

To Red Dust

Under the cover of night, I read about the Forbidden in a language
my parents do not speak.

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My father is not looking at me because he is driving.

Our World Is Red Dust, he explains, preparing me for The Master.

The Master speaks slow, a mantra from the book with the lotus
flower. Foreigners gather at his feet. My father says, Put Your English
To Use. I make up a poem about rivers flowing into our lives, and
then we all turn into bubbles. They clap and task me to do all future
translations. I feel not too guilty because the Master only speaks in
metaphors.

My mother hides in the bathroom and angry whispers: They Are
Swindling You. But she can't say that out loud because what if his
powers are real. A Master from her home province entrapped
disbelievers in a roomful of snakes. It's true, all the newspapers said
so.

Of Course, my mother says, You Are Taking His Side.

[STATIC]

In the dark of a theater:

*The mother's body is too close—so close it vibrates, blurs into
shapeless color. The filmmaker recites her mother's words.*

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My father and I swallow Tibetan Red Flowers to keep us from getting
sick as the train climbs up to Lhasa. The veins in my friend's nose
popped when she took the plane straight up; the bleeding stopping
only when she got on the plane home.

Over three days, the train rises, guiding with it our eardrums, lungs,
stomachs. On the top bunk, I dream I am the lost reincarnation of
Panchen Lama. On the plateau above the clouds, I am taken away by
a hundred robed hands.

On day two, the air presses inward and the land outside looks
violated, stripped bare. My father begins throwing up. He is
ashamed. He stares into the small tin trashcan beside his bunk. I take
out the trash, wipe his spit with a wet tissue. He says, It's Good You
Are Strong.

[STATIC]

On screen, the naked body of her mother. Forbidden imagery. The filmmaker is too-close, unrelenting in her nearness.

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A lump hardens in my mother's breast. In the hospital bed, she sees a vision of Ye Su through the white screens, the singing white savior her grandmother talk-storied her into magic streams that ran through my mother's childhood.

She blows dust off her grandmother's Bible and the three of us are baptized in the upstairs bathtub. I decide to go first.

My mother wakes singing, her voice ringing clear as a girl. Six a.m., her singing wakes us to her schedule of walks and organic foods and the desire to live.

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This is not the first trip people have mistaken me as his lover. Two Beds, he and I stress, when they write down our shared name. The first time it happens, we are on a beach in Bali. I am fourteen and just beginning to feel ok in the bathing suit stretched tight across my chest. My father goes to the bathroom and leaves me haggling with the surf-shack men. Your Boyfriend? They wink.

I stutter, blood rushing upwards and pooling in my head.

[STATIC]

The filmmaker's father finds her filming her mother in the bathroom. A father's rage; a husband's envy.

Her mother: It's as if you have trespassed/ on his property.

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My mother is learning to live in a body less woman than mine—but my body is hers, her arm is my arm, her eyes are my eyes, and her new concave hardness my own.

You Are The Reason I Will Live, she says. I grip the showerhead and sponge her off carefully, rinsing away the streaks on her face.

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My father and I spin bells in the temples of Lhasa. Ready-made prayers lift from their golden bellies into the heavens.

The bells never end. One sends another into frenzy. We touch them, mouthing prayers because we want things too badly to speak them out loud. I watch my father's lips turn.

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On the first of each month, my father visits the Master in the mountains. He says food is forbidden there.

He donates money; our names are carved into the gilded temple gates, the stone railings, the orange shingles.

My father doesn't tell us until our names are forever engraved. He takes me to the temple, asks me to find our names, horizontal next to each other.

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The Man My Parents Don't Know I Sometimes Say The Forbidden Word To is driving. The road is icy. He is concentrating. He needs silence to keep us safe. Music? I ask. No response, he is keeping us safe.

[STATIC]

She pulls the viewer close/ too close to see properly/ this itself is erotic/ interacting up close/ close enough for the figure to be boundless.

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The second time it happens is also the third and the fourth. We are sitting in a restaurant, a table for two, the candle twitching between us. We are at a pool, we are checking in, we are at his college reunion.

My Daughter, he clarifies.

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My mother begs my father to throw out the Master's Idols. She points to the Master's calligraphy, the tapes, books, gold figurines tucked into corners. Her pleadings always turn my father mute.

One day, we wake to find it all gone. As if our past life never existed.

[STATIC]

Mother's words, read out by the daughter.

The words: I don't know what you mean/ when you talk about the gap between us.

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My mother's friend injects sheep hormones to keep her estrogen flowing, keep her husband around, temper her hot flashes.

My mother isn't like that. Her body running dry relieves her the sin of sex.

Now, her only sin is wanting. He Only Speaks When She Is Home!
She wails into the phone.

I know she wants me to overhear, wants my father to overhear.

[STATIC]

The viewer gives up her own sense of separateness.

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The Man I Sometimes Say The Forbidden Word To reminds me to say it out loud in daylight, as well.

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My father chases me up the stairs with the house key. I am seven. In our new apartment, my own room. We are racing. He presses the key into the back of my pants. I screech, laughing, breathing hard, taking the stairs two at a time.

This is our game. Then I get older and stronger and ashamed, I run faster so he can't reach me.

[STATIC]

The camera pulls back.

Now, the mother's nakedness in her entirety.

To the left of the frame: a window, new light.

Light traces her mother's body, illuminating it as the daughter finally pulls back.

Mystery light, light without source. Bubbling within the frame, beneath the cracking paint, between the film grain.

The flashlight inside my covers. Light tucked inside my palms, inside the membrane of a page. In clutched breath, I am mouthing The Forbidden.

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The Forbidden Word cries to her mother, who does not hear her, because she does not exist in the language of this household—she is stuck between the crevice of our teeth:

is the meat dripping thick oil, is my mother
moving between the pork and my half
nibbled bowl;

filling me until my body knows she is seeing
me;
at times so sour I suck in my jaws, retreat
inside myself;
let the syrup roll off my tongue and down
my throat like tapioca bubbles before I've
had the chance to swallow.

I say The Forbidden to my parents in a different language, tracing its
etymology back to the stories they were once told;
where they came from, who they were, who
they can be;
my father as my father and my mother as my
mother, before they were either those things,
before they came to be they, before him and
her and boy and girl;
before the wanting existed for an I.

Silence swells, splintering out from beneath the table legs, from
beneath the paint and window ledges, blooming into the space
between us until
it is all there is, all there can be;
we breathe in its cotton body, catch figments
of its hair with our own.

The Forbidden Word bows to her Master, who shaves all her hair,
lights an incense to blacken three dots on the top of her newly sleek
head;

*Chu Jia Le, the Master announced,
You Have Left Home/
You Have Joined Us*

The Master strips The Word of her Name, tossing it behind his
shoulder into red dust;

mouth to mirror
carving name
to fog -

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The three of us in a hotel room. I am trying to change. I hook my bra
beneath my shirt. I do not change in the bathroom, I do not want to
change us, to offend my father my mother, to see my changing body
in the mirror.

My mother says, Are You Not Ashamed In Front Of Your Father?
As if I am not of my father's body.

I do not want to change/ I do not want us to change.

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When I say words out loud they become real.

Under the rising cover of night, I lift the Forbidden from my mouth.

Notes:

- Laura Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1-22.
- *Measures of Distance* (dir. Mona Hatoum, 1988, 16 mins)