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CULTURAL WORK

Poems 1–9 from *Wandering Spirit and Metaphysical Thoughts*

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Abstract

The 2000 Nobel Laureate for Literature, Gao Xingjian, suffered cardiac arrest while directing rehearsals for his mega-scale opera *Snow in August* that was due to premiere in late 2002 at the National Opera House, Taipei. He recovered, and the opera premiered as scheduled with the help of a co-director before he returned to Paris to direct the Comédie Française premiere of his *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end*. He underwent surgery in February and March of 2003, but was soon again back at work. The year 2003 had been designated ‘Gao Xingjian Year’ by the City of Marseille, and he would direct his new play *Le Quêteur de la Mort* at Théâtre du Gymnase, and then his *Snow in August* at Opéra de Marseille. It was during rehearsals for the former that he collapsed again, and was hospitalized: the play was co-directed by Romain Bonnin, 23–26 September 2003. Large exhibitions of Gao’s artworks had been held earlier that year, but the performance of *Snow in August* was postponed. During his recuperation for most of 2004, he sometimes wrote poems, some of which he later polished or rewrote for his 2012 collection *Wandering Spirit and Metaphysical Thoughts*. These translations by Mabel Lee are poems 1 through 9 from that collection (Taipei: Lianjing, 2012, 89–97).

Keywords

Gao Xingjian; Nobel Laureate; *Wandering Spirit and Metaphysical Thoughts*; Mabel Lee; translation

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(1)

Life for you
Is again so fresh
You're still in the human world
Indulging yourself
And galloping around one more time
What good luck!

Death was to have despatched you
But God said wait
Let him have another turn
The reprobate still has things to say
And there's no harm letting him finish

That joker has too many ideas
And should've dealt with them long ago
Says
Death who has equal rank with darkness

God who is indeed the epitome of kindness
Has given him a horse
Treats him as his favourite son
And forgives him again

(2)

Right now, you're close to the hoary sky
Far from humankind
And the clarity you've just won
Ah, what great freedom!

You look down at the human world
The shambolic multitudes
Fighting and squabbling
A totality of chaos
Everyone runs around
Oblivious
To the big invisible hand
That sometimes toys with them in the dark

(3)

A well
Endlessly deep
God

Is sitting inside
Eyes shut to conserve energy
Invisible to you and me

(4)
Life is a miracle
You came to the world
By chance
And in fact
Are inferior to a blade of grass
Whether you'll make it through winter
Heaven only knows
But the grass next spring
Will be swaying in the wind

You're insignificant
Inferior to dust
When the allocated time comes
You'll be deleted with a brush stroke
Whereas the dust
Will go and return
And can never be wiped away

Life comes by chance
And goes by chance
The dispersal of the spirit
Is faster than dust
Dust and life
Are essentially inseparable
Distilled and rarefied
Limitless times
You are
An ineffable miracle

(5)
A skull
Two black holes
A fragment of the chin
No longer speaks
A disintegrating skeleton
Like withered branches of a tree

(6)
By taking a step back
One can scrutinize
The head
Even take it down
And have fun playing with it
If this gets boring
Nothing wrong with putting it back

(7)
The truth can't be spoken
Once spoken it is no longer truth
It's enough just to know
And whatever is unknown
Should be left to happen
For example
People invariably die
And hearing this people will shrug
Or smile
But when a smile isn't possible
It will have been verified

(8)
You know
How hard it was crawling out of the quagmire
So why clean the sludge you leave behind
Just let it return to the quagmire
The noise behind you turns raucous
And if life hasn't ended
Even taking one step at a time
Is to walk one's own road

(9)
You may as well recreate
A weightless nature
A Garden of Eden in your heart
Where you can wander leisurely
To your heart's delight