

FURNITURE SHIPMENT FROM FORMOSA

A small statue was all I meant to buy
as Chinese wood carvers told of Kuan Kung,
an ancient warrior still revered. Sweet shavings
curled around my feet, romance colors and breath
of auspicious beginnings swirled in my head.
The replica of Kuan Kung's buffet mesmerized me
like the artisans' shimmering tales.

The eight-foot rough-sawn crate came today,
rattling like a giant gourd of fertility--
three hundred twenty-one pounds (minus myth)
on the bill of lading from the Mikagesan Maru
out of Keelung. Outside our everyday Chicago door:
a sudden collage of neighbors, crowbars, splinters
and groaning nails forced from their pits.
The ordinary drifted away like incense smoke.

We rummaged layers of cardboard, scalloped
like Taipei roof tiles, wads of excelsior (or maybe
the phoenix's nest) and swathes of red tissue.
A sudden avalanche of dried mung beans
(source of the rattle, added as desiccant)
bared a fat in-curved leg. The scent of teak
lined with camphorwood conjured lotus pools,
burning joss sticks, folk dancers' flying silks.

A dragon's eye shone within shadow shapes
slashed with gold. Peering from depths
of the Ming Dynasty, urged on by its winged cohort,
it pierced the last wrappings by its own dint.
Coiled on drawers and doors,
enormous impatience slipping its bright ties,
the dragon flexed its magic.

Through a paper fissure on one flank, a trick
of light on hand-rubbed lacquer: the phoenix wing
was a battle-ax, and Kuan Kung, pursuing
his vow to liberate the mainland, adjusted
his armor and headdress, turned and vanished
behind the patina of legend. Only bird and beast
burst free, flaming pearls clutched in claws,
scales glittering blackly,
and shook off the last dust of island China.