

Song and Verse

Where I Lived:
Writers and Composers
of the Asian Diaspora

J.J. Penna, piano and curator
Aislin Alancheril, reader

Friday, April 11, 2025
6:00 p.m.
Burnes Hall

PROGRAM

*This concert will be performed without pause.
Please hold your applause until the end of the program.*

Reading

Jiayang Fan: from “Personal History”, *The New Yorker* (June, 2023)

Chen Yi

(b. 1953)

Bright Moonlight

Jialin Han, soprano

Reading

Li-Young Lee: “Immigrant Blues” from *Behind My Eyes*

Bosba Panh ‘19

(b. 1997)

Father Mine

Five Flights Up

Casabianca

Chemin de Fer

Conversation

Father Mine

Yumeng Xing, soprano

Reading

Han Kang: *Wings* from *The White Book*

Tonia Ko

(b. 1988)

Smoke and Distance

Aislin Alancheril, soprano

Reading

Ocean Vuong: Excerpt from *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Andrew Hsu

Summer Night, Riverside

Giuliana Torti, soprano

Reading

Ocean Vuong: Excerpt from *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Dylan Tran

(b. 1994)

BA: Poems from Ocean

Threshold

A Little Closer to the Edge

Telemachus

Always & Forever

In Newport

Giuliana Torti, Jialin Han, soprano

Reading

Celine Song: Excerpt from the film *Past Lives*

Vivian Fung

(b. 1975)

Is the Moon Tired?

Giuliana Torti, soprano

This concert features a sampling of works by musicians and writers with ties to the Asian diaspora, artists whose creative visions were shaped by narratives of dislocation, reinvention, and transformation. Uniquely, the texts chosen for these dynamic and original songs range from canonical writers in the English canon to the searing poems of Vietnamese-American poet Ocean Vuong and Chinese-American poet Li-Young Lee – a current of writing exploring themes of parentage, identity, power structures, and generational divides. Presenting these works is a testament to the creative process as an act of restoration and renewal.

– J.J. Penna

Bright Moonlight

Outside my window
bright moonlight, kissing the grassland;

Near in front, far away,
given to the earth with consonance.

Look at the window
bright moonlight, missing my homeland;

Near in front, far away,
yearning for the world of consonance.

Chen Yi

Five Flights Up

Still dark.
The unknown bird sits on his usual branch.
The little dog next door barks in his sleep
inquiringly, just once.
Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires
once or twice, quavering.
Questions—if that is what they are—
answered directly, simply,
by day itself. (...)
The bird still sits there. Now he seems to yawn.
The little black dog runs in his yard.
His owner's voice arises, stern,
"You ought to be ashamed!"
What has he done?
He bounces cheerfully up and down;
he rushes in circles (...)
Obviously, he has no sense of shame.
He and the bird know everything is answered,
all taken care of,
no need to ask again.
—Yesterday brought to today so lightly!

Casabianca

Love's the boy stood on the burning deck
trying to recite "The boy stood on
the burning deck." Love's the son
stood stammering elocution
while the poor ship in flames went down.
Love's the obstinate boy, the ship,
even the swimming sailors, who
would like a schoolroom platform, too,
or an excuse to stay
on deck. And love's the burning boy.

Chemin de Fer - an echo across the pond

Alone on the railroad track
I walked with pounding heart.
The ties were too close together
or maybe too far apart. (...)
I saw the little pond
where the dirty old hermit lives,
lie like an old tear
holding onto its injuries
lucidly year after year.
The hermit shot off his shot-gun
and the tree by his cabin shook.
Over the pond went a ripple
The pet hen went chook-chook.
"Love should be put into action!"
screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond an echo
tried and tried to confirm it.

Conversation

The tumult in the heart
keeps asking questions.
And then it stops and undertakes to
answer
in the same tone of voice.
No one could tell the difference.
Uninnocent, these conversations start,
and then engage the senses,
only half-meaning to.
And then there is no choice,
and then there is no sense;
until a name
and all its connotation are the same.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)

Father Mine

I buried my father in my heart.
Now he grows in me, my strange [child],
My little root who won't drink milk,
Little pale foot sunk in unheard-of night,
Little clock spring newly wet
In the fire, little grape, parent to the future
Wine, a [child] the fruit of his own [child],
Little father I ransom [you] with my life.

Li-Young Lee (b. 1957)

Smoke and Distance

Our meeting was like the upward swish of a rocket
In the blue night
I do not know when it burst
But now I stand gaping
In a glory of falling stars
Amy Lowell, from "Pyrotechnics"
Pictures of a Floating World. 1919
The blue smoke leaps
Like swirling clouds of birds vanishing.
So my love leaps forth toward you.
Vanishes and is renewed.
Richard Aldington, from "Images"
Modern British Poetry. 1920

Summer night, riverside

In the wild soft summer darkness
How many and many a night we two together
Sat in the park and watched the Hudson
Wearing her lights like golden spangles
Glinting on black satin.
The rail along the curving pathway
Was low in a happy place to let us cross,
And down the hill a tree that dripped with bloom
Sheltered us,
While the kisses and the flowers,
Falling, falling,
Tangled in my hair. . . .

The frail white stars moved slowly over the sky.

And now, far off
In the fragrant darkness
The tree is tremulous again with bloom
For June comes back.

Tonight what girl
Dreamily before her mirror shakes from her hair
This year's blossoms, clinging to its coils?

Sara Teasdale

Threshold

In the body, where everything has a price,
I was a beggar. On my knees,

I watched, through the keyhole, not
the man showering, but the rain

falling through him: guitar strings snapping
over his globed shoulders.

He was singing, which is why
I remember it. His voice --

it filled me to the core
like a skeleton. Even my name

knelt down inside me, asking
to be spared.

He was singing. It is all I remember.
For in the body, where everything has a price,

I was alive. I didn't know
there was a better reason.

That one morning, my father would stop
--a dark colt paused in downpour--

& listen for my clutched breath
behind the door. I didn't know the cost

of entering a song--was to lose
your way back.

(The text continues on the following page. Please turn the page quietly.)

So I entered. So I lost.
I lost it all with my eyes

wide open.

A Little Closer to the Edge

Young enough to believe nothing
will change them, they step, hand-in-hand,

into the bomb crater. The night full
of black teeth. His faux Rolex, weeks

from shattering against her cheek, now dims
like a miniature moon behind her hair.

In this version the snake is headless — stilled
like a cord unraveled from the lovers' ankles.

He lifts her white cotton skirt, revealing
another hour. His hand. His hands. The syllables

inside them. O father, O foreshadow, press
into her — as the field shreds itself

with cricket cries. Show me how ruin makes a home
out of hip bones. O mother,

O minutehand, teach me
how to hold a man the way thirst

holds water. Let every river envy
our mouths. Let every kiss hit the body

like a season. Where apples thunder
the earth with red hooves. & I am your son.

Telemachus

Like any good son, I pull my father out
of the water, drag him by his hair

through white sand, his knuckles carving a trail
the waves rush in to erase. Because the city

beyond the shore is no longer
where we left it. Because the bombed

cathedral is now a cathedral
of trees. I kneel beside him to show how far

I might sink. Do you know who I am,
Ba? But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming
with seawater. He is so still I think

he could be anyone's father, found
the way a green bottle might appear

at a boy's feet containing a year
he has never touched. I touch

his ears. No use. I turn him
over. To face it. The cathedral

in his sea-black eyes. The face
not mine — but one I will wear

to kiss all my lovers good-night:
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own & begin
the faithful work of drowning.

Always & Forever

Open this when you need me most,
he said, as he slid the shoe box, wrapped

in duct tape, beneath my bed. His thumb,
still damp from the shudder between mother's

thighs, kept circling the mole above my brow.
The devil's eye blazed between his teeth

Or was he lighting a joint? It doesn't matter. Tonight
I wake and mistake the bathwater wrung
from mother's hair for his voice. I open
the shoe box dusted with seven winters

& here, sunk in folds of yellowed news
-paper, lies the Colt.45 -- silent & heavy

(The text continues on the following page. Please turn the page quietly.)

would make a hole wide as morning. That if
I looked through it, I would see the end of this

sentence. Or maybe just a man kneeling
at the boy's bed, his grey overalls reeking of gasoline

& cigarettes. Maybe the day will close without
the page turning as he wraps his arms around

the boy's milk-blue shoulders. The boy pretending
to be asleep as his father's clutch tightens.

The way the barrel, aimed at the sky, must
tighten around a bullet

to make it speak.

In Newport

"In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin's Wet Back"
& close his eyes. His hair the shade
of its cracked flesh.
His right arm, inked with three falling
phoenixes—torches
marking the lives he had
or had not taken—cradles
the pinkish snout. Its teeth
gleaming like bullets.
Huey. Tomahawk. Semi
-automatic. I was static
as we sat in the Nissan, watching the waves
brush over our breaths
when he broke for shore, hobbled
on his gimp leg. Mustard
-yellow North Face jacket
diminishing towards the grey life
smeared into ours. Shrapnel
-strapped. Bushwhacker. The last time
I saw him run like that, he had
a hammer in his fist, mother
a nail-length out of reach.
America. America a row of streetlights
flickering on his whiskey
-lips as we ran. A family
screaming down Franklin Ave.
ADD. PTST. POW. Pow. Pow. Pow
says the sniper. Fuck you
says the father, tracers splashing

through palm leaves. Confetti
green, how I want you green.
Green despite the red despite
the rest. His knees sunk
in ink-black mud, he guides
a ribbon of water to the pulsing
blowhole. Ok. Okay. AK
-47. I am eleven only once
as he kneels to gather the wet refugee
into his arms. Waves
swallowing
his legs. The dolphin's eye
gasping like a newborn's
mouth. & once more
I am swinging open
the passenger door. I am running
toward a rusted horizon, running
out of a country
to run out of. I am chasing my father
the way the dead chase after
days—& although I am still
too far to hear it, I can tell,
by the way his neck tilts
to one side, as if broken,
that he is singing
my favorite song
to his empty hands.

Ocean Vuong

Is the Moon Tired?

Is the moon tired? she looks so pale
Within her misty veil:
She scales the sky from east to west,
And takes no rest.

Before the coming of the night
The moon shows papery white;
Before the dawning of the day
She fades away.

Christina Rossetti

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