

Lepidopterists Dream in Chinese

It's never been an issue for me that my Chinese grandmother *Lao-lao* is a butterfly. Life with a butterfly grandmother is five-percent wonder and ninety-five percent anxiety. The fear of crushing her looms as I shut a book or that a gust of wind might blow her off course, but she survives in my household with a cheery attitude careening through transoms and thresholds. *Lao-lao* is a *Danaus Plexippus*, or a monarch butterfly, the only butterfly that can migrate—an ability only discovered by lepidopterists not too long ago. I had mistakenly believed that all butterflies were like *Lao-lao*, annually migrating great distances to meet the needs of their families. Whenever she visits, there are precautions when going outside together; the glass jar (her crystal carriage) needs to be covered with a net so she can breathe. We keep conversation to a minimum when out to avoid the sidelong glances typically reserved for the mentally unstable. When we meet other butterflies, I allow them to dance together in the sky. A few intimate flutters and twirls and I quickly usher her back. Despite the fact that she had poison in that small body, I often had nightmares of strong drafts from passing cars and little kids that rip anything apart, battering those brilliant wings. She's always present in our portraits as a tiny dot of color, here on a shoulder, there on a knee. In childhood, I would read and watch nature documentaries, learning facts to understand *Lao-lao* the way other children might listen to their grandparents' stories about wartime. Her migrating seemed so natural that it didn't make sense why other butterflies didn't—it couldn't possibly be that cumbersome to flap your wings a few times.

Oftentimes, it seemed like *Lao-lao*'s integration into our lives was as decor or dressing, something usually ignored and handled like thin glass. It was never clear what *Lao-lao* wanted and whether or not we even cared about giving it to her. "Mother, it's bad for you to fly around while you eat, you should finish your food first." *Lao-Lao*, perched on the edge of a dish with her swiveling antennae aimed up towards the gigantic light above her, held up shining little balls of nectar that oozed juice with each twitch. *Lao-lao* fluttered off the table, gliding towards the leaves, her path erratic and floppy. "Exquisite flowers," *Lao-lao* quietly warbled to mom, impressed by the sweet, tender meal that would provide her with the fuel for her migration. Mother would nod solemnly and I would trace

Lao-lao's path through the air and imagine her on the gusts above the Yellow Sea, tirelessly homing in on her home by genetic clock and the sun's position. *Lao-lao* takes time going to China during the summer and winter more to seek its moderate climate and *Lao-ye*, her husband. Their relationship was a complete mystery because grandparents are mysteries. Who could ever fully imagine the time of their grandparents, the heartaches and yearnings, the distances they walked and what poetry they were capable of. Over the years, *Lao-lao's* wings lost their strength, resulting in longer and more tiring journeys. "I need to take care of *Haoshi*," she would whisper loudly on my shoulder so everyone could hear, her voice ballooning with dusty pollen, never saying whether she was going out of duty or desire. My parents often asked her to stay. Yet, I knew, through those nervous translucent wings, that the monarch's departure was impending. She would hang motionless with a false sense of calm below the leaves in our lush veranda, sometimes dripping gentle, steady drops of tears, leaving behind an infinitesimal puddle of dew in the morning. I found these scenes hard to interpret, unsure of whether or not she missed being cupped in a familiar hand or if she had other reasons for secreting that pearlescent fluid. I was too embarrassed to ask. Her stoicism made her seem like fragmented, frigid machinery against velveteen darkness, rods and rails of shimmering iron rattling in frames, vibrating swift enough to meld into one.

Lao-lao's departure was a quiet surprise because her presence was always ephemeral, a fleeting heartbeat. My parents took her for granted and maybe I did as well. Every year, the first sign my grandmother is about to arrive are the cherry blossoms that signal spring, blooming boldly and briefly and falling off the branches like snow. My mother prepares the veranda, tending to a tiny crop of milkweed that grows sturdy and sticky with sap—without them, *Lao-lao* cannot survive in our crammed 15th floor apartment amidst the clutter of books, tangle of charging cords, and particles of dust, waving to and fro. My grandmother arrives quietly, of course, how can a butterfly be loud? One day, she's just there. She's easy to miss, virtually indistinguishable from a flicker of light or a shadow dancing over the milkweed. She always comes excitable as if bubbling over with gossip, chattering about the pineapple cakes I used to love that lately I'd grown to hate. *Lao-lao still* treats me as if I am still a child, as if I learned my first word *deng*, light in Chinese, just yesterday. Now a Junior in high

school—*Lao-lao* still walks me to my bus stop because once I told her I was scared of walking alone after a strange man looked at me from across the street. Quickly slipping onto the bus, I stayed quiet until I got to school, where there was not a single butterfly sighted, and I liked that, even if I felt a little guilty. *Lao-lao* was such a burden for me that I slowly began to erase her in the stories that surrounded my life. Every holiday was a call-and-answer of the same script.

“Hey, are you visiting your grandparents this weekend?”

“Both of my grandparents passed away,” I lied.

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“It’s pretty hard.”

I was 16 and ready for *Lao-lao* to play a smaller role in my life. I was growing up and tending to a butterfly was not in any of the depictions of teenage life I romanticized. I couldn’t tell *Lao-lao* though. I couldn’t tell my mother.

Have you ever seen a dead butterfly? I mean one that has just died of old age, not one hanging out of the mouth of an orange house cat or one caught in the front grill of a truck. I haven’t. I think that butterflies simply vanish. Before *Lao-lao* vanished for good, I had spent all school year complaining about her presence. I didn’t like her showboating in front of my friends, flitting around so that the girls might cry out, Oh cute! I didn’t like how she asked me to sing her Chinese songs on our walks to the bus stop. Once, I even shooed her away and felt the back of my hand brushing her wings. Later that night, the moment of contact was still so visceral, the dust that came flying off her wings, the million tiny cracks in the filigree of her wings. Not long afterwards, as if linked with *Lao-lao* in some symbiotic relationship, the milkweeds started to wilt. Almost secretly, my mother started to be more withdrawn and quiet. She cooked less and I ate out more. Just one night, when it was nine degrees

below zero, I suddenly remembered that *Lao-lao* hated the cold and couldn't fly in temperatures under 55 degrees. I ran through the house, searching for *Lao-lao*, scared that she was stranded on a lamp or slowly creeping along the armrest of a sofa. I finally checked the veranda and saw the glass jar that was her carriage and found only a few yellow stalks of grass, a half eaten cube of sugar, and barely visible smudges of dust on the glass, like the fingerprints of a ghost. *Lao-lao* had left as quietly as all the times she had arrived, and the wind blew a little, and then it was as if she was never even here.

Sitting on the large dining table In the apartment, I watched the clear night sky, lit by the apartment lights: nothing changed a single inch. Strangely, the apartment seemed a lot smaller. *Time to work and do my homework*, I thought, but it wasn't possible to move—staring into the night sky, I suddenly lost all my strength. I imagined a colorful sky in a warm world behind the stark, dark scenery ahead of me. My mother tapped me gently, interrupting my reverie, and all I could think about were those colors which I had seen before reflected in the sheen of thin translucent wings, without really knowing why.