

# **Song at a Bend in the River**

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## Not Our Country

Not in our country but  
here - hot, unbearably humid  
in early morning. From the sea,  
wind like a wave of medicine over skin,  
    a balm for exile.

Here my parents bend  
over their rooted feet, stooping  
toward what we will soon call peace. Careful  
not to bruise a bone, wrench a hip  
or worse. Fixed, watching the sky shuffle  
clouds out over the heat then back,  
    where they belong.

And from farther and farther away  
each day, shouts of children  
running from waves onto sand  
when clouds rumble, shaking branches  
to distraction. The beach wide, emptied,  
    where we belong.

## Evergreen

Rippled contour, maples serrating  
the far ridge like kitchen knives  
    out for morning.  
Through the tint of this sealed window,  
I watch the sun sear the honey locusts  
    crinkling like curtains.  
The flower thorns below the sixth floor  
of Evergreen  
    a sharp clarity.

What happens next,  
    transactional:  
the humidifier can above your bed  
bubbles your air, the nicotine patch leeches  
just enough oil for your dry skin  
to swallow, that pink square lollipop  
daubs mouthwash in its saucer  
    waiting to be pressed into use,  
your cheeks deflating  
between the balconies of your teeth

While you borrow breath  
    I seal myself off  
to watch how the season turns  
on itself. A brittle wagon of light inches by  
horse-shorn, axle-cracked, casket-empty.  
Colors teeter on a trapeze breeze  
    through humidified glass.

Beyond the wide wood door  
you ascend to top the league table. First  
on the nurse's blinking leaderboard,  
    discharge date elevated to 'unknown.'

Code I suppose, for how the wind trundles  
over the serrated ridge, carrying off  
what remains of this light. Code for the clouds  
to swing their safe door shut over the world.

## **Eight Songs, As Autumn Begins (Part 1), by Du Fu**

### 秋兴八首(一)

玉露凋伤枫树林  
巫山巫峡气萧森  
江间波浪兼天涌  
塞上风云接地阴  
丛菊两开他日泪  
孤舟一系故园心  
寒衣处处催刀尺  
白帝城高急暮砧

Early morning dew wounds the withered maples  
and in Wuxan the gorge air weighs on the forest.  
River waves swell toward a sky  
whose weather squeezes the earth in clouds.  
A chrysanthemum thicket open, to another day of tears.  
A lone boat ties my hometown to my heart.  
Everywhere, cold clothes stab the air like knife blades.  
On Baidi a high sunset presses down like an anvil.

## Awake

I wonder did I imagine the crack of light  
through the open window, its tailwind  
dyeing the sheets sepia,  
                  or was it a bloodstain?  
The curtain of my alcove  
rifle-butted by soldiers  
                  dressed as wintry morning.

Delirious, I confuse the details  
I could, seconds ago, surrender:  
did my father wield the knife  
                  or did she?  
The thief who escaped my chase,  
shattering our skin  
through the dining room window,  
did he rummage downstairs  
and find the puzzle piece  
                  I still search for?

Over the cliff my teeth shine in sunlight  
spread like a white sheet  
                  over my windshield.  
Larches shake off their night sweats,  
and from their blanket of snow extend thin arms  
                  in prayer.

## An Old Family Photo Wedged in a Drawer

Its edge has warped us  
into the drawer's inside seam,  
sloughing our ink cells, memory swept  
into its un-beveled cabinet gap.

From the photo's  
raised left wing I stride in  
to hand a bleached sister to my mother,  
her back buried in a seam.

Or maybe my mother is pulling  
her from my reach - hard to tell  
                  who gains, who loses.  
None of us pays attention  
to the damage along our border.

I did not know then  
this would be another moment  
of clarity. That in the constellation  
of my family we were not just stars  
pinned to an ink-black sky, reflecting  
quiet light for each other

but also their gravity,  
pushing and pulling what we shared  
                  into what would divide.

Following each other headfirst into the gap  
my sister has already fallen into,  
it is clearer now, in what gray has survived  
                  light all these years,  
what it has done to us all.

## Elegy for a Cairo Moving Man

Bless the man not looking at me  
but at the sofa suspended below me.  
I remember how his shadow  
stares up at me, the small head of a boy —

peering out like a tongue  
through the cracked lips of a window  
trying to speak.

Neither of us remembers the rope,  
the sofa breaking free of suspension.  
It falls knife-shaped like an aleph -  
the Arabic beginning of 'dangle' -  
and accelerates head-first,  
wings unfastened for descent.

From under it his shoes point up  
at me - two small alephs trained  
by a sharper mother.

But the angel resting on him refuses to leave.  
I remember only its breath blowing  
into the high window of a boy  
who could not scream.

Bless the silence that held us both.

## A Month of Sundays

One cloudless Minneapolis month  
I shuffled like a shared child  
between the Marriott  
and your hospital. Each shorter day  
divided into waiting games.  
Blink once for yes.  
Check the chameleon drip  
twice, every morning.  
Tap tap, for the nurse's attention.

When the nurses muscled you  
out each afternoon,  
I startled the same equation  
scurrying around my head:  
the knife's angle  
times its surgeon's tremble.

One night when twilight  
twisted into weather,  
leaning over the terminus  
hidden under the base  
of your skull I repeated  
the doctor's instructions  
to your scar: which nerves  
were axed  
so others could travel.

When clouds finally divided  
another month over Minneapolis,  
I remember shifting  
in my seat above them,  
imagining your eyes shut  
for both of us.

## Postmortem

Like immigrants  
we return to grief  
again. Unprepared, together,  
as if in a new land.

Incapable, again,  
of its new language  
we work in silence -  
effigies in this heat -

and wonder how any immigrants  
could arrive here  
together, so unprepared  
for the simplest things:

to speak a new language,  
to travel on  
without a father.



## Expedition North, by Du Fu

北征

靜夜四兵權，  
蒼煙落星闌  
秋天白露下，  
冷月葉聲幹

Night rests, over four armies.  
Tobacco ash falling like exhausted stars  
as autumn declines toward its end,  
a cold month when leaves speak for their trunks.

## **You Have a DNA Match!**

Overnight in my inbox they arrive  
stacked like histories  
from Rochester, Cairo, Ottawa,  
and other places I never imagined  
to ask me what I want to remember.

I remember we were like fig trees  
someone planted that no one wanted.  
Under stone fields the clay earth  
burned our feet. Where stones ended  
the Mediterranean sand burnt our feet.

We congregated, smoking  
and slapping tawla tiles  
because there was always time  
for that. After rice-milk ladled  
for breakfast we rolled grape leaves,  
as if we belonged.

Here where it will soon be light  
again, I sit surrounded by cold fields.  
Outside, a clear eye of water  
surrounded by stones. And behind  
the brick row-houses along the Melford Road,  
sheets hang to dry  
as in the old country.

Under different stars  
we divided into what we each intended,  
and on separate maps found  
what we thought we were after:  
the memory of sand that burned our feet  
while tiles slapped nearby,

or meadows cool with the smell of rain,  
and the pleasure of arriving home  
through woods alone at a cold eye of water.

And the world between us  
wider than any map  
we could have ever imagined,  
filled with something burning that split us  
in two, then four, then hundreds.

## **From Five Thousand Miles Away**

From your edge of the ocean  
arrives this whiff  
of a fatherless future.  
A shudder of wind  
that dives down my windpipe  
only to surface as the urge  
to retch.

After my red palms slap the stucco  
pink, between water drops plopping  
the ceramic sink, I switch off everything  
but you.

I imagine a boy  
shaped like you floating over  
a body patched together for travel.

And you surrounded  
by promises like an unmade bed,

your face turned to our unwelcome  
distance. And far beyond it,

on my shore I - a stoic you  
created in your own nature.

## Your Last Gift to Me

Imagine how you might have entered  
me. First your eyes then  
your whole head splay open my ribs.  
Through the hole you tore open  
you burrow deeper,  
your crown surprisingly sharp,  
pressing against my lungs until  
    I can barely breathe.

At the first chancing cut what remains  
of you wriggles deeper, away  
from where I trace your wound.  
I press my chest to feel you  
blink under my lungs,  
braced against the small of my back,  
too far inside to risk chasing after.

I know this is a present you never  
intended, a gift you prayed you could keep  
for yourself: what remains of you  
    torn  
    inside me, smiling  
until I evict you.

## Song at a Bend in the River (1), by Du Fu

曲江二首 (一)

一片花飛減卻春  
風飄萬點正愁人  
且看欲盡花經眼  
莫厭傷多酒入唇  
江上小堂巢翡翠  
花邊高冢臥麒麟  
細推物理須行樂  
何用浮名絆此身

One blossom petal shears the spring air  
then thousands flutter.  
Until the last clears my clouded eyes,  
until I empty the bottle too soon.  
At the river bank a jade pavilion gleams  
and Pegasus, hooves in bloom, guards  
the high tomb's gate.  
A simple break in the world  
cuts the mind into senses.



## Devotion

On both sides of the flooded river,  
when the rain ends a great song flourishes.  
River grass ruffles the moorhens  
awake, while wind inches dryness  
down the drowned fence posts. Clouds paste  
a film over the sunken common  
where orphan birches tuft leaves  
above the receding surface.

And so from grief  
begins a long tenderness. Skylarks sing  
their songs of the dead. Nothing will stop them.  
Between the birches, damage is free to float  
somewhere just as cold. Around their roots  
learning to stay, silt can sift unseen  
wherever the sun lures. Devotion  
is hardest not to the dry world  
we remember, but to this long tenderness  
no one can promise will stay.

## Lone Wild Goose, by Du Fu

孤雁

孤雁不饮啄  
飞鸣声念群  
谁联一片影  
相失万重云  
望尽似犹见  
哀多如更闻  
野鸭无意绪  
鸣噪亦纷纷

A solitary wild goose refusing to drink or peck  
flies crying, a voice searching for its flock.  
Who will join this one thin shadow,  
an image fleeting through a thicket of leaden clouds?  
Exhausted, they seem to appear  
then torment, as if more are heard.  
Only wild ducks, mindless, cackle  
confused cries and chirps, one after another.

## Hydrangea

I tunneled up into this wood box  
from another world.  
Not through the earth, but  
through your square abbreviation of it.

Sitting there in your chair each night  
watching me dream,  
you do not even notice  
how gray flies bore their horns  
between my petals,  
smearing my stigma  
into intense pleasure.  
Right in front of you.

Or how seasons  
pour their sorcery over me,  
pulling me away from you.

In your chair you can only imagine  
that I am here for you.  
How can I teach you  
in a language you might understand?  
You cannot even see

that I have elbowed aside  
your lesser plants  
and emptied this earth  
under my stucco sky

for me. Not for you.

## **Facing Rothko's *Orange and Tan***

In the National Gallery  
we lie like two rectangles  
next to each other  
on a yellow canvas,  
    nearly touching.

You orange, superior, descend  
toward me - tan, heavier,  
whose brushstrokes brim  
the barrier between us  
invisible to strangers.

I see you  
    thwarted  
where your bottom border vibrates,  
your geometry electric,  
crackling like a signal -  
rough smooth rough smooth rough -  
toward my dull tan body  
straining up to cross the space  
neither of us can enter.

In full view of the museum crowd  
two bodies spread on a yellow bed:  
orange on guard,  
its back turned to tan  
so that any gesture  
would be a charge, any touch

a scrape as I steal  
into the space between us  
only visible to lovers  
who have become strangers.

<https://www.azquotes.com/quote/654627>

## Moonlit Night, by Du Fu

月夜

今夜鄜州月  
闺中只独看  
遥怜小儿女  
未解忆长安  
香雾云鬟湿  
清辉玉臂寒  
何时倚虚幌  
双照泪痕干

Alone in her room she watches  
this month's moon over Fu-chu.  
My children far from me,  
only memories of home:  
her knot of hair a moon-shaped cloud  
in mist, her jade-white arm cold and clear  
when she leans past the open curtain.  
Both of us reflections, drying tears.

## Our Imagined Life

At a crossroads near summer,  
this town divides the remains  
of ancient conquests from boutiques.  
Vines graffiti the hills  
while over the ridge the sea,  
warm as a pond, shimmers  
with possibility.

Though we have plenty to get on with  
over here.  
Nursing the lavender back from the brink,  
for one thing. The palms singed  
in sunlight and the topmost tips of ash  
blister in this heat, trying to recover.  
This occupies us  
for a while.  
Destruction, regret, at the same time.

By late afternoon we wish only  
for the confessional of darkness  
in a valley half-buried  
already. Safe as exiles. Safe  
without joy.  
Surrounded by corrosion  
that will descend on us too.  
We wait, all summer for it.

## Summer Book of the Dead

Light rushes the cottage from all sides.  
Partly cloudy then smoke all afternoon.  
Poor bamboo don't stand a chance  
    up against the garden fence.  
The mixed-race ferns we labored over bend  
    perilously.  
This is how loyalty looks  
    when tested.

Darkness malfunctions, this sky roils.  
Cicadas, eyes red, troop forward like fodder.  
The rhododendron spreads mindlessly,  
graying every other shrub we planted.  
    Like nearly everything we regret,  
    unintended  
while the rock doves aspire  
to weightlessness, as if hacking  
at the meat of clouds will stem the damage  
    in devotion, to the wrong thing.

## What No Longer Matters

You ask me: how do I know? I know  
because I have learned to read you like a calendar.

Though I promise you  
again, the effigies lined up  
on the shelf under the TV  
each no greater than my thumb, will stay  
where they are.

One small animal, its head rubbed smooth,  
gullet gashed, next to another we agreed once  
was a hippo with a lion's head.

And the one I know is your favorite -  
not mine -

that figure of a small man on his knees,  
a scarf down his back inscribed  
with numbers like a calendar, head  
chiseled into the head of a hawk.

Signifying that for him too  
instinct rules the body,  
though only the size of my thumb.

I always knew he was  
your favorite.

Not because he is a man  
who could be a calendar.

But because you, too, know how desire  
brings a man to his knees.

## Spring Night in the Chancellery, by Du Fu

春宿左省

花隐掖垣暮

啾啾栖鸟过

星临万户动

月傍九霄多

不寝听金钥

因风想玉珂

明朝有封事

数问夜如何

Against the wall, flowers hide at sunset  
while a perch of birds chirps away time.  
Stars, facing ten thousand doors, stir  
and the moon, nearing the ninth heaven, brightens.  
Unable to sleep, I hear gold keys click  
and imagine jade harness bells in the wind.  
Tomorrow I must tender my petition  
and step by step, ask the night how.

## Lavender Field

Do you imagine I have a choice?  
What I show you, all of you,  
is the face I can lift into the world.  
Not how I want to be seen.

While each calyx raises a fist of tenderness,  
under me a great darkness like a second sky  
where whiteflies nibble  
    my edges raw,  
    for their own pleasure.

This is not a game. While I sprout  
for you my breath spits camphor  
onto each spike  
to cloud the small minds of aphids  
    who come for me in the night.

It does me no good you brushing by me  
like this, breathing the scent of my skin.  
We are not lovers in a garden,  
you and I. In your field I alone hold  
dominion over my withering body.  
Aching for beauty, and nothing else.

## Breaking Point

November again? A whole month  
    forcing itself on us,  
its weight heavy under a sheet of rainwater.  
Cold haze burns off the memories of summer  
piece by piece as the year drains away  
    through this perforated season.  
Gutter ferns gurgle between prison bars  
overwhelmed by the debris  
they soon will become.  
Plane tree branches veil our window,  
breaking into skittles played by a hurricane wind.  
How tricky belief is to hold onto  
    in a year yearning to turn.  
The first flurries of snow for example,  
have only just drained away.  
The stonecrops and asters still purple  
the high fields, their coarse stems  
    the last men standing.  
How perfunctory penitence is these days,  
held down under a sheet of rainwater.  
The blessing of perforation, I suppose.  
Stretches of nothing, for beauty  
    to rear its ugly head.

## **Waking at Dawn**

How did the night end? Did you just slip out  
between the trees? Only your scent hangs here,  
this linger your body left.

What remains of you - each drop suspended  
in its own small volume of protest.

You had such a look last night,  
your sleepless body hammering the dark  
like a long nail, each slipper-step shuffling  
the rough wood planks.

Then the sound of your feet  
cracking dead leaves,  
passing through a vigil of tree trunks.

Awake, I pick my wounds,  
again. By this I mean I pick two. One  
for each of us: you between the trees  
as if you belonged there.

And I, as if I were never here.



## Kings Cross

A red trace in a bare sky  
where clouds corner starlight.  
Inside the old metal gas-holder,  
apartments plastered inside its O  
rise from the earth,  
as if filling an excavated tooth.

Up on a high dry floor your body  
overlooks a back canal,  
a red streak traced in gas light  
on a bare white sheet. Lights blink  
red, green, red, green.  
Each breath birthing its own weak cloud,  
a ghostly blur behind glass.

The tumor a pedestrian  
waiting,  
at the stoplight nearly free  
of obligation. The only thing  
in this dry room working,  
its energy coiled, frenetic.

A strange animal hunting  
the cornered brain of a stranger,  
its body iridescent  
with conviction  
in shadows cast by occasional clouds  
drifting past. If it could speak  
it would sing

for the afterlife.  
How through the light  
of the good gas, beyond  
these flash glass buildings  
and clouds hunting their barren tundra,  
you leave like a pedestrian  
released, beyond a field  
that was once vermillion.

## Portobellos

This is how I live.  
I cannot remember another way.  
When you come out from shadows  
    as I have,  
the sun hardly bothers after a while.  
Sometimes at the end of winter  
I see leaves growing over my past life  
where it ended, where the edge  
of fresh wood tapers into erratic air.  
Here I don't require more  
light than darkness.  
Equal measure is enough.

Did you imagine I would stop  
trying, that I would abandon  
what I have earned to the leaves  
mentioning the wind as they fall  
    as if it were their friend?  
The shallow pools of rain think  
they will stop me.  
This is what they live for,  
it is not what I live for.

## Evidence

Lit so beautifully from every window  
this white room shines like a photograph  
inhabited by two lovers.  
Sun drapes down the pleats  
of its sheer curtains  
onto white stone tiles, rendering  
the white walls  
the color of young bones.

Someone might imagine  
your hips just rolled  
across the sofa, jolting me  
from their magnetic charge.  
Or I just sprang back,  
your warmth still tingling  
the shield of my chest.

But in the actual photograph  
our limbs scrape by accident.  
Behind a sheer summer dress  
pleated like a white curtain,  
your hips turn away from me  
to ruffle the cushions  
at the sofa's far edge,  
your untouched back tense  
toward a half-shut door

just before the sun releases us  
and I snap you there,  
for evidence.

## Weed

It was cold when we opened.  
No one taught us  
                  how to be together,  
in this world. You

were always more beautiful.  
Standing next to you  
I could see at every turn of weather  
the risk. I could never permit you to bend  
                  away from me.  
Not after we have climbed this far.

Every day I dreamed  
of coiling your stalk.  
                  Like this.  
Until we are impossibly close.  
Until we are one.

When I am finished  
you will understand I am stronger  
                  because of you.  
With you swallowed in me  
our children might even describe us  
                  as destiny.

## **Mediterranean**

Behind us the hills steam.  
Here and there the air turns  
toward cicadas terrorizing  
    what they most desire.  
Against the blank sky a shepherd crawls  
across a ridge like an ant. Pulling what  
from here look like goats. We watch  
for a moment and think how this  
is a life admired by strangers.

But we do not want to believe this.  
Because we are visitors returning  
to cities we admire, and want to love.  
And this is only a page in my diary

between whose words a shepherd  
crawls free, like an ant.

**Traveling Through the Dark, Recording My Thoughts, by Du Fu**

旅夜書懷

細草微風岸  
危檣獨夜舟  
星垂平野闊  
月湧大江流  
名豈文章著  
官應老病休  
飄飄何所似  
天地一沙鷗

Thin reeds breeze along the bank.  
In danger, the lone mast of a night boat  
where stars hang level with the horizon.  
The moon swells a bubble from the river.  
How do I write this world?  
Our guide agrees: exhausted, we must rest.  
What I know is real floats around me.  
The world contained in one granule for a gull.

## **Koi**

We think it at the same time -  
when night retracts from the pond  
and we both watch how their images  
ghost across water wrinkling  
from the flap of a fin,  
or the gape of a ragged mouth.

Hungry, they brim near the feed barrel,  
like family. Just beneath the surface  
their bodies scatter mud  
when they drift too close to each other  
to tinker alone around the stems  
of lily pads, plying each with attention.

No matter how hungry, they will not  
gather again until you or I  
dig a hand into the pelt barrel  
and scatter our care over their water.  
Relieved when one of us has done  
what the other only thought to do.

## In Trinity Churchyard

Your face in this square.

Your eyes blinking,  
dazzle.

The afternoon sun exposes  
the whole wild salon of your skin.

Wildness stirs around you.

The oak that sweeps its bench,  
Mars, the river swirling behind us,  
all cancelled.

What endures: words now stilled,  
my body stiff as a needle pricking air,  
warm light filtering you through my mind.

All gratitude for what is already  
drifting away.

## Facing Snow, by Du Fu

对雪

战哭多新鬼  
愁吟独老翁  
乱云低薄暮  
急雪舞回风  
瓢弃尊无绿  
炉存火似红  
数州消息断  
愁坐正书空

After the battle cries subside, new ghosts  
surround an old man chanting alone.  
Clouds descend to dusk. Snow twists  
and turns, confused in urgent wind.  
The ladle abandons its vessel, emptied of wine.  
The stove stokes what embers remain.  
News, in pieces, drifts to our prefecture  
where worry sits stiff as an empty book.

## **Suffolk Morning**

Not only the clouds  
but the grass sparkles,  
tips leaping  
from glazed fields toward  
tarmac shimmering between them.

I am ashamed now,  
at how I remember you -  
gray, powerless,  
unable to express yourself  
through the gray of winter.

And here I see you alive,  
rising toward me, trembling  
as I crunch the gravel road between us.

Forgive me. I am not like you.  
You have changed so much.  
And I, not at all.

## Evening Stroll Along the River Stour

Without any plan for darkness,  
he steps off the light of asphalt  
into the scratch of bushes,  
his shadow stalking a mud trail  
studded with stones  
unzipping the river grass in two.

On one side reeds defend a brick pillbox  
withered from his father's war,  
moorhens tufting its scalp.  
On the other, rickety steps hoist their verge  
into the light, the last step sticking  
its tongue out at the low sun.

This evening all looks dead  
on the river trail. A half-bird uncurls  
bursting from his shadow,  
pinions mottled gray, feathers stiff.

A hoof print stamps its emptied eye.  
As if killing wasn't enough,  
a thing must be ruined too.  
Something living wriggles  
out from that milky hole  
as he steps over it, his shadow  
growing longer and wider  
than he could ever be.

## Inside L'abbaye du Thoronet

Inside its raw stone lodged  
into a valley of hooked oaks, all around me  
silence descends arch-shaped  
from the abbey's upper flows  
down the gritty fabric of its walls  
to hum around my pew.

This chapel is a machine built  
to manufacture silence,  
its motor gear-less, powerless,  
extruding the infinite  
outside. Sparrows twitter  
around its stone courtyard  
and bees buzz the lavender  
against its stone fence  
while its valley gathers lightning  
like a herd in the sky.

Yet this abbey does not care.  
Squatting here, a husk  
in its dominion, enclosing silence  
like its unborn seed.

From my pew, I search everywhere  
for its source.