

Pomelo leaves in hot water

Nina Mingya Powles

坐

to sit / to take / to bear (fruit)

Returning to England from Malaysia after my grandfather's funeral, my suitcase was heavy with objects from the old house. My aunt, my mother and I had begun the slow process of clearing out, opening cupboards and drawers that had not been opened in decades.

small round earthen
jar I can cup w/ two hands
speckled underneath the colour
of waikanae beach wet sand
lip stained w/ dark
soybean paste glaze

set of 3 white & blue
shallow bowls the perfect
size for one portion of
breakfast mee inside a painted
blue fish swimming
on and on

I have never asked my mother what it was like after she gave birth to me in Wellington in 1993. The question feels almost like overstepping — into what? Reading *Matrescence* by Lucy Jones recently, turning over and over the gigantic question of whether parenthood is something I want to embark on in my life, I realise there are many things we struggle to say out loud to each other about our bodies, especially between generations. There are bodily memories that become buried, placed in sealed jars in a pit dug into the earth. I think of the pickling jars and other ceramic vessels Ruby has made in the past, and it feels like my work has been in conversation with hers for longer than I realise.

NINA *I've been asked to write something about an exhibition that touches on foods eaten during 坐月子, sitting the month.*

WEN *Oh wow! Yes, post-birth foods. You'll have to write about it in theory, since neither you nor I have eaten those foods!! But I remember all the traditions in KK, plus cannot wash hair for a month, etc.*

WEN *In KK Hakkaland, foods for the celebration of a new baby are ginger chicken soup 黄酒鸡 (one of my faves — we had it in Meizhou, remember?) and hard boiled eggs dyed red. But not sure if the new moms eat these. Maybe it's more that these dishes were given to friends and relatives when announcing the birth.*

NINA *I remember the soup. So it wasn't a thing in Po Po's family, she didn't have to do it?*

WEN *Yes, she did — they all did — but pretty sure Po Po didn't go the whole hog, as it were. Her ma came over for my brother's birth, I remember. Jia Po, as we called her, stayed with us. But I have no idea what Po Po ate! She just didn't go out. She may have bathed with pomelo leaves in hot water.*

NINA *Pomelo leaves!*

WEN *Or some leaves! Jia Po cooked the chicken soup because Gong Gong loved it. And me too. Very hearty, lots of ginger. Po Po made 黄酒 occasionally in the old house on Tuaran Road. I remember the big jar, but I don't think she did it in the "new" house. She might have cooked 黄酒 in readiness for the birth.*

I remember the soup. I was seated around the table with my mum and her friends, on a week-long tour of Hakka villages in Fujian province, southern China. The soup was thick and dark like wine, and indeed the liquid mostly consisted of rice wine. Yellow-skinned, dark-fleshed joints of chicken floated in the soup along with a curled medicinal root none of us could identify. My mum spooned some of the liquid from the bottom of the heavy dish into my bowl. The flavour was harsher than I expected. Deep and sweet but sharp in the mouth, astringent.

月

moon / month / monthly

On the first day of the new month, the dahlias slow their openings and the ginkgo leaves begin to fall. My mum scatters pale brown eggshells in the beds of soil around the sea garden, a protective layer to help her seedlings grow. My first day of autumn is her first day of spring.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, foods to eat in the week before your period begins (the luteal phase) include dark leafy green vegetables, bananas, beans, mushrooms, fish, and broth. During menstruation itself: limes, lemons, red meat, bitter fruits, sea vegetables such as seaweed and sea cucumber. I come across one TCM practitioner's website which reads, *If your period is painful we can assume that the body has an excess of dampness and extreme cold which could have been inherited from your mother, or due to stress and lifestyle choices.*

What have you inherited from your mother?

only drinking hot water / one feijoa tree / one lemon tree / spring onions planted in a basket / sharp kitchen scissors / sharp sewing scissors / small bowls of congee / six ceramic yoghurt pots from Beijing / folded lengths of silk / fear of driving / love of comedy / watching cooking programmes / going to art galleries and taking notes / island weather, both tropical and temperate

What things have you not inherited from your mother?

proclivity for learning new languages / career ambition / 关系 (networking, building connections) / hosting great dinner parties / keeping up with old friends across decades / innate understanding of 'heaty' and 'cooling' foods / never running out of energy / love of salted plums, dried cuttlefish

子

(noun suffix) / son / child / seed / egg / small thing

When on my period, my breakfast is usually a soft-boiled egg, perhaps two, with a slice of toast. If feeling melancholy, or not in any hurry, I cut my toast into soldiers just as my mum did for me when I was small.

My dog Kaya watches me eating breakfast from her rug. At some point in puppyhood I must have given her the shell of my soft-boiled egg and ever since then she expects it. She shifts on her front paws when I am finished, eyeing the egg. I pass it to her and she takes it delicately with her teeth then slurps any remaining egg white, crunching up the shell into tiny pieces. Having a dog with separation anxiety isn't like having a baby, but it's also something that occasionally draws closer to that experience than anything I have encountered before. Until recently, Kaya struggled with sleeping through the night. There are long periods of blurry tiredness I cannot remember clearly.

I revisit Ruby's notes about making 回口, the first artwork she has created since having a daughter. She calls it her first postpartum work, and I can feel the significance of this. She writes that for the rug, she purchased the yarn off a man whose mother has dementia. The mother used to be a talented knitter and now she knits lots and lots of little spider webs.

When I talked to my mum about confinement foods, she mentioned my Po Po cooking 黄酒鸡 and she said she remembers the jar. I make a mental note to ask her what the jar looked like. I wonder what happened to it. Did Po Po stew the chicken and ginger inside it? I have some of Po Po's cooking utensils, cleared from the blue kitchen after she died: a blue enamel pot, a white enamel plate, and six pairs of melamine engraved chopsticks.

At this time of year, when I lived in Shanghai, I would always get a pomelo from the fruit shop on the way to the metro station. I would park my bike outside under the plane trees. Sometimes the pomelos had a cluster of leaves still attached to the stem of the fruit. I chose the fruit with the most leaves, dark and deep green like the hills above Wellington. I had no idea of their importance. Later, I learn that bathing in pomelo leaves and hot water is an important southern Chinese custom for washing away bad luck.

When we were last in Malaysia, we walked past bundles of dried pomelo leaves in the harbourside market. I didn't know what they were; Mum stopped and pointed them out to me. She snapped a picture on her phone. She said they brought her right back to her childhood.

Looking closely at the threads of the rug, I am struck by the waves in motion in the centre, elemental colours encircling something emerging between two figures. I have felt a new fear

opening up in me, springing up from the water between two islands. But there is a new intimacy in this uncertainty, a closeness with my body and its permeable borders. And hasn't uncertainty been at the root of my creativity in the past; the beginning of a poem spacious enough to hold all that is not known? I had forgotten. It's good and okay to live in uncertainty, in the in-between, to dwell for a while on the cusp, reaching for another shore.

Incantation for altered states of the body in changing weather

in mid-autumn	my arms
dampness slugs	drawing circles
leave marks	around circles
on the wild garden	aquatic insects
window the light	threading webs
pours in my world	their legs touching
my life now facing	the sudden morning
this way in quiet	the morning is a
oriented towards	green lake
her body	a lake can be
her eyes	a shape
drawing a line	that holds you
from her to me	still in the darkening
my body closer	a green lake lives
to the ground	inside you
softer and closer	and cannot leave

Nina Mingya Powles is a writer, poet and zinemaker from Wellington, currently living in London. She is the author of several books of poetry and creative nonfiction including *Slipstitch* (Guillemot Press, 2024), *Magnolia* 木蘭 (Seraph Press, 2020), *Small Bodies of Water* (Canongate, 2021) and *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai* (The Emma Press, 2020). She is on the editorial board of *Starling* magazine, and writes a monthly substack on food and memory titled Crispy Noodles.