

Mother Tongue

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Her Childhood

Chinese elastic and hopscotch are popular games among schoolgirls. The city of Shanghai is struggling to keep up with its growing population. It is the early years of the Maoist Era and opposition against the proletarian socialist revolution is discouraged. People breathe with caution. In a window of opportunity before the borders are closed, my grandmother takes three of her daughters, including my mother, across the waters to Taiwan, leaving behind one daughter who will never forget. Take your bitterness to the grave, Sister Three. My mother attends a girls' school where she sweeps the floor and listens to a teacher's hatred against the Japanese (see *Nanjing Massacre*). They eat rice porridge every day, and once, my mother accidentally gives a bad pork bun to a dog on the street, which will cause it to have severe diarrhea.

In Sight

My mother had a life before Me. My mother has a life more than Me. I am not my mother's life.

Longings of Daughter

My mother tells me she is depressed. I peer into my bowl of noodle soup because it will never tell me anything like that. In the stillness of my room, unchanged by my year away at college, I look through stale, yellowed photo albums, aged by the tick-tock of the clock in the hall. I look through them, flip through them, back and forth, over and over, searching for something I do not understand, searching for her life, for the meaning behind her eyes because I don't know and it makes me nervous, searching also, maybe, for me, in her.

Come closer and feel the pulse of my thoughts.

A nobody once screamed at my mother in the dim bathroom of a Chinese restaurant, accused her of failing as a parent, disrespected her with lies, and my mother stood immobile and pathetic in the corner she had not constructed but nevertheless embraced. This picture of her, it is like the time I saw my father shoving my mother against the wall and yelling at her as she only winced and turned her head toward me--a memory I rarely recall, and when I do, it is sudden, unwanted, details morbidly examined in my mind, then pushed, pushed into blackness because it makes me uncomfortable. Or the time I said "fuck you" to her and instead of being slapped, I collided with her watery, red eyes. The time they wouldn't serve these almond-shaped eyes at Dunkin' Donuts and she kept repeating over and over in the car to my sister and me, *sorry, sorry, sorry* as she stared straight ahead, gripping the steering wheel, blinking wildly. The sales clerk that speaks to her slowly, dripping with condescension, as if she is stupid because she cannot speak English plainly, her flustered fragmented attempts to express until I intercede impatiently as a child of nine, and my mother retreats with humiliation as she clutches the bags to her chest. It is a humiliation that only a daughter, and only in retrospect, can perceive. I hate the nobody, my father, myself, the waitress, and the sales clerk with a peculiar hatred so intense and overflowing with the deep, shaking breaths that only memories of my mother can invoke.

There is a silence in the photos, a colorless silence, and it strangles my mother unknown to me.

Nanjing Massacre

Teacher \l_o sh_\ : Japan people are evil people. They killed your parents, your grandparents. They only know how to kill and torture. They are monstrous people. They see Chinese people as mere animals and have contests of who can kill the most.

Student \xúe sh_ng\ : But our parents eat their food and speak their language?

Teacher \l_o sh_\ : I have no tolerance for people of Taiwan who embrace Japanese culture. It is simply embracing enemy. Chinese people who think Japan was god and savior are imbeciles.

Thirty years later, a mother educates her daughter in their U.S. suburban home while cooking:

Mother \m_ mã\ : I do not hate Japanese people. But I hate their leaders and what they did. To this day, they still do not say it ever happened.

Father \bà bǎ\ : You should not teach your daughter to hate.

Mother \m_ mã\ : (Ignores him). Before the Japanese were in Nanjing, they were in Shanghai.

Emigration/Immigration

Emigration from Taiwan and immigration to the United States: the distance she travels across the ocean is the distance between her life and mine (see *Her Childhood, Knock Knock, Eight*).

From an old home to a new country, in order to attend college. My father will write papers for her so she can graduate, as she still does not understand English grammar.

Solid Colors

Told me to eat my vitamins and drink ginger tea. Dressed me in a red velvet dress, white stockings, and gray Velcro sneakers for my preschool recital. Fed me butter cookies from the blue tin container until I threw up at ballet class. Seemed taller when I was a child, wore jeans and a purple coat, made egg dumpling every Sunday morning, a tradition I recall wistfully. Scared me by washing my hands industriously with soap when I picked the wild mushroom in our backyard and displayed it to her gloriously, expecting her to share in my delight. Brought me a miniature porcelain pig with my name painted proudly on it back from her trip to Chicago, where her father was sick and her sisters gathered.

Has endured living in a place where there were no women who spoke her language or knew her customs, who wondered why she wore a gold peanut around her neck and traveled forty-five minutes just to buy groceries at the little chinatown. Listened to Chinese opera, the furious clangs and piercing voices drawn out like thick smoke that swirled from its source and dissipated into thin gray wisps, listened to it as she scrubbed the sun-lit tile floor or kneaded dough on the counter with a fragile streak of white flour swept across her forehead. The dress that she triumphantly pulled out of the box for my first real dance because she thought it was what I had described; I thought it was ugly, yet I still wore it. The awkward notes she left on the kitchen table for me when she left early in the morning, the way she tried to braid my hair. The smell of soap and spices in her clothes, the strange softness of her arm, softer than any kind of cool silk I have touched, the clinking of dishes as her hands stayed in pink gloves to protect the cracking dryness of her fingers, the way she followed her exercise routine with all of her best jewelry on, dangling and jingling, gold and green, the way she snuck chocolate bear-shaped biscuits from the pantry into her pocket even though she is diabetic.

I remember these things. I breathe it in and hold my breath, savoring the taste in my mouth. And it is like smelling jasmine petals after the rain, like beauty held in the reflection in the mirror of your eye.

Knock, Knock

Her best friendship, she says, is with a Caucasian lady from Canada because she can talk to her. My mother's English is very limited. *The open door of your secret thoughts* is the difference between communication and talking. It bothers me that her best friend is not a Mandarin-communicating Asian. I wonder if it bothers my mother that I am so American.

There are three dialects of Chinese that my mother speaks fluently. But she cannot grasp the English language. Phonetically, "th" and certain "r" and "l" sounds are especially difficult for her, as they do not occur in Chinese language; likewise, "he/she" is interchanged and verb tenses, singular versus plural verbs are all often confused. English is the language I speak with the most ease.

When I am sixteen, I once get angry at her for not getting angry when I inform her that "Auntie" Sarianne told her son not to like me so much since there is nothing special about me at all. She makes no response when I tell her, does not even bother to turn around, only continues to wipe the kitchen table intently. I watch her. I wait. I persist. A tone of indignation: I am your daughter, you should be furious with them for offending me. My mother turns around and there is a lifetime of story obscured behind her eyes. *She is my friend, too, what do you want me to do? Not just about you, how do you think it makes me feel that my friends would insult my daughter?*

Bite my lip and take me back upstairs to my room. We don't speak the same language and I have never been able to learn hers.

Opening Windows

She calls my father "Daddy" and sometimes "Honey": *Honey-ah, your tummy can hold our bowl of popcorn like a table*, and she and I will both laugh. And strangely comforting, her potty humor, a trait she has imparted to all of her children. These orange moments are clear against a hazy ambiguity, and her voice is not so far away.

What is this word, I point to the Chinese newspaper on the table, *what does it mean? What is the picture behind it? Where did you go, what did you buy at the mall today?* She can say anything; it is asking her questions and listening to her talk, soaking the sound of her voice as I lean against her warmth. It is opening the window and shouting when there is no other way to reach across the distance.

Eight

I am my father's favorite child. My brother is my mother's favorite child. Who's favorite child is my sister? I am not aware of my mother's great love for her son.

Although I don't remember, my father tells me I used to say to my mother, *Why can't you be more fun like Daddy?*

She makes my lunch (not always good), buys snacks and milk (not always the right kind), does the laundry (sometimes it shrinks), cleans the house (sometimes throws away what she should not). She talks only with my father (sometimes I listen).

I see her, but I don't know this figure that is mother. It is the difference between seeing and perceiving.

If I want affirmation and security, I look to the male counterpart. My mother is weak, my mother is clumsy. I am eight years old as I climb into my parent's bed with a pencil and my math homework. It feels yellow--perhaps the bedside lamps are lit. They are reading, their backs propped against pillows aligned with the wooden headboard, the flowery green comforter wrapped around their legs. I ask my father to help me, and he tells me to ask my mother. I look over at my mother who is reading some Chinese book. Backwards. *Mommy doesn't know how to do math*, I whisper to my dad. My dad looks amused. *Ah? Your mother's math is ten times better than mine, she tutored me in college*. My mother looks up from her book at me. Smiling uncertainly, I digest this surprising information and hand her the math sheet. And she instructs me.

Longings of Daughter (part ii)

My mother tells me she is depressed, and my eyes, hands, voice do not know how to react (see *Longings of Daughter*). She is my mother, and when I want to feel close to her, I sit at the counter and watch her cook, or we lie in front of the television watching Taiwanese soap operas. Once, I asked her to tell me about her childhood and life before coming to America, and she told me in thirty seconds or less the story of her feeding a pork bun to the poor dog. I asked if there was anything else, and she said no. No, this moment here now of nakedness and proclamation of depression is not familiar. I don't remember the look on her face because I was preoccupied with my bowl of soup. I give to you the veneer of the noodles (rectangular, unusually wide, opaque), the swirl of red sauce (alarming, out of place), and the presence of wet, deflated greens. She is my Beginning. This moment is overexposed and will appear white--too much light. After a brief stunned moment, I run seamlessly through a series of reactions: (1) Treat her like a friend with tea and sympathy. This feels odd. (2) Take her arm and lean my head on her shoulder as if I was the one who had said it. Not quite right. (3) Look around awkwardly, and pretending she hasn't said anything, say something about watching soap operas later, and flee to upstairs. Feel confusion, worry.

This place with windows and no doors is a mad architect's dream.

If she asks me who I am, I will tell her I can't sleep at night unless I tell myself a happy story, a daydream as my eyes close to darkness.

When I walk back downstairs, the soap opera is already playing, and there is not a trace anywhere of what she had said earlier. I walk to her and kiss her cheek. She offers me some orange slices that she has cut, and I take one as I find her side. Neither uncomfortable nor satisfying: the noise of the television in the background, the silence between us, my head in her lap as she strokes my hair--this is the resonating echo of my mother and me.