

LUCY ZHANG

FORSAKEN DAUGHTERS

MY FEMALE ANCESTORS all ended up husks of humans, empty vessels for the Fenghuang to roam the earth in. Even Mom, who claimed she'd never forget my face, eventually lost her wits to the crazy phoenix. She stopped working and sleeping and spent her time trying to jump out the window or burn her hands on the stovetop flame. I have to cook and clean and reassure the neighbors nothing is wrong when Mom drops pots and pans over the balcony like she thinks metal could fly.

"The heavens wait for the burning," Mom says while staring through the window that I had recently bolted shut. She only speaks about the heavens these days, a stark contrast to the terminology she once used to confuse me into compliance—"the crux of the problem is insufficient resources and lack of accountability," she'd say, and somehow I'd find myself soaking adzuki beans and rice rather than insisting she buy me the overpriced bagel bites I'd seen classmates carry in their lunch box.

"What happens with the burning?" I ask as I pull Mom away from the window.

"The burning. You die and start anew." Mom sounds like one of those fanatics who believes in the impending apocalypse unless we all forsake electricity and gas. Grandmother was like this too. All the women in our family were. I'll follow the same path, too, but I've still got a few years before the Fenghuang discards Mom's body in exchange for mine. But Mom looks pretty and young for her age, so I suspect the phoenix will stick around for a while before it frees her body and soul. The only reason any woman in our family has children is to provide a younger, more beautiful vessel and free themselves from the possession.

"But not you," Mom would tell me. "I wanted a child, not a debt carrier." Still the result is no different: a chain of daughters, each emptied for the Fenghuang to inhabit.

Now that Mom's body has become a shell, Nai nai visits several times a week to make sure I don't starve and that the Fenghuang is happy. Nai nai housed the Fenghuang for the longest of several generations because of her looks and youth—still scrambling up mountains and dancing in nightgowns into her late fifties. Those who saw her silhouette at night

mistook her for a ghost waiting for her handsome lover. I think Mom's body will last longer though. Folks are always saying we look like sisters even though, up close, Mom's dimples and cheek creases only add to a charm that I lack. Mom could be a goddess even without the stupid bird displacing her soul.

Nai nai sleeps in the guest room when she visits, but she rarely uses it during the day. She spends most of her time taking walks outside or buying new vegetables from the grocery store, claiming they will return Mom's skin to how it was before childbirth: smooth as a mango, unblemished as a pearl. As I guide Mom back to the kitchen table, she wobbles, her ankles like springs attached to bobblehead mannequins. I place a cup of steaming hot green tea in front of her. She used to drink so much green tea throughout the day that I wondered how she slept at night.

"You must not leave the house on inauspicious days," she mumbles, suddenly gripping my arm.

"Days that end in 'y'?" I tease.

Mom ignores me. "The sky grows heavy, the malignant spirits sink closer to the earth. It's not safe to leave."

I look out the window at the blue skies, then at my phone with the weather widget on my main screen. Tomorrow it is supposed to rain. The Fenghuang despises rain, even though it's necessary to sustain life. Nai nai told me it's because the rain extinguishes the Fenghuang's flames, leaving it no more majestic than a plucked and feathered chicken. "We carry much pride in our form," Nai nai said. The phoenix has long since left her body, so I'm not sure why she still uses the word "we."

Mom clutches the seat of her chair as though she's trying to pull herself into the wood. My phone vibrates in my pocket, the Nest camera spotting Noah outside our house, and I stand to open the door. Mom grabs my sweater. "Don't open it," she warns. "They're here to steal you away, and there'll be no one left to contain the Fenghuang." I pat her hand and call to Nai nai, who's practicing tai qi in the basement. Nai nai handles Mom when I need to head out, a compromise we'd landed on after I promised to continue the bloodline. Nai nai and Mom had a real scare five years ago when I told them I didn't want children: "Won't the Fenghuang just die with me if I don't have a daughter?" I had asked. Neither of them spoke to me for a week—not even when they needed me to jumpstart the car or chase a coyote from our backyard. After I had apologized and admitted I wasn't thinking and promised to conceive a

vessel later in my fertile years, Nai nai told me that without a vessel, the Fenghuang will “burn the earth and drive humanity to its ruin.” They think they’re saving the world. I am not generous or charitable enough to consider a civilization’s survival after I die.

“Honestly, it seems like the world is better off careening toward destruction,” I tell Noah after locking the door and pulling my bag over my shoulder. We head toward the park at the back of the forest. Noah knows I live with Mom and Nai nai and had even met Mom before the Fenghuang possessed her. Back then, they’d banter about the current economic conditions or whether cooking tofu and spinach promoted the formation of kidney stones. I caught words like “recession” and “calcium” and “oxalate” but otherwise tuned them out. Mom liked Noah. To her, Noah represented the ideal, sharp, bright kid compared to me. I thought the comparison was unfair, since no matter how sharp I could’ve been, most of my mental potential would be wasted as soon as the phoenix took hold of my body. But now I don’t let anyone other than family into the house. Though I’ve told Noah that Mom is possessed by a bird who wants to claim all of the daughters in our family, or else it will burn the world to ashes, Noah thinks Mom just has dementia.

“If everyone thought like that, we’d probably already be dead,” Noah replies.

“You’re right. I’m thankful not everyone is like me,” I agree. “But the truth is, I’d make a crap vessel. The phoenix only likes pretty people.”

“You know what they say about appearances—it’s all relative,” Noah shrugs. “Anyway, how are you supposed to understand the mind of a bird?”

“A phoenix,” I correct. “I’ve got an idea about its aesthetic preferences since it has decided to stick with our family for generations. And once the phoenix chooses you, when it switches bodies, that’s it. Game over.”

“Hey, you’ve only got one body. I’d probably run away or something.”

“You can’t run away from a phoenix,” I frown. “It’s out of our hands, and I’m not ditching Mom here where she might accidentally leave the gas stove on and burn the walls down.”

We round the corner where the trail narrows and the trees grow taller because of the increased exposure to sunlight. I stretch my elbows while Noah dumps our bags and tools on the ground. Noah fishes for the shovels and hands me the lighter one. After we remove the grass from a patch of dirt, I begin to dig from the shallow end while Noah digs

from the center, a deeper area for water to maintain its temperature and for submerged plants to grow. The sun begins to set before we finish digging, so we place the corner of our bag with the pond liner under a boulder, leaving it for the next day.

It was Noah's idea to build a pond and observation deck here, even though it's not our property. We've been seeing fewer tree swallows and cottontails lately, and Noah is convinced something in the ecosystem has been ravaging their populations. Plus, Noah thinks it's cool to create vessels for life and claims "all it takes is a pond to attract mosquitoes, frogs—a whole community of things that eat other things." I'd rather dig holes with Noah than stay at home listening to Mom's doomsday predictions. I care little about what snake will eat which frog or rabbit, or if coyotes from the other side of the hill will stomp through and wreck our observation deck, but I like the sense of accomplishment that comes from removing such large chunks of what mother nature gives us and cultivating mysterious, undefined growths in their place. This is also my only opportunity to make out with Noah, and even though dirt dusts our cheeks and crusts underneath our fingernails, his warmth feels more pleasant than I imagine a phoenix's flame ever will. Mom would burn the whole house down if she found out I'm kissing someone, especially before the phoenix approves my partner.

The next day, Noah and I finish lining the pond and weighing down the sides with sand and plants. We stack planks of wood as walls for our observation deck and cover it with camel netting. Then we crouch inside, peering through the window, waiting for the first signs of wildlife to make their homes here. The observation deck insulates and protects us from the wind that picks up in the late afternoon, and with the many layers of clothing we are wearing, we start to feel drowsy. Noah dozes off first and I quickly follow, only to be jolted awake by Noah gesturing toward the pond.

I hear her before I see her: a soft, steady crackle like kindling just lit. I stare out the window, and there's Mom, except it's not quite Mom, walking around the lake. She swipes her hand, and even from a distance, I can spot the two long ears of a rabbit in her grip.

"Hey, phoenixes don't eat rabbits, do they?" Noah whispers to me.

"I don't know, but humans do. Sichuan-style rabbit with peanuts, it's some strong stuff," I joke.

In the dark outside, we can see the fire erupting from where Mom stands. It's like a tiny sun has risen from below, too large and hot for the

earth's atmosphere to contain. And as soon as the light emerges, forcing us to squeeze our eyes shut and shield our faces from the heat, it disappears along with the rabbit. Mom continues to stand there. I scurry out of the observation deck, scraping my knees on the small step we had installed in the process, and blood drips onto my white Adidas as I run toward her.

"It's too late, it's too late," she murmurs. In the dark, I can just make out her pale face and ragged hair.

"The Fenghuang, it has left me," she cries.

I hold her shoulders steady. "What do you mean? Isn't it too soon? Shouldn't it have entered my body? I don't feel anything."

"We've been dishonored. The phoenix has lost faith in our family," she continues. "It's because I am too ugly, and my daughter is too ugly."

"You're not ugly," I reassure her and clasp her hands between mine. "Look how soft your skin is, so much softer than mine. You're not like all the other grannies."

Mom is still the most beautiful person to me. The kind of beauty that is more regal than an empress, sharper than a snake, unwavering like a fortress. I am ugly in comparison, but that's only because I refused to eat all my rice and wanted to play outside in the mud, so I grew wild and freckled and tan.

I wave at Noah that I'm leaving first. Noah waves back and begins to pack our supplies. I hold Mom's elbow as we follow the trail back, waving my phone's flashlight on the ground and carefully guiding her around any fallen branches.

"Now you can go back to being yourself," I reassure her. "Who needs a Fenghuang? We finally got rid of it."

Mom stops walking and turns toward me. "How are you going to start a family like this?" she asks me. "Who would accept you with this face, these hands?"

"Well," I begin. "Technically, we've already got a family."

"The Fenghuang would have cleared this all up," she murmurs, rubbing her thumb over my sun-spotted cheek.

"But then I wouldn't be yours," I say. I point to the bangs that curl around my face, a one-off in a generation of straight-haired ancestors. It's just us two with waves growing from our scalps, although Mom's have turned gray and limp.

Mom moves her hand from my cheek to my hair and takes a curly strand between her fingers, twirling it gently as she hums to herself.