

LAIMA VINČĖ

POETRY 09 January 2020

From the poetry collection *What the Willows Have Taught Me*

Preparing for The Next Life

Circumambulating the stupa in Thimphu,
Elderly Bhutanese women,
Earnestly walk clockwise,

Twirling their prayer wheels, chanting,
Preparing themselves for life's eternal journey.
They all wear purple—
Purple jackets, sweaters, blouses, shawls,
Long purple *kiras*.

All my life I've loved the color purple—
I've worn purple coats, purple sweaters, purple dresses.
I've even painted entire rooms in my house purple.

I fit right in
That moving crowd of purple
And prayer.

Excused from housekeeping,
Tending grandchildren,
They spend their final days here,
In the shadow of the stupa.

When they are called
They will be ready.

Phallus Poem

The Mad Lama
Made good use
Of his erect penis
To do battle
With a demon.

Now, how that works
I don't quite know.

But the result is
He subdued the demon.

And Bhutan lives in peace.

On the Thirty-Year Anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, June 4, 2019

Oh China,
You have blackened my lungs
And broken my heart.

Oh China,
I long for your earth's
Dusty yellow embrace.

Oh China,
How will I live now,
Knowing I may never again wander
Your royal spaces, temples, ancient parks,
Follow your undulating red walls?

Oh China,
I have removed your beads from my wrists,

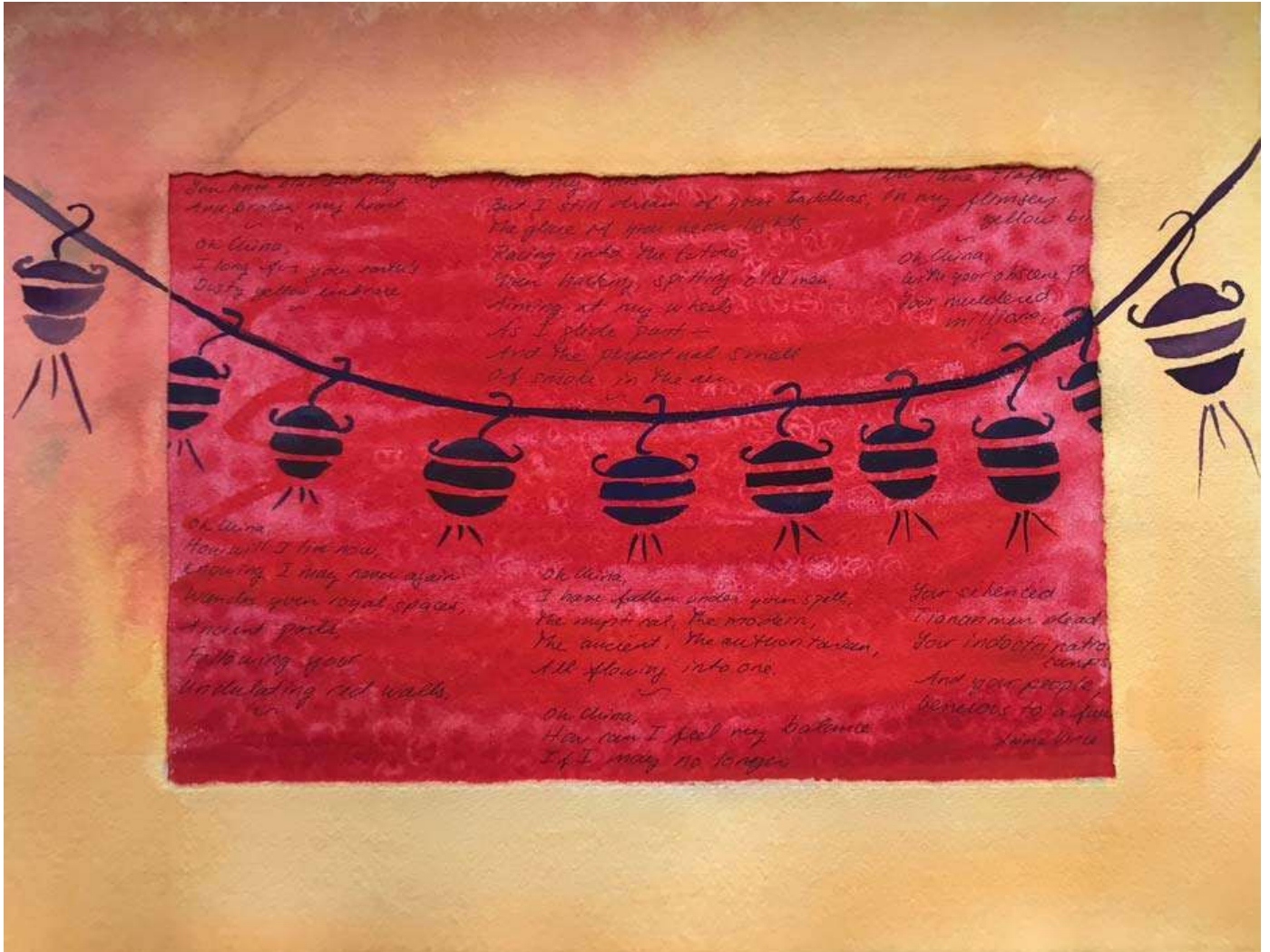
But I still dream of your Buddhas,
The glare of your neon lights,
Racing into the future,
Your hacking, spitting old men,
Aiming at my wheels as I glide past,
And the perpetual smell of smoke in the air.

Oh China,
I have fallen under your spell—
The mystical, the modern,
The ancient, the authoritarian,
All flowing into one.

Oh China,
How can I ever feel my own balance again
If I may no longer
Dip into your ten-lane chaos of traffic
On my flimsy yellow bike?

Oh China,
With your obscene politics,
Your murdered millions,
Your silenced Tiananmen dead,
Your indoctrination camps,
And your people—
Generous to a fault,
Curious, kind.
As I flew over Siberian ice shields,
Making my exit,
It pained me to know
I may never come back,
Never again listen—*ting ma?*
To your gongs, your drums,
Your street chatter—
Be one in sync
With the flow of Beijing's
Twenty-two million registered,
And million more uncounted, undocumented.

Oh China,
My longing for you will never cease.
It will be an ever-present ache,
Like a beloved gone silent,
Who I long for, always.



Laima Vincé, Oh China (or On the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Tiananmin Square Massacre)

Hiking the Great Wall in Spring

We ascend the Great Wall
As pear trees burst into bloom—
A vista of pure white blossoms
Across curvaceous mountains.

And when we descend
Within a thicket of blossoms,
We are hushed into stunned silence.

The handsome young guide
Turns towards a pretty girl
And says softly: *Lihua*.

A shy smile spreads across her face.
And those of us who overheard
Smile quietly too with deep knowing.

Because we know that *Lihua*,
The pear blossom,
Symbolizes a young woman's beauty,
A beauty that inspires love—
A transitory beauty,
Like these pear blossoms,
A love, fragile, blossoming
Between these two.

How Do You Mourn A Tree? Beijing, China

How do you mourn a tree?
With coffee and cigarettes?
Or with your heart and soul.

How do you part
With the one tree
That was your only sustenance
As you gazed out your window
Overcome with homesickness
In a foreign land?

And how do you comfort those
To whom the tree brought shade in their old age?
The elderly men and women
Who would gather beneath its branches
To play *mah jong*, to drink tea from thermoses,
To reminisce and share Chinese wisdom?

The wisdom that the young have stopped up their ears to,
As the nation makes its postmodern leap forwards.

And who devised such a plan?
To slaughter their own backyard tree
That got in the way of cars and SUVs
As they battle for parking spaces?

And how will we all live
In a world barren of trees?
Without their gentle caresses
And the ever-changing light
That emerges from beneath their canopies—
Their quiet conversation
Just when you need to hear those words most,
Or the subtle movement of their leaves in the wind
Like the flickering eyes and hand gestures
Of a Chinese opera singer?

Who will mourn this tree with me?
Who will eulogize this tree?
Who will embrace its thick knotted trunk,
As it ultimately crashes down onto the hard asphalt?

Who will witness this slaughter with me?
And who will feel each cut of the chainsaw
As it burrows deeper and deeper
Into the tree's flesh,
Revealing its naked rings,
Rings as old as the centuries that are China,
Rings that hold within them
The stories and whispers
Of all who have sought solace in its shade.

The life of birds is so brief—
And yet this does not concern them.

They never touch down

on the dirtied streets.

They rejoice in the moment

They are able to fly,

To greet
the morning sun,

And on a good day—

blue skies.

Oh, the life of birds —
Brief, much less so,
Even in motion,
Embracing the luxury
of a single moment
That soon will pass.



Laima

And so, we must all take a
lesson—
From the birds of Beijing.

Like a Vision

Like a vision
She sailed past,
Solemnly beautiful
A young woman
In a silk *cheongsam*.

She was not of this time
Of crowded streets
And congestion.

She'd stepped
Out of an ancient ink painting
Executed on silk
With a good beaver fur brush.

Like a royal courtesan,
She floated past
On little feet,
Like women in the Chinese opera
Glide motionless across the stage.

She swayed slowly,
As she walked,
As willows sway,
Rippled by a breeze,
As slow as the centuries
That are China.

And I stood there
In the alleyway,
Stunned,
With my broken bicycle,
Waiting my turn
For the bike man
To repair it.

No one saw her
But me.

At the Harbin Ice and Snow Festival

Amongst gigantic icons of civilization built of snow,
A Chinese man dressed as a bright orange fox
Reluctantly trudges towards the ice arena.

Under his arm he carries
A large round fox mask
The size of a basketball.

Pop music erupts painfully loud
From strategically placed speakers.
Strobe lights flash across the ice.

He joins other orange fox men on a stage of ice
And begins gyrating his hips, pumping his paws,
Now to the left, now to the right.

I wonder how much they pay him
To dance like that?
Everything is fun, fun, fun.

The flashing lights are incongruent
With the eerie peace of a winter landscape,
And the gently fading northern light.

Behind him is a Taj Mahal sculpted from snow,
To the left a fairy tale castle, and to the right a cathedral,
Across from a cheerful snow pig—this year's zodiac.

In this land of snow and ice, the gateway to Siberia,
Where the bones of hundreds of thousands

Of my people lie,

In the city where the White Russians fled,
Seeking shelter from the Bolsheviks,
We are all compelled to have fun now.

And I think
There is something sacred
About frozen rivers,
Slow northern twilights,
Black arctic nights
With temperatures that kill.

It is something we want to block out
With colorful neon lights and
Chinese pop music shrill voices screaming:
Bu-bu-bu-ka-chi!

When the song is finished,
The troupe of orange foxes,
Trudge off the ice arena.

They tear off their masks,
Revealing black hair
Heavy with sweat.