

Greg Huteson

Every Brilliant Thing

As if by banyans and sad willow trees,
past damp black concrete rife with river stones,

pragmatically, the tan-green water flows
southwesterly, and it is ankle deep.

Some seven decades back, the stones were trucked
past bright green paddies from the scrub-laced land

along the dry Han River, even then
not much more than an incurious stream,

and set in rows by bronzed, loose-shirted men
who gamely squatted on the channel's walls.

The waterway's not straight. Dug (when?) to link
the Han and Wu, it bends and bends again.

(The Wu's a river to the south once known
for flocks of birds that blackened all the sky.)

At oddest angles, it bisects the roads
and slices houses there to triangles,

both scalene and obtuse, winged, tactless shapes,
while other shapes, great bulging bushes, hang

like burlap sacks from cracks in slanting walls,
old burdens slowly tugging at their holds

to carve the cracks into distorted holes.
The railing of this watercourse is poles

of faded teal, and laxly soldered to them
are slender benches also painted teal.

For one short space, the railing's built of posts
of concrete painted bamboo shades of green

to represent the mythos of the woods
in hazy tales of local settlers' deeds.

At intervals along the choppy walk
are trees of many kinds and qualities —

the jackfruit trees with their ungainly fruit
that droop like blistered tumors from the bark,

the bishop wood with dark green oval leaves —
its roots once said to be pain's lauded cure,

the crooked oil trees with their remnant scars,
the ash, the Madagascar almond whorls.

The sweet gum, rain trees, and Chinese pistache
are also there among the varied trees

that overhang the slopes of this canal
a thousand steps to where it's kneecap deep —

and trumpet trees whose golden yellow blooms
still litter walk and wall and water's line.

A light green moss half cloaks the river stones,
but here and there the walls are pierced with pipes

that drain the side streets' gutters to this cut
and add the splash of water's minor fall.

A little distance from a mad morass
of roots of banyan trees are marks of white,

the paint that marks the stages of a flood,
assumed or actual apocalypse.

A sun-dried Buddhist compound, brief mirage
of calm, takes up a block along the road

Greg Huteson

that lines the central part of the canal
while further south the water's shunted down

and under tar and roots and chancy soil
and then on past a cockeyed local park,

where in the cool dusk of the withered days
the elderly and weary children meet

within the shade of tattered, grayish homes,
their windows strung with rusted iron bars,

a lone screen door with peeling yellow paint,
a solitary, ailing mango tree.

One calm spring day, a man released macaws
along a border of this nestled park.

Like blue-gold leaves against the burnished smog,
they climbed and tumbled in the lustered air,

these thick Brazilian craft of careless flight,
above the ring of gray hairs and the black,

above the tousled grass. At last at dark,
they rested on a light wood pole that's lashed

behind a tattered motor scooter seat
while close to them a few old women sat

encased in boldly checkered winter coats
sunk on a bench beside the crooked road

and chatted of the marvels of their lives.
A grizzled man perched on the farther end.

Bored with the talk or mulling buried dreams,
he turned a flat cap in his mottled hands.

Once or twice, a black-haired lady held
a giant goose while squatting on the curb

and waited for a sympathetic ride.
Aloof in all its pride, the goose was calm.

Once past this interlude, the water slips
above the cultivated ground again

then through the middle of a market street
close to a sunlit district. Here the watercourse

is stocked with quantities of vivid fish,
including swarms of orange-dappled koi

as well as silver mahseers, common carp,
and ray-finned zaccos jostling in the dark.

But this is not a place for spreading nets
for every brilliant tallied thing will live.

Ecstatically, the tan-green water flows
southwesterly, and I cannot pass through.