

The Paper Menagerie

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One of my earliest memories starts with me sobbing. I refused to be soothed no matter what Mom and Dad tried.

Dad gave up and left the bedroom, but Mom took me into the kitchen and sat me down at the breakfast table.

“*Kan, kan.*” *Look, look*, she said, as she pulled a sheet of wrapping paper from on top of the fridge. For years, Mom carefully sliced open the wrappings around Christmas gifts and saved them on top of the fridge in a thick stack.

She set the paper down, plain side facing up, and began to fold it. I stopped crying and watched her, curious.

She turned the paper over and folded it again. She pleated, packed, tucked, rolled, and twisted until the paper disappeared between her cupped hands. Then she lifted the folded-up paper packet to her mouth and blew into it, like a balloon.

“*Kan*,” she said. “*Laohu.*” *Look, a tiger.* She put her hands down on the table and let go. A little paper tiger stood on the table, the size of two fists placed together. The skin of the tiger was the pattern on the wrapping paper, white background with red candy canes and green Christmas trees.

I reached out to Mom’s creation. Its tail twitched, and it pounced playfully at my finger. “*Rawrr-sa*,” it growled, the sound somewhere between a cat and rustling newspapers.

I laughed, startled, and stroked its back with my index finger. The paper tiger vibrated under my finger, purring.

“*Zhe jiao zhezhi*,” Mom said. *This is called origami.*

I didn’t know this at the time, but Mom’s breath was special. She breathed into her paper animals so that they shared her breath, and thus moved with her life. This was her magic.

Dad had picked Mom out of a catalogue.

One time, when I was in high school, I asked Dad about the details. He was trying to get me to speak to Mom again.

He had signed up for the introduction service back in the spring of 1973. Flipping through the pages steadily, he had spent no more than a few seconds on each page until he saw the picture of Mom.

I’ve never seen this picture. Dad described it: Mom was sitting in a chair, her side to the camera, wearing a tight green silk cheongsam. Her head was turned to the camera so that her long black hair was draped artfully over her chest and shoulder. She looked out at him with the eyes of a calm child.

“That was the last page of the catalogue I saw,” he said.

The catalogue said she was eighteen, loved to dance, and spoke good English because she was from Hong Kong. None of these facts turned out to be true.

He wrote to her, and the company passed their messages back and forth. Finally, he flew to Hong Kong to meet her.

“The people at the company had been writing her responses. She didn’t know any English other than ‘hello’ and ‘good-bye.’”

What kind of woman puts herself into a catalogue so that she can be bought? The high school me thought I knew so much about everything. Contempt felt good, like wine.

Instead of storming into the office to demand his money