

Ho Sok Fong, *Lake Like a Mirror: Stories*. Translated from the Chinese by Natascha Bruce. London: Granta, 2019. 199pp. ISBN: 9781846276903.

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A lot of strange things happen in the mind of man. No matter what went on outside, the mind forged ahead, manufacturing its own adventures for itself. And who was to know where reality was, inside or out. – Paul Bowles

The nine stories in this prize-winning collection by Ho Sok Fong range across young, middle-aged and elderly women who do not wish or are unable to belong where they live, never mind they were born and raised there. It's a Malaysia that's at once familiar and strange because of this skilled and daring writer's *ostranenie* in her at-home exile's perceptions: the mood in the stories often at times seems otherworldly, dangerous and hopeful at once. The cultural politics the characters confront, particularly in religious dogma, have to a degree impaired the societies they inhabit and try to navigate in. Men play no mean role in these settings, though Fong writes them subtly, keeping them at a distance mainly until the last two stories, "October" and "March in a Small Town". Their appearances there work in quite different ways, and are memorably done, especially in the last.

Natascha Bruce's translation is beautifully poetic at times, capturing the intricacies the short story demands. She is also, like the author, completely aware of the form's traditional use and its modern versatility.

The first story "The Wall" is dreamlike. Aunty moves through her days in a psychological fog, a cat her only companion. Her husband exists like a problem whose fixable date has long expired, and therefore her only recourse is to deal with him as little as possible.

Aunty lives near a big highway that continues to claim the remaining space between her tenement and its roaring flow. When a girl is killed on the highway by a car a wall is built.

"It cut off the sunlight, making our back garden and kitchen dark. But everybody agreed that sunlight wasn't much of a price to pay, considering the seven-year-old girl who'd been killed... The only thing was, the wall blocked our back doors too, and now they opened only a little wider than the width of a foot. Wide enough for a cat or a small dog, but too much of a squeeze for a human" (2).

To deal with such encroachment, Aunty adapts. She loses weight, and is able to squeeze through the door's limited opening. She plants a tiny garden, no bigger than a closet, for that is all she is left outside. It is the final

solace, her last freedom. She loses more weight, and takes care of the cat. Then the cat disappears. Her husband is addicted to football games on TV. He represents buffoonery, appropriately stale and repetitive: “‘Brazil won!’ he exclaimed, delighted. But his cherry tones weren’t for his wife’s benefit. It was as if there were a crowd in front of him, eagerly awaiting his reaction” (5).

Things get weird and worse until the end, a signature moment not just for the collection, but our time. Just before the end Fong writes: “Her complexion merged slowly into the grey of the wall and it seemed that the gloom all around us was her camouflage” (10). Versions of that image stay with you throughout the book. There’s a strong critique on destructive religious tenets in the collection. The trauma inflicted when dogma is forced onto the imaginations of young women in rehabilitation centers that are much like prison camps distorts their ability to apprehend a balanced reality.

In “Aminah” and “Wind Through the Pineapple Leaves, Through the Frangipani”, the self as a spectral entity drifts in various ways through the reform camps, and elsewhere. At other times, it seems too fragmented, schizoid, and in the latter story makes for difficult reading.

“Aminah had returned. Her figure, in the gloom, walked the length of the dormitory, in front of the lined-up prayer mats. Every pair of eyes saw the soles of her feet, and the trail of mud and grass in their wake... There was not a thread of clothing on her skeletal frame. The women had stopped praying and were holding their breath, waiting for this naked, sleepwalking body to pass” (86, 87).

And then later, after some talk about whether Aminah is mad:

“And so, for the next two hours, they went around repeating to one another those same phrases they had used a hundred times before: ‘There is no hiding from God.’ ‘We will bring Aminah back to the path of righteousness.’ ‘We will do our utmost to care for Aminah.’ ‘We will love and care for them all.’ ‘In this way, they will come to know Allah.’

‘This is His test for us,’ said one.

They all agreed, and started to eat biscuits. Sparrows hopped about pecking at their crumbs. The garden scenery was as familiar as always, seemingly impervious to the passage of time” (89). The value of the puerile mind-set is, of course, valuable to any regime.

In “Summer Tornado”, Su Qin, a stepmother, considers her relationship with her husband and his two children. She is unsure if she is loveable enough: her own voice, when she first heard it on a tape-recorder, sounded “tight and anxious, as if a snake were hiding inside it, hissing between the sentences” (72). She lacks assertiveness, as if life is a chore, something to get through with a minimum of fuss. Her mother advised her to get married.

Now her husband looks at her with exhaustion in his eyes, and she wonders if it's their marriage, or the heat and activity with the children, the dazzling sunlight that are responsible.

The story opens with Su Qin briefly stuck at the upper curve of a Ferris wheel, absent from her family down below in the amusement park. She's a woman somewhere between a serious commitment to family life and a ghosting of it. Back on the ground, she tries to read what they feel, tries to gauge their acceptance of her. The children play in the fake beach and-waves area, the husband supervising. Here, and in line for another amusement, she plays a little game – remaining still and silent, she waits to see who will turn to her, who will acknowledge her. The feeling is: Should I carry on, with them?

The melancholy in this story is poignant and attests to Su Qin's inability, for most of the story, to make an effort to belong, to stop ghosting along. She knows she has to make an effort to change, because there is nowhere, no one and nothing else to belong to, she barely even belongs to herself; she seems at times to expect direction from elsewhere, from the light-force magic of the sky which, at the top of the Ferris wheel, she glances up at, in keen expectation. The wind, she feels, wants to lift her up and away into the sky. One gets the feeling Su Qin would go anywhere with it if such a thing were to occur. (In the story "October", that is exactly what happens, pretty much, to another woman, one whose rebellious spirit hasn't been quenched, but with her is an extremely vulgar representative of colonialism.) Yet Su Qin devises a plan, a simple even childish plan, that seems to work; but my sense here is that Fong leaves it up to the reader. The giant tea-cup is a very fine touch, even, I dare say, *wicked*.

Characters like Su Qin, in different stages of life, are frequent companions in *Lake Like a Mirror*. They appear to be in partial exile from life itself, one that is increasingly lifeless, stupid and dangerous, very much like the world now. A few others move reluctantly through it, bored, their awareness enervated, as if they're awaiting mysterious and profound interventions; and always interestingly, for Fong is an important writer, these yearnings are not religious in any sense. They're to do with the nature and mystery of being – concerns, as set forth in the book, entirely outside the imperial-like encirclement made of politicized religion. Fong's characters seek escape from that and the destructive, commercial banality of modern life. And in that, they are always – all of them – worth your company.

The title story is a wonderful achievement in this regard. The poetry of the world, the natural beauty of the planet and its wild creatures (a zoo is also pointedly mentioned earlier) appear fleetingly, until the end where they rise and spread out with a vast and pre-ancient significance, in an operatic silence. This story portrays so much about the failures of our present-day civilization, the shrinking of freedom and security.

A university teacher allows a student to read a poem by e. e. cummings in her class, which causes an outcry because it appears to celebrate homosexuality. The eventual repercussions result in her getting a warning by the administration, but prior to that she is also warned by a colleague about how to conduct herself, how to behave in class, and is reminded that she's supposed to "be vigilant, because your students are sensitive, and so are we. Very, very sensitive" (34).

There's a creeping Stasi-like atmosphere throughout the story. Our protagonist, nameless like everyone else, is being watched. Then another colleague, one she's lightly acquainted with, says something in class about the effacing way Muslim women are expected to dress. She's the one whose contract the authorities terminate. After a chance meeting with her, in which the situation is discussed somewhat indirectly, the protagonist thinks: "She was sure that the woman was speaking the truth. But what was true had nothing whatsoever to do with what was safe. The two things were miles apart. Truth was further from safety than two islands at opposite ends of the earth" (50).

They leave campus together, our protagonist giving her a ride in her car. They talk, and the driver feels guilty because of what happened to the other teacher; she feels it was meant for her. But they do not discuss it. After she drops her off, she has a startling encounter with the natural world. Fong is quietly brilliant in the way she handles the ends of her stories, but the end of "Lake Like a Mirror" is truly masterful, she's so adept at using nature and cityscapes, including the waste and rubbish of cities, to lift her work to other levels that communicate a new music from elsewhere.

"March in a Small Town" ends the collection and introduces us to Cui Yi, who is coiled into an ennui made of familiarity and enervation that prompts her to latch onto an adventure. She doesn't have to go far: a young mysterious man around her age keeps returning to the guest house where she works with her aunt, who advises her early on about guests taking the oddest things from the rooms: "People do the strangest things" (168). The young man is not that sort of person, but is he strange? Absolutely, and Cui Yi finds him fascinating. There's a philosophical silence about him, and Cui Yi's riveted by his comings and goings, as he always requests the same room, for the same amount of time on every occasion. She becomes determined to figure out what is happening with him. It's a magnificent story, an engagement with life, with the living world and its people, its beauties and its mysteries that many of the characters seek in this collection of often thwarted lives. What Cui Yi eventually learns, and doesn't, is of profound importance. What matters most is that she's begun a journey of her own, on her own terms, into that most important terrain of all, her imagination.