

This Quintessence of Dust

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Write me a prologue; and let the prologue seem to say, we will do no harm
with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed . . .

—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.i

1.

The day you explained death, you were jammed between your parents in the back of a cab in Honolulu: “I’m sad,” you said, “but what are you gonna do? It just happens. *That’s what life is all about.*”

You were seven years old.

Your mom cried out, “Who taught you that?”

No answer. I turned from the front seat to look at you: legs splayed out, seat belt pulled over your blue hibiscus dress like a sash. Earlier you’d asked, “What do you spread on cars when you eat them for lunch?” and I meant to yell, *Traffic Jam!* with a high-five for you. But your grandfather had just passed away, and we were headed windward side to scatter his ashes. The previous morning, you’d heard your dad scolding your mom for failing to pack formal white mourning clothes. The best she had was a cotton T-shirt with a breast pocket on it like a folded badge.

It’s my turn now to explain death to you. To tell you about the funeral, about your grandfather, and by that process about you, me, and our family. You call me uncle though in fact you’re my first cousin once removed. I called your grandfather uncle though in fact he was adopted. He was a father to me when I had none, and this telling is a debt I owe, a shuffling of histories to recast his bones.



But first, an explanation of you. You are being raised in a suburb of Los Angeles with a blush-pink queen-sized bed of your own in a two-story house that has a private pool and your own box piano. You have two parents and two sets of grandparents. The set I've only met once often tours art galleries in northern China; your mom's dad is a calligrapher who hangs his works in progress on the walls of a sunlit studio between your pool and living room. Of his art I know nothing except to say that the white spaces he sequesters with black ink are more round than square. Your mom's mom cooked me breakfast twice when I visited you for a weekend, but because I hadn't studied Mandarin yet I could only communicate with pantomime for *food*, for *thank you*, for *waiting*.

That same weekend, the summer before I started college, you were three years old and wouldn't speak a word to me. Your hair was tied in pigtails. You hid your face beneath your dad's wide-brimmed baseball cap, behind half-eaten slices of bread. In the car, you sang the ABCs in perfect pitch with the radio. When I found you in your playroom, we scattered Cheerios on the carpet and took turns lobbing them into a glass jar.

Your dad—my side of the family—comes from southern China. It was from his set of grandparents that you learned Cantonese. You've noticed with frustration that our southern pronunciation of Mandarin is different: the digraphs are shortened (from *shi* to *si*), and the tones hit different registers. We're from a village in the Pearl River Delta, but our migrations have always skirted coasts, bodies of water, and all the tongues in between. It has taken you no time to master English. When I visited again, you were five years old and making demands. You made a mule of me, a horsey-horsey for transport from room to room. When you were seven, we went to a steakhouse where you ordered baby back ribs with a side of broccoli. You ate the broccoli for dinner but asked for the ribs in a takeout box; you wanted to save them for breakfast. The next morning, I woke up early to find you already wandering downstairs. You microwaved the ribs while I read Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. Then you came over, sat on my lap, and read out aloud from the page:

That's because I'm a heathen. They don't know my age.

Even the nightingales have forgotten their names.

The goat declines, head down, with these rocks for a stage
bare of tragedy. The Aegean's chimera

is a camera, you get my drift, a drifter
is the hero of my book.

You laughed and said, "That rhymes. These words are funny."

I said you had a sharp ear. I tried to explain the age of the book as I flipped
through the copyright pages: 1990, not long after I was born.

You said, "Is that when Shakespeare was?"

"You know Shakespeare?"

"My mom read me *A Summer's Dream*. But not the whole thing."

Your hand slipped, smearing barbeque sauce on *Omeros*. A library copy.

Did you know I had none of this growing up? Nor did your dad, nor his
father, nor any of the generations before. You have a natural mainland accent
because you learned English in California; I remade my accent after leaving
Honolulu, correcting the pidgin "dat" and "poo" instead of "that" and "pull,"
which your dad still lets slip sometimes.

I used to ask your dad if he ever thought of moving back to Honolulu,
where his parents still were. My own friends from elementary school who've
stayed for college, who never made it off the island, still sit in the empty
foyers of Kaimuki Mall playing poker for small change and taking turns
smoking by the dumpsters out back. Your dad said he might retire there, but
it was no place to raise a child: disconnected from the mainland, the cities,
the big universities, and so laid back that eventually you'd feel trapped.
Paradise, a place of rest; paradise, a place of death.



Your grandfather took us in when my mother, sister, and I emigrated from
China. I was one year old and fatherless, and as the story goes I cried so much
our relatives in California wouldn't take us in. So your grandfather flew us to
Honolulu and put us up with him in Palolo Valley, where we stayed until I was
nine.

In my earliest memory of him, he took us out for Italian fast food where
the tables and benches, in solid colors of red and yellow, were bolted to the
floor. He ordered spaghetti at the counter but couldn't make himself under-

stood: “*Yi-dai-lee fuhn! Yi-dai-lee fuhn!*” Italy Noodle, he was trying to say. He grew red with fury and shame, a failed host in a foreign land.

When I was six, I forgot the word for “green” in Cantonese and I said it to your grandfather the way my mother did, “gah-leen,” the consonant cluster separated, the R confused for L. “Gah-leen! Gah-leen!” And he laughed at my accent.

In the photos I have of him, his lips are always closed and his eyebrows scoop down with his cheeks. He had full, thick hair to the very end, black with pale streaks, bangs sloping over the right side of his forehead—the same way I parted my hair for a while. In the ICU in his last days, when his skin turned yellow and his lips scaly, his hair never had the chance to fall out—dampened and clotted with grease, the one quick blast of chemotherapy leaving him with at least that much.

In the photos, my sister and I fit inside his arms while we pout at the camera, his belly a third mound between us. He used to pinch at my stomach after a meal and pretend to locate where each entrée had gone to reside, just as he did for you. As a kid, he begged for food in village doorways. As an adult, he worked in kitchens in Honolulu, and even after retirement, after losing his taste buds, he continued to make grand meals for us all. I ate fish only if he cooked it, brilliant red-skinned creatures three times the size of my head: “King fish,” he told me when I asked for a name, but when I repeated this to my classmates at school they said there was no such thing. He had thick, meaty hands and round fingers that he snaked down my throat when I choked on a fish bone. He did the same thing for my sister once. She recalls calm trust. But the thought of his hand fitting in our mouths is impossible, mythic. I recall saliva, tears, vocal chords, red, red.

He took long walks alone in the dusk and listened to Michael Jackson on his Walkman. He watched tennis matches on television and sometimes grunted with the players. He read Chinese newspapers. He took us to the spinning strawberry rides at the Ala Moana mall. He drove us deep into the valley, in a place no one can name now, to sled down grass hills on sheets of cardboard, our minds full of snow. When my sister was seven and I was three, she stole change from the macadamia-nut can he kept in his car and bought gum cigarettes. Then she stole 40 dollars from our mother’s purse and we went to the Fun Factory to play skeeball. When my mother went looking for

us at the closed library where my sister said we'd gone, she thought we'd been kidnapped. Your grandfather found us and he did not punish us.

In the second grade, my homeroom teacher taught us to make our own origami Father's Day cards. I told her I didn't have a father. She said to make a card for your grandfather instead, which I gave him that evening: a folded paper suit, with a tie. I didn't know paper clothes were meant for the dead, for burning like joss. His wife slapped me and I sat on the stairs alone until it was time for dinner.



Your grandfather was an orphan before our family took him in. When he was a toddler, his own father was murdered over money in our village in Guangdong. Either a debt collector for a local gang or in debt from an opium habit, he was shot and killed. Your grandfather was young enough then that when he approached his father's body in the hallway, he picked up his hat and carried it off like a toy. Someone told this story to him when he was old enough to understand, and he told this story to his sons, who told variations of it to me.

His birth mother died of frailty—a lost story, but what we know is that she came from wealth, had never worked until she married into a family where field labor was shared. He had a sister, too, who was sold at a young age. So he was raised by a grandmother, who also died before he reached middle school. By then he was alone and wild. He wandered the village, begging.

He went to school with a classmate who would later become his adoptive brother, whose mother offered him not just leftovers but full meals, who patched his winter clothes, who took him in and became, to his mind, a long-lost mother.

Taking my mother, sister, and me into his home in Honolulu was part of his debt repaid to her, his gratitude passed forward. The Cantonese *tou lei* might describe this process, this wishing of peaches upon others so that all along their journeys the fruit might spring from loam, peaches for prosperity and peaches for immortality.

2.

Your grandfather's sons grew up in China without him. He'd left our village in Zhongshan at the end of 1971. This was before Nixon lifted the trade em-

bargo. This was five years before Chairman Mao would die to be embalmed in Tiananmen Square as a tourist attraction. This was long after Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. This was decades after Captain America vanished with the call to arms, and after another superhero had risen in his place: a spidery adolescent whose adoptive uncle dies an untimely death to leave him with the grief and responsibility of growing up. After Sputnik fired off the Space Age, after countries racing to chase a moon.

This was, in China, the decade of the Cultural Revolution, of a desperation to modernize quickly, to smash through tradition like chinaware. The public was encouraged to humiliate and abuse elders, teachers, any figures of the old authority. The people were unified by the purging of pests, such as sparrows, who were blamed for the failure of crops and were exterminated by means of exhaustion. Imagine an entire country of starving people scaring birds into flight, throwing rocks at trees, banging pots, waving their arms until the sparrows' wings could take no more. Imagine an earth fertilized by stomped bodies.

My mother had been studying all year for the *Da Kao*, which was like the SAT multiplied by ten, an exam to decide irrevocably a student's track and earning power. The exam has since been revived and is so paramount that a student running late can call the police to pave a path through traffic. But just a week before my mother could take her exam, the revolution struck. College educations were blotted out; the decrees from Beijing went to every school like a blast of rain. The Red Guards formed; the marches began. Famine became the long road. No work anywhere. And what is a revolution anyway, what is prosperity, if not the innocent hope of cars on streets, of the sight of limp wrists dangling cigarettes from passenger seats?



Your dad's older brother, who was five, recalls the winter rains that fell when he finally asked, "Where did Dad go?"

Your grandfather used to leave home frequently, for short stints in neighboring villages to offer services like repairing the rice machines. Food was rationed by then, and finding work outside the village earned him spare cuts of pork to bring home. He was well liked enough that he received permits to leave without interrogation. The Chinese Communist Party sent him invita-

tions to represent his village as a model proletariat—a community leader, poor yet hardworking, educated at a technical college thanks to the government—but he never did join.

He was likely the one who organized the group of six or seven who snuck out of the country. No one knows for sure the route they took. They walked east 10 miles, maybe 20, over unpaved paths through the Zhengjiashan mountains, possibly South Mountain too. Perhaps they stopped outside a fishing village at the Zhujiang Estuary, made friends there or stole from the stores. At every border they waited until night and watched, for hours, the guards' shifts. In the daytime, they slept in unmarked graves. When they finally arrived at the beachhead, they didn't cross the border directly into Macau. They cut through Zhuhai, went north so the waves could then carry them down. They'd brought inflatable tubes from basketballs and tied these around their wrists to float. They dog-paddled—three miles? five?—and from there stowed away on a ship in harbor headed to Hong Kong, 30 miles away.

For years, my father's family tried to cross the same border several times. They were caught, beaten, and made to criticize themselves in public. That side of my family remains in China now. My mother's side, the family you and I share, made it to America because your grandfather went first.



America wasn't the intention. Your grandfather worked as an electrician at Chow Tai Fook, a jewelry enterprise still active on Hong Kong Island, which was then still British. He had a lucrative contract, was called on frequently to install the wiring of private apartments, and lived in corporate dorms with free meals. But his wife and sons had no way of getting there to join him.

He had been living and working on the island for nearly a decade when the United States passed the sweeping Refugee Act of 1980. He got a sponsorship interview and demonstrated his "well-founded fear of persecution" in the China he had fled. No one today knows what he actually said. He was offered citizenship as a refugee in America, which he accepted, and 700 dollars, which he declined. In the summer, his wife and sons boarded a boat to Guangzhou, then a bus to Shenzhen, and then a train into Hong Kong. For a month, they stayed in a hotel with a funny name: they said, "We're not in America yet and we've already lived in the White House!"

They took a plane together to Honolulu on August 20 of that year.

3.

Do you know the proverb about labor and child rearing? The child of a peasant becomes a merchant; the child of the merchant becomes an aristocrat; then the child of the aristocrat becomes a peasant again. This is about the lessons we learn from our parents' poverty.

Your grandfather began as a factotum and settled into a Chinese restaurant kitchen. Your grandmother cleaned Outrigger hotels. Your dad grew up asking no more of his parents than their productive absence. As a husband and father now, he sums up those years in one teaching: keep the house afloat.

I think of your big house, of us reading the verses of an island epic while you ate your breakfast of leftover ribs, and I wonder what basket weights you'll carry when you're old enough to leave. Is responsibility always tied to loss? Those last short trips I made to Honolulu, when your grandfather was dying and when your grandfather was dead, took place the summer after I graduated from college.

Your dad drove around for errands, and I went with him to escape the uneasy reunion of mourning. He wore slippers and gray shorts. We picked up food for the others while they sat around in what would become a widow's hollowed home. While driving, we chanted the names of streets as we passed them, stumbling in wonder over their sounds: Kawaiaha'o, Ke'eaumoku, Wai'alaie, one after another. I hadn't learned Hawaiian yet, didn't understand at that time that although this was where we grew up, it was not our land, that we were not just migrants but colonists too, people of the waves displacing yet another people.

But I have always hoped that the key to any home is language. Your father and I talked a lot about accents in the car. He affected an awful British one to say, "Would you like a cup of tea?" And I trumped him with a recitation of some lines from *Cymbeline*:

Are we not brothers?
So man and man should be;

But clay and clay differs in dignity,
Whose dust is both alike.

I thought he'd be offended by the highbrow, but he was proud. He said, "Don't forget that all the places you graduated from will make people look at you differently. Don't forget the power of your education, and your English. But don't forget where you come from, either." In fact, I'm still figuring out where that is exactly.

We talked about your mainland accent, your capacity for puzzles and words. You'll study the humanities in college, I hope. By then you'll be fluent in at least three languages. You'll have a younger brother you can teach, to whom you can tell histories, who at the time of this writing is one month old, and whose birth your dad announced by e-mail with this subject header, typo and all: "Hell World!!!"



Your grandfather died in the ICU of Saint Francis Hospital. Had he died less suddenly, he might have spent some time in the cancer ward, directly adjacent to the maternity ward. He died of lymphoma.

His youngest brother had been dying of another strand of lymphoma in Oakland, California, for two slow years, hair blasted away by the blight of radiation treatment. Your grandfather attended that funeral, a Christian service, in slacks and a dark brown blazer. Then, a month later, he collapsed back home in Honolulu, his own silent cancer by then already in its fourth stage.

In one version of our tellings, the cancer might have been foreseen: a better doctor, a doctor on the mainland, would've acted much sooner. In another version it could never have been foreseen, because your grandfather's decades of *qi gong* breathing exercises had so calmed his mind and spirit that he never felt his body's slow devouring of itself until the very end.

As soon as we got the news, my mother and I flew to Honolulu to see him. My sister flew in that Sunday morning on a red-eye, then immediately back to San Francisco on another red-eye to return in time for work. I was supposed to buy a ticket for my aunt, the recent widow, but couldn't get in touch with her in time; I needed the birthdate on her government ID, but she'd lied on

her immigration forms, as many of us did, and none of her children knew which facts were official, or current, or true.

My mother and I stayed through the single treatment of chemotherapy, which in that condition would either kill him or give him an extra few days of breath. We left at the end of the weekend when, according to his instructions, the family pulled the plug. We came back again the next week for the wake, the cremation, and the scattering of ashes.

Your dad took care of everyone who visited. He made sure everyone had a place to stay, that we ate meals together, that we had the opportunity to be like stupid tourists when there was no point in waiting any longer in the waiting room. I remember sitting next to him in the back of a cab, crammed in with several others on the way to dinner. While the others talked or napped, he hung his arm from the handle over the window, his face in his elbow. He pretended to sleep. He didn't know I could hear him sobbing.

Your grandfather died while my mother and I were in the air. Electrical malfunctions flickered in the plane before takeoff, and the light above my seat was shattered. When we landed, my mother received the phone call. He had been taken off the drugs, opened his eyes briefly, and looked lucidly at his wife and sons. Then he was gone.

The airline gave us ticket vouchers to apologize for the inconveniences. My mother said that this was his doing, his late graduation gift to me.

4.

The ceremony had a mix of Daoism, Buddhism, and the folk religions of Zhongshan: a cacophony of chants, gongs, and incense while the closest family members sat circling the coffin, a dozen of us in all. This included you and other young children, restless in your seats, your black armbands slipping off again and again. For hours we sat in the shadowy, wooden sanctum while a vicious wind and light rain pulled through the palm trees outside. The joss sticks, paper clothes, and paper money to be burnt were kept in cardboard boxes meant for taro. Your grandfather's face had been painted a ghastly gray.

He'd requested none of this. When he was well, your grandfather had asked both verbally and in writing to "make all things simplest" and not

bother anybody with the obligation of attending a service. We come with nothing and we leave with nothing; why waste money on a ceremony or a marker in the ground that nobody would remember three generations later? He wanted to be cremated like the great leaders who repaired his broken China: Zhou Enlai, whose ashes were scattered over valleys and rivers, and his successor Deng Xiaoping, whose ashes were scattered at sea.

But after your grandfather passed away, his wife insisted on at least a public ceremony. The service was modeled loosely after what your dad was used to seeing in China: no speeches, no poetry. Your aunt wanted someone to take photos so you'd all be able to remember this when you got older. Your grandfather's face was painted in a tint faintly like the purple of tarot because the mortuary was Japanese owned. Joss paper was stored in cardboard boxes labeled with brand names for fruit. Mourners came to pay respect by shaking each of our hands and passing the body in silence. The boys of the family sat on one side, the girls on the other. You must have heard yourself named in the monks' chants, when each of us was recited as an announcement to the dead, and without explanation.

What could you or I understand of the small procession after the wake, after the burning of joss, after the noise and foreign tongues, when we followed the pallbearers into the concrete-walled rear hall? It looked like the passageway into a dirty kitchen. It led to the furnace for the cremation.

We stood in that hallway looking at each other, then at nothing in particular, while your grandfather disappeared into a chamber of which no one saw the inside. Later, in the sun, I watched you yawn loose what might have been the most innocent grief.



You and the other grandchildren loved the boat ride out when we scattered your grandfather's ashes. Your dad stayed behind at the docks because it was his birthday and his presence would have been bad luck.

One of your cousins, a boy barely a year older than you, was reminded that he had to be the man of the family, look out for you as well as for his baby sister. "Her?" he asked his parents in that bright sun, counting on his index fingers like they were goalposts. "And the baby? One protecting two?"

You were wearing that blue hibiscus dress. You sighed and lay on the deck in state, then branched out your celery arms. Sunlight everywhere. The horizon widened as we went farther out to sea.

The skipper had sunburned cheeks, shorts, sandals, and an awkward smile because hiring a boat in Hawaii doesn't usually mean a funeral service. He took us past Koko Kai, past the spitting caves of Portlock, and past Hanauma Bay's mountain ridge, that craggy lizard said to come alive once a year to take a sacrifice of swimmers. The skipper cut the engine, spun us around so we could leave the ashes in our wake. Your dad's brother opened the canister, slit the bag, and poured the remains into a ceaseless water.

Dust is what we come to: this quintessence, this darkening on the water's gloss. But it also softens into that spectral line where sky and sea become a single, weightless, shameless blue. Dust becomes the waves that rock back to shore even as they lap outward.

We singed beneath our sunblock, in the wind. We threw white carnations to the water. We said things to him, to the ocean, to no body. We said: peace will be found. We said: you're home. We said it in many tongues.

5.

From Book Seven of the barbeque sauce stain:

Why waste lines on Achille, a shade on the sea-floor?
 Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture
 is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor,

 deeper than it seems on the surface; slowly but sure,
 it will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time . . .

I'm writing to you from Honolulu two years after those ashes disappeared. I'm a graduate student now—at a university in the Midwest where I like to take pictures of snow slowly piling on tables like cake frosting—and I'm making a life out of letters. I've come to Honolulu for research, but because the grief never left me, I also needed a trip back to the shoreline where we cast off and let your grandfather go. I took a bus across Oahu to

Hawaii Kai; my plan was to spend some time on the dock, then walk farther to a beach hidden below the China Walls where I could watch the sun set over the waves.

I got there past dark and mixed up the locations. We must have actually cast off somewhere closer to the Paiko Lagoon, half a mile west of where I got off the bus. But it was too late, and the sun was gone.

I sat on the rocks of Maunalua Bay instead, halfway between the two destinations I never reached, while a shelf of clouds formed over the horizon's dark water. To my left, a family on an outcropping fished with neon bait hooks; to my right, a young couple fought under a palm tree; the wind made light of the waters, and the moon hung like a hammock.

This was the first time I've been back as an adult, to find housing and transportation on my own. I sat there and thought about my research, my long pilgrimage westward in time, then bowed my head before the wide ocean and finally said goodbye to the dissipated spaces where I'd never find your grandfather again. It was the last time I cried in Honolulu.



After scattering those ashes, we returned. That day two years ago, your grandmother handed each of us a red envelope with one dollar inside, money to be spent as a blessing, as a remnant to be shaken off. Your dad drove us back to Honolulu. We stopped at Waiola Shave Ice, where we gorged ourselves on sweets in the shade.

That was the seventh night after your grandfather passed away. His spirit had gone ahead one day before his body, according to the priest, which would mean that the essence of him was already elsewhere in that moment when he opened his eyes in the ICU. On the seventh night, the spirit returns home escorted by the *Niutou Mamian*, two attendants of the King of Hell who have a cow's head and a horse's face. His sons locked themselves into one bedroom for protection as he made his final passage.

You and the other children, in a hotel in Waikiki, wondered whether they were allowed to leave even to use the bathroom. Someone joked about peeing into bottles. Someone acted the part of a zombie returned to haunt the family, and you all laughed. Then the thought became terrifying. You have seen movies like this.

But listen. What kind of ghost would your grandfather be? Our family came a long way to make you safe in this country. What can you fear? Let me show you how the passage is only as dark as the language you choose.



Imagine: you've been asleep for days, though for 70 years you've never really known where the waking stops and the darkness begins, except that for practical reasons one entails work and the other entails recovery from work. You know you've been ill, ever since the fall, ever since your body started filling with stems. You hear the voices of your family—some from across the ocean, some from the distance of years—though no children. The voices are upset because they have forgotten *xisang*, that though your death is sudden, like most deaths it has had the patient generosity of decades. It has shown you leftovers in the mud, as well as delicacies drizzled on white plates. Your death has shown you a resting place of hills so steep, so slick, they may as well be soft snow for the descent, which is easy. You have been shown slopes of handwriting, a Pacific span of white space on which shapes become homes. Long ago you taped your grandchildren's sanguine-edged photographs above your square desk, on the same wall where you spelled out numbers in English for writing checks. Your desk will stay, and a boy you raised will sit there to write your story. Don't you know by now? The only way to save a person is to make him family.

Your waking is a splash of pain. The drugs that clouded gray gaps along your body disperse. You open your eyes to see your wife and sons. You are in a hospital room, and you know exactly what this is all about. You cannot speak. The language of the face suffices.

Then, soon, again you are asleep. Don't be frightened. Your body will keep until time comes to be called back by the chanting. Voices will always lead you back. Voice will be the lasting place. Your story tells itself even as it tells others: every I a multiple, seeing its own light. Look: no more drums. Soon you'll see royal faces, like beasts of burden. Let them lead you away. You're done combing your hair. You'll be cared for and will not feel your body when it burns. The sound of it will be no more than a lit wick waving, a sleeve snagging loose in the wind. You'll find the ocean again, as you always do. And back on shore will be a place of birth, of more days. Dampen, soften. Unknot.

Open your arms. In the end, we celebrate the end. Yes, every day a celebration of the same day's struggle, every day a struggle to celebrate. You're done remembering. You're beyond debt, beyond blood. Be loved. Be water.

