

BEGIN SCENE

The mother's hands, covered in flour, rolling out the dumpling skins. The mother's hands, all the way from wherever she is from, here in a kitchen across the ocean, covered in flour. Rolling out the dumpling skins deftly. With just a few swift controlled motions, she turns the dough and pushes the rolling pin away and to the left, then back towards the right. She spoons the filling—pork and chives, the perfect amount every time—and wraps it up. The dumpling should not be overfilled or it will break open in the boiling water. The dumpling should not be underfilled or it will be unpleasant to eat—the balance will be thrown off. Both indicate a lack of skill.

The bowl of water for pinching the dumplings closed sits between the mother and the child at the kitchen table like the ocean between them. The mother dips her fingers in and so does the child, imitating, learning. For a single moment, both of their fingers wet in their shared sea, the two are close. The mother is teaching and the child is learning. This is how things are supposed to be. For a single moment the child is transported and mother means something much bigger, much bigger, than the child could imagine. Mother means a whole place, a whole country, a country full of love and ancestors and belonging.

The way the mother pinches the dumplings closed is a poem. The way she pinches the dumplings closed is a poem in a language the child does not know. The way she pinches the dumplings closed is a poem like the ones that she used to write in her across-the-ocean language. Her untamed tongue. The way she pinches the dumplings closed is a poem like she would have written if she did not have to come across the ocean to here, or maybe more accurately somewhere in the middle, which is where the child is from, kind of, not all the way, well that's the question isn't it.

END SCENE

My friend Jenny died in a plane crash last spring. She was a photographer, an artistic mentor of mine, and a good friend. She worked with her own family archive; considered art a way to connect with ancestors who were no longer on this plane. I identified most with her work on refusal as a form of power.

Jenny often made portraits of her loved ones as archival work; queer future-making work. I am honored that she'd proposed making portraits together later in the Alaskan spring, once the light started coming back. Jenny often talked about light, pointed out the quality of it, remarked on its beauty. Talked about the work of light in an image, both digital and physical.

The future right now fills me with a sense of dread. Reminds me of my mother, who was incredibly skilled at the immediate, survival kind of hope; the hope-parasite that feeds undetected inside the body of discipline. The emotional and psychological survival skills she taught me without realizing—the very same ones I spent so long unlearning in therapy and relationships throughout my adult life—have become eerily relevant in the current United States.

The literary image, the diasporic shorthand, has remained in the back of my mind as I've moved closer to and further from writing about my mother, my identity.

At the heart of my exploration has been symbols: the dumpling, the sliced fruit, the mango, the tongue, the ocean. The diasporic symbol is textual, of course. But the diasporic symbol has also, in the time since its peak, changed shape slightly.

It represents a kind of time capsule, an experience an older generation of immigrants brought over with them that has since stopped existing except in writing.



The mycelium is breathing, my partner texts me, along with a photo of a fogged-up plastic bin. Yesterday, we buried everything. On the floor of my apartment, we soaked some aspen chips for substrate, broke up a mycelium-saturated grow kit into it, tossed the whole thing together with gloved hands.

I've felt stuck writing, so opened up the process to a co-collaborator, the golden oyster mushroom. I specifically wanted to work with the golden oyster because of its status as an invasive species from northern China that has since gone "feral" in the United States. Apparently, it was recently spotted as far west as Alaska.

The mango, the dumpling, the mother's hands, the mother herself—all of these meaningful symbols begin to function differently. They begin to resemble what Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilem Flusser calls the "technical image." In Flusser's writing, the technical image is an image produced by an apparatus, rather than a human. These technical images transmit information using digital processes that viewers/users don't always fully understand. Caroline Busta, cultural critic, writes: Flusser's technical images "compress and unpack information using digital abstraction, computation, and/or simulation." The diasporic shorthand is, similarly, a kind of abstraction; a distancing mechanism, or perhaps a shortcut.



The shorthand, at this point, you've read about the about Chinese School and stood behind our moms through our eyes, hands wrapping dumplings, portioning filling. You've and heard the taste. Measure with your ancestors tell you to stop. Apologies and plastic bags tenacity and survival. Language barrier that grandparents, how guilty we around languages we may since lost.

might be familiar to you. "stinky" packed lunches, where we are "from." You've and watched them cook covered with flour from rolling dough, perfectly asked for family recipes responses—measure by heart. Measure until your There are sliced fruit under the sink, symbolic of You're familiar with the separates us from our feel wrapping our tongues have known as babies but

To Flusser, the technical image functions more than it describes. The technical image becomes a map, or model, that contains far more information about the program which produced it (what we might call the apparatus) than it does about the subject of the image. According to Flusser, an apparatus is not just a machine, as we might imagine (like a camera), but rather a system that functions automatically using a feedback loop between itself and the functionaries of the apparatus—the people who operate within the system and are programmed by it. In this case, the program is the writing; the functionary, myself.

Fungi excrete enzymes from their cells to break down complex compounds in the world around them and absorb the nutrients once they have taken a simpler form. We degrade our memories a little bit each time we recall them; every time we remember, a memory becomes a little less faithful to life. To grieve with our bodies, our brains, we must necessarily decompose the things we hold on to the tightest.



Jenny has a couple of older pieces up on their website, "Refusal" and "Close to me, a self-portrait," that I visit often. Refusal is a short video of them standing silently outside, facing away from the camera. Only their head and shoulders are in frame. The sun highlights their patterned blouse and the reddish ends of their short brown hair. A breeze blows every so often, gently lifting a few strands of hair off their shoulder and creating a sense of movement—a feeling of anticipation.

"Close to me, a self-portrait," similarly, is a compilation of the sound of their breathing from up-close. There are several moments where they sound like they are just on the verge of saying something, but they never do.

Flusser wrote that the technical image would transform our experience of death. Through the technical image, we would become immortal, and our previously historically-bound existence would turn into a kind of ahistorical ever-present moment. Indeed, I often feel grateful that Jenny left behind a body of artwork, evidence of their own programming and proof of existence. Sometimes I visit Jenny's website and play both of their self-portraits at the same time in a kind of cheap attempt at digital reanimation.

For the duration of the recording, I pretend Jenny's almost-there-ness doesn't make me want to scream, want to reach into the video and wheel them around to face me. I pretend I can tell the difference between grief and anger; don't know the difference between the technical image and the subject; can still get closer to Jenny by understanding the processes of abstraction that they utilized skillfully.

I even pretend the reanimation works. In two minutes and four second intervals, I try to pretend that they are still alive, just exerting their power to refuse.

My mother—and my relationship with her—feel like a second source of light: the shadows I try to capture don't make sense without her. You can see her shape in the background, in between the lines, in your peripheral vision. In mine.

My mom is a Chinese immigrant born right as the Four Pests famine began. After surviving the Cultural Revolution, she moved to the United States where she has lived since.

The first time she left China, she was away for nearly thirty years before returning. She used to deny that this caused her any kind of grief. When I was a child, I believed her. I couldn't begin to imagine what thirty years could mean. Now, I am thirty-one. Jenny was thirty-seven last year.

Thirty years is a lifetime.

Somatically, survival and hope—not the immediate kind, but the imaginative kind, the expansive kind, the kind that requires patience, and experimentation, and resilience—feel diametrically opposed. Psychologically, they are.

Simplistically speaking, chronic stress shuts down the brain's prefrontal cortex, causing us to progressively lose access to essential skills for future-making and solidarity-building. Skills like perspective-taking, focus, self-regulation, impulse control, and empathy for others.

This also happens during emotional flashbacks, like those that occur with trauma, or during periods of intense grief.

SCENE

Me in silhouette hunched over my desk. I am doing homework so that I can be successful in this new place just like the mother wants. The mother's figure hangs poetically dark in the doorway holding a plate of mango, or pomegranate seeds, or dates, or orange slices, or apple slices, or pear slices, which as you know take the place of an apology for some cutting devastating thing she said in her language and then again in a language I would understand—my language—earlier. This cutting, devastating thing is love at its core and means I need to be successful in this place which is new to her but not to me, causing tension, because she came here for me to do just that and I am not sure I can.

I cannot tell her about my unsureness because we have separate tongues—we have since the day I was born onto the outside of her body, since I climbed out of the ocean dripping wet and monstrous, an enormous stranger—so we can never talk about it. She is afraid I will die. I am afraid she will die. This does not make anything hurt less.

The way the mother cuts the fruit is like a poem. The way the mother cuts the fruit and hovers in the doorway with the plate of cut fruit is like a poem in a language I do not understand. The way the mother cuts the fruit and hovers in the doorway is like a poem she would have written if she did not have to come across the ocean to here, or maybe more accurately somewhere in the middle. The way the mother cuts the fruit and offers it, hovering, in the doorway, might be like the kind of poem she would write if there was not an ocean in between us.

END SCENE

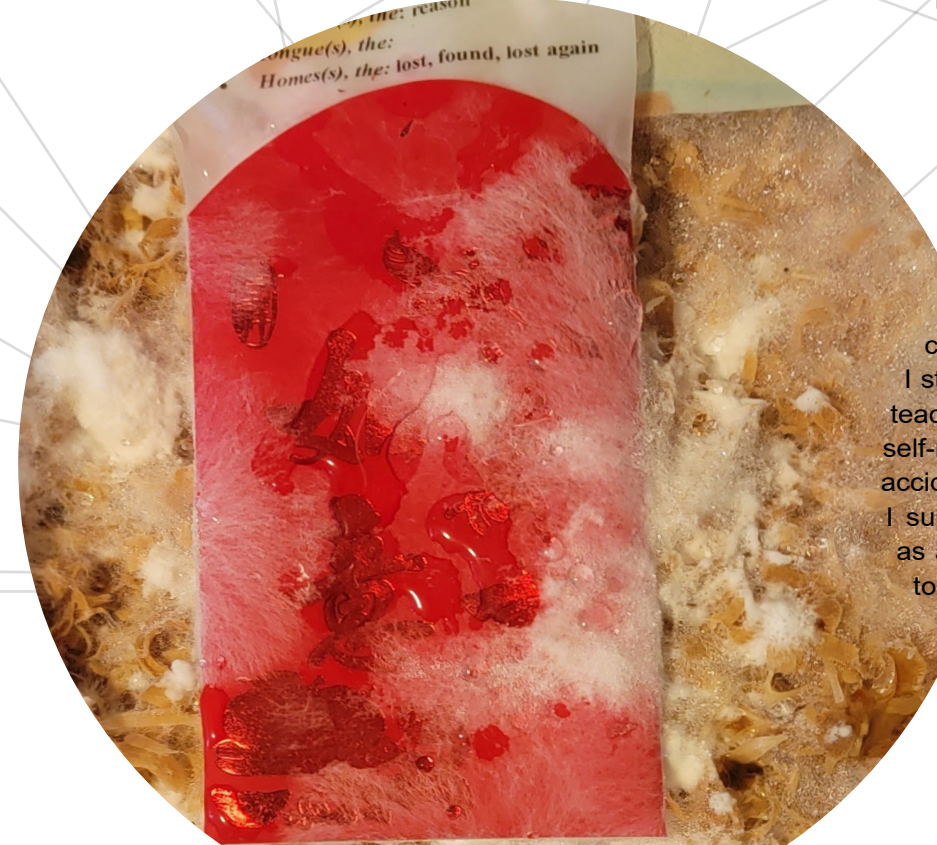
The future is not an ending. The world ends again, and again, and again. In the universe of the technical image, the world is suspended in a single ever-present moment: always just about to end or just having ended. Maybe what I think is that future-making and building solidarity is in fact about perfecting the ritual of grief.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes the matsutake in The Mushroom at the End of the World: mushrooms rupturing the earth, mycelia growing ferociously underground until their fruiting bodies spring up with enough force to move concrete, seemingly randomly along invisible-to-us faultlines. She describes their preference for growing in the ruins, and their inability to be commercially cultivated.

Much of my work so far feels predicated on an experience of rootlessness, of geographic agnosticism and non-commitment. I feel drawn to philosophies of displacement, disembodiment, deterritorialization, and virtuality because they seem like a way to reframe these feelings I have, to hold them. I can feel myself working to erase—to protect—the character of the narrator, until their voice inevitably comes bursting through.

The balance of protection and vulnerability, then, preserved. In this way, perhaps, it makes deep sense that I've been drawn to the mushroom, something so deeply rooted, and so powerfully connected to the physical.

Though the golden oyster is commercially cultivatable and a robust grower, I still hoped that it might anchor me, teach me about fruiting / making art / self-realizing as a precarious process, accidental, non-scalable, uncontrollable. I suppose I was imagining mushroom as a kind of connective tissue, a way to script, to bind, and to hold things together. I had forgotten that a mushroom also indicated decay.



Making the mushroom box feels surreal. Everything smells—the aspen substrate with the warm, slightly damp, slightly blue spore smell. I carry the box to the closet to rest, the entire thing is heavy and warm with water.

My friend Jenny died in a plane crash last spring. She was a photographer, an artistic mentor of mine, and a good friend. She worked with her own family archive; considered art a way to connect with ancestors who were no longer on this plane. I identified most with her work on refusal as a form of power.

I entered this project preoccupied by the transformation of one of Flusser's central artistic questions from "free from what" to "free for what." I wanted to write about "unsticking" identity; rendering it precarious, unscalable, and in that way free.

As a part of my writing, especially writing about my mother, I often find myself looking back at her and retelling my versions of her stories as the necessary beginning of mine. They are the beginning, of course, biologically, cosmologically, spiritually, culturally. I function according to my programming. But I accuse her of using my sister and me to obliterate herself, and I find myself propping up this image of her in front of me, doing the very same thing.

My mother brought me here to be free-from. I will be free-for. But, because I bring it up without realizing, I end up talking about grief instead. How grief is also fungal: sticky, growing thickly in the dark before shooting up with enough force to move concrete. Grief and identity are linked, in all of the ways we know already in this violent and brutal modernity, and also some ways I am still finding.

BEGIN SCENE

The child sits at the kitchen table, doing homework. The mother describes, for the forty-seventh time, the atrocities she witnessed when she was the child's age that make her act in that strange way: strict, unrecognizable.

The child is, disrespectfully, zoning out so hard their eyes are crossing a little bit, their head drooping because they have heard these stories so many times that they are bo-ring and the child is not yet concerned with understanding the mother as a person who existed before them or had desires and hopes before them.

The child is bored and doesn't realize how eventually there will be a time that they grow so far away from these stories that they forget, and hearing the echoes of these stories feels like coming home to across the ocean where they have never been. Or at least they will say it does and they will only have to try a little bit to feel that way.

There will be a time when the child can no longer mouth along with these stories word-for-word (a skill practiced only when the mother's back is turned or shouting from the kitchen). Cannot remember them in the left-behind language in from the place that the mother is from, cannot picture the fruit or the mother's shape hovering in the doorway or the hands that pinch the dumplings closed.

But right now, the child is bored and would like to skip eating the vegetables cooked in the mother's traditional cultural way, the way the mother ate them as a child, the way from across the ocean, and instead go play a game on the computer. The child has to finish reading some extra books assigned by an enthusiastic social studies teacher on the historical event that caused the child's mother to flee. This is something the child feels they get enough of at home, but cannot say no to an authority figure like a teacher.

Later, the child will write this scene and wonder how much of their recounting has been influenced by the poetry, the essays, the thinkpieces, the posts, the videos, and the graphics they've read over a lifetime. How much of that kitchen table is real, and how much has been abstracted, formulated, and created. Programmed. How much any of that matters.

END SCENE

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