

LAU Wai Shing

On Passing by Train Through Tangshan

A huge flute lies on its side before the station
 in its hollow tube curiosity from foreign parts
 forms notes that limber up to dance
 finger-holes like carriage windows
 wait for heavy pressure to descend
 and then the notes will fit themselves to a lilting melody
 and float over the walls of the Forbidden City
 the ruins of the Yuanming Yuan
 the parapets of the Great Wall
 and finally be smothered in the noise
 coming down the tunnel of history
 of the earth caving in
 Will then the eight notes in the hollow of the flute vibrate
 at one with the point eight shockwaves outside it?

The low houses far beyond the station
 spread over the ground like fruits
 whose seeds long to germinate
 and with their webs of roots
 close up the fissured earth

The black on white signs that give the station's name
 stand on the platform like cenotaphs
 the train starts into motion
 Ten years and more!
 The white paint is cracked and crazed
 the cracks spread slowly towards the black lettering
 but the train hurtles into the pitch-black tunnel . . .

Translated by D.E. Pollard

Author's note: The earthquake that devastated Tangshan in 1976 measured 8.3 on the Richter scale.

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Shopwindow

*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world,
and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange
for his soul?*

(Mark 8:36-37)

Too stiff to be able to follow the sequence of dressing
at season's change the mannequins are stripped bare, dismembered
Pointedly thrusting breasts, long plastic legs
waists not for slimming, momentarily arrest
the attention of people hurrying by
They all home in on their favourite part
let it grow its missing organs in their thoughts
like a worm that's cut in half
imagining their day's journey and work
will thereby be made fulfilling
But recollection jumps back to those neat amputations
like a fish on a chopping block thrashing and jerking
comforting the mannequin's pain with their impending pain

The passers-by can only retract their smiles
smarten up their clothing
wind their wristwatches and necklace beads
and try through the phantom images of themselves in the glass
to prove that they too can show off the merchandise
yet they only bare their heads, for in their cavities
light, sound and air linger and circulate
like in the fissures in cliffs in the natural world
that have existed since the beginning of time, all very similar
yet none exactly the same
How can you determine someone's identity
from the set of their features?

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I begin to understand, transparency is a form of nakedness
Without the curvaceous figures, without the painful amputations
shadows would have nowhere to grow and multiply
and then you would have no right to feel doubt
and even less need to enquire after who you are
if everything was even, smooth and bright
The plastic limbs reassemble to assume human shape
and underneath the new season's apparel the gashes
pretend to heal and join, and take on flowing lines
allowing time to glide by unimpeded
Yet the passers-by
grow another finger on account of a diamond ring
grow another pair of hands on account of a pair of bracelets
grow another pair of feet on account of a pair of shoes
Trademarks hop from the mannequins
onto the passers-by like fleas
superfluous limbs keep sprouting and waving
but still cannot scratch all the places that itch
Weighed down by the masses of limbs
the passers-by become weak and weary
forget even why they were hurrying by

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An old lady with no superfluous limbs
only a simple stick to support her whole frame
confides to me her troubles
"With the change in weather the cold cuts
my hands and feet like a knife
I'm only thankful they haven't come off yet!"
I gaze at the tall buildings and hills far away
everyone is busy cutting up the world
but I dare to go naked, let light
unite like a healthy tendon
indoor and outdoor space
even pass through the prison bars of price-tag barcodes
to allow the gashes one remembers
join up the numb superfluous limbs

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WONG Tim Fat, Andy 黃添發
An Exciting Moment, 1992.
Mixed media, 58 x 93 cm.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition 1992.

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A Moth in the Striplight

I wonder how you broke in
 to this seemingly sealed place of light
 Possibly your insignificance
 allows you to squeeze through
 all loopholes in the moral law
 Whenever till now I surfaced from my work
 and looked up at the ceiling it was like
 a mummy waking to see the bandage that covered its eyes
 and believing that light and pure whiteness was the primal state
 the beginning of the bandage and its end

Gradually you become hesitant, downcast
 your energy shifts from your springy legjoints to your sensitive feelers
 irritably you scout back and forth, trying to fathom
 your identity, your memories and dreams
 This endless whiteness, is it enfolding you, or engulfing you?
 Finally you discover a row of objects
 very like you in appearance
 stretched out rigid in this perpetual light stream
 woundless bodies caging and confining all praise
 casting down on people absorbed in the workaday world
 countless indelible black shadows

The stark contrast of black and white
 like a leaf of scripture over my head
 holds my eyes that want to escape the glare
 yet there is no way I can understand
 those cumbersome inert characters
 Watching you bumping and butting to find a way out
 is like looking up from the bottom of the arctic sea
 overhead a tight seal of pure white
 around me eddies of my own thoughts
 pellucid yet icy cold, and I likewise
 in their midst will never corrupt

24 May 1994

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