

RICE

Lazy water buffalo wants to loll in the canal but he must pull the plow
across the matted field, churning in the dung and ash to prepare the soil.
Third grandson shouts his lessons atop his back as he waddles home.

During Tet, the sun bends down to warm the seedbeds sheltered by the
courtyard wall. Elders shake their heads, hugging their sweaters, not yet.
The old rice could survive this cold, but not the new hybrid from India.

Seedlings in wide-rimmed baskets wait their turn in expectant clumps.
Disentangled and poked into cool, viscous mud, like newborn calves
they struggle to stand. Bones chilled, planter pulls leeches from her shins.

Dirt sprays out from the wheels of elder brother's new Honda
as he twists to a stop at paddy's edge. The swollen rain behind the dyke
rears its head in wounded ire hurtling forward to drown the rows.

Auntie takes up her embroidery, piecework pillows and linens
emboldened with lotus petals, turquoise, pink and azure green. In the field
her daughter bends over, a solitary white egret in the distance, weeding.

A good harvest brings an electric fan to winnow the grain replacing
the quiet breeze that blew the chaff into golden air, kernels spilling
into bountiful piles like salt in an hourglass to dry in the drying season.

—Simki Ghebremichael

Yevtushenko at the Hirschorn

March 19, 2003

I take an aisle seat next to a lady from Uzbekistan.

A young Pushkin-like lad reads the English translation
as Yevtushenko recites the Russian straight from his heart.

The poems are like part of his skin, warts rubbed
and fretted over for years. The great poet walks

up the aisle and takes my hand: "I love you
like my mother, for you are the motherland."

He plays a scratchy recording of his hero, Palushka
Robeson. You can hear the audience singing along.

My lover stopped by police while driving his car
is accused of organizing protests against the war.

Yevtushenko reads a poem about the Ku Klux Klanko.

I drive home beside the river listening to the radio:
A woman, 23, was crushed under an Israeli tank.

She stood in front of it and it ran over her.

I see bright lights appearing in and out of the clouds,
a phalanx of guardian fighter planes hovering

along the Potomac, their high-powered
beams stretching far ahead of them.

—Simki Ghebremichael