Spring 2010 *Orlando* Short Fiction Prize Winner

Allison Alsup is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area, now living with her husband in New Orleans where they are slowly renovating a one hundred thirty year old cottage. Two years ago, she made a shift from full-time teaching to part-time work so that she could devote more time to her fiction. "Quick and Clever" is a stand alone piece from an emerging work focusing on the early generations of Chinese immigrants. Another short piece from this body of work won the New Millennium Short Short Fiction Award last spring and just recently, a related story following the protagonist's father and grandfather placed second in the H.E. Francis Short Story contest. Allison would like to express profound thanks to a Room of Her Own for this vote of confidence and much needed support.

"Quick and Clever"

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Sing little bluebird

Fly round and round

I am eight and reading out loud to my mother, showing off the English I have learned in school. I am the third or fourth best reader. Soon I will be first. My mother pulls a needle, ties a knot and clips the thread. She is mending. Her basket is full as it is every New Year and fall, when the men return from the fields, from Castroville, Fresno, Stockton. She sews busted collars, broken frog clasps, fabric sliced by wheat stalks, the mean tips of artichokes, the frayed baskets of shrimpers and abalone fishermen. If ever there is a time when she does not work, I do not know it. The lantern on the table gathers us in its yellow circle as I follow each word with my finger.

Tell of the spring

The glad news bring

Come blow your horn.

I have said heart not horn. I repeat the right word. But my mother does notice the mistake. For her, the American words are just sounds, nothing more. Days, she washes and irons in a laundry on the edge of Chinatown, next to the bunk houses that hold the newcomers and the drifters: miners, fishermen, pickers. The laundry is owned by a Sunning County man. Like us, she says. The laundry also takes in American clothes from the big houses on Nob Hill that look down on Chinatown. When she first started working, my mother laughed at the stiff American clothes -- their tight fits in the chest and waist. She shook her head at the wealthy women who dragged the hems of their white dresses over muddy cobblestones. Ah Bao, she said, rich American women are strange, they do not bind their feet; they bind their ribs. But now she does not find such things odd. Their owners sometimes leave coins in the pockets, pennies and nickels that are dropped into a jar and split among the workers. American forgetfulness buys

salty plums and sweet bean cakes, sesame balls and once, a wooden rickshaw that clicked along the sidewalk.

Yet now there are never any coins for sweet things; any money must go to pay for our room, candles, rice and tea. It is easier to forget about wanting treats when I read. I pretend that I am one of the American boys in my book, curly haired with round eyes and a wide white face, a clean sailor suit and a toy boat, a sand pail or sometimes (I do not tell anyone this), I imagine I am one of the girls with the ribboned bonnets who carry dolls or beat toy drums. They are so perfect! Where they live, there are no laundries, no cigar factories, no butchers, no old men pushing carts or sitting on stoops or selling lottery tickets. There are no airless alleys, no muddy streets, no rotten vegetables, no piles of horse manure. There are no men at all. There are only fields and white clouds, seashores and talking squirrels. There are trees for climbing. I do not know where these places are, only that that they are not Chinatown. Sometimes, I tell myself that they are all pictures of Washington, where my father is many miles north of dai fao, that the factory where my father works is just over the forested hill, or that his factory is really just a little house, the one in the distance with the smoking chimney. I tell myself this even though I know it is not true. No Chinese live in my book, not even one.

The rain is over.

Boys and girls want to play.

Jump and run!

My father has not sent a letter or money for months. In his last letter, he wrote that he wears rubber boots and a rubber apron and guts fish with knives as long as swords. He has written that he must be quick and careful; those who are not, lose fingers. In Washington, the rivers run thick with salmon, some as tall as an eight year old boy. He says that Washington is a cold place, much colder than San Francisco. He has seen snow falling onto the river where the salmon swim, he has seen snow so heavy it stills the water. I have not seen snow except in my primer. No one in my class has touched snow and did not know that the curved stool the pretty boy was sitting on was called a sled until our teacher told us. Snow is white, I have seen pictures of it in my book, and made by beautiful women in long lace dresses whose breath is like ice. My mother does not like these pictures in my primer. She says the women look like ghosts who steal little boys and if you touch one, you will get sick and die. I ask her if she has ever seen a ghost. She says of course, they are all over dai fao, this place is full of restless spirits waiting to return to China. She says it is bad luck to read these pages and if she catches me looking at the pictures, she will slap me.

Run with me.

Little bird, fly to the tree.

“Ai-yah,” my mother interrupts. “Come here, I want to show you something.”

I stand next to her chair. Smelling of bitter tea, she sips from a clay cup. She lets the leaves steep for too long. When I complain, she reminds me that black tea helps keep her awake. I hope that there is black tea in Washington and that my father drinks it to keep his fingers from falling asleep.

“You are a good reader now. Read this,” she says, tilting a square of red cotton towards me.

“Bao!” I say, seeing how she has stitched my name across the fabric. I imagine it is one of the few words she can spell. Already, I have told her that I can read more words than she can.

“Why don’t you try to stitch your name below?” she asks.

I tell her that I need to read for school. She tells me that I am already smart enough and puts my primer on the shelf. In a few more years, I will be taller than a salmon, taller than she is and then I will be able to reach anything. When I whine about the book, she says, “To keep it safe. Come and sit on my lap. I will let you use my needles.”

My mother lifts me up, her arms strong from the laundry. She wears loose cotton jackets and trousers, not so very much different from men, her jacket a few inches longer, her pants a wider leg -- clothes made for those who must bend, squat and lift. She holds out her sewing scissors. I have coveted these small blades, their carved handles, each ending in a crane’s wing so that when one cuts, it is as if a bird is flying. I have been slapped for using them to snip paper, but here they are in front of me. She shows me how to thread the needle, to tie a knot. I begin to pull the needle through.

“Careful not to poke your finger,” she says. “Smaller stitches, Bao. Be patient.”

But I am not patient. My stitches are crooked and in my rush, I prick my finger. A drop of blood beads on my skin. I wipe it on my pants. I have not been quick and careful. If I were in Washington, I would have cut off my finger. Suddenly, I am angry.

“I don’t want to sew,” I tell her. I want to go back to reading, to things that I know. Things she doesn’t.

“Try again,” she says.

“No.”

“Ai-yah, hold out your hands,” she orders. When I do not, she softens her voice. “Like this.”

She puts her hand next to mine. Of course, mine are smaller. There is a little, worm- shaped scar at the base of her thumb. Her skin looks like a shirt that has been washed too many times, the tips of her fingers are thick with callouses. From the irons, she says. They are heavy. But they make her arms strong. It is why she can carry me even though I have grown so tall.

“Do you see?” she asks.

At first, I see only that her hands are old, older than her face.

“Look at the shape,” she says. “The fingers.”

She turns her palms face up. The lines are deep like rivers.

“Put up your hands,” she says. She taps my fourth finger and I notice that like her, my fourth finger is shorter than my second. Then I understand -- the long fingers, the narrow palm, the knotted knuckles. My hands are a smaller version of hers. When she pulls back, I see the faint smear of blood from my cut on her skin.

“What my hands do,” she tells me, “your hands will do.”

But I do not want her hands. I tell her I want to slice fish with swords.

She rips out the crooked stitches with her needle. We begin again. That night, I am glad to have a short name, just one character. My stitches are not as small or straight as my mother’s, but she nods and smiles as I dip and pull the needle, copying her work above.

“Now it is sewn twice. Bao, Bao,” she tells me once the thread has been knotted and clipped.

“Double treasure!” I exclaim.

“What a fool,” she says to the window as if a ghost waits ready on the other side of the glass. “A useless boy.” I know she does not really think this and says it only to keep away jealous spirits. Still I do not like to hear it.

“Double treasure,” I whisper.

“Yes,” she says quietly and pulls me close.

I dream that I am a salmon. I swim in cold waters but do not know I am cold. I am a fish! My father’s hand reaches through the water. Do not kill me, I think. But I cannot speak.

In the morning, when I awake, my mother is already at the stove, drinking tea and heating jook. She points to my jacket on the table. “Look inside,” she says.

I slip from my cot and open the front flap of my jacket. She has cut the red fabric into a small, neat square and attached it with black thread so that it cannot be seen from the front. I run my finger over the stitching, hers above and mine below.

“Now, it is a special jacket,” she says. “It belongs to no one else.”

I have a secret and a secret is like a hidden weapon. Now no one at school can say that my jacket is theirs. If they try, I can open the front and reveal them as a liar and a thief.

I point to the shelf. “My book.”

“Another time, Bao,” she says. “Today, you come with me. I want to show everyone at the laundry how well you can sew. We will show them the patch in your jacket and they will be impressed.”

I take her hand. The morning is cool as we walk over the wooden planks, past the butchers shops with their thick, salty smells, past the walls where the men gather to read new handbills, past the vegetables stands and the pharmacy, past those who have no shops but sell from sidewalk tables, past the peddlers pushing carts over the ruts, calling out to fix umbrellas, pipes, clasps. My mother keeps the sleeve of her jacket unrolled to cover our hands. She has brushed and braided my hair, cleaned my ears, scraped my tongue. An American man with a mustache and a brown suit points to me and holds up a camera; my mother waves him away. If Americans ever ask me questions, she tells me, I am to pretend not to speak any English. When I remind her that I am American, born here, she shakes her head. Chinese in America, she says. Different.

Already, I know that some who pass us on the street think she is a servant girl -- an amah or mui tsai, maid to a merchant. I do not mind them thinking this because then they will imagine that I am the son of a rich man, that my father owns a shop and silk jackets. Even with her hair oiled and pinned into a tight knot, some will think she is not married. Married women are nei ren, indoor people, and have servants to fetch for them. But sometimes, my mother forgets to look down at her feet and stares at passerbys. She does not act like a woman ashamed that she must go to work or the market. Men say things to her. I know they speak low and soft so that I will not hear. She does not talk back to them.

As we pass the gate to the school yard, some of the children stop playing. One calls my name and asks where I am going. He is a boy more beautiful than any of the girls, a boy with a hair like feathers. Suddenly, I am proud. He has noticed me now that I have someplace more important to go than school. I turn back to wave, but my mother grips my hand tighter.

“Look where you are going,” she tells me. “Not where you have been.”

The laundry is hot. A long counter runs from one wall to the other. Behind the counter, irons heat on the stove. The other women stare at my mother. A man comes out from the back door and yells. He stops when he sees my mother, then yells again. My mother tells me to wait and follows the man into the back room. No one says anything in the front; they are listening. The owner sounds angry that I have come. He says there is no money to pay someone else. I do not want to be here, I want to be reading outloud for my teacher, but know that if the owner does not let me stay, then it will be worse. His wife stops her ironing to ask me if I speak English. I lie and tell her that I am the best reader in my class. The other women cluck in approval as they push the irons over white handkerchiefs, collars and cuffs, leaving the fabric stiff and shiny with heat.

L.’s son is clever.

L. is lucky to have such a son.

I know the women say these things to cover the sound of my mother’s voice as it carries from the back room. If my mother were listening, she would be angry. Ghosts.

Then my mother and her boss return. My mother says to show him the red patch, the stitches I have sewn. He fingers the patch too much, then asks if I speak English. His wife calls out that I am the best reader in my class as if everyone in Chinatown knows it already. The man nods again. He holds up a stubby finger that is nothing like our fingers but like a ginger root. I am to learn how to fold first, he says. Today is a test. Then he is shouting again.

“Lan!”

A girl appears from the back. I know her and she knows me. She was in my class last year. But it is only her face that I remember. I have already forgotten her name.

My mother tells me that I must be quick and careful like my father. And I am, even though it is so hot. The stove must always be lit to warm the irons, the vats always boiling to loosen soil and sweat from sheets and clothes. I tell myself that if I am careful, my father will be safe, that if I am quick, he will return from Washington with pockets full of coins. Lan shows me how to fold shirts and pants on the counter, how to wrap them in brown paper and to tie the paper with twine. The string is rough and Lan swipes at it with a small blade. I am impressed with her speed but do not tell her so. We do not talk speak as if we know each other. We act as if we are strangers who never sat next to one another in desks.

At lunch, an old man comes by with a wagon. He brings more clothes, each bundled in a sheet. The boss calls the old man dabo, uncle, then points at me. I am to help carry the bundles in, then carry the brown paper packages out to the street, lift them over my head and into the back of the cart. The wagon is for American customers who pay extra to stay out of Chinatown. I am allowed to pet the man’s horse, given two pennies, then he is gone. All day, my mother says that I can have a nickel to spend anyway I want. But the jar is kept in the back room and so I do not get to hear the sound of the coins as they fall. The boss says that if my English is good enough, he will let me talk to the customers and write tickets. I tell myself that Lan cannot write tickets; she is a stupid girl, too stupid to write anything or she would already be at the counter. It is why she has not been sent back to school.

At the end of the day, my mother says that the boss is pleased with my work. I have passed the test. He says that I am quick and clever. He thinks it will bring luck to have such a loyal son in the laundry. I am to

work six days a week and earn six dollars. I think my mother wil be pleased; six dollars is more than spending money. But she waves her fingers at the boss man and says this is too little. Later, he says, when I am older, then I can earn more.

As we walk home. I ask my mother how much Lan earns. She says to stop talking crazy. Lan is the owner's daughter. She earns nothing. For a moment, I feel bad for stupid Lan. I wonder if she misses school, if she still has her primer.

"Here," my mother says and gives me my nickel.

I add it to the two pennies already in my pocket, but I am too tired to want to go to the bakery. My eyes are red from the smell of bleach and lye. It is already dark and I too tired to want to do anything but sleep.

A letter arrives from my father. My mother must pay the fortune teller outside the barbers on Fifteen Cent Street to read it. We stand on the sidewalk while the old man sits on a stool behind his table. He wears a round cap and a jacket that covers his knees. He moves his inkpot and paper to the side, wraps his spectacles around his ears. He lets his hands rest on the red, ink-stained cloth covering the table.

There are no more jobs in Washington, he reads, the factory is closing. My father has heard of a place in Eastern California, a town called Bodie where there is still gold and silver. There are Chinese there. My father says he has been to this place before, not this town, but one like it, with his own father long ago. It is a hard land, a place without trees. It is best that we are not with him. He will send money when he can.

I ask my mother if it will be cold in Bodie.

Yes, she says.

I ask her if Bodie will be as cold as Washington.

Yes. It will be the same.

The man asks if she wants him to predict a jiri, a lucky day, the day her husband will return, perhaps? I tug on her jacket. Yes, I say. Yes.

But she says such predictions are a waste of money, she knows when her husband will return. The fortune teller nods then tells me that I must be a loyal son and take care of my mother until my father comes home. She hands the man a few coins, then puts the letter in the pocket of her jacket. When we get home, I know she will add it to the others she cannot read in her trunk.

I ask when I will go back to school. I think they are now many chapters ahead in the primer. My mother says that for Sunning County boys, work is more important than school, that school will always be there, and that I can always go back when my father returns. My primer disappears from the shelf and I am given a set of needles, my own pair of crane scissors. I learn how to sew buttons and to drink black tea. Soon the boy with the feather hair does not call my name when I pass the schoolyard. I pull from my mother's hand and shout through the fence, but he does not hear me. He has forgotten me just as I forgot Lan. The next day, we do not walk by the schoolyard. My mother says she has grown bored of walking that way.

On Sundays, my mother and I go to the park. Sometimes men smile from the benches and come to speak to my mother. They bring sesame candies, pork buns and balloons from the Jewish man. She tells me that they are lonely men, Sunday uncles with no family of their own in dai fou. There aren't enough children

in Chinatown; they want nothing more than to hold my hand, to watch me play, see me laugh. If they give me money, I am to take it. She tells me how their families back in Sunning County are greedy and do not appreciate how hard these men work. Some of them work in laundries. Like us, she says. Until my father returns, I am to act like the good son these men deserve. I am to call them dabo, uncle. My mother watches us play from the bench. They are not bad men and they give me gifts. I hate them and their loneliness. I watch for my father. When he returns, it will be on a Sunday, on a bright, clear day like today, and I will be the first to see him, to pick out his black jacket and hat, his long thick braid, from all the rest. I ask my mother when my father is coming back.

At the end of the season, she says.

When is the end of the season?

Here, she says, take this nickel. Go to the bakery.

Ai-yah, you are slow today, Lan says.

We are wrapping shirts in brown paper. I am not at the counter; the boss is always there, sitting on his stool. The American customers call him Mr. Sing Lee. He does not tell them that Sing Lee is not his name, only the name of the laundry and means victorious profit.

Sometimes I think that if I go slow and move my hands like pudding, that the boss will not want me to work for him and my mother will have to send me back to school.

My mother yells.

I speed up.

Boys and girls want to play.

Jump and run!

It is Sunday, our day off. I shout out the words to my primer as I speed down the alleys. I tell myself that I will remember everything I have learned. I am a flying salmon. I am the snow! No ghost that can catch me. I will not be stupid like Lan. I will never be an old man who must borrow other people's children.

Run with me.

Little bird, fly to the tree!

When my father comes home and I return to school, I will have practiced so much that I will be the best reader. Then the others will be sorry that they have forgotten me, someone so quick and clever.