Chi Ku (吃苦)

Shan Shan Song

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Based in Chicago, Shan Shan Song is a Chinese-American, neurodivergent, queer, poet, singer, songwriter and community organizer. Their writing about polyamory and queer theory has also been published in *Queering Anarchism*. When they’re not snapping photos of their favorite landscapes and meals, they like to spend time petting as many cats as they can and making new recipes for their polycule and loves. They have one cat, one sourdough starter and are in the band Shanthony.

**Chi Ku (吃苦)**

My auntie used to say “苦啊“, “苦啊“.
“Bitterness, ah. Bitterness, oh.”
We eat bitterness: we endure bitterness before the sweetness after.

In China, my parents kept their heads down and worked in the fields of the countryside.
Under Mao’s rule, they worked all day then stayed up
To read forbidden school books by candlelight,
Dreaming of a brighter future when there was little hope.

Counter-revolutionaries were forced to confess
To anti-revolutionary thoughts and actions at “struggle sessions”.
Educators were publicly beaten and tortured in the streets.
Some were murdered by students and the Red Guard.
Red flags, red books, red blood in the streets.

The youth were sent to the fields for re-education and hard labor.
I heard a woman died from suicide by rat poison in the countryside.
There was rationing. There was widespread famine.
No food to eat, they ate all the leaves from the trees.

Then in America,
My father worked in the back of the house in restaurants washing dishes,
On the roofs of strangers who hired him to fix their roof,
Hoping for sweetness if he just worked hard enough,
Alone at a university in Rhode Island,
Speaking a foreign language in a strange land.

My ancestors walked their path to become healers.
The healer blood of my family line runs through my veins too.
I draw on the memory of their power to survive.

The first time I remember seeing blood,
I remember seeing my mother hemorrhaging as we went to the hospital.
The redness of blood spilling life scares me still.

Seeing others in pain hurts me,
I too have lived in hurt, the urge to heal is mixed with generational trauma.
Beyond the walls of this system, I dream of building a better world,
Living in love, abundance and healing.
Outside the walls of the medical industrial complex,
Outside of statist communism,
Outside of capitalism,
We can build so much more than this structure.
We live in a nightmare reality
But our hopes and dreams are stronger than the fear.

The first time I ran as a street medic was in 2012.
We march flanked by a line of black-clad riot police.
So many police in the hot summer,
The sunlight gleams off their face-shields.
Batons out. they stand in line with their bodies,
Their line is to control the crowd.
A line made strong by fascist force and ideology.
Batons out. ready to beat the crowd back with their advances.
Lines, bikes, sirens, lights.
Fear is their weapon, but we are strong too.
We dare to dream and fight together.

Two years later, there are spotlights in the dark heat of the Ferguson summer.
Our chants are strong against their fascism and military equipment,
We are strong as we march against their brutality and violence.
United, we stand together. Together we rise.
The system can’t break us, because we’re fucking tough.

My blood is too hot from anger, too sweet from sugary diabetes.
Heat and sweetness running ragged through my anxious veins.
I need cold and bitterness to tame the heat.
Food is life. Sharing food with my chosen family is love.
We have so much now when my recent ancestors did not.
When we eat together, the heat and sweat will be drained.
In these healing moments, the balance will be restored.