

Notes on Heaven by Cathy Song:

"Heaven" appears toward the end of *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light*. By this time, the poet has already married and is the mother of a son and a daughter. The son, who has blond hair (which comes from his father), "thinks when we die we'll go to China," causing the mother to pause at the thought of "a Chinese heaven." The poet further imagines how her son's hand "must span like a bridge/ to reach it." She continues to wonder how such an idea could occur to her son, as she herself has never seen China. As the question of identity and ethnicity is pressed, the poet's thoughts are rerouted to a historical time when a boy in southern China started his long journey to the United States to make a living at the gold mines and the railroad, indefinitely prolonging his stay. Switching back to the present, the poet muses that "It must be in the blood,/ this notion of returning./ It skipped two generations, lay fallow,/ the garden an unmarked grave." This realization, triggered by the innocent thoughts of a child, leads the poet to call to the children to look to where "we can see the mountains/ shimmering blue above the air."

Although one of the themes in "Heaven" is innocence, this poem obviously contradicts Song's earlier statement that she would try not to write on the Asian American theme. Her observation that "it must be in the blood" can be seen as a bold correction of that earlier declaration. The question of returning to China is a symbolic rather than a practical concern, especially after an entire generation of Asian American writers has worked furiously to establish the legitimacy of Asian Americans as Americans. Yet the poem raises a fundamental issue about the nature of Song's poetry in particular and American literature in general: To what extent is it possible, or desirable, to purge the American experience of ethnicity? Song's return to this issue is an important signal because, unlike her earlier, mostly retrospective treatments of the Asian American experience, "Heaven" involves a future generation and is forward-looking. The fact that Song can raise such a controversial issue at all intimates the arrival of another stage in the Asian American writer's search for identity.

Cathy Song's poem, "Heaven," exemplifies the Romantic spirit by evoking nostalgia and separation. In the poem, a woman who is disconnected from her Chinese heritage longs for her ancestral homeland that she has never seen. She is amused by her son's notion that "when we die we'll go to China."

As the idea takes hold of her imagination, she compares her idealized view of China with the familiar surroundings of "the pancake plains just east of the Rockies" where she lives. China serves as an escape from everyday life in the town with "broken fences, the whiny dog, the rattletrap cars" where she is isolated from Chinese culture. The only tangible connection the narrator has to China is a map and railroad track near her home that her immigrant great-grandfather helped to build.

Song's writing employs figurative language to help her son to visualize the country of China from where his great-grandfather came. The poet's son believes that when he gets to the Chinese heaven that everyone will look as the boy does despite his inherited blonde hair.

Using a metaphor of a "blue flower" to picture China on the map, the young boy has trouble imagining how far away it is from his home in Colorado. The mother compares his hand to a bridge that when spread out is the equivalent of an octave on the piano. That is the distance to China.

In comparison, the place where they live now is a dot on a map...not the beautiful flower that describes China. Nothing seems to be good about their home: thin air, no bamboo. The flat mountains do not inspire the poet so she uses the metaphor of a pancake to paint their image.

In the next stanza, the sensory appeal becomes auditory. The whistles of the trains, the whiny cars, and the noisy cars fill the ear as the sounds did in the old west. There were gun fights and fistfights then. Often, the poet sat in a particular spot and wondered why they were there in this particular place.

Her grandfather brought his family to this place with the intention of moving back after he earned enough. Her ancestor worked building the railroads for one dollar per day. Finally, he accepted the fact that he would always be there and that he would die after having seen California.

It must be in the blood,

This notion of returning!

It skipped two generations, lay fallow,

The garden of an unmarked grave.

This desire to return to China is compared to a graveyard that will yield up this new generation to find their roots. There is a genetic connection to China expressed by the narrator's belief that "It must be in the blood, this notion of returning." One day, she calls her son and tells him that if he looks really hard he can see all the way to heaven.