

border crossings

poems by Thaddeus Rutkowski

SENSITIVE SKIN Books

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DEDICATION

For Randi Hoffman and Shay Rutkowski

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ANOTHER PERSON

Become another person.
Shout, "Surprise!"

Clasp hands.
Make no noise.

Touch foreheads.
Suffer a shiner.

Close your eyes.
Have a nightmare.

Skim some rain.
Whirl in surf.
Dream of hair.

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER

Every time I saw her,
she was sitting in the same chair,
and when she spoke,
I couldn't understand her.

I didn't spend much time with her,
except for when I was sick
and she and my grandmother
took care of me.

I lay on the couch,
and she sat in her chair,
until I rose and ran past her
and she yelled after me, "Stupid!"

She was right.
On that run, I managed
to knock a vase off its table
and shatter what had existed for years.

LIGHT AND SHADOW

My father opens a trapdoor
and leads me down concrete stairs
to the half-cellar,
where he pulls a chain for lamplight.

I don't want to stay.
Spiders scrunch in the corners,
and pieces of copper tubing—
remnants of plumbing—
litter the floor.

The smell of old plaster
keeps me breathing.
I move closer to the walls
for a whiff of horsehair cement.
I like the smell
of lime, sand and water.

I'd stay longer,
but my father is finished.
He pulls the chain for darkness.

THE WANG FAMILY, 1973

In the Wang family,
the grandfather, Qi Xing, is smiling,
as he should:
His English name is Cheer Sing.

The grandmother
looks more severe,
with her gray hair brushed back,
as if she is not well.

This is my mother's family,
a grandfather I met once,
a grandmother I never met,
other relatives I've hardly thought of:
two uncles, their wives,
with a son each—my cousins.

They've gotten together here
in jackets that are almost identical,
designed for a look that's suitable
under the rule of Chairman Mao.