

## **Poems by Yang Lian**

**Translated from the Chinese by Mabel Lee**

“Winter Garden,” “Grafton Bridge,” “The Game of Lies,” “Dead Poet’s City,” “Cruel Children,” “The Garden This Afternoon,” “Incidents,” “Hospital,” “Dead Land” and “Valley,” from *Yang Lian’s Works, 1982–1997: Where the Sea Stands Still* (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1998).

“At a Right Angle to Paper,” “Harmonica,” “Ten Years,” “Record of Twin Cities,” “Clouds,” and “Taking a Stroll,” from *Yang Lian’s New Works, 1998-2002: Notes of a Happy Ghost* (Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2003).

## Winter Garden

1

Trees frozen red in snow as if wearing tattered wind jackets  
Snow crunches underfoot  
As night rushes by with newly soled shoes

Goats fear the loneliness and for their own ears  
Transform their bleating into wailing

On the road a cow has just given birth  
Is covered in whip marks and lies panting in mud and blood

Streetlights are on early and lovers dark like rocks  
Stand there with hazy faces against a metallic spiritual bed  
The field mouse is a weary nurse and furtively  
Sneaks through a wound in the garden to dream  
Flowers pale red flesh preserved underground  
Like when a child dies there is always a young ghost

Stars not fully formed lock us behind an iron fence

2

Those who distrust language the most are poets  
In white snow roses wilt at birth  
And flames are far away from a pair of chilly hands  
Winter is busy like a hardworking editor  
I am snipped by the sunlight  
And bend to smell the worsening stench of my corpse  
In the north wind of one person the garden died long ago

Existing for ghosts and finally returning to ghosts  
Blue music of tree and tree arises from the sheer loneliness  
So the same big snowfall twice falls from my shoulders  
Covering the garden I am forgotten  
Trudging up to the road I become a mistake  
And like a hoarse throat in the light of the deserted street  
Chant withered words bearing witness to many years

Those with a fetish for corpses love to stroll in the winter garden  
Those with a fetish for ruins enjoy  
Plotting to drown a kitten in a ditch  
Crushing its head like smashing a walnut  
They must have been children who had come into the garden

Children excel in trampling flowers

Even the last day is false a scorched wooden post  
Pokes slanting out of the ground like a crocodile's snout  
Sky dark as if asleep during the day  
Fish skeletons spewed up by the sea stab at us  
In dream the fish being scaled alive are stabbed  
Are alive under a moving blade

Each body of flesh sinks until too weak to look back

Touch everything tangible does not exist  
Yet a malignant cancer deep within grows imperceptibly  
A pregnant black woman envelops a raped springtime  
A sea of eyes split tree trunks asunder  
Swans' necks arch into stark white underwater traps  
Fragmenting the world through the cracked compound eye method  
We all become blind ghostly silhouettes in white snow  
And exposed to icy winds  
Suffer the pain of bones sprouting

Until the garden is shamed into bright colours  
It will be thrashed all life by an undiscriminating season

### Grafton Bridge

As you cross the bridge the graveyard below draws close  
Pine trees raise their suspicious faces  
A sea of the dead with the stench of iron sheeting  
Rust coloured sunlight circles about  
Like an old dog sniffing at you  
A dog's eye staring scenery on the bridge is unusually clear

Sky a withered dead volcano a crimson fist  
On a cheap headstone a drop of stale blood  
Clouds bring together all of yesterday's storms  
But are sullied by bird claws

The handrail brings you home transparent windows are open  
You are crossing the bridge at home  
A whole city is located in a sickroom  
Green weeds link so many footsteps  
Rock owners under rock roofs close in  
Iron owners in iron corridors close in  
Hallucinations are seen death has no need for speed  
Where you are headed is still the point at which you turn old  
The dead on the grass look down to you it is the same distance

But as if manacled with glass handcuffs you must return  
To inspect and repair each bridge pylon of today's crimes  
A child running wildly amongst a flock of snow-white seagulls  
Suddenly stands still to shout out because of the stars  
To weep loudly because of the sharp lingering pain of black night

### The Game of Lies

When we tell lies tiger stripes disturb the black night  
Road cruelly betrayed by streetlights  
Lies replacing pedestrians

We stroll but an ant charges into forbidden zones of sleep talk  
Must understand fingers  
Moon's dead weight at each setting  
And foolish cries for help from some small throat

No a person never lies to himself  
It is only words playing with him  
Playing at being asleep we dream of the sea  
Playing with the sea we drift to another island  
Going ashore when hungry  
We raise or butcher parrots or monkeys  
And again turn into fierce rocks

But we say nothing and in saying nothing  
Arms become crocodiles snapping at each other's tail in dead water

We believe those self-deceiving words to be  
Real the last day contained in each line of poetry  
Preserves a face in a mirror smashed many years ago  
Long earlobes  
Hang on an iron hoop rolled by a boy

A lifetime of suns rolling to the abrupt slope of a black night

When words gush out a mute is born  
Demented silence in the mute's heart  
A tiger's inner silence as it pounces on a gazelle  
Flesh is torn without even the rustle of paper  
We have always been mute  
And so are manipulated by lies

### **Dead Poet's City**

Not only those who have lived can die  
Those names buried in silence all through life  
Subscribe to silence in this city you have dismantled  
An empty street pretends to be a funeral procession  
Moonlight hard like iron  
Bones clanking in iron hands  
What is outside the window is long forgotten little drums beat  
Each word deleted by you in life returns to delete you

Unsparingly deletes savagely deletes  
World deleted specimens of faces are closer and clearer  
Eyes deleted eyesight polishes glass edges  
Carves a paper bird with delicate lines  
Like the one you saw smashed  
Crumpled discarded on a rotting manuscript in the corner  
Your final death is already familiar  
An old house waiting to shift out dead skeletons

### Cruel Children

Children dance in a circle around a drop of the mother's blood  
Their snowy white arms are born to hit  
Weary eyes all around

First tooth planted in a pink field  
As a low-hanging walnut is cracked  
They watch the mother's twitching face smile

Smiling splashing water in the sky  
Bending on black nights inlaid with no sleep  
When children do not sleep the world must also be awake

Wild skiing on long scratches  
Listening intently for the newest command  
River more transparent weeping more visible

Hostility flows increasingly like unformed flesh  
A bloodstained lipstick cannot be washed clean  
Children dancing

With mothers worn on their feet  
Like favourite toys to be wilfully destroyed  
Like tasty hands untiringly dragged into the future

When they use deathly cruel silence to frighten the sun  
Angels and green flies join hands to clap  
A bean is familiar with bolting the last door

### **The Garden This Afternoon**

This afternoon has always been that afternoon  
Flowers with the faces of bats laugh even more happily  
Hospital windows like the whites of the eyes of staring corpses

Afternoon seemingly fragmented  
Scent of flowers invited into the homes around

Ash swirling from chimneys turns more colourful  
The false teeth of angels are exposed  
Holding down age like holding down a skirt lifted by a wild wind  
With a laugh a cruel spring  
Another laugh and the sound lifts the garden to heaven  
Things not imagined will never be born

People living close to wounds detect smells  
Wounds drenched by rain split exude fragrance

A garden crams in all afternoons  
Bodies are decked with paper flowers paper the only decoration  
Bones shine black branches sprout bone-like nodes  
In the depths of corpses the petals of flowers gestate  
Worms crawl about under skin  
This loneliness is sweet and rancid there is always  
This loneliness when the soil of the heart is crumbled by roots

When each hospital has been gift-wrapped  
Wounds are bright and lush in the sunlight

Looking so real  
Cicadas keep drinking blood keep  
Creating heartless laughter from an empty shell  
And even happier gardens proliferate everywhere

Gradually disintegrating with the shrill cries of bats  
Subtle fragrances of an afternoon roll up the world  
Leaving not even wounds leaving only the swollen moon  
Still the colour of flesh still watching over an unblemished black night

## Incidents

You continue to emerge calmly from an incident  
One amongst many  
One day amongst many wasted months and years  
When rotting wilderness again removes your shoes  
Snow props you up on frozen red toes

On this day the sky is a sombre grey but with no sign of snow  
Only your chilliness from life to death  
The past is soundless leaves no footprints in the snow

Old clothing is always modest like the wooden bed of a corpse  
Sliding to the sea under another copulating couple  
A past incident can no longer generate other incidents  
A lifetime's mistakes are towering trees on a mountain  
White more distant than snow  
Bones emerge from you  
Days emerge from bones you are all  
Thrown behind yourselves  
Look upon many deserted moons

## Hospital

The lid closes    is your face also covered in nails  
Like constantly being spat upon in a lifetime of humiliation  
Has bleached this easy death

A hand cannot stroke its own pain  
The darkness of this night    is external to you  
You have rented four thin walls

Inside a cardboard carton listening to a river  
Inside a hollowed out skeleton    listening to a storm  
You wait for the next patient

Like another teardrop flying into your eye  
A piercing scream    strikes the streaky glass  
Becomes a happy shout    you savagely hammer at nails

### **Dead Land**

You need walls with nothing but the dawn  
The garden is a reflection of the inner mind forever departing  
You need those staring eyes  
You pick out the most easily forgotten pair  
And begin to forget

Fear you fear each day's freckle-faced loneliness  
Violence lasting from four to six o'clock  
Music leaves bones scraped clean  
Clanking in fields  
Nobody knows whether your ears are ringing right now

Nor do you know you only need the room to be empty  
With the masochism acquired in a lifetime  
You use the sunlight to glimpse the unattained real last day  
But for the sunlight there are no tears  
The garden's name yet unspoken is forgotten

## **Valley**

Arriving at darkness we see light at the foot of the valley  
Rocks stretching into the distance like the sky  
Suddenly snap like a shaky ladder  
Timid fingers bending to violent stars weep  
Turning us into cripples  
Deceiving our eyes

When light turns into living things we are dead  
Microscopic wriggling bodies of flesh  
Bore holes into us glow  
Moon like a person falling spread-eagled  
City lying on a bed lush with wrong perceptions  
Reading a morbid book front cover the sea  
Back cover the sound of hoofs treading in muddy water  
Traps always sensed when right underfoot

Only when distance vanishes do we touch the red flowing stream  
And use the wrinkles on rocks to display all the fears of the past

### **At a Right Angle to Paper**

At a right angle to paper you grasp  
A wisp of morning mist a tranquil tree on a grave  
Sky awakening in the bedroom  
Young women at odds naked frenzied stalk  
A daytime walnut destroys the evidence of the brain's crime  
Alcohol all year round sustains a headache  
Holding tight forks at a table sparkling with the sea  
The world puts eyes into mouths

A poem that has never been finished  
At a right angle to paper just written on an epitaph  
Is washed over by the river on floorboards  
Blood nailed up as a ladder with two frozen legs  
Is taken along to the crowds panic buying trash  
Another morning preserving the cruelty of clocks  
At a right angle to a derelict street it says  
This is not the last time for you to come down on paper

### **Harmonica**

The flowers under the chilly sky are grotesque  
Except for the lips river water  
Makes sculptures of tiny ears with a song  
Tongues of past events lick fastidiously into an empty space  
Half a note at a time rocks approach the shore but remain far away  
Spring inhales or exhales fish-bone pipes shine  
Who is it shaking someone's old map in the wind  
To make words vanish so that they are not lies

Like clouds the world resounds when blown  
As young green fingers learn the language of the ear  
Pain finds you lasts longer than the future  
Life so simple as if it is only this life  
River water flowing away a pale white fingernail  
At this instant thrusts deeper and deeper playing  
Restoring fingerprints to ancient silver with no skin  
And loving again the source of darkness in the sound box

### Ten Years

Time like a fish swims to its own taste  
Cliff not under your feet years  
Emptier than a word sea wall  
Sharp nipples suckle the storm  
Rocks are not there turned like a brass bolt you rust  
In the armpit of shining waves epitaph of a sunken ship  
Name swathed in fish scales  
Charges down a slope of flesh the art of stinging a jellyfish

This void called water turns sweet  
Is called old sunlight possesses the pull of a magnet  
Ten summers in your lungs  
Trim back the black water level of a haemorrhaging garden  
Reflections in the harbour dance upside down  
Striving to remember who had left you with a nature such as yours  
In the kitchen sculling a glass of sour self-brewed beer  
Is the same as pouring it out skeleton completes yet another zero

### **Record of Twin Cities**

Infinitely harder than granite pear blossoms  
Protracted busy tone on the telephone  
White like a ringing in the ears hangs up another spring bedroom  
Footsteps taken apart decorate a beautiful address  
Dry skating rink stores dead fragrances  
Person with the same name as you a naked body flying far away  
Is discharged on an alumina street ladder reaching the clouds  
Lust awakens another bout of all night rain

Spring strips away fertile underpants  
Pear tree unmoving climbs into a telephone book's  
Abstraction veranda in complete darkness  
Time difference unreels the silk cocoon of an inch thick past  
Sky separating into two small red moist parts  
Sucks the complex numbers of your skull  
An existence twice fabricated defiles your non-existence  
Pear blossoms coldly construct glass masks and swamps

### Clouds

Their time is it also like a big blob of sticky blood  
Their music stands hide the sky blue performers  
Lento and allegretto scour a veranda  
Bearing down upon the valley the sound of wind fills the theatre  
And the stage crowds with people rushing home

Homeless their loneliness fingers a glass eyeball  
Their heads have all flown from desolate white spines  
Imaginary boatman dreams of cliffs alarmingly close

It is a room flowers on the rented wardrobe chaotically fade  
At lunch wearing the island's velocity they see  
Animals on plates jumping from one side to another  
To be cut up seems to be misunderstood for having been present  
They use different plays to change dialect  
And blood and flesh butterfly wings on the menu are eaten  
Windows darken another border is stealthily crossed  
So borrow an address to heighten the anxiety in a letter

The person who forgets to post it keeps altering the water's surface  
Theatricality reduces the world  
To images barely daring to inhale and can be erased at will  
They transcend their own distance roll up the curtains  
Draw close to the secret part of life

### Taking a Stroll

Can goldfish in water sing of a city's rise and decline?  
A row of swans poke into their feathers by the river  
Are they making portraits of girls holding mirrors to themselves?  
The sound of the wind fills his strolling self  
            Led in the dark by a road  
Arriving at the marsh his feet sink down an inch  
Green spills over the embankment aware of the inevitability of winter  
A bout of rain makes the smashed knees of grasses kneel everywhere  
A cloud creates an eclipse  
He sees in the distant horizon the flickering of light and dark  
            Multiplying that night a wild goose called all night  
Arriving at this forgotten memory  
Gives the feeling of being gently swallowed  
Gives the feeling of becoming the valley a withered willow  
Exploding gold colours eject a womb that keeps giving birth to the sky  
            Listen to the wooden fence roaring in the wind  
            The days can only be fenced in by being nailed to death  
Reaching the sogginess of water and blood  
Drowning awaits future of café chatter  
Locking the door a city full of him holding cups that have gone cold  
            Like a breath that has been planted  
Walking on buried in the skeleton of the old iron bridge  
Unable to go further a big clump of dark red rusted bushes  
Forces itself into a window sunlight malevolently bursts forth  
Revealing the dank water level that has taken residence on his head  
            Strangled scenery appears  
            Dismantled in the darkness  
            Solitarily hanging stairs appear