

Me

a novel in verse

Like

by c john holcombe

YOU

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Colin John Holcombe

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Me Like You

Spread in the brightness of morning,
entangled and pounced on in a strange bed,
Mae-Ying the beautiful is laughing:
as plate-glass pounding feels the heart,
but legs are beating as will a bird
that goes for the lift and fervour till dropped
into the quiet fulfilment of all
lives passing into the strong Chao Phraya.

Before I was girl only, a simpleton
working in the wet fields and the far
plantations of the Pha Mieng Hills.
Long distance by bus and days taking
me on from father and sister sick
in Baen Pang Mai Daeng,
with its bewildering festivals and every
one laughing at great drench of clothes.

I am Mae-Ying of the bright eyelids
and of adulterous attachments seeking
the soft dust trafficking the evenings
as the trees press into the back yard.
I am the compositor of the bright lights
and denizen also of the night lands
of rest. Laughing and more rapacious
than is the mantis, I extend

an unruffled impudence behind me
in my hot cauldron of pants,
not scanty or voluminous but
intricately fashioned in the machinery
of my shaping: So is Mae-Ying
of Baen Pang Mai Daeng,
the village of four pagodas, walking
herself through Patpong's big hotels.

And if something unmitigatingly
sad is going away as though saturated
with what have sinned in, O my Lord
Buddha, I will pay you an offering
of six prayers if you find me husband
among the rich farangs, when truly
I will be faithful if he take me Milwaukee,
or Chicago, be good wife pushing trolley

round with children in the obedient
tree-lined streets I know in films.
But now in Leeds on temporary visa,
with Glen who no is American
but cares for mother. In her small house
I do beds, shopping, cleaning, cooking.
It bare in winter, true, and sometimes
flowers, respectable, look hard at me.

I ask Glen make me real wife, when
Mae Ying happy, tell him. Soon, he say.
But Mae-Ying not sorry he call me his
sweetheart and hot stuff as big men need.
But Glen no like if I ask for money
for family who write, who always say,
*'Forgive us, Mae-Ying, but no forget
who in the Hills send love to you.'*

A whole year pass in city here
grey and not companionable.
Sunlight cold on green park-benches.
Old ladies ask me but I do not say,
as Glen he tell me: stay as clouds
that pass indifferent and far away.
But father write I must come back
to village with its four pagodas.

But no more sport in that deep pool of river
with other women laughing and playing,
as did when young and pretty, always
the prettiest. Why is the wind in the leaves
and the summer not listening but talking as though
through me but into somewhere else?
As breath in my body is that small house
on stilts by river but a long time back.

*'Because you were first, the favoured one,
we ask you please, do not forget us,
Mae-Ying, but learn English. Make money
for father and Sompong who always ask
why sister not here. So no make angry
your husband Glen, but act obedient,
showing respect for high Lord Buddha,
who teach us patience and be always kind.'*

So Glen he take me to evening classes
with no one to talk to but I will learn,
be modest and diligent, keep my place,
and if they no like me I will not mind.
But maybe place special where I am sitting
or maybe I have a different smell.
Boys ask where I come from, what name mean
and if Mae-Ying she happy. I am always so.

Glen my boyfriend I tell them and for
friends I talk only with other girls.
But Goyko I like, he naughty and funny,
but afterwards I sit and am only quiet.
Serb, he tell me: have brother with garage;
good business, he say, but it no for me.
He ask me come pictures, I do not go:
he show me his photos: I only smile.

But Glen then angry I find new friends.
Lock me in room and not let out
but for cleaning, cooking and spend my penny.
But father write I no can leave him,
'Not now, Mae-Ying, that never pay.'
I know that and cannot, for where I go?
Glen he have passport and keep in house
hidden and secret as is the heart.

But later in street if Goyko there
I tell him, *Please you go away.*
But Goyko clever, he call me his pretty
warm sunshine and happiness each new day.
*But Glen my boyfriend, and his house-bound mother
will only make trouble: she no like me.*
*'You beautiful', he say, 'and I only
want you and me stay always friends.'*

'You have laughter in your walking and all the windows light up when you pass this way. How do you fill out your clothes, and what does the wind delight in when following you, my little Mae-Ying?' My name is a beckoning, my fingers are sowing in him a softness that even his eyelids at night are smiling to think of me sleeping wherever I am.

'Please, you must hear me, listen Mae-Ying: Important I find you and show you help.' Mae-Ying of the four pagodas and peepshow places ask what boyish Goyko want. 'You', he tell me, *'you from the first when sitting so small, so quiet and modest as cloud not moving: even men like Drago my brother could not hurt your face.'*

'Remember, Mae-Ying, no good my English but whatever you want I do for you.' Then go, I tell him that Glen no hurt me or keep me in room with nowhere to go. Marya, his sister, he say will help. What does that mean? *Goyko, remember that never can Mae-Ying be girlfriend though maybe she like you, stay friends with you.*

His brother already get passport. Glen
he fight with and collect my things.
Why Drago do that, and threaten worse?
But I a good girl, who no want trouble,
loving but also can live alone.
But Goyko he want me more belonging,
*'With your small ways', he say, 'your lift of voice:
how you walk in your clothes, and take my hand.'*

*'It ache where you touch, stay burning for days
like a watermark deeply etched on skin.
Attentive each evening I would be happy
to soak up your body as fragrant breath.'*
Why he say that? He funny this Goyko:
maybe he love me. I go back house
but now his mother she shout and Glen
more angry, have bruises and glare at me.

Maybe no more the fragrant longing,
the sweetness burning, smoke without clothes,
not Mae-Ying the schemer, the great magician,
who swallow you up like a hooded snake?
Why Goyko not pound me a hundred times?
Like clouds I am silent and distant am sorry,
weighted my eyelids, all night no sleep.
Why he no happy with body his?

Months pass and spring come. Drago watch me.
Does Mae-Ying need money and proper man?
Money must have for father and Sompong,
maybe the once if he no tell Goyko.
He say, '*all right then*' but only cheat.
Afterwards nothing, no money, he laugh.
Laugh at Mae-Ying who is stupid, so stupid.
She lose her position and no can smile.

Marya I try if she no tell Goyko, say,
Where is the money, the money I need?
She tell me go work and be peasant again,
that Drago make meeting, Mae-Ying though sorry
but secret from Goyko: she nod her head.
*'If that's want you want, love. It's cash and no questions.
Ten quid for the transport, the rest you pay
in instalments once you're settled in.'*

Goyko he furious when Marya tell him
Mae-Ying not honourable and she must go.
What can I tell him who is only boy?
Mae-Ying too crying and now is inward
praying to Buddha, that in the heart
the butterfly tremble but no be broken,
for all that she sit there with eyes still looking
far, far away and into the dark.

It sad how the day dies and also in evening
how the trees press to window their little palms
as in prayer and are only silent
as Mae-Ying too, like passing clouds.
Father will die and Mae-Ying know Sompong
can only stay living a little time.
*Why you not tell me, my own Lord Buddha,
that it be needful that Mae-Ying work?*

It dark in lorry and through the night
I know the old girls laugh at me.
But Mae-Ying say nothing, take dormitory bed
and all day thereafter be in long fields bending
cold over cabbage and ragged kale.
Lights out at ten, brief shower at night,
But Mae-Ying she peasant and never forget.
Mae-Ying, are you happy? I am always so.

But Mae-Ying know she must work at daybreak
with back that ache so she hardly stand.
She work in the crop-fields as the grey sky lightens.
Hurt to bend over and is still more hurting
as rain it drenches, drills into clothes.
In the wind she shiver and hear the trees
ask if this her country, and if the clouds
are dark like this on Pha Mieng Hills.

'Well that's alright, love, but if you want something different you let me know.'

Mr. Collins the foreman I know he like me who always am working and smiling to others.

'Look it's no fun to be out in all weathers and if you are game for it the missus can help. Before it all goes, love, so make it smartish: you haven't got papers and inspectors call.'

So life change for Mae-Ying, but what is option?

Inward no liking but she walk around smiling and glamorous that Mrs. Collins say I am natural, but Mae-Ying need to keep more of takings. She say, *'Alright, little madam, we will send the money, but not to you who must work and work, and so in time pay everything back.'*

Mae-Ying must practise speaking tapes and also go college two days a week.

Her name she change to Chirawan, have family in Bangkok now very rich.

She learn conversation, and know good wines, always be charming that men will want her, even the monks: this girl so pretty.

Mae-Ying see thoughts, she always know.

But Chirawan comfortable with long chic dress
and do as they want though sometimes sad.
Her perfume is dressing after giving herself
around what is feral, her feminine centre.
A slight, obsequious, spreading dampness
that makes the surroundings not wholly hers.
Yet never the first time will she sleep with men,
but laugh, be mischievous, be always knowing:
for high ways they pay and give respect.

I make them big money, and visit Paris,
no have passport but everything fine.
Girls of agency smile at officials,
look pleading at men who try their passes,
eat at best places, stay stuck up with waiters.
Dressed like flamingos we sit in foyers,
let men be stupid and insist they pay
for shopping and taxis: we only laugh.

The two years over, Mae Ying established
with passport and permit and new apartment.
Sometimes she lonely in knowing no others
but girls of the agency, where Chirawan best.
She above all with her high-bred demeanour
her impudent walking that make men notice,
offer a drink which she always refuses,
waving them past with a mischievous laugh.

Like delirium of wanting that gives no rest
is shiver to hold me the nightfall dreaming:
they think of her soft parts and little gender.
Why should she work with rough sun coarsening
her skin in planting and hoeing rice?
Childbirth on planks, the blood then running
and rotting the clothes, the painful labour
that an hour in the river can never wash out.

But father know best, and in the distance
is brilliance that burns through these northern lands.
Immaculate in sportscar, Mae-Ying is touring
with soft wind in hair and blowing free.
Continual are seasons in this orderly country,
its fragmentary contentments of quiet clouds:
the trees I pass will lean into evening,
the long sky is blue with my childhood days.

Whatever the case, I have learned not to care
but take off clothes slowly as voices darken.
Afterwards I wash and my prodigal figure
glistens as I slip on some modest attire,
my private dimensions in other clothes.
My little Mai-Ying, are you truly accomplished?
In letter to father I am always happy.
'Then why you no visit?' I almost cry.

Take three planes and two days later
am sitting with Sompong in old time house:
disordered, bad smelling and falling in river.
Father disagreeable and call me changed.
Grown up, he tell me, and now am different.
The little girl laughing has farang ways.
*No, no, I tell him, for underneath
her heart and bloodline are only his.*

*'No, Mae-Ying you have something now
of officious bustle of Bangkok folk.
Even head abbot no give lecture
but ever be bowing with offering bowl.'*
*He want donation as all want donation.
'We also need money, and little Mae-Ying
be compassionate and help us. The hard path of life
has stumbles and needs for which no one asks.'*

So it hurt her now that helping Sompong
to dress her in clothes long dried on bushes
she see her sister there smiling and trying
to bend the leg folded so short and twisted
that no one will want her for a wife.
Where do the days go and why does it seem
the wind is from somewhere, another country
speaking to the small place that is the heart?

Who is Mae-Ying to have these reflections,
Mae-Ying the farang who cannot stay?
Sompong is crying and waving, and Mae-Ying
is also in tears going back to collecting
the sports car and drive round respectable streets:
white lines down the tarmac, the autumn leaves
turning down avenues of tended gardens,
their drives well-swept, with ordered lives.

Mae-Ying could move but she know the city
is noisy, impersonal and here is closer
to the winds off the wheat-fields and tousled elms,
the kale and the rapeseed of hard yellow shining,
the furze-covered hills and forest plantations,
the small towns opening with their filling station,
the bus stop and Safeway and ordinary lives
not hoping for heaven but getting by.

Sometimes she look down on what this body
offers the mirror with nothing on.
She see the supple, warm honey complexion,
the breasts that are flared and yet part of her.
How flawless the eyebrows with their balance over
eyes that are dewdrop and seem distilling
the exotic of longing and distant collusions
of immeasurable blackness she can't unlock.

*Tell me, Lord Buddha, why have you made me
this handful of smoke in a moving dream?*

Smart my apartment in the latest fashion,
this bed with its linens where only she sleep.

Girls from the agency look astonished,
see it so beautiful, ordered, neat.

'How do you do it, and where is the boyfriend?'

Nowhere. I never bring men-friends here.

*'We'll find you a husband who is rich enough
to know how the world is, and not be afraid
of what others will auger from the past.*

*If we find will you try it, however hard
with large house and family and former wife?'*

*If I have freedom, my own part, see
my family and girlfriends, can lie in bed
or get up and go driving all day and on.*

*Men they want change, are ever restless,
but in the end just settle for as it was.*

So there are suppers, and evenings in houses,
Mae-Ying the gracious with her sultry airs
as Chirawan smiling and out of her mind
with paintings, tapestries, the past wife's garden.

From lost in the luxury of heavy sheets
she go on to restaurants her men don't know.

Long months to find this Bernard Flowers
he businessman tell me and dine me over
the county in restaurants and in big hotels.
'The house we can change to what you want.'
But I tell him OK, it is fine by me.
What should Mae-Ying the peasant and worker
in the rice paddy wetness and far plantations
want with the greenhouse and boating lake?

Face framed by windows that are Jacobean,
he tell me, at tea-time with silver tongs:
threadbare the carpets, aching the galleries
where Chirawan step light leather on wood.
Softly she sink into the vast upholstery,
the large flowered sofas that were his wife's.
Mae-Ying, you think now: is this you want,
a man much older than father is?

How slowly she turn to this small boy Richard,
this son by another she entertain
as mistress of manor with its great dark cedars,
mill-boards plashing and peacocks screeching,
the galleries, windows, the wood-panelled rooms,
the fitted cupboards of endless clothes.
Here she will rule and must decorously smile.
'Just for a week, love, he is much your age.'

Mae-Ying, Mae-Ying, why must you linger
distant and astonished in hidden fury?
Much terror she see in quiet features,
a consternation in clear blue eyes.
*'Well, lad: don't just stand there gawking,
show some manners. But that's how he is.
The housekeeper will cook or you can take him out.
Look after Richard, that's all I ask.'*

Terrible pain when we both take breakfast.
Nothing to say as we walk through garden,
nothing to answer where we go to eat.
Mae-Ying now, the sorcerer mistress,
is taking good care to keep her head.
But all that day awful, she so nervous,
say nothing and sometimes crash the gears:
Mae-Ying exhausted, at day's end dying.

*'You'll marry my father?' He hasn't asked.
'But you like him, I mean, his sodding ways.'
I ask you Richard remember position,
the kindness I owe him and not speak bad.
'Well, lucky old bastard, he and his money.
God knows he has used it to good account.'
Everyone does that and we all need money.
I am his mistress and you can't change that.*

*'Yes, but why? I could well support you,
help you to live as a girl again.
Inside and out you could follow your instincts,
make up your story as you go along.'
Richard be man, make your own life's journey,
women you will win but not this one.
'You I must have, forever would hold you,
always be smelling that soft sweet breath.'*

How angry the mistress, the one-time temptress,
she turn away quickly and cannot smile.
Where is the courtesy, the good school manners,
what is this Chirawan that you disgrace?
*'Because he has money? We all have money.'
How could you do that with your bookshop business
with bank loans and credits as father says?
The world is a hard place. You must not dream.*

*'Dreams I must have when I walk with you,
dreams that are full of the moving air.
You're all I recall: the smallest feature,
the clothes, the small shoes, the handbag even
that perched on the seat has abundant life
drawn from another into kindly leather,
smelling of you, the extraordinary fingers
ending in slender, long, pink nails.'*

All this is nonsense. Do not play with me.
I am the darkness, the midnight magician,
I am a snake that could swallow you whole.
No, go away, you will burn your heart.
Now I am Chirawan and always expensive.
Breath in the morning and breath in the evening:
forever my needs in your knitted limbs.
No, go away, I am not for you.

He deeper in me than my belonging,
imbiber of sweetness at my soft breasts.
Mae-Ying the woman always remembering
the summertime wetness and far plantations.
The gladness of harvest in her reeking body
arches her back and bends her still yielding
in a thousand small pieces, in flooding joy
that reaches through happiness to her small toes.

I who was nightshade am belladonna,
the smoke stirring others now burns in me.
No longer the temptress, the great romancer,
no more the mistress of gracious ways,
but hungry, abandoned, a little girl crying
for the far away rain of the Pha Mieng Hills:
where is the comfort to seep in and soothe,
and where are his hands, O my little Mae-Ying?

Chirawan done for without her possession
of money and past that returns in fear.
He will disown me as do the seasons
that pass from comfort to grieving days.
I am the morning as you are the evening,
her body not hurting but only delighting
in the dozen small kisses it feel, collecting
the day come breezily from out of doors.

What will it lead to and how will it last?
Always I ask him but he only say,
'Let him be angry, his words can't hurt.
Soon we'll be married.' But Mae-Ying no certain:
Bernard she know and he won't forgive.
But *yes* to engagement and *yes* to moving,
and though she have doubts she only smile
as Richard he beg her and she nod her head.

Joy is a passing and a strange delirium.
Love is the black face of the moon.
What was destiny, my own Lord Buddha,
you I prayed to, didn't you hear?
Why should she care if old man be angry
and difficult there with his bloodshot eyes?
In all that soft length on the flowered sofa
it's slowly and cautiously she begin.

*'Don't kid yourself, Cherry', he shout at me.
The boy's lost his head, we all know that.'
I asked you, I told you, Bernard, a moment
not to so leave us but you wouldn't hear.
I take all the blame but Richard is yours.
'Pig's arse to that!' and even the house keeper
say, 'Now don't you fret. He's always like this,
threatening the worst but he comes around.'*

A single desk for Mae-Ying at bookshop
where she sit but sell two books a day.
Idle and lonely but think of evening
with Richard there smiling and kissing her.
At sales or at auctions Mae-Ying stay modest,
she know what men mean but never say.
They always pretend and she in smiling
say, *Yes, you come bookshop, see me again.*

So always good salesman, always she promise
change if they ask, and make one more sale.
So it go on, week into months.
Still we make out though Richard worry,
weekends and night-times he will not sleep.
'Dad took it badly. I knew he might.'
Then why you no tell me, but promise easy?
'Would you have left him, if you'd known?'

*'Why should an old man only with money
have what I wanted, you little Mae-Ying?'*
I tell him be quiet, it doesn't matter.
But it does, and he tell me business lose:
without father's backing they call in loan.
Mae-Ying she smile and make appointment,
though Bernard brusque and ask what's on offer.
Mae-Ying then quiet and she put down phone.

She come at last this woman once mistress
with short dress and sports car late one evening
she know the house have no one else.
Never was woman so alluringly dangerous
with downcast, submissive and mischievous pose.
*'So the whore's come back like a bitch on heat,
tail between legs for some extra loot:
beg all you like, you'll get naught from me.'*

*Not forgiveness, but help your son.
'If that's what this is, we can start upstairs.'*
How Chirawan know you'll keep your word?
He not courteous to the exotic mistress,
the Mae-Ying of heavy and somnolent sweetness.
*Bernard I do this but on one condition
that this is the last time and you write agreement
and sign it before we go upstairs.*

But Mae-Ying she stupid and too much trusting.
He write agreement but twist her arm.
Gross and horrible, he is not respecting
the life he once had in the midnight dancer.
Though she is crying he bend her over,
tear off clothes like a rabid dog.
What must she do to stop his anger,
and more than ever keep Richard safe?

So she urge him on the longer and further,
far, far more than an old man should.
Mae-Ying the sorcerer, the midnight eluder,
which he has and he hasn't, her legs are beating.
She turn and he turn, is thrusting and hurting,
the breath coming shortly and eyeballs sting.
Mae-Ying the butterfly almost breaking,
but he, gasping and failing, at last is done.

With the body cooling she pick up phone,
to make her statement and then to doctor.
Everything told except the money.
'*Mighty conciliatory*', the doctor say.
True, with clothes torn off she no
look so modest, but surely her Richard
will know what was done she did for him?
How angrily, angrily he brush me off.

*I am Mae-Ying the only, the daylight's protector
of what we two had and is now again.
What did you need but to have more money?
Here, and I show him the signed agreement,
which he take and tear in a dozen shreds.
For you I have done this, for only you
was Mae-Ying opening and closing her body,
streaming with wetness like a child.*

*'Please, Chirawan, will you go away,
at once if you would, we don't want trouble.
Grasping he was and given to meanness,
but not such to murder, to draw him on.
He was an old man, failing but holding
the status together with what he'd earned.
You were his only, the one he cared for,
a life that was more than business deals.'*

*Is this what you tell me with deportation
order for Monday in one month's time?
I ask you for pity to think a moment,
speak as you have a thousand times.
I am the breath that was far inside you,
helping you bodily to dream with me.
Must I go back to my homeland again
to work in bar or be second wife?*

No look, no answer. Mae-Ying returning
at length to the airport, the old streets passing,
She fasten seatbelt, look out of window,
see hummingbird colours, the blaze of harvest.
So Mae-Ying return and was only thinking
of the strong Chao Phraya with all its glittering
pagodas, men passing and the women reflected
in a dazzle of daylight that is never still.

True, my Lord Buddha, I am the sinner,
also the temptress, the spinner of dreams.
The trees take our hands and the hard days of life
are blessed with our bodies, and in my giving
is the small rain falling on the Pha Mieng Hills.
In far from the wind that is always speaking,
far from the farangs and their little lives,
Mae-Ying the sorcerer is home again.