

*Anniversary Snow*

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楊煉

Yang Lian

*Anniversary Snow*

周年之雪

SAMPLER

*translated from Chinese by Brian Holton*

*and*

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短诗

SHORT POEMS

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## 坝：致黑暗中的听者

### OCARINA: TO THE LISTENER IN THE DARK<sup>1</sup>

there is no beginning the stage is a prehistoric  
retreat into imagination retreating again to kissing  
red-hot lips stopping a mouth of clay six millennia  
a long line of verse rubs lovesick lungs silken gleam  
sparkles and jerks back the wild goose cry in your bosom rehearsing  
the ocarina's one and only night faraway ghosts softly sing  
in the dark you sit deep as the wilderness  
hear a fresh tenderness with nowhere to fall back

from one sound to the next the drawn-out dialect of ghosts  
has erased so many people rubbing water's motion  
surrounding shielding the starry sky with the loneliness of water  
an ocarina fills with a fleshly glow from beneath the grave  
coldly blowing you seep into the female purity of your own shade  
darkly loving every elegy a love song  
in the dark clouds stir as the little finger lifts  
you whisper like wreckage vomit comfort

oh listen the one and only story fired and formed in a kiln  
sobs as it rehearses that distant beauty on your body  
a hole gives you back a single soaking  
a tiny Saturn revolves rings shattering  
tonight hearing's lines of force keep secrets  
need we speak of weal or woe as the score's yearned-for farewell kiss  
in darkness the rare flowers of the dark are thriving  
floating a single second dazzles with threats

the poetic commands the listener to be like a singer commands your breathing  
being born dying the gift of clay

handed through time   you are here   spring breezes in your heart  
mouth on mouth lovemaking sips the green that dyes the wilderness

and what's colourless   caresses grass tips   commands silence  
overflows with echoes   those ripples   have no ending  
    in the dark the melody yearns inch by inch for love  
    carves   the one and only you   the one and only sound that's lingering

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<sup>1</sup> *Translator's note:* The *xun*, which dates back to the Stone Age, is an egg-shaped wind instrument made of clay or bone, similar to an ocarina, but without the fipple mouthpiece. Yang Lian has been attempting to master this challenging instrument for some years.

一条良渚玉琮上的线

A LINE ON THE LIANGZHU JADE CONG

*Translated by George Szirtes and Yang Lian*

Jade wants to disappear – the carved world in its grip.  
Lake-green skin wants to disappear – a strip

Of distant brilliance across the eye –  
The line that depicts home also wipes it away

Straight – birds like shark's teeth graze the blue sky –  
a precise tender body, so birds and hours fly

you're stitching space – time's needle-tip –  
jade dust falls, noise of tsunami, the rip

of pain, of needle – dust falling grit by grit –  
a tight network, the skull's shallow dip

hard carving steeped in softness, *sulci* and *gyri*  
hand enters shape, the teardrop's fragrance, now salty

now crispy – beads' brilliance to hold the circle's eye –  
exposed target – five thousand years crystallised in a day.

returning only once, you're always about to quit –  
like the burnished beauty of the knife's blood slit

with the light in the jade that leaks and silts up –  
stone curtains drawn on centuries, time through a gap,

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jade at its core is a face – desiring infinity  
but infinity has died, as it must always die –

brute natural coral whiteness flooding brow-high-  
home – the fixed idea, increasing intensity

staring as the tsunami rises in one huge fit –  
the first character: one line paints it.

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## 饕餮之问

### QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DEMON TAOTIE<sup>2</sup>

*Translated by Pascale Petit*<sup>3</sup>

the Pole Star is set in the centre of his forehead.  
the deep blue is crystalline his ice pupil  
has destroyed everything does the lonely  
boiled girl embrace everything?

escaping from Anyang is an escape into the Yin night  
no other light except this sight  
luxuriously grinding a huge axe  
where did the tender broken limbs fall?

looking up for thousands of years  
we sink down water always grinds its teeth  
beneath us the girl collapsing to a gurgle  
does Taotie seize or chew?

thousands of words re-split open are still  
the one character that one stroke captures life's flow  
has been cooked ten thousand times the flesh still soaked in sorrow  
to reawaken Is seizing chewing?

this face is even more ruthless  
than non-being this powerlessness  
staring out rams a hole  
to pound away What beauty is not bloody?

our floating life is carved  
on the shallow bronze relief Does

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the pupil's axle icily shrink space?  
how many suns don't rise or set in the darkness of naming?

the girl swings gracefully back from the Yin  
night does a thin fragrance snuff out all light?  
do bestial and human faces gently clasp vapour?  
has unutterable language finally fulfilled the sacrifice?

<sup>2</sup> *Author's note:* This powerful, terrified face stares silently at you. It's made of bronze, the form is symmetrical, the look part human and part animal, but clearly with a supernatural power. It is *Taotie*, the most mysterious, odd but extremely exquisite design carved everywhere on bronzes made in the Shang Dynasty (16th–11th century BCE). But, are these designs just decorations? Then, why do they watch us from all possible angles like God(s)? Looking back at them, one can feel her/his present is sucked in and swallowed by the timeless ancient. In Anyang of Henan province, the site of Yin, the capital of the late Shang dynasty (after 13th century BCE), archaeologists found there were huge numbers of human sacrifices, at the same time as when the Chinese character-system suddenly began without any evidence of so-called prior "evolution". This ancient language has been used throughout the centuries and is still in use. When I arrived in Anyang that night, I couldn't help but jump into a taxi to run into the darkness of Yin, and feel that the Shang moon was still hanging above me. The poem is made up of questions and is about these questions; perhaps they are all we are so far.

<sup>3</sup> *Translator's note:* I translated this poem after descending into the subterranean vault of the Shanghai Museum with Yang Lian. The curator of bronzes brought in a large Shang dynasty taotie cauldron. As it was slowly unwrapped, we saw that there was a demon carved in low relief on the front and back of the vessel. He had tripod legs and verdigris cloud motifs around and inside his face. These cauldrons were thought to have been used for cannibalistic rites, but no one knew for sure if taotie was a god who demanded human sacrifice, since other finds in the old capital of Yin (now known as Anyang) reveal an advanced civilisation with the rudiments of early Chinese characters. I have a special interest in prehistoric artefacts and in demons, so this poem was a delight to work on and try to render in English. I do not speak Mandarin so the translation was done by talking through each line with Lian.



## 纣王的腰坑

### WICKED KING ZHOU OF SHANG'S SACRIFICIAL DOG PIT

menstrual blood pooled under Daji<sup>4</sup> three thousand years crimson  
crimson for three thousand more until it equals Daji's glance  
come pour wine on the jade bowl that observes us dark crane wings flap  
oh how fine the snowy wrist that started the fire the butterfly-embroidered gown

a funnel quietly dripping  
the Stag Stage treasure house upended<sup>5</sup>

words made redundant as the human shape is redundant  
sitting hugging jewellery gold and silver worse to sit hugging a fireball  
from the pagoda's ascending pinnacle to its descending pinnacle a slim  
waist pillowed on height gyring oh whose limbs dance our land

a funnel quietly dripping  
a beauty politely repudiated

treading tongues of flame the tomb passage descends the pit's depth  
only a little deeper than death black as the yellow earth's sighing  
repeating no need for a guide dog the king sacrificed himself pulling  
the probe of white bone downward countenance cold-water ice

a funnel quietly dripping  
a world vomited up

now lovely cheeks have caught fire too like a wild longing for a lover  
now words so close at hand move bright coloured shades  
Daji's poem inhales lovers' hurried and eager odes  
a backward glance a glimpse of a life brimming over

a funnel quietly dripping  
all heaven and earth look on each other and smile

*11 November 2010*

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<sup>4</sup> *Translator's note:* Daji, also known as Fu Hao, Lady Hao, or, posthumously, Mu Xin (died c.1200 BCE), was one of the many wives of King Wu Ding of the Shang dynasty: she served as an army general and high priestess.

<sup>5</sup> *Translator's note:* The pavilion complex Lu Tai, also known as Deer Terrace, was set alight in 1046 BCE by King Zhou: the Shang dynasty ended with his death in the flames: he was consumed along with all his treasures.

# 谒草堂

## HOMAGE TO DU FU'S COTTAGE<sup>6</sup>

*Translated by L. Leigh, revised by Brian Holton*

1

thirty years walking from this side of summer to the other side  
thirty years fermenting autumn colours

a glass of stronger wine  
set before me reflects a swallowed smile

gardenia fragrance still sews up cracked dusk  
the cottage like a straw boat listening to the sound of waters of my own

running past but never out of  
a deep shady green pond's sighing diameter

my strolling breath caresses low bamboo leaves  
as I count the scattered raindrops falling neatly into death

thirty years ago the child turned away leaving the whirlpool  
the flowery path once again the wooden door once again

board the boats of poets' own distinct deaths  
painfully scrape here this river bed thirteen hundred years old

light as a blade of grass despite what the wild wind carved  
he didn't reject the tragic endgame poverty and illness

presented to him the millstone he pushed  
grinds chimney smoke

that faintly floats and diffuses my maturity  
is like a nation grown accustomed to the beauty of sorrow

2

a line of poetry's dim corridor goes darker and darker  
a line of poetry in the quiet garden tourists have dispersed  
the grove's bamboo stems touch the sound of wind of rain of birds  
drenched wild flowers like drenched human forms  
give me a gloaming seeping through yellowing paper  
that waited thirty years seeping through two faces pushed further apart  
by two waters a wooden bed a cold quilt  
catch up with the swallows a faintly scented space endlessly bows out  
into meaning lit up in leaked-away flesh and blood  
give me a life unlike any other path  
but change all paths to shadow he walks slowly  
throws beside me raindrops big as wine glasses  
clouds darken one candle's light shines up from the water's depths  
one summer's chill plays back a thousand summers  
give me the strength to forget poetry and only then return to  
the sweet warmth that pierces bone a death more startling than language  
corrupted by worthless living now become hollow words  
yet the sea's edge I have carefully trodden presses closely on  
his spare silhouette forgetting to pay homage to a thatched cottage  
thirty years before trivially putting up a bit of a thatched cottage  
an endless line of poetry has used up the word vagrant  
a history without scenes of ruin and desolation  
as the lamps of a thousand homes sacrifice in the heart of a night so deep  
and nip buds tender and wet forming in the same instant  
give me bright scarlet a fragrance kept within  
exuding this moment stars flicker and germinate  
I am already that old and beautiful pure and clean enough person

<sup>6</sup> *Translator's note:* This refers to the cottage in Chengdu, Sichuan, where the great poet Du Fu lived, CE760-CE764.

## 奶奶的船

### GRANDMOTHER'S BOAT<sup>7</sup>

*Translated by Yang Lian with Lizhen Liang and Fiona Sampson*

A tune from Guangling<sup>8</sup> and the soaking waists of the palace maids towing the  
boats.

The glamour of waterside willows sinking into the Grand Canal.  
The tiny reincarnated womb approaches once more.  
Mild internal injuries by small footprints on this flight of bluestone stairs  
bound curves embroidered under hulls in another century  
the cry of a startled crane is knocked up deep into the night.

That crane of yours floated above the year 1897.  
The Lord and the little lady arrived with the stream anchored for a night  
answering the bright moon and a vision of splendour anchored for two nights  
the peaks of Shugang Ridge<sup>9</sup> gleam through green hills stretched out through your  
life anchored for three nights you waited for me in a lotus seed,  
onstage at three. Applying and removing its makeup the river  
was spreading a painted scroll.

Destination of your future and of your past the boat's masts  
pointed to the Pole Star the waters of Dongting Lake the waters of the Yuan  
and Li Rivers,  
overtaking the lightning-flash of that flowery snake in the small dark room with no  
window.

No fire accompanied your last breath an old servant's tears  
wiped away without your noticing in the dusk between the fragrant carved  
camphorwood partitions.

Bleakness signalled from the underworld distance froze the bone marrow.

From a duplicate water-mark I identify  
your naivety at anchor still smiling. That Mongolian light in your eyes.

Father holding me and the poem of your absence in this one line  
gone over by heart once again in the accent of a handful of tuberose,  
building up while tearing down the intrinsic tenderness of a little girl  
that casts the finest shadow onto those sculling women.

Stepping through Dongquan Gate<sup>10</sup> a long alley crowded with farewells.  
Stepping in from the House of Rockeries<sup>11</sup> the moon overlooking the water  
waxing full whenever it wants letting the drowned poets stroll underwater.  
Stepping in from the word Yangzhou full of the smell of salt  
through the carved window lattice through the rails Grandmother's boat  
moored at the dock.  
Listen to never-ending three years old. The wild waves

Crush and long-ago crushed the breathing recorded by the stone steps.  
My breath comes looking for you, unreachable in your rare flowering.  
Leaning close to you for once for me you emerge on your sickbed  
fate gathered in your yellowish-white palms. The world's water  
leaks into this one drop Granny. The stinging warmth  
remains when the wake of your small body has flattened out.

I'm already on board. Sweet fishy blood and bone.  
A word is settled a fluid glance lingers in the snow and wind  
the revenant's faint sigh is contained for thousands of miles  
a glistening epitaph returns wherever access is granted.  
You remain in such serenity, Granny. No matter how far away I heave out  
the sails  
you sail ahead navigating with your crane wing-tips.

<sup>7</sup> *Author's note:* My grandmother was in Yangzhou when she was three years old, and I imagined she was brought by boat from Beijing to here, stopped a while, then continued on to south China. However young she was, my father, myself (my poems) and 20th century Chinese history were all inside her (womb), together with her own sad life later. This poem is a small but epic piece of Chinese history.

<sup>8</sup> *Author's note:* A surviving Guqin melody most commonly attributed to the famous essayist and poet Xi Kang (CE223–262). It had its source in another title called 'Nie Zheng Stabs the Han King to Avenge the Murder of His Father'. The *guqin* (pronounced goo-chin) is a horizontal harp, the favourite instrument of the literati. *Guanglinging* is the ancient name of Yangzhou, on record from the Han Dynasty (BCE202–CE220).

<sup>9</sup> *Author's note:* The three peaks of Shugang Ridge traverse the northern suburbs of Yangzhou. The peaks, covered by millions of green pines and verdant cypresses, have as their centrepiece the Daming Temple, dotted with halls, terraces and towers as well as waterside pavilions.

<sup>10</sup> *Author's note:* A quiet ancient back alley in Yangzhou that contains a host of sites, the main gate of which dates back to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). It thankfully lacks any sense of commercialization though small restaurants and craft shops line the alley.

<sup>11</sup> *Author's note:* The only existing example of a structure built by the great 17th century master painter Shi Tao, it is a marvellously creative artificial rockery excelling nature. There is a man-made moon reflected on the pool beside the stone house, which is a super-secluded place to hide away from the summer heat.

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