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Elaine’s family owned a Chinese restaurant in this dumpy, redneck town thirty minutes away from Ann Arbor— I can’t remember the name—but I’d have starved without it. Elaine hated white men who dated Asian women. She’d see the despised couples on campus— always frat boys with gorgeous Chinese or Japanese women (occasionally Filipino, rarely Thai or Malay). She’d approach them and say, *Do you like Chinese pussy? Is it better? More exotic? Is that what you like about Asian women?* Then she would turn on the women, *You are being exploited. Reject the whites.* It was daring. Uncomfortable. The couples, mortified, but silent as if what she said was true. Elaine was always angry. That’s what I liked about her. At first, she only dated Asian men, and then, only Asian men who had never been with a white woman. A friend of mine was Japanese-American, his girlfriend, white. She hated them. Later, he married a white woman; now they have a baby who is beautiful. I send them holiday cards and postcards when I travel to places like Thailand where I walk the streets and, emboldened by my completed Hep series, eat food from all of the vendors even the one woman who offers to kill and cook a chicken for me. She holds the caned cage with the staring chicken and says, *Cheap, cheap.* I have never been that close to something alive I could eat. I buy vegetable dumplings and pay her more bahts than she asks. This prompts her again to offer the chicken. It is raining. I walk to the international telephone booth, and call my wife. She is angry about work. *They treat me like shit. I’m just another house nigger to them.* We talk, her anger softens to loneliness. I am sick from a cold, tired from jet lag and hours of touring ancient wats. I want to eat chicken but not freshly slaughtered; I want chicken with sweet and sour sauce back in Belleville—that was the name of the town!—
at the China King Express—right off the freeway.
I haven't talked to Elaine in years.
I want her to be angry and fierce and righteous—
things I am no longer,
but she, too, may be feeding on something new.
Author Notes

Julie R. Enszer’s first book of poetry, Handmade Love, was published in 2010 by A Midsummer Night’s Press. Her chapbook, Sisterhood, was published in 2010 by Seven Kitchens Press. She has her MFA from the University of Maryland and currently is enrolled in the PhD program in Women’s Studies at the University of Maryland. Her poetry has previously been published in Iris: A Journal About Women, Room of One’s Own, Long Shot, the Web Del Sol Review, and Jewish Women’s Literary Annual. She is a regular book reviewer for Lambda Book Report and Calyx. You can read more of her work at www.JulieREnszer.com.

About the Work

I didn’t have a U.S. passport until I was thirty-five years old. Then, I decided that instead of just being a broad, I wanted to be a broad abroad. I took my wife to Paris for her fortieth birthday. Now, traveling to other countries is an itch that I must scratch every few years.

I had the good fortune of traveling to Asia two times for work. During the second trip, I tacked on four days in Bangkok. It was magical; I want to go back (though there are many other places I want to see first!) The genesis of “One Explanation” was the time in Bangkok, but as a poem it searched around for a while to find experiences besides the telephone call to give it a larger framework. The opening story about my friend and the confrontations with interracial couples on campus is a story that I’ve repeated often. I think about the story because it reminds me that one of the things I want to write about in my poetry is race and racism, and I want to find ways to do write about race and racism responsibly as a white woman.

Writing about race and racism are themes that I both struggle with and reach for in my writing. I believe that white people in the United States have to talk about race more, be accountable for racism and the systems of privileges that we get by being labeled white, and take accountability for the invisibility of whiteness, for whiteness being an unmarked category. So I have a political motivation in wanting to write about these issues, but a political motivation isn’t enough for poetry. It needs art and craft as well.

Much of the revision work of this poem stems from thinking about how to take on this issue artfully and employ the craft of poetry. For me part of the answer came from the answer of the town name in the final lines of the poem. I struggled with this poem on many levels, though. How do I tell the narrative in a way that it makes sense to readers? How do I compress the poem so that it isn’t overwhelmed by narrative and musicality can emerge? How do I deal with the very strong feelings in the poems about race and racism? The most difficult part of completing this poem was deciding to use “the N word” in it. It’s a word that makes me uncomfortable in every context that I hear it. For this reason, I don’t read this poem aloud when I do readings. I’m uncomfortable saying the word aloud and still have a degree of concern in using it in a poem, but it is authentic to me and so while I hold to the discomfort, I am also trying to reach for emotional intensity in the poem.

Elizabeth Bishop is a favorite poet of mine, though I don’t have her degree of emotional distance and remove in my own work. Still, particularly in a poem like “One Explanation,” I think about Bishop and her poems about travel in developing and revising my own work. I also return to
the work of Adrienne Rich often for how she expresses her political commitments in her work; her continuous commitment to her political consciousness in her writing is inspiring, particularly now when one can read volumes and volumes of her poetic output over the course of her lifetime. Rich’s recent essay “Poetry and Commitment” is always on my mind; I try to emulate her poetic sensibilities. Other poet’s whose work I look to for the attentions of art and craft are Jay Wright, Robert Hayden, C.K. Williams, and Audre Lorde. I know that I may never achieve the transcendence of Bishop, Rich, Wright, Hayden, Williams, and Lorde, but when I read them, I revel in being in their presence, and I want to honor their lives and their work.

Julie R. Enszer on the Web

www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/03/31/julie-r-enszers-archival-instinct/


www.poetserv.org/SRR29/enszer.html

www.junctures.org/issues.php?issue=09&title=Voice&colour=rgb%28176,153,0%29

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