

## SINÉAD MORRISSEY

### *China*

#### 1

Tack up a screen before dawn and ready the inks.  
There is a country which does not exist and which must be shown.  
Steady the ingredients.

#### 2

A tunnel of trees. My brother and I on the top  
of an empty double-decker in Derbyshire.  
The absence-from-home of summer  
becoming a scab to be picked over. The bus pulled up

by a pub, as the greenery scratching  
at the window ended and we were given a field  
with a horse and a dog and red child  
in it, waving.

Sunlight was there like a wall  
and halved everything. In my head I was singing  
*This is Happening This is Happening This is Happening.*  
A boy bounced his way down the aisle

and started smoking, when time  
opened. Or stopped. Or almost stalled  
and the boy and my brother and the bus and the world  
disappeared on the prick of a needle - pop! - and I

sat sideways avoiding the gap.  
And then I saw I was enormous  
and in another kind of tunnel. That I was lost.  
That there was no going back.

#### 3

Conjure the Yangtze and the Yellow River  
And bring them a matter of hours together  
On the same train line and both of them seen  
Through semi-darkness on a flickering screen  
Which is and is not a window. Blow  
Over the waters to buckle them. Add snow.

#### 4

The King of the Sea  
is awash with vainglory  
in Beijing.

He has caused havoc  
with his aquatic  
animals. Now

he wants to clobber  
the Monkey King  
(the destined-to-win

Monkey King)  
who is wagging his tongue  
for some rust-free weapons

from the Sea King's  
underwater arsenal.  
The Sea King's antennae

are aquiver  
with put-upon-  
power. The Monkey King,

in his ecstatic  
clothing, is too yellow  
to be trusted.

The Sea King's refusal  
amuses him.  
He is fluid

as a cartoon and brimful  
with trickery.  
He does not know

how colour  
is protected.  
In a square

given over  
to the Palace Executioner  
the cobblestones

are mimicking the sun.  
For coming too close  
to the Only One -

see the desiccated yellows  
of the colour convicts

flutter and flare.

5

Evening. Beijing. And farewell to Mao's mausoleum  
through the glass, ablaze in the nerves of the Square of Heaven  
like everlasting Christmas. The bus forces us on:  
another station, another train, another city, another season.  
Advertising flickers in the waiting room. That night I dive like a child -  
borne aloft by the train's engine, or like one born again in its mild  
motion, the shunt and click of the carriages over the sidings  
the soporific tenderness of a language I do not recognise -  
and re-surface at nine, an hour beyond breakfast time.  
The mine wheels, factories, fish farms, and allotments  
battling for space between slack-blackened tenements  
have receded now into the north. Here the sky is unfolding the blue  
cloth of itself on a new country, or on a country which never grew  
old to begin with. Spinach, bak choi, cabbage greens, lettuce,  
geese sunning themselves among shiny brown cowls of the lotus  
and an echo-less emptiness, a sense of perspective too wide  
and too high for the eye to take in. Two crows collide  
in a rice field, then are flung backwards out of their war  
as the train pushes on. We loiter like Oliver in the dining car.  
Brunch comes as simmering bowls of noodles, under a film  
of oil, and we sit watching the landscape unfurl like a newsreel  
into history. By noon, foothills are banking to the south.  
By two, we're approaching a network of tunnels blasted out  
of the Xi'an Qin Mountains. Blackness falls clean as a guillotine  
on the children in pairs by the trackside, and then again  
on the man and his son who will walk all afternoon into evening  
before they are home. We enter Sichuan without rupturing  
any visible line of division, though dinner at five is brimming with chillies:  
dried and diced and fried with the seeds inside, while the extraordinary  
Sichuan pepper balloons into flavour under our tongues. And all along  
darkness is gathering itself in. I see a boy and a woman  
lit up by the flare of a crop fire, but can no longer believe in them.  
Windows have turned into mirrors the length of the train.  
Hours pass, and there is only my white face, strained  
in its hopelessness, my failure to catch the day in my hands like a fish  
and have it always. The train descends from the soil terraces.  
Electricity switches the world back on: town after coal-dusted town  
streams by in the rain, revealing its backdoor self, its backyard frown,  
until all converge in a dayglo glare at the end of the line and we merge  
with our destination. We have been dropped to the bottom of somewhere  
blurred and industrial, where the yellow of the Yangtze meets the green  
of its tributary, the city with a name like the din of smithy: Chongqing.

6

All night the hammers broke the dark  
But then the dark went on  
I rose and pulled the curtains back  
A semaphore of cranes

Gesticulating deftly  
To each other, to the sky  
A city in conspiracy  
To keep the sun at bay

And in the fog I could not tell  
What was falling down  
From what was rising up again  
Both wore a hanging chain

And both were eye-less, light-less, stalled  
Both held their form elsewhere  
The past or future part-way entered  
Into this wounded sphere

I left the hold of our hotel  
To walk along the river  
Across from me, a chargrilled hill  
Of building like a fever

And junks that could not carry  
The weight of what they bore  
Dying in a tributary  
Inches from the shore

The sky had almost lightened  
To midday's faint resolve  
When a mother tugging a wayward child  
Brushed against my sleeve

And brought me through a quarter  
Of rubble-matted streets  
Where a woman washing her waist-length hair  
Stood wringing it like a sheet

And stopped me at a doorway  
And pointed down its throat  
I photographed it dumbly  
Lost to what it meant

Her urgency diminished  
I smiled I had to go  
The air was thick between us  
With all I could not know

Day gave without a whimper  
I found myself re-caged  
Staring through the filter  
Of money's privilege

7

I find I have made a ghost  
of you - I'm sorry - as I  
aimed my camera foolishly  
at the passing coloratura  
of mountains and fields,  
and snapped them anyway,  
knowing I'd never get them back  
the way they were being given,  
at that precise instant, and caught them,  
yes alright, adequately enough, but somehow  
also caught your watchful face  
filling the window without  
its source. Confucius refuses  
to speak about spirits. *Till you know  
about the living, how are you  
to know about the dead?* he pronounces  
to the ever-curious Tzu-lu.  
And I wonder, if I can make ghosts  
of the living with my dinky, digital  
machine, is it possible I can also  
make the dead visible? And I set my camera  
more deliberately now on the vast, peopleless  
expanse, then check its screen  
to see if I've got anything  
in its wide-eyed little net.  
I don't know what I expected -  
one of two of the million Yangtze  
drowned, perhaps, still draining their ears  
by banging the sides of their heads, or looking after  
the vanishing tumult of the train  
for directions home?

8

Ever been washed  
by a crowd? My mother dragging me  
to the cold-water tap and  
jamming my finger under it  
the day I brushed it across

the cooker-top to see  
if it was on, to *numb it*,  
she said, but it wasn't  
like that at all.  
It was

winter, we were  
baking in the kitchen and  
I could still smell a scrap  
of skin frying in the back-  
ground when the cold

hit home - prodding  
the length of my arm in a surge  
of pain, an ironic  
remedy of extremes.  
And it was oddly

uplifting to be suspended  
there with your body peeled  
back to the nerve all  
over again in a matter  
of seconds, so disarmingly

alive. In four train stations within  
fourteen days I turned my head  
to a conundrum. After a night  
and a day and a night of being carried  
along in a capsule -

a bed, a quilt, a pillow, a night-  
light, a table, tea, a window, a  
radio - I'd uncurl onto  
the platform, grey and  
exhausted, as though I'd walked

the hours that divided us  
from our origin. We were alone  
the whole time, moving like  
automatons from compartment  
to dining car, then back

again, with only the fruit-  
man to disturb our corridor  
with his casual calling. The train's nose  
under the station awning would steam  
with exertion; we'd be cracking

our wrists, or avoiding  
the press, or yawning, and then,

imperceptibly, finally noticing  
the river of people disgorged from a mile  
of doors and flooding towards

the exit sign. There must have been  
thousands of them, our shadow-  
travellers, and we'd been marooned  
in the midst of them. They'd have sat  
upright all day

and all night on benches as hard  
as amazonite, pressed five  
to a row and room somehow  
for rice pots and rucksacks and armfuls  
of jackets, flasks,

blankets. Thirty hours  
at a stretch and seeming as fresh  
as if they'd just stepped out  
of a ten-hour sleep  
on a cloud -

and with somewhere to get to  
fast: time to stare back  
at me the way I was staring  
at them, an extravagance.  
I stayed to one side, watching

them flow like an out-  
going tide into the maw of each  
city, and saw myself  
caught in the pulse of their  
striding, my greenish skin hurled

under water and hammering *I*  
*am here you are real this is*  
*happening it is*  
*redeemable* - as though touching  
them might be possible.

## 9

One day, China met China in the marketplace.  
'How are you, China?' asked China, 'we haven't talked in so long.'  
China answered: 'The things we have to say to one another,  
laid end to end, and side to side,  
would connect the Great Wall with the Three Gorges Valley  
and stretch nine miles up towards the sun.'  
'It's true,' replied China. 'We have a lot to catch up on.'

