

New Poems by Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Commentary by Nina Morgan

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM
and NINA MORGAN

From early on, Shirley Geok-lin Lim's poetry gestured to oil rigs on the Pacific Ocean's horizon and the clicking of refrigerators interrupting domestic silence, already conscious of the surreptitious ways that technology and waste transplant, even subvert, human ties to the natural world. This condition, like the broken family ties she endured as a hungry, motherless child consuming books, the poet resists through her literary expression. In her 2019 talk "A Woman Writer in the Anthropocene Epoch," Lim threads the narrative of her childhood, measuring her travels and feelings of entrapment against the social and cultural design of gender and class that determined how she spent time and where she lived, in order to redress both her personal history of longing and our shared future of environmental loss, "in a radical fashion returning," she says of herself, "to where I had first begun, loving a mother who has already been lost to me."¹ That other mother is, of course, Mother Earth; Lim's loss becomes our loss. Thus the poet's personal story may work as a metonym for our transnational climate crisis: countries, which Lim once described in "Learning to Love America" as "in our blood," today seem obscured in the haze of California wild fires, and the notion that "we bleed them" echoes presciently in light of exploited natural and national resources.² Fittingly, the poet, whose aesthetic of love is yet to be conquered by abandonment or death, responds with new ecological poems that "are love poems, to the Earth, to Nature, to trees and water, air, hills, people and animals; and like traditional poems, they are also poems about loss."³ Thus the threat to habitat and homelands and home itself is layered in a poetic palimpsest that both celebrates and mourns their manmade and natural ephemerality.

Published for the first time, Lim shares five of these new poems with our *JTAS* readers:

Wake!

Wake! Skies will blue in bleakest season.
Wake! Tipping on the blank horizon, the sun,
One, only, for eternity, if eternity
Is, rises. Wake! December moves on,
A name that arbitrates nothing. Wake! The year
Is ending. Or it begins. The leaves mass sodden
Under barren wood, the regularity
Of time worn, underfoot, trodden. Trodden,
The walker who's slept through the century,
Somnambulant as the snail trailing its tear
Track over the lemon groves. Wake! The promise
Of returning light weakens. Nothing insists
Forever. The cycle of summer and ice
Stumbling shakes awake all of your paradise.

(December 10, 2016)

Santa Barbara Rain

Morning after the rains, blossoms
Pop up yellow among their weedy
Tendrils, white in the citrus massy
Branches, scarlet burning bush, plums

Budding, purple in the sage
And orange, orange, orange poppies
To say, Hello, California. These,
Like poems, common on the page,

Lowly or showy tall sprung spiky
Splurges out of succulents
That survive on dew, sky silent
Sprinkled, as, surprised by rain, we

Forget our dry winter heat. Poetry
Needs rain in drought years, like creeks
Need rain to murmur, like dried sticks
Need rain to root, and roots to be

The trees written in their memory,
Like angels need rain to praise
Heaven, like babies need rain to raise
Their sippy cups, like the poppy

Needs rain to wave on its stem,
Like I need rain to write the poem.

(March 2, 2018)

Spring Mornings

After the rains the mornings grow fat again. Their shrubby cheeks glow pink and red. Their green tresses fall long and low. They scatter fragrance and wink sun-beams extravagantly, careless, feminine and fickle, blowing cold and hot both in one day. With names like April and May, why should they fear the blot of droughts ahead? Oh, the hours will be so sweet. Sweet the blue and black berries from farms watered by the March rains. Sweet the peaches promised in the thickly blossoming twigs. Sweet the vision of wine decanted before sleep. Old memory is dying, as across the oceans and beyond the mountains, enemies seem to dissolve with the sugar in pies baking for California. Fear is but the salt in their bread, these young mornings in America, rising, yawning to the pileated woodpeckers' rat-a-tat-tat attacks on bugs clustered in the bark of shade trees hidden vainly in the cracks.

(March 30, 2018)

What Comes After

What comes after the chrysalis?

Perhaps sun and flight.

What comes after the butterfly?

Perhaps darkened light.

What comes after the dragonfly?

Perhaps perfect quiet.

What comes after lonely silence?

Perhaps new delight.

What comes after white spring blossom?

Perhaps purple plum.

What comes after years and losses?

Perhaps parts and sum.

What comes after a question asked?

Perhaps wisdom?

(April 20, 2018)

Winter Moon

This winter moon, bright blot, exits the sky.
I wander, stolen by inconstancy.
Ebb and glut fade into years. Mother Moon,
Cradle then word starlight to creation.

(2016-July 13, 2018)

The movement of the poet's inspiration from the familial and transnational to the natural is tied to a sense of destination and arrival that binds the birth of the poem to what springs from the earth ("Poetry / Needs rain"). Thus, in "Santa Barbara Rain" the poet's work draws on the rain for inspiration akin to the life cycle that is echoed in references to "angels" and "babies"—both of which suggest a spiritual and maternal relation to her rhymed offspring. This autochthonous origin of poetic consciousness where the poem arises in "Wake!" insists that the somnambulant conscience not falter in recognizing the environmental precipice now that time and enlightenment are in aporetic relation ("the year / Is ending. Or it begins") and is, likewise—as "Wake!" repeats throughout the poem—a signal both of the morning and the mourning that await. In "Spring Mornings," the past is very much an elsewhere ("Old memory / is dying, as across the oceans / and beyond the mountains, enemies / seem to dissolve"), but the poem does not condone the "yawning" of "young mornings in America." Working to alert the reader, the poem collapses the impending threats to the environment with the concurrent wars as the woodpecker's "rat-a-tat-tat attacks" echo machine guns as we, like bugs, hide "vainly in the cracks." "What Comes After" provokes the thinking of consequences, although these are always qualified with perhaps—"perhaps" the blossom portends a plum. This is the epoch in which we cannot rely on what we once could assume; this anthropocene age is what comes after the time when the natural cycle was not in question. Moving from the earth to the stars, "Winter Moon" returns us to the theme of the mother. Here, the poem offers a cosmogony in and against order and natural cycles. "I wander" is also a movement, after all, however incalculable, though certainly, in this case of the poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim, inspiring a starlit path "to creation."

For those of us at *JTAS* who have been reading Lim's poems since the mid-1980s and 1990s, tracing their trajectory through her most recent efforts encourages us to widen the aperture of analysis. It allows us to see resonances and continuities between the personal and political dimensions of identity that her early work explored and the ecological and environmental forms of witnessing that the more recent work reflects, raising questions Transnational American Studies needs to address in the present and in the future.

Notes

¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim. "A Woman Writer in the Anthropocene Epoch," keynote talk, Santa Barbara Women's Literary Festival, Santa Barbara, California, March 2, 2019.

² Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Learning to Love America," line 19, in *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1998), 74.

³ Lim, "A Woman Writer in the Anthropocene Epoch," keynote talk.