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Submissions

Shearsman operates a submissions-window system, whereby submissions may only be made during the months of March and September, when selections are made for the October and April issues, respectively. Submissions may be sent by mail or email, but email attachments—other than PDFs—are not accepted. We aim to respond within 3 months of the window's closure, i.e. all who submit *should* hear by the end of June or December, although for recent issues we have often taken a month longer.

*This issue has been set in Bembo with titling in Argumentum.
The flyleaf is set in Trend Sans.*

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John Levy

An Abstract Painting in the Sky

I'm thinking of beginning an anthology
of poems I like
about death. Just

for fun. I read
a very good one yesterday.
Yesterday is dead

maybe. Some poets can write breezy
poems and all
I have to do and want to do is

be with them. I can live
with that. I'm not thinking of
making an anthology of those

pieces, though. Yesterday a gila
monster walked on the path around our
back yard that I had taken too. I was taken

with it (not sure of gender) and
for the first time in my life watched
a gila monster go down into a hole.

An opening, under a tree, perhaps
dug by yet another. The gila
not-really-a-monster-

anymore-than-I-am so maybe it is too
shot
a forked tongue out about

every six to 12 seconds (a
guess, I wasn't timing). It's one of those many
lives who have only legs. I am happy

with my arms. Would I mind
being a fish? An anthology of poems
about body parts

is another idea to trash. I dreamed
last night I was in Phoenix in
the house where I lived as a child, though

I was a man and thousands
of birds began to cry so I grabbed
my camera and went out the front door to

see all those birds. They
weren't there. It was night. I
looked up. One fairly small

somewhat circular patch in the sky
with wobbling colored borders grew
somewhat bigger then

luminous patterns within it brightened
while another area of sky started to
blossom even more brightly and a third it was

the end of the world I
watched the sky announce
as if every living creature's death would

come in about one minute after this night
sky finished turning into a fabulous complex
vivid abstract painting. I woke, it was one

a.m. If there is an afterlife what
kind of anthology of thoughts feelings
moments vision could and would

be edited by whom or what and
would it be more than a sequence
in another time, could it be somehow an all-

at-once everything-you-lived-through-and-
became. And could it include
become, a became/become

neverending arrival that would have to be
eternal? An eternal something-
or-other? Easier for me to imagine

reincarnation, as if I learned
that concept in a brochure
entitled AFTERLIFE FOR DUMMIES

that starts, perhaps
in a nit-picky manner, by asking
what's AFTER doing there

if it's more a THEN-THEN-THEN
chain of lives. The lives can't be
unspecific, the way death threatens.

Three First Lines of Lee Harwood Poems Plus Three First Lines of Gael Turnbull Poems

The dreadful loneliness
Bears dance to the music, slowly, awkwardly
The scent – bog myrtle

It was a good boat, never better,
glitter of what's far off,
It's raining on the brussels sprouts.

Julie Maclean

‘I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.’

‘Nothing is built on stone; all is built on sand...’

‘To fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god.’

—Jorge Luis Borges

He is wearing a dead man’s suit

It smells of ash, Paris,
from his last trip there
in ’63.

His hair is the hair
of a melting man
run into his skull
clump of a clown each side.

He wears a tie out of respect.
His wife does not like it.
Too pussy grey she thinks.
She’d like him to wear a red one
loosely tied at his noose neck.
Baboon’s arse of a knot, no doubt.

She is Alti Plana at the heart.
Well, he thinks she is.

How could he know. She will not let him
near her sun-kissed, air-dried dunes.
Says he is a limp vine. Not a real man.
referring to his pen of course—

slough of a green snake.
He is hung like the full-fat moon
in his mother’s eyes.

Montezuma huge.
King of the sand cathedrals.

He carries his manifesto with him always.
It tells him to be fair.

Be fair. Be a writer.

His wife does not agree
even in translation.

He carries her on his arm.
She never liked being a handbag.

He thinks she's unable to read him.
He always loved being a book.

Helen Tookey

On the Black Canal

Your boat is moored on the black canal
and the woman is playing the cello for you,

long low notes the colour of crows' wings.
You are a sound-box, air vibrates inside your bones

as each note elongates, a dark expanse –
are you under her protection, or is it a baffle

she draws around you, words becoming lost
in the rasp of bow against wire, your skull

full of overtones. Where were you trying to go that day
as you crossed the fields when the planes came,

droning low, forcing you down with the weight
of the sound in your head – you lay it seemed

for hours, pressed to the earth, unable to move
till the sound cleared, the weight eased

from your bones and you ran, away from
the terror of air, the fields' aphasic spaces.

Where were you going? You can't remember, and now
you're moored in the long box of your boat, and the woman

is playing the cello for you, the sound closing
over your head like black water, like crows' wings.

Daragh Breen

Tarot

When the weathervane dealt the cards
Jack Ketch got dealt the barge,
and in its slow, coopered wake
it trailed the bird-shells of all
the spring-eggs that he'd crushed
during his hooded days.

The reddleman and the pig-bleeder
will come at dawn to redden the skies
as the barge hatches him in last night's
mud, his white body stretched like a
badger's back, forever scorched by that
falling star that fell across its ancestor's spine.

Syzygy

Between the twin black souls
of the rabbit's eyes
the moon swam
into the shadow of the Earth
and the rats spilled their guts
hanging them out to dry
as the hares slipped their skins
and paraded on the stilts
of their hind legs

and the old women of the village
emptied their chamber pots
over the yew trees,

the Witching Act having been
superseded by the universe,
for when everything is aligned
nothing is right,
every single thing is in the shadow
of the shadow of the shadow.

Steve Ely

The Ballad of Jack Ross

Ross *You're not a patch on your brother, are you?*
P.M. Walters *[crestfallen] No, I suppose not.*
Ross *You'd be no use at all if it wasn't for him. In fact, there's only one
 better back than A.M.*
P.M. Walters *Who?*
Ross *Me.*

Jack Ross was born on Gorgie Road
in a rat-hole tenement,
water running down the walls
three-months arrear of rent.

Young Jack came out kicking,
some say he never stopped,
from Bernard's Well to the Dancing Club
he tripped and hacked and chopped.

Fleet as a racing snap-dog,
game as a scarred Blue Paul,
he dogged the pitch from box-to-box
in rush and ruck and maul.

Sharp as a border sheepdog,
wise as a hoar deerhound,
he strode the field and ran the game
for Saturday's sneaking pound.

King Cotton came a-calling,
and trebled his backhand cash;
Jack headed South to terrorise
those milk-sop Sassenachs.

His teeth were green as spat catarrh
and through them clenched he'd hiss

threats and murder at his foes
till their knickers streaked with piss.

He hobbled Billy Bassett,
snapped James Brown like a stick,
kicked Nevill Cobbold in the nuts
and tenderised his dick.

No forward could get past him,
he smashed down everyone,
but Sudell would not pay his worth—
so he signed for Everton.

But Anfield's up-front hundred pounds
bought only a single season,
for a hundred more from sour Sudell
helped loyal Jack see reason.

But Jack was not the man he was,
there was something on his chest
and after every match a coughing-fit
left blood streaked down his vest.

Sudell sent him to Madeira
that he might recuperate
and get back to his blinding best—
and staunch the bleeding from the gate.

But Gorgie's blight had rotted deep
and Jack was too far gone;
he died in his Fishwick terrace
at the age of thirty-one.

Ten thousand lined the pouring streets
to see Jack's grand cortège,
and bowed their dripping, hatless heads
as the mournful piper played.

And every mill-hand's running dog
threw back its head and howled
at the tumbril's stately passage
to St. Stephen's clay-gouged goal.

And the curtains closed on Fishwick's streets,
the blinds on Gorgie Road
and Jock devoured by England's earth,
into Hell enrolled.

And the curtains closed at Tynecastle,
and closed on Deepdale's stage,
where ten thousand mill-hands, Bill Sudell,
roared applause—and wage.

Their lucred approbation
rocked Satan's fiery gaol
and raptured Gorgie's ghostly-gun
back to Preston's golden 'dale.

Where sovereigns and brown envelopes
were pressed in pallid palm—
*'Encore, Jack! Take a bow, son!
In our grief, you were our balm.'*

Cathy Dreyer

Form

Away down the field sits a blackbrown hare.
With the sun behind her, she's a shadow,
a woodcut silhouette, the ideal hare,

holding herself ideally still, as though
she died years ago, or is a picture
of herself, already faded, as though

a sudden light caused over-exposure,
too many lux seconds when the shutter
opened. A moment's over-exposure

and the light-sensing surfaces smudge her
into mud and crushed blacks, important bright
areas are washed out. She's a smudge, her

highlights blown out, or zoomed in on too tight.
You can't see her, though she's still in plain sight.

Happy ever after: Beauty and the Beast

The Beast therefore behaved in beastly ways,
demanding *filet mignon* cooked *à point*, eg, or
coq au vin with crudités and seared legume,
to tempt his gullet. He made her scrub the whole
white bath the length of its enamel snow, not just
smear the tide mark of their slurry with a cloth.
She must use the brand new Hoover on the dark
wool carpets that he chose, going into every corner,
and this was after she had wiped her shoes, properly,

before she jangled up the glass-cased steel stairway, he'd had constructed to a brutalist design (which had *brought out*, not scarred) the Grecian detailing of the 1860s villa. (This handily allowed its lucrative conversion into four attractive flats.) Then sex of course, and every night, though only in traditional position.

But most of all, he required access to the index of the book of her, so he could to look up every gesture in her lexicon, testing it for truth and for consistency, not caring if he broke the spine.

When she denied him, he would sneer and smash their mirrors. He'd say his mother warned him that his Beauty was a money-wort, those dirty shikshas being all the same. What a mug he'd been! Then Beauty cried and smoked the cigarettes he hated, sitting on her side of their big bed (which had developed a sad hillock in between the coastal hollows of their nightly separation) unable to construct an answer which did not incriminate her, because, although his mother had it wrong, Beauty's truth was ugly. On the rebound from a chinless, older lover, she had revelled in the drama of the Beast's repeated threats to *end it all* if she refused his ring. He bought a canister of gas, his green eyes bugged and bulging, teeth jagged in the red and roaring cavern of his mouth—*I'll do it! I don't want to live without you!*—the matching horror of their parents—these were satisfying consolations. Beast's money? A convenience, not more.

Of course, Beauty could not tell him that and so, in another end, she left the flat forever, the baby on her hip, the toddler's sweaty hand in hers. She took nothing with her. Nothing that was his, or theirs—to show him, and his mother. She knew that he'd be fair, he wasn't just a beast, not the *heinous Christocidal Jew* her father rang into her ears when bride and groom returned from Scotland, her white boots (Courrèges) already streaked with pavement dust, her silken, hooded mini-dress gone grey with creases. It would be alright. She told herself that Beast was only partly beast. At least, she knew, he wouldn't let his children live in damp and bronchial poverty, would he?

David Rushmer

Intercourse

Speak, then,
of the disappeared
of disappearance.

a beginning
swells
this is your
vast abyss
of loss
stripped of certainty

in empty halls
of language

a moment of calm in white flowers

words dilute on the breeze
detached from their brute
energy
creating
a world without us.

what makes you forget
this memory

the vanishing point
and the tongue
a singular event

opening
the wind

forgotten
drafts
of light
becoming

intercourse

Liam Ferney

February Release

I wait my turn for water behind a thirsty dog.
This is the way of things in Brisbane
where summer is elastic and the late afternoon
showers my legs and the world spins
like a dipping free kick in added time.

Running by the river the crab pots were empty,
the police boats full of teenagers as Sunday's
accumulation of adventure gone awry.
The echolalia of today, blueprints for next weekend.

The after party ache of red wine residue, beer bottles
baited with butts, last night's convenience cruelling
recycling's best intentions. And you skip out
quicker than a kiss, the film the marketing peeps
never figured out how to sell.

Chloe Carnezi

“You must look upon Modern Greek as the impure dialect of a nation of peasants, just as you must look upon the modern Greeks as a nation of mongrel element & a rustic dialect of barbarous use beside the classic speech of the pure bred races.”

—Virginia Woolf

Diary entry from her visit to Greece, 1906

Letter to Virginia Woolf

Helen exiled in Egypt.
Sand rubs her the wrong way, gets
Stuck in every
Fold and furrow of her
Flesh.

Body shameful,
Once the gift of a goddess, now
Body obscene in its thinness.

Breasts halved by a
Hunger mastectomy.

Still. She is Helen,
Helen–Hellene, who is not
Paris’ to steal or
Elgin’s to sack.

Mongrel element, yet
Helen of Greece,
Squeezing her handful of Earth.

Somewhere in Troy is a
Helen that *seems*, structured from
Vapour and rain.

This Helen of clouds wears a
Bonnet and corset and
Giggles with you over
Tea.

But remember: this Helen *is* not.

One day you will wake up alone.
She will be the Fog on your window in Sussex, and
There will be an Empty bonnet and dress, lying on your
Bedroom floor.

Carmen Bugar

An old woman reading

One story ends and another opens on sunlit pages.
Though her arms seem burdened with the heavy book,
She is entirely inside the words, oblivious

To pain or being painted, her cloak the color
Of a red giant star, or the edges of planetary nebulae.
Rembrandt must have enjoyed their mutual silence,

As he poured earth from Siena with his hands
Over the granite table, mixing it with linseed oil
And his spatula, patiently waiting for her

To go into the chapters.
The Belgium heart stone looks grey-black;
You must grate the oil-soaked earth into granite

With its wide top: the top of the heart.
Some say she must be Hannah the Prophetess.
Then she must read about Time, and how

We are made of earth, for here
Is made of earth, oil, and stone. Breathing
Woman, image, story in painted earth.

★

The sun this morning shines through
Rembrandt's windows into his studio filled
With shells, heavy catalogues, philosophers' heads.

His old woman shall forever read in her frame
And we, of earth but not yet back into it,
Eat its other offerings: bright green wild pepper leaves

Sprinkled with roasted coconut and peanuts,
Lime, ginger, red onion, chili, dried shrimp,
And secret honey prepared by a chef from far away.

We taste the earthiness of his homeland
From his hands, which fold the wild pepper leaves
And set them into our mouths, gratefully.

His hands are old as hers, the skin under his chin
Sags like hers, but his house is fragrant. He touches us
The way she touches our minds--her shawl in embers,

And a sun that illuminates the book
Wider than her lap, opened to a space between
Chapters: out of timelessness and back.

John Phillips

Possession

We think to possess a thing
by naming it, or so was thought

before words failed us. Or
we failed words. Nothing

possesses us now but words.
And words possess nothing

but what we say they do.

Exactly

As if there were
someone saying
these words
for someone

else to hear them
being said —
to make sense of
the act of saying,

the act of hearing —
or being here
doing either.
As if words could.

★ ★ ★

Tell me a story,
the words say

to no one there
listening. It's

themselves they
want to be told,

themselves they
want to hear.

The only thing
a story tells

is words happening
to be told.

Rachael Clyne

Bedtime

When it's dark the man behind the wardrobe in the corner gloops like hot marmite I try to ignore him then say in my loudest voice MY DADDY'S A POLICEMAN AND HE'S IN THE NEXT ROOM except he's not and he's deaf. When it's dark the branch-fingers scratch to get in and the chimney moans but I know it's the really-dark 'cause I can't hear the TV and there's only me. Just when I'm nearly asleep they start yelling through the wall behind my head YOU BULLY ... DON'T YOU YELL AT ME ... BASTARD! I put my fingers in my ears and it stops. Just when I'm nearly asleep they start up again. But now I have my Koshy cat he sleeps with me. Now I have Koshy I pretend we fly through the really-dark on a broom and come back when the shouting's stopped and go to sleep.

Apocalypse Shoes

Whatever past-life, barefoot memory haunts her—she must have stout shoes for Armageddon. She bought buffalo shoes in California. They were her insurance. Come the collapse, she'd work the land. Greased with dubbin, her thick-skinned buddies should last a lifetime. Alas they fell along the urban-fashionista wayside, in favour of Terry de Haviland scarlet leather, tarty straps. Dystopian fears have returned to adorn her shoe-rack. They'll house her feet, help her flee the neo-Nazi knock on the door. With Yaktrax attached, she can escape on ice. She has enough pairs to see her through a post-petroleum Arctic melt. When Hinkley Point collapses, she'll stride across the Levels, sack of brown rice on her back, windup torch in her hand.

Susie Campbell

Settling with my madness

Naked, except for her turquoise skin. From each pierced nipple swings a silver charm—a camel with a ruby mouth—a Babel tower an inch high. She begins the dance. Cameras zoom in as she struts with pointed toes, somersaults with squirrel grace and lands with a flick of her wrists.

Handwritten labels peel from clear glass: medicine bottles crammed full of bitter sherbets in the old sweet factory; children's marbles for stoppers—striped *aggies*—blind-white *milkie*s—a brutal *blood-alley*. I hide her in the attic. Down in the street, straw effigies grin and swagger, whistling through sewn lips: *help us, we need purges, syrup of figs and liquorice twists*.

. . .

They drag the river again. A kayaker sucked from his canoe grows gigantic—as the drowned always do—and fills the river with his trailing arms and slackened lips. Even the rubber-suited divers know the water gives back its bodies only when it is done, deposits them hollow and laced together with weed. They visit me—the drowned—leave footprints on my doorstep, a smear of green slime on my china; this paper, draped with nettles and long purples, lying wet on the floor.

Claire Potter

The Salamander

My salamander slid into the coals of the kitchen where I had burnt
your dinner and called it

not my day, but my indifference to being a mother. Being
an entity that at any other time I would have called my salamander
sulking in the coals, but this indifference was cold, no eyes at all

It was something dark like a joint of imperfect heart, a
salamander cloven in the coals.

The Unicorn

The polar bear takes me to an Alaskan village. The bear is treading through wasteland, its white coat ruddied and dieselled, eyes wayward, vision dislodged, not forward but sideways and insular. I wince at the photograph of the bear, think of a student who pushed a block of melting ice through the grainy streets of London, his own traces of foreignness slipping away. I'd like to talk more about his film, but I'm stuck with the polar bear and a graph of climate change that layers science over the Arctic. There's scant left to measure, but I can't leave the Arctic, it's shrinking around me, cloaking me in disappearance, in leaving. The polar bear looks out of place in the village, he is iceless, snouting for food, lodged in a bone pile of whale. I follow him there into the carcasses, into bins scavenging, hissed at to leave, fur quiffed red in the patrol car's light, frightening locals like a lone wolf honing in for leftovers whilst we make trips to visit the Arctic Circle and observe what's left of polar bears. I smell rust and diesel in the photo, see the cogs and wires, the black grease of tyres, every tangle of steel and plastic. The bear is small in comparison with the structure of rubbish. I want to get out of Alaska, I can't be here anymore, I'm reading the newspaper because it's showing me an Alaska I've never visited before. Words hold pitch perfect, but questions creep in, if this is not a polar bear, then what is it? I'm hot under my collar sitting on the ice, I'm watching the bear loop apace around a pile of rubbish as though my being in the Arctic is an equation. I sympathise with the bear, I'm not looking at what I'm doing, I'm wiping fingerprints over his ears and jaw, his polar coat is the colour of newsprint, he's a Frankenstein bear we've built from sawdust and now refuse to talk to.

Lucy Hamilton

from Dissecting the Family

Gold Leaf Boy

I cut a clean line down the centre of his head & face
He's split into two hemispheres and it's for me to decipher

the logical left eye & the creative right | for me to choose
Next the leaf | not hammered into a sheet of 22 karat

Picked from a sycamore by the Cam and bleeding red
green & yellow on my trestle | The leaf curls & crinkles

as I splice it to his right face | gold against 50s Kodak hair
anthracnose spots & veins juxtaposed with boy-fresh skin

broken tooth & freckles | The textured shape of the leaf
conjures & echoes fruit & pulse | food & fluid & function

foreshadows an organ he will lose to tumour | But now
framed under the light of my lamp | the boy's leaf-face

my highlights in his hair and the flexible stalk overhanging
the top of his head | there's a hint of cherub | golden apple

Ho Cheung Lee

Wrapping Paper

Uncle's body found.
For how long he'd been lying
next to his bed we don't know,
the doctor didn't say. His neighbours
smelled him and made the call.

This afternoon, his sister, my mother-in-law,
waited at the mortuary's reception for
the large orange door to slide.
Her mind a vacuum for three minutes
nine seconds.
The tanned butcher man understood her difficulty.

Just stay right there, yes,
just stay where you are.
Just a glance will do. Yes.
That's him alright? Good.

And is his name correct?

Her muted vomit followed
her frustration that spilled out
from the top of her dark glasses.
The stink was agonizing—
it carried his face
and story of his last hours
stabbing through her shut eyelids.
It hummed.

On the way to the crematorium,
the driving lady in purple spoke not a word.
Alan Tam's duet with Teresa Carpio
muffled the passengers with

the oldies, lingering as if we
played them within our skulls.

The dangling fragrance bag in its
kimono danced to the voices as I
tore open the white packet
for the coin and the candy.

The wrapping paper's red,
rustling.
As I was about to dump it into
the cup-holder at my arm rest,
I found three pieces already
filling the unwanted hollow.
All emaciated, lifeless, forgotten.

Martin Anderson

Under Jiu-yi Shan

“I now state my terms to the crocodiles. I set them a limit of three days to take their ugly selves south to the sea ... Do not repent when it is too late!”

—Han Yu, *Address to the Crocodiles of Chaozhou*

I

By the east lake the wind blows hard.
Over reed marsh, mud flat and shallow.
Tundra swan, stork and crane already
have landed. Out of that far barbarian
heaven where snow falls and falls without
stopping. Where, leaving, day after day they heard
nothing but the sound of wind through passes,
across ice-locked rivers, sweeping
the slightest hint of warmth before it.
At the lake edge I stand. Listening. Sedge, crisp
with frost, under my feet crunches. Wondering
at how winter has arrived so early.

II

On Great Marsh of Cloud Dream, alone,
I compose verses, to which no one will listen.
The court of Chu puff themselves up,
parade around, bristle. Idle and poisonous
chatter is all they engage in: a quagmire
of lies, vilifications and distortions.
They would, if they had to,
fill a bag of flowers with excrement
and proclaim that it smells fragrant.
They'd rather, I am sure, that I obliged
by falling into a river full of crocodiles

than ever reappearing amongst them. On
Great Marsh of Cloud Dream I chant
and the birds accompany me, migrants
from far lands, in a music of impending chaos.

III

Mist rolls in over muddy flag filled bottoms.
A rufous sandstone cloud erupts
from the lake's bed, when the foot's
thrust in it. A darkening pandemonium.
Beside me sweet caneflower-
silvergrass leans and shivers. Cold
October air. Wisps linger and curl
over long silt-spits that glisten half submerged.
From creek-head to creek-head the sound
of the rites. Drumming. Drumming.
Drumming. Unabated. Each nubile waist
encircled by an arm. Dancing and
pursuing in the flux and twist of air and
water the whirlwind and the storm. To ease
the dried out heart. To atone. Old
crocodile skin, stretched under the
hand, whose broken lachrymose fate
is conjured and elucidated in your note?

IV

Eaten under the shade of
Jiu-yi Shan, in the dark water
close to Burned Field Village.
At the placid, lapping margin.
So completely devoured, no sign
of them remaining. In each loose-reign
prefecture I ride through, carts loaded.
Families adrift on the roads. Sour

smelling, brackish the taste of a life
lived under Jiu-yi Shan. Far out
the sound of a storm brews over the water.
Muffled, intermittent rumbling.
I listen. Leaves of the orchid
tremble. Fleabane glimmers at the water's
edge, damp from a low cloud that hangs
heavily above it. In the air, scent
of cassia. Over the south running channels.
I point my horse's head toward them.
With a stumble, and a sigh, we follow.

V

Within a charred circle of sourgrass
ash of incense and powdered bone.
Impress of makeshift shrine, dismantled.
Cloud black over vastness of water sky all
the way back to Ying. The damp wind spawns
sinister phantoms that writhe and twist
their way into the heart, when one is
not looking. Sinuous as guts of sacrifice
spread out and interpreted. But who
is the one who yields the life, and the
one who takes it? The sanctimonious cant
of those who thrive, courtiers covetous
of their own comfort and future, only drives the
knife deeper. I came upon this bloodstained
spot at evening, my horse exhausted
my stomach cramped with hunger, long after
the rites had ended. Behind me
from the scattered bivouacs of those from
Chu who'd fled, rather than remain to see
the coming disaster, smoke was rising.

VI

The Imperial Inquisitors of Chin, a country
of wolves and tigers, sit in their gold
plated palanquins and dispense
injustice. Connoisseurs of terror their fingers whiten
often. No room for treatises on music,
philosophy or history in the Imperial
Archive. They burn them. And no need
to bury your head in the sand—they
will, if you write or read such nonsense,
do it for you. Or get someone else to:
there's never any shortage of hoodlums
among us. Each night paranoia stalks their
bedchambers. Informers in every household.
When the wind blows south, over the
Han River, it is full of black dust.
Cities, townships and villages. Burning.
Slowly, it filters down upon us.

VII

Waste of protectorates, of vassals.
North of the Han River. A cold wind
cracks the faces, tears the banners of
Chin armies. But still they move south
ward devouring, like a silk worm, leaf
upon leaf. Massing on our borders.
Pretending it is we who are threatening
theirs. What can't be expropriated
by force they expropriate by trickery and
deception. Chin Shih Huang-ti, face of a
jackal breast of bird of prey, has torn off
the cankered flesh of our court, bit by bit.
Gnawed through its heart. So easy to destroy
such credulous self-flattering fops
trading gold and precious stones for enslavement.

Jin Shang, Cheng Hsiu, Tzu Lan. May
you consume what you have harvested.

VIII

All the fragrant leaves have withered.
Orchid, sun-apple, white rumex, cart-halting
flower, sweet spirit grass. Fleabane bends
back in the wind. Over the muddy bottom
under Jiu-yi Shan my reflection wavers.
Words, like stones, sink. On the air strange accents.
From far prefectures northward. From a
government geared for war, not peace: women tilling
fields, men away expanding borders. Outlaws
in the forests and the marshes. I raise my head.
A faint drumming over the dark waves. The wind
blows hard. Cold hands lift cold water to
parched lips. White as thistle down my breath.
Suddenly all the birds are leaving.

Chu Yuan was a high ranking minister in the State of Chu during the fourth and third century BCE. Because of court rivalries (“Day and night they curse and vilify me.”) and of his hostility to the growing power of the State of Chin, a proto-fascist Legalist state, he was exiled south to a non-Sinitic culture and region, present day Hunan, where he traversed ceaselessly the vast undrained swamps and wetlands around the Dongting lakes. His famous long poem *Li Sao* (Encountering Sorrow) was pro-foundly influenced by the shamanistic songs and lore of the region. His death by his own hand in the Miluo River is commemorated, each fifth day of the fifth month of the traditional lunisolar calendar, by the dragon boat festival. The dragon on the boat prow is a motif which derives from the crocodile. *Under Jiu-yi Shan* (Nine Doubt Mountain, a site in southern Hunan sacred as the burial place of Shun one of the most revered rulers of antiquity noted for his moral stature) embeds various lines from *Li Sao* and observations on Chu Yuan by Su-ma Ch’ien the Great Recorder of the first century BCE.

Eiffel Gao

情有独钟 / Singular Amour

My thoughts about you are as clammy and raw
as the fume beneath the shoulder seam
of your summer shirt.

My hatred of you fizzes through and spoils
every phrase that possesses your name.

Love poems became mine fields;

Chinese egressed;

Another language from another country upholstered me.

You whisked away my eighteen-year-old pride
solved my feelings with a dimple
and strafed my best dreams.

How dare you, still,

call me by that sobriquet

whose sounds make young bracken curl.

Not a word came between us

during that last thundershower in Ningbo

when we stood before high French windows

watching the glacial skyscrapers dissolve into pearl-grey.

I was gazing down into the rotundity of human toil

when suddenly the outer world dimmed much further

and from the craquelure reflection I saw you gazing into me.

Naka Tarō

translated by Nihei Chikako & Andrew Houwen

Décalcomanie II

shi (poem) is the needle's gleam spreading on the marble
me (eye) is the magnet on which its light converges

shi (death) is the invisible sap climbing up the tree
me (bud) is the thorn it feeds pricking the outside world

★

shi (poem) is the shadow of the soaring bird
me (eye) is the rifle bullet following in its tracks

shi (death) is the moth's disturbance circling the night's crown
me (bud) is the flame subsiding on the candlestick

★

shi (poem) is the black rose
me (eye) is the trembling antenna

shi (death) is the sea-bed's tangled algae
me (bud) is the slicing blade

★

shi and *shi* are the ciphers
me and *me* are the decipherers

shi and *shi* are the pollen
me and *me* are the carriers

Osip Mandelstam

translated by Alistair Noon

Four Poems

I marvel at the kids and snow,
and at the light some more—
no faithful servant but a road,
this smile that no one's forged.

December 1936–1938 (?)

Goldfinch friend, when I tilt my head
we see the world like twins.
But is the spiky sky – think seed –
as cruel in your pupil this winter?

Yellow and black, your tail like a boat,
below your beak you blush.
Did you know that you're so goldfinch,
the goldfinch kind this much?

Black and yellow, red and white.
The air gone into that crown!
He keeps his eyes peeled either side—
then stops—and off he's flown.

9–27 December 1936

Philippe Jaccottet

translated by Ian Brinton

Insight

Look at the children running in full cry
through thick grass of the school playground.

Mid-morning September light showers down
in a cool fall and unmoving tall trees
shelter them from the giant anvil
casting off starry sparks
in the beyond.

★

Must such a timid and shivering soul
walk non-stop across this glacier,
solitary and unshod, unable to piece together
a prayer from infancy,
being chastised for its coldness by the cold?

★

Such little knowledge gained after
such a wealth of years,
faltering heart?

Not even a penny to tip
the ferryman when he comes to knock?

I have merely put aside grass and running water,
not weighting myself down—
so his boat can ride the stream.

★

The mirror is round like the mouth
of a child incapable of deception.
She approaches; wrapped in a blue
dressing-gown showing
signs of wear.

Before long, hair settles to the colour
of ash in time's slow-burning fire.

Her shadow still hardens
in the early morning light.

★

On the far side of a window, the whitewashed frame
of which repels both flies and ghosts,
the hoar-frost head of an old man bows
above a letter or just the local news.
Darkening ivy creeps against the wall.

May whitewash and ivy protect him from dawn breeze,
long nights and that darkness without end.

★

Raked light on water gives below the surface
a shape of trees. However hard I peer
I cannot catch a glimpse of this weaver
whose hands one would love to touch.

As loom and cloth and room all fade
one should surely find
footprints planted in damp ground...

★

For a moment we rest still within a cocoon of light.

As that unravels (with patience or in haste)
can we not, as peacocks through the night,
jet out wings decked in eyes
to carry us through the darkness and the cold?

★

Sight into these things and more
(despite a trembling hand and knocking heart)
beneath this same sky:
gleaming garden squash, eggs laid by sun,
violet flowers hinting of old age.

If this glimmer of summer's end
dazzles with the shadow of yet more to come,
I should scarcely find myself
in less surprise.

Virgil

translated by David Habdawnik

from Aeneid, Book VIII

WAR!

WAR!

WAR!

booming from every speaker:

WAR!

everyone's in a tizzy:

WAR!

car horns honking

guns firing

straight up in the air:

WAR!

I pledge allegiance

to the flag

WAR!

for which it stands

one nation

kids

worked up into

patriotic frenzy

emissary to Diomede:

“Hey

Aeneas and his weak-assed gods
have infested Latium
he’s calling himself a king
and his name rings out
on every corner
god knows if we don’t
nip this thing in the bud
what he’ll do (if he’s lucky
in battle), well, I don’t need
to spell it out for you.”

So it goes in Latium—

Brave Prince Aeneas, meanwhile
fluctuates
his soul beat thin as a leaf
twisting
this way and that
catching the moonlight and tossing it
high on the wall
like a question or a prayer

while everyone else sleeps
Aeneas lies by the river
heart torn by murmurs of war

the river god himself rises up
from the Tiber

covered in moss, hair tied back in a reedy knot
and whispers these words:

“You
 godseed
 prince
among men
 don’t shrink from
seizing this,
 your new home.

The deep bruise
of divine anger
has gone down,
nothing can stop you now.

 Don’t believe me?
Nearby there’s a huge sow
that’s just delivered 30 white piglets
eagerly suckling away
a sure sign that 30 years on your son
will found a great white city:

 ALBA

Still don’t buy it? There’s more:
Up the road a ways
are some real tough bastards:
the Arcadians, a breed
sprung from Pallas, they’re always brawling
with the Latins,
go make peace with them
I’ll lead you there myself,
all you have to do is paddle
—Oh, say a prayer to Juno,
make it good, calm down
the last of her womanly anger.
And don’t forget me
 when you win—I’m the Tiber,
 heaven’s favorite stream.”

...