

In-and-outlaws I've barely met
and more seem pregnant than prudent.
I grow old, we grow old, dear heart
but on average the clan
(says our actuarial student)
is getting younger again.

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The People's Road is Loved by the People
in English and Chinese near Lanzhou airport.
Ninety minutes of wildly creative driving
heads for town between more potholes than surface,
skimming unimpressible cyclists
and donkeys or longhandled engines dragging traycarts
of bricks that grow more easily from the kilns
all along here than the irrigated vegetables
flanking small walled villages or cave doors.
On campus we wake each day to a rising shush,
the running shoes of Phys Ed Teacher students
out before light, before the quiet music
which gives over to wake-up songs and news
into every window: the People's Loudspeakers
really are Loved by the People, proudly re-rigged
by travelling folk-dance groups and wind quartets

to mangle the ears of eager audiences.

Twenty months later we see Lanzhou on a newsmag:
three hundred killed protesting against corruption.

No film. A quiet town of roadside markets
and a thick unnavigable river, no
place for reporters to hang round just in case.

Shown as a flame of riots on the map
Chengdu, so humid our washing never dries:
one rice crop after another, up-country clothes
dull on the streets but here and there a sharp
yellow or scarlet blossom of shirt in the fields.
Centuries of bamboo crafts handed across
old to young at one bench; and an ancient man
glad to be watched as treadle and thrown shuttle
inch up unique brocade in a shed at the back
of a factory roaring with machinery,
the silk skills stretching back through twist and new
fangling beyond Tu Fu who found a hut here
for his long exile, and inked out his heart
and mind in symbols not of sound but meaning
so that he still grabs direct at readers
whose spoken language is removed from his
by multiple dialects and twelve hundred years:
the power of making meaning that survives
long after the enemy is dumb.

Today they've edited the film
to make the response seem cause, the cause effect.
After twelve centuries will this be truth:
student aggressors, poor soldiers the innocent victims?
No-one died in Tienanmen Square; Beijing
was freed; the People's Army is Loved by the People?

Halfway across the World News
only thirty years late
Imre Nagy is placed
in a patriot's tomb.