

Rendering voices

a poem for the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible

To begin on the Bible  
To be caught by the rise of a huge wave breaking  
To know all the conflict and chaos to be faced  
If their book could not command  
The nation, the language, in a foment of becoming.  
They heard Scripture's ancient voices, remote,  
Tasting of the desert,  
Its longing, in a strange land.

Their task they called  
A paradise of trees of life. Long hard years  
They walked in this forest,  
Dividing it into six sections,  
Into exercise books, trading  
Sigla and suggestions in rooms  
Where kings had died and disciplines  
Had been invented.

They threw strained eyes up at ceilings  
Of hammer-beams, at gilt stars.  
Every section was read aloud, the company  
Some with eyes closed, some stroking pomaded beards,  
Listening like poets at a workshop  
For a false footfall, for any hint  
Of ugliness. Only the words that formed  
Like birds in the mouth, only they survived.

The ancient voices still arrive out of the past  
Like a time capsule. They are smuggled



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*Dedicated to my godmother Barbara William-Olsson (1921-2010), who gave me my  
first copy of the King James Bible. Love suffers long, and is kind.*