

Literacy Narrative: In Search of Dumplings and Dead Poets

written by Guest Contributor | February 22, 2018



Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London rises from the ground 750 feet from the original site of the theater, the one built by the Chamberlain's Men. Its white timbered exterior glows like the page of a glossy picture book. It looks like it belongs in Disneyland, not Elizabethan England. The original site of the Globe was not discovered until 1989, underneath a parking lot. It's a common happenstance in Europe. Dig up a parking lot almost anywhere and you'll find a lost monument underneath. It's amazing how books and plays and culture survive, but we can misplace entire buildings.

I visit the theater with my mother on a whirlwind three-day trip in London. An English major in my junior year of college, I am in the middle of my semester abroad in France. During my fall break, I travel to the UK to pay tribute to my favorite dead poets.

It's the off season, so instead of seeing a play we take a tour. The guide takes us into the yard, where the common people watched plays for just a penny. I imagine it would have been not so different from a mosh pit at a popular concert, except there were no microphones or speakers. I gaze up at the stage, which is bare, and from this vantage point, it does not look much different from any other stage where people might perform Shakespeare. If I were actually standing in the crowd, watching a play, I would be too short to see anything. When I consider this, I think of all the other limiting factors I would have faced if I had lived in the seventeenth century. I wouldn't have been able to see: I am nearsighted and back then I would not have access to proper eyeglasses. I would have probably caught the plague anyway.

Then there's the undeniable fact that a person like me, with mixed race ancestry, would be unlikely to exist in Elizabethan England. As of yet, I've never heard of a half-Asian woman living in Britain during Shakespeare's time. If there had been one, she probably would have been displayed as a curiosity, like Pocahontas.

Yet if I could take a time machine back, I doubt anyone would give me a second glance. With my pale skin and European features, I look as white as any other Anglo-Saxon. On the other hand, my darker-skinned Chinese-American mother would not blend in at all. If we were not traveling together, I wonder

if people would be able to tell we are related.

Shakespeare's Globe is the first stop on our literary pilgrimage. Next up, we visit Westminster Abbey, home to graves and memorials of dozens of prominent British writers. Inside the abbey, tourists shuffle down the nave and from one tomb to another, listening intently to their free audio guides. The dead kings and queens, the coronation throne, all the relics of the British Empire pique my interest, but I am not satisfied until at last we arrive in Poets' Corner. I'm overwhelmed by all the familiar names, carved into stone: Chaucer, Longfellow, Marlowe, Dickens, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley. Almost all men, save for a few notable exceptions— the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen. These are the literary greats that I've idolized since I was a teenager. They all write in English, my only native language, and the language of my father's side of the family. I don't know of any writers who write in the language of my mother's family, Cantonese.

After our tour, my mother and I try out the British tradition of afternoon tea in the abbey's Cellarium. We eat currant scones with clotted cream. When the servers offer us milk and sugar to add to our tea, we shake our heads and laugh. We take our tea black. I have learned from my mother that this is only way to drink tea, steeping the tea leaves for so long that murky darkness overwhelms the mug. Adding something sweet to the tea would ruin its rich bitterness.

In the Heathrow airport at the end of our trip, my mother and I realize we have forgotten to buy tea from the official Twinings shop when we visited. She grabs a few tins from the store in the terminal.

"If anyone asks, we didn't get these from the airport," she tells me. It will be our little secret when we get back and give these tins as gifts to our friends and relatives. Does it matter where we bought the tea, when the tea leaves were probably picked by laborers in India or China? After all, tea originated in Ancient China, and only became a British staple when the British started growing it in India, which was under colonial rule. Yet when we think of tea, we often associate it with British culture, as if it arrived in Britain fully formed, divorced from the history of colonial oppression. As long as the tea has the Twinings brand stamped on it, the source of the tea is irrelevant. The tea is British.

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When my mother goes to a Chinese restaurant, she asks loudly for "cha" in her best Cantonese accent. It's one of the few words she knows how to say in Cantonese, and she announces this word and the handful of phrases she learned as a child like an incantation when the waiter seats us. It's not just the food she's hoping will appear, but also the recognition from the waiter that these words also belong to her.

“Saam,” she says, when she, my father, and I walk into a bustling dim sum restaurant. *Three*. She gestures at the three of us, to show we are one party. The waiter answers back in Cantonese. This is beyond my mother’s level of understanding, so she switches to English. Still, when we order our food, we let her speak to the waiter, as if she is our translator. She peppers Cantonese words into her order, mostly names of food dishes: *gai lan, cheung fan, ha gow, daan tat, cha siu bao*. Here, in restaurants where servers walk by with carts, trying to entice us with steamed dumplings in bamboo containers, is where I learn my mother’s culture.

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The first person to call me “hapa” was my grandfather, who grew up in Hawaii. His family emigrated from China to Oahu two generations before he was born, when Hawaii still had a monarch. He sprinkled Hawaiian pidgin and Cantonese words into his English and told me stories about growing up on the islands, how his parents who worked at a pineapple cannery brought the sweet fruit home so often that he grew to hate its taste. “Hapa,” he told me, meant half in Hawaiian. It was short for “hapa haole,” or, half-white. This used to be a derogatory term for mixed-race people, but my grandpa used it as a term of endearment. Still, by calling me “hapa,” he defined me not by what we shared, but by how we were different.

At school, I told people I was half-Chinese, choosing to identify as the half that was different than most of my classmates, who were white. One of my friends in high school jokingly called me “Wasian”—a combination of white and Asian. She said that I fit the stereotype of a half-Asian kid well: I had high grades, but I wasn’t as good at math as the full Asian kids. At the time, I laughingly accepted this moniker. But something about it didn’t seem right. My mother likes to say she defied the stereotype of the smart Asian kid because she was never very good at academics. Her classmates tried to cheat by looking at her tests, and she didn’t stop them. She would just tell them, “Go ahead and copy my answers, but you’re probably not going to get an A.”

On the other hand, I excelled at school, and I let my good grades define me. I was a geek, a nerd, a bookworm. But I was also hapa, which, by the time I got to college, had become a more widespread term to refer to anyone with part-Asian heritage. I didn’t know how these two parts of me fit together—being hapa and also loving books. They existed in two different realms.

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I was lucky to have parents who took me on trips to places around the world.

Neither of them had the experience of visiting another country until they were adults. They wanted to give me the chance to see the world even as a child. So we vacationed in distant locales, usually places that my dad had already visited on business trips: Sydney, Australia, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, Vancouver, Canada. When I was fourteen, we traveled to Rome.

I told my parents that while we were in Rome, we had to visit the Shelley-Keats house, a small apartment at the base of the Spanish steps where the poet Keats spent the last months of his life. At the time, I had not read much of the Romantic poets, but the little I knew about them, their tragic fates and scandalous love affairs, made me want to learn more. I wasn't clear back then how Keats and Shelley were related, although I knew plenty about Mary Shelley; I adored *Frankenstein*. The Creature was my favorite character. I mourned for the cruel way the world treated him; I understood why he lashed out against a world that was hostile to him from the moment it laid eyes on his ugliness. I was in the midst of my teenage awkward phase, with acne erupting on my face and braces on my teeth. Now the comparison seems absurd, but when I was fourteen it made sense to me.

When I was twenty-two, I came back to Rome, this time on my own, and visited the Shelley-Keats house again. Pacing around the three cramped rooms of the small museum, I felt the magic that it held for me as a teenager was missing. Now I knew that Keats and Shelley had not traveled to Italy together; Shelley never even lived in the house. I pored over the letters they had on display, trying to discern the words of their loopy cursive and finding that they looked just as much like gibberish to me as the Latin inscriptions on Roman monuments. A sign in Keats' bedroom explained that none of the furniture in the room is original. When Keats died of tuberculosis, they burned all of his furniture. So the bed, the writing desk—all of these were a reconstruction, a museum set of antiques meant to stand in for objects that were much more precious.

This was not the bed where Keats died, I kept thinking. In this room, he took his final breath, but that dissipated long ago. There was a painting of the view from the room's window, depicting how the Piazza di Spagna would have looked to Keats. I liked that painting better than anything else in the room. It seemed to get at the heart of what I wanted to know: what was it like to be here with Keats, gazing out the window at the carriages passing by?

The now celebrated poet spent the last few months of his life in incredible pain, bedridden in that room. The Roman air didn't cure him, and I imagine the noises from the square below—the hoof beats from horses, the cries of the merchants, the peals of laughter, the screams of children playing in the fountain—disturbed his sleep. It isn't fair. He should have had a long life. He should have had a chance to marry and write more poetry.

I don't know why I care so much about a dead poet who lived two hundred years ago. Maybe it's because I've trod the same paths as him, traveling through Europe. Or maybe it's because I can step where Keats stepped, watch the view of the sunset filtering through Via Condotti from the top of the Spanish steps, and understand what his experience was like through his words. He left poetry behind and letters and journals and all sorts of tangible markers of

his existence. The vast majority of dead people don't have that luxury to speak so directly to people currently living. I will never know what life was like for my great-great-grandparents who immigrated from China to Hawaii in the late 1800's, and even though my grandparents told me about their own lives, they are gone now and any untold stories have vanished with them.

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My parents and I hit all the main sights in Rome—the Roman forum, the Colosseum, Castel Sant'Angelo, the Vatican— but we also spend an entire day searching for the one street that makes up Rome's Chinatown. I'm not sure where my mother even got the idea that there was a Chinatown in Rome, but she insists that we look for it. She is craving some authentic Chinese food, and she wants to see what Italy had to offer. We take the metro to the Esquilino district which supposedly contains Chinese shops and stores. My dad and I glance at each other and roll our eyes. We're both used to my mother fixating on something ridiculous like this, and we know from experience that it's better to just go along with it.

My mother circles the street on the map, but the map is of little use. Under the heat of the June sun, my parents and I pace the cobblestones for hours, peeking into alleyways, turning down side streets, checking the map again and again. By this time, it's almost 2 PM, when many restaurants take their midday break and close. We are famished. I grow angrier with my mother by the minute. With all Rome had to offer, why are we wasting a whole day trying to find Chinese food? I don't protest out loud because I know my mother will snap right back at me, and it will lead to a fight.

Then, at last, we spot Chinese characters on a store awning. We aren't sure if it is even the street we were looking for, but it is good enough for my mother. My father and I are just relieved to be able to rest our feet and eat something. We enter the dingy restaurant, whose blinds shield the light from coming in. It looks nothing like a Chinese restaurant at home. There are no circular tables, no Lazy Susans, no Chinese paintings with bold ink brushstrokes on the walls, no golden buddhas hidden in a corner. It has neat rectangular tables and checkered tablecloths, and it looks just like any other restaurant in Rome, only darker. I wonder why they let so little light seep into the restaurant. Maybe so we cannot examine the food too closely.

My mother tries to order using Cantonese, but the waitress responds in Mandarin. We look over the menu, unable to read the Italian or the Chinese. We order with broken words and exaggerated gestures.

Whenever my family eats at a Chinese restaurant at home, the waiters give my mother chopsticks and my father and I forks. It's one of those weird instances that reminds you that everyone around you is always assessing you and putting you into a category. My mom fits into the Chinese category, and my dad and I into the white. But here they don't even have chopsticks to give

out to us. There are only forks.

At last, they bring out the noodles. From the first bite they taste strange, wrong. Too firm, not slippery enough. They are not rice noodles, but pasta, and the sauce is not oyster sauce or fish sauce or even soy sauce. It's tomato-based, but it is not like the tomato chow mein I sometimes eat at home, with cooked tomatoes slices and onions. This sauce has the consistency and flavor of marinara. It has oregano, not ginger. I don't spit it out, and I don't say anything out loud, although the waiter would not understand me if I did. My mother and I look at each other, and I know we are thinking the same thing. The food tastes like disappointment.

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On my various trips to Europe, I've learned to lower my expectations for Chinese food because it never tastes quite right. I tried a Chinese restaurant in France when I lived there because I needed to satisfy my craving for dumplings and noodles. The restaurant was in Strasbourg, the biggest city in Alsace. My French friend recommended it, and since he had lived in the U.S. before I thought he would be a decent judge of Chinese food.

The noodles were made from rice this time, but they were served on their own without any sort of meat or vegetables mixed in. They did not have enough soy sauce on them, so they tasted bland. The dumplings, which on the French menu were called "Chinese Ravioli," came out on a platter, still crackling from the pan. The first bite I took started out promising— the chewy, greasy texture felt familiar in my mouth. But the meat filling tasted nothing like pot stickers at home. There were no crunchy chives in it or ginger or even cabbage to round out the savory flavor of the meat. It was just a meatball wrapped in dough. And it was all wrong.

Then again, what made my version of Chinese food "right?" The Chinese cuisine that I know and love isn't "real" Chinese food. I've never been to China, but I know that Americanized Chinese food is a breed of its own, created by the ingenuity of Chinese immigrants flocking to California in search of gold. In the mining camps, and then later, in their restaurants, they threw together whatever ingredients they had available, including vegetables that didn't even grow in China, like broccoli and tomatoes, and mixed in the spices and sauces they could import from home to concoct something distinct. Eventually, they perfected their recipes until they were just sweet and exotic-sounding enough to pull in the American customers who wanted a taste of "the Orient." The result are the familiar dishes that my family eats at banquets: Broccoli and Beef, Snow Peas and Water Chestnuts, Lettuce Wraps, Kung Pao Chicken, Peking Duck.

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When I was growing up, my grandparents on my mother's side attended every school function that featured me, their only grandchild. In their house, they had a whole wall with pictures of me on it and cards I had given them. There was a poster made of construction paper that I had made for Grandparent's Day tacked on the wall. On Grandparent's Day, we had an assembly where we told our grandparents "I love you" in different languages and each person chose a language to write in on their poster. I wrote mine in Hawaiian: "Aloha Nui Loa" *I love you very much*. They kept that poster above all the other pictures, like it was the title of gallery exhibition.

My grandparents house was always littered with newspapers, magazines, unopened letters and classified ads. My grandfather subscribed to technical magazines. He was a jack-of-all-trades, always fiddling with broken machines. He was the family member you called when you had a plumbing problem or needed someone to help you put up a fence. My grandmother was quiet. She didn't like to talk about her past because she grew up in an orphanage for Chinese girls in San Francisco. She liked to buy expensive make-up and she stashed cash in the nooks and crannies of the house. I don't think I ever saw either of them read a book.

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The private middle school I attended in Berkeley had a tradition of putting on a Shakespeare play every year. The performances were about as good as you would expect from a bunch of pre-teens, which is, to say, not very good. Still, these shows were my first exposure to Shakespeare, and I grew up adoring his plays.

As Shakespeare's shortest play, *The Tempest* was possible to perform in one sitting without abridging the text. The character I played, Ariel, popped up in almost every scene, casting spells on the other characters, so I had a lot of lines to memorize. I don't think I've studied harder or practiced more for anything in my entire life than I did for that play. For months I whispered the lines to myself at home and at school. While I was waiting in line at the grocery store with my mom, I would chant my cues and response. While I ate dinner, I would recite them between bites. I wanted to get the lines exactly write, just as Shakespeare wrote them.

In my Shakespeare class in college, I learned the postcolonial critique of *The Tempest*, how it's really about the imperial power of Prospero, the civilized white master, who controls the elements and enslaves the degenerative native Caliban. Shakespeare was writing during the age of exploration, when the British Empire colonized half of the world and claimed that it was doing the world a favor by spreading Christian civilization

through violent takeover.

While Caliban— ugly, brutish, and savage— fulfills the stereotype of the frightening racial other, Ariel, who is also enslaved, can be viewed as the prototype of the Uncle Tom figure, or, perhaps, as the model minority. He eagerly obeys Prospero, preferring to serve him as well as he can and wait until Prospero grants him freedom, rather than rebel. When he asks for his freedom, Prospero reminds him that he saved Ariel from a much worse fate; his last master, the horrid witch Sycorax, who imprisoned the delicate spirit inside a tree. For all of Prospero's supposed fondness for Ariel, he tells the spirit that if Ariel complains, Prospero will shut him up in the tree again, this time for good.

Work hard and play by rules, and someday you'll be granted freedom, the play tells us. If you don't, you deserve whatever punishment you get.

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My mother never learned her parent's native language, and for the most part, rejected her Chinese background, preferring instead the culture of the Rolling Stones and Lucille Ball. As the first person in her family to graduate from college and as the owner of a small business, she's quite the American success story; a real "self-made" woman and the ideal assimilated minority. I sometimes joke that my mother is the whitest Chinese person I know.

As an adult, my mother regretted not having a stronger connection to her culture. She wanted me to learn what she had not, so she sent me every summer to Hip Wah, a Chinese summer school in Oakland. It was not an immersion program, and it didn't focus much on language. Instead, it taught a bunch of Americanized Chinese kids to appreciate our "heritage." We took brush-painting lessons, practiced Kung Fu, hung paper lanterns, colored pictures of zodiac animals, and learned the same ten words of Mandarin, which we would promptly forget as soon as the summer ended and then re-learn a year later. I was one of the only mixed race kids in the school. The only white kids in my class were two blond sisters, daughters of the former Mormon missionary who taught our Mandarin lessons.

My favorite part of Hip Wah was the reading contest. The school had a library of children's books by Chinese-American authors, and each class competed against the other classes to see who could read the most books by the end of the month-long program. Being the book nerd that I was, I devoured most of the books in the library. I read all of Lawrence Yep's historical novels about Chinese laborers working on the railroads or mining gold. I read books by Amy Tan and Lensey Namioka about girls whose feet were bound and who came to the U.S. as picture brides, marrying strangers they had never met. At the time, I thought these books were good stories, but I didn't think they were literature, not like Keats and Shelley and Shakespeare. Literature in my mind

equaled dead white men. It wasn't until I got to college that I fully appreciated Hip Wah for exposing me to the narratives of Chinese-Americans and other people of color whose stories don't get told nearly often enough. I saw my family and myself in those books, and I realized that I had stories to tell, too.

In my first writing workshop in college, I had a professor, the writer Fae Ng, who encouraged me to write the stories I had inside me, my family's stories.

"But how can I write about my family when I don't even speak their language?" I asked her.

"You don't have to know Cantonese to be able to write about your family," she told me. "Do your research, but also write what you know. That is the best material you have."

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I know what I don't know: I had a Chinese name once, but I lost it. One time at Hip Wah, we had to tell our Mandarin teacher our Chinese names because we were going to write them out in characters on a poster. That week, I asked my Grandpa what my Chinese name was. Meanwhile, my white Mandarin teacher assumed without asking me that I didn't have a Chinese name. She gave me one, christening me 馬麗 (Mǎ lì), beautiful horse, which sounds like my name in English. I don't remember why I didn't ask her to call me by real Chinese name. Maybe I thought it would confuse her, since it was in Cantonese. Still, I have this sticky memory of what I thought was my Chinese name. I even remember writing it down.

A few years ago, I googled what I thought was my Chinese name, Siu Mai. Spoiler alert: It's a type of dumpling. My mother used to put them in my lunches in high school and my white friends made fun of me for eating them, telling me that they looked like testicles. Why are you eating pigs' balls, they taunted me. At some point, the dumplings started tasting disgusting to me because I couldn't get that image out of my head when I saw them packed into a Tupperware. I began to throw them out without telling my mother.

Surely that couldn't be my real Chinese name. I must be misremembering the name my grandpa told me. My grandpa wasn't a malicious man, but he had a strange sense of humor. One time at a family banquet when I was a kid, he used his chopsticks to pluck the eye from fish on the table and offered it to me.

"Ew! No!" I protested. "That's gross."

"The eye is the best part," he told me, and slurped it down. Then he winked.

I wonder if he really did tell me that Siu Mai was my Chinese name. Maybe he

got a kick out of it. He used to make me repeat back Cantonese phrases to him. My favorite one was “Gōngxǐ fācái” (Happy New Year), which I would pronounce “Gong hay fa choy.” My horrible accent made him laugh.

He died when I was fourteen from lung cancer caused by asbestos festering in his lungs for decades from his years working as a shipwright. With him, he took my Chinese name. For all I know, he was calling me a dumpling, and he thought one day I would figure it out, and we would laugh at it together, the little joke we shared.



Molly Montgomery is a fiction and nonfiction writer currently pursuing an M.A. in Creative Writing at UC Davis. Originally from Oakland, she received a B.A. in English and French from UCLA. Her writing often touches on her mixed race identity and her travels around the world. She is a contributor to *The MFA Years* and *French Quarter Magazine*.

If writing defies “common sense,” if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we’re allowed to reinvent ourselves. That’s what I’m looking at with the literacy narrative. I want to hear yours: when you first “clicked” with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote “poetry,” but looked at it again and called it “lyric essay.” I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at sylvia@entropymag.org. Stay tuned for more [literacy narratives](#) from yours truly and others.