

The Poetry of Xi Chuan 西川

Selections: 1984 – 1996

Xi Chuan was born in 1963 in Xuzhou, Jiangsu province, and is now resident in Beijing. He was a frequent contributor to unofficial poetry journals in Beijing, Shanghai, and Sichuan during the 1980s and 1990s, and lent a hand in editing *Tendency* 倾向. In recent years, he has travelled to poetry conferences and festivals in Europe and North America. Following the death of two of his friends in 1989 (Haizi by suicide and Luo Yihe by illness), Xi Chuan's style of poetry was altered. This change can be seen in the poems #20-34.

- 1) **Horses of a Southern State** [南国的马]
- 2) **On that Side of the River** [在河的那一边]
- 3) **Jean Miro** [霍安 米罗]
- 4) **Candlelight** [烛光]
- 5) **The City I Live In** [我居住的城市]
- 6) **Looking Up at a Starry Sky in Ha'ergai** [在哈尔盖望星空]
- 7) **The Wind Starts Up** [起风]
- 8) **A Personal Experience** [体验]
- 9) **A Portrait of Neruda** [聂鲁达肖像]
- 10) **Reading an Old Magazine from 1926** [读一九二六年旧杂志]
- 11) **Low-lying Land** [洼地]
- 12) **Wood** [木材]
- 13) **To Peng City (Xuzhou)** [致彭城]
- 14) **Peach Blossoms Bloom** [桃花开放]
- 15) **In Search of the Sea** [寻找海洋]
- 16) **Gathering Ears of Grain** [拾穗]
- 17) **In the Countryside** [在乡村]
- 18) **Sunset on the Square** [广场上的落日]
- 19) **A Rose of China** [中国的玫瑰]
- 20) **A Day in the Wilderness** [旷野一日]
- 21) **A Distant Journey** [远游]
 - I. #1
 - II. #4
 - III. #5
- 22) **A Musical Exercise** [练习曲]
 - I. **Things** [事物]
 - II. **Things** [事物]
 - III. **Far Away from the Holy Water** [远离圣水]
 - VII. **A Black Bird** [黑鸟]
 - X. **The Journey Home** [归途]
- 23) **Gazing Afar** [眺望]
- 24) **A Person Gets Old** [一个人老了]
- 25) **Bats in the Twilight** [夕光中的蝙蝠]

- 26) **Three Nocturnes** [夜曲三章]
- 27) **Twelve Swans** [十二只天鹅]
- 28) **A Lady Whose Name It's Inconvenient to Mention** [一位不便提及她姓名的夫人]
- 29) **A Fabricated Family Tree** [虚构的家谱]
- 30) **A Tune on a Piano at Midnight** [午夜的钢琴曲]
- 31) **The Moon** [月亮]

- 32) **A Salutation** [致敬]
- 33) **Scenes Far and Near** [近景和远景]
 - #15 **Ruins** [废墟]
- 34) **A Visitation** [造访]
 - I. #1
 - II. #3
 - III. #7

Horses of a Southern State [南国的马]

Horses in a southern state
dream they see heavy snow seal the gate

Their master climbs up onto a bed
like a bear, hibernates

Towards dark, the mare foals
a black pony

But the master never
even carries over a lamp

Suddenly the horses run,
three abreast, out onto the snowy plain

Three bright stars
flicker in the distance

At the crack of dawn, a path of hoof-prints
no person recognizes

On that Side of the River [在河的那一边]

On that side of the river
there is a ball of flame
a ball of flame
burns through May
and burns through August too

When the blossoms of the locust tree flower
a professor with a growth of age spots
bows to her
When the blooms from the miniature-orange fall
the well-mannered son of an influential family
beckons and smiles at her

But she is only on that side of the river
still burning
like dazzling red coal under water
like a red straw hat
blown into the air by a strong wind

Yesterday when I saw her
she was looking up at the sky
perfectly still
but today
she lowers her head
watching the river flow

If it is a cloudy, rainy day
she will be on that side of the river
up to something,
her flames
will never die

A poet viewed her
a farmer gazed at her
a Marxist gazed at her
she's on that side of the river, burning
burning through May
and burning through. August

Jean Miro [霍安 米罗]

When I saw you
I wanted to call you

ask you to point out
the beach,
the wooden ship,
a big star to me,
ask you to teach me
to use the big black pipe
of the American Indian,
to smoke
and chat freely with old farm cattle
at the same time.

Why
do your birds not fear people,
are your evenings
so quiet?
How are you able
to knead the world into
a whole
as if kneading dough,
to give it
a young leopard's bright colors
and meekness?

Jean Miro
let me call you once
You are the wind in April,
a tree in June,
a stone in August.

When I become
dishonest,
fond of fights,
you twist my ear
till it hurts!

Candlelight [烛光]

This is your habit --
to stare at short candles

Candlelight envelops everything
all the places in your vision

You do not have to light a cigarette
and gossip irresponsibly with the years

(the silly girl next door
sobs in the middle of the night)

That former marine of a father of yours
seems to be dreaming of sea patrol again

In his choppy dream there is no you
or your simple, honest mother

Your birth into this world
was never any miracle

(the silly girl next door
is sobbing through the middle of the night)

The City I Live In [我居住的城市] June 1985

The city I live in
is built of building blocks
very neat streets
the square very flat, very broad
although the buildings are somewhat short
they are still very deliberately arranged

The city I live in
is peopleless
when the wind blows through doors and windows
it makes a pure, faint sound
the sun rises east sets west
the seasons alternate
The city I live in
only owns its own dust

Even if I die
if color and light die
there is only one hand
that will topple this city
It will always exist
because the city I live in
has no people

Looking Up at a Starry Sky in Ha'ergai [在哈尔盖望星空]

There is a mystery you cannot rein in
you can only play the part of a bystander
obeying the power of the mystery
sending its signal from a distant place
launching light that pierces your heart
like tonight at Ha'ergai
this bleak place far from
cities, on the Tibetan high plateau
beside a train station small as a broad bean
I raise my head to gaze at the starry sky
at this moment the milky way silent, the wings of birds few
the grass grows green and wild toward the stars
the birds forget to fly
the wind blows the wide open night and me too
the wind blows future and past too
I become a being, a simple room
lit by a gas lamp
like a child I am receiving holy communion
acting brave, but my breath held

The Wind Starts Up [起风]

Before the wind rose the woods were a stretch of silence
before the wind started sunlight and shadows of clouds
were easily overlooked as if they had no
need to be

Before the wind started a person passing through the forest
was a person with no memory
one who walked with the world

Before the wind started you could not say with certainty
if the winter or the summer wind
blew more fiercely

It's been three years since I was in this stretch of woods
I walked there when the wind rose

A Personal Experience [体验]

The train is roaring this way across the rail bridge.
I go down under the bridge. I feel its body tremble.

Because this is the outskirts, and it is midnight.
I think that besides me there cannot be anyone else
planning on passing under this bridge.

A Portrait of Neruda [聂鲁达肖像]

Frequently at the end of everything
when only music drifts by like the dusk
I observe
his portrait hanging on the wall
eyes sweeping over tall mountains, wild foxes
draped in dust and aphorisms
Pablo Neruda
begins to observe
this room
and I sit here
leafing through books and papers
chatting with a friend
a hundred times the sun turns up
and I always mistake the time
but Pablo
always appears as a shadow
pressing down off a big chin
searching this room
The youthful host
when I nod off, I am not able to dream up
sailboards and summer
He writes the poem for me
and quietly
places it on my dirty table

Reading an Old Magazine from 1926 [读一九二六年旧杂志] 1986

Flipping page after page, the intermittent sounds of gunfire
pass distantly across the parched rivers
unperturbed I watch the evening sun fall

In 1926 there would have been a youth
browsing an even more ragged magazine
chewing peanuts, like gems, in his mouth
On the western shore of the Pacific
in a barren peanut plot, a seasonal wind
blows this poet's straw hat askew

Many things need to be chewed slowly
for many years even, those things
still fresh
are in their entirety the day and night
beside us, the floor beneath
our feet the roof overhead
under the window or an early spring I
read an old magazine till dawn

Low-lying Land [洼地] 1986

There is still a stretch of short trees
that needs bats to light the imagination
it lies between a depression and a precipice
that presses the night on the Bohai Gulf
deep into my heart
and over the bitter salty ridges between fields
the last thread of sunlight is warm
the saline white soil divines
any consciousness
sunk way out there in the gasping air
with a jolt that suddenly leads to
me passing through the hollow, ten minutes will be
kept immortal in a corner of the world
I will always believe in the assaults of
birds, salt, wind, and green spring in the sun
in my feeble old days, I will remember
a thread of dark light passing through the depression
cast into the night and the sea on the forest's side
the twilight of early spring covered in mud and sand
three people walking together, the clean tree leaves
rustle in their heads

Wood [木材]

Facing stack upon stack of wood
you hear the roar of the power saw
fell tall straight trees
making the clouds
tumble down
unsupported

(that blue river deer
when will it dodge away
in front of a lair it forgets
when will it rain)

You saw a train come out of a mountain valley
the anesthetized wood
lies flat to bear its holocaust
power saws slice them
the five limbs of man bleed

The wood is embedded in
conference halls, the commercial districts
and garish private residences
together with the people's hearts
it is raised into the air

When the city's eyelids droop
herds of hippopotami surge up onto the river bank
the unassuming planks and boards
of a place between which people see
the constellations
wail loudly tomorrow

To Peng City (Xuzhou) [致彭城]

The people who came out of that city together with me
are my personal enemies and brothers
above the grey train station in chests the size of the palm on my hand
sparks fly up and die down
when we left there was a heavy rain and a fierce wind

We will spread our flight into the wide world
all across the open fields oppressively black quails are falling
before the silence descends perhaps not one will remain
but the source of all life
does not run dry because of this, there is still more wailing

that flies out the womb: from the People's Hospital
delivery room out onto the crosswalk on Liberation Road
at a time like this people kiss
the dew on the stones; others
trample the pitch black shadows of crickets to pieces

Daybreak is first to push forward over the grass, afterward
like planetary bodies magpies and crows swoop along mountain chains
the hands that took new-born infants slice the silence open
the people's eyes are flashing
people bear an enormous love, in Peng City

You have to bleed for an ancient hope
the city, it has already bled a hundred a thousand times
abandon the chestnuts in the fire unless the chestnuts
are fruit no longer, but the city I was born in
is already set up full of green pines, piled full of tombs

The bugle call heard at daybreak oozes into the lungs
the bugler, my brother, is born after I leave
Hey, the city, just like ancient Babylon's
Ishtar Gate will be lit at last by dawn's first light
you will finally be quick-silvery bright at night

and to believe this I am glad to be reborn

Peach Blossoms Bloom [桃花开放] 1988

A large swarm of bees flies up before long
because peach blossoms on the hill have bloomed already
into little pea-green petals not to disappoint
as if confirming a prophesy for me and my lover

My lover's look isn't last year's
her hair is cut very short, this shows
she once sported long hair in winter
and during winter in this region the frigid air cuts to the bone, it's extraordinarily bleak:

Withered trees fling off all their eye-catching yellow leaves –
like an oldster who's thrown away all the cash in his pockets
a sparrow, bony as kindling, bolts out of the city's blockade
drops on a frozen lake, onto a crack in the ice

I don't know if the frozen lake took it in
a sparrow's soul and a human's are alike
if it is not fleeing amid catastrophe
it will still live many years, will gain strength

Just as my lover cut her hair short
spring returns to the earth, she still wants to ramble along the lake dike
climb up into hills overgrown by bush, and see again
the caps of peach trees open for miles on end

My place is far-off in the din of city center
I mean to move onto the broad lakeshore
reeds outside the door, eating away at the waves of words
swallowing the last shards of ice, the basest desires too

Because I will have a hectic summer season
when I lean on the door completely exhausted
I enjoy hearing my lover's whisper
in deserted rooms, I love to pat

the walls grizzled by the bent refracted light off the water
with my yet unborn son talking loudly
and he will dazzle me like a small mirror
so I won't be able to open my eyes: he is hiding behind the light

In Search of the Sea [寻找海洋]

In a place where mountain ridges loom
I search for the sea
I look for a pirate who signals with a lamp
look for an organism called a seahorse
kiss a hexagon of flo-ice

I look for mountain ridges on that sea
the green of a stern trees loved passionately by you
a sun that passes through my chest
disturbs the sandy soil over the tree roots
I look for gold ore in that sandy soil

What I look for is a promise
horses on the stones, you sing so well
the sound of your song stops at ocean bottom of those deserted streets
those houses, I remember them
the instruments out of sequence, I like cards, can't foretell the future

I hear seawater
hear the power of a dark blue love in the latter half of the night
if I were a rock
what would the water flowing through my heart be
and who is it that pins the flowers of ocean stones to a dark overcoat

What sound will not change for a thousand years
like a storm at sea unabated for a thousand years
the mammoths wrestling by the riverside appear to lie down
and become coal as they sleep? Hey, you nonexistent miner
I want the miner's lamp you never had

Light the rugged way
the rough sea route
what I look for is a vast expanse of coral sea
in the mind's azure sea
a fisherman flashes into being the dark shape of my father's back

Gathering Ears of Grain [拾穗] June 1987

I've had that sort of experience
gathering ears of grain in a reaped wheat field
black clouds tossing:
hold back, sky
A blind man charges into the field, the sun dons a straw rain-cape

You were only children then
the world's new generation
a single kernel of wheat can crush you
but who is that straightening up
seeing ahead a little, not just the harvest
In a reaped field who is that
solitary ear of wheat

I've had that sort of experience
spearing the pitchfork into a haystack
sticking a knife into bread
piercing the body of a butterfly with a steel needle
when the heavy rain falls I cannot hold out
The beards of wheat stab into my fingers

In the Countryside [在乡村] June 1987

That evening rain fell continuously in the wheat field
in the field a stretch of raining sound. Plants growing
not easily traced, life on earth is just like this
in the open field three elms sink into silence
like father, mother and child

The rain also falls into the silent village nearby
on tiles, on windowsills, the sound of rain resounds
makes people think of wheat fields, makes people light lamps
and the grey cliff draws in its shoulders, dissolves in the rain
standing watch on the ridge over the broad sky

A freight train speeds into a tunnel the long blast of a steam whistle
like a caged beast groping forward in the black night
when it drives into real night
open fields on all sides, no starlight, no moonlight
the rain falls on its dark black back too

Sunset on the Square [广场上的落日]

“The eternity sinking in the west is like a sun”
-- A line of ancient Greek poetry

Peter whose green spring glows, I want to ask you
to look at the sun setting on the square
I want to ask you to be Chinese for a time
watch the sunset, watch the mountains and rivers under the setting sun

Mountain cliffs and flowing water the sun setting overhead
already very big, already very red, already very round
a massive night has already condensed
onto the rectangular grey concrete grounds of the square

This square is the heart of my ancestral land
those people who move at liberty over square
like blind bats
sense the descent of night's dim light

Peter, ardent for life, you've travelled the world
and you know the color of the night is a sad poem
people who understand the sight of the setting sun
already wrote it innumerable times on the rectangular square

And the sunset on the two sides of the square
now lights the old deep-red palace walls
the heavy-hearted sound of a zither scrapes past
the beer-drinking king of song has walked off the square

I want to compose a new song for the setting sun
make those sisters stunned by memories appear precisely
as sunflowers revolving their golden yellow faces
and my song brushes right over their faces

Ah, young Peter, I want to invite you
to look at the sun setting on the square
to drink a glass of beer, I want to ask you
to watch the sun set, to witness the mountains and rivers under the setting sun

A Rose of China [中国的玫瑰]

-- in memory of an old woman (August 1986)

A Chinese rose that blooms in silence
rose of china playing ,a zither in the moonlight
no path passes through to you
my compass covered by moss
that old path covered by thorns and thistles

But an enticing fragrance from a candlestick
petal by petal flakes off and falls in front of the door
the kind people begin to trudge away --
far-off mountain valleys, distant stars
horses lose their way, pant incessantly

In a book I search for
an unknown woman of impeccable virtue
one night, the starlight at the head of my bed dull
this virtuous friend
in a mountain valley planted a rose

That rose brought bright days
brought love and a hiker from across the mountains
three bottles of wine on his back
suddenly I cherish the memory of an old woman's green spring
an ancient bronze rose

So, where is the path
In which place where brambles block the water's flow
where there once meandered a secluded path
Where are there traces of campfires, black lamps
guide my horse troop on its winding way

The earliest days are now phantoms in my hands
the rose blooms in the apparition
in a dream, I open the coffin of an ancestor
asleep inside is no corpse, but a
Chinese rose, its fragrance condensed and cold

A Day in the Wilderness [旷野一日] January 1989

Over the entirety of the wilderness there is only winter
the tracks of the wolves and jackals we fear are out of sight
a great wind howls and blows by, as if
going round two human-shape stones
surging toward a grand banquet without a host

Follow me, or else you will feel alone
shout loudly with me, let the cold
drive into the darkest part of our bodies
carry away to the dark the dignity that should be there
on this day in which flying birds are lost

Follow me to the earth's forum
under a concentrated sun
eliminate the noisy and tedious fond memories of ours
you must understand how to obey the arrangements of those who follow
the earth's silence contains irrational deposits

Look at those pure, brown shrubs
they keep a silent pact with the wilderness
but for this a person always must
pay out all the enthusiasm of a martyr to faith
before being able to rest in this dull, unlimited space

I stroke all things and gradually age
when I draw back my hands the universe is already dim
I cannot inquire of the dawn among grass seeds
A person means a difficulty
and you will slowly grow accustomed to this

You will see that I yield up myself
so as to meet winter in the wilderness
to offset the damage to my head
so that on the earth's vast deserted forum
I can be silent speechless

From **A Distant Journey** [远游] (a sequence of 7 poems) Oct. 1989 – April 1990.

“[I] want to ride the cold wind, straight up through the drifting clouds”
-- Li Bai, from "Climbing Mount Taibai"

#1

Bathed in the cool breezes of October the stars shift west,
only the North Star holds firm,
hanging high like a crystal chandelier in a large hall,
when the crowd finishes its chorus,
it still radiates a light that overwhelms everything.
Worthy of praise are those ordinary things:
due to forbearance and endurance, they are finally able
to boast of themselves as the pure embodiment of spirit,
allowing us to surmount the barrier of dust,
the insight magnificent and just.

The vast starry sky causes us to ponder,
inside the cricket's song like a cool breeze,
ponder our total lack of everything,
the other half of a life we lost under the porch.
The twinkling torches illuminate the earth,
the dimly visible footprints on the earth
are proof of the ascension of souls.
Far away we see twenty-eight soldiers on patrol
lost in the starry sky, a young housewife resisting life
holds a lamp and asks the way, covered in the dust of a weary journey
far-off we see a winged celestial horse alone moving back and forth
it never falls, transforms into white bones

-- will the earth too finally be destroyed?
-- the earth speeds on, its two wheels scorching hot.
-- will you move far from here?
-- the road is drawn all over my palm.
-- don't forget this time, this place,
-- past affairs are bound to reappear.
-- the dying earth distresses me,
-- I've come to teach you to sing a sad song.

We, the irresolute, now alive now dead
overhead the brilliant starry sky whispers or loudly sings
When we sometimes hope for a hand to cover the sky,
a meteor shower falls down behind us!

#4

Tonight I sleep soundly in this stretch of wilderness,
in this stretch of wilderness I light seven bonfires.
The Big Dipper's seven glorious stars correspond to these,
seven immortal birds come to nest in my hair --
only in dreams can we speak with the dead,
or avoid a real world,
in blood, on exposed torsos,
discover a tiny trace of them:
on a night of a bright moon and few stars, swaying human shadows
stride over ridges between fields and brambles, on each fallen leaf
a clear path through to the Eastern Land for them.

I dreamed them draped in the black night
conservative and secretive, all over the open fields and hills,
as if only just having paid a visit;
and in the dense forest lit by the bonfires,
a mysterious rite inspired reproduction:
men and women from out of the dark holding hands,
circle bonfires dancing and singing, calling the name of the firelight
as if time stood still, on this Valentine's day
a party on a grand scale, when the rising joy
transforms into muffled thunder rolling in from the horizon,
someone says this is your soul awakening.
Souls wake, the guardians of the forest sleep,
O small fallen mother, come,
come beneath this tree of flames, get rid of your taboos,
the dark wants us to pass this good night together!

#5

The journeying Odysseus,
met the journeying knights of the Round Table;
the journeying Buddhist priest Tripitaka,
met the journeying Marco Polo;
a donkey on a pilgrimage, Dante and Chaucer hurried by
but no one saw the Sufi's black horse troop;
setting off a lord carries gold coins and a two-character surname,
in back of the palace of the sun
he startles a large band of quartered dead.

The residents give these transients water and solid food
let them dodge the rain, give them eaves, rice straw and lamplight
because with them there, rainwater is beautiful;
you live in the world, hear the sounds of souls.
when you and the angel of death collide head-on,
they are at the ends of the earth missing you.
The gates of tombs open,
the seeds of pages of poetry disperse;
and if a transient drops behind,
losing his way in your rooted-out city of weeds,
looking in vain for a girl who doesn't exist,
you also have no need to willfully taunt him,
you will see the subject matter of a tragedy,
concealed in his creeping destruction.

Today, this old life is the same as ever,
old abundance and poverty, thorough understanding and dejection
go through pestilence, famine, compromise and combat,
trading places, relying on each other to live.
Fair trade will not let anyone seize an advantage.
If you want to live, you must humble yourself.
Just like my sunflowers all returning home before dark,
treading thick snow, that sky's undertaking,
like a will-o'-the-wisp passes over a century's
streets and bridges, green springs and death,
returning to the place she set out from at dawn,
at New Year's in the sound of the midnight bell vexed hearts confused thoughts.

From **A Musical Exercise** [练习曲] (a sequence of 10 poems)

#1 Things [事物]

A limited number of things in the light
received by the light, extolled by the light
a limited number of things grow thought
correspond to the love of the light
body and soul
the devil and god
a poet and history
a rose and a cool breeze
A limited number of things in the light
their beauty is poverty
their concord is silence
give way to the light, approve of a child
a tiny figure climbing the mountain of the cleansing of sin
spring is a shape, a hue
there are lines of short poems in your heart
until the summer season is done

#2 Things [事物]

Things that arrive on the same day
will pass away on the same night
hills, trees and flying birds
and the stars of the dead on the horizon
they understand each other
and compose poems with soundless words
just like my left hand and my right
under my nose pouring hearts out to each other
the sun that rises for them
illuminates more things for them
to discover: the Chinese rose in the courtyard
the young girl on the stairs, the soul in the body
they are of the same sort, partaking of my song
Things that arrive on the same day
will pass away on the same night

#3 Far Away from the Holy Water [远离圣水]

The rainstorm that swept across the old city
after being buried in the old city
becomes your blood
red river water fully experienced of the world

A pair of pigeons
never heard from again

Sunlight beats on the ruins, wounds fester
those loveable seeds delicately sing
you are the nine-hundred-and-first disciple
perching on a pine bough

Memory's gate opens, a pair of pigeons
rust in a place far from the holy fire

#7 A Black Bird [黑鸟]

A blackbird cawing
a blackbird spreading its wings in shadow
a sheet of black paper, a blackbird climbing
flying up on a current of air
crosses over city walls in winter
over a forest of few trees, frozen smoke

A deep red man, all winter
hesitating at the end of the corridor
he dreamed of this blackbird
like a sound at dawn after snow
above time, above reason
growing beautiful, rich in hidden meaning

A cawing blackbird
is not the form found in our hidden feelings
it has the highest blue sky
it has no relation to this world
it is purely a mistaken impression
since the white snow burnt our eyes blind

#10 The Journey Home [归途]

On the way home I passed through a quiet wilderness of snow
and a deep, deep poplar grove

I remember the shapes of ferocious beasts and birds
remember their mysterious nature
on this night, I am like a
hunter returning empty-handed
passing through the wilderness of snow
a flock of ducks flies toward the moon
their forms fly into my heart
black river water quietly runs east
with the river banks too
and in an instant will vanish -- in the wind

Gazing Afar [眺望] 1990

To people far away, we are far away
are a distant legend, like horses in the light
seizing a moment in history –
but in our destined dying away
only far-off flowering branches are splendid, only those
horses in the light move all along the road, treading immortal
flowering branches, packing memories and thirst

Link life and far-off places
exceed these limited brittle branches and withered leaves
find for loneliness a room for thinking aloud
today, let's look far away from this terrace
survey that clear September
the slowly shrinking shadow, under the seawater
in the horse heaven where the spirit never dies

Wonderful scenery the sky all of a color
we ought to eulogize, just like everything
people who know truth sing with deep feeling
they definitely felt the wind when they were in it
they were definitely woken by birds in flight
today, the sky absolutely empty, a bird flew past
what could be gentler than this bird in flight?

We are already born, our bodies
have already experienced poverty. The inner-being's silence
is such a big secret, but what is it
hidden behind that September mountain range?
Linking life with distant places, making these
lowly things dream of far-off horses
Now we are being covered by autumn shadows

A Person Gets Old [一个人老了] 1991

A person gets old, between looks and conversation,
between cucumbers and tea leaves,
like smoke rises, like water falls. Darkness approaches.
Between darkness', hair whitened, teeth lost,
like an anecdote in olden days,
like a supporting role in an opera. A person gets old.

The big curtain of autumn falls heavily.
The dew is cool. Music goes obstinately on
He saw a goose that had lost its flock, extinguished fires,
mediocrities, a motionless machine, an incomplete portrait.
When young lovers walk far off, a person is old,
birds in flight shift their line of sight.

He has enough experience to judge good and evil,
but opportunities are decreasing, like sand
sliding into broad cracks between fingers, and the gate is closing.
A youth lives in his body;
his speech is a possession of his soul,
the pedestrians he seizes are straw.

Some people build houses, some embroider flowers, some place bets.
Life's big wind blows away the spirit of the world,
only old people can see the destruction in this.
A person gets old, pacing on
the avenues of former days, occasionally halting,
then falling leaves drift down, will cover him.

Even more sounds squeeze into his ears, as his whole body will squeeze into a little wooden box;
that is the end to a series of games:
hiding away defeat, hiding away success.
Above the house beams, in holes in trees, he's already hidden
strips of paper, written full of love and pain.

Already impossible for him to gather crops,
already impossible to get away.
A person gets old, returns to childhood days,
then dies like an animal. His bones
already sufficiently hard, can support history,
let those who follow engrave an exhortation not his.

Bats in the Twilight [夕光中的蝙蝠] 1991

In Goya's painting, they carry nightmares
to the artist. They flutter up and down
now left now right; they whisper together
but never wake the artist

An unspeakable joy appears on those
human faces of theirs. These living things
that resemble birds but are not, bodies all black
unite with the dark, like seeds that will never flower

Like goblins with no hope of being absolved
blind-eyed, fiercely cruel, guided by will
sometimes hanging upside down off branches
like dry leaves, drawing people's pity

But in other stories, they
perch in damp grottoes
their moment of departure is when the sun falls behind a mountain
searching for food, then vanishing without a trace

They will force a sleep-walker to join with them
they will seize the torch in his hand and extinguish it
they will also drive off an intruding wolf
make it fall into a mountain valley, speechless

At night, if a child is slow to sleep
that is because a bat
dodged the aching eyes of the night watch
came into the neighborhood, relating fate to him

One, two, three bats
no property, no home, how can they
bring people happiness? The moon's wax and wane shed their
feathers; they are ugly, also nameless

Their iron-hard hearts have never moved me
until one summertime dusk
when I passed by my former residence and saw a crowd of children at play
saw even more bats fluttering over their heads

The twilight laid out a shadow in the alley
and plated those bats in gold clothes too
they fluttered outside the street door's peeling paint
but silent with regard to fate

Amid old things, a bat
is precisely the form of a fond memory. Their leisurely attitude
held me, made me stay long
in that district, in the alley where I grew up

Three Nocturnes [夜曲三章] 1992

#1

Speak a secret and a pigeon flies to you
speak a secret and horseshoe lotus' bloom
what comes into sight does not tally with the imagination
how can the wind topple stars into the sea?

Tonight trees are lonely
even though they cling together
tonight a horse smashes the hospital main gate open
asks the duty doctor out to the suburbs

When the clock says stop then stop; two husky sounds
from an obsolete guitar
the daytime's nylon cap holds three coins
tonight no buildings will collapse

Tonight the blood of the person who shouts
“stop thief” races, charges straight at the forehead
but you just want to tie up the crow under your bed
not let it fly up onto the mountaintop gallows

#2

The street lights hum, through into the depths of the night
the depths of black night a swamp
the free breeze moves toward it there
I am drawn by a star
I passed by fences and street corners
if at this moment heavy rain falls from the sky, I will
sing under a tree; if at this moment heavy snow falls from the sky
I will wear a halo on my head
emit light at the young girl who might appear

But on a street corner, in a narrow passageway
I am afraid an icy hand
will suddenly seize me, force me
to yell or foolishly commit violence
so I would rather somebody (or apparition)
softly call my name from a place far away
allow me to consider whether to quickly run away
or halt my steps and turn

#3

When the last of the night is about to end
birds of what hue
sweep over the sky above the city

The sounds of their cries become one
they are fairly close to daydreams
they belong to a happy clan

Birds of what color
carry their secrets
and forget to fly away

The sound of tree leaves in summer
the sound of stream water in fall
do not compare to nocturnal bird calls

But I can not see their
bodies, perhaps they
are only happy sounds

Twelve Swans [十二只天鵝] 1992

The twelve swans shining on the lake
have no shadows

Those twelve swans reluctant to part from each other
are hard to approach

Twelve swans -- twelve musical instruments --
when they call

When they wield wings like silver
the air sustains their bulky
bodies

An era withdraws to one side, with its
jibes

Think of it, twelve swans and me
live in the same city!

Those twelve swans shining on the lake
make flesh quiver hearts quake

Between water and ducks, they keep
a pure bestial nature

Water is their acreage
froth is their jewelry

Once we dream of these twelve swans
their haughty necks
bend toward the water

What keeps them from sinking?
Is it the webbing of their feet?

Reliant on the physiognomy of feathers
they recover lost amulets time after time

Unlimited lake water, a distant high sky: poetry
superfluous

I'd so like to see ninety-nine swans
born in the moonlight!

You must become a swan, before you can tail

along behind --
navigate by constellation

Or from the leaves of water hyacinth and lotus
suck up the black night

A Lady Whose Name It's Inconvenient to Mention [一位不便提及她姓名的夫人] 1993

There's a silent male child in your telephone
there's a blood-stain that won't wash out on your silk underwear
"Summer's here, can Fall be far away?"
Your English is regressing
your soul tightens its cap like a bottle of perfume

Ever more disorderly memories change your brain
into an old warehouse dully lit
the smell of death rejects the stranger with a torch in hand
"I've never been romantic, never"
the prudent secretary eavesdrops outside the door

The you sitting straight at noon, the you pacing in the portico
the face that appears on the glass
strands of hair that remain in the brush
a pregnant woman writes a letter to say she's happy
yet your beauty your bearing are fated to be inherited by no one

You once threw yourself into battle too
but in the end acting half-revolutionary, half-Christian
retreat to guard the deep deep residence of your virgin age
a large nineteenth-century bird dives into your bosom
heroes who have passed you by appear vulgar and dissipated

If true to a man, hard to be true to a dream
an impure thought jolts your body
flaccid breasts fit for a phantom's caress
and the living who surround you
are not qualified to express their love to you

Even if that bushel of courage enters your youth
it can only scout out a half of your depth
because you are a light, a fog, a constellation's widow
you flash into being, a face full of spring
a pleasant surprise for my heart, but also bound to doubt

A Fabricated Family Tree [虚构的家谱] 1993

In the form of a dream, in the form of a dynasty
time passes through me. Time like a box of matches
sometimes suddenly burns in its entirety
I distinctly see a great river without beginning without end
light after light illuminates the deep shadows of cities on the river banks

There must be reasons for my arrival in the world
whose hands and feet are the prototype of mine?
A bird alights on my crown, thinking I am a rock
if I wave it away, it will land on
the top of whose head, and turn to watch my whereabouts?

Light after light illuminates those deep shadows of riverside cities
some casual words buried in the sound of flutes at night
multiply. Multiply. The family history is carried on
life's shackles rattle
who will take the final silence, as its end?

I see my old father a face of wrinkles
slowly fuse into one with this nation
hard to say I'm not him: a cautious nature
gives him a life of peace; hard to say
he isn't busy living in my place, a tortured fawning

He seldom talks of my grandfather. I only vaguely recall
an old man amid tobacco and pouring expensive sesame oil
a distant summer, an oldster entangled by past affairs
Go back three hundred years it's a few men drinking their fill
back three thousand it's a family planting their field

From a drop of seawater to a tiny hamlet in Shandong
from a meager estate in Jiangsu¹ to my desk lamp tonight
so many people live: illiterates, scholars,
bandits, small businessmen....what kind of marriage
passed me down? Did I wander in the imperial palace of the Han?²

Night after night of swords and knives, of moving goods to market
death was also not able to stop the gasping dawn
I make up a multitude of ancestral names, call them one by one
one can always hear a reply to some sounds; but I
cannot see them, just as I can not see my own face

¹ Shandong and Jiangsu: two coastal provinces in eastern china, between Beijing and Shanghai.

² The Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.

A Tune on a Piano at Midnight [午夜的钢琴曲] 1994

Luckily I can feel, luckily I can listen
at midnight a tune on a piano resurrects a spirit
in shadows a person walks toward me
a person with no body can not be stopped
but he has the ability to polish lights and implements
make me ashamed to see my dirty black hands

The ice of sleep makes cracking sounds
in a flash azaleas blaze into bloom across the land
a man approaches me, I'm too late to dodge away
just as I'm too late to avoid my own green spring
amid a piano tune at midnight, I lick
cracked lips, awake to the necessity of life

But a tune on a piano at midnight is like me
a happiness that can't be caught, why is it this long
whatever I seize, its nature alters?
As if just now I remember the many raucous song and dance scenes
but tonight's tune is not to be accompanied by anyone
it is mysterious, distressed, a soliloquy

Outside the window the strong wind stops, there must be a hawk
flying close to a snow-capped peak, there must be a peacock
aroused by an illusion, in the starlight extending a screen
and I'm like a sunflower standing at the center of midnight
asking myself who will take away my cumbersome life
a man approaches me, we seem to know each other

We stand face to face, identifying each other
I hear somebody far off applauding
a tune on a piano at midnight returns to silence
Right, it's like this: a man approaches me
hesitates a moment, an immediate urge to speak suppressed
turns back to the boundless shadow to which he belongs

The Moon [月亮] 1994

There are so many things tailing us
among them the moon heard our first wail
we stop, it stops too
separated thirty miles from us, thirty miles away
whiter brighter moonlight swells the head of a wild animal

Hey, periodically surging sadness
Now is the time to shake off the moon
it trails along behind us, like our
old friend's soul; surprisingly it follows me
enters the six square meters of my room

But I should not-leave fingerprints allover the moon
who can be sure it exists for me?
Crazed people still dance in the moonlight
the old lady in the alley wears a colorful kerchief
the black cat with eyes like torches specializes in tricks on cowards

So if you want to speak speak loudly
pick a night when the moon is bright; how many times
on the pitch-black path from the bar to the observatory
have purposely subdued voices drifted by
discussing elopement or reprisal

So get a move on if you want to unearth a grave
Don't wait till the moon opens a breach in your body
knocks on the heating pipes inside you
changes the color of your blood
makes you love the skeleton in the grave

Life, so like a man blowing a whistle
moving in the moonlight, pouring all his passion
out into a little iron whistle
we trail after him, one foot deep one foot shallow
from out of his mouth a tittering sound

And the moon that follows us all our lives
never blocks us, it hides itself again and again
lets us be changed by the darkness
but when we are dead or not long after, it will
appear unmoved beside us

A Salutation [致敬] May 1992

Dejected. Hanging drums and cymbals. A leopard dazed asleep in the cellar. Revolving stairs. Torches in the night. City gates. Under ancient constellations a cold that touches grass roots. A sealed body of flesh. Undrinkable water. Pieces of ice floating like big boats. Birds as passengers. A clogged river channel. Children as yet unborn. Tears as yet unformed. Confusion, punishment yet to begin. A balance. A rising. Blank..... How to discuss dejection and not be considered wrong? Facing a corolla discarded on a side road, please consider the price of risks taken out of desperation!

Suffering: A stretch of immovable sea.

Civilization is written on the seventh page of hardship.

Such a desire to shout, to force iron and steel to cry, to force mice accustomed to secretive lives to voluntarily form squads and come to me. Such a desire to yell, but I must do my best to keep my voice low, it shouldn't be like a curse, but like a prayer, it shouldn't be like the roar of cannon, but like the wind's whistle. A stronger heartbeat accompanies a greater silence, you see the saved rainwater is about to be drunk down, shout! Aa, I have such a desire to shout, when hundreds of crows clamor, I don't have lips of gold words of jade -- I am an inauspicious omen.

Too much desire, too little seawater.

The illusion is maintained by capital.

Let a rose rectify our mistake, let a thunderbolt rebuke us! On an endless journey, not allowed to ask about this trip's destination. At the instant the moth dives into the flame, discussion of eternity is inappropriate, looking for proof to prove a person is without fault is difficult.

Memory: My textbook.

Love: An unfinished affair of the heart.

Happiness like clouds above our crowns. Our crown's clouds like the war chariots of angels: Confused peace! An undertaking faced with risk! A man who walked deep into the mountains miraculously lives. In winter he stockpiles cabbage, in summer he makes ice. He says: "A person who cannot feel is not real, as well as his ancestral and hidden homes." So we get close to peach blossoms to temper our sense of smell. Facing peach blossoms and other beautiful things, a man who does not know to take off his hat in salutation is not our comrade.

But this is not the result we hoped for: Souls, put aside; words, blackmailed.

Poetry instructed the dead and the next generation.

From **Scenes Far and Near** [近景和远景] (A series of 17 prose poems) 1992-1993

#15 Ruins [废墟]

Eulogizing the sublime form of a ruin is the same as eulogizing an atrocity, and looking with indifference at that lofty form is the same as admitting we lack the ability to be affected by it. The reason we have these two difficult states of mind when facing a ruin is that a ruin's existence is vastly greater than ours, between us and ruins there is practically no proportion to speak of. Yet, even if we acknowledge our insignificance, ruins still refuse to act as people and receive us: a ruin is the home of phantoms, only they are qualified to loiter there, so it changes all who enter into ghosts. A ruin is not the same as a construction site: It has won the honor and perfection that things yet to be completed anticipate, its stones that once stood are far more costly than stones that never stood, they collapse but in our minds are prepared whensoever to stand again. Time has weight, history comes at a cost. Ruins are the combining of rooves and the ground into one, ever taller green grass covers the traces of fire, the marks of sunshine and rainfall. Amid the silent ruins, only the stone columns stand alone, talking to themselves -- that is the nature of a building, the essence of creation, the nature of the spirit of mankind.

From **A Visitation** [造访] (a sequence of 7 poems) Jan.-Feb. 1994, May 1995

#1

The night already here and the night due to arrive
are the same type of night: Mountains and rivers dead quiet, blood slowly purling;
the night already here and the night due to arrive
are the same type of night, forcing
the bright even brighter, the dim even dimmer.
The night arrives in this place, I recollect, I soar,
I almost cannot find myself --
when I alight on the atrium in the heart of flowers. I hear
a clock strike twelve, as if twelve little people beat on iron,
as if twelve small birds suffer divine retribution, wings cut off,
they heavily fall on the floor.

Do you remember that woman who truly stood out
pursued to exhaustion by dance after dance,
in the end actually walking home barefoot?
Do you remember that guy who almost destroyed your life
disappeared at dawn on a winter's day,
without leaving a word of regret?
And if you cherish the memory of a person, then please
at twelve midnight facing a mirror peel an apple,
fixedly attentively, softly softly call him.

O, if at this moment he appears in the mirror,
a phantom, like a messenger from another world,
like a blizzard that passed through another century,
(a soldier from 1085 or a sailor from 1521,
a teacher from 1883 or a pilgrim from 1999)
please do not clutch the haft of your knife out of fear, please answer his timid "good evening";
behind him, perhaps souls breed souls
and trample the open country dark green, perhaps souls meet souls
and their custom is to kiss;
and if you have enough courage to closely watch his back,
perhaps you will see an army of souls ruled by silence.

#3

Somebody knocks -- Who? Who is it? Who's there?

I open the door, open all my hair follicles too:

There is nobody. Nobody. Nobody.

But if there is no one, the overhanging rock would make some move,
will we make our acquaintance with the bad luck of those lofty dinosaurs?
Smaller animals grow more easily.

A little boast by us and it's hard to avoid feeling inferior.

Scarcer by the day beliefs, like dark purplish red wine a hundred years ago,
already costly enough to be collectables

at any time can induce wide-scale drunkenness.

We wait for the collector of faith. We imagine her as
a peacock princess or a girl with lilacs in her hands.

But from start to finish she never showed her face, she made
the four seasons seem like four birds in disorderly flight, made
an impatient youth sketch her genitals in a public toilet.

When song becomes narrative, when the moon hesitates,
people longing for love turn on the TV set,

people yearning for purity close the doors draw the curtains,

people longing for a storm have a buzzing sound in the head,

people yearning for truth are sickly weak, paralyzed in bed.

The clown who is at my shoulder becomes brothers with me
and quietly tells me, without the sound of applause he can't answer the curtain call!

The magistrate who resides in my brain energetically upholds the integrity of his old age,
swears he will not die before he sees god.

Such a nice night, a cool breeze delivers the souls of flowers
transmigrating into shortsighted good men

each and everyone of them sheds poverty and for the first time comes across an intuitive friend.

I also encounter an intuitive friend, for him I hum a lullaby.

Sleep well! Sleep well! But I am wide awake till the final moment:

Lingering in the depths of the continent I am far from the sea.

Lingering in the depths of the moment I am far from the future.

#7

The night already here and the night due to arrive
are the same type of night: Mountains and rivers dead quiet, blood slowly purling;
the night already here and the night due to arrive
are the same type of night, forcing
the bright even brighter, the dim even dimmer.
To a creator a world tending to two extremes
is a conundrum; two completely opposite people
are predestined to meet in a graveyard.
You sleep in someone else's flower garden, sleepless, you unearth gems.
The woman you saw in someone else's home
perhaps precisely she who for many years you sought.

The silent nonpurposeful light of the sun moon and stars falls from the sky,
and the life encompassing extinction is convinced it must assume an undertaking.
Perhaps this is a response of the whole,
a blindness the intellect cannot understand
mingling with hesitation and shock directed at oneself.
One person alive is many people living,
it is many people rubbing their temples whispering,
it is many people sitting under walnut trees waiting for the walnuts to ripen.
We see through everything but cannot leave it all in back of the mind;
memory tracks us, gives us a three-dimensional form.

Only a person with feelings soft as water, who grasps the night's dim light
can have a mind to revive the good times and the hard times of the past,
watch a hawk's skeleton scatter over a river's alluvial fan,
attract mosquitoes, watch a squad of ants
traverse the Martian plain of his palm.

Perhaps this is the experience of everybody that I speak out:
A cock's crow. Dawn light. A first drink of alcohol.
A thaw. Spring. A first love.
And later matters have no real need to be said --
Those things that happen today, those that occur in the soul,
the sustained knocking sound, the sound of footfalls in the clouds,
one hundred years ago, perhaps were everywhere on everybody's lips.