

**Sarah Mook Poetry Contest 2017, Grades 9-12, Third place,
“Streaks”**

Writing about one’s parent in a forthright way is challenging, yet the third place poem, “Streaks,” in the 9-12 grade group is another prize-winner that explores a mother / daughter relationship, albeit a different one from the previous winner. While both poems demonstrate the close bond between a mother and daughter, they do not outwardly explore that connection. Instead, they offer a view of the impact of a mother’s life and choices upon her daughter. This poem, “Streaks,” describes the mother as a woman whose memories of her painful, yet well-remembered life in China (which she was “forced” to leave) and her life in America now, reflect regret, tiredness, and sadness. The intriguing element of the poem is how these revelations affect the daughter.

The poem is written in twenty-nine lines without space breaks; its smooth progression offers the reader an entire understanding of the poem. In the opening seven lines, the speaker’s picture of her mother is stark:

My mother dyes her hair rust-brown to hide the
tiredness seeping into the roots. She sighs that it’s
been over twenty years since she left China with
little more than bright eyes and two luggage bags
heavy only with hope. Her eyes are dull now, the
warm years washed away like stones tumbling
down a fast and unstoppable yellow river.

The daughter describes her mother negatively: she hides her “tiredness” by dyeing her hair, and gives a “sigh” at the memory of leaving China “heavy only with hope.” The mother’s eyes are dull now where they used to be bright, and the twenty years since she left China are “washed away like stones tumbling / down an unstoppable yellow river.” The “yellow river” most certainly refers to her life in China.

In the next four lines, the poem goes even further to delineate the mother’s life in China versus her life in the United States. As the mother stirs “steamed egg drop soup” she advises her daughters to “treasure our skin—the canvas of youth” and to not allow their skin to be “eroded by years of rain” like hers. This complaint about aging’s effects reveals the mother’s unhappiness; she sees her value as a young woman with bright eyes and dewy skin, and not now as an older mother.

The following ten lines offer vital memories of the mother's youth:

the days as a girl scrubbing underwear on a
flat wooden board, wind so bitter it sucks marrow
from the deep cracks in the backs of her hands. Water
later turning clear red, tainted by the fumes of strangers.
*When I was five, a delusional cousin tried to stab me
with scissors [italics mine], she says, parting her wintry hair to
revel a jagged light pink scar. Ten stiches, she laughs,
but my mother's eyes are full of sadness. The family she
was forced to leave at the other side of the world.*

This section gives evidence of the mother's hard life in China: scrubbing stranger's underwear in bitter wind that made her hands bleed, and a stabbing injury inflicted by a "delusional" cousin. With "eyes full of sadness," she says that she was "forced to leave her family at the other side of the world." The word "forced" is powerful—the speaker does not give a reason for her involuntary banishment; perhaps it is because she chooses to marry an American? Perhaps the actual reason is not vital to this picture of the mother, just that she comes to the U. S., marries, and bears children. Her sadness now suggests that she looks back at leaving her China life and family with nostalgia bordering on regret.

The next section gives further description of her childhood and the comparison to today. As a child, she lived on a farm and dearly loved her favorite chicken; unfortunately, on her birthday, she fed it too much of her cake causing its death. This sad memory is told in the same matter-of-fact manner of all of her stories. Then the mother says the following that elucidates her difficulty:

..... *It is almost another life,
another shengming, she says at last, turning away to face
our mounted TV with three-sixty surround sound. Sounds
of a running Chinese drama play in the background, filling
the room with the cries and clashes of another century.*

* *shengming*—Chinese for the word 'life'

The mother discloses that her time in China was “another life, / another *shengming*,” as a “Chinese drama play[s] in the background, filling / the room with cries and clashes of another century.” What a vivid way to pinpoint the mother’s double life—a very modern TV in America playing a Chinese program in surround sound that harkens to her Chinese heritage, to “another century.”

The last three lines of the poem refer to the daughter’s reaction to all that her mother has said or done:

The echoes of a past life, of multiple and parallel lives—
I wonder what they were. Who my cousin was.
Who my mother was. Who I am now.

This cultural divide between the past and present is clear. The daughter realizes the distance and yet the parallel nature of all that her mother has revealed: her lack of knowledge of the life her mother lived, of a Chinese family she does not know, and even of the “delusional cousin.” Yet these are only a small part of the missing knowledge the daughter needs: “Who [her] mother was. Who I am now” become the most significant unknowns in the poem. If she believes that who her mother “was” may be a large part of who she is now, one wonders if the speaker / daughter will ever be able to know the answers to those questions.

This writer does an excellent job showing how the passage of time, cultural tensions, and familial differences, impact the lives of a mother, and especially, her daughter.

Thank you for the opportunity to read your work!

Marie Kane

Final Judge

Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2017

www.mariekanepoetry.com