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 hone? 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
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.