

## REVIEW

A Review of Jianqing Zheng's *The Dog Years of Reeducation: Poems*. Madville Publishing, 2023.

Poet-scholar Jianqing Zheng has lived in the Mississippi Delta town of Greenwood for almost thirty years, writing, editing, and teaching poetry at Mississippi Valley State University. Only in his mid-sixties, however, did Zheng finally publish a full-length collection as his *A Way of Looking* won the Gerald Cable Prize for a first book of poetry (Silverfish Review Press, 2022). Most of these *haibun* (a prose paragraph followed by a haiku) address Zheng's adopted landscapes and subjects like the river and the blues, as well as his American parent-figures, who gave him a second life when he and his wife moved from China to Hattiesburg in 1991. Still, sometimes in *A Way of Looking* he evokes his memories of China. One haunting poem relates being sent by his busy parents to board at a kindergarten after his loving grandmother died and he fell into misery. Though now happily rooted in Mississippi, Zheng has said that, ultimately, "Home is where one lives with memories" ("Moving"), and it's this theme that dominates his absorbing, beautifully written second book, *The Dog Years of Reeducation*.

The memories that Zheng captures in *The Dog Years* revolve around his stint as a *zhiqing*, or an educated youth straight from high school, whom Mao Zhedong forced from the city to the countryside to live with and work beside peasants as part of The Cultural Revolution. Zheng recollects these times fifty years later "for the reason of not forgetting," as he states in a prefatory note. Each memory is "a page" he "turns" to remember, to bear witness to hardship, friendship, and dreams he feared he'd never get to see come true. He repeats this apt metaphor near the end of the book in "A Momentary Stay," writing, "Turning page after page, / memories are stirred

up/ like dust spiraling. . ." (p. 65). As if to frame the book, his opening poem also shares this conceit:

Turning each page  
is like unwrapping  
an unearthed mummy,  
dried but well preserved. (p. 1)

So well preserved are these memories that in poem after poem Zheng vividly recreates them in pictorial images and figurative language that flare with meaning.

In "Maostalgia," which is a linchpin in the memoir's plot and comes in the third of the book's four parts, Zheng's use of the sun image is masterly. Earlier poems depict the sun beating down while he is cutting wheat, planting seedlings, picking cotton, and transporting it; they also convey the *zhiqings'* eventual acceptance of their lot. In "The Lesson Learned," Zheng writes in part 2, "we begin to see / reeducation as a coat / altered to wear," "a life to live" (p. 30). But in the *haibun* "Maostalgia," Zheng's disillusionment rises. He narrates that "I lost my voice in the Cultural Revolution," shouting "my heart out for [Mao's] longevity." But when he hears "of Mao's death while picking cotton," hungry and cursing "the sun for not sinking faster," Zheng evokes the strong association of the red sun with Mao, whose propaganda posters claimed he was "the red sun in our hearts." Brutally, the prose ends with these striking symbolic images: "At last, the sun set, bloody red, and the long tolling came from the village to drag me out of the fields" (p. 41). In cursing the bloody, dying sun, Zheng deftly enacts his repudiation of Mao.

Other poems excel in portraying specific moments through sensuous sounds and metaphors. In "In the Cotton Fields," "husky voices / sandpaper the muggy heat" while girls' "hands [are] fluttering / like butterflies on cotton fluffs" (p. 8). Similarly, in "Back from the Cotton Trading Center," Zheng exploits two similes to make us feel his famished stomach and how it dominates his consciousness: "On my way to my shanty,

my hunger growls like a cat. The moonrise looks like an empty yellow plate" (p. 12). And in what may be the book's best poem, "Endurance," Zheng beautifully portrays his yearning for the absent beloved through both literal and figurative images of the moon: "when the moon peeks through," he writes,

you appear  
from nowhere  
to slice my thought

into stripes  
of pale moonlight  
to bandage my wound. (p. 43)

In fact, one of the poignant threads holding the collection together is a motif of moon and star images that Zheng repeatedly links to the uncertain dreams of the future and of home. Hence, as the book ends, Zheng remembers in "The Persistence of Memory" staying awake late into the night, "gazing at / the stars for a bright tomorrow" (p. 68). Thus Zheng confirms Faulkner, that "the past is never dead; it's not even past."

—*Matthew Brennan*