

MEN & other strange myths

POEMS
and ART

H. Tham
1993



Hilary Tham

MEN

And Other Strange Myths

Poems
and
Art

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This book is dedicated to Donald E. Herdeck,
magician who turns manuscripts into books.
Thank you, Don, for believing in my work.

and

with admiration and love
to my Friend, Harriett P. Destler
who taught me the generous heart
never runs out of room



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My love and gratitude to my husband Joe, for not being a myth; to my father-in-law Isaac, for his hardworking and scholarly inspiration; to Ilana who is about to step out into the world of men and myths; to Shoshana, who reminds me of myself growing up and to Rebecca, for nagging me to finish my novel.

Dream Man Ken

Here is a man
who will never need bran in his breakfast,
never grow a beer belly or become a couch potato.

Here is a man
who will never lose his hair
or find fault with you
by criticizing your mother.

Here is a man
without old girlfriends, warm blooded pasts
who call and want to lunch with him alone.

Here is a man
who will wear white
tuxedos without scowling
and feeling stupid.

Here is a man
who does not play with his nether parts
or walk around the house naked.

He will go to the doctor anytime
for a vasectomy to save you the trouble
of birth control.

Here is a man
who does not fall asleep after sex.
He will lie beside you, eyes open, hand
on your breast, though he is really
thinking about basketball.

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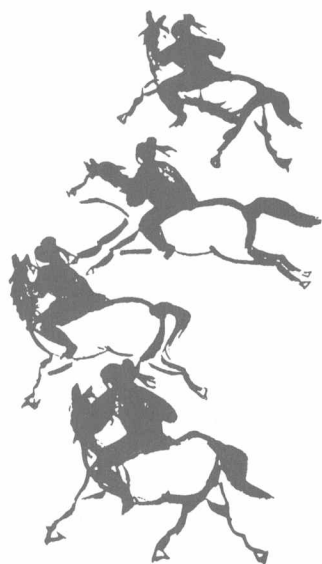
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MAN



Adventure

That time Grandfather took us
to the Night Bazaar, I lingered
to gaze at drama on a white gauze curtain,
of Wayang Kulit puppets, shadows dancing
in a candle's glow, this open window
into other people's more exciting lives.
The night was full of strangers
when I turned around.

A group of young men took me home.

At six, I had no fear of strangers.
The young know the future
only from the past. Nothing bad
could happen to me; nothing bad had.
Caught in the fair's attractions, I
did not know that Grandfather was frantic,
retracing our path all the way home,
his eyes hot and suspicious
on every man with a girl-child,
his head heavy with knowledge of evil
in men, thoughts of kidnappers,
his grand-daughter sold
into a pleasure-house, his hand
gripping his remaining grandchild's.
My brother rubs his hand,
remembering it.



Fair-Weather Friends

"Your father gathers friends faster than hot food gathers flies," Mother often said as he'd leave the house in another stranger's Mercedes or Jaguar. All my father's friends drove expensive cars and picked up women who used perfume and powder without care for their reputations.

Sometimes he took me along, as proof perhaps that their Sunday excursions were innocent. I met beautiful girls who were not wives; I thought men couldn't date wives.

Mr. Ken was always kind to me though Maria, his girlfriend stayed aloof, like a painting. She was so fair, thin eyebrows arced above dark eyes, her lips always red, like *ang pows*, envelopes of gift money we got at Chinese New Year.

Mother warned Father: Mr. Ken is bad company, a fair-weather friend. My father said he was the expert on friendship and weather.

Later, when Maria's other lover threw acid at her and Mr. Ken and ruined their faces, Father forgot him like the taste of last year's rice.



Why Not Agamemnon

Some women have a talent for picking
bad husbands. Take Clytemnestra:
her first, Tantalus, stole
nectar from the gods
for immortality. He didn't bother
to share it with his wife.

When the gods came knocking, he
invited them to dinner and served
steaks à la Pelops, his son
by Clytemnestra. Meanwhile, she
wondered why their son was late and why
she was served fish instead.

This unkosher meal upset the guests.
Or perhaps it was the loss of precious nectar.
They sentenced him for life, and told
his wife she shouldn't wait.

So Clytemnestra married Agamemnon.
Of course, the supply of bachelor kings
was limited, but she could have looked
a little lower.

Any marriage broker in the agora
could have warned her: heroes and kings
make poor husbands. If they weren't killing
their fathers, they were killing

their children to trick gods,
to please gods, or to avert a prophecy.

Clytemnestra knew Agamemnon's house
was purple with the blood of fratricides,
patricides and numerous other cides.
His own father, King Atreus,
had fed his nephews to their father.
Making a meal of murder seemed
to be in fashion at the time.

Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin,
killed King Atreus and put his now
vegetarian father on the throne.
Agamemnon evicted his uncle
but let Cousin Aegisthus hang around,
drinking beer on the sofa.

Clytemnestra watched her children grow—
Iphigenia, Orestes, Electra. She'd found
a good man this time.

One Sunday, Agamemnon took
his children boating, came back minus
one child. So sorry,
had to sacrifice Iphigenia
for fair winds or we'd still be stuck in Aulis.
Look, I brought two back so
don't scream. The neighbors will hear.

Agamemnon had a brother, Menelaus.
The husband of a woman who is
beautiful and likes Harlequin Romances
usually has problems. This time
it was serious. Helen had eloped
with Paris, the ladies' man.

Clytemnestra said she had a headache
every night. So Agamemnon dashed off
to Troy for a quick game of war.

Ten years later, the husband returned
bringing flowers and candy.
He enlarged his exploits, laughed
as captive Cassandra foretold his death.

He was still laughing, splashing
like a baby whale in his tub, when
Aegisthus slid a knife between his ribs.
He died, bewildered, as Clytemnestra
plunged
in her knife. For Iphigenia! she cried
but he did not hear.

For Iphigenia, she said, but Orestes
did not buy the explanation. He killed
her and Aegisthus, reviewed his family
history with a genetics counselor and
to avoid fathering children, ran
around with women well past menopause.

My Father Has Broken Out Again

All these years I must have known
my father's love had a price,
a monthly rent.
Naively, I thought I would pay
coin of the heart for love
but never money.



Yet my father's smile
is a tattered thing when cash does not
meet his expectations.

He will rant at Mother after I leave
beat her with words hard as firewood,
life-long grievances: how she had
blockaded him from his children's hearts,
kept him from marrying three more wives:
each would have given him tall children
with purses now bulging open for him.

This is the father who suspected I stole
the gold coin-button I found on the beach.
Mother gave me a penny to drop into the waves,
"We must repay the sea-god's gift."

This is the man who threatened,
time and again to remove us
from elementary school, send us to work
washing dishes, wiping tables
in the bazaar so he could take
his mistresses to pleasure places.
In his sixties, tamed by precarious health