

"Laohu" (2018) by Marc Tian

One of my earliest memories starts with me sobbing. I refused to be soothed no matter what Mom and Dad tried. Dad gave up and left the bedroom, but Mom took me into the kitchen and sat me down at the breakfast table.

"*Kan*¹, *kan*," she said, as she pulled a sheet of wrapping paper from on top of the fridge. For years, Mom carefully sliced open the wrappings around Christmas gifts and saved them on top of the
5 fridge in a thick stack. She set the paper down, plain side facing up, and began to fold it. I stopped crying and watched her, curious. She turned the paper over and folded it again. She pleated, packed, tucked, rolled, and twisted until the paper disappeared between her cupped hands. Then she lifted the folded-up paper packet to her mouth and blew into it, like a balloon. "*Kan*," she said. "*Laohu*²." She put her hands down on the table and let go.

10 A little paper tiger stood on the table, the size of two fists placed together. The skin of the tiger was the pattern on the wrapping paper, white background with red candy canes and green Christmas trees. I reached out to Mom's creation. Its tail twitched, and it pounced playfully at my finger. "*Rawrr-sa*," it growled, the sound somewhere between a cat and rustling newspapers. I laughed, startled, and stroked its back with an index finger. The paper tiger vibrated under my finger,
15 purring. "*Zhe jiao zhezhi*," Mom said. *This is called origami.*

I didn't know this at the time, but Mom's kind was special. She breathed into them so that they shared her breath, and thus moved with her life. This was her magic [...] At my request, Mom also made a goat, a deer, and a water buffalo out of wrapping paper. They would run around the living room while Laohu chased after them, growling. When he caught them he would press down until
20 the air went out of them and they became just flat, folded-up pieces of paper. I would then have to blow into them to re-inflate them so they could run around some more. [...]

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Josh, one of the neighborhood boys, came over with his Star Wars action figures. Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber lit up and he could swing his arms and say, in a tinny voice, "Use the Force!" I
25 didn't think the figure looked much like the real Obi-Wan at all. Together, we watched him repeat this performance five times on the coffee table. "Can he do anything else?" I asked. Josh was annoyed by my question. "Look at all the details," he said. I looked at the details. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say. Josh was disappointed by my response. "Show me your toys."

I didn't have any toys except my paper menagerie. I brought Laohu out from my bedroom. By then
30 he was very worn, patched all over with tape and glue, evidence of the years of repairs Mom and I had done on him. He was no longer as nimble and sure-footed as before. I sat him down on the

¹Chinese for "Look"

²Chinese for "Tiger"

coffee table. I could hear the skittering steps of the other animals behind in the hallway, timidly peeking into the living room.

35 "Xiao laohu," I said, and stopped. I switched to English. "This is Tiger." Cautiously, Laohu strode up and purred at Josh, sniffing his hands. Josh examined the Christmas-wrap pattern of Laohu's skin. "That doesn't look like a tiger at all. Your Mom makes toys for you from trash?" I had never thought of Laohu as *trash*. But looking at him now, he was really just a piece of wrapping paper.

40 Josh pushed Obi-Wan's head again. The lightsaber flashed; he moved his arms up and down. "Use the Force!" Laohu turned and pounced, knocking the plastic figure off the table. It hit the floor and broke, and Obi-Wan's head rolled under the couch. "Rawwww," Laohu laughed. I joined him.

Josh punched me, hard. "This was very expensive! You can't even find it in the stores now. It probably cost more than what your dad paid for your mom!" I stumbled and fell to the floor. Laohu growled and leapt at Josh's face. Josh screamed, more out of fear and surprise than pain. Laohu was only made of paper, after all. Josh grabbed Laohu and his snarl was choked off as Josh crumpled
45 him in his hand and tore him in half. He balled up the two pieces of paper and threw them at me. "Here's your stupid cheap Chinese garbage." [...]

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My fight with Josh didn't end there. Josh was popular at school. I never want to think again about the two weeks that followed.

50 I came home that Friday at the end of the two weeks. "*Xuexiao hao ma?*" Mom asked. I said nothing and went to the bathroom. I looked into the mirror. *I look nothing like her, nothing.* At dinner I asked Dad, "Do I have a chink face?" Dad put down his chopsticks. Even though I had never told him what happened in school, he seemed to understand. He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "No, you don't."

55 Mom looked at Dad, not understanding. She looked back at me. "*Sha jiao* chink?"

"English," I said. "Speak English."

She tried. "What happen?"

I pushed the chopsticks and the bowl before me away: stir-fried green peppers with five-spice beef.

"We should eat American food."

60 Dad tried to reason. "A lot of families cook Chinese sometimes."

"We are not other families." I looked at him. *Other families don't have moms who don't belong.*

He looked away. And then he put a hand on Mom's shoulder. "I'll get you a cookbook."

Mom turned to me. "*Bu haochi?*"

"English," I said, raising my voice. "Speak English."

65 Mom reached out to touch my forehead, feeling for my temperature. "*Fashao la?*"

I brushed her hand away. "I'm fine. Speak English!" I was shouting.

"Speak English to him," Dad said to Mom. "You knew this was going to happen some day. What did you expect?"

70 Mom dropped her hands to her side. She sat, looking from Dad to me, and back to Dad again. She tried to speak, stopped, and tried again, and stopped again. "You have to," Dad said. "I've been too easy on you. David needs to fit in." Mom looked at him. "If I say 'love,' I feel here." She pointed to her lips. "If I say 'ai,' I feel here." She put her hand over her heart. Dad shook his head. "You are in America." Mom hunched down in her seat, looking like the water buffalo when Laohu used to pounce on him and squeeze the air of life out of him.

75 "And I want some real toys."

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Dad bought me a full set of Star Wars action figures. I gave the Obi-Wan Kenobi to Josh. I packed the paper menagerie in a large shoebox and put it under the bed. The next morning, the animals had escaped and took over their old favorite spots in my room. I caught them all and put them back into
80 the shoebox, taping the lid shut. But the animals made so much noise in the box that I finally shoved it into the corner of the attic as far away from my room as possible.

If Mom spoke to me in Chinese, I refused to answer her. After a while, she tried to use more English. But her accent and broken sentences embarrassed me. I tried to correct her. Eventually, she stopped speaking altogether if I were around. [...] Sometimes, when I came home and saw her tiny
85 body busily moving about in the kitchen, singing a song in Chinese to herself, it was hard for me to believe that she gave birth to me. We had nothing in common. She might as well be from the moon. I would hurry on to my room, where I could continue my all-American pursuit of happiness. [...]

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Dad aged rapidly after Mom died. The house was too big for him and had to be sold. My girlfriend
90 Laura and I went to help him pack and clean the place. Laura found the shoebox in the attic. The paper menagerie, hidden in the uninsulated darkness of the attic for so long, had become brittle and the bright wrapping paper patterns had faded. "I've never seen origami like this," Laura said. "Your Mom was an amazing artist." The paper animals did not move. Perhaps whatever magic had animated them stopped when Mom died. Or perhaps I had only imagined that these paper
95 constructions were once alive. The memory of children could not be trusted.

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It was the first weekend in April, two years after Mom's death. Laura was out of town on one of her endless trips as a management consultant and I was home, lazily flipping through the TV channels. I paused at a documentary about sharks. Suddenly I saw, in my mind, Mom's hands, as they folded
100 and refolded tin foil to make a shark for me, while Laohu and I watched.

A rustle. I looked up and saw that a ball of wrapping paper and torn tape was on the floor next to the bookshelf. I walked over to pick it up for the trash. The ball of paper shifted, unfurled itself, and I saw that it was Laohu, who I hadn't thought about in a very long time. "Rawrr-sa." Mom must have put him back together after I had given up. He was smaller than I remembered. Or maybe it was just that back then my fists were smaller. Laura had put the paper animals around our apartment as decoration. She probably left Laohu in a pretty hidden corner because he looked so shabby.

I sat down on the floor, and reached out a finger. Laohu's tail twitched, and he pounced playfully. I laughed, stroking his back. Laohu purred under my hand. "How've you been, old buddy?" Laohu stopped playing. He got up, jumped with feline grace into my lap, and proceeded to unfold himself. In my lap was a square of creased wrapping paper, the plain side up. It was filled with dense Chinese characters. I had never learned to read Chinese, but I knew the characters for *son*, and they were at the top, where you'd expect them in a letter addressed to you, written in Mom's awkward, childish handwriting. I went to the computer to check the Internet. Today was *Qingming*³.

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I took the letter with me downtown, where I knew the Chinese tour buses stopped. I stopped every tourist, asking, "*Nin hui du zhongwen ma?*" *Can you read Chinese?* I hadn't spoken Chinese in so long that I wasn't sure if they understood.

A young woman agreed to help. We sat down on a bench together, and she read the letter to me aloud. The language that I had tried to forget for years came back, and I felt the words sinking into me, through my skin, through my bones, until they squeezed tight around my heart.

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Son,

We haven't talked in a long time. You are so angry when I try to touch you that I'm afraid. And I think maybe this pain I feel all the time now is something serious.

So I decided to write to you. I'm going to write in the paper animals I made for you that you used to like so much. The animals will stop moving when I stop breathing. But if I write to you with all my heart, I'll leave a little of myself behind on this paper, in these words. Then, if you think of me on Qingming, when the spirits of the departed are allowed to visit their families, you'll make the parts of myself I leave behind come alive too. The creatures I made for you will again leap and run and pounce, and maybe you'll get to see these words then.

Because I have to write with all my heart, I need to write to you in Chinese.

³ the Chinese Festival for the Dead

All this time I still haven't told you the story of my life. When you were little, I always thought I'd tell you the story when you were older, so you could understand. But somehow that chance never came up. [...]

135 *In the suburbs of Connecticut, I was lonely. Your father was kind and gentle with me, and I was very grateful to him. But no one understood me, and I understood nothing. But then you were born! I was so happy when I looked into your face and saw shades of my mother, my father, and myself. I had lost my entire family, all of Sigulu, everything I ever knew and loved. But there you were, and your face was proof that they were real. I hadn't made them up.*

140 *Now I had someone to talk to. I would teach you my language, and we could together remake a small piece of everything that I loved and lost. When you said your first words to me, in Chinese that had the same accent as my mother and me, I cried for hours. When I made the first zhezhi animals for you, and you laughed, I felt there were no worries in the world.*

145 *You grew up a little, and now you could even help your father and I talk to each other. I was really at home now. I finally found a good life. I wished my parents could be here, so that I could cook for them, and give them a good life too. But my parents were no longer around. You know what the Chinese think is the saddest feeling in the world? It's for a child to finally grow the desire to take care of his parents, only to realize that they were long gone.*

150 *Son, I know that you do not like your Chinese eyes, which are my eyes. I know that you do not like your Chinese hair, which is my hair. But can you understand how much joy your very existence brought to me? And can you understand how it felt when you stopped talking to me and won't let me talk to you in Chinese? I felt I was losing everything all over again.*

Why won't you talk to me, son? The pain makes it hard to write.

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155 *The young woman handed the paper back to me. I could not bear to look into her face. Without looking up, I asked for her help in tracing out the character for *ai* on the paper below Mom's letter. I wrote the character again and again on the paper, intertwining my pen strokes with her words. The young woman reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. Then she got up and left, leaving me alone with my mother.*

160 *Following the creases, I refolded the paper back into Laohu. I cradled him in the crook of my arm, and as he purred, we began the walk home.*