Ikebana

By Cathy Song

To prepare the body,
aim for the translucent perfection
you find in the sliced shavings
of a pickled turnip.
In order for this to happen,
you must avoid the sun,
protect the face
under a paper parasol
until it is bruised white
like the skin of lilies.
Use white soap
from a blue porcelain
dish for this.

Restrict yourself.
Eat the whites of things:
tender bamboo shoots,
the veins of the young iris,
the clouded eye of a fish.

Then wrap the body,
as if it were a perfumed gift,
in pieces of silk
held together with invisible threads
like a kite, weighing no more
than a handful of crushed chrysanthemums.
Light enough to float in the wind.
You want the effect
of koi moving through water.

When the light leaves
the room, twist lilacs
into the lacquered hair
piled high like a complicated shrine.
There should be tiny bells
inserted somewhere
in the web of hair
to imitate crickets
singing in a hidden grove.

Reveal the nape of the neck,
your beauty spot.
Hold the arrangement.
If your spine slacks
and you feel faint,
remember the hand-picked flower
set in the front alcove,
which, just this morning,
you so skillfully wired into place.
How poised it is!
Petal and leaf
curving like a fan,
the stem snipped and wedged
into the metal base—
to appear like a spontaneous accident.

Cathy Song, “Ikebana” from Picture Bride. Copyright © 1983 by Cathy Song. Reprinted with the permission of Yale University Press.

Source: Picture Bride (Yale University Press, 1983)

Cathy Song's poetry vividly evokes the flora and fauna of her native Hawaii while meditating on her identity as an Asian woman. (The title poem of Picture Bride (1983) tells the story of her grandmother, brought to the islands from Korea as a “mail-order” spouse; the theme of family relations recurs in her work.) She has also written poems inspired by the artists Georgia O’Keeffe and Kitagawa Utamaro; her fine eye for the telling detail and her own relative invisibility in her poems recall Elizabeth Bishop.