

Agnes LAM**Poems****Woman to woman**

I had met them,
got to know them

as people with offices,
telephone extensions,
bookshelves, tutorial chairs
and notecards
of scrawly handwriting.

people with husbands
and a son or daughter,
who goes swimming,
takes lessons of sorts -
pictures on Kodak paper.

We had exchanged
smiles and greetings
in the corridor,
the pantry
or over the phone.

I had lunched
and dined with them
at the canteen,
the clubhouse
and the hotel restaurant.

And then I read
their poetry ...

lizards slithering through running sand
trying to escape falling into caves
subterranean rivers
gushing through buried treasures
the mummies are sleepy

in the early morning
conches glisten with coral dust
proffering the sounds from the deep
all the barracudas have evaporated
and the whales are expecting

a generation of orphans
 not yet menstruating walk the city
 while women in pain with first babies
 labour beneath rubble
 and the crocodiles are crying

... woman to woman

What can be said
 in the corridor
 as the cleaners pass
 or over the phone
 between classes?

Yes - that was interesting,
 wasn't it?
 the workshop -
 And how was the poetry
 competition you judged?
 I saw you on TV last night -
 Oh that - more exciting
 than the conference,
 I must say -
 there was this man
 who just kept asking questions -
 okay - talk to you later -
 I have to go -
 meeting my publisher -

Poets?

'I'm not coming home
 for dinner.'
 'It's okay.'
 The toilet bowl
 needs disinfecting,
 algae on the bath tiles
 are colonizing.
 It's time to change
 the bedsheets
 and the underwear
 has to be soaked

throughout the night.

18 Feb 1986, Kent Ridge

(Lam, A. (1987). Woman to woman. *Commentary*, 7(2&3), 121.)

My cerebral child

On the walls
of my cerebral womb,
you are knocking.

You scratch on my inner membrane
as I am about to sleep,
tickling me through my dreams,
wanting to be fed.
On the morning bus,
you want to chat.
Between classes,
you whine for patting.
You nudge me
when I do laundry,
chuckle to yourself
during dishes
and prattle incessantly
as the news reel ...

Let me out,
You are thirty.

Child of my imagination,
what do you know
of the wombless world?

Tonight on live TV
the Challenger explodes
before schoolchildren's eyes
an earthquake in South America
leaves babies behind
muddied all over
with laval debris
from California
two kindergarten matrons
are charged with child abuse
and here in Singapore
we are talking
of Total Defence
midst streaming exams.

Child of my imagination,
what have I to offer you
beyond my uterine walls?

How should I reply
if you should ask
why we are eating

strawberries on vanilla
when infants in Ethiopia
are starved hollow
of bone marrow?
Should I offer you charity
and comfort in eternity
as an answer?
And would you then ask -
Why didn't you
let me remain
timeless from the start?

Child of my imagination,
would it be enough
for me to say

there in my womb
I have loved you,
I have hoped
you will make this world
more livable?

Or would you regret
and rather be fed,
clothed and loved
always in my imagination,
my cerebral home?

Tell me,
I am thirty.

20 February 1986, Bus 33

(Lam, A. (1989). My cerebral child. *Westerly*, 34(4), 20-21.)

The rape of a nation

Larger than life,
they were soldiers
in the streets of darkness,
shadows with no faces,
burning, raping, killing
in a land not their own,
a battle not of their making.

I was watching
by the side with others.

They did not see me
 or the other watchers.
 But I could hear the screams,
 smell the wet of the blood,
 see the red of fire.

I was doing nothing.
 Nothing was done to me.
 But I felt the desperation of both
 the perpetrators and the victims
 in the rape of a nation.

Was it from another time?
 Another space?
 Was it just television?
 Or a hallucination? A prophecy?
 A fragment of collective memory?

22 June 1997, Rodrigues Court

(Lam, A. (2001). The rape of a nation. *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 32(1), 136.)

I grew mushrooms

One afternoon I was walking
 among the crowds
 on Pedder Street in Central
 and felt a sharp pain
 on the calf of my right leg.
 Something had hit me accidentally.

I turned around to see a man,
 possibly South American,
 carrying a short bamboo pole,
 chipped at one end.
 'I'm so sorry,' he said
 with fear on his face.

I looked at my leg – a tiny cut.
 'Never mind. It's just a scratch.'

'No, this is very serious.
 The pole was dipped in
 a culture that will not die.
 You must see a doctor

right away, please.’

So I did. In a clinic
on the eighth floor of a Central building,
I waited quietly for my turn.
The wound became itchy. I continued to wait.

An hour or so later,
when the doctor examined my wound,
it had sprouted tiny
mushrooms.
The doctor was taken by surprise but kept her calm.
‘Let’s cut them off.’ she said.
And so she did.

But the mushrooms continued to grow
on the surgical steel tray where they were placed,
even after they were cut off from my blood.

While the doctor turned her head,
roses sprang up from the wound instead.
‘Let’s cut them off.’ she said.
And so she did.
But the roses trimmed off from my leg became
larger and larger, taller and taller,
till they had to bend their heads against the ceiling.

Meanwhile, some orange tiger lilies had appeared
from the same wound. They too were snipped off
but continued to blossom on the doctor’s desk, sprawling onto her shelves,
covering the glass of her windows.

Then hibiscuses shot up, enormous petals spreading over the doctor’s certificates, dusting
pollen over the silver plaques from her grateful patients. After hibiscuses came tulips,
gladioli, peonies, sunflowers, orchids, African violets (not the small potted species) ... One
giant flower after another bloomed from my small cut, until the doctor’s office became thick
with greenery growing around us, through to the waiting area, into the elevators, crawling on
the landings of each floor, spilling from the lobby of the building onto the streets of Central

as passengers got into red taxis with their bags of shopping
and green trams went past with their ding ding bells

from a hundred years ago ...

24 December 2002, Hotel New Hankyu

(Lam, A. (2004). I grew mushrooms. *Poetry International*, 7/8, 119-120.)

April moon

Our Chinese poet, Li Bai,
had drunk the moon in ecstasy.
Our fairytale had flown a maiden
to live there long before astronauts.

Debussy recreated the dreams
of Verlaine's birds on moonlit trees,
the drizzle of fountains on white stone,
pianissimo in night air.

Young Hemingway found nothing
simple in Paris – not the moonlight,
nor the breathing of someone
resting beside you in that light.

You know all that, of course –
nights when your moon has shone
on a path beside a lotus pond,
your fish soothed by michelia scent ...

But this photo you took has another tale to tell.
This moon is not like any of the others.
It was a moon rising over a Singapore sky
on Children's Day at 6.20 pm in the year 2001 ...

... the sun not yet setting,
the sky a clear blue still,
this moon is but a film of white,
barely visible, almost transparent,
unassuming in daylight, yet
with no apology for its being ...

How many times
have we missed such a moon
or other realities not quite
claiming existence for themselves?

You saw it, cherished it
enough to take its picture.

But where was I
this Wednesday in April

when you encountered this moon
six years, three months, twenty-four days ago?

What was I doing, thinking, feeling,

as you composed its image miles and miles away?

Surely you did not know then – nor did I –
you would share your remembrance with me today.

If Time did not travel from the past to the present,
if it were to move instead from the future to the past,
then perhaps we would both know we were to meet, that one reason
you saved your vision that evening was for me to greet this moon today ...

The Soul of the World understands destiny in *The Alchemist*.
And the universe in *The Golden Compass* is full of intentions.
Some have faith God holds all the days and nights of our lives,
knows how fragments of our memories fuse into meaning

even as children chant in Cantonese about a moon pouring over the earth

on New Year's Eve as they pick untranslatable fruits, a pig's stomach,
the hide of an ox, a whip to ride a horse, the roof beam of a house being built,
a knife cutting greens, a round bin cover, a boat sinking, three children –
one floating, one drowning, one hiding under a bed to eat deep fried sticks of dough

for no reason but rhyme and the easy joy of play.

27 July 2007, Rodrigues Court, on Mark Malby's "Moon 2"

(Lam, A. (2008). April moon. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 2(1), 119-120. Retrieved June 21, 2008 from <http://asiatic.iiu.edu.my>)

Rendezvous with glow worms

Inside the Waitomo Caves,
stalactites and stalagmites grow
a centimetre in a century.

Water drops from ceilings of
rock. The air is moist with darkness.
On the black river, a boat gently

floats into a world of glow
worms – tiny stars of soft blue light
constellating into galaxies.

In their universe, worms are
born, grow into adults, shine, mate
for as long as seven hours, give

birth to a hundred babies,
one by one, die right after while
others are born and in turn enchant

other mates with their glimmer,
breed, expire within a few days –
an everlasting birth of light, a

never-ending darkness of
death. In this grotto is all there
is, all that can be, has been, will be.

Perhaps the worms know there are
other caves, other colonies
of their kind. Perhaps they wonder not

as they die before ever
leaving this cosmos lit by their
loves. In their innocence, they need not

yearn to travel to beyond
this cave, this charmed existence of
darkness, light, love, death, darkness, light, love ...

... to another space afar
where stars are born, where a day is
as a million years, a million years,

a day, where angels can love
without mating. There is no end
to love, no distance, no longing, if

time does not exist.

25 December 2006, Waitomo Caves, New Zealand

(Lam, A. (2008). Rendezvous with glow worms. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 2(1), 121-122. Retrieved June 21, 2008 from <http://asiatic.iium.edu.my>)
