

Diagnosis of Familial, Lateral Curvatures

i.

cervical

massachusetts

刘泽慧, *Liu Zé Hui, That is to say: Me*

Mother ran over me at the table the day I received my spinal diagnosis — *scoliosis*; its curved letters
chalked to the touch.

I asked her if my condition was genetic; she spoke in masticated bites, like a break of crab legs on
Beijing motorcycle mornings. She'd escaped Communism to find a city that would let her grow. She'd
stolen every branch and turned every stone to fly here with nothing but two ragged suitcases and a few
hundred dollars. She was the American dreamer, living a good life and working her way to a white
house with straight picket fences.

Scoliosis was a one-woman word, she told me. She, the women in our lineage, were too straight to suit
my spinal curves.

In my solitude, I'd searched for attachment, affixing scoliosis to its natural, mother-daughter adjective:
wrong. Wrong scoliosis was the fundamental shift of my spine: a stone-set root, sprouting sideways,

Liu

backwards, any way but up to find a swig of sunlight. Wrong scoliosis was the brace I'd string up like polymer rib cages, strapped in plastic so tight I forgot the figure-eight form of breathing. Wrong scoliosis was nautical letters, the lurch from *family* to *nobody* by a child stranded far at sea.

In another universe, three wrongs make a right. In this universe, wrongs condense into the clench of my brace, showing the confinements our strange bone gaps bring.

In our wronged universe, the stories closest to me are the ones I do not know.

ii.

thoracic

hunan, shaoyang

刘丹, *Liú Dān, That is to say: Mother*

We're in the cellar again. Māma stitches herself into our huddle, round stomach protruding like a wintermelon. There are four of us (six, if dead children are countable numbers) marinating in this fish-shaped flesh, shit-streaked army boots roaming over our lying bodies.

“Close your eyes and don't move,” jiějie mumbles. “You know where they will take us.”

Liu

Where, according to jiějie, is a place floating in its own little box of reality, because it has no name or home. *Where* is the closest thing to emptiness. It swallows names and faces in large gulping mouthfuls until we remember nothing of the people that go there except the soft of their fingertips on our childish cheeks.

Jiějie grasps my face and pulls me into her chest. I can feel her spine calcifying through the dark cotton shirt, spouting and shirking through broken bone notches — growing pains, māma calls it. Jiějie ruptures bamboo shoots through her back each night and grows them back through her tailbone in the morning. Bàba says bamboo torture is one of the most painful deaths. Yet jiějie never complains about dying every night. Instead, she holds me close and we wait in simmered breaths, hoping the moment will pass.

Above us, bàba paces in hurried steps, using his quick tongue to push the soldiers into someone else's village. He convinces them to go to the ugliest children, the ones without good names, without deep roots of family and home that crack into war-torn cellars. He says he and his wife (who, unfortunately, just so happens to not be home) are good people, with one child and only one. But they come back repeatedly, cursing boot stamps on the walls. Māma holds herself, weary head to stomach, curling into a 凹, *kǒu*, a hollow mouthful, her back weighing down on her carried stomach like a stone pouch. The soldiers are slamming doors and cabinets above us, looking for māma to peel out her insides, to take away our unnamed sibling.

Liu

I am beginning to think they never leave.

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“I was a magnificent writer once,” my mother whispered as she read my poetry. “Much better than you.

It’s because you don’t understand pain. Pain makes small words sing.”

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iii.

lumbar

hunan, shaoyang

秋香. *Qiu Xiang, That is to say: Great-grandmother*

My hair. Half long half shaven; a yin-yang cut. The town knuckled and razed to shave the left side of
my scalp.

“Your family had too much land,” they clattered, looming over my husband’s wilted body. “Too, too
much.”

They say maidens sang rivered blossoms and indulged in half-truths when the 陳 dynasty fell. What is a
home if it teaches hurt? I have half a head. The right side weeps into the ground. I weep. I hope the
whole world sees me weep, and divides time into this small moment. No way to translate it.

Liu

Thirty-six years is enough to draw ropes and learn asymmetry. I wonder about the ways my neck will squeeze itself out. Which way will it swing? Above the bed, the rope numbs through my throat now, hungry and snaked. I draw it over my breast and through the lefts of my scalped head.

I live only in this last second. Time, she gives her love always.

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“Your great-grandmother hanged herself,” my mother mentioned while folding the linens.

My chin snaps up. “Why didn’t you tell me until now?”

She gazed into the walls, her eyes bearing bullet holes. “I don’t know, don’t ask me. Your great-grandmother wasn’t very important. And the dead, well, we blot them out with time.”

My brace clenches my back: three years later, I still feel the ghost of its grasp. I stare down at our bed sheets while wondering how many dead mothers and grandmothers have been choked down in the pages of our

family history.

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vi.

sacrum

home

Liu

I asked my mother about my scoliosis again last night. Over hatched squid and new American china, she admitted truths of her sister's spine, withered and split like foxtails at her lumbar. How my great-grandmother broke her back, unlearning the sores of a jaundice-bruised existence. The family inheritance I'd searched for in my solitary twistedness was here, settled into locked spinal discs.

Now, I finger family photographs on my spine to verbalize the three vertebrae of my Chinese name. *Huì*, wisdom that taught me *disposition* and *depression*: what it means when my grandmothers and I have each put our heads to the tail ends of knives and nooses. *Zé*, the second cousin of water, showed how ugly relatives are asphyxiated like oil on blotting paper. And *Líú*. Every snapped cord of our

history is a reminder —

we are all small and scared shitless.

v.

tailbone

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We've already lived our whole lives running, running from the others, running while our bones slacken beneath our strangled necks. Wrangled and wrangled will we bleed like the white-breasted chicken at the market.

I wonder how long it will take before we run out.