

**Kristina Tom**

**Parallax**

1

I am the end of a rope  
thread an ocean  
across but what  
spun fiber  
stays wound,  
what saltwater  
in time, won't dissolve?

This house is mine, child of peasants,  
the names on the shrine guard the door—  
We were close, a bus ride, but we didn't know the village's name.  
*A-yeh* did.

I sense a  
snapping of lines  
vines breaking one  
then another  
flinging themselves  
from the wall.

2

Blood is not tongue is not language—  
That  
is air.  
I'm without words  
without breath  
what would have been mine. Tell me:

If you cannot see a door, cannot name a door, is there a door?

I find my name in a sea  
of brush strokes, learn his  
in time to see it buried, but I hold  
a bit of earth this whisper  
to myself, again and again as the coin that fell

from a white envelope remains  
unspent, that sweet lozenge

that would chase the bitter still there in my purse  
when I reach for my wallet  
my keys  
a stick of gum.

3

Strange the single seed of discovery and loss—  
*a flower cannot bloom a hundred days*  
*nor a man a hundred years*      Petals shed daily reminders,

point the way, crumb-like, to the southern gate—  
but how to unlock a door you don't know is there?

4

Let me go, the sprig of pine has dried  
the red thread unlucky

I was American  
distinct in a Beijing sun

and mistook the slack in the string  
for its release.

*Can you speak?* No.

5

I was late, could not give  
the English to save you, the language  
of doctors, of wellness.

Thin bed, thinner sheets,  
you lay bloated,  
but thumbs up at me.

My father pushed you back—  
neither of us understood.

He told me in the elevator  
what you wrote: your painstaking

fight with black marker,  
squiggly sickbed strokes.

I didn't think to walk back  
until I'd flown miles away. Next time, I'd tell you

I'd let you go. Guide your hand  
to sign or loose the cord myself.

## **Ride**

He doesn't belong to Monday afternoons—  
she comes home, he's waiting by the open door;  
so begin the car rides: day there, night back,

the moon more faithful now than ever  
to this window. He still sweeps her  
from the back, clears the safety belt,  
soft syllable so—once

a cough catches, a premonition:  
the neighborhood an animal,  
unseen claws—consider

his shirt did not use to thread so thin.  
She discovers oyster crackers  
in the hospital cafeteria, doesn't wash  
her hands, thumbs

salt, when she sees him age in the bed  
and learns the need to be gentle—  
the surest but not the only way

to teach a child restraint.

## The mountain that loved a bird

1

A picture I may have read and remembered

or constructed from longing to receive  
the revelation—perhaps  
the fossils lie in every story,

seed words that never leave us.

*What have you forgotten, some bedtime story?*

Cross fifteen threads of ocean,  
spill a day hot and humid from the gleaming pill  
into merlion song

still I am here, have always been  
home lies always east.

2

The flat of a crayon marks monsoon waves.  
Indigo, onyx, and thrown white gravel make  
this mountain, paper wedged into peaks, ridges,

crevasses of over-eager glue  
spread atop the sponged sunset.  
But mango is hardly worth my money—

instead: a bit of heart, black canyon  
coffee crunch, pineapple  
rice and prawns

tea pulled to the floor like a rambutan  
tumble, or the chopstick trickle  
of shod girls down stairs

my heart so fast, the bed shakes

I have always loved blue  
 known only this rock, the path of sun in day  
 the path of moon in night.

I am too old to wear hearts on my fingers  
 but the ring circles the silver and aquamarine of a bay  
 as careful as you held your gall-ridden body—

Close the eye as a shell—  
 so many threads—one is enough.    Enough.

I ask for rock and no water, no water and rock—  
 what roots reach for cracks, pushing, always pushing,  
 deeper, wider, apart.

How many times must the rock  
 break for the seed

finger the wound left behind, the gap that threatens  
 collapse under gravity. Break and return,  
 break and return – her wings

a feathered fan to the sun.  
 Waiting to heal, she picks at the scab  
 knowing the scar will be beautiful.

**Kristina Tom** is an American-Chinese writer currently based out of Singapore, where she works as a journalist for the Straits Times. You can find her poetry on the web at [www.softblow.com](http://www.softblow.com) and on her personal website [www.geocities.com/krimato](http://www.geocities.com/krimato).