

A Hakka Man Farms Rare Earth in South China

First of all, it's not rare nor earth, as they call it.
The metal lies under our feet, sparkling in the soil we farm,
Red, green, yellow, blue, purple, land of grass
And buffalos, patches of rice, bamboos, sweet yams.
We came here as guests—Hakka—fleeing from angry
Lords. Year after year, we bent over the earth
Feet and hands in the neon soil, our sweat
Fertilized the fields, children, ancestors' graves
Our stove cooked the fragrance from the sun and moon.

Now we dig, deep in the mud, our boots
Rotting in the rainbow sludge . . . Dig, and we dig
Hoes, pickaxes, guns, explosives, acid wash
Ten yuan a sack, this red dirt speckled with
Blue and yellow. Home, we cry,
A small haven painted with green.
Now the mountains are lifted.
Deep crates in the fields, blood and pus
In streams and rivers . . . all because the world
Wants this earth—"Vitamins" for iPods
Plasma TVs, wind turbines, guided missiles—
Things that make the world
Cleaner and more beautiful, as they say

And here we are, in the waist-deep sludge
A sack of mud—a tale of greed
Leaching in our stove.
Fire licks my wife's slender hands
Acid fumes in her lungs, liver, stomach
Till she can no longer sip porridge laced
With the thousand-year-old egg.
In our cooking woks, we exhume
Dysprosium, Neodymium, Promethium
All the names of Gods, they say.

If gods have eyes, would they see us
Slaves on this earth that no longer holds us?

In the distance, a mushroom of dust—
Boss and his Prius, powered by the sludge
That chokes my eyes, ears, nose . . . One *Rich Field*
twenty-five pounds of metal, ten thousand sacks of earth
Ripped from under our feet. We're slipping,
Our chests soaked in blood, backs broken
Digging, pulling, no food or water.
Our quota still short, the boss will be mad,
But no matter. I light a cigarette, each puff
Is the last. Tomorrow is gone, like our village.
Here and far away, where horses once ran wild
Under the sky, where we, children of
Genghis Khan, return every night in our dream
which is gone, too, they say. Mongolia,
Our origin, now a rare earth pit for the world.

Oh, Hakka, Hakka, forever a guest
Wandering on this bare earth.

Dust Angels

stars, diamonds, tears of hearts
sand and cut, cut and sand
shrouded in silicon fog
we string beauty with cornhusking hands

bracelets, necklaces, rings
day and night, night and day
we bend over screeching wheels
making trinkets for the U.S.A.

saints, gods, Buddha
rush down the belt at a dizzying speed
a quarter-cent apiece—the price
of our hands, a nation's pride,
a civilization eating us alive

opal, malachite, topaz
stones from deep in earth—sold cheap at Walmart
our lungs harden from quartz crystals
our lives weigh less than dust
we cough and wheeze
walking half a block we gasp for air

they say we fake our sickness
have never worked in their factories
they hire lawyers to erase our names, ban our union
Marx and Mao are history, they claim
only freedom of market economy
the golden path toward democracy

no money to go home
no face to see parents, wives, husbands, children
all bridges collapsed—

we loiter in hospitals, courts
we pray not to die in this strange land

dust angels, dust angels
who wears the stars and hearts strung with our tears?
who makes a fortune from our wretched breath?
who will see us—
of all the Buddhas and saints
carved out of our bodies
all the eyes of Mary and Jesus
painted in our blood

Bargain

This is a pair of handmade shoes
Awkward and lovely like the maiden behind the stand
Gold peonies bloom unabashed on red corduroy tops
White soles are made of layered cloth
Pasted on a door with flour
A slow air dry in the moonlight
Stitches lined up neatly
Like terra-cotta soldiers on battle grounds

This is a pair of shoes
I've been searching for years
The craft my grandma tried to pass on
Before I left home for good
Without trying them on, I know
They would comfort my calloused soles
Let me run like a whirlwind
Make me feel like
A sword drawn out of its sheath

And we start to bargain

“Ten,” she says, “for the sake of fate
That brought you to this desert town.”
“Five,” I say without thinking,
a trick from my American partner.
“Good joke, Big Sister,” she laughs,
deep creases flashing across her frostbitten face.
I blush for no reason.
“Six then,” I say, avoiding her hands
that bring back Grandma,
her flickering shadow on the wall threading a needle.
“Come on, Sister, have some respect.”
“Okay, seven. Can't go up any more.
Respect has to be mutual, don't you think?”
“Barely enough to pay for the materials, Sis,”

her voice low, wet like the drizzle.
“No mercy,” I repeat the mantra drilled into my brain.
“Peddlers are good at arousing sympathies.
That’s how they make a living.”
“Eight, then, the highest I can offer.
You peasants are getting greedier day by day.”

She raises her hands, ten knotted roots,
ten question-marks of childhood and wisdom
“Do you know how many nights I stayed up
to stitch the soles? Do you see
my fingers? Do you see my eyes? See
my little brother waiting for a bowl
of noodles my shoes could buy?
His hunger does not lie.
My callus does not lie.
We do not lie.”

I walk.
I’m not practicing the walk-away tactic
That works like magic.
I’m running from the mirror of her eyes.
“Stubborn girl, stubborn girl,”
I murmur to myself,
“It’s just a game, just a game.”
She chases, thrusts the shoes into my hands.
“You won, Miss. Take them for nine.
What’s nine yuan to you, a dollar and twenty cents?
And what’s a yuan, less than a dime?
Would you even bother to pick it up from the street?”

I put away my victory in a trunk,
never give it a second thought
until I’m pulled out of the line
at Minneapolis customs, maggot fingers
prodding socks, underwear, wrapped gifts,
and there it is—my bargain
red and loud like thunderclaps:
“You saved a dime, fool, but lost your soul.”

Solstice in Lhasa

What more can you say
Nomad daughter of glaciers?
The city has bleached the sun from your face
Eighteen years old with a freckled nose
Hides of yak, barley, sandy wind
Knees stiff from scrubbing toilets
What dreams keep you alive
On the marble floor of Gangkar Hotel?

Drunken tourists and their nightingales
Money is the moon on Lhasa's holy streets
In Beijing a storm drops thirty-six tons of dust
Upon the city of concrete
Nomad daughter from the Black River
What more can you say?
The wetland is becoming a desert
Home for rats, carcasses of yaks

The salted tea you brought to my room
Yellow butter afloat from a distant factory
"It's fake but tastes okay.
The real is gone, like the snowcaps."

Wind, breath, naked riverbeds
At dusk, a boy on motorcycle
Comes home with his last herd
Nomad daughter from the Sacred Lake
What dreams keep you going
In the glass cage of illusion?

Before the clouds
Cabs, trucks, mobs of fortune seekers
Behind the clouds
Potala Palace missing its Buddha

Your ancestors are on the road
Nomad daughter from the Blue Treasure Plateau
Wooden gloves and padded knees
Long prostrations into the thin air
Their cry of never-perish ghosts
Calling you to keep the lamp burning, burning

And you shout to me across the street
“Sister, please find me a rich husband in America.”

This Is How You Cross the Line

*Any alien who is **physically present** in the United States...
may apply for asylum—INS § 208*

First you gather the paper:
Plane tickets, photos, letters, passports
All fake but for yuan, euros, pounds
Fake certificate, fake license, fake face
Everything about you, even the names
Round them up with care
Tear them, shred them, chew them
Flush the pulp down the toilet
Before the plane touches the ground
You come out clean as blank paper
Belong to no country, no race, man or woman
You're on your own
Bleached, in the mirror
Listless, no hair grown
On your phantom face that is not
Yours—the fear, the hunger, the thirst
The urge to throw yourself
On the ground and cry *Mama*

No!
You walk along the thin corridor
Along with the fellow passengers in suits and perfume
Who rush toward customs, baggage claims
To the shadows hovering behind opaque glass
Bouquets, Homecoming banners, limousines

And you stand in line
You choose a booth with a woman officer
Pudgy, pasty white—a contrast to the young
Starved body that's not yours
You look around
The girl from Fuzhou, still a skeleton
From the two-week hunger strike in Amsterdam

Has picked an obese man
Her tender ankles curve like talons
Over there, under the neon flickering CITIZENS ONLY
You see the man behind the line—
Poised to jump
Dyed beard, dyed hair
The scar on his temple pulsing red
A lighthouse leading you across
the Indian, the Atlantic, the Nordic Sea
His lion fists kept you safe from snakes
In the holds of a rusty ship
You want to throw yourself at his feet
Uncle Wu, where have you been?
I'm WX, Remember me?
But you freeze, your face a mask
Like his, hers, and others
Whose names you must erase
From your sixteen-year-old soul

Suddenly I'm alone
Before me, no human shield
Behind me, no exit for escape
To jump or die—STOP
Breathe, slow, deep
Pad pockets one more time
Everything set—no baggage, no name
No memory—only this body
No longer mine, never mine
Having crossed endless borders and seas
For this final sprint

The officer looks up
Eyes shadowed with overnight fatigue
A smile on her face and your knees buckle
In that small second—Mother
Will she be on the other side—the land of plenty?
But her finger is up: NEXT
And you push—a puppet

Pulled by an invisible string
The smile recedes from her eyes
Ripples of shock, fear, alarm
Push
Carrying nothing—everything
Past her booth, her yellow line of authority
Past the guard huffing over, gun in hand
Pushing
—a fetus—
Crying ASYLUM

WX Speaks from China Wok

Chop chop chop
A chicken under the cleaver
Headless, no feathers adorning its breast
The Supreme Court has spoken
No leniency no America no asylum
Go home boy go home

The sea is blue outside the window
The Florida sun shines into my eyes
Swollen like home on the other shore
Where's home? Where's Mother
Father? Six years on the run. No voice
Where's my bitter tear? Only spider
Webs seal the stove, books, door . . .

Swish swish swish
On the cutting board, flaking scales
Mouth wide open, eyes that won't close
If the fish could speak, what story would it tell?
If the small people have a voice
What cries would we utter? The bell rings
And rings from the tower. Children laugh
As they circle on the grass. Oh Father Mother
Which basement are you kneeling under the cross?
What psalm throbs from your chapped throats?

In the headless breast, the heart beats, stubborn
Into the swelling waves, a bait of earthworm
I've never caught a fish or crab, not even a shrimp
But I keep throwing, woosh, woosh . . .
Until I reach . . . Aaaiii Mazu, Goddess of Mercy
Please hear my story, a boy homeless
Since I was sixteen, a boy floating from sea to sea
In the hold of a rusty ship, a boy on hunger strike in jail
A boy crossing the border to seek asylum, a boy

Working seven days a week to pay off the snakeheads
\$60,000, six years, the boy is becoming a man
Still homeless, still an orphan, still dreaming

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh
The chicken is frying in the wok, the fish
Swimming in the oil. From the wanton waves
Who will see me, Mazu, Flower of the sea?
Who hears me boiling in the sea of anguish
Hope? Who will judge me, a small person
With the same Mayflower dream and heart of buffalo
Who made this land, this sea, this America?