



essay

Washing for the New Year

by Kao Kalia Yang

"In the gray dusk, the whole of the village gathered by the river's edge. Its banks were wide and shallow. Family groups stood together.

"As the mountain clouds fell low and a coolness swept across the land, the fog rose off the water. Cloaked in the moist evening air, the people lathered themselves with soap and rinsed with water. The children splashed around like puppy dogs at the feet of their older siblings and parents.

"Only the elders waited at home. The young will come with pails of water to heat up in the fire pots so they can bathe in warmth later. On low stools by the evening fires, they heated rounds of pounded sticky rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves.

"When the family gathered, each clean, they anticipate the coming of the lunar new year celebrations around their fire rings, hands warmed by hot rice cakes, tongues sweetened by cane syrup."

Our mother spoke quietly as she washed each of the younger children, each standing in their line in the bathtub, their knees covered by soapy water. Her words brought back her childhood. My older sister and I leaned on either side of the frame of our bathroom door to watch her bathe the children before our new year celebrations. When we were younger, we, too, knew the feel of her light fingers massaging our heads, her hands made slippery with shampoo. Outside the warmth of the small room the house felt cool and damp. The scent of freshly steamed jasmine rice filled the air. From the kitchen, we heard the whistling of our father, a tune we don't recognize, a song we don't know fills our consciousness.

"In the old country, we really believed that one had to begin the new year celebrations clean of body and heart. My mother used to tell all of us, 'How your new year's day goes, is how the rest of your year will go.'

"It was a warning so that we would be on our best behaviors. In all the moments of familial angst, when the rough words could slip easily through our lips, we made an earnest effort to soften them, to avert our gazes, and at the very least to lower our voices and gentle our tones."

Far away from the past, my siblings and I grew up celebrating the new year with the stories of our mother and father's memories. The ghosts of their fathers, men we'd never met, men who had died when our parents were just children, sat around us in our living rooms. We imagined one grandpa: tall and thin, bent over, elegant hands clasped on his knees on the soft cushion of our couch, watching television. We imagined the other, short and stout, sitting on grandma's old woven bamboo stool close the ground, supervising our youngest sibling in her play with wooden blocks. In the fog of family, with the nostalgia-soaked voices of our mother and the song of our father guiding us, we adventure to the parts of our stories we've never lived.

"It was a special time to be young. How we anticipated the village gatherings in the morning, the songs and the dance. How happy it made us. How warm our hearts felt despite the cool that enveloped our homes.

"All around our village, there was a flower that bloomed only around the lunar new year. It belonged to a tree. Common enough year-round with its brown trunks and fingers, each new year these trees became something other than themselves: cloaked in petals of white, they scented the entire mountainsides with a blend of citrus and sugar."

Like our mother and father, we stand in our finest clothes at the new year community celebration. We look from the youngest to the oldest and celebrate the fact that we remain one people despite the winds of war, the forces of poverty, and the other injustices. There is a peacefulness that fills our hearts, a knowledge that somehow, even away from that river, memory flows, that far from the flowering trees, we continue to blossom. That in all the bitterness of the world, there remains: a source of sweetness in our lives, love. Always the love, first and last, a love that lasts.

Kao Kalia Yang is an award-winning writer. She authored the memoirs: *The Latecomer*, *The Song Poet* and *Somewhere in the Unknown World*. She co-edited the groundbreaking anthology *What God is Honored Here?: Writings on Miscarriage & Infant Loss* by and for Native Women & Women of Color. Her children's books include *A Map Into the World*, *The Shared Room*, *The Most Beautiful Thing*, *Yang Warriors* and *From the Tops of the Trees*.