

Understanding the Problem with Poetry

or

The Understanding Has the Poetry the Question:

Studying Chinese Poetry and its Translation

by

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Introduction

The title of this project was created by using an internet language translator (<http://babelfish.altavista.com/>) to take a simple sentence in English and translate it into Chinese and then, using the same site, translate it back into English again. The result is a disjointed sentence that has lost much of the basis of its meaning. This subtle change epitomizes what the title originally suggests: the problem of losing meaning when you translate a text. Though this example may be extreme, it provides an example that makes it easy to understand what a subtle difference in translation can make. A language is not just a means of communication; each word carries with it both connotative and denotative differences that reflect the culture that is inherent in each language. When a person attempts to translate a text they have to balance both languages and cultures and, in our specific case of poetry, the aspect of art and craft that has gone into creating the text. Ideally a translator would be a person who is a scholar in both languages, each culture's concepts of both literature and art, and has a personal talent for crafting language in either language. However, I believe that it is possible, by studying the basics of a language, a culture, and a style of writing, that one can find a deeper appreciation for both the process of translation and also for that which is translated. The goal of this project is to not only translate some Chinese

poetry but also to translate some Chinese culture, to create a working understanding of both for the reader.

The Chinese language is doubly complicated when looked at from a Western perspective. Not only is the spoken language foreign to the Western ear but also the written language is equally, if not more, foreign to the eye.

The Spoken Chinese Language

When the average Western person refers to Chinese he/she is often referring to a vague notion of what a Chinese person might speak. This idea often includes a distant knowledge of a “standard” Chinese language and also Cantonese. The reason for this is that many of the Chinese who have emigrated to the West from China have been from Guangdong Province and Hong Kong where the dialect of what we know as Cantonese is spoken. However, China is home to hundreds of dialects of Chinese. Some dialects are only as different as an English speaker having a regional accent, i.e. a Southern-American accent, a Northern-American accent, or equally as diverse regional British accents. On the same note, some dialects are as different from each other that a speaker of one cannot recognize the next. The language that this project utilizes is the “standard” Chinese or what is known as Mandarin Chinese. With a brief introduction to the sounds of the language, even a non-speaker of Chinese can begin to have a working understanding of how the language works within a poem.

One of the key differences in Chinese from any Western language is the fact that it is tonally based. Chinese utilizes four distinct tones: a rising tone, a falling tone, a flat tone and a tone that dips and rises. The following notation can represent each:

ā á ǎ à

ē é ě è

ū ú ŭ ù

ō ó ǒ ò

ī í ĭ ì

Though two words may be made up of the same sounds or what we might in English call phonemes, if the tone used is different it will change the meaning of the word sometimes something completely different. For example “mā” means “mother” and is written as “妈”, “má” means “hemp” and is written as “麻”, “mǎ” means “horse” and is written as “马”, and “mà” means “net” and is written as “骂”. In addition to this, each tone can have different meanings and written differently, just like two words that sound alike and are spelled differently in English.

The Written Chinese Language

In addition to the complexities of the spoken language, the written Chinese language is complex in its own ways. Unlike spoken Chinese, around 5,000 years ago the written Chinese language was created, standardized, and put to use throughout China. Though, like many aspects of Chinese history, the Chinese system of writing is attributed to an almost mythological character from their history, 仓接 Cang Jie, an official under the reign of the Yellow Emperor. The written language surpasses the boundaries of dialects by standardizing and unifying the dialects in one written language. This means that even though two Chinese people may not be able to talk to each other they can still possibly write to each other.

As James J. Y. Liu discusses in The Art of Chinese Poetry, the majority of Westerners can easily recognize and accept that Chinese is written with “characters” instead of a phonemic alphabet. Liu notes however, that that is still a fallacy among some Western readers that *all* Chinese characters are pictograms or ideograms. (Liu, 3). Though the written language may have begun its journey through history as a pictogram-based system, unlike the beliefs of previous translators, most specifically Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound’s “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry”, the written character’s have long since lost their direct attachment in life. This is similar to the history of the English language in how words have transformed both in meaning and spelling over many years. Though the characteristics of Chinese poetry are greatly affected by its written characters, one must not be misled by the impression that Fenollosa has left in the literary world.

Having said this, it may still be helpful to familiarize the non-Chinese reader with some basics of the written language. As Joseph S. Wu said in his essay, “Chinese Language and Chinese Thought,”

There is very little doubt about the belief that the most characteristic feature of the Chinese language lies in its written characters. Every Chinese character is an integrated visual structure of lines or strokes which expresses a single image or concept. From the study of their origins, characters can be grouped into three categories: simple characters, complex characters, and compound characters. (Wu, 2)

Though I will not discuss each different category in depth for this project, as this would begin to delve into a realm for those more knowledgeable about Chinese, this basic idea of word construction is an important facet of Chinese sentence and image structures. Each simple character represents a monosyllabic Chinese word, as do the complex characters, and compound characters might combine other monosyllabic words to create words that are often only two syllables long. This complication of character types, in other words, is a syntactical/audio aspect of the Chinese language impossible to recreate exactly in the English language. In addition to this Wu also notes “...the Chinese language is notable for its lack of inflection. There are no tenses, no cases, no genders, no numbers, and in classical writings, even no punctuation. Owing to such syntactical characteristics, expressions tend toward a high degree of simplicity.” (Wu, 5) Though it at once lends itself to the highly

simplistic and image-based forms of much of Chinese poetry, it is nearly impossible to accurately recreate the sound, style, and function of words in Chinese poetry.

However, through the study of the construction of the Chinese characters, the syntactical complications inherent in translating the language, “some characteristics of Chinese ways of thinking are revealed; namely, the expression of general concepts in terms of particulars, simplicity, and a process view of reality” (Wu, 7).

When most Westerners first experience Chinese however it is usually through one of many Romanized alphabets. Though the old standard was the Wade-Giles criterion, most people now use what is called Pinyin. So, when you see one word spelled both “hsia” and “xia” it is because each hypothetical author or translator is using a separate system of Romanization.

The Process of Translation

I must first admit that I am not fluent in Chinese. I must further admit that I am not even very far along in my Chinese language study. However, I do believe that I have a firm enough basis of understanding not only of Chinese language but also of Chinese culture. I have also used my background in poetry and translation theory to round out my point of view. Having said all of this I hope to direct the reader's focus on the process and specific problems faced when translated Chinese into English. By discussing several theories of translation and then analyzing step-by-step the actual act of translation of several poems we can see how the cultural, literal, and artistic aspects of one poem must be balanced in order to retain it in translation.

Theories of translation have existed as long as there has been interest in foreign languages. Theorists as varied as Dryden and Derrida have all expounded upon their individual philosophies of language and interpretation. Perhaps the most simplistic base-building theory was that discussed by Dryden in his essay "On Translation." Due to its simplicity this theory of translation is what I kept in mind while I proceeded with my own translations. In this essay he describes three theories of translation (*italicized emphasis added by me*):

metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another... *paraphrase*, or translation with latitude where the author is kept in view by the

translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered... [and] *imitation*, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases.

It is these three simplistic ideas of translation that I have found most useful in translating.

It is also important to keep in mind that Chinese poetics work somewhat differently from that what we might be familiar with in Western poetic standards. The language of Chinese poetry is such that it is “extremely concise... a line can consist of a sequence of images... [that] arouse emotional associations,” (Liu, 104). For example, in the poems examined for this project, the description of the surroundings often represents an internal state of the author or narrator character of the poem. This concept is familiar in Western poetics but is not necessarily a standard. This standard comes from a history in which of Chinese metaphysical theories that began “with the notion that literature (by which is meant chiefly poetry) is the manifestation of the Tao, the principle of the universe immanent in the totality of all being... it is important to remember that this concept of a fundamental accord between literature and the universe lies at the heart of all Chinese theories...” (Yu,

291). Thus, it is easy to see that a theory of literature in which you no longer make distinctions between yourself and the earth that this kind of landscape or setting description would result.

My Translations

I.

The first poem I attempted to translate was iconic Chinese poet, Li Bai's, "Drinking Alone Under the Moon." Li Bai (701-762), a poet of the Tang Dynasty, most likely the most well-known Chinese poet in the west, wrote poems that were often colloquial with an "extraordinary lucidity of image," (Barnstone/Ping, 117). The subject of his poems was often himself portrayed as "a neglected genius, a drunk, a wanderer through Daoist metaphysical adventures, and a lover of the moon, friends, and women," (Barnstone/Ping, 117). The following poem is a prime example.

First I began by looking at the original poem in Chinese:

月下独酌

- 李白

花间一壶酒，独酌无相亲。

举杯邀明月，对影成三人。

月既不解 饮，影徒随我身。

暂伴月将影，行乐须 及春。

我歌月徘徊，我 舞影零乱。

醒时同交欢，醉后各分散。

永结无情游，相期邈云汉。

By looking at the poem in its original form, even the non-Chinese speaker can make certain immediate judgments. As is common with many Chinese poems, there is an obvious structure. Each line has ten words equally separated in the middle by a comma and each line is end-stopped with a period.

As my second step I created a copy of it in pinyin, so that a non-Chinese speaker could still understand the sound of the poem. The result is the following:

yuè xià dù zhuó

- li bai

huā jiān hú sǎ, dù zhuó wú xiàng qìng.

jǔ bēi yāo míng yuè, duì yǐng chéng sān rén.

yuè jì bù jiě yǐn, yǐng tú suí wǒ shēn.

zài bàn yuè jiàng/jiāng yǐng, háng yuè/lè xū jí chín.

wǒ gē yuè pái huí, wǒ wǔ yǐng líng luàn.

xǐng shí tóng jiāo huān, zuì hòu gè fèn sàn/sǎn

yǒng jiē wú qíng yóu, xiàng/xiāng qī miǎo yún hàn.

Hopefully, this may help to highlight sonic patterns and repetitions even for an individual completely unfamiliar with Chinese.

The next step I took was to create a representation of the poem with an extended definition of each word. My hope in doing this was to not only find a literal, or metaphrase, translation but also a system which might reflect everything a word implies. Due to the fact that, in any language, one word not only carries with it one definitive meaning, or denotation, but also any connotation or influence of other uses, the combination of words within a poem can have limitless meanings when reflected off of each other. The lines are numbered, beginning with the title as line 1, to help avoid confusion. The result of this process looks like this:

1. moon/month; below/under/(animals give birth)/lower/inferior; single/alone/in solitude/(old people without offspring)/the childless; pour out (wine)/drink/think over/(use one's discretion)
2. flower/blossom/fireworks(anything resembling a flower); between/among/separate/(within a definite time or space); kettle/pot/bottle/flask; sprinkle/spray/spill/shed, single/alone/in solitude/(old people without offspring)/the childless; pour out (wine)/drink/think over/(use one's discretion); nothing/nil/without; (à)looks/appearance/(ā)each other; relative/parent/someone dear.

3.lift/raise/hold up; cup/trophy; invite/request;
bright/brilliant/light/honest; moon/month, answer/reply/face to
face/correct; shadow/reflection/image;
accomplish/succeed/turn into; three/more than two;
people/individuals.

4.moon/month; already/since/now that; no/not;
separate/divide/undo; (ĩ)drink/medicine to take cold(i)give
animals water to drink, shadow/reflection/image; on
foot/empty/bare/apprentice/pupil/believer/follower;
follow/comply with; I/me; body/life/one's moral character and
conduct.

5.of short duration/temporary/for the moment;
companion/partner/accompany; moon/month;
(à)general/commander in chief/chief piece in
chess(ā)support/take/bring/(chess)check;
shadow/reflection/image; line/row/profession; (yuè)music (lè)
happy/cheerful/joyful; must/moustache; reach/come up to/in
time for; spring/love/lust/vitality.

6.I/me; song/sing; moon/month; irresolute/pace up and
down/walk back and forth; *adds to previous word/emphasizes
meaning*; I/me; dance; shadow/reflection/image;

zero/nought/wither and fall; in disorder/mess/in
confusion/upheaval.

7. regain consciousness/sober up/wake up; time/time of
day/fixed time/now and then; same/alike/similar; hand
over/give up/deliver; joyous/merry/jubilant, drunk/intoxicated;
back/behind/afterwards; each/every/various/different;
component/part; fall apart/ break up/come loose.

8. perpetually/forever/always; bear/form/produce;
nothing/nil/not have; feeling/affection/sentiment/love;
swim/rove around/wander/travel, looks/appearance...each
other/one another; a period of time/phase/stage; far
away/remote; say/cloud; man.

Though this may not look like a poem or read like one, and this is because it is not a poem, it shows not only the language that exists within the poem but also the language that exists around the poem. I used this to create my own metaphrase translation of the poem:

Under the Moon Drinking Alone

-Li Bai

Among the flowers a flask spills, in solitude I drink without
family or friends.

I raise my cup to invite the moon, my shadow replies and it
turns into three.

The moon already not used to drinks, shadow follows my body.
My temporary companion, General Moon, and Shadow in a
row; the music that is only spring.
I sing, the moon is irresolute, I dance , shadow withers and
falls in confusion.
The same sobering time delivers the joyous drunk after each
component comes loose.
Perpetually bearing nothing, feeling like I am wandering,
appearing momentarily remote, a cloud man.

What this version of the poem lacks in musicality and rhythm, it gains in breadth of meaning. Though this translation is still rough I wanted to show what a strictly literal understanding.

A more successful and yet still metaphrase based translation is a translation of the poem by Barnstone and Ping found in their book The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry:

Drinking Alone by Moonlight

-Li Bai

A pot of wine in the flower garden,
but no friends drink with me.
So I raise my cup to the bright moon
and to my shadow, which makes us three,
but the moon won't drink

and my shadow just creeps about my heels.
Yet in your company, moon and shadow,
I have a wild time till spring dies out.
I sing and the moon shudders.
My shadow staggers when I dance.
We have our fun while I can stand
then drift apart when I fall asleep.
Let's share this empty journey often
and meet again in the milky river of stars.

Though this poem alters the line length and physical form of the poem, it retains the rhythm and imagery of the original. Perhaps it touches on becoming a paraphrase but not as much as seen in the translation found in my Chinese book:

Drinking Alone under the Moon

-Li Bai

A jug of wine amidst the flowers:
Drinking alone, with no friends near.
Raising my cup, I beckon the bright moon;
My shadow included, we're a party of three.
Although the moon's unused to drinking
And the shadow only apes my every move
For the moment I'll just take them as they are,

Enjoying spring when spring is here.
Reeling shadow, swaying moon
Attend my dance and song.
Still sober, we rejoice together;
Drunk, each takes his leave.
To seal forever such unfettered friendship
Let's rendezvous beyond the Milky Way.

Between my translation and the two others, there are some obvious differences. Both the Chinese book's translator as well as Barnstone and Ping have chosen to break up the poem into fourteen short lines instead of the seven lines in the original. By foregoing the original form there is a visually and rhythmically longer poem. Though there was no way to retain the brevity of the poem, it is hard to say whether or not the shorter lines are the most accurate way to recreate the original rhythm, or if they detract from it to a distracting degree.

To explore this topic more dramatically from reading separate translations than my own in order to add to my knowledge of the interpretation of the poem, I created another, more paraphrastic translation:

Drinking Alone by Moonlight

-Li Bai

The bottle of wine in a patch of flowers,
I am orphaned with no friends to drink with me.

So I salute my cup to the bright moon,
my shadow replies, which makes us three.
The moon is foreign to drinking and
my shadow just mimics what I do.
My temporary companions, Moon and Shadow,
we'll enjoy spring until it's music ends.
I sing and the Moon sways.
I dance and Shadow reels.
The drunk has come to the sobering hour,
each individual drifts apart. Let's share
this infinitely hollow moment again,
wandering as cloud-men.

II.

Also translated was the poem “Spring Rain” by Li Shangyin. Li Shangyin (813-858), another Tang Dynasty poet, is also known as the “Jade Stream Scholar,” and wrote poems noted for their “denseness, allusiveness, symbolism, and obscurity” many of which may have dealt with secret love affairs he was rumored to have had (Barnstone/Ping, 212). Here is the Chinese version of “Spring Rain”:

春雨

-李商隐

依卧新春白袷衣，白门寥落意多违。

红楼隔雨相望冷，珠箔飘灯独自归。

远路应悲春腕晚，残宵犹得梦依稀。

玉党缄札何由达，万里云罗一雁飞。

Similar to the process of translation I used for the first poem, I began with the Chinese poem. This poem differs in its form from the first poem. Instead of ten it is fourteen words long but, it shares the same evenly spaced caesura and end-stopped lines.

The pinyin form of the poem is:

chūn yǔ

– lǐ shāng yǐn

chàng wò xīn chūn bái jiá yī , bái mén liáo luò yì duō wéi.

hóng lǒu gé yǔ xiàng wàng lěng, zhū bó piāo dēng dú zì guī.

yuǎn lù yìng bēi chūn wǎn wǎn, cán xiāo yóu de mèng yīxī.

yù dǎng jiān zhá hé yóu dá, wàn lǐ yún luó yī yàn fēi.

The analysis of the poem through thorough definition analysis:

1. spring rain

2. disappointed/sorry; lie (animals or birds)/crouch; new/fresh; spring; white/clear/pure; lined; clothing , white/clear/pure; entrance/door/gate; few/silent/deserted; (with previous word) sparse scattered; meaning/idea/wish/desire; many/much/more/excessive; disobey/violate/be separated.

3. red/ (symbol of success); storied building/storey(floor); separate/partition/at a distance from; rain; looks/appearance; gaze into the distance/look over/hope/expect; cold/deserted , pearl/jewel/bead; screen (of reeds); wave to and from/float (in the air); lamp/light; only/alone; self/oneself; return.

4. far/distant/remote; road/journey; answer/respond/echo; sad/sorrowful/melancholy; spring; wrist; evening/night, incomplete/deficient/injure; night; just as/like; (particle used after a verb to project possibility); dream; vaguely/dimly.

5. jade; party/clique; seal/close; thin pieces of wood for writing/letter; surname; reason/because of; extend/read/attain, surname/10,000/myriad; inside/lining/neighborhood; say(formal)/cloud; a net for catching birds; one/single/alone; wild goose; fly.

My literal, metaphrase, translation based upon my work with definition is:

Spring Rain

-Li Shangyin

Disappointed I lie in my fresh white lined clothing of Spring,
the white gate is deserted and desire more distant.

At a distance the red mansion in the rain gazes into the cold
distance, the pearl beaded screen floats in the lamplight, I
return.

A distant road replies with melancholy, tonight Spring has
become just as a vague dream.

The jade could not be closed within a letter for you, a lone
goose flying through the myriad clouds to your home.

The Chinese book translation:

Spring Rain

Li Shangyin

New, the white-lined clothes of spring, in which I sadly lie.

The White Gate is desolate, and desire unfulfilled.

In the rain, how cold Red Mansions seemed:

To the flickering light behind the screen of pearl,

I returned alone.

So far away, you must lament spring's passing,

Dreaming vague dreams for the remainder of the night.

How to send this letter, this jade pendant?

Through an endless maze of cloud our wild goose would have
to fly.

My paraphrase translation:

Spring Rain

-Li Shangyin

I lie, disappointed, in my fresh white Spring clothes,

The White Gate is deserted and desire more distant.

In the rain, the red mansion gazes into the cold distance;

I return alone to the suspended pearl-bead screen.

On some distant road you reply in melancholy;

Spring is now only a vague dream.

How could I send this jade in a letter to you?

Through the myriad of clouds, a lone wild goose
would fly to your home.

III.

Finally I looked at the poem “Night Thoughts on a Journey” by Du Fu. Du Fu (712-770) was a contemporary and friend of Li Bai. In comparison to other contemporaries Barnstone and Ping said that “The Daoist Li Bai was more popular...but the Confucian Du Fu had extraordinary thematic range and was a

master and innovator of all the verse forms of his time” and his style is described as being “highly allusive, [with] symbolic complexity and resonant ambiguity... [with a] suddenness and pathos... which creates a persona no less constructed than... Li Bai’s blithely drunken Daoist adventurer” (Barnstone/Ping, 130-131). The Chinese poem, “Night Thoughts on a Journey,” is as follows:

旅夜书怀

- 杜甫

细草微风岸，危檣独夜舟。

星垂平野阔，月涌大江流。

名岂文章著，官应老病休。

飘飘何所似？天地一沙鸥。

This poem is the shortest poem but in some ways is, I believe, the most complex to translate. Though it adheres to a similar form as the others it differs in a few important ways. From a visual point of reference, each line has ten words evenly spaced with a caesura and endstop, except for the last line which effectively has two complete stops.

This is just as obvious in the pinyin representation:

lǚ yè shū huái

xì cǎo wēifēng àn, wēi qiáng dú yè zhōu.

xīng chuī ping yě kuò, yuè yǒng dài jiāng liú.

míng qǐ wén zhāng zhù, guān yìng lǎo bīng xiū.

piāo piāo hé suǒ sī? tiān dì yī shā ōu.

Finally, in looking at the definition of words we begin to see a more obviously woven context of imagery.

1. travel/stay away from home; night/evening; write/letter;
think of/yearn for

2. thin/fine; grass//hasty; gentle breeze; bank/shore/coast ,
danger/peril/high/precipitous; formal/mast.; alone/by oneself;
night/evening; (formal)boat.

3. star/heavenly body; hang down/droop; flat/level/even; open
country/out of office; wide/broad/wealthy, the moon;
gush/surge/rise; great river/Yangtze River; flow/wander from
place to place.

4. name/fame/reputation; how can it be that; literary works;
marked/outstanding/show, officeholder/official/public;
answer/respond/echo; old; ill/sick/disease; stop/cease/rest.

5. wave to and from; surname; place (used for houses);
similar/like/appear? heaven and earth; one; sand/granulated;
gull.

The imagery of fame is linked to the movement of the setting stars, his travel in the country is aligned with his travel in life almost explicitly because, according to the definition of the word “yě” which at this point in the poem refers to being “out in the country” but can also refer to being “out of office,” an image and theme that is mentioned throughout the poem. Images of wealth against nature and fame against freedom hold the poem together. The problem arises that the poem, in its original language, is so finely crafted that it is nearly impossible to translate into English. Of course, we try anyway.

My metaphrase translation:

Night Musings Away From Home

-Du Fu

Thin grass in a gentle breeze on the banks, the high mast of a ship looms alone at night.

The stars droop down making the open country wealthy, the moon surges onto the great flowing river.

How can it be this fame for writing is outstanding?

An ex-official, old and sick, I must stop.

To and fro, to and fro, how do I appear?

Between heaven and earth, one grain, a gull.

The Chinese book translation:

Night Thoughts on a Journey

- Du Fu

Slender reeds, faint breeze along the banks.

High-masted boat, alone in the night.

Stars descend, rimming the endless land.

The moon emerges, on the great river flowing.

How is it that I'm famous for my compositions?

Out of office, old and sick- to and for, hither and yon

What do I resemble, after all?

A lone gull, poised between earth and sky.

The Barnstone and Ping book translation:

Thoughts While Night Traveling

-Du Fu

Slender wind shifts the shore's fine grass.

Lonely night below the boat's tall mast.

Stars hang low as the vast plain splays;

the swaying moon makes the great river race.

How can poems make me known?

I'm old and sick, my career done.

Drifting, just drifting. What kind of man am I?

A lone gull floating between earth and sky.

My paraphrased version of the same poem:

Thoughts While Traveling at Night

-Du Fu

Thin wind in the slender reeds along the shore,
the vast high mast of a ship looms alone in the night.

The stars wilt, a garland across the open country,
the moon surges onto the great flowing river.

How is it these poems have made me famous?

Out of office, old and sick, my career is done.

Drifting and drifting, how do I appear?

One grain of sand,

between sky and earth,

a lone gull, floating.

Original Poetry Inspired by Translation

As is presented in the preceding essay, translating poetry requires not only translating the literal text before you but also the voice of the original author, the connection of the images and language within the poem, and essentially the culture that produced the poem. It is an all-encompassing process and therefore, when a translator, who is also a poet, returns to his/her own writing, there is inevitably influence on their writing. In short, the following poems are influenced by not only the process of translating these poems but also the study of the images and form of the poems. Each poem is heavily focused on the use of strong images and a shorter form.

Shadow Puppets

We speak with pieces of paper cut to hold up to the light.

My fingers don't make the right shapes to hold things.

We don't speak the same language anymore.

It's cold; all the color has burnt itself into ash.

Even the clouds are sluggish in the sky.

We are too fiercely alone.

Old Friends

I see you across a flowered field
painted white by noon light.

We greet each other with hands
held flat above our eyes.

Sunlight pierces the spaces between
fingers like the view beneath a bridge:

river waves rolling quickly underneath,
muddy brown against the we green grass.

The mockingbird whistles
an answer and I don't
know what I have
said, if I have called
the birds to arms,
if they gather sticks
for battle, if I promise
a new love, if I mock
his breaking heart.

Original Poetry Inspired by China

I think it is important for me not only to include my poetry that was inspired by the process of translating Chinese poems but also those poems that I wrote while in China. In a way, these poems are inspired by the attempt to translate a foreign culture into my own perspective. By doing so, I feel that I became more intimately acquainted with the culture and this process was repeated when I translated the Chinese poetry. Though these poems pre-date the poems inspired by translation, I feel that without their influence I could not have attempted to do the latter.

I Call You my Uighur Traveler

-and if I ever write in another language, it will be
yours. Sounds the color of camel hair on a windswept day
next to the oasis. When my eyes are their bluest,
and they're not blue. The way our shadows left
their footsteps in the sand as they followed
behind us. The way we could run without moving.
And I wonder if I will ever think of what
I forgot, because I'm sure I have. The time
when the Ferris wheel stopped turning, but
of course that can't be it- I remember.

The way the smell of oil hung in the air, the sand
shifting under my fingernails, how I could see up
the pant-leg of the man above me, how he rattled
his foot like an angry snake, how you batted
your eyes until they watered and my hands
held your face in response. How the breeze
made us all sway just enough that I thought
we could catch the racing clouds. The sun
made our knees turn pink. Our hands
tangled like bridled rope. The sand shone

at dusk. Our arms grew sore from reaching for
each other. How we raced through crowds
like endless dunes to find out water. How we found
ourselves alone instead, and how we could no longer find
the words to speak a few dry syllables.

My Journey of Over 6,000 Steps

The best way to cure a cold
is to climb up the tallest mountain
you can find. Spot as many lucky
birds, rest on every turn, and when
a man offers to carry you- refuse.

When you think you can't go any further,
you will. Like the bird pacing
the ground and shuffling dirt
with his beak, you need patience.

When you close a lock, throw the key
down the mountainside, it can only make
the bond stronger. Forget about food,
or what you thought it was, question

the safety of bottled water, watch old
women climb faster than you, watch
the clouds erase your time, the sun
write it on the walls, the dry stones bleach.

Untitled

At day, I am a bat. I am a roller coaster.

I've never been to New York but I felt it
when my mother died: I pulled grass to help me breathe.

I sense without senses with my arms stuck
to my sides, I am falling. I am a bat, a roller
coaster that cannot see it's end, lost in a twist
of skyscrapers I've never seen. I count blades
of grass like question marks, when she died

I had to be still. The earth was not still enough.

I've never been to New York- but I want
contrast, to see with my ears. A stoic bat, I hold
my breath on roller coasters. If I cannot be
completely still I want to forget what still is.

The following series of poems was inspired by a story I read while in China in which a sick little girl keeps a fly for a pet. He is her only friend and he is eventually the cause of her death.

The Birth of the Death Fly

The death fly was born in a piece
of fruit left forgotten on my table;
no, he was born in a piece of rotten
raccoon- left dead on the road. His mother
was a piece of salt, a rusty nail,
his father was a piece of
death, a ratchet. He was born
from pieces and lives just so- just
so he is apart. With his wings split
down the middle and his eyes torn
in all directions: he was born
under a blue sky; he was born in a
dark corner, he was alone.

The Death Fly

The death fly followed me home
this evening. He's hovering around
my shoulders, sitting on my ears,
leaning against my neck. He sits
on the edge of my dinner plate
and shares my soup with me.
I'm growing comfortable with him,
tonight he'll sleep in my bed.
I'll coddle him between my two hands
so I won't hurt him in my sleep.
If we both wake in the morning,
stumbling on each other's feet on
the cold morning floor, we'll enjoy, over
toast and coffee, conversations of our
most life-like dreams. How we woke
without waking until we heard the hum
of each other's breath and opened our eyes.

The Death Fly Sonnet

Today, I came home to the vivid sight:
the death fly combing his long moustache's
tails, curling like a girl's soft eyelashes,
around his fingertips. Staring at the light,
his reflection, he lingered in a trance,
daydreaming of love. Each of his small eyes
blinked like silver stars at twilight, disguised
with a heavy horizon, dust motes dancing,
rolling in the sky. His sticky tongue rolled
distractedly at his dry lips, his wings
shivered. His lids fell like a cactus swings
against night, into a crescent moon. Cold
chilled the backlit glass, the sun soon fell slow-
and fading, he lost sight of his comely
face. Instead, people walked past the house, told
stories, smiled. Until now, he did now know
how it felt, what it was to be lonely.

The Death Fly's Self-Portrait

Instead of fluttering, he is plumper and could be mistaken
for an old raisin. His hair is dusty lint. His long nose like
a broken radio antenna, his legs lay limp. He rests

on his back, cushioned by wings that drape across
like moth-eaten gauze. At one side, a can of beer,
on the other, a crumpled ball of paper.

His eyes reflect, like dull mirrors, a reflection
of me- I am a ghost in his presence.

And I flicker like television static. I am cold.

The Death Fly Alone

Only now, he is afraid of the dark.

He coats his legs with vaseline so they are slick;

they reflect light like bottles of water,

like mirror-plated columns, like prisms.

He catches errant rays and hold them there

in their reflections. He imitates fireflies.

He daydreams. He flies higher than usual

but falls quickly in the shade.

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