Dude, where were you last night? Out looking for your brain? I think you left it at Ruby Palace congealing in the Mao Pao Tofu we couldn’t finish our last time there—before they shut down for good. And we never could find another half-decent Chinese joint in this dump of a town. Can you believe it? Nanaimo, with four successive Chinatowns in the past century. Generations of tofu gourmands building this island’s backbone out of steel rail and creosote timbers, caking their lungs with black soot to pry coal from the earth in murderous mineshafts honeycombing this pissant city. Was that our problem? No more Mao Pao Tofu? Was that when we became two quarks in a particle collider? Do you suppose it’s their revenge for the fire? Like, dudes, we weren’t even born! It was nearly fifty years ago when Nanaimo let Chinatown Number Four burn to a briquette because it was on the wrong side of Pine Street, which was Harewood back then—not their jurisdiction. It smouldered for weeks, they say, while treasure hunters raked through the coals looking for tin cans with rolls of bills. They kept them hidden under the floorboards of their shacks trying to save enough to bring their families over (like that was ever going to happen). Rumour was that’s how the fire started—someone wanted to go after the cans. And the men in the trees … that’s just too creepy. Every week after
the fire another Chinese guy was found hanging in
the apple orchard. They didn't have any cash,
didn't speak the language, nowhere to sleep, no chance
of ever seeing wives or kids again. Except for
the few that were here with families
and had some dough. They just moved across
the street to Nanaimo and opened restaurants. Or
what pass for Chinese restaurants in this
mall-bloated milltown pocked with factory outlets
erupting like bad acne.
Ruby Palace was the only one worth two
bean cakes. Just our luck that would be the one to go
tits up. If we could find another kick-ass
Mao Pao Tofu somewhere in this turdfest of a trainstop
would it all be okay again? Would we
sit there past midnight with chairs upside down
on the other tables, jabbering like jays about
the infinite potentialities contained within your
chopstick and the sweet beauty of Bertuzzi's hat trick?
As we poke through the snotty remains
would we find your brain shivering under a slimy
slab of bean curd crabbing “Thanks a lot, you guys—
I thought you forgot about me!”
I've ransacked all the restaurants in the yellow
pages, dude, and there's nothing but a whack of ersatz
hybrid “Chinese-Canadian Cuisine” dives,
which we both know ain't gonna cut it. Fuck,
we might have to go to Parksville.