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Callaloo, Volume 39, Number 3, Summer 2016, pp. 656-663 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2016.0093>



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WHAT IS IT THAT YOU LOVE?

by Mary Jean Chan

詩 [Shi Poetry] = 言 [yan words] + 寺 [si temple]

1. 言 [words]

= 亠 [head/lid] + 二 [second] + 口 [mouth]

1.1 亠 The *Head* That Is Also a *Lid*

1.2 二 A *Second* Chance

1.3 口 The *Mouth* Finds a Voice

2. 寺 [temple]

= 土 [earth] + 寸 [inches]

2.1 土 The *Earth* of Writing

2.2 寸 Becoming a Poet in *Inches*

亠 The Head That Is Also a Lid

I am picking up a book. This time it is a diary—my own. As I retrace the paths within the university I have left for another, the odd tree or wildflower easily sends me on a trip down the memory lane. I see a girl on her way to Accounting 101. She stops momentarily to catch her breath. A poem is emerging in her mind. A car roars past, shaking her out of her reverie. The smile on her face is replaced by a look of grim determination. She squares her shoulders and starts to run. As she turns the corner, my mind fast forwards to a later time. It is 7pm. I watch her leave the classroom surrounded by friends. Their chatter fails to excite her, and the dull throb in her head is getting worse. She closes her eyes. She tries to remember the poem that came to her earlier, but the words do not come.

Once again, I am picking up a book. I cannot bring myself to read it. It is only my third month at business school, yet the success of the market economy is a myth I cannot comprehend no matter how hard I try. There is pain—somewhere inside of me—that cannot be put into words. I look out into the darkness and recall something I learnt somewhere, years ago: *And Winter's dregs made desolate / the weakening eye of day. / The tangled bine-*

stems scored the sky / like strings of broken lyres . . . I am picking up another book. I read those words aloud, from the beginning: *The Darkling Thrush* by Thomas Hardy. *The poem finds the word that finds the feeling* (Winterson 187). I read these words once more, because I am reminded of a German poet who said: *you must change your life* (Rilke 67).

I am picking up a book again. I am reading the Bible aloud in front of the entire school. The book feels heavy in my palm: a weight I have learnt to carry well. My voice echoes across the heads of a thousand girls. I have learnt to keep my face as blank as a clean slate. The same uniform for twelve years. A white skirt, blue collar, blue belt, blue hem. A dark, no-nonsense kind of blue. White the color of snowfall in Eden. I washed it every single day, made sure I ate in small bites, always wore an extra pad so none of the blood could seep through. I began wearing that uniform at age six, my skin haunted by the British flag, so I would be *Chinese with English characteristics*.

A book picks me up. I am sitting for my university entrance exams. We are reading Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and I feel a sudden, inexplicable urge to be Viola, who is pleading for Olivia's love on Orsino's behalf as Cesario. I detest Orsino—he is like a languid fly I long to swat away. I smile as I realize that Olivia is now smitten with Cesario. Who wouldn't fall for such a beautiful . . . lady? Young man? For a moment, I am confused. Now I think I would like to be Orsino, since it is he whom Viola/Cesario loves. I go on reading. I am learning to ask *unanswerable questions. It feels like a text's strange will desires me. It's up to me to receive, to be inhabited by this alterity* (Robertson 26).

A book picks me up, once more. I am ten years old, having recently broken my right arm from breaking a friend's fall off a swing. I have been using my cast as a paperweight. I am at a restaurant, and the adults are talking loudly about me as usual. I have already finished my dinner, so I eagerly return to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. I have hidden the book behind my back this entire time, like buried treasure.

— A Second Chance

This time, it is in a dream. The book's pages are blank, but I hear words ringing in my ears, and I am rapturous. *What, through you, wants to exist* (Tsvetaeva 68-69). I wake up and I cannot remember any words, yet I awaken to a sense of joy I have not felt in a long, long time. There exists a faint, lingering hope that I might someday find those words, and somehow find myself again. *This is what a stone can be. And what is being shown is the phenomenon, the thing, whatever, as not having been established once and for all but rather as coming-into-being and, as that, amid its potentialities. And a potentiality is precisely what each and every example shows . . .* (Lomax 98).

Reading. I am barely aware that I am doing it: it is an act of *pure means*. *For a moment a life exists as a gesture*—one that fulfills its own destiny, like breathing (Lomax 98, 21). I have left the past year behind, having travelled thousands of miles to a small town called Swarthmore in Pennsylvania. Now I study political science and English literature to my heart's content. I turn to a dog-eared page from *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* by Adrienne Rich and read: "Blake, Donne, and Keats are magnificent, but they are not enough." Not enough for what? I read Audre Lorde's "A Litany for

Survival.” Langston Hughes’s “Harlem.” Linda Pastan’s “Why Are Your Poems So Dark?” I think I am beginning to understand. These poems are telling me something. I think this is what I am being told: *It can happen. Make it happen. Find other examples. Make other examples* (Lomax 98).

Someone is calling my name. It is my mother. I glance at the book as I listen to her voice. I ask myself what I would do if I had to choose between these two loves. What will it cost me to *write in the direction of truth?* (Cixous 36). Minutes later, I am picking up a book again. *The womb to tomb of an interesting life—but I can’t write my own . . . I would rather go on reading myself as a fiction than a fact* (Winterson 154). In this fiction I would rather imagine myself as someone who is incapable of lying. Yet to do so would require a certain death. Those years I will omit out of this fiction, because I have not yet mustered the strength to *write by the axe’s light* (Cixous 72). I also want to delay the execution—hers, or mine.

Some days, I leave books behind. I choose to read my own mind. *This is what a split in consciousness looks like—you undress yourself in the dark—feel nothing but ache. Some days, your body refuses to be yours. You stare into your own irises, only to see the face of a boy you have never met. You expect yourself to fall in love with him. Some days, your fingers brush the wrist of another girl—and you understand sin was never meant to be easy, only sweet.*

Reading, I return to a republic of freedom, free from all governments: a familiar scene between the Duke and his confidante. It is my favorite because it is here that *the love that dare not speak its name* comes closest to desire (Douglas). *She never told her love, / But let concealment, like a worm i’ the bud, / Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought, / And with a green and yellow melancholy / She sat like patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief* (*Twelfth Night* 2.4). Tears strain and I let them flow. I put the book down. On my laptop I type q-u-e-e-r into my Google browser. Five seconds later, the damn word is gone and I have deleted my entire browsing history. I kiss the book and beg it to let me go. I am not Cesario. I cannot love Viola. I will not dream about all the flowers of Illyria.

□ The Mouth Finds a Voice

It is 12am, and I have just turned twenty-two. I am whispering these words, my own version of the Happy Birthday song: *What kind of beast would turn its life into words? / What atonement is this all about?* (Rich, *Dream* 28). I have read these words aloud before, but I am suddenly aware that something magical is about to happen. Another writer has told me something essential. *My first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously . . . that influence* (Heaney, “Feeling” 43). I eventually put the book down and pick up a pen. I begin to write. *I’d rebirth myself if I could. So I could / be the son Grandmother wanted / so I could be the daughter you’ll never / stop wanting, so I could wed myself / to a woman and make you happy for it.* I could not have written these words—had I not committed an act of metaphorical murder weeks ago. Mother, I wrote a poem during a workshop in which I was told to dress you for burial. It was an assignment that broke me wide open. That is what poetry is: *a way of happening, a mouth* (Auden).

* * *

A Close Reading

In her poem "The Extinct," Keetje Kuipers poignantly explores the themes of longing, loneliness, and self-blame by placing her speaker in an imaginary wilderness, in which she transforms from a woman into "the snowiest plover" and "the loneliest deep-sea swimming whale" (11). However, her transformations are presented as futile through the use of adjectives such as "last," "snowiest," and "loneliest." This acute sense of futility is accentuated by the use of assonance in the second line, with the repetitive "O" sounds resembling that of a wild animal's keening. The speaker goes on to reveal that she blames herself for the solitary creature that she is—"It's not my fault, but / it might be." The speaker asks despairingly: "Should I keep changing . . . What else can I do for love?" She has taken to confessing to "the gray wolves," yet they refuse to listen. The speaker's sense of isolation is further compounded by the fact that the wolves are a multitude; "they" have one another and share a common knowledge of the speaker's "long litany of failures."

The concept of failure is central to the poem's conflict, particularly the difficulty of *accepting* one's failure, as evidenced by the speaker's self-blame. While the poem does not provide much social context, we are made aware that the speaker is "the last woman on earth" who desires "another." These details leave open the possibility of queer desire. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam contends that from both a Lacanian and Marxist perspective, lesbian desire is doomed to "failure" within a patriarchal, heteronormative and capitalist system, since it is associated with values of "non-conformity, anti-capitalist practices, non-reproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique," in contrast to the supposed "sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption" that characterizes heterosexual relations (89, 95).

As a potential lesbian, the speaker experiences this understanding of herself as an aberration. Just as the reader is convinced that redemption is unlikely, the speaker reluctantly admits that "[the gray wolves] still won't let [her] blame [herself]." It appears that rather than indulging her self-pity, the wolves have been affirming her existence by "[singing]" her name like "a song" (Kuipers 11). The idea that failure can be a song, that it can be sung and cherished, is one that has been proposed by radical feminist, lesbian, and poet Audre Lorde. In her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" Lorde writes: "For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises . . . these places of possibility are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness" (137-38). This place of darkness is precisely one wherein the queer aesthetic thrives: since "failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end . . . the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness" (Halberstam 96).

Only those who understand the darkness can create art from it, yet being a queer artist necessitates the acceptance (and indeed celebration of) the double failure of being "non-reproductive" in both a capitalist and biological sense. Halberstam notes that this is "a story of art without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress" (88). Can the queer artist bear to continue? Can the queer artist bear to fail? All the queer artist knows is that somewhere, someone is calling her name.

± The Earth of Writing

In “Dedications” Rich writes: “I know you are reading this poem . . . / . . . because even the alphabet is precious . . . / I know you are reading this poem . . . / because life is short and you too are thirsty” (Atlas 25-26). I cannot read forever, but writing proposes itself as a possible technique towards lastingness. My body becomes a desk (Robertson 26-27). I am picking up a pen again, ready to raid the inarticulate once more (Heaney, “Feeling” 47). I begin to write. You say: but poetry / produces nothing. GDP has never recognized poetry. / You ask: can words feed a family of five? / I reply: there are other ways of starving.

This time, it is my diary. I am creating a grief space. Writing is saying to no one and to everyone the things it is not possible to say to someone (Miller 71). You asked me this yesterday: do you ever write about me? What do you think, mother? You are always where I begin. I am returning to the dream in which I ask: what if? What if —? — the first revolutionary question, the question the dying forces don’t know how to ask (Rich, *What Is Found* 235). What if I chose to love / this time / for once / with all my intelligence? (Rich, *Dream* 11).

Always the child who wanted to be a boy, so you could be spared by your mother-in-law. Always the ear that hears you tried to translate my poems with a bi-lingual dictionary. Always the pen wishing it could re-write the years you fled from, those Red-Guarded days and nightmares. Always the lump in my throat, glistening iris, imagining you waiting every evening for the grandfather I would never meet. Always the lips wishing they could kiss those mouths you would approve of.

* * *

A Response Essay

Out of the fragmented memories of her life, Daniela Cascella weaves a sonic and sensory tapestry littered with the repetition and circling of sounds that reverberate in the “abyss” that is the text of *En Abîme: Reading, Listening, Writing: An Archival Fiction*—the tome that the reader holds in his/her hands (20). Rather than providing an autobiographical account of her life in which Time is linear, Cascella invites the reader to dwell in the today, and the today of yesterday, and the today of tomorrow that is “an image distorted, reiterated, projected, reinvented and echoed into clusters of words. . . . It has to do with remembering and returning . . . where the formulaic quality of certain recurring images outlines the limits within which I can say *I* again” (25). By resisting the idea of coherence, Cascella urges the reader to recall his/her own memories first and foremost as “texture and experience” wherein people, places, and landscapes appear and re-appear like motifs that define the contours and possibilities of our future footsteps (9).

For Cascella, Rome is a protagonist whose life and legacies exist in her mind as “a clear proximity of infinite thoughts and buildings . . . all of it [tied] to the mysterious sources of a dream” (45). I too recall a city in this dream-like manner. Every departure and return is another layer of paint added to the canvas that is my view of the city that is also home. Through poetry, I have slowly begun to come to terms with the complexity of thoughts

and feelings that underpin my “sense of place, of self, of stories” (33). By returning again and again to the same place, the same memories, the same obsessions, Cascella leads the reader by the hand in an exercise of reaching for rhythm, which is the pulse of being: “We are going to circle . . . a ruthless clasp of frequencies . . . [arriving] at the sound of a new disquieting language” (39).

Heroine

(for Adrienne Rich)

Adrienne, how you spoke
about thirst, parched paper
and the tenderness of ink
that stains every maker.

As I read you through days
of glistening palms—I learn
to listen—the world’s blaze
on the pen’s tip, burning.

To write poems is to eat
and be filled at the feast
of the living, choosing feats
of joy, and perhaps beauty.

Because of you, I am roar
of wing-beat and birdsong,
moss greening in all doors
awaiting touch to belong.

What is it that you love?
The alphabet lyrical
with audacity, asking
what if? What if I chose —

The chosen flesh is challenge
we accept, wintering through
to Spring. She is my challenge,
and I—her imperfect blue.

(Chan, “Heroine”)

† Becoming a Poet in Inches

I am finally beginning to let myself love her, the way I have allowed myself to love her mother-tongue. We are sitting at a desk on the third floor of the British Library. I motion for her to sit by me, and am surprised at the slightly pained look in her rock-pool eyes. It is gone in a flash, but I wonder what it means. She looks at me, then at her book, and gives me a sheepish grin. I understand she is saying: *please do not make me choose*. There is the world of the written word, which, on the day of the apocalypse, shall *end in flowers* (Cixous 156). There is also *the desert of the real*, of which I am a part (Wachowski). We both wish to dwell in the land of flowers. I understand that we must go there separately.

The book that is being written: a story whose time has finally come. I tell you over Skype that you are all the beautiful words in the English dictionary, and you laugh, your eyes shining with delight. I wonder how you've retained that childlike demeanor, that sense of curiosity and joy. You are sad at times. *What kind of beast would turn its life into words? / What atonement is this all about?* (Rich, *Dream* 28). Yesterday, you touched the birthmark I have been trying to hide all these years, behind turtlenecks and scarfs. You said: *Let me see that beautiful map on your neck*.

Reading. I am barely aware that I am doing it: it is an act of *pure means*. *For a moment a life exists as a gesture*—one that fulfills its own destiny, like breathing. I am trying to find my own voice, and a writer is telling me how she found hers (Lomax 98, 21). *I make my way through layers of acquired voices, silly voices, sententious voices . . . then they all quiet down, and I reach what I'm searching for: silence. From this white plentitude, a voice begins to emerge* (Hoffman 275-76). I have left the past year behind at the edge of the sea, having travelled thousands of miles to flowers, where writing and living become one. For the first time in my life, I am beginning to comprehend *the difference between doing nothing, or doing a little, and the redemptive act of true effort* (Oliver, *Wild Geese* 15). *Between my finger and my thumb / the squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it* (Heaney, "Digging" 9). *The earth of writing. Humble work. Without reward. Except joy* (Cixous 156).

My right hand hovers over the bookshelf, as if searching for its touchstone. Then the fingers stop. I turn to a dog-eared page and read: *I knew, even [at age twenty-two], that for me poetry wasn't enough as something to be appreciated, finely-fingered: it could be a fierce, destabilizing force, a wave pulling you further out than you thought you wanted to be* (Rich, *What Is Found* 191). It occurs to me that poetry has indeed pulled me out to sea, over and over. Its salt has been the source of nights of glistening palms; its constant tug is the reason I am beginning to know how to breathe differently in this vulnerable world. The pen picks me up. I am writing these words: *I want my life to take flight / like starlings streaming across undaunted air, / searching for truths as luminous as sunrise*.

This is where I am—the middle ground. *The middle of things is less exciting than the beginning and less dramatic than the end. Middles can seem humdrum. . . . But the middle is as joyous as enduring love* (Solomon). I have begun for too long to claim a beginner's luck, or to pretend that poetry does not really matter too much. I have begun for so long I can only continue. I am catching a plane again, roaming. The physical places do not seem to matter. What matters is the psychic place. *Across enormous social, national, geographic tracts, poetry lifts its head and looks you in the eye* (Rich, *What Is Found* 215). I am heeding the words of another poet who wrote: *I must make use of myself as a found object* (Rich, *What Is Found*

206). The pen picks me up again. I am digging. I am learning how to be artist enough for my loves. *Wonder when I stopped missing home's / extreme heat. Why I long for youth to blossom / elsewhere. How my paths crisscross those years between / then and now: proud of its unfolding, / its tapestry of scars.*

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