Cultural Exchange

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Three Poems · Jane Kenyon

ICE OUT

As late as yesterday ice preoccupied
the pond—dark, half melted, water-logged.
Then it sank in the night, one piece,
taking winter with it. And afterward
everything seems simple and good.

All afternoon I lifted oak leaves
from the flowerbeds, and greeted
like friends the green-white crowns
of perennials. They have the tender,
unnerving beauty of a baby’s head.

How I hated to come in! I’ve left
the windows open to hear the peepers’
wildly disproportionate cries.
Dinner is over, no one stirs. The dog
sighs, sneezes, and closes his eyes.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

A postcard arrives from a friend
visiting the Great Wall of China.
“Life couldn’t be better,” says M.

I was there once, in March. Unkind wind
bore down from the north. Mongolia . . .
How steep it is! In places even presidents
are forced to drop down on all fours.
On the way back to Beijing
our embassy car rushed wildly
through a succession of hamlets, forcing
bicycles off the road, dooryard
fowl to flap and fluster, and from
grandmother, bundled in her blue jacket
to take the pale sun, such a look!

Tired? Tired was not the word.
Getting sleepy in the warm car
I considered the Wall, the scale
of enterprise. A lock of hair had fallen
across my eyes. At last my brain
convinced my hand to move it.

That night I was honored by a banquet
in a room so cold I could see my breath.

A BOY GOES INTO THE WORLD

My brother rode off on his bike
into the summer afternoon, but
mother called me back
from the end of the drive:
"It's different for girls."
How that stung!

He'd be gone for hours, come back
with things: a cocoon, gray-brown
and papery around a stick;
a puff ball, ripe, wrinkled,
and exuding spores; owl pellets—
bits of undigested bone and fur;
and pieces of moss that might
have made toupees for preposterous
green men, but went instead
into a wide-necked jar for a terrarium.