

—*this book is dedicated to immigrants everywhere*—

## **things we carry on the sea**

we carry tears in our eyes: good-bye father, good-bye mother  
we carry soil in small bags: may home never fade from our hearts  
we carry names, stories, memories of our village, our civilization  
    we carry scars from proxy wars of greed  
    we carry carnage of mining, droughts, floods, genocides  
we carry dust of our families incinerated in mushroom clouds  
    we carry our islands sinking under the sea  
we carry our hands, feet, bones, hearts and best minds to start  
    a new life

we carry diplomas: medicine, engineer, nurse, education, math,  
    poetry, even if they mean nothing to the other shore  
we carry railroads, plantations, laundromats, bodegas, taco trucks,  
    farms, factories, nursing homes, hospitals, schools, temples . . .  
    built on our ancestors' backs

we carry old homes along the spine, new dreams in our chests  
    we carry yesterday, today and tomorrow  
    we're orphans of the wars forced upon us  
    we're refugees of the sea drowning in plastic wastes  
    we came from the same mother in Africa  
we're your children, sisters and brothers, father and mother  
    our tongues carry the same weight as we chant

    爱 (ai), حب (hubb), ליבע (libe), amour, love  
    平安 (ping'an), سلام (salaam), shalom, paz, peace  
希望 (xi'wang), أمل ('amal), hoffnung, esperanza, hope, hope, hope  
as we drift . . . from dream to dream . . . sea to sea . . .

## Cockle Pickers from Morecambe Bay

February 5, 2004, on the eve of the Lantern Festival, twenty-three Chinese workers, age eighteen to forty, drowned while picking cockles at Morecambe Bay beach, England.

Two years later, I stand on that beach. Isaac Julien, the British filmmaker, has invited me here. He's making a movie on immigration. He wants a poem for his project.

Morecambe Bay stretches miles into the Irish Sea. The mud, sediment left by the ice age, feels soft under my bare feet. The sea is distant and calm. Who would know that the tide comes ferocious and fast, and no human can outrun it, not even horses or tractors? Local fishermen fear it. So do the immigrants.

But they came anyway. The only job they could get was to pick cockles in the dark and sell them, nine pounds a bag, to restaurants. The beach was cold, and job back-breaking, yet they came. They owed \$50,000 to the snakeheads, who held their loved ones back home as ransom. So they came on Lantern's Day, reserved for family reunion and love. Work is forbidden because it brings bad luck. But they came anyway.

The tide came in the dark. The cockle pickers called 999, but the Coastguard couldn't understand their English. They stood on the shore, listening to the screams for help. England watched on TV, as each cockle picker bid goodbye to his or her family in China, as waves rose to their necks, mouths, eyes.

In the morning, the Coastguard found twenty-one bodies in the mud, two bodies still missing, all in one straight line, as if waiting to board a ship to go home. "The most haunting scene," said one guard.

From the mud beach, I look into the bay of the Irish Sea. There's only cold emptiness.

That night, the ghosts visit me in the tiny hotel room in London, twenty-three of them, including the two still missing. They file into my dream, as foam, waves, wails. Trailing after them, the ten

drowned immigrants from the *Golden Venture* . . . all came from Changlecun 长乐村, Eternally Happy Village on the shore of the South China Sea, the port where Admiral Zheng He sent off seven expeditions between 1405 and 1433, his fleet containing over twenty-seven thousand crew and hundreds of ships with silk, silver . . .

“Why did you leave home?” I ask. “Changle is a beautiful place on the coast, plenty of fish and farmlands. You work yourselves to death in New York, San Francisco, London, and Amsterdam, send your money home to build mansions that remain empty, because everyone is busy making money abroad. It doesn’t make sense.”

They weep and disappear into foam. I wake up. In my notebook, there’s a drawing of spiraling waves—in each wave, an eye, a mouth, a hand, a name, a soul, drifting towards home.

So the tragedy of the cockle pickers is the tragedy of every immigrant, also mine. Their desire, their death and hope is also mine. Their struggle at Morecambe Bay is my struggle at New York. Their dream to have a better life is also my dream. Our lives are entangled, through ten thousand waves. Our story must be told and heard, through ten thousand waves.

I call Isaac. “I need to visit Changle, home of the drowned victims, home of the Chinese immigrants around the globe, home of the seafarers.”

It takes me a year to write the poem. Each stanza is named after the drowned from Morecambe Bay . . . Each word is uttered to raise the dead from the ocean floor, down the mountains, across the deserts . . . to guide the souls home.

Isaac calls from London. He’s raising new funds to make a nine-screen film installation. He wants to name it “Ten Thousand Waves,” a line from the poem “Cockle Pickers.” And the poem will run through the film as its story line, its spirit, its spine.

## Boy at Sea

I met Boy as his interpreter. My colleague Jim was representing him for his asylum application. Boy didn't speak English. Jim needed him to practice his answers before the judge. So he asked my help for the mock trial.

Boy arrived with tea as gifts for us, tins of Tieguanyin 铁观音, Iron Bodhisattva, the best Wulong tea 乌龙茶 from his home province, Fujian. He looked like a skeleton. Jim said he was still recovering from his thirty-day hunger strike in an Amsterdam prison in order to get out and come to America for asylum. By law, the Dutch government had to release him after he lost sixty pounds. They sent him to prison because they didn't believe he was a refugee, didn't believe he was fifteen. His lawyer and interpreter, appointed by the government, told the judge that all Asians look like teen refugees. The judge sent him to prison for lying and illegal entrance as an adult.

Before Amsterdam, he'd been jailed in Italy, France, Germany . . . for the same reasons.

Before he reached Europe, he had spent a year drifting in the sea.

Before that, he was home with his parents. On his fourteenth birthday, the parents fled arrest for attending the underground Catholic Church. A month later, his uncle took him to a sailboat, told him to run because the cops were coming for him. His parents had borrowed \$50,000 to pay snakeheads to get him to New York City, via South Asia, Europe, then America. Once he arrived, he'd work in restaurants to pay off the debt.

His uncle didn't tell him the journey might last for years, with jails, hunger strikes, beatings, rapes . . . There were stories. But stories were luxuries they couldn't afford.

At sixteen, Boy still looked fourteen. The traumas didn't age him. During our practice, his face turned in the direction of the South China Sea, the direction of home, Changlecun 长乐村, Village of Eternal Happiness.

I asked Boy what he'd like to do when he got his asylum. He smiled, for the first time.

“I'll call mama and papa, and tell them I'm a free man now. I can go to church whenever and wherever I want, and I'll go back to school for my diploma.”

And he told me how he crossed the line.

## The Last Call from Aleppo

It's Christmas Eve and snow covers Aleppo  
As it covers the rest of the world  
Please remember my child under the snow  
Under the metal and concrete of Aleppo  
No one comes for us: No UN, no Red Cross  
Only tanks, planes, cluster bombs  
As the bell tolls for Christmas  
The world watches us in silence  
Our homes shattered bomb by bomb  
Our schools crushed plane by plane  
Our hospitals demolished tank by tank  
Our children buried alive in powdery concrete  
Their cry choked before it reaches the sky  
As superpowers bicker over who owns the world  
Oh, what happened to us, to be born  
In such a wrong time and wrong place?  
What humanity could allow this cruelty?  
What sanity could allow this blood bath?  
What civilization could witness this annihilation?  
Please hear my daughter, her last plea for a hand  
If my child is your child  
If my mother is your mother  
If my sister is your sister  
If my home is your home  
If my city is your city  
Could you sit still in the silent night of Christmas  
And watch us perish under the rubble of Aleppo  
Into the crashing waves of the Mediterranean Sea  
As the bell tolls from the ruins of Aleppo  
From the snow-covered ruins of humanity?

## Our Prayers on Father's Day

Dear God, we are not child actors. We are children. Real children.

Dear God, where is my papa and mama? We just walked three thousand miles, fighting coyotes along the way. We thought we'd be safe once we crossed the Rio Grande.

Dear God, you said everyone is born equal, every life is a gift, and the kingdom of heaven resides in the mustard seed.

Dear God, we are small and young. Some of us just learned to walk, some still wear diapers, and some are still nursing. Are we not your tiny mustard seeds, dear God?

You say a kid must not be boiled or eaten in mother's milk. Why are you ripping us from our mother's breasts, from our father's hands?

Dear God, we have lost everything: Our country, our home, our friends and tomorrow. We have nothing left but our papa and mama. Please give them back.

Dear God, here's my mama's number. Here's my papa's number. Here's my aunt's number. I have them memorized. Please call so we can get out of this dog kennel.

Dear God, you cried for donkeys moaning under loads and falling on the roadside. Are you crying for us, as we fall off *La Bestia*, crushed under *El Tren de la Muerte*?

Dear God, you wept when you heard starving baby ravens crying from the nest. Are you weeping for us, Lord, as you hear our wailing for papa and mama from the cage?

Dear God, we followed your law to flee from danger: A burning forest, a roaring tsunami, a raging war, violent gangs.

But, dear God, it's been months since I was yanked from mama's breasts, since I'm left in the cage, crawling in circles . . . as I turn the tender age of eleven months old.

Dear God, we didn't want to leave home, walk three thousand miles, or fall off *La Bestia*.

Dear God, we are not criminals or child actors. We just want our mama and papa. Our parents are not criminals or actors. They just want to raise us. There's no script. Our only word is to live, like all God's children.

Do not turn the light off on us, dear God. Do not throw away the key to our cage. Give back our papa and mama, dear Lord. Do not forsake us, alone, terrified, drowning in our tears. Hear our cries on Father's Day. Hear the cries of our fathers and mothers, dying from the death sentence of separation.

Dear God, please let us be children again, like arrows in the hands of a warrior. For we're your mustard seeds, your heritage, keys to thy kingdom of heaven, dearest God.

*Note: Ann Coulter claims that twenty-three hundred children in cages are "child actors," and the Democrats gave them scripts to read and cry about their suffering.*



## The Names You Call Me

You call me “Criminal,”  
as you cheat, assault, and rob the world blind.

You call me “Shit-hole,”  
as you foul the Earth with your lies, runoff, toxic smoke.

You call me “Welfare,”  
as I work day and night, no vacation, no complaints.

You call me “Thief,”  
as you dodge tax dollars in billions.

You call me “Rapist,”  
as you grab my Mija by her genitals.

You call me “Animal,”  
when ants and bees know more discipline than you.

You call me “Murderer,”  
as you snatch my children, freeze them to death in cages.

You call me “Violence,”  
as you shock and awe with drones, Mother of All Bombs.

You call me “Lazy,”  
as I build your roads, railways, factories on my knees.

You call me “Not Good Enough,”  
as my awards pile higher than your white rage.

You call me “Slum,”  
cooking, gardening, cleaning in your bloody mansions.

You call me “Marx,”  
igniting hope and equality among the wretched.

You call me “Worst,”  
as students nominate me year after year for awards.

You call me “Whore,”  
breasts laden with milk, buttocks curving like the Amazon.

You call me “Terror,”  
my arms taller than the Andes, thighs smashing your shackles.

You call me “Mao,”  
freeing China from your opium wars and colonial lootings.

You call me “Dog,”  
“No Chinese Allowed” in Shanghai’s Concession Parks.

You call me “Che,”  
whistling Amazon warriors from my jungle breasts.  
You call me “Monster,”  
pulling the poor, the sick and the homeless out of the muck.  
You hunt me with ICE,  
troops, Coast Guard, Proud Boys and white supremacists.  
You call me “Uppity,”  
spending millions in court to put a Chink in the Chink place.  
You send students to destroy,  
enraged for praising black, brown, yellow poets.  
You shun me as the “Pariah,”  
ban me from campus for life.  
You build the Wall,  
blocking my path to cross, work, speak, write, publish, live.  
You call me “cavalier, liar, paranoid, renegade, crazy bitch,  
detached from reality . . .”  
You call me “Mandela,”  
Twenty-seven years in jail, still singing with dignity.

You cut my veins, opening lava of rumbling spirit.  
You shackle my feet, and I gnaw through the hole with teeth.  
You slit my throat, and I summon songs with dance.  
You kill my birds, and I build a temple with feathers and stardust.

You can kill my birds, slit my throat, shackle my feet, bury me  
alive, cut my veins, block my path, hunt me down with your drones,  
lawyers and lies . . . my body is not my body . . . my name is not  
my name . . . I belong to every Mija and Mijo, to the Himalayas,  
Andes, Rockies, to the Nile, Amazon, Yangtze, Mississippi, to the  
four seas . . . call me your Monster, Terror, Animal . . . call me Mao,  
Marxist, Che, Mandela . . . names blown, blowing with the wind  
. . . but nothing can change this: I’m your Amazon, your Everest,  
your Pacific . . . I’m your Sky and Earth . . . I’m your parents on the  
road . . . your children in cages . . . named or nameless . . . I’m Truth  
that defies your lies . . . I’m Conscience that jolts you awake in a  
cold sweat . . . I’m Poetry that sails hope across the sea and desert.

## Wandering Souls

Once again  
Our blood boils with longing  
Children of the Yellow Emperor  
King of the Four Seas

Our ancestors wrestled  
With dragons, monsters, nine-headed beasts  
Their floating cities  
Covered four seas and five continents  
Our village—yellow kingdom by the sea  
Port of grand adventures  
If you don't believe me  
Go stand on the shore of Changle 长乐  
Where the South meets the East China Sea  
You'll hear the junks' horns through thick fog  
Clashing swords and fine porcelain  
Admiral Ho's robe fluttering in the arctic wind  
Oh, fire of five thousand years  
Ancestral ghosts  
Our eyes on the North Star  
Our spirits yearning for the sea

## What We Carry to Everest

—*To my Nepali porters, my kin*

Chairs, tables, doors  
Cups, pots, stoves  
Rice, eggs, chickens  
On the backs, over the heads  
Our dokos weigh more than the Himalayas

We are Rais from Kulung  
Children of Genghis Khan  
Backbone of Nepal  
Porting goods through the Nepali Plains

Rocks, metal, cables  
Gas, coal, windows  
Beds, sinks, toilets  
Everything for cafés, restaurants, hotels  
Feeding climbers from East, West, and all corners

We are Rais of Mahakulung  
Children of the Dudh Kosi  
Seven stars from the heaven  
We carry her milk from the riverbeds  
Up and down, down and up  
To quench trekkers' thirst  
Along the dusty path to Everest

Tea, beer, coffee  
Sugar, milk, chocolate  
Cappuccino machine that costs two million Rupees  
Luxuries for civilizations  
Strapped on our heads  
As we inch up, breath by breath  
Towards the base camp  
Into the Zone of Death

We're Rais from Sagarmatha  
Born warriors of peace  
Now the "boys" to bring "comforts"  
To make riches for our New Zealand lords

Ropes, axes, ladders  
Boots, mitts, crampons  
Helmets, goggles, oxygen tanks . . .  
Wrapped around our necks  
Our breaths thinner than paper  
Feet and fingers freeze, then rot through sandals, thin gloves  
As we tiptoe under the moaning icefalls

We are Rais of Khumbu  
Knights of Kirati kings  
Mountains' backbone  
Our feet faster than leopards  
Our shoulders stronger than yaks  
Our hearts' roar louder than lions  
Our spirits higher than sky  
As we carry down your waste on our backs  
As we dig your roads on our knees  
As we lift thousands of you into glory

But who would see our face  
Blackened with frostbite as we fix ropes along icy paths?  
Who would hear us gasp  
Our loads bear down like mountains as we step into clouds  
Who would feel our heartaches  
As we search valleys for a glimpse of our hungry children  
Who would help us get back on our feet  
As we slip from trees, rocks, glaciers  
Who would pull us  
From under the Khumbu avalanche?  
Who would say that every path to Everest  
Is paved with our sweat, tears, dust . . .

Oh, venerable climbers from all directions  
We've offered you the best:  
Our dahl baht and lion hearts  
Our yak backs and goat limbs  
Our spine of Nepali plains—  
Straight up and down between clouds and rivers  
Our Sagarmatha—"Head in the Great Blue Sky"  
Our Chomolungma—"Goddess of Earth"

Please tread on us with care  
As you guide your tour clients through our home  
Please do not spit in our face  
And say "Here you are, Boy"  
As you toss coins, old shoes and moldy sweaters  
Into our welcoming hands  
Please call us by our names  
Rais, sons of Sagarmatha  
Sherpas, children of Chomolungma  
Pride of Nepal, Warriors of Peace  
But please, do not call us your "Boys"  
Do not leave us in the crevasse of Khumbu ice  
As you count your medals  
Gilded with our souls

## My Name Is Immigrant 我叫移民

Ai Weiwei is going home. I ask him what he wants to eat for the farewell party.

“Dumplings, plain old dumplings, pork and cabbage,” he says.

Many people come, all Chinese, poet laureates, master artists, composers, conductors, professors from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China . . . It takes forever to introduce ourselves.

When I talk about my new book, Yu cuts in, “I hope writers and filmmakers will stop presenting Chinese and China in such dark, evil images, especially to foreigners. Don’t forget, we have five thousand years of civilization. What do they have? Maybe a few hundred years, unless they count the Native Americans? We should never lose our pride.”

Song shouts, “But look at us. We are all supposed to be *ren jian*—the cream of this five-thousand-year-old civilization. Yet it is the land with a few hundred years of history that gives us a place to live.”

No one speaks. We all have tears in our eyes.

Weiwei sits alone by the window, twirling a dumpling skin on his fingertips. I grab it from his hand, flip it out of the sixteenth floor, sit down and hold his hand.

“Are you all packed?”

He nods.

“Do you have to go back?”

He nods. His father is gravely ill. Growing up, Weiwei had a feisty relationship with his dad, who would smack him with bricks and laundry bats, hoping to beat some obedience into his rebellious spirit. We had quite good laughs together as we exchanged our stories. Now the old man wants his youngest child at his bedside as he lies dying in Beijing.

“Did your father get his old home back?”

Weiwei shakes his head, then nods, then shakes again. His father is China’s most famous poet. During the Cultural Revolution, the whole family was exiled to the countryside. They lost everything, including their house, an old style siheyuan. They’ve been trying to get it back.

Where is he going to live in Beijing?

When are you coming back to New York I want to ask, but remain silent.

Will he return to the city again? He’s been living here for years and has a green card granted to him as a Distinguished Artist. The city has been his home. Is it really? I remember his basement in the East Village, the moldy rings on his shower curtain and linoleum tiles, his artwork strewn around, covered with spider webs, his roommate Xu Bing, another renowned artist from China, pale and starved looking . . . Song and Yu are still arguing back and forth if we are better off back home or in exile . . . and why we can’t feel home where we live . . . why we forever feel exiled and homeless . . . now my mind goes to Song’s studio in Brooklyn . . . his entire place covered with thirty years of dust, droppings from roaches and rats . . . yet in this “grave” home, he makes hundreds of roles of calligraphy, paintings, poems . . . all breathtakingly beautiful, all kept in mint condition.

That’s when the revelation hits me: It doesn’t matter where we live, what they call us, Pink, Pin, Pig, Chink, Stupid, Ignorant, Low IQ, China Doll, Lazy Bum, Job Thief, Worst of the Worst, Never Good Enough, Go Back Wherever You’re From . . . What matters is how we call ourselves, with the joy and pride of coming home 回家 circling home . . . as a migrant, like a bird, a fish, a butterfly, a tree, a weed, an immigrant, as the first man who walked out of Africa and arrived in South China, who became my Chinese ancestors . . . carrying home on their back, in our heart . . .

I am Wang Ping. I am Immigrant, drifting with the Turtle Island, till I become Mino Giizhii Goo Kwe, Good Sky Woman.



Immigrant is my name, our name. And it's a good name.

“What the fuck?!” someone shouts from the street. The dumpling skin has just landed.

We laugh. Ai Weiwei squeezes my hand. There's light in his eyes, and a smile on his lips. It's not his usual mischievous smile when we've done something “wicked,” but a knowing smile. The same revelation has reached him too.

“I hate letters, but I'll write to you from Beijing. Let's keep in touch, Ping.”

We hug. Our hearts meet then settle, in a magic space where there is no exile, where home resides in the stillness, while everything is in constant motion. We know how lucky we are, still alive after such turmoil. We know each survival is a miracle. We know our miracle is backed by thousands of unfulfilled dreams. The dead are never dead. They live through us. They sing their stories through our mouths and hands. And we have work to do.

I know he wants to keep in touch through living: free, fierce, fearless.

And we've kept our promise.

## Hui Jia . . . 回家 . . . Circling Home

Every Chinese belongs to *lao jia*, 老家, our native land, ancestor, our food, name, spirit, roots . . .

老 lao: old, origin . . . over the head is *tu*, 土, earth, and a plough cutting through ground to make home.

Every Chinese wants to 回老家, *go back to old home*, or simply, *go home*, no matter how far we wander.

At fourteen, I left home on the big island of the East China Sea. I worked in a fishing village, for the one-in-a-million chance to go to college. I never returned.

Three years later, I left the village to study English in Hangzhou. I never returned to the island.

I left Hangzhou for Beijing University. My college dream came true at twenty-two.

I left China in 1986, to pursue my Ph.D. at NYU. I never returned.

“Go back home!” Americans scream, from streets, colleges, social media. Still, I never went back.

I drift farther away from Weihai, my *lao jia*, carrying that old earth in my dreams.

Shanghai is my birthplace. Zhoushan Archipelago, 舟山群岛, is where I grew up till seventeen. I studied English in Hangzhou and Beida, 北大. I earned my master’s and Ph.D. at NYU. As a foreigner, I taught poetry twenty years as an English Professor at an elite college, the only and last miracle. I’ve raised my sons, trained poets and writers . . . my old home is still registered as Shandong, Weihai, 山东威海, my 老家, my *earth*, 土; my *heart*, 心; my *liver*, 肝.

For Chinese, the liver stores blood, and the heart moves it, a circuit of paths leading to one destination—home. At night, the blood must go home to restore the soul and settle the spirit. If it can’t go home, we have a problem: insomnia.

At fifty, I took my sons to the Yellow Sea. It was our first time to see 老家.

Factories and buildings have taken over the land my father talked about every day. The wheat fields are gone. The village is gone. The sand beach is gone. My grandma's grave still stands in the yam fields. I sit down in front of her stone, and everything floods up: sorrow, joy, bitter, sweet, her stories, handmade bread, noodles and dumplings, my father roaming on the island in search of the immortal reishi mushroom, 灵芝, his longing to go back home, 回家.

I watch my sons eating steamed bread, strung together like beads with a red thread. It is their first time to eat this traditional food, but they devour it as if it has been their daily meal since birth, as if they were slurping Cheerios and milk. This is the bread my father craved while living on the island, while sailing the East China Sea as a commander.

Return—回—*Hui*: a mouth within a mouth.

Is that why there is a Chinese restaurant wherever there are Chinese? Just so we could go back home through our food?

Is that how my sons are tied to their lao jia, 老家, in China, even though they were born in New York City and Minneapolis, love pizza, play hockey and baseball, speak English, Hebrew, and Chinese?

I check the dictionary. 回 = 迴 = return = go home by walking, travelling, wandering on earth, carrying mouths, 回, on the traveler's back, 迴 . . .

I remember my DNA test by National Geographic. 200,000 years ago, my ancestors walked out of Africa, crossing the land and sea, following food, hunting, gathering, making home along their paths, reaching South China after 100,000 years.

I remember my father: Left home at sixteen to fight the Japanese invasion, lived and died on the island in the East China Sea, but in his heart, home is forever Weihai, 威海, by the Yellow Sea.

Just like monarchs, geese, salmon, elephants, weeds and other life on earth, travelling thousands of miles to follow food, but always know how to go back, 回老家.

Home is a transit word . . . 回 . . . 迴 . . . return . . . go home.

I keep digging. I need to find the origin.

What I found makes my hair stand up. In the oldest version of Chinese, when words were carved on the bones of birds and whales, on the backs of turtles, 回 = 洄 = water; 迴 = 洄 = water rippling, pushing, whirling, circling towards home.

Home is embedded in the water. Going home is embedded in running water. When Chinese see the word 回 . . . 迴, we've already arrived.

My heart feels at home, finally.

We are water, born to move, wander, migrate, whirl, circle . . .

No need to get mad when people shout “Go Home” at us.

We all carry home in our heart and liver, in our blood, in our DNA, as we flow from continent to continent, from sea to sea, to appease the soul, to circle back home . . .

. . . 回 . . . 迴 . . . 洄 . . . 回 . . . 迴 . . . 洄 . . . 回 . . . 迴 . . . 洄 . . .