When the Canadian Pacific Railway was constructed between 1881 and 1885 … Chinese were brought in from China to help build the railway. As soon as the CPR was completed, the Federal Government moved to restrict the immigration of Chinese to Canada. The first federal anti-Chinese bill was passed in 1885. It took the form of a Head tax of $50 imposed, with few exceptions, upon every person of Chinese origin entering the country. No other group was targeted in this way.

—The Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act, Chinese Canadian National Council website

One hundred and twenty years after, the great-great granddaughters of those who stayed home, are the new princesses of a cold foreign land where barren royalty, aching behind shiny castle walls made money, went for tests, waited, phoned, waited, wrote, begged, cried and waited some more. Wrote China, who offered a tax for loneliness, the equivalent of a university degree for this learning: to travel half-way around the world and find her, their lost daughter,
in an orphanage, hiding, under a spell,  
lifted into their trembling arms by witches posing as nurses  
behind photo-ready smiles, government-paid translators. A gift,  
many gifts, exchanged hands  
in one turn of the planet. And the curse  
suddenly seemed lifted.

Ten days of bewilderment followed  
exposing their dream to the world beyond walls  
target of other eyes, so many pointing fingers like thornbushes  
to prick their new parental exuberance, mothers, fathers desperate  
to make tiny smiles their new mirrors  
as they drag loaded strollers, camcorders  
and diaper bags over the Great Wall  
with the other dream-families, tracked by White tourists  
who want to take their picture. Then through  
the fourteen-hour “mercy flight”  
to Canada, preparing bottles  
in sinks of tiny toilet cubicles  
the nervous smiles, fumbled love,  
embarrassed diaper-changing laughter  
of these oldest of newborns—

Two years later, at a suburb carved  
out of CPR land, a birthday party:  
the princesses—now named Madison, Emily, Hanna—  
reunite, aged three and four. Their parents, bearing toys, tiny  
sweaters or shoes and cell phones,  
greet, hug and share their new wealth, proud with complaints.  
Lines on their pale faces mark their late arrival  
at this crowded station. While the girls sit in a circle  
for balloon animals made out of air  
by Pickles the clown, they don’t yet know  
their good fairy’s blessing: travellers with multiple passports,  
and a complicated pedigree,  
wearing Disney princess nightgowns
mini-ipods (made in China),
t-shirts announcing the Year of the Rooster.
College funds already compounding nicely,
rewarded by time, like their parents, they will be
the new royalty, perhaps fluent
in two gazes, if not two tongues,
the inside-out, the outside-in—

Meanwhile, the railroads bisecting bush, tundra and muskeg
laid by their great-great-great-great uncles
are pulled up
with the new millennium, slag beds untended
to sink back into the dark like unmarked graves.
The National Dream of last century is now owned by bears or coyotes,
taken over by smalltown or reserve kids riding their parents’ ATVs
wasting gas, picking up pig iron, scribbling
their names or profanities
on rock cuts blasted through lives
inside-out of this country.