

FOUR TRANSLATIONS FROM THE CHINESE
By GRAEME WILSON

A Night With Friends

That we may purge
 the world's unending sadness
 Let's linger here
 and drink ten barrels dry.
 This night's sheer sheen
 invites long conversations,
 The moon's too bright
 for sleep to ease one's eye
 But, safely drunk,
 let's bed on this bare mountain,
 Our pillow earth,
 our coverlet the sky.

Li Po (699 - 762)

City

So thick the old tombs cluster
 That not a grass-blade grows:
 Onto the very highway
 The new tombs spread their sprawl.
 Beyond the city's limit
 No inch of open shows,
 And nobody grows younger
 Within the city-wall.

Tzu Lan (late 9th century)

Two Pearls

You know, of course, that I'm married: yet you sent
Two luminous pearls. Touched by the kindliness
Their warmth reveals, I wore them in my bosom
Stitched to the inner side of my red silk dress.

My family's known for holding its honour dear,
And my husband's spear shines by the very Throne.

I know that your gift came clean as a ray from heaven
But I've given my word, till death, for the length of life.
I return your pearls. Two tears, their like, go with them.
Why did we never meet when I was no-one's wife?

Chang Chieh (?765 - 830)

Dawn Crossing

The mist's so thick that neither
Mountains nor rivers show.

I find my way to the village
By the sound of dogs and ducks.

On the deck of the waiting ferry
The hoar-frost shines like snow:

Its prickly whiteness patterned
With the imprint of my clogs.

Yang Wan-li (1127 - 1206)

Disturbances

stumbling on to old photographs
I find her waiting there
smiling through a decade
as she did across the pillows
and I imagine her copy
hibernating in some dusty box
rudely awakened one day
as she rummages for yearbooks
to amuse her latest lover
who'll wonder
as mine will
at the empty-handed silences
we carry back

Greg Simison

Cease-fire Line

they send letters crawling out
like reconnaissance parties
timidly testing the strength
of each other's defences
noting vulnerable lines
for quick retaliation
should negotiations fail
neither prepared to withdraw
regardless of their losses
through future escalation

Greg Simison

Return

for Ben Williams

Between the boxed paths
the clipped greenery of an English park
we walk
raking the tangle of those sixteen years
since we met.

A gardener crops a few blades of grass
straying from the precise lawn's edge.
He has brushed the snapped twigs
in his barrow a brittle wrinkled load.
Our feet stir dust and small pebbles
press into the soles of our shoes:
this one married, that couple split,
no trace of one girl, another in Australia,
and he followed, she lives in luxury,
met and married a rich man, he's dead —
the roll call comes to an end after the quick
beginning — *whatever happened to . . .?* the longer
pauses between — *do you still see . . .?* names
the last — *what on earth was her . . .?* dropping into
silence.

The path turns and we stop.
The park's trim grass, shaped bushes
straggle down to meadow grass
flattened now by grey-brown silt
from spring floods a marsh of dead mud
until the ground rises to the riverbank.

We cannot see the river,
turbid, slow moving.

Peter Stevens

The Skiers

Poised on another element
they wait, supreme, foretasting
the moment of release
where, sheathed in motion, close to flight, they are
paid back for their laborious ascent.
Determined, crouching figures,
reined in like kites, they whittle
the solid air to carve, delirious,
circuits of flying snow, a whiplash
down to the clement valleys.

But it is summer now and on the slopes
by the motionless ski-lift cicada, dragonfly
among dust-hazed, tufted grasses where we lie
oblivious, seem conspiring to create
glistening movement in a dream of ease.

Scrapbooks superimpose
illusions of depth.
The scenes' clash, perspectives.
Three-dimensional, the mastery
of space, another winter:
nuance and detail cancelled with snow evolve
to new distinctions — colour stands out firm
in the keen air.

All we had not foreseen
that since has come about —
a fourth dimension, landscapes
juxtaposed, not reconciled:
each season cherishes impermanence.

Christopher Levenson

The Gradgrind Girl

moira has a small mouth's
small lips
& when she talks talks half to herself
in hoarse low syllables
saying
her dreams are dull dull dreams
her thoughts are spoons
bulging silver bellies & hollows
hanging in an empty tree
in a winter tree turning &
spooning
in a cold wind spoon gymnastics
when moira was a child spoons
were larger
& she must have liked the silver taste
cupped on her tongue
because when she speaks her eyes
touch you lightly
like the cool curved bottom of a spoon's bottom

shawn thompson

Hill-Road

On that hill road the twisted
 iron gate guarded the path
 cool as an avenue. Had
 to balance on the planks, or
 the straight nails tore your hands. Inside,
 the abandoned farmer's kitchen,
 the ancient feather mattress full of dust
 memory the pores of the skin

there we lay cool as dolphins
 in the one wave hearing

the cowman's distant voice a chain
 unwinding, coming loose

hearing the possums
 spatter and clutch like tree-strokes

on the iron roof. And at last, at evening,
 the sun in the green tree-level
 flashed its wheel,
 flashed, burning, going,
 my hands under your shoulders

And years later the evening's closed system
 brings in the clear strained air
 thunder rains, seeping
 saffron through the grass paddocks

The air has no shadows
 and the singing starts. Froglight.
 The evening opens in thunder

that pulls the sky down flash on flash
gossiping and narrowing lightning runs
around the house, downbeat at every window,
bringing through the copper wire
swathes of cool green, the animal
smell of dock, and straggling wet fern.

Vincent Buckley

Know Me

For you
I was a glass of wine.
Maybe
The bouquet lingers,
But the glass
Broke long ago.

Look,
I am water really,
Know me
As you wash your hands.

Lotte Kramer