

WALKING backwards

NEW POEMS

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Some of these poems have appeared in the journals *ARIEL*, *Awareness*, *Cha*, *Hedgebrook Journal*, *Mascara*, *Solo*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Westerly*, and *Yuan Yang*. Her work has also been included in the anthologies *Replacing America*; *Tilting the Continent: An Anthology of Southeast Asian American Writing*; *City Voices: Hong Kong Writing in English*; *Poetry OutLoud*; *Petals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English*; *Across State Lines: America's Fifty States as Represented in Poetry*; *Hong Kong U Writing*; and *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia, and Beyond*.

Copyright ©2010 by Shirley Geok-lin Lim
Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be performed, recorded, or otherwise transmitted without the written consent of the author and the permission of the publisher. However, portions of the poems may be cited for book reviews without obtaining such consent.

First edition, October 2010
Paperback ISBN 978-0-9826968-0-4

Book design by Nancy Woodard
Front cover photograph by Steven Hirst

For book information, see our Web site at www.westendpress.org

West End Press
P.O. Box 27334
Albuquerque, NM 87125

Passport
(Hong Kong)

Passport

*Having arrived now
At the celestial kingdom,
I do not enter.*

I am walking backwards into China
Where everyone looks like me
And no one is astonished my passport
Declares I am foreign, only
Envious at my good luck. Speechless,
Without a tongue of China,
I remember Grandfather's hands, Grandma's
Tears. On Causeway Bay, ten thousand
Cousins walk beside me, a hundred
Thousand brothers and sisters.

The Source

China is the source I have not studied,
Although she/he has been a constant
Like mother, father in memory.
China was the milk that was too heavy,
That made one gag. Vomit. Like the scent
Of stinky tofu. Temple bonzes
Muttered no books of instruction.
Women taught other women what
Was right and wrong, and they were almost
Always wrong. Center of the world, great lump
Of decay where no one is happy,
Was China in Malacca, a misfit, dumb
Country; and I its misfit child,
Bastard and deaf, handicapped and wild.

Marble and Peonies

Two hundred and sixty green peaks and stones
Floating over a vaporous sea:
This is the scene poets and painters
Make much of in the classical tradition.
Junks, lighters, and big ships like minor
Islands adrift, and the silver sheen
Of morning light on the open water
Of the South China Sea. Distance saves us
From reality, and the mysterious
Becomes a luxury we can envy.
Down on the ground, bus drivers lurch
Their stick shifts toward Central's towers,
And the cursing ferrymen
Are casting off the cable ropes as
Everyone seems to be traveling
From bed to work, from island to island.
Close up, sweat shines and sticks; no one's smiling.
The emperor loved the beauties
Of mist and distance, the corruption
Of the harem. His fringed kingdom
Wavers between ground and sky,
Decomposing marble and peonies.

Blossoming

My body is blossoming with bruises,
Red and blue, large as Hong Kong dollar coins
Or dim sum hargow dumplings. Lumps leap
Where I've been bitten. Spotted red
And blue, an open yam, at the end
Of two weeks, accident-prone, I hang on
From one to five-thirty a.m., to stare
At the bleak mists shred like raw cotton
Over Lama, Cheng Chou, and Lantau;
And the real China to the north. I am afraid
Of this China, unseen estrangement
Of strangers from whose lives I'm supposed
To make my story. How do we learn to take
Identity after identity, swallowing
Identities and history, to save us
From contagion of losses and predatory
Nations? In the city, anopheles mosquitoes
Bite, and hardness scars within, even
If I'm not thinking that something violent
Is happening somewhere out of sight,
Even as I sit here, safe, on the wrong side
Of the border.

Leaves Fall Close

(Pok Fu Lam [Lucky Mountain Trees] Park)

The reservoir is a cliché of calm
Despite its Cantonese name. Masters
And indentured agreed these were trees—
“Lam”—and mountains. Masters saw
England: mists and winds rolling down
The Peak another Lake District,
Except off the coast of China. The other
Saw China, classically brushed
In bamboo lines; and the greater China
Behind, reaching beyond the tears
Of the Yellow River all the way to Beijing.

“Lam”—Cantonese for “Lim.” Ideogram
Of trees upright with thick thrusting branches.
Leaves fall close to their roots. Clichés
Surface from speechless calm,
Returning me, unspeaking,
To where I’d not known I’d been.

Bird Sonnet

(Pok Fu Lam Reservoir)

Butterfly season. Purple, green, and blue blurs:
Spectral light, humming birds hovering
Moments into a launch above gyrating
Red-gold dragonflies. Planetary visitants
Like us. Dragonflies adore water the way
Women are greedy for love, buzzing
Among the reservoir's collection ponds.
Putrid waters where lost and dead things
Drift, and rushing down, drains of yesterday's
Monsoon. Their wings mount wet air
Toward nectar pools in wildflower calyxes:
Time already past, glimpsed in May's
Green colors, variegated lapidaries
And grains, wavering flight and fleetness.

Resolution and Retirement

I.

I go to hunt a poem this Sunday,
Perhaps find a friend, young, thinner,
Eager for prizes and Monday.
Minutes up the mount before the gate,
My thighs ache and my chest's constricted.
I have never learned to slow down, simply
Stopped, felled by cough and fever.

II.

Mothers stroll the path, feeding solitary
Sons pastries and idle conversation.
The little walk by the pump-house is littered
With fresh dog shit drying immaculately
Under the December sun. At water's edge
Something splashes—a carp, duck, turtle,
Released by Taoist priests who come at noon
To free the captured ghosts who swirl by
Mongkok's frenzied alleys. Bodies tortured
By triads, crying in their families' nightmares.
It's time for me to become a lady
Of leisure, freed from officious spirits.

III.

Tall grasses bend toward the North Star
Even when the air is calm. One cannot resist
The mountain's influence: the way water
And wind flow in relation to season,
Its feng shui. Here where the foam spills
In falls over the collection grates,
Someone is wearing a Stanford T-shirt.
I cannot stay satirical.
The morning's cool and bright. Why should I
Not walk beside wild rhododendron,

Bamboo, giant mimosas flat open .
To sunbeams, breeze-blown air rippled
With splash of hidden streams and children's
Cantonese, high-pitched, musical, and be content?

City Pastoral

Night is over. CNN is on.
Red and yellow taxis, tops lit
Like go-go girls, prowl the macadam.
Above, in the brightening heaven,
Engines crank. No angels are dusting.
Only the island smog shifts
With sleepers on doorsills.

Last night in Causeway some were fucked
For power, peace, money, love.
Mongkok grandmas sold shoes and wallets.
Uncles were swindled. Some fathers' luck
Came in, ran out. Minibuses sped
With panting breaths, brown stinking coughs,
Condemned, necessary and crammed.

Across the hotel's scythe-shaped window
Serial towers of glowing slate rise
Empty of people. White drawn glass crowd
With drying shirts, frayed towels, gray
And riotous underwear; kettles, pots,
The what-may-have-you despised
That citizens cannot live without.

The happy weatherman is getting back
To us on his little prison screen,
Just as the April sun has risen ever
Higher, ruthless, above the gun-black
Windows. Just, as everywhere, a child
Is waking, fresh, clear-eyed, clean,
Ready for joy in the smoky city fields.

Your First Birthday

(For a Chinese Matriarch)

The first birthday you as a Chinese
Woman can have is when you turn sixty.
Everything before is not worth thinking of
Or can bear remembrance. Sixty is when
You become human: you, a person
Fortunate enough to live so long
The children, villagers, even the Emperor
Will congratulate you.

Most died before sixty:

Hunger, beatings, coughing diseases,
Waste, hanging, or simple sorrow
That turns their faces to the wall and calls
Forth death to sit on their chests
And smother their miserable breath.

But sixty, when the hair is thinner and ash-gray
Combed into your curls reminds you of where
Even your hard knucklebones must go,
You may sip to these years with French brandy,
Red ginseng, rare hot ginger, and the blood
Of fowl. Hens that still lay, young roosters
Crowing with semen. Everything that's full
Of life—to be slaughtered for you,
Should you survive life's slaughtering.
At sixty you may drink all the blood
You can stomach, having become an eater
Of young, a human, on your first birthday.

Seminar Series

(Hong Kong University, 5 p.m., Thursdays)

Listening to a very important person

read his seminar paper

we all fell

into a trance

like passengers on a long

and tedious train ride

during which everyone was afraid

to fall asleep

in case the fascist

commandant threw you

out of the window,

staying awake to save our lives,

as the professor train steadily

moves along the

indistinguishable

anonymous tracks

going nowhere

into a twilight darker

and darker into night.

Hong Kong Muses

I.

My bed floats above the ship's horn,
A long bass note waking me
At 3:30 dawn, a little after
Fitzgerald's dark night. To my right
The air purifier blows steadily.
Steady the reading light by my side.
It's not cracked fame makes me linger,
Or the thrum of the mighty city
Running on wheels and ferries outside
The high windows from where I'd studied
The dirty sun sink to the western sea.
Something wants to be said, has thrown
Its mazy colors with this earliest hour,
In signs foreign and my own.

II.

She comes from a place I hardly remember
To taunt: Amazon, Boddicea,
Queen of the Night, with her coven, dark hair
Sprinkling shampooed sparks and spite, stalker
Of boys and victories. I catch her cloudy
Figure moving ahead. Mistral, Santa Ana,
Hamadan: parting the future, freezing
The waters of the past. Who needs the other more?
The white crane or the shadow-boxer?
I long for the easy life of women herding
Calves and sheep toward fat pastures.
Lead me not into temptation, I write,
Even as she rushes past me, pulling
Walls down, and suspends all, in transit.

III.

Betraying no one but my self,
Music sings loud and louder,
Filling the hours between speaking
And sleep. Among the young
This morning I treaded water,
Floating on airs. Tonight,
An old woman, am led by music
Whose voice suffuses then falls,
A tempo that slips away,
Like you, memory, measured
And immeasurable, betraying
No one but my self.

IV.

Every night she screams, doors slam,
Her dogs bark in the flat below.
Ship-horns blow slow bass space
Resounding thick requiems.

Listening I try to sleep.
No one is here but me, sad, yet not
Unhappy. The woman a floor
Below has fallen silent. Deep

Quiet presses with the cold
Slow rolling down the Peak.
Awake again I know it's time
To quit, for home and the world.

Two Years

Two years is a long digression.
In the meantime I have learned
A new city, although only partly.
Have failed to learn a new language,
Merely words and phrases.
Made a few friends, a number
Of enemies. Have thought hard about
Where I am going. Lost.
And where I want to go. Home.

The islands still rise above
The South China Sea. I will never
Explore more than three or four.
China bulks forbidding
Although no longer forbidden.
Sick of excessive humankind,
Sicker of colonial adventurers
Who fatten on Asian taxes,
I think of Li Po, light a candle, and write.