

**Shirley Lim, *Listening to the Singer*. Malaysia: Maya Press, 2007. 134pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-36-0.**

Shirley Lim's new poetry collection, *Listening to the Singer*, begins with a sonnet entitled "When." This poem provides insight into the volume as a whole:

When I was a child, I would watch the spray  
Break phosphorescence at my feet then run away.  
There was so much sea, always rhythmically  
And gently pulling to the horizon.  
There was the enormous starry clarity  
Of sky and sharply carried upon  
The breeze the smells of pines and salty sea.  
It was a child's preoccupation  
To stare at the yellow coin of moon,  
To crumble pine needles between thumb and finger,  
Not thinking anything particular, to linger,  
Watching the trees bend in the wind, sea dance,  
Till you knew it was time to be home soon,  
And straightaway left with no backward glance. (3)

In the poem, a grown-up persona is remembering a fragment of her childhood, a memory unstuck in time and space. When she was young, she enjoyed playing near the sea. She loved being engulfed in nature and was fascinated by what she could see, touch, and smell. But when it was time to go home, she would leave the sea, the sky, and the pine needles behind, without a thought for the world that had captivated her only seconds ago. Needless to say, this is a nostalgic and very personal poem. The childhood experience is uniquely the persona's: not everybody lives near the sea; not everybody is fortunate enough to have the same level of curiosity. The sea that "gently pull[s] to the horizon" and the trees that "bend in the wind" are common enough natural phenomenon, but in this poem, they are the special companions of one solitary child.

Despite its personal nature, this poem still causes readers to reflect on their own childhood: instead of the sea, it could be a park next to an apartment block or a small forest of trees full of chirping birds. Regardless of the place and space one plays in when young, it is always "home" one returns to (either literal or metaphorical home); the outside world is often nonchalantly abandoned, for we know the child's mind is careless, forgetful, and can contain only one thought at one time: "Till you knew it was time to be home soon./ And straightaway left with no backward glance." That the desire to be "home" can overwhelm everything else is an experience shared by us all. And at this point the poem powerfully transcends the personal into the universal.

I have discussed "When" in detail because I believe the poem showcases the quality and temperament of many of the poems in the collection. Like "When," a lot of the poems in *Listening to the Singer* are distilled moments, deeply personal and

nostalgic (often unabashedly so), but in these poems there is always something one can connect with, and that is an unmistakable sign of good and enduring poetry. Sometimes, even if the connection is not immediately obvious, the reader is never estranged, as he or she is always rewarded with beautiful language that pronounces the power and subtlety of words and makes the reader remember the essence of poetry. In “When,” for example, the moon is “the yellow coin of moon”: in just five words we are told the colour, shape, size, and texture of that hanging decoration of the night.

To illustrate the “connections” I have mentioned, I will now discuss selected sections in *Listening to the Singer* in relation to my personal experiences. Good poetry can touch people’s hearts; one at a time. This is how one heart was touched, and changed for the better.

As a trilingual speaker of Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, I read the poems in the second section (“Speech”) with immense interest. Lim’s Chinese, Malaysian, and Singaporean background and her education in the English language have turned her into a polyglot. The group of poems in “Speech” describe and recount the frustrations of communication, despite, or perhaps because of, the different languages and dialects available to the poetess. Not all Lim’s readers share her languages, but it is likely that they, like her, also command more than one language, and it must be equally uneasy for them to switch between these tongues or simply to find the right words to express their thoughts.

Communication between people is hard, so much so that the persona in “Speech” proclaims, “If I were everything,/ I would bury speech” (21). In another poem, “Lament,” the persona mocks her own naivety in believing in the possibility of owning a foreign language. She writes: “I, stranger, foreigner/ Claiming rights to/ What I have no right—/ Sacrifice, tongue/ broken by fear” (26). And speech is never just speech – it is inevitably tied to history, culture, tradition, and pride. In the poem “To Li Po,” the persona speaks to the Chinese poet, “whose eyes were slanted also”: “Yet I cannot speak your tongue with ease,/ No longer from China. Your stories/ Stir griefs of dispersion and find/ Me in simplicity of kin” (23). But in the end, we must learn that there are things that are unalterable across a wide spectrum of languages. The persona in “Learning English” relates, “the different words working,/ to say what is/ unchangeable. Say, father mother” (31).

Not only are the words “father” and “mother” unchangeable, they also occupy an important place in Lim’s mind. “Mother” and “My Father,” along with “Ah Mah,” are the three sections in the middle of the collection. They are situated in the centre – and therefore iconically and symbolically at the heart – of the volume. And I can see why. I, too, am an Asian daughter, and I understand how parents come first, lodged securely in the heart; even their spectres must not be waved away.

In the first poem in the section “Mother,” the persona describes her mother:

Mother is toothless, sag-skinned,  
Coconut round and brown with scar.  
She knew pantuns, on Mandi Safar,  
Sarong knotted modestly,

Fell into the sea, milk-fleshed young.  
Ungainly now, unstrung,  
She cannot stand heat, lies snoring  
Under circling breezes. (49)

This stanza shows the disgust and tenderness of a daughter observing a mother who has been deserted by youth. The persona describes the mother unflatteringly: “toothless,” “sag-skinned,” “brown with scar,” “lies snoring.” But behind this sense of revulsion lies a gleam of tenderness that cannot be denied. Who would get into such proximity of an aging body, and to notice what is absent in her mouth, to hear her snore and to know, too well, her intolerance to heat? Here, the amount of attention one woman gives to another suggests intimacy. And the honesty of the tone and word choices presents us with a realistic take on old age. This is no romance, and as such this is the best way to come to terms with the unavoidable phase of life. The poem ends with the following, “She shuffles to the refrigerator/ In search of Malacca sweets” (49). These lines are lightly comical, and the mother is a child again, craving sweets.

But this poem is deceptive, a calm prelude to the stormier turbulence of emotions to come: anger, disappointment, hatred. Other poems in the section tell us that the mother, who “wanted fine things” and “confused/ life with wanting” (“Mother’s Shoes” 59), had abandoned the daughter. A permanent wound is formed, scarred deep: “she left/ I never found her again/ I never found the unbroken/ vessel of childhood” (“My Mother Wasn’t” 56). It is no surprise, then, that the daughter finds it hard to forgive the mother. And the rejection is absolute:

No one who gives  
away her daughter has a right  
to love her. I will not forgive you  
till I have made you pay the full  
debt of your abandonment. (57)

The poems in the section “My Father” are very different in sentiment. Perhaps the titles, “Mother” and “My Father,” already betray who Lim favours: it is her father that she claims is hers. Appreciative of what the father has done for the family, the persona writes in “My Father’s Sadness”: “His young body is dying of responsibility” (82) and “My father broke/ with each child, finer and finer, the clay/ of his body crumbling to a drizzle of silicon/ in the hour-glass” (82). Poem after poem, we learn more about the father’s sacrifices and the daughter’s bittersweet love. In a moment of vulnerability, the daughter openly confesses, “No secrets about my love for him now,/ who is disappearing, pound for pound” (90). She even wants to reverse the roles of parent and child, to become his father’s mother: “as a woman holds a child,/ that her caring can be cleansed” (“Black and White” 90). It is, therefore, heart-breaking that as an adult living in a new country the persona does not hear of the father’s death – the irony of life: “No one tells me he’s dead/ till he’s been buried” (“Father in China” 87).

The daughter is devastated by the father's departure. Helpless, powerless, fatherless, she writes:

Today, I would call Canton  
 person-to-person. I'd say,  
 I've booked a ticket for you  
 to Sloan-Kettering. See, I have bank  
 accounts and dollar notes to save  
 your life here in another country.  
 Instead I write this poem. (87)

The last line is at once pathetic and powerful. Pathetic because we are reminded that the act of writing cannot truly resurrect the dead and a poem can never compensate for a lost life. Powerful because the father is immortalised, remembered as loving, in the poem and in many others in the section: the best belated gift a daughter can offer a father. The contrasts of the two sections, "Mother" and "My Father," not only narrate two different parental stories, but also demonstrate Lim's courageous decision to turn her personal history into poetry, and in the process, to confront and ultimately, accept it.

Lim also addresses the death of a dear friend. All poets court death, toy with it in verses. But Lim's efforts are enviable. In the last section, "Eulogy Suite," the poems are devoted to a long-loved friend, who although no longer breathes, lives on in Lim's mind and poetry. There are only seven poems in this section, the shortest in the collection, and in each of these poems Lim shows a slightly different attitude to this final aspect of human existence. Angry and bewildered: "You dared to die!" ("Eulogy" 127). Eerily reflective: "You died tomorrow afternoon, fifteen time zones/ And a whole day early. Like the future I saw/ With you almost a life ago" ("Future Past" 128). Stubborn and self-deluding: "I have lived so long with you in my head/ Your dying seems to mean little to me./ You will, of course, still be there to talk to/ Tomorrow" ("The Day After You Died" 129). Thankful: "Now that you are dead/ I can thank you for lessons/ On love and ego" ("In Requiem" 131). And in the end, the persona is ready to let go and be consoled by poetry: "I cope as always/ In solitary poetry" ("Cremation at Sea" 130). It is as if death has been swallowed whole and spit out; its organs dispersed in these poems.

*Listening to the Singer* houses a large range of emotions and life experiences. Apart from languages, parents, and death, Lim writes about childhood memories, dreams, visiting home, advice to young people, stories of other women, animals, uncles smoking opium, science fiction, food, and different places. This volume of poetry is a life condensed, a vastness tamed, at times broad-stroked, at others microscopic, but never forced, never faked. And this richness of life is matched by the richness of language. One is constantly surprised by the images that Lim conjures: they are often of ordinary objects, but the poet describes them in such a way that they beg to be rethought and imagined anew. "First, the sea, blue heart pulsing,/ Spilling stars, nuts, and sand" ("Crossing the Peninsula" 7), "The wall-clock drips its seconds"

(“Chinese in Academia” 28), “Rubbing elbow creases,/ I made small dirt balls/ appear like opium shit” (“Black and White” 90), “Black wooden stairs still stand/ And wind like arms of slender women” (“Visiting Malacca” 113), “Crescent mangoes like smooth-thighed trailer-/ girls from Siam” (“Mango” 121), and many more. One wants to linger in Lim’s world, where things are not as mundane as they seem: they are more magical, more sensual, more fun.

In *Listening to the Singer*, I feel Lim pouring out the content of her heart – and what a remarkable heart it is.

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