We’re delighted to present today a selection of poems by the distinguished Chinese poet Zhu Zhu in beautiful translations by the award-winning translator Dong Li. According to the translator’s note, “these poems are part of a book called The Wild Great Wall, the Chinese poet Zhu Zhu's first appearance in the English language, a collection of works from the past twenty-five years, a significant poet on the quiet margin, where things matter and perceptive possibilities are gently pulled and pooled. The book is due to appear with Phoneme Media in the fall of 2017.” Check out the publisher’s web site for an impressive list of award-winning books in translation, movie poems, short films and documentaries dedicated to promoting cross-cultural understanding, and to connecting people and ideas.

And remember, in September and beyond: The world lies open—take time to explore it. Read, share, and celebrate your favorite authors in translation.

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

Translator’s Note: I met Zhu Zhu for the first time two years ago when he came to the US for a joint residency with me in Vermont. We established our trust over a long trans-Pacific phone call that lasted a night. Then it dawned on us that that trust could be extended to a book. Since then, I have read every poem that he has written and selected with him a collection that encapsulates what this distinguished poet has achieved in the past decade.

This past decade has seen China’s economic boom and many poets have abandoned poetry for lucrative businesses. Zhu Zhu took to the arts and makes a living by writing art criticism and curating art exhibitions in China and overseas. He has made a name for himself in the new field. Poetry is not neglected. In fact, it was the literariness of his words that first drew attention from a group of well-known artists, who invited him to foray into the arts. The art does not distract Zhu Zhu from his poetry. Instead, it heightens his sensibility to the diverse emotional modes of expression inherent in artistic composition.

Though revered in poetic circles, Zhu Zhu remains on the periphery and his work in art gives him certain advantages in keeping his distance from the occasional riots within the circles. Zhu Zhu writes quietly. His paced poems weave slowly through personal and larger histories. The poems do not surprise for surprise’s sake, rather, they give you a painterly view at each and every turn. His smooth lines unfold like a scroll of painting and accrue meaning. Zhu Zhu’s poetry illuminates and sets the reader adrift in meditations yet the poems are sharp as clear crystals that cut into the interiority of the mind, where it is pooled and pulled. This is a poetry that is brought to the brink of possibility. —Dong Li, translator
Old Shanghai

for s.t.

a carnival, our youth catches the last train.
the customs-tower clock has gotten a new set of works,
it's minute hand turns the whole city around. in the morning fog
whistles blast in unison, the hunched-over bund casts off its shackles,
the colonial age comes back in watery reflections of tall ionic columns.
do not miss watching the crowd on the street before eight o’clock,
millions of ants carry away a lie. every day
is new, a jigsaw puzzle in the kaleidoscope,
you stand and adventures surge toward you. alas, too many blind spots
like a shikumen-style façade, dim and damp and full of holes,
lined up to be exposed once overcast days have filed by.

two universities separated by a railway bridge, you study literature
and i study law, whatever we are learning,
we are learning to breathe freedom. while an
unfinished confession lies in the hospital and accepts admiration,
an underground library expands quickly: nietzsche, freud,
sartre and dear theo . . . by which time the whole city’s elites
can brood on eggs of flesh and blood, patches and detachable collars
betoken the soul, poetry is a pass for the despicable and the noble,
toward friendship and dream, toward schizophrenia and trash
and the adulterous bed of power, until the eventual arrival of summer.

a spiritual carnival breaks off abruptly,
i pack my luggage and feel that it is lighter than before,
like a whimper pressed under index finger; as bulldozers
level the horizon of memory, as life’s
sails will not overlap for good, as our girls
turn into mothers, as shanghai becomes new york city,
for the past twenty years, i have been here less and less, on each visit
i can hardly recognize it – how would we know
every night you sneak back through hidden minefields, to wipe off
portrait frames of the dead, to brandish don quixote’s long lance?

you enter purgatory and bar all of us out.

—First published in World Literature Today
clearing in the woods

i gain peace, peace after execution, head left aside.
around, sympathetic roofs line up, leaning close against each other. shadows of villagers flit past, only after they disappear into deep alleys, heated cries sound.

blue smoke

I

clear bangs;
a coiled bun,
a standard little lady.
her oval face looks like a peach
that repays the climate ahead of its time.

crossing her legs, turning her body half-way around, an elbow on a small table, a burning cigarette between her fingers (once the cigarette is finished, someone will hand her another one and then walk away). in the room she must maintain her posture until the end, a photographer walks back and forth, a painter stares at his canvas, a fly wants to fly through the glass, she watches and wants to vomit.

at night, she wraps her arms with a towel of ice.

II

they continue to work the next day. she sits again on the small round stool, lights a cigarette. the painter talks to her briefly in a low voice, and asks where she comes from and her name. the photographer has not come yet, perhaps he will not come? through the window behind the painter’s back, she can see the bund, the river beats upon wood stakes. a sloop sails toward the deserted island on the other shore.

a trolley rushes by in the ringing of the rickshaw bell. she thinks of soft cushions at guanshengyuan, thinks of her bottom that is not round enough, not as bubbly as a black lady’s. now she forgets that she is being painted, and continues to smoke,

rings of smoke slowly spit out.
something behind the easel bangs on the ground. the painter’s shady eyeholes scrutinize her again and startle her. she lowers her head, while smoothing over the cheongsam that has already curled up the deep of her thighs. today it goes by much faster.
III

the next few days she feels that she does not have to be fully present in her posture, or leave it completely inattentive.

she sits there, as if wrapped in a thin mask of expression, thin as her blue and white colored cheongsam. inside the mask—she is already wandering the streets, already lies lazily on a long couch and parts her legs yawning in a loud voice, already runs in the canola fields by the edge of the sky that yellows the streams.

the photographer appears once again. the thick and unbelievably long lens pokes out of the leathered body, so close that it presses on her face, she yields and smiles him a sweet smile.

a record player: “rose rose blossoms everywhere”:¹ yongchunhe² sends someone over to keep them company.

IV

she starts to run out of the mask, and stands by the painter to see the painting: the lady in the painting looks like and not like her, he puts on too much make-up on her face, the hand that holds the cigarette too delicate, her breasts in his painting hide instead of bulging under her silk clothes and he paints the wall in her shadow as a strange waterfall stiff and static. only a wisp of smoke that rises from between her fingers which looks as if it floats, floating in the air.

she also finds out that this painter in fact has long finished the painting, and the long days after, every day he does nothing but fiddle with that wisp of smoke.

—the wild great wall

¹ a paramount jazz song popular on the bund in shanghai during the 1930s
² full name is yongchunhe tobacco corporation, namely the firm that hired the prostitute in the poem as their advertising model.
I
label of the earth surface
or a strangled trace deep in memory, vanishing
upon invasion of sand-storms and droughts
into mountains whose skin tone is ever closer to ours.

we were once here. even
a young solider conscripted from a small town
would stand tall and with the heart of a rich man
judge aliens through piles of arrows,
the herd of people, no better than beasts crawling in wasteland.

here, we have already built a giant bathtub,
to soak ourselves in warm and languid routine.
when women play on a swing in the garden,
men’s eyes seek out reflections in the water;
barely-cooked bloody meat too uncouth,
the eaves of our civilization
now exacting to the last stretch of an upward tip.

II
now, go through
the most thorough of all destructions:
forgetting—it is like

a reptile spine
moving toward the end of its weathering,
mountain ridges full of jurassic quietude,
as the setting sun moves away, the engine dies slowly down,
the remnant light falls like rusty arrows.

i come to trace the life that disappeared long before our birth,
as if the philological fingers knock in anguish
the ridge of an empty shell,
whose inside has been picked clean.

III
in the peach trees on the steep slope,
bees hum and buzz around,
you have set up a campsite
in a nearby beacon tower
that has been smashed like crockery.

their song seems to say:
everything returns to nature…
wild grass like fingers deep in the earth,
like a fiery ghost troop with halberds and lances held high
climbs onto collapsed steps,
this moment, countless startled landscapes
must be fluttering and fleeing off the walls from museums everywhere.

small town

Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.
–Charles Baudelaire “L’invitation au voyage”

I

early in the morning before the window i
drink coffee, before my eyes, the hotel’s

big garden, flowers in bloom,
bushes trimmed even;

besides a gravel footpath
stands a statue of a half naked goddess,

around me, soft murmurs of people talking,
their elegant manners, closely resemble

glassware on the table
and reflective silverware.

II

moored yachts fill the old harbor,
ropes slack on the mast as if strings

wait to be tightened to be plucked violently by wind—
most tables in cafés along the shore still empty;

thousands of tourists
will come here in summertime.

when i walk along the pine forest
to the beach, past those mansions

and a big park—
in the cold and clean air

there is a void
different from the taste of poverty and despair,
more like a velvet-carpeted prison,
or a hospital with a fountain where the privileged stay.

III

late night i stroll alone in the city,
and find a bar by its music,

and sink myself
in the golden foam of beer,

deep in my dejected mind
the verse of baudelaire like a curse

lingers still, as if i
were him, half-way through the voyage

a night stuck in the mauritius bay,
listening to slaves whipped in the deep forest

as if poems of mine written in the past
echo in my face.

IV

is it that when a man walks too far,
he wants to return to pick up his name,

family history, and the broken-down cradle?
is it that he hates being trailed by shadows

and once gone,
freedom means ennui?

isn’t it that i am already twisted
like a rusty spring,

its elasticity lost?
isn’t it that in complete darkness

i can only feel the truth of existence?
like a whirlwind or engulfing torrents,

sharp hidden reefs
and terrifying swirls of water,

that bring to sailors the feeling instead,
of having a life squarely snatched in arms.

my memory heavy, in a split second,
can turn lips to mud,

my love sticky, like an
unbreakable umbilical cord—

my happiness, a perishable rope railing on a cliff,
my landscape, an ancient abyss.

unable to sleep in this midnight hotel,
i open the window to suck

on the ice-cold sea wind, i long to return
—as i longed for the first sail.

our entire life is
the peach blossom spring and its foe.

---First published in *The Brooklyn Rail (InTranslation)*

**the pioneer**

one among them
though in a wheelchair, still loves raving,
and believes every sentence he speaks is true,
believes that his faraway apartment in a foreign land
would one day turn into a combat headquarters,
whereas more people are tired of hiding
in reed beds from patrol-boat searchlights
they want to go back onto the streets, go back
to rekindle the lamp of everyday life on faded maps,
they have returned and opened a childhood sky
in an old umbrella, on the night square
sip puddles of memory like migrant birds…
alas, absence lasted too long, and the stage
spins already to the other side, like indifferent traffic
leaving a busker suspended on the overpass,
your gaze turns moody for there is no one
who can remember the world past from your face,
when your accusations are mere mutterings,
in unison with dripping pipes in some empty hallway,
when enemies become invisible in time,
impossible to encounter face to face—
you must stand this forgetting like a retiree
sitting on the park bench watching the swirl of dry leaves,
when the dream medal is yet to be awarded,
when the memorial plaque will not be completed before your death,
alas, dear pioneer, do not recant in the seconds before eternity.

butterfly spring

the name of this place had been heard in a widely popular folk song. one summer, harboring
enthusiastic visions of butterflies, a young lady from qunming accompanied me up the mountain
trail. giant banyan trees, clear springs, but no butterflies; not until we crossed a manmade park did
we see small white butterflies flutter on the lawn. they were the most normal type in the butterfly
family, but charming nonetheless.

where had the butterflies gone? then we walked into a dim butterfly museum which had been
barely visited for years. butterflies were mounted everywhere on the walls—a few dozen species of
them—but in quantity that went into the tens of thousands. each kind was relentlessly repeated,
aranged in close rows like canned sardines, heaped like potatoes. we felt short of breath and made
a dash for the exit.

on the slope, the locals tried to sell us their homemade framed specimens, among which were rare
specimens caught in higher-altitude forests. we followed one of the sellers to a workspace, which
turned out to be set up at the warehouse of an unused factory. his partners were in the vast interior
working on specimens. laid out on their laps were pincushions, scissors, tweezers, brushes, and
other such objects. the air was so filled with formalin that my eyes teared up. we went around to an
open sandy area at the back of the building. great numbers of old newspapers were laid out on the
ground, each sheet crowded with dead butterflies; their bodily fluids had been extracted, and after
treatment with preservative they had been set out to dry in the sun.

all around was deep silence; nothing moved in the still air. the green hulk of the mountain seemed
to have solidified in terror. i had never seen so many butterflies in my life, however, this also
meant that i had never seen so many corpses.

—First published in Hayden’s Ferry Review
new jersey on the moon
— to l.z.

this is your tree, river, lawn,
your big house, your america.
this is your life on another planet,
you slow down the car to lead me through foothills,
like a documentary of private life on the wide screen.

reprints by impressionists hang on the living room wall,
your daughter’s toys piled high on the floor,
daytime when your husband goes to manhattan,
and your child to kindergarten, the streets fall silent
except for conversation between vacuum and lawn mower,
on the treadmill, like a toy train
on its oval track you go around and around…

here i am surprised by a sense of strangeness,
not that you have already changed your nationality
or become someone’s wife, i am
surprised that your wanderings have so soon come to the end—
the dreamed-of happy land of our youth
already abbreviated into a comfort cage,
and on the thick velvet couch,
once we speak of china, your mouth curls in a smirk.

i am saddened that you have missed an epic change in time,
a myth of time upended amid reality;
every one of your years here,
is a day that we have spent back home.
twilight, i return to the hotel in queens,
put my coat on the back of the chair, before my eyes
that wild girl floats by, loving
freedom more than carmen depicted by mérimeé, walking
among marchers in a parade, like a godness painted by delacroix.

…memory retains nothing but the kite’s spool,
i know i can no longer take you home,
even blessings seem unnecessary.
no one to entrust a mission, deep in the night
i dream of myself one step over the pacific,
back to fire-bright smoke-thick battlefields,
loading crossbows and shooting down those toxic suns.
passing by

not a drop last night, yet i woke
feeling hung over—at a hotel
before a steamed mirror, in shock, i
listened to the city’s river of traffic. here
i know a friend, who brushed his gifts aside
and scurried to capture cheap praises; a
classic literature professor, who loved his words more
than he did others; a girl, a music school grad
lost a love yet fell in love with this place,
had three jobs and precious little sleep,
—sadder than this was the passion drained away
from several generations in a flash, all of them
rushing ahead, cursing, complaining,
like countless rusty swords impelled to stick together—
a usual spring day, who amongst them
could discern my exacting wishes?
let them keep the best face on the past.
let me pass by without a visit and continue my journey—
throat dry, tongue scorched by soldering iron,
words swirl in dazed mind, so slow to come,
thus the need to pray year after year,
embrace rain showers repeatedly, landscapes and forked roads.
frail like tree shadow, in the puddles of the road
i feel the pain of being rolled over by wheels;
i am cold, because there is no light on the other side,
when people meet, lanterns are turned down low.

—First published by Circumference, Poetry in Translation
About the author:

Zhu Zhu was born in Yangzhou, P.R. China. He is a poet, critic and curator of art exhibitions and has published numerous volumes of poetry and prose, such as Drive to Another Planet, Salt on Wilted Grass, Blue Smoke, The Trunk, Stories, Vertigo, and Grey Carnival—Chinese Contemporary Art since 2000. Zhu’s honors include Liu Li’an and Anne Kao national poetry prizes, the French International Poetry Val-de-Marne Fellowship, Chinese Contemporary Art Award for Critics and Henry Luce Foundation Chinese Poetry Fellowship at the Vermont Studio Center.

About the translator:

Dong Li was born and raised in P.R. China. His honors include fellowships from Akademie Schloss Solitude 2015-2017, German Chancellery—Alexander von Humboldt Foundation 2015-2016, PEN/Heim Translation Fund, The Corporation of Yaddo and elsewhere. He has poems in Kenyon Review, Conjunctions, Cincinnati Review, manuskripte (Austria, in German translation), and others, as well as translations in World Literature Today, PEN America, Guernica and others. His book-length translation of the Chinese poet Zhu Zhu The Wild Great Wall will be published by Phoneme Media in late 2017. His trilingual anthology of contemporary American, Chinese and German poetry in response to a poem by the late C.D. Wright will be forthcoming from the German publisher Matthes&Seitz Berlin in the fall of 2017.