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Asian American Literature

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PRENTICE HALL
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Introduction

You may have a romantic image of explorers who risk their lives to discover new and unknown lands. Writers, too, are explorers. They may not take physical risks, but they take emotional ones as they explore their cultural backgrounds and their own hearts.

Recently, many American writers with diverse backgrounds have been opening up new heart-territory for readers. In stories, essays, and poems, writers have discovered and described what it means to be a Native American, a Mexican American, an African American, or an Asian American. Their imaginative journeys have enriched our literature.

This anthology contains the writing of Asian Americans. Much of this work appeared in the last fifteen or twenty years, and almost all of it shows Asian Americans discovering who they are and how they fit in to American society. Even a story like Lensey Namioka's "LAFFF," an entertaining science-fiction piece, touches on ways in which Chinese American students are stereotyped.

The term *Asian American* can be misleading, however, if it suggests a single group of people with the same heritage and the same reactions to American life. As you read this anthology, you'll find that there is diversity within diversity. An Asian American is someone who comes (or whose parents or forebears have come) from any number of different Asian countries. If America is a rainbow of cultures, then Asian Americans compose a mini-rainbow all their own.

In reading this volume, you'll encounter Chinese Americans like Jade Snow Wong, Japanese Americans like Lawson Fusao Inada, Vietnamese Americans like Le Ly Hayslip, and Indian Americans like Ved Mehta. You'll also encounter writers who come from a multi-ethnic background. The poet Cathy Song, for example, was born of a Chinese American mother and a Korean American father.

This diversity of backgrounds can prompt writers to focus on different historical events. For Vietnamese Americans like Le Ly Hayslip and Tran Thi Nga, the Vietnam War (which ended in 1975) is the key to their identity. Each of them grew up in Vietnam, suffered physical and emotional pain in the war, and eventually put down new roots in America. In their writing, however, they naturally return to their haunting wartime experiences to understand who they are.

Many of the Japanese American writers in this anthology discover meaning in events that occurred during World War II. December 7, 1941, the day that Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor, marked the beginning of an especially difficult period for Japanese Americans. Suspected of being traitors merely because of their heritage, they were taken from their schools, their jobs, and their homes and forced to live in special relocation centers. This deeply humiliating experience is reflected in the story "Slant-Eyed Americans" by Toshio Mori; essays by Monica Sone, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, and Garrett Hongo; and the poem "Concentration Constellation" by Lawson Fusao Inada.

Some of the Chinese American writers in this volume refer to experiences that occurred before the United States entered World War II. During the period 1910 to 1940, Chinese immigrants coming to America were detained on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. There they met with a cold welcome. As Marlon K. Hom describes, the immigrants "had to submit to a battery of physical examinations and harsh interrogations." Hom has translated the graffiti-poems that ordinary Chinese scribbled on the walls of their detention barracks as they waited to be admitted to this country or returned to China. Many contemporary Chinese poets are too young to have experienced Angel Island for themselves. Like Alan Chong Lau, however, they can imagine what it was like for their grandparents.

Although Asian American writers are divided by different historical concerns, they are united in their treatment of universal themes. Chief among these themes is the joy of discovering one's heritage and of paying tribute to one's parents or grandparents. In his essay "Kubota," Garrett Hongo restores the good name of his Japanese grandfather, once suspected of being a spy. In his poem "I Ask My Mother to Sing," Li-Young Lee honors his mother and grandmother as they re-create for him a China he has never seen. You'll find this same theme reflected in many of the stories, essays, and poems in this book.

If you take a risk and journey with these writer-explorers, you many discover scents, tastes, sounds, and sights of cultures that are new to you. You may also discover new thoughts and feelings in your own heart.

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The Explosion in the Parlor

Bai Xiao-Yi

THE host poured tea into the cup and placed it on the small table in front of his guests, who were a father and daughter, and put the lid on the cup with a clink. Apparently thinking of something, he hurried into the inner room, leaving the Thermos on the table. His two guests heard a chest of drawers opening and a rustling.

They remained sitting in the parlor, the ten-year-old daughter looking at the flowers outside the window, the father just about to take his cup, when the crash came, right there in the parlor. Something was hopelessly broken.

It was the Thermos, which had fallen to the floor. The girl looked over her shoulder abruptly, startled, staring. It was mysterious. Neither of them had touched it, not even a little bit. True, it hadn't stood steadily when their host placed it on the table, but it hadn't fallen then.

The crash of the Thermos caused the host, with a box of sugar cubes in his hand, to rush back from the inner room. He gawked at the steaming floor and blurted out, "It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter!"

The father started to say something. Then he muttered, "Sorry, I touched it and it fell."

"It doesn't matter," the host said.

Later, when they left the house, the daughter said, "Daddy, *did* you touch it?"

"No. But it stood so close to me."

"But you *didn't* touch it. I saw your reflection in the windowpane. You were sitting perfectly still."

The father laughed. "What then would you give as the cause of its fall?"

"The Thermos fell by itself. The floor is uneven. It wasn't steady when Mr. Li put it there. Daddy, *why* did you say that you . . ."

"That won't do, girl. It sounds more acceptable when I say I knocked it down. There are things which people accept less the more you defend them. The truer the story you tell, the less true it sounds."

The daughter was lost in silence for a while. Then she said, "Can you explain it only this way?"

"Only this way," her father said.

The Artist: A Chinese Fable

Isabelle C. Chang

THERE was once a king who loved the graceful curves of the rooster. He asked the court artist to paint a picture of a rooster for him. For one year he waited, and still this order was not fulfilled. In a rage, he stomped into the artist's studio and demanded to see the artist.

Quickly the artist brought out paper, paint, and brush. In five minutes a perfect picture of a rooster emerged from his skillful brush. The king turned purple with anger, saying, "If you can paint a perfect picture of a rooster in five minutes, why did you keep me waiting for over a year?"

"Come with me," begged the artist. He led the king to his storage room. Paper was piled from the floor to the ceiling. On every sheet was a painting of a rooster.

"Your Majesty," explained the artist, "it took me more than a year to learn how to paint a perfect rooster in five minutes."

Life is short, art is long.

Housepainting

Lan Samantha Chang

THE day before my sister brought her boyfriend home, we had a family conference over fried rice and Campbell's chicken noodle.

"This is the problem," my mother said. "The thistles are overpowering our mailbox." She looked at my father. "Could you do something about them before Frances and Wei get here?"

My father grunted from behind his soup. He drank his Campbell's Chinese-style, with the bowl raised to his mouth. "Frances won't care about the thistles," he said. "She thinks only about coming home."

"But what about Wei?" my mother said. "This isn't his home. To him it's just a house that hasn't been painted in ten years. With weeds." She scowled. To her the weeds were a matter of honor. Although Wei had been dating my sister for four years and had visited us three times, he was technically a stranger and subject to the rules of "saving face."

My father slurped. "Frances is a *xiaoxun* daughter," he said. "She wants to see family, not our lawn. Wei is a good *xiaoxun* boy. He wants Frances to see her family; he doesn't care about the lawn."

Xiaoxun means "filial," or "dutiful to one's parents."

I was almost to the bottom of my bowl of rice when I noticed my parents were looking at me. "Oh," I said. "Okay, I'll do it."

"Thank you, Annie," said my mother.

The next afternoon I went to work on the weeds. My father loved Wei and Frances, but he hated yard work. Whenever I read about Asian gardeners, I thought my father must have come over on a different boat.

It was a beautiful midwestern afternoon, sunny and dry, with small white clouds high up against a bright blue sky. I wore a pair of my father's old gloves to pull the thistles but kicked off my sandals, curled my toes around the hot reassuring dirt. Inside the house, my mother napped with the air conditioner humming in the window. My father sat in front of the television, rereading the Chinese newspaper from New York that my parents always snatched out of the mail as if they were receiving news of the emperor from a faraway province. I felt an invisible

hand hovering over our shabby blue house, making sure everything stayed the same.

I was hacking at a milky dandelion root when I heard an engine idling. A small brown car, loaded down with boxes and luggage, turned laboriously into the driveway. Through the open window I heard a scrape as my father pushed aside his footrest. My mother's window shade snapped up and she peered outside, one hand on her tousled hair. I rose to meet the car, conscious of my dirt-stained feet, sweaty glasses, and muddy gardening gloves.

"Annie!" Frances shouted from the rolled-down window. She half-emerged from the car and shouted my name again.

"Wow," I said. "You guys are early. I thought you wouldn't get here until five o'clock."

"That was the plan," said Wei, "but your sister here was so excited about getting home that I begged off from call a few hours early." He grinned. He was always showing off about how well he knew my sister. But other than that he had very few defects, even to my critical thirteen-year-old mind. He was medium-sized and steady, with a broad, cheerful dark face and one gold-rimmed tooth.

My mother and father rushed out the front door and let it slam.

"Hi, Frances!" they said. "Hi, Wei!" I could tell my mother had stopped to comb her hair and put on lipstick.

We stood blinking foolishly in the sunlight as Wei and Frances got out of the car. My family does not hug. It is one of the few traditions that both my parents have preserved from China's pre-Revolutionary times.

Frances came and stood in front of my mother. "Let me look at you," my mother said. Her gaze ran over my sister in a way that made me feel knobby and extraneous.

Frances was as beautiful as ever. She did not look like she had been sitting in a car all day. Her white shorts and her flowered shirt were fresh, and her long black hair rippled gently when she moved her head. People were always watching Frances, and Wei was no exception. Now he stared transfixed, waiting for her to turn to talk to him, but she did not.

Still facing my mother, Frances said, "Wei, could you get the stuff from the car?"

"I'll help you!" my father said. He walked around the back of the car and stood awkwardly aside to let Wei open the trunk. "So, how is medical school?" I heard him ask. They leaned into

the trunk, their conversation muffled by the hood. I looked at their matching shorts, polo shirts, brown arms and sturdy legs. When Wei came to visit, my father always acted like a caged animal that has been let outside to play with another of its kind.

Afterward, we sat in the kitchen and drank icy sweet green-bean porridge from rice bowls. Frances nudged me.

"Hey, Annie, I got you something."

She pulled a package wrapped in flowered paper from a shopping bag. She never came home without presents for everyone, and she never left without a bag full of goodies from home. It was as if she could maintain a strong enough sense of connection to us only by touching things that had actually belonged, or would soon belong, to us.

I looked at the package: a book. I stifled a groan. Frances never knew what I wanted.

"Well, open it," my mother said.

I tore off the paper. It was a thick volume about the history of medicine. This was supposed to be of great interest to me, because of a family notion that I would become a doctor, like Wei. I did not want to be a doctor.

"This is great! Thanks, Frances," I said.

"Very nice," said my mother.

"Ma, I left your present in my room," Frances said. "Let's go get it." They left the kitchen. My father and Wei began a heated discussion about Wimbledon. After a few minutes, I got bored and went to find my mother and Frances.

From the entrance to the hall I could see that the bedroom door was closed. I stopped walking and snuck up to the door on the balls of my feet. I crouched against the door to listen.

"I don't *know*, Mom," Frances was saying. She sounded close to tears.

"What is it that you don't know?" my mother asked her. When my mother got upset, her sentences became more formal and her Chinese accent more obvious. "Are you unsure that he really cares about you, or are you unsure about your feelings for him?"

"I know he cares about me," she said. She had answered my mother's question. There followed a pause in the conversation.

Then my mother said, "Well, I think he is a very nice boy. Daddy likes him very much."

"And of course that's the most important thing," said my sister, her anger startling me. I wrapped my arms around my knees.

"You know that is not true." My mother sounded exasperated. "Your father enjoys spending time with other men, that is all. There aren't very many Chinese men in this area for him to talk to. He also likes Wei because he is capable of giving you the kind of life we have always wanted you to have. Is there something . . ." She paused. "What is wrong with him?"

Frances burst into a sob.

"There's nothing *wrong* with him. There's *nothing* wrong with him. It's just—oh, I just don't know—I don't know." She was almost shouting, as if my mother didn't understand English. "You and Dad don't think about me at *all*!"

I imagined my mother's face, thin and tight, frozen in the light from the window. "Don't speak to me that way," she said stiffly. "I am only trying to help you decide. You are very young. You have never lived through a war. You don't know about the hardships of life as much as your father and I do."

"I'm *sorry*," my sister said, and sobbed even louder. I got up and snuck away down the hall.

My parents often mentioned the war, especially when I complained about doing something I didn't want to do. If I couldn't get a ride to the swimming pool, my mother told me about when *she* was in seventh grade and had to walk to school every day past a lot of dead bodies. My mother was a brave seventh grader who knew how to shoot a gun and speak four dialects. But what did I know? I'd lived in the Midwest my whole life. I ate Sugar Pops and drank milk from a cow. To me, an exciting time meant going downtown to the movies without my parents.

That night Wei and Frances and I went to a movie starring Kevin Costner and a blond woman whose name I don't remember. On the way to the theater the car was very quiet. When we arrived, I stood in line to get popcorn and then went into the dim, virtually empty theater to look for Wei and Frances. I saw them almost immediately. They were quarreling. Wei kept trying to take Frances's hand, and she kept snatching it away. As I approached, I heard him say, "Just tell me what you want from me. What do you want?"

"I don't know!" Frances said. I approached. She looked up. "Mmm—popcorn! Sit down, Annie. I have to go to the bathroom." Her look said: Don't you dare say a word.

I watched her hurry up the aisle. "What's wrong with her?"

Wei shook his head a minute, trying to dislodge an answer.

"I don't know." My first time alone with him. We sat staring awkwardly at the empty screen. Then he turned to me as if struck by an important thought.

"Annie, what would *you* think if Francie and I got married?"

Despite what I had overheard between Frances and my mother, my stomach gave a little jump. I thought about what to say.

"That would be nice," I said.

"You think so?" Wei said eagerly. "Listen, can you tell her that? I've got to convince her. It's like she can't make up her own mind. Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess she hasn't had much practice." Although I'd never thought about it before, I knew that I was right. *Xiaoxun* meant that your parents made up your mind. I pictured Wei wrapped up in flowered paper, another gift my sister brought back and forth.

Wei sat sunk in his seat, a speculative look on his face. "Hmm," he said. "Hmm."

I began to feel uncomfortable, as if I were sitting next to a mad scientist. "I can't wait to see this movie," I said quickly. "Frances and I think Kevin Costner is cute." I stuffed a handful of popcorn into my mouth. While I was chewing, Frances finally came back and sat down between us.

"How about it, Frances?" Wei said. "Do you think Kevin Costner is cute?"

I looked at Wei's face and suddenly realized that he could not look more different from Kevin Costner.

"Actually, Frances doesn't like him," I blurted out. "I just—"

At that moment the screen lit up, and despite myself, I gave an audible sigh of relief.

My father was waiting for us when we got home, under the lamp with the Chinese newspaper, in his sagging easy chair. This habit of waiting had always infuriated Frances, who felt compelled by guilt to return at a reasonable hour.

Wei greeted my father cheerfully. "Hi, Mr. Wang. Waiting up for us?"

"Oh no," my father said, regarding Wei with pleasure.

"I'm glad you're still up," Wei said, with a look of heavy male significance. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

This time I had no desire to listen in on the conversation. I headed for the bathroom as fast as I could. Frances hurried behind me.

"Aren't you going to talk with them?" I said.

Frances grabbed the doorknob. "Just shut up," she said. She closed the door behind us, and we stood for a minute in the pink-tiled room under the glow of the ceiling light. Frances leaned against the counter and sighed. I sat down on the toilet seat.

"You know," she muttered, "I really do think Kevin Costner is cute."

"Me too," I said. I stared at the tiny speckle pattern on the floor tiles.

From the kitchen we heard a burble of laughter.

"Dad really likes Wei," I said.

Frances sighed. "It's not just Dad. Mom likes him too. She's just too diplomatic to show it. Dad is more obvious." She raised her eyebrows. "At least I know exactly where I stand with Dad."

Her words frightened me.

"I don't get it," I burst out in spite of myself. "Why did you go out with him for four years if you don't really like him?"

Frances ran her hand around a water faucet. "He reminded me of home," she said. "Why did you sign up for biology instead of art class?" She slid quickly off the counter. "Come on, kiddo, time to hit the sack."

The next morning I slept late. Around eleven I was awakened by a muffled bang near my bedroom window. My mind whirled like a pinwheel: What on earth—? I jumped out of bed and pushed up the bottom of the shade.

Two male legs, clad in shorts, stood on a ladder to the right of my window. Then Wei bent down, his smile startling me.

He was holding a paintbrush.

"What are you doing?" I almost shrieked.

"Just giving your father a little help with the house," he said.

I pulled the shade down, grabbed some clothes, and hurried out of my room to find my mother. As I passed Frances's room, I saw her sitting on her bed, fully dressed, with a completely blank expression on her face.

My mother was in the kitchen, cutting canned bamboo shoots into long thin strips.

"Where is Dad?"

"Don't shout, Annie," she said. "He went to the hardware store to match some more paint."

"Why is Wei painting the house?"

My mother lined up a handful of bamboo shoots and began cutting them into cubes. "He's just being helpful."

"Why is Dad letting him be so helpful?" I couldn't find the right question. Wei must have asked my father if he needed help with the house. Why had my father consented? Why was he accepting help from an outsider?

My mother turned and looked at me. "Because Wei wanted to help, that's all. Why don't you go and wash up? You're thirteen years old; I shouldn't have to remind you to wash your face."

The next few days passed in a blur, marked only by the growing patch of fresh pale-yellow paint that grew to cover one side of our blue house and then the back. Wei worked steadily and cheerfully, with minimal help from my father. My mother went outside now and then to give him cold drinks and to comment on the evenness of his job, or something like that. Frances stayed in her room reading. I reported to her.

"Wei's finished with the back side and now he's starting on the garage," I said.

"Leave me alone," Frances said.

I went further into the room and stood in front of her until she looked up. "I said leave me *alone*, Annie! I'm warning you—"

"Well, why don't *you* say something about it?" I demanded. "Why didn't you tell him you didn't want him to do it?"

Her face contorted in something between anger and tears. "I can't tell him!" He won't listen to me! He says he's just doing them a favor!" She bent over her book and flipped her hair angrily in front of her, shielding her face. "Go away!"

I left the room.

With things at home going so well, my parents left the next morning on a day trip to Chicago. Every now and then they made the four-hour drive to buy supplies—dried mushrooms, canned vegetables—from a Chinese grocery there. After they left, we ate breakfast, with Wei and I making awkward conversation because Frances wouldn't talk to us. Then Wei got up and went out to the front yard. From an open window I watched him pry the lid off a can of paint and stir with a wooden stick from the hardware store. Frances went out on the front porch and stood at the top of the steps looking down at him.

"You can stop now, Wei," I heard her say.

He glanced up, puzzled.

"You don't have to paint today. Mom and Dad aren't around

to see what a dutiful boy you are."

Wei didn't have a short fuse. He shook his head slowly and looked back down at what he was doing.

Frances tried again. "It makes me sick," she said, "to see you groveling like this around my parents."

Wei didn't answer.

"What is it with you?" she sneered.

Finally his eyes flickered. "My painting the house," he said, "is something between me and your parents. If you don't like it, why don't you go pick a fight with them? And why did you wait until they left to pick a fight with me?"

Frances's upper lip pulled back toward her nose. I thought she was sneering at him again, but when she turned back to the house, I realized she was crying. She looked horrible. She slammed the door, rushed past me, and ran into the garage, where she and Wei had parked the brown car. Then before Wei and I could stop her, she drove away down the street.

She came back in about an hour. I sat inside pretending to read a book, but Frances didn't reenter the house, so I figured she and Wei were talking out there. I was surprised when he came inside. "Where's Frances?" he said.

"I thought she was with you."

"Nope. Just finished the front. I'm about to put a second coat on the south side. Want to take a look?"

"Okay." I put down my book. We walked outside and around the house.

There stood Frances with her hair up in a painter's cap, busily putting blue back over Wei's work, painting fast, as high as she could reach. Two new cans stood in the grass. She had finished most of the side and had worked almost up to the corner.

Frances turned to look at us. There were splotches of blue paint on her hands and clothes.

"I liked it better the old way," she said. She glared at Wei, waiting for him to get angry, but he stood perfectly still. I felt cool sweat break out on my neck and forehead.

Finally Wei said, "If you wanted it blue again, you just had to tell me."

Frances threw her brush on the ground and burst into tears. "Damn you!" she shouted at Wei. "I hate you! You too, Annie! I hate both of you! I hate everything!" She looked at the house. "I don't care what color it is, I just hate everything!"

I took a step backward, but Wei walked right up to her and