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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*