

BOAT PEOPLE

'passage to more than India'

1        where we come from

where we come from is not a good place  
where we go to is no place at all

our hope is giving birth to that place, it  
is being born out of our heads  
yet it has been there, in other people's space  
they have always known of us  
they dreamt of us, they feared us  
somehow they made room for us before we existed

2        dogs are barking

many days they watched their surfline  
waves, naked sea, surf curling at shore  
only their fishermen ever broke that shoreline  
fishermen or storms, fishermen or  
government launches

then one day we are filling their surfspace  
we are spilling ourselves stiff and hungry  
on their virgin beaches

they look inward to their dreams  
they look at our needing faces  
they smell the stench upon us, they study  
our eyes, our desperation pulls a cord  
tight in their ribs  
we are not those they dreamt about  
we are surely those they dreamt about

we are as familiar and as strange  
as their own children dying

they help us to bathe in the ocean  
they bring us something to drink  
they feed us  
they lead us to their village  
their dogs are barking, their dogs  
are sniffing at our ankles

their government has warned them not to take us in  
but we are their lost sons and daughters  
their dead grandparents reborn from that ocean

they open their space to us

are we who we were? or are we  
people of that land inside those who receive us?

3 children stop laughing

this boat groans against waves  
contractions of that sea's body  
she bears us with pain, our delivery is hard,  
no room to move, we sit in our own wet  
a man passes out stale cakes, rotten fruit  
we eat little, we drink little  
sun treads us all day, we turn to pulp  
the old people die around us, the children stop  
laughing

all night long we shrink against a groaning  
down dark membranes of her body we strain  
far lights strive and flash with her suffering  
spray smears salt in our mouths  
that primeval blood reclaims us

4 fishes will not go hungry

from a ship nearby we hear a dull creak  
a rushing of water, dry tight voices, brief  
thrashings our sister was on that boat  
our brother's children

fishes will not go hungry  
bones and ragged meat will wash up on sand

i clench a piece of fruit in my hands  
it changes into the breast of my drowned cousin  
i eat it hungrily

who is the stranger smiling thru my lips?  
what mother uses my eyes for weeping?

5 down to that ocean

during the war, they said we were revolutionaries  
after the war, they worried we were Chinese first  
now they want only one kind of meat for tongues  
they tear us out like secret dragons

from between their teeth  
they drive us like snakes to the boats  
they chase us like yellow rainbows  
they steal our stripes and our legs  
they get fat off our leavings, they feel safe  
it was not a good place to be  
it was worse than no place to go

we went down to that original ocean  
we sit in those boats on naked planks  
we are no longer who we have been  
we've lost our skins from under

6 how much room for you?

can you make space in you for us?  
are we the strangers you've always feared  
inside yourself?

do you feel safer when we starve and parch and drown?  
are there already too many boats in your blood?  
are the sidewalks of your soul overcrowded  
with greedy and indifferent neighbors?  
do you send out unconscious prayers for storms  
to sink us?

are you afraid you'll wake up startled in your camper  
and see our faces in that next space  
in Yellowstone Park?

is there no more room for our sweat on your mothering  
flag?  
are you still burying those red strangers who  
preceded you?  
those black ones who built your land?

(no, this is not my boat voice, i don't know you  
so well -- this is your own voice:  
i am being born inside your reluctant marrow)

just how many multitudes do you contain?

how much room have you made for you?

7        who live on a bridge

(passage, immediate passage! blood  
burns in our veins)

we who live on a bridge can never forget the boat

we who touch our feet to land, to moon,  
carry contractions of birthing within us  
always we make room

we are pioneers of that space inside us  
always there is room to grow

we give birth to a new universe  
multitude with contradictions  
a new unity shapes in our paradoxes  
we have learned to say No to cynicism  
we have learned to say Yes to life

all the pairs of beasts strain against our ribs  
send out a raven, send out a dove

it is our life we restore