

NOTES FOR POEMS

The following poems are composed entirely of language from oral histories of the Yangtze River (長江) basin in China, where my ancestors have lived for generations. I drew words and phrases from a series of oral histories organized by the banned Chinese environmentalist and journalist Dai Qing and published with translations by Probe International. These testimonies reflect the construction of the Three Gorges Dam in 1994, the world's largest hydroelectric project, which submerged hundreds of villages and displaced millions of people living in riverside towns and villages.

FROM HANKOU draws from "The Yangtze River Tow Men," an oral history testimony of Tan Bangwu, recorded by Liu Bai and translated by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li.

http://probeinternational.org/library/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/TGP_OH5_towmen.pdf

PER CAPITA draws from "Lost Lives: The Plight of the Migrants," an oral history testimony of Chen Guangjiao, recorded by Liu Wei and translated by Maui Dean.

http://probeinternational.org/library/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/TGP_OH4.pdf

CONTRACT draws from "Bright Sun City's Dark Intent," the oral history testimonies of Fang Yunchao, Wang Like, Kuang Angen, and Tan Guixiang, recorded by Liu Bai and translated by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li.

http://probeinternational.org/library/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/TGP_OH3_0.pdf

PETITION draws from "Lost Lives: The Plight of the Migrants," an oral history testimony of Chen Guangjiao, recorded by Liu Wei and translated by Maui Dean.

http://probeinternational.org/library/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/TGP_OH4.pdf

STORY OF STAR ANISE WHARF draws from "Absence of Justice," an oral history testimony of Lu Chengming, recorded by Liu Bai and translated by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li.

http://probeinternational.org/library/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/TGP_OH2_justice.pdf

From Hankou

they had rocks these special swimmers
pulling their pea pod low boats old
as the tow rope blue sky with a white
disc on it danger crashing the crushed

stone banks of the stream bent bodies dark
as tobacco or plain sailing enough
for six men jumping around on the cliffs
like cats to fend off the boat squatting

old river mouth on the boulders their reasons
leaping about like ditchwater over
their shoulders river song they sang
at each bend there were rapids bowing

to oars from entire cedar trees wearing
straw sandals boiled in limewater cigar twisted
in what's disappeared from the scholars
above the water scores they had drunk

in the gorges eyes came to see what
would be gone soon locals pretended
to be boatmen old-style to spin a buck from
this drum up business or spirit of shoulders

they had breathed their wind their legs
soaked all day dripped on the back
of the black dragon after the dam
he was 89 years old or he was 90 by

reckoning now it's all done with the old
people said a long time ago you could see
pulp tow boats along the muddy river wooden
captains bent like bows in the water

Per Capita

danger of vegetation danger
of white-haired redress take a look
down the stairway above the lower floor
to streams along the purlin
on all sides we want to go back
on all sides a rainstorm struck
from the top of the ridge side walls
eight members of my family
flooding the kitchen completely
for several generations danger
photocopied by the Committee
arranged by the contracts
with the shrubs danger of grass
-land and rock with seventeen cracks
in the floors sinking on the east
side soaked with one hundred years
of fruit trees built or borrowed
or bought danger of rented houses
or relative houses temporary
shelters in which to live danger
of mass and of letter take a look
Old Man Chen what else
should be translated by crushing

Contract

It was late autumn and it rained a lot in Bright Sun
City the migrants stayed crammed in that little room—very

clean and tidy clothes even if full of holes supported
by a few beams loans collapsed at any moment with the rain

beating down on the shelter and frogs croaking outside
for a meal—cut off from water supply one light bulb

they needed hanging from the ceiling the bricks properly
washed like a t-shirt or rice seedlings in a big swamp—

who has been very sad or doesn't know the policies who
can cope without compensation for nine gullies borrowed

from four people trying to muddy the waters digging
wells damaging corn and sweet potatoes probably squandering

their whole time to sell the plough ox in document
40 or expire the loan where this story takes place who exactly

was responsible for piglets—please refer to transactions
in Great Prosperity Town after the migrants arrived of which

details are missing—where was the bridge and the lure and
who was responsible for people to be built transferring

truckloads of cobblestone and permits dedicated
to these roads roads which never saw a penny or a meal

Petition

all the distant have returned plainly dressed
cracks appearing on the floor like snakes stretching

out their bodies water pours falls both outside
and inside the house not concrete nor lime the soil

or slopes without irrigation the water salinated
on a ridge so wide the heart is spare and simple

as an island please don't be fooled by the wall
posters provided by the local government prepared

for us our petition vanishing like ripples thrown
into a stone or a pond we were forced to sign before

lunch took a quick look at the village already
the nails crumbled and the seller a large hole

in the wall I met with that bureaucrat he played the old
game with me cut his ears and arranged details claiming

furniture in the empty then turned his back the prickly ash
and citrus trees brought here have all gone there were once

orange trees through this whole valley now
there is little come sit in the wooden chair chopped

by the forced living come here where there is simply
an open space: wide as a garden attached to a door

Story of Star Anise Wharf

If you want to discuss wharves with me,
you might as well save your breath.

Who else is coming and going
at first light every morning?

Making appeals about the wharf and continuing to do so
for fourteen years.

Your wharf?
Who has confirmed that the wharf is yours?

By the wharf there are steps leading to the top
of an embankment—steep in wet weather.

The old trees, old wall, old streets behind the wharf
didn't take a blind bit of notice.

What is the day month and year of the document
stating you have a wharf?

If it isn't mine
then whose is it?

Dressed in plain blue cotton jacket and pants
came the wrecking team.

All the while the town mayor
ran the operation by remote control from inside, far from the wharf.

In a little over half an hour they totally flattened
the home and the hotel.

When the job of bulldozing was finished,
all the household possessions piled up in the open air.

Dressed to be relocated, unclaimed, promptly dressed
to begin life as refugees.

At the appointed time
dressed.

During the appeals the departments
seemed all at once to have something wrong with them.

The ordinary man in the street
just didn't have a chance!

Neither did the dispatches, the hills, the exhibition hall
of rare stones.

Take everything 175 meters up away
from the wharf!

How bitter I feel every time I go
past the wharf.

The last boats departed
in late afternoon.

