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***In Search
of Roots***



Arrival

There is nothing of the familiar
pockmarked face, scholar's hands
waving at our waiting figures
long absent from his economist's mind.
That weathered bag – father's gift
receptacle of wayward dreams –
takes its time on the belt
while he sweats in the heat of home. *He's taller now,*
po-po says, and remembers him growing up
in her flat, an era I witnessed
from my cot in the single bedroom.
Mother remembers too, suggests bringing him
to make a new suit for next month's wedding:
some choices, cuts of care
cannot be made to wait.

Yi-ma recalls a time
even before his arrival: her eldest-daughter's marriage
mirrors that of her only child. *Ah-Zhang's* arm
is around her; he lets his architect eyes
drift from the modern ceiling
to his reflection beyond the glass.

Departures

Strange, how we discuss death over dinner.
Nai-nai couches the passing of a loved one
as a walking away, as if someone
meant to join us for a meal
were caught up elsewhere. Auntie Fang
nods to herself; she was at the wake the night before,
and cannot forget how young the body looked.
Uncle Yang is his usual self, reserved,
but slightly quieter.

Father is last to hear the news. I watch him
mix regret with shock under his tongue,
shape a prayer waiting to be uttered.
He swallows a mouthful of rice, asks, how old?
Fifty-eight, *nai-nai* replies. She had cancer,
but was still active. So young! –
father exclaims; his voice has an edge
that brings new silence. Someone sighs,

can't be helped. People
come, and quickly go.
Heads bob uncertainly, then in agreement,
as a bowl of fruit is placed amidst the unfinished dishes.
We each take a slice,
but delay clearing our plates. We have all
finished, but cannot bear to leave.

Worship

as if in her heart there was an altar,
burnt brown by the passing of white egrets
faster than the seasons, she knelt every morning
before an imaginary plaque, and touched her head
thrice gently to the ground. this done,
she would straighten her *samfoo*
and remember the fire. as a child,
inhaling air milky with her incense,
imitating reverence in a gesture that eventually
became my first somersault, I watched this silent cycle
from the crib of not knowing, half-afraid that she
would somehow forget and not rise
from the ground. later, I grew
convinced that those childhood oblations
taught me much of what I knew
about age and daily endings. I also learnt
that her prayers were for neither her nor us,
(and hence needed no god), but for her hands
that kept us, her feet that carried us, her mouth
that taught us, and her eyes that wept
for us, gems glistening in the light
of a different kind of worship.

Smile

I love the way my parents think
the same things at the same time, as if
a long invisible thread runs
between them, one

I stumble over every morning
falling out of sleep
to breakfast while
they smile at the bread
(and each other) over
the top of my

being late for school. In between
tying two laces
I realise they have not
spoken the entire time.

Father

saturday lunch. mother's hands
are invariably porridge-wrinkled
and garlic-stained. sprinklings adhere

to quiet corners of her skin;
I watch fragments of spring onion
bury their heads in her grey skirt.

a jade bracelet sieves ashen sunlight
with coconut milk, throwing wrinkled halos
on the barren wall. both are cracked

as the lips that once kissed me,
fragrant with steam and affection.
two sparrows (or three?)

graze the windowsill,
drinking fingers of a wind
still cold with veiled morning.

their mute presence
hangs over the empty bowl
at the head of the table

like conversation or drying laundry
draped piece by piece
limp in the midday sun.

The Flower

when mother returned later that night
she was shouting again at father. he thought
about the flower he'd found lying, plucked
and unblinking on his way home, and was sure
that in his life he had never seen anything so drop
dead gorgeous. upon finding the flower,
he had squatted
to see it better, plump legs
catching his awkward frame, and found
his own reflection congealed against it
in a shroud of rainy orange,
like rust on a gate. at this point
he remembered lifting a petal.
from beneath the myriad of expectation
a stalk had spoken, long and hesitant,
and broken silence with his fingers.

he wished now
that the flower had followed
him home, and that lifting the petal
he could again crawl inside.