

5 Poems By Stanley H. Barkan

Message In A Snuff Bottle

Inside the crystal snuff bottle,
the thin L-bent brush paints
calligraphs & figures of ancient China—
eighteen buddhas in meditation,
emperors at various rituals,
children playing games,
women in various dress,
poems of Li Po & Tu Fu . . .
The girl, Mei Li, who paints them
(whose name means “beautiful”),
comes from a family
(brother, father, mother)
who practice this rare art
(fewer than 100 among
the more than a billion
still have the mastery).
Now twenty-two, Mei Li
has been painting thus
since she was six.
She shares her work,
she says, with “new-old friends,”
then disappears inside
a bottle
 in a box
 on a ship
on the Yangtze
 sailing to,
 through,
somewhere
 beyond the Three Gorges . . .

—Stanley H. Barkan (8 November 2001)

Bathing In Dew

“. . . *those who bathed in the dew
were believed to become immortals.*”

—Robert Payne, *The White Pony*

They say that those who bathe
in the morning dew become immortals.
Thus, I leave my plate outside
waiting for the rise out of the grateful earth.
Each dawn, the dew returns the rain to the sky
so that the clouds can form again and fly to all
dry spots of earth, and spill their load.
Thirsty, the earth drinks in the offering of sky
and new shoots spring out of the saturated dark.
Then, each time the last star appears beside
the golden moon, and the shafts of sunlight
begin to strike the earth, the dew comes up and up,
flying like a string of kites, up and up into the sky.
Catch the morning rise, bathe in it, drink it—
become immortal as a kite slipped from its tether
becomes part of the clouds which come from the earth
and inevitably returns again and again to its mother, the sky.

—Stanley H. Barkan

(9 November 2001, on the Yangtze River)

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Sailing The Yangtze

(7 November 2001)

After listening
to the song of the bells,
struck by thick long sticks,
each larger than a man,
and the echoes of the stones,
the sonorous whistling
of the mouth blowing
the bamboo *lusheng*,

and the plucking of the strings
on ancient zithers . . .

After watching
the young girls
in red silk
trimmed with gold,
topped with
hats of Chinese calligraphs . . .

After amazed
at the works
of a distant past,
long before Moses
wandered/wondered
in the desert,
long before
even the pharaohs
dreamed of structures
to contain their
imagined immortality,
signals to the gods
chariotteering
in the distance
of ten-thousand *li* . . .

I feel the pull
of the river's current,
gliding along the paths
of my yearning . . .

Buried in the belly
of the cruise ship,
half-awake,
I prepare to rise,
to lift up mine eyes
unto the mountaintops,
there in the mists,
there beyond the Three Gorges . . .

Listen!—

the rush of water
over rocks,
 over rocks,
cascading down
into the subterranean
meanderings of the
mind of myth and magic . . .
and pure exhilaration.

—Stanley H. Barkan

T'ang Dynasty Beauty

Thinking of
the T'ang Dynasty beauty
who caused
the fish to drop,
the birds to fall,
the flowers to close,
the moon to hide . . .
I think of you,
so beautiful,
I must shut my eyes
to really see
the hidden essence,
the intrinsic, the ineffable . . .

—Stanley H. Barkan (14 November 2001)

The Cormorants of Guilin

Cormorants are only permitted
to swallow the little fish;
the fisherman makes them
disgorge the big ones
which cannot pass through
the confining neckloop.

Thus, the very smart birds
sometimes only catch small fish.
Once upon a time in the China of Mao
and the Russia of Stalin,
the cormorants caught
only the very little fish.

—Stanley H. Barkan (14 November 2001)