

## 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.