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POETRY

Poetry Between Languages 5 min read

November 6, 2019 Simon Shieh, Jiaoyang Li and Chen Bo

New poems from *Spittoon* magazine, by Li Jiaoyang and Chen Bo

Writing poetry in a second language is like floating in zero gravity; it is freeing and terrifying at the same time. Many jump out of their mother tongue, but few find grace in the free-fall. Li Jiaoyang and Chen Bo – both native Mandarin Chinese speakers whose English poems are published below – have each found a distinct voice in a foreign tongue. Not only that: they have succeeded in presenting the English language to native speakers as something wild and new.

These two writers demonstrate clearly why to learn a new language is to see the world in a different way. It is not hard to see the productive potential that language learning has for poetry, whose gift is to show us the world in new ways, and also to understand how a Chinese-speaking poet might, upon learning English, see a fresh new set of tools with which to paint.

Both Li and Chen write in an English that is influenced by the Chinese language, but in different ways. Li Jiaoyang dropped out of her university in Shandong to pursue her dreams of being a novelist at Goldsmith

University of London. One night, on Shakespeare's birthday, she was drawn out of the library by an all-night poetry reading marathon and was enamored by the craft.' Her poetry still bears the mark of the Chinese language on its surface.

Chen Bo's writing, however, only leaves hints of its Chinese influence, and could have been written by a native-English-speaker. Chen began writing in English when he was living in Dublin, where he exchanged poems with Irish friends. The English language, for Chen, offers a break from what he calls "the sought-after feelings and conventions" of a Chinese poetic discourse. In the end all poems, like Li's and Chen's, create their own universe of meaning, their own discourse, within a language. To read a poem is to trace the meanings of its words anew, to connect its dots – ultimately, to learn its language. – *Simon Sheih*

Pilgrims

by Li Jiaoyang

Flight MH370

disappeared in the Indonesia sea after flying for 40 minutes.

The passengers were painters, Buddhists, fathers, mothers, and infants

Dear earth man,

we have stepped into our suitcase
and fastened our spirit belt,

00:00, 0 feet

injecting with god's floating grapefruit
of frozen bygone days.

A big party

we will have soon,

00:20, 35000 feet

to paint the moon super yellow
and send it in front of you.

Do have an attention of
the dog barking at you on the wet street
the wooden doors suddenly beat,
the glass bead rolling on your ceiling &
the winter boiler with falling heat.

God loves all the broken parts of you:
piles of one pence golden coins are
winter hearts embraced with dust,
falling and shaking in neighbour's
cup and one second and another

Wind past with sound of flute

00:38

we will have a big party soon

to witness the trace of mola mola fish,
wriggles on the white belly

of blue earth

do you feel we move closer

Tinnitus Induced Greenness

by Li Jiaoyang

abandoned on the road

like a chair swiveling
& loosen its screws.

today, you wobble
& soak here
like a spoon stirring the winter golds
& turning slowly for an hour

You are not that bad,
just never wore the right clothes
in front of candles

always so solemn
& so poor

the picture frame
above the fireplace
humming around your burning ears
with a sensation of falling

the ambiguity sold by your sights
calmly land down on the corners
of the table

witness how the unwanted
car honking & menacing the
King of leaving
in his sedan chair

the sound of raining and bathing
invites the you in the distance
walking towards you

you are afraid to talk about those
incorrect triangles

explaining or erasing
is also a gesture of
acquiescence

You are not those shadows
 you are the eyes that fail to lock inside
 the shadows

allowing them to compose
 a foreign dictionary
 partly
 about you

flowing screamings
 distilled by the marching
 temple

Carry me away,
 the choker of new religions

those gently laid letters
 & polite syllables

Memory
by Chen Bo

in the fissure of memory
 conscience grows wild
 while the mirror nibbles at the past

sometimes memory breaks through the mirror
 startling a flock of birds into the air
 which then fall like sawdust

Walking on Ice
by Chen Bo

Late that winter night,
 we walked to the lakeside.
 The water was frozen except for
 vague murmurings underneath.

Look, the ice is so inviting.

On the surface our steps
 overlapped like Venn diagrams.
 Your warmth was dazzling.

Will you remember this?

Words passed our climates back and forth,
 yet the details of life kept us in place
 like our names.

In the morning, I returned to the lake.
 Underfoot, the ice gleamed.
 Frozen inside it,
 a dark green fish hung straight,
 its blank eyes staring.

Tianjin Explosion
by Chen Bo

This weekend my friends and I gathered.
 Xiaomai sighed as she usually does.
 My punk friend was a little dazed,
 he even forgot to say *fuck*.
 All day I read report after report,
 but didn't know what to say.
 At the table next to us,
 a group of people were eating and drinking,
 drowning our conversation.
 We glanced at them,
 the Chinese stomach can digest the heaviest cloud.

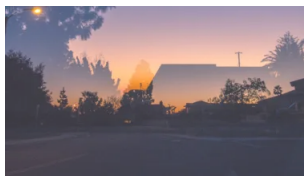
Outside the autumn air was cooling,
 neon lights blinked in the dark.
 To kill the silence, my friend proposed a toast.
 To what?
 Well, to Tianjin then.
 In our impotence,
 we swallowed our beer,
 knowing our anger would, like the truth,
 be gone like a hangover.
 In the end we left early,
 I returned home, and wrote a poem
 that doesn't sound like a poem. ■

“Pilgrims” by Li Jiaoyang and “Memory” by Chen Bo were first published in *Spittoon Literary Magazine*, and are republished here with the permission of the authors.

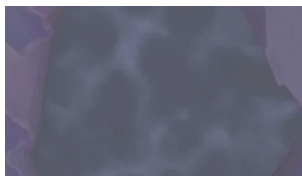
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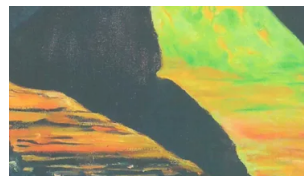
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