

Enter the Chrysanthemum

Fiona Tinwei Lam

Half Moon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY LORINDA PETERSON

The essence of Fiona Tinwei Lam's poetry in *Enter the Chrysanthemum* is distilled in an ever-present tension between the speaker, and the world that moves around her, tentative and timeless. It is a tension between cultures; between daily rituals and changing traditions; between the speaker and her intimate others; between life and death. It is a tension between bodies and their geographical places, as they define, and are defined by one another. The tension is revealed in rich imagery that turns in on itself, often repeats, slightly altered to make connections between poems, and create a spiral rhythm of life within the text. What place has history in Lam's cyclical recreation of mothering experiences? History is a patriarchal construct, demanding static connections, linear movement; Lam's mother-images disrupt history and its necessity for closure.

Enter the Chrysanthemum frames in graceful, yet pointed language, both motherhood bestowed through the act of bearing children, and mothering defined by the day-to-day practice of raising children. The text is divided into four sections reflecting the speaker's journey from childhood, to motherhood, to mothering her own dementia-gripped mother. That is not to say the poems offer a linear progression. Instead they meander back and forth between time remembered and time present, often pressing both into the same image. For instance, Lam writes, "Suddenly my son's face became mine as a child, frozen/ before the contortions of my mother's fury. / My own face stiffened into its inheritance, / the familiar mask that was my mother's" (34). Past and present are fused in a single portrait rocking between innocence and experience, a ritual of inevitable time and tradition that spirals within its linear progression.

The text's four sections carry a conscious awareness of the body as mediator of time, space and geography. Metaphorically, the collection symbolizes maternity. What goes into the womb must come out into the world, vulnerable and in need of protection. In "Waiting" the child-speaker "push[es] the car door ajar;/ dangle[s her] feet outside to measure/ the world against [her] shoes" (13). Symbolically, the child's body tests the world that confines her. In a later image bodies dissolve against life's hard surfaces "like hair in the drain. / Bodies unravel (57). They become failed vessels for resisting the inevitably of change, and must release their contents. Finally in a tangle of bodies,

the speaker's arms act as a seat belt for her child on a city bus, protecting him from the world outside, "seams of telephone and power lines, / worlds held within, beyond" (77). This image reinforces the sense of time frozen in motion, symbolizing the inevitable release of the child into the world.

The speaker in Lam's collection comes of age in a violent home where Cantonese culture meets Western culture amid her mother's "... indecipherable/ torrents of Cantonese punctuated/ by pots and plates flung at linoleum" (14). Only once a year, at New Year's Eve, her mother skilfully creates what her children crave from her, "real food—what came from her hands" (15). As an adult, the speaker starts holiday traditions of her own based in Western culture. The falling gingerbread house she makes with her son is juxtaposed to the successful food her mother created. The gingerbread house becomes a metaphor for change, for movement between cultures, and between personal life stories. "No matter how I iced it or propped it up," she says, "the roof slid down. Then broke" (41). The speaker attempts to move forward within the messiness of change, her relationships with both her mother and her son pivoting around her.

The body in *Enter the Chrysanthemum* is generally untethered, longing to be nurtured, connected. This longing is described explicitly in the book's opening poem and symbolically in the poem "Dream." Throughout the poems in Lam's collection, the child-speaker longs for her mother's care, and similarly the adult/mother-speaker longs for a lover's care. Both speakers collide in a single body attempting to navigate a complex world where neither is ever required. The final image of the collection brings her to the present, reconciling time and tradition in "[a] plate of simple food. Beside us, / the ones we love" (81). In mothering terms, Lam seems to be saying mothering is seldom a perfect act, but most of the time, it is good enough. It gets us to where we need to be.

Brown Bodies, White Babies: The Politics of Cross-Racial Surrogacy

Laura Harrison

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REVIEWED BY JOANNA RADBORD

Are we headed for a dystopian future in which poor racialized women bear white children for economically-privileged white families? Or does assisted reproduction offer new ways of family building that challenge patriarchal