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Four Poems by Yang Chia-hsien

Tina Z. Shan

Barnard College, tinashan22@gmail.com

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Tina Z. Shan

Four Poems by Yang Chia-hsien

Yang Chia-hsien

Waltzing Violence

暴力華爾滋

Fracture the sun with butt of a gun
Strangle the garrulous night with strand of hair
I hold the sky and shake, stars drop their masks

Throw down lover's eyes for firewood in thick fog
Blood left on bed sheets for drinking
After the storm, I cross a disheveled grassland
And chase after countless fleeing signs

O, swollen glacier, dance!
Shed darkness, remove wig of wisdom
My bare skull pays honest salute to pain

Tina Z. Shan

Yang Chia-hsien

The Drill

鍛鍊

I believe I have encountered
the mightiest inspiration
you are the streetlight in every poem
rainy season, fleeting golden crow
corona of a clear night's moon, you
are the father of them all

I settle with delay, settle
with quarantine (did I give it to you or are you
the disease)-like isolation
I must have been calm
calmly I touch you once, then
I cave in

Caught off guard by a flower
passing through veranda, angels of green wings
a most ordinary alleyway
the noodle cart you once pointed to
suddenly, all turn into broken creases
of a worn treasure map, rustling
glimpses of landscape

I even suspect my rebirth
before our next reunion
coal dust left in my hair
thorns stuck between scapulae
I am not afraid of anything (am I)
even if you threw yourself into my arms, you
a sharp blade

Tina Z. Shan

Yang Chia-hsien

Breakfast on Pluto

冥王星早餐

Cheeks baked to perfection
Your waist of thick velvet
Eyes brimming with honey
What else
hides under that napkin
Why does water vibrate in the cup
Room contracts to the most minute
until our kneecaps push into each other
compressed into
another structure

All you see is me
like Pluto ever
sensitive to light
On the lone dining table of
this dwarf planet
you come
you cut me open
Everything that gives way to the blade is yours

Tina Z. Shan

Yang Chia-hsien

The Keepsake

信物

Do not give me
what I have given you
Time stops and starts off again
When summer returns
fireflies and gun smoke take turns
What you refuse to give me
I have, after all, already
redoubled and given you

Those old singers you like
have aged more. The bay we have
yet to see
is made smaller again
Recurring typhoon signal eight
irregular earthquakes
In the floating world
several bullets once deep
rise from my chest

Does your old room still
offer the view of lamps
gradually fading out at day-
break along the seawall?
You painted this picture for me
once in a letter, taking unchanging
scenery as keepsake
You moved out of that room
the keepsake keeps true, but the sender
is no longer found

You who are afraid of old age
have aged
Have you regifted to time
what I gave you?
And what time gave you
you have also generously given
me ahead of time

Commentary

Yang Chia-hsien is a poet, essayist and literary critic born in Kaohsiung, Taiwan in 1978. Her first poetry collection, *The Civilization of Holding One's Breath* (屏息的文明, 2003), was published shortly after she graduated college. After earning her master's and Ph.D. degrees in Chinese Literature from National Taiwan University, Yang was appointed as the writer-in-residence at National Tsing Hua University, where she currently teaches. With the exception of "Breakfast on Pluto," the poems translated here appear in her 2016 collection *The Golden Crow* (金烏), which takes its title from the Chinese mythological creature that is thought to inhabit and represent the sun. Among these poems, "Waltzing Violence" was also previously published in *The Civilization of Holding One's Breath*.

Yang is one of the most iconic Taiwanese poets of the internet age. While in college, she self-published over 230 poems and 90 prose pieces on her blog, which achieved over 260 thousand views within three years of its establishment in 1998. While Yang is now widely recognized as a public intellectual for her active engagement with social issues and the happenings of the Chinese literary world, her poems are intimate explorations of the personal. Heartbreaks and losses are abundant in her work, as are literary allusions to both Chinese and non-Chinese traditions. Yang's verses, while showing influence of classical and modernist Chinese poetry, burst with emotions of contemporary urban life.

The subtlety of Yang's layered language and the agility with which she plays with symbols that have accumulated weight throughout literary history are both what moves one to translate, and what frustrates the translator. In "The Drill," for example, the phrase "angels of green wings" makes a reference to song poet Liu Yong (柳永), who affectionately recalls his lover at the sight of green birds playing with each other. The popularity of Liu Yong's poem made these green-winged birds a symbol for lovers. In Chinese mythology, these birds are also thought to be messengers of the Queen Mother of the West (西王母). Yang places the "angels of green wings" under the veranda, a common architectural feature of Taiwanese cities and often inhabited by

pigeons, the green-winged messengers of modern time. As a result, Yang is able to restage Liu Yong's reminiscence to amplify her own emotions for the addressee of the poem. In this short phrase, Yang uses a snippet of mundane urban life to make the classical move of borrowing a predecessor's sentiments. As the translator, I can only hope that my reader will have read Liu Yong, and have the patience to read my commentary to fully understand the intricacy of Yang's composition.

Another example of how layers of allusion and meaning are packed into Yang's words appears in the final stanza of "Breakfast on Pluto." In the phrase 迎刃而解 ("to separate when meeting the blade"), the final character 解 *jiě* means to unravel, dissect, solve, understand and more. Here, Yang uses an idiom that originally describes the ease with which the bamboo splits at the force of a blade to describe both the hurt and the passion felt by both parties of a relationship. Words such as "unravel," "solve," or "separate" fail to capture the willingness with which a lover sometimes meets the blade. I choose "give way" in the hope of retaining agency for the narrator of the poem, and to emphasize the readiness with which she opens herself up for the knife that is her lover, and the power she holds in such an act.

Source texts:

Yang, Chia-hsien. "Baoli huaerzi" ["Waltzing Violence"], "Duanlian" ["The Drill"], and "Xinwu" ["The Keepsake"]. *Jin Wu [The Golden Crow]*, Muma Wenhua, pp. 46, 40, 131.

———. "Mingwangxing zaocan" ["Breakfast on Pluto"]. *The Merit Times*, 10 April 2013, p. 15.