Jeff Guess

AN OLD CHINESE BOAT-WOMAN RECALLS THE LIBERATION OF CANTON BY THE P.L.A.

The river changes
    she knows its worst seasons.

For years a chattle
    to its beggared-banks.

But somewhere close
    to where the water

once rippled a winking-sun
    down a fisherman’s line.

Because there was no bridge
    and wretched beyond belief

she ferried
    a young unknown soldier across.

As always, terrified
    resigned to death or worse.

But after crossing, he only smiled
    and pressed a new coin

into her palm.
    She remembers now
how cold that morning
    washed against her face.

And the way the first
    of the dawn's slight lantern

caught a red star
    on his odd green cap.

And flung its flame
    down the old slow river

coursing into all her ancient
    sprawled and troubled land.

And how her heart, then as now
    kindled by the first kindness

she had ever known — ignited
    in a bright consuming fire.