

CATHY SONG

*Poems*

Introduced by Alessandro Clericuzio

Cathy Song is the author of four published collections of poetry and the forthcoming *Cloud Moving Hands*. She immediately achieved critical recognition with the publication of her first book, *Picture Bride*, selected from 625 manuscripts as the recipient of the 1982 Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. Since then she has received other prizes, including the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. Her poems have appeared on the buses of the city of Atlanta and the subway cars of New York and have been included in such canonical repertoires as the *Heath* and the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Two of her poems, translated into Italian, have been published in Mario Maffi's anthology *Voci dal silenzio*. She was born in Hawaii, where she currently lives.

In *Picture Bride's* title poem, the poetic self pictures a grandmother leaving Korea for Hawaii "an island/ whose name she had/only recently learned," where she would meet her arranged, never-met-before husband. The poet establishes an identification with the woman, whose image of dryness and emptiness ("her tent shaped dress/filling with the dry wind/that blew from the surrounding fields" [3-4]) already carries a number of meaningful suggestions: connections and disconnections between body and land; gender issues; the Asian American heritage; family relations; the body as the site of identity.

The body is the first page where Song's poetry is spelled and/or read: before being transcribed onto paper, this poetry is visible on

the skin, on its birthmarks, its vulnerabilities, its joys, in gestures, glances, silences, colours, clothes, food. Her poetry is the ikebana of emotions: the neat arrangement of sounds and images is an ancient and humble art, like that of seamstresses, or that of painters, both present in *Picture Bride*. Georgia O'Keefe's flowers and the Japanese master Kitagawa Utamaro's women on wooden boards are revered examples of the delicate calligraphy poetry is made of. Flowers recur in the titles of each section of the book.

In 1988, Song published her second collection, *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light*. The title refers to the necessity of framing and capturing emotions, histories, sensations as fleeting as light. Windows also relate to a sense of domesticity which is growing in the poet's consciousness, more present in these poems than in *Picture Bride*. Childbirth, mothering, and conjugal life are brought to the foreground, together with issues of immigration and the constant focus on minimal objects, as markers of bigger, often untold realities. In "The Humble Jar" the old buttons kept by the poet's mother in a mayonnaise jar turn into a kaleidoscopic heirloom. Seemingly meaningless, those "oddly private" buttons lead, as in a modern fairy-tale, to another dimension of her mother's existence: "She could easily have led/ the double life of a spy" (44).

Song's next volume of poetry is *School Figures* (1994). Family ties are still relevant, as are the processes of artistic creation – photography, painting, movies– and their canonizations of aesthetic models ("School Figures" 107-109). The perception of one's own body and the bodies of others, and the longing for those "immaculate lives" (63) or "States of Grace" (64), make meaning out of the grammar of life, that metaphorical "grammar of silk" learned and silently spoken at Mrs. Umemoto's sewing school. "This evidently was a sanctuary,/ a place where women confined with children/ conferred, consulted the oracle,/ the stone tablets of the latest pattern books" (45). But sewing has a rhythm, "my foot keeping time on the pedal" (47) and as such it stands not only for the grammar of existence, but also for the

music of poetry. Alliteration is a frequent device: “tears that tie me to her” (“Old Story” 8); “the clock stopping one afternoon/ like a car skidding into a snowbank” (“Points of Reference” 10); “rooms/ where, woven into the signature of voluptuous vines,/ was the one who flew one day out the window,/ ... to weave one’s self, one’s breath, ropes of it, whole/ and fully formed, was a way of shining/ out of this world” (“Sunworshippers” 27).

Song’s style develops in her subsequent collection, *The Land of Bliss* (2001): anaphora and epistrophe frequently mark her poetic diction. “The Pineapple Fields” recurs abundantly to both rhetoric figures in the same composition. “Mother of Us All,” a powerful poem of the last section of the book, in style and theme recalls Sylvia Plath’s “The Disquieting Muses.” If Song shares with Plath a confessional element, what is missing in the Hawaiian poet is the dark pessimism that permeates Plath’s verses. Loss and pain are inescapable in Song, but they turn bittersweet in the overarching, blissful projection of nature’s grand embrace. The characters in her poetry connect with the environment in this dual way: they have internalized, spiritual views of the real that sometimes show its darker side, as in “Leaf” (*School Figures* 60-61), or that “poison mistaken for medicine” which threatens and weighs on the couple of “The Ones to Keep.” Also, a child’s first perceptions of danger in “The Tower of Pisa” (*Frameless Windows, Squares of Light* 51-55) is an undercurrent still surfacing in the newest poems, like “How Close They Are.”

Also food sometimes has a potentially harmful effect: “Living Proof” (*The Land of Bliss* 22), “Sunworshippers” (*School Figures* 26-27), symptom of the constant concern with the act of “trespassing” the vulnerability of the body with the act of intake: intaking thoughts, words, emotions, lovers, pollution, food. The poet is always aware of the incessant flux of matter: “The manioc bread he eats/ becomes the children I will bear” (“A Mehinaku Girl in Seclusion,” *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light* 33).

Commenting on the cover photograph of her fourth collection *The Land of Bliss* (some roses and the head of a statuette), Song has said that, according to the precepts of Jodo-Shinshu Buddhism “there are a lot of roses in the Land of Bliss, but the head of the bodhisattva in the picture is broken, askew. That picture seemed to be specific of the workings of wisdom and compassion I was working through in my poetry at the time, where although our own lives are broken and askew, a great awareness came out as well” (<http://starbulletin.com/2002/01/13/features/story1.html>).

On behalf of all AISNA members and readers of *RSA* I thank Ms. Cathy Song for her generosity in sharing with us her two previously unpublished poems, “The Ones to Keep” and “How Close They Are.”

#### WORKS CITED

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The Ones to Keep

The man and the woman have been carrying  
stones for a long time.  
They have carried into this life  
the seeds of stones,  
some of which have grown into boulders.  
They have carried to the water's edge the stones,  
unable to carry the weight any longer.  
They have come to the water  
to put down the stones which have outlived  
their uses, stones they have used as anchors,  
stones they have used as weapons.  
Stones of anger, stones of regret, stones of shame  
are killing them.  
They are killing each other.  
The jagged ones have ripped open the heart.  
The slippery ones have gone down the throat,  
poison mistaken for medicine.  
The stones encrusted with barnacles of fear  
are the hardest to upheave.  
Others, varicosed with veins of impurity,  
cloud clear thinking.  
Trust, that crystalline structure, has cracked,  
and their eyes have turned away from each other.  
They pile the stones into a tower.  
The smaller ones they throw into the water,  
or lay as a mosaic the tide will take.  
Out of the emptiness they feel,  
they tie with twine and twigs  
a boat and send it into the wind  
like a prayer, knowing  
there will be more stones to carry,  
knowing perhaps this time  
the ones to keep.  
The stones that fit like an egg  
in the palm of the hand.

### How Close They Are

The man and the woman stare at the crater.  
A ring of sulphur powders the rim like snow.  
They do not know how long  
they have been standing,  
how close they are to danger.

The man and the woman stare at the hole in the earth.  
They have stared at it since the beginning  
when the man would weave flowers into her hair,  
when the woman would give herself without regret,  
giving herself over to his protection.

They have brought their children,  
other people and their children  
to stare at the hole in the earth  
as if the ruins of geological shifts  
had already happened,  
as if it was happening outside themselves.

They do not know  
how close they are to danger.  
They have stared at it so long  
they do not see the hole in the ground,  
the floor sinking beneath them.

They breathe fumes of poison  
insidious as ignorance.  
They have not been paying attention.  
They have not.  
They have, for too long now, not  
cherished the other.

They have passed along this corridor  
in sun, in rain, in shadow.  
They have passed through mad  
as hell at times with each other.  
Madly, too, conjuring love unconjugal,  
unwholesome.

The truculence of children

nibbling at the coaxes, the musings  
they parceled out like sweets  
kept them from falling  
into veils of fern  
hiding fragile crevices laced with thorns.

The man cannot compete  
with the ghost lover.  
The woman cannot compete  
with the beauty of another.  
The man and the woman exist  
as if to deny all that is  
all that is not  
forming a formless dissatisfaction,  
magnifying fissures and flaws,  
flourishes of the misinterpreted.

They have, for too long now, not  
cherished the other.  
They are in danger,  
standing at the edge of a crater.  
They have not paid attention  
to what is between them  
perishable, unseen.