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Paintings, Portraits, and Naming: On Reading Cynthia Arrieu-King

People Are Tiny in Paintings of China, by Cynthia Arrieu-King. Denver, Colorado/Portland, Oregon: Octopus Books, 2010.

Scott Parry's painting "Mountain Starscape" is a stark image with sharp strokes and primary colors. It also has a dizzying three-dimensional quality—softly muted grays and browns, white streaks superimposed on and under it all. The painting is a representation of a mountain range—it evokes a range's clearness and complexity, colors mixing. The painting is also the cover image for Cynthia Arrieu-King's first full-length collection of poetry, *People Are Tiny in Paintings of China*. According to the speaker in the eponymous poem "[t]hey say the mountains aren't made of rocks / but someone's back broken up. / The paths fast like slides that chute down, or slow, like impossibility up." Things aren't what they appear to be—the mountains are people and the people are broken. The speaker knows language fails with the word impossibility—that a slowness makes the path possible and also that "[t]hey say the mountains are slow and full of snow. / And can hide almost anything." The poems in the book invite slowness, stopping to rest, reading again, and become a continuous path full of reverie and revealing.

As each section begins, an American Scholar with a French Mother and Chinese Father writes *zuihitsu*. The random jottings are structured as four paragraphs on a page. The prose occurs before each of the book's five sections of poems and follows the brush that considers constructions of the speaker's mixed identity. The construction takes place at the state premier of *The Joy Luck Club* in France, at the Hardin County Native American Pow-Wow, in a conversation between the speaker and her brother about how their "father told him never to marry a Chinese woman because they are guerillas only interested in money," at the cashier's counter at Lotus Foods in Pittsburgh, in Oklahoma, in many other childhood, adolescent, twenty-something memories with Flora, Mei-Lynn, Margaret, and in "Horse in the Drug-

store" by Tess Gallagher. These intimate paragraphs show the speaker's sense of belonging is a blurring—she gets framed, mistaken, lied to, surprised, made fun of, caught making fun of her mother. But this isn't a book simply concerned with identity politics or a discourse of abjection, it takes stories people make up about people based on their identity and troubles them in the face of image and narration.

The first object to appear in *People Are Tiny in Paintings of China's* poetry is a convex mirror. The poem is titled "In the Portrait of Solitude," and Arrieu-King begins by building off a passage of John Ashbery's famous "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." Arrieu-King's mirror is in a hospital—many of the poems in this book occur in hospitals—her hospital mirror "that old painter of solitude," is fixed in a corner in the ceiling. A fast push draws lines down as reflection in the portrait's room to show what is there and not there:

there's no direct stare detectable, but room for five, ten,
every soul to chase after her own fact like fish
trailing off disparate. The globe's pragmatic info,
fluorescent resource, light warning us
to yield to others,

As the piece moves forward, the mirror's propensity for distortion reminds how isolation skews while the speaker truncates a feeling of loneliness to its essentiality:

It takes too long to require our souls are captives
only to ourselves. We would all like to stay together.

Often, the staying together renders unattainable for the people in these poems because they have to keep moving. When movement is inevitable, "[i]f travel is search, / home is what we find," Arrieu-King makes it so we want to go with. There is migration, father's leaving home, Pol Pot's exile, sometimes we are in the sky, on the canvas, on a mountain, or back in the hospital.

For Lynn Emanuel, "[e]ach poem, a descent through shifting strata of syntax and history, requires a sustained renegotiation of one's balance in language and the world." This constant reconciling manifests most in leaps taken in the book's longer poems like "Three Heads, Six Arms; With Superhuman Strength." Here the speaker is walking among construction workers in Beijing and she realizes she is being watched, that on the street "[t]he work-burnt faces that see someone

half-white, stare." Her mind races, leaps, makes notes about how to change her hairstyle, practices proper pronunciations of a foreign language, remembers a younger self. This ramble of the interior illuminates how the speaker is experiencing alienation all while realizing her multitudes with brutally fierce lines that avoid any kind of victimization:

Who can't look to the sky, to tops of stars, roofs, radio
satellites?
Sapped through, drained in a colander of black holes.
To know what it's like to be sprayed by a dead look.

She becomes the strength she is longing for. She walks on being read and reads herself finding her own balance in language. She reads graffiti sprayed "across the off ramp: // Not something something June something sun and moon / something yen something / neck back head up / or a stripe, a hall of golden words that probably mean serenity, happiness."

In a Delirious Hem post, Arrieu-King writes, "naming can be an unhelpful, disintegrating concept." The poems in *People Are Tiny in Paintings of China* (particularly ones that look directly at painting) turn framing and naming over onto themselves. In "Target Pistol and Man," written after a painting by Alex Colville, the painter, while in his painting, "knows how to live in a square / where snow hung in bland ovals lights the window." The poem's speaker loves the square, loves "to see the world composed in a square" because somehow the square makes "the world look complete." Again the poem goes on in leaps and the figure of Colville in his painting transcends in to a figure that is the speaker's father after a stanza break. The speaker's godfather names her father "*a hero to his adopted country*" and we also know from lines prior and after this one that the father lies. Colville's life-like snow is paralleled with the father's photographic captures "of churches, of Mom in kid gloves, of monks." Whatever is in the poem is poised in the paintings or framed in the photos, all of it "tricks you" and what is outside the square, the frame, the name?

When the poems pan out of their own frames things are tiny because of distance but there is nothing small here. This obsession with size and perspective is meticulously noted in "The Notion of Landing." And as it takes the reader up near the stratosphere it remembers what distance teaches:

What is so satisfying about everything being so tiny, is not
how houses are far away, or minute. Rather,
the searching clouds learn true meanings of slow.

The poem begins to ask a question but turns to negation so to realize that searching is what satisfies. With the reassigning of language elements we can see the poetry departing from something systematic or answerable to embracing pursuit and inquiry. But what's most lovely amongst the peculiar ways of these poems is their precision. The strength comes through Arrieu-King's ability to engage a lyric that engages sentiment without being overtly sentimental—engages a feeling while problematizing identity politics with an intellectually refreshing strangeness. Take the sequenced poem, "Parting In Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet, and Indigo Minutiae," and its way of illuminating again what is present, where the omission is, what's fabricated and by whom:

5. A wren in its cage moves towards the squared blue of the window. It's frightened. Someone—or I—invented white gauche, a way to fake sky where before, on canvas, painted clouds wanted to heave out rain.

As this collection begins to end even more moments of invented and intricate landscapes fuse into framed intimacy. In "Oxberry Rostrum Camera" the speaker loves "the name of a camera that doesn't exist." We see:

Tulips sway as if being passed by a car
From the cardboard hills, the terra firma
so that bottlebrush foxes will have a fluid
approach.

And the speaker interrogates what's invented—questions and comes to terms with authenticity through a list of stark images. There is a layering of opacity and transparency, things are arranged and still she continues to question everything as representation through statement of what is been observed:

Or else there's only one world.

The writing in *People Are Tiny in Paintings of China* is as demanding, pleasing, and witty as Cynthia Arrieu-King's title.