

# A ROSE A ROSE

## Did you ever see a bleeding star? (or why history feels like burning)

on Sara Sejin Chang's Four Months, Four Million Light Years

by Mara Lee

About a year ago I wrote this poem:

TAILGATE (DEER IN HEADLIGHTS)

What has fallen? I ask myself, as the child picks up the rubble of a sky.  
Mother, word, mouth.  
I clutch my neck, can't breathe.  
Laying straight on the ground, becoming one with winter.  
Still getting no air.

Something darkens, obscures.  
Love is what chokes her breath.  
She sees the road which is mother, which is mouth, and the words:  
The one who is close  
is also far away.  
And the sky, the sky, the stars and the sky. You are one of us, you belong  
here,  
where the one who loves,  
also falls, and escapes.

*a startled deer in headlights on a country road*

We knew nothing, you said, years later.  
I was stunned. How the hell can you miss the fact that someone crumpled up  
a crash-damaged deer and knocked it down into that tiny tailgate?

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### ***We are stars like you***

Upon writing it, I believed this poem was about a mother-daughter relationship characterized by hatred and impossible love, and that the deer represented me. Then, in November last year, I saw the film Four Months, Four Million Light Years by Sara Sejin Chang at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm. It hit me, as well as the rest of the audience, with immense impact and strength. Among other things, the film shows the wounds that can be inflicted by transnational adoption: the separation, the violence, the loneliness. But it also shows a way out of the pain. By weaving new and unexpected connections, the film creates alternative paths to approach the culture and history lost to the adoptee. This emphasizes the importance of refusing to be reduced to one's pain and not only identifying with one's wound. For me, this is imperative.

After seeing Sara Sejin Chang's work, I returned to the poem, realizing that the deer cannot be reduced to a mere representation of me. Such an identification would not only come across as sentimental; what's more, it is appropriating, and it would be to diminish the animal's absolute otherness. Instead, the core of the poem is the act of falling. Stars crash and fall. And that might also be the only thing that we have in common with them: We, not unlike stars, also crash and fall. Where something has fallen, there may be a crater, or an accident, and sometimes – a family.

Then someone asks me:

"So, tell me, what are you really? A deer or a star or just adopted?"

I don't say anything. I try to think of an answer, but I can't. I am too slow. But my heart goes:

If you ever saw a bleeding star, you'd know.

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### ***Digression: bleeding stars***

In my Ph.D thesis I wrote the following regarding the identification with the wound:

Refusing to be reduced to one's pain is not the same as denying one's difference; it is a survival strategy intended to expand categories and frames. When we notice that our surroundings and public life address only our pain, we should refrain from answering. Because what is taking place is not a conversation, not a true address. To the contrary this is exactly the type of performative act *that marks you as a subordinate and wounded subject*. The wound may be an important part of identity for many of us, but it is not the only identity. The important point here is: The subject chooses when she wants to address her wound, and when not to. Trinh T. Minh-ha says: "Otherness becomes empowerment, *critical* difference when it is not given but recreated."<sup>1</sup>

So when authority interpellates you as wounded subject, and you refuse to answer, this does not mean that you are betraying your identity, rather *it means that you are resisting a linguistic and symbolic oppression that only wants to hear you when you scream in "pain."*<sup>2</sup>

Or in pure Swedish: We must refuse to answer when the idiocy calls and instead formulate new questions. Or simply write a new story. And this is what Sara Sejin Chang does. Flipping the script.

### ***We are looking at the stars and the moon (measuring distance)***

There's no clear reason why people would feel the urge to question concepts of distance and proximity. But for those of us who tremble a little extra when we say the word "mom", measuring distance is a critical business. Sometimes it can be somebody "close" who taught us everything we know about distance. And sometimes distance is our best, closest friend. This might affect how we conceive of spatial relations, and also our ability to judge distance and proximity. But is that it? Have we just lost and lost?

In *Four Months, Four Million Light Years*, Sara Sejin Chang shows that even if the adoptee has lost her history and cultural context, she can recapture them through other times and places, or rather: through other ways of approaching time and space. For those of us whose past is shrouded in obscurity, the concept of distance cannot be grasped in kilometers or miles, only. Instead, light-year may be the measure of our estrangement, across time and space. And if it takes light-years to measure our alienation, other units may be needed to measure the loss of history.

### ***The spirit arrives at the time of the stars and the moon***

*Four Months, Four Million Light Years* works in different media; moving image, voice, sound, watercolors, archival material amongst others. In the room where the film is shown, there are flags with the words "mom" and "dad" written in the Korean alphabet hangul, framing the screen. To enter this room is to enter the work. The spectator has thus already crossed a threshold. Into the work, into another world. This may seem like a trivial thing to mention. But not considering that shamanism is one of the film's most important themes. Shamanism connects older generations with younger ones, the dead with the living, and through ancient rituals it offers a way into knowledge and experiences that have many times been considered a threat to existing orders. In Korea, the shamans were often women priestesses called mudang, and the songs they performed, muga, survived by being memorized and passed down from one generation of shamans to the next. The audience was also dominated by women, and their reactions became crucial to whether the songs would survive or not. Sometimes the songs had subversive qualities and many of them could be read as social criticism. These songs told about oppression of women, vulnerability, and many also

<sup>1</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Not you/like you: Post-colonial women and the interlocking questions of identity and difference"; *Making face, making soul: Haciendo caras: creative and critical perspectives by feminists of color*, red. Gloria Anzaldúa, Aunt Lute Books, 1990, s. 374. 1990, italics mine.

<sup>2</sup> Mara Lee, *När Andra skriver. Skrivande som motstånd, ansvar och tid* (Glänta produktion, 2014), 208f.

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had strong female protagonists.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the rituals could become carriers of a kind of counterculture in an otherwise patriarchal world. Counterhistories, passed on orally, from generation to generation of women.

They say: Your parents are dead.

They might be right, so I say "yes".

They might be right, but you could say the same thing about the stars in the sky that burned out ten thousand years ago. They are also dead, but I still see them.

What you see are just memories, they say.

I nod. Something spreads inside, throbbing, electric. I cup my hand around what beats. Thinking: That's all I ever asked for. Nothing more than this: a single memory; that's good enough. Dead or not.

## *Farewell (you are never alone)*

In Western culture, the adoptee is a common trope. Tropes are interesting tools. They help us understand the world around us. In what way? Well, tropes have hooks. Onto these hooks, we attach our understanding of various phenomena. One trope to which we can easily attach our understanding of pain is, for example, violence against women, another one is war. Thus, pain becomes more than just a word through the tropes of "violence against women" and "war," it is embodied and it becomes more real.

The adoptee works partly in the same way. This figure also has hooks onto which we hang things. The adopted becomes a face for something. But for what?

What do you feel when you look at me?

What do you think you understand when you look into my eyes?

Do you learn something new? About pain or loss?

Or are you just observing those rusty hooks they've inserted into my skin and attached under my ribs? Waiting for the deeper meaning to surface?

## *You're still one of us*

They laughed when I in a poem twenty years ago wrote that I still had not learned how to use metaphors. They are probably still laughing. But I have learned that metaphors are based on a relationship of resemblance, a relationship of resemblance, a relationship of resemblance. How do you create relationships of resemblance without someone to resemble? What resembles a mother one has never met? Is it possible to create metaphors without a maternal figure?

## *Farewell (you will never see your mother again)*

I wrote above that war is a trope to which people may attach their understanding of pain. In the film, Sara Sejin Chang mentions the Korean War, emphasizing that the people who loot, kill and destroy the country, are the same ones who then rebuild it. The trope of the adoptee quite frequently emerges against a background of devastation and death. The meanings attached to this little body can be, for example, "hope", "rebirth", and "love". But then I think about death. Death as premise, death as explanation, death as the both fictional and material condition for the trope to continue to live and spread its meaning in the form of hope, rebirth, love and... what else? You tell me. Please tell me what values or meanings I should create for you.

<sup>3</sup> Michel J. Pettid, "May the Gods Strike you Dead! Healing through Subversion in Shamanic Narratives", *Asian Folklore Studies*, Volume 62, 2003, p. 120.

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When summoning the dead, there must be a witness. So before the shaman begins the ritual, she calls upon all the spirits. Different types of spirits must be called into the house. Imagine the poetic apostrophe. Poetic apostrophe means addressing a dead or absent person as if she were here, present. That is what I do – as a writer, as a human being, but maybe also as an adoptee: I turn – trópos – to the absent and the dead.

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"Not just one", you say, pointing at the sun.  
I don't understand what you mean.  
"Not just one memory, at least two", you say.  
Are you talking about the stars that burned? About my lack of memories?

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"The stars", you say, "but don't forget the sun".  
The sun?  
"Sunlight is always historical, its rays reaching us with a delay of eight minutes and twenty seconds."  
I didn't know that.  
"Mm", you say, closing your eyes to the sky.  
The air feels thin today, as if the sun has torn the atmosphere apart.  
"So why does it burn?" I ask.  
"Burn?" You look like a big question mark.  
"Yes, it burns, it feels like burning, on my skin, is it the sun or history?" I say.

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You squint at me and shrug.  
"Why would history burn?" you ask.  
"Why not?" I say.  
"Does it hurt?" you ask.  
"Like hell", I say and something pounds brutally inside of me.  
Your answer comes in a flash: "Then it's the sun."

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