That’s what they call Fengdu, mountainside river port in midday mist where tourists stream from the white ship up a long stairway from the Yangtze slippery with ages of black mud. We watch our feet carefully, look down as hands reach out with tangerines, postcards, green rocks, toy cars. We know how to steel ourselves to women’s cries shrill with the word they believe is magic for tourists, Hello! Hello! shouted like caged parrots who expect no answer. We turn away, boarding the bus for a mountaintop theme park based on Sichuan folklore, where a lipsticked guide singsongs American slang as she leads us through ancient pagodas of 1985, guarded by concrete monsters crude as a kid’s gory scribble. We push away peddlers with bloody finger-puppets, refuse to heed forecasts of happiness depending on how we cross a bridge, balance on a wooden ball. Where’s our sense of humor? Gone. And when we come down to the river again, a family at the crowded dock presents their prize boy with legs twisted backward, a blind mother clamps her snot-streaked child between her knees, all stretching out their arms with trinkets. Hello! Why do the people of Fengdu seem more desperate than those of a dozen other
Chinese cities we have seen? Is it because their crumbling homes will be covered when the great new dam starts holding back the river? Or is it just their fear of any tomorrow? As we slowly disappear into the white boat, we are mute, looking back at the clustered shore, remembering what little we know of Hell, thinking that in this place we are the ones who are unreal. We are the ghosts of Ghost City.