

Special Issue Artwork

Cotton Singers

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa

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The music from the cotton-guitarists
drew women to their gates, quilts in arms.
They might have added straw, or wool,
to suture their mattresses every summer. Feathers
came later, after the border opened. My people
are rarely on time, except when they go to pray
at the stupa, when they wake dogs guarding
gates, paws up like Pasang passed
out on some bench.

Winters I knew, those clouds with the tendency
to shape themselves into symbols, are gone.
The first ancestors stepped down
from the sky on a rope. You can find a portal
or a loophole in every story - trees to
untangle in a plot. In winter I covet what I do
not see. I cannot remember
what leaves do.



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Words alter to carry to term memory
of a clan. I wish I could tell you where it all started.
Under the yak's hoof? The beating of a heart dulled
into duty. Elders shuffle in shoes a size too large,
their heads swollen like juicy lychees. Where
I come from a sentence can attach to a name; a lie
as truth. Where I come from, stories are reasons.

2

She was always in her 40s, her fantasies limited to the men
we saw on the television screen. The ones who flirted
with their feet, their polyester shirts sliding out from their belted
trousers. Back then, songs were what the women had to choose from.
Their days divided into tasks, their fingers serrated
by the wool they spun or built into rugs, their knees
knocking the stove or the loom. Meanwhile, the monks
were all flesh, like ripe pimples. I was a keen collector
of secrets. Even then I understood that hearts shrink.
A month ago, he left me a message on WhatsApp.
*I knew you as a child, he said. You were always around
your mother.* I thought of the photo he had meant to show
my mother but I had been quicker. His arms had been around
an oar, the girl had sat across from him. His torn socks, toes
like mushrooms. She had disappeared on their wedding
day. He is wearing a beret in the photograph, now older
than 40. Older than my mother will ever be. He too has crossed
a pool of water to get to the present. As a child I'd never
imagined he'd cover his head. That he would have hair
to part like the body of peas or river fish.

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is the author of three poetry books: *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake*, *In the Absent Everyday* and *Rules of the House* (all published by Apogee Press, Berkeley) as well as three chapbooks. Dhompa's first non-fiction book, *Coming Home to Tibet*, was published in the US by Shambhala Publications in 2016 and by Penguin, India in 2014. Her monograph *Politics of Sorrow* is forthcoming with Columbia University Press.