

The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai

(From the Second Scroll)

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i

At the place of ascension Pharaoh wakes;
he rises to walk the heavens, pushing his way
through unending fields of stars as through
glittering corn, and at their fading, ride the sun
across waterways of light over his day domains.
He will hold court in the presence of the gods,
his queen, his princes, his priests, his scribes
assemble and stand before his throne, suffused
in eternal glory. Yet it is we who will not die.
Through the stink and maggots of soft-tissue corruption,
through fly-blown, sand-salted flesh and bones,
through mastication by the earth itself,
we journey home to darkness to come again
and see Pharaoh dead in his temples, his pyramids.

¹ A leading English-language poet in Southeast Asia, Wong Phui Nam has been writing since 1955, and has to date published six volumes of poetry and two plays. *An Acre of Day's Glass*, his latest collection of poetry, was published in 2006, and his play "Aduni" appeared in the December 2008 issue of *Asiatic*.

ii

In truth, it is not we who leave the world;
it is the world that fades from us
as our senses die from which is spun
the web of dreams in which we are snared
as temple doorkeepers, bearers of offerings,
priests, engravers, architects, and scribes...
And I, a neophyte priestess from the provinces.
All, all shrivel and fall away as the petals
of a flower drying into fruit, into a darkness
where every dream of the world we ever had
will be weighed against a feather before you,
before we can be fruitful beyond darkness
where nothing is, where all that there is bodies forth.

iii

Set adrift in his four-fold sarcophagus
to catch the winds and tides of time
that are to set him on towards the shores
of eternity, Pharaoh is yet flesh-bound,
tethered by his linen to our common earth.
His ka is pickled, dead in the natron
that preserves his organs in sacred urns,
and his cadaver's face has begun to shrink,
blacken beneath the mask that bears
the remote, august aspect of a divine king.
Coarse and venal men not many years hence
will break the seal of his immortality,
disturb that discovered darkness to lay hands
on saleable gods and goddesses, golden artifacts
a god might take on a final journey.

iv

The true sarcophagus is not of cypress wood
inlaid with gold nor of chiselled quartz.
It is a nothingness that does not eat flesh
but enfolds those who first have its fires stilled
who come to it. All golden funerary masks,
all amulets, necklaces flaming with rubies
in their weave, and shepherd's crook and flail
signifying divine authority... will,
with the unwrapped linen, be laid down
at eternity's door. The pure ones dying,
have their places of ascension more hidden,
more inviolate than Pharaoh's secret chambers,
which grave robbers disturb and empty
of artifacts on which he stakes his immortality.

v

He is Pharaoh over multitudes – men,
women, and cattle that breed in our numbers
in this slit of soft, procreative earth,
a fertile long wound washed by periodic waters
that flow from mountains remote as the moon.
Out of our essential loam, our sour breath,
we provide him his life, and life after
in the heavens, one lone soul in a sun-boat
looking down on us, the multitudinous swarm
the earth brings forth and takes back compacted
into silt and loam in our ignorant flesh.
Past ignorance, we find our mother, and find us
her single child, seeming myriads from her wound,
who leave Pharaoh high in his hell of burning solitude.