

Paper Fan

After “*Planche X*” by *Phuong Nguyen*

When Jenny was a child, her mother had smoked cigarettes like this. Hers were Canadian fulls, lined up in crisp rows in the box, each with a manila-yellow band wrapping its top. Jenny remembers the sound each one would make as it slid out—a quick shearing, the sound of a papercut. Her mother’s nimble fingers, pinioning it at the centre and rotating its end to point at her face, then tucking it between her lips as she sparked her lighter with the other hand. One sweeping, coordinated gesture. Sometimes, when she was done, a stamp of red lipstick would be left on the butt, squashed into the pile of others in the ashtray.

Jenny has never smoked before, not even once. But now, she and Hana are standing outside, smoking Camels that they bummed from some guy in philosophy. Jenny doesn’t know why she took one; she wishes she could have thrown hers away after the first puff. Hana’s hovers near her cheek as she holds her inhale, its end glowing like a tiny red moon in the darkness of the alley.

“You’re so lucky,” Hana says, for the third time. It’s July, twenty-six degrees at 11:30 pm, and they’ve been commiserating about the heat, the stickiness, the sweat.

“Is it true,” Hana had asked, “that Asians don’t sweat?”

“Uh, not exactly,” Jenny had said. “A lot of Asians don’t get B.O. though.”

“What?” she’d said, blowing smoke out the side of her mouth. “Really?”

“Yeah, it’s a genetic mutation. You sweat, but you just don’t produce the enzymes or whatever that make the sweat stink.”

“Do *you* have that?” she’d said, lifting Jenny’s arm as if she might be able to see the answer. “Are *you* a mutant?”

Jenny had laughed good-naturedly, letting Hana take a quick sniff of her pit before pulling away. “Actually, yeah. It’s not true for all Asian people, but it is the case for me.”

That’s when the *You’re so lucky* had begun, quickly turning into the refrain of their conversation as Hana ran through the catalogue of distasteful physical attributes that women were burdened with making disappear—hair that sprouted from any place other than your head, hair that turned white, love handles, wrinkles that formed around your mouth, across your forehead. Jenny had listened, letting her cigarette languish in her hand like a wet rag.

“But you don’t have to deal with any of that,” Hana says now, though at the moment Jenny’s face, her entire body, is barely visible, no more than a shadowy silhouette in the dark. “You probably won’t have to until you’re, like, sixty.”

“Maybe,” is all Jenny can think to say.

Hana isn’t the first to say things like this. Her mother, too, whom she pictures standing in Hana’s place with a Canadian full pinched between her red lips. *Such an easy life. You don’t even know how lucky you are.*

“Should we get back to the A/C?” Hana says, dropping her half-smoked cigarette to the ground and smushing it into the gravel with her flip flop.

Jenny is suddenly tired, and though the apartment that she and Hana share doesn’t have air conditioning, returning to the house party—re-entering the gaggle of grad students taking turns playing covers on their guitars, slugging beers, cleaving off in small groups every so often to wax poetically about their thesis manuscripts and gossip about their professors—seems like a more daunting ordeal than the inescapable heat. She tells Hana she’s heading home, and Hana

shrugs predictably, making a half-hearted offer to walk Jenny back. She's already unlatching the gate when Jenny says, "I'm good. You stay."

After a few paces down the alley, Jenny stubs her cigarette out on an electrical pole and tosses it into a nearby garbage bin. Even though it's a warm night, the periodic breeze like the waft of an oven door, the air seems fresher as she walks out of the alley and into the street, leaving her aura of smoke behind. Her body loosens with relief. Hana is relieved too, Jenny knows. Now Hana won't have to play caretaker, pulling Jenny along behind her on an invisible leash, trying to make friends for her by talking up Jenny's research on the fan leaf paintings of the Song dynasty. Jenny hadn't seen this coming when she'd first envisioned her life as a grad student, hadn't realized that once she'd moved to this university town on the other side of the country, she'd be the only Asian person practically everywhere she went. Quickly and without her control, it had become her whole identity: token Chinese girl, studying Chinese art, of course. Exotic in looks, though surely conservative, delicate, even bashful—not unlike the decorative fans she is so obsessed with. And that's how they see her: a flattened object, an ornamental screen that covers the real face beneath.

Months before, back in February, Hana went on a Walmart run and returned with a gift for Jenny sandwiched between the toilet paper and cereal she'd bought.

"Look what I found," Hana said, pulling out the clear plastic package and placing it in Jenny's hands. Inside was a paper fan, splayed open to show the image that had been laser-printed across its surface: a fox-like creature standing in a dreamscape of swirling clouds against a red sky. "They had all this stuff for Chinese New Year," Hana explained, grinning.

"Oh, it's a jiuweihu," Jenny blurted, regretting the words as soon as she'd uttered them. Hana would take this, she knew, as evidence that the object meant something, to all Chinese people but especially to Jenny. As if it was equivalent in some way to the thousand-year-old fan paintings whose ornate brushwork and richly rendered landscapes Jenny had been poring over for nearly two years.

"What's a jee-o-way-hoo?" Hana asked, peeling the package apart and pulling out the fan to inspect it more closely.

"It's a kind of mythical beast," Jenny said. "From Chinese folklore. It's like a fox with nine tails. But it can also shapeshift into a beautiful woman in order to lure men and eat their organs. Something like that."

"Cool," Hana said. "It's like, your spirit animal."

Jenny laughed. "Because I'm so good at luring men." She arched an eyebrow.

"Well, I mean, because you're all dark and mysterious."

"Am I?" Jenny said.

"You should hang it above your desk," Hana said. "Inspiration."

Jenny agreed, feeling there wasn't much of an option. Hana meant well, after all. So she went along with Hana's illusion, thanking her for the thoughtful gift, pinning the fan up on her wall with a thumbtack. She didn't tell Hana that her family didn't really celebrate Chinese New Year, that her mother didn't know about the jiuweihu, even though she'd been born and raised in China. She'd immigrated with her Malaysian husband, Jenny's father, before Jenny was born, and most of the stories she told were not about China but about how hard it was for them upon arriving in Edmonton, how ambitious and resourceful they'd had to be, just to be seen. For the first frozen winter, while her father was taking eight courses at a time to get a Canadian-recognized version of an engineering degree he'd already earned in Malaysia, her mother sold Mary Kay cosmetics door-to-door wearing a cheongsam, without a proper winter coat. *I'd get more sales when they could see the dress*, she told Jenny. Jenny, however, had never seen the dress, or

any others like it among her mother's wardrobe of khaki pants and rayon blouses. She couldn't even imagine her wearing one.

Looking back, Jenny is quite certain she has learned more about Chinese culture from books than she has from her mother. That was where she'd learned about the jiuweihu: from a book she'd had as a child, a compendium of myths from around the world. It had been her favourite of all the stories. She'd always been captivated by the illustration: the fox, emerging bone-white from a dark green forest, its nine lushly furred tails ribboning from its sleek hind.

When Jenny gets back to her apartment, she clicks on her desk lamp, which throws an arc of light onto the paper fan pinned to the wall. She unpins it and tries it out, fanning her sweat-damp face. Unsurprisingly, the fan, flimsy as it is, does nothing to cool her down in the baked air of the room; it's a thing that exists only for looks. And so she looks, really looking now, for the first time. The jiuweihu at the centre is pretty and smiling, with a pink flower nestled behind one ear, its body smooth as porcelain, its eyes vacant black dots—an airbrushed, Disneyfied version of the one that haunted her as a child. And unlike this one, the most striking thing about that jiuweihu had been its face. While it had the body and ears of a fox, its face was human, baring knifepointed fangs and a long, dripping tongue. Its sharply slanted eyes glowed yellow, full of hunger. When she was eight or nine, she'd often look at that page in the book before going to bed, staring into the jiuweihu's hungry face, and the picture would stick in her mind when she closed her eyes, like an afterimage of the too-bright sun.

She can smell it now, in the smallness of her room: the smoke that has clung to her clothes, to her skin. *You're so lucky*, she hears in her head. Her mother's voice. *To have been born in a country like this. In a time like this. You can be anything.*

She'd say that into the air, looking not at Jenny but off into the distance, the smoke of her cigarette curling like so many tails into nothingness.