

I don't have enough Mandarin words to string together into a sentence. It always hits a dead-end, a period in the shape of a tapioca ball, and falls into a void.

At last, nodding to my aunt and grandfather's conversation, my grandmother asks, "*Ti-ah wu bo?*" Do you understand?

I shake my head.

She chuckles. But tonight, her feathered nature feels loaded, as if masking a loss too immense to comprehend. "*Aiya*," she sighs, "a Taiwanese person who cannot speak Taiwanese."

There are so many ways to respond — self-pitying jokes, heartfelt explanations, unbridled frustrations, and a lifetime of things to say to my *ah-ma* — in English. Yet, since our lives had intertwined in the same city, since the mornings she'd taken me by the hand through her neighborhood market, this has been the extent of our conversation for the better part of two decades. I am crushed by the thought that I will never know my grandmother again, even as she sits across the table from me.

Outside, their rescue mutt pants against the sliding door, her tongue hung loose like a red ribbon, her drool ambling down the glass. She barks. My grandmother shouts something at her; she understands, whines and quiets down. In the adjoining kitchen, our helper is speaking on the phone in Bahasa Indonesian with her husband. My grandmother stares at me as I suck on the straw of my bubble tea. With barely any milk tea left, the liquid gurgles, struggling along the bottom. I try again. Nothing comes up besides a mouthful wallop of air.

My grandmother picks up a slice of goose meat and places it on my plate.



The story of our tongues must begin again: in a cobblestone village in the mountains of Zhejiang Province, where my maternal grandfather, barely eighteen years of age, was handed a rifle and conscripted to partake in a civil war on a parched continent that knew nothing beyond decades of violence.