

"It was a good ship," Kloster said, as though speaking over the remains of a man in state, one who had lived long and perhaps made a difference. Kloster went a bit woozy looking through the model's glass case. The *Norwazy* had had a tough run. In 2001, it sprouted dozens of leaks in its sprinkler system, incurring fines, and two years later an explosion in its boiler room killed eight. It was decommissioned not long after.

I asked Kloster where it was now. He said he'd heard it was lying on a beach in India, but he wasn't sure.

"It's OK." His lips formed a smile for the first time all day. "A ship can't last forever."

PETER HESSLER

Strange Stones

FROM *The New Yorker*

ALL ALONG HIGHWAY 110 we saw signs for Strange Stones. They first appeared in Hebei Province, where the landscape was desolate and the only color came from the advertising banners posted beside the road. They were red and had big characters promising QI SHI —literally, "Strange Stones"—and had been tattered and torn by the wind. We were driving northwest, right into a spring storm. There was only rain at the moment, but we could see what lay ahead—the forecast was frozen on top of the oncoming traffic. Most vehicles were big Liberation-brand trucks carrying freight south from Inner Mongolia, and their stacks of boxes and crates were covered with ice. The trucks had fought a crosswind on the steppes, and now their frozen loads listed to their right, like ships on a rough sea.

It was 2002, I was driving a rented Jeep Cherokee, and Mike Goettig was along for the ride. If things went well, we might eventually make it to the Tibetan Plateau. We had met in the Peace Corps years earlier, and after finishing our time as volunteers we had each found a different way of staying in China: I worked as a freelance writer; Goettig opened a bar in the southwest. But every once in a while we met up on the road, for old times' sake. We passed a half-dozen signs for Strange Stones before either of us spoke.

"What's up with this?" Goettig said at last.

"I have no idea. I haven't driven this road before."

The banners stood in front of small shops made of concrete and white tile, and they seemed to grow more insistent with every mile.

"Strange Stones" is the Chinese term for any rock whose shape

looks like something else. It's an obsession at scenic destinations across the country; in the Yellow Mountains you can seek out natural rock formations with names like Immortal Playing Chess and Rhinoceros Watching Moon. Collectors buy smaller rocks; sometimes they've been carved into a certain shape, or they may contain a mineral pattern with an uncannily familiar form. I didn't have the slightest interest in Strange Stones, but their proliferation in this forgotten corner of Hebei mystified me. Who was buying this stuff? Finally, after about twenty banners, I pulled over.

Inside the shop, the arrangement seemed odd. Display tables completely encircled the room, leaving only a narrow gap for entry. A shopkeeper stood beside the gap, smiling. With Goettig behind me, I squeezed past the tables, and then I heard a tremendous crash.

I spun around. Goettig stood frozen; shards of green lay strewn across the concrete floor. "What happened?" I asked.

"He knocked it off!" the shopkeeper said. He grabbed the hem of Goettig's coat. "Your jacket brushed it."

Goettig and I stared at the scattered shards. Finally, I asked, "What is it?"

"It's jade," the man said. "It's a jade ship."

Now I recognized pieces: a corner of a smashed sail, a strand of broken rigging. It was the kind of model ship that Chinese businessmen display in their offices for good luck. The material looked like the cheap artificial jade that comes out of factories, and the ship had exploded—there were more than fifty pieces.

"Don't worry about it," the shopkeeper said brightly. "Go ahead and look around. Maybe there's something else you'll want to buy."

We stood in the center of the room, surrounded by the ring of tables, like animals in a pen. Goettig's hands were shaking; I could feel the blood pulsing in my temples. "Did you really knock it over?" I said, in English.

"I don't know," he said. "I didn't feel anything, but I'm not sure. It fell down behind me."

I had never seen a Chinese entrepreneur react so calmly when goods were broken. A second man emerged from a side room, carrying a broom. He swept the shipwreck into a neat pile, but he left it there on the floor. Silently, other men appeared, until three

more of them stood near the door. I was almost certain it was a setup; I had heard about antique shops where owners broke a vase and blamed a customer. But we were hours from Beijing, and I didn't even know the name of this county. Goettig had become extremely quiet—he was always like that when things went wrong. Neither of us could think of a better plan, so we started shopping for Strange Stones.

Goettig and I had both joined the Peace Corps in 1996, when it seemed slightly anachronistic to become a volunteer. President John F. Kennedy had founded the organization in 1961, at the height of the Cold War, and back then it was immensely popular, attracting idealistic young people who were concerned about America's role in the developing world. Later, after the Vietnam War, the Peace Corps suffered as the nation experienced a wave of cynicism about foreign policy. Since the attacks of September 11, the significance of the Peace Corps has changed again—nowadays anybody who joins is likely to have thought hard about personal responsibility in time of war.

During the mid-nineties, though, there were no major national events that weighed on volunteers. It was hard to say what motivated a person to spend two years abroad, and we went for countless reasons. Most of the volunteers I knew possessed some strain of idealism, but usually it was understated, and often people felt slightly uncomfortable speaking in such terms. Goettig told me that during his interview with the Peace Corps the recruiter had asked him to rate his "commitment to community" on a scale of one to five. Goettig gave himself a three. After a long pause, the recruiter started asking questions. You've worked in a drug-treatment center, right? You're teaching now, aren't you? Finally, the recruiter said, "OK, I'll put you down as a four." Goettig told me later that one reason he signed up was that he had a girlfriend in Minnesota who wanted to get serious. I heard the same thing from a few other volunteers—the toughest job you'll ever love was also the easiest way to end a relationship.

Back then, I wouldn't have told a recruiter my own true motivations. I wanted time to write, but I didn't want to go to school anymore and I couldn't imagine working a regular job. I liked the idea of learning a foreign language; I was interested in teaching for a

couple of years. I sensed that life in the Peace Corps would be unstructured, which appealed to me; but they called it volunteerism, which would make my parents happy. My mother and father, in Missouri, were Catholics who remembered Kennedy fondly—later I learned that the Peace Corps has always drawn a high number of Catholics. For some reason, it's particularly popular in the Midwest. Of the thirteen volunteers in my Peace Corps group, six came from midwestern states. It had to do with solid middle-country liberalism, but there was also an element of escape. Some of my peers had never left the country before, and one volunteer from Mississippi had never traveled in an airplane.

None of us were remotely prepared for China. Nobody had lived there or studied the language beyond a few basics; we knew virtually nothing about Chinese history. One of the first things we learned was that the Communist Party was suspicious of our presence. We were told that during the Cultural Revolution, the government had accused the Peace Corps of links with the CIA. These things were no longer said publicly, but some factions in the Chinese government were still wary of accepting American volunteers. It wasn't until 1993 that the first Peace Corps teachers finally showed up, and I was part of the third group.

We must have been monitored closely. I've often wondered what the Chinese security officials thought—if our cluelessness confused them or simply made them more suspicious. They must have struggled to figure out what these individuals had in common, and why the United States government had chosen to send them to China. There were a few wild cards guaranteed to throw off any assessment. A year ahead of me, an older man had joined up after retiring from the U.S. Coast Guard. Everybody called him the Captain, and he was a devoted fan of Rush Limbaugh; at training sessions he wore a Ronald Reagan T-shirt, which stood out on the Chinese college campus where he lived. At one point, I was told, a Peace Corps official said, "Maybe you should change your shirt." The Captain replied, "Maybe you should reread your Constitution." (This was in the city of Chengdu.) One day, while teaching a class of young Chinese, the Captain drew a line on the blackboard and wrote "Adam Smith" on one side and "Karl Marx" on the other. "OK, class, short lesson today," he announced. "This works; this doesn't." In the end, the Peace Corps expelled him for breaking a cabby's side-view mirror during an argument on a Chengdu street.

(This altercation happened to occur on Martin Luther King Day, a detail that probably escaped the Chinese security file.)

After a while, though, it was almost possible to forget who had sent you and why you had come. Most of us taught at small colleges in remote cities, and there wasn't much direct contact with the Peace Corps. Only occasionally did a curriculum request filter down from the top, like the campaign for Green English. This was a worldwide project: the Peace Corps wanted educational volunteers to incorporate environmental themes into their teaching. One of my peers in China started modestly, with a debate about whether littering was bad or good. This split the class right down the middle. A number of students argued passionately that lots of Chinese people were employed in picking up garbage, and if there wasn't any litter they would lose their jobs. How would people eat when all the trash was gone? The debate had no clear resolution, other than effectively ending Green English.

The experience changed you, but not necessarily in the way you'd expect. It was a bad job for hard-core idealists, most of whom ended up frustrated and unhappy. Pragmatists survived, and the smart ones set small daily goals: learning a new Chinese phrase or teaching a poem to a class of eager students. Long-term plans tended to be abandoned. Flexibility was important, and so was a sense of humor. There had been nothing funny about the Peace Corps brochures, and the typical American view of the developing world was deadly serious—there were countries to be saved and countries to be feared. That was true of the Communists, too; their propaganda didn't have an ounce of humor. But the Chinese people themselves could be surprisingly lighthearted. They laughed at everything about me: my nose, the way I dressed, my use of their language. It was a terrible place for somebody stiffly proud to be American. Sometimes I thought of the Peace Corps as a reverse refugee organization, displacing all those lost midwesterners, and it was probably the only government entity that taught Americans to abandon key national characteristics. Pride, ambition, impatience, the instinct to control, the desire to accumulate, the missionary impulse—all of it slipped away.

At the shop, a few Strange Stones looked like food. This has always been a popular Chinese artistic motif, and I recognized old favorites: a rock-hard head of cabbage, a stony strip of bacon. But in my

nervousness most of the shapes looked the same to me. I selected one at random and asked the price.

"Two thousand yuan," the shopkeeper said. He saw me recoil—that was nearly \$250. "But we can go cheaper," he added quickly. "You know," Goettig said to me, "nothing else in here would break if it fell."

He was right—it was all Strange in a strictly solid sense. Why had a jade ship been there in the first place? As a last resort, I hoped that Goettig's size might discourage violence. He was six feet one and well built, with close-cropped hair and a sharp Germanic nose that the Chinese found striking. But I had never known anybody gentler, and we shuffled meekly toward the door. The men were still standing there. "I'm sorry," I said. "I don't think we want to buy anything."

The shopkeeper pointed at the pile of green shards. "*Zemeban?*" he said softly. What are you going to do about this?

Goettig and I conferred, and we decided to start at fifty yuan. He took the bill out of his wallet—the equivalent of six dollars. The shopkeeper accepted it without a word. All the way across the parking lot, I expected to feel a hand on my shoulder. I started the Cherokee, spun the tires, and veered back onto Highway 110. I was still shaking when we reached the city of Zhangjiakou. We pulled over at a truck stop for lunch; I guzzled tea to calm my nerves. The waitress became excited when she learned we were Americans.

"Our boss has been to America!" she said. "I'll go get her!" The boss was middle-aged, with dyed hair the color of shoe black. She came to our table and presented a business card, with a flourish. One side of the card was in Chinese, the other in English:

United Sources of America, Inc.
Jin Fang Liu
Deputy Director of Operations
China

Embossed in gold was a knockoff of the Presidential Seal of the United States. It looked a lot like the original, except for the eagle: the Zhangjiakou breed had pudgy wings, a thick neck, and legs like drumsticks. Even if it dropped the shield and arrows, I doubted that this bird would be capable of flight. The corner of the card said, in small print:

President Gerald R. Ford
Honorary Chairman

"What kind of company is this?" I asked.

"We're in the restaurant business here in Zhangjiakou," the woman said. She told me that her daughter lived in Roanoke, Virginia, where she ran another restaurant.

I pointed at the corner of the card. "Do you know who that is?"

"Fu Te," Ms. Jin said proudly, using the Chinese version of Ford's name. "He used to be president of the United States."

"What does he have to do with this restaurant?"

"It's just an honorary position," Ms. Jin said. She waved her hand in a way that suggested, *No need to tell Mr. Fu Te about our little truck stop in Zhangjiakou!* Ms. Jin gave us a discount and told us to come back anytime.

We stopped in the city of Jining for the night. The temperature had plummeted into the teens; the rain had turned to snow; I pulled into the first hotel I could find. It had a Mongol name—the Ulanqab—and the lobby was so big that it contained a bowling alley. We registered at the front desk, surrounded by the crash of balls and pins, and by now I had a pretty good idea where this trip was headed.

Traveling with Goettig was always a calculated risk. Interesting things happened when he was around, and he was unflappable, but his standards of comfort and safety were so low that he essentially had no judgment. Of all the midwestern refugees I had known in the Peace Corps, he had come the farthest, and he seemed the least likely ever to return home. When our group first met for departure from San Francisco, Goettig had shown up with the smallest pile of luggage. He carried less than a hundred dollars, his entire life savings.

He was from southwestern Minnesota, where he had been raised by a single mother. She had two children by the age of nineteen, and after that she found jobs wherever she could—bartending, office work, waitressing at the Holiday Inn. Eventually, she took a position on the production line of a factory that manufactured bread-bag ties, in Worthington, Minnesota, a town of ten thousand people. The family stayed in a succession of trailer courts and

rental apartments, and much of their home life revolved around motorcycles. Goettig's mother was a devoted biker, and in the summer they attended Harley-Davidson rallies and rodeos around the Midwest. He watched his mother's friends compete in events like Monkey in the Tree, in which a woman leaps from the back of a motorcycle to a low-hanging rope, where she dangles while the man continues around an obstacle course, returning so that the woman can drop down perfectly onto the seat. Another contest involves seeing which woman on the back of a moving bike can take the biggest bite out of a hot dog hanging from a string. When Goettig first told me about these events, I realized that I hadn't seen anything stranger in China. Goettig said that he had always disliked motorcycles.

He was the only one in his family who enjoyed reading. After high school, he had majored in English at the University of Minnesota at Morris, and then he went to graduate school at the Mankato campus of the state university. While studying for his master's, he applied to the Peace Corps. He'd seen commercials as a child, and he figured it was the best way to go overseas for free.

In China, he was assigned to a job teaching English in Leshan, a small city in southern Sichuan Province. With two other volunteers, he organized a play: a student version of *Snow White*. Soon, college administrators recognized an opportunity for publicity, and they developed a traveling variety show. The other Peace Corps volunteers quickly washed their hands of the project, but Goettig was game for anything. He went on the road with *Snow White*, traveling by bus to small towns around the province, performing at middle schools three times a day. Originally, the Woodsman was a villain, but college officials insisted that the play end with a more favorable view of the proletariat, so the Woodsman reformed and gave self-criticism. As part of the variety show, a student sang Richard Marx's "Right Here Waiting," a brass band played the "International," and Goettig went onstage with a blue guitar and sang "Take Me Home, Country Roads." He was mobbed for autographs everywhere. During the bumpy rides between towns, the *Snow White* players sang songs at the top of their lungs and gorged on raw sugarcane, spitting the pulp onto the floor of the bus. Goettig told me that those were the longest ten days of his Peace Corps service.

He learned Chinese quickly. The Peace Corps gave us two and a half months of intensive training upon arrival, and after that we could hire tutors if we wished. But the best strategy was simply to wander around, talking to people in the street. Goettig had the ideal personality for this: he was patient and curious and tireless. He was also, as the Chinese like to say, a very good drinker.

One autumn, he journeyed to Xinjiang, a wild region in China's far west. He camped alone in the Tian Shan Mountains, and one day, while hiking off trail, he clambered over some rocks and was bitten on the finger by a snake. First the finger swelled, then the hand. It took four hours to make it back to Ürümqi, the provincial capital. By then, the swelling had spread to his arm, the pain was excruciating. He found a public phone and called the Peace Corps medical officer in Chengdu. She recognized the symptoms: it sounded like a tissue-killing venomous snake, and he needed to get to a hospital, fast.

He asked bystanders for directions, and a young Chinese woman offered to help. She spoke perfect English, which was unusual, and she was dressed in a bright-orange sleeveless sweater that hung loose from her upper body like a bell. At the time, Goettig thought that the woman seemed slightly strange, but he wasn't in a position to worry about it. She accompanied him to the hospital, where doctors sliced open the bitten finger. They had some traditional Chinese medicine; Goettig figured it was a good sign that the box showed a picture of a snake. The doctors used a mortar and pestle to grind up the pills, and then they shoved the powder directly into the incision.

The swelling continued to spread. Goettig's arm turned purple at the joints, where the venom was rupturing capillaries. By evening, he realized that the woman in the orange sweater was completely insane. She had brought her luggage to the hospital; she refused to leave his side; she told everybody that she was his official translator. She wouldn't answer any personal questions—Goettig still had no idea how she had learned English. Whenever he asked her name, she responded, "My name is . . . Friend." Every time she said this, it sounded creepier, until he finally gave up on the questions. She spent the night in a chair at the foot of his bed. The next day, the doctors cut open the hand three times to shove more powder inside. The pain was intense, but at least Goettig was able to

of vehicles, the orange flames dancing beneath blue Liberation trucks.

"You should go up there and get a picture of those truckers," Goettig said.

"You should get a picture," I said. "I'm not getting anywhere near those guys."

At last, here on the unmarked Mongolian plains, we had crossed the shadowy line that divides Strange from Stupid. We watched the flares for a while and then took the back roads to Hohhot. The moment we arrived, the Cherokee's starter failed; we push-started the thing and made it to a garage. The mechanic chain-smoked State Guest cigarettes the whole time he worked on the engine, but after Highway 110 it seemed as harmless as a sparkler on the Fourth of July.

The hardest thing about the Peace Corps, they said, was going home. Near the end of our two years, the organization held a pre-departure conference. They handed out job-search materials, and they talked about how we might feel when we got back to America and people said things like "I didn't know they still had the Peace Corps." A few volunteers sat for the foreign-service exam. One of them got halfway through and couldn't take it seriously; for the essay section he wrote about how his worldview had been influenced by the film *Air Force One*. The others passed the exam but failed the interview. Over the years, I came to know more volunteers who also took that exam, and all of them were befuddled by the process—virtually nothing they had learned in the field seemed relevant.

From the beginning, the Peace Corps had represented a type of foreign aid, but another goal had been to produce Americans with knowledge about the outside world which could benefit their own country. The organization had been inspired in part by the 1958 book *The Ugly American*, which criticized a top-down approach to foreign affairs. At some level, I came away with a deep faith in the transformative power of the Peace Corps: everybody I knew had been changed forever by the experience. But these changes were of the sort that generally made people less likely to work for the government. Volunteers tended to be individualists to begin with, and few were ambitious in the traditional sense. Once abroad, they

persuade some nurses to kick the crazy woman out. After the third day, the swelling began to subside; he stayed in the hospital for a week. He was so broke that the Peace Corps medical officer had to wire money to cover the bill, which was less than \$150. His hand recovered fully. He never saw the woman in the orange sweater again.

A solitary bowler was hammering the pins when we checked out of the Ulanqab Hotel. At the entrance to Highway 110, the local government had erected a sign with changeable numbers, like the scoreboard at Fenway Park:

AS OF THIS MONTH
THIS STRETCH OF ROAD
HAS HAD 65 ACCIDENTS AND 31 FATALITIES

Yesterday's storm had passed, but the temperature was still in the teens. From Jining to Hohhot the highway crossed empty steppe—low, snow-covered hills. We passed Liberation trucks that were stopped dead on the road; their fuel lines had frozen, probably because of water in their tanks. After fifteen miles, we crested a hill and saw a line of hundreds of vehicles stretching all the way to the horizon: trucks, sedans, jeeps. Nobody was moving, and everybody was honking; an orchestra of horns howled into the wind. Never had I imagined that a traffic jam could occur in such a desolate place.

We parked the Cherokee and continued on foot to the gridlock, where drivers explained what had happened. It had all started with a few trucks whose fuel lines had frozen. Other motorists began to pass them on the two-lane road, and occasionally they encountered a stubborn oncoming car. Drivers faced off, honking, while the line of vehicles grew behind them; eventually it became impossible to move in either direction. Some had tried to go off road, and usually they made it fifty yards before getting stuck. Men in loafers slipped in the snow, trying to dig out cars with their bare hands. There was no sign of police or traffic control. Meanwhile, truckers had crawled beneath their vehicles, where they lit road flares and held them up to the frozen fuel lines. The tableau had a certain beauty: the stark, snow-covered steppes, the endless line

learned to live with a degree of chaos, which made it hard to have faith in the possibility of sweeping change.

Many of my peers in China eventually became teachers. It was partly because we had been educational volunteers, but it also had to do with the skills we developed—the flexibility, the sense of humor, the willingness to handle anything an eighth grader could throw at us. A few became writers and journalists; some went to graduate school. Others continued to wander, and Goettig stayed in China for years. During the summer, he worked for the Peace Corps, training new volunteers, and the rest of the time he picked up odd jobs: writing freelance newspaper stories, working part-time as a translator and researcher. Periodically, he came through Beijing and slept on my couch for a week. The term of Peace Corps service is lifetime when it comes to guests. Sometimes I had three or four ex-volunteers staying in my apartment, all of them big midwesterners drinking Yanjing beer and laughing about old times.

In the southwestern city of Kunming, Goettig opened a bar with a Chinese partner. They found space in an old bomb shelter; the lease explicitly stated that they had to abandon the premises if China went to war. They had two pool tables and a stage for bands. Not long after they opened, there was a bad knife fight—one of the bartenders got stabbed multiple times, and part of a lung had to be removed. The bar didn't have much business, and Goettig and his partner barely scraped together enough money to cover the medical bills. Goettig had named the place the *Speakeasy*.

The year after we drove across northern China, Goettig finally returned to the United States. He was thirty years old and nearly broke. He went back to southwestern Minnesota, but he couldn't imagine living there again; after a month, he caught a Greyhound bus heading south. Some other former volunteers were living in Starkville, Mississippi; they let Goettig crash in their home and found him a job teaching English to foreign students at Mississippi State. It paid \$24,000 for the school year. When Goettig looked into teacher-certification programs, he realized that they took almost as long as law school. He bought some books about the LSAT, studied on his own, and scored off the charts. The next time I saw him, he was living on Riverside Drive, studying at Columbia Law School. In his spare time, he did Chinese-language research for Human Rights Watch. Eventually, he became the editor in chief

of Columbia's *Journal of Asian Law*. He wore a certain expression I recognized from China—slightly stunned, a little overwhelmed, completely out of his element. He had no idea where this was going, but he was happy to hang on for the ride.

At the end of the drive, we followed Highway 215 to the Tibetan Plateau. The two-lane road was flanked by high-desert landscapes of rock and dirt, punctuated by highway-safety propaganda. Along one stretch, the government had perched a wrecked car on spindly ten-foot poles beside the road. The vehicle had been smashed beyond recognition: the front end was crumpled flat and the remains of a door dangled in strips of steel. Across the back were painted the words **FOUR PEOPLE DIED**. It was like some gruesome version of a children's treat—a Carsicle. Another sign presented the speed limit like options on a menu:

40 KM/HR IS THE SAFEST

80 KM/HR IS DANGEROUS

100 KM/HR IS BOUND FOR THE HOSPITAL

The road climbed steeply to the border of Qinghai Province. We passed slow-moving Liberation trucks, their engines whining in the thin air; my altimeter read nearly twelve thousand feet. For 150 miles we saw almost no sign of human habitation. There were no gas stations or restaurants or shops; the first town we passed had been recently razed. Roofless walls stood stark on the plateau, lonely as the traces of some lost empire.

In Qinghai, Goettig's left eye began to act up. First it watered and then it hurt; he sat in the passenger's seat, rubbing his face with his fist. We crossed another twelve-thousand-foot pass and descended to Qinghai Lake. It's the largest body of water in China, a salt lake more than two hundred miles in circumference and blue as a sapphire. We camped on the banks, pitching my tent on a finger of land. It was one of the most beautiful places I had ever visited in China, but by now Goettig could hardly see a thing.

The next morning, he lay in the tent, moaning. "It hurts like hell," he said. "It just keeps burning." He had taken out his contacts, but his eyes still hurt; he asked how many hours it would be to Xining, the provincial capital. "Maybe we'll have to find an eye doctor in Xining," he said. It occurred to me that this was the most

ominous sentence I'd heard in about six thousand miles. The eye would eventually recover, and he later learned that the problem had been caused by his contact lenses. In Kunming, a friend had told him that a local shop was selling Johnson & Johnson lenses for half the usual price—a great deal, and Goettig stocked up. It turned out that the contacts were counterfeit. That became a new rule: when in Kunming, don't buy contact lenses on sale. China was full of lessons; we were still learning every day. Don't hike off trail in Xinjiang. Don't shop for Strange Stones in a bad part of Hebei. Don't hang out with people who light flares under stalled trucks. Driving alongside the lake, we passed another Carsicle, although Goettig's eyes were watering so badly he couldn't see it. He wept all the way across Qinghai—he wept along the salt lake's barren banks, and he wept past the stranded Carsicle, and he wept through the long descent from the roof of the world.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

The Lovely Stones

FROM *Vanity Fair*

THE GREAT CLASSICIST A. W. Lawrence (illegitimate younger brother of the even more famously illegitimate T. E. "of Arabia") once remarked of the Parthenon that it is "the one building in the world which may be assessed as absolutely right." I was considering this thought the other day as I stood on top of the temple with Maria Ioannidou, the dedicated director of the Acropolis Restoration Service, and watched the workshop that lay below and around me. Everywhere there were craftsmen and women, toiling to get the Parthenon and its sister temples ready for viewing by the public this summer. There was the occasional whine of a drill and groan of a crane, but otherwise this was the quietest construction site I have ever seen—or, rather, heard. Putting the rightest, or most right, building to rights means that the workers must use marble from a quarry in the same mountain as the original one, that they must employ old-fashioned/chisels to carve, along with traditional brushes and twigs, and that they must study and replicate the ancient Lego-like marble joints with which the master builders of antiquity made it all fit miraculously together.

Don't let me blast on too long about how absolutely heart-stopping the brilliance of these people was. But did you know, for example, that the Parthenon forms, if viewed from the sky, a perfect equilateral triangle with the Temple of Aphaea, on the island of Aegina, and the Temple of Poseidon, at Cape Sounion? Did you appreciate that each column of the Parthenon makes a very slight inward incline, so that if projected upward into space they would eventually steeply themselves together at a symmetrical point in