

Part Two

Mountain streams above the waterfall are dammed

One day a sudden shock:

BOOM!

A violent turbulence

stirred up mud and soil.

Men and giant machines INVADED.

Broken rocks and earth,

suffocating turbid water,

dead fish floating:

no space, no place for us?

Fish market

Wide-eyed, death-flies, a frolic-like fluttering

sometimes, sudden spiralings

in the bright brunt bleached light,

drenched on dull slates to show

iced or fresh - gasping gills,

scattered scales, flapping fins,

squirming, eyes bulging,

drowning in shallow water -

lined stalls in the breaking hours of dawn.

Her red-purple thumb, swollen twice its size,

nags and throbs with pain (she'd reached for the buck-beaked
fish's head, a sudden jerk and the spine had pierced her).

She smooths the ice-cubes along the raised foam,

today's catch showcased in tanks, their movement

draws the eyes of early buyers.

Coming

Going

Filling

Unfilling

Stalls

Bellies

“I arrive at the market at 10 a.m. sharp every morning. I’d come earlier when there is a larger selection but, you know, there’s housework to be done. I’ll probably get a *shek-pan* and some shrimps which I’ll stir-fry with some vegetables. At first, I wasn’t used to the slippery staircase, squeezed between stalls, nor the sight of fishes under the knife, the yellow glow of the lights above, tinted red by the lampshades. Their mouths agape, lying on a bed of shredded ice, looking like some women while their husbands do the deed - don’t tell anyone that I told you that! Innards and bones (like plastic branches) exposed, hearts still pumping *thump thump thump*, flapping about in the boxes.

When I first set foot here with my mother,
I was no more than a new chick hatched in this village,
 Turning into a clucking curious kid,
 then a squawking moody teenager,
 a woman standing on her own two feet,
 now shrunken in size, backhunched, face *wrinkled*, punched.
Our houses, made with tin and boards we bought or found
 Lining the narrow alleys and streets, huddling close
 Postboxes hanging *crookedly*, numbers painted by hand
 Thin walls (sneezes, news, lovers’ quarrels seeping through)
We used to sit on doorsteps, talk until sunset
But ties are beginning to fray at the ends
 each goes to her own home
 Too many chores, too many to-do lists, “I don’t care to know”
Even so, life has been good to me
With my husband, my son, what else could I ask for?
To live in a place like this,
far from the filthy city smog and *débris*,
rush hours, bumping into others, moneyminded

True, I’ve given Chi Fu Fa Yuen
A few more glances than I should have...
What does it feel like to live in a brick block,
Instead of under a tin roof?
High and mighty above it all, sturdy and typhoon-proof.
I would love to have my own toilet
There is no space for us to build one
and the sewage system (so-called) can’t handle it
Ducking behind the houses
the rainwater channels where you find
remains from our toilets,

taps,
and the skies above
The stench unbearable
Smelling of
waste plastic rotten leftovers
from the day

Particularly when it's **magnified** by the heat
The sight of a stream of mink black ink streaked with green
Gurgling its way to the water fall
(or so they say)

Mice, a cockroach or two, mosquitos ...

I'll be dead before the government does anything

Those soul-suckers, they do nothing but poke and croak

And yet when it's time to act, they moan

"S o o n, s o o n ----- w e' r e o n t o i t. WHEN?!"

But the thought of leaving all this behind

Everything that I've known

is even harder to stomach

than the bad fish that gave me food poisoning.

Should I stay or go?

Can I go at all?

The dragon

swerves through our jungle once a year

guarding the waterfall and our doors,

luminous in the darkness

surrounded by a fog of incense,

awaiting the faithful.

where stainless pearls and corals shall be
the ornaments of my bed.

Tell my story in your homes
and I'll rise up once more.
My days shall never be numbered
as long as the dance is performed in my name.

Oh Master. Fine craftsman. My fate lies in your hands. I summon you.

Ng Kong-Kin – the master craftsman of fire dragons

My name is not Master
Don't call me Master
Now stop calling me Master

Nature bred me and my brother by sea and mountain
where we find grass, bamboo leaves and roots and sticks –
for the burning body of the fire dragon.

Yes, I'm the one who resurrects it.
See me by the village end,
get some bamboo and roots
and I'll walk you through
how I seal rattan into paired
eyes that glare
and weeds, shriveled, brittle, yellow
blocked into hay.
Watch and learn
how I stack and snap and wrap
the dewatered weakened dead grass
into the flesh
and bones of the King of the East Sea
(bent and bound in bamboo
strengthened by entangled wires).
You have to have strength as you
thrust and bend the boughs
against the cement floor.

Now you can see him smile -
his teeth glittering aluminum foil.
Five thousand years old,
the King still craves

in his golden blazing ball
the smells, the acidity of grapefruit
as incense pokes and penetrates his heart
and a soursweet liquor seeps out.

I stand, a mere worker with roughened hands
as he burns in the feverish moonlight
and breathes intense incense smoke
I see a shadow, a figure by the stone stairs...
I'm a craftsman you see, I am no master.

A python – that's how it started

a p y
t h

o n

ten or twenty or thirty meters long with green scales brown spots and
a bottomlessbottomlessbottomless cavity

it went and it stole
it stole and it gobbled
it gobbled and it went
foraging amongst
cows

or

chickens

or

goats

we smashed it and crushed it, punched it and crunched it
till it surrendered its green and brown
and rendered up its bottomless cavity

The King of the East Sea

was maddened:

he said we'd murdered his son,
a shapeshifter who inherited his
twirling elongated body.

And so a plague befell us,
body was stacked on body,
the decomposing smell
over Pokfulam when the Reaper called.

Uncle Chu closed his eyes and saw
Buddha's golden self,
told that a fire dragon dance
for three days and three nights
would pacify the East Sea King's bile.

So under the full Moon we dance
three days and three nights without rest
as incense smoke keeps at bay the chance
a plague will ever drift again to our nest.

Kids, remember to return his burning body
back to the salty water:
fire and water are destined to be foes
but they befriend each other in his soul.
Only when he's home can we find our peace
and peace is no more than
Gaa-Wo-Maan-Si-Hing*

**Cantonese: if the family is harmonious, everything will prosper*

A tourist visits the village

A line on a map.
"Home to 3,000".
I find:
Tin-roofed Tinted Narrow Plastic
huts huddled mailboxes alleys Piled up stools
together Shared toilets laundry Chipped
...with barelyenoughspacetobreathe paint

Trapped
in a -ings ngs in ple's
ring green with the sk heads
of silver their ies an in the
white build ceili- d peo- clouds

**hint: read this stanza vertically!*

A flash of light beneath my feet
reflected in the rock pool underneath.
The light that struck from above
like the love I felt from your touch.

We ran towards an abandoned bench
shirt and heart all but drenched.
Jittery from the lightning that barely missed,
I leant in, ready for a

“Por por! How much is this?”

Kids of our own? We could have... if I'd kissed you that night ...or hadn't left town...

I had bigger ambitions
this shop wasn't it.
I wasn't supposed to grow old
in a village like this.

“Yut mun.”
how she pouts...
I imagine our daughter would've
pouted the same way...
I beckon her over
*“Just one story and
I'll give it to you for free.”*

but I put her coin in my purse.

Calloused fingertips run (*thank you*) over coins once more;
counting on the same (*come again*) dead end.
The spectres of (I put her coin in my purse) yesterday.
A puppet, my bones
bend and contract -
the rehearsed phrases of everyday.

Same as last week. (*thank you*)
As last month. (*come again*)
As last year. (I put the coin in my purse)

Like (that last) life I lived in uncertain times.
I voyaged forward tried to make this life mine.

Marriage? A refuge for the weak?
A song for birds... those with no beak!

For I was a soaring swallow,
that no man could trace or follow.
To slow down, pause, want for less?
Only a fool trades a dream for a dress.

But now no one calls me; for
I have become the village por por
And there is no space for me
here in this village of tin.

I pray for more, want time to be reversed.
For my ashes to be strewn in a land far away.
If only my fate was not written in verse!

Selfish words, akin to a curse;
no desire - leads to a solitary life.
I pray for more, for time to be reversed.

I'll run in the rain (*come again*) profess my love:
if only my fate was not written in verse!

I'll bottle it in until the day that I burst.
Might you have taken me if I said 'yes' back then?
If my fate had not been written in verse?

(*Thank you.*

Come again.

Thank you.

Come again.)

Perhaps it's time to close the store
To leave before my feet grow into the floor
To rest my bones and live alo...
“*Por por!*”

Her pout I've seen before. My smile, for her, isn't old.
I pick her up, this delicate flower; who knows where she might go...
but for now she stares a hole into my dried tangerines out front.
"Tell one story!"

*"Nuwa rolled the clay in her hands
and breathed life into these lands.
We climbed out of the gap in her palms
Slouching our way to these open farms...
Travel. Brave new beginnings, tales of marvel.
You mustn't stop here, your view just one floor up.
Not sam, nor sei, nor em nor lok.
There's nothing here: out there lies the answer to a prayer."*

Once a village child

Our great grandfather put down a brick
and so owned this little square
Back in a time when you needed no ticks
from government with its charges - so unfair.
Then he got sick...
He grew up here, he died here
as a ghost he'll dwell forever here.

* To put one brick on the ground meant to occupy the land
then to build a house.

His refined nose could not resist
a whiff, a flavouring on the air
It's all in the water, tea-soaked tongues insist.
He reminisced about when he repaired tin ware.

Angry faced, the red Guan Gong
has a beard longer than his hair.
The white Gwun-Yum is ceramic.
Buddhas don't use chairs...
did those earlobes really exist?

*Traditional Chinese idol

* Buddhist divinity

In Choi Yuen, fruits are bigger than fists
But to go there? I don't dare.
My sisters have taken the risk
to steal a ripening pear.
Papayas seemed high on their list -

*Choi Yuen is one of the three zones of Pok Fu Lam Village

*It is believed papayas help to enlarge breasts

they can make breasts distinguished and rare.

“Zou-Sun, Mei, Sik-Zor-Farn-Mei?”

*Good Morning, Mei, have you eaten rice (=how are you)?

Mum’s yellow teeth were ablaze

“Your turnip cake is Ho-Ho-Mei!”

*Ho-Ho-Mei means very delicious

Their praises start a chase

“How could that be, when your ginger pork
is better ... always!”

“No No No!” “Yes Yes Yes!”

*humility - the repeated denial of compliments

A flood of overpraise.

As the gossip seeps, I crawl and creep
and bounce along to Long Zai Duk

*Long Zai Duk - one of the three zones of Pok Fu Lam Village

Alalala, Halu Halee – I

bump into Ng-Suk-Suk!

*Uncle Ng

“Mosquito, watch the road!”

*Mosquito (or Sai-mun-zai) is used to refer to small children

Bright mandarins are part of his load.

Crack, crack, crack, the tin gates rolled
open. Pop Chan-Bak’s head all bald

*Chan-Bak - Old Uncle Chan

“Fresh milk here! Come, Wa-Zai!

Drink, Fai-Gou-Zeong-Dai!”

* blessings for children to grow taller

“But Chan-Bak I want to have a Coke...”

He laughs and gives my head a stroke
pulling down the red bucket that dangles from a rope,
fetching a dau-ling coin for me, the bucket flying back

*dau-ling - colloquial word for cents

“Get yourself a drink or a snack.”

A millstone grinds soya beans,

Fung-Tse’s tofu hands

*Fung-Tse - Sister Fung

Rivulets of sweat, her sheen

as she makes our home cuisine.

Gai-see-tang in lotus leaves

*(chicken poop vine) a local sticky dessert only found in old villages

and tea fruits in black woks

*(Cha-guo) a local sticky dessert

Fried Stuffed Treasures come in threes,
with delicious steam on the breeze.

* local street food of fried stuffed eggplants, chillies and bell peppers

“1,2,3...”, Ah-Dat’s up the tree, and Zhu Tau’s quick to flee

*Zhu Tau means Pig Head, a typical nickname

Where should I hide? Which alley?

An all-time winner like me!

A messy maze but with a mental map. . . .
surfing through white shirts and skirts, Nan's sunbathing cotton flowers,
tangerines carefully peeled, posters, pipes and posts in a narrow lane, *peeled tangerines (= chan-pei)
bleached benches, falling flakes and flip-flops near a drain
Lunar calendars, Lucky Cats, and lawful loutish clocks. *Lucky Cats (or Ziu Choi Mao)
Ah-Yan's door is open, I saw her frocks and socks.
Ears pricked
 – something clicks!

Finally, I'm here, this scarecrow fence *Pok Fu Lam Village has a place with teddy bears as scarecrows
of strange teddy bears.

I rubbed my eyes. I stretched my arms. My aching back protests.

Eating poon choi at Mid-Autumn festival

candles blushing for the pomeloes

“Wa-zai's a leather lantern – forever not enlightened!” *Cantonese idiom

Now flashlights come and *Orchid Grass* has electric minor tunes *a folk song

La me me me me, re do, re do ti la

Where are the condensed milk tins and broken umbrella sticks?

Where is the salty fish and wax sausages, the baubles and tinsels

of Our Winter Festival?

Where is Chan-Bak in chicken-wing sleeves, crutch waving like a conductor,

fishing for words, finally yelling, “You little mosquito!” *chicken-wing sleeve = sleeveless