

Pain Not Bread / NINE POEMS

STORM LANTERNS

(A Variation on Some First Lines by Du Fu)

Half my hundred-year life gone —
yet borderlands return to no one. Autumn comes.

Above the tower:

a lone, twice-sized moon, a cloud-formed village.

In a town to the north, a watchman's
final light on the water.

Storm lanterns.

A river moon cast only feet away.

A bamboo chill drifts through the bedroom.

I row upstream past the tower,
a slight rain comes.

A thousand feet up, along sheer silk,
a traveller from southern darkness,
at the edge of heaven, descends.

In the city, night's five brief watches begin.

I step out for a moment, then back.

I remember long ago slipping away.

It is bitter cold, and late, and falling.

Looming rain and restless wind.

Our thatch house perched where land ends.

Roads not yet glistening, rain slight.

War carts have ended all travel,
the lamp gutters and flares.
Rivers and mountains survive broken countries.
The Dual Principles have ended in wind and rain.

The last watch sounds, then, in Guizhou.
Standing alone, austere, among the willows,
beyond the smoke and dust,
travelling again in some distant place,
my sad eyes find only frost and wild blooming.

CROWS (An Introduction to Du Fu)

White-headed crows have welcomed autumn to Chang'an.
They strut and caw and peck at people's rooves:
you'd think they were barbarians, advancing on the city's heights
to prise loose everything and carry off their plunder.

*This world is too beautiful to be true
and too beautiful not to be true:*
tonight the year's evening's short light
frosts the edge of heaven.

Sons and daughters spring up, and the endless line of
sons and daughters, growing and departing, brings a sense
of joy and quiet desperation. The raucous crows,
the jaundiced mirror that reflects all the world —

Just standing straight, just feeling, for a moment,
all the weight of that indifference,
can be hard labor.
But maintenance is the spirit's job:

to make the beams and rafters turn their heads
and see what a great weight it is that they must
carry for another year — though nothing is preserved,
in truth, beyond the likeness of divided empires,

the sight of ministers, their diligence forever pointed upward,
scurrying like clouds before the cool, northwest wind
that heralds autumn and the stations of an
endless chain of well-appointed meeting rooms.

The moon emerges like a momentary glimpse
of something white and snowy as the distant Snowy Mountains,
the previous, declining year still winding its brocade
around the always-newly-out-of-style pavilions,

the gloomy secluded paintwork where the young are gathering,
though amiably enough,
to prise loose what has taken maybe
half a lifetime in the making. I, myself, remember this,

though supposedly it is forgetting that is universal.
But I have forgotten humanity and justice,
and that was not enough. I have forgotten the rites and their music,
and even that is not enough.

The world already marvels at so many
with so many designs on it, so many plans
to embellish it against its will.
But life does not depend on truth (as we are often told).

Actually, it doesn't take a carpenter to make a thing of wonder.

CREDO: DEEP SOUTH MOUNTAIN
(An Introduction to Wang Wei)

No sutras, no hymns, no doctrine,
but nature with its personal implications.
A landscape is described, and one understands
in his returning to his cottage the invisible presence
of rapids, the hissing, the tumult,

are not to be interpreted.
Ambiguity is the necessary language of nature.
Twin streams falling from a great height,
virtually inarticulate, alive in the forest.

And Wang Wei? We see him
bowed down by duty and mountains,
the resignation to new systems of uncertainty.

As Buddha sat silent in a famous instant,
or a clock exists in deep unmeasured space,

he has become a convention. Nonetheless, he persists.

THE GOWN OF A DEAD EMPEROR
(An Introduction to Wang Wei)

Illusory things of the phenomenal world mingle in heaven.
Egrets in sudden motion, stitched with rain.
The rain feeding the stream,
itself in sudden motion to the sea.
All causes flow seaward —
oneness, water, birds.
Poetics operating in twilight.
The single thread that leads into an open field.
A hibiscus flowering in the passing of the natural world.

STILL EVENING
(An Introduction to Du Fu)

*In front of this world, another world should be placed,
so that an occasional breeze might tinkle the bells
that hang from the four-cornered eaves of the cosmos —*

“In front of this world,” I think —

and idly turning the page
I realize, without haste,
I’ve wasted my day.
Between my gateposts
the city’s lights have come on,

and temple bells, like sad belled cats,
forever chasing mice.

A peaceful night: the scent of tamarisk orders the world,
half-deserted office towers, their vastness
honeycombed with cubes of light.

Toward the distant hills, the taillights of a
single car ascend.

*Moon emerges cold, as Du Fu says,
above the naked suburban plain.*

What is this great weight?

FORBIDDEN CITY (After the Late Tang)

Green grass swallows the greener air
and, seeing this, the scholar lays down her brush.

Drifting on thought all day — the old cloud pattern's
convolutions, wrought in marble,

that recall a fabled emperor,
while the imperial craftsmen remain unknown.

In less than two years, how much I've changed:
less hurried, more tired.

The world of opinion passes, leaving what? —
the disappointment that comes at middle age —

10,000 oxen might turn their heads inquiringly
at such a load.

Prospects? First financial humiliation,
then ruin,

in a world composed of once-familiar objects
left to gather strangeness in the rain.

Easy to forget all thought is detail,
fashioned out of wood and iron,

when those who imagine
they drag civilization forward,

living in a self-imposed obscurity,
erect implausible schemata and,

beneath their shadows,
endlessly complain about their heavy loads.

Still, I want to know what's going to happen
outside these walls after I've gone.

Lay me out under one of those blue July skies
that make me think of being newly born.

Tell them it's because I devoted my life to leisure and study,
because I'd want to see for one last time the great rooves of the
Forbidden City.

Then stand me in an official's hat under the six-fingered maple,
and so the ink dries quickly, write my name in water on stone.

MOUNTAIN RANGE (An Introduction to Wang Wei)

In its range and beauty, and from a distance,
the desire to be without desire looks like a mountain range.

A blue haze, almost smoky, wraps the things of this world.
The body, the senses:

nothing you'll ever read could move you from this world.
Sometimes I'm tempted to fill it with emotion,

the way as a bureaucrat I filled each day with self-importance.
I suppose salvation is always to be found elsewhere,

only there's no human voice now,
and the empty forest isn't empty, it's full of crickets.

STANDING STRAIGHT (From the Late Tang)

This world is too beautiful to be true,
and too beautiful not to be true —
but life does not depend on truth.

Too beautiful to be true,
and too beautiful not to be true —
so that the world still marvels
at so many with so many designs on it,
so many plans to embellish it against its will.

This is the cypress that was old before Kunming temple was built.
Its roots are like cast bronze footings.
All the ministers who sat in its shade
have had their own appointments and are gone,
but the tree is still cherished.
The moon emerges from its branches,
eager to communicate, white as mountains.

STRANGE RIVER (From The Late Tang)

Gazing down into a language and literature not our own,
the dangers lie on every side, known and unknown,
and few exceptions to the rule. Neither love nor information
will bring us any nearer, and doubt makes reasonable claims.
Yet only here may we drink the water of mysterious origin
so far from the mainstream the whole looks uniform and still.
Strange river, full of images, dead women, sunken leaves,
that waver underwater, buried, where ambition lies.