

From Beijing to Beijing

I remember when Jenny Lou's didn't even have Cheetos,
back when it was all farmland outside 5th ring.
Once, my friend brought a case of Dr. Pepper back,
and it was the best time ever.
There were dirt roads then,
lots of them,
and the paved ones often didn't make sense,
like the ones around my house,
cut a river in two, then three,
called one part 'Duck Pond' and left
the rest nameless.

There's a real river closer to the airport—
Before the Olympics it was a real dump,
after, it's still a dump, but at least there are some
nice trees
now.

4th ring was Wangjing,
Korea-town the size of a small state,
Ikea with its 1 kuai soft serve and 2 kuai hot dogs
that was worth the winding walk through
beds and lighting fixtures.
Lido was where we thought the smog came from,
all stifled and stuffed with taxis and trucks.

Then the city came calling, with
blue corrugated steel fences
and dust and dirt and machines,
at first lapping at our feet,
then rushing over us and
pulling our innocence back with it

to Sanlitun.

After my first 40 Kuai cab,
3rd ring didn't seem so far away,
and sometimes when there was
traffic like all hell,
my friend's driver would go straight
down the breakdown lane—

The lights on Gongti Beilu are up all night until dawn,
and for a 14 year old,
all night sounds like a hell of a long time.

And though dawn always came so quickly,
We never let ourselves see the sunrise,
not yet.

The best thing was Nanjie though,
10 shots for 100 Kuai,
Peach House,
Kamikazi,
Viagra Shot,
one Tequila for good luck,
and it was the best time ever.

The rickshaws will take you to Gongti for 10 Kuai
If you can bargain,
To Vics with its
red and purple lights
and Karaoke rooms,
Elements with its
white and yellow lights
and VIP rooms—
Either way,
you can kiss people that taste of smoke
and stick around for just as long,
though some were more like the smell,
lingering in my clothes and coming back
with each huff and puff of the hookah pipe.

It wasn't until high school was ending,
that I really went further than the 3rd ring—
Tiananmen at sunrise after Grad,
watching the flag raising with the rising sun
not because we're patriotic
not because we want to see the soldiers—
we weren't locals
not tourists either,
just a bunch of kids that finally made it
to the sunrise,
to the center of the city,
but not quite ready to say goodbye
to it all.