

CHEN LI

Poems

In a City Alarmed by a Series of Earthquakes

In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes, I heard
a thousand black-hearted jackals say to their children,
“Mother, I was wrong.”
I heard the judge cry
and the priest repent. I heard
handcuffs fly out of newspapers, blackboards drop into a manure pit. I heard
literary men put down their hoes, farmers take off their glasses,
and fat businessmen take off their clothes of cream and balsam one by one.

In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes,
I saw pimps on their knees returning vaginas to their daughters.

Animal Lullaby

Let time be fixed like a leopard's spots.
A tired bird glides over the water, softly dripping its
tears like a shot arrow waiting to land.
This is the garden, the garden without music. The grayish
elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks
you to guard the honeycomb, the honeycomb without bees.

I will put away dewdrops for the night, for the grass without clothes when the stars
rise in the sky, getting higher than the giraffe in the doorway.
Let nursing mothers leave their infants like
a cat finally loosens its arched back, no more
abstractly insisting on the color of love, the height of dreams,
for this is the garden, the garden without music.

When the awkward donkey parades, don't imitate his snoring.
Let time stop breathing like a bear playing dead lies down quietly,

some white flowers swatting his eyelashes, some butterflies.

I will wipe the doorplate for the cattle pen, for the swallows without eaves when
the grayish elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks
you to mend the broken column, the broken column without sorrow.

This is the garden, the garden without music. Circling eagles, cease
hunting; hunting dogs, stop running—like an angel's forehead,
it's wide enough for fifty castles and seven hundred carriages.
Let the children far from their mothers return to their mothers,
like some long forgotten myth or religion is rediscovered and re-adhered to.
I'll praise and pray for the fruit trees, the fruit trees bare of their fruit.

Let time be fixed like a leopard's spots,
some white flowers swatting his eyelashes, some butterflies.
Don't disturb the wrath of the lion soundly asleep.
This is the garden, the garden without music. The grayish
elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks you
and the mud to cover his footprints quickly.

Microcosmos (ten selections)

1

I wait and long for you:
a turning die in the empty bowl of night
attempting to create the 7th side.

2

Someone is in the autumn wind—
I mean, someone is in the autumn wind saying
someone is in the autumn wind

3

A great event on the desolate
winter day: ear wax
drops on the desk

.

4

Multiplication table for kids of clouds and fog:

mountains times mountains equals trees, mountains times trees
equals me, mountains times me equals nothingness...

5

All the sorrow of night will be turned into golden
ears of rice by daylight, waiting to be
reaped by another sorrowful night.

6

“Which runs faster, grass or dust?”
after a spring shower, beside a deserted railway,
someone asked me.

7

The white skin turns a mole
into an isle: I miss the glistening
vast ocean inside your clothes.

8

Sandals throughout the seasons: do you see
the free verse my two feet write, treading
upon the blackboard, upon the dust?

9

I am man,
I am a disposable lighter
in the dark universe.

10

The story of marriage: a closet of loneliness plus
a closet of loneliness equals
a closet of loneliness.

Nocturnal Fish

In the night I turn into a fish,
an amphibian
suddenly becoming rich and free because of having nothing.

Emptiness? Yes,
as empty as the vast space,
I swim in the night darker than your vagina
like a cosmopolitan.

Yes, the universe is my city.
Seen from any of our city swimming pools above,
Europe is but a piece of dry and shrunken pork,
and Asia a broken tea bowl by the stinking ditch.

Go fill in your sweet familial love,
fill in your pure water of ethics and morality,
fill in your bathing water which is replaced every other day.

I am an amphibian
having nothing and having nothing to fear.
I perch in the vast universe;
I perch in your daily and nightly dreams.
A bather bathed by the rain and combed by the wind.

I swim across your sky swaggeringly,
across the death and life that you can never escape.

Do you still boast of your freedom?

Come, and appreciate a fish,
appreciate a space fish that suddenly becomes rich
and free, because of your forsaking.

The Ropewalker

Now what I sustain is, floating in the air, your laughter,
your laughter, through the obscure quivering net.
What if a ball larger than a roof should be thrown over?
Would it drive you into sudden melancholy?
A ball like the earth, pouring onto your face the unfastened
islands and lakes (just like a wheelbarrow with a loose screw).

Those black and blue bruises are the collisions with mountains,
the metaphysical mountain ranges harder than iron wheels,
the metaphysical burdens, anxiety, metaphysical aestheticism...
And the so-called aestheticism, to me, who tremble in the air,
is perhaps only a restraint from a sneeze, an itch, with
the head still up.

What runs over you at the same time is the joke system of
all continents and subcontinents, interwoven in your body like tributaries,
a joke not very funny: black humor, white terrorism,
red blood. Red, because you once blushed with your heart fluttering
for the beloved girl (of course you can't forget the hatred and bright red blood
aroused by jealousy and fury...) But you're simply a ropewalker
walking on the earth, yet discontented with only being a ropewalker
walking on the earth.

Now what I sustain are the subjects left behind by the
departed circus: time, love, death, loneliness, belief,
dreams. Will you thus unpack the parcel before a houseful of
silent audience? The moment of sudden solemnity after roaring laughter.
You simply pull out, wipe, rearrange the earth's internal organs,
those spare parts that make the world move, sunshine leap,
the male and the female animals reach their orgasms...
They don't even know why you stay there,
stay there (restrain from sneezing and itching),
a wingless butterfly turning a somersault where it is.

So you tremble in the air, cautiously constructing
a garden of jokes on the dangling rope,
cautiously walking across the earth, propping up
the floating life,
with a slanting bamboo cane,
with a fictitious pen.

Note: The Chinese character 兵 (pronounced as “bing”) means “soldier.”
 乒 and 乓 (pronounced as “ping” and “pong”), which look like one-legged
 soldiers, are two onomatopoeic words imitating sounds of collision or
 gunshots. The character 丘 (pronounced as “chiou”) means “hill.”

Formosa, 1661

I've always thought that we are living on the cowhide
 though God has granted my wish to mix my blood, urine,
 and excrement with this land.
 Exchange fifteen bolts of cloth for land as large as a cowhide?
 The aborigines wouldn't possibly know a cowhide can be cut
 into strips and, like the spirit of omnipresent
 God, encircle the whole Tayouan island,
 the whole Formosa. I like the taste of
 venison, I like cane sugar and bananas, I like
 the raw silk shipped back to Holland by the East India Company.
 God's spirit is like raw silk, smooth, holy, and pure.
 It shines upon the youngsters from Bakloan and Tavacan
 who come daily to the youth school to learn spelling, writing,
 praying, and catechism. Oh Lord, I hear their Dutch
 smell of venison (just like the Sideia language
 I utter from time to time in my sermon).
 Oh Lord, in Dalivo, I have taught fifteen married women and
 maidens to say the Lord's Prayer, the Gospel, the Ten Commandments,
 and grace before and after meals; in Mattau, I have taught
 seventy-two married and unmarried young men to say
 various prayers, to know the main religious doctrines, to read,
 and by sincerely teaching and preaching catechism, to start
 enlarging their knowledge—oh, knowledge is like a cowhide
 that can be folded and put into a traveling bag to carry
 from Rotterdam to Batavia, from Batavia to
 this subtropical island, and be unfolded into our Majesty's agricultural land,
 the Lord's nation, cut into strips of twenty-five ges,
 that length squared forms one morgen, and then three and four zhanglis.

In Zeelandia, between the public measurement office, the tax office,
 and the theater, I see it flying like a flag, smiling remotely

at Provintia. Oh, knowledge
brings people joy, just like good food and myriad
spices (if only they knew how to cook Holland peas).
Oranges, with sour flesh and bitter skin, are larger than tangerines. But they don't know that
in summer the water tastes even better than lovemaking when
mixed with salt and smashed oranges. In Tirozen,
I have acquainted thirty married young women with various prayers
and simplified key items; in Sinkan, one hundred and two
married men and women have been taught to read and write (oh, I
taste in the Bible in romanized aboriginal languages
a taste of venison flavored with European ginger).
Ecclesiastes in Favorlang, the Gospel According to Matthew in Sideia,
the marriage of the civilized and the primitive. Let God's spirit
enter the flesh of Formosa—or, let the venison of Formosa enter my
stomach and spleen to become my blood, urine, and
excrement, to become my spirit. I've always thought that we are
living on the cowhide, although those Chinese troops are approaching
on junks and sampans with large axes and knives
attempting to cover us with an even bigger
cowhide. God has granted my wish to mix my blood,
urine, and excrement with the aborigines'
and print them, like letters, on this land.
How I wish they knew this cowhide, in which new spelling
words are wrapped, can be cut into strips and thumbed into
pages, a dictionary loaded with sounds, colors, images, smells
and as broad as God's spirit.

Note: Bakloan, Tavacan, Dalivo, Sinkan, Tirozen, and Mattau are names of communities of the plains aborigines in Taiwan. The Sideia language and the Favorlang language are dialects of the plains aborigines (Sideia is also called Siraya). Zeelandia was a city built on Tayouan island (now called Anping, in Tainan) by the colonists during the Holland Occupation period (1624-1662). Provintia was a fort they built. It is said that the Dutch offered to exchange fifteen bolts of cloth with the aborigines for a cowhide-sized piece of land. After the agreement was made, they "cut the cowhide into strips and encircled land more than one kilometer in circumference" (See Lian Heng, *A General History of Taiwan*). "Ge" was a unit of measurement used by the Dutch, equaling about twelve feet five inches. Twenty-five ges squared equals one morgen. Five morgens make one zhangli.

In the Corners of Our Lives

Many poems live in the corners of our lives.
They may not have reported to the domiciliary registration office
or received doorplate numbers from the district office or police station.
Walking out of the alley, you bump into a jogger speaking on the cell phone.
His embarrassed smile reminds you of the aged doctor who polishes his
young wife's red sports car in front of the house every night.
You realize then that they are two sections of a long poem.

Objects are known to each other, but not necessarily on visiting terms.
Some float up to become images, courting and showing affection
for others. Sound and smell usually conspire first, flirting with each other
on the sly. Colors are the coy little sisters who must stay home,
get set the curtain, sheet, bathrobe and tablecloth, wait for their master to return, and turn on
the lights. A poem, like a home, is a sweet burden
sheltering love, lust, pain and sorrow, taking in the good and the bad.

They needn't go to the health center to be sterilized or to buy condoms
although they do have their own ethics and family planning.
Couples of well-matched family backgrounds do not always make the best matches.
Water can mix well with milk, but it can also be mated with fire.
Hegel eats tender boiled chicken; black-headed flies debate over
whether or not a white horse is a horse. Tender violence.
Deafening silence.
Incestuous love is the poet's license.

Some of them choose to live in the shadow of metaphor or woods of symbols.
Some are broad-minded and optimistic, like sunny spiders climbing here and there. Some
enjoy living outdoors, talking idly and having intercourse; others, like invisible gauze,
are scattered in your brain, which is divided into many small suites for rent, from time to time
switching on the spinning wheel of dream or subconsciousness.
Many poems are said to be imprisoned in the room of habit. In quest of lines you
close the door, overturn boxes and cupboards, call out desperately, and even ride an electronic
donkey, drive the mouse and pound the keys. You open the window
to the big wide world, and surprisingly, there they are:
Iris after the rain. A flock of gulls
on their way home from school. Slanting
waves of the ocean.

But this is not a question of math,
not a question of military affairs, not even a question of medicine.

“This is a question of philosophy.”
Outside the palace, the ignored Persian traveler said,
“Time is the best aphrodisiac
that fosters changes.”

Butterfly-Mad

That girl was walking toward
me like a butterfly. Steadily she
seated herself right in front of the lectern.
There in her hair was a gaily-colored
hair pin: a butterfly on a butterfly.

For the past twenty years, in this
seashore junior high, how many butterflies
have I seen, human-shaped, butterfly-shaped,
carrying youth, carrying dream, flut-
tering into my classroom?

Oh, Lolita

One autumn day before noon, the
sun so warm, a dazzling yellow butterfly
entered through the window, circling between
the distracted teacher and the 13-year-old
girl concentrating on her lessons.

Suddenly she rose, to evade
those scissors-like glittering colors
and shapes, a butterfly scared of butterflies:
ah, she was startled by a butterfly,
and I, perplexed by beauty.

Furniture Music

I read on the chair
I write on the desk
I sleep on the floor
I dream beside the closet

I drink water in spring
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)
I drink water in summer
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)
I drink water in fall
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)
I drink water in winter
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)

I open the window and read
I turn on the light and write
I draw the curtains and sleep
I wake inside the room

Inside the room are the chairs
and the dreams of the chairs
Inside the room are the desk
and the dreams of the desk
Inside the room are the floor
and the dreams of the floor
Inside the room are the closet
and the dreams of the closet

In the songs that I hear
In the words that I say
In the water that I drink
In the silence that I leave