

THE PAST



WENDY XU

THE PAST

ALSO BY WENDY XU

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Phrasis (2017)

You Are Not Dead (2013)

THE PAST

WENDY XU

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opens the book

the words have decomposed

the ruins have imperial integrity

- BEI DAO

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COMING TO AMERICA

Speak first of the flooded interior, supernaturally lit

I is an echo in the word

A proximity, birds over land: *exquisite*

A word I've welded into love

Sure, I was blessed at birth and have outpaced
myself gently

They spoke to me in heavy abstraction

My tongue fading out

Sometimes a mouth is lost to slow time

Did I hear that somewhere?

A gasp of memory appearing now as skin

I had been looking for something

in others — a likening

further inquiry of the lyric self

When something inside me sprung up new, green even

More hostile, less wounded

How can this be the case?

What can I do, except continue to demonstrate love?

Revision is a practice of faith

Revision is a practice of my love against time

PLEDGE

MY DISSENT AND MY LOVE
ARE WOVEN INSIDE ME

I commune with the text by way of railing against the text
The molecular processes of you are never finished
I move through air in the early fall, a cooling spittle, high heat days are gone
When the troops leave the replica city, you see that its battlements are written
 in green
A Western style of defense, no birds, all men
Same plaza, white stones, black columns, no memory
You want to walk along the path meant for military vehicles and are denied
You want to try falling down where others had before you, and are
 unceremoniously denied
You wanted permission to travel to the mainland to see your mother
All of your desires were completely impractical
That is, you did not want to atone for anything you had done

LOOKING AT MY FATHER

It's the inside which
comes out, as I contemplate
him there half
in sunlight, weeding diligently
a Midwestern lawn.

On my persons, I have
only notes
and a drying pen,
the memory
of onion blossoms
scenting
in a window.

Reflection is my native
medium. I am never
arriving, only speaking
briefly on material
conditions between myself
and others. My country
inoculates
me lovingly, over time.
My country grasps me
like desire.

I will show you
my credentials, which is
to say my vivid description
if you ask.

Here we are, my father
and I, never hostile,

a small offering: pointless
cut flowers appear
on the kitchen table
when one
finally arrives
into disposable income.
Still possible.
Am I living? Do I
accept revision
as my godhead
and savior? I do
and I am, in the name
of my Chinese father now
dragging the tools
back inside, brow
shining but always
a grin, faithless
except to protect whatever
I still have time
to become,

Amen.

A SOUND NOT UNLIKE A BELL

In the dream last night I was desperately arranging cut flowers for something
important
The practical uses of my work I was not made aware
Nobody was available to assist
Thus the flowers were strewn about the carpet beside me
I was compelled to finish my task by something greater than myself
The forces that acted upon me seemed to say “Your life depends upon this
assemblage”
I took it as a warning, though provocative, though urgent and abstract
The bouquets were to be picked up as soon as I declared them finished
I admit, it felt good to be the lone member of mission control
There’s no point in talking of how time passes in a dream; I worked for minutes
Perhaps I worked for years
The only accompanying sound was a song looping in my mind about the little
sparrow
A Chinese folk song from somewhere, the past
I was so alone in my freedom to choose, but because I was under deadline, duress
I did not dare make a mistake
After some time, I stepped away from my work and admired the results
The outcome was beautiful, and because I had worked very hard: *rare*

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We don’t remember how we got here, so have woven a beautiful story of
replacement
You mispronounce my sacred name, always in front of others, there it goes
A fine white mist where once it held space for me
I didn’t write for the longest time because you were speaking for me

You had so many eyes trained on you, I wanted them only on me
In order for me to work towards an undoing of my condition, I must know the
characteristics of my condition
In order for me to know the characteristics of my condition, I must not be made
to feel alone in my perception of them
You are and have always been subject to randomness
Accept it

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In World War II the chemical giants (Monsanto, DuPont) made a fortune
through exclusive government contracts to spray death from above
If you think about it for too long you will feel hysterical
You will point erratically at the audience in a frenzied female state
You will stare at the miniature hurricane of Liquid Plumber spiraling down
towards the clog like a heavy godsend

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Poems of the deadpan subject
Poems of the habitually deferred
Poems of the yellow hand and matching face
Poems of the song that feels like a secret
Poems of the fancy free
Poems of the who and what do I love now with all this money?

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I had felt the similes falling away from my holy body
In sharp relief and judgment of you, who have yet to recognize me
I wanted disgusting excess for my family this year, my food out of your mouth
But my practice was of looking at the image and conjuring it up from the
margins

I was crying there in the great hall like something I had never felt
It was repugnant to words
You had your eyes trained on me crying in church
I was tired of being worn by you like fashion and hungry for my life to begin
I attempted to face the successes of those around me

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Pedestrian thoughts again about the body in recovery
Fragile clock, weak and porous until suddenly in revolt
All these days stuck alone at home
Parents in the world are like a roving evaluation, never knowing where their
gaze will fall
On the mouse emerging from the wall
On the wall itself, in need of repair
A friend says “My accent never fails to make them laugh” and I catch myself
laughing
Then laugh again at the brilliant entrapment
The completion of a closed unintentional loop
Lost to laughter now, unable to suck it back into my body
I read a testimony about the loneliness of large unfilled spaces and sense my
parents preparing to board the plane now
Little pleasures of my own: burping, fruit

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Your historical loveliness knows no bounds
Who is Tank Man to you?
My what if and my thank god
Tank Man torn apart by my would-be friends
Tank man dancing immortal as GIF
Tank Man as where you stop reading
Tank Man has been around the world but not back