

## 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.