

[Hula Hooping by Tammy Ho Lai-Ming](#)

written by edward j rathke | April 13, 2015



Hula Hooping by Tammy Ho Lai-Ming
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108 pages – [Chameleon Press](#) / [Amazon](#)

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming's first poetry collection is everything I hoped and expected it to be, and then some. I've been a fan for a long time and I even interviewed her about a year ago at [Monkeybicycle](#). One of my biggest questions—though it didn't make the interview—was why no one had collected her poems before.

Like a river feeding itself to the ocean –
Child, I continue to give myself to you
Until I become undone – scattered pockets
Of primitive earth, peeled bare.
–“A river on its way”

I remember the first time I stumbled into one of Tammy's poems in some online magazine. I fell in love with it and I started searching for her work online. I did the normal things we do online now, I found her on Twitter and then Facebook so I could keep up with her work. Every time Tammy had a new poem out, I was clicking that link and reading whatever was on the otherside.

I entered this poetry collection as a fan with high expectations, because, really, I've never read a bad poem by her. I've never even encountered a poem I didn't like. Still, this collection holds surprises. Over 64 poems, we dance through a variety of subjects. From poems about family to love poems to the history of China, Tammy Ho Lai-Ming's verse is sometimes beautiful and sweet, delicate, but other times it rages and assaults. I once described her poetry as full of love with a quiet delicacy, as if waiting for the dream to collapse. While many of her poems still have this effect, there are just as many that hold a rising fury, a fiery passion, or even a sarcastic and sardonic bite. Sometimes they're funny in surprising ways, like when she compares her vagina to an owl butterfly in “But not Chuang Tzu's butterfly.”

Where this collection works best for me is when it combines the personal and the minute with larger stories about life. These are most often seen in the sections titled ‘Autobiographies’ and ‘China-Elsewhere-Hong Kong,’ which show us something larger than ourselves, something beyond the hyper-personal nature of what so much contemporary poetry has become. Tammy Ho Lai-Ming hits the personal, drawing us in, and then expands our view to moments in history, such as in “The Famine, 1959-62,” or the political, like in [“Official causes of death in a Chinese prison”](#):

A exhausted himself arranging sunflowers.

B drank too much hot water.

C suffered a heart attack passing a toilet roll to his comrade.

D lost his breath while playing hide-and-seek.

E was poisoned from the ink in the newspapers.

F stared too long at the air.

G used high-lead-content hand cream (supplied by his family).

H edited a literary journal named after a beverage.

I actually read this collection in Hong Kong, where Tammy Ho Lai-Ming lives. Our paths didn't cross but it felt appropriate to read this there. I only spent a few days in Hong Kong but wandering through its streets, how the buildings spike out of the earth and reach towards the sky, how the city is made of lights at night, how the trees grow between crowded streets, and the weight of the mountains pushes against the inhabitants and their buildings and their lives. It's a very odd place, where capitalism and nature fight for space, where beauty and chaos are built into the very structure of the city. It's one of the most interesting cities I've ever visited and I hope to go back sometime soon.

That's how I feel about this collection. It's beautiful. It's chaotic. It's vicious. It's glorious. It wraps round your heart and sings into your ears. It fills your lungs and makes breathing easier.

Hula Hooping is a fantastic collection. It's strange it's taken so long for her first collection to come out, but it was so worth the wait.

I asked my father who believed that the world could be constructed with paper, 'We are serving ghosts, are we not? But they will never receive these dying ashes.' He muttered something about everyone ends with bones and ashes, or ashes and bones. He was forever obscure, and singlemindedly returned to the paper Rolex he was holding and added two arms to forge a fixed time.

—"The soliloquy of the paper iPod maker"