

CONTRASTS

by Donna Seto

The chipped wooden cane of my century-old grandmother
beats haphazardly against the damp asphalt
drumming to a history of broken dreams
fossilized by grey-black gum
chewed by absent ancestors.

A mustached man on East Pender,
a has-been accountant with a southern Chinese accent
my grandmother once mistook as her late husband,
hollers across the crowd of Sunday shoppers
 that his gai lan is fresher, greener,
 and crispier than his competitor on Keefer.

His calculated eyes full of adulterous ambitions,
 the slight upturn of his lips resembling a smile
 that women once swooned over during better times.

On sale, poh-poh, the man who is not my grandfather says.
 Bargain –
 Ninety-nine cents a pound.
 The man's village accent echoes down the paint-splattered street,
 sending pigeons flocking from frayed electric lines.

Hushed chatter
of forgotten rice patties and fermented fish
sundried on an old laundry line
above a charcoal fire
in a blackened hut
no different from the one
 my grandmother once called her home.

The tattered shoes on my grandmother's unbound feet shuffles
alongside graffitied walls and broken windows.
Post-apocalyptic scenes of a war-torn past made present
except this is not a war,
 at least not the kind with guns and grenades.

Hungry tastebuds dance to the rhythm of fat
glistening on golden roast ducks
strung out on silver hooks in a butcher shop window on Gore,
 laminated with grease as thick as the layers of paint
 on its exterior.

The city donated paint to fix this graffiti problem, the butcher tells my grandmother,
breathing out a drawn-out sigh while waving his clever,
We suffer there, we suffer here.

Who did I wrong in my past life?

My grandmother's cataract eyes squint
at the shadows that flicker to the glow
of a red paper lantern,
while pale-skinned tourists watch the fat drip
from carcasses
like raindrops cascading to the ground
from rooftops.

A hipster waltzes into the butcher shop,
in designer jeans he claims are from Value Village,
but he purchased on a whim from Nordstrom.
Belly full of fois gras served on heirloom sourdough,
he washes down with an
\$7 oat milk latte,
while k-pop blasts from his thousand-dollar earbuds
as he snaps a photo
of my century-old grandmother.

Authentic china-doll poh-poh, the hipster says
as he shares the filtered snapshot with the world.

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