home is where ...
Dear Dad,

I started off writing my thoughts down for you. Then I talked myself into thinking these are stories for a bigger audience, the wider world. Or maybe for the family; for my kids. But at the end of the day, what I want the most is for you to know the things I’ve been holding all this time. Like that letter you wrote me more than three decades ago, wanting the opportunity for us to know each other better. I don’t remember what I’d written in response to your wish, probably nothing. I suspect, at the time, I cringed at the idea of us being close. I was so angry.

It only took me decades to realize there are things we simply need to accept. Like there are people in this world we have no 缘份 with. You and I weren’t meant to have the father-daughter relationship like most people we know. That is a darn shame for me, but also for you. I see now, if only we had gotten the time together that we deserved, I think we could have been kindred souls.

The thoughts and feelings I wasn’t willing to share, I write them down now. Some of them have to do with you, others are things important to me. Some of these stories you may already know, some of them you’d never have guessed, like my love for Bougainvillea, or my resemblance to Ye Ye, which means you and I now look alike, because you look like your father. You will recognize darkness in these words; it is always there. Except nowadays, it’s a familiar companion and never a threat. There is also tenderness. I think that comes with age.

The one thing I hate to admit is you might have been right about my inevitable longing to return home. I acknowledge that in my writing. After forty plus years, I am tired of feeling homeless. Our sense of belonging here is precarious and always conditional. No amount of good behavior secures a seat at the fancy table. We are merely here to serve.

Speaking of serving, like you, and Mom, I am a really good cook. That brings a sense of comfort, and a connection to what still feels familiar and safe. It is also a bridge I build for the kids to everything I know from the past to the present. Maybe home isn’t where the heart is, but the stomach.

So here you go. If you want to know me, these are what I think about often. And you. Wherever you are now, I hope you have found the acceptance you’d spent your life looking for. I know I am still searching.

Love you always,

藹宓
Nest

Your eyes sparkling the corners of your lips upturned
gentle amused wonderful
I knew I want to be there the way we weaved our thoughts together
like bendy twigs strands of thick threads
interlocking into a nest where birds take refuge

For life you said but I didn’t like birds at the time
it took me years to want to watch the birds land next to me
their feathers in shades of purple green beige brown
the colors shift to orange yellow red
they flex their wings under the brilliant sunlight

When you cawed with sorrow
I saw you in shades of black
shimmering streaks of dark blue
there was so much beauty in all the deep colors
but remember I didn’t like birds
and they said crows were unlucky
I believed them

I’ve been haunted by you when I look in the mirror
I see a full head of raven black hair as if
you were a part of me
but what did I know?
I didn’t know that maybe you were cawing warning me to fly so
I fell out of the nest and ran away instead

3
In the reflection of the bath in the garden
eyes dulled from weariness     lips shut tight
the weight of it all intertwined    cellularly woven dark mass    residing within the body
taking refuge

Can I learn to sing songs in the morning?
whenever I open my mouth to speak birdsongs fly out
as I try to catch    pieces of memory    you holding me in your gentleness
always there

If we could evolve from birds
songs     lights     colors     levitate
retreat into the warmth of the nest we once built together
mother called/ anxious about her move/ all her moves/ China to Taiwan/ Taiwan to America/ America to China/ China to America/ America to Taiwan/ she doesn’t know where her home is anymore/ a diaspora for life/ she proclaims herself to be/ choked up on the phone/ I understand what she means/ no sense of belonging/ this lonely feeling/ carves out your insides/ candle in the jack-o-lantern/ goes out after a while/ rot and mold take over/ caves in
	his type of thinking catches/ on the train a woman/ telling her friend/ she will move/ back to her home country/ she moved away from/ decades ago/ she corrects herself/ I mean where I was born/ there is no home country/ I don’t even know what that means/ trails off/ .../ I lean in to listen/ she sounds familiar/ “I understand what you mean”/ I whisper/ my mouth moving/ I hear her speak

permanent guests in familiar places/ our appearance betrays us/ “home is where the heart is”/ I think it is heartless/ are we then homeless/ where do we go at the end of the day?
Bougainvillea I

The bougainvillea bush in the backyard of our San Francisco home looks exactly like the one that grew brilliant and wild on our neighbor’s front wall in Taipei. It beckons my attention from outside the window as I sit in my dining room in the same way it used to call to me as I walked past by it every afternoon on my way home from school.

The feelings I get when I stare at the splattering deep pink on the wall in the backyard now is the same as how I used to feel as a child, taken aback by the indomitable radiance, awed by the audacity of its splendor.

The distance between my elementary school and my childhood home in Taipei was approximately 1.5 kilometers.

The distance between Taipei and San Francisco is approximately 6430 miles.

The years between when I immigrated from Taiwan to the United States—42.

The space between memory and the present equals none when the trumpet-shaped flowers bloom.
When I was growing up in Taiwan, we had flowers in the house all the time. Bouquets of chrysanthemums and irises graced the handsome granite end table daily. My grandfather was the one who would go to the market every few days to procure the fresh flowers. He was diligent about this task and I don’t recall ever seeing the flowers wilt or turn brown before a fresh bouquet would magically appear to replace them. Yet, I wasn’t too fond of these perfectly arranged cut flowers in the porcelain vase. They always looked put upon to me, trapped in a vessel half-filled with still water, suspended in time even though their life had already been cut short. I preferred the bougainvillea bush growing on our neighbor’s wall, with its thorny twisty branches and unabashed bursts of bright pink flowers climbing over the vertical surface, unapologetic about the way it spread everywhere.
Grandma

was off to the market every morning buying fish, sometimes heads and other times tails, but mostly whole. was taking the chicken, dropped off by grandpa’s client, who didn’t have the money to pay for grandpa’s legal services but offered to pay with chickens, to the market to get slaughtered. was washing the lattice on the room divider separating the dining room from the living room using a small bottle brush. was putting down the woven straw mats on all the beds to get ready for the sticky balmy nights of summer. was reading the newspaper. was telling the cook to dust the fish head with flour, fry it, then braise it in soy sauce, vinegar, chilies, ginger, garlic, and scallions. was teaching me how to make the perfect Shanghainese wontons with pork, shrimp, and Bok Choy filling. was telling me she studied sericulture, that silkworms cannot get wet, mulberry leaves need to be dry, and cocoons were boiled with the silkworms inside so as to unravel a continuous thread. was telling me her father cherished his one daughter who lived when all her siblings died. was telling me her mother bound her feet, but only briefly because her dad intervened when she cried in pain. was telling me she was “the pearl in the palm” of her doting dad. was telling me cash, gold and precious jewels were sewn into jacket lining and hem of pants and sleeves while fleeing China with her two children, leaving one behind because he was too ill to make it across the strait. was playing Mahjong and remaining quiet while all the other women gossiped about everyone they knew. was fighting with her husband. was stashing away cash in case of emergency or desertion by her husband. was aware I knew grandpa had a mistress and two young kids, younger than even me. was not aware I knew grandpa went to visit his other family when he was supposed to be out buying fresh flowers in the morning. was lamenting about the short-lived but spectacular beauty of the Tan Hua flowers on the balcony. was missing her son who died from colon cancer at age 23. was smoking on the sofa every afternoon. was playing solitaire.
Dong Po Rou

1 ⅛ lbs of pork belly cut into 1 1/2 “cubes.

because meat shrinks when it’s cooked
when done
you get 1-inch bite-size pieces that
fit perfectly into your mouth
the gelatinous fat
layered between
tender lean meat

Place pork belly cubes into pot, add 1 chopped green onion, 2” in length, 1 slice of ginger and 2 C of water. Bring to a boil then turn heat down to medium, cook for 30 minutes.

it’s important to boil the fatty pork
before cooking in a savory sauce
parboiling breaks down the tissue of the meat
shortening the cooking process
bloody residue skimmed from the surface
murky water drained
plant-based green onions and ginger
let us forget that
we kill in order to enjoy
Heat 3 T oil in wok. Stir-fry 3 T of sugar over low heat until the sugar becomes caramelized and bubbles. Add 2/3 C soy sauce, ½ C rice wine and 1 C water. Add 5 chopped green onion, 2” in length, 3 slices of ginger, 2 star anise and parboiled pork belly, stew for another 30 minutes, then move to a clay pot and simmer for 2 additional hours.

caramelization
brings out a chocolaty and smoky flavor
you wouldn’t otherwise have
without transforming
white granulated sugar
the star anise with its eight prongs
a miniature flavor weapon
wields subtle but powerful notes of licorice
into the dish
gives it a deep profile and aroma
which evokes a time from long ago…

During the Song Dynasty, around 1030’s, the Chinese poet Su Dong Po was exiled to the province of Hangzhou after he’d criticized the emperor. One day, Su had put a pot of fatty pork on the stove when a friend dropped by and challenged him to a game of Go. Su turned the heat down to a simmer and left the pot on the stove as he became engrossed in the game, forgetting the dish all together until the game was over. Upset that the pork might be burnt, Su was surprised to find the dish cooked to heavenly perfection, the unrushed low simmering heat rendered three shades of reddish brown for each meat cube nestled in the cooking vessel, their texture glutinous yet not greasy, the flavors deep, subtle with just enough sweetness to represent the best of the best Jiangzhe cuisine.

Dong Po Rou
signature dish from the Jiangzhe region of China
legacy I pass down to my children
who are half Chinese
when they bite down into the melt-in-mouth texture of the elastic layer
browned gelatinous skin
creamy light caramel fat
and dark brown soy soaked tender pork flesh,
will they know to thank the poet Su Dong Po
for a forgetful moment long ago on the east side of West Lake
near where their great-grandmother was born?
to love
intimate
near to
dear
personally
in person
to kiss
marriage

to be near to or
intimate with

love
affection
dear
parent
relative
dependent

a confidant
parents-in-law of one’s offspring
one’s own blood
relative of a patient

friendship
good will

right from one’s own mouth
to state personally
one’s own handwriting

my dear
darling
close

to see with one’s own eyes

pro-
affinity

to pain one’s friends and please his enemies
a trusted subordinate
take part personally in an expedition
in favor of
pro-government
Universal Language

I learned something valuable in July 1978. My sister and I had just moved to America the year before. She was 9 and I was 12. We had learned barely enough English to get by. That was not the only reason we stood out. There were few Asian kids at the summer day camp. The population at Bay Ridge Brooklyn was predominantly Irish and Italian American. We could not help but stand out.

We sat down on the only seat left on the bus that day. It was right in front of this boy. The boy my sister and I avoided. We slipped quietly into the bench seat. He had an upturned nose and pink skin. His round freckled cheeks were topped by a mop of reddish-brown hair. We saw the gaps between his yellow teeth whenever he laughed. I wondered if he was going to start his antics behind us.

For the past two weeks when the campers would gather at the gym he and his friends would perch on the top section of the bleachers. Looking for victims. A couple of times when my sister and I sat below. The boys would roar with laughter up behind us. Mostly they made ching chong sounds. Taunted us with mocking words we could not understand. One time I felt drops of wetness on my bare shoulder. When I turned around I saw the boy high up on the bleachers. Jutting his jaw forward and puckering his lips. Motioning to spit again in our direction. When he saw me glaring he would stop. Especially when I stood up.

Now sitting on the bus I felt an irresistible temptation To Hurt. Fury buzzed and charged like a battery inside my skin. Then. I felt spit on my bare shoulder. My brows furrowed. I turned around. Electricity crackling down my shoulder to my hand. Flowing along with the trickle of his spit. I bore into his eyes. Took note of his mockery. His confusion. His fear. I swung my palm across his cheek with crackling energy. Heard the crisp slap. Felt like a sizzle on bacon. A whitish handprint remained on his red flushed cheek. His round eyes stuck in open. What had just happened.

Complete silence around us. We sat suspended in time. Then someone shrieked with laughter. Shattered the stillness into shards of glass as more kids laughed at the boy. I thought I smelled blood in the air.

Back at the gym the boy sat high up on the bleachers with friends. Laughing but not spitting. He looked away when I stared in his direction. We communicated through the universal language of humiliation and cruelty.
Naturally

The psychiatrist gives me an IQ test, geometric shapes and patterns speak to me naturally in a secret language, snug like a baby swaddled, comfortable in a soft blanket, impossible to achieve when I speak human.

I take the test in a three-dimensional equiangular rhombus. I score the same as Charles Darwin. Mr. Naturalist, I do not think humans need to evolve any further, evolution does not seem to be doing us any good.

Outside the hospital window a hummingbird rotates its wings eighty times per second in the shape of a figure eight. The continuous loop allows them to hover, fly backwards. Darwin must have known this about hummingbirds if I know about it.

Back in the cube the psychiatrist says: you are like a large tree with a hollow core, perfect on the outside but, inside you are eaten away and emptied out. Does he know it is natural? Trees have internal decay but survive. Decay can start from a large wound--lightning strike, broken limb, damaged roots--wounds lead to decay. Trees like oaks do a great job compartmentalizing. New growth rings wrap around the rot, thrive in hiding the emptiness. Failure to compartmentalize = failure to survive. Evolution is unforgiving.

I box up the hollow in a cuboid, seal it off in a corner, away from the tender layers of new bark tissue, skin and cell waiting for their turn, protect the newborn from the marks of life. Goodbye ward. Goodbye psychiatrist. I feel around my torso, knocking to make sure it is fortified. A slight echo sounds from within.

Outside the hospital a hummingbird rotates its wings, looks for sap from the tree. Take as much as you need and, let me watch you hover and dance in circles of figure eights.
Like skin-to-skin contact where a baby is dried and laid directly on the mother's bare chest after birth, both covered in a warm blanket and left for at least an hour or until after the first feed. Baby sleeps sinking into familiar flesh, the slow steady drum beat now muffled below the warm skin, body keeping close to, space all around settling down like air blankets, body nestle up, mom against baby to protect and give every care for. Like a cocoon, but the warmth is infinite, travels everywhere but nowhere. Nowhere do I need to go with my body pasted, spread out, body glued to all of it, belong to all of it, can’t be measured when the universe can’t be measured, no question, no doubt. I am considered timelessly, given every thought to, cared for. I long for.
Reflection

In the mirror grandpa’s face
looks back at me
mountainous cheekbones
orbs of knowing stored
behind clear water gaze
maps of faraway land
dotted across nude canvas
baked in by sun and water
I clear away with drops of lemon

One long strand reaches out
from the caterpillar eyebrow
or is it dragon whisker?
In the same exact spot
maybe the same exact hair
I am ready with a tweezer in my hand
“It’s okay, Ye Ye, this won’t hurt
I’ll still look like you
with plucked eyebrows.”

He smiles back at me
lips tinted with mauve rose.