

ANSWERS TO TANG COMPADRES

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We have wandered for years  
In the forest of motives  
Some explored the pathways  
Some lay in wait for others  
At last I'm lying back immersed  
In what I have come through

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Cold has pierced our hearts  
We have made nature sympathize with us  
We even spell out pity in trampled petals  
The next step is keeping each other warm

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War has devastated the Shaanxi fields  
Now they are overgrown with green  
Clouds of trouble run before the wind  
Birds get lost in the distance  
All that he looks at, he feels in his chest

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Half of Du Fu's friends are ghosts  
So what does that make him?  
His boat is tethered to a garden full of them  
He floats downriver trailing a fogbank

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Why does that beauty lean against bamboo?  
Isn't that better than leaning in a doorway!  
But it is hard to get support from bamboo  
Still she endorses that slender stem  
The way Michael Jordan endorses Nikes

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Du Fu dreamed of sharing a hermitage with Li Bai  
They would take immortal medicine together  
Make their tree of poetry grow beyond this world  
Du Fu admired the mountain priest  
The wild swordsman of his youth  
But Li Bai was on the banquet circuit  
Still, when they met and talked poetry

Something still vibrated from gut to gut  
This was good for inspiration  
But Du Fu had great love for this world  
That he could only show through his family  
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A disturbing presence to welcome in one's dream:  
This man whose soul was haggard with care  
He had thrown in his lot with the wrong prince  
And he died where friends could not bury him  
But the two men had knit their souls together  
Their words were crucibles for each other  
So the friend who outlived the other  
Had to sum up their loss and gain  
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Shengdai—the “sagely reign”  
Was a word for that golden age  
Used by people who lived in it  
But that was before their cosmopolitan era  
Was shattered by rebellions  
Now that once-proud phrase comes to light  
Flung into unlikely corners  
Such as the name of a pretty Japanese girl  
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I've heard of ways some people found fame in the capital  
A hermitage on Zhongnan Mountain was supposedly their short-cut  
What a joke! That mountain is piled with human bones  
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Wang Wei tells of an old man  
Leaning against his cane  
He measures hours of waning light  
Waiting for a herdboy to come home  
But Wang Wei himself is the old man  
Waiting for a madman to sing  
Needing something to look forward to  
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Dream of a beautiful girl among the mulberries  
But seeing how she was selected for the harem  
Took the edge off of Wang Wei's fantasy  
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Above the tower of brick  
An unseen crystalline tower continues upward  
Once the trees are reduced to green velvet

What experiment can a poet try?

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A troubadour strides across the landscape of history  
He has heard a new summons to worship  
Sounded from the bell of a woman's dress  
But he grew up sword-fighting with other horsemen  
How can he stop trying to impress them?

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I am the cup he poured his wine into  
Words he spoke get written in my poems  
Low cloud and valley mist make one mist

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Path of words to a mountain hut  
A window-scene of rainy pines  
Where his absence is embedded  
Our loneliness goes to pay a visit  
Along words designed to omit him

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We borrow geese as a figure of distant flight  
Then continue leading the life they fly over  
We rarely visit the remote shores  
Where geese can safely rest their wings  
In tired hours we need to imagine them

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The old hermits went to a place  
Where we revisit their quietness  
Among plants that will keep growing  
But you trust your seclusion to a media screen  
I hope the plug to cyberspace is never pulled  
Otherwise, what space will ever remember you?

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The poets of our network  
Look earthward for their open space  
Their panorama is access to other hearts  
They ride the currents of human feeling  
The way an eagle rides an updraft

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Behold this party of cloud-borne immortals  
Each looks off into a different distance  
Where they have pledged to join each other  
In a party of immortals...

## QUESTION FOR A WINDOW-GAZER

In the barbershop I often walked past  
I used to see fantasy books through the window  
Sword-bearing elves and chimerical beasts on the covers  
Raymond Feist, David Eddings, *The Sword of Shahara*  
They were tossed onto the barber's personal shelf  
Next to a row of hair-cream bottles  
Every month a different grouping of titles  
I sometimes saw the barber between haircuts  
Reading in one of his customer chairs  
I have been in and out of town so often  
I can't pin down when the difference happened  
No more change in that grouping of books  
Four or five leaning, two of them flat  
Picture of colorful castle fading in the sunlight  
Always at that same left-behind angle  
The barber on slow afternoons, sitting in his chair  
No reading matter in his hands  
It's been at least two years now  
It must have been sometime after September 11th  
Some equally wrenching impact  
In the sphere of his personal life  
Broke the threads to his fond imaginings  
I have no interest in his cloud-capped towers  
It's something I passed on the way to a coffee shop  
But I wonder—what made him stop?  
And last week, the second week of September  
My roving eye registered a new question mark  
In the window, next to that old group of books  
For the first time, a cover in black and white  
A news photo of people all gesturing tensely

## THAT GOTHETTE

I look back into your story  
Like veins in this pendant of agate  
You had the face of a lady biochemist  
Who fled the laboratory to become an artist  
You had luminous white skin  
To myself I called you "That Gothette"  
Your father was a famous physicist  
He tied together a network of seismic sensors  
Predicted a major earthquake in Shandong  
Three months before the Tangshan Quake  
200,000 people dead in 1976  
The government was caught flat-footed  
I guess it was something like "Katrina" for them  
Maybe it shook China out of her Maoist dream  
You got a special education from geophysicist Dad  
Heard all his dinner talk about earth sciences  
Memorized the classical poems he loved  
He even had you recite poems in English  
I don't know why you didn't finish high school  
Your father belonged to a special research unit  
With his clout he arranged for home-schooling  
Again in college you only lasted three months  
You turned into a genuine recluse  
You copied seal-style characters from dictionaries  
Collected folk songs and old-time lyrics  
Wrote sheaves of poems outside of any social scene  
Archaic brew whipped in a post-modern blender  
With your own punk energy and a touch of sci-fi  
You reminded me of Emily Dickinson  
Around thirty, still living at home  
Until you watched that TV doc about a guard  
This was a prison guard who painted portraits  
He painted the criminals he guarded every day  
Not just a prison guard, but an artist  
And some kind of wild man who said  
"Officials should hang my pictures in the Statehouse  
It's time they looked human nature in the face!"  
Yes an artist, but due to barroom brawls as a student  
His art school recommended him for the worst kind of job

“Go to that prison and run the inmate art class” he was told  
The prison trained him to be a high-security guard  
Anyway he looked like an intelligent inmate  
Too bad, the art program never got off the ground  
But he had an art program of his own  
Every day after work, he’d paint for hours  
Immortalized the faces of rapists and thugs  
Until his work was spotted by Ai Weiwei  
That great renegade was putting together a show  
*Bu hezuo de fangshi*, Official Title: “Uncooperative Approach”  
1995 in Shanghai, the informal English title was “Fuck You!”  
One of the prison guard’s paintings was shown at that Expo  
It showed a convict locked in an isolation cage  
As guard he had to check the hot box hourly  
Saw the man masturbating again and again  
With electric brushstrokes caught the man’s caged wildness  
Of course that painting wasn’t shown on TV  
But the TV interview brought him national exposure  
Which was seen by you, the mysterious recluse  
You thought long and hard about it  
You wrote a letter to the prison guard  
Admired his love of the rawest human material  
You two started an epistolary friendship  
He took two weeks of vacation time  
Went to Beijing and courted you  
In time you went south to be his wife  
You arrived at the staff residence compound  
Brought along a truckload of books  
You learned to fit in as a prison guard’s wife  
Visited the sick ones, played mahjong sometimes  
Kept up your habit of late-night reading  
When his father in the old village had a stroke  
You stayed for weeks to care for the ailing man  
Each year you went to help in the cold season  
Several years as a prison guard’s wife  
Then he was hired by an art academy  
Only burning idealism could live on that salary!  
Your husband bragged about you in the salons  
Somebody knew that you knew a thing or two  
They paid you to write plans for a technology museum!  
But I never met anyone as quixotic as you  
You used to spin a dream of land rehabilitation

Wanted people to adopt pieces of scarred land  
Reward them with shares in good land  
Make an eco-region where minorities could come  
At dinner I heard developers laugh at your proposal  
But the two of you made me welcome in a new city  
Right away I could talk with both of you  
I went to your husband's canvas-heaped studio  
Those were great hours spent drinking coarse tea  
With your frequent guest who is a great poet  
And I used to take walks with you, Gothette  
You read my absurd unpublished papers  
I could see my thoughts mattered to someone  
Before I left, I shared a last meal with you  
You were even paler than before,  
You got lymphitis from staying in that village house  
Helping your in-laws during the cold season  
In sympathy I touched swollen glands in your neck  
That was the only time I ever touched you  
But I still keep the agate pendant you gave me  
You wanted me to remember your concern  
I want to get back to writing  
Write down ideas to entertain you  
At least I owe you this poem

## ANSWER FOR A WINDOW-GAZER

After noticing signs of a habit put aside  
I posed a question to myself—a window gazer  
The question stayed in my rough-draft notebook  
A year or two later, I wrote it as a poem  
My daughter who is favored by the muses  
And is the best reader a father could ask for  
Read my “Question for a Window Gazer”  
Then she looked up in surprise and said,  
“Dad, I heard a conversation in a coffee shop  
I think it had something to do with your poem!”  
One day my daughter sat in that independent café  
Once mentioned in the *New York Times*  
As one of those “third places” in our city  
A space for neighborhood and community  
And rival to the sign of the “Green Mermaid®”  
Two ladies met and sat at the neighboring table  
One removed a cap, let down her long chestnut curls  
Looked straight at her friend and spoke for a long time:  
“Thank you for meeting me here, this is a sad day  
In a few minutes I’ll go to my husband’s shop nearby  
Today I will begin my first course of chemotherapy  
He wants to be the one to cut my hair  
He doesn’t want to see it fall out in patches.”  
My daughter did not eavesdrop on purpose  
But this story was delivered to her sympathetic ear  
It tells me how someone’s dream was interrupted  
We hold onto dreams by filaments as fine as hairs  
When it comes time for wielding scissor blades  
May we never turn them against anyone else  
May we take care of our own



## DENIS MAIR

**Denis Mair** holds an M.A. in Chinese from Ohio State University and has taught at University of Pennsylvania. He is currently a research fellow at Hanching Academy, Sun Moon Lake, Taiwan. He translated autobiographies by the philosopher Feng Youlan (Hawaii University Press) and the Buddhist monk Shih Chen-hua (SUNY Press). His translation of art criticism by Zhu Zhu was published by Hunan Fine Arts Press (2009). He has translated poetry by Yan Li, Mai Cheng, Meng Lang, Luo Ying, Jidi Majia, Yang Ke, and others. He also translated essays by design critic Tang Keyang and art historian Lü Peng for exhibitions they curated respectively in 2009 and 2011 at the Venice Biennial. (See Lü Peng, *From San Servolo to Amalfi*, Charta Books, Milan, 2011).