

**EDDIE TAY**

From *Remnants* (Ethos Books, 2000)

**BEAST**

*by Eddie Tay*

Forged of the jungle, I have no language,  
but there is a soft rain that wakes me,  
healing the scars on my body;  
wherever I roam, the ground is written  
with rivulets, bringing relief  
to thorns that clutch at a blackened sky.

Forged of the jungle, I have no language,  
but boulders and branches prompt me  
with their silences. The wind drums  
a rhythm on my skin; wherever I roam  
there are gasps of mud-flats at my feet,  
and I murmur with the low rumblings of thunder.

Tall grass beating at my face, a vision  
throbs behind my eyes. I quiver with lallang,  
rear at full sprouts of flowers.  
Forged of the jungle, there is a dull desire  
emerging from disquietness of ancient trees.  
I raise my raven head and roar.

ii. *Utama*

I come from a battle with the sea,  
my men weary, my crown caught  
among weeds in the ocean bed.

The tide washes our tracks  
and recedes, revealing nothing  
but bare faces of the shore,  
and I wish my father,  
Raja Chulan the warrior king,  
descendant of Alexander the Great,  
had not seen this land.

I shout an order, ready to depart,  
rubbing my soles clean of sand ...  
then a sudden stillness;  
hair on my skin rising like feelers,  
I see it advancing from the trees.

Cloven feet grinding hard into soil,  
its dark forehead trembles with a gaze  
that seizes my body.

Motionless, under its spell,  
my throat is ready for its claws;  
the jewelled kris by my side  
is useless against the fire in its eyes.

But our wills, each seeking the other,  
lock horns and struggle,  
my breath becoming his,  
his becoming mine,  
till one walks away the conqueror,  
the other still a prince.

I will capture him in my story,  
give him a name,  
and make my cowering men  
tell no other.

In the Malay Annals,  
he will be my prisoner.

iii. *Hinterland*

There is only a journey into the interior  
after the beast, to seek a sentence,  
a parting of ways from my men,  
to where the sun, like a possessive eye,  
hangs silently over the land.

There is no map, no chart, no parchment,  
nothing to steer me from swamps of leeches;  
whenever I feel beneath the soil  
a body of germinating influences,  
where roots nudge pocketfuls of rain,  
the wilderness echoes with laughter,  
and my feet would sink into nets of thorns.

Though grey-loam, grass and canopy  
swollen by heat press in from all sides,  
this will be my kingdom still;  
I cut every stem, stalk and branch,  
defying folds of foliage, forcing a path  
through tangles of moist, clutching undergrowth.

... I have passed this fallen tree  
a thousand times. Every rock and hill,  
withholding their secret, bears a familiar face.  
Perhaps I am to lose my way,  
to name every boulder, leaf and petal,  
rejoicing at sprays of colours  
bestowed upon a random flower.

Perhaps this is a kind of destination.

**VERSIONS**

*Poems written in Chinese by Li Shangyin (813 – 858)*

Adapted into a sequence in English by Eddie Tay

i.

Coming and going  
like an echo,  
you carried away a promise  
lodged deep in stone.

In the recesses of my mind  
I see moonlight playing on rooftops,  
hear the distance of a bell  
and dream of you in another country...

I scribble a letter, though this is a longing  
with no address.

Even as candle-light ignites these designs  
of birds upon the quilt, the faint smell of musk  
emerges from lotuses on my curtains.

Coming and going  
like an echo,  
you carried away a promise  
lodged deep in stone.

I pause,  
thinking of the distance of the hills.

vi.

It is easy to go wayward  
with this instrument of fifty strings –  
I stood corrected every time  
I was released from playing.

Was I dreaming  
I was a butterfly  
or a butterfly  
dreaming it was a man?

A chance breeze  
will play a melody of lives –  
was I the Emperor  
who loved his Prime Minister's wife?

Tonight, a full moon,  
and from lips of oysters  
beneath the lake are pearls  
for a demon beauty.

I wait by the mountain  
trailed with veins of jade.  
Dazed by the smoke of dawn,  
I think of you and do no work.

x.

Too quickly the furtive sun rises  
and falls like our days  
in this wretched country  
as I search for you among tombstones  
broken by the river.

Joy, that you would leave me  
to wander in the wilderness of my soul;  
my feet trip on stones  
scattered among webs  
of frost hard upon the ground.

I know our dance has ended.  
The pale flowers drop as my fingers grasp  
the air empty of your waist.  
You left me to think  
of a poem of daggers,

craving, for wine to douse the pain  
of a thousand burning sorrows  
in my heart. I am driftwood  
in a forest where trees are draped  
in wreaths of snow.

Too quickly  
our days are burnt like incense  
to ashes... I have no chariots  
or horses to carry me through  
this winter kingdom of my mind.

**Creon's Fates**  
*by Reid Mitchell*

1.

By the time I agreed to abandon  
—renounce, never, never renounce—  
my heart's desire, I had achieved it  
too premature for satisfaction. At first flash  
of grief, consummation was no consolation.  
True, her body hung and spun on a rope,  
her eyes bulged out, tongue real, fat, and  
silenced. But my son, unmanned by this  
woman, anti-filial, clung to her like a  
baby to a wet rag substituted  
for mother's milk. I was the third to see.  
Surely her bridegroom Lord Death saw first me

2.

All I wailed, womanlike myself,  
wife, son, future generations.  
I never regretted her death so much  
as its failure to comfort me.  
Now I have stayed in Thebes and become  
the wisest and mildest of kings, and I know  
the barest crumbs of comfort in sorrow  
and solitude cost more than  
cups of wine at a wedding feast.

3. THE CHORUS DECLINES TO COME OUT

Can it be true? After honoring  
wife, suicide, and son, failed patricide,  
he denies proper burial to the virgin,  
slim Antigone?

4.

She would cuckold my son  
with Death. Sing of no white, slim  
virgin. Surely she had already  
parted her thighs like Leda  
and given herself to her favorite  
among the gods. She could summon Lord  
Death, she thought, if not with her  
prayers, her snatch. Bitch,  
Death is the easiest god  
to summon. Bitch,  
Death is a manwhore. In the end,  
he fucks everything alive—pig,  
dog, vulture, crow, you, Sister Ismene, your father,  
me.

Ismene has no suitors,  
not even the men who butcher  
hogs or beg outside the ruins  
of the palace. Ismene takes thread  
and needle to sew close every hole  
that stops her from standing like  
a statue, every place that allows a man  
to enter or tears or words to escape.  
“Antigone,” she wails. “You died the easier  
death.”

4.

A polluter of his own Thebes,  
a softpadded, slickcoated dog,  
whose eyes shone like signal  
fires on a distant coastline,  
welcoming home a king and his slave.

Creon slept under cabbage leaves  
and lemon rinds, hid  
a human knucklebone  
inside his cheek.

The rope marks burned into his yellow fur  
matched exactly those marks  
inflicted by Antigone  
on her white and virgin neck.

5.

Creon lets fall the  
knife in his hand  
and makes his blood  
his only apology.

He goes in joy to  
rejoining his only desire,  
Antigone.

## **Burials In Thebes**

*by Reid Mitchell*

I

Because of her tears raining onto  
the dust of his exhumed grave  
Antigone does not see  
the undiscouraged worm  
so eager to visit her brother  
Polynices whether he lies  
beneath or above the blood-rich  
dirt of Thebes

II

Creon claims his niece  
wishes to marry Death  
more than his son  
so, incestuous, maddened uncle  
he turns himself into Death  
--Midas of Death who kills  
every loved one he ever touched  
gently

III

Thebans are frightened  
To live in a myth is to live  
in pain. The heroic myth of men  
and women and demi-gods  
pretending that accidents  
are threads woven by the Fates  
when Accident, not Fate  
rules

IV

Where can bread be found  
for the once besieged?  
Where are bandages for wounds  
not sung as deeply but just as deep?  
What poet sings the dead cowards  
and living among the citizens  
of still beleaguered, always haunted  
Thebes?

V

When all has been said  
the bodies brought onto the stage  
the ruler unruled  
the gods perhaps this time appeased  
the city walls remain unrebuilt  
phalanxes form in distant plains

VI

The Chorus of cowards  
more bald than gray  
sings our old men's songs  
Trembling not in wisdom  
but in fear we make  
a senseless sense:  
those slipping into death  
fear it most

I am an old man too

## **A Hamlet For Our Times** *by Reid Mitchell*

It was easy enough. Horatio,  
Marcellus, and I grabbed him,  
hustled him out of Elsinore.  
Electronics to the gonads,  
damp cloth on his rubicund face,  
and water flowing freely.  
Claudius quickly confessed  
to my father's murder.

Also to clipping the coins  
corrupting the currency,  
self-flagellation, simony,  
raping Ophelia,  
buggering my mother,  
and a cunning plan  
to invade Norway--

at which point Fortinbras  
requested his rendition  
and appointed me,  
a mighty pretty fellow,  
King of Denmark.

## **I Planted a Banana Tree Outside Our Window** *by Reid Mitchell*

*Li Qingzhao speaks to her husband who is long absent*

Banana tree in frozen rain:  
nothing looks more dead, nothing harder to kill.  
An axe can't chop through.  
My garden saw makes it bleed milk.  
The trunk won't rot, can't burn,  
but a field mouse leaves his footprint.

We planted the tree under our window.  
Even cut to the ground, roots and stump,  
its heart reaches up to pierce the gray sky,  
and flower in the sun.

Too tired to dry my sandalwood hair.  
Today I hack it short with a paring knife.  
Black and crystal against the cinnamon tiles.  
If you ever rap on the window, remember  
I've grown too old to blush. The nape of my neck  
needs your breath to warm it.

(First published in Issue 23—March 2014—of *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*.)

## **An Outpost Falls**

*by Reid Mitchell*

Must my vigil be stood solitary  
when vodka fills my canteen?  
I easily brush snowflakes  
off my gray hairs but cold winds  
buffet my shoulders and back  
my rump, spine, and kidneys  
all long-complaining

I have stood at this wall too long  
too alone to remember  
Are we beleaguered?  
Are we outnumbered?  
Has the old general died  
recent orders in his fingers ?

I always stand vigil, lone sentry  
guarding an eden long emptied  
where no sturdy beggars knock  
at the gate, a garden  
turned bitter yellow and sere

My vigil? Fearful, near furtive  
a hard watch against sunrise  
and ghosts, a political matter  
in my war with myself  
a photograph taken  
against a moon that's red dust  
indistinctly showing  
an indistinct soul

(First published in the "Vigil" section of Issue 42 of *Voice and Verse Poetry Magazine*, July 2018.)

# KATE ROGERS

## Five "Classic" poems (or responses to them) Cha Reading Series /Kate Rogers

I will read three poems inspired by the myth of Icarus. All three are ekphrastic poems.<sup>1</sup>

(The myth refers to the [Greek](#) tragedy of [Icarus](#), in which Icarus, the son of [Daedalus](#), took flight from Crete, where he and his father were trapped in exile, wearing wings made from wax and feathers. Icarus, disregarding his father's wishes that he not fly too close to the sun, did just that and melted his way to a feathery demise, drowning in the sea.

### **Musee des Beaux Arts (1938)<sup>2</sup>**

*by W. H. Auden*

About suffering they were never wrong,  
 The old Masters: how well they understood  
 Its human position: how it takes place  
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;  
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
 They never forgot  
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
 Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.



**Landscape with the Fall of Icarus** (1960)  
*by William Carlos Williams*

According to Brueghel  
 when Icarus fell  
 it was spring

a farmer was ploughing  
 his field  
 the whole pageantry

of the year was  
 awake tingling  
 with itself

sweating in the sun  
 that melted  
 the wings' wax

unsignificantly  
 off the coast  
 there was

a splash quite unnoticed  
 this was  
 Icarus drowning

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“About suffering they were never wrong, the old masters.”  
-Musée des Beaux Arts, W.H. Auden

### **The Fall of Icarus (2012)**

Kate Rogers

Breughel<sup>i</sup> paused the moment  
when grief pulls you out of your sky,  
gravity and its inevitable weight  
plunge you into the deepest seas,  
when the momentum of loss  
makes it hard to surface,  
and your heart throws itself  
against its cage of bones,  
desperate to escape.

He knew that as you fall  
no one looks up.  
If they did they'd ask,  
*Why try to fly on wings of wax?*

The man rattling his metal trolley  
through the market  
won't see you plummet,  
nor the old woman bent in half  
by decades of collecting cardboard.  
Not the woman at the grocery till  
who sometimes meets your eyes and smiles,  
when she is free to share  
a few seconds of recognition.

The security guard who works  
at the front door day and night,  
stares into space as you walk by,  
treading water in his own ocean,  
exhausted by keeping his head  
above the chill, green chop.

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## Sharon Olds

**Is an influential American poet who has written many poems about taboo subjects connected with women, our bodies, our sexuality and those experiences unique to us. Her poem “Ode to the Tampon” from *Odes* (Knopf 2016) has inspired many women to write about and publish poetry on subjects which have seldom found a home in literary publications.**

### **Ode to the Tampon**

*by Sharon Olds*

Inside-out clothing;  
queen's robe;  
white-jacketed worker who clears the table  
prepared for the feast which goes uneaten;  
hospital orderly; straitjacket  
which takes into its folded wings  
the spirit of the uncapturable one;  
soldier's coat;  
dry dock for the boat not taken;  
seeker of the red light of stars  
which have ceased to be before we see them;  
bloodhound;  
unhonored one; undertaker;  
secret-keeper;  
you who in the cross-section diagram,  
before the eyes of a girl child,  
glide into potential space,  
out of the second-stage rocket's cardboard cylinder,  
up beyond the atmosphere,  
where no one has gone before;  
you who began life as a seed in the earth,  
you who blossomed into the air like steam from a whale's blowhole,  
you who were compressed into a dense calyx,  
nib which dips into a forty-year river;  
mute calligrapher—we write you here.

[\(https://tinhouse.com/ode-to-the-tampon/\)](https://tinhouse.com/ode-to-the-tampon/)

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**I wrote this poem in response to Sharon Olds' odes and the last one in particular. (I would argue that Olds' poems about the female experience are "modern" classics.) Yet my take on an ode is quite different and unique to the environment in which I have lived for the past 18 years. This poem was short-listed for the Montreal International Poetry Prize in 2017.**

### **Ode to my Period**

**Kate Rogers**

*In Cantonese women tell each other*

*"Yi ma lai doh": My great aunt has come to visit.*

My "great aunt" rarely visits  
now but she found me in Sichuan  
half way up the slope of Er Mei Shan.<sup>i</sup>  
I was on the way to the peak  
with four other women when great aunt beckoned  
the monkey to leap from his leaf nest  
in the mountain camphor tree onto  
my pack full of apples. The monkey bared his fangs  
when we shouted and waved our arms.  
He lifted the pack flap and reached in  
for two pieces of fruit. Then later, the raven  
that sauntered into the women's toilet in the monastery garden  
didn't fly away when I squatted over the stone hole,  
plucked my used pad from the bin. He ambled  
outside, scattered scarlet petals  
of its blown blossom on the breeze.

Great aunt has retired since that climb,  
but sends notes in the beak of  
a dark bird. The stain of her sunset returns  
after an afternoon of love.