

Translator's Foreword

Ya Shi (哑石) is a pen name—literally, “mute stone.” The writer claims to have forgotten why he chose it, saying only that his given name, Chen Xiaoping (陈小平) is not fit to sign at the bottom of a poem. In one interview, though, he also mentioned—as if in passing—the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, who wrote “The stone is a forehead for grieving dreams . . . The stone is a shoulder for carrying time.” A twelfth-century book called *Yunlin's Register of Stones*, a manual for the appreciation and collection of rare and attractive stones, lists a “mute stone” from Anhui province, a type of rock that is beautiful and hard, marbled like jade, but that cannot be used to make the stone chimes that provide ritual music. When you carve one into a bell-like object and strike it, no sound comes back. Another name for them is *choushi*, loathsome stones: like the gnarled and uncarvable tree of the *Zhuangzi* they are useless, there is no profit in shaping, sanding, or refining them. As such, they escape the destruction of their natural shape. But this may have no relationship to the name of the poet.

Ya Shi was born in Sichuan province in 1966, the first year of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The generation that grew up during the Cultural Revolution is unique. Their philosophy, their spirituality, and their sexuality were largely suppressed in public culture; any private space for difference and individuality was placed under concerted attack. One of the magazines that has published Ya Shi's work is the *Survivors' Poetry Journal*, and its name is an apt description of the generation. They have not only survived the misshapen construction of a cultural and spiritual system intended to unify all that it touched, they have survived its collapse. What they have been able to become since is comprised of what they were able to smuggle, make up, or steal; they struggle under the moral burden of the survivor, and relatedly, they are deeply tough and unremitting as thinkers. All of these are crucial elements in Ya Shi's poetry, feelings that remain when Ya Shi is not speaking of his childhood, which he rarely does, and are present when he is at play, which he often is.

In 1983, on the advice of his father, Ya Shi took the newly reopened college entrance examination and tested into the mathematics department of Peking University. In the 1980s the PKU campus was the global epicenter of contemporary poetry, whether the rest of the world knew it or not. Lecture halls overflowed with people who had come to hear the Obscure poets, a loose organization of contemporary writers who had been forged underground during the late Mao era. Translations from English, Russian, Japanese, French, and Spanish circulated alongside daring new work by Chinese authors. Ya Shi, a young mathematician, was an onlooker to this revolutionary moment—he is rightly considered part of a generation that was reacting to these poets, rather than imitating them—but the boundary-melting breadth of his poetic erudition, his facility with implication and his conflicted belief in the power of poetry, are all qualities of the golden age of 1980s Chinese poetry.

More important, perhaps, is what happened after Ya Shi graduated from university: he returned to Sichuan, where he still lives today, teaching college mathematics. While Beijing in the 1980s saw the rise and fall of a poetry scene that came to feel representative, classic, and world historical, Sichuan was a home for the avant-garde. It had a rich tradition of poetry, but the province was far away from the seats of economic and political power. Sichuan poets came together not in their poetics or ideas, but in their profusion of underground magazines, which printed work as diverse as the feminist dream-poetry of Zhai Yongming and the New Traditionalism of early Ouyang Jianghe. It was in this environment that Ya Shi would start writing poetry seriously in 1990, and it is in this environment that he has stayed, even as his fellow poets have moved to Beijing or Shenzhen in order to write full-time and to have better access to publication. Ya Shi has been celebrated with the inaugural Chinese Young Poet's Prize (2003), the prestigious Liu Li'an Prize (2007) and the *Stars* Poet of the Year Prize (2016), but his unofficial publications still substantially outnumber the poems that he's placed in official journals or books. His physical, emotional, and intellectual independence from his peers—and from the institutions that surround them—shines through on every page.

The arrangement of Ya Shi's work in this volume is a tiny fraction of his writing, intended to foreground his intellectual restlessness and independence. It opens with selections from the *Qingcheng Poems*, a series of nature sonnets written on and about Sichuan's Mount Qingcheng. I have seen no other contemporary poet think so deeply and patiently about the intellectual uses of wild space in China today; this, alongside an incisive reconstruction of the sonnet form into a honeycomb of gaps and pauses, made this series Ya Shi's first widely circulated work. The open natural space in these poems is a thrillingly permissive home for the sensual, encourages thinking outside the boundaries of state and moral authority, and provokes attention to the terrifying impassivity and distance of the cosmos. He writes:

Now you are a mote of dust dissolved in the light of daybreak
to build a stone house is only to more fully
experience the withering of the flesh experience the aftermath
when the spirit is transformed into a space open on all sides . . .
("Dawn")

Later, Ya Shi would dismiss these works as juvenilia (*shaozuo* 少作), but my subjective sense is that the series ended with his acceptance that it is *people*, and not *places*, that speak. In the final poem, "Symbol," just at the moment that Mount Qingcheng ceases to represent anything, it falls permanently silent. Ya Shi became less interested in the lesson of Qingcheng after he had learned it; the rest of us perhaps still need its provocations in relationship to nature, space, and freedom.

The works collected in Section II, "Free Verse," mark a turn toward the quotidian and the social in Ya Shi's work. Abandoning setting and narrative in favor of voice and mood, these more unrestrained poems call out to the reader with urgent need. In these pieces, it is the social and physical body that serves as wilderness. He writes, "on my body, there is a mystical and uncivilized terrain— / growing thickly over you, pandering to you, shattering you" ("Water Poem"). The way that the poems reach

for a connection unavoidably sketches out the dumb weight of the powers that restrain contemporary Chinese life, and as such, these poems had to be self-published and circulated by hand in the best tradition of the Sichuan avant-garde. The critic Xia Han has said that when reading Ya Shi's poems, "no matter where you look you can see the silhouette of the poet," and that silhouette is revealed with particular clarity in this series, a shape bursting with arcane objects, animal parts, a wooden tongue. This Frankensteinian struggle to speak and to be heard makes the beauty of the poems, many of which are sculpted into perfectly balanced couplets, seem as accidental as sea glass.

Section III, "Fragments," is possible to read as the fruit of the struggle of Section II—having found some purchase from which to speak, and using an arsenal of tactics from both classical and modern poetics, the voice of these poems can reach towards the imperative, exhortative mode. Classical Chinese poetry is sometimes seen as utterly peaceful, instinctive, and dominated by image; as it was experienced, though, even the most ascetic Daoist poems were complex arguments for the repudiation of illusion and self-obsession. These poems get just enough of a running start to give us a shove, whether it is to accept the power of technology to transform the body and mind ("Machine") or to "keep strumming on your shiny oddity" ("Fragment"). To this reader, the compression and clarity comes less from the purity of an empty mind, and more from a canny, engaged understanding of the power of wit and aphorism. All that, though, fails to describe the sense of lightness I feel when reading some of these poems: they are serious and meaningful, but they are also snarky, vulgar, and love to snap themselves shut like a good joke. In that light, I chose a poem to end the section in which an aged Catholic friar looks down thoughtfully between his own legs at "the little Nazi swinging from Thor's belt." It's funny and gross—little hammer, little dickhead—but at the same time, it seems to represent the identification between the boring, the expected, the unexamined, the powerful and the cruel that the poems build.

I call the poems in Section IV “Essays” because most of them were originally published as “界线不明的诗学编组练习,” or “A Group of Exercises in Blurred-Boundary Poetics.” I wanted to reinforce that the pieces argue over and describe structures in the real world, that the relationships between, for example, adultery and lyric poetry are only partially metaphoric. These poems delve into the interlocking structures of feeling that arc between our daily passions, our politics, our art, and our ideas. We know that a poem can cause or be caused by a nightmare, the birth of a child, or the cinch of a political corset; these pieces show us how. My section title notwithstanding, they are no more essays than the poems in Section III are fragments; they are rich and complex, intoxicated by language, and densely layered, like a secret whispered to an intimate. “The Cartoon Cat and Postmodern Poetry,” like many of the poems in this section, has a logic at the level of image (the cartoon bouncing across the screen), one at the personal level (in which the cat’s relationship with the mouse stands in for a particular interpersonal relationship), and one at the philosophical level (in the struggle between the “deep thinking” of great philosophers and the “amused dewdrop” of the body). These fuse and merge into a single gesture that activates and then shuts off the fantasy of corporeality, the contingency of existence, and the sad isolation of living in the simulacrum. The result is not merely a set of feelings that we recognize from our own lives, but a lesson about what it means to write as a postmodern poet, an interrogation of the structures of language, emotion, and action that arise from specific philosophical assumptions.

Ya Shi’s intellectual and formal restlessness challenges readers—one suspects that the audience celebrating the *Qingcheng Poems* is quite different from the audience inspired by Section IV’s essays—but they are just a small part of the difficulty of translating his work. My understanding of the poetry requires me to tell you that any translation of these poems must be, at heart, wild and unkempt and felt. “What I mean is: even a simpler sentence / has complexity that you cannot control. / When it pierces the vein, will our vanity get crossed out too?” I don’t publish these translations, necessarily, because I know that I can produce an English version that

people will accept as correct, or reliable, or meaningful. I do it because I love the poems, because they've hit "the vein," and even though my vanity squawks and howls at my dissatisfaction with lines of my own work, I desperately want people to read them.

The most basic resistance to translation that Ya Shi's poems present is that they move between Sichuan dialect, contemporary Chinese, classical Chinese and translatese, which is to say words and phrases that are recognizably borrowed from European languages. In each case, there exists a dictionary that can give me the denotation of the words in question, but no English version will carry the tonal and intellectual effect caused by moving from language to language. I do not trust that native Chinese readers, in many cases, will understand the denotation of some of the sentences in these poems, but they can feel the work's ambit, which is pluralist, anti-authoritarian, and eminently willing to abandon its own vanity. In "Anti-birthday Poem," there is a list of pronouns that the poem claims can describe the "needle in the cottonball" of the speaker's distress. In Mandarin, they are all pronounced "tā"; one is for men (and, patriarchally, people in general), one for women, one for things, then a slightly rare, archaic pronoun for animals. This is already a translation challenge, as English lacks an animal pronoun, and our archaic pronouns are too distracting to put into contemporary poetry. Past that, though, in Sichuanese each of these pronouns is pronounced "tá," and Ya Shi reads that rising inflection aloud as a series of increasingly ludicrous questions. The distinction between the characters is only visible in the written poem; the sense of incredulity is only audible in the spoken Sichuanese. I suffered substantially over the impossibility of this, there is simply so much happening; I still want to change it or make it better. My translation (simply "he, she, it . . . ?") does get across the laser-sharp criticism of contemporary poetry in Chinese as well as other languages: that poets push down their real experience behind the veil of vague pronouns. It doesn't bog down the poem, which is lithe and fun to hear. But if I had an infinitely long line or a space for concordance, or if I could produce three or four parallel translations, I might produce an explicatory paragraph: "Ah, the ache the

speaker is hiding is about some person. Or is it perhaps for a woman? Or a thing? Or does he long for a beast?" This still wouldn't get across the politics of writing a poem for a generally Mandarin-speaking audience that has a Sichuanese subtext, and it gives up totally on the poetic line; those would all require other parallel translations.

In situations like this, one thing I can do, that I feel required to do, is to build a music for the poems that gives them a tone and mood in English that honors the Chinese. This necessarily has to replace Ya Shi's own fascinating and irreverent relationship to the Euro-American tradition. A senior translator once told me that the *Qingcheng Poems*, because they are in the tradition of Keats and Hölderlin, should sound like Keats and Hölderlin. I might read such a translation but I'd never write one. Channeling Hölderlin in my office in Ithaca is vastly different than reading it in a lean-to on the back of Qingcheng Mountain. The former is bookish and expected, the latter is revolutionary, unexpected, alien. With the tool of my own particular vocabulary and my own stack of Englishes (from suburban Missouri, contemporary American poetry, academia, Chinglish), I'm often trying to create a plural speech that merits Ya Shi's genius. For example, in "An Ear of Grass and Pure Poetry," I ended up channeling a certain sort of patronizing, wandering speechifying that I recognize from fathers I've encountered—*I'd like to say a few words*, the men say—but to also give it the geometrical quality of a refrain and by doing so, make it feel alien, and then to let the deeply lovable and recognizably natural child at the center of the poem puncture the rhetoric. This stands in for but does not replace Ya Shi's very weird title for the poem—in English, as I point out in the note, "ear of grass" is a visualizable thing, but in Chinese, it's the kind of Anglicism that makes it into "strange things about English" lists on the internet. The process of attempting to stitch together a poem from the limbs and organs I have available to me is deeply faithful to my understanding of the process of the poems' composition, but the results—if I'm doing it right—become their own creature.

Equivalence is an endless struggle when translating contemporary poems that reject closure. There is a fundamental and underlying openness

that prevents them from being essentialized into a translatable message. Ya Shi has been inordinately patient with my questions and we have spent long hours together going over interpretations and variations, but there is always a sense of futility: one can explain the words and give the general gist of a poem, but the moment in which the text of the poem blooms into its experience has much to do with extratextual intimacies between writers and readers. There exists poetry that is interested in concrete description, cohesion, and the production of trustworthy interpretations; Ya Shi's work is made of questions, interventions, and transformations. What is being questioned, which ideas are being targeted, and the precursor to the transformation—those are not always present in the text. My primary selection criteria for this volume has been whether I feel that I get the individual poem or not. But rendering the Chinese into English does not always reproduce that getting, the transformation I've undergone. Luckily, a poem that rejects closure makes space for each of us to have our own experience, an individual one; even if you don't experience the same moment as the poems' original readers, the experience is of no lesser value.

I do, though, wish that it were possible for me to bring you into the world where the poems were born. Afternoon conversations in quiet teahouses, underground journals passed around over lunch, blogs that hop from host to host, junkets whose funding is filched from official poetry events and handed over to the real poets, the ones who won't attend unless you can feed them. This poetry is time stolen from a culture of wage labor and the empty story of progress, then slowed down and shared; it is gemlike, rare, worth coveting. It was made by facing a series of economic, emotional, and political risks. In the centers of power, perhaps, those risks can be managed or negotiated; at the margins they must simply be faced. The stakes are not profit or loss but the presence or absence of spiritual survival. I'll have succeeded in translation, I think, if you are able to feel the hard-won joy of this work. But I have had my reward for translating the collection already: a decade spent reveling in the beauty of these immensely powerful words.

—Nick Admussen