Seattle City Council

Public Safety, Civil Rights, and Arts Committee Meeting
Tuesday, 2 P.M., August 2nd, 2005

Words' Worth
The Poetry Program of the Seattle City Council

Curated by **Anna Maria Hong**

Today's poet is **Alan Chong Lau.**

Alan Chong Lau's book "Songs for Jadina (Greenfield Review Press, 1980) recieved the American Book Award from The Before Columbus Foundation. His most recent book entitled "Blues and Greens – A Produce Worker's Journal" was published by the University of Hawai'i Press and UCLA Asian American Studies and is memoir of his days working in a produce department in the International District/Chinatown neighborhood. Lau is the arts editor for the International Examiner, a Seattle-based Asian American community newspaper and coordinator of pacific reader, a north american book review supplement that covers books by and about Asian Americans and new books on Asia.

The Sprout Woman
by Alan Chong Lau

The woman who delivers bean sprouts works hard. Plastic bags of fragile
water trapped in all these crunchy seeds of mung and soy.

The Koreans take the soy sprouts and add red pepper to fleck it with heat.
The Japanese blanch the bean sprouts quickly and toss in a suribachi of
toasted sesame seeds that always get caught between the teeth. And they
never forget the shoyu. The Vietnamese sprinkle them raw over steaming bowls
of pho tinged with the breath of red basil, wedges of lime and slivers of
peppery heat. The Chinese use them both in stir-fry and soup.

Everyday this woman is on the phone to take your order. Brushes back the
hair that mats on her forehead in a steam-filled warehouse out in the
Rainier Valley.

When I pick up the phone, I can hear her shout out instructions in Chinese
to her crew as the roar of traffic and the splash of water crackles in the
background - "Oh Alan, this is bean sprout!"

As she delivers her tender cargo in a beat-up tan van scraped with rusty

scars, you'll see mounds of sprouts in bags stacked neatly in banana boxes that criss cross on top of one another.

Sometimes she's frustrated: "I work to pay for their education but now the big one says she don't want to go to school anymore. What can I do?"

The smallest one with a mop of black hair cropped in bangs yells out "Hello watermelon head!" as her sturdy brown hand holds out an invoice pad specked with water. As she leaves, I reply "Bye little bean sprout!" Someday she will wear red lipstick, march in the Chinese girls drill team and I won't recognize her.

Other times the bean sprout woman will notice the crisp dark green stalks of gai lan as she goes out the door wheeling a hand truck. Comes back to pick out a bunch with chubby fingers for her family's supper.

One morning, I ask her how she got married. She tells me with a smile, "I waited a few years after his proposal thinking it over. One night at Tai Tung's I just decided to go with the fortune. 'The person sitting across from you will be your future partner.'"

Finding The Hair Of A Mexican Woman In This Box Of Sugar Peas -
by Alan Chong Lau

I put the lemon grass out
stripping the dried stems
off each stalk

With ear tear
a lemony mist
scents the air around us

As we work, Ahn tells me
in his country
lemon grass grows in the backyard
a natural fence to
keep snakes away

I find your long hair curled around the stem
of a sugar pea
as I pour out
their flat green bodies
in a pile

I wish I could

twist these stems
of lemon grass
into a fragrant skirt
for you to wear
and keep the slither
of snakes from rustling
around your sturdy ankles
as you pluck each pod
off vine after vine after vine

Bunching Gai Lan-
by Alan Chong Lau

Cutting across
dark green leaves
in a zigzag of hunger
I see the worm
has left his signature

In Front Of The Bank-
by Alan Chong Lau

This woman stands in front
of the bank crying

On the corner
a man draws wings
for an angel
on a cardboard box

The broken thumb
of Spring
does a clumsy skip
around the block

- end -

All poems taken from "Blus And Greens - A Produce Worker's Journal" by Alan
Chong Lau on the University of Hawai'i Press