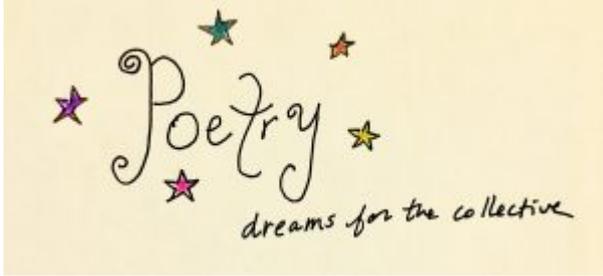


New Poetry from Teow Lim Goh

written by Guest Contributor | December 10, 2018



From China Mary

San Francisco, California, 1855.

Three weeks on the boat. I don't know where I am. I count the days by counting the meals they give us, two a day, I think. I don't get to see the sun and sky. I don't know when it's day and when it's night. Most of the time, I curl up in my bunk, my face almost touching the bunk above me. When we run into storms, which seems to happen every other day now, I close my eyes and rock. No one talks here. The woman below me sobs all the time. Sometimes I think of holding her, consoling her, but I can't even bring myself to look at her.

San Francisco.

I blink at the flood of sunlight
in the fog.

Seamstress,
they tell me to say.

I cannot find the words for
what I want to say.

A scream.
I turn around and see a woman

break free and jump
into the sea.

Men tell me that I'm beautiful.

They say they dream of me –
my eyes, my voice, my body –

when they are away.

They say I am an angel

in this pit of loneliness.

Yet when I look in the mirror,

I see a girl with unkempt hair
and weary eyes, still seeking

a way to face the world.

The other girls here hardly talk
to me. They chatter with each other
about dresses, brooches, the gifts

they get from the men who they think
will marry them. I watch them
and wonder how they feel about

this life. Are they just pretending
to accept it? Do they dream
about the world beyond the walls

of this house? Once I heard them say
that I'm too haughty. Sometimes
I think of joining them, but

I stutter, trying to figure
what to say, and they look at me
as if I'm smaller than a rat.

I hear that in villages along the shores
of the bay, fishermen

trawl the waters for shrimp, staking
their nets in the muddy waters

and let the tides sweep in

the tiny creatures. I wish

I could join these men on their jaunts

of the marshes, the tides

drifting our boat along the brief

rivers where otters

peek through the grasses. Maybe

I can dive for abalone –



Teow Lim Goh is the author of *Islanders* (Conundrum Press, 2016), a volume of poems on the history of Chinese exclusion at the Angel Island Immigration Station. Her work has been featured in Tin House, Catapult, PBS NewsHour, Colorado Public Radio, and The New Yorker. She lives in Denver.