

till angry, he flapped her from him. But if these silent pleas had
meaning, neither knew.
The child's only comfort came from nestling under the
lychee tree. Its shifting branches
whistled her wordless lullabies: the lychees with their watchful eyes,
the wild geese crossing overhead.
The fruit, the geese. They marked her seasons. She didn't long to join
the birds, if longing implies

a will beyond the blindest instinct. Then one mid-autumn, she craned
her neck so far to mark the geese
wheeling through the clouded hills – it kept on stretching – till
it tapered in a beak. Her pink toes
sprouted webs and claws; her helpless arms found strength
in wings. The goose daughter
soared to join the arrowed skein: kin linked by a single aim
and tide, she knew their heading

and their need. They spent that year or more in flight, but where –
across what sparkling tundral wastes –
I've not heard tell. Some say the fable ended there. But those
who know the ways of wild geese
know too the obligation to return, to their first dwelling place. Let this
suffice: late spring. A woodsman
snares a wild goose that spirals clean into his yard – almost like
it knows. Gripping its sinewed neck

he presses it down into the block, cross-hewn from a lychee trunk.
A single blow. Profit, loss.

Loop of Jade

When the television has stayed on too long, the channels
ended, and all the downstairs lights switched off but one,
sometimes, rarely, my mother will begin to talk, without
prelude or warning, about her growing up. Then her words
feel pulled up from a dark and unreflective well – willed and
not willed. It isn't that this tacit contract is not tinged by
our same daily fumbblings, but when the men are asleep, I
think she believes it's someone else's turn to listen.

Once she spoke of her horror, as a very small child, of the
communal kitchen in their low-rise tenement – half-outdoors
in that muggy climate, it ran across the whole row, a corridor
or terrace; this space, aside from housing a blackened, static
wok the size of a Western baby's bath, was also a latrine. Of
squatting barefoot over the cracked tile trench and trying
not to breathe. How despite themselves her eyes would follow
to the nearby drain, as it sprouted – here she giggles, shivers
– the glistening bodies

of cockroaches, like obscene sucked sweets. I see them, the
colour of rust or shit, hitching up from the crusted grille on
agile legs;

things scuttling from some dank, subterranean chamber of
the head.

*

*A pendant of milk-green
Jade was meant to bind
Our two young lovers.*

*So when Zhu was given
To another, older man,
Liang's winged heart
Stopped its fluttering.*

*

Another time she tells of being made, in the bucket room,
at the place she always calls a school, to wash her hair with
a green detergent meant for scouring floors,

shaken from a cardboard tube. Unconscious fingers reach
towards her scalp. I do not look for the candied rose-petal
patches – there as long as I remember – as of mange or burns,
that tell why, before leaving her room, she will so carefully
layer and arrange her lovely black hair.

*

I can never know this place. Its scoop of rice in a chink-
rimmed bowl, its daily thinning soup.

Harbour thunder echoes in their sleeping room: outside, the
rattling, clanking bits of boats. She huddles closer to the other
girls. On slight brown arms, hairs begin to lift. The brightest
smack of lightning will induce (can this be right?) the bunk's
iron frame, like some kind of celestial tuning fork, to zing with
a preternatural hum –

a night-dead television set, its autumn storm. An inch from
the wrought bar's buzzing, her child's hand trembles. I feel
my own palm magnetise to hers; but something holds it back.
The metal has a funny smell:

a smoking wok, or caustic soap.

*

*They interred him by
The mountain road.
From the casement's
High lattice she wept:
A caged cricket. Soon
Came the wedding day
Of Zhu Yingtai, mocking*

*

She tells these and other stories with a pause-pocked, melodic,
strangely dated hesitancy. What I mean by this is, whenever
I hear it, that halting intonation takes me back to the years
when we first moved here. In those days, in her early forties,
in a new country, she spoke more slowly than now, and with
a subtle, near-constant nasal hum, more of a *nnnnnnng* – so
natural to Cantonese –

but which filled the gaps between her otherwise fluent English
like the Thereminy strings in a Mandarin film score. As she
chatted with the mothers of new friends, tentatively made
and dropped-off to play, it seemed to me that every minute
or so – I could feel it building – she would stick mid-note:
raised hand stilled, chin tilted in the doorway, a wound-down
marionette I willed and willed to start up its song again. A
tic the local children mocked me for – that *nnnnnnnnnnng*
in the playground –

as I tried not to be ashamed.

*

*What could never be.
But a magic whirlwind
Stuck fast the procession*

So they could not pass
 Liang's wayside grave.
 The draped bride, craning
 Stepped from her chair –

*

Her longest and most empty pause, I've learned, comes before
 the word *mother*.

As in, *My – mother, she could speak Shanghainese*. This, one
 of her trademark non-sequiturs – at the table the family
 would laugh – arrived while scraping off dinnerplates
 several months after a trip of mine to Shanghai. It's as
 though she's been conducting the conversation in her head
 for some time and decides disconcertingly to include you.
 Or, one Christmas, tucking the cooled mince pies into
 kitchen paper: *I sometimes think she wasn't very – reliable,*
my –

mother. What she told me, I don't know how much – I can
believe.

In her mouth that noun worried at me. For I would never
 naturally use it myself – *mother* – except at an immigration
 office, perhaps, to total strangers, or inside the boundaries
 of a poem. She places it in the room's still air with a kind
 of resolve, and yet a sense it's not quite right – a
 mistranslation –

like watching her wade, one dredged step at a time, out into
 a wide grey strait – myself a waving spot, unseen, on the
 furthest shore.

*

With a clap of thunder
 The tomb cracked open,
 Yawned to a ravine.
 And Zhu, her silk soles
 Balanced a moment
 On the earth's red lip,
 Hurled herself in.

*

There was a man in a nearby district.
 When I was young and my mother short
 of money there was a while a lot of
 times actually when I was sent to live
 with other people. That man was one of
 those people. Looking back it was better
 than the school on Macau. I learned more
 at his house. There were other children
 other girls there too. At night
 he would teach us the old stories all
 singing together. People they used to
 talk about him. These weren't just
 nursery rhymes though I had never heard
 those before either. I mean the classical
 legends and tales. He had a bad
 reputation. The legends like Shakespeare
 had a lot of girls who dress up as boys
 so they will be allowed to go to school
 or to war. My mother heard about it
 had me sent back to her. When I was old
 enough I had to go to the school instead.
 There was one 'The Butterfly Lovers'. It
 was a poem and also a song. I used to
 be able to sing it all. He was kind to me.
 I don't think I ever taught you that one.

*

*Some god was watching
Our lovers' one grave –
Breathed down a breeze
Into their broken husks:
Their souls, now two
Butterflies, flicker away,
Never to be parted again.*

*

It thuds into my chest, this pendent
ring of milky jade –
I wear it strung on an old watch chain –

meant for a baby's bracelet. Into its
smooth circlet
I can – just – fit a quincunx of five

fingertips. Cool on my palm it rests –
the sinople eye
on a butterfly's wing. When I was born

she took it across to Wong Tai Sin,
my mother's mother,
to have it blessed. I saw that place –

its joss-stick incensed mist, the fortune-
casting herd,
their fluttering, tree-tied pleas – only later

as a tourist. As for the jade, I never wore
or even saw it
then. The logic runs like this: if baby

falls, the loop of stone – a sacrifice –
will shatter
in her place. Painfully knelt on the altar

step, did the old woman shake out a sheath
of red-tipped
sticks, and pick one, to entreat my fate?

And if I break it now – will I be saved?