

322 READER PART 4

M

Diana Chang

OTHERNESS

"Are you Chinese?
"Are you American?"

I am fascinated
but other

anywhere

so it follows
(laconically)

I
must
be

Jewish

Leading to an eye-opener:
real Chinese in China,
not feeling other,
 not international,
 not cosmopolitan

are gentiles, no less

no wonder
I felt the way I did
in the crowd

my Israel
not there

not here

SECOND NATURE

How do I feel
Fine wrist to small feet?
I cough Chinese.

To me, it occurs that Cézanne
Is not a Sung painter.

(My condition is no less gratuitous than this remark.)

The old China muses through me.
I am foreign to the new.
I sleep upon dead years.

Sometimes I dream in Chinese.
I dream my father's dreams.

I wake, grown up
And someone else.

I am the thin edge I sit on.
I begin to gray—white and black and in between.
My hair is America.

New England moonlights in me.

I attend what is Chinese
In everyone.

We are in the air.

I shuttle passportless within myself,
My eyes slant around both hemispheres,
Gaze through walls

And long still to be
Accustomed,
At home here,

Strange to say.

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Going Home

Ngóh m̀h s̀k góng t̀hng wá—
besides the usual menu words,
the only phrase I really know,
I say it loudly,
but he is not listening.
He keeps on talking with his smile,
staring, it would seem, past me
into the night without a moon.

He's lost, presumably.
But I don't know what he's saying.
He is an old man, wearing a hat,
and the kind of overcoat
my father wears:
the super-padded shoulders.
His nostrils trickle with wet drops,
which he does not care to wipe away.

Ngóh m̀h s̀k góng t̀hng wá—
I try again, to no avail.
I try in English: what street?
and think of taking out
some paper and a pen.

Just then,
two young fellows approach us
carrying a chair; one look
and I can tell
that *they* will oblige him.
I sigh, and point them out,
and hastily cross the street,
escaping. Once on the other side,
I glimpse around, and catch
their gestures from afar,
still able to hear those familiar,
yet no less incomprehensible sounds.

I head home, and visualize
this old man with his small beady eyes
and the two glistening lines
below them, vertical,
like make-up for some clown.
Out loud, I wonder:
but Chinamen aren't supposed to cry.

Upon Hearing about the 1971 Fourth Coming of Charlie Chan

So sorry,
but I never heard of it
till now. I know what I would do
though.

Late at night
I'd steal a ladder, climb all the way
up to the marquee
of Grauman's Chinese Theatre.
During the next morning I'd gorge
myself full of bananas,
waiting.

I'd watch
as little by little the crowd
would form, then the sudden
applause—

Ross Martin in his tuxedo
with no shoes, coming down
the sidewalk to be
cemented.

Just as he passes
below me, I'd whip out
my Yellow Peril
to drench him.

You see, I know
from experience: no matter
how many bananas
I eat, my piss
always keeps coming out yellow.

Terms of Assimilation

You must become
an ass

or worse:
the mule, that
cross between a male donkey
and a mare,

is
perforce sterile.

Minority Poem

Why
we're just as American
as apple pie—
that is, if you count
the leftover peelings
lying on the kitchen counter
which the cook has forgotten about
or doesn't know
quite what to do with
except hope that the maid
when she cleans off the chopping block
will chuck them away
into a garbage can she'll take out
on leaving for the night.

Chinese Hot Pot

My dream of America
is like *dá bìn lòub*
with people of all persuasions and tastes
sitting down around a common pot
chopsticks and basket scoops here and there
some cooking squid and others beef
some tofu or watercress
all in one broth
like a stew that really isn't
as each one chooses what he wishes to eat
only that the pot and fire are shared
along with the good company
and the sweet soup
spooned out at the end of the meal.

Strawberries

Eric Chock

Leave me alone.
 I'm just an ordinary man
 who loves strawberries.
 I love to grab the green fuzziness
 in my gathered fingertips
 and dip the seedy point in sour cream
 and brown sugar
 and into my waiting lips.
 Mmmm, that's a sweet kiss worth
 repeating all night,
 just an ordinary man
 loving his strawberries.
 And I don't want to have to think
 who picked them with
 what brown illegal alien fingers,
 back bent under the California sun
 that used to belong to his forefathers anyway.
 I don't wanna know that the price of cream
 is American decadence that the rest of the world
 would never dream of spending,
 or that sugar is giving me an insulin rush
 or that the strawberries were sprayed with EDB
 causing me cancer.
 I don't wanna know these things
 so don't bother me!
 I'm just an ordinary man
 who loves strawberries that come to me
 past striking cashiers at Safeway,
 that come to me in green plastic baskets
 that will not decompose, but fill the air
 with toxic fumes as they're incinerated
 in the city dump polluting Hawaii's air and ocean,
 plastic containers, a petroleum by-product
 that the Arabs are processing
 to enable the rich to buy the homes
 of movie stars in Beverly Hills,
 to buy whole hotels in Miami

or L.A. or New York,
 while the rest of their people in poverty pray,
 bowing their heads to the ancient ground
 while all the oil flows out of the deserts
 to America to grease the great machine
 that grows the strawberries that I love,
 sent by diesel trucks to the coast,
 and by jet to Hawaii
 where I can sit on my bed
 and enjoy the pleasures of an ordinary man,
 kissing that sweet kiss all night long,
 without a care in the world.

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LAUREEN MAR

CHINATOWN #1

She boards the bus at Chinatown,
holding the brown paper shopping bag
with twine handles that comes from
San Francisco or Vancouver.
It is worn thin with creases.
An oil spot darkens one side
where juice dripped from a warm
roast duck, another shopping trip.
Today there is fresh bok choy
wrapped in Chinese newspapers.
Grasping the rail with her right hand,
she climbs the steps carefully,
smiling at the driver, looking down
to check her footing, glancing
at him again. She sways down the aisle
as if she still carried wood buckets
on a bamboo pole through the village,
from the well to her house.
Her gray silk pajamas are loose,
better than "pantsuits."
Sometimes there are two or three women,
chattering with the quick, sharp tongue
of the wren: dried mushrooms too
expensive, thirteen dollars a pound now.
She sits down and sets the bag between her knees.
Her shoulder is close to mine.
I want to touch it, tell her I can understand
Chinese. Instead, I stare at the silver
bar crossing her back, and hope she knows
this is an Express; it does not stop before Genesee.

The Immigration Act of 1924

I've taken the police squad outline from where you fell,
you remember, years ago, you heaved yourself up on the
window ledge
of a rundown hotel and jumped? Well, they traced you
on the sidewalk
in chalk. The figure vaguely resembled you, a little
amorphous
and anonymous, the way they liked you.

I peeled you off the sidewalk as carefully
as I could,
making sure you had all your fingers; brought you home,
and propped you up like a cardboard doll.

Now you'll do
as I say.

Sit here in this chair by the window. I'll let you look out
if you promise to behave. Behave!

Are you thinking
about your wife? She's been stranded years in China,
feeding the chickens and ducks. You didn't know
a beautiful country could keep her out?

Don't tell me
you're not accustomed. You've done well, the railroads—
don't shake your head like that! I tell you, I learned
about the railroads in school, listen!—you must do as I say.
Sit here by the window and fold clothes.

Yes, fold clothes.
Later we'll go outside and feed the pigeons together. Look,
don't you see, for you I've painted this room gray? Sit
here
and fold your trousers and shirts, over and over, yes,
there are
no other colors in your closet. Only gray, like moths,
like spit,
like this battered tin pot. You won't go crazy, there are
plenty
of men like you for you to drink tea with.

Get down off the
window!

Get down, and fold these clothes, the same worn trousers
and shirts.

Yes, like that, smooth the creases, they'll leave a fine,
sharp line. Yes, keep folding clothes, I'll shake them out
for you to fold again, I'll bring you more men's clothes,
just keep folding them and folding them until you learn
you can't just die and take yourself away.

TAKING INVENTORY AFTER A BURGLAR!

I consider it a favor. Thanks.
What I could never bring myself
to define as precious, as not,
you have made clear

as air. So the jewels are gone,
the heirloom Chinese spoons
(the only gift from the man I loved
besides an heirloom cleaver),

the shape of my body,
most perfect, at nineteen.
Here, you forgot the white
silk slip (I found it

on the driveway). What else?
The pennies. The porcelain vase.
A tin toy or two.
Were you very disappointed

when you drove off with my pillowcase?
What could you take from me, really,
that I had not already
given up?

ALAN C. LAU

my ship does not need a helmsman

“a ship depends upon
its helmsman for direction
the great ship china
is guided by mao tse tung”
—as seen on the entrance to one of
the floors of the people’s republic
of china department store—
kowloon, hong kong

I

here i lie in chinatown
coughing into my mattress
soaked with the odours
of salted fish
dark years old

home is not
never was
this graygreased
smokefilled room

the walls
smell the same
as the rotting wood crates
from china
that lie piled
with my memories
buried under old papers
of sun yat sen
scented with mothballs

i go outside
and spit
throwing up specks of blood
half cooked soystained rice
for the insistent pigeons

i am a sick dog
and though my tongue
lies continually out
my tail remains standing

2

the young ones
born here
or f.o.b. (fresh off the boat)
snot dripping from the nose
asses strutting
under the streetlamps
simply regard me
as old man
which means docile dog

i know it
don’t think i don’t know it
but my heart
is not in the fight
of children

it lies in the bones
and ashes of my wife
who died waiting
in the home of my province
feeding the ducks
staining her apron

the young barbarians
urge me to protest
in a western style
this gray life

they thrust red books in my face
but i see nothing
except the pigeons
leaving droppings
on my bench

they do not realize
i would rather
withdraw from what
i have never belonged to
than to embrace it

3

here i lie in chinatown
may the rain soak
my ashes

may the muddy rivers
carry them home
to my province

a ship does not need
a helmsman
only a woman
who strokes my brow
and laughs
at the moon
when it is full

Russell Leong

AEROGRAMMES

(after a trip to Sunwui county—Guangdong, China—1984)

Par avion
via airmail
hung-kung:
Only after I returned
to L.A. did China
collapse in my hand—
folded, sealed,
glued & stamped
westward.

I did not ask to be followed.
But someone's village childhood,
spent among the palmettos
pigs & orange groves
of the Pearl River delta
caught up with me
generations later.

Now, five blue and red
striped aerogrammes
corner my desk
airmail-stickered
in French, English & Chinese
addressing my journey
to Sunwui.

In Canton city
The words of the woman cadre
dart past my ears:
"Don't get your relatives Marlboros
why spoil them!
Local cigarettes are good enough—

and good for the economy!"
How 'bout a chicken?
I ask.
"Wait and see—
you may not like
your country cousins!"
I slip four cartons—
two American brand—
& two Chinese
into my bag
anyway.

Harvest
is over by December.
Along the pockmarked roads,
men knee-deep in winter mud
fill ditches
repair dikes.
Traffic holds us up—
I give the cadre
a piece of mind:
"When I was young
in America, we believed
in Mao, revolution,
socialism. Now China
travels the capitalist road—
what should we believe?"
She laughs.
"We never had ships
searching for spices or gold,
or far-flung empires built on slaves.
But a little capitalism today
is a good tonic
to cure feudal ideas!"
She sips a Coca-cola
I buy at the roadside stand.
Traffic unsnarls—
we reach Sunwui
where she leaves me
to a local fellow
from the village clan.

In the clan hall
around a wooden table
the elders tug
at stray whiskers
in thought.
From my pocket,
I fetch
a black & white photo
of my father from World War II.
"Does anyone here remember this man?"
They pick at the image
like a scab off memory
narrow their vision
down to the eye,
recap their stories
down to the tooth.

No, no; yes, yes.
forward & backward
they lead me
through alleyways
smelling of
fish & oranges
to a small house.
I open the door—
my father stares down
from a wartime portrait
on the wall.
I cannot deny the relation
when all the children
in the room
suddenly chime "uncle."

AEROGRAMME 1: Los Angeles

I confess
I did not open the first letter
for a week.
Not that I feared using a dictionary
but the eight-legged ideograms
were like crabs
scuttling after my past.

"Your cousins and nephews
were happy to scatter wine
with you
over the ancestral hillside. . . ."
the letter began.

(I see
them hack away
the green thicket
clearing a path
to bring gravestone markers
to light.
They hadn't climbed
here in months, or more).

Later
Between spats
at tin spittoons
they splatter me
with questions.
"How old are you?
Are you married?
How many sons
did your father have?
Are they married?"
They press
bags of dried orange peel
at me
I answer with wine,
cigarettes & money.

AEROGRAMME 2.

"Your relatives
in Sunwui county
wish good health to you,
to your mother & brother.
By the way
you know that
free enterprise
is alive & well
in China, indeed
we would like

to open
a dry goods shop
but we lack capital.
Send as much as you can spare."

They did not name a figure
leaving it to my guilt or grace.
But I admitted none
for once, in Sunwui city
the county capital
I saw a photo exhibit
of toothy Chinese
from Indonesia,
Canada, Singapore,
San Francisco.

They had invested dollars
in a primary school here,
a textile factory there—
but I had no coined
compatriotism
to tender.

Instead
I xeroxed a photo
of my old uncle
the one in the polaroid
wearing the hand-me-down jacket,
 earmuffs, and torn green sneakers.
"Buy him and auntie
winter coats
and divide the rest of the money,"
I wrote, alongside
the good side of his face
that was not twisted by stroke.

He looks me straight
in the eye
beyond a cold morning
to a day
right after the War.
"In 1947," he says

"I was sixteen.
Standing by the riverbank
I waited patiently
for the ferry
to come upstream
carrying U.N. rations
& your father.
He was the first
from California
to step upon village soil
after the Japanese
laid down their guns.
He came, ate, sprinkled
American scotch & water
on the gravestones
& left.
Months later, he
sent us that picture
of himself in a G.I. uniform—
We never heard from him again."

I blame the cold war.
My uncle nods.
And when I tell him that father
has just died
he shakes his head
without surprise.

AEROGRAMME 3.

"Greetings
from the factory cooperative
in Sunwui City.
The family"
my nephew began,
"hopes to buy a government condominium
Please send five thousand dollars—U.S.
Tomorrow."

I took it in stride.
Checked the horoscope
in the *L. A. Times*

but Virgo refused
to speculate that far.
Consulted close friends.
The ones from China said:
"Send the money."
The ones from America said:
"Crazy, man."

I had split vision.
In my left eye—
a new village house
yellow tiles, concrete block walls
a slab floor without cracks.
Running water, interior pipes
& lightbulbs
electrifying every room.

In my right eye—
a Los Angeles barrio
red spanish tiles aglow
over a stucco bungalow
leaning from the last earthquake,
palm trees, taco trucks
smoggy orange sunsets—
At thirty times the price
of a condo in Canton.
I winced.
Waited.
Waivered.
Calculated
mortgage points
exchange rates:
Four U. S. dollars
to one Chinese.

Procrastination sped me
to the new year
forced open my hand.
I telexed money from L.A. Chinatown,
to Hong Kong, to Canton,
to Sunwui village.
A token, less

than what they wanted
after finding that
they stood second, or third
on the family tree—
not in direct line
from grandfather, but
offshoots
concocted further back.

AEROGRAMME 4.

"Dear cousin in Los Angeles
We pen this letter
on behalf of your aunt
who went with us
to sweep family graves
again.
We chopped our way
thru last year's branches
& wondered when
you would return.

For, as fate had it
as she climbed down the hill
Auntie met
a young lass,
still single
supple as a willow.
It's time to start a family
agreed?"

Struck by the thought
I slid
into my '71 Ford maverick
and cruised down Hollywood Boulevard.
Hookers—of both sexes
were walking nowhere
squinting
against the sun
at four in the afternoon.

AEROGRAMME 5.

Differed from the rest.
The writing quicker.
"Sir
I know it's bold
of me to write you.
I'll be twenty-two this year.
Didn't your auntie tell you
we met on the mountain?
I apologize
for my lack of schooling
I'm a country girl.
But I'm healthy
and you're of age.
If you want to see
me the next time
you return
please answer
my letter."

On the upper left corner
a two-inch photo
of a ten-story hotel
topped by a revolving restaurant
above
the palmettos
& orange groves
caught my eye.
Where was her face?

This is the last aerogramme
I've received so far.
I never showed them
to anyone
though
upon my return
I had pressed
the polaroids, like leaves
into an album.

"They look like
real Chinese
peasants, don't they!"
my mother said.
"You should see
Sunwui one day,"
I told my brother.
"Someday," he said.

Flattened and forgotten
the aerogrammes
lost their edge
until yesterday
when the *New York Times*
reported that
the People's Republic—
through a U.S. Chinese businessman—
planned to export
Chinese workers
to harvest American farms.
This is what he said:
"exporting workers
is like exporting oil—
or silk slippers."
But what we need now is bodies—
he meant to say.

His words hit dirt
reviving my suspicions.
Maybe matters
like aerogrammes,
family reunions,
gravesweeping,
and revolving restaurants
rising from the delta mud—
were just
concessions for export—
like oil or silk slippers.

Only
after I returned
from China

did the idea collapse
in my head:
I swore off
grimy ancestral markers—
I wrote off
filial piety
as useless;
a fallen branch.

Yet
as keenly
as the blade
of the letter opener
that falls upon my hand
I await the arrival
of the next
immutable
aerogramme.