

**Family Portrait as Guttled Fish**

i.

We tried to make your favorite dish today, Bả. Drunken rice-field eel diced into small squares, boiled into a stew with lotus roots and dried red dates. It was Mā and I who had attempted to do the dicing tonight, and it is because of us that this dish was merely an attempt—our clumsy gashes along its underside and numerous cuts on our own fingers. The live eel's skin was slick with mucus, and when faced with disembowelment it flailed erratically, thrashing about from cutting board to counter to floor, as if to intimidate its captors, to make a last stand. As we tried to grasp the floundering animal, I couldn't help but feel bad for it. Plucked and planted a million miles from its homeland, brought to a market of hands, of wads of crumpled green bills, of fish tanks the size of coffins, it now sputtered last words at a final destination: some pseudo-American family's kitchen counter, right beside the Lao Gan Ma and the frozen tater tots.

Mā told me how often you had this dish back in your home village. She recounted how when you would catch the scaleless fish with bare hands, hold them by whatever grip you could force upon their slimy bodies, and carry them home for dinner. You were always determined to provide something: spending countless hours in the paddy fields, you searched, even when all the other kids had gone home, for eels in the umber water. You told me that you came from a family of fishermen, a family that spent generations alternating between the river and the sea, each child drenched in the saline wash and murky beds of water hyacinths. Wooden boats held tight by the wild push of uncaring water, birthing generations of pitiless storms, blood-hardened rope, hands made coarse under the brutish sun.

ii.

And now, here you are, an ocean away from your homeland, still selling fish.

iii.

You taught me how to debone salmon when I was ten. A skill that to you, was inconceivable to live without.

We had been in our family restaurant for twelve hours already: you, behind the sushi bar, face lax with exhaustion, as if you didn't even have the energy to keep your face taut, and I, in the kitchen, shelling shrimp and washing dishes. We had already closed shop for the day. The dining room, a space so usually packed with people swimming about, bickering, gossiping, eating, enjoying, living, was now empty—turned inside out, left vacant.

You invited me to your station behind the glass, to your yellow cutting-board where you had spent years perfecting a single knife stroke, a single dish. You put stainless steel tweezers in my hand, held my hand over the pink flesh of the fish, and ordered me to pull some invisible obstacle out of its body. A salmon's bones are almost clear, hidden under layers of fat, hinted only by geometric white dots lined along its tissue. Although I couldn't see them, when my hands caressed its body, all I noticed were sharp things. Each jagged edge of bone built to be felt and pulled like spring onions out of the ground. We were at this for hours, this dance of touch and steel, until we tired, hands greased with fish oil. I ended up moving to the dining room and dropped head-first into one of the booths, my arms sprawled across the torn leather. I closed my eyes. You continued into the night.

iv.

We had our first, real, big argument the summer you asked me to apprentice as sushi chef at the restaurant. I had been working there for a while, but always in the back, running the radishes through the prep machine or chopping carrots. This time though, you wanted me behind the glass case, on display for the patrons looking for an exotic experience at the sushi bar, mesmerized by some disciplined Eastern technique and far flung fish with unique Asian names. After two days, I was horrified. It was summer, and I had nothing else to do, but I could not imagine spending the whole of my break getting cuts on my fingers and making rolls that fell apart at the faintest prod of a chopstick. I was older then, and I had my permit but could not drive alone yet. But driving away was exactly what I promised. We were on our lunch break and I told you that I was going home, to a friend's house, to anywhere I'd never have to see a fish again.

What I really meant to say was that I couldn't stand what you did for a living. The notion of decapitating fish, of carving out silver skin, of standing for ten hours a day, wet and hungry and hands sticky with dried tuna, for an entire summer, was so impossible to me, that I had forgotten you had done it for almost three decades. That you had done it every day, every week, every month, every year, since you had arrived in America. And you were thankful for it. And here I was, throwing a tantrum because what? Because I didn't like the feeling of fish fat on my hands? Because I thought I was supposed to be living some idyllic American teenage life?

v.

Every single one of these moments with you is haunted by the ghosts of dead fish. Carcasses outline all of my memories. Every birthday, I had waited for you to come home after work, and by midnight it wasn't even my birthday anymore but I wanted to see your face so badly that I didn't even care. The odor of slaughter, of organs hollowed out of fish was unmistakably strong, strong enough to cover birthday cakes. I didn't care. It was only when I got older when I started to wonder about these things, why your jeans were always stained with guts, why you spent so much time at the restaurant, why you couldn't just sell the business and get a white-people job, like a real-estate agent or a businessman. Eventually, I thought to myself, was that it? Was fish guts our destiny? I asked all these questions because I couldn't face what I really wanted: to not be expats on foreign land, to not go somewhere and be the imported entertainment. I wanted so desperately to be American that I couldn't even face you, my own Bà. I knew you tried to accommodate this, singing along to the cheery pop idols in the car, learning to hide your accent as much as possible. When people talk about guilt, they talk about some warm feeling that rises to your head like a small flame, tenderizing your thoughts. But this guilt is so much sharper, so much more angular—like a knife finding an entrance into the soft underbelly of a live eel.

vi.

The offspring of freshwater eels swim out to sea to grow, and when they return, they do not return to their familial rivers and streams, but instead ones determined by the currents. Random bodies of water. Away. Bà, I am sorry. I am sorry that I am still coughing up this unrelenting narrative, wet with saltwater. Bà, we are fishermen still. This new homeland and its jaws will not change that.