locked throughout the six-day work-week. Except on Sundays, the workers couldn't leave the factory complex.

"That can't be legal," I said.

"Many of the factories do that," she said, shrugging. "All of them have good connections with the government."

She explained that one of her friends had worked at the purse factory, where the Taiwanese boss often ordered every-one to work until midnight, yelling when they got tired. One worker had com-plained and been fired; when he tried to claim his last paycheck, the boss had him beaten up. Ma Li decided that she had to do something about it, so she wrote the boss a letter that said, "This day next year will be your memorial day."

"And I drew a picture of a—" She was speaking English, and she couldn't think of the word. She pushed aside her plate and sketched an outline on the table—a simple head, a narrow body.

"A skeleton?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "A skeleton. But I didn't write my name. I wrote, 'An un-happy worker.' "

I didn't know how to respond—back in Fuling, my writing class hadn't cov-ered death threats. Finally, I said, "Did the letter work?"

"I think it helped," she said. "Work-ers at the factory said that the boss was very worried about it. Afterward, he was a little better."

"Why didn't you complain to the police?"

"It doesn't do any good," she said. "All of them have connections. In Shenzhen, you have to take care of ev-erything yourself."

When we finished the meal, Ma Li looked at me and said, "Do you want to see something interesting?"

She led me to a small street near the middle of town. Below the road, a creek flowed sluggishly in the shad-ows. Dozens of people stood along the curb, smoking cigarettes. The street was unlit, and all of the people were men. I asked what was going on.

"They're looking for prostitutes," Ma Li said. We watched as a prostitute appeared—walking slowly, glancing around, until a man came up and spoke to her. They talked for a few seconds, and then the man slipped back into the shadows. The woman kept walk-ing. Ma Li said, "Do you want to see what happens if I leave you here alone?"

"No," I said. "We can leave now."

I spent the night in Gao Ming's one-room apartment. He had recently left Ma Li's factory to start a new job, which allowed him to live in private housing. His neighborhood was covered with bold-faced flyers advertising private venereal-disease clinics; we followed the notices up the stairwell to Gao Ming's apartment, on the fourth floor. The building was only half constructed—the walls unpainted, the plaster chip-ping away, the plumbing unfinished. The water heater hadn't been installed yet. Much of the development beyond the Shenzhen fence seemed to be like this—abandoned before it was com-pleted. There were too many factories and apartment blocks to build, and the contractors moved on once the bare es-sentials were in place. It occurred to me that as soon as anything in this re-gion was actually finished it was imme-diately exported.

Gao Ming's apartment was fur-nished with two simple wooden beds covered with rattan mats. There was nothing on the walls. Apart from a ther-mos and a few books, he didn't have many possessions. His current job in-volved making molds for the production of household appliances.

I knew that something about Gao Ming made Ma Li feel secure. Once, she had bluntly told me that he wasn't handsome, and this was true—acne had badly scarred his face. But his plainness was attractive to her. She had a theory that handsome men weren't reliable.

Over the next year, Ma Li's letters and phone calls became less cheer-ful. She complained of headaches; the job had become more tedious; the boss was insufferable. Her sister had moved away, after marrying a man from Fujian Province. Ma Li's co-workers came and went; she was still the oldest woman in her office. By now, she had adopted a protective role, guarding new women employees against the boss's advances. For Christmas, she sent me samples from her factory: bracelets made of pink and purple plastic beads. She told me that I could give them to my sisters in America.

I sent her a story that I had written about her and her classmates, and she responded, "I'm not confident that I'm

SHOWCASE BY
ROBERT POLIDORI

GATEWAY TO GOTHAM

Architects often have more ideas than it is possible to fit into one building, but sometimes they get away with including them all. This is the case at the new ferry terminal at Pier 11 in the East River, where Henry Smith-Miller and Laurie Hawkinson designed a tiny pavilion that manages to allude to a barge on the Grand Canal in Venice, an aircraft carrier, high-tech industrial structures, New York's old waterfront architecture, and a garage. The building doesn't literally resemble any of these things, although its metal-and-glass façade, which tilts upward to open the entire space to the outdoors, does make the place seem a bit like a dream haven for a pair of silver Porsches. Smith-Miller and Hawkinson, who last week were awarded the Brunner Prize by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, have modernist inclinations, and to turn a derelict pier at the foot of Wall Street into a hospitable entrance to the city they produced a nimble, tensile structure that holds up beside the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan. If Frank Gehry's new downtown Guggenheim Museum is built, the terminal will have to stand up to that, too, since the ferry building would be nestled almost beneath the museum behemoth. But Smith-Miller and Hawkinson's pavilion is tough, and it will do just fine whatever happens in lower Manhattan. It is one of the most refreshing public buildings to have gone up on the waterfront in years. The new ferry terminal celebrates the routine passages of everyday life while hinting at the excitement of travel across water, and it reminds us that eager young architects with ideas don't often enough get the chance to express themselves in the public realm in this city.

—*Paul Goldberger*