

SILKWORM

I XI LING JI DRINKS TEA

beneath a mulberry tree. A white cocoon drops
 into her steaming cup, its shiny fibre
unwinds, long lustrous filaments
 she wraps around her finger.

Goddess of Silk, she weaves the cloth of kings.

II THE CHINESE GUARD THE SECRET OF SILK

for thousands of years. To reveal the secret
 meant death. A princess hides silkworm eggs,
 seeds of the mulberry in her headdress.

Two Byzantine monks return to the east, eggs and seeds
 hidden in the hollow
 of their bamboo walking sticks.

The secret spreads though Europe.

III ONCE, CHINESE WOMEN WERE DEVOTED

to feeding and tending them, to the unravelling,
 the spinning and weaving. An honour
 to raise the silk.

We breed the moths blind and wingless now.
 No longer able to live in the wild.

To harvest silk, we boil the worm in its own cocoon.

IV. IN THE ROOMS WHERE THEY ARE RAISED

the sound of silkworms is the sound of rain
on a bamboo roof.