

The Ocean in My Room

When the rain stopped at last, the huge koi that had sprouted from the bathroom pipes washed into our living room.

The buckets we had stacked to collect the rainwater from the leaky roof were knocked over by the creature's breathless flailing.

Water seeped into the cracks between the floorboards and Ma tutted disapprovingly. His name was Lang. He told me the third day after taking up residence in our living room. By then, his beautiful red and white scales had faded to a dispirited gray and we knew he was close to death.

He had come from one of the tributaries of a wide river that empties into the sea. During the rainstorm, he explained, waving his fins intently, he had lost his way and was blown into our house by a strong wind.

"We have been swimming this way for many years," he said, "When the flooding season begins, we leave our nests along the fertile banks of the Mekong River Delta and migrate all the way up to where it narrows into the Lancang. Fish are in a constant state of motion, you know, we don't stay very long in any one place. It's not good for the fins," he waggled his own fins for emphasis.

"But this isn't the Lancang, don't you know? We're in America, you've traveled a whole ocean, Lang," I said.

He made a harsh sound, like a bark. I stepped back, unsure of what to do, before realizing that he was laughing.

“Not the Lancang? Why of course it is, of course it is,” he laughed and laughed, whole red-white speckled body trembling with the intensity of his disbelief.

And he was laughing hours later as his scales fell out one by one into the small basin Ma had gently moved him into. I watched him and felt a tightness in my chest as he shrank back into himself—skin dried out from the absence of ocean.

At last he quieted, and a heavy silence set into the house.

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“Now, it may not look like much on the outside, but the interior is actually quite spacious—roomier than you would expect.”

I watch as the young couple follow the agent out of the house I had revisited only a handful of times since cautiously easing into adolescence within its walls. It always seemed to me so filled with Ma and Grandma that it felt almost sacrilegious to go back now that they were gone and face its dark windows and empty rooms.

“Yes, it really just needs some TLC. We’ll repaint the mailbox, replace that door, tear out a few of the back walls, and we can paint this little guy’s room,” the man pats his wife’s heavily pregnant belly and smiles reassuringly.

“Yeah,” he turns back to the house, considering it carefully, “Yeah, with a couple of touch-ups this place could be real nice.”

She turns to me for the first time since they got here, “What do you think of the area? What are the neighbors like? My husband and I really want to settle down in a place that’s welcoming and has strong community values.”

I smile warmly at her. She seems nice enough—fair hair and a pretty smile. After a beat, I answer, “Yes, this is a good area. The neighbors will be friendly and there are a lot of young families around, so there should be plenty of playmates for your little one.”

They beam back at me, and I am relieved.

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That night, Ma was shaken—a spirit fish had visited our house. She muttered under her breath in fast coarse Mandarin as she swept every inch of our house to unhitch any spirits that might have followed it inside.

Grandma stood calmly in the kitchen, gutting the fish and cooking him into a soup. She chopped him into thin slices and cooked him in with the cabbage we had gotten from the church society ladies the previous Sunday. His hollow eyes stared back at us as we sat around the table.

Ma rubbed her eyes and protested, “Mother, you know we can’t eat a spirit fish.”

“Nonsense,” Grandma waved a wrinkled hand impatiently, “we would eat them all the time when I was a girl—some days, when we only had the spirits of fish to eat, we imagined they were better than the actual fish.”

“Now what do you think of that,” she grinned at me with all her teeth and I giggled.

Then, my grandma was a lively woman, barely into her sixties. Her iron-gray hair framed a face creased by all the stresses of her life but still sharp and full of vitality. She did tai chi in the early mornings while the rest of the house slept. Swaying to a rhythm known to her alone, she moved with carefully practiced grace, limbs cutting through the dark like a knife into warm duck fat.

She was born in a war and left her homeland in the middle of another war. In the foothills of northern China, she grew up in the care of her grandparents. When she became a woman, she packed all she could carry with her into a bag and walked away from her hometown and an arranged marriage.

On the back of a fisherman's boat, she traveled for eight days between crates of fish and lobster traps along the Yangtze, and washed into the bustling manufacturing hub of Chongqing. It was 1919 then—twenty years before the Japanese would carry out over 200 bombing raids on Chongqing, separating families and killing thousands. Thirty years before Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalists would finally abandon the wartime capital they had made of Chongqing, having transformed the city into a giant of military industry, and leave it to sink quietly into the white noise of the new People's Republic.

Why did you leave Chongqing?—I asked her that night after eating the spirit fish. She was straddling my mother's back in the sitting room, working her hands into Ma's shoulders to loosen the tangle of knots that had built up after a long day at the laundry. She knelt above her and Ma's body became a boat, carrying her mother to safe shore.

I left because I couldn't stay any longer, she laughed, sadly.

She ground her knees into my mother's back and her firm brown hands worked her way down the tenderness of her body, scraping away the dead skin and dust.

The dust is a violence, I think, the tiny bits of person scraping off with every contact. My mother did laundry for other people's mothers—she bent over a basin of soapy water before it was light out and far after it was dark, her hands thrashed against the clothes until they were

no longer dirty, and they left behind a tiny part of herself. My grandma did tai chi barefoot on the fire escape.

The soft of her feet left behind two dark pools on the metal—days and years of flesh that were no longer part of the body. I kissed my mother on the cheek and a tiny bit of me was left behind. She told me to stand up straighter, practice my letters until I sounded like a real American, caressed my cheek and an imprint of her hand was left behind, invisible.

My grandma kneads my mother's back and they become part of themselves again.

There is a picture of a young man on my grandmother's prayer mantel. He is faded and robed in layers of yellowing tape. His eyes are warm and he wears a half-smile, lips tight together like he's holding in a secret. The fireplace was shuttered with woodboards by the previous owner, but my grandma kept candles lit above it always. She prayed to her father—not her Father who art in heaven and within the folds of the cabbages we got from the church ladies or her father who went to fight in the war, but the one who keeps out the spirits of pasts left behind and performs basic miracles like turning a shelter into a home and a mouthful of rice into nourishment. Father, she would say, is a fluidity—river is a father to all the fish, and earth is a father to its people who rely on it. Mothers must be kept too busy to have time for things like listening to prayers, I decided. When she knelt before the mantel, the picture of the man smiled kindly down at her. The most striking part about him was his eyes—pear-shaped and soft like my mother's.

In the middle of a war, my mother was born.

In the middle of a revolution, a young man took his camera and mounted his bicycle. He rode off in the early morning towards the town square and did not come back.

My mother's mother was twenty-one when she left Chongqing for good, heavily pregnant and murmuring prayers to anyone that might have been listening, that my mother may lay low, stay quiet inside of her until the voyage was through.

On the boat to Nanjing, my mother comes out two months early and her mother is afraid. Not of how small, how fragile she is, but because of the flaps of skin sealing her fingers and toes together, webbing them like the fins of a shriveled sea creature.

When my grandma looked into her eyes for the first time, she saw the ocean and the depths beneath it. She cried and prayed for a long time. Her tiny premature child cried desperately as well, though it was for hunger. She quickly tired and contented with sucking quietly at her webbed appendages.

When her aunt's son was born with webbed hands and tiny webbed feet, the men of the family tore the baby away from the pleading mother, took him into the mountains and came back that night with an empty baby blanket, then burned incense to repel any spirits that had been let in with the monstrous child.

My grandma looked at her fish child again and saw only her soft brown eyes.

At that moment, she decided on a name. I will call you Lily, she whispered into her new daughter's ear, because you are from the water and have traveled great distances to surface. I will call you that because you were born on the boat I fled on and will be the surface I flee towards.

The child cried and cried all day and the next, her tiny body not proportionate to the great capacity of her lungs. And her mother cried and laughed and cried because she was no longer alone on the ocean hurtling towards land.

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My mother grew up in a five kilometer radius around Nanjing and never saw the open water.

She used her fins to swim through crowded night markets and belligerent vendors, used her gills to breathe life into the embroidery she sold.

In the market, my mother met an American boy—he was yellow like a Chinese boy but uniformed in the way of the American soldiers that passed through on their way to Shandong. When he spoke, his foreign accent flattened all the words.

He told her he loved her, glanced over her webbed fingers and said it louder as if it could reach the depths of the oceans within her. She said it back, and when he was sent back overseas to another war, the fruits of their courtship were already budding inside of her.

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Once, Ma brought home a bottle of cognac, gathered me and Grandma and called it a congregation.

She leaned against the doorway, and I saw for the first time how gray everything was.

The lines in my mother's face could be the longitudes of all the places worth seeing.

Then, she smiled wide.

"Let's have a party," she shouted in rough English, pulling my hands into hers.

Ma and Grandma drank all the amber—downed the bottle and the moment became trapped inside of us.

We joined hands and danced unsteadily, a tipsy daisy chain spinning precariously in front of the mantel.

(It is so hard to remember, that grace, too, is not equal division)

Ring around the rosie, pockets full of distilled spirits and disorder—Grandma took a few stumbling steps away from our circle, stretching her hands out toward the window like she was reaching out for something, then grabbed onto the muslin curtain and tore.

She laughed and laughed, her voice unnaturally young and giddy with excitement, as she ripped away the white fabric. The stitches pulled apart one by one and then all at once, popping like a chain of party favors pulled open in succession.

She draped the fabric over her hair with all the suavity of a queen and became a bride, took a few faltering steps away from us and twirled to send the veil fluttering softly.

After several quiet seconds, she turned back to us.

“Oh, isn’t it lovely,” she whispered.

It was.

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Just one more. I went back to the house two years ago, before the sale. It was mid-spring and raining, a dampness had sunk into the whole street—the old house was tiptoeing towards its last days and it seemed to know it.

The garden had grown wild and a fox scampered out of the weeds and into the road as I approached the iron-grey front steps. Mounds of dirt crusted the window panes and the roof sagged under the weight of thousands of rainfalls. If houses could look tired, this one did.

Across the street, two little girls in bathing suits played gleefully in the pools of mud that had collected in the grass. I wondered. Not long ago, I watched the little girls and boys playing in the streets from the tiny square window above my bed. The white children who lived on our

street were no members of the high echelons of society—in that regard we were similar—though there was always an unbridgeable chasm between us. We observed block parties and Fourth of July barbecues from the comfortable distance of our own home; Grandma hummed over the loud music that droned on long into the summer nights, filling up the chasm with stories and fragments of songs from her own girlhood; nodded and smiled politely at neighbors, pretended not to notice when they didn't smile back, could not find the words to describe how physical closeness was never an invitation to share in each other's lives.

I sat on the damp front steps for a long time, facing the street that had flitted in and out of so many vignettes from childhood. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I retrieved the key from under the grinning Buddha, a monument to a bygone past. It had stayed right where I had stashed it when I left.

A deep breath, a quick prayer breathed out the nose, and I stepped back into the intimacy of a space I had long forgotten.

It was all the same, still. I drifted tremulously from one room to another like a pilgrim wary of sullyng a sacrality.

The vacant rooms seemed like they had merely been put on hold, patiently waiting for its inhabitants to return. The next day, I would begin the laborious process of packing all of its contents into neat cardboard boxes. Hire a moving company to shuttle it all off into a neat storage unit and be done with it. But today, I soaked in all the messiness that had come with living. I wondered for a while at my childhood bedroom, touching the whitewashed walls and the peeling cutout posters that had been carefully ripped out of magazines. I wandered cautiously into the kitchen, not sure what I expected but feeling silly for it all the same.

It was all still there. The round wooden table, under which I had carved my initials over and over when I was still learning. Its rough top I had laid beneath and kicked in anger during childish tantrums.

I squeezed under it then, tucking my knees in close to my body. Slowly traced the rough letters with my thumb. Swish, flick, and again we go. I stayed there until the kitchen windows shed no more light. In the stillness of dusk, I drifted off into dreams.

In one, Grandma stood at the kitchen counter, butchering a white mackerel. A typical fish, really. Her face was angled away from me, and I watched hungrily as she wielded the knife and hammered rhythm into the fish. Its silvery body flung scales outwards in every direction as its flesh ripped apart from itself and I leapt forward trying to catch each one before it hit the ground.

Each thump of the knife on the cutting board, an axe being borne into an oak. For years, my dreams were filled with fish, swimming through red and white seas on their way to distant lands.

Grandma hummed softly and beheaded the mackerel. It seemed right then that all I ever wanted was a taste.

The white fish spliced in two, its guts spilled out and laid bare. Its story was always the one passed down through all of them, my mother, my grandmother—their lives that had been inseparably entwined with mine.

At last, my grandma turned to me and I saw that she was laughing. Sudden brightness, from which I couldn't look away. She held out a thin slice of fish—an offering, a peace. I took it and began to laugh, too.