

## Poems from *Home Water*

### Dinner with an Eligible Bachelor

There he is—  
but you can't see him—  
the ghost at this Chinese banquet,  
casually eavesdropping  
as my father flatters you  
with a remark  
about the longevity  
of your university.

Your smile indicates  
such strain at the corners,  
such blank politeness.  
Surely there is more feeling  
in the eyes of the grouper  
we have just devoured,  
whose head is being debated  
for its culinary merits

By ladies in diamonds and furs  
who profess themselves *connaissenses*.  
The selfsame women  
and their masticating husbands  
offer toasts to a future  
they have no part in,  
and one which I decline  
to share with you.

Too much stands between us:  
this rotating animal boneyard  
of fowl, fish and mammals;  
shrimps thrashing on the platter;  
our elders' relish  
in their own mortality;  
lipstick stains  
on fake ivory chopsticks—

Not to mention  
the uninvited guest,  
whose letter smoulders and threatens  
to burn a hole in my pocket.  
You have no need of tea leaves  
to predict the gall of coming years,  
nor is there need to make it clear  
that after tonight—we part company.

## Tai Po Mei

Came back to a discreet rain,  
to the shyness of distant lightning  
mussing mountaintops.  
In the pungent wet  
the village huddles like a stray.  
Windows flicker with a firefly pulse.  
The way dips in the dark.  
Now and then a swaying bulb  
spills silhouettes of dancing vines  
on broken walls, plays its lurching light  
over shards of snail.  
This trail of shell leads home.  
This is home then—  
this black iron door  
that clangs shut so finally.  
This is real then—  
the balcony rail under the hand,  
the lights that rim the bay  
like salt on a margarita,  
fishing boats throbbing  
to cicada rhythms.  
In the night  
a rising wind will usher rain,  
and send the mosquito net flying  
like a surrendering flag or sail of mourning.  
There will be music  
in the agitation of bells,  
in random notes struck by moths  
alighting on the zither strings.  
Like flowing grass  
the wavering shadow of gauze  
crosshatches the pillow case  
to net the flutters of ragged wings.  
Fossilized on a wall,  
a gecko waits.

Waits for brazen birdsong to flaunt the day.  
Waits for sunlight sparkling on jewelled web.  
The mat has left its weave on the skin.

Night fades like an old bruise.

## A Reply

My power to haunt you is uncanny.  
You curse me in your sleep at night  
when I stalk through your dreams:  
black silhouettes in leafless jungles,  
the whore insouciant on her red Honda,  
the little boy holding out his arms to you,  
wired to kill.

By day your mouth is tightly sealed  
from mention of my deadly name,  
but in your cups you are heard to shout:  
“No more! No more Vietnam!”

If you could you would like  
to cleanse the world of my poison.

My tenacity unmans you—  
this wisp of a moth  
hellbent on surviving  
the grinding of your heel.

To exorcise me you must explain  
why I have to pay the price  
for your aborted ideals.

Why you blame me for your smudged innocence,  
for jettisoning you into abhorred manhood,  
for staining your hands with my blood.

You were an ungracious guest  
to have dined on your host—  
only marginally were you better  
than the legions who came before.  
After centuries of enforced intimacy  
with hordes of gate-crashers,  
surely I have earned the right  
to a little abuse?

Yet do you hear me  
rend the night with cries:  
“No more! No more America!”

No,  
there is no time for idle wishes.  
You have left my house in such a state  
it will take forever to clean up,  
and put to rights my toppled temples,

my deformed children,  
my diseased women,  
my crippled men,  
while you clamour for the bones  
of your dead.

## **A Commuter's Prayer**

Deliver us from beauty  
on our way to Calvary.  
Numb us to ironies  
we pass every day.

Deafen our ears  
to subway quartets,  
lest we be enticed  
to stray from our path.

Armour our hearts;  
cleave a way for us  
through this sea  
of hands and cups.

Blind us to the patience  
of the man on the corner  
who suffers his indignity  
like a cloak of thorns.

Spare us the knowledge  
of where we are going—  
when the bridge we cross  
disappears in fog.

## Plaint for a Lost Love

With no one to pluck them  
the white hairs grow long  
and unkempt in your absence.  
Come home and I will be  
as dark as a kelp bed,  
sleek as a seal who forsook  
the seven seas for your love.

My sisters grey before their time—  
who in their pigtailed days in Huế  
or Đà Lạt, plucked Bà's hair—  
one *sou* for every faded stalk  
weeded from our grandmother's head.  
Four pigtails twitched with an idea—  
split each hair and get two *sous*!

*Bà* laughed when she found out,  
said *Mẹ* with a smile that ended  
on a sigh. Leaning over me  
in the wintry light, peering  
through glasses, she sifted  
though black, brown and red  
to mine the silver from my hair.

*Mẹ*, of the mini-mall Clairol perm,  
in her youth could stand on her hair  
and slept floating like a mermaid  
on the waves of the night's tide.  
In the moonlight of her garden,  
cloaked in her glory, she dreamed  
of a love outlasting white hair.

My father was one of many  
beguiled by those tresses.  
To free his heart from her,  
he had her shear them off.  
And as she slept, I wept  
to see the roots of her hair



hoary with frost.