

Selwyn Pritchard

REFLECTIONS ON UNFORTUNATE SCHOLARS

—for *Tan Shilin, my friend*

You say that you regret nothing.
Black hornets skid around their nest,
your cage-birds bounce and sing,
you fill my glass and start to talk
of the Fourth Century poet
whose works you have translated,
Tao Yuanming, who, despairing
of officialdom, put himself out of court . . .
“Preferred the idiocy of rural life?”

You pause, then shake your head,
insist that seasons teach discipline;
wisdom grows from flowers’ brevity . . .
Tao met the starveling moon’s enquiry
with vibrant poems and his glass
of chrysanthemum wine held high.
We clink and drink to him who lost
or gave away fifteen centuries ago
poems schoolchildren now can quote:
“Ars longa, vita brevis!”

In the winking, evening light your cats
get up, then collapse in new sun shafts
from the flexing bamboo filigree where
black butterflies with poisonous wings
are fluttering chaotically above the bath
in which you try to preserve the local frog.
Beyond this hedge horns, bells, brakes
stop our talk almost our hearts
as students yell. Mosquitoes plague

my ankles so I slap and scratch without
your Daoist tolerance. You wish, you say,
to emulate your pets (but not the turtles
who make love like rowing boats?) pour
Zhu Jiang beer and then tell me how,
when you landed from the ferry where now
The White Swan allows the rich to pay per night
what some villages earn a year, you found
a welcoming committee with clubs and rope
and one with a gun who pleaded just to
shoot you *once*, if only in a leg, whilst the rest
yelled “MONSTER,” and dragged you off
in a dunce’s cap, distinguished professor.

They brought you to bless the Jesuit school
which taught you to confess with sophistry
sufficient to captivate zealots: you recalled
conversations from years and years before
in Llasa, Urumqui and Ulan Bator, which
MUST BE CHECKED!

Thus time passed.

You gave the bullet a miss. Instead for years
and years you were yoked to buckets of piss,
but knowing how emperors drown in odious gush,
you never spilt a drop . . . or hoed down row on
row of weeds tangled like the rules of fools;
and nightly whipping yourself, laying it on,
flagellant to your own order, you beat them!
They put you in charge of shit and swill:
you made a small profit from coins which
fell from trouser pockets into the pit; in the sty
in the stench, you addressed the swine
in perfect German, English, French which
the pigs, at least, understood. Ten years!
Ten years you endured. Then absolution,
reinstatement, restitution . . . for those who lived.

Oh what, I wonder, do the postgrads make
of my soft irony, that “humour of slaves”
deep in the Englit soul, after your hard
brilliance? They respect the old nowadays!

We have seen Great Causes come to
curious effects; the cities of the word
overthrown by videogoths; the rational
light turn thick with avarice.

Twilight.

Our voices echo. Flowers have closed.
The cage-birds huddle and the hornets sleep.
Now the cats stretch in their welcome yoga;
we stand and bow; your wife comes home.

The title of this poem is from the Tao Yuanming 365-427 C.E.

FREEWAY

Mid-afternoon, the sun already amber
in Guangzhou’s distant pall,
glints like a lost coin under the delta bridges
of the Pearl, is smashed underfoot by workers
straddling rusted mesh, hunkered down
in exhaust where the concrete pours
eight lanes out to Gong Bei and Macau.

The old dust road bumps and roars
in a barter of horns and bells,
bicyclists balancing ruts between lorries,
tractors, cars, the odd Mercedes enjoying
better air than ours on an express bus,
rolling to rhumbas over the humid plain,
across flyovers where rattan shacks
lean out of the monsoon rain and the Unit’s
migrant youths lie in the vibrating, toxic night,
dreaming of out-reaching Li Bai
when day’s new-minted in the East again.