

The Poetry of Yu Kwang-chung

MOUNTAIN RAIN

The fog gathers, and then it brings momentary rain;
The mind, in thrall, penetrates the depths of Mi Nan-
kung;
The way, after many turns, brings down evening—
Ink dots dotting dotted an inkly landscape—
Mist and more mist rise from the heart of the ravine. . .
Oh tell, is the mountain
In the rain or is the rain
In the mountain?
The small pavilion yields no answer.
Listen!
From the innermost shades of the solemn woods, a
bird's call
Turns the four sides of desolate mountains into a
chant of Zen.

—LOUISE HO, trans.

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Yu Kwang-chung (余光中), born in Nanking in 1928, educated in Taiwan and the United States and currently teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, belongs to the first generation of enthusiasts responsible for the importation of modernism from the West into Taiwan during the fifties and sixties. Mainly writing in Chinese, he is author of a large bulk of poetry, essays and literary and art criticism, Chinese translator of Lust for Life and The Old Man and the Sea, and co-editor and translator of An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Literature (National Bureau of Compilation and Translation, Taiwan, 1975).

As a stylist Yu excels in the ingenious invention of imagery and the skillful command of language with an inclination towards innovative syntax, while his themes range from romantic lyricism to reflections on the dilemma of the contemporary man of letters. The six poems here, translated into English by Louise Ho, Stephen C. Soong and the poet himself, include selections from his books of verse Associations of the Lotus (蓮的聯想) and White Jade Bitter Gourd (白玉苦瓜) as well as his latest compositions.

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WAITING IN THE RAIN

Waiting for you in the rain, the rainbow-making rain,
The sound of cicadas is drowned, the frogs croak
From a pond of flaming-red lotus, in the rain

Whether you come or not, it's the same, every petal
Of the lotus flower reminds me of you
Especially through the twilight and this curtain of
light rain

Eternity, an hour; an hour, eternity;
Waiting for you beyond time
Within the frame of time, waiting for you, eternally,
now

If I am holding your hand, this very moment
If your fragrance greets
My nostrils, I would whisper: my little lover

Look, this hand should gather lotus flowers in the Wu
Palace
And this hand should row
The Magnolia Boat with a Cassia paddle

An evening star hangs from the flying eaves of the
Science Center
Swinging like an earring
Even my Swiss watch says: 7:00 p.m.. Suddenly you
come

Walking like a red lotus after the rain, fluttering, you
come
Like a little poem
From an ancient allegory of love, you come

From the lyrics of Chiang Pai-shih, with rhyme and
rhythm, you come

—STEPHEN C. SOONG, *trans.*

HAIR-TREE

Whether it was hair turned into a tree or a tree into
hair
Is forgotten. I only remember
It came trickling, trickling down from midair,
An enchanting dark drizzle thread by thread falling
All over me, falling down, down, down,
Titillating my upturned forehead, cheeks, and lips,
The silky threads, like tiny tiny fingers,
Like thousands of tender, slender fingers, massage
My feverish forehead till I closed my eyes,
The mute, black rain half-heard, a lullaby of pure
black,
Endlessly humming a tickling cradle song.
Too fast is the world, too tall, too headlong.
Let me sleep now, down in the shade of the hair-tree.
Forget, out there, the big alarm clock the sun.
Let the seventies be muffled in the red dust,
Let the tree be thrice circled by the gulping red dust.
Howitzers and jumbo jets, hold your breath.
I'm so tired my slumber could last till the stars grow
old
And muddy Yellow River clears up and shifts its
course.
In the darkness faintly sweet with jasmine let me sink
To the very bottom of my dream, while in my drowse
A blue bird somewhere in the foliage still seems
To be twittering at its tongue-tricks.

—YU KWANG-CHUNG, *trans.*

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*THE KITE**—for Fang-ming across the Pacific*

Eager for the exotic, an aspiring kite,
 Its light tail flapping and trailing,
 By a west wind is blown up the sky,
 Up the sky, wind-wafted far and high.
 Slim and thin, does the single thread trace
 All through the elemental space?
 Fierce the wind and foul the weather,
 Threatening to snap altogether,
 Does the fading thread still hold?

The speck of a kite, free among the clouds,
 Should not forget to come back home:
 Winging with the cloud-clan is not for life.
 Viewed from below, it also seems to ride supreme,
 Its flowing sleeves almost a cloud,
 Yet, on closer look in the void of the sky,
 A cloud is a cloud, and a kite a kite;
 A mock bird, remember, is no real cloud,
 While in the wide coldness of space
 The thread of hope that sent it above,
 No, the single thread of chance to grasp
 Is tied, not to the clouds, but to the earth.

—YU KWANG-CHUNG, trans.

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WHITE JADE BITTER GOURD

—seen at the Palace Museum, Taipei

Seeming awake yet asleep, in a light slow and soft,
Seeming, idly, to wake up from an endless slumber,
A gourd is ripening in leisureliness,
A bitter gourd, no longer raw and bitter
But time-refined till its inner purity shows.
Entwined with bearded vines, embowered with leaves,
When was the harvest that seems to have sucked,
In one gulp, all that old China had milked to feed?
Fulfilled to a rounded consummation,
Palpably, it keeps swelling all about,
Pressing on every grape-bulge of creamy white
Up to the tip, tilting as if fresh from the stem.

Vast were the Nine Regions, now shrunk to a chart,
Which cared I not to enfold when young,
But let stretch and spread in their infinities
Huge as the memory of a mother's breast.
And you, sprawling to that prolific earth,
Sucked the grace of her sap through root and stem
Till the fond-hearted mercy fondly reared,
For curse or for bliss, the baby bitter gourd
On whom the mainland lavished all her love.
Trampled by boots, hard trod by horses' hoofs,
By the rumpling tracks of heavy tanks,
There it lies, not a trace of scar remains.

Incredible, the wonder behind the glass,
Still under the spell of blessing earth,
Maturing in the quaint light all untouched
By Time, a universe ever self-contained,
A mellowness beyond corruption, a fairy fruit
From no fairy mountain, but from our earth.
Long decayed your former self, O long decayed
The hand that renewed your life, the magic wrist
That with shuttling glances led you across, the smile
When the soul turned around through the white jade
A song singing of life, once a gourd and bitter,
Now eternity's own, a fruit and sweet.

—YU KWANG-CHUNG, *trans.*

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THE KOWLOON-CANTON RAILWAY

"How does it feel to be in Hong Kong?" you ask.
 Holding your aerogram, I smile sadly.
 Hong Kong beats with a metallic rhythm, my friend,
 Of a thousand steel wheels playing on the steel tracks
 To and from the border, from sunrise to sundown
 Going north, coming south, playing the Border Blues
 again and again,
 Like an umbilical cord that cannot be severed, nor
 crushed asunder
 Reaching to the vast endless Northland,
 The parent body so familiar yet so strange,
 Mother Earth joined yet long disconnected.
 An old cradle rocking far far away
 Rocking back your memory and mine, my friend.
 And like all raw nerve ends
 This railway is specially sensitive,
 For right now, on the platform of a small station
 Holding your aerogram, leaning against the lamp-post
 Closing my eyes, just by listening, I can tell
 The light knocking of the inbound passenger train,
 The heavy hammering, heaven-and-earth shaking, out-
 bound freight train,
 And the stinking, engulfing, suffocating
 Hurry, hold your breath, pig train.

—STEPHEN C. SOONG, *trans.*

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