

Philip E. Burnham, Jr.

Mailing a Manuscript of Poems at the Post Office

“Does this envelope contain anything fragile, liquid, perishable or potentially hazardous?”

...anything fragile . . . ?

From the Latin verb, *frango, frangere*, to break, to shatter
A fragment of the Greek, *hregnumi* (‘) Ⓞ } J [[), also to break,
As in waves or battle lines or outbursts of emotion,
So if the question is, is there anything fragile here, the answer is yes,
For there is the sea and war and tears
Set out in words composed of inconstant letters
Which may break up or down for any reason
Into other words or fracture into singularity,
Although here within this envelope
They appear to be assembled in a momentary order.

. . . anything . . . liquid . . . ?

From the Latin adjective *liquidus* (so close, so close), fluid, flowing,
The poets Horace, Vergil and Catullus, users all,
The tributary ancient Greek, *leibo* (Ⓛ Σ [Ⓜ), to pour forth
As in libations, springs and perhaps speech,
So if the question is, is there anything liquid here, the answer is I hope so
For there is metre here and rhyme
A current of verse running from line to line
Spilling out of the mind and onto paper
To be blotted dry lest it flow away
In some imagined urgency to be elsewhere.

. . . anything . . . perishable . . . ?

From the Latin verb *pereo, perire*, to pass away, to vanish,
Apparently unrelated to the Greek (or did that connection vanish?)
But said of shoes, of ships, of sealing wax, of cabbages and kings,
Of love and life, of law and lust,
So if the question is, is there anything perishable here, the answer is I believe so.
For there is much talk of what must pass away,
Of wives or husbands, family and friends,
Of memory and skills, of appetite and time,

And finally, the poems themselves to disappear,
Discarded, banned or burned or come to paper's dust.

. . .anything . . .potentially hazardous?

From the Latin adjective, *potis*, able or capable, filled with potential,
And from the French *hasard*, of risk or chance or danger
Stolen from the Arabic *az-zahr*, a game of dice
Winning or losing in uncertainty against the universe,
So if the question is, is there anything potentially hazardous here, I say yes
For there is the possibility of danger
In confession, revelation, provocation or surprise,
And of something to be risked,
Throwing the dice of letters where they may become words
Then, perhaps, be judged, remembered or forgotten.

A Floating World

It is the first day of spring,
On the table a ceramic mug
Steams with aromatic tea,
Outside light snow is falling
Through the sleeping trees.

On the mug's surface
A woodblock print by Hokusai,
Blues and whites and grays:
It is the Great Wave
Off Kanagawa.

Imported from Japan,
Inscribed with *kanji*,
The Great Wave curls forever
Over yellow fishing boats
Under distant *Fuji-san*.

The porcelain and the wave
Are both unbroken, unlike
The great *tsunami* that swept
Over the prefectures
Of the eastern shore.

When the earth trembled,
The sea gathered her depths
To fling them carelessly
On to the busy land
Breaking the afternoon.

The sea, the waves, the mountains,
All children of Izanami,
Born after the chaos,
Become the chaos
While she entered the Land of Darkness

Leaving a world of silence,
The silence of birds,
The silence of poets,
A silence of spirits,
A floating world of silence

Just as spring was coming
There was a silence of snow
White flakes falling as a shroud
Over the lives of the lost
Where once there were plum blossoms.

Philip E. Burnham, Jr. has been writing poetry for over fifty years. He served as Vice-Consul in Marseille, France, and then taught Medieval History in secondary schools in the Boston area. His poetry has appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *IbbetsonStreet*, *Lyric*, *Seventh Quarry* and other journals. He has published four books of poems, including *My Neighbor Adam* (Mellen, 2003), *Housekeeping* (Ibbetson 2005) and *A Careful Scattering* (Cervena Barva, 2007). He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.