

# The Ceremony of All Being: Jidi Majia's "Promised Land"

MARK TREDINNICK

1.

IT SEEMS FITTING that I write these words under a blood moon.

The moon tonight, cloaked in the slanted shadow thrown by the earth, puts out a low glow, like a porch-lamp burning in an outback town, or like a solitary streetlamp in a high mountain village; and looking up at this tender, distempered orb, one feels one is alive in another era, almost in another galaxy, a future world or a past time, which is still remembered tonight in this slow and shamanic ceremony of the cosmos. Tonight, you inhabit briefly a promise you know you were born into: of beauty beyond measure, of holiness incarnate, incarnadine. A new time, a deeply troubled and unsteady present moment, is spoken in this tenebrous sepia moon afloat in a black November sky, and stars bob about like tea-lights on a lake, and all that you have not done right, all that will never again be intact in the world, is suffered to be said in the old words all peoples, all beings once understood, and all is for a moment forgiven.

And after an hour or two, the night goes back to being November in ordinary time; in Egypt world leaders meet again to consider their inevitably compromised and piecemeal responses to the climate catastrophe that we inhabit; in the US the people go angrily to the polls; there are famines and wars and floods and oil slicks and oil shocks and renewed outbreaks of pandemic. And yet, the eclipse leaves a trace of mercy and hope like a wash across the dark skies that in the future time, a vastly changed world, which the celestial phenomenon seemed to foretell (almost to enact), "people are still part of this world," as Jidi Majia's speaker puts it at the end of this great manifesto of a poem.

The colours of Jidi Majia's people, the Yi, or Nuosu, of the high mountains of Liangshan, are yellow and red and black. These are the colours, as it happens, of the Indigenous peoples of my home continent, Australia. And those are the colours of the star country tonight: the black of the field, like an aftermath of sun or burning; the red of the fire that keeps the country well and warms its people (the red, also, of the soil in so many parts of my land); the yellow of the sun. Like all of Jidi Majia's poetry, this long poem, "Promised Land," though it speaks of all lands and contemplates all lives everywhere, rises where he himself arose—the mountain landscapes of his people, "the festival of life" among them, the cultural practices that have helped sustain dignified relations among people and between people and all other beings and with the rivers and mountains and the climate, for many thousands of years.

In Jidi Majia's poem one central image is the hearth, the firepit, the villagers gathered in a circle around a fire, talking and passing on traditional wisdom about "how to greet life and face death." And "only the firelight"—transfigured by Jidi Majia in this time-bending, prophetic, and sometimes ironic, sometimes nostalgic oracle into "the distribution center of the wisdom of a millennium"—"can let those gathered . . . clearly see the things in the darkness." And so it is in his poem, itself a hearth around which it feels we are called to gather and reflect; and so

it is tonight, the red and yellow moon throwing a wise light on things normally lost on us in the everyday and overlit digital blindness of our lives.

So you see how apt it is that—under pressure from my friend Hunter, who is editing this book and who has to translate these words against a tight publishing deadline—I write these words about Jidi Majia’s elegant “Howl” of a poem, under a moon tonight that is made of blood and resembles a fire pit in the black lands, the stars scattered about like sleepless children? His poem seen in this light brings to mind some words from a much earlier poem of Jidi Majia’s.

Give us blood, give us land  
You are more ancient than history  
Enlighten us, console us  
Let children in darkness see their ancestor’s appearances...

2.

How many registers can a poem sing at once and still be a poem? If a deep and distinctive voice, the voice of the Bimo (Yi priest), say, holds it true in its coursing back and forth and far and deep; if topography grounds it and the weather of centuries plays through it; if it is a river many smaller rivers join; if the dance steps of women “treading out the secret rhythms of the earth” trip through it; and if values (struck often like the notes of a chord this great poem is strung on) sustain it—then a poem this big and declamatory, this visionary and discursive, can hold together like wild mountainous country long cared for. And so this poem does. “Promised Land” reads like the “black river” Jidi Majia describes in his poem of the same name; this grand new poem is like a procession for the dead that, like those “black rivers” the poet has seen pass through his home valleys, honour what has passed, respect what never passes, and celebrate, even as they mourn, human traditions carried forward, the patterns of place, the old songs and ways, the dignity of each person (in life and in death), and the power of community (as the poet turns it in this new poem) to each individual life.

I know ancient Nuosu funerals on the great mountain.  
(On a black river human eyes  
flicker with golden light.)

I’ve seen a river of people quietly passing through the valley.  
I’ve seen a river of people overflowing with ripples of sorrow.  
Passing heavily through this changing world.  
Passing heavily through this mystical world.

“Promised Land” is an upwelling, as “incorrigibly plural” (to quote Louis MacNeice) as the land the poet Jidi Majia knows he speaks for. In his poem “For Myself,” Jidi Majia once himself said this. “But this I can be sure of:/If there were no Greater Liangshan and my People didn’t exist/ then I, the poet, wouldn’t exist.” Perhaps

“Promised Land,” a great country of rivers, is where all that country was carrying this poet. For it reads like a manifesto of mountains.

3.

“Promised Land” is a kind of prophecy, commenting on the state of the earth and of us humans upon it deep in the “Holocene” by throwing forward to a dystopian time a little less functional, less linguistically and regionally diverse, less steeped in old wisdom, more mercantile, more abstracted, more scientific, more homogenized, less humane, less wild, more false, more virtual, more denuded of species even than our own. And from that diminished near future—that coming land, which the wayward present seems to promise—the poet looks back to older times, now lost (“his flock of sheep vanished long ago”), or barely hanging on, when older wisdom, schooled by connection to country, held and schooled humans in life and death and community and dignity and beauty.

By throwing forward and back in this way, the poem helps us stand a step back from where we are, as the poet sees it, and think about what we are about to lose before we lose it. Although the poem is nostalgic, the poet is clear: “these aren’t the roads home; the small paths of the past/ have disappeared.” What the prophetic speaker of this poem seems to want is this: that we find new ways of saying and seeing things, and each other, the way they actually are, not the way they may once have been and are no long, nor the way we are told they are or ought to be (Jidi Majia makes telling reference in the poem to Bertrand Russell’s famous words to this effect). And poetry, as ever, the poet wants us to see, is what is what is most under threat and also most of what is required if the promised land is to hold much promise at all—a deeply humane and ecological way of seeing and being in the world, in which the mysterious and diverse and plural nature of all life on earth is revered and conserved. What is most at risk is also what we most need is language that “know[s] why people keep living.” If there remains reason to keep living in the coming world, our descendants in the land the present promises will need to know how to wake to their own “astonishment,” to the mystery and wildness of things, and for that awakening, they will need the dancers and the poets, for the world has always needed the poet—the shaman—to see what goes unremarked, to say what is otherwise unsayable.

And Jidi Majia in this new poem expresses the cautious hope that in the future “their poet might still be alive.” He goes on: “I fully believe/ even though he still stands in a fixed position and sings,/ the torch in his hand will illumine the world.”

4.

“Let ancient languages in the newest laws,” one Bardic passage of “Promised Land” declares, “become the texts of the world.” Here Jidi Majia seems almost to echo Percy Shelley’s famous utterance: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” But for Jidi Majia, the “newest laws” will be spoken in many languages, each an idiom particular to and as specifically wise as its places and peoples. If poetry prevails in the ways of women and men, the future will still be hirsute with “forests composed of words from different dialects.” “Words have a natural slope,” he goes on, striking a note the poem often repeats: what is organic, what grows from intelligent human interaction with the world of canyon and river and fire and mystery, has virtue, and so it is with

language and thought. Diversity, plurality, of language and difference of thought and approach are, for this reason, praised, too, in the poem.

What is wanted in the promised land is integrity, authenticity, particularity. Individuated human lives lived and minds schooled in communities, in real places. All this, once the remit of most of humankind, “who would return to the wilderness to search for the wedding rug of all living things,” is set against “the pragmatism of instrumental rationality”, against abstraction and sameness. And all this, of course, poetry defends and conserves and models.

The promised land the prophetic speaker hopes for (as opposed to the dystopia he imagines) seems, on the evidence of the poem, to be a modified species of modernity, its bad habits—toward digitization, abstraction of thought, meagre conceptions of self (“the stars seem both close and far from our souls”; “identical descriptions of different sorrows”), shallowness and artificiality (the silicon breast implants alluded to late in the poem), ugliness and narrow conformity (“clusters of . . . concrete buildings are like cloned goods”; “the same scene is seen from every window”)—its bad habits all tempered by tradition, by poetry, by the lessons of Indigenous peoples, by recollection of the “breath of the earth” and the scent of the actual weather and the soul of some actual facts, by lived experience of the wildness of things, by a wealth and diversity and humanity of language. The promised land the poem hopes for will be redeemed, it seems from the helplessness of its present dispensation, if its people can recall, at the bidding of the poets and prophets and elders (if any may be found to take the Bimo’s place), that, more than just existing and conforming and buying, each being, even “tiny insects,” takes part in a “ceremony of life,” that all souls constitute and perpetuate through time.

5.

The way forward, the speaker of this poem makes clear, is not the way back (“this is not returning to the past”); the way forward, if you like, is the way deeper in: “it is individual lives/ remembering a spirit that has perished.” In the world Jidi Majia still holds out hope for, against the weight of evidence around him in his homeland China and around the world, modern selves will still know how to keep open a silence in their lives to “tradition.” This, to me, is a compelling, oracular thought, that appears almost as an aside early in the poem: “This is the silence the self offers to tradition.” What is necessary to the survival of civilization, to livable life on earth, is, if you like, the *nothing* that only poetry, that ancient tradition, fashions, the silence that only the awakened heart, the humble mind, the animal soul, is capable of; what will save us is a little remembered reverence—practised, as it were, in every one of our many languages (“it doesn’t belong to any one language”)—toward wisdom passed on hand to hand for generations, toward wisdom implicit in the earth and evident in cultural practices and modes of behaviour and address that have not forgotten what our ancestors knew, and which do not conform to any party line of commercial verity.

“This is the silence the self offers to tradition.”

6.

Somewhere between the second and the eighth centuries, a poet, whose name is forgotten, wrote a poem in Palestine. And it seems to me this poem still speaks today for what it is a human heart—real estate no one can

ever own (though many will try)—yearns for, what a body hopes for, while it has its chance to swim a while in “the river of time”:

To rise on high  
and descend below,  
to ride the chariot’s wheels  
and explore in the world,  
to wander on earth  
and contemplate splendor,  
to draw on the crown  
and sound Glory,  
to utter praises  
and link letters,  
to utter names  
and behold what is  
above and below,  
to know the meaning  
of the living  
and see the vision  
of the dead.  
To ford rivers of fire  
and know lightning.

We are so briefly here in this terrible and glorious and storied earth. We are so soon gone. Even a hundred years passes like a season of geology. And while we are here, we are given these hearts in their longing and these bodies in their moving and loving and sleeping and these senses in their apprehension and hurt and these minds which remember and these traditions to be learned and carried on and these promises to be broken or fulfilled, this work to be done; and while we are here with “all this now too much for us” (as Frost puts it) to be getting on with, there will be some of our kind who will try to scam us and curtail our freedom and still our voices and tell us whom to love and what to do with our lives and where to put our passions; and there will be others will love us notwithstanding all our faults and all that did not want us to flourish in our days. And then, each of us a species of one, will go extinct.

Deep down we live a beautiful tragedy that unfolds in sunlight and in rain, in joy and suffering, toward its inevitable end. And all the while the world, our mother, our eternal home, the rest of who we are, goes on, and will long go on without us. We, with our burning hearts, are born to yearn and struggle and hope and delight and grieve, alive in the knowledge that our days and all that mattered in them will end.

To be human, in other words, is to live with the knowledge that all living, including in particular our own, ceases. How we live well and stay sane in that knowledge is what a lot of our human trouble is about.

Buddhism has helped its practitioners understand that how we fight against the river of impermanence is how we suffer. Be carried by the river, Buddhism suggests, but few find that easy.

While we live, some things we wish would pass, refuse to: our pain, our poverty, bad governments, pandemics, injustices. Other things we wish would stay, pass: youth, beauty, summer, true love, fame, good health, holidays, life itself. And finally, there are some things we need to endure, if the human carnival, the festival of creation, is to carry on, and they seem always at risk of corroding or corrupting, through human neglect, through lack of care and attention, through the actions of the lesser angels of our human natures: I mean, of course, the great virtues, which all of us might name differently, but which we know we need if chaos is not to ensue (compassion, just laws, freedom of spirit and belief, love of beauty, a sense of proportion, a quality of dignity), and I mean sustainable ways of living with each other and with the rest of creation, ecologically responsible practices that do not endanger the temperate climate that more or less allows all human life and civilization to happen at all.

Poetry, I want to say, and better than any other practice, bears witness to these three species of impermanence and does justice to our impermanent lives. It has fulfilled that role as long as humans have known how to speak and sing. Some, like Greg Orr, believe that lyric poetry evolved for the purpose of keeping us sane inside the trauma of our predicament. Certainly, in every culture we know, there is poetry. Certainly, it is the original and the essential literature, and certainly in all languages and places and times it bears witness to what it feels like and what it means to be alive and conscious for such a short time in a world of beauty and dread that will go on without us.

In case anyone should ever ask you how poetry helps anyone through an existential crisis, let this be said about poetry: it is, in these specific ways, the answer to which impermanence is the question. 1. It bears witness to the joys we wish would stay, and keeps them said longer than our lives can. 2. It consoles us in our pain by finding pattern and fellowship across the ages in it, and by ordering otherwise chaotic and inchoate feelings (grief, jealousy, sorrow, anger, desire, wanting); it shapes often unbearable experiences, in other words, into habitable forms—into hearths to sit with others round. 3. By embodying the virtuous habits of the world and of our hearts, which we otherwise disdain or neglect, and by refusing to let goodness and loveliness and kindness and honour go unspoken, poetry has tended also to conserve what Jidi Majia calls in this poem “tradition”—the necessary conditions for the perpetuation of beauty and justice and dignity in our lives and in the lands we are sustained by.

In all these ways, poetry runs lyric repairs on reality, conserving what always otherwise atrophies, and cajoling us to participate in the preservation of the world. And although it is dressed up as the gloomy prognostication of an ageing bard, it is just this work that Jidi Majia’s “Promised Land” performs. For poetry, he knows, as all his poetry affirms, is for the conservation of what counts, what lasts; it is the refutation of what is false and meagre, of all that inevitably falls short in the ways of men and women lived in the everyday and hasty world.

7.

And here, I think, is what, specifically, the speaker of Jidi Majia's poem enjoins us to do—to fashion a good life (not only for ourselves), to help all of us prosper in the promised land:

- To join with grace and gravitas the festivals of the dead.
- To know how and when and where to take one's proper place in the ceremony of all living.
- To know the tune and to sing the words to some true songs in which all life and death are sung.

For poetry is the words to the old songs (forgetting which, we forget ourselves); it is the steps to the dance that goes on (and in which life itself is carried on).

8.

Which is to say: When we end, something we participated in and perpetuated, does not end, and this great living (lived for a while in our embodied moment of eternity) is what poetry sustains and what it reminds us while we live that we are living. This human tradition, this ceremony of life, as Jidi Majia puts it, *is* our true promised land, and it never ends as long as enough of us attend to its conservation. Poetry carries us on, speaking our deep humanity—that unique piece each of us is, and the wider humanity in which we share—when we are no longer here to say and enact it. Poetry speaks past lives to us, the living, as if they were our own, and it speaks our living on to others who come after. Poetry is a vessel, like a pot or a boat, that houses a spirit, a silence, a space; it gives shape to voice and form to breath, the way our bodies do in life. And poetry lasts when we do not.

But if it is to last, if what we lived and what our lives meant are to go on signifying anything, societies must read poetry and live with some recollection of their poetic responsibilities to the past and the future as well as themselves and the present—lyric responsibilities of memory, of witness, of the conservation of ways and places and values and customs and lore that counts—and among those who cultivate the great human tradition, must be at least a few of what Jidi Majia calls in this great poem, variously, the narrators, the poets, the Bimos, the dancers. Holding the torch, stepping out the dance, singing the songs that sustain what sustains us. The lore that poetry carries, in other words, must continue to be said and observed, respected and performed, or it will cease, and the promised land will become the bland dystopia Jidi Majia's poem prophesies.

9.

Rumi, it is said, danced up his poems. The Dervish dance, the spinning, transported that great poet to the ecstatic state from which his poems arose. I have not seen Jidi Majia dance, but I have heard him sing, and I have seen him in an ecstasy of delight at words well spoken and steps well performed. And his long poem, the culmination of many years of tender witness and devoted shamanic utterance, feels to me much less like a sermon than the truthful articulation that the intoxication of the spirit gives rise to. Deep into the poem are fourteen free-verse lines that list, randomly but rhythmically, instances that might be said to stand as metaphors for all that

counts in a good human life; instances of what it is that poetry must sing so that we, who otherwise, in our digital lives, forget to value, will not forget to love in our promised land:

Mountains, bare feet, armor, buckwheat,  
grindstones, golden leather bowls, moon lutes, *mabu*,  
jeweled knives, eagle claw goblets, stone pillars upholding the pot,  
hero's knots, honey wax, the mantra for sending off souls, white felt,  
mountain wind, genealogy, proverbs, epics,  
amulets, common law, releasing souls from purgatory, flames, guns,  
father and son's linked names, liquor, female cousins,  
blood relatives, marriage, sacred eagles,  
sages, saddles, apparel,  
traditions, the Torch Festival, warriors, cremation grounds,  
free migration, dignity, the dead,  
those who can meet death, revere black, heartfelt, passionate,  
animistic, taking oaths, intimate with flesh and blood,  
identity, recognition, solemnity, structure, valiance.

“They know why people keep living” is how this list concludes. Which might be read to mean: these practices and artefacts and values are what living means and why and how we carry on. As is only right, this litany rises specifically from the Nuosu culture to which Jidi Majia belongs. But you can be sure—from all he says in this poem about the necessity of diversity of view and language, and from all he has done in China over many years to promote multilingual conversations in poetry—that this sonnet of a list of true good things stands for all such things in any one of our particular languages or lives. And Jidi Majia, in this poem, wants us to know that speaking for the living and the dead in the great pageant of being is poetry’s work—unless we want impermanence to win. For, as he puts it, “people’s divinity is controlled by the deities, / and the deities’ prophecies can usually only be confirmed by people.”

10.

A poem is an event in words. It is an event in words that stands proxy for the kind of event each moment in life might be if we remembered to live it properly. Jidi Majia’s “Promised Land” is such an event in words. And although it purports to despair for us, in truth it arises from his unquenchable love for all of us, for life, for wildness and high culture, and above all for poetry and the purposes it serves. This is a poem, like so many Jidi Majia has written, of quiet hopefulness. If his hope is tempered by all that is not poetic and all that diminishes us and all that threatens the very ceremony of being he has always sought to sing, we can forgive him. For much is not well in the world. Still, he ends with hope a poem that begins with “the promised land.” Poetry and song might seem brittle vessels to carry humanity across the rising tides and through the intemperate weather our neglect of tradition has conjured, but poetry and song are all we ever had, and they have nearly always been enough.