

YONGMING ZHAI

Six Poems

June

From *Jingan Village*

Translated by Pascale Petit

Moonless night – the wind is high and boys practice killing.
Desire stirs in the wild wheatfield –
I can smell the drunkenness of the village.

For half a year I stare at the moon
until this distorted body of mine melts
and the spinning moon is a rusted hinge.
Everybody is drinking, having fun –
no one notices me.
From the garbage heaps
I can feel an echo from the very heart of the earth.

A dust-covered farmer touches
a fissure in the old ebony table.
I think of legends from the great dynasties.
Tonight there'll be a lunar eclipse
and the farmer's wife will take a bath,
her eyes full of blind fear.

The veiled sky shivers and shapeshifts.
In the graveyard where ancestors lie
the baked mud walls crack open with dead eyes.
At dawn, tomb diggers will find
the lords' coffins crawling with termites.

My body – all the bodies we are born with,
decay in the dark and the light.

Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City

Translated by Andrea Lingenfelter

Here they come, the lightly injured
Their gauze as white as their faces
Their wounds sewn up more neatly than the war
Here they come, the lightly injured
Carrying what they cherish
The parts that have not died
They strip off their uniforms they wash themselves clean
Use checks and credit cards

The gravely wounded city seethes with energy
Its pulse and temperature rising and falling
Faster than war
Slower than fear
Casts off its bandages and artificial legs
It has bled a green secretion
And provided the indomitable power of stone
One of the lightly injured raises his head to look
At those esthetic edifices

Six thousand bombs come pounding down
Leaving an arms depot in flames
Six thousand bombs are burning
Like six thousand gravely wounded eyes
In a rush they light up faces
By the thousand women who have husbands
Men who have wives unmarried men and women
Bodies covered in sulphur or asphalt
At their feet, twisted metal

The lightly injured now set out
Heavily wounded maps in hand
They split up to search
For the new vessels of tall buildings
Forms thin and light and pointed
The brain of this city
Extends its spikes
So easy to chop off
Yet frightening off a number of cuts

Margins

Translated by Andrea Lingenfelter

Six o'clock in the evening, the setting sun shining
Between your legs
Staring into the muddy eyes of a madman
You might resist, but I've tasted to the full
The wind's loud tears, and a grain of sand isn't much to look at
Its gaze fixed on the two of you, it would like to say
That the birds are flying in the same circles they did at some other time

You've already walked to the margins of the stars
You both understand silence
The strangeness of two names recognizes autumn
You two hide your footsteps, denying me
Any peace, while bats are smiling in the sky
Speaking in an entirely inhuman language

You couldn't possibly make a prettier picture
Than you do tonight, with your head
Resting on his leg, the way
Water rests on its stones
Right now the two of you are thinking how the most abysmally lonely moments
Can be turned to grapes, going translucent when the time is right
Falling to pieces when the time has come

The blind pool wants to see right through the night, the moon just like
A cat's eye, and I'm feeling neither happy nor sad
Leaning against a dead fence and staring at you both
I want to tell you With no one holding back the black night
Darkness has already entered these margins

The Green Room

Translated by Andrea Lingenfelter

face like an angel and a shiny pate he moves to take the stage
I recognize him, my father dragging his heels
bearer of gloomy weather
ever alert to appearances he watches us and waits

it was 1972 I was barely fifteen
in a barracks green and shaped like a horseshoe
all of this so remote now
Father's face was full of pain I wanted to leave
there was no holding me back I was a young torrent

now my limbs are spent my body broken
its waters draining quietly away
all creation is suspended above me like gifts I can almost touch
radiant sculptures nearly cover me in light
body bright and cloudless
I have the looks my father gave me sturdy on the surface but weak within
like you looking half-starved
teeth riddled with formless holes from eating so much dust
what used to be a mouth now just a small
round yearning for morals

he'd served for many years was beginning to fray
those deep, deep greens ensnared me
I was barely fifteen no way for me to bear a different standard
he saw in me the decline of a once-great family
Father Father ten years later I married
and made my own way in the world still a torrent rushing away
making the same old mischief

In the End I'm Brought Up Short

Translated by Andrea Lingenfelter

Compared to my tongue my spirit
Runs fast my hands
Are fussier and flightier than my heart

So let's all get up and sing
A quartet

And here comes someone to keep us in tune

It was a perfectly fine day
And you killed my voice
Taking it from gentle murmur to gravelly repetition
You've made me come up short

Now it's my turn to perform
Me and my beloved melody
Pouring out we will
Copy a piece of gold

I want to reshape my soul
Into something bonier
I want to catch my running breath
As it comes and goes
I want to keep up with the even cadences of your words
Want you to believe the sound of mine
And the sixth sense I have for my beloved

You've made me come up short in the end

The Submarine's Lament

Translated by Andrea Lingenfelter

starting work at 9 am
I ready my coffee my pen
poking my head out to size up the umpteenth golf ball
that's strayed all this way
whether it's needed or not
my submarine is always ready
its lead grey body
hidden beneath the unruffled surface of a shallow pool

at first I wanted to write something like this:
currently the war has yet to touch us much
currently curses are taking a different tack
at my listening post I can hear
the gentle flow of silvery fragments

the crimson shellfish still catches my fancy
in the tumult of world events it turns a deeper red
and we eat it the hand that grasps the information the shuttles
back and forth
when I started writing I saw
cute little fish encircling the shipyard

state enterprises are going under in addition
there's economic panic next door and what's more
trendily painted faces
those volatile receipts surround
our shallow pool

so this is what I write:
let me see
where should I launch my submarine this time
in whose veins will it weigh anchor
the starstruck, the hipsters, heavy metal in a disco
analyzing the periscope of writing

alcohol, nourishment, high calorie
like prepositions, pronouns, exclamations
locking up components of my skin
submarine it will plunge to the bottom of the sea
urgently but its diving for nothing
no longer subject to orders

I've written this before, and I'll write it again:
It's a bad fit
You're still building your submarine
still honoring the war dead
entombing those who went down with the ship it will lie dormant at the
bottom of

the sea
but it will also grow ever more distant
in self-imposed isolation

you can see for yourself:
now I've built my submarine
and yet where is the water
it's lapping over the world
now I must create the water
and fashion an elusive perfection
for the lament that lies in everything