

## The Poetry of Yu Jian 于坚

Selections: 1983-1993

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

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Opus #39 [作品 39 号] 1983

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

## **The Tall Mountain [高山] 1984**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



**Monologue [独白]** (December 1988)

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

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

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

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

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

## The Hint of a Rose [被暗示的玫瑰]

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

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

From an unseen place  
the crow rakes away lumps of autumn cloud with its toes  
It drifts into the wind which droops from my eyes and the sky of light  
The mark of the crow: sulphuric acid decocted by the nun of black night  
sizzles its way through the flock's mattress  
sinking down onto the branches of my heart  
As in the days of my childhood, conquering crows nests in the treetops of my hometown  
Never again can my hand touch a scene of autumn landscapes  
It pulls itself up onto another big tree, wants to yank another crow  
out of darkness  
Crow in the past was bird meat a pile of feathers and intestine  
Now the desire to narrate the impulse to speak  
Possibly self-consolation in the face of imminent misfortune  
the escaping of an inauspicious shadow  
This kind of handiwork as blind-eyed as childhood  
my bravest hand thrust into a black hole full of sharp beaks More difficult  
  
when a crow perches within the wilderness of my heart  
What I want to say is not its symbol metaphor or myth  
What I want to say is just crow just as back then  
I could never grab a dove out of a crow's nest  
Ever since childhood to this day My two hands are calloused with language  
But as a poet I have yet to speak it out loud crow  
As much in this age of deep thought and careful plans adept at all forms of inspiration meter  
and rhyme  
as when beginning to write immersing the entire brush in the ink well  
I want to tackle this crow its root from its origins it must be black through and through  
Skin flesh and bones the run of its blood and  
its flight revealed in the sky all must be thoroughly black  
The crow from its birth entering into eternal solitude and being prejudiced against  
Entered into all-encompassing destruction and persecution  
It isn't a bird it is crow  
A world stuffed with evil each and every moment  
They all have excuses in the name of beauty or light  
to open fire on this moving target that represents the power of darkness  
Because of this the word won't escape beyond being crow  
It flies a little higher together they surpass the eagle's seat  
Or they drop a little lower to be found at the lowly level of the ant  
Borer of holes in the sky it is its own black cavern its own black drill bit  
It is its own altitude the altitude of a crow  
On its own bearings its own time, driving its passengers  
It's a happy big mouthed crow

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

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

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

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

## Spring Song [春天咏叹调] (1989)

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



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

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

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

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

### The Records Room [档案室]

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

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

### **File #1 History Of Birth [卷一 出生史]**

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

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

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

## Incidents: A Power Cut [事件：停电] 1991

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

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

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

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



## On A Fly [关于苍蝇] 1994

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Poetry of Yu Jian

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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