IN THE DELTA OF THE PEARL

Selwyn Pritchard

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A COLLAGE
By
Selwyn Pritchard

For
Trevor Pateman

‘Happiness writes white.’
Henry de Montherland.

‘Afflictions turn our blood to ink.’
Henry Vaughan.

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my Chinese students and colleagues
and trust that they will forgive
my mistakes and misapprehensions.

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It became clear that his value as a senior lecturer in Literature, specialising in the poetry of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, was diminishing. For less cost the new 'Department of Communications' could employ three 'casuals' and not have to pay them superannuation nor provide them with studies. He had spent his life from eighteen at the university, but he was offered a 'voluntary retirement' pension and a golden handshake of ten thousand per year of employment - if he accepted within ten days; half of it after that.

'Buckley's', his colleagues had said, and laughed. He didn't attend the Christmas party and his farewell gift, a watercolour of the university, arrived in the new year with a fulsome and sickening tribute. When summer began to wane and the start of the academic year grew near, as a kind of gesture he applied for a job in a Chinese university. He had forgotten about it when, in mid-winter, the Chairman of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures telephoned to check his *curriculum vitae* and offered him the job. Dizzy with surprise and happy to surprise his ex-colleagues, he had accepted. It seemed at the time like *une acte gratuite…*But he knew his poetry, had been slowly turning less fluent and was solidifying like his reputation as a has-been who wished to be a sage, not a rock star - poets having to sell their books now bookshops will not. It was a chance to re-think himself, reinvigorate his spirit, hold back middle-age, and events moved like fate.

It took three visits to the Chinese consulate in Toorak before his papers were in order. The mansion was set back behind a large lawn with an enormous monkey-puzzler at its centre, but the visa office was a small room hardly big enough for the queue and as worn with use as a country railway station waiting room. He found in the punctilious, bespectacled clerk behind the high counter with his ancient guard who sipped green tea from a lidded mug, the endless
photocopying of documents, and incomprehensible questions, such as which 'unit' was sponsoring him, a lack of concern for applicants which was forbidding. Was it intended, this sense of being belittled?
It challenged him and he did not back away from challenges. When the clerk, a mere youth, finally handed over his visa and work permit,
he had felt an absurd gratitude and euphoria.

He had caught a taxi before dawn. For two hours at Tullamarine there had been no explanation for the delay to the Air China flight. Nobody of the three or four hundred in the departure lounge had been game enough to ask for one. Head and shoulders taller than most of the black-haired Asians who stood about patiently clutching far too much hand luggage, he felt that he ought to complain on their passive behalf.

As soon as he had stood up to do so, somebody slid into the seat behind him. The shining, blonde at check-in said there was a problem with a wheel, but through the windows behind her no one was paying any attention to the jumbo's wheels. The aircraft looked abandoned. He thought it seemed entirely reasonable that such a huge

machine had become incapable of flight. In the grey morning the whole idea seemed as improbable as his presence there.

All around personal space was at a premium. People bumped into him and each other, children struggled, screamed, slept. An announcement in Mandarin caused a hush in the uproar not accorded to the English version. He was borne along in the mob, which had no thought of a queue, hurrying as if to make up time, tripping over bags, colliding with best of them. He put spit on the fingers of his right hand and slapped it on the side of the plane as he entered. So far it had not failed him.

On board people were stuffing too much hand luggage in the overhead compartments while others tried to shove past. He found the luggage space above his seat already crammed full. He complained. The flight attendant grabbed his bag wordlessly, but he still did not sit down until he saw where it went, even though the queue shoved up hard against him. He was pleased to have asserted his rights.

They flew North over baking and boring Australia for four hours. He read Lowell's *Life Studies* again and thought it mostly narcissistic dross. He was off-centre, dislocated, aware that he was fleeing from a culture in which English Literature was despised, his poetry was dismissed, Don Bradman was Homer…And where his broken heart could never mend. He re-read Lowell. Four hours after that they were high over Hong Kong and the delta of the Pearl. They were three hours late. Daylight was almost done. Would anyone still be there to meet him? He spoke no Chinese and had no idea where the university was in Guangzhou.

They bumped and tilted down into monsoon cloud, the land obscure except for the sudden silver of lakes, ponds and the tributaries feeding the dark gut of the huge river which barges and ships churned white.

His neck ached with staring down, but under the wings which streamed with rain in the gloom, lightning flashes picked out new tower blocks inside bamboo scaffolding above streets where cerise and cerulean neon characters glared and stuttered, huge adverts for American cigarettes glittered, headlights flashed on shoals of cyclists merging and diverging, wheeling through the downpour.

They bumped, landed, trundled. People began to get up and unload the overhead lockers and collect what they had buried under seats, ignoring the high-pitched instructions to stay seated until the aircraft stopped just as they had 'no smoking' signs during the flight.

He stayed where he was. To his surprise an old man nest to him, who had regularly and loudly cleared his nose and throat and spat in the bag provided for air-sickness, gave him a smile, long finger nails of a bird-like hand gripping the seat in front as he rose. He seemed happy to be back in The People's Republic of China.

The high steps shook and ended in a puddle in which rain bounced. He wanted to complain. You never heard anything good about China. What had he expected? He was shoving along in a kind of panic. The stifling air smelt of hot, wet wool and reminded him of childhood. When he saw Westerners he looked away in case they saw his anxiety.

The push was for luggage, then passport control. The uniformed woman asked

him take his straw hat off with a gesture, smiled when he obliged, then meticulously examined the visa he had been given at the Chinese Legation in Melbourne. Anything might happen to him. Now he wished he was one of the anonymous crowd. He passed into the mêlée of the Arrivals concourse, looking for signs and symbols, carried his bags this way, then that, perspiring, heart thumping. The world he had left was made of subtle matter, vortices of inference, infinite connotations, ghosts even, but now it was empty of any coherence. He could not read anything, understand a word, could not recognise cues or clues, make up his mind. He found some luggage trolleys but the youth in a t-shirt could only smile and say 'yes' and fan with a fistful of Chinese notes. He had none. Where was the bureau de change? He wanted to complain, but was in the way again, a bulky obstacle to the quick people who came and went, shouting with excitement, racing trolleys and suitcases on wheels, dragging kids, hugging greetings.

He hefted his bags and saw, for the first time, the faces pressed against the glass doors of the Arrival area. Some were waving. At him? One had a sign, which she waggled, smiling. It had his name printed neatly: PROFESSOR GREG BUCKLEY. He quite liked that. He hadn't been a professor before. He stopped and raised a hand and they waved, an odd shake of the palm from side to side, and smiled in welcome. He was light-headed with relief and exhaustion.

Afterwards Greg realised that Professor Li had taken the best students to the airport: two boys and two girls. Li was taller than Greg, a bespectacled smiling man, and as he inquired about the flight in excellent English, the students, who were half Greg's weight, having bowed and shaken his hand, picked up his heavy suitcases and set off in the rain. "We have been very much looking forward to meeting you," said Professor Li.

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Li swivelled in the front seat of the minivan and said other things as they drove through the rain in the swirling traffic, but they were lost in the engine noise and chatter of the students for whom it seemed as much of an adventure as it was for Greg. Some streets were awash and their surfaces were jagged with the dazzle of headlights and neon. A red car under a concrete flyover had a man sitting miserably in the lotus position on the roof as waves washed in at a window. His head and hands hung. (Who would help him? Again and again his desolate image came to mind like other inexplicable vignettes of China.) Bicycles carried improbable loads of cardboard, caged ducks, furniture; some had small children clinging for dear life although it was late at night. The bespectacled girl with a round face next to him spoke, but he could not catch her words, shrugged and smiled. She retreated shyly. He stared at the crowded pavements, the open-fronted shops and slant of silvered rain, drowsy in the warmth and din.

The campus was dripping trees with whitewashed trunks, roadside lakes

and mysterious buildings. The Foreign Expert Building seemed deserted. There was no lift. Greg was so hot and exhausted that he baulked at climbing the steps up to the fourth floor with his bags, but the tiny students did so with good humour. They gave themselves English names to make things easier: Angel and Ivy, Phone and Henry. He panted along the bare corridor behind them into what he took to be a storeroom with stained carpets and a battered fridge. There was a hole through a wall where a pipe had once been, the carpet had dark stains, the chairs were battered. “Here we are,” said Li. “Your bedroom is through there and here is the bathroom and lavatory and opposite is the kitchen. We will bid you pleasant dreams.” He had very modern spectacles, tinted with gold half-frames. How old was Professor Li? Greg could not tell. Later he learned that in that black-haired land, few went grey before retirement. He shook Greg’s hand again, job done, ushered the students who bobbed their heads, and the door closed. He went to the sliding door and let in the roar of the city. Between palms water reflected the red neon cross on the building opposite.

In the bedroom he turned on an air conditioner which roared like the jumbo. There seemed to be no bedclothes. A faded curtain covered the bed and a worn bath towel was the sheet. A mosquito net hung. In the bathroom a cockroach as big as the mother in ‘Alien’ lay on its back in the bath. He knew that you must boil water, even to clean your teeth, and found a pan the previous occupant had left in the small, step-down tiled kitchen. There were matches too and he filled the pan and lit the gas ring. Mosquitoes whined and zoomed. Some had been smashed on the walls. He stripped, got the duty-free whisky took it to the bathroom. The shower was a lukewarm piddle. He let it bounce on his skull as he swigged. He was exhausted and supposed that he would have no difficulty in sleeping, but mismanaged the mosquito net and the noise and heat and humidity were overwhelming. He took the pan from the rattling fridge and drank, then tilted the bottle again, lay and dozed naked.

Several times in the night he got up to drink from the pan and stain the net with his blood. He did not feel good. He closed the door, switched on the TV and counted fifty-one channels broadcasting everything from old Hollywood films in black and white to market report graphics from Merrill-Lynch in Hong Kong to slapstick from Benny Hill. Thus comforted Greg slept at last on the ruckled mattress cover.

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At six, a good proletarian and peasant hour, but not one with which he was much acquainted, he was woken by a truck unloading and the shouting which accompanied it. The sky was hazy with smog, but higher up a duck-egg blue. He felt concussed. He had nothing for breakfast. Mosquitoes were gathered against the screen door. It did him good to get up and destroy them but it did not cure the bumps and itches.

He showered, then on impulse shaved off his beard. Where its bush had been there were creases around his mouth, but he had only one chin. His features

seemed crammed into the middle of his face, which was pale. He thought that he might have looked younger. It was years since he had grown it: another gesture. He was surprised to see himself again. Something of his dad stared at him. What would he have made of his circumstances? Not much. He unpacked and put on clean clothes. He was already perspiring.

There was a balcony. It was small and had a pot-bound rubber plant and a line for washing with a few coloured plastic pegs. It was contained by a grille of rusting iron rods in which there was a minute door with an old padlock for which, no doubt, the key was lost. It was too small to be much use to him in the case of fire. (He wanted to complain.) It reminded him of the lack of bath plugs and lavatory paper in Russia, said to be a small reminder of the privations of the revolutionaries. Everywhere the same grilles were in evidence, even on top floors, as if thieves could be so desperate. Perhaps there was no adequate banking system yet. What of that exemplary story of the tourist who discarded an empty ball-point in Shanghai to have it returned the day after arriving in Beijing? To the sides and below he could see that such balconies as his were put to no more use. On the ground floor, where he supposed the staff lived, it was clear that they were used to throwing out rubbish and slops with rustic insouciance. He could smell this pervasive excess four floors up and determined to complain. Throwing trash out of the window he had first thought an anarchistic response to authoritarianism, and almost admired, but learned it was rural behaviour hard to unlearn.

Between the Foreign Expert Building and the Olympic-size swimming pool was a grassy bank. To the right of the pool, through a straggle of hedge, was the path he had learned to take around the lake to the main teaching block. To the left was bush and a bamboo brake. All around were identical blocks with flat roofs, rising only five storeys it was said, because either the materials used would not stand any more, or lifts would be needed it they could. Later he heard that they were built to Russian plans and this explained the huge vestibule in the teaching block, which was designed for hanging up bearskins in the Russian winter. Any or all of these explanations might have been a Chinese joke. At that time, tired, wretched, bewildered on day one, there were no jokes. He drank the water from the pan and boiled some more, trying not to see the brown cockroaches dart and scuttle.

When he had just finished hanging up clothes and moving furniture, the doorbell rang. A small man stood deferentially, clasping his hands. He was swarthy, the skin around his eyes especially dark, and Greg supposed that he was Algerian. He was asking, in a soft American accent, if Greg had any breakfast and offering toast and marmalade next door.

Ted's rooms (His name was Eduardo and his parents were Italian tailors in Quebec) were identical but much better appointed. While Ted busied himself Greg looked at his posters of the universe and his caged birds looked at him and tweeted. There was a shelf of books with a wooden crucifix above and, on the sofa next to where he sat, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. For an instant he heard those familiar seductions of Christendom echoing down the centuries like plain song,

then tied himself firmly to the mast of atheism.

Ted tended to flutter, hands flicking sideways, knees bent. head bowing as he delivered what he promised. It tasted good, as did his coffee.

He was a kind, simple bloke but a natural groveller.

"The great virtue of Christianity over these other, unforgiving Semitic religions, is charity," Greg told him as he munched. "This is really beaut of you, Ted."

"Oh no," Ted said sotto voce. "I remember what it was like when I got here. They don't realise what a culture shock it is, never having been anywhere but here. I starved, then I discovered the restaurant next door. I think that they will take you there for lunch today. That's the usual routine. Then it's siesta until two thirty."

"And the semester begins on Monday?" He nodded, biting his one piece of toast daintily. "And what time do we start?"

"Eight. Two two-hour slots. Finish at twelve." He smiled, "Although you do see classes straggling away before that. The faculty all work so hard at translating to pay school fees and so on, they tend to be focused on that. There are two afternoon sessions."

"School fees?"

"That's what they call them. It will be two amounts, you know."

"No, I don't."

"Well there will be the fee they have to pay, then the other."

"Graft?" He tilted his head in assent.

"I'm amazed."

"It's very competitive. Kids have to pass exams to get in the good schools before there's a chance of university entrance. It is hard on them. Parents will always do whatever is necessary. I think some students here, for example, would be very difficult to fail. They would *not* fail. You know they are idiots, but they get through."

"*That* corrupt?"

"It is influence too. Doesn't it happen in Australia? Don't the rich buy it for their kids, fix it? They do in North America. Here power and money are not quite the same thing."

"They shell out for private education…and you hear whispers. There was a case not long ago where a kid got his scores bumped up because his aunty was a top administrator in the university, but they bumped them down when somebody blew the whistle."

"You worked in a university?"

"For bloody years, mate. English Literature. They offered me early retirement to get rid of me and my subject. I rejoiced. Most academics are pissed off with their discipline by the time they are forty." He was always defiantly obscene around holy people. It made them feel good. "They wanted the space to start some kind of management course...That sort of barbarism. I was happy to be out of it, but I missed the routine. Perhaps that's why I am here. I need to structure my time, my life."

"There isn't too much structure here," Ted said. "Really, they don't care what

you say, so long as you talk. Because of the exchange rate they pay us so poorly that it is hard for them to recruit, so don't expect too much academic challenge. That's why we are, some of us, oddities. The students who get here are very fine, but once they are through the meat-grinder of the school system, they relax. They do what they have to promptly, but not much more. Of course, until last year they were given jobs by the state, but now that has stopped, maybe they will start to compete with each other a tad. After all, the country was built on competitive entry into the civil service."

"When did that start?" He wanted to grin.

"A couple of hundred years before Our Lord's birth." He no longer did. "Before I forget, I must show you where to buy things like bread on the campus. There are stalls and shops. You must get unsweetened bread. I'll write it down for you."

He went to make more coffee, a boyish figure, his head too large, perhaps, or his legs too short. He had spent a good deal of the conversation staring above Greg's head at the crucifix. Greg had read of the near bankruptcy of Canadian churches because of the damages paid to children that the clergy had sexually abused. Maybe Ted was an anchorite in retreat from that colonial culture. Maybe he was the same. Australia had snatched Aboriginal children from their families, often to the same result. Ancient clerics were being prosecuted for it, but worse, because under international law such policies were judged to be genocide, that law was not promulgated and the country was full of war criminals from all round the world, and no political party was likely to do anything about it.

He heard the telephone in his rooms begin to ring. "Oh, that will be Professor Li inviting you to lunch. When it stops, I'll ring him." He did. It was. Greg took the phone and heard the polite invitation to have lunch with Professor Li and Professor Cheng, the Chairman of Department. They would meet him in the foyer of the F.E.B. at twelve-fifteen. He sipped the coffee which turned to instant sweat.

"It's difficult, isn't it, at first?"

"She'll be right," he told him. In his rooms he began the poem which became:

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The Ghost of Benny Hill

At Four I can't sleep, eyes on a station from
Far Sichuan silently blooming and fading:
Benny Hill mugs the camera in his boy scout kit,
Blue eyes bulging behind bottle-bottom specs,
Grin fixed in the jocund fit of a hollowed turnip.

The busty girls in hot pants can't see
What Benny is doing behind a tree...
(we can: he's peeling spuds in a bucket)

Bent at his fat knee. BANG! A bullet
Hits the pail. The girls see a spurt, a jet.
BANG! *Another*! They scream and flee.

All over China, over hills and paddy plains,

Deltas and rivers, conical peaks, villages
And city streets where derelicts lie asleep

His mirthful energy is energising molecules.
But I remember that they dug Benny up
For the diamond rings he never wore,

They left him sprawling in the mud
Much as he had sprawled for days before
They found him in his armchair

And switched the telly off at last...
Meantime his agent had uttered his obituary
On Frankie Howard - a posthumous laugh,

But here he comes again, leading his crazy
Dance Macabre, capering tghrough the Asiatic night…

Distinguished Professor Ye
Has an ancient mirror he covers after dark.

*

He winced to recall his faux pas; not that Professors Li and Cheng acknowledged them as such. His shirt was sticking to him before they had gone ten yards, and in the restaurant, which was full of students and the roar of their conversation, he had felt awkward as an adolescent, an 'oddity' as Ted had said, as all eyes seemed to follow him. What fatuity caused him to tell them that he would not be able to recognise their best students again, and think it funny? Li had politely failed to notice his lack of a beard; Cheng had shaken his hand warmly as if the occasion was not a routine chore. Why did he expect a knife, fork and spoon to be laid for him among the hundreds using chopsticks there? Why did he fail to conceal an assumption

that their knowledge of English Literature would be superficial or simplistic? To the Australian psyche, all foreigners are a bit of a joke. You did better not expect too much of them, ay? His aunty's report from North New South Wales when she moved there was: "It's beaut - not many Asians." There were always racist jokes, of course: 'Solly, I'm so sorry to hear about your fire'… 'Shut up! Shut up! It's tomorrow!' But they were all good-hearted weren't they? Under it was the fear of the horizon and the retribution which might come over it and a fearful commitment to a culture which trashed and dumped their ancestors the year before the French Revolution. Engels' description of Australia was 'united states of deported murderers, burglars, rapists and pickpockets'. All of this was in Greg's mind as he struggled with his chopsticks and received polite encouragement. Of course, the miseries of life, the embarrassments and idiocies, you remember… The diary pages of happy and contented times are written in white ink.

He might have got the usual implements if he had asked, but he was in a state of anxious excitement and burbled on, fiddling and then conveying morsels precariously. Was it dog? Cat? Snake? Pig? He was grateful for whatever he contrived to chew.

Li seemed pleased with him and Charles Cheng, if he was appraising his recruit, didn't reveal it. Greg asked if they lived far away?

"We all live on the campus," said Charles. "We never leave until we die."

"A community of scholars! A medieval European idea."

"Was it? Earlier than that…Of course, not all of us are scholars, " Li said. He was never far from laughter.

"And sometimes you need a wall behind which ideas can grow and truth flourish," Charles added quietly.

"That sounds elitist."

"Oh it is," A huge smile closed his eyes. Everyone had black hair but Charles's was wavy. The women struggled to find ways of being different. Some wild spirits went red and ginger; some even wore blue contact lenses, he discovered. At that time he saw few other distinctions. Age, sex, size, attractive or not, solemn or smiling…Could they have the same problem with Westerners? Of course not!

The table next to theirs was riotous with hearty male students, hair cut *en brosse*, spitting fish bones at side plates, cracking crabs. When they had finished, waitresses picked up the corners of the white tablecloth and bundled the crockery and refuse up and carried it out. "Koreans," Li explained. "We get students from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia…One from Brazil this year."

"Taiwan. Most of the new building is Taiwanese money. Shanghai is running on Taiwanese investment."

"Why? Why do they come?"

"To be educated in the motherland," they said together, surprised by his naivete.

It was unbearably hot. They had to shout across the small table. They had bought beer which he drank as quickly as it was offered, sweat running. They taught him to decline, to 'knock' like domino players when giving up a turn, but they did it

oddly, first and second fingers bent. Li explained that it was a simulation of the horse-like kow-tow of the equestrian Manchu dynasty, born of courtesans' desperation when the emperor disguised himself as a servant and poured their wine. They felt it important, he grasped, that they learned how to say no. He was very happy. He liked them very much.

They left him to walk back round the lake beyond which the continuous flow of pedestrians and bicycles passed under the trees. They walked slowly, discussing him, he guessed, one tall, one short, hands behind their backs. Ted was right. He was not of great account in their scheme of things, he had understood as he walked through the iron gates of the Foreign Expert Building's walled compound and laboured back up to his room, looking forward to 'siesta.'

When he woke it was dark. His watch showed that he had slept for three hours and the sky that the gloom was that of the evening typhoon growling up the delta, black clouds boiling, lightning snapping. Soon his mosquito net was ballooning, doors slammed, and silver cascades spilled from gutters. He lay beaded with sweat and tried to listen to Crackers Keenan on Radio Australia calling the footie for South-East Asia through the crackle and crash of the storm.

*

Matter of Time

you cannot stir for weight of air
and beaded sweat

out of reach the radio spits news
as high above Canton
the typhoon surges boiling black

Crack! Lightning makes clear
what can happen will
in time like life itself

the radio reports a comet
rehearsing species-death
on Jupiter

on Earth wind blasts
palms buck and thrill
doors slam mosquito nets balloon
as helpless you watch
gutters' silver spill.

*

At lunch he had carefully not seen how people scoffed with chop sticks flying from their bowls the short distance to their mouths, or tooth-picked away while shouting. Charles Cheng, who had done a second degree in Sydney, discussed his Second Year postgrad Pragmatics class. Had they realised these incommunicable moments might occupy a useful analytical half-hour? Was that what they wanted? It was a turgid thing to have to teach but they
had otherwise given him *carte blanche,* or at least, raised no objection to his suggestion that he should look at Twentieth Century poetry. There were a couple of hours of 'Composition' with Third Year and an hour of 'Western Culture' on the timetable he had been given. It came to twelve hours a week and he was pleased until he remembered Ted's 'they don't care what you say so long as you talk,' and his mood deflated, but then, given such an opportunity for such a conspectus of the century, his own poetry could only improve. Greg was cheering himself with this when the doorbell pealed.

"I can't shake your hand just now, but welcome to the F.E.B.," said a jovial guy with a jowly red face, gold-rimmed spectacles, and hands full of gin and tonic, two glasses stuck on his big fingers. He bowled past me and began to set all these down with care on my little round table. "Dis, y'see, is da tried and trusted antidote to da typhoons. In fact, I never hear tunder without developing a tirst, like one of that feller Pavlov's dogs, y'know." He turned and thrust out a large glass. "And here's to your good health and luck here, Doctor…?"

"Greg", he said, taking the glass. "Greg Buckley."

"I'm Brother Terrence, Greg Buckley. Otherwise known as Professor O'Neil." He clunked his glass and they tipped them. It was a jolt of gin. He felt its descent." Can we sit down d'ya think?"

"Sure." He sank another gulp, as if thinking what to say next. Greg thought two Catholics in one day was a good many . "I met Eduardo from next door this morning."

"Ted's a nice feller."

"He is." His grand entrance seemed to have been rehearsed and he had forgotten his next lines. He looked around absent-mindedly.

"Is he a 'brother' too?"

"Oh no." He had almost finished his drink and was looking at his. He gulped companionably. There was a kind of incipient numbness in his face. "He is on the run, y'know, from his bishop."

"What did he do?"

It made him laugh hugely. "What did he do? He said he had no vocation for the cloth!" It was some kind of joke. Greg occupied myself with the rest of the tumbler whilst he shook. When he finished he was on his feet again with the bottle. "Now this is the one that really makes the difference. Maybe ice helps. Have you got any ice?

You have to boil the water first, you know." And there was another huge gin in his hand.

"I need to pace myself. I'm still feeling a bit crook after the flight."

"This is the way to do it, y'know. China knocks your clichés to blazes. Drink up and come down and have a bite to eat with some of the others."

"Look, I will have to get dressed."

"Oh come in your dressing gown. The girls would like that." Some books were stacked and he left him looking at them as he went and pulled on a shirt and strides.

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Ron Riley, the priest, was tall with a beer-belly and horn-rimmed glasses. He was tapping his foot and playing a jig on a little flute or whistle and several of the others were clapping in time. It meant that he could get in the room without too much ceremony and the introductions that were made were drowned, which was as well because some names he never got right. He accepted another gin and tonic and sat on the carpet, back to the wall. The pear-shaped Japanese professor, with glasses and teeth, he code-named Tojo, and the Portuguese woman, who was given to emotional excesses, became 'The Infanta'. It was her operas he could hear from the top floor during siestas. She was spiky and sharp-faced, in her mid-forties, with dark Moorish eyes and black hair. Tojo had bowed and smiled; the Infanta did neither. The third he met was an American woman, Patti Deville, of huge shot-putting potential, from Scandinavian stock in Minnesota. Her doctorate, she soon told Greg, was in Science Fantasy, and she forever looked for opportunities to display her detailed knowledge of 'Star Trek' or to draw analogies and examples from other similar cultural phenomena. She was married, it turned out, to a man of similar bulk, who required two seats on aeroplanes when they travelled to their society's meetings in hotels around the States, where all dressed up as their favourite historical character and acted their parts. Six foot three and heavily paunched, she went, she said, as a handmaiden of the Emperor Li Yu. He chose to sit on the floor in order to escape her loquacious bulk. Ted was there, in deep discussion with a pair of married Mormons who were also six-foot-three, had marvellous teeth and concomitant smiles and never stopped doing good works around the university and the city: 'Mr and Mrs Wonderful'. They had stepped straight off a cereal packet. There was a woman who was trying to do an Irish jig, arms straight and feet flying, half-joined in herself, although Father Ron's face was turning puce with the effort of playing. Miki, a beautiful porcelain Japanese girl, half joined in, twitching gracefully. 'Gargantua', as Greg decided to call Patti (sex was no object) was trying to sing some air in an astonishingly pure and powerful soprano. Brother Terry gave a ponderous demonstration; Mr and Mrs Wonderful quietly left; Ted spectated gravely. Marvin Langley, another Canadian, a young man who spent much of his time off campus, had been there but had left before Greg arrived, he discovered…And

that was the collection of 'Foreign Experts' Greg registered drunkenly, wishing he could eat. The windows were wide open and insects arrived and departed apparently satisfied, but the room was hot almost beyond bearing. He emptied his glass and thought that if it were not for the promise of food, he should be gone. The Irish jigs diddle-de-dummed too loudly. It occurred to him that if he didn't get to his feet, he never would. Ted helped him. The diversion seemed to stop the music. The dancer was beaded with perspiration, top lip and brow: Gisela Schnell was a Swiss doctor, fortyish, blonde with brown eyes, and an amused view of things, maybe because she was an oncologist. Ted introduced him and she held his gaze and hand a second too long.

Greg was not up to much more than leaning on the wall of Father Ron's room, smiling winningly he hoped, stomach rumbling, face numb. Gargantua was centre stage, singing airs from Oklahoma beautifully, Ron and Terry echoing her off key. Gisela said something that he didn't catch. "Sorry," he said. "I'm taking gin for culture shock." She closed her eyes with laughter. Her neck, although hooped with creases, had an agreeable curve, her lips were full and used to shaping languages other than English.

"It is very nice to meet a new person here." She wore no rings, no jewellery at all. Flushed and sweaty, she brimmed with good health.

The Infanta was at his elbow. "I am Fatima."

"Yes, I remember. As she spoke two Chinese girls entered bearing plastic bags in which plastic boxes held the feast.

"Be careful," she said hoarsely, "of the food." There was general applause and Father Ronald, still red, sweating, and gasping like a fish, stubbed out his cigarette. If Brother Terrence was sixty, Ron was more like seventy. Greg would often find him stranded and gulping, grey-faced on the stairs.

"It is not hygienic," she said in the silence of anticipation.

"Is that right?"

"The Chinese are filthy," she whispered. Her gestures chopped and jabbed.

"Why do you think that? Fifteen thousand million of them seem to survive."

"I *know*. I have been here four years and I have seen new people get very ill because they were careless about their food." The others were exclaiming as the boxes were opened. "That Swiss, I saw her eating at a street stall, and she's a doctor."

"Thank you," he said, "for your advice," and pressed forward with the rest. There was fish of some kind and little nibbles of meat. (How disgusted, he discovered, the Chinese are by our great steaks of corpse-flesh!) The vegetables were like no others he had tasted; the rice better than any he remembered. He sat and saw Fatima looking at him with pity as he scooped with a plastic spoon. When Moon, which is what the bigger of the Chinese students was called, offered more rice and he took it, the Infanta scowled. She never really stopped. She white-anted us with the people who administered our affairs, sent flowers and flattery to the powerful, glowered in her room, at the door of which she had drawn in chalk what seemed to be cabalistic signs

to deter, it was said, rats and cockroaches.

There was wine, Australian: chateau cardboard. The Priest said it was in my honour; the Brother said if that were so, they had been honouring me a good while before they knew I was coming. It caused everyone to laugh too much, and I guessed it was a kind of insubordination. It didn't deflect Father Ron, who wanted him to sing for my supper.

"Now tell us, Greg, what brings you here."

"Nah, mate, too pissed." Now the laugh was louder.

"We hear you are a poet."

"That's exactly right. Didn't know my fame had spread so far as China. I had the feeling it didn't even get round Melbourne much."

"Maybe you could recite us a few of your works."

"Nah. I can't remember them." He wasn't having it.

"'Can't remember them'! Surely that's a funny thing, a poet who doesn't know what he has written?" There was a silence. It was a joust. I didn't want it, but I wasn't going to be subordinated either. I chased bits of rice and did not reply. Somebody had re-filled my glass and I swigged it. "Don't you think so, Greg?"

"When I was a kid, I had to learn the bloody Catechism, which meant nothing to me at six and means less now, and when I made a mistake, this old dame used to whack the back of my legs with a ruler. I think she took the opportunity because I was a rowdy little bugger, but that conditioning has made rote-learning agony. The one thing I could not do at high school was learn French vocabulary. It upset me, y'know? I loved the language. I don't mind so much about the poems: they interest me when I'm writing them, but when I've finished one, that's it. If you want to know if I am any good, the answer is not bad, but I'm considered a young fogey. My disability is that I refuse to join the entertainment industry and run around reading my stuff and being a 'character', right?"

"In vino veritas," said Terry emolliently. He was smiling, glassy eyed, but Father Ron sat in his chair by the door to the balcony and blew streams of smoke irritably. "Well," said Terry, "that's a sober thought from a drunken man. Let's all have another drink."

And they did. Gargantua stood in the middle of the room, her feet spread, her skirt draped from her belly, and in the sweetest and truest and girliest soprano sang the song about love from the ball scene in Zeffirelli's 'Romeo and Juliet'. It was very beautiful, but he had to close his eyes to know it, the voice so ill-sorted to the person. She sang again, as required, but he heard no more until Ron's, "Will you look at your man now. He's away like a baby."

"No," he said. "No, no, I was transported." Someone sniggered. He stood with some assistance from Ted and Gisela, then pushed himself upright.

"Well this is a very good start," Ron said with mock approval as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Terrence. He manoeuvred through the door, the rest having apparently left some time before, Gisela and Ted attending him like tugs down the corridor, then precariously down the stairs.

“Have got your key, Greg?” Ted asked.

“Didn’t lock up.”

“Oh that’s a pity,” Gisela said. They opened the door and switched on the light. Everything looked as untidy and uncomfortable as when I had left it. “Where did you put your credit cards?” she asked. He had some problems with inadvertent eructation. “Are you going to vomit?”

“Used it as a bookmark.”

“What?” He got across to the table and picked up his book. The card fell out.

“You mean, you only have one?” Ted seemed amazed. Gisela was in my bedroom. “Your brief case seems untouched.” He didn’t want her in his stuff.

“Of course,” he said. “And look, the whisky’s still here. Let’s have one for the road.”

“Maybe a little one,” she said. She clinked glasses and Greg sat with a thump in an armchair and let his head bang on the wall.

“Ouch,’ Ted said. “Listen, where did you leave your dough?”

“Linen jacket on chair. Inside pocket.”

“You were lucky, “ he said some time later. Then

“Do you want me to help you get into bed?”

“I’m all right. I’ll just sit here for a while. This is a very funny existence. Is it always like this?”

“What?”

“Is it always like this?”

“No,” Ted said. “We kind of let our hair down when there are no students around. They start arriving tomorrow.”

“Are you having a drink?”

“No,” Ted said. “Will you be all right?”

“Yes,” Gisela said. “I’ll just sit here a while with him.”

“Well good-night then.”

“Good night,” they said.

“I’m just next door...”

“Yes, I know.”

“Good night.” Ted closed the door. Greg had heard all this as from some distance. He felt deeply weary.

“You have to be careful of those fellows,” Gisela said. He opened an eye and looked for his glass, but she had only poured one for herself. “They are very close together, you know?”

“Gay?”

“Maybe, but not that way…Maybe we can talk about

it when you are sober.”

“Are you?”

“Enough. This is not a nice room they have given you. You should complain.”

“It will do. I don’t feel entitled to complain about anything.”

“You will find that will not always be so. It’s lonely here.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I came in January and I go in December. That’s when my scholarship money stops. I will not be sorry.”

“Do you speak Mandarin?”

“Enough, now. Yes. It has been a nice holiday. I go back to not enough sleep and my mother, who is on the edge of dementia. You know, she goes out at night and waves down cars and tells them it is too late to be driving and too noisy. Up until now, no harm has come to her.”

“You must live in the country.”

“In a village. We have always lived there.”

“She’s lady of the manor then?”

“Pardon me?”

“She feels she has some authority there?”

“Oh yes. We employ many people on our farms.”

“But that didn’t interest you?”

“No. It interests my brothers.”

Someone in the corridor cleared their throat and spat. A silence lengthened. The city hummed. “What time is it?”

“It’s ten before one. Do you want to get some rest?”

“No. I couldn’t sleep now. There’s some water in a pan in the fridge, if you are feeling benevolent. I am thirsty.”

“Here,” she said, and he took a glass of it and gulped it down. “You must take salt too. We sweat so much here. Sometimes you change your clothes three times a day.” She poured him more water. “Your fridge is empty. What will you eat for breakfast? I will bring some fruit and cheese and coffee. Milk is difficult, so you must drink it black and take green tea.” He heard her get up, then she was back and loading my fridge.

“It’s very kind of you, Gisela.”

There was a pause, then “What children men are, needing to be looked after.”

“It’s very good of you. I’m quite used to looking after myself, as it happens.”

”There are places you can buy cooked food on the campus. There are market stalls, but you must wash and dry fruit carefully, and a shop near the North Gate, which sells unsweetened bread. You need to like rice and forget potatoes.” Outside there was a sudden barrage of croaks. He drank more water and glanced at her. Gisela had style.

“Perhaps I was rude to that old guy?”

“He is rude. He gives advice without asking.”

“What has he been telling you?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He closed his eyes again but somewhere close by a train

hooted impatiently. It startled him awake. Gisela was staring at the ceiling, legs crossed, foot tapping in mid-air. In her sleeveless dress, her arms seemed extraordinarily long. As if she felt the weight of his eye, she turned her head and smiled. She said, “Even drunk you are more interesting to talk to. It’s a lonely place. Fatima has cabin fever.” She revolved a finger at her temple.

“I’m not so drunk now. I’m wondering what I have got into?”

“What have you left behind?”

“A house full of books and spiders.” It seemed a good reply. She rolled her brown eyes at me. He wondered if he would regret candour and decided he did not care. “A lonely life. I came to escape myself but the first thing I did today was shave off my beard to see who was underneath it. I grew it to annoy my father when I went to university.” She laughed, a pleasant sound. “When I got there the first person I met became my nemesis years later. I never knew what I said. She made a hobby out of loathing me. She was ambitious and had a long memory, and she proceeded to become Dean. She retired me early. She never worked out why I was so grateful when she told me the bad news. Not long after she was telling most of the old English faculty the same. She went on to be made Pro-Vice-Chancellor for the way in which she had destroyed her academic discipline.” Gisela considered this and her red fingernails. She was a woman of experience.

“The students here are very wonderful. They will like you. They are studious and do what you ask. They respect age and experience. Your Chinese colleagues are the same. They will not ask you home, because even the professors do not have big apartments, but you will be all right with them because you have been a university teacher. So many who come here are hardly graduated even, like Marvin. They cannot afford to pay attractive salaries because of the exchange rate. Of course, these religious people come free. It’s only a problem for the University if they are too, what do you say?

“Aggressive? I should send the lot packing.”

“No, they do good work, work hard. The rest does not matter.”

“Perhaps not, in this country.”

“I heard that a couple of years ago, in another province, they collected up some American evangelists and their literature, took them to the airport and put them on a plane.”

“Beaut.”

“But if they will teach English, cost nothing, and work hard?” She shrugged, chin to shoulder, very European. It was very pleasant to talk intimately to someone like her. He tried to say this. He wanted to tell her about his miserable love life, but as if she sensed it, she was on her feet.

“You need sleep.”

“I’m fine.”

“Good,” she said. She was gone in an instant.

He locked the door after her and, in the night, heard the slither of Chinese

slippers going by and, sometimes, the squeak of rats. The city's population of brown rats, he came to know, was many times that of humans, and there were millions of those.

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The hospital's cross
Runs like blood
In the undulant pool

The moon has silenced the birds
White dishes gape
After its ascent

Bats scream as they catch
Celestial signals
About world futures

The city's monstrous life
Glows and roars and
China's autumn evening is
Starless

*

Red star, white star…He thought the last word might make a title as he screwed up the wad of previous drafts, then sat and considered the use he made of capitals. Once they had been a technique of defamiliarisation, then they had become normal and discarded. It was post-modern irony to resurrect them, was it? Or was it a gesture of false modesty? Capitals *might* make people pay attention once more, and he thought that if lines worked properly, punctuation was superfluous. e.e. cummings had dispensed with capitals, or his typewriter had, and the result had been interesting, diverting. It was a question of stripping the language of poetry down, cleansing it of the duplicitous prevarications of prose. Some poets scattered parts of poems around the page like body parts from serial murder of sense, or wrote in montage so tangentially and hyperbolically that they might have been better employed constructing cryptic crosswords. It was as if the advance of literacy had caused the arts to retreat into esotericism. It was an unsolved puzzle still. Of course it had been necessary to burst from the existing representations, collusive as they were, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg had done it, not being part of the hunting classes, but what had come next was often fascistic and sterile elitism in content…Eventually you just did what you

could. You could not *choose* the poems you made. They just came. He looked at his first draft and tried to judge if this last had achieved much more. It had, so he clipped them together and put them in his folder. It was a hopeless pursuit, really: nobody knew what was good, and certainly not what was excellent. There was no consensus as the old bourgeois culture was dumbed down under Americanisation. He thought of himself as akin to a monk in a Dark Age scriptorium, but not so much copying as trying to preserve something worthwhile from the barbarians.

'Dumbing-down' was to do with homogenisation and economies of scale. In the city, among the myriad Chinese characters, he had seen the familiar corporate logos and slogans with pleasure where standardised junk food was on offer. The new aspirant class ostentatiously swung plastic bags from such places. Gisela told him that they were working hard on promoting ice-cream. The yellow cow being a poor milker, milk products were not a staple part of Chinese diet, and the necessary enzymes for digestion were sparse. He hated the city, the people jams and crush, the heat…and when you passed into the modern emporia and new hotels, flunkeys opened door and bowed and the temperature and humidity dropped magically. He never went there if he could avoid it, relied on the others to bring him alcohol and Western food.

The telephone rang. Li: "What does 'At Home card' mean?"

"It's an invitation to visit someone. 'Professor Li will be "at home" on October the tenth at half-past two.'"

"All I could find was that George Bernard Shaw wrote to Lady Bagshaw: 'George Bernard Shaw will *also* be "at home" at …on...' And now I see the joke. Thank you."

He made a cup of coffee. Down below in the blue pool a hundred Chinese students splashed and yelled. Nobody said he could not go in too, but he needed a medical certificate, and that took a good deal more organising than anyone he could be bothered with. Among those neat bodies he would have felt like a hippopotamus. They were such starers! Off the campus people from the country, who had never seen a Westerner, walked up open-mouthed, then would point and say excitedly 'Gweilo!' Staring at his hairy arms and legs. 'Gweilo!' It meant 'foreign devil', which was earned by the British attempt to deprave the Chinese via Indian hemp. When they resisted, we Christians showed the bastards, but we and the other would-be colonists never overcame the disdain of their elite. Communism was a means of excluding the dreaded Gweilo. Now here we were again and his religious colleagues had brought the opium of the people for free, this time, bless them. There was a dry pragmatism about the Deng dynasty.

Gisela said the twenty-first century would be Chinese. She asked if he had been given any tins of moon cakes and said that they would feel sorry for him, being apart from his family at the Moon Ceremony, which had just passed. He hadn't known what the cakes, , were for, filled with chestnut gelatine with an egg yolk floating, and having tasted one and finding it too sweet, he had given the rest to the girls in reception who had been delighted. He hadn't even noticed the full moon, let alone the students

with their coloured paper lanterns sitting in groups on the lawns between the library and teaching block, and sending messages of love to bounce like radar back to their families and singing songs or reciting poems to the white jade rabbit or lady of the moon. (She told him that student joke was that when they went home after Year One, the neighbours said that they looked like city-slickers; after Year Two they were called ‘foreign devils’; after Year Three they were asked if they recogised their parents.) It was a festival of family unity, like Christmas without commercial exploitation, and he had seen none of it. He seemed to see nothing but the press of students along the campus roads or the multitudes outside the gates.

*

beyond the gates

all hours cyclists in shoals merge
and diverge and children hang on
for dear life they
dare not fall
asleep.
on thundering roads of exponential growth
their pedaling parents spit
air coating tongue and leaf

numerous as minutes since 300 B.C.
for 5000 years their bones have marked
long marches through dynastic dreams
and deserts of imperial obsession
Darwinian exemplars
of genetic endurance
without a character for god.

*

He had not known what the banquet was for, nor why he was invited, but once he was seated amongst the hierarchy at the round table with the dumb waiter turning at its centre and the split-skirted girls in high-collared red and gold uniforms circulating with wine, beer and a clear spirit like schnapps or vodka, it seemed too late to inquire. The grave men were talking solemnly, suited and tied, and he occupied himself with his chopsticks, anxious to perform well, stabbing like a heron at what took his fancy, not knowing whether it was dog, cat, snake, or merely pig. After a while, when the

heat and noise had built and he was glad that he was not wearing a tie, he began to think that he had made as much a mistake in mixing hop, grape and grain as he had in coming at all. Nobody had said more than two words in English. He was there as a kind of curio, perhaps.
He had spoken up in a silence. “Tofu and sushi! Why are these poets edible?” They all looked steadily at him, then went back to their talk. On the way out, however, when he stumbled on the stairs, several hands steadied him and spoke companionably.

In the taxi Li said, “Why do you pun?” Cheng said, “Poets play with words.” Li said, “It’s confusing, you know.” Greg said, “I’m a Confucian.” They helped him out at the F.E.B. He went carefully up the steps, sweating.

*

Days of the Autumn Tiger

Year One’s first month Drill:
The boys stride out too long
So girls are out of step
Arms windmill in the squads
On the melting courts
Shadows are sun etched

What randy fun for British sergeants
But the P.L.A. call sober commands.

A supernumerary NCO muscles up
hangs cruciform on bars pointing
the toes of his camouflaged shoes
above a pieta of giggling girls.

I meet Wu Man-li paediatrist wife
To Huang Jun (‘Don Huan’ and ‘Womanly’)
Back from a conference in Kunming
On the improved diet which makes
Her ten year-old daughter taller
Xing-Xing had hugged a white rabbit
“When she found she had eaten
Her pet she wept and wept.”

A yellow duck grasped by its wings
Leaves a trail of puzzled quacks

as it banks into an apartment block
where it will get the chop

I buy bread and wine go sweating back
to the fourth floor in the Foreign Experts' Block.
Next door the priest covertly intones
"This is my body…"

*

Journal.
30/xi

Paul is a disciplined scholar. I never turn up to find that he has not typed up the poems he had chosen for translation, annotated them by hand, translated each character and its nuances literally, shown the rhyme scheme, and written some Tennysonian doggerel in the manner of Chinese academic translators. He urges me to include all the meanings and not to deviate in pursuit of some other aim. Mine is to grasp the beauty of the poem without crushing it with scholastic rigour and write an English poem in response. We do not always please each other.

He is very sharp in defence of Tang and Song poetry, which my students tell me expresses the essence of their culture (that word, not 'country') better than anything in the intervening ten centuries. In fact, or so they claimed, that was why they could tell me nothing about modern poetry. (I asked to meet poets to no result, suspect that they lie low and are thought to be as dangerous to the republic as Plato said. I feel ambivalent about this: imagine poets being so potent! Ours are suppressed by the dreaded market, if that can be distinguished from the state.) Tang poetry, written when Beowulf was a few prefatory grunts in the embered night, the sophistication of a millennium's literature, but I came to it not for itself but as a means of meeting Paul Ye and with a slight disdain for its limp, if limpid, sadness and regret.

Perhaps he detects some arrière pensée. He explains 'the bitterness of the bureaucracy', the way scholar-poets were exiled to the provinces, if they were displeasing the court, and continually moved to limit their influence to their given authority. It makes me see how it comes to be the case that our tenure is limited to two years…And how such men, like Paul, endured maltreatment in a stoic or Daoist(?) manner and were not effete as I had ignorantly assumed. Poems of farewell to colleagues are *sad, for friends might never meet again in that vast land and fraught life.*

*

Saying Goodbye to Meng Haoran
At the Yellow Crane Tower

'Goodbye old friend!' The Third Moon's
mists and flowers all around
as your sail turns to blue sky.
The Yangtse flows unperturbed.

Li Bo 701-762 C.E.

*

In English you can say words (eg. 'Hi!' or 'Hello') in many different tones to indicate your mood. In Mandarin there are four ways of saying a monosyllabic character, referring to four different things in the world. This means that there is a regular set of four sounds, a music, which the poet can employ. There are far more rhymes than in English, so that in the four line verse of the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.) the first, second and fourth lines could always be rhymed. I can't offer to emulate the music, but what I can do is use as many syllables as there are characters in a line, which means either five or seven syllables.(Poems consist of one or two quatrains.) This discipline of concision influenced Japanese verse forms, such as the haiku, and a millennium later, the succinct epiphanies of the Imagists in the West. This is the route, I think, via which to make poems contemporary English poems.

It needs diplomacy: Paul is not alone in a liking for ancient poeticisms, such as 'methinks', 'thou', and 'o'er'. I've looked at dozens of translations by Chinese scholars, which ramble about and struggle to rhyme like Rupert Bear, and American academics also have similar tendencies and suppose their slang fits poems written by courtiers between the Seventh and Tenth centuries: "Shit!" one made the poet exclaim on seeing the Lushan Falls. 'I got smashed', says another. Ezra Pound's Cathay usurped poems and ran some together. Imagine doing that to Shakespeare's sonnets! (That other young arriviste in his top hat and spats, lock-stepping T.S.Eliot, wrote that Ezra Pound was 'the inventor of Chinese poetry'.) Achilles Fang, doyen of translators (but no poet) said of Chinese verse that 'the rhetorical progression is often alogical and the syntax ambiguous' and to that must be added the physical charm of the ancient pictograms, the display of meaning in classical calligraphy, and more, a specific trope, neither simile nor metaphor, in which this visual pleasure, seems redoubled by the adept arrangement of characters in charming ways. A poem I have encountered, for example, began with five nouns (they have no use for articles) arranged beautifully to Chinese eyes.

Beyond us and ineffable...

Paul is shrewd as well as amiable, tough as well as sensitive, and sometimes cannot conceal that he thinks I am a barbarian in the porcelain shop. I did not care to tell him my flippancy conceals that I find many poems he gives me, on which I dutifully spend hours, both footling and wooden in English. To be honest, I only began on the task because I wanted to talk

to a Chinese intellectual. He, in turn, wants to hear current English. So every Friday afternoon I turn up, unless we have argued too hotly - in which case he has a strategic cold - and we get through five or six translations.

Of course, we talk of other things, but mostly we work hard for a couple of hours through all kinds of weather, sometimes in the garden, or in his study. We get along very well. Generally speaking.

*

Reflections upon Unfortunate Scholars

You say that you regret nothing.
Black hornets skid around their nest,
your cage-birds bounce and sing,
you fill my glass and start to talk
of the Fourth Century poet
whose works you have translated,
Dao Yuanming, who, despairing
of officialdom, put himself out of court…
"Preferred the idiocy of rural life?"
You pause, then shake your head,
insist that seasons teach discipline,
wisdom grows from flowers' brevity…
Dao met the starveling moon's enquiry
with vibrant poems and his glass
of chrysanthemum wine held high.
We clink and drink to him who lost
or gave away fifteen centuries ago
poems schoolchildren now can quote:
"Ars longa, vita brevis!"

In the winking, evening light your cats
get up, collapse in new sun shafts
through the flexing bamboo filigree
where black butterflies with poisonous wings
flutter chaotically above the bath
in which you preserve the local frog.

Beyond this hedge horns, bells, brakes
stop our talk almost our hearts
as students yell. Mosquitoes plague

my ankles so I slap and scratch without
your Daoist tolerance. You wish, you say,
to emulate your pets (but not the turtles
who make love like rowing boats?) pour
Zhu Jiang beer and then tell me how,
when you landed from the ferry where now
The White Swan allows the rich to pay per night
what some villages earn a year, you found
a welcoming committee with clubs and rope
and one with a gun who pleaded just to
shoot you *once,* if only in a leg, whilst the rest
yelled 'MONSTER', and dragged you off
in a dunce's cap, distinguished prof.

They brought you to bless the Jesuit school
which taught you to confess with sophistry
sufficient to captivate zealots: you recalled
conversations from years and years before
in Lhasa, Urumqui and Ulan Bator, which
MUST BE CHECKED
Thus time passed.
You gave the bullet a miss. Instead for years
and years you were yoked to buckets of piss,
but knowing how emperors drown in odious gush,
you never spilt a drop…or hoed down row on
row of weeds tangled like the rules of fools;
and nightly whipping yourself, laying it on,
flagellant to your own order, you beat them!
They put you in charge of shit and swill:
you made a small profit from coins which
rolled from trouser pockets into the pit;
in the sty's stench, you addressed the swine
in perfect German, English, French which
the pigs, at least, understood. Ten years!
Ten years you all endured. Then absolution,
reinstatement, restitution…for those who lived.

Oh what, I wonder, do the post-grads make
of my soft irony, that 'humour of slaves'
deep in the Englit soul, after your hard
brilliance? They still respect the old .

We have seen Great Causes come to
curious effects; the cities of the word
overthrown by videogoths; the rational
light turn thick with admass avarice.

Twilight.
Flowers have closed. Our voices echo…
The cage-birds huddle and the hornets sleep.
Now the cats stretch in their welcome yoga;
we stand and bow; your wife comes home.

The title of the poem is from Tao Yuanming 365-427 C.E.

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He had managed to get some spaghetti and invited Gisela, Ted, and Gargantua to share it. He made a bowl of spag. bogs. and asked them to bring a glass and suitable bowl or plate. Ted cried off late, bowing and fluttering his hands, and saying he felt unwell. He wasn't. It was the acceptable Chinese excuse. While Greg waited for the women, who were late, he held a glass against the wall and heard him muttering repetitively next door.

Patti arrived with a huge bottle of cola which she put on the small table with a thump, saying that it aided her digestion. Her symptoms were to furnish most of the conversation. It was impossible to deflect her from this free consultation as she hunched, huge and perspiring, and hacked at the spaghetti with the side of her fork and took it up like pneumatic blackbird. He admired her earnestness, or innocence of irony, except when she responded combatively to his attempt to tease her away from the nausea her malaria pills induced, the side-effects of arthritis pills for which she took another pill, the special hair wash she needed, ear infection she suspected, asthma, leaky heart-valve, and with too little circumlocution, drips from her private parts. Gisela responded solemnly, Greg remained mute, except to offer more spaghetti, he had cooked for four. On the second occasion she fired up. "Hey, I'm resting!"

The contrast between the two was cruel, Gisela coolly listening, sipping wine and deftly twiddling and avoiding saying anything if she could, Gargantua sweating and spluttering and quaffing from the bottle. Greg drank beer and could feel his good humour and sensed that there was some gender collusion in their duet. Neither had complimented him on his cooking. His frustration was channeling, he realised, into that Aussie billabong of ambivalence for a louche daughter of European landowners with all their savoir-faire; and the certainties of brash America, sick with pills and junk food, giving doctorates in pulp literature and pop culture. When the discussion turned to the lessons we can learn from our turds, he pretended to cramp and walked out. They paid no attention.

He climbed up to the roof where the laundering was done and hung from wires which neatly took him under the chin. For the first time he wished he was back home. The hot night was not so humid, the monsoon season long finished, but the air smelled like singed felt. Apart from his teaching time, which delighted him, and his weekly jousts with Paul, which sustained him, life in the F.E.B. was Spartan and his colleagues rebarbative. His few trips into the city depressed him, the heat and crowds and beggars…He was in a kind of cultural prison. He wished that Stella had replied. It had been a glamorous way into the future. He no longer thought he could abide another year in China. He looked at the lights of the city twinkling and tried to imagine what it must be like to be Professor Li or Paul in such a place. It was not possible.

When he got back they had gone. They had closed the door behind them. He had not taken his key with him. He went down to Reception where the girl was on the telephone and wasn't going to spoil an amusing conversation for the likes of him. He leant and waited and drummed his fingers on the marble to make certain she understood that was what he was doing. The girls were all lovely and happy and cheeky with him, which he enjoyed. Now he didn't. On the wall the clocks told the time. All of China thought it was eleven, which was Beijing time, and London, Paris, New York, Moscow and Tokyo variously disagreed. Another girl came yelling in Cantonese and the girl on duty put down the telephone and hated him. "Key." I began, clenching finger and thumb, twisting his wrist, turning a door knob. Of course, she affected not to understand. He wanted to shout obscenely. He lunged over the top of the marble counter and grabbed her pen and some paper and, with some difficulty, drew a key. He wrote the word in capitals and gave it to her. "Key."

"Key?"

"That's it."

"No key."

"I have no key, right."

"No key."

"I held my hand out." KEY!" She flinched.

"Hey," said Patti behind me, "Did we lock you out? What happened to you?" She was smiling down in her slippers and dressing gown, there to replenish her cola supply from the dispensing machine.

"Felt crook. Needed some air."

"Did you vomit again?"

"Again? No, I didn't."

"Well the cooking was just fine." She grinned.

"Thanks." The machine thundered and flashed and she scooped up another litre bottle.

"Enjoy," said the Receptionist, and giggled. They exchanged a few words and the girl handed her the passkey. Patti handed it over.

"She says be sure to bring it right back straight away." He hurried away as if called by nature in order not to have any further conversation, but as he climbed he

heard her booming away in Mandarin and laughing. Safely inside his door he cleared up, poured himself a whisky, went to his desk in the bedroom and his translation.

*

Night Mooring at Maple Bridge

Crows call down the frosty moon,
Riding lamps sway in the trees.
At midnight a temple bell
Soothes my heart from Windy Hill.

Zhang-Ji (766-819)

*

"Are all Australian men woman-haters?"

"Bunch of bastards," He agreed, happy to be escaping. The Macau bus bounced them together, then apart. Dust and exhaust came in the open windows; occasional phlegm and cigarette ends went in the other direction. It had not been easy to get up and he had neither eaten nor drunk before the university car was blasting its horn down below at six-thirty, They were late to start with but even at that hour the drive had been tortuous amongst a million bicycles, cars, vans, trucks, all conducting a cacophonous dialogue with horns and bells. In the park outside the hotel, on the worn grass, another million had been exercising at Tai Chi, Su Bashi, whirling wooden swords, flags and spears. It made him dizzy to watch: any morning, every morning, wherever *he* was, *they* were doing this. And then in the evening, Gisela said, they did it again. It was better than games: old ladies were preponderant, fat old men, kids, not just sporting young hearties displaying in their various uniforms.

He had shoved past pimps who came and spoke quietly at his elbow, then saw the destination he wanted to see, had climbed on board before he realised Gisela wasn't behind him but several over-burdened Chinese were and wanted him out of the way. He had sat down, but a tiny old woman with angry eyes seemed to think it was in her seat. She began to shout. He showed her his ticket and sat tight,
then Gisela was calling through the window, "Come out of there, you idiot! Greg, you're on the wrong bus."

As soon as he moved the crone tried to get past him, but he had to get his bag down. She burrowed away at the back of his legs until he lost his temper. "Wait a minute!" You did not shout at old people like that. There was a great deal of silence. He had got his bag and begun determinedly for the door, aggressively pushing by the people in the gangway.

Gisela had thought it very funny. "So the aggressive Westerner has no

respect for the old!" He wished he had not agreed to come and still did as they bounced and swerved, hooting and braking through the city, then the straggling outskirts, where the broken paving became packed earth on which stall-holders and small businesses, like barbers and dentists operated. The sun got to them but it wasn't possible to change seats, and he cursed to himself and hugged his hunger and thirst. Latin music syncopated mesmerically with the bus's rhythms. A fine dust was swirling in sunbeams, incentive enough to keep one's mouth shut even if it had been possible to converse without shouting and he had felt like it.

They were building the new road, a concrete super-highway, alongside the old one, and hundreds of young people were carrying baskets of stone on their heads in file or levering rusted mesh reinforcing into place before wobbling nozzles evacuated slurry over it. Now and then the bus thrummed along the new surface, then it was back to the swaying and bouncing rumba, but the countryside was beginning, the small houses amongst orchards, the ponds full of white ducks, the water buffaloes making slo-mo progress across huge paddocks and paddies. All the flat and alluvial delta was threaded by streams, rivers, cut by canals which had to be bridged, and on either hand people bent to the crops. Rice was harvested three times a year; growth never stopped. It overwhelmed him. His stomach rumbled. He hoped to God that he was not taken short. That was always his concern. The splattered public squats separated by three-foot walls horrified him. He had said as much to Paul, who had harshly asked why he shied from revealing his common humanity and grown grim when he had corrected the last word to 'animality.' They had left it at that, but fear of catching some bug and being taken short lurked always.

Suddenly Gisela said, as the bus queued to cross a new bridge: "Would you rather have come with Patti? She was going to ask you. She got the address from Fatima."

"Jesus, no!" It pleased her. She squeezed his arm.

She was wearing a kind of 'white hunter' kit: A wide-brimmed hat with a bit of a veil which she had over her nose and mouth, a trouser suit in the same kind of light khaki. She had made it plain that she was talking about separate rooms, and that was all right with him. He was going fifty and expecting the wheels to fall off. The Infanta had found her a pousada and done all the telephoning. Gisela said she had urged her to book two seats so that she would not have to sit next to some contagious Chinee, but she had decided to take him instead.

When we pulled off the road everybody got off and rushed to get to squats. "Are you thirsty? I could go and buy you a coke," she said.

"I don't drink it on political grounds." She obviously repressed what came next.

"Well, I'll find something else. A beer, maybe?"

"Whatever. Thanks. And a biscuit or chocolate?"

He watched her ascent of the rutted slope among the crowd, none of whom reached her shoulder. She was the only 'Foreign Expert' with whom he had any rapport. He had always found intelligent women a problem, which had not helped

professionally, although he did his best to control it and rarely admitted it to himself. He tended to give such students a few marks extra in case he had let this bias interfere with his judgement. It was all over, that kind of problem, little Chinese girls rang no bells. They were so small it would be like paedophilia. How did they ever have such fat babies? Gisela was coming back, a can in each hand. He decided to try to be nicer, and slaking his thirst, it wasn't too hard, he was so grateful to her, munched chocolate and the day improved.

At last the Pearl, a serious river, a kilometre or more of deep, dark strength on which ancient barges slid and large ships loomed. It was a way out to the South China Sea and the world. Now they were on finished road, rolling smoothly to a tollgate at which various police in green uniforms took turns to look at papers, open doors, lift car boots, sit about, play cards. One got on board and stared, keen-eyes methodical, as he walked down the bus, shaking his head at their passports. This was the Zongshan, the New Economic Zone, and after a tunnel under low hills, they found a sort of Shangri-La of wide and clean streets with flowerbeds and lawns and shady trees, modern and stylish apartment blocks and factories. "This is what 'The Third Way' is like."

"You think it is a socialist market?" He nodded. "You are naïve."

"For China the Third Way is the only way," he said. "The Party can't ignore the peasantry."

"What about Tiananmen Square?"

"Which version, what really happened or what the American press corps decided?" The bus swung into a service station where many alighted as the driver refuelled. There was no litter, people strolled, vehicles cruised, trees blossomed. Gisela stared out of the bus window, head turned away.

We lurched into Gong-bei, which filled the space before the Mecanese border. It was as scruffy and run down and due to be levelled as soon as Macau became Chinese again. The bus stopped at the kerb in a street of shanty-shops and all stood with their baggage and pushed. They got out last and followed across a packed square in the midday heat to what looked like a cinema in cream tile with green glass windows and wide steps up to the doors and a foyer where people joined various queues.

Soon we were through the brief formality of leaving China and plodding the worn asphalt paths across no-man's land, where the original gate, an ornate one-span stone arch supported the Portuguese flag on its mast. They had been there since the Fifteenth Century. The paths went round it, full of heavily laden people bearing loads of curious things like lavatory paper. Then another stamp and they were in Macau.

It was immediately different. The architecture was European and the streets were empty of bicycles. People were leap-frogging to get to the next taxi and already the furthest were well down the road. It was very silly. They agreed that an orderly queue, so long as you knew what it was for, was the epitome of Western civilisation. Small buses were stopping across the road and they decided that they were the answer. It then occurred to him that he had no Portuguese money. She had. That was

what those softly spoken blokes around the buses first thing had on offer, and she had the sense to stop and buy some. It was hot and the clear air emphasised it. It was well into siesta time and still he had not eaten. They caught a bus, got out in the city and she stood him tea and sausage and egg and toast. He taught her the expression 'yum', which cheered her. They walked in the shade of narrow streets with balconies where cats stared and flowers bloomed. Down alleys and through arches they saw courts where laundry dried. She said it was so like Europe that she wanted to weep. It certainly wasn't much like China. They took a taxi to the pousada which was on a hill and cool with tiled floors and tapestries. His room was a delight with a normal hotel bed, thick carpets, a beautiful bath and shower of which he took immediate advantage, then lay and luxuriated on the bed in the sunshine. It had gone when he woke and Gisela was rapping. He wrapped the bath towel and let her in. "Oh," she said," you have different peasants' hats on your walls. They will be different from different areas, maybe. You been sleeping? I went for a walk. We cannot have dinner here. We can have breakfast and further up the hill there is a dining room where we can have lunches. This is owned by the tourist organisation and they train staff and entertain officials. Fatima told me this." She drew his curtains and sat in the armchair. "That poor woman is a forty year old virgin, Ja? She was very in love with a man in Lisbon and he did not even notice her, that is why she is coming to China."

"Ja," he said. She didn't seem to notice.

"I found a shop that sells European food, French wine and all kind of good things. Portugal is in the European Union. We could buy them and eat here, but I do not think that they will like that. What do you think?"

"Stuff 'em. We can buy plastic cutlery and paper plates, but I thought that you would want to be out there making the scene, doing the tango and dining in a Portuguese restaurant."

"You want to do this?"

"Tomorrow."

"Get dressed," she told him. "We will go shopping."

They walked down the steep hill in the twilight, the birds in the shrubbery quiet but the insects drilling and trilling, stars bright between stylish apartment towers. Gisela preferred to walk a metre in front, so it was that he found himself staring in the windows of a building in the street below. A small Chinese boy with a straight fringe jumped up and down, shaking his hands at his side. Out of sight a woman exclaimed, yelped, moaned, groaned. The boy looked up and saw him staring, paused for a moment, then began bouncing with excitement, or perhaps anguish again.

He was happy to let Gisela do the shopping, she knew the wines and cheeses and European brands. He held the bags. When they climbed back to the pousada, the light was out where the agitated boy had been.

In his room they drank gin and vermouth from tooth glasses. It tasted like nectar and he felt exuberant after only two; then they scooped caviar and ate pate′

on salted biscuits; after that, with Nuits St Georges, they gobbled up thin and rawish beef and ate tomatoes and lettuce and cucumber with French rolls and Irish butter. Gisela had found Swiss cheese, which he had to enjoy, and then they had only powdered coffee but good Martel. They had found Portuguese music on the radio and he wondered if he should suggest that they danced. But they were not looking at each other, there was a tension, so he stared in his glass and nodded to the music. Suddenly she seemed to be drunk, stood and swayed and twirled, staggered and arrived on his lap. She kissed with her mouth open straight away. He breathed in the smell of her, responded. It was like swimming really, you didn't forget.

"Are you sure?"

"I have my needs."

He rose to the occasion. She gave him a sheath and anointed herself. He humped away and she took up the rhythm and pulled his mouth to hers roughly, but it was only when he thought of Stella, that magic girl, that he climaxed. He brought her off too with his fingers before falling asleep.

He woke alone in the half-light, got up and tiptoed onto the balcony. Birds were piping in the bush below and beyond the huge tower blocks the Eastern rim of night was red, then orange. A sliver of the old moon was fleeing hopelessly for the dark zenith. His senses were revivified. Could it really be because he had had sexual release? Or was it his work among the Daoist and Buddhist poets? Or both? He went back to the bed's warm luxury and slept.

She was at his door early, smiling and full of vigour.
She walked in and looked at the mess, began tidying up, came across his open notebook on the dressing table.

An Early departure in the Shang mountains

Rising to early harness bells
And thoughts of home in setting off.
Moonset, cocks crow from the inn's thatch,
Prints already on the white bridge,
Crisp oak leaves on the mountain tracks,
Orange blossoms at staging posts…
I recall dreaming of Duling…
The geese flocking on meanders.

Wen Tinyun (812-870)

"Well," she said to him as he sat on the bed's edge, hands hanging between his knees, "This is Prima - first class."

"No. A failure. Too many syllables. I can't get below eight a line. Should be

seven."

"Why?"

"Tang poems are seven or five characters."

"Let it be the exception that proves the rule. Nobody counts poems, do they?"

"I do. What wonderful English you have." She shrugged.

"I wish my Mandarin was as good just now."

"Look," he said, "I need to pay a visit."

"Where?"

"Answer the calls of nature."

"What?" She laughed at him, pretending not to understand, but she dumped the rubbish in the bin and left him. He lay down for a while before he went to breakfast.

"Lazy bones", she said cheerfully, elbows on a sunny tablecloth, coffee cup poised before her smile. He went to a side table where there were bowls of fruit, cereals, toasters, and spooned grapefruit. The tiled floor was glossy ochre and there were blue and white panels of antique tiles making pictures of sailing ships and junks and the old town on the white walls. A breeze, which came across the roofs from the sea, ruffled long white curtains. The tables with comfortable chairs were mostly empty. Others contained a few solitary officials in suits and ties and there were a couple of families, the children wide-eyed with the effort of behaving. He balanced his dish back. "Not like our restaurant where the Chinese are all yelling 'Speak louder,' at each other," she said. There was hardly a sound, a little scraping and crunching and the clicking heels of two beautiful Mecanese girls who brought dishes to the tables with smiles.

"I didn't realise how I missed this kind of thing. I'm even going to eat eggs and bacon, something I never do at home."

"What do you eat?"

"Vegemite and toast."

"What's that?"

"It's a thick and bitter paste, better if it is eaten with butter too, but I don't do that. I just glue two pieces of toast together with it and have sugarless black coffee. I try to slim."

"But you are in good shape for a man your age."

"That's what we call a 'left-handed compliment'."

"Ah, I learn something." She did not try to make amends. He wondered why he thought that she might.

"I'll be fifty after Christmas." Now she dissembled elegantly, patting my hand and smiling.

"I too am reaching middle-age."

"You! You are young and beautiful and you will stay that way for a long time yet." The waitress stopped play and he ordered. She seemed to be part Portuguese,

more brown than yellow with a charmingly hooked nose. Gisela wanted more coffee. A helicopter came whirling over the hill, not much higher than the tower blocks of apartments.

"I have been thinking how little I know about you," she said. "Ye told me that you are a poet, yes? And you taught at a university but retired very early. You are not gay, as somebody suggested, but you have no relationships and it is a long time since you were with a woman, although you are not ugly. Please explain yourself."

"That's it. You've said everything. I didn't know that you knew Paul." How discrete he was. "He's very discrete."

"I speak German with him once a week. He also speaks French with Fatima."

"And American with Gargantua?"

""Oh no," she said, shaking her head solemnly. "Why do you not talk about your poetry to me? *You* are discrete. "

"Why don't you tell me about tumours?" She thought this very funny. People turned at her laughter. It was very pleasant, the white curtains billowing in the breeze from the South China Sea, sunlight dazzling off the crockery. "Poems and tumours are quite similar. They grow secretly, then suddenly, there they are. I wish that they were always benign but at times they have to be excised from the subconscious with pain and suffering."

"Now you exaggerate, Greg."

"You are allowed to if you are a poet. Some poems insist on being written, but that doesn't make them good necessarily. Some are, but the critics, who are often competitive poets, or academics frustrated in their scholarly careers, vivisect them. Some people make a reputation by publishing this type of poem but garbling the message, in various ways concealing it by disarticulation, as I call it, chopping it up and dispersing it among fragments of euphony or whimsy or horror or whatever."

"I didn't understand all that."

"Poets have to make public their feelings. Even if they are famous, or rich, they have to keep doing it. They have to keep making poems." He had finished his bacon and eggs and regretted that his mind had been elsewhere. He was watching her intently to see if she would be less than candid. She picked up crumbs of toast from her plate and put them on her tongue. "Now you tell me why you want to slice into people."

"Maybe power, but mostly to do good, to improve a life or to ease it."

"I think poets might say something very similar."

"Yes," she said. He got some toast and they brought his coffeepot. She watched him fiddling the plastic covers off the marmalade and butter. "But maybe it's best not to ask such questions of yourself. You have a problem to deal with, better not begin each time with philosophy." It was delightful to talk, now the heat was off.

"And Paul, what do you think of him?"

"He is a great scholar. Each day he works on the classics of his languages. He is a 'perfectionist', is that it? And will not play his violin because he cannot do so

as he did. He thinks that you are planning a book of translations, but he is not pleased by the idea.“

“Well he’s wrong…but it’s worth thinking about. I wondered why we spent so much time on really boring poems…You can’t say that to him, of course, or he gets fired up, doesn’t he?” Greg had only half-formed the thought of a collection.

“Never! He is a gentle man.”

“’Amongst men a snapper, amongst women a groper’.”

“What?”

“I’m quoting a Kiwi poet, Glover.”

“He says you have some genius.”

“Well that’s very kind of him. I wonder why the idea of a book doesn’t please him?”

“He says the poems are for themselves, not for gain. He is a kind of Daoist.” She put her hand on his, laughed, head back. “They sent him to learn from the revolutionary peasants and he did!”

“You have to admire the bloke, ay?”

“He is so handsome too.”

“Is he?”

“Fatima…”

“No! That praying mantis!”

“But he loves his wife, Ja? She is very beautiful.”

“She is.”

“What is a ‘praying mantis’?”

“A large and nasty insect.”

“Poor Fatima. You are not nice about her. Perhaps you will not be nice about me? I do not think you like women.”

“Well I do, it’s just years since…”

“Why is that? Do you not go to prostitutes if you have no friends?”

“Jeez, no!” His expression made her laugh.

“You are a shy man.” He was glad that the waitresses were hovering, waiting to clear away. “Have you no relationships?” He shook his head. “Never?”

“I have had two serious ones. The second destroyed the first, then me.” He got up, the chair squealing on the tiles.

They began by walking up the hill, passing the modern dining room and kitchens, until they came to the stone ‘fortress’ promised on the map. It was not very impressive but from its walls you could see most of the town, and down below the plastic bottles that had been emptied on the way up. The sun burned in the clean air.

They walked everywhere. The tourist office was in the central square and they bought postcards and posters of the dragon dance against the cathedral ruins. They walked

to where the towering Bank of China dwarfed everything and beautiful bridges swooped away to the islands, hydrofoils to and from Hong Kong creaming beneath

them among the motorised junks and shipping. She wanted to go in the casino but he refused, and they stopped and had cold drinks in a café. It was busy. A couple sat in front of them, the man speaking forcibly to the Portuguese proprietor who sat a couple of tables away with coffee. When the couple left, saluting jovially, the proprietor stood up. As he walked past another man, a Chinese, he accepted, hand at his side, a note and slipped it in his pocket. Gisela was oblivious, talking about the acceptance, but not fatalism of the Dao, or Way, born of the seasonal imperatives of rural life, faith in natural harmony. If Buddhism was about expunging the ego, Daoism was about controlling it; Stoicism about disciplining the emotions. She loved the idea of China, its teeming, polluted, energetic, the force of its history, pleased her.

They strolled along the coast again until they found the Santiago Hotel. The entrance was in the rock face from which wide stairs led up to the foyer, then the terrace which had tables under shady trees and, beyond a low stone wall, a panorama across the harbour to one of the islands. First they had gin and tonic, watching the junks and coasters, hydroplanes. He wanted to know how she knew that he had not made love for a long time; she wanted to know all about his private life. Did he have his own house? Did he have many friends? Did he come from the city? Perhaps her clever brown eyes were too close together; maybe there was something voracious about her curved lips; possibly all she had told him about herself and her affairs was fiction?

They edged around these matters and agreed that the bourgeois privations and deprivations of their lives in China made them savour their time in Macau, emptying a bottle of white Portuguese wine with fish, then European cheeses. “You wouldn’t be dead for quids,” he had told her. With the second he came to think his reticence was due more to the ordinariness of his life rather than discretion and began a monologue under the trees, head on his palm, her hand on his across the table, gulls swirling past.

”My parents used to speak of ‘Home’. I think that was a kind of status thing: he was headmaster of a primary school in Gippsland and my mother was a city girl who got posted there after she’d trained as a teacher. He’d won a medal for bravery in the war, which he’d spent mostly as a prisoner-of-war in Germany, and so was a leading member of the Returned Servicemen’s League and the local church. He was a good man but always buttoned-up, y’know?”

“Mum was much younger. I was an only child and expected to do well, so I did. Dad’s subjects had been maths and science, so I leant to English, my mum’s subject, and eventually I got a good degree. She enjoyed poetry and read it to me so I went to sleep with the rhythms of poets from before the First World War in my head. When I began to write it, I kept it to myself and surprised them when I first was published in a little magazine. He was as pleased as she was.”

“I liked ornithology and fishing. I did not enjoy games, which was a disappointment to my dad. He was president of the local footie and cricket club. He was strict about how I dressed, no funky gear for me, the headmaster’s son…“ He

stopped and drank the chill wine. He was talking for himself, not her. Four Chinese in suits and ties were getting pink-faced with drink at the next table. One turned, snorked and spat. It seemed like an assertion of cultural superiority. He wanted to remonstrate. London to a brick

they were mainland party officials come to look the territory over prior to taking possession. He looked elsewhere to hide his rancour. Gisela seemed not to have noticed. He liked to feel European with her.

"Yes," she said. "Go on."

"At university I called myself a poet and grew long hair to prove it and wrote the most un-Tennysonian poetry I could contrive. I said that it was 'New York School' and with some others, ran a magazine called Fire Island for a few issues. To my surprise people took it seriously, I suppose because it was mostly unintelligible, and said such verse was 'delightfully mischievous', 'ironic', and so on. It was a claim to superior sensibility, in the manner of those who saw the virgin in the grotto or the tears of a stone Madonna. What I wrote, I thought, might be a bit too private in its symbolism and metaphor, but some of the other stuff was gestural, pretentious, deliberately obscure. It was Ern Malley come again, sub-Mallarmé, post-Dylan Thomas, mellifluous and empty. It wasn't communication, except musically. I got down to my doctorate. I was a focused, disciplined man, like my dad, and when my thesis became a drag, as they do, I thought of his habits of work, term by term, year by year, and completed on time." She re-filled their glasses. "Then I got a job at the university and grew grey in it. I was happy. I had a few affairs but I was happy enough until Norma Cathcart fell off her bicycle. She was weeping with pain when I picked her up and was surprisingly light. I carried her to a bench by the campus lake, and collected the books and her bicycle from the road where she had not seen the rock, which I side-footed into the gutter. She hadn't seen it, I learned, because she hated wearing glasses. She sat and rubbed her ankle and I tried not to see the self-exposure this involved, but talked lightly of this and that whilst she decided nothing was broken or sprained, and agreed that I might buy her a life-sustaining cup of tea."

"Tea became a leitmotif of our relationship. At times of stress whatever time of the day or night there it made a pause whilst we considered our positions, sipped and snapped biscuits and talked things through. Norma taught French, a language with a range of emotional nuances which leaves English cold. She'd lived there for long periods whereas I had only spent a few days at a TIM hotel in Montmartre. It gave her a certain superiority. She'd got tickets on herself, Norma had, in the cultural stakes."

"I think I know that hotel, that little square. Picasso painted in the studio next door…"

"She was always pushing me to perform, get out there and read, but I wouldn't. That was my area and she could keep of it. Like father, like son…I kept away from all literary events and festivals, readings and rantings, and contented myself with placing a poem in the best literary magazines I could in Oz and the UK and the US. I told her my ambition, which is to write three or four really good poems which would

outlast me. She tended to rewards on this side of the grave. So did her parents who lived in Kew. Her father was a dentist; her mother was a dentist's wife. They seemed to veer between wanting Norma married, but not wanting her married to me, wishing me in hell and wanting me to be a success in my academic and poetic careers …Or so I gathered from Norma's Sunday mornings with them. I kept away from them too. For seven years… My parents liked Norma and Norma liked them. They refused to meet Stella."

"The femme fatale, ja?"

"Ja. I'll tell you about her some other time." They were the only table left from lunch. The shadows had shifted so he was perspiring. He could not talk about Stella. It was part superstition, part a kind of religion. And it made him smile at such futility. She frowned. There was wine left but he had drunk enough, put his hand over his glass.

"Why not now?"

"I'm still in love with her."

"Love?" Gisela laughed darkly.

"Schadenfreude?"

"Jawohl." Breath exploded from her lips. "When I was young I fell in love with everybody. Now I have grown up."

"Ah well, you see why I keep my mouth shut."

"You still have contact?"

"A letter to tell me her husband had died. I replied cautiously. No response…But, look, there's always a kind of duologue going on."

"Via the moon?"

"Shit! Yes, if you like. Don't be so bloody arrogant.
That girl burst on me like a supernova." She looked away, chin jerking up. "Like a supernova!" She folded her arms, mouth set, still staring at the harbour.

It was true. It wasn't as if Norma and himself were unhappy. She did hang her face-cloth on what he took to be the rail for the bath mat, and he did tend to spoil her sleep by snoring, but nobody was making a production of these things and they had agreeable work routine and went early on Saturday mornings to Victoria Market for the week's veggies and sprawled about on Sunday mornings listening to Radio National and whatnot. About once a week they went out to eat and saw a film or went to a play or concert, and every other weekend had friends in or went to see them. Norma was gregarious and did the talking. As she liked to do the driving, he drank on her behalf. In the vacations they went to New Caledonia and a couple of times to Tahiti. It was a good life, though there was never talk of legalising it nor having children - apart, that is, from his mum, who desperately wanted a few grandchildren to love. Gisela got up and he watched her walk inside. She was battered, lost, but tough as boots. It occurred to him that she might have pissed off and left him. He poured himself the last of the wine. He was indifferent, slumped, staring at nothing.

His dad had died in 1985, aged 75. He had never managed to get rid off his hostility to that costive, colonial generation, or him. His father was washing up when his mum heard a crash of pots. It upset her that the last thing he might have heard was

her complaint about his clumsiness. She had the full monty for his funeral, the church full, everybody in their best gear. He had read a poem and made him and one or two others weep. It was a hot day and his mum had to be coaxed from the grave side where ants were running in the sandy earth. In dreams his father came back: “Sit up straight!” As if in response he grabbed the arms of his chair and did so to some extent. The waiter was collecting their plates. Greg tapped the bottle and nodded. Why not? Sod her, haughty Swiss bitch!

His mother stayed where she was known and knew everybody: a township of a few thousand with a general store and a post office at the muddy Northern end of Westernport Bay - a café and a petrol station, a couple of wooden churches, the RSL and sports club. She often talked of going back to Elwood, where her family lived. His dad’s family farmed near Wangaratta. While he knew cousins on his mother’s side, he had no real memories of his father’s family. The only visitors were my mum’s sisters, who would drive down once or twice a year.

His father used to leave them to it in the kitchen. There had been hard words on one or two occasions about politics: cheerful politeness was the order of the day so far as he was concerned, before some ‘urgent’ matter took him off. Mum’s elder sister, Noreen, was married to a Communist, and this always shocked and excited him, except that he was a mild, thin man with large black-framed glasses who worked for the railways as a clerk at Spencer Street station. His son, Peter, was at university with at the same time. He wasn’t a member of the Party but he was a Marxist and it was from him that Greg got some idea that there was another way of viewing the world that was more substantial than what you found in The Age or heard from Canberra. He lifted him from the muddle and amazement of adolescence. At some anti-war demonstration a sweating policeman in battle gear, to his surprise and indignation, had tried to smash his baton in his face. The look on his face had been one of terror. God knows what he had been told about them. Peter was arrested several times, but it did not affect his subsequent career with the railways. He used to catch the train to work with his dad when his management hours coincided with his father’s shifts. When he went home, he felt like a show pony when his dad took him for a beer at the R.S.L. where it was all jovial aggression. Someone was always going to make some racist remark and give him a glance, or tell a chauvinist joke and watch him not laugh. He couldn’t find a way out of the old man’s repetition of such embarrassments. Maybe his dad didn’t feel them, perhaps he enjoyed his obduracy, which was a family characteristic my mother claimed, or there was simply nowhere else to go in Collins Creek. It was his ‘universe entire’ and he ended up teaching the grandchildren of his first pupils. The waiter had filled his glass, he had slumped in his chair again, the shadows were lengthening.

His mum had never really let up, forgiven him for finishing with Norma. “You are supposed to be so clever, but you behave like an hoon, don’t you, Greg? You seem to be on a steady and sensible course, then off you go, as soon as you are aroused. Look at that fight you had with Michael when you were little. Never a cross word, and then you went absolutely burko.”

“Mum, I have been a perfectly quiet, boring bloke for years and years. I have never hit anybody in anger.”

“I’m not talking about aggression, Greg, I’m talking about losing touch with yourself and then flying off the handle.”

“Look, for sure Norma and me knocked along all right for years, but as soon as I met Stella, I woke up to how unhappy I really was and how the future might be different with Stella.”

“Don’t even mention her name! She used you like a tissue then threw you away.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Oh yes it was. Women see these things.”

“Can we give it a rest, please?”

“You started it.”

“Bloody didn’t.”

“Greg!” she said, started to laugh. Her laugh is like the tick of the kitchen clock, which he can hear still.

“So,” Gisela said, ”you are still here.” He was obviously supposed to have gone to look for her.

“So are you. Where have you been?”

“In the bar talking to an American.”

“Half your luck. I’ve been sitting here thinking about my mum and dad.”

“That’s very nice. My mother is a pest.”

“Mine can’t forgive me for leaving Norma.”

“What has happened to Norma?” He didn’t like the way she said the name. He hadn’t know what had happened to Norma for a long time. Friends, who were really her friends, were sworn to secrecy.

“She ended up teaching at a French university, married with a child, or so I was told a year or so ago. I’ve had enough of this. Come on.”

“But there is all this wine!”

“I’ve had enough,” he said. The gravel was treacherous. He was drenched with perspiration, pissed and she hummed with bad temper.

In the taxi he fell asleep. She hurried ahead of him at the pousada and slammed her door as he reached the top of the stairs. He stood under the shower for a while, then sat naked at the desk and wrote in his journal what he would not tell her.

*

Journal

I had become a Senior Lecturer and could afford a mortgage on a terraced house near Darling Gardens in Clifton Hill. It was where Stella deigned to visit me. Our encounters were chaste, although once, in the kitchen where she was making coffee, before I knew what I was doing I had slid my hands under her arms and cupped her breasts. They pilled my palms and her nipples went hard immediately. She spun round and anticipating a slap, I had tried to pick her up by the elbows and failed. "You chauvinist pig!" I had slunk away but my hands still remembered her. Of course, I should have kissed her. If I had…Who know? Instead she said that if I tried anything like that again, she would never see me again. So spent the time in scholarly discussions of her thesis and this and that and I was sometimes rewarded with a farewell kiss, sometimes of a sensuality which rang my soul. She gave me hell! I knew it but I could do nothing about it.

Ruben Jones, who lived next door and kept irregular hours, played that weary and beautiful Californian music that was all the go in the Eighties and Nineties, which I now cannot listen to without physical pain. I admired him! He was a cool dude, tall and slim with a brown beard and long pony tail and, in those days, a chef. He was what was called 'laid-back'. One morning as I was reversing out, his panel van slid across my gate and stopped. Ruben got out and loped up and leaned down. 'See how hard it makes life, man, if your lady parks outside my gate like that?'

'Greg,' I said, 'How're you going? Look. I'm sorry. I'll tell her, but she's bit of a law unto herself."

'Ruben.' He stuck a hand out. 'Yeah, so am I, man, and that's a real nice car she's got. Pity if…'

'Ruben, take it easy, mate. Let me have a chance to explain to her.'

'Sure', he said, 'no animosity.' He stuck a large hand in the car in a kind of high-five and I reciprocated. "They don't always do exactly what you tell 'em, do they?' And he sloped he off. It did me good. It was like an old Clint Eastwood movie. I was envious.

I could see into his long and narrow back yard, which had bolted, so a huge and straggly hibiscus brought its crimson blooms almost up to my eye level. Once I saw Ruben lying in the nude with Dawn, his shapely partner, and sharing a joint while languidly swatting at flies, which otherwise would have driven them inside. His garden grew large mosquitoes as well, which caused me to have flyscreens fitted, and to cut my grass close. He had very quiet parties at that time, although later, when he got religion, he played the same evangelist CDs over and over, whilst people chorused 'Halleluiah', or whatever. I went to a few of the former gatherings, the ones where people took five minutes to walk across the room and a somnambulist sang, 'This guy's in love wid you,' over and over, but I closed my fly screens and windows when Ruben was into telling his friends that 'God had put him on this Earth for a purpose and he was determined to do the spiritual exercises to discover and execute it'. Eventually he evolved into a Buddhist, which was quieter, except when he got married, when the tom-toms reverberated in the jungle of his garden and holy mud and sacred water, brought from some site in Queensland padded by some 'Tibetan-Monk-to-the-Stars', was flung about

and smeared on arms and faces. The fire, third of the three elements, was provided by candles and everyone was given a garland of flowers to wear. I especially enjoyed the speeches, not so much for what was said, which was unremarkable, but the interjections of a pair of kookaburras in the trees of Darling Gardens, which rang like shadenfreude in the quiet of the hot Sunday afternoon.

The Buddhist phase fitted with the pot smoking of the former and peace reigned. When I visited I noted that Dawn, his new lady, had taken to putting Vegemite on bits of Ryvita and saucers of water in front of the photograph of the monk, whose strange face loomed into the room, the eyes set curiously high so that the jowls were huge. Joss-sticks always burned in there, where the curtains were never opened more than a crack and one went in fear of tripping over a pouffe or beanbag, the armchairs gone and only the black leather couch not a test of athleticism. The music now was sitars and bells and it was always pleasant to go there. Whatever he did, I admired his style, and he seemed to think I was very, very clever, so we got along well and never hesitated to ask advice of one another nor try to give each other the irrits.

"That's a spunk chick, you've got there, Greg," he told me one morning at the corner shop.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci," I told him.

"Like that, is it?"

"More or less."

"I had one like that once, years ago, in Southampton when I worked for Cunard. Real spunk but a ball crusher."

"Tell me about it."

"She gives you a bad time? You give her a bad time."

"She wouldn't notice, mate." It made him grin. It was a fine Spring morning and the traffic was building up on Hoddle beyond the sylvan vistas of Darling Gardens. People exercised dogs and pooper-scoopers in the sun slants.

What did you do for Cunard?"

"Same as I do now: chef."

"And you got round the world I suppose."

"Ah yes, but you hardly stop anywhere and you are not always off duty when you do. It's fucking boring…But that chick, Gloria she was called, was always there when you docked to see what you had got for her, then she'd fade. Then one of me mess mates told me she met the Bosanova *and the* Calypso Queen *regular too. It broke me bloody heart, being young…But you're not young, Greg. You should know better. What was it we used to say in the bad old days: 'Never run after a tram or a chick, another will come along'?" He had a special rude laugh for such remarks.*

A big black dog came along, tail up and sailing along on tiptoe, staring up at the trees in Darling Gardens. Eventually it found what it wanted and barked while bouncing up and down on its front paws until some one called it. "That Bill's a possum expert. He stirs them every morning." He sat on a bench. There were other people taking their ease on the benches nearby as I left Ruben, long legs crossed at the ankle, elbows hooked on the back of the bench.

It was Stella who told me that she thought he was a dealer. She wouldn't say how she knew. It was just another of her mysteries. We were going through the curves on the Great Ocean Road too fast for my comfort on the way to Ferryport Music Festival where she was going to sing, though she hadn't told me this, nor that she would disappear for the night with the band she sang with. I was giving her a private lecture on Swift's historiography as we whizzed along in her Mazda coupé, the white sand beaches flashing with surf. She stopped suddenly. "Skinny dip," she said, rolled the car down a track and parked in a bit of mulga shade. She got out and pulled off her skimpy top, her bra, stepped out of shorts and pants and sandals before I had time to close my mouth.

What a woman she was! It still makes my heart race to remember her running down the sand and hurling herself through the first two-metre wave. I didn't want to do anything like that. I had to be sure that we could not be seen from the road, then struggle to keep my socks out the sand and the sand out of my shoes. Finally I had to struggle to get my jocks off, I had such a stiffy. She loved all this, jumping up and down in the water and laughing at the sight of me running down the beach after her.

"If only I had my camera! The guys would shit themselves to see you blundering down the beach with your dander up like that!" Such joy of life she had.

There's an Indian temple carving of a man with his left arm round a girl, her buoyant left breast in his hand, his right hand lifting her chin, her left thigh across him. That is my memory of that moment. I thought that I might burst with joy and love, and did with very little encouragement from her as we were picked up and rolled by the sea on the sharp sand.

Then she buggered off with these young jerks in torn jeans and battered straw hats and left me to find my own bitter way home. Oh she apologised, for what it was worth, and I forgave her. Again. What agony it was, that wretched state of cringing doglike devotion!

What she had told me about Ruben was confirmed about two in the morning some time after she had done her final disappearing act, when there was a hammering on the front door. I had got to sleep by swallowing a pill about midnight and it took me some time to get downstairs. When I enquired who it was, a coarse voice yelled, "Open this fucking door. It's the police," in such an authentic way that I did. They came in a rush and one stood on my bare toes extremely painfully, so I hopped and sat down on the bottom stair while they all yelled at me. "You've got the wrong house!" I yelled back. "Try next door!" By that time one was toeing me from behind, having raced upstairs, and the others had thumped about the downstairs rooms. They were clumping about the garden. One stepped in my little fish pond and broke my John Howard gnome and between them they knocked down half the fence. I watched them shining torches and poking about Ruben's garden. His lady was having hysterics. Nobody apologised.

Next morning, when it finally arrived, I got a call from a golden-tongued W.P.C. to explain that Ruben had run up my drive and this had given him enough time to collect his loot from next door and climb a few more fences and escape. I said that I suspected her colleagues had broken several of my toes and, after I had visited the doctor, they would hear more from me. They hadn't; they didn't. Ruben shot through.

I did what I could for Dawn, but she seemed surprisingly competent in the

circumstances, and locked the house and took off next day. Now and then I heard somebody try the front door bell, but up until I left, the place stood empty and the front garden grew as well as the back, where the hibiscus grew even more rank and beautiful.

The only colleague with whom I had any kind of real friendship was Jos Ten Bos, who started as my student and ended as a more successful poet, and a thriller writer. He changed his name to Beatrice Barker for the latter - his protagonist, a butch homicide detective, earned him enough to give up academe. If he had not, and the intrinsic virtues of Humanities had been sufficiently valued against the claims of Business Administration, IT, Tourism and what not, with their 'through-put' and big bucks from foreign students, Jos would have become an eminent professor. As it was, he wrote elegant metaphysical poems with lovely lines that dissolved slowly in the mind like aspirin and, unlike me, he kept in touch with the literary 'industry', read at festivals, and did helpful jobs for the Literature Board of the Australia Council. He looked like one of the Potato Eaters, with a bit of a snout and a rather blotchy, red face and bristle of nondescript hair, but he was ironic and charming. Like me, he had had a fairly long relationship, but later was a loner, although one did not inquire. He was secretive and it was years before his nom-de-plume was cracked and the press had a good time with what they claimed was covert homophobia, but he took himself off and only came back when they had got onto some other powerless wretch, and showed me some beautiful work that had come out of it.

When we were at the university, we often had a sandwich together at lunch-time, and I had to endure my more blokey colleagues' innuendoes to my students, which never seemed to be a problem so far as they were concerned. It was not, as I first supposed, that they were more enlightened, but that they were uninterested in the sexuality of old people, which meant anyone over thirty-odd.

He listened sympathetically to my story as it unfolded, but he was an acute critic otherwise. We used to show our stuff to each other often. Now and again I would be privately upset when he seemed to me to be unnecessarily brutal and I had to repress a need to do the same to him. If he was a narcissist, hiss polite demeanour and savoir-faire concealed it in public, but yes, he could be bitchy. I contented myself by assuming it was envy and sometimes it clearly was. He was always impeccably dressed and not averse to cosmetics before a spotlit performance. We remained good friends right up to his death.

It was via him that I got to know my contemporaries: 'The Skipper', a cricket-playing professor who enjoyed managing a team of poets and acting as their literary agent among the many contacts he maintained; the 'Snout Baron', whose rise from sentence to stanza, cell to celebrity, nick to notoriety, embodied the country's cultural history, and who was reputed to have tried to dig up Arthur Rimbaud with some friends one dark Parisian night. ('Arthur! Arthur! Racontez-nous de votre saison en enfer!'); and Bill Banter, well-loved by the Poms from his crumpled tee shirt to his muddy gum boots for seeming another emanation of the popular transvestite comic and member of the London Athenaeum Club, where he played the role of cultured gent, Baroness Chlorene McCoo. Apart from these older male luminaries a steady number of lesser lights of several sexes, shone for their fifteen minutes at Jos's soirees. The females were no joke, stealy and determined for all the surrealist eroticism of many. Once I took Stella, or she decided she wished to come, but even her equanimity was disturbed by

the spiky logorrhoea of the assembled bards, some of whom were quite capable of addressing everybody, eyes glazed, gestures brilliant, without registering that nobody was listening or others were doing the same in other parts of the room. Of course, as I feared, some of the males looked at me and looked at her (I was fifteen years older) and concluded that they were just what she needed. One fellow, who spoke of himself in the same breath as W.B.Yeats, ('I am at one with Willy Yeats on this') even became angry when his offer to bed her met with a laugh, and I had to steer her away as he railed at me for my 'lifeless lines' and 'limp verse' to general amusement.

I didn't go back.

Jos surprised me by his vehemence when I left Norma for Stella. He read me a lecture on the mid-life crisis, quoting from Othello and I don't know what, with such energy that I supposed it had been building for some time. "And that Bunuel film in which the girl's role is played by two different actresses and the guy doesn't notice." The Unknowable Object of Desire? Yes, that's it! And she was shagging Adrian Bell not long ago, and probably still is, knowing him; knowing her. No doubt at students' parties she…"

"Fuck off! Fuck off! I don't need all this."

"Oh you do, you silly man."

But I was past correction. I stalked her, hanging about in the library gallery so I could see her when she came in, driving along the road where she had an apartment in South Yarra, parking and walking back if her car was parked and looking up at her windows, leaving notes under her wiper blade. I used to flagellate myself with visions of her making love with Bell or some student I saw her talking to, or even with some other, mysterious woman I fantasised. I fell into love, as Ovid said, 'like a cockroach into a basin', struggling to escape but forever sliding back. It flattered her to start with, and I saved her a fair amount of research with my extra-mural lectures, but eventually, at the age of forty, I found myself on my knees insanely eating the violets she had snatched from me to smash across my face.

That was the last time I saw her before she left the country. What I remember is the misery of pining for her, only sometimes in dreams reliving the joy of our private times when I forgot to be anxious or shy.

We are a strange species, capable of love only in darkness, in light seeing the other objectified, the pink, soft, neat animal a focus of lust, so we must close our eyes and, even then, habitually fantasise and seldom know the actuality of love, only vaginal masturbation. No one speaks of these things, but I think that it is sad that even at our most tender moments we run blue movies in our heads and are hardly present, hardly authentic with the person we love. Perhaps this is the acme of our alienation in capitalist society: even in love we must consume, must be objects and commodities to each other. With Stella it would be the real thing. Of course, I am aware that romantic love is a medieval invention and a cultural and historical aberration. It sent men mad as Romeo and women as crazy as Emma Bovary. I was also intent on destruction. I even got as far as stopping on the crest of Westgate Bridge to jump, but I found that I couldn't open the car door for fear of it being smashed off by the traffic. It seems risible now. Not then.

There was forever the gap in my world where she had been. It was like a bereavement.

My mum waxed stern. We were sitting in her kitchen and she was watching a programme in which the front man, Bert Newton, had a face like the moon beaming down, and I was watching the black sky to the South over Westernport Bay against which white gulls were swirling, when she said:

"You're going to let that girl ruin your life, aren't you?"

"No!"

"Oh yes you are. We always hoped that you would find a sensible woman like Norma, now you have made a fool of yourself and you are going to go on continuing to do so. You're just like your dad. That Dallas Dryborough who cleaned at the school, he had it off with her a couple of times and he went on calling on her once a week right up until she died."

"He didn't!"

"He did. I gave up bothering. He used to give her money – she had two kids by different men – and helped her with her insurances and income tax and stuff. It was supposed to be R.S.L. work – her Kevin was killed in Korea – but I knew. She was a useless cleaner, and you know how fussy he was, but he kept her on at the school. Idiot! It was bad enough with him, now you're going down the same route."

She stared at the screen, didn't look at me, and I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. I was a disappointment to her, as he had been. She had wanted more children from him and grandchildren from me. I gave her an extra hug when I left. It seemed impossible that it was the last I should ever give her.

*

Greg sat back. To write it down, externalise it, was to grasp it plain, make it more real than the photographs the Chinese were always taking, and it was abreactive, therapeutic… He fell face down on the bed, exhausted by the effort of it. Had he fictionalised it? If he had, fiction was the nearest we got to reality, except for the insistence on closure. Life wasn't like that.

She woke him with her knocking. It was nine. He pulled on his clothes, a fresh shirt, let her in. "You have slept all this time? You want to eat now? I have the name of a Portuguese restaurant." She was in high heels, which dwarfed him in his bare feet, wore a black skirt and sleeveless vermilion blouse that he had seen before, jade earrings and necklace. Her blonde hair was loosely tied at the nape and her lipstick matched the blouse. "Jeez! You scrub up well," he said cheerfully, then quickly, "you look great." He moved his notebook to his bag in the process of combing his hair. He needed a shave, really, but wasn't up to it. In his creased strides he looked a bit of a dag in the mirror in comparison to her as she waited impatiently.

The restaurant was quite small, hot and crowded and the salt fish lived up

to its name so that, with the cigarette smoke, Gisela felt nauseous. They left and were walking slowly down the cobbled side street when she grabbed his arm, doubled up, vomited against the marble wall of a bank. He stood with his back to her, concealing her, but there was nobody about. As she coughed and retched he felt sorry for her: she had dolled herself up and had been all European haughtiness and now she was reduced to this. Such pathos in humanity! He held out his handkerchief, which was not all that clean, but she took it gratefully, straightened up. “Sorry!” He patted her shoulder wordlessly. A car’s lights swept round the corner and they walked again.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was a bummer of a place.” He was glad that he hadn’t found it. “It wasn’t a tourist place at all, really, was it?”

“I asked for a real Portuguese restaurant.” Her tone was defensive. Under the street lamps she repaired her face, palming a mirror this way and that, dabbing, powdering. She had lost face, he thought wryly. It was painful.

In the square there was a Communist Party meeting with red flags and spotlights, an earnest man speaking to an attentive crowd. They sat on a bench. She sat close and he put an arm round her. The air was balmy but she shivered. They watched gleeful children stamping on some exploding dust on the outskirts of the crowd. The orator’s voice echoed around the elegant colonnades. There was a momentous sense of history on the air as tangible as the smell of the fireworks…

The Portuguese had offered to hand the territory back when they got out of all their colonies. They had been told, ‘Not yet.’ Since then the Economic Zones at Zongshan, and at Shenzen next to the Hong Kong border, had been built, white and modern offices and factories with the latest technology. Arterial roads were being constructed from Guangzhou and in 1999 Macao would revert. As with Hong Kong, the Western Press promised chaos and purge, but the Chinese seemed to know the value of these acquisitions. If there was to be any purge, it would be of the criminal gangs around the Macao casino. An international airport was being built for tourists on one of the islands with, it was said, special facilities for (nauseating epithet for criminal scum) ‘international high-rollers’. So much for The Long March and the idealism which had sustained it…Except that Beijing was preparing to urbanise half a billion, it was said. Five hundred million individuals given superior incomes, health and education. American plutocracy couldn’t organise. It required idealism and more than short-term concerns for quick profits and the next election.

“Now I am alright. What shall we do?”

“What would you like to do?”

“Get away from this Communist.” So they stood up and walked, but he was suddenly nervous of any but the best-lit streets, wanted to go back but she wanted some coffee.

They sat at a pavement table. The clear air by the sea had no unhealthy taste. He said so and she told him of the number of lung and bronchial tumours she saw at the hospital. She was of the opinion that there was a kind of carelessness endemic in such a huge population. He didn’t argue, there was tension enough between them. They both knew that next day they took the bumpy bus ride back and she was due at

a conference in Beijing from which she would fly home in time for Christmas.

"I don't think we ought to sleep together tonight."

"Why not?" She was piqued.

"Because it will just make your departure more bloody awful."

"Are you a coward?"

"Probably. It would be easier if you were not so attractive." This had mollified others, but not her. She stared down at her cup for some time. When she looked up, her pale face seemed blurred in a way that was certainly not happy. "You have eaten and now you move on," she said. It sounded like a translation from her own language. I shook my head. "Ah, yes." The pupils of her brown eyes were tiny: snake-eyes.

"No."

"Somebody said that you 'preferred the bottle to the breast' and I laughed then. Now I see you are a man without principles. You do what suits you only."

"I live alone, yes."

"And you drink too much and feel sorry for yourself. You write a little poem and get it off your chest, then you look for another amusement."

I sipped my coffee, which was cold. I could not think of anything to say. She looked everywhere except at me.

The meeting in the square had ended and people were filling the tables around them, laughing and chatting.

"Do you have willow pattern china in Switzerland?"

"What is that?" She shook her head irritably.

"It's a blue and white picture of a rustic bridge and a temple with lovers and blue birds. It's popular in Australia and everybody thinks it's typically Chinese."

"What are you talking about?"

"You never see it in China." She shrugged. It was time to go.

He really didn't think she minded about the sex so much as his lack of enthusiasm for her. When shove came to push, he had usually declined. He had a weak sex drive, perhaps. Other men seemed, or claimed, to be like butchers' dogs. Women probably promoted that idea too. Maybe it was part of something far bigger than personal choice, like the falling sperm count and birth rate in the West.

There was no sign of her at breakfast. At reception he learned that she had gone out, so he too walked down the hill. There was a real sense of Sunday, the pavements and roads quiet, a bell ringing. He hoped to find her. He didn't in the least want to be on bad terms.

There were two vigorous and skillful mixed-race soccer games to watch, the teams in neat and colourful kit clapping and shouting for the ball, the linesmen racing up and down with their flags, the referees' whistling echoing amongst the buildings. Nearby was an excellent bookshop in which he bought some translations from the Tang and Song published in Hong Kong. He strolled along narrow twisting Sunday streets feeling happier than he felt that he should be. Macao was not an Asiatic town and he

was at home there as he was not in Guangzhou. He found himself at the site of the cathedral above the town, where tourists stood on the cobbles and took photographs of the tottering façade, all that was left of several wooden basilicas, which had burned due, no doubt, to cavalier use of candles. Japanese Jesuits had carved Seventeenth Century phantasmagoric horrors and whatnot. There was a cobbled plaza and bus loads of tourists, mostly elderly and in sun hats, shorts and colourful shirts, stared up at Mater Dei's verdigris tears staining the granite, snapping and moving on: Asians, Europeans, Americans, part of the shuffling tedium of well-heeled retirement.

He sat on a wall in the hot sunlight and looked about, anxious for her as, no doubt, she intended. It wasn't a very big place, crammed on its promontory. Suddenly, as the cacophony of the dragon dance began and the beast came cavorting all gilt and pink with eyes on springs, he saw her, walking away down the wide stone steps, which led into the town. Had she seen him? He hurried after her. Did she increase her pace? The press of tourists climbing up in their busloads slowed him and she had disappeared. He suspected that she knew exactly where *he* was, as she lurked in some clothes shop. He continued down the steep street to the bottom, which turned out to be the square where they had sat the night before.

*

Christmas in Macau

Japanese Jesuits carved
Granite into sixteenth century
Baroque: 'The Apocalyptic
Woman smashes the seven-
Headed hydra'; 'The beautified
Luis Gonzaga' grips his heart
Stares down at the harbour

In her superior niche
Mater Dei cries verdigris
That so many basilicas
Were consumed by candles
They left it one stone thick

In the cobbled cathedral yard
Above the town jaws a-flap
Pink red and gilt with eyes
on springs the jolly dragon swirls
Bells twitch and cymbals clash
Fire crackers make us hop and clap
Under that tottering crazy façade's
Empty windows full of Chinese sky

*

She really didn't see him until he put a hand on her shoulder. She jumped with surprise. "Hello." He left his hand where it was but she slipped from under it. "I am sorry," he said, "but if *you* had said 'no', *I* should have respected it."

"What are you talking about? We must go and pack. I will get a taxi." He was dismissed from her life. Stubbornly she joined him in waving at taxis.

Her remoteness continued until, falling asleep in the careering, hooting bus, she nestled against him; but the holiday was over. When she woke, she stayed where she was and he said nothing although his left arm was numb. So were his feelings. He wondered what he *should* be feeling? The truth was that he had felt an absurd sense of victory. Their conversation was monosyllabic. When they got back to the F.E.B. they walked wordlessly away from each other.

Nobody knew where they had been.

*

Freeway

Mid-afternoon, the sun already amber
In Guangzhou's distant pall
Glints like a lost coin under the delta bridges
Of the Pearl, is smashed underfoot by workers
Straddling rusted mesh, hunkered down
In exhaust where the concrete pours
Eight lanes out to Zhongshan and Macau
The old dust road bumps and roars
In a barter of horns and bells
Bicyclists balancing ruts between lorries
Tractors cars the odd Mercedes enjoying
Better air than ours on an express bus
Rolling to rhumbas over the humid plain,
Across fly overs where rattan shacks
Lean out of the monsoon rain and the Unit's
Migrant youths lie in the vibrating, toxic night
Dreaming of out-reaching Li Bo
When day's new-minted in the East again

*

It was a surprise when he found an inquiry as to whether I wished to continue for a second year in his pigeonhole. He read the words again, almost suspiciously. As is often the case with significant events, it was followed by another. The telephone was ringing as he unlock his door. “Oh great! You are there,” Stella said. “I thought that you would never answer.” The familiarity of that deep voice, the sibilant ‘s’ flooded my bones. “How are you?”

“Stella!” He confessed to myself this was what I had been waiting for.

“Happy Christmas.”

“Is it? Christ, you’re right!”

“You sound very gruff.”

“I haven’t spoken to anyone for a few days.”

“Why is that?”

“Nobody to speak to. Everyone is on vacation: we Christians get three days plus the weekend and I can’t speak Mandarin.”

“Oh, you must be very lonely.” Her New York intonation was strange.

“You know me. I’m a hermit.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I’ve tried and tried to reach you, but always this officious Chinese woman repeating I don’t know what before I had the bright idea of using a translation service …And there you are at last.’

“Yep. She says you’ve reached the university and to dial the last three extension numbers.”

”Is that right? Well that will be a saving…Greg, it’s a long time since we saw each other, although I have often thought about you and wondered how you were. I’ve been living in New York all these years, teaching classes at the City University, getting married twice and having a daughter who is away at school.” He marvelled at her new American candour. Her secrecy had hurt him. “I have only been back for brief stays for weddings and funerals. Now my mother has died and I am selling up the family home.”

“That’s very sad.”

“Yes. You know they had a little Jack Russell, which wouldn’t let me in, barking away with such ferocity in the empty house, that I broke up. Had to get the veterinarian in to deal with it.”

“How horrible. Poor dog.”

“Sure didn’t seem much of a reward for loyalty…But look, I’m almost through here and I need a break, so I thought that I would fly in and see you. How about that? It would be great to see you again. There’s nothing to stop you, is there? Another lady, maybe?”

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll be there next week-end. Maybe it’s easier if you come to Hong Kong. I expect that there’s a problem with visas for China and, anyway, it scares me.”

"It's not scary at all…"

She cut him off. "Are you sure that you want to see me after all this time?"

"If you want to see me."

"Well, I do."

He had to fight a kind of mental dazzle. What was he *doing*? Was it just something to do? No, his heart was thumping like a boy's, his hand ached with gripping the receiver and he said what he had to say without caution. "I have hoped for years to see you again Stella. I've done Internet searches in the hope of finding that you were alive… You thought I was just another opportunist old perv. I wasn't. I'm not. I love you."

"Oh" she said, "You know that makes me so happy! Listen, I only said that I was going to the States to try to make something happen, and when it didn't I sort of was committed to it. Life's crazy, isn't it? I was young, excited by life. Half the time I had no idea what I was doing." She paused. "Maybe I still don't."

"Look, I hope you do." The ground was shifting. " I mean, this conversation… "

"I know what I'm doing. I'm a big girl now." She laughed with self-congratulation, but he thought of the implications, all the penises, orgasms, passions…She had been so *free* with herself. "Greg?"

"Yes?"

"You sure about this now? It's a long way to come for…"

"Sure. Amazing! Wonderful! It makes me dizzy."

"I'm not a little girl any more, Greg."

"'A big girl now'."

"Right. So what are you doing there?"

"Well, teaching – the students are wonderful – taking a breather from a culture where Don Bradman is our William Shakespeare…You know," It made her laugh. "They just asked me if I should like a second year."

"Would you?"

"Don't know. It's great, the teaching, the colleagues, but you're in a kind of linguistic cage and the so-called Foreign Experts are a bunch of international weirdos. It's great to talk to you, to someone who just knows where I'm coming from." Even as he said it, he wondered at her American life in New York. *Did* she know any longer?

"And the poems? I have to tell you that when my first relationship was foundering, and now, as poor Mark was dying, those poems you wrote for me kind of sustained me. I'm really grateful…kind of honoured." It sounded as if she might cry. "Greggy, I've missed you."

"I've missed you too. You have rarely been out of my thoughts. I always thought that it was sentimental gush…But you…"

"I know, honey, I know. Hey, hurry up next weekend! I'll fax you where I will be staying."

"I'll phone you and tell you what time my bus gets in." She did not reply for a moment, then:

"Great," and she had gone as if too full for further talk.

He sat back in a heap. It was crazy! He had been talking to her as she was years before, beads in her mouth to try to conceal her smiles of pleasure or amusement at his urgent speech, curtains of hair shadowing her face in the pub. Well, what was she like so many years later? He could not, would not, imagine.

There was no letter and card from his mother. The post was not the most efficient. Marvin said they opened ten per cent of it, then threw it away. Gisela had said Marvin was a spook. He organised English teaching for the employees of one of the U.S. corporations in the evenings against the rules. Rather than take the train or bus, every other weekend he went by the crowded overnight ferry downriver to Hong Kong to bank his earnings in cash and returned the same uncomfortable way...Let him! Fuck-wit! It was true, the denizens of the F.E.B. were a bunch of weirdos and he was out of place there…Wasn't he?

There was a large packet from his best undergraduate student, Moona, a piece of writing he hadn't requested. He was glad for it, needed to divert his thoughts until his subconscious had soothed them.

My Romance

'It disappointed everyone when the second day of the Chinese New Year turned out to be terribly cold and rainy. Personally I did not mind the weather being better or worse. What I cared most about was the pleasure that I had taken in staying with my family members whom I missed all through the days I spent in the university. After a hearty lunch I received a phone call from an acquaintance who asked me earnestly to accompany her to the park which, according to hearsay, was lavishly decorated with beautiful flowers and coloured lanterns. My answer, "no", did not affect her mood and at length I was persuaded into going with her to the park and to take some photos if the weather permitted.

On our way to the park we ran into many old friends and exchanged greetings. The bad weather seemed to have no effect on the ocean of jolly people strolling on the bustling streets. On a sudden an exclamation was forced from my confidant's lips and I was naturally shocked by her surprise. She pointed to a man riding a bicycle about ten metres away, crying: "Isn't he Liu Huang? Yes, I am quite sure he is." My eyes followed the movement of her finger and finally fell on a vague figure in the distance. "He recognised us. Look, he stopped. Now he's walking towards us." Knowing that I was short-sighted and probably did not understand what was going on, my confidante gave me a vivid and detailed report.

"Just now I saw a girl sitting on his bike. She must be his girlfriend," I said with a sense of relief, which fortunately did not arouse her curiosity and sensitivity.

It was three years ago that I got to know Liu Huang, as well as his two pals who served in the navy. At that time they, and sailors from other navies, assembled at the college where my friend and I were to receive their training lessons. It chanced that

when I was playing badminton with my friend, Liu Huang and his two pals watched us with amusement in their eyes. Now and then they burst out laughing at the sight of us muffing a shot. At first we paid no attention to them and only shrugged our shoulders, but gradually their distraction became intolerable and we gave up the idea of practising our skill. Noticing that we were a little irritated they made faces at us. Since we were of about the same age we started conversations that paved the way of our friendship. Before long I perceived by instinct that Lui Huang, the handsomest of the three, had taken a fancy to me. He was short, but amazingly vivacious, and he had pink cheeks that made you think that he was lovely and naïve. His dark, bright eyes gave you an impression of cleverness. I liked him simply because he was talkative and amiable and I looked upon him as my little brother, not a lover. I hoped I made a mistake and held my ground firmly that boys and girls could not only be lovers but friends. I made a point of leaving him out in the cold while chatting high-spiritedly with others. My attitude perplexed him and for several days he looked miserable and the radiance went from his eyes. Although I was also suffering from being unreasonable and ruthless to him, I thought it was good for him to nip the bud of love before it seized his whole heart and tortured him. All this happened under the eyes of my confidante and his two pals who were still overwhelmed by the felicity of knowing each other. One day I was glad to see he had regained his usual eloquence and vigour and believed he had come round to the idea I tried hard to convey. We spent many happy hours together in counting stars in the sky, eating ice creams and chatting. When time elapsed our pure friendship was cemented and finally it was time for me to leave for Guangzhou to start a brand new life in university.

Soon I left home with the good wishes of my friends, including Liu Huang. I admit it was a great delight for me to receive letters from him when I was afflicted with serious homesickness. From these letters I learned a good deal about him. Since his passionate love again showed its trace between those lines, I was lost in perturbation. On the one hand I was deeply affected by his perseverance; on the other hand I did not know how to refuse him, for I could not bear the idea of hurting him by telling him frankly that it was impossible. I tried not to think of him anymore and burned all the letters from him. I could hardly remember how many letters he had sent me after we parted but could remember quite clearly that it took me half-an-hour to burn them all. Gazing at the scarlet flame I felt an unprecedented pain in my heart as if I had lost something very important forever. I knew that was childlike innocence but from then on he was erased from my memory. For the sake of confidentiality I told my friend nothing.

What a surprise that we should meet again! My mind was still sinking in the reminiscence when he came forward and said hello to us. I felt disconcerted at the sight of him and turned my eyes upon the ground. He did not face me either and merely answered some questions raised by my confidant. I raised my eyes from the ground only to find that he was looking at me. I concluded from that glance that he had changed so much. He was in Western dress and leather shoes, which did not suit him well. His hair, which used to be short and showed vigour, was now permed, which

showed poor taste. The pink of his cheeks was nowhere to be seen. He was not the innocent boy with whom I played and conversed any longer. Maybe owing to certain circumstances he turned into a man in those years.

Our encounter was so unexpected that after a while we were too much exercised by our own thoughts to say a word. At last I broke the ice by saying disjointedly, "Don't keep your girlfriend waiting for you too long. She will be impatient…I am glad to see that you have changed into another person. That's good." He gave me a piercing glance that made me feel uneasy. I fact I had not been at my ease in his presence from the very beginning. He seemed to have an insight into my heart and roused in me the wildest passion that was strictly restricted to the bottom of my heart for fear that its eruption would be uncontrollable.

I saw him move his lips as if something was on the tip of his tongue but could hear nothing except a sigh which the most sensitive ears could have missed if he was not being scrutinized. I wondered why he would produce that sigh, so I looked at him closely in order to find the source of his grief. He winced at my glance and said goodbye to us hurriedly.

Just before he turned his eyes lingered on my face for a moment. What kind of expression was it that was held in his eyes? Anguish not unmingled with obsession. What I had been afraid of was true. He still could not drive me out of his heart. I could not imagine how much he had experienced during those years but could tell from his eyes how much I had hurt him. For heaven's sake forgive me and forget me forever, Liu Huang! My cry from the heart was fervent and sincere. All those pretty flowers in the park that competed for beauty of looks meant nothing to me and the encounter weighed on my mind all through that day. Now and then an eighteen-year-old boy in his smart navy uniform with a sweet smile on his face arises in my mind in spite of my strenuous efforts in dismissing from my memory. After all, it was my first romance and will remain in my heart for good.'

*

In a state of euphoria he decided Stella was a witch who had put a spell on him. Certainly with the tent of auburn hair, big earrings, long black skirt and collection of bangles that she wore, there was something gypsy, cabalistic, mysterious about her. When did it start, his obsession? She was one of a dozen or so First Year post-graduates who came to him for discussion of research skills. It was the third time, a March evening like an outpost of retreating summer, with the windows of his fifth floor study open on a view of the block graph of site values that was the C.B.D., the sky beyond darkening with pink smog. She came late. He heard her running along the corridor, then she slid in and sat down, her luxuriant hair untidy and breath loud behind some guy's complaints against the Dewey system. Then there was a sound, the snap of elastic against her rib cage as she recaptured a breast. He dared not look up for a moment, even when whoever spoke came to a stop. It seemed the most erotic sound

he had ever heard.

Perhaps to make amends for arriving late, Stella had developed what she had heard. Her deep voice was fluent, the light was bright on her face and her dark Latin eyes. My chair was against the window. He had taken something that she said and made a joke of it, which amused the rest. He found he tended to look at her when he spoke, inviting her opinions in a teasing sort of way. It put the others in a good humour, but at the end, she lingered until they had gone, then said: “If you do that again to me, I’ll kick you in!”

Her nostrils were dilated with anger. No one had ever spoken to him like that. He felt a kind of fear. “Why did you do it?”

“Because I find you very attractive.” It was said before he knew it. Her eyes opened from the slits they had been. She suddenly swished out, but did not slam the door. He stood for minutes, pulse racing, shocked out of dissemblage by her aggression.

He had treated her with careful politeness and, in fact, took the class with more concern than he usually gave it. She smiled now and then from the back row when he caught her eye and, when he had his famous crash in the car park with the Deputy Dean of Humanities to loud acclaim, and his car was out-of-action for some time, she offered him a lift home in her B.M.W. coupé, ‘as it was on her way’, after they had been members of a party which had been to see Shaw’s *Heartbreak House* in the Arts Theatre. All through the performance he had covertly watched her. Her expression did not change. (His, he knew, reflected the action like a dummy: he smiled, wept, sneered, sniggered as appropriate, as required). At the interval he had watched her conversations jealously, saw the eyes pass over her breasts, heard the male laughter at her jokes. She had not once looked at him.

There is a dangerous space between older academics and décolleté young women into which not a few careers have dived. He was quite aware of what was happening to him, quite unable to do anything about it. She was, a colleague said, supposed to be ‘a bit of a goer’ and her expensive clothes and jewellery and car, excited scurrilous interest in the staff club. It was anguish to listen to and remain impassive.

She drove with style, bangles a-rattle, and they had talked about the play, of which he did not think much. Before he knew it, they were stopping in his street.

“Where?”

“This will be right.” He did not wanting a car like that outside the door. “Thanks.” He had put the back of his hand to her cheek. She grasped and kissed it.

He was out of the car on the kerb, dizzily watching its lights go red at the end of the street, then waiting to get himself together before walking home.

He never really had. His days, his head, his life hung on her dark eyes, her smiles. He tried not to produce the classic symptoms over which he had laughed in others: the unusual lack of interest in discussing some topic, the studied looks in the opposite direction, the conscientious telephoning and errand-running for the partner

or spouse…But he found references to Stella cropping up with his colleagues - who she was screwing, if she was ac/dc, which staff member had the hots for her…It was purgatory, and the bastards knew that he was, as they said, 'cunt-struck'. He couldn't bear to think about it, that time of anguish, those moments of crazy joy before he had bolted. He needed to keep cool and sensible.

He got out of his chair and went to the bedroom where his poetry folder lay on the table, began a poem which he never finished. Its tone and register are out of joint with the times, yet he could not find another in himself. It's romantic tosh, but as he read it, and when it surfaced among his half-done and overdone relics, he remember again those light-headed days, before he saw her again.

She sent a fax about an hour after the conversation, but it was Boxing Day before he knew of it. Paul told him it had arrived. He didn't ask how *he* knew. When he went to the telephone office, where students waited to make calls, there was a list of names on a blackboard, one of which was his. He took his turn to the counter, pointed at the blackboard. The clerk, a harassed youth, pulled an unpleasant name and shrugged. Somebody yelled at him from the office. He went inside and got the fax, held it out dismissively with a straight arm while talking to the next customer, a youth who jostled him aside. He took the fax outside and sat on the wall under the plane trees round the second lake before he looked at it. It said no more than the name of the hotel, as if to attempt anything further was to invoke the lords of misrule, which was sensible but a disappointment. The students on their way to and from classes looked at him with curiosity as ever. He got up irritably, marched back, the wind sharp.

He wondered if he should book a room, which would probably be enormously expensive, and decided to wait and see. He had shared a bed with Stella one night. He was sober, she was not, or so it seemed. It was at the house of a married postgrad after a party which ended in the small hours. She had insisted that it was just a matter of sleep. He had not attempted anything, except briefly to feel her wonderful body, because she was convinced that all he wanted to do was penetrate her. They had lain like Tristan and Isolde with his sword between them in the darkness as it gave way to dawn and they had slept. He thought that if they had got the sex out of the way, things might have been very different. He might have forgotten her just as he was prepared to forget Gisela's healthy callisthenics.

The temperature had dropped as seasonable winds from Mongolia came South. Ted had got a sort of wreath to put on his door with something appropriate in golden calligraphy. No cards had arrived. The swimming pool was drained and scrubbing women yelled and laughed over the Christmas days and leaves whirled. He saw Gisela at a distance once, but as she affected not to see him, gave up knocking on her door after The Infanta opened hers to see who was calling, then slammed it and turned up the opera.

He telephoned his mum on Christmas Eve. There was no reply. He tried several times. At her sister's? This was from Reception, where they had to make

external calls. As he had leaned and listened, he did not sense Gisela's approach until she kissed his free ear in a soft explosion. It was the last he saw of her. She swayed out with a young Chinese, a fellow doctor he assumed, helping to carry her baggage to a taxi, and disappeared.

It was the *silence* of Christmas Day that he missed. He woke to the roar of traffic, thump of pile-drivers, yells of the girls up and down the service lift shaft. Ted was round to offer him a small present of biscuits and Christmas greeting card. He and Brother Terry were off to some Catholic gathering. Hong Kong TV did not hesitate with its array of charts and diagrams and statistics of market movements. Paul invited him round and was suitably jovial. They sat in his study in front of his impressive hi-fi, drank Zhu Jiang and listened to a succession of orchestras playing Brandenburg Four seemingly identically, though Paul explained all kinds of differences. He said his friend Paradise was ill with
influenza. Greg sometimes saw the white-haired old man, who had collaborated with Payne during the war on the great anthology of translations into English, The White Pony, shuffling along with his cane among the fishers round the lake and they bowed and grinned across the language barrier as fellow poets. It was absurdly hard to accept that he had lived there all his long life, as if their reality ought to be temporary too. It was an inexpressible idea, which he kept from Paul's incisive mind.

Paul wanted to talk about Christmas past at his Quaker school where he had fallen in love with a European girl with whom he still corresponded, although now she was married to a rich lawyer in Grenoble and her children grown up. Xia-Xia, his smiling and graceful wife, went to and fro as he spoke. She did not speak a word of English but the conversation embarrassed him and Paul saw it, said that she knew all about his lost love. He's a strange man with a serious mind but a love of smut, which creases his stern face in a lopsided grin. About noon Paul walked back and had scrambled eggs for the Christ Mass dinner.

He could not sleep, could not wait for the weekend, sat up hating the compulsive mosquitoes, frantic cockroaches, froggy cacophony. Watching the red cross sway on the pool, surfing the endless channels on TV, scribbling and crossing out, re-writing and missing the bin.

*

Shamian Island

Odd, a primary school above the trees
in the old colonial facade, a grille
from which small hands gesticulate.
We wave, their voices shrill:

“Gweilo, gweilo, gweilo.”

“What is that, ‘gweilo’?”
“GWEILO! GWEILO!” “It is the curse
the sale of opium earned right here,
two centuries ago.” *“GWEILO!”*

“Foreign devils.” “Oh.”

We stick to shade, watch passing faces,
maintain a steady pace. **“GWEILO!”**
“What a consumer good,” I say,
“with brand loyalty not much seen today.”
“GWEILO-GWEILO-GWEILO-GWEILO!”

“At least the trade paid for Orwell
at Eton and gave us ‘Animal Farm’
and ‘1984’. “ ***GAWAYALOOOH!”***

We hide under a shop awning. “And what
a gesture, on the other hand, to sup from
his saucer in the BBC canteen.”...
”Solidaritea?”
“Gweilo? GWEILO? ***GWEILO!”***

I doff my straw hat, mop my brow,
see in reflection our pose objectified.

‘**GWEILOES**.’

*

“If I had fucked you I’d have wanted to do it all my life!” He had grabbed her wrist as she tried to get up, the two tots in their pyjamas standing side by side with clear and innocent eyes. The words had shocked her. They were wrung from him at the sight of her nakedness. Her body was so smooth, so neat; not like his hairy torso, pot, vulnerable, dangling appendage. He had meant what he had blurted. He was ‘married’, had a debt of loyalty … It wouldn’t have lasted six months. She’d have been off with some bucko. It was fear of her exotic sexuality, her erotic prowess, the comparison with her lusty young lovers…

Better to have not loved and lost…But it wasn’t about bodies exactly. No, she was a ripe young woman but her features were not the delicate kind. It was her

charisma, style, savoir faire…and yet that look of shock. Maybe she had been out of her depth with him? It was of a piece with the naivety of the way she had kissed his hand…A substitute for his mouth? He laughed, careless of a glance from his neighbour, a smart young American, he guessed, grasping his knees and staring ahead. Could it be true? He had thought about her in such set ways for so long that he had hardly thought at all until then, when her reality was an hour away. What was it that she had become, a projection of his anima? Hadn't she always been? She certainly wasn't his mother. He snorted again. The American gave him a suspicious glance; he turned a page as if in explanation. She had been unlike other young women he had taught, more exotic in her gestures, her clothes, her hair; more passionate in her opinions ("I'll kick you in!') and actions; and richer: her brothers flew around in light aircraft from one site to another from Queensland to South Australia; she drove superior cars…and she spoke better French than he did, as well as Italian and, of course, Maltese. Maybe it was also the insouciance of class, She didn't need his good opinion or reference; she probably didn't even have to work. Her family would have had her lined up, perhaps, for some desirable union…and *that* was why…He snorted again. Such nonsense! No, the thing that he most often recalled as antidote to her enchantment was their neighbour, professor emeritus Alastair Flett, a widower until an ex-student had moved in as his research assistant and house-keeper. He had followed her around like an old dog, eyes never leaving her. When she found something better to do, he had taken a drive up into the Dandenongs at night, undone his seat belt and taken his hands off near the bottom of a steep hill. An open verdict. Lost control. Well *that* was the word…"I'm glad I didn't fuck you or I should have wanted to do it all my life…"

There was the sniggering Ye Shaoweng poem about cuckoldry:

A Garden Visit Deterred

Not wanting my footprints on his green moss path
He preferred not to hear me knocking at his gate
(Absurd to try to shut in Spring –
Already the apricot is over his wall!)

(d.1225)

The double-decker skimmed along the concrete toll roads through the concrete foundations of a concrete megalopolis, which would stretch from Guangzhou to the New Economic Zone of Shenzen. It was titanic infrastructure on which hundreds of thousands of peasants laboured, far from their village paddy fields and orchards, obliterating those of others…Huge corporations, with incomes greater than nations, made decisions about the most profitable use of their capital and societies, customs, traditions, skills, families, beliefs fragmented thousands of miles away. People were

uprooted, shifted. Gisela had reckoned they were all for it. A better life. But the supportive, welfare role of the family, generations expanded across the land, ended with the one-child policy. That, she had said, was when the fur would begin to fly. It had been raining. The tyres hissed over the bridges across the waterways. From the top deck he could see for miles across the plain…

But she had written a letter to their flat, which he had never read and only learned about in Norma's last gouts of bitter bile as he had packed. What had she written? And saying that she was going to America…He had taken it for proof that she had had never been serious…And she wasn't to start with, but her family were glad to get her away, no doubt. Expense was the least of it for them, rich builders. And she had implied on the telephone that she had gone because of his failure to…So he went round it again, the book open unread on his knee, rain falling again over the Delta. He was excited, worn out with sleeplessness. They were both ten years older; she was two marriages and a child older. He ought not to be readying himself for disappointment on that account, but remember he was a paunchy ex-academic of no real distinction, which might also be a description by some of his poetry. One of her attractions was her praise for it!

By Shenzen he drummed his heels with nervous anticipation. It was bigger, grander than Zhongshan, went right up to the Hong Kong border and was already to go, ready to lock-step with crude capitalism.

Over the border they were in British suburbia down the slope towards the sea: there were footpaths and pedestrian bridges, few bicycles and predictable traffic driving on the left. The city towered, walkways suspended like science fiction, streets full of traffic and people, signs and images, some in English. Looking down from the top deck as they pulled into a bus station, he saw Stella waiting for him. About then his mother was found dead in her kitchen in Collins Creek. She had been in hospital, recovering from a stroke when he was trying to call her. She had seemed quite better, competent and compos mentis, but had been upset that she had failed to send a Christmas card.

The shock of recognition was physical. Stella had sunglasses on top of her head, which stared back up at him. Her hair was short, frizzed, still the same colour. Her nose seemed larger than he remembered. It was turned towards the door of the bus. Before he got up, the last to leave, he saw the division of her bosom under a green silk shirt and the tight white trousers and gold sandals of a woman in early middle age. He descended nervously, carefully.

"Greggy!" Everyone looked. She beamed and bounced into his arms. "Oh my God, it's so good to see you!"

He was tongue-tied, did not want to let her go, kissed her fragrant neck, squeezed too hard. The Chinese were more reticent, stared. She drew back and kissed him and he kissed her. She tried to take his bag, explaining that the hotel was some floors up in the same building. Once she had chewed her fingernails, now they were long and silver. In the empty lift, standing side by side, there was a constraint she covered with gossip about her flight.

Her suite was large, light, all gilt and plush, polished tiles and wall hangings in the Chinese way. Stella clicked about as he stood uselessly, watching her tidy flowers and cushions, looking out at the sky scraping buildings, shimmering harbour. She seemed so self-assured, glamorous with her gold bracelets and rings and ear-danglers and necklace. His mother had hated her years before and would be dismayed to know he was meeting her again. He had thought that it had better be kept secret "Oh my God! Let's have a drink! Gin? Gin and vermouth? Tonic? Champagne?" She had produced canapés with slivers of smoked salmon and pâté, olives of various sorts, a delicious sorbet. She say him down and looked after him as if he had travelled as far as she had.

*

Journal

By the time I got back to the university mum was burnt and gone. It was not until Patricia, my student, remembered to tell me, that I knew there was a fax. I read it twice in the busy office, then again outside among dripping trees. The lawyer's language made the facts cold and definite. Two days previously she had turned to smoke and ashes. The raindrops spattered the waxy paper. Students thronged by, curious as to my concentration in the rain.

Well, she was old, but spry and had all her marbles. She hadn't wanted me to leave, but I had. I could not have imagined she might die. I wondered to whom I should apologise for my absence. There really wasn't anyone. I wished that I was religious and could pretend that I might send a kind of 'soul mail' to her and, like the Chinese sent to absent family and friends at the Moon Festival. As I stumped along, head down by the lake, said a "Sorry Mum" aloud, which did not distract any of the men and women who were squatting with their long rods after bigger fish. You would think that there could hardly be a more intimate relationship than that between parent and child, but there's a block on it linguistically, if not in feelings. We can't say much to each other that matters.

I didn't know her doctor's name and I didn't know where my rellies lived. Eventually, in the sweaty kiosk in Reception, I got the number of the local Returned Servicemen's Club, where my dad had been such a stalwart, but the bloke who answered was sorry, but helped me with the number of a friend of my mother, Helen King, who burst into tears when I told her who I was. "Oh," she said, "she had such pain with her stones these years, the poor soul was glad to go."

I did not say that I knew nothing about 'stones'. Mum had such an amazing collection of pills that I didn't take them seriously. Helen King added :"And she was heart-broken, you know." Her tone left no doubt that was all my fault.

"It's just terrible, terrible," I said, pissed off by her censure. "Is the house all right?"

"What?"

"Is the house all right?"

"Course it is! Is that all you can think about? Don't you worry about that. I gave Mr. Lawson the keys."

"And who's he?"

"Don't you go crook with me!"

"What?"

"Don't use that tone with me. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I had no idea she had any health problems."

"No, she wouldn't tell you in case you were upset." Sarcasm.

"Well, thank you," I said. "I know you were always a good friend to mum. We will no doubt meet again." Mine bounced off her. I could already hear her in the local store: 'I had a piece out of him, the jumped-up bastard…All he cared about was the bloody property.'

I remembered the woman quite well, a committed recounter of the latest word from the Sun-Herald, who had the short, violent answer to most problems. I had no doubt that she would have had a rustle around the house before any solicitor turned up. The thought made me suddenly furious. I had no means of checking what she might have stolen, and if I had, no means of proving she had taken it. The solicitor's letter, if he wrote to me straight away, was still some days away, and if I asked him to take an inventory, he would charge like a wounded bull. I thought of the bits and bobs Mum had, bits of pottery, little ornaments from here and there, and fumed at the idea that vast old virago had got them. I could hardly think of anything else. It wasn't that I wanted them. There were a few books of dad's and some nice pieces of antique colonial furniture I shouldn't mind, and the family photograph albums…and one or two paintings. If any of those were not there I should go straight to the cops…as if they would do anything. I bet Helen's daughter would have collected a few things too.

It's very hard to get it all out of my head, except via this route, perhaps. It's a diversion from the fact that my parents are now both dead, I'm an orphan, never gave them any grandchildren, and these few sticks I was so keen to defend were all there was to prove they had ever been, apart from me.

I sat about in the silence of the FEB, drank for my guilt and mourned for my mum. She had sensibly stayed where she was when dad died, although she always claimed to be a city girl. I think that she started off trying to do the right thing as the Principal's wife, but she refused to vote Liberal or National or join the Country Women's Association and ended up voting Green after dad died. Perhaps she had voted Labour to annoy him, but I have come to think that he enjoyed the independent spirit of his young wife and saw something of it in me with my beard and poetry and demos. I loved them both in the choked way of the Australian Anglo-Celt. In his seventies dad liked to hug me when I arrived and left, but mum was right for a peck on the cheek, that was all. I would sometimes coax them into a drive, rather than sitting in the kitchen saying the usual things to each other, and what they most enjoyed, before some buffoon 'privatised' it, was to drive down to the end of Philip Island and watch seas from a reach as far as the Antarctic ice smash in blindingly white foam and energy on the black basalt rock. We would sit in the car and munch sandwiches and drink thermos tea in silence and then drive back contented.

"Oh poor Greggy. You were so happy!" and Stella had burst into tears. While I told

her the details, up into space and down to my ear came her sobs and snuffles. Of course, some of it was due to her own mother's recent death, she was full of empathy, but it made plain her feelings for me and I didn't know what to say. "Poor man! Honey, I'm going to have to call you back." It was oddly disturbing, this anxiety to…this compliance; the opposite of the flighty young woman she had been. The years seemed to have broken her.

Her public exuberance on meeting me at the bus station beneath the hotel had given way to restraint as she sensed my embarrassment. She was boots-and-all; I tiptoed. Her familiarity was wonderful to me. There she was! We sat opposite each other on identical white sofas and talked in an abstract kind of way about our lives. It seemed, from what she said that both her marriages had turned brutal, perhaps physically. As she had read poems I had written about her and my feelings for her a decade before, she seemed to have come to mythologise me in her turn. She had her worn copy of Clifton Hill Blues and said she had dreamed of hearing me reading the poems to her. Tucked in it was something in my handwriting:

'In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.'

As I finished reading Dylan Thomas's words she had landed at my knees, tears rolling down her heavy face. Thus kisses had come easily and we made love in a tangle of clothes then and there. There was nothing clinical or athletic about clinging together in that glitzy magazine-spread of a room. Afterwards she said she cried for happiness. I secretly swore that I would always remember that animal joy, but it is as elusive as it indescribable outside our dreams.

I had got up for a pee. When I went back, she was lying on her back with her knees up and wide apart, her pubic hair neatly trimmed, her neat toenails absurdly painted, breasts sliding under her arm pits, mouth gaping. I had tried to stare at her dispassionately, then lecherously, but it didn't work, and when I got back in bed she had rolled and put her knee across my belly as she had in the surf so long before. Under the sheets we made a bas-relief from a Hindu temple. Flesh did not endure like stone. I held her heavy head on my arm until the muezzin began to call from the white minaret, which disturbed her so that I was able to retrieve it and turn away into deep sleep.

We never left her suite except for a trip to see the view from the top floor. We talked, ate, drank, held hands, kissed, made love this way and that, but when I look back, it was the girl, not the woman, I penetrated. What do we expect of life? Reality is in fiction, in describing hidden lives we come closest to it. You come near the truth about yourself in describing other people.

*

She had champagne on ice and several more bottles in the fridge. That was what they drank. In their dressing gowns they had danced the rhumbas playing endlessly everywhere in those days, swayed about on the balcony in a state of happiness, smooching and humming along. In the purple zenith Greg saw the wake of a jumbo climbing up for the troposphere; ships and boats voyaged on the blue harbour; traffic honked and echoed far below. Life in all its energy was focused on them. The music stopped. She went inside to turn off the chatter. He held the chromium rail of the balcony dizzily. He felt exuberant, fit, fulfilled. At any moment a wonderful first line would come to him. Her breasts were against his back.

She had ordered dinner to be brought up. It seemed filmic…Hollywood. The waiters served it with style, eyes averted. After dinner, with more champagne, they dozed in each other's arms. After midnight they took the lift up to the observation gallery and stared at the glittering city and ships and stars in their courses and told each other how happy they were before they fell into airless sleep on the huge bed.

At some time in the darkness he was woken by her deft ministrations and they went at it again with a passion, half drunk, half awake, disembodied cries like ghosts' suspended between the ocean and the stars. He told himself that he had never known such happiness.

*

He snatched up the phone before it hardly had time to ring. “I’m all right now. Is there anything that I can do for you at this end?”

“Yes, there is. I had a word with a neighbour, who has given me a dose of the irrits. She went crook for no reason I could see except bad conscience. She’s probably been hanging around my mother waiting for this opportunity. She says she has given the keys to the solicitor, who is Lawson of Bantings in Hastings.”

“Not a problem. I’ll go down there and get the locks changed and I’ll get the keys. I’ll say that we are very good friends, okay?”

“That would be great, Stella.” It was relief to him to hear her confident and capable.

“Not a problem. I want to come and see you again soon.”

“Do. They offered me another year.”

“They did? What did you say? You didn’t sign anything?”

“Not yet.” Why did it please him to test her? Did his ego have an unsettled account with her?

“What about me, Greggy? Don’t I count? I couldn’t come there, could I?” It flattered him, this biddability.

“Of course you count, Stella,” he heard himself say. It excited him just to talk to her. “Look, we finish the semester at the end of the month, then there’s a month off.”

“You must come back here! Greg, book now. Do it!”

“I hadn’t though about it.”

“Well, why not?”

“You know me, Stella.” What did she know? That he was a prevaricator. “If I got back there with you, I shouldn’t be able to return, ay? I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t let them all down. It’s not the Ritz, the climate’s crap, my colleagues are all weirdos, but the Chinese faculty and students…I love them. I have to see them right, okay?”

“I’ve got to see you, Greg.”

“And I can’t bear to think of an Australia empty of my mum.”

“I’ll come there again. I’ll fix it, right? There’s stuff I have to do, okay? But then, in your vacation…Oh screw it, there’s someone at the door.” He wondered if there was.

*

His mother had sent him a cutting. She had written a shaky note in the margin to tell him to go back home before it was too late. The letter had taken weeks by surface mail.

From **The Age**, Melbourne.

‘A few days before his death from an unexpected heart attack last week, the man who survived for 22 years as Mao Zedong’s personal physician sketched out a terrifying scenario of a China soon to descend into anarchy and chaos.

Dr Li Zhisui spoke of a weak-willed communist leadership, an enormous and corrupt military machine at war with itself, the reappearance of powerful regional warlords, an ever-edgier gap between Chinese haves and have-nots, and widespread starvation.

“This has already begun”, Dr Li said. “Do not believe the propaganda that China is now feeding itself. At least ten per cent of the population is starving in remote provinces - in the north, in the south-east – that no Western journalist will ever be allowed to visit.”

It was an improbable setting for such an apocalyptic vision: a small, elegant dinner party in a baronial home in a suburb of Chicago, thousands of kilometres and a civilisation away from Beijing.

Slim and white-haired, erect and alert at 75, Dr Li displayed all the smoothness that carried him through more than two decades of poisonous throne-room intrigue before emigrating from China in 1988 to join his two sons and their families in the Chicago area.

The men and women around the dinner table listened open-mouthed as Li spun out anecdote after anecdote, more of it covered in his book, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao,* now on the national bestseller lists.

All of that seemed far removed from the dinner party but in response to questions about the future of the world’s most populous nation, his face and prognosis turned grim.

Of the head of state, President Jiang Zemin, anointed successor to ailing, 90 year-old paramount leader Deng Xiaoping: “No force of personality. A bureaucrat who sucked up to Deng. He won’t last.”

Of Zhao Ziyang, the reform-minded Communist Party leader driven into exile after the Tiananmen Square riots of 1989: “He will be back.”

The post-Deng era, Dr Li said, would be determined by the million-man military machine.

“The army is a latticework of corruption and profiteering. It is involved in an enormous number of profit-making ventures. Did you know that the best hotel in all of China, the five-star Palace Hotel in Beijing, is owned by the army?” he asked.

“The benefits of this, the spoils, are reaped at the top. They don’t trickle down to the peasant conscripts who form the bulk of the armed forces. Nonetheless, the army has the power. You ask if a military czar could emerge as the leader of China? The answer is yes.”

China is so vast and populous – 1.2 billion people officially, and some experts say it could be as many as 1.6 billion – that, more than ever, what happens there will hugely affect Asian geopolitical stability and the global economy.

One aspect of that: if Li’s dark vision is accurate, and only 1 percent of China’s population flees a new reign of terror and confusion, the outflow would nearly double the number of the world’s refugees.

– Knight Ridder.

Journal

0800 Jan 19

I was early, the cleaners still busy. I said 'Ca va?' in my best Mandarin. One did the peculiar, shuffling trot of respect towards me until stopped by a word from the caretaker, who looked at me, head bent down to the tight, with dark, bright eyes like a magpie.

They go on cleaning, I write up instructions. Outside a cold mist filters milky winter sunlight between silver-grey palm trunks. The caretaker appears, picking up fallen fronds from the wet grass. Students enter, subdued, no cheerful bobs and greetings, look for their seat numbers. Stern Professor Li enters shouting and they scuttle to bring their bags and padded jackets to the front. He looks under the desks where ledges might conceal cribs, and the atmosphere is oppressive. I finish writing. My co-invigilator, Jane He comes clicking in just in time in high-heeled boots, out of breath, starts round the room. It's a big and serious occasion: Chairman Charles enters. I give him a paper. He starts the exam. We hand out papers. He leaves.

Forty-six writing the end-of-semester 'composition' examination for undergrads. Jane has a yell as various dignitaries enter, deans and things. The Party Secretary, a comely woman recently widowed, stands at the back. Jane tells me that she says my handwriting is too small. This does not please me. She requires student identity cards to be on the desk next to each candidate. Hands go up. Students discover astonishing ambiguities. There are a couple of dumb typos which I correct with some satisfaction as a reposit to the re-writing I had to do. I have two spare papers. Jane sets about the lists, standing in the one spot of sun which has entered the chill. Having started them writing on the half-hour, I make these notes at the desk on ther dais. The department secretary, grim lady, talks too loudly, discussing the missing students. Jane strides about in her yellow boots, flash as Mercury's. Serious faces appear, old blokes, examining the examinees and examiners.

The strip lights pale as the sunlight grows stronger. I look at the glossy black heads bent so assiduously. Coughs, sneezes, sighs. The walls are matt white. Where water has penetrated, lime green flakes through like Chinese paintings of conifers in snow: beautiful dilapidation. Jane comes whispering. We are on our own, apart from the departmental secretary, who is reading at the back. Jane has heard of my attempts at translation and wishes me to know that it is impossible in English to do justice to the historical and literary allusions which make Tang poetry so wonderful. She has a determined look in her eye, as if to put me down for my impertinence. I maintain amiability with some effort. She has a child, a 'little emperor' (a little monster!) but recently fell pregnant again and had to have an abortion. She embarrasses me with the volume of her whispers, which must be a bloody nuisance to the students, but they don't look up.

Half-past nine: two hours to go. The shadows of the palms are distinct. They move slowly. I go and sit in a spare seat and earn some quick smiles for eccentricity, perhaps. I start a poem:

Heroic Soup

Gaunt with white hair,
He has no blue guitar
But a broken neck
Collects
Waxy-red flowers
Of the heroic tree
Makes heroic soup
To cool his hot blood.

A scholar once he cracked
Under the loutish yoke
And now he cleans
The teaching block
Sleeps
In a broom cupboard
With a poster of Mao beaming
Like the full moon
As rats, bats and roaches sing.

*

The semester ended with a photograph, the students decked out in graduates' gowns and mortar boards of the Western kind. It was cold and he only had his zip-up jeans jacket, but nobody complained. He sat next to Chairmen Charles, who had a red beret flat on his head, and said "How do you know that they will all pass?" out of the side of his mouth.

Charles laughed: "All pass! All pass!"

Afterwards he asked Li why they didn't have a Chinese academic dress, like Tang scholars whose degree was revealed by the tabs which projected like ears behind their heads. He shrugged, didn't know. Students clamoured to have their photograph taken with him.

The Infanta flew back to Portugal and the Doctor of Science Fantasy to Beijing; the spy, Marvin, disappeared into the hinterland; Ted retreated to a monastery on the Canadian tundra and Brother Terrence went back to Hong Kong HQ. Bats zoomed and rats dashed in the corridor at night. He managed to get an electric fire.

In the departmental library there was an extraordinary collection of books left behind by the flaky foreign devils who had preceded him. He read the *Mabinogion, Microcosmographie* of John Earle, Bishop of Salisbury, and Milton's *Areopagitica;*

he tried to write poems, drank, made love to his fist and groaned in his solitude. The campus was almost deserted and, out-of-semester, none of his colleagues wanted to meet him. As he took his walks around the lake among the trees with white-washed trunks, watching the smaller fish near the shore, the biggies submarining about in the middle, some bicyclist might wave, but did not stop.

*

He telephoned Paul and was granted an audience that afternoon. He much admired Paul's scholarly dignity: he took himself seriously and worked away at set times at his literary and linguistic pursuits and also took time to listen to music. He collected pirate CDs, which cost little and revealed how profitable the industry was in the West. Greg arrived to Mahler's Fourth and sat in his usual rosewood chair, staring up at a white cat on top of a bookcase which stared back at him for a while. The music ended.

"Now, my dear chap, to what do I owe this pleasure?" He smiled and Greg, who was always expecting irony behind Paul's formalities, smiled too.

"My mother has died. I didn't find out until she had been cremated. I got a fax, but it took two days before I knew it, and by then she had been cremated."

Paul had sat and looked steadily at him. "I am extremely sorry. You are an only child like me. That bond is very strong."

"I was never even told that she had suffered from kidney stones. I didn't know that she had suffered a stroke. She had been in hospital and had gone home, having recovered, but then was found dead in her kitchen. She lived alone."

"Poor lady. Here she would have been with her family."

"I feel ashamed that I did so little for her. I mean, before I decided to come here, I used to drive down from the city now and then and take her for afternoon tea somewhere, but when she really needed me…" He shrugged. "I had telephoned, you know, but I had been getting no answer…And now I never shall." He grasped his nostrils, held his breath.

"We can never do enough for our parents in their old age." He got up and Greg followed him to his kitchen where he made a pot of green tea. Greg carried their cups into the garden and they sat on wooden recliners in a small paved area where cats sprawled in the winter sunshine. There were not so many. The market stall holders captured them and ate them. Paul had said nothing, as if affected by Greg's news, then, "I know someone in the telegraph office and I will do what I can to see that you get your messages in time."

bicycle race seemed to be in progress around the campus, but whether it was impromtu or official was not clear to Greg. Some of the bicycles had tall canes with coloured flags, which fluttered along the top of the hedge. There were cheers and shouts of what seemed to be encouragement.

"Oh, these fellows! They are trying to interest people in the effort to get the

university into the ‘top hundred’, as they are calling it.”

“Top hundred?”

“Top hundred universities. There are more than fifteen hundred, but now we must have an elite, and to be in it there are criteria by which we will be judged. I am pleased to be retired.” They sipped, his cage-birds chirruped, the cats ignored them.

“When you were young, did you meet Chiang Kai-shek?”

“Meet him? My dear chap, I saw him when he came up to take the air in the hills above Chunking. I was kept out of the way.” Then: “If the Americans had not been such fools and had helped him put down the communists, he would have made a rapprochement with the Japanese and they could all three have attacked the Soviets from the East while the Nazis did from the West, don’t you think?”

“Christ!” Could world history have been so re-written? “Do you think that was on the cards? Those blokes do make plans like that, don’t they?”

“It’s all they ever want to do, the idiots! They are megalomaniacs. It’s what drives them. Usually they are fools too, or mad. They kill millions.” He threw up his hands. “Don’t let’s speak of them. “The Americans talk of ‘losing China as their worst foreign policy mistake’! Hubris! They want to make history but have learned nothing from it!” His voice echoed and the President of the university lived above him. He saw Greg’s glance upwards at his windows and laughed. “Come on, let’s speak of something important. Have you completed the Li Bo?” He handed them over. “Read them to me.” Even in winter mosquitoes were busy at my ankles which itched consumedly. They seemed not to bother him. He waited impatiently as Greg rubbed his ankles together, sipped tea, not flattering him too much by hurrying.

Meditating in Jingling Mountains

All the birds have flown
A single cloud drifts

I contemplate peaks
Brooding upon me

Visiting the Ancient Site
of the Wu King’s Terraces at Tui

Willows green on terrace ruins
Spring bursting with girls’ singing.
Only the moon which gilded
King Wu’s concubines still shine

Watching the Lushan Falls

Censor Peak breathes purple plumes
As sun lights the river up-
Ended: three thousand sheer feet
The Milky Way dazzling down!

Farewell to a Friend

Green hills to the North
A clear stream washes
The town's Eastern walls

You will roll away
Like a cloud while my
Heavy heart sinks down
With the sun...We wave
And our horses neigh.

Thoughts of Her Husband on the Frontier

When did we part just last year?
South garden green...Butterflies...

This year, when do I miss you?
Snow on Western hills, black cloud...

Jade Pass is so far away,
Can letters find where you stay?

A View of the Celestial Gate

The Celestial Gate opens
East; the Yangtse bends North, sprawls.

From between the green mountains
a sail skims close to the sun.

*

Paul did no more than nod, shuffling the papers. “He was a big man, a drunken womaniser; famous for it, but he was close to the Daoist adepts too. He was imprisoned for treason after the An Lushan rebellion and died not after. He was a great spirit.” He produced another half-dozen poems on the thin paper he used, the neat characters with literal translations, the lines of doggerel.

Greg took them. “Maybe I could come to see you…” Paul held up a hand.

“Friday is your day. I am too busy to see you twice a week, even if it is the vacation.” Greg flicked his eyebrows involuntarily. Paul smiled thinly. It was master and pupil. Why did he put up with it? Because he wanted to *know!* And he liked the old brute too. He was the only person with whom he could talk about Chinese poetry and poetry in general.

“It’s very good of you to find the time for me.”

“No, it’s good for my English and, you know, it makes me look closely at the classics again. It’s like you translating Chaucer, maybe Langland even.”

“Heaven bloody forfend, mate!” Paul liked that. “I know you tell me that I should concentrate on my art and not even try to get published, but I feel bound to tell you that my partner and myself are setting up a small poetry press’…He rehearsed several such remarks as he had climbed the steps. It was extraordinary that he should go to such lengths, Stella would be *amazed*. One result of totalitarianism was that intellectuals and artists were important people: the Emperor Mao had given them all ten years’ hard to prove it, those who had survived being ‘struggled against’ by the self-righteous louts of the Red Guard. It was hard to inhabit such a reality if you had not experienced it, and you had to respect such experience. Western intellectuals and artists were amateurs in comparison. Nobody gave a brass razoo for them except themselves.

Paul had been leaning on his gate beneath the buzzing of the bees, wearing a white plastic pith helmet and smiling. “Welcome,” he said, Welcome,” and he drew the bolts and held out his hand.

“Well I have come to make a confession.” Greg said.

“Ah, well, there’s plenty of time for those. Come and look at these cats, my dear chap.” He led the way into the shade of a mulberry tree and pointed. For a moment he could not make sense of what he saw in a high fork: a white tail like a flexible pendulum swung, then he saw the head of another cat. It held the white cat by the scruff as they mated. ”Isn’t that beautiful?”

“It’s certainly bloody precarious.” As if offended by their scrutiny, the female cat suddenly twisted, spitting, and whacked the tom on the head so hard that, even when she had gone, it continued what it had been doing for a moment. The white cat stared down disapprovingly at their voyeurism. Paul indicated the garden chairs he had set out and went in for their green tea.

They sipped and Greg struck out at the tiny mosquitoes which Paul ignored. “You have not brought your folder. Are we not working this afternoon? I was looking forward to it.”

“I have been working away at the last batch, but life has become complicated. I shan’t be here next weekend, I’m off to Hong Kong again to meet the same lady. It seems that we are becoming more formally involved.” Paul raised his brows and tilted his head.

“Marriage?”

“Not yet.”

“Ha! The wily old bachelor.”

“I suppose so, yes. She was a student of mine for whom I developed a romantic fixation, this was years ago, which I feared she found no more than amusing. I left my partner, but Stella -”

“I’ve heard this.”

“Oh! Sorry. Well now the boot’s on the other foot, so to speak, and she is very rich and wants to start a publishing business with me –“

“And publish all the beautiful poems that you wrote about her and for her in her golden youth?”

“That’s exactly right.” His stern face cracked.

‘Well congratulations, my dear fellow. Everything comes to him who waits.” He was smiling with pleasure; though Greg suspected irony, none was apparent. One of the difficulties was his old-fashioned courtesies could seem only a touch from sarcasm. “Where’s the problem?”

“It isn’t long ago since I told you that I would have none of that sort of thing. You were saying that all I wanted was fame at the time.”

“Was I really? Good gracious. I expect that I was trying to make you understand that you possess a touch of genius. I have watched you work, and often been amazed at what you can do. Whatever objections people may choose to raise against your approach to translating classical Chinese poetry, be assured that when it comes to power of imagination, beauty of style, and economy of words, you remain unsurpassed. It has irritated me that you refuse to accept this.”

“It’s very flattering, Paul, but…”

“There you go again, you see. Have some more tea. Don’t look the gift-horse,

whatever that is, in the mouth, not, I assure you, that your lady from Hong Kong –“ He gave up and laughed, then: “Have you told Cheng? He’ll be terribly disappointed. He was hoping that you might care for one or the other of his twins. Both, perhaps. Ah well, I take it that you’ll finish at the end of the semester, that’s the plan?”

“Yes, if you think - “

“If *I* think? It’s your decision, old chap. Life doesn’t often present such chances. A millionaire publisher? I can see you now on a balcony overlooking the tropical sea, quill in one hand, gin the other.” He seemed unable to speak seriously about such bizarre possibilities, shook his head. “I really should congratulate you. I hope everything goes well for you…For you both.” He held out his hand and I shook it again. “Perhaps you can sell her our translations?” Now he *was* being snide. His sole interest in them was in the linguistic process and seeing how I dealt with his literal text. “I’m afraid that I shan’t be able to assist, but I have two of your students that I see as they are the most able of those I taught, and I’ll supervise their work with you.” It was not possible to decline.

Paul had said no more about Greg’s bereavement that afternoon except, with a handshake as he left, “Profound condolences, old chap.” Greg was glad to have told him. Paul’s benevolent opinions mattered to him.

*

He offered to teach English to the girls in reception, which they found a giggle until, he suspected, the manager discouraged them. Five more weeks! If he thought about it, it was a good opportunity for going troppo, or organising his translations into a manuscript…Paul must not suspect it. And Stella would come to see him, he was sure of it. Already she was becoming a glamorous myth again.

She hadn’t said much about America, her life and relationships, her daughter, and her Americanisms were less, although Australian speech was supinely receptive to it and to American culture. All the ferals running about with guns (killing things and each other) were certain they had a constitutional right to do so; all the people swearing an oath on the bible said, ‘So help me God’; at the end of marriage ceremonies, celebrants said: ‘You may kiss the bride.’ He especially hated ‘Enjoy!’ even more than ‘Have a nice day’…But not more that ‘Have a nice one.’ The really horrible thing about US culture was that it saw people as means, not ends in themselves. It made him savour Strine: “Off like a bride’s nightie’, ‘grinning like a rat with a gold tooth’, ‘fuller than the family po’. She knew it, of course, which perhaps explained her reticence, but she had caught that job’s-a-job, sleeves up, let’s be serious, entrepreneurial enthusiasm. Now she was free, she was casting about for something to do with her inheritance and he sensed that he mighty feature in it.

He developed a routine, walking round the campus shops and stalls first thing to buy vegetables, fruit and tins of this and that; walking to the library and

browsing there; mooching in the squalid streets and small shops outside the gates and buying pirated CDs. Once a week, in Brother Terry's absence, he went into the city to buy drink, coming straight back. He couldn't bear it, ignored waifs who bowed, a small note tucked their wagging, praying hands outside the 'smugglers' cave', as the Chinese called the shop for diplomats. He had thought that he would travel before he went to China, but now he knew that the simplest thing was so difficult to arrange, and knew as well the hustle and crush of Chinese life, he stayed where he was and wrote poems of pedestrian worthiness because a great sense of unreality grew in him the longer he was there.

*

China Day

Fingers laced above your head,
Palms up, arms outstretched,
Among the bushes and the litter

Against the early sun you sway,
Hips as mobile as a girl's…
Old crone, I look away.

Against a tree trunk by the lake
A student squats, rote learns,
Eyes tight, softly muttering,

Ignoring rotting lotus leaves,
Effluent stink, certain when
The time is ripe, perfection comes.

*

Things happened just as they had before. She had chosen a better room, or rather a better view of the harbour beyond the white towers crammed between its shores and the hills. It cost as much for a night as he earned in a month. Her wealth made him uneasy. He could imagine what his mother would say. Stella had her ashes.

They woke as the day was fading over China and the city's glittering and twinkling was becoming obvious. A white cruise-liner turned into a city of lights in itself. Whilst she showered, he sat and drank a glass of orange juice and looked at

what was supposed to be the freest-wheeling capitalist city in the world before a little 'democracy' had been allowed in order to make the Chinese take-over seem brutal. It was not enough to be a nuisance to Beijing or the multinationals whose logos burned brighter as the last of day declined. For a long time it had been plain that those who ran the media could not decide whether to bang the Tienanmen drum as the cash-cow was returned to its owners, or serenade the barbarian Chinese by telling them it was in their best interests to change nothing. They seemed to pay no attention. Whatever Western media chose to promulgate, the determinations of power were as certain as midnight on June 30th 1997, when the Brits got out. He ought to feel like Gibbon staring at the ruined Forum from the Capitoline Hill, sensing the end of an empire and the way it might be recorded. He had no language for it. Such historic moments were nothing to do with individuals. If he tried it, as he had in the past, the result was lifeless posturing, gestural as the posters of Socialist Realism. He should stick to people and their feelings and relationships, the liberal individualism, which upset tyrannies.

He hadn't heard her, she put a hand on his shoulder and made him jump. "What are you thinking about?"

"The difficulties of trying to write poems about history."

"Hah!" she twirled in front of him in a bath towel skirt, flung her arms up fingers fluttering, moved her head from side to side like an Indian dancer. "I thought that you would be thinking about me." She shuffled a few steps for him, mobile breasts just out of his reach.

"Fair go! It's an old man you're with." She took his glass off him and sat on his lap, smiling into his eyes.

"Have I got a surprise for you! The first from Stellar books."

"Stellar Books?"

It was in rough in a plastic wallet: *SELECTED POEMS OF GREG BUCKLEY.* Its cover in silver and purple had a collage of shots of Flinders Street station, trams on St Kilda Road between leafy trees and St. Kilda beach on a summer's day. It was grim. He put it down and took her breasts in his hands. "Just stop that! Have a look."

As he expected, the poems turned out to be largely those he had written for her. He flipped through, pointing out some typos.

"You don't approve, do you?"

"Bloody Oath I do! But you need to put 'love' after 'selected'."

"Yes, that's true. But you don't really approve, I can tell."

"I'm gob-smacked, Stella, that's all. I'm not used to it. It's always been very personal, secretive even." He thought she might cry. "'It's a rum business, art', as somebody said." She snatched the pages up.

"I've paid for the copyright."

"That's excellent. It's very good of you. What goes on the back?"

"You. I have a lovely photograph taken of you about then, when you had a beard. It suited you, you know. You should have kept it."

"There's grey in it now." He could see she was crestfallen, stroked her arms.

“There doesn’t have to be, Greg.” She said, and began to weep, her face contorting. It was a shame to be dressed like that and weeping. He felt himself harden. “I’ll get dressed,” she said, as if she felt it too, but she lingered. He hugged her, patted her back and kissed her neck, but she did not relax. Now she knew it looked like a tourist brochure.

“Love poems about the publisher are a touch vain for starters,” he said so as gently as he could.

“Yes, darling, we mustn’t fall out. We have to be businesslike,” Stella said. “I’ve got all sorts of plans.” She kissed his brow.

He put his only tie on and they went to a restaurant in the hotel and ate trout, drank Chablis, even shuffled on the dance floor and became friends again. He told her about the curious state of affairs – more poetry being written than ever before by people at evening courses, on creative holidays, for first, second, third degrees – tens of thousands of them in the English-speaking world…And nobody buying it. The mainline presses and bookshops giving it up, little presses struggling even with subsidies. She smiled.

When they went back upstairs she found a little bottle in her cosmetics case and put five millilitres in each of two glasses of water. They hung over the balcony and watched the moon rise. A breeze gusted. From the white concrete revetment, which contained the hillside, brambles thrashed like snakes.

“Stella, love, the book won’t do like that. They will laugh at you.”

That’s why I need your help, Greggy.”

They finished her little bottle and were weary, heavy, utterly at ease. A gibbous moon looked down on them in the king-sized bed and, drifting along through the dreamy night with it, he understood that one reason for not going back to Australia was that he would have to own up to the fact that he had sold their home and removed all trace of her and his dad. He had no home any more. It made him cry. He tried not to make a noise but after a while she heard and tried to comfort him. He got up and sat in the dark. Her voice surprised him. “Tell me about her and your father. You’ve never said much.” He took his time. It was a valediction. When he spoke his voice seemed formal and distant, as if he were in the lecture hall again. The moon had gone. He was thirsty and gulped water down. Stella’s breath was steady and deep. The drone of the voice in his head ended. They could go now, his mum and dad. He had finished with them. He had struggled upright, surprised when his body obeyed him. His throat had parched and now he must drink. He put on a small light and with some difficulty navigated the debris of clothing and baggage to the fridge. There he poured iced water, asked if she wanted any. She didn’t reply, lay bare and abandoned in a sprawl of sleep. He lay down beside her.

They woke late on a bright and hot morning. He felt subdued and sombre; sat in an armchair with grapefruit juice and the papers. The South China Post was as full of idle speculation, over extension and lateral reasoning as most papers and he was soon done with it. Breakfast was wheeled in before Stella appeared and he had it set on the balcony. For her amusement he found the Australian Broadcasting Company on the radio, but she had no time for it. “Oh God,” she said, “please turn it off, I was enjoying not having to listen to those pinkoes.” It was a kind of joke. In another mood he would have obliged her with a grin, but as it was, he suggested that they ought to get out and about a bit more than they had on the previous occasion.

And they did, although the heat on the paving distressed her and she did not enjoy the crowds nor the stink of diesel fuel, petrol engines being banned from the deep canyons of the streets. She enjoyed bargaining with stall holders, mostly Chinese crones, and bought a number of small, brass birds in boxes which sang and trembled to her delight when the lid admitted light. Not long after noon they found a cool bar where they drank long, iced Tom Collins in the gloom and he found that he had nothing to say. In desperation, perhaps, she asked him what had most surprised him when he got to China.

“Terror of thieves,” he had said. “There’s no banking system yet, and as they are all happily making money, all windows are barred and doors double-locked, and in my wardrobe I have a safe which is too heavy to pick up, and,“ he produced his key ring, ”needs these two keys to open. I don’t know of anybody who has had something stolen, apart from Paul, whose breadfruit were nicked, probably because they looked like beautiful breasts and the students couldn’t keep their hands off them. Almost as beautiful as yours.” He saw it would have been better not to have said it, continued quickly: “Of course, we rarely read anything about China in the West without negative spin.”

He saw that it was hard for her not to reply, then she smiled: “They are all so small and ugly, I don’t know how you stand it. You *are* leaving at the end of the semester, Greg, aren’t you?” He found that he wanted to argue out of loyalty to his Chinese friends and she sensed it too. “Maybe I should come there and see for myself?”

“You would hate it, Stella. My rooms are tatty, the linen is old, the curtains patched, the carpets stained. It’s really humid and hot and grimy and the plumbing is a bastard. You have to see past that stuff to the people, who are the best. I can’t say enough about them, students and faculty, and I wish you wouldn’t start on that ‘small and ugly’ Aussie crap. Is that how all these people seem to you?”

“Well, they are not Communists!”

“How can you tell?”

“Well of course they are not. They take terrible risks to escape China. Everybody knows that they have no freedom of speech and it’s a slave economy. I have no patience with…”

“Quite a proportion of my students are from here and Macau and Taiwan and

Singapore. Why do you think that is? They love China. They are very proud of their culture."

"I don't want to talk about this." She stood up. He finished his drink and went and paid. She had walked a short distance and was staring in a shop window. A turbaned Sikh wearing a bandolier full of shells and with a highly polished shotgun across his chest towered over her outside a jeweller's shop.

"You suffer from the vertigo of the rich," he told her. She seemed not to hear, staring in at various glittering objects. He walked, then saw a bookshop down some stairs opposite, and turned to tell her that was where he was going. She had gone. The Sikh's teeth were stained. He was an old man. He had stood there every day for years, waiting for some one to start something. Now he was smiling and jerking a thumb inside. Greg nodded, tapped his chest, pointed over the road. The smile broadened in the full beard.

There were several packed shelves of poetry. The books oppressed him: hours of effort and anguish to what result? Nobody bought it except poets, sometimes. Creative writing courses burgeoned, there were degrees and doctorates in it, thousands wrote it, but nobody read it. Mainline presses were giving up pretending that there was a market for it, small presses were ephemeral, but year on year reams and reams of it were written, crossed out and re-written over and over, fell through letterboxes as if into oblivion, but did not stop. Did she not know it? She would have to employ somebody to read it and post back rejection slips by the hundred each week, week after week.

Nothing of his was on view. If it was bought on a whim, it got read once at the most, or half-read, then stuck on another shelf until it was sold second-hand or thrown away. It was compulsive, pathetic, subject to chance or favour. All he had written in China was a series of well-meaning postcards, tourist views, superficial stuff. "'Oh, for a muse of fucking fire!'" he said aloud as he moved along the shelves. He thought of the snarling poetic coteries trailing poetry editors and snapping at scraps and each other. The bastards would sneer at Stella's publication of his work.

"Professor Buckley!" It was a student, an elegant girl who was bowing, smiling. "Oh what a lovely surprise to see you here." Outside the university she was dressed very stylishly from her expensive earrings to her high-heeled sandals. "I came to look for a book I need. It's such a good bookshop, isn't it?"

"It seems to be." He couldn't remember her English name. "What book are you looking for?"

"Roderick Random, by Tobias Smollett." It was a title that might have been chosen to test her pronunciation, but she hardly over-emphasised it. "And where are you staying, Professor? Do you like Hong Kong?"

He was telling her when he noticed Stella flicking at pages further down the shop. She obviously had no intention of coming any nearer. He excused himself and the girl bobbed her head, smiling with pleasure.

"A student of mine," he explained. She nodded and didn't look up, pretending

to be absorbed.

"I should like to have introduced her, but I couldn't remember her name. Let's eat."

"I need a drink, another long, cold Tom Collins. Let's get a taxi back. It's too hot to walk." In the taxi they were silent. The sun was melting the city, shimmering on the roads, flashing and glittering on chrome and glass.

They ordered smoked salmon sandwiches and drank frigid gins. He talked carefully, felt that they were in a minefield while she looked at the paper and offered little in return. He did not like to upset her, but on some issues he would not dissemble. He thought that elites were inevitable and the problem had been 'how to keep the bastards honest', but now that was a joke and the world was consumed by their greedy, self-righteous decadence and there was no hope for it. It was amazing to think that so short a time ago he had believed his career played a part in advancing civilisation, developing empathy and imagination. He suspected that it had been a complete waste of time. He said as much.

"I remember the first time I saw you," she said. I walked past the Arts lecture hall and you were holding forth on Yeats. It was inspiring. I stood at the back and listened to you read *Byzantium* and was late for my class in Linguistics. You obviously cared. That was why I took your courses when I could. I found you an inspirational teacher, that was why I went on to do a doctorate and ended up teaching, I suppose… All your fault, Greg."

"You're having a lend of me, Stella."

"I'm not. It's true."

"I always thought I was a bit of a bloody bore." Whatever it was that he was blaming her for, he forgave her.

"I used to get my leg pulled, and then later, when you started to take some interest, I couldn't handle it."

"That made two of us. It's a long time ago now, isn't it?"

"So long ago that I don't remember what went wrong, except that you left your partner and I got cold feet, you dithered so I announced I was going to the States, which my parents thought was a good idea, and then I was there and in free fall somehow. I got in a real mess, y'know. I used to look back with real nostalgia. I've always loved you, Greg."

"It's time for siesta," he told her. He didn't know what to say. He had never thought that she saw him as anything but an old joke, never took him seriously. The whole episode had been baffled anguish, which didn't stop. And it need not have been. They could have done anything together, he thought, as they lay and kissed each other. "If only we had done this then," he said.

"Well we did, but you wouldn't go through with it. You told me that you were demonstrating true love by not putting it in." He didn't think that she had meant to laugh, but having said it, she did, and so did he.

"We had better put that right," he said, and their irritations turning into erotic

vehemence so that she had to put her hand above her head and palms on the wall.

She woke him with a cup of tea. He got up and took it on their balcony among the potted bamboo in the hot evening. “I’m going to sell my house in Clifton Hill and with the result and what my mum left me, I am going to buy, or maybe build, a beach house on Westernport Bay. The Chinese say ‘the falling leaf lands on its roots’ and, in so far as I have any roots, that’s where they are.”

“That’s a great idea. We can drive down at weekends or when we feel like it,” she said. He was not the only one with plans.

*

By the time he caught the Guangzhou bus, and he had agreed that the book should go ahead (although he had not mentioned that a couple of the poems were not addressed to her as she supposed, but to Norma) and that he would finish in June and would grow a beard again, Stella’s mood was elated. They had parted tenderly and she had given him a little box of singing birds as a memento.

As the bus, which seemed to be exonerated from speed limits, boomed down the concrete fast lane, he felt relieved to escape. Love him she might, but she had very little idea about art, and nothing would displace his commitment to it…Certainly not notions of fame. He stared at the foundations of the new city. Here and there graves of the powerful had been left undisturbed while the red earth had been lowered around them, so that they resembled the ravined and conical mountains where immortals lived celebrated in landscape art. ‘The towering dead…’

*

Journal

Friday afternoons with Paul began at two-thirty sharp, apologies began a minute later, but sometimes he felt sedated after siesta and could not hurry by the lake where the water smelt and dace gasped on the surface so that children enjoyed waving their arms and seeing the swish and swirl of the fish. He plodded up wide steps which had once been elegant, but were now cracked and chipped and rarely brushed so that they could be treacherous, and along the earth paths between the lime green two storey apartment blocks where washing and cage birds hung on balconies and there was rarely a sign of the retired academics and their families who lived there. Paul obviously stood and watched for him, then hurried to open the side gate into his garden, which was shaded by palms and looked over another lake. Their initial exchanges were formal, and this continued until they were in Paul’s study, where they

sipped green tea and gossiped and listened to some new black market CD for a while before getting down to work.

Paul always made clear that he was taking time from his scholarly work and that his time was valuable and not to be wasted.

So they would begin. Greg would read his first attempt to capture in twenty syllables, five per line, Paul's literal translation. As Greg read it aloud, Paul would point out where the meaning of the original was diminished or lost and Greg would offer alternatives. The process would last until five when his wife came home, sometimes five or six poems completed, sometimes only two, and often a poem from the previous week would be revised with afterthought. It was, so far as Paul was concerned, akin to working on Shakespeare's sonnets, and he could become angry if Greg seemed casual; but for Greg it was rarely more than a chore, a way of passing the time, a means of talking to Paul once a week. Eventually what seemed flippancy to one and arrogance to the other, exploded:

Poetic Conceits

You are shouting in the gloom,
eyes staring, nostrils wide.
So much I can see against the light
sprawling in a rosewood chair
in your book-filled garden room.

'*Respect for the classics! Each word*
is precious...More valuable than friendship!
You are too flippant...You want fame!
"Old tree" is "old tree"..."Withered vine"
is that and no more..."Stark pine?" Absurd!'

For too long our eyes don't shift.
I cross out "Autumn Thoughts,"
say, '*In English it's a clutter of cliches.'*
Now we stare anywhere...

And so began our rift.

*

It had the curious effect of making them superficially more intimate, as if to offer tokens of goodwill. So it was that Paul confided that Gisela had written to

him and told him that she feared she was HIV positive. It seemed, he said, that she enjoyed an active sex life. He had an infectious grin. He knew, Greg guessed, that he had been to Hong Kong.

"You are a wicked old Chinaman," and noted a flash of amour propre. "I went to Hong Kong to meet another lady during the vacation. She's setting up a publishing house and wants me on her list. She tells me that she is going to make me famous."

"So, of course, you will do it?"

"No, I won't." As he said it, it surprised him. "I am sorry to disappoint your expectations."

"My dear chap, that is very good news. You simply must have faith in your ability and not let yourself be distracted by such things. I congratulate you." He reached across the table between the chairs and shook his hand. Greg wondered if this was more irony, decided it was not.

"You over-estimate me, mate. I rarely get the divine afflatus, my stuff tends to lie heavy on the page. There's point of lift-off when a good poem takes wings into a different element, sort of powered by the unconscious, and all aboard get a huge view, but I rarely manage that. It's maybe a sign of the times as much as… " He had shrugged.

Paul inclined his head and made silent hand claps. "Even those whom we call great write a good deal of ordinary stuff, you know. No, what I want to say is that at a certain level of achievement, considerations such as modesty or vanity or fashion do not come into it. Romanticism was defeated by irony, I think, and now the task is to get beyond that, which you fail to do, so far as I have seen. If I may say so, you care too much about the opinions of others."

"So you don't mind if I don't take any notice of your lecture?"

"Ah, what is it they say. 'Be cool'?" He grinned, pleased with himself. "I prepared for my retirement and disconnected from my colleagues and the vanities of the world. I pursue my interests and try to emulate my cats."

And so they went on until, susceptible to his claims, Greg pointed out that Paul was bourgeois by birth, the son of a fashionable doctor and a university teacher, and had been educated at private schools, and that was why he could not match his Olympian certainty. Impasse. An arrogant stare. It was such traits which had earned him ten years of persecution, but Greg had no desire at all to make anything of that. On the other hand, whilst he liked being told that he had talent as a translator, he disliked having his motives so often doubted.

He told him again that he did not take part in the round of ill-attended poetry readings and festival entertainments, where audiences sat about waiting for something to laugh at, preferably obscenity. Paul again insisted that he wanted to be famous: that was his motivation. Greg said that every now and then someone would recognise him, but it startled him. They always had some wild idea of a poet's life, as if it was different and full of various kinds of extravagance. There he was, a moth-eaten and bookish old bloke!

Occasionally there were other surprises from that learned and sophisticated

man, who said that while he was not a materialist, he did not believe in life-after-death, yet reported that when he had been to see his dying father-in-law, he had told the old man that his daughter and himself had decided to continue together beyond the grave and the old man had nodded assent. There was also the story, which made Paul smile lewdly the first time that he heard it, that boys of eight were often given governesses of eighteen or so, who took care of their needs, including sexual needs, until they grew up. They might marry, but then the young man might look elsewhere. He wished, he said, that he had met his beautiful wife in such a way. (She is some ten years younger.) Was it a figment? It could not be questioned. But he was a realist, for all his mystical Daoist feelings, and said bluntly that those with power in Beijing would never give it up for some abstraction called 'democracy', which certainly did not exist in America, which was a straightforward plutocracy behind the obfuscation of the constitution.

*

Journal

'*Professor Rao has begun to talk to me. He is fluent and voluble and had an agreeable penchant for using 'well' to clear his throat before setting off on some short lecture. He had been an enthusiast in his youth and, unfortunately for him, had taken part in the public discussion, 'Let a thousand flowers bloom', which Mao ordered, but did not enjoy, and it had earned Rao the label 'Rightist.' He had ended up labouring in the country but said, whilst the life of a peasant, especially an inexpert peasant, was very hard, people were kind. It had given him more determination, he said.*

One thing that he determined was that he would not marry until Mao bowed out. As emperors went, Mao was near the top, but he had eventually set the country back a decade or more as he lost his grip, or struggled to keep it. He recalled a journey North just before 'The Great Leap Forward', when every village furnace made iron, then on his return finding whole hillsides denuded of trees. Then there was the plague of insects, which destroyed crops and resulted from the war against the sparrow.

*

Water Buffalo World

When the People's Liberation Army,
red flags flying, rolled into the university,
academics knew their next appointments
would be extra-mural...
The leeches
were worst, Liang Jun said, glutting

on your calves, depending from
your thighs, but the pain in the spine
did decline, planting rice, wearing nails
to the quick, and revolutionary peasants
were pleased to share their expertise:
the best slope for the yoke and best lope
with bouncing baskets, building the wall
fifty feet high, fifty miles long, to make plain
the People's Will to the river dragons
who spilled yearly life and death.

Eight university staffs replaced the inmates
of an open prison, scholars from two
mandarin millennia of competitive entry
and imperial vagary, glasses bright,
muscles developing as proof
of zeal for the agricultural basis,
maintenance of party spirit and the water buffalo.

It was several years before Liang Jun
was given charge of a huge and gentle,
dumb and humble beast, rode its back,
even lay and sunbathed, rolling like a cloud
over the alluvial land: Wah!

But suddenly huge horns could jerk,
nostrils snuff...oof! OOF! OOF!
and off the buffaloes would trot,
dragging drovers, chains and stakes
splashing, yelling through the tidy crop.
They did not stop until they barged
and bumped where bulls disputed it,
booming and boring, horns clashing and locked,
huge hooves flailing until one turned tail,
fled to shrill applause, turned and crashed
through canals, smashed through paddy
until some boundary was crossed.

Then the victor, tail up like a flag,
came trotting back, searching
for a failure to kow-tow low enough
...again the snorting thrash: the tyrant butted
and rutted until, to scholarly hilarity,

His Bovinity was satisfied.

Then men and beasts would trail away
back to the labours
and the ruminations of their day.

*

Under the trees over the steps above the cluster of stalls, Professor Cheng told Greg that he had been at Beijing University with Rao, who had been ‘struggled against’ with a third of their class by the rest, and came close to suicide. Cheng’s lips were wet with spittle as he recalled the terror of it. He said he saw a mild little schoolteacher who came from the landlord class, having nails hammered into her body, and had watched the British Consulate burning and the diplomats on their knees on the lawn, begging for mercy. He kowtowed because if he hadn’t he would have been killed by the Red Guards. His round face trembled a little, his eyes behind his round spectacles darted among memories. It was plain that he was still disturbed by such events.

Between the angles of the buildings Greg saw Paul in his garden. He was doing exercises, swinging his arms and lifting his knees, white hair shining as he began a stumbling run back and forth. He laughed, pointed, but Cheng solemnly told him that Paul had been very ill and kept himself fit. He said that as a student he had known Paul’s mother before he knew Paul, and unlike many American academics, who kept clear, she was kind to him, gave him water to drink when no one else would.

In those days nobody had any grasp of events, but in Guandong nowadays they could see Hong Kong TV. He said that the boy who stopped the tanks in Beijing (i.e. during what the Western media call ‘The Tiananmen Square Massacre’) climbed up and sat next to the tank commander and tried to reason with him. The commentary said, ‘See how carefully the tanks of the People’s Liberation Army treat this misled boy’. Greg explained that in the West the episode was truncated and was seen as a demonstration not of reason, but of desperate bravery.

Cheng suddenly decided he had to go. He was very pleased because he had just got a solid translation to do for a Japanese bank. He sat on his bicycle and, paused to ask why Greg had decided to come to China. Taken off guard, he told him that it was to escape the sullen expectations of him in the literary world in Australia. He hardly heard. He now wanted to tell Greg that Marx’s thinking changed after the Paris Commune was crushed. He saw argument was not enough and power must eventually be dealt with. It grew from the barrel of a gun as Mao saw. He bicycled away, head on one side, seeming to consider this.

*

Now the boredom became exquisite. There was no use in pining for Stella, no use in wishing he could see Paul. He worked at his translations of Wang Wei, the reclusive Buddhist, who had been a child prodigy, passing the imperial examinations at twenty-three, and Du Fu failed three times. With Li Bo, their contemporary in the first half of the Eighth Century, they seem to be the leading poets of antiquity. He read that Wang Wei's rejection of office was for Buddhist seclusion, while Du Fu was Confucian in his concern for proper government and for the plight of the peasants in hard times. Li Bo, was Daoist. All three were the beneficiaries of the ex-concubine, Empress Wu, who made literary skill an important part of the selection process for the imperial bureaucracy, so that 48,900 poems by 2200 poets have survived from the Tan dynasty: a fraction of those written.

*

Wang Wei

(701-762)

Answer to Magistrate Zhang

Old, I prefer peace
Affairs don't fret me
I have ambition
Only for these woods

Pine winds tug my sash
Moonlight gilds my lute
'Fortune's path?' Sing deep
Songs to the river!

Deer Park

Mountain silence…Faint
Voices in deep woods.
Last sun slants through trunks
Fires emerald moss.

Getting Out

"Dismount and we'll drink!"
Where are you off to?
You've resigned? Fed up!
The Southern mountains?
Go, no questions, man/
(Those endless white clouds …)

Du Fu

(712-770)

Wartime Moon

A Fu-zhou moon my
Lonely wife sees too …
My innocents can't grasp
That I'm in Changan

Her fragrant hair's damp
Her pale jade arms cold
When will we both lean
Looking up, tears dry?

The Prospect in Spring

Our state has gone: hills,
streams go on. Flowers
droop in towns; weeds, trees
grow rank; birds shock me.

Three months of war. Mail
would be gold. Worry
turns my hair white; sparse,
it can't hold a pin.

Night Thoughts on the River

Soft winds sway grasses
And my mast against stars
Low over vast plains
The bright moon surging.

Poetry brings no fame;
My career folds. Old,
Sick, I drift downstream
Lonely as a gull.

Li Bo did not make sixty; the other two just did. Their calm and quiet observations live on. It consoled Greg, but thoughts of Stella teased his mind – the way she had ending up limping in her beautiful gold sandals, so determined was she to tell him; yet he had hardly heard.

They had walked and she had talked, staring at windows in arcades like side chapels in the temples to the money god, and along walkways with the throngs over streets, through buildings like so many towering termite hills, two among the millions hurrying after 'top dollar', as China itself was learning to do, past a park where off-duty Filipino maids stood in gesticulating groups. The blue-green harbour was all choppy energy and sun-glints. Launches scooted and ferries churned, gulls hung and swooped while he heard about her marriages in New York, her daughter, Jacinta, an affair with a lawyer who turned out to be an addict. She wanted to tell it all, clicking along with a hand holding on a straw hat with its rose like a miner's lantern, a veil which now and then was in his face. She walked with such determination and charisma that people went round her and he shortened his stride to hers, head bent to listen, or seem to do so. She stopped to buy some lace gloves and he stood back, watched her fondly as she bargained with panache, but the main feeling he had was that she was crestfallen at what had happened to her. She had gone ahead without hesitation, making the scene, making things happen. (He had gathered that she was doing the same with the Melbourne literary set, making contacts, asking advice.) She was a formidable lady.

"Stella," he told her as they lay in bed staring at the three o'clock stars, "you need to steady down. Take it easy." She had turned almost violently to wrap herself round him. She was sure that he found her ugly, that her thighs and bottom were huge, her skin unhealthy and slack. She needed his reassurance over and over. The bold girl he had doted upon had gone.

In the mornings, in the half-light, a muezzin woke him. He was in strange territory.

*

Journal
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Paul is known as a most distinguished teacher. I think he is a rare person, one of those brilliant thinkers who reach opinions of their own which, I suspect, is not a popular trait in China or anywhere else for that matter. Ten years ago he went to Germany, where his mother came from, and he said that she had given him such a vision of it that he had to keep the blinkers on or die. He says that black, acid rain falls in Chunking, where he came from, and that he could never go there. He wishes to live like his pets, be idle, consider things in a Daoist way, be casual, cool, laid-back ... He said that he does not care to look in some antique Chinese mirrors in case something looks back. He covers his own up at night.

He takes himself very seriously. He parcels out his time as if it really matters what he does, which doesn't seem very casual to me. I can't help feeling it is an impressive pose. On the other hand, I should not have survived what he went through with my nihilistic mind-set. It isn't a matter of believing in an eternal payout that sustains him, so far as I can tell. It has to be ego. Maybe that's why he doesn't lean to Buddhism. It's a puzzle…But only if you assume that people's opinions are all of a piece.

We are quite similar: he cuts himself off from the university's grind and politics, even though he has plenty of academic grunt. I can't abide public life in Oz, where you can go nowhere without incessant ra-ra drumming: in malls, airports, aircraft, lifts…on TV behind every bit of dialogue and in crescendo during adverts and sporting replays. Even cars reverberate with the beat as they drive past. Bloody drumming, twanging, with the occasional screaming have been prole music for fifty years now. What's it for? Is it akin to the watery echoes of the revolutionary march the Party plays before lectures each morning? What is the message of this endless copulatory excitement?

From The Age of Extremes, Hobsbaum, 1994.

'The very stridency with which the U.S.S.R. insisted, in the Stalin years, on its lack of intellectual and technological dependence on the West, and on the indigenous source of all the leading inventions from telephones to aircraft. Was a telling symptom of this sense of inferiority.

Not so in China, which, quite correctly, saw its classical civilisation, art, script and social value-system as the acknowledged inspiration and model for others – not least Japan itself. It certainly had no sense whatever of any intellectual and cultural inferiority, either collectively or of individual Chinese compared to other people…The technological inferiority of China, which became only too evident in the nineteenth century, because it was translated into military inferiority, was not due to technical or educational incapacity, but to the very sense of self-sufficiency and self-confidence of traditional Chinese civilisation.'

*

As he walked away from the library in the evening, Professor Cheng swung down from his old bicycle and invited him to visit his apartment and meet his daughters. There was no escape, although he wanted to do nothing but get his damp clothes off and drink a bottle or three of the Zhu Jiang beer in silence.

They lived in one of the old, lime-green, three-storey blocks, where pipes dripped and a foul gutter made an odoriferous moat before a battered grille kept permanently locked. Inside stone steps twisted up with bicycles parked, and litter and dust for which nobody, obviously, took responsibility. A solid security door opened on a narrow sitting room with a concrete floor which was cluttered with furniture, the piano, TV and VCR, bright aquarium, covered against dust. The high windows were barred with no views and a naked bulb burned. It seemed poverty then, but such buildings have now disappeared and been replaced by tower blocks, financed by developers, often Taiwanese, for which a rent is to be paid which was about what Cheng earned a year. Translating must cover the rest.

Cheng had called out as they entered and it was not until he had sat gratefully on a sofa and had a fan trained on him, that the girls came smiling. Identical twins with fluent English, they were training to be teachers, smiled beautifully. After a moment one offered to play the piano, sorted through her music and began 'Early One Morning', which the other sang sweetly. He joined in, basso profundo to cover his embarrassment at such a flattering welcome.

The girls, who were about twenty, laughed and sang a Chinese song, which he applauded. They changed places and were preparing to deal with a contemporary pop song, when their father, a proud roly-poly man of more than sixty - he had told me his mother had lied about his age to keep him out of the army, which had allowed him to work longer- quoted Jane Austen's Mr Bennett: "You have delighted us long enough!" The twins had laughed, Greg had clapped as they bowed. They got him a drink of a fizzy kind and offered little biscuits they had made, perching too near him, so he could feel their warmth and sense their odours. He was unused to such innocent laughter and so much smiling at such close range. They wanted to discuss *Pride and Prejudice,* which had been on TV. He felt like Mr. Bingley. Of course, his age was not such a barrier in Chinese culture. (Marvin was going to marry an ex-student who, it was said, was quite candid as to why: she wanted to live in the West.) He had gulped his drink and slapped his knees in the universal gesture of departure.

Days blurred waiting for phone calls, Fridays, letters; the weather turning more humid as the second semester and rainy season approached.

*

Journal

Paul surprised me with a telephone call. Would I care to visit an exhibition of an old friend's work with him at the Academy? I was delighted by this conciliatory move. I took up the work on Chinese poetry to meet him, though I dare not say so, and my relationship with him matters to me. I guess he senses that the poetry is in some way secondary, although I have grown into it, and assumes my primary purpose is to use it to help my fading poetic 'career'. I still don't know which students he is grooming to help me, partly because he doesn't know their 'English' names, partly, perhaps, because he likes to keep me dangling. I suspect that I misjudge his reluctance to have his name as co-translator on a putative collection as a consequence of his doubts as to the quality of my contribution. This is because praise always makes me doubt the bona fides or acumen of the critic, but he does seem to admire what I do and does not, as a matter of principle, dissemble beyond what courtesy demands.

*

Paul had ordered a university limousine and we sat next to each other with space between us on the back seat in a traffic jam, rain running down the windows in yellow light. We were going to a valedictory exhibition of oils by an old friend of his at the Academy, where he had taught all his life, apart from the Cultural Revolution. Paul was looking forward to seeing him after some years, and was dressed formally and was in high spirits.

"Come on," he ordered, "we might as well talk about your problems. Are you joyful when you make love with this young woman?"

"Too right!" He raised both shoulders, then let them slump.

"That is all that is needed if she is the same."

"There's a bit of a difference, I think. Women here are…"

"Ah yes, here daughters are still 'spilt water', as we say: they run away uselessly so far as the family is concerned. Wives who produce a daughter are sometimes divorced because a man wants a son. We have not had the misfortune to suffer from the invention of romantic love, and the one-child policy is very sobering. Already it is clear that there will soon be many bachelors in China. What will they do? Already city women are stolen and sold in the country where daughters are often allowed to die. What is to be done? They shoot the kidnappers…" He threw his hands up.

Outside the university he seemed expansive, yet blander: the sage. He slapped Greg's arm lightly. "But I still say that if the sexual part in a relationship is sound, the rest is likely to be."

"Maybe you are right. She has inherited millions. Her father built huge commercial buildings. He's dead and his wife died recently, so the company is run by his sons and she has a part of that. The family home was sold, and that would have

been worth a packet. She lives in a world of absolute freedom because, unlike the rest of us, she can afford it, and if she finally realises what a drunken old bore I am, and one of her sort gets interested…" He snapped his fingers. As if in response, the car moved forward, wipers beating.

"There are many far worse predicaments, old chap." He made me laugh. And then he laughed too. We both laughed for quite a while.

The car battled on through the traffic tangles, the trucks and bicycling peasants with their improbable loads from ducks to cardboard, the head-down pedestrians, I had an uncomfortable feeling behind the one-way glass every time the driver blasted his horn, and said so. Paul pulled a face at my facetious suggestion that it felt like a pre-revolutionary situation, but said nothing.

*

Retrospective in Guangzhou

A portrait bust glared from banked
chrysanthemums: the artist in his pomp,
chin-up tough. Inside we found him
bent into deference, the jacket
of his grey, double-breasted suit hung
on his knee, so he must smile up through
dusty specs and bushy brows white
as his long goatee, hands knotted on
a cane, weight on the silver ferrule
between his new, white suede shoes.

People drifted,
got in each others' light: his students from
half-a-century; noisy teachers with their
quiet flocks; friends, enemies, party hacks…
TV and the Press selected groups, found him
a pretty girl, a huge bouquet: tiger smiles frozen
in a flash.
The work was badly hung on
gloomy walls, ill-sorted, out-of-plumb, some
canvases slipped, frames grimy, cracked;
surfaces too. Pigments had turned fugitive,
highlights dim: the show hardly honoured him.

Artists in old age can be impatient,
gestural, as if formalities waste time

and might be vanity enough to bury them
in history's dust with nothing answered,
even asked: the nudes, who turned their
heads away for more than modesty
in some fraught place, seemed deformed
more by default than by design, and such
landscapes had lacked conviction for a century –
deader than Dada or still-lives of apple and grape
banality which he'd pursued with such tenacity.

I remembered that Agathé Sorel told me how
she knew that she would be an artist when,
aged nine, crushed in a gutted synagogue,
she just drew and drew with the charcoal
on the sacred walls when the line to Dachau
was bombed…
He too had survived, for some
too well: back in the Academy after ten years' hard,
he was also made boilerman, so that he must
scratch around for sticks. For a time some laughed.

Eventually he was promoted porter
At the gates, saluting official cars until,
a last despotic irony, one day he was given
an hour to catch the Beijing train and tickets
for a show of French Impressionists.

All this explained I walked about again
and saw how the pictures changed
to something other than the cultural cringe
I had seen with Western arrogance.
I bowed when we shook his hand again.

I can't pronounce his name.

*

Chinese New Year had started in early February with a bang, or a series, a salvo, a crescendo of bangs to discourage the local devils, but the Department begins semesters with a banquet in a side-room of one of the campus restaurants. The dishes, little nibbly bits of this or that, revolve at the centre of a round table for a couple of dozen or so. Gargantua has gone; Brother Terry has new spectacles and beams

with bonhomie: even the Infanta is animated by something other than rancour and gesticulates as she talks to Charles. Their glasses are filled continually by the neat little waitresses he has come to know.

There are several new faces. The Japanese, who had replaced 'Tojo', has already turned bright red with alcohol. Everyone is in a good mood. The main restaurant is almost full of newly returned students who are also boisterous. He anticipates speeches of the kind enjoyed by those in authority who usually take such opportunities, but the conversation round the table swirls on, mostly in Mandarin and English.

He finds himself telling Marvin, who is on his left, that just as Picasso revived Cezanne, Eliot resurrected the metaphysicals. "No shit," Marvin says with interest. He (again) says that he has a contract with a multinational to organise their staff English classes and asks if Greg is interested. He says Greg can easily treble his income. Greg declines (again). Once more his doesn't please Marvin, who was probably planning to hire him out at one price and pay him twenty percent less. He boasts that he gets paid in cash and that is why he takes the Friday overnight boat down the Pearl to Hong Kong, where he pays it into a bank from which he transfers it as dollars 'stateside'. He means Greg to be envious. Greg tells him that he has a university superannuation payment each month and does not need the money. Marvin cannot believe that he does not want to make more. He is in China to make money. He wants to save enough money to see himself through an M.B.A.

"In hopes of making even more money?"

"No shit."

It is the last time they speak to each other, except perfunctorily in the line of duty.

A cheerful and attractive young woman sits on his right. "How are you?" he asks. She has high cheek bones and full and expressive lips.

"A little bit watery stools', she says, and purses the sphincter of her mouth. He watches where her chopsticks go and chooses something else, in fact, he hardly eats. He drinks. He had swallowed two preparatory gins in his rooms and drinks the beer which makes his shirt stick to his back.

The girl excuses herself abruptly and after a while, Professor Li comes, amiably and loquaciously to replace her.

"Hello, you gay old dog!" It is out of his phrase book.

"G'day, mate. What's this 'gay' business?"

"Students tell me that they see in Macau one minute, Hong Kong the next, with different ladies." His glasses glint with good humour, his face is bright pink.

"Yes, well…" They had filled his glass again. "That's okay, but 'gay' means homosexual nowadays."

"Wah! The students, some say that you are homosexual." This quietly with glances about, but everyone is happily shouting. "This is because you discuss sexuality so much."

"Well you can't bloody teach literature without doing, and the students are so

naïve, so you have to explain…" It makes Li laugh. "Bloody hell! I can't win, can I?"

"Chinese men are quiet about these things in public." "I didn't. Can't say I'll do any different. Are there complaints?"

"Complaints?" Li became serious briefly. "No." It clearly puzzled him. "No complaints." And then he laughs again and slaps Greg's arm.

A bottle of Chinese firewater comes round to drink with the beer. They concentrate on that. The noise is amazing. "They are all shouting 'What did you say?'" he tells Li.

"What?" They laugh for a while, then Li yells in his ear, will you be staying with us for another year?"

"What?" They laugh again.

Chairman Charles stands up. He raises his glass. "Let us all have a Happy New Year of the Rooster." We drink to that. "Well, shall we all go home?"

We do.

One benefit of modernity is that you could get drunk quite quickly, not like Li Bo and Co, who had to drink gallons of chrysanthemum wine before achieving the desired state.

Rats scatter from some carrion or confabulation by the lake. The moon waltzes on the water. Inside the FEB he goes in the airless kiosk and calls Stella. There is no reply.

*

There had been a putsch, a change of President to a younger man with an international reputation in physics, and this was intended to improve the university's chances of being placed in the top hundred. Three student journalists interviewed Greg and were obviously impressed by his ignorance of the institutional ruckus that was going on around him. He asked them what would be the advantages? Would there be more funding, more pay for academics? They shrugged, smiled. They asked if it was true that he was a poet before they left.

Greg noticed changes occurring, at first piecemeal – the trunks of trees were re-whitewashed, the rusty grilles around balconies were daubed silver – and then wholesale as at dawn trucks rolled through the gates and digging and delving, planting and pruning, tiling and painting and cleaning, dredging and draining, scrubbing and staining began and did not stop until last light. Even after that floors were being sanded and polished and street lights tested and replaced. They began sanding his corridor at nine p.m. and would have continued all night if Greg and the others hadn't bombarded the manager of the F.E.B. and Chairman Charles with telephone calls. They found solidarity in their outraged individual rights.

The bush below was cleared in two days flat and instant lawns rolled out by young peasants who arrived in lorry-loads, scooped up from the railways station where, in hundred thousands they wait with bed roll and rice-cooker, plastic pail, coat

hangers and a bag, to earn a pittance building motorways, climbing about bamboo scaffolding on vertiginous tower blocks and transform the university, painting, digging, sweeping, clearing lakes, mountains of filth, so we can be in the top hundred of fifteen hundred universities in the land. How they worked, those happyt young men and women, dawn to dusk. It was an astonishing exhibition of labour power.

Cadres seemed to be the Party Secretaries from each department, with class lists, red lapel badges, serious looks, who watched the student rush for eight o'clock by the grand doors of the teaching block. Even in the postgraduates' room a sticker now reserved a seat for students who came late. (It disappeared.) Then inspection was all over, the university sighed, colleagues' classes began again to end before the stroke of noon and students who had previously hidden behind a bush for an hour arrived a few minutes late.

Whatever else success brought, lawns and flowers grew where there had been mud, and the teaching block had been made over in marble tiles, metal windows, and painted. The new desks were fixed in rows, so he could not drag them in a circle, but he almost forgave that for the air conditioning, which was the latest Japanese and did no more than hiss politely.

*

Recollection in Tranquility

'Let a hundred flowers bloom. ' Mao

Party time was Thursday afternoon
but I could usually run a post grad class.
That day I played 'The Solitary Reaper,'
and while they followed the text, watched
the Faculty raking leaves and smelt
the fragrance from their fires down below.

It made me smile to see professors and the rest
deft with skills learned in the dynasty of Mao.
I turned up Wordsworth, leaned out, urged them on.
Some faces shone, most did not. All talk stopped.

*

What he heard as he went up and down the long corridors of the teaching building was quite a deal of repetitive rote learning, but he couldn't imagine any university he knew producing so many students competent in Mandarin each year; there was little overt competition between them. It was very strange. The students and

their families had gone through hell to get them there, but from what he saw as he walked past, they lived like submarine crews, crammed in humid gloom in bunk beds, nine to a room with one shower and a squat and hardly any study space. Nevertheless they were always neatly dressed and groomed, with all their preparation done and never anything but polite and keen. It troubled the inmates of the F.E.B., who knew that happiness only came from creature comforts and a superfluity of electronic goods.

*

In hope of avoiding any selection of experience with him in mind, he had required his undergraduate composition class to describe exactly what they were doing at noon at February the First.

Sheila

'At twelve noon I was praying inside a crowded Chinese traditional temple in my hometown. The poky space of the temple was pervaded by smoke produced by three incense burners before the golden statue of a god and linear pieces of incense held by everyone praying. Old and young, men and women, put their palms together, closed their eyes and fell in prayer: some gave bows, some were inserting the incense into the burners and some rocking a box of bamboo ballots.

I muttered what my mother had taught me: "My revered god, please condescend to listen to my prayer. My name is…" An abrupt burst of firecrackers from outside interrupted me, at which more people poured in and squeezed forward to make the poky place even more crammed. I had to be very cautious not to be burned by the incense sticks around my body. Mother was not beside me now. I tried to look for her and at the same time searched in my brain for where I had been stopped.

It was the second day of the first lunar month of 1995, people's faces hanging with jubilation of Spring Festival and expectations of the following year. It is said that the worship and prayers during the Spring Festival will bring a whole year's luck, so every year at this time many people will come to the temple. My mother is one of them. This year she told me to come with her to pray for a good job because I am graduating in the summer. Whether or not this belief was a superstition, I felt glad to make my pious mother happy, so I came, stood, a bunch of incense in my hand, but aware of every movement around me rather than my own prayer.

I gathered my heart and started again, but soon an old woman's action attracted my attention. She knelt down, straightened up her arms and clapped her hands, then lay prostrate to kowtow, then she stood back up and repeated the whole act of worship.

It was so amusing to me that I couldn't help giggling. An angry look was immediately cast at me to remind me of my impiety. I went silent out of sorrow. This was a place with only gravity permitted.

Once again I picked up my prayer and was able to finish it. "Mum, I've finished my prayer. What shall I do now?"
"Go over and insert your incense into those three burners, one in each. Bow before you leave, then take a rest outside."

I squeezed to the biggest burner, which was full of inserted oil candles and sticks of incense whose thick smoke irritated my eyes. I inserted one piece of my incense, gave a quick bow and turned away. The other two burners were dealt with more simply with the bow eliminated because my eyes were irritated. Soon I made my way to the gate.
I leaned on a round pillar outside to wipe away my tears. The ground was covered with paper scraps of firecrackers. People came and went, having inserted their incense in small and large burners, which was what I had to do in a minute. However, I wondered what sense did such services make? Would the god punish me for being too hasty? Wouldn't I find a good job as a result? Just for a while I became uncertain, then thought of my three years spent at university and the work I had done in every vacation, and besides, my confidence. For these years I did harbour a wish for the god's blessing and made every effort to get to it. Now I was sure it would come to me, in spite of my attitude to these services, because it only reaches those who have made themselves qualified…

Mother came out with the red eyes of sincere piety and beckoned me over. I followed her obediently, deciding to make her happy.

Teddy

At the Spring Festival, I did something, which you must think horrible. I ate dog meat.

On that day, one of my best friends invited me to dinner. The main dish was dog meat. I didn't like the idea very much, for I think dogs are our friends. When I heard that my friends's dog would be our food in a few hours, I really wanted to cry, but I couldn't turn down the invitation because he was my best friend. To make matters worse, he asked me to help him kill his dog.

I refused to help him, but I witnessed the murder. My friend put a cap on the dog's head to blind it, then hit its head with a huge hammer. The miserable dog met its end at once, then he stewed the dog meat with some spice.

An hour later that horrible dish was on the dinner table. It seemed that there was little difference between dog meat and lamb, and it smelt very good. With the words "Help yourselves", my friend began to enjoy that dish, but I still dared not taste it. After a few minutes my friend noticed. He smiled and said: "Come on, the dog was not as good as you think, it has bitten many persons, so I had to kill it. I would rather eat it than throw it away, right?"

So I tasted it. The feeling was not so good: I thought I was a savage and eating human flesh.

Cathy

I look out from my verandah. It is quiet in the campus. As it is the second day of the New Year, most people stay home having their family affair. But some workers carrying saws and ropes come into my sight suddenly. They stand under one big tree which is in front of the construction site in front of our building. Among them the tiniest one puts down his rope, spits on both hands, and then climbs up the tree. He sets his feet on the branches and gets to the top in five minutes. I name him 'Monkey'. He takes a thin rope and throws one of its ends down to those who stand under the tree. They catch it and tie it to a stronger rope. Monkey pulls it up, unties the thinner rope and throws it down, then ties the strong rope to the top branch. Everything is prepared. He slides down the tree, and now they start to work, drawing a line about ten centimetres from the ground round the trunk . To begin to saw from either side. The others stand far from the tree holding the rope. Finally, when the tree stands on its middle point, they pull and the tree crashes down.

The job that two people can do in twenty minutes takes five an hour. It is strange that modern technology is totally unacceptable here. I wonder whether the electric saw means unemployment to them.

Wingo

In the Chinese New Year we go back to our hometown and observe the festival there. On most days I stayed at home and went nowhere. Today is the second day of New Year and I went with my family to visit and greet some relatives. For several years I have not been to our hometown and I sat on the bus and found that it had taken on a new look. The muddy roads had gone and rows of new factories line either side of the new roads. There are no more veggie and rice fields to be seen and instead of bicycles more and more motorcycles and cars run on the roads. People seem prosperous.

The first stop was my cousin's. He is not quite rich, but he lives very adequately. We

may call him the new rising middle-class. He has a newly built three-storey mansion with modern conveniences. He has two daughters, a typically modern Chinese family.

During our conversation I mentioned what I had seen and he told us that in fact most of the rice fields have been used for factories and houses. Few grow rice; young people do not like to be peasants, many of them go to the cities. On the other hand lots of people from other provinces came to look for jobs. In some cases these outsiders have outnumbered the natives. It may be good from the point of view of eugenics. However, there is a crisis and we have to import grain, and lack of supervision allows factories to pollute the air and water.

I also found that there are more and more restaurants, night clubs, cinemas but few bookshops. I visited several families but I seldom saw a book. I feel dismal. People are getting rich but what is the good of getting rich without anything in mind?

After the greetings we went back home and I felt a little dizzy. Lying on the bed I closed my eyes but I could not sleep. In no more than a month I had suffered a series of frustrations which had great effect on me. I helplessly asked myself 'What is life?' I know it is silly to ask such a question. I worked hard to try to make an achievement, but it had proved impossible. I had to re-assess myself. I used to think I was something. Now I know I am nothing.

*

Thus he read on, making three heaps, then dividing each into two, then ordering each heap and examining those at the margins to see if they should be moved. Usually he marked out of fifty, weighted twenty for content, twenty for construction, ten for 'flair'. These categories and weightings were not fixed; he showed his marking clearly on their papers. He liked to read them all at one go to make the first three heaps, which might take all day and the evening too. He enjoyed it, sitting in his dressing gown, drinking iced orange juice in the draught from the air conditioning.

His only real problem was occasional plagiarism, which might be obvious but untraceable, the charge thus unsustainable. He then had the dilemma of distinguishing between a fairly flawless piece of copying and a good, if flawed but genuine attempt at the 'composition' in hand. Li smiled and shrugged. He awarded both a good grade but also pointedly asked suspects loudly in class "Is this all your own work?" Their charming innocence disarmed him. Where plagiarism, or personification was congenital, he handed the matter to the Chairman Charles. He assumed that, as an Oxbridge M.A. had been, keeping terms in a 'community of scholars' was, by osmosis, an educational experience. What he remembered from his own time as a student,

was very little except how clever men and women had organised their material, got questions clear, then assembled relevant responses.

*

Kitty, a smiling and enthusiastic Third Year, who often met him in the mornings by the grove of trees between the gate of the F.E.B. and lake, and walked with him to the teaching block to improve her English and his opinion of her (She gave Marvin an expensive pen.) produced a free ticket to an ethnic exhibition for tourists, which he accepted. He ordered a car and Kitty, Helen and Athena met him under the portico of the F.E.B. on the Sunday morning.

All day jets rose roaring, wheels hardly retracted, into the hot and smoggy sky, drowning the music of the ethnic minority troupes: Mongol dancing girls, Tibetan twirlers, Moorish cymbal clashers. One girl, who did a kind of bottom dance every half-an-hour or so, was well attended by a rush of young soldiers and hobbledehoys, who clapped and appreciatively. He bought them fizzy drinks and they fussed around him amiably as they strolled.

There was an exhibition of craggy peaks with pines and, in some corner, a reclusive scholar. They explained that mountains were the home of immortals and several were especially sacred. Kitty said that they were like the other side of the pictograms of calligraphy, then they broke into a dispute in Mandarin. At any event the faint washes and delicate lines, rivers, lakes, clouds and peaks resounded with silence and calm and space and deserved better framing and hanging.

They walked along a path in the park among the throng and there, like dream, was a tiger!

It was at its ease on a small table with no obvious means of restraint. Its handler smoked and looked bored. Fools stood next to it for photographs. It caught a whiff of him and turned on him curious amber eyes like saucers. Someone had said Westerners smelt like wet chooks. He increased his pace and hoped the tiger was drugged, full, toothless. A jet split the air with a scream likely to send it amok. It was like a nightmare. He suspected it would continue as such.

It did.

*

Teaching the postgraduates was always a pleasure, although he was usually there before them, they always arrived with good humour and intentions. There had only been one contretemps. On a torrid day of monsoonal gloom and humidity, when rain came down silver on gusts which rattled the palm trees, lighting seared and thunder detonated, he had asked them to prepare Marvel's To His Coy Mistress as an

example of a great poem which ran contrary to the moralising they found in English literature. Only Percy, a party official who sat in for love of the subject, and had named himself after Shelley and the two Paul had selected for training in translation from classical Mandarin, had brought their books: Penny, demure and tiny, who wore spectacles round as her face; Colin, a shock-haired young man who smoked too much and had, by great endeavour arrived to do a second degree after being brought up in a poor and isolated village in Hunan province by his grandparents, slipped his book out of sight on sensing the group's reluctance. Greg had taken grim satisfaction in seeing him copying the poem with the rest from the blackboard where he wrote it up, sweat from his wrist smudging, his shirt clinging to his back. Percy and Penny had read, eyes averted. When it was done, there was hardly any time for discussion, but Penny had smiled and nodded as usual. Once he had paused to thank her for this confirmatory behaviour and she had smiled sweetly and said that she only did it when she did not understand.

*

Stella told him that she would supervise the sale of his parents' house and dissipated his faint and dumb dream of becoming a Wang Wei of the mudflats. She had taken it to the city firm, which had sold her parents' Toorak mansion and they had told her properties sold at auction in country towns often sold again much better within a year. Their costs were high, but Stella said that they would be offset by their skill. She drove down for the 'open days' and, he had no doubt, charmed the possible purchasers and discouraged the sticky beaks and battleaxes. It had sold well to some doctor who wanted a week-ender and she arranged for all the contents to go into store and reported that the garden shed had been emptied of tools and the lawn mower just before this happened. Stella enjoyed these demonstrations of her American know-how and it was certainly a great help to him.

This matter occupied a couple of months. Her immediate concern was her publishing venture. What should she call it? "Darling, I know that you are busy but I do need your help in this," she told him.

"Stellar Books," he said facetiously,

"Greggy, that's marvellous! You are a great guy! That will do wonderfully. "I wish you were here. I mean, I met Clyde Calder the other day and he was really interested. His magazine has done very well and he knows publishing backwards."

"Pun intended?" There was a pause, an intake of breath.

"But that's no reason not to have him on board, is it?"

"On the board? Is that what…Look, he's right-wing and cunning as a shit-house rat. He's a big, fat ugly bastard and he likes that Ashbery nonsense-verse, all piffling whimsical chat and bright inconsequentiality. Haven't the buggers read 'Jabberwocky'? If you got involved with him, he would be expensive and he would

push his horrible barrow as usual."

"Please don't be so upset. It was just an idea. I can't do it all on my own, Greggy."

"Ma petit pamplemousse, J t'adore." It was easier to say in French than 'I could not love thee dear so much, loved I not poetry more."

"I can't be jealous of that, can I?"

"No, it's more an affliction than an art. Maybe it's more dead than afflicted."

"Hurry up," she said. "Get back here. When can you leave?"

"Early June, before the finals."

"Three months."

"At least."

"What do you mean? You would sign up again, would you?"

"I might if you get mixed up with the likes of Clive Calder."

"Oh Darl! Do you need to have me on my knees?"

"Every way." It didn't please her he could tell. There was a hiatus while they listened to each other's breathing, then:

Oh!" she said, "A little boat has capsized on the river." Her new place looked down on the Yarra. "Perhaps I had better call the police. Yes, I will. Please think about a company title for us." And she was gone about her good works.

*

A Portuguese altercation was occurring with doors banging on the floors above as he climbed. The Infanta Fatima had a new colleague, Doctor Maria, who was supposed to take over the more academic students, being better qualified and experienced. It was not happening, the scuttlebutt said. Maria was a slight, plain, blonde lady of forty, plus or minus two or three years, and now she was standing and weeping with rage on the flight of stairs above him. As he looked up, he saw the Infanta dodge back. "She 'as taken my letters and, Greg, not give them to me. She says she is having tea and come back tomorrow. She is crazy!" Tears coursed Maria's white face. "I am telephoning Macau. I will speak to the Director. She will not do this to me." Even as she spoke, two or three letters came fluttering down the stair well. He picked one up and held it out, but Maria was screaming in Portuguese and the Infanta's door slammed. Maria managed a smile when she took her letter, bobbed her head, "Thank you" and her heels went clicking down the steps to search for the others on floors below.

*

The FEB inmates are taken to Foshan in an ancient bus over pot-holed roads through a concrete landscape. Twenty-eight kilometres take an hour and a half.

They walk round pottery and craft workshops. As soon as they appear, beggars come hopping, crawling, scooting. Greg *hates* it and gives them nothing. He doesn't know why. He doesn't care about the money. Is it something to do with the assumption that he is easy-pickings, maybe? No. He can't understand himself, and is irritable with them and himself.

The craft workers are nimble-fingered women with extraordinary eyesight doing intricate things with paper and clay. A child looks up and sees him. Her innocent eyes fill with horror. She screams and her father sweeps her up and away. People smile sympathetically but he gets out of the shop, wonders if most of China sees all 'foreign devils' as mobile horror shows.

Felicity, the woman from Foreign Affairs, earns a pittance, and is delighted to order lunch and to play Lady Bountiful. Her pleasure is charming, especially as she is often resentful and moody. She's a tough nut. Felicity is a misnomer. She is also The Infanta's confidante and believes what she hears.

*

In the period of cool relations with Paul he worked away at the Song poets.

Su Shi
(Su Dong Po)
(1036-1101)

Hunting at Mizhou

At forty a last wild flourish: yellow hound
on my left, black hawk
on my right wrist, silk capped,
fur-coated, with a thousand horse
I sweep the hillocky plain. Townsfolk flock
to watch their tiger-hunting magistrate!

Strong wine expands my heart. Who cares
about a few grey hairs?
Make me an Imperial envoy!
With pennants flying
I'll bend my bow like the full moon and aim
North-West, shoot down that fierce sky wolf!

Composed on the lake tower whilst drunk
on the 27th day of the Sixth moon

(i)
Ink black clouds spill, blot out peaks
Bouncing pearls of rain spatter the boats
Then in an instant the wind makes all clear
Look, under the tower the water's reflecting the sky!

(ii)
Turtles and fish follow freely in our wake
As we float by fair lotus beds on their sanctuary lake
From my pillow I watch mountains bow their heads
Our boat takes the course that the rippling moons take.

Dream of my Dead Wife
on the Night of the 20th Day
of the First Month, 1075

Ten years in separate worlds:
I seldom
think of you, but do not forget.

Your grave's far away:
too far to grieve. If we met
you wouldn't know
my worn face.

Tonight a dream of home: you
brush your hair under our
small window. We
stare...shining tears speak.
Each year I weep as the moon
rises white
from your mound.

In the Lonely Mountains to Meet the Monks
Huiqin and Huisi on the 8th day of Twelfth Moon

Clouds hang heavy with snow
over the clear lake where light
picks out the tower, then is gone.

The mountains lour, are lost,
but the water turns transparent:
each green boulder distinct, every fish.

Not one soul in the birdsung woods.

Su Shi of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) passed the imperial exam a year younger than Wang Wei, and like him was a noted painter and calligrapher. He was banished in stages for misdemeanours until he reached Hainan Island.
Recalled at last to court, he died at Guangzhou at the age of 63.

Li Qing Zhou's aristocratic life was life ruptured by war and her grief at husband's death. She recalls their first meeting:

Li Qing Zhao

(1084-1151)

Swinging

I stopped the swing,
Rubbed my soft fingers, stood
In dewy grass
Which had soaked my dress,

When a young man appeared,
my stockings down, hair-pin lost,
I ran away, pretended to sniff flowers
and shyly turned my head.

The Water Pavilion at Dusk

The water pavilion at dusk I recall.
Drunk, lost, our gusto diminished
as we steered in lotus beds
…but splashed on, splashed on
panicking whole shoresful of gulls!

At the Festival of Lanterns

A golden sun
sinks in clouds' jade.
Where is my love?
Misty willows and flutes lament.
How long will Spring last?
The festival!
Fine weather now,
but changes can be swift.

My thanks, friends,
in verse and wine,
for the coach you sent for me.
I recall joy
in the old days –
leisured ladies loved the festival,
wore emeralds, gold filigree
vying in their hair.

Old and wrinkled,
Grey hair awry,
I never appear, but
behind bamboo screens enjoy
talk and laughter.

Over and over he wrote the poems, trying to reach their truth, not because of Paul's fierce pride in their integrity, but because they spoke to his condition: the need for silence and space against the media battering and superficiality of Western life and the sporting culture for 'kidults'. Without any intention, by a kind of osmosis, these poets of a thousand years ago shamed his art.

*

Professor Rao also liked to practise his English with Greg. On Saturday evenings he would come and drink beer. He looked younger than he was because, like nearly every middle-aged Chinese, he dyed his hair, which had a schoolboyish parting, glossy black. At first the number of hair-dressers on the campus had been a puzzle until Greg had realised that the chairs were often occupied by older men. It was when Rao rocked back in his chair and put his head against the cool wall that you noticed that he had a baggy, old man's neck. He would assume this posture to talk about his childhood in Shanghai during the Japanese wartime occupation, when often his way to school was round corpses, who had usually starved to death. He admired Churchill, whose war speeches he had listened to secretly with his father and a few friends and his views were surprisingly reactionary. He had told Patti Deville**,** to her outrage, that it was nonsense to suggest that there were any lesbians in China. He upset Greg by his often-repeated claim that as Picasso drew and painted so wonderfully in his youth, his later daubs and scribbles sent him laughing all the way to the bank. He would slide his glasses up on his brow and massage his eyes with fingers and thumb while Greg told him that the ruling ideas and values of the ruling classes began to crumble in the industrial age and disintegrated in the First World War for all the efforts, such as his, to prop them up. It made him smile to be thus allied but he couldn't be budged from such positions.

Greg had a pet gecko which dashed across the walls and ate insects. Rao found it repugnant, calling it a 'wall tiger' and saying he always killed them. Greg told him that it was his close companion and this led to a discussion of the loneliness of Foreign Experts, locked away in their languages, closeted in their rooms. It was something to be borne in mind when applications for extensions were made. "Well there was one fellow who was here many years, a Shakespearean scholar, an Oxford man, who was unavailable after dinner, as he put it. He could be unavailable for whole weekends too." The recollection made Rao smile.

"Sly grogger, was he?"

"What?"

"Australianism. He drank?"

"Well yes, he did. He drank whisky. Somebody counted his bottles once. It was about one a day, but he did what was wanted, although the students were not very fond of him because of his tendency to frottage,"

"His what?"

"Well you must look it up!" He was very pleased and laughed again. " If he got the chance, in a crush, he liked to apply slight pressure to the girls' bottoms."

"Poor old bastard."

"Nobody really minded, not even the girls."

*

Invigilation

Winter Saturday, Canton, 8 a.m.,
the sun a sore blister between blocks,
postgraduates bent to the Bard,

that brave sceptic sad misanthrope
that suave genius surfing past
on the last metaphoric wave of hope...

Up on the rostrum under my straw hat
I've a handkerchief knotted on my bald crown,
in warped windows the wind's morose

and there's no public heating this far South,
so I stand, step down and walk the rows,
feet echoing in the sniffs and coughs.

Behind me someone hawks and spits
winter nor the 'flu can stop their pens after
thousands of years of austere meritocracy

I stare out hoping for a gleam of the Pearl
where ships groan in mist and sad as whales
freight trains croon across the concrete suburbs

Below a swaddled gaggle like geese pluck grass
smooth and green as the lakes, grab bamboo hats
and back their stools into a stiff Mongolian blast

that crashes palm fronds down, bowls litter past
and cracks the red flag on the white mast
A sudden shiver spins me...

Biru's eyes after a flying thought,
Stare through me...She smiles.
Some last endocrine dreg

Stirs my heart as I walk back
Almost distraught, ascend,
sit on my cold seat, shiver

rub my palms between my thighs,
hunch and watch the long strings
from ceiling fans swing and sway…

...Thelma's blue cotton school skirt
as she climbs the milk churn slide
Summer Term, steam hissing from the train
bluebells dog daisies dandelions
rockery stones white-washed army style
and plovers tumbling over clover fields…

For the first time I see
that brave vibration each way free:
*O glandular epiphany**!***

ThelmaThelmaThelma Stead
for fifty years you've swayed
your lovely rhythm in my head
Thelma,Thelma! Are you alive or dead?

It took a frantic year before at the ticket-barrier
I let the back of my hand touch the silken slither
under your dress. How could you not feel
the current that jumped…
The blood left my head
Among my schoolmates I walked
Fainting, almost dead.

Nothing since has been erotic!

In that furtive guilty flogging culture
we only loved our fists, women were obscene,
I found the vicarious joys of literature,
thumbed *Fanny Hill* instead of Mons Veneris…

In China age and learning are not a joke
I have indemnified the university
against funeral costs
until an American accent is preferred
I'll teach the Bard

Stiffly again I walk, Biru does not look up
three helicopters come clattering by

and seem to shake down rain...

There's still an hour to go…

*

Ted was shy, so bought an aquarium as a conversation piece, then having bought the fish to go in it, was told he needed a plastic bag of fifty or more much smaller fish and a net. He had no problem in getting students in to talk to after that, they came at feeding time when the aquarium was churned into a froth. Twice a week he had to take a crammed bus into Guangzhou and back to fetch supplies until he revolted, began down eight flights with their tank to tip it in the lake. A receptionist offered to help him out. Gladly he had accepted and never asked what happened next. (Once a family went into the restaurant next door to celebrate bearing a trussed peacock, head jerking in surprise this way and that.) It is true that famine has taught the Cantonese to eat anything that swims, apart from submarines; anything that flies, except aeroplanes; anything with four legs, except tables.

Next Ted got two budgies, the bigger pecked the eye out of its mate so that, enraged, he chucked it out of the window. He last saw it flashing through the trees below with something black in hot pursuit. And then the one-eyed mate pined and died. He didn't smile. It was a salutary tale.

*

'What can ail thee, knight at arms, alone and palely loitering?'" Paul grinned over the gate he was unlocking.

"Exactly right," Greg said. 'La Belle Dame sans Merci hath me in thrall'."

Paul was very pleased by this exchange. Perhaps he had been practising it, having relented and sent a polite note.

The rosewood chairs, the green tea, bookshelves, murmuring hi-fi and a beautiful, younger wife and a little translation on a Friday afternoon: what more could a man require? They began again without a pause to talk about the set of Song translations.

The East winds of Spring had subsided and it was hot, airless, humid, the clouds or smog about two hundred feet up, and he could feel sweat run on his sides and see it smudge as he wrote. It was normality for Paul, but still at times near unendurable to Greg. He wondered at the fortitude of the Victorians in their serge and barathea, high collars and helmets, in such climates... Allegri's *Miserere,* sung in cold King College chapel, underscored his discomfort. When, work completed, Paul went to get two bottles of beer and some glasses. He seemed to expect a discussion of Greg's love life, but now Greg was disinclined, enervated by the heat and the beautiful

despair of the music. Paul, however, was in a jolly mood, pouring beer.

"Now, did you decide to tie the knot?"

"No."

"Ah, make haste slowly."

"No." He caught something of Paul's mood, made a deep sigh, pulled in the corners of his mouth and shook his head once.

"Well what went wrong?"

"Nothing. We hardly got dressed as usual, but I realised that her politics and mine are miles apart. I did tell you that she is very rich?"

"Several times."

"Well she's a dyed-in-the wool reactionary."

"'Dyed-in-the-wool'?"

"Knee-jerk."

"Ah. And what does reactionary mean in this context?"

"Anti-progressive."

"Ah. So there are two reactionary parties to vote for, but one is more reactionary than the other, and she belongs to that?"

"She probably doesn't belong in the sense of being a member."

"Well then, if you will forgive me, old chap, it all seems rather unimportant, doesn't it?"

"Paul, you are being disingenuous, mate."

"No, I assure you. I do not properly grasp…What was that in *Gulliver's Travels?* Politics was a matter of which end of the egg you opened? It seems like that: not crucial, you understand; not likely to be fatal, let us say; and not sufficient to stop you loving this beautiful and rich woman who you say is in love with you." No trace of laughter was apparent in his eyes, although he did contemplate the beer in his glass with some concentration as the seconds lengthened.

"When I'm seventy, she'll be in her fifties. I've seen it before. They bugger off and dump you."

"There are some years between Xia-Xia and myself. She shows no sign of 'buggering off' as you put it. We were cycling the other day and the wind disturbed her hair and I saw traces of grey. I was very moved."

"The thing is, I've committed myself to leaving and now I wish I had not."

"Can't she come and live with you here?"

"No way! I can't imagine it. It had never occurred to me."

"Ask her."

"I know what the answer would be." He did not wish to elaborate.

"So if you want her, you must go there, and you must give up some life-long values?"

"And suffer publicity campaigns to make me famous."

"Ah, that's something else again." He produced this phrase with a flourish. "Something else again."

"You always try to tell me it's all I want, but it isn't so. I could spend a good deal of my time reading to a dozen old ladies in public libraries around the world if I wanted to. Many do. It gets them mentioned, sells their books. Then they get on stages at literary festivals and read to mobs with all the other hacks. No thanks. They can get on with it. It's all vanity."

"'Saith the preacher.' Very commendable, but keep your emotions focused, old chap. I think that you have touches of genius as a translator and, from what I have seen, in some of your more tender poems, and that's a talent that you have to nurture, as it is rare. Such considerations as vanity and modesty do not come into it at a certain level of achievement."

"She has no idea. None at all. To her it's a kind of glamorous trick…I shouldn't talk like that about her- she was a brilliant doctoral student."

"I'm flattered that you talk so to me."

"I do because your acumen impresses me." Paul looked away through the window bars at the green garden, then looked back. "I should like to be like you."

"It is very kind of you to say that. It gives me the nerve to tell you to go back, stop hesitating about her, but put the poetry first. Another bottle?"

Greg declined.

Later, as they walked round the house to the gate, they met Paul's wife, whose name was so beautiful that Greg never dared to mangle it. She was stepping daintily on the stones of the path, smiling up, but not stopping. Envy jabbed Greg as he looked at their smiles, then he set off for his uncomfortable quarters, stopping on the way to order a take-away dinner at the restaurant where the little waitresses tried their English on him. "Hello Professor. Good evening, sir. How are you?" They cheered him up with their smiles and laughter.

*

Journal

I talked to Paul fairly openly about my dilemma, which pleased him. He, of course, finds bourgeois politics very simple, so there's no problem so far as he can see. A rich woman loves you? This makes things difficult? A joke!

He tells me to get on with life. I wish that it were so easy. Does she know where I stand? Of course she must, and it doesn't bother her. If I listen only to my body, it glories in hers and her warmth and love for me, and I should take his advice. I can always come back here if it doesn't work out…but I know in my bones it never will. Next time I speak to her, no matter what that deep, dark voice does to me, I will tell her that I have spent my life hating the kind of politics she takes to be common sense. It's better to deal with it now than slide into a complicated relationship, which it might be agony to unravel. And as for Paul's Olympian certainty, you only have to walk through doors held open by bowing boys in pillbox hats

and tight, striped trousers and monkey-jackets straight from 1930s Hollywood, out of the multitudinous push of the stinking hot streets, to experience a class boundary like no other I have known. Within a few metres of shuffling, hopeless poverty, marble foyers arch with palms and fountains in cool and quiet, which overlooks sparkling limousines and dozing chauffeurs. It can't last, can it? These monsters, Mercedes and Cadillacs, Rolls and Alfa-Romeos, blast bicylists out of their path with their horns as if egalitarianism had never been thought of in China. Paul's grasp on political reality is no better than mine. In fact, it is worse. The Party and the New Bourgeoisie are not the same thing,

But property does not mediate power here yet. There is no challenge to the party. Yet the facts are that there is no unrest since gross inflation was cured and corruption diminished. They play a long game, the Chinese.

What I fear is that Stella will want me to move into her apartment and circle of silvertails, who will talk about the stock market after dinner and have nothing to say to me at all, nor me to them. I'll become a sort of curio, a pet poet, a poodle. Fuck that! I'll keep my house in Clifton Hill as a line of retreat.

*

"You have to stop hovering," she told him.

"Havering…Silly procrastination."

"No, honey, you've got some decisions to make and it's time to do it. Do you want to live in China or do you want to live here? It sounds horrible, from what you tell me, but maybe it's preferable to me." (She had never mentioned his earlier lie about having been there for years and intending to stay for years.) "I need you. You know, a man can get away with murder so far as a woman is concerned, even after all kinds of upset, it's like that with me so far as you are concerned."

"I missed the teaching, my colleagues are great, the students are beautiful, but I have no friends and the climate is shitty."

"Then enjoy what you have while you have it. You know next year would be less novel, more routine…Running this business would be a fun thing. Oh God, I want to see you, Greggy. We can't work it out like this, on the telephone." And she was gone.

He didn't trust his feelings. Often it was only when his drinking got too much, or his gums ached, he couldn't sleep or got incipient piles, that he woke up to himself. He longed to have her naked in his arms again, but what could she possibly see in him? She could have anybody. He was middle-aged and redundant, beginning to stoop, get a pot, and his teeth were not good. (It occurred to him that he might grow his beard again to please her.) He admired her dispatch and acumen, but she had always had enough money to take off after projects, then drop them if they got boring, and he suspected that her view of him might be as false as his had been of her more than a decade before. He thought that she wanted his devotion again, and to get it

she would suppress her feisty nature and do her best to make him a famous poet. She wanted him on television and radio with whole pages in the weekend papers. He wasn't a bad poet, and there were plenty worse who were well known, but he was shy of all that superficial glitz which filled a space between the advertisements. He was a peripheralist and always had been and he was neither badly off enough nor avaricious enough to be after her money. She had a life of glamorous publishing planned, but there was a good deal of graft to it. Would she keep at it? She would eventually defenestrate him and publishing and go off to do archaeology in Morocco or ballooning in Tashkent. She was not so very sentimental, her daughter stuck in a New England boarding school seemed to bear that out. Yet there was no doubt that what held them together was something more than chemical. Yet he didn't trust his feelings. Was it choice between her and fame or whisky and frottage? He had clumped down to the foyer and called her number. Someone he didn't know, some guy, answered, "Stellar Books…She's busy right now," against a loud background of talk and rock.

"This is an international call from China. It would be nice if you hurried up." The 'phone was thumped down and he listened to the strange row of humans enjoying themselves.

"Hello," she said. "Is that you, Greg?"

"Stellar Books."

"It's beaut. I really wanted your name in it though."

"I didn't. Who answered the phone?"

"Roland Boyle, the literary editor of the *Herald-Sun."*

"You do keep exalted company."

"What?" She couldn't hear. Hopeless. His intentions disintegrated.

"It doesn't matter. I love you," he yelled.

"Love you too," she said. That was that.

*

The New Dialectic: Demand and Supply

Is it time to give up teaching
when the happy expectations
of those about to graduate
pierce your heart with beauty and grief?

Oh look, everything you plan
is pre-ordained, but chance does let some
dance down long lives to painless graves;
others are blindly maimed or crushed.

And if I tell you, you will smile,
indulge my white beard, and that is right.
The beauty is your courage and belief
that now you are free. That is grief to me.

*

He felt obliged to explain why he must refuse their offer, although neither actually seemed very interested as he talked about an 'old flame', a usage they did not know. "Well it is kind of out-of-date, I suppose, but I don't know what else to say. The lady is very keen to get me back to Australia - and to marry me, if I am not careful." They had smiled at this.

"You are sure the lady will not change her mind too? It gives us a great problem to replace you. We will not find another as qualified and experienced. There is no other reason, is there? Are you comfortable with us?" Li enquired, eyes bright behind his stylish spectacles. My rooms were drab and had not been painted for years; the plumbing was inefficient and idiosyncratic; the linen was worn and torn, but given the circumstances and budgets, you couldn't complain about that any more than you could about cockroaches, mosquitoes and smog.

"You are all beaut. The students are so keen and co-operative and the staff so welcoming and helpful…The only complaint I have is loneliness." Charles Cheng lifted his brows and one shoulder. "Quite," he said. "I'm used to being a bachelor, but…"

Li said, "It is a pity that Swiss doctor didn't stay longer," and grinned.

"Oh look, I'm quite able to cope. I suppose that it's the language problem. I can't even begin on it. How the hell you guys get across that bridge into English, I don't know. Some of your best students are better than some I taught in Australia, but I'm too old and stupid, I guess…God, you must have heard all this before."

"Yes," Charles said," yes, we have, but we are still impotent to do anything about it. There are more than fifteen hundred universities in China, almost six million undergraduates. Up to now just preserving what there is has been sufficiently difficult."

"But we have good hopes in the future," Li added. "I think you will see that things will change. The economy seems to double in size every seven years. Maybe we can offer a better salary soon."

"For many years teachers have not been very favoured in that way." Charles added. "They often mention our virtues, such as dedication." He was about to reply but Charles held up a hand, as if scenting flattery. "Do you think this lady will change her mind?"

"You can't ask him that," Li said, and laughed heartily. We all did.

"Well, what can I do? You see the lady – look, her name's Stella – has started a publishing house, she's beginning with a book of mine and she wants me to be a

partner. I don't want to be, by the way. I'll be a consultant, but I am a poet and I can't see poetry as a commercial thing. I've never made a profit, only a loss from it." He said this rather proudly.

"Wah," Li said," that won't do here nowadays."

"Yes, just a little romantic and Nineteenth Century for our times," Charles agreed, but he was becoming uneasy with such talk. I was history.

"Look, is it possible that I could come back at sometime in the future?"

"But of course!" Li said. "It's my turn to be Chairman next too." And so we laughed and left it there, except that to my surprise, they asked me to have a word with another Australian who had arrived and was teaching in the Centre, which ran separately from the department, and provided part-time and ad hoc language courses. Perhaps he might do? He knew me, they said, through my work, and was a poet himself: 'Stan Skuta'.

*

The trouble was, no matter what he told himself, or wrote in prose, it was only a gloss on his real feelings. Once he had been sent by his doctor to a specialist who decided on a cystostomy and, even though he did not have a private health fund, performed it within a week. He had arrived in good time after a sound night's sleep and chatted cheerfully with the nurse who took his blood pressure. It was virtually 200 on 100. It did not matter that he joked with her, he was screaming on the inside. Sometimes the words were waiting, the phrases forming to make a line, then another from his true voice, deep[feelings. It wasn't often. More often some glibness occurred, something he could shape, and he would send it to a magazine and forget it until it turned up, dead on the page. He had a sporadic gift and he had to be glad for it.

At times he had thought that there might be some holy technique, some oriental discipline, which might enhance it, but he had found nothing except self-delusive and transient groups of the well-heeled and despairing groping for God or the Buddha. There was nothing to be done: you were, after all, shaped by your class and its institutions. He knew Stan Skuta would think him more English than the English after years of teaching their literature, and he could hardly disagree. What he would not accept was that the answer was to reject those centuries for cocacolonisation's imploding signs and stupefied significations; t-shirts advertising U.S. universities or even displaying the Stars and Stripes had been frequent on the campus. He had a joke about 'cocacoala bears.' For all their junk food enthusiasm, Chinese youth tended to surrealist t-shirts often sexual: 'SUCK! SUCK!' one girl sported on her bosom; 'PACKED LUNCH FOR MEN' another. A third had a tennis racquet with 'DOG' across it. There was a naïve anarchism in it, after years of discipline, that went with spitting and littering and driving dangerously with a Mao's head medal as a talisman to fend

off bad luck

If you had no concept of an omnipotent god, not even a character for that divine intervener, then you needed to gamble to assert yourself, it seemed. Half your luck!

*

Journal

Off on another 'breath-of-fresh-air' trip in the ancient bus, intended to shake us out of our frowsty routines. I am dumb enough to let the rest on first and find myself with the Friar on the back seat, experiencing every pothole. The Infanta is a couple of seats in front and she keeps turning and looking at my foot (My legs are crossed and my foot is jerking as if I am trying to kick her.) What a lunatic! She will go quite crazy.

On some hills we pass a huge cemetery, each grave marked by a red disc. "'Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts'", I said inconsequentially, but one of the Chinese Foreign Affairs women looks very bleakly at me.

It promised to be one of those days.

The clay makes excellent red bricks and tiles for village buildings, with no timber or concrete as is elsewhere the case. Each village has a pond with a thousand white ducks messing about cheerfully, and a lychee orchard. Water buffalo mooch in ditches and in the paddy men and women are thigh deep, planting rice by hand. Machines can't do it precisely enough, but the planters' fingernails are worn down to the quick and their legs are plagued by leeches.

We stop at a temple in a small town where all take photographs of ancient decorations, which seem to have escaped the obligatory pulverising by the Red Guards. The Infanta strikes poses as if she anticipates being in other people's shots, so I oblige when she is stooping, posterior thrust out, focusing on some small idol, and give the result to Dr. Maria who is much cheered. I notice the wooden-faced new Japanese handing over some money and am pleased not to reward him with yells of alarm when a string of violent firecrackers explode. I follow the Friar into the Gents, which consists of a low wall and steep drop to a small stream. A huge turd is causing eddies. Outside he is pulling off bits from the bog roll he carries on such occasions and offering them around for brow-mopping. Nobody accepts this civility.

We are going to Mark's home. He is a young graduate who recently joined Foreign Affairs, a handsome, obliging and intelligent guy, he is down the front making explanations, which we can't hear. The land is flat, a flood plain which had a fifty-foot earth levee about fifty miles long, built during the Cultural Revolution to contain the North River. When we cross the river it is about three times the size of the Yarra in Melbourne, but only another tributary of the Pearl. Every so often the embankment, along which a frieze of Chinese country life is passing in silhouette against the hot sky, has a beautiful design of flowers. It is an injunction to take good care of the embankment. It is a monument to slave labour of a kind the West has not known since the colonisation of Australia and astonishing in that it is considered unremarkable.

Mark's home is in its shadow. All about the land is hot and baking under the empty sky so that you feel that you can almost see the curvature of the Earth. We all go inside, the 'experts', the Foreign Affairs staff, the office workers who were seat-fillers, the driver, and we sit down on the benches and plastic chairs arranged along the brick walls on the earth floor. The family is assembled, although the father has gone pedalling off to the town we have just left to buy us each a tin of cola as that, apparently, seems necessary for the entertainment of Westerners. The right-angular grandmother examines us through wintery eyes, none has seen foreigners before, but Mark's mother is full of talk and laughter. She sends him up a small staircase to bring down a large sack of dried sweet potato, then urges us to help ourselves. The grandmother, Mark explains, wonders why I have taken so little when I am such a large man, but apart from a natural reticence with such rural delicacies, I am dismayed by the way the rest almost empty the sack. I nibble a few strips to please the old lady, who is ninety-three and has all her wits, and nods delight, but it is bland, poor stuff, as glorified by the rest as bush tucker in Oz. The mother smokes prodigiously, and points out the television on its shelf. It appears to be disconnected. She says that if they had not had to pay for Mark's time at university, it would be a colour set. Then the father comes home with a plastic sack of gaseous gunk, which I have never drunk for years, on political grounds as much as taste, and under the frosty eye of grandma, I accept a tin and a handshake from the sturdy and hot father, and pull out the safety-pin with a flourish. The Infanta takes the chance to sit next to grandma and put an arm round her shoulders, waiting for the flashes to pop, which they do. Then she lets go. Stan Skuta sits near and I turn in the hubbub: "Get her, grinning like a rat with a gold tooth," I say. To my relief he grins back.

"Rattus rattus', he says.

The house is pervaded by the smell of the chicken pens around it in which red hens bolt about nervously as we inspect. Under a thatched canopy a huge goose sits and cackles in the shade and we learn that if Mark had given the family proper notice, they would have made a feast of it for us. Throughout Mark smiles less than usual, as if anxious, but his folks are courteous and polite. Did he kiss his mother as we left? I didn't see. I did notice the masts of a large vessel above the embankment and guess the surface of the river there was about twice the height of the house. We leave in a hooting and a waving.

In the afternoon in baking heat, it's a crocodile farm.

Near the Crocodile Farm, Guandong,
with the Foreign Experts

Even more indifferent
in concrete
the vast
reclining Buddha occupies
the place vacated by
a stone predecessor
Red Guards pulverised

Replaced for profit not
piety the temple's
concrete too
the ceiling
wallpaper trompe-l'oie
peeling in the humidity
above the pot-bellied bald
and bulging-eyed guardians
vigilant for devils at the door
by which the Friar and I dispute
as ever the existence of god
An old woman bent to a right angle
by child-bearing in famine
enters wagging her praying hands,
a long cigarette like a joss stick
in her front fangs has him
insisting people must have ritual
and by implication the church

but I am distracted by the memory
of a yellow duckling snatched up
and flung for our entertainment
managing one amazed quack of joy
before the awful jaws in the dank water
gaped and snapped shut

Aware of tourists hissing at
the crone (she is in their shots of us
as red faced bald and paunched
as the guardians) I shrug
dyspeptic even before the journey
on a bus designed to test organs
and intercostal tissue
and walk away…

*

I get a seat behind Stan Skuta but the engine noise makes talk next to impossible and soon I fall asleep with my head banging on the window. I wake with it aching as we pull through the main gates in the dusk.

*

"Come and have a beer," Greg said as they got off and plodded up the stone staircases together. "I've had enough of fucking China for one day." Stan Skuta laughed but said nothing. He had a small mouth and feral teeth, which sloped inwards. His red frizz was pulled tight on his skull by a ponytail and the back of his denim shirt was dark with sweat from the bus seat. "Yeah, for god's sake talk to me of Oz."

"Pissed off, are you?" He was inspecting my books as I poured beer on top of the growling and wheezing fridge.

"Well once you make up your mind to leave, it sort of comes unstuck a bit, y'know."

"Leaving? I heard that you were here for years."

"Good health," Greg said, handing him his glass and the rest of the bottle. "I thought I was, but I've done me dash."

"Right." He shifted half his glass. "It's a bit like the Foreign Legion, ay?" The beer was cold and strong. I was already looking forward to another.

"So where are you from, Stan?"

"Dawes Point…under the Harbour Bridge."

"Okay: behind the Rocks."

"That's it. I see you've got Gary Snyder on your shelf. He's cool, isn't he?"

"Yes, some great lines, but a bit Hemingwayesque for me. The poet as machoman hanging out in the East." He said nothing. I bit my tongue. "And how do you find it here?"

"It's okay." He wristed his mouth, drank again. "Better than what I was doing."

"What was that?"

"Waiter." He emptied his big brown bottle. "Mind if I smoke?" He pulled papers from one of his shirt pockets and a small plastic bag from the other. Greg hated the smell, hated being asked, and was despising himself for trying to ingratiate himself with the younger man who was making himself a leisurely joint.

"Yes," I said. "I do. I don't like the smell."

He put the joint on the table, picked up his glass and emptied it. "Okay," he said, "I can handle that," but then in a little flash: "You've written some good Larkinlike stuff, but I reckon a bit of mull would loosen you up, man" He stood, did an American salute, and sauntered to the door and through it.

When he had drunk his beer, he called Stella, but got her answering machine: "Hello," she said a few times, "you've reached Stella. Please leave a message after the tone and I'll get back to you." After the third time, he said: "Hey, where are you when I need you? Some young Aussie bastard has called me Larkinlike" and hung up.

He had got a tin of baked beans and a few tomatoes, some bread and

cheese, and he boiled a couple of eggs while he drank more beer. He switched on the telly and surfed around the multiplicity of stations. He found some cricket from India. Tendulkar was blasting the bowling in a hot and half-empty concrete stadium somewhere. He woke up stiff and bitten to death, the telly a swirling of electrons and the red cross burning bright outside.

*

He met Professor Li in the Departmental Office where he was sitting on a shiny grey sofa reading his mail. “Ah,” he said, “You are on cue, Greg. Here’s a letter from your successor, a Canadian lady.”

“Great,” he felt dismayed.

“We are lucky,” he said. “She’s divorced and well-qualified.”

“Beaut.”

Letters sometimes went to the Department and he found one from Stella. He snatched it up and put it in the breast pocket of his shirt. The rest was pieces of work from students on irritatingly different sizes of paper, contrary to his pleas and instructions. He left them where they were. It was absurd to be put out by the ease by which he had been replaced, but now here was a letter at long last. It had American stamps and had been posted in New York more than a week before. He sat on the sofa and used his pen to open it.

“Wah,” said Li. “Mind those stamps. Mrs Wong is a keen collector.” Mrs Wong, who sat at a huge old wooden table with her computer, had a forbidding look as she stared over her black spectacles, but a smile which completely dispelled it. She jumped to her feet and brought him a worn paper knife with a little bob of the head, which he repeated as he accepted it, slicing the envelope and handing it and the knife back to her. Again she bobbed.

“She says thanks, she hasn’t got them.” He put his own stuff down. “Well we will miss you. What will you do next?”

“I’ve no idea. What I did before, perhaps: mooch about the city and write poems…Now,” he raised the letter, ”here is this lady who has some notion of promoting my career.”

“Well you are already quite famous, Stan Skuta says. He seems to be in awe of you.”

“He certainly doesn’t give me that impression…and no Australian poet gets famous unless they turn into a trumpeting global circus act. The Americans pay no attention anyway, but the English think that ‘Australian poet is an oxymoron’ and promote poets who meet their expectations.” His tone made Li wary.

“He speaks highly of you, says you hide your light under a bushel.”

“I shall miss you too,” Greg said, laughing as Li went off to his next class.

Darling,

My little girl has had an accident. Somehow she scalded herself. I rushed here and her arm seems to have improved. It was a stupid accident and has all caused me some anguish and I have been busy with my lawyers. It's complicated. I will explain it to you when I see you.

But when will that be? Jacinta will be in hospital for some time yet, perhaps a month, and then I must make sure that she gets proper care and attention before I leave. I can stay with friends for a little while longer, I guess, but then I will have to find accommodations while I try to do the best for her. She is so brave. She was scalded on her left arm and was in great pain at first. I must be as good a mother as I can for a time.

Of course I have tried to call you, but the time problem is confusing. Please have patience with me. I was planning such a homecoming party with some of your friends from my time, but we can still hold it later. Do take good care of yourself. Have you grown a beard for me yet?

There was a postscript.

Your book has been printed. I guess that we must put off the launch and publication for a while. I do hope that you are not too disappointed. Who shall we ask to launch it? I have friends who know the Premier well.

*

As he plodded across the park by the library students bowed and called "Good morning, Professor!" He had learned that they were very happy to stop and have what they called 'free talk' with him. With some of the dainty and beautiful he could not help himself. At first he had thought them innocent, but then he had understood, as a result of soft hands and breasts touching his arm, that men of his age were not repulsive, but he could not dream of reaching out to them for all the beautiful eyes they made when they felt like it. He felt very sorry for his frotteurist predecessor.

Paul he met bicycling the narrow road in his shapeless white hat. "Ah, the poet," he said as he swerved by. "See you soon."

The air, after a night's deluge, seemed to sparkle over the lake where thistledown and dragonflies dodged about in swirls of breeze. There was an 'ancient' collection of rocks made of concrete by the water. He perched against it and re-read the letter.

He really knew very little of Stella's marriages and relationships. It seemed incomprehensible that her daughter of the first marriage should be in the custody of her second husband's mother, and not Stella. What could that mean? And was she contemplating litigation over the accident? It seemed so. How did he feel about having an instant daughter? Confused. He had told her everything but really knew little of her life.

It was a relief to know that he could evade an old chums' party and a P.R.

book launch. The Premier indeed! He would be one of the last men whose hand he would want to shake; and as for ex-students, he usually didn't recognise them even if they recognised him. It had got easier in later years, when the numbers on English Literature courses began to dwindle as the world became commodified in US dollars and, as acquiring them, rather than some wisdom and imagination, had become the solution to life's problems. It was no longer *his* problem, the replacement of intrinsic value in education for vocational training. In fact, he suddenly felt as if he had no problems at all except the next three weeks of examinations and marking and packing up, and yes, it really was good to be able to go back to his old life.

There were no letters for him at the desk and he climbed up to his floor two steps at a time, arriving hot and out-of-breath to hear his telephone as he fumbled with his keys: Stella!

Darling! There you are at last! I've been listening to telephones ringing and no answer for ages. Oh how great to hear you! How are you?
Greg: I'm good. How are you? How is your little girl?
Stella: Oh I'm fine now and Jacinta's almost right. It will hardly leave a mark, they say. My ex's mother can't stand me, so it was best to clear out just before she left hospital. I got back yesterday. Are you puffing and panting because you guessed it might be me?
G: Yes. It's a really nice surprise, Stella. I have been wondering what you were up to and where you were since I got your letter.
S: Have you, darl? Well I've been in hospital too. I had to see my gynaecologist in New York. I wasn't supposed to have another baby.
G: Baby? My baby? You were having my baby? You had an abortion?
[At each question his voice rises until he is almost squeaking with amazement. She laughs, dark and sweet as a chocolate and the sound, meant to delight him, chills him.]
S: That's right. I was told that…Hello?
G: What sex was it? [She laughs again, this time less smoothly.]
S: Darling it was tiny. They don't say. They probably don't look even. It doesn't matter, does it? It wasn't a person, you know…[He cannot speak.] Are you upset? I expected that you would be relieved.
G. Yeah, well. [He says, tough as he can manage.] I suppose I always wondered if the bloody thing really worked, ay? And you are okay, right?
S: Yes, I am. There's not much to it. [She is mystified.] You're not one of these 'right-to-lifers' are you?
G: No way. I just never expected to be a…Make a baby with you, or with anyone somehow. It never occurred to me. I don't know why.
S. You're a puzzle, Mister Buckley. Do you know that? Have you been behaving yourself in China? Do they have sex there? Whenever I see them on TV they are bicycling about in those grotty pyjamas. You have given in your notice, haven't you?
G. I really should have made you came here, Stella, to see for yourself. The country's

being transformed, the students are the best and the staff really decent blokes - and sheilas. So far as I can see there's none of all the tenure insecurity and elbowing that goes on in…
S: But you have resigned?
G. I have. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have, though the climate and pollution are horrible. It's the first time for a long time since I felt useful, y'know. It's a nice feeling. They really appreciate…
S: But poetry is your real vocation, Greggy. You are capable of great poetry. Everybody says so. [She has more of this but he cuts her off,]
W: Everybody can get stuffed! I know I am no more than a *second eleven p*oet, right? Australia has never done any better, that's true, but …
S: You constantly undersell yourself.
G: Well that's a metaphor I reject, Stella. I'm afraid we don't share the same Weltanschauung, y'know.
S: Oh dear [she says wretchedly] Oh bloody hell! I don't want this now, Greg. I know you go on with that Seventies and Eighties stuff but it's as out-of-date as the U.S.S.R., Greg. [The words come down the line with an utterly tedious lack of surprise, as if they had been on the way for weeks. They thump into him and make him furious.] None of it matters at all nowadays.
G: Well it fucking does to me, baby! [It bursts out of him. He hears it echo somewhere as if it has circled the globe. For seconds she says nothing.] And those poems you selected, two were not to you at all.
S: You think vanity was my criterion of choice? [A grim voice, then a yell.] And I'm not one of your crummy little Chinese students! [The line goes dead.]

*

He had left the door open. He went to close it and found Terrence outside blushing. "I couldn't help hearing that. I was coming to give you this. Try not to be too angry. You look terrible, you know." It was the exam timetable. He stared at it but saw nothing. It shook. "Come and have a drink."

"I don't mind if I do."

"Pink gin?"

"That would be terrific.".

"They tell me that they take these end-of-the-year exams very seriously. I'd better not let the little rascals interrogate me about the questions this time." Terry smiled, all the creases in his face taking part as he held out the glass. "There," he said.

"That will do me good."

Terry raised his glass. "May all your problems be little ones, as we say at Catholic weddings."

"Did you overhear that too?"

“What?”

“Never mind. Good health.” He had mixed them strong. “Do you know anything at all about women?” He felt it burn down his gullet.

“If they are human, I do. My grandma used to say they were cats and men are dogs, mind. Did you just get scratched? Was that what all the barking was about?”

“Well, in a way. Christ!” He shook his head with anger.

“That’s your answer.” He laughed, jowls shaking. “Too much of yourself for too long. I know, I’ve been there.”

“You don’t want to get onto that old band-wagon, do you?”

“I always do.” He put his head back on the armchair and laughed.

“Well fuck off then,” Greg told him. He had to push his glasses up and knuckle his eyes, but didn’t offer to move. A large mosquito settled on his neck. “There’s a mozzy making a meal of you.” He pointed. Terry slapped the wrong side and it had gone. “I don’t know if I hate them or bloody cockroaches worse.“

“So are you beginning to think that you would like to stay here and escape the tender trap?”

“They hired a Canadian sheila already.”

“Have they now? Nobody told me. I was looking forward to some nice little postgraduate classes. I’d better be on time this week and do a good job. That Li is always floating past on the dot and tapping his watch at me if I’m a few seconds late. What do you know about her, this Canadian? Is she another lost soul?”

“Is that what we all are?”

“Oh yes. Just look around... Well I am, for sure. I couldn’t wait to get out of Ireland. I had got to hate the bloody country.” He had emptied his glass. “The Church is gerontocracy, I’m a young hothead so far as they’re concerned, so I am here in China until they chuck me out.”

“Well they won’t until you are really troppo because you don’t cost them anything. Mind you, if all their students start talking bog-trotter, they might get upset.”

“Oh yes? What if they all speak Aussie?”

“Mate, it’s only a couple of days ago I was being told that I’m no more than a displaced Pom by my young compatriot.” He gave Terry his glass back so full he began by suction.

“Oh him. He’s an addict, and he’s after the girls all the time.”

“Gin? Is that his poison? And if it is boys, like Ted?”

“You bloody Aussies are so rude all the time. Stan says your kind of poets are ‘wanked out zombies’ and that it is all over for you. His stuff is bloody weird, a lot of noise and no sense, but at the same time he seems to know nearly everything you’ve written.”

“Slap the top of your head.”

“Slap the top of your own bloody head.”

“Please yourself, cobber. You have malaria if you want it.” His pudgy palm whacked down, then he looked at it.

“Look at all that blood, will you?”

“Very symbolical that.”

“The horrible little thing.”

“’All things bright and beautiful…’”

“’The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate.’” They sang together. “Now that’s your text for today and every day, isn’t it?”

“Too bloody right, mate!”

The telephone rang. It was Stella. She was weeping, apologising, saying that she had been under a lot of stress, asking him to forgive her, saying that she would make it up to him…and Terry was standing up pulling faces, wagging his head, chucking the gin down and trying to close the door quietly behind him.

“Oh forget it,” he said, “I’ve been getting pissed with our tame Catholic brother. I’m sorry too. We are both sorry.” He slurred his words more than he had to and she brightened.

“I remember you seeing you drunk for the first time. It was at a party in St. Kilda at about three in the morning and you were offering to swim to Williamstown.”

“I was?”

“Yes.”

“I must have been bloody drunk.”

“You were mad with me as usual. I was playing you up.”

“Did you really screw around? It used to torture me.”

“Of course not. Listen hurry back and then we can get drunk together in the middle of the day. What are you drinking?”

“Pink gin.”

“I’ve never had one of those.”

“Wait a moment and I’ll make you one.”

“Then you’ll drink it for me?” She laughed as he had never heard her laugh. “Oh God, Greg, you are a funny, cussed man and I want to look after you. I want to take care of you real bad.”

“Oh,” he groaned, ”that’s terrifying, Stella. I’m a selfish old bastard, a crusty old poet…”

“And you are crying out, even if you don’t know it, for some T.L.C. It’s been obvious ever since your mother died.”

“Yes,” he said. “Mum.” Tears rolled down his face. “Mum won’t be there when I get back. If you had kept our baby she would have been so happy. Poor Mum. I wasn’t even there.”

“You couldn’t know she was going to die like that…and Greg, there was a very good chance that I should have died too if I had tried to have the baby. We’ve only got each other.”

“Yes,” he said. He sobbed and she understood that he was crying.

“Oh baby, I do wish I was there with you. Poor man. Poor Greg.”

“I have to go,” he said. “I can’t talk any more.”

“Okay,” she said. “Things are okay between us now, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” he said. “I love you, damn it.”

“And I love you too…And I’ve got a surprise waiting for you.”

“Oh hell, take it easy, Stella. I’m an old bloke, y’know…I’ve got a surprise for you too.” He rubbed his brindled chin.

He put the gin away and made a tomato sandwich and a cup of coffee. One thing about China was that his belt was comfortably on the tightest notch. And he was always wide awake there, even when the days yawned. He sat and munched and sipped and looked at his books, trying to decide which he would leave behind in the departmental library.

*

The Infanta went ballistic that Paul had not waited and asked her to the exhibition. Her glare became pure hatred when she saw Greg. Paul, however, was remorseful. “I knew that she is keen on Chinese artefacts; not that there was anything there for her to buy and parcel off back to Lisboa.”

“I can’t imagine sharing a car with that cow.”

“Delicately put and correct, but she was great fun when she arrived and much nicer than others we had entertained.”

They were drinking green tea and listening to Franck’s Sonata in A for violin. It was hot and outside the sunlight almost hummed with radiation. Greg was tired, they had worked hard together, finishing things off, tidying up. There was almost a book to be made from their translations but he wasn’t going to say so until distance had made Paul’s heart fonder and less likely to want to teach him an object lesson in restraint and proper modesty. He shuffled the Li Bo landscape poems into his folder.

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Meditating in Jingling Mountains

All the birds have flown,
a single cloud drifts...

I contemplate peaks
brooding upon me.

Visiting the Ancient Site of the Wu King's Terraces at Tui

Willows green on terrace ruins.
Spring bursting with girls' singing.

Only the moon which gilded
King Wu's concubines still shines.

Watching the Lushan Falls

Censor Peak breathes purple plumes
as sun lights the river up-
ended: three thousand sheer feet:
the Milky Way dazzling down!

Farewell to a Friend

Green hills to the North;
a clear stream washes
the town's Eastern walls.

You will roll away
like a cloud while my
heavy heart sinks down
with the sun...We wave
and our horses neigh.

Thoughts of Her Husband on the Frontier

When did we part just last year?
South garden green...Butterflies...

This year, when do I miss you?
Snow on Western hills, black cloud...

Jade Pass is so far away,
Can letters find where you stay?

A View of the Celestial Gate

The Celestial Gate opens
East; the Yangtse bends North, sprawls.

From between the green mountains
a sail skims close to the sun.

Failing to Find the Daoist Priest in the Daitian Mountains

Water babbles, dogs bark and dew
drenches the dark peach blossoms.

In deep woods glimpses of deer,
but no noon temple bell rings

Where streams spurt from cliffs, in green
haze bamboos arc, and no one

knows where he is. I loiter
ruefully among the pines.

He kissed Xia-Xia's hand at the back door among the twittering finches where only a couple of cats remained from the depredations of the stall holders who snaffled them in the early mornings, or so Paul believed. They shook hands something like sportsmen after a contest, promised to write, made little bows at the buzzing gate, waved, then that was that.

Saying Goodbye to Meng Haoran
At the Yellow Crane Tower

'Goodbye old friend!' The Third Moon's
mists and flowers all around
as your sail turns to blue sky.
The Yangtse flows unperturbed.
Li Bo 701-762 C.E.

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Among the queues of Asians from the overnight flight from Canton Westerners stood out as taller and fatter. One had somehow preserved an immaculate Panama hat, which was as inappropriate
for a cold winter's morning at Tullamarine airport as his crumpled white linen suit. He was middle-aged, not much above medium-height, but thickset, bearded, and with a clear-eyed, inquisitive gaze. He was in good humour, pleased to have landed and with the spacious corridor, large windows and views of the airfield where aircraft silently taxied, took off and landed from around the globe, tickled to hear the Australian accents on the PA. His head jerked as he looked about and he almost smiled to be back in his wide, brown land.

The queues moved forward up to the yellow line and waited quietly, half-awake, anxious, not only children watching the wagging tails of Beagles, which followed their noses among the bags and parcels. He handed in his passport in turn and watched his particulars being entered on a computer. Next came a straight look and comparison with his photograph, the bang of the stamp and he was through.

He had taken half-a-dozen paces when he was stopped by a crop-headed young man in a dark blue blazer. "Can I see your passport, please?" He took a look at it, then the customs form he had completed. "Poet," he read, a touch of Europe about his Australian. "Is that a *full time* occupation, Doctor Buckley?"

"Absolutely." Greg smiled with surprise at the question. There was no similar response.

"'I shot an arrow in the air': is that Wordsworth or Longfellow?"

"Longfellow."

"If I wanted to find that poem, how would I set about it?"

"An anthology, perhaps, like this." He produced the one he had been reading. "It isn't in here, however."

"A poet, that would mean an academic post, wouldn't it?" The official's dark eyes were insistent; he liked his work. Early morning turned Greg's humour to sarcasm. He wanted to go.

"Not always, but as it happens I *have* just been teaching at a Chinese university." He accepted his passport and customs document.

"Have a nice day now." He was of no further interest.

"I hope that *you* have a nice day too." He went in search of his baggage.

Arriving at Tullamarine is like appearing on stage. The expectant audience beyond the glare of spotlights call out, applaud, the arrival holds up a hand against the lights, anxious to respond and not to collide with the people pushing trolleys in front. Cameras flash, people surge, laugh, cry, bow, hug, shake hands, shout and whisper.

She was wearing sunglasses, which he thought extravagant at that hour, a scarlet Angora beanie, a short black jacket with white fur collar. "Greggy!" She reached her arms round his neck and kissed him. "You look great." Her smile delighted him.

"I feel buggered." She guided him out of the mainstream of arrivals, helping with his trolley. Outside chrome yellow taxis flashed and buses shone in cold sunlight and suddenly a microphone was pushed at his face so that he jerked back in surprise. A light dazzled him. Stella removed his hat, smoothed his hair and beard, patted his brow with a fragrant handkerchief. "I feel like a show-pony." He said, back to the bystanders.

"What's it like being back in reality?" a woman with cropped white hair demanded, her face familiar.

"I'll tell you when I've been to the bureau de change," his voice was deep with disuse and exhaustion. People who jostled round laughed. Stella had moved the trolley away, stood and watched with pleasure. Another microphone was by his left ear.

"So what was China like?" a male voice asked.

"Unreal."

"Did you write many poems when you were there?"

"Yes, but mainly I worked at translating Tang and Song dynasty poets." He looked at Stella for explanation. She was smiling encouragement, high heels apart, assured in the dazzle and glitter.

"And do you think Deng is being kept alive by drugs?"

"I suppose so. Most people over seventy are."

"What strikes you about being back?" another asked.

"As we came down gum trees stuck up through the mist like a Chinese painting. It was very beautiful to see."

"Thanks for your time, Doctor Buckley."

The light switched off, the film crew turned away and people dispersed. He

looked exhausted, Stella thought, his breath stale and his eyes dark-ringed, the lines and lineaments of his face setting into middle age. She kissed him again.

"Christ, Stella, was that the surprise?" He blew out his cheeks. Somebody laughed as if he were still performing. He turned his back and grasped the trolley.

"Don't you remember me, Doctor Buckley?" asked the white haired interviewer. She wore a good deal of make up, her eyes outlined in black, her brows amazing. "I used to come to you for the Romantics." She grinned. "Like Stella."

"Did you? Okay, well, good to see you again." She doubted it, hurried away.

"Good on you, Ginny," Stella called.

Some Chinese girls, who had been on the same flight, were waiting by a sliding door, loud with excitement. "The freedom country!"

"Not so loud," said the young man meeting them.

"Leave money changing until later, possum," Stella told him, "you don't need any," and they set out into the cold air. "I can't wait to get you home." The space, the lack of people, the huge sky of high cirrus delighted him, but the cold breeze was not hindered by his thin clothes. He suddenly felt exhausted and did not refuse her assistance. Seeing her in Australia emphasised the change from a feisty girl to a woman anxious to please, placate, be a kind of victim. When they stopped at the boot of a geranium red Ferrari he was astounded.

"This! Is the surprise?" He hefted the bags. The lid closed with a clunk.

"You want to drive it, Darl?"

"Christ, I couldn't!"

He hardly knew the engine had started until they rolled. He sank into the sweet-smelling leather and warm air and stared up at an American jumbo, which seemed to hover and at the high ice crystals, the mares' tails, above which it had flown. And fell asleep, hands grasping the hat on his knee.

He woke as the acceleration pressed him back on the freeway. She smiled, bracelets rattling as she slid from lane to lane. The dewy paddocks stretched past and the city's familiar towers shone. She laughed as he fought sleep, patted his hand. Somewhere between dreaming and consciousness his spirits sagged that he was not going to his own house, own bed's comfort and the stored apples smell of his books. All night the man next to him had sneezed, coughed, spat, smoked until he had taken his pillow and used it to fan the smoke away to the man's surprise. No more of that, he thought in a flash of consciousness.

The noise of the security grill banging down behind them brought him wide-awake. They were underground in a cold, dim place where 'Stella De Bono' was stencilled on the wall. They got themselves and his bags in a lift which only revealed its ascent by numbers whirling up to twenty-six, the over-sweetened air matched by swooning musac. He saw himself, slumped like a sack of potatoes against the wall, next to a vibrant, happy woman, twirling her sun glasses, big dark eyes shining at him. What could she see possibly see in him?

She was so pleased to open her door and walk him round. The sitting room

was like a cloud: on three sides wall-to-ceiling windows admitted the sky, wispy remnants of the early fog drifting by, and the light blue of the horizon repeated on the one wall in which a black marble mantle had a big Ann-Heather White abstract in blues and white and gold above it. He walked to the teetering edge and looked down at the khaki Yarra, then saw, a floor or so down, a roof garden with hedges and trees and an amethyst pool. He was intimidated. He could not imagine himself sauntering up in his daggy togs and diving deep into that sparkling jewel.

They wound round beige cubist furniture over white shag pile rugs and the polished floor to his study, with a view across the city to the shadowed Dandenongs and a desk with a space age computer with empty, glass-fronted bookcases to either hand. In one a casket, which he guessed, but dare not confirm, contained his mother's dust. She threw open the bedroom door like an impresario. It was big with soft grey and blue furnishings and a view down river to Port Philip Bay where big ships anchored in the offing. The bed seemed almost to fill the room. "Oh God! Let me get at it." He began to undress.

There was a script. "No, Greggy. First you must have a shower, then I have a lovely breakfast for you, then we both will go to bed." She pushed his hands away, undid and unzipped until he was naked, then she took him in her hand and gently led him into the en suite, laughing as at least that part of him was all attention. She had to show him how to control the shower, which came at him from all directions. The purple bath towels were huge and crisp and there was a colour-coordinated bathrobe. She called him to the dining room and an antique, oval gate-legged table intended for the shorter people of a couple of centuries ago, There was an arrangement of grasses and twigs and seed cases at its centre. Everything seemed brand new and very expensive.

He said so.

"I wanted a fresh start, Greg. I wanted to go back and start again with you, as we should all those miserable years ago. My brothers shared the parents' stuff; I had nothing. I got the cash equivalent, and this is it."

Stella had obviously taken endless care to welcome him. He was half-awake but keenly aware of himself in his stylish and glossy surroundings, flattered, embarrassed: what was he, after all, but a battered Australian poet of whom hardly anyone had heard? A man in his fifties wondering if he could do the business well enough with a woman fifteen years younger. He sat in the dazzle of it all, knuckling his eyes until they ran whilst she went back and to, all flourish and largesse, everything planned for months.

She remembered exactly what he liked for breakfast: fresh grapefruit juice, then hot toast and vegemite, then marmalade and glugging black coffee. "This is bleeding bliss, Stella. It's a magnificent spot for a poor boy from the mud flats to find himself in."

"I can't tell you how I have longed for this minute," She put her palms together as if in prayer, then wagged them up and down like an excited child. "How are you

feeling?"

"I'm overwhelmed by your kindness. I wonder what the hell I can possibly do in return?"

"Write some great poems! You must, you must! You write them and I'll sell them, okay?" She clapped her hands.

"I'll do my best," he said. "I'll do my best."

She had nothing but coffee herself, watched him eat with pleasure, liking the way his capable hands handled the knife, toast, cup; his tousled hair going grey at the temples, grey on his chest beneath the robe. He seemed to avoid her eyes shyly, stared out at the morning. She began to wish that he would eat up, finish his coffee, but at the same time enjoyed his calm performance, being made to wait. She could not remember when she had been so happy.

A shout of laughter woke him. He felt incapable of movement, flat on his back, but out of the corner of his eye he saw a glitter, turned his head and there were the huge container vessels lit like fairgrounds in the dusk on the bay. He remembered that Stella had said something about 'a few people for drinks' and that was what seemed to have come to pass. He lay still, eyeing the Southern Cross. He wanted to see the moon the right way up once more. He didn't want talk, he wanted more sleep with Stella, but he had to get up and visit the en suite.

When he came out she was waiting for him, full of happiness. "Do get dressed, Greggy. Everybody's dying to meet you." She wore an elegant long brown dress with a string of large white beads, and she flushed with euphoria and gin.

"Jesus Stella, I'm bushed. I can't talk." He watched her struggle to contain her enthusiasm. "Look, I'll just put my head in." She just wanted to exhibit him at last.

"Brush your hair. Shall I do it?"

"No, you go back. I'll be along." He stood for a while among all the mirrors stupefied, then he ran cold water from the gold tap and dashed it in his face. He brushed his hair and turned up the collar of the bathrobe and shuffled into the Japanese slippers she had bought him.

"Ha! There you are, you bastard!" Morris Hilditch said, coming forward with his hand out so that Greg had to step forward from behind the door to shake it. He had known Hilditch for years, but not so well as to enjoy this hearty greeting. "How do you get jet-lagged flying North to South?" Greg's appearance caused some mirth among the three women with Stella, who detected a debauched afternoon.

"I haven't had a decent night's kip for weeks. It's summer in China and hot and humid in Guangzhou and last night the flight was bloody awful." He was still growling. Morris Hilditch was not slim and his neatly parted curly hair and owlish glasses had given him a schoolboyish appearance into late middle age. He had written some shitty reviews of Greg's books in his time and turned down poems for Cowabunga once too often years before. Now he assumed the role of host and began to introduce him around, even to Stella, who thought it funny. The names he supposed he ought

to know. Delilah May-Smith clicked – black hair cut in a fringe, serious spectacles magnifying blue eyes; Annabel something: plump and painted…and others. The arms of the robe were too long, the silk slithered, he threw down the drink, had no taste for humour or more alcohol and shuffled himself off. The laughter seemed louder.

In the kitchen he found milk in the fridge and drank. It was marvellously good, he hadn't had any for months, and he drank some more. His mother always gave him hell if he drank too much milk. He wandered into his empty study and closed the door, sat in the padded swivel chair, savouring the cold, smooth liquid and looking out across the grid of the C.B.D. He had hardly thought of his mother since she died, as if she was still alive, but now he was back it was quite clear that she was not. He twisted his chair to look, not at her ashes on the empty bookshelf, but in what he took to be the direction of his childhood home. She would have not known whether to laugh or cry at what had become of him. She had never liked Stella, something he had attributed to her tacit suspicion of 'reffos', and had not been mollified by the story of how Stella's father had started off with a cement mixer and ended up with a building empire. In fact, that kind of thing exacerbated his parents' general theory about reffos and Jews and incomers in general. 'Theory' wasn't the word – it was a conditioned reflex more than an idea. Well, they were gone, very nearly, that RSL lot, but he didn't think that it meant the end of timid xenophobia in Australia. You got it with your mother's milk.

For all the hilarity next door, his spirit was still as he sat and looked out. Aircraft winked, a meniscular moon rose, far below a siren yodelled distress. It seemed dreamlike, filmic, fantastic. The people he had met were all media glitterati, who saw him like a fabled beast that Stella had captured, a curio, a new possession. It was a seductive. He wasn't having it.

Stella found him. "Baby! I thought that you had left me. What are you doing in here in the dark on your own? They've all gone. Why didn't you get dressed and join us?"

"All my stuff's creased and probably mildewed."

"I hung it up for you. It isn't that bad. We'll get it laundered on Monday. Hey, they didn't use Ginny's piece on you. Some new assassination has filled the news."

She kissed him, mouth heavy with desire. He found her zip so her dress fell. Her breasts were in his hands and mouth. She dropped to her knees, adjusted the angle of his erection, took him in her mouth. He had to stop her. She knelt on the chair, he rammed home violently, exulting, grasping her hips. They jerked together, spasmed and yelled and rolled. She was sobbing.

It hurt to withdraw. His knees shook. He reached under her and found the weight of her hanging breasts and the nipples hardened and she shook and wailed again. "Oh my god! Oh my god!" It sounded curiously American. Far off he heard his own voice, a sad sound although he had met her challenge. The frontal lobes of his brain felt smoothed of wrinkles. He collapsed on her. The chair had rolled to the window. He was staring at the vertiginous drop to the street, the river, face against the numb glass. She still shivered with pleasure and he kissed her, tasting the gin.

"I love you," she said.

"I know."

He was suddenly famished, rejected her offer to cook him civilised dishes, wanted bacon sandwiches, Worcester sauce; crunched and chewed like Robinson rescued. Then he drank a mug of tea.

She sat and watched his relish, happy to have pleased him. She thought that if she got the basic things right, nothing could go wrong. She had put the translations he had sent on the computer in his study.

Sunday did not begin until after eleven. After scrambled eggs and coffee, they sprawled with the weekend papers. He looked at the magazines, the pictures of people also sprawling in rooms like the one he was in, all polished floors, wall-to-ceiling windows and sparse, elegant furniture. It seemed to him as strange as the F.E.B. had been as he turned the pages. Stella searched for a mention and was rewarded: "Look, Greggy!" And there they were at the airport in an embrace. 'Warm Welcome', said the caption with a sentence of who they were. She was very pleased, put some pop music on and shook about, held out her hands for him to join her, but he laughed and would not. Did it confirm the reality of his life, a photograph and a sentence in a newspaper? Stella thought so. She had worked hard to make it happen.

*

Pop music woke him, the sun soft in the room. For a time he lay in the bed's luxury again and enjoyed the lack of mosquitoes and yelling of Cantonese by cheerful girls up and down the goods lift shaft.

Stella heard him and came in for a cuddle, dressed now in a severe outfit, a blouse with shoulders, skirt and high heels, which is what she wore in her 'publisher role.' She had put the coffee and toast on and gone back to the book designer who was showing her some ideas in 'the office'. Greg hid in the kitchen and wondered if his spirit had caught up with himself after the flight. Was it was still over the South China sea? He buttered toast gratefully.

He didn't escape so easily. She brought Rodney Critchlow in to meet him and have a cup of coffee. He was a neat, balding bloke about the same age and as tall as she was, shy and smiling in his pink t-shirt, jeans and trainers, the transgressive uniform of creative people. She had taken him on after Greg's dissatisfaction with the cover of his book. They were relieved to get the 'great man's' assent to its new cover and layout He filled his mouth with toast and marmalade before he could say anything critical, Stella's pleasure curbing him. The launch was due the following week. Rodney shot off to finalise the cover with the printer and Stella to arrange matters with the distributor.

Stella's original copy of the love poems was on the shelf of her bedside

table, so he set himself to choose twenty minutes' worth, which he might declaim with least embarrassment, and began reading them aloud and timing how long it took. He was still at it when she got back, full of bounce. The morning paper had some copy about his appearance at her drinks party in a bathrobe by one of her guests, who was evidently employed to write silly paragraphs. Wallace Hilditch was on the answering machine to tell her how pleased he had been to see Greg again and how he hoped that he would send some of his new collection of poems from China to Cowabunga. There were other snippets she told him, but he was concerned about the publicity programme presented as a fait accompli. Both launches, the first in Melbourne and the second in Sydney, were scheduled for restaurants, where the menus had been ordered and paid for and the state ministers for the arts would speak. He insisted that he also read at Glebe Books, in Sydney, and Collected Works in Melbourne, where people interested in poetry, rather than fashionable 'freebies', might come. He was allowed to be aware that this caused some muttering, but Stella glossed his cussedness with her smiles, which also took him to a tailor where he got kitted out for contemporary public appearances. The outing delighted him – the wide, half-empty streets and pavements, clean air, comprehensible signs and directions. She had wanted him to take the Ferrari but he walked. He had calculated that the cost of the car would have paid Li's salary for 373 years.

The week came and went with a couple more cocktail parties at which he had to field questions about the People's Republic. At one of these, unfortunately, he found himself arguing with another poet about 'free speech', which he was certain did not exist in China but did in the West.. When Greg said that it had never been the slightest problem, he replied it was because he was a 'bloody Commo anyway'. Frantic poets in Australia have been known to get into fistfights. For a moment, it seemed very possible that it might occur again. This guy, who died not long after, riding his bicycle whilst euphoric with some substance, reminded Greg why he had kept out of literary life. When Stella began to tug him away to meet someone else, he found it hard to move and break the glare he was returning. "Cunt!" he said vehemently by way of farewell.

"Greggy! You are usually so phlegmatic."

"Oh I can't stand these bastards! Let's go."

He also was not impressed by the half-dozen manuscripts, which she was seriously considering from the mountain stacked against the office wall. A girl came in just to control this 'slush pile', filleting packages, binning those without return postage; setting aside for return those on coloured paper, not typed, in doggerel or not long enough to make a slim volume; looking for those poets, which Stella had listed after consultation with him; piling them in a cardboard box and the remainder on a side table. It took her all morning, such was the paucity of poetry presses. Greg helped, dipped into the heap on the side table, rejecting the hopeless cases, or suggesting as much, leaving Stella to decide.

The launches and readings blurred into each other, the ministers, both charming women, told everyone what a good job they were doing, Stella explained how her publishing house intended to prevail and laughed away, four times, the self-flattery of her first book. She called Greg a 'distinguished' poet and deep-thinking man and made his year in China sound akin to some Nineteenth Century foray into darkest Africa: then he read his dozen poems as slowly and clearly as possible, wishing that people would not applaud each one. Afterwards he signed books, which Stella sold. One or two people he knew at each reading, but he did not look to prolong conversations or mingle, sipping his wine and waiting to go. Stella was pleased at the number of books that were sold. She said that he read 'superbly' and did all the talking with those she thought significant. He wished that he were more elated by the success she had made.

So it was two weeks before he got to his house at last. The car was still in the drive, covered in leaves and splashed with birds' muting, but the little door to the petrol cap had been wrenched off and the petrol, he assumed, siphoned. Leaves had banked against the front door, which was stiff to open. He left it open to replace the stagnant air inside, expecting to find the place ransacked. It wasn't. There was fine dust everywhere but things were just had he had left them at first light so long before. In the front sitting room, the cushion his mum had made still bore his imprint and the half-read Stanley Middleton novel was on the table by the reading light. The kitchen blind was down and he let it up so motes glittered in the sun as he washed up his last plate and mug before he had left for China so very long before.

The TV and VCR, which were what usually got stolen, were still in the back parlour, and The Age, lay open crinkled and yellowed on the table. When he pulled back the heavy curtains he saw the garden had bolted. He felt dismayed at its disloyalty and the hours of work that would be needed to get it back.

Upstairs there was a large, dead Huntsman spider in the bath. His bed looked grey and damp and the duvet had slipped off the end. It was his study that he really wanted to get back to, with its antique desk and walls stuffed with books. Open on the desk was The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook with a pen in its crease. He sat down with a thump, raising more dust, and switched on the power to the computer, then the beast itself. The incoming e-mail would take a day to read through. He sent brief messages of thanks to Chairman Charles and Li, to Penny and Colin, who would continue with him where Paul had left off. That done, he sat back, suddenly exhausted. In the left-hand drawer, was his commonplace book, stiff backed and the spine red-leather bound. To his surprise, he had written nothing about leaving for China. He picked up the pen, wrote the date and 'Home again!'

On the screen he wrote:

Dear Paul,

All the time I think of your responses, and that of the shadowy band of scholar-poets to whom you introduced me. Your retreat from the world's pandemonium, like theirs, is

an example to me in my gilded cage.

Stella will often sing snatches of famous songs, which utter, I suppose, all most adolescents can feel, and is disappointed, I guess, by my utter rejection of popular culture. It was a relief in China to escape it. It's part of the 'dumbing down' of public life which involves the trashing of the great humanist hopes of the Enlightenment, and their replacement by dazzle and excitement with the volume turned right up. (Of course, Lao Tzu recommended that people should have full bellies and empty heads!)I saw the beginnings of this vapid consumerism in China. It is, I suppose, now functional to the new corporate age. (Is China is big enough not to be bullied by American transnationals? Can it evolve in a more humane and responsible way? I think it might.) We have six TV channels, not fifty-odd like you, and their output is as politically scrutinised as that of your poets. (TV stations, not armouries or parliaments, are nowadays the first things to be captured or destroyed by invaders or rebels.) There are two public stations, under political pressure for their mild liberalism, which do not fill the evenings with violence, killing and 'soft porn sex' from Hollywood. It is from this adolescent nihilism that one must nowadays escape into seclusion.

Somebody walked in below and yelled "Hello!" He went to the head of the stairs but it took a moment to recognize Dawn against the light from the open door. He did his best to descend boyishly, grasped her shoulders and kissed her purple mouth, which didn't stop grinning. Her hair had turned short and spiky and red and she had gold rings in her ears and four plastic bags of mail.

"You look beaut!" She looked bizarre, but she was really pleased to see him and led the way, exclaiming at the state of things, and telling him kids had stolen the petrol only a couple of nights before and Ruben would have fixed it, but she had not seen or heard of him for weeks. He was keeping off the local turf and, of course, he was very busy in his new job at the Casino…and he had started his own catering business…"What was it like then? Did you do any opium, Tai Chi or anything?" She smiled brilliantly, twiddling her fingers at her side and turning this way and that. She was wearing a dark brown woollen dress, which was tight against her hemispherical parts, and a long necklace of seed pods of some kind. "Did you like it?" He warmed to her as she walked about, talking, inclining her head this way and that inquisitively. Why did he think of his father's school cleaner?

"It was great. Fantastic experience."

What she really wanted to talk about was what she had seen in the Press and TV. "I saw you smooching that Stella. It's on again, is it, after all this time? Ripper! Just what you need, Rip van Winkle, a young woman like that, though I must say she's put on a bit of weight since we last saw her. Cheered me up!" She patted her bottom, which he had always admired since he had first seen her sunning it with Ruben one hot day.

"I thought that you had shot through for good after the night the pigs attacked."

"Nah, I went up to Brissy and stayed with a mate until the dust settled."

"Did they catch up with Ruben?"

"Nah, he's smart as a shit-house rat. He had a rough trot but he's come good, ay? They have never laid a finger on him and, y'know, he just knows how far he can go without giving them the shits. Sometimes I've thought he was gone for all money, but not Ruben. Oh no, he's taken out tickets on himself. Nothing would surprise me about that bloke."

"Are you still an item?"

"I'm here, ay?" It made them both laugh, heads back. "I'm all right. I've got a little job at the newsagent up the Parade and Ruben divvies up for 'caretaking', as he says…You'll be moving out and selling up, I expect?"

"No," he said. "I'm attached to this place. I'm in no hurry. It did me good, this morning, coming along in the train and seeing all the backs of those dingy suburbs, then walking through the gardens with all those people pooper-scooping. That's the height of civilisation, ay?"

"Don't you start hovering again. That's what caused things to go crook last time."

"Maybe, but I don't want to be a toy-boy." I despised myself as soon as I made the joke at which she did not laugh. It had come from nowhere.

"You are a case, Greg." She shared Ruben's idea that I was the absent-minded, nutty professor. "Never mind, they are lovely poems. I saw some in Women's Monthly and I'll buy them when they come out."

"Don't, I'll give you a copy." She sprang, kissed his cheek, left the front door open as she had found it. She seemed to think that he had become a celebrity. It excited her.

I have been reading The Letters of Keith Douglas, a poet who was killed in the invasion of Europe at the age of twenty-four. Paul, if I wished to write like anyone, it's him. He has a strong, clear voice, urgent and tense as might be expected from an officer in the tanks who had survived the desert war but felt his luck could not hold forever. I opened the book where I had left my leather bookmark and re-read the critics' crass responses to his refusal to be lyrical while he waited for the shell with his number on it.

What Edmund Blunden did for Wilfred Owen, who died with little published in the First World War, was done for Douglas by Desmond Graham, then Ted Hughes. I think that Owen and Douglas are two of the finest poets of the century. Neither belonged to the hunting classes. Those who did got wiped out in the Great War. In their absence two American reactionaries ransacked European culture, both of them poseurs, their work artificial. The result was said to be 'Modernism.'

In his Lives of the Poets, the great critic, Doctor Johnson, listed fifty-two from Cowley, in the previous century, to 1779, of whom about forty are lost or almost gone and neither Herrick not Marvell are numbered. So much for fame!

He read it over; deleted it.

*

Ricky from Stellar Books' public relations firm broke into this reverie, wanting him to speak to Carl Craven of the ABC's Book Biz.
Stella had given him the number although he had asked her not to.
It was already gone noon and Stella would be back from her hair appointment. He agreed to be ready for the camera crew at four, then began listing his Chinese poems, firstly chronologically. Stella phoned to ask if he would be back for lunch and to confirm that he understood Craven would be there at four. He capitulated, walked back across the Gardens and crossed Hoddle Street's torrent, and caught the train. As he sat there staring at the graffitied gable-ends and factory walls he realised that one or two people were staring at him, doing double-takes, looking at his reflection in the window looking at them. He thought he should shave his beard off again.

Carl Craven was not pleased by his lack of awe for his profession. The fact was, he did not think it mattered. All that mattered was what got on the page and now he had begun work again he thought of little else. The furniture had been pulled about and some trouble taken to get a view down river without the lights reflecting on the glass. Stella had bought a pink shirt and brushed his hair and powdered his brow most professionally, reminding him that she had made some educational films in New York.

Carl Craven was in his late fifties but his hair was thick, cut boyishly, and probably dyed brown where necessary. He was a likeable bloke with a firm handshake. He wouldn't start until he had things just as he wanted them. Greg had assured him that he didn't mind what he asked him.

TRANSCRIPT

Carl *Greg Buckley, the distinguished Australian poet, has just returned to Melbourne after a year's teaching at a Chinese university in what we used to call Canton. I talked to him in his apartment high above the Yarra.Greg, this must have been a very interesting experience.*

Greg *Yes, it was. I can't say that I have really got to grips with it yet. I'm finishing a collection of translations from the Tang and Song dynasties with a couple of my postgrad students and maybe when that's done, I'll be clearer about this last year. Coming back to Melbourne is also proving to be an interesting experience.*

C *Can you expand on that?*

G *Yes, it's really good to be able to drink the tap water, you appreciate such things, and the place seems half-empty.*

C *It was a difficult time for you, was it? A harsh experience? Sleep in a dormitory? Mud floors?*

G *No, but I'm spoilt. We all are. We switch on the light and have no thought about the labour at the other end of it which turns night into day.*

C *Haven't I heard that before?*

G *I hope so. You can't hear it often enough.*

C *So you mean to say that you learned to appreciate the dignity of labour?*

G *Perhaps I did, yes. People work very hard. There are thirteen thousand million Chinese and they are not frightened of work. We have such a negative view of them, but they seemed to me charming, clever and happy people, in spite of their recent history, although I mustn't generalise too much on my minute experience of life there.*

C *Quite. Now you were a professor there?*

G *That's right. So is anyone appointed as a foreign expert to an academic post.*

C *I want to get to the effect China has had on your own work, if it has.*

G *I spent a good deal of time with Distinguished Professor Emeritus Yi, a marvellous man, hugely civilised and well-read in English, French and German, as well as Mandarin, Cantonese, and some other Chinese languages, whose respect for the Chinese classics was most impressive. I think that I learned a great deal from him by osmosis – his attitudes to life, sort of thing – and from the poets. They are always treated as if they were urbanites, sentimental about nature, but they were toughies, like my mate Paul, who wanted to cooperate with nature, not operate on it. There's a deep bond between ourselves and the seasons that…*

C *Ah, the mystic East!*

G *Look, they have a continuous culture six thousand and more years old in the same place. The world…the Western world, has left the Earth behind…*

C *Yes. You don't speak Mandarin?*

G *No.*

C *Your <u>New & Selected Love Poems</u>, published by Stellar books here in Melbourne, seem to be a great success. Do you anticipate the same for your translations? When will we see these translations. What are they called?*

G *I don't know yet. 'First catch your hare'.*

C *Well, on that amusing note we'll end. Thank you, Greg Buckley, I'm sure we all hope that you continue to enjoy the tap water.*

Craven gave him an old-fashioned look when they had finished; Stella, however, was delighted. They all had a gin and tonic together before they left, whilst she questioned Carl flatteringly about his daily round and difficulties. She had other poets' books upcoming.

*

The regimen was established that while Stella focused on her publishing in the morning, he took himself off to Clifton Hill about eight-thirty and returned after midday. His study in the apartment, which he used in the evenings, became something of a storeroom for the unsold books, which he did not mind, although he pulled a diplomatic face less it was too obvious. He refused to answer the phone in the mornings, explaining that he needed peace and quiet in order to work, and did not allow himself to get involved in book production other than in initial manuscript selection. He worked away happily and had the poems of Missing the Moon Ceremony done by late October, enjoying the rapid exchanges by e-mail with his ex-students.

Dawn, when she was not at work, would bring two mugs of coffee about ten-thirty. She liked to pat his arms as they talked, lean against him, and he developed the habit of sitting on the stairs to drink his coffee, inhibiting her in that and in taking up too much of his writing-time. She was a tonic, rueful about her relationship with Ruben and seeming to hear little from him, full of curiosity about what she supposed was his glossy, high-life and Stella's coterie.

*

At the end of the working day, they had a glass or two of gin together. He heard about her problems with bookshops, which did not want to stock poetry, or if they did, stuck it in on a low shelf in the least likely part of the shop. "Don't take it personally," he told her, "it's the market, you see. The market decides. We poets must propitiate the market by writing poems to its praise. You publishers must make sacrifices to it." They were in the kitchen.

"Oooh!" she groaned, "Greggy, you're a dag!" She rubbed her face, shook her hair, went on slicing carrots. He had the onions to weep over. "It's really tough going with those characters."

"No, just look at the really successful poets. Were they lefties? No." She didn't

reply, chopped, sniffed. “Banjo was the boy, bloody Sydney solicitor, ay? Went bush now and then for the
weekend and slept in feather beds. ‘Waltzing Matilda’ celebrates the power of the state over recalcitrant citizens, that’s why it ought to be our national anthem, rather than that boring as batshit bunch of spondees we have to listen to.”

“Yes, well ‘God Save the Queen’ doesn’t ring too many bells with us ethnics, I can tell you.”

When she had the veggies assembled they went into the sitting room. A bright yellow star winked. “Arcturus,” Stella said. When it rose in the morning in September, it was supposed to be the time of the vintage and for bringing the cattle down from the high pasture.”

“How d’you know that?” he asked.

“I don’t know…Maybe because they called me Stella.” She was nestled under his arm, ledged together on the back of a sofa, a second glass in hand, some pop station that played ‘golden oldies’ burbling, the city’s lights gaining strength below. “Y’know, darl, you don’t get enough exercise. You’ve put weight on since you came back from China. We ought to take a swim in the mornings. The pool’s heated.”

“I’m a bit shy of using it. I’m a rotten swimmer, as you may remember.”

“You were going to swim across the mouth of the Yarra!”

“Nah! I was going to commit suicide.”

“What a little bitch I was!”

“No, I was crazy.”

“I couldn’t believe you.”

He fetched the stuffed olives and sun dried tomatoes. “Look, it’s horrible to recall. Let’s not.” They went and sat down. “It’s this bloody awful nostalgic music, Stella. Let’s have some ice cold Satie or something.”

Her mobile buzzed like a hornet. “Hi!…Sure…Okay.”
She threw it on the cushion next to her. “That was Leticia Kitchener. Wants to change a word.”

“What’s on telly?”

“The usual. We ought to get some vids.”

“I’d rather read, to be honest.”

Satie tinkled in his mind like ice.

*

Greg sat at the head of the table in his black sweater. Leticia Hilditch was on his left, Morris on Stella’s right. The other two, Delilah and her current swain, made up the dinner table. He seemed shy and Greg was in his clam mode, so Stella was as bright as she was able. She wished Greg would smile at some of her quips as the others did.
He could be funny himself with his puns when he had swallowed a few drinks. He ate

and watched. Neville was relaxing:

"When they made the comic an honorary doctor of law I realised that the Enlightenment was done for," he blurted, apropos of nothing in particular. He was years younger than Delilah, a literary critic keen to impress. Conversation halted, then Greg laughed. Morris rode to the rescue:

"Yes, we live in a sad stretch of history."

"Post-democratic," Neville persevered. He had a shaven head, which shone in the candlelight and a gingerish Van Dyke beard. Stella felt maternal towards him, filled his glass. "Can there ever have been a time when public utterance was so distant from reality? It's Orwellian!"

"Psychopathic." Greg agreed, as if in apology for his schadenfreude. "Everything's collapsing, starting with commonsense. We can't think past what we are told."

They seemed to weigh his words in silence. His hair was looking unbrushed, his beard ruffled, but she had learned that he was a careful man, thickening into middle-aged moderation, and his reticence was not, she knew, the lofty pose some assumed. When he wasn't writing, he was thinking about it and passing the hours until he did so again. He had told her as much, had said his focus was on the end of his pen or on the screen where the words appeared from nowhere. She wished that he would look at her, she knew that she looked good. The other men did too, but he rarely looked at her.

She was relieved to knock her glass over.

*

My Dear Greg,

As the years roll by, leaving precious little behind one could hope to cling on to for a while in retrospect, it feels reassuring to find meaningful fragments of a wasted life pulsating in forceful poetry evocative not only of the incidents as such, but more congenially, of the wonderful afternoons on which these were imparted to a subtle bard of a friend. As it has invariably been the past to which I feel drawn, I should keep returning to this enthralling record of a friendship between two kindred souls that have by some unlooked-for chance drifted together.

Whenever I indulge in the pleasure of browsing through the pages of this collection, I cannot help being overwhelmed by the wit and ingenuity that have breathed life into even the most trivial recollections I related in the course of our weekly conversations. Had it not been for your enviable artistry, many of these scenes and episodes, encapsulated in your poetry, would have inevitably faded from memory.

So much for today.
Yours,
Paul.

Its polished brevity upset him. Was he merely one of a succession of 'foreign devils' with whom Paul had practised his English? He could imagine the reverse had he wished to practise Mandarin…but they had been good friends, hadn't they, and spoken candidly? Yes, the letter said so, but the hyperbole of the last paragraph perplexed him: was Paul having a lend of him? Maybe in China frankness in correspondence was feckless, or *de trop*? Marvin had said mail was routinely opened. He had left himself open to a snub, if that was what it was, but refused to be put down. He would say what he wanted to say. That was the Aussie way. There was no one else he might write to in such a manner. It had been like the confessions of passengers who would never meet again and went on their different ways unburdened.

Over the months as he had made the translations into a book, he began to wonder at Paul's refusal to put his name to their work. Was it Daoist indifference, decent modesty, or an unwillingness to be academically associated with another barbarian depredation? Greg decided that he would dedicate it to Paul, out of patience with such niceties.

*

Dawn had taken to sporting a diamond in the wing of her delicate nose and bringing him a chocolate biscuit to have with his coffee. She was full of bits of local 'goss' gleaned from washing lines and snatches of conversation in the shop. If he asked about Ruben, he got no real answer. She seemed indifferent about his activities or preferred to seem so... What they did discuss was the iniquities of the government, a taboo subject with Stella, who assumed everything that it did was common sense and anything else ideological and born of envy. Dawn stood and read the headlines and front pages with a down-to-earth cynicism, or despairing idealism, which made him laugh. He was doing so when Stella walked in. At the time he thought nothing of it. She was dressed like a fashion plate, on her way to an exhibition at Heidi where she was meeting some girl friends and wanted to remind him that he would have to get his own lunch. She postured, eyes shining, in front of them, twenty years younger than Dawn, who said nothing until she had gone, then expressed admiration. Outside the Ferrari boomed down the street.

"I bet she cossets you, doesn't she?"

"I don't want for much," he laughed, "except a bit of peace and quiet."

"Oh well, I can shove off if you like."

"No! Not you. You don't overstay your welcome."

"Don't get the bloody chance, do I mate?"

"I'm serious about what I do, Dawn. It's an obsession, ay? I mean, even poets who are Nobel Prize winners and collect a million and all the fame you could imagine, go on producing their stuff."

"She keeps an eye on you though, doesn't she? Gave me the bloody once-over."

"She wants to be loved by the literati, so we are entertaining and being entertained and I am reading at festivals and people are calling her and e-mailing and manuscripts come by the truck load – I just want…"

"Tell her."

"Ah no. She really gets off on it. They *do* love her! Not me. They say I'm an untalented lucky bastard."

"*I* didn't say that!"

No, not quite, but being a poet's a high-wire act. What keeps you up there is self-assurance. Maybe it's more like the Indian rope trick – an illusion…Or delusion. Look, I'm sick of thinking about it, talking about it. I just want to do it."

"Oooh!"

"Shut up, Dawn."

"Y'know, I love butterflies. All my life I have. When I was a kid I called them 'flutterbyes' and when I get really pissed off, I go up to the zoo and hang about in the butterfly house and let them land on me. I was there last week. They dance about, big beautiful things from the jungle. My first bloke caught local ones and pinned them on a cork mat and had them framed for me one Christmas. As soon as he went, it did... Well, go on then, get on with your poems." She had marched out as if suddenly embarrassed and he had climbed back upstairs.

A couple of weeks later the accountant Stella used came to dinner with his wife and a property developer connected with the De Bono family brought his. It made a change from the literati. Stella had got caterers in and so she sat in state and they were waited on by two sweet Asian girls, Thais he guessed. As usual with Stella's set, they talked business over dinner and over coffee turned to share and bond prices, stockbrokers and the property market. As usual he had nothing to say. He smiled when they laughed and stared out over Melbourne's twinkle. The table was candlelit so when the kitchen door was open he could see the reflection of the interior in the window and, to his astonishment, the tall slim figure of Ruben in a chef's hat busy directing the clearing up and packing of equipment. Their eyes seemed to meet, the door closed and the accountant was talking to him, genial and red-faced with wine.

"Stella tells me that you've got a house to sell in Clifton Hill. I tell you what, values there are going up and up. You should hang on it."

"Oh what are you telling him?" Stella called. "It's taken me this long to get him even to consider selling it." Everyone laughed. Greg couldn't recall any conversation with her about the house. He excused himself and went out.

Ruben had gone. The girls confirmed it. He started at the Casino in half-an-hour, they had told him, all smiles and charming head movements, but Greg felt sure he had shot through again.

Later, sitting alone, she had said, "Greggy, I hope that you didn't mind me talking about your business without your permission." He had said:

"Yes, I did, as a matter of fact," although he hadn't and his abrupt departure had been to find Ruben. "I am going to sell up and with the money from my parent's

place, I am going to buy a weekender down the coast. I need to have a place of my own. Some people treat me like your toy-boy and I can't hack it." She had blushed and didn't say anything. He was surprised to hear his plans too. He hadn't made them consciously.

It took until early summer before he had the translations for Missing The Moon Ceremony finished. He handed it over to Stella and put his house on the market.

Dawn had been dejected at this, hugged him wordlessly. He had not told her that Ruben had chosen to avoid him and she never mentioned it. Afterwards he wasn't aware of saying goodbye to Dawn, though he must have. (He later thought of her among her 'flutterbyes' up at the zoo.) At that time he was involved in a tussle with Rod, the book designer, who thought that he had invented the bamboo cliché cover. He proved a stubborn opponent, but Greg found a calligraphic print of the title poem in the National Library and insisted that was used. Stella said nothing.

They were becoming experts at that.

The house fetched more than he expected at auction just before Christmas and three times what he had paid for it. He moved his stuff into store with what his parents had left him. The book was published in time for Christmas and sold two hundred in a month, which was success in terms of what had happened to their other titles. He sent one to Paul and waited for his response to the dedication, which thanked him for his 'crucial advice', and included the reviews, the best of which was from The Times Literary Supplement. He sent them to Paul.

*

My Dear Greg,

Hearty congratulations on the glowing eulogies showered upon the deserving poet! All this critical acclaim your poetic licence has earned you is, I am inclined to believe, but a modest overture to the panegyrics and encomia in the offing. Beware, however, of being carried away by the recognition you now command, seeing that the tide may turn and the weather break – denigration often follows on the heels of praise.

Rest assured, nonetheless, that your long-awaited success is now beyond a shadow of a doubt established. No vilification on the part of self-proclaimed chauvinistic and hair-splitting critics will stand any chance of detracting from the esthetic merit of your own ingenious approach (whose superior result speaks eloquently for itself), namely the unique style of a singularly endowed, sensitive and committed poet attuned to the heart-beat of like-minded poets whose songs he seeks to transcribe into a tonality that would more readily set the heartstrings of his readers resonating in unison. (I was about to seize on the analogy between the pentatonic and the tonic scales, with Claude Debussy's exoticism in mind – a similarity which, in the present context, would be quite out of place.)

In sum, as long as the song is delivered in tune, the message truly conveyed, and the beauty of the original rendered unimpaired, the translated version cannot fall short of being consummate art. So far as the spirit and soul of the original is kept vibrant, the vessel bearing it to foreign lands can hardly be off course. Those who relish fault-finding and are given to hair-splitting, are fortunately, and justly so, denied access to higher spheres. He who is not a bard from birth should have the decency to keep from meddling in the concerns of the Muses, which reminds me of the way retired eunuchs, with their impotence exacerbated by age, were in former times held up to merciless ridicule for keeping concubines despite their woeful deficiency resulting from the veterinary surgeon's knife. 'Crush the abomination!' (runs Voltaire's cry to battle: 'Ecrasez l'infame!') In profound humility, to you I raise my hat!

Fond regards,
Ever yours,
Paul

*

He replied, but it was as if he was writing to a stranger:

Dear Paul,

The morning sun, which before today has been a problem, has backed off a few degrees towards Guangzhou, and the Tropic of Cancer, from where it came to make our summer. For the thousands who now labour at computer monitors, Autumn becomes apparent. The heat remains, days of thirty or more and too little rain, so the reservoirs stay under fifty percent of their capacity, but soon the Great Southern Ocean will assert itself with cold winds, and Northerly Busters from the deserts will be a memory. (It's a good climate – so long as the rains come.) The air arrives previously unbreathed from Cape Horn via the Cape of Good Hope and, being a small and isolated coastal community, we don't get the colds and influenza, which lurk in city smogs around the world. It's a good place, except that research has recently found that our beach was a massacre site. There is one road and the tribe was herded down so they couldn't escape, then shot. A few stragglers turned up later and were given damper with arsenic, it is said. A lot of people tell you that they don't feel comfortable in this country (Someone may come and do the same to us!) but there's nowhere else for us to go and no way to escape these ghosts without some honest acknowledgment that our lives now rest on their bones. The government will do nothing but continue to pretend that nothing needs to be done, and the suburban population in their cities are fed junk food by the press barons and distracted by one sporting circus after the next. I should leave if I had somewhere to go.

I am sorry that it has taken me so long to write in reply to your graceful remarks. I was embarrassed by your over-estimation of the book and my talents. If what you say ever was true, I'm afraid that it is so no longer. I do write poems, but they tend to be repetitive in theme and self-parodying. I wonder if, as we say, I have done my dash.

I often think of those last days at the university: the rich student waiting in the trees for Marvin by the gate of the F.E.B.; the happy undergraduates in hired gowns being

photographed by their parents and friends and nobody able to tell me why China has aped Western academic dress when their own scholarly tradition is thousands of years older; and finally, at the farewell banquet, after the Chairman Cheng had declared closure and sat down next to me again and I said "You're a good man, Charles," he gripped my forearm and said "So are you," and left. I was near tears.

At the airport Li helped me with my bags and, in a very un-Chinese way, hugged me and slapped my back after we had shaken hands, then he was off on the return journey in the unrelenting rain. I, meantime, was paying five hundred dollars excess rather than entrust my books to the airport baggage system, then sitting for hours in the steamy departure lounge during an unexplained flight delay, watching the electric storm crackling and sparking over the hills. To be honest, I wasn't sad, I was glad to be disconnecting, retiring again like Wang Wei.

Now I study the ocean and feed my doves and parrots.

I wonder about the inmates of the FEB. Brother Terrence, is he still distributing the opium of the mass? I remembered his horror of sitting with the other decrepit priests and brothers in their Irish retirement home, waiting to hear the rattle of the drinks cupboard keys at lunch and dinner time. When I left he gave me a curious gift of a little silver bell on which stood a small and naked boy, knees bent in urination, one hand grasping his minute penis. It seemed curiously naïve for that worldly institution he belonged to. Such an agreeable lunatic. And Doctor Gargantua, who broke her lavatory seat and was hit by a plastic bottle thrown by someone in the market…And the ineffable Infanta? And Ted, kneeling on his prie-dieu while dodging swipes through the barred window of his cell from a polar bear up on the tundra.

What disparate and desperate lives!

Like my own.

I have bought a beach house down the Peninsula below Melbourne. I added a deck high above the sea from which to consider the huge view of where the sun and moon rise and huge tankers anchor, although rather fewer nowadays as our resources run out. I tried to make an effort to be what Stella wanted, but I wasn't comfortable in the sort of clothes she thought appropriate for the role she had made for me, and I saw how her cheerful friends' faces fell when I appeared. Her ambition was to be loved by the literati and this was too easily accomplished. She agreed to publish too many poets, who are as flattering as they are unprofitable, even with Australia Council subsidies. At first I tried to intervene but gradually my weekends down here got longer. I thought of Tao Yuanming, Wang Wei and yourself in your seclusion, and hoped you would understand.

She had her office in her apartment where a book-designer and a girl worked, and she hustled about the literary circuit, speaking on panels at festivals and launching books and throwing parties, getting on radio or TV if she could. She was very good at that sort of thing, having a sharp mind and handsome presence, but increasingly she made an operatic production of everything, and involved me in 'crucial' searches for lost manuscripts and attempts to extend missed dead lines and placate or influence editors. Stella had always been able to afford to be casual and it was a matter of style, I thought, not incompetence. Whilst we were still in a loving relationship, it became accepted that I stayed here and she came down for the weekend, often bringing supplies of food and wine and 'interesting' people for me to meet…I longed for Sunday afternoon when they would all go away. I am a solitary beast.

*

Ruben had telephoned him: “G’day, look, your old lady’s screwing that smart-arse in the office. I went round with a menu and found them at it, ay.”

“Jesus! Are you having a lend of me?”

“Nah. I just wanted the pleasure of telling you, you bastard.”

Greg had sat very still. The collared doves on his roof offered their condolences. He had expected it, somehow encouraged it. A motor mower coughed to life. Suspected it. He would say nothing.

He walked out on the deck above the autumn sea. It was a still, blue day. The shore below was empty and nothing moved on the bay. A flight to Tasmania stitched small cumulus clouds together. He held the rail and stared at Phillip Island where roofs shone. It felt in his bones that it had all been inevitable.

Delilah had a place somewhere on Main Ridge, which she had inherited and she had taken to calling now and then. She seemed to him, with her Cleopatra hairstyle and horn-rimmed glasses, a perpetual schoolgirl who did her homework conscientiously and hardly concealed her cheerful prurience. She made him feel old -fashioned, which he didn’t enjoy, but he supposed that she intended to develop familiarity. He couldn’t say when Delilah said something to make his antennae twitch, but there were plenty to tell Stella that she was wasting herself on him. It seemed disloyal to discuss Stella with her, but he listened as she said that Stella’s hope was to be loved by the literary world, but this had been soured because of her vacillation and dislike of saying, ‘No’, loudly when it was necessary. His part as the ‘court favourite’ was viewed with cynicism and black laughter: he was aware of that. It was really no more than an expensive hobby over which she exhausted herself and ended up on Rod Critchlow’s shoulder, so his designs began to extend beyond books. His wife made a great fuss, possibly because Stella was more than ten years older and she felt unbearably slighted. She telephoned and yelled. Critchlow gave his notice in, and Stella attempted suicide.

He had been to hear Mahler’s Fifth and the second movement, as ever, broke his heart as it brought back to him the feelings he had when he fell in love with Stella, the most beautiful girl that he had ever seen. It seemed to him that he had been dreaming all his life before he found her in a bath of bloody water, snoring and spluttering. It was that noise in the dark and silent apartment, which caught his attention as he took off his coat. He barged the bathroom door in, took a look, and dialled emergency, then used his belt to tie her wrist as the water drained and she coughed and groaned. Poor woman, her body so soft and weak and her mouth gaping, helpless as a fledgling. He squatted, talking and stroking her wet hair until he heard the siren and ran to open the door, holding up his trousers, led the way.

The ambulance men shoved him firmly out and flipped her slippery flesh onto the floor with a bang, getting water from her lungs, tourniquet on her wrist, oxygen in her. They rolled her on her side, back on the stretcher, covered her nakedness and had her wheeled out and gone before he knew it and the police were questioning him, young men with fresh complexions and of heavy build, getting the facts down, heads all bristle with their hats off. Soon they were leaving and he had to call after them. Where had they taken her?

Casualty at The Alfred hospital was all pink curtained cubicles, inside which humanity groaned, swore, wailed, wept, retched, or quietly died. The doctor in charge, an Arab or Indian, walked from one patient to another, hands in the pockets of his white overall, calm as an admiral on his bridge as he instructed and advised. When someone died, he turned to another who lived, and all the time more casualties arrived. Greg watched all this through a gap in the curtains as he stood by Stella's bed, her face white as the pillow, a tube taped in her good arm, her bandaged wrist on the bedspread. He thought her nostrils dilated and relaxed, but it was a faint movement and her face seemed lifeless as marble. A series of leads led to a screen above the bed where her vital signs were graphed mesmerising him.

The curtains swished. The doctor said: "You did very well, Mr Buckley. If you had not acted, she would be dead by now." He turned, attracted by a yell of drunken fear and some kind of ruckus in the entrance. A calm voice announced an alert, heavy feet came running. Anger at the buffoonery and yelling in such a place made him grip the end of her bed in fury at the way of the world, then he wept for what he had done. "Like a cuppa, darl?" A nurse, blonde and busy smiled. In no time she touched his shoulder, "Here we are. She'll be all right now, I think."

"Please," I said, "don't bother about me. Help these poor people."

"It's okay, it's after midnight and things are slowing down. It's always a rush, Friday night." She pulled the curtain closed behind her. I drank the weak and sugary tea which reminded me of childhood, and stared at Stella, who had not moved and still scarcely seemed to breathe. What had we come to?

"You best go now, Greg." The nurse took the cup and saucer. She slipped a thermometer in Stella's ear, put a plastic thumb-stall on her right hand and read off statistics and wrote them up. "She seems stable and we will be moving her somewhere quieter in a while after a few more tests." She patted my shoulder. "I think she will probably be all right. You telephone in the morning." Then, shyly, "This is Stella to whom your poems were dedicated, isn't it? My husband bought them for me for my birthday. They are lovely." He cried, kissed Stella's brow as if she had died, and fled.

Outside the main door of the Alfred smokers huddled in the blustery night, their faces orange with their inhalations. Some were in wheelchairs, others in pyjamas – poor coughing specimens. He palmed the cold tears from his face. The trees in the park made a noise like the sea as the helicopter screamed in with another casualty, its lights flashing on the landing pad which bridged the road, and he walked away and found himself yelling some Dylan Thomas in the racket:

‘Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms,
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art’.

It was a strange performance of false pride in the face of calamity, but he had no band-aid clichés to hand for their calamity, his feelings of dire culpability, the way he had repaid her generosity.

Had there been a taxi, he had not enough money for it, no coat, so he walked briskly up St. Kilda Road, where trees tossed in the yellow light. He saw no one until he reached the art gallery and bridge, then all manner of people in all kinds of conditions seemed to be gathered on Flinders Street station steps and amongst them he did not seem to be unusual.

He had left the apartment door open. The bathroom floor was still drenched. He looked about but found nothing, no letter, as the police had expected, no clue as to feelings. He was exhausted, climbed into their cold and empty bed.

When the telephone rang and woke him, it was the hospital. Stella was resting peacefully in a ward and they had no anxieties for her at present. She had requested that he did not visit her. It was a sinful relief not to have to meet her lovely eyes.

It was not long after that the first telephone calls began: her friend, Delilah, at first distraught, then aggressive. Then a journalist, the first of several before he left the telephone off the hook. One said she had been his student, but he had no recollection. He explained that he had come up to hear Mahler with Stella, but she had not felt well, so he had gone on his own and found her when he got back. He refused to say more. In between calls he was dunking the mat, which smelled foully of the sleeping pills she had vomited and cleaning the bath at the same time. The sound of her bones knocking against porcelain, banging the floor, still echoing in his mind. In the end he left, and not a moment too soon, it seemed from what he read by reporters who had got no reply and so started by describing that as significant.

He had a silent number down on the coast, but Delilah knew it. She told him to clear off. He called The Alfred. They said Stella could not speak to me but was making satisfactory progress. He left, driving along empty Sunday roads. It was raining hard and he soon lost ambition and found a motel on Phillip Island. It wasn’t till then, when he sat in the damp box of a room, listening to the rain drumming, that he accepted the implications of what had happened and his new reality clenched like a fist in his mind. He stared out at the rain and the sea beyond twisted conifers or at the tomfoolery TV.

Next morning he realised Stella had made him famous at last. She had

talked to Delilah and Delilah had made her Beatrice to his Dante. Such nonsense caught on. Certainly the picture she printed, taken when Stella was a student and his beard was black, was ‘a blessing in disguise’. Delilah’s romantic version of them, being better sourced, was the one that prevailed in a boring stretch of what is called ‘news’. A paragraph next day revealed that he had disappeared, that there was some concern for his safety, and that Stellar Books was reprinting his love poems to her. It amazed him. Who was making such decisions, if the report was true?

When he telephoned the hospital in the evening, she had left. There was no reply from the apartment. By Tuesday they were replaced by the problems of airlines, which were competing, which is a very good thing; but at the expense of safety, which is not.
He walked up the main street with its shop windows of kitsch trinkets and souvenirs, each bellowing rock, and found a café where he ate soup and rolls for lunch, then he drove back.

He half-expected that there would be a letter from Stella setting out the terms and conditions of reconciliation, but there was nothing. He sat and watched the rain bouncing in the puddles of the deck. It didn’t stop. The sea seemed as oppressed as he was, grey and troubled, the islands invisible. It was a bleak time, the rain did not let up for long before it began again, and he was running out of food but unwilling to go up to the store. He felt notorious and ashamed, kept out of sight like a sick cat.

Eventually he called Delilah and asked her to buy some provisions. That was the following Saturday. Delilah put her feet up by the stove when they had eaten, obviously ready for some heavy counselling, but what he wanted was news of Stella. There wasn’t any. After hospital she had spent until Thursday in a hotel not far from the hospital, then left. The Hilditchs had said that she was recovering amazingly and had a new lease on life, was very positive about what she was going to do, but did not know what it was. He heard nothing. Her recovery was such a relief that he was happy to do as she wished and keep away. He had done enough damage, and supposed she would get in touch when she felt right. It was the cheerful accountant winding up Stellar Books who told him that she was in America and had flown away the weekend after she left the hospital.

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Listening to Handel from Hong Kong, the poems he had written about China, sold quite well at the launch in Collected Works Bookshop. A small press had taken it up on the back of his notoriety. Stan Skuta had stood at the back as he read but was gone when he had finished. He signed quite a few books and heard that Stella seemed to have made a new career in radio, presenting an arts programme. Someone told him that Delilah was planning to write his biography, so he brooded upon his life,

writing about the last years and wondering how Stella and himself came to project such hopeless romantic desires upon each other. He thought that what they had together would fade in duplicitous memory.

*

Coronary Ward

The moon on her rounds bends over my bed
Asks after my heart in her old way
But I long for nothing am content

Above my head the screen chases my pulse
My breath and blood as the dying moon
Sinks down over the sleeping town