

Mirror at the Back of My Home

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There is a mirror
at the back of my home,
just around the corridor
behind the laundry room.

An antique mirror
from my mother,
three folding panels
mounted on black wooden legs
carved with leaves and flowers.

Once a year,
for twenty-four hours,

you can walk through it
to meet anyone you like
in another country,
without worrying about visas,
flight schedules, airport transfers
or getting your work done
ahead of time.

One year,
my Filipina helper,
Julia, the one who had retired
after six years with me,
walked through it
laughing from Laguna

¹ Born in Hong Kong, Agnes Lam studied in Singapore and America. Upon graduation, she taught at the National University of Singapore before returning in 1990 to teach at the University of Hong Kong. She specializes in language education in China and Asian poetry in English. She is also internationally known as a poet and some of her poems have been translated into German, Italian and other languages. In 2008, she was awarded the Nosside International Poetry Prize (Special Mention) and was made Honorary Fellow in Writing by the University of Iowa. Her current project on Asian poetry in English, funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council, took her to several Asian cities from Macao to Delhi.

to make me a sandwich.

Another year,
 I walked through it
 to my aunt's living room
 on the beach in Tsawwassen,
 the west coast of Canada,
 to make her congee with abalone,
 she coughing too much to come home.

There are many people
 I wish to visit
 through that mirror

to have a meal with them,
 to listen to them talking,
 to hear them laugh –

Lysa, my canoemate in Outward Bound –
 who emigrated to Australia.
 Will she still need me
 to rearrange her furniture
 like we did one Singapore evening
 to her husband's surprise
 when he went home?

Miti, a few years younger than I,
 from the Akha tribe north of Chengrai,
 who walked four hours with me
 down the mountain,
 across a river to say goodbye.
 Does her husband still write music?
 Her children sing in four voices?

Wing and Aileen now in Bangkok –
 they made me the most Singaporean
 meal outside Singapore,
 complete with *blachan* and *rojak*,
 in their Hong Kong home.
 Food in Thailand is so good –
 does Wing still cook?

Mr. Attwood, a flight engineer
in San Francisco – he helped me
find my luggage when lost
at the airport after a flight delay
the first time I landed in America,
I sat on the stairs about to cry.
Has he retired?

Daniel and Olive,
who removed their new baby
to give me their bedroom
to sleep off my jetlag
when I arrived on their doorsteps
without any notice.
Where do they live now?

Vivien in Washington –
she gave me quilted house boots
one winter in Pittsburgh after
she saw my toes in Japanese slippers
one morning she stopped by.
Which Chinese student
is she feeding now?

So many friends
I have made and
lost in so many years,
so many places.

Without the mirror
at the back of my home,

I cannot visit them

to ask how they are doing,
whether they are happy,
whether life is kind –

whether there are answers.

Agnes Lam, 18 January 2003, Rodrigues Court

TM011N

Wait for me at TM011N!
You don't know where that is?
It's the eleventh lamppost
from the east on the north side
of the Tsing Ma Bridge
From there, you can see
the Ting Kau Bridge
across a space of water.
I know exactly where it is
and will be able to find you...

Long time ago, lampposts had no names.
When the lights went out, it was difficult
to find them to fix them.

Now every lamppost has a name.
38941 stands next to a cotton tree
with antique bowls for flowers where
Mount Davis Road meets Pokfulam.
HKU 226 marks the southwest corner
of our heritage main building.
Because I know their names,
I can recognize them.
Because I recognise them,
they are not like other lampposts to me...

Long time ago, lampposts had no names...
Hong Kong had no name...
Our earth had no name...

Agnes Lam, 12 June 2011, Wai's car

What then is Life

These last few weeks,
wherever I walk,
whatever I see or hear,
I keep wondering –

what life lies behind them?

The grey steps on which I walk,
the green guardhouse I pass,
the fire station across the road,
an engine, washed and waiting –

who designed and built them?

The glass towers on the edge
of the harbour, the tunnel beneath
the network of bridges, flyovers,
to the airport, planes flying –

where to and where from?

The diamond butterflies on display,
the handbags, suede boots from Europe,
the honeys and nuts from the South,
the white orchids in black glazed pots –

how many lives crafted such luxury?

The concerts, the musicals, the movies,
television dramas, documentaries,
the jazz music slightly short of breath,
the fiction, non-fiction on my shelves –

which of these minds are still thinking?

The news reports of a starving child
looking for food falling off a window,
a democratic member visiting prostitutes,
bananas and bones thrown at ministers –

why should it be so?

Mini titanium umbrellas implanted
in my brothers' hearts for blood to flow,
another operation to stop blood feeding
a lump of tissue growing on a kidney –

how many more years do they add?

Every day, every minute,
life is being designed, being
transported, being enjoyed,
spent, abused, extended –

but what is life?

Agnes Lam, 17 July 2011, the steps of Rodrigues Court

Plant a Tree

My mother-in-law said,
'When I die,
do not worry
about burying me
in a cemetery.
Just plant a tree
somewhere
in Guangzhou.
In the old times,
we did that.'

But
where should I plant the tree?
How do I get a permit?
What kind of tree?
How large must it be?
What if it looks like another nearby?

I did not ask her those questions.
Neither did I promise her
I would do so...

... I wonder
how many have died in Hong Kong
since the first person arrived?

For the whole world,
for every person living,
there might have been 14 dead.

The other day I saw an ad –
scattering ashes into the sea
or a country park is free.

Some time ago, there was another –
about synthesizing ashes of
your loved ones into gems,

a bracelet of ancestors...

even if you won't wear it,
at least not every day,

in case you drop it
somewhere...

Perhaps, it is better
to plant a tree
or tend a pot of flowers.

When Father-in-law left,
I planted jasmines
in pots of midnight blue ...

... every summer
their scent floats in from the balcony,
I think of him smiling.

Agnes Lam, 14 January 2012, Guangzhou Through Train