

BLENDING INTO THE UNTAMED LAND

ZHANG WEI

TRANSLATED BY TERRANCE RUSSELL

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Since beginning to publish in the mid-1980s, Zhang Wei has been one of the most prolific, celebrated and controversial of contemporary authors in China. His novels, short stories, poems and essays have received numerous awards and stirred several major national debates. And yet, he is virtually unknown in the West, even among scholars specializing in Chinese literature. The reason for such an anomaly almost certainly lies in Zhang's steadfast refusal to abandon his deeply held convictions regarding Chinese cultural values and the role of the intellectual in defending those values. This makes him a conservative and a romantic in an age when neither conservatism nor romanticism is fashionable within the academy.

The essay translated here won the Shanghai Prize for Literature when it was published in 1992. In retrospect, this award seems most ironic. *Blending into the Untamed Land* appeals for an understanding of the ancient, almost primordial bond between mankind and the land, the kind of bond that Shanghai, of all places in China, has most obviously and tragically lost. Within the greater context of China, however, large, modern metropolises like Shanghai, and the feverish rush towards a high-tech, consumerist society that they represent, are a minority phenomenon. There are still enormous tracts of rural countryside where the majority of the Chinese population still resides. In that hinterland, it is yet possible to experience the intimate relationship between peasants and the land, a relationship consummated through the medium of hard, honest labor. But it is apparent that such may not be the case for much longer as urban sprawl and industrial development replace the croplands.

Blending into the Untamed Land is an eloquent contemporary expression of naturalism and spiritual monism. Some would see in it traces of Heidegger or the American transcendentalists. Reading from a Chinese perspective, it is a retrieval of Daoist philosophy that was from its beginnings, over 2,500 years ago, a product of rural China. Like Zhang Wei, the Daoist masters possessed an understanding of mankind's place in the natural world that was directly in opposition to that flowing from the urban centers. Daoism rejected the deification of technology, progress and development. In their place it offered a vision of reality as balance, unity and mystical ecstasy.

Daoism formed an important element in the spirituality of the Chinese. It was also an essential element in the formation of the landscape aesthetics that set Chinese art so clearly apart from the Western tradition. What Zhang Wei fears is that his nation has abandoned those aesthetics and the spiritual naturalism on which they are based. In their place is a slavish, ill-considered enshrinement of the Philistine gods of development and corporate capitalism. Art and honest creativity are entirely valueless and unwelcome

under such a regime. Zhang dares to confront that Philistinism and appeal for the prioritizing of art over consumerism.

We must read *Blending into the Untamed Land* as a profoundly personal statement of ideas. It is Zhang Wei's apologia for his work and his mode of existing in the world. As a writer and as an individual Zhang is in search of a language with which to convey the sensations and emotions of living on the land, of being in one's native place, and of blending into the natural landscape. Those things are not easily expressed. Like the Dao that animates the universe itself, it may be that they may only be given form indirectly as art. This essay ultimately argues for the preservation art and the sincere quest of human reality. In contemporary China such idealism seems Quixotic in the extreme, but Zhang Wei has never strayed from his ideals, and as his prolific output continues, he gives no indication that he will do so in future.

*Blending into the Untamed Land*¹

1. The city is a recklessly embellished stretch of wilderness; in the end I will bid it farewell. I want to find that which is original, that which is real and true. This naive longing is like a rousing folk song that lures me onward. The sound of the city is like the tide, inundating all. I want to drift out on it and catch a glimpse of the wild plain, the mountain ranges; to cast my eyes over the forest and the fields with their mantle of green. I searched and I saw, but I returned with only endless, silent thoughts. There is the vast earth, and around its boundaries is the ocean. Infinite life forms bound and leap, multiply, and grow luxuriantly. The rising sun shines on them day in, day out. . . . At any given moment, if I open my eyes wide, I notice immediately that all before me has changed into something brand new. It startles, moves, and awes me. It is like being born anew and discovering for the first time that marvels are arrayed all around.

I desperately want to grasp that "momentary sensation" when the heart is filled to overflowing with wave after wave of mad joy. In the midst of all this I come to the realization: the myriad things are all in furious cycle of endless birth and extinction; eternal and ephemeral are only relative terms; but in the midst of the confusion and disorder there is something that is truly eternal. I grasp and pursue it, but it absolutely can never belong to me. This is a tragedy, and at the same time a comedy. For the moment I hold back my urbanite's sentiments and face the broad wilderness to ask: Why is this so? Where do all of these things come from after all? That which already exists is so perfect; so perfect that one can hardly imagine it. It is also deficient, so deficient that it makes one suffer great pain. That sense of tragedy or comedy originally all comes from a kind of apathy, for what we face is not only a world with which we are familiar, but also a world that is entirely foreign. . . .

¹ This short essay was published as a **post face** to the novel: *September's Fable* The text of "Blending" is available on-line. The URL is:
<http://www.shuku.net:8082/novels/zhangwei/zhangwei11.html>

My heartstrings are pulled tight as I forcefully suppress an infinity of emotions. As always, life surges toward me, unsettling me with every wave. In my dreams I always see that kind of tree that clings so tenaciously to its patch of earth. I refuse a life that is rootless and inconstant. What I want to pursue is no more than the simple, the authentic, the established. But this must forever rest in the realm of desire. Finding a place to go has become a major problem. Comforting this adult heart of mine has also become a major problem. As things drag on in silence, a person always first learns how to tolerate, then finds ways of refusing. Tolerating, always tolerating---tolerating the vileness that one's self-respect has no manner of accommodating. Yet, it is also in the midst of this uncertainty that genuine refusal begins.

This long road is like nothing so much as the long night. In the boundless night who is constantly sunk in thought? Who is lamenting the state of the world and mankind? Who is probing their hearts and their fate? The realm of the mind does not easily admit the clamor. Thus it transforms into the darkness of night just on the verge of the ears. In the lightless and colorless interior the eyes cannot see, but one need only extend a hand to feel. Here conventional knowing and seeing have lost their original meaning. But the night air has been rubbed scalding hot by the footsteps of imaginings. With all my heart and mind I want to continue pursuing them. Bearing, accepting, enduring---Can an individual truly endure? Sometimes I reply that he can, and other times I reply that he cannot. In the end after all, one cannot. Thus I am finally left with only refusal.

2. In those times when I cannot yet express this concept of "untamed land," I think of blending in. This is because, relying on nothing more than direct perception, I know that it is only in the genuine untamed land that people can ignore the ordinary and discover the divine dancing cranes. The soil nourishes everything; there people can obtain all that they require, especially that sense of comfort, which is so elusive. The untamed land is the birth mother of the myriad things. Her offspring abound and she can never grow old and decrepit. Her milk flows and becomes the rivers, giving sustenance to the tens of thousands of living spirits as it drains into the ocean.

I walk away along a small road. On this small road there are few footprints, nor does one hear the sound of human voices as it runs directly through this native place of mine. Who doesn't have such a familiar place? People extend their first tender roots into their native land; such places form links with their very pulse. But who can maintain constant attachment to their native place? It was only today that I finally realized that when a person grows up and goes off to some distant place, enters the bustling cities, or plants his feet on the ocean's other shore, he will still stubbornly maintain: my native place is located at the center of the earth. His entire world begins from and extends outward from that small patch of earth.

I have also seen the mountain ranges and the plains, and gazed out over the boundless great ocean. The vapors exhaled from the swamplands are so dense, and the breathing of the land is so clear and distinct. The crops of grain, the grasses, the forests; people, gnats, fine steeds; hosts, like species, parasites . . . they are all intertwined and coexist in one space. I have gradually drawn closer to the enormous shadow of a body. . . .

The native place points towards the borders of the untamed land. Herein, there is a key. Here, there is an entrance, a gate. The vines that cover the ground ensnare my hands and feet. Dense thickets of scrub trees block the escape route. Have they waylaid a traveler or a returning life form? I lie down and listen, pressing tightly so that I can feel the movement of the pulse and the warmth of the body. Only in this moment do I relax, because I have found genuine tolerance.

At such times, a person will be profoundly moved. He will be like a tree that has sprouted from a patch of mud. All that he is came first from this place. This is the boundless source, which he will never completely exhaust during his entire lifetime. In reality a man is a tree that can move about. His excitement and his desires are all supplied by that patch of earth. He once grew up along with the greenery that surrounded him. Now, so many years have gone by that, when he looks around at the scenes from the past, he will discover that time has changed so much, and yet it hasn't changed things in the least. The greenery, and the barren earth are still there side by side, and the wizened tree and long creepers still enwrap each other. That familiar bird with red-pimpled bill, and the enormous stone mill wheel were discovered together; there was also the beautifully elegant little nest made by the Mongolian lark amid the weeds of the desolate wilderness . . . to me this native place is everywhere replete with miracles.

A person need only return and he will seek. He only need seek and he will find what he wants. It is such a strange yet such a simple principle. I need only bend down and pick it up. I lie prostrate on the ground like a tree that wants to put down roots--this yearning has been sullied by being mindlessly parroted time and again. I want to return it to the origins. The indigence of my soul is exactly as fervid and pure as it was in my childhood.

I am like a practiced landscape viewer, narrowing my eyes as I look off into the distance. In this way I can blur the picture and delete many concrete objects. What I see are not individual trees, but rather a panorama of green; it is not one old man, nor one young woman, but rather a dense tableau of human life. All sounds are scattered over the surface of the soil. They meld together and flood past, like the buzz of a bee, like the collapse of a mountain.

I squat down beneath a strong, broad stalk of corn and for a long time watch its leaves like great swords, and the silver floss atop it. I pay special attention to its roots, like claws, or like filament tightly grasping the soil. How luxuriantly it grows, perfect, without flaw! Its heroic spirit is palpable. Voiceless life forms like this one are found everywhere. Together they show a disregard for the death that will come in the future. They have a spirit that is secret and unproclaimed. This is how I gaze upon the stalk of corn just before my eyes.

Today it seems even less likely that anyone will take the mystery of perception seriously. People seem to have no choice but to accept. Information brought by language and pictures piles up like a mountain. The communication technology of the modern world allows a person to squat off to one side and still observe the entire world. Truth and

misinformation are strewn abroad in such equal measure that we human beings feel as if bombarded by a deluge of stones. What this damages most is people's organs of perception. What we lose is the basic right to analyze. We are left with only a bitter ordeal. Even if a man now opened his eyes wide, he could not push aside the shapeless blinders. Misapprehension constantly binds, and in the end always forces submission. Traditional "knowing" and "seeing" give to us but also render us ignorant. Therefore we must seek a new manner of perceiving and be vigilant over our sight and hearing.

I stand at the centre of the earth and discover that it is forming a body. It supports the rivers and the cities and it allows people of all races, as well as creatures and plants, to grow and recreate everywhere. What is so exceedingly moving is that it preserves a place at the very centre to serve as our native place. With a pack on my back I travel during the day and rest at night. Sometimes I traverse mountains and valleys, other times I sail down the rivers. This piece of land can never be completely traveled and each square inch of it is priceless. A professor from a foreign country said that it was no bigger than a postage stamp, but have I ever come near or bumped into you? An indistinct sensation of self-satisfaction floats through my heart.

3. It probably isn't exclusively a professional habit, but I am always urgently seeking a kind of language. Language for me has always had an air of mystery about it. The reason why the myriad things that one encounters on the road of life are speechless and silent is mainly because they have lost their language. Language is proof. It is evidence. It is the fundamental substance that allows continued progress forward. The language I seek can reach in all directions. It is something that has its source in the mountain ranges and in the soil. It is as animated as life itself and as hard as solid rock. It has form, but no form. It has sound, but no sound. It is scattered all over the untamed land and lies hidden amid the myriad things. The river water gurgles as it flows. The great ocean roars day and night. Birds sing and people shout--these are all the languages of separation. Where then hides the language that can reach in all directions?

It is so much like gold in the soil. It waits for us to live through all of our hardships before it leaps forth. On that day when my strength has all been spent, what meaning is there even if all my wishes have been fulfilled? Like everyone else, I am apprehensive, dejected, and despairing. I don't know where my objective lies. My mood is at once desolate, elevated, and remote. All in all, the pain of having no language is difficult to endure. It is a genuine pain. It is not that my aspirations are great. What I wish to evoke is no more than a single phrase. But sadly, and cruelly, not a single word is uttered. I plunge myself into the embrace my native place, as it draws me near and inflames my heart, but I can speak nothing but endless nonsense. Only after rambling on for a long time do I realize that it is still utterly mute. It makes me feel truly awkward. I know that, regardless of whether it is the chirping of autumnal insects or the joyous speech of humans, there is always something hidden. It is the silences in their utterings that convey true meaning. What I collect are but the echoes of the low register of those utterings.

On the site of an old abandoned village I discovered a mill stone that had been left among grass and weeds. Its surface was covered with well-worn grooves. Once it had been

surrounded by crowds of people busily going about their work and must have been engraved with their incessant babbling. There were also piles of broken pottery shards that the grasses could not conceal. Most likely they are still as sharp as in the moment they were first shattered. Of that I am firmly convinced. It is just that I still cannot break the code. In the fissures in the ground beneath my feet were tiny living spirits that peered up through the leaves of grass. The sun was about to set and the golden red flames burned all the way from the horizon to my feet. In that moment of nostalgia and recollection I felt forlorn, but even more I felt the immense emotion possessed by the natural world. Still, no words passed between us.

The sense of familiarity and intimacy that I felt when first I drew near my native place began to dissipate gradually. A profound sense of strangeness came in its place. I recognized that, beneath the surface layer there were things that I had never in my life approached. How many times had I stood on the wild outskirts under the setting sun, silently watching and contemplating, as though waiting for an opportunity? It was just at such times that I would occasionally think of the passing months and years. This evoked a twinge of bitter pain. Fortunately, I now no longer feel the need to confess as a pedant does, but rather, I am filled with love and gratitude. So, happily and willingly, I wait and wait. When I recall my childhood, it isn't the stories, but rather the joyfulness of that time that I think of. What is astonishing is that the joy of those days has never reappeared. To some extent I have come to understand that back then it was still actually possible to have a dialogue with Nature, for there had been no time to gain a command of much common speech. The joy I felt came from communication and exchange. In my childhood I had still not entirely cut myself away from Nature's maternal body. The common speech of the human realm appears to have a certain gravity, but to the ears of the myriad things of nature it is a vulgar, alien tongue. People who make use of that kind of speech will have very little hope. Comprehending this has filled me with a sense of great relief, and I heave a long sigh.

There are many people laboring in the fields. They crawl on the ground, covered with dust. The green of the grain stalks obscures their bronze-colored bodies and absorbs them into a single sheet. Labor is the language that connects humans with the land. In the midst of their labor people forget the common speech of society. When that happens they join with the earth and all the life forms surrounding them to form a single body. It appears that people have blended into the murkiness. Do you want to listen to their words? They have now truly entered into the soil and grown into green colored stalks and leaves. This is a grand conference of labor and interchange. Wishing to join that grand banquet I throw myself into the labor. I, too, want to blend in.

If people abandon labor they will fall into benightedness. I have made an exquisite and unforgettable observation, which is: Once those laborers leave their work they will immediately begin to use the common language of society. Then they will no longer have the tools of intercommunication and they will lose their contact with the world that surrounds them. This will leave them completely without strength. Language is not only expression, it is also principle. It has its own life, quality and form. It is essential spirit that has been rendered illusory. By expressing oneself in a language that is only sound,

only external appearance remains, the soul has flown away. I adore language and elevate it to the position of something divinely sage and mysterious.

4. Life proves time and time again: it is difficult to endure. No matter how philosophical a person may be, in the end it is difficult to endure. Fleeing, surrendering, destroying oneself; none of these is to endure. Refusing is also not the same as to endure. To be unable to endure is an aspect of the resoluteness and purity of human nature; it is one of the reasons why humans are endearing. Occasionally, one endures for the purpose of making a final refusal. We should endorse the spirit and attitude of refusal. However, any kind of choice must be completed by being given a form, and that form can be extremely varied.

If a person is infatuated with love, although he appears to be befuddled, he has, in fact, found a path for himself. While others are busy refusing, he has entered into a state of self-forgetting. Self-forgetting is also the result of not being able to endure. He has crossed over the raging path, burning off his anger and resentment. Only then does he enter infatuation. When you love an occupation, a flower, or a person, what you love is a concrete thing; when you love a sensation, or a desire, a piece of land, or a state of being, what you love is abstract. So long as you start from the beginning, so long as you love sincerely, you will be besotted. If you are besotted with love, you create an emotional space.

When I cast myself into a stretch of vast wilderness, I understand that I have turned my back on something that boils furiously and makes my heart tremble. I have walked from the concrete toward the abstract. As I stand amid the fallow fields and raise my eyes to look in all directions, one question cannot be avoided. I reply that I still love. Even though my hair has become disheveled and my clothing is torn, I know that at this moment my heart will be remade, carefully and pristinely. Carrying only a sack on my back, having no lance or spear, I wander back and forth around the fields and in the gullies, which receive and dispatch the four seasons in their turn. I willingly release my ambitions and exile myself. Heat and cold, sorrow and joy, one after the other they weave a web. I understand even more that I “cannot endure.” Throwing aside small pleasures, I walk into my native land. Under the wild grain stalks of autumn a joyful smile comes to my lips.

I only wish that I could cut off the road back so that I would forever linger here. Sometimes beauty and goodness must be protected to the exclusion of all else. You can only watch them grow, wide-eyed. I live in a deeply tranquil, soundless world where I can enjoy peaceful seclusion. I hear my good friends praising my resolve, and my comrades lauding my sacrifice. But for me, it is only that I cannot endure. A single hawthorn tree, a clump of grass, all inspire me to sing. I cannot leave their side; they fascinate me deeply. Amid their light, clear fragrance I am constantly moved. Perhaps they are only a simple, bright, extremely ordinary flower or tree, living creatures of the wilderness, but how genuinely they live!

I erase time; and time does me a favor. Wind and frost wash away the thin, light enthusiasm and leave behind only firm, mature indifference. Standing on this distant, broad expanse of farmland I will never again smell the odor of the distant city. All around are roads leading away, and no one is holding me here, nor is anyone pressing me. Here time becomes expansive, and one's nature slackens of itself. I know that excitement exhausts a person to the point where he is completely spent. I love the wild country, I love that distant horizon. I become so besotted that no drug can cure me, as though I have entered some gate of mystery. When I lose my sensibilities I can no longer speak and my hand cannot write; my heart is distant and my hand clumsy; sometimes I raise my pen but forget the words. I follow the small paths of my native place out into the wilderness. In a crude hut in a desolate village I force myself to write down a wild song. I did not place these sloping, curved traces of ink in the homemade leather folders of the people of yesteryear. They were wrapped up in a piece of homespun floral cloth and carried over the shoulder.

Since the small floral homespun bundle holds my idiomatic singing, I take it in my hand and continue to walk forward. All along the road I continually read characters. If, as it is said, the form of pictographic characters was originally taken from real objects, then each one of them ought to correspond to every other. So now they can be identified with even more real objects. This kind of interest can be sustained for a long time, and it can only be obtained while in the vast countryside. Time rushes ever by, minute by minute making distinctions between puzzling details. This is the way that I pass my days. I am satisfied by this state of being and its sensations, and with this bliss that is so difficult to express. This bliss is as though stolen.

I know that those things that cannot be endured will eventually disappear, but I also understand that a person is extremely stubborn. For that reason, wise people throughout history have been unimaginably happy once they have let go of themselves. Everything comes to pass so uneventfully, always renewing like the sun. There is inexhaustible content in that renewal.

5. In a few relatively straightforward writings I have noticed that we are invited over and over again to take note of the following idea: Solitude is exceptionally beautiful. Here, the concept of solitude has a certain amount of ambiguity. In a person's inner heart where the spirit resides, probably there is already no way of making it any more precise. It likely refers to the state of being alone---naturally it matters not whether this is a physical or a spiritual aloneness. An animal, or a tree, all can be alone. Solitude is a result of being difficult to classify. Is it beautiful? If it truly is, then people have no need of frantically avoiding it. At the very least, it is not as beautiful as people fantasize. If it has some modicum of beauty, then it is only a kind of desolate beauty.

For a person to be in that kind of situation he must have been coerced. The reason why contemporary man is so solitary and alone is because he has a "spirit" that continually grows. If you want to eliminate that fear of solitude, you have to cut off its roots. But this is futile; so long as man goes on living, the fear will grow. To feign ordinariness may

have some appeal, but if you want to cast a man back into the ordinary, you will inevitably encounter strong resistance from him.

To linger in solitude is full of poetry, but extremely few people have noticed the pain involved. Solitude is usually a matter of the connection between one mind and another being blocked. From the time human beings are born, they are faced with innumerable secrets. In the case of each and every person, those secrets do not diminish with time, they increase many times over. They come from everywhere, and they come from people themselves. Therefore, the awkwardness of being mocked and confused will forever accompany them. For that reason everyone consciously and unconsciously struggles for release--an inexpressible terror leads them to lose their composure.

In my eyes, solitude is frightful, but to throw away one's self respect is even more frightful. How can one maintain the latter, yet preserve the freshness of his mind? Perhaps one really cannot "have one's cake and eat it too." Perhaps it is a puzzle that awaits a solution. In the course of the long, long wait, is there anything that can substitute for inner thoughts and personal dialogues? I have discovered that the soul is capable of dividing itself into parts. The different parts can even engage in dialogues. But it goes without saying, in order to hear this dialogue an unusual amount of tranquility is required.

Just as a seed that is cast down must find a piece of naked soil, I follow my direct impulses to flee toward the earth. It produces everything, can respond to everything, and fulfils everything. Because I have been starved and abused for so long, I chose September, the season when the crops have grown to maturity, to make my long flight back to the wilderness. Then the fields are full of produce. Because of the plenitude and abundance, the myriad living things exude an irrepressible joy. Everything is pleasing and good. The deep green plants, the flowers that have not yet withered, the black soil and yellow sand---all are fresh and vivid. Here, in the midst of all this, the anxieties which invade and wound are reduced as never before. All that arises in my heart are reliance and grace.

This is a world in which one mutters to oneself; it is the most generous world that I have yet found. Here the spirit is least disturbed. Being here, I finally realized that solitude isn't only the loss of the facility to communicate. Even more formidably, in face of repeated intrusions, it is the loss of the right to speak to oneself. This is the final right.

It is for this small gain that I have been willing to travel thousands of miles, and have even, for a time, become "able to endure." I calm myself down and settle in for a stay. Only then do I come face to face with my own good fortune. I am simply overjoyed. In this place I have come to understand a matter very close to hand: In contrast to us, the mountain ranges and the earth are a background, which have not changed for millions of years. It is as though we have been set before a kind of perpetuity. Leaning against it we can, as much as we dare, enter a deep somniloquy. Then, with the dawn, we will always be awakened by that persistent, far-off call.

Where can any place comparable to this be found in the realm of the quotidian? This is the center of the world. It is the place psychologically closest to the maternal. Here you can tell all you want of the wanderings of yesteryear. As the years and months of misery have already passed away, a man finally welcomes his parents. You did not weep, for you have become so used to hiding your tears. Ultimately, your sensibilities have become so acute that with a light, quick glance you can see right through the common. The perpetual and the temporary, the empty and the real, all appear clear and distinct. You have discovered that it is not as difficult as you had imagined to seek those people and things that are like you. All that are straightforward, calm, and pure are the same as you. It is most probable that not all of these will speak the same language, nor necessarily communicate with a voice. Those that are of the same kind are all children who Mother Earth cares for in the same manner. They drink at the same breast and give off the same milky smell.

In the long, warm tranquil nights, you are bathed in the fragrance of the wilds. Reminiscing and musing freely, you dispel your loneliness. Your breast full of tender emotions also finds a place to reside. I become yielding and understanding. I attempt to forgive those things that in the past I have never forgiven, and I also seek to investigate things at the very root of my nature. The sounds of the night are endlessly complex and profuse. I contemplate in their midst. They even inspire me to once again seek out the mystery of words. With my intonation and voice I tried to imitate the things of the wilderness, trying to convey their inner expression. The small birds chirp; “Jiu, Jiu.” Not only does the word very closely imitate their song, the character ‘autumn’ (qiu) leads us to think of autumn; the autumn sky, and autumn wilds. From the “mouth” radical in the character we think of autumn’s mouth and vocal chords---these are brought together. There is also the sougning of the wind in the fields, the echoes, and the light that wanders about in the depths of night. How should these things be formed into words and entered into the understanding of modern people? This is not just an experience replete with interest; it almost comes closer to a kind of meaning and an objective. In the silent nightscape I find the meaning of sounds and their secret code. It is almost like holding the throbbing pulse of the myriad things in my hand.

A feeling of mutual support and complicity expels the mind’s unease. I exist and live together with all things in the wilderness, together experiencing and accepting. By the end of the night I have heard more than once the anguished cries of the myriad creatures in that instant when they give birth. I thus have received the feelings spun from the confluence of desolation and excitement, and have let them steel me.

It is well that these things do not only remain in the sensations. After having transcended the boundary of subjectivity, they can truly and genuinely be touched.

6. Because I have, to a very great extent, cast off the loneliness of life, I am able to withdraw from my pessimism. From now on my singing will not only comfort myself, it will be used to arouse. More and more, I am certain that it is a way of recording and not merely a diversion, or an amusement. There is not even time to feel sorrow. That being the case, everything that I do will evaporate like the morning dew. What I want to warn

people to take note of are only a few very ordinary things. Because the elements that those things embody will cause people to be shocked, in the end they will never be forgotten. What I focus upon is not only people; it is everything that cannot be separated from people. I have never dwelt exclusively on hardship, but can never lose that intense sensitivity. What I offer is only testimony to a certain state of being.

This is probably already enough. And it is necessary. Here I only follow a principle of simplicity, that of naturally despising the opportunist. To the left and right I am accompanied by the real and true, and at this moment it is not necessary to seek recognition. My voice is exactly the same as the sighing of the wind in the grass and the chirping of insects. It is identical and equal to the noise of the wild plains. There is no need for an independent singer here; in fact, it would not be possible. I must use all my powers simply to achieve fidelity, in order to gain the right to sing by their side.

I came completely empty-handed and the wilderness took me for a destitute brother. We rubbed shoulders, staying close together day and night. I merged myself with the wilderness. Ordinary eyes had no way of distinguishing me. Our breathing combined to form the wind. The gusts blew from the stalks of grain and through the river valleys, then returned to our midst. This wind washes away my fatigue and weariness as it enfolds our song in unison. Can anyone distinguish my voice from the chorus? I have become the voice of nature. This is the first time in my life that I have felt so proud.

The world into which I have cast myself brims with life force. Here is a never-ceasing metamorphosis, perishing and birth. News of these things is covered by the falling leaves and seeps into the mud below.

Things newly born shine brightly in the first rays of sunlight. Here, ten thousand changes take place in an instant, and as light and shadow mingle; I only draw my heartstrings tighter and allow my thoughts to melt slowly away. A cacophony rises all around, and there are endless disturbances----this is my native place. I follow the Spirit of the native place closely, following as it roams over every ditch and gully. My singing sometimes reverberates in the depths of my heart, and sometimes it floats with the wind. The Spirit invisibly controls the singing, or perhaps the unified voices bring the Spirit to life. I am charged with being the incompetent secretary of this place. I write down all that I hear and recite. Stupid and befuddled, I dare not fall behind a single step.

I can see that my limbs have been entangled by green vines. Lichens have grown over my forehead. This is not death, it is life. I can be a tree, thrusting down my roots to become a sensory organ on this place. From now on my sighs will no longer be my own, nor will I be in control of them. A man has perished and a tree has been born. Life still remains, but there has been a qualitative transformation.

In this way the sounds and harmonies that I myself have produced remain in another world. I seek out those like me because I love them. I love all that is pure and beautiful. The result of my search is that I have been transformed into a tree. The wind and rain will continuously comb and wash me; the frost and snow will be my make-up. But I have no

loneliness. Since loneliness is a concept from the other side, it issues forth another kind of smell. From here on there will only be the self knowledge of a tree. There will also be its experiences and sensations. Some people may understand the songs sung by the tree and notice the sounds made by the leaves in the wind. However the tree itself has no such expectations. Each and every tree is born and lives this way. Its greatest desire is probably to hold tightly to the soil all its life.

7. As the years go by I increasingly have noticed the mystical power of art. Only in art have so many of the secrets of nature congealed. So I consider that glory has always belonged to those poets who can most move people's hearts. Humans have always followed the road of art---to contact the riddle of time, to verify the mysteries of life. All that is in nature can be set in motion and brought into people's field of vision by the hand of art. Its relationship to people is the most singular. People are fascinated by art because they are fascinated with themselves, and fascinated by all that this world shows to them. A person who has grown up healthily has no way of choosing his relationship to art.

But in reality a choice does exist. I consider that I have had a choice. There can be many explanations relating to art. This is inevitable. Nonetheless, I have always considered that placing art in the position of choice is a regression.

I once made a choice, so I have also had a regression. The manner of redressing this is perhaps to embrace tightly the result of that choice in search of the soul's sublimation. The more the material lust of this world burgeons, the more calm I become. So, as for art, why should I worry that the best it will give me is an opportunity to abide alone. I have woven many layers of concern: On the one hand I hope that all people will be engaged in art, on the other hand I do fear that its sacredness and purity will be tarnished. In my view, things will only continue to proceed towards desolation until they reach an extreme. This leaves me only to pray silently, for the protection of art, and for the saintliness which I have acknowledged. Naturally, this is not possible.

I once dreamed of a silversmith laboring away under the light of a candle, I especially remember the ring of white hair that flashed on top of his head. It was deep in the night, and the middle of that night was the glow of a candle that could be scooped up in the palms of the hands. . . . What is art? What is labor? Were they born and raised together? That morning I exhorted myself . . . Never leave labor behind--even though I had never considered doing that, nor had I ever thought of leaving.

The quality of art and that of religion are not entirely the same; but both require that the heart is sincere and earnest. When the frenzied waves of greed and acquisitiveness break the land to pieces and you have no choice but to row off in a boat, what will there be left in your heart? There will be nothing but a sense of ardor and loyalty. Those things that hunger and death cannot wrest away are the only things that are truly precious. How many have sung the praises of material desire, saying that it has created the world. True enough, it has created an evil world; it has also destroyed a world--a tranquil world. Gradually I have come to understand: If you want to preserve abundance forever, the rate at which you accumulate things is not important. What is important is to be able to

accumulate. Honest laborers and artists together have discovered the sorrow of history: it is “to be unable.”

The years in a person’s life are so much like the seasons that are in constant rotation. Sometimes there is a gorgeous blossoming, at other times all is washed completely bare. Then everything must then begin all over again. In seeking constant and perpetual support, what people found was this piece of earth upon which they stand. Millions of years of secret history are mixed in this soil which has given birth to both fresh flowers and poisonous mushrooms. What means have we of understanding and expressing these indescribable things? Even if we obtain only the right to draw close, what is there to rely upon? It is still art. It is still that mysterious power.

The wild earth which gives birth to the myriad things accepts the artist. The wild earth can also refuse, and refuse resolutely and thoroughly. Things that are forced upon it can never gain a foundation. The soil is like a good artist in that it looks profoundly still, but in fact its breast is filled with ardor. An artist can appear to be like green flames, or like the emerald vines blazing there on the ground.

In the end, only a pile of ashes can remain. It is so temporary, even in this respect the artist seems like the emerald vines. Nonetheless, he at least uses this method of drawing close to the torrid earth.

8. I have asked: Where does the spirit of an intellectual originate? What is its source? For a very long time this originally simple question has been buried under layers and layers of paper. Naturally, I cannot deny that the literary world that has permeated my heart and mind has incubated a certain kind of spirit. But I have still discovered that what leads me to lament has come from nature, from a vast and desolate world. Perhaps this kind of lament exists in any time and place---We have too few intellectuals. Their emblems are not simply education and accomplishments; the most important attribute is the quality of the soul. True knowledge should reach the sublime. Those who make use of the technical arts in hopes of success must at the same time also make themselves grow into intellectuals.

Vulgarizing the concept of “Intellectual” is a travesty. It will bring forth uncommitted frauds, muddle-headed scholars and artists who have sold out their integrity. Sometimes these people do not necessarily hate hard work, but without exception they all have an extreme fear of poverty. They concentrate on their external appearance, have no inner sense of order, and are most adept at following current trends. Has anyone seen an exception? Who has found such a rarity? In face of power and advantage each is more devious than the last, as though they were approaching the end of the world. I would prefer to spend my life sweating and groveling in the dust, while remaining far from them.

I have been a professional writer, but the highest ambition of my life is to become an author.

People need a distant focal point, like a far away star. I walk towards it, wearing shabby clothes and eating frugally, concentrating and disciplining myself. I hope that a hand in the darkness will open the gates of wisdom for me. Compared to my objective and the training that I pursue, I appear to be so insignificant and humble. I am pale and powerless, trivial and lazy, unable to undertake self-examination. But, for the growth of my spirit, I ensure that my sincerity, my simplicity, and my benevolent behavior never leave me. I ensure that my courage and righteousness become more concrete and clear. In that way I can also be a companion to the long, silent process of erosion and attrition.

On the wild plain where I cast myself, in the midst of the millions of living things, labor makes me profoundly still. I have achieved this state of being: I steadfastly maintain my faith in the meaning of work and discovery. What I write down with my own hand is only immature and crude, but it is work with no affinity for common eyes. These words that I write are for you, for him and for her. I love you all. For you I respectfully submit this work.

9. Because of a fleeting fascination, I set out. My aspirations are simple and yet indistinct: to seek the untamed land. First I step onto my native ground, and from there make the first step forward. I try to feel out its boundaries, gazing out through the curtain of mist. I discard everything and bolt towards it in order to blend into it. Trudging, pursuing, asking--What is the untamed land, and where is it after all? Does the untamed land also include the completely boundless world of my sensations?

I cannot stop my searching . . .

Zhang Wei, 1992