

2000

# All That Divides Us

Utah State University Press

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/swenson\\_awards](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/swenson_awards)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

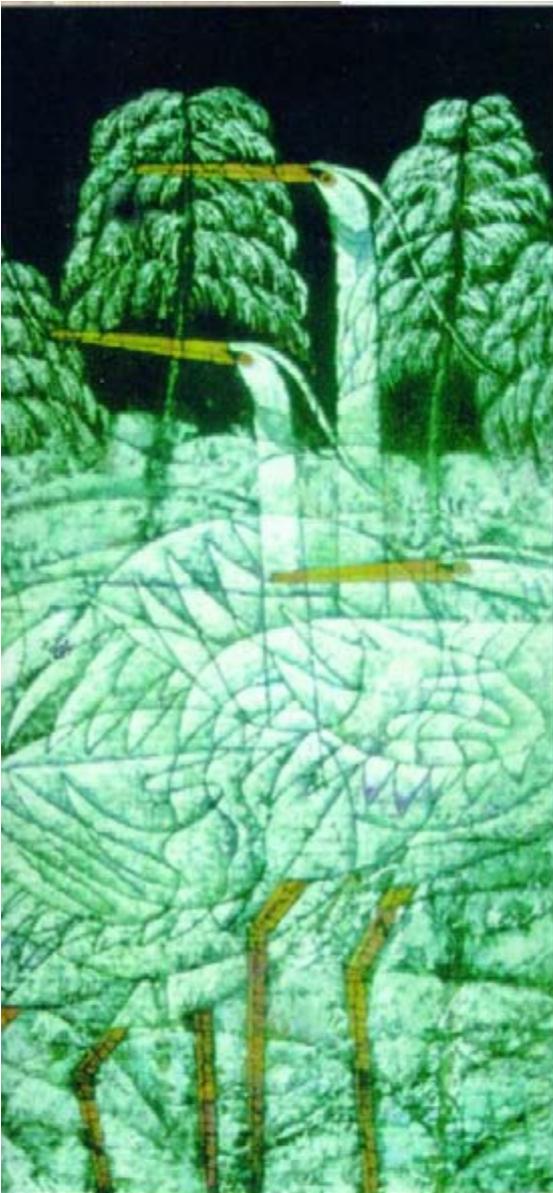
## Recommended Citation

Utah State University Press, "All That Divides Us" (2000). *Swenson Poetry Award Winners*. Book 1.  
[http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/swenson\\_awards/1](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/swenson_awards/1)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the USU Press at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swenson Poetry Award Winners by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [becky.thoms@usu.edu](mailto:becky.thoms@usu.edu).



Poetry  
Award  
Series  
*May*  
Swenson



All  
That  
Divides  
Us

*poems by*  
*Elinor Benedict*

foreword by  
Maxine Kumin

ALL THAT DIVIDES US



May Swenson  
Poetry Award Series

ALL THAT  
DIVIDES US

*poems*  
*by*

Elinor Benedict

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Logan, Utah

Utah State University Press  
Logan, Utah 84322-7800

Copyright © 2000 Elinor Benedict.  
Foreword copyright © 2000 Maxine Kumin.  
All rights reserved.

Many of the poems published here have appeared in literary journals and other publications. A complete list of these is included in Acknowledgments.

Typography by Wolfpack.  
Cover design by Barbara Yale-Read.  
Cover art is a detail from a scroll painting by Song Feng Guang of Jinan, China.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Benedict, Elinor, 1931–  
All that divides us : poems / by Elinor Benedict.  
p. cm. — (May Swenson Poetry Award series)  
ISBN 0-87421-295-2 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-87421-406-8 (pbk. : alk.  
paper) — ISBN 0-87421-333-9 (e-book)  
I. Title. II. Series.  
PS3552.E53956 A79 2000  
811'.54--dc21

00-009804

For the worldwide family  
of  
Grace Divine Liu



# CONTENTS

*Foreword by Maxine Kumin*

ONE: *Begin the Ceremony*

- Letter to Myself on My Birthday 3  
A Bridge to China 7  
To the Chinese People, Who See the Same Stars 8

TWO: *Strangers and Kin*

- Paper Flowers 11  
Nearly 12  
Meeting Our Chinese Cousins 13  
Two Women Leaving Beijing 14  
Immolation of a Stranger 16  
Hawthorns 18  
City of Dust and Water 19  
The Guest Chair at Nankai University 21  
Chinavision 23  
Storyteller 25

THREE: *In the Company of Magpies*

- Chinese Art & Culture Tour 29  
Sylvia Plath in China 34  
Ghost City 35  
The Truth About History 37  
How to Change a Country 39  
Yin and Yang 41  
Mr. Yuan's Two Joys 42  
Chinese Puzzle 44  
Full Moon Harvest Festival at the Spa City 45  
Peace Road Kindergarten 46  
Tiger Hill 48  
Vision at Tai-Shan Mountain 49

FOUR: *Searching for Grace*

Where It Hurts	53
Deep Enough to Go Home	54
Scarred Baggage	56
Found Snapshot: The Year His Sister Left	58
Remembering the Three Gorges	59
The Rope	60
Missing in China	61
For Those Who Dream of Cranes	62
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	64
<i>About the Author</i>	66
<i>The May Swenson Poetry Award</i>	67

## FOREWORD

WHEN I UNDERTOOK THIS BRIEF INTRODUCTION, I FOUND MYSELF in the refreshing position of not knowing the identity of the prize-winning poet, or where, or indeed whether, any of these poems had been previously published. Out of 728 manuscripts submitted, this one by Elinor Benedict surfaced as I read through the final completely anonymous twenty-five. On several subsequent rereadings, it rose again and again to the top.

Here are the facts about the poet that I learned afterward. Elinor Benedict lives in Rapid River, Michigan. Many of these poems have been previously published in journals ranging from *Helicon Nine* to the *Hawaii Pacific Review*, as well as in three chapbooks.

I was drawn to the narrative thrust of the book. The poet travels to China; she makes another and another trip. She and her daughter establish contact with missing relatives. These tentative rendezvous grow in intensity, and relationships develop from them. Although the poems stand as discrete units, they accumulate, taking strength from one another as we see them in their historical, chronological order. They grow on the reader as the narrative unspools, and we see the story told from successive points of view. It's an old story, full of poignant possibilities. "Don't you act so biggity, Miss Priss," Lula, the family maid, scolds. "Your aunt done married a Chinaman."

Nonetheless, an aura of romantic mystery shrouds this marriage from the poet's girlhood onward. The now aging aunt comes home to die, but the chapter never closes. Ultimately, the poet and her grown daughter travel to China to meet their Chinese cousins. Bits of the lovers' history, rescued from snapshots and old postcards, as well as face-to-face meetings with members of her family, spiral around.

Almost every poem delivers a sidelong irony, a study in contrasts that is always overridden by the sense of common humanity shared by two disparate cultures. In a poem titled "Ghost City," the poet is one of the tourists visiting Fengdu, a port city on the Yangtze River, where the dock is crowded with local entrepreneurs desperate to tell fortunes, or sell tangerines or finger puppets.

... a family  
at the crowded dock presents their prize  
boy with legs twisted backward, a blind  
mother clamps her snot-streaked child  
between her knees, all stretching out  
their arms with trinkets. . . .

The poet's voice is clear, direct, yet artful. Many of the poems are written in nonce forms, stanzaic patterns that arise to suit the occasion. There's a skillful villanelle, but formalism is not the issue here. The sensibility that pervades these poems is that of a mature woman with an inquiring mind and a strong sense of family attachments.

Traveling from the airport with her half-Chinese cousin in his western suit, she begs him to explain where they are and what they are seeing. The bus inches its way down a street "choked with people waiting to buy cabbages."

... To just  
such a market he used to rush, to wait  
to buy pears for his mother. . . . beside me  
my cousin makes a low sound in his chest.  
Turning, I find his face drawn, white.  
He whispers, "In the market I saw—myself."

The final poem in the collection, "For Those Who Dream of Cranes," in four sixteen-line, sonnet-like sequences, juxtaposes the white cranes of Jinan, China with the sandhill cranes migrating through Michigan, effortlessly playing one scenario against the other. In the final poem, the two tableaux come together:

Inside the maze, you learn the language,  
begin the ceremony. Gray brothers,  
fly safely. White spirits, speak.

Maxine Kumin

ALL THAT DIVIDES US



ONE

*Begin the Ceremony*



# LETTER TO MYSELF ON MY BIRTHDAY

1 *June 4, 1931*

This is the day I was born.

Summer in Tennessee, a long time ago,  
when people feared dust, debt,  
and that dry mouth feeling the voice  
over the radio's crackle called  
fear itself.

In my mother's  
hot room I lay naked and yelling  
when my father's sister  
came to say goodbye, holding  
a baby of her own, half-Chinese,  
leaving with a man  
who changed her country,  
her mind.

When I was older  
I learned her story from snapshots,  
gifts from abroad, bits of gossip  
around the holiday table. I caught  
those glances between my father  
and my uncles, felt their  
red-faced silence.

Lula the cook  
served the meal as if she didn't  
see. She took care of me, knew  
the family secrets. How surprised  
I was, to learn she had two  
children of her own. When  
my mother drove Lula home  
downtown, two small boys  
darker than their mother  
ran up, then stared at me

through the closed  
car window.

Once when  
I wouldn't behave, Lula snapped,  
*Don't you act so biggity, Miss Priss.*  
*Your aunt done married*  
*a Chinaman.*

2 February 1974 - January 1980

For years my world  
seemed made of papier maché, yellowed  
newspapers full of war stories  
crumpled in a ball. I lost  
my aunt's face among  
armies and arguments, hid  
her name in the fears I wanted  
to forget.

Then one day a letter  
rose from the mail thin as smoke,  
strangely marked, a phoenix  
among sparrows, announcing  
she was alive, coming back  
to die.

When she arrived, small  
and gray, I was astonished  
she could laugh. Her stories  
of concubines and conquerors,  
noodles and murders, brought  
to my kitchen the underside  
of the earth. Talk made us  
sisters, remembering  
younger days.

After her memorial  
in the cold Hall of Martyrs,  
her returned dust in China forever,  
my cousins took me to see

the sights of Beijing, a careful  
gift for American kin.

Quietly, proudly,  
my cousins showed me the monument  
where the death of Zhou Enlai  
brought thousands of paper flowers,  
black ink verses, to mourn  
their loss of a father, more  
than voices could say.

I stood  
among strangers in Tiananmen Square,  
winter all around, my aunt  
in ashes.

3 June 4, 1989

Today I watch  
Tiananmen Square from afar  
flickering in a box, seething  
in white June heat. Crowds gather  
once more, sons and daughters of heroes  
wearing faded jeans, headbands,  
cocking their fingers  
in the borrowed V. They push  
a plaster goddess they hope  
will save them.

Now they shout  
those words we have heard so often  
in our own language:  
*Freedom! Justice!*

Lightning  
nicks the air, smelling like  
hot metal. The screen falters,  
then flashes with the faces  
of students marching. I want  
to call out, *Wait! Take care.*  
*Breathe deeply.* But they are born

in front of me, slim legs walking  
toward the growling column  
of tanks.

Then one small man  
dares a tank to crush him. A cry  
begins, the same cry we heard  
in another stone place  
filled with thousands of faces  
of all colors, bearing  
the eyes of brothers,  
sisters—Listen!

The air  
still vibrates with the voice  
of that man whose dark face  
shone in the downcast gaze  
of Lincoln in his chair,  
the voice of a servant  
dreaming the end  
of suffering—

*Free at last!*

*Free at last! Thank God almighty,  
we're free at last . . .*

With the students of Beijing  
I strain to hear him. His words  
flow over us. Thunder rolls,  
rain clatters, the earth  
shakes as if it is opening.

Together, naked and yelling,  
we are born.

## A BRIDGE TO CHINA

*In memory of Liu Fu Chi and  
Grace Divine Liu*

No engineer could dream  
such arches, drape them over  
monstrous pylons, ask armies  
of ironworkers to hurl  
enough highway across  
a planet already curved,  
tense with spilled rivers,  
heavy with salt. Yet

one woman sailed across  
more than an ocean  
to join a man who dreamed  
his country out of the dark.  
Their lives spun silk  
over distances, wove  
legends of Sian's warriors  
and tales of Tennessee  
women, fine-tempered as steel.

Now their families face  
each other across years  
of long water, pull tight  
between two continents  
the invisible threads.

TO THE CHINESE PEOPLE,  
WHO SEE THE SAME STARS

Lake Michigan  
lies flat in the dark  
a black pool wide as a prairie.

The sky stands perpendicular  
over the water's body.

Its tall onyx multiplies  
the harbor lights  
into a millennium of seeing  
the clockless house of the hunter  
the queen in her jeweled chair  
the two bears eating  
drinking, pouring  
the everlasting cup.

## TWO

### *Strangers and Kin*



## PAPER FLOWERS

*Hall of Revolutionary Martyrs  
Tianjin, China, January 14, 1980*

An official hands out paper flowers. We pin them  
on our coats, my daughter and I, following  
our Chinese cousins into the Hall of Martyrs.  
Cold flows from stone; an ocean closes behind us.  
Our footsteps speak the only language we know:  
Stop. Stop. We shouldn't have come.

\*

In the anteroom we sip black tea. We try  
to warm our hands on the cups while guests  
fill the table like a jury. I bow my head, feeling  
my daughter accuse me of mourning a woman I hardly knew.  
Dear girl: She was my father's only sister.  
You don't know yet, how that is.

\*

The bald man beckons. We file into a chamber where  
hundreds of gray flowers clutter the walls. From a hood  
of black crepe her photograph gazes. I close my eyes.  
Last time I saw her, the wind flew her hat like a kite  
over the seashells, over the blue umbrella, at my father's  
old house. She laughed when he caught it,  
my father her brother again.

\*

Four times we bow to her ashes boxed in a vault.  
Men in gray suits collect all the flowers, stuff  
them in cardboard for the next quick blooming. I'm dry  
as the petals they crush, until someone touches my shoulder  
like a small bird perching, an ivory woman in black. She takes  
my daughter's hand, reaches for mine. She says nothing,  
but her cheeks are wet, her eyes alive with the shock of love.

## NEARLY

It's nearly twilight as our bus rattles  
from the airport through narrow streets  
on the outskirts of Beijing, dodging  
shadowy pedestrians and scattering bicycles  
like mice in a gray pantry. We rub  
frost from the window panes with gloved  
fingers and beg my half-Chinese cousin,  
returning in his western suit, to tell us  
what we see. He points out courtyards  
smoky behind brick gates, small markets  
choked with people waiting to buy cabbages  
under yellow light. He says they hurry  
to get home and dinner before dark. To just  
such a market he used to rush, to wait,  
to buy pears for his mother. We nod,  
flutter our guidebooks and wave to children  
in padded coats clustered like bells  
beside doorways. Looking for familiar faces,  
they keep their hands curved in their sleeves.  
Workers stamp up and down in long queues  
puffing the air blue with cigarets and cold.  
At the curb a student ties green onions  
to his bicycle, clutches a bag of pears.  
He careens into traffic, trying to steady  
an old woman against his back. Our bus  
honks its way through the crowd. We press  
our foreheads to the windows. But beside me  
my cousin makes a low sound in his chest.  
Turning, I find his face drawn, white.  
He whispers, "In the market I saw—myself."

## MEETING OUR CHINESE COUSINS

*“... every man heard them speak  
in his own tongue.”*

—Acts 2:16

Pressed into a bedroom  
of the Beijing Hotel  
we are strangers  
and kin.  
We bow and hug  
and give each other gifts  
of sesame sweets  
and tinfoil chocolate.  
We take each other's pictures  
and compare faces.  
Everyone talks at once—  
in two languages.  
But I am confined  
to a few words  
like an expensive jailbird.  
They feed me  
the necessary phrases  
bit by bit.  
When they hand me  
the key to my room  
I go quietly.  
But all night long  
I sleep with my eyes open,  
see hundreds of faces  
listen for voices  
speaking  
in tongues.

## TWO WOMEN LEAVING BEIJING

We follow the evening tide that pulls  
us through the railway station's  
halls like seawater sucked  
into caves. Dazed by the swell,  
I see myself among swarms  
of fish—one small neon among  
swirls of dark silver. They flow  
around me like chains, hauling  
their burdens from earth's center  
where almost everything sleeps.  
We inch toward a stairwell, ooze  
through its narrows, fan out wide  
to a bay where black trains  
fume and sigh. At last we grow  
legs, walk upright, breathe.  
I notice a woman hurrying beside me  
the shape of my mother, dangling  
a carp in mesh, its body frozen  
in weather. I start to live  
in her clothes. My son,  
his wife and two little ones  
shiver in our upstairs room,  
anxious to see me thaw out  
the prize, stir a white batter,  
heat up the stove—but I can't  
finish this scene without seeing  
my own son, tall, his jaw bearded,  
his blue eyes keen, grinning  
beside his car with a salmon  
hooked on his thumb. Just then

the woman stops, swings her fish  
up the steps of the train as I pass  
on to mine. She hesitates as if  
I had called her and turns  
at the door. We look

toward each other like migrant  
women of two different tribes,  
tending separate fires, clutching  
our skins around us, rising to see  
who comes.

## IMMOLATION OF A STRANGER

*for Ellen Liu (1937-1983)*

It's jade, flawed with brown flecks,  
rimmed with narrow gold and not quite  
the shape of our usual hearts, those  
valentines with twin scallops we send  
to hide and seek love. This one,  
cool as a lilac leaf but heavy  
in my hand, grows a third curve  
where the chain holds—an odd  
catch of the heart.

I close my fingers  
around the green stone, remembering  
the chilly gift shop in Beijing  
where bored young women sold  
silks and bamboo off-season. They  
hugged themselves in the bitter air  
and turned their heater's flame so high  
I imagined the fringe of my plaid  
wool scarf catching fire for buying  
something cheap to take home.

Ellen, my cousin and companion  
that final day, watched me solemnly  
as I made my small choice, guided me  
with kindness through that gray city  
she called home, looking even then  
as though she were lost. Her eyes  
and forehead—half foreign, half family—  
made my face burn as I remembered  
how my uncles, their necks flushed,  
talked about their sister marrying  
a Chinaman, disappearing for years,  
only to come back at the end  
to make claims on them.

But gentle Ellen,  
who owned so little, claimed nothing  
but what I felt from wearing  
her mother's face.

Now three years  
later this thin letter from Beijing  
tells me how the same grim illness  
and death that took her mother,  
my second self, has finished her.  
I think of journeys, kin, distances,  
home. Foolishly I wonder what  
she took with her. If I could  
send her something, I'd say, Ellen,  
take this, my flawed stone heart,  
and keep it green.

## HAWTHORNS

At the Temple of Heaven  
old men with tightened faces  
sell sticks of small red haw-apples, pierced  
by the dozen and glazed over fires. I buy them  
like beads with my newly-changed money, fumbling  
in cold, counting out coins and mixing  
white breath with incense  
of charcoal. My Chinese  
cousins watch as I bite  
the sweet skins, the tart fruit, full of seeds  
hard as mahogany, clinging to each other  
in carved families. Nini, the eldest,  
looks into my face as we climb  
the temple's great stair and says in her soft  
syllables: Those were the favorite  
fruits of your aunt, our mother,  
when she was still  
with us. Do they grow in America  
where you live, where once she lived as a girl?  
Here, the same hawthorns bloom white in spring,  
and when their petals fade, the harsh yellow  
wind from the desert blows them  
over our rooftops like fine ashes that fly  
almost as far as the sea.

## CITY OF DUST AND WATER

*Tianjin, China, 1980*

*Damaged by earthquake, 1976*

### 1

The dry earth coughed, shrugged, dropped  
its load of buildings into cracks  
that opened with sounds of stone  
grinding on stone.

Underground  
kingdoms rumbled their doors, scrawled  
their messages on walls. Neighborhoods  
broke into anthills, running with fathers  
searching for families, everyone  
turning to children in earth's  
quick coming apart . . .

How slowly  
the signs of a city's undoing erase.  
The people of Tianjin do not boast,  
"Here is the tower that fell,  
the ancient cedar uprooted."  
They look down, brush away  
dust. It settles everywhere,  
in hair, in eyes. Their voices  
squeeze out of lungs still  
choked with surprise.

### 2

Sampan toss and groan under our hotel window.  
At 2 a.m., my daughter and I cannot sleep  
together in this bed so many worlds  
from home: our snow-hushed rooms, warm  
and separate, changed to this stiff  
intimacy under silk. Neither of us knows  
the other's skin. Hers is smooth, blue as milk;  
mine crinkled, scalded cream. We try  
not to cough or sway the ancient mattress.  
But I want to tell her how this dark

hotel's a buried city of women like us.  
In this room we meet and part from our  
mothers, children, lovers, breath.  
This bed swings like a bridge  
over all that divides us.

## THE GUEST CHAIR AT NANKAI UNIVERSITY

First we dine on carp, sweet and sour.  
After the prized fish, the old chairman  
slurps his soup. Hunched like a holy man,  
he never looks up from his bowl. But the Canadian  
exchange professor stares at me between  
spoonfuls and rubs his new beard. Over

green cabbage and leeks he tells me  
his students of English beg him  
for lectures on Adam and Eve,  
Jesus and the fishes. He says these stories  
filled his childhood in Saskatchewan  
by the parsonage stove. Now they  
haunt his cold narrow room. And what

does he tell them? Parables  
in whatever words he can find. Then  
the students ask if his people really  
believe. They write out dozens of questions  
on Bible-thin paper. Across the teacups  
choked with leaves, the professor hands me  
pages like white money, trembling.

During the passing of pears I study  
the students' small writing. Who is God?  
Why did he make the world? What does it mean  
to be saved? I think these are the same  
questions asked by strangers who sweat  
in cold rooms. Before I can

find out what answers  
he gave them, it's time to rise  
from a table littered with fish bones  
and bow to a chairman sleepy with meat.  
I shake the professor's hand and say

the only thing I can think of  
to join us together: *Good luck*  
*fishing!* His eyes look  
hungry for more.

## CHINAVISION

### 1

Still I see those two-humped camels  
tied for tourists at the sunny hut  
beyond the shadow of the Great Wall.  
Blond girls stare and run toward  
the arch, hugging their blue nylon  
ski-jackets. Cold burns their cheeks  
with crimson stars. I follow them,  
sand in my eyes, as wind swoops  
like a comet's fist, socking  
my breath away. Above, the wall  
crouches on yellow mountains, teeth  
crumbling, no longer sharp against  
barbarians. On the parapets old men  
in Mongolian hats grin and offer  
chunks of jade hidden in rags. Blinded,  
I shake my head, fight to the last  
tower, wondering why their ancestors  
wanted this wind, this wilderness;  
how thousands of hands could fit  
these stones with freezing thumbs.

### 2

Later, afternoon sun tries to warm  
the Valley of Mings, where 13 emperors  
buried themselves under 13 hills.  
Two camels, chiseled in stone, face  
each other on the Avenue of Beasts,  
smiling for their photographs. My half-  
Chinese cousin stands beneath two smooth  
humps and squints in the sun, ready,  
but my camera jams in the cold. I must  
carry this picture in my eyelids, back  
to another continent, this house  
where I reel in gray visions. I see

my cousin beside the strange beast,  
his twin, wincing in the glare;  
and afterward, his face reflected  
in the train window as he returns  
to his old city, his skin pale,  
his lids closed. Now both of us  
see double under a single sun,  
our eyes full and burning.

## STORYTELLER

*for William Weihan Liu*

It's your story, cousin, but I've  
stolen it. Like a magpie I've snatched  
pieces of your life to weave a coat  
for myself, more colorful than a wise  
father would have given, something  
I made and called my own. They're  
all gone now. Your mother, your  
two sisters, your own engineer father  
who used to take you with him Sundays  
when you were a boy to check the city's  
vast water system, his greatest pride,  
next to his only son. You still  
keep the small yellowed snapshot  
of the two of you pausing in ritual  
inspection tour, your father's face  
broad and competent, yours small, thin,  
but both smiling, pleased in each other's  
company, safe after a world at war  
in your own city. Your birthright is your  
vision of all that happened since, China  
*in extremis* through your eyes as a boy  
with feet straddling both worlds,  
a story you will write for yourself  
someday, when time tells, spirits rest.  
For me you are generous with your life.  
You will not give me away. Only I  
can do that, a loving thief giving  
fingered goods back with a pinch  
of rue. Here in my patched coat,  
my pretender's shoes, I stand.



THREE

*In the Company of Magpies*



## THE CHINESE ART & CULTURE TOUR

### *Valuables*

In Shanghai rich young Amanda buys dead insects  
in amber from a shop as dark as a vault.  
Where jade cutters hunch, she scoops up  
handfuls of stones, raking them into her purse,  
twittering how they look just like quail's eggs.

At the carpet factory she picks out a rug  
swarming with dragons, nestled in wool too white  
for anyone else to afford. She rolls it up  
like a sausage, so many dollars per pound.

Later, in a town full of farmers, she yawns  
through schoolrooms, fidgets through institutes,  
hurries to prowl the back streets for more loot.  
Soon she comes running, her eyes big as bowls.  
"It's true! They do eat rats. An old woman  
grinned and offered me one by the tail!"

"Tut," says the guide, descendant of Wu, king  
of this province famous for gardens and silk  
and small-fingered girls who embroider cats.  
He smiles with centuries of charm: "The people  
of Suzhou want foreign ladies to know  
how well we take care of pests."

### *Mischief*

In the Forbidden City  
under a cold dazzling sun  
we take pictures of men  
in fur hats grinning,  
showing jagged teeth  
and breathing out frost  
like smoke from campfires  
hidden under rough coats.

Kin to the Khans, these  
men with tawny faces come  
from provinces up north,  
teased by forbiddance,  
tickled to be tourists  
in their wildest outfits  
for curious western  
women with cameras who  
giggle, find them irresistible,  
and go *Click! Click!*

*The Look*

In the upstairs jade factory  
young men and women in gray suits  
bend over drills and emery wheels  
to shape gardens of green stone.  
They look like machines themselves,  
faces blank, fingers moving as if  
oiled and geared. They stop only  
to exercise their eyes to a recorded  
march with scratchy, barked commands.  
Then quickly they resume chiseling  
ornate leaves, birds, phoenixes  
that look as though artful monks  
on a mountaintop carved them  
with years of meditation.

They were picked, we learn,  
for their dexterity, spatial knack,  
ability to follow a plan. Their workplace  
is cold as a cave. In back of the room  
near a stove that gives barely enough  
heat for fingers to move, one young man  
suddenly looks up. While the others  
keep on carving, his eyes lock  
onto mine. Insolent, hot. He wants  
to throw down his flowery statue,  
stalk toward me and grab my wrist,

push me down into his chair behind  
mountains of frozen stone, hissing,  
“Work, you lazy white dog!”

*Bamboo*

Off a back street courtyard, a gray room  
flowers with bright brush paintings  
by elderly men and women who gather  
to meet us. They wear old Mao suits  
as if they have slept in them for years.  
They sit shyly while their leader demonstrates  
how to paint bamboo on silk.

But we are tired.

We have seen too much bamboo already.  
During the question period we hardly ask  
anything. We walk around slowly, smiling  
at the walls, wondering what these people did  
before they got old. Worked in the silk mills,  
picked soybeans? One small woman shuffles  
up to me and points out her painting above us,  
a blood-red peony. She tells me she speaks  
a little English. I look for a suitable  
question to give her.

“What did you do  
before you retired?” She bows her head as if  
receiving a blessing, answers, “For China  
throughout seven provinces I designed  
railroad stations. Also my design,  
this next picture of bamboo.”

*The Wild Dinner*

Chinese city dwellers call far-out Guilin  
wilderness. Ancient poets and painters  
grew blissful over its sugarloaf peaks,  
clouded shrines, criss-cross thickets  
of pine and bamboo that fueled the mists  
of their minds. Later, half a century ago,

these limestone caves proved useful  
in hiding from bombs. Refugees huddled  
where we now stand. Today the travel bureau  
jazzes the caverns with red and blue lights,  
applies nicknames that out-do Disney  
for tourists, the newest frontier.

Tonight's farewell feast is billed  
"The Wild Dinner." In a private room  
above untamed peasants we drink strange  
beer, sing loudly what sounds like  
Sino-American hillbilly. When  
twisted meats of mysterious origin  
arrive steaming, our guide translates  
with difficulty. This is—how you say—  
the delicious "flying fox." We munch,  
guessing squirrel. Other beasts we leave  
tangled in rice as we swallow fiery  
maotai, toasting South China wildness.

Months later the flying fox leaps out  
on Sunday afternoon TV, flexing its black  
wings, grinning like a miniature hyena:  
the notorious giant fruit bat of Southeast  
Asia. As its leathery body flops before me,  
I redefine my ability to adjust  
to wild things.

### *Partings*

We applaud over littered banquet plates  
and Qingdao beers, start loudly singing  
American camp songs mixed with Chinese ditties  
hardly anyone understands, but everyone  
keeps grinning and toasting Mr. Yi.

Mr. Yi is leaving home to be married.  
He is bashful. After more songs, his face  
grows damp as Mr. Yang, his fellow guide,

presents him with a wedding gift:  
a bed comfort of bright red silk.

Asked to solo, Mr. Yi demurs, hangs  
his head, mumbles when his friend  
calls his voice the best in the province.  
But later, on the way back to the hotel,  
as the darkened bus rocks us to sleep,  
a quavering tenor rises against silence.  
This is no brazen shriek of Chinese opera.  
It's a child lost. An animal snared. We  
clutch our sweaters around us. After the wail  
subsides, Mr. Yi tells us under dark's cover  
the name of his song from ancient China,  
"Saying Goodbye to a Friend." In our light  
applause I seem to hear the sound of water  
lapping against the sides of our bus, a boat  
full of strangers, pulling away from shore.

## SYLVIA PLATH IN CHINA

How did you get here, big blonde  
with x-ray eyes? On the train  
from Jinan to Qufu, you climb out  
of a slick magazine brought by an old  
classmate of yours from the States  
who wants a place in the gossip.

Today you wear a new mask, cold  
and arrogant, no longer pitied for  
your faithless husband, your lone frenzy,  
two little children left to find  
bread and milk instead of mother.  
If you had lived, maybe you'd ride

this train as a gray-haired grandma  
with children in your billfold,  
scribbling your latest volume since  
the Pulitzer, with a kindly second  
husband dozing at your arm. Green  
fields of rice blur by. You smile

at hyperbole in a teacup. The house  
you'll return to is warm, ordinary,  
with all the conveniences you missed.

If your immortality didn't depend  
on misfortune, mania, and death  
at an early age, squeezing genius

out of your brain like grapes  
pressed to thorns and sour wine,  
we could welcome you home.

## GHOST CITY

That's what they call Fengdu,  
mountainside river port in midday mist  
where tourists stream from the white ship  
up a long stairway from the Yangtze  
slippery with ages of black mud. We watch  
our feet carefully, look down as hands  
reach out with tangerines, postcards,  
green rocks, toy cars. We know how  
to steel ourselves to women's cries  
shrill with the word they believe  
is magic for tourists, *Hello! Hello!*  
shouted like caged parrots who  
expect no answer. We turn away,  
boarding the bus for a mountaintop  
theme park based on Sichuan folklore,  
where a lipsticked guide singsongs  
American slang as she leads us  
through ancient pagodas of 1985,  
guarded by concrete monsters crude  
as a kid's gory scribble. We push away  
peddlers with bloody finger-puppets,  
refuse to heed forecasts of happiness  
depending on how we cross a bridge,  
balance on a wooden ball. Where's  
our sense of humor? Gone. And when  
we come down to the river again, a family  
at the crowded dock presents their prize  
boy with legs twisted backward, a blind  
mother clamps her snot-streaked child  
between her knees, all stretching out  
their arms with trinkets. *Hello!* Why  
do the people of Fengdu seem more  
desperate than those of a dozen other

Chinese cities we have seen? Is it because  
their crumbling homes will be covered when  
the great new dam starts holding back  
the river? Or is it just their fear of  
any tomorrow? As we slowly disappear  
into the white boat, we are mute, looking  
back at the clustered shore, remembering  
what little we know of Hell, thinking  
that in this place we are the ones who are  
unreal. We are the ghosts of Ghost City.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT HISTORY

### *Where Were You?*

At Shandong University a middle-aged professor wearing a pinstriped suit gives his lecture on “Modern Chinese History for Foreign Visitors.” The room feels muffled as he details the May 4 Movement, Mao’s rise, the Japanese War, Liberation. We nearly fall asleep, but we wake up when he reaches the Gang of Four, nearing that day we saw on television, Tiananmen Square.

He stops before he gets there. We ask him why. He clears his throat, pronounces the incident too new to be history. Then he offers what he insists is only his personal opinion: Lawless elements, vandals to blame. We glance at each other. Afterward someone asks our young Chinese guide if he agrees. His eyes cloud. He begins as usual, “A very difficult question.” He looks behind him and quick as a tossed grenade, blurts, “I was there.”

### *Cleaning the Stain*

Chinese toddlers wear open-air pants,  
a scandal to westerners, but practical.  
A young mother in mini-dress, chrome yellow  
with black polka dots, shiny high heels,  
turns her back on her squatting son,  
who pees baby-style on pavestones.  
An old woman passing by clucks approval  
at the boy, not at his mother, who  
walks away, pretends he’s not hers.  
Soon the boy scampers back to her side,  
begs a bottle of Sprite, then runs

to pour it on the widening spot. She turns  
her back again, putting on dark glasses.  
It's simple enough to clean that stain,  
one of many. Others are not so easy.

## HOW TO CHANGE A COUNTRY

*At the Peasant Movement  
Institute, Guangzhou*

### *The Belt*

How spare this place is:  
A monastery turned into cells  
for Mao's early converts,  
learning how to change  
the country overnight,  
over months, over years,  
however long it took.

Everything is in rows:  
Narrow beds, earthen bowls,  
tables of rough wood.  
Nothing is wasted,  
nothing says comfort.

And in Mao's own cell  
there is something else:  
a holster and cartridge belt,  
looking ready, hanging  
on a peg like a coat  
waiting for him  
to come back.

Outside the institute  
Mao's statue, not yet  
toppled, stands huge  
among cherry trees:  
a stone man—too big  
for his belt.

### *The Memento*

On the institute wall  
we find a small photo  
in black and white  
of those who studied

here, among them  
handsome Zhou Enlai,  
a shadow-man who often  
stood between Mao  
and the people.

I ask my Chinese cousin:  
Why no giant statue,  
no florid portrait  
of Zhou? At first  
he doesn't answer.  
Then he says only,  
*It's not his way.*

Meaning, I think,  
Cousin, be quiet.  
You walk on our soil,  
but you cannot enter  
that needle hole  
inside us where  
he lives.

## YIN AND YANG

### *Shanghai Contortionist*

She's at it again, that rubber girl  
with no bones. Look how she bends  
slow as a snake, sitting on her own  
head and grinning between her legs  
at the crowd who loves it. In the wings  
her master waits. The laundry needs doing,  
rooms want cleaning, a dozen guests  
are coming for Peking duck. She  
balances five tiers of crystal  
goblets on her chin while she rotates  
like the world on its axis, knows  
he will want her later, using  
her most exotic positions, torso  
and legs presented like fine loins  
of beef to be turned, twisted,  
pounded into succulent display.

### *Young Tai-Ji Master at Qufu*

Is it the white silk of his loose  
shirt and pantaloons sliding against  
his still-cool brown body  
Or is it the tight skin of his muscled  
neck, small-knotted at the throat  
between tendons like cords  
balancing the chiseled head and face,  
eyes cave-black, watching a distant  
fire that never burns out?  
Or is it the movement itself, slow  
as a hidden river flowing soft over hard  
stone to the ocean's floor like a net  
that dredges us out of ourselves,  
makes us part of this man turned oracle,  
mind and body prophesying together?

## MR. YUAN'S TWO JOYS

Our Chinese guide adores English idioms.  
He presents them to us like bonbons  
at each corner we pass in Shanghai,  
where old men play chess at rickety  
tables between their knees. When  
the bus stalls in thick traffic,  
Mr. Yuan scratches his head, declares,  
*Gridlock!* and smiles for the first time.

At the park Mr. Yuan makes a speech  
about Liberation, how before that day  
signs said, *No Chinese and Dogs Allowed*.  
He puts his palms together, offers:  
*Birds of a feather flock together?*  
This time he doesn't smile. We clear  
our throats, look out the window.

Next he takes us to the section  
where he says beggars, opium addicts,  
prostitutes once crammed the streets  
like dead fish. *Redlight district*,  
he intones, waving to an empty plaza,  
*now clean as whistle with communism*.  
We wonder whether to smile or frown.

While we visit the museum, Mr. Yuan  
stays outside by the bus, chain-smoking.  
*Like a smokestack*, we could say  
as we return, looking him over secretly  
at close range. He is small, young-old;  
his chiseled face looks *dog-tired*.  
A former professor, maybe, or a diplomat.

When the tour is over, we ask Mr. Yuan  
how he will spend the rest of his Sunday,  
expecting him to tell about home, family.  
*In the park*, he answers instead, *playing chess*.

He smiles his second smile, almost radiant.  
Quietly we file off the bus, leaving him  
in the doorway. We whisper to each  
other: *Do you think they tortured him?*

## CHINESE PUZZLE

You say they've been civilized  
longer than anyone, and this museum  
proves it, with artifacts made  
thousands of years before Christ:  
implements, weapons, remnants  
of that famous potentate in Sian  
who loved his warriors into clay . . .

Consider the intricate casting  
of this bronze dagger, the iris blue  
porcelain, red cloisonné peonies  
growing on the mirror of a palace  
concubine. What is the link  
between art and cruelty? Here  
are the makings of war, slavery,  
and notions of beauty that crushed

girls' feet into pairs of dead lilies.  
See how exquisite the small shoes.  
Like you, I could rave about loveliness  
but instead I ask myself where  
goodness and justice fit in. You'd  
touch a finger to my mouth and chide,  
Don't ask. Let civilization  
make beauty without judgment . . .

Take this scroll, for example,  
with cragged mountains, lone monk  
by a cave. Observe the wet pines,  
raven in mist, waterfalls lighting  
the monk's smile. A courtier  
imagined this wilderness among  
tassels and brocade. Did either  
painter or painted hear the muffled  
weeping in the narrow passageways  
that twisted into the city's heart?

## FULL MOON HARVEST FESTIVAL AT THE SPA CITY

In the restaurant and all over China tonight  
there are millions of mooncakes, flat and round,  
white with mysterious dark centers.

Here in this luxury retreat built for him,  
aging moon-faced Mao never quite arrived,  
never climbed the three hills or dipped  
in the seventy-two springs that dried up,  
or swam in the Olympic pool still waiting  
without ripples behind glass walls.

Now among second-level bureaucrats driving  
Japanese cars, our study group steps  
from a minibus, inhales the bourgeois roses.

Beyond the hotel's blue-lit fountains,  
exotic pines and pagodas loom at dusk.  
Then an enormous moon appears.

Next morning at the prison seminar  
we taste mooncakes fresh from the oven.  
The warden breaks them apart for us

at the kitchen door after his lecture  
on all the lies our press tells about  
Chinese prison labor. Fuming,  
the torn cakes reveal their dark secret  
and we agree, they're the best ones  
we've eaten. We lick our fingers

and proceed to the last courtyard,  
where a small brass band of prisoners  
breaks into "Auld Lang Syne." We wave  
goodbye with mooncakes on our breath,  
believing most of what we have heard  
in hope of a fortunate harvest.

## PEACE ROAD KINDERGARTEN

In this small city within a city  
children live from early morning  
until dusk, when parents come back  
to remind them who they are. All day  
they chatter like flocks of sparrows  
who used to nest, the oldest teacher  
remembers, in these low trees with shiny  
leaves, before all birds were eaten.

Today for foreign guests the children  
dance and sing under red tile roofs  
where the air smells like jasmine  
and cabbage soup. They dress up  
in festival costumes with paper flowers,  
silk butterflies, golden crowns,  
crane feathers. For the grand finale  
two boys roar in a double dragon suit.

Sweaty after the pageant, the children  
troop outside, strip to underpants  
and swim two by two in a raised pool  
the size of a victory garden. Some  
children's ribs show, none looks fat enough  
for a dragon to eat. But they are strong  
and hungry. They kick vigorously  
toward the smell of soup. Fed,

smiling again, they run to play  
in a yard where the earth is polished  
from so many feet. The guests follow,  
well-lunched and laughing as they watch  
a relay race of letters delivered  
to a little green mailbox; braided rings  
tossed around a stick; and run-sheep-run,  
only in this country, it's a rabbit

with cardboard ears, running for his  
life to the sizzle of a young teacher's  
tambourine, then found and hugged—  
not eaten—and settled down for a nap  
to singsong music as the visitors  
feel dreamy, charmed, seeing themselves  
playing those games years ago  
in vacant lots, backyards. Home.

## TIGER HILL

No tiger. Just a hill with teahouse  
next to wedding-cake pagoda  
that leans too much for climbing.  
Our faces shine above our fragrant  
teacups as we turn to view  
through latticed windows ancient  
gardens blue with haze below.

We find instead bouquets of Chinese  
faces pressed at dusty windowpanes,  
peering into our cage, at us, the latest  
tigers. We study the tea leaves, mutter  
to ourselves how communism is turning  
common folk away. We ask our guide,  
Why don't you let those people in?

Mr. Wu adjusts his smile of uncommon  
charm and quotes the numbers, says  
so many feet would trample lovely  
teahouse flat. We swallow hard, gaze  
at carvings above our heads, ask  
him something simpler. Why pagodas  
perched on hills? His airy answer:

to offer flying spirits a roosting place.  
Our tea begins to taste like weeds. We rise  
and gather souvenirs, avoid the stare  
of leather faces as we walk a thousand  
steps down Tiger Hill, where spirits  
hover, pilgrims keep on climbing,  
and we return to trampled earth.

## VISION AT TAI-SHAN MOUNTAIN

I'm doubtful, restless, on this journey  
upward with Buddhist pilgrims to Tai-Shan seeking  
whatever mountain covered with cloud can give.

Here at the midway station, the summit's foot,  
westerners gasp at miles of stairway carved  
into rock, a tower of Babel, a Jacob's ladder,  
spotted with toiling figures. For tourists

there's another way: a sky tram with rickety  
gondola packed and swaying across chasms toward  
the sacred peak beyond mist. I stay behind, feet  
wanting earth. Instead I pace the road past booths  
of hawkers, then follow a path away from the crowd,

looking for hummingbirds, five-leafed ginseng.  
Litter grows on the slopes, pecked by squawking  
magpies. The path leads to a hut on a cliff  
where two men carry a load of cabbages on a pole  
through a narrow door. They argue, go sideways,  
heads tumble and roll. I want to laugh but there's  
too much that's human in it, earthbound like me,  
no place to turn. The long-tailed magpies soar  
into the abyss as I edge to trail's end, only to find  
a privy, foul as a harpy's nest. *Back!* the birds  
cry. I turn, clouds break, the mountain flashes  
a mirror signal from a temple where saffron monks hum  
beyond all I know. Then mist moves over like a hand.



FOUR

*Looking for Grace*



## WHERE IT HURTS

In memory's interior eye this old girl  
is new, a school child with white flower face  
ready for Easter, shiny shoes tapdancing  
on cracks down a sidewalk, skirt twirling  
like a parasol, singing, *Mirror, mirror*  
*on the wall, let my father say I'm pretty,*  
*not you look like my sister Grace,* that curse  
to make a daughter old as a Chinese aunt, flat  
photograph always staring, gray as a church  
with closed doors hiding something sinful.  
*But she's ugly!* the girl cries with a false  
truth no little lady should tell. Her chest  
tightens as she gets into the family car,  
hugs herself in the backseat, ribs hurting  
from big sister's scornful elbow. Silent  
father sits at the wheel, never looks back.  
This old girl wants to jump out, but it's too late.  
Then love's brass looking-glass goes dark.

## DEEP ENOUGH TO GO HOME

### *The Gift Mirror*

My Chinese Aunt  
Grace with her letters full  
of floods and famine and children  
stiffening under sycamores  
while missionaries  
carved  
their Sunday lamb  
  
threw her Bible away  
and sent our family  
a gift: this  
mirror of amethyst and jade.

Looking for  
her picture lost inside  
these attic boxes  
I find instead  
myself  
staring out of the gift mirror—  
  
a missionary  
surrounded  
by grapes and leaves,  
asking  
  
Who *is*  
this old girl?

### *The Hook*

An old man made of terra cotta  
always fishes with good luck  
from the edge of my father's desk.  
The little carp he catches  
smiles as if the line that dangles him  
could suddenly plunge deep enough  
to go home, to find the artist

who made him, the merchant  
who sold him, the young man  
who bought him and tossed  
this treasure across the sea  
to hook my father and me.

*Unsent Postcard to My Father*

This is Tianjin, cold and harsh, Aunt Grace's old city. I want you to know K and I witnessed the memorial to stand up for her American family. For you. We didn't know what all the words meant, but Papa, you can be proud of your sister. She was a good wife and mother. In the eulogy they said she was a great teacher and patriot. So what, if she chose real China instead of your American dream and married a man who called himself "heathen." She's saved, I hope, no matter what she believed. Isn't that what true grace means? As you always used to say, Papa,  
*Rest assured.*                      Please.

## SCARRED BAGGAGE

### *Something Lost*

Once I saw on TV an old  
Chinese woman with her voice  
shaking tell how she fled the communists  
during the civil war, when rich people like her  
left everything behind, taking only the clothes  
on their backs—plus the valuables  
they hid underneath—to seek  
freedom. She saw  
herself a heroine, daring  
to abandon most of her worldly belongings  
for the cause of an abstraction. An admirable risk,  
perhaps, except later I learned, when she dropped  
like a small paper sack slipping from  
a great bundle, the news that among  
the things she left behind was  
a baby—her only  
daughter. I think  
her child comes home in my suitcase,  
maybe in everyone's suitcase. She keeps on coming,  
growing smaller, hard and bright as a pearl.  
None of us knows what to do with her.  
She's everything we ever did wrong,  
failed to do, loved—  
but not enough.

### *The Key*

A locked suitcase.  
Tiny gold key. Lost.  
Want to turn the lock,  
open everything up,  
burrow inside stuffing,  
throw out silks, beads, letters,

dig down under thick wool,  
find something hard,  
shiny, the ache  
of a gold tooth at night,  
key itself  
locked inside the suitcase.  
Chisel, knife, axe.  
Sister. Father.

*Unpacking the Suitcase*

Everything in order  
when I packed my bag:  
thick-soled shoes, cotton undershirts,  
wool scarf for walking in bitter off-season cold,  
two pairs of eyeglasses to guard against loss,  
binoculars to help me see  
even farther, the guidebook,  
pills. I numbered  
the days, baedekered and timetabled  
my heart, wound it up tight with spirals  
of cities, rivers and mountains, pagodas and shrines—  
cocooning myself from the one day of mourning I feared  
would drown me with voices and faces, this funeral  
journey disguised as  
a trip. Now I come  
home, open the suitcase, put away  
silks, souvenirs, unsent postcards, coins  
now worthless, small notebooks spotted with rain. Things  
I didn't see inside the suitcase start rising up  
dark as a mountain of rags: clothes I knew  
well as my own skin turning to ruins  
I dig through, mole-like, hands  
into claws, raking what's  
buried all the way  
down to where  
it hurts.

FOUND SNAPSHOT:  
THE YEAR HIS SISTER LEFT

A young father pulls  
back his small daughter  
in a wooden swing,  
a plank and two ropes  
hung from an oak.

It's early evening  
after work. He looks  
tired, with his tie loose,  
his white shirt open  
at the neck. He holds

her steady and close  
to him, pausing this  
instant before he  
lets her swoop out  
among leaves and sky  
back to his arms again.

The little girl's face  
is complete as a rose.  
For this one moment  
her father belongs

only to her. He will  
always stand there  
to hold her back,  
let her swing out,  
bring her home.

REMEMBERING THE THREE  
GORGES

*for my father*

The Yangtze River  
flows wide and narrow,  
narrow and wide,  
like an ache that comes  
and goes, a pain  
in the shoulder  
from holding your hand  
for hours as you squeezed  
along a narrow passage  
I couldn't see, like  
a pilot guiding a ship  
blind. It was my third  
night watching. My right  
arm bent over the steel  
bars to cling to what  
was left of you, giving  
me this ache that  
stays with me  
a year later, mark  
of a grief I thought  
had already loosened  
its hold, the way  
a flood withdraws,  
leaving the shore  
damaged, the way  
your spirit flew  
away from me, home  
to your mountains,  
far from the river's  
changing path.

## THE ROPE

Last night my father came back.  
At first I saw him from a distance  
across a long valley with no trees  
beside the Great Wall. My mother  
and sister held onto me, watching  
him walk slowly down a steep path  
behind a man who led him with a rope  
as if my father were a colt. The man,  
a stranger, wore a tight, dark suit.  
Father's white shirt hung loose  
with no tie except the rope. He  
looked young again, innocent  
of all that has happened.

Tonight they return, come closer.  
The man vanishes and Father starts  
to climb with us into a blue sedan,  
our old family car. Mother flutters,  
*Is it really you? Oh, I'm so glad  
to see you again.* Then her face  
shadows. If he's alive, he will  
have to die again. I watch myself  
reach forward, try to take hold  
of the rope, tell him there's  
no room. I can't speak.

## MISSING IN CHINA

Sudden moonlight steals my father from me.  
These nightly visions of his death must end.  
Another woman lies down in my place  
awake. She wears a copy of my face.  
Her skin is torn, a scar she could not mend.  
Her open eyelids steal my father from me  
with foreign dreams suggesting prophecy,  
a lonely death some distant God might send.  
A jealous woman lies awake in place  
of daughter's innocence. Buried memory  
weaves a rope from silken dresses, blends  
flags and flowers, steals my father from me  
as I dream a death I would not hope to see  
except that life itself decrees an end.  
Again his sister rises in my place,  
the one who left her brother without grace.  
Her missing face is mine. My dreams pretend  
a foreign country stole my father from me.  
A jealous child is waking in my place.

## FOR THOSE WHO DREAM OF CRANES

*After a painting by Song Feng Guang*

### 1 *Jinan, China*

They wait for you at night  
in a thicket of bamboo. Snow  
falls around them. Their feathers  
rustle in light wind like secrets.  
They are talking about you. Beaks  
click like yellow knitting needles.  
Circle-eyes pull you with invisible  
strings onto their ground to turn you  
into part of the ceremony. Watch how  
they bow, lift up long stick-legs,  
set down feet as if casting small nets.  
Now they are calling, dancing. Their  
feathered crests nod, white wings  
billow in moonlight. Then daybreak.  
You awake alone, heavy. Silence.  
A thicket. Ghosts of cranes.

### 2 *Stonington, Michigan*

In late August near home, as the sun  
drops its red coin into a slot of  
black trees, sandhill cranes float  
down into the new-mown hayfield  
where they pace and strut, nearly  
tall as deer, dark gray, ghostly,  
making no sound as they feed, ready  
to leave for winter. Last spring  
you heard them coming, a muttering  
beyond the lake like something small.  
Closer, they grew monstrous, voices  
loud as dry wood dropped in a box.  
They passed over, bound for their hidden  
nesting place. Tonight you watch them  
again before they vanish tomorrow,  
coming, going, sure as the sun.

3 *Jinan*

Steel cranes lean over this city,  
piling up giant buildings where  
low brick houses with courtyards  
used to sprawl and tumble, where  
backyard fields of corn and cabbage  
reached toward the countryside. Now  
these great featherless birds haunt  
the new skyline, as if everything  
depended on height, concrete, money.  
Images of sacred cranes still grace  
the city pavement, the ancient form.  
The artist at the university quickly  
brushes them in traditional form to help  
feed his family. But in this scroll,  
his favorite, painted slowly at night,  
cranes live as they should, forever.

4 *Jinan. Stonington.*

In the thicket again, white cranes  
wait. You enter, empty-handed.  
From inside the puzzle of branches  
you see vast plains where farmers  
cut corn stalks by hand. Hunched  
families drag rakes over dry soil  
to plant wheat for millions of mouths.  
You turn. Beyond bamboo, the hayfield  
near home. Gray cranes feed in first  
light. They gather to fly over miles where  
bird-like machines worth armies of farmers  
eat corn. Wings pump high into cloud,  
over cities already jagged with steel.  
Inside the maze, you learn the language,  
begin the ceremony. Gray brothers,  
fly safely. White spirits, speak.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT IS MADE TO THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS in which these poems, some of them in different forms, have appeared:

*Helicon Nine*: "Two Women Leaving Beijing," "City of Dust and Water" under the title "In a Far City." *The Helicon Reader*: "Two Women Leaving Beijing." *Iris*: "The Gift Mirror," "Hawthorns," "Two Women Leaving Beijing." *Images*: "For the Chinese People, Who See the Same Stars" under the title "Sight." *Nankai University Journal*: "For the Chinese People, Who See the Same Stars" ("Sight," in Chinese translation). *Contemporary Michigan Poetry* (anthology): "Two Women Leaving Beijing," "City of Dust and Water" under the title "In a Far City." *Poets On*: "Nearly" under the title "Glimpses." *Parting Gifts*: "Chinavision." *Christian Science Monitor*: "The Hook" under the title of "Simple Surprises." *Eclectic Literary Forum*: "Paper Flowers." *Writers at Work*: "Mr. Yuan's Two Joys." *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*: "Partings." *Hawaii Pacific Review*: "The Guest Chair at the University" and "Bamboo" under the title "The Senior Center at Jinan." *Americas Review*: "Two Women Leaving Beijing," First Prize Winner, 1995, and "Mr. Yuan's Two Joys." *Connecticut Review*: "The Rope." *Doors of the Morning* (anthology): "Paper Flowers" (Co-winner of the Sandburg-Livesay Award, Canada, 1997). *Waiting for You to Speak* (anthology, Sandburg-Livesay Award, 1999): "Chinese Puzzle" and "In a Far City." *The MacGuffin*: "Ghost City."

Some of the above poems and additional poems appeared in the following chapbooks: *A Bridge to China* (Plattsburgh, NY: Hardwood Books, 1983); *The Green Heart* (Normal, IL: Illinois State University, 1994), which won the Illinois Writers, Inc., competition for 1993; and *Chinavision* (Greensboro, NC: March Street Press, 1995).

Many of these poems were written with the assistance of grants from the American Association of University Women and the Michigan Council for the Arts. They grew out of travel in China for purposes of family reconciliation, research, and tourism in 1980, 1993, and 1995. A documentary account of the life of Grace Divine Liu, the

author's aunt who lives in these poems, may be found in *Grace in China: An American Women Beyond the Great Wall, 1934-1974* (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1999) by Eleanor Cooper and William Liu, in which "A Bridge to China" is included as an epigraph.

The author wishes to thank Roger Weingarten of the M.F.A. program at Vermont College for his perennial acumen and generosity during the development of this collection. Others who helped early in the work's progress were Heather McHugh, Mark Doty, Mekeel McBride, Leslie Ullman, and Pattiann Rogers. The late William Matthews gave important encouragement near the end of the project. Thanks also to friends and colleagues Carol Hackenbruch, Larry Leffel, Anne Ohman Youngs, Mary Joy Johnson, and Deanna Pickard, and to my son-in-law and colleague, Kurt Ayau. Special gratitude to the McCallie, Divine, Liu, and Benedict families in whose stories and images these poems are grounded.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELINOR BENEDICT, A NATIVE OF TENNESSEE AND GRADUATE OF Duke University, earned an M.A. in English from Wright State University, Ohio and an M.F.A. in Writing from Vermont College. She has won several journalism prizes, the *Mademoiselle* Fiction Prize, a Michigan Council for the Arts Award, and an Editor's Grant from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines (now CLMP). As a writing teacher and founding editor of *Passages North* from 1979-1989, she has encouraged many emerging writers.

Her poems have appeared in magazines and in five chapbooks, including three with a Chinese theme. This body of work began to develop in 1980 when she traveled to China with her daughter to attend her aunt's memorial "rehabilitation" after the Cultural Revolution. In 1993 and 1995 she returned to China for seminars and tours.

Her most recent chapbook, *The Tree Between Us* (March Street Press), deals with life in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where she lives with her husband among trees, lakes, and snow. They also spend time in Naples, Florida and travel whenever possible, often visiting their three adult children and seven grandchildren.

## ABOUT THE MAY SWENSON POETRY AWARD

THE MAY SWENSON POETRY AWARD WAS NAMED FOR MAY SWENSON, and honors her as one of America's most provocative, insouciant, and vital poets. During her long career, May was loved and praised by writers from virtually every major school of poetry. In John Hollander's words, she was "one of our few unquestionably major poets." She left a legacy of nearly fifty years of writing when she died in 1989.

May Swenson lived most of her adult life in New York City, the center of poetry writing and publishing in her day. But she is buried in Logan, Utah, her birthplace and hometown.