

POETRY

Images of My Mother

Bliss Cua Lim

stand across your child before the door,
a foot and a generation away,
(the getting old, the crying lonely)

regretting late nights come home
from saving other lives
to find your own draining away.

and still your spirited, benevolent beauty
lovelier than in girlhood, and wasted.

The girl in those pictures,
buxom, buck-toothed, in white or red
leans on the shoulder of the man
who holds her.

When did it happen, and why?
You bear so little resemblance to her
and he cannot be the man you first married.

well-stocked kitchen, joyless meals.
maidswept home, earworn plastic-laminated prayers.

(suffering mutely)

three overstuffed leather chairs in a room
the one in the middle piled high with dusty books,
the other two cradling the bottoms of strangers.
What happens to you and he when I leave

for my own bedroom at night?
You said the silence cut you.

(love and hate consume a two-wicked candle:
a bitter burning at both ends)

In a windowless passageway,
no glinting laughter -

Oh come away from the shutters, mother,
beloved and undimmed.

Voicelessness

I once knew, very briefly, a woman and a man,
in conversation cluttered by the cigarette smoke
of quasi-literati
When her friend went off, I spoke with her,

I, stale and inelegant as two-minute
acquaintances often are,
she, quick to take in hand
the obligation to chatter.

Her loquacity was bizarre and a little absurd,
her voice was thin and carried her

I got away - but twice, afterwards, I saw her
with him, the husband brilliant,
the wife once-beautiful.

He held forth while she kept still.

Later I guessed at and pictured her,
steadily pummelling her notions till they were

malleable and shapeable into new forms;
she did it so subtly and unhurriedly
I doubt she knew how manifestly they resembled his,
And how they took on a ring of apology.

Sometimes, as I regale my students,
my voice bounces off them and its words are yours,
Our quarrels are tiresome because they
re-echo old grievances,
and they are painful but not momentous because
we sound like the people we've watched on tv.

Alone, I clutch at myself,
but my hands keep crumpling lines from
other sources, and what
I thought my life would intimate
has been detailed some four disparate times before,
in Chinese, English, Pilipino, and Greek.

Voiceless, I recognize nothing has been left unsounded.
I cannot even be conspicuously silent,
a Russian having already used that on the stage.

Penelope's Hunt

I fixed them on a spindle, watched them whirr,
I noticed that their colors changed,
I spun it for him and he said
it was a bicycle wheel with glimmering spokes,
but I heard next door it was the color red.

I threaded them and knotted and tugged each end
and toyed with them awhile,
then went to the bathroom, wearying of play.
When I returned, she was wearing it,
a necklace, on her young dark skin,
a circle sketched between brown collarbones.

And I saw her unclasp it and
bestow it upon a jewel-case,
heedless of my wailing.

There the little child found it,
laid it on the floor, saw it was empty,
and took it for refuse. I became hard gravel gliding under his wheels, and
the clicking as he coasted and
the dappled blackness beneath the trees
made him think the crank was turning
not tires but movie reels.

I saw this in a mirror, and
I showed it to him, but he said
my face was beautiful and
troubled in the glass.

I traced it to a postcard (I later framed) of a child
under a sombrero, lying in green grass
beneath a hot sun.

And a year ago, in the blue light of a night
without electricity, when
the world in my windows was
paler than in my bedroom, I thought I saw it
hovering expectantly.

On July 1991 it was in the right half
of the cover design of Kurosawa's Dreams,
and yesterday in a snapshot of
calamitous Pinatubo.

I have stalked it, yet
never again has it been mine, -
until at last I shadow you,
your intrusive eyes and hands, you
who are as yet unaware of me,
my spindle, webs, and strings.