

Xiaole Zhan – Secondary Schools Division, 1st Equal

Woman, sitting in a garden

So the old woman sits in her garden. She has gone home to watch her trees grow, to watch things change beneath the light. And the sky is wide open, is a naked palm of wet paint. And the sea is wide open, yawns an infinite tenderness. And grass grows, and grass grows, and nothing happens. Time is slow as a tree.

There is light over everything, between everything. There is light the colour of lemons beneath the old woman's skin. There is light bejewelled upon red, yellow, royal blue. There is light clean like a straight line, light clear like the plain tone of the horizon, light licking light listening to ringing light.

From pale petals there is the singing of bells. The air is wet with round lips, with warm breath, flowers blurred with drunken light, flowers with soft animal faces pressed beneath heavy blankets of light. The air is aquiver with flecks of red, yellow, royal blue, soaked with the fluid of lungs.

And stroke upon stroke of translucent time glistens upon moving water. And lightly, lightly, the sky above the horizon bathes in a thin skin of white. There is white over everything, a pale wash of watered light, a closing eyelid clear as glass glazing over the world.

And long blue shadows lounge along the moon-white path. Shadows luminous with longing tongues welling with pools of colour. Shadows with soft tummies swollen with swilling paint. Shadows luring round ringlets of light down slick throats, drinking, drinking, drunk and languid along the garden path.

Nestled in shadow, a startle of daisies. Bright pizzicatos. Flicked with a wrist like the glint of the tail of a silver fish. Flickering the air, sending shards of sky into leaves, shards of leaves into sea. Dotted the grass, tickling the hard elephant skin of the old woman's feet. Glowing sharp and godlike, as if piercings in canvas, wounds from a spell of bladed stars, pinpricks into another world.

And the old woman wears clothes worn loose and soft and smelling of mother. The old woman wears clothes made of blocks of solid colour. She is plain as the sky, an open palm of

green. A breathing plain of grass. She is the shape of the wide dome of the world, the shape of open arms.

And the aroma of old bone soup mingling with chrysanthemum tea is lacquered over the old woman's lips. The old woman is the age of soups, the age of new faces like loose threads unspooling old faces and faces and faces.

And the garden is a slow broth of loose marrow in warm bones, of tendons boiled mellow in the sun, of star anise a lukewarm breeze over a spiced and cooling sea. Star anise tingling limbic, buried beneath the gentle mound of the old woman's tongue.

And the old swing whines tenderly. There is a breeze in the garden, and it rocks the swing made of rope and an old black tyre which rubs off on everything. The swing is a maker of calluses along small children's palms. The swing dangles from the great gum tree and there is the faint outline of words etched along one arm of the black tyre.

Facing the swing, there is a window. The window is gold from the light of the sun. Faint, there is a figure through the window, large in the dark house. The figure is matte black and pulsing, as if in blurred vision, in and out, in and out, the dilated pupil of an eye in wavering dark.

Through another window there is a yellow lamp, and at its centre, complete whiteness. The lamp is hot and curled in like a cabbage. There are fingerprints along the base of the lamp, and bits of skin, and webs of sweat. There is no longer a surgical sharpness to the light, no knifing of lines, of edges. In the dimming glow of the lamp, the room is almost shaped as a circle. In the centre of the lamp, the bright heart of yellowing leaves, there is the shivering of atoms, of white heat. And reflected in the glassy bulb like an old teary eye, there is the pooling of nights, the quiet of days, and a long white dress flaming atwirl.

And nothing happens, and nothing happens. Insects trickle along invisible veins of the garden, drop dead, legs scattering black eyelashes, everywhere. Webs drool over petals, over the old swing, over everything. A cabbage moth glints in the light, and then disappears.

Beneath the paintlike light of the garden, beneath stroke upon stroke of even colour, beneath the roots of the great gum tree and the shadows along the moon-white path, beneath moving water, breeze of star anise, beneath all of these things, these things like a great palimpsest of skin, these things like a stern and glassy lake, there moves a giant muscle, schools of glinting fish, of which it is possible to catch glimpses, often, so often, and yet impossible to draw into light – how is it the great mound of memories, of embraces, of open palms, of hands to foreheads, hands to cheeks, hands to lips, hands to hands, the soft gestures, the space between limbs, the spacelessness between limbs, lips to foreheads, lips to cheeks, lips to lips – how is it all these touches, movements, memories, absorbed only in other touches, movements, memories – how is it these things remain impossible to catch in the confronting glare of day, exist only in one moment and not the next, evaporate quick like the flicker of a cabbage moth's wings?

Plants elongate slowly. Petals wilt in the sun. There are a thousand silent tremors as the great gum tree unfurls its roots. Grass grows, and grass grows, and nothing happens.

In all this waterlogged time, the old woman moves only once, or perhaps by a trick of the light, to inhale, exhale, softly.