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The "M" in Mother Is The End of "Dream"

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The "M" in Mother Is the End of "Dream"

to the child of immigrants, abc means one of two things.
the english alphabet,
or American Born Chinese.
chinese adults shake their heads at me,
"why are you so disrespectful?
why are you so lazy?
of course, it's because you're american."
white american kids ask me,
"why can't you come to my sleepover?
why are you so good at everything?
of course, it's because you're asian."

i am 4 years old and starting chinese lessons.
everyday i am learning to read and write
the 3000 year old language
that runs through my veins.
i am my mother's daughter, and i must have chinese
on my lips, in my ears,
printed across my pupils,
in every tap of my fingertips.

i am 5 years old and starting piano lessons.
my mother says it will help my brain develop,
make it work faster and harder –
in short, make me the smart, high-achieving chinese girl
i was born to be.
piano is fun,
but not when my mother looms menacingly as i practice,
she and the upright yamaha piano
like twin mountains casting shadows over me.

i am 9 years old and write in my diary,
"i don't think my mom loves me."
every day i march off to fight another battle
in the civil war against my mother.
i am seceding from her iron dictatorship.
the piano chords turn to hisses and cries.
i draw chinese characters with the heaviest hand i can manage,
as if my pencil is a bayonet and the paper is my mother's chest.
my mother yells, criticizes, threatens.

in the past she would beat me,
rulers, chopsticks, and cooking spoons
falling on my body like a hail of bullets.
but i have now learned to hold my tears.
i am developing a new nuclear weapon.
apathy.

resentment seeps into my soul.
does my mother really want me to succeed for me?
or am i just carrying out her dreams,
so that at the end of it all she can gloat over the perfect daughter she's produced?

i quit piano.
my chinese books lie collecting dust.
my mother, seeing my anguish and anger, lets me –
she lets me go.

all i want to do is be like the american kids.
i join the school musical.
she lets me go.
i try to write a novel.
she lets me go.
but ... i don't become a cool "theater kid" with lots of friends.
and ... no one likes my novel.

i am 14 years old and starting high school,
a stem-intensive school where all of a sudden
all of my classmates are asian.
all of my friends love being asian.
all of my friends credit their asian parents,
their ferocious, demanding parents,
their towering mountain, war general parents
as the source of their success.
i feel inadequate.
did my mother give up on me?
or was i the one who gave up on her first?

i am 18 years old and starting college at an ivy league.
i read *battle hymn of the tiger mother* for writing class
and while my classmates pingpong opinions across the discussion table –
"she's awful" "her actions are outrageous" "i hate her" –
i stare out the window and find myself wishing

my mother had been a tiger.
i wish she had pushed me to keep learning chinese.
i wish she had pushed me to keep playing piano.
because now i see, after all these years,
my mother's dream wasn't for me to make her respected.
my mother's dream was for me to have a dream.

late at night, getting a glass of water,
i stop to peer into my parents' room.
my mother lies in bed, fast asleep.
she's dreaming of me.