THREE WOMEN SKY FALL

by

Qinglan Wang
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

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Date: _______________________________ Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Three Women Sky Fall

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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Bachelor of Arts
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DEDICATION

For Peter Streckfus, Susan Tichy, and Kyoko Mori.

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ABSTRACT

THREE WOMEN SKY FALL
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George Mason University, 2016
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If you are reading this for a formal abstract about a book of poetry, then you will be sorely disappointed. The following is a creative hybrid poetry manuscript. It explores the cross-language and cultural experience of being Chinese, German, and from Hawaii.

“no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory / of whiteness.”

-- Williams Carlos Williams, “The Descent”

Woman, female, other – haunt me.

These words shape a cloud of faces.

They glow and undulate, draw a border about me.

In Memory of White Spaces

I am a tongue tucked within a body held in time, susceptible to the amorphous nature of language, and vulnerable to remembering: a space, whiteness, a personal re-construction. The page looms in front me, as a block of white stands in place of my memory. Inhaling, the brush soaks in ink. Exhaling, the brush spreads black across white. A slow piecing of events, faces, and places eases the white into grey fog.

A meaning is captured and begins to be remembered. I define one word at a time, combing out the snarls of three languages that I have inherited. I start with Chinese. The tongue I was born out of. The tongue that I cling to.

Writing is as repetitive as the steps to re/membering a past. Every Chinese character is a composition of strokes. Collected in unified rows and columns, each stroke creates a radical. The etymology of radicals traces back to the Oracle Bone Script (甲骨文), the first set of written Chinese that dates to the Bronze Age of China. Used in divination, the Oracle Bone Script first appeared as scratches on small animals bones and turtle shells.

A basic set of scratches formed a vast language. Revisiting a memory is enacted in reading.

Nü

女

It takes two lengths of rope to bind four human limbs together and render the body captive. It took one wrung out kitchen rag to tie my left wrist down to the leg of the dining table and one year for me to learn how to eat with my right hand. My Nagbu, maternal grandma, still gloats about this triumph. Since it is Chinese tradition to gather around a circular table for meals, I must learn the right ways of eating. One girl cannot disrupt the flow of meals and bring future shame to the family. I was a test from the heavens, sent to see if she could right the natural flow.

I stared at my full bowl, my right fingering the slippery chopsticks as my left crept up the teak leg and pushed my blue bowl closer to the edge. The left hand holds bowl below chin while the right pushes food into mouth. Every child must learn to eat with two sticks longer than her nose, must weld them as an extension of index and thumb.
Tethered, I was a picky eater, not caring for wilted spinach or flakes of fish that slid off of chopsticks. Instead I speared sliced dark meat and grabbed buns with my fingers like a peasant.

To balance a grain of rice between two chopsticks is a display of refinement and breeding. Balance is in everything, repeated my mother over and over as she instructed me in calligraphy, after I was kicked out of the Chinese Learning Center. It's all in the wrist.

Her limpness pulled perfect wisps across the page. It was not my fault for knocking over the inkwell, I thought to myself. It wasn't my fault. I didn't mean to. It was more fun to grind ink than hold a thousand-haired brush. It was more fun to leave black handprints than to gently sweep the brush across rice paper. Two hands gripped my shoulder as the teacher gave me back to my mother. I was a terrible girl, stubborn and unbecoming. Her black bob bounced along, explaining my un-girlish behavior. Tight-lipped and apologetic, my mother took me back. You need try harder to be a girl. Every calligraphy lesson with my mother ended with my decisive throw of the brush against the page, bleeding the black ink into sheets of rice paper. Resolute in my resistance, I wrapped my arms around my knees and sulked in the corner until she left the room.

To stare at one grain of rice between two chopsticks is a waste of time. Years later, I learned to tuck in my elbows while holding a fork and knife over a plate. A land of sauce and vegetables bordered a slab of meat. I imagined falling face first into this plate-like-map. Prostrated with elbows tucked in and knees crossed below a tented napkin, my body, a hinge of two opposing lines, becomes as simple as a woman.

父

The word for parents in Chinese is 父母 (fumu: father-mother). The ordering of the characters depicting parents reflects Confucian tenet of filial piety, or 孝 (xiao), which is a sense of virtue and respect one holds for father, elders, and ancestors. Extrapolated further, filial piety defines a larger scale of cultural identity: father comes before mother, as husband stands before wife, man before woman, and sovereign before an individual.

Honor and fear make up a form that provides and strikes. It was not a stick my uncles used but the upturned black heel of a leather shoe. For the first three years of my life, I lived with my extended family while my parents worked abroad for two years. I turned three with the feel of rubber soles imprinted on the back of my thighs. I learned not to respect but to resent the scuff of heels as they entered the room. My legs reddened at my stubborn refusal to sit still, to be silent, to be good.

My earliest memory of my father is when he took me from Shanghai to Berlin in silence. He returned to fetch me because it was his duty. He, a tall stranger, pulled me through the air and dropped me onto a land of ashen white faces.

It was not a stick my father used but a leather belt that held his jeans to his waist. It first flew down onto my flailing back as I screamed and kicked at the apartment door. Cold air rushed at my face beneath the crack of door and floor. My mother stood off in the corner, waiting for my confusion to calm me, waiting for my father's tired anger to subside, waiting to gather my crumpled form into bed. Hiccupping, I promised these two strangers that I would be good if they let me go back.

A father runs the family unseen. He appeared only in bank statements, wads of cash on the kitchen table, and monthly stuffed animals. He was only overheard in arguments, where plates and chairs crashed into tables and tempers melted into fists, belts, and voices. Left behind are the crumbs of his distance. He is the one who faded first into the background, when my mother took me across two oceans, remarried, and started the turbulent cycle again for a third time.

A father is the silhouette trailing after me as I move forward from one place to another. At times, he is just another man in the long line of men crossing my path.

Sometimes I linger in conversations with him, in hopes he will grow familiar, benevolent, and comical. He is but a face that mirrors too closely to my own. No longer do I run away from the arc of lashes. I do not rise against the stance. I drop the pen and let him fade.

母

母 (mu) formal for mother is a five-stroked character. Starting from top left corner, the brush pulls down and to the right, making the first bottom corner. This marks the pair of bound wrists. Lifting, the brush returns to the top left, crosses to the right, and drops down to complete the square. This right line goes past the first left corner, to mark her spine and her knees, seen in the small hook at the right-hand corner. The brush lifts again and drips the first of her two nipples, as signified in the top water drop. A line cuts across her chest. The second nipple is placed at the bottom, completing the character.

Without the two water-dropped nipples, the halved box resembles the character 毋 (wu), which means without, not, or nobody. To differentiate her from nobody, these two water drops show her anatomical difference. She is given personhood when offering her chest. Transformed from a bound shadow with holes, she reappears as a bound pair of breasts.

Personhood lies in a pair of bound breasts, procured, and offered. For the first four years of my childhood, I did not recognize my own mother. The year after I was born, my mother left Shanghai for Berlin to work abroad while my father went to Japan. My absent parents left me in the care of my grandparents and Amah, nanny. Without any real parents, I had every whim indulged. In my mother's eyes, this was the root my misbehaviors. She would first blame the heavens for cursing her with motherhood, chide me for my failures, and then claim I was the reason for holding her back in life.

She appears in halves, never as a whole. When my father returned to reunite the family in Berlin, my four-year-old self did not recognize these strangers as my parents. I was not the only one at a loss. My parents did not know how to care for me. I grew silent and withdrawn, learning how to be alone in an empty apartment as my parents pulled long night shifts at the German Chinese restaurant. I learned how to be useful and cared for myself in their absence. As a child, I already understood that my parents were flawed human beings, lost in the darkness of their decisions.

She, the bound shadow, is the snake down my spine. My mother is a shadow, one I could detach from once I had found better replacements. One country after another, one year after another, it became easier to distance myself. I had the advantage of learning more about the new culture. She, a shadow, trailed behind me, bemoaning in Shanghai dialect her present predicament. An echo falling out of my ears, I held her off with German, then English. Later, I placed education and physical land between us.

To be without, to be a no-body is to see that I have become, a woman without her.
The longer I stare at this character drying on this page, the less I see of my self. She, the breathing image of her self, is detached and separate from her body. A nebulous tense

shadow remains bound to white. She rears her head only when my fingers trace the shallow grooves of my cheeks and dip down to jut of my hips.

Lessons

Lessons

When my mother and I relocate to Honolulu, my mother signs me up for Chinese calligraphy school. My mother signs me up for watercolors. My mother signs me up for piano. My mother signs me up for ballet, tennis, and swimming.

Stubborn and alone, I am sent home for throwing paint, for teasing the other kids, for not listening.

My mother, desperate for me to remember, speaks in a broken tongue. In the stillness of Sunday afternoons, she guides me through rows of Chinese calligraphy.

The grind of ink. Swirls of black in water jars. Switch-shuffle of rice paper sheets. Humid air hangs between us. Endless squares wait for my brush to fill.

Composition of characters. Left to right, top to bottom – she drills the same sequence of strokes over and over. Black smears my right pinky. Watery ink evaporates after each stroke. I trace and retrace one stroke after another. Crossing and re-crossing the squares, I twirl the brush.

Blank white looms before me. Mind numbed, my ear no longer hears her. My fingers crease the corners of white paper. Sheets rustle and wrinkle under my palm before tearing. I drop the brush and wait for her to disappear.

好

A cousin of mine in Shanghai wanted a child, believing it would complete her life. When she got pregnant, she was overjoyed. Consumed by the prospect of completion, she pulled longer hours at her advertisement company. Six months into her pregnancy, on a flight back from Singapore, she was quarantined for bird flu because she had a fever. This was during the height of bird flu scare. Landing in Shanghai after spending three days in quarantine, she fainted. One thing led to another, and she had a miscarriage.

In her hospital room, I tasted a metallic stillness in the air. Dark in the afternoon light, her pale face met mine. Eyes dry, she scanned the dark corners of the room for something unseen. Nonplussed, her mother patted her arm and told her this was normal. Every woman goes through this. Propped upright with a thin blanket tucked around her slender belly, my cousin stared blankly at her mother's mouth. As if her mother's words floated above her face, incomprehensible. An incident not worth holding on to. Forget about it. Move on. As if her eyes could ward off those words from sinking into her body.

Her mother turned to my mother for reaffirmation. My mother nodded. Stop overreacting and being so melodramatic. This is nothing but a phase. All women go through this. They both went on to recount the number of personal miscarriages they had before having us, along with a list of friends who had more impressive totals. Before leaving, my mother looked knowingly at my cousin. I give you half a year to try again.

Goodness is created, recreated, procreated in a woman. Miscarriages are a part of creation, as failures are a part of living. When my Aunty Yilan in Hawaii heard about my cousin, she clicked her tongue but confirmed that this was a necessary spasm to undergo for a new future. She rattled a few more names of women who had miscarriages. She then paused before recounting her own loneliness when she chose to get an abortion in Berlin. Childless, she reaffirms it was the right decision.

A generative machine, unseen behind the shade of her child's embrace, a woman is good only when she reproduces. Successfully. Yet it is not this fear of failure that reinforces my decision to be childless. It is the simplicity of choice. My ability to choose my self over another fills me with goodness and completion. A selfishness to retain my body for my self, to be good without being overshadowed.

要

If want is female, then a wanton is a promiscuous woman, who uses her sex as a tool to control the actions of those around her. Perhaps a woman is called a wanton because she does not display the need to cover her body and therefore, leaves nothing to the imagination. The mystique of a woman vanishes when a woman is seen uncovered and whole. The ease of her fullness results in the rejection of her. She is no longer wanted. Wanton sounds like wonton, which is a delicious ball of meat and cabbage, my Nagbu wraps in a thin flour skin and boils in chicken broth. She would make this every Sunday when I was a child in Shanghai. I still marvel at the delicacy of the act. The dexterity of wrinkled fingers moving about a ball of pork, an art I never had the chance to learn from her.

Fidgeting by the doorway of the kitchen, I watched as her outline moved from bowls to pots. Hunched over the counter, sunlight lit the crane of neck and shoulders. She would turn and catch me staring up at her. Shooing me away to go play, her shrunken frame reclaimed the sunlit counter.

I was her treasured baobei, her second chance to be the mother she never was to her own daughters. I was not allowed to step inside and learn how to fold flour about meat. It was beneath me, this desire to find belonging in a kitchen. My place is outside, beyond the confines of the rusted gas stove, as it once was for her. I should want to run a room full of people, or in her case, the department chair of Fudan University’s foreign language. My decisions should hold more weight than what to make for lunch tomorrow.

A sense of withholding incites curiosity. Delighted, I always scalded my tongue as I gulped down one wonton after another. I could never learn to wait, to blow steam away. Nagbu never revealed what she wrapped inside. She always waited for my spoon to push open my lips before dipping hers. Eyes averted, she swallowed her spoonful quietly. As if the spoon held her tears that once smeared the telephone receiver to when I called to her in German and then later in English. Tongues scalded by forgotten words, the silence between us grew.

She always waited. But by the time I was old enough to see her, she had waited too long. The soup had grown cold and globs of grease had congealed at the top. I can see her now at her sunlit counter, folding flour over meat. Each crease seals her hopes into a savory juice that will one day flow over my Chinese tongue again.

安

A few weeks before I left Shanghai for Berlin, my Nainai, paternal grandmother, took my four-year-old self to a Buddhist shrine. She wanted to pray for my travels. I fidgeted as we waited in line for a turn to kneel before some hollow golden deity. The shaved monks droned on. Bored, I sneezed into the heavy sandalwood air and rubbed my eyes. We kneeled down on a clothed plank. The golden deity smirked. Plates of oranges and joss paper loomed before me. Lit incense wedged between my palms.

Little red packets of peace glitter from potted shrubs in open courtyard. Peace whistles above shrines, a knock of wood against chimes as wind slides across the tips of roofs. Etched into tombstones, peace guards the departed. A black imprint against a white banner around the heads of those in mourning, peace is a woman kneeling beneath.

The brush dots the top-middle space of the page, like a tip of a hat. Lifts and restarts on the left. Dips down and up, creating the first hook of the dome. Then it pulls across a bar to the right before hooking down and out. A dome sits on top of woman. Capped and secured, she radiates peace to the eye.

Peace is not for those gone but for those still present. The dead remain present, a reminder for the living of the time left. The Chinese do not fear death or life after death, but time.

When I returned to Shanghai twenty years later, I visited my great-grandmother's gravesite. More out of curiosity than obligation, the blandness of this day struck me: long bus ride, the trek to locate her row and slab, the first rainy day of monsoon season. Peace stood next to her gray marbled face on black marble. Her unflinching stare caught me. I offered her bread leftover from breakfast and mumbled my greeting in broken Chinese. Silently, I confessed how I envied her, her certainty in belonging to this land, in staying put in one place, in always having a native tongue to scream out.

On the surface, a woman must appear calm and collected. Nothing is lost if silence is part of her composure. She cannot run away until someone releases her from the dome above. I remember the smallness of my great-grandmother's feet as they stretched out next to mine. Later, I learned that she had her feet bound as a child. Only rich women bound their feet. It was a luxury to not stand and work on your feet. I forgot what led her to stop wrapping bandages around her soles every night. But her feet were shrunk and shriveled by the time she met me. Hobbling along she follows me, her tiny, cupped feet echoing the ungainly thud of my knees and palms.

怒

Rage, the devotion to anger, warns against excess. My mother spent decades tending to one man after another. After running away from my father, she chained herself to my stepfather. I do not know if it was fear or love that propelled her daily trips for a 24-case of cheap beer. Watering my stepfather from morning to night, she tempered him with beer. Beer drunk, he was philosophical as the Buddha. At dusk, he mindlessly ate whatever my mother put in front of him and shook his head at my doomed future. He knew what was best for everyone, most of all, for me. What is the world coming to? he yelled to Mick Jagger's voice. Listen to what this man has to say about life, and turned up Johnny Cash's moans. His nights quietly withered into a faced-down form on an unmade bed.

The mind is never truly freed. I have heard that addicts are as predictable as storms: a collection of clumsy fumbles, raised voices, and drooped limbs as telltale as a change in air pressure. Having never met him sober, I have little to compare. Conversing with a drunk is like fighting with one's shadow. Every sentence a rant about the wrong he experienced and who first wronged him. Insecurities show through the litany of his past achievements. As the youngest of three, he was used to playing victim to any open ear.

Liquor, unlike beer, has an uncanny resemblance to a ticking time bomb. At first, liquor warms the esophagus, as it spills into the stomach. The body is lulled into a false sense of calm and control. As liquor seeps into the liver, it winds an internal body clock. When his head shook as he rose up from his seat, he entered a state of slurred disorientation.

My mother never knew when to stop talking, even after she learned to recognize the signs. There was no ignoring a drunk in an enclosed space. When his friends came and liquor visited him, a lacquered dullness switched his eyes into navy pitch. Often the warning signs came too late. Sliding around to the polka beat, his heavy steps escalated words into actions. Sometimes Wagner rang to my mother's muffled screams. Other times, staccato crescendos morphed her chokes against the wall into a soundtrack of body meeting drywall.

To indulge in an emotion is to never learn from a past experience. I remembered once staring at the streams of sunlight in the dusted cracks of my door, as I had slammed it in time to deflect a fist from my eye.

A composite of three radicals, rage is a mark of excess. The heart, a dominant rectangle below, holds the eye in warning. The triangular symmetry of this character is deceptive. Behind each of the nine strokes flows the implication of correctness, a cold rationalization of emotions. Pulling each black line down and across the white page invigorates the hand, wakes the brush to want more. Black fills the page. A swollen drop hangs over the heart, the point where moderation and excess converge before splintering.

Native Ghost

Native Ghost

I am a brash and jaded 18-year-old. I sulk in my seat next to Aunty Yilan on a 14-hour flight from Honolulu to Shanghai. It is my first return since I left for Berlin at the age of four. No one had asked if I wanted to go. No, this two-week trip is a mandate from my Chinese family.

Before we land, Aunty Yilan reminds me not to speak in public because it would reveal to strangers that I'm not actually Chinese despite my very Chinese-looking face.
I open my mouth to close on the irony: I understood what is being said to me, about me, and in front of me, but can only respond in English.

What's wrong with her?

Is she sick?

Long index fingers point out my differences: my eyes are too big, my complexion too dark, my nose too straight. I am not Chinese enough. Shaking their heads, they sigh in pity at Aunty Yilan, like she is cursed.

Perfect English

My Chinese relatives fear silence unless food is present. I must have eaten at a dozen different restaurants. I must have met ten different relatives each night. Yet I cannot distinguish one restaurant from another relative.

Each night begins with a question posed at me and answered for me:
Does she need a fork? asks relative-X.

Thankfully, we've taught her how to use chopsticks, replied Aunty Yilan. I smile and roll my eyes around the windowless dining room.

Would she like soda? asks relative-B.

CO-KA-CO-LAH?? is spelt out in my face.

No, she's not that American. She'll drink tea, replied Aunty Yilan.

You know, soda is very fashionable now. All the young people drink it, said relative-A's wife. She jerks her head at cousin-D, who stares straight into her cellphone.

What I wanted was a glass of ice water, an impossible request as ice is not readily available. Bottled water is reserved for sweaty Americans. The Chinese in China believe cold water is bad for body circulation – a mantra repeated every time I hold up an empty glass.

Cold makes blood stop and heart hurt, explained relative-C in his perfect English.

Negative Hope

My paternal and maternal grandparents battle over me. When I was born, my parents left me in the care of my two sets of grandparents while they went abroad for work. Each set always recounts how I was ushered from one apartment to another. Each set has a competing idea of the woman I will grow up to be.

My maternal grandparents are both retired university professors. In addition to Mandarin Chinese, my maternal grandma, Nagbu, is fluent in Russian and Japanese. She was the head of the foreign language department at Fudan University, a prestigious institution in China. My maternal grandpa, Nagong, taught western philosophy at Shanghai Normal University. He still recounts the brief stint where he was forced to kneel on crushed glass as his former students accused him of treason during the Cultural Revolution.

In contrast, my paternal grandfather, Yeye, once owned the largest tea monopoly in Shanghai. I was born above an old teashop front that the Communist Party let Yeye occupy after they had seized his other assets. My paternal grandmother's family specializes in making clay tea sets. Her marriage was arranged like a business transaction between two monopolies. A proud woman, Nainai, paternal grandmother, often boasts about her three wealthy, successful sons.

Both sets weigh in their sufferings. How much things have changed since the Cultural Revolution. How it will be different for me. They surround me with their negative hope.

Shark Fin Soup

Unknown to me, my father had remarried, divorced, and then married again for the third time. I meet her during my ten-day trip back to Shanghai.

My visit starts in a grey van driven by my new stepmother. A pink-blue toy poodle sits up front, in the passenger seat next to a white COACH purse. My father is conveniently busy with something to come along to lunch. I climb in the middle row between my Yeye and Nainai. The poodle pants in excitement as I am introduced to the hired-translator seated in back row, next to my baby cousin.

The car jerks left and then right before stopping in front some famous restaurant in new Pudong. I grasp the headrest of the front seat for support. My stepmother, with her pink-blue poodle in her arm, leads the way in.

When finally seated, I am asked if I have ever eaten turtle, shark, bald eagle, or drunken shrimp? Upon my answer of no, my stepmother orders all of them to be slaughtered and served. She adds a whole pheasant to the mix. For a lucky reunion.

Dribbles of shark-fin soup, ashen turtle from an upside down shell, and phallic strips of bald eagle loom before me. Then comes main highlight: live-river shrimp drowned in 90% proof alcohol. I politely turn it down. My baby cousin impales a river shrimp with his fork. He had requested a fork when I refused one earlier. He plops the lower half of a shrimp into his mouth. Two antennas wiggle grotesquely around his lips. Bemused, I compliment him on his new moustache. Disapprovingly, the translator pretends not to hear me. Within a few moments, he pulls the now disembodied head out from his mouth and spits out the bits of chewed shell into his bowl. After one last hack of shell, he wraps his lips around the torn neck and slurps out bits of grey matter.

My grandparents' eyes shine as they watch my hands move about the scope of my plate and seat. They pile food into my bowl. I chew and swallow. Fish bones separate from soft flesh. Cartilage dislodges from knobs of meat. I am complimented on how well I use my chopsticks.

At the end of our meal, my grandparents and I do not hug. Our bodies stiffen at the nearness of one another, trapped in our own sphere of silence. But as I turn away, they grab my hand and pat my back.

Homeloss

Local

Local or Kam’āina is someone who grew up in Hawaiʻi but is not necessarily of Native Hawaiian ancestry.

Location and geography act as identity markers. The social question of where did you come from? is a way to discover how Local one is to the Islands. This singular question highlights:

1. the immediate distance you traveled to the meeting location
2. how different/similar your experience of a particular place is related to another’s (i.e. high school, shared friends/family circles, familiarity of food establishments)
3. how many generations you can trace back to a specific location and show how much of an insider you are

The label of Hawaiian, or Native Hawaiian, refers to Polynesians living in Hawaiʻi before the arrival of British explorers. There are no Hawaiian tribes, only lineage, generations, descendants tracing back to the Polynesians who settled the islands thousands of years before Western contact. Distinct in their culture, heritage, and ethnicity from the rest of the people living on the Islands (Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, Portuguese, etc.), Native Hawaiians see themselves as separate from Native Americans.

Locals refer to the continental United States as “the Mainland.” Locals are constantly aware of the geographical separation of Hawaiʻi from the rest of the world. This attention to division, the constant comparison of what life is like on the Islands versus anywhere else, defines what it means to be Local.

Tell everyone on the Mainland you’re Hawaiian. They not going to know the difference. Besides you look different already. Your nose can pass you off as Hawaiian. You going be more different on the Mainland. Good to be different. Go standout. Hawaiʻi is the last part of you, the closest thing you got left to a culture.

My Aunty Yilan, having acquired English as her fifth language, after Chinese, German, Italian, and French, takes advantage of every opportunity to be different. Twenty years retired, the Mezzo-Soprano in her always finds the right pitch.

Pidgin

Hawaiʻi Creole English, commonly known as Hawaiian Pidgin or Pidgin, is a debased form of English. Pidgin, a bastardization of forms, takes diction and vocabulary from two or more languages to create hybridity between people lacking a common language. Pidgin – a cross of Hawaiian, English, Japanese, Chinese, and Portuguese – marks the people who morphed the Islands over the course of occupation.

Once American capitalists discovered the Islands' resources, Manifest Destiny spilled overseas. They first pushed Native Hawaiian families off fertile lands. Then the rise of sugar cane, pineapple, and coffee plantations brought waves of Japanese and Chinese immigrant laborers. Portuguese acted as lunas (bosses) who oversaw the plantation work. Longhorn cattle were introduced, followed by Mexican vaqueros (expert horsemen), which led to the creation of paniolo, the Hawaiian cowboy. When the Japanese and Chinese workers held labor strikes against indentured servitude conditions, the oligarchs brought in Korean, Puerto Rican, and Filipino immigrants to break the strike. Quietly, they worked faster for cheaper conditions.

Pidgin, the hybrid bond, is fast dirty plantation talk. The first generation of immigrants retained their native tongue and hacked words into a cobbled Pidgin. The later generations smoothed it out, learning Pidgin English as their native tongue and codifying it into a refined badge of blue-collar pride.

Pidgin is also an arcane term for business, an occupation, an action. The term stems from British ships trading with the Chinese, where they observed the Chinese could not pronounce business but instead said bigeon, which morphed phonetically to sound more like pigeon or pidgin.

Orientation

When the body stays away, the mind returns to a place that does not exist.

Homeloss occurs when:

Reality no longer matches memory

Familiar space is completely foreign

Places feel exotic in their familiarity

Body experiences home again for the first time

Loss is easier to understand than belonging.

Orientation is simple on an island. Makai is the side towards the ocean and mauka is inland terrain. You are always between the mountain and sea. Directions are ascribed to the wind: head *leeward* away from the wind, or *windward* towards the wind.

My body has forgotten how to orient my being to the mountains and the sea.

When I last returned to Honolulu, I wandered down streets whose names rang familiar in their vowels but whose crossings conflicted with the maps of my mind. A maddening itch coursed through my legs. Round and round I turned, searching for the salty ocean flooding my nose. The blue-white street markers angled down and glared at me, crossed like knots in a net. Heavy threads weighed my shoulders, beat into my chest. An undertow on land. The ground spun. Disoriented, the land expelled me to sea. Sinking, I do not belong to the land, but can no longer belong to the sea.

Accent

To leave a homeland is to remain different. Homeloss is a process of change.
You’ve lost your accent observed an old friend. You had this way of speaking, a strange dip in the middle, a lilt at the end of your sentences. Rough and uneven but distinct to the Islands. Now, you sound like everyone else. Proper, from the Mainland. If I closed my eyes, you would be anyone else but you.

There are eight muscles in the human tongue: four intrinsic muscles, unattached to the bone, to change the overall shape. Four extrinsic muscles, anchored to the mouth, change the position of the tongue. While the tongue’s common usage is to salivate and taste, its secondary purpose is to articulate or to make sounds into words. To communicate.

The tongue exists to shift, morph, situate the language for the body to fit in.
Language acts as a localization key. The English language is one of transaction and directness. A construction of propriety with too many rules. There is a correct way of writing and speaking, of presenting the self, being included and excluded. Each word has a proper place within a sentence.

Nameless Place

When the exile is relegated from home, the tongue of origin is lost.

The exile must negotiate an entrance with the exit, an exit with the entrance.
A break in the sense of belonging. The bond between home and body is fragile, translucent. Physical distancing severs the body from home. Torn, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, an entrance to an exit.

Home – Land = Land – Home =

A separation of home from land is another nameless place.

Code-Switch

Rules are created to be broken. On the Islands, everyone knows how to code-switch, to taste out social situations. A time and place for everything.

The first thing a child learns once she goes to school: Pidgin is used only with friends and family. Proper English must be spoken, written, presented in schools and classrooms. The rules of inclusion and exclusion are taught on the first day. Only when someone becomes a friend, as in meets your parents at a function or is invited to stay for food, do you code-switch with them.

Aunty Yilan loves this story: Remember how you used to be friends with the fisherman's daughter? You came back from fishing by the rocks saying tanks tanks. I almost died from embarrassment. Finally, you stopped hanging out with her. I got you saying thanks thanks again. You can't go round talking like that to educated people.

There are different levels of Pidgin. The more fluidly your tongue can switch, the more you can hide that Pidgin ghost.

Code-switching means having the education, the money, the means to leave behind plantation life. It means the difference between public school and private.

A tongue marks the line of inclusion and exclusion. Mine meant I was more local than tourists but less local than those born here, who have family here. It meant I can switch out and earn a scholarship to a private prep school.

I could never speak the true Pidgin of my friends. No matter how much I tried, my speech would always be somewhat off, different, less local, less connected to the Islands. I was less local enough to attend a New England liberal arts college on another four-year scholarship.

Sediment

I confuse sentiment for sediment, matter composed of particles that fall by gravitation to the bottom of a liquid.

The landscape of homesickness is a collection of sentiment-sediment lingering like beads of scent on skin. The body reeks with sentiment of the past.

Home + Land – Home = Land + Scape = Landscape

Scape in Landscape is the act of escaping. Scape sounds like scrape, to remove dirt from a surface. The removal of sentiment-sediment leaves the mind raw and unattached.

Gerald Manley Hopkins thought of Scape as an impression of an image left behind. The sentiment-sediment, an impression of a place, lingers in the mind. This is the physicality of remembering.

Landscape

If rain did not cover you with mildew, then the sea drowned you in salt.
Land is more precious beheld from sea. It is the rocking that never leaves.

On land, things are stilled. Landing opposed to drifting. Inanimate until interaction. A finality to each movement. Hand and foot find resistance.

Out at sea, movement is fluid. Only a lung full of air, the body balances stillness with weightlessness. Upside-down, right side up, the sandy bottom dances away.

Hands cannot hold on to the sea. Salt fills me. The sea swallows me whole before receding back to my memories. Capsized, the body a minutia in infinite blue.

Salt

When I was seven, my mother and I immigrated to Honolulu.

As we disembark and walk through the open-air strip between runway and terminal, a strange wave of salty flowers hits my nose. With no flowers in sight, I am disoriented. Heavy and thick, the salty-flower scent surrounds me. A lazy breeze rustles the palms trees. Salt dances in the bright sunlight.

We move in with my mother's younger sister, Aunty Yilan, and her husband, Uncle Don, at their Kailua beach-front house. I walk from the back yard to the beach. Each step brings the crash of waves closer. Through a swatch of bushes, the endless blue stretches before me. Driftwood and dried coconut husks knock against my toes. The relentless wind pelts salt and sand in my face and hair. At the edge, my feet find wet smoothness.

The salt on my lips tastes familiar and foreign, all at the same time. As if I had once felt the Pacific long before, as a child in Shanghai.

Salt covered everything at the Kailua house. Under the propped hood of Aunty Yilan's baby grand piano, I watched orange piano wire croak mutely as she stepped and pressed one worn key after another, a rusted muffle creaking out of iodized green lines.

Paradise

The same question comes up again: why would anyone want to leave paradise?

Pair + of + Dice = Paradise

Pair-ra-dice: a term describing an ideal, a perfected reality. A term constructed on luck, desire, dissatisfaction, a trapped hand rolling a die.

This is how a place survives in a person.

The assumption: paradise is the same for everyone. A mass-produced ideal, it is the ever-unattainable reward. Paradise as synonymous remedy for every dissatisfaction.

A false panel, when opened, reveals dissatisfaction, claustrophobia. The hand is trapped in its eternal rolling.
No synonymous remedy
No perfection
No singular reward
No paradise

For those lucky enough to escape paradise, the word parasitic comes to mind, the cloy of paradise. Survival is found in physical departure.

The mind, held hostage to this desire for the familiar, forgets. Instead the mind frames, reframes homeland. Taste empty air for the cloy of salty-flowers.

Scape

The Harvard Dialect Survey, a linguistics project by Bert Vaux and Scott Golder, placed my English tongue in Honolulu, San Diego, and Connecticut. A friend explains how New England and Honolulu share commonalities. Especially since I attended private school in Honolulu.

I never thought Native Hawaiians wanted to leave the Islands. All through grade school, we learned how they were wary of strangers: defending their land from waves of Europeans, preserving their culture from Christian missionaries, and countering the spread of American capitalists on their land. Land rights, land ownership, land inheritance – land, land, land.

A body identifies itself through the amount of land and space it occupies.
The first Hawaiian Christian, Henry ʻŌpūkahaʻia, jumped aboard Caleb Britnall's Triumph and sailed for New Haven, Connecticut, after surviving the massacre of his family at age ten. This was 1815, during the Second Great Awakening, and about 37 years after Captain Cook first discovered the Hawaiian Islands in 1778.

ʻŌpūkahaʻia learned English and discovered Jesus Christ. This discovery sent waves of Christian missionaries to the Islands. Religion thrives in paradise. Today, its presence lives in the privatized educational institutions around the Islands. Most notable is Brigham Young University—Hawaiʻi on Oʻahu, which also runs the Polynesian Cultural Center, where displays of cultural traditions are exchanged for a good Mormon education.

Enamored by the newness of the English language, ʻŌpūkahaʻia began to write the first Hawaiian dictionary, grammar and spelling book. Since Hawaiian was birthed from one mouth to another, he reduced the chaos of sound into a system, from tongue to pen and ink. He had planned to return to Hawaiʻi to preach but instead died of typhus at 26. His body, reduced to foreign diseases, was brought back to Hawaiʻi while his work remained incomplete.

I learn more about a place I have left behind than I did living there.

Man o’ War

Walking along Kailua Beach, I notice tiny bubbles washed up on the sand. I bend down to poke one. But before I can touch it, Aunty Yilan flattens it with an authoritative pop of her slipper. Smugly, she explains that she just saved me from getting stung by stupidity. She points out a knot of blue threads behind the popped blob of blue. That’s the Portuguese Man o’ War’s stinger. I should learn to stay away from this jellyfish.

The Portuguese man o’war, also known as Portuguese Man-of-War, is often misidentified as a jellyfish. The two creatures share a similar outward appearance: a bloated belly with trailing stingers. Yet a jellyfish is a single organism while the Portuguese man o’war is a collection of microorganisms called zooids.

I learn that these bubbles cannot sting the bottom of my bare feet. In pure childish malice, I stomp on every blue bubble in my path.

A man o’war has a bloated belly that resembles a bilateral sail seen in 16th Century Naval warship called man-of-war. Like a warship’s trimmed sails, this belly inflates for the creature to float with the wind. It also deflates to submerge from a surface attack.

I regret my childish bravado. I am swimming behind Uncle Don’s sailboat miles out from shore. Another windy day, perfect for sailing. Floating on my back, I see three bubbles causally drift by. Before I can yell out, a small wave blows the blue bubbles into me.
I am burned alive in cold water. Clawing at the waves, my fingers search for the invisible web. I do not know what to do first: to stop swimming and scratch at my skin or to keep treading water. A mess of screams, tears, and flails. Later my fingers trace the large welt around my left calf and forearm.

Portuguese man o’wars have a tail of venomous stingers that grows up to 160ft. These stingers latch onto a hairy surface.

Bows

The first word a child learns in public school is ‘Ohana, Hawaiian for family. The word derives from ‘Ohā, the second generation of kalo [taro] growing from the same rootstalk. Unity in family. Creation of inclusion.

‘Ohana goes hand-in-hand with countless drawings of a rainbow. Perfect life lesson. Rainbows are introduced, reintroduced, reinforced into children everyday.

A drawing is never complete without a rainbow.
A child is never bored when asked to draw a rainbow.

The rainbow never leaves the Islands because Hawai‘i is the Rainbow State:
    Rainbow Shaved Ice
    Rainbow State license
    Rainbow Car Plates
    Rainbow Warriors (Univ. of Hawai‘i’s sports team)

The sun and rain are always in perfect harmony there.
Cyclic and idyllic, there is never an end to the bow.

A child learns that the human hand can also gesture the Rainbow.
Known as the Shaka, or Hang Loose:

1. Raise the pinky and the thumb.
2. Close remaining three fingers into palm.

Now, imagine a Rainbow arcing between pinky and thumb.
To this day, I still can’t name the order of colors in a rainbow.

Spine

There are 206 bones in an adult human body.

There are eight main islands in the Hawaiian chain. Uneven dots on blue, they curve about the Pacific like a spine.

There are twelve bones in the human spine, the long curve spanning down to the hips. I imagine Kaua‘i, the oldest island, at the base of the neck, which is located six bones below the hyoid bone. The other six (Ni‘hau, O‘ahu, Moloka‘i, Lana‘i, Kaho‘olawe, and Maui) pinch and drop down the spine to the lumbar, the lower back. There at the base, the Big Island, Hawaii-nei, the one with the active volcano, sat and waited.

Before I left, I toyed with the idea of a tattoo, blue etches chaining my body to one place. But I was repulsed by the thought of being permanently chained to a place. The urge to escape fills me. Repulsion propels me forward. I continue my search for new landscapes.

Stone

There is life in stone and death in stone. The Native Hawaiians believed that Kāne, creator of man, first outlined his image into the red dirt of Kaua‘i. As Kāne chants LIVE LIVE, the form filled and breathed.

Man learned to live in solitude. His shadow hung alongside, echoing his singularity. It never talked or laughed but hung to one side. Seeing man's shade of loneliness linger, Kāne fashioned a companion out of man's shadow. Wahine, shadow-made-of-heaven, man called her. The woman raised her head and beamed into his open face.

Slabs of earth mark Native Hawaiian ancestral bones and cords of childbirth. Devoted to the stones beneath their feet, Native Hawaiians water these stones. They rise from the earth before dying by the stones. Land and sea, together they join in the act of remembering how these smooth bodies once washed ashore.

There are 206 bones in an adult human body. A single human foot and ankle has 26 bones. Together, two feet make up one quarter of all bones in the body.

I do not count how many footsteps it takes to walk back to the homeland. Careful in treading through the Islands. It is forbidden to pocket pebbles from the land, an act of stealing. I abide by this warning and hold nothing but fistfuls of memories, I ground down with each passing year.

Hyoid

There are 206 bones in an adult human body.

The hyoid bone connects the head to the body, a bone hinge between head and neck. Acute angle allows the face to ascend and see the horizon, to nod in agreement, to meet eye-to-eye in challenge. The opposite is also true. The hyoid bone dips to gravity, as the head and face drop in resignation, avoidance of guilt, in regret and reflection of the past, in contemplation of the ground beneath feet.

In Japanese cremation, the body is slid into a chamber of fire. After the allotted time has passed, the metal slab, like a tongue, is retracted. The ashes are strewn about, ready for the picking. Surviving members take long metal chopsticks and collect the bone shards left behind by the flames. Bit by bit, the picking begins from the feet up to the head. The idea is to stack the human body upright, as if standing, inside the urn. The prized bone is the hyoid bone. Hornlike, it is the crux of the neck's end and the beginning of skull.

Effaced shadow, broken, the body leaves behind white shards that fall as sentiment-sediment sinks to the bottom.
Homeland is a body trapped.

Manoa

It takes about 90 minutes to cremate an adult body, 45 for a child, and 15 for less. I imagine it took a flat five seconds for my stepfather's heart to burst with its furious over-pumping and another five for his body to drop like a sack of stones on the linoleum floor. The cashier leans forward, into her scanner and peeks at his body.

At least, that was what was reported over the phone. Instantaneous. Like the dropping of a mottled mango from a low bough outside our old house in Mānoa Valley. When it met hard ground, the purplish rot rose to the surface. A splat marked by broken vessels. He didn't suffer or bruise from the fall, having been already dead by the time his face hit the floor. At least, that was what was reported over the phone.

We lived in Mānoa Valley for two years. Mānoa means thick, solid, vast, or immense depth. A valley swept with rain, the sun fading in and out with the chime.

Sogi

Sogi, a Japanese funeral rite derived from the Chinese Chan funeral rites, is the popular tradition on Oʻahu. Japanese families own the crematories while Chinese own the cemetery. A fair transaction.

After the last bone is picked and stacked into the urn, a photograph is laid in front. The dead is there but not present. Incense is lit for a year or two after passing. Grave sweeping is left for the day of the dead, the fourth day in the fourth month of the year. The Chinese and Japanese word four is homophonic for death.

My mother scatters half of his body to the Pacific and keeps the other half in the hallway of her Kuliʻouʻou house. Every morning she lights three incense. Her hair reeks of sweet smoke. She sets a can of Fosters in front of him. A favorite, she claims, surprised that she even knew he had a preference, or that his tongue differentiates between the brands. Over the lip, his blue eyes stare at strangers crossing the threshold.

He's not Japanese or Chinese, or even Australian, but Czech.

Disjointed, the last thing I wanted was to return to scatter my stepfather's ashes into the Pacific. The longer I stayed away, ignoring the calls for return, the heavier the desire grew.

As wind whips my hair, I turn the urn upside down. The Islands fall away from me. Black-grey spill up to my averted face. Sea spits salt on my face.

The cut, final, severs me.

Fistfuls of his body crumple into the sea, as if I were a child making wet sand sculptures out of his blackened body. I walk deeper into the sea. A cold shiver runs up my calves. A dog barks down the shore, jolts me back to my black-stained hands. Knee-deep, I wash him away.

Homeloss

Boiled down, words are figures in equations. Questions with plausible answers.

Home + Loss = Homeloss or Homeless

Silent and dry faced, I watch invisible borders collapse around me. The barrier, my sedimental reality and homeland, spill into one another. Frothing, green-blue waves bubble to the white shore.

My body has forgotten the web of sea and mountains. Careful to not stray, I leave the mildew, the erratic sunlight of Mānoa Valley. Away from the flowery heaviness, I throw the Pacific, a decade, an entire continent between us.

Eyes milky and hollow, I circle about, unable to see past from present. Homesick without a starting point, a skin webs over homeland.

Always a bottom to containment

An end to meet the beginning

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There is no more for me to return to.

Landscape transforms into a closing. Homeland holds the body captive. Silence clings to my mouth and nose. Thickening, the distance lengthens. I inhale the whine of wind at sea and spit out neutralized speech.

Erase the landscape of mountains from sea, my body from a homeland.

My ear forgets the erratic tune of plantation talk, forgets sucking green pools, forgets the wall of rain falling down black cliffs.

Mist rolls in and never leaves.

Two kinds of people walk through this world – the ones cleaved to the land and the ones belonging to the sea. My body no longer fits in either. My body finds space in division, only belonging in the between.

BIOGRAPHY

Qinglan Wang is a multilingual writer, artist, and teacher originally from Hawaii. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize (2012), her work has been featured in *Ninth Letter, Bone Bouquet, Hot Metal Bridge*, and other places.