

# By Degrees

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*For Christine Burn*



## *Shanghai in November*

A reminder on Facebook  
to wish you happy birthday

even though you've been gone  
for three years.

Then in the afternoon a ginkgo tree;  
its leaves abandoning it

when brushed with  
the slightest breeze.

There's an ease to letting go  
that doesn't feel right,

the weight of this tree's  
squandered gold

and how it's swept away,  
the embarrassment it causes

the street-sweepers.  
This city has no room

for the seasons of loss,  
see, even this moment causes discomfort:

*Why is that foreigner staring?  
Why is his head in his hands?*

## *By Degrees*

The security guard puts the gun to my head  
then clicks. He turns it to show me: 36 degrees

and waves me in, his expression hidden  
behind his mask, his eyes vacant.

I walk around the almost empty supermarket.  
No eggs, no veg, the milk sold out, less pasta

than three days ago. Chinese New Year music  
still plays on the store's radio, its merriness

like a slap. People queue up rather than use self-service,  
nervous to touch what others have touched.

Heading back I see my apartment is sealed off  
I must walk round the back, to the other entrance

guarded now by five policemen with temperature guns.  
I go in and they scan me again: 37 degrees.

Other cities don't have it like this.  
Going out like this is a privilege.



## *The Virus at My Window*

The street below us is still firmly shut  
apart from the realtor's, for some reason,  
and the fruit shop, with its oranges and dragon fruit.

Everyone going past is wearing masks  
and walking slowly, as though on tiptoe,  
as though having nowhere to go.

It's quiet too. The winter smog drifts like a sinister mist,  
and the woman next door plays her new piano,  
bought in a moment of quarantined boredom.

She gives it up and we hear the birds: pigeons  
and sparrows – rare to hear them – and then  
the distant mewling of an ambulance siren.

It's heading this way, and everyone on the street  
stops to watch it. It's passing, it isn't slowing down.  
The people on the street breathe, then keep walking.

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