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TITLE INFORMATION

TIME PEELS ALL TO ORIGINAL WHITE

Xueyan Poems

Xueyan

Fernwood Press (173 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A Chinese poet seeks answers in the sky and the soul in this debut collection.

This is not a book for the casual poetry fan; from the first page to the last, the poems are dramatic and deeply spiritual. "Breaking free from waves of sorrows / I leap ashore / Stars coronate me / beads of tears on hairs ribboned by light / I am owned by eternity," writes Xueyan in her collection's closing work and author's note. Even the back cover, reserved for a brief bio, bears a "bio-poem." The collection's nearly 140 concise poems, arranged in four parts, dwell mostly on the nature of human devotion, the heavens, and the machinations of God, and they do not provide answers. Many entries reflect on mortality, painting humanity's sacrifices with macabre strokes; in "Prophet," Xueyan writes, "The halo hangs above me / a holy gallows / Enchanted by light / I ascend to the aureole / to the sacred execution of my mortal flesh / My eyes / my skin / my tongue / melt." This abundance of unsettling descriptions, while compelling, occasionally overshadows the poems' meaning. Other entries consider the lessons of Greek myths ("Prometheus's Fire," "Icarus"), the Bible ("Lilith Leaves Eden," "The Crucifixion"), and religious history ("Jerusalem").

Xueyan reverently explores Mary and Christ as tragic figures, and the imagery can be stark and memorable. The poet seems to suggest that brutality is cyclic and inevitable; snow and water appear again and again to signal both beauty and death. Poems on romance also address God: "A tear shed for love / is deeper than the sea / When I murmur your name to the winds / I am as clean as Yahweh's bones." Xueyan adroitly explores her themes, but not all of the poems feel necessary, and some of the shortest ones simply retrace what has already been expressed. Despite an overall somber tone, she finds occasional moments of levity: "After long journeys / two fish finally meet / love at first sight / They are going to kiss." The closing section departs somewhat from the cosmic framing of the majority of the works and incorporates more mundane language; cigarettes, electricity bills, and the subway add grounded contrast with natural beauty and Messianic references, but they don't always effectively mesh with the book's more ethereal scope. Some poems fewer than 10 words ("Shortest Poem" simply says "Love") don't always justify their brevity, but the abrupt ends evoke the speaker's restlessness. [124] Part of the book's intrigue lies in the author's opacity and lack of personal details. The closing poem, "To Wake," does the best job of distilling the poet's seeming intended takeaway for her readers about the dissonance of Christian aspirations compared with the burden of everyday life: "Humans wake because they are hungry / not because they love the world."

Ably and originally muses on Christianity and personal sacrifice.

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