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# Reflections on Unfortunate Scholars

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## *Selwyn Pritchard*

### REFLECTIONS ON UNFORTUNATE SCHOLARS

—for *Tan Shilin, my friend*

You say that you regret nothing.  
Black hornets skid around their nest,  
your cage-birds bounce and sing,  
you fill my glass and start to talk  
of the Fourth Century poet  
whose works you have translated,  
Tao Yuanming, who, despairing  
of officialdom, put himself out of court . . .  
“Preferred the idiocy of rural life?”

You pause, then shake your head,  
insist that seasons teach discipline;  
wisdom grows from flowers’ brevity . . .  
Tao met the starveling moon’s enquiry  
with vibrant poems and his glass  
of chrysanthemum wine held high.  
We clink and drink to him who lost  
or gave away fifteen centuries ago  
poems schoolchildren now can quote:  
“Ars longa, vita brevis!”

In the winking, evening light your cats  
get up, then collapse in new sun shafts  
from the flexing bamboo filigree where  
black butterflies with poisonous wings  
are fluttering chaotically above the bath  
in which you try to preserve the local frog.  
Beyond this hedge horns, bells, brakes  
stop our talk almost our hearts  
as students yell. Mosquitoes plague

my ankles so I slap and scratch without  
your Daoist tolerance. You wish, you say,  
to emulate your pets (but not the turtles  
who make love like rowing boats?) pour  
Zhu Jiang beer and then tell me how,  
when you landed from the ferry where now  
The White Swan allows the rich to pay per night  
what some villages earn a year, you found  
a welcoming committee with clubs and rope  
and one with a gun who pleaded just to  
shoot you *once*, if only in a leg, whilst the rest  
yelled “MONSTER,” and dragged you off  
in a dunce’s cap, distinguished professor.

They brought you to bless the Jesuit school  
which taught you to confess with sophistry  
sufficient to captivate zealots: you recalled  
conversations from years and years before  
in Llasa, Urumqui and Ulan Bator, which  
MUST BE CHECKED!

Thus time passed.

You gave the bullet a miss. Instead for years  
and years you were yoked to buckets of piss,  
but knowing how emperors drown in odious gush,  
you never spilt a drop . . . or hoed down row on  
row of weeds tangled like the rules of fools;  
and nightly whipping yourself, laying it on,  
flagellant to your own order, you beat them!  
They put you in charge of shit and swill:  
you made a small profit from coins which  
fell from trouser pockets into the pit; in the sty  
in the stench, you addressed the swine  
in perfect German, English, French which  
the pigs, at least, understood. Ten years!  
Ten years you endured. Then absolution,  
reinstatement, restitution . . . for those who lived.

Oh what, I wonder, do the postgrads make  
of my soft irony, that “humour of slaves”  
deep in the Englit soul, after your hard  
brilliance? They respect the old nowadays!

We have seen Great Causes come to  
curious effects; the cities of the word  
overthrown by videogoths; the rational  
light turn thick with avarice.

Twilight.

Our voices echo. Flowers have closed.  
The cage-birds huddle and the hornets sleep.  
Now the cats stretch in their welcome yoga;  
we stand and bow; your wife comes home.

*The title of this poem is from the Tao Yuanming 365-427 C.E.*

## FREEWAY

Mid-afternoon, the sun already amber  
in Guangzhou’s distant pall,  
glints like a lost coin under the delta bridges  
of the Pearl, is smashed underfoot by workers  
straddling rusted mesh, hunkered down  
in exhaust where the concrete pours  
eight lanes out to Gong Bei and Macau.

The old dust road bumps and roars  
in a barter of horns and bells,  
bicyclists balancing ruts between lorries,  
tractors, cars, the odd Mercedes enjoying  
better air than ours on an express bus,  
rolling to rhumbas over the humid plain,  
across flyovers where rattan shacks  
lean out of the monsoon rain and the Unit’s  
migrant youths lie in the vibrating, toxic night,  
dreaming of out-reaching Li Bai  
when day’s new-minted in the East again.