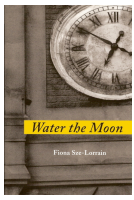


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*Water the Moon,*  
poems by Fiona Sze-Lorrain,  
Marick Press, 2009

Fiona Sze-Lorrain's debut poetry collection, *Water the Moon*, features an array of subject matter as richly diverse as her background, unified by a clarity of voice in dialogue with the world.

Sze-Lorrain was born in Singapore, received a British education, moved to the United States and graduated from Columbia University and New York University, then pursued her Ph.D. at Paris IV-Sorbonne. She is a *zheng* concertist who has performed worldwide and she writes and translates in English, French, and Chinese. As one might expect, with a background like that, Sze-Lorraine's poems exhibit the influences of place and culture.

*Water the Moon* is divided into three sections, the first of which addresses Sze-Lorrain's Chinese heritage. The first poem of the section, from which the collection's title is taken, blends history and ritual with imagistic leaps that make this so much more than a poem about a grandmother making cookies:

*First, she imagines an encrypted message,  
longevity in Chinese characters,*

*ideograms of dashed bamboo and mandarin  
ducks. Grains of red beans churn in her palm,*

*their voices a song of cascading waters.*

...

*War strategy? Emperor Chu Yuan-chang*

*performed the same ritual. He who'd construct  
a new dynasty, slipped espionage notes*

*inside mooncakes. Soldiers lacquered their lips  
over them, tasting bitterness of each failed revolt.*

from "My Grandmother Waters the Moon"

The collection's second section is named for its leading poem, "Dear Paris," touching on Sze-Lorrain's love of the city itself, but also moving into the more sensual realm. Many of the poems focus on culinary experiences and in her sestina, "China," Sze-Lorrain is quick to fix her attention on the incongruities of an Asian restaurant in Paris:

*Mademoiselle, voilà your green tea, a waitress says,  
tucking in a blue apron that cleanly spells palace.*

*Each garçon speaks in six tongues at this palace.  
Sartre and mandarin ducks are the mural décor,  
a cultural must-see, the paperback travel guide says  
in Japanese. How can you remember an exquisite  
passion without spending your heart over such wintered silver?  
Someone imitates Li Po, insisting vodka on a table.*

The third section of the collection, "The Key Always Opens," is not as theme-driven as

the previous two sections, but it does drop many names known well in the visual, literary, and theatrical arts, including Samuel Beckett, Man Ray, Paul Celan, Marcel Duchamp, Gertrude Stein, Dora Maar, and many others. Because Sze-Lorrain lives in both New York City and Paris, you see that much of her poetry springs from her own interaction with the artistic communities and amenities around her.

The section includes “A Lot Had Happened: A Five Act Play,” which is attributed as “after Gertrude Stein” and effectively imitates – though it, unfortunately, doesn’t push beyond the imitation of – Stein’s quick-fire staccato redundancies and permutations:

*Something has happened. And so it happens that we are part of the happening.  
The hall is in silence and silence is in us, though we are not in the silence. I hear  
him drop a handkerchief not because he drops the handkerchief, but because the  
handkerchief drops. I hear the drop of the handkerchief because the hall is silent, but the  
hall is not silent enough not to hear the handkerchief drop and is silent enough to hear  
the drop.  
I wait to sit down.  
I sit down. I wait.  
Now I am sitting down to wait.  
And now I am sitting and waiting.*

from “A Lot had Happened: A Five Act Play”

*Water the Moon* features many imagistic flights of fancy, tempered and grounded in the real and sensual world, and infused with heritage and history. This is an engaging debut collection from Fiona Sze-Lorrain and I look forward to her future work.

78pp.

*Also by Sze-Lorrain: Silhouette/Shadow: The Cinematic Art of Gao Xingjian*  
(co-authored with Gao Xingjian).

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