

Selected Poems
Karen Swenson



Crowd at the
Saza Dawa Festival,
Mt. Kailash, Tibet.
Image courtesy of
Karen Swenson.

THE CULTURAL BIGAMIST

The cultural bigamist hitches from Lhasa on the Madison Avenue bus with two truck drivers who share their smoky, peeled-from-the-bone, dried strips of mutton, the salt of yak butter tea stirred into their ground barley served from a woven bamboo basket on her way to tea and talk over scones, smoked salmon, Devonshire cream. Yet in a facet of sun on the monastery court's old stones she looks up at the two joyous monklets who cover her from the balcony with plastic Uzis transmutes them to soprano angels who hover above Pamino's magic flute. She believes she's got the best of both worlds, two civilizations but maybe merely disengaged between two fictions.

FOOD COURT, TEHERAN

Like pigeons winging down on a spill of breadcrumbs,
they flutter headscarves loose over hair black as lacquer.
Authority—heavenly or earthly—succumbs
to hormones, to khol lined eyes without rancour.
In wallpaper tight jeans and hiplength jackets, so snug
the fabric stretches to parentheses,
between the buttons, they giggle across tables and mug
for each other's cameras in the greasy sleaze
of make believe foreign restaurant including
a Tex-Mex. On this isle of adolescent liberty
where boys stroll by and look, these faces leaven
dreams creating divine and political difficulty.
The essence of adolescence is invariably heathen
And totally opposed to religion or reason.