

Hervé Le Tellier. **Enough About Love.** Adriana Hunter, tr. New York. Other Press. 2011. 231 pages. \$11.95. ISBN 978-1-59051-399-6

There are many things to like in this smart, droll, finely crafted novel—and not least the sleek narrative symmetries that animate it. There are two married couples here, Louise and Romain, Anna and Stan. Hervé Le Tellier conjures up two lovers, Thomas and Yves, to put those couples dramatically into question. These individuals meet, and sometimes connect, two by two, weaving in and out of each other's lives in closely calculated patterns. Le Tellier stages their meetings with the satisfying ineluctability of theater. He confirms the notion of “play,” moreover, when he intimates that he has relied on a game of dominoes to help him structure the intrigue. And not just any game of dominoes, but Abkhazian dominoes, a variant of the common game, played in the near reaches of the Caucasus. As practiced in Tqvarcheli, Pskhu, or Gulripsh, that game deploys as many sets of dominoes as there are players, minus one: any tile put into the chain may be removed and replayed, and the game may last a very, very long time. A perfect recipe, in short, for a novel. So perfect, in fact, that the question of whether that game exists in the phenomenal world or only in an alternative, Borgesian one makes very little difference.

We are put on notice early in this novel that “an attentive reader will always learn more, and more quickly, from good authors than from life.” Lest we imagine that Le Tellier makes such a remark in an exclusively self-serving perspective, he peppers his text with allusions to

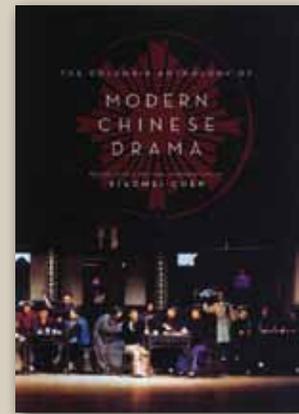
other good authors, principally but not exclusively his colleagues in the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Oulipo), an effect that brings another consideration to the fore. This is a book about love, certainly, but it is also a book about love stories, and the way in which those stories play out according to their own logic. Watching Hervé Le Tellier conduct that process as he leads his characters in and out of love, one is reminded that literature, too, is an affair of the heart.

Warren Motte
University of Colorado

Viivi Luik. **Varjuteater.** Tallinn, Estonia. Eesti Keele Sihtasutus. 2010. 309 pages. €18.21. ISBN 978-9985-79-326-8

Viivi Luik (b. 1946) is a brilliant poet whose novels *Seitsmes rahukevad* (The seventh spring of peace) and *Ajaloo ilu* (1991; Eng. *The Beauty of History*, 2007) received much international acclaim. Her third novel, *Varjuteater* (The shadow play), was awarded the 2010 Cultural Award of the Republic of Estonia. The novel consists of thirteen memorial essays in which autobiographism is this time explicit. The work concentrates on Luik's Rome years (1998–2003), when she lived together with her husband, ambassador and writer Jaak Jõerüüt (“who has been my home in the world”), dodging now and again into the realities of her childhood in Berlin and Finland.

The composition originates from a deep déjà-vu experience that lies at the heart of her identity, reveals itself in different manifestations, and amounts to a general state of mind. Luik feels that her entire life has been nothing but a voyage toward Rome. It started when she was only three and saw a picture of

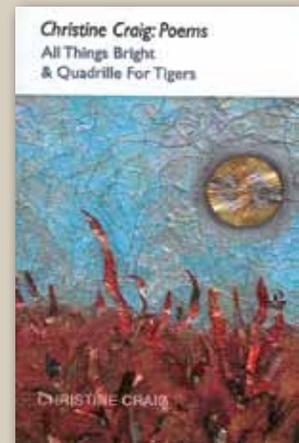


Xiaomei Chen, ed.

The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Drama

Columbia University Press

Editor Chen has compiled twenty-two plays for this anthology of modern Chinese drama, dating from 1919 to 2000. These plays illustrate Chinese theater's ability to accurately reflect “national and gender identities” in seasons of change that have affected China, both politically and socially.



Christine Craig

All Things Bright and Quadrille for Tigers

Peepal Tree Press

Described as “metaphysical,” Jamaican poet Craig uses this anthology of her poems to explain, with brutal honesty, her affection for and uneasiness toward her home island. “In the curve of the beach / . . . see across the islands / our daughters are growing / all our beauty / all our riches are one.”

the Colosseum on the muddy and bloody floor of the house of deportees, and became clear in a flash of lightning in October 1998 when she finally arrived in the Eternal City. For half a century, the Almighty knew that this precocious child and that pensive grown-up were the same person who has spent her lifetime between the stones, scooters, and cafés of the Whore of Babylon.

The image of the shadow play divides reality in two: outside there is an everyday bustle of superficial masks, behind which glimmers a sense of unity of mankind. These two spaces are separated by a temple screen like a sheet of ice located in her inner self, between people, positions, and faiths, but which may also transform into an Iron Curtain. Luik has always tried to break through that wall to experience the glory of happiness “when the human masks disappear *and all living beings turn into one breed.*” Still, despite her enduring passion to feel a common love, she has also learned to accept agnosticism: “In Rome you’ll understand that you don’t know what it is all about, even that you shouldn’t know. Live.”

The author follows the urgent recommendation of a German critic in her novel: “Write only about what you are most ashamed of—don’t lie!” Thus the undertone of her work is shaped by the inevitability of facing death. The last chapter describes her father’s funeral back home and a Jewish shadow show in Berlin, which appear as a quintessence of Rome: the candle is out, and while it seems that nothing more is expected, “the dead are rising again, stamp their feet on the floor, and sing a new brave song. And people are laughing.”

The melancholy of eternity alternates with mild (self-)irony. Luik makes fun of the clumsy Estonians in contrast with elite Europeans. On the other hand, she mocks “the cultivated indifferent impudence” of Italians who prefer shallow entertainment to thoughtful communication. Forget shyness and offer your lonely neighbor a first flower of spring that has penetrated through the snow: “No way this earth and these muddy spades can ever harm you.”

Arne Merilai
University of Tartu

Fred McGavran. **The Butterfly Collector.** New York. Black Lawrence. 2009 (rel. 2010). 191 pages. \$16. ISBN 978-0-9815899-5-4

“The link between butterflies and dreams is poorly understood.” So begins the title story of this wry and witty collection, narrated by a henpecked husband who, it turns out, has Alzheimer’s disease. So the reader has doubts, even as the story begins. It is not just unusual; it is bizarre for the narrator to be the victim of a mental condition he can’t control. But his condition isn’t pitiable; it is comical. He is collecting butterflies by catching them in his hand, not in a net, and not outdoors but in the insect cage of a zoo, muttering to himself as he does so, about how boring his wife and her mother are, about how glad he is to capture a butterfly and take it home with him, where he can release it and marvel at its fluttering, which conjures up exotic and colorful images in his muddled brain. One can imagine James Thurber drawing a cartoon of him.

Fred McGavran’s characters tend to be eccentrics who inhabit

a world of humdrum people from whom they are trying to escape. There is the beautician whose specialty is making corpses appear life-like in the coffin, the amputee who still nurses his phantom limb, or the young historian who seduced the woman he married with stories of the scandalous behavior of Roman emperors. These eccentrics are distinctive individuals, conscious non-conformists, while the normal people all seem depressingly alike, unaware of how mundane and trivial their lives really are. As you read these stories you find yourself laughing at the misfortunes of those who deliberately break social conventions to avoid boredom and others who are trapped in them and can’t break out. *Ennui*, Baudelaire once wrote, is the besetting sin of bourgeois society, and all McGavran’s characters are decidedly bourgeois, whether they are happy or unhappy. They are mostly unhappy, but the author’s humorous treatment keeps the reader from pitying them.

The humor is understated and often wicked. There is not a single story without it, and McGavran’s fiction is infused with a sort of subdued laughter that bubbles up, no matter how outlandish or implausible the plot. “Breaking Cover,” for instance, is about a man whose arm is shrunken from polio but who once killed a bear and loves to tell the story of how he did it, varying it each time so that “the story was either hysterically funny or more frightening than a recurring nightmare.” McGavran’s narrator may be a lawyer (his own profession when he isn’t writing stories), or a real estate agent, or a minister, but he is never exactly the same person, and the setting may be a retirement home or a comfortable suburban