

OUTSIDE PLATO'S REPUBLIC, THE LAST POETS WAIT FOR DEPARTURE

Hong Kong International Airport, 1989

...the poet himself is a China

~ Liu Hongbin, Chinese poet-in-exile

1.

This one, tired from the long journey,
leans back in his airport chair. The stain of travel,
tattoo of sweat and the lips of sleeping women
pressed unknowingly to his shoulders mid-flight.
How their faces turned inward the way
a cat's pink tongue fills a wound
with an instinct for sweetness and iron.
Grounded, he is a castoff map, a blankness
scarcely smudged by the sounding rings
of impinging continents. Land he has only seen
through mists. Has only witnessed in the fine print
at the bottom of passports and visas, the insides of cans,
the raised edges of boxes made somewhere else.
Somewhere forgettable where the sick and insane
piece each plastic toy together, immune to pleasure.

2.

In the corner, against the bullet-proof glass,
another raises his arms high above his head,
as if in prayer, or uttering a name to be nailed
like a piton into a hardened cliff face. This unbending
yearning. These barren limbs sprouting from a man
worn smooth by wind and water. How they stretch,
reaching for a heaven of silence, some dim realm
of rope and boards. A bridge. A strict metered offering.
Even. Still. The emptiness of fired clay. A scale.
A measure of wanting. Each hand a receptacle for ghosts.

3.

The last one traces the outbound curve
of an *O* that returns to its origin again,
stopping once before moving on. She thinks
of round coins punched through with squares,
the angle of characters lifted in relief, the thin
red string that holds them together around her neck.
O, she opens her mouth in a question wide enough
to hold a world the shape of her lips. *O* is the letter
she leaves at the gate for her lover, for the one
who is always nowhere, too late and too soon.

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