

Monkey Hands

A Daughter's Inheritance

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English 313 (Creative Writing)

Mentor: Dr. Ann Pancake

Artist Statement

“Monkey Hands” is an autobiographical short story that explores identity displacement in a multicultural setting. The story uses narrative, scene, and figurative language to describe the mother-daughter relationship with my mother, an Indonesian-born, Chinese immigrant. I was born and raised in Miami, Florida, a primarily Hispanic city, which made me question my mother’s Asian lifestyle. I compared my life with my peers, which challenged my ability to fit in with the societal and cultural environment that differed from my household. I focused on a traditional, Asian way of pineapple cutting because it reflects my mother’s persona: artistic, resourceful, precise. When I moved to Hawai‘i I noticed the parallels of my upbringing with my life on the island. Her way of expressing love was not with “I love you,” but with criticism. Later in my life I realized that her tough love was not indicative of how much she loved me, but how she loved me. My mother did not immerse me in the Chinese culture; she handed down an Asian-influenced skillset that she thought was lacking in the American lifestyle. She taught me how to utilize my hands and surroundings, invest time and knowledge into what I needed, and appreciate what this earth has to offer.

I turn the body to lie on its side, scalping its head clean of all unwanted skin. With a steady hand I clench my sharpened, straightedge knife, slicing so its blade pushes away from me. I peel away the thin, spiked layer of skin, careful not to waste any of the valuable meat. I twist my wrist to follow the rounding of the body’s horizon.

Cutting out the eyes while saving as much flesh as possible requires absolute precision. With a firm, yet cautious grip, I place my knife parallel to the lining of the eye

and push down at a forty-five degree angle. I stop as my blade reaches just below the eye’s center. On the opposite side of the eye I slice in a perpendicular manner so the bottom of the slices meet, allowing for the eye to just pop up with the flick of my wrist and join the pile on the side. I am careful not to leave any residue. One by one I cut out the eyes in diagonal rows, creating an organized spiral of layers from top to bottom.

With no head to think, no eyes to see, and no skin



This piece was written as a creative nonfiction assignment for my creative writing course. As I am obtaining two Bachelor’s degrees in English and Journalism, I experiment with the differing styles of writing. I am interested in storytelling that explores science, culture and cultural disparity, environmentalism, and much more. While writing the story, I was challenged in translating the complexity of parental approval, belonging in society, and cultural differences via the art of pineapple cutting. With some guidance from my professor, Ann Pancake, I was able to weave these issues into the story in a subtle, but apparent way.

to yield, the pineapple lies vulnerable. For many years I apprenticed under a professional pineapple peeler, my mother. Her mother, I am told, is an even better pineapple peeler. Here I am taking almost an hour—it takes my mother 15 minutes—to cut this pineapple that I can scarf down in less than five minutes.

I walked up my doorsteps earlier today and picked up an overly taped, priority mail package from “Mom Le Jeune.” I brought the package to the kitchen and cut the tape along the edges of the box with a knife. Now I live in a pineapple-thriving island far, far away from my personal professional pineapple peeler. Helpless as I am my mother knew what to send. I opened the box and appreciated each item in its entirety. Dried mango from the yard she spent hours preparing. Handmade, reusable crocheted bags to take grocery shopping. Two knives worthy of sculpting gold. One to cut pineapples, another to cut the same pineapple in a different angle. Apparently I am not yet a good enough pineapple peeler to cut with just one knife.

“Why can’t you just cut it straight down and peel the skin and eyes together? It takes too long this way.” I questioned my mother’s mad methods.

“If I did it that way I would lose half of the pineapple. You want as much as you can get. Yes it takes time, but cutting it this way is an art, too. My mother did it like this, even better and faster than me,” my mother said, with all the pineapple-cutting wisdom in the world.

I cut the pineapple into slices that look like flattened flowers created by the crevices of the removed eyes. I pick up a pineapple flower and eat it over the sink; I could just hear my mother screaming at me not to make a mess. I allow the juices to slop over my chin. The stringy fibers lodge their way between my teeth. The acidity burns the corner of my lips. The fruit reminds my tongue of races to the kitchen against my brothers—survival of the fittest—for the pineapple slices my mother worked so hard on perfecting. I finish eating the first slice and throw out the small disc of a core into the trash. I can see the spots where I cut out too much flesh, cut too crooked. If my mother saw that . . .

I think about how she was always there when I would cut a pineapple, criticizing my every move. She was always there to make me feel incompetent. She was always there to startle me, knife in hand and, “Wah! You cut too much! No good!” She was always there to let me know how wrong I did it. She was always there to take the knife out of my hand, take the precious pineapple from under me, take over. I didn’t mind, I just wanted the pineapple.

The summer before I left home for Hawai’i, I pursued the art of pineapple cutting—correctly. Learn I did. I asked my mother to mentor me. This business agreement she took seriously. I remember asking my older brother to help me move from Miami to Hawai’i. My mother did not oppose the idea. However, she thought she should be the one to help me move. Odd, I thought. She never seemed concerned or interested in my life. Not in a neglectful type of way, but in some kind of my-daughter-can-handle-herself-tough-love type of way. I assumed she would not be amused about my moving cross-country, proud (was she proud?) of me in the quiet, Chinese way she has always been. She knew I had grown up, was capable of taking care of myself. She never asked if I needed help. She just made sure I left with her pineapple powers, and for us, that was enough.

I bite into the last slice of the pineapple—always the ugliest—the slice my brothers and I would not eat. The slice my mother claims is the sweetest. She is right. She is always right.

When my mother sees something done wrong, she takes it upon herself to fix it. When I had to use her collection of needles and threads she would watch me struggle until she couldn’t watch anymore and finish the job. When I tried to bake some goodies she would show me how to whisk the mixture until it did not need to be whisked anymore. The end product must be perfect. Doing something wrong was a reflection of my mother’s abilities, an insult she was not willing to represent. When I spent hours doing my homework and working on projects she never asked for my report card, she knew my grades needed no attention. When I purchased my first car she never told me how to budget for the insurance, she knew I could. But she knew I needed her for those things you don’t get taught in school, like pineapple cutting, so I let her pride have its way.

I stretch out my sore hands after holding onto my stencil of a knife and my sculpture of a pineapple for nearly an hour straight. My mother handpicked these knives for me. In some subtle way, she sends me her blessing to cut my own pineapples, with her knives and method of course. I think about my mother hugging me at the airport, crying. Tears were shed on very few occasions in our household, especially from her. I take my last bite into this amateur-cut pineapple slice.

Oftentimes I answer the phone call that travels through time zones.

“Kunyük, kunyük,” my mother calls me baby monkey in her native tongue, Indonesian. Monkeys,

of course, are not found in Florida. During the best of sweaty mango-collecting days, my mother could be found leaping on the thinnest of branches, barefoot and agile as a monkey. During mango season, she was a hero. My mother, and her children, were among the only ones in the neighborhood able to collect the ripe mangos before letting them hit the ground, bruising, and wasting away. The only monkeys in Florida were in our backyard.

She moved to Miami from her island home when she was 28 years old. With a mango seed tucked gently in her luggage, she brought a little piece of home with her.

Being raised by a monkey in Miami was strange. I was forced to use my hands to collect magazine clippings for poster board presentations, flour and water for my Mt. Rushmore model. My friends went to craft stores to buy perfectly pre-cut scrapbook pieces and top-of-the-line clay. Life didn't seem fair. Now, living in Hawai'i, the monkey skills I tried to repress growing up are more beneficial than when they used to seem useless. I can climb unlim-

ited mango trees and furnish my home by the magic of refurbishing trash, all with the hands my mother shaped to think resourcefully. She wasn't training me to be weird and different from everyone else like I thought she was. She was training me to be creative, independent.

I moved to Hawai'i from my Miami home at the age of 20. She shaped my hands to reflect her own. These tools are not quite as perfect as hers but they are set with the wisdom I need to take care of myself. With my hands tucked gently in my pockets, I brought a little piece of home with me.

After cutting my first ugly pineapple without my mother hovering over me I feel proud. I feel old. Miles, states, and oceans apart from my island-bred mentor to an island girl in the making, I have never felt more like my mother's daughter than I do now. I can still hear her nagging when I cut too deep, cut too much, eat the slices way too fast. I wash the knives and place them in the dish rack to dry.