



“ars poetica with baba’s eighty-five inch tv”

Chloe Chou  
Westmoor High School  
San Mateo County

I am always afraid but things are never the same.

cantilevered to my hometown I ask my baba about

the taste of chicken knuckles – he looks at me scandalized.

split-faced & rooted in an american taste he says to me

欣儀, how you learn a dish like that? I am all tongue-  
twisted. my teeth rotting in my silvered mouth, I look

away. he sighs, speaks again: 欣儀, I am an esl.

english is not my first. I know this already. my teachers told me  
this in elementary school, the cartilage in my knees crackling  
for my american appetite – breakfast sausage and honeyed  
eggos for days. I tell him, sorry, baba. he smiles at me slowly,  
face unlatching to a toothed voice box.

I am writing this poem because I don’t know what else to say.

every chinese new year I am buried under the incense from

the temple next to an ikea. every chinese new year me & baba fill

up the offering table with jellies from 99 ranch. we watch the

zodiac predictions on his eighty-five inch tv that was half-off

at costco. watch the reminders of matriarchy in our homes.

forget the syllabled necklace around my throat is our bloodline:

half of its nerves can be used to play the guitar, the other half can

be sold to buy four cycles at the washing machine. no, that just

won’t do – the zodiac predictor says only numbers in multiples of

eights are lucky. like 16. like 40. like 88. 88, or in chinese, ba ba.

I am ending this poem now because I have written twenty-three lines  
and I still know nothing more about my language. because my brother  
& I were glass children. I had read his expressions once and  
found nothing there but a fear of drowning; his legs tangled in salty  
liquid, his ribcage expanding for oxygen. his body sixty percent water  
but still unable to accept the atoms outside – how I prayed our baba  
would teach us to swim one day. but all he told us was                   there is nothing  
                  noble in water. how I prayed he could teach me the workings of our country,  
wrap me in the red flag of his northbound city. but he said to me   no 欣儀,  
                  this color is only blood. how I prayed to tear his eighty-five inch tv apart,  
ripping the circuit boards from blue & green wire, ask my baba how something  
so desecrate could be a mosaic of my mechanical wanting. where the eighty-five  
is only half eight, half                   ba, meaning only half lucky. how I prayed for salted egg yolks  
and smoked grasshoppers from home, only for baba to say to me, 欣儀, stop.  
                  stop with your wanting. we are in the beautiful country now.

欣儀: a mandarin name