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Word Painting

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WORDPAINTING

A SELECTION OF POEMS BY
WANG WEI, T'ANG DYNASTY
ARTIST-POET, TRANSLATED
FROM CHINESE CHARACTERS
INTO ENGLISH TYPESCRIPT
AND TYPED BY CARL SESAR

ONESHOTPRESS

Passing a Temple Smothered in Incense

no idea a temple smothered in incense
lay many miles on up this cloudy peak
an old wood and a path with no people
where was that gong deep in the hills
brook babble chokes past jagged rocks
the sun slant cold in the green pines
near dark around a bend an empty pool
I sit calmly and quell deadly dragons

Reply to Vice-Prefect Chang

at this late age all I want is peace
not one hundred and one things to do
don't have any grand plan for myself
just to go back to the rickety woods
let the pine wind flap my belt loose
pluck lute in the mountain moonshine
you ask me what about causes eternal
go fishing and sing in a deep lagoon

Home to Sung Mountain

a clear river winds by the tall grass
my cart horse clip clops lazily along
the water runs with a mind of its own
night fowl in pairs fly back together
a ghost town vigilant at an old ferry
as the sunset floods the autumn hills
come a long way to this high mountain
now to slam my door shut on the world

Return to Wang River

in the gorges below a lazy bell tolls
fishers and woodsmen dwindle to a few
far away a mountain darkening at dusk
alone I wend up the white clouds home
sedge vines are too weak to hold fast
and willow flowers airy so easily fly
on the east flat green spring grasses
sick with regret I close my wood gate

Six Accidental Poems, Number 6

got old and so lazy turning out poems
there's nothing left but to get older
a make believe poet for one past life
and a dabbler at painting before that
couldn't get shy of my left over ways
so folks in this life know me as both
by name and style and all of that yes
but about my heart are still no wiser

Sitting Alone One Autumn Night

sit alone sad alas my temples are gray
the hall is empty and the hour is late
mountain fruits plop in the heavy rain
weed bugs crick and buzz under my lamp
hair gone white won't ever change back
and a golden elixir can't be concocted
want to know how to avoid sick old age
all you do is learn how not to be born

Notes

It was said of Wang Wei that "in his poems there are paintings, and in his paintings, poems." Oft quoted and much discussed, this statement by the Sung dynasty poet, painter and calligrapher Su Tung-p'o (1037-1101) came to embrace Chinese poetry in general, with regard to its imagistic content and descriptions of landscape, the graphic quality of Chinese characters, which are written with the same brushes used for painting, and the calligraphed poem itself, a concrete arrangement of images fixed in space, vibrant with meaning, often hung on a wall and viewed as a painting.

Using a manual typewriter, I've tried to carry over the visual dimension of Wang Wei's poems along with the thoughts and feelings they express. The originals have eight lines, five characters per line. Five poems are in the "new style" developed in the T'ang, known also as "regulated verse." The poem titled "Six Accidental Poems, Number 6" is in the earlier, less regulated "old style."

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