

Zhang Zhen

Translated by Bob Holman and Xiangyang Chen with the author

Music

Stumbling out of the grand reception
I tripped across the low white chains to the raw street
My breath boomeranged off the low-hung street lamps
Like the fangs of a terrier biting my shadow
Destinationless, moonless
Lost in the glutinous blue fog
I chanted, and when each note decrescendoed
And disappeared back between my lips
Strands of hair, C#
Rise to the eaves
So I cried, until it poured
When light dawned
The buried city began to emerge
Encumbered with a vast grassland
And glistening on the tip of each grass blade,
A single black note.

Train

ramshackle, watertight, snaking
through the tropical red marsh
You got no ticket.
You get on board.

Carriage domed like an observatory,
The only window covered with layers of plaster.
Father comes in, goes out. A long line
Of men, dressed like him, files through. They
carry measuring tapes and hammers and
start back in on the big Spider they are building.
No noise. Pitch black. The door to the next
car is ajar - heat and spunk gushes in
but there is no way to see what's going on.

Ok, it's finished. The Spider
hangs over us, an elegant chandelier
canopying the dome. My sisters
and I climb up the ladders in silence
and begin to light the candles

in the Spider's legs. A sudden gust
balloons our dresses, they catch on fire!
a beautiful image which soon sizzles to ash.
The window is open - through it I see the
brand new future. A sharp strong white shaft
penetrates the carriage from the red dry river bed,
lopes along towards us, a gargantuan hippo,
its nostrils flaring, riffling, transmutating,
underscoring the descent of wonders.

Our beautiful hippo vanishes. Sigh.
Our attention is drawn to the window where
we now see a line of dead bodies, like men
left behind huddled in sleep. These are
the unnamable messengers, descendents
of dinosaurs, or perhaps Chinese red shrimps.
The tropical sun laps their translucent bodies,
their razor sharp beards, like a curse. I want to shout

with joy, hailing all, living and dead!
But my voice has evaporated. I feel
my whole body dehydrating, becoming light...
Helpless... Father rushes in in exasperation.
I block the window with my body.
The light pours round my silhouette.
My eyes occupy the bodies. A secret
flashes by and moves on, never
to return to the window on the train which
continues snaking through the red marsh,
ramshackle, watertight. I have no ticket.
I get on board.

Meeting at the Square at Noon on the Dot

One-armed red-head man walks past
Monkey clinging to his stump sighs
At the sight of me me me

Wide-eyed blind man walks past
Orbs teeming with iridescent light
Big red spade dangling from the chest

Old lady in babushka walks past
Hauling a frog basket
Their croak desire drowns the landscape

Girl in slit trousers walks past

Gashes each electrical pole she passes
Milk gushes like a woman after delivery

The square begins to whirl — it's a windmill
The sun has vanished taking everything with her
Hey. I'm here. You're not. On the dot.

Dream Mansion

like an architectural drawing unfolds
square, somber and white as lead
skin of a teenager. No clue

of size, scale. Just walk up the steps
how you do it without touching earth
I do not know I can't even

throw an apple or a stone
up is down now hello stairs drip
a secret passage where the hell

am I? without a door the whole place
gone my memory hole I throw
myself into and ask the white bird

“What's the weather like outside?”
It's already gone. Flew away. Or
Vanished, who know, was never.... Aha!

I am forever stuck to my footsteps.
But you are with me, I won't let go.
Your four walls. Your existence. Dream stuck.