

CIRCUMSTANCES

XUE DI

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY

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XUE DI

DP

“FORGETTING,” “TRANSLATION,” AND “INTERNAL RELATIONS” WERE FIRST PUBLISHED
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FORGETTING

Six years of drought
Eye on the boats. River grows short

Man lost in a foreign land
speaking some other sort of language

closer to himself
the local scenery

smoke among rocks, dinnertime
through empty walls

Then the guests lift up their bodies
a river in a region without boats

tide rising. It's farther to my home town
speaking some other sort of language

asking for the road home. A flock of gray birds
carry drought from the mainland

Cold surging from crystals of
oblivion, strange things, transparent

SEVEN YEARS

Walking on broken glass, living
in a city whose dialect I don't speak

Feet infected, walking my own way
things persisting back of the flesh, bringing

thoughts to fruition. Making hands
hold back, there where the dark stands out. Speech

reaching to where we have not reached
Labor without end. Loneliness, then a precise

word. In a local crowd: stronger
than some new kind of language

HOTEL VIKING

In the wake of a prefabricated passenger ship
the ocean, as if with an old cotton blanket

weighs deeply on a body wide awake
The sky in the eyes of a scattered school of fish

grows brighter and brighter. The bridge that spans the
brine crosses also the opaque middle-aged mind

dark path between two precise terms
My mother grieving

writes to her faraway son
Waterbirds, lonely, follow the lights

toward regions of cold where they hover
This evening the hotel room's thermosystem

thundered without rest. Number 634
said the key in the unlit hallway

In my homeland some valuable
persons are disappearing

TRANSLATION

Staring at the clouds, I see a single figure
arranging a flower garden. She sets three
streams between her seeds and the dairy cattle

Recalling childhood, I see a collapsed
well, eight full-bellied
pitch-black birds perched

among the ways of thought of
one who has moved into a strip of land
near the ocean. The man lives alone, dreaming

Lifting my gaze toward the sun, I see
a single shining wing, darkness
circling in the air. It is some other city

My loving heart in pain cries, Do love
her elegant, well-made naked body
my lonely unclean imagination

Daydream. Faith
Imaginary life
Love's flower bed beside three streams

Shattered continually by one
act from childhood
Each blackbird on its own

hovering
in the dreams of a believer in luck

INTERNAL RELATIONS

Christened in whitest snow
A life-style the very image of
winter landscape. The horses, blue

crook their necks, sleep
soundly in the snow.
The child peels Chinese bananas

develops very thin life-
long, filled with spirit and good will
Darkness dances in his fine

symmetrical limbs. Riven, like
sex emerging naked in a core
of light. Together with a

pretty woman, kindhearted, moist, the fire
surges up again. Yellow weasels gang up
screaming in a no-man's land

Her face is radiant. Black night's
youngest psychic child
dissonant most when alone

Pheasants return in memory before sunset
Wild dogs traipse the snow in the
small town. The child called Xue

utterly lonely, fantasizes all day long
He has seen happiness, translucent, shining, shattered
heaviest snow of the year

AN ORDINARY DAY

From darkness to darkness
half way is even darker, a
path completely spiritual

Imagination makes day heavier
our flesh easier
among supposedly visible rays of light

so that wild animals, in the memory
of those earliest forgotten peoples, are
full of human nature. A tattooed child

eats meat in the shallow darkness
on his left ankle an anchor, resembling
the figure of a bird carrying a distant evil

flying away
The master of a new age arrives
his body full of holes and gilded rings

shining out of a darkness we know intimately
whose very end is the deepest darkness
spiritual darkness. Where

a body sits thinking, sad
solid, alone, like
a tattoo needle

RADIATION

March liberates those plants
oppressed for so long
At the first green cluster our minds

darken and sink down. Organs
mobile, we lose our human aspect
when the beast rises up in our flesh

The sweetheart longing for spirit
cries out as cars collide. A wall darkens
and days turn warmer. The sturdy

torsos of naked lovers, as midnight rain
infiltrates piles of stones, rise
perpendicular into the perplexity of

daily life, damaged nerves
Sex binds up those screams where
mucus drips. Forgotten

words, self-abused, follow climax
till we experience the lowest pitch of
momentary darkness. Spinning!

Waking up atop the narrowest
sunbeam. Return to March.
Like the blessed in bright sunlight

As if they looked normal, only
strange and sick in mind
Originals. In this most hectic

most modernized materialist society

LOCAL WINTER

They tear yesterday off the calendar, hailing
the snow that drifts along state highways

Stags die on exit 3 ramp
Old folks lost on downtown

intersections. Pedestrians
going the right direction all

fagged out. Imitation river
passes beneath asymmetric bridge. The homeless

stand on the bridge to watch
brief fireworks for Watch Night

Snow falls now
over exit 3

Policemen estimate inches of snow
travelers from elsewhere curse

Local expressway drivers lean on their
horns, brought to a halt by a hideous carcrash

A new billboard towers
gigantic in the snow:

HOPE FOR RHODE ISLAND
JESUS STILL THE ANSWER

Patriots beaten in yesterday's
final. Drastic cold front

continues. More viruses brought
into this close and frigid little city

by returning businessmen
For sale signs proliferate, up

all winter. Shoals of
sea birds, wild ducks, motionless

prone on that most famous local
lake, now frozen, deadly

REPETITION

Living in the love of a local woman
intense and beautiful

Lost feet
walking an old wall

Winter's garden
slimming him while he sleeps alone

The heart is an empty place to work
a small town's only river

sick lovers crowding in. Sun on
snow seems like weight being lost

Mango, the day's delight
Discontent wedges the memory

A man forced to leave his home gazes
seaward, longs for a school of dead fish held

fast. Time's inner organs
degenerate in a foreign land, decay

In a life without imagination even poetry
grows dark again. Like this land

dusty beyond consumption
Winter's lake, lake the locals

point out to outsiders
Lovers expressing calm

many and together
on the bright ice

NEW YEAR

Snow covers former days

Children hide in the snow while three squirrels
scurry to cross the road running between tree trunks

The trumpet blows the lips, extravagantly
wild with joy. Lover's anxiety
blessing like an abandoned factory

in this year's coldest rain. Cello
slithering, like a big bird on vacation
A feather, mother's best loved child

in a foreign land, days grown old, even
lighter than a feather. Father, a pen

nearly fountained out, held
in the hand of his oldest farthest child
in exile, a soul alone

Spirit-filled child. Who feels most
the pain. Whose thought is deepest
And the flesh hardening

around his deep and anguished love. As in
a small harbor, fishing boats arrive on time
tourists gawk at seawater unloaded by the gallon

After which, mast and sails
point at a tilt. Birds, vacationing
done, fly north along the ocean axis

Snow presses down on shrunken
used-up days. Through the window
I see a new year, sunlight darkening

in a quiet little New England town
New Year—is my distant home

feeling the chill, a period of new blizzards

CIRCUMSTANCES

In the bikeshop basement, a repairman fits the
naked wheel. March, like a crazed sheep

Lovers leap longingly across Valentines
like a black rain coming down in sunlight
Crowds collect, turning both directions

on cracked concrete roads. Tax money
maintains the smallest state stranded on the longest
polluted shore. Then come commercials

oozing with essence of female
pudenda. Private viruses made public
sooth the natives to stupor in sticky sheets

Fresh air aggravates craziness
We try to forget whatever we don't understand
powerless against distant antagonists. Reduced to

personal lives, we drift
dark and polluted streams
on the ground of freedom

INFORMATION

In an emblematic downpour
I shift my body, look towards ocean

watch fish slow down gasping for air
Eyes of my homeland. I am

one lost in a crowd. Thirty-eight years of
struggle, I join the wheat harvest crew

In the dark and alone, carrying water, in
free moments scrutinizing the growing crops

Effort through bad seasons
imagining

I'm a happy harvester
not going with the crowd

I know well the pain of purposeful neglect
use my heart more, not my mind

Living in imagination
a phantom joy

From tranquility
cleaner and cleaner

far from the clever crowd
closer to my own delirium

With a precise cold eye I see
the one who lives alone walk in the rain

Discomfort is a ray of light
in harder and harder rain

Crossing the intersection, in my
heart, eyes of a spawning fish

slowly going shut. Homeland
with the sound of ocean

in the ear of someone sick
resonant and more resonant

SWEET JAZZ

Love with care. Loving you
amber in sick flesh
east of China. When I love, a
pair of goat horns seems more
crooked. Our love's closest ocean's
salt flows into the
one dog's eye. Those labyrinthine
eyes once deeply loved

Those fires—the river at nightfall
carries them away. Horses vanish
night owl of the east. When torso and torso
like two lakes flow together, lips like
fish on a dive to the lake's bottom
Our love's closest village
all the ponies jolted from their dreams
to happy waking

ARC

Pure in spirit
two feet walk into society

Seeing life many-layered
seeing in silence

a celibate walk away
emaciated body

disturbed by pure thought
And one naturally precise utterance

makes experienced travelers happy
makes the ambient light grow weak

Lonely creator, in recollection, sees
standing on high the purveyor of words

Vegetarians, in a polished
abstract poem, see spirit

while a few others in the collective craziness
grumble. The communal life

early risers slurping deplorable coffee
under pressure to get the garbage organized

breathe in new viruses. No matter where
alarms scream everywhere

Seeing in the sky
that slack rope full of tight knots

turning bodily another direction, I sense
collapse, a mood of hopelessness

ONCE AGAIN

Violence and love, image glimpsed in fatigue
in those exquisite performances

I lose my spirit. Unforecasted snowstorm
this life suddenly chaotic. Before waking

cold flesh. Then conscious. A short
bridge stubbornly reaching for the other

side, metal of another reality, created by machines
of our age. Sick minds with superior intelligence

for the most part stark black and white
in the neutral dark taking over life

The harbor is still there, a magnificent idol
replacing merchant ships and their returning cargoes

A crowd of new age types in the blackening water
search for their souls. Water birds with slender wings

fly into eyes filled with salt water
closed moments sighting violence

epidemics, fleshy hate-filled eyes
Afterwards, love. The retreating eternal

precise tide leaves behind it the loneliest
most grief-stricken, beside a shining rock pile

Dreams full of detail, brushes filled with
ink, held by a returning people

in swollen hempen hands. Love
satisfied, a body trampled by temperament

In the reality and collapse of violence those awakened
twist and turn in fear, those still to wake

in endless hatred, loss, despair
all destined to be punished. Driven by our own

desires out of control and uncontrolled evil

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xue Di is a native of Beijing. After taking part in the 1989 demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square, he left China and, since 1990, has been a fellow in Brown University's Freedom to Write program. He has published two books of poems in Chinese, contributed to many magazines, and is also known as an anthologist and critic. His books, in English translation, are *Flames* (paradigm press, 1995; translated by Wang Ping, Iona Crook, & Keith Waldrop), and *Heart Into Soil* (Burning Deck / Lost Roads, 1998; translated by Keith Waldrop with Wang Ping, Iona Crook, Janet Tan, & Hil Anderson).