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Linguist

AUST

1.

When ten years old you read of the East
in books from the shelves of a neighbour's house,
her daughter feeding you Dutch liquorice
and rucking up her skirt, enjoying
your entranced, embarrassed gaze. You kissed
her salty lips and the world opened out.
You've written since of language—how meaning
is everywhere differently made. Last year,
leaving again, you said you were going to chase
your old impulse and, months later, wrote
of drinking yak-butter tea that slowly
you learned to like; of throwing rice
“to appease ancestral spirits”; of seeing goats
on slopes that dropped five thousand feet;
of a woman in blue, traditional dress
dancing as if she conjured a languor
out of the depths of the earth. And of sitting
on a donkey among mountain crags
above a valley where herdsmen and their flock
followed a white track, slowly rehearsing
new words you had garnered, ways of saying
“tradition”, “hearth”, “to travel” and “at home”.

2.

At the edge of what you know
there are raucous bird calls
scraping the sides of a valley,
swift and scissoring flashes of light,

the rustle of silk on hurrying women
whose dark faces glance up
before they turn into a gated laneway,
a spidery cascade of herbs
near a colonnade broken centuries ago,
crowds shouting in narrow streets.
Also, some seemingly impossible thing—
perhaps a figure of light, perhaps an old carpet
that floats away of its own volition,
or a voice speaking in a vanished language—
you turn to the sound and see five women
in scarlet silk busy at haggling
over the price of aubergine. A smiling vendor
holds out his arm, balancing dark fruit on a scale.



3.

Even the way the name sings in your mouth
excites you, fantastical and joyous,
and though others debunk the idea of Shangri-La
as preposterous, your thoughts won't let it go,
travelling past mysterious peaks and over long plateaux
made when the earth was new. You began with trepidation
in lower grasslands, having boarded a groaning train
in an ancient city, where women
with red and orange shawls around their faces
were—strangely—talking in English,
bending to pick up baskets
of washed linen and three rectangular parcels
wrapped in cloth of gold. You were conspicuous
because of your pale skin and overly nonchalant posture,

still getting used to the feel of your travelling body.

Beggars demanded money; someone grabbed
at the ring on your hand. Much later,
in a town cut out of stone,
you followed scrawled directions down an alley,
past shadows that seemed alive, and suddenly knew
that looking for Shangri-La might be your death
despite a café's flicker of candlelight.

You sat with food that smelt of cinnamon
and something unrecognisable, a sour,
heady flavour that seemed to adhere to the dress
of the silent waitress who bowed when greeting you.
Tomorrow a man is due to bring supplies
so you can hunker down on a camel trek
for another thousand kilometres towards
the globular, sacred mountain which you believe
will be luminous and white like a monstrous pearl;
towards that lovely, seductive sound in your mouth,
the indomitable, rising inflection of your dream.