

The Ninjas **by Jane Yeh**



'*Marabou* is fresh and surprising. If only all first books were this unusual' wrote the *Independent on Sunday* about Jane Yeh's first collection. [*The Ninjas*](#) went on to expand upon the themes established in her debut – Yeh dances between high art and pop culture, cutting lyrical beauty with a dark wit and the occasional slapstick pratfall ('Getting pelted with elaborate hairballs in the kisser' as 'Scenes from *My Life as Sherlock Holmes*' has it). An American writer based in London, her journalistic reviews cover as wide a range as her poems, she eyes the spectrum from sport to fashion.

Manet's Olympia

The orchid in her hair won't fold or furl.
The string at her neck is tied in a knot for safekeeping.
The stack of pillows she leans on is a towering pouffe, stiff

As a meringue; it means liberties won't be taken.
(Her maid hears everything there is to hear
From the other room, which isn't often.) The bouquet

Stays in paper, the silk-fringed shawl lies untouched
On the back of the chaise, the bedlinen keeps its disarray.
Her eyebrows frame a question that hasn't been asked. In her face,

Discontent and patience. The rest of the morning dangles
Like the opaline drop on her cuff – fire clouded over.
When will anything happen? The waiting

Goes on like a vat of amber being poured
Out slowly, coating them. The clock chimes faintly
From the other room. The cat in the corner rises

To the occasion – it hears something coming.
The maid thinks of cream cakes and breaking the rules.
Her voluminous apron conceals a multitude of plots,

None of them hers. She'll replay them later.
Her eyes betray nothing of her nascent rebellion.
Her hands shape quenelles into uniform spheres.

She doesn't want to sit in state like a pope, or simper in parlours.
Her attention to detail is wasted on mending.
She'd like to seize the day, but the day won't let her.

On Sorrow

This is as much space as I can spare to look at ferrets. My friend's ferret used to burrow into the red velvet cushions of her sofa, worm its way under the seats and into unretrievable nooks. Ferrets are mustelids, meaning their nearest relations are weasels and stoats. Take care! A pile of laundry might be hiding a napping ferret. My friend's ferret liked to crawl up the bootcut legs of her jeans while she was wearing them. Ferrets are crepuscular, which means they're most active at dusk and dawn. Some are adept at stealing small objects such as socks and unused tampons. My friend's ferret made a clucking noise whenever it was happy, like a sweet fur-covered baby. It would do a frantic hopping routine out of sheer excitement if you threw it a handful of toy balls (this is commonly known as the ferret war dance). One day her ferret just disappeared. It must've tunnelled through a gap in the ash skirting boards of the study and landed in unknown territory. I like to think it found its way outside and survived, but equally it might be rotting in the wall. Sometimes a ferret is just a ferret, but my friend said it was as bad as losing a child. Ever since then we haven't seen each other much. The truth is most people can afford to lose something they love. (My friend, for instance, still had her partner, and later a baby and dog.) Ferrets have a distinctive musky scent that some people find off-putting. The collective term for a group of them is a business of ferrets. Whenever I think of my friend's ferret, I remember its bright beady eyes.

The Lilies

The lilies whisper but no one is listening.
Their heads are filled with pollen and boredom.
In the gaps between them, something might happen
(But it doesn't). Their mouths are filled with sugar and organs.

In the parlour they crowd out the normal flowers
With their fussy ways and *pudeur*. It's a hollow victory.
They lean against the wall like spinsters on crutches.
They think about wishbones and what happened yesterday (nothing).

The lilies are throwing a party for themselves.
Their eyes light up at the thought of company.
There will be a finger buffet, with cocktail sticks for the squeamish.
Their stems will be filled with pity and vodka.

Later there will be parts falling off. The freakish lilies
Sulk and droop in their vases like limp spaghetti.
They don't expect much, but they're still disappointed.
The water they drink tastes sour like it.

Discussion Ideas

- Manet's *Olympia* - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympia_\(Manet\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympia_(Manet)). Would this poem be better called 'Yeh's *Olympia*' – or even 'Yeh's Maid'? Who is looking at whom in the painting? And in the poem? What are we being shown? What are we seeing?
- Manet's painting caused outrage because of its brazen depiction a prostitute. Is there any trace of that outrage in this poem?
- Read 'On Sorrow' aloud to your group, but don't say the title – ask them to give the poem a title. How close does anyone come to the actual title? 'This is as much space as I can spare / to look at ferrets' she says, then goes on to fill more than a page, repeating the word 'ferret' 14 times. Is she protesting too much? If the poem is not actually looking at ferrets, what's it looking at?
- Find any magazine with a 'who's been to what party' photospread. Which people are like The Lilies, and why?
- Do you know The Furniture Game? It's a way of describing people – if this person were a piece of furniture, she would be a [chaise longue eg], if this person were a musical instrument, he would be a [kettle drum eg] and so on, the categories are endless. Play a round of The Furniture game, concentrating on flowers. What characteristics make someone like a rose or a sunflower, for example? What characteristics make someone like a lily?

Jane Yeh was born in America and educated at Harvard University. Her chapbook, *Teen Spies*, was published in 2003 by Metre Editions. Her first full-length collection, *Marabou*, was published by Carcanet in 2005 and shortlisted for the Whitbread, Forward, and Aldeburgh Festival poetry prizes. Her second collection, *The Ninjas*, was published by Carcanet in 2012. She has been the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. She lives in London and lectures in Creative Writing at Kingston University.

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Other books by Jane Yeh

- [*Marabou*](#) (Carcenet, 2005)

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