

from Seasons Greetings from the Diamond Grill

On the edge of Centre. Just off Main. Chinatown, at least in most cities, is always close to the centre but just on the edge of it, because of the cafes. In places like Swift Current, Regina, Calgary, Vancouver, the Chinese cafes are clumped together in a section of town usually within a few blocks of the hub. Not way out. Not rural. Downtown. but on the edge of. In smaller towns like Red Deer, Nelson, Fernie, the cafes are more part of the centre.

But somewhere further off from the cafes is usually the Chinese store—a room really, smoky, dark and quiet, clock ticking. Dark brown wood panelling, some porcelain planters on the windowsill, maybe some goldfish. Goldfish for Gold Mountain men. Not so far, then, from the red carp of their childhood ponds. Brown skin stringy salt-and-pepper beard polished bent knuckles and at least one super-long fingernail for picking. Alone and on the edge of their world, far from the centre. This kind of edge in race and family we only half suspect as edge.

For me, I would wander to it, tagging along with my father or, with a cousin, sent there to get a jar of some strange herb or balm from an old man who would force salted candies on us or take a piece of licorice dirtied with grains of tobacco from his pocket. the old men's voices sure and argumentative within this grotto. Dominoes clacking. This store is part of a geography, mysterious to most, a migrant haven edge of outpost, of gossip, bavardage, foreign tenacity. But always in itself and part of edge.

In a room at the back of the Chinese store, or sometimes above, like a room fifteen feet above the street din in Vancouver Chinatown, you can hear, mysteriously amplified through the window, the click-clacking of mah-jong pieces being shuffled over the table tops. The voices

from up there or behind the curtain are hot tempered, powerful, challenging, aggressive, bickering, accusatory, demeaning, bravado, superstitious, bluffing, gossipy, serious, goading, letting off steam, ticked off, fed up, hot under the collar, hungry for company, hungry for language, hungry for luck.



Who am I I thought I might say to my friend Charlie Chim Chong Say Wong Liu Chung, the chinese poet. He said he could tell me more about my father than I can imagine.

Like my name. This chinese doctor I go to for acupuncture always gets it wrong. He calls me Mah. And I say no, it's Wah. Then he smiles, takes out his pen and writes my characters on my forearm, sometimes on my back, between the needles, or down my leg (sciatic signature). He says Wah just means overseas Chinese. So I'm just Fred Overseas.

I tell him my dad was really Kuan Wah Soon. He says my family comes from Canton region. Then he smiles. He knows so much.

Now I have a large coloured portrait of Kuan Yü, illustrious chinese ancestor hero of China's epic drama, the San Kuo. You can see him as any number of small porcelain or clay statues in Chinatown; he has three long beards swirling out from his chin and cheeks. Charlie Chim Chong Say Wong Liu Chung says he wasn't even chinese, probably an invading Moor.

No swings in this long, slow stroke of signature. Unreadable, but repeatable.



What's already in the ground, roots of another body, method of dirt, fragment of stone, simple weight of the saviour, fossil of marrow, concrete translation of immediate skin pore, pigment, preamble to another quiet yet almost cloudhead thunder building, saying get to the end of itself, maybe the magnetic compass would help, chinese ink strokes too, a little purple and green from the lottery sheets, eye wanders into the middle of this book into the gutter, a certain speed there, swaying of the transit plumb bob, hand across his mind, intimate life lines, sudden

word for number, just sudden, skipping, rope, some later meditation anchor oriented.



Until she called me a “Chink” I wasn’t one. That was in elementary school. Later, I didn’t have to be because I didn’t look like one. But just then, I was stunned. I had never thought about it. After that I started to listen, and watch. Some people are different. You can see it. Or hear it.

The old Chinamen had always just been friends of my dad’s. They gave us candy. I went fishing down by the boat-houses with one of them. He was a nice man, shiny brown knuckles, baited my hook, showed me how to catch mudsuckers, showed me how to row a boat. But then I figured it out and didn’t want to be seen with him. We were walking back up the hill with our catch of suckers and some kids started chiding Chinky, chinky Chinaman and I figured I’d better not be caught with him anymore.

I became as white as I could, which, considering I’m mostly Scandinavian, was pretty easy for me. Not for my dad and some of my cousins though. They were stuck, I thought, with how they looked. And I not only heard my friends put down the Chinks (and the Japs, and the Wops, and the Spiks, and the Douks) but comic books and movies confirmed that the Chinese are yellow (meaning cowardly), not-to-be trusted, heathens, devils, slant-eyed, dirty, and talk incomprehensible gobblydee-gook. Thus “gook n. Slang. 1. A dirty, sludgy, or slimy substance. 2. An Oriental. An offensive term used derogatorily.” And now a half-Ukrainian-half-Japanese daughter of a friend of mine calls anyone, white or not, who doesn’t fit, a “geek.” Even her father, who, we all know, is really a “Nip.”

Sticks and stones might break my bones, but names will never hurt me.



Strange to watch your bloods. Like one of those sped-up movies of a cell dividing under a microscope. For just a split second your body’ll do something Asian—like poised over a dish of Lo Bok with your chopsticks. There’s just a brief Chinese glint in your eyes that flashes some shadow of track across your blond and ruddy Anglo-Swedish dominance. Some uvular word for hunger guttered at the back

of your mouth, waiting. Or how about your cousins from Trail, where we gaze at the same sudden trace behind a dark Italian countenance.

And I've watched you both closely at times to see if I can detect any of that Nordic gloom my grandparents brought over from Sweden. Once in awhile during your teenage years I worried that that depressive despair might overwhelm you as it has me from time to time. But what foolish stereotyping, to generalize about an ethnic quality like that.

Certainly your Swedish grandmother has more cheerfulness about her than melancholy. And friends of ours have frequently said, your daughters are really pleasant, smiling all the time, such happy girls. And you've been that way to me, too. So maybe I fret for naught, as usual. Besides you're only as much Swede as I am Chinese, one-quarter, twenty-five percent, a waning moon, a shinplaster, a blind alley, a semi-final, less than half a cup of honey.

And exactly half Brit. Now that's the one I can't figure out. Your mother claims she isn't as strong and tough as I think she is. Rock island North Sea solid English weather fortitude. Sometimes just plain stubbornness, and you both got enough of that.

But oleomargarine soft now; take that yellow colouring and mix it with the white stuff. Better for you than pure butter, my mom said. A good substitute, cheaper, easier to get, you can have more of it, it'll feed the world's starving, the mix of the century.

Know what I mean?