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Sit with the Buddha in the jungles of Java.
Worship at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi.
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ATLANTA



ATLANTA REVIEW

REVIEW

ASIA

JAPAN CHINA SINGAPORE INDIA NEPAL
VIETNAM PHILIPPINES KOREA BANGLADESH
TAIWAN PAKISTAN UZBEKISTAN TAJIKISTAN
AFGHANISTAN JAVA THAILAND NEW GUINEA

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Editor & Publisher: Daniel Veach

Literary Editors: Memye Curtis Tucker
Lee Passarella
Alicia Stallings

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Welcome

Asia. A small word for a vast continent. But the long wind of its boundless steppes seems to blow through the open vowels at each end. If Asia's physical enormity were not forbidding enough, we also find Kipling's warning over its gates, advising us that East and West will never meet. But we are in possession of a magic lamp, and a magic carpet. The art of poetry has a longer history in Asia than anywhere else on earth. And its magic is just as potent today as it was a thousand years ago. With this lamp and this carpet we can overcome all distances, and penetrate to the very heart and soul of the mysterious East.

Our Asia journey begins in the friendly and cosmopolitan port of Singapore, where both English and technology are spoken fluently. Alvin Pang and friends will make you feel right at home in this city where East meets West. From there we set out on the adventure of a lifetime, from the heights of the Himalayas to the steppes of Central Asia to the deepest jungles of Java. You'll sample delightfully different cuisines and meet a host of fascinating characters: natives, travelers, expatriots and exiles. There will moments of exotic surprise even for Asians, like our encounter with three remarkable women poets from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. (In the Asia section, you'll find the country of the poet or the poem in parentheses next to the poet.)

I want to express my gratitude to Taylor Mignon of Japan and Nabin Chitrakar of Nepal, without whose help this issue would not have been possible. Thanks also to Singapore Airlines for travel assistance. Singapore will host the world premier celebration of *Atlanta Review's* Asia Issue on May 28-31. If you're in the neighborhood, please drop in!

This issue begins and ends, fittingly, with poems about the tragedy of September 11, which has touched people and poets on every continent. Be sure not to miss the final poem of this issue, "New York Dawn." In all, it's a remarkable issue, filled with tears, laughter and humanity. It should make us all, wherever we are in the world, grateful for the art we share and love.

Dan Veach
Editor & Publisher

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Remains of the Day

What happens to ash?
 Shovel a palm of white dust
 from the stomach of a wood stove.
 What was kindling?
 What was the *Times*?
 Multiply that by six thousand
 or six million,
 and then again by six degrees of separation,
 and suddenly scooping from a hearth
 becomes saying farewell
 to a forest of relatives and friends.
 Turn on CNN and see the ash of an attorney
 or a mail clerk
 on the boots of a worker trudging
 through a crowd of red-eyed Manhattans.
 A black woman who makes it out alive
 doesn't want to sleep or blink again,
 she says.

I busy myself with the hearth,
 and stay as busy as possible
 because grieving,
 when properly done,
 doesn't reach bottom
 for a long, long time

so I'll mix some lye in a vat
 with all my ash,
 so that I might scrub
 my patch of earth,
 pretend that something,
 somehow, can be cleansed.

Anne Silver

Autumn Stars

When the people disappeared,
they weren't going into hiding.
They turned to pure sound
and then to rubble, ash, dust,
a rescue worker's cough.

They have become names
as they were in their beginning.

Meanwhile a jetliner has lodged in my chest.
If it were a tumor, I'd know what to do.
If it were a fatal disorder,
I'd let a hundred poems fly
from my mouth between drinks of water.

Suddenly I am eleven years old again
crouching under my desk
fearing Castro and Khrushchev.

Yesterday the wind-chimes outside played
sweetly in the key of D.
This morning they are only reporters
of the wind that has changed.

So I'm afraid to go outside,
as the names of the dead
might blow through my bones,
and exhale the remains of my father's name.

What would he say about the tracts
of Afghanistan where the wind
infused with poison gas
left gazelle and all breathing creatures
to litter the hills?

It could be the Mojave
or the Valley of San Gabriel
or the basin of the City of Angels.

And I imagine a place
where there is no more cancer
no more AIDS no more bigots or smog
and perversely, I want them back.

Because I need to inhabit my own name
before it too disappears
in the catastrophe of hate

to find at least one person
in the landscape I might help,
someone to drink from my well of love,
so I would be necessary again.

Anne Silver

For Peter Jennings

His disembodied baritone narrated
weekday dinner. At 6:30 his bust glowed
from our kitchen TV and the world
began and ended, depending on where
you were, over meatloaf and mashed potatoes.
I grew and he greyed, probably raised
his own kids, off camera, a place
I still can't fathom. And some nights,
when I had practice or didn't want
to put the cap on an effervescent ride
in my car, I came home to a cold plate,
which I warmed in the microwave.
But Peter had already wished the world
a good night, from everyone at ABC News,
and had retired to the back corner of the TV
or wherever anchors go when lifted
from their groove in the lives of millions.

In '86 the *Challenger* fell out of the sky
like God, and I remember that morning
in front of the TV, the electric awe of loss.
Then in '89 it was the Berlin Wall, which
I think was supposed to mean that everything
was okay and there was no need for world news
anymore. Tienanmen that year too, during
Friday night, almost preempting the weekend.
The Gulf War, a few earthquakes, Princess Diana,
other noteworthy events,
Homecoming, Winter Formal, Prom,
Rwanda, Somalia, Kosovo—other places
that may or may not exist anymore,
an impeachment, undergraduate studies in English,
24 hours at the Millennium, first published poem,
the debacle of an election, the morning
I woke to see New York in flames,
the test I had canceled that day.

And always there, Peter Jennings, the Canadian
high school dropout, the steadfast professional,
who knew the story was almost too sad to tell
but told it anyway, which is important to remember.

Dave Lucas

Commercial Interruption

Mother woke me one Saturday morning
when I was twelve with the news
Robert Kennedy had been shot.

Spring-cleaning day was not canceled.
As I wiped blinds, dust motes danced,
glittering the air between the TV and me,
while I absorbed my first experience
of relentless, continuous coverage of tragedy.

Suffocated by adult sadness,
the sprightly spring day slumped;
grew limp, stagnant, still, stifling my heart.

Then for a minute my spirits rose
as a Double-Mint commercial
interrupted scenes of the slain senator.
Twin teenage girls astride bicycles cheerfully
chirped, "Two mints, two mints, two mints in one."

Then, as if someone strangled a songbird,
the screen images shifted back to blood and loss,
like a gray cloud blocking the sun.

Teaching me at age twelve
that sorrow has slats.
For in every dark time
something silly, or slight,
briefly penetrates the blackness,
like a sliver of sunlight
slipping through a slit in the blinds.

Catherine McCraw

In a Time of Unease

It is too soon, I know, to hope
there will be poems again
where a poet's smile
plays below the surface,
fish or swimming shadow, saying,
"This small commotion pleases me."

Too soon.
It must be enough,
whether from faith or habit,
that rooms are swept,
roofs repaired, bulbs planted,
enough that poems are made at all.

Marjorie Mir

Mindfulness

Sometimes it takes a small flower
to remind us where we are:
the yellow-centered blue aster
from my Colorado childhood
brushing the toe of my boot,
the Rocky Mountains sprawling
like an ancient lizard
all the way to Mexico, and me
standing in this subarctic meadow
on the tip of its drowsy tail.

Gayle Eleanor

Kilimanjaro

Kiongozi, nyayo yako maridadi.

On the mountain in the moonlight,
you cast a shadow in the shape
of a map of Africa, and I follow.
Kwenda polepole—go slowly—you say,
and I do: one step, a breath, another step.

I press against the mountain,
mountain that resists me as I rise
to the highest point on the continent—
nothing but clouds below and sky above.

We've left behind seven climate zones,
left behind orchids, lilies, impatiens,
protea, even the flower called everlasting.
And now there is nothing
but scree and starlight and thin air.

Above, the glaciers glow silvery green,
a kind of nightlight for our journey.

Guide, your footsteps are beautiful.

Sue Standing

Five Riddles

1.
Maze, flytrap, sticky lair
for the tongue's honey,
my labyrinthine corridors hold
more than you can imagine—
blacksmith's tools or symphony.
2.
Bag of bones, nest of nerves,
I flush or freeze, shake or shiver.
Warren of wiggle, I self-repair
my host of curves.
3.
Choose: backward or forward.
You can use me,
but you can't use me up.
4.
Creature of paradox:
once I was soft as skin,
now hard as bedrock.
My heart of flint
can be sparked with a tap.
Then I emerge like the map
of an unknown country:
embedded until you see me.
5.
Come closer, listen to this
echo of ancient oracles, these
layers of murmuring melodies.
Listen to my voice—
open me, open my cup of sound.

Sue Standing

1. ear 2. skin 3. path 4. fossil 5. cello (acrostic)

Palindromic Years

Two years after the millennium,
I will be among
the first people since 1001
to experience two of these
in a single lifetime, an illusion
of balance as I spin toward the future.
1991 was a good year,
so I named my daughter
cleverly, just in case.
Did Hannah say as Hannah did?

Our Siamese cats cry like babies
somewhere out of view,
and the bicameral mind
creates a link between two
random occurrences. Yesterday's
paper provides another;
Siamese twins were successfully
detached with laser surgery.
As she pushes on the glass,
I tell *Hannah* to try anything, but
step on no pets.

She looks into a full-length mirror
on the back of my bedroom door,
is pleased to see herself
and the possibility
of walking through it
into the familiar room before her;
my reflection in the background
falls under the same spell,
as I sit on the bed, smiling to myself.
Oh who was it I saw, oh who?

Leilani Wright

Internal Exile

Although most people I know were condemned
years ago by Judge Necessity
to life in condos near a freeway exit
convenient to their twice-a-day commutes
through traffic jams to jobs that they dislike,
they didn't bury their heads in their hands
and cry "Oh, no!" when sentence was pronounced:
Forty years accounting in Duluth!
or Tenure at Southwest Missouri State!
Instead, they mumbled, *not bad. It could be worse,*
when the bailiff, Fate, led them away
to Personnel to fill out payroll forms
and have their smiling ID photos snapped.
And that's what they still mumble every morning
just before their snooze alarms go off
when Fluffy nuzzles them out of their dreams
of making out with movie stars on beaches.
They rise at five a.m. and feed their cats
and drive to work and work and drive back home
and feed their cats and eat and fall asleep
while watching Evening News's fresh disasters—
blown-up bodies littering a desert
fought over for the last three thousand years,
and smashed-to-pieces million dollar houses
built on islands swept by hurricanes.
It's soothing to watch news about the places
where people are dying (literally) to live
when you live in a place with no attractions—
mountains, coastline, history—like here,
where none aspire to live, though many do.
"A great place to work, with no distractions"
is how my interviewer first described it
nineteen years ago, when I was hired.
And, though he moved the day that he retired

to his dream house in the uplands with a vista,
he wasn't lying—working's better here
than some misplaced attempt at having fun.
Is that the way it is where you're stuck, too?

Richard Cecil

Epiphany For a Gloomy Saturday

nature is the art of God
—Dante

I am in the midst of a dreary muse
when the doorbell rings, and I halfway
consider for a moment not answering.
More kids selling something I can't use.
Cherub faces suckering me with candy
bars for little league, money-making
cookies for girl scouts. So much to please
the tongue. But then again it could be
one of the local kids, and wanting
to help, I open the door to the angelic gaze
of a woman with eyes that mirror the sky,
and another woman who prefers to say nothing
at all, letting her friend be the one who says
they're from one of the local churches,
and would like to share the Good News
of the Gospel with my children every Sunday,
hauling them off in buses singing
Jesus Loves Me for a proper dose
of old time religion. Almost regretfully I say
my children are grown now, on their own.
And the lovely woman with the voice
of Marilyn Monroe asks me if I died today
would I go to Heaven or would I burn
in Hell forever, a great gulf fixed, where fires
are raging and the worms don't die.
I tell her no, I can't be sure, being
a round peg in a square peg world, I choose
my own way, strange as it is, but would she
care to dance in the rain, singing
a Hoagy Carmichael tune as we embrace?
Stardust perhaps, or *Baltimore Oriole*?

She does not answer but hands me
a tract that can save my soul, turning
and walking away in a breeze
that lifts her skirt enough to display
nature's resplendent art in sensible shoes.

Gary Lechliter

Car Wash, April

You close all your windows, slip into neutral.
The conveyor belt inches you forward
into a storm of suds and water.
Outside, such battering and pounding,
such blasts and grindings,
your vision limited
to the world just beyond
your Toyota. Its dark red body
sheds its winter salt and grime
like a skin it no longer needs.
And you are caught in this sweet hiatus
in the middle of your life,
dry and serene, utterly held,
while the beast rages outside—
long leather fingers slapping at glass,
hot wax sluicing down over the metal,
the wide mouth of air
blowing over your hood.
You give in to it all.
Something bigger than you are
has taken over your life and will deliver it,
you can depend on it, at the other end—
scoured, shining, newborn.

Patricia Fagnoli

The Trouble With Existentialism

You don't exactly pick up
a copy of *Being & Nothingness*,
there on page 645, find Sartre

discussing on one's being-for-orchids,
one's being-toward-riverbanks-at-sunset.
You can't go searching through pages

of Nietzsche's *Will to Power*
hoping to catch sentimental Friedrich mid-
aphorism, stating: "Man surrenders gladly

for a gentle kiss." It's all struggling for control,
to survive, to find oneself or freedom in despair,
struggling for the privilege to struggle more.

Sure, there's Camus with his man-is-defined-
by-his-make-believe, but a single
tragic-sense-of-life keeps that in line.

Yet I want to assure you you might traverse
the land of Kierkegaard without contracting
sickness unto death, fear & trembling,

either/ or. Know only that
townsfolk you meet won't press
fingers into the pit of your back,

stroke your inner thigh.
They are not at all like you
with your being-for-flush-of-skin,

sighing at night with will-to-embrace.
Even in love & sleep they lack your
being-toward-poems-by-moonlight.

Ace Boggess

Unfinished Poem

1.

Driving north in early November along
the route of the padres—El Camino Real—we
have just left the sad and crumbling remains
of The Mission of Our Lady of Solitude when my wife
asks how far back can I remember. I am lost
in the canyons of my mind, thinking about a poem
and listening on the radio to Schubert's Symphony No. 8
in B Minor, his "Unfinished Symphony," so my answer
is guarded: I can remember all the way back to
breakfast this morning in Calabasas. Don't get cute
with me, she says, you know what I mean. Maybe she
is simply looking for reassurance so I respond,
Okay, I can remember thirty years ago today
the very first time I cast adoring eyes on you,
and I will not ever forget the first time you
let down your beautiful hair. This never works.
My wife knows by now that I will sometimes say
anything just to side-step a conversation. I mean
in all your life, she says, how far back can
you remember? And I am surprised to realize that I
have no memory uncontaminated by family tales
of anything that happened before my sixth year
in Shantung Province on the North China Plain.

2.

February of 1932 in Tsinan, ancient city
of springs midway between Shanghai and Peking.
In twilight gloom we are sitting down to supper.
I remember a nasty wound on my father's forehead.
There was a disturbance today in the city, he says,
a student uprising. After the blessing of the food
no one speaks. "Abide with me! Fast falls
the eventide" is playing on a victrola in the parlor.
The compound outside our house is woodsy with secret

places for the journeys of a child. Our dog Prince
patrols the walls. When we climb the stairs to bed
I am afraid of being first. I try to stay in the middle
between my older brother and sister. Monsters dance
in the attic, I tell them, and under my bed. They tease
me to death. Sometime in the night my father wakes us
and leads us in darkness to the cellar. We spend the rest
of the night in candlelight and silence with a few Chinese.
A mob in the street shouts "Death to the imperialists!"
and "Foreign pigs go home!" but I do not understand.
This is the only home I know. In the morning under
a dusting of snow the city is quiet. I hear whispers
about headless corpses in an open ditch nearby.

3.

When I finish relating this memory to my wife the last
notes of Schubert's Eighth Symphony are fading away.
Frost sparkles on empty Salinas Valley fields.
Sunlight explodes like crown fire on the near peaks
of the Gabilan Range. We watch for the road to Monterey.
My wife wants to know how I will end the poem.
I think for a long time before answering. Both of us
are silent. "Isn't it sad," I say finally, "that Schubert
died without ever hearing that magnificent piece of music
performed?" "Yes," my wife replies, "but I think he
knew that in the end every life is tragic, and the only
truly happy ending would be no end at all."

John Harris

Snapshots of the Sand Mandala

After a week, the sand mandala
is completed. It is now time
to dedicate and destroy it.
The monks mark the moment with a blast of trumpets
startling the casual sandwich buyers
in line on the stairs for the student lunch program.
Half of the redistributed sand will shortly be poured into living water
to carry healing to all of earth's far corners.
So God forbid we should fail to hold onto
our own permanent record of the great gesture. Camera shutters
open and close rhythmically and often
like the fine strands of the endless jewelled net
of origin dependent upon desiring that keeps the world together.
Saint Augustine likewise diagnosed the root of generation
in the disordered, desirous will. Item: every one of us grabs
for the little bags that we fill with leftover colored sand
doled out from paper cups advertising the school's chief preferred
soft drink,
which had been filled in turn from the ornamental vase into which
the mandala was ceremoniously emptied. We snatch, lest they
should run out
of this potent symbol of the complete impossibility
of holding onto or possessing anything whatsoever.
Beings are endless, I vow
to redeem them all. Sufferings
are infinite, I vow
to exterminate them utterly.
Don't vow. Do it. It is, after all,
the one really unreal thing.

Jerry Cullum

Japanese for Beginners: A Triptych

I

A *ronin* is a samurai without
a lord; a hired sword who boldly slaps
his sandals down the misted paths of sharp
Shikoku hills; and those he kills he knows

from their supporting roles in other blood-
soaked Kurosawa epic films: a priest,
a beggar monk, a warrior, a drunk—
one time he slew a *Daimyo* with one stroke,

fought bodyguards and courtiers—all slashed,
sent reeling, blind, through sun-bleached graveled courts,
to crash through *shoji* screens and flimsy walls
and die; their crimson handprints still alive

on swaying, spattered scrolls—then helped them up,
pulled out a smoke from deep kimono sleeves,
swept back his swords and joined the *Daimyo's* crew
at *Toho's* commissary buffet lunch:

a pleasant bunch—thieves, peasants, courtesans,
stout farmers, archers, artisans and such—
all *ronins* there, in service of the small,
age-beaten lord in glasses and beret

who would quite soon complete his duel, his film,
his life—die too—the players left again
to slouch from inn to inn; to roam the land
without a lord, without a truth: *ronin*.

II

A *gaijin* is a foreigner without
a face, a rented space who shambles through
the midnight streets of noodle carts and sushi
shops and smoke-filled gangster bars, and acts his

parts with vacant grace—an exotic in
the *mise en scène*, secret lover of
the geisha mistress of a business thug,
his lips are cloaked and hidden when they brush

her dark tattoo—outsider, stranger,
émigré; the *gaijin* does not quite belong,
lives in the shadows of another's glow,
is never at the center of the scene:

he longs to take the classic, leading roles
demand attention, dominate a stage,
put on a noble's mask—not always play
at the intruder, skulking, door to door,

but enter stage right, swagger through the bar,
a prince, in heavy, silk embroidered robes,
the center panel of a three-part screen,
and then, in true *Kabuki* art, quick-change

the clothes to good tweed jacket, faded jeans
a carefully selected book—a look—
and hold a frozen pose that will become
a way of life, a state of mind—*gaijin*.

III

An *aijin* is a lover who has gone
away; an imprint made another day,
the final woodblock in a triptych frame,
a pentimento leaning on a wall:

bright colors paling into faded tones—
deep muted golds, moss greens, soft browns
of hidden courtyards, bare *tatami* rooms,
dark purple silk kimono crumpled there.

An *aijin* is a lover left alone
one day, a single floating island in
the fog-bound Inland Sea, a charcoal line,
a twisted pine, a rock, a memory

uncertain as a cross-cut flashback torn
from *Rashomon*: a woman, man, a gate,
a storm, their two divergent views; the truth
becomes a rubbing from a worn-down stone

a palimpsest of touch and flesh, of hair
and scent and fantasy that once one time
a lover was who was to stay, not turn
in slanting rain to drift across the arch

of some forgotten bridge, and leave behind
in *Grand Kabuki* stance—two swords tucked in
his puckered sash, a fan in one white hand—
a solitary walk-on role: *aijin*

Michael Cantor

After Long Fever

for the ancient court poet Izumi Shikibu

1

Down from the tall pines
moon dusting sand with light snow.
And dusting the moon
the wingbeat of the wild geese.
Temple. Table. Tower. Gate.

2

After long fever
the ice-break of dawn. Each breath
a young fox crossing
the frozen lake. My burning
eyes, ears, the name on your lips.

3

The fall of combed hair.
Alone I feel the winds toss
the white bay. How calm
the heartroots of the wild tree
loosening its limbs to love.

4

Shells of wind, inside
their breaking shores of silence.
Beyond ridgepole and
rafter the thin moon rises,
feeling its way in the dark.

5

Night's long tide of frost.
These bed silks burn and crackle
like a painted bird
on gilt leaf. Clinging to the
pillow—this strand of his hair.

6

Moon climbing mountain,
moon walking valley. Casting,
hauling the star net
the pole boat swings. A scatter
of minnows. A thousand cranes.

Steven Lautermilch

Chinese Translation, Letter II

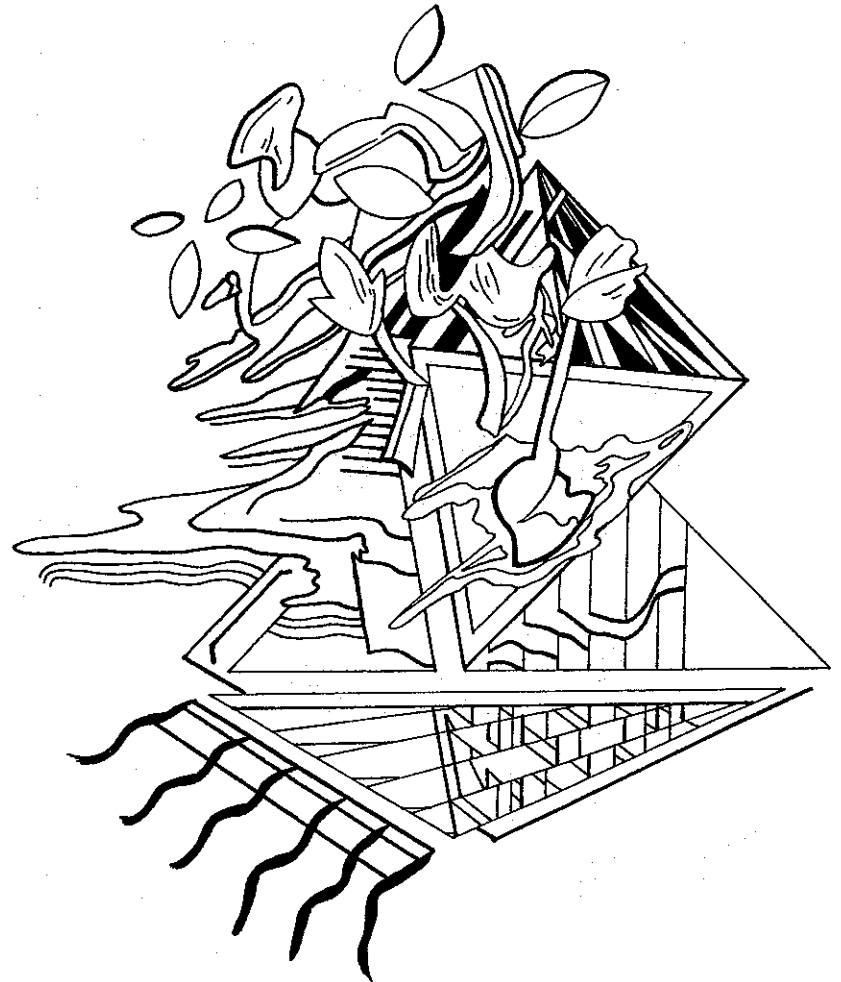
Remember when our eyes first met?
"Elder cousin, are you well?" asked Ling Tse.
"Your cheeks are flushed as apricots."
Inside I was silver hot,
as if already naked in your bath.

Stopped all mornings in my thoughts
I am no different from the girl
Wu Min, the cook's boy, kissed
thirty years ago
under the market road bridge.

In the women's pavilion, my son's wife has just given birth.
When the nurse brings me the baby
I kiss his tiny underlip, the fragrant creases of his neck
let my face wrinkle freely in its moon smile.
True, the child also gives me much pleasure.

The way you make my skin sing,
bring exquisite tingling to my wrists.
Thirty years a jar locked behind a wall.
You broke into the jar.
Hurry back! The coppery nectar is spilling everywhere.

Linda Lancione Moyer



Enduring the Expression of Freedom

Artwork by Wendy Lu



Invitation

Ink Painting by Marie Taylor

ASIA

Feature Section

edited by

Dan Veach

*Japan • China • Singapore • India • Nepal
Vietnam • Philippines • Korea • Bangladesh
Taiwan • Pakistan • Uzbekistan • Tajikistan
Afghanistan • Java • Thailand • New Guinea*

In Transit

*between our arrivals and our
departures, it is a strangely
guiltless territory*

—Marne L. Kilates

With my wife in her usual high-altitude slump, seatbelt fastened, the cabin lights dimmed and bad comedy on the movie channel, I slip into what one poet has termed the blameless country of air travel. I've ploughed through several novels this way, unperturbed, felt the heart-surge when a particularly rousing phrase of Beethoven's coincides with the exact moment of take-off. Sometimes the peace is so rare I wave off free champagne, and in Economy the meals are never worth missing the view for: sunset over the Grand Canyon, or the Pacific flowing like silk brocade. Now we enter the sphere of maps, a world abstracted and solid all at once. As settlements snuggle up to rivers, and paddyfields play endless checkers on terraced hillsides, there's space enough for long thoughts, wispy musings. Do clouds, for instance, discharge their burdens in relief, or do they, in their secret hearts, dream of the fallen? And which is the life we regret, what was left behind or the one to which we hurl at 800 km/h? Only at such giddy velocities might we savour the wonder of stasis, how the earth's rotation keeps us easily in place. Just as, if we knew the true evanescence of a second, it would stop us in our tracks— with indecision, if not physics. Yes, even in seat 34A, risking thrombosis, with barely enough room to clap, there's time to ponder unseen forces, the invisible lift beneath all our wings, only the first human

century in history with this luxury of boredom. If the flight were any longer we'd resort to art. Plot new routes to godhood. No surprise the Pyramids (just visible beneath the cloud cover on your left) had tombs built like departure lounges, since many of us too would opt to go to ground this way—with such conducted ease, to the sound of our preferred music in the company of strangers. How good to set off so eager, yet unhurried, to arrive watched for, and welcomed at the gates.

Alvin Pang (Singapore)

Religion in the Third World

It's always the Big Ideas
that get personified: Death, Wisdom, Eternity,
their capital letters lining up
in the cold marble halls of the unconscious.

You can tell by the flowing beard
and grand costumed gestures; the banners and fanfare
in stanza after stanza of classical poetry, centuries
of fat burghers posing in portraits
as the God of Fortune, or Zeus, or Nike.

As for my tribe of the incorrigibly second class,
whose dieties will never reach the Spiritual Top Ten,
ours is a quieter worship, more commiseration
than awe. The Immortal of Loose Change is a favourite,
as is the God of Small Aches, Sore Knees and Bruises.

There's a Muse for those of us who aren't CEOs
and MPs, who never got straight As or went to Harvard,
who spend our days dusting behind History's footnotes.

Not for us the Spirit of Nation or Race, the rattling of sabres.
Our patron saints send taxis going in our direction,
clearance sales, coupons for free saucepans and vitamins.

In our fables, the Angel of Assertiveness is forever battling
the Demon of Things Which Don't Quite Work As Advertised,
and our Fall is in the bathroom, or down wet stairs,
never so precarious a perch as Paradise.

Somewhere we know there is a Heaven
for Lost Architecture, where every old building and stonepile
has its own address, and nothing ever gets torn down.

And then there's one for the rest of us, an Afterlife
worth dying for: the goddess of taking it slow,
of lazy afternoons and large warm fields of grass,
who comes to me as I fall asleep, her long hair
sweeping clouds under the sky's endless carpet.

Alvin Pang

Tienanmen Square, 1997

A bus ride through Beijing streets, to a city square
called Tienanmen. Our guide, Little Zhuang,
saying that if we had sensitive questions
we should ask them now.

Later there might be policemen in plainclothes,
and he would have to refuse to speak
for fear of bringing trouble
onto himself.

It's a bright beautiful summer day,
the wind gusty. At the square, a dozen people free
their giant dragon kites into the clear blue sky.
The children scream with laughter.
No one is to grieve. No one is to recall the 4th of June.
History is written with a scalpel,
and the flesh that festers can be cut away.
Years ago, there were people who dreamed
and ran and fell to their foolish useless deaths here,
but the state has spoken and the ghosts,
it seems, will not remain.

Gilbert Koh (Singapore)

Chopsticks

let me walk you through this:

you hold your chopsticks approximately two-third way
from the tapered tips that touch your food

you balance one the way you hold your pen
not on the middle finger, but the fourth one

pin it down—immobilize it with your thumb
the index and middle finger move the other piece
around the fulcrum of the thumb

you pick food with a pincer movement
with practice, chopsticks become extensions of your hand

remember—do not cross your chopsticks
they are meant to be dainty and precise

in rest, they twin neatly, tip to tip
on the rim of your side plate
on the edge of your bowl

never scatter them carelessly

let me walk you through this:
it is only a matter of balance

it is not difficult
and the hand never forgets.

Angeline Yap (Singapore)

dragonflies

dragonflies, skimming the water's surface, hover
the way a waiting wife will not fully fall asleep
until she's sure her husband's at her side.

Angeline Yap

writing home

here in the wilderness of australia
writing home becomes easy
in spite of the spreading wild fires
there is less heat, more certainty

writing home, writing this
i think of those without real homes—
our city, people say, provides houses
which do not, often, bring one home

Kirpal Singh (Singapore)

Real Estate

There's always an off chance the hype is true
and the city of tomorrow unimaginably
close at hand: Flying cars, robo-maids, gleaming
towers strung with hyper-trains and skyways.

Or we could slowly invade the empire of fish,
learn to breathe water, perhaps wall it off
in giant aquatic neighbourhoods. Neptune's Court,
unblocked views of the Great Barrier Reef.
Conveniently located near major shipping routes
and continental shelves. Come live where mermaids
frolic. I wonder what poems mer-folk
would write, about the eels and corals
of life, their horizons green with wet sky,
incandescent sealights from passing subs.

A little later, we might abandon cities altogether,
scatter the rich grain of humanity across galaxies,
those vast plains and endless glades where everyone
would have a bungalow, swimming-pool, garden space.
Imagine lounging in a low-gravity hot tub
carved from the red crags of Mars, drink in hand,
observing novas in the district of Andromeda.

Odds are, future cities will be compromises
in dust and gravel, punctuated by instances
of improbable grace. Reshuffled decks like today.
I'm in a study, cradle of all cities there were
and never were, trying to detect their glass
and granite hearts. Anything to bypass
the untired traffic outside, diesel gutters
taking us hour by slow hour into what will be.

I'm thinking cloud-conurbations, digitopias;
kingdoms born of air and light, whose walls
are tall, bright and solid as we'd always hoped.

Alvin Pang

The Meaning of Wealth in the New Economy

Wealth is the means by which we fulfill our desires.

—Stan Davis & Chris Meyers, Harvard Business School Publishing

Hence the cat's languid stretch, its bullet spring, and the puppy eyes of the one you love, asking undue favours you know you will resent, yet relent to. The mercenary burst of bougainvillea, machine-gun clatter of rubber-seeds falling to hard ground as December comes, bearing fistfuls of rain. Consider the lilies of the field, how like your pale hunger, the hollow in the gut that pulls you forward, the lust to work, earn, mate, the same gravity that binds water to sky, impels birds to song and blood, both.

Remember the electric twitch of a nerve as skin kissed skin for the first time ever? Every word you've wasted in trade for the half-truths you need to get by, turning the volume down on guilt as you come home past midnight, head bowed, rehearsing lies as you knock on the door. Every lapse in your wellness diet, stolen Oreos, the prophylactic silences, each step you take away from the home of your childhood, thirsting for road:

Nothing but riches, between the leafy congregation of trees and the echo of a single prayer down empty aisles, as cars slam in unison and grumble one by one into gear. A child's gurgle and squeal, the kind that brings parents running for a glimpse of joy, reward, and willing to pay for it with love. In which case we have always known this bounty, the means to open a window and let the morning in for all it's worth.

You hoard a little every time you put aside, in sleep, your daily dying. The doubling, and doubling again of years of weight, of sorrow, that longing, for the one thing you know you can never have, which keeps you alive. In your dreams of being free, everything you've always wanted to be, you walk smiling and whole, away from the infinite riches of the world.

Alvin Pang

HR in the time of recession

Screening candidates for an appointment is a funny task. There're stacks and stacks of CVs to go through, and each of them is a life. Most don't stack up, most hope to be given a chance, though I had a multi-lingual mainland Chinese PhD nuclear scientist who knew ten programming languages asking 900 USD for an intermediate-level marketing position. There was the graduate who said her choice of our company was no accident, but
"an astute choice,"

because we were well-known for our training and "had a good reputation regionally," which would have been flattering if we weren't a 4-month-old 6-man startup.

After a while it becomes voyeuristic. You see the fear in their reduced asking salaries, mutter at the mistakes they make, curse at those who fail to meet the requirements by a pole vault, smile at the evidence of determined, continued self-improvement; you peer into their photographs as though their eyes might meet yours (wondering what they would have been like if you had met them), even as you toss their CVs into piles.

Most of all, though the odds are against you, you wish you could give them all hope, a better life, the opportunity to prove themselves, to pull themselves from the swamp of dreary afternoons sat writing CVs, until you see, within a celibate and private flash, the imperfectly perfect patterns of Bridget Riley: those irresistible and tantric paintings, those perfect-imperfect lines that if stared at too long will purple out real things.

Toh Hsien Min (Singapore)

Bridget Riley British abstract painter in the shimmering "Op Art" style.

Boats

You and your photographs of boats;
that repeated metaphor for departure,

or simply the possibility of a voyage?
What you cannot tell me you tell me

with a vessel and its single passenger,
eyes fixed on some skylit conclusion.

Set apart and starkly upon a canvas
of tractable waves, brought to still

by the trigger-click of your camera,
like the sound a key makes when it

releases the lock. Your heart became
that lock; these images how you have

always articulated distance, a withdrawal.
Darling, there are just as many ways

of saying goodbye as there are ways
of letting you go. The boat is narrow

like the width of my heart after
impossible loss, cruel resignation;

this heart you ride in. Love, if this is how
you choose to leave me, let me let you.

Cyril Wong (Singapore)

A Poet Is Instructed by the Death of His Master

Know this:
what the world provides
you must give away in turn.
Forgive its loss.

When morning breaks
into the room
to tear you from sleep,
do not mourn
the night's passing.

Let waking divide
this day in which you walk
from the past
which already is less
than whisper, fainter
than a breath's caress.

Let the day begin
without prejudice, clean
of grief or gladness.

What lies before you is all
the potential you need.
All you will ever have.

With one stroke you end the cosmos
of a life. Gather your poems
from the carcass.

Remember you are dying.
That your absence is also poetry.

Make space with your words
so those who come after
may hear their own voices
in your silence, deepening.

Alvin Pang

The Conspiracy of Silence

The night is drowsy
And someone
Has broke into the human breast
To steal his dreams—
The theft of dreams
Is the greatest disaster

The tracks of the thieves
Are stamped
On every street
Of every city
Of every country
But no eye beholds them
No one is shocked

At times only a solitary poem howls
Like a dog, tied to a chain

Amrita Pritam (India)
translated by the poet

The Laughter of a Woman

In the singing springs of stony mountains
Echoes the gentle laughter of a woman.
Wealth, power and fame mean nothing.
In her body, hidden, lies her freedom.
Let the new gods of the earth try as they can,
They cannot hear the sob of her ecstasy.
Everything sells in this market-place
Save her satisfaction
The ecstasy she alone knows
Which she herself cannot sell.

Come you wild winds of the valley
Come and kiss her face.

There she goes, her hair billowing in the wind.
The daughter of the wind
There she goes, singing with the wind.

Fahmida Riaz (Pakistan)
translated by Rukhsana Ahmad

The Bazaar

Every day bearing a basketful of light
The sun arrives at the bazaar
Before anybody else
And, alone, he displays his wares
On the floor.
In course of time the bazaar comes alive,
The customers getting lost
In the multiplicity of shops,
And the shops getting lost
In the midst of the jostling crowd.

In the evening the bazaar rises
After gulping down a bowlful of wine
Men and women walking in single file
Follow the uphill trail
Their cheeks tinged red with contentment.
The sun, lagging behind
Puts back into the basket
The light that has remained unsold
Even after the daylong exhibition.
He puts the basket on his shoulder
And homeward plods his weary way,
The youthful sun of the morning
Turning old in the evening,
Despondent at heart
And averting his pale face.
With the departure of the sun
Darkness descends on the scene,
And solitude utters a shriek.

On reaching their respective homes
People empty their shopping bags
And exclaim: "Oh, this time too
The sun went clean out of our minds."

Their hair stands on end
And they pass the night in total darkness,
Muttering to themselves,
Turning and tossing on the bed.

Every day in this bazaar
The youthful sun comes to sell light,
And turning old,
He goes back broken-hearted.

Keshav Man Shakya (Nepal)
translated by Tirtha Raj Tuladhar

Tet

Ha noi, I come in the night of New Year
by the lunar calendar, Tet, when everyone's out
along the Lake of the Restored Sword,
lights twined in the trees and shimmering on the water
where the Tortoise Temple shines green
and the vendors have brought yoked baskets,
masses of fine noodles wrapped in huge leaves, cauldrons
of broth and herbs, basins of big snails. Red banners
stretch between the trees, Communist anthems and romantic songs
broadcast. The next day I walk streets so picturesque
it makes me dizzy—great red leaves fall from the trees
against weathered walls of ochre, cream, pink, jade;
the red flag with its single yellow star flies everywhere.
At the Temple of Literature there's a ceremony:
women in yellow satin with fantastic headdresses
offer incense, candles, plates of oranges and apples.
I suddenly see it as a painting, an epiphany—
the sashes and ribbons mingle, weave,
like when two wires cross and there's electricity;
two fine threads cross and there's love.

Inara Cedrins (Vietnam)

from *The Prison Diary of Ho Chi Minh*

Ho Chi Minh's "Prison Diary" is a series of poems he wrote while incarcerated in Chinese prisons during World War II. He chose to write in the "prison house" of classical Chinese verse form.

Entering Jingxi District Prison

As seasoned inmates take the greenhorns in,
Clearing weather drives away the squalls.
Here and there the clouds go floating by,
Leaving me to chafe at prison walls.

To the Sound of Rice Being Ground

Round and round under the grinding stone
The grains are polished into pearls of rice—
And so it is with all of us
Ground in the pestle of misfortune.

À la Recherche du Temps Perdu

How heaven loves to hinder men of valor
And squander the years when each and every hour
Is worth its weight in gold—and so I wonder
Not *when* will I be free but will I *ever*?

Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam)
translated by Steve Bradbury

Up River From Hoi An

If there's a river, I thought, there must be villages,
if there are boats, there must be a way
to reach them. If they are not on the map,
not in the guidebook, if the police
and the tourist office insist they know nothing
about villages not on the map,
then I had to see them. So I hired a boat—
with a terrible diesel engine
that belched black clouds all day,
but with beautiful white eyes
on its prow, and, an hour later
on an empty shore I'd pointed to,
children were everywhere, singing
their chorus: *How-are-you?*
How-are-you? as though it were the start
of a nursery rhyme. Twenty led me
to a shrine where a goddess walked on waves
bearing a lantern
to rescue drowning sailors.
One God can hear a thousand miles,
an older boy labored in English,
One God can see a thousand miles.
Together they guard the temple.
Now there were forty children,
and some adults watching, shyly. Then
Huynh Le Phuong, who was beautiful,
asked me to her home for tea,
and as we walked boys grabbed my arms,
pulled hard as they could, pulled
the hairs and laughed,
and she told me *they like you* and tried
to smile. I walked with my hands above my head
so they could not reach them. At her home

her father placed a thermos of tea
before me and another by the photos
of her mother and brother and grandparents,
so they would not become thirsty or sick
in the next world. *You like*
Vietnamese girls? she wanted to know.
Do you fall for me? Will you take me
to the Himalayas? The big, big mountains? When you go
back to New York, will you remember me?
Will you write a poem for me, just for me,
and send it?

Andrew Kaufman (Vietnam)

In Papua

From the camp of the road builders
the mountain jungle is mystifying,
utter creation beneath a primeval sky.
In the waking dream of the surveyor from Indianapolis,
among the flashbacks of ski trails and tavern encounters
and the truth about his father,
 the intolerable wilderness molders
 in the rains of irrational eons.
Things that have no names
 slither and squawk in the tangled gorges
 where violent death is a terse rustling
 among the oblivious vines.
Dark fables crouch in their lairs,
 enormities of the preying id.

At the tourist hostel where tribal contacts are arranged
they have snapshots of aboriginal women in arse grass
and mud men dancing in abominable masks.
In the blatant sociology of the salesman from Kyoto,
among the ruminations on debits and arrivals
and alienation from his son,
 pigs root in the debris of a thatched hut.
 A toothless crone, paps dangling,
 stoops to her digging stick
 in the sweet potato patch above the compound
where ferocious youths practice their vanities,
 faces painted and ritually carved,
 wrists and ankles adorned with feathers,
 shells, bones, and magic stones.

On the veranda of the tea plantation
they recount the missionary lore
of impassioned nature in the depths of the forest.
In the colonial melancholia of the matron from Utrecht,
among the distractions of migraine and child nurture
and Mozart on the wireless,
 the scent of frangipani,
 of orchids and bloody hibiscus,
 drifts across a moonlit glade
where the male of the bird of paradise is poised,
 dazzling in red and yellow and black,
 the plumage of his tail arrogantly spread
 beneath a cloak of orange,
his noble and emerald head expectantly cocked.

Oliver Rice (Papua New Guinea)

After Rain

After rain, countless dragonflies
dragonflying in a field. In me as well
there is their nature, their spirit.

Through love each day begins.
Love takes it on its way
and lets it come to its end.

In dragonflies there are
words to the wise,

intense, inescapable words.
That is what I require
since they are my words.

In a field after rain,
dragonflies countless.
In me as well is dragonfly life.

Yamao Sansei (Japan)

by one scent of
the plum is the cold driven
away brought home

Basho (Japan)

translations by
Scott Watson

also in a single blade of grass
the cool breeze
has lodged

don't beat me!
the fly wrings his hands
wings his feet

pearls of dew
in each of them
my hometown

Kobayashi Issa (Japan)
translated by John Solt

under the mosquito netting
with one mosquito

taxi driver on cell phone
smashes into the steaming noodle vendor's cart

Wat Benjamabophit, Bangkok

in the marble courtyard
with fifty three Buddhas
one dead bird

John Solt (Thailand)

The people,
the time has come they say,

there's an avalanche, so they say
avalanche season has come.

When we lay down our arms—
that pledge of permanence—that purified heart—
that kept out the forces of the world's fighting countries—
we were a hibernal people living in a small way.
Even with many restrictions
we found life good.

Peace.
Peace to last.
Peace, a one-colored, silver world.
Yes peace, the word
over this Japan's diminished lands,
a powdery snowdance
that in abundance fell and lay.

Mending socks,
knitting, hands rest at times
and I gaze out, sigh,
here there are no more bombs bursting, no more
red glare, and think this way of life
suits me better
than to struggle
for global supremacy.

That, past, was a flash.
Before the stack of firewood was out the people
were astir.

Time's come, they say, you
can't change the season.
Snow's already stopped.

Under the snow
look! Ambition's hidden buds,
deception, greed....
That's the way life goes, blows. Helpless—
that one word off a far cliff
plunges, raising all the land's snow,
bellowing Helpless! Helpless! Helpless!

Oh, that avalanche, that word progressively
gains force as it spreads and the distance closes.

I can hear it.
I can hear it.

Ishigaki Rin (Japan)
translated by Scott Watson

Myself

I happen to wake up midway through a dream,
so I enter into the shape of the dream once again
that's still waiting for me on the other side
and somehow I feel I've gotten very small,
the space between me and the shape of the dream baggy
as a boot that's too big.

Over There

I'm walking along when from the other side grandmother comes by
and asks where are you going
so I say I'm going to see myself over there
and she says you'll run into horrible trouble if you become too
friendly with the other one.

I say the other one seems gentler and more beautiful
and she says that's the trouble.

She says that's because the other one has makeup on.

Don't you smell my rouge?

Shall we try to see if you are really me? she'll say.

Shall we try to see if we exactly fit each other? she'll say.

Saying things like that, she intends to suck you in and become
the real thing, she says.

You better watch out, she says and turns to walk away,
and her back is glitteringly wet.

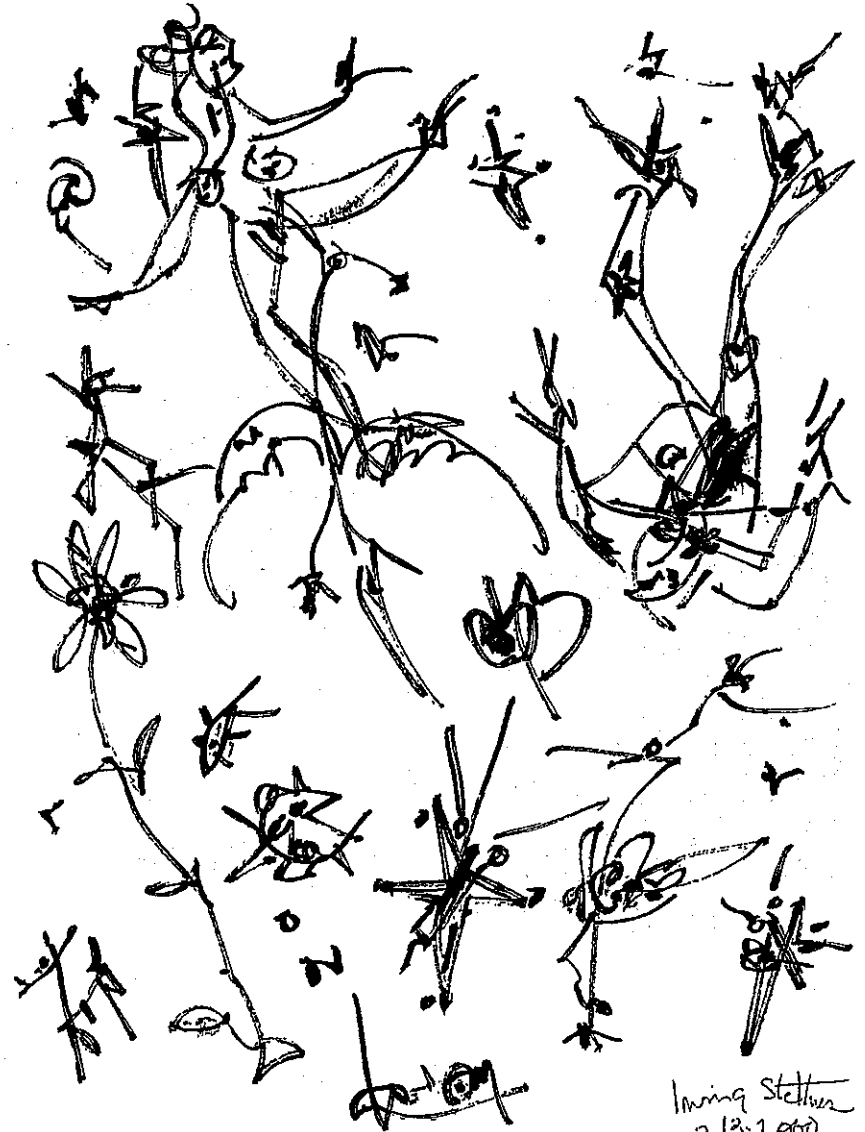
Giggle giggle giggle—Grandmother herself must have seen
herself over there.

Smell rouge?

Exactly fit each other?

When I still don't know anything about the one over there and I'm
going to her for the first time?

Kimura Nobuko (Japan)
translations by Hiroaki Sato



Ink drawing by Irving Stettner

books left unread—
a roll-call for the dead;
books filled with wonder
bring things together.



本にもまた鬼籍あり
その小は読まぬこと
本にはまた奇蹟あり
その小は縁むすぶこと

木島始



Artwork by Kijima Hajime

Sonnet for a Japanese Husband in California

I went to Japan once. Everything was so small,
said the sushi-bar waitress in the baseball cap.
Making the paper chopstick sleeve
into an origami samurai helmet, small and exact,
folds that resist her bidding come to you at once.
The ideogram for *kotobuki* is embroidered on her visor.
You tell her it means "happiness" and she says she doesn't mind.
Your driving instructor—a student of Soto Zen—
balances *nigiri* on the tip of his chopsticks,
extends an invitation to meditate anytime.
You came to get away from Japan,
but here there's more Orient than Occident.
You tell us quietly how you used to hate to sit still
with your father in the stifling hot *zendo*,
mosquitoes biting at your back.

Leza Lowitz (Japan)

Erudite Blues

I've got more troubles
Than there were oil dealers
In Maximian's Rome.

My feelings are as gone
As silphium from
The Western pharmacopoeia.

I'm as lachrymose
As Cherrapunji
Was in 1861,

Because I lost my baby,
Who was as valuable to me
As pepper in the Middle Ages.

Michael Fessler (Japan)

Like gods descending from heaven
Former high officials land
Cushy posts without a trace

Sticking to the ceiling
A gecko is eavesdropping
On our conversation

People have no room to move
During a typhoon
In a tight country

Gengoro (Japan)
translated by the Aogiri Group
with Taylor Mignon

I? Who
else could

I be
kidding?

As long as it is
the cricket crickets

What else can it be
but what makes it be?

Every body
dies — what would be the point of
living otherwise?

Cid Corman (Japan)

This business of life, getting on—
like making a snowman in Spring:
scrimshawed stones, brassoed buttons,
that touch of the human,
and a soundless dripping within.

Kenko (Japan)
translated by Andrew Fitzsimons

Izakaya

Compare art to a Chinese lantern:
diffusing redly, blooding the dark;
a guide as you enter, a glow when you depart.

Andrew Fitzsimons (Japan)

My Mother

My mother is a tiny woman,
with skin like stones worn
smooth by the passing of water.
Her hair is black and coarse,
and she wears glasses
that on her face look
like two huge butterfly wings.

During the Korean War she lay
very still in a ditch among
dead bodies,
the stench filled her
nose and throat, and she lay
there for a long time, long
after the threat had passed.

During the war she found
a tiny girl folded over her dead
mother screaming over and over
mommy please wake up
mommy please wake up

My mother didn't see me
crouched behind the door
as she danced in the dark.
Whirling and spinning
her hands spread like fans
her smile something
wild chest lifting
and falling, the air
pulsed
around her.

Then her legs collapsed
and she crumpled
to the floor.
With tears running down her
face and neck she crawled
to the couch
and she lay there
for a long,
long,
time.

Patty Paine (Korea)

Half Korean

I was six when Charlie Morgan stuck his finger in my face.
Is your mother from North or South Korea?
I guessed South. *It's a good goddamn thing.*
In fourth grade Robert Matzke told me:
*If you stop sleeping on your face
maybe your nose won't be so flat.*
I was ten when Robin Cobianchi beat me
every morning at the bus stop for being a *gook*.
At sixteen Evan Wennerberg couldn't date me.
He said his parents would never approve
of an *Oriental* girlfriend. Recently I realized
I shouldn't have been happy when my best friend told
me after awhile it didn't matter I wasn't all American.
My mother didn't let me learn
Korean, she wanted me to be *All-American*.
I craved her language and would slip out of bed to listen
to my mother and her friends play Hwatoos.
They sat cross-legged on a straw mat and held fans
of glossy cards. Their constant conversation
was punctuated by the thwack of cards against mat.
Between hands chopsticks darted out to spear
bits of squid, and they pushed rice into their mouths
from the edge of upraised plates.
In English my mother seemed caught
in her throat, her words unable to convey her
into meaning. In her native tongue she moved
into the timbre of her country, which resonates
with overtones of hope and despair.
The air vibrated with the language of my mother
and her friends and I understood
I was hearing the words of their dreams
and regrets. The day after a card game I stole

into my mother's room and slid the Hwatoos cards
from their black lacquer and mother-of-pearl case.
I wanted to feel the slick plastic slip
between my fingers. I wanted to hold
the fragile lotus blossoms, swollen plums
and larchwood in my hands.

Patty Paine (Korea)

Ghazals from Central Asia

Zebunisso (1639-1706) was born in Delhi, a descendent of the Babur Dynasty. Living much of her life in Central Asia, she studied poetry, music, law and philosophy, and wrote in the Tajik language. Her poetry is known throughout Central Asia.

You with the dark curly hair and the breathtaking eyes,
your inquiring glance leaves me undone.

Eyes that pierce and then withdraw like a blood-stained sword,
eyes with dagger lashes!
Zealots, you are mistaken—*this* is heaven.

Never mind those making promises of the afterlife:
join us now, righteous friends, in this intoxication.

Never mind the path to the Kaabah: sanctity resides in the heart.
Squander your life, suffer! God is right here.

Oh excruciating face! Continual light!
This is where I am thrilled, here, right here.

There is no book anywhere on the matter.
Only as soon as I see you do I understand.

If you wish to offer your beauty to God, give Zebunisso
a taste. Awaiting the tiniest morsel, she is right here.

Dilshod, also known as Barno (1800-1905), was born in Istravshan, in Tajikistan. At age 17 she was captured during an invasion by the Khan of Kokand. She spent the rest of her life in Kokand, Uzbekistan, where she studied with the poets Khofiz and Navoi and became a prominent poet herself. This poem is a veiled complaint about conditions for women in the harem.

Pomegranate

I see a little wonder
inside a ruby hive.

There is an angel in here
and with a forlorn heart.

Disconsolate under
your gossamer veil

your pale face
is obscured by a golden sheen.

Covered with silk, you stream
scarlet tears down your cheek.

From such a beauty,
can this be poison?

Barno tastes your tears,
and understands.

Anbar Atyn (1870-1915) had a short and tragic life. A favorite student of Dilshod in Uzbekistan, well-educated with democratic views, Anbar used her poetry to protest the rulers of her time. She was consequently severely beaten and ended up with paralysis of both legs. She wrote until her last day.

White goose! Open your wings
wide as the planet

that I might inscribe my sorrow.
Rush it to the one I love!

Can two wings
carry such weight?

If only to be heard!
I implore you with a beautiful rug

and poet-guests, gathered
to sing rivers of praise.

If only he could
hear a single word—

Anbar's love
would make his heart take wing.

*translations by Sally Lee Stewart
with Maksuda Jorayeva
and Elena Serebranik Bell*

Face of the Daughter

A face like the risen moon,
Except that there is no blemish here.
The innocent, simple face
Of my small, sleeping daughter
Radiates a soft moonlight
Pervasive and replete with unbroken peace.
Blinklessly I behold with a mother's eye
Inside the closed eyelids
Waves of elation, joy and pain
Are stirring, waiting, waiting
The intoxicating curve at the corners of the lips
Those contours of smiles and tears,
With sweet convictions of contentment
And knots that form with want,
Disturbing with their intermittent resurgence.
The rhythmically raised and lowered small breast,
The invariable music of inhalation and exhalation
Lyrically drawn and released,
The uncovered exquisite face
And then the absolute silence of the night
Are making me swoon.
I feel like stealing this purity,
feel like experiencing the bliss of her imagination.

Sharada Sharma (Nepal)
translated by Padma Devkota

The Son and Daughter Problem

When my wife was pregnant
we had different expectations (or sinister designs)
about our child's gender.
I hoped it would be a girl
whose silver-bell laughs
would ring in our simple home
a compensation for my childhood
when there were no sisters to love and protect me.
My wife wanted a boy
for girls would have many a setback in life
too much of a worry for their mothers.
In fact it's not hard to solve the problem
We'd first have a boy
to fulfill my wife's wishes
then we'd have a girl
to make up for the lack in my childhood.
But this would be against the will of the state.
Between sons and daughters
we had to make a choice.
How difficult this was.
Our sons and daughters
would never meet in reality
like life and death, two faces of a coin
unable to see each other
unless we divorce
to make a new marriage.
But my wife and I are still in love
and do not plan to divorce for the time being.
The son and daughter problem isn't a small issue.

We constantly debate it before we go to sleep,
never achieving any results.
Perhaps the problem will never be solved
before the child is born.
My wife feels dejected.
We really are unlucky.
Why can't we be perfect like our parents,
with sons and daughters?
I said to my wife
that it would be unlucky for our child
to come into the world alone
without brothers and sisters.
We'll give birth to a lonely generation.
Oh, the lonely generation—
Even before you are born
you put your parents in despair.
Before we wake up from our dreams
we each have divorced the other.

Xi Du (China)
translated by Ouyang Yu

The Wanderer

Xue Di (China)

The sea once again leaps up before me. I sit and listen closely. A cigarette sizzles on wet rocks while the waves make a sound like our common sorrow. Familiar sour salt smell. Naked children duck and run through the gate of their mother's legs, playing out their childhood. Sea birds, luckier than us, pass back and forth between land and water.

Come, I'll throw my worn straw hat to my feet and sit beside you, Ocean, and with you, my reader, and with all mankind, and have a chat. The noon sun's radiance strikes from the top of my head to the heart's center. What you bring me, Ocean, is vast. It can't be the same craziness as seeing you for the first time, but still I am drunk on you. Heart, you thirsted to see strange things—look at the line of sparks along these breakers!

Sunbathers, don't you want to be naked, don't you want to peel off your skins and get down to your own lives? Then we could listen with real silence as the waves rake the reefs and make sounds that start to live. I attend that wordless language and begin to understand you, Ocean! We both know about hearts torn open and lungs split wide and howling at the sky.

Now both you and I are calm. In this still place we can hear the sound of blood slipping to the ocean floor. That sound is the ripple of a dogfish's fin, the far off song of a small lobster. Or a bell buoy that's there, then not there. Beneath that exquisite buoy the shift and resetting of bones. Shift once more and I'm home again across the sea.

Yes! What else can I say? These people praised me and cursed me and made me start on the long road that brought me here. These people still want to praise me, still want to curse me, but they are just bathers stepping out of the surf. They walk through my body, walk through my life which is spread out on the golden sand. They leave watery foot-

prints, leave this face of mine looking up from the reefs at the sky drying in the sun. What else can I say to this? They finger my tongue, they beat fiercely in my blood. Day and night they rub their genitals against my lair. I am an ant seeking sweet food, I am the reef seeking some boatsman, I listen to the most exquisite cries, hear those who have embraced death and are moved suddenly to praise life. Oh don't excite me in vain.

Ocean, your distance is where I come from, the home of my loved ones. I make of those miles these promises: beauty-seeds from tropical forests, honeymelons delivered in dreams, and my childhood, inlaid with faraway voices. Who can hear, when one is this lonely, the mermaid sing? Who can stretch their hands inside this statue? Who can feel the honesty of copper and its desire to be lovely?

The abject, beaten world is still hopeful. There are still word forgers. Once again I recall the fisherman's voice as he faced the waters and said, with tears in his eyes, "The ocean is clean. Nothing, there, stays soiled. The waves wash all dirt to shore!" And the shore, oh the shore, place where we come together.

Oh let me talk with you a little more! Quietly, humbly, sitting in patience, both knees unfolded before me as I seek out whatever is vital in the space between words. Can anyone doubt our common fate? Oh my friends. Oh everyone I thought my friends.

Yesterday I trudged through the villages of Hebei. I saw the earth-packed urns which store bitter water, I saw the aroused faces of the poor and their copper-colored voices. I saw wheat, that golden symbol of existence and of all that will be reaped. In the jumble of villages I held, for a moment, the parched earth in my hands.

Then the jazz drumbeats of rain fell and the roof tops stretched to catch each heavy drop. And the song of a country woman which was the same song as the rain, a song made up of every imaginable city and all the magnificent seasons of the south. Splendid! How could I not run out to the rain-spotted steps of the earthen house and grieve with the sky? The wolf pack's passion comes from inside man. An eighteen-year-old's time-worn shirt hangs open and shows her breasts.

I can't help wanting the world, and you, Ocean, remind me of this.

Be patient with me, get comfortable, unfold your legs and chat just a little while longer. Home, we call you, and Destination, but don't let us make you a symbol. Your waves, crashing toward me, are they really the breasts of women spilling from open blouses?

Just this once, Ocean, I want to compel you with words. I want to stand next to the sun and command you to play your hand accordion; I want you to fold yourself up and become a small village in Hebei; I want you to recreate the sounds of that dry place and an eighteen-year-old's thirsty voice. Just this once.

A few of the bathers are leaving, a few new waders take their place. I must ask all you new arrivals to keep still.

Is it possible? Can we doubt our common fate, our inconstancy? Suffering and sea waves compel our acceptance by their unceasing motion. One might start by gathering up, alone, one's lamentations. One might begin with a single No.

Schooners and sloops. Children's buckets filled with starfish, my own five fingers walking in their prison. In one corner of the world the wind rises and far away a crowd overflows the watery footprint and disperses. The setting sun, inlaid with images of a single contemplative face, but under the water bright red flowers bloom. When people drown, their bones continue to grow until they speak their one word, No.

I can only be silent. There is no way to say clearly why I left that place and came here. What did I escape? What enticed me all my life? Ocean, your night waters mold and fashion my body, sculpting from my flesh a stone church.

Chinese Wedding

This is the first time I attend a Chinese wedding and I haven't the least knowledge of what to do on such an occasion. It'll be great to have you keeping my company.

—*Let's Learn Mandarin*

Guests sign the great book, browse
through beaming glamour shots.
People are slowly seating themselves

in name-card circles, cracking seeds,
drinking oolong tea and Taiwan beer.
Servers flutter about, attending the ceremony

no more or less than the red envelopes
of good luck money piled on the gift table.
Oh, I forgot to bring my wedding present.

*It doesn't matter, we can give the present
in cash. But, be sure not to make the sum an odd
number and it must not bear any fractions.*

The slew of courses begins with soup
and carousels through chicken, octopus,
fish and lamb, finally reaching fresh fruit.

Bones, shells and red peppers overflow
the small saucers slated for scraps. Talk
trickles, people gather their things

amidst hand shakes and goodbyes.
Children suck on sweet and sour plums
and yank the dresses of lingering mothers.