

every dollar is a soldier/with money you're a dragon

by Daniel York Loh

'No one reads my fiction

Where my soul runs free

They see my prosperity and the name of my family

But not the real me

Not my turmoil not my grief

Not my one lost love

Just strange Wealthy Willie

Whose failings they never tired of

Not like my forbears and my insouciant uncle

Whose sleep was untroubled by the source of our wealth

Who never even knew of the sweatshop labour and cruel rents and unsanitary living conditions and who voted down every single proposed tenement act designed to improve the tenants lives and their health

Nothing ever touched them

America is not a fit place for a gentleman to live

So I'll pretend to die and the report of it give

To those small-minded vindictive vultures of the fourth estate

Who peck and tear and decide reputation's fate

Did I even say that America is no fit place for a gentleman to live?

You'll never know but it was there in the print

And I know how to aim

Because we Astors are inured to hold fast to what we've gained

And we gained the world but not my

Acceptance

And no one reads my fiction...

Every dollar

Is a soldier

That will follow

As you're bolder

Sleeping crammed in a sampan

Only cooled by the breeze of the Nanyang

The workers they need but the workers they hate

With heart under knife we made our escape

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We jumped ship at the dock in this city sickly with gaslight
We huddled here in the Eastern enclave where we made our world and our own kind
of street life
And cooked chop suey invented even further West
Where we built railroads and joined the gold quest
They saw us as a peril that was yellow
“The Chinese Must Go” was the angry bellow
They knew our hair was black and our labour was cheap and our need was great
and toil was our fate and the earth in our land was made in that shade
But when they coloured us this we knew how far we'd strayed

Three times a week
The bell rings here in our Limehouse Chinatown
For a Thomas Cook theme show
Of hatchets and pig-tails and clan wars in silk dressing gowns
We put on this spectacle that belongs on their stage
Turn this street into a zoo and us animals in a cage
While in their theatres they dress up as us
Paint themselves yellow as they perceive us
Tape their eyes back and portray us
In garish imitation that clearly distorts us

I won't make it home this time
With money you're a dragon
Without it you're a worm
Find a place that you can build on
And a way to hold on firm...
*Great grandfather tried his luck selling opium to Cathay
But the big conglomerates had sealed that cache
Come war-time with ships under blockade
A stranded Chinese mandarin he offered to convey
Sent a ship East with his life code
That returned with that pay load*

*When you start out first you use the same fork to eat ice cream and peas
But you assimilate slowly and gradually ease
Into the high life
And the glittering twilight*

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Until

*One comes who tires of the trappings of accumulation
And searches for meaning outside affectation
And riches and inherited affirmation
An American Astor the legacy betrays
Becomes The Man Who Gives It All Away
While here we titled ones preserve our tranche
The English Astors the trunk to the US branch*

And now in this Soho Chinatown
All florid gates and gold at sundown
In the cold rain they chant and they march
And a fight breaks out near the Wardour Street arch

*'The man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones'
'Good habits make any man rich'*

They kept us Apart
Outside in the Other
They made us all one
Chinese Community
There but not seen

Like ghosts in a dream

We drift and dance and melt in between

Philosopher, tyrant, Arcadian phalansterist, evil genius, victim of narcotics, peddler of narcotics, noble patriot, rabble-rouser, wartime ally, Red Communist threat, frugal peasant, blue ant, seaman, landsman, washerman, laundry-lord, pauper-cook, get-rich-quick-caterer, inscrutable outsider, benighted illiterate, academic whiz-kid, likely member of the professions and salariat, illegal immigrant, exploited cockle-picker, DVD seller, golden visa princeling property tycoon

But always Apart

And not quite seen

And definitely not heard

Like ghosts in a dream

They made us all one

Chinese Community

Every dollar

Is a soldier

That will follow

As you're bolder

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With money you're a dragon
Without it you're a worm
You find a hill to plant your flag on
And a way to hold on firm...

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— 當代華人藝術 —