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Our Poets, *and* A Novel

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Our Poets, *and* A Novel

Xiao Kaiyu (bio)

Translated by Christopher Lupke (bio)

Our Poets

When in our indignation Chinese
becomes pallid and ossified
as in hotels, markets, banks,
computers, going through customs, open-bar parties. . . .
we, benighted, alien students of Borges,
tin-eared impersonators of Rilke's theism,
victims of the gawky translation of Joseph Brodsky's verse,
producers of goose eggs out of Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*,
fraudulent drunks who feign lunacy and conceal our spiritual numbness,
we curse English. In New York, Paris,
and all the meat-eating cities, we chase the dollar,
and the endorsement of self-important professors,
and we use antiquated Chinese to represent China.

Alas, our women govern the home
like tyrants, and each and every one of us
is as thin as a rope, as plump as a roundworm.

Alas, our men are like executioners,
plunderers of society.

In the deceitful plans of two- and three-room flats,
we use roadside gardens that have nothing to do with us
and other fabricated scenery crowned by the sun and the moon
to signify the desiccation of our brains.

We use violence to sing of peace, a last gasp of breath,
a frail breeze that blows life afield,
we deliver a solemn verdict that it is love.

Alas, our poets, our work
is nothing but lies! It's just
a little sing-along, officialese.

When the functionary dons his uniform
to assay realism, meting out praise and critique,
young men and young women encircle the politician's corpse in the
square

and joyously commemorate the holiday with fireworks and howls; **[End**

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when the publisher won't print a single line that is on target,
conscience and fantasy reverting to silence and death,
we investigate technique. Pure writing
scrapes off any possible rancid remnants like picking teeth.
(Our innards have long since been shaved clean,
of ourselves, there is scarcely anything left to write.)
We use hollow language to pen our humiliation.

1995 [End Page 77]

A Novel

Seeing how you've been convicted of a crime, I'll withhold your name.
No one has ever finished reading your novel, as you don't have the skill
to get those peculiar and aggrieved characters to stage a credible
fight.

And now you're in prison. Once the villa you built is auctioned off,
all your past blunders will be swapped for twenty years of freedom.

Now there will be plenty of peaceful evenings propped against the wall,
with shame as the headdress for your aching skull.

You never imagined they'd catch wind of the ugliest rumor, using it to
capture your friendships a day early. In an instant,
they propelled you back into the dream world of a luckless novelist

and furnished you with a dozen contrary images. When, under the shafts
of light

split by the prison bar window, you put yourself on trial,
arraying a different confession, a novel spreads out
before you. The hero wears plain army fatigues,
shouting out slogans, boarding a train covered with posters.

Midcourse it's discovered he's a cheat.

He's purloined the alternative meaning of a sentence. Before reaching
maturity

he's already assumed the mantle of a swindler. As for other cheats,
his victories came when he began cheating himself: repeatedly

going to prison, going to court, spitting. As if he were
the hard-nosed hero from an era of falsehood. He was called to the
stand
wearing an old army uniform in a freshly minted new era,
reciting that set of clichéd but increasingly novel contentions.
The judge and the courtroom gallery gave a sympathetic wheeze.
Actually, these days all he can come up with are word games.

Is he a bygone master adept at sophistry?
No. He's just you. You've cheated the case,
cheated your mother, friends, and yourself, but
out of some bizarre logic you've withdrawn a fortune, you
did it for a hundred villas, because of your faith in a hundred holidays.

1997 [End Page 78]

Xiao Kaiyu

Xiao Kaiyu was born in the village of Heping, Zhongjiang County, Sichuan Province, in 1960. Beginning in his youth, he was interested in literature and...

Xiao Kaiyu

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