

NG MEI-KWAN

Rainstorm

In memory of 4 May 1989

We endured so many days of deep depression
in an atmosphere so drear we lost proof of our existence
deathly silence, unruffled by the slightest breeze,
prevented us from noticing the passage of the seasons
while in the intersection between expectation and despair
people forgot, after the Excited Insects tremors,*
how the prophecy hailing changes to the seasons
was buried without trace in cloud valley, deprived of speech,
as we readjusted, the uproar that disturbed us was forgotten
memories dwindled into badges pinned on our lapels
the seeds sown that spring lay dejected, hidden in soft mud,
even should they spring to mind again
they would not be able to ponder how
the earth's grass and leaves interpret sunshine
or how to thirst for the beneficence of rain
after sunburn

And then in May (when spring is hard to tell from summer)
distant thunder
unexpectedly rang out, sharp and clear,
a great storm burst, the rain came pouring down,
making the noon sky black with rage as if it had been cursed
people's voices mingled with the chanting of the rain
creating an extraordinary air of calm
you did not congratulate yourself on having escaped the rain
but from the inside kept watch on the downpour lashing the window

it could only make you mistake the time of your appointment
in a state of excessive security
deepening a hesitant burden
just as constant drops of water falling from an umbrella
pool in a small, parched room

In the end we decided to go forward through the rain together
letting our shoes make a small boat to launch us into the water
steadfastly meeting natural waves
and imbibing the smell of rain-soaked grass and mud
in a faint voice the rain gently told us
not to frown if our shoulders get wet
or blame the rain for having to wade through water
we only know that tomorrow we will see
the one and only sun
shine as ardently as ever over the earth
but never falsely
stuck redly in the upper left-hand corner
like a kindergarten art class painting

Translator's notes:

May Fourth has been a significant date in the history of political protest in China since 1919. It became a turning point in the 1989 democratic movement, when more than a hundred thousand students gathered at Tiananmen Square to press their case for political reform. Their demands rejected, the students began a hunger strike on May 13, which in turn led to the declaration of martial law on May 20 and the violent suppression of mass rallies in Tiananmen on June 4. What is referred to outside China as the Tiananmen Massacre (or Incident) is officially known in China as 'the political turmoil between spring and summer 1989'.

** Excited Insects is a period in the solar calendar immediately preceding the vernal equinox. The reference here is probably to the April Fifth demonstrations at Tiananmen Square following Zhou Enlai's death in early 1976.*