

Purple Magpie Terrace: A Story of His and Hers

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(2003)

# Purple Magpie Terrace, A Story of His and Hers

## Name 名

Under a red, snapping sun, my 外公 went searching for  
crowns, integrity, variations of clouds or  
any character that he saw *hopeful* and *sweet* in a dictionary  
to come up with the perfect name for his first granddaughter

What he found:

铮: iron bones.

杨: white poplar. 外公 said that its leaves bit off the front legs of a tornado.

长歌: to sing a long song.

箏----

this became my name. Too few characters to be remembered about 箏,  
meaning the “kite:” a toy that is not ironic enough, not white enough,  
not even musical enough to be beaming with the weight of  
welkin, grove, waters and birds, a world accumulates into her wrinkles.

I massage my face every day and night to preserve a presentation  
as smooth as possible--for as long as I can.

外公 gave up on reading last year. Too many characters he could no longer recall;  
His ceremonious collection wore out years ago.

I hold onto those crisp pages as tightly as he holds onto my thread.  
Perfection is loose and far, though;  
*Have you ever, 外公, dreamed of a land where the best stories  
can be titled with soft easy names near at hand?*

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## Part I. Purple Magpie Terrace | 紫鹊界 | zǐ què jiè

Mā insists that it was the year I graduated from middle school when we went back to Xīnhuà, parked along the mountain belt for water, took pictures in which I elbowed 外公's haughty ribs in displeasure for I had my first date that summer and *didn't ask to be dragged to a freakin hamlet with bad internet connection.*

My version of the story: it was summer, yes, but I learned to love an old man's terror of rootless teeth before putting on the shoes that would be walking me out of *there*, by then it was merely *here*, the Purple Magpie Terrace. A few kilometers beyond we'd reach our destination, Lóngguí with ice-cold stone beds and quenched girlhood--wishing wells where hens and ducks pooped inside; a cottage, roof honestly gapped; a handful of half-melted candles await. “笔田,” down in the fields a pail of loaches spell out your used name.

We were not a household of wordsmiths, the Yús and the Luós. Only 外公, but even he wasn't good at grabbing disenchanted fires by their sore throats. White cheap answers half a century before, how I'd vomit for missing that chance half a century later, married, stacked, hiding from the suns every summer when I recognize us too much: some tourists, some homecomers.

From Purple Magpie Terrace I could not stop seeing dried tea-leaves in an enamelled cup, sipped, saturated, sealed. We parked along the mountain belt for water, spotted a bird only to leave it: what we do we do, even when driving homeward we utter 再见 a bit too often.



(2013)

## 我们的厨房

Angelica,  
*you should be coming home*  
before the next full moon takes off.

外婆 summoned me to her kitchen:  
she decided to teach me  
some vocabulary from her book.  
But I can't stand the smell, I exclaimed,  
who cares if these hurt animals and hesitant herbs  
need to be caressed and whispered to  
before they are boiled?

It had been drizzling outside  
I wanted only to carry my moth-eaten bamboo stool elsewhere  
--a millimeter or a mile from the eave--  
so I could read while watching the swallows  
reluctantly taking their leave.  
Drowsed on the threshold between 外婆's  
pork livers  
and  
everywhere else  
I longed to forget about Angelica, or 当(should)归(return),  
its bitterness  
that was supposed to  
“escort Chinese little girls through their first fruit passage.”

In our kitchen grandma worshiped bitterness  
she thought it would be the best for me, too

To carefully immerse these tubers into a bowl  
of millet congee, stir clockwise and count to thirteen  
Healing

For some years I have traveled like a dead plant:  
astringent, loved,

the vapor I exhale braize a birth canal open



(2020)

## How, when and why my brother and I grew terrified of schools, 1960

The year in which 外公's education piled on his forehead when he turned sixteen

The year in which strokes and books, pipes of grey air marched out of what's no longer a chimney

The year in which a house quits breathing because they've torn that thing down

The year in which 外公 traded stout, scarlet bricks for a bright, genital-shaped blue fountain pen

The year in which 外公's bà and mā preach with a heavy accent

The year in which 外公 and his brother bent their backs too low when out working on the field, so low that grapes of sweat would be fruiting upward their spines, bare hearts, a sharp river

The year in which *That's when I told your 叔外公 those insipid jokes.*

The year in which *mā's chapped lips and bà's swollen tongue make "chimney" sounds like "eye bug" and we'd "Ha! Ha! Ha!"*

The year in which my 外公 imagined his life in college where they'd teach all splendent grown-up-to-bes how to spell:

Chimney & Bug\*

Flower 花

Flour 面粉

Sex 性

Elegy 哀歌

the correct pronunciation to their kids

so the students go home and get married and feed

The year in which off 外公 went

The year in which he then learned so much so

Different how to choke any old cottage

--they've broken chalks as cheap examples--

How to get angry at an already very quiet chimney.

\*烟囱(yān cōng) : chimney  
眼虫(yǎn chóng): eye bug

## The Iron Child

In and out of scorching consciousness, my 外公 with Alzheimer's disease mumbled about the iron child whose stomach was filled with belief in false stars.

Having belief itself was an omen. Just like  
*gorging on sorghum porridge too fast would  
destroy your brittle stomach which, for months,  
had been chewing on pigswill and whatever dead insects  
you and your brother picked up on your road to school.*

The road to famine was cast with iron,  
iron they believed would smelt into  
a New China, grand and beautiful, each  
healthy breath driving a train to run.  
How forcefully they *did* run! Wingfooted  
steel wheels trundled on shriveled flatten bellies  
of my 外公 and his brother, of women and men,  
of the elders, of the children: of the iron child.

*Iron child was a retard.*

He was choked once by his mā's feeble vagina  
and once again, when he turned eight, by the hand of a jaunty  
god. *His mā loved him just like your great-grandma had  
loved us.* But that breathless brain of his,  
it never worked out the difference between  
a furnace and a pot: the giant, somber cupola furnace  
they built at the entrance of the village  
and the tiny, muddy clay pot his mā used to  
cook him tofu soup with bitter melon  
on a windless, sticky afternoon.

In 1958, 外公 was fourteen;  
*my brother only eleven, iron child was older  
than both of us. One day he was so starved  
he walked towards the sparkling furnace  
and ate what was seething inside.*

Years later when my 外公 went to college  
in town, some nights he missed the taste of dead moth so badly

he'd light a candle in the hallway to lure those crunchy,  
transparent wings into his mouth.

One day when our country finally produced enough  
bright, rigid, promising bunks of iron, the golden  
armies in the paddy field started to swell and stoop.

Then there was a middle-aged woman  
from a neighboring village stuffing  
herself to death with rice:

crystal-like, plump grains of new-born white.

She died with *that much* content. On her funeral,  
the family slaughtered a skinny piglet, every guest  
dressed in festive red; *my brother and I were invited  
as well. Your great-grandma told us to say  
"Congratulations" when entering their house.*

A happy death means dying with your stomach full.

## An eye for an 爱(ài)

“天”

Look above  
and describe your world to me  
The women of your family, unbound feet up in the air  
they smell like feathers and cars  
and they leave you for good  
diplomas, son-in-laws, threat-coated happy hours  
--did you at least find  
one of these little laughs dampening the dirt between your toes  
after what, 30, 40, 50 years?  
I pick up clouds from your voice but  
we were always looking for a medium still lighter,  
red and consistent as the day we were born

“地”

Self-buried  
farm animals are the kindest livestocks, you always said  
and I always imagined days and rains and lurking soil  
softening a human into another very similar human  
me into you, can't be the other way around  
(but what if it had been the other way around)  
we hopped on a oxcart to go to the market and sell our brushes and inkstones  
the year mā had an abortion--  
I hated losing everything but you were fine with giving up

A good life had to be hidden beneath  
layers of parched earth & parched hands & *letting go*  
you always said but I always recognized  
that to you, disgrace was not at all uncomfortable  
so you took off your straw sandals, promised everyone everything  
-- mā wanted yet another son, I wanted dignity--  
and right before the end

“人”

the stingy  
lord of the visionaries thinks small.  
At night, mā and I meet  
in the middle of nowhere to plan our revenge  
leaving you out of every childish solar system  
an alienation you won't fear, nor care  
We are old now. Four legs seven arms zero liver  
countless comes and goes and did you know?  
That thinking of you,  
I once finished reading an actual poem  
just so the space between your hallucination  
and my muted brain would shrink into a warm dot  
and I could  
hide it into a teabag, squeeze our industrialized ancestry  
with two fingers  
whenever I want to feel immature again.

“和”

With insecurity  
I restore you  
as a brother.



When 外婆 became a 外婆 she became happy, too; once she told me she would have sailed to Egypt and spit in the water bottles of whoever opposed her idea. “If I had the money,” she said. Money is and is not a dispensable matter. Guó Huá, 国华, try and write her name you’ll find the character ‘国’ funny, its bulgy regularity like a sponge full of water. ‘华’, on the other hand, is supposedly a variant of ‘花’, *flower*.

I was in Grade 7 and was told that every Chinese name contains a wish. I asked 外婆 what Guó Huá’s wish was. In answer to my sealed lips, she poked my ribs and told me to finish up this entire bowl of winter melon soup. So I did, exactly as she ordered. I loved her.)

Part II. The gloom of two rivers| 两江愁 | liǎng jiāng chóu



(2018)

## River Town

Dear fog,  
For so many years I didn't want to distinguish you  
from running water, from steel  
that will nullify any proposal for newer  
transportation and let wood be wood

I was certain then I was not.

Bidding river town farewell wasn't supposed to be  
forever. Nobody boards a ship to start life over  
nowadays; we travel underwater just to  
hear less. *Swiggle, swiggle, count to three;*  
*Grandma's bridge is near in sight.* In Chinese, my family  
name sounds like the pronunciation of fish.

We took a plane: me, my 7th grade English teacher,  
and 21 other confident *well-behaved students* who'd been  
learning a second language just to make use of it one day.  
Big bird. I stuck my head through the crack between two  
seats and sang to a bald white male sunk in half-sleep  
"Hello, nice to meet you, where are you fù-rom?"  
In my backpack the security check would find an empty  
water bottle, a second-hand ipod, ten vacuum-packed cubes of pickled cabbages,  
a passport, a teddy bear, and a camera. One hour from Sydney,  
Australia I remembered 外公's reverence for morning sun  
so I woke up from dichotomy and invited all the red to come in.

Our knowledge of the world: linear. Which makes the  
foothold important, where a mandarin fish used up its  
divine power and still refused to call a plate home. Birds too.  
like fins, wings are always ready to be yanked off.  
Pacific was a hot shiny pot of soup, I took one sip,  
one trip one day before I was registered as a human.  
See-through creatures, you may love a sister once I dye my hair.

## Water Suit

We tried fighting to be comfortable  
you and me, two misnomered eclipses  
of a glazed china whose chins  
are always up, and every feature else all under

In Orange County I take you to the doc for  
you prefer your head inside a microwave  
over cinnamon oil, Beijing opera  
airmails, or a walk back to 1989

“Here the summer’s always hot” and I  
get what you mean, finally, when we grow  
light together. Light and knowing and intoxicated  
with Ginger Ale

If it rains hard tomorrow, let’s make you a water suit in spite of the cicadas.

## **But not every moon must rise**

But not every moon rises. only the sensible  
ones who eat so little to afford a soul

Ones you see immediately upon  
arriving at a forest. those trees each  
look up to different names, too, cedars and such,  
and their aspiration funny, somehow functionary  
but that's surprisingly okay.  
we can't dance unless we must learn to

There's secretive honey within the slippery  
pronunciation of the word "must," you know it  
I know it. must see marriage to its end, must  
body, must whip up a couplet with both hands

I love you I love you I love you I love 有(yǒu)  
*I must love having you*

## **We are all bad at this**

Stay up: on New Year's Eve

Mā will coil her bangs before she  
sneaks a hand pretty obviously under the dinner table  
and fills my pocket with chocolates. British brand,  
the next day I will have licked the generous sweetness off  
each foil wrapper and pushed it across the boundary between  
two adjacent varnished desks so that my best friend Píng Ping

Sees: an alphabet-decorated tomorrow. That I, a busy animal  
no more delicate or assiduous than we were instructed to be  
in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is going to be heading south, then north, then west,  
after which who knows? And of course I try to be good at this  
*dream big* game I heard on a radio but if I fail--*nǐ zhī dào,*  
*nǐ zhī dào wǒ huì shī bài de, Píng Ping*--tell Mrs. Wang that she  
could give me a two-hour detention during which I will stay up,  
still, feet aligned, palms bumping forehead without a word.

## No time

Is this your family address?  
I just want to make sure  
that we don't throw away anything tangential  
to the future in case these street names are  
all you ever weep about. Gardens  
filled with chilies instead of jasmine;  
would you like to knock off a second hand  
and take the easiness with you?  
From now on you will think less  
but combat thirst with a colloid familiarity  
more often. You will swallow and we  
know how to pretend not to see. Is there

going to be an alternative where you read aloud in  
a public library because you loved your possibilities too  
much and nobody blamed you for making more than  
3 wishes on birthdays? Or a yellow cube of sugar,  
a chapter, a I-don't-know-what-I-want-to-be-when-I-  
lose-the-set-of-keys-to-your-interrogation-room.  
I let an insouciant woman down & started to  
believe that death is merely foreplay

Good girls see it all through

I am not convinced by *for better or worse* so  
we don't have to catch the train

## Elixir

At seven I find our belief boring—  
that every drip of rectitude  
has to come from a gratitude for  
rice. Between grasshoppers and egrets  
there are seasons, each delaying its  
admittance; how & when I sneak into  
womanhood is something the farmers  
won't fear.

Years later I'd sail from a ceremony  
to your house. My heart and pen are made  
of rice husks, whose smell are unambitious  
so of course you don't remember. You  
take me to your garage and show me a  
sea of more recent history, nickels that  
when being flipped up  
their embossing tells a delicious anecdote  
about lakes we had swum in yesterday

Fingers buckled,  
I take off some clothes  
and write you a quatrain  
with green water

## Intuition

Bà is a rooster  
but the Chinese zodiac sign soon went out of fashion  
as horoscopes *bringing in western ideology*  
*to infect our unschooled hearts*

*Now you are a Pisces*, I held a magazine up  
and read aloud his personality to his face.  
Or 双鱼 (try and pronounce with me: shuāng--yú--)

Thinking back, the impulses were simple:  
I found an entrance and wherever that opened up to  
a father shall come with me

We rode in a borrowed car to sign me up for  
level-3 oral English lessons in town. A few days ago,  
the white girl at the reception desk told my parents that  
she came from (“New York!”) and she thought I had a  
promising accent. As a return, Bà stepped forward  
with his hands on his hips and back straightened,  
“thank you” & “谢谢” flew out of lips which  
now flap like two newborn fish

## landing on meow

My <professors, hallmates, program manager>  
are from: Virginia, upper state New York, Philadelphia, D.C.  
Cats are just cats. We are not pumas, and that's it.  
Mā prefers a Siamese over an American shorthair but she never supposes  
they'd care. Perhaps you would      though perhaps you won't remember.

Mild misconceptions are acceptable, they know.  
Diversity 101 on how to distinguish a Chinese from a Korean from a Japanese  
from--a ruler. A spice jar. An atheist. A gormandizer.  
I took that class to get an F  
and to make this grade bigger than it'll ever deserve.

F: Finding 101 on how to remember names  
of the city/mountain I'd come back to one day.  
on how to envisage bareness, to stop  
conditioning oasis.  
If only I am what I was given:  
a good animal that purrs

Part III. Tomorrow is just like Yesterday | 明日如昨 | míng rì rú zuó



(Photo by me, taken in 2020; sketch by my 外公, drawn in 1954)

## **An Asian Elephant Finds Herself in Rainforest**

What might have happened if our ancestors never learned to build a proper house; will the moon thus pity humans and take us all in? I think I'll love living in light instead of under it.

“Asian elephants inhabit grasslands, tropical evergreen forests, semi-evergreen forests, moist deciduous forests, dry deciduous forests and dry thorn forests, in addition to cultivated and secondary forests and scrublands.” *Wow*. Choices are almost always hard and sweet: how does an Asian elephant get used to deciding what forest she wants her offspring to inhabit?

No time to worry for elephants and tigers and street cats and *other* stuff, I was told. Well, for the first 19 years of my life, at least. Now's different: now time is all I've got. I think about Asian elephants and their rusty, solemn feet every hour every day. Water pouring down from heaven as casual as swarm washes their mild triangular faces. Just like them, in ancient times, my great great grandfather never knew about America.

## **The Emperor's lump**

By the grace of rice paddy  
he(I) was raised to be reasonable  
to not shiver too much when the dragon's  
words streaming out of a mouth  
that has inherited his(my) color

I(he) always knew magenta to be  
sure as sauce, embellishing the  
snow-white breast beneath which  
we had buried a mother.

As a child we once banged a eunuch's head  
against the Forbidden City's wall  
and spent the rest of this cumbersome life  
wanting to believe in our righteousness:  
he was old and obsequious and would  
never be able to produce a son  
even for us, even if he loved us

When orioles began their mating  
we shall ascend the throne,  
exempt one thousand and  
one slaves, us not included.  
We were young before we became young  
in other's mouths, bright as the  
admonishment of our dragon--

one never suckle, neither dream nor  
sing about the past; we've owned the past,  
but we forget about it every morning when  
the mountains hurry to alter their allegiance  
and faces.

**Waltz in the Snow, a letter from 2016 to 1942, from Tang Wei to Xiao Hong**

Three years or four after becoming you, in 2016 I had a baby. It was the first time ever since the movie, our movie, finished that spring decided to pardon me. I've been living inside this long, coquettish winter chasing you all around on the empty slippery streets of Harbin, vagina pressed against the sun; Nothing except snow had ever flowed out of me. 1942, the year spring eventually gave you up, you were set free, but never was I valiant enough to break away.

My daughter was named Doris. D-o-r-i-s, when the midwife washed away the streams of blood between my open, shivering, shameless legs, my baby started crying: she was tired. Were you? You've both come this far, to watch the sun rise up, were you glad that death could no longer squeeze into your uterus, the cold cold winter finished, 70 years after the morning your child failed to crawl out of you, we were endowed a new sun? Your name was *Hóng*, it means red; Doris shall love it, the color that vivisects winter.

There are times I believe I am you. Especially during winters, when I'm in need of arms, love, sex between bookshelves, I know men would be scared away but I have to have it. I have to forget about being an actress, have to rape a sun, have to give in to the seething desire dripping out of my pink tulips, have to bear a baby-- not a baby who cries, but a baby who makes them cry, who would have finished your beautiful beautiful love stories with the word "family." Your stories, they weren't made up!

"Did her men ever love her?" the Director threw me a question while I was getting up, getting ready to *be* you for the first time on set. I wished I could've known you last winter, the day when snowflakes sprinkled my embroidered evening gown. A dance wasn't finished yet, but I couldn't wait to tear all the sparkling poems on my necklace away into the crowds--I knew you'd love that. How you had loved us to be gazed upon, *baby*, those cowards called us. Yes, they had all loved you; Oh but you were too splendid a sun!

Before those poor, inept centaurs, you were loved by other men. Grandpa would pluck the sun for you if you, six-year-old-you, said you'd want it. On the flagstone walkway he'd lift you up onto his shriveled shoulders, lying about how mighty they were, the old man and his baby, holding hands, bare feet against bearded cheeks; you'd traipse through a thousand winters if time was merciful. It wasn't. When you were nineteen, your knight passed away, Eleven damned years after that was your memoir about him able to be finished.

You never forget, my self-punishing wintersweet. Your war is never finished; What was it that you were fighting against with your pen? Was it the sun-- were you blaming it for not roaring loud enough, for not eating away

all the bullets, all the beamish rifles, all the ripped-open dead bodies insouciantly piled up on the streets grandpa and you used to step on? Their toes pointed stiffly at the winter sky, in 1942, you shook yourself out of a world where everyday mothers lose their babies.

When my Doris grows up,  
I'll teach her to love like you did. Love each passerby, love even the winter  
for seasons might be unmerciful but you, you know that under the sun, there's never an unwanted  
baby.

**小倩, or Feeble Beauty**

*A Chinese Ghost Story*

All that matters is

Love

or

the gravity against one's body  
or running out of coins foretells that  
you will later run into the most pure and  
reliable and truculent heart of your life

or

小倩, it's a wonderful name  
for it tells you where to look at.  
In order to survive a ghost story  
you have to differentiate between  
the good and the evil, inherit a sword  
from your great grandfather

or

pledge fealty to an almost forgotten emperor  
so that the power of real dragon would  
hack down from Heaven and protect you

from a love born in servitude,  
a good woman hanging from a tree  
The heat of last autumn's apricot  
小倩, or those who could not and would not  
help themselves  
you cajole a princess into abandoning her maiden name  
now 小倩 has to choose between  
a monument of Virtue  
and  
a traversed white horse

**Part IV. Clematis | 铁线莲 | tiě xiàn lián**

Some flowers are bred to be useful. But they can be pretty, too. That's a clemency of nature.

你知道吗？铁线莲的花语是：宽恕我，我因你而有罪



**(2003)**

## Meeting Gods

First we have Buddha--also known as a pool of body languages in which every dolorous twister recognizes a path downhill.

It is true: fabulists know that the real magician always talks little but smiles or shakes his shiny head often. An agonized soul decides to visit those termite-invaded, mellow temples up in the clouds; all they ever ask about, eventually, is *please, Master, would you mind telling me how to go down the mountain and return home?*

At a very young age I have learned from stories as such that Buddha, or 外婆's God, answers only the least relevant question.

*What does your name mean?*

*Are you planning to come back to China after you finish school?*

*How does it feel like to be the only child of your family?*

*Do you play ping-pong very well?*

The color of my grandparents' skin was the drabness between a fissured roast potato and a sheep ready for slaughter. After they came to the city, their sunburn wore down, and when 外婆 gave birth to my mā and her twin in 1974, those feet--though showered in warm blood--were gladly dirtless.

The Buddha dresses in white. I'm never confident enough to know a Jesus but somewhere tidy and upright and lenient someday  
I will have heard the choir sing  
a pasty finger a threadbare kasaya a--path

Please, Master, would you mind telling my family how to climb up the mountain without bleeding themselves and find me full?

## A Hardwired Life

外婆,

快要过年了 You've never missed out a single New Year's Eve except that one  
周末我和妈妈去花市买你爱的花 weekend trip to the City of dim lanterns and second-guessing  
汽车尾气而竟非摇曳热情的花蕊令我想起你 birds. They've helped you a lot,  
灰的城 confronted with wind and such  
捉来一只小鸡, 你将饭粒均匀洒落阳台各个角落 and just like that I want  
随随便便地告诉她“你要死了” to be of some. some. of some use to you, too  
What's the difference 有什么分别呢

On our way home

--cut--

They won't buy it. Nobody is always on their way home--

So we start over

Before all there comes an almond of truth

Trampling on her preexistence

with a bookmark glued to her throat.

The fruit basket that she carries marks an elderly/early visit:

In this town we read aloud every myth of bustling dragons &

leaping tigers exactly once, once only

Nobody smells anything except you with your smart but humble nose

meek as a chalk of turnip

we then have to walk you to her side

Does never expect, does never exit

Our Great Happy New Year

## Illiterate

Thinking this was it  
My six great-aunts and one great-uncle hurried  
a long way to witness your refluence  
They were used to seeing your barefeet  
but put on their shiniest pairs of leather shoes  
to step into your  
intensive  
care  
unit  
as if it was our living room

The rice flowers that your brother grew  
had stopped none of our cities from  
gaining extra weight, the edge of things,  
business, your veins, swelled anyway. Cattle,  
I thought,  
we put a hassock on your back so you  
could transport each watershed and sell them to  
a decent storyteller for a decent

what, that was the one second in life  
when nouns didn't make sense to me.  
Sitting next to your siblings outside of your clotted existence  
I realized what they are: sparrows shot in the goddamn liver  
illiterate yet reproducing

Were you once just as fatal, just as mottled, just as small?  
I don't want to have to  
think hard to remember the day  
you wrapped me in a tawny rain jacket  
--your bicycle wheel drummed against my calligraphy copybook--  
*There are two ways to put down everybody's name,*  
You went and I listened  
*One with pen, one with plowing.*

## Notes

*or*

*this other way of putting down our names*

*how I wish I could unlearn the significance of language*

### **Prelude: Name 名**

外公 (wài gōng) is the Chinese characters for maternal grandfather. While 公 being a relatively direct translation of “husband/father/the man of the house,” 外 in itself is a character that most often signifies “outsider--” maternal is merely a paraphrase. In our culture, a traditional, devoting marriage is meant to exclude a female’s past firmly from her future; thus when wives become mothers, their children are expected to grow up sharing a living space with parents, siblings and paternal relatives only. Once or twice a year, a mother may be granted leave to bring her kids back to her parents’ house for a few days--to visit a family outside of *the* family.

Things have been different for some decades now. For me, at least, I grew up in my maternal grandparents’ house with my parents and my mom’s unmarried twin brother until I turned ten. When I had just begun to learn to speak, I couldn’t pronounce 公 right for half a year or so, no matter how hard I tried; I ended up calling my grandfather “外-外,” a nickname that he has loved and remembered for as long as Alzheimer's allowed him to.

Outsider, outsider. My first ever collection of poems is a mass of voices striving to celebrate outsiders. Is this a coincidence? Sometimes, I find myself waiting in the dark for my 外-外 to regain his sharp consciousness and place a plastic, lukewarm jar of answers gently *inside* my palm.

### **Purple Magpie Terrace | 紫鹊界 | zǐ què jiè**

The family of Luós--my 外公, his two sisters and one brother-- are from 罗洪(Luó Hóng) village, 隆回(lóng huí) County, Hunan, China.

Have you ever picked up duck poops?

When we(the Luós and the Yús) first visited 外公’s birth place as a family, 外公 tried to show me how to clean up the ducks’ dens. I frowned and screamed and fled, asking mom if we could

go have another look at the Purple Magpie Terrace that we'd passed on our way here, this time under the sun. The next day we arrived, only to watch dozens of ducks dipping their muddy webbed feet gracefully into the field as they marched. Actual magpies were nowhere to be seen.

再见(zài jiàn): Chinese for "See you again some othertime."

我们的厨房

: "our kitchen"

In addition to *Angelica sinensis*, another translation for the traditional Chinese herb 当(dāng)归(guī) is *female ginseng*.

Angelica, I like the sound of this name, but it has always reminded me of a girl who is desperately trying to keep herself clean.

We are told as children that 当归 has something to do with a mother's secret of being a mother. The soup made of boiled 当归 tastes like acceptance: my 外婆 and 妈妈(Mā ma) grow used to its nauseous bittersweetness but I never could.

***How, when and why my brother and I grew terrified of schools, 1960***

**&**

***The Iron Child***

叔外公: Chinese for "great-(maternal)-uncle."

It is generally believed that the Great Chinese Famine(Chinese: 三年困难时期, "three years of *great difficulty*) lasted from 1959 to 1961. For my 外公 and his fellow villagers, ominous incidents began to take place as early as 1958, the year in which a mentally disabled child drank from a furnace of melted iron.

In combination with natural disasters, the policies of the Great Leap Forward(Chinese: 大跃进) had resulted in a death toll due to starvation between the range of 15 to 55 millions.

"I was lucky that we only ended up eating beetles and *mildly* poisonous weeds, at most," 外公 has always commented so on his teenage years. There is, I later learned, oral documentation of human cannibalism taking place all across the country during that time.

### *An eye for an 爱(ài)*

爱(ài) is the Chinese word for love. The title of this poem, quite obviously, comes from the common saying “an eye for an eye” and the imperfect rhyming of “eye” and “爱.”

天地人和(tiān dì rén hé): a widely known vernacular variation of the Taoist understanding of humans’ place in nature: 人, the human, serves humbly as a bridge of communication between the heaven/sky(天) and the earth(地)--only by maintaining so will the universe be at its harmonious(和) balance.

Like described in “*the year in which...*”, my 外公 left his village and family for further education. In ten years, he had built a prosperous life in the capital of our province and left everything--the old house and their animals--to his younger brother, after they had married off their two sisters. For over sixty years since then, my 叔外公 has led the life of a reticent farmer, receiving visits from his *older brother* in town annually.

Knowing 外公 and our similarities as well as I do, I wrote this poem from a second person perspective for I wanted to reimagine him as a young, aspirant stranger, how he takes every responsibility in a hurtfully decisive way. I wanted to restore that image of an obstinate brother for I sensed its importance while I felt it fading: last year, when at home, my grandpa couldn’t tell the difference between mornings and evenings anymore. Yet in his own village, sitting by his younger brother’s side, 外公 managed to teach me the difference between male and female ducks, how to judge their fertility by the size of their wings.

### *We are all bad at this*

Píng Píng, or 平平, once told me that she got her name from the Chinese four-word idiom “平平安安(píng píng ān ān)”, meaning “safe and sound.” As a child, Píng Píng never quite liked her name because she thought it was not ambitious enough. We became best friends in third grade and agreed that someday we would be travelling together to a distant coordinate in both space and time, where we could eat chocolates while reading a book in class and not get scolded.

*nǐ zhī dào, nǐ zhī dào wǒ huì shī bài de, Píng Píng*

你知道, 你知道我会失败的, 平平

*You know, you know I'd fail, Píng Píng*

## Intuition

Bà(爸): Chinese for “dad.” Looking back, among a series of poems celebrating and contemplating the stories of my mother’s side of the family, a poem about my Bà seems alone, and almost awkward. I’m never truly closed to my paternal grandparents as much as I have been with my 外公 and 外婆. Bà doesn’t seem to have a problem with it; I thought he would like a poem recognizing his presence in my journey to *another side of the world* anyway. Having 外公, before ten I didn’t really feel like I needed a father to be there for me. Bà has been there for me, though, this whole time.

## River Town

Never have I ever lived in a city without a river.

*Swiggle, swiggle, count to three; Grandma’s bridge is near in sight:* this is the beginning of a Chinese nursery rhyme, 外婆桥(Grandma’s bridge), that prevails in the mandarin-speaking regions south of the Yangtze River. I’ve had friends from Shanghai, Macao, Singapore and Malaysia who share with me the memory of *Grandma’s bridge* sung in different dialects. I try to translate my family’s version of *Grandma’s bridge* into English, and the full text is as follows:

摇啊摇、摇到外婆桥，外婆叫我好宝宝。

Swiggle, Swiggle, count to three; Grandma’s bridge is near in sight.

Grandma calls me her *good baby*--

请吃糖，请吃糕，糖啊糕啊莫吃饱；

Here, eat a candy; and have a cake too, please. But be sure not to fill up your belly with these:

少吃滋味多，多吃滋味少。

because the less we eat the better they taste; if we stuff down too much we won’t remember what we ate.

## An Asian Elephant Finds Herself in Rainforest

The beginning of stanza two is a piece of general information cited from Wikipedia-- Wikipedia contributors. (2021, April 15). Asian elephant. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 06:42, April 19, 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Asian\\_elephant&oldid=1017950818](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Asian_elephant&oldid=1017950818)

## ***Waltz in the Snow, a letter from 2016 to 1942, from Tang Wei to Xiao Hong***

Originally my very first attempt at pantoum in a sophomore year creative writing class, this poem was inspired by a 2014 biographical drama film--*The Golden Era* (黃金時代) which features the life of Xiao Hong (蕭紅), a romantic Chinese female writer of the 20th century.

I first knew Xiao Hong from her book *Tales of Hulan River* (《呼蘭河傳》) for I was attracted by her intimacy with her grandfather as well as her bold interpretation of such personal relationship in terms of grand historical background, how individual life could be seen stirring up societal currents during her special time. In *The Golden Era*, starring Tang Wei, Xiao Hong is presented as an ordinary yet unbridled young girl driven by flooding emotions. The image of flooding is powerful beyond words: in one scene, during a citywide flood, a pregnant Xiao Hong jumped out of a hostel window onto a small raft to start a new life with Xiao Jun, a man she'd only known for weeks.

When asked to experiment with the form pantoum, the movie came to my mind: the implicit, gentle pattern of repetition that a pantoum holds would coordinate with the paralleled and/or intertwined destinies of different females across time and space that I tried to imagine and realize: a writer and her reader, for example; or, in another life, a protagonist and her actress.

### ***小倩, or Feeble Beauty***

小倩(xiǎo qiàn) is the lead female character of 蒲松齡(pú sōng líng)'s 《聂小倩》(Niè xiǎo Qiàn), one of the most famous fantasy stories among his collection *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (聊齋志異 *Liáo Zhāi Zhì Yì*).

聂(Niè), 小倩's last name, is an derivation of the Chinese character 撮(shè), meaning literally "to cajole." An astonishingly beautiful female ghost like 小倩 is typically considered dangerous, and the source of her power is the ability to seduce male passers-by and consume their souls.

In 《聂小倩》, 小倩 is coerced by demons to practice evil and hunt on human beings. She is attracted to one of her intended preys, a frail-looking young scholar named 宁采臣(níng cǎi chén), and turned to him for help. The kind-hearted 宁采臣 takes 小倩 home after relocated her grave to avoid further assaults from malicious spirits; 小倩 hence lives under his roof together with his sick wife, undertaking the responsibility of a virtuous concubine. Eventually, upon the death of 宁采臣's wife, 宁采臣 marries 小倩 with the hard-won permission from his mother.

*Part IV. Clematis | 铁线莲 | tiě xiàn lián*

花语 huā yǔ : The language of flower

铁线莲的花语是 : Forgive me, for I sin on your account

The language of clematis: 宽恕我 , 我因你而有罪 kuān shù wǒ, wǒ yīn nǐ ér yǒu zuì

*A Hardwired Life*

A translation of the verses written in Chinese is as follows:

外婆 wài pó,

快要过年了 kuài yào guò nián le

It is almost New Year

周末我和妈妈去花市买你爱的花 zhōu mò wǒ hé mā mā qù huā shì mǎi nǐ ài de huā

on the weekend mom and I went to the flower markets to buy ones you love

汽车尾气而竟非摇曳热情的花蕊令我想起你 qì chē wěi qì ér jìng fēi yáo yè rè qíng de huā ruǐ  
lìng wǒ xiǎng qǐ nǐ

Smokes from cars instead of those passionately swaying pistils remind me of you

灰的城 huī de chéng

Ashen city

捉来一只小鸡 , 你将饭粒均匀洒落阳台各个角落 zhuō lái yī zhī xiǎo jī , nǐ jiāng fàn lì jūn yún  
sǎ luò yáng tái gè gè jiǎo luò

Catch a chicken, and you will evenly spread rice grains on every corner of our balcony

随随便便地告诉她 “你要死了” suí suí biàn biàn dì gào sù tā “nǐ yào sǐ le ”

To let her know so casually that “you’re dying”

有什么分别呢 yǒu shen me fēn bié ne

What's the difference

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