

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: THE BLIGHTED STARFRUIT: POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS

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Starting and ending with travel, *The Blighted Starfruit* collects the poems of a writer working through his apprenticeship. The writer explores the limits of prosody and literary precursors in search of a manner and company his voice can press up against. The initial section collects the manuscript's shorter lyric poems, culminating in a series, 'Enigma Variations,' unified by form. The following section consists of translations from Haizi. The collection ends with 'Riverwolf,' a piece that renders the excursive nature of this poet's mind into the form of a long poem. If the writer's manner can be characterized around the notion of travel, it is a travel that defines itself as a middle state where departure and arrival co-exist. The work at hand displays a student's efforts to come into a particular sensibility by trying to figure his self—body, mind, and experience—within the landscape of whom he's read.

THE BLIGHTED STARFRUIT: POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS

By

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MFA

*He knocks at all doors, strays and roams,
Nay, hath not so much wit as some stones have,
Which in the darkest nights point to their homes,
By some hid sense their Maker gave;
Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
And passage through these looms
God order'd motion, but ordain'd no rest.*

—Henry Vaughan

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“Initial of Creation, and/ The Exponent of Earth—”

To pass through astonishment and know much too late.
And because something about habit makes us strange
I find myself searching a landscape that generates questions
beyond its ability to solve.

That dark post
out there might be this poem standing as you would—
lead in the 4th grade play—under theater lights
and your shadows that petal around you. And what
should be most memorable isn't. I recall
those prolonged moments of silence incongruous
and revealing as metaphor most frequently.
For instance: waiting at the bus stop in Pai in
a mid-morning the hue of the road-side guardrails
that dot the cliff's side like Morse code. Before leaving
with trees (those felled, ones half-painted white, the burnt trunks...)
that passed by like the so many phenomena
of our days blurred together into a motion,
at times, convincing as a nickelodeon's,
I waited under the thatched roof of the station
with other travelers. With each in our common
solitude risen around like that Haydn piece
in the tunnel I descended into on my
way out onto Broadway from the 1 train some months
ago it seemed of Hopper. Starfruit on the ground
discolored, withering, blighted. Three of the town's
strays hobbled by before mid-day's heat stalled the town
like some lost Stephano, Trinculo and their lamed,
dark sycophant—at least that's what they were for me.
It wasn't comfort, never comfort, but something else.

And when each moment with expectations for more
than it can hold leads to the next and soon—as then—
expectation fills up the day as does your breath
a balloon, the day moves with such care and strange hours.
And both pleasure and pain are motions of the soul...
Plato wrote—poetry’s banisher, beauty’s guard.

I.

Suburban Eclogue

Volgar succede...

Again, the streets empty this early hour
on Sunday evening except those two
—now married?—walking their pugs before the work
week, the occasional car passing by
in the middle of the widened streets
found in suburbs. The lone dribbling's ceased,
the girl next door called in for dinner and homework.
Dusk turns on the porch lights. The yards make sure
that facing windows here are far apart.
I'm de-veining snow peas (with enough to save
for lunch tomorrow) and boiling water. The deer
will gather on lawns and driveways as they do
nightly, and parents will close their windows soon
as Mom did for the room which Matt and I shared.
With tongue clicks, we, as kids, would beckon the deer
in our own driveway, anxious, seeking to be
looked at with another kind of sight.

the flailing dance-floor,
Band-side towards
an abandoned beer—
Tepid, flat,
but free. The frenzied
Score's stopped,
stopping the crowd.
A new singer
sings an old song:
The heroine crooned
and crooned 'til all cried:
An entertainer's tears
mistaken for
Laughter, fistfuls
of lifted loot
The embezzling bartender
put back,
The imbibing blubbering
in nickel beers.
How you're drawn
to her, her
Only song
sung too sad.
What curious courting
and conversation
Led to, leash
loosely in hand,
Made my knees
knock the nightstand,
The rap ringing
through empty room,

A week's worth
of mail wobbled.
And elegy
too your every
Dance and disobedience,
body drawn
And entangled
as an ampersand,
And I'm lost laughing
for your inexhaustible limbs.

Enigma Variations

Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?
—Giorgio de Chirico

Poem: Banyan Tree

Leaf down,
ground-seeking roots,
aerial seeds, tangled
trunks afar a crowd of headless
corpses.

Grey bark.
Ground-seeking roots
(as crib and canopy
Sakyamuni and Crusoe
here dwelled)

latticed
around the host.
Caprifigs bearing wasps.
The wasps encircle different figs
than I.

nihil in intellectus quod nisi prius in sensu

Some sprays first on the wrist, and then the place
behind the ears, and so the body's trace
simply a scent. Before the bathroom mirror
flecked with toothpaste I stand, nail clippings pain
lodged in my foot, those inexact moons waning.

With headphones on and batteries long dead,
I pass the beggar, an allusion unglossed.
The elevator lifts us up to work—
a crowd that's conjured by averted glances.
(I wait, rooted no matter what the stance is.)

The coming storm now crowds my mouth.
Soon umbrellas all will sound
like bulbs now useless. Until then, part
those clustered pigeons grouped and heart-
shaped, their throated calls abound.

In Terraced Fields Just Outside of Mili

Me this hour stills.

A wooden handle, a metal blade,
two hands not callused in the cornfields.

A cleft in dirt from a hoe upturning
rain-softened mud

which buries green
once rooted in it; not with hands,
but by them, sweaty with dirt staining
the quicks. And over the far plain,
from mass the birds

articulate
to go where their bodies will. With calm,
look, Gerald, at the pre-mature
blister, that hidden sun, on your
suburban palm.

China. Yunnan. Honghe. Mili.

Polyneices to Antigone

Poly. What has come of this, my kin, you who have returned
to me; you, now gone, to be sealed apart from us?
Some dogs last night approached me with their hunger. *Friends,*
eat, I said, *if only to be hungry less*
an hour. My body now picked at, twice-buried, and cursed.

Chor. O limits speech obliterates.

Poly. My parched, shapeless wounds
the wine you poured burned. With high winds the near forest
will sound the sea, the sea my Argive ship crossed, home-bound:
stink of pitch, the smell of burning pine-torch. The shore is
again praised, with those dead, by the Theban guards and chorus.

Who but you could have guided him, our father and
our sibling? After such public grief, you, bound with rope,
led towards your cave—womb of this inconsolable land;
and above ground—for days the sun might vanish, I hope—
I dwell, with birds and dogs feeding of me, this corpse—

Rest Stop

Airing out my feet, I caught an ant
on the top-most ridge of my empty boot,
raising him to his hind legs with my thumb,
brushing away crumbs with my other hand,
damp from driving so long,

while he uttered, “What, then, is it that I measure?”
I tumbled the Algerian confessor,
first scout seeking among pupas of gum
a life from which there’s something you should guess for,
to the bench from the tongue.

Anne’s just come out with jean-dried hands, tired smile.
In the past eighty-seven houseless miles
another state line crossed (our separate homes
require us), words just from the tape deck while
our bodies grow stiff while drawn.

Into Carthage...

unseen because divinely enshrouded—

 how history-swallowed the arrival was
for you. Unstarved treason: you, fate-yoked,
 emerged from the infinite translucence of mist
brought out against that *O* of your bronze shield

 and what it gleams about destination.

The torch will come soon. A Late Waker's shut eyes
 and that stupor when they open: it is light
which can't be kept out. That atop what I own
 I might blur as syllable-thickened air.

The fog, refleshing somewhere below my room,
 through alleys leading men to market,
generous with let light...the fog
 from which you once stepped forth into my streets
makes inexact your departing white-sailed ships.

Before the Third Dream

In Ulm. 10 November 1619

...and curled in the leaden belly of the stove,
unbidden, I've ceded from the blue sun,
enveloped the way silence is with a lone
gunshot. Refuge from dawn, the city's edge,
and then the river made taller with boats

with bolts of cloth gone eastward. With the true
diadem an excess of the sun,
the anthem comes in angles. Swollen feet.
Both neck and back now ache, event dull-sheened
as my aged, used pistol out in the room—

side A adjoined to C in—

The worst:

the letter from father lost. Always the sun.
Beneath the Hapsburg claim and this tattered coat,
you—mis-proportioned Jonah—doubt the sights,
the navel the specter of birth between country and host...

Self-Portrait with Actaeon

More than vision doubt is needed
as proof as river unfastens to sea,
bank to shore. The soon-to-be-slaked caribou,
with cautious steps, upstream steps,
antler-budding head surveying the scene

as I would if it had human ken.
Should I be apologetic
for the boundaries of sight gods also get lost by?
Snow-shadows around tree trunks.
The snow-gowned field, hoof-holed and regenerative.

Convinced of solitude it lowers
its head the way a ballerina
would her leg; my hesitant approach not for truth
as much as access to it
towards the upturned palm of the delta.

Elegy Written at Yuantong Temple

That ash holds up the incense ashing away:
this afternoon a breeze called back your word
 and storied urn, Tom Gray,
 trailing from the wood-
plank tub before me smoke limbs trying to stay.

Often I'd sit by the magnolia tree,
bare save one bud unfolding for weeks now, hidden
 from the activity
 near the front gate, the wooden
tub, and the pond surrounded by the people

setting free pets. Not ready for home, some of
this noon I spent pond-side. The day I lost
 cleaved soundly. The surface calm was,
 with the stale bread I tossed,
broken by the massed carp becoming commas.

China. Yunnan. Kunming

At the Cloisters

The oscillating fan here in the room
hums. The makers' names are long forgotten:
lonely in the millefleurs,
the unicorn—secured
by collar and fence—spotted by spearwounds.

There's nothing more than vision at a remove
left for us. Allegory; these salvaged halls;
the shame absence brings woven
with the hunters' leaving,
where willed together are the seasons' blooms.

The city can resist with metaphors too,
parables ourselves. In wasted trust
I'll stay the comfort of
the foxglove's speckled tongue
disguised, spoken in weakened solitude.

II.

from the Chinese of Haizi

Dawn (II)

Dawn holds the cup of her own son's fresh blood
Holding me, brightness' twin brother
Walking on the ancient Persian plateau
Open country of holy scriptures
The sun's light like flood water's over-brimming onto the two shores of the plain
Sprouts radiant wheat like sabers' edges
Walks all over India and Tibet
From there I trek distances walk all over India and Tibet
On snow mountains, jagged rocks and a lion that seeks
The Sky's daughter and poetry
The Persian plateau also the native ground's summit before I'd been exiled

The plateau ground that accepts the bright words I've spoken
The open field is all grain and barns
Blanketing resentment
And the dark mother of blessing
O maternal Earth, your evenings all belong to you
Your darkness all belongs to you, then why not give me dawn
Let the girl wear tender lips the likeness of bouquets
Let the girl for me wear lips the likeness of flames
Let the skull of primordial night lift
Let gods from in my skull rise afloat
A Sky blood-red light flushed from a battlefield
The fire within fire, he has a coarse name: Sun
And Revolution, she has a naked body
That is walking a line and dissipating

Teardrops

The last of the summit's leaves slowly redden
The mountain range seems a poor child's grey and white horses
In October's final night
Fallen into a pool of blood.

In October's final night
The poor child, carrying a lamp in night, is on his way home tear-flow covers the
face
All die midway to the distant home's small town
In October's final night

That man with his back to the tavern's white wall
Ask about the man buried in the pea-field at home
In October's final night
Ask for whom the white horse and the grey horse die.....blood blackish-red

Whether their master, carrying a lamp, has returned home or not
Whether the specter of autumn is keeping him company or not
Whether they are all corpses or not
All madly stampeding on that road to the Abyss

Whether this specter opens a window for me
To toss me a worn-out collection of poems
In October's final night
From now on I'll never write you.

Misfortune

—for Hölderlin

1) Wine in Sickness

Lifted up a sickbed

My Hölderlin he just lies on this one bed

Horse frenzied sprint

Across all of France from west to east

Become a Symbol of the pure poet, the ill poet

O misfortune's poet

People tether you like a horse

Tethered on one sickbed in a carpenter's home

I do not know

In dying dusk of August

Second brother seeks Sophocles

Whether or not he has eased your pain with tragedy

When those sisters and abbot

Raised misfortune's wool

Burning wool

The burning like white snow's

He says—do not worry, fretful gods

Wait for an ode to the native ground to be sung through

Just then can I bore into them

Dark and slow-witted horns

Abundant horns horns that wail a noise

Crown and frenzied horn: I lie down
—“ten thousand years is too long”
Only these horns poetry dark poet blind

2) Reminisce or without Gain

Wait for your hand to grasp a dull sickle
Shear off white snow and wool
Unfortunate Hölderlin’s already gone mad

Son of the monastery master
Lover of the banker’s Madame
Unfortunate Hölderlin’s already gone mad

Wait for you to finish building a hospital
Having positioned one sickbed after another
Hölderlin just lies down on the first bed
Experiences days without gain
Those are happy ones
—“gain is misery”

Could only reminisce for wild goose—
That weeping and smiling basket
When you follow me
Arrive at human life
Could only reminisce for wild goose—
That bride of flesh dyed red by dusk.

3) Shepherd’s Dance—Symmetry—Dark Still Country

4) After Blood is Darkness—More Red than Blood is Darkness

Hölderlin—tell me what that darkness is
And how he inundates you
How he squeezes you into his chest
Like the Ganges having inundated a steed

The one existing the one braying sore and O the dark pail's master
You—now and how over an abyss hover—dismally dance—me you will desert
And me you ridicule—Hölderlin
However you've already grown into a part of the dark God

Native ground
.....we still, embracing this pail-fragment dissipating in light, construct land and
villages
After all they will be inundated by darkness
Tell me, Hölderlin—my poetry is written for whom

Poison-poetry and grains in the burrow dug deep
House and fruit tree—these fragments—how will it emerge in darkness,
Hölderlin?

O the dismal road journeyed on for six years
Whether or not brothers comprehend? Whether or not to sympathize with
Diotima—although she's already long dead?

Which god once used hands to draw you across the path of interwoven light and
darkness?

On that harbor you saw what kind of old mother and carpenter's kin?
Are they phantoms or are they Truth?
Beauty or falsehood? dismal or ecstatic?

Or are they the two converged to one: govern.
After blood is darkness—more red than blood is darkness
I forever reminiscing of you
Misfortune's brother Hölderlin!

5) Devoted to Fate Goddess

Embrace the one worn lamp flung broken by the kind-hearted man
Embrace the happy fauna on cliff and leap down

Red wild goose
Gaze over beautiful villages and towns across the river

Some lines of verse devoted to the fate goddess
Confess of pain on mountain without restraint

Red wild goose
In the Southern wind faintly rustles

Young girls feed on sheep sheep feed on verdant grass shoots sprouted after
adolescent death
A lump of white clouds swept you away

Sheep that comes and goes with the wind
—fate goddess!

For Kafka

—convict's two walnut feet

Convict that makes fire in winter

Beyond a doubt often needs warmth

This is kin as maternal flame

Yet he is pounded by the tens of stalks of corn behind his body

In ground, beyond a doubt also is

Rich peasant's cropland

Yet he has thought the Sky

Beyond a doubt still is burnt first dry, then clean by the sun

This sun a lowered head comes, these shackles well-lit

Beyond a doubt still is one's own two feet, like walnuts

Buried in the steel of the native ground

In steel of the engineer

Peach Blossom Season

Peach blossoms into bloom

The bone of sun's crown throbs, flame and hand from head stretch forth

A mass of wild beasts licking flame blade

Walking towards the end of the destitute river valley

Cuts open a blood-wound. They can turn water to fire's lovely stature

Water at this moment is flame hung on air

Yet at the deeper place still water

Wings blood red, rich with aggression

That is nothing but the peach blossom season of the Cyclops

The Cyclops embraces in arms a grove of peach trees

What he saw all is Earth surging an unexhausted column of fire

He is in the bottom unit of a smoldering stomach

Abruptly encounters peach blossoms

For each other as victuals and empress

On a guillotine spits fire in frenzy

A breast spits fire

Hanging on dry land

Tumbled from the heavy sky

Struck on dry land struck lost the head struck sodden the four limbs

At spring in between hundreds of millions of citizens where spring-beasts
spit fire

They have hallucinations

Herds of beast spitting fire have grown flowers

Herds of beasts lining up flesh encasing bone growing into forests

Spitting fire is nothing but flowers how luscious the landscape

You accomplish sun and Abyss in a briefer circumstance

Interior's fire, frigid soundless burn

Birtherd the sisters on the Earth's two river banks

Dawn clouds and sunset clouds

The soundless are drifting in the space of the mountain range

Us two on a plateau meet on the pasture woven on the loom of the three sisters
of fate

III.

Riverwolf

It was late June. Flocks of just-unpenned sheep
scattered through fields between the alpine peaks,
ahead of homes and keepsakes baled atop
camels, wagons, and trucks driven to lower
and more thawed-out fields for the next few months.
The Blue Eternal Sky lengthened across
the drawn landscape, the Altai Mountains sound.
Nomads consider the sky limitless
as well; with curls of cirrus clouds, the sky
congealed like skin atop room-cooling milk.
I wished to linger on the countryside
with families erecting yurts, their famished
sheep and molting camels chewing like
the dentured old, when our tour guide showed us
Genghis Khan's footprints, two sandbars in the Irytsh,
the only green-less land in sight pressed on
the azure trail that's blazed through all those trees,
when stopping beside the only road above
that glacial river, for a picture, enroute
to lodgings near the Tuwas' winter homes.
Against the unitary flow of nomads
we drove, or rather he drove (Anne and I
seated alone in his back seat), up slope
to drop our bags off, meet our hosts, and rest,
our place the next few days a sod-roofed hut,
never a chance for staying in a yurt.
If only we could've rested in that one
we saw on our day-ending walk with its
carpet walls unfurled, the doorframe up,

circumference of the latticed wall complete,
roof's spokes fanned from the hole that gathers them,
two sticks bent for a dome above that hole.
The want of the nomadic life my dearth,
wanting to have every here as home,
technically immune from nostalgia (from
the ancient Greek for longing to return),
what durable existence the citted wait for,
how Mongol emperors expanded the world
into one boundless pasture, the horizon
just another deel's gold thread frayed loose.
The main attraction there is Kanas Lake,
its monsters known to drag camel and livestock
drinking from the shore to the lake floor,
its shifting colors like the Amazon
waters' Bishop wished to write about,
only able to when distanced by years
and drafts. I liked that place; I liked the idea
of that place even when the sport-boat roars
I shouldn't have been surprised about met me
when reaching the lake later that afternoon.
Driving up, our guide Ma Ge (we shared
a drink the day we met to celebrate
shared surnames) told us about the story in
The People's Daily just weeks ago: a boat
of seven Beijing tourists spotted two
of the lake monsters jumping from the depths.
One tourist fumbled for his camcorder
in time for a vague clip authorities
demanded access to. Officials think
the monsters are merely giant taimen fish

roughly ten meters long, a trout the Russians
nickname ‘riverwolf.’ Upcoming months
a team of divers and scientists will scour
Kanas Lake, a lake that stands between
a country and a country and another.
The road followed beneath the only line
running electricity from Altai
city to the stationary homes—
for winter, tourists, and those upgrading—
dotting the slopes and steppes. Through groves of larch,
pine, patches of wild-growing cannabis,
cedar, and spruce the roadway wended, twice
as long as from the city to the lake.
The groves grew the most dense just minutes up
from Khan’s footprints, at fifteen miles an hour:
the turns, the climb, the narrow road’s poor state.
The trees, robust after another winter
six months long and tall with self-taken souls,
I treasured, their songs, venting sorrow, let
only when gashed through bark to cambium.
That silence in the score’s absence filled the day
outside: no harpies here, though, no chance to meet
the nameless Florentine running from Atilla
(really Otilla), nor chance to twist off branches
to hear the sinners that sing—not much in common
between our guides. Ma Ge was driving us
anyways—so if he were Nessus, who
was Virgil? And I was only twenty-four;
I hope that’s not midway on *my* life’s journey.
Dante didn’t write that in his twenties—did he?
That’d be half-way, he lived to fifty-six.

What happened? This isn't like my memories.
Those groves were not the Woods of Suicide
until working these lines. If only I
could also will into my past events
an Italian Romantic overhearing
an Asian shepherd's song or a German one
interpreting beneath the Alps (both favorites
whose poems I can only read translated),
just mountains standing in the way of the sun...
To not get far enough from whom I've read,
living with forward sight in a world built
of seasons, cycles, and regeneration,
to lose track of my thoughts condemned to meaning
in nothing but the valley of a book—
as the growth under the dead surface pulls
with steady care the bark's tectonic plates
apart, as the re-leaving trees together
gather the only evidence of breeze
from the still air, recasting without warning
the certainty with how my day will end,
those moments from which days just outward grow
like rhizome betray every sense I'd had.
It seemed each turn we took deferred the lake
just as each line defers the end. The landscape
trapped whatever thoughts I had away
from me—something beauty seems to do—
only to be transfigured, memory
alone no longer adequate. We stopped
one other time between Khan's footprints and
the unexpected entry post: Ma Ge
pulled over on the way up, on a blind

turn, with no shoulders on a dip in a road
that barely fits two lumber trucks. We paced,
squat on our haunches (one of the first things
I learned to fit in—really out of need:
it’s hard to take a shit in China without
learning how to), threw rocks, and mindlessly
picked at shoots like deer nibbling for a snack.
It was gorgeous hanging out up there.
I gazed across to the opposing slope,
wondering, as I always do when staring
at dense woods from afar, is someone out
there where I’m looking? Can that person see me?
A flat-faced cargo truck, anachronistic
to only Anne and me, careened past us,
too close, kicking up rocks too big to be
considered gravel, rattling by while dropping
to neutral down the hill—engine off too—
as peasants here do to save gas. Ma Ge
and I shared a laugh recalling my high school days
on football fields or egging cars or cracking
jokes I would now be embarrassed of.
Looking towards where the truck came from, we stepped
into the middle of the road. The girls,
Anne and the intern with us—what was her name?
it’s only been three years!—didn’t follow us.
Ma Ge slowly smoked a cigarette;
I threw more rocks down below; the sky drifts at
a different pace when traveling through nature
than towns. We stepped back towards the inner bank
of the curve when victorious and content
with our mindless glance, brief as the pair’s whose stay

at Khan's snow-ward bound prints was shorter than ours,
away from the rail-less edge, back where a patch
of gravel would have—Ma Ge's cigarette
hardly had two drags' worth of ash smoked gone;
I love how ash falls on windless days, as light
as the first breeze-drawn ripples across a lake.
We couldn't get to the lake shore soon enough,
where I would peer across Kanas, across
prismatic waters (I didn't expect those hours
walking on newly built boardwalks and docks)
to catch the other mountainside, but not
the other shore, peering from the northern shore
famous for its Thousand-Meter-Long
Bank with Withered Trees, that gathering
of driftwood which floated against the hidden current
of Kanas Lake I did not get to see,
the driftwoods' branches locked into a dike
by nature alone. He signaled with a wave.
Of course our stop ended with the butt still
burning that red of pigeons' eyes flicked off
across the road into the bushes below.
It *was* a bit like in the movies. We piled
into the car. The trees were motionless,
neither bird nor beast on the lee-side
that day. We checked our belongings. When Ma Ge
turned the engine on to keep on downhill
the AC roared our chatter silent until
the intern asked us something less a question
than a wind-up for her boilerplate
full of the rankings and the measurements—
729 types of plants,

fourteen-hundred meters above sea level,
188.4 meters deep
at its deepest point, China's deepest lake...—
the Chinese love. I liked her. Of the three
who greeted us in Ma Ge's office she's
the one who ponytails her hair so tight
her forehead's always slightly glowing. Her smile,
dimpled and straight, the ringtones of her phones,
even the teal of her work fanny-pack
I still remember, but not her name. In my
defense, on her insistence we called her
Jie Jie (Big Sis) the whole time even though
she couldn't have been more than two years our senior.
We never saw her without heels on, hiking
on the pointy rocks that left my ankles sore
the next morning all afternoon, or taking
stairs two at a time to wake us up
where clocks deceive, the region furthest from
the center of the country's one time zone
(sunset at three in the afternoon) and daytime's
sand-stormed into a level shade. Just hours
after meeting her she disparaged me
for being swindled when she learned about
our hotel room and haggled for the place
we actually stayed in, a room a floor
below the office; she's the last of many
who had done this for us, Xinjiang our last
vacation before moving back to the States,
our only solace was a chance to rent
a place, at last, for longer than a year
—all our years together else-where bound.

Up at the entry post one barked gate arm,
one shack not big enough to be called a room,
one bored guard who must've startled all four legs
of his stool back onto the floor when he
heard our Isuzu brake just yards away.
The road finally evened with the bank
of what I still think is the Irtysh, the river
that surged through Altai city, torrent grown
so tall by melting snow it licked my lens
while taking a picture from the city bridge.
When it had calmed at the entry post, I wished
to touch the freshly-melted water, not
submerge my arm elbow deep into the pure,
shocking river. I just wished to slide
the last two fingers of my tightly cupped
left hand—against the current, naturally—
below the surface. Why against? To fast
the steady hand against the weight of it.
To redirect the flow and watch it swirl
against itself. Freud quoted Kierkegaard:
'Travel is the best way to avoid
despair'—written under which of many
names, I don't know. Ma Ge had to attend
to business with the guard. The entrance fee
yet to be paid, they went into the shack
while all three of us took our bathroom-break.
I squeezed out a neon trickle. When I left
the wooden stalls, I wandered towards the bank
to wash my hands and then my face. Across
the rubble road, down feet of rubble slope
I strolled alone onto the untouched flatland

a fifth a football field deep to the bank.
Less than half way there I turned around.
Each step, even when stepping gingerly,
started to accumulate so much
mud I walked clumsily as a foal, first steps
on tender joints, the season yet to have
a rainy day. The breaking point was when
mud squished into my shoes, crusting my only
pair of socks. No picture of our time
at the entry post exists, really a shame.
In fact, none of us took a single shot
between our portrait at Khan's footprints and
our hut, Anne's camera stuffed deep in our bags.
I didn't bother to dig it out despite
scene after scene I wished to keep passing by.
Anne's always been the one to take nature photos,
—Do we have a picture of the lake?
The mud had clumped together rubble and turf,
more paste than something on its own by then.
Scraping off mud onto the road, I looked up
to check my balance, and then downward, catching
a glimpse of my own footprints in the freshly-
pocked grassland, numerous, unnamed, and hollow.
It was our longest pause the whole way up.
Ma Ge's business involved some shots of baijiu
and smokes. He was so close his breath betrayed
him, one arm slung across my shoulders, at
neck's back the pit snug, the right arm pulled past
both bodies, cinching my waist, awkward still
this freedom Chinese have with publicly
displaying close friendships between same sexes.

Even after eighteen months I still
felt weird for if I turned to catch his face
I would be inches away from kissing him;
I'd lurched from disco to disco in this way
with friends on countless nights through neon-drawn lanes.
With Ma Ge's crew cut bristling my temple,
he uttered something kind. His piercing breath
reminded me how hungry I'd become,
knowing that night we'd only have the instant
noodles we were told to pack because
not even we could afford the food up there.
(Ma Ge was right: two pan-fried fishes cost
as much as the train ride from Kashgar to
Urumqi.) When arriving to our hut,
our host immediately offered us
some Black Fish (Northern Snakehead) from the lake,
just caught, seared whole, its taste the taste-dense flesh
of carnivores. They prey off other fish,
grunting like pigs, some peasants say, while rows
of mid-throat teeth shred bodies vacuumed in.
They're not, I think, indigenous to Xinjiang,
invasive species and obligate air breathers,
able to live on air up to five days,
fins used to flop across short stretches of land,
a delicacy easy to smuggle in,
suitcases filled with snakehead bagged in air,
nothing moving but the eyes. Five years
ago the DNR drained some small lake
in Crofton, Maryland and sprayed the poison
that killed everything in the lake—the dead
ceased rising three days later—and still kills

locals when anglers brought in photos of
a fish they snagged and released, wanting its name.
Since then they've found their way to the Potomac,
a panic spawning straight-to-cable movies
and a state-sponsored trip, advancing southward
from the Pentagon, encouraging
invited sportsmen no restraint, at day's
end the deck glistening with knolls of bodies
later tagged large-mouthed bass and blue catfish
and such, but not one snakehead there. A man
confessed to dumping off the original pair,
brought from some Flushing street-side pharmacist,
the trip's sole aim, when his ill sister, before
chance to simmer for her snakehead soup
arose, had convalesced. And '97,
Spiritwood Lake, someone electroshocked
another one and took a picture, froze
the specimen, and later threw away
the behemoth, unpreserved, that photograph
unlocated to this day. We declined
the offer and never saw our host again.
Our guides ushered us inside; it was one
of the few times I've had to duck in through
a front door. Wedged into the earth, the croft
was just a room with nothing but two beds,
as always (we weren't married). After we sprawled
our stuff across one bed, I sipped a cup
of boiled water from the canister the host
set next to the one door: the warmth, the steam,
the taste acquired from boiling it, a taste
I grew to love from comfort it would not

challenge my stomach and give me the runs.
Door-side (was the floor dirt, or the room round?—
the bed had no unawkward place to fit)
the canister of ‘opened’ water stood
like a lone tower bearing down upon
a boundless gobi desert where the sense
of distance to the mountains has been lost,
the still view comforting from the train windows
locked to stale air for the day’s ride spent lying
forearm propped feet from the ceiling. We sat on
the mattress—a thin springless block of cotton
in China—only for a bit before
Jie Jie rapped the door to go to Kanas.
The bed was just as hard when we returned
hours later for our nap: Anne spooning me
while lying on our right, sheets taut about,
her left arm down my belly draped to hold
my left hand curled, like a fern frond, neckward,
which cups her breast when flipped, the fit just right,
nipple at the palm’s spot a bite can’t reach.
I love to nap because ‘it’s sleeping when
you’re not supposed to sleep,’ as Mom says. Light
had no chance to impede us in the house,
grass-topped and windowless. Beneath the shallow
roots of grass, gold cloth, stapled to the roof,
billowed down, slack as sails on helpless days.
The nap was so good I woke up more tired
than when I went to sleep. I half-tried not
to wake Anne getting out. A well-timed knock
almost made me believe in Fate: I could
guiltlessly skim Anne’s face with fingertips,

half my body stolen out from the sheets.
It was Ma Ge this time, pressuring us
to walk around before nightfall; the teal
surface of Kanas told us it was mid-day
when we left it, the surface palette wide
because the lake's so close to the sun. We
stepped out to Jie Jie's figure, Ma Ge gone.
She made a call and brought us to a friend's
nine houses down towards the far edge of what
I'd only call a group of homes. Barely late,
we sneaked in on a Tuwa tourist show,
ducking to the near corner, noticing
Jie Jie abandoned us. I remember cringing
down half a sip of fermented mare's milk.
In hollowed stumps and leather bags the Tuwas
hooch this semen-colored milk, its taste
what I can only guess the dregs of soured milk
taste like, its consistency like water's,
its bite not even that of beer's. Because
we were the only ones not from the Mainland,
Anne alone not yellow (and yet, something
about my stance screams foreigner—the locals
would pin me a hua qiao before my words
would confirm their guess, and Anne's dark Irish face
looks part-Asian), it's no surprise the crowd,
tourist and local, put Anne on the spot
when the throat-singer's final note returned
to her without sound, trading songs a must
when strangers meet she said. So Anne blushed out
the Irish lullaby about two men,
O'Riley and O'Leary, alone, dead

unbeknownst to the other. The songs now blent,
the singers shared a shot of mare's milk wine.
Applause, and in the true blue deels they all wore
with grace, gathered by nothing but a belt,
the male presenter played the Tuwa flute,
something more technique than instrument,
lodging the bamboo vertical between
top-lip and teeth like I did with chopsticks
when playing walrus as a kid, except
he looked much goofier, relaxing his
entire face, eyes rolled up into his skull,
slouching back in his chair—students across
the States have mastered this first step in boredom.
As the tune lingered note by note, no higher
than chilled air would, the dissonance and pace
prismed not my thoughts, but rather my attention.
In silence the throat-singer couldn't command
(the sugar-frenzied kids had calmed), the tune
filled my whole stay with its slow growth beneath
the hour's still surface as things, last of my
remembrance changed, distended, as with time
the place, too, grows beyond its proper name
with what I've penned; with writing, verse no longer
the indispensable tool of memory.
In the vast cloisters of my memory
will hide away all from my life except
what I've forgotten, the only things that last.
I wonder if the nomads have travel writing,
if travel's only of the sedentary,
and what is travel writing but the need
to half-remember how I filled my time,

nothing but a disquiet of the soul,
in foreign lands around all that I missed,
to reawaken that astonishment
with hopes that I can visit once again
that unfamiliar place, to trace my route,
to look down at the water hoping to see
the surface rainbowing your face away?
Knowing I'll never become part of it,
I could not make out if he played a series
of songs or just one drawn-out tune, not sure
if the pauses were ends or merely rests. Although
the flautist earned the most of our attention,
he got the least applause. With knowledge that
we'd missed their festival by a half-week,
we lined out of the house into a world
more foreign now, more ripe for significance:
flies landed on my face; I caught the gaze
of locals as I walked out of the town
beyond the hut-turned-discotheque that blared
Tibetan-electronica through the earth's
tranquility; the three of us walked across
a bridge to see the fenced-in reindeer kept
to grind out aphrodisiacs from its horns.
And I grew tired from getting carried away,
but now imagination's formed the past.
We walked away from cabins hoping to chance
upon some yurts. The last of two we saw
up close was up. The land gleamed. We encroached
without qualm, asking for a peek inside.
He was an old man smoking, listening
to the radio, anemones of hair

sprouted from moles across his face and neck
in places we find hard to look at or look
away from, wrapped up in traditional
clothes—so traditional they weren't pristine.
He granted our request with calm, a look
vacant as if resting his worn eyes
on kites tethered afloat in parks or fish
swimming in captivity. I was
too shy to ask permission to take shots
of the interior. Good thing Anne asked
because I likely would have forgotten how
a step into the dim-lit, cavernous tent,
past the flap, beige and unadorned as all
the tent's canvas is, under the close sun
leads you into a belly of fluorescence
muted by a single bulb; rugs, blankets,
shelf-bed, and wall shadow with that light
whose source is God knows where, the naked bulb
centered and low enough for the mirror's face.
The yurt, between possessions strewn around
and the river that divides forest from plain,
I left, not knowing what of home becomes
a life. The family had lots of stools—
enough stools there to seat three times more guests
than could fit inside their yurt: some wood, some steel,
some plastic. Their possessions seemed all seats
and bundles, the most ornate a green one stitched
with double-happiness signs. We hastened not
to bother them. We wandered along the path
past barns and houses as abandoned as
the solitary tchochke stand upon

the parking lot just out of the lake's sight.
That un-manned table displayed nothing specific
to Kanas, just goods Chinese vendors hawk
to tourists. Sadder was the raft stand steps
away: some rafts not full enough to hold up
even one kid, so parched the rubber had
blistered and cracked, the yellow paled and blotched,
those stands profaning like the hums from he
who classified the fugue 'a variation
of a particularly *nomadic* order'
(italics his). There's also Bruce in that
the Kids in the Hall skit about the Doors:
'The gypsies had no homes; the Doors had no bass.'
The yurt would later move, leaving no trace
across that spacious plain I kept in sight,
my back to the stream that murmurs the coy laugh
of secrecy. The yurt left nothing firm.
The yurt's roof-canvas flared its hem at one point,
caught by an errant breeze only a photo
reminded me of. Little word on just
the plain of music, not of grazing stock,
a plain so distant from the ocean's shore,
that plain in summer-death, the season not
of slaughter. Where's my name in all of this?
The yurt's possessions waited for unpacking;
it seemed no rush, the able-aged ones gone.
I heard no music. What I saw I treated:
a gardenless background and a home not big
enough to contain even my bookshelves.
What do they use to patch up what's forgotten?
Or memories that go without a name—

like men of certain tribes—born nameless and kept
so, patiently? The flatland paced my mind
(later that night I learned they have their tales)
towards houses gathered up the plain. My mind
was full, and the imagined flatland swept.
The lost refrain, the sun's course, a world without
the skull-battering hoe, that blood-marked source
of Enoch, tool of my evasive kin.
Of course...of course a lake, of course an alp,
and Hesperus—assurance we will want
our entire lives—aligns my expectations
to matter in the world. The look wasn't long,
standing in lawn-height grass kept short by grazing.
The landscape dozed. The region pulsed with comfort.
Surely my modern thoughts can't be described
by such clear manner: bundles, trees, stream, stools—
Only our pictures could convince me that
in the close distance yurts clustered next to cabins
exactly like the one we visited
when Ma Ge brought us to friends he wanted us
to meet that night back in ourcroft's neighborhood.
The outing closed with too much baijiu, missing
next morning's chance to roam around Altai
once more; feeling quite nauseous riding back,
lips clamped and stomach brimmed, on that same road;
vomiting mid-sprint out our lunch stop, stuff
banked off my hand against my face (Ma Ge
laughed and pointed) after just one bite.
His group of friends was great: that man obsessed
with Tyson biting Holyfield's ear off
who chuckled at the well-placed shadow on

the cherub pen-tattooed across his arm
—or was the Buddha on his arm, the cherub
the one across his breast facing me all night?—
when we admired it; those two sisters who worked
for that place making the high end baijiu
from Kanas that we drank, the three of us,
and the half-Russian I mistook (in my mind)
for someone from afar. They all lived up there.
Oddly, they never asked about our time
at Altai, what we saw or how we felt
having already gone to Kanas Lake
(they must have been Ma Ge's good friends). The chance
to compliment them on their land and life
never arose, nor chance for me to recount
the best of all my visiting to them:
how we finished with the scenic route back home,
and in the clear smooth sky that to me seemed
another lake, the flaring sun stayed fast
against the summer afternoon I miss.
Anne and I pulled away. Jie Jie parked it
on a rock, slackened her professional
tether loose. We paced away, just out
of our guide's sight for the first time, towards nowhere,
just away, the two of us alone,
tired from the day and the thin air. Anne's fingers—
they fit my hipbones so well—dangled like fruit
too heavy for its branches as we walked
upslope against an unnamed brook that let
a prayer for nothing in particular.