

February

“Oh February. To get ink and weep!”
This line of Pasternak
is frequently quoted these days.
A line about happiness circulating
in this unfortunate time.

An iron-clad night.
(Someone scurrying downstairs?)
I lie awake in bed, berthed
as if on a dark ship.
Listening attentively
to my wife’s snoring,
I wonder if it releases the ship
into a vast, empty night.

Run, Rabbit

Not the rabbit Milosz met,
“riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn”—

Nor the rabbit, encircled by thousands
which I saw in a childhood rye field—

It appears amid dead silence
after a thirty-day lockdown,
startled and alert,

as if trapped by a beam of light
or escaping from our dreams,

or chased by a car-butcher
by its glaring, menacing eyes:

it’s a spirit, frightened,
making its last leap
before death catches up—

At the Former Residence of Yu Dafu

An early autumn, I walk past your door
when South China is sweetened by osmanthus.

The Fuchun River flows ceaselessly
still, a widened view when the willows are blown.

They chiseled a statue for you, a sixteen-year-old
casting a last glance at his hometown.

He never returned. A tumultuous life
ended in the forest of Sumatra.

But here you sit, sailing in a different time
as a riverful of tugboats come and go.

The Death of a Beekeeper

The death of Lao She, of Virgil, of Mandelstam,
and of doctors, nurses, and more doctors
is different from that of a beekeeper's:
In Xichang, Sichuan province, Liu Decheng
lived near a hillside of blossoming rapeseeds,
flanked by pagodas, burclovers, the clear smell of vitexes.
But the road was locked-down by red armbands.
With 176 packages of bees as his multi-part choir
("If you remain silent, you forget how to speak,"
this lone singer told others,) he couldn't resume his song
across the border of his province. His drinking buddy, the village chief
was a stranger now, ready to hew his hives
and make him mad. He howled at last on the hill
the ending lines that would frighten Lao She or Shakespeare,
then turned off his phone, already out of power.
His bee choir is now haphazard cries.
His bee choir is now a gust of wind from the ground,
smelling like lives, with the sound of dripping mud
from the four corners of a casket.
He died. In a tent no one dared to approach.
In a most silent spring. In a season where he had seen
the most luxuriant flowers growing.