

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Stephanie Han: Three Poems

Stephanie Han · Friday, August 28th, 2020

The Modern Truth

The modern truth
is more of what
we already are.
Screens in dim rooms.
Nonsense papers
of busy work.
This disease
has pushed us in.
Leaders shout
from a stage.
Clapping. Lies.
No exit.
The blasphemy
of our species:
To live
and crumble.
To huddle
in blue light comfort.

*

Old Man Son of Sun Lung Wai

Outside my kitchen window
banana leaves shade a woman's plot—
insistent styrofoam boxes:
choy, chives, ginger.
Plants buoyed by a hoe,
a rigid hand scattering soil,
a brave reach for water.

This mother, once daughter—
 a paper deed married off,
 tradition peeled, preserved,
 a steel face, a sour mouth.
 Her acquiescence masticated decades ago.
 Ferocity gathered with age.
 She stakes her son's land
 with bamboo sticks,
 a cat's cradle of pink twine.

Old man son drools,
 babbles in the village square,
 dodders up the path,
 relieves himself under an asbestos roof.
 He jabs ghosts behind banana flowers,
 scans the stream for memories and frogs.
 Old man son with flat sunken eyes,
 chants toothless murmurs of the dead
 battles demons by bins,
 drops leaves to time a water's flow.
 A mint clothespin swings from his ear.

My son cries. My explanation fails:
 a head missing pieces,
 a wound of the mind,
 a sickness that stays.

Mother and son equidistant from home,
 an isosceles in time.
 In the beginning, a son!
 Bound to a mother's back.
 A deed. A name.
 Land. Always land.
 Fatigue, tenderness, despair.
 Such years fester the heart.

Old man son shuffles by rusty bikes, plastic pails.
 The TV trumpets: he scoots closer, transfixed.
 Music, colored lights, women in swimwear.
America's Next Top Model.

Outside the mother fingers a lemon tree's gnarled
 bark. Some fruit never ripen.
 She sells them split,
 opened for an icebox's scent.
 A twisted tree withers,
 but she will never free the roots.
 She guards it
 for him, her baby and child,

old man son,
answer and heir to this land.

*

An Ordinary Winter

My child kneels on black ice tiles,
vomits a towel offering.
I rub his tiny back, knead shoulders, pretzel soft.
He sobs through mucous: I am trying to get better.
I tuck him in. My back spasms.
Massage, massage. Sleep with me here.
His face darkens, white hot sheets cook his body.
Sing, *Caro mio ben*.

I am sixteen,
sing of passion unknown
Caro mio ben.
Dearest, my love.
I warble an Italian art song
learned one New England winter.
A trudge through snow,
blurred glasses, damp wool scratches my neck,
cold coats my cheeks.

Go to sleep. Jagged dreams.
Playground terrors, movie hauntings.
A baby beetle. My son whimpers,
searches for the pillow's polar stretch.
I want cold.

I am nine,
shivering in a nightgown.
I jerk forward.
Dad shoves an empty plastic bin near my toes.
I blanket its bottom—
a sour pool of eggs and spring onions.
I cry at the unbearable stench.
Mom puts me to bed.

Small fingers grab my hands.
I'm so sad. I'm sick.
I kiss his flushed cheek, sing illness will depart.
He curls sticky and sweet into my arms.
An ordinary winter:
a sick boy, a tired mother,
I stroke damp hair,

smudge his forehead's shine
sing *Caro mio ben*
and feel the ice descend.

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