

**Ethan Hsiao**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

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Category: Poetry

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**Inheritance**

888 left-behinds

i.

my family's buddha statue nests  
in the quietest room of our home.  
we burn incense next to crystal bowls of water,  
two white orchids grow  
next to two lotuses.  
my mothers refers to the altar in  
her native tongue, warm with years,  
*fuatang*.

before i think to wake,  
chanting echoes through the house,  
passed from ear to ear in legato honey.  
it draws out the drumbeat of standing bells  
and the soul of a bloodline,  
of taiwanese street vendors  
shaded in sing-song innocence,  
*liang zhi lao fu, liang zhi lao fu*.

bowing at the mantle, palms pressed  
with purpose, i feel centered.  
one day, those heirlooms will  
pass down to me.  
they'll carry our hopes and history.  
the Memories of those gone.  
it's how we keep from becoming  
forgotten, *yiwang*.

ii.

my hands will always remember.  
their creases hold years,  
decades of tradition.  
they form a shallow bowl for the *jiaozi* skin,  
fondling the wrapper that mama  
reminds me is fragile like petals.  
(americans pronounce it "gyoza",  
which makes me smile a little).

one scoop of filling, sometimes two,  
a light touch of water to seal it all in.  
pinch and twist, pinch and twist.  
i can't close it tight like mum can.

she washes a coin at the sink before  
slipping it in an unfinished dumpling.  
i hear her tell my brother that it's good luck to find  
(secretly i hope i don't choke).

*gonxi facai xin nian kuai le.*  
my tonations are horribly wrong,  
thick and crooked like nana's step-wise english,  
but i say it anyways. prosperity and fortune,  
happy chinese new year. the rich mahogany tones  
remind me that traditional culture is  
Valuable,  
that i have a duty to carry it on—

i think i'm lucky that way.

### Newtonian Doctrine

I don't really understand the fixation on shoes.  
Americans must have a thing for them.  
*Step in someone else's shoes.*  
*Waiting for the other shoe to drop.*  
*If the shoe fits, wear it.*

My mother isn't any different.  
*Xiezi*, she reminds me. Right.  
Because Taiwanese culture demands respect  
and wearing shoes into the house is the  
ultimate act of sacrilege.  
Mud is also sacrilege apparently.

*Pull yourself up by the bootstraps,*  
my ancestors whisper.  
This saying is different from the others,  
less innocuous. It leaves the taste of  
salt water and fermented bean curd on my lips.

Physics says it's impossible, of course—  
to take hold of your own rein and rear into action.  
My teacher calls it an internal force.  
*Everything needs an outside hand to move*, he says.  
Newton's Third Law: "no bootstrapping".  
It's obvious that physics never knew about my family.

Bootstrapping is tradition for us.  
That's why it scares me so much to realize that  
relying on myself means  
I'm left with no one but myself.  
Laces ripped, soles stained by a mixture of  
tears and sidewalk dust,  
I'm not sure if I'll ever fill the shoes of my legacy.

### Asian-ness blossoms by bone

Age 6 // red SUV with the sun roof //  
Afternoon drives feel like classrooms  
when they tell me to watch my color.  
I listen to a lot of should's and should not's,  
and would's and would not's, till

all the words melt into an amorphous mass  
of phonemes, phrases.  
I wonder if my friends had to learn  
these rules, too.

Age 9 // playground, chain swing #2 //  
My eyes and nose look normal to me.  
I eat ordinary school lunches in the  
cafeteria at eleven thirty, and walk along  
the crowded halls to Americanism at one,  
listening to the voices  
that sound just like mine.  
They say it's all a joke except the  
punchlines still feel like punches.  
I go silent instead.  
I raise my hand to speak.

Age 11 // field by I-35 and the cemetery //  
I practice my words for the spelling bee that  
papa tells me is important; he writes  
flashcards for me in wispy tails and  
a's that look like e's and o's.  
Inferiority.  
I-N-F-E-R-I-O-R-I-T-Y.  
Inferiority.  
I write it on my hand with my pointer finger  
to help visualize the letters.  
It feels familiar on my skin.

Age 14 // behind the equipment shed //  
The back smells like smokers but the new coach  
says to get the orange cones, and I do.  
Teammates reassure me and say I'm a  
shoo-in, since I'm a starter from last season.  
I'm not.  
I go home crying after soccer tryouts.  
The official team roster is out—  
All the names look whitewashed this year.

Age 15 // room 813 //  
The test proctor asks why I didn't  
fill out the race section of  
my bubble sheet.  
I tell him I don't know my ancestry,  
but I'm lying.  
My last name is lying.  
Sometimes, I think it's better to be a liar  
and a "not provided" than a stereotype.

Age 17 // lakeside on sidewalk //  
The sound of footsteps follow me  
for too long, so I quicken my pace to  
make sure I don't become a headline.  
I wonder what they'd say if I died.  
Probably just to "go back to my  
country" since color always looks  
misplaced on a backdrop of white.

eraser shavings

in 1492, columbus sailed the ocean blue.  
i learned about the discoverer (read: colonizer)  
in kindergarten between clockwork schedules of  
snacking and napping and recess-ing.  
we learned the name of his ships, nostalgic  
memories like blockbuster's or nana's cooking—  
niña, pinta, santa maria.  
we made flags, and re-enacted the landing  
with a sandbox and some expired glue.

grades 1-5 celebrated the first thanksgiving:  
90 wampanoag, 53 pilgrims, lots of fish  
buried beneath corn (correction: bodies).  
my fingers ache with the memory of middle  
school notes, pages on the trail of tears  
and how the 27th president died in a bathtub.  
marie antoinette lost her head over cake,  
america lost its head over tea.

only a year from university,  
it's strange that no one ever taught me about  
the chinese exclusion act or the court-enabled asian  
massacres. it's strange that i had to find out  
from a two-line footnote in the index,  
the section everyone skips over because nothing  
important is in the Back of the book.  
i want to think that the publisher's made a mistake  
or there was an error on the printing press.

(edit: i lie to myself sometimes).