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How I Got That Name

Marilyn Chin

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Two Poems · *Marilyn Chin*

HOW I GOT THAT NAME

*An essay on assimilation—
or: Deng Xiao Ping, are we not your children?*

I am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin.
Oh, how I love the resoluteness
of that first person singular
followed by that stalwart indicative
of “be,” without the uncertain i-n-g
of “becoming.” Of course,
the name had been changed
somewhere between Angel Island and the sea,
when my father the paperson
in the late 1950s
obsessed with some bombshell blonde
transliterated “Mei Ling” to “Marilyn.”
And nobody dared question
his initial impulse—for we all know
lust drove men to greatness,
not goodness, not decency.
And there I was, a wayward pink baby,
named after some tragic
white woman, swollen with gin and Nembutal.
My mother couldn’t pronounce the “r.”
She dubbed me “Numba one female offshoot”
for brevity: henceforth, she will live and die
in sublime ignorance, flanked
by loving children and the “kitchen deity.”
While my father dithers,
a tomcat in Hong Kong trash—
a gambler, a petty thug,
who bought a chain of chopsyey joints
in Piss River, Oregon

with bootlegged Gucci cash.
Nobody dared question his integrity given
his nice, devout daughters
and his bright industrious sons.
As if filial piety were the standard
with which all earthly men were measured.

Oh, how trustworthy our daughters,
how thrifty our sons!
How we've managed to fool the experts
in education, statistics and demography—
We're not very creative but not adverse to rote-learning.
Indeed, you can *use* us.
But the "Model Minority" is a tease.
We know you are watching now,
so we refuse to give you any!
Oh, bamboo shoots, bamboo shoots!
The further west we go, we'll hit east;
The deeper down we dig, we'll find China.
History has turned its stomach
on a black, polluted beach—
where life doesn't hinge
on that red, red wheelbarrow,
but on whether or not our new lover
in the final episode of "Santa Barbara"
will lean over a scented candle
and call us a "bitch."
Oh god, where have we gone wrong?
We have no inner resources!

Then, one redolent spring morning
the Great Patriarch Chin
peered down from his kiosk in heaven
and saw that his descendants were ugly.
One had a squarish head and a nose without a bridge.
Another's profile—long and knobbed as a gourd.
A third, the sad, brutish one

may never, never marry.
And I, his least favorite—
“not quite boiled, not quite cooked,”
a plump pomfret simmering in my juices—
too listless to fight for my people’s destiny.
“To kill without resistance is not slaughter”
says the proverb. So, I wait for imminent death.
The fact that this death is also metaphorical
is testament to my lethargy.

So, here lies Marilyn Mei Ling Chin,
married once, twice to so-and-so, a Lee and a Wong,
granddaughter of Jack “the patriarch” Chin
and the brooding Suilin Fong,
daughter of the virtuous Yuet Kuen Wong
and G. G. Chin the infamous,
sister of a dozen, cousin of a billion,
survived by everybody and forgotten by all.
She was neither black nor white,
neither cherished nor vanquished,
just another squatter in her own bamboo grove
minding her poetry—
when one day heaven was unmerciful,
And a chasm opened where she then stood.
Like the jowls of a mighty white whale,
or the daws of a metaphysical Godzilla,
it swallowed her whole.
She did not flinch nor writhe,
nor fret about the afterlife,
but stayed! Solid as wood, happily
a little gnawed, tattered, mesmerized
by all that was lavished upon her
and all that was taken away!

for Gwendolyn Brooks