When I Was Growing Up
Nellie Wong

I know now that once I longed to be white.
How? you ask.
Let me tell you the ways.

when I was growing up, people told me
I was dark and I believed my own darkness
in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision
when I was growing up, my sisters
with fair skin got praised
for their beauty, and in the dark
I fell further, crushed between high walls

when I was growing up, I read magazines
and saw movies, blonde movie stars, white skin,
sensuous lips—and to be elevated, to become
a woman, a desirable woman, I began to wear
imaginary pale skin

when I was growing up, I was proud
of my English, my grammar, my spelling
fitting into the group of smart children
smart Chinese children, fitting in,
belonging, getting in line

when I was growing up and went to high school,
I discovered the rich white girls, a few yellow girls,
their imported cotton dresses, their cashmere sweaters,
their curly hair and I thought that I too should have
what these lucky girls had

when I was growing up, I hungered
for American food, American styles,
coded: white and even to me, a child
born of Chinese parents, being Chinese
was feeling foreign, was limiting,
was unAmerican.
when I was growing up and a white man wanted to take me out, I thought I was special, an exotic gardenia, anxious to fit the stereotype of an oriental chick.

when I was growing up, I felt ashamed of some yellow men, their small bones, their frail bodies, their spitting on the streets, their coughing, their lying in sunless rooms, shooting themselves in the arms.

when I was growing up, people would ask if I were Filipino, Polynesian, Portuguese. They named all colors except white, the shell of my soul, but not my dark, rough skin.

when I was growing up, I felt dirty. I thought that god made white people clean and no matter how much I bathed, I could not change. I could not shed my skin in the gray water.

when I was growing up, I swore I would run away to purple mountains, houses by the sea with nothing over my head, with space to breathe, uncongested with yellow people in an area called Chinatown, in an area I later learned was a ghetto, one of many hearts of Asian America.

I know now that once I longed to be white. How many more ways? you ask. Haven't I told you enough?