

KELLY ZEN-YIE TSAI

## Burying Bones

*For Ricardo and Lucretia*

Human bones are not like bird bones

They are not light  
They are not easy to carry

Their physics do not beg them to fly  
Or navigate us around nature's changes

We,  
Lonesome-headed  
Without formation,  
Move or are moved  
To escape more  
Than the dead of winter

Bones not made for these migrations,  
Our bodies detach from evolutionary sources  
Branded with the fingerprints of  
Greed, violence, and the stink of poverty

Our bones make it look easy  
Eating history and biology like calcium  
Growing strong by hiding  
Awkward questions in our marrow

Birds dive between skyscrapers  
As we rest our tired bones  
Licking the rims of intoxication  
Joining three corners of the earth:

Brown, yellow, and black  
Around a tiny table in Manhattan  
Getting shitty, laughing

Our bones obscure why we are here  
The promise of our flesh  
Flying from lived revolutions  
Flipping capitalist to communist  
Or socialist to capitalist  
We hear the echoes that warn  
To not take freedom for granted

We survive the lives of our parents and grandparents,  
Bones formed under the heat, water, wind, and land  
Of China, Chile, Guyana

Here in America, we live where nothing fits us on purpose  
Except for the choice that we are always reminded of  
That we didn't have to come here  
That we could have always stayed

And let America come to us instead  
Trudging across the hemispheres as it always has,  
Building factories that reshape and demolish bones,  
Stitching together governments with Elvis, English,  
Christianity, the CIA  
Dealing dollars embossed with white men's ghosts,  
False teeth chattering beneath close-lipped smiles

We three have not lost our gift  
To conjure on command to  
Taste the humidity in the air  
Paint the colors of the foods  
Nestle into rhythms of words  
Whose meanings we cannot easily describe  
Envision the foreign adolescence of our ancestors

Folding her eyes into a dark horizon,  
Lucretia imaged life falling from her parents' bones  
Feet hands hearts split across time zones  
Wondering what earth will claim them and us  
When our souls, not our bones, decide to leave it

I dream those breaking cliffs in Taiwan

Where the family funereal plots hang  
In sheer defiance like eagle talons  
Spirits drifting so fast into the gray valley below  
The cliffs are steep and narrow enough  
That you reach your hands to the ground  
To catch yourself dizzy before you fall

I resurrect the strangeness of death  
Made even more gawky in America  
Laminated photos document the life of people  
Born Buddhist and dead Christian  
As interpreted in words and gods  
Never spoken by their mothers  
Closed caskets are buried in neighborhoods  
Made in the years of our parents' births  
To get away from people who look like us,

Indifference bought by entire lifetimes,  
Allowing us to stay a month, a year, a family, an eternity  
Learning to work while biting down on tongues  
Transforming into something  
That is neither this world nor that

My mother chats on her cell phone  
Weaving between English and Mandarin  
As my father steadies the wheel of their car

The adaptations mark and shape our flesh  
Brown, yellow, and black  
Making it fit, making it do

But our bones do not forget  
They can't forget  
They don't forget  
They can't forget  
They don't

Human bones are not like bird bones

They are not light  
They are not easy to carry

□

## to be a martyr

you must believe  
in something  
so unmistakably

that flesh falls away  
from the skeleton

bones crumble  
into air

all you are  
left with

is spirit  
pure spirit

you let go  
of resurrections  
rebirths, mad-  
dash escapes

you accept  
finality

the blinding  
of the light

you are  
truly committed

and for  
the newspapers  
that paint you  
as a madwoman

and all the  
detractors  
who could not  
believe

how heartless  
and cruel this  
foreign woman  
was (and isn't it  
always a foreign  
woman?)

how she didn't  
love the child  
she held in  
her arms

carried in  
her belly 9  
months before

how she would  
just as soon  
blow the child to bits  
as guide her nipple  
into its mouth

how she filled  
the baby bottle  
with lotion concocted  
for explosion

and they and the  
plane would have  
gone down in  
charred flames

the mystery  
wafting over  
the atlantic

of how this  
woman could  
have ever loved  
this child

to kill in the  
name of jihad

but i say  
it was not  
quite that

it's never anything  
so impersonal

no, i say  
it was right there

under her shirt  
along her breast

tucked into  
her baby's mouth

as clean as  
the milk that  
seeped from  
her chest

as natural  
as the baby's  
skull

at rest  
upon her shoulder

it was  
something as close  
as this

that made her do it

without  
hesitation

confident

that this life  
this way  
is not worth living  
for all

