

OUYANG JIANGHE

## Five Poems

### Crossing the Square at Nightfall

Translated by Michael Day

I do not know where a square of past ages  
begins, or where it ends.  
Some people take an hour to cross the square,  
some a lifetime --  
In the morning it's children, in the evening people in the dusk of life.  
I don't know how much farther you must walk in the twilight before you can  
stop your steps.

In the twilight how long must you survey  
before you can close your eyes? When a fast moving auto  
opens its blinding lights  
in the rearview mirror I saw the flash of the faces  
of those who once crossed the square on a bright morning.  
In the evening in buses they leave.

A place that no one leaves is not a square,  
a place where no one falls is also not.  
The departed come home again, but the fallen are forever fallen.  
A thing called stone  
quickly piles up, towers up,  
unlike the growth of bones needing a hundred years time.  
Also not so soft as a bone.

Every square has a head built out of stone  
making the empty-handed people feel the measure  
of life. To look up and think with a huge head of stone,  
not a simple matter for anyone.  
The weight of stone  
lightens the responsibility, the love and the sacrifice on people's shoulders.

Perhaps people will cross the square on a bright morning,  
open arms and tenderly embrace in winds from every side.

But when the night falls, hands grow heavy,  
the only body emitting light is the stone in the head.  
The only keen sword that stabs at the head quietly drops to the ground.

Darkness and cold are rising.  
Surrounding the square tall structures put on the latest fashion of china and glass.  
All grows small. The world of stones  
lightly floats up in the world reflected in the glass,  
like an oppressive notion scrawled in children's workbooks  
that at anytime can be ripped out and kneaded into a ball.

Cars speed past, pouring the speed  
of running water into a huge system of concrete that possesses muscles and bones of iron,  
in the shape of the horns bestowed on silence.  
The square of past ages vanishes from the rearview mirror.

Disappears forever --  
a square covered by acne in its green spring, in its first love.  
A square that has never appeared in the accounts and notices of death.  
A square that bares its chest, rolls up its sleeves, tightens its belt  
that wears patches and energetically scrubs with both hands.

A square that through young blood runs outside its body,  
that licks with its tongue, strikes stone with its brow, and covers itself  
with flags.

A square of daydreams that has vanished, no more exists,  
stops in the morning as if there has been a night of heavy snow.  
A pure and mysterious thaw  
shimmers in turn in eyes and conscience,  
a part grows into a thing called tears,  
a part grows hard inside a thing called stone.

The world of stone collapses.  
A world of soft tissue climbs up to the high spot.  
The entire process like spring water leaving minerals through a draw pipe  
going distilled into an airtight, beautifully packaged space  
Riding an express elevator I rise in the umbrella stem of a rainy day.

When I return to the ground, I look up and see a circular restaurant  
opened like an umbrella revolving in the city's sky.  
This is a cap grown out of wizardry,  
its size does not agree

with the head of the giant piled up out of stone.

The arms that once supported the square are let down.  
Today the giant relies on the support of a short sword.  
Will it stab something? For example, a fragile revolution  
that was once stirred up on paper, posted to walls?

There has never been a power  
that could glue together for long two different worlds.  
In the end a repeatedly posted head will be ripped away.  
A repeatedly whitewashed wall  
has a half occupied by a girl of mixed blood baring her thighs.  
The other half is enticing ads for the installation of prosthetics and the regeneration of hair.

A pram quietly parks on the evening square,  
silent, not related to this world soon to go mad.  
I guess the distance between the pram and the setting sun  
to be farther than a hundred years.  
This is an almost limitless yardstick, sufficient to measure  
the length of the confined era that passed over the square.

The universal fear of house arrest  
brought people off their perches to gather in the square  
changed the lonely moments of a lifetime into a fervent holiday.  
And in the depths of their dwellings, in the silent eye-catching ceremony of love and death,  
a square of shadows empty without a sign of life is treasured,  
like a tightly sealed room for penitence it is only a secret of the heart.

Must one pass through the darkness of the heart before crossing the square?  
Now in the dark the two blackest worlds combine as one,  
the hard stone head is split open,  
in the dark keen swords flash.

If I could use the mysterious black night chopped in half  
to explain a bright morning trampled to the ground by both feet –  
if I could follow the flight of stairs swept by the dawn light  
and climb up onto the shoulders of the giant standing high on the summit of nothingness,  
not to rise, but to fall --  
if the epigraph engraved in gold is not to be an eulogy,  
but to be rubbed out, forgotten, trampled –

Just as a trampled square must fall on the head of the trampler,  
those people who crossed the square on that bright morning,

sooner or later their black leather shoes will fall on sharp swords,  
as heavily as the lid of a coffin must fall on the coffin.  
As long as it is not me lying inside, and also not  
the people walking on the blade of the sword.

I never thought so many people could cross the square  
on that bright morning, dodging loneliness and immortality.  
They are the survivors of an era of black confinement.  
I never imagined they would leave or fall in the evening.

A place where nobody falls is not a square.  
A place where nobody stands also is not.  
Was I standing? How much longer must I stand?  
All in all those who fell and me are the same,  
we were never immortal.

# Between Chinese and English

Translated by Michael Day

I reside in a pile of character parts,  
between the casual looks of this and that form.  
They stand alone and penetrate, limbs rocking and unsteady,  
a monotonous beat like shots from a gun.  
After a wave of sound, Chinese characters grow simple.  
Some arms, legs, eyes fall away,  
but words still move on, stretch out, and see.  
That kind of mystery raises a hunger.  
Moreover, it left behind many delicious days,  
let me and my race eat it, pick over it together.  
In the accent of this place, in a local dialect gathered up like a crystal,  
in classical and modern Chinese mixed into one speech,  
the figure of my mouth is a circular ruin,  
teeth sink into an open space  
and do not collide with a bone.  
With this kind of vista, this kind of flesh, Chinese feasts over the land.  
I finished eating my portion of days, then ate the ancient's, until

one evening, I go to stroll on the English Corner, and see  
a crowd of Chinese round a Yank, I surmise they  
want to move into English. But English has no territory in China.  
It is merely a class, a form of conversation, a TV program,  
in university a department, tests and paper.  
On the paper I feel the strong likeness of Chinese to a pencil.  
Light strokes and vague outlines, the life of a worn eraser.  
Having experienced too much ink, glasses, typewriters  
and the weightiness of lead,  
relaxed and smooth, English rolls up on a corner in China.  
It accustoms us to abbreviations and diplomatic language,  
also western food, forks and knives, Aspirin.  
This type of change does not involve the nose  
and skin. Like a daily morning toothbrush  
English moves over the teeth, making Chinese white.  
Once I ate books  
ate the dead, therefore

everyday I brush my teeth. This concerns water, hygiene and contrast.  
This produced a feeling for the mouth, a taste for speech,  
and the many differences in the language of everyday use.

It also relates to a hand: it stretches into English,  
the middle and index fingers spread apart, simulating  
a letter, a victory, a kind of fascist experience of yourself.  
A cigarette drops to the ground, extinguished when only half smoked,  
like a part of history. History is a war that suffers  
from a stutter, earlier it was the Third Reich, it was Hitler.  
I do not know if this madman shot English, shot  
Shakespeare and Keats.

But I do know in the Oxford dictionary there is the English of the nobility,  
also the English of Churchill and Roosevelt armed to the teeth,  
its metaphors, its objective reality, its aesthetic of destruction,  
exploded at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In Japanese I see piles of Chinese characters become corpses –  
but beyond language, China and England-America make a pact.

I read this part of history, and feel very suspicious.

Between history and me I do not know which is more preposterous.

More than one hundred years. Between Chinese and English, what actually happened?

Why do so many Chinese migrate into English,  
work hard to become white people of a yellow race, and see the Chinese language  
as a divorced wife, see it as a home in a broken mirror? What  
actually happened? I live alone secluded in Chinese,  
in dialogue with a great many paper people, daydreaming of English,  
and see even more Chinese climbing up into it,  
changing from a person of pictographic likeness to a phonetic linker of sound.

# Spring

Translated by Michael Day

Just as a rose is reddest amid fresh blood,  
it will also grow blacker in a black wound,  
stopping the world from rising high on your left arm  
or hanging down, because what's clenched in your hand is not spring.

Just as a flame grows whiter in white terror,  
it will also shine green in the eyes of the dying,  
not because of hatred, but for love,  
the springtime love sunk in the flesh like the claws of a wolf:

A spring of tightly sealed lips and clenched teeth,  
the hiss of a venomous snake is spit from the tip of your tongue,  
shadows of death pass through wolf lungs  
twisted tight, shaken in upright blood.

The spring wound round our neck is a poisonous snake,  
the spring that leaps into our embrace is a pack of hungry wolves.  
Like a drowning man saved and thrown into a fire,  
spring gives to love the power for blood to flow.

Wearing the moon the snake darts out from the flames,  
bearing love the wolf falls in a rose bush.  
This is not the fault of lovers, nor  
that of the immortals imposed over our heads.

The evil in the heart of man grows up with all things,  
it plunges roots into a place the dead can see.  
There, the heart sees farther than the eye,  
like the smoke that puffs up, your hands are inhaled into nostrils.

A person cannot warm frozen hands on a rose,  
although roses and flames answer a similar call,  
among the mass of left arms raised in salute that transmits  
the annual blossoming, the yearly conflagration.

Neither can a person cool singed lips on a flame,  
although a flame becomes water faster than a lover,  
rising up into the coldest kiss of kisses,  
the yearly selection, the annual annihilation.

# Inkbottle

Translated by Austin Woerner

Paper faces in distant winter  
Rolling: mad wind lifts paper rooftops, revealing  
A brain's black nib, pregnant with ink.

If the pen's cap is screwed tight,  
No choice but to write with a sharpened pencil.  
A spider-leg winter moves with the rapid poses of wind.  
I see a black night descend on snowy ground;  
I see, between ink and eraser,  
A white page.

Who has unscrewed my tightened cap?  
Who has rewritten my life of pencil  
With indelible pen?

Covered, eternally and interminably covered.  
A life of footsteps, by airports and train stations  
Covered. A fleeting smile—by a few pat phrases  
Covered.  
The earth's real and distant winter  
Covered by a man-made 220-volt winter.  
Green fields by sullen rooftops covered.

And when my little atelier, descended on the page,  
Is covered by inkblots of collective dormitories,  
Who will be holding the tilted bottle?

# Our Hunger, Our Sleep

Translated by Austin Woerner

1

The aether-banquet's styled slaverings rise, rise;  
The servants stand all night in the sky,  
No steps to let them down.  
The candle's flame, meek, solitary, aspires.  
You are not suited to such heights,  
To gaze down at happiness from a higher hunger.  
Happiness is a low-blowing morning breeze, no more;  
If we do not stoop, we cannot reach it.

2

Low, low below the aether-banquet, shadow  
Awaits the leopard's coming. His hunger  
Is an intellectual condition,  
Voluminous as bloodlines, millennial annals—  
But betraying no ragged mark of teeth,  
Undigested, unexcreted,  
Craving only reverence for food  
And a mortification of the intellect.

3

The bat's arrival needs no sky;  
Bat upon bat, they intercleaving fly—  
A muddled, camouflaged and hybrid flight,  
A face transfigured from the rat,  
But meat and bones and all the other parts  
Consent with what we see in daylight birds.  
The bat paints sun in photographic negative, makes deep  
Our reliance on sleep, and on the dark of night.

4

We in our sleep have invented birds,  
Birds of pretty song, of white  
And limber feathers. But our birds  
Are nothing but the party line on flight.  
The bat has no residence in light, his sky  
Is an underground sky, of lower visibility  
Than a candle's flicker. Extinguish sight:  
Let ashes softly rise, rise.

5

Sleep shrouds sleep as the bat folds back his wings.  
You stay, but a thousand miles off  
The leopard who was knocking at the door  
Gets up and leaves. His hunger is a prison-hunger,  
And liberty's gate gives onto gunfire.  
Morning comes, the bat's sky disappears,  
Leaving us insomnia engraved  
And a key winking in the dark of night.

6

In sleep you hear a knocking, knocking.  
The Dead are knocking: What do they want? No door  
Can be between these two realities.  
So you trade your footprints with the leopard,  
Bequeath your glasses to the myopic bat,  
And to the Dead offer sad currency to spend—  
You wake, discover that your chains have grown  
Into your skin like the leopard's lovely stripes.

7

On the face of the earth we stand alone,  
Pressed by the weight of the recumbent above.  
Pale bodies reiterated, alike  
To the point of a glint in slumbering  
Animals' fur. A goat-hair blanket slips from space  
And covers up your butterfly dreams.  
Yet there is no Zhuangzi here for you to read,  
Nor should you hold out hope for a Confucius.

8

For years you have awaited your heavenly banquet.  
Now latecomers mount the antique stairs to find  
Not a seat remains. They stand all night.  
We eat the together and combined, but he,  
The leopard, eats only. Lofty, this affair:  
You order your dish in the leopard's abstruse tongue.  
Such recondite hunger, almost no hunger at all, unless  
You lend it a little beastliness.

9

Let food limpidly rise, rise. Who knows  
How much salt you added to your evening meal?  
This is life's own secret:  
Why we wake thirsting in the dead of night.  
You've sucked all moisture from the earth, now suck the sky's.  
A night of rain needs throat or eyes to cup,  
Needs a tap screwed tight  
To drip, drip, softly irrigate our shame.

10

Water collected will not pour.  
The ocean overflows its shores, and yet  
Our storehouses, our cups are empty. O sea,  
It does not care if its vessels are gold or rot.  
Do not hope that unhorizoned happiness  
Can hold for you a happiness small  
As a filled cavity's black daub  
Keeping company with years of small pain.

11

Toothaching leopard: let him howsoever prey,  
His vast belly disseminate like applause.  
But this is all a product of the brain,  
Approaching spirit with the rarefied order of violence,  
As if hunger were an ancient art,  
Its face the unchanging face of Time  
And Food its mirror.  
Yet we have relied on our old age to live until today.

12

A bat's night is inverted day.  
To see so far in that kind of dark, a bat  
Returns to light heartrent, eyelorn.  
The light that has its share in bat is blind,  
Its sight sublimated to another nature;  
It regards itself with humanity's borrowed eyes.  
A rat that is a bird wings on,  
But the bird within the rat has lost its sky.

13

When we go to our supper, it will be in the sky.

Lean on the lever, watch the table rise.

Can our hunger truly be so high?

When the leopard, like fermented spirit, weathers

Bounty and gain, when the bat's body on the wall turns white.

Last night's rain was yesteryear's light.

The sun's apotheosis is a candle's flicker

Illuminating empty bedrooms, empty kitchens.