

Skinned

When mama landed in America, with my baby sister's head leaned against her shoulder and my fingers twisted in her iron grasp, her skin had just started to shed and shift.

She had taken up her first job in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant so cramped that it must have violated safety standards, and the American grease and oil must have seeped into her hair and pores. Her hands had started to develop an oily texture, no matter how chapped they became from her washing, like a second skin had grown over the skin she brought from China.

When she hastily scrubbed our faces at night, her fingers left shimmery trails on our foreheads, a dirty ghostly residue. That was the first sign of her shedding.

Every night that year, my eight-year-old self stayed up to watch mama trudge into the apartment we stayed in above the restaurant. When she took off her shoes and socks to pad across the floor on her way to the dingy shower, her feet left oily footprints that disappeared if I squinted at them. Something about her was falling apart from the outside.

I offered to wash her feet.

Her feet were slippery to hold. I cradled them carefully, refusing to shudder at how bits of translucent skin would fade into the water. She was shedding herself in the basin like a snake, but becoming smaller and more shriveled with each layer of skin she detached. No amount of clean water washed life back into her.

It was only after starting school and having to swallow foreign English syllables around my home-cooked rice that my skin started to change too. After a boy pushed me for not understanding what he said, I had started to grow scales.

My baby sister had started kindergarten then. She never said a word to me in school.

She had still seemed the pouty baby that came to America on mama's shoulder, but now she knew how to use her cheeks. While I scowled at my classmates, my sister always beamed at her teachers.

My sister did not show any signs of change at all. She looked perfectly normal, oblivious to the way my mother and I shifted one way when we went out and undressed our skins when we came home.

Raised on American sandwiches and orange juice, my sister was the only one who could drink milk straight from the fridge without upsetting her stomach. The only one who could not remember the Chinese names of the vegetables on her plate.

I still struggled with English at school, but I counted change faster than any of my white classmates.

While my mother's touches began to become ghost-like, my skin became armor-like. Scales clattered to the floor after a day at school or babysitting, followed by my mother's shout to clean up after myself while my sister chattered away at an iPad. I swept up my scales into a bin, watching out of the corner of my eye how my sister so easily ignored mama's silent footsteps.

I came to realize what my mama and I were when my English had caught up to understanding what was taught in science class. Adaptations. Forced bodily change in a foreign environment. A survival instinct.

I wondered how my sister survived so effortlessly.

As kindergarten turned into first grade, then second and third, and my sister had started to make friends with the white kids at our school. I had almost stopped watching

her every move. I tried to tell myself that I didn't care, that I was not waiting for some sign that she was one of us, despite her all-American pronunciation and personality.

By then mama had turned nearly invisible. She became an outline in the shape of a woman who wrung out laundry and made my sister lunch-to-go. It seemed that she had shed one too many skins each night, each iteration turning her closer to a ghost. So I felt her name ghost my tongue each night too. I wanted to call out to her, but come morning, we both had our skins prepared to go.

I never gave up trying to force my sister to change, thinking that if mama hurled one more shout or if I fought her chopstick one more time at dinner, something inside her would break. I refused to speak to her in English; she never responded in our dialect. She was as stubborn as ever.

For myself, I needed a sign that she was as uncomfortable in her skin as mama and I were.

And it finally happened when she thought I wasn't looking.

She had gone to a playdate with a white family, and must have come back too chipper to keep her guard up. I was scrutinizing her from her reflection in the kitchen window—we had moved to a little old house in the suburbs by then—and she was lapping up the milk in her glass with expert swirls of her tongue.

Lapping?

I turned around. Something darted back into the corner of my sister's mouth, long and slithering. I didn't need to see it again. I knew—my two-faced sister had a bifurcated tongue, two-tongued for a two-skinned family.