

To See a Brief Future

Las Luces de Mi Vida

I. August 9, 2007

There are papers in my bag
(Don't touch the papers in my bag)
"That's my daughter's life in that bag."
And we walked along the railroad tracks, followed by
Six spirits whose bodies built them
We carried three tickets: me, my son-in-law, and my grandson,
Who saw to translating at the ticket counter
And paying the funeral bills

Look! Look out the train window,
See the headstones up ahead
Hear the peonies, smell their timber,
Watch the cattle run, the pearl flush of water,
Markets in Zhongshan, the Hakka words
Still echoing down the subway walls
On the other side of America

Let me show you my daughter,
Who spoke no Mandarin.
She was southern, how southern she stayed,
Her body striding like shadowed sun

When the glass towers and highways came
(And what ivory towers they were!)
And all civilization came south with it
And all the gold dried up, she sought
(The remains she could scrape, she thought)
All that was there, that was never there in the first place.
"Baba, I'm sad no matter where I am,
Zhongshan, Los Angeles, Miami,
It's all the same for me in the end.

I'm missing and I don't know why."

And when her son was born,
He was thrown out into a Miami hospital, like a marble;
The happy nurse under happy trees, whose palm fronds
Hugged the air like a buttoned up sleeve, who asked for a name
And my daughter said (how I still hear her voice!),
"I gave him two, look at his fierce eyes:
Leo, mi león, and Zhang Yong, my brave, brave boy."

And what lovely brown eyes he still has
Left to watch the headstones drifting by

II. February 18, 1989

At the bus stop rain shelter sat
He and she, *contra mundum*
Tents of his people and shacks of ours
Line the Western coast, away from the
Sandblown regents of small domains
Packaged into cardboard boxes
Strung up by their eyes
I do not know what they spoke of
But perhaps it went like mirrored shadows
Under their ears and over the world:

“I’m alive,” she said, “because my grandfather fled Hong Kong
As the Japanese invaded and captured everyone.”

“I’m alive,” he said, “because we hid under the back seats
As the truck crossed the border to freedom.”

At the train station platform stood
He and she, *contra mundum*
On matted sacks of clouds and sand
Their parents might embrace
Just as they do (“You lucky two,
Arm to arm, you fall asleep to each other
You lucky, lucky, happy, happy two.”)

III. June 7, 1996

Years ago after their wedding
I paid a visit home to my family
The southern village was barren
When I came to it last; my home,
Or what's left of it

Until you walk west towards the mountains
Silent heelsteps pelting the earth
As you go up the cracked steps to home
Uncles smoking indoors with windows left open
When you step into their domain
Their eyes pronounce judgment on you

What do you see, Xue, now that you're home?
What a magnificent painting of men and women
Seated on bamboo chairs fanning themselves
Who don't move who don't leave not
Because they don't want to but they don't know how to want
(They were never taught to dream) because how
Could you dream if the dreams evaded you if you
Tread so softly they won't even recognize you?

I laughed, drank their tea, ate their market food
How they laughed and shared their
Prophet's words like porcelain falling
While a child treads on the pieces

And then one of them speaks up about my daughter:
"Xue, I heard Meizhen married some Mexican boy.
Maybe he won't be lazy like the rest of 'em."

In a moment of cowardice and shame,
I laughed it off and made
An old joke about 老外
The foreigners who looked nothing like us
And tried to be with the people
Who tended the fields that became their graves

IV. July 4, 1991

His name was Alejandro, she said
("Los Angeles is drier than Zhongshan, *baba*,
But there are mountains taller than at home!")

And Meizhen loved all of it, the suburb where
Alejandro had walked to school, his parents
Who made *arroz rojo* for her to take back,
Who listened to her novice Spanish
("Mi padre... mi madre... mi hermana mayor...
Hasta se me quitó el dolor... este... este... este...")

(When Alejandro and Meizhen visited Puebla
They saw grey tarp zip tied to the metal poles
Covering the crack in the window, the barbed fences
Guarding the other half, while the painted wood panels
Formed houses that overlooked cracked cobblestone)

In summer the soles of Alejandro's feet were
Worned into leathered baby feet
Massaged into delicate little things
To be slipped into a pair of leather boots
To walk the mile to fix the neighbor's car

In the summer the palms of Meizhen's hands
Grew calluses from frying rice in a wok
Serving mixed peas and cut carrots in
Cheap rice drowned in subpar soy sauce
Walking the mile to come home again

They watched the burst of fireworks that night
Through the painted balcony railings
Through the gaps in *una jaula de oro*

V. August 10, 2007

In a moment of indecision Leo brings the unfinished rice
To the kitchen, perhaps to send the sorry grains into the trash bin,
Perhaps to swear in Cantonese or Spanish or English
And my memory picks itself up again:

“For every grain of rice you waste,” said my mother,
“You lose another grain of luck in your future.”

“But I’m full, I can’t eat anymore,” I would cry.

In a swift choice, Leo scoops up to his mouth
The remaining three spoonfuls, washes his bowl
And says yesterday was a blur of sky

“You will eat it all, Xue, you will eat it all
Or there will be a day you will eat nothing at all
There will be nothing left
Nothing left at all.”

And I ate all of it
I ate it all

Alejandro comes home to a bowl of *arroz rojo* set out for him,
Steamed fish under soy sauce and scallions in a plate,
Sopes de pollo made by Leo
 (“With the green sauce you like, papa”)
Little moons made of *masa*
Like boats rising to meet the light

And Alejandro was left to finish every grain
And every crumb; familial love hovered in the air
But all in vain to stop the bowl of rice
From mixing with his tears

VI. A Postscript

You may relish your northern smog-spawn palaces, but do care for
Your southern hamlets, your rivulets, your terraced fields,
Your fish raised in rice fields, your women and men
Who don't travel far from our homes; we, who pick the rice
Grain by grain, we, who wear the sweat in our brow
You, my friend, should wipe the sweat off our brow
But I deign to guess that it is too much to ask
For wrinkled Han men like us

We too are your 漢人
We are the stuffed men
We are not northern, look
How southern we stayed

We rise to the occasion and smoke a pipe, our thatched hair
Covered by woven, bamboo 斗笠 shipped from Vietnam
Come join our little minuet (here, wear the bamboo 斗笠 on your head)
Kneel into the mud with us and meet the fish-spawn, the gnarly
Knuckles of our toes covered by moss hairs, sift through the
Pebbles that still furrow into little patterns of the Earth

Our women marry, not for love, but for comfort
Our men marry, not for beauty, but for loyalty

Were we silkworms, we would shed our tanned skin,
Outgrow them each week, lolling in mulberry leaves,
Roll ourselves into pearly spheres of silken value,
Hollow shells with nothing left except one who grieves.

Before the red sun sets again into swathes of mountains
I want to see my wife and daughters again
And eat around the dinner table again
And grow the lotuses on the rooftop again
And so I wait to see
A brief future in the drought of our dreams
And in the terraced fields a hearth contained