

HELEN MOORE

## Lament for Baiji, Yangtze River Dolphin

Our People's Republic's opened like a giant  
red flower – head turned to the West –  
and ever since our world's been going sour.

Along the Yangtze a filthy stream  
of traffic pours – dredgers, barges, tourist  
boats tossing our sampans aside.

They say it's the way forward,  
but this great river's giving up the ghost –  
and with no Fish or Shrimps to eat,  
our River Dolphin's vanished.

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On the fifth day of the fifth month  
our hut inspired hopeful aromas;  
and women came with scarlet thread to tie  
Bamboo leaves round homemade dumplings.

Pang was rosy-cheeked, scolding me  
for my despondent moods. As usual we'd honour  
Qu Yang, our patriotic poet – his 'Lament for Ying'  
and drowning in the river.

Legend tells that fishermen threw dumplings in  
to tempt the River Dragons from the poet's body;  
but we believe our sleek Baiji came clicking,  
whistling him away.

*Cheer up, Huang! Pang urged me.  
Soon young men with boats and drums  
will sound the Dragon's heart.*

Soon after Duan Wu the Sun attains its peak  
and we need the rains to plant our rice;  
last year they didn't come – for months the soil  
was bones boiled and set like glue.

*But this is Duan Wu in Golden Pig year,  
Pang persisted;  
Dragons will surely bring the rains!*

Father smoked and watched her wrap the sticky parcels,  
his face a haze of bluish mist;  
he remembered the Great Leap Forward,  
how Mao denounced the tales that kept our Dolphin safe.  
Superstitious maybe, but old men like Father  
would never hunt them for their flesh. *Those who hurt Baiji  
are always cursed*, he said.

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Now Pang is patching trousers –  
her sewing brings a little income;  
she sighs and glances up. In the wintry light  
her face is drawn, aged.

My good wife looking like a stranger!  
I search my thoughts for something  
to restore her cheerful smile –  
a little joke, a reminiscence?

But hunger's gnawing at my belly  
and I've no strength to break the silence;  
this year even Golden Pig was out of luck –  
the rains arrived, but heavier than we'd ever known.

How long we'll survive  
lies with the gods – perhaps no longer  
than our flower can  
with growth devouring its heart?