

Virtuous Palaces

This week, the cherry blossoms sprang.
In whiteness, buds demurely hang.

The palaces with tourists swell.
Their histories they softly tell

Of kings and concubines in silk,
And poets drunk on booze like milk.

Inscribed in stone beside the stream
Their poems imbibe the sun's warm gleam.

Pavilions, multi-colored, spot
the hill's uniformly barren plot.

The lotus ponds retain a placid silence
Except for the pesky koi fish presence.

And through the garden's arched stone gates
Abiding adolescence waits.

An Unapplauded Theater

As writing is an unapplauded theater,
Performed beneath the hot and buzzing lamplight
Of a black desk, I started as a player
In Shakespeare tragedies. The famous playwright
Delivered his eternal, Delphic lines,
In colored scripts. Like Socrates, I knew
Nothing, but practiced looks and gentle signs
To swell a progress, start a scene or two.
In tawny suits and dressing gowns, I strutted
Through entrances and exits for an hour;
Through minstrels' merry songs and dances, muted
Laughter, and dull applause. And nothing more.
The playwright's sharpened pen and yellowed paper
Seemed mightier than Hamlet's poisoned rapier.

To Archilochus

O Archilochus, Greek father of the elegy,
How your biting lines will live in memory!
Soldier Poet of the personal, you fought for
Thasos, miserable city, under
Stalwart, cynical commanders. Beam-like weapons
Hurtled toward your bare chest. From your goose pen
Issued slanders, scorning Lycambes for broken
Promises. The family's honor shaken,
Everyone committed suicide. And did you yield?
No, the key is moderation. Good shields
Lost on battlefields deserve no female grieving.
Love and war are Moirai's fickle weaving.

Our Apprenticeship

Screw by screw, piece by piece, we disassemble
The entertainment center in the bedroom.
We twist the ancient bulbs, then fight and fumble
With the twin towers: double-doored and tomb-

Like cupboards, which as children we played hide-
And-seek in. Labeling the drawers and shelves
With masking tape and magic markers, we find
What duty suits us best. Our father solves

The issue of the nailed-in base. As Daedalus
To this obsolete invention, mazelike by
Today's Ikea standards, he reminisces
On his workshop. How many solitary

Hours he pursued the Golden Ratio?
Among the shriek of whirling razor blades,
We jumped and dropped his hammers on our toes,
Learning to break apart but not create.

Human Figures ('Ain Ghazal)

Reed-bundled twig bodies, like scanty scarecrows,
Support the fired plaster skin of sculptures
Buried in the shallow graves of 'Ain Ghazal.
Thirty-two dead-stiff figures, laid in rows,
They cradle their waists, like velociraptors.
Distended necks display their flattened skulls
Of cowrie-shelled and bitumen-defined
Eye sockets, flaring nostrils and tight lips
That spill no secrets. What religious rite
Did such a taciturn and weary kind
Of idol serve? The remains of relatives
Were ceremoniously interred inside
The homes, while they endured the elements.
The city's outcasts rotted in garbage pits.