

A Bridge Dead in the Water

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JAMES THOMAS STEVENS



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for Nicholas

*I wanted to be sure to reach you;
though my ship was on the way it got caught
in some moorings. I am always tying up
and then deciding to depart.*

— FRANK O'HARA

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Introduction

A dead bridge. A dead theory. The Bering Strait theory, dead to Native peoples, whose hundreds of creation accounts dispel those of anthropologists. This collection was written after a trip to China in 2002. After entering the catholic Xujiahui cathedral across from my hotel, I was led to do research on Jesuit interactions with Asia. What I had encountered there in the cathedral and in museums in Shanghai, reminded me of the history of Jesuits back home in Iroquoia, especially in the Mohawk homelands along the Saint Lawrence River.

The first poem in the collection, *(dis)Orient*, addresses issues of charting and mapping, as well as issues of authority. It leads to short poems written in and about China, then on to the central poem, *The Mutual Life*, a poem of post-colonial and personal emergencies. A poem of healing, as well, based on a 1901 book of accidents, emergencies and illnesses published by the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York. The poems proceeding are poems written in and about Iroquoia.

They are followed by my most recent undertaking, *Alphabets of Letters*, which explores the propaganda found in Native American children's primers from the time of our honored Mohawk chief, Joseph Brant, and the propaganda of rhetoric in general. This poem explores the rhetoric of empire and the short distance our world has moved toward understanding and communication in these past few centuries.

(dis)Orient

*Meaning is revealed by the pattern formed and the light thus trapped—
not by the structure, the carved work itself.*

— W. BION, *A Memoir of the Future*

*At length all our journeyings, which were made only by paths all strewn
with Crosses, came to an end very fittingly at a lake bearing the name of
the Cross, from it's having the Perfect shape of one.*

— FR. ALBANEL, *The Jesuit Relations*

How quickly we prescribe

the shape of all things.

In the instant of disorientation,
a dim shimmering
projects uncontainable fear,
spreads out from our wooden boat.

Separation sounds,
soft as wool
pulled from a spindle.

Alone on our glassy seats and rocking,
overcome with need
to chart the waterlight
between
the bow and the border
*with reference to ourselves,
its distance, and what tribes dwell*
on its shores.

To place myself
when I have lost you.

Marker.

Born on the shore
of your consequence
though absent

when you came.

Your desire
to know periphery,
the jagged coast
of your container.

Mapped by echo and story.
A cry returned by crosses
along the strand
does not imply acceptance
of your plan, your shape.

Echo, mirror, story.
Each bent to serve.
Do not listen to me
but yourself listening to me.

What is returned to us,
by recount
or reflection, rendered line.

*We obtained all the information we could from the Indians
who had frequented those regions, and we even traced out
from their reports a map of the whole of the new country.*

—FR. MARQUETTE, *Recueil de voyages*

You've informed me
of lands where
dark men dance with spades,
their black hair aw whirl.

And others, where yellow men
pound winter rivers
that their waters not feel the freeze.
A marble boat
hovers in a vast bright lake

which in my mind
bears your name
for its having the perfect shape
of you.

But how much faith
is required
before making the projection.

Relating your stories,
I feel the irritable reaching,
looking steadily to your experience
till a pattern emerges.

A wind across your surface
and you shiver in every limb.

Supplemented by tales,
all error and conjecture reflected.
I recall your sounding points
as security,
skim your body for meridian.

Surrounded now by minute links
which, impregnated with cruelty,
link your parts together cruelly.

Orient or disorient.

Huronia & Cathay.

The landbridge will not be forced
to function
by what you find familiar
on either side.

What is *not* familiar around us,
more relevant
than what is.

The seduction of delineation,
that mathematically
I might know you,
the circumference of your eye.

The exact length and breadth
of your first finger,
pointing unfailingly
to the sky when you sleep.

Lines that transcend language.

Mathematics & geometry,
a new universe
of discourse.

*By glancing, as one can, at the Map of the lakes, one will gain more light upon
all these missions than by long descriptions that might be given of them.*

—FR. DABLON, *The Jesuit Relations*

In fear of dislocation
I return to my drawings of you.

Consider my meridian,
neither Paris nor Peking.

No map is a neutral document.

Both in selectivity of content
and sign,
there is bias.

The fine rendering
of a pale blue delta on the your thigh
fades to cool yellow whiteness.

And all that is not you:
the wall, the pillow, the stair,
give way to darkness.
Delicate color disappears.

An atlas of the rivers
on the underside of your foot.

An atlas of the line
where your chest curves to arm.

An atlas
of your open eye.

The many drawings you'll never see.

And my trips
to the liquid parts of you,
more apostolic than geometric...

the glistening rim of your mouth.

*...where this great lake discharges its waters, is very
advantageous to perform religious
functions, since it is the great resort of most of the
savages of these regions...*

Charting by echo
of sense, both thought and real.

Compelled to seek asylum in fiction,
because disguised as fiction, the truth occasionally slips through.

But whose truth, whose meridian
would show your proper placement?

Not wanting to move you away
by either idolatry or insult.

When seeing yourself so large,
myself in a distant corner,
or sometimes drawn so small,
you are lost in the warm port beneath my arm.

*... the more ignorant began to make fun of such a description but
the more intelligent, seeing such an orderly arrangement of
parallel lines of latitude and longitude . . . could not resist believing
the whole thing true.*

—FR. RICCI, *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses des Jesuites de Chine*

My native mind,
orientalists say,

...more concerned with what happened at the
place than
the place itself. The route represented as
continuous line.

The symbols similar
on both sides of the sea,

While skirting some frightfully huge rocks, we saw upon one of them two monsters painted there that startled us at first. Even the boldest Indians dare not rest their eyes on them for long. They are as large as a calf, with horns on their heads like those of deer, a horrible look, red eyes, a beard like a tiger, a face somewhat like a man's, a body covered with scales and a long tail that encircles the body, passing above the head and going back between the legs, ending in a fish's tail. These two monsters were so well painted that we could not believe that they were executed by a savage.

—FR. MARQUETTE, *Recueil de voyages*

Our margins of comfort
might be marked
with nameless terror

or inscribed on the rocks,
the sign of your narrow hips,
signaling
safe passage.

Last night, my face beneath
the light framework of your knee.

Night anchorage
at Maple bridge
or the matrix of bodily awareness.

Locate me.

A bat
etched into a charred canyon wall,
or carved on a beam above
the canal's east gate,

is an empathetic creature.

Charting solely by
what is returned.

Each image projected
through my experience of you,
with you,
bounced off your bias and
tender aesthetic.

No concept of felt objects,
the shoreline shifts with travel.

And the space does fill
with what it is that's happened.

Experience overcomes exactitude,
all scale is lost.
The canoe or ship
appearing bigger than the sea.
Your warm hand larger than the hills.

The lakes laid to line
for missionary zeal,
*...influenced by a most ardent desire to make him known
and adored by all peoples of all countries.*

Lacus Huronum et Tai Hu.

Aware of the empirical
and angered by infidels, who blur all distinction
between actual, lived space and imaginary, idealized space.

Not above adding soft folding hills
below an auspicious ridge,
to create a more favorable
geomantic space.

Linking the lived to the imagined,
I recall only the silent pause
between harsh words—the reconciliation
not the wronging.

Wanting
to avoid
 the empty space.

He moves in and fills the room
with familiar objects.

Lying beneath a pine,
in the damp scent of red needles,
a white bough bends
 over me.

The senses ring familiar
and I hang
pictures of you and I
 across the hostile void.

Then comfort comes in recognition.

The little people who inhabit these shifting tenements, strike camp in the morning all together, to go fishing or work in the rice; they sow and they gather here three times a year...One might say they are ready to embrace [our religion]; but he would be mistaken. They respond coldly: Your religion is nowhere in our books, it is a strange religion...

—FR. DE PRÉMARE, *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses des Jesuites de Chine*

The Indians gather and prepare [the rice] for food as follows. In the month of September, which is the proper time for the harvest, they go in canoes through these fields of wild rice and shake its ears into the canoe...I told these Wild Rice People of my design to go and discover remote nations in order to teach them the mysteries of our holy religion...They told me that I would meet nations who never show mercy to strangers, but break their heads for no reason...

—FR. MARQUETTE, *Recueil de voyages*

What I tell you is
 what I want to hear,
but the words are dull,
 a mouthful of rice.

No making opposite shores connect,
the landbridge dead in the water.

If I name the rapid—La Chine
 it does not bring China closer.

As stroking the rough skin of
the pine above me,
 does not make it yours.

My fingers through your hair.
Needles.

And the coast shifts regardless
of our desire
for things to remain the same.

The pines now replaced
by silos and stacks.

An image of you
constructed, but never abandoned.

From the boat, from a distance,
so simple to assume quietude.
Calm points
of placement along the shore,
despite the maddening clang of tin
from elevators along a canal.

And from water's edge
the boat assumed silent, though
the deafening clap
of wind through skins from the mast
both fore and aft.

Confused by what
is returned from what was imagined.

Lost in the roar that exists
on the other side of silence.