

Songs of Yesterday's Tomorrows

Samara Lo

The gǔzhēng propped against the wall sits inside its green, coffin-shaped hard case. Quite suitable imagery for something Anna had buried years ago. Normally, it's easy to ignore the niggling that comes whenever she notices the box collecting dust in the corner, but today is different. It's hard to pinpoint why. Maybe it's nostalgia. Maybe the sight of it doesn't hurt as much.

Layers of dust smudge her fingers as she sets it down, unclasps the latches, and lifts the lid. The familiar earthy scent of lacquered wood seeps out. Inside, twenty-one strings run the length of sixty-four inches of board, set across individual wooden bridges. Smooth carvings of peonies and clouds decorate the compartment hiding the tuning pegs.

A string in her chest tightens and twists as she runs her fingers down the strings. It's been five years since she last played. Five years since she last spoke to her parents.

The sight of the instrument draws up feelings she'd shoved into a deep abyss. Why she'd kept the giant thing instead of throwing it out like the broken relationship with her father and mother was beyond her. Maybe a part of her wanted to hold on. Maybe a part of her still believed in the ties of generations, one in which honouring one's parents was important.

She should pack the instrument up, but like a sadist, she chooses to pick at old wounds instead. With faux-tortoise-shell nails bound to the pads of her fingers, she stumbles across a piece written as a serenade to the full moon. She's slow at first, rusty. The notes that had once been memorised scripts in her head have long faded.

Yet even with such a clumsy attempt, she's thrown back into her gǔzhēng teacher's home. Scrolled paintings of mountains peeking through swirling clouds hang on the wall. Steam wisps from the spout of a fist-sized teapot on the wooden table, stewing dried leaves of tiěguānyīn. It's in this place she felt closest to her parents' home country.

Each lesson, she would pluck out a song that she had forgotten the meaning of, with a name made up of characters she had never learnt to read. But none of that mattered, because music was a language in itself. One she understood. The numbers, symbols and lines running across the sheet music all had meaning. They opened a doorway into another world where tea brewing felt

like a ritual and each arpeggio and tremolo told stories of emperors, empresses and their people. Thousands of years of history were tied into each note. Her teacher's history. Her parents' history. Her history.

And all throughout the lessons, her parents smiled proudly. They were happy whenever she played. Perhaps they too saw the door that opened to a land they'd left but never quite left behind.

She pauses, fingertips throbbing against the hard strings. With a shaky breath, she shifts into the next song with quick, strong plucking. It's the angry pound of war drums, mirroring the battle waging inside. It reminds her of the song that had drawn her to the instrument in the first place. The theme song of a fictional martial arts hero.

During her first lesson, her teacher played it as a demonstration. He'd stopped part way, his weathered hands hovering above the strings.

'I'm too old to play this now,' he'd said gently.

But she was not old. So she practised daily to master each technique. Yet even when she was skilled enough, he did not teach her. So she taught herself. At least, she tried. But her fingers couldn't keep up with the tempo. She didn't know how to read all the symbols. Like her teacher, she stopped part way. But she wasn't old like him. Perhaps it was because she was...

'Lazy.' Her father said it so often it had to be fact.

'A stupid pig.' Her mother smiled each time the words left her mouth.

They were meant to be words of affection. A backwards show of love. It's why she was taught not to tell a baby they were cute because they would grow up ugly or why she should never praise another for their cleverness in case they forgot humility. So she was always ugly, lazy, stupid. They were phrases meant to be embraced as a warm hug, but were a slow death by a thousand cuts.

Her left hand sweeps down. Her right hand follows. Glissandos race rhythmically down the strings. They're the ringing of waterfalls, the rush of a river pushing a small boat downstream, the sweet haze of intoxication, and a soft mist blanketing a jade mountain. They're falling teardrops, a bleeding heart broken by misunderstandings and criticisms, the weight of honouring one's parents but failing, and the exhausted cry of endless overachieving yet somehow still never being good enough.

Harmonising with the melody are the remnants of the eternal questions that she had asked when she was younger: Who was she? Where did she belong?

She had always been too different. Too influenced by the culture she'd grown in rather than the one she'd inherited. Too foreign compared to her parents, relatives and neighbours. Her foreignness was a joke during family gatherings. An accent to laugh at. A behaviour to mock yet forgive, because she would forever be a spectator caught looking in. It only emphasised the fact she was like them, but not quite. That she didn't belong.

Yet neither did she fit in on the other side. Her dried seaweed snacks were disgusting. Her chive dumplings were pockets of yuck. And then there was stinky tofu and tripe. She loved it all still, even though it had made her an outcast in her youth. These were parts of her that she couldn't hate, just as it turned out playing the gǔzhēng was a skill she couldn't erase.

'Mummy? What are you playing?' A small voice pipes up behind her, more beautiful than the song she'd been playing. Tiny footsteps pad into the room and small hands reach across to pluck the strings.

Anna slides her chair back so her daughter can climb onto her lap. She smells of strawberry shampoo and baby lotion. She smells like home.

'This is a gǔzhēng. I learnt to play this when I was little.' She had only been a few years older than her daughter.

Hugging her little one close, she struggles to remember receiving such an embrace from her parents. It wasn't in their culture nor how they showed love.

There were other ways it was done. Bowls of sliced fruit. Homemade bone-broth soup. A good education. They'd given her opportunities they'd never had by holding down multiple jobs no one wanted to do. Their ways were practical ways. Dutiful ways. Anna didn't blame them for that. They'd done their best with what they had. It wasn't why a great wall had risen between them. That came later.

When she'd been torn between the idea of boundaries and the notion of filial piety. Been crushed by the weight of their shame that demanded the erasure of the fatherless child in her belly.

It would be quiet. No one would know. Women like her would've been drowned in a pig cage in the era her parents romanticised.

But Anna had chosen a different kind of love back then. One she now cradled in her lap. It was not lost on her how, by cutting ties to her parents, she'd epitomised the very culture they'd always said she carried too much of. As always, that brought a twinge of regret. One that said her child should've had a chance to meet grandma and grandpa even though they hadn't wanted her to exist. The one that belonged to a world across the ocean, re-awakened by each note her fingers had sung across the strings.

'Do you want me to teach you to play?' Anna presses her cheek to her daughter's head and feels the gentle nod. Guiding her daughter's small hands across the strings, they pluck out the opening bar of a nursery rhyme.

After a few attempts her daughter holds up her hands.

'Mummy, it hurts.'

With a nod, Anna lightly kisses her daughter's fingertips.

'It does hurt at first, but then the skin hardens with callouses and it stops hurting.' She pauses, surprised, reflecting on the wisdom her daughter has inspired.

Setting up another chair beside her, she takes out the music sheets for a different song. It's the theme from a Chinese drama, so different from the classical music her teacher taught.

As she plays, she smiles at her daughter who listens intently. It's then she realises that some ties can never truly be broken. Her upbringing may have been different from back in her parents' home country, but the gǔzhēng, the music, tied her back to it. To them. Somewhere in the melody were notes of her parents' love, of pain, hurt, rejection, but deeper still, perhaps there was a song of forgiveness — but not yet.

She understood then that this was who she was and where she belonged. With her daughter, cherishing the piece of her parents' culture preserved by this instrument, while giving herself permission to cultivate a culture of her own. One fitting for her family. A hybrid. And the best of both worlds.

Samara Lo is an Australian Chinese author from Sydney. She was the recipient of the Copyright Agency-WestWords Fellowship 2022 and the Westwords Emerging Writer's Residency at Varuna House 2021. She was a judge for the 2022 Aurealis Awards and has appeared in panels and workshops for writers such as the Art Gallery of NSW's Emerging Voices program. Her short fiction appears in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Flame Tree Publishing's Sci-Fi Anthology* (2023), *BAD Crime Anthology* (2023), and *The Living Stories Anthology* (2021).