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THE MAGIC WHIP

for Chris

It is the mark of
a virgin,
the *yellow blossom girl*
men would bid
to deflower—the black pigtail
that brushes its path
along the waist, hips, backs
of the knees, tied with
a ribbon or red yarn.

“No woman is allowed to bind her feet and every Chinaman must wear a queue,”
ordered the first emperor of Qing.

I saw the black down on my shins,
thought I was turning into a man.

She trades her voice for human legs, rises naked from the sea to meet the prince
on the beach. She wraps her shame with a cloak of brown hair that drapes to the
ankles. I cried over the book stolen from a sealed library, and vowed to keep my
hair long.

I poured the kerosene into a wooden basin, and let go of my braids. “Are you
sure you want to do this?” asked the old village woman who gave me the folk
recipe. “Another way to get rid of those bugs, once and for all, is to shave your
hair.” I nodded, bent my head, and slid the black cascade into the kerosene.
Fumes smarted my eyes and pricked the scalp like needles. Count to three hun-
dred and all the lice and the eggs will be dead, I muttered through clenched
teeth. I was fifteen, had just left home to work on the village farm. I was deter-
mined to save my hair, at any cost.

She combed her daughter’s hair,
coiled it into a bun, crisscrossed
with strings of pearl, velvet flowers,
a golden hairpin of the phoenix
to hold it tight.

The husband came to fetch her.
Kneeling on the bed, she licked
a hole through the paper window,
watched him carry her youngest girl
into a bridal sedan, face wet behind
a scarf. She wanted to join
the wailing to wish her good luck.
But she had no more tears.

When they caught the adulterers, the villagers broke the man's legs and plucked
the woman's pubic hair clean.

After midnight
the only lights are from the beauty
salons along DeKalb Avenue
of Brooklyn where they braid
each other's kinky hair
laughing, slapping their thighs.

In Hong Kong, she cut the braids she'd kept for fifteen years. She arrived in JFK
the next day, the new c-bob perched on her scalp like a battered helmet.

The Chinese Boxers braided talismans into their queues.
We have magic whips, they sang in unison.
No bullets from the foreign ghosts
can ever touch us.

A woman without pubic hair is called a "white tiger"—a man killer.

Hair curling up over his shirt
buttons, hair running down the back
of his neck, hair rolling out of his sleeves,
hair on his legs when he comes
dripping from the ocean.
And he's my "honey," my "sweetheart,"
my "daddy."

She caught him again with a woman in their bedroom. "I can't go on like this. You keep the son and I'll take care of this one," she pointed to her swollen womb, and left. Within a week, her hair became matted and the braids formed into the shape of a cobra with a raised hood, lice in the locks like worms. No man would go near her.

Tough hair on a girl equals stubbornness equals disobedience equals bad luck.

His advice to women friends:

Keep your hair long

if you want to find a man.

"I'm so tired of my hair. I'm ready to cut it," I whined to my lover.

"If you cut it," he said sternly, "you'll have nothing left."

Another outbreak of lice in the nursery. Teachers pulled her out to examine her head. They always started with her, for some reason. They didn't know that lice hated kinky hair. Its nappy jungle made it too difficult to reach the scalp for blood.

The laws of the Great Qing: removing a man's queue is punishable by decapitation.

He caught me shaving with his razor at 3:00 A.M.

"I thought Chinese were hairless," was all he could say.

The nurse shaved her, told her to relax. The doctor walked in, face behind a mask. He injected anesthesia into the naked armpits, then cut along the marks drawn on the skin. He peeled. She felt the tugging and pulling, her arms jerked up and down like a puppet. He finished the last stitch. "All gone. No more sweat, no more fox stink," he said cheerfully. "Are you really eighteen?" he examined her face. She looked up at his sparse eyebrows, couldn't tell him she was fifteen but had already smelled so bad that nobody would come close, couldn't tell him she had to sell her pet chickens to pay for this. "I know it's none of my business," he said. "But if you are younger, the sweat glands may grow back and you'll need another operation."

I grew up hearing this every day:

A man without a mustache

is a man without a brain.

Names for haircuts: crimp, bangs, snake mane wave, curlicue, buzz cut, spike, coif, upsweep with attitude, brow-tossing, ringlet-topped, shoulder-brushing, tousle-finish, wind-blown, dred-like, razor-cut, luscious body, hip with a flip, down-to-there.

When the last Qing Emperor was dethroned, the New Republican soldiers patrolled the streets and shaved off men's queues.

A treatment for hysteria: depilation of pubic hair. When blood rushes to the pulled roots, the "heated" head will cool down.

She got a perm at Midtown Hair. Her lover opened the door and laughed. "Where did you get that Afro cut?" The next day, she found a Korean salon in Flushing, and straightened all the curls. She ate Ramen, ten cents a package, for the rest of the month.

Hairpainting	Colorsilk	Natural Instincts	Nice 'n' Easy
Les Rouge	Nutrisse	Color Shock	Gray Chic
Xtreme FX	Consort	Born Blond	Just for Men

Women constantly stop her on the street and say,

"I love your braid.

Don't ever cut it."

The body dies, but the hair continues to grow.

MIXED BLOOD

At fifteen, my father ran away from his widowed mother to fight the Japanese.

"I'll come back with a Ph.D. and serve my country with better English and knowledge,"
I pledged at the farewell party in Beijing.

Home—家—*jia*: a roof under which animals live.

When asked where I'm from,
I say "Weihai," even though
nobody knows where it is,
even though I've never been to that place.

He lost his left ear in a bayonet fight with a Japanese soldier. Two years later,
American cannons split his eardrums.

The night I arrived at JFK, the Mets won the World Series and the noise on the
street went on till three. I got up at six and went to work in my sponsor's
antique shop in Manhattan.

The bag lady stopped her cart on the busy street and peed onto a subway grate.

"Did you jump or fly?" asked my landlady from her mah-jongg table. Then she
laughed and told me that her husband had jumped ship ten years ago. When he
opened his fifth Chinese take-out, he bought her a passport and flew her to
Queens.

The only thing he liked to talk about was his old home, Weihai, its plump sea
cucumbers and sweet apples, men with broad shoulders, stubborn thighs, and
girls with long braids making steamed bread.

"I don't know why," she said, shivering behind her fruit stand. "Back home, I
could go for days without a penny in my pocket, and I didn't feel poor. Now, if
my money goes down below four figures, I panic." She scanned the snow-cov-
ered streets of Chinatown. "I guess I really don't want to be homeless here."

I hired the babysitter when she mentioned that her hometown was Weihai.

The president visited the rice paddies in Vietnam where a pilot had been downed thirty-three years ago.

My father tried to return to Weihai after his discharge from the Navy. With his rank, he could find work only in a coalmining town nearby. My mother refused to go. He went alone, and soon contracted TB. Mother ordered me to date the county administrator's son so my father could come home.

"No, I'm not sad." The street kid shook her head.

"How can I miss something I've never had?"

On her sixtieth birthday, my grandma went home to die. She would take two ships, one from the island to Shanghai, then from Shanghai to Yantai. From there, she would take two buses to reach Weihai. I carried her onto the big ship at the Shanghai Port, down to the bottom, where she'd spend three days on a mattress, on the floor, with hundreds of fellow passengers. "How are you going to make it, Grandma?" I asked. She pulled out a pair of embroidered shoes from her parcel and placed them between my feet. "My sweetheart and liver, come to see your old home soon, before it's too late."

House—房—*fang*: a door over a square, a place, a direction.

He never lost his accent, never learned Mandarin or the island dialect.

Weihai, a small city
in Shandong Province,
on the coast of the North China Sea,
a home, where my grandfather
and his father were born,
where my grandma married,
raised her children, and
now lies in the yam fields,
nameless, next to her husband,
an old frontier to fend off Japanese pirates,
a place I come from, have never seen.

Back from America, my mother furnished her home on the island, bought an apartment in a suburb of Shanghai, and is considering a third one in Beijing. "A cunning rabbit needs three holes," she wrote to her daughters, demanding their contributions.

They swore, before boarding the ship, that they'd send money home to bring more relatives over; in return, they were promised that if they died, their bodies would be sent back home for burial.

I drink American milk—a few drops in tea.

I eat American rice—Japanese brand.

Chinese comes to me only in dreams—in black-and-white pictures.

My mother buried her husband on the island, where he lived for forty years.

Room—屋 —*wu*: a body unnamed and homeless until it finds a destination.

We greet a stranger with,

"Where are you from?"

When we meet a friend on the street, we say,

"Where have you been? Where are you going?"

家—a roof under which animals live

房—a door over a square, a place, a direction

屋—a body unnamed and homeless until it finds a destination

—my tangled roots for home.

I CURSE BECAUSE

You say the streets are paved with gold.
You say even the maids have maids.
If we work hard, our dreams will be fulfilled.
So we come—on foot,
by boats, ships, planes.

“Do me a favor, and get a new name,” said my boss. “Something American, like us.”

In the alleys and backstreets of Chinatown are job agencies, where opium dens and brothels used to be. We gather behind the barred windows and iron gates, waiting to be dispatched as cooks, dishwashers, delivery boys, as receptionists, waitresses, nannies, housekeepers, button sewers. We work under the table for minimum wage.

First bite of pizza—throw up on the boss's shoes.
Dirty streets littered with the homeless.
No public toilets on American streets.
Can't understand a word, despite my English degree from Beijing University.
Armani suit man spits on the sidewalk.
Pork tastes like woodchips, tomatoes like mud.
Lost in the subway maze.
So high the skyscrapers, so low my basement.
Vast shopping malls, my empty wallet.

“Please, please become an American citizen,”
my brother begged me over the phone,
his voice severed by the long-distance wire.

“This is the only way I can come to America.”

To keep my job, I changed my name to Penelope, then Penny. For ten years, I was known as Penny Wan.

Through the barred windows of Ellis Island, we gazed at Manhattan's silhouette. Paradise was only a river away. Around us were the names of the deportees—the sick, low wits, anarchists, criminals, potential prostitutes—names carved into the walls with pens, brushes, nails, knives.

This is how you bus a table, as she stacked dirty plates on her arm.
This is how you serve clients, she grinned, her face a mask of meekness and rage.
If they spit in your face, turn the other cheek.
If they forget to leave a tip, smile and say "Welcome back."
Forget about your Ph.D., having taught in Beijing University.
You start from here, zero, she stamped the ground, hard.

We know the stink and hunger of a ship's hold. We know the unforgiveness of the desert. We may be raped, drowned, dehydrated, caught, deported. May never pay off the loans to the snakeheads. May end up dead in a sealed truck, in the sea, become ghosts in deserts and foreign streets. We know. We know it all. From rumors, stories, eyewitnesses, movies. But we're still coming, like marching ants, locusts, tidal waves. The moon guides us, pulling us to the other shore, by the heart.

The boy knelt into the sand, and kissed the soil of America.

Eight moves within eight months: Flushing, Brooklyn, Elmhurst, Harlem, Elmhurst, Rego Park, Flushing, Flushing. Finally a steady income from a law office—\$5 an hour cash, and moved into a house on Farrington Street, Flushing. \$200 a month, heat and electricity. Across the street, a Korean brothel. Sharing kitchen and bathroom with a Vietnamese, a Malaysian, two Fu Jian ship jumpers. Our Hong Kong landlady believed in energy saving. Two hours of heat a day—more than enough. Taped our windows with plastic, wore sweaters, coats, hats, and gloves to bed. Fought over the toilet and stove, over who ate what in the refrigerator. But we held out. This was our home. Our dream.

Restaurants and gift shops line Chinatown streets like crows.
I constantly got lost in the maze, even though the Twin Towers stood a few blocks away.

The U.S. consulate rejected my brother's third application. He talked about borrowing thirty thousand dollars from snakeheads and jumping ship.

Did you have a toilet? bath? hot water?
Could you afford a car? a house? three children?
Color TV? VCR? Laptop?
Could you say whatever you wanted in your own country?

Last stop Flushing. Run up the subway steps. Do not look around. Do not glance at the car purring along Farrington Street. Do not panic at his open fly, pale hand up and down under the wheel, ring gleaming in the moonlight. Do not hear the whispered beckoning: Hey pigtailed China doll, won't you come with me?

"You're in America now, you have nothing to fear," said my sponsor at JFK.

He inches his van through fish and vegetable stands, through underwear, bras, slippers, perfumes, through baseball hats, dragon T-shirts, Chanel bags, through throngs of shoppers and gawking tourists. "Too many Chinese, too many fucking Chinese!" he mutters as he enters the heart of Chinatown.

"Don't tell me it's impossible. I'm willing to wait five, ten years. I'm willing to work, restaurants, laundromats. I just want my daughter to have a good education and freedom to choose where she wants to live, like you, Sister."

5:00 A.M. The old man arrives at Confucius Plaza. Feet apart. Knees bent. Hands before the chest. A ball of fire. Sixty years of tai chi. Under the statue. Never missed a day. Since the ship's arrival. No wife. No children to inherit his savings. He's an American, an overseas Chinese, venerable Laundromat Wong on East Broadway.

We've been deloused, tagged, marked with chalk.
We've answered questions like "How many legs does a horse have?"
We've been stripped, poked in the eyes, ears, private parts.
When the officer called our names aloud,
we ran down the steps, screaming,
into the arms of our estranged fathers, husbands, brothers, and sisters.

Go to Ellis Island. Go find your ancestor on the Wall of Honor. Trace it. Trace with a pencil. On paper. Our ancestors. 500,000 names. More to come. Inscribed. Steeled.

I sent home \$400, my first month's earnings as a waitress, along with a photo of myself at the airport, grinning from behind a trunk, two fingers heavenward in the shape of a V.

What do you really want?
What more do you want?

GREAT SUMMONS

A ritual song from 300 B.C., China, to call the souls of the dead to return home

All names are beautiful.

Benilda Domingo, 37, maintenance, 93rd through 103rd floors.

Milagros Millie Hromada, 35, 98th fl.

Nizam Hafiz, 32, 94th fl.

Oscar Francis Nesbitt, 58, 86th fl.

Colleen Deloughery, 41.

Joseph Ianelli, 28, 94th fl.

Patrice Braut, 31.

Gertrude Alagero.

Rocco A. Medaglia, 49, 104th fl.

Joseph Calandrillo, 49, 99th fl.

Catherine MacRae, 23, 93rd fl.

The sound of calling, voices
of wingless birds
hurling through the open eyes
of children, fingers pointing
heavenward, to the screens.
Big birds? Angels?
Where are they going?

All faces are beautiful.

Leonard J. Snyder, 35.

Christopher Dincuff, 31, 98th fl.

Khalid Shahid, 35, 103rd fl.

Ed Beyea, 42, 27th fl.

Darya Lin, 32, 78th fl.

Lindsay C. Herkness, III, 58, 73rd fl.

Ralph Gerhardt, 33, 105th fl.

Ron Fazio, 57, 99th fl.

Jason DaFazio, 29, 104th fl.

Geoff Campbell, 31, 106th fl.

Wesley Mercer, 70, 44th fl.

City of faces along
shop windows, buses,
subways—the Great Wall
for the missing and the “confirmed.”
Fingers combing accordion floors,
air pockets, severed limbs, bones, flesh—
we want them all.

All bodies are beautiful.

Joe Rivero, 34, 107th fl.
Taimour Kahn, 29, 92nd fl.
Scott Hazelcorn, 29, 105th fl.
Christopher Sean Caton, 34, 105th fl.
Brian Monaghan, 21, 96th fl.
Saranya Srinuan, 23, 101st through 104th fl.
Raymond J. Metz, 37, 84th fl.
Joseph Visciano, 22, 89th fl.
Tony Savas, 72, building engineer, WTC 1.
Michael DiAgostino, 41, 105th fl.
Michele M. Reed, 26, 100th fl.
Jody Nichilo, 39, 105th fl.

Let the chanting rise from temples, mosques,
and the bells ring through churches' steeples.
Let the fragrance of bread and coffee
waft from darkened houses, street corners,
to summon the spirits, to bring them home
by charred hands.

Charles Burlingame, plane's captain on American Airlines Flight 77, survived by a wife, a daughter, and a grandson.
David Charlebois, Washington, the first officer, “handsome and happy and very centered,” said his neighbor, Travis White.
Flight attendant Jennifer Lewis, 38, wife of flight attendant Kenneth Lewis.
Kenneth Lewis, 49, husband of flight attendant Jennifer Lewis.
Bernard Brown, 11, student in Washington. He was embarking on an educational trip to the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary near Santa Barbara, California, as part of a program funded by the National Geographic Society.

Sarah Clark, 65, sixth-grade teacher in Washington.

Asia Cottom, 11, student in Washington.

James Debeuneure, 58, fifth-grade teacher in Washington.

Rodney Dickens, 11, student in Washington.

Eddie Dillard.

Charles Droz.

Barbara Edwards, 58.

James Joe Ferguson, director of the National Geographic Society's geography education outreach program. He was accompanying the students and teachers to the Channel Islands. "Joe was here at the office until late Monday evening preparing for this trip. It was his goal to make this trip perfect in every way," said John Fahey, Jr., the society's president.

Wilson "Bud" Flagg of Millwood, Virginia, was a retired Navy admiral and retired American Airlines pilot.

Darlene Flagg.

Richard Gabriel.

Ian Gray, 55.

Stanley Hall, 68.

Bryan Jack, 48, senior executive at the Defense Department.

Ann Judge, 49, travel office manager for the National Geographic Society.

Chandler Keller, 29.

Yvonne Kennedy.

Dong Lee.

Leslie A. Whittington, 45, professor of public policy at Georgetown University. She was traveling with her husband, Charles Falkenberg, and their two daughters, Zoe, 8, and Dana, 3, to Los Angeles to catch a connection to Australia. She had been named a visiting fellow at Australian National University.

John Yamnicky, 71.

Vicki Yancey.

Shuyin Yang.

All stories are personal.

Must be told,
and retold till they blossom
between our lips, take root
in the belly button, till the currents
of sap, thicker than blood,
roar in our veins, till eyes

can open again to the blazing sun,
and the moon no longer weeps in the dreams
of children, till every name, face,
every shattered hope, calls
from the womb of memory:

*"Let some goodness
come out of our deaths.
Let the pain of the living
bear some fruit."*

ON A PLAYGROUND IN BROOKLYN, A RETIRED NEUROLOGIST FROM BEIJING IS CURSING A HENAN GIRL

Sit still, you little pumpkin shitface.
Stop fidgeting. And stop
whining about your sore feet.
If your mother hadn't left you outside
a shoe factory, dumping you like bad luck,
you'd be digging mud and collecting cow dung
in some godforsaken place.
You'd be lucky to have some corn gruel
to fill your stomach, some rags
to cover your ass. And God bless
if your father agreed to send you
to school for two years, just enough
to get a job sewing buttons, embroidering
napkins and tablecloths at some Chinese American joint.
You'd be lucky to marry a peasant from another village,
to have a kid within the quota.
If a boy, you'd be pampered.
If a girl, you'd be cursed and beaten.
Or if you were pretty, which you're not,
you'd sell your flesh at hotels, bus stations,
become some rich man's mistress.
If you were intelligent, which I doubt,
you might get into college,
suck up to your professors for a better grade,
always nodding, smiling
even if you didn't understand or agree.

But this is how fate laughs in our faces.
You, a little nothingness, live in a brownstone
in this filthy rich neighborhood, and I,
a venerable doctor and professor,
wait on you 14 hours a day, 6 days a week, for minimum wage.

You pick at your food like a spoiled princess.
Your Gap outfit and Elefanten shoes
cost more than my daily salary—
all because you call some white-skinned
lawyers Papa and Mama, who hardly see you
except on Sundays, who want you
to speak English without an accent and hopefully
pick up a few Chinese words from your nanny.

No way!

Listen carefully, you little hoof.
A whore is always a whore, just
like a dog will never grow ivory from its jaw.
Born in a peasant's sty, you'll always smell
of mud and straw fermented in piss, your eyes
the cutting wind from the Yellow Plateau,
your feet thick, thighs bulging with muscles,
hips wide for labor, sex, birth,
even though at three and a half you still look
like a two year old, still wobble
when you stand or walk, the back of your head
flat like the bottom of a pan from the orphanage crib.
Believe me. I'm a doctor. I know.
Once a peasant, forever a peasant,
just as a Chinese remains a Chinese
wherever she goes, even in her grave.

Why are you crying, you little oily mouth?
You're not supposed to understand a word.
Two years in America should have wiped out your past,
erased every memory. But who am I kidding?
A night alone on the cement steps of a factory,
a year spent in an orphanage. They say
the trauma has stunted your growth hormones.
But who hasn't gone through a few things in this life?
I've survived two prisons, three labor camps,
the Cultural Revolution, and now this plight
at age sixty, to become a maid for an outcast

to support my good-for-nothing son and his family.
And I'm still standing tall, defiant.

So Lili, my silly pumpkin face,
wipe your nose and walk.
Time to practice again.
You're stubborn, and proud. Good!
Don't ever let your parents' frown seal your lips.
Don't let their butter and steak mush your brain.
You're Chinese, a Chinese peasant girl.
Now take your steps.
It's all right to stumble, to fall.
Here's my hand.
Take it.

I'm your countrywoman.
I am your mother.

TSUNAMI CHANT

I'm not a singer, but please
let me sing of the peacemakers
on the streets and internet, your candles
in this darkest moment of night,
your bodies on the steps of government buildings,
your voices from the roots of grasses and trees,
from your pit of conscience.

I'm not a prayer, but please,
please give my voice to the children
in Baghdad, Basra, Afghanistan,
and every other bombed-out place on earth,
your crying out in pain and fear;
please give my hands to the mothers
raking through rubble for food, bodies;
my sight to the cities and fields in smoke;
my tears to the men and women who are brought
home in bags; and please give my ears
to those who refuse to hear the explosions,
who tune only to censored news, official words.

I'm not a citizen, but please
count my vote against the belief
that the American way is the only way,
count it against the blasphemy of freedom,
against a gang of thugs who donned crowns
on their own heads, who live for power
and power only, whose only route is
to deceive and loot, whose mouths move
only to crush, whose hands close
only into a grave.

I'm not a worshiper, but please
accept my faith in those
who refuse to believe in painted lies,

refuse to join this chorus of supreme hypocrisy,
refuse to sell out, to let their conscience sleep,
wither, die. Please accept my faith
in those who cross the bridge for peace,
only to be cursed and spat upon, but keep crossing
anyway, every Wednesday, in rain and snow,
and my faith in those who camp out night after night,
your blood thawing the frozen ground,
your tents flowers of hope in this bleak age.

I don't possess a bomb, don't know
how to shoot or thrust a sword.
All I have is a broken voice,
a heart immense with sorrow.
But please, please take them,
let them be part of this tsunami
of chanting, this chant of awakening.