

TO DU FU ON 14TH AUGUST C. 750 A.D.*

M.L. McCarthy

(On reading Keith Holyoak's English versions of his shorter poems)

Saluted by an endless drone of flies,
This brutal, stifling, humid August lies
In predatory sprawl on the thick air.
Oh, for great fields of ice, to wander there
Barefoot!—but here the poet, belted, gowned,
Sits at his desk. His fingers prowl around
His itchy, sweaty waist; now touch his head,
Push the thick cap a little up. His bed
Brought no repose: he will not sleep tonight,
Nervy, restless, fearing beetles, the spite
Of sullen, savage summer's scorpion-brood;
Nor will his stomach toy with any food.
Besieged by piles of papers, stunned by heat,
He toils at tasks he never will complete!
New tasks come: he must deal with those, and these.
He's one of the imperial secretaries—
Fortunate man! If heatstroke doesn't kill,
He'll earn his cash-strings, keep his family, still.

Ah, great Du Fu, your country's glory—then
A prisoner in an office, contingency's den:
Twelve trundling centuries will not crush your name,
Nor dim the bright star of your deathless fame!
But deathless fame won't help you: you'll be dead.
Oh, for some present happiness instead
Of statues in a garden! Our delight
Of red outlanders brings your feverish night
No cooling blessing in a gentle breeze.
Perhaps our smiles, our ignorant praises, tease
More than mosquitos. Yet, from eternity,
Unshackled from clogging hours, perhaps you see
With some indulgence, even with some pleasure,
McCarthy marvel at your muse's treasure,
Displayed in Holyoak's vigorous, elegant phrases.
Perhaps, even, though August stuns and dazes
Your hot office, one second through your mind
A freshening zephyr flits, breath of one kind
Admiring impulse out of my today,
Dear comrade-poet, centuries away.

**Gregorian calendar date estimated by Prof. William Hung of Harvard*

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