

# 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