

SPRING 2010

KARTIKA REVIEW

MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



KELLY ZEN-YIE TSAI

digging a hole to china

1.

we are at war
with ourselves

700 missiles
point
sharp noses
across the taiwan
strait

my mother
runs delicate
fingers
over plum candy,
sesame bars, dates
mashed with
walnuts

at the sweet shop
in shanghai

for the first
time in 60 years

these her
child tongue
remembers

before revolution
before exile

as she stuffs
a plastic bag
to its brim

for the 17 hour
flight back
home

to chicago

2.

the engraver
at the great wall
didn't even turn
all the way around

before he muttered,
"oh, hua qiao."

and continued to hammer

my father's name
my mother's name
my name

the day's date

into the piece of
granite before him

what kind of
people are we

to think that we
can build anything
big enough to keep
our culture intact

that we can
be impervious to
change

that we can shut
the world out?

3.

carol and i
are useless

american-born
hackney-tongued

we listen
to my father explain
why each of these
places are so important

so many poets
so many temples
so many gods

i can read only
the waving of
the lotus fields

the old women
dressed in black
reaching their
arms towards
the sun

the children walking
two by two gripped
in each other's hands
with superhero
backpacks on

4.

tiananmen square
is empty of ghosts
empty of blood

just stretches of
gray stone buildings
and packs of postcards
sold for a dollar

soldiers tread lightly
past me in green polyester pants
striped with yellow

their shoulders
marked in red

their faces
younger
than mine

we are not
so different

i realize

i press a kiss
to my crossed
fingers

untwist them
and let the kiss
ride on air

we survive
every history

in prayer
in prayer



The Ballad Of The Maybe Gentrifier

I'm not white, but
I love me a white person's wireless internet café.

I don't wear a thrift store grandpa sweater,
scraggly beard, and oversized plastic glasses
with my skinny jeans.

I don't expect the neighborhood
to change around me. I don't want it to,
but I am clearly the face of this change.

You could hardly gather from my eyes, my skin,
my hair, and say this girl is reppin' Bed-Stuy...hard.

(Usually people guess Korean from Flushing.
Wrong on both counts).

This is the Bed-Stuy of Biggie's ghost,
boarded up brownstones with "For Sale"
signs, plucked one by one, puckering
into a revived concrete bloom.

Handwritten notes that read:
"Will buy your house for cash.
Call this number." rolled up and
shoved into rusty wrought iron fences.

Rented dumpsters out front,
hammers and nails and saws,
brown bodies hang out third story
windows for 50 dollars cash per day,
painting the worn exteriors
of brownstones brown.

Is this life after death?
Or a parasite?
Or the green shoots of new growth?

I walk by brick and steel and
concrete boxes towering over
the old hardware store,

even I can see the neighborhood
is changing, and this change
is also a part of me.

Chinese Taiwanese from Chicago, Black
from Seattle, Jamaican from Columbus, Pakistani
from Austin, Mexican from San Francisco,

We are the slightly less visible marauders
ruffling the edges of rents upwards
hanging out at Habana Outpost,

kicking back mojitos in the summertime,
designer sneakers, designer jeans, designer
sunglasses,

(Or at least, the knock-offs.)

Will the real Bed-Stuy please stand up?

The lifetime residents clinging to legacy
in rent-controlled apartments, the old folks
hanging in clusters on the stoop, the families
at Marcy projects, the bodega owners stocking
more and more organic produce, the children
who went abroad and return to family buildings
with European accents and college degrees, the
Bloods and the Crips, the storefront imams and pastors,
the hasty landlords with rings of keys and credit check forms
ready on clipboards in the driver's seats of parked cars.

Will the real Bed-Stuy please stand up?

The Bed-Stuy of Timothy Stansbury and Rashawn Brazell.
The Bed-Stuy renamed Clinton Hill and Stuyvesant Heights by real estate
agents.
The Bed-Stuy before and after white flight.
The Bed-Stuy that survived the looting and the burning of Broadway in '77.
The Weeksville Bed-Stuy.
The Do or Die Bed-Stuy. The Bed-Stuy and Proud of It.

The neighborhood is changing.

It is plain to see.

I am a part of it. It is a part of me.



Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai is a Chicago-born, Brooklyn-based, Chinese Taiwanese American spoken word artist who has performed her poetry at over 400 venues worldwide including three seasons on "Russell Simmons Presents HBO Def Poetry." Winner of a 2007 New York Foundation for the Arts Urban Artist Initiative Award, she was listed as one of Idealist in NYC's Top 40 New Yorkers Who Make Positive Social Change in 2008 and AngryAsianMan.com's "30 Most Influential Asian Americans Under 30" in 2009. She has shared stages with Mos Def, KRS-One, Sonia Sanchez, Talib Kweli, Erykah Badu, Amiri Baraka, and many more. (www.yellowgurl.com, FB: Kelly Zen-Yie Tsai, Twitter: @yellowgurlpoet).