

## Zuo Yue Zi (Sitting the Moon)

My body is diminished. It needs to replenish. The process starts on Day One, when I'm lying in the hospital bed, unable to feel my legs. Blood seeps out, caught by a pad changed every two hours by Nurse. She whispers in and out, stealthy, like the wind.

I can see her hands, but I can't feel her. So in some ways, she's the opposite of wind.

The gash on my stomach is a bright red smile. My body failed at the critical moment. Failure to Progress, my case notes say. The sting of the truth is almost too hard to bear.

Sandwiches are brought.

"The confinement lady will not approve," I say.

Nurse shrugs, and takes the sandwiches back.

The baby is quiet, bundled up in a mess of blankets. Soft, white blankets.

Soft, white baby.

1. Week One: pig's liver soup, snake head fish soup, rice porridge with flecks of shredded chicken. Medicinal tea, sweetened with red dates.

The bed is huge, comfortable, a four-poster. Tapestries line the wall. The window is swathed by burgundy-coloured velvet curtains, with an inner layer of creamy lace.

The pig's liver is intensely savoury, with a slight metallic undertone. Raw liver—wet, glistening, brown-red and fleshy—reminds me of placenta.

*"Do you want to keep it?" The midwife holds up a bowl.*

*Why?*

*"Some people like to eat it. Or bury it."*

*Ew, no!*

Perhaps this is my penance, for so freely discarding our flesh into the biohazard bin.

In theory, it's wonderful. One full month of resting. One month of bonding. One month freed from housework. These four walls encase me like a cocoon.

I am nurtured by the warm rice porridge, pungent with sesame oil and the sharp tang of ginger, dashes of brown sugar lacing the top.

The confinement lady draws the curtains each morning and sets a pitcher of water beside my bed. The water is to drink, not to wash with. I am not allowed to wash. Cold, whether from water, draughts, or crunchy foods, will unbalance my body.

The confinement lady peers at baby.

"So silent, la. No crying?"

"No," I say. "She's a good baby."

"You move house while pregnant, yes?"

"Yes, but—"

The confinement lady shakes her head, tsks with disapproval. "Not move while baby in belly." She shakes her head again. "Baby is empty."

I nod and smile, polite as always.

"Baby is empty," she repeats, piling a huge heap of blankets on top of me. "Soul is lost. Can't find new house. Listen for knocking at night-time. You hear knock, you let baby in." She thrusts me a mug of warming herbal tea. I'm already sweltering.

At night, I cry. Sometimes I look at baby and instead of eyes, I see two black holes. And in the darkness of the night, when everything is still, I almost believe.

Stupid superstitions. Stupid customs. All I want to do is wash my hair.

I drink snake head soup and imagine it uncoiling in my belly, rising up my oesophagus, emerging out of my mouth-hole like a second tongue. Ready to unfurl. Ready to strike.

2. Week Two: pig's trotters, fried eggs, barley tea, fried green vegetable

I hear knocking. I hear it. It wakes me up, fills me with cold dread. Baby has unwrapped her swaddle. She is crying.

My bed is soaked with sticky milk. Each time she cries, my breasts leak. I spend hours pacing around with her on my shoulder, singing increasingly off-key songs. She won't stop crying. Why won't she stop crying? Now I'm crying, I can't stop crying. She's crying and I'm crying and every now and then I feel like flinging—

Sometimes I think she'd be better off without me.

"Baby find voice," the confinement lady says the next morning, when she draws back the blood-red curtains. She nods, her head bobbing up and down like a loose-necked toy.

"You hear knocking?"

I avoid the question. "What's on the menu today?"

The pig's trotters look like actual feet. My teeth tear the meat, chew through connective tissue. It's visceral, the shredding of flesh. Inside me, and out.

While baby is sleeping, I inspect the room. The wood floor is scuffed with pale, raw wounds. I flip up the edge of the antique rug, uncovering a trapdoor. Underneath is a square patch of dirt. It makes no sense! I'm on the second storey.

I am distracted when I drink the barley tea. It's sweet, the little grains both hard and yielding. When it scalds my tongue I barely notice. My mind is elsewhere; all I can think about is the trapdoor.

That night, as soon as the confinement lady leaves, I fall to my hands and knees and scrabble to open the trapdoor. I start to dig, my fingernails caked with dirt.

There's a snuffle, a sigh. Is baby waking? I freeze. More snorts.

No, she's settling back to sleep.

She's a good baby.

I've dug down several metres when finally, there are signs of life. It's a mass of earthworms, shiny and pink, writhing away in a tangled heap. Some thick and almost phallic, some as fine as spider's threads.

I stare, entranced, at the heaving mess; I cannot distinguish where each starts and ends.

Suddenly, I realise. They aren't feeding on dirt. They're feeding on flesh. Flesh that belongs to myself, my past self. The self that no longer exists.

When I'm next served breakfast, it's fried eggs. They're sunny side up. Two round white globes. Huge, protruding yellow nipples.

"Is this a joke?" I'm crying again. The confinement lady crosses her arms and sucks in her lips like she's sucking on a sour plum. She pokes me hard in the chest.

"You no cry," she scolds. "If cry and sad, baby grows up crying, sad."

That night, I can't sleep. The trapdoor is calling.

I open it and claw at the dirt, digging deeper down into the moist, packed earth. It's not long before I'm sinking, drowning, deep within the clay. Things are colder here, further from the surface.

Eventually I hit weathered wood; the type that washes up on beaches bleached white by the sun. Small shards fragment away as I brush off the dirt. My hands trace a smooth, round, curve. A rock?

No. A skull.

A skull with an empty stare and wide, fixed grin.

They say corpses continue to grow hair post-mortem. I see now that it's true. This skeleton is swathed in long, long tresses. Shadow-black, just like mine, entwined around the skeletal body.

I realize that I know this skeleton.

This skeleton is me.

Swallowing a scream, I dash dirt back over the bare bones of my face and fight my way back to the surface. My feet kick, flail out, connect with something. A crack—I look down. The skull is cleaved in two, its face a broken smile.

I burst out of the trapdoor, my mouth full of dirt. My neck full of bile.

I've glimpsed my future. It's both a promise and a threat.

Trying to distract myself, I pick at my leftover dinner, but it sticks in my throat. Soggy green vegetables, slick with oyster sauce.

Things which once were alive, but now are dead.

### 3. Week Three: Clay Pot drunken chicken, ginger fish, Bak Kut Teh

I've memorized these walls. The routine is familiar. Every morning, the confinement lady opens the curtains, and sets out the water pitcher.

Every night, she draws the curtains, and tips the water out, undrunk.

I'm constantly hungry. The drunken chicken tastes like heaven. The soup is sour, and salty, energy-giving. Energy enough to keep digging. Energy to continue my journey.

My hands are entirely black now. I don't care. The trapdoor opens, I climb down, I sink my hands into the loam.

I dig.

This time, deeper, there is a tangle of tree roots. Dry and brittle. Perhaps they are dead. But I hear them. I hear them whispering. Whispering a song that's both ancient and unsaid.

They snake around me, wind around my torso, wrap around my limbs. They mean to keep me here. They've been languishing down here, so deep, devoid of any sustenance. Now they're making use of the only remaining resource.

Me.

I have once chance to escape. With a superhuman surge of strength, I fight my way out of the tree roots' grasp and struggle back to the top. They're alive, they're alive, they *were* alive.

But so am I.

### 4. Week Four: Dao Fu, blood soup, chicken with wooden ear fungus, juicy black dates

I need to escape.

The Dao Fu is slimy. It wobbles on the spoon, emitting an earthy, beany odour.  
Slippery, and mushy, and fragile, and sweet.

Not long now until I can drive, and bathe, and lift heavy things. Still, the shame of my body's failure consumes me. I picture my body as a porcelain vessel, its neck so narrow they had to crack me open. Yes, they patched me back together. But if you look closely, the cracks still show.

In spite of my Birth Preferences and Candles and Riding of Surges, things didn't go to plan. My body failed. I failed.

I'm determined to do this confinement thing right.

That night, after eating blood soup, I dream about taking a bath. A layer of sweat, grime, and tears floats suspended just below the surface. It is warm, like a womb. I slip my head underneath.

I'm in a lake. Dappled light filters from above. Aquatic plants wave to and fro. Fish dart through branching green fronds.

I spot baby spinning in the current. I swim towards her, my arms stroking through the water. As I draw near to baby, she opens her eyes. They're almost black, like mine.

Her lips open, but not to cry. She's smiling, toothless, dark liquid streaming from her mouth. I hold out my arms to her, but then I balk. The liquid that's coming out of her...

It's blood.

She smiles wider, and then I notice it. Her mouth isn't empty.

It's full of jagged teeth.

5. 30 Days: completion of the Lunar Cycle.

I need to know. I need to know.

I need to complete the journey. Find out what's beyond the trapdoor.

This time, I dig further than ever, through bedrock, and lakes, and sticky layers of clay. I'm exhausted and dirty, but it's my last chance.

So I dig.

It is unbearably hot when I hit the lava. It's a ball of fire, and somehow I know I've reached the centre of the earth.

*Join us, says a voice. Come to us.*

*Who are you?* The heat singes the hair off my head, starts to melt my face.

*We are.*

*You are what?* There's a complex, savoury, food-like smell. Burning flesh.

*Nothing. We just are.*

I can barely breathe. Volcanic dust clogs up my nose and mouth. *Why did you call me? What do you know of my struggles?*

The voice surrounds me. It's simultaneously inside me, and all around. *We know, because we are Mother.*

*Mother? Whose?* My tone is incredulous.

*Everyone's.*

I want to curl up here, to rest on Mother's bosom. It's so warm. And I'm so tired. But I am compelled to keep digging. My hands are raw and bleeding. My fingernails are black. The creases on my palms are gashes, pale and startling, like wounds.

I keep on digging, digging, digging. It's getting cooler, lighter. The air is less dense.

And suddenly, I break through. I'm on the other side, the other side of the Earth,  
where everyone is upside down. Briefly, I wonder how they don't fall off.

My baby is here, in mirror image, and I'm also here, but upside down. Everything  
seems wrong, slightly off-kilter.

I'm here, just. Clinging to the rock face by the tips of my fingers.

And, I conclude, I may as well hold on.