All chinatowns smell the same. The year is 1975; I am fourteen years old; and I could be in Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York. It doesn’t matter. The smell is the same—a mix of ginger, shitake mushrooms, durian husks, tofu, fish, and rice. It is earthy, palpable, and old country-ish. Cabbage leaves glued flat to wet sidewalks, overripe papaya, deep-fried pork. The smell greets you as soon as you cross the border into Chinatown, informing you of your arrival.

I don’t like Chinatowns. They are a world away from our suburban house in Detroit with its clipped and coddled lawn, living room furniture from New Englander, and cars tucked tidily in a double garage. My parents, both professors, drag my sister, brother, and me to Chinatowns across the country the way a fishing boat scours its net across the ocean floor, missing nothing. We dread plunging into these strange worlds where we hear little English and barely any Mandarin, which we speak. In Chinatown, traffic follows no logic, men spit on sidewalks, and restaurant bathrooms harbor broken towel dispensers and toilets that smell like sweat. The streets never rest; crowds swallow up my family and spit us out again. Everyone talks at once, their Cantonese tones twanging like notes from slide guitars. The old ladies especially, with their flashing gold teeth, jade pendants, and skin dotted with liver spots, aggravate me. They cackle in Cantonese and flap their skinny arms up and down. I am never sure if they are cursing me or commenting on the world at large.

Our parents embarrass us by randomly approaching strangers, as though any Chinese person qualifies to be our personal friend. My siblings and I not so secretly call all Chinese peng you, “friend,” our American-inflected tone deadly with disdain. Our ventures into Chinatown remind me of roots that I prefer to keep hidden. Whenever I walk those streets, navigating the rivulets of water, the garbage, the spit, I can’t avoid confronting the truth of my origins. I reassure myself that people in Chinatowns are a different kind of Chinese than me, less American. They can’t speak English; they practice dirty habits; they hang their underwear outside to dry.

I want to be American. Whitebread. Plain vanilla. I see no point in standing out with our strange language, our blackened wok, our mirror glued to the front door to ward off bad spirits. It is one thing to act Chinese in the privacy of our home, quite another to act Chinese in public. That just shows my parents’ ignorance, their resistance to new ways, and their attachments to obsolete old-world values that carry no relevance in America. The fact that my parents’ journey to America resulted from tragedies—the brutal Japanese occupation of China during the 1930s and 1940s, followed by a civil war—is lost on me.

Chinatowns are messy, dirty, and foreign. They can never seem to contain themselves properly, spilling their lives out into the streets and sidewalks from spindly wired crates overflowing with bok choy and food carts with barbecued...
ducks skewered onto hooks. This is America. Why can’t Chinatowns display sparkling clean counters and neat rows of newspapers and canned goods? Most of all, why do they have to smell?

We visit Chinatowns everywhere: my native Detroit, Windsor, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and, of course, the meccas—San Francisco, New York, and Toronto.

Toronto. The very word sinks my already moody adolescent constitution. Not again! We kids groan. Why can’t we just eat pizza like normal families? My family power-pilgrimages at least twice a year to Toronto, a five-hour drive from Detroit. The goal? To eat at as many Chinese restaurants as possible within forty-eight hours. And when we aren’t eating, we are stuffing the trunk of our silver Buick LeSabre until it sags with cans of pickled cucumbers, jars of bamboo shoots, and boxes of one-thousand-year-old eggs, cured until the whites resemble opaque black marble.

The customs agent at the border crossing in Canada asks, “What will you be doing in Canada?” And my father, his brow furrowed above his horn-rimmed glasses, his hands resting on the steering wheel, replies, simply, “Eating.”

The agent raises his eyebrows, looks at my father again, then hearing no additional explanation, scans the rest of us—my mother in the front seat, her eyes dreamy at the thought of roasted chestnuts, my sister and brother in the back seat, poking each other’s ribs, and me, passive in a way that suggests that my father’s answer is all too true. “Can you believe it?” I want to say, and thereby disassociate myself from my parents. It seems to me absurd to drive five hours to another country, cooped up with my siblings who alternate between arm wrestling and giggling, merely to visit a Chinatown. They are all the same. What difference does it make?

The difference, of course, is that Toronto’s Chinatown is the real deal. It makes Detroit’s small enclave, anchored by the Golden Dragon restaurant, a place for amateurs. Toronto is for the serious foodie. Toronto is the epicenter. If you can’t be in China, you can be in Toronto on Yonge Street with its double-parked cars, shouting vendors, and streams of pedestrians flowing from sidewalk to street to sidewalk again, oblivious to the traffic, which, in any case, hardly budges. Stores blare sticky sweet Chinese pop music. Theater marquees blink and dance, featuring the latest action movie with Hong Kong’s hottest star (who, I later learned, was none other than Jackie Chan).

All the signs are in Chinese: the advertisements, the store awnings, the store windows, the street signs, the public notices, the stenciled shipping crates, and the newspapers. English words don’t help, for they are merely sounded-out approximations of the Chinese words. Why bother writing...

Photographs courtesy of Eve M. Tai
Fung Wong Lau? It’s still Chinese. I pick out the simplest of characters—person, big, dragon. I find the character for my name, hua, everywhere, and I can’t decide if this cheapens my name or lends it more importance.

My parents seek out restaurants that don’t cater to wai guo ren, foreigners. By foreigner, they don’t mean themselves. Banks of aquariums greet us at the entrance, bubbling away with crab, lobster, grouper, and prawns. Inside the dining room the noise level soars ten notches. Each time the kitchen doors fly open, the hum of overhead fans and the click-clack of the cooks stir-frying in giant woks rush out. Platters clatter, patrons shout and laugh, waiters holler. The waiters wear black vests, crooked bow ties, and white shirts rolled up at the sleeves, as though they were attending a formal dinner and got drafted into helping in the kitchen. On the round table, a tilting stack of ceramic teacups and a metal teapot that slaps shut and open. A lazy susan. My father pours tea for each of us, wheeling the cups around. I order Coke and set the can to my left. My little teacup on my right. East meets West.

Dishes arrive in an endless parade from the kitchen—green pepper and squid, spicy fried-pork lettuce wraps, seafood noodles, marinated pork hock, and amuse beef. They pile on the lazy susan, threatening to slide off. We spin the lazy susan in the same way that a filling machine rotates in a factory, each of us heaping our bowls before the dishes rotate to the next station. We grasp porcelain bowls of rice in our left hands and a pair of slippery plastic chopsticks in the right. As we gulp down pork dumplings, thick wedges of watermelon, almond cookies, and limp. She nudges me toward the display case and points to the rows of bao and bing, pastries and buns stuffed with lotus-seed paste, black sesame seeds, and red bean paste. My favorite is there, egg custard tarts, yellow as sunlight and gently sweet. I can barely prop my eyes open. My mother flicks the back of her hand on my shoulder. “I lost two whole years of Chinese food!”

Dessert? Who has room for dessert? Orange slices, almond cookies, thick wedges of watermelon. My mother is already discussing the next restaurant with my father.

One time we arrive in Toronto long after the city has gone to bed. Despite the late hour, my parents show no interest in finding our hotel. Instead, my mother twists and turns a street map around, trying to navigate while my father stretches his neck to study the street signs. I fall asleep. When I wake up, we are parked in front of a dark, shuttered storefront on a dark, shadowed street. To my astonishment, my parents hop out of the car, abandoning the usual caution they exercise in similarly darkened streets at similarly late hours in downtown Detroit. Their voices are pointed, excited, like teenagers discovering a new mall. “This is the place!” they exclaim over and over.

They knock on the storefront’s glass door. My father steps backward, places his hands on the small of his back, and arches his chest, scanning the windows above. My mother raps again. And again. Then the two gather and conference in loud whispers, as though they haven’t already woken up everyone within a block.

Finally, the flicker of gray fluorescent lights. A Chinese couple materializes in the back of the store and shuffles to the front door. The man is skinny, and his thin cotton robe hangs open at the chest, exposing his ribbed undershirt. The woman’s hair poofs out on the left side, nestling a single pink sponge curler. Both of them rub their eyes, squinting at the door.

My parents’ faces light up and they shout in Chinese. “You’re here. You’re here!” as though the Pope himself has arrived to give an off-the-record blessing. More rapping on the glass, even though by now the shopkeepers are clearly awake. Back at home, inconveniencing someone even slightly—say, interrupting the mailman’s delivery by saying hello—draws sharp reprimands to mind our manners. And here are my parents, excited about pulling strangers out of bed.

My parents announce that we have driven all the way from Detroit just to visit this bakery. This is only half true. With two days to go, we will also fit in five full meals, three snacks, and two shopping expeditions. But the owners are clearly pleased to hear this compliment. Or perhaps they see the look on my father’s face and know that this is not a man who will be denied his Chinese baked goods.

My mother extracts me from the car, my body sleepy and limp. She nudges me toward the display case and points to the rows of bao and bing, pastries and buns stuffed with lotus-seed paste, black sesame seeds, and red bean paste. My favorite is there, egg custard tarts, yellow as sunlight and gently sweet. I can barely prop my eyes open. My mother flicks the back of her hand on my shoulder. “Wake up, sa gua—silly,” she says, “Look at these goodies!”

A clock hangs on the pale green wall behind the counter, its wire cord dangling like a tail. It is 12:25 in the morning.

When I am thirty years old, I “return home” to China (as my parents would see it) for the first time. The plane glides over wet emerald fields, the dark water shining like mirrors into the sky. I land in Shanghai, my mother’s hometown. A few hours later I am walking on a Shanghai street, a canopy of chartreuse sycamore leaves above. People. Everywhere, people. Walking, bicycling, driving, chatting, eating. Cooking, sitting, marketing, brushing teeth. These
are lives lived inside out. The street swarms with neighbors in a dance choreographed and invisible as that of honeybees. I see woven bamboo baskets piled high with turnips and lotus roots and eggplants. Plastic buckets swimming with eels. Piles of sesame-crusted pancakes. Little cooking carts with portable gas burners. On the ground, thong slippers, silk-embroidered slippers, soft cloth slippers, all displayed on worn cotton sheets.

I have never set foot in Shanghai, or in China, or even in Asia. Yet this market feels familiar, as though my thirty-year-old bones have been carrying around a seed that, with the right conditions, now germinates. I sniff. Of course. It’s that smell. Why wouldn’t China, the mothership of all jackets, and participate in that most American of activities, Starbucks, play the latest Norah Jones, wear fleece?

Stinky tofu, so delicious, she would say, her eyes closed. Chinatowns, smell like Chinatown?

A woman in a floral blouse squats behind an oil drum and a wok alive with boiling oil. Beside her, a green plastic tub contains something foul. I gag. I begin to push away through the crowds, away from the woman, when I see her smile faintly at me, a Chinese Mona Lisa. Her smile catches me. I stop and turn around. The woman leans over the green tub and scoops out a few squares of something soft and spongy, textured. She drops the squares into the wok; the hot oil swallows them eagerly.

And then I know. I know what’s in the wok because the smell tells me. The woman is cooking “stinky tofu.” I have only heard about stinky tofu. My mother used to talk about it whenever she reminisced about her girlhood in Shanghai. Stinky tofu, so delicious, she would say, her eyes closed.

You have no idea how delicious. Stinky tofu made you forget all the badness in the world—the Japanese hunting your parents, the bombs dropping on Shanghai, the gunboats cruising the waters, the slow, heartbreaking collapse of the world you love.

The woman fishes out the tofu squares with a flat wired spoon. What my mother never told me is that stinky tofu doesn’t stay that way. Before me now, the row of tofu squares sits on a wire rack, golden and crisp. What my mother never told me is that once you fry stinky tofu, it becomes as fragrant and delicate as spring. The woman scoops three squares onto a plate, sprinkles chopped scallops on top, and slaps a dab of red chile sauce on the side. I bite into the first square; I bite into China.

Though I have never lived in Chinatown, Chinatown is where I was raised. From the outside, my life in Seattle resembles that of my neighbors—I drink chai lattes at Starbucks, play the latest Norah Jones cd, wear fleece jackets, and participate in that most American of activities, psychotherapy. But it is in Chinatown where my roots tug at me the most.

If Chinatown feels that way to me, then I can only imagine how it feels for my parents. In 1949 my parents fled their war-ravaged home, losing family members in the chaos before landing almost ten years later—alone and foreign—in graduate school at the University of Illinois. Three of my grandparents were buried in China by the time I was born at the dawn of the space age. From 1949 to the time that President Nixon called on Beijing in 1972, a period of over twenty years, China sequestered itself, cut off from the world. My parents’ sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, great aunts, great uncles, were all left behind “back there,” cloaked in a strange land where no one could visit and no one could leave. At the core of it, my parents’ eating frenzies in Chinatown, those road trips to Toronto, were about feeding the heart, about filling themselves up with reminders of a home they could no longer return to. With every jar of pickled radishes, every package of rice noodles, every can of straw mushrooms, my parents could literally take China home with them.

If you were to propose this idea to my parents, they would shrug it off. Reading too much into it, they would say. It’s simple—Chinatown is where you get the best food for cheap. Practicality ranks high with my parents’ generation, simply because it had to once. So perhaps the idea that Chinatown connects me to my roots is a luxury affordable only by my generation—the one born here in clean hospitals, educated in American schools, and raised without ever worrying that our doors might be smashed in the middle of the night by Japanese soldiers or Red Guards.

And what of the next generation? The one my parents refer to as “you Americans,” as though my siblings and I are foreigners in our own family? The answer is this: our bellies and therefore our identities are fundamentally Chinese. Over Christmas last year, I visit the Getty Museum in Los Angeles with my parents, my brother, Mike, and his wife, Linda. My mother mentions having dinner that night at a Chinese restaurant in Irvine whose specialty is fried salt and pepper squid. Minutes later we are lined up at the shuttle to return to the parking lot. There’s no time to waste.

Today when I visit Seattle’s Chinatown (now renamed the more politically correct “International District”), I do so without the benefit of my parents’ expert tutelage. My Mandarin slips away with every passing year, and many of the foods remain mysterious to me. But even if I can’t remember the name of a certain dish, a certain dim sum, a certain fruit, there is always that smell. The smell of generations before me extending back across the Pacific Ocean. The smell that beckoned my family five hours from Detroit to Toronto. The smell of home.