

I
LOTUS LEAVES



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LOTUS LEAVES

Of all the flowers and shrubs on land and water, many are worthy of love and admiration. The poet Tao Yuanming of the Jin Dynasty was especially fond of the chrysanthemum. Ever since the Tang Dynasty, the Chinese have loved the peony. As for me, I am especially fond of the lotus, which rises from the mud unsullied, washed in clear water but never vain, hollow within and straight without, neither clambering nor branching. Its fragrance spreads far and strong, yet it stands still and firm. It may be admired from afar, but one can never get close to it or taint it. I consider the chrysanthemum the recluse among flowers, and the peony the flower of prosperity and fortune; but the lotus is the true gentleman. Alas! The chrysanthemum has been out of fashion since the days of Tao Yuanming. As for lotus-lovers, besides me how many are there? But everyone loves peonies!

—*On the Love of the Lotus, Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073)*

These poems of mine are variations on a classical theme, playing loosely on the traditional and popular motif of the lotus. But of course they do actually ask a lot of questions. The movement of thoughts, the process of transformation, and the possibilities of figures, are important to me. I wanted to explore various traditional values in contemporary contexts . . . I returned to Hong Kong in 1983, and during the summer I went with artist Leung Kui Ting

to the Green Pine Taoist Temple to look at lotus flowers. I found the dusty lotuses at the edge of the city so very different from the lotuses in classical Chinese poetry and painting despite certain similarities . . . At that time I was experiencing some upheavals in my own life. This was not just because I had returned to the East from the West; I seemed to have entered another stage of being. I tried to look for another form to settle in amidst all the turmoil . . . a new form to orchestrate my thoughts on art, on culture and history, my emotions.

—PK

This series was written between 1983, before the Sino-British Joint Declaration, and 1999–2000, after the Macao Handover. They are about voices on the margins, prejudices between cultures, struggles of the colonized language, communications and doubts in human relationships, and a simple father's fatigue. But mostly, they are about a protest against authority.

—Leung Ping-kwan(1949–2013): A Retrospective, 2014

Seven of these poems appeared in 2018 as a separate bilingual booklet, the first occasional publication of the Wairarapa Academy, accompanied by the superb black-and-white lotus images of New York photographer Lois Conner. As a sequence they are dense and intense, often puzzling, always demanding for reader and translator alike. If the poems in the later section of this anthology entitled 'Clothink' present the poet at his most light-hearted and playful, here he is at his most riddling and serious.

Leaf Connection

By chance we come to this lotus-field
Walking an old wooden plank into the thick of leaves;
Silence rubbing silence utters sound.
This is a wonder, green
Answering green, an encounter in this morning of a world.
There the wind blows open closed faces,
Here it stirs my cusped leaf-edge.
We make contact,
Begin clumsy explanations;
The leaf-veins which language illuminates
Are the only world we have.
The fresh dews of morning which gradually become round
Cause me to grow still, my silence
Touching another leaf, each bearing alike
The weight of an insect at rest.
In a chance encounter in this world, side by side,
With no intentional prosody,
We utter the same sounds, then drift apart
Rather than explore each other in the wind.
We raise our heads naturally,
Meaning rises slowly to the surface.
The frosted snow on all the leaves still weighs upon me;
Growing from the same shallow water.
We strive to stand erect on hollow green stems,
Reaching toward a truer space.
I know we can never depart from the language of this world,

But neither need we conform to it.
When we are silent, there will still be noise;
Each of us abiding the seasons' dust,
We listen attentively, and as we unfurl
We sense the colours of distant waters.

Summer 1983

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Leaves of Love

At this limpid pool in early morning
As she bows her head to quench the desire of her thirst,
Another desire is born in her heart,
Like the swaying of seaweed, like a fish opening and closing its gills.
This is not a shoulder partially glimpsed amid trees,
Not a fragmented view of eyes, but
A complete human form,
The image she likes to see,
The image she sees seeing her.
Between us, she says, lies only a thin film of water.
Her eyes glisten with a strange lustre, her face
Flushes, her voice grows more tender.
As though drunk with wine, she makes strange movements.
For reasons unknown, she turns her body, raises her hand,
Strokes her willowy hair, sways her head
Like a falling leaf; or weaving her waist gracefully, stretches,
Watches the water like a mirror watching her stretch,
Reads an oncoming hand, like an intimate sign.
She reaches out to unfurl the hand, but the sudden contact
Shatters the image; shock after shock, seen,
Then unseen; thunder and lightning,
The agonized uprooting of the gale,
Union, then separation; roots snapped, fibres still
Entwined. During the long patient awaiting, ripples settle
Into circles. Can anything ever be added to the mirror,
Can anything ever be subtracted? Gradually she grows calmer,

Steadies, a secret heaviness transmuted into
Gravid fruits,
An invisible heaviness and opulence; she opens her face,
And between the gaze of desire and the depths of the water
The wind blows ripples of words.

1986

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Leaf Crown

The word *lotus* is itself somehow archaic.

As if we cannot find seeds,

Cultivate new flowers of our own.

Pointing to this trembling pink apex, you give it names,

Nenuphar, *nymphaea*,

Fuqu, *bandan*,

Many fine names,

Beautiful, splendid names.

But they've got nothing to do with me. What significance

Do their beauty and splendour possess?

I wait in faith, to hear at length

The sepal breath, I am heavy and clumsy,

Thwarted by mud. You drift lightly across the water

Shedding the petals of yesterday, your face fresh and clean again,

In an open world, amidst the disseminations of men.

My leaves and stalks are loaded with human clamour too,

But muddy,

Sluggish, caught in private nightmares,

In perilous deluges of dawn; my roots tangled

In silt, can never be articulate

Before I can finish, you turn impatiently towards

The attentive gaze of others, the habitual, recognized rhetoric.

I fear my words will eventually prove futile, will fail to make you

Abandon the old demarcations, fail to make you feel true cold
or warmth.

If you are for grandeur
Inevitably you will find my lack of embellishment shabby.
Finally I fall silent, look to the distant hills,
Watch the pale blues and grey greens one after the other
Come surging onwards, breaking the symmetry.

Summer 1983

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Leaf Letter from West Lake

At West Lake,
By Winding Bridge,
I glimpse them all in the distance,
Their open palms waving gently in the wind.
I'd like to write you a letter, I'd like to tell you all about
West Lake, how we wended our way through the jostling crowds
To a pond of free-furling flowers and leaves. I refuse to employ
Archaic language to narrate the antique drama
Of Duke Ruan's Islet,
That well-known site so replete with allusion. I'd
Rather tell you my story, in meandering fashion,
In the belief that somewhere beyond the dense miniature shrubbery
We can reach a tranquil pond of our own
Within the heart-and-mind, a place where our leisurely gaze can
Sweep over the fresh crimson blooms,
Beside the withered leaves.
Even as I write,
I find myself studying the faint flower patterns on the paper,
Which have a hidden meaning of their own.
I'd rather not pollute them with words at all; how
Can I ever hope to convey human truth and illusion in the interstices
Of flowers? Again and again all the elegant rubbings and calligraphies
Fade, the carved steles recording history
Are demolished in a cultural holocaust
Or corrupted with graffiti. We can only join a few dots, trace
calligraphic strokes,

Seek out hidden scars, lament the fragmentation of language.
Meanwhile
Beautiful legends continue to circulate, even as more and more
Vulgar sky-scrapers rise into the air, rebuking the lake's
Leisurely beauty.
We cross Winding Bridge but can never
Draw near to the centre, nearer to one another.
Our flower-loving hearts must abide the mockery,
As the fish-watchers discern fish-heads
Nibbling beneath their busy hands, as they discover
That the moons in the water
Are mere multiple refractions of artificial light.
All myths turn out so differently in the end. I can imagine
You smiling superciliously at the delicate, but lifeless patterns on
the paper
Of this letter written by the lake,
Surrounded by ancient scars and fresh bewilderment.
Pain and grief lurk in the shadows of
Trees, bitter lamentation is swallowed up in the dark swelling wave.
But the wind moves her wrist, the ripples
Unfold their painted scrolls,
Heaven and Earth brush their graceful but desolate calligraphy.
We are scattered dots of ink
Splashed against a boundless misty watermark,
Vaguely surmising from the broken strokes the liquid veins
Of a greater whole,
Of an entire landscape.

1987