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# **ABSINTHE**

*PEN AND BRUSH*

*ABSINTHE 22 | WINTER 2016*

A selection by Emily Goedde  
in collaboration with Etienne Charrière



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## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

When I began to think about what to include in an issue that would weave together literary work from and about Europe and East Asia, a poem came to mind, “Renoir’s ‘Portrait of a Young Girl’” written by the Chinese poet **Zheng Min**<sup>1</sup> (郑敏 b.1920). It begins, in my translation:

*Those who pursue you, enter your depths through eyes half hung,  
Half opened; eyes yet to send darts of light into the world;  
Like an ocean entry for the soul, your every thought flows through them  
Back to calm body, like tidal waters breathed back into the earth’s core.*

This poem—a sonnet, actually, a form that Chinese poets embraced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—seemed an appropriate place to begin. Not only because it is an ekphrastic poem by a Chinese writer on a piece of European art, but also, maybe more so, because it is a meditation on opening up to the world. The poem ends:

*Look, how a soul first locks itself tightly, tightly  
Only then to unfold toward the world: Strenuously, silently, she scrutinizes  
herself,  
In order to walk toward a world full of demands of love.*

Although a poem about a woman coming into adulthood (Zheng Min was a young woman when she wrote it), it suggests questions that all the writers in this issue of *Absinthe* take up in some way: How do I scrutinize myself, even as I open up to the world outside? And how does this world outside bring me to scrutinize myself?

**Wei-Yun Lin-Górecka**, a Taiwan-born writer and artist who now lives in Poland, treats these questions in her three keenly observed essays, ‘The Skeletor’, ‘Miss Kiwi’, and ‘Solaris Stop’, which I have woven through the issue, like threads connecting the many possible answers. The pieces are drawn from Lin-Górecka’s collection *Translanders*, a term Lin-Górecka uses to describe ‘people who feel at home everywhere and nowhere. Always in-between’.

Hong Kong writer **Xi Xi** takes up these questions as well, using them to play with meaning and form. Xi Xi is among the mostly highly regarded Hong Kong writers

<sup>1</sup> Although we have generally kept Chinese names as they appear in Chinese, which is to say surname first and given name second, we have followed the writers’ preferences in the cases of Wei-Yun Lin-Górecka and Japanese writer Ryoko Sekiguchi, whose given names are followed by surnames.

from the second-half of the twentieth century, and her 'At Marienbad', from the late 1960s, is an avant-garde gem from the period. Written thirty years later, her musing on Chinese translations of Yeats's poem 'Among School Children' is just as insightful and playful, a true joy for anyone who has thought about the trials and tribulations of translating poetry.

**Ryoko Sekiguchi's** *It's Not Coincidence* is a deeply moving reflection on her experience of the Great Sendai Earthquake of 2011, and the tsunami and nuclear disaster that followed. From her position as a writer, who, living and working in France, is physically distant from Japan, even while she is still intimately connected to it, Sekiguchi pushes us to simultaneously consider the effects of catastrophe on international and internal levels.

The intensity of Sekiguchi's work reverberates in the swirling poetic excerpts of **Yang Lian's** book-length *Narrative Poem*. Yang shows us that to move between continents is to stretch and transform ties between families. Indeed, Yang, who was born in Switzerland, but who grew up in China, only to be exiled in 1989, has the ability to transform the pull-and-pull between places into revelations about family, language, identity and belonging.

Icelandic writer **Magnús Sigurðsson's** poems evoke crystalline moments of natural beauty, and they pair evocatively with the oil paintings and watercolors by artist **Chen Limin** included here. Both Sigurðsson's poems and Chen's images subtly mix the sparseness of Chinese traditional forms (be they literary or visual) with European subject matter, allowing us to see both the forms and the objects in new ways.

As with Sigurðsson and Chen's works, **Chang Ying-Tai's** novel *The Bear Whispers to Me* is both innovative and timeless. Winner of the 2015 Lennox Robinson Literary Award, *The Bear* is one of the first novels about Taiwan's aboriginal populations to appear in English. It revolves around the life of a young boy, and in this excerpt we find how the international wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reverberate in his world, even today.

In his fascinating vignette 'The Women Who Defeated America', Spanish writer **David Jiménez** is transfixed by a postcard image of a young woman soldier from the Vietnam War, only to meet the same woman a few hours later. She is no longer

a fighter, however, but a grandmother, full of stories and wisdom. Jiménez comes away from his time with her feeling as if his understanding of the world has shifted.

**Zhou Weichi's** graceful poems mix the playful and poignant, the academic and the sentimental, creating a portrait of an intellectual who moves between China and Europe. While Ouyang Jianghe's 'Autumn Listening: on a performance by the late cellist Jacqueline du Pré' evokes the pathos of the talented musician's short life. In **Lucas Klein's** translation, we hear the chiseled musicality and lovely poignancy of both Ouyang's verse, and du Pré's own story.

Excerpts from *The Waiting Room*, by **Tsou Yung-Shan**, join Wei-Yun Lin-Górecka's essay on translation, 'Solaris Stop', to bring the volume to a close.

Tsou, a writer from Taiwan who now lives and works in Germany, has written a beautiful novel about a young man, Hsu Ming-Chang, who, after being divorced by his wife, moves from Munich to Berlin, rather than return to Taiwan. In Berlin, Hsu finally finds the space to create his own world, and the novel presents with great acuity the folding in and opening up that Hsu is able to perform only once he has moved into this foreign space. One of the great strengths of the novel, however, is that even as it develops Hsu's central story of self-awareness and freedom, it weaves in the struggles of two women, one Belarusian, one German, as they come **up** against limitations of place. In this way, the novel creates a nuanced picture of the effects of political, economic and cultural realities on our personal narratives.

Let me close with some words of thanks. I am thrilled to include a short review by a Master's student in the University of Michigan's Center for Chinese Studies, **Samantha Hurt**, on English-language publishers of contemporary Chinese literature. If your interests have been piqued by this issue, we hope that you'll use these resources as a starting point for continued reading. I am also indebted to writer and artist **Bonnie Mu-Hua Hsueh**. It is thanks to her fine advice that the work of Wei-Yun Lin-Górecka and Tsou Yung-Shan appear here. Similarly, I would like to thank **Professor Xiaobing Tang** for introducing me to the work of artist Chen Limin. This issue would be much the lesser without the addition of her lovely works.

EMILY GOEDDE  
ANN ARBOR, 2016