

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, *hula hooping*. Hong Kong: Chameleon Press Ltd., 2015. 96 pp. ISBN 978-988-13642-3-4.

Far from perfunctorily announcing title and author, good book covers cue one into what the book is about – and sans a clutter of images. In this instance: a weathered red-orange wooden door. On it, a well-worn circular iron door knocker hangs and rests like an empty eyeball, black paint peeling off to reveal layers of past coatings. The words “hula hooping” in white below it, and the author’s name in black further below. The arc of thought connects the circle of the knocker with the unseen one of the hula hoop and sees, at a glance, the ironic conceits of stillness and motion, containment and freedom, silence and sound, suppression and play, and fatigue and energy at work. A visual *coup de foudre*, this interplay of opposites and conflicting forces and emotions, and this is what one finds between the covers of *hula hooping*.

A long time coming is what has been said of this book, her first, of Tammy Ho, professor at Hong Kong Baptist University and co-founder and editor of the influential *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. And the wait is now over. Comprised of sixty-five poems selected from several hundred poems of the past fifteen years or so of writing, the book ushers in a distinctive and powerful new voice in the Hong Kong poetry scene. The poems are almost equally distributed into seven sections – “Family affairs,” “Story poems,” “To make death in us live,” “Love poems,” “Autobiographies,” “China-Elsewhere-Hong Kong” and “Envoi” – in a kind of bildungsroman introduction to the writer. But trust the recalcitrant spirit of the poet not to observe religiously the tags in those boxes.

The poetic voice in the poems is strong and confident, steeped in irony and sarcasm. Though it seduces, it does not seek to charm; though there is a range of colours in the emotions, the heart knows things in black and white. Irony is a tool of the intellect, and therefore a number of poems here are cerebral. Definitely not poetry to play footsies with. It is cut of the same cloth as Louise Ho’s forceful poems, although the older Ho’s is more aphoristic, reflective and chiselled. But trust Tammy Ho to keep a sensuous balance between the expressive and the intellectual without loss to the powers of either. This is something remarkable since an ironic view of things is a trait not common to young poets. The poems here are full of the everyday, but as experienced – or undergone – by the poet, it becomes not quite everydayish.

Consider the first two poems in the first section of the book captioned “Family affairs.” “Tiny scissors” pays tribute to the grandmother following a family tradition of using “scissors to cut food into small pieces” (2). She is “Toothless, gums eroded like seaside rocks” for whom “eating was not enjoyed, only endured” (2). She does not speak Cantonese despite living in Hong Kong, and she believes that “Hakka, if uttered slowly,/ would be universally

understood” (2). The portrait of the old woman in four quatrains is warm and precise. The last stanza introduces the speaker thus: “Her eldest granddaughter, I was the one/ for whom nothing was misunderstood./ In the last week, she gave me her scissors,/ and reminded me that I’d too one day be toothless” (2).

That last line is masterly. Everything in this stanza is described so matter of factly that it is easy to miss the story and humour suppressed in it – that the handing over of the scissors and the accompanying reminder are not a gentle grandmotherly bequest but a sharp rebuke of the bright and sensitive and therefore naughty granddaughter (“one/ for whom nothing was misunderstood”) who must have had a history of making fun of the poor woman’s toothlessness to give cause for the reprimand. The cunning phrasing does it all, and the humour becomes just a whistled innuendo.

The second poem, “As I lay curled on the sofa,” describes a moment when the mother, preparing breakfast, verbally abuses the daughter who is, as the title announces, unhelpful and practically useless around the house. The daughter, half-asleep on the sofa when the poem begins, is wakened when the mother makes her vexation audible through the kitchen implements within her reach and with her cursing: “She called me ugly./ The words were distinctive,/ despite the mixture of noises from the kitchen.... She said I was like a flat-faced frog/ when I declined to respond./ She said there were two screens between us,/ even on the good days:/ the television, my laptop./ Then the stirring stopped.// I pretended my mother hadn’t been talking,/ as I lay curled on the sofa/ half-awake” (3). Between the halves of sleep and waking in that scene is a tale of diurnal defiance and abuse so common between growing child and parent.

Attitude – that’s what the speaker has in these poems. And it is wielded consistently in the collection, but so wisely subtly that one misses it when one blinks.

In two other poems, this attitude is sourced in an early endurance of shame and humiliation and in another bitter early experience of family alienation and sibling envy. In the first part of “Self-portraits” she recalls wetting her uniform at age six and being told by the school nurse “some people have no self-control” before being handed the soiled dress “in a red plastic bag/ as if it were a dead fish/ bought from the wet market” that she later brought home with the smell “next to my skin.” She walked in dread and no longer remembers if she “hummed a tune,/ or thought of afternoon snacks” (60). In “Frames,” the speaker considers her absence in a photograph of her twin sisters thus: “There is no trace of me in that familiar frame,// but I was convinced that I must be there somewhere,/ in that same room. For many years, I imagined myself/ standing just behind a cupboard or a broom,/ looking on adoringly at my sisters and their toys:// shells, scraps of indistinguishable paper, dust balls./ Later I was told that my too young mother, who had had/ three by

twenty-two, couldn't handle us all under one roof/ and had sent me to a village on the mainland.// I was not there when that picture was taken" (9). There is a number of sub-stories here not told but only suggested, intensifying the pathos sculpted by deep pain.

I make much of these poems written in the confessional mode not only because these are very difficult poems to write but also because the experiences these poems depict give the writer character and a rich and intense emotional position that allowed her to navigate and process skilfully and with authority both the complexities and paradoxes of her later life experiences and the artistic strategies entailed in transforming these into poetry. Read "Self-portraits" and discover the transformative and emotional power of her poetic spirit.

The leaps in thought and emotion, the submerged but adumbrated story behind the present story being told, the sharp eye for vivid details that turn out to be revealing and epiphanic – there is always more than meets the eye in a Tammy Ho poem. In "Newest, hottest, tallest, the most London," she deplors a lover's comparing her to "a playful angel and a shameless whore" and claims "I'm only an innocent girl" (75). Ho usually gets away with this innocence stance because of the tenderness and suppleness of her affection and attention when she constructs a poetic scene, but she and her personae always know more than what they let on. Her poem's closures are more often than not grazing ground for sarcasm and irony. "Am I already?/ Your girlfriend? Yours?// Then, you're my newest boyfriend/ (the hottest, the tallest, the most/ London) who is now in France" (75). In "The Argument" where the lovers argue but in a way that those who see them are led to think "they are hopeless lovers," the closing couplet nails down the devastating irony: "Let them think we talk sweet nothings./ Shall we love a little more, sweet nothing?" (45). And in "Haunting": "let me be presumptuous and say/ my last words now:/ I'd rather be with you than live" (39). The touch is jazz-cool and pitch-perfect, and one never really knows whether the emotion and idea enunciated are to be taken positively or negatively – one just has to refract them according to one's own experience of the poetic moment talked about, if any. That is the art of unsaying more than saying, which the poet has under her belt.

Because she had looked hard into herself, looked at her torn shoes and hard toenails and is not ashamed of the poverty she's been through and her working class parents whose love is likened to a river that gives and gives until it becomes "undone – scattered pockets/ Of primitive earth, peeled bare" (8), she can think of death as "most benevolent... taking [people] when they were daydreaming./ fantasizing, living" (33); she can talk about her resentment at being "told about the sordidness of/ being the third person, in a relationship,/ on a square mattress, in disguise" (49); she will remember, in "The Famine, 1959-62" that "people exchanged with neighbours dead/ And lean children. One didn't eat one's own" (67); she can condemn, on one hand, the illusions

foisted on the people by a leader in bow tie whose “appointment was predicted... cooked in a black box” (68) and, on the other, the sinister possibility that editing a literary journal could be an official cause of death in a Chinese prison; she can assert that in China, “surreal is the norm.../ Kafka couldn’t have dreamt it as well/ as the people who live it” (71); she can write about her neighbours who “don’t care... [about her being ‘intellectually trained’], [and who] live less ambiguously... speak/ One dialect only” and around whom she and a partner “dare not open our mouths, lest our strong HK/ Accent betrays our humble origin. The terrible/ Flatness of our tone, the inflexibility of our tongue” (84). And her diction is unafraid to have words like “vagina,” “penis,” “ejaculated upon,” “fuck,” “dark slit” and “pussy.”

Tammy Ho is a natural at storytelling and writing poetry, and one is grateful for the fact that she did no formal studies at all in order to write. There is something to the raw energy of her lines and the sometimes awkward line breaks and lame titles that should improve for the better in due time. Sometimes the language could take a surprising turn, as in “She said he could draw vases for catalogues,/ church spires, reposing dogs” (“The newlyweds,” 16) and “Every afternoon,/ the vendors gathered in front of the primary/ schools, chatting heartily until an explosive ringing/ of electric bells in disharmony (“Years ago, picking them up after school” 6). There is enough variety of lyric forms here, with a few dramatic monologues and lyric sequences thrown in for good measure, and a lyric dialogue in the form of Q&A. There are experimental pieces, mostly catalogues and listings, the most successful of which, to my taste, is the prose poem “Hula hooping” at the end of the book that I find oddly both cubist and pointillist in terms of rapidity of thoughts and images and the disconnections, discontinuities, and complementations among these. It is here where we find the only two references to the title “hula hooping,” both unhappily consignable to bins marked “Failures” and “Forgettables”: “My sisters and I believe that playing with a hula hoop will give us slim waists (it doesn’t work on everyone)” (92-93) and “I sometimes think of hula hooping with my sisters but I don’t really remember much” (95). Ricky Garni’s attractive spiral drawing at each section break echoes the door knocker on the cover and with just a hint of the yin-yang figure, though I wish it was made to whirl around each time it appeared on a page.

More poems were left out of this excellent debut collection. One can only hope that all, if not most, of these would be able to see the light of print soon enough. Tammy Ho is one strong poet, and the prism of irony through which she looks at things could very well be a handy tool in dealing with realities in today’s Hong Kong and China.

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