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Caitlin Horrocks

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Caitlin Horrocks

And Into the Mouth of a Shark

We thought we were going to a funhouse. That's what the guidebook said, a funhouse where a little train would motor us past dioramas of the Wild West, Space, Christmas, the Age of Dinosaurs, and into the Mouth of a Shark. We hailed a taxi and pointed to the park on a map. The only words we knew were "hello" and "thank you," and we said them preventatively, hopefully, as we pointed: *Here. Thank you? Thank you. Here.*

At People's Park, we circled a lake, fishermen, a twelve-piece band, and three hundred people dancing. It was humid and bright that day in a polluted city where, our hosts had told us, the sun almost never shone.

We spoke with a gleaming black bird who knew more Chinese than we did. *Ni hao*, we greeted him. *Ni hao*, he said, with his delicate orange beak. The day's newspapers were splayed open, sandwiched like moths between glass plates in special pavilions. In a corner of the park, we found a gateway with a set of cement steps leading underground, posters of space, of a monorail. We paid our money and descended.

The deserted air raid tunnels stretched in front of us. The walls were painted intestinal pink and curved us further and further underground. It grew cold and whisperingly damp, the cellaric bowels of the sunny park. We had expected a train platform, a ticket taker. We turned every corner hoping for them. Space. Christmas. The Age of Dinosaurs. In one corridor, we found a dirty mattress and an empty display case. In another, broken arcade games and shattered glass. Our footsteps echoed. A bent mop stuck in the net of an old basketball hoop. A doorway leading into blackness. We stared and saw shapes whirring in the dark.

We walked on and collided with two gaping mannequin heads, impaled on poles, rotating in a scraping mechanized circle. More heads leapt, bloody saws and dismembered victims and flailing animatronic monsters. We ran, adding to the screaming on a crackling amplified soundtrack, until we turned a corner into silence and stood gasping in the glow of a single red bulb. We surrendered, bolted back the way we'd come until we burst into the light and fell past the ticket takers. They were watching a tiny black-and-white television, and we imagined, as we escaped, that we would see our own screaming faces on the monitor.

Above ground, the hundreds of dancers swirled past us. A woman sang

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karaoke folk songs. Lovers paddled in boats. A man sang earnest Chinese opera. People fed koi, the greedy fish rising from the water in a solid roil. Three foreigners stood gasping and confused and vaguely betrayed, our guidebook another failed way to make sense of where we were.

We found another gateway, music shouting from underground speakers, posters of Donald Duck and a group of women holding a giant snake. We can't give up now, we thought. Maybe this is it. And it was, if "it" meant not the mouth of a shark but a urine-soaked monkey chained to a chair screaming while a nearly-naked woman danced with a snake in a Plexiglas cage, a man in a pink plastic kiddie chair straining forward.

We fled to the overworld. Did everyone know, we wondered, the dancing couples, the boating lovers, the tea drinkers, the fish feeders, the talking bird? Did they know what was happening in the tunnels beneath their feet? They must. Surely it was only a mystery to us because we were who we were, strangers here. Because we depended on columns of transliterations and outdated admission prices.

We circled the park a final time, wincing and suspicious: they must all have noticed, we thought, have wondered what we wanted from the horror show, from the caged stripper. People stared but only like they always stared; we plodded through the dancers, mute and uncomprehending and with the wrong faces and bodies and clothes and hair—we were already so foreign, so clueless, so unnecessary. What more could we get wrong than ourselves?