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## [What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say](#)

by Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Albuquerque: University of New Mexico/West End Press, 1998

Paperback, 82 pages, \$8.95



### [Catherine Anderson](#)

In [What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say](#), Shirley Geok-lin Lim writes the left-out words predicting an immigrant daughter's future with sharp, haunting imagery and a dual edge of anger and humor. Born in Malaysia of Chinese-Malaysian heritage, the well-known author and poet continues her telling of Asian-American lives in this, her most recent book of poetry. Stories of a mother who could not see beyond her desire for Western possessions shadow the poet's understanding of her own rebellious identity as an adult Asian woman living in the United States. Lim's portrait of her mother could stand in for many immigrant women who have staked their lives on a prefabricated, Hollywoodized ambition only to be left out in "a land with no ancestors." The title poem, "What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say," appearing as the very first poem of the book, begins the work of straightening the skewed record her mother and her mother's mother have kept:



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When the old man and his crow  
 picked the long folded parchment  
 to tell my fortune at five,  
 they never told about leaving,  
 the burning tarmac and giant wheels.  
 Or arriving—why immigrants  
 fear the malice of citizens  
 and dull shutterings of those  
 who hate you whatever you do.

In "Mother's shoes," the theme of misguided motherhood surfaces again, but with the spice of wit: "In my mother's shoes, I was short/ of imagination, stuffed full of/ ancestors, recessive genes." In "Lost Name Woman," the title of the second section of the book, Lim imagines beyond the lives of her own family to include other women who come to the United States from Asia. For these young women, as for the ones of previous generations, American culture dramatically severs roots for the sake of survival: "Mississippi China woman,/ why do you wear bluejeans in the city?/ Are you looking for the rich ghost/ to buy you a

ticket to the west?" Lim echoes the same irony later in the book in "Learning to love America" with its deadpan first line: "because it has no pure products."

Elsewhere, Lim reminds us that a mix of Asian cultures populates the major cities on our east and west coasts, creating a rich texture of voices. This pan-Asian plurality mirrors Asia itself, whole continents representing Hindus and Buddhists, Tamils and charismatic Christians, thousands alternating between the gaudy, Westernized temptations of popular culture and the more perennial pulls of family, love, and the erotic. The drive to show how east meets west, hot strikes bland, and tragedy bumps up against comedy, is the heart of one of Lim's most vivid poems, "At the funeral parlors, Singapore Casket Company." The poem tells the chaos of her mother's wake, "Pastor John in platform shoes walks to the boom/box on the concrete floor, bends down and turns/the knob till the volume hisses, WE SHALL/MEET BY THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE. . ." Bored by Christian hymns, Lim turns in fascination as the Taoist shaman in the funeral parlor next door burns a scaffold of paper for the dead, setting his blaze afire with "a Cricket barbecue starter." This impromptu ceremony, with its hint of burning acetate Maytag deep freezers becomes the more meaningful expression of grief.

Lim is a poet of the senses as well as of history, a truth-teller in love with pungent phrases that evoke textures, fragrances, and flavors. Her most affecting poems blend sensual description with the oratory of witness, as in "Oranges," about a fruit seller bravely venturing into Southern California traffic to sell his wares, or "In California with Neruda," a dream sequence for the old poet of Chile. Other poems touch on the sensually forbidden, as a talisman for a woman's awareness of her own sudden sexuality and changing identity—as in "Strange meeting," about seducing a stranger.

True to her own mercurial vision, Lim defiantly probes the limits of what can be known of oneself and one's family, country, or history. In the book's final poem, "Self-portrait," she highlights the contradictions of a woman's life in recalling the poet Rosario Castellanos: "I want to write a self-portrait/ like Rosario Castellanos/ who knew herself so well/ she could knife herself in the back/ and laugh. . . ." [What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say](#) is brimming with edgy truths, a version of life as seen by an Asian-American woman at the height of her powers, unafraid to pick up her knife and write.

**Shirley Geok-lin Lim** is Chair Professor of English and head of the English Department at the University of Hong Kong, as well as Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has published five books of poetry,

three collections of short stories, and, recently, a novel, *Joss and Gold*. Her memoir, *Among The White Moon Faces*, received the American Book Award. Her first book of poems, *Crossing The Peninsula*, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

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**DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY**

Ashbery, John, *Your Name Here*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000. Hardcover, 127 pp. \$23

**ALSO BY FAYE KICKNOSWAY**

Kicknosway, Faye, *Asparagus, Asparagus, Ah Sweet Asparagus*. West Branch, IA: The Toothpaste Press, 1981. Hardcover. Available by special order.

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