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On Poetry

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ON POETRY

“We’ve been looking for you for twenty years.”

“Because of the ‘Gang of Four,’ I didn’t know what happened to you. I thought you might be dead.”

This is taken from a letter written by a concerned reader. All the letters I receive express the same concern. At the end of April, when I published my first poem, another reader wrote:

“When a writer is not publishing, it is like he ceases to exist.”

To be nonexistent is to be dead, but I am not dead yet. For so many years, Lin Piao and the “Gang of Four” have repressed us. Writing which was outside their sphere was forbidden. However, as long as people sing, they will preserve their songs.

“I wanted to read your poetry, but I couldn’t find it anywhere.”

“When we found your poems we would copy them by hand and read them secretly.”

“I had to wrap your books in plastic and hide them inside my rice barrel.”

“After the T’ang San earthquake, I found your book of poetry underneath a dresser.”

Recently, a friend asked me to autograph as a keepsake a copy of *Ta Yen He (The Big Dike River)*, published forty-two years ago. I wrote this poem for him.

Like an orphan
Lost among the people
I have gone through fire and smoke
I have gone through torture and hardship
Separated for more than forty years,
Finally we meet again
My body scarred with pockmarks and holes
But my face is serene
It was not easy.

At the Kai Liang coal mines, a worker wrote:

I don't understand poetry. I was born on a farm. When I read your poetry, I recall my childhood on the farm, and long for those old times. Why is poetry so moving? I only know that although I am an ordinary worker, I often miss and worry about you! I only want you to know my feelings—the feelings of someone who has missed you for more than twenty years. . . . It will make me feel better.

Almost all the letters I receive express happiness that I am writing again. "Everything is all right now. Finally, you've come back to us. You should sing out that you're still alive."

This year I am sixty-eight years old. This is not considered old, but I have so many friends who died younger. I am like a shell lost in some corner who has finally been found again.

translated by Marilyn Chin