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Claire Kiefer

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Travelogue

Abstract

2012 Booth Poetry Prize Honorable Mention, as selected by Linda Gregg.

Keywords

China, travel, visit, globe



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Travelogue

Claire Kiefer

2012 Booth Poetry Prize Honorable Mention, as selected by Linda Gregg

In my dream I am still speaking in Chinese
though I don't know the words for wisdom teeth
and I've already been home a week. You heard me
when I muttered something about the girl
at the silk market. And that my tooth was throbbing
all night until you brought me a popsicle, the pain rising
opaque from my open mouth. I tell the taxi driver
that something hurts, though I can't tell him
exactly what. He's taking me four hours east
to where the sea storms the Great Wall, where no one
speaks any English and you aren't there to translate
or compliment my organza dress. I tell the driver
to turn around because I wore it just for you. It's so cold
that I can't hear you calling from Shanhaiguan,
saying, *Come here, this used to be a bell tower. Come,*
no one is looking. If I turn a certain way
you can see the freckles on my shoulder. If I mispronounce
go straight the taxi driver thinks I am asking him

to be my lover. If he ever brings me to you,
I have tricks tucked in my French braid I know
will make you laugh. I have a plate of eggs made
with salt and rosemary, just how you like them. Teach me
to say *Go a little faster than that*. Teach me to sing
the birthday song. I try to show the driver your address
but when I reach into my bag I pull out my plane ticket.
The date is blurred with undrinkable water. If I'm sick enough
I won't be able to fly. Teach me the word for *hospital*.
Which road grows the wild jasmine? Which road
to the restaurant with red velvet curtains?
The taxi pulls into the airport and I can't think of the word
for *no*. I don't know how to say *my wisdom teeth hurt
too badly*. I don't know how to say *I can't leave him
in that village*. You are waiting in a second-floor room
with a king-sized bed. You've put the smaller slippers
on my pillow. The woman at the front desk knows
you are waiting for an American woman with a set of keys
and likely a lotus root. Teach me the words for
let's not wait. I only know how to say *yes*,
thank you, *goodbye*, *I want*—but I don't know
any nouns. China is gorgeous
where you are. Teach me to say *come home*.

Claire Kiefer is a writer and teacher in San Francisco. She received her MFA, in Creative Writing, from San Francisco State University in 2007, and taught social justice and art to children of incarcerated parents for several years. She now works for *Voice of Witness*, a nonprofit book series that uses oral history to depict human rights crises around the world, and teaches a weekly poetry workshop at San Quentin State Prison.

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