

Wintering in Auckland: Yang Lian's 'Winter Garden' and 'Sea of Dead Lambs'**Hilary Chung**

On July 25th 1989 Yang Lian wrote the following in a letter to the editor of the Taiwanese newspaper *United News*:

At present it is impossible for me to return home to China and I am in New Zealand as a temporary resident. There is no need for me to elaborate on my difficult circumstances but in addition to these there are also considerable mental pressures. For me the inseparable bond between language and the land is so crucial that it is impossible for me to believe in world literature. Thus Tiananmen for me was death and whether or not [...] there will be a rebirth remains to be seen. (Yang 1990, 5, adapted)

In the light of the international acclaim which Yang Lian has subsequently received, these comments do not lack irony, but they also underscore the trauma of the political and cultural displacement which sudden exile in Auckland brought upon him. Such circumstances meant death for the poet. Yang rationalised his condition of exile as a kind of living death or 'ghost life'. A poet in exile dies multiple times: he is wrenched from his cultural milieu, with its fame and acclaim, and thrown into sympathetic indifference in New Zealand. Removed also from his linguistic milieu, he confronts mutual incomprehension, and the familiar spaces and landscapes of the dry, dusty north China plains are replaced by a season-less land of volcanoes with the strange presence of the sea everywhere. There is death too in the unreliability of memory, both the failure to remember the old places clearly and the fear that others will fail to remember him; and there is death in the numbness which follows in the wake of the cataclysm.

Thus the exiled poet has died multiple times and yet must live a twilight existence out of language, space and time. He is located in the Auckland landscape which is the starting point of his exile but it

is also the point at which the everyday world becomes radically estranged and estranging. In this alien linguistic environment, language itself becomes alien. Yet the living ghost must forge new bonds between language and this land. One of the features of Auckland's unreal reality was that it seemed to have no seasons. In the prose piece 'City of One Person' Yang wrote: 'You say "four seasons" only from habit. This city is green all year round. The green is like paint on an old wooden plank that won't wash off'. (Yang 2006, 89) Surreal transformation is part of the everyday in Auckland. Encountering a Winter Garden in the most expansive park of this season-less city is all the more disjunctive once it becomes obvious that it is a hothouse garden, full of lush, tropical plants. The poem 'Winter Garden' takes the challenging reality of an Auckland landmark as its starting point and effects a series of defamiliarising transformations which 'always ends in a mirage'.

Winter Garden

I

trees are frozen red in the snow as if wearing worn-out windbreakers
 snow crunches underfoot
 night walks hurriedly, always has brand-new soles

goats fear loneliness so for every ear
 cries become bitter weeping

the path a cow that has just given birth
 pants paralysed in bloody mud with welts from head to tail

streetlamps come on earlier lovers dim as stones
 faces blurred stand by a metal bier
 the vole is an exhausted nurse stealthily
 withdrawing into the garden's wounds to dream
 flowers preserve their pink flesh underground
 like children after they have died always fresh and tender ghosts
 underdeveloped stars lock us in with iron railings

(Yang 2006, 36)

Here the lush hothouse garden is disfigured as death and decay in a wintry landscape. Tropical colour is frozen in the snow; tropical leaves are limp like worn-out windbreakers, which would be useless against an icy blast. The crunch of gravel becomes the crunch of snow. The leisurely pace of a walk in the park becomes hurried and further problematised by new soles. Soles which remain brand-new

have no contact with the ground and suggest the precarious presence of the living ghost. Day becomes night. The bleating of goats continues the auditory pattern of transformation and disfigurement. An everyday animal cry is heard as an expression of pain and suffering. Goats also develop the exilic preoccupation with dislocation and displacement, for there are no goats in the Auckland Winter Garden. They are heard in Berlin, where this poem was written. In 'Why there has to be prose' Yang writes:

A heavy snowfall in the walker's innermost being always engulfs him tightly,
stopping him in his tracks and turning him white. On a winter's night a howling is
heard above the bleating of the mountain goats in Berlin Zoo. It is like you,
howling in your mother tongue. (Yang 2006, 69)

Written back in Auckland after an extended period of time spent in both Germany and New York, the prose piece meditates on exile as posthumous existence – 'this is how the world is: with a strange cunning it treats each person's innermost being as posthumous'. Exile embodies an interior winter of existence which paralyses, transforming any attempt to articulate this state into incomprehensible bleating.

This is a total transformation of a park which for Aucklanders is a place of lovers' trysts, family picnics and free concerts where the community comes together. The normality of a garden path is abruptly linked to visceral horror. For the lyric subject the path of poetic creativity itself has become nightmarish. The distorted and disfigured image of creation and birth is one of many in Yang Lian's work which evoke the aborted creativity of the poet, living yet dead. 'The Dead in Exile' provides another example:

flesh white as snow stained with blood within
they crawl out from the filthiest tunnels of their mothers' bodies
screaming as they slide towards hell

(Yang 1994, 45, adapted)

The exilic condition of a living death is evoked through the multiple associations between winter and death in the garden. This is a place of death where night encroaches unexpectedly, making identity and human relations as inanimate 'as stones' and denying either party a clear delineation. Activity centres on the funereal bier, which is not blurred. The vole as nurse is exhausted by her inability to prevent the advent of death; instead she withdraws into the very wounds she is unable to heal. The trees in winter are as if dead and are envisaged throughout this poem in terms of the body. The vole retreats into the body of the living dead. The association of death with winter enables the ambiguities

of this state of death to be explored. In winter the semblance of death is belied by the possibility of spring but flowers seem possible only in dreams. Death of the body should imply the corruption of the flesh underground, but here the pink flesh of the living is preserved underground. The fortuitous alliterative association of flesh and flowers in the translation strengthens the death/winter coupling via colour. The incipient buds of spring are trapped underground, and yet through their colour they live on in ghostly vulnerability. The final two lines of Part I return to the central preoccupation with the failure of the creative process. Even the night sky, classic source of inspiration to poets, only renders underdeveloped stars where creativity and potential are confined. The iron railings, an inheritance from the Victorian colonial past in Auckland, are not the ‘railings that guide you home’ across nearby Grafton Bridge (Yang 2006, 39) but the imprisoning motif that appears in the prose piece ‘Eclipse’, affirming an association with the grave:

Walking in the graveyard, all the normally inaudible noises resound in the silence.
Iron railings rust, blacken flake by flake, like fish scales or charred wood. (Yang
2006, 81)

‘Winter Garden’ continues its investigation of poetic white-out:

II

in the world the one who trusts writing least is the poet
in the blank snow roses have been withering since birth
the flames are far away from a pair of cold hands
winter bustles about like an industrious editor
I have become something cut out by the sunlight
bending to sniff the stench of my own corpse that grows stronger each day
in the lonely north wind the garden passed away long ago

it exists as a mirage finally as always it ends in a mirage
the blue music of tree and tree is played only by silence
so the same heavy snow falls twice from my shoulders
when it covers the garden I am forgotten
stomping on an intersection I am mistaken
under the lamps the empty peopleless street is like a hoarse throat
reciting and for many years the withered words look on

(Yang 2006, 37)

The poem intensifies its preoccupation with abortive creativity. Whereas Part I echoes with bitter weeping and incomprehensible bleating, in Part II the inhospitable winter landscape invades the realm of writing. Exile has ruptured the special relationship of the poet to the written word. Writing is no longer a trustworthy means of expression; the blank snow suggests the blank page. Roses recall the 'pink flesh' underground, but now the creative process is entirely reversed as perpetual decay, appropriate in winter. Flames could offer the comfort of colour and warmth but these are far away as the bloody reds and fleshly pinks of Part I have faded into colourlessness. However corporeal exploration endures even as the body is dismembered, becoming just 'a pair of cold hands' distanced from the lyric subject by the lack of possessive indicators. Winter as the evocation of 'ghost life' is further transformed by the personification of severe acts of self-editing carried out by the poet. A winter sun edits him out of the writing process – a poet who cannot write is as good as dead. Indeed, the decay of the body mirrors the decay of the garden. There is industrious activity such as we might expect to encounter in a springtime garden but it only serves to efface or distract from the writing process. It might also suggest the kind of everyday displacement activities to which a writer resorts when writing fails. The warmth of a southern hemisphere north wind becomes the chill of a northern hemisphere north wind, whose 'loneliness' literally translates as the 'wind of one person'; the garden has undergone such a complete transformation that it has not only died but has become nothing more than a mirage. We note the insistence of 'always', marking the perpetual nature of the transformation. Yang gave the title 'City in a mirage' to a cycle of Auckland poems written at this time, expressing both the strangeness of the place to the point of unreality and the abstracted and tenuous existence of the exile poet. 'Blue music' offers the only possibility of colour in this section, though such synaesthetic possibilities are quieted by silence. There is only the absence of colour and the denial of sound and verbal expression, but however insistently the advance of winter in the hothouse garden is distanced from the lyric subject, his centrality in it cannot be denied. It is he who makes the 'wintering' happen – 'the same heavy snow falls twice from my shoulders / when it covers the garden' – to perception, to writing, to existence.

The statements 'I am forgotten' and 'I am mistaken' have particular force in the Chinese original where the passive is only used to express strongly adverse situations. They also reiterate emphatically the significance of memory in the life of the exile whose memories are of a past suspended in time, and whose existence is given affirmation only if those he remembers remember him. This is given extensive treatment in the prose piece 'Ghost Talk':

In the beginning you were afraid of forgetting. You were afraid that you yourself would forget, and that you would be forgotten by others. [...] All you remember is that dead face, with its unchanging expression, always the same, so frighteningly young. You know that it is you who have left the days behind and gone to another

place. The act of remembering has distorted you. Although you tighten your grip, the face begins to melt from the instant you must 'remember', trickling away drop by drop. The harder you try to remember yesterday, the more thoroughly you lose today. In fact they are just different types of death: death from remembering is the same as death from forgetting. [...] The people whom you have forgotten or still remember have forgotten or still remember you too. (Yang 2006, 77)

'stomping on an intersection' recalls the crunch of snow in the first section: both evoke the sound of disembodied footsteps, both play on the notion of the tenuous reality of the exile, who as 'living dead' may hear his own footfall but has no further affirmation of his own existence. In contrast to the initial crunch of snow the stomping is directionless and possibly more desperate for being at some crossroad. A confrontation with the mirage using the sound of footsteps opens 'The Dead in Exile':

this street is not real the footsteps are not real either
 although the moon rises up with the same slow movement
 and sinks down the light is not real

(Yang 1994, 41, adapted)

The lamps in 'Winter Garden' perpetuate the transformation from day to night effected in Part I, but whereas previously there was the possibility of human relationships (however indistinct) now there is total loneliness because the street is empty. The image of the peopleless street recurs throughout Yang Lian's Auckland work where the city is consistently envisioned as a city of just one person. 'City of One Person' presents Auckland as the ultimate unreal city:

When you are alone, nothing exists except your illusions. You live in your empty head, letting this city chafe against your shoulders like shabby clothes. The more you dream, the more splendidly you act out your mercilessness. [...] When it's put like this you understand: you are the product of a mirage, like tinnitus ringing in the ears, a sound born out of the void. The city of extinct volcanoes, sea and stone is really there. Feeling for them is like feeling for your own face. But as soon as you feel for them they are lost. The stone you were grasping in your hand is gone. Whether you lock yourself up in your room or walk the streets, it is all the same: both you and this city are nothing more than a mirage in outline, empty of substance. (Yang 2006, 90)

Loneliness perceived as an empty street reflects the perceptions of one who has spent his life in the teeming cities of north China, to whom in comparison Auckland is a ghost town. In the prose piece

this emptiness is both internal and external such that the poet and the city embody each other. In the poem the empty street becomes a hoarse throat, the distancing effect of the disembodied throat calling into question who is reciting. The poet's words are distorted by his own recitation in another act of deformation, and the winter extends 'for many years' with no hope of new growth. There are only withered words like leaves in the winter garden, so disfigured by the hoarse recitation they are rendered irrelevant (there is no one to listen or read them) and can only 'look on'. The association of withered words with withered leaves brings the focus back to the body and its disfigurement as a tree in the winter garden. Then attention turns to what kind of grim socius is offered by such a world:

III

people who have a weakness for corpses love to stroll in gardens in winter
 people who salute ruins can appreciate
 a plot to drown a kitten in a ditch
 pressing its head down as if crushing a walnut
 it is definitely children children running into the garden

children know better than anyone how to trample flowers

even the doomsday is fake a piece of a charred pole
 leaning out slantwise from the ground like a crocodile's long mouth
 the sky is as gloomy as daylight's sleep
 fishbones spat out by the sea stab us
 live fresh fish scraped clean of scales are stabbed one by one in dreams
 alive under the walking knife

each body is reduced to the point where it has no strength to look back

touch everything that is touched is not here
 and a malignant tumour swells impalpably in the depths
 a pregnant black woman carries the raped springtime
 a tree trunk sliced open by sight
 swans' necks bend into pale underwater snares
 after we have dismembered the world with fractured compound eyes
 we go blind each of our spirits opposes the other setting off the white snow
 exposed in the icy wind
 endures the pain of bones budding

until the garden is shamed into colour
 lashed all its life by an unrecognisable season

(Yang 2006, 38)

After the intense loneliness of Part II, the plural noun ‘people’ might imply a sense of community. However as the plural is not marked in the original Chinese the possibility is more tenuous and could relate to the singular subject of the previous section. Only the one(s) who has/have a fascination for the body as a living corpse love to stroll in gardens in a winter they themselves bring to surroundings configured in corporeal terms. From this perspective creativity and wholeness become ruins and destruction, in particular the destruction of innocent life. The image of a drowning kitten recalls other images of unrealised potential which figure the failure of the creative process. Particularly striking is the callousness of the act – the delicate skull is crushed as casually as a walnut. But this is potential destruction, a plot the appreciation of which links the lyric subject to the destructive force of children running into the garden – an explosion of implied noise which shatters the subdued brooding of Part II. Children do not ‘appreciate corpses’ but they would know about plots to drown kittens, just as their ‘innocence’ brings only wanton destruction. The crunch of snow transformed into the desperate and potentially violent stomping on an intersection has now undergone further transmogrification into the trampling of the subject of dreams from Part I. The same Chinese word for flowers *huaduo* (花朵) is used and the significance of the line is underscored by its separation from the rest of the stanza. By using the image of children associated elsewhere with anxiety and despair at the failure of the creative process the poet becomes the source of the destruction of his own creativity.

The notion of doomsday is recurrent in Yang Lian’s Auckland work. From ‘Death Trap’:

glimpse in the sunlight a real doomsday never reached
 nothing but sunlight is tears
 the name of the garden is forgotten before you open your mouth

(Yang 2006, 45)

The Chinese word *mori* (末日) used here has taken on Christian connotations to mean Judgement Day but it can also mean simply ‘end’ or ‘doom’. A real doomsday suggests a point when the interminable winter of exile will end, and its Christian overlay implies resurrection of the dead to eternal life or damnation. But the winter garden denies possibility, so its doomsday is fake and winter itself must undergo transformation. Winter trees become dead burnt wood, no longer tall and straight but leaning at a dangerous angle offering only entrapment and destruction. When winter is

transformed in this context day is no longer night illuminated by lamps but an ambiguous gloom, neither day nor night.

The plural of the first person pronoun ('stab us') also offers the possibility of community but it is immediately compromised because the others in the garden ('definitely children') are intruders, the trampers of flower dreams. So the focus switches to the most surreal aspect of the Auckland landscape, the alien and all-encompassing presence of the sea. In 'City of One Person' it looks like this:

You still do not really believe that you now live in a city beside the sea. You can even see the sea from your window. Despite the assault of glass and concrete which breaks up the view, the sea is omnipresent, adorning every building as if it has taken sole ownership of this city. (Yang 2006, 87)

The sea encapsulates Yang's sense of dislocation, being the ultimate defamiliarised environment for someone from arid inland north China. Yang contrasts a mythical notion of the sea in northern China with his present encounters:

There the sea is just a myth carved onto a purple screen, dry and cracked, like a handful of salt. You could only ever imagine the sea when parched with thirst or through one person's loneliness when imagining the even crueller loneliness which possesses the lives of multitudes. Even if you could stretch out your hand into the water, grab hold of a fish and watch its breathing become increasingly laboured in the sun, you still could not grab hold of the sea. The sea slips through your fingers, mocking you and your ignorance through the pale pupils of a dead fish. All you can do is live beside the sea, blankly watching that blue mirage close at hand. (Yang 2006, 88)

Thus the sea stands for unreality, for something that always slips through your fingers. In many poems the smell of the sea is linked to death, and its continuous movement is threatening and perplexing. In the Winter Garden, fish are consumed by the very environment that sustains them and by stabbing 'us' the sea associates 'our' fate with theirs. Fish scraped clean for cooking are still alive, maintaining existence somehow under the knife. Being stabbed with their own bones in their dreams echoes the poet's predicament where dreams of a restitution of the creative process as a flowering are trampled by his own abortive attempts at creativity. The unbearable impasse is contained within the body, thus it is the body itself which is reduced, lacking the strength to engage with the past, only

able to address the interminable winter of the present. Again the line stands alone from the stanza emphasising its significance.

The following stanza continues the intensely corporeal response through touch, which should provide a reliable affirmation of reality but does not. Instead, the overriding truth of the corruption of the creative process is impalpable – the original Chinese reads ‘cannot be touched’, repeating the verb from the preceding line a third time. The incipient new life, the longed-for springtime, is a malignant tumour. A dark winter tree looks like a woman pregnant with new life that is the consequence of rape: the black trunk of her body has been sliced open. This further degrades the relationship between lovers that was already fragile in Part I. However the tree is sliced open by sight, implicating the lyric subject once again. It is the destructive force of poetic perception which brings this wintering upon the garden; simple images of natural beauty in the park, such as swans feeding in the pond, take on the sinister connotations of entrapment. The poet’s compound eyes dismember everything in the world and are ultimately self-destructive: ‘we go blind’, the plural pronoun here uncannily inclusive. ‘We’ are blinded by the snow which is a product of our own ‘wintering’ perceptions, starkly outlined against its whiteness, enduring through the body the ravages of the season we have inflicted on ourselves until corporeal bones bud like trees. Creative life emerges out of intense anguish, here expressed through the physical pain of the body. In the final couplet colour returns to the garden but is not a return to the old reality of the hothouse garden. Rather, it is a new reality produced by enduring the ‘unrecognisable season’, the winter in a place that has no winter, which is inherent in the poet’s perception of everything in the unreal city. ‘The garden is a reflection of your innermost heart’ (‘Death Trap’, Yang 2006, 45) and it grows in the extraordinary circumstances of living death, defying the environment of the unreal city which is so flagrantly alive.

Yang Lian’s contemplation of the impasse of exile makes strange such commonplaces as Auckland’s subtropical luxuriance and the ever-present sea. In ‘Winter Garden’ winter is a powerful trope of exile and in ‘Sea of Dead Lambs’ an aspect of New Zealand’s high country farming year allows the allusions of the trope even greater play. A normative reality of the new place is warped by the gaze of one who can see only its phantasmagoria:

Sea of Dead Lambs

the coffins made from your [pl.] flesh were nailed to death long ago
 under soaking fleece the sea’s flesh
 opening a book reeking of mutton and leafing through
 for the naked woman asleep by the fire wrapped in hides to read
 when a heavy snowfall swallows a flock of lambs it is deaf

wailing choked in a fresh scarlet lung
 fish die in total whiteness beneath shattered glass
 sheep eyes finally empty enough to recognise this winter sea
 blood freezes recognises the wrung necks
 gazing at the storm you [sing.] slowly turn transparent

so all pain is frostbite
 a kitten-like body with the bones removed
 so soft the biting snow leaves tooth marks
 when your [pl.] heads are plastered with mud abandon the truck in a heap
 fear herded deep into frozen ground and huddled together for warmth
 grey-black seawater like a drop of milk still being sucked after death

spring has sold you [sing.] out it has fled far away
 summer's semen sweats constantly
 but foetuses poke their noses out of the womb's jelly
 sniff four hooves rushing towards the bitter cold
 rushing into the snow prematurely dead organs grow until the pain is no more
 the fresh flesh of death breeds vast shadows
 sheep-dogs by the thousand spring in through a window barking wildly
 catch sight of you [sing.] from the sea vengefully remaining in winter

(Yang 2006, 51)

The sea encroached on the Winter Garden and in the poem 'Grafton Bridge' its impenetrable surface is as hard as iron: 'the surface of the sea of the dead like iron smells of fish'. (Yang 2006, 39) As part of the cycle 'The Sky Moves', written when Yang returned to Auckland in 1992 after time spent in Germany and the United States, 'Sea of Dead Lambs' presents a contemplation of the sea which allows the possibility of some kind of engagement. While it often stands for the decentred dislocation and constant movement of life in exile, in this poem the sea itself undergoes a transformation of corporeal dimensions as the poet observes the late-winter spectacle of stock losses at lambing time in a part of the country far removed from metropolitan Auckland. Winter is no longer an internal phenomenon but part of the new country's surreal reality. In this new perception of reality centred in the mass death and burial of farm animals the poet is quick to draw analogies between animal and human carcasses. Both the poet and the sea undergo their own winterings which bring commonalities of corporeal experience. The sea becomes tangible through flesh just as death (in exile) has long since been embodied by the poet.

As coffins are the lodging places of the dead, so the living dead are imprisoned by the fleshly lodgings of the body. The act of imprisonment is an external, violent assault upon the body but also, via enjambment, it occurs ‘under soaking fleece’, under a sea of flesh. Throughout the cycle ‘City in a Mirage’ the sea not only contains the stench of death (the smell of fish), it also threatens and imprisons, and becomes a place of corporeal putrefaction:

You have been drowned at the bottom of the sea. Bones covered in sores and pitted with holes in a sunken ship – once sunk to the bottom, the cycle of transmigration is broken. (‘Ghost Talk’, Yang 2006, 76)

We recall ‘the stench of my own corpse’ in Part II of ‘Winter Garden’. Imagined as an expanse of dead sheep, the sea is implicitly motionless but also suffocating: drenched fleece is heavy. In its transformation as flesh the sea retains its alien repugnance by being associated not with lamb but with mutton. At one stroke the iconic New Zealand commonplace of the sheep and its meat is rendered grotesque in the eyes of pork-eating Han Chinese who are repulsed by the smell and taste of mutton. This repugnant smell of death permeates the world of books and reading but at the same time an alternative transformation is evoked for the length of one line. Fleeces can offer warmth and comfort; winter could offer the possibility of love-making by the fire. The gentle, erotic image is a far cry from ‘lovers dim as stones’ or the ‘raped springtime’ and offers a rare moment of consolation.

Heavy snow engulfs exile death, stifling creativity and existence. In the New Zealand agricultural winter when snow falls on fleece it produces a white-out reminiscent of the blank snow-page that confronts the poet. As snow is impervious to the final cries of the sheep it smothers, the world is deaf to the incomprehensible bleatings of the exile in his unintelligible mother tongue. Wailing is choked even inside the lung, the source of bitter weeping and hoarse incantations. Even articulation itself is nothing more than flesh, its fresh scarlet contours resonating with the bloody tableau in Part I of ‘Winter Garden’. The crucial elements of winter and the sea are finally brought together but it is only through the empty eyes of dead sheep, which have undergone their own excruciating wintering, that this uncompromising dyad can be recognised. In this winter sea there is total whiteness – nothing can survive, not even fish for whom the sea has become an alien environment. The ‘shattered glass’ hints at a poetic confrontation with the zero-state sea. In ‘Broken Feet that Walk the Wall’, another poem in ‘The Sky Moves’ cycle, ‘a pale expanse of toenail finally penetrates the glassy expanse of the sea’. (Yang 2006, 50) One cannot penetrate a sea whose surface is as hard as iron; but transformed into glass (itself a liquid) the surface will shatter and reform around a toe dipped tentatively in the water. To shatter the surface of the sea is to take the first step in a confrontation with its unyielding obscurity; the confrontation is violent and all that is gained is recognition of suffocating whiteness. The destruction that winter wreaks upon the body is unremitting and can only

be fully recognised by undergoing this corporeal violence, by becoming the frozen sheep whose white corpse is indistinguishable against the snow.

There is an intensification of the exilic winter which assails the body with frostbite and is the source of all pain. The hypothetical image of a dead kitten in 'Winter Garden' is realised here. Understood in the light of 'Winter Garden' the image is powerfully associative, combining the anxiety of abortive creativity with the destructive cruelty of wintering which spring both from within the body and assault it from without. The scene of agricultural carnage becomes more graphic as the total whiteness is fouled and muddied. The perpetuation of existence after death becomes firmly located in the corpses of the sheep, which are not dumped as inanimate conglomerations of flesh and drenched fleece by the truck, but instead abandon the truck, propelled by fear or perhaps an embodiment of fear. A pile of dead sheep (a sea of dead lambs) appear to huddle together for warmth even as they are being buried. Their soaking fleeces offer no warmth or comfort, and once committed to the ground they enter a twilight world like that of the living dead, with its inevitable encounter with the sea offering a travesty of succour. The notion of milk sucked after death recalls the succession of distorted and disfigured images of creation and birth which appear in 'Winter Garden' and also suggest the death of unborn lambs, whose mothers' bodies become their fleshly tombs.

Spring, potentially the harbinger of new life and creativity, remains an unreliable aspiration, the disfigured and degraded manifestation of the Winter Garden is transformed in the final stanza into treachery. The insemination of the lamb-as-creative-work is not brought to parturition but to endless sweating stagnation. Worse, the unborn defy the protection of the womb and are subject to winter's assault, towards which their mother's four hooves propel them. Once again via conceptualisations of fleshly entombment this becomes an evocation of the process whereby the poet becomes the source of the destruction of his own creativity, rushing headlong into the white blankness of the snow-page, nurturing the posthumous growth of foetal organs until sensitivity is lost among the vast (corporeal) shadows of the ghost life. This is emphasised by the reversion to the singular second person pronoun identifying the singular impasse confronted by the poet. Throughout this poem a series of dislocations is achieved through the manipulation of the singular and plural second person pronoun 'you'. This is impossible to render into modern English but the variations are marked above. The manipulation enables simultaneously both monologue and dialogue, interiority and exteriority, disassociation with the frozen flock and complete association – being simultaneously suffocated by the heavy sea and part of the sea's flesh. The dislocation is maintained as the poem comes to a close. The location shifts to an enclosed space with windows, a room where the singular 'you' is now, still assailed by the agriculturally determined winter outside. Sheep-dogs, usually a benign New Zealand commonplace, also undergo grotesque transformation. They are viewed by 'you' from the terrified perspective of the flock, all the more awesome because they are the means by which the sea enacts its

revenge. Temporarily stilled as soaking fleece, the sea reasserts its movement and unpredictability via embodiment by the thousands of sheep-dogs. At the same time ‘you’ are continually watched by the vengeful sea whose associations with the exilic winter remain as strong as ever.

New Zealand was both the place of multiple dislocations in Yang Lian’s life and the central point of orientation within that dislocation. His New Zealand poetry is at once specifically located in Auckland or other New Zealand landscapes and abstractly dislocated from them. In his exploration of the complexities of location and identity, he reformulates and updates the paradise/slaughterhouse dichotomy which Patrick Evans (1980) traces in New Zealand fiction, whereby the colonial vision of New Zealand as a garden paradise (rearticulated today as ‘100% Pure’ or Middle Earth) is variously transformed and disfigured. For Evans, the slaughterhouse (or meat works in its modern manifestation) which is the other side of the pastoral idyll symbolises the repressed violence in New Zealand society in the work of writers from George Chamier to Ronald Hugh Morrieson or David Ballantyne. Yang’s evocation of agricultural carnage and his transmogrified gardens extend these explorations of cultural dislocation, which are figured by class and the effects of colonisation, to the defamiliarising impasse of exile. In each case the subversion of the impossible idyll arises from observations of the normative realities of New Zealand life which contradict a specific set of cultural expectations, be they Chinese or post/colonial. As such, Yang Lian’s poems offer a complex of mutually informing resonances and perhaps ironically find for themselves a place within an enduring New Zealand tradition of displacement.

Many of the ideas developed in this essay grew out of discussion with my colleague Jacob Edmond during our collaboration in the translation and editing of Yang Lian’s Auckland work, published as Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland. Auckland UP, 2006.

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