

Import

The purpose doesn't go over my head.

I am a commodity
like a can of Coke
a jar of Prego
a 29 y.o. car with a 100 million miles on it
decked out in
Listerine green headlamps,
ivory paint,
blond leather
and an engine that hums
English.

I am an import,
a foreigner, a *waigoulin*,
I. Am. An. Outsider.

The Leper

She sat in a rusty wheelchair
at the end of an overpass,
no hands, no feet, no nose
a sign strung around her neck:
I'M A POOR SOUL
PLEASE GIVE ME MONEY
I unplugged my earphones
dipped into my pocket,
pulled out a couple kuai,
but then paused.
Wondered,
how did she get here?
If she has no feet,
she couldn't have walked.
If she has no hands,
she couldn't have wheeled herself.
And shit,
if she has no fingers,
she couldn't have written the sign.
I kept my change,
continued on
and was later glad I had.
When I asked one of my Shanghainese co-workers,
a very sweet girl named Sunny,
about this leper at the train station,
she told me the leper had an owner
and was carried there day after day to beg.
Sunny said "Don't give her any money,
it's a business,
people buy the deformed and use them as beggars."
With the foreboding tone of fortune teller
she predicted, "You will see worse,
much worse."

She was right.
I would.
I did.

The Little Boy with the Hole in His Ass

I tried not to see him
my first morning in Shanghai
spread across the broiling sidewalk
like a patient in a proctologist's office
his pants pulled down to his ankles,
underwear and all.

I tried not to look
at the bloody gauze
taped athwart his bare ass.

I tried not to hear
the strident moans
as I stepped over him.

I ignored the drunk father
as he pointed to his child
and groveled for money.

But
when I returned
12 hours later
I couldn't pretend
the boy wasn't *still* there,
crying.

**Walking Home:
On Restaurant Street**

In Shanghai,
in the Minhang district,
as I trotted through "Restaurant Street"
on my way home
the proud, satisfied Chinese men stood
in restaurant doorways
with toothpicks in their mouths,
T-shirts pulled up to their nipples
exposing pregnant, bowling-ball stomachs.
They wanted me to see,
they wanted everyone to see:
I have money
I am not poor
I can afford to eat, at a restaurant.

Rolling Beggar

It was 50 degrees Celsius with the humidity
I was sweating, agitated, so hot I could hardly breathe.

A man, an old man,
saw me from across the street,
hollered at me, in Chinese.

I don't speak Chinese,
I don't understand Chinese,
but I knew what he hollered.

I knew because he had his hand out.

In any country, in any language
this means the same thing:
give me money.

And despite the 50 degree heat
he wore a winter coat,
a winter hat and winter boots.

His wife was with him
wearing pretty much the same
except she had a thick wool blanket covering her,
or rather, her dead body.

She was laid out on a wooden plank with wheels,
something a mechanic might use
to slide under a car.

He pulled her towards me
with his hand out,
jabbering at me with tears in his eyes.

When he got within touching distance
the dead wife's eyes suddenly popped open,
her arm sprung up,
palm out,
face curdled like she'd just gulped sour milk,
whining,
bellowing,
pleading for money.

The hundreds of Shanghainese
on the busy street
came to an abrupt stop.

Every one of them looked at me,
every one of them wanted to know if he ~ me
the stupid *waigoulin*,

would be stupid enough to give this couple money.

This stupid *waigoulin*
did exactly what they all did.
I shook my head
and continued on my way ~ desensitized.

How to Lose 30 lbs. in Three Months

A fast and easy way to lose weight
is to go to Shanghai
and drink 'B grade' water.
A person could lose
as much weight as the person wants to lose
without exercise or effort.
Unless sitting on the toilet every morning
for an hour and a half is considered exercise.

There are 3 grades of water.
A grade,
which comes out of bottles.
B grade,
which comes from a dispenser in front of your apartment
and C grade,
which comes from the tap.

I wasn't dumb enough to drink the tap water.
But I figured the B grade water,
which came from a purifying dispenser
and cost 5 kuai to fill up a two liter jug
was hep free,
bacteria free, clean,
safe to drink water.
So I drank it,
I used it to make coffee, spaghetti, tea, ice cubes,
everything you normally use water for.

For the first three months,
as I dwindled from 150 to 120 lbs
I continuously drank 'B grade' water
then found out,
by luck
or misfortune,
(depends on which way you look at it)
that I had parasites
renting space
in my intestines.

Context

- Shanghai has a population of 23 million residents, but it's closer to 30 million with all of the non-registered residents.
- Shanghai is the HIV capital of China.
- 150 years ago killing a Chinese person in Shanghai warranted a 300 dollar fine, which was to be paid to the person's mother, if the person didn't have a mother, then the next closest relative. If the person had no family, there was no fine.
- Possessing drugs ~ pot, ecstasy, codeine, cocaine, heroin ~ is punishable by death.
- One hour with a whore costs between 150 to 300 kuai.
- A 640ML bottle of beer is 6 kuai.
- A meal from a take away/delivery restaurant is 6 to 8 kuai.
- A large pizza at Papa John's is 120 kuai.
- The average salary for a Shanghainese person (a waitress let's say) is 700 kuai a month and they are given free shared accommodations (basically a mat on a floor with up to 12 other people in a single bedroom apartment).
- My salary as an English teacher was 13 000 kuai a month.
- My hourly fee for a private 1 to 1 English lesson was 200 kuai. About the same as a whore.