

Dirty Laundry

You're no better than anyone else, I'm afraid.

On summer days, flush with heat,  
my grandmother would take the futons out to sun on the balcony,  
beat them clean and air them dry.

If a sudden rain came, brought by the wet monsoon, she  
took the clothes that hung limply on lines outside like cotton flags,  
brought them in and waited for the gray humidity to pass.

Sometimes a piece of cloth, coming unclipped,  
would be borne elsewhere to earth.

This is what I remember, or think I do:  
walking away from her small apartment, turning back,  
looking up, seeing the white lines of hanging clothes  
brazenly draped across the windows, each household its own:  
sleeveless blouses and hand-washed work clothes,  
old towels and rags, faded panties turned off-white...  
the pale sky, the light breeze, the delicate fluttering that cheered on the day.

The sun, the heat, an eruption of summer.  
The heart inside me stifled and tense.  
Standing still, I put my hands together and wished for a wind,  
to lift me up and blow me gently away.

The Pill

When doctors finally released the pill to forget, people lined up in streets  
from Bangkok to L.A., waiting day after day,  
so patient they could have been terra cotta, except  
for grief which can't be sculpted.  
Who would have thought so many had so weary a heart?  
"Hey, what's your story, man?" the bohemian asks Wall Street,  
who answers,  
"Before the stock market crashed, a girl told me money didn't matter."  
All along the sidewalks people are lighting street fires,  
preparing to burn the memories they've held onto:  
eight hundred origami cranes, the last one crumpled;  
a faded Polaroid with five teeth-smiles still visible;  
a red leather address book which almost doesn't burn;  
baby shoes for Christmas, 2001.

In the middle of New York there comes a cry:  
"What are you doing here?"  
"I came to forget *you!*"  
Instead of pain, there is laughter, and "One last time, then,  
remember that day when—"

Scientists shrugged before popping the pills themselves,  
left empty except for a sensation they had forgotten  
something perhaps important.  
Wandering the streets, people looked dazed but happy,  
spontaneously hugging strangers and saying,  
"I could hold the sky!"  
And I, spacious like an empty treasure-box,  
walked home tripping on lost children's shoes,  
until on the way I met Mistake again and asked,  
"Do you want to grab a coffee?"

not knowing what that tug at my heart  
was supposed to warn.

Virtues of a Good Chinese Girl

Are respect, responsibility, piety and modesty.  
Once I sat in a restaurant in Shanghai and my uncle said,  
*You can see that you're American without even speaking.*  
But I have yellow skin and small, slanted eyes,  
the epicanthic fold that makes my eyelids so thick,  
and a low nose bridge like everyone else, I suppose.  
Then, why?

It's because I don't sit straight. Because I laugh loudly.  
Because I look him in the eye when he ruffles my hair  
and greets me by saying, "The foreigner has come."  
It's because I yawn with my mouth open,  
wave energetically when seeing people I like, and  
take up more than my share of floor space;  
because I eat meat by the pound,  
tell uncles not to smoke, and sometimes  
cut others off when they're speaking.  
Yang Guifei, they say, was one of the four  
Chinese beauties, skin so radiant it must have  
held the moon. She cast down her eyes  
and knew to obey. The Emperor, who is the  
Son of Heaven, moved all ends of earth for her hand,  
plump, soft, and timid; when finally he held it, he thought,  
Good-bye the painted ladies of the imperial consort!

If I am told I'm an American girl, at least  
I'm a girl who does as I'm told.  
I smile when I see people. I say pleasant things.  
Words of criticism are hard to say.  
I feel embarrassed with attention.  
I am trained to be polite. Polite, which means quiet.  
I want to please. I want to be good.  
I am told to wait for good things to come.  
Bent over the desk, spine curved like a moon,  
I dutifully work and wait for those things.

Wait with patience, and good things will come?  
Under the lamp, I see my hand yellow.  
There are butterflies in me, waiting  
to be flown. These nights come and go.  
I lose sight of the moon.  
I wish I could chase the Emperor.

Strawberries

Let us pretend there is no mystery in strawberries,  
that we know precisely what floods the flesh so enticingly red,  
coloring summer with a crimson flush, a violent bloom  
amid the cool earth greens.

Let us knowingly say the unabashed hue comes  
from ripeness for eating, and there is no more meaning  
to the deep red so like our hidden internalities,  
which we feign ignorance of while complacently stroking  
the shield of our outer flesh.

Let us declare the finger-stains of picking are superficial,  
and are washed away when our hands are clean;  
that the strawberry juice has not already penetrated below the dermis  
so that our own blood runs redder,  
intoxicated and giddy with the inbred sugar of fruit;  
let us feign that we see no connection  
in the perfect way a single strawberry nestles in the human mouth,  
to bring memories of feeding lovers and butter light,  
romances that never were, and cool saucers in the evening.

And lastly, let us make believe  
while the fields are still heavy with the lush season of ripeness  
that the bruises on the tender skin do not hurt us, too,  
that we don't notice time playing decay on that succulent red;  
Let us insist to ourselves, assuredly, continuously,  
that our own hearts are not already burst  
as the short-lived strawberry loses its firmness on the earth.

AP 日本語

For four years we all wanted to be Japanese,  
trading *omiyage* and saying *Konnichiwa, sensei,*  
*kyou ogenki desuka?*

Instead of school uniforms, we wore what  
short skirts we had, sliding on knee socks and  
carrying Sanrio-brand pens. We wanted to be  
cute, no, *kawaii*; we wanted  
to wear kimono robes and watch fireworks  
wearing yukatas in the summer,  
make chocolates on February 14 and  
receive return gifts on White Day.  
*Soshite, minna ga kawatta.*  
Then, everyone started changing.

The words are leaving, I have to strain to remember:  
*Hajimemashite.* Nice to meet you.  
*Watashi wa Minai to moshimasu.* My name is Minai.  
*Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.* Please take care of me.  
Did you hear the latest song from  
that band, Alice-something, isn't the drummer  
so cute, did you see the latest episode of that anime?  
And the Lolita dresses at Harajuku, aren't they so pretty?  
No, I haven't, and the single  
Lolita skirt I have, I last wore  
three years ago.  
*Kimi ga suki desu.* I like you.  
*Takoyaki.* Fried squid balls.  
On a street in Osaka: *Purikura wa doko desuka?*  
Let's take photo stickers and draw hearts on our faces,  
eyes sparkling so much more than is actually realistic.  
I'll meet you by the red *torii* gate at the shrine of dreams,  
where the Shinto spirits and a ghost fox walk.

Once I knelt by the great Daibutsu, took  
pictures in front of the Golden Pavilion,  
dipped my left hand in the well water and  
wrote prayers for luck on a wooden tablet in hiragana.  
When cherry blossoms fall, they say  
*Sayonara, sayonara:*  
That needs no translation.

Human Error

whoso would parse the lines  
“since feeling is first”  
would identify the preposition first,  
and the tense of the verb (present),  
a third person singular,  
and the transitivity (in - that is to say,  
intransitive)

and go on perhaps to discuss the progression  
of metaphor in the poetic devices,  
speaking of meter and rhyme (unstressed,  
a trochee, a spondee),  
of the repetition of wholly  
so that they might win  
approve,

insert remarks on the impermanence  
of Spring and flowers as symbols,  
giving the best gesture of their brains while

outside, under the window,  
yellow flag and blue geraniums open

And having written some paragraphs they ask  
are kisses are a better fate than—  
who can say?

for if in this analysis we have missed some  
point of impact then there  
we can only apologize,  
not knowing how to do better, and  
attribute it to human error.