

# A Poet's Voice

Gary Geddes

Gary Geddes's most recent publications are *Sailing Home*, *Skaldance*, *Kingdom of Ten Thousand Things* and *Falsework*. In 2008 he received the British Columbia Lt-Governor's Award for Literary Excellence. He lives in Victoria and is currently writing a book about human rights in sub-Saharan Africa.

## Marginalia

Space matters to emperors, a circle of security,  
room to disport themselves, evade attack.  
For us space is a luxury, ten to a room, sleeping

in shifts. Yet we flock to the capital, crammed  
outside this hybrid shape we call a city, convinced  
a better life can be found, riches, advancement,

stock phrases clouding the vision while time,  
precious time, slips away taking children and health  
with it. I wasted my youth copying old masters

whose brilliant compositions perpetrate lies,  
the status quo. Odes to privilege. I loved  
their shape, colour, the magic suggestiveness

of line, light and shadow, but content made me gag.  
Now I stalk the margins, outlandish to a fault.  
I know the difference between pigs and pigment,

between courtly scenes and genuine courtesy.  
I want an art that helps us know ourselves, imagine  
alternatives. Till then, I dwell in negative space,

plant coded messages in all my work. Today  
my wife and child depart for the capital by boat  
to fetch supplies, deliver plans to fellow-travellers.

I kiss their rags, frail bones. They look as if they  
stepped from a Tang scroll? Don't be deceived,  
the drawings in their hands could change the world.

## Swimming Ginger

Three weeks at the ginger guild  
marks a girl for life. Heads  
turn when you pass by, smiles  
or expressions of disgust. I take

the back-streets on my way  
to work. Third Watch, no one's  
out that early on Jieshen Alley  
sorting gold, gems, coloured

silk. Only hawkers of tripe, lung,  
sheep's head, clams, udder,  
dove, quail, rabbit. Several wave.  
Others try to sell me produce.

Fourteen things done with ginger,  
two unspeakable. I can't afford  
wine on Crossroads Street or  
Xu's infamous mutton stew,

but I like to watch the merchants  
trading hawks and falcons, claws  
slicing into leather wrist-straps.  
What don't they know, these birds

of prey, fierce eyes that miss nothing?  
They note my peregrinations  
on the weekend, slipping from town  
on my lover's wupan, hidden

under sacks, head and shoulders  
nestled amongst unsold cabbages;  
watch us bathe in back eddies,  
couple like mink beside the river.

You taste like ginger crab, my lover  
says. Though I dress like a man  
and learn to hold the steering oar  
hard to starboard for hauling

upriver, I know the time is brief  
before my belly starts to swell  
and the merciless falcons single  
me out, pick up the scent.

### *Author's Statement*

An ancient scroll painting that came into my possession beside the Yangtse River began to speak to me. Qingming Shanghe Tu was painted in the twelfth century, I think by Zhang Zeduan, and depicts daily life in the ancient city of Bianling, destroyed shortly thereafter by the invading Jin. The anonymous figures in this painting took me by the throat and demanded that their stories be told. Since I believe that poetry is a kind of rescue work, an attempt not just to recover history but to make it strange, who was I to argue? These poems may become part of a new collection, *Ginger Swimmer*.

### *Herbalist*

Prescribe, prescribe. The sick  
expect miracles, but seldom  
pay bills on time. Taoists, alas,

are the worst. Purification  
obligatory, never the settling  
of accounts. What did I learn

in the ghastly desert, my sack-  
cloth wretched and torn?  
Meditation does not work

when the stomach's empty,  
the muscles cold and cramped.  
Sitting motionless in a dank cave,

no sensation in my feet, a spider  
moving unencumbered across  
my forehead, I had a brief

epiphany: a job. I was in need  
of paid employment. Herbs  
came first, treating my sores

with a potpourri of medicinal  
plants. Aloe, eucalyptus. Hello,  
said my body, coming at last

to your senses? Reassembled,  
my ravaged parts acquired  
wisdom, weight. I apprenticed

to an apothecary, a saintly quack  
who followed his own advice  
to the letter and died young.

I took over the business, including  
his widow. Her ministrations,  
more restorative than herbs,

left me agog, a gong going off  
in my extremities, an opiate  
coursing the length of my mercantile

veins. And to think I might have  
traded all this for gruel, for the  
fiction of an afterlife.

### *Three Notes*

My robe is ragged, hunger  
dogs my days. I find no  
justification for my state  
in the Tao. Don't blame  
the gods, my mother used  
to say, they have enough  
on their plate already.

While a green snake takes  
sun on the jade patio,  
I use my fingers to pluck  
the p'i-p'a strings. Leaves  
of the magnolia lie about  
on the path. In the distance  
the sound of war drums.

Have I slept seven winters  
or does earth spin faster  
on its axis? What value  
is longevity if those who  
love you have all died?  
Questions. Even the log  
I recline on given to rot.

# 诗人之声