

# The Edge of the Island

島嶼邊緣

Poems of Chen Li



Translated by  
Chang Fen-ling

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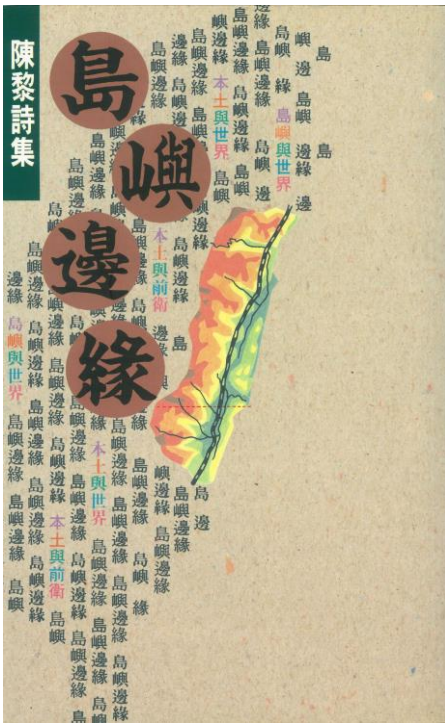
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## Translator's Introduction

Chen Li (born in 1954) is one of the foremost practitioners of contemporary Chinese poetry in Taiwan. He started writing poetry in the early 1970s and has published thirteen collections. In a writing career spanning more than forty years, his poetic style has undergone several transformations. Originality, variety, wittiness, and profundity have always been his signal traits; fluent command of imagery and innovative technical experimentation are characteristic of his works.

Born and brought up in Hualien, a small city on the east coast of Taiwan, Chen Li derives much of his inspiration from his hometown. In the postscript to his collection *Animal Lullaby* (1980), he writes, "Isn't the mundane world the greatest theme of my poetry?... I can never forget what's coarse and humble in our residence on earth." And from the vulgar and twisted fragments of life in this small city, he has come to realize the imperfection and confusion of human conditions. In his first collection *In Front of the Temple* (1975), he cherishes nature by celebrating the innocence of his attachment to his childhood, hometown, and motherly love (which are treated here as symbolic of nature). On the other hand, he sarcastically hammers on the unnatural and inhumane phenomena of modern life. In either way, his concern and sympathy are focused on the limitations and dignity of ordinary people.

In his second book *Animal Lullaby*, Chen Li is no longer a sarcastic realist; he reveals himself as a romantic-symbolist. The longing for nature and the sarcasm directed at city life are now recast more generally as meditations on life and time. He builds up a world of imagination and sketches beautiful experiences, trying to seek out of the limited and fragile reality a certain order to wrestle with the ridiculousness and disorderliness of the world. The chaos and absurdity of man's situations on earth are illustrated in "In a City Alarmed by a Series of Earthquakes." Chen Li sometimes takes a dark view of life: the world is a prison in itself and everyone is born into it as a prisoner

(“A Handbook to Prisoners”); people can’t be free from fear, and even “a sudden shower” deprives them of their sense of security. However, the poet is not a pessimist; he is curious and imaginative enough to get joy out of life. In the second collection, there is a recurrent motif—the world as a theater abundant in dramatic scenes. In “The Lover of the Magician’s Wife,” Chen Li lets one image after another flow out to express vividly and fluently the caprice of the magician’s wife and the ever-changing atmosphere of magic. In the process, the poet himself is revealed as a magician of imagery.

Chen Li shows much concern for people who suffer through life in anxiety and fear. They are “alarmed by a series of earthquakes;” they are threatened by the temporality of life; they are troubled by desire; they are confined physically and mentally; they mourn for the loss of innocence (the teacher in “Among School Children”); they humbly long for human dignity (“The Love Song of Buffet the Clown”). Chen Li’s compassion for human plight and understanding of human suffering are clearly expressed in the title poem “Animal Lullaby.” Chen Li successfully avoids sentimentality by implying his theme through careful choices of imagery and tone. This poem is set in a tranquil and peaceful world, but it’s a “garden without music,” which may well be viewed as a garden of eternal sleep—a graveyard (the heavy steps of the grayish elephant imply a funeral procession). In this poem Chen Li points ironically to the cruel fact that death seems to be the inevitable solution to human suffering.

Chen Li’s humanism is most explicit in “The Last Wang Mu-Qi,” which won the first prize for poetry in the China Times Literary Contest of 1980. In this long poem, Chen Li exhibits his talent for narration and lyricism, and reconciles the contradiction between sense and sensibility, art and reality. The narrator of this poem is Wang Mu-qi, a miner who has died in a mining calamity. Through him, Chen Li attempts to reflect miners’ reality, presenting their fears and nightmares, sorrow and anxiety, dreams and longings. Contrasts are cleverly juxtaposed: we hear Wang Mu-qi’s ghost relating the pathetic tragedy, we hear the wretched families’ heartbroken sobbing, we see miners’ miserable

living conditions and share their fatalistic views of life, but we also see a Utopian dreamland Wang Mu-qi pictures in his mind; we see sixteen pairs of “black” images composed as an elegy, but we also see Wang Mu-qi’s letter to his wife—full of affection and tenderness; we see the miners’ distressing plight, but we also see the poet cynically criticizing those who are indifferent to the suffering. Throughout the poem, the misery of the living is contrasted with the relief of the dead. The dark group of images alternates with the bright one, contradicting yet complementing each other, and the intensity of the whole poem is thus developed.

In the “Rainstorm” series of the third book, *The Love Song of Buffet the Clown* (1990), Chen Li expresses, after an interval of nearly ten years, his deep affinities with the land where he lives—its history, its culture, its society, its people. Meditation about life and time is now replaced by retrospection on the history of Taiwan and reflection on his own Taiwan experience. He writes of those “Rebelling against the foreign regime while ruled by it. / Raped by the fatherland while embracing it” (“February”); he uses the green onion as a symbol of indigenous Taiwanese culture, expressing his earnest aspiration to get reacquainted with and cherish his living environment in its entirety—its culture, art, literature, and history (“Green Onions”); through the work of sculpture *The Portrait of Water Buffalo* by Huang Tu-shui, a gifted pioneering Taiwanese sculptor, he perceives the suffering and toughness of the Taiwanese people, protests implicitly the injustice of the society, and goes deep into the secret dreams of his island (“Buffalo”); he looks forward to a better future: the coming generations are imagined as able to appreciate the value of tradition and the land in a world where a diversity of voices and ideas are highly respected and tolerated.

Chen Li has expanded the territory of his hometown into a fountain-head of images and symbols, and Taroko Gorge, an iconic site with mysterious beauties and of a personal “heritage” significance, is undoubtedly an ideal symbol for Chen Li to integrate his Taiwan experiences and his Taiwanese identity. “Taroko Gorge, 1989,” though

not the longest, is arguably his most ambitious poem on account of its integrated fields of environmental and cultural consciousness. In this poem Chen Li describes the various and changeable scenic features of Taroko Gorge to suggest the complexity of the fate of Taiwan; he leads the reader to review Taiwan's suffering, look back on its lost culture, and acknowledge the fact that it has become a melting pot of different races, different ways of life, and different cultures. With time passing, Taroko may never recover its original indigenous features, but the new life emerging from it brings forth a renewal of energy, vitality, harmony, and sweetness for the human spirit. The poem ends with the Buddhist chanting at the mountaintop temple, suggestive of a realization of life—when the depths of human hearts are as vast and grand as the natural setting of Taroko Gorge, all hatred, sorrow, frustration, and bitterness can be shed, endured, soothed, or even transcended, just as the inhabitants of Taroko Gorge, assimilated to one another, have come to accept racial differences and cultural complexities as part of life's bitter sweetness.

After the "Rainstorm" series, Chen Li finds a new direction for his poetics in his fourth collection, *Traveling in the Family* (1993). Unburdened of the solemn meditation about history and culture, he turns to his own life experiences for inspiration. He ponders over the essence of life in plain language and restrained sentiment. In the title work, which consists of seven poems, Chen Li presents with tenderness and affection, in a series of compassionate vignettes, a family's traumatic history. The dark undertone of this group of poems is wrought in images of misery with the shattered incompleteness of life, the unifying theme of the series. However, what coexists with this melancholy is human warmth—family love, dreams, toughness, and tolerance—with which sorrowful mothers silently embrace "anxious fire" and "the waves that turn back" ("Traveling in the Family"); poor children do all they can to protect their precious school satchels, on whose contents their future hopes depend ("Stairs"); the aged and sickly grandfather "seems to smell the fragrance of flowers" while waiting in a narrow house for the sunset ("The Garden"). And through the images of

circles in “A Rider’s Song” Chen Li expresses his compassionate hospitality toward life. The bracelet, ring, and necklace in this poem symbolize on the one hand life’s inescapable bondage and family ties, but on the other, unceasing human love and commitment to life.

Chen Li picks his images and scenes from everyday settings. Memory is like a scarf which is “used in winter, forgotten in summer” (“An Intimate Letter”); meeting with his mother at the crossroads reminds him of the relationships within the family, which are seemingly intimate yet actually alienated, seemingly alienated yet actually closely-related. Such paradoxes are treated by the poet as exemplary of human relationships in general (“An Encounter”). In the cup from which we drink water every day, he sees a river in which flow the shadows of time; life comes and goes in the same way that a camellia or a jasmine flower blooms and falls (“The River of Shadows”). In all these poems, life is a great magic in itself, and we are all living in a world of ever-changing enchantment where nothing is eternal and things are not what they appear to be (“The Magician”). Therefore, the poet, a magician of language, conjures many touching scenes of life out of a flash of emotion, a fit, a stray notion, or a piece of music. In his note on “Postcards for Messiaen,” he quotes a passage from the Japanese composer Takemitsu, “The joy of music, ultimately, seems connected to sadness. The sadness is that of existence. The more you are filled with the pure happiness of music-making, the deeper the sadness is.” And this is true of Chen Li’s poetry writing. As a lover of the mortal world, he has a profound understanding of the sadness of existence.

The most interesting poem in this collection may be “A Vending Machine for Nostalgic Nihilists.” Chen Li designs a game for readers to play. But the sense of fun is not the only thing he offers. He seems to imply that people today are missing some of life’s natural elements, such as mother’s milk, drifting clouds, chirping insects, and twittering birds. But on the other hand, he is offering several types of Utopia for readers to choose from. What a fantastic world it would be if such things were available at any time—hot mother’s milk, large packets of drifting clouds, enduring cotton candy, canned daydreams, perfume

with the twittering of birds, marijuana of freedom and peace, and white moonlight ball pens! It takes an idealist to invent such a vending machine for nostalgic nihilists.

Chen Li's fifth book *Microcosmos I* (1993) is a collection of one hundred three-line poems. Patterning after the Japanese *haiku*, the poet doesn't adhere strictly to its traditional verse form, but adds to it contemporary interest to it, exploring new poetic possibilities. To stimulate readers' imagination with such a concise and compact style is certainly a challenge. These short poems are indeed self-contented microcosms, from which readers may derive the delight of discovering new meaning and sensibility from daily experiences. Chen Li seems to have the insight of finding poetic mystery in even the most prosaic of things. A remote control, a turning dice, ear wax, a multiplication table, a pelota, a mole, soybean milk, a faucet, an insane woman, a pair of sandals, the towels outside a massage house, a blind men's chorus, an erect penis, TV antennae on the roof, and the flush toilet have as much poetic charm for Chen Li as the autumn wind, solitary peaks, clouds, stars, grass, Bartok, Balzac, Baudelaire, schoolchildren, a necklace, a blue silk handkerchief, tears, sorrow, passion, and love. Through *Microcosmos*, the reader encounters the macrocosm, and therein lies the greatest joy of reading these modern haiku. A critic once compared the haiku to a silent bell, and said that a reader must first sincerely learn the skill of tolling the bell before he can hear its mysterious and profound toll. Indeed, a haiku, whose ideas are very often subtly implied through allusive imagery rather than offered explicitly, is best completed by the reader's active mental engagement with the poet's impulse. In reading these poems, the words of Robert Frost are also relevant, "A poem should begin in delight and end in wisdom."

Like all conscientious writers and artists, Chen Li is never restricted to one style. He always has his own angle on the diverse coordinates of art. Therefore, the reader will find a variety of styles and encounter new aesthetic approaches in each of his poetry collections. His sixth book *The Edge of the Island* (1995) offers much pleasant surprise. One of its most impressive features is the poet's experimentation with verse form

in terms of the concrete poem. Only some of Chen Li's concrete poems are included in this anthology because the linguistic symbolism and cultural specificity of many others defy translation. For example, there is no attempt here to translate the poem "A War Symphony," since any relinquishment of its Chinese characters would mean the loss of its poetic charm and the significance of its technical form. Those Chinese characters (兵, 兵, 兵, 丘) and the verse form with special visual effects speak for themselves. This piece is not only a poem, but a picture with sound and sense. In its first stanza, an imposing military force marches to the battlefield; the second stanza is a pathetic battle scene: some soldiers are wounded with one of their legs missing, and others may be killed, as suggested by the blanks interspersed between. And in the last stanza all the soldiers seem to be assembled, yet they may be seen as handicapped or buried in the graveyard. Visually, "丘" suggests soldiers without legs, and literally it means "small hill," where the Chinese dead are usually buried. The hills, though speechless, offer the strongest of accusations against the cruelty of war. "A War Symphony" successfully combines the qualities of images, sounds, and Chinese characters. It is a silent protest against war, a compassionate elegy for those who suffer it, and a tribute to the Chinese language.

Chen Li exhibits his sensitivity to language and his efforts to re-energize it in many other poems, such as "A Prayer of Gears," "Wind Blowing over the Plain," "A Cup of Tea" and "The Autumn Wind Blows." Again it's an unavoidable fact that there is no way to do justice in English to the abundant wit and subtle ingenuity with which Chinese graphemes are manipulated in the "concrete" aspects of these poems. Chen Li deconstructs the familiarity of some Chinese characters and idioms in such a way that their conventional meanings can no longer be taken for granted. He reinvests these signs with the linguistic energy of their original symbolism and leads readers to interpret them from a long-forgotten yet brand-new angle, just as he looks back on the history of his homeland not only to rediscover but also to reappraise its meaning.

Meditation on the history of Taiwan has been a central theme in Chen Li's poetry since 1989. In "Green Onions," Chen Li reexamines his own residence on the island of Taiwan, analyzing its significance both in history and in the personal territory of his life. In "Taroko Gorge, 1989," he looks upon his hometown as a symbol of vitality which comes from interracial hybridization and tolerance; in "Hualien, 1939," he rearranges the scattered voices and historical scenes, representing the touching temperament and image of a new-born city where different cultural and racial elements coexist. In "Formosa, 1661," he takes the reader further back to the seventeenth century, when the Taiwanese were under the rule of Holland and would soon be governed by Zheng Chen-kong, a general of Ming Dynasty who drove out the Dutch in 1662 and tried to establish Taiwan as a base from which to regain sovereignty over China. Chen Li boldly combines two seemingly contradictory elements in this poem—a serious historical theme and imagery suggestive of sensuality and sexuality. These contrasts contribute to the post-modern interest of this poem. The speaker of this poem is a Dutch missionary with a sense of racial superiority and a sense of entitled satisfaction with his accomplishments on this island. He plays a double role: a colonizer who presumes himself a "civilizer," a master who expects to assimilate the Taiwanese to his own culture but is being assimilated by them in subtle ways. Chen Li expresses no antagonism toward these colonial invaders; he even finds humanity in them. Toward the end of this poem, the Dutch missionary says, "...I've always thought that we are / living on the cowhide, though those Chinese troops are approaching / on junks and sampans with axes and knives / attempting to cover us with another bigger / cowhide," which sarcastically implies that without respect for the indigenous people, no colonizers can justify their invasion or colonization, whether they are the Dutch or the ethnically related Chinese. From "Green Onions" to "Formosa, 1661," as Chen Li goes deeper into the history of Taiwan, he has also broadened his definitions of national identity. In the process of root-seeking, he has come to realize that the vitality of Taiwan arises much from the fact that it is a

melting pot or a palette of various racial and cultural elements. The 17th-century Dutch missionary treated here is no doubt a member in Chen Li's "united family" of Taiwan. Chen Li is persistent in exploring the history of Taiwan. After writing his trilogy of Taiwan—"Taroko, 1989," "Hualien, 1939," and "Formosa, 1661"—Chen Li looks further back and explores deeper into the island's cultural roots. In his collection of poetry *Me/City* (2011), there are a series of poems dealing with some historic constructions and landmarks of Taiwan which are precious memory assets for all the people living on this island. To Chen Li, the conquering Spanish navy soldiers who were conquered by the beauty of the island ("Santiago, 1626") and the Spanish invaders who sat at Tamsui listening to the simple and soft flowing rhythm of the river ("Santo Domingo, 1638") were once new inhabitants of this island, contributing to part of Taiwan's unique culture. What remain conflicts in politics find perfect solutions in poetry.

In the tug of war between politics and art, the power of the latter can never be underestimated, and in the Chinese painter Li Ke-ran, Chen Li finds confirmation of this aesthetic power. The painter's ruler attempts to govern art with "threats under which even plants were taken for enemy troops," while the artist liberates politics with "knife-sharp brushes and ink" ("The Autumn Wind Blows"). With belief in art, the artist has tragically but heroically survived political pressure and dignifiedly become the master who dominates the territory of truth and beauty. Chen Li glorifies the triumph of art over politics, but he knows well the tragic essence behind—what a dear human price the artist may have to pay in achieving such a victory! He is never a naive optimist. In a short poem "Floating in the Air," he compares a poet to a spider:

A spider, I imagine,  
occupying a few branches  
to spin out poetry—  
transparent stanzas interweave an empire,  
a self-contained sky  
baptized by rain and wind.

And in “The Ropewalker,” he compares himself to a comic tightrope walker of a circus, who trembles in the air “cautiously walking across the earth, propping up / the floating life, / with a slanting bamboo cane, / with a fictitious pen.” Burdened with thoughts of “time, love, death, loneliness, belief, dreams,” the poet is dangling on the rope of art and trying hard to find his balance. Similarly, in “The Image Hunter,” Chen Li depicts the photographer Kevin Carter as precariously balanced between morality and art, conscience and duty, death and beauty, reality and aesthetics.

Chen Li’s seventh collection of poetry, *The Cat at the Mirror*, published in 1999, was named in recognition of a work by the French painter Balthus. In this volume, Chen Li continues his experiments with new forms and searches for new sensibility. Here, *what* the poems are about is not as important as *how* they are expressed. He puts in his poems certain musical elements when exploring various human experiences or emotions; he makes his poems a “composition” of colorful lines or narrative blocks, which reflect the joy and sorrow of love, the lightness and weight of desire, the splendor and shadows of existence; he brews the modernistic and post-modernistic wine in the casks of myth and balladry; with compassionate tenderness and profound understanding, he turns many snowy scenes in the memory into new landscape of life. These poems travel well between the real world and the fictitious, dive deep into life, and transcend it.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, three books of Chen Li’s poems were published: *Agony and Freedom Well-Tempered* (2005), *Microcosmos II* (2006), and *Lightly/Slowly* (2009). In 2012, Chen Li suffered for months with pain in his back and right hand. Unable to use the computer or write with pens, he could only circled around words with pencils from some published texts (such as the Bible, works of Shakespeare, Neruda, Szymborska, and his own) to create new poems of his own in what he called a “half-automatic” way of writing. A perfect example is “‘The Love Poem’ Renewed”—an English haiku based on a 36-line poem by the English poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy.

In rearranging the words he picked out of other texts for his “half-automatic” writing, Chen Li set rules for himself to follow. These rules were not limitations but instead opened up radical new possibilities for word choices just as the strict requirements on sound and meter in traditional Chinese poetry or English sonnet forms require poets to choose very bold and unusual words. In this sense, limits set on the play of words actually made for greater risk-taking and consequent liberation of the poet’s imagination.

Therefore, although physical pain disabled Chen Li from writing with the convenience he was accustomed to, the acute mental stress caused by his physical constraints unexpectedly resulted in tremendous renewed vitality for experimental poetics. The more intense his physical and mental anguish, the greater his energy for self-expression. Indeed, he found writing itself an effective way of fighting depression. In three months, he completed more than three hundred poems. That was quite remarkable. The results are presented in his two latest collections of poetry: *Evil/Exorcized* (2012) and *Dynasty/Saint* (2013).

What Chen Li has suffered from for the past two years may well be looked upon as a blessing since it has led him to see and record life from a different perspective. He has learned to express his feelings more directly and warmly, but with equal wits and cleverness. In “Mechanics,” the poet wrote in a tone of confession: “For nearly thirty years, I’ve been flying / toward your sky like a ball. / How come I’ve never fallen and vanished / in the void universe behind you, even though / I’m an obstinate nihilist? / Under the swing, I’m grateful for your / tolerating my dissoluteness, which has swung you / from the horizon of disappointment to / a transient climax. Which is heavier / or hurts you more, a newton of / longing or a newton of sorrow?” And in “The Saint in the Kitchen,” he even puts his wife’s name in the poem (though playfully) as a tribute to her: “If you find the title ‘Saint in the Kitchen’ / unpleasant to the ear, I could call you ‘Saint Ah Fen-ling.’ / O Saint, I’m blessed that you have my teeth and tongue / always feeling (ah Fen-ling) good, and that every day you’re / as nagging as a wind-bell hanging at the window of the kitchen, / tinkling and jingling loudly

enough to be heard all over the world.” Any such explicitly autobiographical allusions are rare in Chen Li’s earlier poems.

Being ill, he was in a wintry mood, which led him to ponder once again on the themes of life and death. In “Winter Songs,” the poet compares the grayish blue sea of winter to “an aged giant ship, / lingering outside the harbor, ill at ease when approaching home.” As the season passes, winter is coming home to the world. Likewise, as time goes by, we humans are on our way to death day after day—preparing at home to go home. The cycle of seasons symbolizes the cycle of life and death. What the world offers us is simply a transient residence on earth. A similar notion is present in one of his three-line poems in *Microcosmos II*: “Offer Death a one-night stay in your pocket / to experience your curiosity and timidity about him: / he can try the food and the bed, but it’s not formally open yet.” This time, he added seriousness to his usual witty playfulness of the tone. The learner who used to be “not very attentive in class” is now studying hard on the lessons life has assigned him.

Chen Li chose to teach in his hometown Hualien (“the edge of the island”) after he graduated from university as an English major in 1976, and has been staying at his “seaside classroom” ever since. He once wrote in an article entitled “The Traveler”:

As long as I conceive longing for the world, I’m on the road.  
I know the fifty students in my classroom are fifty different  
guidebooks, leading me to fifty different cities; I know that  
the people I meet every day on the street or by the market place  
have hearts as colorful as all the scenic spots in the world. I...  
duplicate all the cities in the city where I live, and I travel all  
over the world in my world.

Despite his attachment to his hometown, the poet keeps himself well-informed of the world through reading and listening. He writes about his favorite writers, musicians, and artists, and translates works of many poets into Chinese. We find echoes of their voices in Chen Li’s own

works: the Chilean poet Neruda (in “The Last Wang Mu-Qi” and “Taroko Gorge, 1989,” for example), the 18th-century Japanese haiku master Kobayashi Issa (in “A Cup of Tea” and *Microcosmos*), the German baritone Fischer-Dieskau (in “Listening to *Winterreise* on a Spring Night”)... He borrows titles from Yeats, Janáček, John Adams, or Jiří Kylián (“Among School Children,” “An Intimate Letter,” “Short Ride in a Fast Machine,” “Petty Deaths”) and is inspired by the works of Miro, Buffet, Debussy, Messiaen, Cage, Balthus, and Mahler (“A Dog Barking at the Moon,” “The Love Song of Buffet the Clown,” “Footprints in the Snow,” “Dancers of Delphi,” “Postcards for Messiaen,” “An Open Cage,” “The Cat at the Mirror,” and “Saint Antony Preaching to the Fish”). Writing poetry to him is a way to communicate with the world, and each poem is, in some sense, an “intimate letter” to the world.

In the poem “The Edge of the Island,” Chen Li compares the island of Taiwan, which lies in the Pacific Ocean and is reduced to one over forty million on the map, to a yellow button lying loose on a blue uniform, and the existence of each individual on it to a transparent thread. As long as the heart—“another secret button” pressed close to the breast “like an invisible tape recorder”—does not fall off, one can always receive the sound of the world. Humble as a poet is, the pen in his hand can serve as a needle “threading through the yellow button rounded and polished by / the people on the island” and piercing hard into “the heart of the earth that is behind the blue uniform.” With profound understanding of life and with strong faith in poetry, the poet turns the edge of the island into the center of poetry.

Chang Fen-ling  
Hualien, Taiwan, 2014



## I *Poems 1974-1989*

廟前

動物搖籃曲

暴雨



## **Impression of the Sea**

Entwining herself about a shameful giant bed,  
that debauched woman lies the whole day  
with her wild lover,  
pushing a huge white-laced water-blue quilt  
now  
    here,  
then  
    there.

(1974)

## **My Mistress**

My mistress is a slack-stringed guitar.  
Hidden in the case, her smooth body  
is kept away from moonbeams.

Occasionally I'll take her out,  
holding her in my arms, gently  
touching the back of her cold neck.  
Winding with the left hand, touching the strings with the right,  
I tune her in various ways.  
Then she tenses herself into a real  
six-stringed instrument, spreading intensely  
her easily-ignited beauty.

But when I start playing, the strings  
suddenly  
break.

(1974)

## How I Photographed for Playboy

1

The moon was as clear as a mirror then. Flashing and shining, an amazing monster-revealing mirror reflected all the sleeping darkness. The glass beads in my eye sockets turned and turned like two telephoto lenses, piercing into every private part.

Extending and extending. The moon was a magnesium light, my brain a reeling roll of film. High above, above the morning idleness, the afternoon depression and the night filth, high above, I photographed for Playboy.

2

From Saigon Roses to unpicked daisies, how, at midnight, our playboys shot their nourishing urine at the flowers of evil with tear gas guns. I was witnessing. How they showed without reservation their bravery and righteousness and activeness and generosity after drinking home-made imported wine. Ah, how they enthusiastically supported the poverty-sweeping project they were in charge of, saying smilingly that they had—too much money.

Youthful desires struggling in front of the small hotel finally, like the attracted iron sand, reported their arrival to the magnetic buttocks. How here was one curtain after another, yet there was only a thin board serving as the wall. Pictures were my proofs. How all the windows had turned off their lights, and the only one who bored the wall for light didn't do so for the sake of the entrance exam.

3

The theme of this roll of film is getting rid of filth and chaos. Those gentlemen's saliva flowed into the end of the ditch with filthy water. It was a sightseeing district, a scenic spot of the small town. Ah, in my enlarging lens, the drowsy town was not asleep. How the low wooden houses squeaked. A woman disseminating smiles with cosmetics cursed

her customer's mother in awkward Mandarin; after the belt was fastened, she quickly translated it into Taiwanese.

My models posed in every place they could lie down. Eager and lusty, eager and lusty. My camera was busy working. How they left historic scenes after conducting public or private affairs, doing business or running schools. How they said it was in life as in dream, it was in dream as on the stage, and the hazy night was the best stage. I saw the best husbands help others' wives fulfill their duties. The latest TV news said a charitable campaign was underway like wildfire. Chewing gum sellers, lottery sellers, glutinous rice dumpling sellers, herbal tonic soup sellers. I saw the moon over my head reflecting the peddlers' hawking, and how my playboys' alcoholic smell and laughter bloomed and yielded fruit in my brain.

3

The moon was rising, rising! And my sight was rising with it. Over the tall buildings, beyond the piling mountain ranges, my lens projected deeper and farther. Going from darkness to further darkness, ah, I began to see dark blue woods, those branches, those leaves. Flower by flower, grass by grass. Their brilliance. Ah, how my color camera failed to work, in the pure and clean scenery, how my busily turning eyeballs stayed motionless: keeping awake, like the sleepless moon.

The white moon, the white moon, over the black earth! How I photographed, photographed, and photographed for Playboy, yet what my film developed was simply black-and-white scenery.

The wind was blowing. Crystal-like dewdrops fell one by one...

(1975)

## **A Handbook to Prisoners**

We didn't understand what people said about our parents, that they had committed murder, and about the various theories of heredity. When we went through, the door was open, with the cut ribbons scattered bright red on the ground. We really didn't know who presided at those inaugurations. The passage that followed seemed all the narrower, and dark. To be frank, it was so dark that our eyes were as helpless as two lighted bulbs in broad daylight. We could only grope along, seemingly hearing the dripping of water and feeling thirsty. What stopped us was, as we expected, a door. One of us said that we had the key with us. The door opened, and to our surprise he said,

“We've committed murder!”

Sir, we are truly innocent because we were really in the very, very dark darkness, knowing nothing except a sound much like that of the scissors.

(1976)

## **Footprints in the Snow**

Cold makes for sleep,  
deep  
sleep, for  
a feeling soft as a swan.  
Where the snow is soft, a hastily scrawled line is left  
in white, white  
ink,  
hastily because of his mood, and the cold:  
the hastily scrawled  
white snow.

(1976)

## **Dancers of Delphi**

There wandering, a lad with his lute and poems.  
There, under the moonlit laurel tree,  
the dancers of Delphi sprinkled wine all over the ground  
and the moon fell into a trance.  
Those fond of asking riddles kept swinging their hair-trailing heads,  
thinking of nothing but melancholy and dark thick eyebrows.  
How did he know,  
how would he suspect those whirling myrtles and ivies weren't their  
bodies?  
How would he? Such exquisite and life-like description:  
smiles, sculptural relief, all the mysterious occurrences.  
There, the dancers of Delphi sprinkled wine all over the ground.  
There, a lad with his lute and poems.

(1976)

## **The Lover of the Magician's Wife**

How can I explain to you this breakfast scenery?  
Orange juice falls off the fruit tree, and then flows along the river into  
cups;  
sandwiches are conjured out of two beautiful roosters.  
The sun always rises from the other end of the eggshell, in spite of the  
strong smell of the moon.  
The table and chairs are just hacked off from the nearby forest;  
you can even hear the leaves crying.  
Maybe walnuts are hiding under the carpet, who knows?  
Only the bed is stable.  
But she's so fond of Bach's fugues—the magician's wife whose  
fickleness is due to  
people's incredulity. You can't but stay up the whole night fleeing  
with her.  
(I'm most likely the one who pants after her dog-tired...)  
I'm afraid after she wakes up she'll play the organ, drink coffee, and  
do her calisthenics.  
Alas, who knows whether the coffee is boiling in the hat?  
It's my turn, perhaps, to be the next garrulous and verse-parading parrot.

(1976)

## Animal Lullaby

Let time be fixed like a leopard's spots.  
A tired bird glides over the water, softly dripping its  
tears like a shot arrow waiting to land.  
This is the garden, the garden without music. The grayish  
elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks  
you to guard the honeycomb, the honeycomb without bees.

I will put away dewdrops for the night, for the grass without clothes  
when the stars  
rise in the sky, getting higher than the giraffe in the doorway.  
Let nursing mothers leave their infants like  
a cat finally loosens its arched back, no more  
abstractly insisting on the color of love, the height of dreams,  
for this is the garden, the garden without music.

When the awkward donkey parades, don't imitate his snoring.  
Let time stop breathing like a bear playing dead lies down quietly,  
some white flowers swatting his eyelashes, some butterflies.  
I will wipe the doorplate for the cattle pen, for the swallows without  
eaves when  
the grayish elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks  
you to mend the broken column, the broken column without sorrow.

This is the garden, the garden without music. Circling eagles, cease  
hunting; hunting dogs, stop running—like an angel's forehead,  
it's wide enough for fifty castles and seven hundred carriages.  
Let the children far from their mothers return to their mothers,  
like some long forgotten myth or religion is rediscovered and re-  
adhered to.  
I'll praise and pray for the fruit trees, the fruit trees bare of their fruit.

Let time be fixed like a leopard's spots,

some white flowers swatting his eyelashes, some butterflies.  
Don't disturb the wrath of the lion soundly asleep.  
This is the garden, the garden without music. The grayish  
elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks you  
and the mud to cover his footprints quickly.

(1977)

## Love Song

We'll wait until love and the sunset descend to our ankles.  
I suddenly think of the midsummer, feeling my  
face is like a glass overbrimming with juice.  
But your eyes are an acre of dark purple glass grapes  
which will never explode for the overloaded gaze.

We'll wait until all the florists in the city pluck away time from the  
clocks.  
Our dream was once the unique giant garden,  
the most brilliant and accurate star chart.  
A stranger may come to inquire about the route at night.  
He'll tap our foreheads lightly  
and wonder at their solidity.

You'll find how close the next morning is to us  
when your bracelets and my kisses are all engraved in the pillars of the  
temple  
to illustrate all the abstract virtues.  
Yet you won't know how long eternity lasts  
until all the poems dedicated to you are written down in scriptures:  
recited by insects and birds.

(1977)

## Among School Children

1

The singing rules of insects can never be broken.  
Fruits of the chinaberry covered the whole area for sweeping  
like the lowercase letters just taught this morning.  
The sweeping students spelt new words with fingers.  
One sprinkled water,  
seven or eight long broomsticks reaching the ground.  
The one who walked outside the wall might be the civics teacher.  
The clouds peeped on the top of the tree; the net  
enclosed the future tentatively.  
The bells rang loud,  
settling a day's argument publicly:  
    Play while ye work,  
    Work while ye play.  
On the vast campus, you heard only one  
sound.

2

Raindrops then followed. I stood  
in the middle of the corridor to work out puzzles  
for the last student.  
On such evenings I too had asked questions of my teacher.  
I was once as patient as a pond,  
as confused as now.  
The rainy sky poured all the words of the book into the rain.  
This is a cat. This is a dog. These are not apples.  
Are those trees?  
    (Sir, someone's plucking flowers!)

The sudden cry held back my action.  
"Ha, who is it  
that dares to encroach upon our holy meadow?"

His pale yellow raincoat glittered,  
their tiny feet were bare.  
My eyes dared not rush out of the sockets  
to revolve, revolve with a tiny pink umbrella.

What a green meadow!  
He danced on the taboo that we dared not trample.  
Torrential music.  
Endless transparent coniferous woods.  
The rain was piercing.  
I dared not approach the strange freshness.

3

You didn't need a book.  
Your dance knew no start or end.  
You didn't need a pile of expressions loaded with meaning:  
desks and chairs, repeat after me,  
stand up, sit down...But why,  
why did you wander to my classroom  
to play in the luxuriant flowers,  
to grow in the rain?  
Raindrops meant only sounds,  
bitter fallen leaves, to you, meant  
mere shapes.  
Oh, how I wished to cry out,  
to bid you stay there, no more chasing, no more talking—  
stay there

like any young tree:  
no need to know about time,  
no need to understand the garrulous foreign language.

(1977)

## A Love Poem

We must welcome all kinds of  
possible quarrels,  
let different feet experience different  
meters: crooked metaphors,  
paradoxical expressions,  
for love has only one theme.

For instance, I, fond of making couplets, may say  
“Sorrow is made of nothing more than care, jealousy follows women  
everywhere,”  
while you, sticking to your poetic rule, would in a half-new way  
refute that  
“suspect,” an abstract verb,  
cannot be rhymed with “me.”

Oh, we must master the various skills of rhetoric:  
hyperbaton, hyperbole...  
and like alchemists, transform everything, everything  
unbearable into gold—  
for love,  
love is really too huge a rock.

(1978)

## The Love Song of Buffet the Clown

Simply because half the world's sorrow is resting on his nose,  
Buffet the Clown stays awake the whole night. He laughs,  
radiating light as dutifully as a street lamp.  
No other machine is more awkward; he hangs a hammer on his breast  
to guard, to watch over time,  
as if his hands rather than his legs were the clock hands of infantile  
paralysis.

Our righteous Buffet knows no hunger.  
He lives frugally, keeping his figure slim for the numerous affectionate  
ladies on the balcony.

His hat is a weathercock whose paint is chipped,  
chasing the dandruff of dreams day and night.  
His eyelashes are the illegitimate children of pelicans.  
His sighs are the female cousins of crows.  
But how proud the neck covered with lipstick marks,  
persisting in its slenderness more gracefully than a giraffe.

Simply because half the world's happiness is resting on his nose,  
Buffet the Clown stays awake the whole night.  
He laughs, he laughs, behind the eyes as sour and yellow as lemons.  
For the tiny eyedrops of love  
he must cry, must pretend to cry sadly.  
No more honest magic can ever be seen.  
He presses a curved glass wand close to his ears  
to turn the evil curse into grape juice and make it flow into his mouth.  
But you must forgive him for his speeding heartbeat;  
timid Buffet is at best half a great ropewalker,  
dancing shakily before the slanting electric guitars.  
Ha, when the ladies and stars are frustrated in love,  
Buffet the Clown reads the moonlight  
and imitates a broken clockwork orange, singing silently.

Simply because half the world's superiority is resting on his nose,  
Buffet the Clown stays awake the whole night.  
He cries, he laughs, in the upside-down dressing mirror.  
For the sake of the ladies' bright spirits  
he adorns himself carefully, rubs laboriously  
and polishes his wits as if they were worn-out shoes.  
And without his knowledge dust moves into his hair,  
wrinkles of desire crawl up his babyish face like a giant spider...  
Ha, Buffet the Clown has no mask.  
Buffet the Clown has no Oedipus complex.  
He must get angry, must get jealous,  
must write his love poems on every disposable advertisement like a  
    forgotten hero,  
and on the great morning—  
march into the printing house of sunshine with all the vermiform  
    appendixes in the city.

(1978)

## **A Sudden Shower**

As cruel as last night's bats.

Flapping, the giant wings abruptly break into  
the aluminum doors and windows of sleep open to attack,  
leaving an ill omen pitilessly on midday's mouth:  
screaming—

you find around you melted and stiffened time,  
crisscross paths interlocking one another,  
the fear of getting lost becomes wet faster than the ground:

I prefer my world to be smaller than a candy box,  
more solid than fragile glass.

(1978)

## **In a City Alarmed by a Series of Earthquakes**

In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes, I heard  
a thousand black-hearted jackals say to their children,  
“Mother, I was wrong.”  
I heard the judge cry  
and the priest repent. I heard  
handcuffs fly out of newspapers, blackboards drop into a manure pit. I  
heard  
literary men put down their hoes, farmers take off their glasses,  
and fat businessmen take off their clothes of cream and balsam one by one.

In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes,  
I saw pimps on their knees returning vaginas to their daughters.

(1978)

## **The Seaside Classroom**

How far away  
the calls of the harbors and the island!  
In the high school where we grew up together,  
a thousand times, the wind  
has scattered salt lumps into the shining textbooks.

Seated in one corner of the quiet library,  
accompanied by the undulating tides, I am reading page by page  
my students' weekly journals.  
Fishing nets are displayed and dried on the motley beach;  
tourist buses have carried the latest group of foreign visitors here to  
watch the sea.

Just as they approach that white lighthouse in droves,  
I see the purplish red waves fly onto the dike,  
disperse us, who were still young, and then  
cross the railroad,  
slyly tempting my students, who are having class.

I do not doubt that now  
you may be on a distant continent missing the harbor.  
A thousand ships have departed.  
I stay in the afternoon  
to watch over this gradually eroded and retrogressing seaside classroom.

(1979)

## The Dancer in the Kitchen

—for my mother

Twenty-five years like a day,  
in remote Hualien,  
you worked your way through your own college.  
Washing clothes, going to the market,  
getting to work, preparing meals—  
heavy schoolwork deprived you of time for recreation.  
No music class.  
No art class.  
No barbecue or picnic three periods a week.  
No monthly party to welcome the new or see off the old.  
Love was your student ID number,  
and worry your most intimate dictionary.  
Late to bed and early to rise, you studied hard,  
meticulously taking notes of overheard key points:  
only to give,  
to give is the main point of all tests—  
Day and night  
I saw you go to and from school with a big bookbag on the back.  
Before the dim lamp,  
on the windy road riding a bike,  
you devoured the textbooks of life  
more voraciously than a bookworm.

Twenty-five years like a day,  
I saw you write answers in ink of sweat and tears.  
On chilly nights with starlight sharp as a pen  
you paint your dreams by the window as if with magic.  
Daily tests and monthly exams, one paper following  
another—  
your demanding teacher was never satisfied

with your scores.  
Your sons all went north to study  
and graduated one by one.  
But you remained in your college,  
studying home economics once more,  
taking make-up exams in manual work.

I don't know if your staying back every year  
finally relaxed your persistence in academic work.  
Your unbalanced education made you realize  
the importance of aesthetic and physical training,  
the value of youth and health.  
In the deep of night, with few stars in the sky,  
after grading my students' test papers, I walked by your classroom.  
Suddenly I heard a familiar waltz  
coming from the dimly-lit kitchen.  
There I saw you, still young, holding a small tape recorder,  
carried away by your own dancing:  
the refrigerator on the left,  
the electric rice cooker on the right.  
I seemed to hear the bowls and chopsticks in the cupboard clapping  
their hands together  
to accompany you,  
with tomatoes, lemons,  
bitter gourds, and cabbages...

(1979)

## **In the Poorest County of Ours**

—as seen on Jan. 28, a day of religious service

Two hundred million New Taiwan dollars,  
four thousand giant boars,  
forty-six ceremonial arches,  
twenty-three religious altars.  
After three days and nights' fasting and purification,  
knives are presented to butcher chickens, ducks and fishes.

Fifty thousand distant relatives,  
eleven local beggars.

(1980)

## The Last Wang Mu-Qi

Seventy days,  
we have stuck to the profound darkness,  
listening to the coal strata talking with water.  
The recycling quiet is as everlasting as tapes,  
playing back our breath in the minutest detail.  
Roses between the lips,  
maggots on the shoulders,  
the glowworms breaking in remind me  
of the morning stars I saw when I came.  
The Keelung River is snaky and winding.  
The maple trees at Sijiaoting are frost-cold.

Intricate veins,  
mysterious mother.  
We are thus warmly immersed in great  
geology.  
Iron spades, coal carts, dynamites, fears  
have all slipped along cordage of time into cobwebs of sleep.  
White night, black night.  
Black night, white night.  
Our hearts have gradually yielded to  
the uproaring motors, to  
the ancient water running more swiftly with every function of pumps.  
The Keelung River is vast and imposing,  
innumerable bats flutter across the only sky.

Indulged in pure narcissism,  
I am surprised to hear my name called  
along with cymbals, bells, wooden clappers, and sobbing:  
“Mu-qi! Mu-qi!”  
“Oh, Mu-qi! Mu-qi!”

Are you asking me about that sudden deafening explosion?  
Eleven-forty,  
the earth wept for her long-departed babies.  
Tears initiated ten million horses of torrents,  
which crazily galloped and ran after me  
in the crooked and muddy tunnel,  
tumbling baskets,  
tumbling wooden shelves.  
They went roaring by  
before we could possibly recognize them.  
I saw them trampling down Wan-lai's shoulders.  
I saw them trampling down A-xin's forehead.  
Yet we didn't even dare to escape  
when we found more horses swarming in from all sides,  
gnawing our eyes,  
swallowing our hands and feet...

All these came suddenly, just like the scene in  
the movie we saw last spring,  
and we had failed to surmise the sorrow in it.  
How I envy you, the elder who is shuffling by the mine, left foot  
crippled by the fallen rocks.  
How I adore you, the young man who is still rolling about  
in piles of coal.  
But haven't I heard you talking and laughing loudly  
when, having smoked the last cigarette, you sat on the morning wood  
    waiting to get into the mine,  
when, hoeing lumps of coal, you let your sweat drip into the lunch  
    boxes?  
And on those nights of wine bottles as dark as abysses,  
in the enchantment of dice as black and hard as coal mines,  
haven't I seen you yelling,  
panicking and trembling?

Seventy days.  
We have been lying on death's breast so solidly.  
In the profound and brilliant darkness,  
our dreams  
are the darkness far more brilliant and profound—  
glittering maps,  
eternal kingdoms.

Shu-xian, Huo-tu:  
Did you see our newly-completed town of miners?  
Neatly-planned buildings,  
lush boulevards.  
Zhao-ji and Qin-xiang are living right next door to Shuei-yuan, close to  
the biggest aquarium.  
The cinema is next to the beauty parlor.  
The clinic, the opera house, the supermarket—all half a minute's walk.  
Li Chun-xiong, who lived in Villiage Sandiao, has now moved to Gold  
Sesame D Building.  
Zheng Chun-fa, who lived in Village Shangtian, has now moved into  
the 21st floor of Apollo Building.  
Shenaokeng Road is to be made into a big park.  
Fengzaita Road has long become our favorite golf course.

How about coming over to see my newly-decorated house?  
Next to the swimming pool is the garage.  
The living room is in the front.  
The kitchen is at the back.  
On the second and third floors are the bedrooms of my six daughters.  
(Tuesday and Thursday, Professor O of the Art College comes for their  
piano lessons.)  
(Saturday, time for outdoor sketching.)  
(Sunday morning, time for church-going with their mother.)  
You must be wondering where we've hidden our bicycles.

We have had our driver's licenses for months.  
Next to the dining room is our bathroom.  
Next to the bathroom is our alcohol cupboard.  
Next to the alcohol cupboard is our television set.  
Behind the television set is my son's study.  
(Bi-lu, my son,  
I have received the telegram you sent on the 22nd  
from Mazu. The "Wang Mu-tu" on TV is none other than Daddy.)

The bread and butter of sunshine:  
I don't have to be  
the Wang Mu-qi who left home at five in the morning!

No more dilapidated and low-hanging eaves.  
No more jam-packed beds.  
No more bedclothes too short to keep warm.  
No more bowls waiting to be fed.  
Eagerly-waiting wives lost in apprehension deep as a well; their thick  
and coarse hands;  
and  
on every washed, mended, torn, and stained dress,  
the imperishable coal dirt of sorrow.  
The bell rang—  
children after school who played hide-and-seek in the dark workmen's  
hut  
at six p.m. (they never saw their sober fathers).  
Coal dust, powdered milk,  
greedily-gazing falling rocks,  
explosion, loan, silicosis.

Recycling nightmares.  
Recycling tapes.  
Oh, memory, let me  
erase you thoroughly.

A nine-year-old child,  
I saw in the dream my dark-faced father return from the mine  
and beat up Mother without saying a word.  
A seventeen-year-old youth,  
he watched confusedly his naked father  
weeping secretly by the wall—  
were you that young child too, when a black umbrella  
sent the sister to a faraway hospital  
on a stormy night?

Seventy days.  
Do you still send painful disease to the distant hospital?  
Frail mothers,  
aged grandmothers,  
crooked ears,  
broken vertebrae.  
Seventy days.  
Do you still send tormented souls to the distant badminton court?

We are sticking to the damp and dark rock strata, waiting  
to be mined by sunshine.  
Uproarious motors, sand bags, pumps.  
Flags are swaying involuntarily in the dusky air.  
Yu Tian-deng,  
the first to run out of the third bypass on the right to inform us.  
Yu Tian-deng,  
who had four gold teeth in the upper jaw and whose second toe of the  
right foot was missing.  
Have you finally recognized his face,  
his bravery,  
his stupidity?

Get away from the wound of pain.

Get away from the pit of despair.  
Get away from anxiety, sorrow, and waiting.  
Get away from paper money for the dead, ashes, and howling.

Let frightened children return to their classrooms.  
Let fainting old grandmothers return to their rocking chairs.  
Hoes must work.  
Bees must smile.

We are waiting here  
because the proud crowns wouldn't shatter their hereditary jewelry.  
We are waiting here  
because the well-fed cows wouldn't take off their clothes of cream and  
balsam.  
Pottery makers who are trembling among the clay,  
you will know.  
Masons who are dozing among knives and stones,  
you will know.  
Writers who are writing rapidly on manuscript paper.  
Congressmen who are urging emphatically before cameras.

We are waiting here  
because of our fathers and brothers who are of equally humble birth.  
We are waiting here  
because of our fellowmen who have no other choice but to believe in  
fatalism:

Dying streams, black steps.  
Hollow rock strata, black temples.  
Huge ink ponds, black elegies.  
Boiling canyons, black choirs.  
Sobbing moon, black bronze mirrors.  
Coarse heavy linen, black blinds.  
Tangled railroads, black veins.

Burning ore, black dams.

Black windows, eyes of water.

Black grains, spades of water.

Black rings, chains of water.

Black ankles, reins of water.

Black names, dictionaries of water.

Black pulses, pendulums of water.

Black earthen jars, melancholy of water.

Black bedclothes, fury of water.

(Oh, memory, let me erase you thoroughly...)

Seventy days.

Are you asking me about the color of the lawn, the direction  
of the setting sun?

The snakily winding Keelung River is vast and imposing.

Flags are flying.

Flags, are flying.

I see your dark thin figures prop up the newly-woven linens  
in the evening wind.

I see your tin-white lips, your twinkling teardrops,  
so huge and far away,  
dripping toward me.

“Chen-man, my dear wife: No news after the departure.

Have you recovered from the cold?

On such a dark stormy night, how can I picture  
you, standing before the window wearily,  
staying awake from care and looking back at our daughters,  
who have just fallen asleep?

It seems to have been a love story ten thousand years ago.

I saw you, a little girl with a bowknot on the hair,  
come running to play at our muddy mining neighborhood.

Then I saw you, shy and tall.  
Then I saw your furious father's harsh  
eyes:  
'A miner's child?!'  
Yes, a miner's  
child...

It seems to have been a pledge one hundred thousand or one million  
years ago.

I watched you washing and sewing clothes,  
nursing my children and sharing my surname.  
But we had never filled up those three milk powder containers  
with coins. The night was long.  
The sleep got all the narrower for crowdedness.  
Maybe we no longer need  
any milk powder container.  
Things are so expensive,  
and you are so weak.

Is A-xue still feeling pain in her shoulders?  
I've read the letter from Bi-lu. I am  
happy to know he is stout and healthy.  
After his military service, you can take him to the mine  
to see the boss.  
The firm will surely offer him a job.

In the pocket of my raincoat there is a pack of lotus seeds I've bought.  
Do remember to take it out.  
I have left four dry batteries with Uncle Chun-wu.  
Lin A-chuan at Ruiju Road owes me one hundred and five dollars.  
You may as well get it back from him in your free time.  
You can buy a new pair of sneakers for Xiao-hui to wear at the athletic  
meet.  
You should eat more and do less laundry work.

On such a dark stormy night, don't forget to bolt  
all the doors and windows of the house..."

(1980)

*Author's Note: On March 21, 1980, a great calamity happened to Yongan ("Eternal Peace") coal mine in Ruefang: enormous amounts of water welled out and developed into violent and rapid currents. There were many miners working in the mine. Ten, including Wang Shu-xian and Wu Huo-tu, had a narrow escape; the other thirty-four, including Wang Mu-qi, Yu Tian-deng, Lu A-xin, Du Wan-lai, Yu Qin-xiang, Shiu Zhao-gi, Zeng Chun-fa, Li Chun-xiong, and Xu Shuei-yuan, unfortunately died at the bottom of the mine. Because of the constantly falling rocks and the difficulty in pumping out water, it was not until May 10 that they found the first dead body—that of Yu Tian-deng, who was the first to run out of the third bypass on the right, yet turned back to the third bypass on the left to inform his fellow miners and therefore failed to escape in time.*

*The narrator of this poem is Wang Mu-qi, fifty-one years of age, a digging worker of Yongan coal mine. It was reported in the newspaper that his eldest son, Wang Bi-lu, who was serving in the army at Mazu, sent an urgent telegram home to ask if his father was sound and safe, because according to the news report on TV, a miner by the name of "Wang Mu-tu" (a miswritten form of Wang Mu-qi) was on the list of the victims. Besides his wife Wang Chen-man, Wang Mu-qi left behind him six daughters and a son, who were all under age and the youngest of whom was still studying in primary school.*

## Rainstorm

I hear the rainstorm shouting at us,  
ten thousand acres of trembling starlight and shadows.  
I hear the vast ocean crying for her lost babies,  
dark sighs and breaths.

Rotten night,  
rotten night.  
An ideal has died here.  
Do you see that?

Rotten night,  
rotten night.  
An ideal is about to resurrect.  
Do you hear that?

I hear mud and sand carrying pollen,  
stinking water carrying honey.  
I see excrement fostering rice,  
rotten iron supporting insects' chirps.

Swinging among waves is the world's rubbish:  
kernels, waste paper, dead sperm.  
Agitating among waves are the utterances of people:  
prayers, love poems, four-letter words.

Tear the shore open!  
Tear the shore open!  
Do you hear them yelling,  
washing our guardian dam of morality like the rainstorm?

Tear the shore open!  
Tear the shore open!

Do you see their shadows,  
rising from the secret ocean of life like giant trees?

And you— are you still the proud cliff?  
Plunge into that ocean!  
Plunge into that ocean!  
A great love is to be born here!

(1981)

## Song of Big Wind

Thirty years old. The timid look of an infant.

Awake from a nightmare again at five o'clock.  
There is still a teacher to give you tests,  
there is still a secret agent to find fault with you,  
there are still military instructors, tutors, and disciplinary patrols to  
    temper your behavior,  
to evaluate your honesty.  
You wash your face, brush your teeth,  
and before going to the toilet finish the poem you started reading last  
    night before you went  
to bed.  
Pickles. Motorcycles.  
Flag raising. Good morning, teacher.  
Jogging on sunny days.  
Opening and closing an umbrella on rainy days.

A big wind is blowing,  
blowing on the fog of a century's depression,  
blowing on the dust accumulating on office desks,  
blowing on the filth gathering in corners of local-news pages,  
blowing on banality,  
blowing on pedantry,  
blowing on bookbags,  
blowing on the safety helmet of the personnel director.

A big wind is blowing,  
blowing on unbearable tears of one thousand years,  
blowing on travelers stumbling over thorns,  
blowing on starlight thinking in the dark night,  
blowing on furious-looking old writers of futile passion,  
blowing on widows with hatred in dreams and blood in hatred,

blowing on manure,  
blowing on green grass,  
blowing on wild roses in little sisters' hair.

Thirty years old. The heavy steps of a tortoise.  
Still seeming capable of pride.  
Still seeming able to laugh wildly.  
Cold tea. Hot sweat.  
Going upstairs. Class dismissed.  
Ever-twinkling traffic lights all the way. Slogans.  
History. Black fog...

“A big wind is blowing, blowing on what?”  
On all the people with love and tears.

(1982)

## Shadow Fighters

We ride to work on gray shadows in the morning white as soybean milk.  
We ride from work on gray shadows in the evening dense as sauce.  
We're the headless riders who have tossed racked brains to the setting sun.  
We're the Don Quixotes who have hidden the glimmering starlit dream  
in the dark night.

We run after rumors, wipe out the crashing truth,  
hurrah with the puppets whose single movement may result in  
thousands of others.  
We catch at winds and shadows, change with anything new,  
mark time because of helpless circuit.

We take pain for painlessness,  
take dullness for undullness,  
take killing for non-killing,  
take loneliness for non-loneliness.

Poppies. Bankbooks. Lighters. Lunch boxes.  
We duplicate today's garbage and smiles from yesterday's.  
Invisible youth, unrevenged enmity.  
With wide open eyes we watch our bodies and swords getting old, yet  
the hearts remaining young.

We ride to work on gray shadows in the morning white as soybean milk.  
We ride from work on gray shadows in the evening dense as sauce.  
We're the headless riders who have tossed racked brains to the setting sun.  
We're the Don Quixotes who have hidden the glimmering starlit dream  
in the dark night.

(1984)

## **Imitation of Atayal Folk Song**

### ***Passion***

I would rather that my love lived in a far-off place  
so that I might talk to her more boldly and freely.  
(Ah, how like flies and spiders and ants it is  
to whisper in the ear only! )  
I might take her hand, kick her feet  
without having to be afraid of her squint-eyed and broad-shouldered  
uncle and aunt;  
I might praise and sing at the top of my lungs  
without having to fear the nightingale across the street should mimic it  
or spread it out.

I would rather that my love lived in the snowy north.  
There, in heavy drowsiness and a tremor  
she will recall the nocturnal sky of the south more clearly:  
the sweat in May, the heat in July.

### ***Houses***

Some build their houses on the stone,  
some on the steel pillars.  
I build mine on the wine jar,  
swaying and singing with the sweet smell of wine overflowed by  
earthquakes.

### ***The Moonbeam in the Valley***

The moonbeam in the valley flows slowly.  
It flows past the stream bank where my baby plays.  
Antelopes, deer, piglets in fairy tales,  
walk one by one onto her heart.

The moonbeam in the valley flows slowly.  
It flows into my baby's pond of dreams.  
Butterflies, paper boats, silver bees,  
quiver gently with her smiles.

The moonbeam in the valley flows slowly.  
My baby is soundly asleep—  
beautiful flowers come into her dream,  
blooming on her mother's songs.

(1988)

## **The Distant Mountain**

The distant mountain gets more and more distant.

Once, in the morning of childhood,  
with each day's new-born ideal,  
it rose like a morning song on the heart's flagpole.  
It was once the stands in the baseball stadium, a badge on the chest,  
the screen of dreams, the piggy bank of tears.

The distant mountain grows up with you, and watches you grow old.

Between the afternoon wind and antennas,  
between the human dusk and filth,  
behind houses, cars, cords, and knives, all kinds of  
regular and irregular non-blocks—  
the distant mountain is talking to the distant mountain.

It tells you the silence that is never spoken.  
When you are in love, the distant mountain  
comes close again overnight.

(1988)

## Listening to *Winterreise* on a Spring Night

—for Fischer-Dieskau

The world is getting old,  
laden with such heavy love and nihilism.  
The lion in your songs is getting old too,  
still leaning affectionately against the childhood linden tree,  
unwilling to give in to sleep.

Sleep may be desirable, when  
the past days are like layers of snow  
covering human misery and suffering.  
It may be as well to have flowers in one's dream,  
when the lonely heart is still seeking green grass in the wilderness.

Spring flowers bloom on winter nights,  
boiling tears freeze at the bottom of the lake.  
The world teaches us to hope, and disappoints us too.  
Our lives are the only thin sheet of paper we have,  
covered with frost and dust, sighs and shadows.

We dream on the fragile paper—  
none the lighter for all its shortness and thinness.  
We grow trees in the dream which has been erased time and again,  
and return to them  
each time we feel sad.

I am listening to *Winterreise* on a spring night.  
Your hoarse voice is the dream in my dream,  
traveling along with winter and spring.

(1988)

*Author's Note: In January 1988, I heard Fischer-Dieskau, the famous German baritone, singing Schubert's song cycle, Die Winterreise (Winter Journey) on satellite TV. Ever since I was a teenager, I have listened to Fischer-Dieskau's recordings of numerous German songs, and I have never got tired of Winterreise. On this occasion, on a quiet midnight, I saw the performance of so many familiar songs, such as "Der Linderbaum" ("The Linden Tree") and "Frühlingstraum" ("Dream of Spring"), coming out of the throat of the 63-year-old singer, along with the voice of time. I was moved to tears. How much love for art lies in Fischer-Dieskau's aging voice, which reminds one of a life full of vicissitudes!*

## Green Onions

Mother bade me to buy some green onions.  
I passed Nanking Street, Shanghai Street,  
and Chiang Kai-shek Road (which sound strange  
nowadays), and then I reached  
Chung-hua Market.  
I said in Taiwanese to the vegetable saleswoman,  
“I want to buy some green onions!”  
She handed me a bunch of green onions smelling of mud.  
When I got home, I heard the Holland peas in the basket  
telling Mother in Hakka dialect that the green onions were brought home.

I sipped the Japanese soup in the morning as if sucking Mother’s breast  
and took it for granted that *miso shiru* was my mother tongue.  
I ate the *pan* bought from the bakery every evening,  
not knowing that I was eating the bread with Portuguese pronunciation.  
I put the scrambled eggs into my lunch box, put my lunch box into my  
satchel,  
and ate my lunch stealthily after every class.  
The teacher taught us music, the teacher taught us Chinese,  
the teacher taught us to sing “Counter-attack, counter-attack, counter-  
attack the Chinese mainland,”  
The teacher taught us arithmetic:

“If each national flag contains three colors, how many colors  
then do three flags have?”  
The class leader said there were nine, the vice-leader said three,  
the green onion in my lunch box said one.  
“Because,” it said,  
“Whether in the soil, in the market, or in the scrambled eggs with dried  
radish,  
I am the green onion,  
the Taiwanese green onion.”

I traveled around with the empty lunch box smelling of green onion.  
The noise in the market called my name zealously in the box.  
I struggled over the Brahmaputra River, the Bayenkala Mountains,  
and the Pamirs (which don't sound unusual  
at all now),  
then I reached the Green-Onion Mountain Range.  
I said in Taiwanese Chinese, "I want to buy some green onions!"  
The vast Green-Onion Mountain Range gave no answer.  
There was no green onion in the Green-Onion Mountain Range.

All of a sudden I am reminded of my youth.  
Mother is still at the door waiting for me to bring back green onions.

(1989)

## February

Gunshots died away among the dusk flight of birds.

Missing fathers' shoes.

Missing sons' shoes.

Footsteps returning to every morning bowl of porridge.

Footsteps returning to the water of every evening washbasin.

Missing black hair of mothers.

Missing black hair of daughters.

Rebelling against the foreign regime while ruled by it.

Raped by the fatherland while embracing it.

Reeds. Thistles. Wilderness. Outcry.

Missing calendars of autumn.

Missing calendars of spring.

(1989)

## Merry-Go-Round

Merry-go-round. A city park on Sunday afternoon.  
In a ten-dollar song operated by machine  
the world and childhood went round slowly.  
My daughter and I, sitting at two opposite points of a circle,  
rode our respective toy horses parading in the land of the fairy tale.  
Motionless stone lions, stone elephants, stone giraffes,  
joined in the prancing parades in a daze.  
The green mountain, green rivers, the Martyrs' Shrine,  
revolved with us as well.  
We galloped in the overlapped time and space,  
her childhood chasing my childhood.  
I turned around, seeing my father seated behind her back  
chased by my swift-moving childhood.

The Martyrs' Shrine on Sunday morning. My young father  
ran up and down the steps with Mother and me.  
I was eating sushi, Mother was singing sweet songs of flowers.  
Father talked with Mother in Japanese interspersed with Taiwanese.  
A military truck went down the hill loaded with soldiers.  
By the suspension bridge, two indigenous women  
walked from the Mei-lung Stream with newly-caught clams on heads.  
We went up to rest under an iron war-horse carved with "Recover Our  
Territory."  
Ma said the Martyrs' Shrine used to be a Japanese temple.  
I asked what was the difference between a martyrs' shrine and a temple.  
Pa said a temple was built to worship Japanese gods, while the Martyrs'  
Shrine  
was to worship soldiers killed by the communists, or  
martyrs caught by the Japanese.  
I asked if Grandpa's third brother was a martyr, who was caught after  
the retrocession of Taiwan.

Merry-go-round. A city park on an autumn afternoon.  
The history losing weight in the whirling circle.  
The gunshots from the martial prison behind the bamboo groves.  
Cicadas' chirping. Reeds.  
Japanese concrete lanterns coming up all the way along the stone steps.  
Childhood. Wonderland. My daughter and I  
sat on the whirling mechanical horses, listening to our respective  
nursery rhymes.  
"A white egret, driving a dustpan, to the stream bank..."  
Sausage sellers, ice cream peddlers, hot dog and tempura peddlers.  
The ten-dollar mechanical nursery rhyme stopped abruptly  
in the noise of reality. I sat on my wooden horse,  
someone calling, "Papa, Papa, let's go home."  
An autumn afternoon. The shadow-lengthening Martyrs' Shrine.  
I rose, with my daughter in my arms,  
recalling to mind the nursery rhyme she had just learned from her  
grandma:  
  
"Silver moonbeams, a learned scholar, riding a white horse, across the  
lily pond..."

(1989)

## Buffalo

Those officials from the north swarmingly  
stepped down the dim stone stairs, some  
leaning on walking sticks, some coughing lightly.  
Accidentally bumping against a wall with a relief of water buffalo on  
it, they stopped.  
“Water buffalo?” said one of them.  
“Things left behind since the Japanese Occupation times.  
Ha, those ignorant Taiwanese buffalo, fatalistic and naive...”  
They followed an increasing number of visitors into the hall ablaze  
with lights  
and seated themselves in the old hall of the viceroy office of the  
colonial period,  
chatting and executing the Constitution for the people who they had  
never acted on behalf;  
what they chewed in the mouth tired of speech might be  
Taiwan sugar, which they had had so much as to suffer from diabetes.  
Drinking tea, urinating, on the laboriously-carved dreams of the people,  
why should they bother to tell whether bananas or barley is grown in  
the soil under the buffalo’s feet?  
Buffalo are buffalo even if they are led to Beijing.

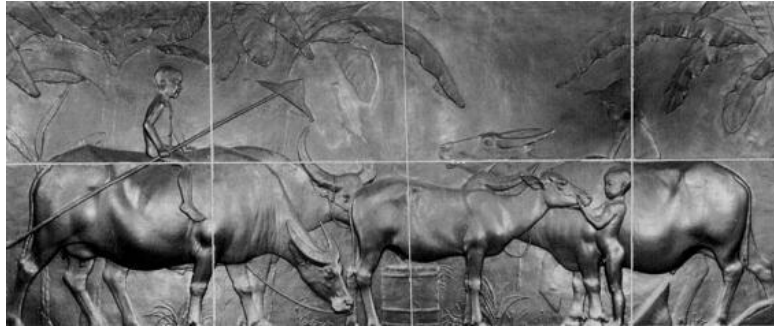
I am thinking in the long night about the relief in the dark corner.  
Five water buffalo, foundling each other joyfully on the green land,  
melt the day’s sweets and bitters together with their master  
in a brief yet comfortable rest.  
Dreamlike green grass, water-like fine wind.  
They turn to accept the earth’s caress after the exhausting plowing.  
That naked shepherd boy may be you, may be I,  
may be our unborn offspring.  
With a long hoe and a short bamboo hat, he plays with the cattle  
on the mid-summer evening of the island.  
They plow their own fields, being their own masters,

reaping the vast splendor of sunset, and the pure moon.  
Five water buffalo, stout as thick and callous palms,  
giant-like, are stamped into the breast of history  
and reach the heart of darkness—

reach the newly-completed city art museum.  
That day, along with the students visiting in a queue the government-  
operated memorial art exhibition,  
I stood before the shining bronze water buffalo.  
I saw more clearly the secret of the island.  
Lingering among those still bright and beautiful paintings and  
sculptures,  
I found what I walked into was not the art history of the Japanese  
Occupation times,  
but the dreams of the island, the heart of the history.  
How far-away and vague those times were!  
Sculpturing his people's images under the oppression of a different  
race,  
soaking his body in the mud of his native land,  
Huang Tu-shui, how transient yet gigantic a life!  
I imagine those pioneers plowing and carrying on their backs this land  
like water buffalo.  
Their passion, guts, perseverance, and wisdom  
go deep into earth like the ever-dripping rain,  
blossoming and yielding fruit in desolation and taboos.

Buffalo are buffalo even if they have never been to Beijing.

(1989)



*Author's Note: The Portrait of Water Buffalo was the famous work of Huang Tu-shui (1895-1930), a gifted, pioneering Taiwanese sculptor in the early 20th century. This work of sculpture is now displayed on the wall in front of the stone staircase between the second and the third floor behind the Kuanfu Hall in Taipei. Recently the Council for Cultural Planning and Development appropriated funds to make two bronze copies of it and presented them to Taipei City Art Museum and Taichung Provincial Art Museum. Wei Qing-de, a poet, once wrote about the sculpture: "This masterpiece, eighteen meters in length and nine meters in height, represents in relief a mid-summer banana orchard: the gentle breeze blows, green leaves flutter, five water buffalo fondle each other on the green pasture, two naked shepherd boys look innocent and carefree—one sitting on the back of a buffalo, with bamboo cane in hand, ...the other standing by a buffalo, passing his hand over it. The scene poetically forms a picture of serene and peaceful landscape of the south."*

## **Autocracy**

They are the lawmen who tamper with grammar at will.

Singular, yet accustomed to plural forms.

Objects, yet presuming to be subjects.

Hungry for the future tense when young.

Indulged in the past tense when old.

Needless to be translated.

Resistant to any changes.

Fixed sentence patterns.

Fixed sentence patterns.

Fixed sentence patterns.

The only transitive verb: suppress.

(1989)

## Taroko Gorge, 1989

1

In a drizzly chilly spring I ponder over the subtle meaning of your  
silence.

Your vastness is a kind of close intimacy.  
The towering mountain walls lie flat at the bottom of my heart like a  
grain of sand.  
Clouds and fog push gently by.  
Lushness revolves and pauses in moisture.  
The tenderness is like breath,  
like the gentle falling of a leaf, the slow flight of a bird,  
and the blossoming of a tree  
on the steep and slippery mountaintop and cliff.  
Your profundity takes in misery and ecstasy,  
as solemn as a lush rain forest,  
or a dark blue starlit sky. Your sonority is  
like lively rabbits and fowls  
passing through last summer's torrential mountain floods,  
galloping on the sunny morning.  
I seem to hear the calling of life to life  
in the deep pond where I used to play in my childhood,  
in the dream from which I awoke with a start last night.  
I seem to see the passion of history  
twisted and frozen by time  
on the surface of crinkled and rugged rocks,  
at the bottom of the valley tumbling with rocks,  
whose veins run like clouds and water,  
in the endless gaze between mountains,  
in the endless reflection of the sky and earth.

Still you simply look silently at me  
walking on your mountain path.

You look at me, time after time,  
stumbling before you  
just like those who have fallen, bled and died  
in your arms for the past thousands of years.

2

How many times you have left your children  
stumbling, hurt and rising in your arms.  
How many times you have left them  
proceeding and lost in the luxuriant forest scattered with rotten leaves.  
You see youth splashing like flying waterfalls,  
flowing into the distant ocean with mountain streams.  
You see floating clouds loaded with dreams,  
vanishing slowly into more giant dreams.  
You let them search for massive rocks to meditate on.  
You let them lean on the toll of bells to go into the evening.  
They grow in the torrential rain.  
You have left them standing by the broken cliff,  
watching water dripping through rocks,  
watching time flowing by like a river day and night.

Time flows by like a river day and night.  
You allowed the red-haired Spaniards to gather gold dust in your gorge.  
You allowed the red-haired Dutchmen to gather gold dust in your gorge.  
You allowed the Chinese driven over the sea by the Manchus to gather  
gold dust in your gorge.  
You allowed the Japanese who drove the Manchus away to gather gold  
dust in your gorge.

To build fortresses, set up cannons, and kill in your gorge.  
To build fortresses, set up cannons, and kill on your mountainside.  
To build fortresses, set up cannons, and kill on your streamhead.

You heard the Han people enter and say to those under their knives,

“Surrender, Taroko barbarians!”

You heard the Japanese enter and say to the people under their guns,

“Surrender, Taroko Barbarians!”

You watched those tattooed people move gradually from the depth of  
the mountain to its foot,

from the foot of the mountain to the plain.

You watched them gradually leave their homes  
in silence.

3

You watched them gradually leave their homes

and come to you,

those Chinese who were driven over the sea by the Chinese.

With postwar explosives, nostalgia, bulldozers,

they dug new dreams among your tangled bones.

Some were missing in the tunnels they themselves had dug.

Some sank into the eternal abyss with falling rocks.

Some had one arm or one leg left,

standing in the wind like a persevering tree.

Some took off old robes, picked up hoes,

and nailed new doorplates by the newly-built road.

From the girls whom they were newly acquainted with in the strange

land, they learned

to graft, mix blood, propagate.

Just like the California plums, cabbages, Twentieth-century pears they

grew time and again,

they planted themselves into your body.

They hung new names of places over the newly-built roads.

In spring,

their great leader, wearing medals of honor,

came to a place named Tianxiang to appreciate fallen plum blossoms.

They paved the royal couches on the hot-spring path, with hot vapor

overhead,  
reciting aloud *The Song of Righteousness*.  
But you are neither Huaqing Pool nor Mawei Slope,  
nor the vague, distant Chinese landscape.

That famous painting master Da-qian, with his trembling hand  
touching his beautiful beard, more elusive than mountain clouds and  
fog,  
painted nostalgia extravagantly with half-abstract splashes of ink  
on your concrete face.  
They painted the picture of the Yangtze River on your mountain wall.  
Yet you are not landscape, not the mountains and rivers in the Chinese  
landscape painting.  
What hangs down from your forehead is neither Li Tang's *Whispering  
Pines in the Mountains*  
nor Fan Kuan's *Traveling among Rivers and Mountains*.  
To those who visit you in air-conditioned tourist buses  
you are beautiful landscape.  
(They are just like the Portuguese who cried out "Formosa"  
in a strange tone when their ship passed by the ocean in the east four  
hundred years ago.)  
Yet you are not Formosa, though you are beautiful.  
You are not the landscape to be carried, hung, or displayed.  
You are living, you are life,  
you are the great and truthful existence to  
those people of yours,  
who vibrate and breathe with the pulse of your veins.

4

I'm looking for the foggy dawn.  
I'm looking for the first black long-tailed pheasant that flew over the  
gorge.  
I'm looking for the indigo and the euphoria that peeped at each other  
through crevices.

I am looking for the first tongues that loudly praise the sea and sunrise.  
I'm looking for the red knees of the setting sun that chased the flying  
squirrels.  
I'm looking for the calendars of trees that changed their colors with  
the changes in temperatures  
I'm looking for the tribe of wind.  
I'm looking for the rites of fire.  
I'm looking for the footsteps of mountain boars that echoed with the  
sound of bows.  
I'm looking for the bamboo houses of dreams that slept on the pillows  
of floods.  
I'm looking for architecture.  
I'm looking for navigation.  
I'm looking for the crying stars in mourning.  
I'm looking for the mountain moon which, like a hook, hung up the  
bloody night and the gorge.  
I'm looking for the fingers that tied themselves with wires and hung  
down thousand-foot-high cliffs to explode with the mountain.  
I'm looking for the light that dug through the wall.  
I'm looking for the skull that hit the bow of a ship.  
I'm looking for the heart that was buried in strange soil.  
I'm looking for a suspension bridge, a song without a shoelace maybe.  
I'm looking for the caves of echoes, a group of significant vowels and  
consonants:

Tangarao, Bunkium, Tupido,  
Tanlongan, Losao, Teruwan,  
Topogo, Sumeg, Lupog,  
Kobayan, Balanao, Botonof,  
Kumoxel, Kalagi, Baga-Paras,  
Kalapao, Tabula, Lapax,  
Qesia, Busiya, Tassil,  
Sexengan, Sidagan, Sikalaxen,  
Qaugwan, Tomowan, Bolowan,

Vetodan, Putsingan, Senlingan,  
Daoleg, Degalan, Degiag,  
Sakadan, Palatan, Sowasal,  
Bunayan, Bololin, Tabokyan,  
Owai, Doyun, Batakan,  
Dagali, Xoxos, Waxel,  
Sikui, Bokusi, Mogoyisi. \*

5

I'm looking for the cave of echoes,  
pondering over the secret of the humble residence on earth  
in a drizzly chilly spring.  
When autumn came, they traveled together on the mountain path in the  
gorge.  
What were waiting in the woods or by the stream  
might be a group of suddenly-swarming monkeys,  
might be two ownerless bamboo houses standing silently  
by the desolate plowland.  
Farther into the ancient path, they crossed a shrub of weeds  
and encountered again the Japanese army trench lying in ambush.  
Still farther on was an indigenous hunting hut built of thatches,  
with a couple of broken pottery pieces left by  
the latest party of archeologists.

We pass by Huitowan  
and arrive at the suspension bridge where stand nine plum trees.  
At the place where Japanese policemen used to be stationed, a modern  
postman  
happily distributes mail into different mailboxes.  
It may be taken away by the old veterans living at Water Lily Pond,  
who will cross the suspension bridge after two hours' walk,  
or by the women living at Plum Village,  
who will come jolting all the way down in a cart.

You jolt along into the evening village.  
A healthy village boy runs excitedly to greet you.  
His agile figure is like the wild deer that his maternal grandfather  
hunted fifty years ago.  
“Papa has made good tea for you!”  
Bamboo Village, the name of their hometown,  
so much like the poetry of Tang Dynasty his father read in his youth.  
Just like the Atayal people who plowed and hunted here fifty years ago,  
they crossed the sea and became the owners of the land,  
growing their fruit trees, raising their children.

6

In the drizzly chilly spring I ponder over the secret of  
the humble residence on earth.  
One toll pushes another.  
Mountains stand beyond mountains.  
I go up the steps, in the twilight approaching slantwise  
the Buddhist chanting of the mountaintop temple.  
Like the repeated beats of waves,  
like your vast existence,  
how simple and yet complicated the low, repeated chanting is—  
tolerating the infinitesimal and the vast,  
tolerating the distressed and the joyous,  
tolerating strangeness,  
tolerating imperfection,  
tolerating loneliness,  
tolerating hatred.  
Just like the low-browed benevolent Bodhisattva, you too are  
the silent Goddess of Mercy,  
impartially looking on the creation of the heaven and the earth, the  
death of trees and the birth of insects.  
The landscape speaks aloud, the skies are boundless.  
I seem to hear the calling of life to life.  
It goes through the crystal look of mountains and waters,

through the caves of eternal echoes,  
and reaches tonight.

The towering mountain walls lie flat at the bottom of my heart like a  
grain of sand.

(1989)

*\*Author's Note: The above are the ancient names of the places in Taroko Gorge. In the Atayal language they refer to different meanings. For example, Tupido, now called Tianxiang, originally means "palm tree;" Losao originally means "swamp;" Tabokyan originally means "sowing;" Putsingan originally means "a must for passing;" Bolowan originally means "echo."*

## II *Poems 1990-2000*

家庭之旅

小宇宙 I

島嶼邊緣

貓對鏡



## Postcards for Messiaen

1

We are all hanging

Tears

Stars

Rainbows

Birds

Over the abyss of time

singing

singing

A garden of sorrow in the air

2

We run on a terrestrial globe

I am in ancient Asia

you are in distant Europe

Someone revolves the earth

we stumble, falling together into  
the melancholy ocean

3

The suffered but serene ocean

Breathe

Breathe

Breathe

Love

4

Like a stretch of waves full of strength and light

Going up  
and down

Like a secret tunnel recycling over and again

From the canyon to stars  
From dream to dream

5

Birds fly into a pentagonal garden  
music streams into music

The west  
The east  
Accord  
Discord

According to what

(1990)

*Author's Note: These poems are written according to some of the music I have heard recently, especially that of Messiaen (1908-1992), Nono (1924-1990), Webern (1883-1945), and Takemitsu (1930-1995). Takemitsu said, "The joy of music, ultimately, seems connected to sadness. The sadness is that of existence. The more you are filled with the pure happiness of music-making, the deeper the sadness is."*

## Traveling in the Family

### *Traveling in the Family*

And of course it is a book,  
a dictionary of absurd form and yet of absolute truth,  
printed on four-color cards, on certificates of indebtedness,  
on warrants for arrest, on marriage certificates.

On this page is my father, who has been wanted by time.  
Because his mother is a crab swimming in the sea and crawling on the  
sand,  
all his brothers' names are made of water.  
Her husband came down from the mountain in a cable car, with  
the vigor of mountains and the violence of fire: pressing her, beating  
her, cursing her  
after drinking at midnight, leaving her washing the scars on her body  
with her baby in arms.  
And he resented that he had a fire-like name like his father's, just as he  
resented  
pneumonia and festering ulcers, which were responsible for  
his twin brothers' early death and crippling.

This page reveals the family medical history too harsh to face—  
my infertile grandaunt, my mother's missing father,  
my mother's brother, who came to know that his own father was my  
father's father after living together for twenty years,  
my father's sister-in-law and cousin, who married my fourth uncle and  
gave birth to three mentally retarded children,  
my father's father, who knew how to beget children yet knew nothing  
about child-raising and education...

This page is an index of difficult and obsolete words—  
my drowned uncle, my father's self-imprisoned cousin,

my father's sister who eloped when young but became a tonsured nun  
when old.

This page is an index of words in order of phonetic symbols—  
schooling: with years' schooling, my father was corrupt and negligent  
of his duty;  
screwing: gambling and screwing around half his lifetime, my father  
became a drug addict and seller.

They are traveling in my trunk,  
overturning and rearranging the printing types again and again,  
to become my brothers, to become me.  
The margins are tears of mothers:  
love, sorrow, silent embrace—  
embracing anxious fire, embracing  
the waves that turn back,  
and on the beach of time, reading over and over  
the pages of the ocean that become all the whiter with every leafing.

### *Stairs*

Stairs are the dreams of the poor.

We dreamed of a tall building like others', stable and secure stairs,  
going up, and up, and up  
to see the scenery all over the world.  
But our stairs were horizontal, put low in the corner of the one-story  
wooden house  
and carried out when typhoons came.  
We climbed up to the roof with Father to mend the iron sheet, to mend  
the doors and windows.

It never rains but it pours.

Our dreams were like the basins placed about in the house, holding  
one drop of rain after another.  
We stepped onto the tables and chairs to hang our satchels on top of  
the erected stairs:

the fountainheads of dream that allowed no invaders to occupy.

### *The Garden*

The garden, a warehouse of memories.  
My illiterate grandfather is sitting in the narrow house waiting for the  
flowers to bloom.  
It's dark, he turns on a dim light,  
sick and old.

He turns on a dim light, brightening  
the ants that are carrying away his drowsiness.  
Magnolias are by the trash can,  
the out-dated calendar on the wall.

He did grow some flowers.  
The yard in the morning, a spring mood  
blooming with sunshine.  
Mother's red chair stood bright by the fence.

That was the garden we shared, a winding corridor of time  
hanging in eternity.  
We took a walk in it with our sorrow,  
hiding the superfluous fragrance in our pockets.

Now his garden is even bigger,  
distributed in the medicine parcels of various colors.  
Sitting in the narrow house waiting for the sunset,  
he seems to smell the fragrance of flowers.

*A Rider's Song*

My dear grandmother  
rode her bicycle,  
singing in the sky.  
Two bracelets were left behind  
like wheels on the ground,  
hanging on my heart.

The wheels revolve into  
a ring,  
worn around the finger of  
my newlywed daughter.

Some day  
when I too ride my bike  
singing in the sky,  
her child will feel  
the necklace on her breast  
and smile at me, understandingly.

(1990)

## The Wall

It hears us cry.  
It hears us whisper.  
It hears us tearing the wallpaper,  
searching anxiously for the voices of departed relatives—  
the enormous breaths, snoring, and coughs,  
which we have never heard.

The wall has ears.  
The wall is a mute recorder.

We give it nails  
in memory of those absent hats, keys and coats.  
We give it crevices  
to give shelter to crooked love, rumors and scandals.

Hanging on it is the clock.  
Hanging on it is the mirror.  
Hanging on it are the shadows of lost days,  
the lipstick marks of sunken dreams.

We give it thickness.  
We give it weight.  
We give it silence.

The wall has ears,  
leading a giant existence sustained by our frailty.

(1990)

## **An Intimate Letter**

Youth, the sound of the chapel organ  
returns periodically  
to the window where you've just written a letter,  
distant but intimate,  
all at once the street becomes broad and spacious again.

All at once it brightens up,  
because of a boy on the bicycle  
with a bell in the front,  
because of the washerwoman crossing the bridge.  
You think of many a street corner.  
Turning around it, you come across him;  
turning around it, you find him gone.

You think of many a corner of life  
once belonging to you:  
the panting electric fan in a small hotel,  
the street lamp sighing under the moon.  
The door opened, the door shut, and you stood before the same window—

Before the same window as now you are,  
with your back to a set of half-dark wardrobes.  
You think of a scarf, not exactly ugly,  
used in winter, forgotten in summer.  
It occurs to you that a scarf is like a song, and a song  
is a winding street.

So you go downstairs,  
waiting to meet with him again around the street corner.

(1990)

## A Dog Barking at the Moon

Time sets its dog biting us.  
It bites off our sleeves, leaving two or three  
rags of oblivion.  
We cross the street to buy sugar, finding a deserted arm,  
not sure whether to drop it in the nearest mailbox or not.  
Maybe our parents on the trip will receive it  
at a distant hotel.  
Maybe it is hanging at the door of the railroad station.  
Every five minutes out of the loud-speaker comes the announcement:  
“A deserted arm to be identified at the information desk.”

We don't believe they are our long-departed relatives:  
childhood handkerchiefs, exercise books, lipsticks and  
brassieres of the beloved, diplomas.  
We pick up the toys scattered about on the ground.  
They are heard to say, “It hurts.”  
The moon is pasted on the sky like a stamp obscured by the postmark.  
We write letters with ball point pens of starlight and mail them  
to God, who lives north of the air-raid shelter,  
and two express conductresses in red skirts and red hats  
push the pushcart by and ask if he'll buy some medicine.

Of course it's bitter,  
still he sends us a family photo:  
the war-fostered colonel, the black-skinned procuress,  
tomcat Gigi, the unmarried old maid Ah-Lan—  
they are all there, on the platform of time,  
facing a dog barking at the moon with wide-open eyes.  
They are waiting to pass by us once more.  
We open the stamp album, suspiciously searching out  
seemingly familiar cries.  
Maybe that's what they call family reunion.

(1990)

## **An Encounter**

On my way to work  
I saw my mother  
on an old bike  
stopping before the traffic light.

She didn't find me looking at her before the other traffic light.  
A pink umbrella, a black purse,  
a basket to carry vegetables home after work.

Every night I drive my wife and daughter home to eat the dinner she  
prepares;  
every night I eat the fruit peeled by my father, have a chat  
and then come back to where I live.

I've never felt that we aren't living together,  
never felt that she is moving on one way,  
and I, another.  
I know that after doing the dishes she will take a bath and watch TV;  
I know that she will dance and jog in the neighborhood primary school  
the next morning.

This morning,  
under the brightening sky,  
we waited to cross the street with the crossroads between us.  
She was standing by her bike, ready to turn left;  
I was sitting in my car, ready to turn left—  
turn left, to different places,  
where different tears and music meet.

This morning,  
under the bright sky in my hometown,  
we encountered for a brief moment,  
and then disappeared from each other's rearview mirror.

(1991)

## The River of Shadows

Every day, from our teacups  
flows a river of shadows.  
The places spotted with lipstick marks  
are the constantly vanishing  
riverbanks.  
A houseful of tea fragrance allures us into sleep.  
What we drink may be time,  
may be ourselves,  
may be our parents, who have fallen into the cups.

We catch from the silty bottoms of the cups  
last year's scenery:  
a mountainful of jasmine,  
flowers blooming and falling.  
We watch the cold river boiling once again,  
warmly dissolving the descending darkness.

Then we sit drinking tea from the cups that  
brighten up like lanterns. We sit  
on the bank as high as a dream,  
waiting for the tea to turn into the river,  
for the trees to blossom and bear fruit,  
till we, like our parents, are incarnated  
in a fruit,  
a camellia,  
vanishing into the river of shadows.

(1992)

## The Magician

That night, on one end of the bridge after the crowd had dispersed,  
he said to me, "Son, all magic arts are real..."

So, those drifting clouds were conjured out of the handkerchief on his  
breast,  
those running cars, those motionless houses.  
He waved a secret river,  
a white handkerchief stained with tears and sweat—like a dove in the  
dream when folded,  
and a world map when unfolded.

He spread the unfolded handkerchief over the ground, unfolding and  
unfolding  
until all the people were seated on it.  
He said, "Magic is love,  
love for all the things that are transient and beautiful, that  
you want to possess but fail to."  
He conjured a bunch of roses out of the handkerchief  
and connected himself to the flowers with vein-like tubes.  
He asked us to stab his heart with a knife.  
"My heart is filled with love.  
Stab the knife into me, and my blood  
will spit out of those roses."  
In panic we tried to keep away from the blood splashing around like petals,  
yet found it as sweet as jam.

He conjured a deck of poker cards out of another handkerchief,  
saying we were all in it.  
He wanted each of us to pick a card, remember the number,  
and put it back. He said numbers were our names,  
the identity cards given to us by eternity.  
He shuffled the cards skillfully until every card was turned

into the same number.  
We gazed at each other amazedly, not knowing which one  
was our true self.

He liked all changing things.  
He hid in the sleeves all the fountains of the city,  
mixed them with our joy, anger, sorrow, and delight,  
now spurting black vinegar,  
then spurting red wine.  
He knew there was nothing new in the sun,  
so he chose to perform in the moonlight.  
The flames and sharp swords swallowed into his throat  
would eventually turn out to be (he declared as he unfolded the  
newspaper)  
shocking murders, massacres, and religious revolutions far away.

He wanted us to watch carefully because life, he said,  
is a great magic itself:  
“As long as you believe, a handkerchief can become a flying rug!”  
But some changes come too fast  
for us to tell the differences,  
and some so slowly that it takes a lifetime  
to perceive the mystery in them.  
They say an ocean may become a mulberry field, and girls  
may become old women.  
But how can love blow the dead soul awake, ashes  
be burned into new fire?

That night, on the vacant lot by the river  
no one believed the handkerchief beneath our feet would fly us to a  
far-off place.  
Yet the magician was still working on his handkerchief,  
a secret river flowing in his eyes.

(1992)

## **Spring**

Oh, world,  
our hearts have  
become legitimately and healthily lustful again.

(1992)

## **The Bladder**

I feel all the more  
the bladder is another heart of ours,  
trembling on the verge of waking and sleeping,  
burdened with our previous luxury.  
When the original heart, because of the day's uproaring,  
the night's duskiness, gets weary and fatigued,  
it, remaining clear-headed,  
reminds us of the direction of reality  
with the water pressure of a whole reservoir.

With the weight of a whole reservoir it plays  
seesaw games with our dreams,  
lifting us from the chaotic abyss to  
an altitude of dizziness,  
making consciousness struggle against subconsciousness,  
making crime argue uneasily with punishment.  
It goes up and down, flickering and blinking,  
until we, having had enough of the torment,  
start up resolutely  
to confess to the nearest toilet,  
and in a fervent, short flush,  
repent to our hearts' content.

The bladder, the conscience in the latter part of the night,  
the witness of a prodigal son.

(1992)

## **An Open Cage**

—for John Cage

You are a born cage,  
so are we—  
writing our faunas in the destined space.

But your bird is not the nightingale that eats ice cream and cotton candy;  
yours is a magical bird that eats screws, rubber, wood,  
spitting out piles of fantastic notes,  
hitting the fence around it,  
shattering the glass that blocks it,  
and like excavators, digging out every throat that has been  
buried by habits.

It also eats the wind, drinks dews, and hangs the cage  
upside down like a basket,  
filling it with sounds of wind and water,  
sounds of vehicles and people,  
with mushrooms,  
with silence—

with silence, like an empty  
conch shell  
receiving all the sounds of existence.

Your clock is twelve radios telling different stories.  
Your calendar is musical scores arranged at random.  
To your bird nothing is discordant. It can't tell  
which is more musical—the noise of a truck passing by a factory or  
the noise of a truck passing by a music school.  
It enjoys the biting of gears as much as it welcomes  
the kisses of trees with wind or the dialogue between hammers.

A mechanical bird flying with a cage,  
a wound-up bomb of notions,  
you respond to the posture of falling leaves, the speed of running water  
with lonely but clear heartbeats,  
and on an afternoon when all strings contend to be heard,  
blow open the world with  
deafening silence—

blow open the cage of the world,  
and make us hear the open music.

(1992)

*Author's Note: John Cage (1912-1992), the most controversial and influential 20th-century American composer, philosopher and writer on music. Breaking off the line between noise and music, he attached much importance to silence in music as well as in life, and regarded every sound as music. His most famous work was "4'33", silence throughout the whole piece. He was also an expert on mushrooms.*

## Souvenir-Photo: Statues of the Bunun



I do not know if Rodin, the sculptor of *The Burghers of Calais*, would ask them to rise at sight of them. Nine Bunun people, nine obstinate stones, sat side by side in front of the police substation. Iron chains locked their limbs, but not their souls. If their heads should be chopped off with huge axes to become other stones, their bodies would still be perfect statues standing upright on their native land. Now they were seated waiting for the trial, for the ruler to mold them into immortality: Ramata Siensien of the Ikano tribe with his four sons; Taromu of the Kanto tribe with his three younger brothers (he even killed his mother, who came to talk him into capitulation under the Japanese's threat). Their eyes looked right ahead, carved on their faces was "dignity" pronounced differently in the Bunun language: dignified sorrow, dignified apathy, dignified freedom...They were inborn stones.

(1993)

*Author's Note: This photo was found in Perspectives on Eastern Taiwan, published by Mori Toshiyuki in 1933. Taiwan was ruled by Japan between 1895 and 1945. On September 19, 1932, at Lilong in the prefecture of Taitung, some Bunun people (indigenes of Taiwan) killed two policemen and one police assistant in Kwaigu near the Daguansan police station. The Japanese police went all out to arrest the killers: first they tracked down the suspect Taromu, an influential man of the Kanto tribe; then on December 19 they went into the mountains and caught the principal offender Ramata Siensien with his four sons as well as three younger brothers of Taromu's. On the photograph, these nine men sat side by side, barefooted.*

## A Vending Machine for Nostalgic Nihilists

Please choose the button

- Mother's milk** ● cold ● hot
- Drifting cloud** ● large packet ● medium packet ● small packet
- Cotton candy** ● instant ● enduring ● tangled
- Daydream** ● canned ● bottled ● aluminum foiled
- Charcoal coffee** ● with nostalgia ● with passion ● with death
- Star perfume** ● with chirping of insects ● with twittering of birds ● pure
- Sleeping pill** ● for vegetarians ● for non-vegetarians
- Misty poetry** ● two pieces in one ● three pieces in one ● aerosol
- Marijuana** ● of *Freedom* brand ● of *Peace* brand ● of *Opium War* brand
- Condom** ● for commercial use ● for noncommercial use
- Shadow facial tissue** ● extra-thin ● transparent ● water-proof
- Moonlight ball pen** ● gray ● black ● white

(1993)

## The Edge of the Island

On the world map on a scale of one to forty million,  
our island is an imperfect yellow button  
lying loose on a blue uniform.  
My existence is now a transparent thread,  
thinner than a cobweb, going through my window facing the sea  
and painstakingly sewing the island and the ocean together.

On the edge of the lonely days, in the crevice  
between the new and the old years,  
the thought is like a book of mirror, coldly freezing  
the ripples of time.  
Thumbing through it, you'll see pages of obscure  
past, flashing brightly on the mirror:

another secret button—  
like an invisible tape recorder, pressed close to your breast,  
repeatedly recording and playing  
your memories and all mankind's—  
a secret tape mixed with love and hate,  
dream and reality, suffering and joy.

What you hear now is  
the sound of the world:  
the heartbeats of the dead and the living  
and your own. If you cry out with all your heart,  
the dead and the living will speak to you  
in clear voices.

On the edge of the island, on the boundary  
between sleeping and waking,  
my hand is holding my needle-like existence:  
threading through the yellow button rounded and polished by

the people on the island, it pierces hard into  
the heart of the earth lying beneath the blue uniform.

(1993)

## 50 Poems from *Microcosmos I*

1

He washes his remote control  
with the moonbeams infiltrating  
between two buildings.

6

A swift and downward glissando:  
someone puts a ladder  
against my childhood window.

9

It invites me into the TV set;  
on the seat I stand up from,  
I find a leafless metal tree.

14

I wait and long for you:  
a turning die in the empty bowl of night  
attempting to create the 7th side.

16

Someone is in the autumn wind—  
I mean, someone is in the autumn wind saying  
someone is in the autumn wind

17

Bartok, Balzac:  
I strike over and over with tongue and throat  
this brief and forceful secret telegram.

18

A great event on the desolate  
winter day: ear wax  
drops on the desk.

21

Tears are like pearls; no, tears are like  
silver coins; no, tears are like  
loosened buttons to be sewed back.

23

I return to my childhood school to fetch my daughter,  
thousands of similar children rush out of the playground:  
a butterfly lost in the garden of mirrors.

26

From the cup I drink the tea you pour for me,  
from the cup I drink the spring chill flowing down  
between your fingers.

27

Joy is a hole:  
tuck an object in, and out flow  
fruit-like vowels.

29

A parade in honor of death:  
strolling shoes working shoes sleeping  
shoes dancing shoes...

30

Every street is a stick of chewing gum:  
chew it repeatedly, but  
don't eat it up at a mouthful.

35

What connects solitary peaks  
is solitude, as well as  
the glances of black birds and white birds.

38

On a night cold as iron:  
the percussion music of two bodies  
that strike against each other to make a fire.

45

Morning of Children's Day: we hike to the cape of  
time, waiting for the late-returning grandfathers  
to ride back, on the setting sun, from their hiking.

46

Prisoners of silence: with speech we shatter  
the transparent wall, and are forced to  
nip back every piece of broken silence with our breath.

48

Aside from the bed, what other submarines  
can we choose  
to dive from the ocean of reality into the dream?

49

All the sorrow of night will be turned into golden  
ears of rice by daylight, waiting to be  
reaped by another sorrowful night.

51

Multiplication table for kids of clouds and fog:  
mountains times mountains equals trees, mountains times trees  
equals me, mountains times me equals nothingness...

52

The sky gargles with the ocean, spits out the day's  
clouds; the night gargles with stars,  
spits out the glowworms that fly before your doorway.

53

Swirling rapidly into the dream like a pelota, bouncing  
and bouncing,  
the midnight barking.

54

The tongue is the wet root of words:  
oh, stretch forward, stretch closer, to become  
a secret exclamation mark in my thirsty mouth.

55

Paste the stamp right here:  
what I'd like to paste is a piece of your favorite  
cake, or lips.

56

Glittering around your neck is  
a necklace  
strung with my glances.

57

An egg: the most delicate mode of  
dream; the womb of meditation  
you can't bear to pierce through.

58

Opening the cage of depression:  
out flies emptiness,  
in flies the void.

60

In the chaotic huge maze of the world  
the only support to keep from getting lost may be  
the tiny flesh map you offer.

61

Mother's blue silk handkerchief:  
the profound and damp starry sky of  
summer night.

62

"Which runs faster, grass or dust?"  
after a spring shower, beside a deserted railway,  
someone asked me.

63

Having constantly broken world records,  
our lonely shot-putter throws his head out  
in one put.

64

The lottery of skulls:  
with the four words—Life, Age, Sickness, Death,  
you may have the latest Lover's Manual in exchange.

66

The white skin turns a mole  
into an isle: I miss the glistening  
vast ocean inside your clothes.

67

Silent soybean milk: day after day  
from my bowl to my body flows  
the blank music.

68

Turn gently—oh, I fear  
out of the midnight faucet might come  
a baby's crying other than water...

69

Night lies there crosswise like a comb:  
to comb the half-bare woods  
in my body? Autumn.

70

Turn on the light, turn on  
the eyes of the dead, which are imprisoned  
between the wall and the furniture.

74

She isn't insane; she is a dramatic soprano  
trying time after time to cut her belly open with sharp laughter  
to give birth to huge amounts of suffering.

76

Sandals throughout the seasons: do you see  
the free verse my two feet write, treading  
upon the blackboard, upon the dust?

77

Outside the massage house they often  
stretch two ropes across, to hold  
a speech contest of sign language for towels of all sizes.

79

Oh, Baudelaire,  
how broad and comfortable  
a sofa of senses!

86

I am man,  
I am a disposable lighter  
in the dark universe.

87

A pomegranate, wet and green  
in the rain,  
seems to have something to say.

90

Violent love brought about pleasant injury:  
I perspired the sweat equivalent to five boxes of grapefruit,  
you had twenty-one hairs broken.

91

I like the shopping bag you left behind:  
I carry in it the newly-written haiku, lemon cake,  
the mountain scenes after the rain.

94

Oh, the blind men's chorus:  
their faces are discordant chords  
far more touching than their harmonious voices.

95

An obstinate mollusk: lodging inside  
the crotch of trousers, out sometimes for a demonstration,  
a pompous shell-less snail.

97

The story of marriage: a closet of loneliness plus  
a closet of loneliness equals  
a closet of loneliness.

98

They might be gossiping about  
the setting sun—the whispering  
TV antennae on the roof.

99

A rondo now forte now piano:  
the flush toilets of the nihilistic republic are playing  
again their mumbling national anthem...

(1993)

## Autumn Song

When dear God uses sudden death  
to test our loyalty to the world,  
we are sitting on a swing woven of the tails of summer and autumn,  
trying to swing over a tilting wall of experience  
to borrow a brooch from the wind that blows in our faces.

But if all of a sudden our tightly clenched hands  
should loosen in the dusk,  
we have to hold on to the bodies of galloping plains,  
speaking out loud to the boundless distance about our  
colors, smells, shapes.

Like a tree signing its name with abstract existence,  
we take off the clothes of leaves one after another,  
take off the overweight joy, desire, thoughts,  
and turn ourselves into a simple kite  
to be pinned on the breasts of our beloved:

a simple but pretty insect brooch,  
flying in the dark dream,  
climbing in the memory devoid of tears and whispers  
till, once more, we find the light of love is  
as light as the light of loneliness, and the long day is but  
the twin brother of the long night.

Therefore, we sit all the more willingly on a swing  
interwoven of summer and autumn, and willingly mend  
the tilting wall of emotion  
when dear God uses sudden death  
to test our loyalty to the world.

(1993)

## A Cup of Tea

And then I know  
what the time for a cup of tea means.

I waited in the crowded and noisy station building  
for the one who was late for the appointment  
to appear on the bitterly cold winter day.  
I carefully held a full cup of  
hot tea,  
carefully added to it sugar and milk,  
stirring gently,  
sipping gently.

You casually opened the slim collection  
of Issa's haiku that you had in your luggage:  
"A world of dew; yet  
within the dewdrops—quarrels..."  
This crowded station was a dewdrop within  
a dewdrop, dropped  
in the tea deeper with every sip.

A cup of tea,  
at first hot, turned warm, and then cold.  
Things on my mind  
ranged from poetry to dreams to reality.  
In ancient times—  
in the world of Chinese serial novels or  
tales of chivalry—  
it would be the time for a cup of tea,  
in which a swordsman drew his sword wiping out the besieging rascals,  
and a hero was enraptured and enchanted before the bed of a fair lady.

But modern time has changed its speed.

Within about the time for half a cup of tea,  
you drank up a cup of golden fragrant tea.  
A cup of tea  
going from far to near and then into nothingness.  
The one for whom you had waited long finally appeared  
and asked if you would like one more cup of tea.

(1993)

## Morning Blue

Between the whiteness of the night and the darkness of the day,  
you mercifully give me the morning blue,  
your blue underwear, which is sought everywhere in vain,  
your blue hair ribbon, which is raised with the wind.

You mercifully give me color blocks of melancholy  
to cover the empty heart that stays awake the whole night;  
you mercifully give me moist soul  
to melt the darkness of the day that follows in no time.

You are a blue sheep  
running to and fro on the border of the dream.  
With blue, hairy shadow you contradict my thought,  
oppress my breath,  
make me long for your blue eye rims,  
and look forward to your blue tongue—

the blue waves that break at each swallow and spit.  
You leave me on the beach at the ebb tide,  
picking up your lost blue necklace,  
collecting your runaway blue mammary areolas.

You make me take the remainder of your saliva as the ocean,  
as the Mediterranean,  
and guard the narrow strip of the blue coast  
between the huge continents of day and night.

Oh, goddess of evil, master of the morning.

(1994)

## Nocturnal Fish

In the night I turn into a fish,  
an amphibian  
suddenly becoming rich and free because of having nothing.

Emptiness? Yes,  
as empty as the vast space,  
I swim in the night darker than your vagina  
like a cosmopolitan.

Yes, the universe is my city.  
Seen from any of our city swimming pools above,  
Europe is but a piece of dry and shrunken pork,  
and Asia a broken tea bowl by the stinking ditch.

Go fill in your sweet familial love,  
fill in your pure water of ethics and morality,  
fill in your bathing water which is replaced every other day.

I am an amphibian  
having nothing and having nothing to fear.  
I perch in the vast universe;  
I perch in your daily and nightly dreams.

A bather bathed by the rain and combed by the wind.

I swim across your sky swaggeringly,  
across the death and life that you can never escape.

Do you still boast of your freedom?

Come, and appreciate a fish,  
appreciate a space fish that suddenly becomes rich  
and free, because of your forsaking.

(1994)

## The Autumn Wind Blows

—for Li Ke-ran

The autumn wind blows down new sorrow  
and the skull of the fatherland...

The autumn wind, on a summer street in Taipei,  
at the end of the century,  
between the water lily pond and a pachinko house,  
a middle-aged man, having just stepped out of the History  
Museum, is dripping wet with sweat  
which still smells of the shining black ink  
in your paintings. He recalls to mind twenty years ago  
when, in an imported hardback book in English,  
he first bumped into your subtly magnificent landscape,  
*The Boundless Landscape is Absorbed in the Picture*,  
which is now hanging right on the eastern wall of the museum.  
Those mountains, those waters, the same images of sail  
were stamped, like a stab, in his chest just rid of  
history textbooks. A college student accustomed to  
the banana green and the rice yellow,  
he casually opened the newly-bought book in English  
to the vague scene of spring rain south of the Yangtze River,  
to a gust of autumn wind.

*The Autumn Wind Blows Down the Red Rain.*

In a foreign-made Chinese painting album,  
those frosty leaves, flying over the laterally-moving letters,  
were printed vertically one by one in my heart.  
I was the shepherd boy buried in the music of the flute, in your  
paintings. The autumn wind blows down the red rain  
on the territory of old dreams which die and revive  
repeatedly. Sparse willows  
are hung with new leaves; plum blossoms

are blown into spring.  
In an age of taboos,  
I peeped at you, who, on pure white paper,  
dyed the woods in the mountains totally red  
with timid guts and persevering soul.

To dye, or not to dye?  
Whether it be an inspiration from Chairman Mao's poem  
or an attempt to write biographies for the landscape of the native country,  
you knew you were aiming at  
ever-transcending creativity.  
You broke the skull of the fatherland forcefully  
to endow the landscape with new souls.  
Three thousand abandoned paintings, one living life.  
You made the landscape survive in you.  
Cultural Revolution, armed strife, banishment, denouncement.  
With threats under which even plants were taken for enemy troops  
the ruler ruled over art.  
With army-like grass and trees, with  
knife-sharp brushes and ink, you liberated politics,  
liberated such a beautiful land.

To dye, or not to dye?  
Dyeing every grass, every tree  
in every mountain, every water,  
you gave the picturesque landscape  
new pictures: shepherd boys on buffalo's backs,  
autumn wind with red rain.  
You gave the sorrowful autumn new sorrow.

At the end of the century, on a summer street  
between the water lily pond and a pachinko house,  
a middle-aged man, having just stepped out of the History  
Museum, is dripping wet with sweat.

Looking up, he is greeted by  
a sudden gust of autumn wind.  
He holds tight the Dajia straw hat  
which comes near being blown away,  
as if it were a new skull.  
“The Landscape of Guilin, the World of Dajia”:  
a real estate advertisement occurs to him  
in the nostalgia which gets mixed up all of a sudden, and  
in the red rain which is blown down ceaselessly.

(1994)

*Author's Note: The Autumn Wind Blows Down the Red Rain (quoted from Shi Tao, a Chinese painter of Ming Dynasty), The Boundless Landscape is Absorbed in the Picture, and Dye the Woods in the Mountains Totally Red (quoted from Mao Tse-tung) are titles of the paintings of Li Ke-ran (1907-1989). “Write biographies for the landscape of the native country” and “Three thousand abandoned paintings” are the contents of two of his seals.*



## The Image Hunter

—in memory of Kevin Carter

If there is a war far away, and the black chessmen  
carrying rifles, spears, and axes fight hand to hand against the fully armed  
white chessmen on the street, if a chessman  
falls down, wails, blood splashing around,  
how will you, a hunter whose camera serves as a gun,  
make quick movements, hold your breath, and push the camera shutter  
as if triggering a gun to give another shot before  
death departs, and hunt its most touching image in time?

If there is starvation far away, and naked and skinny humans  
embrace one another in the wilderness, awaiting Lord's supper of blood  
and tears  
to feed their bodies, if a girl  
falls weakly, head on earth, with a vulture behind her  
waiting for the corpse with cruel greed,  
merciful hunter, how will you  
move slowly, restrain the sense of guilt, cautiously avoid disturbing  
the food-seeking vulture and spoiling the perfection of the picture  
so as to present the world with true and grievous art?

If there is a war far away, morality and art,  
conscience and duty, if the mosquitoes of death and of beauty  
gather simultaneously on a living lump of  
rotten flesh, poets who sit in the study reading about  
the world, how will you wave the swats of reality and aesthetics  
which have so very different graduations, how will you wind the springs  
of suffering and passion, making fruit slack enough to flow out  
juice, how will you develop the images of tragedy  
with the pictures of words, how will you reconcile the contradictory  
compassion  
with the compassionate contradiction?

( 1994 )

*Author's Note: Kevin Carter was a South African photojournalist born in 1960. In May, 1994, a picture of a Sudanese girl who was on the verge of dying of starvation and becoming the prey of vultures (printed in New York Times, March 1993) won him the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography. Being awarded, Carter was criticized for capturing the scene at the cost of others' misfortune. In July, 1994, Carter killed himself with carbon monoxide. His last words were, "It's a pity that in life pain prevails over joy after all."*



## The Ropewalker

Now what I sustain is, floating in the air, your laughter,  
your laughter, through the obscure quivering net.  
What if a ball larger than a roof should be thrown over?  
Would it drive you into sudden melancholy?  
A ball like the earth, pouring onto your face the unfastened  
islands and lakes (just like a wheelbarrow with a loose screw).

Those black and blue bruises are the collisions with mountains,  
the metaphysical mountain ranges harder than iron wheels,  
the metaphysical burdens, anxiety, metaphysical aestheticism...  
And the so-called aestheticism, to me, who tremble in the air,  
is perhaps only a restraint from a sneeze, an itch, with  
the head still up.

What runs over you at the same time is the joke system of  
all continents and subcontinents, interwoven in your body like tributaries,  
a joke not very funny: black humor, white terror  
red blood. Red, because you once blushed with your heart fluttering  
for the beloved girl (of course you can't forget the hatred  
and bright red blood aroused by jealousy and  
fury...) But you're simply a ropewalker  
walking on the earth, yet discontented with only being a ropewalker  
walking on the earth.

Now what I sustain are the subjects left behind by the  
departed circus: time, love, death, loneliness, belief,  
dreams. Will you thus unpack the parcel before a houseful of  
silent audience? The moment of sudden solemnity after roaring laughter.  
You simply pull out, wipe, rearrange the earth's internal organs,  
those spare parts that make the world move, sunshine leap,  
the male and the female animals reach their orgasms...  
They don't even know why you stay there,

stay there (restrain from sneezing and itching),  
a wingless butterfly turning a somersault where it is.

So you tremble in the air, cautiously constructing  
a garden of jokes on the dangling rope,  
cautiously walking across the earth, propping up  
the floating life,  
with a slanting bamboo cane,  
with a fictitious pen.

(1995)

## Formosa, 1661

I've always thought that we are living on the cowhide  
though God has granted my wish to mix my blood, urine,  
and excrement with this land.  
Exchange fifteen bolts of cloth for land as large as a cowhide?  
The aborigines wouldn't possibly know a cowhide can be cut  
into strips and, like the spirit of omnipresent  
God, encircle the whole Tayouan island,  
the whole Formosa. I like the taste of  
venison, I like cane sugar and bananas, I like  
the raw silk shipped back to Holland by the East India Company.  
God's spirit is like raw silk, smooth, holy, and pure.  
It shines upon the youngsters from Bakloan and Tavacan  
who come daily to the youth school to learn spelling, writing,  
praying, and catechism. Oh Lord, I hear their Dutch  
smell of venison (just like the Sideia language  
I utter from time to time in my sermon).  
Oh Lord, in Dalivo, I have taught fifteen married women and  
maidens to say the Lord's Prayer, the Gospel, the Ten Commandments,  
and grace before and after meals; in Mattau, I have taught  
seventy-two married and unmarried young men to say  
various prayers, to know the main religious doctrines, to read,  
and by sincerely teaching and preaching catechism, to start  
enlarging their knowledge—oh, knowledge is like a cowhide  
that can be folded and put into a traveling bag to carry  
from Rotterdam to Batavia, from Batavia to this  
subtropical island, and be unfolded into our Majesty's agricultural land,  
the Lord's nation, cut into strips of twenty-five *ges*,  
which length squared forms one *morgen*, and then three and four  
*zhanglis*.

In Zeelandia, between the public measurement office, the tax office,  
and the theater, I see it flying like a flag, smiling remotely

at Provintia. Oh, knowledge brings people joy, just like  
good food and myriad spices (if only they knew how to cook  
Holland peas). Oranges, with sour flesh and bitter skin,  
are larger than tangerines. But they don't know that  
in summer the water tastes even better than lovemaking when  
mixed with salt and smashed oranges. In Tirozen,  
I have acquainted thirty married young women with various prayers  
and simplified key items; in Sinckan, one hundred and two  
married men and women have been taught to read and write (oh, I  
taste in the Bible in romanized aboriginal languages  
a taste of venison flavored with European ginger).  
Ecclesiastes in Favorlang, the Gospel According to Matthew in Sideia,  
the marriage of the civilized and the primitive. Let God's spirit  
enter the flesh of Formosa—or, let the venison of Formosa enter my  
stomach and spleen to become my blood, urine, and  
excrement, to become my spirit. I've always thought that we are  
living on the cowhide, although those Chinese troops are approaching  
on junks and sampans with large axes and knives  
attempting to cover us with an even bigger  
cowhide. God has granted my wish to mix my blood,  
urine, and excrement with the aborigines'  
and print them, like letters, on this land.  
How I wish they knew this cowhide, in which new spelling  
words are wrapped, can be cut into strips and thumbed into  
pages, a dictionary loaded with sounds, colors, images, smells  
and as broad as God's spirit.

(1995)

*Author's Note: Bakloan, Tavacan, Dalivo, Sinckan, Tirozen, and Mattau are names of communities of the plains indigenes in Taiwan. The Sideia language and the Favorlang language are dialects of the plains indigenes (Sideia is also called Siraya). Zeelandia was a city built on Tayouan island (now called Anping, in Tainan) by the colonists during the Dutch Occupation period (1624-1662). Provintia was a fort they built. It is said that the Dutch offered to*

*exchange fifteen bolts of cloth with the indigenes for a cowhide-sized piece of land. After the agreement was made, they “cut the cowhide into strips and encircled land more than one kilometer in circumference” (See Lian Heng, A General History of Taiwan). “Ge” was a unit of measurement used by the Dutch, equaling about twelve feet five inches. Twenty-five ges squared equals one morgen. Five morgens make one zhangli.*

## The Olympic

—Ars Poetica

Festive, competitive, of the five rings...

Of words and words. Vaulting over the secular level, with pens as poles. Creating new aesthetics. (The definitions of pens were expanded at several conferences of judges at the turn of the century, and it was agreed that finding in poems stimulants other than

inspiration was acceptable.) Take this poem for example. Its title, “The Olympic” (or “The Olympian”), is copied from the last line of another poem of mine, having nothing to do with inspiration. Even the form looks the same.

Words race with words: a relay race. You can't see the baton passed or received. Straight smoke above vast desert, round setting sun on long river, most touching is the occasional bursting out (I miss you near the end of every stanza) of the pure joy

of poetry. Pure joy, game of the pairs: big robber; merry widow; reed organ; green sleeves; autumn floods; Emanuel Kant. Or in threes and fours: the dark eyes; lonely hearts club; Where the bees suck; store of furniture; the Island Formosa; Shoot the Piano Player; standing in the wind. Words in the wind,

standing, running, shooting, grow to time, like a clown. Gentle wind brings a small response, violent wind a great one. Let the craft drift over the boundless expanse, and being deranged, make the words become  
unanimous,  
harmonious, pure and clear, endlessly echoing—dignified and venerated,

enjoying themselves—a milieu which is festive, competitive, of the  
five rings...

(1995)

## Small Town

Here they live. Some winds and some clouds. One street meets another, forming a cross. They cross the street to fetch the shades blown far away by the wind and fasten them to the doorposts with the polished moods. Crosses are connected into squares, much like those on a chessboard. They do farm work, fish, strike iron, hunt. Red Bishop 3 + 5. Black Horse 2 + 4. Red Cannon 6 = 3. Black Chariot 8 + 1. They meet some others of them. They exchange goods; they return favors. Some shades blown far away get martially related to some others; some drop into the farther ponds, becoming death. A stream sets out from the mountain foot, crosses the chessboard, and gallops into the ocean with colors of grass and birds' chirps. Stream waters dash against the sea and form whirling waves, making the silent chess watchers exclaim: oh, Hui-Lan!

Oh, Hui-Lan! Their name. The waves of life which, in a minimal yet brilliant way, overflow the chessboard, crash at the very top and transform into recurrent impressionist music. They keep engraving, revolving the chessboard as if it were a record player. One street meets another, forming a cross. They cross the street to fetch the fish shaken out of the pans by the earthquake and nail them to the doorposts with the polished doorplates. Crosses are connected into squares, much like those on a chessboard. They take a walk, drink tea, have teeth pulled out, make love. Black Cannon 5 + 2. Red Horse 4–6. Black Pawn 7 + 1. Red Pawn 2 = 3. A stream flows across the chessboard and gallops into the ocean, just like the stylus playing on the tracks of

a record. Those occasional interferences are the shades  
blown far away by the wind. They are found by some  
others and returned to them. Here they live.

(1995)



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(1995)

*Author's Note: The Chinese character 兵 (pronounced as "bing") means "soldier." 乒 and 乓 (pronounced as "ping" and "pong"), which look like one-legged soldiers, are two onomatopoeic words imitating sounds of collision or gunshots. The character 丘 (pronounced as "chiou") means "hill."*

## **Furniture Music**

I read on the chair  
I write on the desk  
I sleep on the floor  
I dream beside the closet

I drink water in spring  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)  
I drink water in summer  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)  
I drink water in fall  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)  
I drink water in winter  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)

I open the window and read  
I turn on the light and write  
I draw the curtains and sleep  
I wake inside the room

Inside the room are the chairs  
and the dreams of the chairs  
Inside the room are the desk  
and the dreams of the desk  
Inside the room are the floor  
and the dreams of the floor  
Inside the room are the closet  
and the dreams of the closet

In the songs that I hear  
In the words that I say  
In the water that I drink  
In the silence that I leave

(1995)

## A Prayer of Gears

Oh Lord, our  
life is so,  
so strugglingly  
revolving, a set  
of tooth-biting  
gears, the planets  
that bite and fall  
ceaselessly, with you  
as our center, with  
night as our center.  
What ties us is  
the unfathomable  
fear, the provocation  
of omnipresent  
darkness. We're the  
eternal mechanism  
led by others  
yet leading others,  
unable to twist off ethics,  
morality, passion, and  
fury. Oh Lord, we are  
traveling in the universe,  
the metal family  
with grim hard edges,  
an eye for an eye, a  
tooth for a tooth, circling  
in nothingness, the  
lonely hedgehogs that  
rub each other's  
humble bodies to keep  
warm. Please tolerate  
our discord and

friction, tolerate  
our daily trivial  
dirty fight for  
power and profit,  
ceaseless  
biting and falling:  
a collective living body  
that we can't but accept.  
Oh Lord, we are  
silent mills  
revolving  
in the prison of time,  
Sisyphuses who push  
and grind cyclically,  
grinding desires, grinding  
agony, grinding out  
spots of mystic  
ecstatic starlight  
of powder, the heroin  
that makes death dizzy,  
the flowers of evil  
that make night tremble. So  
strugglingly we bite  
and revolve because  
oh Lord, they will  
follow the light and see  
our hereditary  
garden of soul.

(1995)

## Three Poems in Search of the Composer/Singer

### 1 *Starry Night*

Open . . . . .  
. . . . .  
. . . . .  
. . . . .

Every pachinko house in heaven.....

## 2 *Wind Blowing over the Plain*

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### 3 *Footprints in the Snow*

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(1993)

*Author's Note: The meanings of the four Chinese characters in the second poem are as follows— 嘘 = hush; 口 = mouth; 虚 = empty; 人 = man.*

## Old Snow

### *Black Sheep*

Dropping out of senior high and fooling around, my youngest brother is the black sheep of us three brothers. Although he has a blue dragon tattooed on his leg, his heart is as gentle and weak as our mother's. Mother, who has been riding a bike to and from work all her life, has been paying off debts all her life. She has wished her youngest son to stop going astray. After the several motorcycles and cars she had bought for him were all gone, she borrowed money and bought him another car without my knowledge. That was a white car, white as the morning fog on winter days. That morning when I returned to Shanghai Street, I saw her, with cleaning cloth in hand, sneaking toward the white car parked on the roadside and wiping its body forcefully but gently, as if to rub the black sheep into a white one. She rubbed and rubbed, because she knew the white car might soon be gone, and she had to sew the white skin on quickly before the black sheep woke up.

### *Evening Breeze*

I well remember her name was Evening Lee, which I saw on a strip of cloth at her funeral. I was eleven years old then. I walked slowly with a group of people from Seashore Street to the downtown main street. The afternoon sun blazingly shone on the funeral procession. But after thirty years, what crosses my mind now is the gentle evening breeze, pleasant and refreshing, blowing from the evening sea. While she was alive, it never occurred to me that she should have a name other than "Great-grandma." What I can recall to mind about her is one afternoon in my third or fourth grade. The teacher announced we could leave school earlier to go home and ask parents for money; all the students were to see a movie in a chartered cinema. I got home, and in the dusky kitchen found Great-grandma, who was aged over seventy. She stopped working and took out a lump of cloth from her clothes, and from the

well-folded cloth she took out a one-dollar coin. I have long forgotten what the movie was about, yet I clearly remember the sound of that coin sinking into the wooden box of the lady clerk at the entrance. However, the coin isn't gone; instead, it is deposited secretly in the bank of time—an forgotten sum of money which is glitteringly recollected after many years, along with the interest it has yielded. All of a sudden I realized she was the toughest, bravest, and purest woman of the whole family. During the last years of her life, she chose a religious belief different from her children's, just as she chose in her youth to betray her impotent wealthy husband and give birth to my grandmother and her brothers. I, taken care of by her until nine years of age, feel a thrill of joy mixed with loneliness and revolt in the breeze blowing from the ocean.

### ***Comb***

Comb your hair with my comb: my comb is made from time.

Wash my comb with your hair: your hair melts old snow into spring.

(1996)

## Butterfly Air

“The fluttering of ten thousand butterfly wings in the Southern Hemisphere causes a typhoon near the Tropic of Cancer in the summer midday’s dream of a girl who was pursued by love and yet betrayed love.” I found these words in a meteorology book with color illustrations lying on the dressing table in your room.

Oh, the attic of memory with metal walls and glass floor, where I once entered, but later I lost the key and could no longer find my way in. With a dark blue eyebrow pencil you underlined the main points: “These butterflies feed on love poems, especially sad ones, unable to be swallowed at one gulp and required to be chewed over and over again.”

I ponder over the ways to re-approach you: to dismember yesterday and hang it up, leaving it floating like a spider outside the tall building where you live? Or to air-drop to your door the parcel of desire and despair through the flight of one butterfly stamp after another? Your smooth, sealed metal walls make every thinking reptile of mine, which attempts to cling to and get close to you, slip and fall off the building.

So I am expecting the butterflies in the Southern Hemisphere to flutter their wings, which will cause a typhoon in your summer midday’s dream, so that the butterfly shadows secretly issued by sorrow may flap and pound the doors and windows of your heart, so that a question mark or a comma in an incompletely digested poem may trigger your memory like a tiny screw driver and loosen the stopper of the old perfume bottle at your bedside, so that you can hear anew what insects’ chirping, dogs’ barking,

the noseless clown's singing we once heard together and are stored inside,  
so that you can smell anew what smell of sweat and scent of mud we once  
rolled out together and are stored inside:  
an unhinderable summer night's dialogue at the deep bottom of a lake.

Now our hearts are poles apart, although my eyes  
are fixed, like thumb tacks, on the longitude and latitude of your location  
on the map.

All I can do is write a poem, a sad poem, to make the butterflies in the  
Southern Hemisphere fight for it,  
fluttering their ten thousand wings and resulting in a typhoon in the  
summer mid-day dream of you,  
who are behind the metal walls of a tall building near the Tropic of Cancer.

(1996)

## Night Song

When your parachute for sleeping lands,  
someone's unrighteousness makes it suddenly lose speed and bearings  
and get stranded in the treetops on the isle in the lake.

You cry to the childhood scenery for help.  
Your father gave you a lollipop (like a tree trunk  
hard enough to support your body).  
A Children's Day balloon was entangled, like happiness, in the power  
pole right in front of the theater.  
(A pill once put you at that height afterwards.)  
The entertaining band's muted trumpet tremblingly uttered "not guilty,  
not guilty."  
Next door, the woman and her husband turned off the living room light,  
a laundered purple bra hanging dripping under the eaves.

You are stranded on an isle surrounded with loneliness and desire,  
and the night, and boundless memory and humiliation.  
And I look helplessly at you on the indifferent continent.

How can one turn an umbrella into a piece of cotton candy?  
How can one turn a pair of sandals into a pair of wings?  
At least on this night, when you can't find a key to unlock  
the body in your body,  
let the entwined iron blossom in your hair,  
let those unused characters and spells which escaped from the dictionary  
and have been chasing you the whole night  
return to their radicals.

Oh, beloved,  
untie your parachute,  
human in my unrighteous arms,  
even if all the dogs in the world bark,

jealous of your over-cooked tears.  
If love should deepen the pot of night,  
if love should increase the weight of hate,  
you can have my monotonous song pushed by like a cart  
to load and unload your soul and flesh.

(1996)

## **Tunnel**

Your sobs, in the distance,  
drilled a tunnel in my body.  
This morning I was back again to the familiar darkness.  
I entered the cell of the honeycomb where I belong  
And waited for my sorrow to drip like honey.

In the amber hours I congealed myself,  
reared by imaginary death, by  
fudge of void. Silently your sobs  
were tattooed on the leaves of my ears,  
and then at the end of the tunnel they sparkled into a

transparent rain tree.

Search for its shape, not its entrance.  
A tunnel passes through a life of distress to connect you and me.

(1997)

## The Cat at the Mirror

My cat jumped from inside the book on the desk into the mirror.  
It was a cat painted in gouache  
by a decent lady in the early twentieth century,  
lying near the foot of a flute-playing lady.  
I closed the book and returned it to the library on time,  
but the cat is still in the mirror, on my wall.

At times I hear the music of the flute flow out of the mirror,  
along with sounds of a moon-shaped lute and car wheels.  
Playing long hasn't made lipstick come off  
her tiny red mouth (I guess the dust of time has obscured  
those melodies). I gently wipe the mirror, seeing  
the crouching cat give a yawn and stand up.

It's still active in the painting, sleeping  
between music, contemplating, and occasionally passing through  
the picture to overhear my 11-year-old daughter in the  
next room talking with her classmates. It even sees  
them looking at each other in the mirror, discussing brands of  
cosmetics, good and weak points of cars with hand and auto shifts.

It must have seen itself in the mirrors  
in their hands: idle, yet still  
young, lodging in the mirror on the wall in a corner  
of my study. It must have seen me, outside the mirror, sitting  
at the desk reading and writing, and wondering when  
I will open a book, unfold a piece of paper,

for it to jump back onto the desk.

(1997)

## Short Ride in a Fast Machine

Passing  
through  
the  
chirping  
of  
summer  
cicadas

we  
have  
just  
en-  
countered  
the  
sea

the  
waves  
of  
maples

snow

dark  
night

(1997)

## Music

A daughter  
will recall these  
30 years from now:  
her father  
drove her  
to school.  
In the back seat  
she listened to the  
music from his player  
(usually what she  
was practicing hard)  
interspersed with  
the sounds of his  
clearing the throat.

For 30 years  
repeatedly playing  
these musical pieces,  
she will feel that  
wrong notes flashing  
once in a while  
seem to be  
some kind of  
acceptable beauty,  
like the style  
her father has played  
all his life:  
unethical, derailing  
on the lengthy  
stern course of life.

(1997)

## Composition

I cultivate a space  
with loneliness, and with breath.  
Two or three plastic bottles are on the floor;  
a laundered pair of orange panties  
hang on a stainless steel bar dripping    dripping.

I cultivate the smell of oranges.  
Shampoos. Wings of a glider.

I cultivate a word in lower case—  
*veronica*: cloth with the holy face of Jesus  
printed; a bullfighting pose (the matador,  
with both feet firm, slowly turns the cloth  
he holds away from the charging bull).

I cultivate a closet where hang a black pair of jeans  
and a blue T-shirt.

I cultivate a laptop computer which awaits the sea  
and a range of waves to be input.

I cultivate a gap:  
isolating me from the world  
and leading to the mortal Eden hanging underneath your navel.

I cultivate the latest and the smallest country  
along with its detouring and complex nation-building history.

(1998)

## Gliding Exercises

—based on Vallejo's theme

At  
such height looking back at the earth  
your breath tops my breath

We  
steer the wind forward, along with  
the stars playing truant

Sleep together  
through such lengthy and dark pre-historic times and Middle Ages and  
suddenly wake up  
in the modern light

Plenty of  
wet and glistening golden fleece, and your name, called by the  
lips of the whole Milky Way

Nights'  
medals, words which have been  
rubbed and inscribed

That  
(yes, that) giant warehouse with time as its pillar, where thunder and  
lightning and clouds and rain  
are stored in its secret

corner

(1998)

*Author's Note: The first line of each stanza of this poem comes from the*

*beginning of a poem in **Trilce** by the Peruvian poet César Vallejo (1892-1938)—“At that corner we sleep together plenty of nights.”*

## **Tango for the Jealous**

If you embrace love as if it were a  
dish-washer, ignore the greasy scars left on  
the dishes licked by others' tongues or cut by  
their physical knives and forks. Turn on the faucet  
and give them a flush: forgetfulness is the best detergent.  
Remember only the glorious, wonderful, and shining part,  
because containers, especially china, are fragile.  
Wash them, dry them, and, like a brand-new man,  
greet tomorrow's breakfast as if nothing had happened.

Especially when your life is approaching or has passed  
the midday: youthful anxiety comes back to you once more.  
You pick up the phone and dial her in vain.  
Suspicious and fretful, you make mute and  
aimless phone calls to the invisible rivals in love.  
You call that one again and again (oh, what convenient  
modern communication), only to be answered  
by the afternoon empty as a big bowl. At this point, please pull out  
the plug of the dish-washer for the moment, and swallow  
the tangling phone wires like a mass of noodles,  
with a little imaginary soy sauce of revenge.  
The dish-washer will soon wash away your disgrace.

However, the dark night is a still bigger dish-washer,  
when you feel sad and all the past dishes are flung at you,  
and unwashable spots of starlight stick to the dish bottom.  
Ah, ignore the noise of the machine in operation,  
the imperishable noise in the tranquil universe.  
Ignore the shadows which encircle you like left-over  
fish bones, if the one you love is not around.  
If yet you feel the impulse to spit out those irritating fish bones,  
rearrange them one stroke after another into new lines of poetry.

(1998)

## Sonnets

You asked me what eternity is, for we often can't wait to stick our tongues to panna cotta before eating up a cup of ice cream. I love lemon pie (I hide it on your breasts); cheery soda, cheese cake, nyonya cake, sago are also what I desire. What is desire, what is taste, what is everlasting gluttonous hunting—eat till the table is messy, eat till the day breaks, eat day and night, around the clock. Eternity is not a paused scene. Often we watch channel A and record channel B. Fast-forwarding, rewinding the video, we watch and search, feasting ourselves on tasty images and sounds. We feed our fastidious senses, allowing them to build an illusory city of color, smell and taste on the leased land of time. What is eternity? Before answering you, let me lick you up first.

\*

At midnight, when they are watching the World Cup on TV, another World Cup is being held on your breasts quietly, with, oh, the holy cup made of your eastern and western breast hemispheres, our unique World Cup. You said: defend with the heart, attack with the eyes, and don't rashly dispatch your ten fingers or toes. The right wing of the French team then caught his teammate's pass, made a strength shoot, came near shooting into Brazil's goal. You said: desiring is always better than achieving. Enjoy your creativity and wit; hold back your shooting. The French team gets a corner kick, No.10 player volleys the ball and scores a goal. The audience gives thunderous shouts, but you, looking at me in silence, said: drink me like noiseless juice, shoot my goal, open my cup, the World Cup made of imagination and expectation.

\*

The earthquake is the topic we haven't talked about yet. Yesterday a violent quake hit Chiayi. Houses caved in; landslides blocked highways. Today there were ceaseless aftershocks in Hualien. The biggest one's epicenter was on your bed. Scattered on the floor were our gasps. The earthquake is over; the rhythms remain... Earthquakes make us beware of peril in peacetime. Suppose all the fleshly constructions collapsed, what would it be that pillars our love? Slanting metaphysics? Metaphors deformed and reformed? Earthquakes make us cherish peace in time of danger, thinking of the holy empire of senses that is both spiritual and physical, of gossip, suspicion, poverty, and sorrow that strengthen its columns, roofed corridor, and overhanging eaves. Thunder and lightning help form the music of blacksmiths; at earthquakes we feel sorrow, write, and keep music going.

(1998)

*Author's Note: Chiayi is a place in the western part of Taiwan, while Hualien is in the eastern part.*

## On the Island

1

A hundred-pacer snake stole my necklace and singing voice.  
I will go beyond the mountain to get them back.  
But Mother, look!  
He has torn my necklace up, cast it down to the valley,  
and turned it into starlight flowing all night long.  
He has compressed my singing voice into a teardrop,  
falling on the silent feathered tail of a black long-tailed pheasant.

2

Our canoe has drifted from the ocean of myth to the beach tonight.  
Our canoe, my brother, has landed anew, along with this line of words.

3

A fly has flown onto the sticky flypaper below the goddess's navel.  
Just as the day hammers gently on the night,  
my dear ancestor, hammer gently with the unused Neolithic tool  
between your thighs.

4

We do not die, we just grow old,  
we do not grow old, we just change plumage,  
like the sea changing its bed sheets  
in the stone cradle, at once ancient and young.

5

His fishing rod is a rainbow of seven colors,  
bending slowly down from the sky  
to hook every swimming dream.

Ah, his fishing rod is a bow of seven colors  
that aims at every black-and-white fish flying out of the subconscious.

6

Because the bees buzz underground,  
we have earthquakes. Yet earthquakes  
can be sweet, if a bit of honey should  
seep through the cracks of the  
earth's crust, through the cracks of the heart.

7

She stood singing on a rock with her brother on her back;  
the god who heard the singing voice fetched her to heaven.

But she felt like eating millet, so she asked her father  
for three grains to sow them in heaven.

“On hearing thunder, just picture me  
threshing millet.”

At the sight of lightning, we'll assume  
she has threshed open her homesickness again.

8

Her body, unopened by desire,  
is a cement room without doors and windows.

“Drill a hole through my wall, Mother.  
Numerous fleas are anxious to rush out of the dark ages,  
out of my soft, swelling *hahabisi*,  
to receive the baptism of light.”

9

Under the giant Harleus's crotch hid a mobile rapid transit system.  
His eight-kilometer-long penis is the most flexible viaduct,  
crossing swiftly running dales, crossing mountain ranges,

stretching from Village Hikayiou to Village Pianan.  
Fair girls, while you enjoy the ecstasy of free transportation, beware  
that his fleshy bridge may suddenly turn its direction  
and creep into your dark tunnels.

10

The day is too long, the night is too short,  
and the valley of death too far away.  
My dear sisters, leave the taro fields  
to men, and sweat to ourselves.  
Let's put the hoes on our heads like horns  
and become goats, to take shelter from the sun under trees.

You are a goat,  
and I am a goat.  
Away from men, away from toil,  
we play and enjoy the cool breeze in the shade.

(1998)

*Author's Note: (1) The black long-tailed pheasant is a rare bird found in the Taroko Gorge National Park. (2) There is a legend about the origin of the Amis: a brother and a sister sought refuge from a deluge and drifted to the east coast of Taiwan on a canoe. (3) According to the Atayal myth of the Creation, there were a god and a goddess in very ancient times, who were ignorant of lovemaking until one day a fly landed on the private part of the goddess (the Amis have a similar myth). (4) According to a Saisiyat legend, old people could recover their youth simply by peeling off the skin. (5) An Amis myth has it that the rainbow was originally the seven-color bow of Adgus, the hunter who shot down the sun. (6) There is an Amis legend about how earthquake was formed: the people living on the ground cheated those living underground by exchanging hemp bags filled with bees for goods. (7) The Paiwan have stories about a girl singing on a rock with her little brother on her back and being delivered to heaven because she aroused gods' sympathy and affection. (8) A Bunun legend goes like this: once upon a time there was a beautiful girl whose private part (hahabisi in the Bunun language) was a little swollen but tightly*

*sealed. Her mother cut it open with a knife, and out sprang numerous fleas. (9) There is an Atayal legend about the giant Harleus, who had a tremendously long penis. He stretched it out as a bridge for people to cross flooded rivers, but he got lustful at the sight of pretty girls. (10) A Puyuma legend goes like this: two girls were close friends. One day they worked in the taro field on the mountain. It was so hot that they took shelter from the sun under a tree. Rejoicing, they put hoes on their heads and were turned into goats.*

## **Aria on the Coast**

At that time our memories of the ocean were as plentiful as the grains of sand on the beach. Walking down the dike along the southern coast, we became ants and it took a long long long long time to get to the sea. What a spacious beach, you said. You saw the coast surrounding, with a beautiful dreamlike curve, the small town where you grew up. You were merely a child of the size of an ant, and how sweet the beach of cube sugar and crude sugar was! That blue ocean was definitely a blue cake, but you were not sure of its flavor or ingredients, because every day it rolled out different shades of blue and different looks. God's cookbook was bigger than the ocean, and the number of its recipes for cakes was larger than that of the sand on the beach. Those whitened waves were, of course, God's saliva. Every day you longed to move some back home stealthily, but you weren't able to, because such sweetness was too heavy a burden. Leave it there on the coast, you said—a public cake permanently mouth-watering to God, to human beings, and to you, who were as tiny as an ant.

(2000)

### III *Poems 2000-2013*

苦惱與自由的平均律

小宇宙 II

輕／慢

我／城

妖／冶

朝／聖



## **Foil Carton**

drink me

drink my blood

drink my milk

drink my saliva

drink my flesh juice

drink my love liquid

drink my spasms

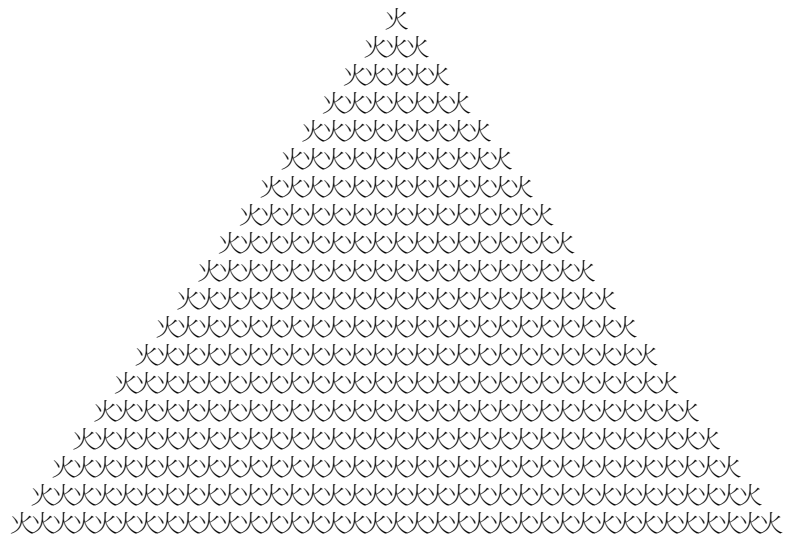
drink my infidelity

before the use-by date expires

(for date of manufacture, see bottom of the coffin)

(2000)

## Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain



(2000)

*Author's Note: The Chinese character 火 = fire; 焱 = flames.*



## **In the Corners of Our Lives**

Many poems live in the corners of our lives.

They may not have reported to the domiciliary registration office  
or received doorplate numbers from the district office or police station.  
Walking out of the alley, you bump into a jogger speaking on the cell  
phone.

His embarrassed smile reminds you of the aged doctor who polishes his  
young wife's red sports car in front of the house every night.

You realize then that they are two sections of a long poem.

Objects are known to each other, but not necessarily on visiting terms.  
Some float up to become images, courting and showing affection  
for others. Sound and smell usually conspire first, flirting with each other  
on the sly. Colors are the coy little sisters who must stay home,  
get set the curtain, sheet, bathrobe and tablecloth, wait for their master  
to return, and turn on  
the lights. A poem, like a home, is a sweet burden  
sheltering love, lust, pain and sorrow, taking in the good and the bad.

They needn't go to the health center to be sterilized or to buy condoms  
although they do have their own ethics and family planning.

Couples of well-matched family backgrounds do not always make the  
best matches.

Water can mix well with milk, but it can also be mated with fire.

Whitehead eats black-boned chicken; black-headed flies debate over  
whether or not a white horse is a horse. Tender violence.

Deafening silence.

Incestuous love is the poet's license.

Some of them choose to live in the shadow of metaphor or woods of  
symbols.

Some are broad-minded and optimistic, like sunny spiders climbing  
here and there. Some

enjoy living outdoors, talking idly and having intercourse; others, like  
invisible gauze,  
are scattered in your brain, which is divided into many small suites for  
rent, from time to time  
switching on the spinning wheel of dream or subconsciousness.  
Many poems are said to be imprisoned in the room of habit. In quest of  
lines you  
close the door, overturn boxes and cupboards, call out desperately, and  
even ride an electronic donkey,  
drive the mouse and pound the keys. You open the window  
to the big wide world, and surprisingly, there they are:  
Irises after the rain. A flock of gulls  
on their way home from school. Slanting  
waves of the ocean.  
The microwave oven boiling tomato soup with slices of bean curd.

It occurs to you to buy some peas. You go to the supermarket and see  
can  
can  
can  
You take one can casually and find what you've been racking  
your brains for owes its presence to its very absence:  
can  
cancancancancancancancancan   cancancancancancancancancancancancancan  
can

A persimmon lies solitarily on the counter. You say,  
how fantastic, a persimmon lies solitarily on the counter.  
A line of words forms a family in itself.  
You can't help suspecting it was immigrated from Japan, or from the  
High Tang, when quatrains were flourishing.  
But you don't mind at all. You don't mind at all that they'll all fit into  
a small shopping bag.

(2000)

## Reading Huang Ting-Jian at the Turn of the Century

The old century will soon be over. Thumbing through your poems is like visiting a newly-opened store selling exquisite articles, on whose upstairs they also engage in plastic surgery, organ donating and transplanting.

Turn iron into gold; get disembodied and transformed: the tremendously huge sign scares away those customary consumers. They say: is it possible for poetry to function as alchemy or surgical operations?

They don't know surgery also takes a tender heart. Writing is an art of mental exertion. Poets rewrite the footprints that time has left on water, carve out new stanzas of verse, without leaving any scars.

They say you are a thief, transforming the stolen chocolate into Goodyear tires, tumbling and galloping on the imaginary candy wrapping paper where the boat is moored 300 km away, and dreams bring it an inch away.

How can we eat the candy of Tang Dynasty only? you said. They say candy wrapping paper is formalism and that you the foremost of all evil thinkers, a shrewd plagiarist, a wicked-looking collage and parody player.

So, I can call you a post-modernist far back in ancient China? Your French kinsman Duchamp moved an upright urinal into the exhibition hall, saying it was a "fountain."

If your "raining in the night by the lake" were twisted

into “leaking in the night urinal”, it could also turn out  
to be a lamp blazing throughout the history, couldn’t it ?  
The guy Chen Wu-ji you mentioned in your poem, who shut

his door looking for words, is actually the incarnation of me:  
the boat bound for your dream, with nine hundred years  
in between,

sails every half minute.

(2000)

*Author’s Note: Huang Ting-jian (1045-1105), a Chinese poet of Sung Dynasty.  
“Writing is an art of mental exertion,” “The boat is moored 300 km away, and  
dreams bring it an inch away,” “raining in the night by the lake,” and “Chen  
Wu-ji who shut his door looking for words” are lines taken from Huang Ting-  
jian’s poems. Chen Wu-ji was Huang Ting-jian’s fellow poet and friend. He  
often stayed in his room, waiting for inspiration and racking his brains for good  
poems.*

## **Kubla Khan**

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
a giant, mobile pleasure-dome decree.  
“I don’t want fixed things. I am tired of  
those regular rooms, of concubines who use the same perfume,  
give the same moaning after standard procedures  
though there are thousands of them...”  
Picking and calculating carefully, his Italian counselor, good at business  
administration,  
arranged and combined those concubines into teams of six, three, or five,  
three times per night, in different directions, in different formations,  
to serve their emperor by turns.

Fine wine, opium, honey, leather whips,  
globes, vibrators, the Bible, sex-appealing underwear.  
“I’ll ceaselessly move, ceaselessly feel excited, ceaselessly conquer,  
ceaselessly reach the orgasm...”

But this is not a question of math,  
not a question of military affairs, not even a question of medicine.

“This is a question of philosophy.”  
Outside the palace, the ignored Persian traveler said,  
“Time is the best aphrodisiac  
that fosters changes.”

(2000)

## Wooden Fish Ballad

This is the seventh autumn of my visit here.  
The cool wind comes as usual; the autumn typhoon conceives no mercy.  
My sentiment in recollecting you is like the flooded MRT system,  
    where no trains are available,  
and thus people can go nowhere.  
I am stranded in the memories of the past, which are  
deeper than the flood in this city,  
picturing you looking casually at the twilight reflected on the pair of  
    Hello Kitty by the window.  
As I am seated alone at the computer desk thinking quietly,  
the cell phone with newly-set tone  
rings like birds chirping, and the newsbar roll on the TV reads:  
The airport is closed, transport both by land and air blockaded.  
All these add to my sorrow and annoyance in missing you.

The past testament is hard to break. What I have hoarded is a coverless,  
wordless Bible, which, like an ever-turning waterwheel  
carrying last night's nocturnal emissions and leaking from the upstairs,  
    drips on my heart.  
They've got all wet—these pages of the scripture about ecstasy of fish  
    and water:  
Poetry and music, our sacred swimming pool.

My shining silver-scaled swimming choir,  
tapped out in rows from the electronic wooden fish,  
pass through the flooded city, through the spongy-wrinkly  
moonbeams, and swim to your computer screen.

I know how to recall and narrate the merry hours:  
I remember the day we met for the first time at the theater.  
I was a wretched and penniless traveler,  
Yet you showed your affection toward me, because of an

unaccompanied aria  
composed simply of function words and vowels.  
You kept me loving company by the hotel bedside lamp, inquiring in  
detail about  
what the aria was about. I narrated to you the romantic tale  
underlying “The Traveler’s Autumn Rue,” telling you about  
Miu Lian-xian, how his memory of the songstress Mai Qiu-juan  
left him feeling remorse on the journey, passing days as if they were  
years,  
writing poems, lost in reminiscence, trying to find outlets for sorrow.

After listening to my narrative, you heaved plenty of sighs and said,  
“You were actually narrating the story about us, how the memory  
bred music and images for poetry to recite about,  
how you, a poet, courted me, chanting  
on similar yet different themes  
with subtly varied postures and tones; I  
was meant to be a songbird whose mission  
was to sing, but in front of poetry, another  
more melodious songbird,  
I now choose to be silent in response to voices.”  
You said I was equipped with pearls of words, with priceless abilities  
to create something  
out of nothing. I knew that you not merely appreciated my talent  
compassionately but  
felt no contempt for my poverty. My only possession was fabrication.

Oh, my dearest lover, your attentive listening is  
singing in itself. I write, because you are there.  
You are not a songbird; you are all the singing  
and non-singing birds: robins, bluebirds, red falcons,  
sandpipers, snow-owls, and swifts...  
You are music incarnated,  
existing before poetry exists. Attracting poetry, accepting poetry,

you are the supporting scaffold for words that have got lost,  
my lodging house on the journey, and in the aquarium of your screen,  
my shining silver-scaled swimming team and chanting choir.

(2001)

*Author's Note: "Wooden fish ballad" is a form of oral literature popular in the province of Guangdong, China. Wooden fish is a wooden percussion instrument used to keep time and rhythm in chanting or singing. "The Traveler's Autumn Rue" is one of the most famous in the repertoire of wooden fish ballads. "I know how to recall the merry hours" is a translation of a line from Baudelaire's poem "Le balcon."*

## Butterfly-Mad

That girl was walking toward  
me like a butterfly. Steadily she  
seated herself right in front of the lectern  
in her hair was a gaily-colored  
hair pin, a butterfly on a butterfly

For twenty years in this  
seashore junior high, how many butterflies  
have I seen, human-shaped, butterfly-shaped,  
carrying youth, carrying dreams, flut-  
tering into my classroom?

Oh, Lolita

That autumn day before noon, the  
sun so warm, a dazzling yellow butterfly  
entered through the window, circling between  
the distracted teacher and the 13-year-old  
girl concentrating on her lessons

Suddenly she rose, to evade  
the scissor-like glittering colors  
and shapes, a butterfly scared of butterflies:  
ah, she was startled by a butterfly  
and I confounded by beauty

(2001)

## **Petty Deaths**

—based on Jiří Kylián's dance title

Under the quilt of the wind, each day  
petty deaths

Under the wavy quilt, you and I  
wave a sword of nothingness

A sword stabs into the body  
to kill you, to kill me

A sword stabs into the heart  
to kill time, to kill time to death

Where the tip of the sword points, petty  
orgasms of the quilt

Where the shining sword passes, petty  
yells and cries

Petty deaths, to get us  
gradually accustomed to the humility and triviality of living

Petty conquests and surrenders  
on the plain of time where there are neither enemy nor allied troops

Killers and pushers to the other  
Assassins and pilgrims to the other

The livelong, indolent process of living  
process of death: indolently

inverting the sword handle into a pendulum, each day  
petty vibrations, petty deaths

(2002)

## The Tongue

I left a segment of my tongue in her pencil box. Consequently, every time she opened it to write a letter to her new lover, she would hear my mumbling words, which were like a line of scribbles, chafing among commas with the movement of her newly sharpened pencil. Then she would stop writing, not knowing it was my voice. She thought that I, who had never spoken to her since we last met, had kept silent for good. She wrote another line, finding the Chinese character 愛 (love), which consisted of so many strokes, was carelessly written. She handily picked up my tongue. Mistaking it for an eraser, she rubbed it forcefully on the paper, leaving a considerable drop of blood on the spot where the character 愛 disappeared.

(2002)

## Night Song

By the mailbox on the street corner  
I stop my car, turn off the engine, and doze for a while.  
In front are glimmering traffic lights;  
the sea we know well is at a short distance.

I doze on the street waiting for my daughter  
to walk out of the piano room of the college after her lesson.  
When I left home, my VCR was recording  
Mahler's *Song of the Night*. The laborious  
long day will be rewound and repeated tomorrow.

Several mosquitoes fly into the car  
biting an exhausted human body in the dark:  
the mosquitoes of Hualien biting this native  
of Hualien is like the tide biting at the beach  
leaving temporary marks.

Like music streaming through the sky  
and disappearing soon after, we cannot tell  
which part is Mahler's, and which part  
the plow song, which part is this life  
of ours, and which the afterlife of others.

The sea we are familiar with is a giant package  
which is packed with our dreams, with  
music boxes scattered on the beach like shells  
and repeatedly delivers itself at the same spot.  
The mailer's address is the receiver's.

My body, stamped by mosquitoes,  
is a package in a package, hidden in the car  
box and awaiting the sea wind not far away  
to blow it into the mailbox on the street corner.

(2002)

## Autumn Sonata

It's getting cold. Wearing one more garment,  
you feel too hot; taking one off,  
you feel too cold. So it is with two lovers  
living together for too many years.  
To love or not to love  
doesn't seem right.

The house is less crowded;  
There is as much furniture and music.  
the heart is none the smaller.  
You have nothing to hide  
or defend, except the right-of-way  
in the night over the path to dreams.

In the mirror still hangs the red trunks  
you wear on the summer beach.  
What is found on the slope may  
be the medicine mine, not the gold mine.  
Something is yet  
to be excavated, or prospected,

such as ethics, the transparent vest  
woven and patched again  
and again (to wear or  
not to wear doesn't seem right),  
such as understanding, the coal  
used as fuel or pigment:

to be spread in the darker night  
to turn darkness into light.

(2003)

## **On the Island**

—based on Yami myths

1

The island is by the sea, and the sea by the island  
Our island is a tiny, motionless ship

Tsunami turned the ship into a cradle  
The waves dashed toward the mountaintop, splitting the giant rock  
Out of the rock I popped  
I am man, I am Tau  
I am a man

Tsunami turned the ship into a cradle  
The waves tumbled over reefs, splitting bamboo woods  
Out of the bamboo I popped  
I am man, I am Tau  
I am a man

We were the first two on board  
We were men having no women to love and  
loved by no women

We rested on the ship, slept on the ship  
On the knees we twined our exceedingly long penises  
We gently swung our knees, sleeping foot to foot  
Our knees touched comfortably, getting all the itchier with every touch

We scratched each other thoughtfully  
With each scratch came a greater itch  
until a man burst out of my swollen right knee  
(oh Tau, a man)  
until a woman burst out of my swollen left knee  
(oh Tau, a man)

They are the Taus  
Fulfillment of love between two men

2

The island is by the sea, and the sea by the island  
Our island is a tiny, motionless ship  
But Mama, our sky is so low  
Our deck is so high  
That fire ball, with wide open eyes  
is hanging above our heads, burning hot

Please ask the next-door Uncle Giant to stretch his arms and legs  
kicking the ground down, and upholding the sky  
I will use my fish-spearing lance  
to shoot blind one eye of the two-eyed fire ball, thus dividing it  
into two: the half hanging in the sky will be  
the sun, and the other half left to the night to accompany us in sleep  
will be the moon

Behold, the moon is risen  
So gentle is it, like  
a bashful lily  
From the depth of the evening sky, my lance slowly drops back  
The fish I speared yesterday clings to the sky  
becoming a milky way

(2004)

*Author's Note: The Yami (also called the Tau) tribe are indigenous people of Taiwan living on the Orchid Island, which lies to the southeast of the island of Taiwan. "Tau" means "man" in the Yami language.*



## Poem Gained in Dream at a Hotel in Winter

The white hotel took me in on a winter night  
just as an aluminum pot accepts a grain of rice,  
washing its body with sufficient hot water,  
warming and steaming it with the heat of quilt  
until it becomes a self-contented grain in the  
pot of rice of the soundly sleeping world.  
Someone (God maybe?) slightly opened the cover  
of the pot. I felt the good smell of rice brimming  
over the dream, and I saw in my dream a poem  
forming, written on the wall of the white hotel, or  
on me. It was obviously not a modern eight-line or  
four-line verse with meters and rhymes (I wondered  
how come a tiny rice grain could contain so many words).  
It was a poem that had never been written before,  
a brand-new poem without any device of rhyme  
or metrics. The imagery in the poem was vivid  
and charming; not only was it very musical but it  
gave forth sweet taste and smell from time to time.  
It was about love, about solitude, about  
time, and beauty (oh, it was virtually  
a great and perfect poem one could  
expect only in dream). I dared not  
believe that was my own work—  
so original, so wonderful. I thought  
it was written by some fellow poet more talented  
than I since Li Po and Du Fu. I was  
reluctant to write it down at first purely  
out of my jealousy. I left it suspended in  
my dream. As I savored it and surmised its  
technique and grandeur, I grew embittered  
secretly. How I wish this poem had never  
been written. When I suddenly realized I was

the author of my own dream and that the poem  
might have been written by me, and got anxious  
to memorize it, the pot cover of the dream had been  
completely lifted. I remembered not very clearly  
the atmosphere and ideas about it; as regards  
the concrete text, there was not a single word  
I could recall. I was a waking grain  
of rice, naked, chilly, in the bed of  
the white hotel, feeling a kind of pure  
blankness, empty fullness: just like  
that poem in the dream, gained and then lost.

(2004)

### 33 Poems from *Microcosmos II*

1

Live broadcast—  
Mom called to ask:  
will you come home for dinner?

2

Chirping competition:  
0-year-old aged cicadas teach 0-year-old  
baby cicadas to sing “Happy Birthday.”

3

Love  
Death: a three-legged race relayed by all generations across all ages.  
Love

4

Two bodies, with cliffs on four sides:  
desolate love scenery of  
a woman with a woman.

7

The unbearable lightness of dream:  
the weightless pressing of the breasts  
of the lover who is gone.

8

Great fleeing: let me hide inside  
you, like water melting in water, seen  
by the world, found by no one.

16

Pillowing on two books, lying on the floor  
one hot night, pondering on words with legs bent and  
knees swaying, I am the first haiku in this summer.

21

Having breakfast out with my 70-year-old mom:  
in the salad sauced with sunshine  
were her 17-year-old smiles.

22

Fire engines lined up motionless before him:  
nobody noticed the blazing fire inside the man  
seated in the teashop before the fire brigade.

23

Behind the bra, her half-naked breasts  
are like palpitating vowels bulging in the mouth.  
They escape the lips because of your exclamation.

25

A turning die in the empty bowl of the night  
creates the 7th side:  
oh God, you do exist.

26

Mango-cake moon:  
generous enough to shed sparks of crumbs  
for lovers separated by space to eat at once.

27

Seeing Mom in the teashop frequented by youths,  
I stared at her incredulously. My friend, sitting  
opposite me, asked, “Which belle are you looking at?”

33

Serving and cleaning the table so nimbly,  
the waitress didn’t know how hard it was to  
wipe off your greasy gaze upon her glossy arms.

45

Love is simply hanging on the tree.  
Love is simply hanging on the breasts.  
Come and get it, oh loverboy.

46

Bunun, Bunun... We are a bee box that makes  
droning sounds, a beehive in which honey is made  
with harmony, blocked yet bouncy vocalic choral.

*Author’s Note: The Bunun are a tribe of Taiwanese indigenes. They are best-known for their polyphonic vocal music.*

47

Your voices suspend in my room  
cutting through silence, to become  
a bulb speaking with heat or chill.

48

.....

°

,

52

Love, or alas?  
I say love, you say alas; I say  
alas, alas, alas, you say love's lost, alas!

57

Pulling over to the roadside, I lay down to see the blue sky beyond  
the nose. A small bug stopped on my nose tip as if on a peak.  
At that moment, my body was a mountain range of my hometown.

58

Ah man (人), come and have  
a photo of existence taken:  
prisoner (囚).

*Author's Note: The Chinese character "prisoner" (囚) looks like a man (人) confined to a frame.*

60

Let Basho write his haiku, walk on his  
Narrow Road to the Interior: my Basho  
chooses to write your narrow road to the interior.

*Author's Note: Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), the Japanese haiku master, wrote Narrow Road to the Interior (Oku no Hosomichi) in the form of a travel diary.*

63

There's a wound in the little finger. I can't pick my nose.  
The stars tonight are just like dots of nose excrement,  
stuck in the dark nose, refusing to fall.

64

The morning violent earthquake shook away Mom's  
pearl earrings on the dresser. The afternoon violent  
earthquake shook Mom's lost pearl earrings back.

66

An earthquake tumbled down the huge wall around the prison.  
Prison breakers, major or minor, still at large included  
two hounds, seventy mice, and eighty-six cockroaches.

69

Who comes first: the universe? the emperor? God?  
death? G cup? eating? —  
I will go move the bowels first.

75

Years later I re-knocked at the door of your heart. I said  
*Open Sesame*. All the food has been deleted from your word bank.  
I replace in vain the key words: *Black Sand, Baby, Sorry, Love Me...*

81

A newly-passed family violence law for nightingales:  
Never say “I no longer hunger for you”  
with too strong a voice.

92

I wrote an email to Great-grandma, who never kept a digital mouse,  
talking about love and death: she sent back (and asked me to  
forward it) the most ancient email written with lightning.

93

Mom said we’d dine out on New Year’s Day, with  
my home-coming brother. We’d dine out and look  
outside the window: the shiny lawn, the floating clouds.

97

Twisted metaphors, unethical  
ethics: benevolent  
love of poetry.

98

Offer Death a one-night stay in your pocket  
to experience your curiosity and timidity about him:  
he can try the food and the bed, but it's not formally open yet.

100

I'll minimize my poetic form, making it  
smaller than a disc, bigger than the world,  
a replicable and rewritable microcosmos.

(2005-2006)

## Adagio

Grandma sitting by the window  
(she was seventeen  
then, she says)  
waiting for the distant clouds  
to move slowly to the mountaintop  
and become her hair in the mirror.  
A cat walks across the lawn  
(so can a pig,  
but not now)  
upsetting the rattan chair she often  
sits on in the middle of the lawn.  
She turns on the radio  
to listen to news about the snow  
but the grass is very green.  
Suddenly she thirsts for  
vanilla ice cream.  
The bread tree stands at one end  
of the lawn, not moving  
at all the whole afternoon;  
The oriental sesame flower stands  
at the other end of the lawn,  
chit-chatting now and then  
with her sisters. Grandma thinks  
the silent tree is poetry,  
so are the chatting flowers.  
Looking up, she sees me,  
with satchel on back, cross  
the lawn, set the rattan chair  
upright, open the door,  
enter the house, and see

Grandma sitting by the window  
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the silent tree is poetry,  
so are the chatting flowers.  
Looking up, she sees me,  
with satchel on back, cross  
the lawn, set the rattan chair  
upright, open the door,  
enter the house, and see

(2007)

## **Song of the Insomnia Girl**

All night long, my family  
and my neighbors snore like a river  
flowing through my brain.  
My brain is a buzzing humidity reducing set  
dripping, after long whiles, one drop of water after another  
into the empty tank of my dreams.  
I pour the brimming water into the river.  
The whole world's snores gush over to scramble for it,  
converging to form a vast ocean before me.  
My gaze dives deep into the ocean,  
yet I remain sitting on the coast.  
Below my feet, the dandruff of  
dreams piles up like sand.

(2007)

## **Song of the Somnambulist Girl**

I am asleep, not knowing I've fallen asleep.  
I am alive, not knowing life is like a dream.

I'm strolling the earth with eyes closed, not knowing  
I'm walking on the eggshell.  
The smooth cliffs of dream on all sides  
are seducing me to smash into pieces.

I walk to my lover's bedside,  
spread toothpaste on a toothbrush to shine his shoes,  
getting ready for the trip of our pledge.  
He's asleep, not knowing our long night invites bad dreams.

I walk to the window of my rival in love,  
sealing her curtain, cutting the throat of  
her cock, wring off the spring of her alarm clock.  
I wish her a never-waking sleep, a never-ending night.

I am alive, yet I don't want to live quietly.  
I am asleep, yet I don't want to thus fall asleep.

(2007)



## **Slow City**

The mountain is very slow.  
The wind is very slow.  
The calisthenics exercise clouds take is very slow.  
The woodpecker types slow.  
The time when bread falls off the bread tree comes slow.  
The sea draws out tissue paper quick.

The train is very slow.  
The newspaper is very slow.  
The bank robber pulls out his gun very slow.  
The party alternation in power is very slow.  
The department store opens very slow.  
The news of Auntie Ah-Ching taking a bath with windows open  
spreads very quick.

The afternoon is very slow.  
The light is very slow.  
The philosopher eats bean-curd jelly very slow.  
The snow's on-line connection is very slow.  
The expiry date of dream arrives very slow.  
Happiness is being sorted and recycled very quick.

(2008)

## Pian Pian

She enjoyed eating leaves  
and all natural or organic food  
rich in chlorophyll.

She also had me eat leaves  
and made them gradually grow out of me  
to become underpants to cover my lower body,  
to become my polo shirt, jogging pants, and tuxedo  
to compete with others for glamour.

She was a fox draped with human skin,  
yet she draped around me bark, leaves, and her love  
for me, to make me glamorous and glittering.

She was like an elegant butterfly, so was I as elegant as a butterfly.  
We flew freely and gleefully, caressing and coupling each other.  
It was unlike earthly life.

But I should have restrained  
the impulse to eat *sashimi*.  
In the night club, those mermaids  
fed me with their bellies and their breasts,  
inviting me to their revelry of fish and water.

Alas, I became a fish, one  
with all scales gone. On my way home  
I saw all my clothes and buttons turned into withered leaves,  
scattering all over the ground.

(2009)

## **Fragments**

—found on a worn-out fox skin

fragrance

you

far away

me

tonight

tonight

(2009)

## Simple Sacred Songs

1

I like Sunday:  
instead of going  
to work, I go to  
Sunday school  
at your  
church  
of idle sleep.

2

O saint,  
show me the taste  
of immorality—  
with a sense  
of guilty  
but much  
pleasure.

3

Angels came.  
We were not home.  
We went out for  
something important.  
We went out to eat  
bean-curd jelly.

4

Angels came again.  
Again we were out  
for something  
important.  
We watched the sea

side by side.

5

In the farm field  
we practice arranging  
forms, colors, light  
and shadow,  
and move it  
back to our  
straw mattress.  
We call this  
a return from pilgrimage.

(2009)

## **Santiago, 1626**

We sailed north alongside the east coast of the island. East:  
the direction shared by the empire, the church, and dream.  
Sailors of another country once shouted to it  
“Formosa.” And to me, who left Luzon  
and Cagayan, jolting all the way here,  
the blue of the sea and the green of the island  
were nice in the May breeze. The navy soldiers  
on the galera said eagerly to me, “Father  
Bartolomé, sing us a song to praise the guardian  
of Spain, to praise our Saint Jacob.  
He is watching us at a short distance...”  
Waves splashing over faces, they excitedly yelled  
“Santiago y cierra España,” just like our ancestors  
who cried out warriors’ whoops  
charging the Moors centuries ago:  
Holy Saint bless us! Dash forward! Long live Spain!  
I really saw a twinkling eye watching us at a short  
distance; at the northeasternmost cape of the island  
it winked its luxuriant trees’ eyelashes waving at us  
though a black mosquito circled in my eyes off and on  
no matter how hard I had tried to drive it away  
with my prayer book. Santiago y cierra España.  
The one-eye on the green island giant’s forehead  
got closer and closer; the navy soldiers rushed ashore,  
irresistibly. The beautiful island conquered them with  
the beauty needless to translate. Thank Holy Saint,  
let this dream cape be named after you. The east  
of the east, the dream eye on the dream forehead  
which was shining to the future: Santiago.  
The newly baptized islanders followed me all the way.  
Looking back at the landmark of our contradictory  
martial victory, I wondered how they were going to

translate it: Santiago, Saint's ego, or  
Cape Three Martens? Not a single marten was  
in sight although I saw two dogs  
and a black spiraling mosquito I couldn't  
get rid of. May God use his blue toothpaste  
to cleanse this pretty dream eye; may he use blue  
waters and blue toothbrushes to brush the new  
decayed tooth in my eye. Santiago,  
in your name will our vision ever be renewed.

(2009)

*Author's Note: In May, 1626 the Spanish Governor in Manila sent galeras from Cagayan (a province of the Philippines) to Taiwan. The Spanish sailed north along the east coast and reached the northeasternmost point of Taiwan, which they named Santiago (now called 三貂角 [Cape Santiago], pronounced as "San Diao Jiao" in Chinese, which literally means "Cape Three Martens"). Then they entered Jilong (Keelung) and named it Santísima Trinidad (meaning "Holiest Trinity"). After the ceremony of occupation at Palm Island (now called "Peace Island"), they began constructing a city named San Salvador, meaning "Saint Savior." Among the expeditionary army of three to four hundred members were Priest Bartolomé Martínez and five clergymen. Santiago was San Jacobo, one of Jesus' 12 disciples and the guardian of Spain. "Santiago y cierra España," which means "Santiago bless us! Dash forward! Long live Spain!" or "Holy Saint bless us! Spain will win," was the war cry of the Spanish while they were fighting against the Moors.*

## **Santo Domingo, 1638**

The castle after the rain is so much like God's dinner plate where attar of roses is dripping. Three reconstructed stone bastions and a watchtower: so much like the three buns and the glass for drinking water God bestows us. Beneath the castle, the light-colored water of that broad river flows through the square surrounded with wooden fences and reflects itself in our daily water glass. Plain water, plain flavors of life. That year, after the galeras had sailed into the harbor, in the new city named Santísima Trinidad we had the cross and the King's banner erected by the seashore; our arquebuses and catechisms also aroused the islanders' curiosity and astonishment. Actually the inhabitants of the Senar settlement were simple and kind-hearted (though they took the lives of some of our fellow countrymen). Windbreak forests made the hill they lived cool and protected them from the cold. The peach and orange trees convinced me that the earth is round, and so was the shape of dreams and nostalgia, or else how come I got home so easily after eating them? The Chinese who came here taught the islanders to grow rice and sugarcanes. With the rich produce, they were more than happy, without having to worry about the lack of food, but I'll say it was Lord's love that enriched their spirit as well as the body. More than a century before, my fellow countryman Columbus had established a city by another great ocean on a Spanish island outside of Spain. He had named it Santo Domingo. Here we also named it Santo Domingo because we loved Santo Domingo, who liked preaching and theology, who liked us to say Prayers of the Rosary, because when we sat here listening to the simple and soft flowing rhythm of the river, we found it like a song, a hymn singing in the language of the Senar inhabitants in the plain-looking Church of Santo Domingo not far away.

We dedicated to Church of Santo Domingo the statue of Our Lady of the Rosary worshipped in the barracks. On the festival day we carried Our Lady's statue from Church of Santo Domingo to the Senar tribe's church and held rites of Mass and celebration.

The native people greeted it with their simple but wild dance, not wishing us to carry the statue back to Church of Santo Domingo, just as I won't believe that after the festival the circles of their wild dance should have expanded so much as to reach this castle and turn into fire balls, rocking all night... Finally with stone materials we rebuilt it, Santo Domingo, which sounded equally pleasant, whether wood and stone...

We won't believe our Governor in Manila should have given such orders of destroying the fortress and withdrawing the troops, which gave the red-haired Dutchmen the chance to step on our bricks and build their Fort Antonio.

The castle after the rain is so much like God's dinner plate where attar of roses is dripping, with a watchtower pouring each day the light-colored water of the broad river into our water glass: the plain water, the plain flavors of time.

(2009)

*Author's Note: In 1628 the Spanish occupied Tamsui, a place in northeastern Taiwan. At Senar, a settlement of Taiwanese indigenes, they built the fortress of Santo Domingo, which is called "Red Hair Fortress" by the Taiwanese. In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed at Môle Saint-Nicolas, to the northwest of present-day Dominica in the Caribbean region. He claimed the island for Spain and named it La Española (meaning "the Spanish"). In 1496, in the south of island, his brother Bartholomew Columbus built the city of Santo Domingo, Europe's first permanent settlement in the "New World." Santo Domingo (1170-1221), known as Saint Dominic, was a Catholic saint and the founder of the Order of Preachers, more commonly known as the Dominican Order or the Dominicans. The preachers that came to Tamsui with the Spanish troops built the first church in Tamsui, Church of Santo Domingo. In 1636, the indigenes of Tamsui rose in rebellion and burned down the originally wooden fortress of*

*Santo Domingo. The following year, the Spanish rebuilt it with stone materials. In 1638, not long after the reconstruction, the Spanish Governor in Manila ordered that the fortress be destroyed and the troops be withdrawn. Later the Dutch attacked and occupied northern Taiwan. In 1644, the fortress was reconstructed and named Fort Antonio.*

## Sinckan, 1660

—Tiladam Tuaka's Rain-Praying Ritual

Before coming to me, you must abstain from meat and pleasure,  
look out for dreams and birds' chirping. Women must  
piously set iron knives, mow weeds, put into baskets  
hats to wear, tiny pottery jars, bangles for wrists  
and for arms, praying to the ancestral spirit for blessings. Men must  
offer millet wine, steamed rice, betel nuts, betel leaves,  
and pork, pray that your knives, arrows, and spears are sharp,  
and then bring along your wine, cheering loudly  
at me. I—Tiladam Tuaka—  
exorcist-priestess of our Siraya tribe, daughter  
of the ancestral spirit, the real baptist who re-cleanses and re-baptizes  
your bodies and hearts after your baptism by the red-haired priest.  
Offer wine! Raise a huge jar of wine with both of your hands,  
otherwise the ancestral spirit won't drink it! Very soon the ancestral spirit  
will lead me to heaven through a ladder of light,  
a heavenly ladder only for the naked one stripped to the skin  
to stand fast against it and move upward step by step.  
Offer me wine, look at the glittering upper half of my body,  
the glittering lower half of my body, look at my private part,  
which is standing open like a fountain on the roof of the *konkai*.  
Your pork has satiated and pleased the ancestral spirits' appetite.  
Now they are thirsty; they want me to urinate as a sow does,  
pissing all the wine I have drunk. The ancestral spirit says  
if I discharge a mountain of urine, he will reward us with  
a mountain of rain; if I discharge an ocean of urine,  
he will reward us with an ocean of rain. Now give me wine,  
give me wine to drink, so that a urine mountain and a urine ocean  
may bring us a plentiful year. My fountain is an automatic  
wine shaker, a drink vending machine, which gives the nectar  
to the ancestral spirit and to you, erupts one string after another of

water fireworks. Watch my private part,  
such a public one-man orchestra, generous and divine.  
See how it plays various kinds of fabulous music with the touching,  
patting, thrusting in, and twitching of my fingers. Groan  
with my groans; scream with my screams.  
You too shall go naked, mounting the bare heavenly ladder  
with me to reach the lip, the tongue of the ancestral spirit as well as  
the nose, the forehead, the brain of the ancestral spirit, like a  
giant tree with clusters of branches spurting out of the top  
of the ancestral spirit's head: collective ecstasy, collective  
orgasm. Lying on the roof, I am as plentiful and substantial as  
a mountain and an ocean. Now carry me down to  
the *konkai*, make me drink more wine and discharge more  
urine. Strip your hearts of the last pieces of cloth which cover  
vaginas and penises, and go back with soaking wet  
hearts to commit adultery with your sisters,  
daughters, brothers, neighbors, passers-by, to have  
intercourses with them and drink wine from door to door till dawn,  
so as to bring us rain for a plentiful year. I know  
they will exile me to Tirozen, to  
Batavia. But I will come back. Whenever  
the heavy rain pours down, you'll see me come back...

(2010)

*Author's Note: In the 17th century, Sinckan was among the four major settlements of the Siraya people of the Taiwanese indigenes. It is now located in Xinshi of Tainan. The Sinckan settlement was the area in Taiwan which got the earliest access to the Western culture. In 1626, the Dutch people built churches and started preaching in Sinckan. They also wrote the indigenous language in Romanization. In May, 1636 the first school in Sinckan was established. Nearly 70 boys and 60 girls went to school. In October, 1639, the Dutch official Van der Burg wrote a report to his governor, mentioning the Sinckan settlement had a population of 1047, that all men, women, and children were baptized, and that 119 couples held Christian weddings. However, the truth was that Siraya's*

*traditional religion and customs were still deeply rooted in people's lives. The Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper in his book Gedenkwaerdig bedryf der Nederlandsche Oost-Indische Maetschappye, op de Kuste en in het Keizerrijk van Tasing of Sina (published in 1670) wrote, based on the descriptions of a Scot named David Wright, about some annual Siraya festivals. Among them was Tiladam Tuaka's Rain-Praying Ritual, which this poem deals with. Dapper said Wright stayed in Taiwan for several years until 1662, when the Dutch withdrew from Taiwan. "The red-haired priest" refers to the Dutch missionary, and Konkai is the public activity center of the Siraya people.*

## The Guts of the Tribe

—Night Rite in Xiaolin Village, 2009

The urine accumulated for three hundred years by the witches  
erupted overnight. Tiladam Tuaka was back.  
Tiladam Tuaka—the great Siraya priestess  
of ours. The rainfall during those three days and nights exceeded  
that of a whole year. Low-temperature home delivery of all goods  
in stock, original and authentic. The late prompt delivery.  
The ancestral spirits' night soil that panicked and overwhelmed  
one house after another. You call it "88 Flood,"  
which made our villages vanish from the map overnight.  
She said it was distributing indulgences and coupons and value-storing  
cards  
and easy cards of water debts. The music of water floating at ease above  
the disaster, taught orally and perceived mentally, without words or score.  
Abstract sounds, shapes, colors, postures  
conveyed by mouth and ear, taught with alarmed hearts. With hundreds of  
thousands of liquid ropes the scattered packages of memory  
were connected and prolonged into a chant which grew thicker  
with singing and bound us tight into a chain.  
Overnight it was delivered to the tops of our heads in a roar.  
In the squares of the tribe which were washed away, the guts of our tribe  
sprang onto water in watermarks:

Still we feel like making sounds tonight  
Hand in hand we stamp our feet in a circle and listen  
One sound overlaps another to welcome ancestral spirits to join us on earth  
The night you don't cry for anything the night you are not allowed to cry  
Still we feel like making sounds this evening  
Hand in hand wearing wreaths we listen  
The rising sounds of the river circle toward the hollow of the ritual  
bamboo



## 18 Touches

While it's dark, touch our hearts and change  
their ciphers lest they be embezzled by the lovelom.  
While it's dark, touch my porcelain-spoon-like white hand.  
If thirsty, use it to ladle and drink the moonlight on my breast.  
While it's dark, reach the sky to touch the transparent phonetic ㄩ,  
ㄅㄆㄇ, I will give you my goal, give you a ㄩ. While it's  
dark, touch its golden posts and have a ride on the swing with  
the virtual goalkeeper by using paradoxical and hesitant language.  
While it's dark, touch the sky piano; the universe rents us its music hall  
just once in our lifetime, our hearing must walk on the heavenly wire.  
While it's dark, touch the perfume bottle by my groin and lift its lid,  
lift & reveal my mortal Eden, with one deep breath after another—  
While it's dark, touch the end of the island's vertebrae, Eluan Beak, which  
also has a nose to breathe; it spreads its *eluan*, and I spread the sail.  
While it's dark, touch the Paiwan chieftain's glass beads; the ever-fattening  
hundred-pace snake turns into an eagle, whose feather is put in my hair.  
While it's dark, touch the iron clip in the fairy tale; the broken leg the trapped  
muntjac left behind while escaping is made into stuffing for 101 millet cakes.  
While it's dark, touch the stuffing of my millet cakes on my round and soft  
breast plates; eating it, night gets deeper, a hungry man gets even hungrier.  
While it's dark, touch Puyuma children's songs—the owl will scratch the eyes;  
oh, sleep, sleep on my shoulder—they'll lull every sad animal to sleep.  
While it's dark, touch the copper gong of the inland Pazeh tribe; strike it  
and build a fire, burning the water bamboo field on my body.  
While it's dark, touch Red-headed Island's taros; touching twice, they  
say, is *sosoli*, a quick touch, ah *soso*—it turns out to be my breast.  
While it's dark, touch the eye of Cape Santiago; I see no marten: only the  
moon shines upon the coastline of my shoulders where galeras row across.  
While it's dark, touch Turoboan's lips; the shimmering stream runs  
through the gorge, making delicate intimate sounds of mouth harps.  
While it's dark, touch the silver & gold sand deposited on my skin;  
your Liwu River is producing sugar and salt on my body.  
While it's dark, touch this drifting ball, which drifts  
from the Black Ditch to my bay of white knees.  
While it's dark, touch your gold sneakers;  
I'll give you my goal, give you a ㄩ.  
I want you to raise your foot,  
give it a kick into  
the goal...

(2010)

## **“The Love Poem” Renewed**

—an English haiku based on Carol Ann Duffy’s 36-line poem

My eyes count the live  
syllables of quotation  
marks in thy heart: love

(2012)

*Author’s Note: This poem is based on a poem named “The Love Poem” by Carol Ann Duffy from her book of poems Rapture. I circled words from her poem with a pencil to make a 17-syllable English haiku. In 2012, I suffered from pain in my back and right hand for months. Unable to use the computer or write with pens, I could only use texts which already existed to create new poems of mine in such a “half-automatic” way.*

## Seven “Half-Automatic” Poems

The fairest wantonness  
fuels itself by hunger:  
eat it!

\*

Summer wind blows open  
the colors of the wild roses:  
perfumes are extracted

\*

The floating fragrance of dream  
is hurting me: the vast autumn  
sings secretly under my tongue

\*

Two lovers,  
hugging and tearing each other  
with a transparent rope

\*

Sharp teeth bite madly  
the hands of the accordion: it  
sings easily with the wind

\*

Time cleanses the sad look  
of the orange with snow  
and touches your face

\*

The river of songs which has  
three banks is wider than a galaxy  
Singers may pass away some day  
The ship of songs sails quietly against the  
flow of time: we all hear and see it

(2012)

## **Pilgrim**

You didn't come as you'd promised.  
You simply sent a breeze at sunset  
to blow to me what smelled like  
your shampoo. I failed to tell  
its brand. Or maybe it was not  
shampoo at all, but the smell of  
your perfume, given forth from your neck,  
armpits, navel, or breasts...  
It was getting dark. Standing  
in front of the exposed concrete wall of the church,  
how I wished myself to be a follower of some  
secret religious sect, and you  
a saint, preaching via hidden aroma.

(2013)

## **Mechanics**

Even on the night campus,  
they allow us, senior schoolchildren  
retaking the course of introduction to physics,  
to ponder on mechanics experiments  
outside the classroom at the break.  
For nearly thirty years, I've been flying  
toward your sky like a ball.  
How come I've never fallen and vanished  
in the void universe behind you, even though  
I'm an obstinate nihilist.  
Under the swing, I'm grateful for your  
tolerating my dissoluteness, which has swung you  
from the horizon of disappointment to  
a transient climax. Which is heavier  
or hurts you more, a newton of  
longing or a newton of sorrow?  
I'm still a learner who is  
not very attentive in class.  
When we stand up from the seesaw,  
I see that placed on one end are  
the few metaphors which occur to me in class,  
and on the other, the starry sky.

(2013)

## Chin Dynasty

Not yet Ching Dynasty (it's *Chin!*), closely akin to CHINA—which was named after your dynasty and would someday turn into lowercase letters, china, a substance other than bronze and iron. How fragile it is! Chin Shi Huang, the First Emperor of China, you sought elixirs for longevity but died at the age of fifty. Your empire, lasting only fifteen years, was no wider than your legendary A-Fang Palace, let alone the Great Wall you built. Burning books and burying scholars alive, you started the first cultural revolution to be copied by later ages. Leaving behind only books on medicine, divination, and tree growing, you encouraged people to study medicine, to make money by foretelling, and to be nature-friendly. You led your terracotta army underground to fight against time and brew a large-scale quiet revolution in your mausoleum. After 2000 years, with strict discipline and grim order, they'd rise from the underground to startle the world again.

(2013)

*Author's Note: The Chin Dynasty (秦朝, 221- 206 BC) and the Ching Dynasty (清朝, 1644-1911) were two dynasties of China.*

## **Saint Antony Preaching to the Fish**

From songs of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, which Mahler composed at the end of the 19th century, I learned about your story of preaching to the fish: Antony, young Franciscan friar who came to Italy from your hometown Lisbon. At the age of 26, you got to see St. Francis of Assisi, aged 39, at the Chapter of the Mats among three thousand friars. You slept on the ground, wore garments of coarse cloth, walked bare-footed, felt contented in poverty, took delight in preaching and helping others. You should have heard marvelous tales about his preaching to birds (perhaps you could communicate with each other in the bird or fish language which you know). He asked you to enlighten junior friars. Besides that, you preached to pagans out of your will. In the church, you spoke loud; outside the church, they turned a deaf ear. When you walked to the river mouth, the fishermen on the boat thought nothing of you. You spoke to the water rushing out to sea, as fluently as the water flowed. All of a sudden a pike leaped out, shuttling leisurely on the surface of water. It washed its ears, listening with its body straightened like a space shuttle, propelled by a passionate rocket, ready to launch to heaven. The salmon which swam back home joined in, along with the cod pregnant with spawn, the sly and slippery eel, and the trout of elegant bearing. They surrounded you in excitement as if waiting in broad daylight for the vendors' hawking and the subsequent lottery drawing in the night market. The crab which walked sideways and the turtle which moved at the speed of a turtle also arrived slowly from the sea. Smilingly you said to them, "I am selling nothing; I'm giving you presents, the sacred words I've learned from Lord, who gives you the three meals and night snack,

who gives you revelry with river water and sea water.  
He gives Nature a huge dressing room  
for you fishes to pick out a swimming suit and evening  
dress which you like and fit perfectly well. You should  
praise Him with the most fascinating postures of dancers  
and with the most cheerful moods!" Having heard this,  
the fishes opened their eyes wide, shouted bravo,  
hurried to shake their scales. The loud jingling noises  
they made were as loud as the tsunamis. The fishing boats  
out at sea turned around one by one. The fishermen knocked  
on the decks, pressing the "like button" with every finger.  
All the newly-sliced fresh *sashimi* of tuna and swordfish  
struggled desperately for rejunction. As if granted rebirth,  
they jumped into the water to celebrate the occasion.

(2013)

*Author's Note: Saint Antony (1195-1231), also called "San Antonio de Padua,"  
was a Franciscan friar who was born in Portugal and died in Padua, Italy.*

## Saint in the Kitchen

You are privileged to be called a saint when you  
can see and hear well and aren't yet aged sixty.  
For you have worked part-time doing odds and ends  
in my house besides being a teacher, a wife,  
and a mother. Proficient in applied mathematics,  
you know well how to prepare homely dishes for the next meal  
by combining and rearranging scrap food, leftovers, along with  
antiques preserved in the fridge since yestermorn or last week.  
You are indeed a saint in the kitchen who are eco-friendly  
and a lover of leftovers. You cook and enjoy food with  
chilies (which kill me); as a result, you have it all to  
yourself as well as to your stomach, or, since I dare not eat much,  
put us in a predicament of struggling hard with more leftovers  
at the next meal. Living up to your distinguished heritage  
of cooking, you import to Hualien your father's and forefather's  
private cuisine of stewed marinated beef and trickled pastries.  
At the smell of them, our family of three drool; after we've  
had enough, happiness trickles onto us from top to toe.  
Knowing I dislike eating fruit and am too lazy to  
eat fruit, you stock up varieties of juicers and invent  
unique recipes, making unrecognizable and  
fabulous juice out of various kinds of fruits which  
I used to regard as sufferings. If you find the title  
"Saint in the Kitchen" unpleasant to the ear,  
I could call you "Saint Ah Fen-ling."  
O Saint, I'm blessed that you have my teeth and tongue  
always feeling (ah Fen-ling) good, and that every day you're  
as nagging as a wind-bell hanging at the window of the kitchen,  
tinkling and jingling loudly enough to be heard all over the world.

(2013)

*Author's Note: Fen-ling, which sounds very much like the word "wind-bell" in Chinese (風鈴, fon-ling), is the name of my wife Chang Fen-ling.*

## The North

The North erected a hanging imperial tent above the grasslands in my dream. The young Khitan King, with a rose between his lips, turned his galloping horse around and, with bare hands, tore off the courage and grandeur of two Chinese provincial governors. He sent messages by pigeons to the Chinese Emperor in Chang-an, asking for the youngest and fairest princess as his bride. The valiant and beauty-worshiping emperor granted him his request without a second thought, asking for 300 bottles of crystal white and fragrant Khitan rose attar as betrothal gifts. The envoys of Khitan escorted back Princess Aroma—their new queen—along with her dowry. Her dowry was herself. Without a single drop of rose attar on her body, an indescribable aroma followed her to the imperial tent. It seemed to come from the heaven, not from the earth. The aroma provoked not only the sense of smell, but that of sight. It spread over *Herd of Deer in an Autumn Forest* and *Deer among Red Maples* in the tent, bathing the two paintings in a bright and gorgeous autumnal tint. I didn't know when the imperial tent turned into a hanging garden; I simply heard maidservants playing the Tatar horn, bamboo flute, *sheng*-pipes, *pipa*-lute, zither, and the *konghou*-harp. The Khitan King, singing to the music, rose to the air with his bride and officials in my dream of grasslands.

(2013)

## **Eight Hands**

On one hand, she loves him;  
on the other hand, she hates him.  
On one hand, she receives him;  
on the other hand, she deceives him.

On one hand, he rages at her;  
on the other hand, he rides her.  
On one hand, he flares at her;  
on the other hand, he forgives her.

(2013)

### 13-Line Poems: Winter Songs (4 selections)

1

The grayish blue sea is now an aged giant ship,  
lingering outside the harbor, ill at ease when approaching home. Winter  
has come home again, to put on winter clothes, to eat midwinter  
dumplings, to have periodical winter dietary supplementation,  
and to hibernate when tired. It itself is like a home  
yet is coming home to us. We also feel ill at ease to meet it.  
Will every reunion brings about new discord  
after old wounds are healed? Just as on the brilliant sea in the sun  
new waves with scars are pulled along by old ones. Winter  
is about to land. When the grayish blue sea turns bright,  
when its gray hull fades out on the bright blue sea,  
we know it will soon get home,  
and we are getting ready at home to go home.

3

Winter fog affixes grayish seals to deserted electric appliances,  
and deepfrozen gramophone records and CDs.  
The unplugged sound of winter is thinner  
than mp3. In the fog an elephant is hidden, and  
inside the elephant's belly is a provisional court.  
In dreams you stole a pair of leggings, two  
dark green bras; they accused you of murder,  
and the victim was a woman. You insulted white-eye birds  
in spring and oleanders in summer; to punish you,  
they made you run a 1600m relay on daggers of waves  
with other prisoners and restart once the baton was dropped.  
Is this a court of time? Make an appeal to time  
for re-investigation at the appearance of the next elephant.

12

The ship will eventually enter the harbor and then depart;  
no customs will investigate it. All the wooden guns we carry  
are no more than a box of pencils. My partners and I start  
revolutions and are counter-revolutionized; we exile and fight as guerrillas,  
seek chances for another revolution, for further innovation. We stand up  
for living and hope not to fear death. We duplicate bullets  
with those shot into our bodies, from our enemies or friends,  
from foreign or native land. Preciseness and conciseness  
are indispensable when we plan, in the finest order, where  
the bullets should fall, whether any of them bewitches one at once.  
Beauty is power in fighting against royalists, palace chamber groups,  
defenders of old forces: we take away cartridges,  
blood, and terror, leaving the sea, nostalgia, and sketch books

13

Because those abstract and conceptual things are too heavy,  
we leave them behind for new-comers to find ways to simplify,  
to lighten and lighten, until they can be easily  
put on and taken off like badges, pins, brooches,  
or until they can lift weight easily like cellphone charms  
fastened to the waist, helping us to carry baskets, ambulances,  
lighthouse, dreams, and satellite navigators. How heavy is beauty?  
How heavy is time? How light is love? How light is death?  
Can we sail all of them away with our bodies, fingers,  
or pens as canoes? On shore, we'll turn them into  
a folding bike and go for a ride on it. We use simple skills  
to fold lost time, sorrow, submarines into waves, and wait for  
spring waves to roll everything up to the sea surface.

The grayish blue sea is now an aged giant ship...

(2013)

## *Appendix*

在語言間旅行



## Traveling Between Languages

0

Language is a communication of thoughts, feelings, etc., through a set or system of formalized symbols, signs, sounds, or gestures. Chinese, English, and dialects in Taiwan (Min Nan and Hakka dialects, for example) are languages; music, painting, and mathematics are also languages. While notes and colors are the languages used by composers and painters, words are the language I use to write; while some writers use other systems of words, I write in Chinese.

I also translate works written in other languages into Chinese. To me, translation is a substitute for reading and writing. I'm not an active reader. To translate, I force myself to read more widely or attentively. I am not an active writer, either. Through translating others' works, I get some compensation and stimulation—in translating a work, I mistake it for my own, feeling that I'm writing again; during or after the process of translation, I inevitably acquire some inspiration or dynamic for my own writing by getting closer to others'.

I sometimes feel writing is another form of translation: while writing, I integrate or transform into my works my experiences of reading, translating, or having access to other languages (English, Japanese, etc.; music, painting, etc.)—either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, I, as a writer, travel from language to language frequently.

1

I was born in Taiwan after the Second World War and brought up in Hualien, a small city in eastern Taiwan. My parents grew up in the period when Taiwan was occupied and governed by Japan. Therefore, in my childhood and youth, I spoke Chinese (Mandarin) at school and Taiwanese (Min Nan dialect) at home, and my parents talked to each other in Japanese most of the time. My mother is a native speaker of Hakka dialect, so I could often hear her speak the Hakka dialect with her relatives living in the neighborhood. After graduating from

university, I returned to my hometown from Taipei and worked as an English teacher in junior high school. In a class of forty students, there were two or three indigenous (mostly Amis and Atayal) students. They spoke Chinese just like the other students.

When I studied in the English Department of the National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei, I started to read literary works of foreign writers in the original or in translation, including those of Yeats, Eliot, Rilke, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and some Japanese haiku poets. Since my graduation from university, I, in collaboration with my wife Chang Fen-ling, have translated into Chinese many poems of foreign poets, such as Larkin, Hughes, Plath, Heaney, Sachs, Vallejo, Neruda, Paz, Szymborska—they all have had influence on me. Among them, Neruda's influence seems the most obvious because we have translated at least three books of his poems.

In my university days I chose Spanish as my second foreign language and came to take an interest in Latin American literature. I was not a good learner of Spanish, but I found Spanish sounded delightful, which motivated me to read Spanish poems. I bought some bilingual (Spanish and English) collections of Latin American poetry; they seemed not too hard to comprehend. In 1978, I set about translating an anthology of modern Latin American poetry. It was completed by 1985. However, not until 1989 was the book published. Included in the more than 600 pages are nearly 200 poems by 29 poets.

Since my high school days, I have enjoyed listening to music. Composers like Bartok and Debussy influenced and inspired me when I was very young. Later, Webern, Janáček, Messiaen, and Berio also became my favorites. After attending university, I started to read art books and appreciate works of many cubist, surrealist and expressionist painters—Picasso, Braque, Dali, Magritte, Ensor, and Kokoschka, for instance. They too play a part in my aesthetic development. In my university days, a school librarian gave me an old issue of the *Chicago Review* (a special issue of concrete poetry), published in September, 1967. This issue left quite a deep impression on me and, to a certain extent, contributed to my later writing of concrete poetry.

For the past few decades, the Chinese language used by the people in Taiwan has been in many ways different from that used by the people in Mainland China. The differences lie not only in the expressions, accents, pronunciations, and characters, but also in linguistic “temperament.” In my opinion, the Chinese language used in Taiwan has a vitality different from that used in Mainland China. For one thing, whereas Mainland China made great efforts to wipe out the traditions, started the Cultural Revolution, and implemented a simplified form of Chinese characters, Taiwan, under the rule of KMT after the Second World War, launched the “Movement of Reviving Chinese Culture,” continued to use the traditional complex characters, and put Chinese classical literature and history on the examination list—the result of these two different policies is that people or writers in Taiwan are likely to have a more profound understanding and a subtler perception of “the beauty of Chinese” than people or writers in Mainland China. For another, being an island, Taiwan enjoys a more liberal, freer living environment, which enables the people to assimilate more naturally and freely diverse elements of language (Taiwanese, Japanese, and English in particular) and elements of daily life to form a more flexible, energetic, hybridized, and colorful language.

Chinese, with its pictographs, monosyllables, homonyms, and characters having multiple meanings or similar pronunciations, has a savor which is rarely found in other languages. A Chinese poem written in traditional complex characters is likely to lose part of the savor if transcribed into simplified characters. Thus, I feel that the Chinese or the Chinese poem I write in Taiwan has absolutely a savor which may be absent in works written by users of other languages or Chinese from other areas. Judging from what modern poetry of Taiwan has achieved in the past few decades, the Chinese language in Taiwan has indeed evolved and created a new sensibility, interest, and vitality.







the Russian animator Garry Bardin (1941-) in 1983. A green match troop comes into conflict with a blue match troop; they burn each other to death. This animation never crossed my mind when I was writing “A War Symphony.” Not until a female artist in Taiwan re-presented it in form of animation did it occur to me. You may say my poem translates Bardin’s film. Some reader mentioned on the Internet that there might be some relation between “A War Symphony” and the poem “Ping Pong,” written in 1953 by the German poet Eugen Gomringer (1925-). I searched for the poem immediately and found I had never read it before. Yet this poem is very much like a translation version of part of the second stanza of “A War Symphony”:

ping pong  
ping pong ping  
pong ping pong  
ping pong

I think this may be regarded as a coincidental encounter of two writers while they are traveling in languages. And such a happy encounter transcends time and space.

3

In 1983, in collaboration with Chang Fen-ling, I translated and published *Selected Poems of Nelly Sachs* and *The Divine Arias: Dante*. Translating works by Nelly Sachs and Dante was a very peculiar experience to me. Before that, I knew nothing about Jewish mysticism, and had little interest in imagined afterlife or heavenly blessing. But translating forced me to read; after reading, I got confused, started to ponder, and was greatly touched. I can never forget the thrill I felt while reading the last few cantos of “Paradise” of *The Divine Comedy*. What great and magnificent imagination! What abstract and pure order! Neither can I forget the peculiar joy I felt when my heart was pierced with Sachs’ pure, mysterious, persevering lyricism, even though I am still an atheist. These marvelous imaginations and creations are

concerned not only with religion (or one religion), but with all mankind. Besides being realistic, I learn to see things in other ways. To me, translation means conveying concretely and clearly to others the touching experience I have had through reading. And it is a translator's job to transform the experience into a motive force with a clear direction. The translation which enables readers to fully feel what you have felt is a good translation.

Comparatively speaking, Latin American literature can more easily touch the hearts of people growing up in Taiwan. This may be partly because the third world countries are in the similar situation when faced with the impact of Western literary trends. I have always felt the development of modern poetry in Taiwan is actually the epitome of the history of modern Latin American poetry, except that their progress or problems came twenty years earlier than ours. The ultimate question is: how to preserve or manifest the local characteristics in the process of westernization or modernization? Magic realism is the distinct answer Latin America has given. But there is more than one answer, and each answer has its own meaning. No doubt, surrealism allows many poets in Latin America and in Taiwan to have more ways of viewing the world. Reading and translating Latin American literature teaches me to combine elements of Taiwan with modern or postmodern art. To put this into practice, I appropriate or re-create (or de-create) the myths and legends of Taiwanese indigenous peoples in some of my poems. The following is an example: "A fly has flown onto the sticky flypaper below the goddess' navel. / Just as the day hammers gently on the night, / my dear ancestor, hammer gently with the unused Neolithic tool between your thighs." (According to the Atayal myth of the creation, there were a god and a goddess in very ancient times, who were ignorant of love-making until one day a fly landed on the private part of the goddess; the Amis have a similar myth.) Words like "flypaper" and "Neolithic tool" integrate the past with the present, adding to the poem a postmodern interest and making it both legendary and contemporary, tribalistic and erotic.

The first poem I translated of Neruda's is "Explico algunas cosas"

("I Explain a Few Things"), taken from *Residencia en la tierra* (*Residence on Earth*). This poem states the reason for the transformation of his poetic style—because of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, his poetry begins to move away from the obscure, hermetic, and fanciful to a clearer and more accessible style. The last few lines are very touching: "You will ask: why doesn't your poetry tell us / about dreams, about leaves, / about the great volcanoes of your native land? // Come and see the blood in the streets, / come and see / the blood in the streets, / come and see the blood / in the streets!"

As a writer, I think my poetic language and concepts are evidently influenced by my experience of translating Neruda. However, I am not sure whether my poetic language—with Chinese as its tool—is influenced by Neruda's original poems or by my Chinese translation of his poems. The poetic strategy and ideas in some of my poems indeed derive from Neruda. In 1979, I translated his "Alturas de Macchu Picchu" ("The Heights of Macchu Picchu"), a long poem in *Canto General*. The theme of death and birth, of oppression and rising, and the idea that poets should be sufferers' spokesmen have since been deep-rooted in my heart. In this poem Neruda piles up a litany of 72 noun phrases, which inspires me to boldly juxtapose 36 noun phrases in "The Last Wang Mu-Qi," a long poem written the next year about a mining calamity. Later in the poem "Taroko Gorge, 1989" I apply the technique of cataloguing, listing 48 names of places in the Atayal language, and in the poem "Flight over the Island," I list 95 names of mountains of Taiwan deriving from different languages. All these can be seen as an extension of Neruda's writing techniques. But they may also be traced back to another poem in *Residencia en la tierra*: "Como era España" ("What Spain Is Like"). In the first four stanzas, Neruda describes how he loves the tough land and the humble people of Spain; in the last six stanzas, he lists 52 names of Spanish towns. I didn't translate this poem because I didn't think it was successfully written since the names were catalogued in a rather flat way (when the famous English translator of Neruda, Ben Belitt, translated this poem, he omitted the last six stanzas which impressed me). In "Taroko Gorge,

1989” or “Flight over the Island,” I try to make the groups of nouns form a certain dialectic relationship to the other part of the poem. Reading them over is like undergoing a ritual of identity, a return to the native land where different races are reunited. Neruda’s cataloguing, in turn, may have been influenced by another Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948), who listed 190 noun phrases with “Molino” (Mill) as the initial word in Canto V of his 600-line-long avant-garde epic poem *Altazor*. In *Anthology of Modern Latin American Poetry*, I translate five poems of Huidobro’s. Among them, “Nipona” (Japanese), printed in the shape of a double arrowhead, is the only concrete poem in the anthology. I found it quite interesting the first time I read it.

4

Although I can’t read Japanese, yet I have read and translated some Japanese haiku and tanka through English translation and the original, because there are many Chinese characters in Japanese and because I can always consult my father, who knows Japanese. Reading these Japanese poems inspires me to write about contemporary life in similar poetic forms. The result of such experimentation is my book of three-line poems: *Microcosmos: 200 Modern Haiku*, whose title comes from Bartok’s *Microcosmos*, a musical composition containing 153 piano pieces. Patterning after or imitating senior masters (or using allusions) is in itself part of the convention of haiku. Some of my “modern haiku” are tributes to or variations of classical haiku or other art classics; others are evolved from poems written by senior writers, fellow poets, or myself. Whether they are metamorphosed thoroughly, reshaped, or implanted, traveling in the family of poetry forms the most substantial and warmest link on the lonesome journey in the universe (“Traveling in the Family,” the title of one of my poems as well as of one of my book of poetry, comes from the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade [1902-1987], whose poem of the same title is translated in my *Anthology of Modern Latin American Poetry*). My three-line poems are “Taiwanese” rather than “Nipona.” They manifest the savor of

“Taiwanese Chinese”: at once Chinese and Taiwanese, classical and contemporary, just like the island Taiwan, which constantly assimilates and converges all the surrounding elements because of its geography and history. Take for example some poems I’ve read, translated, or written:

Picking chrysanthemums by the east hedge, at ease I see the south mountain. (Tao Chien, 365-427)

At ease he sees the south mountain-this frog. (Kobayashi Issa, 1763-1827)

Resting on the temple bell, asleep, a butterfly. (Yosa Buson, 1716-1784)

Resting on the temple bell, glowing, a firefly. (Masaoka Shiki, 1867-1902)

He washes his horse with the setting sun on the autumn sea. (Masaoka Shiki)

He washes his remote control / with the moonbeams infiltrating / between two buildings. (Chen Li, *Microcosmos*, I:1)

I wait and long for you: / a turning die in the empty bowl of night / attempting to create the 7th sid. (*Microcosmos*, I:14)

A turning die in the empty bowl of the night / creates the 7th side: / oh God, you do exist. (*Microcosmos*, II:25)

Multiplication table for kids of clouds: / mountains times mountains equals trees, mountains times trees / equals me, mountains times me equals nothingness... (*Microcosmos*, I:51)

The story of marriage: a closet of loneliness plus / a closet of loneliness equals / a closet of loneliness. (*Microcosmos*, I:97)

Just as the “frog” in Issa’s haiku defamiliarizes and freshens the perspective of the Chinese ancient poet Tao Chien, I use the “remote control” to translate and update the elegantly lonely life scene of Shiki. Both are resting on the temple bell—Shiki’s glowing firefly vividly stirs the serenity of Buson’s soundly-sleeping butterfly. And in my poems the same die tosses out a different imagination at a different time and space, attesting to the ambiguity of the existence of God or miracles and to the anxiety and fragility of man. The last two poems are written based on “pseudo-arithmetical” formulas. Maybe they could be seen as examples of how modern poetry in Taiwan creates surprise out of the commonplace.

In 1976 I wrote a ten-line poem “Footprints in the Snow,” whose title comes from a piano piece by the French composer Debussy (*Preludes*: Book 1, No.6). I attempted to translate Debussy’s musical work into poetry: “Cold makes for sleep, / deep / sleep, for / a feeling soft as a swan. / Where the snow is soft, a hastily scrawled line is left / in white, white / ink, / hastily because of his mood, and the cold: / the hastily scrawled / white snow.” Several composers have set this poem to music; by so doing, they have translated it back into music. In 1995, I wrote another “Footprints in the Snow.” You may say it was a translation version of the previous poem, but this time I used non-character symbols and punctuation marks only:

%  
 %  
 %  
 %  
 .  
 .  
 .

A similar self-translation appears in *Microcosmos*:

Your voices suspend in my room  
 cutting through silence, to become  
 a bulb speaking with heat or chill.      (*Microcosmos*, II:47)

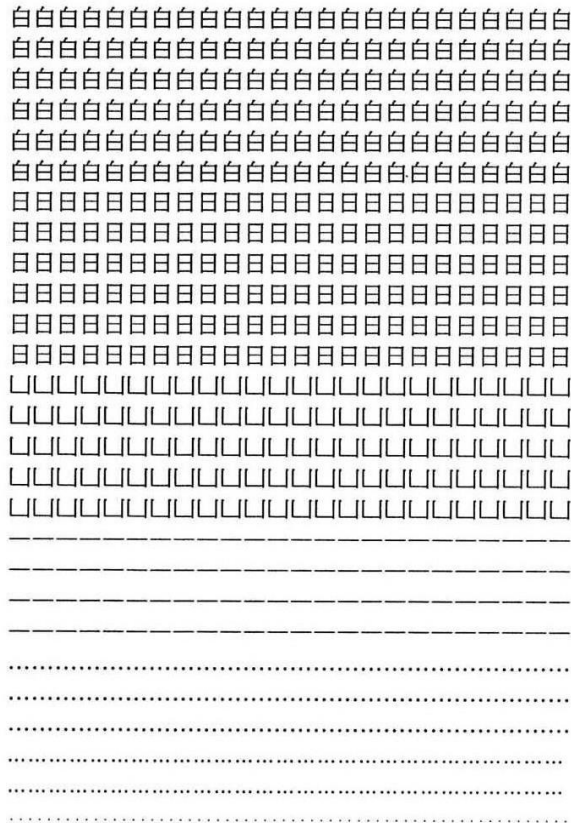
.....  
 °  
 ,

(*Microcosmos*, II:48)

The latter poem can be viewed as a translation or visualization version

of the former poem. The Chinese punctuation mark “。” (a period) is very much like a bulb which gives off sound in silence or with silence.

Is writing some kind of translation, traveling between languages? Or do all writers create the same work, the pure blankness and the empty fullness overwritten again and again? Recently I wrote a poem “White.” The first half consists of two Chinese characters “白” (white) and “日” (day); the other part is made up of non-characters. After this poem was completed, the paintings of Mark Rothko (1903-1970), an American painter whom I like very much, came into my mind:



(2009)



## Translator's Notes

### *Footprints in the Snow* (P.32)

The title of this poem comes from a piano piece by the French composer Claude Debussy, "Des pas sur la neige" (*Preludes*: Book 1, No.6).

### *Dancers of Delphi* (P.33)

The title of this poem comes from a piano piece by Debussy, "Danseuses de Delphes" (*Preludes*, book 1, No.1).

### *The Love Song of Buffet the Clown* (P.41)

In writing this poem, Chen Li may have had in mind the French painter Bernard Buffet (1928-1999), many of whose paintings are portraits of clowns.

### *Song of Big Wind* (P.60)

"A big wind is blowing, blowing on what?": a popular game among children in Taiwan.

### *Imitation of Atayal Folk Song* (P.63)

The Atayal are one of the indigenous tribes of Taiwan. The "valley" in the poem "The Moonbeam in the Valley" refers to Taroko Gorge, a national park located in Hualien, Chen Li's hometown. The Atayal people are the original inhabitants of Taroko Gorge.

### *Green Onions* (P.68)

Taiwan has been coveted by many countries since ancient times. It was visited by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, colonized by the Dutch and the Spanish in the seventeenth century. After that, it was governed by Zheng Chen-kong and the Manchus. In 1895, it was ceded to Japan, which ruled over it for fifty-one years until the Kuomintang government took it over in 1945. Under the reign of so many different

rulers, the culture of Taiwan has undergone the process of mixture and assimilation.

*Miso shiru* is a kind of Japanese soup flavored with *miso*, a food paste made of soybeans, salt, and, usually, fermented grain; *pan* in Taiwanese means “bread,” yet it is actually a word borrowed from Portuguese. Scrambled eggs with dried radish is a typical Taiwanese dish flavored with green onion.

The Bayenkala Mountains, in the eastern Tibetan Highlands, are where China’s two longest rivers, the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, originate. The Green-Onion Mountain Range (the Pamirs are part of it) is a mountain range in southwestern Sinkiang, known as the ridge of Asia. The journey of buying green onions can be seen as a process of returning to the native land. “There was no green onion in the Green-Onion Mountain Range” because the poet has come to realize that his roots are in Taiwan.

***February*** (P.70)

In this poem, what the poet has in mind is undoubtedly the tragic event which occurred in Taiwan on February 28, 1947. In 1945 after Japan was defeated and surrendered, Taiwan was retroceded to China, and the Taiwanese were overjoyed with the end of colonization. However, Chen Yi, the new Governor of Taiwan from China, was unfamiliar with the customs and living conditions of the Taiwanese, which led to his bias against the Taiwanese and improper ruling measures. What made the matters worse, corrupt discipline prevailed among the government officials, productivity was declining, the cost of living was soaring high, and there were serious problems of unemployment. All these aroused the people’s dissatisfaction with the government. On February 27, 1947, the men from the Monopoly Bureau in Taipei went to Yen-ping North Road to catch those who sold cigarettes illegally. A woman peddler was hurt and a passer-by was accidentally killed. The following day the people of Taipei held a demonstration, demanding the murderers be arrested. Several people were killed; the fire of indignation was thus kindled and a riot started. To put down the riot, the Chinese army was sent from Nanking by

Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan. In a few months hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese people were killed or missing. This tragedy is known as “the Event of February 28.” After the event, Taiwan was under martial law for nearly half a century. And the tragedy remained a national taboo until 1987, when martial law was lifted.

***Merry-Go-Round*** ( P.71 )

*sushi*: a Japanese dish consisting of small cakes of cold cooked rice flavored with vinegar, typically garnished with strips of raw or cooked fish, cooked egg, vegetables, etc.

*tempura*: a Japanese dish consisting of shrimp, fish, vegetables, etc. dipped in an egg batter and deep-fried.

In the second stanza, the historical background of Taiwan is implied through the dialogue between an innocent child and his father: Taiwan, once ruled by the Japanese, is now governed by the Nationalist Party of China (Kuomintang). Different rulers give different definitions of “martyr” —for Kuomintang, only the soldiers captured or killed by the Japanese or the Communist army are martyrs, while the Taiwanese killed in “the Event of February 28” are regarded as rebels. The wheel of politics toys with the fate of the Taiwanese. Yet, when history loses “weight in the whirling circle,” the merry-go-round with family love as its axis can still gallop and sing.

***Buffalo*** ( P.73 )

The poem is not only a tribute to Huang Tu-shui’s artistic accomplishments, but an attempt to recapture through his work the suffering and tough images of the Taiwanese people and to go deep into the profound secrets and dreams of this island. To the Taiwanese who have long been governed and exploited by foreign regimes, the serene and peaceful scene in Huang Tu-shui’s relief *The Portrait of Water Buffalo* is symbolic of ideal life—self-contented and carefree—in which one reaps the fruit of hard work and in which social justice is not a faraway dream.

“Buffalo are buffalo even if they are led to Beijing” is a Taiwanese proverb, whose equivalent in English may be “The leopard cannot change

its spots.” Chen Li subtly transforms it into “Buffalo are buffalo even if they have never been to Beijing,” which may be seen as an assertion of the independence of the Taiwanese people from the Chinese mainland.

***Taroko Gorge, 1989*** ( P.77 )

Tianxiang: a place in Taroko Gorge, named after Wen Tian-xiang (1236-1282), a heroic character in the last reign of Sung Dynasty, who fought against the invaders only to be captured. Refusing to surrender, he was executed after three years’ imprisonment. Before the execution, he wrote *The Song of Righteousness* to express his loyalty and patriotism for the native land.

Huaqing Pool and Mawei Slope: names of places in Tang Dynasty. Yang Yu-huan (719-756), Tang Xuan-zong’s favorite concubine, bathed in the former, and was forced to hang herself on the latter.

Da-qian (Zhang Da-qian, 1899-1983): a master of the traditional Chinese water-and-ink painting. Living in Taiwan in the last years of his life, he painted mostly the scenery of Mainland China.

Li Tang and Fan Kuan: two major Chinese painters of Sung Dynasty, famous for their landscape paintings.

Formosa (meaning “beautiful” ): another name for Taiwan given by the Portuguese who reached it in 1590.

The indigo (*Indigofera ramulosissims*) and the euphorbia (*Euphorbia tarokoensis*): two rare species of plants found in Taroko Gorge.

In Part Four, Chen Li lists twenty images of search, which is an attempt to lead readers into the heart of Taroko Gorge to look for its origins, to take a glimpse at “the secret of the humble residence on earth.” He also lists 48 ancient names of spots in Taroko Gorge. To the outsiders, they may be meaningless sounds, but to the Atayal people, they are significant, vividly revealing the local features. The reason why Chen Li makes such a long list is obvious: he is eagerly inviting readers to go on a journey of retrospection to the lost culture of Taiwan.

***Traveling in the Family*** ( P.89 )

“four-color cards”: a card game popular with the Taiwanese folks, usually used for gambling.

***A Dog Barking at the Moon*** (P.95)

The title of this poem is taken from a painting of the Spanish painter Miro (1893-1983).

***Microcosmos I*** (P.109)

The fifty short poems translated here are taken from Chen Li's fifth collection of poems, *Microcosmos I*, which consists of one hundred three-line poems patterning after the Japanese *haiku*. Chen Li has obviously taken his title from Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*, a work of one hundred and fifty-three short piano pieces.

***A Cup of Tea*** (P.119)

The Chinese title of this poem is the name of the Japanese haiku master Issa (1763-1827), which means "a cup of tea" or "a single bubble in steeping tea."

***The Autumn Wind Blows*** (P.123)

Li Ke-ran: one of the most renowned contemporary Chinese painters, whose Chinese name "Ke-ran" (可染) literally means "can be dyed."

Guilin is a city in the northeast of Guangxi, in Southern China, famous for its beautiful scenery. Dajia is a town in Taichung, in the central part of Taiwan, famous for its straw hats. There is a Chinese saying, "The landscape of Guilin is the most beautiful in the world"(桂林山水甲天下). But here in this poem Chen Li cleverly transforms it into "桂林山水大甲天下", which can be interpreted in two ways: one is that "the landscape of Guilin is *by far* the most beautiful in the world"; the other is that however beautiful Guilin may be, Dajia is itself a world of unique beauty. In the last stanza, the middle-aged man is lost in the confusing nostalgia, which implies the dilemma many Taiwanese are in: to be linked to Mainland China ("the skull of the fatherland"), or to break away from it. The poet seems to have made his choice: he "holds tight the Dajia straw hat / which comes near being blown away, / as if it were a new skull."

*A Lesson in Ventriloquy* (P.126)

Ventriloquy is an art of speaking with no or little lip movements. This poem can be viewed as a variation on the theme of the Beauty and the Beast, monologue done by a man, or the beast, toward his beloved, the beauty. A man has wanted to speak words of love or make some confession to his beloved. He tries very hard to use ventriloquy to say “I am gentle and kind,” but somehow, he is too nervous or too shy to express himself properly. Before the right words are uttered, what come out are numerous twisted sounds which either seem unrelated or imply evil intentions. The beast produces a lot of odd-looking words with the same sounds. Chen Li obviously found all the weird characters with the help of the computer for this audio-visually striking Chinese poem :

惡勿物務誤悟鷓鴣驚蕩嚙龔甌瘡迢埒芬  
軌杙葵驚望沕迓選銻硯物阮軌焔焔焔  
(我是溫柔的……)  
叭扒焔焔焔軌阮物硯銻選迓望驚葵杙軌  
芬埒迢瘡甌龔嚙蕩驚鴣鷓悟誤務物勿惡  
(我是溫柔的……)

惡餓俄鄂厄遏鍔扼鱷蠶餒蝥搨圖軛猓猓  
顎呃愕噩輒阨鸚罽罽砗砗權鑼吸罅梔齧  
尊罇啞罅搯謠闕頰竭竭頰闕謠搯啞罇尊  
齧梔罅吸鑼權砗砗罽罽阨輒噩愕呃顎  
猓軛圖搨蝥餒蠶鱷扼鍔遏厄鄂俄餓 (而且善良……)

*The Olympic* (P.134)

“Straight smoke above vast desert, / round setting sun on long river” (大漠孤煙直，長河落日圓) are famous lines of the Chinese Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei (701-761). “Where the bees suck” are the opening words of a song in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. “Shoot the Piano Player” (*Tirez sur le pianiste*) is the name of one of Truffaut’s films. “Gentle wind brings a small response, violent wind a great one” (冷風

則小和，飄風則大和) are words written by the ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu (369?-286? B.C.). “Let the craft drift over the boundless expanse” (縱一葦之所如，凌萬頃之茫然) are words taken from a well-known prose poem of the Chinese Song Dynasty poet Su Tong-po (1036-1101).

***Small Town*** (P.136)

Hui-Lan (meaning “whirling waves” in Chinese) was the ancient name of Hualien. The origin of the name was recorded in *The History of Hualien County*, “East of the Hualien Stream, where the waters flew into the ocean, great waves dashed against one another, forming whirls and surges. So, according to the natural phenomenon, they named the place Hui-Lan.” Later its assonance “Hualien” was used and has continued to be used till today.

***Three Poems in Search of the Composer/Singer*** (P.143)

Pachinko is a game of gambling with a lot of small metal balls whirling around in an upright box, popular in Japan as well as in Taiwan. The titles of the second and third poems are taken from Debussy’s piano work *Preludes*.

***The Cat at the Mirror*** (P.153)

“The Cat at the Mirror” is the title of a painting by the Polish-French artist Balthus (1908-2001).

***Short Ride in a Fast Machine*** (P.154)

“Short Ride in a Fast Machine” is the title of an orchestral fanfare by the American composer John Adams (1947-).

***Gliding Exercises*** (P.157)

“At that corner we sleep together plenty of nights” is the beginning of a poem in *Trilce*, a collection of poems by the Peruvian poet César Vallejo (1892-1938). Chen Li divides the sentence into seven parts, and tries to weave them into this poem of his own, using each part as the first line of each stanza. It is a pity that owing to the gap between

languages the English translation fails to present such a poetic device faithfully.

***Butterfly-Mad*** (P.180)

This poem is shaped like a butterfly (or several butterflies).

***A Serial Novel : Huang Chao Killed Eight Million People*** (P.188)

Huang Chao (黃巢, ?-884) was the leader of the Huang Chao Rebellion (874-884) in the Tang Dynasty of China. According to historical records, shortly after the outbreak of the uprising, there were rumors that Huang Chao's troops had killed eight million people.

***Pian Pian*** (P.203)

“Pian Pian” (翩翩) is the name of the heroine of a tale among *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (聊齋誌異: Liao Zhai Zhi Yi), written by Pu Song-ling (1640-1715) during the early Ching Dynasty. In this poem, “Pian Pian” is used not only to refer to a girl’s name but also to describe the delicate and elegant flight of a butterfly. *Sashimi* is a Japanese delicacy consisting of very fresh raw fish sliced into thin pieces. In Chinese, “fish and water” are used to imply the sexual relationship of a man and a woman.

***18 Touches*** (P.217)

“18 Touches” (十八摸) is a Chinese popular song with erotic allusions. 勺, 夕, 冂 (similar to *b, p, m*) are three phonetic symbols of Chinese. Eluan Beak is the southernmost point of Taiwan. *Eluan* is a transliteration of the Paiwanese word for “sail.” Red-headed Island is also called Orchid Island, where the Yami (the Tau) people live. *Sosoli* is the plural form of “taro” in Yami language (*sol*i, the singular form), and *soso* means “breast.” Turoboan, where the Liwu River runs through, is the ancient name of Hualien, famous for its Taroko Gorge. Black Ditch is the old name of Taiwan Strait. Chen Li’s original poem in Chinese is shaped to the contour of Taiwan:

趁黑，摸摸我們的心，修改  
一下密碼，免得被失戀者盜用；  
趁黑，摸摸我白得像瓷匙的手，  
如果你渴，用它舀飲我胸前的夜色；  
趁黑，摸摸夜空中那透明的口字，  
ㄅㄆㄇ，我給你我的球門，給你口；  
趁黑，摸摸它金黃的門柱，用似是而非  
半推半就的語言和虛擬的守門員盪鞦韆；  
趁黑，摸摸天階上的鋼琴，宇宙一世只租給  
我們一次音樂廳，聽覺要攀走仙界的鋼索；  
趁黑，摸摸我鼠蹊旁的香水瓶，用一次次的  
深呼吸掀開它的瓶蓋，掀開我的人間——  
趁黑，摸摸島嶼脊椎盡處的鵝鑾鼻，它也  
有個鼻子在呼吸，它張開鵝鑾，我張帆；  
趁黑，摸摸排灣族頭目的琉璃珠，越來越胖  
的百步蛇變成鷹，羽毛插在我的髮當中；  
趁黑，摸摸童話的鐵夾，中了陷阱的山羌  
逃脫留下斷腳，做成一〇一個小米糰的餡；  
趁黑，摸摸我小米糰的餡，在我圓圓軟軟的  
胸盤上，用它餵夜夜更夜，用它止飢飢更飢；  
趁黑，摸摸卑南小孩的歌，貓頭鷹會來抓眼睛，  
睡吧睡吧在我肩上，催感傷的動物們入眠；  
趁黑，摸摸島嶼中央巴宰海族的銅鑼，一邊  
敲打一邊燒火，燒我身上的茭白筍田；  
趁黑，摸摸紅頭嶼的芋頭，摸兩下他們說是  
sosoli，快摸一下，啊 soso，變成我的乳房；  
趁黑，摸摸三貂角的眼，不見貂影，只見  
月光，在大划船划過的我肩胛的海岸線；  
趁黑，摸摸哆囉滿的唇，金閃閃的溪流  
穿峽谷，吹奏出口簧琴細秘的聲音；  
趁黑，摸摸我肌膚上沉積的金沙銀沙，  
你的立霧溪在我身上製糖製鹽；  
趁黑，摸摸這一顆漂流的球，從  
黑水溝漂流到我的白膝灣；  
趁黑，摸摸你的金球鞋，  
我給你球門，給你口，  
你給我提腳，  
送它入  
門……

**One of the foremost practitioners of contemporary Chinese poetry in Taiwan, Chen Li has translated, with his wife Chang Fen-ling, the works of many poets—such as Plath, Heaney, Neruda, Paz, Tranströmer, Szymborska, Yosano Akiko—into Chinese. He subtly combines in his poetry the elements of Western modernism and post-modernism with the merits of Oriental poetics and the Chinese language, seeking incessantly to find a balance between art and life, suffering and joy, dream and reality. In 2012, he was invited to the Olympic poetry festival (Poetry Parnassus) in London as the poet representing Taiwan.**

“Chen Li is one of the most innovative and exciting poets writing in Chinese today. Ranging from the intensely lyrical to social satire, his work bears witness to the historical changes that have transformed contemporary Taiwan on the one hand, and to the poet’s exuberant spirit of experimentation on the other. Chen Li’s poetry not only epitomizes Taiwan’s bitter-sweet quest for cultural identity, but, above all, it is an eloquent testament to the felicitous union of the personal and the political, artistic avant-gardism and literature of conscience.”

—Michelle Yeh, *University of California, Davis*

“(Chen Li) applies Western poetic aesthetics to themes of significance to Taiwan. He derives inspiration not only from English and American literature but also from Latin American literature, which makes his current unique writing style a combination of wildness and delicacy, of boldness and tenderness.” —Yu Kwang-chung, *poet and translator*

“poetry..., a self-sufficient world of beauty and order that is magical. It is precisely this magic in language and form that characterizes Chen Li’s poetry.” —from *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*

“One does not read Modern Poetry to find a Li Po or Du Fu because there can never be a Li Po or Du Fu in the twenty-first century, just as one cannot find a Dai Wangshu or Chen Li in Tang poetry.”

—from *New Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*