

A Birth

N. N.

Every morning, Jenny's mother wakes at five. She pushes her body out of bed and shoves her swollen feet into a pair of pink bedroom slippers. Standing up, she folds back her corner of the bed sheets, waddles to the bathroom, and brushes her teeth for exactly three minutes. She then creeps into Jenny's room across the hall and shakes her only daughter awake. Through her sleepy eyes, Jenny watches her mother disappear back out the door, hears the slap of her mother's slippers on the bare wooden staircase, and pulls her tired body out of bed.

Jenny finds her mother waiting in the dining room. The room has been converted into an altar room, which lays empty except for the large, Chinese armoire that takes up an entire wall. It is made of cherry wood with images of lotus blossoms carved into the doors. It is glossy in the early morning light from the oil that Jenny's mother polishes it with every week. The top of the shelf is adorned with framed photographs of deceased family, porcelain plates filled with pyramids of oranges, two red unlit candlesticks, a small black urn full of ashes.

A stack of four flat cushions sit in a corner of the room. Jenny's mother takes one and places it on the floor next to her. She walks up to the altar, pulls open a drawer and draws out a long stick of incense. She lights the stick, extinguishes the flame with a wave of her hand, and inserts it into the urn.

Both mother and daughter give a half bow, drawing their spines parallel to the floor. Then they perform three full bows, touching their foreheads to the white carpet gently each time. Jenny watches her mother as they bow, copying her every move, from the exact positioning of her hands, to the curve of her shoulder as her mother crouches low on the ground.

When they finish their bows, Jenny's mother tugs the red cushion

into place and kneels on top of it. She begins her prayers. Her eyes are closed, and her lips barely move with the sound of her words. Jenny doesn't know it at the time but her mother is praying for the safe delivery of the child within her womb.

Jenny's birth had been difficult, nearly fatal when she emerged half strangled by the long, blue umbilical cord that was wound tightly around her neck. Her mother's screams echoed in the halls of the hospital. Her father stood watching, his face pale as rice flour, a puddle of his wife's blood pooling around his feet. The American doctor with his wire-rimmed glasses cursed foully the whole way through the emergency Cesarean.

Even after the umbilical cord was removed, her face remained deep blue until one of the nurses began thumping the child on the back with the hook of her palm until thick clots of dark mucous and blood were coughed up from her tiny blue lips. They wrapped the child in a white blanket, placed a pink stocking cap on her head, and offered the baby to her father. He backed himself meekly against the wall before accepting the bundle. The doctor ripped off one of his surgical gloves and offered the other red stained hand. It went ignored. He finally settled on patting the father on the shoulder. His hand left a red palm print on the father's blue hospital gown.

"She's a beautiful girl," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "You must be proud." The father said nothing. "Don't worry." The doctor snapped off his surgical mask, revealing a blinding row of perfect square teeth. "You did good," he said and walked away. The father stared with horror at his wife lying on the operating table, her stomach slit and sewn and knotted back together again with black thread, like spiders emerging from her navel.

These are her mother's thoughts as she prays. Jenny wraps her arms around her mother's thick waist and tilts her head into the smooth hollow of her back. Jenny listens as the monotonous sounds of her mother's mantra slip into her ears, lulling her back to sleep.

When Jenny's mother finishes her prayers, she shakes her daughter awake again. Jenny jumps up and helps her mother to her feet, and the two of them perform the closing three bows. When they walk into the kitchen, the sun begins to peer in through the kitchen windows, and Jenny's mother pauses to look.

"What do you want for breakfast?" her mother asks, a soft palm placed gently on the swell of her belly. "What does my baby want today?"