

opium dreams.

emily yee clare

visual artist

ryan kai cheng thom

writer, performer

This visual art projection and spoken word performance was performed during the Art in Action exhibition as part of Study in Action 2012, Montreal.

Excerpted from a book in-progress, “Opium Dreams” is an interdisciplinary, multimedia exploration of Chinese diaspora, poverty, gender/racial fluidity, and queer desire. Emily Yun Ching Clare combines stencils of contemporary Chinese North Americans with hand-drawn motifs drawn from classic Chinese folklore, highlighting the contrast between the difficult realities of migration and the mythic power of the imagined homeland. Clare’s portraits infuse the monolithic, mainstream narrative of Chinese diaspora with shades of individuality, re-imagining the migrant geographies of past and present, spirit and body. Ryan Kai Cheng Thom’s spoken word performances blend drag, comedy, and slam poetry, lending a unique narrative voice to the idiosyncrasies of growing up as a queer person of colour. His work seeks to embody the dynamics of celebration, survival, and intimate violence in the queer community.

the kingfisher queen

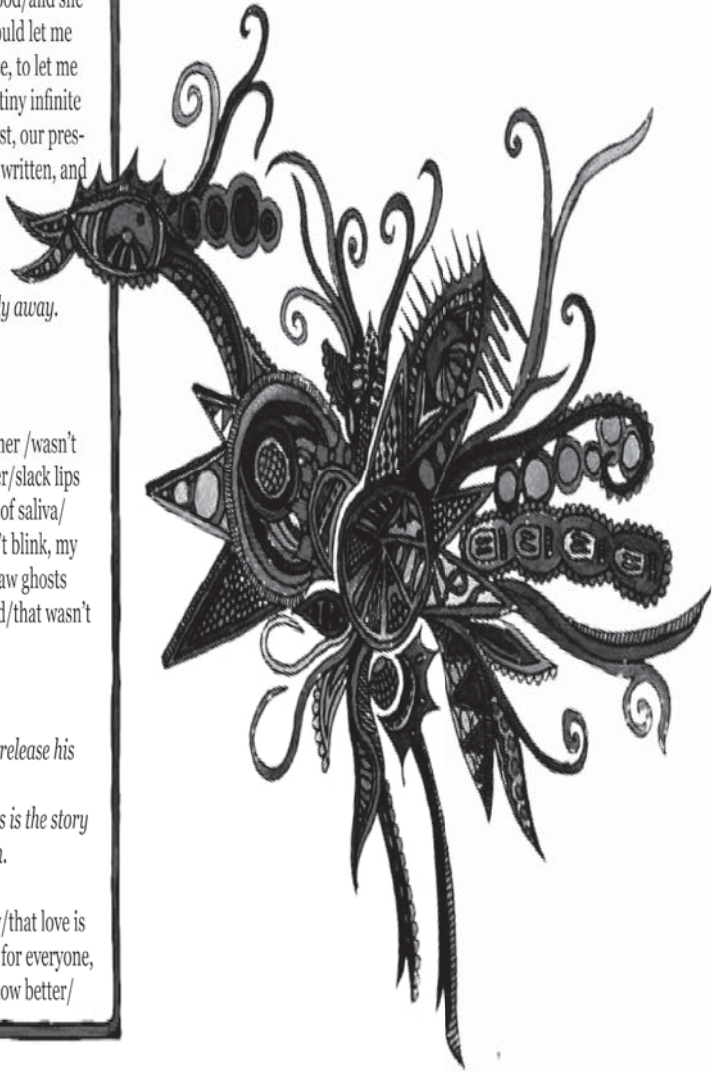
my mother kept her stories in/a black
lacquer box that she had taken with
her/ all the way from China/across
the sea. If I was very good/and she
was feeling well/she would let me
open it/she would pause, to let me
behold in wonder/that tiny infinite
darkness, where our past, our pres-
ent/our possibility was written, and
then/she would begin

*Stories are like birds;
it is in their nature to fly away.
We release them so
they will return.*

but most days, my mother /wasn't
feeling well; I remember/slack lips
streaming thin threads of saliva/
blank eyes that wouldn't blink, my
mother/heard voices, saw ghosts
from Old China, a world/that wasn't
there anymore

*Rare indeed,
the man who learns to release his
love
before it's too late! This is the story
of the Kingfisher Queen.*

lo fan people like to say/that love is
infinite/there's enough for everyone,
all the time/Chinese know better/



love is like a well/you cannot see the bottom/but the water level drops in the time of draught/my mother/drew on the well of my love/ like she was dying of thirst

Poor the peasant man who dreams of diamonds, indeed!

He wanders about looking at the sky, distracted by stars while other men spend their time gazing at the ground: harvesting rice, pulling fish from the pond. But sometimes, the man who wanders at night may be granted the magic of the moon.

when you're a poor Chinese girl, you can be little/but never young/especially when your mother's schizophrenic/trapped in the World of Yin/imagine/me at ten years old, running down the streets of small-town BC/Mama is three blocks ahead/screaming nonsense/moments like this/the world is a black lacquer box/nothing written on its walls/but emptiness

Dai Tin walks alone at night, his head full of dreams.

He comes upon a clearing, where the pond glistens, still

and dark. Look! A thousand feathers fall like rain.

Lo, the Kingfisher Queen and all her train have come to bathe.

she spent some days screaming/running from monsters only she could see/other days, she could barely rise from bed/baba and my oldest brother had to work/my little brother went to school /i took care of my mother/ changed the sheets she soiled/ dragged her to a chair/where she sat, staring at the window/like the sky held a secret/that could change our lives

What miracles may be seen by moonlight, indeed!

The Kingfisher Queen and her attendants

have shed their feathers; now they are beautiful women.

Dai Lo creeps to the bank and takes hold

of the Kingfisher Queen's cloak.

what i became in that house was determined/hard as stone/a jewel in my chest/i had to write my own story /one that would take me away from there/from the dark box of my moth-

er's madness/a story that could carry
me away/like wings

*Frightened, the bird-women
put on their feathers and scatter to
the sky – all
but the Kingfisher Queen, who has
fallen in love
with this poor earthbound mortal
whose eyes are bright
as the stars.*

so much of my love/drained dry by
my mother's need/leaving only an
empty space full of wanting/desire
like a drum/beating the sound of to-
morrow, tomorrow/i lived for tomor-
row/for the day when my love/my
life/could belong to me

*Enraptured, the lovers return
to Dai Lo's cottage. For a while, all is
well,
but the Kingfisher Queen misses her
kingdom.
Pity, the bird who cannot fly! But
Dai Lo is afraid –
who is to say she will return? So he
hides the feathers
of his wife's freedom.*

i went to college/ studied anatomy
and health sciences/just another

Asian girl/with glasses and a bag of
textbooks /i learned so much about
medicine/but found nothing that
could heal that empty space/where
the well of my love/was dry

*The Kingfisher Queen waits and
dreams.
In a year, she bears a daughter. Pity
indeed,
the child who is half the earthbound
world
and half the sky! Always searching
for the secret
of belonging, the girl spends her time
playing in forbidden places.
And one day, this rebellious daughter
finds a box in the cellar –
underground, where no bird would
ever look*

in my last year of college/my mother
died of cancer/i spent days trying to
feel sad/wrenching salt water from
the dry riverbed of my tear ducts/she
left me two things: her black lacquer
box/and a letter

*"What's this, mother?" the little girl
asks. Aha!
Joyous indeed, the bird who at last
may return to the clouds!
The Kingfisher Queen, without a*

*thought, seizes her cloak,
so long and dearly lost,
and returns to the kingdom of heav-
en forever. So it is,
that love kept too long is lost. So it is,
indeed.*

she left her money to my brothers/
that's the Chinese way /i felt so bitter,
holding/that empty box in my hands/
until i opened it/and found it wasn't
empty after all/it was full of feathers/
my wings

*Stories are like birds;
It is their nature to fly away.
I give them to you,
so that you may return.*

