

POETRY

DIANA BRIDGE¹

the gap between stones

This city cradles its monuments as though they were its life.

We enter everywhere through arches, climb the great
wedges of its stairs, stair upon stair, until we look down—
sultans from a terrace, a platform on a level with the birds.
We creep inside the skin of a stone drum which, without
any sign of quaking, vibrates to human shouts—shout
upon shout. As splendour splinters into rumour
we start to think of thrones—perhaps it's buildings—less
ruined than vacated; in quieter intervals we crane our necks
toward some recently imagined infinite adjusted, shape
as well as scale, to that vast ball, the Gol Gumbaz,
which commandeers the skyline and every tranche of view.

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Meaning, for us, is improvised in running script across
a crenellated outline, picked up in the interrupted sweep
of an archway struck off the day's mild sky. The god
of Bijapur lies here—on his side, in the gap between stones.
And if we cannot read the ripples of calligraphy
that cap an arch or wash against a tablet in a mosque
or screen around a tomb, we do see that he signs his name

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in shields and squares of grass, in half-moon flowerbeds.
 And scrawls it in less geometric script across clouds
 stained by sunrise. Like a remnant of the same
 slow-rising sun, a girl in fluttering orange standing
 on the edges of our scene. The keeper of men's shoes.

Bijapur

The century

We talk about India, China. It's their century,
 we claim. We place them well into it,
 by the twenty-fifties, say, they'll have bypassed
 any demographic, distribution curve or
 instrument of measurement you'd like to name.

And there they gleam: China, India,
 stars in the broad blue band of the future.
 Set so far ahead in the century
 that it could be our century still that we mean.

'Taking Leave of a Friend'²

At first you want connectives, reach like anyone for 'as',
 your only chance, you think, of seeing how things stand;

or how they might have stood for him, that is, the poet,
 for whom the Chinese word lay open. They,

the trained and the knowledgeable, have their own bridges.
 Listen, they say, to the white waters that wind around

the east part of the city, its outer rampart thrown
 across a range of hills; or that same mountain range—

² This poem takes off from a poem by Li Bo (701-762); I give its title in Ezra Pound's translation.

it might be green, was sometimes blue—crossing
the straddle of those northern walls. Feel the palindromic

pull of the furniture as Li Bo is saying goodbye.

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Once they part, with but one prop, a rootless orphan weed,
on this journey of ten thousand miles,

you will have to leave the tight determined weave
of your own tongue, its forward plunge, behind.

Now there is nothing that binds the floating clouds
to a wanderer's thoughts, the sinking sun to

that yearning for your friend. On the great plain
of the unknown the Chinese word has turned on its side.

In this strange place, with the day slipping down
out of sight and the clouds always changing the sense,

you glimpse a glue between lines. The double life
of a cloud, that's how the poet sees it; he always has.

And if they are reliable, your guides, you will have run up
in the slyness of the space between two words

against the largest measures. But to end, we're back
to the small animal moment. Hands sign a parting.

He goes from here. It's the horses that neigh.

Magnolia

I catch it through branches that stoop
in a ruined umbrella over the sodden earth.

Its own branches reach up like a last supper
of arms, all of them Christ's. No supplication here,

just chalices of creamy white, occasionally incised
and bruised, like Ding ware, with a fine dark rim.