

DIALOGUE IN CELESTIAL PALACE

A POEM BY A.E. CLARK

Yes?

It's nothing, I wished only to report—

Then do so.

That rock you had us mark for demolition,
Sir, up on the mountain—

Yes.

We squeezed it as you said, screwed tight
The vise; we stoked the heat, and pounded
From all sides; eventually it shattered.

Of course. Tomorrow's meeting—

There was something inside.

Excuse me?

Inside the rock, Sir.
A monkey hopped out when it broke apart:
Small and hairy and probably harmless,
Though he mocked us with a rude noise.

Get rid of it.

We plan to, Sir. The rascal's oft surrounded
By his fellows: As soon—

Don't wait: strike hard.

Distract the others between fruit and flower,
And then among the swirling torrents
Take him down.

Well?

Alone against many, he had no chance;
In shifts harassing, we devoured his time,
And forced him back against a waterfall . . .

What then?

He leaped in and was gone.

How kind of him to spare you—

And then came back.

I beg your pardon?

I said he came back, and told
Of visions on the other side.

Absurd! . . . What did he see?

He spoke in riddles.
*Tree has root, and stream has source,
The nameless whence the wind.*

The trees are felled, the river's dry,
We've walls against the wind.

There's more: *A palace dangles in mid-air—*

How far above the ground?

Man's height.

Not much!

Last: *Bowl be empty, bowl be full,*
Whose the hands that hold?

Watch him well.

Should any follow, let me know.

At once, Sir.

How now the troublemaker?

A joke! He wanders country roads, ill-shod,
Bizarre companion to the common poor,
Befriending yokels, clods.

What says he to them?

He rarely speaks, but listens to their griefs,
Examines all their wounds; 'tis droll
When they crowd round him to recite their tragedies.
Some nights we've spied him, by a taper's glow,
Wielding a brush. Each time we confiscate:
Each time he starts anew.

These writings breathe rebellion?

No. He fusses over rights and wrongs
And drafts petitions, helps the bumpkins whine,
But in the end he always quotes our Law.

You underestimate the threat.

Remove it. This time, no bungling!

Exile, or . . . ?

He'll trouble you no more.

We dumped him on a raft and pushed it out
Among the waves with none to witness.

Good. These numbers from the harvest—

Sir, I am not finished. On the beach,
Before he left behind this land and life,
He bent to rake his fingers in the sand,
Then standing taller than I thought he could,
A handful lifted, scattered on the wind.
Sand sparkled in the sun. *You see them shine?*
He pointed,
They, rising, form new constellations;
Yet every star was torn from stone.
I saw. He gave me then a message, Sir.

For later generations, I suppose.

For you. He knew your name,
And said without your help—

Ha!

—had you not crushed so hard and ground so fine,
He never would have found this beauty
In the dust. He bade me thank you, Sir.

Ha! Ha! Tell him—

Too late. The ocean took him.

[Silence]

Sir?

It's nothing. Go.