

# Sestina for a Father

I don't know much about it anyway,  
the self-professed king who handed over  
his part of the Three Kingdoms to an idiot  
son, the tyrant who slew his warhorse  
to feed his dying troops, the general whose main  
battalion burned, decades flying into the air like water.

Yet I never saw your eyes water  
when the farm boys, charging, yelled away,  
their scrawny arms the force behind the main  
assault, their fire-lit arrows sent over  
to pierce the laughter of the gloating king, whose victory horse  
must now sit quiet in the stall, idle as an idiot.

I do not want to be the idiot, father.  
I do not want to be the one to watch you water  
plants in little clay pots, you who rode your horse  
giddy towards mountains. You say  
this illness is nothing, just some pain to get over.  
You watch melodramas from the couch, hunched in your domain.

All onscreen believe that whoever could get a certain man  
on their side would unite the Kingdoms. Idiots.  
Though what tragic joy lay in that wise man's eyes, when all was over,  
to say he could have done nothing more, nothing to water down  
the terror of a child-king who shrank from war, if his father's away  
and dead. Wisdom and goodness ruined by a boy who played horse.

Even if I screamed my voice hoarse,  
father, I could not say it—these mangled manes,  
these stories broken down into madness. Away from you,  
I know nothing, least of all a charging river, one that nursed idiots  
and heroes. I know nothing of waters  
old and depthless. I clap my hands when the show is over.

When all this is done, when all this is over,  
I will buy you some land and a horse  
to lead around fields and drink from cool well water.  
I will watch you there, free from harm by the main house  
I cannot go back to. I will be that idiot  
and I know it, at that shrouded bank when you ride away,  
laughing. And perhaps it's easier that way, to be that idiot  
not knowing when things are over, than to stand on that main  
bank without so much as a horse to ride into the water.

*Ting Gou*



Ms. Gou is a member of the Class of 2017 at University of Michigan. Her poem won third prize in the 2015 *Pharos* Poetry Competition. Ms. Gou's e-mail address is: [tgou@med.umich.edu](mailto:tgou@med.umich.edu).

Illustration by Laura Aitken.