FOUR POEMS BY SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

Feeling Sorry

What a pain it is feeling sorry
for everything. You were born with your liver
on your shoulder which retarded your ability
to feel nothing. Do we eat fish-head curry
on forty thousand banana leaves? So, must you mutter
for the fallen forest, the extinguished school?
You explain, its jellied eyes accuse you
of apathy among the mustard seeds.
Desert images — sand blowing into mango ice-cream,
the beautiful pellucid stare
of children sucking on dried paps while their skulls
flare in kilowatt explosions —
line the crimson-gold seafood restaurants.
It is obvious your heart’s not in the eating of live
prawns or fresh guilt. What do you want,
I say, tired of playing along with everything.
It is true you are only good
at worrying about goodness, suffering
the famine of those with too much to eat.
Must the young man with the revolver
to be hanged tomorrow noon have a claim on us?
Why should you worry about the seventy-
pound grandmother mopping mopping the condo floors?
Look how her bright false-toothy smile
stabs your eyeballs, you go on your knees
pretending you’ve lost your contacts,
begging forgiveness. I could scream, give money
if it would stop you. Can’t you stop
being a pain, grow a hump on your shoulder,
and develop a passion for education?
A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren

I am tired of poetry —
this boring half-talking
to yourself half-asleep —
broken flight of women
turned unsuccessfully
to birds tumbling
into the deadly
arrogant ocean.
Instead I want
a pot of fragrant rice
to share with good mothers:
grow yeasty thighs and sit
comfortably on backside
five grandchildren at my feet.

It’s terrible to be
seduced by filthy books
with high thoughts which make you want
to delete the world.
Thoughts that starve you,
eat your heart out,
use all feelings up
even those for yourself,
lock you in a room
from crowds and crying babies.
Mothers want to feel
babies against their rough cheeks,
to see each one of five
pinky fingers opening
regardless of sunlight
or of darkness.
Have you also wasted your life in libraries,
walking between tall walls of words and listening
to them conversing with each other?
Deep talk — splendid
as a sea-king's palaces,
his oldest and newest, leaping among giant sea-fronds —
and I've wanted to fly from the dull silent rooms up to the clear blue,
my own swift bird into the heart
of light those books described so well —
to blue thoughts spelling among airy towers in waves underwater.

But a little bird
I'll never be. No, let me fall asleep among loud voices of grandchildren grown tall on milk and fragrant rice.
The Gate

After the day's rage, the quiet:
the flower garden, the gate
ajar, the woman smoking
in slovenly solitude.
An attitude to adopt
almost naturally, as mood
suggested by moon and tide.
All else beyond: concrete condos,
tepid Singapore air, scorpions
in a city night. To follow
the natural contours of an
unnatural world, wondering.
Where is the stir by which we know
our own? Estranged yearning
falling almost naturally below
into shapes of garden, gate,
a woman alone smoking.
Again and again the grate
of anger in a glass-and-stone
night without moon's anchor,
without scent and tide's quiver.
How then to make of this quiet
after day's rage a human gate?
Pain

One breathes, preparing
to wince. Living
has taught us this
if nothing else —
the mystery of pain.
Health we take as plain
daylight, till the long noon
tips us over on our knees.
Nothing prepares
for pain, that goon
in our skull we must
endure and learn to love
as revelation.