

The Poetry of Yu Jian 于坚

Selections: 1983-1993

Yu Jian was born in 1954 in Ziyang, Sichuan province, but has lived most of his life in Kunming, Yunnan province. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, he participated in unofficial literary activities in Kunming, contributing poetry for journals and giving poetry readings. In 1983, by way of contributing to the Lanzhou-based journal *Same Generation* 同代, he made the acquaintance of the Nanjing poet Han Dong, and in 1985 Yu became one of the core contributors to the Han-edited *Them* 他们 poetry journal until the mid-1990s. Also during this time, several of Yu's poems were published in Sichuan's unofficial journals. Since the mid-1990s, Yu has been a frequent visitor to Europe and North America, and in recent years has seen a succession of his poetry collections officially published in China.

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Opus #39 [作品 39 号] 1983

During a time of crowded avenues
you went alone to Xinjiang
it's just as well that you're walking on open ground
you don't stand out in the crowd
now you can find out
if your blue jeans are durable
worn for three and a half years they still look new
you must remember that time
we spoke so frankly
but people were silent
you've never laughed at my ears
actually, in your heart it's clear
our lifetime struggle
is a desire to act like individuals
confronted by pretty females
we are forever at wit's end
not understanding oneself -- just how stupid can one be
there was a woman who came to see me
said it's a pity about you with your voice
by all rights you could be a baritone singer
sometimes I remember you've borrowed money from me
I can also stand by the main gate
recognizing those messed-up men
I know that one day you'll return
clutching three novellas and a bottle of strong liquor
you'll sit down on that rattan chair from Sichuan
and lecture me for two hours
as if the whole world were listening
occasionally you'll turn to look at yourself (in the mirror)
for a time happy at heart
later you'll stare at me, speechless for a while
and you'll go home alone clutching an empty bottle

The Tall Mountain [高山] 1984

The tall mountain casts its shadow at the world
the largest man is made to look small
among tall mountains a person must be sincere
a person feels that he walks before heroes
he doesn't speak afraid he'll lose strength
be honest like a black rock
like an eagle a young sharp-needed tree
only in this way can you be on the tall mountain
walking on its summit
tempests floods and lightening
all are the immortal power of the mountain
they smash at it
but the mountain also smashes them
they create the mountain
and it also creates them
on the tall mountain a person is alone
only the flat lands are jammed full of kitchen smoke
you need the patience of a seaman in the high mountains
the waves will not quiet down the port will not appear
between the pitch and the roll
you ascend to the mountain top
or sink into a chasm
never to see the horizon again in your lifetime
to see into the distance you must climb high
but from the top all you see are mountain tops
an uncountable number of higher peaks
you're silent you can only move on
no clear destination
in Yunnan many ordinary men and women
have reached many grand mountain peaks during their lives
and in the end have been buried among these stones

Number 6 Shangyi Street [尚义街六号] June 1984

Number 6 Shangyi Street
a green French-style house
Lao Wu's trousers are drying on the second floor
a shout a spectacled head is thrust out through the crotch
early each morning there's a long line-up
at the big public toilet next door
we usually present ourselves there at dusk
flocking into it like stinking canned fish
opening packs of cigarettes breaking out the worries of many days
unfolding the loneliness brought away from the sea of men
Yu Jian's painting is tacked on the wall
many people take exception to it
they only know van Gogh
Lao Ka's shirt crumpled up into a rag
is used by us to wipe fruit juice off hands
he's leafing through a book of pornography
later he has a love affair
they often arrive as a pair
they argue here they flirt here
one day they announce their separation
for a time, friends relax are happy
but the next day he sends out wedding invitations
everyone dresses immaculately and goes to the banquet
Zhu Xiaoyang's manuscript is invariably spread out on the table
his words at sixes and sevens
the bastard fixes a gaze on us like a policeman's
confronted by that pair of bloodshot eyes
afraid they'll look down on us if we say it's good
afraid they'll shoot out sparks if we say it's bad
we can only speak obscurely
like a fashionable poem
Li Bo's slippers are pressed down on Fei Jia's leather shoes
his feet wrapped in Lao Wu's pillow case
he's already made a name for himself he has a blue (writers union) membership card
he often lies in the bunk above us
telling us how we should wear shoes
how to piss to wash underwear
how to cook to sleep etcetera and so on
When he returned from Beijing in 1982
his manner was more profound than before
he spoke of literary intrigues
in the tone of a famous author

the tea is Lao Wu's the electricity meter is Lao Wu's
the floor is Lao Wu's the neighbors are Lao Wu's
the daughter-in-law is Lao Wu's the stomach medicine is Lao Wu's
the phlegm the cigarette butts the air the friends are all Lao Wu's
in a city without prostitutes
male virgins speak confidently of women
occasionally skirts come and go
and everybody does up their buttons
at that age we all dreamed of getting under a skirt
but weren't willing to bend at the waist
Yu Jian wasn't famous yet
and was chided every time
he wrote down his many deeply meaningful pen names
on an old newspaper
there was one who everybody feared
he worked at a certain office
"He has motives for coming,
we won't say a thing!"
on some days the weather was bad
we were always out of luck in life
so we attacked Fei Jia's recent works
said Zhu Xiaoyang was a great master
afterwards this sheep would stroke his wallet
hum and haw hedge this way and that
eight laughing mouths would immediately stand up
that was an age of wisdom
so many conversations could have produced books
if they had been recorded
it was an exciting time
so many faces appeared here
if you ask about it in the city
you'll find that they're all big names now
it's drizzling outside
and we arrive on the street
the big public toilet is deserted
for the first time he uses it alone
some have married
some have become famous
some are going out west
Lao Wu wants to go too
everyone says he's just pretending to be a tough guy all are anxious
Wu Wenguang, you're going
where'll I bum a meal tonight
old debts of gratitude and resentment clamor and confusion
finally everyone has left
an empty floor is left behind

like an old record that'll never be played again
in other places
we often mention number 6 Shangyi Street
saying that on a day many years hence
children will come to look
when Zhang Qingguo and others hear this
they feel jealous but look natural
how is it that we didn't get to know Wu Wenguang then
they think that night in their beds

A Far-off Friend [远方的朋友] (January 1986)

My far-off friend
I've read your letter
what do you look like I think it over
more than likely you look like so-and-so
I realize that one day you'll come to see me
I can't help feeling somewhat anxious
I'm afraid we'll have nothing to say
that as soon as we meet we'll discover ulterior motives
each wanting to get the upper hand
I'm afraid we'll be silent
having said all that we should say
no matter whether here or there
the days pass in the same way
here or there
we read the same novels
I fear not having anything to say about the state of the nation
of being drowsy in front of you stifling yawns
I'm afraid I won't get your humour
I'll be struck dumb like a marionette
I fear you might be noble, dignified have an elegant way about you
which will scare me into clumsiness
a shirt cuff catching a tea cup a cigarette burning my finger tips
I'm afraid you'll be polite urbane
I won't know where to look
constantly mishearing what you say
now rubbing my thighs
now picking at my ears
my far-off friend
it's not easy to find a friend
if you were to open my door with a kick
and shout "I'm so-and-so"
all I could say is:
I'm Yu Jian

Opus #101 [作品 101 号] November 19, 1987

In a strange land the sea surrounds you
all about you hostile waves roar
like a pack of sinister dogs in a remote village
you force a smile out onto your face stroke life's fangs
like spring's gentle breezes you make the waves bow their heads and nestle up to you
the sky's above and the sea is boundless
far away from the ancestral wreck from now on you'll follow the waves and the current
an outsider never again will the world know your true image
no need to touch the water plants hidden in the deep
those are plants which even the tempest cannot pass through
it was entangled by them once and died of hydrophobia
no need to touch them no need to search out their roots
they're nothing but instants of music carried on the wind a black net woven by the months and
years
a farce a scar a moniker and the source of a pleasant flavor
of course your days are hard their bites will leave you covered in blood
when the weather is bad you must endure it alone
and the mail van is far away hands empty, you stare blankly
from one line of waves to another
both life and the ocean are equally vast
a red sea a golden sky
but below it's as black as night but, there, in a certain place
your memories are fresh in the midst of the pack of snarling dogs
once when faced with a rash intruder
your curly hair stood brazenly on end

Monologue [独白] (December 1988)

Every Autumn the crops ripen under the moonlight
just as the spirit sinks It's fated to be this way
established at thirty still I'm not spared
the walls of the heavily fortified city are breached once more
traitors trample the crops a soul fleeing the holocaust
has no place to hide but is entirely at ease
In the past, besides myself I also supported a god
in the history of the heart everyone ignored the white flags
I keep watch over myself an entirely naked clown time and again sliding down the mirror of
time everything in the past is so clear it makes one sick
nothing can be grasped anymore because both hands are full of fruit
At the start everything started off from truth solemn vows
but like a hypocrite I put on elegant airs
I probably should have long ago been silent as a stone
finding peace in the river's flow But, no
my heart has sunk into degradation longing for nobility
yearning for immortality thirsting to confront the great sea
from then on I was broad and deep
fated to fall forever an actor
if one doesn't mount the stage others will play your part
sobbing over yet another deception yearning to repent
a century without churches no light in the sky
even if you kneel for a thousand years
never again can you become a seed thick-skinned and brazen
you still puff out your chest and act the man guileless and upright
but the worm will never die it is always biting
until your complacent life is once again punctured
And so it's the Autumn grain ripening in the moonlight
and what must sink down is the soul
moonlight like water illuminates the pretty countryside
and shines on your soul's dark mirror of time

This Evening a Rainstorm is Approaching [这个夜晚暴雨将至]

This evening a rainstorm is approaching
on the street people walk quickly
you've just washed your hair
skin as white as snow a group of Italian musicians
is playing spring for you on an audio cassette
the oil painting on the wall is of a valley somewhere in the south
an azure sky a leaf stirs the human heart
the spirits of all ages stand on the book shelf
thoughts which in the past incited rebellion
are now quiet
friends won't be coming
you go ahead and lie down
I want to sit a while longer write letters
so many things are going to get soaked
will be changed
so many umbrellas will be opened or closed
after we experience this sort of wet night
nothing amazes us anymore
when the raindrops fall
we're already asleep
already asleep

The Nail that Pierces the Sky [一枚穿过天空的钉子]

The nail that pierces the sky
enters the expectant heart
That which enters is not what the heart had been waiting for
It's not the entry of the approaching word
It's not an entrance initiated by an act
In fact this nail had long ago gone into the wall
The movement which had knocked it into that wall has long born rust
On a metallic, small and static early morning I first saw it
Exposed on the wall, its bald head penetrating the sunlight
Entering into a keenness it had never previously possessed
There it not only penetrated sunlight but also pierced the room and its sky
With its bald head from the factual deep side
It stabbed towards the empty side the shallow side
This kind of entry coincides so well with the sky and tallies so well with the heart
The nail that pierces the sky
sharp expansive its radiance shoots in all directions

The Hint of a Rose [被暗示的玫瑰]

It's hinted at in our yard as being
A rose
A small garden makes this sort of suggestion
The shutters of a yellowing house have dropped this hint
We always smell a certain odor on a day in May
Always, during the dusk of this day we sink into the nets of passion
as if we hear the hum of bumble bees see birds and gardeners
We murmur to ourselves calling a girl a rose
It's been hinted at in our compound as being a rose
Although, there amid a pile of bricks and clumps of weeds
a plant like a rose has never been bred

The Naming of the Crow [对一支乌鸦的命名] (1990)

From an unseen place
the crow rakes away lumps of autumn cloud with its toes
It drifts into the wind which droops from my eyes and the sky of light
The mark of the crow: sulphuric acid decocted by the nun of black night
sizzles its way through the flock's mattress
sinking down onto the branches of my heart
As in the days of my childhood, conquering crows nests in the treetops of my hometown
Never again can my hand touch a scene of autumn landscapes
It pulls itself up onto another big tree, wants to yank another crow
out of darkness
Crow in the past was bird meat a pile of feathers and intestine
Now the desire to narrate the impulse to speak
Possibly self-consolation in the face of imminent misfortune
the escaping of an inauspicious shadow
This kind of handiwork as blind-eyed as childhood
my bravest hand thrust into a black hole full of sharp beaks More difficult

when a crow perches within the wilderness of my heart
What I want to say is not its symbol metaphor or myth
What I want to say is just crow just as back then
I could never grab a dove out of a crow's nest
Ever since childhood to this day My two hands are calloused with language
But as a poet I have yet to speak it out loud crow
As much in this age of deep thought and careful plans adept at all forms of inspiration meter
and rhyme
as when beginning to write immersing the entire brush in the ink well
I want to tackle this crow its root from its origins it must be black through and through
Skin flesh and bones the run of its blood and
its flight revealed in the sky all must be thoroughly black
The crow from its birth entering into eternal solitude and being prejudiced against
Entered into all-encompassing destruction and persecution
It isn't a bird it is crow
A world stuffed with evil each and every moment
They all have excuses in the name of beauty or light
to open fire on this moving target that represents the power of darkness
Because of this the word won't escape beyond being crow
It flies a little higher together they surpass the eagle's seat
Or they drop a little lower to be found at the lowly level of the ant
Borer of holes in the sky it is its own black cavern its own black drill bit
It is its own altitude the altitude of a crow
On its own bearings its own time, driving its passengers
It's a happy big mouthed crow

Outside it the world is merely a construct
Only the limitless imagination of a crow
You the vast sky and the earth the vastness beyond vastness
You Yu Jian and generation after generation of readers
in the crow's nest are all eatables

I want to deal with this crow with only a few dozen morphemes
The ripe fruit of description It's said to be a black box
But I don't know who holds its key
I don't know who is conceiving the dark code of a crow
In another depiction it appears as a pastor binding his leg wrappings
This saint is standing below heaven's high walls looking for the entrance
But I realize the crow's dwelling-place is closer to god than the pastor
Perhaps one day it will be at the top of the church steeple
having already seen the body of the Nazarene
When I describe the crow as a swan reared by eternal black night
A solid bird flashing the light of a swan flying past the brilliant bog beside me
This fact causes me to immediately to lose confidence in the metaphor
I set the verb "drop down" on its wings
But in the manner of an airplane it "soars through the nine heavens"
I say to it "silence" but it stands stock still in "speechless"
I saw this sorcerer-bird, defier of all laws human and divine
In the sky above me a great flock of verbs in tow crow verbs
I can't speak them my tongue held in check by rivets
I watch them soar high up into the sky leap up
sink down into the sunlight and then gather on a cloud top
freely, leisurely transforming and composing every kind of crow totem

That day I was like the hollow scarecrow standing in an empty land
All my thoughts were sunk in crow
I distinctly felt crow felt its dark flesh
Its dark heart yet I couldn't escape this sunless fortress
When it circles it is me circling
How will I ever reach beyond the crow get a grip on it
That day as I gazed up into the blue sky all crows were completely black already
a tribe which dines on carrion long ago I should have turned a blind eye to the sky over my
hometown
I caught hold of them once I was so naive then
at the first whiff of that stink of death frantically I released my grip
As to the sky I should have fixed my glance only on clouds and skylarks white cranes
How well I understand and love these angels of beauty
But on that day I saw a bird
an ugly bird a bird the color of a crow
suspended by the sky's grey rope
its distressed legs stretched straight like those of a wooden puppet
hanging aslant over the slope of the air

revolving around a certain center spinning
a gigantic, empty circle
On that day I heard a series of evil cries
suspended in an invisible place
I want to say something of that
and make it known to the world I'm not afraid
of those invisible sounds

Spring Song [春天咏叹调] (1989)

Spring you kick open my windows and somersault into my room
Your body is covered in sunshine feathers and water and leaves, too
You knock over my flower vase
A quiet virgin in its black evening gown it waits for you to present a bouquet of real flowers
You spill out its water and without helping it up you leap over
Provoking gales of laughter on the earth outside from the red-faced farmers wives
Last night you were even more brutal pulling the table cloth out from under the sky's birthday
banquet
So many stately stars crying out in misery as they dropped down
So many whales flipped over by the waves
So many stones left their old homes
Last night I hid in the castle once more you kidnapped my heart
Your tanks rumbled across my roof I listened to them all night
I listened to your ferocious assault on the South an assault on the gigantic bird cage
As if it had heard the flute of an Indian swami a snake awoke in my body
But I can't go out I have neither wings nor roots
Hiding in the house like a die-hard royalist I have no ties to the new season
If I leave the castle I won't reach the speed of the wind I won't sing out like a bird
I won't join in with the leaves won't become a charioteer
Staying put I have a greater interest in spring than any bird
In this world before the earth and the seeds I am the first to speak of spring
the first sound among sounds to sing of spring before the North and the wind
O! Spring I've stitched together a skirt to fit on you
Like the bowls of beggars I've lined up flower vases on the world's long table
Each nerve bristles as wide open as a hedgehog
I don a green wig and sneak into the flower garden
Late one night in February I sit alone writing poems for you
O Spring Spring you're an unworldly lad a naive fool
As soon as your flower buds nod their heads or your bees lift their voices
All is a fully-exposed image of death like a belch that can't be held in
A vase full of stale water a corpse wrapped in a curtain
Stinking adjectives stiff verbs empty nouns
In the spring I am the strangest he who gets along least well with others
My body refuses to grow grass the word Spring is not in my vocabulary
Living beside trees I have never seen how they drink water
Living with the wind I have never touched its skin
Even though I am one who praises spring though I am witness to spring year after year
Time and again I watch the snow melt into water
Again and again I watch plants raise the same flags from different houses
In the spring our labour is still the production of bricks and iron braces and the putting up of
new walls

We make the motions of spring entering into our loneliness and reproduction energetically
Always Spring is just for its own things thus it stirs the world
And passes through our homes kicking our windows open
it has no interest in awakening some part of us it doesn't understand our truths
It rejects our love our quest for help it rejects our finest poems
We are forever a den of foxes looking forward to the next March the next night
The sky hung full of golden grapes all sour

A Bald Autumn Children Standing Outside of Death [秃顶的秋天 站在死亡之外的
儿童]

A bald autumn death passes through the gaps between trees
and enters life Several unusual events occur
A dark rain doesn't let up until water begins to seep through walls
a swollen hospital jammed with the joints of sufferers and in the moonlight
there are always mysterious appearances hovering above the white objects of that harvest
moss hangs from windows into solitude and sadness
and poetry is of no more use than other seasons
a frightening path muddy An ex-beauty queen
up to her ears in dirty clothes and a poverty-ridden marriage
just like the premonitions we had, the days are being peeled away
writing ads for "expert treatment of impotence" exposing
the glue under the paper on the rotting body of the telephone pole
all this is enough to fill a person in his green youth
with the stench of mildew waking him occasionally from his long slumber
like a corpse looking at a dark mirror
and it's these things exactly that death relies on that likewise opens wide
the playground for the children
they are here growing up just as they have before
a bright, gaily colored group There, where we see death
they see a red rubber ball
just across the street bouncing

The Dossier of O [零档案] (selections) March-May 1992

The Records Room [档案室]

fifth floor of the building behind lock after lock his dossier
packed in a document pouch it acts as proof of the person separated from him by two
floors
he works on the second floor the pouch is 50 meters of hallway distant thirty
stairsteps
a room different from others six steel-reinforced walls of poured concrete three doors
no windows
one florescent light four red fire extinguishers 200 square meters over a thousand locks
visible locks hidden locks drawer locks the biggest is the "Forever Fixed Brand"
hanging outside
up stairs turn left up stairs turn right turn left again right again open a lock
open a lock
pass through a combination finally enter within file cabinet up against file cabinet
this one beside that
that one above this this one beneath that that one in front of this this one behind that
eight rows 64 lines packed within them over a ton of glazed printing paper black
characters paper clips and glue
his 30 years a pouch in one of 1800 drawers mastered by a key
it's not really very thick this person is still young only a little over 50 pages
somewhat more than 40,000 characters
together with a dozen or so official seal-bearing documents seven or eight photos and
some hand prints net weight: 1000 grams
different handwriting all from left to right two blank lines after the first another after
each paragraph
from one radical to another it's all concerned with his name definitions and adverbial
modifiers
a third of his life his time places events people and patterns of regular activity
no pile of verbs lies reliably in the dark it won't budge won't be exposed to the light
it won't get wet won't catch fire there are no mice no germs no microorganisms of
any kind
transcribed neatly clearly cleanly he's trusted
based on this, others see him as comrade issue him credentials wages acknowledge
his sex
based on this he comes to work at eight o'clock every day uses every kind of paper
ink and correction fluid
he conceives the opening lines the composition the revision makes everything
abide by standard grammar
from the writing of one character to another the movement of the hand the pen, from
left to right from one radical
to another from verb to noun from frank detail to metaphor
from, to.

the process of the ink's gradual exhaustion the action of a good person called "O" by
some
his body carries him as when o turns his body in response to someone asking for paper
his building is absolutely motionless his position is fixed the rays of light are perfectly
still
the locks are motionless the huge metal cabinets stand stock still and the pouch doesn't
budge

File #1 History Of Birth [卷一 出生史]

his organs have nothing to do with writing he came from the 28 year-old labour pains of a
woman
an old established hospital carrier of three floors inflammation medicine doctors
and a morgue
whitewashed each year to save on trouble consuming reams of gauze cotton balls glass
and ethyl alcohol
the walls expose their bricks the grain of the wooden floors has disappeared things from
human bodies
take the place of paint not smooth somewhat elastic no connection to humanity
the scalpel has lost its chromium the doctor is 48 the nurses are virgins
howls struggle infusions injections the passage of instruments sighs daubing
wrenching clutching push pull cutting tearing running relax drip trickle
flow
these verbs all on the spot the scene is entirely verbal verbs immersed in a sea of
blood
"the head's out" the adept tones of the doctor Testimony: blood covers hands
a white smock covered in blood a bed sheet soaked in blood blood all over the floor
blood all over metal implements
Testimony: "Delivery Room" "Please don't spit" "Having only one is good"
Investigative Data: those with colds to the right laryngitis straight ahead "Men's
Toilet"
X-rays on the third floor hospitalization department out the door and 100 meters west
surgical department in 305
line-up for injections on the first floor payments line at the left-side window medicine
pickup line at the window to the right
a day crowded with every sort of pain a day of tight nerves of slicing and suturing
a day of initial diagnosis and relapse of decomposition and full recovery of birth and
death
everywhere there is talk of cure and illness words begging for life and dying words
everywhere
there are curative actions and ill behavior acts of attendance to the dying and the delivery
of life
all of that old routine adheres to that first child that initial one that first time
to that new tongue those new vocal cords that new head that new pair of testicles
these active things which are born out of countless verbs are given the notional name of 0

A Beer Bottle's Cap [啤酒瓶盖] February 1991

I don't know what to call it just now it still resided at the high point of the banquet
the guardian of a bottle of dark beer you shouldn't doubt it has some status
signifying a fine feeling at dusk and the depth of a frothing cup
at the start of an evening meal with a movement very like a bullfrog it hops off with a pop
the waiter thinks it really is that thinks that on a table set full of cooked food something returns
to life
upset at his misconception he immediately turns his attention to a toothpick
he's the last one after this the world will never think of the bottle-cap again
no more do dictionaries have an entry for it no more roots extensions and transferred meanings
now the china plates reluctantly laid beneath it signal a cluster of Sichuan flavors
a napkin gets used by a general's hand roses flourish proud metaphor
in an odd arc it got out of the occasion This is its curvature
the brewery never designed this sort of a trajectory for a bottle of beer
now it's together with cigarette butts footprints chewed up bones and the floor, these filthy
unrelated things
an impromptu pattern no one of them any use to the other
but it's even worse off a butt can recall for the world of a slovenly pig
one piece of bone identifies a cat or a dog footprints hint naturally at the life of a person
it's a waste item its white is only its white its form is only its form
beyond all that our adjectives can touch on
At the time I had yet to drink it was I who opened the beer-bottle
so I saw it hop so oddly so simply to get out of there
suddenly I also imagine the pop of it the leap away but I can not
a writer with a body of poetry and a torso of sixty kilos
I merely bend over gather up this little white gem
the hard serrated edge of it slices into my finger
makes me feel its keenness unrelated to knives

Incidents: A Power Cut [事件：停电] 1991

In our lives a power cut is one of the incidents we often run into
a little pantomime on a fuse wire arthritis at a power plant legalized rape and violence
the guillotining of light we're used to it we take it calmly
when suddenly all light is arrested the world's in darkness
we're not the least bit anxious unmoved we continue to study to live
everyone knows a power cut can't alter the size of a bedroom
cannot change the amount of starch in a slice of bread can't change the color of water
we know it all well before the outage after the outage the same
sequences particulars parts whole climax and epilogue the same
First some minor romantic effects such as ghosts corpses a haunted house
such as candles in a kingdom of darkness footsteps on the stair and demons
one after another these little conceptions attack we pretend to be afraid or tragic throw up
our hands or puff out chests
we know these tricks well like familiar toys familiar MSG and milk
we're well aware the door's shut tight the neighbors are all comrades there's someone on
duty at the main gate
in the end we all stay in our old spots completely unharmed same ideas same motions
still like good people under the light keeping a proper sense of decorum our bearing self-
restrained
certainly nobody will change their posture suddenly "like a rapier" that way for instance
assaulting the women there (this has now got into a novel) The world as perfect as in the
beginning
seeing going on seeing movement going on moving silence continuing silent
hands feet move in and out freely no need to thump in on heels like an invader
everything is still everything space color sound texture weight and inner
being
on the ceiling a hanging lamp under foot a floor left hand to the left right hand to
the right
the bed deep in the room placed by the window beside it a dresser and mirror
a box is placed highest shoes lowest food in the cupboard the TV reports news
extend the left hand you can take hold of painkillers and a hot-water thermos a glass
and cigarettes
extend the right you can touch an orange a candy jar and magazines extend it a bit
more and matches
half a step forward this long object must be the sofa sink down at the opportunity and
rest on cushions
back a bit an empty space at the foot of the wall portrait frames at a height of six feet
my parents and me 1954's smiling faces 1967's seating arrangements
standing beside the door a bookcase on the highest shelf classics third shelf medical
books
the wallpaper behind it pasted in the year of the horse behind the paper 1987's bricks
ice in the icebox clothing on clothes hangers water in water pipes time behind the

clock casing
what's soft is cloth sharp a fruit knife a collision is sound itching is skin
bed sheets are white ink is black rope thin and long blood liquid
leather shoes \$48 a pair power 45 cents per watt a watch worth \$400 a TV \$2,500
everything present nothing will disappear no electricity the switch is still here
the electric meter still exists tools exist electricians engineers and plans still exist
only that wolf isn't here the he-wolf that stands on the calendar's August
at the moment the power cut out it slipped into darkness I can't see it
cannot determine if it's still on that paper for a few seconds
I feel this fellow breathing listening carefully in that piece of flat darkness
since the power went out this feeling is the only delusion amidst all my composure and
sobriety
the only time on a summer night I shiver in fright

A Stack of Gas Cans by the Railroad [铁路附近的一堆油桶] 1993

Piled beside the railway line making up a surface
large deep-brown outlines clearly distinguished from the earth and sky
"surroundings" and "vicinity" all background
red-painted letters apparently the proletariat's hand
A B M and X like metaphysical spiders
represent something interior behind the surface
I can't see any interior when the train passes here
only a dozen seconds or so the time I witness a surface
before this my eyes were as blind as the train's
following a fixed line toward a station already known
the carriage behind is a boxcar tightly sealed
a herd of pigs off to Wuhan travelling with me
by the Beijing-Wuhan trunk line my vision is preserved by a surface
as on a certain day in history Vincent van Gogh
arrived at a farm near Arles
I realize later on it's only a stack of gas cans

On A Fly [关于苍蝇] 1994

The fly appears in places where April occurs
I want to present it with the words "rose" and "migratory bird"
they make up conceptions of April simultaneously living things of different form
from the garden from the north from the garbage dump but signifying April
is a month that already exists in time and space a vivid conception
it isn't the April of poetry not the April of a flower vase nor the April of an enemy
it is the April of earth roses complete the garden migrant birds open up the sky
and flies make the room an area where wings can move
they each go about their own business move April on toward completeness
I still want to present the fly with "bloom" and "chirp" "fragrant" and "melodious"
and I also want to offer "germs" to the rose "filth" to the bird
and "biting" "buzzing" too
the world's mysterious passageway is only found in if you can pass through the dark to April
a fly has a fly's darkness a rose has a rose's a migrant bird a migrant bird's
in this bright month before it enters into this month recorded by lyric poetry
a fly doesn't know if it can enter into "fly"
a rose if it can enter "rose"
a migrant bird if it can go into "migrant bird"
not all things can go into April as in the Aprils of history
in the city where I must live April cannot arrive at April's appointed time
it cannot pass through the rose's darkness the darkness of iron a factory's darkness
it can't pass through the darkness of a revolutionary's hatred of the old world
in a fly-less April missing a rose that likewise hasn't appeared
and this is the world's darkness a darkness April cannot supersede

Sunlight Shatters My View of a Bunch of Tree Leaves [阳光破坏了我对一群树叶的观
看] 1994

Sunlight shatters my view of a bunch of tree leaves
a simple tree as a tree, grows among trees
but the sunlight makes one tree distinct
the leaves of a solid whole it splits into a dark zone
a bright zone a half-bright half-dark zone
like a lion the ruler of a water hole all golden-yellow curls
but not yet scribbling out the whole picture
it's the sunlight and not the lion in April's blue sky
exercising a sun's prerogative during a clear moment
an actual eucalyptus tree disappears now
"a tree is not just a tree"
that pyramid-shaped timber that rises out of the earth into the sky
has at least three symbols suggesting light and dark
informers and traitors swinging between the two

Mouse in a Glass Cage – A Record of a Trip to the Zoo [玻璃笼中的鼠—记一次游园活动] 1994

A Frenchman draped in silver ornaments sleep's beneath Egypt's springtime sky
What I point to is a python
in a glass cage in the zoo its court coiled poison daydreaming, it releases its missed lunch
A white mouse
climbs back and forth on its body a pocket-size bear doing floor exercises
optional moves all of exceptional skill tail turned up along the snake road like a soldier
beating a drum moving on to death
It steps on and over the snake's face making bystander mankind break out in cold sweat
Under the jaw of a devil the mouse fine-tunes its ears
listens continues to play Death at one stroke already 21 fellow-sufferers have fallen in
this game it is the last
The time of the snake a gear drenched in oily poison a minor role like a nimble chisel
entering deep into a maze of patterns
The corridor of god people cannot enter like church and heaven forever partitioned by
baroque glass
A ghastly sight watching this little animal really fly on Death's tongue hopping rolling
it can't fall down
Suddenly the snake stretches into a huge yawn like an island rising up out of a gulf the little
white mouse a lone precipice Beneath its toes
the demarcation line between two deaths it's close the snake will die die too in another
mouth of time
A leap toward the abyss it falls into the snake's feeding place unexpectedly it doesn't meet
with death
Sailing back out of the snake's mouth it licks at its body's odd odor with its pointed red mouth
Once more it enters the arena a little lunatic in its asylum striping its frenzied nerves
naked a mad look a frenzy of hands and feet
Suddenly normal again it runs toward the audience looks at their feet and speaks in signs
Outside the glass cage a group of thinkers is gathered round In the lofty view of man
at this time in this place it should have quit playing long ago It strikes the thinker's pose
like that Danish prince, think that way to live or pass away
It doesn't know any better the python is bigger the mouse's world belongs to a smaller
domain smaller food
smaller foes How could I know in a larger universe it is only bread crumbs
Outside the glass cage the bystanders' sky is full of drifting sympathy universal love
humanism insight a grand overview but no person can save the mouse
A zoo has a zoo's rules mankind has mankind's intellect a mouse has the lot of a
mouse This is the order of the universe
And poets a common saying has it a mantis traps a cicada a siskin stands behind
If the story ends here a deep theme can be inferred from it
If we were mice and there was a python bigger than this python as it swallowed us
who would save us?
Thank the zoo the cost of a ticket wasn't wasted we've received an education our

thought has progressed
I go back to write the inspiration I receive from a snake and mouse a story a
record of a trip to the zoo

The Poetry of Yu Jian

This collection of poems is intended to reveal the personality, style and growth of Yu Jian as a poet over the years since 1983 until 1994. Of course, as this is only a partial selection of his poems, such a claim is of limited value, but still of some value, nonetheless, since so little of his poetry has been read beyond the confines of the Chinese language. I will not list honors that Yu Jian and his poetry have received in order to prove the value of his poetry; rather, I believe that the quality of his poetry is readily apparent to those of us who have an interest in the modern poetry of any language. In view of these comments, I will now do no more than offer a generalized biography of the man and a few equally general comments about the poetry from which the sensitive reader will be able to draw finer distinctions on his or her own.

Yu Jian was born on August 8, 1954 in Ziyang, Sichuan province, but moved with his family to Kunming, in nearby Yunnan, at a very young age. As a result of the Cultural Revolution, Yu, like many others of his generation, went to work in a factory at the age of 16 and remained there for ten years before having the opportunity to attend university. During those ten years, Yu was able to educate himself through extensive reading of literature and poetry in particular. During the years of the cultural Revolution, for many of the more sensitive and aware, poetry was the only place where honest emotion and expression of self could occur.

The poetry of Yu Jian, when it first began to circulate beyond the borders of Yunnan in 1983, was something of a revelation to others (some of whom claimed then, and still do today, that what he writes is not poetry) exactly because of his plain, unaffected colloquial style and his unadorned naturalness of expression. The poems of this period are characterized by nature poetry (<The Tall Mountain>) devoted to the mountains, plateaus and rivers of Yunnan. This theme was perhaps unremarkable, but he also wrote as naturally and unaffectedly in his portrayal of city life and relationships with others (<Opus #39>, <Number 6 Shangyi Street>, <A Far-off Friend>).

In 1984, together with two other poets (Han Dong of Nanjing and Ding Dang, then of Xi'an), Yu co-founded the unofficial poetry journal *Them* [他们]. The seventh issue of the journal was printed in the Fall of 1994 and, true to its origins, it remains a journal for poets who are more interested in "how a thing is said" rather than in "what is said." Yu is a poet who would rather exploit the language of the street than the language of current poetic discourse -- a language, in China, which Yu feels has lost its bearings within "utopian mythologies", some imported from modern western poetics, others which can be traced back to the influence of Mao Zedong and China's brand of communist discourse.

This is not to say that Yu Jian has not been influenced by Western poetics, for surrealist influences are quite obvious in some of his more recent poetry. Beginning in 1987 or so, his poetry began to take on a more obscure dimension, as if he were driven by forces beyond his control to mask his sentiments behind clouds of verbiage which remain, admittedly, plainly accessible to the more devoted reader of poetry. To a certain extent, the sentiments he has sought to express are now more complicated and controversial, and both critical of himself and of others.

<Monologue> is a strange poem which I had mixed feelings about translating and including in this collection. It is one of the most discursive pieces that Yu has ever written. Also, it is exceedingly strange in that it consists of a cluster of "fixed idiomatic phrases" [成语], and trite phraseology taken, in part, from translations of Western poetry. A puzzling poem, I have now

come to the conclusion that it was written as a not-so-subtle, indirect criticism of the poetry written by many of China's younger poets in recent years. Yu is often critical of their inattention to language, by which he means the cavalier disregard of the Chinese language as the only true home of poetry that can be called Chinese and contemporary. Instead the stock languages of foreign and metaphysical "utopian mythologies" dominant the poetic landscape of China. (But, then again, I cannot be sure of this. What seems obvious in the Chinese language text all but disappears in translation. Possibly Yu was experimenting with new forms and sought to express the sentiments which appear less affected in English than they do in Chinese.)

Of course, Yu himself is far from being entirely innocent of these charges, as some of the poetry I have translated will attest. Perhaps it was his own awareness of this fact which led him to write <The Dossier of O>. This poem reveals the emasculating nature of the modern Chinese language as Yu apparently perceives it. The language of the Communist Party of China lays a trap which all are born into and are fated to die within. The impersonal, all-powerful personal dossier creates the limits from which no-one may escape. The actions and words of all are molded so as to fit its dimensions, and, consequently, thoughts and emotions are also stunted to the height and depth required by the Party and the dossier. Yu offers no options, no pathways out of his sprawling linguistic snare. There are only the actions and thoughts of the hollow men, stripped of their humanity -- the unpredictable, uncontrollable imaginative faculties that distinguish an individual.

A bleak picture and a very political picture. It comes as no surprise to learn that Yu had difficulties in getting the poem published. Fearing political consequences, the establishment literary journal which ultimately published it in the spring of 1994 (*Great Masters* [大家]) required Yu to remove portions of the poem which might prove most troublesome politically. Many Chinese readers are having difficulty coming to grips with the idea of a personal dossier as the subject of a poem. Certainly, as a poet, it took some daring on Yu's part to address such an object as a muse. And it will be interesting to see what kind of impact, if any, this poem will have on other poets. However, as Yu has pointed out, it seems that many Chinese poets today are ashamed to admit that they might possibly be influenced by another Chinese poet, alive or dead. And the Chinese language, as a language of poetry, is no more than an accidental circumstance of birth. Pity.

But where does Yu Jian's poetry go from this point? Perhaps after reading his poetry in translation, people other than his readers in the PRC will care to know.