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Dennis Haskell

Poems

Nature and the Human
The snow that warms and thins
and shivers down mountains
then gurgles its way into trusting cities
translating streets into streams,
strolling into drowning;

the dragon fire that sails on the wind
and licks up fences, cars, community,
cackles at churches, cremates ordinary lives;

the epilepsy of air that churns
and jives, argues with itself, gnashes
its windy teeth over timber, tiles, arches,
tossing home parts up like a frenzied juggler;

the earth that tears apart like unwanted rags,
heaves hard, deep stones skyward
then makes them flow like rocky blood

draw our astonishment and sympathies,
prove nature is not always nurture
and snubs human nature after all:

but they all happen to others, not to us
– to us drama and excitement
on the nightly news. What
makes us think that the climate is ours?
Is this how living works? That
catastrophe will never conscript our names
but someone else's, while we build a planet
where the news waits to knock,
edgily, on everyone's door?

Kuala Lumpur, 2024
for Shan Mugalingham

Ziggurats, jagged glass stacks,
twin rockets or minarets,
palm leaf folded onto palm leaf,
KL's modern towers make
their magic beanstalk climb
into a ruffian sky.
They're building New York,
but the stately skyscrapers
must wear foxy cloud toupees.

Far below them
in makeshift alleys and meandering streets
poverty is stretched through time:
another Malaysia works
and lives, tourist-free,
where once white walls
wear black fungus curtains,
tassels dripping down,
squat on the rain-drenched ground.

Dignity and Indignity
1994, in a still impoverished China
I stood on a large, blank concrete square
where hundreds of would-be passengers crouched,
the only *laowai* white face there
– all would-be traveller refugees
when China's Communism meant power
for every petty official to gloat and seize:
the ticket seller decided when she would bother
to swap your money for a seat on a train
or when she would *mei you* you away;

so my Mandarin-speaking son and Chinese friend
set off for tickets to Hangzhou, however constrained,
while English-speaking I was left with bags to defend
in that brittle, early morning light

when up he came, inky-outlined, as relentlessly
as Hamlet's father's ghost. Broad-chested,

almost as wide as he was tall,
a strange cloak draped across his forceful breast
and with the long, white flowing stream
of beard he looked like he had stolen
from an ancient Chinese scroll, with
an implied calligraphy of bold birthright.
The people parted for him like the sea.

His eyes never left me as he stepped forward;
in his right hand he held a staff as thick
as a tree trunk, not to lean on but just to hold:
I thought him a Chinese Moses, but quickly
shifted my Western bias, and thought of Confucius
although he looked more warrior than thinker.
I stared back, my eyes as fixed as his.
I didn't need to look to sense
that the whole square watched
as he came up and up towards me, shoulders squared:

I decided to play the dumb, determined foreigner
with not a word of Chinese. When he stood,
eyes close to mine, he held out a cupped left hand
as large as insistence, as firm as a fist;
I didn't know what he wanted, or so I bluffed
but he knew me for the fraud I was. He was not
begging but demanding; I was staring and not giving.
From his elbow he rocked his hand like a gymnast
and I still stood, blind-ignorant, until
he banged that staff on the concrete, hard
and banged again, and again. I felt the concrete shake
but I didn't give way. He looked at me
with neither pity nor disappointment but contempt

when he finally backed away, eyes on me,
staff in hand, as if I was watching centuries disappear,
as if the loss was not his but mine,
and perhaps it had to be.

25 Abril, 2024
The kerchunk-squash, kerchunk-squash
of tyres on cobbled streets

is silenced; tourist ubers are diverted
while people march, flags and home-made placards
and casual clothes, up and down Lisbon's
argument of hills, their only weapons
red carnations. Fifty years since
a woman dropped red carnations
into gun barrels
and the soldiers let her. While elsewhere
in Europe right-wing zealots
and immigrant-hating
strong-arm politicians
flaunt their trade: *25 de Abril sempre,*
fascismo nunca mais,
La Revolución de los Claveles –
the old who remember the dictatorship of guns
and the young who have never known it,
the Portuguese march with democratic fervour.

Dennis Haskell is an Australian poet, critic, Emeritus Professor of English and Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. He is the author of ten poetry collections, most recently *Who Would Know?* (2024), as well as fourteen volumes of literary scholarship and criticism. A former co-editor of *Westerly*, he has received the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Poetry, the A. A. Phillips Prize and an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from UWA. In 2015, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for his services to literature, education and intercultural understanding.
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