

Girl warrior, or: watching *Mulan* (1998) in Chinese with English subtitles

1.

I remember the sound the sword made / when she cut off all her hair

a sound like my mother cutting fabric / those blue scissors / clutched
in her small hands

I remember wondering why she didn't cut from the roots / a Disney
princess kneeling in the smoke-coloured dark / with straight hair /
thin waist / hardly any breasts

unlike me with my thick legs / and too much hair that doesn't stay

why don't we cut it short she said / and so we did

but soon it curled sideways / ungracefully caught / in the wind
of some perpetual / hurricane

2.

When I watch *Mulan* in Chinese with English subtitles / I understand
only some of the words

my focus shifts to certain details / how *Mulan* drags a very large
cannon across the snow / with very small wrists

how the villain has skin as dark as coal / and such small eyes /
he has no irises

once a guy told me mixed girls are the most beautiful / because
they aren't really white / but they aren't really Asian either

3.

After Mulan saves China / fireworks rain down in waves of multi-coloured stars

you fight pretty good / says her boyfriend with the big American arms

I have small victories too / being kind to my body for one day / not checking my phone for your texts / walking home at night alone / not feeling lonely

4.

Why don't you ever write about yourself / and I didn't know why / either

in Chinese one word can lead you out of the dark / then back into it / in a single breath

shut off the light / as my mother and other Chinese mothers say

now open it

5.

Halloween, 1999 / she unearthed a pink shawl from inside her wardrobe

cut a strip of purple silk to tie around my waist / bought a plastic sword / gave me Hershey's kisses

at the party I was conscious of my makeshift costume / I lingered near the glowing pumpkins / lips stained red by Starbursts

6.

When Mulan returns home the colours change from greybluegreen to
pinkwarmyellow / there are plum blossoms floating in the stream

her hair is still a little messy / to make sure we don't forget

she used to be something else

7.

When summer ended / rain poured off the edge of elevated highways /
and washed away the moon

I no longer have a sword / but sometimes at night I hold my keys
between my fingers

I paint my lips /

I draw avalanches /

I light fires inside dream palaces /

I cut my hair over the bathroom sink /

The Great Wall (2016)

When Matt Damon saved China
by driving his spear into the alien's mouth

I was distracted by Lin Mei's long braided hair
and the way she holds herself so still

ready to strike down her enemies
with a knife in each fist

but some things are fixed
in the white-saviour narrative

like the exotic love interest who will risk everything
as ancient cities crumble around her

and when you asked me what I thought
afterwards in the autumn rain

I wanted to say *some parts were beautiful*
like the pagoda of iridescent glass

shattering into pieces of pink and blue light
just as Lin Mei lets loose her arrow

and also when you whispered something
in my ear and I was hit by the shockwave

caused by my body and your breath existing
in the same moment in the same universe

months later you told me you cried during *Rogue One*
the scene where two men hold each other

weeping beneath the palm trees and light beams
 blasting the leaves apart and their hands

shaking moments before a star-destroying weapon
 obliterates their small wrecked portion of universe

I didn't know what to do with these space-opera feelings
 only that I had to exit this particular narrative

in which our knees are just touching
 and we are laughing while the city disappears around us

as if we could reach back through hyperspace
 to touch the silver holograms of our past selves

as if we could go back to some other time
 on some other planet

before the first particles of energy let go of themselves
 like the thousand paper lanterns

released into the sky above the Great Wall
 a thousand tiny fires trapped inside

Colour fragments

#5c85d2 | blue smoke: melting clouds

On our way home from the botanic gardens, we dreamt of building a museum of all the colours in the world, all the pigments and what they're made of, colours in their purest forms; a museum of memories stripped down. The colour of them on the inside. The tints and shades of different feelings, and the objects that colour them.

*

#cc7722 | deep ochre: iron oxide

Ella Yelich-O'Connor describes her experience of synaesthesia as seeing "clouds of coloured gas moving slowly closer and then away" when she writes music. The different notes and chords correspond to differently coloured clouds.

That day you sent me pictures of all the yellow you could find (yellow raincoat, yellow peach, yellow hothouse flower) I found a song that made me see yellow—the same colour as the painted faces of women and goddesses in ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. I wanted to play it for you but you said *save it for somewhere beautiful*, as if where we were wasn't already beautiful and we weren't already travelling so fast that I might burn up like a broken piece of space shuttle entering the atmosphere, disintegrating over the ocean.

*

#fe02d4 | magenta: neon dreams

We spend June nights in the apartment under the magnolia tree, its swollen leaves forming a canopy against the acid rain. In the early morning there is a wet sequinned heart on the ground beneath green stained glass. At the top of the stairs we wake in a room of pink glow.

When I stand under the lights of the city it's hard to separate out what is real, like American film directors who confuse modern Asian cities for their post-apocalyptic sex fantasies. Answer: it is all real, including the burnt-up chemical sky that leaves a red taste in my mouth.

*

#3e3d3e | smoke black: peach stones

We kissed in a black room inside the museum, an installation of total loss of perception. But there were my nerve endings, like a million tiny solar flares reaching for the upper edges of your clouds, generating green magnetic waves in the dark.

It is like being inside clouds in perpetual dusk / It is like being inside a Rothko painting

*

#fee10c | saffron: pigment in Medieval manuscripts

If I could step inside any Rothko painting it would be *Saffron* (1957) which is different from his other yellows because of the thin bright line that divides the *colour fields*, not *colour shapes* or *colour squares* or *colour blocks*, none of which are wide enough to contain the light. A line dividing two yellow atomspheres glows along the edges, an electric current. If you stare long enough it seems to get bigger, slowly opening at one end until it forms a bright gap that you could just fit through by putting each one of your limbs inside, one by one, until you are swallowed by light and your skin is the colour of sunflower petals right before they die and you are either floating or drowning or both at the same time.

Dreaming in a language I can't speak

*This is not a souvenir,
This is not what it looks like.*

Her name 《 雯 》
means *multi-coloured clouds*.

I almost tattooed it on my skin
while explaining over and over

this is what you can't see:
pieces of language that fell out of my mouth

as a child, crushed-up words I pull back
from disappearing rooms inside disappearing homes,

the name my grandfather gave me 《 明雅 》
two characters I still cannot write beautifully—

a sun 日 next to a moon 月
a tooth 牙 next to a bird 隹

She gave me a seal with my name carved inside it.
In a room full of untouched sunlight

I let hot wax drip onto my palm
leaving a mark that will fade over time

like the imprint of rain
in burnt chrysanthemum clouds.

In the dream-mirror
I open my mouth

and birds fly out from between my teeth.
They do not make a sound.