

**TANG Siu Wa**

Poetry and an essay

**Why Rely on the Fictitious**

The smoke disperses  
Night has fallen  
Violet Alice  
Holds out two hands from the black velvet  
The pastoral is becoming old-fashioned  
We are tied up by utterances  
Growing more clueless day by day  
How to make ourselves transparent you said  
There is a whole world out there  
Yet we turn around to face inside

Cat sneaking along the vertical edge  
The rose of pain withers away day by day  
Will just a puff like this do  
When we still are searching for the right word  
Like shaving our sideburns clean with a razor  
Hoping in vain not to be bothered

Another moment of delay and the rose will be forgotten  
Thorns will be snatched away too:  
That is an ancient conclusion.  
Who can remember that our own bodies  
Are indeed a sword? We have forgotten  
That the world is a necessary shield:  
“Regard all the agitation and pain honestly,  
Light and darkness deep inside the body  
and in every corner of the world...”

We are still wrestling with the meaning of words  
Wishing they would stay further away from us  
Do we rebel with our spring-like attire only  
As we cautiously follow instructions  
Dressed in colorful layers of clothes streaming  
Shy away from debates  
Lay our skeleton out for others to scrutinize  
Without stating our view  
Stay happy with the encyclopedias hawked to us

The island is crashed, the shore tossing  
Delicate knots on our tongues appear way too quiet in the tumult  
Knives and forks, candlesticks, table manners:  
How should we describe the cracks in the house?  
Squashed bodies, juice gurgling out  
Is rhetoric still needed  
To trim all these into smooth nails  
Click-clack, click-clack and they're cut away.  
Deny having witnessed fragility.  
We are poor – and not because of our income

Is innovative belief more dangerous than  
A hypocritical spring?

If we return all our papers to them  
Let our grammar stand opposite of theirs  
Repudiate regulations  
That transform into irregular butterflies  
Fling their coins at them with clatter  
Dump the shadows and theses imposed on us  
Don't sit with knees together anymore  
Betray eternity  
Our utterances will get tangled  
Unnamed darkness falls  
We become infants, refuse to be raised  
Reassign parents to ourselves  
Smash all conjunctions with our screaming

Learn to make unprecedented gestures (inevitably odd)  
 Arms around each other's shoulders, naked as if emerging from fire  
 Will this anchorless drifting  
 Find that unique rose of ours deep under the sea  
 As a testimony to our meticulous shore

Note: "Economic development is the eternal theme of Hong Kong" -- Zeng Qinghong, Vice-President of the People's Republic of China, 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2004.

### Getting along with my house

The city has its own riddle for the lost.  
 When the sun is gone, all others stroll in the streets,  
 Leaving their own houses behind. Then I always start climbing up,  
 Secretly entering those empty rooms

No need to tell them apart. They're always unfamiliar  
 For they do not belong to me. Defined by the touch of someone else,  
 Their walls are soft and transparent like veins of leaves  
 Sofas carry me like floes on a lake

The toilet bowls sparkle like young girls' cheeks  
 The curtains are forever half-open, like murmuring lips  
 Always there are pictures of the deceased, revealing the somniloquy of Time  
 Hair strands of lovers on pillows -- I wouldn't bat an eyelid

Tea leaves in the cupboard curl like soft larvae  
 Nail clippings in the carpet all the time  
 As if planted there  
 A phone is ringing – don't step over it  
 I tap on keyboards with the sound of a double bass  
 Caressing the dust on every lampshade  
 I give them names

Talk to them about the city's weather  
 They all shall be restored to zero when I leave  
 The simple lines of the light in the house  
 Bring me closer to enlightenment

The music I play on the recorder is nothing more than silence  
 The chocolate I've eaten is so easy to overlook  
 Open others' letters before gluing them shut  
 Take out bills for someone else to be shredded

Everything I've touched becomes still  
 Everything I've passed through tends towards purity  
 I lay my hand into the unnamed anxiety of various things  
 They permeate me, putting me at rest

Only in this way does the night cease to be still  
 When I look out the window from another's room,  
 watching the night flow like a river, chant  
 I slowly descend to the ground and make my way back

Only this nighttime wandering and climbing helps me get along with my house.  
 It stands in the grayish dawn, cold, waiting for me to come back to sleep  
 We never talk, our eyes are brightly silent. And the night turns sharper.

### **Abstract Oneness**

The night lasts longer than life  
 Briefer than ice. When everything deforms and evaporates in the dark  
 Careful words only come from the stars  
 We are dim and pale like a gray rock.

Leaning over the black spring water  
 You taste its blade, licking its  
 Icy chill reflection of the shadow behind you  
 A blade is a kind of deprivation

A kind of silence as well  
Black spring water, beyond comprehension  
Endlessly repeated histories  
Trivial desires that get lost

Never could I clearly explain  
Black is definitely a liquid  
Bringing all sounds under its wings  
All sounds have a reverse  
To which you listen with the utmost respect  
Only to approach that silence of horror

One must drift through the wind to hear the forest  
Touch lamplights to pacify the stars  
Block all possibilities before imagining for once the mirage  
And nail yourself to nihility  
Before you can identify the structure of the world, which certainly worth  
Pondering, and you shall meet, after a sensory collapse,  
Your splintered hands

Stars being witnessed  
Are dead for billions of years  
All words are notes left by the deceased  
The reverse of sounds  
Are the sounds themselves.  
A fleeting and feeble night  
With a clearly defined structure: blade, black, deprive, silence  
They're doubtless the same thing:  
Pain. Pain cannot be understood nor shared  
Therefore we stay with each other

### **(The Fallacy and Pleasure of) Irrelevance**

In my living alone days I wander often in the parks between Prince Edward District and Yau Ma Tei. It is always late at night, when street lights are dim and the silhouettes of trees imply a shelter, letting one go unnoticed. While my sense of smell is hopeless, bits and pieces of sounds weave into a vast blanket covering me. There are tweets and chirps and rustles and whirrs together with sounds of breeze and stray cats. At a distance, heartbroken people are shouting on their phones. With peace in my heart I go on reading under the street light. There are phone calls from dear distant friends, sending me festival greetings or wishing me a happy birthday. I always surprise them by dwelling in these cramped, filthy cage-like parks, even on major holidays.

A little further away, outcasts are sleeping on stone benches; a couple rises and leaves; a stooped elderly man makes an obscure dark shadow; a quiet crowd gathers around a chess game. Streetwalkers try to keep their distance from me. How I hope I have not caused these girls too much trouble. I like that we are sharing the same space with our stories, entirely irrelevant to each other. I have a flat all to myself, in which everything has something to do with me, is imprinted with the smell and the daily routine of myself. Even the dust is undeniably related to me. Sometimes I just wish none of this had anything to do with me.

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I am forever late when I am abroad. I lose my way, hop on the wrong bus and train, miss one stop after another. And I never get upset about that. Imagine travelling abroad for the unfamiliar: indeed we can never compare the intended destination with the landscape that comes our way when we get lost, and decide which one is more important. How can we tell which is the most desirable among a cluster of unknown objects? Can you choose the strangers you meet? That is why I am completely at ease with the aimless drift when I travel. That's why I usually end up arriving nowhere, dragging on exhausted legs, smiling even when there is nobody around. That is, I later discovered, the kind of polite smile I would put on when hosting a party of guests. So who am I hosting in a foreign land where I am a complete stranger? Is the world my living room? Could it be that the "living room" as I understand it is indeed an "inn" in its common sense? I am supposed to be the owner, be it a living room or an inn. Can I say that such an attitude toward travelling is based on giving up the familiar for an alien land before creating again an illusion of having the whole world in my hands, a faint yet newborn sense of subjectivity surrounded by some mysterious sense of security? Pretty ironic. According to Canetti, becoming a stranger is better than receiving one. Easier said than done.

Not everyone knows how to become a stranger before receiving one, especially when I live in a small city with no memory of history, and inevitably become short-sighted.

Familiar landscape. Mutual distress among intimates. When I smash my favorite plate into pieces, there is history behind every single piece of broken glass. A simple look at any one of them would recall an enormous yet trivial interpersonal network. After a series of interpretations, retorts, connections, looping, and predictions, a small stone in a shoe expands into an impassable mountain range that puts climbers off. The stone is, of course, me myself. I am formed by countless others before causing myself to stumble. Perhaps the happiness from travelling comes only from comparison: difficulties in dealing with strangers are sometimes slightly more bearable than difficulties arising from intimacy.

Unfamiliarity is discomforting in that it makes us take leave of ourselves. Yet there are times when we do wish to leave ourselves.

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When Yin Jiang comes across a couple of sentences, he writes a lot of poems about strangeness, encounters, and reconciliation so that readers may come across things unknown even to the poet himself. "Meditating in a Train Compartment" opens with a quote from Paz-- "Two bodies face to face/ are two stars falling/ in an empty sky"—then moves into a metropolitan scene of contemporary Hong Kong, where strangers meet each other in a MTR train compartment so packed they are nose to nose. But the stranger facing you will soon vanish like a falling star, there is not even enough room for meditation in such an overcrowded environment. And Yin Jiang can always go further. He imagines a tragedy drawing even closer than the already too close personal contact: if the train derails, the two strangers will die, their thoughts unknown to the world, and both will become wandering souls before they get to know each other. The insight sounds simple in the poem: "Oh my dear vanishing stranger whom I meet by chance/ You must move your nose away/ Before I can/ Take a look at you/ And / Meditate." Apart from the real life experience of squeezing into a crowded train, the irony of distance between strangers lies, more importantly, in Yin Jiang's imagination of dying together, which gives rise to a space of wandering and encounter. The short, choppy lines lead the souls of the reader away from the annoying closeness and toward the experience of wandering and encounter. This is what in literary theory we call speech acts. The work transforms the reading experience into some almost-other experience. In more popular words, the poet says, "Let there be light," and there is light.

In Yin Jiang's poems we are so close yet so far. It is a weird thing to quote him. Taken away from their original context, those lines seem to be plain as water and choppy like rain. Their only purpose is, it appears, is to slow down the reading. But then we must follow the slow pace of the poem before we can enter that space of meditation, and then we can be friendly

to strangers and others, rearranging the reference points for difference and sameness. In fact this is exactly the logic behind public squares: plenty of space, free flows, perhaps limited yet unconditional kindness.

Thematic coordinates of strangers: a (non-) encounter. Yin Jiang addresses the theme from two perspectives: strangers always meet and embrace each other somewhere in Time, where life and death is consigned to oblivion, like the two opposing parties in "Somewhere... On Seeing Chihoi's Painting *The Promenade* in the East Bank Bookshop": "You cast me a glance/ I return a smile/.../ If not in our lifetime, then when we are dead." While benevolence between opposing strangers is a recurrent theme, when it comes to depiction of reality, such goodwill materializes into war. "One Man's Bible, or The Day after a Nuclear War" demonstrates an ironic dialectical combination of form and content: "imagine all the yellow ribbons/ Tied in a jardin of the alienated/ Surviving fists/ Punch surviving chests/ Every dialect every accent every folklore/ Uttered/ In the same tongue." Here we have "sameness" expressed in a hybrid language, adding to the poem a spectacular dialectic.

Encounters between strangers imply love, which is only one step away from eternity. In "Seven Passages of Fox Talk," a one-night stand between a man and a fox spirit in the form of a woman leads to them exchanging heads as tokens of love. Thus the two of them exchange their identity as a man/woman and human/spirit, both becoming strangers to themselves. Destiny or chance is in fact a kind of alienation. The unpredictability of destiny implies that we may end up not meeting someone we are predestined to meet: "When the unobserved moon/ Exists/ Someone who exists/ Wakes up/.../ Wakes up/ Thinking of some unknown soul in the crowd/ Who has fallen for him/ And goes unnoticed/ By him/ What a pity// What a regret though it's worth the while/ Sunk/ In sleep." The expected change does not take place. A quiet sorrow. How should we understand the triad of "exist"- the realization that one has overlooked a chance - asleep? Is it that we can be regarded as existent only when we realize we have missed certain possibilities? Or is it that we exist because we have missed certain possibilities? If we realize the latter, are we awake or asleep?

Even without much imagery, Yin Jiang's poetry lines shine with the glamour of countless "possibilities." Apart from his penetrating insight into the world, the poems Yin Jiang writes for his children are suffused with a mist of tenderness. "Strangers are angels/ Others are Bodhisattva Manjusri/ In the hands you shake stands Mount Wutai/.../ Everyone is a sage if/ They come across a sage/ But unless you are a sage/ How/ Would you/ Meet/ A sage?! Friends/ Strangers/ Are not/ More unfamiliar to you/ Than you yourself are/ Be a sage!/ Thus the sage said/ Work hard to become a sage so that/ Those who/ Meet you/ (Like me)/ Or 'im/ Shall become sages/ And turn people they meet/ Into/ Sages// Ain't it fabulous?" ("Strangers are

Angels –For Dan and Shi”) The whole logic is turned upside down: if one is self-sufficient enough to become a sage without encountering anyone, there is no need to think about what strangers one will meet; a sage need not worry about how he can meet another sage. All in all, on the road to wisdom on his own, Yin Jiang coaxes and cajoles and rejects his own ideas while raising two possibilities to his children: 1) Strangers are sages; 2) The mutual influence between people who meet will turn them both into sages.

And who said we will definitely get wiser? Who said all strangers are angels? Among millions of possibilities some are better than our wildest dream, and some are so horrendous that we cannot bear it. Yin Jiang insists on talking about the bright side, so the gloomy possibilities remain, a subdued shadow of that unrealized world. People torn apart by frustration and separation are lifted up by poetry from reality to the mysterious origin of the world where everything is yet to happen, while still keeping their traumatic memories. Their eyes reflect a carefree origin they could never reach on their own. Such is the mysterious healing power of poetry. That is why those short yet lingering, light-hearted yet tender, humorous yet profound poems of Yin Jiang’s move us to tears.

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It takes as little as a space of flow to hint at the far shore, just as the wind has tempted mankind into dreams of flying.

*Translated from the Chinese by Aurora Tsui*

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