

Xi Chuan

Salute

ONE: NIGHT

In the noise of trucks passing through the city: how hard it is to make the blood be quiet! How hard to make the draught animals be quiet! What persuasion, what promise, what bribe, what threat will make them quiet? But they *are* quiet.

Stone beasts under the archway are breathing moonlight. The knife-grinder's rickety body is bent like the crescent moon. He is exhausted but he will not go to sleep: he whistles, to call the birds from sleep to the end of the bridge, but forgets that on the cliff, silvery as the moon, there is a pregnant leopard that no one's looking after.

The spider intercepts an imperial edict, thus going against the wish of the road.

In hemp fields, lamps have no rights of residence.

Someone is about to arrive and knock on the door, sheep are about to appear and roam in the meadow. The wind is blowing on apples which have never yet entered its dreams, a youth is singing in the basement, surpassing himself.... It's night, needless to say. Memory can create brand-new things.

How vast the sky, higher than memory! Climb high to see far, and the spirit will know no limits. Ever-burning lamps, two or three, look like will-o'-the-wisps. For the soul that cannot sleep, there is no poetry. One needs to stay awake and be on guard, but in the face of death One cannot ponder.

I have brought you a searchlight, there must be fairy maidens flying over your head at night.

I chose this record player from the warehouse, to play you a song, to cure your old disease.

In this night, with the stars in battle-array, my hair stands on end and the black mole on the left side of my chest is blacker still. God's grain is plundered; beauty comes under attack from large, vengeful birds. On nights like this, if I fly into a rage, if I retaliate, then do not speak to me of mercy! If I pardon your crimes, then take to the road right away and do not stop to thank me.

Please clean your wounds with the juice of the ginger root.

Please leave a way out for the weasel.

How powerless the heart when the lights go out, when street-sweepers get up, when crows take off into the sunlight shining on this city, proud to have their luxurious wings no longer confused with nighttime writing.

A face flushed red, all the body's blood. The bugle blows, dust trembles: the first note always sounds bad!

TWO: SALUTE

Dejection. Dangling gongs and drums. Dozing leopard in the basement. Spiral staircase. Nighttime torch. City gates. Cold, below the ancient stars and reaching to the grass's roots. Sealed-off body. Undrinkable water. Ice floes drifting like ships. Birds for passengers. Waterways closed. Children unborn. Tears unformed. Punishment unbegun. Chaos. Equilibrium. Ascension A blank.... How does one speak of dejection and not be in the wrong? Face to face with a crown of flowers left at the crossroads, please realize the price one pays for recklessness!

Pain: a sea, unmovable

On the seventh page of suffering, civility is written.

To want to scream, to force the steel to shed a tear, to force the

mice used to living in secret to line up and appear before me. To want to scream, but in the softest possible voice, not like curses but like prayers, not like the roar of cannon but like the whistle of the wind. A stronger heartbeat accompanies a greater silence, helplessly watching how the stored-up rain will all be drunk—well then, scream! Oh, how I want to scream, with hundreds of crows clamouring, I have no mouth of gold. no words of jade—I am an omen of no good.

Too many desires, too little seawater.

Illusions depend on capital for their preservation.

Let the rose redress our errors, let thunder reprimand us! On this endless road, there is no asking where the journey leads. When the moth flies into the flame, that is no time to talk of eternity and it is hard to find proof of a man's moral flawlessness.

Memory: my textbook.

Love: unfinished worries.

Happiness is like clouds over our heads. Clouds over our heads are like the angels chariots of war, chaotic peace! Dangerous undertakings!

A man goes deep, into the mountains and miraculously survives. In winter he hoards cabbage, in summer he makes ice. He says: "One who will let nothing move him is not real, neither where he comes from nor in his present life." Therefore we crowd around the peach blossom to sharpen our sense of smell. Face to face with the peach blossom and other things of beauty, one who knows not how to doff his hat in salute is not our comrade.

But we do not hope for an outcome in which souls are made to lie idle and words blackmailed.

Poetry guides the dead and the next generation.

THREE: ABODE

Clocks let on the sounds and sights of spring, the cricket on its

manor sings. What I will not allow has happened: I am slowly changing into someone else. I must call out three times, I must call myself back.

With the props that I've collected, I decorate the room. Every night, I have the good fortune to enjoy a play staged purely by props.

The kitchen is a place for knives and forks to sleep, the square is a place for the goddess to stand.

The world in the mirror is my world's equal but its opposite, too: if it isn't hell, it must be heaven. A man exactly like me, but my opposite too, lives in that world: if he isn't Lucan he must be Saint John.

I rarely touch my cheeks or my ankles. I rarely touch myself. Therefore I rarely criticize myself, either, and I rarely beat myself up.

This often happens: Liu Jun¹ makes a phone call to find another Liu Jun. As if I am talking to myself, cradling the phone.

The smile of one who suffers from a mental illness. The reproductive organ he bares to the sun and to women. The sound of him banging his head against the wall. His underdeveloped brain. "Am I right? Am I right?"—the question he persists in asking, over and over again.

There is no guard at the door of my house. If I hire a guard, I must guard him with all my might.

If three thousand beauties came to sit in this room, would you be excited or afraid? Three thousand beauties, they might be three thousand fox spirits, the only way to cope with them would be to get them drunk.

A man whose axe has chopped his fingers off comes to tell me the story of his love. Experiences of others may to us well be taboos.

The lilac in the ink well is slowly turning blue. It hopes to remember this night, it would do anything to remember this night, but that is impossible.

I nourish this flower seed with my innermost secret: when the lotus blooms, it will be summer.

FOUR: THE MONSTER

The monster—I have seen it. The monster has bristly hair, razor-sharp teeth, it is close to going blind. The monster breathes its husky breath, it shouts of calamity, yet its feet move without a sound. The monster has no sense of humour, like someone trying hard to cover up humble origins, like someone destroyed by a calling; it has no cradle offering memories, no goal offering direction, not enough lies to defend itself. It beats on tree trunks, it collects infants; it lives like a rock, it dies like an avalanche.

The crow seeks allies among scarecrows.

The monster hates my hairdo, hates my smell, hates my regret and my overcautious ways. In short, it hates my habit of dressing up happiness in pearls and jade. It bursts through my door, tells me to stand in a corner, will not let me explain and falls through my chair, shatters my mirror, rips my curtains and all protective screens around my private soul. I beg it: “When I am thirsty, don’t take away my teacup!” Right then and there it digs out water from a spring:
that must be its answer.

A ton of parrots, a ton of parrot-talk!

For the tiger we say ‘tiger’, for the donkey we say ‘donkey’. But how do you address the monster? It has no name, so its flesh melts into its shadow, so you cannot call out to it, so you cannot determine its place in the sun nor foretell the fortune or misfortune it may bring. It should be given a name, like ‘sorrow’ or ‘shame’, it should be given a pond from which to drink, it should be given a roof over its head for shelter from the rain. A monster with no name is scary.

A thrush bumps off all the king's men!

The monster is exposed to temptations too, but not those of the palace, not those of female beauty and not those of sumptuous candle-lit banquets. It is coming toward us, but surely there is nothing about us to make its mouth water? Surely it will not try to suck emptiness from our bodies? What kind of temptation is that! Sideways through a shadowy passageway, the monster collides head-on with a glint of steel, and that smallest of injuries teaches it to moan—to moan, to live, not to know what faith is. But as soon as it calms down, it hears the sesame stalks budding once again, it smells the Chinese rose's fragrance once again.

Across a thousand mountains flies the wild goose, too timid to speak of itself.

This metaphor of a monster goes down the mountainside, picks flowers, sees the reflection of its face in the river, in its heart of hearts feels unsure who that is, then it swims across, goes ashore, looks back at the haze above the water, finds nothing, understands nothing; then it charges into the city, follows the trail of a girl, comes by a piece of meat, spends the night under eaves, dreams of a village, of a companion, then it sleepwalks fifty miles, knows no fear, wakes up in the morning sun, discovers it has returned to its earlier place of departure: still that thick bed of leaves, hidden underneath the leaves still the dagger—what is about to happen here?

Dove in the sand, you are awakened by the shine of blood: the time to fly has come!

FIVE: MAXIMS

Strike down shadows, and it will be people that stand up.

Trees listen to trees, birds listen to birds; when poisonous snakes raise their bodies upright to attack people passing, they become people themselves.

To scrutinize the face in the mirror is to affront a stranger.

The law says: those who go looting at the scene of a fire must die, those who put up a sheep's head to sell dog meat must get what they deserve, those who gaze and peer to left and right will find a trap beneath their feet, those with narrow chicken minds must meet with scorn. But I can't stop myself from adding something here, for I have seen that women whose star is rising are just as competent as men whose star is rising, just as muscular, just as ruthless.

The sunflower after all is a flower too!

Why have cats not tigers become our pets?

Tiny pain, like the feeling of sand pouring into one's eye socket—from whom does one seek compensation?

A book will change me, if I want to take it in; a girl will change me, if I want to sing her praises; a road will change me, if I walk it to the end; a coin will change me, if I want to own it. If I change someone else who lives beside me, I change myself: my single conscience makes the both of us suffer, my single selfishness makes the both of us blush.

Truth cannot be public. Thoughts without echo are difficult to sing.

Anger puts incantations out of order.

To the shipwrecked sailor, what use is a compass?

Don't ask too much of the world; don't sleep with your wife in your arms while dreaming of high profits; don't light lamps during the day, don't do business with the night; smearing black on other faces will not make your own face any whiter. Remember: don't piss in the wilderness; don't sing in cemeteries; don't make rash promises; don't be a nuisance; make wisdom into something useful.

Motionless shadows may be held in contempt, but one must stand in awe of moving shadows.

The sunbirds all suddenly take off, who is giving chase?

What kind of luck will make your left eye-lid stop twitching?

SIX: GHOSTS

The air embraces us, but we have never noticed. The dead have withdrawn from us, into the fields, into the moonlight, but we know exactly where they are—in their joy they will not run farther than a child.

The treasures buried deep and unknown to anyone have all been spent by Time, with nothing in return. The dead buried deep and gradually forgotten—how can they take care of themselves? They should be moved out of their graves.

The death of others makes us guilty.

Sorrowful winds surround the dead and ask for consolation.

There is to be no death by lightning, no death by drowning, no death by poison, no death in battle, no death by disease, no death by accident, no death by unending laughter or unending crying or gluttonous eating and gluttonous drinking or an unstoppable flow of words until one's strength is exhausted. Well—how then is one to die? Noble death, ugly corpses, a death without a corpse is impossible

We break up roads and build high rises to make the ghosts lose their way.

Things left behind by the dead sit in a circle, holding their breath and waiting to be used.

How will the ghosts appear? Unless hats can be transformed into hat ghosts and clothes be transformed into clothes ghosts, flesh-turned-ghost must be naked, but the appearance of naked ghosts is not in keeping with our current morality

In the dark, someone reaches out a finger and taps me on the nose.

The tinkle of the devil's chimes is just what I need.

SEVEN: FOURTEEN DREAMS

I dream of lying on my back with a sparrow standing on my chest telling me: "I am your soul!"

I dream of a swimming pool lined with sheets of iron. I lie flat, singing to my heart's content while my feet are kicking the iron and keeping time, but suddenly there is no one left in the pool.

In my dreams I steal things. How can I protest my innocence to the sun?

I dream of a pile of letters on my doorstep. I stoop to pick one up. But this is a love letter I wrote to a girl, years ago! Why has she returned it?

I dream of a woman calling me on the phone. A stranger, a woman who seems as if she is already dead, in a tone of the utmost concern urges me not to attend tonight's party.

I dream of vanishing from the face of the earth. In a subway station, I hear an old lady sobbing.

To dream of Haizi,² grinning at me and denying his death.

I dream of Luo Yihe,³ luring me into a garage, its floor covered in oil stains. In a corner stands a single bed with white sheets. That is where he sleeps, every night.

I dream of entering a meeting room, the air inside thick with smoke. The room is full of men and women seated in chairs, with blurred faces, not saying a word. As I sit down, a man comes storming through the door, his face covered in blood, screaming and shouting: "Who's the traitor?"

I dream of a child falling from a high rise. Without wings.

I have dreamt of twisted steel, I have dreamt of poisonous leaves—this is a city in the midst of collapse: fires rage, hooded

men emerge and vanish, But one small building is left in peace. I am keeping my appointment, sitting on the stone steps outside the entrance, but the person I'm expecting never shows up.

What kind of horse is called a 'Horse of Fortune'?

What kind of meteor will set the sea on fire?

I dream of lying on my back, the waves outside my window crashing ever louder. On this solitary island even the seagulls have nowhere to roost, but who is that man, whose is the face that flashes past my window?

EIGHT: WINTER

This is the time when the hair turns grey, this is the time when Orion passes by us, this is the time when the soul loses its water and the snow descends on the factory's reception office. A girl sitting down is invited and takes to the dance floor in flickering light, a spare-time writer stops writing and starts to prepare food for the birds of dawn,

Snow is falling, horse dung is freezing.
Village accountants are dancing into the city.
A cat stops en route and enters into debate with itself, in two voices.
A painting incomprehensible to the child remains incomprehensible to this day.

The taxi covered in snow is pure white, like a polar bear. Its engine doesn't work, its body temperature drops to zero. But I can't stand watching it give up, so I write 'I love you' on one of its windows. As my finger moves across the glass, it makes a happy, squeaking sound, just like the face of a girl expecting a kiss will start to glow.

Diseases do not go around in winter, diseases do as they please.

Frozen taps save on every drop of water, frozen oceans save on our deaths.

Whenever I wake up in the dead of night, that is when the fire in the stove goes out. Barefoot, I get out of bed, walk toward the fire-stove, rattle the fire-tongs, and fire-flames—gone without saying goodbye—come crackling back into this world to warm the night's saliva and breath. For the one just now dreaming of wolves, my lighting the fire means rescue. How I want to tell him that even in the midst of cold, fire will burn one's hand; wolves' fear of fire must go back to when one among them was burnt by fire.

Oh you hero who break through my door, you can take the money-jar from under my bed, take the fire from my stove, but you cannot have my glasses and you cannot have my slippers—you can't live in this world pretending to be me.

An address with no name has made me silent for a long time, a face has been forgotten:
another life, another way of killing time, have formed an Other of my flesh and blood. With the address in my hand, I walk into a street full of wind and snow: by what sort of people shall I be admitted, rejected?

Spit marks: there are people living here.

The cold has underrated our endurance.