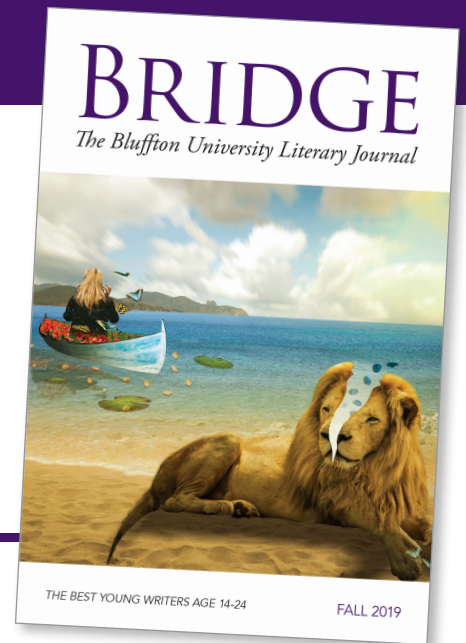


BRIDGE

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BLACK SPECKS

Carrie Hsu

I. To Want Mangoes

How to tell if a champagne mango is ripe and plump for a feast—inhale the top and scan it sacrificially if the mote at the top is bleeding dew a sticky juice if the flesh surpasses the crevice as mountains do valleys if the pond that used to be an ocean is sunken in and the mango has become independent of its roots if summer caves in to fragrance and that little black belly button at the very top is not at the very top any more and the fruit has blossomed past where it used to be attached to a family of parties and patio breezes if gold is speckled with black—then that is the one you must take.

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We buy nine mangoes, my mother and I, and I sniff the caps and smell the fruit past rigid skin that hides it from heat and scars. They're now suffocated in a plastic bag, thrashing to be bitten and killed so that their blood can flow soundly, sweetly, down our cheeks. An ant crawls past them as we plop them on the sidewalk; their weight wedges indents into our fingertips and promises revenge come nighttime. The ant is not alarming, merely secular, as it avoids invisible

barriers and scurries indecisively in every direction upon paths we cannot see.

To my left, a daughter sits in a stroller, gaily blowing bubbles. Her mother pushes her along. An elder daughter, still shorter than the mother, stands tall beside them. They are the perfect picture of a trio of girls, black hair combed back by the wind, eyes clasped half-shut to polarize the rays that stab drably at their bald skin. I turn to my right, watch cars pass and cigarettes drop. The cry of a child slices a humid bubble, and my eyes snap back to the daughters and their mother. The one in the stroller is now rotating violently, squirming away from her mother's arms. Her eyes are clenched shut in an effort, her face red with trivial fury. The mother yells, aggravated, and the bubbles float away. They fuss and struggle, and the mother shouts in crimson Chinese, and all I can comprehend of this scene is the mother repeating, 媽媽(Mama), 媽媽. The daughter fights unresponsively to her mother saying her own name, and there is no comfort withheld from such dialogue. The standing sister watches, silent in her own game, and the mother pushes them forward in a declarative march, her sunflower pants splattered boldly with



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large flowers. A child cries so easily.

My mother walks out the supermarket with a new bag, full of flour and a jungle vegetable. I lie on her shoulders and hug her. Her arms barely wrap around my waist as I tower over her short, sturdy structure. Her grip is secure around me as we stand in waiting for 爸爸(*Baba*)'s car to round the corner. I watch the frail, aged men and women in the beige car as they watch us in return. I wonder what they think of my mother and me, two women standing in the midst of the heat of a Chinese supermarket. *What a wonderful pair*, they must think. *How wonderful it must be to have a daughter who loves her mother. A daughter who hasn't left her mother in the confines of a lonely home, that hasn't dropped her in an ocean of age and despair. How wonderful it must be for a mother to love her daughter as dearly as she loves her.* They watch, longingly, as we stand resolute in the air.

II. Four to Three

The sun shines shyly through the skylight as 媽媽(*Mama*) makes the call for lunch. It's a clear Saturday morning and the house is fragrant with the smell of the sea burnt to crisps. Lunch is salmon fried rice with carrots and onion and lima beans and a foreign tinge of ginger, slyly erect in my mouth. It's oddly quiet but it's a pleasant meal; the coolness of the Japanese cucumbers marinated with fungus and yet more ginger slices tingle hotly against the rice, fresh off the fire. I eat it slowly with the oat-cereal and blueberries and grapes and cranberries dried with time, an odd offense against my skin. My mother turns silently into a tempest, watching us like a hawk flying over a stream, a balloon soaring above the sky and popping without notice. *I'm going to eat* (she stumbles, but it does little to belittle her demeanor) *somewhere else.* Her feet make dreaded

thuds on our wooden floors that resonate more like planks when she strikes them, like xylophone bars helplessly pinned beneath padded mallets made of stone. They ascend upstairs, and my father shrugs his shoulders. The sun still shines through the skylight, indifferent to the absence of the woman at the head of the table. My father, my sister, and I sit in a wondrous silence, each bathing in remorse of what we may or may not have done to have caused such disturbance to our pleasant, quiet, Saturday lunch. I wash down the ginger with a bitter freshness of jasmine tea fermented in the refrigerator for four, perhaps three days.

III. Goodnight, Moon

Car ride home, my mother drives. It's too warm. The sun's shining everywhere unwanted, and the car seat is warmer than me. It's too warm; one day it'll melt and the leather and steering wheel and radio and metal will all have made their final stand. *Enough*, they'd say, and then they'd join hands and reminisce those car rides and talks and walks when nobody cared to abide. But that was a faraway dream of some ten, twenty years. For now, they're blind and argumentative and lashing with resent.

A dog walks astray, its fur black and shabby, unleashed and wild and carefree. It's lost, but it wanders mindlessly to itself, its tail held high, its nose cautiously independent. A house blurs past, its face hidden by evergreens and uncut grass. There's a field of dandelions at its feet, seeds readily begging to be blown, wishes unwished.

I do as my mother directed. New scenery, new floor, new chair, new desk. Papers scatter; they don't want to go. I collect them gracefully, ashamedly, and walk upstairs to where my father sits. I will sit across from him. I collect papers and bring them to the abandoned

bar. If only there were red wine and champagne in that empty honeycomb cabinet, perhaps glass shards would sweep up the papers and push them away as ripples wave apart leaves and such.

Mother's here again. ... *You know what your one problem is?* That's 爸爸(*Baba*)'s line; and it flows strangely, as if the sky had rained dirt. ... *We are normal people...* Am I? I think not. I'm a rat in a cat's game.

Wordlessly, I walk out to the garage, feel the chill of the tile beneath my toes, fill an old wine bottle with tap water by the kitchen sink, then walk out to the battering sun. The leaves of my lemon tree have turned a yellow-green since I moved it outdoors beyond my affection in the greenhouse. I move it from under the shadows of my house and allow it to prosper in the sun. A centipede crawls from behind it, scuttles into a crevice between the time-polished brick driveway and the garage floor painted over several times, then vanishes. A red fly circulates it endlessly, and I soak the soil excessively, then wash away the spider web after entertaining the droplets that balanced ripely on intricate threads of white. It's now a decimated apartment that children walk hurriedly past, left only with the sides clinging to leaves and the center slaughtered in a seamed smoke. The wine bottle is placed back by the kitchen sink. It makes a soft, dying thud against the perfect, resilient marble, diminishing as if absorbed, like the sound of 媽媽(*Mama*)'s fingers pulling gently at an infant's earlobe.

I like my earlobes cold; it's a habit.

As I sit and watch the new scenery of the dull white wall before me, my feet scrape back and forth above the new wooden floor like a clock awaiting a cuckoo's sunrise. My back leans against the new chair, and my

computer lays in sharp angles, poking at my new desk. It was always mine.

There are two picture frames against the white wall. One is of my sister hugging me when she was taller, labeled “Big Sister Little Sister.” It’s framed in a rosy picket fence, bright green leaves sprouting from spiraled circles and magenta dots sprinkling white. They aren’t real roses, more like candy balls that circle around like cotton candy snails. The second is framed in a deeper pink, the color of cheeks after a summer jog by the sidewalks. It holds, mysteriously, elements of *Goodnight Moon*— the golden moon, a sprawled cow, a laughing puppy, a spoon in a bowl, a plate served acutely, a troubled tea cup, and a gay cat playing the fiddle. Stickers of velvet pink and amber yellow stars stick gladly to it, holding a photo of a toddler in my mother’s arms and my sister in my father’s. We’re smiling boldly, each shiny and daring and wispy and young. I placed my water bottle and pencil holder in front of it earlier as I moved up, but I shift them aside now. My mother’s face is visible, and I trace the lines of her face with mine.

IV. How to Cry Grown-Up Tears

You think that because you’re more grown up now, you won’t cry, and if you do, you’ll have some very explicit reason in your head, and then you’ll go off to the side, wipe away a few tears, recover within a minute or so, and then waltz right back into conversation. No. That’s not how it goes. Let me tell you how it goes.

First, there’s a wave. A rush of blood and memories and a default childhood response floods up to your face. Your face heats up and swells like a balloon gone wild. Next, the latch. There’s too much of it; it just comes all at once. Around your throat, under your skin, against your tongue. It squeezes, and squeezes, and squeezes, until you scrunch up your

shirt upwards as if it were your favorite blanket and pull it towards your eyes, because there’s nothing more attractive to saltwater rain than watching saltwater rain fall. The ping of droplet after droplet diluting the first, making everything fuzzy and unclear, adhering to each other until a pond forms. Expanding outwards like a disease, a virus that wraps around every speck of pain you’ve felt, every hurt you’ve ignored, every word, every slap that you buried deep under your skin, your muscle, your tissues, until it’s been secured tightly in your bone.

And like an injured fawn, you glance around quickly, naïvely, looking for some cave, some hole, some void you can jump into until everything stops and there’s nothing but solid, solid black. But they know. It’s home, but it’s not; it’s *their* home and not really yours, and they know every inch from top to bottom, left to right. The only difference is, now, you’ve grown up. You’re older. You get to lock the door to the bathroom. So when they come calling out of guilt from their spontaneous rampage, you can shout back “I’m fine.” You’ve learned, over the years, to perfect that shouting voice that pushes down the sultry screams in your eyes. There’s no voice to tears, they simply, fall. And there you are, pacing in solid black in a room with no windows, the door locked, more alone than when you were younger and had to pace in an open space where they’d knock on the door until you stopped pressing your back against it and let them in. And then they’d give you a hug and you’d melt for love, for any affection, and then, forgiveness was default. But not here. Here, black is the new default. It’s not resentment, rather, self-exorcism.

It latches on, around your throat, under your skin, against your tongue. Around her throat, under her skin, against her tongue. Around his throat,

around his skin, around his tongue. My tongue screams silently. Hers lashes out, quick, blood red, pellets shot fast enough to reach my bone.

V. Holes

We’re all living holes. Not assholes, not black holes, just holes. Spaces in between our bones that we fill with muscle and skin. Eyeballs, ears, nostrils, mouths. Armpits, belly buttons, that space in between ribs, that space under them, that hole until your hips. The holes under you.

And we fill them up slowly, like sand fills in dunes in that hourglass, piling up layers around these holes to make us feel less like lonely, needy whores. It takes time, lots of it, but slowly, surely, we fill them up. We fill up the sacks that we carry on our backs, and we fill them up with people. They become saturated, pregnant with fat and luxuries and love and purpose.

But just as quickly as an hourglass shatters—insert a knife into any one of these holes, any one of them, and we spill.

VI. Hung Flowers

Today I hang flowers in my greenhouse. I am reminded that lovely things don’t last, and that flowers are beautiful, so they must die. I like that about them. I hang them upside down, hoping to turn the tables for a while, so that I may preserve their beauty a little longer.

Today I hug my mother as she lays her head on my chest, remembering how my head was on hers not long ago. It was so long ago that I heard her heartbeat by my ear as she stroked my ears.

Today I massage my father’s back as he lays stomach flat before me, belly down like a retired trout. I remember when my limbs were not quite as long and he carried me on that same back, my stomach flat on it

like a baby cub clinging to its home.

Today I eat red bean soup at my dinner table, three people around a table meant for four. I recall drinking this soup with my sister, my mother, my father, and smile fondly at how my sister took hours to consume it whilst I secretly added sugar. My mother adds sugar for me now, and I look across the table at them both, my mother and my father. And I hope that this does not fade.

VII. Grow

Each summer morning I walk past this small bricked off area bulging from a building. There's an old Chinese man there, hunching his back, his shirt sticking to his back as the front hangs down sleepily, the humid air suffocating leaves and cultivating soil. The ground is puddled from the hose, yet there's no dirt elsewhere. Every morning I watch as I walk past and he gracefully tends to each sprout like children of the sun.

I wish I could grow like that, vines erupting from my heart and around my ankles, lapping at my neck and erupting from my mouth as my eyes turn forever to the sky. Leaves sprouting at the corners of my eyes, fingertips thinning to unfurled potential green, alive with promise.

VIII. Ants Are Not Your Mother

Years ago, when I was young enough to sprawl time out onto my driveway, watching ants elope over stones and bricks, I'd asked a lot of curious questions. 媽媽 (*Mama*), I had asked, *why are you always so mean to me? You criticize me, you call me stupid, you tell me I'm nothing, you say I'm not your daughter. Look at the ants; they're so nice to me. They crawl around and they don't criticize me; they don't call me stupid or tell me I'm nothing.*

She had replied, *that's why I'm your mother, not ants. I'll always tell you the truth. When we go out, I call other kids pretty or <<好可愛!>>(so cute!)*

even if they're fat or ugly or stupid.

That's why ants are not your mother.

I had sulked off in a fog of bliss, nurturing the small specks of black into hands that grew open with love.