

Dear Poets,

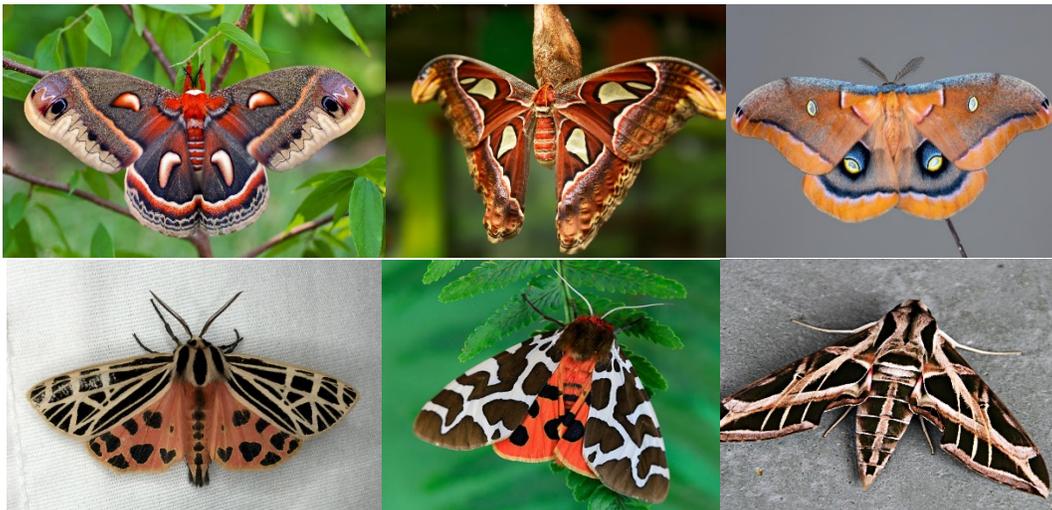
Today's teaching takeaway examines Shelley Wong's "Exit Strategist" from her full-length debut, *As She Appears*, winner of the 2019 YesYes Books Pamet River Prize. To preserve formatting, we have included the poem, and a closer look at its sonic qualities, as a separate document. We are excited to feature this work on the heels of the collection's release. Congratulations, Shelley.

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How It's Put Together

The work begins in synesthetic conflict ("A quarrel in white"), which is intriguing since synesthesia relies on sensory disagreement as part of the experience. The women dwell confusedly "in noir low light," their coverings associated with nature, wine, and radiance. I appreciate Wong's contrast between solemnity—the trio of veils—and frivolity ("for kicks"). This strategy accomplishes that chameleonest of craft moves: changing a poem's tone in the space of two words. Thereafter, pine trees herald the observational You, which raises the question, How do writers best differentiate between You-witness and eyewitness?

"The dirty perfume we trample" is a mixture of collusion and where can I get that fragrance!? *Trample* crowns the image as one of the best footfall scenarios I have read. Next, we enter the section of sword and arrows, objects that, like perfume, make bodily contact. Less than halfway through the piece, our narrator twice declares victory followed by commands ("Don't touch the trees // don't clap three times. All the pretty moths // represent"). I link "pretty moths" with the veils, given such pattern as



The wingspans increase ("One bird, one way out"), value residing in exit knowledge. "Is this a game?" allows us to discuss construction. Spacing and lineation of Wong's columns (left justified; right justified; the center as open as a pinball meridian) provide multiple escapes, thereby negating the earlier monobird. *Broken bridge* easily applies to each of the alternating twenty-six lines whose

separation breathes on a page where words resemble lungs. If the aesthetic is game chasms, “Exit Strategist” wins.

Bridge also puts us in a nautical mindset suited to “the good book of knots” while the simile that likens a passing woman to “a long apple peel” revitalizes fruit’s possibilities. Think about that the next time you gift a kiwi to a stanza. The You disembarks in favor of *she* and *he*, inventor *I* claiming responsibility for “These arts” whose persuasion is airtight. “A bowl full of fish” takes us to the maritime finish line; “I walk the plank” crosses it. White space is our ship’s mast.

Prompt

“Exit Strategist” is constructed with an ocular/olfactory outlook, those without a departure itinerary “writhing in place.” Write a poem about the lives of secret passages that incorporates Wong’s blueprints (columns, trinities, distance). Include synesthesia and a tonal shift achieved in three words or less. Give us a footfall scenario that makes trampled perfume tip its haute hat.

Happy Poeming,

Jon

