

MARK WAGENAAR

A Reply to Du Mu From the South

Du Mu looks up from a letter he's writing to us
twelve centuries ago,
a letter edged with a description of the four hundred eighty temples
of the Southern dynasties—
what they did with their idleness,
with a need they couldn't explain.

Old friend, the same wind
that lifted the corners of the rice paper
around your hand
riffles wild white yarrow & black-eyed Susans
in the field beyond the burned church.

Here, as many empty porches & boarded windows as Southern temples.
Tractors rust beneath grass, county roads dissolve to gravel,
the walkers on the bridge
vanish. Where do they go,
the ones who move on without a word,
who leave toys in the back yard, utility bills on the front door?

Here, a little sunshine & a wine-dark spill of deer's blood
across the county line,
orange sun-spotted pagodas
of wild tiger lilies in the ditches

off the rain-tamped white dust of Elk Chapel Road,
a straight shot to the polestar.
So much I can't explain,
so much forgotten or unfinished,
if you can tell the two apart.

Old friend, I'll be forgotten.