



Eight Days in Lhasa

Christopher Kelen

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Eight Days in Lhasa is a new China hand's pilgrimage into some of Buddhism's holiest places. The ambivalence begins in the Shangrila of legend, or at least the town in the Tibetan corner of Yunnan which has renamed itself Xiangalila in Chinese. The skyline in these poems is dominated by the rugged grey-green mountains of the high plateau, by prayer flags and red flags, smoke from offerings and the gorgeous temple-scapes from which these issue. Kelen's verse journey tracks key contradictions among the ideological meetings and misunderstandings which are Lhasa today. Visiting various monasteries around the capital, from every angle we see the Potala, empty seat of the Dalai Lamas and heart of Tibetan awareness. Between these covers we're never far from the smell of the butter lamps or the rhythm of turning prayer wheels . Attention is always drawn to the breath at this altitude. Here's how the journey begins: in my ears / air so thin, so pure / this must be / the sound of less than nothing / lungs at rest lean uphill / mountains throw themselves around / sunshower from my hotel windows / dry height they have here leaves you hungry / they're building the old town right now.

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