

Typhoon

The wind blew across a plant-filled terrace
to a table brimming with dishes provided by our host
who reappeared with more food when, it seemed, we had no room
to sample the “snail eating fish,” the bean curd,
the thousand year eggs; he smiled and toasted his “very honored guests,”
in tones both warm and reserved, and his wife—
a painter whose work I admired for its clarity, its delicacy—
fell back, swooning. I restated the question of the evening
which none but her husband could answer as he returned with another dish
and let the steam waft over his face while the night air
assumed control for what he’d later tell us:
that he was more than happy, that life those
twenty years in the sad provinces had taught him to endure
(“...I had my chickens, my cabbages...”)
though all that was useless, old and without connections
as he now was; but clearly it had not been all bad,
the sun and night soil, the country classrooms,
the sputtering oil lamps—all that, he cheerily told us,
with a little distillation, with time—“like these eggs”—
all that became memory, and, he said, leaning against the doorjamb,
“What else was I to do—I had no choice (others
drowned themselves, fell suspiciously down stairwells...) but to be quite happy, to be, that is, myself...
what I became, in the country,” he said, pausing to find the words,
“That was, you see, the answer.” We smiled.
We drank our flat Shanghai beer as the room fell through shadow.
And when the evening ended, the painter, our host’s wife,
out of his earshot, turned to me and said she too spent twenty years,
her youthful years, in a backwater (“And I hated it,”
she said, “Nothing’s to be said for it.”)
and with one final wind-burst that threw open doors,
smashing a teacup on the table beside her,
the room died, was drained of meaning, of any real consequence.