

Delingha, Suspended by a Poem (A Suite of Poems)

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1. Delingha, Suspended by a Poem

At Grain in Ear, I set out from Lanzhou.
The train climbs, and climbs, half out of breath,
through Delingha—Delingha shattered by night
rain.

A horse recognizes itself in the marsh.
A horse makes out the snowline on the poplar tops.
A poem lays a hand upon the aching rails.
A young mother cradles her child,
so like a grieving sister, like Delingha cradling
humankind.

The train will leave on time; the night rain will stay.
The heart of a poem, broken by a night of rain, will
stay.

Delingha, awakened by a poet wild with longing,
will stay.

When orange dusk has steeped Delingha through,
Delingha, murmured softly by humankind,
hangs suspended from a poem.

2. Mani Stones

Come, my friend. Lend me a hand.
On the scattered bed of the Binggou River,
let us find a lonely place.
Carefully, we raise
a little cairn of mani stones,
a dopang, sacred and mysterious in Tibetan.

Stones moved by the warmth of our bodies grow
tender;

already specimens of the soul. If you doubt it,
come listen when the night has fallen still:
across their faces roll sutra chants, cries, songs, and
thunder.

3. White Poplars

The path from when I was thirteen
set out beside me; the poplars along it
stood as I yearned to stand.

Ever since, I have kept walking
between the rows of poplars,
righting my stride, adjusting my role,
because I know
there can be no turning back.

These straight-backed trees of the human world
have watched me fall and rise again;
with their lush leaves they clap and cheer.
When my spine is bruised,
the poplars, fatherlike,
come to embrace me all along the way.

4. Spider-Men

Under their own eaves,
under the eaves of others,
under the eaves of life.

For such a life,
they suspend themselves high above the ground,

mending the faces of the world's high-rises.

5. Roots

In life, a root
is a village,
a screen wall.
In death, a root
is a burial mound,
a gravestone.
Stretching farther still, a root
becomes a family genealogy, and
a few full-length prostrations by those who follow.

6. Toward a Lamp

Far or near,
ancient or now,
with the current or on a stranger's road,
there is always a lamp
like a law, like a pull,
that lets you lay down your faltering gaze,
your familiar fear, your defeated steps;
let home
find the dialect it has lost;
let the orphaned heart
find warmth;
let the land of China
leave the darkness behind.

One lamp links to another,
each rising higher than the last.

7. When I Grow Old

When I am old, I will dance with you,
sing with you—
sing of love come apart, of bodies gone frail,
then steal a moment to boast of my past.

Who have I lived for, all my life?
For my ancestors? For my children?
For myself? For the people?
None of these, it seems, is wholly true.
In this body, dissolved by the slow boil of days,
not one grain of sarira can be found.

8. A Rainbow

I have known too many dusks bowed low,
seen too many doors open, then close.

A waterwheel, old and storied,
a forest of rusting steles.

The hills and rivers, worn old beneath my gaze,
make room for a rainbow.

I have no hometown, no kin—
only a rainbow across the sky.

9. Improvisation at the Heavenly River

My grandmother, serene of face,
slips into the orange dusk.

My mother, her face dust-worn,
skirts the seasons of the north.

My beloved, lush in grace,
casts a languid line through ten li of spring wind.

My daughter, her beauty half-veiled,
let the first traces of stars gleam deep in her eyes.

I stand by the Heavenly River, improvising to the
wind,
counting the descendants stretching on behind me.

10. Ferry Blossoms

Wen-guan blossoms, May at its fullest,
bloom just so, with the bearing of fruit from home.
Wen-guan blossoms, May at its fullest,
bloom just so, like recluses hidden among village lanes.
Wen-guan blossoms, May at its fullest,
bloom just so, first white, then pink, then purple.
Wen-guan blossoms, May at its fullest,
bloom just so, as Prajna's ferry blossoms.

11. Mother

The one who never breaks a promise
is Mother.
The one who polishes the days until they shine
is Mother.
The one most like a magician
is Mother.
The one who cannot bear to let you go
is Mother.

As long as Mother is here,
even the tasks we have grown weary of
become a pleasure to do.

Those who have lost their mothers
walk on with sorrow hidden inside;
seen from behind, they pretend nothing is wrong.

12. North Dragon Mouth

So many from Lanzhou, so many from elsewhere
file in one after another,
watch a great river yield,
and the days link one to the next.

So many from Lanzhou, so many from elsewhere
file out one after another,
as though released from some unseen bond;
before them, the view opens wide.

So many tenderhearted souls
pass through North Dragon Mouth;
some sing "The Yellow River Ballad,"
others "Going West through the Pass."

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