

# MOONLIGHT & SHADOW

An Imaginary Portrait of Mei Yao-ch'ên

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AN IMAGINARY PORTRAIT OF MEI YAO-CH'EN

NIGHT, BY MEI YAO-CH'EN  
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH  
BY JEFF SCHWANER

Do we say it's fate that dark green moss hems the edge of my stairs  
or do we slam the door and crouch behind it, afraid of company  
and travel, of what signs our shoes will reveal in the mud on the steps?

Mei Yao-ch'en

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

MANY OF THE MORE INTREPID readers of my site *Translations from the English* know that for most of 2014 I was at work on a sequence of poems about 11th century Chinese poet Mei Yao-ch'en, the premise of which includes me somehow transporting him in the midst of his forty-ninth year to that same moment in my life here in the 21st century; that as Sung dynasty poets tended to do, Mei and I thought time and distance less important than wine and friendship, and that he heroically and generously consented and contented himself with being a guest in my house (and millennium) for some undetermined duration, taking it upon himself to write home occasionally about his experiences, sometimes to his friend (and his brother in law's son) Hsieh Shih-hou.

The poems in this book, then, are in Mei Yao-ch'en's voice. The titles are in mine — in the absence of the proper writing materials, Mei records his thoughts on walls, towels, shower curtains, poster board, on the underside of a Christmas tree skirt, whatever is at hand, much like his predecessor Han Shan was said to scrawl his poems on rocks, trees, and monastery walls — and I translate and record them, adding long explanatory titles which are themselves the type of titles that were very much part of the social transmission of poetry of the Northern Sung dynasty of Mei's time.

I call these poems an “imaginary portrait” because, of course, the words are not Mei's, and while I'm not sure they are entirely mine, either, there is no one else about to take credit or responsibility for them; so they are those of a Mei of my own making, and they do across their breadth begin to sketch out a portrait of that poet for twenty-first century readers. Also, in the first and only book I was able to find about Mei's life and work, the cover and verso of the half-title page are adorned with an image of Mei that is described as an “imaginary portrait” painted roughly six hundred years after his death. Honestly, I thought if someone could take a shot at painting the guy's likeness after six centuries, could I trespass any more on the truth by trying to throw him a thousand years into the future and read his mind?

I was moved to write about Mei after reading wonderful translations by David Hinton and Kenneth Rexroth. Seeking out additional information I found the book mentioned above, *Mei Yao-ch'en and the Development of Early Sung Poetry*, by Jonathan Chaves. Published in 1976, it is a gold mine of biographical information, critical perspective, and translations of dozens of Mei's poems. I found it just after I had written the first one or two poems about Mei and decided I'd write more.

In the spring of 2014 I made contact with Professor Chaves, who teaches in Washington, DC at George Washington University, to thank him for a book he wrote forty years ago. To my surprise and

delight, Professor Chaves responded the next day, and added: “In Spring of 2011 I visited Mei Yao-ch’en’s hometown of Hsuancheng / Xuanchang in Anhui Province, where a new monumental statue has been erected in commemoration of him.” He included photos of the monument in its in-progress state, which may by now have been completed. It’s good to know my old friend’s work is getting the attention it deserves.

I found additional insight into Mei’s life as a poet by reading *The Social Circulation of Poetry in the Mid-Northern Song*, by Colin S.C. Hawes. It contains several translations of Mei poems I have not found in translation elsewhere, and even more of Mei’s good friend and fellow poet Ou-yang Hsiu.

The Afterword of this book contains a translation of Mei Yao-ch’en’s poem “Night”. This translation is my own, done with the great help of Chen Zhang, who at the time of this writing was serving as Literary Chinese Preceptor at Harvard University, and who provided insight into the Traditional Chinese characters of the Sung dynasty poets. The sum of what Ms Zhang provided me in my struggle to translate a single poem of Mei’s is far greater than what shows up in the merit of the translation. I made this attempt mostly to introduce to readers of contemporary English-language poetry a poem of Mei Yao-ch’en’s which had never been translated before; to absorb directly an appreciation of the actual work of translation; and to offer it as a token of appreciation and gratitude to Mei Yao-ch’en himself.

## A NOTE ON UNREGULATED VERSE

Much of the great classical Chinese poetry is written in a style called regulated verse. The regulations of this form do not translate into any English form of verse, any more than Traditional Chinese characters translate to single English words or syllabic counts translate from Chinese to English. But I did gain some appreciation for at least the translated effects of regulated verse in the course of reading and re-reading thousands of wonderful poems from the T’ang and Sung dynasty, through the insightful translations of David Hinton, Red Pine, J.P. Seaton, Kenneth Rexroth, Witter Bynner and Kiang Kang-Hu, and others; and so the form that Mei Yao-ch’en ostensibly utilizes in this collection, called by me “unregulated verse,” does indeed have its characteristics, most of which pay homage, technically or thematically, to regulated verse and the themes and memes of that work, strained (much like the ancients strained their wine before writing their poems) through a sieve of centuries, and newly tainted with the road dust of the mere fifty years of this individual’s flawed vessel. The result of certain characteristics of this form may result in what looks like inconsistent punctuation and other anomalies. My only assurance is that there is a form, and for those seeming inconsistencies I’m willing to take full blame, knowing this is one of the perils of translating one’s own work. *JS*

Only the moon and my shadow find nothing wrong with the way I live.

MEI YAO-CH'EN, 1051

I TRANSPORT SUNG DYNASTY POET  
MEI YAO-CH'EN NINE HUNDRED AND  
SIXTY FOUR YEARS INTO THE FUTURE  
TO MY HOUSE, WHERE HE WRITES  
BACK TO HIS FRIEND HSIEH SHIH-HOU  
ABOUT VARIOUS THINGS, IN THIS CASE  
FIXED OVERHEAD LIGHTING

---

The sun the size of a dragon egg in the ceiling scares away the moon and Star River  
has altered its course around this house, is nowhere to be seen when I look out the window.

It is summer noon with a finger-flick. In your home the light is still where you put it, please assure me.  
As the sun's light meanders across the ground each day, changing it all, showing everything as unfixed.

The hawk on the morning branch is not the hawk at noon, nor the hawk before dusk:  
We can tell easily by the direction of his shadow if he is desperate or just digesting.

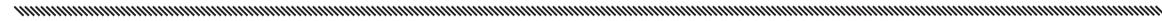
This dragon egg will never hatch or wait with a dormant season under water's roar.  
Outside this room the owl in the evening wood will find a hunting ground somewhere darker

And the sound of his claws leaving the low branch would be an absence disturbing my emptiness  
if I could find emptiness in a room so full of light. At least the alley between this house and the next

Is subject to the regular hours of heaven, and from the window by my host's writing table  
I enjoy the trundle of the opossum going where we can't see. Like me, shine a light

Down on him and he stops in his tracks, shows his teeth, plays dead, hides under the alley junk  
which even in strong light cannot be properly defined and pulled away, even to throw away.

MY FRIEND THE SUNG DYNASTY  
POET MEI YAO-CH'EN, WHOM I  
HAVE TRANSPORTED INTO THE  
FUTURE FROM THE YEAR 1050 A.D.,  
AND I DISCUSS TRAVEL, DISTANCE,  
AND EXILE, AND HE REPORTS  
BACK TO HIS FRIEND HSIEH SHIH-  
HOU IN THE FORM OF THIS POEM



Do you remember the night an autumn windstorm marooned us on that cold mountaintop monastery?  
We were on our way to say farewell, and in place of plucking a willow branch we gave each other

Whole days and five hundred miles to learn a single word, even though we nearly froze a few times.  
It felt much colder on top of the mountain my host showed me today, halfway

Between where he spends days working and where he spends nights with his family,  
From this mountain top shaved flat like a monk's head, both are within the horizon's brushstroke.

So every day is a long journey blurred by speed like a footstep in mud.  
The kingfisher's flash of emerald won't explain how he found the stream.

There are no long farewells here. The farewell happens every day.  
But even so there are vast azure clouds filling the distance between people. If you were here

I'd take you to meet the old yeller next door—just him and his dog, clearly in exile  
though crowded with ghosts. I think of children unmoored from their mother.

I think of friends sent on long journeys. Now you don't even have to leave town to be shunned.  
And a thousand years later, the latrines can still freeze your ass before you even know you are finished.

SITTING TOGETHER WITH JASMINE TEA  
BECAUSE ALL THE HOLIDAY WINE IS GONE  
AND TALKING WITH MEI YAO-CH'EN,  
RECENTLY TRANSPORTED HERE BY ME  
FROM THE 11TH CENTURY, ABOUT THE  
NUMBERS OF HISTORY, HE WRITES THE  
FOLLOWING LINES TO HIS FRIEND HSIEH  
SHIH-HOU AT NAN-YANG



As far as dynasties go, the American dynasty has done alright. Two hundred forty years are good, and only six thousand times that many dead in wars, almost

half of them fighting each other. Yet a million and a half snowflakes can fall and melt on the roof of this old house in a single day. So what's a few hundred years?

Yet my host says that in our own time the Sung will topple barely a hundred years after my fiftieth birthday. Oh friend, where will the children of our children's children be

then, and their children's children? I suddenly feel adrift: a cloud's reflection in a full spring river, parted by a branch floating by. And all we have are teacups to drink the river dry.

INSCRIBED ON  
THE WALL IN MY  
HOME'S UPSTAIRS  
HALLWAY BY  
SUNG DYNASTY  
POET MEI YAO-  
CH'EN, AFTER  
MAYBE MORE  
THAN A LITTLE  
WINE AND A  
LATE NIGHT  
DISCUSSION  
WITH HIM ABOUT  
HIS WIFE BACK  
IN THE 11TH  
CENTURY FROM  
WHERE I HAVE  
TRANSPORTED  
HIM, AND ABOUT  
THE VALUE  
POETIC AND  
OTHERWISE  
OF BEING  
UNMOORED

Here in the future I grieve for my wife, even though she is years gone,  
and I know that in this world and century I am already dead as well.

But where is her hairpin? the scratchy mirror we shared, that evidence  
her death still moved around me? Without it I fear love itself was imagined.

This place has unmoored me, a boat drifting on a river past unfamiliar banks.  
My host laughs at the image: if only I could be unmoored like that! he says.

Here we are most truly lost when most secured to the moment--  
the river is a flat featureless black road, and we know exactly

when we should be arriving, satellites not stars track us every minute so  
that we could in fact be anywhere or anyone so long as we are on course;

try to budge against the force of all that direction. To be unmoored,  
going nowhere but the earth's direction--grief alone won't get you there.

MEI YAO-CH'EN, WHOM I HAVE  
TRANSPORTED ALMOST A THOUSAND  
YEARS INTO THE FUTURE BUT WHO IS  
NEVERTHELESS A GRACIOUS GUEST, DRINKS  
WINE WITH ME AFTER A WARM AND WINDY  
LATE WINTER RAINSTORM AND WE TALK  
ABOUT ABOUT OUR MOTHERS, AFTER  
WHICH HE WRITES THESE LINES ON A TOWEL  
HANGING IN THE UPSTAIRS BATHROOM



I would bury and mourn two mothers ten years apart.  
You have been mourning one for years still here as a shadow

she slowly draws away toward the western mountains  
diminishing but a solid profile in the slanting light.

My father's concubine drew me from those shadows  
and his wife fed and clothed and loved me. I mourned two years

for my provider, and years later again in private for my creator.  
But was I not luckier than most for that?

The beings who birthed us remained with us, while the memories  
of motherhood scattered like flowers off trees in spring's wind.

That moon rising now after the storm—who do we share it with?  
Why is it blurry when the most distant stars have not gone dark?

SUNG DYNASTY POET MEI YAO-CH'EN  
REFLECTS ON THE UPRISINGS OF THE  
11TH CENTURY AS WE WATCH EVENTS  
IN SYRIA AND THE UKRAINE UNFOLD ON  
TV, AFTER WHICH HE WRITES TO HSIEH  
SHI-HOU TO ENSURE HIS YOUNG FRIEND'S  
SAFETY



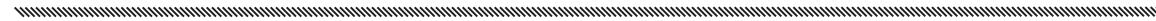
I will not wait for the caves of Tun-huang to open their mouths:  
the monkeys did not run screaming at the sight of T'an Ying

and his sharp weapon of dharma—the fruit trees were simply empty.  
Monkeys re-appear same time as the fruit does—but they do not grow on trees.

Anyone can thus appear enlightened or name themselves the Prince of Tung-p'ing:  
go and burn down all the ladders from which your enemies may scale to enlightenment!

Death will come through underground tunnels to reach you if it has to.  
Young friend, if there's a country worth dying for isn't it any country at all?

SOME LINES BY MEI YAO-CH'EN FOUND BY  
ME ON THE INSIDE OF A TOILET PAPER ROLL  
IN MY UPSTAIRS BATHROOM, IN WHICH THE  
POET WHOM I HAVE TRANSPORTED TO THE  
PRESENT DAY FROM ROUGHLY 1050 C.E.,  
ANSWERS CRITICS BORN THREE QUARTERS  
OF A CENTURY AFTER HIS DEATH, AND I  
STILL DO NOT KNOW HOW HE MANAGED TO  
GET THIS POEM IN THAT ROLL BUT HE DOES  
SPEND A LOT OF TIME IN THERE



Like the river-pig fish in the poem Chu called "dry and withered"  
wanders up the stream and in and out of season,

it finds hungry ones deep inland who have been waiting for it  
long after those at the river's mouth have forgotten what nourished them.

I TAKE MEI YAO-CH'EN TO THE GROCERY STORE  
ON A MILD DAY IN EARLY MARCH BECAUSE A LATE  
WINTER STORM HAS BEEN FORECAST; THE STORE  
IS MOBBED AND PRACTICALLY ALL THE SHELVES  
ARE EMPTY; FURTHERMORE THERE IS NO SALT  
FOR THE STEEP STEPS OUTSIDE OUR HOUSE; BUT  
THERE IS WINE AND CINNAMON DONETTES SO  
WE BUY SOME OF THOSE AND AFTER THE STORM  
HITS MY 11TH CENTURY FRIEND PENS THESE  
LINES ON A GIANT POST-IT NOTE I TOOK FROM  
WORK TO CHART PRODUCTIVITY METRICS



Warm enough to sweat walking up the hill to my host's house  
food and drink stacked in our arms, we laugh at all storms

on up the stone steps we will nearly crack our heads on tomorrow  
marching whooping like northern barbarians with shovels to kill winter

I like this house set into the hill which would be at home on any hill  
what did you mean my host asks about cracking our heads on tomorrow

is this the Tao or Ch'an speaking through you is this your tzu-jan  
you always speak of? So you know tzu-jan? I wave my shovel at him

Here we are surrounded by occurrence appearing of itself!  
Only in your century could you crack your head on tomorrow

AFTER THE LAST SNOW-  
STORM OF THE SEASON,  
MY 11TH CENTURY  
FRIEND MEI YAO-CH'EN  
AND I SIT AT THE  
KITCHEN COUNTER  
AND WATCH THE END  
OF THE DAY, AFTER  
WHICH HE WRITES  
THE FOLLOWING LINES  
TO BE SENT 964 YEARS  
BACK INTO THE PAST  
TO HSIEH SHIH-HOU

In late dusk after winter's last day of snow  
the drifts are aglow with an azure light

For the time it takes to drink this wine  
the sky is the same color as the snow

We pour another glass to see if it will stay with us  
all the tree trunks hum black wind laughter at that

Give us one more night they say to measure our bones  
the blue wing is already upon us

AFTER TALKING  
ABOUT DEPARTED  
LOVED ONES, 11TH  
CENTURY POET MEI  
YAO-CH'EN AND I  
DECIDE TO SEEK  
OUT THE YELLOW  
SPRINGS, WHERE  
ALL PEOPLE WHO  
DIED A THOUSAND  
YEARS AGO WENT;  
OUR WAY THERE  
IS BLOCKED  
BY A FAMILIAR  
QUADRUPED; AFTER  
THAT DONUTS  
DON'T SEEM A BAD  
IDEA; SOMETIME  
LATER HE WRITES  
THIRTY LINES  
IN HONOR OF  
THE OCCASION  
ON THE INSIDE  
OF THE SHOWER  
CURTAIN IN THE  
STYLE OF SOME  
OF HIS POEMS  
ABOUT PAINTINGS  
OF INSECTS AND  
PLANTS

My host's wife has run us out of the house  
She misses her grandmother, dead these eight years

he tells me, it's not us. I thought it was the spilled wine  
and chanting. It's cold on the porch! Hesitant rain

as it was eight years ago in another century  
north of Yang-chou on the Grand Canal

when wife and son left me at the riverbank  
for the eternal current the Yellow Springs

This thought alone makes the sensitive dog  
behind our house begin his dirge

What now my host says we can't stay here  
the wine is suddenly sour and ghostly

It's either the donut shop again or the underworld:  
the earthen walls coil with worms pointing back up

even without brains they are smarter than us  
a ginger shadow muffles the river sound ahead

steps into the tunnel. Red cat, growing larger  
in yellow light. This is not the way, the cat simply says

its whiskers scrape the walls. Why my friend did you look so frightened?  
Stale kitchen smell in the air and shadows moving

beside us as we fled and old garments emerge from the wall  
my wife's wedding dress, which she died in, touches our feet

Someone is putting coins in your hand  
are they paying us to leave?

Above ground, our hostess is calling from the porch.  
That look of love and pity, it could be my dead wife's

The next morning, with grits on the stovetop  
I realize I was the worst guide to the underworld

A poem has ever seen; the dead peer out blindly  
from our loved ones: the dead have moved on but we haven't

MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I,  
BOTH APPROACHING  
FIFTY YEARS OF AGE  
THOUGH HE HAS  
BEEN DEAD FOR  
NINE HUNDRED AND  
FIFTY TWO YEARS,  
DISCUSS THE POETICS  
OF GETTING OLDER  
AND APPREHENDING  
DEATH, AFTER WHICH  
HE WONDERS HOW  
MUCH OF THIS HE WILL  
REMEMBER WHEN HE  
RETURNS TO THE 11TH  
CENTURY AND DECIDES  
TO WRITE TO HSIEH  
SHIH-HOU ON THE  
INSIDE OF HIS ROBE SO  
HE CAN TAKE IT WITH  
HIM EVEN IF MEMORY  
ABANDONS HIM, BUT  
IT COMES OUT IN THE  
WASH AFTER I COPY IT  
DOWN, EVEN IN THE  
GENTLE CYCLE

The last quarter of our forty ninth year's upon us  
the whole half-century diminishing like a toad's eye

Is it any wonder we drink wine under the waxing moon  
but feel the weight of its dark side which will only grow?

Each of us drifts the length of Star River but once  
if we're lucky the hole in the boat fills slowly

You at least he tells me know how long you've got.  
I do. He showed me the book. If I ever get back in time

to die, I'll live to see another hundred and twenty moons.  
No matter what that number turns into as the months drain it

it will never be auspicious, never enough. Still my host  
does not know for himself when black drift's wave

becomes the shape of his boat and he sinks into night:  
unless distracted by mist that toad suddenly blinks

I TAKE 11TH CENTURY SUNG DYNASTY POET MEI YAO-CH'EN  
WITH ME ON MY DAUGHTER AURORA'S SCHOOL FIELD TRIP  
TO WASHINGTON, DC; WE WALK ON THE NATIONAL MALL  
AND HE IS MADE UNEASY BY THE VIETNAM VETERANS  
MEMORIAL WALL; AURORA GETS HIM A HOT CHOCOLATE  
AT THE REFRESHMENT KIOSK BY THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL  
BUT THIS KINDNESS REMINDS HIM OF HIS OWN INFANT  
DAUGHTER, WHOSE DEATH HE WAS STILL MOURNING WHEN  
I TRANSPORTED HIM TO THE FUTURE AT THE AGE OF  
FORTY-EIGHT; ALSO, HE DOES NOT TRAVEL WELL ON THE  
CHARTER BUS BUT I HAVE SMUGGLED SOME WINE ABOARD  
AND HE CHANTS THESE LINES AS WE RIDE, WHICH EVEN  
UNTRANSLATED LEAVE THE TEACHERS AND CHAPERONES  
FEELING UNEASY



The ground rises but the dead do not  
Their names drive straight into the earth

The black wall reflects today's visitors  
absorbs their pain but gives nobody back

I see just below the roots of jade grass  
it continues endlessly and I can read the names

through my eyelids like we read terror  
in earth's shadow obscuring the moon. I know now

I have only your name. Even that will be eclipsed  
beneath the jade knives, my Ch'eng-ch'eng.

DURING A VISIT TO THE DOCTOR, MEI YAO-CH'EN  
AND I DISCUSS THE UTILITY OF FISH TANKS WITH  
NO FISH, AFTER WHICH WE WALK AROUND THE KOI  
POND IN GYPSY HILL PARK, AND HE LATER WRITES  
THESE LINES AND ASKS ME TO SEND THEM TO HIS  
FRIEND HSIEH SHIH-HOU, WHO HE WORRIES MIGHT  
BE WONDERING ABOUT HIS WHEREABOUTS



In the doctor's office I am comforted we are surrounded by elders.  
Though they have all made appointments to see the doctor, they must fill out forms

As if the doctor did not know who they were or what they suffer from.  
A stranger from ten thousand moons away, even I know what they suffer from!

Near the entrance in a glass box water quietly churns. It's a fish tank, my host says.  
Inside there are no fish, just murky water. Every elder is pointing at it and smiling.

I think I know why there are no fish. I think it is a sign of tzu-jan.  
We can all go back to our houses, and one day they will all be empty.

On Gypsy Hill among flowering dogwoods and beneath the gossip of ducks  
the wise koi circulate like clouds. Distant enough from this cold world

They can survive the harsh winter and come to the surface for surface things.  
Still they are trapped, my host says. Then give them their freedom! I tell him.

I have filled out many forms and failed many tests—that is being trapped.  
Now I'm trying to pass the test as they do. You have, he says. For I have brought you home.

And I have disappeared, I answer. As when you can no longer see the bird's nest  
outside your window because of the new leaves, you know then the bird is home.

MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I LAMENT MISSING THE LUNAR ECLIPSE BECAUSE OF RAINY WEATHER, THOUGH WE HAD SET THE ALARM AND ROSE AT TWO IN THE MORNING TO VIEW IT, AND WHAT ELSE COULD WE DO WITH OUR TIME NOW THAT WE WERE AWAKE BUT DRINK WINE AND WATCH THE NEW MAPLE LEAVES STILL ONLY HALF UNFOLDED BOW UP AND DOWN LIKE OBEDIENT MONKS TO THE RAIN, WHICH IN TURN INSPIRED THESE LINES BY MY 11TH CENTURY GUEST, WRITTEN IN THE STYLE OF A POEM BY HIS GOOD FRIEND OU-YANG HSIU



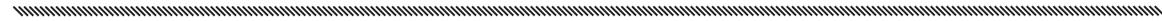
Don't look up at the moon! at its old red eye clouded by the shadow of ages  
Do all those lifetimes frighten you, hidden in your jade cloaks and bowing?

Don't look! Who acts older, you whose lives have just begun, shuffling  
like old men already bent beneath worshipping what falls, or the unblinking penumbra?

Somewhere south of here, the frogs chant about towers in their flooded garden  
The rain laps at the steps but hesitates like a visitor who won't come in

Over clouds the great toad opens his eye to the light and there my love and I recline  
Don't look then! not for what you might see but for what is now looking back

AFTER BEING INTRODUCED  
TO A CHEAP CALIFORNIA  
MOSCATO, MY 11TH CENTURY  
FRIEND MEI YAO-CH'EN, STILL  
VISITING ME HERE IN THE  
21ST CENTURY, REFLECTS  
ON A RECENT TRIP IN MY  
FORD EXPLORER THEN  
INSISTS I STAND IN THE BACK  
YARD WITH HIM AS WE ARE  
SOAKED IN MIST THOUGH  
THE MOSCATO TASTES NO  
DIFFERENT FOR IT



I prefer the walk in the backyard wood to the drive across the valley.  
Blink once and you have missed a thousand things!

Blink twice and one of them has scurried beneath your wheel.  
Blink a third time and you have outraced a cloud. Why would you outrace a cloud?

My host pours me another glass and asks me, why not the ten thousand things?  
Does it matter that I was not counting? That I did not count the leaves

On the backyard maple but still enjoyed its new green shade.  
Some things are not made to count. This fine spring rain in the dark.

UP LATE AFTER TRYING A NICE WASHINGTON STATE  
CHARDONNAY AND FORCING ME TO PLAY HIM SONGS BY  
STEVIE NICKS AND FLEETWOOD MAC , MEI YAO-CH'EN,  
SUNG DYNASTY POET STILL HANGING AROUND FROM  
THE 11TH CENTURY AND NOW ENJOYING SPRING IN  
THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS THOUGH NOT WITHOUT  
SOME MELANCHOLY, WRITES THESE LINES WHICH HE  
SAYS ARE ABOUT BOTH CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND  
HIS REGRET ABOUT BEING PARTED FROM HIS LOVE, AND  
THANKFULLY DOES NOT INCLUDE THE PHRASE "JUST  
LIKE A WHITE WINGED DOVE" WHICH I WAS HONESTLY  
AFRAID HE WOULD FOR A WHILE THERE



The dragon is a worm, but not every worm breathes fire  
The moon is a toad, but a toad is not the moon

The moth is drawn to the lamp, but not every light burns  
But the robin's breast flares when its beak cuts the worm

and I feel older and dry with every full moon apart from you  
and the sun sings more of my thinning crown each day I seek you

while a moth, no fool, sits patiently on a book on my desk  
knowing that light is not for him

SHOWING A MAP OF THE 21ST CENTURY WORLD TO MY SUNG DYNASTY FRIEND MEI YAO-CH'EN, I UNWITTINGLY MAKE HIM AWARE THAT THE MOST FAMOUS CHINESE POET EVER LI PO WAS BORN IN WHAT IS NOW KYRGYZSTAN, NOT EVEN A PART OF CHINA THESE PAST THOUSAND YEARS, AFTER WHICH WE DRINK WINE AND CHANT COUPLETS FROM 'POEMS FOR THE MASTERS' UNTIL HE QUITE SUDDENLY RETIRES TO THE GUEST ROOM UPSTAIRS AND WRITES THESE LINES AND TITLES THEM 'SOME LINES FOR A CHANGED WORLD, WRITTEN FOR THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE ME AND THOSE WHO CAME AFTER ME,' WHICH I TELL HIM IS TOO LONG A TITLE FOR A POEM THESE DAYS



I have seen the ages pass, clouds across the moon, as if I lived on the Three Mountains.  
Yet I'm no spirit, and what if all the gods were ever but men pulled forward in time by poets?

Before me and after me they have gone, greater ones than I, rising on life's roots  
to surface briefly like lotus flowers in a pond visited only by frogs and fish.

In the birthplace of the greatest to pick up his brush, they do not speak his language  
and have not since the time of the seven tribes. By embracing the moon they say

Li Po drowned, deep in his own spirits, making surface and depth one. We do not know this  
but we know Wang Po did drown, trying to visit his father, a hundred years earlier.

Is the moon beneath the surface closer or just more patient? A generation after I died  
Liu Chi-sun walked away from his desk leaving only a poem about his departure

for Mushroom Mountain. Even Wang An-Shih would not deny him this pleasure  
yet where now is his library of thirty thousand books? With the gods, petal by petal,

Their shared language a swerve of gold scales in murky jade depth briefly lit  
by an epoch of koi disturbing it on its drifting way to join the silt, and all fathers and sons.

MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I, WALKING DOWNTOWN  
FOR PIZZA ON A MAY AFTERNOON AND  
COUNTING OURSELVES LUCKY TO DO SO,  
ENCOUNTER A GARDEN FULL OF BUDDING  
PEONIES, NODDING THEIR ROUND HEADS  
IN AGREEMENT, WHICH ON CLOSER  
EXAMINATION ARE EACH HOSTING AT LEAST  
ONE ANT, WHICH LEADS TO A DISCUSSION OF  
PEONY FOLKLORE OVER GUINNESS, AND THE  
EVENTUAL AUTHORSHIP OF THESE LINES BY A  
CERTAIN SUNG DYNASTY POET LIVING IN MY  
HOUSE



An ant crawls across the crown of the king of flowers.  
It may be just an old wives' tale after all

that this least artistic insect opens the peony by nibbling away at the closed bud  
until its thousand petals uncloset and cluster as if embracing memory

In Luoyang the peony crawls across the second largest city in the world  
and opens up the city's memory that it is beautiful in spring

And in much the same way, I nibble on these lines because I like them  
having no idea what will unfold in you

If love could embrace you forever you would feel the red peony around you  
If lost you were ushered home by the moon it would smile like the white peony

The dewy eyes of the first glance of your first child  
are a black peony and the ants scrambling away invisibly are every moment

you lived before that moment

OVER NINE HUNDRED  
FIFTY YEARS AFTER HE  
DIED AND WAS BURIED,  
SUNG DYNASTY POET  
MEI YAO-CH'EN SITS  
IN MY KITCHEN  
DRINKING JASMINE  
TEA AND DISCUSSING  
THE BAN ON BURIALS  
IN CERTAIN RURAL  
AREAS IN CHINA,  
AND HE WRITES THE  
FOLLOWING LINES AS  
INSTRUCTION TO HIS  
FRIEND AND RELATIVE  
HSIEH SHIH-HOU, BACK  
IN THE PAST

I remember a path to one of those villages beyond number  
barely a loose thread spun by the wind far off the silk road

connecting nothing to nothing—  
easier to find a star through midsummer trees

Have so many died in a thousand years that the path  
winds among tombs instead of bamboo and bramble?

No longer allowed to bury their dead, another path  
will be lost, and a few generations from now

nobody alive will be left knowing how to sweep the graves.  
I know it sounds silly but when the living have no room

for the dead we will already have half-buried ourselves:  
That woman who hung herself at eighty on the last day

of the month before the law went into effect  
even though they destroyed her coffin before her eyes—

how gladly I would offer my tomb to her if she'd live  
out her days; all my folk are long gone, and the dead

are not here for any but the living. Ching-ch'u!  
I know you will outlive me—if you somehow get this, young friend,

remember the lady from Anqing for me, and when  
you know I'm gone, pull me out and leave me

for the sky kings. Then take my brush  
and send word to Anhui province.

WHILE THERE ARE NO GIBBONS CRYING IN THE TREES  
OUTSIDE MY HOUSE AS THERE WERE IN ELEVENTH CENTURY  
CHINA, MEI YAO-CH'EN NEVERTHELESS SHOWS INTEREST IN  
THE MONKEY-LIKE SONG OF THE PILEATED WOODPECKER  
CAREENING FROM TREE TO TREE ON MY STREET, AND SINCE  
HE NEVER WROTE A SHIH-HUA OR STATEMENT OF POETICS  
AS MANY OF HIS SUNG DYNASTY PEERS DID, I ASK HIM WHAT  
HE THOUGHT ABOUT THE NINE MONKS OF THE LATE T'ANG  
DYNASTY, WHO IT IS SAID WERE UNABLE TO WRITE A POEM  
WITHOUT THE WORDS "MOUNTAIN," "FLOWER," "GRASS,"  
"SNOW," "FROST," "STAR" OR "MOON" IN IT, AND WAS THAT A  
GOOD THING OR A BAD THING, AND IN RESPONSE HE WRITES  
THESE LINES IN VERY SMALL CHARACTERS ON PAGE 219 OF MY  
COPY OF THE KAUFMAN FIELD GUIDE TO BIRDS OF NORTH  
AMERICA



Who can stop the monkeys in the trees from chittering and screaming?  
They will do it anyway, no matter my mood as we drift past the trees

Overhanging the river. A thousand years later I hear their echo  
in a great crested bird here—when he finally stops his crazy laugh

to pulverize tree bark on his way to pulling out a bug to eat,  
I can feel the vibration through my brush like a penetrating thought.

SITTING ON A GENTLE GRASSY SLOPE IN  
AN HISTORIC GRAVEYARD FILLED WITH  
THE REMAINS OF PEOPLE BORN EIGHT  
HUNDRED YEARS AFTER HE DIED, MEI  
YAO-CH'EN AND I AWAIT FOURTH OF  
JULY FIREWORKS AS EARLY SUMMER  
FIREFLIES SKID ACROSS THE DIMMING  
AIR AROUND US, AND AFTER THE SKY  
LIGHTS UP BETWEEN TWO OLD PINES  
AND WE WALK BACK HOME, MY POET  
FRIEND WRITES THE FOLLOWING LINES  
A FEW HOURS LATER WITH A SHARPIE  
ON A MILK CARTON WHILE APPARENTLY  
RAIDING THE CUPBOARDS FOR LUCKY  
CHARMS AS THE REST OF THE HOUSE  
SLEEPS

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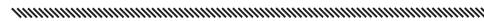
I'm reminded by my host that the Chinese invented fireworks.  
Should I tell him it was merely a chef's mistake? Does it matter?

This country likes humble beginnings. From some dropped ingredients  
to giant flowers of unimaginable color burning through their season

in seconds without roots or water or sun. Later I cannot sleep—  
the blooming flower is etched onto my inner lids though it lasted

A moment only, and yet I cannot remember my dead wife's face.  
Feeling old, I finish the milk and pick out the charms, hoping to forget what is left.

WHILE SOME COULD ACCUSE ME OF MAGICAL THINKING IN  
TRANSPORTING AN 11TH CENTURY SUNG DYNASTY POET TO  
THE SHADOW OF THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS IN THE 21ST  
CENTURY, NOBODY ACCUSES HOUDINI OF BEING ANYTHING BUT  
THE GREATEST ESCAPE ARTIST AND DEBUNKER OF SPIRITUAL  
CHARLATANS, AND SOMEHOW THESE GO WELL TOGETHER,  
THOUGH ON THIS SUNDAY IN JUNE PASSING THROUGH SCRANTON  
PENNSYLVANIA WITH MEI YAO-CH'EN IT HAPPENS THAT THE  
HOUDINI MUSEUM IS CLOSED, LEADING TO A TRIP TO DUNKIN  
DONUTS AND RANDOM THOUGHTS ON MAGICIANS, MAGIC AND  
MYSTICISM BEFORE WE HIT THE ROAD AGAIN, IN THIS CASE  
INTERSTATE 81 WHICH FAR FROM BEING THE SILK ROAD MIGHT  
BE CALLED THE TRACTOR TRAILER ROAD, ON WHICH WITH HIS  
SANDALED FEET UP ON THE DASHBOARD OF THE FAMILY VAN MEI  
CONJURES THE FOLLOWING LINES AS IF OUT OF THIN AIR



Even magic is tethered to landscape. The illusionist Houdini never lived in Scranton  
yet here is his museum, two houses down from Beaner's Wait A Minute Bar

across from a hairpiece store, and closed, as if the secret of the entire trip's trick  
is being withheld from us. In my time scholars collected dwarf landscapes

Of contorted rock resembling the rough contours of a city. One court magician  
was famous for being able to disappear into his landscape tray at will.

Did anyone think he was turning to stone? With Houdini you were never confused  
just confounded. Like the dwarf lady magician in the Tang Dynasty

Who turned herself into a bamboo stalk, he hadn't changed reality  
but mastered it. They made us aware that there were simple things

we just weren't seeing. That escaping from the impossible was a skill  
and not magic. It's why I'm not mystified by this vessel spurring us

across flat earth at eighty miles in an hour. Tiny hidden sparks are moving  
us all, after all. All magic is local, and knowing magic, all roads are silk.

BY THE BANKS OF THE CAPE FEAR RIVER MY 11TH CENTURY POET  
FRIEND MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I ARE JOINED BY A GHOST FROM MY NOT-  
SO-RECENT AND NOT-SO-DISTANT PAST, AND AS THE NIGHT LIFERS  
ON FRONT STREET IN WILMINGTON NC ASSUME THEIR WEEKEND  
FICTIONS, THE THREE OF US WALK THROUGH THE DOWNTOWN  
NEIGHBORHOODS BACK TO MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S OLD VICTORIAN  
HOUSE, WHERE GHOSTS GET GOING AND A THOUSAND YEAR OLD POET  
WRITES THE FOLLOWING LINES ON MY BEACH TOWEL

In a cricket-less city the chirps and clicks of air conditioning units keep us company  
We reach the waterfront and stand on a dock whose pilings are so low

you can feel the air trapped by the waves beneath it pushing through the gaps  
like the breaths of ghosts of the drowned. No gibbons swing and moan

from the trees on the distant shore. It's so quiet we can see the past from here.  
A white figure draws nearer across the water—at first rowing a stand-up paddleboard

but after he gets halfway across he gives up and just shuffles across the sound.  
My host tells me this is his mentor and one of his favorite poets. Therefore I know

he must be dead. "Well yes, I am dead," the apparition speaks and steps from water  
through the rail and onto the dock. "And I'm Archie. You don't know me, Sheng-yu,

but I know you. Oh yes." As he quotes from a poem I wrote I can hear the English  
version my host hears, as well as my own words in my native tongue. Archie

notices my wonder and smiles. "You learn a new thing or two when you're dead,"  
he says. "Now, Jeff, I know you were expecting me, so put your jaw back together

and let's take a walk. I haven't seen your wife's mother in decades, and I hear  
she's still a pretty woman." Huge live oak trees arch over the streets, we walk slowly

and looking up you can see the grief that has not been permitted to leave.  
"The grief itself is lighter than air, you see," Archie says. "But everything connected

with the grief, as long as it's connected, trunks up thick, stretches out in search  
of space, blossoms, rejuvenates, drops back and re-rooting re-routes the grief.

Take a breath. Only the tiniest bit comes out from the leaf-ends, so pure,  
without that little bit let go to go on we'd suffocate." Front Street is on us then

its restaurants and bars, its noise. Finally, I relax. Here are the gibbons I'm used  
to hearing at the river's edge, monkeys of heartbreak howling. They just don't know it yet.

MEI YAO-CH'EN AND THE GHOST  
OF ARCHIE AMMONS CONTINUE  
THEIR CONVERSATION OF THE  
NIGHT BEFORE, TOUCHING  
UPON TREES AND BIRDS AND  
THE POETICS OF P'ING-TAN, AND  
BEFORE LUNCH MY CHINESE  
POET FRIEND COMPOSES THESE  
LINES AS ARCHIE TRIES TO PICK  
FLOWERS WITH HIS GHOST  
HANDS FOR MY MOTHER IN LAW

After breakfast, Archie rings the doorbell and we meet him on the wide wooden porch. "Oh," he said. "I was hoping

Mary's mother might answer. I guess I could just walk through the door and look myself, but I was being polite the way

the dead mostly are." Archie floats down stone steps, flakes bark off the crepe myrtle in front of the house. "I saw a cardinal once

with no feathers above his neck. His head was the deepest blue except his beak. What do you make of that?" he asked me.

We're all vultures but that does not mean our vulture nature is not compatible with that which makes us capable of marvelous

flight, I tell him. "Well," said Archie. "That, too. I was thinking more about what it's like to be bald, I mean, to realize your biggest thoughts

are built mostly of circumstance and stuffing—the sphere of suffering's transcendent but always tighter fitting and pretty

much transparent and thus insignificant to others. But if the sphere can reflect so well at the angle of any exigency exactly

what is beyond it, to the point it's opaque and the view of the poet hardly matters, then what's the need for red feathers?"

I take Archie's hand: You have defined p'ing-tan poetics perfectly—the house sparrow flies where the peacock cannot.

"And not to mention," Archie says as his hands glide through some pink flowers in the neighbor's garden he was hoping

to pick, "the peacock poops on everything."

11TH-CENTURY SUNG DYNASTY POET MEI YAO-CHEN, WHOM I HAVE TRANSPORTED AT THE AGE OF FORTY EIGHT TO THE 21ST CENTURY TO SPEND SOME TIME IN MY COMPANY, CONFRONTS EYEWITNESS DETAILS OF HIS EVENTUAL DEMISE NINE HUNDRED AND FIFTY FOUR YEARS AGO IN A PASSAGE IN A BOOK ABOUT HIM BY THE SCHOLAR AND TRANSLATOR JONATHAN CHAVES, AND AFTER AN AFTERNOON SPENT CARRYING AROUND THE BOOK WITHOUT OPENING IT AGAIN, TAKES TEA AFTER DINNER AND TURNS IN EARLY TO THE GUEST ROOM WITH MY BOTTLE OF WASHINGTON STATE PINOT GRIS, THERE TO APPARENTLY STUDY AND IMPLEMENT IDEAS OF EMPTINESS UNTIL DAWN, WHEN HE COMPOSES THE FOLLOWING LINES



My host's handsome bookmark in a monograph about me leads me to my death—  
it's right there, on page forty-six. Stunning to me that in a book entirely

about me that my death should come so early, only a sixth of the way in.  
“It's not your death that's being studied,” my host tells me, “it's not your life

even, it's the impression you left. That's all we really have. And our own  
impressions.” I carry the book with me all day around town, not sure

what I want to know. I know I'll be ten years older than I am today,  
I even know the calendar day because it's the same day my host's niece was born.

But do I need to know about the “unusual color of my face” as Chih-ts'ai  
would write? Late afternoon, when the wind picks up and loosens leaves

streaming by as if headed to the Yellow Spring itself, I see the impression  
of a single unmoving leaf and stem, embedded in a sidewalk seasons and seasons ago.

MEI YAO-CHEN AND  
I, NEITHER OF US  
QUITE AS DRUNK  
AS WE'D WISH AND  
CAUGHT IN A LATE  
AUGUST STORM,  
WATCH WATER  
RUN UPHILL AND  
DOWNHILL AT  
THE SAME TIME  
WITH NO CHANCE  
OF LEVELLING  
WITH US, AND THIS  
PHENOMENON IS  
LATER RECORDED  
IN AN EVEN AND  
BLAND MANNER  
BY MEI SO THAT IT  
IS EASY TO CHANT  
AND SO THAT HE  
WILL NOT FORGET  
IT WHEN HE IS DEAD

Late summer turns on us—after mild sunny days  
we get storms and heat at once. Morning fog turns to midday haze

and haze to afternoon storms. A big cloud like the distant relative  
who holds it all in until you come outside and it sees you—then

it lets loose! It doesn't matter if it's tears of joy, love, or anger.  
One rumbling sound, which could be heavens rending or indigestion—

no lightning, just a release of wind and water so violent  
it lashes a stream of rain uphill in the middle of the road

while against the street's curb-edge the flood runoff goes thickly  
down the path of gravity. It's dizzying to watch both currents

caused by the same event, and even if you think a circle  
or circuit is inherent, nothing recognizable comes back.

AFTER SHARING MOST OF A BOTTLE OF APOTHIC RED WHILE WATCHING A TWO HOUR EPISODE OF AMERICAN NINJA WARRIOR, MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I READ FROM A BOOK OF JAPANESE DEATH POEMS IN THE ANCIENT HAIKU FORM, WHICH IS ACTUALLY A FORM A FULL ONE HUNDRED YEARS YOUNGER THAN MY 11TH-CENTURY POET FRIEND WHOM I'VE TRANSPORTED TO THE PRESENT DAY AND I'M NOT EXACTLY SURE HOW HE FELT ABOUT THAT BUT IF THERE'S ONE THING SURE TO GET A POET DEAD ALMOST A THOUSAND YEARS THINKING ABOUT DEATH, IT'S READING DEATH POEMS, AND HE SOON RETREATS TO THE GUEST ROOM WITH THE REST OF THE BOTTLE TO WRITE THE FOLLOWING LINES, WHICH HE FINISHES JUST AS THE LAST AMERICAN NINJA FINALIST IS FALLING FROM THE OBSTACLE COURSE INTO THE DRINK HIMSELF

One hundred and eight years ago Jakura died, reaching for his brush and a sheet of paper which would remain always blank. If only nobody present had remembered

what he had just recited! It would be the most auspicious death poem. It could be late summer's awful heat wave, or the two-year old blend of Zinfandel, Syrah and Cabernet,

or the men swinging like gibbons on the obstacle course competition on TV, but I can't make sense of this new classic tradition. My host and I decide to split the poems

into those who outlived my own fifty-eight years of life, and those who died younger. Apparently, living longer, and even writing one's death poem in advance and not

in the delirium of transposition, do not make for better death poems. Apparently following the classic tradition of mentioning a season in the first lines brings no wisdom either.

Three lines, plucked from a renga of thousands of them—how could they encompass death? How can a branch encompass a tree? Better to follow it back to the roots and soil

and out to the air itself, biggest blank page. It's funny to read about purity of form while watching Americans trying to become Japanese, drinking wine that is better

for being masterfully blended, living a thousand years after my death where my own life is a surprise to me, a blend of only that which has been translated

out of that which was kept. Every poem appears to have been a death poem. I prefer Jowa's zekku to all of this—last poem he wrote, on a visit to relatives, unaware

he'd die without ceremony the next day. He wrote about putting on a bamboo hat and going home. My host is telling me from another room that the last ninja

is halfway through the obstacle course but that his strength could give out at any time. Soil to root to trunk to branch to leaf to air. Outside it's not raining.

COMING HOME FROM A WINE TASTING,  
MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I ARE BOMBARDED  
BY QUESTIONS FROM MY SEVEN  
YEAR OLD SON, INCLUDING 'WHO  
WOULD WIN IN A FIGHT, THE WIND  
OR THE MOUNTAIN?' AND 'WHICH IS  
STRONGER, WATER OR AIR OR EARTH?'  
RESULTING IN ME SHUSHING HIM AWAY  
AS MY 11TH CENTURY POET FRIEND  
RETREATS UPSTAIRS TO THE GUEST  
ROOM, THOUGH LATER I REALIZE  
HE HAS SCRAWLED THE ANSWER ON  
MY SON'S PILLOWCASE, BECAUSE THE  
NEXT MORNING WHEN HE IS BRUSHING  
HIS TEETH WITH SILLY STRAWBERRY  
TOOTHPASTE I NOTICE A SINGLE  
CHARACTER FOUND IN THE LINES  
BELOW IS SMUDGED IN REVERSE ON MY  
BOY'S CHEEK

---

Since I was born between the Twin Streams of Wan-Ling, on flat earth  
I thought the grasses of harvest created the wind as they bowed to the water.

Now I know the wind makes the mountain by what it takes away and every rain  
drop's a reminder—a moon, an ocean, and the space between that's stronger.

WALKING THROUGH  
THE LOCAL  
CEMETERY THE FIRST  
WEEK OF AUTUMN,  
11TH CENTURY SONG  
DYNASTY POET  
MEI YAO-CH'EN  
AND I GET INTO A  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
DISCUSSION ABOUT  
MIDDLE-AGED MALE  
HAIR LOSS AND  
WHILE PAUSING IN  
THE SHADE OF A  
LARGE BEECH TREE  
HE COMPOSES AN  
EIGHT LINE POEM  
HE TITLES 'HOME  
AND MEMORY AS  
THE SAME THING,  
AS ILLUSTRATED  
BY TWO DIFFERENT  
THINGS FOUND  
IN A MAPLE TREE'  
FOLLOWED BY A  
BAD PUN ON MY  
PART ABOUT THE  
STRUCTURE OF  
REGULATED VERSE

The black walnut tree is thinning at the top and its leaves fading  
much like my own hair is thinning at the crown and every day another

strand floats through the air's local eddies to land on the other side  
of the earth from where I died a thousand years ago. Is this possible?

I ask my host. Where is this hair actually landing? Can it be  
in two places at once? If you got a trim and lost the Steven Seagal look,

he responds, you wouldn't notice it as much, and the question might  
thin out along with your hair until there's nothing left of either.

But I know I'll die before this hair is gone, I tell him. He nods.  
So is your hair in a grave somewhere by the Twin Streams, he asks,

or is it here, on the ground? Or will you lose it all over again,  
forgetting that you already lived these days, once you get back?

We walk beneath a stone bridge and stop in the shade of a beech tree  
so large that crickets are fooled into thinking it's autumn evening already

And I compose and sing the following lines, which he assures me  
he will translate rather poorly into American English:

'Empty bird nest, a brittle vortex drawing me into thoughts of beginnings:  
a house made of what the tree needed least, woven without a hand

into what the bird needed most, fallen to the ground when need had flown.  
Four feet up the trunk, a cicada's husk holds on as if it still mattered.

I could take it home with me, to help dispel wind and heat from the body  
but where would I find the field mint to mix into it? If memory clung

to real things the world would be so full of such signs of minds' moltings  
there'd be an outcry for people to clean up after themselves.'

That's good, my host says, would you call those couplets 'receding pairs'?  
I remind him that a thousand years from now, nobody will remember who

Steven Seagal was. Right, he says, or that General Ts'ao painted horses.  
But somehow, inside this husk of words, we both lived and outgrew ourselves.

LEFT ON HIS OWN FOR AN  
AFTERNOON, 11TH CENTURY POET  
MEI YAO-CH'EN TAKES MY DOGS  
OUT IN THE BACKYARD ON ALL  
SAINTS DAY IN EARLY NOVEMBER,  
PREPARING TO TURN THE CLOCK  
BACK, BUT INSTEAD IS FOUND  
COMPOSING THESE LINES LATER IN  
THE EVENING WHEN WE GET HOME,  
STILL AN HOUR AHEAD OF WHERE  
WE SHOULD BE



A canoe leans on a grassy rise, overturned, in a neighbor's backyard.  
The oldest mountains are diminished but have still not broken.

And I can't lift that boat, even in my mind, to visit the shores I have passed.  
I stand by a black walnut tree, my host's dogs wandering about and pissing

aimlessly, and look over the fence at it, wonder how it got there,  
when my old cat Five White crawls out from underneath it

with a satisfied yawn as if he'd just napped on a bed of rice and roots.  
He protected my food from rats but I could not protect him from time.

I buried him in the middle of the river with chanting and sacrifices.  
An old song catches in my throat and he is rolling at my feet, oblivious to dogs.

Like these mountains, the past used to be so much bigger and threatening.  
Now it is smaller than a tear too small to leave the eye, no more alive

than the leaves swirling about my ankles. But there is a wave, slower  
even than the Star River, and a boat which carries us all here and back.

BECAUSE WE ARE SAVING THE WINE FOR  
THANKSGIVING, AND EVEN THOUGH DRINKING JAVA  
AT 11PM OR REALLY ANY TIME IS A LITTLE FOREIGN  
TO HIM, 11TH CENTURY POET MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I  
SHARE A POT OF HAZELNUT COFFEE AND SETTLE IN  
TO WAIT ON THE FIRST SNOWFALL OF THE SEASON,  
BUT HE GETS REASONABLY JITTERY AND IMPATIENT  
AND WON'T SETTLE DOWN UNTIL MY WIFE BEGINS  
PRACTICING GUITAR JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT, WHICH  
IS WHEN I REALIZE HE'S WRITTEN THE FOLLOWING  
LINES ON THE WINDOW NEAR MY DESK USING A DARK  
CRAYON, WHICH WILL MAKE IT EASIER TO READ IN  
THE MORNING



Time is moving in many directions, in a hurry,  
like the squirrels who were cascading from tree to roof

gutter to tree to unseen home this afternoon.  
Now that I have seen the pathways I will never unsee them—

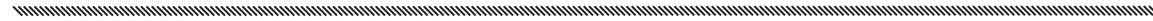
peering through the dark window I can sense the motion  
every still branch supports and wonder what it is I have been

supporting all this time, what messages and storages I have  
grown to harbor. Today my host pointed to a clogged fork

in the tree's arteries and said, They are returning dead leaves  
back up the tree to reinforce their small holding against winter.

They gather them to survive the world's impersonal spell, I say.  
I'm glad you didn't rake it all up neatly and haul it off, after all.

DRINKING AN AUSTRALIAN SHIRAZ  
CABERNET WINE WITH MEI YAO-CH'EN  
AND GIGGLING AT A CAT PAWING AT  
ITS REFLECTION IN A MIRROR, MY  
THOUSAND YEAR OLD FRIEND GETS  
REFLECTIVE WITHOUT GETTING  
DEEP, OR MAYBE IT IS THE OTHER WAY  
AROUND



When a mirror is leaned against a wall and slides to the floor on its back  
because a cat has been picking a fight with itself, it's not bad luck in any century:

Unless I missed something by skipping the Middle Ages, I tell my host  
as I lean down to pick it up. We're in the middle ages now, Sheng-yu, he says

but I'm not listening, I'm suddenly as dumb as the cat, looking down, one hand  
reaching for the mirror's frame, and see myself reaching up from beneath the floor

behind the thin glass—my first impulse is to recoil, think you're not pulling me  
down again! But shouldn't I have thought, can I help you get back on your feet?

Never confuse reflection with direction, my host advises, filling my cup.  
When a cat looks in a mirror, it never sees what is not there.

DISCUSSING AN  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
CURIOSITY FROM PERHAPS  
THE HAN DYNASTY WHICH  
HE WOULD WRITE A POEM  
ABOUT IN 1052 AFTER  
BEING INTRODUCED TO  
THE AFOREMENTIONED  
ARTIFACT AT A DRINKING  
PARTY AT THE HOME OF  
A CALLIGRAPHER, MEI  
YAO-CH'EN AND I FIND  
IT CURIOUS THAT THIS  
ARTIFACT TRIGGERS DEEPER  
DISCUSSION ABOUT THE  
NATURE OF HIS VISIT FROM  
THE ELEVENTH CENTURY  
AS WELL AS HIS EVENTUAL  
DEPARTURE FROM THE  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
TO FINISH THE REST OF HIS  
LIFE, INCLUDING ATTENDING  
A CERTAIN PARTY AT THE  
HOME OF TS'AI CHUN-MO  
MENTIONED EARLIER,  
TOWARDS THE SUCCESS OF  
WHICH WE BEGIN DRINKING  
IN ADVANCE

When they dug at Lang-yeh to build the city wall,  
deep in the earth they found a bronze trigger.

Its silver inlaid lines of calibration now far removed  
from crossbow and arrow—all that remains

are the lines, and the eye that looks upon them.  
Archaeologists would debate for hundreds of years

exactly how the calibration lines worked, what they lined up—  
inventing again and again the marvelous weapon

none had seen, found where the city's defenses would be built.  
I will write a poem about this trigger in the year

I return to my homeland; so my host tells me—  
he has the advantage of my entire life's work

in a book. I only know what I have written so far!  
Yet I am sure tonight, discussing this poem

dug out of a book of the future, a poem whose lines  
of calibration will be a mystery to me until the day

I write them, that we've uncovered the trigger that will  
send me back, we were the marvelous weapon

yet to be built—me the arrow and he the bow  
lining up on the open edge of midlife's sight.

It's how you got here, my host tells me. By the time  
a poem reaches its reader all that remains

is a trigger waiting to be found. What it calibrated  
once is a mystery, as if that even matters.

All that remains are the lines,  
and the eye that looks upon them.

IF YOU HAVE NEVER HAD AN 11TH CENTURY SUNG DYNASTY POET HELP YOUR FAMILY PICK OUT A CHRISTMAS TREE AT LOWE'S, YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU ARE MISSING, WHERE EVEN A DRIVE-BY CONSUMERIST TRADITION ACQUIRES SOME LEVEL OF EVIDENCE OF TZU-JAN, THE SUCCESS OF THE SEARCH IS A FINE EXAMPLE OF THE GENERATIVE FORCE AT WORK, AND ALSO, MEI YAO-CH'EN REALLY KNOWS HOW TO TIE KNOTS WITH TWINE TO SECURE THE TREE ON TOP OF OUR MINIVAN, THOUGH NOT SO MUCH HOW TO UNTIE THEM, AND SO WHILE I AM CUTTING THE KNOTS APART SO THAT MY VAN IS NOT COVERED WITH STREAMS OF TWINE LIKE CARTOON ACTION SWOOSHES WHEN WE DRIVE, HE IS WRITING THIS POEM ON THE UNDERSIDE OF OUR TREE SKIRT, BUT I CATCH HIM FINISHING IT AND TRANSCRIBE IT HERE, WONDERING HOW MANY OTHER POEMS I MAY NOT FIND UNTIL AFTER HE HAS GONE

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Why not this one? My host's wife stands at the entrance  
to Lowe's, pointing to the very first tree in the lot.

Not even under the store's protective canopy, close to the curb,  
its boughs crusted with the day-old remainder of a Thanksgiving flurry.

Come on, my host says, disappearing into a tree-filled cavern larger than  
Buddha Hall at the Universal-Purity monastery. What's wrong with this one,

she asks me. It's a fine tree and I say so, and in my travels I have seen this  
hardy fir grown the height of forty men. I know its nature. This tree existed

before leaves learned to arch themselves across sunlight; before grass  
spread across the plains this tree braced itself against sharp young mountains.

What difference does it make which one you choose? But for this one,  
it's full, flexible, with a strong base, just the right size for the corner

you have cleared in the living room for its arrival. And here it is  
the very first tree we see, out of hundreds, as if it is waiting for us

to brush a few chunks of ice off its coat and welcome it. She holds it  
at arm's length, and smiles. Then it is settled, she says.

Now if we could just find my husband and brush the ice off him.  
He'll come back soon, I say. Some just have to go searching.

SPENDING OUR LAST HOURS IN THE SAME CENTURY TOGETHER ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, SUNG DYNASTY POET MEI YAO-CH'EN AND I DECIDE TO ENGAGE IN A TRADITIONAL DRINKING PARTY TO INCLUDE THE COMPOSITION OF SEVERAL POEMS, THOUGH WE ARE SIDETRACKED INITIALLY BY SEEING THE BEGINNING OF "JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH," THE 1958 CINEMATIC VERSION OF JULES VERNE'S 1864 NOVEL "VOYAGE AU CENTRE DE LA TERRE," APPEARING WITHOUT COMMERCIAL INTERRUPTION ON TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES, AND SO WE SIT FOR A WHILE TOGETHER, ENTRANCED BY GIANT UNDERGROUND MUSHROOMS, JAMES MASON GOING IN AND OUT OF A SCOTTISH ACCENT, AND PAT BOONE TAKING HIS SHIRT OFF MORE TIMES THAN ANYONE HAS A RIGHT TO DO UNDERGROUND BUT MOSTLY NOTICING HOW GERTRUDE THE DUCK ALWAYS SEEMS TO KNOW THE WAY, AND WHEN THE MOVIE IS FINALLY OVER WE BRING A POT OF OOLONG TEA UPSTAIRS AND SIT ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF MY DESK ALTERNATELY LOOKING AT THE MOON AND COMPOSING LINES OF VERSE, FIGURING THE WINE CAN WAIT, AND WE DO OPEN A BOTTLE SHORTLY AFTER MY FRIEND COMPOSES THE LINES BELOW

In the passageways of the Yellow Springs, deep in the earth, you cannot cast a shadow,  
so far from the sun's rays is the afterlife. In this century they say that a great writer

casts a long shadow. But long shadows only occur when the light is about to die.  
My host agrees: A long shadow's a distorted shape, a flattened movie on the floor—

cast it a thousand years and all the fine points disappear and even the fat parts get lean.  
That's why you had to bring the rest of me here, isn't it? I ask him. I wonder how

it will happen, I know this time change is as arbitrary as any, where can the magic be  
that will bring me back to my family, my friends, and the sickness that will kill me?

Outside on the road, which is no longer paved but scattered with stones and puddles,  
something duck-shaped shines in the moonlight. The road curves into the earth,

into the past I have not lived yet. The cars outside shimmer and grow transparent.  
This must be how dogs experience time—this morning seems distant and forgettable

and my love's head in my lap countless years ago, her heartbeat against my chest  
feels vibrant and colorful. Like a Technicolor movie? my host asks, pouring the last

of the tea. That's not dog-time. That's being middle aged, and finally knowing,  
with certainty, that you're going to die, and that the dead cast no shadows.

We pour the wine and roll it in the wide clear glasses, a wrinkle of light in the center  
swirling, and the raft of my heart turning, turning, waiting for me.

DRINKING A BOTTLE OF CARDINAL  
POINT NOUVEAU RED, WHICH  
IS MEANT TO BE DRUNK IN THE  
WINTER AND NOT TO BE TUCKED  
AWAY IN A CELLAR, MEI YAO-CH'EN  
AND I CONTEMPLATE OTHER  
THINGS THAT ARE MEANT TO BE  
ENJOYED NOW AND NOT LATER,  
INCLUDING THE MOON HIGH ABOVE  
US ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, AND HE  
CHANTS THESE LINES AS I REFILL  
OUR GLASSES AROUND WHICH  
ETCHED BIRDS SEEM PREPARED TO  
FLY CONSTANTLY, LIKE MINERVA'S  
OWL, THOUGH THEY NEVER DO NO  
MATTER HOW MUCH WE DRINK



The last of the year's light slid away without ceremony like rain off a duck's back.  
Still all this darkness to the hours left, and the next year beginning in pitch black—

Is it any wonder we may not sleep soundly? Though even the winter wind  
through dead leaves has its song, and the stinging silence of stars

would be a fine last sight. So what if this is all the sigh of a sleeping dog?  
But then I see it: the moon already streaming tomorrow's daylight.

WALKING HOME IN THE WANING LIGHT  
OF THE LAST DAY OF THE YEAR, MEI  
YAO-CH'EN AND I SEE A FOIL BALLOON  
FLOATING AWAY IN THE AIR AND CROSS  
THE RISING MOON, AND HE CANNOT  
HELP BUT SPONTANEOUSLY CHANT  
THE LINES WHICH FOLLOW



Somebody's new year is already getting away from them!  
The string's weight swings it back and forth

and the wind sweeps it across the moon. How can loss be  
so buoyant and shiny, and our hearts so heavy?

SAYING GOODBYE  
TO MEI YAO-CH'EN  
AT SCARGO TOWER,  
CAPE COD

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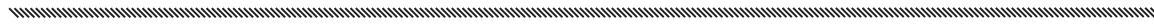
From this modest stone tower you can see the entire bay in icy blue.  
To the left the sun sets over lake, bay, and land beyond. To the right

The Cape points the way back to your home. When the sun pauses  
above the horizon, some have seen the entire sky turn jade.

For a moment the world is a priceless gem. I have not seen this  
myself in over three hundred sunsets but I know I will tonight

and when I turn you will no longer be next to me. You will write  
when you get home, on a late night walk through the cold,

that only the moonlight and your shadow find nothing wrong  
with the way you live. My friend, that is not your shadow.





NIGHT  
(FOR RUAN JI)  
by Mei Yao-ch'en

From the east the day comes spinning, revolving towards  
the strange west, where descending evening colors the ocean's every drop.

Every living thing is resting, or holding its breath, it's hard to tell  
on nights when the toad swallows the moon –

Starlight glinting from every pine needle – or is it a million swords  
unsheathed, our demons striving to materialize out of the dark cluster?

Only you, my friend, sleepless, pacing in your room, can sense it; only you  
with a word, or a wave across your zither, can turn the knife's edge back into night.

\*

My continuing thanks to Chen Zhang, Chinese Literary Preceptor at Harvard University, for her explication and patience. She not only provided a word-for-word translation but important historical and critical perspective that helped me locate this work closer to the heart of Mei's writing; she also provided her own enthusiasm for this specific poem. Sitting alone with a cup of coffee at a Panera Bread with a marvelous view of the twilight saturating the Blue Ridge, I found a way into this poem through the voice of the poet I have appropriated/channeled/imitated in nearly forty other poems that were not attempting to be translations. That voice I was so used to writing in already helped me re-imagine this most recent version, which I think may be closer to a true translation of my friend Sheng-yu's work. After several false starts to the translation work, I had hit a roadblock, and the idea came from Chen to approach the task of translating through the poet's voice as it already existed in the poems in this book; she pinpointed so well the difference between interpretation and translation in my many amateur's questions.

Ruan Ji (210 – 263) was a poet Mei admired. He was also, some might say, an accomplished ne'er-do-well born into a prominent family who was unafraid of leveraging that prominence and wealth to support his chosen vocation as a poet. Some stories about him include him staying drunk for over a month to avoid having to get married, and so impressing an elder in his family with his zither playing one evening that his reputation was upgraded to ne'er-do-well-who-plays-a-mean-zither,-and-that-has-gotta-mean-something.

MOONLIGHT & SHADOW  
An Imaginary Portrait of Mei Yao-ch'en

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