

Sally Ito / FOUR POEMS JEWS IN OLD CHINA

I

Their history
is without words
in this ancient land.

Who carries the struggle
but the oak, the voices
in the still branches?

II

The silk road
winds around their middles
like sashes of birds in flight
over the soundless plain.

A ringing bell,
and they are sudden scattered
pearls in a wave
of blue silk.

III

These sages
cut across pages
of black ink
and rice paper.

Searching, searching.

The fine stroke of the brush,
the black flutter of words,
the sudden rush of wind
and their story is revealed.

UPON SEEING A SCULPTURE OF MAITREYA, THE FUTURE BUDDHA

the finger
is the arc of a crescent moon
lighting upon the face
of a starless night.

Such still perfection!
the full tremor of heaven within those lidded eyes,
the smile of seeing on those silent lips.

poised,
it sits, an arrow in its bow.
The sudden pull,
the swift song,
the toppling body.

the lotus,
shedding its last petal
into the clear waters of enlightenment.

KYOTO

I

Book of knowledge said:
a city of cultural splendour
housing the nation's most
historically revered pieces of art.

Voice of Grandmother says:
ah, city of palaces and castles
built up in gold and silver
for emperors and lords clothed
in kimonos of the purest silk.

Kyoto in my head:
a city of light nestled in mtns
mtns to climb
mtns to worship
mtns to crumble, fall away for me
to see
what has been there
for ages.

II

kyoto station,
early spring
you meet me here,
an appointed guide, my relative,
(we look astonishingly alike).
Knowing
too well what i seek, you say at once,
'Kyoto is a city of ephemeral delight.
To hold the most fleeting sight within
the palm of your hand is to catch
the heart of your imagined place.'

*

late night,
downtown kyoto

tonight, i caught glimpse of her
of whom you spoke, flitting into the night;
a sleeve, red as blood, flashing from
a geisha hurrying into a limousine
down a Gion alleyway.

even here and now,
 you say the sight is rare.
 Rare as what?
 Me in my kimono
 or you in yours?

*

hot springs
mtns near kyoto

 naked,
in the spring, i bathe
quietly in the corner—
my body exposed, pale and white
 against the coloured tile.
 you offer to scrub my back.
 i nod.

 Hearing
only the quiet chuffing of your
hands upon my skin, i think
 ‘how loud
the sounds of insects
humming in the night.’

*

last day,
omuro, kyoto

And oh,
the cherry trees are in bloom!
We have gone to Omuro Temple to see
the late blossoms
 worshipped for centuries by courtiers
 and priests,
 and merchants
 and yes, even you
who claims veteran this world of transience—
you, who saved for me, two pink petals,
soft as a child's cheek, to put in my pocket
for me to find at the train station.

‘ah, train fare
for home.’ —Parting gift
too fragile for the
station clerk's punch.

ON MEETING THE PROPHET: FIVE STAGES

Seeking the Prophet's thumb
 like seeds among stones,
are hands, blooming frail
 the flowers of His sowing.

Savouring the Prophet's cries
 like fruit, all bruised
are golden scattered, a flock of sheep,
 a swarm of flies.

Wearing the Prophet's face
 like gems upon water,
are two eyes, clever frogs!
 green stones of silence.

Shedding the Prophet's gown
 like wind undressing,
are restless scents, quaking lilac
 shuddering rose.

Riding the Prophet's tail
 like water rolling off the leaf,
the still sounds of His flight
 are bells, clear as the new moon.