

PAST
LIVES,
FUTURE
BODIES

kristin chang



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Symmetry

How our bodies domesticate

disaster: by swallowing

another country's rains. By reining

my jaw to the sea, my bones

lurched into boats. My breasts bitten

into apples. My mother says

women who sleep with women

are redundant: the body symmetrical

to its crime. Between your knees

I mistake need for belief

in a father figure: once, we renamed

our fathers by burning them

out of our bodies, smoking the sky

into meat. I have my father's name:

張, meaning archer.

I consider coming clean

through you like an arrow. I consider

the way we shape in bed, like the sea

has revised its shoreline & we

the country it moves to meet. Every language

has different words for the same
want. I name you the body
of water my thirst is native to.
When I kiss you, I remember
every silence begins inside
a mouth. Everything edible begins
as a bird. At night, birds peck
peepholes into the dark
the way I have always
watched women: in the distance
between a girl & herself
is an entire body
bulls-eyed, arrowed
holy. A girl castling
her voice into a throat
of stone. I kiss you & forget
to turn on the dark. I taste
salt afterward, trace
where light through a window
veins your body, its wanting
to reroute your blood
someplace safe.

The Chinese Sappho

To translate my mother
I swab her mouth

with a sword. I have never understood her
grief as grammar. She wants the plural of violet

to be violence, the plural of woman
omen. I knew the definition of damn

before dyke. I've never read *The Price
of Salt & Blue is the Warmest Color*

is so white I wrote it
this poem. Yes, I will always want

my mother more than a lover. But I still
dream of your breasts floating

over my head like furred moons.
I mumble your name with a bloodbent

tongue. Daylight defaces me,
shreds the eye. I lose more & more

face every time a white woman
compliments my eyes

I want to pluck them out, soft
boil them in their sockets & eat away

the whites. A tragedy that's Greek to you
is Chinese to me. Is there a difference

between wanting a country
to home & wanting a body

to home? Don't tell me
I'll learn the language

it takes to know. Don't call 吴藻
The Sappho of China, don't forget Greek

was once a tonal language
like Chinese, it enters the body

slant. They say the mouth
shapes after its language.

My mouth ringing your nipple
is a vowel. In my dialect, every name

begins on a vowel, the mouth
circling itself. I circled your chest

like a restless bird, cribbing
inside your ribs. Your heart wringing

vowels out of blood. Over the phone
I teach my mother the difference

between singular & plural. I say
in English, the word changes

to match the thing. She says no,
a word is the thing itself: one woman

is a woman. Two, a woman woman.
Three. A woman woman

woman, she asks: when will you learn
to act the word? Like a mother's voice

I want to be beginningless.
I fantasize about my mother still

alive. Too soon
the tones of my birthname

sour like mourning
breath. When a word

is gone, the meaning
haunts the mouthhole.

When my body doubles
over, a ghost saddles

my back. The sum of my meat is
mare. The sum of my language

loss.

anchor baby

who will smuggle me
back into a body

of water
is another way
to say mass grave

say a broken girl is still
right twice a day

ask me for proof
of parentage I'll point

at the water

your own face

slurring the surface show me
a shipwreck resettled by schools of fish
a skeleton barnacled alive again ecology
evolved from grief death our new way
of life

here my child

threads her tongue

through a needle

stitches me a mouth without sound

I turn my tongue on itself swallow my own
language gilled to survive a sea

I boil

the sea into steam

sweet tea I bruise a pearl

in my jaw swill salt
until my mouth is scoured

stone I followed
 this country's
 coast like a scent
 to prey

I didn't listen
 when they told me *stay*

away
I didn't anchor
 the ship

I sank it



Photo: Ja Bulsombut

Kristin Chang lives in New York. Her work has been nominated for *Best New Poets* and *Best of the Net*, and she has been anthologized in *Bettering American Poetry Vol. 3* and *Ink Knows No Borders* (Seven Stories Press). She is a 2018 Gregory Djanikian Scholar (selected by *The Adroit Journal*), the recipient of a 2019 Pushcart Prize, and a Resist/Recycle/Regenerate fellow with the Wing On Wo Project in Manhattan Chinatown.