

Zhou
Nick On

smith|doorstop

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i.m.

Joe On (-1949)

Barry On (1930-2018)

Zhou

One of the legendary Three Dynasties of ancient China which ruled from c. 1020–221 BCE and is traditionally divided into periods of the Western Zhou (to 771 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou.

The time of Confucius (c. 552–479 BCE), Zhuangzi and Laozi and the final form of the *Classic of Poetry* (c. 600 BCE).

The tenth most common surname in mainland China.

Yellow Bird

the yellow bird stops
on Navigation Street
where my Chinese grandfather
dropped dead

his untranslated stomach said
'sickness is the seed of health'
so he bet on the *Yin-Yang*
and lost

he left his laundry
seven children
and a medal
from Chiang Kai-shek

the yellow bird stops
on the *paifang*
to the Chinese Quarter
where the bend of his little finger
beckons me in
to gather watercress

Fragments of Zhou

people came to him with letters

Consider the unmarked square.

Select a character to bind
within its blank perfection.

Something simple to instruct the boy.

With brush hairs holding exact ink
make rapid strokes in running style
the tensioned gut of the drawn bow
the hook of the dragon's mouth
in the sharp curve of the *kou*
discharging without residue
into

□ (mouth).

The boy is the hole in the mouth
the useless dragon of spring
who must learn the line –
the un-correctable line –
by the numbers and the lists.

Nine *Shi* of the dragon art:
hiding the tip, protecting the tail,
linking the scaly carapace,
emptying the grip, pillowing the wrist,
starting with force to move the mountain,
making strokes of bone, strokes of muscle,
uncoiling the breath of ink.

we do not know why he left

But the boy thought

‘Balls!

My testicles are *Shi*. These things you’d have me learn
are bricks to bang on doors with nothing now behind them.
There will be no chosen scholar on his couch,
belly full, reclining, writing eight-legged essays,
putting permanent names on mutable things
to the sound of beating gongs.

We will have to clear the middens of these mandarins,
grind their shit on ink-stones
and dip the tips of autumn pelts
in this most fragrant ink
and with our brush-pens dancing
list those who wear the *cangue*.

Our writing is destroyed in separate small pagodas
for euthanising characters
where Europeans see
the burning of books in little yellow kiosks.

I will learn just enough
to write a letter, to keep a ledger,
but not to lie in ink and cover facts of blood.

I have seen the suppurating docks
licked by Europe’s clustered ships.’