

Chinese Wishing Well

Virginia Webster

I remember the morning I was stung
by her first push against my womb.
Pulling at the ripe strands of rice
nestled in the mud blanketed paddy,
I dropped a grain out of my nut brown hand
and watched it plob into the water.

Only one, the government says.

I saw the world shrink into myself
bright glare of sky bouncing
from ground into my eyes and
squeezing into the black hurt of birth.

It must be a boy, my husband says.

He watched the old woman
take me from the fields.

He thought I could choose our child
the way I pick lilies from the swamp meadow,
the way I dance with petals in my hair.

It is for the best, the old women say.

There is a well in the field
that has long since dried.
It is a thin mouth into the earth
where children throw pebbles
into its long throat,
giggling at the echoes escaping
so long after the fall.

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW

I watched him that night
as he took her there.
I saw a silhouette against the stars
and an infant pressed to his chest.
What I felt is like the
hollow innards of a reed pipe
silent for lack of the player
who turns air into music.
He took my only note
and held her over the hungry well.
He dropped her like a shiny pebble.
Her sound seemed that of
a crane winding its long neck
into the setting sun.
It will be a boy next time, he says.
And when my legs open to him,
the song of the player
who plucks with butting haunches,
I hold my breath
waiting for the next note to form
and fearing the sound it will make.
The echo of the crane lingers
listening to what they say.