

Shirley Lim, *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011. 358 pp. ISBN 978-981-4346-54-2.

The latest offering by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, respected academician and acclaimed writer, combines poetry, short stories and fictional pieces into a compilation called *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives*. The writings in this collection were produced over the last four decades and contain some of Lim's earliest work beginning from 1967. An "old friend" I recall is "Journey" (1967), a particularly moving account of a young girl growing up in a poor, volatile household and the way in which she has to shed her youthful innocence in a moment of harsh reality. I read this story as an undergraduate in university and was awed by the way the author captured the whole scene without any forced sentimentality. Then there is "Conversations of Young Women" (1972), a story which carries a conversation between a group of girls and the silliness, fun, irritation and, ultimately, truths which emerge from the animated dialogue they have with each other. A later work by Lim, "Sixty" (2004), describes, again in a way that is devoid of too much emotion, the trials faced by a woman who is growing old. Losing her grip of dreams that have been deferred for too long, and with her health steadily diminishing, she finds herself caught in a kind of limbo, her situation made worse because she is also in an unhappy marriage which she had over the years tried to break away from. Crestfallen when she sees her husband with another woman, she is even more alarmed when she realises that there is no other recourse open to her at this stage of her life. Themes and tales about women abound in Lim's short stories which are well-written vignettes of human strength and weakness.

This collection is divided into three sections: short stories, flash fiction and poetry. Poetry occupies the most pages of this book. This is not surprising. Lim has garnered international recognition for both her prose and poetry but it is her poems which capture the universal themes of loss, displacement, identity and borders which are dominant in this compilation. Like most book titles, the title of this book is significant and suggestive. A passport is an official document which defines who we are, which country we belong to. But Lim's stories and especially her poems tell us how our lives are a perpetual quest for identity, as we constantly arrive at and depart from different phases of life, different locations and contexts which bring to question who we are really. Lim is perhaps an exemplary example of such sites of incredulity and wondering. Born in Malaysia, Lim's ancestors are from China and she currently resides in America. Indeed, this is a personal history rich with overlapping cultures and influences. She refers to all three defining locations in her poems. "The Source"

(345) and “Blossoming” (347) recall her ancestral ties to China, a place which these poems suggest eludes the poet’s understanding: “I am afraid/ Of this China, unseen estrangement/ Of strangers from whose lives I’m supposed/ To make my story” (347). Then there are the many poems located in Malaysia, among them “Bukit China” (283), “Song of an Old Malayan” (286) and “What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say” (298). Her formative years were spent in Malaysia and a number of poems are devoted to her family. Poems like “My Father’s Sadness” (282), “Black and White” (311) and “Father from Asia” (313) are very telling of a difficult, often misunderstood relationship between the poet and her father.

“American” (266), “Solitary” (354) and “Keeping your Distance” (353) are among the many poems which refer to America and recount Lim’s sometimes uneasy relationship with her adopted homeland and its people: “I am learning what Americans do so well – /Staying out of each other’s hair” (353).

In all the poems, Lim ponders on what is the contemporary, transnational identity. She acknowledges that though the overlap of cultures and sites is exciting and empowering, it is also troubling: “How do we learn to take/ Identity after identity, swallowing/ Identities and history, to save us/ From contagion of losses and predatory/ Nations? (347). Perhaps in these mullings, Lim questions the whole notion of the passport. Can we really be a citizen of a particular country? How should we view ourselves within diversity, a feature which increasingly characterises today’s world communities? *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives* is indeed a wonderful read in that it puts forward varied stories, fluctuating emotions and different ideas which all go into making the passport of life. Lim’s own personal narrative provides a rich space wherein she, for the past forty years, has interrogated issues of identity, belonging, culture and history in an attempt to better understand how we can live in a world that is growing more complex by the day.

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