

National Treasures Coming Home

By Emily Sun

My boss, the head nurse, says she has a collection of Ming Dynasty crockery,
Qing dynasty snuff bottles and
a Shang 代 bronze tripod vase
(always filled with fresh pomegranates)
looted by her ancestors or
bought at Sotheby's
for all the tea in China.
"I'm the poor cousin, the others got more
Come for dinner and you'll see them all."

I disliked her then, I dislike her now
But it is Queen Victoria I should 更讨厌
throw rotten eggs at
or spray *Four Bandits* on the pedestal where
she sits in the park at the end of Great George Street.
'Looty' was her Pekinese,
say it in Cantonese '北京狗!'

It is my boss, not Victoria, who wants me to eat beef stroganoff and polenta
off my ancestor's plates.
sniff the potpourri she's placed
in rhinoceros-shell-lined bottles
translate the inked poems
about ancient fish
and explain why the toad has red eyes
flared nose and only three legs

For dessert she will make a Pavlova in her new Bosch oven
with fresh cherries, seconds from local farms.

I usually pay to admire stolen goods, encased in glass cabinets,
national treasures and ancient clays I cannot afford to buy.
I've seen the Egyptian treasures, excavated
by the men who live in Downtown Abbey
"Your Chinese mouth would not touch these Chinese treasures
had we not salvaged history back to Portsmouth.
Look at what happened to the Temple of Baalshamin
the Giant Buddhas of Bamiyan!"

We have an understanding, she and I.

I order pens, paper, ink cartridges and pantry supplies, soaps,
malted milk and chocolate biscuits
for children who attend our geriatric clinic.

I add two extra boxes of tampons

“For the patients, of course”

I nod when she says, “People *should* pay for their health care.”

Because she gives me hour long-lunch breaks
and calls me “good girl.”

So I say “I will come to dinner.”

I will see if Russian gravy tastes better on centuries-old porcelain plates
patterned by cobalt and manganese
and ingest the same trace elements as
imperial court nobles who ate 菜 off the
crockery, fresh out of the kiln.

But my cousin says that our people were peasants who woke early to pick grains
of rice or maybe it was wheat with our hands,
We were foreign to the Forbidden City.
I ask him what I should wear to a meal with the descendants
of drug dealers who poisoned a nation with opioids
rendered it sick
too yellow and diseased
to walk in leafy green meadows
when they could not cure their addiction to yum cha.

He says, “I will lend you my vest, cut from the uniform of a Song dynasty eunuch.
It does not fit me but it will indeed fit you”.

Perhaps

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Perhaps.

更讨厌 – Gèng tǎoyàn (Mandarin) – more disgusted

菜 – Cài (Mandarin) – vegetables [dishes]

北京狗 – ‘bāhǎ gīng gow’ (Cantonese)– Peking Dog [Pekinese]

