



# Ye Xian

Matthew Francis

In a pocket in the limestone  
waking to the drip of morning,  
from the cavern roof above her,

Ye Xian, leftover daughter  
of the chief of an ingrown village,  
hears her stepmother's voice rebounding

from wall, overhang and buttress,  
past the toothy jaws of tunnels,  
every word a ringing headache,

back again as soon as it's faded.  
Dressing quickly by damp firelight,  
she winces barefoot over rubble,

till the glare of outside blinds her  
and a wind from all directions  
binds her clothing to her body.

She must pick through alpine clutter  
to fill waterskins from sources  
chilled and purified by remoteness,

struggle up the scratch of footpath  
round the shoulder of the mountain  
for the bent trees' wind-dried firewood

on the wind's precarious doorstep.

That's her, trembling on the surface,  
as she dips the skin to fill it.  
Water-wrinkles spread across her,

and a shadowy finger, rising,  
starts another set of circles,  
pokes out, shakes itself and swivels,

cruises through her; red fin hoisted,  
staring up with golden eye-beads,  
mouth emitting vowels of bubble.

Who can tell what chilly feelings  
pulse in that brass-plated body?  
Does she think a fish can love her?

Three weeks later she is scattering  
rice and chicken-scrap on the surface,  
as her friend rises to to greet her,

lounges, now long as a forearm,  
chin supported on the foreshore,  
like the elbow of a drinker.

Are they talking? In whose language?  
As she crouches, the black curtain  
of her hair falls round them, screening

their amphibious communion.

Cavern gossip says a monster  
toothier than the mouths of tunnels  
lurks beneath their drinking water,

longer than a man, and armoured  
in many-tinted clankless metal,  
hand-sized scales garnished with weed,

says the firewood girl has fed it  
to rice-swollen, looming vastness,  
talks to it in hair-fringed darkness,

and the stepmother hears the whispers.  
The mountain sky is ragged roses  
as she picks through alpine clutter,

but the tarn's lacquered with midnight,  
no lights in it but the watcher's  
eyes as bulbous-gold as Venus.

What it sees against the porcelain  
famille-rose rice bowl of daybreak  
is the vase-shape that means woman,

rice and chicken-scraps and nuzzling.  
One last time it lumbers upward,  
beaches on the rasping shoreline,

meets the knife held in her hand.

Frying sesame and ginger  
fills the cavern with its perfume.  
Fishy sweetness underlies it.

Fresh leviathan's strangely delicate,  
fluffy-white as angel feathers.  
You could eat a dozen bowlfuls,

while Ye Xian weeps by the water  
for her friend who never rises  
to the patter of her rice-grains.

Up above, the cloudscape flowers  
into a chrysanthemum splendour.  
Something more than sun is shining.

At its heart a straggling figure's  
lowered to her puppet-fashion,  
ancient, like a shrivelled foetus.

Ye Xian, dig in the dunghill,  
for the fish's crystal skeleton.  
Scrape it clean of clinging matter.

Rearrange it in your grotto.  
Honour it with the smoke of joss-sticks,  
muttered prayers, and earn its blessings:

pearls, jade, rice, silk dresses, emeralds.

In the grand hall of the mountain  
smoky quartz glints in the torchlight,  
shadows cross a cascade of limestone,

slide around the white formations,  
dripstone, flowstone, frostwork, moonmilk,  
ribbons, broomsticks, worm-clumps,  
cave-pearls.

All the villagers of the caverns,  
got up in their mineral lustres,  
rose quartz, topaz, opal, amethyst,

dance to two-stringed catgut fiddle,  
bells and bamboo flute and dulcimer;  
picking melody from the echoes.

One dancer in gold-leaf slippers  
startles them like blue-green lightning  
in her dress of kingfisher feathers.

Puzzled mutterings of the step-kin.  
Can it be the firewood skivvy  
skimming over the rubbled dancefloor?

Then she's gone, her iridescence  
leaving a faint streak in the dimness.  
Later someone finds a slipper

wedged between two stalagmites.

Pearl-foam swathes an island kingdom,  
merchants trading near the harbour.  
One offers a gold-leaf slipper

to the officers of the palace.  
What use is a single slipper?  
If we had the woman from it ...

Emissaries pick through the clutter,  
inquiring at the cavern doorways.  
Only one girl fits the slipper,

fills the cave with blue-green lightning.  
There's a palanquin to take her,  
and another for the fish-bones.

Kingfisher lady of the palace!  
Every day the husband offers  
smoke and prayers to the skeleton's  
casket

and his strong-room fills with gemstones,  
gleams with minerals and metals,  
till the magic is exhausted,

and he buries it on the seashore.  
One day someone finds the casket,  
wrestles with the breakers for it,

leaves the fish-bones to their element.

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**Matthew Frances**