

PEN America: A Journal for Writers and Readers
Issue 14: The Good Books

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COVER ARTWORK

Brian Dettmer, *Tower of Babble*, altered books (48 paperbacks), 28" x 10-1/2" x 10-1/2".
Images courtesy of the artist.

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PEN AMERICA

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against the translator is more common, in any language, than infidelity. "Traduttore, traditore," a platitude whose wit I do not get, rolls off the tongue of the scholar-critic with a smug frequency. In Genet's reverse theology, betrayal is the only true form of human intimacy, and Frechtman was but one of many friends Genet disposed of along the way. But Genet's act of betrayal is reenacted every time we English readers open up *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *The Thief's Journal*, or *The Maids*. In these works, and in others, I find nothing except page after page of love, surrender, and the deepest form of fidelity.

CHINESE TALES | SRIKANTH REDDY

A year before the First World War began, a young executive at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia wrote to his girlfriend about an upcoming lecture by Martin Buber. "It would take more than Buber to get me out of my room, I have heard him before, I find him dreary," wrote the company man, whose name was Franz Kafka. "No matter what he says, something is missing."

Embedded in this little footnote to European cultural history lies a gem of world literature. "No doubt he knows a lot," Kafka continues in parentheses, acknowledging that "he, Buber, published *Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*, which are wonderful, at least the ones I know." It seems only natural that Kafka, the existential hunger artist, would find Buber's mystical largesse as a theologian to be, in some respects, unsatisfying. But in *Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*—a small German selection of "strange tales" originally composed by Pu Songling, a failed provincial bureaucrat of the early Qing Dynasty—Buber the believer and Kafka the skeptic find common ground in the realm of wonder.

Here we find the story of Zhu from Lingyang, who invites a demon from the underworld to become his drinking companion and finds his life marvelously transformed as a result. Elsewhere, a thug forces himself upon a supernatural vixen, only to discover that he has been copulating with the knothole of a tree, which houses "a scorpion the size of a lobster." In a story titled "The Land in the Sea," a young merchant named Ma Chun embarks on a business trip but becomes the prince of an aquatic kingdom, where he rides about "on a splendid sea horse, dressed in magnificent garments, and accompanied by a mounted troop of bodyguards armed with white water lilies." These are strange tales indeed—part fairy tale, part *Twilight Zone* episode—originating within Pu's inimitable literary vision and filtered through Buber's alien yet equally eccentric sensibility.

Buber had no real knowledge of Chinese. Sometimes he relied upon the

(grudgingly acknowledged) aid of a visiting scholar named Wang Jingdao, who apparently provided him with rough draft translations of Pu's highly refined classical Chinese prose. More often, however, Buber simply worked from English versions of Pu's tales, translating selections from Herbert Giles's 1909 edition of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* into German without referring to the original Chinese text.

Pretty much all German is Greek to me, so I rely upon Alex Page's English translation of Buber's German translation of Giles's English translation of Pu's classical Chinese. Inevitably, this game of Chinese whispers leads to an irremediable distortion of Pu's elegant and allusive prose style. Still, if I were invited to a book swap, I would bring with me an obscure text rather than one widely known, and Page's 1991 translation of Buber's volume, simply titled *Chinese Tales*, would suit my purpose as well as any. (Incidentally, this edition includes Buber's versions of Zhuangzi's Daoist sayings and parables as well, so it's a sort of two-for-one deal.)

The pleasure of Chinese whispers lies in the transformations that arise while playing the game. In Giles's early-twentieth-century English translation of Pu's tales, the amorous thug mentioned above is a more chivalrous (and less comical) version of himself: "Seizing her hand, to tell his passion, he found that he was grasping only a log of wood which stood against the wall; and the next thing he knew was that a scorpion had stung him violently on the finger." The enormous scorpion in Buber's rendition that clamps this suitor's member in its jaws seems to have been the theologian's own mischievous flourish.

Then there are the uncanny serendipities which only such a game of transhistorical and intercultural telephone could occasion. When Page translates Buber's rendition of the tale of You Yunhao, for example, the resulting English version reads, at times, like a parable of the theologian's meditations on the first and second persons in *I and Thou*:

After the stranger had eaten enough for half-a-dozen normal men, his hunger was satisfied. He thanked You and said, "I haven't had such a meal in close to almost three years." "And why must a heroic figure like you live in such privation?" asked You. The other merely replied, "The sayings of heaven are not a topic for discussion."

In the end, Buber's versions (as rendered by Page) can only encourage more readers to seek out Pu's original tales, or at least more literal translations of them, available in English selections by John Minford or in a four-volume complete edition by Sidney L. Sondergard. All these versions testify to what is lost and, curiously, what is gained, too, in translation.