

# A BOUQUET OF POEMS

CRF is honored to present English translations of the works of some outstanding contemporary Chinese poets. Wang Yu and Yan Li read their poems at the formal opening of HRIC's new office on November 20. Zhang Zhen and Liu Hongbin, unable to attend the opening, kindly offered their poems for publication.

## Someone Outside the Door

There are doors all over the world  
You are the one who collects what others have lost  
Then you generously throw them out  
on the long journey

Though you are wildly arrogant  
and want to rush into the thundering storm  
to search for the future  
as you would search for poems in the sleepless midnight  
You cannot help but admire  
the unhurried clouds on their way across the sky  
We are travelers on a trip of little distance  
but we never reach our destination on time even when we hurry

You were formed before you  
You will be yourself after  
Your life is an endless whistle  
The echo of your footsteps will be heard through time

You are no more the childish fool  
drawing portraits for others on the water  
and leaving the ripples to yourself  
You have already begun your journey  
Looking to the future  
Looking for a shooting star  
Your mother once told you  
it was your twin brother

— By Wang Yu

Yan Li, born in 1954 in Beijing, is a poet and artist who first came to public notice through his participation in "The Stars" art movement in 1979 and 1980. He now lives in New York.

## Give It Back to Me

Please give me back the door without a lock  
even without a room still I want it back please!  
Please give me back the rooster that awakens me  
in the morning  
even if you have finished eating it still I want the  
bones back please!  
Please give me back the shepherd's song  
from the side of the hill  
even if it is on tape still I want it  
back please!  
Please give me back a relationship to my  
brothers and sisters  
even if it lasts no more than a year, still I want it  
back please!  
Please give me back the space of love  
even if you've worn it out, still I want it  
back please!  
Please give me back the whole of the globe  
even divided into thousands of nations  
hundreds of thousands of villages  
still I want it back please!

— By Yan Li  
Translated by John Chow

## The Position that Rhymes

All who come into this world have errands  
Entrusted to them by immortals.  
All the riddles of incarnation  
Need karmic ties to solve them one by one.

As for you,  
I sense incense floating from afar  
To enwreath you in this Oriental guise.  
A karmic tie to you in memory  
Brought my errand from immortal Guanyin  
Incense used its pale-blue smoke so I could learn  
By sense of smell to judge sublime from wretched  
Back then I knew nothing of America the beautiful,  
But I knew the Guanyin statue in our house  
Watched over the beautiful hopes of humankind.  
My grandma lit incense on those Shanghai mornings  
So I could keep the scent of peace in memory.

Now along my road of striving  
I find you here in the road.  
Dare I let you symbolize the errand  
I have realized from Guanyin,  
And make this our special secret?

In a classroom in America  
I recite poems rendered into English  
And realize as they run off unbridled  
They don't care which language plays the melody,  
And surely you aren't sitting here by accident  
Because right here in front of me  
Is the position that rhymes with my poems.

— By Yan Li  
Translated by Denis Mair

## Rotten Rope

It has come loose!  
Do you believe it?  
History that has come loose from a piece of rotten rope  
Will be clasped forever in a museum's arms  
It has become loose  
Those knots like fists are coming undone  
A bundle of excavated death comes loose  
From that rope that has no backbone  
That strength that ancestors tied up in it is coming loose  
According to the science of genetics  
That strength  
Has already come down to our hands  
These hands  
Even now are digging out words that ancestors forgot to tell us  
But these words  
Have come loose from that rotten rope  
These words  
Can't be tied up into sentences again  
These words aren't fitting into prose that says what we mean  
And that means  
That we in the 20th Century are victims of a great big trick  
Oh man!  
That rotten piece of rope is really rotten!

— By Yan Li  
Translated by Denis Mair

## The Autumn of 2003

Using falling leaves, the autumn gives a recital of its own abundance  
Migratory birds from the just-finished essay  
fly to the top of another essay  
Fire-hot though history may be, it must nonetheless accept  
the air temperature of winter  
At any rate: the majority, in secure and warm environments,  
can chat about the wars of a small number of other places

The earth has ordered from the sky a coat stitched by winter snow  
Underneath, winter wheat is preparing next year's bread  
When the trees complete their orations  
Our field of vision will be much the wider  
And we shall see the characteristic differences between coldness and war

The fruits of the autumn have allowed us to see the purpose of our labors  
Everything that has withered and fallen proves that the earth needs rest  
We too enjoy a relaxed trunk and branches lying down just like the autumn does  
But those suffering after the war  
are still busy reconstructing previous springs

— By Yan Li  
Translated by Ben Read and Yan Li

# A Time for Patches

By Yan Li

In 1985 I came to New York from Beijing and underwent baptism into capitalism. This was on top of what I had gone through in the Cultural Revolution and other movements in China. These things taught me that mankind faces a crisis of material things and ideals. I am both a poet and a painter. So far, I have been better able to express this crisis with words. In 1986 I wrote a poem called "Give It Back to Me" to express problems that are a common denominator in modern society, under whatever system: "Please give me back the door without a lock; even though the room is gone, still I want it back please. . ."

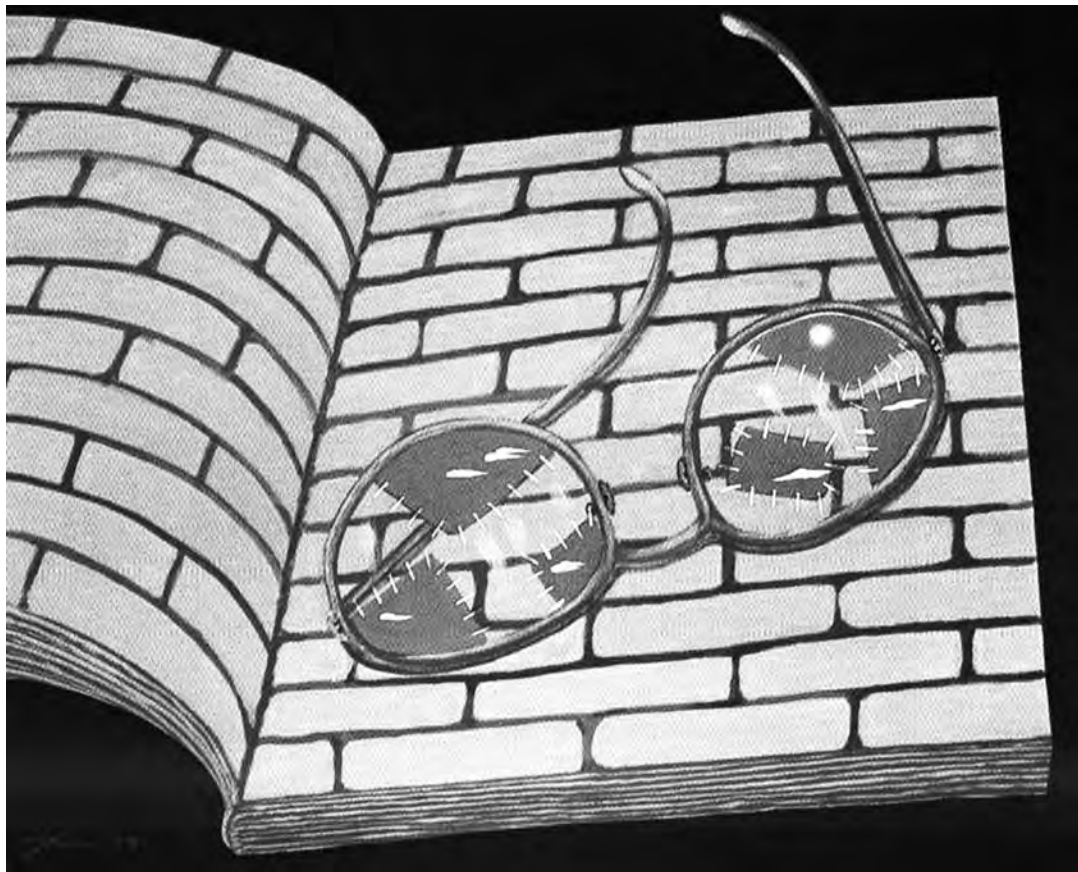
Later I wrote many poems and stories on this theme, but despite my experiments with painting, I did not find the visual imagery to express it. I figured painting has its own route, but I still had not stumbled on it. In the history of art, Impressionism and Surrealism had their beginnings with poetry. I figured someday the key would come to me, then I could find full expression in color and line, without confining myself to the written word.

Mankind has been using this planet and straining the goodwill of his own kind for a lot of centuries. Under the sting of materialism and fanatical ideals, mankind is riddled with cuts and slashes. Over the past twenty years, pleas for rescue have swelled into a maelstrom of desperate cries. This is a fact, but we have to resign ourselves. We resign ourselves because we are caught in intense competition for survival: we have no time for other concerns. But a person cannot sleep in two beds at once - mankind needs to get a grip on his inflated material desires.

Two years of work in Hong Kong deepened my realization of what limited space humanity lives in. We are experiencing loss, and there is a greater need to patch ourselves up all the time. So after I returned to New York late in 1998, I was driven to find a mode of expression that people accustomed to the visual language of movies and advertising could relate to. One February evening I thought of something my grandmother Zhao Jiemei said. She was a housewife who fit the old Chinese pattern, and she raised me to adulthood. She told me a little story about when she got married in the Twenties. She told her husband not to buy her a golden wedding band; instead she wanted a golden thimble. Her request symbolized the sanctity of marriage and her own thrifty habits. This memory led me to the idea of "a world in need of patches." I picked up my pastels and went to work. . . This is how my "patch series" got started.

Translated by Denis Mair

Yan Li – Patch Series



**READING HISTORY**  
24" x 30" (60 x 76 cm) 1999  
Acrylic on canvas

Born and raised in Shanghai in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, Zhang Zhen emigrated to Sweden in 1983, then moved to the United States, where she now teaches cinema studies at New York University.

## In America

By Zhang Zhen

In America  
Car windows open onto the wasteland of history  
Where Waves of Rocks clang  
I arrive at our new home: it has no kitchen  
In America, I think of those Japanese cats  
Tailless, as if castrated  
Playing hide and seek with pilgrims  
In the temples, up and down the mountains  
In America I will become a cat  
A cat with a tail, but it cannot meow  
Roaming about in hollow white buildings  
Not wanting to return to my kitchenless home  
In America all memories about wandering  
    Burning in the wasteland  
Learn how to be a mute circle  
Under the boundless clear sky