

TAIEN NG-CHAN

My mother has the strength of a lion, a tiger, a horse

These are the stories you told me: the time you sat down on a cold bench
in the park and cried bitterly because you had come to a cold country to be with my father
and then he left you with me, you cried because you had nothing and could understand
no one, didn't even know how to ask strangers for help

but you said having me was everything, so you did everything you could, you went to night
school to learn English and accounting, leaving me with babysitters until I told you I was old
enough to cook rice for myself and I didn't want babysitters anymore, and you always
felt so bad for leaving me at home, and even though I was always happy by myself reading
and making up solitary games, you would phone me every hour to make sure I was alright

and you broke your leg once falling on the black ice hidden underneath the sidewalk snow,
you were running for the bus so you wouldn't be late coming home to me

but I was too young to really remember any of those times. All I know is that you managed
to build a house for the two of us
from nothing
gave me everything so that

I can sit here now to write you
a poem

and in this poem I wanted to say that my mother is like a lion or a tiger, that she has the
strength of water against rock or the pull of the moon on the sea, I wanted to declare all these
things to say that I understand, but though I can say all these things, I have almost none of
your own language to say them in, almost none of your words but what I learned in three
years of Chinese school, simple words like *small, moon, fire*.

But I have the words you taught me. I can write my own name in Chinese, and I can write
the name I called you by as a child—Mama.

Not in English words, then. To me, Chinese words are pictures, and pictures can be worth
more than words. Here, an ideograph of a horse with four tiny brushstrokes for legs, and a
woman beside the horse, drawn burdened and bent by the weight of her burden: the Chinese
words for Mama

woman and horse
work like a horse
and strong,
I say yes,
my mother has the strength of a lion, a tiger, a horse

Taien Ng-Chan's poetry has appeared in various magazines and anthologies, including Geist, blue buffalo, CV2, The Capilano Review, Out of Place (Coteau Books), and eye wuz here (Douglas & McIntyre).