

Mary Zheng
The Hand of Fate

The night before she left for South Africa, she dreamt of a cerulean waterfall. Its translucent waters gushed down with fury into a pool so blue that it made her cry. She stood naked, stripped of everything, even her ring.

She never smelled things in her dreams but standing by this waterfall, as her toes curled over the edge of a damp, gray rock, she lifted her chin, closed her eyes, and inhaled the heady scent of damp moss, earthy and full. She exhaled. And then, with no fear, she dove in, the shimmering water gently closing over her and billowing against the rock.

She had forgotten this dream until now, when she held the cheap, plastic plate under the sunlight streaming through the window, studying the image of a lush waterfall imprinted in the center.

"China," the store owner called, "You want it? I give good price."

"*Cha ngiyabonga*," she responded in Zulu—*no, thank you*. The butcher knife was what she came for. The one she found here was close enough to the Chinese cleaver she used at home, a place she'd be away from for 27 months.

Her therapist said that she should have divorced him before she left—that giving up wasn't shameful, especially if what you gave up on was ruining you. How she hated her therapist in that moment, with her presumptuous cat-eye glasses and eternally black outfits devoid of personality. What did she know about devotion, about sacrifice? Yet softly, in the corners of her battered heart, she knew her therapist was right. And still, she couldn't leave him.

"You'd have to pry my ring off," she liked to joke. It was a terrible joke, and it wasn't funny at all. Just pathetic.

She wasn't fighting for their marriage as much she was fighting for the stars to be vindicated. Ever since she taught herself astrology, she had delighted in the knowledge that Jupiter, the planet of expansion, was in her 7th house, the house of marriage. It was her god given right to attract abundance and fortune and prosperity through her marriage. She dismissed the astrologers who interpreted that placement not as the potential for an abundant marriage, but for an abundance of marriages.

No, she didn't like that. She wanted to believe that one day he would return to his former self, and their marriage would finally bring her everything she was destined to receive. They just needed time, and space, and her willful delusion that there was still something salvage.

She gingerly placed the plastic plate down so that it didn't make a sound when it touched the wooden counter. After walking up to the register with her knife, she unzipped her fanny pack, pulled out a slim black wallet, and plucked out 200 rand. Of the Peace Corps pittance allotted for moving to the village, this was all that remained. She'd spent the rest on a mattress, some shitty sheets, a plastic green bucket she'd learn to bathe in with only 1 liter of water, and a brand new dresser that squeaked.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

"China, you don't want the plate?"

"*Ngiyabonga, kodwa angifuni,*" she responded — *thank you, but I don't want it* — placing the bill on the counter between the two of them. The demure smile of Nelson Mandela gazed at them in shades of burnt orange and cream yellow.

Not two steps out the store, she spotted in the parking lot her host-brother. He was leaned against the hood of his rusted red pick-up truck, called a *bakkie* here, his head tossed back to the sky as he guzzled the last of his 40 oz Black Label. As he ripped the bottle away from his lips, he wiped his mouth and the beer dripping down his chin with the back of his hand.

"Ay, my sista!" he yelled, waving at her with hands still clutching the empty bottle.

"Hi, my brother," she said, her face blanching. "You had something to drink?" she asked tepidly. Fear had bolted her feet to the ground.

"Come, come," he motioned, beckoning her with the bottle. "Let's go home."

"Do you...want me to drive?" she nervously asked, standing as stiff and straight as a prickly cactus.

"*Cha, sista, trust me. Asambe — let's go!*"

Slowly, she unscrewed her feet from the pavement; they creaked a terrible apprehension as she forced herself to the passenger door. In times like these, when her mind had shut off in favor of flirting with dissociation, she appreciated direction.

As she reached to slip her fingers under the door handle, her host-brother announced, "It is better you sit in the back, with your things, so they don't fly out."

She would do anything to avoid being trapped in the car with her host-brother. She knew that if they sat in the front together, the smell of alcohol radiating from his curdled breath, sickly sweet and warm, would be enough to transport her home.

Home. Home was her husband squirting his toothbrush with far too much Crest and brushing his teeth, scraping his tongue, bathing and changing outfits, only to still reek of bourbon — as if the alcohol had burrowed into him, emanating from his millions of pores with every breath he took. Home was contrite vows to change, built up like Babylon, only to, heartbeats later, shatter like a crystal chandelier hurtling into the ground. Home was not anywhere she wanted to be.

She dragged herself to the rear of the *bakkie* and climbed in atop her new mattress. The plastic covering squeaked as she nestled herself behind the driver's seat. She set the knife down to her side, using it as a weight so the shitty sheets wouldn't fly away. She tucked her knees close to her chest, and as the engine began to rattle and sputter alive, she tried to focus her vision on the cloudless sky.

He flew past a red light on their way out the city, but she didn't see that. A taxi screeched to a halt and righteously honked at them, but she

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

didn't hear that. As much as she tried to focus on the sky, all she could see was an image of herself, twisting and writhing on her side of the bed, waking up every other hour to see if her husband had come home, and then burying her face into the soft pillow when she saw that he had not. He was going to have only one drink, he said. Just one.

They were five minutes from the village now, and her host-brother's alcohol drenched blood was pulsing as he recklessly barreled down the steep and spiraling road which hugged the mountain. If she could see, she would've been greeted by shades of green, the blurred acacia trees whirling by. If she could see, she would've caught her host-brother's flickering eyes cast down at his Nokia, his thumbs darting across the keyboard as he texted, the leather steering wheel relegated to his left knee.

Before he could send his text and before she could see, the *bakkie* slipped off the raised road, tipping on its side as if threatening to flip. His body was jerked into vigilance and he tried to maneuver the *bakkie* back onto the road, but panic had hijacked his senses and he overcorrected, swerving to the opposite side. They shot into a neighbor's yard and smashed into their *JoJo*—seven-foot high, five-thousand liter plastic rain-water tank—and at that moment, as if electrocuted, the rear of the *bakkie* leapt into the air, ejecting everything from the bed.

Lying on her back, a few feet away from the smoking *bakkie*, she could finally see the cloudless sky. As she squinted at the sea of blue above, the hot sun beat on her face. The mangled *JoJo* shamelessly spewed water into the air, spraying her cheeks with a fine mist. A curious sensation overtook her hand, and when she turned her head to the left, she saw.

Her loyal butcher knife had flown out the *bakkie* with her and sliced her hand off. As the gold ring gleamed on the finger of her severed hand, bright red blood gushed out of her wrist, quickly gathering into one large pool, so red that it made her cry. .