

Portrait

This film poem reflects on the process of sewing a portrait of my late grandmother. Five portraits were made in total to shoot one poem and each version of my grandmother, brought me a different memory – some kind, some not, all tender.

The values and attitudes to womanhood and ageing that my grandmother passed to me were ultimately quite mournful and stern. I felt judged from beyond while making this piece and my superstitiousness kicked into high gear. I took every precaution such as only knotting in loops of 3 or 5 to avoid the number 4 – which in Chinese culture sounds like the word for 'death'. While my grandmother has already passed on, I did not want to remind her spirit of its current state.

Embroidered portraiture also makes you keenly aware that you are putting a sharp object through someone's face. I found myself uttering 'sorry' every time I pricked the cloth although the audio of this is not on the film.

The sad, respectful mood of this poem is also complemented by instrumental music from Singaporean artists Subhas Nair and Fauxe for which the artist is thankful.

I start with your eyes,
nervous as I poke needle through iris.
Through soul that has left
but whose spirit
I call into focus.

Still nervous, I risk
removing the feeding tube
that lived in your left nostril.

A foreign object succeeds
when it is no longer clear who is the parasite.
It feeds you and you feed it
until one of you is dry. I
connect nose to jowl. To pocket,
heavy with words unsaid.
Promises and compromises your heart
would not make
but that were ready to leap off your tongue,

if only you were kinder.

Now your ear which I know is just thread on cotton
but I'm certain has gotten the gift of hearing beyond.

Elsie, can you hear me?

I'm sorry I'm using your first name but there must be so many
grandma ghosts where you are all tittering about what the grandchildren
wearing their faces are doing.

Elsie, I am sorry.

I'm working on your scalp now.

Pricking where I used to brush
your powdered shave releasing a fine mist.

How you'd choke and our eyes would dart
back to the Suria channel
when it was safe again.

By now, I have made it to your mouth.
It's warning stroke, a thinning tide dragged out

lower than any ebb
on a June evening.

And it's mole on the left lip.
An inheritance from a long line of photocopies.

I'm not an apple far from your gravity.

This mole on our lip. Less north star,
more falling debris.

My lovers say it is beautiful
now

but one day they too will watch a slow drama by my bed,
tolerating exactly one episode.

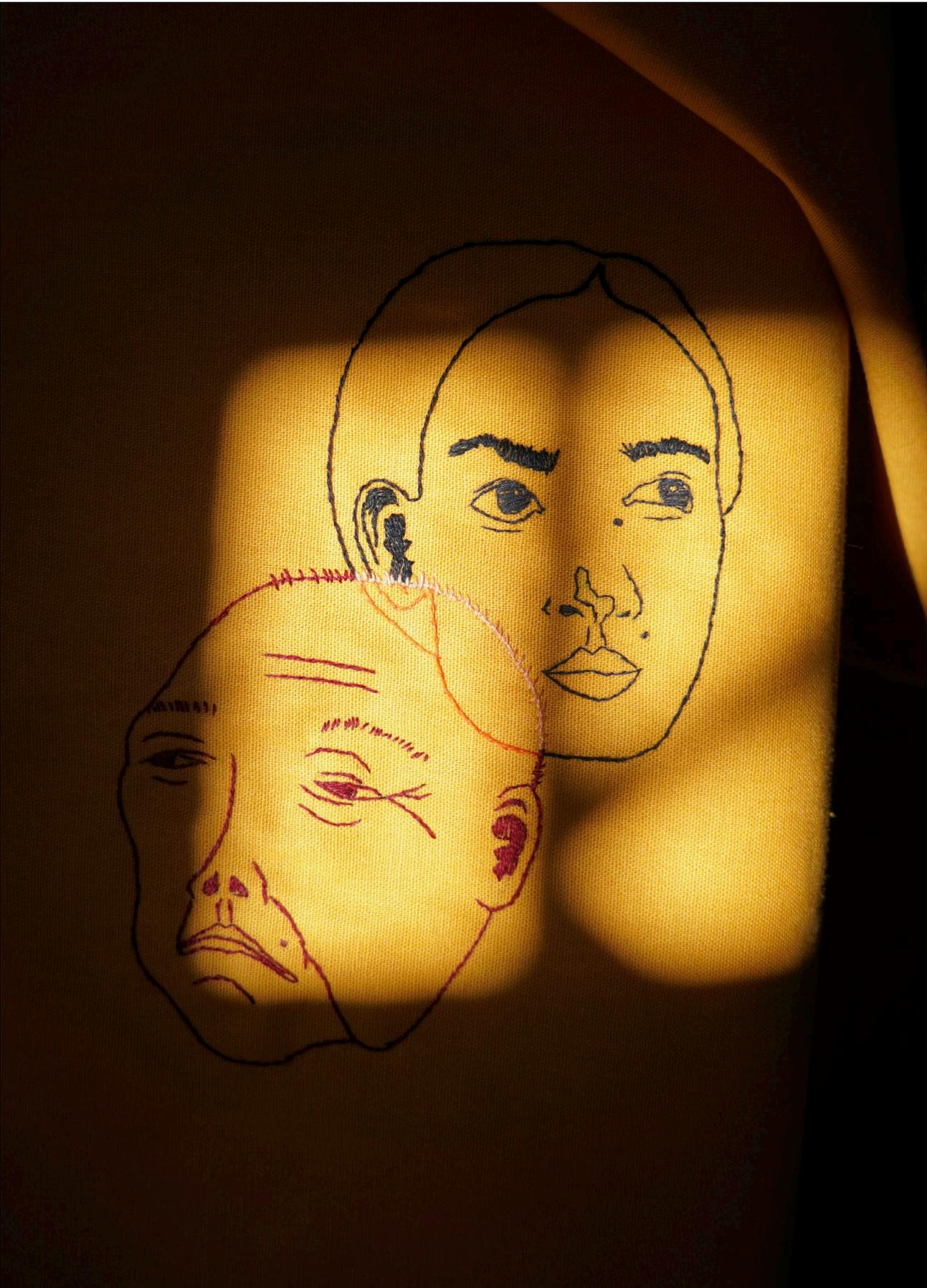
This mouth, grandma.

I will not wait to say all it needs to say.

Before sewing it all in place.

Link to current version of poem:

<https://youtu.be/0vofui3ktpI>



A Woman (After Wong May, 1969)

This poem is written after a poem of the same title by Wong May who was born in China but lived in Singapore, the US and Ireland. I stumbled upon her poetry with the help of my friend and poet Tse Hao Guang and was struck by the wry playfulness of Wong's work. Perhaps because I was also supposed to go to the US to pursue my masters, I was drawn too to her biographical journey. I consequently did not achieve a scholarship to go and so our paths diverge, but nevertheless I am glad to have been exposed to her work and to produce a sparse poem which is not my usual style of writing.

I.

Skin is not a roof.
Breasts are not doorknobs.

The wound is (not between my legs).
I am not home.

II.

I told you a messy room is a messy mind
and you said, better than an empty room.

And I imagine my room blissfully so,
with no bed for you to couch on.

III.

You sit inside me
even when I've said what I've said.

Baby, my hush isn't me.
It's just the wind.

IV.

You say you will always be jealous of me.
Of my potential to feed an army.
My body; camp site, base, kitchen, oven,
appliance of law always foreign to me.

If I could give you my body I would.
But it's not mine to give.

V.

This wound in a place I don't know
from a time I can't remember,
stays soft in the shape of you.
Takes you in against its will.



you sit
inside me

even after
I've said

WHAT I'VE SAID.

To The Idealists

This poem was written in the wake of a spate of high-profile racist incidents in Singapore in the first half of 2021. The use of the moon imagery is in reference to Singapore's national flag which contains a crescent moon - symbolising a forever-young nation on the ascendent - and five stars. The image of the bomb is also in direct reference to a Singaporean minister's comments in 2016 that the Little India area and its inhabitants were 'walking time-bombs'.

The minister has since apologised for this comment but the sentiment is still prevalent - the majority regard brown residents of Singapore as dangerous or unruly especially when gathered together whether in physical or online spaces. However, these spaces - particularly online - are key environments for public critique and resistance against the national picture of repression and uneasy harmony.

The authorities are keen to caution Singaporeans in guarding against tension, particularly racial. While the poet concurs that tension must be addressed, it is the poet's belief that acknowledgement must make visible a fuller and messier picture.

The embroidery version of this poem was conceived as a talismanic wall-hanging but has since been sold in the form of postcard prints to benefit mutual aid efforts in Singapore.

It's always about the rain drop, not the storm.
The one sad story, not the long arm

of history: a surface made threadbare, a clouded
eye, a sadness with no reckoning.

All your life, you faced a hoisted moon and their ideals
as stars so tiny, you cannot make them out.

All your life, hand over heart to this painted crescent
- moon loved still, loved to stillness.

All your life is precious,
even when they say it is not.

They blame your light, your shadow,
your tone, the thunder.

But look at her, not the portrait they made
and can never raise high enough to reach her heights.

How she comes and goes and becomes again.

This pulse in our sky, teasing out time.
they say we must never let finger off the trigger.

And yet, what if we let it bloom?

All your life, you hold your breath, your words,
your comebacks – come back
before you retreat so far into yourself you cannot answer
why you love this country.

Look at her. How she addresses us
naked as a bomb's heartbeat.

TO THE IDEALISTS

IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT THE RAINDROP, NOT THE STORM
THE ONE SAD STORY, NOT THE LONG ARM

OF HISTORY: A

SURFACE MADE THREADBARE, A
CLOUDED EYE, A SADNESS WITH NO
RECKONING

ALL YOUR LIFE
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AND THEIR IDEALS AS STARS

SO TINY

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HAND OVER HEART
TO THIS PAINTED
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YOU CANNOT MAKE THEM
OUT

MOON LOVED STILL,
LOVED TO STILLNESS

ALL YOUR LIFE IS
PRECIOUS

EVEN WHEN THEY SAY
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THEY BLAME
YOUR LIGHT
YOUR SHADOW
THE TONE
AND THE THUNDER

BUT LOOK AT HER

NOT THE PORTRAIT
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HOW SHE COMES
AND GOES

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AND
ADDRESSES
US



NAKED AS
A HEARTBEAT

Locked In Blue

During the period of the residency, I was also contracted to teach on spoken word and mental wellness by the Esplanade, Singapore. As part of my practice I asked students to draw a place that made them feel safe to use as ekphrasis for their own poems later on. A student drew their mind as a private pool locked away from others which I found to be an arresting image. Inspired by this image, I started with an embroidery of my own profile and replaced the pool with the ocean. I then wrote two variations of a poem based on this embroidery. Personally I prefer the free form version but I am happy with this, my first sestina.

Locked In Blue (Sestina Version)

The poet says: the body is a country
Collectively, we spread; a map of feeling.
But I do not feel solid. I rock
myself for comfort. Come against
hard boundaries. Lap at coastlines
but never come ashore.

My mother says: Come ashore.
I started as spring, escaping from her country.
My thoughts lie further out from her coastline.
She wants to know what I am feeling.
In water, there is nothing for my thoughts rub against.
To take them out is to gasp and flop on the rocks.

I think: I don't want to die on the rocks.
There is nothing but ugliness ashore.
Outside of me, my thoughts smell – and again
the poet speaks of the spread of countries;
of thought as food and fuel for feeling.
Feeding you befouls the coastline.

Needing you feeds the bottom line.
Poet, mother, people as rock:
I am between a hard place and your feelings.
What monuments you need to shore
up, to make yourselves grand countries.
What odes to odds to fight against.

What odds are odes even against?
To sign upon the dotted line

is to symbol myself solid as a country;
is to say I will not falter, armed like a rock,
land-locked to neighbours as to shore.
I want more for my own feelings.

I say: I want my own feelings.
The sea is private. It waves against
and again and against. Only nibbles the shore.
Coast as toast. Bounds as hairline.
Body as fracture. Rock as rock.
The poet in me says: When is a country?

One day I'll dry up and become a country.
You can have my thoughts when I am rock.
Til then let me swirl below sightline.

Locked In Blue (Free Form Version)

The poet says: the body is a country
but I do not feel solid.
I rock myself for comfort and come against
hard lines. Nibble at
coastlines and never come when I'm called;
coast as toast and tea
growing cold. My mother says: What are you
feeling? And I want to
but I don't say how graceful these thoughts
are gliding in the water
inside me in a way nothing on land can. How
taking them out of water
is to turn them to death and gasping. How outside,
my thoughts smell; rot;
are not good food for others' thought. But people
want a spread. Define
themselves by each other: map of desire and
obligation. I don't want
to be told what I want or to have people want
what they're told by what
I want which is: I'm not telling. Let the manta rays
spell it in the water.
In their dance in blue skies, an ode to the odds
that we will all make it out
alive.

