November 2014 Volume 7, no. 1
General poetry section
Guest editor: Alison Flett

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Instinct

She knew before it came
before it stood awkward at her door
in a uniform it couldn’t breathe in.

It was far off at first
as though she’d left the phone off the hook
and another world was calling.

Then it got closer
building in volume like some great tidal wave
with nowhere to break.

And after they’d told her
she realised what the sound was
and carefully shut her mouth.

*J.V. Birch*
Travel Notes: Dhaka

Time never has controlled desire.
It would have been timely to let go of Bangladesh
But now I write in the open air of evening before a familiar view.
Beyond the balcony is a Dhaka twice removed.
(that is, I’ve removed myself twice from it.)
From there I can’t stand the distance.
And from here, the proximity.
Roofs and trees give way to the bamboo bones of half-made buildings.
By the sky’s hazy suspension, the hour seems later.
The cantonment pond reflects a blot of crows.
Air contrives a dusty plan on my skin.
It dries in cracks then deeper in, like salt from my native sea.
To feel it there hurts as much as when I forced out my first language.
The present shows up bleakness in its light.
Moments I’ve scarcely missed reveal my loss.
When I stand for the panorama the drink runs to my knees.
On the rooftop before me, laundry lines are wound in.
In place of their dresses sit the women who fit them.
The fronded pond turns a greyer shade of brown and crows fly from the treetops.
The women rise to go inside.
When they do, I follow.

In my room I telephone just about everyone I know.
Just about everyone I know is male.
The past six months I describe for Ganesh as a desert.
He replies, That’s always the problem in Australia.
His thoughts are not on sand.
I travel alone and when I do the solitude pricks.
Every new life I lead is filled with ghosts. I give myself the creeps.
They distract me into wandering the city.
I come to a cafe garden full of trash.
Those eating cake are watched by those on the street outside.
In between the wall is barred and ridged with glass.
This is non-fiction after all.
Dhaka is not a place for living or eating alone. Flats and meals come in family portions.
Outside a crowd shouts for a pleasure I don’t understand.
Tin instruments in revelry, car horns in confusion.
My instinct is to keep the time rather than the beat.
I am a damp onlooker to the return of a lost carnival.

‘Travel Notes: Dhaka’, Kathryn Hummel.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
There are those who are in charge of wheels
and there are those who are ready to spin them.
I’ve no desire of my own but to feed off those of others.
My CNG cage is a portable exhibition of the pale-skinned animal.
Bottle tops and mucous make me perform.
Each object cast has Biblical possibilities.
Lepers, fallen women, mad dogs.
The question of silence is when to maintain it.
Reacting will only bring curses upon you.
Neatly timed emotion makes the world turn.
Badly timed, it regresses.
Timing is on the wristwatch of the beholder.
Emotion attaches a label of madness.
There are those who will never go below the surface.
There are those who will never imperil themselves.
And then: foreign women may walk and talk where local women should not.
Learn from your sisters.
It is unclear whether they are right or not.
So call them right, save your voice.
Nothing in between.

The sky makes way for an ocean of rain.
Flooding floors and leaking through windows.
A shipwreck in an apartment.
Balcony dirt pulled inside with the tide.
Through the branches of washed trees shine wedding lights and windows.
A halo from a candle in a narrow space.
I almost...
Pause as the azan fires over the bed.
It reminds me words and people can’t be rushed.
Direct the body from the soul.
Six o’clock on the day of prayer with washed floors and filthy feet.
I can smell the sea this afternoon.
On the balcony a crow dips to drink and cleans itself on a wire.
From my holiday, a suntan and a white dress.
African songs and beer from Mexico.
Anywhere could be here.
Tonight another friend leaves for another country.
Gifts for someone already gone, farewell over the phone.
The heat is everywhere without relief.
In sameness there is a tinge of discomfort.
I feel the need to expel something.

‘Travel Notes: Dhaka’. Kathryn Hummel.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
I visit the beauty parlour to be among women.  
There are too many mirrors and cat’s eyes for sanctuary.  
The stares measure me. They know I’m not as beautiful as they are.  
Even to myself in the mirror.  
I’m doing what it is a writer should be doing.  
Trying to save my voice from failing.  
My original mantra said the only cure is action.  
Stick it to your life.  
In this heat it slips.  
Half in shape and half out.  
Always compelled to do the opposite of right.  
A wall of certainty is something my self-doubt can’t stand before.  
The planes of some landscapes you can’t flatten your body to.  
When I was younger my mind was stricter.  
Now I excuse humanity’s twists.  
I make allowances in my age and ego.  
Judgement slips, exposing my pale side.

Conversations flow like days.  
Women move in cycles.  
Around yonic curves we are brought together to talk again.  
The people and their words change.  
The rhythm does not.  
Even absence has a meaning of its own.  
The fullness of feeling.  
The fullness and kick from a Gulshan coffee.  
My company, the female deshi diaspora.  
Self-assurance as boundless as the cash at their backs.  
In theory, existence across worlds begets a crisis of belonging.  
But suppose the worlds are not so different.  
Moneyed confidence and education are world travellers.  
Accented with more American than America.  
Well-groomed significance both here and there.  
Nothing in between.  
Bonhomie in sorority.  
In tailored elegance, every curve attended to.  
In their company, I suspect they can turn the earth.  
My energy lifts to consider what I’m missing.  
You only have to choose which world you want to know.  
Simultaneous life is possible. Simultaneous intimacy is not.  
Outside, I’m sure they are traitors in ready-made clothes.  
The illusion is on the inside. The danger is beyond it.
You never know til you leave it just what a place means.  
Withdrawal is quick but the only way to insight.  
An exercise in removing the present tense.  
How to write now, with any certainty?  
How to write in future with any certainty?  
Reflect inwards daily. Seize the meditation.  
Write it out. Start fresh and new.  
To protect myself I encourage more ghosts.  
You have plenty of friends, one of them tells me.  
Not true when I find Bangladesh hostile.  
At this, a respected Sir expresses surprise.  
I back down and wrap myself round Bangladesh. Combine the trouble.  
But inside I whisper—hostile.  
Hooded words on the street outside.  
Miaows from the lips of velvet-eyed men.  
Slights from the privileged fruit of the disordered diaspora.  
An onlooker announces: You’re supposed to understand.  
Exchanges it with: You don’t understand.  
And again: You don’t get it or you failed.  
He counts the gaps in my grasp of System, Culture, Family Life.  
Always blame. Elsewhere, guilt.  
Everywhere people resist or desist, push tea or pull rickshaws.  
Everywhere people are their own cause and effect.  
This is my attempt to unhook their mercy.  
This is my attempt to set my suspension down.  
Close up. Close up those eyes.

Wide open your eyelashes stick to your skin.  
Wait for the morning.  
Watch the city from your window, don’t write a poem.  
Clouded, the sky is as passionless as a sleeping face.  
Wait for the tender light of twilight.  
Watch the city from your window.  
Don’t write a poem about that either.  
You could really do so much with your hours.  
Alone you come to the sanest conclusions to the wildest thoughts.  
Test them on yourself.  
Life has too many toxins.  
On the street there is a boy tall as a short man, smoking a cigarette.  
Elsewhere a man slapped a child and smiled at me.  
There’s never enough sleep to cover certain pictures.  
The air rejects me.  
Wine and cigarettes are the only things to be absorbed.  
But nothing has the ability to clear moods or tidy messes.  
It started to rain.

‘Travel Notes: Dhaka’. Kathryn Hummel.  
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.  
Control your reaction if not the event.
Don’t telephone just about everyone you know.
Just about everyone you know is male.
Progression.
Heavily the rain came.

A vision of how my life should be comes as I depart.
It is something more than silk scarves and pottery to take away.
Unhappiness is not geography.
Always between spaces we show understanding.
I wanted my Bangladesh to have width, but I am the audience, not the creator.
I have never listened to the same tale twice.
The arrangement of words is finite.
Patterns never serve to transgress or pay tribute.
I don’t like writing in a straight line.
To capture instantly, make all words free.
Fatigue stops my fingers from fully closing around meaning.
The emptiness around like an ocean.
In transit the hours have a smooth pulse.
Rest easy til the next destination.
Forget scattered time. Forget yourself.
Spend the energy where you land.
I keep saying I will not go back.
But outside you feel how much you’re not in it.
I want more time in Bangladesh.
Either I can’t resist it or I’m afraid to move beyond.

*Kathryn Hummel*
The Bridge

A man walks across the old gnarled bridge,
his cigarette a lone red dot, packet close at hand.

Clouds cover the moon. Street lights pucker in the water. 
We stand by the stall selling lanterns, lean towards one or two,

billows of purple, yellow and red, but mainly red.

I think of Hong Kong, reach into the past, pagodas 
and temples glimpsed from our moving car, a red ribbon,

silver cups for coming first in school sprints, the sky 
at sunset, clouds pink and puffed, the night closing fast.

My parents on the balcony, cigarettes alight, whispering.

Keith Mac Nider
Rapid learning
Whanganui River, New Zealand

First of all, you have to enter the game, open yourself to risk. Perched upstream from where the water whets itself into blades between the serious granites, make sure you take your time, assessing every strategy. Because once you commit to your path through the rapid’s tusks there’s no changing your mind, no turning back. This is not the place for mindless flow. Yes, let the current take you, exploit it’s relentless momentum, but never forget you are more than flotsam. Self-sufficiency is here between these cool-furred cliff walls that rise above you like hands in prayer. And once the rapid is finished with you take some time to breathe, coasting the stillness. Fill your lungs with survival, rinse adrenaline’s citrus from your mouth because the next rapid crouches, beating itself against the nearest horizon, just beyond sight.

Rachael Mead

'Rapid learning’, Rachael Mead.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
Kayaking with a head cold

Whanganui River, New Zealand

The inside of my head is a wartime infirmary.
Chills ripple me; I am wearing the skin of the river.
There are no concessions; headwinds do not relent.
I dig my way through as if shovelling my own grave.
The day stretches to the doorstep of the mythological,
but I can only sit in my kayak,
unvaccinated against everything air-borne
except confidence, that virus to which I’m somehow immune.
There is no rescue, the disease must run its course,
so here I am, no longer paddling but battering my way
through winds and rapids that are drawn around me like blankets.
I transform to stone, to water, to greed; anything relentless -
until finally the river, falling through the handclasp of its cliffs,
shines behind me, a gilded monument to nothing but itself.

Rachael Mead
My father lives in ’merica

My father lives in ’merica
And I am in the remote bushes
My married father and his wife
And my brothers with spike hair
And sisters with pony tail
In the twenty second-floor
Seeping their souls into lovely misty cloud.

With dry eyes
I live here in the wild foliages
‘Very soon, very soon … all processing on …
She’ll leave …’
With soaking eyes dadu gossips to all.
Young men loiter around the house
And wink at my shadow, a golden chariot to cross
The fuming white Atlantic.

My responsible beloved father lives a life
There
Leaving my mother inside the silent earth
Calls and sends dollar
With assurance, ‘Very soon … very soon’
Years after years.

Umme Salma
Blush

i.

the afternoon we first made love
seem plausible: was a tease

no better than this: deliberate
& playful: at the wedding of

a childhood friend: an arrangement
of outdoor furniture: on

a desiccating lawn: & afterwards at a table: your face

platter: an offering: of strawberries: crimson lake: or

plum: the afternoon that love first seemed possible: a fruit

that we might share: the taste of it in our mouths already:

ii.

it begins with neurotrophins
flowering: the swoon or

vertigo of the lesser romantic poets: romantic with

its lower case ‘r’: it begins
as an off-rhyme: tentative:

& vulnerable: a line
begging its neat couplet:

begging a line that echoes:
with a sense of rightness:

of right weightedness:
of purpose: a confluence:

something iambic: the
measure of the beating heart:

Thom Sullivan

Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
7 haiku

Matsuyama-jo.
Brief lives bloom and die. Wood burns.
Yet these stones persist.

Sakura buds swell.
Autumn’s beauty is coming
but we will be gone.

We climb castle steps
at winter’s end, clouds coming
down, meet us half way.

Bike ride, castle stairs.
These knees creak like wooden steps.
Two ancient structures.

March morning chatter.
Ma- Matsu- Matsuyama!
trams clatter in tracks.

Light showers outside.
On okonomiyaki,
bonito dancing.

Toshi’s laugh wrinkles
carved into Nikko’s Noh mask
six hundred years past.

rob walker
Medicine

Winter in its depths here in Pine
River but it doesn’t stop
me from seeing your eyes in that instant
when they were turned
towards me from a crowd
of gossipers.
Later, over dinner
I heard your story of how
you travelled all the way
from Honduras to Hong Kong
after a domestic fight
and I read your poem
after you went to the loo
in which you talk about many pills.
I lost my head.
I had no comprehension
but I praised.
I must have appeared stupid
in your ‘beautiful’ eyes
and my stupidity
led to loss.
It was not till long afterwards
that I realized
I could have saved you
if I had met you earlier
than the poem.

Ouyang Yu

'Medicine'. Ouyang Yu.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
A Nation

Of exclusion
Of isolation (I-solation)
Of rejection
Of alienation
Of dumping the waves on their own heads
Of seeking asylum elsewhere, e.g. where no families break up
Of offering asylum inside its own body to its own body parts
Of self-hallucination
Of policing so much that heaven’s gates are constantly under lock and key
Of irrevolution
Of irresponsiblesolution
Of no
Of no sharers
Of nay sayers
Of yes slayers
Of dreaming for its own sake
Of white on white
Of calculated cons
Of a scheme designed to last longer than long itself
Of hate boats
Of hate eyes
Of hate ears
Of love that contains a hole in it
Of hope that does the same

A nation
Of no asylum to others but its own people

Asylum sought
Asylum given
Asylum, the size of a continent, lived and being lived

Ouyang Yu
'this is a pretty unhappy country*

this is a pretty unhappy country
the busy become busier
the poor, poorer
and fatter
and quieter

looking from a distance
especially from a high rise in the city
it is a pretty
country

on closer inspection
there is shit
in everyone’s smile
and eyes
even the beer
can’t wash it clean

there’s money for sure
and the mortgage
that keeps the poor poorer
and more invisible
and the rich
are dying an early death
of having too much money

and this we had called
a paradise
before we came
this shit
this shithouse
this shithole that looks so pretty
for the less merrys

*Ouyang Yu*

‘this is a pretty unhappy country’. Ouyang Yu.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
Snapshots of an awarding ceremony: slightly out of sequence

a. I said didn’t see any writers he said you wouldn’t perhaps because they were hiding themselves at home writing I said well if they were not shortlisted they wouldn’t turn up he said that’s right

b. I saw a man in his seventies getting his poetry prize a white man I saw a man in his late fifties getting his fiction prize a white man I saw a lot of white skinned white haired men and women around me peppered by brown people and yellow people who were the only ones sitting the weak ones

c. A man read or rather recited from a play and ended his performance with a loud FUCK that caused everyone to applaud and shout and shriek with laughter in the presence of premier and arts minister a female the white woman behind me didn’t seem to be very pleased but she didn’t say anything

d. A woman an old one asked are you Vietnamese I said guess again she said you look like a Vietnamese that I once taught in adult migrant education centre I said guess again I mean give it another go she said ah well I can’t I said China Chinese you know she said oh does that make any difference I said

e. She asked when I got home why you came back so early is that because no-one paid any attention to you again I said no she said yes it must be like last time or every time but I said no I had fun thinking of my weariness my urge to say fuck my instinct about people I dislike my reluctance to go and congratulate anyone who’s won a prize even the one I’ve judged to be the winner my wonderment why big names keep winning prizes why they make themselves so lonely and why so few people go to them to say nice things why they pat each other on their backs to congratulate themselves why people feel so important after they win but not before what makes a human being a full human being not a less or more one as I trudged towards my car somewhere near a city public bath-house

Ouyang Yu