

FERMENTED RAINBOWS: ILLUMINATING THE ROAD BEHIND ME

泥地漬虹： 女同志 X 務農 X 成家

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A young woman abandons the city and its oppressive conventions in favor of the rigors of farm living. The indefatigable Chen Yiju interweaves stories about the joy of pickling vegetables into this invigorating tale of redefining herself as a woman, a daughter, and a caretaker of people and plants.

Despite their relatively progressive politics, Taiwanese cities can feel like suffocating spaces to certain kinds of people. Chen Yiju knew from a young age that she didn't fit the established profile of a young urban woman; her body didn't develop like one, she didn't like to dress like one, and her lesbian identity seemed to pose an obstacle to building a family. Even after her parents chose to recognize and respect her sexual identity, there were certain barriers they just couldn't cross together.

Hands-on agricultural labor afforded Chen the freedom and responsibility over many kinds of life that she wanted. To grow into herself there was to become tanned, muscular, and imbued with the smells of the field – characteristics no traditional urban woman could abide. There on the farm, surrounded by the plants she cared for, Chen found space to work through the opportunities – and the frustrations – that befell her. One of the ways in which she loves to express her care and knowledge is through pickling.

As anyone who has been to Asia knows, pickling isn't just for cucumbers! It's an ancient method of cooking food without fire that imbues the careful



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attention of the pickler into every unique food, be it a tuber, or a leafy green, a fruit, or even a flower. The transformed food comes out of its jar bearing the distinct flavor of its individual creator.

For Chen Yiju, Taiwan's answer to Annie Dillard, pickling food is more than just a hobby – it's a metaphor for genuine living, as the sugars and acids of our environment change us, make us more interesting, more resilient, and more than a little funky.

Chen Yiju 陳怡如

Born in Hsinchu and now living in Yilan, Chen Yiju is a farmer and master pickler.

FERMENTED RAINBOWS: ILLUMINATING THE ROAD BEHIND ME

By Chen Yiju

Translated by Mary King Bradley

Preface: A Crock of Fermented Cares

Two years ago, I interviewed the women farmers and pickle makers around me for *Pickling New Stories into Life*, in which I described these women's feelings about pickling. In the book's preface, "Pickling and Women," I talked about women's innate talent for creating new life, a talent much like a crop's seeds: the seeds generate the crop's flavor, which in turn decides the taste of the pickles. Long ago, women bore the responsibility for the harvest. Today, women still possess the secret of plants, using vegetable matter to attract the bacteria that cause fermentation. Women's lives are bound up in other people, family, society. They mull things over at great length, collecting their cares in crock after crock of pickles.

My own pickling stories consist of various incidents and coincidences having to do with women and pickling. They are also about being different from everyone else. Growing out of my identity as a lesbian, the stories are about my body and my emotions, about farming, about my family of origin, and about LGBT family building. They include many dark and bitter memories.

People always write about food as something pleasant, about how hard farmers need to work. As I interviewed people and worked on my previous book, I readily accepted others' points of view, unable to reveal the dark aspects of my own relationship with food. Yet those dark memories always came to life as I made pickles according to the solar terms of the Chinese lunar calendar. All it took was a whiff of the pickles' scent, a glimpse of their color, the feel of them on my skin, their flavor on my tongue to make my whole world come crashing down. It was like I had spent an entire summer trying to get rid of ineradicable barnyard grass.

I read others' deep dives into farming worries, seeking a thread of comfort. At the core of those stories was marriage and establishing a family. They described their worries about farming, about family, about personal matters in the fields, at home, and even within their extended families. These stories affected me. But they followed the blueprint for a heterosexual family and never awoke any sense of recognition in my innermost self. Nowadays, we can go online and see many different types of families. We aren't limited to printed books. All the same, an unmarried, lesbian farmer is the modern-day woman's version of self-sufficiency and self-empowerment, while a lesbian couple farming together is two people working their fingers to the bone, an image of joyous harmony that is likewise no consolation for me.

A dozen years or more ago, I read the first picture book to feature a family with lesbian parents, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, written by a woman who grew up in a North American Jewish family. The families in the picture books the author encountered during childhood gave her the feeling of “seen one, seen them all”. She looked for but never found a single book in which she recognized her own Jewish family. So, she wrote her own story about a different kind of family.

Enthusiasm bubbled up inside me. I wanted to write *my* story about pickling. I’ve never been all that good at expressing myself; usually, I just keep my thoughts to myself around others. Writing, on the other hand, gives me a sense of security and puts me at ease. While writing this book, however, my words became heavy stones, stirring up ripples in a sea of memory that splashed over me and left me drenched.

I remembered my kindergarten years and the shy boy who was afraid to go down the slide. I came up with every possible way to make him take the plunge, but every time I got to the top of the slide, I realized he was no longer where I’d left him. I used to run back and forth looking for him and, having failed to find him, would return to the classroom nursing my resentment only to see him sitting there in his seat. But maybe the person who was too afraid to go down the slide and later found a way down on her own, maybe that was me, trapped by my inner gloom?

Different life stages brought their own darkneses that I hid and ignored, one by one: my first crush on a girl, which created anxiety and dismay; my struggles with a menstrual cycle that left me exhausted and my inability to tame an uncooperative body; leaving the city to work on a village farm but finding it was the same old story of feeling out of place in the race called life. I made pickles, memory rubbing in the salt, pain’s dirty water seeping out and softening the bedrock of my resolve while I waited for flavor to be absorbed, fermentation to end. At last, I put a pickle in my mouth and tasted its deliciousness. I finally realized that the potency of gloom and happiness had intensified the pickle’s meaning, the two emotions coexisting by necessity, just like light and shadow. I practiced confronting my darkneses, but not to justify myself. Truth is a good thing. Mistakes are perfectly fine. They are the light and shadow that fall across the earth as I journey through life. This book looks as it does because I hope to illuminate others with brightness and provide the shade that brings cooler air and rest.

I have intertwined the rhythm of lunar agricultural seasons spent on the Lanyang Plain with travel in my spiritual homeland of Mongolia and scattered wild mushrooms from a woodland mountain meadow throughout these pages. Drawing on sensory observations made while pickling, I have used my pen to unravel my achievements as a lesbian, to examine and ponder my body, my emotions, the LGBTQ+ movement, farming, and family – both my family of origin and the family I have made with my female partner. It all goes into the crock to ferment and bring out life’s pickled flavor.

Thank you to all those encountered in my life of pickling.

This book is dedicated to all of us, past and present, who become more aromatic with age.

1. Earth

1.1 My Moody, Overemotional Body

Sown in spring, roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) blooms and fruits in autumn.
Profoundly wild by nature, it adapts to any soil, has a tall, clumping growth habit,
and is a prolific spreader that bears its fruit in clusters.
During those years, at that time,
my body bloomed like that season's roselle flowers,
youth cultivating a delicate, full-bodied appearance and form.

Recently, I not only realized that I would not have kids, but that my body does not have limitless flexibility and energy. As a result, I had many dreams about pregnant lesbian friends, as if to reinforce the realization that I would never have that experience. Eight years ago, however, things were very different. At the age of twenty-eight, something triggered my biological clock, its ticking suddenly loud and clear. It ticked for four years, reminding me that *now* was the time to have a child while I still had the strength for it. I in fact very much wanted to have a baby during that period and would often fantasize about taking him with me to LGBTQ+ demonstrations.

I knew quite a few lesbians who wanted to have kids, and we didn't lack ways to do it: buying or obtaining sperm from someone and in vitro fertilization, whether done illegally in Taiwan or legally abroad, were certainly possibilities. But like me, what was missing for these women was the resolution, opportunity, and money to make it happen. As for doing it naturally, only sex with a man could make that possible. Besides that, none of my partners wanted kids. Of course, that too was because I lacked the necessary "resolve" to make having kids a condition for choosing a life partner. Ultimately, though, the sum of money required was enough to outweigh all other factors. As a member of the working poor, just the thought of spending money on sperm and IVF was more than I could handle. In short, that was when I gave up on having a child.

Although I didn't physically become a mother, I nonetheless manifested plenty of maternal strength, mellow and substantial, right after sowing a field. This, however, didn't save me from my mother's scorn. As soon as I began doing agricultural working holidays, she urged me to protect myself from the sun. I wore a conical paddy hat covered in flowered fabric, covered my nose and mouth, wore long sleeves and pants, smeared myself with sunscreen. My mother even laid in a supply of hats and arm covers for me, her maternal love on full display. Initially, I was obedient, but after a few years I abandoned all these sun protection measures. Afterwards, whenever I returned home, my mother would shake her head when she saw my tanned face, then slap my sturdy arms and thighs and jeer at me for being a big strong ox. My older sister, who worked as a counter girl in a department store, had kept her slim figure and still looked remarkably girlish despite having given birth to two kids. I, in contrast, looked far more like a mother.

In my mother's eyes, my body – insufficiently slender, insufficiently fair-skinned – gave others the impression of a girl who deviated from the norms.

When I was little, my aunt used to bring her daughters to our house. She always had me stand with my cousins so that she could compare our heights and weights. During elementary school I was thin like my dad, with bird-leg calves and dark skin, and much lankier than my cousins. My mother was pleased with my height; my aunt was pleased with the color of my cousins' skin. Convinced of our superior merits, they would smile at us. Come middle school, however, it was as if my cousins had drunk a magic potion. Their breasts grew round and full, and their bodies shot up seemingly overnight. Add in their fair skin, and they had become beautiful young women. We were made to stand together again, the comparisons instantly underway. It was then that my mother began to brag about my academic achievements. During middle school, especially, I liked studying. The night before a test, I always carefully arranged my alarm clock on my stomach when I lay down to sleep so I could wake up early the next morning to study some more. My mother, smiling and full of pride, shared this with others as if it were a good joke.

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My mother no longer held out any hope for my body. While preparing for the high school entrance exam, I ate more and moved less, and gained a lot of weight through my backside as a result. This situation lasted until the summer break before I entered a girls' school, when I forced myself to be more disciplined. Thanks to my self-control, I was finally "skinny" again, just like my dad. But once I left behind the high-pressure environment of secondary school for the carefree life of a first-year university student, my weight shot back up. My parents once again urged me to lose the weight, so I went for an occasional jog at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial and also walked regularly from section 1 to section 7 of Zhongshan North Road. With breakups added into the mix, it wasn't long before I was skinny again. To sum up this period, I would gain weight, my mother would scold, and my weight would go down again. These weight fluctuations continued until I began farming and the immense sway my mother held over me lessened. Maybe my heart had toughened enough to no longer be so easily worn down by her disgust; or maybe after I moved to the farm and my mountain glen home, she realized how much strength that undertaking required and showed a bit more empathy.

The day-in, day-out physical labor of farming had an impact on my appearance. The sun beaded my face with moisture, weeding hardened my arms, planting seedlings strengthened my pelvis, and walking in the fields thickened the soles of my feet. Day by day, I shed the body I had in school, the body I had as an office worker, the body I had while dating my city girlfriend. My body knew better than I did what it wanted to be. It was my mind and heart that couldn't get to the place my physical self already was – the idea that my body was gross and unfeminine was always there, as were my feelings of anger and frustration with it. Like my mother, I felt disgusted by my body and criticized it. I doggedly stuffed work-hardened muscles into my old clothes, which I found were becoming increasingly tight across my arms, chest, and hips.

It definitely took time for me to accept this farm-hardened version of myself, and then my spirit settled into its new “space”, my physical and mental selves merging to become a whole. I thought I could hear my body saying, “I told you. You didn’t listen,” while it sighed and shook its head at my mind and heart.

“When did you say something?” my mind and heart shouted at my body, unconvinced.

“It was in the roselle patch!”

“That was years ago! Who could remember what happened back then?” was my mind’s angry reply.

“Why don’t you tell me exactly when you said something?” said my heart, in a gentle, conciliatory tone.

Almost a decade before, I had started planting flowers and plants in pots on the balcony outside my room. On one occasion, I stuck a withered Chinese fringe tree in a corner of the balcony and didn’t water it again, but the next spring, it put out leaves anyway. I was astonished. How was it possible? Sprinkled by rain, its soil had remained moist, and despite no one paying it any mind, it had retained enough hope to grow. Around that same time, I was thinking about pursuing a career in ecology or agriculture. A year later, I got my wish. Regardless of where I worked, I was a novice at everything, whether it was planning, leadership, organization, or cultivating the fields. After one wholly unremarkable meeting, we split up into groups and carpooled to a nearby farm. The farm was in a suburb where a science park was scheduled to go up on expropriated land. The second rice crop had just been harvested and the rice was hanging upside down to dry on bamboo poles in the rice paddies. Roselle grew along the paddy’s edge. My colleagues called out that we should go pick the flowers.

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I walked among the wild roselle plants, attracted by their delicate, wine-red flowers shaped like small bells. The leaves of the wild roselle were huge; to trace the flowers’ fragrance to its source, I had to lift aside their layers, which hid the blossoms. On one leaf, I encountered a pair of red soapberry bugs that were mating; they faced away from each other, hindquarters joined. Bright autumn light fell seductively over my surroundings, turning them a hallowed gold. Towards evening, I picked some of the abundant blooms, deseeded them, blanched them in hot water, and mixed them with a bit of salt, some sugar, and lemon juice. My hands were immediately impregnated with pink juice as I massaged the flowers with my fingers.

Sown in spring, roselle blooms and fruits in autumn. Profoundly wild by nature, it adapts to any soil, has a tall, clumping growth habit, and is a prolific spreader that bears its fruit in clusters. In those years, at that time, my body bloomed like that season’s roselle flowers, youth cultivating a delicate, full-bodied appearance and form.

Often, unpicked roselle blossoms will hang concealed amongst the plant’s luxuriant foliage and gradually wither.

My city girlfriend once told me that her roommate liked her so much that she had removed every last stitch of clothing and, standing naked in front of her, asked her to make love while wearing only her tears. I could picture that sort of immense, heart wrenching desire. There was the time I had greedily consumed too many candied roselle flowers, tart to the point of bringing tears to my squinted eyes. There was the time my city girlfriend had chosen to physically distance herself from me, and my body grew weary of waiting for her....

My body: unadmired in love's domain; unconforming to maternal standards – these were the tiniest of shadows. They had no impact on my daily life and flared only occasionally, an intermittent pain that was possible to endure. Gradually, I even grew accustomed to this pain, which over time became my comrade-in-arms. This, then, was my body.

Becoming a unified front in the war we waged was the first step for my body and me. I found a solution in autumn's red persimmons. I like soft, ripe, red persimmons with rounded flesh that pulls the skins taut, as if the slightest breath might split them open. Such a thin and fragile peel lacks all trace of astringency. I would bite through the skin, filling my mouth with the soft, delicate pulp. Fruit eaten down to the firm, slippery seeds, I rolled them on my tongue, conscious of their springy tactility.

When I was very young and no one was looking, I used to put my hand in my crotch. Just having it there was soothing. Scratching an itch likewise provided a sense of utter relaxation and comfort. Later, I learned from our dog and cat. They liked to lie on their backs, completely at ease, hind legs splayed wide. If I then stroked their bellies and massaged their hindquarters, they were overjoyed, as if they were on the receiving end of the most perfect love in the whole world, their trust and infatuation total. The easy comfort I found in my body came from animal instincts. I became increasingly aware of my animal self, still wild beneath a docile exterior.

My mother did not approve of children having pets. One weekend when I was in primary school, my father took my older sister and me to the flower market where we bought a fluffy Formosan mountain dog pup. I was practically walking on air that afternoon. In addition to asking my sister, I searched out and consulted a classmate who had a dog to find out what puppies ate, how to set up a dog crate, bathe the puppy, and de-flea it. My mother returned home after work and flew into a rage the moment she saw the dog because she didn't think I was responsible enough to look after it. She didn't doubt for one minute that she'd be left picking up the slack. Unfortunately, that night the puppy caught its foot in a chink in the cage, and its piteous crying went on and on. Then it drank some milk and got diarrhea. I had no clue what to do, which just served as proof for everything my mother had said. Early the next morning, she packed up the dog and took it back to the vendor at the flower market, my sister and me in tow, even though we couldn't get our money back. I cried all the way there and home.

My mother's biggest concession to me, whose maternal instincts were particularly geared towards caring for animals, might have been allowing me to keep a dainty budgerigar, even though just the animal I proved to be distressed her. When I was in high school, I once terrified her by skipping class with a girlfriend. The school drillmaster learned from my class head and class discipline monitor that I and a certain classmate from another class had unexcused absences.

This other student and I had always been on good terms, and the drillmaster decided we were skipping class together. My mother was called and told to come to the school, where she was asked why I wasn't in class.

That evening, I somewhat uneasily let myself into the house at the usual time after school. It had never occurred to me that skipping class would trigger such consequences; I thought it was a simple matter of being recorded as "truant" in the class register. I hadn't realized my mother would be confronted with the drillmaster's threats, or that my classmate and I might have to transfer to another school. I imagine my mother worried sick as she hung up the telephone and left the house, her hair in disarray from housework with no time to comb it. I imagine her snatching up her cheap, synthetic-fiber coat and draping its detested, unsightly red like the color of a child's toy over her shoulders. What impression did my mother make on my classmates that day, with a furrowed brow that made her look older than she really was?

"They might be homosexuals," my girlfriend's father said to my mother over the phone.

My mother had never dreamed the day would come when someone would say this to her about her daughter. She was like me when I'm angry at my dog for chewing on slippers, towels, work gloves – unsure what to do, unsure what her ignorant child might be thinking, not knowing what's wrong with her. In those days, my mother certainly didn't understand why this once docile animal had started acting out.

"Are you a homosexual?" my mother asked me gravely.

I shook my head.

The Roselle Patch

I started getting my monthly period. I would toss and turn during the night, staining my bed sheets, or maybe leave a few drops of blood on the toilet seat. My mother abhorred filth, and she held me in contempt for being even more like an animal, in this case one that didn't have the sense to bury its own excrement. Classes, exams, rules, and human interactions during that period had turned me into a caged beast. I could turn around inside my cage, but my period was the only way out in that it allowed me to ask for leave from school and go home early. On one occasion I had such intense cramps that a sea of black overwhelmed me, and I sat on the floor, crying. My mother couldn't help her incredulous exclamation: "Is it really as painful as all that!"

Later, farm work and other things pushed my weight to an all-time high. My menstrual cramps and my problems with cold hands and feet in winter disappeared completely. At my physical, my chart had a note written in the space next to my weight. The note indicated I was at the maximum permissible BMI; any heavier and I would be obese. I wasn't the least bit concerned, however. I paid attention to my food sources and ate a healthy diet. Plus, my period and cold weather no longer left me "fragile and in need of protection," as my girlfriend had once described me. My body that "failed to meet the norms" had found quiet, comfortable shelter.

Ten years after the roselle patch, I was living in the northeastern part of Taiwan near the Pacific Ocean, where I had established a small vegetable garden in a mountain hollow. Before that, I'd had five years of experience in the rice paddies and spent my first working holiday cultivating someone else's land. My spade bit into the topsoil's dense weed cover, into earth left untouched for two years. More and more dark-black soil became visible as I dug. I cut through the first, pale layer of topsoil, then I dug deeper, turning over spadefuls of loose, black earth. It was late autumn, but not one cloud floated in the brilliant blue sky, and there was no wind. The simple physical labor dampened my shirt with sweat. When I remember how hard I worked in my rice paddies and vegetable garden, my heart thumps faster. The impact of the spade jarred loose tears and the sweat beading my brow. Both tears and sweat fell onto the soil and quickly evaporated.

Once the black soil was entirely exposed to the sun's rays, I covered it with cogon grass and banana leaves.

At night, I aimlessly struck a metal singing bowl and was soothed by its harmonious chimes. I've heard that the principle behind the singing bowl is to heal and comfort by vibrating the water that makes up 70% of our bodies and that the resonance induces an awareness of our physical selves. I'm not sure I really understand how it works, but with each chime of the bowl, I imagined a moment when the water my body held would reach a threshold and overflow, spilling across the ground I stood on and deepening the connection between person and soil. That day, I understood only sweat and tears. Before long, I would realize that blood and effluent have the same qualities.

For me, "Don't fertilize another's field" is a familiar saying that evokes a very clear mental image. But I never had any desire to experience that image in real life. During my first try at being a working holiday farmer, I heard a colleague say he wanted to use his own feces to fertilize the vegetables after he watered them with urine. I was shocked, completely unable to imagine putting this into practice, and my colleague didn't take it any further than what he'd said. Instead, it was I who, as a natural matter of course, began to water my vegetable garden and orchard with compost from the bio-toilet after I settled in my northeastern mountain hollow. I always lit a fire and boiled a large pan of water first, though, so that afterwards I could wash off the stench. Rituals like these transformed my body over the next seven years, turning me from a working holiday farmer into a mountain-dwelling farm woman.

My mountain home didn't have any mirrors, so I saw no evidence of my farm woman's body. It was only after I returned to the city that I got a good look at myself, my reflection sharp and clear in the light of an incandescent bulb. I had the sense of looking at a stranger's body, one I wanted to make love to. I couldn't help remembering a day during a month-long trip to Europe while I was still quite young. In the bathroom of a youth hostel at the foot of the Alps, I could look at myself in a full-length mirror. Walking more than ten hours a day had revealed my true, lean form. Filled with admiration for my own body, my thoughts had naturally turned to sex.

That body no longer exists, but the thoughts I had then haven't changed. I rejoice for myself, happy that the marks left by my unwanted and unaccepted body have not lessened my

nostalgia for that version of me. Nostalgia lies opposite to longing, like opposing leaves. It represents my eagerness to live and bring things into being.

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In my mountain hollow I put in a vegetable garden and planted roselle. Despite being pummeled by wind and heavy rain that split the sturdy stems and bent them to the ground, the roselle plants grew. They produced flowers, their crinkled petals tinged pale pink and darkening to a deep red at the flower's eye.

After harvesting the flowers, I removed the calyces and petals and mixed them with sugar. I blanched the seeds in a small amount of boiling water to make a viscous white liquid and allowed it to cool. After the sugar mixed with the roselle petals dissolved, I pulsed them in a blender, then placed them in a pan. As the mixture came to a gentle boil, I stirred in the roselle seed liquid and some lemon juice, then let it simmer. At this point, the color of the liquid was no longer bright red, but a dark ochre. The entire pickling process revealed all of the roselle's charms; it was like a woman who has experienced love, understands how to please herself as well as her partner, and has full command of herself.

On the mountain, passion fruit comes into fruit at the same time as roselle. I dug the seeds out of the orange flesh, added a splash of lemon juice, and simmered until the mixture became a syrup. I then mixed in the roselle fruit syrup and cooked the two together. The roselle jam was immediately rejuvenated. Taking a bite of its delicate peachy-red sweetness, lively and full of mischief, I could put aside a bad mood that had descended the previous night before bed and start a brand-new day feeling confident and at ease.

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After I started doing agricultural work, I learned how to use cloth sanitary pads and swapped these for synthetic fiber pads during my monthly periods. My mother saw my used pads soaking in a basin of bloody water and exclaimed, incredulous. She had always considered anything to do with menstruation as nasty. For decades, she had followed the correct and proper procedure, disposing of her rolled up pads in the trash can, making them completely undetectable to others. The menstrual pads that met her eyes swept her back in time to her youth, when she had washed out her pads by hand. That her daughter followed an outdated procedure from decades ago simply confirmed all over again that her daughter was an animal. I didn't put my menstrual pads into the washing machine with the rest of the family's clothes. As a rule, I washed them myself and hung the clean pads on the balcony to dry in the sun. But my ever-efficient mother, despite the revulsion that showed on her mouth, would trot into my room looking for laundry. Sometimes she would include the pads from that day I hadn't yet had time to wash. I can't help envisioning what she thought of her daughter's menstrual blood at close range, of its compelling vitality.

A just-removed sanitary pad, still vital and warm from the body, has a faintly salty, subtly fishy pungency that I couldn't help sniffing. Cherishing the scent of my body, I would examine the color of that day's blood and the amount of flow, admiring how fresh and plentiful they were. I rinsed out the cotton pads and put them to soak in a basin, waiting until they released the blood before I tipped out the red water, which flowed into the pumpkin patch adjacent to the bathroom. Following the incline toward the lantana, Formosa ash, longan tree and bamboo grove, the water flowed on, nourishing life.

Spring is spider breeding season, and many mornings, I would discover a mother spider's white egg sacs on the windowsill. A miniature spider that lived on the warm power switch used to play hide-and-seek with my fingers. Around the time of Dragon Boat Festival, praying mantises appeared; daily sightings of these were followed by frequent encounters with small stag beetles found belly up on the kitchen counter, which I picked up with index finger and thumb and relocated to the Formosa ash tree's trunk, even though it wasn't long before they fell clumsily onto the fallen leaves below. It was during this festival that I once heard the most horrible of insect anecdotes: The eggs of hair snakes (a kind of parasitic worm) are implanted in the stomachs of praying mantises. The eggs hatch, and after the hair snakes grow to maturity, they hypnotize the mantis into believing it's thirsty. Then they tell it to "go to the stream to drink some water!" The mantis, which doesn't know how to swim, drowns, and the hair snake detaches itself, its freedom gained. Yet, in places where rainwater had collected after a thunderstorm and these newly freed hair snakes should have been clearly visible, nothing moved. Meanwhile, the mantises struggled to climb the screen door and enter my room during the night.

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I still remember a film I saw in primary school. It was about a woman widowed at a young age who lacked love for many years afterwards. Meanwhile, her body yearned for the affectionate touch of another. One scene cut to the woman washing out her menstrual pads and putting them to dry on the sill of an open window. A dusty black insect that looked like a tree stump, which I interpreted as the dead husband or a symbol of the woman's desire for love, landed on the sanitary pad and clung to it, sucking moisture from the cloth. The film ended on this shot. This scene has remained in my memory for almost thirty years. The first time I used a cloth sanitary pad I recalled it and was surprised that as a child I had understood how this woman felt.

That was my moody, overemotional body!

1.2 My Many Anachronisms

Aroma is what marks an individual's recipe as theirs.
Subtle differences make it impossible to completely replicate another's recipe,
or to have absolute ownership of one.

I made pickles for a long while before having this revelation.
Before that, I was always a person out of step with the times.

On my way back to my hometown before the Lunar New Year, I walked through the Rear Train Station in Taipei and went into a wholesale store to buy some glass jars for pickling. I paid for my purchases, and as I turned to go heard the woman who owned the store ask the clerk, "Why do I smell radishes?" When I turned, the store owner's nose had evidently caught the scent of pickled white radish in my basket. She must have had a lot of experience with pickled radish to know the difference between its odor and flatulence without seeing the pickles.

I myself didn't recognize the smell of pickled radish at first. One time, I caught a sudden whiff of flatulence on a jolting bus. Disgusted, I suspected my neighbor of having furtively passed wind and used my scarf to cover my nose and mouth. Who would have guessed the smell was coming from the basket of white radishes sitting on the floor by my feet!

For crisp and delicious pickled white radish, it's essential to choose radishes with fine, delicate peels. I sliced and salted the unpeeled radishes, then pressed the water from the radish slices with a heavy stone set on top of them for two nights. I drained off the water, added more salt, and applied weight for another night. This was a time-consuming process requiring several days, so my half-finished pickles came with me when I returned home for the Lunar New Year. The pressed radish slices should be set in the sun and then turned occasionally so they can thoroughly soak up the sunlight. After they have been massaged for a full day, their bad odor is gone, transformed into a clean, sweet scent. The pickles are seasoned with salt, sugar, and finely shredded chili, and then packed tightly in jars. The finished pickles can be kept in the refrigerator for several days. The rooftop of my family home gets plenty of light, but I still pickled my white radish Yilan-style. In Yilan, the "caged radish" pickle-brining process is similar to the one described, minus the step of putting the pickles in the sun. This is an entirely pragmatic response to Yilan's rainy fall and winter. Packing the jar tightly reduces the amount of air and is the best method of preserving the pickles.

While farming in Yilan, I began to stink without being aware of it. Others told me about my odor, saying I smelled like dog, probably because my dog always curled up close to me and seldom left my room during rainy weather and winter. At night, I had developed the habit of listening for its breathing before I could peacefully drop off to sleep. A little kid I knew said I smelled like grass, which sounded a whole lot better. I preferred to smell like a plant. Each summer, I took advantage of Yilan's sunniest weather to gather five-leaved chaste tree, mugwort and lemon beebrush. These plants can be dried in the sun and made into small, scented pouches for clothes closets. Burning mugwort in summer repels insects, while lighting a stick of mugwort (also called a moxa stick) in fall and winter dispels moisture. Both my clothes and body are in the constant company of plants, which makes me look like I've just stepped out of a weed patch. Farming has tanned my skin a deep brown, and since I also have a broad face and dress head to toe in cotton, some people assume I'm from the desert.

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While I was traveling in the Gobi, the desert wind carried a familiar scent, like mugwort and crown daisies, that reminded me of my hometown. After tracing its source to tiny clusters of plants on a rocky outcropping, I gathered some and made a bouquet of other flowers to take back to my traveling companions, who were battling diarrhea. The next day, my companions felt much better, so we piled into the Jeep and asked our driver to take us back to that rocky outcropping. Our driver spoke a different language and didn't talk much, but we exchanged stories about where we were from and about plants and songs all the same. We also sampled the plants he had gathered, turning the Mongolian plant names over on our tongues. In the car, he sang a Mongolian song that reminded us of one in Chinese.

Mongolia's dry climate and precious water resources meant I usually didn't need to and couldn't bathe every day during our trip, but I didn't think my body odor was off-putting. For someone like me who hated taking a bath every day, not having to was immensely satisfying.

What kid loves to bathe and wash its hair? Just the sight of running water used to make me burst into progressively louder wails. Wanting to look nice and be clean, daily showers, frequent hair washing – I didn't do any of those things because I liked them but because of social constraints. After I started farming, it was like I had changed back into that kid who hated baths and washing her hair. For one thing, farming kept me busy. On one occasion when we were transplanting rice seedlings, I didn't shower for three days in a row. Springtime was damp and cold. Add to that being tired and hungry after the work was done, plus having to be back in the field at first light the next morning, and I simply didn't bother to shower! It wasn't until I got into the rhythm of the busy season that I found scrubbing myself clean and relaxing in hot water after a day of hard work in the fields allowed me to feel that the day had been truly lived to the full.

My mother didn't think that way. Neither did my ex. They both followed an ironclad rule of bathing and changing clothes before bed. My mother kept commenting on my body odor.

"I smell?" I raised my arm and sniffed it. "I showered before I came home."

Maybe it was because I had cleaned out the bio-toilet that morning, or because I mended a hole in the embankment between two paddies, or maybe it was from weeding.

My mother delivered her verdict: "You don't smell like sweat. But there's a smell."

An earthy smell, I thought. That year I had organized a picture book workshop with the theme of LGBTQ families. One of the participants was a painting teacher who looked at my drawings and said, "Your drawings are so earthy." At a subconscious level, I felt deep shame. *Earthy. How inadequate. Look at what your colleagues have done, how refined their drawings are!* The teacher went on, clarifying her comment by asking, "You farm, don't you?" I was even more embarrassed. A farmer repulsed by "earthiness"?

My drawings seemed covered in mud and muck, the colors muddled, just like my rubber boots after I'd walked through a rice paddy; the giant characters I'd written looked like barnyard grass run wild and the impossible-to-eradicate Mexican primrose-willow. The soil I farmed was rich and thick and it stank. With a single step, you might sink into it up to your thigh. Returning

from the field, you didn't just stink from head to toe; your clothes were black. But the more a field stinks, the better, as this means it contains anaerobically active microorganisms. One reason I work in the fields is to support the microbiota that live on my body, since it's these natural, wild microbes that are most effective for making pickles. Are microbes the reason for my body's earthy odor?

*

Koji mold (*Aspergillus oryzae*) has as many aromas as the number of individuals who grow it. W, the woman who taught me how to make koji rice, once excitedly snatched up some rice that had already been fermented, rinsed, and dried in the sun for a day and held out this now precious foodstuff. Richly fragrant, W's koji rice was a pale buff flecked with a few dark brown grains, like dust caught in bright sunlight. It was a perfect match for her personality: frank, generous, strongly maternal. In contrast, my koji rice is pale yellow, like a beautiful girl from humble origins, its aroma simple and refined like wildflowers. It's very much like me: reserved, quiet, and unable to let go. By the time I moved to the farm, I had changed my residence almost annually. Conditions for fermentation had likewise changed from year to year, as had the climate, but every batch of koji rice I made was like this, as if ordained by heaven.

Another time, I was practicing how to make koji rice and miso with some other farmers. My "beautiful girl from humble origins" appeared, of course. There was also the koji a man had made from broken grains left after rice is milled – it had the sweet fragrance of a hardworking and thrifty household. Then there was a friend's rice, purchased in Japan and now redolent with the aroma of flowers and fruit. We made three batches of miso, mixing and matching the three kinds of koji rice in proportion to our personal preference. First we mashed cooked black beans into a paste and added salt. We then added the koji, mixed the ingredients vigorously until they were thoroughly combined, and rolled the mixture into balls of miso, which we threw into a crock. When our crocks were full, we covered their mouths first with plastic bags, then inverted ceramic plates weighted with heavy stones. Three months later, we met to open the containers and taste the results.

We had a cold snap that January, so we prepared hot pot in anticipation of the miso's unveiling. We removed the ceramic plates, then peeled back the plastic bags. Air touched a top layer of white bacterial film, a sign of quick fermentation. We skimmed off this film, revealing the glossy dark brown of black bean miso. By using the same proportion of black beans and salt mixed with different proportions of the various koji, each of us had made miso bearing our personal stamp and an aroma that matched our individual personalities. All three batches were excellent, whether the resulting flavor was calm and steady, joyful, or bright and lively. Each of us was especially pleased with the fragrance of his or her own miso. Aroma is what marks an individual's recipe as theirs. Subtle differences make it impossible to completely replicate another's recipe, or to have absolute ownership of one. I made pickles for a long while before having this revelation. Before that, I was always a person out of step with the times.

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The first day of primary school, my parents insisted on taking me to the opening day ceremony even though my body was riddled head to toe with chicken pox. I was the youngest in my class but tall for my age, so I sat all the way at the back of the classroom. The blotches on my arms grew increasingly ugly, made more conspicuous by the white dress I wore. My hair was naturally curly, becoming thicker and more tangled the longer it became. I always envied that first row of petite, slender girls with their soft, fine, jet-black hair. When I was in high school, I heard that shampooing your hair with birth control pills ground into a fine powder would straighten it. I walked into a pharmacy without the slightest hesitation.

“I’d like to buy some birth control pills.”

“What for?” The pharmacist exhibited all the warm-hearted enthusiasm of the neighborhood watch.

“Nothing.” It wasn’t until this point that I felt the impropriety of buying birth control.

“One pack?” The pharmacist took the pills from a shelf and set them on the counter.

I experienced more secret delight in my successful purchase than dismay at having failed to defend myself against the pharmacist. My hair would finally be straight! Unfortunately, the more I washed it, the drier it got, which triggered an untamable puffball effect. It finally reached the point that one of my classmates said, “I wanna cut off all your hair.” It wasn’t just my hair that got comments. “Your teeth look like a jack-o’-lantern’s!” another classmate told me before bursting into unrestrained laughter. Many years later, I happened to see a documentary called *Gap-Toothed Women*. Covering medieval times to the present day, it talked about the various interpretations of the gap that sometimes occurs between women’s front teeth. In Gambia, West Africa, for example, the gap is called the “opening of God” and symbolizes wisdom. It also featured a medieval engraving in which a woman rode at the head of a group of saints, illustrating that at that time the gap meant a love of travel and an erotic nature.

Wisdom, a love of travel, and an erotic nature: these are accolades I gladly accept.

My girlfriend and I took our first trip without adults when we were seventeen, choosing places we’d never been before in Yilan, Hualian and Taitung counties. Before we went and because of all the fuss when we had skipped class together, my girlfriend’s father told my mother about two lesbian classmates at Taipei First Girls’ High School who had committed suicide in an Yilan motel. My mother told me the school counselor had warned my father about the possibility of suicide and to keep an eye on me. This news terrified me. My mother couldn’t help being profoundly worried, but she didn’t try to stop me from going. Instead, she got in touch with an experienced auntie, who recommended we take a non-stop route directly to our destination in Yilan, giving up our longer and more grueling trip by long-distance bus. My father gave me his bulky mobile phone and told me to call every day to let him know we were safe. My girlfriend’s father memorized the motel’s phone number so that he could call once a day to check on us. He

also wanted my girlfriend to give him our itinerary, saying he might want to try it himself someday. We recognized all this as our parents' tender concern.

The night before my high school graduation, everyone already accepted to a university got together for an open mic meetup in which we all enthusiastically joined in. It was a chance for us to get some distance from the endless practice exams and just unwind for a bit. Part of the process was to share our reluctance about going our separate ways, so everybody took turns getting up on stage to say how they felt about graduating. Some sang the theme from the then very popular drama series *Flying Dragon in the Sky*; some offered advice on staying healthy, telling us which stores had multigrain steamed buns that would rescue us from constipation; some solemnly performed the traditional three bows in front of the portrait of our national founder and former president, Chiang Kai-Shek, because we would no longer see it hanging in our classrooms; and some classmates bashfully confessed their feelings to boyfriends.... I was in the grip of adolescent moodiness back then, worsened by the anxiety of making a farewell speech. As soon as I stepped onto the stage, my throat tightened. Crying, I said, "I feel different from other people, and it makes me sad. Actually, I'm just like everyone else." Later, people said that after me, everyone cried while they were on stage.

Before the internet fully permeated my high school years, I knew practically nothing about being gay. I had read the book *Stone Butch Blues* and seen the movie *Boys Don't Cry*, both of which had overwhelmed me with sorrow; I had frequent arguments with my girlfriend about an uncertain future, including her fantasy that I would have a change of heart and fall in love with a guy; and I was sensitive to the perception of elders, classmates, and society that any LGBTQ+ person was different. Feeling awkward or downhearted, I wept endlessly all day long.

The trip I took when I was seventeen happened to coincide with the spring rains. Decades later, when I moved to Yilan before spring plowing, the drizzle evoked a bout of nostalgia. Yilan had changed a great deal, but the endless spring rain remained the same. As the rain fell on ground not yet saturated, the soil emitted a clean, fresh scent, like the fragrance of a lover's body after a bath, or a white shirt dried in the sun.