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June Fourth Elegies

Liu Xiaobo
Jeffrey Yang, translator
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June Fourth Elegies is the first book of poetry translated into English by Chinese political dissident Liu Xiaobo, winner of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. A leading activist during the Tiananmen Square protests and author of the human rights manifesto "Charter 08," Liu is currently serving an eleven-year prison sentence for crimes against the state while his wife remains under house arrest. This bilingual edition brings to readers Liu's insights and frustrations, as well as his commitment to remember the deaths of Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. Underlying this remembrance is the fervent hope that the dead did not perish in vain.

The poems in Liu Xiaobo's collection were written over a twenty-year period, on each anniversary of the military action that brought untimely deaths to many throughout China. Divided into twenty sections for every year of remembrance, from 1990 to 2009, the book contains a poem or group of poems in each. Year by year, the place of composition is noted. Sometimes it was prison or labor camp; for others, it was at home or at a bar. This location hints at Liu's tumultuous life and also places readers in the mental world of the poems.

Blood runs through this collection. Indeed, red is one of the rare colors used by Liu in these stark poems. In the section "Again the Closing of the Breaking Through," Liu writes: "The dead flies in the pans of food / I finely grind and chew then / spit at the withering-red dusk." In "Standing in the Curse of Time," he recollects "Ten years ago this day's / dawn: a bloody garment / sun." No matter where he looks throughout the twenty years, Liu shows readers how time has "been petrified by gunshots" ("Experiencing Death") and blood tinges everything. There is immediacy in these elegies, reflecting the struggle that continues.

In addition to the poems, the book contains a foreword by the Dalai Lama, an introduction by the author, and a helpful notes section that clarifies the allusions Liu makes to people, places, history, and legend. Most importantly, the book contains an afterword by the translator. In it, Jeffrey Yang provides an extensive biography of Liu Xiaobo, as well as an account of his translation decision to maintain Liu's exact number of poetic lines, lack of end punctuation, and what Yang terms the "syntactical flexibility of the Chinese language." Since the meaning behind some of his lines can be challenging to decipher, Yang's explanation is informative for both readers interested in translated works and those drawn to the enduring human rights messages of Liu Xiaobo. With this translation, a voice that refuses to be silenced can be heard by a greater portion of the world.
JENNIFER FANDEL (February 29, 2012)

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