A tall gent taps me on the shoulder, points to the sign I wouldn’t read and says in perfect English, ‘Chum, can’t you read? It says eight items only, savvy?’ I search hastily for a tongue to pretend I’m Spanish, French or a Lithuanian. And sheepish go through, while the whole queue stands and stares and the lass on the till registers my error without the blink of an eye.

BRUSH STROKES
FOR THE COURTESAN

How to bear the sadness?

She lights more joss sticks.

Her lord is scraping his ink block, readying for more powerful strokes.
His calligraphy re-scribes Li Bai.

She knows the eight strokes, the agile brush.

Despite his years of care he would write her epitaph with resolute touch.

Yet her heart beats on stubbornly, like the scrape scrape of the inkstone and the lash of the brush.