

Poetry & Society: A *Cha* Reading

Reid Mitchell

Set I

I Hear America Singing

Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
 Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
 The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
 The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the
 steamboat deck,
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
 The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon
 intermission or at sundown,
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or
 washing,
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
 The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

A Supermarket in California

Allen Ginsberg

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets
 under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit
 supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full
 of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca,
 what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats
 in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price
 bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in
 my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

Set II

All The Arts Are The Same Art

Reid Mitchell

Seven years old
sitting on the stoop
On the street
bass drum beating
Seven blocks away

Like the beating of your heart
Like the heartbeat of the sun
Like every promise you ever heard
in your life was about to come true
and now comes the snare drum

and the trombones and the trumpet
and the tuba and high above them
swooping and soaring like a mighty hawk
the clarinets insisting on their say

By now you are running in the street
running toward the sound
running toward the feet already marching
toward you, eager to greet your future

And the band appears swinging

with uniforms, with hats all alike
 and a marshal highstepping like a king
 and you think "I don't want
 to sit on the stoop no more
 I want to parade the rest of my life."

Then you study hard
 because everything is beautiful
 but how will you contribute
 to all this Beauty?

Clarinet, snare drum, trumpet
 Big bass drum, tuba, trombone?
 That one little fellow smiles your way
 a gold tooth right in the front of his face
 and he's skinny just the way you are too skinny
 then he lifts the clarinet to his lips
 and blows "Lady Be Good"
 and your future is determined.

I have had brass bands march
 down the streets of my mind
 and they determined my future

although they were figurative
 brass bands and I am only a metaphoric
 clarinet player but really, dear friend

we both want to contribute
 to all this Beauty

Tiny Pyramids

Reid Mitchell

*By the Lucid River tonight
 the friend of my heart is sure to stand
 singing hometown songs.*

-----Wang Changling

On the Big Muddy levee tonight,
 dirt and grass that almost always holds,

my friend is realing and rocking.

Spinning like a wheel of fortune,
bearded like the pard, he chants
te na na na na nah.

His shadow is as long as a prophet is tall.
The chicken man's top hat floats under his gaze,
unbought lucky beans, ducks on roller skates.

The old Greek calls, "Step in,"
from the courthouse shore.
"It's never the same river once."

A Chinese woman sends txt msg poems
Who care me? Only u.
Who care u? Only 1.

A cornet blown, brass turned gold,
sixty blocks and one thousand months back,
breaks rows of glass, sound following sound.

Nanoslaves are building pyramids,
Slick with oil, they long for freedom.
They remember Babylon. They cannot weep.

Ur heart big but out of control.
Bank ur coin. Eat ur heart for breakfast.
News from Hong Kong.

A tinny band marches a tiny parade
through mirrors: tigresses, clowns by rank,
painted baby dolls, elephants, and jacks.

Lucid levees should almost always hold
but the muddy river current sometime soon
must cut stronger and flood.

My lone friend signals Saturn.
te na na, Sun Ra, sendships.
We sing our hometown songs

All Saint's Day

Reid Mitchell

Home in New Orleans,
my friends, unconsciously Chinese,
are scrubbing their family graves
and drinking red wine, cherry bounce,
or bourbon in iced tea glasses.

My parents, unfilial, carried me far away
from their families' graves
behind fallen church buildings
on roads now hidden by pine
no longer swept clean and beflowered
on some spring afternoon.

If I neglect my father's grave and my mother's too,
and I missed their death beds, I, filial,
treat my parents by their own example.

Besides, it's raining this All Saints' Day.
At least inside my house.

Set III
**If I Were the Sun:
Song of the Emigrant Daughter**

Reid Mitchell

Nobody had to draw me a picture
No snow smoke from chimney
no grinning bicycle boy, lunch box in hand
You already trained me
with small words and loud silences
Just that one slap rocked my head,
made me lick my lips, bite my tongue,
gave me something red to spit.

Not my failure, my destiny,
written not by stars, but by map
and sperm, rooms crowded with furniture,
clocks, eggs, and QBZ-95s, and
a plum bruise on my cheek
just the size and shape
of my father's hand.

The Sun rises in the East,
even in China.

allusion to a nonexistent poem I made up just now
*"The sun rises in the East,
his face as red as a drunkard's,
drowns over the ocean.*

*If I were the sun,
I'd leave the world to the moon,
and go back to bed."*

Seasonal Lament

Reid Mitchell
after 李清照

Spring wild geese fly north
Autumn wild geese fly south

Please fly through prison bars
and bring me a letter from my love

you wild geese silhouetted
your shadows black

on the craters of the moon
What one word can express

my sorrow?

Halida

Reid Mitchell

You are my favorite teacher
Come to my home town
You have never tasted sweet melons
until you tasted the summer melons
that grow so ripe in my home town
Take the train with me, my friend

You are my favorite teacher
Shun my home town
You have never seen shame
until you have seen my shame
when I cannot walk free through my home
Please spare me my shame, my teacher

Do not come to my home town
Don't write me one more message
Stay away! Your friendship scares me
Your smile is a danger, your concern
a threat. No sweet melons ripen
in my young memory, Teacher