

An eulogy to fall, a love letter to spring

I left you when your twigs became feeble in the cold, when your leaves started to turn yellow - just to let myself be carried by the wind to a foreign land of Maples. Last year was the eighth year since we've parted, yet I remain burdened by guilt and regret as I make a free swirl under the glazing sun, opening my arms for the new spring without a second glance at your ombre colors, your crisp morning air under the high azure sky. I admit, sometimes I try so hard to bury you like rotten leaves deep under the soil where the roots meet, my hands tinted by dew-kissed soil and shame. I always tell them that I come from you, that you are my roots and my birthplace, that I am both you and *her*. Yet it has been so hard. I can't be both all the time because nature demands us to move on.

You were the intricately interwoven basket my grandmother placed before the ancestral tablets every year, when leaves turned yellow. *They are for holding the food*. She would say. *You venerate and keep your ancestors happy in the spiritual world with food, so that they will bless the family*. The room was incensed with the smell of burning sticks. Sandalwood. Pepper. Camphor. The six-year-old girl stared at the tablets with awe as if presented in front of her was a world estranged from hers. *I'm afraid of these tablets, lǎo lao*, I held onto my grandmother's hand covered by wrinkles like veins running down the blade of dried, autumn leaves.

You were the taste of candied hawthorn in the Yuyuantan Park beside our apartment before we moved to the other side of the city. Under a Ginko tree that shook its leaves in the mid-Autumn wind, an old man dipped the fresh, red hawthorn berries in a cauldron of syrup. The little girl carefully licked the berries one by one on the bamboo skewer, savoring their sweet, sour taste, too reluctant to break the shiny, glossy coating that enwrapped the fruit within. A funny, clucking sound came out of my mouth as I desperately tried to remove melted candy that clung onto my teeth. A sound that would be reminiscent of eight years later, when I tried so hard to iron my tongue straight to pronounce "thank you" rather than "sank" in a foreign land.

You spoke the language of a civilization once crowned by the golden letters of history. Every subtle stroke in your characters was the humbleness and self-discipline that flowed in my body. *You approach the paper with respect*, the kindergarten teacher would say as she circulated the room, *for every character embodies the tradition and history of those who walked before you*. Seventeen years later, I still had your calamity, responsibility and modesty, your deep buried heritage and traditions.

Yet sometimes, I felt suffocated by your layers and layers of fallen leaves. Your deep, tangled roots strangled my neck as I tried to escape the burden of your over-regulated, increasingly impermeable soils. I watched the way the free-swirling leaves fire and burn into ashes in your blazing flame of propaganda. In your dry and misty air and your uniform spectrum of tangerine, I couldn't breathe free —

She winks at me, a sly and irresistible smile in the corner of her rich, glossy lips. I cannot stand unwavering in the face of her sea of flowers, each with their own shape and colours and freedom to grow in all directions. Staring at her flowers with admiration and sometimes envy, I wonder if I can

also grow like fresh buds, even though my grandma tells me that I have to rise up from the fertile soil where layers upon layers of hardened, buried foliage was trodden by those who walked before me.

I long to breathe free in the air of spring. In the warm breeze she calls me with her enchanting voice marked with words that have rhythms: that I can fly beyond the rigid lines set before me and trace out letters on her land like a free skater who carves the ice with the blades of her skates, that I can transplant my roots and wash yellow and red off the back of my hands, and that *I* can also be the daughter of liberty.

To say that I can be both you and her is to evade the real issue because like plants, we naturally seek to belong somewhere: your songs would bring me back to the warmth of childhood, while her rhythmic beats and rap were a mash of syllables mixed with unrecognizable, metallic sounds. Hera and Athena echoed like indistinguishable names of girls who I was always too afraid to approach in the distant playground, while *Nv wa* (女娲)¹ and *Chang e* (嫦娥)² smiled at me like old friends, with their portraits imprinted on the porcelain pots - portraits that I would remember - long, silky hair black as night and lips like cherry blossoms. *Just like my grandmother and mother's*. Mulan's talking little dragon, rather than Cinderella's handsome white stallion, was the imaginary pet that I always welcomed into my home.

My father once recited this verse from the Song dynasty on one's solemn reflection and nostalgia in fall: 枯藤老树昏鸦，小桥流水人家，古道西风瘦马 *Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows; Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows; On ancient road in the west wind a lean horse goes.* 夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯 *Westward declines the sun; Far, far from home is the heartbroken one.*³

It's a pity that you have never learnt this poem, my dad said, it's beautiful.

Yet despite never having the chance to learn the poem, I savored its meanings as I imagined the way one walks away from home a child and return a stranger, and what it takes for the "heartbroken one" to realize that, perhaps, one finds only home and a sense of belonging when one detaches oneself from the arbitrary boundaries of a community of origin and another of destination.

Fall is decay and separation, yet also rebirth and resurrection. After all, this shouldn't be an eulogy - the transition of leaves from orange to red is just another quiet reminder that, despite its descending action, there is always something new. Born in fall and walking into spring, I am no longer defined by the definitions of old and new, of gold and green, and of the accepted and acceptor, as beneath the thousands of controversies of spring and fall, they are also a part of the same cycle. The forever evolving narrative of the seasons and the never-ending transitions of

¹ The mother goddess. In Chinese mythology, she created humans by molding them with yellow clay.

² The Chinese goddess of the moon.

³ Titled "天净沙·秋思", originally written by a Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) poet, Zhiyuan Ma (马致远) and later translated by Yuanchong Xu (1921-2021), Chinese translator and professor.

different phases of growth are what defines who I am. Eight years after I first landed on the Land of Maple Leaves, I stand amazed watching the way fall embraces spring, breathing the air full of the liberty to belong, to grow, and to see myself as I choose to be.