

The Poetry of Zhai Yongming 翟永明

1982-1995

Zhai Yongming was born in Chengdu, Sichuan province, in 1955. She as one of the instigators of the “Black Tornado” of woman’s poetry that swept China’s poetry scene in 1986-1989. This came about as a reaction among other woman poets to the official publication of poems from her series <Woman> and other poems during this period. In fact, <Woman> was written in 1984, and poems in the series appeared in Sichuan’s unofficial poetry journals and others outside the province in 1985. The series was officially published in book form (with other poems) in 1989. Since the 1980s, Zhai has maintained a position as one of China’s most prominent poets, being a frequent guest at conferences and festivals in Europe and North America since spending over a year travelling in the West with her then artist-husband in the early 1990s.

- 1) **I Have a Broom** [我有了一把扫帚]
- 2) **Woman** [女人]
 - I. #1 **A Premonition** [预感]
 - II. #3 **An Instant** [瞬间]
 - III. #6 **The World** [世界]
 - IV. #7 **Mother** [母亲]
 - V. #9 **Anticipation** [憧憬]
 - VI. #10 **Nightmare** [噩梦]
 - VII. #11 **Monologue** [独白]
 - VIII. #14 **July** [七月]
 - IX. #17 **Human Life** [人生]
 - X. #18 **Silence** [沉默]
 - XI. #20 **The Finish** [结束]
- 3) **Peaceful Village** [静安庄]
 - I. **The First Month** [第一月]
 - II. **The Seventh Month** [第七月]
 - III. **The Twelfth Month** [第十二月]
- 4) **The Black Room** [黑房间]
- 5) **At This Very Moment** [此时此刻]
- 6) **The Red Room** [红房间]
- 7) **You've Cut Off My Hair** [头发被你剪去]
- 8) **Landlord! Landlord!** [房东! 房东!]
- 9) **Death's Design** [死亡的图案]
 - I. **The First Night** [第一夜]
 - II. **The Third Night** [第三夜]
 - III. **The Seventh Night** [第七夜]
- 10) **I Spur the Horse, Flourish the Whip** [我策马扬鞭]
- 11) **The Marmot** [土拨鼠]

- 12) **I Stand at the Intersection of Perpendicular and Horizontal Streets** [我站在直街横街的交点上]
- 13) **A Beetle** [甲虫]
- 14) **September** [九月]
- 15) **In a Southern Region** [在南部地区]
- 16) **Family Affairs** [家事]
- 17) **Saturday Afternoon** [星期六下午]

- 18) **Zhai Yongming: China's First Woman's Poet?** (essay by MD, 1995)

I Have a Broom [我有了一把扫帚] (1982)

I have a broom
that is to say
I've a colorful life
fresh air and
a path that is my own
I'll ignore neighbor's ridicule
the obstruction of relatives and friends
I have a broom
I've work
I sweep away today's and yesterday's garbage
clear away the filth in the streets
and in people's minds
I put on new work clothes
Looking in the mirror, I now understand
the mildness of my mother's eyes
I'll never again have to cast perplexed looks
into the street
into a corner
at the colors of billboards
neither in the pained wrinkles of my mother's brow
must I dodge fears of my inability

With the blessings written out by my mother' s eyes
I brandish a broom
and move on greeting the morning breeze
behind me, a clean street

From **Woman** [女人], a four part 20 poem cycle) 1984

#1 A Premonition [预感]

The woman in the black gown comes carrying the night
her darting, secretive glance exhausts me
suddenly I remember this is the season all fish die
and all roads pass through the traces of birds in flight

Like a corpse, the mountain peak is dragged off in the darkness
the heartbeat of a shrub nearby can be heard faintly
giant birds look down on me from the sky
with human eyes
all winter a consciousness rises and falls, cruel and male
in a savage, unheard-of weather

I've kept an unusual calm throughout
as if blind, and so I see night in the day
a childlike frankness, my finger prints
can provide me no more sorrow
Footsteps! a sound getting older
dreams appear to know something of this, in my own eyes
I saw a block of time that had forgotten to flower
weigh down on the dusk

Fresh moss in their mouths, the meaning they besought
pours knowing smiles back into the breast
the night convulses, or doesn't, like a cough
choked back in the throat, I've already quit this dead-end hole

#3 An Instant [瞬间]

Stand here, just stand
and become one with the twilight spitting blood
take back the stained-black sun for me
as patient as death is this stone
spellbound, suddenly you know the sky is already far-off
at the last moment the stars pull out, until
the night is cast off and I fall silent

All the years are hijacked in an instant
you arrange the movements of the constellations and stars on my face
a silent sneer, as if sustaining a whipping
Endure this stretch of sky, smoother than the human body
more frigid than metal, only I
heard the ticking as dawn was breaking
a matchless moment of joy, a cold mood
as if harboring doubts about the air, one time it was dew
once it was night; up until I brush the evening aside
until I fall silent

Stand here, just stand
facing this cold, detached stone
and suddenly, at this instant, I experience painfully
its unknown divine nature
and during another dark night
indifferently, I become its counterfeit

#6 The World [世界]

Left by the wind, the esoteric face of the world, a piece of flint
 blazes time into doubtful illusions
the sun preserves the reach of its anger with a dictator's eyes
 and searches for the top of my head and the soles of my feet
even though this subject is long past. In dreams I am haughty
 I approach softly, am impregnated by the sky
there black clouds incubate the setting sun, the sockets of my eyes are filled by an ocean
 white coral grows out of the depths of my throat

 Waves strike me
as the midwife strikes my back, in this way
 the world bursts into my body
alarming me, making me feel a measure of wild joy

 I still treasure it, in the mood
of that mighty wild beast, I gaze at the world, lost in thought
 I think: History really isn't far away
suddenly I hear the crash of tides, carrying their ancient odors out of

the dusk, in a death like a world falling, bawling to earth
 above me, like mankind's door to reproduction
Aeries still glimmers, the precious yet terrifying glow of the maternal instinct
 before I was born, I was doomed to plant

the roots of black desires for these primitive rock forms.
 Relying on my blood to grow
 I've been witness for the world
and so make black night to spare all men disaster

#7 Mother [母亲]

There are too many places I haven't the strength to reach, my feet hurt, Mother, you haven't taught me how to be infected by ancient griefs in rosy rapacious dawns. only my heart's like you

You're my mother, I'm even your blood that flows at daybreak
in the blood pool where you're astonished to see yourself, and wake me

I hear the sound of the world, you cause me to be born, you shape me together with misfortune
the fearful twins of this world. For several years now, I've been unable to recall this night's
weeping
the ray of light that impregnated you, travelled so far, so tentatively, stood between
life and death, your eyes hold a darkness and a shadow that passes through the soles of your feet
is so heavy

In your embrace, I once betrayed a smile like the answer to a riddle, who knows that
you made me comprehend everything chastely, yet my heart was unmoved

I took the world to be a young virgin, could it be that the hearty laugh
I let out at you never razed enough of the summer? Did it not?

I've been left in the world, by myself, the sun's rays
envelop me sadly, once you bow down to the world do you know what you've lost?

the years put me in a grinder, force me to see myself pulverized
Hey, Mother, when I'm finally shut up, are you glad of it

no one knows how imperceptibly I've loved you, this secret
comes from a part of you, like aching wounds my eyes watch you

living for the sake of living, I seek my own end, in order to resist that ageless love
a stone is cast aside, until it is blasted dry like the marrow in the bones, this world

owns an orphan, causes every blessing to be exposed, yet who best understands
whosoever has been placed in the hands of a mother, will die in the end for being born

#9 Anticipation [憧憬]

Where can I show myself? I don't know
my own face in the water, the people walk by one after another
Imitating this soundless terror
the summer descends, rising and falling
Dew-like, my lover I extend my senses
the whole sky sneers
no woman can get clear of it
I'm used already to examining the way the moon smiles at night
in this place or in that, since I am
soil that suffers through the expectation of nightmares
where can I gather myself together? The evening sun sets
knocking against the dark, I'm still the painful core
In the sunlight, every pose is struck by the shadows
no murderers, but also no survivors
this stretch of sky sets out the first of its ribs
at the distance between stars
My lover, can't the rainstorm in my eyes
make the blood you shed for me return to your body
and work a miracle?
I'm so dependent on you, so small
but one day, this yardstick that I am
will join in with the sky's dark shadows, and astound you incessantly

#10 Nightmare [噩梦]

You lie here, plotting a desert
you laugh like the laying of eggs
someone is covertly arranging
dreams in sunflower patterns. Your heart beats beyond your control
close your eyes, create a fragile, obstinate atmosphere
the sea is all, your body is all

like a huge, ruined bodily organ
and those living, forsaken silent faces
the stars are indifferent, like distant white eyes
a cactus proclaims to the sky
the reason breeding is impossible

And you are? You're not the first to discover cities on the sea
that which raises the twilight up into dawn and makes the color red obvious to the eye
is forever the icy hand
the sea is unmoved, your body is untouched

in a different place raise your head to the moon
beneath the stars a face of death exposes the rocks
in loneliness the night gilds all similar hours
into the remnants of a wall of substance

the whole of you is a dream of degenerate colors
you emerge in the morning, making the sky rust
making the earth beneath your feet revolve in insignificant ways

#11 Monologue [独白]

Me, a wild thought, imbued with the charms of the abyss
accidentally born of you. The earth and the sky
combined as one, you call me woman
and consolidate my body

I'm as soft as water's feathery white body
you hold me in both hands, and I take in the world
an ordinary embryo wearing a body of flesh, in the sunlight
I'm so dazzling you find it hard to believe

I'm the gentlest, most understanding of women
I've seen through it all, yet am willing to share in everything
I long for a winter, a huge black night
my heart as the limit, I want to take hold of your hand
but facing you my pose is a kind of crushing defeat

When you go, my pain
wants to vomit my heart from my mouth
to kill you with love, who's taboo is this?

the sun rises for the whole world! But only for you do I
focus the most hostile tenderness on your entire body
from tip to toe, I have my ways

a chorus of cries for help, can the soul also give a hand?
with the sea as my blood it can
lift me high to the foot of the setting sun, who remembers me?
but what I remember, is surely not just one life

#14 July [七月]

From now on summer is occupied by July
and restraint becomes conviction
from now on I hold up a heavy sky
and turn my back to the sun

You are a season beyond comprehension
I only discover your secrets when I'm in death's embrace
I smile because there're still these last nights
my laugh is my right to remain in the world
and today the hand is still on the crown of my head
what sort of eye is it forces me to see
all methods now no longer exist

July will be a death
Summer is its most appropriate season
I was born as a bird, and only die in the sky
you are the shadow encroaching on my perch
silencing me with mankind's only trick

I've never had deep feelings, so sustained
so attentive, I'm a tiny teardrop
gulping down the sun, I ripen in order to complete myself
and thus my heart is invulnerable

Can it be that I have been the black night that remains in my heart?
in the shadows of the setting sun I've felt
the flesh concealed within you, from start to finish
and so you're the misfortune poured over my body
in July wrapped in dewdrops and dust you sleep soundly
but who knows with what heaviness your bones
are waiting in the dusk

#17 Human Life [人生]

Each day is the enemy of today, we're terrified
evil still rises up, so many names are concealed
pale foreheads, you're secretly
happy, and practice the intentions in your lies

Going like the wind, a black-haired girl
stirs the blood of summer without a sound
with hopelessly enchanting ways
full of secrets, the night enters your hearts

The night frightens us, we seek out our arms
boundless beauty, unlimited wonder
in the form of the moon, in the traces of a falling leaf
the night teaches us to endure it, or enjoy it

I am the seducer. Evincing a fictitious light
uniting with the dust so perfectly
the path appears to run true
the spirits of nature remain aloof, letting you to have your own way

Who's that? And who's that?
coming and going like irresponsible shadows
froth flies up, fated to vanish quickly
the living hand touches each evening, like truth

Countless numbers have walked the path
but for all of you it's the first time
daughters superficially delicate
day approaches, you turn and go

#18 Silence [沉默]

There's always a butterfly calling her name in the night
suddenly she comes, with a smile like quicksilver
the moon is very cold, very ancient within her, already inborn
endowed on the two of them as one, often I attempt, gloomily
to fathom her gestures, but have nothing to show for it

But you barely twenty, standing
nailing this beautiful season
to the inevitable sentence
you still walk in that heartbreaking way
as if declaring an acutely poisonous attitude You're
calm like the countless beauties of a will-o'-the-wisp
your light renders the moon unable to cast down your shadow

Full of life, and yet so amazed
now who was it that silenced you?
a clear gaze aimed at all things, but
everything has left you

more and more swallows build their nests in your house
black opium poppies are hung in the windows as ornaments
your eyes become a snare, packed full of black nights
creeping oxalis plants wither in your hands

How did she learn this art? She dies
but leaves no trace, like the happy darting glance of October
brimming with confidence, emotive, and yet abruptly silent
eyes forever open, watching the sky

#20 The Finish [结束]

When it's done, what of it? On that day
I lifted the child into the air, and, like a tree
returned to the first center point
from beneath the earth the blood gushing up raises me high
now I open entirely-new eyes
and aim a long sigh at the sky: when it's done, what of it?

Hey, look. Don't turn your faces away
seven days make a week and follow me at my heel
I'm encircled by a countless quantity of dreams fulfilled
Having laid away my fill of fresh dreams, suddenly an incomprehensible
suffering gradually yields a clue, and it's newly writ
in the sky: When it's done, what of it?

It'll never end, its echo like a path foretold
all strength shot into the Achilles heel, and there
I no longer know: What of it when it's done?
but in the air there's another sound that's unmistakable, clear
naturally, it's merely the final question
yet no one answers: What of it when it's done?

I'm no longer concerned about my secret, this embryo
even more translucent, like the wailing of October
forever in anticipation of to the end, yet you all endure secretly, wordlessly
the glint of an answer makes me focus on the direction of the dark night
All winter I asked in a small voice, and smiled
enigmatically, who can tell me: When it's done, what of it?

From **Peaceful Village** [静安庄] (a twelve poem cycle, 1985)

I'm nineteen, entirely ignorant....
Who could have foreseen I'd develop into a disease?
– in Peaceful Village, 1974

The First Month [第一月]

As if it had always existed, as if all was already in order
I arrive, the noise has nothing to do with me
it settles me into a south-facing wing

My first time here I happened upon a pitch-black day
everywhere there were footpaths resembling faces
pale and lonely, the cold wind blew
at a moment like this the fields of corn are stirred up
I arrive here, I hear the howls from the double-fish star
and the endless trembling of a night full of feelings

Tiny haystacks scattered and solemn
The sole fragile cloud, solitary as a wild beast
approaches on tiptoe, reeking of foul weather

Those who I come across become hearts worth knowing
the long fishing rods slide across the water's surface, oil lamps flicker
the hoarse barking of dogs gives one pause

Yesterday the sound of a great wind appeared to comprehend it all
don't let in the black trees
in every corner murderous thoughts take up their places
enduring the moments spread over your body
now unfettered I can become the moonlight

In their dreams a married couple hears the patter of pre-dawn rain
By the stone mill black donkeys discuss the tomorrow
There, land of mingled dark and light
you know all its years like the palm of your hand

I hear a cock crow
and the windlass of a well

The Seventh Month [第七月]

-- In the dog days of summer, if it rains
even if sturdy, it's hard to retain

Who told me of rainy days
I stare at that toxic eye
A strange climate in the season of White Dews¹
throughout it all I'm in this village of dry wells
first I see a large stone
then the blood on it

Appearing in the sunlight
men and women come forward
kneeling they beseech the sun
the dead road whitens
the setting sun's direction approaches my body
round pebbles blockade the river's surface
this moment like the deepest sorrow

You carry soil in your left hand, water in your right
the fire on your crown dazzling
and the trees are already in league with the sky
There can only be the emergence of one possibility
cooking smoke has already entered the superficially sacred moment
anxious moments like nets

Late at night, the grandmother, both mortal and divine, turns her face to the sky
the stars rotate endlessly, the extreme prophecy clearly states
the souls of people searching for a source of water steam
In my mouth
there are anonymous cracks it's hard to bring up

Above or below
call birds together in magnanimous ways
with the qualities of death
In the dark you can also see the eyes of locusts
Come, here
brutal hearts their gaze on the sky
yet both hands scalding

In the dust
your back to the earth

¹ The 15th solar term.

you suddenly see a confusion of colors appear in the sky
Lacerating pain covers your body
the owl's son leaves a gap for the day
open your mouth and let out a hideous laugh
make the dry season dip down and persist in its ways

The perfectly healthy water wheel moans
a young cow waits expectantly
a woman visited by divinity appears
no man takes her to wife
green phoenix trees don't record time, here they are born and die
the people in old houses leave, those keeping night-watch struggle to stay awake

A pregnant woman carries weariness like fruit
the calamity of blood's light makes clan members remember insatiable graveyards
elders sit before the door, the heat and thirst makes their rubbery bodies
fill with respect for the gods
their looks cannot pass through

Ardent news in the cool of the dusk
the rape occurred at noon, like an earthquake
at the last moment the sun goes limp, prayers fill the village
raised heads swell in agony, and see

The silent light dyes roofs thatched with wheat stalks red
you discover a rare object in a dream, robbers are everywhere
your belly is bursting with the strong spirits of home-made wine
throughout it all I'm in the village of dry wells
first I see a large stone

Then I see the blood reappear on it
a stake stands alone as all things dance in jubilation
like an oldster who has lost density
Shouts from the sky make your whole body break out in a cold sweat
At the last your eye is revived by the sight of rain

The Twelfth Month [第十二月]

Now the time has come to leave Peaceful Village
the mare's still stamping its black hooves
a north-westerly blows over a no-man's land
and a herd of calves thinks of war.....

So far the empty form can't be identified
the setting sun descends like pestilence, sitting atop the village
the heart's wound like a tree
the desires of white sap laid out by your hands, raised by your shout
you look up and see a flying saucer, a fortuitous appearance
you stealthily stroke the stone in your breast and kiss me as you leave
the entire village suffers your gloom
shoes full of sand, the smell of malt thick in the air

the sun is high and cold
with an effort you imagine it as a living thing with a brain
an aging woman shakes the suffering fish
In every corner, skulls full of dust
an arid smile is revealed on your face, a dark swaying shadow

The sound of footsteps rises up from beneath the earth, like flowing blood
butterflies see their own reflections go seeking refuge in death
Just like you, distance is the core of all things
I'm still the loner from a strange land on the earth's surface
From start to finish in this village where crows and sparrows are not heard
At this moment my ears hear the old tones of birth
A dull pain in my ribs
a once-approachable time opens for me the great gates of night
a girl stands in the gloaming

Grey horses, grey shadows of people
the sparks kicked up off the flagstones shine
A nauseous sensation falls on the roof like rain
An infant's dejection is born
we leave
bearing unfathomable bodies of flesh and blood

After all's said and done, I came here
and was liked by others
yet when I leave, I don't harbor good intentions
smoke brings tears to my eyes, my gaze directed towards
old wrinkles and the transmigrating part that suffers from sapped vitality

A low flying bird passes through my heart leaving me with nothing
the old elm on which my birth date is carved
is also full of the knots of the old hemp rope of my father's age
proud that it's given us life
The village people stand on a sunny slope
doubting the day, returning to rest in the night after taking the long way round
a winter throughout which evil intentions are deployed forced to withdraw under the keen looks
of the elders

Cracks appearing on that face gives me strength
the magical child I saw at the start stands under the tree
he's still considering
how everything was brought into being
during those invisible moments

The Black Room [黑房间]

As a rule all crows under heaven are black, and this
intimidates me, they have so many
relatives, their numbers are legion, hard to resist

But we are indispensable, we four sisters
we are the snare in the black room
slim and graceful, walking to and fro
appearing to have winning lottery tickets in our grasp
But I intend to work mischief, my heart is harsh
On the surface I maintain a girl's pleasant disposition
while retracing my daily defeats

We are fair maidens of renown awaiting proposals in our boudoir
smiling resentfully, racking our brains
for ways to make ourselves more attractive
Young and beautiful, like raging flames
very single-minded snares, baked black
(Which of the unwavering countenances of good men with sharply-
ground teeth and ramrod straight gaze, which of the boundary-
crossers and calculating plotters shall be my brothers-in-law?)

At night, I feel
crises lying low all around our room
the cats and mice are all awake
we go to sleep, seeking in dreams
the license numbers of strange hearts, in the night
we are women ready to fall like ripe melons

A confusion of phoenixes, male and female, so on and so forth
we sisters four, daily-new monthly-changeable
Marriage, still at the core of choosing a mate
The bedroom light dispirits the newly-marrieds
Risk it all on one throw, I say to myself
Home is where you start off

At This Very Moment [此时此刻]

Living in the world, without sons without daughters
becomes a harmful business as days go by
The mirror is loyal but loathsome
Facing me
The perfect moment for a born-widow arises

A long face, buck teeth, the attitude of she who knows her place
At this moment, I've taken a bead on a certain matter
What do I want to do? Don't know
but I'll shock everybody

Most of the time I disappoint them
like a glass of milk, but turned clear
The matchmaker often to's and fro's, important looks on her face
At this moment, there's a war in the east
People, biped and erect
are doing what animals won't
Soccer fans are more brutal because of the weather

A large portrait, cold as a commoner
Fall back on your natural talent, suspended in my room
Speechless, an omen for a body of communicable disease
On the way to the hospital, I discover
in the storm, leaves have already forgotten yesterday's foundations
Bright as wine, pearls of water disappear slowly
Things are like this: Unchanging and indeterminate

At this very moment, I'm walking among people dressed for the occasion
hands tucked into sleeves I pass by, dressed up like a good citizen
exactly the image of a vigilant woodpecker tut-tutting aggressively
one lives in the world and ridicules oneself:
At such an extravagant age, it'd be better to marry

The Red Room [红房间]

The days change me, lead me home
I'm not so picky about everything anymore
Sitting in the red room, I lower my head
A hopelessly tangled ball of thread
flows out of mother's hand to my end of the room

You sigh for me, suffer for me
but I saw the true face of this pain long ago
Endure the love that commoners must endure
because my heart's already a bird startled by the mere twang of a bow
When I make my comeback, and sit here
As always, I still sense its rich potential

And it's the red room that causes your delivery pains
and spurs you to go on improving
it caused my birth, it made me
retain old blood ties willingly
beneath my mother's supine body

And in this room
is the sound of my words
blood flows from my body to my end of the room
eyes like fish, an odd disposition
a head swollen up like a stele's inscription in the mist
absolutely motionless, I emerge from the womb and go

The days change me, make me go home
sitting in the red room, I see my true likeness
in your eyes
Your nameless suffering is a near-pure poison
endless admiration. Clothing overstocked with dust
a spacious body of flourishing fruit, pendulous
its exterior starting up endlessly
there's a heart within, difficult to control
It's me, light of hand and foot
arriving punctually, leaving on time too

You've Cut Off my Hair [头发被你剪去]

You've cut off my hair! with your
delighting executioner's hand
An incomparable genteel pose
You turn my head
and my heart: No! No!
Cat's eyes watch me, pity me
furry intentions conceal the maw of ruin
You've cut off my hair! My pet
a deep black shape is now dying
if it leaves me, it dies immediately
It's like a rope, sometimes a snare
sometimes a decorative item on my neck
No matter who it's like, I dote on them all
I provide it with blood, make it grow large
follow me for half a lifetime, affect my facial expressions
You've cut off my hair
take hold of its fine feelings
stiff as ice, but still boiling hot on my body
the cat shreds it with hands
destroys it with a conspiracy of feet
The killing ground! My head twists back and forth
can't retrieve the flavor of used things
Once, they were confused curves wreathed about my crown
or were frenzied bats tracking me
until my hair was cut away by you. You feel nothing
casting it off as if discarding home and children
life death, I was inured to it all long ago

Landlord! Landlord! [房东! 房东!] 1988

Landlord! Landlord!
we lightly tread on the setting sun of the dead
going home swaggering through the street
we these little characters
used to solitude yet hanging on to marriage
calmly tread on the dust

For a string of days snails run amuck on the street
the oppressive black air travels through one long winter
and enters a new residence
today dead water tomorrow an overpass white like chalk
sets up an air of orderliness
vendors with a sharp-eyed joy
hold a big one-time-only sale
our bodies all alert we pass through the market
for a brief interval
fix your stare directly on the deep spot you can't set foot in
In this mood like a decent person
believe that day will eventually come

Landlord! Landlord!
today she's still young yearns for the son's return
blackbird's swarm over the station like so many ugly thoughts
with a natural bearing coming and going
our road ahead cannot be known
we move toward a far place or return feel its weight

Landlord! Landlord!
We're about to hold an gathering
quests come forward hands holding fresh flowers
speaking a language unknown to man
some dead parts
some injured parts
come in with them
darkening the room
our sun leaves eyes sightless
several people hallucinate
this is the weather for hallucination

Landlord! Landlord!
We occupy the residence of others
eat drink and make merry and arrange an unreal backdrop

Death's Design [死亡的图案] (a 7-poem cycle, 1987-1989)

The First Night [第一夜]

Suddenly everything about the old days pours out
and tonight I extend my fingers toward the boundaries of death
an enormous disquiet presses in
As if awoken by a secret concealed in my body
as if the blank color of your face has parted us
Tonight's echo reveals itself on everyone's body
the white courtyard grass already dead, won't flourish again

Your body suffers a terminal disease, you struggle to breath
The light in your eyes, now dark, keeps you company
or else those who lived with you so many years
will injure you with their words of comfort
or else your daughter will lap up your blood
searching for death's hiding place

Seven days seven nights, I've a clear knowledge about death's true likeness
The cries for help in your eyes
spell it out in every language: birth -- death -- life
I conjecture strenuously
Your breath tells me
There: in in out out
There: up up down down
Dust full of trickling tears
I see a scene reeking of blood

Grey-white arms, atrophied legs
Blood gushes up from the ground, like a pattern rising up to the sky
I clasp you to me tightly
My round arms find your weight difficult to bear
Everybody's death appears on your body

Who is terror's master? Who is your saviour?
Who controls the sun setting in your eyes
and lays out a dark stage for the slow moving earth?

My mother, once your body was my hiding place
Discarded, I lie between earth and sky
legs splayed, exhausted always
The wound rotted together with you
A hypothetical death grows, murdering under cover of night

My body will keep the agony of all the world's dying
and howl because of you

Late at night, you wake me with a start
with the words of the living I call to you
with such strange, casual sounds
In your eyes
I'm death's accomplice
young, vital
my burning mouth spouts rich flavors -- unpardonable
However, everything is incommunicable
Your breath feeble, already everything's unalterable
I hold you to me, lay you down
Your hand extends, a finger at my heart

The Third Night [第三夜]

Tonight I understand some things
I know how death is born out of death
As I put my mother's effects in order
the letters in the dust store away the after-death solitude
in the heart of that person
The fingers of so many years, black as roots
The face of so many years, yellowing
In the photo-album of life's pursuits
if there's a dead person, he'll contaminate
quickly develop hysteria
If mankind owns a mirror, they will see terror in it first
If there's one thing of more importance in the world
life will pass on its news of death

For over thirty years, your space has been plugged by the dust in the atmosphere
There, nothing can be seen
In the dark, you part company
Your letters are preposterous
as if you are using the name of an enemy

You two were once tourists at scenes of slaughter
like a couple of women with evil intentions
A smock smeared white, in a morgue
one person lies, submitting to the will of Heaven
While the cadaver's bones blacken, you're both untouched by it

My mother was once a surgeon
would dress me in red skirts
Ever since I was small, the exquisitely wrought edge of a knife
has sliced through my sensitive skin
causing me endless joy

Tonight I tell you death's secret
Through mother's eyes I've seen
the soul's end; you go your own ways
your last lodgings packed tightly together
Seven days seven nights
An old woman can't call out the names of her kinsfolk anymore
Another's still wrapped in the bandages of a dusty world
The two of you were once tourists at scenes of slaughter
Today I saw the murderer with my own eyes
but I was untouched

The Seventh Night [第七夜]

Tonight I get a taste of death
discover its fearful knowledge
sitting in a deserted room
I think of you, you make me shudder

Wild-hair, your eyes emit this alarming power over me
and look disdainfully on the world of man; you gather your cries
Your feet shift on the earth; your flesh won't be forgotten again
In a corner of the room it breaks out of its encirclement
A white hospital gown twists tightly around my breath
Grey mice scatter
their limbs sicken me!
Their long-time custodian couldn't foresee
the misfortune that arose suddenly

A true-living mother has brought white snow down upon me
She makes me revel in the color of death with her, silent
makes me tell you: not with the tongue
but a lacerated body, a clothes hanger in the shape of a cross
The eyes drop into invisible misery
You understand what assassination is, you once told me
When I was twelve, I had shed my first blood
shaking all over, lying in your icy embrace
I understood how death would come -- summon me then depart

Feet bare, you dig into your flesh with both hands, one after the other
Lips sealed tight but a voice says:
Death is still here, still active
passing through prefabricated stone panels, revealing itself still on the four walls
Endless, exchanging secrets of the apocalypse with me
The night's straw mat and a sudden growth of courage
leaks a ray of light into my heart through a black window
If I were you and you were me, how much time would there be
to let us see the final parting, all that's been abandoned
You deceived me, I've been there
Any signs of people are rare, the air there buried me
and to this day won't allow me to break free of your shadow
All night I think of you, my mother
Because of you I now know: the graves of the dead are in the living!

I Spur the Horse, Flourish the Whip [我策马扬鞭] 1990

I spur the horse, flourish the whip in the strong, black night
an ornamented saddle beneath me
four surging white hooves

treading a narrow winding path a riotous profusion of falling petals²
what century am I moving in?
what form of life is doing battle?
a spacious residence I once dreamt
a true door opened wide
inside, a sword and halberd laid out a suit of armour
in search of in search of a dead general

I spur the horse, flourish the whip on a convulsing, frozen plain
the cowhide reins let the day and the night go
I want to sweep over its length and breadth

pass through gaunt forests
thunder and lightning nearby
children wail in the distance

What mighty, forged axe
is brandished before me?
where does the blood that stains the green uniforms red come from?
expectations, expectations of a resounding bugle call
a life of martial exploits their officers and men arrive
the combined leadership of black has come

I spur the horse, flourish the whip in heart-rending moonlight
locked shapes locked bones mine sit sternly in the saddle
an unchanging, naturally delirious disposition

I've raced past white tents shadows of tree after tree
under lanterns emaciated men play chess
a door curtain flies up his commanders enter:
The enemy! The enemy's in the area
Tonight is a night of many years ago
Which of the dying is young and full of spirit?

² A line from Tao Yuanming's (陶渊明 365-428 C.E.) poem "The Peach Blossom Spring," China's version of "the land that time forgot," a farming community unchanged and uncontaminated by outside turmoil over a period of 500 years. The peach trees mark the entrance to the community.

The black shadows of giant birds those of helmets too
make me quake in fear
coming toward me are the black shades of souls
Wait wait for the result of the match
if a game doesn't end my delusion becomes real

One book a book of a past age
records these lines of poetry
On the quiet river surface
See Here come their long-legged flies!

The Marmot [土拨鼠]

#1

All winter I grieved for my dead friend
in the posture of the speechless through a low-lying dusk
and a rich harvest And on the homesick black earth:
a charming face

I know those dug-over fields
or those serious stones
carry the hand-prints of our ancestors
An encouragement for the dead is retained forever
in its gloomy eyes
It knows how desolate the night is
even the irregular rise and fall
of breath over the perilous pit of my stomach

“My intimate, decrepit prematurely
between mankind's memory and your feeble hand
that ikon you do your utmost to become
will rip me to shreds”

My old residence³ looks at me askance
its face rhombus⁴ are suitably superstitious
and so hand in hand we pass through
reasonably sensitive the soul's scream floats to the surface of the water
reasonably sincere
like the zone of purity in a beautiful girl

“Eventually you'll be out of house and home
stay with me hold in check
this evil-idea idealistic love I have”

A legend draws to its close
there are it's almost unbearable, unadulterated features
an almost translucent heart
the arduous spirit there it proffers with both hands

Our solitude becomes addictive fate has run its course
together we enjoy
the acts of love the ruins of the flesh

³ Old residence 旧宅: a term used by the poet Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 to refer to the grave.

⁴ Rhombus: a lucky symbol. Reduplicated, it is supposed to ward off evil spirits, demons and so on (as in Europe).
(Rhombus = an equilateral parallelogram)

the unhoped-for weapons of life
are our sustenance

#2

My trick is in putting one poem on top of another
the animal on top of the person
it'll make for a stretch of rapid roaming

My meaning is the headlong passion in the bones
can it be pumped up into the whole body?
the sole of midnight's feet
lines that have run into the wind
this poem writes of our flight
like an old debt

This poem sets down a small legend
that stands for the spasms of a lover
a small adorable thing
Lift your eyes into the distance
Write that a son is organizing
the way the land lies around autumn and winter In dreams, a marmot
destitute scholar
the loneliness it handles in both hands
It and I are so close
The dark of night fills its breast it is loaded down with hardship
breaking through draft after draft
a tiny loveable thing
is easily hurt in loving

It follows me in the moonlight
its entire body turns white
this poem sets down its masses of hair
sends true, loving feeling off into the distance
these are priceless
Its dried-up eyes remember me
In parting, its thin, small mouth
lets out a faithful howl
This is a poem to be sung
about a marmot
It came up out of the plains
beyond any fabrication of language

I Stand at the Intersection of Perpendicular and Horizontal Streets [我站在直街横街的
交点上] 30 February 1993 New York

Up out of the house up out of the subway car
a city map in your bag
a host of strange faces dodge back and forth
I walk among the living or the dead
more and more used to
the serious mien of white-collared beauties
navigating through a fleet of sky-scrappers
my stride is stiff

One two three, endless elevation
metallic high-heels
striking, like a woodpecker
coming toward me
a tall, tall woman
like an encounter out of my dreams
someone forgotten when conscious
she carries time and a geography of sorrows
alone I stand at the intersection of perpendicular and horizontal streets

My friend Lili brought her pretty cotton prints
her heart full of flowers ready to burst into bloom
this cold fragrance circulating in the bedroom makes her face all red
her early experiences complicated and confusing

I stand alone at the intersection of perpendicular and horizontal streets
a phone booth dialing the tones of death
today many will die
(exactly like someone far-removed from this world
talking to himself
the morphemes patently uncalled-for
the man from a nearby street upsets me)
good-looking men and women walk quickly by
their shabby clothes or sumptuous apparel
that are an anxiety each day
do not involve me at all
but I stand on this point of the vertical and the transverse
so many footprints already hopelessly tangled up in mine

Shy Lili picks up her
embroidery frame thinks of her Ma
who'll die of cancer large tear drops
stain her print from China red

I stand by the phone booth repeatedly dialing
What do I want to say? who to?
my voice passes through an immense space
a thousand, ten thousand miles so tedious
the greetings stretch on a little at a time
a test of patience -- the both of us
stand by a phone booth at the corner of horizontal and perpendicular streets
remember a laughable love
my face in a display window of scarecrows
trading looks with the lovely fashion models
each admiring the other's frosty looks
the blue-collar lot talk behind me
news of new bargains and war

Tender Lili retouches dragons embroiders phoenixes
tracing a pair of mandarin ducks
she thinks of her lover
that bellyful of baffle-gab from the Orient

A Beetle [甲虫] November 1994

From morning till night I search for the beetle
it confuses me with its body
made of a unity of silence and the black night
a mystery opened like an eye
flashing by like a black boat

I sit on a white chair
lethal weapon in hand
no one knows my sad fate
only this black goblin
closely questioning throughout the whole room

I've seen doctors been diagnosed time and again
struck down by white gowns too
I've asked everybody
each day busier than the last
and the beetle goes off separately to search for those small openings
little beds of white powder it's so lucky
always to appear-disappear in this white room

My silence like its silence
the darkness I can't speak of fills the night
in the world I have no way to sleep
when the black beetle haunts is a companion to me
I sit on the white chair lethal weapon in hand
who shall I cut open my belly full of meticulous enquiry for
when the moon gets drunk like mud
I still can't get to sleep
the white plaster already piled up to the side of my foot

September [九月] 1995

Today the footsteps out of my dreams brush past the door
as if backed-up for years
Today the sun's call moves my heart to joy
smoke rises from the rooftop
the weather turns cold girls get up to work
their looks swallow the flesh of fruit all around them

My brothers and cousins squat amidst the dead
pockets packed with seeds
house building wall repairs all done according to local custom
a cradle rocks in the grove
my wails summon an angry woman

Manager of the household finances maternal grandmother's conscience is easy
happy like an old hummingbird's
rough tea plain fare laid out in the sunlight
sprouting beans on a base of dirt
that hoards lots of things

What kind of violence exhausts her in the extreme
thoughts of sleep come but first my head grows big
lets my own eyes see the cycle's process
everything a wonder beyond words:
I've already eaten animal spleen
my gut is full of live poultry eggs
I already smell the odor of poison among the vegetables

At birth I knew:
the origins of horses and cattle
the cry of chickens and the breath of wild cherry grass
and mankind's end

Two icy hands a moving voice
mother hugs me to her bosom
grandfather's whole attitude makes it clear
who the water nourished
right up to his twilight years

In a Southern Region [在南部地区] 1995

On the border of a southern region
on my street gambling dens flourish
life there is tough the ground moist
I've seen old gluttons pour alcohol into their guts
the smell of tobacco year in year out
recollecting past affairs experienced hands shuffle the deck
or privately distill spirits scalp raw opium

Evening an unsettled gas lamp raises waves
a quiet sound passes along mean streets
a merchant who willingly came south remembered long ago
the good points of a soul hands crossed
her most loving glance
all enters into a show of tender care
a petty thief walking alone thinks of performing rash acts

A county fair they all come
hands holding needles thread and bolts of cloth
girls in braids odd-jobbers
single men
come together move on singing
icy-cold blind-eyed the bustling ferry
convoys workers the entire day
tenant farmers, hearts freighted with care bellies full of plots

People scatter when the wine's gone everything vanishes like dust and smoke
mother leads me along the rough stone wall
she washes clothes cooks food is easy to anger
back to it all she tends her busy affairs
I cautiously watch what's inside the window
the miserable condition of each minute fascinates me
my eyes brimming with pearls of tears: in my southern place

Family Affairs [家事] 1995

The family ways of past ages come down in their turn to you
grown so perverse
they leave our labor futile profitless
Who is the predator?
August's season you fit out a backpack roam far fly high
light in years you cannot see the outworn corner
do not know your innate gift can be directly traced to the souls of several generations' dead

Hands empty returning with a son and a daughter
my clan-sister sits in a train
a belly full of complaints already too much to handle
baggage carried into the carriage load after load
they who see her off seek only peace
under a bright sky and radiant sun
what do we amount to?
worry twists intestines into knots we feel heart and body vanquished

Clan-sister the grains of sand you dig up in that distant place
cannot resist the oppression of space
afternoons of life-and-death bring
damaged faces
in extraordinary times you joy in imagination
can it be you want us to open our eyes
to read the chilly loneliness when you smile
a son and a daughter they grow silent
vast open space becomes the answer to riddles

Ten years ago roaming far flying high
Young you couldn't see certain things
I remember your laugh then and there
now I write you into a line deep into a human heart
look at your face all a crisis precisely where are your doubts?
you halt remain I've long been suspicious of this

Saturday Afternoon [星期六下午] 1995

Saturday afternoon standing at the high point of a home for foundlings
I see silly boys race on the lawn
their crude impetuous ways like the padding of wolves
at this moment I don't sing, don't dance
only cast my stealthy glance into the distance

In pitch-black night I stand in dreams
possessing a human form a body of my own
a wild soul joins with me
displaying charms long held in reserve
my young graceful limbs richly resilient
parade in a room under the sky

The way falls into my bosom
my high-leaping hind legs break through the window
in my dreams in the eyes of a little girl startled
awake the brilliance of mankind appears
her deep-red lips have enjoyed cruel joys to the full

Saturday afternoon standing at the high point of the foundling home
I see a lone wolf arrive far too early
its anguish drinking in the remnants of the sun
we regard each other darkly a lonely posture becomes my sorrow
has it come from the nether world coming and going in this?
Waking my blood group
because of its well-known howl?

In the distance boys race on the lawn
the five-year-old wolf stands at the high point of the foundling home
enduring murderous looks
a tiny pallid face a small white skirt and blouse
I too wait for the dark
just like me my same-aged companion
has sad black eyes
immature teeth an orphan's oddness
something sound asleep in my body gradually grows large
out of the meek look in its eyes we share
an agony of previous lives hunger from antiquity to now

Saturday afternoon standing at the high point of the foundling home
I see the five-year-old wolf walking alone
no mother father cut off from the world its empty shadow
gives rise to ruthless reasons

Zhai Yongming: China's First Woman's Poet?

Zhai Yongming and the poems she has said are an expression of the unique perceptions and consciousness of the female sex (女性诗) first appeared in China's world of poetry in 1985. This was the year her 20-poem cycle *Woman* (女人) and its preface <Black Night Consciousness>, written in 1984, first appeared in China's literary journals. (Zhai was born in 1955 in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province.)

There are very few female of note poets in the history of Chinese literature, a situation that is certainly not unique to China alone. However, it can be convincingly argued that prior to Zhai Yongming no female poet had ever seriously attempted to stress the unique nature of female experience and perception. The three female poets that have received the imprimatur of Chinese literary tradition and the current establishment as exemplars of the poetess in China,⁵ to a greater or lesser extent, all accept and conform to the male perception of the role of woman in Chinese society.

Until this century, it was common practice for male poets, based on their perceptions of the role of the female in China's poetic tradition, to write from what they perceived to be the female perspective. I do not believe I exaggerate when I say that the anonymity and misrepresentation of women in Chinese literature is on a par with that of the other major cultures, and in the past 200 years has fallen far behind that of European (including the Americas) literature.

Not surprisingly, Zhai and other female poets in China have had to look to the West for their role models, and have found them in Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson and other contemporary sister poets whose work has been translated and published in China's literary journals and collections of foreign poetry. In part, this situation and a general breakdown in the hold of certain aspects of traditional culture since the advent of the rule of the communist party and the rapid industrialization of Chinese society in recent years, has resulted in a great increase in the number of female poets (however, in my estimation, still amounting to less than 10% of all poets).

While Western women have had to deal with the effects of the myth of 'Adam's rib' and a traditional belief system that men themselves began to dissect and destroy in the eighteenth century, I would argue that Chinese women have a much more difficult row to hoe. Traditional Chinese cosmology and the all-pervasive "yin-yang" principle are barriers that female poets must address and surmount as they meet them in Chinese society and in the Chinese language. Ergo, Zhai's <Black Night Consciousness>:

Now is the time I become truly powerful. In other words, now I'm finally aware of the world around me and the implications of my presence in it. The consciousness inherent in each person and the universe -- I call this the consciousness of the black night -- has determined that I must be a carrier of the thoughts, beliefs and emotions of the female sex; and, furthermore, injects this burden directly into what I view as the greatest work of consciousness. And this is poetry.

As half of the human race, the female sex is faced at birth with an entirely different world [from that of the male sex]. Her first glimpse of the world is necessarily tinged by her feelings and perception, even by a secret psychology of resistance. Does she spare no effort

⁵ Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1081-1150 A.D.), Bingxin 冰心 (1902-1999), and Shu Ting 舒婷 (1952-).

in throwing herself into life and creating a black night? And, in a crisis, does she transform the world into a giant soul? Actually, each woman faces her own abyss -- personal anguish and experience that continually vanishes and is continually confirmed -- far from every person is able to defy this proportionate form of hardship up until their destruction. This is the initial black night: when it rises it leads us into a world that is entirely new, a world laid out in a particular way and at a particular angle, and which is unique to the female sex. This is not the path toward deliverance, but the path toward a full awakening.....

Zhai is seeking a language of the unconscious, of initial perception, but a language which she considers unique to the female of the species. However, it should be pointed out, her quest is personal by its very nature. Despite first impressions, the preface is in fact a statement of her personal poetic credo, not a manifesto designed to serve as a rallying point for all female poets or even all Chinese female poets.

This point, however, has yet to be fully appreciated in China. In response to the *Woman* cycle and its preface, what Zhai has termed a "black whirlwind" (黑旋风) swept through China during the latter half of the 1980s. what Zhai had intended as a personal poetic exploration into language, culture and her own unconscious, in the work of other female poets, often devolved into a superficial exercise that threatened to obliterate the value of Zhai's own efforts. In the June 1989 issue of *Poetry Monthly* (pp. 10-11), Zhai offered her opinions on the fad: "As a joke I often say that I should change the first line of <The Black Room> from "All crows under heaven are black" to "All women under heaven are black".

In fact, by the time this article, written in March 1989, was published, Zhai had resolved to stop writing poetry altogether. After divorcing her first husband, she had recently remarried and was preparing to follow her new husband, a well-known artist, to the U.S. However, her true reasons for abandoning poetry might be found in the seven-poem poetry cycle, <Death's Design>, written upon her mother's death in 1988 (I have translated three of these poems). And the events of the summer of 1989 only worked to strengthen her resolve to give up poetry.

Zhai has returned to poetry in recent years, however, but she no longer places as great an emphasis on the female unconscious and to some degree is no longer as combative or insightful as she had been in some of her pre-1989 verse. This may be taken as a sign of greater confidence in her art and maturity as a poet, but several of her more recent poems appear to be somewhat forced or ambivalent, almost as if written on automatic pilot. There would seem to be a danger of complacency, of her becoming to comfortable in the pose of the 'poet'.

On Reading Zhai Yongming

When reading Zhai Yongming's poetry, it is often essential to have some understanding of the cultural codes she is responding to and interacting with in order to fully appreciate her work (this is particularly the case with the *Woman* poems). To this end, I will offer a few comments on the principle of the "yin" in popular Chinese culture, and Chinese mythology as it relates to women and creation.

The original meaning of the character Yin is the "shady" side, or the side of a mountain that is in shadow (as opposed to the Yang or "sunny" side). In its full sense, Yin has come to be understood as the female principle which is also associated with the earth, the north and with the

cold. It should be remembered that the concept of yin and yang was traditionally all-pervasive and to some degree dualistic (although, in the original explication, they are meant to be complementary principles). Water also symbolizes Yin, just as fire symbolizes Yang. Water is soft, yielding and pliant, as a woman should be. A passage in Laozi's *Daode jing* 道德经 states "weak overcomes strong, soft overcomes hard." Laozi considered water as an exemplar of proper behavior.

Zhai does not reject these distinctions out of hand. She recognizes a fundamental cognitive difference between men and women and to a certain extent utilizes these beliefs and their incumbent imagery to make her poetry.

The major female figure in ancient Chinese mythology is Nüwa 女娲 who is said to have married her brother, Fuxi 伏羲, the first of China's cultural heroes and accredited with inventing the eight trigrams of the *Book of Changes* 易经, fishing nets and the fishing cage. Nüwa was described as having the body of a snake or, alternately, the tail of a fish (Fuxi is often depicted as having a calf's head and the scaly body of a dragon). She and Fuxi are said to have invented marriage (i.e.: sex). However, her main claim to fame seems to have been the ability to smelt and fuse things together. In one version of the many differing tales about her, Nüwa is said to have created human beings from figures of clay which she baked in an oven.

Another creation myth has Nüwa or another female deity being impregnated when she steps in the footprint of Pangu 盘古, who in some legends is said to be the creator of the world.

The color black, which is so prominent in Zhai's poetry, is associated with water, the North and a salty taste. Finally, the color also stands for darkness, death and honor in Chinese tradition.

As the female is paired with the earth, the male is paired with the sky in Chinese cosmology. Old creation myths depict heaven (or the sky) and earth as a conjugal pair engaged in never-ending intercourse.

Finally, the moon is also associated with the female principle, Yin (the moon deity is, of course, a woman – Chang'e). Both the West, in which the moon is said to rise, and the autumn are also classified as female.

In writing poetry (prior to 1989) that made full use of Chinese tradition as it relates to women, Zhai has been able to write a poetry that specifically addresses the situation of Chinese women today (in particular, female poets) as they continue to attempt to recover an identity and a voice that can relate to their experience as individuals and as women in China.