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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

LOST NAME WOMAN, THE REBEL, AH MAH, MANGO

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,

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

pins. 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?