

From the Chinese of Wang Wei

Translated by Albert Faurot

A FARM BY THE WEI RIVER

Slanting sun across the land,
Cows and sheep in crooked lanes;
Aged farmers, propped on canes,
Watching for their shepherd lads—
Pheasants whirr in the heavy wheat;
In sparse mulberry, the silk worms sleep.
Homeward trudging with their hoes
Workmen murmur when they meet.
This life I long for makes me hum
That ancient folk-song, "Going Home".

渭川田家
斜光照墟落。
窮巷牛羊歸。
野老念牧童。
倚杖候荆扉。
雉雊麥苗秀。
蠶眠桑葉稀。
田夫荷鋤至。
相見語依依。
即此羨閑逸。
悵然吟式微。

The six poems by Wang Wei 王維 printed here are selected from a portion of his works written in wu-yen form, i.e., lines each containing five characters. Ranging in length from four lines to above, they represent the poet's mastery in coining the most sensitive and inspired utterances within the confines of the short line, his best medium. With each poem, he depicts a scene of nature which he responds to, in that quiet, musing voice unmistakably his own.

Born into the T'ang empire at the height of its power, Wang Wei (701-761) enjoyed a career of high officialdom, only shortly eclipsed during the period of recovery from An Lu-shan 安祿山's rebellion. But, rather than write about the sweeping changes in the face of society, like his younger contemporaries Li Po and Tu Fu, he devoted himself to hermetic thoughts far removed from human want and woe. In artistic achievement, he was painter, poet, musician all in one, his cult being that of the Buddhist who sought pleasure in solitude and meditation. Unrivaled in landscape description, he has passed down to us a body of poetry that reveals his sharp observation and rich artistry. He is also recognized as one of the earliest masters of monochrome landscape painting, though only copies of his work exist today to justify it. Among the many judgements passed on him, the most famous came from Su Tung-p'o 蘇東坡, himself a connoisseur of poetry and painting: "There is poetry in his painting and painting in his poetry."

MOUNT CHUNG-NAN

Towering to celestial heights,
 Linking mountain range and sea,
 Your white clouds behind me gather;
 Mists I enter seem to flee.
 By your ridge the wilds are parted,
 Sun and shadow split in vales.
 Needing shelter for the evening,
 Woodsmen o'er the stream I hail.

終南山
 太乙近天都。
 連山到海隅。
 白雲迴望合。
 青靄入看無。
 分野中峯變。
 陰晴衆壑殊。
 欲投人處宿。
 隔水問樵夫。

HUA-TZU HILL

Ceaselessly the birds fly by
 The range again is autumn-dyed.
 Up-hill and down-hill, time on time—
 I grow ever sadder, with each climb.

華子崗
 飛鳥去不窮。
 連山復秋色。
 上下華子岡。
 惆悵情何極。

DEPARTURE

I dismount and pour refreshment.
 Friend, why go? And whither bent?
 You say, I have not found contentment.
 Back to South Mountain I am bound.
 So let me go, and do not press me.
 White clouds drift there, endlessly.

送別
 下馬飲君酒。
 問君何所之。
 君言不得意。
 歸卧南山陲。
 但去莫復問。
 白雲無盡時。

RETREAT IN MOUNT CHUNG-NAN

I followed, mid-way in life, the Way,
 And of late retired to Mount Chung-nan.
 In solitude I roam all day
 Midst beauty known to me alone.
 I stroll to where the stream begins,
 Then sit and watch the cloud banks turn.
 Sometimes I meet an old woodsman
 And chat, and laugh—and not return.

終南別業
 中歲頗好道。
 晚家南山陲。
 興來每獨往。
 勝事空自知。
 行到水窮處。
 坐看雲起時。
 偶然值林叟。
 談笑無還期。

HOME TO SUNG MOUNTAIN

By grassy banks, the river lingers
 Like my carriage rolling on:
 Man and stream, with birds together
 Homing in the setting sun.
 Past the ford and ruined fortress,
 Now the whole fall mountain glows!
 Far away, beneath its summit
 Latch the gate, and find repose.

歸嵩山作
 清川帶長薄。
 車馬去閑閑。
 流水如有意。
 暮禽相與還。
 荒城臨古渡。
 落日滿秋山。
 迢遞嵩高下。
 歸來且閉關。

王維五言詩