

## Jade Woman (玉女)

My mother said the bracelet had been in our family for several generations—it once belonged to a beautiful woman. The bracelet had been buried, then unburied, then buried again. I slipped it on, the stone cuff cool against my wrist. Not green but a mottled blaze of red, orange, and black—already I knew what to wear with it. The weight felt like riches enough, a talisman of good fortune, but my mother shook her head. Bad luck, she said. She may have used the word *cursed*. I've never been one for jade, preferring silver, platinum, diamonds, but what Chinese American child hasn't grown up surrounded by this stone? In China, amulets were placed in the mouths of the dead to purify. For the living, jade protects when worn close to the skin. When I asked what kind of bad luck it brought, my mother didn't answer. When I suggested we throw it away, she only sighed. *As if misfortunate can be so easily remedied*. You can't throw such things away, told me—such things are our inheritance.

## Pantoum for a Single Bowl of Jook

It starts with a bowl of rice, and a lot of water.  
I never called it *jook*, the Cantonese word for Chinese rice porridge.  
My husband's family speaks Cantonese, my parents speak Mandarin.  
Born in America, my husband and I are fluent only in English.

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We speak the language of our heritage like tourists on vacation.

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Pointing to a steaming vat of soupy rice works well, too.  
No one wants to embarrass themselves by saying it wrong.  
Jook vendors look at us in pity, think *banana*—yellow outside, white inside.  
We look Chinese, but we're not. We look American, but we're not.

No one wants to embarrass themselves by saying it wrong.  
Our children don't understand Chinese at all.  
We look Chinese, but we're not. We look American, but we're not.  
Our children like their congee hot, topped with scallions or fried dough.

Our children don't understand Chinese at all.  
They forget the meaning of their Chinese names.  
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This is as close as they get to tasting who they are.

They forget the meaning of their Chinese names.  
They don't know what province their grandparents are from.  
This is as close as they get to tasting who they are.  
It starts with a bowl of rice, and a lot of water.

## The Chicken is a Phoenix

Joyce Chen tells her audience that in China, foods are often given glamorous names. For instance: lobster is Dragon Shrimp, chicken is Phoenix, pork meatballs are Lion Head. Sometimes, she says, people get confused. They think Lion Head meatballs are from a lion, like spoils from a recent hunting trip in Africa. No, no, she assures them. They are just big meatballs. No lions were killed in the making of these meatballs.

I had Joyce's cookbook before I found her television series, archived in black and white from 1961, seven years before I was born, the opening credits accompanied by the soft tinkle of white capiz shell chimes never found in a Chinese home. Placards revealed each ingredient—4 cups ground pork,  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup soy sauce,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cold water,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon dry sherry, 1 teaspoon light brown sugar, 1 teaspoon salt,  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon MSG, 4 tablespoons corn starch—accompanied by ceramic figurines of Chinese men with long white beards. Hearing her explain how to grind the pork butt (*in China we have to chop it by hand!*) was like being in the room with someone I loved.

Joyce, our trailblazer, our Julia Child. What Chinese woman didn't want to be like you? My mother has a picture in the *Denver Post* back in 1975, preserved forever in Getty Images, chopsticks in hand as she hovers over a serving platter of "traditional Chinese food." My mother-in-law made the local Chico newspaper for egg rolls fried up for New Year's. My aunt in White Plains had a Chinese cooking school, a Chinese restaurant, and several Chinese cookbooks. It didn't matter that they all had master's degrees—in social work, in home economics, in English literature. Chinese cooking was their membership card in America.

Last weekend, my 14-year-old son and I tried to make lion head. My son poured enough salt to double our blood pressure; the meat was too wet. But we stuck it out, spooning our lopsided creations onto wilted cabbage, white rice on the side. Here was my childhood. In every bite I could taste how hard we tried, how much we wanted to do this right, to be able to say we'd done it, and done it well.

## Wuxi

1. I'm dismantling my father's Wuxi photo album, using an X-Acto to separate pictures from the page. My mother is cleaning her basement and doesn't know what to do with it. What isn't saved will go in the trash.
2. My father made his albums with thick black card stock and glossy vinyl letters, shiny duct tape running up the spine. He made a baby album for me, two inches of photographs and letters, heavy as a brick. When I ask him about it now, he says he doesn't remember.
3. The Wuxi album is filled with people living along the canals in Jiangsu province. A fortune teller, a bicycle attendant, a gathering of seated men, each with a teapot and teacup. A close-up of the gabbling of a two-story house. There is a dumpling maker, a crowded noodle stand, shredded posters plastered to a cement wall. Men playing cards, men standing in line, men gazing into the middle distance. Houseboats line up alongside concrete constructions, laundry strung from windows with shirts hanging limp, as if waiting for a body to slip in.
4. On the back cover, there is a year—1981. In 1981, I was 13 years old, three years away from the last time my family would ever live together under one roof. My brother and I would leave for boarding school and then our parents would drift apart, carried by the current of their own desires.
5. The remaining photos stay attached to their pages—they will meet their end this way. I take a picture of the detritus, to document these photos, my father, his work. That he put his hands on this album and made it in a way I have just unmade. On top of the pile, a final picture of a woman looking over her shoulder, nose and mouth obscured. See her eyes, how they gaze at you. See how they question what you are looking at.

## Why Some Women Go to War

This is what the brazier told her: *leave while you can*. It spoke in a whisper, but she heard it clear enough. She was making tea for her father, warming the room for their sleep. The earthenware glowed green. *A match has been made while you were at the market. Do you want to know which lucky farmer will have you as his wife?* Three sparks spiraled in the air—birth, marriage, death. *I promise you will not be impressed*. Outside, her father gazed long at the stars, slow to come inside. *It is my duty*, she informed the brazier. A lick of flame touched her wrist, an admonition for telling lies. She picked up a charred stick and stabbed the coals, breaking one in two. The fire burned brighter but would lose its heat faster—she bit her tongue until she tasted blood. *What choice do I have?* She placed the kettle half-filled with well water atop the brazier, hoping to silence it, already knowing what it was going to say. The brazier spit, then belched as another coal broke in two.