

Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, 2016

The city is turning, the trees are turning,
we are walking or perhaps swimming
through a sea of yellow leaves when Louise
stops to bite a perfect persimmon. Her front teeth
pierce the skin and she is laughing saying
I remember my mum cutting persimmons
in the sun one afternoon while soft orange bits
stick to her palm. We look up the Chinese name
for persimmon on my phone, 柿子, we taste the word,
we cut it open, wondering at how it sounds
so like the word for lion, 狮子, lion fruit
like a tiny roaring sun, shiny lion fruit.

At dusk we sit outside cutting mooncakes
into quarters with a plastic knife, peering
at their insides: candied peanut or purple yam,
matcha or red bean? The moon looks like
a single scoop of red bean ice cream
but really it's a girl who ate her beloved
then swallowed the sun he gave her as a gift.
Oh there's always so much to be lovesick for
when seasons change, like green birdcages
and plastic moon goddesses and pink undies
hanging up to dry above the street and boys
who only text at night. We lick the sugar
off our wrists and it's been so long,
so long since we dreamt of the sea.

Hua Mulan comes back to visit her grandmother

Where the yellow flame tree hangs over the doorway
I watch blue-winged dragonflies Inside, she watches the window
Her eyes widen *My girl—*
I want to take her hand but it is so small it might break

Nǐ chī le ma? Have you eaten?

Yes, wàipō, how is your heart today?

She is so small a soft wind might carry her away
There have been times these last ten years when I have had to imagine
my mother, my father all of them carried away

Magnolia leaf girl—nǐ chī le ma?

Yes, wàipō, how did you sleep last night?

Ma says she is not sure of the last time wàipō went outside
But maybe when she shuts her eyes she is climbing limestone mountains
I can't remember when we last spoke I can't remember much except

Nǐ chī le ma?

her hands scooping steamed rice into blue bowls and lighting coiled candles
I want to know her favourite type of tree Her favourite dress
I want to know *My girl, nǐ chī le ma?*

Yes, wàipō, is there anything you need?

what colours she dreams in Are there long white clouds and blue peaks

My magnolia girl,

Yes, wàipō, it has been so long

Nǐ chī le ma? Come—

excerpt from **Field Notes on a Downpour**

(一)

The first character of my mother's name, 雯 *wen*, is made of rain 雨 and language 文. According to my dictionary, together they mean "multicoloured clouds" or "cloud tints".

There are so many things I am trying to hold together. I write them down each day to stop them from slipping. Mouthfuls of rain, the blue undersides of clouds, her hydrangeas in the dark.

Also in the dictionary under "wen":

文 *language, character, script*

温 *warm*

吻 *lips*

纹 *lines, veins / cracks in glassware or jade*

(二)

I read an article about a boy in China whose name contained such a rare, ancient character (half dragon, half sky) that it no longer existed anywhere except when written down by hand. The computer could not print his name. His existence could not be recorded in any system.

How can you be sure this really happened if you didn't get proof?

There is always something disappearing here. Old buildings are crushed to pieces and replaced by shopping malls. The skyline goes dark at 10:30pm. The subway map rewrites itself each day.

Not long after we met I learnt the word 霓虹, neon, which is both a type of light and a type of memory.

霓:

a secondary rainbow

the name of a species of Japanese cicada

(三)

In order to make learning this language easier, I started to see the characters as objects I can collect and keep close to me.

魔 (*mó*), spoken like a murmur, an evil spirit or demon.

One night you said my name in the dark and it came out like a ghost 鬼 from between two trees 林. In this same forest I found a path between rice fields, a piece of steamed bread, paralysis of one side of the body, and the thin blood vessels of rain.

In June the cicadas were so loud we thought the trees would swallow us whole.

(五)

The lady at the fruit shop asks me how I can be half Chinese and still look like this. (She points to my hair). We come up against a word I don't know. She draws the character in the air with one finger and it hangs there between us, glowing invisibly.

“juan”:

卷 *curl*

媵 *to have tender feeling for*

捐 *to abandon*

罟 *a net for catching birds*

(六)

Some things make perfect sense, like the fact that 波 (wave) is made of skin (皮) and water (氵) but most things do not.

That night there were cracks in the ceiling where the rain fell through and dripped down the back of your t-shirt, then onto my arm.

Last week two hundred white tundra swans were found dead beside a lake in Inner Mongolia.

Two days ago I smashed a glass jar of honey on the kitchen floor. It shattered softly, the pieces melting apart in my hands.

I still think of it now.

(七)

鸣 (*ya*) is the cry of animals and insects, which rhymes with tooth, which rhymes with precipice, which also rhymes with the last part of my Chinese name.

I am so full of nouns and verbs but I don't know how to live any other way. I am a tooth-like thing. I am half sun half moon, and the uneven traces of leaves. I am honey strokes spreading over the tiles.

Certain languages contain more kinds of rain than others, and I have eaten them all.