

**MICHAEL BROEK**  
**The Golden Venture**

*The freighter Golden Venture ran aground off Rockaway Beach, Queens, in 1993, carrying nearly 300 illegal immigrants from China. Ten died trying to reach shore. Many others were jailed for years in York, PA, as their asylum claims worked through the legal system. Those who were paroled are still without final legal status.*

*The mouth is a flooded machine*  
—Terrance Hayes, from *Lighthouse*

**1**

The law demands a representative.

Asked to translate, I cannot translate myself.

My family came for the Golden Mountain (Gum Saan), the California gold rush. When the earthquake destroyed the records (there were no records), my grandfather became a “paper son.” His slot was bought.

My father moved east to New York, found work, then west to York, built his Wonderful Garden.

He said Americans can’t eat enough Chinese.

The law demands a defendant understand the charges.

I barely know his dialect, this refugee, Shengqiao Chen. Not Manchurian. Not Cantonese.

I was born here, where the Underground Railroad ran. The Lincoln Highway travels through town, a ribbon tying two coasts.

The law demands habeas corpus.

The law demands a body to be prosecuted.

Messiah College in Mechanicsburg is my alma mater. My degree is in English. China is my Epcot Center where no one drowns and everyone buys souvenirs signaling happiness.

The law makes demands of the body but never of the soul.

If interpretation is what you need, that’s more than I was hired to provide.

2

*I write in the report*

The *Golden Venture*  
freighter  
foundered  
& Shengqiao Chen  
was dragged to shore  
eighteen-years-wet illegal  
lungs split with salt—  
off Queens  
off Rockaway  
off ship ten  
jumped  
over the side  
into the screws

“I would do it again”  
though  
“the water was cold”  
as was the beach  
where nearly nude  
girls  
chests crushed  
under latex hands  
trying to restart hearts  
were muled from Fujian  
to America  
vomiting sea.

*I write in the margins*

what the screws do to you  
what lack of love does to you  
every law does to you  
every single law signaling  
imagination failed

3

On my shelf, I never find the book I am looking for.

There is another, in a different language, with another spine.

Another way to cover what's underneath.

Alphabetization is a border fence holding out/in chaos.

Chinese has no tense.

Shengqiao Chen wants to learn.

The language of buying and selling.

I adjunct at the community college—English as a Second Language.

Proper use of the comma and the full stop.

Proper frame for an argument.

Proper attitude toward the opposing view.

An attitude toward anger.

Errors of article and agreement.

How to create great forts of words, impenetrable.

To experience.

Of the actual.

I choose a dictionary and *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The proper use of the subjunctive requires a lifetime to learn.

And even then unnecessary.

This counterfactual condition.

4

CSX ["how tomorrow moves"]

train cars full of chemicals  
through York

east to Port Elizabeth  
seagulls circling

toward Chengdu  
where oysters drop from the rooftops

Foxconn built  
into Apple's leaky

suicide nets ["how tomorrow moves"]

shift over or  
about to begin

China that new old Eden  
née America

rumbling out prison slits  
["how tomorrow moves"]

beside the railroad tracks  
the mind's hand

lets go

5

*I write in the report*

Shengqiao Chen  
watches the prison vigils  
outside slitted windows  
folding origami hands  
from donated GQ mags—

“my friend drag me out”  
the sea.

*I write in the margins*

how many folds

right angles

shaped in laps

against rounded bars

form palm's meat

hand arching up the back

hand praying upstate in York

which buys the refugees

to fill the jails it built

awaiting the ships crashing

down on Far Rockaway to come

drowning to come

border crosser come

criminal walking five nights

against desert come

the profitable refugees

to York

“my friend drag me out”

come, the sea

*What Chen cannot say*

“I had been watching the mockingbirds  
on the ledge outside all night  
& given up thinking  
I was like them with their prepositions  
signaling they knew their way  
in, around, above, over, with & through.

“There was just me here alone  
so when the jailer shaking keys  
like a baby’s rattle told me to go, I thought  
just knowing the door opened was enough  
but when he threatened to walk away  
I said, *Yes, I am coming*, gathered my papers  
my origami hands  
so that he did not think I loved his  
blue eyes enough to stay  
& ran.

“The door was like that.  
When I thought it would not open & nothing  
could be on the other side, it did  
& when I think it will never close, there is  
someone there saying, *Hurry up*.

“Here is a flower I folded for you  
when I thought I would not see you again  
& here are my empty hands.”

7

*What my dreams say*

who does not want  
a new land  
new city  
clean  
like god  
smelling Tree  
    the first time?

    that is what you are to me  
    U(S)

clear, sea, unctuous lover  
contraband

& Shengqiao Chen  
pinches dumplings  
along Red Hook Batteries

singing subways  
great underground tunnels  
crossing & recrossing  
exiting  
everywhere

*What the papers say*

Death of the freighter  
*Golden Venture* towed  
down off Boca Raton  
mouth of stones  
mouth of ship's bones  
rats caught in the trap

the Coast Guard  
the water cannons  
making her sink  
making her grave

→

**MICHAEL BROEK**

marking her a site  
for divers  
swimming through her belly

“within sight of the Gold Coast”

“laid to rest”

“an artificial reef”

“I am not dead”

inked  
in the skin’s creases  
washed away