

SICK

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for all my mothers, by blood & by blessing

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This is all, ultimately, a litany of madness—the colors of it, the sounds it makes
in heavy nights, the chirping of it across the shoulder of the morning.

—Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*

ghost

at the funeral we learn to substitute a stone for a mother
begrudge this stolen soil for swallowing our mother

there is an ocean between me & what I miss a constant
gravity tiding Hong Kong history homeland mother

every flight & phone call a clumsy stutter towards family
across static corridors foraged words my lost mother

tongue calls out for discipline bows beneath its fledgling
Cantonese as to the heft of a grave & unfamiliar mother

who could have taught me to press dough into dumplings
seal the skin to prevent rupture a burdened mother

the kind our fathers fed their fictions to betray
the lineage of our mothers & our mother's mothers

he named me for her in English & in Chinese 念
to practice or commit to memory as in poetry or a mother

split

the first spring we planted perennials

it felt like an undeserved miracle, that four hours
of fingers kneading earth could lead to a lifetime's
flowers, that each year a different brood of blooms

would crown gingerly through the snow-drowned
soil, a new cacophony declaring arrival, cautiously—
in Cantonese we do not say *dead*

we say *not here* and imply *for now* as if loyalty is an antidote
for death. imagine our betrayal when the irises and bee
balm and Veronicas didn't sprout the following summer

like when your body didn't return from North York General
and Dad swore his hands would never bury anything again
that had no hope for resurrection. that spring, we scourged

our nails of pallbearers' dirt. we drank need
like water, tended our garden on faith.
we didn't ask for rain. careless.

what did we know of permanence?

some things are worth the pain of losing.
when May comes, Dad crouches on his plastic stool
in the front yard, tucks his long-sleeved flannel

into his jeans and turns fragile seeds into being and counts
the ones that didn't and lays tulips on your grave and still
the cemetery hurtles to life under a blanket of dandelions

still you sleep, not here, for now

superstitions

getting a haircut in the year's first month portends the death
of an uncle eating fish will bring your family abundance
八 meaning eight sounds the same as 發 meaning wealth
& hair eight is the luckiest number but avoid the number
four at all times the Beijing Olympics opened at 8:08 on August 8
2008 red is the colour of the flag & also fortune 四 meaning four
sounds the same as 死 meaning dead this elevator lacks
a button for the fourth floor never order exactly four
dishes at a restaurant on new year's children receive red
envelopes stuffed with money 送鐘 meaning to gift
a clock sounds the same as 送終 meaning to attend a funeral
& to run out of time white is not to be worn
on the body white is not to be used to decorate the home
red is the colour of blood betraying the skin & life
過身 means leaving the body so 不在身 means not here
not red white is the colour of funerals & foreigners
when eating rice do not leave your chopsticks upright
in the bowl like incense

never give anyone a clock

origin story

dinner plates hurled at the wall
puddling between shards of soapwater
bows hurled at 's headstone
we forgot its coordinates
maple tree rusted hose
I told she wasn't family
a graceless child
one recess I muddied my only jacket
pristine ice crimsoned
my face breached to reveal
shame stuck to the dressing
shame stuck to the seam
my fascination 's knee
goosebump between boot & skirt
 guilt pungent as onions
I dream on wet pillows
wake hollowed of history
 a runaway an orphan
the spiderplant shrivels
long I search for a reason
I too deserve to die young

allegation

it was late I was lonely I wore leggings a hoodie we were [friends]
I thought I might want until I knew I did not
such as comfort such as [] company he didn't notice
I didn't tell him [] I cried the whole time
he [didn't] notice

the walls their grip on the ceiling
his forehead ragged with concentration
his Radiohead Arcade Fire
I willed the walls let go

I didn't report there was nothing to gain
he texted me I texted back
the week before we wrote our together
mac and cheese I scrubbed the dishes [scrubbed]
my body became a portrait of
my body soapy water smeared between and after
my grip on certainty
I didn't say [no] did I
know I could I willed myself to
[let go] I deleted his
I made better other calluses
other mattresses to
here's what you want to know
I don't owe [you] anything