

# Run the Jewels

BAO PHI

*In Los Angeles, 1871, after a police officer was shot and killed, a mob of approximately 500 people descended upon Chinatown and lynched seventeen or eighteen Chinese men and boys, including a respected doctor and apothecarist, Dr. Gene Tong*

The Coronel building is a broke back centipede in Calle de los Negros.  
I stayed here because people seemed to need me,  
my shop so skinny the walls  
embrace all who enter,  
shelves upon shelves  
of traditional and modern medicines stand as armless sentinels.

From its covered sidewalk they drag me.

A woman, her face a basilisk of hate,  
shadows deep in the creases,  
offers a clothesline.

*Hang 'em*, her voice a coarse yarn.

A small boy runs up with a rope in hand,  
says he just wants to help.

Already my people hang like hellish ornaments swinging in and out  
of the glow of gas lights,  
as if their bodies flicker between this world and the next.  
One, two, three, up to seventeen,  
they hang,

from the crossbar of old Tomlinson's,  
 from two upturned wagons,  
 from John Goller's roof,  
 John himself begging them to stop so his children won't see,  
 'til they jab a rifle to silence him.

Across from me, a man dances on a roof,  
 two Chinese hanging to either side of him  
 as if they were jaundiced drapes—  
 he dances a jig,  
 he dances:  
 and this is when I know my life is over.

When they stood on the roof hacking it with axes,  
 then shot their bullets down,  
 I did not quiver, I did not cry.  
 Here in the street, I did beg,  
 in the good English they had once complimented.  
 I offered them the jeweled ring on my finger,  
 the cash in my pockets.  
 A man lifts his gun, puts it in my mouth.

When I was a little boy I ran between thick rafts of tea leaves  
 the mounds fat caterpillars whiskering the sides of my feet,  
 harvesters balancing bowed rods heavy with buckets to either side of their shoulders.  
 The sun seemed like it would never sink,  
 and the earth seemed a part of my feet,  
 even when my mother picked me up and swung me around, and around,  
  
 calling my name, a chirp, again and again,  
 as if it was the music that made her smile dance.

I can barely see his finger on the trigger,  
he pulls down on that scythe.  
I would tell him he needed no gun to quiet my kind,  
that none of this country would ever be for any of us  
but now my teeth are broken jewels  
jagged in the mud of my gums,  
my mouth is blood, my nostrils smoke.  
I look in his eyes with the bullet congealed somewhere in my mouth,  
I am sure this man will live a long happy life  
and die, beloved, and peaceful, in his sleep.  
His smile is a jig on his face.  
My eyes are eclipses now  
as they put the rope around my neck.  
I barely feel when they cut my finger off to pocket my ring.  
My neck is a crooked ramp.  
A wet swath in the red dirt road beneath  
curls away, a bloodied swan's wing.  
The dark rectangle of my door somewhere behind me I can't see,  
but I know it swallows me one last time.  
I am barely there when all that I am is lifted.  
My feet lose touch with the ground.

