

1981

Absorption of Rock

Maxine Hong Kingston

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Recommended Citation

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "Absorption of Rock." *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981): 207-208. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2729>

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Absorption of Rock · *Maxine Hong Kingston*

We bought from Laotian refugees a cloth
that in war a woman sewed, appliquéd
700 triangles — mountain ranges
changing colors with H'mong suns and seasons,
white and yellow teeth, black arrows,
or sails. They point in at an embroidery,
whose mystery seems the same as that posed
by face cards. Up close, the curls and x's do
not turn plainer; a green strand runs through
the yellow chains, and black between the white.
Sometimes caught from across the room, twilighted,
the lace in the center smokes, and shadows move
over the red background, which should shine.
One refugee said, "This is old woman's design."

We rented a room to a Vietnam vet,
who one Saturday night ran back to it —
thrashed through bamboo along the neighborhood
stream, then out on to sidewalk, lost the police,
though he imprinted the cement with blood
from his cut foot. He came out of the bathroom
an unidentifiable man. His strange
jagged wound yet unstaunched, he had shaved.
Yellow beard was mixed with blood and what
looked like bits of skin in the tub and toilet.
On the way to the hospital, he said, "Today
the M.C. raised his finger part way.
They're just about ready to gong my act."

We search out facts to defend a Vietnamese,
who has allegedly shot to death a Lao
in Stockton, outside a bar. It was in fear,
we hear him say, of a cantaloupe or rock
that the Lao man had caused to appear
inside him. One anthropologist testifies

that Vietnamese driving in the highlands
rolled up the windows against the H'mong air.
The H'mong in Fairfield were not indicted for
their try at family suicide; there was a question
of a Lao curse or want of a telephone.
Three translators have run away – this fourth
does not say enough words.