

The Taste of Songbirds: Poems of Love and Memory

## Description

# The Taste of Songbirds: Poems of Love and Memory

### Author's Memo

This work illustrates the very personal process of a Chinese-born immigrant to the U.S. and a U.S. born citizen learning about each other's cultures over the course of a 27 year marriage. With my husband's passing this year I am realizing now just HOW CHINESE I became from our long involvement, and that I no longer feel like a "mainstream" American in any way. At the same time, I sense having gained a certain empowerment from access to the perspective that the East has on the West, as well as what the East has that is all its own.





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### The Momentum Ball for Guan-Cheng Sun

This is not soccer culture, I tell him. This is football culture. The object of football is to knock down everyone so that maybe one person can run down the field.

His eyes opened wider.

In football everyone pigpiles on top of the one they think most likely to try and go somewhere, so why is it that you think anyone likes your visionary world-view and ambitions? What kinds of sports do they play in the country you came from? Ping pong? That's what we're playing at home.

# When you walk out the door, it's football every step of the way.

I'm not faulting you, I'm just running interference for you, doing my daily job of imagining you emerging without injury from beneath the pile of half-backs and full-backs, from the howling fans wild with enthusiasm that you have run into a hole that led into a corridor and then a field, or else just gained another yard and walked out of the building that had formed to keep you shut.

I can't stand back and be a spectator either. I throw myself into the fray, into the massive wave of bodies that come spilling around you with grass stains on their knees and elbows, as we wait for the referees to declare some sort of order over the developing mania of every play, and hope that we will not be penalized or defrauded of hard-won gains, while players go limping off the field and referees make calls in stentorian voices.

The clock winds down the quarter and starts up again the next. And everyone's running and everyone's stopping everyone from running.

Everyone keeps quickly moving with all eyes following the momentum ball. Shaped like a pointy Chinese cabbage, it flies through the air and lands firmly in your palm on the little field of this new culture as you learn your English and keep holding on, and passing it off.

It doesn't matter how much or how often people are tackling or people are throwing, because the field on which we're running is an object of praise. It rises on its own flowing, rises like the wind that has leapt through battles, and blows roaring. It leans and climbs in a fury of chasing and then arriving in postures of declaration.

The cause of the ball is perpetual. The bodies slide off, and light reflects: upland ahead; quicksand behind; flash floods breaking on either side– as you veer, you turn, you charge. You charge!

### The Taste of Songbirds for Guan-Cheng Sun

In a tiny cottage tucked amongst bamboo, was a desk that took up most of it, and a window full of the sound of breezes ruffling bamboo, or the sound of raindrops falling slowly through bamboo: bamboo rustling in the wind, and bamboo music in the rain.

\*

He recognized the picture on the wall. He'd grown up with it in his childhood home: a picture of a girl on the back of a fish. And my old life sifted through the familiar streets and stood back long enough AutoEthnographer for the world to pivot on the tiny hinge of happenstance, as we climbed the ladder to the sleeping platform under the roof, by the chimney stack.

\*

Because this will be a second marriage for each of us we go about it, awkwardly at first, both of us like lizards who must grow new tails.

\*

English is not his first languagenor is it his second.

Even after many years his English will not be perfect,

though it will have benefited from the threads of many poems,

which I will have simplified to their most elemental forms.

\*

Stray cat's already been here five years.

For some reason living with him continually reminds me of the first time I ever lived alone. My windows looked into a huge treetop, and inside my little apartment I felt as if I were living in that tree or on it, watching the sky turn colors all around it—actually it wasn't like living alone at all.

\*

An orphan now, he tells me about his childhood, his parents. They were the first in the village to own a bicycle—a Golden Deer. And their next bike was a Flying Phoenix! He tells me about my mother-in-law, how she unbound her feet from their stinking cloths and after a while her feet flattened out like paddles wheeling across the earth.

Somewhere inside him is a small boy who carries stones and a slingshot. He is hungry and there is no food. Now he has forgotten about the taste of songbirds but remembers the hunger and keeps filling the cook pot.

\*

Also inside him-Tai Mountain, from reciting its poems, from climbing its staircases, from living at its feet. Once, thieves were waiting on the mountain path when he came along. Putting up a good fight he wrested the knives from their hands. A silver scar on his hand flashes in the sunlight. He took their money from them, peed on their beaten bodies and lived well for many years.

\*

I play rock' n roll for him on the radio, but he doesn't understand the noise. He practices calligraphy. We constantly weave something more than half a world, unruffled explorers, rolling around inside a great circle.

\*

The day of our wedding I wore a red robe and stood he AutoEthnographer by a statue in the garden and he took a picture and put the picture on his desk. The day was cold and I was white as frost in the vivid robe, with all that commitment inside me, spilling into the camera. It didn't matter what happened next, or if nothing happened. I was prepared for anythingfor going back into the warm house, or standing in the frost like a statue.

\*

I would become a stone for him, or a wall, an earthwork, a lake, any part of the landscape he needed most. I would dive into the waters of creation to save him if I had to.

\*

We know now how to see in the dark on behalf of another person. That was when we turned into a family.

\*

We have worn out our precosity and are settling in with what's left—

sometimes just being in the same room together was asking far too much.

But somehow we became citizens of a protectorate

by means of a tenacity that surprised the both of us—

and more than that—amazed us, that two people could say

such grievous things and be forgiven by each other,

do so much for each other and not worry over thank-you's.

The workings of this alchemy are hard to fathom, but now the gold is coalescing.

\*

We are orbiting each other now, encircling the other, transforming, turning and turning like the ringing of cymbals, circling and filling like the ripening of peaches.

\*

And so I build my nest with him, and he places the sticks and feathers, bits of spider web and lichen, in a skillful mortar all around us, and then we sing just for the sake of the walls. He sings in his mother tonguesongs about the moon, or peonies.

\*

If he has been dreaming of buckets of waterall will be well.

If I have been dreaming of beautiful carpetsthe design is underway.

\*

Basketweave of days and nights AutoEthnographer carry us into a few unhurried hours together.

I have so many things to report, but suddenly fall silent.

He has so many plans, but they seem to disappear.

East and West, right and left, all the paired opposites, suddenly shift position.

There's just this center driving itself home.

\*

When I met his Chinese friends they went out of their way to speak English; they served helping after helping of effortlessly prepared dishes. But they wondered why he couldn't get himself a Chinese girl, someone who cooked the right food, someone who spoke Mandarin. After a while, they didn't speak English, much, and their cooking seemed less impressive. After a while, we didn't go. A lull came over us, a lull that entered the equation of our lives and filled the parentheses

with a new calculus. The Kitchen God stopped trifling with me and gave me bright ideas. Dried dates and fungus! Soy sauce and chili oil. Black beans and egg flower. I didn't need a cookbook. The Kitchen God put it all in my head.

He looked at me in surprise, and cleaned his plate. I started speaking Mandarin. At first like a child, who has a few coins they've been given as an allowance. I spent them quickly, advancing rapidly The AutoEthnographer to investor status, like someone with a stake in the words they were speaking.

\*

When we started dating and he met my Caucasian friends, they kept waiting for him to make an exit any moment, any moment at all would do. They didn't understand they were throwing eggs at a rock. Then they didn't like the egg on their faces. They insisted that it wasn't an issue of two races, but two cultures. All they could do was slip and slide down the slope of this meeting we insisted on havingthey cracked and chipped around their edges and resented walking on their own eggshells. I ignored their jibes about small penises (repeatedly), was worth defending. My old friends think I have betrayed them. And perhaps I have.

It's never lonely, on the crest of the hill, just above a headstone in the shape of an enormous heart. We bring potted daffodils to Bruce Lee's grave, but wait—until the martial arts afficianados have seen the scene through telephoto lenses, have paid respects, and walked awayuntil it's only us, Caucasian woman, Chinese man, assorted ghosts, a little pot of cheerful yellow flowers. I place the flowers on the polished marble already full of other offeringsand then the tears of understandingfall suddenly unrestrained, from fifteen years of struggle, and do not stop. The man beside me stands there like

a mountain.

\*

The Lunar New Year comes and the hollows ring out with echoes. Such a house-cleaning has taken place! So much has been donated to charity, and what remains has been put in order, with all the dust dusted away, and spaces left between things. The spaces resist being occupied, for they are things too, and fill with honeycombs of air turning this way and that, admiring the view.

\*

He sits beneath the thirty-year-old dragon tree and closes his eyes in the half-lit room, so tired he's already dreaming as we speak. It's late, but not too late to keep the pattern going—it keeps growing more blue, more at home—does he remember, now, our conversation? Could he discern it from the rain that scattered across the windows?

\*

I found something in the Tang dynasty, and also in the Song, that was missing in the poems of this day.

And I was wooed away by tone, by images, that were vervain to frayed nerves. I strained the tea and drank it down—

all those rivers, moons, peonies, farewells, and drafting of soldiers to the Great Wall. All those long sad-sleeved, candle-lit

verses of missing a loved one so fiercely the yearning lit the sky, telegraphing the feeling for thousands of miles, hundreds of years.

In the hands of those masters, tea being brewed, or snow that is falling, is just now brewed, is just now falling—

a meticulous liveliness on the point of a brush, and an alchemy of ink, the mixture held together with soap and soot, which doesn't wash off.

\*

When we work on translation our attention forms a bower around us. Overhead on the arbor a spreading vine of bottle gourds forms whip-long tendrils and small fruits in figure eights. AutoEthnographer We bring ourselves to this meeting alert and fresh, sensing the fountain of the ancient mind along its route into modernity. We face each other with the joy of holding jade in our hands while the sun looks on from above the roof of the black pine. The tip of the poem begins to tilt onto the page, in a splash of characters and a chaos of potential meanings, each a blossom hanging in a mist of interpretations. The true blossom appears in front of our noses. We fly like swallows along an invisible trail of happiness.

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