

Fiona Sze-Lorrain's *Water the Moon*

by

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As tempting as it is to read Fiona Sze-Lorrain's remarkable first poetry collection, *Water the Moon*, as autobiographical, ultimately the poems do not invite readers to take that liberty. While on the surface, many of the poems are personal narratives, the totality of the poems does not yield a clear personal portrait of the poet on a journey that has its own narrative thread, or arc. Certainly, the poems are embedded in time and place, which for this poet, span three continents, the paroxysms of history, her own fluctuating economic status and an emotional and intellectual terrain, as rich as that of her multiple forebears and current companions. With this much personal history available, readers inevitably want to tease out details to make sense of Sze-Lorrain's life and psychology, but consider the delightful, wry piece, "A Lot Had Happened: A Five Act Play After Gertrude Stein:" "We are so attentive and he is so narrative. That always happens when one narrates what is narrative when narration is so narrative." Point taken.

That said, who is the "I" of these poems? Paradoxically, an elusive self and a super-saturated self. The latter inhabits the poems and renders in rich detail an inimitable experience, which then becomes the reader's own. But in the gap between poems, the particularized "I" seems no longer necessary. We meet her again in another poem, on new terms, the terms of that poem.

And how engaging are these individual experiences! One, among many favorites, is "Claustrophobia," an account of the narrator's aversion to a painting her husband had hung in their bedroom: "only black/ ink gnawing at the cloth—/ an impression of a downpour,/ or the cry of a woman crammed in a cell," and then his gentle ministrations until "stealing/ my first taste of what it should/ speak: a thousand geese/ on the wing."

Two poems later comes another clean, stunning poem, "Bathing My Husband," similarly grounded in exquisite minute detail, "Softly I scrub. He does not flinch. / Soap slithering down his chest, he closes/ his eyes and tells me he must be in Kyoto", widening into another landscape where "He darts across it like a hooded pilgrim... to catch the scent of lavender and steam/ from a spring/ where I once washed my broken limbs." The placement of this poem is particularly interesting, as it follows "Untouchable After David Constantine" with its dreamlike, unidentified other and the absence of intimacy or satisfaction.

These poems seem to come from a quintessentially female perspective. The title, with its surprising image, as if we could water the moon!, suggests perhaps the feeding and care

of the feminine energies. Not the situations, but the sensibility of the poetry, creative, delicate, receptive, nurturing, underscores this idea. Images of hunger and longing, tears and chocolate occur in poems as steely in their way as battle anthems. A stranger falls in “Platform 15, Gare du Nord:” “Without that smile, gold-molared, his face was an empty pot. / Picture embarrassment going to his bones/ before it took root in onlookers’ hearts.” “Eating Grilled Langoustines,” she writes, “for the first time was like chasing/ wilderness —simmered with white wine/ and garlic dashes, they slipped/ through the teeth of my fork like blind/ horses running through a gate.” The current term for writing such as this, I think, is muscular, here a uniquely feminine muscularity.

The “I” of these poems is free, able to engage with man or woman, dead or alive, on equal terms, Einstein, Edith Piaf, Van Gogh, Mao, Paul Celan, to name a few. In “A Talk with Mao Tse-tung,” she wonders: “I ask myself, why am I talking to you, dead man? / At a cocktail party in Paris, you are nowhere/ till a Swedish journalist recites your poetry/ and wonder why you praise heroes.” Killer lines, it must be admitted.

The poems are mostly free verse, with an occasional formal poem, most memorably the villanelle, “Along Ludlow Street.” Poems frequently play off one another, either imagistically or thematically. For instance, the second poem, “Shoebox Filled with Mao Button,” begins “Stubs of sun, deflated saffron orns,” a subtle, but once recognized stinging, connection to the previous one, “My Grandmother Waters the Moon.” Some poems are better than others. Occasionally, there is an oddness of expression, which works against the poem: “swampy in their spines” is great but “insisting vodka on a table” sounds stilted. Occasionally, a poem suffers from an extended preamble or delayed closure, but these flaws are rare (and only my limited opinion). In the main, the poems work brilliantly and sizzle with intellect, sensuality, fierce honesty and precision of language.

Finally, elusive as the poet might seem, she speaks a perennial truth in the concluding lines of the remarkable penultimate poem, “Stage Fright:” “I was a surfer/ riding on waves that were never mine.” The vastness of the universe and all its possibilities; the fragility of the perceiving self; the joy and freedom of that experiencing self: If I had to choose one place where the poet and reader were united, this would be it. At the very least, *Water the Moon* is a wave that brings us together.

Fiona Sze-Lorrain writes and translates in French, English and Chinese. Her books include *Water the Moon* (Marick Press, 2010) and *Silhouette/Shadow* (co-authored with Gao Xingjian, Contours, 2007). Co-director of *Vif éditions*, an independent Parisian publishing house, and one of the editors at *Cerise Press*, she is also a zheng (ancient Chinese zither) concertist. Her CD, *In One Take/Une seule prise* (with Guo Gan, erhu) will be released in Europe this summer. She has also recently completed prose translations and an introduction