

1959

## A Tale for Cynthia

Burton Raffel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Raffel, Burton. "A Tale for Cynthia." *New Mexico Quarterly* 29, 4 (1959). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol29/iss4/15>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## A TALE FOR CYNTHIA

They said of young Wang, when the Emperor's glove  
 Slapped across his shoulder and in nineteen southern  
 Provinces, unhappy sucklers of bandits  
 And civil servants, men began to shave  
 Their daughters' heads and carry buried  
 Silver into the mountains, in terror of what  
 A poet could do if governors possessing no talent  
 Had left them only every other grape and taxed  
 Even the flowing of water—they said,  
 Where his poems were known, that Wang  
 Had too much thirst to drink from a slender spring,  
 Meaning to say that poets who govern  
 Have shed the scholar's shabby robes  
 For the public lust that is everyman's pride.  
 Only the third of his seven daughters,  
 Who slept next to his door and wrote,  
 In the mornings, the dreams he had saved,  
 Could have told how every night's vision trembled in beauty  
 Of words no pen had ever conceived, brushed in wonder  
 Across unwinding scrolls his hands trembled  
 To touch, in the cold morning when courtiers  
 And beggars and eager officials already pulled  
 The brass and iron knocker pinned to his gate.  
 Only his wife, and later his six grown sons,  
 Could have told why Wang, governor of eighty  
 Provinces, honored with rice from the Emperor's bowl  
 And soon to be regent of China itself, boarded  
 A sampan and drifted like a lazy fish  
 Along the Yellow River, collecting leaves  
 And burning his face in the sun and staring,  
 Unable to weep, at a chest of virgin parchment  
 Hung beside his bed, unopened, unsoiled,  
 As ready to be enscribed with careful reports  
 As, five weeks before, when the porters carried it up  
 From the dock and Wang, smiling and silent,  
 Followed them like the tail of a dragon parade.  
 His daughter's record was found, a decade ago,  
 Lining a box of tea; his wife's story

Was whispered down a hundred years  
 And is worthy of even a critic's belief.  
 His sons were honorable men, his daughters  
 Married well, and when Wang died, bearing  
 The crescent ruby of semi-godhead upon his heart  
 And the crimson band of every power around  
 His wrist, the old professors were careful not to exhume  
 His youthful indiscretions, the wild, inebriate  
 Poems the Emperor chose to forgive.  
 Only his poems seem really dead, thrust  
 By timid hands beneath an unknown pile  
 Of parchment, buried deep in the palace vaults.  
 I hope, some day, to find them,  
 Spread them for all to read how Wang  
 Could rhyme and sing with no-man's pride  
 And a heart so full that he needed neither court  
 Nor jewels nor the sacred scraps from the Living Moon God's plate.

—BURTON RAFFEL

## INTERNATIONAL GEOPHYSICAL YEAR

### I

We harness this year  
 The galactic simoons of space . . .  
 In forge of our hydrogen and shrapnel success  
 We scaffold manned bullets:  
 Challenge to much fabled and fictive discs.  
  
 Peace beyond reach,  
 We infringe the firmament We  
 The foragers,  
 Cradled by such our speeded funeral We'll  
 Land our shells  
 Abreach the aerie esplanades:  
  
 Take heed our threats! savannahs of the moon.