Fiona Sze-Lorrain. **Water the Moon.** Marick Press

Reviewed by Christina Cook

The title of Fiona Sze-Lorrain's debut poetry collection resonates with the sensual French melody of "Eau la Lune" and the staccato Chinese tonality of "Shui Yuèliàng." Indeed, *Water the Moon* is a book in which these two languages are in dialogue with each other—a dialogue expressed in the English language of the poems themselves. To write this book in French or Chinese would not have allowed a space of neutrality necessary for Sze-Lorrain to fully explore the intersection of these two languages and cultures. The arc of the book navigates the sense of otherness necessarily connected to expatriation, beginning with poems set in the speaker's homeland of China, then moving on to poems anchored in her adopted homeland of France. These English-language poems burst at the seams with the customs, gastronomy, ancestry, literature, and art of the two cultures that inscribe the book's elliptical narrative arc.

The first section of the book is titled "Biography of Hunger," which foregrounds the role food will play throughout the collection in providing a physical connection to the home culture. In the opening poem, "My Grandmother Waters the Moon," words and ingredients become one and the same, as the traditional Chinese meal that the speaker's grandmother prepares is imaged as a written text: "First, she imagines an encrypted message, / *longevity* in Chinese characters, // ideograms of dashed bamboo and mandarin / ducks." The food-as-text imagery develops over the course of the poem, conveying the ancient lore of her native land:

> . . . molding her message on top
> of each crust, she now gives it a mosaic look.
> War strategy? Emperor Chu Yuan-chang
>
> performed the same ritual. He who'd construct
> a new dynasty, slipped espionage notes
>
> inside mooncakes.

The speaker's grandmother makes mooncakes as "[a] snack / to nibble for her granddaughter . . . sleeping on her back," no doubt in a traditional *mei tai* baby carrier. The old Chinese woman will literally feed the words she created from bamboo and shredded duck to the speaker. There is no trope, no figurative language involved in poetically expressing this act. The speaker, as a baby, literally ingests her ancestors' inherited texts and is physically nourished by her culture's historical and literary traditions.

Later in the first section is a poem titled "Tibet," in which the tongue becomes not only the organ by which one's culture continues to thrive via its food but also via its language. Set in a country that itself has long been the center of dispute over its selfhood, the poem begins at a border crossing: "Without papers, he translated / his name on a knotted / French tongue." A border is a cultural boundary that surpasses the physical demarcation of

land: once this border is crossed and the homeland is left behind, this Chinese name will never again be spoken by a Chinese tongue, and therefore never again be pronounced correctly. This fact is highlighted by the dramatic line break after "foreign":

> as if pronouncing, my visage
> defines a painting that parents
> no title, it is a bowl *can you*
> *see it?* containing red
>
> dust
> burying alive the foreign
> name

The middle of the poem tells that "Those who perished / before arriving / built their tombs in those / who escaped," suggesting that the native culture persists in the "foreigner" status of those who leave their country. However, it becomes clear that the individualized self is the more persistent force as this section of the book draws to an end. For example, the poem "Odyssey" begins with a line of inverted syntax, denoting the language of ancient wisdom: "Says a Buddhist parchment, / *everyone has a twin sister.*" But the speaker refuses to be thus connected, insisting "Mine instructed me to cut her away, / an umbilical cord infected with love" and, in a line dramatically indented and standing alone, "*(I'm not your doppelganger!).*" Later in the poem, the speaker refers to the fact that "I left her for France," clearly choosing selfhood over ancestry. To seal the deal, in the following poem, "The Sun Temple," the speaker says, "I tremble to realise that I can no longer / remember my grandfather—I am merely a tourist" and the expatriation is complete, the umbilical cord cut.

"Biography of Hunger" refers to a hunger of the body for another kind of food and a hunger of the spirit for a life beyond the boundaries of the speaker's own culture. This hunger lands her in France, where in the second section, titled "Dear Paris," we see the speaker making a life of her own choosing. In "Betrothal,"

> She made up her mind to arrange
> her little life in this atelier
> at rue Séguier,
>
> where windows open wide to the river,
> silk curtains in an abating wind,
> reach out to their nakedness.
> Two bodies curled in a roomful of moonlight,
> lying perpendicular
> to each other, destiny parallel.

Now an expatriate, the speaker chooses to create a life for herself in an expansive, windswept city, looking over a wherever-the-river-may-lead land, naked in her second birth. The betrothal into which she has willingly entered links her to this new land but will not rule over her destiny as she

felt her native people try to do: her and her new husband's destinies are, significantly, "parallel."

"Dear Paris" unfolds, event by specific event, depicting the speaker as carrying her Chinese self into her new land, assimilating without losing her status as "foreign," which is now a fundamental part of her selfhood in that it reflects her choice to leave her native land. In "Bathing My Husband," we see her gently folding her Asian customs into her husband's French world:

> Softly I scrub. He does not flinch.
> Soap slithering down his chest, he closes
> his eyes and tells me he must be in Kyoto.
>
> Smoke billowing from a mountain top,
> a heron swoops low over a lake.
> Wind whistles like a hundred tea kettles,
> he travels alone in the fog.
>
> So I take my time like a monk pouring tea,
> shut the nozzle, run my fingers
> through his hair, dissipating to first light.
> Doesn't matter if he still sees me as mist—

The invocation of mountains by this visually imagistic language is significant: the poem transforms the couple's Parisian bathroom into a Chinese landscape painting. Traditionally, such paintings depict mountains, which represent a long life, and water, symbolic of happiness. Chinese landscapes also generally include mist or clouds, which symbolize good fortune and are thought to arise from the union of yin and yang, the two main principles of traditional Chinese philosophy.

Two poems later, "China" aptly captures a faster-paced style of poetry than the quieter "Bathing My Husband." Sze-Lorrain controls the collection's energy masterfully throughout, juxtaposing spare, quiet poems reflective of Chinese poetry with poems having longer lines and more energetic syntax. "China" is set in a Chinese restaurant in France called "Moon Palace." Significantly, this was the name of the now-defunct Manhattan restaurant credited as being the namesake of Paul Auster's novel about the quest for identity. The question of identity is central to this poem as well, as "[e]ach *garçon* speaks in six tongues." The English tongue says "*Fortune cookies in this palace come from Ohio*" and "the paperback travel guide" is "in Japanese." The poem then fractures into an abstract montage that brings Russia to mind: "Like a Bolshevik film about the Tsars, the palace / now turns into a red banquet where anger and silver / reflect each other. Lemon trees drop from the wall décor." When one of the garçons tells the speaker, "*Your Eurasian visage matches our décor*," her transition from Asia to Europe is solidified, giving her a new identity as self *and* other, native *and* foreign, seamlessly embodying both cultures in a face that makes visual sense to the multilingual waiter. The fact that this poem is a sestina, in which the form never feels forced or intrudes on the flow of the poem,

adds even more to the montage: the sestina was originally an Italian form, thus endowing the poem with the sixth language spoken by the garçons (after Chinese, French, English, Russian, and Japanese, as invoked in the poem's dialogue, imagery, and setting).

From here, the book launches into its third section, which explores expatriatism more broadly. The section opens with a poem about Edith Piaf in "We'll Always Have Her":

> Transatlantic love. Across an ocean that mourns
> and carries a broken jar. Shards she takes
> inside her, embedded deeper and heavier.
>
> So the voice decides to lift its body, soon no more than
> a deserted island. Floating on waves that clap and dissolve
> into salt, into white light. The voice continues to reach
> octaves until it breaks an imaginary line.
>
> Thick and taut, the line trembles like the old
> tramway path that crawls down Belleville, where
> sparrows twitter over the first dawn:
> *piaf, piaf, piaf.*

Edith Piaf is an iconic figure in French culture. However, as the first quoted stanza conveys, she is shards, as we all are shards. By zeroing in on a quintessentially French persona, we see that the wholeness inscribed by nationality does not hold. She is a montage of many facets, some things breaking her apart, other things holding her together. And where is identity located in all this? She is indisputably French. Yet Belleville, the section of Paris where she was born (on the pavement, as legend has it), was a strongly immigrant community, and her father was French Italian, her mother a first-generation Frenchwoman of Moroccan descent. Yet her voice, "the voice of the sparrow," has become one with the very landscape of Paris, as the final stanza suggests.

The final section takes the questioning of national identity one step further: almost every poem celebrates an expatriate artist, poet, or musician living in France. It contains poems about Pablo Picasso, Vincent Van Gogh, Frederic Chopin, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, and Paul Célan. "Ruach of Célan" is a meditation on Célan's having drowned himself in the Seine, considered as the speaker walks along the river more than thirty years later:

> The Seine rinses blood, it sets ghosts wild.
>
> Running river, gnawing waters,
> widow of Death, widow of your fractured verses.
>
> Say the world's gone, the river-spine breaks.
> I wonder, *does it carry you?*

As with Piaf, there is fracture—in the extreme in Célan's case, given his horrific experiences prior to his expatriation—but even in a poem about

his suicide, we see the possibility that a fractured state of being can still carry us. The fact that the Hebrew word "ruach" is in the title of the poem itself asserts that the Hebrew word is untranslatable into English: that specific word in that specific language is so tied into webs of religious, personal, and cultural meanings that it cannot change even when contextualized by the lingua franca of another country. His "ruach" is not lost and indeed does carry him through the streets of his second homeland. When the speaker addresses Célan, it is clear that his lingua franca is not lost: "You breathed wordlessness in your lingua franca, / a German language read as sparse and terse." Sze-Lorrain uses onomatopoeia to make the last line of the couplet sound German to an English-speaking reader. Splitting both of the disyllabic words, "German" and "language," in half with a metric foot, then using only monosyllabic words in the rest of the line, truly makes it "read as sparse and terse."

The book ends with the assertion that cultures must intersect, that people, particularly artists, of different cultures must mingle for their worlds to be fully alive. The title of the final poem, "Instructions: No Meeting No World," harkens back to the epigraph of the opening poem, which reads, "*Ingredients: 1 pound red azuki beans, lard, / sugar, salt, white sesame, walnuts, flour.*" Blend, blend, is the message the poem seems to be giving in these "instructions." Blend everything together and don't try to make sense of it. The poem opens with the imperative to

> Hang a bicycle tire on the door and Duchamp's
> portrait on toilet walls. Toast three slices of bread
> all at once without worrying if they turn black
> one minute later. Savor ginger without sugar.

References to food continue to abound in this final poem. Here, the English reader is reminded that ginger is not just for gingerbread and gingersnaps but is also used in savory sauces in Eastern cooking. Similarly, she suggests Chinese / French fusion cooking: "Cook omelettes with mandarin / confiture." All sorts of energetic, exuberant instructions continue through until the poem's closing lines, when they turn more self-reflective:

> Leave your roots. Leave your ancestors. Leave
> the weight that drains your limbs and takes
> away your throat. No life is measured by absence.
> All your youth, you tried using words to shape
> memories until they danced and balanced on straight
> lines. Yet you flee—with a bleeding heart you flee
> all your life along a shadowed curve.

In the end, the speaker has broken free of the cultural boundaries and expected usages dictated not only by her native language but also by her adopted one: in other words, by the dictates implied in the use of any language. The result is a tour de force, a mélange flavored by the rich heritage of different cultures in dialogue with one another. Through the arc of one woman's journey, *Water the Moon* relates the importance of

plurality in our increasingly global community, detailing the role language plays in the creative spirit borne of heterogeneity.

George Looney. **Open Between Us.** Turning Point.

Reviewed by Mark Brazaitis

If you google George Looney, you'll be asked if you meant to google George Clooney.

I would love to hear George the Actor read poems from George the Poet's latest collection, *Open Between Us*. Pre *Up in the Air*, Clooney wouldn't have possessed the maturity of tone to carry off this duty. Now he's ready. Poems on CD, anyone?

Looney's poems are dense, somber, contemplative. More important, they're the poems of someone who has lived with his eyes wide open, someone who, like most of us, isn't given a map to navigate life but must bushwhack his way toward where he's going. There are pleasures along the way. There is also pain and sadness. With luck, there's wisdom. There's certainly wisdom in Looney's work.

The enlightened Clooney at the end of *Up in the Air*, his heart broken, his lifestyle exposed as vacant, would know how to read Looney's "The Worst We Can Do," which is a love poem to love itself. But it isn't love as romantic inspiration or love as pseudonym for sex. It's love as an endurance test, a marathon of the heart. The speaker's father is shown coming home drunk and falling asleep in front of the television. The mother copes as best she can, sometimes leaving him to sleep in his chair, sometimes waking him and urging him upstairs to bed.

> It hurt her, and I couldn't understand how
> she could limp through such pain
> and still love him. But she did.

If love is true, the poem concludes, it "makes it through the worst we can do to it." Love isn't a conqueror, it's a survivor.

Looney's collection is filled with such insights. Whereas younger poets —or, anyway, poets who haven't reconciled what they hope life is versus what it actually is—might be tempted to flavor the themes Looney addresses with grand observations and stirring epiphanies, Looney is content to allow his work a quieter wisdom.

Take, for example, the collection's opening poem, "How It All Is." Read out of context, the concluding stanza might seem grandiose:

> How predictable this sore world can be.
> Always take as much of it in
> as you can, my friend, to love.

But what comes before offers no fireworks. It is honest in its understatement, its adherence to the way life, in most instances, is lived: quietly. But if consolation is sometimes small, at least it's present: