

# Stanford Journal of Asian American Studies



## Special Issue

featuring

Shimon Tanaka, Sarah Gambito, and Ken Chen

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## INTRODUCTION

*Nicole Chorney*

Asian American literature is a growing and complex genre that is constantly evolving and being reinvented with the arrival of new Asian immigrant groups to the U.S. and the enactment of legislation with regards to immigration and race-related policies, which both shift the boundaries and definitions of Asian American culture itself. Literary critic Susan Koshy delineates these shifts into five major historical patterns of ethnic formation:

- 1) Mid-nineteenth century to WWII: Chinese, Japanese, Asian Indian, Filipino and Korean male immigrants came to the U.S., and over 600 pieces of anti-Asian legislation were passed;
- 2) WWII to mid-twentieth century: the rise in differentiation of social statuses of various Asian American ethnic groups created borders and division amongst the Asian American community as a whole; immigration laws restricted the entry of the Japanese, Japanese-Americans were forced into internment camps and immigration channels from the Philippines, China and India to America were re-opened;
- 3) Mid-twentieth century to 1965: the term “Asian American” was created to contrast to the commonly used pejorative “Oriental” and “Yellow” terms, and Asian American studies became established as an academic discipline, a by-product of the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam protests;
- 4) 1965 to 1980: a series of new immigration laws allowed for another large influx of immigrants from each Asian country, in addition to the immigration of immediate family members overseas, and the migration of several Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, Mien and Cambodians to the U.S., further diversifying the Asian American community;
- 5) 1980 to present day: the drastic change in economic, political and cultural relations in the Pacific pushed the contextualization of ethnicity towards the transnational, and away from “the problematic of how Asian Americans will be incorporated into the American body politic” (Koshy 318-322).

The resulting effect of these five shifts in ethnic formation has caused Asian American literature, in the words of Geok-Lin Lim et. al,

to have “no single unifying grand narrative to organize the vast materials that Asian American writers call on; it possesses no single linguistic Other” (2). One might then think of “Asian America” as an imagined literary place, influenced by the material conditions of the various Asian American ethnic groups, which Lisa Lowe characterizes as “heterogeneous, hybridized and multiplicitous” (4). Lowe argues for heterogeneity to counter the common misperception that Asian Americans are a homogeneous ethnic group – an identity enforced first by the U.S. exclusion acts on Asian immigration, and again by the quotas discriminating against Asians in university admissions – and hybridity to call attention to the class, gender, linguistic, diasporic, and national differences of Asian Americans.

Other misconceptions of Asian American literature include the suggested domination by East Asian American writing, and a mostly linear plot trajectory, beginning with immigrant entry and ending with successful assimilation with points of internal conflict and struggle encompassing the middle. While this may be true of *some* Asian American literature it is certainly not true of *all* the literature in production today. Some Asian American writers, such as Karen Tei Yamashita, Nam Le and many participating in this print issue, have questioned, through the content of their writing, whether Asian Americans must “reflect Asian ethnicity-specific issues” and solely “dwell on being Asian or Asian American” (Chae 89). One might do well to remember that the term “Asian American” is a social and political construct, which only serves as one modifier for the many individuals classified as Asian Americans. It, however, continues to serve as a useful construct in academia for categorizing the literature of Asian Americans, since many of the pieces that fall into this body of work share similar tropes and themes, deriving their inspiration from “shared experiences” of those who fall into the heterogeneous group of Asian Americans. This special edition of the SJAAS certainly can include itself among the evidence of the increasing body of literature, criticism and theory clarifying the complexities of Asian American literature, and by extension, Asian American culture and identities.

This journal is divided into three sections: poetry, fiction and non-fiction. However, many themes repeated across various texts, derived both within and outside of the Asian American experience, are not exclusively found in one genre of writing nor does any one piece solely concern itself with one major trope. Sarah Gambito’s “Ancestor,” for example, focuses on the cyclical life of the cherry,

considering the cherry to be an ancestor. Its continual existence seems to transform the cherry into a type of diasporic subject without a real sense of home, living “here and not-here” (15). Moreover, “Ancestor” is a poem that is not exclusively examining Asian ethnicity-specific issues, but rather borrowing common elements of Asian American literature for a lyric deception concerning generationality and food consumption.

To conclude this introduction, it seems useful, in the interest of comparative and contextual analysis, to briefly underscore some of the similarities and contrasts between many of these texts to guide a critical reading of this collection of Asian American student and professional work. Derek Ouyang’s “Trees in Love,” Samantha Toh’s “Pacific Crossing,” and Karmia Chan Cao’s *Forgetting Tiburon*, for instance, are all rooted in the Asian American experiences of migration and the subsequent fragmentation of families resulting from single-family member migrations to the U.S. Jackie Chu’s “The Musician” and Trac Dang’s “Making Sense, Making Peace,” on the other hand, remind us that the waves of migration of various Asian ethnic groups to the U.S. resulted from different motivational purposes. The grandmother’s loss of linguistic facility and vocal musicality in “The Musician” seems to be the consequence of her forced exile from Vietnam, her sadness and abrupt loss of “homeland” literally burying her ability to articulate her orchestra of Vietnamese dialects. “Making Sense, Making Peace” also explores these varying impulses for migration, arguing that the exiled characters in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* could be distinguished as either forced-exiles or expatriates.

Food is another trope which has commonly been used to mark a subject’s cultural identity in the Asian American literary tradition. Justine Kao’s “Chopsticks” and Yii Wen Chuah’s “Onion and Garlic” illustrate how food can both serve as a reminder of “home” and a way of distinguishing place. In “Chopsticks,” for example, the wontons in California are described as tasting “more foreign than burgers,” suggesting that taste alone can act as a signifier of difference (12).

Iris Law’s “Pandemic,” Stephanie Le’s “JAL Flight 071,” and Mia Malhotra’s “The Cello” all focus on how the body can be used as an indicator for “Otherness.” In “Pandemic” the speaker’s sinus infection is automatically misperceived to be SARS simply because of her ethnic background. In “The Cello” the instrument becomes a metaphorical doppelgänger body for the speaker’s deceased aunt, one she plays in order to “free the body of silence” induced by the mysterious forces

behind her suspicious death (17).

The tourist gaze is another literary lens often used for observing Asian American culture. Becky Wright's "The Aspara" encourages readers not to forget the history of many tourist objects, such as the infamous Angkor temple located in present day Cambodia, whereas Katherine Chen's "Essay #4" questions whether the tourist gaze pertains more to the duration of one's visit rather than one's inaction towards and complete disassociation of this "Othered" location. Chen reflects upon her own experiences after returning from Beijing, struggling with the juxtaposition of the intensity of her 5-week stay in China, and the brevity of the relationships she formed there with her host family.

Shimon Tanaka's essay, "1Q84: Anatomy of a Literary Bestseller," enters a similar transnational realm as that of "Essay #4", exploring the cultural phenomenon of Japan's literary hype for Haruki Murakami while revealing the issues involved with making literature transnational by way of one bilingual writer translating the fiction of another multilingual writer from one language to another. Tanaka compares Murakami's translation of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* to "watching a puppet of Holden yammer on, with Murakami, cloaked in black, working the strings" (63).

Stephanie Otani's poem, "Insufficiency," grapples with the issue of linguistic barriers, demonstrating through her use of code-switching between seven different languages that no single language exists which is sufficient enough to fully articulate one's identity, or perhaps, for communicating effectively altogether.

Henry W. Leung's "Fellow Ship," Victoria Yee's "Jie Jie," Kairen Wong's "Michael," and Ken Chen's "Portrait Without a Face" play with the notion of identity formation and how one's identity is constructed. "Jie Jie" and "Michael" offer examples of how one's sense of identity becomes developed through one's relationship to another, such as an older sister, brother or mentor. "Fellow Ship" explores how race can complicate one's self-understanding of identity, always capable of reducing someone to a stereotype such as "FOB" regardless of attempts to deny identification with an Asian ethnicity. "Portrait Without a Face," on the other hand, takes the reader through the journey of constructing a woman's identity based on a third eye's observations of her relationship to another man, leaving us to ponder both the accuracy and the problems of conceptualizing identity from such a distance.

Grace Um's "Shame" and Ken Chen's "Rule Out," "Selfish," and "Love Song of Vicarious" fully step outside the literary traditions of Asian American literature and grapple with the limits of human nature, focusing on the obstacles challenging our empathetic capabilities. Um delineates varying degrees of shame, arguing that we are only capable of feeling the shame associated with the public sphere, like when "mothers turn red" from their public embarrassment caused by their "thieving children"(20). In Chen's "Rule Out" he runs us through a dialogue of miscommunication that forms the foundation for heartbreak. In "Love Song of Vicarious" he argues that heartbreak is first expressed in the audible forms of fighting and crying, and then followed by the inaudible volumes of sadness and despair, all of which are constantly torturing the speaker from the other side of his apartment's wall. In "Selfish," Chen illustrates the uglier aspects of human nature such as hypocrisy, crime, tragedy, dishonesty, insecurity, loss of self and subordination.

While this is certainly not a comprehensive dissection of the creative and critical works in this publication, hopefully the collection of writing in this journal will help to illuminate, if not further solidify, the "hybridity, heterogeneity and multiplicity" that is Asian American literature (Lowe 4).

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## PACIFIC CROSSING

*Samantha Tob*

I.

Pressed beneath the plastic, the peonies sprawl,  
flattened against the table in a final shade of rose.  
Above them, plates clatter, babies dribble, elbows roll, flesh  
against dried petals. They have seen too grossly the  
food you have fed and wasted, white grains sticking

to your children's screams, their foreign tongues.  
The table shifts now with someone's weight, a stretch of fingers for  
something dropped: a chopstick, a fork. These flowers,  
you sometimes forget, were once crimson.

II.

Your mother's lips were half-moons in the field,  
swollen and heavy from the weight of the afternoon. Too hot,  
she would lick them, they would weep with spit, she would spit  
her spit.

And in the sound of wetness falling, sweat gullyng through her  
skin, the splat of a foot in moist soil turns rain into  
mud. Toes stick, bending weeds.

This was the afternoon, the two of you side by side  
backs creased like paper, and if you could fold yourself into a plane  
you would  
fly. Instead she folds herself over again, feet rooted. The padi arches  
and  
pops in her fingers.

III.

Her ankles were still in sod the day you left.  
She paused to look at you, to wish you well.  
Brief words, cut like stalks of grain, the edges  
raw enough to scratch.

You turned back once, to look at her – she was doing it again,  
with the snails, plucking them off stems where they sucked  
close to the root. In the squeeze of her hand  
the dark red shell caved into itself, the soft body  
sucking in the shards, heaving.

Wiping her face, her narrow shoulders crumbled.  
The snail dying, cupped in her palm.

IV.

With the small reserve of love she gave you, you crossed a sea and  
made a better life scrubbing bowls in the back of a  
kitchen six feet wide. An old, hunchbacked woman shouts at you,  
gives you little pay. You wonder if all old women look the same

and if they do, how one can be that much more cruel.  
All you have now is the memory of an equally bent silhouette, though  
a kinder one:  
the smell of earth layered over her shadow, the trees by the  
wayside, shaking their heads *no no no*.

If you squint over the field, across the acre that is  
time, your mother pauses, hands halting, the human machine stalled.  
The wind lifts the flooded field into ripples.  
The sunshine is behind her, falling into the ground  
and you remember her slouch, her age, red peony in her hair.

## THE MUSICIAN

*Jackie Chu*

My grandmother, the music of Vietnam—

In Vietnamese, there are three dialects:  
Northern swoops and dives,  
sharp notes on a violin.  
Middle languidly rumbles,  
a measured roll on a bass drum.  
Southern is a twang, a quick recoil:  
plucked strings of a guitar.  
Most people can play only one,  
but my grandmother was an artist of all three

on the Vietnamese radio.  
She was only 16 when her father was murdered,  
decapitated,  
in the political pruning of a crumbling and corrupt tree.  
To save the family left bleeding  
without its head,  
she moved to the city in search of work.  
In Hanoi, her music flowed out of every radio:  
the news, poems, interviews—  
violin, drum, and guitar,  
an orchestra of one  
in the dying days of a nation.

I walk into her dim room.  
My grandmother sits, stooped on the bed.  
She opens her mouth, and speaks—  
quietly, she plucks the guitar, whose strings are drooping,  
too loose.  
The plucking is dull.  
I have never heard her play the violin or the drum.  
I think she buried them in shallow Vietnamese graves.

## CHOPSTICKS

*Justine Kao*

I come from inside the shell  
of a salt-pickled duck egg,  
yellow yolk like sun-baked  
sand on my tongue, sultry  
as tropic sunlight spilled  
in the hollow of Taipei City.  
I nibble the salty insides  
as chocolate is nibbled  
elsewhere, through long nights  
reading Confucius and Shakespeare,  
dipping chopsticks in the rich  
heart of the egg like oars  
trying to find a way.

I come from an island shaped  
like a sweet potato, dug from  
the red soil of its motherland  
and left to stew in the Pacific Ocean,  
a vegetable with no root  
but itself. I ask my father  
are we a country? over long-distance  
phone calls from California, where  
the wontons taste more foreign  
than burgers. He tells me I am  
American now but I am not  
a banana, yellow skin peeling,  
white within.

I come from a basin boiling  
summer typhoons and cups  
of boba tea sweating in the heat,  
students in school uniforms  
dragging matching shoes down  
mismatched streets holding rainbow

umbrellas against the sun.  
I come from inside the dumpling  
skins my grandfather presses flat  
with his palms, counting  
grandchildren at the dining table  
where we eat slices of watermelon  
over newspapers.

I come from the marrow  
of my mother's broth  
brewed from cow thigh bones  
and radishes, soft and heavy  
like her words of advice. The day  
I left home she whispered  
no secrets in my ears,  
and when I looked out  
the window on the airplane  
the clouds spread beneath me  
like wings.

I come from a pot of noodles  
pinched from dough rolled  
in sesame oil by different thumbs  
of the family, steam rising into our eyes  
like the opposite of tears.  
My mother said, when  
you're there, you can use spaghetti  
instead of pinched noodles.  
Holding a piece shaped like  
a heart between my chopsticks,  
I laughed.

## ONION AND GARLIC

*Yü Wen Chuah*

Browned skin,  
turmeric fingernails broad as the  
papery white cloves,  
calloused fingers flecked with oil burns,  
skin formidable as oven gloves.  
Hers is the wrinkled skin of a chef  
born aged eight.

Snowy steamed tilapia bubbling in the wok,  
the firecracker crackle of Emperor's vegetable  
shrinking in a puff of steam,  
the burble of golden oil  
delivering happy parcels of wonton.

Onion and garlic start off every dish.  
Slice chop dice smash fry.  
The first scent in the kitchen,  
the smell on my grandmother's hands.

Those hands never caressed my face.  
Their rough skin wiped my runny nose,  
patted and stroked my back  
while I vomited in the toilet,  
coaxed spoonfuls of rice meat vegetables  
into my mouth,  
cut mouths claws eyes on tortoise buns,  
painted them red  
for our good luck and fortune.

Why do your hands smell, Popo?

*It's the smell of people who cook,  
the smell of my life.  
I balanced the spatula in one hand,  
you in the other.*

## ANCESTOR

*Sarah Gambito*

The cherry knows herself and wraps herself up in fronds and friends with knick knacks and special clocks that tell the time for hunger. The cherry does not know when she is full. She asks for more and the world gasolines amid her shrieks. Not high enough! Not blue enough! Not fun enough! All while the blue brilliantine world caterpillars in the keen valley seen only by its feelers which are responsible for propagating and building cities and luncheons and effective beautiful marbles. The cherry sees this and weeps in my mouth. She sits still outside of the present of my mouth which loves her at last. Love bedevils the cherry because it lives at the keen mouth of here and not here. You must understand. I ate the cherry because I was hungry. This is all. I didn't know about her orchard, her temperament or private solstices. I was hungry. And the cherry was brave. She was brave because she saw herself living before me and then after me. When I would become a loamy mass weeping at the base of the handsome cherry tree. Wait a little longer. Don't leave me little fairy cherry. I'll make it up to you. And, thankfully, for you. It will never be enough.

## THE APSARA

*Becky Wright*

Hewn free from the sandstone block, I danced into air  
And my feet, commanded by the god-king of a Cambodian empire,  
Pointed themselves, anklet-enclosed, in the shape of a prayer.

Slowly, sinuously, my arm rose above my head, my fingers flared  
And arched towards my sister dancing by my side, part of thousands  
in our choir  
Hewn free from the sandstone block; we danced into air.

Today, in shades of gray, lichen and rain stains twist across my hair  
Entwining my jeweled headdress with the passing time, dappling the  
three rising spires  
Crowning my brow, delicately-balanced, in the shape of a prayer.

Hindu at conception, I now dance for the Buddha, for I shall do what  
the god-king declares.  
Attended by the pious few draped in vivid orange who worship here,  
divinely inspired,  
We still, hewn free from the sandstone block, dance into air.

Hundreds now trek daily to capture my frozen image within a camera,  
and stare  
At the detailed girdles kissing our hips and our silver skin, much  
admired,  
Baring itself, polished by fingertips, in the shape of a prayer.

Unable to leave this temple of Angkor, my movements shall forever  
belong to the Khmer  
But I am proud to uphold their hopes and heavenly appeals as I turn  
and twist and never tire:  
Hewn free from the sandstone block, I shall forever dance into air  
Arching myself, bound and beloved, in the shape of a prayer.

## THE CELLO

*Mia Ayumi Malhotra*

I had the feeling I should avert my eyes  
When they pulled the cello clear of its bag  
And stood it upright in the hall.

I heard women's voices, filtered  
In from the other room.  
*You were closest to her. You take it.*

Though I never met this aunt, I see her  
Playing the cello: back straight, arms crooked,  
Fingers spindling up and down the neck.

My aunts like to say *she was the life of the party*  
Though they never mention her death  
Or the fact that it was no accident

She chose the largest instrument,  
Being the smallest of the four and the last  
To join the family string quartet.

They took the cello and left the bag  
Lying on the floor like a heap of skin  
Shuddered from the body.

When she draws the bow taut  
I hear the scrape of horsehair, as if  
She is sawing the thing in half

To free the body of silence.

## PANDEMIC

*Iris A. Law*

Wheezing into the phone, I spoke lightly  
of school, my sinus infection,  
the teacher who'd demanded  
if I had SARS. We were not supposed  
to say that our father had gone

to Hong Kong to care for his dying  
mother. While the virus gutted  
the city, he was watching the cancer  
consume her body: first her liver,  
then her pancreas, then  
her throat, and lungs.

Calling home, he talked about  
families he'd seen on the news,  
children who crowded the hospital  
sidewalks, craning at windows  
for a glimpse of their parents, doctors  
locked in with the dead and dying.

Weeks later, when we picked him up  
from quarantine, it was the cast  
of light that I noticed first: how it stained  
the room and furniture yellow, spittle  
and sweat stains dark in its glare.

My father, sitting in the lamp's  
sallow puddle, laid out photographs  
of the funeral, then turned away,  
squinting so we wouldn't see his tears.

## JAL FLIGHT 071

*Stephanie Le*

Flock of bowing doves:  
Japanese women  
have exceptional necks.

## INSUFFICIENCY

*Stephanie Otani*

Oh, sure I'll tell you:

*I'm rocket sharpened on my mother's sidecar. And on my father's lateral image of the skull comes. Half incision is blood for the moment, but I never really knew the way the dinosaur could eat through the completely chain link fence. So, the half cascabel no fue satisfecho por the nighttime whole convergence of flesh to bone to stone to big valleys and sand foundations. 浪人 thrice partial hooligan sugar wakening 聞いて来ていただけないでしょう。 Polygon. Sparrow. Sorrow. Crucifix. Lavender. Her hammony noranelle tryplichsadon, so she told skybird the mixture werquint viuescent nictual. Falintina morengilligus froschette flickeral.*

*So I guess that makes me :\*¢::@#|%>;{.*

Thanks for asking.

## SHAME

*Grace Um*

I have wondered whether we are the only animals who know shame.  
Rapists who cover their faces from the press,  
mothers turning red in apology for their thieving children,

or two fat women running together in the dark.  
But then again, this morning when I told you I loved you,  
you licked your lips and announced that you'd farted.

Remember how, when we started out, you used to ask to hold my  
hand.

These days we get undressed without much reservation.

A question:

Does a man born alone, raised alone, dying alone ever blush?

Blushing is a rush of blood, a public service announcement:

*This is the back of my thigh. See how it reddens when kissed by a stranger.*

The devil kitten you brought home from Pleasanton  
tore my favorite pair of lace underwear apart.  
When confronted about the crime, he attacked my crotch,

so I threw him in the tub and watched him thrash around  
while you were at work.

## PORTRAIT WITHOUT A FACE

*Ken Chen*

He smacks you with his eyes, his looks that are neither searching nor dear, but stiff as though a transparent nail connects his pupil to yours. Where was the familiar rubble—small talk, that dousing self-consciousness we use to smother what we like about ourselves? And because he blurts at you monotonously and skulks, a smitten ostrich, because his blood is enthusiasm alone and fumes with the autodidactic undergraduate's free-wheeling charlatanism, his ideas garlanded with careless jargon and the schizophrenic's breathlessness—you find yourself eager to disbelieve everything he says. He is, as you say, "crazy" and so revealing even when he snoops and observes, poking you with annotations. This manic curiosity pumps him up like bellows, so even though he crawls around the gallery, as slender and asexual as a newt, just as well does he barge gluttonous about the room, a fatso of culture. Horizontally-compressed, tilted, owl-like, sneaking, he has an aftertaste of sleaziness, but this is why people like him. He is obvious. There is nothing hidden about him, so that his worst consequence is being "a lot to handle" and not civil or boring. Childlike, he seems good in a frivolous way—merely because he does not know he is being watched. He has planted the flag not here, where we are all safe, but in the outer foothills where any interaction sputters unconvicted. What initially seems like and may be rudeness, reveals itself as the earnestness of a porous mind. This is conversation as diary—not dialogue, but an audience before one who has been dented open, bubbling up the lush magma of cognition, but not self since there is only talk, an unpersoned mouth wording away from integrity. Conversation grows engulfing, thrilling, useless—it would proceed identically if you weren't in the room. You might as well gossip with the wind or importune a movie to calm itself into a painting. He is as narrow as those who are always themselves, those conservatives of personality who lack the mutability you need to listen to others. A furry impatient beam of light cannot be clenched into a ball. As we walk out of the gallery, it is a starless night and he says—"I miss my almost girlfriend. I hate falling in love so quickly!"

Shall I tell you what interested me most about him? How comfortable you seemed. You walked alongside him lightly down the alley.

## RULE OUT

So maybe heartbreak's for testing  
all these theses of wrong. Like "Never lie."  
Like "Call." Like "No  
just say you're sorry and don't care if you're right." Like "Don't make  
unwarranted generalizations—run away from *never* and never  
say *you always*." "You always  
forget to call." "But we're not dealing  
with facts Ken. We're dealing with what you did." "*You* better  
be plural in all these rules of yours." "Our rules. Not mine."  
"Sometimes you can wound a man  
by caring for him." "Yeah but what's  
your definition of *caring*?" "You telling me Woody Allen plots  
as we're getting ready for bed. Breakfast, coffee and I  
shoved the falafel into your mouth."  
"Oh you're quite the charmer aren't you?" "Charisma  
is a source of error." "Fuck is that why you never want  
me anymore."  
"I didn't say never."  
"You know our fights are starting  
to attract stray dogs. They like eating shit."  
"In spite of it—I still love you."  
"What's *it*?"  
"Me I guess."

1. An equation that has love as its face.
2. She remembers me, but does not like me.
3. Thought-cudgel we furnish for our own intimate beating!
4. **Virginia Woolf:** Out it tumbles upon us, hot, scalding, mixed, marvelous, terrible, oppressive...

### SELFISH

4. **The Detective:** Acting, not projectile charm, but an athleticism of empathy. If the playwright invents people-cars, how the actor test-drives these intention-dollopped selves.
5. **The Detective:** On the way to the market, I found that some pickpocket had stolen my wallet, house keys, and self. This perturbed me as I usually prefer having them on me at all times.
6. **The Dandy:** Love, accepting that we are not pure and lucent hearts, ricocheting towards each other like unlatched stars—no, we are tainted with self. We sometimes believe the self is an invisible glass, just as we believe the body is a suit made of meat. Doubt all things invisible.
7. **Li He:** “If heavens too had passions, even heaven would grow old.”
8. **The Dandy:** The lesson my friends is—Fear people who are finished.
9. **Djuna Barnes:** “No one could intrude upon her because there was no place for intrusion. This inadequacy made her subordinate—she could not participate in a great love, she could only report it.”
10. **The Detective:** The insecure are halfway honest. They comfort themselves with excuses. Aware these are only excuses.

11. **The Dandy:** My friends are the target audience of my secrets. But why do we tell secrets to friends? One friend of mine, **X**, was snooping around in **A**'s room and found a box with my self in it. She removed it from its packaging and was amazed with how small it was. Did you know that my head is small, less than a mile in radius, yet inside my brain and retina, the world exists again entire?
12. **The Dandy:** I used to pretend I was American. This was until I realized I was American.
13. **The Detective:** The goal. Not to be a tragic person. What is a tragic person? The victim of a crime who does not realize the criminal is himself.
14. **The Dandy:** What is forgiveness? When someone else's sin becomes merely an action we ourselves might plausibly commit. The virtue of hypocrisy—we temporarily become people other than ourselves and can notice our actions from the other side, as saintly as no one.

Let's see what happens when all the bullets are in the gun.

## LOVE SONG OF VICARIOUS

*You fucking cunt if you really think that then*

My neighbor wakes in the middle of the night  
and says, "Silence is unheard of in these apartments.  
First the fighting and now the crying, the thin walls are  
biased against secrets. Sometimes  
he sobs so much I plug the door cracks for flooding. Other times  
there are only white walls and silence. Not the opposite of  
words, silence intends too much. I don't know  
what to make of it. Has he gone out or is this  
just patience? When I hear him I say to myself  
this is how sincerity tortures. I want him to invest in virtues  
that make the heart sing mute. I say to our wall—"Be quieter  
than air." Heartache can make whispers too."

"What?"

"No."

"No, we've never met."

## FORGETTING TIBURON

*Karmia Chan Cao*

Excerpt from Act One  
Original Student Production in the  
Asian American Activities Center Ballroom, April 2009  
Directed by Karmia Chan Cao

*Monologue by June Xu ("Grandma June"), whose father was imprisoned in Angel Island's Immigration Center barracks under inhumane conditions for three years, due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, and suffered severe psychological deterioration. He was deported at the close of the detainment and committed suicide on the ship returning to China, where he had left his pregnant wife waiting. These reflections occur soon after a young June discovers the truth behind her father's disappearance, and the grander, national abandonment she must learn to accept.*

*June Xu was originally played by Theresa Zhen, Class of 2009.*

**JUNE:** You said: There once was a peasant girl who lived with the mountain tribes in West China. She was dark and beautiful. Two long braids hung before her chest.

Once, when she was getting water from the well, she noticed that her reflection in the well was trembling. She looked up and saw an entire army approaching their mountain village. She bowed her head. The army came to a halt in front of their house and she saw one horse trot towards her.

"Lift your face, woman," the man said and she did. "Why, you are a desert flower..." She lowered her head in fear. "I am your King. And when my borders are secured, I shall come back to make you my wife."

She looked up at him again, bewildered. "Yes, yes," the King said to the villagers who were gathering. "This girl is spoken for. Remember." The crowd erupted into applause. The King kicked his mare and the army continued their journey West with a rumble.

After they left, this peasant girl waited for the war to end, for the saplings to appear, for the stars to fall, for the fruit to age, for the snow to descend and for the saplings to appear, for the fruit to age, waited, as her face crumpled, her hair fell, and her womb withered.

She waited for forty-four years. Forty-four years later. On her last day, she threw off all her clothes, loosened her white braids and ran along the mountainsides naked. Then she laid down in a wilderness clearing and waited for the jackals to come.

The King had long forgotten his promise.

Walking out of the cemetery last night, I remembered it. Us beating clothes with sticks by the Pearl River. You told me this story, then remarked, as you always would when we were by the river, that the water runs into the ocean, and Baba is floating across the ocean to get to America. But people say he's been gone for ten years, Ma, I would say. Then, you would cry and I would hold you. This was our ritual. *It's okay, Mama. You got me.*

You had me after he got on that ship to conquer the Gold Mountain, and we waited together for seventeen years on this side of the ocean before you too, left for a *better* place.

This story about the peasant who waited her life away because of a forgotten promise... How did I not understand what you were trying to tell me... You were the girl, he was the King who went to America and forgot you, forgot everything. I blamed Baba for never returning, for the jackals that finally found you, Mama, and loved you so thoroughly.

So I looked for him, when I finally made it to San Francisco, looked for him from Chinatown to Sunset, from Marina to Mission, from Oceanview to Belvedere, crying:

**ENSEMBLE calls:** Baba... Ayah... Phụ Thân... Papa... Otousan... Daddy... Auppa... Abba... Father...

**JUNE:** I searched for this father and did not find him.

One day, I sat on the sidewalk of Fulton St. with a bowl of noodles. I wept as I ate. The early morning fog was in my face and the wind chilled me to the bone. There, before the sun illuminated Coit Tower, a watchman passed me. His face was hidden. I could not find his eyes, but I heard him say, "Down Tiburon Boulevard, a million in this nation's yard... Down Tiburon Boulevard, a million in this nation's yard". He walked by me and I ran all the way to the wharf.

Baba, on Angel Island, I met you for the first time. I met you and one million others, one million souls standing across the Island, a great multitude of men and women, children and elderly, just standing right there on that Island, watching a sleeping Tiburon, just a mile

away. Outside the gate, eternally now. Just there. A mile away, outside the gate, eternally now, just there! JUST THERE! A mile away, watching, waiting, *interrogated* still. Answering and answering:

**A:** The schoolhouse is next to the well. The well is next to the doctor's home.

**B:** There are eight people in my family. My name is--

**C:** No, I don't remember. A cow in the shed.

**D:** Yes, I want to come to America. Will work hard!

**A:** No, my children will never play outside of the Chinese Playground.

**B:** No, I will never forget that we are not wanted--

**C:** That the statue doesn't hold my liberty. That there *was* no statue for the Pacific.

**D:** They kept us in the yard like dogs. We *were* dogs.

**A:** We built these railroads on our bones. Caught the fish. Cleaned the house.

**B:** We never asked for anything more than we earned.

**C:** We didn't deserve a thing!

**D:** Give me back my years! Will *you* speak for me? Or stay quiet because I'm underground now.

**C:** We don't *deserve* justice, so shut—

**A:** Well I am speaking now. So child, write something new!

**D:** There is no history for us. Can't have it. We can't look back.

**B & A:** I will never tell my children about this island. Never.

**C & D:** I will never tell them. I will set them free.

**A:** I, once, had a village.

**B:** I once had a story.

**C:** I, once had a window.

**D:** I once had a door.

**JUNE:** Ba, you did not forget us. You carved us one hundred poems on the walls of your prison. Ba, you were just another criminal, another ring-wormed, cheap-ass, piece of yellow war trash. You left a China that had been pumped with Opium, murder and rape by those greedy, European men. You were imprisoned on the island as just another criminal, right? Guilty of *this* skin.

I became a new orphan when I left your barrack that day, as I walked out of the sunshine and into my ferryboat for Tiburon. I became a new orphan. My past breathed its last and said, "America, America, why have you forsaken us?"

## TREES IN LOVE

*Derek Ouyang*

It just so happens that when two people have exactly the same favorite place in *Liang Yuan* to sit and contemplate the meaning of life they end up getting to know each other pretty well. That's how *Mei* and I, denizens of *Heaven*, came to be.

Where the entrance path splits off into the loop around the lake, straight up the knoll on the right that overlooks the apartments and smog, past the lawn where the old women practice their *Tai Ji*, through the gardens of rose bushes and across a nice quiet meadow few people know about, over the log that spans the creek and finally into the thickness of the woods, where all the tall trees have been for hundreds of years, their massive roots burrowing into the ground in ingenious ways and creating dozens of magical tunnels, thick with sap and webs and cold soil, the perfect place to escape the afternoon heat.

That's where I met *Chen Mei*, one day two years ago when her brother was playing football and we crowned each other prince and princess in the burrow beneath our two favorite trees. We meet there still, after the bell rings and everybody runs out the front double doors to the bus but she slips out the classroom window, over the chain-link fence and through *Shi Fu's* backyard, a shortcut into *Heaven*. The timing is always just right.

Today she lays her head on my stomach, stretched out across the cave as I curl up against the thick roots, breathing slowly. Between the silky threads of brush and patches of dirt, yellow rays of light fall like raindrops upon our bodies, upon the tufts of grass by our hands, upon the creamy pages of her newest book, *Lin Meng*. She reads the scripture out loud to me, while I read the future in her eyes. Today we are on Chapter Five, *Shu de Ai Qing*, and as I curl her soft, black hair in my fingertips she translates:

*"Trees in love lay their roots down in the same soil, like lovers thrusting their feet into the folds of the same blanket, and heart to heart they grow, sprouting lush leaves, reaching for the morning sun, intertwining their trunks and branches in a summer embrace."*

"It's beautiful," I whisper and she smiles, showing her two front teeth that protrude just barely enough to be irresistibly attractive. The

sentences mean nothing to me because I don't know too many words, but I don't like to be reminded of that much and she doesn't mind anyway, just loving to read from her books, never asking for anything but the steady rise and fall of my body. The story I cherish is in the wrinkles at the end of her lips before she speaks, the pink of her tongue that shows when she says certain words, her pale nose that wiggles whenever she takes a breath. I imagine her saying over and over again, *I love you, I need you, I want to grow old with you in Heaven.*

Three hundred-twelve days, three days a week for fifty-two weeks a year for two years, the days she is not practicing piano at school or home for the weekends, she has met me in *Heaven* and read from her little books, the margins of which she has filled with sketches of flowers and little temples. Thirty-nine books in total, each about one hundred to two hundred pages although that's a little bit harder to keep track of. I want to kiss her every time she ends a sentence with a slight rise in pitch, like she's asking a question that I must answer before it goes unnoticed, discarded with the nonchalance of another word.

*"I want to kiss you,"* I tell her, tickling the curves of her neck. She squeals and nudges my hand with the back of her book. *"Keep to yourself,"* she laughs, inching closer to me.

Why she still comes to me, I will never know. There is nothing I can give her but the warmth of my skin, warmth that she can find in her mother's fur coat, under the heat lamps of the city, in the broth of her favorite chicken soup. *Mei* is the kind of girl who could do anything she ever wanted, who could caress the entirety of the world in her thin fingertips. I followed her home once, in the rain which she withstood just to keep our promise, miles through the city with the buses that threw torrents of mud onto her ruined dress, to the front steps of her apartment where her father immediately dragged her violently inside, while I hid behind the wall and cried myself to sleep. I watch her in other places too: through her classroom window as she copies her recitations, struggling to keep up with the pace of her class, from above the music room where her instructor walks away and she cries, at the corner of the street where she always stands alone.

She continues to read, *"But then after some years, the soil is unable to feed two mouths, their roots encroach on each other's space, their canopies compete for sunlight but the overlap is too great, so neither has enough sustenance, and slowly their leaves begin to wither, their trunks begin to gray, and their lungs shrivel and collapse."*

Why I still wait for her, I will never know. Why I place my heart

in her hand and give her my reason to live, to stay in this city for one more day. Why she still believes that I make sneakers in the factory and live on *Yang Zhi* Street. Why I cannot bear to admit to her that *Heaven* is all I've got, that her escape is my prison, where I spend twelve hours a day, the other twelve in the alcove under the bridge because the officials let the dogs out in the woods at night. That every day I spend in this tunnel waiting for her is another day my family in the countryside waits for me to return with money and medicine I never found. Why I die for days when she is away just so I can live for hours touching her, holding her, for one more buck-toothed smile, one more misunderstood word.

I'll die if I stay here one more year. She has the whole world in her fingertips yet she rests her head on my body like I am her everything.

"*It's beautiful,*" I say again, but her eyes are fixated on the page, welling with tears. She is reading something that speaks to her heart. She flips to the last page of the chapter, and I realize finally after two years, that I have wasted her youth, just for mine. That I have cast my dying, impoverished heart on a girl that belongs in the company of meaningful others. That neither of us belongs here in *Heaven*. A light breeze flows through the cave, separating her hair from my fingertips, and I think to myself, *Tomorrow she will come, and I may be gone. She will hate me, but I will love her, and I may be gone.* I close my eyes, feeling the roots behind my head, listening to the melody of her fading voice.

*"All the while they knew that this would happen, that two trees could never grow so close to each other and expect to survive, that love, always, is a form of sacrifice. But in spite of this, or perhaps because of this, they loved each other all the more."*

## JIE JIE

Victoria Yee

Their heads barely reached above my waist, and I had to look down to see them.

"Jie jie, ni hao," they responded in unison in Mandarin. *Big sister, hello.*

I was talking to one of my parents' friends, and they had two children: an older boy, and a younger girl. The mother was trying to constrain the boy from running off, and the girl was looking beyond me at something much more interesting.

Only afterward did it strike me as some kind of glance back in time.

My older brother was always on the move and curious; I was trusting, but perpetually brooding. We talked to each other in English with insertions of Cantonese, a Chinese dialect. He was *kob kob*--big brother, and I was *meh meh*--little sister.

I chased after my older brother and my cousins' stories, desperately trying to follow their big footsteps. I also developed a sense of being *meh meh*, as I am the only girl and the youngest one in the Yee family. I was protected by strong arms.

But suddenly, we've all grown up and gone away, and I'm not crying about the stolen pencil that had the best lead to sketch my flowers with, or panicking when I don't find my mother nearby when I wake up.

But I still feel like *meh meh*.

Maybe I want to be coddled like a little sister often is-- to laugh in another's arms, to snuggle into someone older's shoulder, to be sheltered from punishment because I "didn't know better."

*Kob Kob. Mong kon!* Big brother. Help me! Maybe I want to lift the responsibility of being older and how it is oftentimes associated as being somehow wiser.

I have been so blind chasing after my *kob kob* and laughing with my *jie jie* I have not completely comprehended that I've become one myself. They served so large an inspiration in my young eyes that I feel that, as I stand, I am not half the person they were when they were my age. My younger friends and teammates look at me with doubt and cyni-

cism, and I want to scream, "I am not your *jie jie*! I am sorry I cannot serve you as I was served."

*Koh Koh, Jie jie*, where are you when I need you?

Can you tell me that the fears that rock my own mind today were ones that did the same to yours before?

## FELLOW SHIP

*Henry W. Leung*

The first thing Danny Wong and Ronnie Barclay do is wedgie a Chinese kid with thick bangs named Sookie. His arms are all vein and bone, sickening. He makes no sound when they catch him in the bathroom. They laugh at his dirty tighty-whiteys. Afterwards, Ronnie pounds Danny's fist.

Then Danny's family sublets to Sookie's family. Sookie moves in downstairs. Danny pretends he's never met him before. He sits on his hands, waiting for Sookie to snitch to his parents.

Sookie doesn't. And that gives Danny and Ronnie new permissions. Walking home from school, they follow Sookie's silhouette and throw pennies at him. When he turns around their hands are smoldering innocently in their pockets.

Ronnie honks out gibberish that sounds like Chinese and asks Danny if he said anything real.

Danny snorts that he doesn't know Chinese: he's no FOB.

Ronnie throws the rest of his pennies and then deviates to a side street. He pounds Danny's fist goodbye. Danny watches Sookie's silhouette bend down by a tree and palm a big, sharp rock. Danny grabs one too, just in case. It is a long, dangerous walk home. Danny slows down, letting Sookie shrink into the afternoon sun.

Sookie's rock lies useless on their front yard. Danny releases a heavy breath and aims his rock at it. They tick together, then roll apart. That night he sleeps well, alone, a survivor, as though they won't suffer each other again tomorrow.

**MAKING SENSE, MAKING PEACE:  
MEMORY AND RECONCILIATION  
IN *THE BOOK OF SALT***

*Trac Dang*

Over thirty years have passed since the last American troops evacuated Saigon, and yet the war over Viet Nam drags on to this day. It is not a physical war waged in the jungle by soldiers with guns and bombs—rather, it is a war of memories waged in our minds by writers and historians, artists and filmmakers, a war fought using words and images. For both nations, memories of that brutal conflict remain bitterly contested. And for those caught in between, who are both Vietnamese and American, memories of the Viet Nam War occupy a terrain marked by great complexity and even greater contradictions. Within the last couple decades, a growing number of Vietnamese Americans have taken their pens into the fray in order to try and understand a war in which a few had fought, of which only some bear recollection, but by which all had been affected. These authors have of course used writing to make sense of the past, but some have also used their stories to make peace with the present—by inserting their voices into the dialogue of post-war reconciliation that began with the reestablishment of trade relations between the United States and Viet Nam in 1995. With return no longer an impossibility, Vietnamese Americans finally have the chance to make peace with the country that had exiled them so many years ago. However, one should not overlook the global capitalist processes fueling these reunions that threaten to turn forgiveness into a commodity. Class-based in nature, this emergent transnational mobility unfortunately privileges certain bodies over others, an exclusivity that undermines the very spirit of reconciliation.

Faced with this new era of increased globalization, Vietnamese American authors have also begun to chart different narrative trajectories in their writing. Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* is one such example. Truong's novel features a gay Vietnamese protagonist, Binh, who alternates his narration between his present life in 1920s Paris and scenes of his past in colonial Viet Nam. *The Book of Salt* stands in stark contrast to other Vietnamese American texts because Truong sets her story in a time and place before Americans, before the war, before exile. Regardless, it

would be foolish, if not outright dangerous, to read *The Book of Salt* without a consideration of the war and the Vietnamese American diasporic community created in its wake—of which Truong herself is a member. Published within the context of such a complicated history, *The Book of Salt* nonetheless mobilizes various characters, spaces, and motifs in order to explore and critique contemporary peace-making efforts within the Vietnamese diaspora. By analyzing certain allegorical relationships in Binh's life, we can inquire into new models of remembrance and reconciliation that could help resolve the tensions between the anticommunist Vietnamese diaspora and the Vietnamese government, queer sexuality and the Vietnamese family, and postcolonial nations (like Viet Nam) and the global capitalist economy.

### **Binh the Exile: Bridging North and South**

As Americans living in the shadow of the Viet Nam War, many of us might accord more priority to the repairing of relations between these two nations. Such a perspective, however, assumes only two participants within the war: the Americans and the Vietnamese. As history would reveal, America played a rather minor role in the grand epic of Vietnamese history as compared to the Chinese, the French, and of course, the Vietnamese themselves. Furthermore, "Vietnamese" is by no means a singular identity category, and the numerous divisions among the people who lay claim to the title ultimately reveal an urgent need for Viet Nam to make peace with itself. In *The Book of Salt*, Binh's relationship with a fictionalized HỒ Chí Minh serves as the strongest allegory for Vietnamese self-reconciliation. As diasporic subjects, their encounter in Paris aptly mirrors the transnational character of Vietnamese American experiences.

Before he finds employment as a live-in cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Binh meets an unnamed Vietnamese national one evening on a bridge in Paris. At first, Binh simply refers to him as "the Man on the Bridge." Indeed, it is precisely the space of the bridge that allows for the conflation of multiple, disparate identities through the category of the exile. First of all, the bridge is a space that "connected us to neither here nor there" (Truong 92). David Eng notes: "Suspended between departure and arrival, Asian Americans remain permanently disenfranchised from home, relegated to a nostalgic sense of its loss or to an optative sense of its unattainability" (204). The bridge, as a space "in between," accurately symbolizes the experiences of Vietnamese Americans as a people without a true sense of "home." Binh is likewise caught in between two countries, Viet Nam

and France. And because of his queer sexuality, Bình's claim to the Vietnamese family (and, by extension, the nation-state) no longer exists once his Old Man disowns him. France, too, cannot offer him a permanent residence because of the racist, colonialist, and classist global contexts of the late 1920's. Bình's exile from Viet Nam, a direct consequence of his queer sexuality, stands in for the violences suffered by the South Vietnamese at the hands of the post-war communist government. By merging these two diasporic histories, Bình's character forces Vietnamese American audiences to connect their experiences of exile with his own expulsion.

If Bình's character allows for Vietnamese American identification with queerness, then "the Man on the Bridge" supplies another kind of identity mapping as the object of Bình's queer desire—that is, one with Vietnamese nationalism. In an interview, Truong admits that she had created "the Man on the Bridge" as a fictional representation of Hồ Chí Minh ("An Interview"). Even if one had not read the interview, readers with knowledge of Hồ Chí Minh's biography would be able to draw the same conclusion from the subtle details Truong sprinkles throughout her novel: his four-year stay in Paris, his numerous menial jobs, and his penname, Nguyễn Ái Quốc, which Bình discovers on the back of an old photo. By making him the object of romantic desire, Truong cleverly forces upon her Vietnamese American audience a queer romance with the most prominent figure of the Vietnamese nationalist movement and the forebear of Vietnamese communism. Like Bình, Nguyễn Ái Quốc is also a Vietnamese in the diaspora. His motivations, however, have more to do with a nationalistic desire to resist French colonialism than a forced expulsion from Viet Nam. When he discovers the pseudonym, Bình explains that Nguyễn Ái Quốc's given name translates to "love" and "country" in that order, but when conjoined they mean "patriot." Certainly a fine name for a traveler to adopt, I thought, a traveler whose heart has wisely never left home" (Truong 247). And when Bình decides to save up money for that photo of Nguyễn Ái Quốc instead of the one of his American lover in Paris, he ultimately aligns himself with an "expatriate Vietnamese nationalism" (Cohler 29). His decision suggests that one can profess love for one's country of origin even while in exile—a possibility that's incredibly significant for many Vietnamese Americans, who were often branded by the North Vietnamese as "traitors" during the war.

The space of the bridge not only brings together these different kinds of exiles, but it also exists as a space of reconciliation. During one of their first conversations, Nguyễn Ái Quốc explains to Binh:

“Bridges belong to no one... A bridge belongs to no one because a bridge has to belong to two parties, one on either side. There has to be an *agreement*, a mutual *consent*, otherwise it’s a useless piece of wood, a wasted expanse of cement. Every bridge is, in this way... a monument to an *accord*.” (Truong 92, emphasis added)

In the passage, the bridge physically links two otherwise disconnected entities. However, his word choice implies another function of the bridge. “Agreement” comes from Latin “pleasing,” “consent” derives from Latin “feel together,” and “accord,” from Latin “to heart,” had the literal meaning of “to bring heart to heart” or “to reconcile” (OED). The use of these specific words suggests that reconciliation is an endeavor that begins in the heart, one that involves pleasurable feelings—much like a romantic relationship. Aside from their shared queer diasporas, Binh and Nguyễn Ái Quốc’s physical sharing of the space of the bridge ultimately hints at a new mode of appeasement founded upon their relationship.

Nevertheless, the reconciliatory project here remains unfinished because Binh never actually sees Nguyễn Ái Quốc again before the end of the novel: “I returned to the bridge alone. I always do” (Truong 100). His lonely occupancy of the bridge makes clear that reconciliation is a two-party enterprise. Of course, although Truong offers a more sympathetic rendering of Hồ Chí Minh, one must not underestimate the intense hostility within the Vietnamese diaspora toward Vietnamese communism. True reconciliation, therefore, should not forget to hold the Vietnamese communist government responsible for the violences they committed in the aftermath of the war. In a similar vein, one must also hold Vietnamese society accountable for its enforcement of heteronormativity. In her theoretical work on queer diasporas, Gayatri Gopinath states that “what is remembered through... the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles” (4). Thus, in addition to an acknowledgement of the violences carried out by the North Vietnamese, reconciliation must also take into account the long history of violence inflicted upon queer bodies.

### **Binh the Son: Sharing a Lost Home**

Attempts to settle the differences between the Vietnamese in the diaspora and those living in Vietnam are vastly limited because certain bodies are written out of such efforts. In particular, queer subjects occupy troublesome position because they first have to reconcile their own relationships to both Vietnamese society and the Vietnamese diaspora, both of which have been known to enforce heteronormativity. Reconciliation remains incomplete because not all victims are allowed a chance to express their grievances. As such, it is absolutely crucial for Viet Nam to come to terms with its own oppressive history. In *The Book of Salt*, Binh's relationship with his mother provides a potential model through which queers can negotiate their own positions within the communities that oppress them.

In the story, Binh's mother is possibly the sole person through which he might be able to reconcile his sexuality with the demands of a heteronormative Vietnamese society. It would make sense for Binh, as a colonial queer subject, to turn to his mom, a colonial female, because of their shared experiences of oppression under a patriarchal, imperialist, and capitalist society. Within this system, both are dehumanized and commodified; their worth to society is dependent on their possessions and their labor, not any inherent humanity. Binh and his mom, however, don't own much at all. In fact, his mother barely owns her body, as she was essentially sold to her husband as a girl, and throughout her marriage, she only has a few items (which she acquires from a nearby trash dump) to call her own. Binh's mother does claim the small kitchen as a space all her own—nevertheless, the kitchen was only built at the behest of the Old Man, her husband. Similar to Binh's experience of exile, his mother, as a woman, also possesses a tenuous claim to her own home.

With regard to labor, mother and son share similar livelihoods as cooks. Binh learns to cook from his mother, a skill that he will take with him into adulthood. Even their labor is not good enough under an imperialist, capitalist society: "No matter how many steamed packets of rice she sold, my brother knew that the Old Man would never tolerate it being called a 'business.' That was his word" (Truong 51). The Old Man, emblematic of patriarchy, exploits capitalist rhetoric to devalue Binh's mother's efforts by claiming ownership of, and thereby masculinizing, entrepreneurialism and assigning value to specific kinds of labor. Thus, if the business of capitalism belongs solely to the patriarch, this passage points to how patriarchal forces work in tandem

with capitalist ideologies to oppress and devalue women. Binh's labor is likewise undervalued in colonial Vietnamese society; he works as a kitchen helper in the Governor-General's mansion, a profession that perpetually keeps him in a subservient position.

In spite of all this, Binh and his mother also share something else—stories. Binh's mother tells him his first stories as a child, moments that he remembers dearly: "A story, after all, is best when shared, a gift in the truest sense of the word" (Truong 165). In comparing stories to gifts, Binh suggests that stories are all that he and his mother owns—indeed, one cannot give away something that one does not possess. However, because gifts, by definition, are freely given, they exist outside of a capitalist system. As a gift, the people involved in the telling and listening of the story determine its value, not an outside force like patriarchy. Remembering his childhood stories of the scholar-prince, Binh says: "I am filled with these stories. My mother fed them to me as we worked side by side" (Truong 80). His mother first shares her stories with him while they labor together—preparing food, to be precise. Binh's use of the words "filled" and "fed" implies that the stories possess a value akin to that of sustenance. In this scene, his mother freely gives him her stories as she would her supper, altering Binh's relationship with food. For a brief moment, Binh is freed from his everyday profession as someone who can only prepare, but never consume, food, if only symbolically. Writing on the oral traditions of Third World women, Trinh T. Minh-ha states: "The storyteller has long been known as a personage of power... What is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission" (126, 134). In this sense, Binh's mother, as storyteller, can reclaim and wield some degree of power, which she also shares with her son. Storytelling, therefore, exists as a means through which Binh and his mother can resist the oppressive forces under which they live.

Binh's relationship with his mother, as explicated through the things they share, for better or worse, presents a possible route toward a renegotiation of queerness within the Vietnamese family. After all, Binh and his mother no doubt share a familial bond—a blood tie that could potentially form the basis of a new "home" within an oppressive society that refuses them both their original one. It makes sense, then, for colonial queer subjects to unite with colonial women in order to challenge oppressive structures, including heteronormativity. However, Grewal and Kaplan argue against "think[ing] of sexual subjects as

purely oppositional or resistant to dominant institutions that produce heteronormativity” (670). Of course, the one thing Binh and his mother do not share is their gender, and this fact alone accords him more privilege within their oppressive society.

By considering the ways in which Binh himself may be replicating dominant patriarchal structures, we are able to challenge a simplistic “mapping of resistant/oppressive onto homosexuals/heterosexuals” (Oswin 92). Although he is exiled, Binh is eventually allowed more mobility than his mother. Furthermore, his cooking skills do manage to earn him a certain amount of capital, though marginal, while he lives in Paris. Acknowledging Binh’s own privilege dismantles the traditional-heterosexual-mother/progressive-homosexual-son binary, thereby opening up more nuanced articulations of colonial womanhood. It may seem counter-productive to paint Binh as a potentially non-progressive character, but such a move actually allows Binh’s mother to resist ideologies that may be damaging to herself and her son.

Binh must eventually confront the guilt and regret that accompanies his male privilege in order to come to terms with his abandonment of his mother, especially after her death. Near the end of the book, his mother’s spirit visits him in a park in Paris, and they are in fact able to make peace: “In the city of my birth, you keep the promise that we made to each other. We swore not to die on the kitchen floor. We swore not to die under the eaves of his house” (Truong 221). For Binh and his mother, the kitchen has existed as a space of oppression, a place in which their labor has been repeatedly exploited by imperialist capitalist forces. Thus, this ethereal reconciliation also marks a moment of solidarity. Unfortunately, even this model of reconciliation is not perfect because Binh is only able to make peace with his mother after her death, when it is too late.

### **Binh the Cook: Remembering World History**

There is no doubt that racist and colonialist ideologies have greatly impacted the trajectory of Vietnamese history in the twentieth century. From French colonialism to the Viet Nam War, Western perceptions of the Vietnamese have been none too favorable. These assumptions about the Vietnamese—who were often seen as more servile and incompetent than Europeans—were used as justification for repeated denial of Vietnamese independence. Therefore, a reconciliation project that does not address these histories is an incomplete one.

Furthermore, the global capitalist basis for today's reconciliatory efforts do not allow for an accurate acknowledgement of these exploitative histories. In *The Book of Salt*, Binh's relationship to food mirrors Viet Nam's recent history, and the point at which this relationship changes forces us to confront the ideological forces that have shaped Viet Nam's complex relationship with the West.

Throughout his life, Binh's relationship to food has been consistently marked by oppression and subservience. Whether he's living in Paris or colonial Viet Nam, Binh's livelihood is dependent upon his ability and willingness to cook and prepare food for other people. Not only that, the imbrication of imperialist, racist, and classist structures has shaped Binh's sense of identity as a cook since he first learned to prepare food. His employers are mostly White and wield a significant amount of power over him—they are, after all, his employers. Furthermore, Binh also learns early on in his career that food can exist as cultural and racial signifiers:

[M]y brother told me that these French chefs were purists... The *chef de cuisine* at the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon—a man who claimed to be from Provence but who was rumored to be the illegitimate son of a high-ranking French official and his Vietnamese seamstress—had to be dismissed because he was serving dishes obscured by lemongrass and straw mushrooms. He also slipped pieces of rambutan and jackfruit into the sorbets. (Truong 42)

Indeed, certain kinds of foods, coded as Vietnamese and therefore baser in nature, were looked down upon in French-ruled Viet Nam because of racist ideologies. The scandalous nature of the incident in the passage involves not just the serving of Vietnamese fruits and vegetables, but also the possibility of an interracial pairing. Thus, the “purist” nature of the French chefs takes on blatant racial overtones. According to these white supremacist beliefs, Vietnameseness must be avoided lest it contaminate the purity of both French cuisine and French blood.

However, his relationship to food is radically altered when he shares a dinner with Nguyễn Ái Quốc in a Vietnamese-owned restaurant. For once, Binh is not serving food to anyone—rather, food is being served to him. And because “the chef here won't charge us a centime” (Truong 96), Binh's dining experience actually resists the

capitalist system. The chef provides them both with a free dinner—a gift—because of a sense of camaraderie deriving from their shared Vietnamese heritage. However, even though the chef is Vietnamese, Binh requires Nguyễn Ái Quốc’s confirmation: “First of all, friend, the chef here is Vietnamese... He now cooks here on the rue Descartes, but he will always be a traveler. He will always cook from all the places where he has been. It is his way of remembering the world” (Truong 99). While there, Binh also has a difficult time identifying the specific cuisine they are eating because the establishment looks no different from other French restaurants, and it even sports minor Chinese decorations. The ambiguity of the cuisine in this scene differs markedly from the previous passage set in colonial Viet Nam. As Wenying Xu explains: “The transcultural [cuisine] presents a kind of cultural exchange and collaboration that is powerfully oppositional to colonialism” (147). No longer is cultural hybridity viewed in such a negative light—instead, it is celebrated as way of “remembering.” Furthermore, Binh himself, as a diasporic subject, attains a certain degree of cultural fluidity by the end of the book. Having lived in Vietnam and France, trained under both his mother and French *chef de cuisines*, Binh’s own cooking similarly reflects the different cultural influences that have shaped his life—thus, following Xu’s argument, granting him another avenue through which he can resist imperialist forces.

The scene in the restaurant ultimately allows Binh to reconcile his previous relationship with food, which had been largely shaped by racist, colonialist, and classist ideologies. Similarly, his own journey toward reconciliation presents a possible model for Viet Nam to renegotiate its own relationship with the West, marked by a history of Third World labor exploitation under the auspices of a Western discourse of universal freedom. As Eng elaborates in his article, “The End(s) of Race”:

This dynamic stretches back to colonial labor relations organizing the plantations of the New World, but it also reaches forward to our contemporary moment of United States-led globalization, whose political culmination is the official disappearing act of race... in the name of freedom and progress. (1480)

Therefore, it is necessary to expand upon a model of reconciliation that refuses to “forget” the imperialist legacies that belie Viet Nam’s

position in the world capitalist economy today.

### **Conclusion**

Writing on the politics of reconciliation within Vietnamese American texts, Viet Nguyen warns against “paying lip service to the ‘oppressed’ Vietnamese, by seizing on or lifting up ‘representative’ speakers for admiration while ignoring the uncomfortable realities of those whom these speakers ostensibly represent—realities in which the First World subject is materially implicated” (112.) Undoubtedly, as First World subjects ourselves, it’s not quite so easy to imagine alternatives to global capitalism. Only in Truong’s fictionalized landscape does such an economy exist—an economy premised on the act of giving, wherein the value of what we freely give (whether it’s our labor, our services, our possessions, or ourselves) can remain unaffected by the forces of capitalism. However, this model of reconciliation is ultimately imperfect, simply because of the sheer enormity of what it would take to eventually reconfigure the material realities of our world. Nevertheless, *The Book of Salt* reminds us that reconciliation requires remembrance, that in order to make peace with our present, we must be able to make sense of our pasts.

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## ESSAY #4

*Katherine Chen*

“Blues/ just bend low/ and moan in the street/ and shake a borrowed cup.”  
—James A. Emanuel, “Get Up, Blues”

Beijing for a week isn't real. At night, it glitters and shines with buzzing neon light, and the alleys feel safe, with only the light echoes of child kidnappings and clandestine government operations. Young women in strappy gold heels and short sparkly miniskirts rush out to nearby discos that pulse with European techno, and young men in fake designer Polos and jeans strut along the sidewalks, flashing golden Rolexes, smoking. At day, the rosy sun is bearable, and I don't mind pushing back my hair from my sweat-slicked face, batting the mosquitoes out of my face. The same women and men bustle past, with sweat-stained nondescript work shirts and brown freckled skin. Everyone keeps their elbows to themselves, and still it is easy to get punted around in a sea of people who never look forward and only look down. The city streets are lightly dotted with garbage, the vendors are charmingly pushy, and it's almost funny when a little girl reaches up, fingers sticky with chocolate, and takes my wallet.

Beijing for five weeks is more (real), and so I saw her in all her grimy glory: the communism, the history, the money and no money, the people, the hope, the One World One Dream<sup>1</sup>.

My host sister, Yao Yuan, is very impressive: one of the best students in her class, a representative of Beijing at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, a government commended citizen for her active role in advocating green, and an obedient daughter. When she, her mother<sup>2</sup>, and Shushu<sup>3</sup> come and pick me up in the family car she grabs my

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<sup>1</sup> Slogan for Beijing Olympics 2008, with the idea of bringing the world together under one dream.

<sup>2</sup> I realize now that I never learned her name. I do know that she is an office worker and a feminist and that she has written a book on why men make relationships fail (she gave me a copy.)

<sup>3</sup> Shushu means “uncle” in Chinese, or more specifically, younger brother of my father.

hand and places it over her heart and says, “We’re so excited to have you. Welcome,” with such affection and maturity that I mistake her as my host mother.

We arrive at an apartment complex that looms tall and dark grey, blocking out the sun. There are more bikes than cars in the parking lot; still the city’s streets remain congested<sup>4</sup>. A lady on a little wooden stool beckons us forward from inside the elevator and pushes the 6 button like it is her job. (It is.)

Entering through the green door of their home, immediately on the right is a dimly lit little room that is the kitchen no wider than the span of my arms, with a quick gas stove, a deep metal sink full of dirty metal dishes, and a refrigerator. There is an open space on the left; it just sits, a swollen entrance, with mirrors lining the wall and a raised wooden platform with a bamboo mat resting on top of it, bordered by stacks of old newspapers and magazines and a dying potted plant. Walk a little through a narrow passage and on the left is the wash-room, complete with a sink, mirror, dysfunctional toilet, elevated shower—only enough room to stand straight with locked knees and a tightened back—, and a washing machine. Then across is Yuan’s room. It’s easily the biggest room in the house, with bookshelves crammed with books with red titles that pop lining the walls, a dresser, wooden table, and bamboo mat bed, next to a large window with a sliding screen showing Beijing from a bird’s perspective. And then finally, there is a dining room-living room-office-etc. with a real undecorated mattress, eating table, four chairs, TV, and computer from the ’90s. There is a small foot-wide balcony from which clothes

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<sup>4</sup> And still, surprising amounts of people take the public bus. On Chinese buses, you must board at the front door and leave through the middle door, and it is always a struggle to squeeze past the fat men and skinny ladies, all of them sweating profusely and stubbornly holding their ground. You just have to pretend your face is not being scrunched anywhere near a businessman’s posterior or that the leering men are not waiting for an opportunity to accidentally bump into you (to steal your money or anything else). There was one time where I was not aggressive enough, and I missed my stop. Luckily there are so many buses in Beijing that I just took one on the opposite side of the road one stop and arrived home. But, it was frightening to be almost lost in a foreign city. I had to sit in a Starbucks for a bit to regain my composure. I didn’t buy anything though; they still charge American prices even when not in America.

are hung to dry: Yuan's uniform skirt, Shushu's work shirt, and a bra flap in the wind.

Yuan wants to learn how to cut hair, and her mom has a friend who is a hairdresser. Three times a week, I go with Yuan to her mom's friend's workplace and home. It is different from the hair salons on the main streets where teenagers advertise aggressively: the men with bizarre patterns shaved into their scalps, the girls with half afros half shiny sleek, highlights and lots of product, passing out flyers, tugging on your sleeve. Instead, Yuan's mom's friend has a number of devoted clients. Yuan watches dutifully and mom's friend lets her cut a few chunks of the customer's hair, shows her how to hold the scissors with dexterity that looks haphazard to me. I'm asked to look after the daughter, who is sitting in the back room in a pile of toys and blankets, old pajamas and picture books.

For the first half hour she ignores me, and frustrated with her lack of open friendliness, I ignore her back.

Then the silence stretches into this awkward mass between us, and I ask her if she needs help on her English homework, and she consents to read aloud in English for me. It's halting and sort of adorable, and she grudgingly finishes a paragraph. Then, she asks me to read something different for her. It's completely and utterly embarrassing when I find out that I cannot read a child's picture book in Chinese.

Again with the awkward silence. I finger a piece of cloth sticking out from under a pile of faded newspapers.

"That's for a dress for my doll," she says, in Chinese.

I glance around. "Really? Where is your doll?"

She reaches over my lap and grabs at a stuffed thing. There are no blond locks, lacy dress, or painted face. It looks like it's stuffed with cotton, with a face drawn on in black marker, and brown fuzz stuck on with glue for hair.

She says, "When mother has time, we'll make a pants and skirt too. Except she never has time." She looks dejected.

"We can make one ourselves," I respond. I take the cloth, cut it, and wrap it around the doll, toga-style. She smiles.

As I am leaving, I think to myself if I am to have made some impression on someone here, let it be on this girl, who can speak better English than my Chinese and whose eyes are bright as she clutches the doll with the makeshift dress to her heart.

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I visit the Children's Village<sup>5</sup>, a refuge for children whose parents are currently serving prison terms, just in time to see the children perform to thank the donors of a recent large donation. A little boy with a purpling bruise under his left eye sits by me, head cocked to the right, right hand scratching his hair. The children perform a fan dance and then a song, as one of their caretakers scratches out accompaniment on a synthesizer.

Afterwards, the boy shows me to their living quarters, painted green and blue with cherry red roofs, crosses between barns and greenhouses. Inside, each four children have their own room, and the walls are papered with cutouts from teen magazines, of pop idols Jay Chou and S.H.E. I do not see any personal possessions, though; the surfaces are all empty, except for a chessboard with no chess pieces.

Outside I meet the donors, two men and a woman. They are movie stars, they tell me. The woman is wearing a tight yellow T and oversize sunglasses and runs away as the kids chase her in a game of Tag. She is caught and recoils when a girl's hand taps her on the waist, like it is dirty.

The little boy and I say goodbye beneath the sunflowers that grow in a tangled patch by the entrance. He and the other children wave vigorously as I walk away.

Yao Yuan is afraid that the Chinese government won't let her come to America<sup>6</sup>. She will only speak in English to me and forces me to cor-

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<sup>5</sup> Founded by Zhang Shuqin, the Children's Village is located in the Banqiao village, north of Beijing, and is a privately run organization with no financial support from the state and no prior tradition of private philanthropy in China. The Village provides its residents with basics such as clothing, food, and shelter. An old medical clinic is used to house the children, and China's Prison Bureau has donated furniture such as bunk beds for the children's dormitory rooms. School fees at local elementary and middle schools are waived for the Children's Village kids, simply because there is no way to find funding to pay for their education. Zhang has managed to set up six group homes for these children, and the number of kids living there has grown from 36 to almost 200.

<sup>6</sup> Only 70% of student visas are approved. Applicants must write up an essay and sit through an interview.

rect her grammar. She writes essays on why she is leaving and they are too proper and I can't seem to convey to her how to make it less so because language is such a complex thing.

They make her promise to come back to China, to bring back her knowledge and spread it to her own people, and she does, but secretly tells me that the promise is only temporary.

"What do you think of your President Bush?" She's whispering, as if his name or words like democracy are unspeakables. My eyes drift toward the green door, half expecting the Chinese police to burst in and knock it down, like I've read in newspapers back home.

"He's okay, I guess."

"What do you think of the war?"

Pause. "I don't really think about it." Is this American ignorance?

"Oh."

"He went to my school, you know."

Yuan looks horrified, and I laugh.

The incidence of car accidents is high in Beijing. Bicyclists are crushed by taxis and people walk recklessly, courageously, across the street. The government offers alternatives now to crossing the road, over via bridge and under via dark musty tunnel; the Chinese build infrastructure quickly. I've only gone under once, in a busy shopping district near the 2<sup>nd</sup> ring road. The air was dank, thick with the sour smell of rotting garbage, and the dark sank into my clothing and through my skin. The cement was wet, but it couldn't have been rain. We walked briskly, drawn to the light at the end of the tunnel, but it was still very dark.

I almost tripped.

A man was sprawled languidly over the steps, wearing cargo shorts that were coming undone at the edges and a loose peasant's shirt decorated with crud, food, and bodily fluids. He stretched his arms toward us imploringly, and that is when I realized he had one less hand than he should have, that his right arm extended only to his elbow and where the lower arm is usually attached there was a fleshy pink stub, a rounded mass of flesh, like the end of a baseball bat, and nothing more.

I took a picture of him. I don't know what I was thinking, just moved by some otherworldly impulse to capture the desperation in that instant and try to change it, make it go away, show it to someone

who would care and give this man a home, a coin, a shower.

I deleted the picture later that night, as I rocked back and forth on my worn bamboo mat, waiting for dinner. Because I couldn't look at his image without feeling a cocktail of disgust, pity, sadness, not his contorted face, the sores on his feet, or the place where his arm should have been. I didn't want to carry that burden with me.

The next beggar I see is blind. He sits in front of the bank on oil-stained and bubblegum-spotted pavement, next to a magazine stand that sells ladies' fashion magazines and men's paper fantasies and plays a wooden hand-carved flute. His fingers are swollen around the knuckles and his nails are so long that they curve forward over his fingertips like claws. He plays the same four measures—lilting cadences, an Oriental key—over and over; over and over he nods when he hears the coins clatter in the blue plastic cup by his purple cloth shoes.

Maybe I've read too many fiction books—maybe too much of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* with the blind preacher<sup>7</sup>—but I wonder if he's truly unable to see because people will do crazy things for money, like take advantage of strangers' sympathy. I shuffle forward so that I am just inches away and drop three coins in his cup. His eyes flash open, and they are a watery thundercloud gray. Mouth cracks into a grin. Eyes bulge as if they can see my doubt, and I am ashamed.

Later, when a man drags his body before me with two elbows like a broken caterpillar, I blink twice, feel my heart bleed into indifference, and wonder if I am used to seeing this already.

Shushu is blushing red with alcohol, and Yuan is silent as she helps him up the stairs. The elevator is undergoing repainting and refurbishing and restripping, but it really looks the same as it did before, the wall just a little lumpier, fake wood veneer just a little more misaligned. Six floors, two flights each, ten steps from one to the next. One hundred and twenty, and down through the narrow hallway with the flickering almost broken lamplight, and open the metal grate, the green door. Dinner is cold on the table: pink pickled duck meat, soy sauce chicken, tofu with pork shavings, rice porridge. Four pairs of

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<sup>7</sup>The blind preacher claims to have blinded himself for his faith but is really too afraid to do so; he does act the part though.

chopsticks untouched. Shushu collapses onto the kitchen chair—it creaks under his weight, scrapes gratingly on the linoleum floor—it’s probably a tough day at work, and maybe it’s because Yuan is leaving for America, and maybe that is the only thing that keeps him going, that she is blindly grasping for something better.

Before I am ready to leave, I am forced to, and I wonder how it is so easy to enter into people’s lives and then just disappear. Five weeks, and we’ll never see each other again. “Thanks for the smiles, memories, good times, it was fun?” I feel fragile and nostalgic, but the memory card on my camera is full.<sup>8</sup>

“Get up, Blues./ Fly./ Learn what it means/ to be up high.”  
--Emanuel

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to insert one of my travel epiphanies here: As I board the plane to return to Los Angeles, I see a young man pressed against the glass windows of the terminal, unblinking, like he’s trying to remember every flickering light in nighttime Beijing. He sits next to me on the plane. We play Big 2, and he beats me every time. Then he tells me he’s flying to New England to work on an oilrig for the next two years to earn money for his wife and fourteen-month-old child. He’s twenty-four years old and has never been to America. All he has is his one-way plane ticket, their pictures in his wallet, his employment contract, and some faith. He doesn’t sleep and in the morning when we land: I’ll be back, he tells me confidently, I will, for them.

## MICHAEL

*Kairen Wong*

*Where the gold sank it waited ... the caches of gold were entombed under tons of gravel and sand and mud. Forests grew atop the tombs, quiet and serene by the measure of biological time, amid a landscape that remained violently unsettled in geological time. Eventually those forests attracted an inquisitive species, a biped drawn to the forests for their timber, but possessing a peculiar penchant for shiny yellow metal. When this species began scratching about in one of the streams as yet unburied, biological time and geological time abruptly intersected and entered historical time.*

*-The Age of Gold, HW Brands*

I have an image of the early gold miners of California. While they were in fact men of every variety, dreamers who shared with each other only a common belief in the ability of their own hands, in my head they are all the same man. A mustached, dark-haired man, built up in the shoulders and just beginning to widen at the belly. I see this man kneel down at the stream near Sutter's Mill, to discover the glint of gold as he lifts his hands to his face, this same man set up tent after tent in the mountains, hoping against hope to find the next gold vein, this man, wizened up, now part of a large quartz mining operation, hoist his like-minded friends up from a vertical shaft. In my mind, it is this man who frequents the saloons of a violent West, this man who tires, finally, of the ever lessening prospects of making his fortune on gold and settles in wild, untamed California, making cities of tall mountains and desert sand. This man does not look dignified, as a portrait of John Marshall does, nor fit and triumphant, as John Fremont once looked. No, his demeanor is casual, his face set forever in a sneer.

It took John Marshall fully four days to report back to Sutter's Fort the news of his discovery of gold. In his mind, the gold was just a distraction, which occupied the men on their breaks. Yet from the beginning, Sutter's mill was headed for ruin for the path had been set. When news of the discovery spread, "it sucked nearly every free hand and available arm to the gold mines." For "as the golden news spread from California to the outside world it triggered the most astonishing mass movement of peoples since the Crusades. From all

over the planet they came - from Mexico and Peru and Chile and Argentina, from Oregon and Hawaii and Australia and New Zealand and China, from the American North and the American South, from Britain and France and Germany and Italy and Greece and Russia. They came by the tens and hundreds and thousands, then by the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands..."<sup>1</sup>

Michael draws out the packet of pictures he's just picked up from Long's and three tall Arizona teas, one for me and two for him.

"This here's my wife."

The pictures are bad quality, clearly taken at night with a cheap camera. Most of them involve his wife and their baby, nestled together on the right side of his car. In plain view of the camera the big boss sometimes watches, we pour over the pictures. It is, after all, Sunday morning. Until Heather, our alcoholic second supervisor, arrives nearing noon, it is a two person world in this little bookstore. Our only customers quietly scan the shelves without questions, then hurry off to meet friends and family for brunch next door.

I am just getting to know Michael, who has the unique position of part time supervisor. At Books Inc, the title and duties of being supervisor are given to anyone who works full time. Michael though, works only weekends. He mentions off-handedly that such-and-such happened at his other job, before looking around suspiciously and then calling me into a corner of the store not watched by the cameras.

It is always precisely at this moment that Michael is at his best. When he reveals his own mistakes and faults, when he privileges you with his secrets, you feel lucky to be his confidante. This was before I had learned that Michael tells everyone his secrets.

"So I was way overqualified for this job when they hired me. Eric was like, 'You're not going to leave are you?' Well, I fucking needed a job, so you know what I said, right?"

"You said, 'yes?'"

"Well, yeah. Duh. So I feel bad, because I said I wanted to work here. But they are so fucking full of themselves. Our revenue is 30,000 dollars a week. When I was night supervisor at Home Depot, we made that in one hour every night."

The first time I worked alone with him, I arrived at the store to

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<sup>1</sup> Brands, H. W. *The Age of Gold: the California Gold Rush : the New American Dream*. 1st Anchor Books ed. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.

behold an unfamiliar sight; the store still closed, the newspapers outside, the time nearing 9:00, opening time. I waited on the bench outside. Finally, a man came through the store at 9:05 to unlock the glass doors. He turned his round glasses on me and said, "Don't mention this to Eric, okay?"

I nodded. My first indiscretion. Within two minutes, Michael had already made me a conspirator, a buddy in crime.

Shasta City, California, began as a tent city upon the discovery of gold in the spring of 1849. Within three years, the town had become a central part of the northern California mining scene; freight teams hauled supplies from Sacramento to Shasta, rested overnight and then continued onwards to various mining camps. The town itself was mainly a shopping mall, and it was here that Anton Roman set himself up selling books after striking it rich. By 1857 though, the mines had played out and Roman moved his bookstore from Shasta to San Francisco itself. This store would be sold and would later expand to become Books Inc. Shasta in the meantime, experienced a fast degeneration. By 1872, the California and Oregon Railroad bypassed Shasta, and in 1888, "the fading village experienced its last rebuff - the moving of the county seat to Redding."<sup>2</sup>

About a month into working with Michael, he pulls up his Myspace, asks me to take a look at some pictures. It's Michael in a long green Longs T-shirt and a couple of girls. He continues, "These are my coworkers from Longs. You see this girl? Yeah she was hot. I had to be careful though because she was a minor."

I look at her carefully. She's Asian and about my height.

"She looks like you, huh."

I catch him looking at me to see my expression as he says that. I stare stonily at the screen and say, "Black hair. Black eyes. That's me all right."

In his inaugural address as governor Leland Stanford said, "To my mind, it is clear that [the Chinese's] settlement among us is to be discouraged by every means. Large numbers are already here." Indeed, by the time he was elected in September of 1861, California had attracted thousands of young Chinese men to brave the seas in search of work. But when Stanford acquired

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, Donald C. *Ghost Towns of California*. Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Pub. Co., 1978.

Southern Pacific in 1868, the reality of economics taught him to sing a different tune; construction or railroad track called for cheap labor and the Chinese worked cheaply. Whereas white workers received thirty dollars a month, plus board, the Chinese typically received twenty-six per month and found their own boarding. That same year, a son was born to Stanford after eighteen years of childless marriage. Upon his child's death just before his sixteenth birthday, Stanford vowed, "The children of California shall be our children." I am a child of California, and a child of Stanford.

Michael is a history buff. He's read the history section of the bookstore from start to finish, and brings pictures of gravestones every week to show us. This week, he waves me to the computer.

"Bet you didn't know there were any ghost towns in the Bay Area. Isn't this fucking awesome?"

It's a town not far from San Jose, he tells me, maybe forty minutes' drive. He's taken at least three hundred pictures there, of buildings in various states of disrepair. It is "fucking awesome," and creepy, a type of analogy for Michael himself. The pictures show a place forgotten, left behind, thriving in its wilderness. The desolation and freedom mix well, but in an almost elemental way that scares me.

Pictures of Chinese Camp, a ghost town near the southern end of Gold Country, boast, among other things, Joss houses and an elementary school, complete with the traditional Chinese pagoda roofing. Nearly two thousand five hundred Chinese resided here just two years after the town's founding in 1850. The United States post office, that officiating building that marks any town's existence in national consciousness, was founded in 1854. It is currently vacant. As of the 2000 census, there were one hundred forty-six inhabitants of Chinese Camp. Just one is Asian in heritage.<sup>3</sup>

Michael is tall and solid, a straight block of human meat encased, always, in black, some chains, and those jangly keys. As a retail person, he's not a perfect fit; he doesn't blend in with the background, doesn't make you feel comfortable, and doesn't agree with whichever opinion the customer expresses. I remember suddenly one day as I work with him that I've met him before, when he rang me up for a list of AP

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<sup>3</sup>"American Factfinder." US Census Bureau. 20 April 2010. [http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?\\_lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en)

English books and I felt intimidated, scared of him even before I knew him.

I doubt he remembers that moment; I probably came across as just another Asian girl, studious and most likely premed. But I distinctly recall his sneer. It was judgment, all right, and I hadn't bought books up to his standards.

To some though, Michael has exactly the opposite effect, which is probably why Eric keeps him around. For a certain type of balding middle-aged man, Michael's conspiracy theories are perfect. One morning I return from break to hear him finish off his alternative fuel spiel - "I hate alternate fuel. It's all a fucking lie. We're screwed. All the cars in the entire United States generate the same amount of greenhouse gases as one percent of our industry. There's no way we will ever stop. This world is screwed."

"You think we can't invent ways to avoid it?" I ask him.

His listener is already bought, and glares at me. What can I tell him - I have to believe in science - that is the value of my Stanford degree.

Michael notices and smirks, "I'm just saying, there's no way we can be saved."

Women, too, take to him. It's precisely because his air is so judgmental, so standoffish, that these women are drawn to him when he approves of their book choices and cracks jokes at them. On this same Sunday, Michael walks a tall shapely blonde to the front desk. Her perfume smells of cinnamon.

Michael hands me the book he's recommended for her, his favorite suggestion, Devil in the White City, and stalks back to the history section. I see temporary annoyance flash across her face as she realizes she's essentially been handed over. I ring her up.

As she turns to walk out the door, Michael comes back, visibly ogling her ass.

"I'm sorry, Michael, did you want to ring her up?"

"No dude, I had to get away from her."

"Wait, why?"

"She was fucking hot."

"So?"

"So I'm married now. I shouldn't be looking, but I'm a guy. Sometimes there are just things that you notice, and she was fucking hot."

We both glance at the video camera.

“Okay, Michael.”

“For all the democratic rhetoric that surrounded Stanford’s founding caste lines formed immediately.. The social alienation between “rough-necks” and “queeners” ran deep. Students, moreover, had little interest in the elaborate shops the Senator had fitted out to teach manual skill and its corollary, self-reliance ... Jordan fought these trends. His severity with slackers was notorious, but he could not fire the entire student body. Senior class dress - corduroy pants, boots, flannel shirt, and Baden-Powell hat - expressed the rugged Western image Jordan advanced. Yet independence and virility could also account for behavior Jordan deplored. Throughout his presidency he fought a pitched battle with rowdyism. Frontier boys tended to riot, smash furniture, and play violent practical jokes.”<sup>4</sup>

Michael’s wife comes in to visit him on a day when he actually decides to stay until 4:30, the time he technically gets off. As usual, Michael has taken three to four hours off in the back smoking, since as soon as Heather gets here, we have four people manning an empty store.

His wife is very unattractive. I mean this in the kindest possible way. But having seen who Michael thinks is “fucking hot,” I wonder what it was about her that made them fall in love. I realize, in a strange way, that Michael doesn’t love his wife like that. Michael loves his wife because he is king of her world. That is the very reason he hates this bookstore; he might be a supervisor but he’s still at the bottom of the pecking order. When Eric hires another supervisor to work weekends as well, Michael takes offense and types up a quick, rude resignation. I think Eric is relieved to accept his resignation.

On Michael’s last day of work he calls me to the back. He holds his hand out and gestures forcefully. In the back, I sit in the corner surrounded by books and he pulls the other chair in close.

“So today’s my last day of work.”

“Yeah, how does it feel? You’re free.” I feel myself sinking into the self I’ve known only around Michael. It’s a sarcastic, mean self. Around him, I’m clever, cool and terrible.

“Finally have weekends, out of this shit hole.” Michael is happy for once, and he rarely is happy. If rage can be elemental, so can joy.

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<sup>4</sup> Starr, Kevin. *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915*. 1st paperbound ed. Santa Barbara [Calif.]: P. Smith, 1981. 1973.

In his joy, he is ready to scorn his entire six-month career at Books Inc, everything he did and everyone he met. “I won’t miss anybody either. I mean Jason’s a fucking weirdo and Eric and Katie are so fucking uptight.”

I can’t decide if I’m happy or sad that he doesn’t want to see me again.

“But.” Michael stops. I can tell he’s got a spiel, something he prepared. “I don’t normally say this to people, but you’re chill enough to say this to. So, Kai.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Have you ever gotten high?”

There’s a moment where I want to say yes. In front of this man, I pretended so many things. I pretended not to like Pride & Prejudice, pretended to be working for the money, and pretended not to care about what my manager thought of my job performance. I will never see this man again; it would be the ultimate joke. But I say, “No.”

“I figured as much. It’s my last day of work, it’s a weekend. I can wait around till you get off work. Then we can just drive like a hundred miles, stop in the woods and get fucked out of our minds.”

I laugh, a harsh sound. “Look, Michael, I know how to get drugs. I could get drugs any time I like.”

“Yeah, but what type?”

“I dunno. Weed, crack...”

“Crack, really? That was hard to get in high school. That’s it, though?”

I decide not to point out that he missed the joke. “I don’t know, whatever college students do. Ritalin. Hah.”

“Well, there are only three types of drugs worth doing. Crack, shrooms, and ??” I don’t remember the last one. That should tell you who he was talking to, and who he thought he was talking to. But I wasn’t who I thought I was, because under all that “common sense,” I was flattered. Flattered by a nearing-middle-age pervert’s offer to drive off to the middle of nowhere and get high. “All your friends do weed yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, pot is crap. It isn’t worth anyone’s time.”

Michael lifts his back off the chair a little, and fishes around in his pocket. He withdraws a translucent plastic bag, clearly filled with his drug of choice.

“These are shrooms. Fucking awesome. You can’t get anything

like this from your friends.”

This marks about 15 minutes of break so I get up, but Michael stops me from going.

“Hey, hey. We’re not done here.”

“Michael, you can do drugs any time you please.”

“Well yeah. But I want to open your eyes. I’m going to show you something mind-blowingly amazing.”

I say nothing. In the future, I will look back at this moment and understand why I couldn’t just say no outright. There was something wrong with me, perhaps, or him. Or how close he had pulled his chair. Maybe there had been something wrong all along.

He takes it as an assent. “My wife is a recovering drug addict. She thinks drugs are evil. So we’d have to keep this on the d.l.”

I stall for time. “She was addicted to drugs?”

“Yeah, people can get stupid about stuff like that, you know. But I’m smart about it. Getting high is a fucking experience. You’ve got to live it. Look, Kai, I wouldn’t say this to anyone. You have to get high with the right people. You go to an insane place, like a graveyard or something, and after you get high out of your mind, then you really start seeing the meaning in things. But you have to do it with genuinely cool people.”

I have been talking to Michael for two hours, trapped in a dark room full of books. He sits directly in front of me. I wonder how I spent so many hours working with this man, unaware of the danger.

But I am saved. Heather comes in and says, “Organize the children’s spinners.”

Michael tells me not to, and I say, “I have to work with her, but I’ll never have to see you again.” I feel triumphant at the blank look in his eyes. Through his round glasses, he suddenly looks like a dazed Harry Potter.

“One more second,” he says, and Heather leaves. I want to stop her, but I don’t.

He spreads out his arms, and then I am engulfed in black, leather, and cigarette smoke. On my back, I feel the shrooms jangling from his hand in their plastic bag. “Make sure you read your fucking Hunter Thompson, ‘kay?”

“Bye Michael.” I give him my grimace-smile.

Outside in the open store, I stop Heather. “Thank you.”

“I figured you needed to get out of there.”

I see Heather, the alcoholic, as a woman, as responsible, as a fig-

ure of maturity, my savior. Who would have figured.

"Drinking presented a problem. As a physician and as a social philosopher, Jordan hated alcohol. It destroyed the strenuous life and tempted chastity. 'From the beer-bust of college,' he warned, 'to the red-light district of town, the way is short and straight.' Stanford students seemed bent upon taking that primrose path... In February an intoxicated student wandered into the wrong home and was shot dead as a burglar. When the Board of Trustees banned liquor from campus as a result of the incident, a mob of students, to the sound of a brass band and firearms, paraded through campus buildings in protest, hectoring the wife of the head of the faculty Committee on Students Affairs... The strenuous, individualistic life, Jordan discovered, could also mean rowdiness; a democratic style could become resistance to authority; and high spirits might take the form of boozy noise. Self-support could mean embittering poverty and personal alienation as well as ennobling struggle. Stanford's hope for a California elite could nourish a colony of slobs as well as worthy lads bent on a career."<sup>5</sup>

In the safety of my dorm, granted the luxury of never having to see Michael again, I suddenly remember our conversation about Myspace. My roommate's out, so I undress slowly in front of the mirror. I wonder if Michael thinks I am attractive. I have a boyfriend. I stop myself. What's more, I am a Stanford student. I am here to avoid being like Michael. I sit down, and stare at the wall. I remember.

"Take an hour of break." Michael says to me this one Sunday as he comes back from break. "You heard me. Shit never happens around here."

I can't count; it's my fifth, my twentieth, my one hundredth indiscretion. But I take the hour-long break. I feel that I deserve it; I've been alone in the front all morning, and this isn't the only time. The week before, Michael went for a smoke break and left me alone during a rush, and I, unable and unwilling to compel Michael to come help me, suffered the impatient wrath of the privileged adult so far removed from their teenage years as to forget the humiliation that is retail.

The back room is a small cramped space, carved out of the store so that three people can sit in front of their computers managing in-

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<sup>5</sup> Starr, Kevin.

ventory and shipping. The center is alternately filled with boxes of books to be shelved or boxes of books to be sent away, back to the warehouses to sit in wait of renewed interest. I'm falling asleep, having finally done the college thing and stayed up late on a Friday night. Head down, I suddenly see Michael, leering.

"You've been napping for an hour. But I won't tell anybody, don't worry about it," he sneers.

"Please don't tell Eric," I'm pleading.

"We're friends, remember?"

I don't want to be friends with you, Michael. Not now, not ever.

I see Michael in black, Michael on a motorcycle, Michael in red, gesturing, Michael rising like fumes from the ground to become solid. "Come here."

I shake my head, "No."

He points his hand at me. Suddenly I'm not in the store, but at home, crying.

The repairman appears. "I'm here to fix your plumbing."

He's dressed in black, chains hanging down from his waist, tools from one of those workmen belts. I listen to the clanging, though he's perfectly stationary. The bell rings. I open it. Michael pulls up along the street in a rusty red convertible. "Come on, we're late."

I look at the repairman, who is somehow right next to me.

"I'll take care of the house, don't worry."

The quality of the dream is bad, like a faded video, like those faded pictures Michael so proudly showed me once. Everything is dark, shaded.

In my dream, I walk down my garden path and clamber into Michael's car, now a red Toyota Corolla, sitting shotgun in front with Michael, his wife and the baby occupying the back seat. We're headed to Los Angeles.

Michael's wife says, "You sure you don't want to come down with us to Vegas? We could drive with the top down, your head twisting, and smoke drifting out from our lungs into the open sky."

**1Q84: ANATOMY OF A  
LITERARY BESTSELLER**

*Shimon Tanaka*

**SELLOUT**

A Monday in June, 2009. I'm hanging out in a noisy Tokyo pub with friends I haven't seen in over a year. They're all talking about the same novel. None of them have read it, because none of them have been able to get a hold of a copy. It's been on sale a couple of weeks but the publisher has been unable to keep up with demand.

This is the first I'm hearing about the book. I'm in Japan for a week, visiting my father and catching up with friends.

The next day, I pass a bookstore. I duck in, but as soon as I enter I'm greeted by a large sign: VOLUMES ONE AND TWO OF *1Q84* SOLD OUT.

When will the next shipment be coming in, I ask the girl behind the counter. She adjusts her glasses and sighs. The sigh is worn—and practiced, as if she has been doing nothing that day except sigh.

Thursday, she says, blinking back at me expressionlessly.

**HOLDEN CAULFIELD'S VOICE**

And no, we're not talking *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*.

There are a few writers whose new books I gobble up as soon as they come out. Alice Munro is one, Philip Roth another. Haruki Murakami is a particular case. For years I avoided reading his work at all, without knowing exactly why. Perhaps I was turned off by his popularity. Perhaps I'd trained myself to have a certain idea of Japanese literature should be, by reading writers like Tanizaki, Kawabata, Soseki. One day, though, I picked up *A Wild Sheep's Chase* on a whim, and I've been hooked ever since. I've read every book he's ever had translated into English, as well as a couple in their original Japanese. Back when I was studying for the Japanese proficiency test, I read his translation of *The Catcher in the Rye*. And yeah, it was weird—as if I were watching a puppet of Holden yammer on, with Murakami, cloaked in black, working the strings.

Come to think of it, in some ways Salinger and Murakami are not that dissimilar. Both writers are consummate prose stylists with mesmerizing voices; both toss off similes and drop-dead accurate observa-

tions about the world as casually as you please; both feature disaffected narrators; both writers leave you dazed and shaken at the end of a book, so that it takes a day or two afterward to readjust to the regular world.

Another comparison may be apt. With either writer, you are sometimes left feeling as if the book you just finished strove earnestly for something deeper than an ordinary work of fiction, yet managed to come up just a hair short.

#### THE WAREHOUSE

Once more I stop by the bookstore on Thursday, but the novel is still sold out. The heat is suffocating, though it's early June. I go for a jog over the Rainbow Bridge and around Daiba, down the beach, ostensibly through parkland but under the shadow of a Ferris wheel, a television station, and a forty-foot-tall Transformers character standing in the park, heralding the Japanese release of its namesake movie.

Back in my father's apartment I turn on the television and rehydrate by chugging Pocari Sweat.

It's six o'clock, and there's not much on. A drama about high schoolers. A cooking show. I switch to the news and leave it there.

There's the regular fare: a scuffle in a session of the Diet over who knows what, a feature on the plight of rural towns, children of a suburban school picking up trash at the beach for a day. I pick up my laptop and open my email, letting the TV drone on in the background. It's then that I hear the words: "Haruki Murakami's latest novel is once again stirring up a sensation." I turn my attention back to the TV. A reporter is standing in a factory in Shinjuku. It takes me a second to figure out it's a book-printing factory. Behind her a series of machines hum along at blinding speed, lifting a book off a conveyor belt with a pair of robotic arms and passing it overhead to another machine, where a cover is slapped on and the whole thing is shrink-wrapped. Fast, clean, efficient.

And impressively quiet; the reporter must raise her voice only a fraction above normal speaking volume. A million copies have been sold of the two volumes, she says, even before it has become widely available in bookstores. Cut to a shot of a forklift transporting a pallette of boxes. The pallettes seem to stretch out into the distance, as in the last scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Though perhaps I imagine this.

A *million* copies, in less than a month. Of a thousand-page literary

novel.

I turn off the television and make my way out to meet some friends in Shinjuku. In the balcony alcove of a tiny takoyaki shop tucked along the edge of Kabukicho, I mention my quest to find at least volume one, hoping that my Tokyoite friends, who include a journalist, an editor, and a translator, will be able to point me to a bookstore where they are selling. Instead, they tell me of how they purchased their copies of through Internet auctions. Price: \$35. (The hardcover retail price for the novel, at \$18, is significantly lower than it would be in the US.)

I sprinkle the bonito flakes on my takoyaki and watch them dance in the heat.

#### GROUND-RULE DOUBLE

The following evening I meet up with my old friend Kazumi at a Yakult Swallows game.

Hey you, she greets me, with a laugh.

Back when I first moved to Tokyo, I lived with Kazumi for almost a year. She was a musician back then, in her early twenties. I would help her with the English lyrics to her songs. I moved back to the US, and she became a hostess. Now she is the top hostess in a swanky Ginza cabaret, and is dating a player for the Swallows. Which is, I figure out now, the reason she asked me if I wanted to watch a game.

It's a beautiful night, clear skies, a warm breeze blowing in from left field. Perfect baseball weather. The kind of night you never get in San Francisco, where I live. We're sitting in the wives, girlfriends, and family section. Mini-skirted women roam the stands with kegs of beer for backpacks. I order us a couple of Asahis. The woman pouring the beer knows Kazumi and asks after her. Beers in hand, Kazumi and I catch up a bit, and she asks me what I'm reading. I tell her about my efforts to procure a copy of *1Q84*. She says she is reading *The Long Goodbye* by Raymond Chandler. Chandler? I ask. She shrugs. Murakami's new translation.

How is it?

Well, she says, it's really good, but it reads just like Murakami's stories. She can't tell the difference, except that the novel is set in LA in the 1920s and there are no vanishing elephants or talking frogs.

I order us a couple more beers and some yakitori sticks. We move on to her recent trip to LA, about politics and music, about the

proper way to make gyoza. I muse, not for the first time, that for all her beauty, this is what makes her a top hostess, her ability to banter about everything under the sun. She wears braces now—braces, at thirty. She displays them proudly. She used to have the overlapping incisors traditionally considered attractive in Japan. I'd always thought they suited her, but come to think of it she'd always been embarrassed about them. The braces will be off in a year, she tells me.

I don't mention it, but while I'm at Jingu Stadium I stare out at the outfield bleachers and recall the moment Murakami claimed he first got the idea to write a novel. At the time, he was running a jazz bar in Kichijoji, just getting it established. As he's described it in interviews, he went to a Yakult Swallows game and, for whatever reason, at the very moment that an American batter hit a ground-rule double, the thought popped into his head, out of nowhere. He thought: I want to write a novel.

I like this story, the simplicity and finality of it. I also believe it and don't believe it. It feels too neat, too perfect.

Idly, I wish for my own moment of inspiration. I sit there eating my bowl of kimchi and pork over rice, and I sip my beer and stare out over the field, waiting. Next to me my friend is sitting in her Yakult uniform, banging two plastic megaphones together. Yakult is down four to two, and the crowd is rowdy. Then Jamie D'Antona hits a three-run, walk-off homer to left, and as is the custom in Jingu stadium the Yakult fans all pull out their plastic umbrellas and thrust them up and down in celebration, singing the Yakult fight song—rousing yet elegiac—as D'Antona, looking every inch a giant American farmboy, trots around the bases. As he crosses the plate, he is mobbed by his teammates. Yakult yogurt drink is poured over his head as if it were champagne. My friend is shouting, screaming.

My moment of zen never arrives. It's a good game, though.

#### BOOK FIRST

Saturday, I am meeting a friend in the Ginza for brunch, and as I arrive early I take an elevator up to a bookstore on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of a department store. There, at Book First, I land both volumes.

Finally.

It's only then that I question whether I'll be able to finish them. The last time I read a Murakami novel in Japanese was *After Dark*; when I got to the last quarter of the novel I decided it either wasn't

quite making sense, or my Japanese reading skills were not good enough to figure out the major trick in it. So I stopped reading. That was barely a couple of hundred pages.

All day I feel the pull of the books weighing down my messenger bag.

#### THE TITLE

*1Q84*. In Japanese, the pronunciation of the letter “Q” is the same as that of the number nine; hence, the title also reads as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. A nod to Orwell’s novel. Since “1Q84” is also simultaneously business-report nomenclature—first quarter, fiscal year 1984—I wonder if it might also contain the kinds of gentle critiques of expense accounts and “advanced capitalism” contained in *Dance Dance Dance*.

I’ll find out soon enough.

#### WITH A NAME LIKE BLUE BEAN

I wake up early Sunday morning and head out to the corner coffee shop, set up my electronic dictionary, and crack open the novel.

We begin with a woman sitting in a cab on the Shuto Expressway in western Tokyo. The cab is stuck in a traffic jam, inching forward. The woman’s name is Aomame. “Aomame” means “Blue Bean,” which sounds just as odd in Japanese as it does in English. Aomame needs to get to Shinjuku for an important meeting. It’s imperative that she makes this meeting. She absolutely, one hundred percent cannot miss it. She sits in traffic distracting herself by wondering how different her life would have been had her name been something more ordinary.

The cab driver is a typical Murakami supporting character: precise, cryptic, and knowing. Indeed, he tells her she will never make it to Gaien-mae by three o’clock and that if she really wants to get there on time, she should get out of the cab and walk up the emergency stairs they just passed. If she does that she will be able to get to a train station and just make her appointment. She seems doubtful—how this cab driver would know about this emergency exit?—but she feels she has no choice. She gets out of the taxi and walks down the stairs. In the car next to her a kid makes a face.

End of chapter one.

It’s only taken me two hours to read twenty pages. Only! But during those three hours time has slowed down. You linger longer on

details when you have to struggle to understand them.

Japanese hardcovers come with a cloth bookmark attached, in the way Bibles do here. I slip it in between page twenty and twenty-one.

#### THE LITERARY ESTABLISHMENT

The last couple of days are a whirlwind of phone calls, lunches, drinks, and mad dashes to catch the last train home, so I don't get to read the book again until the flight home.

We switch plotlines. Two men—one young, one older—are sitting in a cafe talking about a book manuscript submitted for a major literary prize. They are screeners for the judging committee. The manuscript in question has been submitted by a novice, a young girl with terrible grammar and no prose style to speak of; nevertheless, it's captivating. The two men have an impassioned debate about what to do. The manuscript would never make it past the literary critics on the committee, says one. From the careless style it's apparent the girl isn't even interested in writing anything "literary." But the two men can't help but admit the story is like nothing they've read before. There's something there. They hit upon a solution: rewrite the book for her. The older man convinces the younger to do the rewriting, and instructs him to purchase a \$1500 word processor for this purpose. He tells the younger man to contact the writer, certain she will approve.

End of chapter two.

#### HYPE AND MERIT

Back in the US, it's a little easier to have perspective on the two volumes I have in hand. *1Q84* is a big book, intended by Murakami perhaps to be his opus. It's enjoyed the kind of hype that an American publisher, in this age of declining readership, would do almost anything for. (In a sign of just how much hype there was, the obscure piece of classical music Aomame listens to in the taxi in the first chapter—Czech composer Leos Janacek's *Sinfonietta*—has apparently seen its sales go sky-high as well.)

The big question is: is it possible for a book like this to live up to the excitement?

I'll reserve judgment on that, partly because I'm still not finished with it, and partly because I'm reading it in fits and starts in a language that's not my first. Suffice to say the book alternates between the two plot lines I've described. There are assassins, mysterious, improbable

prodigies, scandals. Reviews by friends have been favorable. US audiences will see the translations of the first two volumes late in 2011, and will be able to judge for themselves then. Yet it's perhaps instructive to keep a couple of things in mind.

First, hype exists virtually anywhere in the modern world, but in Japan, the land of remarkable external homogeneity of opinion, crazes can be sharper, more pronounced and more easily forgotten, than in the US. Second, this kind of hype has famously been bestowed upon Murakami before: after the publication of *Norwegian Wood* in 1987, a similar craze developed, driving the private Murakami out of the country for the better part of a decade. And although it's still the book of his that everyone in Japan has read, almost no one who knows his writing says it is his best. For whatever reason, a book was published, and the cultural phenomenon surrounding the book took on a life of its own. The hype can exist quite separately from the book itself.

#### LIFE LESSONS FROM RUNNING A JAZZ CLUB

Which brings me to the question: as a reader, why would I care? Isn't it enough that a book is simply good?

In *What We Talk About When We Talk About Running*, Murakami describes the way his approach to audience developed out of his experiences running a jazz club:

If one out of ten [customers] enjoyed the place and said he'd come again, that was enough. If one out of ten was a repeat customer, then the business would survive. To put it the other way, it didn't matter if nine out of ten didn't like my bar. This realization lifted a weight off my shoulders. Still, I had to make sure that the one person who did like the place *really* liked it. In order to make sure he did, I had to make my philosophy and stance clear-cut, and patiently maintain that stance no matter what.

I've taught a number of his short stories in my classes, and I would say this ethos is reflected pretty accurately in student responses. Not all students like his stories, but the ones who do, *really* like them. For all his blockbuster, Murakami is at heart a writer who can be said to have a cult following, precisely because what he has developed is a clearly defined aesthetic. The sharp prose, the storylines that pull the

reader along, the possibility that at any moment the story might slip into the surreal, the earnest attempts at philosophical inquiry—these are all the elements that have developed from the blending of his own experience with the fertile territory of his imagination.

Which leaves the developing artist with a simple, almost embarrassingly obvious takeaway. Be true to yourself—your experiences, your influences, your imagination.

## AFTERWORD

*Henry W. Leung*

When I came to Stanford I already knew I'd be a writer; I just didn't care about all that race stuff. But the Asian anxieties have always been here—because I have a Chinese middle name, because when asked, “Where you from?” I have multiple answers, because I write and I'm terrified of being called an Asian American Writer, flagbearer for my people, whatever that means. I grew up thinking Asian American lit was a genre of racial activism and a duty paid by bourgeois speech to the subaltern and oppressed.

Then I got involved in *Oceanic Tongues*. Then I took one of Prof. Sohn's classes. And I saw it's not that kind of boxed genre; Asian American lit is just a label applied from outside while, each decade, its various faces go through various phases.

This book's an artifact of those decades filtered through a single, cosmopolitan generation which holds history at a mouseclick's distance. These are people who care enough about something to craft it onto paper, and somehow their racial identity, or others' around them, or movies—whatever it may be—factors into these narratives. This generation resists definition, and will be subjected to it anyway.

So as a Chinese American immigrant, why do I write? I do speak for where I come from, but that means Texas blues as much as Cantonese lilt. I write because I grew up in a tradition of Western literature I came to love, then later again in a tradition of Eastern literature. I write because my first fiction teacher was black and a mother and gay with sunburned cornrows, and somewhere in that memory is a story worth living for. I write to reflect reality better than the last generation did. And to name it better, to right it. I write because the race trope's just as useful as the romance trope for characters on the page, and for understanding complex people in kaleidoscope societies.

As for the writers in this book, they speak and write for themselves and continue to do so. I hope more elsewhere will too, redefining all of us. It's not really about the politics, the movement, or the time's abuse. It's about fear, and whether you're willing to take a name, which has been handed to you, and make it your own. That's why every generation's at once a little old and a little new. That's how language works. That's how we go on writing the world.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Karmia Chan Cao** is a Chinese Canadian junior majoring in Creative Writing. She is a poet, playwright and musician. Last year, she wrote and directed the acclaimed play *Forgetting Tiburon* about the lasting legacy of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. She is now directing the workshop production of her all original musical *Abraham Niu and the Friendly Fires* in collaboration with STAMP.

**Katherine Chen**, class of 2012, is an Electrical Engineering major, with a Computer Software focus. Her secret dream is to be a travel writer and her writing was at one point heavily influenced by William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In her spare time, she enjoys cooking and playing spades.

**Ken Chen** is the 2009 recipient of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, the oldest annual literary award in the United States. His debut poetry collection *Juvenilia* was selected by Pulitzer Prize winner Louise Gluck. He is the Executive Director of The Asian American Writers' Workshop (aaww.org), the most prominent literary arts nonprofit in support of Asian American literature.

**Nicole Chorney** is a senior undergraduate at Stanford University, majoring in English with a concentration in contemporary literature. Her literary interests include ethnic literature, particularly Asian American literature as well as postcolonial, postmodernism, and identity theory. In her spare time, Nicole also works as a student gardener for Stanford Dining and manages the Stanford Produce Stand, a bi-weekly "mini- farmer's market" selling produce cultivated both on-campus and also by other local farmers.

**Jackie Chu**, class of 2010, is a Human Biology major hoping to go on to medical school. This is her first time being published!

**Yii Wen Chuah** is a junior majoring in Psychology. She likes tea, baking bread and feeding people.

**Trac Dang**, class of 2012, is a History major and Feminist Studies

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**Sarah Gambito** is the author of the poetry collections *Delivered* (Persea Books) and *Matadora* (Alice James Books). She is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Fordham University and co-founder of Kundiman, a non-profit organization serving Asian American poets.

**Justine Kao**, class of 2011, is a Symbolic Systems major with a minor in Creative Writing. She enjoys thinking about languages and pretending to be a native English speaker.

**Iris A. Law** is the editor of the literary magazine *Lantern Review: A Journal of Asian American Poetry*. She received her B.A. in English from Stanford in 2008 and her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Notre Dame in 2010. Her poetry has appeared in *LUMINA*, *Kartika Review*, and *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* and was recently selected for inclusion in Sundress Publications' 2009 *Best of the Net Anthology*. While at Stanford, she served as the founding president of Oceanic Tongues.

**Stephanie Le**, class of '08, is a typical premed turned med now at UC Irvine SOM. She is co-maintainer of poetrying.wordpress.com, a fun blog aiming to discover a new poem each day. She loves blueberry steelcut oatmeal.

**Henry W. Leung** is the graduating president of Oceanic Tongues. His story "Fellow Ship" is reprinted here from the University of Chester's *Flash Fiction Magazine*. He's currently working on two novels.

**Mia Ayumi Malhotra** is currently pursuing her MFA at the University of Washington. She graduated from Stanford University in 2007, and is currently the Associate Editor of *Lantern Review: A Journal of Asian American Poetry*.

**Stephanie Otani** is a junior majoring in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. She has been using her time at Stanford to study Asian American issues, critical race theory mixed race, and identity in the United States and Japan. She hopes to be a writer and an activist when she grows up. Stephanie can be contacted at [sotani@stanford.edu](mailto:sotani@stanford.edu).

**Derek Ouyang**, class of 2013, plans to major in Civil Engineering and Architecture with a minor in Creative Writing. He is a member of the Stanford Mendicants and is passionate about photography and film.

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**Samantha Toh**, class of 2011, enjoys writing, baking obsessively, and thinking about happiness in the form of tea and cookies.

**Grace Um** is a senior majoring in Biology and minoring in Creative Writing. She loves good stories, clever puns, healthy food that tastes unhealthy, and Will Ferrell movies. She enjoys poetry most for its power to capture the human experience.

**Victoria W. Yee** is a freshman at Stanford. She enjoys creative writing, art, soft pop music, and photography.

**Kairen Wong**, class of '12, is a Mathematical and Computational Science major.

**Becky Wright**, class of '10, is a Comparative Literature major with a minor in Creative Writing. Previously her poetry has been published in *Skipping Stones*, a youth multicultural literary magazine, and *The Tower*, her high school quarterly paper. She plans to continue working with literature after she graduates in the role of a designer at a publishing house. Other interests include gardening, travelling, and Stanford Women's Ultimate Frisbee, for which she is captain this year.

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