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ONE

*Begin the Ceremony*



LETTER TO MYSELF ON MY  
BIRTHDAY

1 *June 4, 1931*

This is the day I was born.

Summer in Tennessee, a long time ago,  
when people feared dust, debt,  
and that dry mouth feeling the voice  
over the radio's crackle called  
fear itself.

In my mother's  
hot room I lay naked and yelling  
when my father's sister  
came to say goodbye, holding  
a baby of her own, half-Chinese,  
leaving with a man  
who changed her country,  
her mind.

When I was older  
I learned her story from snapshots,  
gifts from abroad, bits of gossip  
around the holiday table. I caught  
those glances between my father  
and my uncles, felt their  
red-faced silence.

Lula the cook  
served the meal as if she didn't  
see. She took care of me, knew  
the family secrets. How surprised  
I was, to learn she had two  
children of her own. When  
my mother drove Lula home  
downtown, two small boys  
darker than their mother  
ran up, then stared at me

through the closed  
car window.

Once when  
I wouldn't behave, Lula snapped,  
*Don't you act so biggity, Miss Priss.*  
*Your aunt done married*  
*a Chinaman.*

2 February 1974 – January 1980

For years my world  
seemed made of papier maché, yellowed  
newspapers full of war stories  
crumpled in a ball. I lost  
my aunt's face among  
armies and arguments, hid  
her name in the fears I wanted  
to forget.

Then one day a letter  
rose from the mail thin as smoke,  
strangely marked, a phoenix  
among sparrows, announcing  
she was alive, coming back  
to die.

When she arrived, small  
and gray, I was astonished  
she could laugh. Her stories  
of concubines and conquerors,  
noodles and murders, brought  
to my kitchen the underside  
of the earth. Talk made us  
sisters, remembering  
younger days.

After her memorial  
in the cold Hall of Martyrs,  
her returned dust in China forever,  
my cousins took me to see

the sights of Beijing, a careful  
gift for American kin.

Quietly, proudly,  
my cousins showed me the monument  
where the death of Zhou Enlai  
brought thousands of paper flowers,  
black ink verses, to mourn  
their loss of a father, more  
than voices could say.

I stood  
among strangers in Tiananmen Square,  
winter all around, my aunt  
in ashes.

3 June 4, 1989

Today I watch  
Tiananmen Square from afar  
flickering in a box, seething  
in white June heat. Crowds gather  
once more, sons and daughters of heroes  
wearing faded jeans, headbands,  
cocking their fingers  
in the borrowed V. They push  
a plaster goddess they hope  
will save them.

Now they shout  
those words we have heard so often  
in our own language:  
*Freedom! Justice!*

Lightning  
nicks the air, smelling like  
hot metal. The screen falters,  
then flashes with the faces  
of students marching. I want  
to call out, *Wait! Take care.*  
*Breathe deeply.* But they are born

in front of me, slim legs walking  
toward the growling column  
of tanks.

Then one small man  
dares a tank to crush him. A cry  
begins, the same cry we heard  
in another stone place  
filled with thousands of faces  
of all colors, bearing  
the eyes of brothers,  
sisters—Listen!

The air  
still vibrates with the voice  
of that man whose dark face  
shone in the downcast gaze  
of Lincoln in his chair,  
the voice of a servant  
dreaming the end  
of suffering—

*Free at last!*

*Free at last! Thank God almighty,  
we're free at last . . .*

With the students of Beijing  
I strain to hear him. His words  
flow over us. Thunder rolls,  
rain clatters, the earth  
shakes as if it is opening.

Together, naked and yelling,  
we are born.