

## The North · *Ai Qing*

One day  
A poet from the Ke Er Chin grassland  
Said to me: "The North is sad."

True, the North is sad.  
Blowing from beyond the frontier  
The desert winds  
Have swept away the North's green life,  
The brightness of its days—  
A sheet of dull ash-yellow  
Covered by a clinging mist of sand.  
A roar breaks in from the horizon, bringing  
Terror with it, madly  
Sweeping over the vast land.  
The wide, uncultivated plains  
Frozen in the cold winds of December—  
Villages, hillocks, riverbanks,  
Crumbled walls and overgrown graves  
Shrouded by grief, the color of earth.  
A lone traveler, bending forward  
Shields his face with his hands,  
Walks through sand and wind.  
Breathing with difficulty, step  
Over step he plods  
Onward . . . a few donkeys, beasts  
With forlorn eyes and tired, drooping ears  
Bear this land's painful burden.  
Their weary hooves  
Trudge slowly  
Over the long  
And lonely road of the North.

The streams have dried up;  
Their beds are scarred by wheel tracks.  
The land and people of the North  
Long for the springs that nourish life.

Withered forests  
And short, stunted houses  
Are scattered sparse and dark  
Under the ashen sky, and in the sky  
The sun cannot be seen,  
Only large flocks of wild geese,  
Anxious, confused geese  
Beating their black wings,  
Honking their distress, escaping  
From this desolate land  
To the south, where the green foliage  
Blocks out the sky . . .

The North is sad,  
And the Yellow River, thousands of miles long,  
Sends its turbulent billows  
To spill hardship and disaster  
Over the North's vast land;  
The wind and frost of ages  
Are gouging  
Poverty and famine  
Into the North's vast land.

But I, a traveler from the South,  
Love this sad North country.  
The wind and sand that slap my face  
And the cold air that pierces my bones  
Have never made me complain.  
I love this sad country;  
This endless expanse of desert  
Wins my respect. I see  
Our ancestors leading flocks of sheep  
Into the dusk of this great desert,  
Playing their bamboo flutes.  
In this earth that we tread,  
In this powdery earth,  
The bones of our ancestors are buried.  
This is the land they nurtured;  
Thousands of years they lived here  
Fighting hostile forces of nature.  
They guarded this land faithfully  
And never once surrendered.  
They bequeathed this land to us.

I love this sad country;  
Its vast yet barren land has given us  
A sincere, direct language  
And generous ways.  
I know this language and these ways  
Will live steadfast on earth  
And never die;  
I love this sad, this ancient country, whose land  
Cradled the most ancient people in the world,  
Those who have endured the most hardships,  
Those, I love.

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