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THE AFTERLIVES OF PROTEST

SOMETIME IN JUNE 1989, my aunt held my hand as students marched through Jinan University. In my mind's eye, I can see the skinny adults holding protest signs, shouting, closely followed by a tank from which an erect soldier sprays bullets from a machine gun. Yet my six-year-old self couldn't have witnessed this massacre, which occurred at Tiananmen Square, 1,330 miles away from our Guangzhou campus. I couldn't have picked up the image from our small square TV either, as the massacre was never televised within China. I'm not sure how this scene came to live in my head, but the image has never wavered—my aunt next to me, the students at some distance, their signs, the rolling tank, bullets. There is no blood in this memory, just the vibrating sound of the machine gun.

That year, the only Chinese characters I knew how to write were my name and 我爱中华人民共和国, I love the People's Republic of China. I doodled it everywhere: next to pencil drawings of warships and elephants holding camcorders, on walls of the bedroom I shared with my grandmother, and eventually, after I moved to New York to meet my parents, on my mother's desk calendar as her acupuncture patients paraded past me.

On June 4, 1989, my parents woke for another day of work. Sunday was the busiest day, both at my mother's practice and at the restaurant upstate where my father waited tables and served drinks with paper umbrellas. Two weekends before, they had taken an overnight bus to Washington, D.C., to join the mass of Chinese students protesting in front of the embassy. As a child, I used to go through the stack of photos they took at that protest: both of them wearing white strips of cloth, with handwritten Chinese characters, tied around their foreheads, their mouths open along with everyone else's, my mother carrying a white sign with one hand and a black umbrella in the other. But June 4th was a work day. I wonder if, on his way to the 7 train, my father saw the newspaper headlines, or whether he was still bleary-eyed from a late shift the night before, when a coworker approached him at the restau-

rant. Perhaps a pit grew in his stomach, but he couldn't stop to breathe—there still were hundreds of wontons to roll with a butter knife against his index finger, oval plates to balance on his forearm, suburban customers' orders in English to decipher, toothpick umbrellas to slide open.

Across the world in Tel Aviv, another protest took place on June 4, 1989. Twenty thousand Israeli peace activists protested vigilante raids by Jewish settlers in Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza strip. "If the state of Israel does not rise up and arrest [those settlers] now, perhaps not too far away will be the day they will arrest us," novelist Amos Oz predicted at the demonstration. In English-language media, I cannot find a single photo of this Tel Aviv protest, but surely they survive in the homes of aging protesters, tucked into loose envelopes at the bottom of their nightstands. Did their children grow up rummaging through those photos, and did they one day disappear, as my parents' did?

Some weeks earlier, in April or May of 1989, my aunt sent a care package of soda crackers to the students in their tents occupying Tiananmen Square. Each soda cracker consisted of two squares joined by a perforated line; I had eaten them many times, snapping the rectangular cracker into two, or nibbling toward the perforated line, attempting to create a straight break of the remaining square. I don't know whom my aunt addressed the care package to, or if the crackers reached the students.

On May 30, 1989, in an attempt to reinvigorate the dwindling Tiananmen movement, several art students unveiled a thirty-meter sculpture of foam and papier-mâché. The sculpture, which they called the *Goddess of Democracy*, was positioned to face Mao's portrait, and it created the desired buzz: two days later, the numbers at the square swelled from ten thousand to three hundred thousand. Growing up, I had always assumed the *Goddess of Democracy* had been modeled after the Statue of Liberty, and the emulation made me cringe. I was surprised to learn that the students had purposefully tried to avoid this very association, and actually modeled their goddess on Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoznitza Woman*, a stainless steel sculpture of two figures holding a hammer and a sickle, created for the Soviet exposition at the 1937 World's Fair.

On June 6, 1989, two days after the massacre, one hundred students from Jinan University—some likely from my aunt's classes—staged a sit-

in at the Regional Military Headquarters in Guangzhou as a protest against the massacre at Tiananmen Square two days prior. This is unlikely to be the protest that lives in my memory, as I remember students marching, not sitting, and I remember my aunt and I walking hand-in-hand to the protest from our home. Had I appended to my memory the image of a rolling tank, taken from the footage of a PBS documentary I watched several years later in America?

In response to China's suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests, George H.W. Bush signed Executive Order 121711 on April 11, 1990, which deferred the deportation of Chinese nationals and their direct dependents from the U.S. Shortly after, I wore an American flag pinned to my summer dress to the American consulate in Guangzhou, where my aunt had taken me for prior visa applications, all unsuccessful. This time, the consular did not even lift his head to question us, and, as he scribbled away, his interpreter informed us that my visa had been approved. Several thousand students had been killed, and I would meet my parents.

June 4th lived on in my parents' home for many years. In New York, dinner conversations often ended with my father shouting that he refused to die until he could return to Tiananmen Square, in order to throw stones at the hanging portrait of Mao. He was sure the collapse of the government would happen in his lifetime. When he had been an even angrier nineteen-year-old, laying down railroad tracks between Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, he had lodged secret protests by pushing piles of equipment over the cliff, when no one was looking. I'm not sure if the missing equipment was ever noticed, but he was never caught. Now he no longer dreams of carrying stones to Tiananmen Square, but keeps his anger close; it is his oldest friend.

In June 1999, photos of my sixteen-year-old self, speaking at a rally for garment workers' rights in Chinatown, appeared in New York's Chinese-language newspapers, *Sing Tao*, *Ming Pao* and *World Journal*. My parents were horrified—after all their protesting, border crossing, their subversions small and large, their daughter was turning out Communist. For the next ten years, my parents' friends called them to report sightings of me at Chinatown picket lines. The last thing aging Tiananmen-era protesters want is for their children to take to the streets in America, their promised land. What was there to protest?

On July 5, 2016, one day after my contractions started, Baton Rouge police officers shot and killed Alton Sterling, who had been selling CDs outside a convenience store. A day later, police officers shot and killed Philando Castile during a traffic stop outside St. Paul, Minnesota. Castile's girlfriend streamed the aftermath of the shooting in a Facebook Live video, to widespread outcry. When I emerged from my caesarean, shuddering from anesthesia, the nurse in the observation room asked my partner if we had driven. She told him that protestors had shut down the highway, but her voice sounded dim and far away compared to the sucking on my breast.

I had always been a fearful protestor, never quite putting my body on the line. A cautious friend shared his tips for marching: Always stay on the edge of the crowd. That way, if the police try to kettle everyone for mass arrest, you can escape easily. During the Occupy Movement, I marched and chopped vegetables at the encampment during the day, but I stayed home after dark, listening to helicopters circle overhead as police shot tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd, night after night. During Tiananmen Square too there were fearful protestors who left the square when the army approached, and those who stayed to defend it. Would the outcome have been different if everyone had stayed?

These days, my parents hold the most bitterness toward Tiananmen Square student leader Chai Ling. She encouraged protestors to defend the square in the face of imminent bloodshed, all the while making plans for her own escape and safe passage into the U.S. She and a number of other student leaders are also accused of mismanaging funds raised by donors after their arrival in the U.S. But I also wonder if my parents harbor particular resentment toward Chai Ling because she was the only woman among them.

At some point, while I was a new mother with leaky breasts, I encountered Wang Xingwei's painting *New Beijing*. In place of the two injured Tiananmen Square protesters lying in a bicycle cart as the cyclist rushed them toward the hospital, Wang Xingwei had painted two emperor penguins. He kept human forms to depict the cyclist and dazed witnesses. The penguins lay on a slab of wood tied to the bicycle frame with white rope; two men were running alongside the cyclist, reaching out with a hand on each side to keep the wooden bed steady. The penguins were not

bleeding profusely—only a small red dot on the chest of one penguin indicated a gun wound. Litter and broken glass lined the street. Two passersby looked on with slack, open mouths.

On the other side of the painting, in the glossy, quiet museum, the baby suddenly felt very heavy strapped against my lungs. I could not feel the space around us. For a time, I felt we would topple over.