

## Three Lessons

*for voice and guzheng*

I.

Another festival today—a banquet for our family’s ghosts  
across the seas. Grandma sends their invitations by incense  
and greets them warmly as they come: fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles  
introduced by forgone names—those voiceless artefacts she aims  
to bind to her blood, and to ours. She tells us where to place the bowls  
and we obey: pour tea and wine in shallow cups, curl golden paper  
squares to ingots, clasp and pump our hands in prayer: luck and health,  
success and love. Jasmine smoke unfurls a promise, loosely swirls

Grandma tries her best to feed the crowd but can’t transform  
the hot roast chicken, plastic-wrapped, to baahk chit gai  
or languid oats to hearty mounds of rice. The old ghosts sigh  
around the coffee table crammed in the garage  
an altar space our car will gladly fill when she departs  
with all her guests—their voices lost, a dried mirage

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II.

Across the seas and centuries, we play  
 the voices of the dead to life; invite  
 their legacies borne not by blood but flight  
 of ink and spirit—spring of all delight  
 My teacher curves my fingers to fit her palm  
 and teaches me to sing in foreign tongues:  
 bourrée, chaconne, gavotte, courante, allemande  
 I learned the ways of old when I was young  
 and now I sit beside the keys and guide  
 my students, children, towards the famous ghosts  
 I try my best to conjure joy and pride  
 in charming hammered felt to well-formed notes  
 but present tides are strong and ever changing  
 the seafloor's form, always rearranging

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III.

Songs of blood are hard to sing—believe me, I’ve tried everything:  
 martial arts, calligraphy, language classes, recipes  
 none of which rang deep or true  
 enough to call a song, myself a singer

So I tied a line around my waist and cast it back a few millennia  
 when ancient poets plucked drunken tunes in bamboo groves  
 and zithers were all the rage. I hoped my stubborn blood  
 would resonate with the instrument, which shredded

my fingertips and stiffened my thumbs—a hardening  
 my ancestors knew as the grind of a shovel, the back-heat  
 of working fields. Grandma brings me chrysanthemum tea  
 when I practise and lingers to listen, sometimes hears a memory:

a red song for breakfast; twirling with friends in the square  
 when she’s gone, I’ll invite her to dance

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