

Cao Shuying

Translated by Caroline Crumpacker and Zhang Er with the author

The Magic Cube

“I’m playing the magic cube!”
She separates its red feet
from its blue hands.
Its chilly black skeleton
rising into a square black face.

Television. The power out.
Lack of travel. Lack of ocean.
A ribbon-fish doll stares at the bed.
Her mother and father, heads bent,
wondering if the sheets can stand another bed-wetting.

Standard Chinese. A sentence learned.
An inch gained. 4 feet tall.
Carbohydrate surplus. Calcium deficiency.
She can’t run. Her ankles heavy.
The bullies pull her braids.
She fights back in secret with candy.
The smiling candy devours her.
Tooth by tooth, bone by bone.

Thirteen years later, another body
in the magic cube.
Squares the color of her days.
Six dissonant sides for her next six years
growing in the earth of her home, back to the sky.
The playground staring at her blankly.

“Water! Water!” she crawls out
of the earth, dirt around her mouth.
Dreaming of water on a garden
of arms and legs. Chest to the front, bottom to...

Her parents, heads bent,
clawing the earth.
Their pile of clay offspring.
Their pile of clay PhDs.
None of it real.
Her spirit mired in the clay.

Red feet. Blue hands.
She digs herself out
with clay in her mouth.
The magic cube corporation dissolves.
An autumn wind blows away spring.
The magic cube scatters into small days
perched on birthday cakes
asleep with their candles.

Marionettes

1.
For years they have followed you,
the three ephemeral moons behind your back.
I imagined they were witches, skirts
floating footless above the ground.
And when your diaries take you home,
you see their feet pausing along the streets
of Chengdu to display their useless beauty.

2.
Your back a thunderstorm,
Your eyes hidden behind mountains.
Tears shimmering a lake. Your forehead drizzling.
One two three. Three of them holding their breath
and pulling their strings closer and closer.
I remember the tails you left dangling
from dresser drawers, waiting to be pulled.

What's is it? Do you feel bad, darling?
Why is your red sweater so tight?
Why do you look so shifty?

3.
Three moons always there,
more faithful than your shadow.
In sleep you're scared, feeling them inside you.
You bought many erasers to rub out
their eyes and listening ears.

4.
When I hold you, they loom over me,
I see them perfectly. The plain one with a crystal ball
of steaming food. Through the steam
I see a roadstand, chopsticks clacking their heads together.
I see a girl's dorm and the cheap red lamp

threatening her curtains drawn against the sun.
I see the lost clothes belonging to...who?
Hanging ripped on the throat of a naked tree.
The most beautiful of the three has marks on her swan's neck.
The myth of Narcissus written all over her.
I know you've read her many times. Stars glow between the lines.
The embarrassing hyperbole of your smile.

5.
Do I scare you? Yes.
They are right behind you.
When you bend to embrace me,
three lights drop with you,
their faces shining fiercely.
When you dance with me,
they float beside us like heartbroken leaves.
You are their marionette, your eyes
drawn backwards even as you face me.
Do I scare you? Darling.
Now let's look in the mirror.