

BEA CHANG

ARTS & LETTERS / SUSAN ATEFAT PRIZE FOR CREATIVE NONFICTION

REQUIEM FOR A BUBBLE TEA 波霸奶茶的安魂曲

Up in my grandparent's fifteenth-floor condominium in Xindian, my mother is writing me instructions for “boiled song-ban 肉.” The reason: my mother, vaccinated, is leaving Taipei to tend to her garden in California, and she doesn't want me — a woman in her mid-thirties — to starve. This is what our language has become: a stir-fry of English and traditional Chinese, peppered with anglicized phonetics of what my mother does not know in English and what I cannot read in Chinese.

Translation: boiled jowl, the cheeks of a pig. She likes to serve black pork at room temperature, thinly sliced and marbled with fat, soaked in a pond of soy sauce, mirin, and water. Simple. Decadent. Let the fresh-cut meat from Taiwan's southern coast speak for itself. I ask her what “mirin,” a Japanese rice wine, is in Chinese. She says she doesn't remember.

“So, how do I find it in a grocery store?”

My mother's jaw locks. Her teeth grind. Frustration swells up her body, her cheeks pink, as if she were drinking wine. I — infuriated that I am illiterate, unable to navigate food aisles on the island of my birth — feel a burn searing through my lungs. Since I was a teenager in suburban New Jersey, while slabs of braised pork belly bronzed in the oven, this was how most of our Mandarin-English fights began: when words failed us.