

Stir-fried Swordfish

Today is my mother's funeral, the day she's about to be pushed into the cremation furnace. She's been lying peacefully at home for three days. Knowing her vibrant and restless nature, she would have been up chatting and drinking with family and friends. But there she is, lying quietly in the middle of the living room and dining room, surrounded by flowers she didn't like - bright colors instead of the pink she loved. I sit beside her, looking at her, wanting to curl up in her arms like I did when I was a teenager, finding solace in her warm embrace and steady breath that seemed to dispel all fears.

I recall when I started high school, struggling with academics and disfavored by my teacher. I was relegated to the last row, typically where disliked students sat. I shared this with my mother, and from that day, she seemed to realize I needed guidance and companionship. She stopped going to work and started learning to cook, taking care of me every day. During that brief two months in winter, I wore navy blue cotton shoes she bought, walking from night to night. They weren't appealing or comfortable, and I worried about mockery from classmates when wearing them, but I never said anything. Her braised carp was a bit salty; it made my throat stick, but I didn't mention it. Neither did she. Later, I moved up more than a hundred places in the next exam. Mother was pleased, everyone praised me, but all I wanted was to hide those navy-blue cotton shoes in a cupboard at night, deep into the concrete structure of the walls,

until this building no longer stood. But now those shoes are gone. Countless times in my early twenties, I detached from my mother's hand, escaping her embrace until her grip weakened until my resistance was imperceptible. I lay down silently, curled up beside her, imagining she'd be holding me. I thought she should be holding me.

It's time. I hear the bustling crowd gathering at the door to take her away. I sit up and change into a different outfit in the room. Dressed in a proper shirt and trousers, I stand at the door, watching my uncles and aunts carry my mother into the hearse. I sit in the car, watching the familiar streets recede, backward through the years - to the year of her birth, the year she lost her right breast, the year she moved to this city, the year she married my father. The funeral parlor arrives; I've never been here before today. The intense fire of the cremation furnace offers no solace for grief and loss. Silently, I watch my mother pushed into the dark-brown grid. I stand there, observing everything as if detached, as if none of this relates to me. I am a soul not belonging to this world, forced to witness humanity mourning and cremating another human being. I can only watch.

Ten years ago, just before I left for London to study, my aunt took me to a fortune teller's house. He said I would have a bright future; I didn't believe him. He also said my mother would pass away at 56; I believed that. Since that day, I've been preparing for this moment, bidding farewell to my mother for a decade. The cremation is over. I carry the box to the cemetery. It's too heavy as if it might pull me into

the grave along with it. My father stands behind me, but when the box lands, we both stagger. After all the rituals, my father and I returned home without entertaining guests. Two taciturn people, not saying a word all day. Father sits on the couch, making tea, and asks, "When are you leaving? Have you booked your ticket?" I glance at the steaming cup, remembering the smoke at the grave. I also think about the flight in a week back to London, feeling like that plane might encounter an accident mid-air. I take out my phone and cancel the ticket. That moment of cancellation feels like saving a life in jeopardy. I say, "No rush, let's stay a few more days." I look at the familiar layout of the house; it took Father four months to design and supervise this, their first home. He designed warm-colored bulbs for the house, and the walls were a light yellow.

But now, the warm bulbs in the house can't shine yellow anymore.