

# **The Confessions of Ginny Yuan**

## Prologue

Mama Yuan

Mama Yuan, tell all the people how I was conceived  
There at forty-thousand feet, under the airplane  
Blanket. Describe for them your hungry days in Hunan  
As a girl, living on radishes and boiled rice, how  
One day Uncle came back to your village  
With gifts galore and tales of far-away America.  
The day the work in the wet fields grew too much,  
You ran away—just a note saying “Off to America.”

Mama, you must explain the miles of walking  
Till you wore your shoes to skin. And at Changsha  
How you finally hopped a hard-seat train  
That bumped and wound its way across China  
Until it reached Shanghai. How was it then,  
Among the morning bao-ze merchants, the streams  
Of bicycles? Did you feel lost among that sea of yellow  
Faces? O America you imagined! Land of golden  
Chances so Uncle said, something better than  
Being wet and tired under a rotting roof of thatch.

Tell then of the sleepless nights as a hostess  
In karaoke clubs, of the men with wandering hands  
Who paid dearly for your sitting on their laps. If you  
Did more I understand. There is nothing  
To forgive in doing for your dreams. And so one day  
After all the months of saving, of sleeping two girls  
To a bed in tiny rooms, of taking wash-rag showers  
From a dripping tap, naked and shivering,  
You finally had earned enough.

The morning you woke for your flight  
To New York City you put on your pleated skirt  
Flared below the knees. Nothing pretty, just demure.  
This journey was to be a new beginning—a white blouse  
With short sleeves, and a neat-cut pony-tail. You looked  
So prim! In the photograph of you standing there  
Before the airplane, your smile is wider  
Than the moon. When I see you with your thumbs  
Pointed skyward in the sign for “Go!” I can’t  
Help smiling. Something of the mother persists  
In the daughter: a swerving sense of coming  
At the world obliquely, with elbows swinging.

How did that next feeling come upon you, Mama?  
You were a virgin until then, so you’ve insisted, and just  
Nineteen. You’d learned some simple English at Berlitz

And words like “fuck,” “blowjob,” and “cunt”  
From far more horny men than anyone could  
Ever want to know. I believe you when you say  
They were all unworthy. But then you must explain  
To us about the pilot, helmsman of that flying ship—  
You never learned his name. You say he saw you  
Sitting there, your long skirt riding upwards, repeating  
“Mei-guo, mei-guo,” the word for America sounded  
Like a litany of love. As captain he had you re-assigned  
To a first-class seat. During the night,  
When that plane was steering high across the wide  
Pacific, and the others in the cabin were  
Fast asleep, he returned to descend upon you,  
An angel with golden wings. Divine-eyed, gorgeous,  
Zeus transformed into a swan, he made you into Leda  
With his soft touches, his whispered “Ni shr piaoliang”  
That finally persuaded. Like Leda too, you briefly resisted—  
Bit a lip, drove your nails into his hands. Yet  
In the end you were thrilled, wanted what he gave:  
A chance to have a child born in the land of dreams.

Mama Yuan, you must tell us about your first sight of  
New York, how you saw it from above: the needle-spires  
Pointing upwards from the buildings, the watery necklace  
Around Manhattan, and that green grass blanket  
In its middle: Central Park. The airplane landing  
Felt like the coming together of your heart  
From scattered pieces—Hunan, Shanghai, and now  
New York rejoining with central-seeking force.  
Who was the unruly customs agent who let you in?  
You knew no one here except for Uncle, an unwilling  
Sponsor. When agent skeptically eyed your passport,  
You blurted out “I want to work, I want to work,”—  
A simple English phrase you’d memorized.  
And as if this were some secret spell opening the door  
Into a magic kingdom, the agent sharply stamped  
Your book, then waved you through. What a victory  
You felt, that moment’s proud elation: your spirit  
Rising, a little line of triumph breaking on your fresh  
And startled face.

Sixty-three dollars isn’t much with which to start  
A life. But you were still young and far too foolish  
To imagine what was reasonable. Without such dreams  
What is our life? So, still soaring from the heady ride,  
Your mind whirling high above the wham of hard reality  
From all you’d seen of this new world,  
Of your very real success at crossing customs

With such ease, you hopped a cab from JFK  
Into Manhattan.

New York looked at from the ground  
Was grander still than what you'd seen  
From flying in the air. Shanghai was a smaller place  
Back then, and though no longer  
A country girl you couldn't believe that buildings  
Could be made to rise so high: you gasped at arched  
Windows rising through all a building's height, at foiled  
Swirls atop broad ionic columns, at terra-cotta  
Grimaces on faces in relief above the busy doorways,  
Cornices crowning their buildings like a king.  
Oh the rainbow of it all! And then the people, their  
Foreign tongues, their frantic moving. You fell in love,  
Swooning over each and every heady dreamer,  
Each one made more beautiful for what their hunger wished.  
Yes, yes here was the chance for a better, richer life,  
But freedom too. In America so Uncle said, there was no  
Arbitrary ruling over you. Laws could be changed,  
People's minds remade by an argument's strong evidence,  
Its strength of interlocking logic. In America,  
Every now and then, the realm of reason ruled.

At Mott street the taxi turned south to let you off  
In front of number thirty-five. With its noise and  
Smell of trash, its shouting vendors pushing  
Wares—four fresh sticky buns for just a dollar—  
The piles of star-fruit spilling out onto the sidewalks,  
Mott street reminded you of home. Here perversely,  
One found China in America. With only fifteen  
Dollars left to call your own, you bounded up the stairs  
With all the energy of youth, full of the vigor of someone  
Who'd not descend to expectation. Down the narrow  
Dingy hallway, its teal paint peeling, lit by a single, long  
Fluorescent tube, you went, thinking once more of close  
Shanghai: those unswept streets, the bicycle repairmen  
Working in the road, white diapers swinging  
From a plastic clothesline. New York  
Was not Shanghai, but perhaps her richer cousin,  
Showing in her messy beauty a family resemblance.

Uncle wasn't home. You rang the bell at first, but no one  
Answered. You knocked hard, then harder without avail.  
Finally, with nowhere else to go, you settled in—  
Sat down in front of number six with your legs crossed,  
Never minding that your skirt had grown dirty, your  
Blouse had gathered dust. Comfortable, unconcerned,  
Cat's eye glasses pinching your broad nose,

You immersed yourself in reading Adam Smith's  
*The Wealth of Nations* in Chinese. Hardly  
Had you gotten past Smith's example of a functioning  
Pin factory, when you heard the door unlocked  
And saw a woman's head come peering out. She asked you  
Who you were, and you replied "Pei-feng Yuan,"  
Your proper given name. At that the woman  
Unlocked the door and let you in, declaring  
She was your one true Auntie Cha, and Uncle's wife  
Whom you had heard much about, but never met.  
Auntie apologized for leaving you outside in the  
Hall and invited you in for some hot tea: Darjeeling black  
She pressed upon you, since, as she quickly let you know  
This flavor was her favorite. Auntie liked to talk,  
And you Mama, crazy you, you liked to listen!  
Would that I had gotten a bit more of your wisdom,  
But I suspect there's been too much of that wild pilot  
In my blood; telling tales has always been my specialty.

Auntie Cha was a Tibetan from the province of  
Gansu. Many years before, Uncle had been working  
On an engineering project to bring water from  
Mountains in the south, up north to the parched desert  
Near Dunhuang where the beautiful Mogao caves  
Hide the artistic visions of many men.  
Uncle always dreamed of making deserts bloom. His project  
Failed. But on his way home to Hunan, as a momentary  
Consolation for his loss, he stopped by a roadside stall  
Where Tibetan girls offered horse rides to the passers-by—  
A chance to make a few Jiao for a new necklace  
Or a bright sash that cut across the shoulder. As Uncle rode  
Cha-chan led the way, holding close the reins  
Of the strong steppe pony. The day was heavy with clouds  
Lowering over the Sang-ke grasslands, and that sodden  
Drizzle it seemed would never end. Peering sharply  
At the sky, the girl suddenly sniffed the breeze. Then,  
Hopping up behind Uncle, she grabbed the reins,  
Pressed her lithe body to his back, tightened her legs  
Against the horse, and urged the beast forth into a gallop.  
Now the wind blew dark and cold, signaling a storm.

Uncle loved that moment, being windblown and wet,  
And thus the girl who gave it to him, her strong square  
Features, her dark skin: she was the girl who made it rain.  
Beside the hut, standing out alone against the sea of grass,  
Cha-chan tethered the horse just before the great drops  
Began to tumble down, and there, beside the hearth fire  
Her father fed him champak—a well-ground buckwheat  
With a bit of water—as her mother poured a constant

Stream of tea into his cup. Mandarin and Tibetan  
Are not the same language, but the father knew  
Enough to understand what Uncle wanted—the girl  
Called Cha-chan. She was a younger daughter,  
And for a moment the father pressed the older one upon him  
But Uncle shook his head. It was Cha-chan that  
He wanted, so he said, and if she would have him,  
If she would smile into his eyes, and they as parents  
Would consent, he would swear to make her happy.  
Cha-chan didn't have much choice; she grinned and tried  
To make the best of what was not good. Uncle knew her  
Father wasn't satisfied—there was little friendship  
Between the Tibetans and the Han, but he  
Sweetened his offer to them through a handful of big bills,  
A form of bribery no doubt, but one acceptable enough  
To finally work. With two sad faces the poor parents  
Soon relented, and gave him Cha-chan for  
His own. Her father led them back to the high road,  
Bridle in his hand, big tears rolling along his hollow cheeks.  
Then the man turned the horse and walked off home.  
Uncle had his wish, the Cha-chan was his, and he took her  
Back to Hunan to be his bride.

When, a decade later Uncle moved off to America,  
Aunty Cha of course came with him. She was industrious  
And clever: she had quickly, like so many others of her sex,  
Learned to run both a business and her household:  
She was essential. Even as the years had made her  
Broad-hipped fat, still she took no shit from Uncle,  
Was as garrulous and quarrelsome as ever  
Smiled, laughed, was always the first with dirty jokes,  
Remained passionate about her tea. Now she spoke  
Mostly Mandarin, but was Tibetan still, so she insisted.  
She had made her life in New York for twenty years,  
Knew it far better than Uncle did;  
And also her English wasn't bad.

“Pei-feng dear, we've got to get a job for you—that's the  
First priority. What can you do? Can you cook  
Or clean, are you strong enough to carry heavy packages  
Up flights of stairs? Or are more the precious type,  
A sales-girl shall we say? You're pretty enough  
From what I see, and your tits are big for a Chinese girl,  
But you don't seem much like a store-front type  
To me. We've only just met of course, but from what  
Uncle told me, you're a Dragon, not the selling personality  
I think. Uncle and I know someone, a Mr. Tan  
Who runs a laundry, nearby on Bayard Street. Perhaps  
Mr. Tan will take you on. It would be washing

Clothes at first—loading and unloading the machines  
Putting in the soap and pressing pants and shirts—but with  
Hard work I think one day our Mr. Tan might  
Let you buy his laundry shop. He's in the tongs  
For sure and so runs many things. This place is  
Not his first priority. He's ugly, cruel, and rather sharp—  
A Cantonese—but with a good nose for every kind of profit.  
Perhaps you'd be able to help him out?"

Mama Yuan, you must tell us why you accepted  
Without a second thought the first job that Aunty  
Offered you. Hers was no kindness. Ah Mama,  
When I think of you now in later years,  
Your head lying back against our downy pillows,  
Your face wrinkled, shrunken tight in desiccation,  
Your hair leaching out its color from coal to steel,  
And tending too steeply sharp towards cloudy white,  
I become sad. Your eyes now sometimes grasp at mine  
Like the reaching of an intrepid mountaineer  
Against the sheerest face, who with darkness  
Coming on searches for a hidden handhold in the rock.  
So seeing you, I would be your reliable belyer,  
Winding up the rope that binds our lives,  
As I alone become our faithful storyteller.

Oh Mama, you must help me explain to everyone  
How you found a way to thrive at Tan's old laundry.  
Aunty got you a tiny room above the place,  
Where you could feel those industrial machines  
Spinning in their cycles like a hundred madly-whirling  
Planetary systems. How the apartment trembled  
When the washers all hit their stage at the same moment!  
As if your daily life didn't have enough of banging  
Back and forth—working first for Aunty Cha  
Who had you diapering her neighbor's children,  
And then the nastiness of Mr. Tan, who yelled  
Uncontrollably when client's shirts weren't folded  
Fast enough. Yet you survived somehow,  
Kept a tight hold on your cool, faced down the screaming  
Boss and comforted the tens of crying babies, worked  
Fourteen-hour days with only a break to eat some raisins,  
Read a few pages from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*.  
You were preparing yourself in case you were a fool,  
Had made a big mistake coming to America.

And later when you first began to show, how Aunty Cha  
Was horrified. "Pregnant?" she began; "But how?"  
"With whom?" Then you explained about  
The pilot—the way he looked at you, opened you

With just a glance; resistance had been futile.  
Finally Aunty accepted it was all true; you were soon  
To have a child. “Now the INS will never  
Kick you out, though Uncle’s sponsoring you  
Ought to have been enough. Why did you do it?”

The cruelest month for mothers must be the ninth.  
Mama Yuan, how long was that drear year-end  
December? Did I weigh any less upon your body then  
Than on your soul? The morning of the winter solstice—  
That darkest time of year—when the machines were  
Churning up their wash, your water broke.  
Suddenly the contractions came,  
Slowly at first, then starting to gain speed. Quickly  
You called up Aunty Cha, who was as always  
Holding court over her friends at the Mah-jongg table  
To take you to the hospital. She knew only Mount Sinai,  
A long way north at ninety-ninth from Bayard street.  
And Tibetan though she was, she still wouldn’t pay  
For your taxi ride uptown. Nonetheless Aunty  
Held your hand as the two of you descended to the subway,  
Placed two tokens in the turnstile, and hurried for the  
Five express to eighty-sixth. “From eighty-sixth” she said:  
“I’ll fork out for a cab—that’s only fourteen blocks,  
By far a better fare. Pei-Feng dear, you really shouldn’t  
Have gotten pregnant. It’s inconvenient and expensive,  
And it’s only just beginning. You’re my niece and I’m  
Responsible for you, I understand, but really you ought to  
Have thought of money before you fucked that pilot.”  
To such words Mama, you gave no answer,  
Just a hard-steel look that said your will would not  
Be bent by such statements of obvious injustice.

The five train was slow in coming—too slow by half  
For what you felt. How long ago already had your  
Contractions started? Aunty had misjudged the time  
And you went into labor right there on the platform  
In front of all the people. You stumbled forward a few  
Steps, grabbed for Auntie’s steady hand, then slowly  
Let yourself down onto the concrete platform.  
The young Sikh man who ran the newsstand box nearby  
Was the first to notice your distress, and he ran over,  
Looking worried, a pile of *Wall Street Journals* in his arms.  
“Here, here take these, I’ll lay them out flat on the floor.  
They’re not comfortable exactly, but maybe they will help.”  
Aunty looked at him with mild surprise: “Don’t worry,”  
He added. “They’re fresh from yesterday. Old news  
By now. I keep a big stash behind the counter  
Next to the juices just in case someone needs a

Stock quote that they've lost." An old black woman  
To their left began to wail "Call an ambulance!  
Baby coming through!" Then a white-shoed lawyer  
On the other side took off his Zegna sports coat  
And laid the coal-smoke colored thing over your  
Shoulders to keep you warm. He smiled broadly  
Through straight teeth. "Please take it; I've another  
Five like this one hanging in my closet. The loss of  
This one will only be a pittance." You didn't understand  
What he had said, but watching his bald, hairless head  
Helped very much to ease the pain.

Aunty and the Sikh boy tried to make you  
More comfortable. Over you they spread  
The Zegna jacket the lawyer had made his little gift.  
You closed your eyes then, gritted your teeth,  
And began to push. Aunty held one hand  
As the young Sikh boy gently stroked the other.  
"My name is Moeen," the Sikh boy said. The black woman  
Who earlier had called out for an ambulance  
Came over to sit behind you and cradled your head  
Upon her lap. "No time now to call a doctor,"  
She gently said. "You'll have to have it here.  
But don't worry yourself, I've done this  
Many times before. Take long, deep breaths  
And count down from ten to one as slowly  
As you can. When you're finished do it again.  
Going backwards helps." The five train  
Suddenly arrived and the white-shoed lawyer  
Brusquely interrupted, "I'm so sorry, I have to leave.  
I've got a pressing meeting. Do please enjoy the coat."  
And in a moment he was gone. Then looked back at you  
Just once, waving shyly from the rear window  
Of the train.

Mama Yuan, you must tell all the people  
How surrounded by this circle: Aunty Cha, a Sikh boy  
Named Moeen, the black woman who pillowed you  
Through all your birthing pains, I was born.  
Deep beneath the surface of the Earth I swam out  
From your splayed legs, took in my first breath of air,  
And let out a cry loud enough to wake the world above.  
Moeen the newsboy swaddled me in the *Wall Street Journal's*  
Business pages then swirled me over to your arms—  
He, the black woman, and Aunty Cha,  
Along with all those unknown riders of the New York City  
Subway, sole witnesses to the strange location of my birth.

## Book I—Childhood

### Sheets

My first memory is of Tan's little laundry—  
The green washing machines, the yellow-painted  
Dryers large enough to house an entire  
Chinese family. I recall never needing  
Socks. Always there was a mismatched pair  
A careless customer had left behind  
For my adoption. I vested and divested  
Myself with odds and ends, forgotten bits  
Of sartorial stuff. Clothes made the girl  
As an amalgam. Better still than clothes were sheets  
And pillow-cases. Like geometric planes of  
Tiny universes to be forgotten in I found them. Folded,  
They made a beggar's shirt, an evening dress, a toga  
For a little Roman. Tented, sheets would form a shelter  
Re-designed upon a whim; when laid over a chair  
Sheets would shape themselves into a landscape  
To be crawled across: make mountains, valleys  
From just a wrinkle—then a river's course  
Springs from a fold, a horizon rising at the edges.  
Turbans for our grand adventure are wound  
With just a whirl. Hide your face behind a  
Pillow-case to become another person,  
Be like a ghost to frighten those who  
Never see the soul beneath the surface.

In my early years Mama and I slept together,  
One of us beside the other in our bed.  
During my infancy she put me on her stomach,  
And I would fall sleep with the rocking of her breath,  
Like Noah in his ark upon the worldwide ocean.  
As I grew, gaining weight, I would lean my head  
Upon her shoulder, and we would descend together  
Into the lands of sleep. Between our sheets I'd lay  
Nights staring upwards, eyes searching towards the sky  
To find myself, my unexpected origins; sweeping the stars  
That I imagined moving month-by-month across  
Our painted ceiling, seeking the compass point  
Of my conception. At night, when it grew  
Cold and the stars' beckoning grew ever brighter,  
Both of us wrapped warm blankets over our shoulders  
And like ancient queens folded into the finest ermine  
We would pad around our dingy palace drinking tea  
Our blankets dragging behind us in a royal train.

Then I was three and Mama taught me  
English letters, first to sound and once I could sound,  
To write. Together we copied out the alphabet,  
Capitals first then lowercase. Mama wrote first.  
Happily I matched her marks, mine made  
In a red ballpoint from the laundry, and hers,  
Because she already knew how to form characters  
Of many sorts, in elegant black-ink swashes  
Made from a fountain pen we'd borrowed  
From Aunty Cha. Together we filled square-ruled  
Notebooks with our words, sheet after sheet  
Holding our lines of neat-rowed writing,  
Moving from letters, to words and then to sentences:  
"America is the land of freedom," we wrote down.  
"Buy stock in IBM," I added. Mama was especially  
Proud of: "Ronald Reagan is an old white geezer."  
As soon as I could write with ease—sometime after  
My fourth birthday—we took a trip around the corner.

Up the street we went together, hand in hand  
To where Mama said were kept great treasures:  
The greatest in the world. We walked into  
That hall one freezing January morning, through the  
Broad wooden doors above which stood a line of letters  
So high I couldn't see them. "Mama, mama, what do  
They say?" Pei-feng slowly sounded out the words "New York  
Public Library." Then she added in her whispered Mandarin  
"All the secrets of the world are hidden here,  
The answers to the world's problems and the source of  
Consolation. When you are sad come here to laugh,  
When you are lucky to be laughing, come here to learn,  
When you are learning, you may discover here  
How much you have yet to learn. If you would like  
A home away from home come here to find it.  
In a library, my love, you will never be alone." In time I  
Discovered everything was as Mama said: and a cosmos  
Made of words was opened up before my eyes.

Within the sheets and covers of borrowed books  
I grew up quickly, hungrily drinking down all these  
Newfound English words and living on literature  
From our lending library at East Broadway  
Where Portuguese and Yiddish would jostle for space  
With Mandarin Chinese. Someone had translated  
Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. Mama devoured that  
One, its ideas flowing into her with giant gulps  
Like a child sucking up hot chocolate. Every day  
We read together—Mama in a chair with her philosophy,  
A wordy medicine for lonely times, taken in draughts

Between her washing work, and I, behind her  
In the laundry, my butt flat on a machine,  
My back propped up on a pillow against the wall,  
Taking in reading from all the worlds I could imagine.  
Mama's English improved along with mine  
As together we grew in leaps and bounds of thought.

As soon as I was big enough to carry loads of clothes  
I helped out with working in the laundry,  
Got good at loading ten washers at a time  
Starting them up in measured intervals so each  
Would cease in proper sequence and no time would be  
Wasted starting with the drying. I'd load those whirling  
Things up to their maximum, count out on a little abacus  
The total minutes, then set those drums to spinning, their  
Dials madly ticking down the minutes like an  
Undetonated bomb waiting to blow, till all the dry stuff  
Was ready to come out. I learned to sort a stack  
Of skivvies faster than a full-out functioning  
Chinese factory. Together Mama and I put in  
Our twelve-to-fourteen hour days, six days a week  
Till Sunday came around and we could briefly  
Measure out our leisure—I to play and walk,  
And Mama, O wise mama, to read her books as ever.

Early on I discovered the pleasures of creating imaginary  
Friends. What else does one do as a child in a working  
Chinese laundry? I made myself into Zorro, Captain Hook,  
I was a slant eyed Cat In the Hat who sought her  
Heffalumps behind the piles of long-forgotten towels.  
From this cast of characters I made up my own stories  
Had sock-ball armies with whirling shoelaces invade  
The land of Rolled Up Pants. Late at night, after a  
Long day of washing, Mama and I would take on  
Different roles. I made her play the Grand Vizier of  
Baghdad—the clever Iznogoud—while I pretended  
To be the Caliph's daughter. With underwear on my head  
My face painted in blue blush, I could become a little Smurf.  
Lucky Luke—the cowboy who shot faster than  
His shadow, and Asterix the little Gaulish warrior  
Were also among my favorite imaginary friends.  
Though they appeared in different tales,  
I had them meet as allies in a Medieval-era battle,  
Become companions, then fall in love.

Asterix and Lucky took on the world of evildoers  
By holding hands in public. Intelligence in Asterix  
And skill in lovely Lucky were together an unstoppable  
Combination. Stupidity and intolerance fell dead

At the feet of my dynamic duo. When my amazing heroes  
Decided to move to Canada to get married,  
All the imagined world applauded. Lucky looked  
So cute in his short white wedding dress!

After learning about Icarus and his tragic  
Fall, I decided that his problem had not been  
Excessive pride—what we've been told—but merely  
An inadequate pair of wings. So I re-wrote the story  
With Icarus as a famous flier. I imagined he flew upwards  
Until he discovered unseen constellations, star formations  
No other soul had seen. In my story there were no Gods  
Up there upon Olympus to punish people for ambition,  
For raising themselves from depths and darkness.

Out of a sheet and bits of twine I made my Icarus  
A better pair of wings. I tied triangular sail-like  
Pieces to a worn-out pair of trousers and a long-sleeve  
Collared shirt. Then I found some high stoops on  
Christie street from which to jump. My first set of wings  
Didn't work well. I sprained an ankle jumping off  
One of the higher sets of steps. Along East Broadway,  
Past the synagogues and the public library branch I knew so well,  
I'd run full-tilt my head held horizontal, my hair loose  
And wild about my ears, makeshift wings spread out behind  
In hopes that somehow by running quickly with my invented  
Apparatus I might gain lift enough to raise me skywards  
So I could see from there above the buttress that New York  
Had become to my heart, see it just as Mama had first seen it  
On her arrival.

“Look, look, there's Ginny Yuan, the flying girl!”  
Everyone would exclaim as I ran by.  
People would point and wonder aloud, astonished  
That a Chinese girl, one who should be proper, dutiful,  
And well-behaved, could be so strange. Some even  
Talked to Mama and sternly said “What are you doing  
With your daughter, letting her run wild like that?  
Why isn't she by your side as a proper Chinese girl  
Should be?” To these people Mama replied,  
“Here in America, how I raise my daughter,  
What she does or doesn't do, is no concern of  
Yours. Look please to your own affairs.” In this too,  
Mama had the support of Auntie Cha who said  
“Who's been saying these things about my niece?  
Just tell me their names! I'll spit ragged tea leaves  
Into their eyes. No more mah-jongg games  
For them in my front parlor! Pei-feng, dear,

You're doing a great job with Ginny. Only five years old  
And already writing well. What parent could complain?"

### School

At six my life began to change—it was time for  
Little Ginny Yuan to start with classroom learning.  
And so I left Mama's close embrace, the sanctuary  
Tan's laundry had become. "Parochial school  
Seems best," Mama announced into the air one day,  
As if speaking to someone who wasn't there. "Not quite  
The cost of private instruction, but far better teaching,  
Stronger authority than in those crummy  
Public classrooms, where children think they are  
In charge and always disobey their elders.  
There's no respect in such a place.  
So parochial school for you it is. I'm not sure  
How much I like their teaching of religion  
As part of education, but I don't think  
I see another choice. Now off you go to learn about  
Their tales of God and that skinny hero man they call their  
Savior—Jesus Christ. Hopefully you'll learn  
Other things as well. Remember who's paying  
Your tuition. I expect you to work hard, respect and  
Obey your teachers, and I really need not add,  
Get by far the best grades in the school."  
"Mama, mama" I said, "Of course I understand.  
I will be obedient and dutiful, a stellar student.  
Only may I please wear my pairs of mismatched socks?  
They mean so much to me, and then for sure  
We won't have to purchase other pairs."  
"Certainly my child," she chimed. "As long as that's  
The only way that you intend to break the rules."

Trinity, named first among religious institutions,  
Rose high up on ninety-ninth street. See me that early  
September morning—my pea-coat tightly buttoned,  
My black hair pulled into a well-brushed pony tail,  
Socks of off-white, happily unmatched—holding Mama's hand  
As we scurried to make it to the subway in good time.  
Mama left Tan's laundry for only fifteen minutes—  
Just long enough to bring me to the station. She kissed  
Me on the cheek, then added: "Don't talk to any strangers.  
Stay with the crowds. If a weird looking man asks you  
If you want some candy, stare him directly in the  
Eyes, then firmly say 'No,' and quickly walk away."

See now how Mama Yuan returns promptly to her toil,  
Alone there among Mr. Tan's twirling machines  
Like the lonely elevator operator

Who endlessly drives his box both up and down,  
And thereby is forgotten, rendered invisible  
Through his silent, unobtrusive service.

Suddenly, I wished myself back in Mama's tight  
Embraces, me happily loading my whirling washers,  
Tempting all the dryers to hit their perfect spin,  
While she stood there across the room,  
Folding clothes, repacking them into neat piles,  
Negotiating with her unruly customers,  
Addressing their frustrations and concerns,  
Providing a bit of philosophy as consolation—  
Locke, Spinoza, or Rousseau if they could take it,  
Some juicy gossip from *The National Enquirer*  
If they couldn't.

But I could not help but also quickly fall in love  
With my daily subway ride—the descent into dark worlds  
Enflamed electric with our human ingenuity,  
The running straight of rails from place to place;  
And beneath it all, that tossing together of humanity,  
Raucous bodies choreaed up one against the other  
Classes, ages, races, all bound together in the running  
For a train. Behind us, the bulls that drove us onward  
Were ones of our own making—a hunger for achievement  
Whether for the limelight or just subway's shining tube  
Made little matter. Here an audience—a world at whom  
One might disclaim, or smell, shout or perform,  
Reveal, offend, display, and every other human adjective  
To defy description—a subway ride: where tolerance of  
Nearly everything except one's own precious morals  
Was required.

That first morning's journey, however, was full of  
Trepidation, not for the ride itself, for that was fun  
But for my Mama, her work, and my own school  
Performance. Mama Yuan was depending upon me,  
Having me outwork, outthink, outperform all the other  
Children, a responsibility I bore whether I wanted it  
Or not—one I was born with by virtue of that pilot,  
A man Mama would never see again, did not want  
To know the name of, a father whom I would imagine,  
Winging his way across the globe, touching down  
Momentarily, then leaving the two of us alone,  
Earthbound in our flaws, caught up in material  
Over spiritual desires. Yet leaving Mama that first  
Morning I could not help but feel the whirling  
Hole of loneliness descending into me, the empty  
Feeling pushing through me, splintering my self

Until I felt like broken bits of autumn leaves  
Blown gradually away.

Wistfully now I recall my daily transit under Trinity's  
High mock-gothic front: the way that building's  
Limestone cladding rose up in cross-like structure,  
With classrooms at the top, a dim-lit chapel in the middle—  
Its heavy curtains pulled tight to shut out day  
That we might better find light inside ourselves—  
And the library situated rightly in the basement  
So the teachers said, since founded knowledge should sit  
Well beneath the world of faith. Religion  
Trinity proclaimed, could help people ascend  
Above their disciplines of separate inquiry,  
Binding different realms into a higher plane  
Of thought. What other solution was there  
For disagreement in this life they said, except to find  
A common note, like dissonant singers  
Who hearing a melody sung so sweetly  
Are moved by a strong impulse for harmony  
Then tend towards the splendor of a resolving dominant,  
Till at last they yield to unison. Then the singers,  
Now sounding together in one voice,  
Together burst all limitations, bringing down  
The house of our flawed inhuman reason  
With the true power of belief.

Such was their philosophy, a view its founders  
Hoped was strong enough to leash the frisky dogs  
Of disobedient humanity now running free  
About the world. Discipline and order, so we were  
Told were the sole keys to a successful life, and thus  
Religion in and of itself—what it demanded  
Of subservience and proper due respect,  
Would be our first subject to be taught.

See me now that early September morning  
The only Asian girl among twenty or so  
Others in Sister Smith's grade one class,  
Taking in these proffered lessons. "Welcome to Trinity,"  
Intoned Sister Smith on my first morning there.  
"In this class we will mould your character,  
Bend and shape it into a shield made hard for battle  
Against the harshness of the world. Armed by knowledge,  
With a new faith you will go forth, shining out  
When storms strike, like a blinding ray  
Cast towards unbelievers' eyes. For certain here  
We will learn many useful things. This is  
A proper curriculum after all, with every field

Of knowledge to be opened to your minds,  
But our religious studies will come first.  
Go around the room and introduce yourselves.  
Give us your name, then tell us something unusual  
About you we should remember.”

“I am Jane Aaronson, began the first girl, Jane,  
Who was short and freckled and had an upturned nose,  
And on the weekend I like to go to Coney Island  
To ride the Ferris wheel.” Then on to the second:  
“My name is Martha Bronk. My father runs  
A hardware store, and so if you need some nails,  
Just let me know.” This provoked widespread laughter.  
“And you,” said Sister Smith, pointing at the third girl  
In the front row of the class, a slight built child with long  
Lashes, “Who are you?” My name is Kerry Christian;  
I’m an orphan. Children’s Services sent me here.”  
“Christian, did you say?” interjected Sister Smith,  
“A lovely name. Will you be with us for the year?”  
“Sister,” said the girl Kerry Christian in reply,  
Her head demurely tilted towards the floor  
“I want to be like you, a sister too. I will remain  
At Trinity as long as great God allows.” And so we ran  
On through all the girls assembled there,  
Through names like Goodman, Herbert, Roberts,  
Sorenson, until we came at last to me, my last name  
By starting first with “Y,” making me be called  
Last among all those there who were to name  
Themselves. “I am Ginny Yuan,” I blurted out,  
“I was conceived of a man with wings, then  
Born deep underground.” This was the truth  
Though stated slant. Why I was not literal then,  
Straightaway tried to explain about the pilot, my  
Accidental subway birth? Was I compelled perhaps?  
Did God make me do wrong? I was too young to know  
How badly such a declaration would be heard—  
No kindness from that quarter. “Yes, yes you do  
Look like you just crawled out of a dirty hole,”  
Shouted Peggy Moser to great guffaws of laughter  
From among the other girls. “Didn’t you know  
You were supposed to take a proper bath  
Before coming into class today?” jumped in  
Jane Quigley. “Do those slant eyes make it easier  
To peer through darkness when you’re crawling down  
Those subway tunnels you inhabit?” added another.  
“Silence girls!” roared Sister Smith in a voice  
Powerful enough to silence even Satan.  
“We’re all equal in the eyes of God.” “God is

A white man with oval eyes” shot back Kerry Christian  
Suddenly. “What would he think of *her*?”  
To this Sister Smith made no reply, but pausing only  
For a beat or two of my now racing heart  
Added “Enough of that. Now on to mathematics.  
Take out your workbooks and turn them to page three.”

At home that evening I said nothing of my first day;  
Proper Asian girls do not complain. I held my breath  
Against the hurt and would not even tell Mama  
How I was feeling. When she asked for first day news  
I displayed my homework, done I knew correctly,  
Without a flaw, the sums flowing from me  
Like air currents running underneath an rigid wing.  
It was only early the next morning,  
Sitting alone among inches of water in the tub,  
Behind the well-locked bathroom door  
That I then allowed my tears to flow,  
Knowing this water would mix among the worlds  
Of moisture there and drain away,  
Lost in the sewer systems that link our lives  
Through the discarded things we wash away.

The next morning in my anger I wore  
Red socks to school in contravention of the  
Uniform. The policy called for white and only  
White—a tradition as old and well-respected  
As the school itself. Already I’d heard stories of girls  
Sent home for white socks overwashed—  
Their brightness fading and growing dull,  
A purity made insipid from careless overuse,  
But clearly my red socks ran no such risk.  
My first day yesterday in my off-whites  
I had been warned, but was permitted to stay  
On that condition. Father Peter, our stern, avuncular  
Head of school had said to me, “For the first  
Day we can be understanding, but after that...”  
No sooner had I crossed the school’s threshold  
Than Father Peter, standing at his guard  
Beside the gate, stopped me and demanded:  
“What are you doing child? Don’t you know  
The rules? Your skirt should be blue tartan  
Cut below the knees, your shoes of patent leather  
Snugly tight, your blouse high-buttoned  
To the neck, and your socks as white as clouds  
When God gives us glorious days. Go home  
And change,” he chided. I turned upon my heel  
To face him then: “Father Peter, I am so sorry.  
I know the rules quite well. Though my mother

Runs a laundry and works hard, we are quite poor,  
And I must live on cast-offs from other people.  
We spent to buy the skirt and blouse and shoes,  
But thought that God might grant our saving up  
Some pennies by crimping on the socks,  
And so each morning before class, I sort through  
Such piles of socks as you have never seen, dear Father:  
Heavy woolen ones for giant feet, old lady's socks  
With lace and frills, socks just barely bigger than  
Your thumb, made to clutch a tiny baby's feet.  
Sometimes these match—a holy pair, but often not.  
Do you have any notion of how hard it is to find  
A clean white set in such a situation? O pity me  
Dear father, for I know not what to do.”

“Rules are rules, whatever your lot may be,  
My child. Wherever we lead, you young must follow.  
Though God may show you sympathy, Trinity  
Must not. I won't send you home—you seem  
To me to be a clever girl—but you must remove that  
Red. Such a color cannot be seen in our good  
Halls; it would show too much nerve. Red,  
Of course, was the color of our enemy,  
Lucifer who lost the war in heaven, and was  
Hurled down for all eternity among the nether  
Reaches. Since you are poor my child, be then  
Like our Savior, who I am sure never saw  
A sock, and take those off.” And so  
With this odd compromise, we settled  
And were content. Henceforth, unique  
Among my peers, I wore no socks. Father Peter,  
Who brought us students tea on chilly days  
Told me later my red socks had found  
Good service in the school kitchen as pot-holders  
When he had to lift the boiling kettle from the heat.

We began our second day's lesson with  
The Holy Bible—its Book of Genesis.  
Sister Smith read warmly to us  
Of Adam and of Eve, of their creation,  
And of the good Garden given them  
For their eternal use. Listening to her  
Read to us, early on that second morning  
I found myself falling into her depths,  
Her blue-green eyes were rough round seas  
Framed within her wimple. I admired  
Sister's perfect oval face—a moon it seemed  
Peeking out its white form from darkened clouds.  
Her bow-tie lips spoke each word distinctly

In a motion that loved each separate sound,  
And it was hard then for me  
Not to imagine as she read to us that she  
Was Eve, the first woman in the world,  
Who knew as yet so little of the world's corruption.  
In my imagination I saw Sister Smith in Eve's  
Still happy stead moving here and there  
Among Eden's endless bounty  
Gathering all the necessities for a couple's daily life.  
Yet who was to be her Adam?  
Could she have done her chores unclothed  
With him nearby, too pure in a world  
Before the fall? Sister seemed to me so proper  
And wholly without corrupting thoughts.  
Eve with Adam had surely sinned, I felt,  
Eaten then with eagerness the fruit that was  
Forbidden. I couldn't see such unholy acts from  
Sister Smith. Those white hands seemed  
To waft her a world away from all earthly  
Powers of temptation. Never could she  
Have been to me the thing I knew I was—  
A bearer of other's dirty linen.

The other children who saw me sockless  
Knew then that I was different and left me alone  
To contemplate my busy thoughts.  
When I stared narrowly at Peggy Moser  
(Just for the fun of it—to see what she would do)  
She began to blush, then looked away, embarrassed.  
The others too seemed to avoid me, too frightened  
Now that I had befriended Father Peter.  
Only Kerry Christian would consistently look up,  
Meet my sharp look and send back  
Her own hard-pebbled certainty  
Confident that whatever she might appear to us,  
Her grasp remained well within her reach.  
Alone of all the others, Kerry seemed unimpressed  
By what she heard from Sister Smith,  
In daily lessons paid little attention  
To the tuition, but with head tilted down,  
In what appeared to be humility, crossed her hands  
Upon the desk in front of her, pressed her thumbs  
Together as if she was emphasizing some important  
Observation to herself, and remained that way  
Until she sensed other eyes upon her, then met  
Their gaze with as much force as those who  
Looked at her. Uncanny in her sense of knowing  
This little long-lashed girl had a sixth sense

Of what was happening. At times she seemed caught  
In a prayer, at others to know answers to questions  
The second they were asked.

That afternoon we moved onwards, forward  
In the Book of Genesis, verse by verse,  
As Sister read to us, explaining what  
Each passage meant. “And the eyes of both  
Of them were opened, and they knew that they were  
Naked; And they sewed fig-leaves together, to make  
Themselves some aprons,” she read. At this point  
Somehow compelled again, I raised my hand.  
“What did they do when the fig-leaves became dirty?”  
Didn’t they have to take them off for washing?”  
Sister Smith couldn’t quite repress a replying smile.  
“To tell the truth I’m not quite certain.  
I never thought of that. But no doubt God found a way  
To be sure that they never saw one another naked,  
For otherwise they would have been ashamed.”  
I didn’t understand how exactly this leaf washing  
Happened or why they were embarrassed  
Since they had both been created without leaves  
Happiest in Eden there without a speck of clothing  
But finally I figured it was better not to press  
The point.

Adam and Eve before they were cast out  
Into the east of their good garden were beautiful to me,  
Their perfect freedom, their gorgeous bareness,  
Bodies moving unconsciously through space.  
When I thought about the roundness of the apple,  
Its wayward arcs, its shaded redness,  
The knowledge eating it would bring,  
My mouth began to water; it began to open of its own  
Accord, in eager hopes of finding flesh.  
With no fruit beside me to fill my hunger  
I chewed at my fingertips for some distraction.  
We moved on then to other stories  
Afterwards in later days: Abraham and Isaac,  
Moses and the Red Sea parting  
But during all these tales my mind would wander  
Back to Eve and to her handsome Adam,  
And wondered always about those fig-leaf aprons.

When I came home that second afternoon  
And finally yielded to Mama’s questionings  
For news—all that had happened,  
The teasing, the teaching in religion—she nearly hurled.  
“These are the values they want to teach you!

An end to independent reason,  
Faith overcoming all differences of thought?  
And the behavior of those girls!  
No, no, this will never do!"

But already it seemed I had found a love  
For Sister Smith—couldn't wait until tomorrow  
When I could hear her lovely voice again.  
"But Mama, they teach math and science too!  
Their point is only that religion should be  
A framework—a way of making sense  
Out of our far too messy world."

O Mama, let me stay at Trinity. See I already have  
The calculations done for today's homework,"  
And I handed her my newly-done assignment.  
She examined what I'd given for a few moments.  
"You've made a mistake here: Three and nine  
Are not eleven—this is just an oversight I trust."  
"Yes, mama, I know of course that together  
They make twelve. I will correct it."  
"Little one, no more mistakes! We can't afford it.  
Ginny dear, are you sure you really want to stay  
At this school? Wouldn't you prefer to take the risk  
Of going to a public institution? "Really, Mama  
I don't mind," I answered. "I enjoy Sister Smith  
And how she reads." And so, for the moment  
It was settled. Sockless then for many mornings  
I went again and again to Trinity—got wry smiles  
From Father Peter, who ever at his doorway post  
Shook his head in generous exasperation.

In class I soon fell in love with math  
As deep into a well—a pure and quiet beauty,  
The subtle perfection of running sums,  
Each trailing tails off towards the horizon.  
Math was an animal dashing that we could catch  
If only correct answers could be uncovered,  
Quiet creatures fallen into the trap of reason.  
And to catch them, what tools we had!  
How quickly we shot kilometers of space  
When at last we learned to multiply. Subtraction,  
Division, these I liked less; they were a returning,  
A retracing of paths we had gone down long ago;  
My wish was ever to catch my prey without a  
Turning back. In a special rule of mathematics,  
I decided that infinity divided by itself  
Made not one, as the identity rule would say,  
But in this case made infinity itself,  
So that division for once had no effect,

But merely made again what it had started with.  
Daily I dreamed about quantities growing  
Upon quantities already measured, each number  
Feeding the next one in its sequence  
Until these together were grown into a chaotic herd  
That I could corral together with my ropes  
Made from the flying slip line of computation.

“Children,” said Sister Smith as my second winter  
Wore on towards spring. “Now we must also learn  
The history of our good faith, how it came to be,  
Grew to assume its present shape. That way  
You each will rightly know how to worship God.  
Ours is the good faith of Jesus savior everlasting,  
Who died for human sins.  
Girls, what is a sin?” “Something you yourself  
Would never do,” replied Jane Quigley from  
Behind my back. “Good,” responded Sister Smith.  
“And there are how many?” “There are Seven Deadly sins,”  
Said Sheila. “Name them.” “...Sloth...envy...pride...  
I’m sorry Sister Smith, I don’t remember  
Any of the others.” “Memorize then,” said Sister Smith.  
“Repeat all together after me: lust, gluttony, greed,  
Sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.” And together we  
Repeated: “lust, gluttony, greed...”

“Children, you may suppose that these sins  
Have equal weight, that all should be held  
In someone’s same contempt, but this is not really so.  
The men who wrote the Bible were often wrong.  
Dear children, I will teach you about sins,  
Which ones to avoid, and which are venial,  
And so easily forgotten. Greed and envy, girls  
Are never sins, but virtues. Greed first  
Is great, a minor god, and well worthy of your worship.  
Greed makes the world rich through redistribution.  
What is the world without our alms for others?  
Thus far in North America all our great preachers,  
Shepherds of good greed, have been men, but I hope  
One of you will one day do what they have done,  
And bring money to the service of our God,  
Provide us with the funds to free sinners from their  
Wrongs. Have you ever seen the happiness on the faces  
Of a giving congregation? Generosity makes for joyful  
Hearts, and greed, however bad it may sound to you  
Is just the corollary of generosity—one cannot exist  
Without the other. So one key lesson for you girls  
To remember is that greed makes the world go ‘round;  
It is a democratic virtue, sending goodness to all

In equal measure. One of you at least must be like  
Our men, a preacher beyond reach who persuades,  
Shows people how heaven heeds not money,  
But arrives from alms for the church's benevolent ideas.  
You, mysterious speakeress, would prompt the people  
To give up what is proper—their careful savings to the  
Church. Remember, we here in North America  
Are not like those evil Papists, selfish believers  
Who funnel all their money to that old man in Rome,  
An uncrowned, unwanted king. We here return our money  
To our congregations, provide them with great halls  
Grand enough for groceries and childcare,  
Spiritual songs, and bowling alleys. You must accept  
Being a capitalist for God's good grace, see commerce  
As your ally in building a better church. Be greedy, girls  
And fund those who would find a faster way to heaven.”

“Envy too is good, for it is merely the expressed desire  
To have what others have. Yield to envy if this will  
Give you the wealth you can give over to the church.  
Wanting the material possessions of your neighbor  
Cannot be a fault, for God smiles upon the richness  
Of his kingdom. The poor too desire to be rich,  
Who then could want to thwart them in their want?  
What people can be made to give you should accept.  
Resist implacably, however, the envy of the society of  
Others. A desire for this or that associate, friends in  
High places, attention from adoring crowds; this is quite  
Wrong. You need only keep company with our Savior—  
No one else. Be committed to God, and God will  
Give you back that commitment a thousand fold.

Pride, I think, is not a sin, but merely what results  
When you have done a splendid deed. If you are  
A good student, be proud of that! Wear your pride  
Upon your lips, and blow a bit of it at whomever  
You might wish. When you convert a heathen to our  
God loving ways, be proud. Wrath, while problematic,  
Is not a sin but simply an emotion to be used guardedly,  
When you feel it can bring forth good. Be angry  
At those who do not see how ours is a God of good,  
Of truth, of light.

Sloth is bad, but still not yet a sin. Don't be lazy,  
Let's be sure. None of you, my students, in any case  
Will get the chance. Your job here is to work,  
Labor for a better world. So we come now to gluttony.  
Gluttony, children, really is a sin because it makes you fat.  
Heaven is a narrow place; there is no room there

For an over-expanded self. To be abstemious  
In food consumption is a virtue, self-denial of such pleasures  
Is the root of self-control. Your personal passions  
Must not get the best of you. Work hard, consume  
Little food. This philosophy, girls, is the surest  
Way to wisdom. Now this leaves lust. Lust is the worst sin  
Far beyond all—a terrible, horrible wrong, especially for girls.  
Lust is a feeling of the body. Like gluttony it will  
Destroy you. I promise you that in the part of a  
Body that feels the lust, that part will drop off,  
Wither, and soon die. Carnal knowledge is not allowed  
In heaven. If ever you feel lust, you must immediately  
Begin to pray, and pray until the feeling stops.  
Lust is a terrible disease and fervent prayer its only cure.”

As Sister Smith said all of this to us she paced  
Like a caged panther, first moving to one end of the room  
And then the other, always keeping her face  
Towards us. And to emphasize her points she would  
Thrust one arm outward, palm up, in a reverse  
Salute. We children had assumed various poses—  
Most of us leaned forward, frightened by this lecture,  
Afraid of what might happen to us if we should feel  
Some deeper urge, should begin to fall to pieces,  
Or in our hunger yield to some temptation.  
Only there in the back row—where she usually sat,  
Leaning back in her chair or looking out the window  
Kerry Christian sat straight up, in a rigid pose  
At firm attention, her eyes full of fire, a whirl of  
Happiness and arrogance filling every aspect  
In her face.

Reviewing this lecture, I thought on my own sinfulness:  
Greed held little interest for me—what I wanted of  
Money was for Mama, otherwise I felt disdain  
For commerce. I knew I envied the other girls  
Their round eyes, pale skin, high cheekbones  
On sculpted faces. As for pride, since Sister Smith  
Seemed to think it was no sin, I took in stride  
My own pride at my achievements, knowing that  
I had no academic peers among the others in class.  
Sloth I would never succumb to—I could not live  
Without work, the joys of labor. Certainly sometimes  
I got angry, and showed it in my protests against  
Conformity, the wearing of red socks, so concluded  
I could blame myself for wrath. As for gluttony and lust,  
Those wrongs that Sister Smith had set as highest,  
I knew myself free of these, felt no desires of the body,  
Only hungers of the mind.

“Girls, girls,” Sister Smith said one day, “you must  
Learn the ways of good and evil, and so I think  
The best thing is to truly show you goodness and  
The problems with temptation. Long, long  
Ago, when people were better Christians  
Than we are now they wrote plays about the passions,  
Of our temptations, teaching everyone the terrors  
That await the mighty sinners. So the class will put  
On a passion play. Some of you will need to  
Act, pretend to be what you are not. I have  
Roles written here for Jesus, Mary, Joseph  
And the twelve apostles. Who wants a job?”  
Many hands went up. Sadie Smith, a pretty freckled  
Girl began to shout “Jesus, Jesus, someone give me Jesus.”  
Many clamored then for the opportunity to be our  
Savior, but Sister Smith began, “Calm down now,  
Jesus’ role is not for grabs. I decided long ago  
That place would be reserved for Kerry Christian, who  
Has so clearly taken God into her heart, asserted she  
Wants to be a nun. Poor parentless girl. You should all  
Have sympathy for her, model yourselves on this  
Proper child’s behavior as one who has given herself  
To higher, better things. No, what I need first is  
Twelve apostles: Peter, John, Paul and all the rest,  
And someone to play the traitor Judas, betrayer  
Of his people.” So one by one the apostles, Joseph  
And Mary were assigned till in the end there was only  
Judas left, a role no one would willingly take on.  
“Who will be my Judas?” asked Sister Smith.  
“Clearly someone needs to take on the role. How about  
A volunteer?” But no one could be persuaded  
To accept. Then Janice Herbert—cast as the apostle  
James—pointed her pudgy finger in my direction.  
“What about her, the ugly slant-eyed subway girl?  
She was born underground and looks dirty.  
Sister Smith, why not give the nasty role to her?  
I’m sure she can find a way to betray both us and Jesus  
If she just tries hard enough.” A twitter of  
Assent ran through the class, “Yes, Yes” the twitter  
Seemed to say, Ginny Yuan will make a perfect Judas.

And thus it was that I began to act. There I stood  
Repeating Judas’s self-damning lines, memorized  
With mama over the dinner table until we both knew  
The medieval play by heart. Wrapped up in a red shift,  
I moved about the stage as I had been directed  
In sequence, step-by-step as if it were a dance of death.  
Father Peter insisted I should also wear red lipstick

So all would know whose lips had done the deed—  
Judas Iscariot, who sold Jesus to the high priest Caiaphas,  
For money and a kiss. See Kerry Christian across  
From me in pure and cleanest white, an artificial halo  
Hooked onto her head so that she might appear  
To all to have become the savior demanded by her role.  
For the first time I tried my tongue at tripping out  
Temptation: “Oh Jesus look!” I said. “Here is a feast  
Laid out upon a table fit for a conclave of hungry kings:  
Sweetmeats, nougat and praline, barrels of mead made  
From Arabian honey, caviar from the coldest  
Seas. Eat what I have offered!” To this imagined meal,  
That even in its description made my own hunger  
Much more hollow, Kerry’s own voice sang:  
“No, impossible. I will never accept these sinner’s gifts,  
My faith in God’s divinity shall always keep me clean.  
I have come down to earth to free man from  
His wrongs. Indeed, I am certain this is my only purpose.”  
Again I tempted her, a sing-song in my tone, this time  
With riches, hordes of gold piled up in wood and leather  
Chests taken from the evil Philistines. Crowns I  
Offered Kerry, each inlaid with precious stones,  
Again I sweetly sought to push on her the devil’s bargains—  
Palaces, servants, a new robe for every day a year,  
But Kerry’s Jesus was implacable; she only laughed,  
A light and dancing laugh that seemed entirely real  
To me. “You think you can tempt me, you little  
Whoreson Judas, you speck of devil spawn,  
You artless imp of imbecility? Know then that I  
Lead the armies of salvation. Against you who try  
To lead me into evil, I swear I will be the eternal  
Illuminating candle, the hope against any darkness  
Of despair. Apostles all denounce this Judas!”  
She shouted so strongly I was sure she felt this  
To be true. Around me then, the others gathered,  
Jesus and her followers formed into a circle.

In Akeldama there their paper stones were raised  
Against me. Hard upon my head they hurled  
Harsh words, hard thoughts. I collapsed as I had been  
Commanded, fell prostrate into the field of blood  
Until my sides split open from the blows,  
My guts turned out for all to see. Then they tossed me  
Into the burning bush to sear my flesh. Within that  
Earthly realm I died. My bones were turned to ash,  
My ruin a sign of all I had done. My grave, unmarked  
Yields to the world just useless weeds.

Mama Yuan, you must help me to explain  
To everyone how despite the ugly part I played,  
I was drawn up to the pleasures of performance,  
How the dropping of any inhibition happens  
When in an invented character my scattered self  
Finally could rejoin its fractious-fitting pieces  
To be reforged again as one fused whole,  
The sinewy matter of the mind forming  
From memory a bright born person who  
Mimicked well the real. Who might wonder then  
That I could not escape invented characters,  
Played Judas, Jesus, and John the Baptist  
All with equal ease. Into the library  
I would wander to seek for other parts, read  
Fiction, poetry and drama all in an effort  
To expand my knowledge of other selves,  
Hopeful that one day I'd find a self to fit  
My own, a costume in which to clothe my own  
Malleable identity. When I found a character  
I liked I would memorize her lines,  
Back at the laundry I would find a way  
From among the piles of clothing  
To dress myself as I thought that character  
Her or himself would have been dressed  
And standing at the back of the laundry  
Where a sheet hanging from a clothesline  
Served as my scrim, I would imagine a theater,  
A Teatrus Mundi—a stage for all the world  
Where each upon our little orb could come to watch  
This play, be entertained, begin to lose themselves  
In the life of someone else. Mama, would read the parts  
I could not play. Aunty Cha would play the role of  
Audience and would clap heartily when I  
Finished my performance. "What a girl  
You are," she would say. "You could be  
An actress if you want, a grand dame  
Of the stage."

O Eurasian girl, odd-made child of semi-slanted  
Eyes who so gladly takes on these lineaments  
Of someone else, who are you really?  
Boy or girl, man or woman, lord or servant,  
You become each and all with equal art.  
What self are you: made from two older worlds  
And thrust into the new?

In the beginning was the Word...and the Word  
Was as God. So through this passion play  
The role I had become—unchosen, but put upon me,

Words became as Gods to me. Early on I knew  
That I was meant to serve the world of language,  
So each morning when I awoke next to Mama  
Who lay there still asleep, I whispered  
Over and over to myself: “In the beginning  
Was the word and words were as gods,”  
Until I knew that this was true.  
Words were to make my world.

Every morning in chapel I would watch the tall  
Candles that burned on one side of the altar  
Like the thin flame of human life. Too often  
In the sermons made my thoughts began to wander,  
I looked upwards at the wooden beams that arced  
Across the ceiling, lost the meaning of the words  
Father Peter spoke for us, and dreamed alone,  
To my own private self, that if there was a God,  
That God must be architecture, a construction that  
When well-made will move us to good works.  
And when the sermons were finally finished, I found  
Such sadness when Sheila Aronson came by with  
Her snuffer—a little bronze bell made to extinguish  
These too small wisps of light. Sheila made no sound.  
Stealthily she stepped up with her little suffocater.  
Holding it in both hands, she would poise it over  
A candle, and then, with a sudden drop, like a guillotine  
Coming swiftly down, she'd breathe out first one candle  
Then move on to the other to do the same again  
With brutal force, send wax splashing down the tapers  
Before vaulting the chapel back into its former shadowed  
Darkness. Like a cat she would step down from her  
High altar, then sneak along the choir to return  
The snuffer to its rack. I would sit there alone  
After the others had all returned to class. I'd find a pew  
In front, slip in to look around some more, gaze up  
At the light streaming in through that parti-colored glass  
Set high above, and know that I felt God only in this.

Why then in a universe that would itself  
Someday burn out—all things bright and beautiful  
Turned then as dead and bare as frozen moons,  
Flowers on the hill no more, no choirs singing  
In the nave, all voices weakened and grown mute,  
The beauty of a building that once shouldered  
Its way skyward, now tumbled down to dust;  
Why if all this would someday leave, so that one day  
Our children would no longer themselves have children,  
Why then have religion? Of what use is an  
Unjust God to us? Can God teach us to smile,

To laugh at the truth of totality's impermanence?  
Is spring's beauty just because it passes,  
Or do we feel its beauty most because though she  
Dies once we know she will return again?  
Where is there God in this final, unremembered death?  
What value this great struggle to keep on living  
If we cannot somehow, someday, pass on what we know—  
To show to some next world what springtime is—  
Show them the atoms we have altered by the very fact  
Of our existence? So much will be forgotten.  
Many springs are still to be, many, many lives  
To see and read, to walk and think within  
The shallow shadows of a sun-dappled cloister.  
I cannot know what is to come. My children  
And theirs and theirs on after that may well be alive,  
But then, and then, and then what after that?

O Mama Yuan, you must help me to explain to all  
The people about the flasher on the train. Every morning  
I rode to school among the crowds, the pushers and  
The paper shovers, people busily regarding their news  
Or simply lost in their own thoughts. I don't  
Remember what he looked like, only the strange  
Combination of triumph and pity on his face.  
I was only eight and not very tall; I hardly came  
To the man's waist. When his raincoat opened  
Showed his erection rising from his unzipped pants  
I felt disgust, an overwhelming wish to retch, to run  
Away. Why? Why had he done this to *me*? Who was I  
That I had been selected to experience this gross violation?  
I got off at the next stop because I needed air,  
To see the sky, to feel for a minute  
The winds of autumn rustling in my hair.

That evening, despite the shame I felt, a sense this  
Man's wrong was somehow, perversely my own fault,  
I confessed to Mama, explained the situation, all my  
Disgust and shame. "People," she began, "men too often—  
Behave in ways that suit their needs. This man cannot ever  
Be forgiven. He is ill or sad or both. You must be  
Careful, Ginny. And yet this too is part of  
What happens in a city, an aspect of its performance—  
A display that is offensive, unacceptable, and dangerous  
But paradoxically also a part of our grand human drama.  
The passions, like managers of a playhouse,  
Often force upon men unwilling parts,  
Without consulting their judgment first.

Ginny, think of the city without sin, a place  
Where everyone obeyed the rules, did just what  
They were supposed to do. Would that be any better?  
That man wants to be someone he is not  
Less lonely, less isolated; he surely needs a friend.  
He is a disgusting pervert, but is playing a role  
That he has not entirely chosen. Yes, he did the act,  
And I find that reprehensible. In fact I intend  
To call the cops. But understand this about wrongdoing.  
Here is not the vaunted free will so often preached  
By that religion you listen to so well. Feel angry  
As you should, and I do too, feel violated,  
As well you should as well, but find some pity too  
Within your heart, and which I will struggle for as well,  
For such a man is more sad than he can be called  
Immoral. So ride the subway as you do each day.  
Be careful! But take it all also as a part of  
The adventure.”

When we learned about Greek mythology I had  
To choose the story of a god or goddess to present  
For others in the class to hear. I chose Diana the Huntress  
With her bow, her ever unerring arrows.  
“Diana is the Goddess of the hunt,” I reported.  
“She lives fleet-footed in woods and fields  
And may sometimes be seen when the moon is full  
Chasing down her quarry. Diana is the huntress,  
Yet she is never hunted. Men worship and desire her,  
For she remains a virgin, not the possession of any man.”  
“An excellent presentation, Ginny,” said Sister Smith.  
“Diana, though goddess of a heathen people  
Should still be a model for all you girls.  
Diana is good at what she does, discovers professional  
Opportunities, and preserves her independence.  
In her behavior she is much like a well-known holy woman  
From our better Christian realm. Girls, who does Diana  
Remind you of?” Rebecca Sorenson raised her hand.  
“Yes, Rebecca, the answer, please.” “Is it you, Sister?”  
Answered Rebecca haltingly. “No. Though I am flattered  
By your mistake. Dear girls, what Christian woman  
Should be your heroine?” Then Kerry Christian  
Raised her hand. “Yes, Kerry.” “The Virgin  
Mary, Sister should be our model of the woman  
We all want to be.” “Excellent Kerry! Yes! See what an  
Example of good Christian faith is demonstrated here.  
Whoever named you chose well, young Kerry Christian.”  
Sister Smith taught us economics, or should  
I say “Consumption Science,” for that is what she

Called it. “Buy, brave children! Buy! You all  
Have a responsibility, remember, always to  
Purchase things. Know that consumption science  
Works on the principle of the velocity of money.  
The faster money moves, the better off  
Everyone becomes. So if you have  
A dollar you should spend it, so that by spending  
You send money to another person, and thus  
Improve the lot of your fellow fallen humans.  
If you are penniless, just borrow off someone else.  
Don’t worry about repayment. If you just  
Buy fast enough, the other person will get rich.  
Debt, my children, can never be a sin. Pray for  
God to intercede in what you owe, and all  
Your liabilities and accumulated interest  
Will suddenly be forgiven. Pray and then pray harder,  
And you will gain the power to prey upon others.  
Know that God is giver of all riches; he wants you  
To be wealthy. Have faith in the free market,  
And it will show its faith in you. Put your trust  
In money and you can never be misled.”

Then Kerry Christian raised her hand,  
“What about the earth? Won’t Mother Earth suffer  
If we’re doing all this buying?” “Mother Earth!”  
Snorted Sister Smith. “What is Mother Earth?  
The earth is no one’s Mother that I know. Remember  
What the Bible tells us—that Man (and Woman too)  
Were meant to rule over all things. The earth was  
Given to us for our use or abuse, whichever one  
We please. The Bible says nothing of responsibility.  
To guard over our brothers and sisters, respect our  
Parents and obey our teachers—that at most is all.  
Beyond that, girls, power is yours to use as you see fit.  
Change the earth! Make that your goal, and everything  
Will be as it should. Scorched grass recovers;  
Resources are renewed; God smiles on human work.”

Mama Yuan, how shall I explain to everyone about  
Consumption races—how we did field trips to a  
Wal-Mart on Staten Island and were set the problem  
To find the most efficient way of buying things.  
With wads of mock money in our hands,  
And careful diagrams to plot our course,  
We raced for six packs of processed cheese  
At the far end of aisle 3, boy’s plastic motorcycles  
In aisle 26, and found to our dismay that polyester  
Hawaiian print aprons (on sale for 15% off)  
Were hung with women’s plus sized underwear

(We should have guessed), instead of being  
In aisles 16–19 with all the cooking implements.  
Our carts now full, we added up our purchases,  
Calculated costs with all the sales, then paid up,  
As Sister Smith, standing regally at a register  
She'd somehow borrowed for our classroom use,  
Checked off our items from her comprehensive list.  
Of course this was only an exercise that Sister had  
Somehow won with worldly charm, and we left  
Our purchases at the exit to be later returned.  
Always in this form of competition, Sister Smith  
Would urge us on: "Faster, faster," with a raised fist  
In the air, she would proclaim the virtues of unbridled,  
Unregulated markets. "Remember dears that the velocity  
Of the consumer encourages the velocity of money.  
Spend, good children, spend, and forever God  
Will smile upon you!"

Sister Smith became my fascination. Long I dreamed  
Of what lay behind the wimple, of her easy authority  
Over us all, the fear and respect she naturally  
Inspired. More than once I remember passing her  
Open office door—set ajar so that all might know  
She was still present—and seeing her there, bent over  
A bible or *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, or with her  
Head angled, eyes quickly scanning a pile of student  
Exercises. Around her in her office were lines and  
Lines of shelves filled end to end with titles  
That seemed, from my distance, to open upon  
A world filled with discovery. While I could not  
See myself always bending to her wishes, yet I felt  
Deep respect for Sister's choice—the patience to  
Teach and learn, to forgo fame in the public forum  
Because of her devotion. Yet Sister's preferences  
And biases were clear to me—intelligence and passion  
In a student drove her to help beyond reason,  
And this she seemed to do with Kerry Christian.  
What they spoke of or worked on exactly I did  
Not know, but several times I remember seeing  
Kerry—her neat dark hair held back in a pony tail,  
Her freckled face and white skin—sitting by Sister  
In her office doing her homework.

One day as I was walking alone along the street  
I found a dollar—George W. was staring up at me.  
His face was wet from hanging in the gutter;  
He was covered in trash. I rescued him, the dollar  
I mean, dried him on a bit of rag I used to  
Blow my nose, and then folded him in two and

Put him in my pocket. I now had extra dollar to my  
Name—a lucky find. Above me the trees  
Showed off their summer leaves; the avenues  
Were radiant; it was hot. I wanted to remember this  
George W., use him for all the things he could  
Provide. For far too long Mama and I had lived  
On fried sardines and boiled rice. My stomach  
Grumbled for other sustenance; I was starving,  
Seeking something better than what we always ate.  
Then I remembered Mama—here was a little sum  
To put towards buying her some minor thing  
A well-thumbed copy of Stendhal, or fresh flowers  
For the space behind the kitchen sink,  
Some gift to relieve her own hard days, her too many  
Hours working. On Carmine street I passed by  
Scoops Ice Cream, turned around, and then  
As if by magic, through a certain slant of light  
Oppressing that warm afternoon, was drawn  
Inside the store. The space was cool, the smells  
Rising from the freezers recalled a world of  
Carnivals. “You look bushed. How about some  
Ice cream?” the tall man behind the counter said.  
“Have a taste of our double-chocolate fudge,  
It’s one of our most popular.” Then, smiling broadly  
He handed me the tasting spoon. I swallowed  
That rich cream, and quickly I was sold. “I’ll have  
A double scoop in a sugar cone with some of those  
Yummy sprinkles on the top,” I said, as my mouth  
Began to drizzle with anticipation. He handed me  
My indulgence, and I gave him my George W. dollar  
And headed back out into the heat, my scoops  
Dripping their deliciousness upon my shirt.  
I devoured the ice and too soon it was gone.  
Only then did I think of Mama, tied to Tan’s  
Laundry, unable to leave her mighty post. I recalled  
Sister Smith’s injunctions against gluttony  
Her conviction that unbridled eating was unforgivable  
Cardinal among the sins. Despite my own recognition  
That appetites are natural I couldn’t forgive myself  
For not having thought first of Mama, blamed  
Myself, George W. and being bushed for having  
Given in, putting myself and my needs first  
When I had obligations to Mama Yuan, my only family.  
I found a florist to sell me a rose—flower white  
Of pure intentions, a symbol of my wish for some redemption—  
A means to wash my sins away. I snuck home quietly,  
Tore off my soiled top and tossed it in a pile of dirtys.  
I discovered Mama at her irons, pressed the rose into

Her hands and said: "I brought this for you. Thank you  
Mama for all you do for me." Mama Yuan looked up  
From her labor, tossed her hair-tousled head,  
And smiled a long smile. The rose was not enough to  
Make up for what I owed Mama, but I paid gladly,  
Thrilled for some small sign of my own gratitude  
To reward dear Mama Yuan.

Well now do I recall our first field trip from Trinity  
To Liberty and Ellis Islands. We gathered, twenty from  
Sister Smith's homeroom class, in the Departures Hall  
At South Ferry. Single specks of small blue dresses,  
We coalesced in that vast and ill-lit terminal like bits of  
Dust accreting to a giant star. At our head, gathered into  
Her own separate body, radiant in her black shift,  
Sister Smith was like a moment of night shading luminescence  
We knotted around our teacher for protection, feeling  
Apart from the masses moving, the passing world  
Of people flowing on around us. Onto the ferry  
We tumbled, candies pouring into a jar. We scattered  
Randomly, each finding our own place, a separate level  
From which to watch the journey. Gulls hovered  
In the whipping October wind above, and the smells  
Of Fulton Fish Market floated upwards from the south.  
At the stern I settled in, peering down at the trailing  
Wake, missing already the raucous city's noises,  
Its towering habitations. The sea blew its cooling brine  
Into my face. The water rose to meet me. After a few  
Short minutes, hardly a hop across the water,  
We disembarked at Ellis Island. There, under the vaults  
Of the Registry Hall that barreled high above us,  
Our once disbanded group reformed. Sister Smith,  
Practiced orator that she was, then began her lesson.

"Children, I've brought you here to Ellis Island  
To learn about America. Imagine if you will,  
Yourself arriving from a week-long journey  
Across the sea. Ever since the ship set out from Calais,  
You've been tossed by many waves. You've endured  
Storms, rain, and a rough sea to make it here.  
All your belongings are in a trunk you've dragged  
From your now distant home stuck on the far side  
Of the Atlantic. You're here alone, without  
Resources. For thousands of immigrants from  
Europe, Ellis Island was the only port of entry,  
Where they were first permitted in, or if they were  
Thought to be diseased, marked by a letter  
In white chalk upon their coat, indicating their  
Pathology, and then sent back, because

America wanted none of them. So many long ago,  
Who gave up everything they knew, friends, jobs,  
Relations from the old country, to take a risk  
And come to this new world of the United States—  
Land where one could be free, free to live  
The life one had long dreamed. Ellis Island  
Is the symbol of that dream. Here in the Registry Hall  
Surrounding us, thousands of names  
Were uttered, written down, and changed.  
If you had been, say, Monsieur Drabinsky,  
Now you were simply known as Mr. Drab.  
Suddenly and irrevocably lost even to yourself.  
Ellis Island was a place where selves were erased  
And then had to begin a life anew.”

As we went through the museum, reading  
The placards about the people who'd passed through  
I reinvented Drabinsky for myself. Originally a Pole  
From Lodz, you, my little hero, Vladimir Drabinsky  
Arrive at Ellis Island via Paris where you have been  
Residing. While there you took it upon yourself  
To become a Frenchman. French you understand  
Is the language of nobility, and a gentleman like you  
Will converse in nothing else. When you are asked  
Your name in English, you haughtily reply:  
“Je suis Monsieur Drabinsky, musicien.”  
And then you turn away, as if the little person  
Asking you these questions is not worth  
Your time. No one can pronounce your name:  
“Drab-in-sky.” You do not want to be thought of  
As merely Mr. Drab—a dull fellow who cannot  
Whistle a scale without leaning towards the flat.  
No, no, you are a Prince of higher purposes.  
But in this matter you have no choice. Now and  
Henceforth you will be “Mister Drab” to everyone.  
Once you wore striped shirts; your well-knotted neckties  
Were colored like the rainbow. Now, when you open up  
Your suitcase you find that everything has faded:  
The suits you packed have turned to sere, your ties  
Are worn down to narrow black, and the  
Photograph you carried of your dead wife—  
Hit by a streetcar one Sunday in front of the Lodz  
Cathedral, was soaked in a tempest upon the crossing  
And has now begun to crack. Where then  
O Vladimir is your nobility? Where have your finer  
Accents gone? Everything has disappeared.  
Here in the Registry Hall you fall down on your knees  
And with your face in hands quietly begin to sob.

An old man in tears is such a sight!  
You are cast upon this shore with just yourself  
Brave Monsieur Drabinsky. In such harsh light  
How will you ever be made whole again?

From Ellis' arms we dashed again onto the boat  
For the spit-distance ride towards lady Liberty  
Guardian of all approaches to New York. And then  
I heard Emma Lazarus sing out to me: "Give me  
Your poor, your tired, your hungry, Your huddled masses  
Yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse  
Of your teeming shore..." O Emma perhaps then  
You understood with me how one might stand alone  
At the front of a long ship—a clouded dawn  
Coming in from over east, and marveling to watch  
That new world of New York swim into view—  
An apparition from the skies—and suddenly  
Feel reborn, the way that beggar must have felt  
When after long days living at the rich man's door  
Always unremarked, he finally found his way  
To heaven while the rich man stayed down  
Among the suffering.

So under Lady Liberty's skirts we climbed.  
Through her hammered bronze body we rose,  
Feeling our way upwards along the three hundred  
Spiral steps—a dizzying ascent, until we reached  
Her crown. Then, looking out, we were more silent  
At that view than Cortez must have been:  
Stunned when he first spotted the Pacific.

In music, taught at Trinity by young Mr. Matheson  
I found myself listening intently to snatches  
Of the symphony he played for us: the happy harmonies  
Of Mozart, then Beethoven's onrushing power,  
And Chopin's distinctive tones of momentary silence.  
In instrumentation we began with the recorder—  
Learned our scales: both sharps and flats,  
Ran through all the key signatures. I was no  
Musician—intervals have never been my thing,  
But I practiced hard, enough to make me competent  
To know harmony from melody, to appreciate  
What music meant. "You are an angel child,"  
Mr. Matheson said to me. "When people look at you  
Sideways, they will see your golden wings."  
He had my heart then from that first moment  
And in my childhood eagerness I swore  
Him loyalty—to do his bidding,  
Whatever he might ask. When Mr. Matheson

Sat at his piano, striking out the keys  
Accompanying himself in his high-tenor voice  
How gladly then I sang for him of our re-arisen  
Martyr, that carpenter's son, who gave away  
His worldly wealth all he had or might somehow  
Hope to acquire, whose hate extended only  
To the wealthy money-changers  
Corrupting perfect practice in the temple.

Through music we became acquainted. I had no  
Talent, but I liked to sing, push out a note  
Until my own body began to vibrate at that  
Frequency. But I had passion in my phrasing,  
And Mr. Matheson took to that. "You bring  
The heavens right down to earth with how you  
Sing," he added with a smile. "Come visit me,  
Anytime, and we can work on improving  
Your phrasing—how words are held in breath  
And then released." I needed a friend,  
Someone to help salve the days at a school where  
I had become an object of derision, where the name  
Ginny Yuan was a source of laughter  
Among the in-group girls, so I showed up  
For comfort, singing lessons, an escape from  
Childhood cruelty. Mr. Matheson sat at his  
Piano, vested in his gabardine and silver pocket  
Handkerchief, playing chords that I would try to  
Reproduce for him. Together we worked down in the  
Small basement room where the piano sat.  
I would sing, and as my voice moved up the scale  
Mr. Matheson's smile would always grow, his fingers  
Signaling the increase in volume from piano  
To quite forte. He sang the la's and ti's I made  
Along with me, his tenor a happy accompaniment  
To my own unsure soprano.

Trinity lay over three long and sprawling floors,  
With far more halls, classrooms, and unused spaces  
Than our little number of students could ever seem  
To fill. We moved from class to class in clumps,  
Like snowballs flying across a winter playground.  
Often I would linger behind to peer into  
Empty classrooms, offices, the hidden storage closets,  
Imagining a tutor and her student bending over a book  
About the fall of Rome, a teacher in his seersucker standing  
At the board, scribbling out quadratic equations in yellow  
Chalk, a janitor breaking down boxes in a windowless  
Room. During study hall I would sneak out and  
Find a quiet place in which to study. By the window

Of a third-floor classroom, I'd seat myself,  
Prop up my legs on an opposing chair, look briefly  
Out the window at the top branches of the trees,  
And start to read.

One sunny Friday afternoon, after other students  
Had gone home, I was wandering the halls,  
Seeking out empty classrooms, when I happened  
To catch sight of Sister Smith and Kerry Christian  
Together in a room. Kerry was standing at the front  
While Sister Smith sat, her tall form leaning back  
Against a chair. I could hear the sound of Kerry's voice  
But not what she was saying. Sister Smith seemed to be  
Listening intently. I caught a rhythm here, the sound  
Of rhyme. Kerry was reading poetry to Sister Smith.  
Sister, whom all we girls thought of as stiff, appeared  
Here at her ease, laid back in a pose of easy listening.  
Listening to the poem, Sister smiled contentedly,  
As if for the first time in her life, drifting away  
On the sound of some sweet music, or resting  
Contentedly by a window after a mid-summer meal.  
Like a spy, a peeping Tom, I continued to observe  
This interaction. The poem ended and Sister Smith  
Rose up from her chair, walked over to where Kerry  
Stood. The teacher approached the student. The girl  
Looked up at the woman, and there was a longing there  
In the girl's eyes—a wetness seeping from the corners  
As if a hint of tears was breaking through  
The edge of someone who hopes to find their home  
Is soon approaching. Looking down at the orphan girl  
Sister Smith reached out one long arm, and put a hand  
On Kerry's shoulder. The girl shuddered. Sister held her  
Glance, then turned away and walked towards the door  
Where secretly I stood. Like a gliding bird I had to fly,  
Both swift and silent from my aerie here to a far hideaway,  
So I would not be caught having seen what happened.  
I knew that this exchange had been private—an act  
I should not have seen. Quietly I crossed the hall  
And entered another empty classroom, sat swiftly  
Down at a desk and took out my math work on equations.  
Seconds and minutes passed, still Sister did not enter  
As I had feared she would, and so my mind spinning,  
Numbers and their operators rising like bubbles  
From a sunlit sea outside that I grasped at but could not  
Catch with my disordered thoughts, I rose from there  
To dash towards home, to seek out Mama among her  
Drying drums, her ironed piles. I said nothing but  
Began to load the washers up, finding some deep

Comfort in the spinning clothing, in the rhythm  
Of daily work. “How’s life?” she asked. “Is everything  
Okay?” I merely smiled and nodded then continued  
With my washing work.

Once I found a way onto the roof of Trinity. Behind a  
Closed door I discovered unlocked, up a steep set of  
Stairs, I found a skylight to the sky. I pushed it open.  
Through the skylight I crawled and upwards went  
Until I stood there, alone on the flat roof. Below me  
Moved the whirling city. I walked to the edge, defined  
Here by a waist-high parapet and so of little danger  
To a girl as short as I.

O Glorious City! The people are fleeing into  
Your embrace. They are hanging about the piazza  
Sipping Illy coffee, they are gathering in galleries, they are  
Dreamers and flaneurs. They are talking about  
Politics, they are building to make the city  
Still more beautiful, they are making love along the  
Avenues, they are dancing naked in the parks.

As I grew up I got to know the regulars at Tan’s  
Laundry, those who showed up to have things washed,  
Stopped by to smile, say a quick hello, or even lingered  
For a bit of conversation. Uncle Guo and Auntie Cha  
Often came in of course. Auntie brought her Darjeeling tea  
And helped us out by stirring up some egg-drop soup  
On the tiny stove upstairs. Uncle entertained us with tips  
About the stock market. From Shlomo Goldstein—  
An unwashed little Jew with a skullcap and open  
Hairy nostrils I learned my Hebrew bible tales  
And the tradition of High holidays. “When I was  
A boy in Tashkent...” Shlomo would begin  
In his Russian-accented English, and Mama  
And I would then fall silent to listen rapt to his  
Unfolding story. For studying the Talmud he told us  
Officials had sent him to the Gulag. There  
For five years he had lived on boiled bread  
When winter came, and buckwheat porridge  
Only in the warmer, better months. Just dreams of Masha,  
His true love back in Tashkent, kept him alive.  
Shlomo’s tragic stories came out in careful portions,  
Like little spoons of measured sugar to sweeten  
Our dull days. Each time he would stop talking  
I would beg him for more. “Tell us another about Masha!  
Did you ever write to her? Did she ever send you  
Better food from home?” But he refused to answer  
All my insistent questions. Always his Masha

Was the girl of happy dreams, the one he loved,  
Admitted sheepishly he had taken to a dance  
Once upon a time, to a picnic among quiet forest groves  
(Just the two of them alone!) That he once and very sweetly  
Had gotten luckily to kiss goodnight  
Beside the doorway of her parents' house as her mother  
Approvingly looked on from behind the shuttered  
Kitchen window. Masha was the one he never saw again—  
Who sadly got away. When he ended his talking  
Mama would always add, "Now Shlomo,  
You must please remember to bring us down your shirts  
To wash. With a story like that there could never be a charge  
For our work." And Shlomo would always  
Take off his yarmulke, make a little bow in her direction,  
And reply, "Next time dear Pei-Feng Yuan. Next time  
I will bring the laundry," And he would then laugh gently,  
Almost to himself, and lean in to try to give Mama  
A kiss upon the cheek. She often would lean back  
In her refusal, but understood his heart was well-intentioned  
And so could never hold such horny sentiments  
Too hard against him. Ever and forever he was invited  
To return, partake of Auntie's tea, and bring his tales  
Of Masha and of Tashkent, even if as we finally began  
To understand, they were not always true.

Of those other who had assisted at my subway-platform  
Birth only Moeen, now grown a little older, but no less  
Sweet came to form a part of our happy circle.  
How he found us I can only guess. An odd series  
Of links from train, to hospital, then to our laundry,  
Gathering stopping points and addresses  
Along the way, each pulled no doubt with difficulty  
From surly assistants trained just to repeat  
"I don't know; it's not my responsibility; I can't  
Help you;" or perhaps he just walked by one day,  
Saw by chance Mama there behind the counter  
Her hands flying in efficiency faster than Ariadne's own  
As they swept the shuttle-cock back and forth  
Across the loom, and then with a warming pulse,  
Formed suddenly a wish to enter our grimy laundry,  
Still afraid to sound out the words he wanted,  
Being like a besotted man with a glass ball  
In his throat but who finally crossed the threshold to say,  
"Hello, my name is Moeen. I was nearby"?

In any case, however he came to find us, I do  
Distinctly recollect Mama kindly replying  
"Of course, Moeen; for sure I remember you—  
Those copies of the *Wall Street Journal*

You laid out for me. How could I forget? You had  
My back. Come in, come in. Ginny here will make you  
Some hot tea. Ginny! Run upstairs and start the kettle  
Boiling. Earl Grey okay?" "I've always been an  
Orange Pekoe man myself. Two sugars please,  
And a little spoon to stir. No milk," he said.  
"How have you been keeping?" Mama began.  
"I'm still at the same newsstand" Moeen replied.  
"I live with my family in Jackson Heights—in Queens.  
My father owns a restaurant there called the Pakora  
Hut. Tell me honestly, Mrs. Yuan, do I seem to smell  
Like curry?" And Mama responded with laughter,  
"Only a little bit. It's not unpleasant. Soon enough  
You will be for us like the sea is for those  
Who live near it—a pleasant sensation that  
Reminds us, draws us on to other times and places."  
Mama sometimes spoke like that. And Moeen  
Then began, "I've brought you the *Journal* copies I used  
That day. Here they are. I thought you might  
Like to have them." "Why thank you. How  
Kind of you to think of us. What's the news  
These days? How's the world of business doing?  
Any tips for investing in the stock market? At this question  
Moeen began to brighten as if Mama had hit on  
Something that he understood: "Yes, inexplicably,  
Sex toys are doing really well." "Sex toys? Really?  
How is that possible?" Mama asked with two  
Dark eyebrows raised. At this point Moeen looked  
Nervously in my direction, afraid to say more,  
But Mama added "Don't worry Mr. Khan, Ginny's  
Ears can take anything you have to say. Ears, you know  
Make a poor fuel for fire. Whatever you've got to say  
She'll have to learn about sooner or later.  
Keeping girls innocent about sex only makes  
Them stupid, so charge right ahead with your  
Explanation." Now a cowed Moeen, bumbling  
Like a nervous boy began, "A sex toy, as you know,  
Is an instrument for self-pleasuring—enjoying  
Sensuality without needing another person there.  
Now because of various social factors—mobility,  
Decline of marriage, fly-by-night associations—people are  
Into pleasure. They want to explore their boundaries."  
"And *this* is a business that is doing well?" Mama  
Replied incredulously. "I don't deny it's strange,"  
Answered Moeen, but sales year-over year are  
Up thirty percent. Manufacturing fundamentals  
Look good, while markup on production costs  
Is well over one hundred percent. Do you have

Any idea of the profit margin on a dildo? They're  
Made in China—where you come from—for only  
A few pennies, and then resold here in New York  
For anywhere from nine to ninety dollars. This is  
Better than cigarettes at Philip Morris—sex toys  
Are going gangbusters. You should invest. I've made  
A thousand since last month.” And Mama answered,  
“I've heard here in America that investing is indeed the way  
To wealth. How odd. Getting rich without working;  
Just using money to make more money. Then you  
Begin to forget what things are really worth.  
Haven't people heard about the Dutch Tulip Mania  
Of 1637? How did a simple, not very beautiful  
Flower come to cost several thousand times the salary  
Of an ordinary craftsman? Imagine paying thousands  
For a single tulip bulb. There was even a case of a man  
Who was imprisoned for mistakenly eating the  
Petals of an innkeeper's only tulip. He thought they  
Were little bits of cheese. He burped loudly  
After eating every petal and even said 'Excuse me.'  
The poor man died in prison, all for eating tulip  
Parts. Hmm. Strange country, this America. Still,  
While we are living here, we must do as the natives do.  
So with whom should we invest?” asked Mama.  
“There is a company called Adam & Eve,  
Based out of Livingston, New Jersey. They sell  
By mail-order but also retail: nipple clamps, cock rings  
And bondage sets, edible underwear, lube, and all the  
Other things people use for sexual enhancement.  
It's trading at a discount, only fifteen a share  
Down from a fifty-two week high of twenty-six.”  
And so Mama, you took some savings—the little bits  
Not trusted to the bank, but kept close by you  
In the pockets of a pair of men's corduroy pants  
And gave all to Moeen to put towards profits from the  
Sexual enhancement business.

Mama Yuan you must be muse to me. Explain to us  
How you took them both, Shlomo and Moeen as lovers,  
One older, a story teller, a wise man in contending  
Words, sad journeyman across rough seas, and the other  
Younger, still to many a beardless boy  
Yet man enough for you, you had decided. What a  
Family I then acquired. You and me, and your two lovers  
Each accepting you, and weirdly one another,  
You happily shared between the two. I recall  
A wintry Sunday morning full of flakes  
Sitting at the little table under the window

That looked out on Bayard Street, watching  
Snow fall. Shlomo sat on one side, reading the stories  
Of Isaac Babel, his glasses sliding from his mighty  
Shnoz, while on the other Moeen bent close  
With some insect-like intensity over his paper,  
Perusing prices on his stocks, seeking out  
That perfect deal that one day would make him rich.  
I sat in the middle, munching on my muesli, looking  
From one to the other, my long braids swinging  
Back and forth, musing on time, history and fate.  
Mama worked behind us, in the other room  
Busy changing bed sheets. Shlomo, like the good Jew  
He was, knew how to cook. He had made breakfast—  
Flapjacks for everyone. Moeen made the tea  
That he and Mama and I would drink. Shlomo drank  
Only espresso, carried carefully in a covered cup  
From Gino's Coffee shop over on Mulberry Street.  
Sunday, and we were deciding what to do,  
Where to go, how to spend our one spare day.

As the years wore on, old Mr. Tan, who used to  
Whinge hard about the errors Mama made appeared  
Less frequently among us. He'd bought a house in  
Ocean Beach where he aimed to live out a life  
Of easy days. Now and then he'd call and ask Mama  
A thing or two of takings in the till. But for these  
Many months the count of cash had been quite good.  
Mama worked through six days, was unfailingly polite  
And loved her people, above all knew the virtues  
Of hard labor. Money flowed in frequent floods  
And as Mr. Tan could ask no more of his  
Meager laundry, in time he gave over nearly all  
Management to Mama. Uncle Guo, who was more clever  
Than he looked, one day suggested we should buy  
The place off Mr. Tan. "Old Tan wants to retire.  
He's done well and his restaurants in any case  
Will give more than enough to meet his needs. If you  
Present the sale to him as 'consolidation,' a chance to  
Save some effort, no more traveling into Manhattan  
For him, I feel sure he'll take the bet. Then the laundry  
Will be yours." Mama thought it over for a short while,  
And replied "But I've got no savings—nothing  
Pent up to keep a roof over our heads if I should lose  
This job or the laundry business should go bust."  
"No problem," answered Uncle Guo, "Aunty Cha  
And I will put up the cash. You pay us back as best you can.  
We just get twenty-five percent of profits in perpetuity."  
"Twenty-five percent? That's theft!—I can't afford

To give you more than ten.” “That amount we won’t accept,”  
Said crafty Aunty Cha, “Let’s settle on twenty all together;  
Remember we’re putting up the cash without an ounce of  
Interest. You pay us back just what it costs to buy the place  
Off Tan. Now, come on Yuan, that’s not so bad.” It was clear  
To Mama they liked the deal. She said: “Eighteen forever  
Is my final offer—more than that and I’d rather quit  
Here and move myself to fucking Flushing.”  
And so the deal was sealed among them. Tan took  
The offer gladly, happy for quick cash: college tuition  
For his daughter off to Princeton University  
And triennial holidays to home outside Hong-Kong.

After a decade of existence, still I did not know  
Myself. In the books I discovered I sought somehow  
To explain my origins, bound as I had been since birth  
Between high-flown conception and lowly creation.  
I began with the heavens—where I had first  
Began to grow. I memorized the constellations,  
Learned to find Orion’s belt, the dip of Ursa Major,  
Studied the properties of stars like Betelgeuse  
Rigel, and Alpha Centauri, tried to imagine parsecs,  
Could calculate distances, luminosities, and red-shifts,  
Was undecieved by Dopplers, and wondered whether  
The unexpected fucking that first made me  
Happened under a near or distant nova.

“There once was a lady named Bright  
Who could travel far faster than light  
She set out one day, in a relative way  
And came back the previous night.”

To know the underworld—my other nature,  
I read about geology and geography, the curiosities  
Of continental drift: Gondwanaland and mysterious  
Pangaea. I dwelled upon a wandering and nameless  
Island, a castaway who sailed beyond the sunset  
Searching still for Ithaka.

Between earth and stars lay architecture  
The art of rising from earth to sky but staying  
Grounded in concrete reality. I was a city girl,  
Mama was a refugee coming from a place of poverty  
Where she had long been immured  
“City air makes you free” she had read somewhere  
And when she told me this years later  
I heartily agreed. Curious about buildings, these objects  
That linked the two great moments of my early life  
I learned about the history of Rome and Athens  
Saw the Parthenon’s Doric symmetry, sat

Among the spectators at the Roman Forum;  
Moved stones with the builders of Machu Picchu  
Helped raise the Pyramids, assembled pieces of the  
Flying buttresses for Chartres cathedral, saw  
Myself chief architect for a shining city on a hill  
Put together with the inconsistencies and imperfections  
Of all great beauty, filled it with the sorts of people  
I saw in New York City's teeming streets  
The hungry, crazy, happy, loud, obnoxious  
Day-dreaming multitudes, resistant to authority  
And all convention.

On Bayard Street it seemed I was destined to remain  
Through all my early years, as Mama and I  
Grew into our business, kept a roof over our heads  
As we washed our cares away. Over the years  
The laundry became my second classroom:  
Shlomo taught me English, history and then  
Philosophy. Uncle Guo instructed me in math: algebra  
And bits of science. Between her hearty hugs  
Auntie Cha showed me how to evaluate a business  
Find credits and debits, taught me about inventory.  
How on an airplane a seat sold for a dollar was  
Always better than flying with an empty seat.  
Daily after school I went to the public library  
Like a possessive lover who cannot leave his concubine  
Alone. My life seemed to rotate between three fixed  
Points—school, the library and Bayard Street.  
I triangulated them and plotted their positions on a  
Printed Manhattan map I found left among  
A pile of books beside the next-door stoop.

Thus did my days happily pass on. From the messy,  
Gorgeous city, her insane soul, I had received so much  
That I was now beginning, was learning how  
To shape a better life.

## Book II—Youth

### Bodies Borne in Motion

Mama, mama muse of mine, how can I narrate the way  
That in my eleventh year my body too began to change?  
How among the traffic flows of girls moving in and out  
About the hallways, I scurried, hiding from my shame.  
Here were changes I, the subway girl, had not sought.  
Tell then the tale of what I learned at school,  
And my feelings for it. Help me explain, O Mama,  
How I was sent away into the country wilderness  
As penance and how I grew and developed from girl  
To woman. To most, yourself included, the telling of such  
A portion of my story would be embarrassing—  
A confession no doubt, and so best left aside.  
Not something to be repeated except in whispers  
Unleashed inside a wooden booth  
In the far corner of a dark and ancient church.  
Yet Mama, I will never be your child alone—  
For somewhere among the starry spheres my father scuds,  
Patterning the clouds in a secret language  
Invented just for me. Now my father, moving above me  
As he traces out his arcs, sings another sort of song,  
One that hears a pounding rhythm irresistible,  
That I must go with from sudden inspiration.

Breasts. How can a girl begin to talk about her breasts?  
Such simple things really. At first two rounded flaps  
Of skin surmounted by a flat cupola, like a saucer  
On its back. And then one day *surprise*, the saucers  
Begin to swell, upwelling into domes; two small hills rise,  
Architectural in form. An awakening comes upon me—  
Embarrassment, excitement at this development.  
At first I hide my shameful secret: I wrap long strips  
Of cloth over my chest to disarm this material congregation.  
“But, but,” I want to shout, “I was happy as a girl!”  
Once, oblivious to all attention, innocently I moved  
About the world. Now tearfully, I see with great regret  
Some things must change. Ahead I imagine adulthood,  
See responsibility. In my dream a man walks  
Beside me. I feel his warmth, his arm encircling my waist,  
But I can’t see his face. Afraid, I refuse to turn his way.  
Manequin man I call him. At night manequin man and  
I make love, his latex penis pushing open my thighs.  
Later, as I am walking, my eyes sweep downwards  
To where my belly has grown. In my arms I am shocked  
To find a child, tiny copy of the self that I have been.

One day my breasts become too large and the ruse  
Too obvious. Mama notices and gently laughs,  
Though without cruelty. "I did the same when I was  
Your age. Bound my boobs inside a cotton scarf  
Before heading out into the fields to work.  
I felt more like a man done up that way,  
Feeling like I was a boy made me work near twice  
As hard." She smiles at me again, places a gentle hand  
Upon my head. "Don't worry Little One,  
Being a woman isn't so bad. Male eyes upon you  
Are sometimes good: The gaze objectifies but also  
Confers power. What kingdoms come  
When one is made into a Queen."

But I, who had been brought up in religion,  
Those worlds of faith where even St. Theresa's  
God-inspired ecstasy was seen as shameful—  
How then could I begin to discourse on  
What I really felt?

At home Mama and I had never been much for clothing:  
Behind our piles of sheets and towels, our folded shirts  
We were both often naked. Especially in July and August's  
Blazing summer heat, there among our dozen whirling dryers,  
The puffs of irons pressing, sweat streamed down us,  
Till it seemed our whole bodies were crying out hot tears.  
In the back room, where nobody else could see, we would  
Work in just our shoes—happy to be free at least of our own  
Wraps that otherwise would simply need to be rewashed.  
Yet till now I had always been a simple girl, small, thin,  
And without curves, belike a sexless boy. Ahh the delight!  
Former freedoms now all gone. I knew Mama's body so well—  
Its curves, its lovely shapes, the blemishes and puckers too,  
But saw them from far away, as something that belonged to  
Women, not to me. I could not understand that one day  
I would look as she did now.

When I speak of the desire that grew in me, I talk of nothing—  
Of gravitation, magnetism, the strong and weak forces  
Held in the atom's structure, of matter pulling other matter  
Towards itself. Will then death's final separations, of stars,  
Of universal dust, win out over the inward pull of things,  
That tugging on your sleeve that says "Over here, over here,  
Come! Come see the world be born anew!?"

At night as Mama tossed beside me in our bed,  
I would lay awake, frightened at the transformation  
I could feel. You must believe me when I tell you it was  
With an absent mind that my fingers found my emerging blooms  
Of breast, the surging nipples rising like mermaids from

An unmoving sea. Then it was as if a virtuoso played  
Minuets along my body; I made the mermaids dance  
By finding tunes that I could make with my self-strumming.  
On I continued with this exploration, week after week  
Seeking out the grottos of my pleasure, awakening the genies  
That heretofore had lain asleep.

Along with this emergence of desire there came the growth  
Of mind, the discovery of worlds beyond the ordinary.  
From earliest youth I had loved the library, but now  
I found my way to art museums as well to discover the  
Physical heritage of civilizations. In the Met I found  
My bliss. From the Cycladic islands I uncovered those early  
Limestone figures, their arms enfolded, eyes invible, just a nose  
To suggest the inward rush of breath, the exhalation of  
Spirit into the lower heavens where we daily dwell. Next  
I moved onwards to the krater—Greek vases made for  
Storage—water, olive oil, the figs from last fall’s harvest,  
And upon them, painted figures in red or black,  
The black ones rarer and more precious—each vase  
Circled by bands of longly muscled nude young men,  
Their biceps passing strong, their legs long and springy,  
With their small penises, sculpted and erect.

There were no boys at Trinity and all mentions of the  
Male gender made the teachers squirm. Yet there was art—  
The representation of the human figure. Art and  
Mathematics gave me line and curve, the linear, quadratic  
The use of the arch and barrel-vault in building, how  
Bodies related to the world around them.

The passage from elementary to middle school was a  
Sharp change for our little homeroom where we had been  
Ruled over by the exhortations of sweet Sister Smith.  
One late spring day she called us all together and began:  
“Girls—soon you will be released from me forever  
And will enter the sixth grade. Your homely roost  
Here in my homeroom will be no longer. Come fall  
You will be wanderers, travellers in the halloing halls of Trinity.  
I will not be your main teacher anymore, but all subjects  
Will have a different specialist. Religion—which has thus  
Far been central to all that you have learned—will take  
A lesser place as simply another subject such as science or  
Sociology. Your central star I shall no longer be. Yet do  
Not be sad, for God as I have given him to you will still  
Be present, guiding your behavior. This is my oral  
Vade mecum to go with you as you set out: there is a  
Narrow fellow in the grass called Lucifer, avoid  
Him and be ashamed of disobeying commands

Arriving from above. Jesus was a capitalist  
When he sailed his yacht upon the water.  
And he took many people upon it, preached to them  
That they could be rich beyond their wildest dreams  
If only they would remember him. And so remember me,  
Girls, for I am always here. I wish you riches of mind  
As well as of possessions. I will still teach you  
Religion, as only I can do. Come by and visit when  
The world of ordinary subjects seems too dull,  
When you are being told about societies much unlike  
Our own near-perfect one.”

Too often at Trinity I had been called “squint-eyes,”  
“Dirt-face girl,” “gooey chop-suey.” Sometimes  
I fought back, hurled at my nemeses my own  
Invented names. But one day, when I was in sixth grade  
Martha Bronk went once too far in insult.  
“Skinny-Ginny, skinny-Ginny, who dipped you in  
Pee-pee?” she lilted out at me while I was walking by.  
My temper, always simmering, finally boiled over.  
I whirled the girl around by force, though she was  
Taller than I and twice as wide, and grabbing then the collar  
Of her blue blouse I pulled at it with all my force  
Until the fabric ripped. I tugged at this loosened bit,  
Till the thin strip came away. There I stood, smiling  
Despite myself, with a ribbon band of Martha’s shirt  
In my right hand. I felt the blood rush through my body  
In satisfaction. Though obviously unharmed, Martha  
Looked rather silly in her tattered shirt. Trinity’s code  
Would never allow a girl to wear a ripped up  
Shirt. We were a proper school. Terrified of  
Consequences, Martha screamed loudly, and then  
Began to cry. Father Peter came rushing down the hall  
An eraser in his hand to hurl hard at the offender.  
When he saw the situation, what had been done,  
He slapped me sharp upon the cheek. I stood still,  
Unmoved. “How dare you do this, you evil, spiteful,  
Hateful little child. What happened?” And Martha  
Started to explain how I, according to her unprovoked,  
Had cruelly torn her brand-new just-ironed blouse.  
When Father Peter asked me, “Are these allegations true?”  
I answered that my actions were not unprovoked,  
Started to say more, but Father Peter would not hear  
Further defense from me. “Apologize, like a good girl,”  
He interrupted. “Like a good girl?” I mimicked  
“Dear Father Peter, I know we have been friends,  
Your kindness and your understanding about the socks  
Has made my stay here tolerable,” I said. “But you will never

Get an apology from me for what she did. Listen to  
Her side alone, if that is what you feel you must,  
But I have a story too to tell, my own version of events.”  
Again Father Peter ordered, “Apologize,” but I would not;  
And so I found my strength in silence.

For this so-called egregious crime Father Peter  
Threatened to suspend me. But Mr. Matheson  
Responded “No,” argued strongly for my fate,  
Told Father Peter what he had seen in halls  
And classrooms—the behavior of other  
Girls towards me. “If you only knew her,  
Her family, how hard they work, Father. She is  
Not like those other girls—our upper-east side  
Spoiled children who have a maid to wipe  
Their chins, who take taxis to get to our front door.  
Ginny is our star.” “All this is true,” acknowledged  
Father Peter, but we cannot allow such behavior in our halls.  
We shall have to tell her mother.” “Can’t we avoid that?  
Think about the sacrifice the mother made to get little  
Ginny here. She would haul the girl straight out  
Of school. Let me deal with the child. Say nothing to  
Her mother. I give you my promise Ginny will behave.”  
I stood red-faced as Mr. Matheson made his plea  
For me in front of Father Peter. “Okay. But this is the girl’s  
Last chance. Once more, and she’s not just suspended,  
But expelled directly.” Then Mr. Matheson took me  
By the hand, led me away. “I understand  
Why you did it; I’d have done the same or worse,  
But it’s best if you just ignore these other girls. They  
Don’t understand the ways that you are different.”  
“Why are you so kind to me?” I asked him. “Because  
I’m different too,” he answered, “And so in some  
Important way, we are alike, the two of us,”  
And he laughed sweetly, a vulnerability showing  
In his voice. Then something surged inside me  
—A confidence perhaps—a sense of a new bulwark  
For hard times. It seemed that I had  
Really finally found a schoolhouse friend.

That evening when I got home, I told Mama  
Yuan all about my little fight that day. I could not  
Bear that there were things and thoughts we did not  
Share. I had expected rage or upset, but it seemed  
I knew my mother less well than I imagined.  
“Ginny child,” she began, with an almost smile  
Upon her face, as if she was reluctant to deliver  
Such a lecture: “We are in this world together,  
You and I. It’s just the two of us, kiddo. I’m not really

Cut out for running a laundry—I'd rather read  
Philosophy or be made a foreign correspondent for  
*The International Herald Tribune*, but I don't really  
Have a choice. So here we are, a single mother and her  
Daughter. I wash, and work, and fold, so you can go  
To school. This is my life. If you are expelled  
What will we do? For what purpose would be  
All this work I've done? I understand that what those girls  
Do to you is wrong. I asked you on your second day  
At school whether you wanted to stay at Trinity  
Despite the teasing and the instruction in religion,  
And you answered strongly in the affirmative; that was  
Your choice. Now you must endure the consequences  
Of that choice, and find a way to stay. I don't  
Want all my hard-earned tuition money to go  
To waste. So while I'm not really blaming you  
For what you did, I am saying that you must learn to  
Control your temper. Isn't there a way to turn your  
Energy to better things. How are your grades?"

"Mama, I am first among the girls. I have only  
One competitor, a white girl even smaller and thinner  
Than I am, called Kerry Christian. She is a favorite  
Of Sister Smith, perhaps because she has declared  
She wants to be a nun. She played Jesus in the  
Passion play. She is smart and quite ambitious,  
Is emotional and intensely focused. Of all the girls  
Only she can present me with any competition.  
But I am glad for it—she's the best enemy anyone  
Could hope to have. I am sorry about the anger  
But it comes upon me suddenly, lashing out  
Like a refiner's fire." "Why don't you get a job,"  
Said Mama, "something away from school,  
A place where you can use all that extra energy  
Constructively?"

It was thus that I met Gabriel, my first forever  
Friend. One Saturday in early March I took a walk up  
Fifth avenue, from its base at Washington Square Arch,  
Past the Flatiron Building with its single line of  
Vertex windows, through Madison Square Park,  
Where the old Garden used to stand, until at last  
I reached sweet Patience and silent smiling Fortitude,  
The stone lion pair I wished my dreams could bring to life.  
Up the stairs of the New York Public Library  
I bounded to reach those doors of bronze relief.  
Past them into the vestibule I swept,  
Peering up then at the white marble, noting how  
The risers of that grand staircase were worn down

In their middle from feet ascending in their scores  
To this free education. I marveled at the grace,  
The simple symmetry of this high temple,  
Sure we imperfect humans could never give  
This masterpiece the praise that it was worth.

At their close ends, where the two reading rooms  
Joined, you put in your request with an attendant  
Who wrote down your delivery number on a slip  
Of carbon paper. One copy she would give to you,  
The other she fed down a vacuum tube, sucked into  
The bowels of the library: the levels of stack areas  
Underneath the reading rooms. Here below, I learned  
To make my dash. The Public Library Pages  
As we were called, were nearly all young students  
Fleetness of foot and nimble fingers were what was  
Needed. Along the rows—the eighty miles of shelves—  
We ran, a call-slip in each hand. To the right and left  
Each range had a number. Somewhere in  
Those many miles of ranges hid the desired book.  
O how I loved the dashing! And the finding of  
Odd-requested pleasures. Here I learned about  
And held for the first time a Caxton volume  
On Aesop's fables, saw his printing of the tales of  
Chaucer. Jerome's version of the Vulgate Bible  
Was one of my most frequent calls. Quickly  
I became one of the better flyers. At eleven I was  
Still small and thin, but my legs were already long  
And I was filled with eager energy. Years of  
Loading and unloading washers had made me strong,  
And I was proud of my ability to run along the ranges  
With three full folios held under one arm.  
I was fast I knew, but faster still, the fleetest of our  
Fleet, was Gabriel, our Mercury of messengers.  
He was the Chief of Pages, the trainer of our rest.  
One glance at a call number and it was  
Memorized for him—no cross checking  
Call numbers with the spines of books themselves.  
Between his teeth he held his call slips,  
Leaving both hands free. Through this  
He doubled his capacity to carry. Then like  
A cyclist without a cycle he seemed,  
Legs wheeling, torso suspended in a crouch,  
Eyes focused straight ahead, out at infinity,  
His body lifted as if on wings along  
The pews of this vast church of unforbidden  
Knowledge. Well Gabriel knew our Elysian fields.

Gabriel had blonde dreadlocks and wore  
Black tights to do his work. Already at thirteen  
He knew much about a little and a little  
About much. Alone among us Gabriel  
Was fast enough to read and linger—hiding out  
Among the shelves and then taunting us to  
Find him, as if he were himself a treasured volume  
Requested by a reader. Gabriel was a student  
But was not enrolled in school. Everything he knew  
He'd taught himself. He was an "autodidact" so he  
Claimed, a word I didn't know until Gabriel himself  
Taught me what it meant. Gabriel took me  
Under his wing: "You're quite fast," he said to me  
As I leaned against a shelf on my second day of work.  
"That's unusual for someone who isn't very tall."  
"I like to run," I responded. "I was born  
To move," I added. "Me, too," he answered  
With a smile and held out his hand. "My name is Gabe,  
But please call me Gabriella" he said with a snarky  
Smile. "Hi Gabriella, nice to meet you. Why  
Do you want me to call you that?" I asked.  
"I guess it's wishful thinking," he explained.  
"Gabriella represents my inner girl. I may be  
A boy, but I have girl sides too, even if they aren't  
Visible to everybody. N'est-ce pas? How do you like  
My tights? I have a friend at Capezio Dance  
Who gets me a discount on my pairs." "That's clever,"  
I shot back, "But I can do better. I can get you  
Tights for free. "Find me in the stacks and I'll let you  
Know how." I dashed off then into the J call letters,  
Where I felt he wouldn't find me. I hid myself behind  
A trolley in the map stacks with folios piled high upon it,  
But soon enough I heard the sharp sound of beating  
Feet and in moments he was on me. Happily he shook  
His head. "You're it!" he said, as if we were playing  
A game of tag together. I took up the challenge  
And ran off after him, attempting to keep up. He was  
Too fast for me, and at first I was uncertain  
Of where to search. But then I thought about  
Special Collections, a logical place for someone  
Who himself was special, different, unique.  
And indeed I found him there, leaning languidly against  
A shelf with a leather-bound copy of Euclid's  
Elements in his hand. "Impressively quick," he said.  
You must have triangulated my position," he joked.  
"What about those free tights? Can you really get them?  
And I answered: "Just tell me how many pairs you want.  
But know that I don't have every color; I can easily do

Black or blue. Sometimes I'll have exotic colors—  
Red, orange, even burgundy. Any interest in indigo?”  
“Of course, but what's your hook? How do you source  
Your stuff?” “My mother runs a laundry. People always  
Forget their clothes with us. Mama and I label them,  
We try to be responsible. I've spent many a Saturday  
Calling customers to let them know their order  
Is ready to be picked up, but usually I get no answer  
And then the clothes get left behind. In the  
End Mama and I adopt them. At the back of the  
Laundry we have a range of shelves where we put  
Our lost clothing stacks. Everything is sorted  
By its function. Would you like some pantyhose  
As well?” “Only if you've got fishnets,” he answered.  
“For I fancy myself a Fisher King and pantyhose alone  
Can cure me of my cares.” “I saw a purple pair  
Just yesterday,” I said excitedly. “Perfect for someone  
Who's pretending to be royalty.”

In our slacker moments we played the game  
“Find Gabriel” as a way for me to learn  
The layout of the stacks. After being found,  
Gabriel would always smile a giant pixie smile  
And shake his dreadlocks. “Catch me, catch me  
If you can!” he'd shout, then he'd dash away again.  
I'd search hard and then find him in an unexpected  
Section reading Tolstoy, Kant, or Newton's works  
On alchemy. Gabriel was always an endless fount of  
Curiosity.

For the first time in my life I could earn a little  
Money. Paltry though the stipend seemed  
At three-thirty five an hour, at least I was  
Earning on my own. Never had I had  
So much fun with labor. I worked three weekdays  
After school and all day on the weekends. My Sunday walks  
With Mama were all sacrificed for the few dollars  
I could earn racing along the stacks. I kept two dollars  
Of what I earned and gave the rest to Mama  
To contribute to our funds. Though she was sad to lose  
My main hours of labor in the laundry, we both agreed  
What I could earn myself was more important.  
“That is better work my child. Think of all the things  
You will get to read about. I shall expect a daily report  
On what you've read.”

Oh Mama, mama how can I tell everyone about the blood?  
That it should have happened, even had to happen  
I understand, but did it have to happen in the middle of

The New York Public Library. I had been working up above  
Inside the main reading room, ferrying requests from the  
Delivery desk to reader's chairs, when after calls for  
Seventeenth-century botanical history, a request  
For Aphra Behn's imaginary tale about Surinam, *Oronooko*,  
And delivering up a text on contemporary hydraulics  
To a man with only a fringe of hair, I noticed that  
People were looking at me strangely, as if I were  
Some kind of alien. I was, of course, a half-breed Asian  
And still a curiosity as I knew, but I had walked the  
Reading Room before without such stares. Being  
Of the type to enjoy attention quite a bit,  
At first I ignored the stares and put them down  
To the short skirt that I was wearing. My work finished  
Up above, I returned to my home below in the bookstacks  
And dashed towards Gabriel, as I always did whenever I had  
Some spare time. Gabriel saw me and gave me a strange look.  
"Is something wrong, Ginny?" he asked. "No," I said  
Annoyed and out of breath. Why would there be?"  
"Well, look between your legs. There's blood flowing  
Down them." I looked and to my horror realized he was right.  
"Oh shit!" I said unable to restrain myself. If a yellow girl  
Can turn bright red I'm sure I did then. I ran off then to find  
A bathroom, to stanch the bloody flood, and reflect  
Upon the passage from innocence into a world of  
Culpabilities.

When I was not dashing from class to class, I found  
Again my refuge up on the roof of Trinity. Around the  
Leaded skylights, between the tin chimneys  
Standing like pillared houses above a waveless sea,  
I would circle the several different segments of the roof,  
Leaping the low parapets along the building's firewalls,  
Pausing here and there to lean upon a cornice back  
And stare out at the street below. When I could  
No longer I would lie upon my back and peer up at the sky  
Examining its hues and changes, watching the concourse  
Of traffic in the air till time was lengthened almost to  
Infinity and I would wonder, wonder once more  
About my father and the conditions of the clouds:

O Daddy mine, where are you roaming?  
O stay a-ground, your daughter's coming,  
Who can soar both high and low, both high and low.  
Fly no further distant father, journeys will end  
In families completing.

Thirty five thousand feet, and a storm is breaking...

Father I have no face for you except the differences  
I see between myself and Mama. I think I must have  
Some aspect of your chin since mine juts out like a horn  
And the cheekbones of your ethereal face make a sharp  
Ridge under my eyes. I have not the deep curve of  
Mama's lips, nor the smallness of her swept-back ears.  
Pilot, was this mugged face of mine your only gift?

I hope that wherever you may be, you are accompanied  
By more than mute bare splendors, that the sun and moon  
That are your still sustaining compass are pointing now  
Your nose towards the chaotic noise of New York City.

Pull up, pull up! May you be blessed with many landings.

Ah Father, those sticks and wires that were wrought  
To make your wings, make you an Icarus too high for me;  
To Olympus you have ascended on your metal mount  
And now remain, a God beyond my reach.

Oh Mama, Mama because you are my muse,  
You must help me to explain what I saw  
One quiet evening at Trinity. I had been up on my roof  
As was my wont when the weather was good,  
Reading Richardson's *Clarissa* for a bit of time;  
Dusk was approaching; the sky was skewing its clouds  
From pink to purple, painting Manhattan's water-towers  
In hues of night. I descended, turning off lights—  
Trailing darkness behind my flippy fingers.  
All others had gone home save Father Peter,  
Who guarded still his schoolgrounds like a  
Sleepless sentinel before the morning's battle,  
When I chanced across the office of Sister Smith.  
Her door was set ajar and as I passed with curiosity  
Looking in to see, saw Sister Smith leaning back  
Her wimple thrown aside, her hair, blonde I realized—  
Since I had never seen even a trailing wisp before—  
Hanging straight down, her eyes focused upward  
On an infinity far beyond the ceiling, arms open as if waiting  
For God's final embrace, her lean legs bare and splayed.  
And in between, where Eve had covered herself for shame,  
Was Kerry Christian's little head, bobbing up and down  
Sweetly licking Sister's pleasure. I nearly gasped,  
Revealed myself, but held my breath, and moved along  
As if I had seen nothing, been unmoved. Father Peter  
Saw me leave, but only glanced at my quick exit,  
Then returned to the regular reading of his rosary.

Back on Bayard I found myself alone among  
Our clothing piles. Mama had left a note saying

She was at a movie with Moeen. And so I ascended,  
Crawling into bed by myself and still breathing fast  
From what I'd seen Kerry do Sleep would not come  
And like a stormed mariner I was tossed between my  
Sheets. Oh Mama Yuan, I can never, ever tell you this,  
But I wanted badly to be Kerry—doing what she was doing,  
Feeling what she must have been feeling, losing another  
And myself deep in the delicious folds of pleasure.  
Oh the sin, the wrong, the violation of all decency!

And so, still laboring my sleeplessness, I returned to  
Our ground floor where, among our towers of  
Piled-up objects I found a tape-sealed cardboard box  
That Moeen had had sent to us as part of our investment  
In the sex-toy business. I ripped it open, and digging  
Through the wrapping material found a black latex  
Dildo that I unwrapped and brought upstairs.  
Taking one look at the size of the thing, I thought  
“No, no, this will never work!” But caught between  
Shame and my desire, I needed to continue,  
And turned the thing towards that tiny open space  
Between my legs. Gently I pressed the angled top  
Against myself then began to push inwards, till like an eye  
Opening into darkness, the head passed through.  
All of a sudden then I felt a rush, the blood flowing,  
A delicious mingling of pain and pleasure, so nuzzled  
Still further the dildo deep within me. Plying it now  
In and out I felt the heat-cords pulling from my centre  
Outward, outward stretching me in all directions—  
A flow of fire along the lines of force that  
Pulled and pulled against my best resistance  
Until I exploded from within myself and felt  
I was no more.

For a week I tried to keep Kerry's secret to myself—  
Walked the halls of Trinity dashing from class to class  
Afraid to visit my aerie on the roof, would do my reading  
At home or in a coffee-shop, terrified that I might chance again  
Upon what I had seen before. But finally I went to visit  
Mr. Matheson and explained what I had seen.  
“Why did you tell me this, Ginny? I mean, I realize  
The magnitude of what you saw. But what am I  
To do?” “To do?” I sputtered. “To do? Mr. Matheson,  
You must tell Father Peter! Kerry is only twelve. She's  
Not of an age to be giving head to Sister Smith.”  
“Ginny! I'm shocked. You know the term? What  
Have you been doing—reading dirty books?”  
“I do work in a library,” I responded “and would of course  
Have access to *The Kama Sutra*. But actually I learned about

“Giving head” from my mother’s boyfriend’s business talk.  
Mama has invested in a sex-toy business Moeen is running.  
But that’s not the issue at hand. What’s important is what  
I saw Kerry do. You must say something, or I must.”  
“Ginny I agree that the right response would seem to be  
To tell this story to Father Peter. But I am worried.  
Father Peter and Sister Smith are both ordained;  
They very much see eye-to-eye on matters of morality.  
Sister Smith is very clever and knows exactly  
What she can get away with. So before you run off to  
Talk to Father Peter, remember that I only just barely got  
You off suspension for tearing the blouse off that silly  
Martha Bronk. Are you sure you want to take the risk?  
Though Father Peter may have been kindly about your socks  
All those years ago, he is no longer on your side. Though  
No one can complain about your grades, you are too much  
A rebel Ginny Yuan, and I worry that your passions will  
Get you into trouble.”

“So wait,” I said. “You expect me to say nothing? Kerry  
Is my nemesis I admit; I feel no love for the girl,  
But she must be protected from the depredations of Sister  
Smith.” Mr. Matheson replied: “Depredations did you say?  
But did it seem that Kerry was being forced? Has she  
Seemed troubled or upset in any way?” “Not that I can  
See. Oddly she’s looked rather happy these last few months.”  
“Could the smile be forced,” he inquired, “an act put on  
For the world to paint a happy face on misery?” “Not that  
I’ve noticed,” I replied. “Then could it have been consensual?”  
Mr. Matheson asked rhetorically. “Mr. Matheson, do I need to  
Remind you that, like me, Kerry is only twelve? Do  
You really think we are of an age to be making these  
Decisions? In all such encounters we cannot be considered  
To have given our consent, whatever the benefits of  
Outwards appearance may lead you to believe. So I  
Would caution you to be more careful before you  
Defend the status-quo.” Mr. Matheson paused and looked  
Abashed. “I am sorry Ginny. You are right,  
And what Sister Smith did was wrong, but if you intend  
To remain at Trinity there is nothing to be done. One  
Of the greatest powers in the world is the power of  
An institution. No individual alone can challenge the  
Power of an institution. They need the support of others.  
For the moment you are alone. I at least can do nothing for  
You because to do so might mean losing my job. And there’s  
Another problem too, you see, I’m gay. You know what  
That means, right?” “Yeah. I think I have a friend who’s  
Gay.” “Sister Smith knows this about me but has

As a great favor kept that fact secret from other ears,” he added.  
“If Father Peter found out I’d almost certainly be fired.  
Without this job I cannot live nor feed my ancient mother.  
So I cannot be your advocate, and alone without adult support  
Your accusations will only harm you. This situation is not  
What it should be but unless you’re prepared to be expelled  
(For Father Peter’s regard for Sister Smith puts her beyond  
Reproach) you’d best be silent. Let me tell you, however,  
How much I respect what you’re doing, your sense of  
Principle.” “Fuck off Mr. Matheson,” I answered him  
And stormed out of the room.

Yet I did want to stay at Trinity and so I found myself  
Compelled to silence about this crime. I watched Kerry  
But could see nothing unusual that might prompt me

“Ginny, to improve your singing, we should take  
You to the opera.” Mr. Matheson said to me one day.  
“Will you ask your mother?” “Of course,” I answered.  
So when I got home that night I spoke to Mama:  
“Mama Yuan, Mr. Matheson has offered to take me  
To the opera. May I go?” “Of course Little One,”  
She responded with a sigh, brushing a strand of hair away  
From behind her ear. “What’s the opera you are seeing?”  
“I believe it’s called *Eugene Onegin*, Mr. Matheson said.”  
“Ah yes, Pushkin’s story of the Russian dandy—  
Set to music by Tchaikovsky. Sounds like fun.  
I only wish that I could come with as well, so off you go  
To have some fun. But you must promise to tell me  
How it was.” “But why can’t you come with us?  
I’m sure Mr. Matheson could find an extra ticket.  
And you would enjoy meeting him: he has a mustache  
That makes him look quite dapper.” “My dear,  
Mr. Tan has just sent in an extra order of trousers to be  
Washed and pressed. See those two tall piles over there?  
All that has to be done before the weekend. I shall  
Be occupied it seems. And so mustache or not  
My meeting with this Mr. Matheson will have to wait.  
You’re going to the opera. Have you asked about  
The cost of tickets? Opera isn’t cheap. And what will  
You wear? You can’t go to a performance in your  
School clothes. We shall have to find something  
For you here among our stash.”

When Mr. Matheson told me tickets cost sixty  
Dollars I was shocked. That much just for the opera!  
I had saved up forty-two from my working  
At the library. How then to earn the extra eighteen  
I needed, and earn them quickly? I asked Mama

What I could do. “You could always help me with  
This pile of trousers. Take those slacks and start  
To iron. This was on Friday night and the opera was  
On Sunday. Through all day Saturday, when I would  
Otherwise be working at the library I labored hard  
With my sweet Mama Yuan.

See me now, still short and thin, with my hand  
In Mr. Matheson’s as we attended Tchaikovsky’s  
*Eugene Onegin*. Ah Onegin! You and I would have  
Been friends despite our differences—you loner who  
Wanted to leave behind society, retire to your  
Country estate to read. When you received  
Tatiana’s love letter—she who read French Romantic  
Novels, stories of requited perfect love—  
Why did you not reply? Onegin, you who lived  
So much for art, a time waster, a dandy,  
Famous flaneur, did you have no space for feeling?  
Why is our real life never like our imagined life?

Onegin, you were no gentleman, but I would have  
Loved you still. I would have arrived in a  
Coach and four from Petersburg, my hair in a  
Bouffant, a low-cut silken dress upon my shoulders.  
Together we would have shared cups of milky tea  
And almond croissants. Afterwards we would go out  
For a walk—you in your riding boots and  
Silver-buttoned jacket, I in the top hat and great coat  
You loaned me for damp weather. I carried the brace of  
Pistols hidden in a case held in my hand. Secretly, I was  
Your dueling second. When we arrived at the pond  
On your uncle’s estate I handed you the loaded  
Guns. On the water a family of geese circled.  
Onegin, you carefully took aim, your face grimly  
Focused. Without qualms you fired, killed  
The goose and then her goslings, blood on grey light;  
Four feathered bodies sinking fast beneath the surface.  
“Have Gumlov gather them,” you said without expression.  
I did not object, would not exclaim against your  
Cruelty. You showed no pity; you were not friendly.  
Wordlessly we walked back. Together we went into the  
Library. You paced by the window and lectured me  
On history. I listened sitting and watched the sun shift behind  
Your head—making a halo for you, Eugene.

### Exodus

O Mama Yuan, you must tell everyone how happy  
I was with you, just the two of us together. Even as

We were caught up in the busy doings of the world,  
I with school and you with keeping that roof over our heads,  
With learning from all the people gathered around us—  
You and I, Mama Yuan, were become like sun and satellite,  
A binary system pulling at the other's center,  
Twirling self-sufficiently, independent of other bodies.

Trinity had been my home since I'd started school.  
I'd passed from religion, to literature, history, and geography  
But instruction stopped at the eighth grade  
And now, having reached the limits of Trinity's offered learning  
I would need to move on towards new locales. I had won,  
With some reluctance, along with Kerry Christian,  
My old antagonist, a scholarship to the Staten Island School  
Across the water. We two, alone among the girls of Trinity,  
Had soared in scores above the rest. And so Kerry,  
With Sister Smith's full and enthusiastic blessing for  
Her ongoing great success and a fond wish for her  
Eventual return to take up Sister's place someday  
In front of a classroom full of children like ourselves,  
And I—sent off by Sister with a more wary and reluctant  
Admiration, some clear surprise that the school's only  
Subway child, of dirty face, an outsider born below  
The surface world of things on a sheaf of folded newspaper  
Whose stock prices printed in long columns serves as  
The stripes of my first pinafore—Left behind  
These high-floor girls who gawked and gamboled  
Blithely through the passing days.

I remember well the morning I left Mama in our laundry,  
How she refused to cry although she wanted to,  
Heard the closing click of the front door,  
And then how I finally turned my back to Bayard Street  
Walked alone past Worth and Water Streets among the towers,  
Rising through all the coffee-bearing well-bespoken men—  
Who I knew even then pleased themselves  
At the expense of others, who waited in ordered  
Corporate lines for their fast-delivered fortunes  
From a public made mild by its disdain for regulation,  
Passed past the men with some relief, and headed down  
Towards South Ferry where I stood awaiting,  
Accompanied by the pressing crowds of late night-watchmen,  
Of Dominican ladies in yellow aprons coming off  
Their cleaning shifts, ensconced among Korean deli  
Salesmen heading home, and that rare tourist  
Off to take the ride quick to the ferry's other end  
Who then returned without ever having seen more  
Of Staten Island than that grey and sterile landing.

Down towards the boat, wearing my schoolbag  
Across my shoulders I descended. Manhattan my  
Thus far only home dropped fast away. The leaden morning  
Pushed hard upon me like the low roof lying above  
An Irish hovel. The Atlantic Sea, mixing here with Hudson's  
Higher waters, spread out like a landscape of peat  
Worn down to stone out of which nothing grows.  
Water will not hold a cut—the blade cleaves,  
Slices through, and still the path stays closed.  
Indifferent to all human fears, liquid shapes itself  
Without regard to human feeling.

Noah saw it rain for forty days and forty nights,  
Long weather until the earth was covered  
And no land ho.

Alone I watched the black smoke rising from atop  
The engine stacks blown back by the vessel's  
Forward motion, felt the gentle rocking side to side  
From the breaking of waves against the hull,  
And for the first time, now without Mama,  
Our little laundry, that source of my initial comforts,  
Cried myself some rolling tears thinking on the life  
Of Bayard Street that I had left behind.

St. George at the landing felt wet and small, a fishing  
Village forgotten among those who dream of towers:  
Its single story houses rising hard upon the shoreline,  
Like crooked teeth jutting from a broken jaw.  
The girl who came to meet me was called Helen Churchill,  
A tall junior girl with blonde hair, blue eyes, and breasts  
That even as a ninth-grade girl I well knew how to envy.  
“Hello, my name is Helen,”  
She said as I walked up to her. “Are you called Ginny?”  
Helen wore a short red raincoat, a plaid pleated mini  
Cut in the latest style, and held a clear plastic umbrella  
In one hand, “in the event of rain,” as she informed me.  
After I nodded my affirmation to her question  
She took me by the arm—her touch was warm.  
“Will this be your first day at SIS?”  
She asked rhetorically. And I responded  
“I've never been to boarding school before. How is it?”  
She looked down at me then curled her upper lip  
“I love it,” she said with a sprightly little laugh. “Everyone,  
The teachers too, listens to me. I'd call it a lovely place.  
Periodically one has to study a bit, but not too hard.  
At least I never do. Most things come easily to me.  
Are you from Manhattan? Where do you live?”  
“On Bayard Street. My mother owns a laundry.

Mama is from China, but I was born here. All I know  
About my father is that he was an airline pilot.”

“A child conceived above!” she exclaimed.  
“I’ve never met an angel child before. How fortunate  
You must be!” “And what about your family?” I queried her,  
In my own turn, now feeling a bit bolder. She answered:  
“I come to school from Oyster Bay by car and driver  
In the mornings. My mother drops me off. Our driver  
Then takes her to Manhattan where she shops  
For the latest in design, then home she goes again  
To play gin rummy with her friends. Was it hard  
Growing up in a Chinese laundry? Don’t you have  
To do a lot of work?” “It’s fine really. I help out Mama  
With the washing. I can load ten washers all in sequence,  
Then time them to stop so that all the clothes will dry  
Together. I think that’s cool. We work and learn together,  
Mama and I. On the weekend we go out  
To the public library so I can get books to read.  
Reading is my main obsession. When Mama wants  
To punish me she threatens to take away my books.  
That terrifies me and I immediately obey.”

“How charming,” answered Helen. “For myself  
I prefer shopping—Manolo Blahniks on my feet  
And a Coach purse on my arm. Possessions equal  
Status, so Mother says. I make quite a cutting figure along  
The avenues when people see how well turned out I am.  
Father feels that too much reading leads to trouble.  
Still, I do like to sneak in a bodice ripper now and then.  
You know, the flashlight under the covers for all  
The racy bits.” “What’s a bodice ripper?” I queried her.  
“Perhaps some other time,” she answered  
“I’m forgetting that you’re still only thirteen. I should  
Not corrupt you at your age. Forget I said a thing.  
Now come with me to the car. Green, my chauffeur  
Will drive us to the school.”

With my hand held in her soft white own  
Helen led me from the ferry landing  
And towards a burgundy-colored Jaguar purring  
In the road. As we approached a suited man  
Uniformed in grey with matching eyes and hair  
Exited the car and came round its rear end  
To open the back door. Helen said to me:  
“This is Green. If you need anything,  
Anything at all, ask him.” Turning then to him  
she said “Green, this Ginny Yuan, one of the scholar-students  
Up at SIS. She may ask you favors. If she does

You are to do them.” “I am Green” he lilted  
Without offering his hand, “Pleased to meet you.”

The Jag, with natural leather seats, rich wood paneling,  
And a chrome-plated steering wheel, was quite an item.  
“Green, off to the school, and make it quick,”  
Commanded Helen, that order rolling off her lips  
Like a quick kiss blown to an ever-leaving lover.  
“You know of course that this isn’t the usual way  
For you to get to school. I’ve been asked to pick you  
And the other scholar-student Kerry Christian  
Up from the ferry. And I am glad to be of help, of course.  
I have a driver, but most boarding students  
Such as yourselves must take the bus. Lucky you.  
But for an angel child so rare a thing, and her companion  
Kerry, who arrives tomorrow, I’m happy to oblige.  
We will all three be friends I think, though we come  
From different worlds.” Then without a smile or nod,  
Without a word, Green started up the quiet engine  
And we pranced away from the grey shore  
Into the inner reaches of that suburban island.

Happily, my chaperone didn’t want to talk.  
During the ride she turned her head away  
And looked at the world of Staten Island going by.  
I did the same. We stared together at the wood-framed  
Single story houses, their vinyl siding girding every front  
Like a flimsy shield against attack—useless defense  
For a determined foe. Their inhabitants it seemed  
Had failed to understand that boredom  
Was their greatest guard against invasion.

The Jaguar jumped fast across the land.  
After a brief ride, no more than minutes,  
We came into an open grassy road, high hedged  
With paired neo-Gothic buildings on each side.  
“That’s SIS over on the left” said Helen,  
“And on the right there’s SIBS, the Staten Island  
Boys School. Girls are forbidden to consort  
With boys from SIBS. But its been known  
To happen. Unless you’re fond of potty-mouthed  
Young boys, I’d stay away from there.”

When we arrived Green opened the door for  
Me and bowed, “Here we are Miss” he said to me  
As if I were some sort of noble lady. I blushed  
Smiled, and answered “Thank you Green.” Again Helen  
Took me by the hand. “Let me introduce you  
Our headmistress, the infamous Miss Purse.  
She will insist upon your calling her Doctor Purse,

But since she's just a doctor of education, we call  
Her Polly Purse among ourselves."

She led me up a grand staircase with a carved banister  
Past several empty rooms with well-stuffed chairs  
Along a hall with portraits of the former heads of school  
Until we arrived a large white painted door  
With a sign saying "Headmistress" on it. Helen rapped  
As if she were best friends with the person on the  
Inside of the door. A woman's rough voice answered  
"Enter if you must." We walked into a large corner  
Office, well appointed, with leaded windows looking out  
Onto a sunny lawn on which a few brave girls  
Were sunning themselves in the early autumn rays.  
Behind the desk sat a stout, round-eyed woman  
With bulbous cheeks. "I am Doctor Purse,"  
She said in an oniony voice, "headmistress of  
This school. You must be Ginny Yuan from  
Manhattan, one of our two charity Trinity girls."  
She looked me over head to toe as if I were  
A discount item she was perusing for defects.  
"Yours is of course, a first-rate school,  
And we are happy to bring you two poor girls from  
The hellacious city out to our bucolic haven here.  
However, I think you'll find SIS a more challenging  
Environment than you were used to in the city.  
I think particularly you'll find our strengths in economics  
Rather stronger than you might have found at Trinity.  
Girls need to earn their own way after all.  
We're a practical institution here, and our girls  
Are quite successful on the college front.  
Your colleague Kerry Christian arrives tomorrow.  
I've put you both in the same corridor in Morgan Hall.  
Now since I have nothing else to say to say to you,  
Unless you have something to ask of me, Helen  
Will show you to your room."

And so we left the office of Miss Purse and  
Wound our way down hallways and out of doors,  
Across the now-deserted school quadrangle to where  
Morgan Hall stood awaiting our arrival.

Mama Yuan inspire me in my song, help me become  
The many selves that I must be to tell how  
I first began to become rich at the Staten Island School.  
From simple principles that I knew well—  
To cut and sew, to twist and curve simple geometries  
I began to shape cloth into clothing and  
Found a name—Wrap Designs. O bodies, bodies,

How I shall wrap and then reveal you. Here show  
Only an eye, there a bit of leg, reveal an ankle  
A minor bit of breast. Here then the start of my own  
Dream for you Mama. Now I take comfort in  
Knowing that I found a way to give you what  
You needed that you may have a peaceful and  
Comfortable old age.