

LAURENCE BREINER

Three Poems

Jason in China

for Mary Campbell

“news has a kind of mystery”

Strictly speaking, he’s in a tent.
The tent pegs are driven into China.
His feet tread on China.
Sometimes on China he reclines.

He’s slept abroad before.
Whenever he wakes like this,
encased in his tent,
staring up at the ridgepole,

one slow deep breath
is the first search for clues
what place is this,

where am I now?

Every happy camper knows it:
if you smell only this earth,
nothing but life, going on,
you cannot stay where you are.

You have to get out and look
at the flat, or the rolling,
or the craggy ground,
and wait for something telling to show.

There may be a billboard

Welcome to China

- There you have it,
time for breakfast,
this is your lucky day.

More often nature itself advert:
the national beast,
if it's not too shy,
runs up to lick your face.

Or some quaint way of building
recognized from a book,
or a funny-looking truck,
can meet the eye half-way.

There may be a native speaker,

or better, two natives, speaking,
oblivious to you
and your gaping tent flap.

Are they sharing some fruit
grown only in beautiful wherever?
You needn't know their lingo;
the thing is, can you place it?

So he wakes in his tent.
He breathes, he sees;
with one thing and another
the land makes sense around him.

When Jason, in China, knows it;
when China becomes him
like a cap with a logo,
he'll tell you what it means to be in China.

At home, your phone is ancient as a commissar's,
black as a cabinet of memory
in some bleak western province
where words are carried on the wind.

Bad connections have frazzled the wires.
The bells inside, pinched from a shrine
where no one misses them much,

await the impulse from Asia.

Ask him, when he calls,
could he smell China, first thing?
Was there a scent of panda,
or revisionism, blowing in the wind?

Are the coin slots square on his payphone?
Are there lions? Must he whisper to you
through a chink in the Great Wall
under a mulberry in moonlight?

Ask: does he call out
in his sleep,
in his tent,
in China?

Your voice, while you speak,
is in China;
his voice, while he speaks,
is at home.

Make him talk China to you.

Machu Picchu

Just here, the surf of Asia cast the last jewel of its spray;
roared up, broke on those peaks, and scoured a desert in its wake.
Like tidal pools left somehow two miles up, these ridges,
nearly jungles, steep and impenetrable and lush with orchids,
their beauty grown inaccessible by its own abundance,
these are such earthly paradise as earth has known.

Clouds ceremonious and pensive as gods drift through the streets
of this haven some child of heaven made for those he loved.
From here, bright fields terraced with stone drop down for miles,
so sheer a drop, the countless terraces seem to be moving,
overlapping like scales, feathers, wrinkles in skin;
the rhythm of their bounding walls blesses the eye.

Below, the rapids (nearly a moat for this mountain) buckle with light.
This place, though ruined, seems timeless, and the river too
says nothing of time passing, or history in its plunge.
Every detail of its chatter is heard up here, and none regarded;
whether two streams of ants meet and destroy each other,
or the armies of two hemispheres, those sounds come from another world.

"This was the king's apartment, this his consort's. This, . . ."

the guide has no idea what life was lived in these bare rooms
or how that life was lived, with what delight, what dignity,
what sense, always, of occasion (as the place itself demanded).
Here the sound of the wind, and the wings of the condor soaring on it,

and the panpipe it blows across, and the breathing of the piper,
and the tang of the thin air in his lungs, were all one music.

In this thinness of light, and air, and earth itself; on this bevelled edge,
life flickers. So dwarfed by circumstance, they must, when they spoke,
have placed their words like masonry. Where every inflection echoed,
they grew eloquent in the shift of their shoulders under a cloak.
Each movement had to strike its deal with gravity, so jealous here
at its last outpost, where simply to raise a cup and set it down
said who you were, who you could be, what you deserved from the world.

Yet the natural state of dwellers in this scanty eden must have been elation.
To feel the cold air and the hot sun, to see space open around them,
and the granite gardens flourishing - simply to exist
in such a place - must have made them breathless with pleasure.
Here in the continent's sequestered heart, how they must have cherished one
another.

In a corner full of light, an old woman plays the bulky harp of Peru.
Her face under a woolen cap seems motionless, a chasm of memory;
her hands upon the strings seem not to move, and yet she sings.
The tourists dream what might have been; she sees what was.
This ruined town - this home - so desolate, so close to heaven,
is her song:

*When they were higher
and the roofs were on,
these rooms were ours.*

*This is the finest stonework in the world;
blocks fitted together without a gap,
so nothing can come between them.
We meant it, built it to tell our truth:
nothing can come between us.
The stones still stand;
They shelter nothing;
the wind blows over them.*

*Each day, when the sun strikes this corner,
I bring out the song of my loss.
I reproach the god who defies love,
I reproach the destroyer of worlds.*

*That is the spell you feel here, traveler,
the high, thin music that haunts the place.
The wind will sing it;
it will grow into the reeds
before they are cut for flutes.*

*I have taught this earth
the song of my defiance,
my lost America,
my love.*

Love's Geography

There is a world where you and I,
beyond all other passions, love each other
as a man loves the green earth he wakes to
when his life is sweet.

Nights are enormous there;
a warm sea pounds the reef.
It streams so still and clear under the palms,
only to glance from shore and see you swimming
is sure possession.

It can't be far. Chance winds
bring me its nutmeg air,
baffling as desire.
And when I see you unexpectedly
or think I hear your voice,
what heats my blood is the hot sun of that place
and its salt spray stings in my eyes.

It's not so far as you are from me now,
so nearly almost touching as we are,
one of us on the ship, one on the pier.
Between, so far below, a strip of sea
that somewhere joins that sea.

The lines are all undone and cast aside;
One of us is on the way there.
If, in the next instant, we could tell which,

the other could jump.