

Beijing Parakeets

Returning again to this hutong hotel
I come in from the frost, remove my mask,
hand over my passport and order a beer.
Check-in will be fifteen minutes, sir.

I step out into the courtyard,
towards the small sad pond, winter water
on the verge of growing its bones,
the slow creak of rusted and muttering carp.

I've already got a pollution headache
but I wait beneath the bare pomegranate tree
and watch the two old parakeets, lovebirds,
huddled up together, one cleaning the feathers
on the other's head, the other softly singing.

They've been here every time I've stayed.
I've seen receptionists sneaking them
breakfast-scrap of mango, and watched tourists
smuggling pomegranates' meaty red seeds
between their bars like rubies.

I sip my beer, the birds softly sing,
their little lungs inflating, deflating,
the smog of Beijing simmering around us.

Like this, like this, we go on living,
through the cold and the smog,
through Spring Festival's firecrackers, we go on,
they go on, singing querulous songs:

*O fire lantern, you are floating
through the gathering thunderheads.*

David Tait