

UNMADE IN CHINA

Poems of the factory worker Xu Lizhi

-Translated by Eleanor Goodman

I Swallowed an Iron Moon

I swallowed an iron moon
they called it a screw
I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment forms
bent over machines, our youth died young
I swallowed labor, I swallowed poverty
swallowed pedestrian bridges, swallowed this rusted-out life
I can't swallow any more
everything I've swallowed roils up in my throat
I spread across my country
a poem of shame

Meditation

After finishing this poem,
I will go to meditate in the willow grove
I will watch the sky above the mountains, as the setting sun
lets cicada chirps and lake water
wash the mortal world, and a visitor's heart
and in the dusk I will whisper pardon, forgiveness,
absolution, compassion...

Rented Room

About ten square meters of space
cramped, damp, never seeing the sun
in here I eat, sleep, shit, think,
cough, have headaches, get old, sick but not dying
again and again in the dusky lamplight I stare blankly, laugh stupidly
pace back and forth, sing softly, read, write poems
every time I open the window or the grated door
I'm like a dead man
slowly pushing open the lid of his coffin

A New Day

I want to look at the ocean again
to see the vastness of my half lifetime of tears
I want to climb a tall mountain again
to try to call back my lost soul
I want to lie in a prairie
and leaf through the bible my mother gave me
I want to touch the sky
and stroke that swath of pale blue
But I can't do any of that
so I will leave this world
No one who knows me
should be surprised by my leaving
There's no need to sigh, or feel sorrow
I came at the right time, and will go at the right time too



I Know a Day Will Come

I know a day will come
when those I know and don't know
will enter my room
to collect my remains
and wash away the darkened blood stains I've shed across the floor
rearrange the upturned table and chairs
toss out the moldering garbage
take in the clothing from the balcony
someone will help me write the poem I didn't have time to finish
someone will help me read the book I didn't have time to finish
someone will help me light the candle I didn't have time to light
last will be the curtains that haven't been opened for years
someone will help me open them, and let the sunlight in for a while
they will be closed again, and nailed there deathly tight
the whole process will be orderly and solemn
when everything is tidy
they will all line up to leave
and help me quietly shut the door

Xu Lizhi committed suicide at the age of 24 by jumping from the 17th floor of a building in Shenzhen not far from the Foxconn factory where he worked. His reality was one that millions of other people face across China, but particularly in the south, which has become a centre of production and exploitation. His "poem of shame" (I Swallowed an Iron Moon) is not a personal one, but a public and national one.