

voice boomed like ocean in a cave. With her chopsticks, my grandmother severed the fish head and placed it on his plate. My third uncle cracked jokes about his sister's double-eyelid surgery, and it sent the whole room into a loud cackle of laughter. His wife slapped him playfully across the shoulder.

Beside me, my youngest aunt lifted a chicken leg out of the clay pot and onto my plate. She whispered in Mandarin, "Don't tell Grandpa." I stuck out my tongue in joy. She then told me about the red-butt macaques she saw bathing in hot springs in Japan.

All of this was a long time ago.



This is a story about our tongues: how they were forced to bend with the muscles of alien languages, how they were salted with the brine of a whole ocean that separated us. But before I tell you about how my brother and I started hanging out at a Taco Bell on Pacific Coast Highway in California, about how our Mandarin melted—like cheese in an oven—into English, I want to tell you this: My grandfather wiggled into life in the Shōwa Era in the margins of a city built between rivers, in a brick-and-mortar farmhouse on a dirt road in Japanese-occupied territory. He grew up, in the 1930s, cracking jokes in Minnan, a language birthed on the blue-steel continent across the Strait he had never been, the dialect of a people who'd sailed to the island looking for fertile land. In another part of Taihoku, my grandmother's childhood nightmares were marinating in the cackling shuffles of pai gow and mahjong, her father wagering away acre after acre of land to men rolling toothpicks across their yellow teeth, cheering in the riotous dramatics of their native Fujian tongue.

In elementary school, my grandmother was made to use a Japanese name that wasn't her, 梅 mei 子 zi, one that she will almost forget. My grandfather, four years her senior, penned essays in the colonial language about how his parents had given up his baby sister for adoption and how he'd found her and cradled her all the way home. After the Emperor announced their