

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

3

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 indiscriminating 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 soginess 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