

2010 Roger M. Jones Poetry Contest
First Prize: Cynthia Li

Waiting for the Coffee to Make Itself, She Sits and Shivers

I found the key
(in the cookie jar, where you hide things
like parking tickets and late-night confessions)
waited for sleep, then
one by one, opened the shells of your soul
peeled back layers of insulation
of confidence, of suavity

and then I saw the flame of you
flickering like a small, scared child
clinging onto one last shred
of something that might have been a dream

and then I saw the flame of me
reflected in your wide blue eyes
just as scared and just as cold
huddled in my tent of quilts

ashamed that we had seen a weakness
in each other we put our clothes
back on

ashamed that we had been vulnerable
we turned aside and wished for day
to hide us

waiting for coffee to break
the silence--
something false has died
and in its place an awkward truth
has come between us
makes us dependent
--the smell of earth and blood
and dark follows us as we go through
motions:

I put on my makeup
you go out to smoke
and we both pretend
it never happened
that we are safe and secure in life

brightly beaming, unhesitant
while the children inside beg
us to show some humility
that they might get warm

After Death

the world transformed
when I died
and shed my skin
and shed the slippery
and shed the scales
and shed the seawater
from my back
and it was cold
I had no clothes
naked on the beach
my prince was nowhere

he found me the next morning
legs new and clumsy
I was happy to see him
and said yes to everything
said yes to everything

years I lived with this man
inside his small castle of marvels
where things are dry to touch
and fine sand swirls in the doorway
when one day our children were out
doing their chores
and I was cleaning the fish
he said to me "sella--
I am not a prince."
and my happy dream was consumed
by the waves.

he was my husband
father of my children
but the knife in my hand
cut across the palm of his hand
he tried to take my hand
but I knew of his hands
and feet
and legs

and all
all I could think of was
how I had said yes to everything
yes to everything
and I couldn't stop running.

back to the waves
but I stopped when the waters
came up to my waist
even angry I remembered
that my lungs are full of air now
my toes are full of sand now
my arms are full of children
and even angry I remembered
my head is full of land-songs
and my heart is full of him

so I turned back
and I walked
although my father told me not to go
I turned back
and I walked
because although I had died for a prince
even the dead must somehow find their way
in life, and my husband
he needs two hands to bind his wound.

Like a Girl eating Daggers

my table is empty save for my elbows and the remnants
of a drink, the napkin that I'm scribbling on
is tucked away discreetly
I smile up at you

"waiting for someone?" you say

"for you" I lie.

I've been told that I flirt
like a girl eating daggers
I don't care what I say
I just want a reaction

how surprised I become
when the glint of the candles

reveals that you, too,
have mastered this art

and it is so rare
for two such wolves to meet
for a moment we almost
forget to be smooth

but a moment is all
that it takes to remember
that our lies hide the lambs
fast asleep in beasts' furs.

Continuum

somedays I wake to find that I
have changed a little in the night
died a little in the night
and turning on the bedside light
I kiss the corpse I was goodbye
and kiss the corpse I was goodbye

the mirrors here were never planed
they undulate like frozen waves
bulge and burst like frozen waves
and dressing for a dark new day
I wonder at my shades of gray
and wonder at my shades of gray

the temple steps are smooth and broad
worn by the feet of those who sought
by the faith of those who sought
and bringing incense to the trough
I cannot help but scorn the moth
and cannot help but scorn the moth

these winter days are flowerless
and still the trees yearn for a kiss
still the girls yearn for a kiss
and wishing you my simple bliss
I pause with brush to write you this
and pause with brush to write you this

our paper windows can't deny
the cold that breathes and moans and sighs

wind that chills and lives and dies
and seeing you in newer light
I kiss the corpse you were goodbye
and kiss the corpse you were goodbye.

Ad

foreign men seek
chinese women
for marriage
and/or dating
in whichever order
suit their needs best

foreign man seeks
chinese woman
for answers

foreign man thinks
chinese woman
knows something
foreign women don't

foreign man watched
chinese woman
crave for freedom
in a documentary
foreign man thinks
chinese woman
is grateful
for his offer
foreign man thinks
chinese woman
will moan in foreign
languages

foreign man dreams
chinese woman
has tiny feet and
slender hands

foreign man seeks
chinese woman
to no avail
she must be hiding