

Letter to the Reader

Over these six weeks, with feedback from my mentor and peers, I've learned how much a poem depends on concrete imagery and on the metaphors and devices that sharpen that imagery rather than decorate it. I've also learned that the explaining lines are usually the weakest ones, and that cutting them is harder than writing them, because they're where my own uncertainty hides. The biggest change in my writing has been learning to trust the image.

The poems in this portfolio circle a few things I kept returning to: family, memory, distance, and the kinds of love and loss that don't resolve but simply stay. I didn't set out to write about the same subjects four times, but the revisions taught me that my strongest material was the material I was most tempted to over-explain. When I let the details do the work, the poems said more than my commentary ever could.

Revision, I've found, is really about listening instead of fixing. Some of my changes were small, a cut line or a reordered stanza; others reshaped a whole poem once a peer or my mentor pointed to something I couldn't see on my own. A few times, the feedback led me to keep what I'd almost thrown away.

What I'll take from this program is the confidence to say less. I used to think restraint meant holding back, but now I think it's the opposite, that trusting the reader with an unexplained image is its own kind of generosity. The pages that follow show that shift: originals that still explain themselves, and revisions learning to stop.

Thank you for reading.

— Amy

Piece 1 Original Version

Mother's hand moves through the dark before mine does,
decides the air I'll wake into.

Between the pillow already wet and the pillow not yet dry—
there is no seam, only a permanent middle season
I have lived inside since before I can date it

Mother, is this love,

like the cotton wadding wrapped around the body and stuck to skin,
restraint and forbearance are ingrained
 in
 the
 marrow

A hand entering what is mine before I have finished deciding it is private,
a fan swinging its slow arc across a room already gone, the blood spilled, tears & screams. I am the
ungrateful animal.

At a height a child's hand could reach, a bowl
already down against the marble.

In this muggy summer, only the dampness
 warms me.

You tell me you want your ashes settled around me,
the dearest daughter you calls me in that same breath—
texts stiff as something folded too many times to lie flat again,

the love is only dense, drizzling, finding a net porous enough to
hold, softly,
the pull backward disguised as gentleness.

I crave this mild,
but wish to run out of this moist,
to go and touch
a cool breeze, a sky without clouds—

Pain, warmth, reply, struggle:
none of the
the right size for what this is,

one day the rain will stop, the sky will clear,
but the moisture

stays

Piece 1 Revised Version

In the returning-south days, the walls weep first.
Mother's hand moves through the dark before mine does,
decides the air I'll wake into.

Between the pillow already wet and the pillow not yet dry—
there is no seam, only a permanent middle season
I have lived inside since before I can date it.

The periphery of your skin reads my thermometers for me,
knuckle by knuckle till we share the one temperature you calibrated
without noticing I was burnt & choked.

like the cotton wadding wrapped around the body and stuck to skin,
restraint and forbearance are ingrained in the marrow.

At a height a child's hand could reach,
the blue porcelain & the white marble & the loud & buzzing fan & Mother's skin & Mother's blood.
I knelt, ten, wiping the blood out of the white, the floor
refusing to stay a floor.
The blood the marble would not drink, I did.

And still, who else has ever kept me this warm
in this muggy summer—

You tell me you want your ashes settled around me,
the dearest daughter you call me in that same breath.
How do I evict a love that chose its grave here?

The love is only dense, drizzling, finding a net
porous enough to hold it, softly, in this rainy season.
On the white wall the fungus comes up glistening
and shines.

The rice in the jar has begun to sweat. Mother,
we are the two halves of a window in this weather—
one of us always the cold side, one of us

always the side that clouds, and neither of us
can say which face the water chose, only that it
arrives
between us
and calls itself the same body.

I revised the poem by cutting the lines that explained rather than showed. Following the notes, I removed "Mother, is this love," the "melancholy that never dries" couplet, and "disguised as gentleness," trusting the images to carry their own meaning. I kept only one of the two rhetorical questions—"How do I evict a love that chose its grave here?"—so the mother's ashes stanza could stand as the poem's turn. I also changed "debugged" to "calibrated" to keep the register consistent, and trimmed "while I drowned" so the ending stays concrete. I preserved the typographic experiments you liked—the strikethrough blood, the wedged "in the marrow," and the stepped window ending—and added the epigraph so the opening reads as an unfolding of the proverb.

Tao might be the smartest man in Xuanhua, which is a rank
you can only hold by leaving. He sits in the corner café
with his favorite quantum mechanics textbook, spine uncracked
past the fourth chapter, beside a paper cup he does not drink,
a phone laid face-down, and the number eight hundred thousand—
the dollars that left him on one call he forgot to calculate.

He reads anyway. He believes he is fixing to be a scientist.
A fortune teller told him the misfortune would come after
twenty-three, and Tao, who does not believe in fortune tellers,
turned twenty-three and believed. He cannot go home. In Xuanhua
he is a genius; in New Jersey he is a drop of water and the ocean
is other men's names in journals. His apartment is one room,

one fan, the fan always running, the walls always sweating
as if the building itself were nervous. Mother called, asked him

to help carry the family's things to the new house, and Tao said
that is not my home. He says everything in English now,

even to the Chinese, even the words that live only in the other
tongue. His collections: liquor, arranged by nothing. Musicals

he has memorized and cannot sing. Mountains—he skis them,
climbs them with his hands, walks up them hunting the meaning

of his life, which he suspects sits at a higher elevation
than the one he was born at. His favorite country is America.

His favorite direction is away. He wants out of the family,
out of Beijing, out of China, out of Xuanhua, out of the body

that keeps being from there. That Thanksgiving was cold.
That Thanksgiving was ungrateful. Somewhere his sister

is ten thousand miles from him and he calls that the distance.
He is wrong. Here is the distance: Tao sits in the café.

I stay in the house. It is a five-minute walk.
I have never once made it.

Piece 3 Original Version

All day her hands measure the powder that will bloom and fade, bloom and fade,
while the same gray dust works into the creases of her knuckles, but will open red

above a square, the red she carries home in her skin. In the morning the voices climb
together and braid into one rope of sound, and for as long as the song lasts

no one's stomach is the only thing awake in them.

No blessing greater than the Party's kindness, no one nearer than the Chairman.

On every wall the posters, layer over layer, the paste still wet under the new ones,
so the Leader's face looks out from beneath the Leader's face, his cheeks the pink

of a health he hands down to them like grain, his eyes turned always toward a sun
that is rising just outside the frame. The women, row on row, sleeves pushed up,

their arms full of wheat they did not grow and will not eat, their faces lit from inside,
all of them looking the same direction, toward the morning the posters promise.

They pay her twelve mantou, still warm, then she lets them go, dries it, and sends them
North, to her mother, and her four sisters and brothers. What stays is the bag, which she

turns inside out, running her finger down the seam for the white dust the bread forgot, then hot
water over the crumbs, she calls it soup, and the calling makes it soup. The street is full of people

who have lain down and will not rise, their open hands like empty bowls turned up to the sky. Her
own hands are two such bowls. When will the morning come, the one they promised?

Chairman, my dearest, she says, tell me—you who are nearer to me than my own mother, where
have you put the morning? At home the wheat stood gold and tall above them, shining all night

like a field of small lamps, keeping watch over the people who had lain down in it and would not
rise. The grain went away from them, cart after cart, the way water goes out of a field and does

not come back. No. It is worth it. Surely it is worth it. Tomorrow the sky will clear. It was a natural
disaster, only that, only the weather, only the year being cruel—

it was nothing anyone did. A natural disaster.

Piece 3 Revised Version

My mentor's suggestion is that that the poem needed emotional movement, some reckoning in the speaker rather than a fixed faith held from start to finish. Now the woman believes the Chairman's promise all the way through, and it fractures only at the very end: she waits for the words "it is worth it" to warm her the way they used to, and they don't, then says the blessing quietly, "to no loudspeaker," and hears "how far that is." That gives the ending a readable arc instead of a static one. I also pushed the music image so it does more work ("one rope of sound, thick enough to haul a body up by"), made the ideology audible by having the loudspeaker speak the slogan and the woman repeat it back, and let the repeated images deepen instead of just echoing, the empty bowls return as her own hands, and the final "natural disaster" lands harder because she says it "the way she says soup," calling emptiness by a fuller name. I kept my original voice, line breaks, epigraph, and the mantou footnote intact.

Piece 4 Original Version

Father said 曙光 is my uncle, his name means the flush of dawn,
the pink that stains the sky's edge pink stains before the sun climbs high enough to burn it white.

I wonder who he is, this uncle I never saw, whose shadow never fell across the doorway
of the old house, who never sat at our table, never left a chair behind to miss.

Father said he was twenty-six, forever twenty-six. it's fixed, photograph left too long in sun until the
edges curl but the face won't change.

His name like wind in the house, sometimes leaking through fragmented sobs behind the
cracky door, heard it in the confusion during spring festival—

hello to the eldest, skip the middle, then it's my father—
A blindness who slipped between names.

When yearly subsidy arrive the first day of a new year, reward for a police killed,
how thin it can't carry tears,

the third-class merit medal breathes at the bottom of the
closet leaning against the wall.

The story has an age now, thirty years old, older than he ever got, the road folded him into the bus,
the bus folded him into the asphalt, the asphalt gave back ashes.

His fiancée standing somewhere in that crowd, and what remained, not a self, but gold, silver, cash,
letters the bride price traveling backward, her house to his.

They burned his wedding suit at his grave, and the wedding with it,
both becoming the same gray dust that settles on headstones and doesn't wash off.

I dream of my grandparents, their face still bright with the colors of being young,
turning to depth like ocean water and sinks into a hollow fills with salt.

My father rides his bicycle from the work unit toward a train station, wind mixing tears with grit until his face is a map of that day, and he's still riding it for thirty years.

And my grandparents carried him into their nineties, learning that a son's leaving isn't a storm that passes but a wetness that seeps into everything—

into the kitchen where his bowl was never set, into the darkest hours when sleep won't come, into ordinary days that crack open.

dampness that won't dry, and that small storms keep blowing through.

Piece 4 Revised Version

Father said 曙光 is my uncle, his name means the flush of dawn,
the pink that stains the sky's edge before the sun climbs high enough to burn it white.

I wonder who he is, this uncle I never saw,
whose shadow never fell across the doorway of the old house,
who never sat at our table, never left a chair behind to miss.

Father said he was twenty-six, forever twenty-six,
a photograph left too long in a drawer until the edges curl
but the face won't change.

His name moves like wind in the house.
Some spring festivals I hear it leak through the door—
my father's sobs, after the others have gone to bed,
the confusion of a house counting children it no longer has:
hello to the eldest, skip the middle, then my father,
a blindness that slips between names.

The road folded him into the bus,
the bus folded him into the asphalt, the asphalt gave back ashes.
He was twenty-six. The story is thirty now, older than he ever got.

His fiancée stood somewhere in that crowd.
Afterward the bride price traveled backward, her house to his—
they burned his wedding suit at his grave, and the wedding with it,
both becoming the same gray dust that settles on headstones and doesn't wash off.

My father rode his bicycle from the work unit toward the train station,
wind mixing tears with grit until his face was a map of that day,
and he is still riding it, thirty years on.

My grandparents carried him into their nineties,
learning that a son's leaving isn't a storm that passes

but a wetness that seeps into everything—
into the kitchen where his bowl was never set,
into the darkest hours when sleep won't come,
into ordinary days that crack open.

A dampness that won't dry, and small storms keep blowing through.

My mentor's main note was that the logistics is confusing. So I cut the "reward for a police killed," the "third-class merit medal," and the yearly subsidy entirely, since those threads created the timeline confusion and pulled away from the real center: the father's grief and the speaker's struggle to mourn someone they never knew. I clarified that the sobs behind the door are the father's (her question "who's sobs?"), and moved the uncle's death up so cause and effect read cleanly. I also cut the standalone "I dream of my grandparents... ocean water" stanza, whose sun/photograph imagery echoed earlier lines she'd flagged as repeated. Following her note that ending on the dampness line feels stronger, I kept that final image bare and removed the interpretive gloss around it. The humidity metaphor is now the poem's emotional through-line, landing at the end without explanation.