

THE FREQUENCY OF SICHUAN PEPPERCORNS

is 50 hertz. That tingly sensation can be measured
in micro-vibrations, a scientific breakthrough

illuminating paresthesia and other abnormalities.
Scientists say Sichuan peppercorns light up

touch receptors—actually *replicate touch*. They can't wait
to order dan dan noodles and spicy eggplant,

a slurp of pins and needles. There's a stereotype
that Chinese families dislike physical displays

of affection—I wish it weren't true
but I'm uncomfortable when my mother tries

to hug me. Sichuan peppercorns aren't peppers
at all—they're berries from the prickly ash tree

doing their best to ward off predators
and failing, garnering instead a global fanbase

for *málà*, the spicy numbing that burns away
the pain of mapo tofu, constantly on the menu

at my mother's house. I never used to like it
but I get it now. I'm sorry to fail at hugs

and other abnormalities, but I'll keep eating
at 50 cycles a second.

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MULTILINGUAL

On job applications I'm unilingual, fluent
only in my second language. Forgive me,

I never learned how to say *I've lost*
my mother tongue in French class,

remember only how to ask for permission
to *aller aux toilettes*. I've forgotten

how to say *I grew up speaking Cantonese*
in Cantonese. To the Aunties

I say *sik teng mm sik gong*—*I understand*
but I can't speak, a common refrain

amongst second-generation immigrants,
a nonsensical kind of immigrant

who's never moved countries, who's never seen
the motherland, who struggles to speak

to her own mother. Instead, I cook
what I remember: mapo tofu, tong yuen,

ginger scallion fish. My mother listens
for the whisper of her child's hunger

after a long journey, prepares ramen
at midnight, sits in silence until I return

the empty bowl. I read the laboured way she moves
and understand the weight of the years

and the heavy resilience in carrying on. I wonder
whether we'll be able to speak to each other

when we come back as hungry ghosts,
whether we'll have a communal place to haunt.

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