

China: 5,000 Years

Guggenheim Exhibition, 1998

not the jade ornament of a pig-dragon or the lamp in the shape of goose holding a fish

not the bronze buckle ornament of a dancer with cymbals
or the nephrite jade carving of a winged horse
all from the second century B.C.E.

not the chime with a crouching dragon carving from 1600 B.C.E.
or the rearing gilt bronze dragon from the 8th century

not the Neolithic goblet with eggshell walls so delicate
or the eleven-headed bust of Avalokitesvara, looking eleven times compassionate
or the Buddhist ritual objects—a carved turtle, a pillbox

not the Ming dynasty silk paintings with mountains that look like dragons
or the earthenware squatting musician with dimples and a drum from 25 B.C.
who looks as modern as the busker you saw on the street today

not the dragon-shaped jade pendants from the 4th century B.C.E.
that make you wonder about the marvelous lapels or blouses
of the ancient people who could have worn such things

which gets you thinking about the cave of your own people
where they must have been squatting at that time
drinking out of streams, gnawing meat off bones
with no clock or mirror or comb or pen
or compass or gilded silver tea utensils
certainly, not even tea or calligraphy

none of this hits you until the Indian restaurant on Columbus Avenue
where you sit by a big window and watch the stream of faces push by

and perhaps you've had too much wine, and gar1ic naan, and mughlai chicken
and maybe the ragas aren't helping either, the sitars and tablas
circling around a five-note melody

and that's when something starts to well up in you
-you hope you can make it back to the hotel-
so you ask the waiter for your bill, but instead
he brings you dessert, a small custard in an oval bowl
which he offers in cupped hands for your inspection

saying, *for you, on the house*

and you try to say *thank you*, to register your delight
but instead, something starts to come out, a deluge
the napkin clutched to your face
mascara smeared on white linen
and real crying, real shoulder-rocking sobs

all of which alarms the waiter, who has bent down to you now
and the two women dining in the table next to you
have rushed to your side asking, *is it something we said?*
No, no, between sobs, you try to tell them
about the exhibit of 5,000 years of Chinese history
about the smooth five-petaled porcelain bowl from the 10th century
and the funerary objects carved in the shapes of laughing dogs

but all you can get out, really, is the thing about the terra cotta warriors
the soldier, the military officers, the general, and their horse and cart
to represent the other 6,000 figures discovered in Pit 1 in the Shaanxi province,
the way they looked lost in the Guggenheim without their spears, swords,
or crossbows, with their hands still frozen after centuries as if holding weapons

but mostly, it was their faces-
how you realized real people must have posed for each statue,
real people from 200 B.C.E., each with unique noses, hair plaits,
shapes of eyes, curves of cheekbone-
and how they were all so dead now, how they'd all been dead
for such an incredibly long time.