

## Preface. A Slow Thief's Thank-you Note

1.

"We live downriver from the past; we fish our phrases from the stream. They are not ours; we finish stanzas long ago begun."

So I put it in my poem "Before the Day," a poem too long to include in *House of Thieves*, this selection from my work. "Before the Day" won the inaugural Miluo River International Poetry Prize. It celebrates—it divines, in a sense—the great Chinese poet Qu Yuan, with whom it is said all lyric poetry began, and it is dedicated to Jidi Majia, the great contemporary lyric poet.

And I believe this is true: in our present moment we live and write downstream of all that reaches us from times past, as Qu Yuan did in his days, as the great Indigenous poets of my homeland would also say they have done, who have danced and sung lyric poems for many tens of thousands of years. Though one's work aims in every phrase to be as new as dawn, as fresh and raw as new love, as inimitable as any given moment, it perpetuates the ancient and essential work lyric poetry has performed in all human societies from the beginning: the bearing of memorable witness to what Dante called "the divine comedy," the absurdity and holiness, in other words, the inner life and felt sense, of any and every human life, lived for so brief a time, in trauma and in delight, alone and in company, in this burning and beautiful world, this shining and warming earth, where, in our many dialects and forms of dress, we find ourselves set down.

2.

We are languaging mammals, and we have sung, it is said, since before we could talk. And when we sing well, we live well; we are consoled and conserved and improved. We have in all cultures and times needed to cry our human plight and to seek to understand the earth and our troubles on it and to offer sometimes useful conclusions about all we have seen and what we hope our descendants will remember and enact more wisely than we have. And lyric poetry has been the vessel every society has fashioned after its own habits to float that project into the great seas of unknowing that surround us. Poets have sought, in all cultures, not just to say their own lives and times, to the music of their "own particular heart," as Jack Gilbert put it; they have hoped, by employing language from which all that is inessential is stripped, and by recruiting wise and robust poetic forms that in their poems they both honour and bend, and by insisting on much more from their diction and phrasing than is adequate in daily conversation—they have hoped to do some justice to *all lives* (of which theirs is merely, as Seamus Heaney said, one instance) *and to all times*, past and present and future, of which the present times are also an instance.

3.

This, in any case, is how I understand my poetic project. I write downstream of a long long past, and I write upstream of all the days to come. In my words flow ideas and images and whole fellowships of phrase that occur to me in my making, out of all the reading and thinking and talking and looking and looking and learning and teaching I have done, out of the great literatures of the world (Persian and Russian and Japanese and Hindi and Panjabi and Arabic and Chinese, for instance, Italian and French and American and British and Canadian and Romanian and Spanish) I have encountered in translation. For poetry is the world language, and all of our poetries are its dialects—as distinctive, each of our poetries, as our geographies and cultures, and yet each a subspecies of one great deeper speaking, the lyric conversation of all humanity, in which all our lives are scrutinised and found wanting and forgiven and loved and set back down in nature and time and place.

I am a translator, like all poets, of Being. I hope to transfigure such experiences as I have been given into language worthy of the particular local genius of those moments that I was not too distracted by myself to notice as they passed. I have been given, like all of us, one life; I give it back in poetry, and I hope it does justice to the gift and that it speaks of many other lives (and birds and places and lovers and children and cultures and passions) than my own.

4.

Here, then, are one hundred of my shorter poems, selected from my five collections of poetry published in English to date, along with a few poems from other books and from my most recent work. It is hard to choose, and it took me longer than it should. These are all my children, and it seems unfair to leave any out. Most of my poems, in fact, run longer than these ones, and it feels strange to have none of that work represented here for a Chinese audience. It's my hope that you seek that other work out and that this selection is followed by others where the longer work can be encountered. To the poems, I've added some few pieces of my prose, mostly on prosody and lyricism and poetry—that nature of poetry, the craft of its making, the practice of poetry as a way of performing a useful kind of presence, a calling of all of us to account, in the world.

For most readers, this will be their first encounter with my work, and so my translator Professor Huang Shaozheng (Hunter) has added an afterword here that introduces and throws some light on my poetry, its themes and characteristics. I thank him for that appreciation of my work, and for the brilliance and hard work entailed in translating these poems from my Australian English into a readable Chinese that tries to do the same kind of justice to my poems as they have tried to do to the moments that gave rise to them. For we are all translators, and we are all working in the dark.

5.

The occasion for this book, which I feel deeply honoured to see made, is the awarding to me of the Golden Tibetan Antelope Poetry Prize, recognition given by the organizing committee of the Qinghai Lake International Poetry Festival, for the contribution made to world literature by a poet from outside China. I feel, of course, like an imposter in the list of the poets who've received this award, among them the great Indigenous American poet Simon Ortiz, the Syrian émigré poet Adonis, Syrian poet Adonis, Argentine poet Juan Hermann, and San Franciscan beat poet Jack Hirschman. I am most grateful to the committee and its chair, Jidi Majia, for their recognition of my work and for this opportunity they have afforded me to share it with an audience well beyond my shores and my native language.

My work became known in China because my friend Isabelle Li, Chinese-Australian writer, translated a selection of my work for a book called *Almost Everything I Know*. Some of her translations were published in 2015 in the *World Literature*, and because of their quality, they were read and remembered. (There was, I know, some awareness of my prose and poetry before that time among the eco-critics in China; my own scholarship has been in that field.) Some of Isabelle Li's translations are included in this book, alongside brand-new translations by Huang Shaozheng. It was my poetry, then, that brought me to China, where I have travelled five or six times now, most recently as a guest of the international writers' program at the Liu Xun Academy. My life and my writing have been enchanted and enlarged by my encounter with Chinese poetry, contemporary and classical. So, it gives me great joy now to see a translation of so much of my work into Chinese, one of the great poetic languages of the world, making it available to a people whose culture and literature I have learned so much from.

My deepest gratitude must go to Huang Shaozheng. This work is his. He exhorted this selection from me, and he worked rapidly and with great devotion to understand the poems—with so much idiom in them, native to the poet and his places, and with so much by way of joke and irony and implication and speech pattern, so much craft particular to the poet's native tongue—well enough to make these transcriptions, these accurate impressions, these versions, these translations. Our conversations about the poems were long and deep and a great joy to me. I am honoured by the fierce and generous attention you've paid to my lines, Hunter.

But my thanks, also, as ever to my partner Jodie Williams, who helped me make and transcribe this selection from my work and who supports my writing and my life with much more kindness and loveliness than I deserve. My thanks to the publisher, Guagxi Normal University Press, for taking on the manuscript and making of it something so fine. And to the many poets, scholars, writers, hosts, and readers who have made my times and travels in China a pilgrimage of delight and learning—the very centre of my days.

6.

“Break & Enter,” one of the poems in this selection, considered a rose that grew into my writing room one winter, through a crack in the pane I had not known till the rose bloomed almost beside me. Playing on the idea of “break and enter,” the phrase used in English for the crime of burglary, I refer to the rose as a “slow thief,” whose scent is its thank-you note for permission (it never sought) to break in and break out. I speak of the bloom as “a burglar tired of taking, determined now to give himself away.” I have named this selection *House of Thieves*, the title of another of my poems here, with this idea in mind—that the poet is just such a slow thief, their poems moments stolen from the bounty of the world as it visits, transcribed into remembrances such as these. One’s poems are one’s thanks for what gave rise to them, and they are an apology, also, for what one has taken and for all one has failed to say as well as the moment or the witnessed life deserved. These poems of mine are a slow thief’s thank-you notes. An attempt by this particular thief to earn back some honour by giving back to the world a little more even than he was given.