

Dear Mama

by Joanne Leow, '03

*By the same token I leave you,
I leave myself (with you)
Wong May, "Dear Mama"*

Wong May, poet extraordinaire, transnational writer, post-colonial female subject, unphotographed, barely reviewed, past unknown, present undocumented, and for all intents and purposes disappeared after 1978 somewhere in Western Europe.

Things I do know about her, mostly from an entry found in *Contemporary Poets*, edited by Thomas Riggs:

She is Chinese by birth, born November 16, 1944 in Chungking, China.
She is/was/is not anymore a Singaporean citizen.
1965, Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature, University of Singapore
1968, Master of Fine Arts, University of Iowa,
1969, first book of poetry *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals* published by Harcourt, Brace and Jovanich while working as Assistant Editor for United Business Publications. This is her only documented professional appointment.
1972, second book *Reports*. 1975, she is translated into German and receives a German Academic Exchange Service fellowship (Deutsch Akademisch Austausch Dienst).
1973, marries a certain Michael Coey, who is referred to as a travelling companion in her last and final book,
1978 *Superstitions*.

With all this information, she fills one page of my notebook.

Then she disappears.

Or rather, in the spaces between her poetry, she was never there in the first place.

My obsession is with her absence, her absence in reviews, her absence in critical studies, her absence in official conversations about Singaporean poetry. On the inner book sleeve of her second book her quote reads, "My poems are about wordlessness..."

So I decide I want to write about her, a substitution for writing to her, because it is to her that I would rather write. But since there is no way of doing this, I pick the second best, I write, I investigate, I fixate.

The last lines of her last book read,
O Travellers, travelling anywhere
the world is beautiful
Our windows get dirty

Her books are all dedicated to her mother, "DEAR MAMA," "To My Mother," "To my mother." Her poems are the only chronicles I have of her life. In the second book we learn that she started writing it in the winter of 1968 in New York and finished it in Winnipeg in September 1971. Her third book is begun in Berlin that same year and finishes in France, in between she continues in Hebrides, Singapore, Steglitz, Meylan, Budapest, Iona, Cracow, Prague, Poland, Malaysia, Paris. Some of these places I have recorded in my mind like an old silent movie, other names are new and unfamiliar, they have strangely colored skies and exotic smells. Everywhere she has been, I want to be. I know that I have been waiting for her words since the moment I took the first steps away from home.

Little things happen.
I'm reading the Aeschylus play *Agamemnon*, and these lines strike me

But a man's life-blood
is dark and mortal
Once it wets the earth
What song can sing it back?

So I write them down in the notebook, my fountain pen makes gentle insistent contact with the paper.

And then, sitting in bed on a Sunday morning reading her second book of poetry, I come across her poem entitled "Re:," begins with the same quote from a different translation,

When the black and mortal blood of man
has fallen to the ground before his feet,
who then can sing to call it back again?

I see myself in her. I see her in me.

She writes,

I cannot write.
Approaching poetry,

the unhopd for
the never to be hoped for
turning
I have lost my speech.
Approaching speech
I have almost lost my life.
Speak to me.

She has disappeared, but these words continue to speak to me; some days they gasp out from their pages, some days they whisper me into insomnia, some day I want to write a book that begins with her lines

Do not believe in me
Do not not believe in me,
Love, I am a pathological liar,
Erase me
word by word
alive.

*

In my desperation, I dream of a book written about her. It is old, like all the used, out-of-print ephemera that I've been hunting down. In it, on the inside cover there is the only sketch of her I've ever seen. She is a frustrating blur of cloudy black hair and unfamiliar face. She looks almost like a young version of my mother.

Later, in another part of my dream, I am giving a lecture on her somewhere, my chalk makes soft calling sounds on the blackboard.

She is nowhere, she is everywhere.

The book is called *Illuminations*, each chapter in the first section deals with a single color in her work and modes of transportation as themes.

She is constantly in flux.

I cannot see her for her movement.

In my dream, my green umbrella becomes imprinted with autumn leaves, red, gold, their dye seems to seep into the material, blooming like a secret obsession.

I imagine that one day I will knock on a door, and she will open it. I am waiting to see her smile. What will she look like? What will she say? What happens next?

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14th November 1944, 15th October 1944, 20th February 1943; Wong May, my thesis advisor and my mother, all born within twenty-four months of each other.

That has to mean something.

I've been thinking recently about why we are so obsessed with our mothers, so obsessed with those years that are missing to us, what was Wong May doing in 69, 77, 79... what was my mother doing?

Why am I writing about women writers who grew up in the same milieu and timeframe as my mother? I have gone through so much other writing, in English, in French, in translation: Japanese poetry, Icelandic sagas, Russian novels, everything and anything I could lay my hands on, wanting to be as far from my origins as I could be. But all to turn back with my newly found tools to delve back from where I came. I have come so far only to be compelled by some strange force to look back to my Eurydice.

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Josephine Veronica Phun Siew Chin, teacher extraordinaire for the past 40 years, care counselor, pillar of the church, ex-principal of a high school, my mother, adopted. She is photographed extensively by her foster parents, but never before the age of one. I never realize why until much later, never realize why my grandmother never discusses her own pregnancy but only my mother's. Having a revelation this late in extended childhood --- on the brink of adulthood --- makes all these disparate pieces of your childhood memory come together in a complex almost indecipherable puzzle; it almost makes sense but there are still so many gaps to be filled in. To me she is as much a stranger as Wong May.

Things I do know about her, mostly second-hand, indirect, implied, disguised:

We are sitting around a table with our French friends in Toulouse, my mother and me and the four of them. Claire asks,
-- À quel âge as-tu été prise?

I translate this, because my mother has lost most of her rudimentary French.

-- They want to know when you were adopted.

I have only known this fact for 3 years now; it is not a very long time.

-- When I was one, she answers.

-- Quand elle avait un an.

I translate my mother's past for them, unknowable to me, fragment by fragment, into another language.

One day, my father says

-- You know there were three miscarriages, one before you and two after.

My mother was 37 when she had me.

At that late age, the miscarriages were to be expected, I suppose.

-- One time it was right by this junction, right here we were on my motorbike.

We were driving by an anonymous intersection in our old neighborhood.

He didn't elaborate.

Some days I wonder whether I am worried about her real parents because she is not concerned. I think that if I don't consider these things then nobody will, and these faceless grandparents, this couple with too many children fleeing the Japanese occupation will be forever lost.

I am not, the only child of an only child, and if I don't remember this, no one will.

Everyone out here could be a potential uncle, aunt, cousin. A whole new secret family tree, waiting to stretch out its roots and branches.

-- I was really skinny and malnourished, my brothers had apparently once left me in a drain.

-- You had brothers?

-- Yes, that's what they said.

-- Do you remember them?

-- No.

-- Haven't you ever wanted to find them?

-- No, not really.

I enter my mother's name in an online search engine, as I'm entering Wong May in the dialogue box. Wong May returns 2,170 results, only a handful of these are relevant. My mother's maiden name returns 2 results, her married name another 2. From one website I find out that from 1976 to 1978 she was the principal of a girls' conven

These years are just before 1980, the year I was born. She hardly talks about them; I know they were painful for her: the late marriage to my father after waiting for seven long years, six of those watching him go through a seminary, a nervous breakdown and a year of priesthood.

-- I never told you this before, but that trip that your father and I took to Europe? We weren't married yet, we were trying to decide things.

I knew how unthinkable this must have been at the time.

-- We stayed with Jean and Claire and the rest.

These were other priests who fell in love.

I remember my long conversations with my father about how the church should have optional celibacy for its clergy.

They couldn't keep this from me, the fact that my father was going to receive all the seven sacraments.

I wondered what made my mother decide that she was going to hold on to him, she often makes it sound that she was just waiting for him to make a decision.

-- He found the priesthood too lonely.

-- I wouldn't have married anyone else that late in my life.

-- Besides, it was like a ship coming into harbor

She often uses that metaphor to talk about their relationship.

*

I take my mother on a holiday in Italy, it is our first real holiday alone together and it will be one of our last ones. I know this, and she knows this. In two years she will be 60; in the backs of our minds, the place where we hide our sadness and fear, we are quietly calculating these matters. She tires easily, she reminisces mostly about the time she was here with my father in the 70s.

-- There were fewer people, and fewer cars; and we ate a lot of sandwiches.

I make sure she has as much Chinese food as she wants; we hunt down these tiny places in the winding streets of Florence, off piazzas in Milan. She wants to go to Venice, but there is no time, no time for her and no time for the city before it floods over.

One night in Milan, she is asleep in the bed next to mine, I am up writing a poem. She hears my pen and barely awake is watching me.

-- what are you doing?

-- writing a poem.

She never asks to see it.

Another golden twilight in Florence, she is particularly exhausted and I go out into the dusk to buy food for us. I wander around aimlessly, almost lost, looking for something to satisfy our hunger. I feel guiltily relieved to be young and light-footed. Later with a lover in Venice, I realize how much I take staircases for granted. My mother struggles up to one floor to our Florentine hotel and I admonish myself for not reading the guidebook more closely.

On one of our last train journeys in Milan, the lady sitting across from us strikes up a conversation. Her name is

Francesca and she is friendly in an Italian sort of way, open, warm and generous. Suddenly my mother says,
-- my daughter, she planned this entire trip, she booked the hotels and the trains. She speaks French to the Italians we meet if they don't understand English. I'm so proud of her.

I blush with a pleasure I had not known before.

*

Wong May has a poem called "To my mother", part of it reads
I remember
as a child I began to be aware of language
only when I began to be aware

painfully
how I cannot write without a pen

about you
Yes, even about you

I will perhaps never write about you

to this day I consistently write about other things

I wish so often love were otherwise

*

Some days I think I can see my past disappearing, leaking through the gaps between my fingers, like sand, like water, like a cloth so fine that you cannot grasp it. So I take photographs, because I want to remember, want to somehow possess images that give me the artifice of immutability, of permanence.

My mother and I are walking in the Boboli Gardens in Florence, she wanted to come to relive the time she spent with my father here. At first we cannot find the correct entrance and we are thwarted by gates concealing the maze-like shrubbery beyond. But now we are here, and she says she doesn't remember all these stairs. The heat is obtrusive, stifling almost. She turns away from me to walk down another tall green corridor, her back to me, and I let the shutter of my lens close and shut quickly.

I want remember her this way always, her right foot lifted slightly off the ground in a step that she is about to take, the shadow of her sandal beneath her.