

Grandmother's Boat

Yang Lian

YL'S NOTE ON THE POEM:

MY GRANDMOTHER WAS IN YANGZHOU WHEN SHE WAS THREE YEARS OLD, AND I IMAGINED SHE WAS BROUGHT BY BOAT FROM BEIJING TO HERE, STOPPED A WHILE, THEN CONTINUED TO SOUTH CHINA. HOWEVER YOUNG SHE WAS, MY FATHER, MYSELF (MY POEMS) AND CHINESE HISTORY IN 20TH CENTURY WERE ALL INSIDE HER (WOMB), TOGETHER WITH HER OWN SAD LIFE LATER. THIS POEM IS A SMALL BUT EPIC PIECE OF CHINESE HISTORY.

THE FORM OF THIS POEM: THERE ARE 7 STANZAS, EACH LINE-ENDING IN THE FIRST STANZA IN TURN BECOMES THE MAIN RHYME OF ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STANZAS. THIS FORM ECHOES LINKED MEMORY AND HISTORY.

A tune from Guang Ling¹ and the soaking waists of the palace maids towing the
boats.

The glamour of waterside willows sinking into the Grand Canal.
The tiny reincarnated womb approaches once more.
Mild internal injuries by small footprints on this flight of bluestone stairs
bound curves embroidered under hulls In another century
the cry of a startled crane is knocked up deep into the night.

That crane of yours floated above the year 1897.
The Lord and the little lady arrived with the stream anchored for a night
answering the bright moon and a vision of splendour anchored for two nights
the peaks of Shugang Ridge² gleam through all the green mountains stretched out in your
life
anchored for three nights you waited for me in a lotus seed,
onstage at three. Applying and removing its makeup the river
was spreading a painted scroll.

Destination of your future and of your past, the boat's masts
pointed to the Pole Star the waters of Tung-T'ing Lake the waters of the Yuan
and Li Rivers,
overtaking the lightning-flash of that flowery snake in the small dark room with no
window.

No fire accompanied your last breath, an old servant's tears
wiped away without your noticing in the dusk between the fragrant carved
camphorwood partitions.

Bleakness signaled from the underworld distance froze the bone marrow.

From a duplicate water-mark I identify
your naivety at anchor still smiling. That Mongolian light in your eyes.
Father holding me and the poem of your absence in this one line
gone over by heart once again in the accent of a handful of tuberose,
building up while tearing down the intrinsic tenderness of a little girl
that casts the finest shadow onto those sculling women.

Stepping through DongQuan Gate³ a long alley crowded with farewells.
Stepping in from the House of Rockeries⁴ the moon overlooking the water
waxing full whenever it wants letting the drowned poets stroll underwater.
Stepping in from the word Yangzhou full of the smell of salt
through the carved window lattice through the rails Grandmother's boat
moored at the dock.
Listen to never-ending three years old. The wild waves

crush and long-ago crushed the breathing recorded by the stone steps.
My breath comes looking for you, unreachable in your rare flowering.
Leaning close to you for once for me you emerge on your sickbed
fate gathered in your yellowish-white palms. The world's water
leaks into this one drop, Granny. The stinging warmth
remains when the wake of your small body has flattened out.

I'm already on board. Sweet fishy blood and bone.
A word is settled a fluid glance lingers in the snow and wind
the revenant's faint sigh is contained for thousands of miles
a glistening epitaph returns wherever access is granted.
You remain in such serenity, Granny. No matter how far away I heave out
the sails
you sail ahead navigating with your crane wing-tips.

Translated by Yang Lian with Lizhen Liang and Fiona Sampson

Notes

1. A tune from Guang Ling: A surviving Guqin (literally "ancient stringed instrument") melody most commonly attributed to the famous essayist and poet Xi Kang (223 – 262). It had its source in another title called Nie Zheng Stabs the Han King avenging the murder of his father. Guang Ling is the ancient name of Yangzhou, appeared in Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD).

2. The Shugang Ridge: The three peaks of it traverse the northern suburbs of Yangzhou. The peaks, covered by millions of green pines and verdant cypresses, have the centerpiece of the Daming Temple, dotted with halls, terraces and towers as well as waterside pavilions.

3. DongQuanGate: A quiet ancient back alley in Yangzhou that contains a host of sites, the main gate of which dates back to the Qing Dynasty (1636 – 1912). It thankfully lacks any sense of commercialization though small restaurants and craft shops line the alley.

4. The House of Rockeries: The only existing copy of the building works by the great painting master Shi Tao in late Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty, an artificial stone-laid rockery of a marvelous creation excelling nature. There is a man-made moon reflected on the pool water beside the stone house, which is a super secluded place to be away from the summer heat.