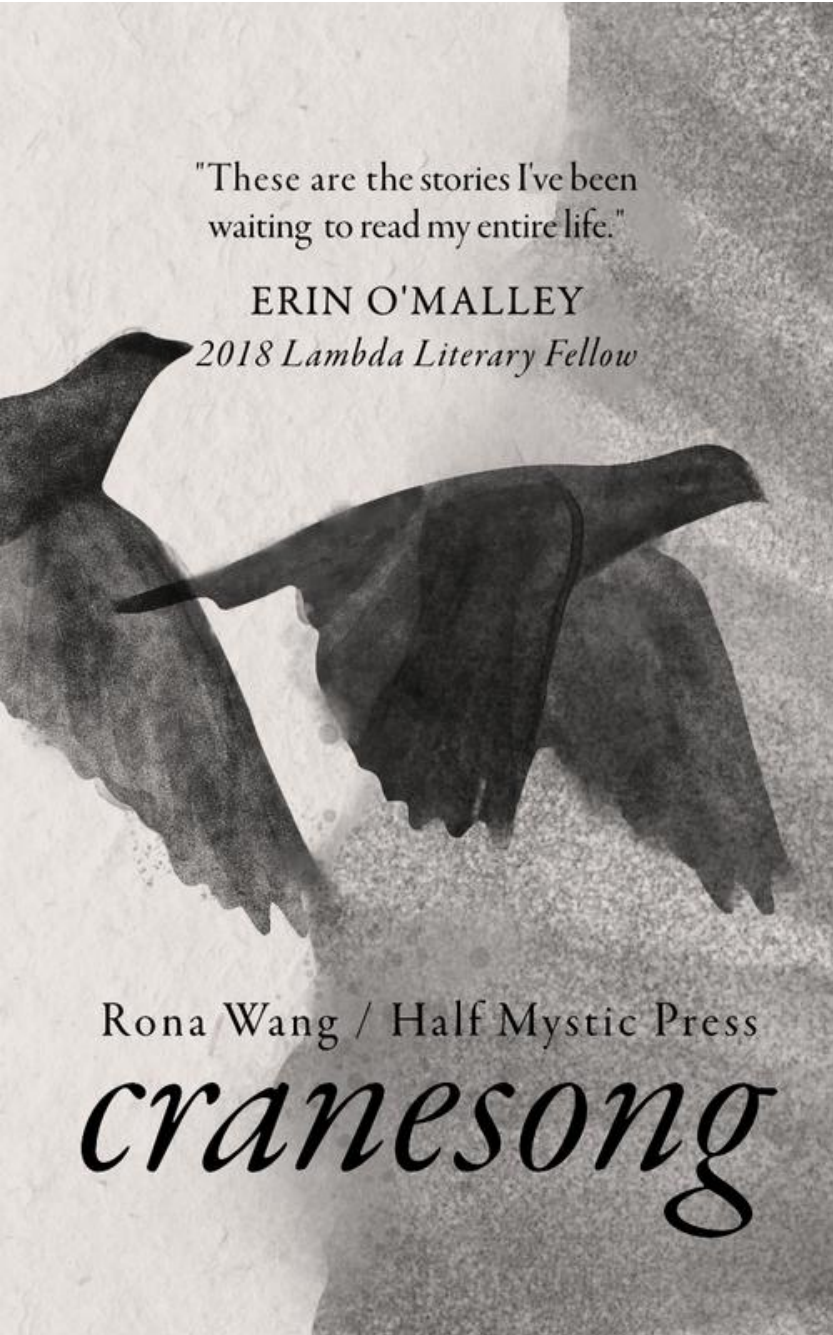


# Rona Wang's debut story collection sings

Empathizing with the lyrical, moving images of queer and  
Asian identity in 'Cranesong'

Ivy Li

Feb. 7, 2019



"These are the stories I've been  
waiting to read my entire life."

ERIN O'MALLEY  
*2018 Lambda Literary Fellow*

Rona Wang / Half Mystic Press  
*cranesong*

Rona Wang '21 wrote 'Cranesong,' her debut short story collection published by Half  
Mystic Press.

Courtesy of Half Mystic Press

*Cranesong*

By Rona Wang

Half Mystic Press

Feb. 13, 2019

What will first strike you about Rona Wang '21's *Cranesong* is how she manages to combine the horrific with the fantastical: "Afterwards, I kept thinking of feathers unfurling from her eye sockets. Her painted lips puckering and pulling into a beak. A mesh of honey-blond corkscrew curls, ripping out by the roots. Her French manicure calcifying, claw-like. An eternal scream of horror caught in her throat, languageless."

This excerpt from the story "The Evolution of Wings" feels like a dream: the story is about one girl who finds that all the children around her are transforming into birds. In Wang's deft writing, the other stories read like dreams but are grounded in the real. Her writing sits in that comfortable tightrope between poetry and prose; it is neither purple prose nor dry economical retellings but it manages to combine the mesmerizing, horrifying, and heartfelt in swift, deft motions.

The modern stories, despite their images in a stream of pop culture and American teenagedom — referencing K-pop, YouTube stars, American high school — are still firmly rooted in history, in race, in identity. The tenuous connection among the stories is that their characters are aware (either consciously or otherwise) of being "the other." For that girl, watching the people around her literally taking off and leaving her behind is a metaphor: that uncomfortable feeling of watching everyone else grow up except you.

Wang has been working on this story collection throughout the course of her time at MIT. "I think most of the stories I wrote in 2017 or 2018," said Wang in an interview with *The Tech*. "And most of them I wrote for class because I was in a fiction writing class at MIT, or I wrote [while] doing this workshop with a literary magazine, or I wrote it for myself for fun."

The collection is bookended by "Style" and "Dissonance," two portrayals of queer girls molded by an Asian American experience. "Style" treats female sexuality with refreshing honesty but a sympathetic touch. (The killer quote: "Tinder was a cesspool of sex bots and greasy, Mountain-Dew-chugging dudes living in their mothers' basements.") The protagonist in "Style," the rebellious and all-too-relatable Kitty, is given the freedom to fangirl and love and lust and grieve for Janie in different moments without missing a beat. In "Dissonance," Natalie's softer crush on Vera, the new girl who steals the spotlight in youth orchestra, is a mixture of both jealousy and admiration and equally honest as a portrayal of girlhood.

Accompanying these two stories exploring the modern Chinese experience are other stories that tackle discrimination, most notably "Liv, Liv, Lipstick Liar" and "The Art of Acceptance." It's always been relevant: the problem of looking different, of sounding different, of feeling or experiencing the world differently. Wang takes us into Liv's mind in "Liv, Liv, Lipstick Liar" as she oscillates between reluctance to misbehave and the desire to belong in a modern high school ("...Mama always said not to talk bad

about teachers, that education is all we FOBs have in this country...”). In “The Art of Acceptance” (the Isabelle de Courtivron Prize winner in 2018), Wang writes from the perspective of a Chinese girl living in New York’s Chinatown during WWII where anti-Japanese sentiment runs rampant in the streets and Chinese people must wear their I AM CHINESE pins to protect themselves. Its foreboding first words tell us what is to come: “Before the white boys found him, Jin-John Tsao was going to go to Harvard.”

“[As a child] I didn’t know that Asian Americans or people who looked like me could be heroes of the story,” says Wang. “That was something that was really important to me, to write stories in which Chinese people or Chinese American people could be the heroes of their own stories.” The stories in the collection are varied experiences because the experience of being Asian in America is not uniform, but the empathy with which Wang writes and the stories told contain universal truths.

*Cranesong* is a beautiful debut story collection, stringing together characters exploring their identities: what does it mean to be an artist, to be female, to be Asian, to be Asian American, to be queer? Many of the stories are less about this assuredness of one’s culture and more of one’s search for what it means to be torn between cultures and histories. As Wang explains, “I feel like in writing and in poetry and in painting, all of these are ways of us trying to understand who we are and translate our mind into something others can understand. There’s always this chasm where it’s never truly possible and I wanted to communicate that through a story.”

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Full interview to come next week. Pre-order *Cranesong* on Half Mystic’s website.

*Editor’s note: Rona Wang ’21 has written for The Tech but was not involved in creating this review except for being interviewed as the novelist.*

## The Ted K Archive

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