

1981

The North

Ai Qing

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Recommended Citation

Qing, Ai and Marilyn Chin. "The North." *The Iowa Review* 12.1 (1981): 89-91. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2829>

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The North · *Ai Qing*

One day
A poet from the Ke Er Chin grassland
Said to me: "The North is sad."

True, the North is sad.
Blowing from beyond the frontier
The desert winds
Have swept away the North's green life,
The brightness of its days—
A sheet of dull ash-yellow
Covered by a clinging mist of sand.
A roar breaks in from the horizon, bringing
Terror with it, madly
Sweeping over the vast land.
The wide, uncultivated plains
Frozen in the cold winds of December—
Villages, hillocks, riverbanks,
Crumbled walls and overgrown graves
Shrouded by grief, the color of earth.
A lone traveler, bending forward
Shields his face with his hands,
Walks through sand and wind.
Breathing with difficulty, step
Over step he plods
Onward . . . a few donkeys, beasts
With forlorn eyes and tired, drooping ears
Bear this land's painful burden.
Their weary hooves
Trudge slowly
Over the long
And lonely road of the North.

The streams have dried up;
Their beds are scarred by wheel tracks.
The land and people of the North
Long for the springs that nourish life.

Withered forests
And short, stunted houses
Are scattered sparse and dark
Under the ashen sky, and in the sky
The sun cannot be seen,
Only large flocks of wild geese,
Anxious, confused geese
Beating their black wings,
Honking their distress, escaping
From this desolate land
To the south, where the green foliage
Blocks out the sky . . .

The North is sad,
And the Yellow River, thousands of miles long,
Sends its turbulent billows
To spill hardship and disaster
Over the North's vast land;
The wind and frost of ages
Are gouging
Poverty and famine
Into the North's vast land.

But I, a traveler from the South,
Love this sad North country.
The wind and sand that slap my face
And the cold air that pierces my bones
Have never made me complain.
I love this sad country;
This endless expanse of desert
Wins my respect. I see
Our ancestors leading flocks of sheep
Into the dusk of this great desert,
Playing their bamboo flutes.
In this earth that we tread,
In this powdery earth,
The bones of our ancestors are buried.
This is the land they nurtured;
Thousands of years they lived here
Fighting hostile forces of nature.
They guarded this land faithfully
And never once surrendered.
They bequeathed this land to us.

I love this sad country;
Its vast yet barren land has given us
A sincere, direct language
And generous ways.
I know this language and these ways
Will live steadfast on earth
And never die;
I love this sad, this ancient country, whose land
Cradled the most ancient people in the world,
Those who have endured the most hardships,
Those, I love.

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