Poems

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Abstract

LOST NAME WOMAN, THE REBEL, AH MAH, MANGO

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Shirley Geok-lin Lim

LOST NAME WOMAN

Mississippi China woman,
why do you wear jeans in the city?
Are you looking for the rich ghost?
to buy you a ticket to the West?

San Francisco China woman,
you will drink only Coca-cola.
You stir it with a long straw,
sip ss-ss like it’s a rare elixir.

Massachusetts China woman,
you’ve cut your hair and frizzed it.
Bangs to hide your stubborn brow, eyes
shine, hurricane lamps in a storm.

Arizona China woman,
now you are in Gold Mountain Country,
you speak English like the radio,
but will it let you forget your father?

Woman with the lost name,
who will feed you when you die?

THE REBEL

Tonight I will think of my uncles.
For once I will walk in their spirit.
Pile mahjongg tiles in great walls
and crash them down with two big fists.
I will be reckless and roast opium
balls over spirit lamps. I will close
my eyes in fox women harems
and wake to male children, this one
with my bulbous nose, these
with staggered pointed teeth
like handsome crocodile,
a dozen black-headed sons
to curse and gamble like me.
What fun my uncles had, springing
knives, fighting, using their
full confident voice.
This morning I sang with the car windows up,
letting my voice go its natural length.
What a revelation to hear my voice
as it is, booming in natural rhythm.
Did my uncles always speak in their voice?
Did no one tell them to be quiet,
be gentle, be soft, to whisper,
to hush? I with seven uncles
am forbidden to walk their path.
Tonight I’ll speak like my uncles,
I’ll tell those who taught me to be
a girl, I’m not, not, not, not, not.

AH MAH

Grandmother Lim was smaller
than me at eight. Had she
been child, forever?
Helpless, hopeless, chin sharp
as a knuckle, fan face
hardly half-opened, not a scrap
of fat anywhere: she tottered
in black silk, leaning on
handmaids, on two tortured
fins. At sixty, his sons all
married, grandfather bought her,
Soochow flower song girl.
Every bone in her feet
had been broken, bound tighter
than any neighbour’s sweet
daughter’s. Ten toes and instep
curled inwards, yellow petals
of chrysanthemum, wrapped
in gold cloth. He bought the young
face, small knobby breasts
he swore he’d not dress in sarong
of maternity. Each night
he held her feet in his palms,  
like lotus in the tight  
hollows of celestial lakes.  
In his calloused flesh, her  
weightless soles, cool and slack,  
clenched in his stranger's fever.

MANGO

Mango at the New York A & P.  
at eighty-nine American cents each:  
stone-red, fore-shortened, puffy  
hybrid all the way from Acapulco,  
from corporate farms and rich Yankee  
enterprises. Two days later,

my brother slowly drives me, Straits-born,  
home through narrow, rewritten, Melaka.  
Before despairing houses whose sons  
and grandsons have left for Australia,  
umbrella trees drop welcome shade.  
Crescent mangoes thrusting as smooth-thighed trailer  
girls from Siam gleam among sickle-drawn  
leaves. I eat a green mango. Solid,  
sour, it cuts the back of the throat, torn  
taste, like love grown difficult or separate.  
More chillies, more salt, more sugar,  
more black soy – memory of tart  
unripeness sweetened by necessities.  
Where do we go from here, carrying  
those sad eyes under the mango trees,  
with our sauces, our petty hauntings?