

WANG JIAXIN

Poems

PASTORAL

On the country roads outside Beijing
you're sure to spot sheep
scattered over fields, like unmelted snow
or swollen blooms burst open.
They cross the road in clumps,
the herdsman barking them down
a weedy ditch, tripping and tumbling
through the dust.

I never paid much attention
until one afternoon
in flurries of snow
I nosed close behind a sheep truck,
the dark eyes gazing down
gentle and quiet, not knowing
where they were headed.
They turned toward me then,
curious as children.

I let the car drift back
through the thickening curtain of snow
and watched them disappear.

TRANSFORMATION

Seasons change overnight,
before you know it
the wind against your face so cold
you turn back in the yard,
the buffeting sky
impossibly blue.

Suddenly you're old,
withered, utterly changed,
shuffling through a swirl of fallen leaves.
After the night's storm
the cask of the heart, half empty,
sloshes at each step.

Yet wind thrills through the season,
tearing at the clouds,
the sky lofting higher, vaster,
always carrying something off,
the smallest chink in the rooftiles
filling with moans, voicing what was still,
urgent, blowing.

Few days left.
The dead leaves whirl,
in the distance
parched whispers of the trees,
the murmuring human surf, traffic
heading in one direction.

The wind's weight
finds your bones,
in a single night
changing everything,
snatching up your heart.
Hold on tight.
It's time to stand in the wind
or surrender.

THE LAST DAYS OF OCTAVIO PAZ

Mexico City, dusk,
he watches wide eyed
as a great conflagration
devours his house, his life's
possessions, the years
of manuscripts, poems finished
and unfinished, the Aztec mask,
the Picasso, chairs
of his ancestors, photos from childhood,
the joyous dome, its ribbed beams and rafters,
everything turning to ash
in a whirling column of fire.

The flames blaze on,
charring night,
lick the black wings
soaring from his poems,
consume the leaden hours,
human illusion, human desire,
wish and ambition,
emptiness and ash--
all crackling in a fire
come late in life,
as the firemen shout in the choking dark,
fleeting shadows.

So late, so late
but now set free
from long affliction,
Octavio Paz will sit once more
beside a Paris street,
dry leaves scuttling silent at his feet,
a far off light
dawning on his brow.

FIRST SNOW

Whatever joy the first snow brought
has long subsided. Falling without end
across upstate New York,
beyond the window
snow mantles snow,
white fact cancels white fact.
Your days fill with snow.
For one unaccustomed to boots,
just stepping outside is trouble.
My wife and son head off for their sweet nap,
his bike, “Red Rock-It”,
propped at the stoop,
half-buried.
The washer thrums and spins,
the apples on the table at peace,
the English-Chinese dictionary, at peace.
My steps,
measuring the stillness,
more silent.
A glance toward the snowy hills, distant, veiled.

SCORPION

Turned every stone on the mountain,
not one scorpion: this was childhood.
But which year, what day?
Now I've returned,
the mountain pines thicker, taller,
and from a cleft of ochre rock
a scorpion, tail up,
comes toward me.

Eye to eye, in a single moment,
I am the stones beneath his feet.

1986

DARKENING MIRROR

1
Loving trees and stones: the root of all ethics.

2
The Age advances, and at dusk more girls appear, with tinted hair, beckoning from the roadside. Why not pull over? What have you left to be proud of? Do you really think your noble soul, compared to one of their combs, is more enduring?

3
Though the wine lies heavy on your mind, forgotten wounds stab sharper than a spike.

4
Someday you'll recall the little restaurant buzzing with flies on the edge of Beijing: how we sat gazing at the glorious lights of the far-off Hilton, seeing for the first time how humiliation smites the destitute.

5
Airport shut down, a blizzard madly filling in the sea; no homecoming, but one kind of dialogue, grown difficult.

6
Those who know how to live in deep cold save a plot of earth in the yard to sow sunflowers.

7
Time to take down your ex-lover's painting, but under the eye of the new mistress of the house, where can you put it?

8
Having lived from then till now, belief is hard, but disbelief is terror.

9
Gold corn mouldering, crops rotting in the field. Old man on the doorstep, staring in the soft autumn rain. What makes you turn from bitter glances? Why are you always ashamed to write poems about fruitless human labor?

10
If a donkey claims he's a Great Poet, you bow solemnly, for this is The Land of Poetry.

11
As you grow old, that first thin gleam of scorn in your son's eyes comes like an undeserved gift on a long awaited holiday.

12
This is the music I love, coughs from the audience as the master performs: I resume my seat in darkness.

13
It's not that you're any older; your mirror's just grown dim.

14

It's not that you're any older; dining alone just takes longer.

15

It's not that the hometown girls are loose; just that the sailor back from the storm went blind long ago.

16

Daily you polish your room's pine floor. To prepare for life with a barefoot angel who never appears? There is no angel. From a corner of your ceiling descends a fat spider.

17

You arise in the morning and listen to the organ, at dusk the violin, and evening the piano; but awakened at night, you hear unending silence.

18

Restoring faith in life is like stamping your feet in winter; warmth returns, then you stride off further in the snow.

19

Years since your last trip to the zoo: she's still drawn to the Hall of Snakes, but as you no longer wish to see tigers or swans, you head straight for Monkey Hill, thronged with children.

20

When his lifetime of writing is finished like a term of hard labor, I think he'll step from the room and look far away, murmuring to himself: Child, now I feel the sun's warmth, and from your garden hear your daughter's laughter.

REWRITING AN OLD POEM

Rewriting an old poem demands
not merely the craft to measure each word,
but the nerve to open the coffin
and look in
to see if the body's dead.
It's about missing a future, not viewing the past.
It's once more lamentably recalling that evening
when clusters of stars broke through
and you sought the one lit for you alone
until the streetlights winked on.
But at the moment, in this old apartment,
I'm letting the poem write me.
It's been writing me a long time.
Through its words, I take on a new face, new eyes.
I sense dusk seep into its language.
I hear as well those heavy steps
mounting the dim stairway
then going down.

TANGERINES

All winter he eats tangerines,
sometimes at the table,
sometimes on a bus.
Sometimes, as he's eating,
snow falls inside the bookcase.
Sometimes instead of eating,
he simply peels, slowly,
as if something lives within.

So he eats tangerines, all winter long,
and while eating recalls a novel
in which the heroine also brought to the table
a dish of tangerines. One kept rolling
till the end of the story.
But he can't name the author.
He simply eats the tangerine in silence.
The peels on his windowsill rise higher.

At last an image comes, several tangerines,
in childhood, placed near his hospital bed.
His mother had found them somewhere.
Though his little brother begged one, mother refused.
He shared, but neither
would eat the last tangerine,
which stayed on the night stand.

Who knows what became of it?

So he eats tangerines all winter,
especially on snowy days, gray days.
He eats slowly, as if
there's plenty of time,
as if he's devouring darkness.
He eats, peels, and when he lifts his head,
snow glitters at the window.

OYSTERS

Party's over. On the seaside dining table
a few oysters left,
large, unopened.

Heading back in the car, someone says
"The ones you can't open
taste best."

No one laughs,
no one considers what it means.
At night the surf sounds heaviest.
Through dark pine woods
our car weaves onward.

Translation from the Chinese © Diana Shi & George O'Connell
