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TINFISH RETRO SERIES NO. 4

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“If you want to know
the taste
of a pear, you must
change the pear
by eating it yourself,” Mao said,

meaning you must,
by biting
into the fruit, enter the conversation
of a pear, and convince it
to change its pear-mind,

or at least alter it in
some way—
perhaps an inclination
or a way of decorating
a home could be improved.

You can't really know
a pear
or anything, for that matter—
an eel, green peas, wafers, tomatoes
—unless you change it,

because letting these things
stay
what they already are,
untainted by our knowledge,
keeps us in a state of

ignorance. Therefore, a comrade
 once asked
Mao if a lover could be
 known without
changing her, and

the Chairman said,
 “If you want
to know the structure and properties
 of the atom, you must make
physical and chemical experiments

to change the state of the atom.”
 The comrade
was still perplexed, couldn't
 he let his woman be
who she was

and still know her? Maybe
 Mao
was right, he thought,
 it was an atomic question,
without change there

could be no real
 insight.
Still, he wondered if Mao
 had eaten too much bread,
or if his wheat diet

had influenced his
 judgment.
Before approaching his woman,
 he returned to Mao again
for counseling,

and Mao said, "If you
 want to know
the theory and methods
 of revolution,
you must take part in the revolution."

Convinced, the comrade
 returned
to his woman with the intent
 of getting to know her.
He asked her, "Will you

stop being so stubborn, spend
 less time
at home, cook more for me,
 and get over your issue
of needing often to be alone

so that I may finally know
 who you are?"
I am like the pear
 that is never eaten, she said,
I am the atom unchanged.

M a o ' s O l d C h i n a

“Young people are unable
to see
the contrast between the Old China
and the new,” Mao said,
referring to the late styles

of his favorite artists,
Edward
Hopper, Ralph Ellison,
Ella Fitzgerald
and Peter Nu—

Filipino novelists are
old hat,
Mao thought, whereas
the ones scribbling on
visual cultures are way

ahead of the game. Some people
can't withstand
the smallest pressure,
her back turned
to found-art installed

in the corner of what you
most
want—beach town, heartland,
city or country,
prestige or family?

Those trees reached almost
 across
the street, the prettiest women
 study cliffs, and
Old China is more memory

than presence—look around you,
 everything
distilled to a menu, or TV,
 you're mistaken. Where, then,
is the new China,

a needle in a haystack,
 short
strands of noodles
 in the latest Michael Crichton
book, an upscale college town?

I saw old China
 standing
in front of the cash register,
 looking over her shoulder
wondering which China

was waiting in line, looking
 for
the future to explain everything
 to him—thousands of years
from now every China

will be Old China, and there
 will be
mint China waiting
 to be coined—
but before that happens,

let's talk about your
 dysfunctional
family and mine, how
 distance lets us forget
the bickering we were

forced to meditate—how
 every
new challenge, rooted in the past
 made us grow
towards each other like

rows of grape trees before
 they are
picked by worker's hands,
 before the gatherers come to yield
what became of us.

Without struggle there can
be
no identity,
said Mao Zedong,
but what is identity—

a mouse-trap with a
piece
of sushi
placed on it,
sure to capture

before night's
end,
a propped up idea
for red lanterns
and neon logos,

colors making a
striking
contrast in the window.

The win-lose
situation is dialectical,

would suit Mao's
one-
up-on-the-other
pirates of the
Caribbean anti-metaphysics.

One culture jumps
 another's
ship—eye to eye
 no captain
needs a peer

to navigate the
 sea.
We who put our
 foreign policies
and Gap clothes

in the same grab
 bag
should know—
 there are bigger cities
but that's just a poor

reason to
 escape,
the cold, solitude, obstacles,
 challenges. You are
what you ooze,

I read somewhere, which
 makes
some people sex,
 stars, breathing gloss.
Identity goes reeling

before these
 involuntary
self-definitions—
 tea bag, blue lamp,
hands in the pocket.

Wool-wearing,
 brown
or red, how Fall
 gets translated
over your skin.

Stay and watch the
 colors
turn if you can
 take it, resist
the urge back to the coast.

No homeland, but
 California,
bootleg rum stash
 island
will never be

imaginary—think of the
 pleasing
font on the menu,
 how much it has
already decided for you.

Tears on the
 hands
of a Cartier watch,
 trusting church or state
never yielded

a trail of
 diamonds.
Try to look
 at the global role
of sticking it out—

there's a woman
 who
talks dirty
 in Polish to you,
her words

can outweigh the
 frozen
tundra of her state.
 She may let loose
and trust again,

more than photocopied
 eyes
bringing energy
 into the room,
her life, leaving me

only with the
 absence
of a black-and-white
 image of a stranger,
almost as foreign

as the one you
 love
on most days.

 Or not, when the temperature
sinks below zero.

Make your call
 before
then, China
 and Winter
are sleeping giants now,

except that China won't
 wake
for 45 years,
 and Wisconsin's cold
blitz is around the corner.

M a o ' s I n d i g e s t i o n

I used to have ideals,
Mao confided to me,
his trusted medical advisor.
He remembered the village
under two feet of snow,

the black Norway spruces at the gate.
This, after he had demanded executions
and made it clear
to the order of the scribble—
those who didn't "get"

his doctrine
would be struck down
by terminal infections.
Mao talked about that night walk
back to the farm

with his wife's cousin,
how he told her
what he knew—ledges of granite, the ice age,
pixels revving crumbs in a graphic novel.
A decade gone by and China

a crystal pattern identification
on the map of the market,
while early modern London
staged a come-back on history's
gendered pandemic.

He said he wanted to step down,
let someone else take over—
maybe then he could be who he once was,
the farmhand who paused above
the dip of the Corbury road,

talking big about coasting,
listening to her say,
“It might have fallen off into the snow.”
Mao, as I remember,
was not influenced by sickness,

though he complained of indigestion.
I wondered what happened
to his dialectic, bourgeois–proletariat,
capitalist–Marxist thinking
that defined his lifestyle.

Would China change overnight,
could culture become less revolting?
Would the soldiers let down their guards
depending on Mao’s memories,
a reduction of lightness,

a tint of regret
in the seven volumes of his search
for lost newspapers?
Mao indicated as much.
He wanted to be the man again

who hauled wood in the mill,
tried to patch together
the dish his wife's cousin dropped.
Mao continued to complain about
a burning feeling in his chest,

a sour taste in his mouth.
I mixed vinegar with herbs,
instructed Mao
to rest, stop talking for an hour.
When I returned,

Mao thanked me for the cure.
I expected him
to tell me more about what happened
to the dish, were there enough fragments
left on the floor?

Instead, he said, "There is nothing
that does not contain contradiction;
without contradiction nothing would exist,"
and he proceeded to write
colorless ideas in his notebook.

R e q u i e m f o r M a o

Mao walked by me on North Street,
the sleeve of his shirt brushed against mine.
While I was working at the computer,
Mao roller-skated around my kitchen,

knocked on the wall with his knuckle.
He let me figure it out slowly:
why he wanted a homeland
and a mother tongue to keep

his adolescence in a perpetual
state of calculation. But Mao knows
that the checkbook on his desk,
and the honeysuckle on the side-street

around the corner from my place
are more than a reflection. The basket
on the tabletop and the anemones
are on the same plane, winners and losers

both play with a racket. The neighbor next door
is paying alimony but he'll run out of money
soon, and Mao is closer than I thought:
he gave up his cell phone, learned how to

sand and prime, to paint without streaks.
Mao has also made sense of which beaches
are his favorite, why he doesn't eat as many steaks
as he'd like to, why he never understood if wants

should be limited to achievable things,
if our gods behave worse than us, if it is better
to be a human being dissatisfied
than a pig satisfied.

It is. Fear doesn't count,
yet Mao still stresses over tests, worries about
what costume he'll wear on Halloween,
panics about war and alcoholism.

Mao still knows intimately the magnificence
of his alarm clock's red digits, the narrow rectangle
of imagination, the vertical block of greed.
Perhaps some bitterness kept him here.

“Buy a ring that hurts your eyes, if you want,” I told Mao.
Mao saw himself as something socially manufactured,
never as innate and universal, never as
a circus star in a French movie, or a chef

fusing Asian with old hat American.
Mao comes from a place he can't pronounce.
When the shipbuilders gave him a big contract
he played the race card so he could

listen to the Beatles instead of work.
Mao was never what I imagined.
It never occurred to me that he was only
the small part of the brain that thinks.

If Mao stands a certain way, it's because
he's remembering how he used to stand
in cities he loved: places like Chinatown
microphone one way alley ornate doorbell

endless beach tow-truck curbed downwind.
If I can't see Mao the way I used to,
it's not because he thinned his visibility
like a used car. I changed.

I assembled Mao's contour with a new vision
of merely linguistic constructs.
I said his self was a fiction.
How then can I know him?

I never lived it up, but it doesn't mean
I have the energy of a fake flower
stuffed into a bottle: maybe Mao is
no longer in the mix. Does that mean

he's an object, like the hat on the rack?
Mao pins a snapshot of a river to his wall.
He lived hard when he could.
My worship of reason will do more

harm than he ever did,
being the simple farmer that he was—
working the land, mind distracted
by a desire to migrate to urban tundras.

Do you think he was not determined to get paid
for making furniture, cooking gourmet dinners,
designing documents and
blaming it all on who he later became?

Mao is defensive and wants to be himself again.
He didn't coerce this figure in the mirror,
it came for him: fending again for the grain,
glint and roar of a crystal animal conspiracy.

When Mao dragged the active to the altar
of candles and coins, he asked the Madonna
for mercy to change his life. She said, "Listen
I can't spark the dull cans of beans

or even say thank you, I don't have a nickel to give."
So Mao felt responsible for the long days
and wanted to make them brief like Basho,
a few lines suggesting the length of his hair.

As hours grew repetitive, he began
to want a glass house where
his surroundings would speak to him.
Mao thought about brevity,

lifespan, all his silent reading binges.
He imagined the future of a kingdom
to be found, bowing to eagles and seashells.
All his latent talents became ubiquitous.

It wasn't all that easy to stitch it together:
determination to alter oscillation,
a fan's natural inclination to spin.
He wanted to celebrate

with champagne, like movie stars do.
He went for long walks and hit up
every museum in the city, and some said
he was lying to himself, as if he really wasn't

living. As if he was watching the film
The Last Emperor and inserting himself
into the story. "Escapism," they said,
"talk about real pitchfork scarecrow living."

It was because he had to labor so hard
to make sure he understood all the coupons,
what was being sold at the farmer's market,
if he should play sports or not.

But no one lamented him. He wanted to hear it—
some dumb condolence for the life he'd led
arguing with architects who wanted to turn
lakefronts into residential areas.

Mao doesn't need to be called back, so don't look
so conspicuous walking around the factories
on the periphery of the town—he is beyond the magnified
prisms he tried to guide me through.

Mao already knows how to hold
knee-jerk reactions, and magazines that attract
the eye with words of instruction. There are
no holes in the logic of his advice.

Mao doesn't know how to enable the allure
of billboards on pear-shaped trucks,
of logos on socks, or of wrongdoing.
He's still here, on the same corner.

He was open to all things—new
neighborhoods, trout fishing, boredom,
chopping wood, trendy ethnic novels,
Brooklyn accents and playing darts.

But does love mean being alone,
and from what movie did he get that idea?
He'd gained so much only to slip back
into a life he never wanted—all the Buddhist

retreats he didn't get around to meditating on.
How can I help Mao keep what he needs?
What should I do—put the volume up
on the laugh track, cut his hair

so it rises like dough, brush all the flies out the door?
Mao chose to live with the hurry.
This made him unaware of the lies
told to him about Indian restaurants.

But it did seem he had what he dreamed—
seasons, administrative oversight,
fifty cent tolls on the interstate,
torn button-down shirts,

a political rant every Friday.
Perhaps he was right: the enmity between
listening to jazz while sipping
mango freezes and remembering

all things past, this clash of straw
and framed pictures goes back thousands
of years. It's just he couldn't bear
to keep living a life he wasn't living.

I told Mao to get out. He stared down the paper.
“How do you know what my tasks are,
you who drink too many cocktails
on weeknights?” Mao said, as if our lives differed.

I had to imagine Mao's
liquorless, licorice eating nights,
with no firsthand experience.
Why did he ask for my help in the first place?

He always leaves the café with
smiling happy people who carry
their presences far away. Maybe
he could walk down the long steps,

near to where I sit by the open
garage door, and advise me with ideas
that still hold true in this world—
“I will give you all the secrets of inertia

if you take me hiking in the woods,
adventuring, like the others do,” Mao said,
pondering what it was he hoped to find there:
the present moment sitting on a rocking chair,

exuberance of having the nerve
to berate the high-minded people
he hated, of pulling long cords
and making circles of them from hand, to shoulder?

Yes, to wear a hat that doesn't suit him.
Rivers, still full in early fall,
moving for no reason except that
their schedules are packed with

equal parts glam and mundane acceptance of everything—
cosmopolitans and witty banter, so-what stances
on what is boring, extreme feeling curbed by a combination
of banners and jewelry with no symbolic residue.

“Past wounds are just food to let go bad
and throw away,” Mao said. “Who will
assure me that danger in awareness electrifies,
is only music, not an insoluble shootout

of tricksters, trying to make a fool of me?”
Mao trusted the coyote and wound up
on a country road. A random fiesta
with trumpets came out of the woods.

What did it mean, some kind of redemption
or pointless excavation? They said
Mao was a penitent type, but he saw me
trying to put down my brush.

A b o u t t h e P o e t

Kenny Tanemura is a graduate of the MFA program at Purdue University. His poems have appeared in *Volt*, *The Sonora Review*, *Xconnect*, *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*, and elsewhere.

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