

my grandmother caressing ginger and lotus roots in those early mornings before family dinners, my small palm in her hand. I pick up a bundle of water spinach and hold it like a bouquet of flowers, breathing in the fragile crunch of its hollow stem, the perfume of our island's rain-soaked jungles. The vendor says something to me in Taiwanese I cannot understand. I grin; I nod. I know that in Mandarin, the greens in my hands are called 空心菜 kong xin 菜 tsai. Literal translation: Empty heart vegetable.

The 心, my friend points out earlier, runs with three drops of tears, like a permanent state of sorrow. I want to ask my father: Why did we emigrate?

In the end—I want to know—was it, any of it, truly worth it?



During the three years I end up living and working in Taiwan, I begin to spend afternoons washing the soil of my island off of the vegetables from the market, plucking leafs from their stems, and pulling the strings off of sugar peas like a runaway stitch. More and more, I call my mother for cooking advice: stir-fry black pork song-ban 肉 with Korean 김치 kimchi and stew pork belly in a pot of soy sauce and Japanese みりん mirin. She tells me to adorn bok-choy with duck oil and to drizzle Sichuan chili oil from a boutique shop on Dihua Street on napa.

With the fan in my kitchen grinding, I simmer sakura dried shrimp from the deep waters off of 東港 Dong Gang, its sweet and salty taste flaring out into the high mountain cabbages like cherry blossoms in the spring. My mother's Post-its are still taped to my dining room wall, scribbled in the havoc languages of our convoluted, borderless lives. But here are her recipes in a nutshell: batter colonization with migration, toss in a cup of childhood nostalgia, whisk it with the island's fresh produce, and finish it off with a pinch of ingenuity and western taste.

One afternoon, I call my mother to ask about steaming a flop of river fish belly to a tender, oily delight. She winds up telling me: my maternal grandfather had spent the remainder of his life in exile trying different