

Mary Soon Lee

Words

A couple passes on the street
tossing remarks to each other
as if words were merely puffs of air,
but FAT is a rock punching my stomach.

I can't walk on. I stand helpless
while a gang of school boys rushes at me,
the leader's GOOK detonating in my ear,
an echo of the bombs my father
hurled each night at my ma:
SLUT, DRUNK, STUPID, BITCH.

I am late for my shift at the restaurant,
expecting trouble, but the manager
just says "You O.K.?"
wrapping the three short syllables
around me like a blanket
given to an old dog.

I take his gift back to the kitchen,
where I roll out pale damp sheets
of dough, and pretend I am filling
each dumpling with one of my mother's
Chinese words: *JIAOZI*, *YU*, *ZONGZI*,
whispered to me sweet as spring honey
as she folded her hands over mine,
teaching me how to cook.

