

The Poetry of Tang Yaping 唐亚平

Selections: 1983 – 1995

Tang Yaping was born 1962 in Tongjiang County, Sichuan province. She graduated from the Philosophy Department of the University of Sichuan in Chengdu in 1983, and has been working in the editorial department of the Guizhou Province Television Station in Guiyang, Southwest China, since 1984. Prior to her departure from Sichuan, Tang befriended the woman poet Zhai Yongming, and her subsequent poetry bespeaks Zhai's influence and that of Sylvia Plath, whose translated poetry was then circulating on China's unofficial poetry scene. The poetry series <The Black Desert> followed shortly after and made Tang well-known throughout the poetry scene in China as part of the flood of woman's poetry that was subsequently termed "The Black Tornado".

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To Conquer [征服] 1983

Aside from pure men and impure women
nobody can conquer me
Except for love from the heart and hatred off the tongue
no one can win me

And so I stand
like a horse a cow and a bird
open like a street a shop a square

And so I'm alive
living for every man and woman
alive for every senior and child
My goodness is the golden desert
my love the moonlit sea
my hate a sheer precipice

Aside from pure women and impure men
nobody can win me
Except for watchdogs and wanderers
no one can conquer me

Hey, Water Wheel, Don't Tell Our Story [水车呦，别讲我们的故事] 1984

What can those square meters of apartment units and tall buildings
hold? Perhaps they're incapable of encompassing
one of our simple folk songs. Only the earth is boundless
with our joys and toils
Rough wind-beaten sunburnt skin, of one color
with the dirt. Kiss my forehead, as you would
kiss the dirt; drink the tears on my cheeks
as the sun drinks dry dew drops on the grain, its seed, by the stream
the water wheel turning day and night, quickly ends the telling
our ancestor's story, and our story -- please don't
tell it any more, we ourselves will write in on the earth
Corn and grain, potatoes and soybeans are
our words, during future seasons of transplanting seedlings
the sluice we fix will bubble and declaim.

One Hundred Roses [一百朵玫瑰] 1984

A hundred mornings weep for me in spring
and grow into a hundred autumn dusks
The sword is the longest path A hundred roses will not comfort the grave
I wish to slumber through a hundred winters in your embrace
a child, tired of running
only you can tolerate my world of reveries
and allow the rhythm of my heart to find peace

Hugged deep into sleep in your embrace I change into a hundred babes
in your embrace, arching on the rise and fall of your chest drawing in your body heat
I'm a child weary of bitter tears
only your kiss can drink my tear drops down
giving me the deep ease of an ancient well

For a hundred years I want to sleep in the deep of your embrace
change into a hundred naked women and a hundred roses
in your embrace brew strong liquor and hot blood to choke me
I'm a lonely child weary of my ripening
only your reckless rhythm quickens the height of my pride and confidence

I'm a Waterfall [我就是瀑布]

I lead the mountain people to become a waterfall to break free of heavy constraints
on the precipice I spread the wild liquid wind in the name of the vastness
I open wide the vocal chords of the universe of the whole high plateau
in the name of the passions and aspirations contained by the mountains
I moan over the high plateau's massive silence and its thick pain
of the whole high plateau I sing nature and imagination

On the edge of deep sleep and dreams
I'm a waterfall cutting off rivers of darkness
I become a wild naked woman
nobody dares approach me no one dare possess me
thunderbolts dare not flash their power wild winds do not dare provoke
goshawks don't dare flaunt and clouds dare not make up to me
I'm a woman grief and indignation maddens
I scorn the sky I scorn the sun the moon the sea
I scorn soundless strength and thought
I'm the bold wife of a hundred thousand mountains woman of the high plateau
my grief is the indignant high plateau's
my agony and constraints those of the whole plateau
I sing praise of the height and tragedies moving over every part of the plateau
but the plateau does not move

Everlasting sturdy and composed
after the fierce commotions it comforts me
lying quiet in a deep dark gorge
I wake up clear and bright surrounded by upside down images of mountains
all day and all night I gaze up at them
until they have become tall sturdy men
become a verdant karst forest on the karst plateau
with stubborn love its twisted roots and gnarled branches
pierce the limestone suture canyons sew up faults
I'm rearing to go
I can't wait to suckle them on the milk of a waterfall
won't tolerate a century of sloth and hesitation
I'm the equal of red dirt
I have a desire to make A desire to bear fruit that won't stop
I like the high plateau
I have a cause a lofty duty
I'm a woman of the plateau
I'm unable to tolerate a thousand years of losses or a dull attitude
Perfect as the sun the plateau's grandeur and magnificence I dare
to give up everything give up everything

Growing lush from stones mountain folk sturdy as a forest
I dare to conquer all conquer all

An Autumn Flower will not Wither and Fall [秋天的花是不会凋谢的]

How I want to call out these wild flower's names
they always smile at me
even when the coldest winds blow
even during the most distressing time of autumn
Today I lie in the bosom of the blossoms
for the first time I know autumn is warm
my dreamland full of bright flowers too
Autumn blooms do not flower for fruit alone
nor do I come to autumn for fruit alone
In the dream I smiled
when I wake I'll go on smiling
Because it doesn't blossom for the fruit alone
one autumn flower will not wither, fall

The Black Desert [黑色沙漠] (A sequence of 12 poems) 1985

The Black Night: A Prefatory Poem [黑夜：序诗]

Black nights involuntarily flow from my eyes
the outward flow of black nights leaves me homeless
in a patch of pitch black I become a goddess wandering in the night
aureoles in the night mist swarm to me
that rich ambiguous color leads my heart and soul to an understanding
All colors find a home in the black night and get on well together
the goddess wandering in the night is a sad anxious thing of rare beauty
has the body of a snake and in her paws the fleshy pad of a cat
has a sly wit that dodges the cock crow
What is it that I really want to do I walk in a massive night
I want to change myself into a shadow of flesh and blood
I want to cavort in all the shadows as if awake as if asleep
truly a beauty rare beauty rare thing
I seem to be draped in black gauze that whips up a night wind
I am so natural light adrift aflutter
In the night everything will turn into the shadows of the unreal
even skin flesh, blood and bones all are black
unexplainable inexplicable ineffable
the shadow of the sky and sea is black night too

The Black Swamp [黑色沼泽]

Nightfall is a time of haze
this god awful weather raises doubts in dogs so easily
I always doubt the gods and ghosts Always unsettled in my seat or where I am standing
My long hair streaming flies up The desire of the black night is to overcome
My desire is a boundless pitch black
For a long time I finger the darkest spot
I watch it become a black whirlpool
and with the power of the whirlpool tempts sun and moon
Terror is born from this As with the night it has no place to escape to
In a panic that night my secret was entirely exposed
my only courage was born out of dejection
my final daring born out of death
Either abandon it all or possess everything
I simply must walk into the black swamp
I was born suspicious born credulous
before my birth I gave my mother cramps premonitions
Tonight nightmares will pierce the thin ice
flooding in on and sinking my memories
What I want to submerge is already sunk
all that remains is a cluster of old sunlight I haven't yet overcome
my silence stops the black night's throat

Black Tears [黑色眼泪]

Whose child is on the square playing with a ball
He wants to stir my heart till it bounces on the ground
a bounce makes an empty sound
on earth everybody is a ball rolling here bouncing there
I never imagined god created so many people
I never thought so many people created only one god
Just like god everyone dominates me
Who is it that arrives languidly leaving listless
On the rim of a broken china bowl I ponder for a thousand winks
a thousand moments become one night
black solitude cries black tears
The shadows sloping through the dusk fall toward me
my hands are thrust into the night
It's as if my life is imperiled by the night and the day
I don't want to stand against death in full battle gear
I have ten thousand anxieties
things I want to dispose of I have yet to throw away

Black Hesitation [黑色犹豫]

Dusk is close
In ruins the stale rays of evening sun reminisce their brilliance
I close my eyes slow in wanting to open them
a black hesitation circles in my blood
The night wind blows through a fearful haze
I don't know where to go
I'm so heavy with grief
perhaps it's permanent homesickness
I want to walk over that stretch of open country
a stretch of country, yellowing, set in its ways
my hesitation already exhausted
I walked sunward all day
I find it also hesitates each day
sunk in black hesitation

Black Gold [黑色金子]

Already prostrate withered, I'm
obedient already in all things
my loftiness has hurt so many lowly people
my wisdom hurt so many able all-rounders
my eyes become deep pools
misfortune infects the blood
the milk of my breast transforms into tears of gall too
my trials are griefs of gold
plundered by all
beset by all of love
Each night is a chasm
where you possess me as black night possesses the firefly
my soul will change into mist and clouds
leaving all my dead body obedient

The Black Cave [黑色洞穴]

The darkness of the cave envelopes day and night
flocks of bats wheel around arched walls
their wings stir up a gloomy obscene charm
in a splendid flash of time a woman slips into a blind cosmos
Who extends a hand to point the road out without a sky?
A hand bony and thin
wants female roundness moulded into angles
to make clouds and rain with a slight of the hand
Pull the woman out
give her eyes lips
make her a cave
Who stretches out a hand
and adds to a sky without a path?
A hand bony and thin
that wants to rake in the sunlight with its fingers
and leave the brand of one searing finger on the woman's breast
and in the cave of woman cast the stalactite
The sky with a slight of hand the earth with a flip of it

The Black Nightgown [黑色睡裙]

Bottle of a bottomless deep, I'm filled with footwashing water
the rainy nights are the most meaningful
ask a fellow over to talk big
before he arrives I don't think a thing
I lower the violet curtain turn on a red wall lamp
the black nightgown swings in a circle in the room
there have already been three knocks on the door
propped on the floor in the middle of the room
we start drinking strong tea
flattering high-sounding words run loud like water
honeyed lies as moving as stars
Slowly casually I lean back on the sofa
and with academic detachment relate an old maid's tale
the god between us begins to abscond
he covers his ears loses a slipper
all night big talk has an overall effect
when telling a story
the darker the night the better
the harder the rain the better

Black Midnight [黑色子夜]

Light a cigarette and move through the night
the steps of a woman in heat loiter in the black night
only desire is red and smells fishy
glittering because she is seeking
a smoke ring with nothing to its name that floats in the sky
before the merciless indifference the stars fade
a shadow huge and black coils around the seven-storey apartment block
over from the mouths of all the windows pass pitch-black sighs
suddenly I have one wish only --
to kill and set fires break down doors go in
a decrepit old bachelor
is tearing the clothes off the woman
snatching a half-extinguished butt off her
lost ruthlessly in the dark

The Black Stone [黑色石头]

Find a man to torture
a beauty smiles with tiger's teeth
you must follow in the tracks of suicide to live
walk toward despair brimful of confidence
a nothing land and a nothing sky
you can be as great as you want
death is a stone life a stone too
nothing to hate nothing to love
nothing to be loyal to nothing to betray
the more heartbroken the happier
let bottomless ideas control all
small fluffy birds preen through its baser obligations
a head won't give a dream house room
the flow of blood saturates the air of catastrophe
even though the forbidden fruit, already fully ripe
without temptations all of it will be plundered
Here like butterflies itching to fly
faces of pregnant women everywhere
the nightmare mystery brims with provocation
if you live you will have the contractions for life

Black Frosted Snow [黑色霜雪]

On the dim and dark mountainside moguls
frost and snow nourish the dry cold color of night
everything will grow into nothing
A witch is trapped in her own magic
in the night who can escape themselves
who can write their own names with snow and frost
I have loads of cold looks
the world flattens out for them too
the exercise of magic is always aided by the exercise of night
a snowy lacquered-on complexion seals the loneliness in ice
In the morning on the water begin to face up to the water
Like a cat, cooking smoke licks at the scales of the tiles
in flight a victorious fish slips through the market of the live catch
the air reeks of blood, the hawking cries rip through the dawn

The Black Turtle [黑色乌龟]

The pool of sloth is unfathomably deep
a hidden peril adorned by a string of bubbles
the turtle dreams an ancient dream
while dreaming its head is timidly drawn in
with turtle patience I while away a long night
warm black emotions feed earth and sky
tree shadows like the drifting clouds wish to be immortal fly
in a drift that carries you away
the turtle is good at dream images
the frail moon bends a tired back
the weight of the night cannot be got beyond
my body carries a nest of turtle eggs
a blackbird awakens me
at sunset a slothful slumber is aborted into clouds
I wonder how I should thank the blackbird
thinking everyone needs to be thanked

I Want a Son [我要一个儿子] 1988

The room shrinks my body grows big
I fear childbearing, fear birthing a weird fetus
the fear wounds head to tail tears me in two
I won't tolerate a bale of flesh owning me for no reason
won't tolerate a bale of flesh deserting me without cause

Everyplace people, those who ought to die don't
a hive of loud honeybees discussing liberty and independence
makes god murderous, and he forsakes us
we also jettison god
always wearily alive, god hasn't the luck to die
we are better than gods, we who die

I am hemmed in by a haggard old rag of kid's clothing
in a dream I use up all my strength
a stone with a rasping hack can't spit out its phlegm
at last with this my granddad breathes his last gasp
the flow of warmth for the only wound in my body stops
a teardrop is frozen on my face
and becomes a white mole
an all-over weakness worsens into a critical condition
I don't want a thing
I want a son

The Hausfrau [主妇] 1988

My waist thickens, my voice gets loud
a chattering mouthful of teeth bites the world to bits
a daily fare of garrulous words is very tasty

Silver bracelets can play tricks on hands and wrists
one nothing to do with the other, ring on ring they press each other flat
it's time for me to circle the pots
tie on a dirty apron
I've the eyesight of a mouse, and these far-reaching feelings for the family

Trifling things, never end ever to work or words
only the ordinariness makes the days long
tomorrow's tomorrow is all jammed into jars and cans
you can live to the finish like this

What can a person do
we build houses, then go in go out
we build ships lay down roads, then come and go
we lay flights of stairs, go up and down
we live days as they come, fussing through a lifetime
the tingle in the toenail is not wrong

Without me, where can you find shelter
home is a doomsday land
I was born and will die at home
I'll fight over each, I'll not give one inch
stacked pieces or Chinese characters crowd around
I bring you like bones scattered in a tomb
in 'round me, wrap you in a home

The Mirror [镜子] 1988

Tears stream down the face of the mirror, wet what light it has
the heart of the reflection poisonous the hands soft
facing the glass a blow to my chest
what's smashed is an appearance
now I don't fret over where to rest
this wall's house
has unlimited space
I reside in it, alone with the light
my whole body ruled by the mirror
I wear the mirror down
and the mirror wears out time

The lamp has no good intentions
it holds my flaws in its teeth
this face is so ugly
this body so clumsy
in front of the mirror I take myself in
the mirror and I are in league
the night is my only shelter
a full wig won't let the weak points show
I curl up in the glass
lean on the only wall
I have my trump card

I blow on the mirror
its old eyes dim
at a stroke of my hand
its spirit shines
the mirror follows my orders
the mirror orders me around

An Absent-minded Noontime [走神的正午] 1988

The sound of stone music is low
opium poppies stand in the wind, in weak condition
the skin on the face of the moon is thin

We have a good name as a couple
a loving pair, together till our hair grays
we eat plain food enjoy the good days
open strife the secret struggles are a delicious dish

See me squat on the face of white porcelain
and excrete yesterday
see water flush it down another pipe
before it loses body warmth, memory drops it
a wisp of odor stays on hauntingly

The sky sinks low
sinks to water's bottom
a fragile heavy transparency of glass
a vista degenerating incessantly
a face a brittle leaf
Swallow a mouthful of saliva, then you can put up with the world

A Confession [自白] October 8, 1989

I have my family property
I have my interests
a study-cum-bedroom
everyday in books I make a life
I quietly converse with a sheet of white paper
I listen close to the paper's roar the pen's sobbing appeal
I vomit up my heart and spill blood on a character
I watch the happy look of the paper
the impressive laugh a stretch of open silence

A sheet of paper floats into the flow of the river
one sheet drifts up to the clouds
and now I expose both palms
ten fingers ten fine
symbols possessed alone by me reveal heaven's secret
ten transparent nails dance on the door
since birth I've made uncommon music

My skin is the skin of paper
written out by mountains and rivers
my face is the pallid white of paper
my appearance negligent
casually I shed shreds of paper
a bare foot steps into the grassland
I squander the realm of the deathless in my dreams
a papier-mâché mask laughs endlessly wildly
it's already guessed the paper's riddle

I possess a study-cum-bedroom
the moon in the window is my family property
I was born to be a sheet of blank paper
anticipating a divine pen
to write me in
I have my interests
my palace in heaven is on a sheet of paper
I seek the sound of god to build a ladder
to lay blank paper flat sheet by sheet
to blot out the wrinkles of characters
I crawl onward through the thorny thicket of words

Unexpected Scenery [意外的风景] Oct. 29-Nov. 30, 1989

The observer turns his body away
before his eyes a stretch of unexpected scenery
look at this lonely face
searching for a wind to allay his hunger
darkly, desert sips desert
darkly, sea water sips sea water

I look at myself like a doctor
the illness enters the vital organs
I patiently stroke the glossy metal
the icy old body temperature pleases
I shrug my shoulders
and search for another hand in mine
I have already tasted the flavor of metal
death is the gift I've long anticipated

The eye is empty of people, vacant of vistas
the space in a hand is space enough for me to live in
when did I fear this solitude and terror
the solitude makes time and space flee into the wild
the terror smothers all animals to death
the person who waits for me stands on the horizon
like a tree growing on a sheer cliff
distance increases my feelings of tenderness
what are we saying
we only see the setting sun the fluctuating shape of a mouth
between us we can't hear a sound
a gesture repeatedly wrong
leads me to mistakenly enter a divergent path
a wind scattering lies wakes me
I can only leave the mistake be
autumn days no path to follow
the hollows of the palms of fallen leaves still drip icy tear drops

The rainfall is my sobbing
and leaves your whole body soaked
a sound of rain that seeps into a person
an ancient melody
carries comfort to you
autumn is my gift
death is my gift
and I am your gift

The entire body of the moon bright and clear
a white that delivers the color blue and cold
a woman lying face to the sky
an idle body a patch of waste
the body of a wild beast and hoof-prints of domestic fowl
I'm just like a plant
moving back and forth between heaven and earth

Between fruit and fruit I have a beautiful bleak dream
I lie like this, arms spread wide
one hand empty as the wild
one hand a winning ticket in its grasp
the blood placidly flows away
wounds of sorrow trouble me no more
homesickness lays a hectic life at leisure

Who's telling a ghost story
who's making a terrifying joke
that icy metal makes flesh crawl hair stand
in the gloom my body drinks in a sword
as it would drink a large bowl of numbing spiced meat soup
I'm a merry woman
who loves to chortle and chirp like a painted bird or flower
that day on my birthday I drank too much
and had an exuberant interest in the gray scenery
after my day of birth came life
to not live is to not live in vain
death is my gift
death is unexpected scenery

Do not look for me in the mirror
I'm in the palm of my hand
in the palm of the hand of water
in the palm of death's hand
I must strike a pose of living for myself to see
and strike the same pose for you
a woman who eats the desert has no years
a woman who eats the wind is without a form
you come, I go, I turn my body away
like this the sky is close to me
like this I'm close to the land
close to you
close to unexpected scenery

How do You do It [你怎么下手]

Autumn leaves ears all red
bear the season's shame
listen carefully to the brittle sound of wind
stones carry a hidden pain
the sighs of clouds forever at your ear
since birth I've carried a wound prepared to bleed
a line of murdering light comes over
to see how you do it

A mother fish swallows the bait and the hook
its tail kicks water, kicks stones away
a affected expression moves people deeply
with all your might you want to find an inflexible foe
an old fisherman whistles a flirtatious tune
how can you bear to do it

Death is best at killing time
now you need patience
I untie my arms and legs
expose a wound forever fresh and alive
the wound full of resentments that never heal
the sky darkens
you test a knife on a tree
I watch how your hand falls

A Zombie [行尸]

Twilight, only the sound of a human head hitting the ground
the bone of an animal wedges into the wound
bearing the agony that never heals
the bitter astringency of blood, the aches of the flesh
which of you can get free of it
the sky is in no position to rise high
the wind cannot screen the desert's naked body
this nude's zombie is free and easy
an invisible grace vast boundless
cold detached she can't control herself, her limbs are paralyzed

Three months pregnant, the blood has taken a form
the miserable screams of an induced abortion scatter in shards
a heap of broken mountains and rivers a mix of flesh and blood
a bundle of empty belly-skin kneaded into wrinkled silk

Watching an extremely familiar face
she suddenly forgets the name
a drop of light cannot be absorbed
she's eaten the five cereals had a hundred illnesses
but the life of one bean bloats a person to death

Facing a sheer precipice let out a great yell, absolute silence
yet the stone sucks in a cold breath
blue grass hovers between life and death
transparent green sap swells roots and stems
pinch a bright-colored finger
a plant's blood hasn't a fishy smell

A Performance of Death [死亡的表演] December 1989

Now there's nothing that can be done
I lay out my body, cover my head and sleep soundly
blood sinks without limit
sleep makes me a sheet of white paper the skin of a beast
an enigmatic plaster an elegant position to sleep in
thinly spread on the bed
on the bed is spread water sand two levels of clouds
wind and water everywhere, I'm happy with the ups and downs

A stretch of glass my body beyond me
madly I drink in a bone carving's view
the blind eye of the bedroom's west window is open
I look over my sleeping posture in dreams
my limbs have no form
blood doesn't dissipate the alcohol, I'm plastered like mud
asleep I become a gold bough a jade leaf
a pool of dead water
a heap of fragrant rubbish
the west wall opposite yanks out a wind sail
a hotbed follows the current down
a flat boat floats in my hand
but the pillow has already cast anchor
in the dream I see a blind bird flying in the mirror
its call flutters down

Deep in the night the quilt ferments
simultaneously a different sort of sloth swells
embroidered pajamas a body of oedema
my flesh and blood is puffy, incessantly drowsy
the bed is an entrancing stage
at this moment I'm up in the sky
a meteor shoots across the corner of my eye
the soft setting sun resplendent calm
the distant dreamland well lit by lamp light
my body nears this land, allowing sound sleep to act death out
one leg performs, one watches
one side of my face dies, one keeps watch by it
death is a desire a treat
I lay out my body, the sleeping position stiffens
closing eyes is like closing an old book
shining windows consciousness becomes a gravestone
a cacophony of the intonation of all sorts of inscriptions

Metaphysical Scenery #8 [形而上的风景] Dec. 31, 1990

A pure tree
no flowers no leaves no fruit
barren of branch
extremely abstract
on a backdrop of winter
framed into a woodcut by the west window
Poet you sit facing a wall
you say what are you doing

with words you praise words
with words digest words
with words make words

The music of gods drifts in from the distance
the sound of a laugh from the one looking on vanishes
Poet you sit facing a wall
you say what are you doing

you rely on words to speak
rely on words to make
rely on words for silence

An animal just born
in mother's milk
tastes the immortal taste
Poet you sit facing a wall
you say what are you doing

At the source of words you seek a clear spring
a beautiful vista a bright day
a reader floats on the water
the cover of an old book

Metaphysical Scenery #10 [形而上的风景] Dec. 30, 1990

A drop of evening dew falls from the corner of your mouth
wets words of ancient fragrance and color
Cracks in the paper let loose worries about home
yellow is the color of time
the white-faced scholar dodges into the night
giving a sound to words written in dreams
all his brush strokes of utmost elegance

Your old ancestral home
the years left to you a candle in the wind
flames crackle in the stove
snow laughs in novel ways
kneaded into a carved wooden chair
by the window a white-faced scholar
candle in hand
biting, chewing on words

A book takes charge of one side of things
the book has its own gold
its own color
in the book is everything it needs
on one sheet of paper
a banquet that never ends
it scrapes bones and tortoise shells clean
hangs around with books
some brush strokes soil flowers and stir up the grass
some fish for fame angle for glory
a mirage out at sea
seek its home at the ultima Thule of words
settle down in your mother tongue and get on with it

Terror has its source in a cup of yellow earth
recall has its in a heap of old books
Poet you sit facing the wall
you say what are you doing

I make a home for the wind to blow
shed tears for the rain to fall
get wed for clouds to climb into the sky

Amidst the characters and the lines
a flower blooms

a fragrance that billows out over a hundred lives
a single cup of wine
makes the spirit drunk
Poet you sit facing the wall
you say what are you doing

with words you give birth to words
with words foster more words
together with the poet you bury their words

Metaphysical Scenery #1 [形而上的风景]¹

#1

One hand and the other
repel and attract
clasped together like a clam
a pearl of an idea
like a tree lying in the dirt

#2

Flesh free of affectation
becomes a bearing for the body
two trees share autumn color equally
green leaves, the chant of wind from the four seasons ending
pick up a flower, smile
and quickly drift away

#3

A blind fish
with nothing to do but get fat
wallows in the expiring water
a wisp of blue smoke
wins a way out from death through the uplift of air

#4

Water glad to find form in its hues
the sky as its backdrop
rides abroad on its unreliable horse bagging the wind
the trickiness of water falls into a trap
bones in the avenging of old grudges
are pardoned by god
buried by light
now you are all in heaven
and quiver like cold cicadas

#5

¹ This poem was originally published in a 1991 edition of Mountain Flower monthly [山花], a literary magazine published in Guiyang, Guizhou province. However, it was rewritten and published again in the September 1993 edition of People's Literature [人民文学] monthly, published in Beijing. It is this latter version which I have here translated. MD

The crossed spears and shields of words
in a battle with your back to the water
no winners or losers
on a page the flags droop the drums cease
lie down in a book to look at the sky
enjoy the vast expanse of thought
the moon holds fast to its flaws
such a bright white suspended belief
the awareness of clouds is unbelievably high
time is the sole snare
the drifting of the crowd is a guise for its lock step with destiny

#6

A pose of careful listening can gain an outpouring
a sound as old as the earth and sky
too weak to survive the wind
a tenderness difficult to bear
this day is boring to the point of fascination
the wind can interpret all languages
it's full of metaphysical charm
a richly-endowed woman, unawakened, slumbers on
her entire body transparent like a silkworm
millions of threads but is this life none of which you can count on
the next life beyond her scope
O god she keeps a respectful distance from you

#7

Count every breath and enter into the quiet
your hand clenches an empty fist
one thought takes the place of ten thousand
warm and soft your limbs
roam the third river bank
go down it with the flow

#8

The sound of wind by your ear is long gone
many complicated looks come to nothing
self-satisfied blood gushes across a thousand miles
silently the drifting clouds secrete the body
establish an image fully express intent but lose it
in the here and now snowflakes fly up

A Confession [自白] Sept. 27, 1992

A mirror hovering in the air
days to come will reflect the old
the wind rouses old affairs
makes me cry
tears have a charming salty flavor
hardened sleep is soaked to softness by the water
a river wind scatters my limbs
my body a bundle of gentle feelings

I sit in a fabricated chair
I dress and make up
A knife of a subtle persuasiveness
its blade moves with skill and ease
following each change of heart
A cat takes a walk on the roof
blue tiles too many to count

The tree of a settled life
has no branches no leaves
is rocked by silence
and takes joy in the seasons
the nonexistent apples are
full of autumn color

The wind is not seen to move
wandering homeless clouds
have only themselves to blame
water will be happy in its place
and I will be content in mine

Tired, Dozing Off [困顿] August 1993

Noon well fed empty spirits
women filled with thoughts of sleep
an overly ardent sun
animals and plants start to doze

The pregnant ink is unbelievably close to full term
So eager to come out well, a crowd of written characters don't do themselves credit
some words dream of flowers and willows
some characters shore up remnants of mountains and rivers
a culture that honors ancestors
so splendid in decline
the ancient sun shines
illuminating a mob of unworthy children

Today exploits yesterday
one character blackmails another
cook all Chinese characters in one big pot
stew them till they are soft very nourishing pulp
roast yesterday till it's dry
the setting sun is a delicious dish
looks aroma flavor it has everything
but the children shred the wasted-paper
and the women laugh demurely

Noon well fed empty spirits
the sky has evil intentions
the sun bares a ferocious face
plants and animals wither

A Mirror Game [镜子游戏] 1994

A river shot through with Yin fostering Yang
loses its heart in an empty space
the water's looks are confirmed again and again
you see through to the bottom of the deep
like walking on flat land
thinking of the fall's finish sets your heart at ease
sleep digests the aggravation in front of your eyes
a heavyhearted egg
never stops
hatching startled chicks
they fly up to the sky
transform into clouds
the moon is their hometown
barren of human signs
the looks of clouds a thousand transformations in a wink
a million attitudes struck to fit any situation

The Mirror and the Brush [镜子与笔] 1994

A masterly brush
convenes characters roaming in every direction like monks
and a sheet of paper gives them a stable home enjoyable jobs
it fosters the writing in the mirror
one daub and it's black
the sunlight has fled inexorable doom
laying bare the dark plots of old books
merciful during the days and months
my heart is kind to each character
awareness of blood ties brings me joy
lets me savor the flavor of grains and fruit
thanks to the will of heaven
my limbs and brush strokes dissolve into one
in a wink I accomplish the mission of a lifetime
make each character shoot bright rays in every direction
the brush strokes grow like seeds of grain
pearls of dew drop jade green
this is the brush's dream
lean on this brush bring forth birth death and love into being
lean on the mirror make a home
I'm a happy poet
I dream that the brush blossoms
spirits high colors bright
leaning on a brush I touch a star
take command of a classical text
the galloping cavalry of Chinese characters
Horses of heaven move through the sky
everywhere victorious
With feet on a sheet of white paper
I mount a cloud ride the mist
the hooves of my horse never rest

The Mirror and the Flower [镜子与花朵] 1994

The rose in the mirror a bud about to bloom
flowering is an inborn skill
withering is of another kind
the tricks of flowering and falling
and the fragrance with no bone nor flesh
fall to a good heart

A haughty winter season
a sky of cracked ice the attacks of frigid air
the ice is a beauty's mirror
skin like caked grease
chilliness is in a beauty's disposition
beautiful people use hearts as mirrors
a laugh is an everlasting flower
laugh the laugh that brings you riches
the laugh of the hopelessly far behind
laughing is a field of learning
its own state
a way out

Who is it that with a chuckle picks the flower
the laughter of the dead echoes through the sky
laughter becomes wind
grows into a vast body of water
water is the mirror of the wise
clouds are the mirrors of the gods
piece after piece of flo-ice fills the sky
a beauty's pearly tears are the head dress of our ancestors

The Belle of the West Shi Clan² [美女西施] 1995

Beauty is a ruthless war
Looks that topple cities and states
make history unbearable
long drawn out jealousy
does not differentiate male from female
The East Shi clan acted out
a play that sunk deep in the heart of man
a pot of mature vinegar appetizingly sour
soaking in it the whimsical fluctuations of the oval of a face
Flirting is a cheery form of attack
In their sleep belles seek out weapons
rusted shields and spears can meet the urgent need
engaging the enemy in my dreams
I stand in front of a shield
beautiful looks sweep past the flash of blades shadows of swords
this bout very calm and cool
countenance and voice unmoved
I watch the long lance in my hand slowly grow soft
like long flowing sleeves it floats off elated
Night is a battlefield without borders
vinegar and strong drink await dawn pillowed on a battle-axe
make the hearts of beauties and heroes ash
in the seven orifices of the head the fires of war rise
a stretch of scattered corpses
I am one
gracefully I stand between spear and shield
threatened by both
quietly reciting a declaration of war
the results self-evident
behind the shields the enemy lying in wait is
just a carved relief on a copper mirror
smiling I follow the dawn cock crow
the phoenixes on my nightgown suffer famine
compel me immediately to get out of bed
No time to tidy up the battlefield
the whole mirror a view of the war's aftermath
clothing flung every place
like piles of dislocated corpses
among them I am one
some more charming than in life

² Xishi 西施; an infamous feme-fatale of China's Spring-Autumn period (770-446 B.C.E.). One of the first of a series of women to be blamed for the fall of kingdoms and dynasties over the course of Chinese history.

better able to go down into history
White bones in a wasteland
have a form livelier than in life
Death is an even purer vista
the outer forms of shellfish are all very pretty
can be used to make myths and ornaments for the head
just as Xishi's name has become an adjective
Some haven't seen a mirror in their entire life
some Xishi
I have to face the mirror meticulously wash and dress
and maintain peace and order in the room
arbitrarily I glance over a page of the paper
the textual research of a specialist scholar states
the belles of the West and East Shi clans were twin sisters
they were bashful deaf and dumb
easy for others to talk a lot about
Apricots and grapes lower their banners muffle their drums
and help me digest the edibles in my belly