tell me
what glimpse of future
turned you back?

--Opal Moore’s “Lot’s Daughter Dreams of Her Mother”

What is this Golden Land:
my mother remembers fat yellow mangoes, dripping
village mud paths turning to dust in afternoon sun
Even here, now, in this new city
when my father talks of 香港 and corruption and political unrest,
she fills the kitchen with oranges, glistening.
tell me, mother,
turning back,
what do you dream of?

--

“As flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley.” (19:18)

As you run you imagine the earth unraveling around you. It takes a man to think he can outrun context, history. Eradicate sin by burning it to the ground. You, woman, know better. You remember the new year festivals and lions and laughter and your daughters playing in those streets. You remember the times you did laundry and yelled across the street to the neighbor’s wife and made small talk in the elevator. You remember the invitations and conversations and myriad ties only a man could consider burning up in exchange for the cold silence of a mountain. And as you imagine this new life, this new lonely life, spent suffocating on the quiet of an unhappy righteous man, you begin to turn.

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On those first calls home after you married a man with two plane tickets, you almost asked your mother why your new husband didn’t speak to you. (Mama he does not like me, you almost said as the conversation neared its end. He will not speak to me. Why won’t he speak to me?) But you did not say this. Instead, you asked how your father’s cough is. Getting better, she said, and you tucked the phone closer to your ear as if her voice from a continent away could keep you warm. You asked if she is almost done with the dress she is making for your little sister. She said no, almost done, and you thought of the BOGO FREE WOMENS T-SHIRTS BIG SALE! stores below
your apartment. How your mother would love this city where soft white shirts cost less than yarn. She asked if you are eating. You said yes, the food is good here. And, always, almost: Mama, he does not like me. Daughter, he has no use for your words.

You promised to call her soon.

--

As the months passed, you stopped trying to make conversation. He came home, hung up his coat, and you did not say hello how was your day. You finished making dinner and left it on the table, did not call him away from his broadcasts to eat. When he undid the buttons on your shirt you turned over, wordlessly, trying to imagine away his cold hands and sweaty breath.

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A shopping list:
- Rice
- Cabbage
- Lean pork w/ bone
- Matches
- Words

As the two of you walked through the market he fixed his eyes straight ahead. Ignoring the signs promising karaoke bars and pretty girls in the windows, written in mangled Chinese-Spanish-English; the dirty men wearing layers of old jackets and cardboard signs; the vendors selling their knock-off electronics and cigarettes-- he’d push past them all. Instead of words, you walked home with his disgust heaped on your shoulders.

The day he told you not to go out into the market alone anymore because the people of Chinatown-turned-Sodom were a “rowdy, sinful bunch,” you wondered if the cold silence of that apartment could make you forget language altogether. While he fell asleep with cheap liquor scent and CCTV mandarin washing over him, you mouthed the words so you would not forget. Remembered haggling with fruit vendors, making plans for tea, calling your mother.

Where he saw dirty sinful dangerous, you heard bursting color noise music laughter come to life.

--

His silence grew when your twins turned out to be daughters. Leaning over the cradles, side by side, he would not even do them the courtesy of speaking their names. But if he would not, you would. You were thankful.

Hello, you practiced saying as your hands braided their hair.
I am your mother, as your hands stirred shrimp flakes into porridge.
You are my daughters, as your hands folded their neat navy uniforms.

I love you, and I will tell you I love you.
My flesh walking, breathing--
   let me show you and teach you and care for you and, through my hands working and making,
speak.

When she would not go to sleep and her father was almost home. She cried and screamed and woke her sister. She would not eat, pounding tiny fists on the floor, tears streaming from eyes, mouth stubbornly gaping, open. “Please,” you whispered. Even then she was braver than you, you were sure. Even then she knew what it meant to scream with every fiber of her being.

For the first time you were terrified for her humanity.

16 years of nicknames for your daughters:
   Assata and Yuri
   Madonna and Audre
   Harriet and Teresa
   Joan and Amelia
   Qiu Jin and He Zhen
   Malala and Marie
   Zora and Toni
   Emily and Sappho

They grew taller and louder and faster (and strong, you liked to believe). In the afternoon, from the window, you would watch them walk home with their friends: sharing milk candies with girls in navy skirts, kisses with white boys with hands in their pockets.

You wrote this note a hundred times: There is a roll of coins hidden in the kitchen cupboard so you can buy candies from the market on your way home. I love you. Goodbye. Each time you could never bear to sign it. Sent it up in flames instead over the kitchen stove, like a promise or a prayer.

--

He didn’t need to tell you what the angels promised. The sinfulness of muddy yellow-brown Chinatown-Sodom in this white American country was taken (always, already) for granted.

He didn’t need to ask you when he gave them up. The impossibility of your consent in this wordless house was taken (always, already) for granted.

Because you are Woman, made out of Man. Because you are Eve, knowing, stupid. Because you are Rebekah, scheming, or Tamar, seducing. Because you are Lot’s wife, Lot’s pretty, silent wife. While
the angels with their white wings and white skin sat eating your bread on the living room sofa, he
pushed the two girls rubbing sleep out of their eyes forward into the crowd. Lambs for sacrifice in
exchange for a promise that looked like a moving van, an uprooting.

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What did burning Sodom look like? A symphony. Even in fire, Sodom would not go quietly. Screams
wrapped themselves around crumbling towers. Bodies moaned and wept as they melted into puddles of
flesh. Prayers and curses ground back into the earth, back into the dust. Choking, vomiting on the
smoke of their own charred flesh. A cacophony of noise erupting, manifesting, bursting into a million
different colors of flame.

From that hill, Sodom looked to you a pyre of song and speech and heat, beating back the enfolding
silence of the cold mountains behind you now. As you opened your mouth to greet the burning city,
you tasted salt on your lips.