

BOOKS

Fact or fiction, Sze-Lorrain's poetry exceeds truth

BY KATE WELSH

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Fiona Sze-Lorrain, CC '03, is on a quest for a strange sort of truth: one that depicts her reality in precisely the way she wants to know it.

In her first book of poetry, "Water the Moon" (Marick Press, November 2009), Sze-Lorrain presents her entire life—from first memories to seemingly recent dinner parties—with elegance, boldness, and, perhaps most importantly, complete believability. She freely admitted, however, that most of the poems "are not necessarily true ... It's like what Emily Dickinson said: You tell the truth but you tell it slant."

While Sze-Lorrain's poems may not be entirely factual, the sentiments she conveys throughout her work undoubtedly are. "Par Avion" is a poem about a daughter receiving a letter from her father filled with "nothing but instructions, / Confucian wisdom," and the anguish is palpable. The daughter desperately wishes for more of an emotional exchange rather than the passionless reiteration of an ancient philosopher's words, and the reader cannot help but ache for her.

This poem is part of the first of three sections that Sze-Lorrain used to organize "Water

the Moon." Titled "Biography of Hunger," it deals primarily with her attempt to understand more about her family. Due to political unrest, Sze-Lorrain's relatives scattered all over the world. Sze-Lorrain moved from Singapore to England with her parents, and the fragmentation of her family was never addressed.

"I don't know a lot about what happened because nobody wants to talk about it," she explained. "So I ... tried to find that out, and the more I find out, the more I realize I don't know." She discovered that writing down stories about her family—even if they weren't true—helped her to resolve some of her lingering questions.

Despite the impact that her relatives had on her writing, Sze-Lorrain believes that only part of a person can be shaped by familial influence. The other part, "what makes you you," is addressed in the other sections of "Water the Moon." The second section is titled "Dear Paris"—an ode to the City of Light and to the world in general. Living on either side of the Atlantic—she spends time in both New York City and Paris—gives Sze-Lorrain a self-professed "cross-cultural energy," which permeates all aspects of her poetry. In a poem called "China," a mention of fortune cookies made in Ohio mingles with a generous peppering of French words and a nod to the Chinese poet Li Po.

And Li Po is not the only artist who receives acknowledgment. The entirety of the third section of "Water the Moon," titled "The Key Always Opens," is dedicated to the influence of other creative people in Sze-Lorrain's life. A musician in her own right—she plays the zither (a horizontal harp) and has recorded a CD—Sze-Lorrain spends a lot of time "finding the music" in the words she put down on paper. In the third section, references run the gamut from Man Ray and Edith Piaf to Van Gogh and Chopin.

In addition to all of her other accomplishments—she is a musician as well as an oft-published poet—Sze-Lorrain is also an editor of *Cerise Press*, an international literary and arts journal. As such, it seems that Sze-Lorrain is well on her way to joining the ranks of some of the aforementioned artists. She adores what she does and sees herself as a person living her life instead just of going to work every day. But "loving something is not enough," she emphasized. "You need to feel an obligation ... You need something extra, something that can't be explained, that pushes you to do it. If you feel alive all the time when you're doing that activity... you're on the right track."



Courtesy of Fiona Sze-Lorrain

POETRY MUSE In addition to her family and life experiences, Sze-Lorrain finds inspiration in her music.