Pass Away

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Pass Away

by

Jessi Li

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Thesis Sponsor:

12/20/18  A.K. Burns
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Before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home…. It is a human thing to do to put something into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair… and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people…" ¹
—Ursula K. LeGuin

In Ursula K. LeGuin’s essay, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” she describes the vessel as the original object and uses the bag as a feminist perspective on the formation of narrative-- an all-inclusive, non-hierarchical version of storytelling. It is in opposition to the tale of hero and action, and instead relies on a circuitous path that embraces all that is held. Bags enable mobility by providing a sense of home in unfamiliar terrain. What is carried on a trip to the grocery store? To California? To the other side of the world? To the moon? Into the afterlife? What choices are made out of necessity versus what is carried out of desire or fear?

* * * *

At twenty my mother, Rebecca Teichman studied abroad in Taiwan. She lived in Taipei, Nanning, and Hong Kong until the late 1980s. In Hong Kong, she fell in love with Li Youngzhou, a man whose family had been displaced from Xiamen, China during the cultural revolution. Li Yongzhou, his mother, and younger brother fled to Hong Kong (at the time, a British territory), while Yongzhou’s father and younger sisters stayed in Xiamen. It is rumored that Yongzhou’s father lost his mind when intellectuals were prosecuted and ousted from their positions at Xiamen University.

Li Yongzhou was the family’s golden child, the eldest son. When Rebecca and Yongzhou married, Hong Xiu Feng’s mother, Yongzhou’s grandmother, returned from Singapore, meeting her grandchildren and reuniting with her daughter for the first time in thirty years. Rebecca’s parents and sister also attended the wedding, traveling from Poughkeepsie, New York. Rebecca recalls her father, Milton Teichman, a professor of Holocaust studies and 18th century British poetry, telling her that “Hitler tried to kill all the Jews, and you are doing the same by marrying this man.”

Rebecca Teichman Li flew across the world to give birth to me in Poughkeepsie, NY on June 13, 1987. She returned to Hong Kong shortly thereafter. My mother speaks generally of the oppression she felt as a wife and mother in Hong Kong. Her mother-in-law dictated every detail of her life; her finances, her employment, and her parenting choices. Hong Xiu Feng wanted to raise me while my mother started a currency exchange business.

My grandma Gilda often told me of my Mom’s escape: how my mother made a plan to return to the US with another American mother, also living in Hong Kong. With me in her arms, she flew to New York using Xiu Feng’s credit card. The credit card was canceled by the time she arrived, and she moved to Poughkeepsie with little else besides me. Yongzhou, with the chosen alias of Joe Li, followed her to the US, and the couple agreed to buy a house in Jersey City, NJ, where Rebecca’s sister, Sarie lived. Joe Li flew between Hong Kong and Jersey City for a couple of years, and continuously begged Rebecca to return with him to Hong Kong. She had no intention of going back there, and Joe Li could not imagine a life in the US. By my second birthday, he stopped visiting.
My Grandfather still refers to me as Jessica Teichman even though I’ve never used my Mother’s last name. I am the only member of my family with the surname, Li, and I have always been certain about keeping the name. I often wonder whether “Li” gives undue credit to an absent father, but it has become emblematic of a curiosity surrounding my identity. It is confusing to want a connection to a culture and a family that have never been a part of my life, and I have always felt hesitant about acting on the desire.

* * * *

Thirty years after my mother left Hong Kong, my family still lives in that three-story brick row house in downtown Jersey City. The Teichman, Heiden, Li home was built in 1890, is characterized by a quaint bay window, and was originally identical to the five adjacent houses built at the same time. Up the front stoop, the main floor consists of the living room, two staircases (one down to the ground level, one up to the bedrooms), and the kitchen. A china cabinet in the living room houses our judaica, menorahs, seder plates, shabbas candlesticks, and my great grandmother Gertrude’s collection of dainty uranium glass chalices and porcelain bone china teacups and saucers -- each lavishly decorated with china paint and lusters.

The Chinese are considered the “inventors” of porcelain. In 18th century Europe, porcelain was the most precious commodity, valued higher than gold. It was a mystery as to how the Chinese were able to produce the white clay with a delicate blue hue that

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Uranium glass is a yellow/green glass known for its brilliant color and florescent green glow under ultraviolet light. Uranium oxide was popularly used in glass tableware during the the early 1900s, but the radioactive material was banned for decorative applications in the US during the 1940s and used instead for the production of the atom bomb. See Bowey.
when thin, could transmit light. Porcelain trade, and the quest to replicate it, was serious
business. People died trying to learn the secrets of the material. In 2008 I studied at
the Ceramics Institute in the porcelain capital of the world, Jingdezhen, China. I was
introduced to artisans and craftspeople, each with a specialized skill. Demonstrations
and factory visits showcasing various ceramic techniques from brick making to china
paints were shown daily. The group traversed China visiting famous ceramic sites-- the
terra-cotta warriors in Xi’an and the perfect earthenware teapots made in YiXing.
Despite the western fetishization of Chinese porcelain, it was there I fell in love with the
dark rich earthy clays which were used to depict facsimiles of the living world for burials.

In preparation for my first solo adventure at nineteen, I purchased my green and
gray Mountainsmith women’s “Lily” backpack at Campmor on route 17 in Paramus, NJ.
My Mom helped me pick it out. It features a compact design with a surprising capacity,
many exterior pockets, and loads of adjustable straps and attachments. Lily has been
on nearly every trip, big or small since 2007. She accompanied me that fall to study
 ceramics in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Lily and I returned to Hong Kong and China this past summer, 2018. Eight years
after I studied ceramics in China, Li Sze Min, Yongzhou’s youngest sister, under the
aliases Henry Leung and Jakina Li messaged me via facebook. It took me two years to
respond:

11/29/2014 1:26AM
Henry Leung: hi how r u? you look like my friend. i have something important.
please add me as friend.

3 Gleeson, The Arcanum: An Extraordinary True Story

4 210-209 BCE Emperor Qin, in preparation for his death, orchestrated the production of
his entire army as life size terra-cotta figures.
11/30/2014 4:33PM
Jakina Li: hi, nice to meet you. i like your work. are you selling the piece?

12/21/2016 9:44AM
Henry Leung: hi, i am from hong kong. I have something important about your father. Reply me. Thanks.

12/22/2016 12:41am
Me: ?
Henry Leung: Hi, about your father
Is your mum even mention about him?
Me: What is going on?
Who are you?
Henry Leung: I am your father sister
Me: Where does he live?
Henry Leung: Talk to u later, something to do
Noe
Now.

12/22/2016 5:10AM
Jakina Li: Pass away
If u need anything, i will help
I still remember your dad beside table is your photo
Your dad, my brother treat me well, i will try my best to help,
If u need.

12/22/2016 12:07PM
You accepted Jakina's request.
Me: He passed away?
Jakina: Yes
Me: What happened?
Jakina: Very sad, don't want to talk here, i will tell u everything when i see u

This was the first time anyone from the Li family extended communication. I didn't know how to feel. Questions about my Chinese identity now had a remote presence, which begged the question: do I want to bridge this divide between the familial and the estranged, between my American Jewishness and my Chineseness, and between my life and this new found death? I didn't meet Sze Min or any other relatives despite our mutual plans to do so.
I’m angry. I’m angry at the patriarchy, that I question whether my gender contributed to the absence of my father. I’m angry at Sze Min, for offering a sense of kinship and not following through, and I’m angry at a dead man who participated in bringing me into the world and did nothing about it -- shields up, weapons out. Even though death is inevitable, it still comes as a shock. The news of Joe Li’s death was no exception. All of the anger, the lack of resolve, remains without a body to attach itself to.

* * * *

In July, 2018 I went to Hong Kong and China and visited strangers graves. On the last day in China, of my nearly 30 day trip, I visited the Qianling Mausoleum. On the other side of the security gate at the rural Qian County bus station, a throng of tan, smoking men waited. My solitude and westernness was blatant. Aside from a previous run-in with wild dogs in the Chai Wan Permanent Cemetery, this was the only time on the trip that I had realistic fear. The men were all cab drivers, or friends of cab drivers, local Qian county people looking for tourists--I was the only one on this busload. The first persistent cabbie was touchy and aggressive, he became more and more irritated when I refused to get in a car with him. I waited for local bus 2 to take me up the mountain to the mausoleum. Another cab driver approached. He was gruff, but not physical with me.

We spent the whole day together visiting four separate burial sites. It was 104 degrees outside, but closer to 60 in the tombs. The cool was too creepy to feel good. Underground was wet, every surface covered in condensation. At the entrance to the final chamber, a squat stone doorway, delicately engraved with animal figures and floral decoration. Stepping over and crouching through the threshold, my body was
sandwiched between an enormous black stone coffin and the compressed earth wall. One dim bulb shone overhead, making the line engravings barely perceptible. At the formerly sealed threshold I made a stone rubbing on a piece of notebook paper. Two neighing horses appeared facing each other guarding the tomb entrance.

* * * *

A twenty four foot long sculptural conveyor belt extends the length of the gallery’s mezzanine. The wood and MDF structure, painted in thin layers, allows the orange underpainting to subtly come through a deep purple top coat. This treatment is designed to match the two glazed terra cotta archways that rise above and cross over the belt. Each archway is comprised of three rectangular prisms, replicating the posts and lintels at the Qianling mausoleum. The conveyor belt arches are engraved with the same wildly complex, but surprisingly subtle patterns marking the threshold between the resting chamber of the dead and the living. Neoprene rubber flaps dangle down from the lintels, resting on a black PVC belt wrapping around the entire length of the piece. The conveyor belt suggests movement across the gallery, but also larger moves around the globe, or from the living to the dead.

In the many burial sites I visited, from modern cemeteries to ancient entombments, I recorded inventories of objects “taken” to death. How do you pack to go to a place you know nothing about? I reflected on my own journey and what items I brought on the trip out of a similar fear of the unknown. In reconstructing objects or creating sculptures for this multi-transitional venture, I have used manufactured objects, sourced from a database of TSA approved items in conjunction with life cast of hands, mouth, and tongue. Through a process of assemblage I construct weapons that could
potentially pass through airport security. The defensive, aggressive and resourceful nature of the sculptures allude to the hyper awareness of physical safety that comes from traveling alone as a women. The vulnerability of solitude is particularly acute when your closest resources are on the other side of the world. These weapons also serve as a way of processing the anger I hold towards my absent family, protection not just from physical threats, but from the harm inflicted by carelessness, absence and abandonment.

The first objects on the belt are a few small sculptures -- two miniature screwdrivers impaling orange foam earplugs, a crochet hook with the butt end sharpened to a point, and a uranium glass cast of my tongue crudely adhered with black epoxy to a red and black caulk gun.

Uranium glass is also used for casts of my hands in kung fu postures. Two sets of nunchucks are attached with knurl headed screws and brass bicycle chain, one connects the cast of a hand held in the baoquan (leopard fist) position to another in the fut gar (Buddha Fist) positions. Another pair of nunchucks are constructed using the long xing mo qiao (Southern Dragon) position and a pink disposable razor. As an adornment, or key chain like attachment to one of the bags, a cast of the top row of my teeth is adhered to a dog choke collar. Posing no real threat but evoking a gnarled bite. Additional travel items are used to evoke aggressive compositions including a stainless steel spoon, sharpened at the tip, making a blade edge where the object would touch your mouth. The spoon forms an armature for two sets of nail clippers and a set of tweezers.
The three bags in the installation become subjects of this travel narrative. Two sacks traverse the conveyor belt structure, while the third sits at a distance. The baggage like forms take on characteristics of the body: protuberances of limbs, breasts or a phallus, as well as concavities that evoke mouths, vaginas, or ears. The duffle bag takes up the width of the conveyor belt as its two identical army green nylon protrusions (reminiscent of bicycle saddlebags) push forward. These bulges are sewn onto the machine-fabricated, partially deconstructed duffel and are decorated with stripes of window insulation felt and trimmed teal webbing. Hiding in the crevices are hand-modeled strap adjusters in teal Magic Sculpt. Near the nylon mesh handle, neon chartreuse pockets penetrate the surface of the original black bag sack, balancing the army green growths on the other side. Zipper pulls augmented with the same teal material as the strap adjusters read “pass” and “away” on each pull.

The backpack is made of a beige nylon canvas with details in neon chartreuse. The upper structure hangs over the more utilitarian backpack base suggesting appendages of a body. The only access point is a five inch zipper cutting across the width of the top. The zipper pull and strap adjusters are customized from teal Magic sculpt. Trimming is comprised of the same mesh material seen on the handle of the duffle bag and houses red elastic rope. The EPDM rubber straps are also covered in the beige mesh, with orange webbing and insulation felt details.

Five feet away, off of the conveyor belt, a wheelie suitcase with a long phallic protrusion is made of the same beige material as the backpack. A long teal zipper with customized zipper pulls extent the exaggerated length. The same trim of beige mesh and red elastic elaborate the connections between the made and found. On the back of
the wheelie bag and tip of the intestinal appendage, chartreuse canvas forms a recess and protrusion respectively. The handles of the bag are covered with beige mesh, and further adorned with teal Magic sculpt which has been pressed into the spandex material to reflect the mesh pattern.

Each bag and ‘weapon’ combines handmade and pre-existing objects, obfuscating the distinction between the crafted and manufactured. During my first study in China I visited ceramic factories, and was surprised to learn that objects which I assumed were made by machines, instead were directly fabricated by people. The fluidity between the handmade and the manufactured is part of my history as a maker and the colonial exchange of goods and labor inextricably linking China and US. It is a misplaced sort of comfort that I’ve found in identifying with objects in this colonial trajectory -- my great grandmother’s bone china teacups or the clawfoot bathtub in my childhood home. I see myself in these things, their Chinese history masked by their banality.

I struggle to imagine what the bags carry in them, maybe because they are the characters of the story. What does my mother carry with her? Myself? Joe Li? They have been given a form, inspired by bags like Lily or my commuter backpack, but as their forms take on human features they begin to contain more than just stuff. Work in this exhibition can be seen doubly through LeGuin’s carrier bag theory—on the one hand a literal interpretation of sacks and bodies as holders for all that is contained, but also in a less physical sense, that the work comes from a journey, one where expectation and fulfillment never quite match up.

5 The claw holding a ball is thought to originate from the Chinese myth about a dragon guarding a magic pearl.
Works Cited


Image List

Figure 1: Installation View, *Pass Away*, 24’ x 30” x 80” MDF, wood, terra cotta, glaze, uranium glass, brass bicycle chain, aluminum crochet hooks, miniature steel screwdrivers, foam earplugs, aluminum caulk gun, neoprene rubber, PVC belt, EPDM rubber, nylon canvas, nylon webbing, spandex mesh, elastic rope, epoxy clay, steel chain, aluminum chain, zippers, insulation felt, stainless steel spoon, nail clippers, tweezers, disposable razor, found suitcases. Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition part II, fall 2018.

Figure 2: Installation view detail, *Pass Away*, Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition part II, Fall 2018

Figure 3: *Wheelie Bag*, 72” x 19” x 36” salvaged and altered suitcase, nylon canvas, spandex mesh, elastic rope, zipper, epoxy clay, insulation felt, 2018.

Figure 4: *Backpack*, 24” x 16” x 10” nylon canvas, EPDM rubber, epoxy clay, nylon webbing, elastic rope, zipper, insulation felt, 2018.

Figure 5: *Duffle Bag*, 24” x 24” x 20” nylon canvas, epoxy clay, nylon webbing, insulation felt, salvaged and altered suitcase, 2018.

Figure 6: *Nunchucks I*, 10” x 8” x 4” uranium glass, knurl head screws, brass bicycle chain, 2018.

Figure 7: *Nunchucks II*, 10” x 8” x 4” uranium glass, knurl head screws, brass bicycle chain, disposable razor, 2018.

Figure 8: *Utility Knife*, 8” x 1” x 1” spoon, nail clippers, tweezers, 2018.

Figure 9: *Caulk Gun*, 12” x 6” x 1.5” uranium glass, epoxy resin, caulk gun, 2018.
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