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## Compound Life

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## Old China Hands

Beyond familiar lights  
and shops on Renmin Road  
a sultry evening turned to cloudburst,  
turned dusty paths to mud

and left me drenched.  
Well there you stood,  
old doorway woman,  
speaking no English,  
words lilting in your hands,  
beckoning, offering  
a bamboo chair,  
toweling my feet,  
and in the way your fingers smiled  
softly about your tiny grandson's face.

Your peasant name has disappeared  
in flight through thirteen time zones  
but memories jarred by thunder storms  
on summer nights  
still hold those hands.

Helen Petter Westra



## Compound Life

The day's long handled broom is still.  
With shutters shut, she rests  
under mosquito net, a bird caught,  
beauty draped,

a veiled woman. In the quiet  
nursing her daughter,  
she feels the infant breath  
like moth wings on her skin  
and breathes the night air free  
of dust she mounds each day  
in noisy streets sweeping up  
footprints, waste paper, twigs, dead cicadas.

Against the shimmering moon tonight  
plum blossoms float soundlessly.  
Tomorrow they will limp before the broom.

Helen Petter Westra

