

Incense Tree

Collected Poems of Louise Ho

With an Afterword by Douglas Kerr



香港大學出版社

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

Hong Kong University Press

14/F Hing Wai Centre

7 Tin Wan Praya Road

Aberdeen

Hong Kong

© Louise Ho 2009

ISBN 978-962-209-054-5

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Secure On-line Ordering

<http://www.hkupress.org>

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available

from the British Library.

Printed and bound by United League Graphic & Printing Co. Ltd., in Hong Kong, China

Contents

Acknowledgements	xi
Sheung Shui Pastoral 1977	1
Hong Kong Riots I, 1967	3
Off the Train at Sheung Shui	3
Pop Song I: “At Home in Hong Kong”	4
Pop Song II: “I Am of Hong Kong”	5
Sheung Shui Pastoral	6
Babies and Mothers (at Tai Po Train Station)	7
Writing Is Bleak	8
Summer at Warwick	9
Boston, First Impressions (and Therefore a Bit Raw)	10
The John Hancock from the Top of the Prudential	11
To M.O.M.A.	12
Mountain of Wisdom	13
Cherry Tree Wood	14
A Confession	15
O God, When Do You Find Me Guilty?	15
Underdeveloped	16
I Hold My Past	17
Excreta Tauri (Intone the Title and Read the Rest at a Run)	18
Poetry Is Never of Emotion	19
The Sculpted Hand	19
Raw	20
When Tired and Sleepy	20

Soliloquy of Light	21
Remonstrance and Reply	21
Notes before Bedtime	22
Letter to My Brother	23
Miniature Trees	24
On the Double	25
Of Strawberries (From D. to A.)	25
Local Habitation 1994	27
What's in a Name	29
Hong Kong at the Crossroads	30
Towards University Station	30
Home to Hong Kong	31
Canticle on a Drop of Water	31
Living on the Edge of Mai Po Nature Reserve	33
Hong Kong Riots II	34
“Cloud Gate Dance Theatre”: Three Dances	36
Remembering 4th June, 1989	38
Like Pilgrims	40
Jamming	42
First Stop: Frankfurt	44
Vase	44
City	45
The Blind Samurai	46
In the Warm Glow	47
Polite Conversation	48
Apple Tree	49
A Bit of Luck	50
Image	51
Jade	51

Clip Clop	52
Tombbed-In	53
Colours of Corot	54
Consider the Peppercorn	54
Things Pentecostal	55
Bronze Horse	57
Mother Has Just Turned Seventy	58
Black Hole	59
Fragment	60
Well-spoken Cantonese	60
Soliloquy of a White Jade Brooch	61
After Yeats	62
Acrostics	63
Slow Rain	64
Apprehension of Beauty	65
For Foone, Brighton 1978	65
Discipline	66
The Cold Keeps Me Out	67
A Burning Inadequacy	68
The Hind-wheel of a Double-decker Bus	68
No Swan	69
Prayer	70
The Long Frown	71
What Mother Taught Me	72
Three Men in a Lift, Not to Mention the Woman Who Didn't Get In	73
The Passionate Lovers	75
A Neighbour's Tale	76
To Grandfather (Monsieur Emmanuel Allaye Chan)	77
Desire	78
Once upon a Time	78

The Awful Belief	79
There Are No Monkeys Here	80
Time's Pummelling	82
The Unknown Source	82
Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex"	83
It's Been Snowing	83
For Every Mask	84
Unschooling	84
I Love the Child in Me	84
Soliloquy of a Madman	85
New Ends, Old Beginnings 1997	87
Migratory	89
Did You Know	92
On Seeing Promite on the Shelves	93
Conversation	96
January on the Gold Coast	96
Odd Couple	98
Chat	99
Rambler	100
Party	101
The Australian O	101
Knocking at the Door of the Aboriginals	102
Coomera Lines	103
At the Foot of the Mountain	104
Beginnings and Ends	104
Storm	105
Shadows	105
Tree of Life	107
End of Era	108

Walking	108
Island	109
Spirit of Place	110
Flags and Flowers	111
Extension I	112
Extension II	112
A Good Year	113
One Hundred Days to Go	114
Chek Lap Kok	115
Meeting	116
Hopscotch down the Corridor	116
Upon Hearing of a Friend's Death (after Yeats)	117
Discomfort	118
My Crown Jewels	118
Tilting	119
Dr Hero Joh	120
New Poems	121
Reflection	123
I Sing of a Man	124
Incense Tree <i>Aquilaria sinensis</i>	125
Marching	126
Forty Years to Go	128
Skeltonics	129
Giants on the Land (Canada 2007)	130
Kindred Growth	131
How on Earth . . .	132
TSANG Tsou-choi " <i>The King of Kowloon</i> "	133
A Veteran Talking	134
La Reine Australienne	135

Darkness at 4 p.m.	136
Three Poems on a Painter's Works	136
Dance	138
Cock-a-doodle-doo	139
About Turn	140
Dusk	141
Askew	142
Sounds	143
Nests	143
Notes	144
Learning to Walk	145
A Poem Is an Object	146
A Poem Is Like	147
Curtain Call	148
Found Items	149
The Other Day	152
Afterword	153
Louise Ho: An Afterword by Douglas Kerr	155
Appendices	163
Introductory remarks to "Sheung Shui Pastoral 1977" by Helga Burger-Werle	165
Introduction to "Local Habitation" : Dialect without a Tribe by Ackbar Abbas	166
Introduction to "New Ends, Old Beginnings 1997" by Michael Hollington	172

Writing Is Bleak

Writing is bleak,
Writing in this language in this place
Is doubly bleak.

How the heart yearns
For the Paris of Joyce,
Synge, Pound, Yeats,
For the camaraderie of letters
In the city of letters.

The cold night wore on.
The North wind
Riding on a country air
From some distant flute
Told me not to fret
Over the right word
Or the heart
In the right place,
That all things shall be well,
Given time.
It was singing of man's impermanence
And all his arts'.

I Hold My Past

I hold my past in the cup of my own hands.

– A large collection of images,
Of many places and many smells,
Some more painful than others.

Colours brilliant or drab,
Events that show the condition inhuman –
These do not make a picture.
The images, scattered by constant change,
 are not connected.

What lurks in the hollows
Between time and time?
An absence of adhesion,
Like mother's love, perhaps.
The eternal spaces and
The eternal child, both ignorant.
How little that amounts to,
The cup of one's own hands.

“Cloud Gate Dance Theatre”: Three Dances

I

He bent the air like a reed
greenly loined and a green dash
over his chest
Nijinsky’s Faun
could have danced this way
he landed like a sliding leaf
silently on the balls of his feet

He flies like a bird
he hugs the floor like a frog
he leaps like a springbok
he sweeps the stage like an elf

Elfin perfect elfin bright
flesh made elfin elfin light

II

Never a cloud god so muscularly shown
dancing at cloud level throughout
hoisted up high
on the shoulders of two others
half dancers half shadows dressed in black
he wears the mask of the god of thunder
his many muscles bulge like so much cumulus
he circumnavigates the stage
like so many clouds

III

They fell they splintered they exploded
like Chinese New Year fire crackers
to the sound of fire crackers

Then their gestures changed
they jerked and grimaced
before they fell
to the sound of bullets
then a hail of bullets
and complex variations of falling

Then the lights of a tank shone
straight at the audience
one man stood firm
then he jerked and fell

A Bit of Luck

My wife and I were waiting for the bus in Canberra one Saturday afternoon. It was a sunny day in winter and we were on holiday. Soon I noticed that a woman sitting next to us was attempting eye-contact and was on the verge of a smile. The clement weather brings out the sociable in people, I suppose. Beautiful day, I said. It transpired that she managed to buy the handbag she was cuddling at a very low price that morning. It was the only one left, and she was clearly very pleased with herself. The bag was ghastly, faded plastic and lopsided. That was lucky of you, put in my wife trying to say something nice. She smiled, drew on her cigarette and said, one always needs a bit of luck in this world.

Mildly eccentric. But that wasn't it, there was something inexplicable about her. She was clearly older than she seemed, she also had a battered look about her, also there was an underlying bubblyness which was almost manic. She chatted on merrily in her very German voice occasionally flattened by the Australian vowel. At one point her sleeve fell back and there was a number etched on her forearm. We tried not to react. She smiled and explained that she was Aryan, not Jewish, she was thrown into the camps because she was a communist, but she managed to escape and came to Australia as a refugee. That was a long time ago, a long time ago, she said, reassuringly.

Migratory

You want space
You've got space
Now what do you do with it

I floated alone in my king-size bed
I steered between abysses
To my left 1997
To my right 1788
I hugged the shorelines
Crossed the high seas
And drifted here
Landing on terra firma
Terra Australis

A part of ancient Gondwanaland
Its unique flora and fauna are young
Fossils mirror their living counterparts
The hundred million year Wollemi Pine
Will one day propagate in our gardens
The echidna, spikes on a meat slab
Has tunneled through the ages to us
Having walked with dinosaurs

Another Anglophone settlement
Irish, Cockney, North country
Transported cultures
Transformed in two hundred years
Into new shapes new sounds
And endless possibilities
At first the heart longs
For the absent familiar

Cosmopolitan Hong Kong
Its chaos, its anomalies, its power
Or England, my other world
Or some landmark somewhere
A villa by Serlio on the way
To Erbusco, outside Milan
Or family, relatives
In New York, San Francisco
Vancouver, Toronto . . .

Then, like lightning
The shock of the void struck

The neighbours are kind, the dogs are friendly
The land is veritable Eden, the roads are straight
Tender is the meat, tasty is the fruit
It is the loss, the loss
That grips like a vice
That tightens the spine
And the legs go soft
Space-tost, land-lost
I float, I drift, I hover
Cannot settle
Cannot come to stay

Concentrate
Minutely on
This time, this space
Measure the land
Foot by foot
Step by step

These eight acres
Study each weed
Each blade of grass
Follow each flow of air
Sink the ankles
Touch the ground
Walk normally

These are my songlines
Claiming by declaiming
Over my land
O land, walk with me
May the dust settle
Wherever I may stand

Skeltonics

Ten years on and what have we got
Good times bad times the lot
The first headman was put on the spot
Up North noticed the snot
And made him trot
The new man a sot he was not
Still he wasn't all that hot
Before the dreaded slot
Everybody said the city would rot
But nothing has gone to pot
Oh no oh no we have not lost the plot