

DAVID ROWBOTHAM

SAMPAN WOMAN

At Aberdeen the woman scrubbed her sampan,
And all of Hong Kong contracted to her boat
As if to a Chinese clog on wooden water;
In character; Cantonese; the anchorage was
A calligraphy of ships. The colonised harbour
Back over the island with commuters from Kowloon
And frigates from an anachronistic kingdom
Could never be China in my time like this,
Though this was as old as Ming; a refuge severed
With so many vanished swords; its anchorage then
Green spring Aberdeen, called fragrant harbour
by fleets of ancestors chattering Hong Kong
Till the island gulped the grace in governing granite
And the fragrance ebbed. From the sandalled hulk of Shanghai
Feet eddied in. The neighbouring decks in their hundreds
Were stepping-blocks to the open seas they hauled,
And the market was spilt next door to her domestic
Yard, where, unsmiling but not impolite,
She paused at my half embarrassed nod. Staring
Down from the wharf to which in the wooden day
Her sampan house stood roped, I watched her cleaning
On bended knee a fishery of steps.
Her pause admitted me. And tai-fung China,
On the clogged waters of Hong-Kong Aberdeen,
Walked my footpath in the kingdom of a woman.