

# Two Poems

Chen Li

Translated by Elaine Wong

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The two poems included here are from Elaine Wong's project translating Chen Li's poetry. "I Run into Monet in Monet's Garden" imagines a conversation with Monet on the redemptive power of art in times of personal suffering. Wong's recent viewing of the wall-sized *Water Lilies* by Monet at the Met brought some breakthroughs to this translation, especially to the wordplay on "water lily" and to the transition from pain to beauty. "Rivers North of the Future" portrays Chen Li's friendship with the Beijing poet Wang Jiaxin as well as his aspiration for sincere poetic exchanges between Taiwan and mainland China. Meeting both poets in summer 2018 helped Wong better understand the poets' relationship and their poems.

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## I Run into Monet in Monet's Garden

I run into Monet in Monet's Garden. He asks, "Did you come

from the Orangerie, where lianhua ponds line the oval walls?"

I say, I came from Hualien, the opposite direction.

Your

Japanese footbridge brought me here. You came up against

poverty, and you lost two wives and your eldest son in his prime. Is life bitter?

"Transience is a mother of the dreamy-colored dusk, and a father of the crowing, wing-flapping dawn.

Artists find pleasure and perspective in hardship.

Poets meet their muses in misery. All I can do

is transfer some water lilies from pond to

canvas. When the day breaks,

I open their Impressionist eyes—their colors changing at different times—blink by blink.

I delight in pressing the water lilies on Facebook, so you can see their faces in the liquid crystal pond, as well as time's face, and mine. . . "

Oh, your eyes are all you have, but what eyes! Is light

important?

"Yes, light is important. Like flowers, water, the breezes (ah,

God's embrace) . . . Light is every color;

it makes what it penetrates vibrant and glowy, like love."

But your eyesight is deteriorating. (Is there a cataract?)

Can you see light sharply with your eyes?

"I also use my mind's eye. I can see

the wrinkles in flowing water. That

is immortal youth . . . "

I came under physical and emotional pain, and encountered a depression as heavy, or light,

as ocean and sky blue. Can I turn Hualien, my

hometown,

into a water lily pond? Can I piece together lush

lily pads and water lilies

from the endless green mountains and the colorful

hair of truants?

"The poet scratches his neurotic skin

to uncover blushing clouds at the sky's edge,

set in a frame of emptiness.

All you can do is hold your breath, ignore your itch,

and salute the fleeting image . . . Beauty

is humans' height-training machine. We wrap it

in a plastic-clear mind, put it in a freezing bag, and

send it by the slowest courier, ignoring the use-by

date.

The water lilies come alive, fresh in scent,

inside rising bubbles of dreams . . . "

Running into Monet in Monet's Garden on the

midnight line, I ask,

Moments of the grand universe, are they no more

than a Monet?

## 在莫內花園遇見莫內

在莫內花園遇見莫內。他問：  
「從蓮花池連作環壁的橘園來嗎？」  
我說：從花蓮。剛從你的  
日本橋走來。你見識過貧困  
兩度喪妻，長子壯年  
離世。生命苦嗎？  
「無常、瞬變是姦紫嫣紅夢幻  
黃昏之母，也是雞鳴雀躍的破曉  
之父。苦中作樂作畫  
詩人經常得意於失意時。我所  
能的只是把一池睡蓮，從水中移到  
畫布，隨每日晨光的醒來  
睜開它們一眨一眨——不同時候  
不同色彩——的印象派眼睛  
且樂於把它們凝於臉書，讓你們  
在液晶池裡看到那些蓮花之臉  
時光之臉，我的臉……」  
啊，你有的只是眼睛，但  
何等的眼睛！那光  
重要嗎？  
「重要。一如花，水，清風（喔  
神的擁抱）……光是所有的顏色  
它使其透入的對象鮮活  
明媚，一如愛」

但你的視力逐漸衰退（是  
白內障嗎？）  
你可以清楚用眼察覺光嗎？  
「所以還要用心。我清楚瞥見  
流水的皺紋，那是  
不死的青春……」  
我見識過身心之痛，和海藍  
天藍一樣重或輕的憂鬱  
我可以把我的家鄉阿蓮，或花蓮  
變成蓮花池嗎？貼萬頃山綠  
與逃學少男少女各色染髮為田田  
蓮葉蓮花？  
「詩人在自己過敏症、神經質的  
皮膚上搔刮出天邊的雲彩  
包含於一個空無的屏框  
你能做的只是繼續屏息，忍住癢  
向那幻影致敬……美  
是人類的增高器。我們用心智  
透明的保鮮膜，低溫包裝宅配  
慢遞它，不虞賞味期限  
那些睡蓮，那些花香，在升起的  
夢的水泡中清晰可見可聞……」  
在子夜線上莫內花園遇見莫內。我問：  
大化之妙，莫非都在一個莫內之內？

## Rivers North of the Future

— to Jiaxin

Are rivers north of the future  
sweet or bitter? Are they heavy  
as the masses, or light as words and phrases?  
In front of the Wen Yiduo statue in Redtown, Shanghai,  
I seem to hear a poet, wise and deft as Wen Yiduo, say,  
A cultural revolution, a ditch of dead water.  
Enough, more than enough.  
What's left behind is the counter-attack and counter-revolution  
by poetry and beauty...  
At a lakeside pub in Suzhou, a neon light goes out.  
Obviously drunk under the willows, you  
declare your aspirations to the glimmering lake and  
the ever-rising beer foam. Amid the five black categories  
and twelve dark sides exiled by the night, you are  
the most humble, persistent star. You invoke Celan  
all night long. How I wish I could incite the ripened lotuses  
in the lake and the oranges in your poem  
to flow in a river north to Hualien, on the edge of the island.  
A Milky Way of language across borders and nationalities.  
Good, all to the good.  
At the graves of Mu Dan and Dai Wangshu in  
Wan'an Cemetery, we "poet-translators" settle on  
an unrestrained form to translate their underground angst  
into the lilac scent and starlight filling Fragrant Hills tonight.

## 未來北方的河流

—給家新

未來北方的河流  
是甜的，或苦的？  
如人民般沉重，或語字般輕盈？  
在上海紅坊園區聞一多像前  
我彷彿聽到聞一知多的詩人說  
一次文革，一溝死水  
夠矣，多矣  
剩下來的是詩與美的反撲與  
反革命……  
在南方蘇州霓虹燈突然斷電的湖畔酒吧，你  
柳樹下昭然醉己，以一夜的湖光  
和不斷溢出的啤酒泡明志  
在被夜流放的五類黑和十二種暗中  
你是最卑微而堅毅的一顆星  
你整夜策蘭，而  
我多想策動湖中尚存的可採的蓮和你  
詩中的橘子  
隨一條北方的河流流到島嶼邊緣花蓮  
一條跨界、跨籍的語字的銀河，足矣  
做為「做為譯者的詩人」，在  
萬安公墓穆旦、戴望舒墳前，我們都同意  
以不受限制的自由體  
將他們地下的幽憤譯做今夜香山  
滿天流動的丁香香和星光

**Note**

The title of the second poem comes from the line “In the rivers north of the future” (“In den Flüssen nördlich der Zukunft”) by Paul Celan. Wang Jiaxin (王家新), to whom the poem is dedicated, is a scholar and poet-translator living in Beijing.

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**Chen Li** 陳黎 lives in Hualien, Taiwan. A recipient of Taiwan’s National Award for Literature and the Arts, the Taiwan Literature Award, and other literary prizes, Chen Li has authored fifteen volumes of poetry. While his poems have been translated into English, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Croatian, Japanese, and Korean, Chen Li has co-translated with his wife Chang Fen-ling the works of Carol Ann Duffy, Robert Hass, Seamus Heaney, Brenda Hillman, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Sylvia Plath, Wislawa Szymborska, and other poets into Chinese.

Originally from Hong Kong, **Elaine Wong** lives in San Antonio, Texas and teaches at Trinity University. Her current translation projects involve poetry and fiction from Taiwan. Her translation of Chen Li was given an Honorable Mention by the 2018 Cliff Becker Book Prize in Translation.