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Nonetheless in Chengdu

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Meishan Window Panes

The air conditioner rumbles.
From my cool room
through my window and theirs
across the alley
on a hot night,
I watch the three young men
flicking their Nanjing cards,
bending from the edge
of their bamboo mats
in a circle of light
toward each other,
skin bronze, hair shining, shoulders bare,
fine boned, muscular.

Their laughter
strikes my pane.
They sit, a triad with half-smiles,
hands raised, calloused,
playing to win briefly
against the gray evening walls
of their small room
hung with work clothes, towels,
laundry, spider webs,
mosquito netting.

All day they have worked
under neck poles
with buckets of wet cement.
Their eyes flicker and droop.
The laughter quits.
Another day has vaporized.
The cards are stacked again.

Helen Westra

Feathers Bloom

Strolling the market lane,
I look for flowers
and see hens
bunched foot to foot
in coppery bouquets.

Helen Westra

Nonetheless in Chengdu

She's an odd one,
congenitally subnormal,
marked by nonsense and
unkempt hair
like frayed chrysanthemums;
her small grub fingers
are eager to
stroke my foreign hands;
her mouse eyes shine at my silver locket.

She's a small accident that
outwitted party plans and darted
past policies
designed to prevent her
in a compound life
where sons are worth
ten thousand pounds of gold
and daughters one,
and girls and dullards
are discarded.

She's a little joke
in the scheme of things,
chirping gibberish,
living and growing
wild and strong
as the plant that roots
between the bricks,
the fir that grasps
mountain rocks and drinks strange mists
like mother's milk.

Helen Westra