

White Fox

This is something I will never tell my mother: I like her better when she is Chinese. During big gatherings, someone inevitably brings out a case of mahjong. The tiles spill onto the table and clack against each other, the miraculous and wonderful sound of bamboo, ivory, bone. When my mother plays, she is aggressive. She snaps. She is quick, and sharp, and funny. She is always thinking ahead, never playing dumb, angry in defeat, cocky in victory. More than anything, she is unconcealed, barefaced, brazen and bold, *open*.

But this openness, which I inherited from her, was a trait she tried to iron out of my skin. From her constant carping I learned that American and Chinese values are not as different as some might think. Bad American women are open women. Bad Chinese women are too. Be a bad Chinese woman in America and your life is over.

Who would ever want you? my mother once asked, and I spent the rest of the night trying to forget how to talk.

It could be worse. An anomaly among Asian immigrants, my parents never hurt me physically. The closest my mother got was a purple hairbrush, flung into the wall with so much force it punched through to the other side. But the flurry of her violence never fell on my skin. This was not so for my friends, who knew belt lashes, black-eyes, bruises across their back. My sister's elementary friend-turned-enemy had a burn mark on her wrist. The father of my closest boy friend had two wooden planks by the door of the garage, one for each of his troublemaking sons. We learned that the most beleaguered of the playground gang had managed to elicit two week armistices from their parents after threatening to call CPS (but history tells us that if only one set of shoulders is burdened with reparations, war will just spring forth again.)

My father, whom this story is really about, I think, was quieter about it. From him, my punishment was abandonment. From him I heard it many times, that if I continued to speak so openly and act so hastily, he would leave me out in the dark, to fend for myself. That was what my father feared most, I think, so that was what he threatened his children with. If we were truly strong, we would learn to survive.

I used to play the threat out in my dreams. I would sit on the red-brick porch for seven days and seven nights, then pick myself up by the bootstraps and venture fearlessly into the world. I was a machete-wielding scientist, cutting through the dense undergrowth of the Amazon and discovering a cure for cancer in the bulbous cap of a reclusive mushroom. I was a charismatic but lonely genius who slept on a college campus bench. One morning, I met a socially-impaired coder with curly hair, and together we invented the next Facebook. No, a *better* Facebook, one that didn't bend to government pressure or steal people's data. I was a ruthless economist, the King of Wall Street, dashing through mergers and acquisitions and hirings and firings without any emotion at all. No one could stop me, because I was intrepid. I was hardened to the world. I was a director. I was shooting my movie in Northern California. The opening scene took place on the tennis courts by the community college, and I won an Academy Award because the film was damningly provocative. Most tempting, I was an author, and I wrote a series of stunningly imaginative novels. I was catapulted immediately into stardom. Then I

returned home to the red-bricked porch and as a reward for my strength, my father welcomed me back with open arms.

When I was twelve, I met a girl. She was one year older than me, but a good six inches shorter, Vietnamese, with dark hair, dark eyes. Her palms, which were rough but warm, were always wrapped around my forearms. We first traded names in a physical education class. She said that I looked strong, and asked if I could carry her like grooms carry their new brides. What I remember most, though, is the shape of her teeth.

Her canines were slightly more pointed than the human standard, and when I focused on them, they made her look beastly. That observation grew into a game I played with myself. Whenever she opened her mouth, I made her look more and more wild in my mind, lengthening her teeth, curving their architecture, sawing off any dull ends. Eventually it activated the primal, evolutionary function that drew a connecting line between sharp teeth and *barbarian*, *brute*, *savage*, *danger* — and at the consummation of that process, I believed I loved her.

She could be cruel sometimes, living up to the reputation of her teeth. For a week before her fifteenth birthday, she refused to talk to me, refused to even walk on the same sidewalk my feet landed on. Her birthday was on the last day of May, and before this whole nonsensical spat had even begun, I had purchased a stuffed dog with shining, golden eyes from a Hallmark store. On the morning of May 31st I stood in the kitchen with her present in my hand, debating whether or not I should just send it back. I remember that the red curtains of the house were still closed. In the end I decided I was not ready to let her go, and brought the dog to school.

I handed it to her during the Pledge of Allegiance, which neither of us had ever stood for, and whispered *Happy Birthday* while keeping my gaze perfectly straight. At *one nation* she pulled the dog out of the bag, at *indivisible* she began to cry, and by the time the more patriotic students sat back down in their seats, she was apologizing. In the end I felt a revulsion — I had just grinded my own teeth down into petty dust, because this was another reminder of how easily I could be subdued, tamed, subjugated.

The truth was that I was soft. Unlike the rest of my family, I could be pushed around by anyone who thought to use me like that (and that included my parents, who casually fell into the habit of weaponizing their children against the other.) They had divorced long ago to irreconcilable differences, but at least they agreed on what the perfect daughter should be. “Be strong,” my father would snap. “Stop crying,” my mother would say. The perfect daughter is noiseless, but clever, sharp-tongued. She is a facade. She is wary, cautious, and analytical. She does not show her cards, she does not give any emotions away. She is not weak. She is at peace with herself, and cannot be affected by any external force.

I think that I am very little of those things. I figured that if I told them about this ordeal with the dog, they would be incapable of looking at me with anything short of shame.

It became evident in high school that the Vietnamese girl was not an exception. I liked girls, and she was just the first. I did the only thing I could with this realization: I went looking for stories. I searched for remnants of myself in the brassy vessels of old dynasties, but more often than not my hands came up with water seeping through my tightly-clenched fingers.

Chinese mythology, despite being filled with legends of all sizes — heroism, civil wars, gods of lightning, shapeshifting animals, daytime ghosts — only contains pockets of queerness that have barely enough sustenance to count. And that's for men. You might as well forget women entirely.

Still I counted myself lucky to stumble over one of those pockets. I read in the public library that homosexual activity in Chinese mythology was often written in military terms, and between test prep books and autobiographies, I laughed. This stuff was interesting, but not positive or encouraging in the slightest. But it was partially my fault; I should have sought solidarity from postmodern texts and contemporary poetry, not from old tomes.

Eventually it broke my heart, because everything was about violence. In one story, an old farmer is repeatedly sodomized by a dragon — a dragon! — and must seek a doctor for his wounds. In another, two male lovers die, and after a warped cycle of reincarnation, get to be heterosexual in their next life.

It was not better at home. My parents only talked about gayness in relation to an external, alien world, as if they existed in a bubble. And they were always so callous with it. They discussed it as one might discuss a new policy to raise the price of gasoline. Displeased, disinterested. All in all they'd rather not hear any of it. They'd rather sweep it under the rug. I like to think that my parents could not tell I was gay — would they have talked like that if they knew I was? I hope not.

And like a lot of children, I couldn't help but dream. I couldn't help but invent. I built aerial screws out of clouds and paper, and set them alight in my mind. They traveled through continents and time, burning bright as they flew, sending Prometheus in all eight directions. I got good at it, and after my flying dreams had reached all corners of the world, I created better stories. Good stories. *Fantastical* ones.

The stars, as usual, are bright. Whenever I step out into the evening, I keep my head up to look at them. My mother hits me for that habit. I need to keep my eyes sharp for danger, she says, for men that lurk in the foliage and would like to kill a being like me. But my ears are also pointed up, at the bright, glimmering fires of the night, so I do not listen to her.

This evening, the stars are blue, white, and red gems in a quarry, scattered, few and far between. They are tempting, they beckon me to chase them, and I understand why man hungers to own them. My eyes take over my feet, and before I realize, I have followed a star all the way to the city.

This is my first time seeing human geometry, and I make a game of it. I jump from curved tile to gently sloping wood to pagoda balconies, challenging myself not to trip. I make my way towards an inner courtyard. At the center is a bubbling fountain, a pearlescent orb set in the center. A stone dragon curls around it. I balance on a windowsill to watch it.

Then I notice the girl in the room behind me. She looks to be my age, old enough to sit in on diplomatic meetings, but young enough that they will keep her out of the war rooms. I have never seen a human this close, and out of novelty, my skin becomes unfurred like hers, my bones adjust to a two-footed science, my ears slide down to the side of my head. I become human. Then having felt the newness of the form, I shift back into my original shape.

“Hello,” she says. My ears prick forward. Her voice is the sweetest chiming of a bell, played over the fearless cadence of a thousand-horse army.

“Hello,” I reply.

She does not alert the guards or scream for her servants. Instead, she tells me what I am by writing it in ink on her windowsill. *Huli Jing*. 狐狸精. The first two characters mean fox, she says, running a finger down the white bristles of my forehead, pressing a fingertip into the soft and damp peak of my nose.

“But this last character,” she says, “is *Jing*. It means *perfection*.”

I stare at her, and I am perfect.

Huli Jing have always lived in The Land of the Green-Hills, north of Tianwu. From afar it looks like grass, but on the south slopes you can find thick crops of jade and on the north slopes are bushels of green cinnabar. We exist in one clan, and infighting is rare and quickly settled. Children are taught to be clever, unemotional, and above all wary of humans, so I do not tell my parents about the princess I have befriended.

For centuries, we have maintained a precarious, tenuous relationship with humans. We watch them from the edges of the forest, slinking back into darkness if they seem to spot a flash of silver. Humans do not trust us either. In some periods of our history, we were hunted to near-extinction. It is better now, in contemporary times. In this modern age, a handful of the Huli Jing have even broken from the pack. They shed their fox skins at the edge of the green and live with the humans.

At first I only visit the princess on No Moon nights, slinking out under the cover of darkness and practicing my metamorphosis. It feels like bubbling, like the bottom of a waterfall. A frothiness begins in the pads of my feet, and after a series of warbling pops and cheerful effervescence cascades up my form, I become human. I walk 500 steps as a human, learning how to balance an upright spine, then allow myself the comfort of 100 steps as a fox. Slowly I get to the palace, to the princess, 600 steps at a time.

Every time I go, she teaches me about humans. Their ears, which are attached to the sides of their heads, get worse as they age. The same thing can happen to their eyes, as if a silk curtain is drawn over them. They make loud noises, with their palms, with calfskin drawn over wooden barrels, with heated bamboo stuffed with gunpowder. They eat all sorts of things — pork, chicken, duck, yams, broad beans, turnips, fish, shrimp. A lot of them like to eat sweet things too, like fruit and red beans, and in the summer, a sweet mixture of milk and rice. The princess says she’ll give me some when the days grow warm.

In return I teach her about us. None of our senses worsen with age, except maybe our willingness to meet strangers. We are constantly talking with the spirits in the trees, grasses, and rivers of the world. On Full Moon nights, the adults will dress up as humans and the most adventurous will head to a nearby village. They will bring back toys for the children — painted wooden horses, whistles in the shape of birds, rattle-drums — and fine silks for themselves. They will not speak with humans except to haggle. We children like the toys, of course, but our favorite things to play with are the coins, especially the ones with circles in the center. We drop them from treetops and see who on the ground can hook the most with their claws.

Soon, it becomes clear that we are not teaching each other about our peoples, but about ourselves. Everytime I leave, I linger on the windowsill, waiting for one more secret to fall from her mouth.

“My father is the king,” she says, two years after our first meeting. “He has been gone for the last decade of my life.”

“Where is he?” I ask. I fear that he is dead and she is surrendering to the roundabout, metaphorical communication of humans.

“He and ten thousand men are fighting the stone giants at the border of our kingdom. I write to him with every cycle of the moon,” she says, while motioning for me to come deeper into her room. With every step forward, my mind meets the clangor and clamor of my heart. Even we fear the stone giants, who are insidious and mysterious beings.

From under the floorboards, the princess pulls out a huge scarlet and golden chest with shimmering tassels dangling from the edges. From the string around her neck, she produces a large key. In this chest is everything her father has sent her from the war front — braided blades of grass, the frayed leather of a horse’s bridle, an empty snail shell as thin and papery as the pages of her book.

When all is closed and tucked back under the floor, she turns to me. “Will you come during the day?” she asks. “I want to show you the fish pond.”

I am old enough now that my parents do not ask me how I fill my day, so at the moment of dawn, when the sun spills over the mountains in a fit of runny yolk, I leave the hills for the city. I see more humans that morning than I had the rest of my life. Some are tall and bent like willow trees, some are rounded in the stomach but like pillars in the legs, some have no hair at all, their heads looking like bronze orbs. There is something intoxicating about most of them. They smell like the flower patch west of my home, purple and dreamy, like amaryllis steam from a hot spring. A few, though, linger too long on me. Their eyes drag. At first, I fear they can see past my human disguise, but soon I realize that by staring back at them I can push them into peace. They drop their gazes and walk away. Impressed by my newfound power, I step more lightly down the winding path.

That night, I decide I cannot hide it from my parents any longer, and I make my confessions under the round light of the moon.

“I have committed a crime,” I say. “I have fallen in love with a human.”

My parents are good, far better than I had ever hoped for, because they do not believe in chastising what has already been done. They seek to ease the arrow’s path in the sky, not adjust the past position of the archer on the ground.

“It is not a crime,” my mother says first.

“You are grown now. Do you wish to be with her?” my father asks.

This is the standard that all parents should conspire to — without needing me to speak, they understand my intentions and hopes, my fears and dreams.

“Be careful,” they say. “There will be humans who will want to take advantage of you and your kindness. Remember to use your teeth.”

In a perfect world, we keep our fangs always sheathed.

I promise to visit once every moon. At the edge of the green, I tell the kits of the clan that I will bring them wonderful things — lotus cakes with fatty yolks in the center, silver peeling bells on red string, and stories, so many stories of humans. Then my four legs become two, and I walk to the city.

This is what happens to a Huli Jing who decides to join the ranks of humans. The skin on their torso becomes speckled with crescent moons, like birthmarks, like a robin's egg. Their hair starts to grow, and must be cut regularly. Their fingernails too, must be trimmed with higher frequency. Some nights, they will be unable to sleep, and will feel the need to stalk through the roads as if hunting for prey. This is because nature seeks to remind these Huli Jing of who they are, in the way of homecoming.

When the princess sees me at the gates of the palace, she smiles, and I decide that this must be home too. I feel it in my heart: the bamboo slips of my old life are tied into a bundle, and a new row for my new life is laid out in front of me.

As we finish the rest of our adolescence, hand in hand, the princess's personality flares out at the edges. It is striking, written in bold ink on white wood. Her tongue becomes silver, a scimitar blade sheathed until the moment calls for it. She is daring, intrepid, one of Zheng He's ships that plunder the high seas. More than any of it, she is kind.

Of course she had suitors upon suitors vying for her hand. On the fifth day of each month, she and I would peer out of our window and see them below, a gold and scarlet line like a dragon, each man a scale, snaking through the many complexes of the palace. Their drums and cymbals wake up the entire earth. But not once did she lie to a suitor, not once did she charm them when she had no intention of considering marriage. "I am not looking for a husband," she would say, then send them away with a ginkgo leaf that brings good fortune to its holder.

Life was good for a time. Although she still worried for her father, and although I still missed my family, we spent our days together and we were happy. When she began to preside over the royal court, she inducted me into a scribe's post. I did not mind. I already loved listening to her speak. And sometimes, when she glanced at me across the candles and ornamental tiles of the court floor, I thought that perhaps she loved me too.

One afternoon, we fall asleep in the courtyard. Needing to visit the market before sundown, I wake up just in time and see that the princess has fallen asleep on one of my long, beautiful waterfall sleeves. For the first time since my birth I unsheath my fangs, and cut the cloth. My work is neither quick nor elegant, but in the end I manage to make my way out of the palace without disturbing her sleep.

I go to the market with one sleeve that drips to my ankles and the other ragged and shorn. The moon has risen by the time I return to the palace. The princess is still in the courtyard, sitting underneath the pine tree, wringing my cut sleeve in her hands.

I sit down across from her. The moonlight falls upon her face in the most gentle way.

"You are beautiful," the princess says, and traces the slope of my forehead. "I have wanted to tell you that since our first meeting. Do you remember that night?"

"I will always remember it," I say. "Since then I have always wanted to be by your side, and you have always wanted me there."

We remove each other's silks and fold them gently so as to not damage their finery. She kisses me once, then marvels at the tiny moons on my torso. "They're arranged like the stars," she says, and with her finger, draws a tapestry to connect them all.

We are so happy now, so glad at our mutual unraveling. We are laying our chests bare, splitting our skin to reveal our beating hearts. By loving another we have been brave, and the world is rewarding us for it.

At the end of the first month, I take her to The Land of Green-Hills. My mother and father are waiting for us by the cinnabar fields with crowns of flowers. We spend the night surrounded by the children, the princess answering their requests for stories. A tortoise monk battles a white snake. The tears of a widowed wife collapses a section of the Great Wall. Two lovers rise from a grave together. The cowherd and the weaver girl embrace on the white bridge in the sky.

Soon after, the king stops writing back to the princess. For three moon cycles she sends letters with no response. When I talk to my parents, they tell me that the war between the humans and the giants has reached a volcanic peak, a tipping point, a moment of breaking.

On the longest night of the year, the princess and I hear a clap of thunder and rush outside. The deep red palace gates swing open, and standing in front of us is the 10,000 man army. At the very front, on a white mare fit for a Shangdi, is the body of the king. A chorus of soldiers fill us in.

"He leapt into the army of the stone giants."

"He brought his jian into the heart of the giant king and killed him twice."

"He sacrificed his life to save our kingdom."

I rush forward to the king. His hair is gray, his skin brown and weathered from so long on the front. There is still something royal in his face, in the wide set of his shoulders, but it is hard to imagine him as a king, as cloaked in near-death as he is.

But he is still alive — I can feel it in the air. The wind is frantic, rushed, panicking. There would be no breeze if he were dead.

The soldiers rush their king to his chambers, the doctor, the shaman, and the princess quick on their heels. I sit outside, staying vigilant and listening for changes in the wind. Any temporary gusts or falterings would be a premonition of death.

At dawn, the princess bursts through the doors.

"What is it?" I ask.

"He is alive, but he has changed. He has become fearful of even the smallest shadow in the room, the slightest shift in the air," the princess says. "And now that he has defeated the threat at the border, he seeks to get rid of any danger within the lands."

My heart revolts.

"He wants to hunt down the Huli Jing," she says.

"We are not dangerous," I protest. "We do not want to cause unrest or chaos. We are a peaceful clan. We live quietly, we do not look for trouble. Is there no way to persuade him of this?"

“I do not know,” the princess says. Her eyes are red. “I will keep trying, but he says that as soon as he can stand, he will ride out to The Land of the Green-Hills.”

My mind runs away from me. I could sneak into the king’s chambers at night, and kill him silently. No one would ever know the truth. Except the princess, I realize, who has always been able to see through to my center. If I killed her father I would never see her again.

She sinks her fingers into my shoulders. “Maybe,” she says, “we can make a plea together. You can show him your true form, and I will tell him that you have been the best companion.”

The hair at the back of my neck rises. I fear that the king will immediately have me killed. I might be the first execution of a new age, my pelt tied to a flagpole, the flagpole raised at the head of the hunting party that will ravage my home.

So I remain silent, thinking.

Over the next two months, the king recovers his strength. The princess visits him every day, bringing food and stories and pleas not to hunt the Huli Jing. I go only once, when he is asleep. I do not wish to speak with him, but to see and understand the man who may soon become my enemy.

Slowly, the king’s legs begin to work again, and at the suggestion of the princess, he takes short walks around the imperial gardens. One day, the princess makes plans to meet him by the ginkgo tree. “We can convince him,” she says. “I know we can.”

I think she is wrong, but I go anyway.

In the winter, the ginkgo tree is naked and bare, quivering in the wind. This is not a good day for negotiations, but as a human, the princess cannot sense this. She marches up to her father.

“Will you reconsider your decision to hunt the Huli Jing?” she asks. I linger in the background, unwilling to speak out of fear that I will reveal myself.

The king shakes his head. He has healed, but looks even older now. “If we do not attack first, they will. Perhaps not soon, perhaps not for decades. But victory and strength lie in building something that will last far longer than you.”

“You’re wrong,” she says, and I expect the king to strike her. Instead he shakes his head. “I am not wrong. In three days time I will begin the hunt. You will come along, and see how dangerous the Huli Jing can be.”

Before I know it, I am speaking. “Will you wait until Xiàzhi to begin the hunt?” I ask. “It is months away, but it is an auspicious day. You will want the gods on your side if you want to hunt the Huli Jing.”

The king agrees, partly to placate his angry daughter. I will have until Xiàzhi to come up with a plan, but my mind keeps returning to the murder of the king.

The next few months are torturous. I cannot sleep in the palace, three doors down from the mad king, and I cannot return to The Land of the Green-Hills without an answer for my family. So I haunt the gray earth in between my two homes. My human form becomes unkempt. My hair grows long and tangled, my fingers become dirty, my skin pales and sallows under the sun. The few humans and Huli Jing that cross my path run back and tell their friends about the ghosts in the woods. It feels like centuries have passed.

My nightmarish reverie is only broken a week before Xiàzhi, when a colorful procession comes through the forest. It is the princess's seven cousins from the north, come to visit her and their ancestors' shrine. I follow them as they pass through. There are four sons, and three daughters, and all of them are like willow trees, swaying in the wind. The sons are tall, with flowing black hair and broad shoulders. They will join the king on the hunt. The daughters have even longer and more luxurious hair, and each of them carries a parasol in the crook of their elbow. They will go with the hunting party and set up a picnic in the woods.

The sun rises on Xiázhi. It is a holiday, so all the palace officials and most of the sentries have been dismissed. The king will be relatively unguarded. If there is any moment to carry out my act of violence, it will be today. My feet carry me back to the palace. The layout is still familiar to me, and I easily make my way towards the king's room. I do not pause at the princess's window — if I see her, I will be unable to go forth with my plan.

Then the wind shifts. At first I ignore it — nothing will keep me from my goal — but soon it becomes a swirling and anguished squall. *Danger. There is danger.* I leap to the roof, and see the seven cousins racing towards the king's chamber.

“Help!” they shout, clamoring against the red door. I do not wait to see the king, not when I can run faster than even his fastest horse.

I rush to the shrine of the princess's ancestors. There, on the sacred earth, I see the prince of the stone giants, come to get revenge for the death of his father. He holds the tip of his sword against the princess's neck. My wrath spirals away from me. I will tear him into shreds, and tear those shreds into darkness. I shift without knowing, and my metamorphosis shocks the prince.

Even after years and years of neglect, my fox form is no less perfect than it originally was. My claws are sharp like sabers from the north. My teeth loom like crescent moons from my jaws. My fur is kingly, imperial, white as snow and soft as silk. I put my body between the princess and the stone prince.

“Who are you?” the prince asks.

“I will give you one chance to turn around and never enter this kingdom again.”

“What have I ever done to you?” he asks. “Why do you stand between me and the humans? You are Huli Jing.”

“If you are to turn back, do so now and — .”

The prince is not so honorable; before I even finish my sentence he is running towards me, sword raised above his head. When he fails to strike me, he turns his attention to the princess. Then my fury is fully unleashed, and flies forth like a blade.

I chase after him and sink my claws into his back. He is a good fighter — I will allow him that much — and for a while his sword clangs against my teeth like metal scraping against metal. Then I hear the stamping of horse hooves against cobblestone. Charging towards us is the king. He distracts the prince and leads him away. But the king is weak and only manages three good swings before his arm falters.

It is enough for me to gain the upper hand. I see an opening, and rushing forward, I snap the prince's neck between my teeth. His body crumbles into thick and clumpy sand, swept away by the wind, and his sword clatters to the ground.

The king and I stare at each other across the divine land of the shrine.

“What kind of Huli Jing are you?” he asks.

I put my fangs away. “I am like every other one to walk this earth.”

I see it in his eyes. They are like suns dipped in water. He is changed.

The next morning, the king requests the presence of 500 of his best scribes, 500 of his best horses, 500 of his best riders. They will run out to all parts of his kingdom with his new decree, that the Huli Jing are to be the prized friends and allies of the human kingdom.

I bring the news to my clan, and for a week we rejoice in The Land of the Green-Hills. When I return to the city, I bring a caravan with me. My mother and father, my cousins and my siblings — we all march into the human city. We are met not with the fireworks and drums that the Huli Jing hate, but with quiet wind instruments and strings of flowers between the buildings. I see the princess tying paper decorations to red, lacquered pillars, and know that she must have arranged the whole thing.

Then we celebrate this new allyship together. Human children and Huli Jing children run wild through the streets together, chasing alley cats and holding up pinwheels against the breeze. Adults share food, splitting pork buns and pouring tea into each other’s cups.

The princess’s seven cousins marry seven members of my clan, and that summer we are blessed with wedding after wedding after wedding. At the end of each celebration, the princess and I sneak away together. We sit in the courtyard where we first met, and connect the stars above us in the cleverest ways we can.

For centuries afterwards, both the Huli Jing and the humans will tell my story. They will light candles, and speak of the white fox who fell in love with a human princess, who prevented a war and united two kingdoms. Parents will look at their children and ask, “Why can’t you be more like her?”

Reality has not been so wonderful.

When I was still young I believed I could be the noble, kind, magnanimous, *lucky* Huli Jing who made peace between the humans and the foxes. I was sure I could convince the Americans of how good the Chinese were. Not all slit-eyed devils or cheap beggars — let me be your proof. Let me do great things for your culture — let me cure your incurable diseases, let me write your century-defining book, let me make life even more convenient for your everyday American citizen — and that will show you how good and useful the Chinese can be.

And I would make my parents, undeniably, indisputably, absolutely proud by doing so. I would make sure that they no longer had to worry about me, or themselves. Sometimes, I dreamt even bigger than that. I dreamt that I would make Chinese parents across the entire country proud, because I had terraformed America into a place suitable for a safe and happy life. I could be *perfect*, and through my perfection, I could convince the antiquated king to shake hands.

I used to be angry with my parents because they never taught me how to live. Now I realize that they were teaching me how to survive, because they were never sure about their new home. Survival — that was the most they could ask for, so that was all they focused on. And now that I am older, my teeth are always bared, and life is a wary, wary act. Now that I am older, I feel myself veering into violence. The roots of my teeth ache, they demand to be used. But what use am I? Asians are spit on in the streets of my city, my San Francisco. They are shoved onto

subway tracks, they are struck with baseball bats and flying glass, and I sit at home with my anger. I feel guilty for my fantasies now, in which I dig out my own baseball bat from years of the sport in elementary school. I stalk the corners of big city blocks, looking for aggressors, and when I find one, I swing my metal weapon without hesitation. I break heads open like summer watermelons, I crack chests and rib cages, snap femurs and shins. I imagine someone wanting to hurt my grandmother, and I dream about the many ways I could kill them for that crime. And then I return to reality, and another name disappears.

The worst years of my life were when this fury coupled with my perennial fear. I thought that if I told my father about my love for a girl, he would threaten to kick me out until I renounced it. And I was no longer young, hopeful. I knew that if he abandoned me, to the dark, I was angry enough to fade into it completely. I became a child again at age sixteen, dreaming about that red-bricked porch. But my dreams were different. They were less sophisticated, done in less detail.

If a language has only two colors, they are bright and dark. If a language has three, they are bright, dark, and red. It is in this three-colored language that my dreams were born. From the red-bricked porch, I stand, and I have become a big, shaggy dog. My eyes are red, my tongue is red, my teeth are bright, my body is dark. The world is bright, and I rip through it.

It's hard to convey the brutality of this dream. I am like the dark Norse wolf at the end of the bright world, the red Doom of the Gods meant to swallow the bright sun, hurtling across the dark earth and leaving red ravine trails in my wake. Dark, white, red, dark, white, red. The color of blood, of meat. I ruin the world with my anger against it, my desire to consume it.

I practiced by telling my mother first, because I was not scared of her punishments. Even if she gave in to physical violence, I knew I could weather it. So as she drove me back from swimming practice, I told her.

I don't remember the exact details of it now, but I recall a vague jaggedness, my gag reflex threatening my throat with an acidic knife. She did not speak to me for the rest of the night, and the next morning, resumed speech as if nothing had happened.

I waited another six months to tell my father. One night I twisted up my heart — a ragged and weak piece of cloth — and told him the truth. He was angry, but did not force me out of his house. I left him alone and sat quietly in the kitchen.

Ultimately I could rationalize both my parents' reactions, so I did not blame them for it. Survival in America was hard enough as an Asian girl. Everytime I went out by myself, I knew they feared for my safety. And by being gay, all I did was increase their fears tenfold. *How the hell is she supposed to survive like this*, they were asking themselves.

After three hours, my father came down and sat across from me.

"It's not a big deal," he said, and for a moment I believed that this was acceptance. Then he continued, "When I was young, I loved my male friends too. So you're not gay, unless you think I am too. Now we don't need to talk about this anymore."

I have seen pictures of my father in his youth, and what surprises me most is the volume of his hair. Even before I saw his pictures, I was always preening myself, running my hands roughly through my hair to pull strands loose from the ponytail, ruffling my bangs across my face, forcing my waves to be thicker, taller, fuller. I always thought I looked best when my hair

caved over my forehead, just like my father looks in that photo. And while I recognize my father, I recognize that boy even more. It is difficult for me to imagine, but still I do: that boy holding hands with his best friend as they walk through the gentrification of Shanghai, palms on palms, swinging, loving.

I also imagine two boys sometimes, shirtless, lying together quietly in bed. Neither of them are my father, because if one of them was, it would be an act so disrespectful that I'd be struck from the earth. The boys are pale, lean. Their dark hair falls like a river over their eyes. One of them smokes a cigarette, and raising his hand like porcelain, hands it to his lover.

Or maybe my father was not in love. Maybe I am transposing a Western, label-centric descriptor to his relationships. Many indigenous groups have always had more than two genders: the Hawaiians had *māhūs*, the First Nations had Two-spirit. So perhaps in a way that was similar, my father had a way of loving his male friends that did not need to be corralled into Western rules. Still, I questioned it.

Recently, my first girlfriend ended things with me. The worst part was how she did it — beginning in January she faded away from me — what is that line, a whimper, not a bang, right? It was quiet, a lame dissolution, coward-like (and as soft as I was, I was *never* a coward). I was at school, away from my family and my home, and it was a hell of a time. For my emotions to depend on an externality — that was true humiliation. Every time I ran into her afterwards, I wished I could shift into a body she would not recognize. But trapped in my familiar, human form, all I could do was smile and pretend that she had not, with the tips of her clean and polished fingernails, pushed scraps of shrapnel through my chest.

I call my mother about my pain. Our relationship has improved in recent years, because she gave up on parenting me and tried to be my friend instead. And she is good at being a friend. When I called her, I was searching for this vein. I was hoping that she'd give me some pithy advice, like we were two best friends in a nineties sitcom, drinking margaritas with too much tequila. But she veers back into parenthood.

“Don't think about it,” she says. She tells me to ignore it and focus on my education instead. “If you listen to me, you might be like me one day. Look how much I have now.”

She is referring to her new house, her American Dream, the culmination of all her hard work and achievements. I hang up feeling more miserable than I had before.

I skip dinner, but at least, I force myself to wash my hair. Afterwards, I lay on my bed, hair hanging off in a twisted waterfall. I am cringing at the water leaking onto my blankets, thinking about how I should have put a towel underneath, when my father calls to ask when I am coming home for the summer.

I go through the motions and tell him about the flight I had booked months ago, but I can't help it — emotions bleed through my teeth. I am not good at pretending. My father is very good at reading between the lines. It's a bad combination when I want to hide something.

He asks if I'm all right.

I never meant to tell him — I still taste the bitterness of how poorly it had gone with my mother — but there he is, waiting on the other end for me to speak. I sit up on my bed, ignoring

how my wet hair falls against my back. “Would it be strange if I talked to you about a relationship?”

His voice gets higher, or maybe I imagine it. “Why would it be strange?”

“Because we don’t talk about these kinds of things. But my friends are all young and they don’t have experience so I need to talk to you.”

He tells me to talk. So I talk, and use gender-neutral pronouns throughout. My father is not a dumb man.

I explain how, against logic and cleverness and any ideals my parents wanted me to inherit, I had stuck my hand out over the chasm, hoping to feel something on the other side.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he says, and I get angry.

“That’s not the point. I did it. So what now?”

I can see my father shaking his head an entire country away.

And then I say, “I have a hard time regulating my emotions.”

“I know,” he says, and my heart grows soft, like a red apple left to oxidize on the countertop. He has always been the first to criticize me for my volatility. *You have to be stronger*, he said. *You can’t be weak like this. You can’t be soft like this.* But he’s not doing this now.

It is a reflex. Because the tiger is hungry, it leaps on the hare — because I want to hear my father say it again, I repeat my confession in a different slant.

“I’m horrible at handling my emotions,” I say.

“I know you are,” he repeats. “I know, I know.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” I ask. It is a plea; I am a child asking my father to fix the scrapes on my knees.

He is silent for a moment, and I wonder if he is thinking about his friendships in old Shanghai, or his militant divorce from my mother.

“You just have to feel it,” he says. “No one ever got only the easy pieces of the experience. Everyone always gets the whole thing.”

I am silent.

“Does this help?” he asks.

“Thank you,” I say. The words are too formal, too stiff, but I don’t know how to express my gratitude without crying. We say goodbye, and I hang up. Then I go outside, into the night. As I walk, I think about my father’s love, which has spread across the world and turned it blue.

My world is not at all like the one of the Huli Jing. Animals do not become human, or kill stone giants. Kings do not look past their misgivings.

My parents affixed a single character to my name, an addendum to change the course of my life. Not *jing*, but *qi*. Not perfection, but fortune. Oftentimes I hear it as irony. Good luck, my ancestors said, before firing the clay and casting me out of the clouds. But tonight it is more of a wish. That all of my family who came before me saw this sky, this moon, this pain, this world, and tried, just like me, to live through it all.