

THE MESSAGE IS LILIES

By Linda Rogers

This is the sacred neighbourhood
of starry nights, where wild women
hug trees and eat the tasty roots
of camas lilies (not the poisonous
white ones) and where their husbands
sneak out to steal horsetails and
cat's tails (the louder their mid-night,
midlife singing the better) to make
into paint-brushes, because, when
their spring seeds are planted, the
gardeners of Fairfield are artists.

What do they say about living at
Mile Zero, where the old Chinese
Cemetery straddling the fault line
faces home on the other side of the
Pacific Ocean? Rest in Peace, paint in
peace, the artists of Fairfield know
they are blessed with good luck when
the lilies rise up singing year after
year in their graveyards and gardens.

Rumours float up to the beach at

Gonzales Bay. Messages in bottles
tell them the garden is failing. An
ear washes up in the changing tide.
Hear us, the bottles say. Hear me,
the severed ear insists. Hear us, sea
shells insist in the sibilant tones of
their flesh-coloured palette. Hear
us, the three part lilies insist the
world needs them now; and the
artists listen with their eyes, then
charge their brushes with praise.

For The Fairfield Artists, April 2009

BIRDS OF PARADISE

Sometimes the carpets come down the family, from our mothers and grandmothers.

Sometimes a man comes out of a dark doorway in Turkey or Afghanistan saying, "Lady, please come in for tea!" and we buy our way out of captivity. We know better, but women who travel are curious as cats.

Curiosity is how we came to be here, in Heaven on Earth at the end of the New World, where we inherit beautiful gardens and carpets from exotic lands colonized by adventurers. We were taught to be more careful, not to take tea from strangers, not to step on native flowers, or to damage the heirloom rugs. One of our grandmothers went mad and watered the flowers on her carpets. She'd crossed boundaries, they said. Her children were beautiful, neither English nor Chinese, possibly "a touch of the tarbrush," the bridge club ladies reported. Were they aware that their favourite game was a form of whist played by their soldier husbands in

brothels on the far side of the Galata Bridge?

The new women gather in circles, admire gardens and carpets improved by time, worn down by footsteps, like the marble stairs to the Parthenon. Seagulls fly landward to break clamshells on the rocks that guard our beaches. They cry out to one another, the call to prayer as the Birds of Paradise gather to gossip, "God's sip" we learned in Sunday School, the sharing of Proverb, and admire one another's shoes.

We drink tea and celebrate the soft leather and delicate ankle straps, the silk flowers in carpets our ancestors transplanted, their threads no longer scarlet, gold, indigo, but blended with a patina like the incandescent heads of infants glowing in windows that look over the water that brought us here, lighting the way for the ones who will come after us.

for Framing the Garden, March 2009

OUR HAPPY VOCATION

In the beginning, it's so gentle we
hardly notice. We are thrilled: by
the scent of jasmine and mulberry
leaves spun in the love extremities
of insects with happy vocations, by
those narcotic moments when the
silk tightens around our necks, and
the brain contracts like a womb.

There are so many guilty pleasures
for a witness addicted to language,
we sometimes forget the truth is a
song often played on lethal strings.

We live for the frisson of male and
female words: naked bodies tumbling
in the corridor of bliss, sometimes
failing to notice poets with bruised
throats falling around us, their indelible
blue hands staining its paper walls.

We dip our fingers in the deeper wells.

In Tehran they came like water, a
green river of pilgrims, lassoing the
minarets with nooses of light. Later
they dispersed like wine, strangled by
grief as the human river turned red.

O Rubayat, this is our happy vocation.
Sex and death are as simple as words
on a page, the reason we go there every
time a story asks to be told, every time
a prophet is blinded by angry gods.

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