

HU XUDONG

3 Poems

A SHORT CHAPTER

Nearly all afternoon, I sat
 on the long bench of the balcony
 of the second floor sickroom,
 gazing at the southern sky
 while a ball of cloud, beautiful as a snow leopard,
 gradually dismembered:
 first its strong, supple limbs
 torn slowly by the wind, then its head
 cracked open by a plane.
 When the spine was drawn out,
 and its twisted back collapsed,
 a sack of pulp and skin
 cast into a grove
 at the far end of Qinghua Gardens,
 I felt my own flesh like sand
 leak down between the bench slats
 until it formed a dune
 adrift in the deserts of disease.

TIBETAN MEDICINE

One day in a lunar leap year's April,
 on Barkhor Street in Lhasa,
 my father bought some Tibetan medicine,
 which on a starry night mother broke into chunks
 entrusted to a messenger for delivery
 to the chaos of the capitol. All summer, while my countrymen
 hawked popular events, and merchants scrambled for small trade,
 each day from its bamboo tube I'd draw one or two nuggets
 of this dark herb and dump it in a waterglass,
 still acrid, even chewed with sweet dates.

I swallowed this nameless tonic from a nameless realm,
went to work, came home, saw good people, chatted nonsense,
the herb sinking deeper into my flesh, calm as a heavy bell.
Then midnight came, as if someone small, dressed in black, delicately entered
my forlorn liver, tolling the bitterness of life.

WRITTEN AT WATERSIDE

The source of this stream can no more be found
than where its water goes after filling my spleen.
The flight of stunning things along the mountainside
interpolates beauty's contours. I know so well
how dragonflies with butterfly wings
gracefully and subtly tease up the air's gorge
and force the canyons to cry out their strained chill, though
the force of memory draws water through
slim tear ducts between rocks. I know so well
how the wild duck of rippled light healing its wound in the water
suddenly rises, leaving a patch of
crystallized anguish.

So I
simply plunge into the water, clumsily
swimming the sharp cold. First
like a dragonfly nymph between the pebbles, dark
and low, then as a fish spitting bubbles
in a sunny morning yawn
you slip under my skin: I begin to
feel a distant air bladder: thus
when you are hurt, it contracts,
rolling my white, bashful belly up.

But
most of the time it's only like a sleeping lotus
swaying in waves beneath my ribs, or
a paper lamp burning above the water,
guiding me to rise. When I'm light enough
to surface, I discover
the dragonflies have changed
into sleep-shaped clouds, and I,
lying on the surface,
am their cool, almost inaudible snore.
And you?

Are you hanging on my eyelashes? Can your "No"
still cast itself into a string of birdcalls, scattered
at evening across the whole mountain? Wind splays
sunset across the water like a red fox
flashes into woods. It's only now I see
the waterfall from upstream flowing clear and bright,
like your dazzling face
rushing out from my body.

Translated from the Chinese by George O'Connell and Diana Shi
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