Transnational Literature
Volume 6, no. 2
May 2014

Complete Poetry
(in one file for download/print)

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The more obscure and undecidable
the more palatable. Anneh’s scowl

still bothers me and she’s been dead
for at least a decade. Her husband

comically diffident, downtrodden man
once a Communist?! How much

more fascinating, radical with my
grandparents as émigrés escaping Stalin,

coming to Iran to found a Trotskyite cell,
instead of banal matriarch and dull

ex-patriarch immersed in gossip
and religion. As a child I hated

only a few things more than being
left alone with them. He once believed

in the Dictatorship of the Proletariat? When
he died, I couldn’t summon a single tear

for my Aababa. Had he been so simple
and meaningless? As for Anneh

perhaps not really possible
that she migrated as a teenage girl

from Baku to Iran for a more exceptional
reason than giving birth to a son who’d meet

a woman who’d then give birth to me. Genes
are a poor substitute for fantasy

of a revolutionary saga, a universal family.

Ali Alizadeh
Dear Gabe,

After your phone call last night
I was able to picture you
on the train, a little past rush hour.
The train had sounded empty,
& you were able to talk freely,
so I pictured ‘no-one-about’. We heard
the regular chime—
& the automated voice declare
‘Southern Line’.

Because we know a summery London
I saw light, & pale sun,
on empty, clean, railway stations,
shrubs, an easy air—
 tho I realised later, if it wasn’t
snowing exactly, it was at least cold
& liable to rain. Our most recent
pictures of you—of you & Stace—show you two
on a pleasant day, at an
outdoor table with Greg & Jen. You
both look relaxed & self-possessed,
amusing & amused. Stace is mugging
(a term from mid-century—or earlier—
the comedian’s equivalent of vamping, of
pulling old tricks shamelessly like a musician

Ken Bolton, ‘(Write To You) Another Letter’,
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014,
finding conventional patterns
to make up an accompaniment,
impromptu,
sufficient to the moment
he has been thrown into).
(Why use this term?)
(Ken—revise!)
Stacey—beautiful, lovely—is smiling, bats
her eyes for the camera, & defers to you
who amusedly acknowledge
that same camera—or
the situation—tho resisting
the imperative brought with it—
to smile, to pose. It makes
you both seem cool & sophisticated.
The best ways to seem, surely.

#

Greg & Jen’s kids
think you are both those things,
to the nth degree, & you won’t
have let them down, which is important.
Anyway, I love the photos—there are two—& another pair
showing you with the boys, & Greg & Jen,
all crossing the novel bridge across the Thames—
what is it called, ‘the walkway,’ the ‘moveable bridge’?
So maybe you were at Tate Modern, or one of the
pubs or coffee shops further along. That we ourselves
have been to, so I can imagine them,
 tho maybe you were elsewhere.
I guess you had us pegged—
Cath had one receiver & I the other, to take the call: we were
at home
(& it is the house you grew up in). It
changes regularly but you’ve seen it in its
current conformation, even the latest painting,
Kurt’s ‘Eurydice in the Underworld—or Debbie’
—some beautiful powdery pale blues, &
hilarious, cartoon, thirties cubism, of
the Return to Order period. It sings away,
trills almost—against the blotchy
muted salmon pink of that wall, the wall you know.

Not that you’d have pictured us under it

or near it, even, probably. The lounge room. Funny
what one does picture—or think—
during phone calls—but one does it more,
that I am certain of, for overseas calls—
because they mean more.

So I saw you in the train.

It would be good to have you back home—
or to be over there with you is the
alternative. That would be good too.
Did you like my poem about the San Calisto?
Maybe we could have a drink there, a
drink & a natter. A few weeks in Rome,
with you—& Stacey there, too—would be good.
Not necessarily at the San Calisto. Tho it
is easy to find. I see us at a San Calisto table. (You look
very much as you do in this photo—surprise,
surprise—as does Stacey, & as I see it from my point of view I do not see myself.

*Two Weeks In Another Town* was a not very good novel & a bad & unintentionally funny film: an American in Europe, up against all its shocking amorality, venality & corruption:

Kirk Douglas playing a guy brought in to save a failing director, get the movie back in production, on budget, & quickly in the can. Italy. You can imagine. Well, you can’t. I can. The world is spared, today, much exposure to Kirk at full throttle. It was possibly an attempt to make something like *La Dolce Vita*, but understandable-for-Americans, & with a ‘clear moral point of view’—as they used to say, the duller critics. America has slipped a bit in the innocence ratings. But Italy… Berlusconi might have stepped right out of Kirk Douglas’s nightmare.

That said, Shall we go?

It may be that we won’t. The duller critics are back! One of the dullest now runs things in the Australia Council—so, *no money for me* in the foreseeable future. No travel. No Italy.

There is no news. I mean, you’re up-to-date—nothing to tell of news from here. It seems so ridiculous to be my age that, tho I feel okay, one can’t help thinking about it. I would certainly like
to see you more,
partly to draw light
from your energy & attitudes,
or to feel more myself, as I do
when there is someone like you around—
to explain myself to.
Tho did I, do I, ever do that? No,
fun is all I want. Old movies, too. Notionally.
(Would I watch them?)

What I am doing now, is sitting up late,
with an old tape, of older jazz—Coltrane, Miles,
Dolphy, Jimmy Forrest’s ‘Night Train’ etcetera—
while I write.

I picture the room
in its many guises, over the 20 or more years
I’ve sat here fooling round—time running out,
but slowed by the process, checked, slowed
right down—me & the room, the house adjusting
as the night cools—an insect butts
the window occasionally. I decide to turn the tape over again,
or don’t decide but listen & write, alone, close, in a way,
to you in London, SE14—5NW, UK
as the first buses of the morning
probably, roll past your house, at about this time.
And school kids soon will start walking up Jerningham Street
& young mums will appear & you will play guitar a bit,
& then get to work

Ken Bolton

Ken Bolton, ‘(Write To You) Another Letter’,
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014,
The Japanese Conference

night flight to Japan
one child’s tears for seven hours—
all of us sleepless

crossing the harbour
we watch our ferry’s TV
where ships are sinking

he spoke no English
and I spoke no Japanese—
look at my haircut!

how worldly I am
oh, great global traveller
with just one language

building a haiku
syllable by syllable
no, this will not do

now I’m watching it
the spider on the ceiling
comes down to watch me

my stomach still growls—
‘no cake, no life’ says the sign
but our bus won’t stop

she describes their trip
tracing the route on his back—
her husband her map

in the Kobe street
he perfects his golf club stroke
swinging empty hands

the museum guard
next to the No Photo sign
poses for my shot
three old ladies talk
blocking the entire footpath—
a wall of wisdom

pretty little thing
just one cake left on the tray—
why aren’t you eaten?

after the tea break
three hundred conference bags—
but which one is mine?

there is but one truth
wearing many odd costumes—
why bother to choose?

in the plenary
the sound of a cicada—
a mobile’s ring tone

does she still love me?
wedding anniversary
at a conference

*Steve Evans*
Boundary Rider

he knows this carries on beyond the boundary: there’s so much distance it spills over the skyline; sometimes it’s beautiful the way it trembles in forgotten corners of his eyes until he becomes separate from nothing/no-one

here he’s not lonely there are roos, emus, crows more family than he’s ever known sometimes there are dingoes growling from the other side of the fence he checks the fence over and over; he makes sure there are no holes

once there was a boy/ whose parents kept him alone/ in/ a room/ for thirty six days/ they pushed bits of food/ under/ the door/ whatever would fit/ in/ an envelope/ a slice of bread/ a Jacobs cracker/ the police came/ about a different matter/ and wanted to know/ what was/ on/ the other side/ of the locked door/ they could smell/ something bad/ they didn’t expect/ such bitter shreds/ of humanity/ the level of excrement/ the staring emaciated child/ some of them/ were frightened by it/ the child/ had forgotten/ fear/ and much else

now he has forgotten the orphanage all he remembers is coming to this country by boat: the endless water and then the endless dust here everything is buried in dust here he belongs to nothing/ no-one

he is only one of many stories his horse’s hooves make small shapes of sound as they travel the packed earth the skin and bones of animals/ humans the delicate skeletons of plants shift slightly under their weight

once there was a girl who lived with her mob/ in/ the desert/ there were many children/ they played together/ amongst/ the distance/ all the noises they heard/ were little until/ some people came and took/ the girl away/ they put her/ in/ a house/ with/ some strangers/ she didn’t like the inside/ it made her breathing hard/ she ran/ she tried/ to get home/ but she didn’t make it all the way/ through/ the desert/ her body disappeared/ into/ the dingoes and crows/ her bones settled/ in/ the dust
sometimes the wind spins the dust
into devils it sticks
to him he breathes
it in he knows this
is all he is there is

everything is only temporarily contained
the air in his lungs the earth in its orbit
he in his skin his blood is red
when it comes out but in his dark
interior he hears how black it is

once there were some humpies/ that settled/ in/ the desert/ the long bent
branches/ the gunya bark/ sunshine dinged/ against/ the hanging silver
pans/ the men sang/ around/ the fires outside/ the skin of their palms
was/ rough and hard but gold dust glittered/ in/ the dirt/ under/ their
nails/ when the men left/ the air/ inside/ the huts was no longer formed/
into/ words/ the roofs tumbled/ into/ the dust/ the skeletal branches/ the
crumbling bark/ until there were only small squares of debris/ circles
of stone/ the sparse maps/ of long-ago lives

sometimes the sun
comes over to his side
it leaps up from the horizon
and changes the world
it makes his insides shine

on the other side of the planet
it is dark now but people are still
shifting slightly in their sleep
they scratch their skin they grind their teeth
his horses hooves travel the packed earth


Alison Flett
Marsh warbler,
you are so full with babble, with rambler’s rove.
Reciter of cloud note, utterer of melodies—
each country carries your suitcase of songs.

I want to hear that stretch of Algeria
where you sing a high note loud and long.
Sweet ball of feathers, you are argot in mid-flight.

Libby Hart

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* Mantiq a tayr: the language of the birds (Arabic). ‘The marsh warbler imitates fragments of songs of the other birds it hears as it flies across Europe and Africa. It is, in the words of David Rothenberg, “the one bird in the world who can recount its migratory path as a kind of songline where the journey is mapped into the music itself”.’—Jay Griffiths (Wild: An Elemental Journey, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2007)
Connemara Dreaming

Small bogs pockmark a shiver of green fields.
It’s cold, and I’m perched on a rocky mound
Just where the mist begins to thin.

Where the slope ends, old sheep bones
Jut out; a tiny feather or two, caught on a ribcage,
Tremble with the wind.

I lean forward into the day.
Somewhere, further into the mist,
Is the coast.

I strain to hear any of its language,
That deep ocean swell coiling
Into small inlets, tide at first
Seeping in, almost silent, then thickening

The raucous, insistent cries
Of gulls; drone of a motor
Boat, engine suddenly revving. A ferry
Further out to sea, returning from one of the islands,

Its wake trailing memories. But here,
A different tide, black-faced sheep,
Quiet on the soft, moist turf, nibble at the grass.

I want to stay, drink in the green,
Dissolve into the mist, to run with the clouds
On tops of mountains, to rest my body,
dwell awhile, soothe a deep ineffable divide within me, an exile.

There’s grief in that, here too,
Stone cottages, collapsed
and dishevelled, windows
Gaping, sheep dung on earthen floors.

Chimneys blackened, rimmed with moss,
The hollowed remains of hope.
Yet an aliveness too,
In the bones beyond reach

Thrust into the air like ogham sticks
The pools that hold the light even on the

Keith Mac Nider. ‘Connemara Dreaming’.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.
darkest day. A standing stone
And another, aligned

With stories deeper than sight,
Something far older, ancient beginners’
Feet, tracks below the surface that hum through
The earth, stories that call us back,

Nudge us forward,
A tidal sway, reminds us, like the slow,
soft drip of Irish rain,
That the quiet dreaming of a Connemara

Morning, breathes within us too.

_Keith Mac Nider_
Present in Makarora Valley, New Zealand

Plaintive a roadside lamb
   bleats pointier than this here local razor

wire strung to keep it stock not dinner. And traffic. Fabric-
   -winged, a crop-duster

zips four-hundred fanfare bucks and their interlocutors
   off a goat-mowed grassy runway

a red windsock dangles expectantly near. Sifting wind
   kicked up in Texas. A cattle-dog’s exhaust(ed), tongue

co-piloting further search for drink
   Teen hoons careen in mums’ sedans, smashed on claustrophobia

dreaming big for Invercargill. Pickled exhales depress
   a clutch for gear, a stone’s toss to all neighbours’

place. And into song. Red deer clop on damp top pasture,
   character development – fauna onto menu venison

poise well-composed behind strategic pines. And then ... and then!
   steeling in from a vanishing point, a lone

Thai man comes a country highway stoat
   slaloms the dotted centre highway line – Shaun Tan’s early draft Arrival – and
inside a claim bedecked itself in cycling Lycra
    how he’s pedalled go-go vast calligraphy of watershed

up Dunedin on a ten-speed. He motions us to photograph him. Twice. 10pm
    an atoll, re-gifts its daytime proof of alchemy. Into now’s valley

we excommunicate to reach its trumpet belts of twilight
    ricocheting huge above St Francis ungulate

that graze their end
    here brassy a Christmas night. Or lazy bargain

washing machine of Turkish fabrication sweats out its ferrous rot
    in weeds – lamb serves – to life it whirs and brims hot infant light

*Kent MacCarter*
Oddington Lodge

I want to sense again those icy winding roads
explored in 1984 when we descended from
our attic’s condensation, the borrowed TV,
its milking of the Orwellian future
in what was our vibrant, albeit frugal, present,
now my tantalising then. Now this inertia.

To breathe that air under a mazarine sky,
smell the heavy fall of your brown hair instead
of tracing damasked memory to ward off chagrin.
The letters, and Google, rang my buzzer,
our roof onscreen in colour, the path
frost-bitten, where your camera fixed me
as I galloped back from a daft run.

No Google then but bowered reading, writing.
These years on I read the letters in biro
in the self-satisfied hand of youth,
when our estranged friend from that time
made contact, sending what she had kept,
a hushed discovery of long lost love.

Ian C. Smith
a cleave of time and place

the sun sets – I think of you
the dawn awakes – the same

a single muted lamp gives off some early light
beside a glassy harbour
while sharper lights bounce from a distant tower

by noon my world expands
to wake again in deeper voice
as muffled sounds reverberate off bathroom walls
a heavy humid sloth unrolls
toward a sanguine afternoon
rose-coloured

soon enough, long time waiting,
here, there, every sound –
cough, swallow, breath indrawn, a sigh –
is caught on optic cord

only just begun, cut short,
my fast-receding day moves back to black
lit by a half-moon
each side of the sea

Christine Williams

* to cleave has two meanings - to split apart and also to hold together