

**voices**  
asian  
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*Shanghai, Kenneth Fan*

## **editor's note**

People kind of look at you funny when you tell them you are going to work on Voices. They usually have no idea what you are talking about. This isn't necessarily anyone's fault. It's just one of those things that doesn't get remembered, it's just not on the top of everyone's mind. We hope to change that, we hope we can get you to think about us-- as artists, as people struggling, questioning and healing. About our issues and our selves.

There are screams here as well as whispers, and cries as well as triumphs. These voices don't belong contained in the Asian community, they need to go out. So thank you to all who contributed and all who read. I hope you found something to take with you.

eurie chung

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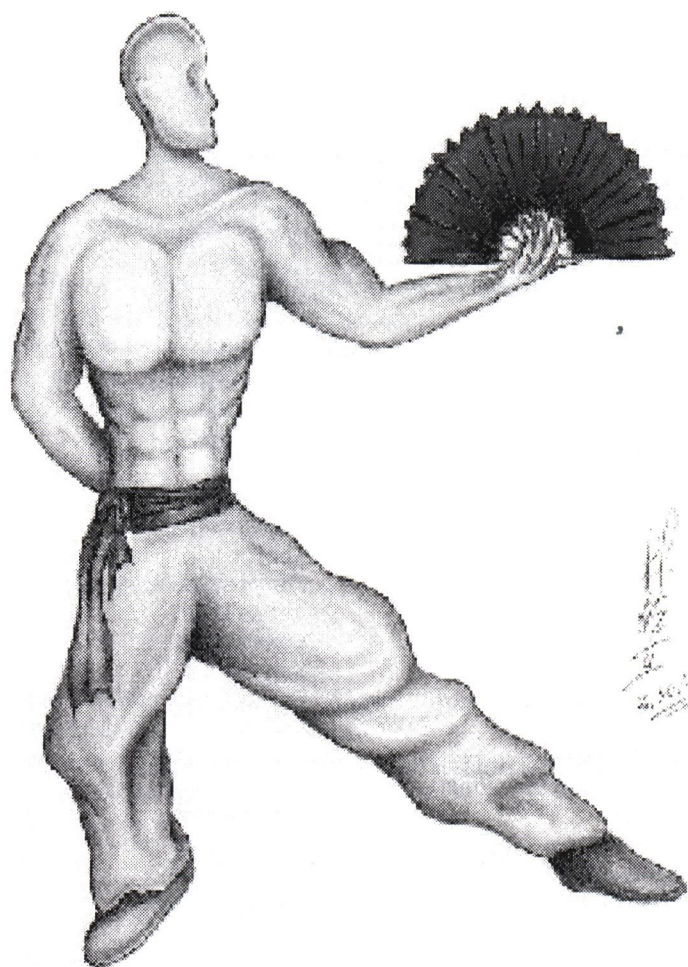
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thanks

to act (and senate) for the moolah, asian american center, all the culture groups, and everyone we forgot. it's been a long day for layout...

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*Wah Lum, Kenneth Lin*

## **Bananas, Twinkies, and FOBs**

Walking through Life  
faces unlike Mine.  
I am only a ghost,  
a figment of their imagination.

I search for a home,  
a place of comfort.

Protect me from the Eyes,  
the Eyes.

Help.  
taken hold of me.  
In the mirror  
Who is this person, this figment?  
Colors changing before me.  
It smiles at me,  
It frowns at me.

Suffocation wraps its fingers.  
I see the light.  
The white light so infamous.

the alarm goes off.  
\* Oh, it was just a dream.  
Just a dream.

I walk to the mirror.  
Who are you?

I am ME.  
is that okay?

-Kimberley Chien

## Coffee Break

by Preetha Mani

Appa's coffee is tepid and cooling more and more as it sits on the kitchen table. His brown head is bent, and the buttery lamp light shines off it, smoothing his skin, creating a halo. It is tax time. The whole family feels the weight of it. Appa sits up this way every night for a week or two, flipping through the old receipts and bills, writing down the figures, filing away the records. He is meticulous and merciless. He makes no mistakes.

I pull a chair to the round wood table. The legs drag on the linoleum and make a dull screeching sound. Appa wrinkles his nose with annoyance and then promptly dismisses my presence. I see the numbers he records on the squares of his lenses. Appa hasn't got eyes anymore. The hollows above his cheekbones are plastered over by white sheets scrawled with black figures.

"Shall I heat up your coffee?" I ask.

"Mmm," he says not looking up.

I am afraid to ask if that means yes or no.

"I could help you," I whisper timidly.

"Mmm?" He asks. He rubs a crumbling pink eraser over a sum on the page.

"I could keep some records, too," I offer.

"Mmm," he says. He nods his chin up and down over the page, noting and checking each calculation he has solved in his head.

I scoot out of the chair and carry the mug of coffee to the stove. I pour the milky brown liquid into the soup pot and light a match to start the flame underneath. There's the soft hissing sound of the gas and the tender scratching of Appa's pencil. There's the metal scruffing of the pot as I move it on the stove over the flame. There's the buzz of the lamp bulb hanging over the table. There's Appa and there's me. Everything else sleeps soundly within night's envelope.

I stir the old coffee and watch the milk curd at the top from the heat. The stuff is old; it has lost its bitter roasted smell. I decide to throw



it out and make Appa a new cup. I accompany the excitement of the project with the tapping of my feet.

"Kannama," Appa says harshly. *Dear girl.* The noise of feet is distracting. The joy of feet is too great in this time of seriousness. I take the milk from the refrigerator. I take the coffee powder from the paint chipped cabinet. I dump the old coffee into the sink and swish and swirl cool water over the pot. I wipe the pot dry and place it back onto the eye. All the while I scrutinize every sound, hear its ebbs and tides, its resonances and constrictions in the tiny enclosed kitchen. I listen for the sound that will jump across the boundary and reach the table, grip Appa by his shoulders or around his waist and make him look up. None catch him; not one is strong enough.

I stir the coffee and the milk. I watch the crumbs twinkle and dissipate and the milk brown and thicken. The liquid spins as I whirl the spoon round and round. I whirl too quickly; some coffee sloshes over the pot and sizzles in the flame.

I glimpse at Appa. He nods his chin up and down over the page, noting and checking each calculation he has solved in his head.

When the steam rises from the coffee, I click the stove off, clack the spoon into the sink, and pour the coffee (as well as I can without spilling) back into the mug. I take the steaming cup to the table and sit again in my chair. There is quiet once more, Appa and I mired in his concentration.

Then Appa's pencil scratching stops; he softly slaps it down over the paper. He slides off his glasses and rubs his eyes with his thick thumb and forefinger. He inspects me.

"School is going well?" He crinkles his bushy brown brows together.

"Yes, Appa."

"That is good." He examines his glasses and then squints at me. "You don't have homework, no?" he asks.

"I already finished," I say. I look at him earnestly. "Shall I help you?"

"It is difficult," he says. "Go to sleep now, kannama, so you can get up early and study."

“Okay, Appa.”

I reluctantly slide the chair from the table. I stretch there beside him, reaching my arms to the ceiling, raising my heels from the ground.

He nods his chin up and down over the page, noting and checking each calculation he has solved in his head.

I walk away.

At the kitchen entrance I pause and gaze at Appa. He is hunched over scattered white papers. The mug of coffee beside him has lost its steam.

\* \* \* \*

## potent toasts

when time seemed to move so slow  
it was speeding and reeling past me  
before my eyes were fragmented images  
like tilting puzzle pieces in mid-flight blinking  
to lubricate them did not help to make them  
sink into one field and the potent toasts  
superceded any cerebral will to  
press them into clean dissolution so  
i shut my eyes in languid trepidation relenting  
to the smooth pulsation lulling through  
me as inundating waves almost like one  
sedative filling out over another warm  
and fuzzy was the darkness with  
its suspended colored flashes that peeked  
through my lashes I tried to feel  
the time pass as best possible  
extracting it wantonly

meaningless kisses marked this embraced  
world tumbling from side to side  
meaning to each other meaningless to time  
trying to pass time  
it was dashing by already  
carelessly trying to take flight  
when it has already taken off  
trying to feel its rush as  
it has rushed on its way  
we were not too skillful  
and now my head is careening  
while time does move so slow

-Hannah H. Suh



*untitled*, Cheryl Chan

## **A Mother's Hands**

She has my hands,  
which unfurl into white fingers with  
nails, sharp enough to cut me.  
Their lacquered surfaces shine  
like stolen stars, sentenced to sit there,  
until natural colors sprinkle emergent life.

Our lifelines spill down our palms,  
like rivers, following the sounds of death  
that beat from the fleshy banks.  
And there are shadows of children  
searching each fingertip, chasing  
the whisper of their mothers' voices  
that wants to stay silent in the bellows  
of blood, flooding over my wrists.

And sometimes, she reaches out to grasp  
at the tattered veil of dust that darkness has spread  
like walls.  
Maybe she's reaching out for me, only to fill her  
palms with dreams so brittle that they ignite her hands,  
giving birth to flames that spit bitterly in her face.

-Catherine Hubbard

## Secret Kitchen Stories

by Elizabeth Chen

My mother does not tell me stories for the sake of family history and memory. Instead, they are a warning to her too-American daughter. This is what this land can do to you. Guard against it.

Once there was a lazy man, she began solemnly in Mandarin at the kitchen table. (I am eating her scallion pancake and she is watching me eat.) He couldn't do anything for himself. His wife did everything—cooked, cleaned, washed his clothes, even did his plowing for him. One day, she received word that her mother was ill. As duty required, the wife made plans to travel to her childhood village to sit by her mother's sick bed. Worried that her husband would not lift a hand for himself while she was away, the wife busied herself with making enough scallion pancake so her husband would not go hungry during her absence. After the wife had made enough scallion pancake to last for a year, she molded the pancake around her husband's neck and told him that all he had to do was eat what was in front of him until she returned. This good woman was comforted that she had done her duty to her husband and that she was now going to do her duty to her mother who she had not seen since she started doing her duty to her husband. On her return, the woman saw vultures circling around her house. Worried, she rushed into the house and found her husband lying dead on the floor. The pancake that had been within reach of his mouth was gone, but the rest was still there.

He had died because he had been too lazy to lift a finger and feed himself, my mother concluded triumphantly. He couldn't even reach out his hand and bring the pancake closer.

But Mom, I protest, what did he do exactly if he was too lazy to do anything? Wasn't he bored? How could he just sit there for his whole life without doing anything?

She says nothing.

Mom?

That's not the point.

My mother gives me a look I know means she wants me to be quiet. I ignore it.

What? What did I do now?

She says nothing.

These secret kitchen stories are passed down only after the meal is cooked and you are waiting for your children to finish eating so you can clear away the dishes. When the football game or sitcom isn't on. When they're not looking at the movie screen instead of you. These rare moments when you can speak and they will listen without mocking you or correcting your speech. You can slip back in your tongue and they will understand you, they will not interrupt. These moments are rare.

Sometimes she tells me, you must not tell. This is what I give to you and you must not tell anybody. By that, she means there are secrets we share, these secrets that bind us together that nobody can see.

I want to write a letter to Maxine Hong Kingston and ask her what her mother had said when she learned that her daughter had spilled the secret kitchen stories.

You must not tell anybody what I am about to tell you, her mother said. Instead, Maxine spilled her secret stories out on paper for the whole world to see.

I began writing at an early age. I can't remember what I wrote about, except that once I started a story about a girl whose mother had died. My mother read the story and was angry.

I wasn't writing about you, I said, annoyed. That's what fiction is – it's made-up, fake, not real.

My mother gives me a look meaning she wants me to be quiet.

What if someone who didn't know our family picked it up off the street and read it? They wouldn't know it was made-up. They would think your mother had died, my father explained patiently to me.

But nobody would think that!

It's disrespectful to your mother.

I storm off to my room, muttering. I slam the door.

## **A Boy's Elegy**

The boy with his father's face is astonished,  
Knowing that his father's spirit is banished,  
Lost to him forever.

Quicksilver mind knows what eyes never saw,  
Young uncle's head bowed as sonograms draw  
A cancer in Father

Devours the gut, quenches the brilliant spark  
Of heavy lidded eyes long pained and dark,  
And his last endeavor.

His silence is the fitting testament,  
To a childhood lost, to straight lines now bent,  
His father's elegy.

--James Uhm



## Sanctuary

Upon holy ground,  
I stand alone  
within cavernous walls  
which echo deep silence.

Signs of purity  
surround me,  
while disdainfully,  
I wonder- *Shall I bow?*

The darkness pours over me  
and I glare ahead  
into the eyes  
of the figure before me.

I shatter the pious serenity  
screaming poisoned words  
until only a hoarse whisper remains,  
*Why have you forsaken me?*

Crumpled to the earth,  
my lonely words,  
mix with bitter tears  
as I realize- *There are no answers for me here.*

So I turn and walk away,  
from the mournful eyes behind me,  
beyond Sanctuary's doors,  
where He reigns...  
His tears upon me.

-Eric Chung

*Claustrophobia and Family Bonding*

Packed like sardines  
and ready to go  
another grueling car ride  
squished between two brothers  
I can hardly move  
but I've no place to go  
5 pairs of skis atop a red jeep  
travelling at 65  
on a snow white afternoon  
my brother's elbow's in my rib  
and I have trouble breathing  
because the air's so dry  
I beg someone to open a window  
but then it gets too cold  
and my mom starts to yell  
I guess I have to deal with it  
for a few more hours  
listening to the same tape  
play over and over  
as day turns into night  
darkness has fallen  
everyone's asleep  
so I talk with my daddy up front  
and I lean on the elbow rest  
as we eat Fritos corn chips  
it's just us two  
looking straight ahead  
into the blackness  
an endless stretch of road it seems  
with white flakes falling from the heavens  
it's as though our jeep could take flight  
into the sky  
and daddy would get us there safely  
*We're almost there*, he says

-Lynnette Kim-



*Louvre*, Kate Cohen

*Untitled*

Didn't want him to wait up for me again  
'cause I can't stay home all the time.  
Cant' stand the fighting.  
He lost me a long time ago.

Hate having to sneak in and to meet  
his eyes, looking at me, looking old and tired  
and not saying a word, just  
giving me guilt with his silence.  
I look to the side and walk  
away. Can't show him  
my tears.

*What have you become of?  
Whose girl were you tonight?*

Shame sends me to bed. Surely  
he knows what my business is.  
I'm sending him to his grave,  
an ungrateful daughter.

Father, please forgive me for  
I do what I must do.

-Lynnette Kim-

### *The Child Within*

*There is a child inside of me  
Who lives within my heart  
A child who longs to be like God  
Pure and without fault.  
Though not of purest gold is she  
But of most fragile glass  
"Protected," she is, by walls of hate  
Leaden and detached.  
Perhaps one day I will awaken  
Realize, and truly see  
That the child who lives inside my heart  
Is who He wants me to be.*

- Clara Seo

### **Shipwrecked**

Whispers bubble toward daylight,  
Giving breath to the depths,  
Each forming patterns unprecedented,  
Unyielding to a ticking moon,  
As tomorrow passes through dark waters,  
Leaving shadows to fill the undertow,  
A barnacle to the hull,  
Remains forever fast.

- Michael Park

*Psalm 23*

I feel  
I've walked  
Too long.  
I sit  
To rest  
Upon a rock  
Upon a hill  
Upon the green carpet of a meadow.  
I do not see  
The trees  
Swaying in the whispered winds  
Nor the concert of birds  
Atop verdant canopies.  
What I see  
Are worn soles  
Upon my feet.  
Worn out.  
Worn down  
Almost to nothing.  
Holes...  
...That expose the flesh  
It hurts to walk  
On holy feet,  
That bleed red tears.  
Wet steps,  
Every step.  
I do not want to walk  
Anymore.  
Nevermore.  
Forevermore,  
I want to rest.  
I lay myself down  
Before ALL,  
Beside my shapely stone  
To welcome  
What dreams may come...  
...Through the looking glass  
Of a peaceful slumber...  
What I see is nothing  
Blank  
Dark  
Space.

I hear a voice calling to me  
Offering new souls  
With which to walk  
Beckoning me from the bleakness  
Is it calling to me?  
Are you calling me?  
Silence...  
I reach upwards  
To where the voice once was  
But with a flash I wake  
To find my sole's  
Renewed.  
I stand  
And walk  
Leaving behind  
Those painful worn out souls.  
And even beyond this green pasture  
Where nothing may seem to matter  
I continue to walk on.  
Walk on, walk on, walk on.

-Eric Chung-



## Questioning Living the Middle

-Frances Chu-fong

Asian

American

Can I really be both,  
without also being neither?

White

Black

where do i fit in this narrow U.S. race paradigm,  
when niether colors fully represent me, but racism clearly effects me?

Model

Minority

Is this label praising us,  
or really just dividing us and pitting us against other minorities?  
*Falsely advertsing our mobility in this race-based hierarchical society.*

Subservient

Domineering

Are these the only roles an Asian American women is allowed to cast?

Where have my true role models gone?

The ones which have more demensions than these sterotypes allow.

Home

Land

Why is it that I need to state I am 'really from' a land I've never seen,  
when America is the only home I have ever known?

Questions

Solutions

Will we find answers to these questions and create solutions,  
instead of living the middle ground of unanswered pleas that is splitting  
me apart?



## Questioning Living the Middle

-Frances Chu-fong

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me apart?

## Desideratum

I want something faintly elegiac  
blue piano, acoustic guitar -- finger picked  
october skies or crumbling leaves  
an ode to the departed days  
a knowledge of that to come  
sweet sorrow -- nothing biter  
real as my mother's cooking  
delicate as my sense of self  
to wrap in the fur of a pussywillow  
and treasure in my heart  
in memoriam.

--James Uhm

## Iron-Cast Cloud -Eurie Chung

Grainy pebbles grind into my feet  
leaving patterns of intricate texture as I walk.  
I can't make myself stop and shake it out,  
the pain is an uncomfortable, persistent reminder.  
Of what, I don't quite know,  
the feeling of presence perhaps.

I found a spot between two ribs on my left side  
that, when poked, tweaks a nerve in my left elbow.  
Lying flat on my bed  
my fingers creep to that spot  
and with my index fingernail  
(the sharpest)  
I pierce my flesh and water my eyes at the shoot of pain.

Closing my eyes, I try to recall the shape of a cloud,  
but the ephemeral tendrils do now hold, form  
long enough to hold its texture;  
like trying to keep the imprints of pebbles on your feet  
after you've stopped walking.



*Rejection*, Ken Lin

## Second Hand Smoke

Eric Chung

*Warning: Smoking may be hazardous to your health.* I smirk as I read the small print on my pack of Camel's. *Holy shit! These things are bad for me? Damn, I thought they were good for me! What the hell, I don't need to be a surgeon to know that, never mind the damn Surgeon General of the United States,* I think laughing quietly to myself before taking my customary seat on the steps of my apartment. I love the view I get from here. I can see all the way across the park and on good days, I have the pleasure of watching the sun set beautifully as the park meets the sky-today is a good day.

The irony of the city sky is that the pollution in the air makes the sky, Nature's greatest gift, so much more beautiful. All that crap that we pump out into the air with our smokestacks, aerosols, exhaust and yeah, even my cigarettes, make the New York City sky a technicolor dreamsky. Purple, pink, blue, orange, and red-you're not going to get this combination in Wisconsin. I guess that even though we're killing ourselves, at least we have something nice to look at it before we go. Yeah, New Yorkers always have style, even when killing ourselves. Anytime I see a sunset like this, the loud city seems to just shut up and everything seems perfect. Oh yeah baby, this is the life. A cigarette in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other and a beautiful sight right in front of-right in front of...this guy in my way?

"Ummm, excuse me? Uh, you're standing in my view."

"Yeah, I know," the wiry middle aged man says.

"Well, would you mind moving? I was kind of enjoying my sunset."

"I just have a few things to say to you. Just a second."

Great. Here I am enjoying a perfect sunset and then this rudy-poo candy-ass shows up. I look him up and down. Salesman? No, doesn't look sleazy enough. Jehovah's witness? Mmm, maybe, but he doesn't have that lost look in his eyes. Who is this guy? Ahh, a moment of revelation. On his feet are a pair of worn out Birkenstock's and the shirt he's wearing says *Greenpeace*. I smile ironically and say, "How may I help you?"

"Man, help yourself, help the world and put out that cigarette. Do you realize that you're creating a hazardous environment for me? I have to breathe that smoke you blow out."

"Well, just keep walking and you won't have to breathe it and I can enjoy my sunset."

"It's not your sunset, man. It's **our** sunset and that shit you smoke is gonna ruin it!"

In a city of millions of people, **this** guy has to be on **my** street and pick **me** to harass. All I want to do is enjoy myself a little. "Look man, I have a right to do what I want, when I want, as long as it's legal. I don't see any laws against an adult smoking a cigarette, so you can just go back to where you came from."

"Why don't **you** go back to where **you** came from?!"

Oh...he went there. It's **on** now! "What the fuck did you just say?"

"You heard me! All you damn orientals, you guys don't give a shit about anything, but money, image and yourselves. Selfish people, that's what you are. None of you orientals care about the environment. You'd destroy all of nature for a buck. Don't destroy my air, go back to China and ruin your own!"

This is interesting, a racist environmentalist, this is definitely new to me. Everything within me wants to get up and knock this guy's teeth down his throat, but I bite my lip and try a little bit of diplomacy-my style. "Understand something you skinny piece of crap, the only thing holding me back from putting my **Korean** foot up your lanky-ass is the fact that you're so ignorant that i think you have a disease. I don't need you to bleed all over me because you might be contagious."

"I'm ignorant? Who's the one who can't use his head and speaks through threats of violence? I thought you people were supposed to be intelligent. You seem like an ape to me."

As angry as I am, I see the truth in that statement. Rearranging this guy's face won't solve anything, even if he deserves it. As I open my mouth to say something, Greenpeace rips the cigarette from my hand and stomps it out, he folds his arms and stares at me expectantly. Behind him, the sun is almost gone and the sky is turning into a dark purple haze. I shake my head.

I want to tell him that it wasn't my people that dropped two atomic bombs onto a country turned guinea-pig to make the holes in the ozone layer.

I want to tell him that tobacco was brought to Asia by the Europeans just to make a buck.

I want to tell him that I am American, just like him. I come from here.

I like it here and I'm staying here. If he doesn't like it, **he** can leave. I want to tell him all these things, but I don't.

Instead, I take out another cigarette, light it up, and inhale deeply. I stand up on my feet, eye to eye, trying to stare through what once obstructed my view. Greenpeace opens his mouth, maybe to take a breath, maybe to insult me again. Who knows? Who cares?

I don't. This is my opening. I exhale all the smoke of years of anger, years of oppression right into his mouth. He chokes. He gags. He doubles over coughing and wheezing. His eyes squinting like mine.

I turn my back on the gasps of suffering and helplessness and leave it behind me.

I take another drag of thick grey smoke into my lungs and bitterly smile. Fuck the Surgeon General. He doesn't know how I feel. Joe Camel is my way away from this world; it's my ticket out of here. Tell me why I want to stay here with these fools. The sun is gone. It's dark. I take another drag, turn, and flick the still lit butt at Greenpeace. I miss. Hmph. I turn again, walk up the steps and close the door.

## **Incomplete**

by Martin Hsia

Each of our lives is like a personalized puzzle. We're all trying to put pieces together to form a complete picture, like the one on the box.

Every piece is different, whether it be in shape, size, or the little section of the picture you see on top of it. Some are end pieces, or corner pieces. Sometimes I find one that I'm sure will fit perfectly in a certain spot, but when I try to press it in, everything else falls apart. Or often I'll snap a piece into the rest of the puzzle, only to realize within seconds that it doesn't fit as well as it should, and may actually belong somewhere else. When this happens, I guess I could take it out and work with it later, but I usually just leave it as it is.

I find that as I connect more pieces together and the puzzle becomes more complete, there are some holes I just can't fill. I want so much for every portion to be complete, but when I struggle to find the right piece I really wonder if it exists. Maybe the people that packaged the puzzle left that piece out by accident.

Sometimes I'm doubtful that I'm really putting pieces together by myself. Maybe when I'm not around, someone comes and helps me, fitting in a few pieces, but not so many that I would notice when I return.

Is it really necessary that I complete the whole puzzle? I wonder what will happen if I don't.

I wonder if anyone every really finishes their puzzles. It just seems too difficult.

I'm still missing so many pieces- what I've made so far doesn't look anything like the picture on the box.



*Inner Reflections.* Cheryl Chan



## I have a power over them

And they all know it  
one by one they appear and linger  
with the hope of an entrance  
but it is all up to me

I know almost each one's face  
if not *more*  
and they all want to know me  
pretending that they do  
if they're desperate enough  
whining kisses help  
but sometimes it's not enough  
I want them to beg  
get on your knees and beg

It all depends on who  
I choose according to their prospective  
flavor that adds to my home  
and the texture of their flesh  
against the extent of their dress  
and let's not forget the asset of their breasts

it's hard to rule when it comes to a whore  
her legs are open for business  
but so much of that isn't always exciting

then the innocent  
with the eyes so withdrawn and  
coated with no unveiled surface  
is even more enticing  
they're so submissive that it's effortless

but they taste so lovely  
and when it's my turn in the rotation  
don't think I hold any back  
I'm going to pounce on them

The trick is to be sweet and trusting  
and when they need a little help  
get some service but essentially  
they all get what's coming  
they know what they're doing  
even those who think they do not  
if they show up where they are  
in my eyes unworthy rags

-Hannah H. Suh

### **Inside Out**

The spark of electricity seen in the eyes,  
As the mouth pants for quenching waters,  
It's automatic yet renewing every time,  
Clinging on to completeness,  
Getting lost in it as time dissolves,  
Denting the monotone hum,  
Filtering energy from busy bees,  
Hoping that this will be the moment.

-Michael Park

## One-Way Glass

Eurie Chung

For years it chased me, haunted me—  
being different is scary for a little kid.  
They made me repeat myself,  
every time.  
It always sounded like everything else, too.  
rhymes with worry and blurry—  
All the ugly words start with 'yu-'  
yucky  
urine  
ur-anus

Even in Korean it means something not-so-great.  
glass  
Dad, why would you name your first-born child, 'glass'?  
No, no, that's not what it means.  
It's in the inflection.  
One way, it's glass.  
One way, it's emerald.  
Not many people know that, but  
that's what it really means.  
one way—glass  
one way—emerald

The name is quite appropriate I think.

one way ordinary  
one way extraordinary  
catching shifting in the light  
haunting transparency, difficult reflection,  
multifaceted inflections  
crystal clarity  
ordinary simplicity

one-way glass  
always looking out



## Happy Child

by Elizabeth Chen

You were a happy child, my mother and father sometimes tell me.

It's true, I looked it up in the photobooks my father keeps in chronological order in the family room.

I'm happy. On the bed and waving my feet. Pink soles and white comforter and one happy baby.

In another picture, I am playing with my cousin. We both look alike – we both have dark black hair and round baby faces. We match 'cept he's a boy and I'm a girl. We are placed smiling side by side.

My parents tell me I sang a lot. You used to sing all the time, they look at me almost wistfully. You were such a happy baby. I look and I am singing.

My young mother in the picture is happy too. She has long black hair. And a short gray skirt. Shoes with heels. She is stylish and beautiful. She is smiling for the camera. I wonder if she has come to America yet.

My father looks different too. I don't even recognize him. He is skinny and tall—a young earnest-looking type.

That's the young man you told me about, the one who offered to carry your lunch up the mountain if you shared half of it with him. The one who you decided senior year of college that maybe you liked after all. The one who took you dancing. The one who you took the train to go see every weekend once you were in America.

I used to think you didn't love him. You never kissed him or hugged him or displayed affection toward him like people in love in the movies. I wondered again if you loved him.

I thought maybe Chinese people don't love each other. Maybe we're not built like that. After all, I had heard these stories about daughters and matchmakers and secret arrangements. Maybe that's how you met him. Maybe you had been in love with someone else, but you married him instead. Maybe your heart broke because Chinese people

aren't allowed to love each other. You never told me how it was that you came to love him.

My parents don't love each other, I once announced to my American friends.

But I knew even if you were unhappy, you would never leave him. Divorce seemed to me an American concept. Parents breaking up, families breaking apart – no, that wasn't my family. I knew that my mother and father sat across from each other and were comfortable.

Later, I was older and curious. I asked you how it was that you had married my father and you surprised me. The story that leaked out was so different from what I had imagined that when I looked at your in old photographs, I thought I was looking at two different people.

Your father gained some weight after he started eating American snacks, my mother tells me when I look at the pictures and then look at my father nodding off on his American sofa with a Chinese newspaper in his hand.

Why did you come here, Mom? Why didn't you stay in Taiwan?

She's fiddling with pots and pans, slicing, sizzling, shaping the evening meal with bared hands, furrowed brow. TV blaring, she's saying in Mandarin – What? I can't understand what you're saying. What?

Sometimes she pretends not to understand.

I don't speak that language, she says in Mandarin.

Speak to me in Chinese.

Other times, I reply: Mom, don't speak to me in the supermarket! It's embarrassing.

She's too loud and everybody's looking.

What's embarrassing? she replies in Mandarin. She's obstinate.

I look away.

You know English, I insist in perfect English.

You know Chinese, she parrots back in perfect Chinese.

In Chinese school, we make fun of the teacher. You can tell she's just come from Taiwan. She wears too-tight green sweaters and pronounces her words funny.

We don't listen to her when she speaks. Instead, we giggle and doodle in our lesson books. We whisperspeak in American until she glares at us, green sweater and all. But we don't care. We're glad we're ABCs. We're almost white.

In American school, we the loud and obnoxious are separated. Along, we are offensively obedient – choking out meek yellow words for the teacher to swallow like a greedy hawk. In class with all the other white kids staring at me, every word sounds yellow. When they look at me with piercing eyes, I can almost see them squinting at me, squinting... squinting... squinting until I can almost hear it – CHINK! ,

Later, I began slamming doors and talking loudly at my American school. I hated the other Chinese kid at my school. When the other kids laughed when he sat quiet and looking at the red marks on the page and tears dripping down yellow cheeks. When he did well and sat there without tears, I hated him.

Quiet and meek I was not. My teachers thought I was crazy, all of a sudden slamming doors. I could see them looking at me and shaking their heads, she was such a happy student.

The year I became Asian American I read Maxine Hong Kingston. She spoke to me — through the black lines on the page, I could see her face. It was mine, I knew the truth.

That was also the year I became angry. So angry that I choked on the every word. Vincent Chin – I identified with him. Connection to a Chinese-American man with his head beat in with a baseball bat.

Maxine and Vincent became my guiding posts, angels I clung to when I couldn't read any more of my Dickens, my Shakespeare, my Greek poets, my Hawthorne, my Melville. They were my mother and father, guiding and feeding my anger.

Faye Myenne Ng. Gish Jen. Amy Tan. Japanese internment, Chinese Exclusion Act, picture brides, paper son, Hawaii, David Mura, slaying the dragon, lotus blossom, Russell Leong, Asian fetish. Yellow,

yellow, yellow.

Later, I stopped smiling. I imagined you looking over old photographs and wondering what had become of that girlchild you had pushed out of your swollen womb.

That last year—how I longed to be away from you, to be on my own.

Those four walls which had seemed so safe also seemed so constricting. They seemed to grow inward upon me until I had no room no breath.

That was the year I rebelled. You sat up waiting for me, counting up the pay stubs on my checks and matching them with the hours I said that I would come home. Look what you've done, you yelled at him as if holding my broken shards in the light would put me back together. You blamed him for my rebellion and revolt, for my bad behavior, for my talking back, for my insolence.

You gave me a choice—him or school. You drew my decision out of me like a blood debt.

I chose.

Now that we no longer argue about him, you ask me about other boys.

I want to meet your friends you say.

If I mention a boy, you pretend that you don't know who he is. I feel compelled to ask for your stamp of approval, although I know how little it will take for you to dismiss, disapprove, tell me what's wrong. I disagree with you, but then the thought lingers. I know you have certain expectations that are unspoken, unwritten. I think I have always disappointed you. You constantly preach your commandments, ingraining the way you think, inscribing it onto my broad forehead so that I am marked.



