

Zhou Enlai in Auld Reekie

In November 1920, Zhou Enlai, future prime minister of the People's Republic of China, left on the steamboat Porthos with the intention of studying at the University of Edinburgh. On arrival in Auld Reekie, he discovered that, to gain entry, he had to learn a second European language. After four months in Edinburgh as correspondent for a radical Chinese newspaper, he left for Paris, never to return.

*Whirls the wind-and-cloud,
The dusty continent over.
All throughout the land
Sinks in a hushed gloom.
To top off the heartbreak,
Autumn is here again.*

*

The Journey to the West.

*Porthos steams without incident,
Filled with three classes of men
Eating, excreting, exhaling
From Haiphong to Port Said.*

*The wharfs of Marseilles.
The suburbs of Paris.
London's hundred phenomena.*

*Journey's end
Before the Bridge,
Beside the Law.*

*

*Parted in life or separated by death,
The worst that could happen to me,
Parted – in sorrow, in anguish,
Dead – for nought that counts –
Is it not better to bid
A farewell that inspires?*

*

A lookout from the suburbs green.
Thickening fumes reek and reel.

*

The doors of learning
Laugh in my face.
I have come too late
And lack in language.

I join the year's litter
Cluttering the Meadows.

There were flowers in the rain,
Flowers in the mirror.

*

*Bloom and decay,
Triumph and defeat
Are the objective givens
Of the world of men.*

*

This beer as dark
As the sky,
Its reek reeking
With misery.

Bitumen black
The dividing-lines
I drift down
And inhale.

Easter Road.
Abbeyhill.
Meadowbank.
Morningside.

Old Town.
New Town.
Gorgie.
Dalry.

Inequality's ostentation,
Plump on a cycle,
Strewn on the swathe.

*

*My favourite is the water lily
Rising stainless from its slimy bed,
Modestly reposing on the clear pool.
Emblem of purity and truth.*

My sandals slide
On Hibernian silage
In Cowgate.

My curse is cast
Like the Qing
And my pigtail.

*

*There seemed a fated affinity
Though duckweed-like we met*

*Nor was it accident that we
Bore the satchels both in Tientsin.
Lice-catching, you often stunned
Your friends with bold eloquence.
Crabs to wine, we chew
Fondly over bygone days.*

*

I shun George Square
And down the brew.
Good *Porthos* will carry correspondence:

Europe after the European War.

Crazy years of brazen blondes.
Faces reek of mustard gas.

*

Rain over.
The Mound darkens with the clouds.
Dusk is approaching.

Lights out.
Fewer and fewer people.

A drunken storm sweeps our close.

*

*Cherry blossoms all over the park,
Brilliantly glowing,
Light shining out on all sides;
Throngs of people chattering and chattering.
A drooping willow nestles by a small pond.
A young girl stands there all alone
Which is the lovelier –
The cherry blossom or the willow?*

*Quite forlorn, she speaks not a word
And nobody seems to care.*

*

Every Sunday evening,
At Pringle's Palace,
The Party meeting.

We sell Soviet Stars
To feed the Ukraine.
Coal gathers at Leith
To fuel the Comintern.

At the hungry banquet
I raise my glass
To the musketeers
Of Bela Kun.

*

White terror threatens the Pentlands.
I raise my eyes to the hills.

A look in the distance
From heights ascended:

Hills met in grey.
White clouds, part shaded,
Narrow down to a stripe.
A dozen electric lights glare
From the dark formless metropolis.

For a moment, a cry from the people breaks through
the scene:

*Elder statesmen, warlords, party bosses, capitalists, what, from
this, are you going to fall back on?*

*

A chance glimpse of our spark in the haze.

Tianjin in deep water and burning fire.

The heroic cries of female students.

*

It is difficult to hear
The wheels of Tranent.

The streets are blackened
With lawyers and priests.

At the Usher Hall,
Anti-bolshevik spit
Laquered my hair.

*

The International Red Day campaign starkly revealed all the weaknesses of the Party – our isolation from the broad masses, no roots in the factories, under-estimation of the war danger and pacifist illusions.

*

The Dream of the Red Chamber.

The Causes of Revival.

The mildness of the south.
The cold frontier of the north.

Mediating between mothers
Who called me the advent
Of grace.

*

*Ten years face to wall,
I shall make a breakthrough
Or die an avowed rebel
Daring to tread the sea.*

*

In the bowels of St Giles
I found guidelines for myself:

Study diligently, grasp essentials, concentrate on
one's subject rather than seeking a superficial
knowledge of many.

Work hard and have a plan, a focus and a method.

Keep fit and lead a reasonably regular life. This is
the material basis of self-improvement.

*

Around the Mercat Cross
A danse macabre
Of infant corpses.

Thoraxes yearn
For southern spaces.

*A big agitation must be developed for a special Christmas grant
for all unemployed.*

*

We played whist to arm the Red Fleet.

An Irish jig relieved the Kerch Straits.

Dominos will topple Dominions.

*

This University is not
Universal.

Its dour stone rasps
My cheek-bones.

I will have to learn
New words.

*

Decisions must be correct.

*

Nothing but green leaves on the branches
With the solemn pines looking on.
Where are we to find
*'The cherry blossoms,
Deliciously pink, tenderly sweet?'*

*

Winter has set in.

Co-existence with mutual benefit?
The sweating of men alive!
The indolence of life-in-death!

*

*Promise, I pray, that some day
When task done, we go back farming.*

*

Ziyou quxiang:
Blood that spatters

The Sacré-Coeur.

The subject races
Like the pumping heart
Of *les faubourgs*.

Theories of men
Along the Rue de Richelieu.
Restless arses
In the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Attending
Dangerous
Classes.

Factories spew, spin and spread.

*

Plunge yourself into action.
You'll overthrow the outdated ethics,
All by dint of a thought in your mind!

*

*No sowing done,
No reaping possible.*

*

Drizzle nestling, haar thickening.

Deer chase hot in the heartland.

The lone heron scours the skies.

I will hear swallows twitter in The Meadows.

I take the long walk to Leith.

*

Songs of parting waft from the southern beach
As the east wind urges travellers aboard.
In a twinkling, you'll be miles away.

Stars fall apart to man's regret.
Clouds disperse for all we care.

Gavin Bowd, from *Rifle Song* (Biggar, Red Squirrel Press, 2023)