

Four Poems from 1985

Fish

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Fish lead such placid lives,
bask in sun, hide under rock,
weave through their fluid hives.

Look at people, grabbing,
snatching, a piece here,
a piece there. Anything
will do. Gold or cake,
arm or leg. Stuff bellies,
contort faces – stomachache!

Take catfish. Confident,
cool, they swim in schools.
Complete in their silence,
they feel the rhythms, slow,
of their swim, viscous algae
slipping, and mystic glow
from the upper air, in
Nature's sway, unthinking.

¹ **Shirley Geok-lin Lim's** *Crossing the Peninsula* received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (1980). Presented the Multiethnic Literatures of the United States Lifetime Achievement Award and University of California Santa Barbara Faculty Research Lecture Award, she's published ten poetry collections, three short story collections, two novels, a children's novel and *The Shirley Lim Collection*. She won the American Book Award twice (*The Forbidden Stitch* and *Among the White Moon Faces*) and published research on Southeast Asian, postcolonial and feminist studies. She was UCSB Chair of Women's Studies and Chair Professor of English at University of Hong Kong, and is Research Professor at UCSB.

City Monsoon

(Tanah Ayer-ku)

All the world was water beating
on the air-conditioned room
like an ice-box humming.

Save me from water, she cried,
glad for the neutral air
blowing round her arms and feet.

Banging on glass, concrete,
red mud and Bermuda grass,
it roared and hissed on the streets.

Rusty tankers and containers,
spired refineries floated
in the sky where water

was all beyond the glass
of the cool cool room. And she thought
of herself drenched as she passed,

ragtag ten, in all that
monsoon afternoon, whipped
in water, soaked to the armpit,

navel, crotch, elbow bones,
kneecaps and ribcage sticking
through sodden school cotton,

having given up the idea
of shelter, anxiety of shop-fronts,
dripping moldy trees, for water

beating on lallang, wind-slung dust
and thorny mimosas clenched shut,
child walking in her stormy heart.

Now she huddles in the cold dry wind,
beaten by water of memory,
country-warm and freely falling.

Man Eating *Ais Kacang*

Ice whirls in a steel clamp.
Shaved quick and fine it falls
Snowy dust, a mountain
Promising cold pleasures
In a hot mouth. Like a
Woman's suppliant body
Or a man's respect, tastes
Evaporating on
Your fleshy tongue dissolve
Memorial seduction.

Tung Chee²

Yellow paper, red brushwork:
he squints in dazzle.
Gold paint and blood of cock,
sun gush through open temple.

Skewered, noon-tranced,
he pulls in the spirits
muttering, his dance
a writing of strokes and cuts.

Here are names,
victim, demon,
floating with chrysanthemums
in his bowl, summoned:

Do you believe? Do you?
His writing is to name,
to claim he knows, true
like the drops from a flame,

stippling from tongue, fingers.
To swallow the images
that had burnt, the letters
accusing, now ashes,

in recovery of sense, trace
of flesh and spit, yellow
ash blood daze
is to know yourself better.

² A Taoist exorcist; a temple medium who heals through spirit-possession.