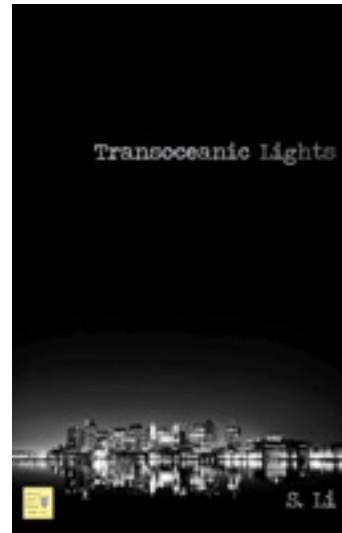


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**Transoceanic Lights by Sui Li,
Harvard Square Editions, New York, 2015**

Review By Luke Salisbury

Transoceanic Lights is a first novel about a Chinese immigrant family's first four years in America, but labels do not adequately describe the high quality of writing, subtlety of construction, or fresh look at the subject. The story is largely told by the oldest son, who was five at the time of arrival, and sometimes in his mother's voice. The child is enormously intelligent, and his narration is seasoned by comments from years after the action, but these, rather than intruding, or lessening the story, broaden and deepen it.



The novel opens: "The clouds below drifted in the wind and swelled into rain-laden anvils the size of mountains before dispersing into wisps of cobweb."

Much of the tale is contained and foreshadowed in that opening sentence. This is late twentieth century immigration. The family is on a jetliner. One world can be left for another in a matter of hours, and the transoceanic lights—the dreams, hopes, illusions that pull and uproot the family (The word will only be used once in the text and beautifully: in the last line)—are literally and figuratively, in the clouds. The reality awaiting them will indeed be "rain-laden" and the crushing reality of immigrant labor will be an "anvil."

A sense of "dispersing" pervades the novel. The essence of this story is change. The first day of school will become third grade and fifth grade. The difficult marriage between the narrator's parents will get worse. Work will not get easier. Work will always be work. The horrid relatives—and there is doozy of an aunt and a hilarious awful cut-up cousin—remain horrid, but time is moving. America does not stand still, no matter how difficult life is. Everyone is in transition—on the move—toward the transoceanic lights. This seamless novel beautifully shows the passage of time, mixing familiar worlds of childhood and the very trying world of immigrant adults.

The author, like his main character, was born in China and came to America at an early age. He himself is "transoceanic." Chinese? American? Chinese-American? His child narrator is a fascinating mixture of all three—as newcomers to America have always been, as we amalgamate, cling, and change, into that shape-shifting phenomenon we happily call an American. "Cobweb" strikes me as especially, Asian. Think of the Cobweb Forest in Kurosawa's great *Macbeth* adaptation, *Throne of Blood*, where Washizu and Miki are lost in the violent, stormy Cobweb Forest, inhabited by demons and the Witch who makes the fatal prophecy. One feels another sensibility in this novel. It's exact and appropriate.

The word is used again: "The clarity of those days is long gone. All the memories have vanished, replaced by figments, cobwebs, and ghosts."

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This is more than a story of immigrant hardship; it is a story of and about memory. Ma, the mother, remembers China and her loving father, who can not help her now, not with work, or mean treatment by her husband's family. Ma remembers China but "all the strands that wove the fabric of those memories together belonged to a time never again to become present."

The writing is remarkable for its lack of self-pity. Coming to America means work in an older brother's fast-food Chinese-American restaurant for Ba, the father; in restaurants for Ma, where she labors equally hard, but doesn't have the security of family. Ba returns at night "to collapse from merciless exhaustion and wake up the next morning to resume the perpetual cycle." That cycle includes nightly arguments over money, which he hides from Ma. Ma says of working in America: "...it's all backwards, if I work hard someone thinks I'm a threat and tries to get me fired, if I slack off, out the door I go, and if I work just right, then it all depends on the whim of the boss."

It's not that the characters don't complain. They do nothing but complain, and have reason to, but the novel doesn't complain. The novel moves from one grade to the next for the narrator (A terrific evocation of childhood with its fears, bullies, accidents, friendships and lost friendships), the years of hard work for the parents, the birth of another child (A powerful scene. The author is a doctor and the reader is the beneficiary), and finally Ma's return to China to visit her dying father, which is terrific. The depiction of the Chinese hospital is amazing. The reader may recall the phrase 'don't get sick in another country.' *Transoceanic Lights* does not ask for pity or resort to nostalgia. This is life where no one has the option of quitting. It's not the America I know.

The heart of the book is the ferocious love Ma has for her children. She will work any job, call home any number of times a day when the narrator takes care of his sister, put up with a man she can not stand, not move back to China—for the sake of her children. Education is everything. The narrator can no more not be the best in school than Ba or Ma can quit their jobs. Ma is literally sacrificing her life and happiness for her children. Her son is her ticket to a better life and he's known that since he was five years old.

Transoceanic Lights is very well written. The style is fluent. It surprises, in the way a reader likes to be surprised, takes chances, and fits the story the way a seasoned novelist suits the word to the action. Ma's angry phone calls to China become repetitive, but they are, of course, conversation, and conversation can be repetitive, especially if you hate someone, as Ma comes to hate Ba. The shifting points of view move the story effectively. Several times I was confused, but rereading solved the problem. The use of detail wonderful. Whether it be the nuanced smells of Asian food, a new city, the family's American apartment which has "an odor... occupying the corridor like a poltergeist," the filthy city streets of an American Chinatown (The city is never named), or massive litter by the Pearl River, the sense of place is marvelous. This is a fine novel.

I doubt there will be many better published this year. Let me be the first to welcome a serious new talent to the room.