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Rainy Night in Linqing, Spring Rain, and Evening Meditations by Yao Nai

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Andrew Gudel
Rainy Night in Linqing

Yao Nai
臨清雨夜

Yesterday our little boat set out on the river's flood.
On the same boat were wine we brought and all the very best guests.
Autumn sounds on both banks, though the maples were still green.
At midnight, the bright moon made the river's water white.
Wandering friends—close their whole lives—
Will recall tonight, when scattered across the land.
The Zhang River flows east while the Wen River runs clear;
In the cold rain a lonely sail gathers many sorrows.

Andrew Gudel
Spring Rain

Yao Nai
春雨

Evening comes and the east wind ceases;
I close my book when the window goes dark.
A spring rain comes, rustling,
and the room gets a little cold.
Just then, a bird perches and the fluttering sound
admonishes me to be humble.

Andrew Gudel
Evening Meditations

Yao Nai
夕懷

The ridges to the west draw down the slanting sun,
The last rays of evening are just like the dawn's earliest light.
The window darkens in the winter sun,
And with difficulty I put down my book.
The wind along the eaves sighs;
The fallen leaves flutter on the stone steps.
A murder of crows comes and perches on the branches,
And caws repeatedly from the forest's edge.
All things are interdependent;
Who is the host? Who is the guest?
It's certainly foolish to chase what's before us;
How can it be right to explore what is past?
In the darkness I raise my head and say nothing;
The cold moon is suited to the still night sky.

Commentary

Yao Nai (1731–1815) was born in Tongcheng in the modern-day Anhui Province of China. In 1763, he passed the Qing Dynasty’s highest imperial examination and achieved the rank of *Jinshi*. He served in several high-level administrative positions and was compiler of the *Siku Quanshu*, an encyclopedic collection of all books in China at the time. He is considered one of the early voices in the establishment of the Tongcheng School of Writing, which he helped spread by teaching at various academies during the second half of his life. The Tongcheng School stressed natural, straightforward prose and harmony between a written work’s theme and form.

Yao Nai was an expert on ancient and classical texts and his poems abound in allusions to earlier poems and poets; sometimes he also plays with their themes. For example, the line “Autumn sounds on both banks, though the maples were still green” in the poem “Rainy Night in Linqing” is modeled after a similar line in the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai’s “Setting Off Early for Baidi City.” Yet the two poems are mirror images. Both describe journeys by boat, but Yao sets his at night and there is rain; Li Bai sets his at dawn with brilliant morning clouds. Though Yao’s poems are enjoyable in and of themselves, for an audience that was familiar with these earlier poets, the scattered literary allusions and modification of themes would have added additional layers of meaning and emotional resonance.

In translating the poems, I tried to keep the English straightforward and let the images speak for themselves, reflecting Yao’s simple—and sometimes spare—style.