

Jenny Zhang

Hags

I'm editing a memoir for an eighty-six-year-old woman who once slapped her crotch and said, I'd rather have a couple of bad fucks than work a job I hate for five minutes. She dictates little bits of her life—growing up in a small village in Czechoslovakia and beating the village boys in literal pissing contests, her mother's self-absorption and how it saved her and her brother from the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau, falling in love with her English teacher in Switzerland only to find out he was already fucking all the underage girls, stowing away on a ship to America and watching the slops of vomit slide across the ship's deck, the time a distinguished scholar thirty years her senior invited her to sit on his lap during a dinner party attended by intellectuals, artists, and the wealthy who lurk and hover, and how she had worn a long, shimmering skirt that came down to her feet, and in the middle of a heated group conversation, she realized she was being fucked. She turned to look him in the eye but his gaze was elsewhere, focused on the men in the room who presided over the big questions of: What does it all mean?

What does it all mean?

In all my entanglements with men, she says to me, I have never been damaged. What would now be called abuse seemed, back then, to be trifling, insignificant. There was so much else to worry about.

When she can't remember if there was a bakery or a butcher shop kitty-corner from her family's estate, I suggest, Why don't you ask someone?

Immediately, her face sours. When you say things like that, I think that you just don't understand.

I'm sorry, I said. I shouldn't have said that.

I can't ask anyone, she says, because there is no one to ask.

Last week, her husband took a spill in the street and died the next morning. He was too frail to withstand the injuries, she writes me in an email where the subject line is simply "personal."

There was a time when my grandfather was still alive and my three aunties called my parents from Shanghai to tell us he was so frail that if we were to brush up against a table, every bone in his body would shatter into dust.

I don't want to be nothing when I die, I announced to my parents when I was five—four months into my new life in New York. A family friend who had seen me when I was a week old was my traveling companion on the flight from Shanghai to Anchorage to New York. I ran up and down the aisle of the plane giggling with tears in my eyes until I was so tired that I fell asleep in the middle of the aisle floor. A stewardess put a blanket over me and my companion carried me like I was a newborn, wrapped in an airplane blanket, back to my seat. In Anchorage, I was transfixed by a woman in a red suit who seemed to be in charge of something. At one point she said on the phone, Hong gong sai.

Hong gong sai, I said to my mother and father when I saw them at the airport for the first time in two and half years.

Where did you learn that, they asked me.

We lived in Rego Park my first year. I had dreams about my extended family, which raised me in Shanghai while my father was getting his PhD in Linguistics and delivering Chinese food to businessmen in the financial district. One night, his boss saw him reading the paper and said, Keep it up. The performance is thrilling.

My mother worked at Dunkin Donuts at night, glazing and frosting the pastries at three in the morning for the rush hour crowd at seven, and modeled during the day. On her way home from modeling one afternoon, a man cornered her at an intersection and promised her that he would make her fluent in English in six weeks flat. Are you interested, he said. In English lessons, he added, with me? They met a few times at the public library where he had reserved a private room for the two of them. I hope this doesn't make you uncomfortable, but I want you to feel free with me, he said, reaching for her hand.

I thought he was just an extremely kind and giving person, she told me years later. He thought I wasn't wearing my wedding ring on purpose but I just didn't have one. Then he got on one knee and said he had never met anyone like me and I ran away before he could finish and never saw him again.

As a child, I used to take off my shirt and press my baby nipples against our living room window that looked out onto the street. Don't, my father said. Don't run, he said, because you might fall. Don't breathe too hard because you might inhale

something bad. Don't stick your elbow out the car window because another car might come too close to us and slice it off.

How would that look, I wondered, the corner juncture where the upper and lower parts of my arm meet, suddenly lopped off? Would it reveal a tiny hinge? Was I wooden puppet all along? I thought Pinocchio was so annoying—such a victim, so delusional. I hated how he was encouraged not to lie and to be good so that he could be loved. Can't the angry be loved? Can't the cruel be loved? Can't the deranged be loved?

The good, I think in being good, is so useless. Just shit in a bush and get a pinecone to wipe the drippy excess. Just piss on your own leg and warm yourself. When I was little, I had such poor circulation and winter was always a ghastly, icy stretch. My parents couldn't afford the heating bills because back then my parents couldn't afford shit. When we went out, they would turn the heat down to fifty, so when we got back at the end of the night, the house would feel as cold, or sometimes, colder than it was outside. I would jump into bed with freezing toes and fingers and sometimes, my father would take my hands, place them together in prayer position, and squeeze them between his thighs to warm me, then when my hands were no longer ice, he would squeeze my toes in between his calves.

That's okay, Dad, I said after a mandatory assembly in school about inappropriate adult-child relations. I don't need your help.

I wanted so badly to be sufficient for the whole entire world. I wanted so badly to be everyone's entertainment. In the car, whenever there was a traffic jam, I would lie on my back and swing my legs up into the air.

What are you doing, my father would ask me.

It's a leg show for all the bored people behind us, I said. Clap for me. Everyone else is.

In my diary, I wrote, I'm so afraid someone is gonna give me a Grammy. What if a famous music producer walks past my house and hears me singing and becomes obsessed with me and makes me into a huge pop star and because of my music, millions of people decide that life IS worth it, and I am basically responsible for the continuation of humanity, and I win all these Grammys and even though my real passion is writing poetry, I will have to keep singing . . . for humanity? How could I turn my back to mankind like that?

Before I had any notion of what saintliness consisted of, I thought I was saint.

I am saint, I said to my friend Lata in fifth grade when I let her copy my math homework.

Oh, you're no saint, she said, and I can see your nipples.

I can't wear this shirt anymore, I said to my mom when I got home.

Don't be ridiculous, she said.

During the 1996 Olympics, I got in the habit of taking cucumbers from the fridge and laying them out on the couch. Oh this is so big and so good, I moaned. When I was done, I would rinse them off and put them back where I found them and then turn on the television and watch Amy Chow, the one Asian girl on the American gymnastics team—the Magnificent Seven—kill it on the uneven bars. She was the first Asian American to win an Olympic medal in her sport. Did they mention her precision? Did they mention her discipline? Did they know she meant something to certain girls in 1996? An article in *Asian Week* reported on her winning the silver in the uneven bars, “Although she’s not the star of the US women’s gymnastics team, Amy Chow has been one of its most productive members.” She had to share her silver medal with Bi Wen Jing from China. When I was an undergrad at Stanford, there was a girl named Jennie Kim who worked for the school newspaper. Sometimes people would come up to me and talk to me about the articles she had written.

That one on getting a Brazilian was hilarious, some guy said, high-fiving me.

I think you think I’m that other Asian girl, I said to him.

The other is already the other. At a reading I hosted in Bushwick last year, this couple went up to the only other Asian girl in the bar and told her that her charisma was electrifying. She tells me this outside and we laugh hard at it, slapping our knees in the dark. I don’t mind sharing the compliment, I said to her. One year, my mom worked as a secretary and fit model

at an apparel company, and she would often come home in tears because she had mistakenly called her boss by an underling's name.

What happened, I asked her.

You know how it is, my father said, they all look the same. It's not your mom's fault. There's just no telling them apart. Same high nose and deep-set eyes.

I know, I said.

You know everything, my mother used to say to me. You can say everything exactly as it is. You always say, I know I know I know, but you must DO. Why don't you ever DO?

Isn't knowing enough, I cried. Most people don't even know, I said, weeping in the car. At least I know. Don't ask me to do more than know. No one can promise more than to know.

You must do, she said. I don't care if you know. What you know is nothing if you can't do.

The hag grandmother in Isaac Babel's story tells the little boy stand-in for Babel, "You must know everything!" and with that, he is ushered into the world of adults. Their nasty rows and mind games and layers and layers of manipulation. Oskar in *The Tin Drum* narrates the story of how he came to be—it all started with his grandfather running from the police, who had been pursuing him for setting fire to a bunch of sawmills. He comes across Oskar's grandmother in the field. She takes pity on him and lifts up her layers and layers and layers of skirt. He

runs into her skirt and hides in there when the police come and ask her if she saw a man running. As she is lying to the police, he starts fucking her underneath her layers of skirt. They conceive Oskar's father, and life begins. The whole thing is treated as a trifle. Like an insignificant matter. The real damage is what happens to Oskar when he is three and witnesses the monstrosities of the adults around him (petty bickering, infidelity, deception, etc.) and decides to stop growing. He's our hero! The years pass, but his body remains that of a three-year-old. When he goes to a circus, the leader of a troupe of performing dwarfs invites Oskar to join them.

"Oskar, he says, "you would have a time with us."

But Oskar refuses at first. His reason: "In truth, I prefer to be a member of the audience and let my little art flower in secret." We root for him. So damaged and so lovable.

I know I am not the first woman to ask this, but how can I be both damaged and heroic? Both damaged and lovable? How do I become the protagonist of a story?

Dead white guys and not-dead not-white not guys hate it when you dismiss revered works of art and literature by saying, Ugggggggggh. I hate this.

And give no reasons why at all.

If I live to a hundred, do I really have to spend eighty-five or more of those years explaining why I don't like this?

My brother, after seeing *Home Alone 3*, the one without Macaulay Culkin or Joe Pesci or Daniel Stern, learns the word *winky* and he finds it so delicious, so tantalizing that he gets me to help him tape twenty sheets of printer paper together and he draws one loooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooong winky that extends so long we have to roll it up like a scroll, and later, we unravel it on the carpeted steps of our house like a second carpet and I jump up and down every step of that cock carpet and spit on it and fart on it for days and days and days until it is completely damaged.

I used to hold in my farts in public until I could find a large white man to covertly let them out next to. They'll think it's me, my boyfriend used to say. Well good, I said. Would it have been too on the nose, too victim-y, for me to have pointed out back then, or what about now, that I am blamed all the time? My theory is weak. I am either stupid or lazy or both. I'm disinterested in sound reasoning. Isn't sound reasoning partly why American and European scientists and leaders told the Hmong in Vietnam and Laos, who watched their family members die and fall in from the yellow rain that was dropped on them, that they were just "making it up"? That their firsthand accounts of what they saw, what they felt, what they experienced and lived through were not as convincing as the testimony of white men who were never there, who never watched loved ones die, who never knew what it was like for their lived experiences to be not enough, to not hold up against science, to be constantly under suspicion, subject to review. In

an interview for *Clash* magazine, M.I.A. said, “Sometimes I repeat my own story again and again because it’s interesting to see how many times it gets edited, and how much the right to tell your story doesn’t exist. People reckon that I need a political degree to go, ‘My school got bombed and I remember it ‘cause I was ten years old’ . . . I think removing individual voices and not letting Tamil people just go ‘This happened to me’ is really dangerous.”

“Point of inquiry: At what point must a female senator raise her voice or her hand to be heard over her male colleagues in the room?”¹

The Republicans said they were going to send 84,601 blank sheets of paper over to Senator Wendy Davis’s office, each one symbolizing an abortion that was performed in 2011.² Because an unborn baby is like a blank sheet of paper? Because these fetuses could have been written on eventually if only they were allowed to be born? Could we have printed on them? Crumpled them up? Origami’d them? Wiped with them? Is there a way to calculate via blank sheets of paper how many of us wish we were never born? My mother had a miscarriage before me and she tells me all the time how she is so happy so she did because if she had not, she would never have had me. Could I have

¹ Texas State Senator Leticia Van de Putte on the Texas Senate floor as Republicans attempted to break Senator Wendy Davis’s 11-hour filibuster of an anti-abortion bill, June 25, 2013.

² <http://www.texastribune.org/2013/06/26/dems-approach-abortion-victory-special-session-wan/>

gone to another family, I ask her? Would “I” still have ended up in this world, a different “I” from the “I” I am now? No one knows, she answers. There’s no way to know. Maybe you would have been stuck in nonexistence. Maybe everyone only gets one chance to exist, and if you miss it, then you miss it.

After Senator Davis was given a violation when a colleague helped her put on a back brace, Senator Rodney Ellis, a Democrat from Houston, recalled a story of members of both parties gathering around a male senator during a filibuster so he could empty the “astronaut bag” he had put on so he could relieve himself.³

Remember that NASA astronaut, Lisa Nowak, who drove nine hundred miles in astronaut diapers because she was hell bent on getting revenge on her husband’s mistress? She drove the nine hundred miles from Orlando to Houston, packing latex gloves, a black wig, a BB pistol and ammunition, pepper spray, a hooded tan trench coat, a 2-pound drilling hammer, black gloves, rubber tubing, plastic garbage bags, approximately \$585 (USD) in cash, her computer, an 8-inch (20 cm) Gerber folding knife, and several other items.⁴ All my friends were obsessed with the story. Dude, she fucking wore ADULT DIAPERS so she could drive straight through without having to stop to shit or piss. Was it baller or was it batshit crazy? Can I talk about someone being great without using male genitalia to show

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/nasa-astronaut-lisa-nowak-escapes-jail-plea-deal-violent-love-triangle-case-article-1.414775>

that I'm so down and like so okay with everything? Such glee in the eyes and voices of those who think they have found an irrefutable example of a woman acting like a crazy-ass bitch. Jay Leno joked on his show that evening, "We will not be stopping for commercials tonight . . . because I am wearing a diaper."⁵

I loved her, even though I didn't know anything about her pain.

When you're so angry you cease to exist.

When asked if she was equipped with a catheter, Senator Davis responded, "I've taken care of it, that's all you need to know."⁶

As a child, I would go days and days without speaking, and then suddenly I would scream until everyone was looking at me. The banshees who raised me without their physical presence. The aswang, the Filipino vampire who sucks the blood of unborn infants and flies around legless at night looking for pregnant women and stray children. The kumiho in Korean, the hulijing in Chinese, the kitsune in Japanese, a shape-shifting, nine-tailed fox who can transform herself into a beautiful young maiden to seduce boys so that she may eat their livers or sometimes their hearts. The Korean urban legend from the seventies of the red mask, the scorned ghost with beautiful eyes who wears a blood-soaked surgical mask covering her mouth. When she approaches you, she asks, Am

⁵ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/obituaries/la-me-spacediapers9feb9,0,362582.story>

⁶ <http://www.texastribune.org/2013/06/26/dems-approach-abortion-victory-special-session-wan/>

I pretty? If you say yes, she'll kill you, and if you say no, she'll take off her mask and show you her Glasgow smile, revealing her botched cosmetic surgery. She then asks again, Am I pretty? If you say yes, she'll cut up your face; if you say no, she'll follow you home and cut up your face anyway. If you tell her, You look normal, then she wanders away, confused. The kwishin, the ghost with long black hair that hangs over her pale face, dressed in white burial robes, wandering the earth after having suffered an unjust death that prevents her from passing over to the afterlife until she has exacted revenge on her tormentors. The minghung, the Chinese practice of "spirit marriage," a wedding ceremony performed primarily for hags so that they may have a husband in the afterlife and so they are not denied a tablet at the ancestral altar of their natal homes. When I was twenty-one and fresh out of college, I found a job as a union organizer for health care workers in San Francisco. A month into it, my supervisor assigned me to eight days of strike duty. I used to wake up at four in the morning and drive down to the California Pacific Medical Center in Duboce Triangle, and I would eat Spam and eggs and rice with the Filipina nurses and nursing assistants who had agreed to an open-ended strike without pay. They told me about this demon woman penis-snatcher who went around at night looking for penises to steal, and how men would try to fool her by sleeping with a miniature replica of a penis by their pillow.

These hags, these great beauties, these mermaids who taunt, who feast, who slash, who steal, these succubae who cannot

rest, my mothers, my sisters, my unborn friends, my keepers,
my guardians.

The fifteen-minute banshee scream that filibustered SB5 into a
protracted death.⁷

the female kicking and screaming

the female hysteric

you're hysterical

the roar at sporting events

the screams in the street

the tears and cries of sports fans when their team wins

when their team loses

Beliebers: Why do you cry in his concerts and obsess over him?

painting themselves the colors of their heroes

all of that makeup

all of that exposed skin

aren't you just asking for it

what other ways are there to be a fan

to be appreciative of the form

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/26/wendy-davis-abortion-filibuster-chaos>

can't I apologize when I knock someone over
someone get me a vuvuzela
so I can hold it like a baby
as tenderly as I possibly can
you don't have the ovaries
and some of us don't
or wish we didn't

I think I am wild, but I can't signal it by painting something
brilliant and memorable on my stomach.

At Slutwalk I show up in regular clothes, and I feel as if I have
betrayed all the heroic sluts whose existence permitted mine to
be even more magnificent than I thought possible.

Lil Wayne sounding so bored when he says, "Tongue kiss her
other tongue."

The first poets I met when I went to graduate school for fiction
claimed they were prophets, mystics, deranged seers, opium
takers, orchestrators of orgies, the messengers and progeny
of Bacchus, Lupercalian ogres, disgraced deities, bratty bards,
and drunken augurs. I said I was a materialist. Occasional
sensualist, because my poet boyfriend used that word and I
wanted to be his twin more than I wanted to be his lover. I
was unable to look past what was right there. Unable to hear
anything except what was audible. Unable to imagine touching

anything that did not already have a name, a defined form. I repeated the same ideas in every poem. I had only one thing to say. I was so terrified of saying it because once I said it, would I still have anything left to say? To have so little to say. To insist on speaking. To create a silence every time we speak. To know all this and do it anyway. This is as close as I can get to saying what I mean.

My mother said my poems were “touchable.”

I want to fart imperialism into oblivion. I said, I want to fart imperialism into oblivion! If I fart next a hulking white man and then walk away, have I done anything important?

Is this person in middle school

Is this supposed to be shocking

Her provocations are not in service of anything

YAWN

NEXT

Her tits can't rap

I'd rape her just to get her to stop talking

Still, my other tongue wants to speak. My other tongue wants to be kissed. My other tongue speaks for me. My other tongue cuts others off. My other tongue feels the entitlement that some people don't even know they have. My other tongue knows such tenderness. Such mortality and cowardice and neglect. I mean

to correct my mother when she calls me to tell me the “smoking turkey” she ordered from the internet for Thanksgiving is on its way. But I leave it. I don’t want to fix it. I don’t even want to record it. But sometimes, I do. Sometimes, I want to act out my urge to rescue it. To be a hero. To be praised. Our compulsions are as heroic as our excesses. Our excesses as heroic as our restraint. Our forgetfulness as necessary as our total attempt to say something.

When you say things like that, it makes me think you just don’t understand, I have said before, thinking that would put an end to it. Only later realizing what effort it is to begin at all.

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