

PAPER SCISSORS STONE

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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
www.hkupress.org

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ISBN 978-988-8083-47-3

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover © Ffiona Lewis, 'Curlew in Flight II'

Printed and bound by Kadett Printing Co. Ltd.,
Hong Kong, China

A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words “block”, “pillar”, “slab”, “beam”. A calls them out; – B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive this as a complete primitive language.

Wittgenstein

Scissors should always be sold, they should never be given.

A Dictionary of Superstition

Paper, as opposed to Egyptian papyrus, was first made by the Chinese eunuch Cai Lun from the bark of trees, remnants of hemp, rags of cloth, and fishing nets.

The Four Great Inventions of Ancient China

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The Hairdresser by the Styx

Don't ask for a second chance: it is a relief
to live the same life again. What is beautiful
in repetition is not the false belief
in suffering, nor something as simple
as pure coincidence. All the things
that I saw, heard, breathed, touched, and ate.
For instance, an instant. All the beings
that I met I meet again. Some are late,
others early. In a story like this, I can't bear
to imagine the difference between the past
and the future. It is not present here.
Everything is the same and all is not lost.
Trust me, I spent most of my life in the mirror.
I do partings well. Loosen the tie. Undo the collar.

Paper Scissors Stone

I

It is not only the guilty secrets
are hard to tell in the end.

From the age of six my mother
put me in the Telford Gardens

Library in Kowloon so that she
could sweat in other people's

kitchens. That was why I owned
a library corner. Every shelf

hour held me in custody.
Page travels, lost milk teeth

and pre-myopia. Curled up
in my shell in the sun with Little

Red Riding Hood and King Midas,
month by month I crawled

like a snail past spines of fairy
tales, before I knew the Moon

Goddess, the dragon dance,
dandelion and chrysanthemum.

There were years of afternoons,
clouds and thunders, without

parents. I dreamed of an orphan-
age: long corridors, dorm beds, wet

sheets, breathing up against the wall.
I made myself homeless as if she

would never come back, her hands
tinted with bleach.

I prayed that my book-lined
womb would not be scissored apart

as pages and covers braced the skin
against the emperor's new clothes.

II

And I wasn't totally wrong.
That August seven years ago

the library was torn down
like many other things.

No trace now of books or shelves
or readers. Only dust, pits,

cranes and stones. The limbs
of Orpheus are not there.

Even though guilty secrets
are hard to tell, I wish you

could have told me why paper
attracts scissors, books turn to stone.

Handwriting

for T.K.W.

To start with O'Connell Bridge and the River Liffey (*leaning over on my stomach on August stone looking down*) the currents drawn by sunlight (*this choking weight, feet in mid-air*) like the day in Jack Yeats's 'The Liffey Swim', whose coral colours' nervy flow you've never seen (*dropping, ending it*). To continue with All Hallows Church now called St. Andrews (*the cold smell of sacred stone called him*): 'No Communion Today'. Then walk southward along Westland Row retracing those footsteps to Sweeney's following the guidebook (*sending you the sweet lemon soap?*).

After a rest, it is time for the Book of Kells (*my books were never your kind of books*) and a closer look at its illuminated vellum leaves: one bears a Buddha-like Madonna with the child cupped in her arms (*his teal-blue top just like the fish-jade you carry round your neck for peace*). A page-palette of colours: iris, lilac, egg yolk and lapis lazuli brushing against the lagoon of a Latinate 'g'.

Curtains drawn, a desk with a chair: it is time to start. (*This postcard is a page from Book of Kells?*) In the end you'd written: 'Though we won't see each other again, this is meant to last.' (*It did last, hidden in my wardrobe among your presents.*) I should have gone on (all the way from you to here).

This is Dublin (*how clearly your handwriting comes to mind before I can remember your face*). Outside, the human traffic dapples the busy street (*this silence between us*). Inside, two angels flutter in the background behind her halo (*those shell-like feathers started clapping*) and I stop.

'Chinese Poetry' (in translation)

'Last night's wind rose / under last night's constellations.'

And you weren't there. You came from a small village where mountain

after mountain after mountain held the spring fog.

You returned for a visit by bus. To study 'holding

*forth' (what Confucius called 'gentleness'). 'Warm and soft / heavy
and broad: / the teaching of poetry.' You yourself couldn't say why*

*you were here again. The family sitting opposite you
in the bus was reading a brochure about the place*

*you were born. 'Withered wisteria, aging tree and dusk crow /
Small bridge; water flows by people's homes / Old road, west*

wind, thinning horse / The sun's in the west /

We, torn apart, are scattered near the land's end.'

*You were once well travelled. From the North to the South, you'd climbed
all the 'famous' mountains. Now you were lost in your own.*

The road smelt of wet wood and mushroom.

Your trainers went splish-splash in the mud.

*'A pinch of rice / a sip of water / lie down / my arm / for a pillow /
Like this / Like joy / in loneliness ... / Like me / this moving cloud.'*

*You paused on the missing beat.
You tripped on an unstable stone.*

*You hurt your knee but not too badly. You sat down. The strokes
came together
into characters: 'water / flow / heart / no / chase / clouds / here /*

*mind / slow'. It is Tu Fu, you thought,
in English. As good as it could be.*

*'Could be': the way this language fostered possibility in the past tense.
The way you were spelling everything out and keeping your lips*

*tight, your mother tongue. Sitting here,
you found the stream and the clouds.*

*'The heart has no wish / to keep pace with the stream.
Clouds move slowly in your mind.' And 'in your mind'*

*you thought they were slow, yet could they be
moving even slower than you thought?*

*Nothing seems to resolve, but then 'nothing' is a resolution.
You sat here. And so it was. Letting the stream run and the clouds
move.*

*「山窮水盡疑無路 柳暗花明又一村」
You walk on. The traveller's left behind.*

ABOUT THE HKU POETRY PRIZE

The HKU Poetry Prize, initiated by the School of English at the University of Hong Kong in 2010, is an international award recognizing outstanding poetry written in English. Judged by renowned poets, it celebrates a body of original work in a first book of poems published by Hong Kong University Press. The HKU Poetry Prize looks to the history of poems and honours the craft and achievement of contemporary poets.