

Second Mouth

BY FRANNY CHOI

Other-lips whispering between my legs.
What they called black hole not-thing
is really packed full of secrets. A rebel mouth

testifying from the underside. Careful
not to let it speak too loudly. Only hum
demure in polite company — never laugh

or spit on the sidewalk or complain
lest we both be dragged under the wheels of
one of those. Or worse coddled

smiled at as at a lapdog acting wolf.
Or worse called ugly a cruel joke. Or —
there are always worse things.

Too many messengers shot. But then
who wouldn't fear an eyeless face
whose ghost stories always come true?

Immigrant Blues

BY LI-YOUNG LEE

People have been trying to kill me since I was born,
a man tells his son, trying to explain
the wisdom of learning a second tongue.

It's an old story from the previous century
about my father and me.

The same old story from yesterday morning
about me and my son.

It's called "Survival Strategies
and the Melancholy of Racial Assimilation."

It's called "Psychological Paradigms of Displaced Persons,"
called "The Child Who'd Rather Play than Study."

Practice until you feel
the language inside you, says the man.

But what does he know about inside and outside,
my father who was spared nothing
in spite of the languages he used?

And me, confused about the flesh and the soul,
who asked once into a telephone,
Am I inside you?

You're always inside me, a woman answered,
at peace with the body's finitude,
at peace with the soul's disregard
of space and time.

Am I inside you? I asked once

lying between her legs, confused
about the body and the heart.

If you don't believe you're inside me, you're not,
she answered, at peace with the body's greed,
at peace with the heart's bewilderment.

It's an ancient story from yesterday evening

called "Patterns of Love in Peoples of Diaspora,"

called "Loss of the Homeplace
and the Defilement of the Beloved,"

called "I want to Sing but I Don't Know Any Songs."

Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls

BY CHEN CHEN

Can't stop eating you, movie-style extra butter microwave popcorn.
Can't stop watching you, rented movie about an immigrant family
from Lebanon. Can't help but weep, seeing the family wave

goodbye to relatives in the Beirut airport—tear salt mixing with
popcorn salt. Can't hide my mess, myself from the friend beside me.
Can't answer his question, *Does it remind you of your family, leaving China?*

I want to say, *No, it's completely different*, which in many ways it is, but really
I'm remembering what a writer friend once said to me, *All you write about
is being gay or Chinese*—how I can't get over that, & wonder if it's true,

if everything I write is in some way an immigrant narrative or another
coming out story. I recall a recent poem, featuring fishmongers in Seattle,
& that makes me happy—clearly that one isn't about being gay or Chinese.

But then I remember a significant number of Chinese immigrants
live in Seattle & how I found several of the Pike Place fishmongers
attractive when I visited, so I guess that poem's about being gay

& Chinese, too. So I say to my friend, *I'm not sure*, & keep eating
the popcorn. Thank god we chose the giant “family size” bag. Can't stop
the greasy handfuls, noisy mouthfuls. Can't eat popcorn quietly.

Later, during my friend's smoke break, still can't come up with a worthy
response to his radical queer critique of homonormativity, of monogamy,
domesticity, front lawn glory. *These middle-class gays picking out*

*garden gnomes, ignoring all the anti-racist work of decolonization
that still needs to be done—don't you think they're lame?* I say, *Yeah, for sure*,
but think, marriage, house, 1 kid, 2 cats—how long have I wanted that?

Could I give that up in the name of being a *real* queer? Probably can't.
& it's like another bad habit I can't give up. Eating junk, can't. Procrastinating,

can't. Picking scabs, can't. Being friends with people who challenge

my beliefs & life plans, can't. Reading & believing in Ayn Rand, though?
Can, Brief phase as a Christian because I liked the cross as an accessory? Can.
WWJD? Can. White heterosexist patriarchy? Can. America . . . can't.

Can't help but think, when we get back to the movie, how it was my father's
decision to move here, not my mother's, just like the parents on screen.
Can't stop replaying my mother's walk onto the plane, carrying me,

though I was getting too old for it, holding me, my face pressed into her
hair, her neck, as she cried, quietly—can't stop returning to this scene of leaving,
can't stop pausing the scene, thinking I've left something out again,

something else my mother told me. Like my grandmother at the airport,
how she saw my small body so tied to my mother's body, & still she doubted,
she had to say, *You better not lose him.* & my mother kept that promise

till she couldn't, she lost me, in the new country, but doesn't
that happen to all parents & their children, one way or another,
& don't we need to get lost? Lost, dizzy, stubbly, warm, stumbling,

whoa—that's what it felt like, 17, kissing a boy for the first time.
Can't forget it. Can't forget when my mother found out & said,
This would never have happened if we hadn't come to this country.

But it would've happened, every bit as dizzy, lost, back in China.
It didn't happen because of America, dirty Americans. It was me,
my need. My father said, *You have to change,* but I couldn't, can't

give you up, boys & heat, scruff & sweet. Can't get over you. Trying to get
over what my writer friend said, *All you write about is being gay or Chinese.*
Wish I had thought to say to him, *All you write about is being white*

or an asshole. Wish I had said, *No, I already write about everything—*
& everything is salt, noise, struggle, hair,
carrying, kisses, leaving, myth, popcorn,

mothers, bad habits, questions.

I Wake Up in New York to an Explosion in Lahore and Carry On With My Day As If Nothing Happened

BY MOMINA MELA

I shouldn't write a poem about it. There's no use.
I want to feel healthy so I walk to the kitchen with
one foot in front of the other and crack two eggs on the counter.
I can't go to the gym today though, this time the explosion was
too close to home. The fact of bodies is tangible.
The obliterated parking lot flashed on the local news—
if I squint it looks like a construction site.
I'll go out today but I won't tell anyone about the bomb.
It's none of their business and anyway, I can't always be
a symbol of a wreckage having occurred elsewhere.
I sit in the park instead and watch people relax.
A man kisses a pigeon and another kisses a dog and
both times I look away to gather the spikes of trees into a
dripping faucet. The water fountains open their empty
oyster shells and today the sun is made in the image of a sliding
trolley—partly because light is slipping away and partly due to
the nostalgia of railroad tracks. I run into a poet who insists on using
material from real life to write a poem and for the first time in my life
I don't have an opinion. I believe the trick to achieving perfect symmetry
is to lean backwards into your soul and fake a ripening. Look grateful,
debauchery is a fact the same way a watershed actualizes a river.
Your experience is only the accumulation of tongues in your mouth.
You find a street and walk on it. You don't call your mother.

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