



*Next Stop, its Up to you* by Belle Villar

# *Dear Chinatown, I miss you*

Amy Ng

Dear Chinatown, I miss you.

How have you been?

You were my first home, my second mother—Chinatown, I hold onto the edges of your tattered homemade, thick-skinned, floral-patterned rice sack dress and I wonder how long I can live in the past with you.

You smile with your thin melon-painted lips and I taste the bitterness like the soup your worn hands have stirred painstakingly over the years. “I’m sorry”, your hushed whisper reaches me, apologetic soup hands stroking up and down my back like I wasn’t the one who abandoned you first.

It is the first time in years we touched, did you realize it? Did you miss me too, Ohk-Key?

You blink down at me.

“Maybe once, Gai nack dai”, you tell me as one of your hands trembles in my hold.

My brain kicks in then, as if energized by the flood of new information, and I let the thoughts trickle in, slowly but surely replacing the dull, monotone colours of my own childhood perception. I remember the halcyon days of my childhood, red steps along clean streets filled with people of my colour—we were reds, browns, pinks and so many shades of blue above—and you would lead me up and down straight roads, past the organized chaos that was medicine shops, past the hollering of Aunties and Uncles I had never met before but held a string of blood connection to and into the chilling air of Dollar Meat, where we would stare into the eyes of white dressed butchers with stubbly greased fingers. He smiles, because he’s done this a million times over and asks if we’ve eaten already.

We haven’t, as we both shake our dark heads (a proud status symbol) and behind the semi-visible glass he shuffles his lumbering gait over to the cases.

“Sook-Sook”, you would call to this man who we both only knew as the man who was a meat butcher —temporarily forgetting he had a name, a family, maybe even his own meat man somewhere— and the man would call us both Liang nües (I always tried not to preen and smiled demurely instead) and say his customary line of “xiang mm xiang hoay muuht-ya, a?”

“Whole chicken, soy-free range, drum sticks still whole, green onions extra will you?” Your deceptively delicate voice responded as always, never able to forget your usual order since 30, 50, 100 years ago. I say deceptive because I know how loudly you scream when you see the invisible rats beneath your feet, crawling belly down to the scattered crumbs flicked up from cutting boards, brushed from stained-pitted yellow aprons and down the silver-oiled edges of the chicken cases. I laugh as they wiggle their little bottoms away, tails up in the air like silly worms crawling back into the dirt of the cardboard boxes stacked up.

They are invisible because my friend at English school told me once she had friends like that so I play along, with my Pei Pa Koa like eyes, slow dripped and sweet and you play with me always, screaming, laughing, sneering.

Our chopped chicken arrived, neatly stacked one slice diagonal to the next—beheaded be-

cause no one liked to stare into the eyes of the fool and no meat could be found there—and we headed out, our light steps clicking along the streets.

Back then, the streets would light up and nothing but the neon signs filled with foreign homely Chinese would catch me faster. You sigh, wondering what a child would find so interesting about a sign that simply says Wong's Insurance, but you let me tug you along anyways.

I'm not a child anymore, not according to these Canadian laws but in your ancient eyes, I must seem as temporary as a single season of monsoon rain. I am your child of blood, of culture, of looks and heritage and I am forever yours as you are somehow mine. Our black hair, smooth and long, tells us we are one, locked together as tightly as the knots on your handmade dress. I'm glad for that though, as they say, no parent should bury a child but I fear deep down the day I will have to send you back to China and bury your bones.

Or maybe you've become just as Canadian as me. Will you let me hold a place for you in a grave, surrounded by countless others, plaque forgotten as the generations who once held you in memory dearly slip away into the dirt too?

Our feet carry us past the sign, and as the light smell of soy chicken entombs us, we walk too far into the present—where the marginalized sleep in the crooks of your elbows, the swell of your hidden breasts and the long warm lines of your thighs. They spill their unwanted junk, medicine for the broken inside—when I go to brush a hand along your forearms, you hold me back with tight eyes and say that I'll catch my hand along the needles littered within your bruised fair skin.

A parent protects the child. Then. Now. It is my duty, my filial piety to you to always remember that.

Your hair is no longer black, only grey with the rain and the mix of people who don't know your memory, your history but walk your Vancouver streets anyways. Your once luxurious red dress is sliced down like your shops slowly closing, shut board signs and gentrification—I heard the news and wanted to see you one last time.

Chinatown, I walk with you in the present and I wonder how long you can keep this up. The chill in my heart finally spills out from my eyes.

You press me to your chest, and I listen to the faint heartbeat underneath my ear, to the

humming sound above me and I know you will stay alive, at least in memory, as long as I breathe. “Sorry”, your hushed whisper reaches me, apologetic hands stroking up and down my back. That, too, makes me too hot and too cold simultaneously, “Sorry, sorry, it’s alright now.”

You speak English to me now too, only sometimes, because I’ve forgotten much of the tongue that bound us together. Are you still Chinatown if you do? Can you forgive me just this once?

The chicken from the past, warm in its takeout box, still tastes the same and I wonder why you couldn’t have been free to do the same.

I try to call out to you, Chinatown, as you break away from my present. As the sun sets and you walk away from me without another glance, foreign words slip away from my tongue like gold in the foreign rivers our people panned once.

I know you must know English. You could have, should have heard me. We both knew then.

But I let you go.

You slink back into the boxes like the pretend rats we once saw and I watch you, tongue twisted and you disappear among the throng of the homeless.

In/visible until my memory and words find me again.

*The Loving Hand* by Hugo Xiao

