

中秋奏鸣曲 / Mid-Autumn Sonata

Inspired by the Chinese myth of Chang'e

I.

It is dark out, and the Moon trails our car.
We wash across the veins of this country like
a brushstroke of calligraphy never taught to us.
Still, we are headed home. Dad has one hand on
the wheel and the other rolling down the window
to spit a scalding pot of expensive tea, or a morsel
of forgettable history, into traffic, leaving potholes
everywhere. A tenor's tessitura climbs out from the
phone lying in Mom's lap, the brief silence sawed
through by his vibrato. She is rebirthing into 嫦娥¹
with every new night, and her head against the
window drifts closer to the Moon. Again, I listen
to Dad clear his throat, finding more past to spit out.
He turns up the radio's volume, sharpening
the Chinese dubstep playing. It has surrendered
itself in 美国², no 二胡³s or 古筝⁴s to be found in
its violent pulses. *No beauty*, my grandfather would
say, and we love it. I look in the rearview mirror to
see Mom's waxing crescent smile as she sits up.
The raspy silence crescendos, and gazes at the end.

II.

It begins with Mom's soft rage, a river of jagged
丑话⁵s flowing upstream to Dad with laughter
swimming above, below. He would dip his feet in
like he was still that village boy, emerging from the
muddy waters with both feet bloodied. Like tears by
the night's end, there are falsities of feeling after
卑鄙⁶ instead of baby. He listens to her grievances,
eyes making a new lover of the black horizon, and
like a son, balloons the car with his cigarette voice,

phlegm, ashes, and all, slamming his palms, which
once held the American phone as he called for Mom
in Macau, against the sweat-stained steering wheel.
Outside, the cold night folding into us. Unlike an
American, I crack open the lotus of my mouth,
only to find—in its place—my grandmother’s lectures
on being the good son. Back in China, I might have
turned out the dragon I was supposed to be. Here,
in this blurry mass of violence and all the roads
unrooted, we started selling jade spines for survival.

III.

They are a watercolor wash of mountains at the
intersection—awaiting silence and its birds—our
tires sticky with flattened 初心⁷s, which flew out
of the open window a few red lights back. I turn
to the rearview mirror once more and find Mom
staring at the Moon, imagining it to be me or this
country. Her throat now shot by 后羿⁸, there are
not many moons left of this. Back when she was a
lotus in Macau and moonless, she would listen to
Dad recite poems at the pond’s edge. So much has
waned. They were in love once, and I was not
here. I was not here, and they were in love. In the
beginning, there is always love. With the radio
still playing dubstep, the Chinese star in Mom’s
phone straining for a note out of his reach—
muddying his tone raspy—we pull into our
driveway with morning chirps, the Moon fighting
for more sky. In China, there is still Sun.

¹ *Cháng’è* - Chang’e is the Chinese goddess of the Moon.

² *Měiguó* - “America” (in Mandarin) The direct translation is “beautiful country.”

³ *Èrhú* - a Chinese instrument (in Mandarin)

⁴ *Gǔzhēng* - a Chinese instrument (in Mandarin)

⁵ *Chǒuhuà* - “ugly words” (in Mandarin)

⁶ *Bēibǐ* - “ruthless” (in Mandarin) *Bēibǐ* is a harsher form of ruthless.

⁷ *Chūxīn* - “initial heart” (in Mandarin)

⁸ *Hòu yì* - Hou Yi is a mythological Chinese archer and Chang’e’s husband.

新传统

Let it be known. We circled—
barefoot—the parking lot, searching
for our car, last seen by villagers to be ferrying
torsos across a river. No matter, the living do
what they know best. From this foreign shore
I now call street, I hand body parts to you
for wear: a father's shoulder, a mother's
back—the things we do for survival.
At home, everyone is missing a chest,
taken by a bullet tracing itself through
a new frontier, and I name it immigrant.
There, you wear your country's skin well.
When the sun gives, you could hang it
alongside my wedding dress, but I am
a boy, and you looked into my face, bruised
with makeup, to remind me, so you don't.
Though I am your son, it's too easy to forget
how I ran from love, how the Chinese night
eats its simple men; how these streets
swallow cars whole. One thing is easy
to keep, your old language I use for poems
and pillow talk. Here's one: the jade talismans
you brought over from the village have made
like a wishbone, and split itself home. Follow it,
but you can't—your tires are slashed. You run,
but everywhere is made of streets, and everything
is slashed. Come back, we are in the parking lot
again, holding your son—stroking his cheek—
finding in his mouth the second half
of everything you've ever wanted.

The Whale

for David

Every sky held you like you were
born into it, their wispy clouds cutting

barnacles away from your underside,
holding you in still life. I watched

from below, the sky burning with
blush. In my restless city full of time,

I traced myself through for a better view
of your flippers, cleaving air like love.

You were singing your song, incapable
of damage. But lately, foreign whalers

from cities I have only heard of, never seen,
whisper that your heart holds miles, weighs

as heavy as distance. The last time
you swam, there was a man you descended

for, streetlights brushing up against
the soft animal of your parted lips. He slept

within your vessels—cavernous with life—
drinking blood as you ferried him

to the edge. There, he drove a calloused
harpoon through your make-believe blubber.

Listen, in our lives, there is always a man
to be hated. In mine, it will never be

your turn. I know this because you know
me. I am a boy, and I don't know

if I'm yet evil. Stay far away enough
to close enough to see me standing below

in a street at midnight, head cocked up,
admiring an unruined animal pretending

to be human. You can hide in this. Here,
I can blame my whole world on you.

Here is love, and it's not an ocean.
Here is a piece of me that will do
no harm.