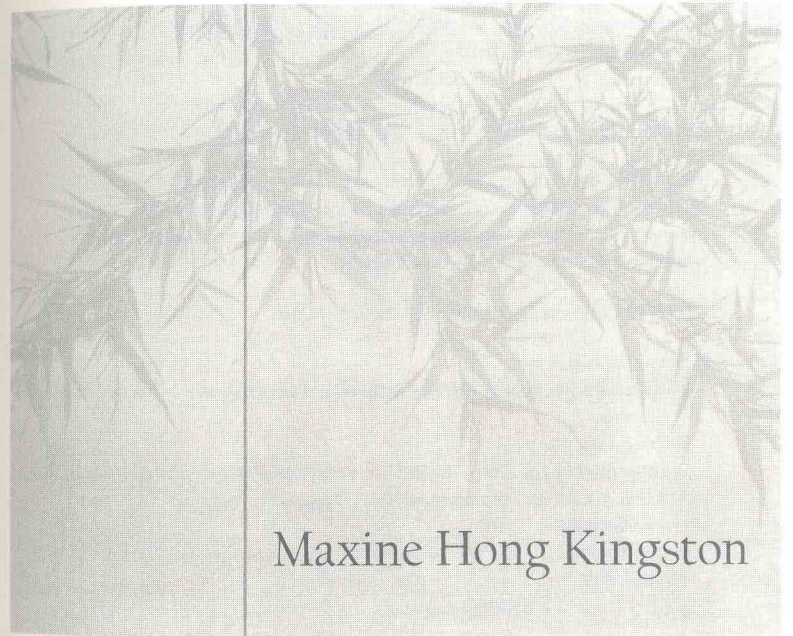


I Love a Broad Margin to My Life



Maxine Hong Kingston



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HOME

I am turning 65 years of age.
In 2 weeks I will be 65 years old.
I can accumulate time *and* lose
time? I sit here writing in the dark—
can't see to change these penciled words—
just like my mother, alone, bent over her writing,
just like my father bent over his writing, alone
but for me watching. She got out of bed,
wrapped herself in a blanket, and wrote down
the strange sounds Father, who was dead,
was intoning to her. He was reading aloud

calligraphy that he'd written—carved with inkbrush—
on his tombstone. She wasn't writing in answer.
She wasn't writing a letter. Who was she writing to?
Nobody.

This well-deep outpouring is not *for*
anything. Yet we have to put into exact words
what we are given to see, hear, know.
Mother's eyesight blurred; she saw trash
as flowers. "Oh. How very beautiful."
She was lucky, seeing beauty, living
in beauty, whether or not it was there.

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I am often looking in mirrors, and singling
out my face in group photographs.
Am I pretty at 65?
What does old look like?
Sometimes I am wrinkled, sometimes not.
So much depends upon lighting.
A camera crew shot pictures of me—one of
"5 most influential people over 60
in the East Bay." I am homely; I am old.
I look like a tortoise in a curly white wig.
I am stretching head and neck toward
the light, such effort to lift the head, to open

the eyes. Black, shiny, lashless eyes.
Talking mouth. I must utter you
something. My wrists are crossed in my lap;
wrinkles run up the left forearm.
(It's my right shoulder that hurts—Rollerblading
accident—does the pain show, does my hiding it?)
I should've spoken up, Don't take
my picture, not in that glare. One side
of my neck and one cheek are gone in black
shadow. Nobody looks good in hard focus,
high contrast—black sweater and skirt,
white hair, white sofa, white
curtains. My colors and my home, but rearranged.
The crew had pushed the reds and blues and greens aside.
The photographer, a young woman, said, "Great. Great."
From within my body, I can't sense that crease
on my left cheek. I have to get—win—
compliments. "You are beautiful." "So cute."
"Such a kind face." "You are simple."
"You move fast." "Chocolate Chip."
A student I taught long ago
called me Chocolate Chip. And only yesterday
a lifelong friend told Earll, my husband,
he's lucky, he's got me—the Chocolate Chip.

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6 | They mean, I think, my round face
and brown-bead eyes. I keep
count. I mind that I be good-looking.
I don't want to look like Grandmother,
Ah Po. Her likeness is the mask of tragedy.
"An ape weeps when another ape weeps."
She is Ancestress; she is prayed to. She
sits, the queen, center of the family in China,
center of the family portrait (my mother in it too,
generations of in-laws around her)—all
is black and white but for a dot of jade-green
at Po's ears, and a curve of jade-green
at her wrist. Lotus lily feet show
from the hem of her gown. She wanted to be
a beauty. She lived to be 100.
My mother lived to be 100. "One
hundred and three," she said. Chinese
lie about their age, making themselves older.
Or maybe she was 97 when the lady official
from Social Security visited her, as the government visits
everyone who claims a 100th birthday.
MaMa showed off; she pedaled her exercise
bike, hammer-curved hot pink barbells.
Suddenly stopped—what if So-so Security

won't believe she's a century old?
Here's a way for calculating age: Subtract
from her age of death my age now.

$$100 - 65 = 35$$

I am 35 years-to-go.

Lately, I've been
writing a book a decade; I have time
to write 3 more books. Jane Austen
wrote 6 books. I've written 6 books.
Hers are 6 big ones, mine
4 big ones and 2 small ones.
I take refuge in numbers. I
waste my time with sudoku.
Day dawns, I am greedy, helpless
to begin 6-star difficulty
sudoku. Sun goes
down; I'm still stuck for that square
that will let the numbers fly into place.
What good am I getting out
of this? I'm not stopping time. Nothing
to show for my expenditures. Pure nothing.

8 days before my birthday, I went
to John Mulligan's funeral. He was 10

years younger than me. He died without finishing his book, *MIAmerica*.
(I have a superstition that as long as I, any writer, have things to write, I keep living.)
I joined in singing again and again a refrain, "Send thou his soul to God." Earll, though, did not sing, did not say any of the Latin, any of the prayers. He muttered that the Catholic Church divides you against yourself, against your sexy body. "The Church is a gyp." John Mulligan should've been given a pagan ceremony; Woman Warrior, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Cuchulain had come to him in Viet Nam. John carried them, tied to him by silver cords, to the U.S. The priest, who came from the Philippines, kept reminding one and all that the benefits he was offering were for "Christians" only. But he did memorialize John being born and raised in Scotland, and coming to America at 17. Summarily drafted to Viet Nam. You didn't have to be a citizen to be drafted.

The war count, as of today:

Almost 2,000 killed in Iraq. G.I.s.
Not counting Afghanis,
Iraqis,
civilians,
mercenaries,
children, babies,
journalists.

7 days before my birthday, I had breakfast with Mary Gordon, who's always saying things I never thought before: "It's capitalistic of us to expect any good from peace demonstrations, as if ritual has to have use, gain, profit."
I agreed, "Yes, it's Buddhist to go parading for the sake of parading." "Can you think of a writer (besides Chekhov) who is holy *and* an artist?"
"Grace Paley." She smiled. "Well, yes."
Obviously. "Thoreau." "Oh, no. Thoreau's too Protestant, tidy, nonsexual. He goes home to Mom for hot chocolate. No

sex, no tragedy, no humor.”

Come to think of it, Thoreau doesn't make me laugh. A line from *Walden* hangs over one of my desks:

I love a broad margin to my life.

Sitting here at this sidewalk café with Mary, deliberately taking time off from writing and teaching duties, I am making a broad margin to my life. The margin will be broader when we part, and I am alone. Thoreau swam, then sat in the doorway of his “Shelter,” “large box,” “dwelling-house,” alone all the summer morning, rapt in the sunlight and the trees and the stillness. Birds flitted through the house. “. . . Until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time.” I have a casita of my own, built instead of a garage after the Big Fire. Its width is the same as Thoreau's (10 feet), its length a yard longer. He had a loft; I have a skylight. I want to be a painter.

Sometimes, I hear the freeway, now and again the train, and the campanile. Thoreau heard the band playing military music; his neighbors were going to war against Mexico. He made up his mind not to pay taxes.

Trying broad-margin meditation, I sit in the sunny doorway of my casita, amidst the yucca and loquats and purple rain birches. Some I planted, some volunteered. Birds—chickadees, finches, sparrows, pairs of doves, a pair of towhees, and their enemy, the jay. Hawk overhead. Barn swallows at twilight. I know: Thoreau sat with notebook and pencil in hand. Days full of writing.

Days full of wanting.

Let them go by without worrying that they do. Stay where you are inside such a pure hollow note.

— R U M I

Evening, at an Oxfam Relief benefit for Hurricane Katrina refugees, I read aloud

what Gilgamesh of Uruk (Iraq!) heard about a flood.
The Euphrates flattened a city “. . . bringing calamity
down on those whom now the sea engulfs
and overwhelms, my children who are now the children
of fishes.” Earll auctioned away a 100th
anniversary Mardi Gras doubloon handed down
from his family. A bakery donated an immense cake
with candles, and people sang Happy Birthday to me.

6 days ahead of birthday: A small
white man sat abandoned at the stairs
to our garden. Summer sportcoat. It's autumn.
He carried a heavy suitcase.
Two bigger suitcases, trunk-size,
sat on the sidewalk. “Here B
and B?” he asked, and handed me papers.
Lists of bed-and-breakfasts, the top one
with our cross-street but no address number.
A neighbor must be running a secret B & B.
“Widow B and B.” A widow used to
live next door, but her house burned
down, and we bought her vacant lot.
And there's a Viet Nam widow down the street,
and a faculty-wife widow 2 doors up.

“I got reservation. My name is Fred.
I came to see about my Social Security.”
Where are you from? You can go to your local
Social Security office. “I came from
airport. I paid shuttle thirty-one
dollars.” But it doesn't cost nearly that
to be driven here from OAK or
SFO. “Shuttle van brought
me here, to B and B.” Earll phoned some
home-inns in the Yellow Pages, and drove Fred to
a B & B, which cost \$125
a night. “One hundred and
twenty-five dollars a *week*,” Fred
corrected. No, no, a *day*. He
looked ready to cry. “Get me
a taxi.” The innkeeper called motels, and found
Days Inn at \$90 per night,
and a hotel at \$60 per night.
Fred told us of his life: He had been educated
at San Jose State. He lived in a basement,
and studied engineering. He'd made \$900
a month, then in San Francisco \$1,200
a month. Housing was \$30 a night.
“There's no work for engineers in San Francisco

anymore." Social Security will give
him \$600 every month.
Earl also—\$600 per month.
"In Iran, I live for a long time
on six hundred dollars." We took
Fred to BART. Go to San Francisco.
At a big hotel, ask for a "youth hostel."
Earl gave him a hug goodbye.
We picture the little lost man, from Iran,
getting his bags stuck in the turnstile,
leaving 1 or 2 behind as the train
doors shut. Should've warned him, he has to
compete with the Katrina refugees' \$2,000
housing allowance. Should've offered him water.
In Fred's reality: Widows rent out rooms.
At B & B on the computer, hit
Print—voilà—room reserved,
room confirmed. Taxi drivers know
the place for you, and will take you to it.
Everywhere wander people who have not
the ability to handle this world.

Late the next day, we went to the City
for me to talk on the radio about veterans of war,

veterans of peace. In a waiting room, women
in scarves—Muslims—were serving food to one
another. Each one seemed to have come from
a different land and race, her headdress
and style and skin color unlike any sister's.
Silks. Velvet. Poly jacquard. Coral,
red and black, henna, aqua. Peacock.
Crystals, rhinestones. Gold thread. Impossibly
diverse cultures, yet Islam brings them together.
This corridor is an oasis on the Silk Road,
as if that thoroughfare continues through Africa,
and across oceans. An Egyptian-looking woman
held up to me, then to Earl,
a tray of fruits and vegetables. "Eid,"
she said. "Celebrate the Eid."
I chose a cherry tomato and a medjool date.
I willed my Thank you to embrace her, go through
and around her, and enfold the other Muslims, the ones
here, and the many far away. Thank you,
Muslims, for giving food to whoever happens
among you. I'm lucky, my timing in sync with their time,
the sun setting, and a new moon coming up.
Last day of Ramadan, women ending their fast.
If not for years of practicing Buddhist silence

and Quaker silence, I would've chattered away,
and missed the quiet, the peace, the lovingkindness.
Happy birthday to me.

Sunday, my friend Claude
brought a tea grown by old Greek ladies.
"It cures everything." I drink, though nothing
needs curing. "Cured!" we said in unison.
Monday ere birthday, I resolve, I shall rest
from worry and pursuit. (In childhood chasedreams,
monsters chased me. Now, I do the chasing.)
Joseph, our son, calls. In a marathon read,
he's finished all the books I've ever published.
I'm the only writer I know whose offspring
reads her. "How was it?" "Good." ("Accurate,"
said my mother.) Joseph cares for accuracy too.
He's mailing me pages of errata: I got
the Hawaiian wrong; I got the pidgin
wrong. He's a musician; he has the ear. I love
hearing his voice wishing me happy birthday.
"I must be getting old too; I
really like my power tools." He'd
read again and again the instructions on how
to use a chainsaw, then cut up the pine
trees without mishap. Borders in Honolulu

sold all his CDs, and wants more.

My time in Hawai'i, I never learned the hula,
never learned the language. Couldn't bear
the music. Heard at evening, the music—mele
and pila ho'okani—would stay with me
all the night and into the next day.

It hurt my chest; my chest filled with tears.
Words for the feeling are: Regret. Minamina.
(*Hun*, said my mother. *Hun*, the sound of want.
Hun.) *Hun* the nation, lost. *Hun*
the land. *Hun* the beloved, loving people.

They're dancing, feasting, talking-story, singing,
singing hello / goodbye. No sooner
hello than goodbye. Trees, fronds wave;
ocean waves. The time-blowing wind

smells of flowers and volcano. My son has given
me the reading that I never gave my father. Why
aren't writers read by their own children?

The child doesn't want to know that the parent
suffers, the parent is far, far away.

Joseph says, "Don't write about me."

"Okay. I won't do it anymore."

To read my father, I'd have to learn Chinese,
the most difficult of languages, each word a study.

18 | A stroke off, a dot off, and you lose the word.
You get sent down for re-education. You lose your life.
My father wrote to me, poet to poet.
He replied to me. I had goaded
him: I'll tell about you, you silent man.
I'll suppose you. You speak up if I've got
you wrong. He answered me; he wrote
in the flyleaves and wide margins of the Chinese
editions of my books. I should've asked him to read
his poetry to me, and to say them in common speech.
I had had the time but not the nerve.
(Oh, but the true poet crosses eternal
distances. Perfect reader, come though 1,000
years from now. Poem can also reach
reader born 1,000 years *before*
the poem, wish it into being. Li Bai
and Du Fu, lucky sea turtles,
found each other within their lifetimes.
Oh, but these are hopeful superstitions
of Chinese time and Chinese poets.
I think non-poets live in the turning
and returning cosmos this way: An act
of love I do this morning saves a life
on a far future battlefield. And the surprising

love I feel that saves my life comes from
a person whose soul somehow corresponding
with my soul doing me a good deed 1,000
years ago.) Cold, gray October
day. I've built a fire, and sit by it.
The last fire. Wood fires are being
banned. Drinking the tea that cures everything.
It's raining, drizzly enough, I need
not water the garden or go out to weed.
Do nothing all the perfect day.
A list of tasks for the rest of my working life:
Translate Father's writing into English.
Publish fine press editions of the books
with his calligraphy in the margins and
my translations and my commentary
on his commentary, like the I Ching. Father had
a happy life; happy people are always
making something. Learn how to grow
old and leave life. How to leave
you who love me? Do so in story.
For the writer, doing something in fiction
is the same as doing it in life.

20 | I can make the hero of my quondam novel,
Monkey King, Wittman Ah Sing,
observe Hindu tradition, and on his 5-times-12
birthday unguiltily leave his wife. Parents
dead, kids raised, the householder leaves
spouse and home, and goes into the mountains,
where his guru may be. In America, you can yourself
be the guru, *be* the wandering staretts.
At his birthday picnic, Wittman Monkey wishes
for that freedom as he and the wind blow out
60-plus candles. Used to telling
his perfectly good wife his every thought,
he anti-proposes to her. "Taña, I love you. But.
I made a wish that we didn't have to be married
anymore. I made a wish for China.
That I go to China on my own." Taña—
beautiful and pretty as always, leaf shadows
rubbing the wrinkles alongside her blue eyes
and her smile, sun haloing her whitegold
hair—Taña lets Wittman's bare words
hang in air. Go ahead, you Monkey.
Wish away. Tell away. Tell it
all away. Then she kicks ass—
"Here's your *one* to grow on!"—then

gets quiet. *She* can be rid of *him*.
But first, have it out. "So, we're not
going to be old lovers, and old artists
together till we die. After all our years
making up love, this thing, love,
peculiar to you and me, you quit,
incomplete. God damn it, Darling,
if your wife—I—were Chinese,
would she be your fit companion in China?"
"Hell, Sweetheart, if you were Chinese,
I wouldn't've married you to begin with.
I spurned the titas for you." Forsaking the sisters.
All my sisters-of-color. O, what
a romance of youth was ours, mating, integrating,
anti-anti-miscegenating. "Bad
Monkey. You married me as a political act."
"No, Honey Lamb, uh uh.
An act of artists—the creating of you-and-me."
Married so long, forgot how to declare *I*.
I want Time. I want China.
Married white because whites good at everything.
Everything *here*. Go, live Chinese,
gladly old. America, can't get old,
no place for the old. China, there be

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Immortalists. Time moves slower in China.
They love the old in China. No verb
tenses in Chinese, present tense
grammar, always. Time doesn't pass
for speakers of such language. And the poets make
time go backward, write stroke by stroke,
erase one month of age with every poem.

Tuesday, I cried—in public,
a Chinese woman wailing to the streets—
over the headline: LIBBY FINGERS CHENEY.
I gloated, but suddenly stopped moving, and wept.
The stupid, the greedy, the cruel, the unfair have taken
over the world. How embarrassing, people asking,
“What’s wrong?” and having to answer, “Cheney.
Rumsfeld. Rove. Halliburton. Bush.” The liars.
The killers. Taking over the world. Aging,
I don’t cry for the personal anymore,
only for the political. Today’s news photo:
A 10-year-old boy—his name is
Ali Nasir Jabur—covers his eyes
with his hands. He hunkers in the truck bed
next to the long blanket-wrapped bodies of
his sister, 2 brothers, mother, and father.

A man’s bare feet stick out from a blanket
that has been taped around the ankles.
I see this picture, I don’t want to live.
I’ve seen the faces of beaten, cloaked women.
Their black wounds infected, their eyes
swollen shut. Their bodies beaten too,
but can’t be seen. I want to die.
Just last week, 12 sets of bones
from Viet Nam were buried in 12 ceremonies.
At sunset, I join the neighbors—with sangha,
life is worth living—standing at the BART
station, holding lit candles, reminding
one and all that the 2,000th American
soldier has died in Iraq. Not counting
mercenaries, contract workers, Iraqis, Afghanis.

2000/23

The children are quiet. How do their parents
explain war to them? “War.” A growl sound.
And the good—capitalistic?—of standing in
the street doing nothing? “People are fighting . . .”
But a “fight” connotes fairness, even-sidedness,
equal powers. “. . . And we’re being quiet, thinking

of them, and holding them in our hearts, safe.
We're setting an example of not-fighting.
The honking cars are making good noise;
they're honking Peace, Peace."

Wednesday,

birthday eve, I tried re-reading
Don Quixote. (My writings are being translated
into Castellano and Catalan. *La Dona Guerrera*.)
The mad and sorry knight is only 50.
Delusions gone, illusions gone, he dies.
Books killed him. Cervantes worked on
Don Quijote de la Mancha while in jail.
For 5 years, he was given solitude,
and paper, ink, and pens, and time. In Chinese
jails, each prisoner is given the 4
valuable things, writes his or her life,
and is rehabilitated. I've been in jail too, but
so much going on, so many
people to socialize with, not a jot
of writing done. The charge against me:
DEMO IN A RESTRICTED ZONE—
WHITE HOUSE SIDEWALK. The U.S.
is turning Chinese, barricading
the White House, Forbidden City, Great Wall
along borders.

Now, it's my birthday.

October 27. And Sylvia Plath's.
And Dylan Thomas's. Once on this date,
I was in Swansea, inside the poet's
writing shed, a staged mess, bottles
and cups on table and floor. A postcard
of Einstein sticking out his tongue.
I like Thoreau's house better, neat and tidy.
I walked out on Three Cliffs Bay.
Whole shells—cockles, mussels, clams,
golden clams, and snails, and oysters, jewels—
bestrew the endless wet land.
I cannot see to the last of it, not a lip of sea.
No surf. "We be surfers in Swansea."
I've never seen tide go out so far.
"The furthest tide in the world." I followed the gleam
of jewels—I was walking on sea bottom—
and walked out and out and out, like the tide
to the Celtic Sea. Until I remembered: the tide
will come back in, in a rush,
and run me down, and drown me. By the time
I see and hear incoming surf,
it will be too late. I ran
back for the seawall, so far away,
and made it, and did not die on that birthday.

Not ready to give myself up.
I have fears on my birthdays. Scared.
I am afraid, and need to write.
Keep this day. Save *this* moment.
Save each scrap of moment; write it down.
Save *this* moment. And *this* one. And *this*.
But I can't go on noting every drip and drop.
I want poetry as it came to my young self
humming and rushing, no patience for
the chapter book.

26 |

I'm standing on top of a hill;
I can see everywhichway—
the long way that I came, and the few
places I have yet to go. Treat
my whole life as formally a day.
I used to be able, in hours, to relive,
to refeel my life from its baby beginnings
all the way to the present. 3 times
I slipped into lives before this one.
I have been a man in China, and a woman
in China, and a woman in the Wild West.
(My college roommate called; she'd met
Earll and me in Atlantis, but I don't

remember that.) I've been married
to Earll for 3 lifetimes, counting
this one. From time to time, we lose each other,
but can't divorce until we get it right.
Love, that is. Get love right. Get
marriage right. Earll won't believe
in reincarnation, and makes fun of it.
The Dalai Lama in *How to Expand Love*
says to try "the possibility that past
and future rebirth over a continuum
of lives may take place." We have forever.
Find me, love me, again.
I find you, I love you, again.
I've tried but could not see
my *next* life. All was immense black
space, no stars. After a while,
no more trying to *progress*, I returned—
was returned—to an ordinary scene that happened
yesterday, and every sunny day: Earll and I
are having a glass of wine with supper—bruschetta
from our own tomatoes and basil—under the trellis
of bougainvillea, periwinkly clematis,
and roses. Shadows and sunlight are moving at Indian
summer's pace. The Big Fire burned

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28 | the grove of Monterey pines. We planted
purple rain birches, Australian tea
trees, dogwood, the elm, locust, catalpa,
3 redwoods from seed, 4 pepper
willows, and 7 kinds of fruit trees.
The katsura and the yucca are volunteers.
That Texas privet and the bamboo, survivors. Here,
I feel as I felt in Hawai'i, as I felt in Eden.
A joy in place. Adam and Eve were never
thrown out; they grew old in the garden.
They returned after travels. So, I,
like the 14th Dalai Lama, have arrived
at my last incarnation? I don't feel a good
enough person to be allowed off the wheel.
I am guilty for leaving my mother. For leaving
many mothers—nations, my race, the ghetto.
For enjoying unconsciousness and dreams, wanting
sleep like thirst for water. I left MaMa
for Berkeley, then 17 years in Hawai'i.
Couldn't come home winter and spring breaks,
nor summers. She asked, "How can I bear
your leaving?" No, I'm not translating right.
"Can I seh doc your leaving?" Seh doc
tells the pain of losing something valuable.

How can she *afford* my leaving?
Seh doc sounds like *can write*.
Sounds almost like my father's name.
Father who left her behind in China for 15
years. I too left her.
"Lucky," she bade and blessed, in English. "Lucky."
She and Father stood at the gate, looking
after me. Looking after each child as
we left for college, left for Viet Nam.
Her eyes were large and all-holding.
No tears. She only cried when laughing.
Me too. I'm in tears laughing.
From the demimonde, Colette wrote, lying
to her mother, All's well, I'm happy.
Our only son did not leave us;
we left him in Hawai'i.
Generations. Karma. Ah Goong
walked my mother to the end of Tail End
Village. Whenever she looked back, he was still
standing there weeping and looking after her.

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LEAVING HOME

I'll watch over Wittman Ah Sing
go through the leaving of his wife. A practicing artist
herself, Taña understands the wanter
of freedom. Let him go. If they stay put,
husband and wife lose each other anyway,
artist and artist dreaming up separate

existences. Go on roads through country you define
as you go. Wend through taboo mazes.

"But, Wittman," says Taña, "'til death us do part."
(Say those words, and you vow once again.)

"No, Taña, not death, only away awhile."

Married so long, every word and moment is
thick with strata and fathoms and echoes.

35 years ago, they climbed

the Filbert Steps, walked in and out
of garden gates, pretended this house
and that house were home. They'd wed atop
Coit Tower. Look! Where it comes again.

Our wedding tower lifts out of the fog
and the forest edge of the City. "I need
to get to China, and I have to go

without helpmeet. I've been married to you
so long, my world is you. You
see a thing, I see it. The friends you
like, I like. The friends you can't
stand, I can't stand. My
perception is wedded to your perception.
You have artist's eyes. I'd wind up
seeing the China you see. I want
to see for myself my own true China."
Taña says, "So, you don't want to be
with me, and we become old, old
lovers and old artists together. You,
my old lover. I love you, old lover."
Wittman feels a rush that is Taña's benevolence
for him suffuse him. He has to try harder
to leave her. "I love you, Taña. Thank you,
my wife, for our lifetime,
and our past lifetimes. We don't
have to get divorce papers. We quit
being householders is all. The chi
connecting us will stretch infinitely."
On such agreement, the long-married can part.
His birthday morning continues fair. The Bay
is busy with sailboats, and the ocean outside

the Golden Gate calmly opens forever.
All seems well, as though Water Margin
protected us. I have a soul, and it expands large
as I look out at the Pacific; I do
remember to look every single day.
Suddenly, I get scared. Some
fanatic is delivering by freighter or yacht or barge
or cruiser a nuke. BANG! The end.
The separating couple drive to Reno—not
for divorce but to give their son, Mario, a chance
to say Happy Birthday, Dad, and Goodbye.
Spelling each other at the wheel, they cross
stateline at South Shore Lake Tahoe,
travel Highway 50, the Loneliest Road
in America. Objective correlative everywhere—
lonely Sierras, lonely turkey buzzards, lonely
railroad tracks, ghost towns, lone
pines. You can stay on Highway 50
all the way across the U.S.
of A., but they turn off in Reno.
Husband and wife walk its streets hand-in-
hand; they keep ahold of each other;
they could divorce in an instant. They arrive
in the middle of Mario Ah Sing the Real's

Magic Show. (The father a mere monkey,
a trickster; the son a magician of the actual.)
There he is—our dear, only son.
Father and mother feel shock, thrill
at sight of him—grown, a man, a strange-
looking man. It's the Hapa eyes;
he's got the epicanthic fold *and*
the double lid. The better to see you with,
my dear. Mario spots his parents
heading in the dark for the last empty table.
And his patter changes. He is strange-
sounding too, his voice deep even as a
hairy baby. ". . . Raised in Hawai'i, no
picnic. Too much da kine. Da
bad kine. You dink it's all
aloha, you got another dink
coming, Haole. Take dees, Haole.
Take dat, Ho'ohaole." He socks,
he punches, takes socks, takes punches that
clobber him against invisible walls. The audience
laughs "But. Yet. On the other hand—"
shaking out each sleeve of China Man gown.
Nada up his sleeves. "—the wahine are beautiful.
I love the wahine, and some of them have loved me.

They swam out to meet my ship." He
 chants spooky-voice mele, calls
 upon his 'aumākua—and a hula girl
 appears out of nowhere / somewhere. She
 hula hula up to him, her hands
 making the " 'ama'ama-come-swimming-to-me"
 moves. Mario the Real snags a rope
 of flowers in air, raises them above her head,
 places them around her neck and shoulders. See?
 No strings, no mirrors, no
 hologram. Upon being circled, the Little
 Brown Gal (in the little grass skirt)
 says, "Aloha-a-a, Mario," and on the long
 out-breath becomes air. The flower
 lei falls to the floor. The audience applauds.
 "Aloha to you too," says Mario. "A fine how
 do you do. Hello goodbye." He confides
 to one and all, strangers and family alike:
 "I've just been dumped. My wahine alohaed me.
 Auwe! It hurts. Aiya!
 My chi is broken. Aiya!" He lifts
 his elbows; his arms dangle—broken wings.
 The poor parents just about cry.
 Oh, our son, our only child hurts

so bad, he presents his pain
 for all to see. Oh, the guilt—to've raised
 him among Hawai'i's violent people and heart-
 breaking girls of every race. "Auwe-e-
 e-e. Ai-ya-a-a." And pidgin-speakers
 teaching him to howl and yowl and keen. Our fault.
 We should've stayed in California, mainland,
 home after all. Having a kid
 gets you running the hamster wheel.
 But the audience is aiya-ing and auwe-ing.
 He has an audience, and they're with him, mourning
 along.
 "My penultimate gal, Lori, girlfriend-
 before-last, had the ring I gave her assayed.
 Assayed?! I'd give her a fake?!
 'No, no,' she said, 'not fake.
 It's good—twenty-five hundred
 dollars. Oh, Mālei. Oh,
 Mai'a mālei, I love you.'
 No, you don't, Lori. You don't
 love me. You had me assayed." The poor
 parents should've broken him out of magic.
 But he keeps truck with the Little People
 (who live in the rocks at the edges of old gardens).

The sharma thrush was his 'aumākua. The pair
 that lived in the Surinam cherry hopped in the grass
 behind his feet, sang on branches above
 his head. All day they sang him night-
 ingale songs. All year they flashed him
 Hallowe'en colors. Now he plays
 clubs and lounges—like night all the time.
 Mario the Real uncoils a length of rope.
 “This cowboy rope belonged to a paniolo
 I rode with on the Big Island. Most likely
 any old rope will do.
 I throw it into the air like so—and something
 or someone catches it. I can feel him or her
 or it grab ahold. I better go
 exploring, and see . . . ” He shinnies up the tense
 rope, lifts one foot, sets it down,
 then the other, sets it solidly down,
 and pulls himself into the invisible.
 Mario does not reappear for a curtain call.
 The audience waits a stretch of dead time, then
 disbands, wanders, examines the rope, which
 collapses on the floor, an ordinary thing.
 Such relief when the missing son (Oh,
 too many dead sons!) in regular

T-shirt and jeans exits the side door
 into the parking lot in daylight.
 Those who've seen a baby erupt into being
 will ever after fear that he'll as suddenly
 slide, slip, crash out of life. Now
 you see him, now you don't.
 Father and mother both have nightmares—
 war, the war, the wars happening at this
 very instant. A missile drops from the star-
 warring sky. A rocket shoots up
 out of the mined earth. Harming our child,
 who is all the ages he's ever been. Shrapnel
 rips through his face, his baby-fat cheeks,
 his goateed chin. His mother holds
 his head. His father holds his hands—
 they've been chopped off. The magician's hands
 chopped off. Don't try to comfort me,
 that it's only a dream, only a dream.
 I answer for what I dream. Kuleana hana.
 Our son was born year of the Rabbit.
 The character *rabbit* under the character *forest*
 under the radical *home* equals the word
magic. It's all right that he didn't graduate
 from a 4-year college, didn't become

an engineer. Admire the magician most
of all the artists. He makes something out of
nothing, can himself become nothing.

The Ah Sing

family is together again; the parents hug
and kiss their grown son; he hugs and kisses
them back. You are safe. You are safe.

“Happy birthday, Dad. Howzit feel
turning sixty?” The father takes a deep
breath, and answers his son, “Old. I feel
old. I *am* old. No. No.

I don’t mean my looks. People of color
revenge: We always look good.

I feel time. It’s like a wind
cutting through my skin and insides. When
I was your age, time and I moved
at the same rate. I was *in* time. I went
with the music. The ancestors say: In China,
time moves slow like yearly rice, andante.
Chan / Zen has been working for 2,500
years to stop time—get that now-moment
down. I want to be where no-beginning-
no-end. I’m not good at staying put.

The older I get, the more tripping out
and flashbacks. I live again feelings
I’ve already gone through. Pink
embarrassments, red guilts, purple guilts.
I see *your* life too. *Your* life flashes
before me. I look at you, my son,
and you are every age. I saw you being
born, face first. I saw your face,
eyes, mouth tight, then maw!
You were mouth, all mouth—red
tunnel into a universe. Then I saw
your whole body, your hairy little wet
body—you were so small, how
can you make your way in the world? How
could I, myself small, safeguard you?
I saw you—I see you—sit up—an owlet
in a nest, blinking big eyes at me, at everything,
ears perky, hair perky. You
were not a cuddle baby. You kicked and punched
out of swaddling, out of diapers, out
of the little gown. You sledded down the stairs
in your walker, bawled at the bottom—alive! You
said, ‘My eyes are little, but I can see
so-o-o much!’ Your toddling down-

hill faster and faster, and not falling.
Your announcing, 'I am Second Bull
of Second Grade.' Oh, I just now
got it—you were in a fight. You
came out second. I saw you
take your time running the bases—you hit
three men home. Grand slam!
Your popping up out of the ocean—
alive! Rell Sunn the Queen of Makaha
was watching too. Your concentrating for an hour
on the written driver's test. Your telling us that
you obey the law, you registered for the Draft.
I am constantly remembering you." Meaning,
I am constantly *loving* you. I am constantly
worried about you. Old people suffer,
too much feeling, shaking with feeling,
love and grief over too many dear ones,
and rage at all that harms and hurts them.
"Mario, I'm going to China. No,
no, I don't mean I'm going to die there,
home with the ancestors. I'm curious to know
who I am alone among a billion three
hundred million strangers who look like me.
I am Monkey of Changes." Hero of the talk-

stories that he raised his son on.
"I regret I missed the Revolution, and ongoing
revolutions. I was kept busy claiming
this country. 'Love it or leave it.' 'Chink,
go back to China, Chink.' I had to
claim my place, root down, own
America. This land is *my* land.
Why should *we* leave? We who made
everything wonderful, why should *we* leave?"
It's easy to talk yourself out of leaving.
Easier to move in, stay, than to move out, go.

The troops will never come home.

"But now my work establishing Asia America
is done. Our nation won. We have a people.
And passport home. My leaving is not exile.
I must, I need act out my deep
down monkey nature. Wife, son,
let your indulgence set me free."
And so, wife understanding and son
understanding, Wittman Ah Sing
begins his Going Forth. (Buddha left
wife and son. Confucius' wife left him.)

From his bank, the Bank of San Francisco,
China Man took out his money.

Sittin' in the sun,
Countin' my money
Happy as I can be.

How very grand—there's money, money
to spare. Grandparents and parents had had
leftover money too and passed it on.
There's money. Enough to live in a rich country
for 6 months, or in a poor country
for the rest of my life. So-so
Security will send a check every
month to wherever I'll be living.

China

begins at the Consulate, where you get your visa.
The last couple of times I, Maxine,
went, members of Falun Gong were protesting
against China persecuting them and their way of
kung fu. At first, they merely moved
and breathed, doing slow, quiet exercises
on the curb in front of the door to the Consulate.
They looked like other Chinatown ladies

who exercise in the parks of San Francisco.
Then, they started showing color photos
of torture—purple black eyes, a red rectum.
Wittman, lover of street theater, come,
talk to them. Three old women meditating
beside their yellow banner with the pink flower.
Look again. The poor things aren't old;
they're younger than oneself. But they dress old,
home-knit vests, home-sewn
pants, the same style patterns passed
along for generations, old country
to new country. They're coifed old-
fashioned, Black Ghost hair.
It is raining. Martyrs praying in the rain,
beseeking China, shame on China. Two
sit cross-legged on the cement, eyes
shut, palms together. The woman who stands
also has her eyes closed; she holds
the banner out from its stanchion, one hand
in prayer position. Bags full of food
to last days. At Tiananmen
Square, the man faced off the tanks
with a bag of groceries in either hand, danced
stepping side to side, tank moving

44 | side to side. A Chinese can dare
anything, do battle, armed with bags of food.
Wittman feels guilty, about to break
his vow never to cross a picket line.
Talk to these women, justify himself.
“Excusu me? Excusu me?” he says
to the woman standing. She opens her eyes,
looking straight at him. “Please, teach me
about Falun Gong.” She reaches into a bag,
and gives him a CD, says, “Falun Gong
is good.” He goes for his wallet. She waves
No no no—shoos away
payment. Amazing—a Chinese who
doesn’t care too much for money.
The label has no info, only
the pink flower logo. “You hear
good. Falun Gong good.” “Thank
you. Daw yeah. Yeah yeah. I go
now to apply for visa in-country, your
country, China. I vow, I’ll do
something for your freedom of religion. Don’t you
worry.” “Dui dui dui.” I love it
when Chinese make that kind sound.
Dui dui dui. Agree agree agree.

We conjoin. Understand. We match.
(The CD turned out to be blank.
The true scrolls that Tripitaka Tang
and Monkey carried on the Silk Road also blank.
Meaning Noble Silence? Emptiness? Words
no good?) A purer citizen of the world
would boycott China—for tyrannizing Tibet
and Xinjiang, for shooting nuclear missiles
off Taiwan’s beam, for making weapons
and selling them to all sides. Better to
communicate or to shun?

Inside the Consulate,
the Chinese diaspora are seeking permission
home, yelling its dialects and languages,
the Cantonese hooting, honking like French,
lispings like Spaniards, aiya-ing, the northerners
shur-shur-shurring. We’re nervous.
The borders are sealed, the homelands secure.
Every nation state is mean with visas.
Especially the U.S.A., especially
the P.R.C. We shut
them out, they shut us out.
Even Canada, even Mexico.
(But here’s a deal, brokered by our office

of Homeland Security: 39,000
visas back to China for aliens and/or
refugees. Can you trust that?)
Wait in line at the Applications window,
come back next week to Payment,
then Pick Up. In plain sight is money
heaped on a table, piles of banded bills
and loose bills. We're the rich; we saved up
for years, for lifetimes, able to afford
travel to the other side of the world.
The form asks for one's "Chinese name."
At last, I've got a use for the Chinese name.
Space to write it 2 different ways:
characters and alphabet.
Hong Ting Ting. The poet Liu Shahe,
who sings Walt Whitman, sang my name,
"Tong Ting Ting, the sound of pearls,
big pearl and little pearls falling
into a jade bowl bell." His fingers formed
pearls and dropped them into his cupped hand.
Now Wittman writes his Chinese name:
Chung Fu. Center Truth. When I first
imagined him, I gave him that name
as a brother name to my son's,

Chung Mei. Center Beauty. My son,
child of Center Nation and Beautiful Nation.
Hexagram 61 of the I Ching
is Chung Fu, Center Truth. Don't
believe those who tell you Chinese
have no word for *truth*. (Ha Jin
told me "we" have no word for *truth*,
nor *privacy*, nor *identity*.) Truth's pictograph
is the claw radical over the child radical.
Americans understand, eagle snatches
Truth in talons. But to the Chinese,
the brooding mothering bird's feet gently
hold the hatchling's head. A cap of eggshell
clings to baby Truthie's fontanel.
The superior person broods the truth. And if
his words are well spoken, he meets with assent—
dui dui dui dui—at a distance
of more than 1,000 miles. We won our visas.
Our names are legal, and we win countries.
Though we Chinese and we Americans
shouldn't need passports and visas
to cross each other's borders and territories.
President Grant and Emperor Tongzhi
signed a treaty giving freedom of travel—

48 | “for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents.” The right to curiosity! Curious Monkey waves the Burlingame Treaty under the noses of officials at every checkpoint, and is let through. I, though, am nervous at Passport Control. When I was arrested for demonstrating at the White House, I couldn’t find my I.D., couldn’t be booked properly. “Overnight in the big cell for *you* tonight.” I phoned Earll in California. He tore the cover off my passport, and fed it through the fax. I watched the copy arrive at Federal prison—an illegible dark zigzag mackle. I’ve glued the little book back together along its stitched spine. Crossing any border, I’m nervous, it’ll fall apart. I’m nervous, I have relatives in China. My actions and words can endanger them. And I have relatives who work at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory; you lose your job if you have foreign family.

Wittman is all-American; no relatives anywhere but the U.S.A.

Goodbye, Husband. Goodbye,
Wife of almost all my life.
Goodbye, my one and only child.
Now, they are in my arms.
Now, I turn, they go. Zaijian.
Joy kin. Ropes, veins, hairs
of chi that root the leaver to home pull,
stretch, attenuate as we move apart.
The red string—I can feel it. Can’t
you feel it?—has tied us espoused ones
ankle to ankle since before we met,
before we were born, and will connect
us always, and will help us not to miss
each other too much. Westward East.

Facing west from California’s shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, toward the house of
maternity, the land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle
almost circled . . .

Wittman is going to China for the first time.
I have been 12 times, counting

Hong Kong and Taiwan as China.

Long having wander'd since—round the earth having
wander'd.

Now I face home again—very pleas'd and joyous.

(But where is what I started for so long ago?

And why is it yet unfound?)

But I did not wander, never
wandered, and never alone. I have responsible
work to do, the teaching, the writing. I
am writing right now on an airplane,
above thick clouds. I've taken the window seat.
Upon the dragon clouds, Mother's soul
walks toward Father's soul. He's holding open
a shawl; he's hugging her in it. They're happy,
they're home, ancestors all around.

The clouds dispel. Ocean and sky on and
on and on. Land. Mountains. Circles
of irrigated fields, squares of plowed
fields. From on high, human beings
and all the terrible things they do and make
are beautiful. Loft your point of view above
the crowd, the party, any fray. All

is well. All always well. Land,
Chek Lap Kok International. Hong Kong.
The soldiers at Passport Control do not
say Aloha, welcome, dear traveller, welcome.
But then, no such hospitableness anymore
at any border-crossing on earth. (Once,
at the supermarket in Ann Arbor, in America's
Heartland, the butcher called out
to an Asian-looking man and woman, "Where
you from?" The man of the couple answered, "Seoul,
Korea." The butcher said, "Welcome, sir. Ma'am.
Welcome to Michigan.") Wittman took the train,
got off in Central, and alighted tomorrow in the Land
of Women. Women everywhere—the streets, the parks,
the alleys, the middle of streets. All the city
was closed today, Sunday. Women on sidewalks,
curbs, stairs up and down hills—
everywhere women. Women of his very
type, beauties with long black hair
gathered up or cascading down,
naturally tan skin, dark eyes
the warmest brown, lashes like black fans.
The women were of one generation—no matrons,
no little girls, no crones.

52 | *Thala-a thala-a-a.* The one man, knapsack on his back, stepped—delighted, curious, enamoured, happy—among, around women. Women picnicking, drinking sodas and juices. Women playing cards. Women combing and trimming their sisters' hair. Painting emblems and charms on fingernails and toenails. A solitary is reading a book. Another writing a letter. Mostly the women converse. The sound of their language is like hens cluck-clucking. They talk, talk, listen, listen, listen. For them, the city stilled. Women walked and lingered on streets meant for cars. What are they saying about life, about love, these Peripatetics from the Pilippines? Wittman circled *este grupo*, *ese grupo*. No woman paid him look or heed. Standing on a box in an intersection, a sister raised Bible and voice to the crowd and/or to God. Sisters (and brother Wittman) tarried and stared, then floated away on the wavery heat of the tropical sun. They passed expensive stores, passed luxury hotels—five stars all. (My mother

on her way to catch the S.S. Taft, fled the police soldiers by running inside one of these hotels.) A bronze sign on a movable stand placed mid-sidewalk says:

IN CONSIDERATION FOR HOTEL GUESTS,
PLEASE DO NOT BLOCK
ENTRANCEWAY.

The women sat at the curb, like hippies. Free of husband, free of kids. Like on vacation abroad with girlfriends. Oh, let me be hippie with you. Just like we were last summer! The women and the hotel people act as if the other did not exist. A vendor of sweets, a man, set his wagon down; the women crowded, haggling, selecting, buying just the right treat—that candy for me, that cookie for best girlfriend. All people smile and laugh when anticipating dessert. Along another curb, a row of women stood in political demonstration.

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They'd appliquéd a paragraph on a long
piece of cloth. Something about la inmigración.

Something something derechos. Rights.

Los derechos de criadas.

"What is criadas?" asked Wittman.

"Maids. Servants. Maids." So, these masses
of women are maidservants, and today their day
off, Sunday. And they want their rights.

Tell them, Wittman: "In San Francisco,
we have inmigrante workers too.

We want los derechos too."

"O-o-oh, San Francisco," breathe
the women, "O-o-oh, California."

They like you from San Francisco, and California,
my places, and Hawai'i, and the Grand Canyon,
also my places. I have places the world
dreams for, hardly knowing they're U.S.

"Are you organizing

las criadas labor union? Los

Commies allow unions? Commies have servants?"

A sassy girl waved a handful of papers.

"We want long long stay visas

for Pilipina maids." I get it: visas.

"To stay, to work. For Hong Kong to be

safe harbor. We want health
insurance." "We too. We want
health insurance too. Universal
human derecho." Simpático. The women told
the man their grievances: "The bishop's Pilipina
maid cooked and cleaned house for eighteen
years. She grew old, and is sick in hospital.
The Chinese will deport her."
Yes, Hispanics like you get deported
in my country too. Operation Return
to Sender. "The bishop went to the visa office,
petition for her, his housekeeper. Chinese
ask, 'She fit or not fit for work?'
Can't work, must deport.
That's all Hong Kongers care."
"The other day, a maid fell four
stories. From up there—that high
up. Madam made her wash the windows.
She's alive. She's in hospital, but who
will pay? Who will send money
to her husband and babies?" Wittman could pay.
Pay for the hospital, pay for the babies, pay
for the whole village. Rich American karma:
Pay. Pay. Pay. (*Karma* is Sanskrit

for *work*. *Karma* does not mean *doomed*.
All it means: *work*.) From a pocket of his Levi's,
he pulled out the U.S.D.s and the R.M.B.s.
"Here. Yes, yes. Take it. Please.
For you. All yours." He's got more;
he's got enough. "Give it to the bishop's house-
keeper. Give it to the window-washer maid."
Giving away money, don't make
the donee feel poor, and don't you
be her fish. Our donator finessed
the bills under a brick that held flyers
down. "Use it to lobby for health and visas.
Thank you for taking care of citizen business
though not citizens. No, no problem.
Thank you. Goodbye.

56 | Behind the great
windows of the Bank of China (Hong Kong)—
open but not for business—a priest
in white and gold regalia was lifting a chalice—
not toward any altar, his back to the congregants
(as in Earll's day), but toward Pilipina maids.
Pilipina maids knelt and sat on
the marble floor, scarved heads bowed
and palms together, attitudes so humble,

you could cry. They give in, they *thank*.
Old Monkey would've jumped into the crowd,
snatched wine and mitre, slurped up the wine,
donned the hat, pissed in the cup. Today
Monkey went quiet. Quiet prevailed.
He backed out of the bank that's church this Sunday,
and continued his walkabout basking in the alma
and the mana of Yin. In a bright alley, jam-
packed with boxes, mothers and godmothers
filled cartons with toys and dried milk
and canned milk, and children's clothes and shoes,
and men's clothes and shoes. Las madres y
las comadres shared tape, string, scissors,
and wrote out postal and customs forms.
They are saviors of families, villages, populations.
Woman's adventure, woman's mission.
The lone male looking at them was no bother.
But they hated *me*, a woman, seeing them.
They looked back at me, shot me with hate.
Turned to follow me with their eyes, hate
firing from their eyes. They hated me.
Hate-stares followed me though I walked
with the attitude that I was at home among my own
Asian sisters. In words, they'd be calling me

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names. "You fucking bitch empress. You
make me clean your toilet. You make me sleep
in the toilet." Though catching stinkeye,
a curling lip, a dissing shrug of shoulders,
I willed a kind and pleasant mien.
May you be happy, you be safe.
May you make much, much money.
May your children and family be happy and safe,
and you return home to them soon.
I must remind them of Madam, their Chinese employer.
But I don't look like a Chinese matron.
I don't dye my hair black. I'm not
wearing my gold and jade. They don't know
I bought these clothes at the Goodwill.
I'm wearing shoes donated after the Big Fire.
They don't know, most of my nieces and nephews
are Filipino, and 9 great-nieces
and great-nephews, Filipino Chinese
Americans. They don't know me, I am like them,
my marriage like theirs. Wife works for money;
husband, employed or unemployed, has fun.
Son, too, has fun. Men know how
to play. Music. Sports. Theater. These women
don't know, I work 2 jobs.

I moonlight, do the work-for-money
and the writing. I wish I
had thought to be a stay-at-home mom.
(How interesting: The girl makes wishes for
the future. The eldress, for the past.)
I, too, send money to villages, the promise
made to family when leaving them. My BaBa,
who arrived in New York City when Lindberg
landed in Paris, vowed: I will not
forget you. I will always send money
home. The Pilipina maids see
me a lazy dowager, and hate me.
Crone. Witch. Aswang. Old woman
going about with long hair down
like a young woman's, but white. Normal
in Berkeley, beautiful in Berkeley. And in the Philippines
I'm already in costume for Aswang Festival,
day before Hallowe'en, days after
my birthday. Come on, fête me and my season.
On the grass in a city park, our male traveller
feeling his lone hobo self, laid
his body down with backpack for pillow.
In San Francisco, it was 2 o'clock the night

before. Going west from California's
shores, jumping forward in time, he'd arrived
at the house of maternity, the land of migrations.
Sleeping in public, jet-lagged, soul
not caught up with body, body
loose from soul, body trusted itself to
the grass, the ground, the earth, the good earth,
and rested in that state where dream is wake,
wake is dream. Conscious you are conscious.
Climb—fly—high and higher, and know:
Now / Always, all connects to all.
All that is is good. His ancestresses—
PoPo Grandma and Ma,
so long in America—are here, the Center.
Expired, Chinese people leave go of
cloudsouls that fly to this place.
Breathe, and be breathed. The air smells
of farawayness. Seas. Trash. Old
fish. The Chinese enjoy this smell,
fragrant, the *hong* in Hong Kong, Fragrant Harbor.
Yes, something large, dark, quiet,
receptive—Yin—is breathing, breathing me
as I am breathing her. My individual
mind, body, cloudsoul melds

with the Yin. Mother. I'm home. But
stir, and the Land of Women goes. Wittman
arose to bass drums of engines—multiple
pulses and earth-deep throbs. Forces
of rushing people. Monday morning go-
to-work people. The City. (The late riser
has missed the tai chi, the kung fu,
the chi kung. While he was sleeping, the artists
of the chi, mostly women, Chinese
women, were moving, dancing the air / the wind /
energy / life, and getting the world turning.
They'd segued from pose to pose—spread
white-crane wings, repulse monkey,
grasp bird by tail, high pat
on horse, stand like rooster on one leg,
snake-creep down, return to mountain.
They played with the chi, drawing circles in the sky,
lifting earth to sky, pulling sky
to earth, swirling the controllable universe.
Then walked off to do their daily ordinary tasks.)
Wittman, non-moneymaker, fled
the financial district. Already dressed,
the same clothes asleep and awake, he merged
with a crowdstream, and boarded a westbound

62 | train. Go deep in-country.
Find China. Hong Kong is not China.
The flow of crowd stopped, jammed inside
the train. Wittman was one among the mass
that shoved and was shoved onto the area
over the coupling between cars. They
would ride standing pressed, squashed,
breathing one another's breath, hoisting
and holding loads—Panasonic and Sony
ACs—above heads. The train
started, the crowd lurched, the air conditioners
rocked, almost fell but didn't. Men
prized through the packed-tight crowd,
squeezed themselves from one car to the next,
and back again. A man, not a vendor,
jostled through, lugging a clinking
weight of bottled drinks that could've smashed
the upturned faces of the short people. Bags
smelled of cooked meat. I have food,
I can do anything. I know I can.
I know I can. Hard-seat travel.
Suffer more, worth more. The destination
more worth it. The Chinese have not
invented comfort. People fell asleep

on their feet. They work hard, they're tired,
grateful for a spot of room to rest. Rest.
Rest. A boy slept astraddle his father,
father asleep too, 2 sleeping
heads, head at peace against head.
Had Wittman and his son ever shared one
undistracted moment of being quiet?
Though tall, he could not see above the crowd
and their belongings. What country was rolling past
unappreciated? The train—a local—made stops.
More people squeezed aboard. On and on
and on, yet on the border of immense China.
You've heard, always heard: China's
changing. China's changed. China gone.
Old China nevermore. Too late.
Too late. Too late. Too late.
Voyage far, and end up at another
globalized city just like the one you left.
Vow not to stop until you can alight
in green country. Country, please remain.
Villages, remain. Languages, remain.
Civilizations, remain. Each village
a peculiar civilization. The mosh between
cars did empty. You got to sit

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in the seat you'd paid for. Hillsides
streaming by on the north; on the south,
a river. Arched doors built into
slopes of hills. Cry "Open sesame!"
and enter the good earth. People walking
the wide, pathless ground, placing on the thresholds
flowers and red paper, wine and food,
incense. Ah, altars, doorsills of graves.
Ah, Ching Ming. All over China,
and places where Chinese are, populations
are on the move, going home. That home
where Mother and Father are buried. Doors
between heaven and earth open wide.
Our dead throng across the bourn,
come back to meet us, eat and drink with us,
receive our gifts, and give us gifts.
Listen for, and hear them; they're listening for
and hear us. Serve the ancestors come back
to visit. Serve them real goods. If
no real goods, give symbols.
Enjoy, dear guests, enjoy life again.
Read the poems rising in smoke. Rituals
for the dead continue, though Communist Revolution,
Cultural Revolution, though diaspora. These hills

could be the Altamont Pass, and the Coast Range
and Sierras that bound the Central Valley. I
have arrived in China at the right time, to catch
the hills green.

And where shall I be buried?

In the Chinese Cemetery on I-5?
Will they allow my white spouse? We integrate
the cemetery with our dead bodies? It's been my
embarrassing task to integrate social functions.
Can't even rest at the end. Can't
rest alongside my father and mother.
Cremate me then. Burn me to ashes. Dig me into
the peat dirt of the San Joaquin Valley.
Dig some more of me into the 'aina of Hawai'i.
Leftovers into the sipapu
navel at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, and more
leftovers at the feet of oaks in Oakland
and redwoods in Muir Woods and eucalyptus
in the Berkeley grove, and around Shakespeare's
plants in Golden Gate Park. All my places.
Yosemite. The Sierras. A few handfuls of me
off the Golden Gate Bridge, which I skated across.
And my last ashes on Angel Island, where
my mother was jailed on her way to my father and America.

Thinking about death and far from home, Wittman,
 a skinny old guy with nothing to eat, looked
 lonely. Chinese cannot bear
 anyone being lonely. Loneliness is torture.
 (What's the word for *lonely*? "Nobody," they say.
 "I have nobody.") Passengers this side and that side
 proffered food. Buns, *bow*. Pickled
 vegetables. Candied vegetables. Chicken fingers.
 Beef jerky. They said, Eat, la. Eat, la.
 Chinese can't eat unless everybody eats.
 "Daw jay," he said, "Dough zheh. Jeah jeah.
 Je je nay. Je je nee."
 Thanking in variations of accents and tones.
 An old lady (that is, a person
 of his own age), wiped the rim of her vacuum
 bottle cup, poured, and with both hands
 handed him tea while saying, "Ngum cha.
 Ngum, la." Being given tea,
 accepting tea, you drink humbly, but think:
 I am being welcomed, honored, adored. Out of all
 who exist, we 2 tea drinkers
 together. Be ceremonial and mindful, we

are performing Tea, performing the moment of eternity.
 The tea woman, in the facing seat, held
 a box in her lap. The size of a head.
 The Man Who Would Be King's head.
 Pointing with his chin as Chinese do,
 Wittman impolitely asked, "What
 do you have in there?" Can't be nice with small
 vocabulary. She answered, or he understood
 her to answer: "I'm a-train-riding
 with my husband, carrying my old man home,
 ashes and smashed bones." "Aiya! How did he die?"
 "Martial arts killed him." Or "Bitter work
 killed him." Kung fu. Kung fu.
 "Aiya-a-a," chorused the Big Family.
 Everyone listening, the widow told her life.
 It went something like this: "Not so
 long ago, a *loon* time, an era
 of *loon*, this man, this very
 man now ashes and bones, swam at night
 from China to Hong Kong. A boat family,
 who harbored in the Typhoon Shelter, gave
 him bed on the water, and shared him 2 meals.
 Day, they rowed him to a station for signing up
 to live in a safe place / haven / sanctuary /

refugee camp. I.I." Illegal Immigration.

"Aiya-a-a." "O, Big Family,

hear me. For *loon* years, he—I too—

I was I.I. too—lived

up on top of the barbwired hill.

We met at the fence at the farthest edge. He

looked off the shores toward his lost country.

I looked off toward *my* lost country.

His was that dark mass that looms right there

forever across the Straits. Han Mountain.

He'd say, 'They can see us. They can see us better

than we can see them.' Hong Kongers

are rich, they waste money on electricity,

keep lights open all night long.

I could not see *my* country, Viet Nam.

Too far, and China in the way.

We married. We wrote: 'We marry.

Free or in prison, forever, we marry.'

If only we could write 'legal immigrants,'

and be legal immigrants."

Why always

Illegal Immigration? Oh, no one

ought be made alien to any country.

No more borders. Nosotros no

cruzamos la frontera; la frontera
nos cruza.

The Vietnamese Chinese

woman addressed tout le monde, including

her husband, a ghost, who was standing behind

Wittman. He was a ghost in the listening crowd,

and he was the ashes and bones in the box.

"You were a good man, Old Rooster.

You worked hard. A farmer works hard.

He'll always work hard, his life hard,

though he leaves the farm. Though farm /

ground / earth / floor be taken from him."

The chorus intoned: "Aiya. Hai, la."

"Taken by the government." "Taken by business."

"Taken by brothers." "Deem the land." "One

day mid-harvest, a middling harvest,

you, Old Rooster, gave up the fields,

and went to 'seek your fortune.'" She said

in English, "seek your fortune." A generation

had learned the language from fairy tales broad-

cast by loudspeakers across the commune

agricultural zone, across orchards,

furrows, paddies, dairies. "Farewell,

dear Father. Farewell, dear Mother.

70 | The open road beckons me." "Farewell,
my child. Go forth. Win your fortune.
Make money, my son. Find love.
Marry the princess." The widow spoke addressing
her husband, telling him his own story.
"Following the waterways, you walked and swam,
swam and walked from duck pond and streams
and rivers to the Mouth of the Tiger. You had no
Permit To Settle. All through nights,
lights beckon Hong Kong Hong Kong
red red green green. Liang
liang. Ho liang. You swam
for those lights, and came to the ten thousand
sampans, the floating town gone now.
Free and safe for a night and a morning. Boat
people fed you and let you sleep, gave you
bed on the water, fed you twice, supper
and breakfast. JAWK!" She hit the box, caged
it with fingers and arms. "They CAUGHT him."
Wittman jumped. She laughed; everybody
laughed. "Don't be scared, foreign
Chinese person. They did not
torture my husband to death. He got
hit a few times was all. You know

the Chinese, they hit to teach you a lesson.
I saved him out of I.I. I got
out of jail because China and Viet Nam
became normal. Han and Viet same-same."
"Hai, law. Hai, law." Her American
listener chimed in: "Hola! Hola!
In California, we, Chinese and
Vietnamese, together celebrate Tet."
Sing dawn. Tet nguyen dân.
"I took you, my Chinese husband, by the hand,
and we left prison. I'm the one,
freed you, you Old Rooster. Woman
is better at living than man is. We
went to live in public housing just
like everybody else, the sampan
people, everybody. I made
money. All I do, each meal,
I cook enough for more than 2—
2 people eat very little.
The extra, I sell on the street. A hungry man
always comes along; he'll buy
breakfast or lunch or dinner or suey yeah.
Life is easier on a woman. Your abilities,
my good Old Rooster, were to swim and to farm.

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In the city, you had to sell your *lick*.
Ladies and gentlemen fellow travelers, he
sold his kung.” His strength, his labor. “You
rode a water-soldier boat out
to one of the warships from all over
the world. I watched you be lifted and lowered
by ropes. You hung from ropes down the side
of the ship’s mountainface. Using rags,
you painted the gray ship gray,
ashes, ashes, gray on top of gray.
Fields of gray above you and behind you, you
and the cadre of painters—many women—women,
who adore flowers—oozed gray everywhere
you touched. Metal doubled the sun’s heat,
and baked you, baked lead paint into
your skin. You could’ve let yourself
fall backward into air and water. But you,
everyday you went to Pun Shan Shek
and toiled for me. For me, you caught yang
fever. You breathed poison. Skin and lungs
breathed poison, sweated poison. We
could not wash the gray paint out of you.
It was painting warships killed you. That work
so dangerous, the foreign nations don’t order

their own water soldiers to do it. Old One,
I thank you for your care of me. You are / were
a good hardworking husband to me.
I’m sorry / I can’t face you, my gray
Old Rooster, we never had a son.
Okay. We’re each other’s child.
I take care of you, and you take care of me.
I bring you home. I’m sorry / I can’t
face you, I have taken too long
to bring you home. Stacks and stacks of caskets
and urns wait to get out of Hong Kong.
I pulled you out of the pile-up. We’re on
our way home. You’re a good man.
You worked hard. Yeah yeah yeah.
Daw yeah. Thanks thanks thanks.
Big thanks.” No verb tenses,
what is still happening? What is over?
Yet refugee camps? Yet piles
of unburied dead? Yet coolies painting
ships with lead? All that’s happened always
happening? “I too am walking mountain,”
said a man dressed Hong Kong styly,
expensive suit, expensive shoes, expensive
luggage. “I’ll sweep the graves, I mean, fix them.

Find my people's bones, and bury them again."
(Oh, to say "my people.") "Cousin
was mad; he dug up Po and Goong."
Mr. Walking Mountain laughed—heh
heh heh heh. Chinese laugh
when telling awfulness. "Cousin dug and cried,
dug and cried, 'Out the Olds! Out
the Olds! Out! Out, old family.
Out, old thoughts. Out! Out!'
He dug up our grandparents and scattered
their bones—ha ha ha—because
I was rich in Hong Kong and did not
send money—heh heh heh—
did not feed him, did not make good,
did not make good him." Chinese
laugh when pained. "I return. I shall
walk mountain, and follow li. I'll
make good the ancestors." *Jing ho.*
Make good. Fix. "Dui dui,"
said the Big Family. "Dui dui dui."
Oh, to hear dui dui dui
to whatever I have to say.
The listening world gives approval, dui
dui dui dui. The train stops

at stations in built-up places. Where's
open country? The planted fields, water
and rice, rice and water, are but green
belts around factory-villages. Those are
50-gallon drums of something rusting
into the paddy. That apartment and that
factory is a village. Legs of Robotron
stomp through the remains of the old pueblo.
Gray pearlescence—marshes and lakes,
mists and skies mirroring mirroring. Beautiful,
and alive. Or dead with oil slick? Mist
or smoke? Why are Wittman and I
on journey with the dead, and escorts of the dead?
Toward sunset, there swung past
a series of pretty villages, yellow adobe
houses, almost gold in the last light,
almost houseboats, wood railings
on the river for laundry and fishing. Half
the homes hung on either bank. Make
up your mind, Monkey, get off the train,
see the rivertown, enter its symmetry.
Paddle the river straight down the valley;
stream with the sun's long rays. Walk
the right bank and the left bank. Get

yourself invited into those homes. Sit
on the balcony facing the river and the neighbors
on the other side, everyone's backs to mountains.
Upon Good Earth, lay the body down,
open the mouth wide, let song rush through.

RICE VILLAGE

At the next station, Wittman, nobody else,
got off. The moment his feet touched ground,
the Chinese earth drew him down
to her, made him fall to his knees, kowtow
and kiss her. Gravity is love force. It bends
light and time and us. Mother pulls us to
her by heart roots. I have felt Great Spirit
before: Touching the green wood door
of Canterbury Cathedral. Hearing the air
of Hawai'i singing 'Aina. Standing in the fire
zone, where my house and neighborhood were burning.
Lofting great balls of pink mana
at the White House and Bush, and Iraq.
The interested traveller walked along the railroad
tracks, then up on path atop bunds.

In the San Joaquin Delta, we walk and run
and bicycle upon dikes too, call them levees.
Many kinds of plants. Crop diversity.
Rice in all stages of growing and going
to seed. All seasons happening at once.
Plains and terraces, levels and hills, greens
dark and light, blues, and straw, are dotted
with moving red—the farmers are working dressed
in red. They can see where one another are.
They are seen; they are lucky. It's beautiful
and lucky to dot red on anything—cookies,
buns, baby carriers, envelopes, white
chicken meat, white dogs. On one's self,
who blesses the earth good and red.

Wittman got to their village before they did,
nightfall ere home from work. The yellow
adobe pueblo was one conjoined structure.
Neighbor and neighbor lived with common walls
this side and that side. Each life impacts
every life. You'd have to live carefully.
You'd watch your moods. And your actions.
Curious Monkey entered through an opening
in a wall and faced another wall,

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decided to go right, right being
the right way, usually. The next doorway
took him to an alley; he could look-see
into courtyards, like outdoor kitchens
and laundries and pantries and even bedrooms.
An old squatting grandma was stirring a wok.
Another was washing vegetables. They paid no
mind to the stranger shadowing by. Kitty
cats and a big pig and chickens—swine flu,
bird flu—slinked, lumbered, scratched,
came and went into and out of houses.
That alley jigjagged into another
alley that opened on to the public square.
La plaza at the center of the pueblo. And at the center
of the plaza was the waterworks, not a fountain
but two porcelain troughs with PVC
pipes above and below, and faucets in rows.
Cupping water in worship-like hands
(turn off tap with elbow), quaff
as if welcoming myself with ceremony,
joining myself to this place. Drinking,
aware that I, a citizen from the wealthiest,
squanderingest country, am taking precious water.
Unpurified tap water. Aware that I

risk my life, I throw in my lot
with the health of this common village. Sit
right down on the curbstone on the east
side of the square. Face the last of the sun.
Unpack notebook and pen. Write:

arrive
adobe
China
home

At home in a civilization kind with plazas,
containing me and the sky and a square of earth.

Father Sky
Mother Earth

It's not only Native Americans who pray
Father Sky Mother Earth. Chinese
say Father Sky Mother Earth too.
In the almanac of stars, moons, luck, and farming:

爸 Ba
天 T'ien
媽 Ma
土 Day

80 | Doff sneakers, doff socks, feel
the ground with naked soles. The floor of the plaza
is warm and smooth; skin meets skin.
Chinese generations walked
barefoot here, sweated, oiled,
spat upon, tamped the black soil,
which they could've planted, so rich. Now,
the farmers, men and women, homeward plod.
A goatherd following his goats and sheep,
a duckherd his ducks, light and long shadows
of many legs oscillating. They came upon
the writing man—poet!? retired philosopher!—
in the act of public writing. Quietly,
they peered over his shoulders, peered over
his right (writing) hand, peered over
his other hand. By calligraphy, they can tell
character and fate. Readers jostled

one another for the spot directly in front,
looked at his writing upside down,
craned their necks to see it from his point
of view. English! The Brave Language. But
his Chinese! A boy's Chinese.
The man draws like a boy. "Read, la.
Read, la-a." Our not-so-ugly American
dared recite loudly, in his best language
and second-best language, the 4-word
poems. Audience clapped hands, and laughed,
and mimicked, and asked, "You've come from what
far place, aw?" "I was born in the Beautiful
Country." "Aiya-a. Beautiful Country.
Is Beautiful Country truly beautiful and rich?"
"Well . . ." (*Well*, English, American.) "Beautiful
Country People are like me, not too
beautiful, not too ugly, not too
rich, not too poor. But some
too rich, too poor. Most,
my color skin, tan. Our color
skin." Actually, the color skin of the people
around was darker, darker from working in the sun.
"I live in Big City. Eighty
out of one hundred people live in the cities.

But I am not like everybody.
Everybody has cars. 2 cars.
I don't have one car.
I don't want one car."
Have and want, same sound, not
same tone. They pitied him, poor man,
no car. Audience grew, 50
souls hearing the sojourner who'd seen the Beautiful
Country, who'd learned to write their horizontal alphabet.
People vied with one another, please,
dear writer traveller teacher, come
to our home for rice, and stay the night.
A confident village, the people not shy
to bring you home and see their hovel.
He chose a solid-seeming man, mine
good host, and comradely put himself in yoke.
The farmers, washing up in public, showed off
the on-and-off faucets and the pipes. They filled
wood buckets and plastic buckets and jars.
Wittman asked for a carrying pole across
his neck, above his backpack, which steadied
and cushioned the bouncy, springy, sloshing, heavy
double load. Proudly, he sidestepped
through alleyways and around corners, and up and over

the raised threshold into the courtyard,
brought that water home where he would stay.
His host—Lai Lu Gaw,
Brother Lai Lu—praised and thanked
Witt Man Gaw—shouted, "A good person
has come to visit us!" Out of the dark
of an open doorway appeared a woman. How
to describe Beauty? Perfection. Symmetry. Beyond
compare in all aspects—intelligence of gaze,
tallness of stature, star presence, gentillesse.
Not young, not old. Just right.
What a good man am I, able
to love looks so not-American. Bro
Lai Lu introduced her as Moy Moy.
Younger Sister. (Lower tone: Plum Plum.)
They're not husband and wife. Father and daughter?
Brother bade brother, Come in,
la. Sit, la. Rest, la.
Home, la. The men sat on stools
at a low table. The woman brought tea;
she poured. With both hands, she
held the cup out to the guest, who
quickly accepted it with his 2 hands.
I am paying you my full attention.

The Communists and the Cultural Revolution have not wiped out manners. Hosts and guest drank without speaking. From the dark loft hung, high and low, dried and drying plants, tree branches, gourds with writing on them, clusters of seeds, baskets. On the ground, the dirt floor, all around were open jars and sealed jars, bales, bundles, sheaves. We are bowered in a nest. Smell: medicine herbs, chrysanthemum, mustard, licorice, cilantro, vinegar. The poor save everything, all they make and grow, and so feel abundant. Please don't want to be like us. Don't want. Host as well as hostess carried from stove and cooler, from pots and jars, dishes of brown foods. A cauldron of white rice, enough for meal after meal. The brown foods tasted like jerked meat, sausage, brined and sugared citrus and plums. Moy Moy got up, and cooked afresh peas and choy, greens of the new harvest. Back-home Chinese, too, cook throughout the dinner party, everybody in the kitchen. The hostess began conversation:

"Are you married?" What answer but Yes?
"Yes. She's not Chinese." Too small vocabulary, blurt it all. "She's white ghost woman. Her name, Taña, means Play." (*Fawn*. Lower tone: *Food*.)
"I married Play. Heh heh.
I married Food. She married me.
I am with her more years than I am without her."
Hard to parley verb tenses. And impossible to admit: Marry white, escape karma.
"How much money did you pay for your airplane ticket?" She's rude, bad manners East and West to ask cost.
Truth-caring Wittman answered, "One thousand dollars one-way." Impossible to explain redeeming coupons, miles, life savings. "Waaah! One thousand dollars!?!
What do you do to make such money?"
"I write." Impossible to explain the life in theater. The moneymaking wife. "So, how do *you* make *your* money?" "Farmer peasants don't make money, don't use cash." They live as most human beings have lived, directly on ground that gives

work and sustenance. “Mr. American Teacher, will you marry me, and get me out of the countryside?” “But I’m already married. I have a wife and son.” “No matter. No problem. Marry me, a Chinese woman. Chinese women are beautiful, kind, and good.” “I came but today to the countryside, and do not want to leave it.”

The brother spoke up, “I want to stay in the countryside too. I learned the lesson Chairman Mao sent us down to learn: The people who work the earth know true good life.” “Where were you sent down from?” “Shanghai City.”

The Shanghainese took the worst punishment in the 10 Years of Great Calamity. “We read. Both of us, readers. So sent down, Moy Moy to Xinjiang, I to another part of Xinjiang, far far west, beyond Xizang, almost beyond China. There are Uighur Chinese, Muslim Chinese, Xizang Chinese. The women—they’re so free—whirl and twirl,

raise their arms to the sky. The music comes from bagpipes. Pairs of women lift and lower the grain pounder—bang bang bang bang—a music too. Their religion has to do with buffalos. They collect the skulls and long horns, and put them on a wall or on the floor, and that place changes to a holy place. That area was made good. I felt the good. I am able to know Good.”

So, what does Good feel like?

He could not say. Or he did say, but in Chinese, and one’s Chinese is not good enough to hear. “After Great Calamity, after Xinjiang, I went on the road. People are still on the road, millions traveling like desert people. But the desert people go on roads they know for ten thousand years. We seek work. We seek justice.” Or *restitution*. Or *revenge*. *Come out even*.

You know what he means, millions of homeless wandering the country, displaced by dams, industrial zones, the Olympics. “I wandered lost to many

villages until I came here and made up my mind
Stop. Here. My stay-put home.
I took for my own this empty house,
whose family left to work in Industrial Zone.
Many empty houses—you can have
any one you like.” “I want you
to take me to U.S.A.”
said Moy Moy. “A Chinese farmer
is nothing. A maker of the mouse in an electric brain
factory—nothing.” The nightingale in the cage above
their heads sang along with the talking, and scattered
seeds and spattered water down upon the talkers
(and their food). A bare lightbulb hung next
to a wall, to be lit for emergencies and holidays.
In the dark, Moy Moy told
her failure: She’s never married.
“During the Great Calamity, women acted
married to one husband, and another husband,
and another. I had no one. No one
but this brother waiting for me at the agreed-
upon place.” Lai Lu told
his failure: “I have no children.”
Wittman told his failures: Not
staying with his wife till death us do part.

His son not married. Never getting
a play on Broadway, New York. Not
learning enough Chinese language.
(Marilyn Chin says, “The poet must read
classical Chinese. And hear Say Yup.”)
Midnight, Lai Lu stood, said,
“Ho, la. Good sleep, la.”
He left for some back room. Moy Moy
said, “Follow me.” Wittman followed her
out the front door. White stones
studded the courtyard walls;
a jewel-box up-poured stars into sky.
Followed the queue of black hair gleaming
in the black night, hied through alleys that turned,
and again turned, and again, 3 corners
in, and entered a home through an unlocked
door. “No one lives here.
You may live here.” She parted curtains.
The bed was a shelf, like a sleeper on Amtrak.
She backed into the cupboard, scooted, and sat.
Her pretty bare feet swung. He
sat beside her. “Heart Man, marry me.”
He ought to kiss her. But they don’t have
that custom, do they? He was a virgin for Mongolian

women. Aged, married too long,
the body refused to spring and pounce and feast,
to make the decision for sex. He reached for and held
her hands. "Moy Moy." Oh, no,
shouldn't've said her name. Can't fuck
Younger Sister. "Thank you for wanting me
to marry you." Her hands felt trusty. "Marry"
said, and "marry" heard many times tonight.
Taña appears. She's sitting on the other side of him;
that's her, warm pressing against him. He
could see her in the dark, her whitegold
hair, her expression; she's interested, curious,
pissed off. He tapped her bare foot
with his bare foot. She's solid.
A red string ties her ankle to
his ankle. No string connecting him and
the other woman. He spoke to the not-hallucinated
one. "You're the most beautiful Chinese
woman I've ever met. I dearly want
to kissu, suck lips with you."
Say anything; Taña doesn't know
Chinese. "Thank you, you want to marry me."
A rule of the open road: Keep thanking.
"However, I don't want more marriage.

Our son, my one son doesn't have any marriage.
No one. Will you marry him?" Wittman
dismayed and amazed himself. Forever, then.
Forever husband. Forever father. Never
lust after a woman again but wish her
for his lonely son. I wish for Mario
a life's companion. "My son, Mario,
makes good money. He knows power
tools and car mechanics. He can cook.
He has some college. He is kind
and intelligent, and I want for him a kind
and intelligent person." The old Chinese
customs aren't so bad; fix him up
with a wife, a daughter-in-law of my own choosing.
Moy Moy's holding of his hand became
a handshake. "Dui dui dui,"
she cooed. "We will agree on a place to meet.
He will be waiting for me there. Ho, la.
Good night, la. Good sleep, la-a-a."
(You do not need vocabulary to understand
the Chinese. Just feel the emotion
in *la-a-a* and *ahh* and *mo* and *aiya*.)
Moy Moy left. Taña, also, left.
I am alone in the dark, so dark that

nothing exists but my thoughts, and thoughts
are nothing. Came all the way to China,
and failed to fuck another besides my long-
wedded spouse before I die.

The next thing,
dust was falling like ash, like glitter. Far
away, so faint, maybe imaginary, crowed
a rooster. Another, closer, rooster answered,
took up the opera, and another, and another,
each rooster louder, the loudest blaring
right outside the window. Wake up
in a village in China. Go use the community
toilet. Wash up in the town square,
brush teeth, swab down with the guys.
The women clean themselves indoors.
“Ho sun.” “Ho sun.” “Ho sun.”
“Ho sun.” Good morning. Good
body. Good belief. Good letter.
A happy civilization, glad to see
one and all, every morning. “Help me
farm rice?” asked Brother Lai Lu.
He took Wittman’s hand. 2 men
are walking China hand in hand. They walked
to the field for planting on this hopeful day.

They wrapped seedlings in cloth, settled the bundles
in baskets, tied baskets to waist, and waded
into the paddy. Oooh, the mud, the pleasurable
mud, my free and happy toes. You trace
in water a square, and at each corner embed
one rice plant. Oh, my hands
rooting and squishing silken luscious mud.
Look up: A line of rising and bending
people—kids too—are coming toward
our line. (The kids are all boys.
The girls have been adopted out to the most loving,
well-educated parents in the West. Chinese
girls will take over and improve America.)
Children, everybody growing mai.
Plant toward someone who’s planting toward you,
and make straight rows. Perfectly quiet,
we’re sighting and pacing one another, and organizing
the water into small and large rectangles, stitching
a silvery quilt over Mother Earth.
Every jade-green spikelet has its jade-
green water double. 2 infinite
blue skies. Slow white clouds
form, move and change, and wisp away.
Me, the one amid all of it taking

note. In the silence, critters peeping,
buzzing, chirping, humming, seem to be
my own mind idling and making it up—
but a frog jumps, a dragonfly zooms.
Tadpoles—schools of tadpoles—hurry by.
A mudsnail gliding and sliding. And me
planting rice, helping to feed a fifth
of the world's people. All, all related.
This planting food together is heart
center. Hour after hour, eon after eon,
doing the same thing, plant, plant,
sink, loft, into water, into sky,
I am one of the human race that has always
done this work. Stay, let this life be
my whole life, and these people my people.
That other life, the one in America, the wife,
the son, the Berkeley education, that
complex life is dream. Stay
and see the rice through to harvest. How
long does it take for rice to grow through
its seasons? A year? Two years? Now
that I've found this lost possible self—Chinese
rice farmer—let me stay with it. Keep
doing this most basic human task

til satisfaction. When used to that life
and don't see it anymore, then leave.

BAD VILLAGE

Once more, away,
out on the open road, Wittman enjoyed
his walk with fellow travelers. Millions errant,
looking for work, some on paid vacation.
The driver of a pony cart slept atop
his produce; his pony knew the way. A buffalo
or ox pulled a tumbrel of logs and rocks;
woodcutter and wife dozed side by side.
A bicyclist carried one bar of steel
under an arm. Another bicyclist was delivering
a circus of chairs. Motorbikers covered
faces, and entire heads, with gauzy scarves,
no helmet law. 100
big white ducks or geese rode
on the roof of a bus, feathers ruffling; they
did not try to fly away. A stake
truck and a flatbed truck, both
honking hard, drove head-on

at each other, veered to drivers' right,
and passed. They're right-laners, like us.
People walking carried twigs, furniture,
baskets, pots, live fish in buckets.
Wittman changed his walk to be like other
Peripatetics. Cut out the American
attitude. Quit the truckin', the I'm-walkin'-here.
Send the strength away from macho shoulders,
and will it down to butt seat chakra.
Walk bent-legged, loose-kneed,
loose-seated like kung fu.
Hands behind relaxed back. Oh,
it feels so good, giving in—bent old
China Man at long last. A pickup
truck bounced, braked—off popped
a giant pig, a hog. PLOP! Burst?!?
But it got to its feet, jiggled, breathed loud,
coughed, coughed, and screaming, ran off.
Some men in the laughing crowd gave
chase, Wittman too. They were running
after a big fat naked person.
Her pink Caucasian ass and hams rolled
and pumped. Hurrying ahead of the hooting, joking
crowd, she screamed, grunted, wheezed. Internal

injuries. Ran toward people who were assembling
a market. Help me. Help me. Please. She
was It, the big fat naked dumb one. Caught.
The redoubling crowd herded the sow back
to the truck. She climbed the ramp. Her owner kicked
her legs out from under her, thanked the people,
and drove off. No pig basket for
her. So what if she's hurt? On her way
to slaughter anyway. Wittman reentered
the village that the sow had led him to. Today
was market day; farmers were arriving with this day's
harvest. Cooks were boiling up noodles
for breakfast, throwing in handfuls of meat and choy.
There was an empty stool in a hovel restaurant;
he sat down amid the slapping, slurping men,
and let himself be served what everybody else
was having. (You're charged extra for the seat; sitting
is a luxury.) (No ladies. Ladies cook
and eat at home.) The men sat close,
knee to knee, thigh to thigh, but not
quite touching. Did bump elbows.
They ate fast. 2 fingers tap-
tapped the table—another luxury, a table—
got refills. Tap tap. Thanks

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thanks. The cook himself came around with the tea. Some people lift-lifted it toward the others. Sociable Wittman lift-lifted, nod-nodded to one and all. Tap tap. Thanks thanks. Abruptly, eaters pushed away from the table, paid, and left. Lazy guys stayed on, lit cigarettes, talked. One man folded himself up on his stool, arms wrapped around knees, and slept. Chinese can sleep anywhere. Our American did not understand any of the speaking, he'd traveled that far. Can't stand to be left out. Act as though you get it. They spoke a spit dialect, like Daffy Duck and Sylvester the Cat. And they held long notes, ho-o-o, who-o-o-o. Laugh when they laugh. They didn't seem to be talking about him; they weren't referring to him with their squinty sly eyes. The spitter with yellow tobacco fangs, Sylvester, looked straight at him, and asked something. Yes, nodded the agreeable American. Yes. Sylvester and Daffy glanced at each other. Complicity. Good, they seemed to say, let's

go, let's do it. They stood, paid, waited for Wittman to pay, saw his wallet, watched him pay with a bill that made the proprietor use up all his change. He walked deliberately step by step up to the suspected muggers, and said in English, "Don't you mess with me, bro. You're gonna get what for. You're gonna get what's comin' to ya. You mess with me, you messin' with the Man." He reached inside his shirt for his gat. The bravos vamoosed. Onlookers, who will gather at any commotion, gave way. And spread the word: armed man, American with a gun, come to town. Whichever twisty turning meandering path he took, Wittman felt people keeping slant eyes on him. And so, as the bad stranger, he arrived at the meat market. The halves of a boiled hairless dog hung by meat hooks through its eye sockets. Paws in begging posture. German shepherd? Labrador retriever? Parents have brought children to watch the butcher do something to it with a knife. At another stall, a tub of piglets, like human babies,

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some dead, some but stunned, alive
and moving, bloodied. A customer chose a snake
from jars of live snakes, haggling price
all the while. The snake man squeezed
the sides of its head, the jaws opened,
the fangs shot milk, which he caught in a bowl.
Just when you're feeling relief, they aren't harming
those snakes, he killed one, drove
a nail through its head. (So this
is the ancient culture that Chinatown defends
against the Department of Public Health and PETA?)
Wittman stayed in that town. Don't turn away.
Face what's real. Fix my reputation.
He found a hotel, a house with door wide
open, showing a front room with cots as
furniture. The crony witch widow woman
pointed at each bed, choose, choose,
you choose, first guest, no
other guest. Ah, but there's more;
she led him to a ladder, indicated up
up, you up. The loft was the private
one-bed room, fit for a rich tourist.
He paid her, held out money, let her take
however much the charge. Then up ladder

again, and fell into the rag nest bed.
Sick. Gave in to illness, every
part of his body ill. Ceiling and walls
waved, buckling, fluttering. He'll tilt
and roll off the edge of the loft into
darkest China. Hot. The roof? Fever?
Time spirals in China. In America, it shoots
straight out, like the line on the heart monitor
of the dead. The line faded between forever
and instance, awake and asleep, actual and dream.
It seems, at some twilight, the widowlady
witch fed him a brew, a medicine or a poison.
So kind or wicked of her, too old
to be climbing ladders, yet climbing the ladder
to take care of him. The ladder was missing.
No escape. He had memory of it: one pole
taller than the other, for climbing up to the mesa-
like rooftop, and down into the kiva,
when I was an Indian, a San Ildefonso
Indian, former life. I'll make the witch
happy, recognize her, she and I were
girlfriend and boyfriend. I know
she recognizes me too, ministering to me so
nicely, palming my brow. I hear voices.

I can understand them; they're plotting to steal
my money. All she had to do was ask.

I fanned out my money, take, take.

But she wants my life. Do I have a soul?

I can't feel my soul. I think soul

is something we have to imagine. Want

soul, imagine one. Like imagining I have

it in me to be a husband, a father. Imagine

the peaceful dark, and you go into the peaceful

dark. Imagine the white light, and you enter

and become the white light.

May all beings be safe from danger.

May all beings be safe from danger.

May all beings be safe from danger.

May all beings be safe from danger.

A gold ribbon arises and flies and winds
around the woman on the ground floor and around
the man in the loft, and shines through walls
and curls and twirls around every neighbor
and neighbor's neighbor and the big pig
and her baby pigs and the dogs and snakes and geese
waddling the earth and geese flying in air, and
spans oceans all the while looping
dolphins and whales and sharks and small fish

and the flying fish spangling and leaping like the ribbon
itself lacing and embracing each and every

living thing all the way to the other

hemisphere to hug my own true love

and our own dear child and all people

our own people and returning to include me.

Aloha kākou. May there be love

among us, love including me.

Oh, I am loved. I am loved.

With such good feelings, the pilgrim recovered
from illness-at-the-world and illness-at-China.

The pig chasers, the would-be thieves, the dog and
snake butchers, the witchy innkeeper

took their places as ordinary people, as ordinary
as himself. Wittman got up, well, and traveled on.

Now, I, Maxine, could let Wittman die,

let him die in the China of his dreams,

and proceed on this journey alone. He's lived

a full life, life enough, China

enough. Loved wife and child; they

loved him back. Planted rice. Read

some good books. Felt happiness, felt

104 | gratitude. Enough. But I don't like
traveling by myself. I ought to learn to go
places on my own, good for my character,
to be self-reliant. (A translation of my name,
Ting Ting, Self-Reliance. I should
live up to my name, Self-Reliant Hong.)
Why I need a companion, Monkey, along:
He's unafraid and unembarrassed to butt
and nose into other people's business.
He likes chatting with them and partying with them.
(I would rather hide, and spy, and overhear,
find out who people are when I'm not there.
Responsibly, sociably among them, I'm wont
to correct them, teach them, tell them Be happier.)
And he's able to enter the many places
in this world that a man is allowed and a lady
is not. And Wittman, a fiction, is free to befriend
anyone, and tell about them; he has no relatives
to be held hostage. I don't want to leave him dying,
sick and poor, destitute of health and money.
No airline ticket home. Passport
and identity stolen. The life of lowest poverty
is a meditation practice, a discipline, another
tale. Let me take him to one more

village, give him the commune of our bohemian
dreams.

ART VILLAGE

Ming Ming. Bright Bright.
Double bright. He arrives at Ming Ming
in a rainstorm. Wind is driving the bamboo
and ginger and cane flat. No moment
between lightning and thunder. A logo
flashes. Ming Ming. A word we know,
sun and moon together, *bright*. 2
suns. 2 moons. Bright Bright.
Following the way the sign points, the wet
traveller runs to a village mired in mud,
into a courtyard that's a sty of mud. Ming Ming
seems to be a ghost town, yet
another ghost town whose denizens left
for a global city somewhere. He bursts in
to find an art studio, and artists painting
indoors during rain. They shout and laugh
like Welcome! Look at what the mew dragged in!
Like Get the man dry clothes and hot tea!

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The nude model throws on her robe, and dashes
away to do their bidding. The men set
down brushes and palettes. Take 5.
They pull up stools and crates around the stove.
Wittman takes off his clothes, soaked
to the skin, and dons the robe the model brings
along with tea and wood and coal. "Thank you.
Thank you," the guest says in English,
his natural language, the best for giving
heartfelt thanks. "You well come,"
says a goateed artist. No, not
goatee. Let's give him a soul patch.
"Well, well," says a fellow with a ponytail.
"Koo. Koo. Koo." Cool. Cool.
"How are you?" "I am fine.
Thank you." "You well come."
"I come from Heilongjian. And you?"
Black Dragon River. The artists, communal
around the fire, brothers, smoking Peace
brand cigarettes and being served tea
and pastries, delight in trying out the Brave
language, the lingua franca taught in schools.
The cats are hip and up-to-date.
They wear their colors on worn, torn denim.

Some long hair. Some skinhead.
Black beards. Purple beard. 5
o'clock shadow, designer stubble. The old man
bewhiskered like that handsome Commie, Ho Chi Minh,
is home among his own kind. The artists
get to the extent of their English. Pots and buckets
plink and plunk; the roof drums. The paintings
are hung and stacked on the dry sides of the room.
Mr. Soul Patch brings to his lips
a xun, around which his hands fit perfectly,
and blows a music, old from long, long
ago. Our first male ancestor,
Bao Xin Gong, made the xun
of earth, made it earth-shaped, and gave
forth this sound that is the sound of time, from
far off to now to far after, the sound
of the animate winds, the yin wind and the yang
wind, the sound of the first man and this man
breathing song. Hear it, and it belongs
to you, and you belong to all of it.
The music ends on a long long
outbreath. The musician coughs and coughs,
spits a lung on the dirt floor,
rubs it in with his foot. Lights up

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108 | a cigarette. Urges the guest, Go on, go,
try it, blow. Wittman holds the earth xun
in spread hands, fingertips over some
holes, brings it up to his mouth. Pásame
la botella. The sound he gives out
is low, definite, smooth, clear, loud.
“Koo.” “Koo.” “Tell me about xun.”
The artists—they are masters of many arts
in this commune of makers—speak with numbers.
7,000. Xun was unearthed? invented?
7,000 years ago? In the year
7,000? 40. The xun in your hand
is 40-something—generations? years?
Cough cough. Pat-patting the lungs,
the heart, me, myself. 40. The musician
who takes up the xun will die in his 40s.
All artists die young. We sacrifice.
The painters, the model too, have coughs. The smoke,
inhale, cough, exhale, cough, cough.
The elder artist can't help lecturing
the younguns about their health. “No wonder
you Chinese chronically cough and spit.
You, with every breath, you're drawing microbes,
germs, disease from that old, used instrument,

into your respiratory system. Those xun
players died young because they caught an illness
from this infected instrument, which they passed on to you.
You guys shouldn't be living in your studio.”
Points at the beds, the stove, the tables loaded
with cans, bottles, tubes of chemicals, food.
“You're handling poisons all day,
and breathing fumes all night. I know.
My wife's an artist. We've been poor,
but she keeps her workplace, her art lab,
away from where we eat and sleep. She wears
a face mask, a respirator. Just like
Chinese do in traffic. And, come on,
don't smoke. Don't smoke. If you
knew your history, you wouldn't smoke.
Only 3 grandmothers ago,
BAT, British American Tobacco,
forced our people to buy opium, and tobacco-
opium mix. We had two wars
Chinese versus Anglos,
Opium War I and Opium War II.
We lost both times. We fought back
poison against poison, and guns, sold
bread with arsenic at the bakeries for Westerners.

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When I learned my history, I stopped smoking
cigarettes, pot, any kind of shit.”
The young artists don’t understand
a thing he says, else they’d laugh over
the bakerman, bakerwoman guerrillas.
They do know, they give their lives for xun,
for art. They take his waving and pointing to mean
admiration for them and their work. They open
albums full of photos of paintings with prices.
Their brushwork takes your breath away.
The lines and angles of Picasso. The impasto
of Van Gogh. The colors of Rothko.
The icing of Thiebaud. They can do anything.
But where is the new, the never-before-seen
that we’re counting on the post-Liberation
post-Cultural Revolution generation
to give us? Art schools in the U.S.
are folding their painting classes, teaching computer
and industrial design. The young artists show
the old artist (buyer? patron?) their portfolios.
Chinese kids selling their art
on the streets of Sydney, Florence, San Francisco.
On these walls, their latest work: dark
pictures. Heavy black crosses. Black

cross in foregrounds crossing out whatever else.
Black cross in backgrounds or upper
corners, a coming menace. The New China
still hung up on Christianity.
Let it go already. But look,
we’re painting exactly what we see
before our very eyes. There, above
your head—the stovepipes, one up through
the roof, and 2 arms out the walls.
Like the number 10. † We are painting
hearth and home. The world will see Crucifix.
Chinese viewers will read personal
messages, and political messages. And the government
read forbidden messages, and the artists get
into trouble. And what is that above the door,
the kiva, hogan door? Eagle, you are here.
Bear, you are here. Bear, protector
of journeys west. Dragonfly, you
here too. And Snake. And Coyote, you,
here. And Zia, sun and sipapu.
Kokopelli on flute. Whirling Logs,
like Buddha’s hairs, like swastikas.
All bordered by beansprouts, river
waves, whirlwind. And the threshold

lintelpiece itself border, land
bridge, rainbow. "Nicolai Fechin,"
say the artists. "Nicolai Ivanovich Fechin."
They name the woodcarver who made this icon,
and placed it at this threshold, that we be
aware coming in and going out that
we, people and animals, migrated across the top
of the world. They came our way; we
went their way. All connected with all,
all related. The rain stops. The painter
with the purple beard motions Come come,
and leads the way through the mud to his home
and studio. "Nicolai Ivanovich Fechin. . . ."
They stand before a wet oil. The paint
wet but also a river rushing, mud, and men,
men drowning? mouths wide open
crying Help? No, they are cheering and
laughing—Eureka! The pan is full of gold!
They—Chinese American Forty-Niners—
fall into the gold-giving water,
and roll in it. In joy. In fear. O,
Comrade of Californians! You we left
behind know and care what became of us
who went to Gold Mountain and never returned.

O, Artist. Draw *me*. See *me*.
Show me beautiful, old. "Draw *you*,"
says Purple Beard. Dui. Dui. Dui.
So, for long sessions of time, the wanderer
holds still as the artist draws and paints him.
The artist looks and looks, squinting his eyes,
to see everything, what's there, the visible,
and what's not visible, only he can see.
Suddenly, at a break, at a meal, Purple Beard's
face comes up close to Wittman's
face. He's studying my profile.
Tonight by electric light, the left profile;
this morning the right profile, the 3
quarters profile, the angles the eyelids
open and shut, the ear, the other ear,
the hairline, the texture and many colors
of hair and skin, the lines, the creases. Eyes
asquinch, he's studying me, breathing, smelling me.
He hasn't begun the actual painting, won't
begin until he's made studies and decisions.
Here, let's work in the courtyard,
the light from the north. No, let's go
indoors, this house, the light
from the south. The artist faces the sitter,

looks and draws, draws and looks, and one
day decides: Fullface. Good.
The face I myself looked at every
morning first thing back in the life
where bathrooms had mirrors. Full on. I, the writer,
look in the mirror more than the normal person.
To know my mien. *Mien* same-same
Chinese, English. To track and trace
momently changes. That's me, still good-
looking. But can't hold any one
expression for long. Hold it, and you freeze up.
Think upon looks, and that vanity shows.
Try method acting. For lovingkindness
in the eyes, look upon the other lovingly,
kindly. Purple Beard works without
talk, can't understand him anyway,
makes you quiet down yourself, likewise
be without talk. Be Nobody. He's
making an idol of me, admiring, adoring me so.
Lately, Taña doesn't draw her husband,
doesn't use her art on him. Doesn't give him
her artist's interest, regard him, record him, behold
him, find beauty in him. She disdains "narration."
She paints lines and spaces like calligraphy

that's not words. She can't stand Frida Kahlo—
"Too much narrative. Too much pain."
All the way to China to get appreciation.
Taña would love it here, among this commune
of artists. No, no, she wouldn't. She
wouldn't live like these girls. Bicycling
away rain or shine to run an errand
for her artist. Coming back with cigarettes, food
supplies, art supplies, coal, wood,
money. They aren't so very communal;
each woman serves just her one
boyfriend. We're back to the days of
James Joyce and Henry Miller, women
living to serve genius. Taña would organize
a cultural revolution. Girls, *you*
can be the artists of your dreams. She'd
see to it that this village dine together.
Everyone cooks for all. Give dinner
parties, be civilized. You ALL come.
Walt Whitman: "I will not have a single
person slighted or left away." But Taña
and these artists same-same: Once they regard
a thing, it becomes treasure. Surprise:
I'm not bored sitting day after day.

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to rest. Chinese know about working
hard, and give rest as a gift. "Sit.
Sit," they invite the guest. "Sit, la."
You take the crate or stool or the one chair
(Chinese invented chairs), saying,
"No, no, *you* sit, la,
don't stand on ceremony, thank you,
thank you." Purple Beard crouches, peers,
takes a kung fu step forward,
a tai chi step back, moves himself and
his metal easel right beside his subject,
paints, paints, backs away, easel
and all, paints some more. Turns his back
on the model and the picture, holds up a hand
mirror, and looks at their images in reverse,
turns around quick—catches something—
paints it down. As if I am
hard to see. The artist is doing mighty
feats of concentration to hold me real.
Across the courtyard is a south-facing
window, dark inside, nobody lives there.
One day, the window is utterly gone.
Nary a jamb or corner or glint remains.

The explanation has got to be that tree;
it leafed out, and put the window out
of sight. Must've mislooked, imagined
a window through the wavering spaces between
glittery leaves. Then, another day,
the leaves disappear, the tree disappears.
A green tree? A red tree? Gone.
And there's the window again. Next to the window
is a gray wall. There are no shadows
on it because no tree, no branches.
Only light, light that changes, changes
with the moving day. So beautiful, the non-
repeating universe, I could watch it forever.
So beautiful, the nothingness of the ground.
Suddenly, the artist picks up the painting,
turns it around, thrusts it toward its subject—
"Finis!"—and has him see his portrayal. Omigod!
So much strain. So many wrinkles.
Read the wrinkles. I'm straining might and main
to carry out ideals. I have ideals.
I didn't lose them along with my young self.
But I try too hard, the strain shows.
Not graceful under fire. I ended
the war in Viet Nam. I am determined,

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we shall stop warring in Iraq,
and Afghanistan. Well, not
the fun-loving monkey but the world-carrying
citizen, okay. Wittman leaves
the art village, leaves the picture for history.