

Wind, Tree, Sea

Guo Jie's Lyric Ethics of Time, Nature, and Inner Distance

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Abstract

This essay examines the lyric poetry of Guo Jie (郭杰)—a prominent Chinese poet and scholar—through the lens of ethical attention, temporal consciousness, and non-instrumental engagement with nature. Situating his work at the intersection of scholarship and lyric creation, the essay argues that Guo Jie exemplifies a mature form of the contemporary “scholar-poet,” whose poetry is shaped by historical patience rather than academic display. Through close reading of three representative poems—“The Wind, at Times, Is Lonely”, “Ode to an Ancient Tree”, and “My Heart Has Flown to the Sea”—presented in bilingual Chinese–English form, the essay explores how wind, tree, and sea function not as metaphors subordinated to human emotion, but as ethical interlocutors that resist possession and demand attentiveness. Time in these poems operates as an ethical medium, emphasizing endurance, waiting, and inward distance over resolution or climax. By foregrounding listening over statement and restraint over expressiveness, Guo Jie’s poetry offers a quiet corrective to both academic over-explanation and lyric excess. This essay positions his work within contemporary Chinese poetry while situating it in dialogue with international concerns related to ecological lyricism, ethical minimalism, and the responsibilities of poetic attention.

Keywords: Guo Jie, scholar-poet; ethical lyricism, nature, temporality

Editor's Note

Verse Version has long been committed to publishing poetry and criticism that foreground ethical seriousness, cross-cultural dialogue, and sustained attention to poetic practice. In presenting this feature on Guo Jie, the journal seeks not merely to

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introduce an established figure in contemporary Chinese letters, but to examine a mode of lyric writing shaped by historical consciousness, restraint, and moral patience.

Guo Jie's work is particularly resonant at a moment when poetry often oscillates between theoretical abstraction and emotional immediacy. His poems demonstrate another possibility: a lyric shaped by deep scholarly engagement that nevertheless turns away from display, choosing instead clarity, humility, and listening. By presenting bilingual texts and sharp commentary, this column affirms Verse Version's commitment to poet-centered inquiry that integrates textual presence, critical reflection, and ethical concern.

PART I

(Editorial Introduction · Intellectual & Poetic Biography · Poetic Orientation)

1. Editorial Introduction: A Scholar–Poet at the Threshold of Lyric Attention

In contemporary Chinese poetry, the boundary between scholarship and lyric creation is often carefully maintained. Academic authority tends toward historical synthesis and critical distance, while poetry seeks immediacy, vulnerability, and experiential truth. The work of Guo Jie (郭杰) occupies a productive space at this boundary—not by erasing it, but by inhabiting it with quiet confidence.

As a poet, scholar, and long-standing educator, Guo Jie brings to lyric writing an unusually deep historical consciousness. Yet his poetry does not function as learned display, nor does it translate academic insight into didactic verse. Instead, his poems move in the opposite direction: away from abstraction, toward lived perception; away from conceptual mastery, toward attentiveness and ethical restraint.

For *Verse Version*, an international journal committed to poet-centered inquiry and cross-cultural seriousness, Guo Jie's work offers a compelling case of lyric maturity

shaped by intellectual discipline without being constrained by it. His poems demonstrate how a long engagement with classical Chinese thought, literary history, and cultural memory can lead not to rhetorical density, but to clarity, humility, and emotional precision.

This column approaches Guo Jie not as an institutional figure, but as a poet whose work reflects a sustained ethical relationship with time, nature, and inwardness.

2. Beyond Position and Title: An Intellectual Life Oriented Toward Poetry

Guo Jie's academic career is extensive and distinguished. He has served as professor at Shenzhen University, held senior leadership roles at multiple institutions, and authored influential scholarly works on Qu Yuan, Bai Juyi, and the relationship between ancient thought and poetic imagination. He has also edited major collective literary histories.

Yet none of this explains the tone of his poetry.

What matters for poetry is not position but disposition. Guo Jie's poems suggest an intellectual temperament shaped less by authority than by historical patience. His long engagement with classical poets—especially Bai Juyi—appears not in stylistic imitation, but in an inherited ethical stance: clarity without simplification, emotional depth without excess, and moral seriousness without declamation.

His lyric voice is notably unhurried. It does not rush toward insight, nor does it dramatize its own sensibility. Instead, it lingers with processes: the movement of wind across seasons, the aging of a tree, the slow separation between inner desire and external

circumstance. This patience reflects a scholar's respect for duration, but also a poet's trust in silence.

3. Nature as Ethical Interlocutor, Not Ornament

Across Guo Jie's poetry, nature is neither backdrop nor metaphorical instrument. Wind, tree, sea—these are not symbols enlisted to serve human emotion. They are interlocutors, presences that shape and test the speaker's understanding.

This orientation aligns with a deep current in classical Chinese poetry, yet Guo Jie's treatment remains distinctly contemporary. Nature in his work does not guarantee harmony. It does not console automatically. Instead, it reflects processes of solitude, endurance, and distance—conditions that mirror but do not reduce to the human condition.

The poems examined here reveal a consistent pattern: the speaker approaches nature not to master it, but to ask questions—questions about loneliness, memory, perseverance, and the gap between aspiration and circumstance.

PART II

(Poem Texts · Bilingual Presentation · Close Readings)

1. “The Wind, at Times, Is Lonely”: Solitude Without Pathos

1.1 English Translation

The Wind, at Times, Is Lonely

Trans. Zhang Guangkui

*The seasons turn upon the wind,
All life by wind is born and thinned.*

— *Inscription*

O wind, I know,
There are times you're lonely so,
Like a wanderer astray,
Drifting to the world's far gray,
Roaming ends you cannot stay,
With no fixed home to hold your day.

Only spring can truly see
Flowers flooding hill and lea,
Chasing you in shades so bright,
Tracing every vanished flight.
Tender grass, with scented sigh,
Makes the heart grow warm and shy;
That lonely core may softly mend,
And briefly feel its chill suspend.

But when autumn walks the land,
Leaves fall loose at fate's command,
Earth is strewn with broken lines,

Sparse as half-forgotten signs,
Writing out your sorrowed tune,
Your deep desolation's rune.
Not for cloud or passing rain,
But a doom you can't outrun or chain.

When you lift the birds on high,
Lend their wings a freer sky;
When you cast the scattered seed
Across the plains in silent speed;
When through birch groves pale and white
You glide with barely breathed delight;
When snowflakes, elfin, light and clear,
Dance at your touch, far and near—

I can hear your murmured tone,
Or your long call, wild, alone.
Yet I've never seen your face,
Nor the form that you embrace.

Though I know your open mind,
Hollowed like a valley kind,
Still I ask you—tell me why

There are times you pass us by,
Keeping distant, standing apart,
So lonely, wind, so lone of heart.

1.2 Original (Chinese, for reference)

风，有时是孤独的

四季以风而流转

万物因风而繁育

——题记

风啊

我知道

你有时是孤独的

像一个流浪者

漂泊天涯

居无定所

只有春天

遍布山野的鲜花

以缤纷五彩

追逐你的踪迹

蓦蓦芳草

沁人欲醉

那颗孤独的心

或许会有几分温润

而当秋季来临

枯叶零落

大地铺满了

萧条的字句

书写你那深深的

苍凉和忧郁

不是因为

一片云

一阵雨

而是一场

无可逾逃的命运

当你托起

飞鸟的翅膀

当你把草籽

洒向辽阔大地

当你从白桦林间

轻轻穿过
当你吹拂一片片
精灵般的雪花
翩翩起舞

我能听见
你低声沉吟
或悠然长啸
可我始终未曾见到
你本来的
躯体和面容

即使我理解
你虚怀若谷
但还是
请告诉我
为什么你有时
落落寡合
显得那么孤独

(原载《莲花山》2023年第4期)

Commentary

This long lyric unfolds as a sustained address to the wind—a natural force that is omnipresent yet bodiless, powerful yet homeless. The wind becomes a figure through which the poem meditates on solitude without tragedy.

Crucially, loneliness here is not framed as deficiency. The wind's wandering is not blamed on misfortune or alienation, but understood as structural. It moves everywhere and belongs nowhere. The poem's emotional intelligence lies in its refusal to sentimentalize this condition.

Seasonal movement structures the poem ethically. Spring briefly softens the wind's solitude through flowers and fragrance, but this consolation is partial and temporary. Autumn, by contrast, reveals the deeper truth: the wind's melancholy is not caused by passing weather, but by "a fate that cannot be escaped." This is not resignation, but recognition.

The speaker listens closely—hearing murmurs and long calls—yet admits the ultimate limit of perception: the wind's body and face remain unseen. This acknowledgement of unknowability gives the poem its ethical poise. Understanding does not lead to possession.

The poem ends not with explanation, but with a question. That question sustains the wind's dignity as other.

2. “Ode to an Ancient Tree”: Memory, Endurance, and Moral Stillness

2.1 English Translation

Ode to an Ancient Tree

Trans. Wang Ruixu

In this late autumn season
I pay tribute to an ancient tree

Behold its crown of golden leaves
Accepting my reverence

Your gaunt form beneath ice and snow
Once held fast to spring's longing

Your tender new buds
Once unfurled scenes of gentle beauty

Beneath your boughs, a shy youth
Embraced sweet love

Though paths may diverge
Beautiful memories never dissolve

Flocks of birds upon your branches
Once raised joyous songs

Singing of every sunbeam
And the laughter beneath its glow

Now the autumn wind grows stark
Yet you remain steadfast and serene

Even should you return to earth
Life endures through unwavering devotion

September 9, 2023

(Originally published in the "Zheng Feng" supplement of Zhengzhou Daily,
November 12, 2023, under the title "Autumn Thoughts")

2.2 Original (Chinese, for reference)

向一棵老树致敬

在这深秋时节

向一棵老树致敬

看那满树黄叶

接受了我的虔诚

你冰雪下的嶙峋

曾坚守春天的憧憬

你嫩绿的新芽

曾绽放柔媚风景

树枝下羞怯的少年

拥抱过甜蜜爱情

即使各分东西

美好记忆不会消融

枝头上一群群鸟儿

曾发出欢乐歌声

歌唱每一缕阳光

和阳光下的笑影

如今秋风萧瑟

你依然坚定从容

纵化作满地泥土

生命因执着而永恒

2023年9月9日

(原载《郑州日报》2023年11月12日

“郑风”副刊。发表时题为《秋思》)

Commentary

Where the wind poem centers on movement and homelessness, “Ode to an Ancient Tree” turns toward stillness and rooted endurance. Yet the tree is not idealized as static monument. It is presented as a living archive—bearing traces of seasons, love, memory, and song.

The poem moves chronologically without linear narration. Past and present coexist: youthful love beneath branches, birdsong once vibrant, now recalled. What holds these layers together is not nostalgia but continuity of attention.

The tree's persistence through ice, snow, and autumn wind models a form of ethical steadfastness. Importantly, this steadfastness is not heroic. The tree does not resist change; it accepts it. Even the final transformation—returning to soil—is framed not as loss, but as fulfillment of life's logic.

The poem's moral center lies in its final claim: life becomes enduring through devotion. Devotion here is not grand commitment, but quiet fidelity—to place, to memory, to process.

3. “My Heart Has Flown to the Sea”: Distance Between Desire and Condition

3.1 English Translation

My Heart Has Flown to the Sea

Trans. Tang Qiuping

This moment, my heart has flown to the sea—
to listen: boundless breakers chant their verse to me.

Listen: at sunset, gulls at close of day
wheel between the islands and the foaming spray.

Listen: in the dusk, the stars speak secret signs,
and cool night winds let them echo back in lines.

Listen: when the storm has faded out of sight,
the after-silence seems to cradle hidden might.

This moment, my heart has flown to the sea,
yet still my boat lies lingering in the harbor with me.

I can only take the evening wind for wings,
and under silver moonlight, soar alone as it sings.

A whale sends up a towering fountain of spray,
to brace my staggering sails as they press on their way.

I'll keep the company of the measureless night,
till I meet once more that faint first thread of light.

Source: Guo, J. (2025). *Moonlit Sea*. People's Literature Publishing House.

3.2 Original (Chinese)

我的心已飞到海上

这一刻，我的心已飞到海上

倾听万顷波涛吟诵的诗行

倾听夕阳下一群群海鸥
在岛屿和浪花之间盘旋歌唱

倾听暮色中群星闪烁的暗语
随着凉爽的晚风悠然回荡

倾听暴风雨远去后的静寂
似乎隐隐蕴含某种神秘力量

这一刻，我的心已飞到海上
而我的船还滞留海港

我只能乘着晚风的翅膀
在银白色月光下独自翱翔

鲸鱼喷起了巨大水柱
支撑起蹒跚前行的帆樯

我将和茫茫暗夜为伍
直到遇见又一缕熹微的晨光

（郭杰，《月光下看海》，人民文学出版社，2025：407）

Commentary

This poem articulates one of the most persistent tensions in lyric poetry: the separation between inner movement and external limitation. The heart flies freely to the sea, yet the boat remains in harbor.

The repetition of “listen” establishes a rhythm of attentiveness. Sound—waves, gulls, stars, silence—becomes the primary mode of encounter. Vision is secondary. This auditory orientation suggests a poetry less concerned with possession than with resonance.

The sea is not romanticized as pure escape. Storms have passed; silence remains. That silence carries “hidden might,” suggesting that power need not be violent or visible.

The image of the whale’s spray bracing fragile sails introduces a moment of unexpected assistance—nature supporting, but not rescuing. The poem ends in companionship with darkness, oriented toward future light rather than immediate arrival.

Hope here is patience, not urgency.

PART III

(Thematic Synthesis · Ethical Poetics · Global Positioning)

1. Time as Ethical Medium

Across these poems, time functions not as backdrop but as ethical medium. Seasons, aging, memory, and waiting shape the speaker’s stance toward the world. Nothing is rushed toward conclusion.

This temporal patience reflects both scholarly formation and lyric maturity.

Meaning arises not through climax, but through accumulation and return.

2. Nature Without Instrumentalization

Guo Jie's poetry consistently resists using nature as emotional shorthand. Wind is not simply freedom; tree is not merely stability; sea is not pure transcendence. Each remains complex, partially inaccessible, and ethically independent.

This restraint aligns his work with a broader international movement toward non-instrumental ecological lyricism, where attention replaces metaphorical exploitation.

3. Scholar, Poet, Listener

What ultimately distinguishes Guo Jie's poetry is not its learning, but its listening. His scholarly background sharpens his awareness of limits—historical, linguistic, perceptual. His poems honor those limits rather than attempting to overcome them.

In this sense, his work offers a quiet corrective to both academic over-explanation and lyric over-expression.

4. Conclusion: Attention as Lasting Form

Wind passes. Trees age. The sea remains distant. None of these resolve into answers. Yet the poems endure because they practice a form of attention that is itself ethical.

For *Verse Version*, Guo Jie's work affirms a shared conviction: that poetry's most enduring contribution may lie not in statement, but in how carefully it listens to what cannot be fully possessed.

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