



*HOW  
OFTEN  
I HAVE  
CHOSEN  
LOVE*

*XIAO YUE SHAN*

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## PRAISE FOR SHAN'S POETRY

“Xiao Yue Shan’s poems are both alight and firmly buried into the earth at the same time. What a wonderful discovery of Shan’s poems. In a poem, “the worth of a woman’s life in China,” Shan writes: “in china they say a man is like a mountain/and a woman is like a river. it is because we spread/to fill empty spaces.” Shan’s poems both create spaces we didn’t know existed and spread to fill them with new words and combinations of words. Definitely a poet to watch!” — Victoria Chang, Guggenheim Fellow & author of *Barbie Chang*

“I’m bonkers for these poems. Be still my heart. The love of this world, its inhabitants painted with all palettes from dusky to florescent to bloody, infuses every line in this volume. Like many of ‘us’ today, I am drowning in books. This book made me want to drown right in its pages. I’ll be reading it on repeat.” — Jordan A. Y. Smith, Editor-in-Chief of *Tokyo Poetry Journal*

“Creation myth does not do justice to the ambition of Xiao Yue Shan’s poems which, by straddling the mythical-poetic and the historical, transform both into a vision that is completely the poet’s own. Shan’s lines have the effect of being simultaneously heavy and effortless—a quality that rhymes beautifully with her speaker’s prevailing attitude of critical fascination with the world. From the injustices of history to the injustices of the present, from the joys of childhood to the wisdom of adulthood, Shan’s poems bring us into intimate engagement with her inner world” — Simon Shieh, Editor-in-Chief of *Spittoon Literary Magazine*

HOW OFTEN I HAVE CHOSEN LOVE

FOR MY MOTHER, 张冠伟  
FOR MY FATHER, 单连泉

when I was four years old my parents took me to tiananmen square

1.

in the train car from dongying  
to beijing, the light, 3am humming, sleeps  
in strange directions. different weights

of yellow. I close my eyes,  
dizzy. mama's warm hand greying exhale  
against my forehead, the world

escapes by in the window, like fleeing.  
I didn't realize it was we  
who were running, and everything else

was still. it takes time  
to figure out different kinds  
of quiet. like how colours come

to belong to their names, and if blue ever  
gets bluer. there are boiled chestnuts  
in mama's coat, and she cracks them for me

one by one until  
we arrive at tiananmen  
in time for dawn. the sun

looks as if it was put  
hastily in the sky. hesitant despite having risen  
the same way for ever. a flag is raised

into it, as if this is the thing  
that makes and unmakes  
the day.

2.

feed the dead raw silk and organza.  
feed them gold-plated sunflower  
seeds in water-chipped ming bowls,  
holy basil, wild ginger. feed them white  
buns with hearts of brown  
sugar, spooned porridge under pink  
cotton quilts in bouts of childhood  
fever. feed them freshwater pearls.  
they were loved. they were the most  
loved. in a garden plant 200 or 1000  
orchids, shoot the bulbs into the  
ground. pile gunpowder over them.  
hope they will still grow stalks of  
colour. feed the dead soft plums  
and seawater. give them something  
to bite on, before you begin to  
remember.

3.

mama knit stories. a woman who filled  
the ocean with milkstones,  
a girl and a rabbit and a peach tree  
  
on the moon. stories steeled in centuries  
that sang our blood  
a chinese blood. myths barefoot to the strain  
  
of erhu strings. a sky boiling  
under nine suns, crossing seas  
upon a sword— stories  
  
we do not negotiate  
as we do facts  
about how many died

and where. and when. and men packed  
like tindersticks, some  
light between them. I watched

mama's shoulders downward  
in front of an oil portrait, hung over a fiery shade  
of carmine that everyone knows

means lucky.  
I'm in a green dress.  
papa takes my photo, standing

in a thrill of poppy and chrysanthemum,  
under the painting of a man who looks  
like my grandfather.

4.

let me walk down the paper-white roads of chengdu one more time. let me  
green my arm in the waters of songhua river, glance over my  
grandmother's table. let me watch the steam weeping from windows  
down shangde avenue. let me do it without bravery.

let me swim in the yangtze. let me  
touch the softening cheeks of my mother. let me put my daughter's  
shoes on for her. give me time to figure out how to be more  
than water. let me see my home town through the smoke  
of my uncle's cigarette. let me please see november. let this day pass  
without my having done anything to end it.



5.

it is a red light that sounds through the flag  
and I am experiencing, in a little life,  
the closest thing yet

to prayer. the palm,  
the white glove,  
the breast, fine

and whole. no one admits june fourth  
through the gates, so we all stand around flowers  
and little girls and we say;

pretty. remember our names do not have long to live  
either. we are lucky if they even  
grow old with us. oh, and, the day is the thing

that gets blue  
and bluer. someone had a dream that heaven  
could be a modifier for earthly

peace, then men died, and the next morning  
we woke up complicit. liars  
when our feet

touched the land.  
with noonshine sounding copper  
on my wrists, I watched papa's spine iron

with pride. his china, the spring front ancient  
and careful, our breathing  
not filled with ghosts, but

mulberries. chang-an jie is ripe and glossed  
with bodies, smoking and laughing and beginning  
things. I looked both ways and couldn't see

the end of it.

and hong kong in 2001 was always this shade of light blue

papa was a communist  
making parts for  
it wasn't quite proper  
coming home with black oil  
but I guess we  
the kitchen at night  
and bare hot-july chests  
yellow slick skin  
grease throat laughter  
white-blue hong kong dusk  
through the open  
the balcony brimmed  
stalks of lucky bamboo  
it was  
so I curled on  
half naked  
overflowing ashtrays  
mama putting on lipstick  
occasionally threatening  
and the hungry skyline  
into the neon basin  
around the table  
they were taxi drivers  
shined woks  
loved their country  
papa had skinny arms  
mama wore hoop earrings  
sometimes I wish we  
with 50000 yuan  
that they kept laughing  
popping caps  
doing bad impressions  
some teresa teng song  
a smell of smoked duck  
in that 400 square foot  
where no one ever got

mama worked in a factory  
airplanes  
for girls to stay out all day  
on the pales of fine necks  
needed the money  
shined of cigarette smoke  
men swilling warm beer  
steamed chestnut shells  
glass spilling laughter  
peppering our mouths  
window  
with pots of laundry water  
red-gold ribbon curls  
too loud to sleep  
papa's knee  
among the sunflower seeds  
black sesame cakes  
over the steaming stove  
to call someone's wife  
no longer fit  
of shing min river  
red cheeks red palms  
low-level bureaucrats  
pulled rickshaws  
just enough  
skimpy black moustache  
a filthy mouth  
never left china  
a single suitcase  
chain-smoking  
off green tsingtao bottles  
of their bosses  
swaying the hot air  
steamed sweet potato  
one bedroom apartment  
to finish a sentence

## the girls of harbin

*for my mother, zhang guanwei*

they call them northern lilacs, winter beauties. they say coral-hawberry cheeks in nomadic january, that between the baroque quarters of songhua river you can see the small hem of a gold-brocade cashmere kissing the ice-crushed curb. they say in harbin, you can watch girls just walk, forever. that she sweeps through the city and the streets make music against her body. in heilongjiang, the days are so short for so long, but the light loves the skin it lands on—seemingly staying for awhile, breathlessly frosting, hinting of water, before washing itself away. they say the further north the further you are from heaven. and maybe that's why the girls here are milk-bathed, long-necked, laughing, shaking out their hair from glazed-shell pins, looking at you that way. no matter where they are, they're thirsty for a winter that blurs the edges of when their shoulders meet the air, pale as horizon. they say when russia came with its railroads and cathedrals and black bread, it was girls with whom they drank vodka from porcelain bowls, tearing red sausage teeth-first from coal-charred steel, girls with eyes and lips satin as ricepaper, girls measured with peaches, girls daughters of refugees and criminals and girls who knew the needlepoint of new snow against raw fingertips, combing through the land, knitted with ice like lacework, for something, oh, anything to eat. it is because the winter-earth has been thawed by blood, here, that they say you will never hurt a girl from harbin. that she wears honey on her breath but doesn't talk sweet. that she'll break a window before she opens a door. that she eats ice cream in the dead of december, licking a black sesame drip from a bare wrist. girls in harbin know to never complain about the cold. they press it to their chests as a bouquet of bluebells. or a blade under the sleeve. and through shuangcheng to yilan you don't get tired of watching girls walk. the winter chrysalis shedding in mid-may turns the day orange, dripping so, and you'll see them in their thigh-skimming skirts, lips just-bitten red, throwing a sudden black braid over the shoulder, tossing easy a wind that always blows north-ward, disrupting the timid spring day like a wild peony bursting, breaking the bud with one flick of a silken skirt.

## ornithomancy

on peace boulevard some engine thunder sends  
stray pavement tumbling, and in the black  
dust of travel an ear is put to the ground to hear  
the idiolect of footpaths, mineral-old, still  
somehow speaking. language pulling knots in  
the veins of the city. traffic serving its metronomic,  
hypnotic purpose. beijing whose cartography  
was modelled after the angelic. from gem-windows  
thriving skyward, the dimmed land still gathers up  
breath and smoke all in some apparition,  
a city in gauze looking almost like heaven. a city  
in bandages amidst its own demolition. no one  
will ever again say that it's just like we never left.  
what's left? camphor and paper houses.  
the orange light is purple and grey and too-blue.

between the slender courtyard walls it seems  
everything is counting on all this being kept  
just between us. a carved sparrow trying to fly from  
the pear-wood frame before its contractual, imminent  
expropriation. a city clerk marries his pen  
to the page and two days later mingshan houjie  
is smoke and knee-deep in a red rage, ochre  
brick broken from walls once laced through with  
the scripture of thin broths, secrets, ceremony.  
the children born on this ground were always  
ancient. their stunning bodies calling backward,  
backward, a lineage of soil and clay. here we  
buried milk names. here we lit golden bells.  
and as the razing rhythms on we lock the doors  
that no longer serve their purpose of protecting.  
at our feet shatters a sparrow's wings, wide  
amidst chipped sprays of chrysanthemum,  
toothless eaves, pale tiles scattered like petals.

## willingly into the muting blue

all the while down minsheng road the cars curl around one another, almost kissing. in the dark looking enough like bodies that it was easy to forget they had people inside of them.

smog glared against the sky. grey on grey.

somebody said this wasn't ordinary traffic. somebody had a hot dinner waiting back at home.

eight pm sees teenagers just out of class. angels against glory-white doorways. the convenience store named after the moon. hand-warmed bottles of too-sweet tea. pink cream pastry, bare forearms and cheeks blue and perfect in the cellophane light.

wives, holding plastic flowers, spilling over the street-corner. someone invents the tangerine peony.

in the middle of the qizheng courtyard a tall bust of venus, piano-white. shadows doing work hands cannot. no one knows who built her or why one shoulder slopes, our marbled swan in foreign river-water. no one lives in the qizheng buildings, not for a long time.

pride, maybe. or guilt from not coming home more often.

goldfish tied to hooks on the pavilion we're still laughing.

streets of oyster-shell pattern.

the tallest gravestones in the huang shan cemetery are still the ones for the russians. mandarin prayers for slavic names. stalks of closed tulips. tissue-paper aster, carefully purple, frosting over.

it is said that the ghosts of the occupiers feel just as at home as the ghosts of the occupied.

woman selling hawberries in syrup outside the old synagogue. between her and the arched doorway a pure, white space.

beer and warm vodka. beer and warm vodka. she sits at the table in her high collar opening bottles all night. beer and warm vodka. she drinks when they tell her to drink. she smiles her small, close-lipped smile.

the sound of water being poured into a hot wok is so familiar it reminds everyone of their mothers.

cars parked on sidewalks. cars the meeting place for furtive trades. cars driven into walnut trees.

back end of a truck filled with green-stained wooden slats. front end of the truck nowhere to be found.

the gift of grapefruit on a tuesday. the shop just got them in. how do you eat this? she asks, tapping the rippled skin with a fingernail.

the thing about uninhabitable places is that you have to wonder who lives there.

don't fall asleep in the car. your spirit won't know the way back home.

easy to tell who was raised right by the way they pick out fruit. heaviest ones are the juiciest. thinly pressing the bursting skin of a nectarine. knuckles knocked against watermelon rinds.

her needle digs tiny tunnels along the seam, the thread following like river-water.

cold that the air freezes clean. nothing leaves a trace, save for the astonished breath turning into snow.

in the window: silk, dried plums, cutting board, wool socks.

they said that all the pretty girls were cabaret hostesses, and all the ugly ones were dentists.

a man reads the paper and shells beef into white buns, selling them for eight yuan through a half-cracked door. glass impressioned with grime. letters in red and less-red.

in winter harbin is a diamond. city somehow orienting itself around its prisms.

she's in bed wearing a yellow nightgown. light from other apartments sheening colour on her still face. her little hand on top of the crochet pillowcase.

we are still inheriting linens from our great-grandmothers.

tomorrow is the sun and moon nestled next to one another. then the sky.

day red day blue day.

## the nation of aphasia

when a writer goes missing in china  
we take the red and gold paper emblems  
that display the character for luck  
off of our doors and paste them  
over our mouths. and we go back to  
the old books to learn again  
what we've learned for millennia,  
that you can command armies or  
recompose history or traverse  
from xian to changsha to mount lu  
or buy a dozen eggs and none of it  
will mean that your life is a promise  
your country makes to you.  
hong kong is a dewdrop glittering  
in mid-january. we close our eyes  
to take its temperature, trying to find  
just the right word. the rain  
only a sweet-tasting silhouette against  
the gleaming skyline. late-day light  
spreads a white sheet over the windows  
and no one can see in. no one can see out.  
still, no one ever thinks this is the day  
someone will knock on the door  
asking you to identify your husband  
by his handwriting. how is it that  
we have made a culture out of  
paying a heavy price. wearing out stones  
with water. chasing the sun across  
the eastern front with our poems  
closing in behind us like lost birds.  
the gardens we do not tend. the paper  
boats we do not try in the yangtze.  
imagine your life is the thing  
that is trapped on the tip of your tongue,  
the word that is almost realized,  
but you can't quite think of.

## ideogram of morning

over rooftops written  
timidly into the city like  
fiction, we waited

for the day  
thickly blue  
between our teeth

pristine cotton light  
unpacking flora  
onto our limbs

chiaroscuro  
of cold juniper  
silvering wisteria

trying to start  
with our bodies  
a dialogue about colour

we bore witness  
to our own  
creation myth

and the red  
was in exactly  
the right place

you were  
a perfect compromise  
a truce on the white concrete

like someone  
all of a sudden  
thought

to build into a window  
what the light looks like  
as it is passing through



## explain to me fate as if I were a child

how do things come up to be next  
to one another. streets with no names  
pressed poorly upon mountains, molasses  
twilight holding the day, hip  
pushed to hip during rush hour,  
and old photographs leaving yellow oil  
upon the new. the city-bound flocking  
above the river-water, the benevolent  
laying her hands on the unforgivable,  
the living light that eagerly tenderizes  
the dying one. how does a child  
meet the future just so,  
how do sprouts meet their flowers,  
how do various evenings meet in the kitchen  
over broths and breads. how many pairs  
of hands carried fruit to this bowl.  
what rhythm of music led some eyes  
from here, to a place a little more  
dangerous. how did we come to be with  
one another, here as if enchanted, with  
no more reason than two grains of sand,  
and no less intoxication than two winds,  
infuriated by the distance  
they've both had to come.

梦

I lay my head down on a pillow piled  
with characters, yellow tracks and traces  
of the name I was given. I sleep  
on chinese every night. I speak  
dialects inside my head, words strange and  
pelagic. words harnessed to a shore. language  
that asks for directions back to the main street,  
for a second helping, for a mother. there is a child  
whose head fits where mine does, upon  
cotton worn to silk by years and years  
of sleep. I do not know how to speak chinese  
that does not belong to the child. I know how  
to ask for milk but not scissors. I know how to ask  
to be held but not to explain why. I bite down  
hard on a word. black sesame word, warm tofu word,  
morning words. in the mid-minute above waking  
I remember every moment of a dream,  
before forgetting.

when you plant a seed in vietnam it grows and grows

the mekong seems like the edge of the world  
but it can't be. that would mean we came

from somewhere,

but behind there's nothing but green.  
moon, moths, the oily throats of wild banana trees

all green.

the woman rows the boat and she is green, her skin  
takes root. this water, thick and dark as the mouths

of doves,

seems home to even far away places. a man dips his feet  
into it, sways. holds. he is drinking. light freezes

and does not touch.

palm fronds and straw-stems and blue tarps  
float and then are swallowed. here the earth

takes from us.

everything we relinquish and abandon  
she receives and weighs in her hand, forces it

to bear fruit.

fruit that is sweet to the point of seeming  
mysterious. here our bodies are salt and

the light licks at us

as if we were a wound she wanted to heal.  
here one only has to open a mouth to be relieved

of thirst.

the whole air is here. whole days of clouds.  
we fall sleep in sweat and smoke, safe knowing

we will wake up green.

## search by no light

by the antibesian waters  
of tokyo bay  
I search my body  
by no light

learning and naming  
what I alone can touch  
leather pearl  
paper silver

where and how  
within me contains  
artillery  
who put it there why

the moon admitted  
courting river birches  
light does not blanch  
hand prints water stains

upon the skin  
past touches lie  
powdered  
sifted and merging

the secret taste  
the bullet rising  
my creation myth  
has no tale of falling

## easier if we cried

sitting across from one another with cigarettes we keep forgetting, san francisco hanging like sheets to be kicked away in the middle of the night. I can tell by how beautiful you are becoming that something different will be said. careful to salt the words before you let them leave. july daze was gauzed around our shoulders, heat that alighted wildflowers, that convinced the sweet out of the wine. you are so thin I would believe someone's rib was used to make you, all deep breaths and clicks of your bad wrist. the bare leaf of your upper back, you're sitting so still but your body looks like

it remembers falling. you say, and then I woke up and this guy I've never seen before was having sex with me. our stupid, heavy language. this wooden, through language that makes a fist out of your beautiful mouth. words naked by light, green-olive bitter, soaked with evening. we always knew we weren't new things. you would point at my collarbone and say, this hollow here, showing me the places love would discover. slights that act as stopping-places for sandy water, jasmine-smell, lips that could not be redder. you say when the right person touches you it feels like grasses growing up between cobblestones, and then you woke up and this guy you've never seen before was- that sounds like rape, I say, too quickly. I don't want to think about it that way. you said. the small linen of your skin, knitted with blush. fingers stiffened in the shape of a pistol. the car that forgot you were in the trunk when it dove into the river. I'm always putting out my hand to find ashtrays

that I didn't know were there. if you never say never, you can't say nevermind. I don't want this to be one of those things where I reach out to take your hand and discover that they are the same size. you are so small, on the other side of the table. candlelight sculpted a mirror of you in the glass, smoothing down the corners. you, softer. I want to not be scared that you would be scared if I touched you. it's for selfish reasons. I don't know how to fix fruit broken with bruised, full bites. peach flesh and shrapnel on your chair. I can't think about it that way, you said, so, so, beautifully. the perfect note of your skin to punctuate the sentence of you and I sitting there. it was july in san francisco. I was holding the word rape in front of your mouth like a knife. all this intention we sacrifice to the open air. I want to pick up the telephone of your mouth and use it to call backwards, ask to speak to you then, just one more time. the silence before you say hello,

on loop. that hollow there.

## inheritance

my mother says about hong kong:  
that wasn't your life. that was my life.  
she meant the chicken boiling with anise  
on the stove and the rouge pinking the edge  
of the wooden spoon. the broth she raised to  
her mouth to taste. she meant I couldn't taste.  
too young. she put cotton over my mouth  
when we went outside. air softened. it was  
her life. all skins of oranges left outside  
to dry and the anthemic thunder— this  
is not the life I want for my child.  
that was her life. I run into hong kong  
on the street in the summertime. I say  
I got off the plane and came right to see you.  
she wears orange. rouge. my mother's face.  
upon her so few places to lie. we sit in a cafe  
in sheung wan with pink cups eating  
bean cakes, and later I call my mother to say  
I found our old apartment building.  
that I had walked up the blue stairs  
and laid my hand on the door.  
hong kong a neon neckline, long hair glittering  
with ship-lights, crystal balls, storm velvets.  
it's her life, yet I had come, and grown  
my hair, and happened upon the eastern sun  
like a moon. a life pearled into stories  
served on porcelain into the mouth  
of a hungry child.

## the diaspora roommate

coming in from doorways  
opposite into a room  
that seemed to face whichever way  
the sun was coming in, all of the time.  
you were hanging clothes with your shoes on  
and the room was pendulous  
with your testaments—  
your furniture. your pictures  
and a quilt draped on the bed  
made by your grandmother.  
*when did you get here*, I asked.  
*a little while before you did*, you said.  
and we stood for awhile unsure  
pebbling our individual scripts  
with our few common words.  
*can I sit there*, I pointed  
to the velvet-looking window seat.  
*actually, that's a family heirloom*  
*but you can sit here*, you pulled up  
a wooden chair. I smiled. you did too.  
I pulled green dates and candied  
hawthorns from my pocket  
and we shared them. I felt precious  
to be with you, when you told me stories  
about here. the room was warm  
and water white from the tap was cold  
and good. you asked me, *why did you*  
*come?* and I said, *I heard good things*  
*about this place*. you liked that. you nodded  
with pride. we slept side by side  
that night. you on your bed and I  
on my coat spread out on the floor.  
I didn't have very much. you understood.  
I knew that you were here first. you agreed.  
but when the patterns of this world  
began to show upon my skin  
I felt as if I were home. you didn't disagree.  
after awhile I seeded some small pots  
with anise and papered the drawers  
pink and yellow. at night you asked me questions  
and I answered them. *my father's farm.*  
*chives and cabbages. the mountains.*  
*some places especially enchanted*

*on the edge of october.*

you let your hand fall  
and touched the floor, as if  
testing the temperature. I lit sticks of incense  
stuck into oranges and told stories  
infinite as the evening. you played records  
that did sound exactly like blue.  
sometimes I called home.  
sometimes we shared cigarettes.  
sometimes we spared one another  
the little indignities of writing names  
on bags of apples. sometimes we didn't.  
we varied in shape and left trails  
of different colours as we moved  
here and forth, across the room.  
I loved you from certain angles—  
your different astrology, newspapers,  
and you loved the things I gave  
without knowing. the sweet taste of salt  
and sheets of wild silk, thin as sprouts.  
some things we never managed  
to teach one another. the feeling of hot oil.  
prayers. the xi of my name.  
you soundlessly replaced certain  
things of mine. a word here.  
a taste, a colour elsewhere. and when  
it became cold I sometimes pulled  
your grandmother's quilt from your bed  
and wrapped myself deep within it.  
I did not feel guilty to know what  
was yours, and what was mine. we lived  
without consciousness. we were not careless  
though from beyond the window it may  
have seemed so. we did not have  
a mutual language by which to explain  
why. the small room and its white  
concrete walls unfolded  
in various blooms. single light.  
multitudinous voices. our respective  
breathing revolving.  
you, who was here first.  
and I, who was here anyway.



in which we have never returned from our wars

when waiting becomes something to measure  
eternity with  
and because time is without quantity  
it is able to detain a whole country in  
dark oaken stasis  
violence was shared equal between the land  
and the bodies of our youth  
during the winter of 1969  
spaces gouged deep within them  
as if something green  
may one day grow there

eventually all things come to rest  
on the horizon even our children  
the stiff fields of maize and sorghum  
continued to be tended for new seed  
even as the mothers on their knees  
within them paused again and again  
disbelieving the barren days  
unfolding letters  
from their sons who were somewhere  
in xinjiang or siberia  
and having to find one of the three men  
left in the village who could read

november bleeding into february  
my father answered a knock at the door  
every couple of weeks  
receiving mail from his classmates  
who had not been able  
to afford gloves in their school days  
he read passages aloud to waiting parents  
*it's just a little cold not so bad*  
sometimes he received lightbulbs  
in brown paper still warm as thanks

my father            the patriot            believed  
    in the greatness            of country  
and the men            willing to die            many  
ordinary deaths—            by ice            by starvation  
                                  for            it  
                                  still            the bodies  
deified by frost            seemed shameful  
                                  like all            things done  
                                  where our mothers            cannot see

                                  strange                                    to think  
that a nation can build itself up            and wide  
                                  and grey            without days ever seeming  
to have gone by            men blackened by snow and  
living on paper                                    with them standing  
so still like this                                    hands open like this

## the worth of a woman's life in china

never looking backward. never calling out  
their names. your accusers. your torturers.  
picking up the long-soft fruits of a gone summer,  
never straying too close to the water.  
in china they say a man is like a mountain  
and a woman is like a river. it is because we spread  
to fill empty spaces. because we allow for  
greenness. it is because they drink  
freely from us. because they carve routes  
upon us. because when our lifeless bodies are swept  
into the delta it can be said that we are simply  
returning. they may then rinse the blood  
from their hands with our hems. perhaps  
it is that we slowly darken with their dirt,  
their sand, their spit, their sweat,  
their urine. in the dim throb of moonlight  
a thousand chinese daughters melt into  
the fertile soil. millet will be grown there. oilseed,  
cotton. and in the speed by which crops of autumn  
come a thousand more girls will be bowed,  
mouth-first, into the land. to be seeded,  
to be plough. it cannot be seen from above, but only  
from looking backward. yet when standing upon  
an edge one does not glance behind,  
but only beyond. so it is that these daughters  
continue to become wives, continue to become  
mothers. so it is that the good women  
have survived! upon the paths crawled deep  
by slender forearms, by black plaits shorn close  
to the skull. upon the ground cultivated by  
a monthly blood, good women have walked. those who  
take no notice of their scars, for they no longer  
hurt. truly we have come far. truly we have come here.  
here the daughters of this splendid, instant metropolis  
are dwelled and glittering into hotel windows,  
oscillating rings of bluish light, jacquard gowns  
and jewels upon the toes of high-heeled shoes.

their soft bodies threaded in and out  
of bedroom doorways and rimmed with pastel  
laces. yet baited by the crystalline  
frame the silken bed is beaten into a hook  
upon which the act of using is synonymous with the act  
of making love. yes, the glass candelabras. yes,  
the swollen green rings of jade. yes, the millennial  
shade of lipstick! yes, the lozenges made from pearl-dust!  
they are escorted from girlhood in the blaze  
of a pinking glory! nothing like the university students  
of the revolution who plucked slivers of bamboo  
from the deeps of their thighs. nothing like the childless  
mothers of northern earthquakes. nothing like porridge  
and boiled cabbage every night. violence  
has slipped into richer clothing. it has been cured  
from stone into diamond. yes, it can no longer be said  
that we are worthless, for we can be weighed,  
wrapped. we can be sold. we can be purchased.  
at train stations and fruit stands and fragrant department  
stores, and of course, what can be bought can also  
be stolen. they still pull us into gutters.  
pass us off to fellow soldiers. they have used the mouths  
of bottles and the branches of firs. they still do, though there are  
new, more intricate ways to destroy. new concrete steps  
stitched crooked to the side of the same cascade, same river.  
same wreckage, same water. where have we travelled  
in never looking backward. never naming  
our devourers. our inflictors. what is the worth  
of a woman's life in china. I'll tell you. it is the life  
of every man who has spit into her water.

## how often I have chosen love

how often I have chosen love  
in the chestnut of november  
when the night cracks open and is yellow  
the dusk lifts the city up towards mid-air  
how it stays there  
pendulating and trembling  
grasped in the palm-sized wind

daily how I have chosen the lemon tree  
hanging over the slatted rooftop  
and tatami shade  
copper-colour, time-stoned  
every shape of the moon having made  
itself upon it  
bearing fruit  
such heavy living fruit  
to be picked by no one

how every rained-in morning  
spoke itself in unison  
just as I have chosen to meet it  
and all the distance was electric  
pretty girls standing paled  
roman windows spun with wire  
along the circle paths of daikanyama  
river pebbles

how I have chosen to love a city  
that takes from other cities  
the whole of tokyo a lockbox  
overflown with photos of flowers  
passing the bike rack by nakameguro station  
upon which miki had brushed her hair  
and taught me dirty words in japanese  
few leaves clinging  
I imagined I heard the sound green made  
threading the cherry trees

how often I have chosen the sumida  
and the sight from the middle  
standing on the red bridge looking  
at the blue bridge  
as a man pours half a bottle of whiskey  
into the river and it whirled  
inward like a handprint

should I mention the fingernail moon

how I had once boarded a train to ibaraki  
and peeled mandarin oranges  
until citrus drowned the stale air  
I watched heels dig perfect circles  
into the snow and seedlings shot up  
from where precisely they had stood  
it was easy to imagine  
what could be watercolour  
a painted moment otherwise gone  
saved for later

names of people do not come as easily  
as the names of rivers  
at the photographic museum I saw  
a flock of birds all rise at once  
save for one who nailed  
a piece of the ground underneath him

how often we sat by the heating lamp  
smoking our different cigarettes  
as their tails drew non-figures upward  
we read them as symbols  
you did not look at me at first and then  
you looked at me  
my hand was painted into the dim  
in yanaka the trees grew into houses  
and we did not spend too much time thinking  
about who lived here before

how clouds turned into gold once  
they touched the ground in shinjuku  
how lightbulbs shed their cloud-glow  
upon those who kissed under them

ikegami: in the mute plum garden  
combed through whitely  
by generations of hands  
starlight is vivified when reflected  
off the skin of a plum

how I had walked  
on music shed by passersby careless  
leaving strings of words dangling  
handed to me adjacently  
from both sides  
even sometimes laughter  
even sometimes ginger flowers  
passed over and I took them

the acquiescing light tied around  
wild-pink buildings  
by some hand wishing  
I take it a sign of my good youth  
that I am still enraptured by sunsets

how I was taught the right way to pray  
with a ten yen coin  
by someone who loved me  
up an uncountable number of stairs  
the jagged papers spun  
as though the forces of our shadows  
inhumanly elongated  
ruffled the hems of a spiritdom  
there were three anonymous flowers  
growing from the stone

how often fresh figs were cracked  
against the concrete linings in toyama-koen  
capsuled in droplets of lilac sun  
their sweet smell

how often I have chosen love  
upon this ground every block charted  
by prodigal feet, by unnamed rulers  
in the onset of winter a cartography emerges  
a heart startles heavy  
traffic blindly intersecting  
in tokyo where there is no patience  
after having chosen



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