

scallion pancakes.

I pedal to the Shida neighborhood, where a queue of university students wait along a one-way lane, their faces glowing with the light from their phones, the ramen bar still more than an hour from opening. At an open-air stall on the corner, a broad-shouldered, big-breasted woman digs her tongs into a tandoori oven and lifts out Fuzhou-style pepper buns that steam like a fog rolling through the mountains for a man in a western suit. All of a sudden, the air around us smells like the zest of freshly ground pork and the warmth of succulent meat bathing in its own juice. I lick my lips, full of wanting.

“What would you like?” She asks.

Brushed in black-ink calligraphy, her menu tumbles like waterfalls down four wooden placards. I study the strokes of those words—牛 beef, 羊 lamb—but my tongue, caught like a hooked fish in a river, cannot find the shape of their sounds. Across the street, in front of a brightly lit bubble tea stand, teenage girls in uniform skirts giggle. The broad-shouldered woman stares at me. Soon, she turns to another customer, dropping half a dozen steaming buns into paper bags. My stomach gnarls with something close to rage. Not knowing what else to do, I take a picture of the menu and scurry away on my bike.

That night, in my grandparents’ condominium high above our city of culinary feats, I rewrite the menu by hand, translate the characters online, and curl their pronunciations across my tongue. A few days later, I come back to the broad-shouldered woman, who hands me a paper bag, pregnant with a beef pepper bun, already darkening with grease. At the street corner, I sink my teeth crunching through the oil-soaked bun, the sweet and savory broth bursting like firework sparklers in my mouth, triumphant.

By day, all across the city, I gather Chinese menus with my phone and memorize them like SAT words at night. Slowly, I recover my mother tongue deep-fried in the boneless chicken thigh in the alleyway, blended in grapefruit green tea with coconut jelly, and kneaded in 飯 fan 糰 tuan from an auntie who begins to recognize me. I remember how to read signs for 刈