

Fall 2020

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Recommended Citation

Wang, Jieyan (2020) "The Blue Umbrella," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 92 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss92/25>

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JIEYAN WANG

THE BLUE UMBRELLA

YESTERDAY, WHEN THE autumn rain was particularly hard, I became my mother's blue umbrella so that I could watch her childhood self. From my seat above her head, I saw her walking home alone from school for the first time. This was before my grandmother became wrinkled; she was still in her twenties. My mother carefully stepped around the puddles on the streets in her squeaking yellow boots. Her backpack sagged around her shoulders in the rain. She breathed in the wet air and the sound of the whirring cars. It was then that she realized that she was lost.

She stood there for a minute, clutching my handle in her hands. Scared of speaking to strangers, she sat on the doorstep of a convenience store. As she watched the men and women in heavy coats walk by, she counted the minutes on her pocket watch. One. Two. Tick. Tock.

It was fifty-eight minutes before my grandmother noticed that she had not come home and called the police to find her. That night, my mother returned home in a white-and-black police car. When my grandmother asked what had happened, all my mother did was shiver.



I TURNED INTO my mother's blue umbrella to witness my mother and my grandmother eating dinner five days after my mother got lost in the streets. From my corner in the dining room, I could see what was on the table: two plates of mashed potatoes, both half-eaten. The rain had slowed outside. A few rays of sunshine broke through the clouds.

My mother put down her fork and said, "I don't understand. Why can't I just walk back with you? Yesterday, I almost got lost again."

"You still found your way back here," My grandmother replied, scooping more potatoes into her mouth.

"You used to always walk me back. What's different?"

"You'll be fine. Eat your potatoes."

My mother opened her mouth and then shut it again. Many years later, I asked my mother why we never visited my grandmother. My mother answered that she was born when my grandmother was too young. Carrying this living weight all through her youth, my grandmother eventually became tired of taking care of my mother. So, she stopped walking my mother home from school and instead left her in the rain.

However, my mother did not know this as she finished her dinner, eating mouthful after mouthful of potatoes in silence.



I BECAME MY mother's blue umbrella to sit next to my mother as she gazed into the fireplace. My canopy was still wet. It was only one hour after my mother's fifty-seventh walk from school alone.

My mother closed her eyes to listen to the crackle of the flames. She thought about how empty the house was. It was only her and my grandmother, who was tucked in away in the bedroom on the opposite side of their home. Often times, my mother went several long hours after school without speaking to anyone. On those days, she sat in front of the fireplace, thinking about how lonely the word "lonely" looked with its two tall *l*'s standing far apart from each other.

As my canopy began to dry, I wondered what it would be like to be one of the raindrops clinging to me. During storms, thousands of them fell towards the ground. But in the heat of the fire, they disappeared one-by-one, as if they had forgotten that they were once together in one cloud.

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I WAS MY mother's blue umbrella on the day that my mother became an adult and left my grandmother's home. It wasn't raining. So, my mother folded me up and put me under her arm. As she walked under the bright sun, she wasn't sure where she was going. She just wanted to find a place in the world that wasn't empty and cold.

She ended up going to many places, working many jobs. Once, she served as a waitress in a restaurant next to a cow farm. Another time, she

became a wide-smiling salesperson for a vintage clothing store. She had that same smile on when she met my father in a café on a weekend.

The first thing he said was, “Don’t your cheeks hurt from smiling so much?”

“I’ve gotten used to it. I could smile all day if I wanted to,” she replied.

“But still, doesn’t it hurt?”

“If it does, I don’t feel it.”

My father could tell that my mother was lying. For the rest of the day, my father and my mother talked in the café. He asked her about her smiles. She turned the topic towards the rain. She said that she sometimes wanted to drench herself in a storm so that she could ask the water in her clothes whether it was alone or not. This was what she wanted to know: the number of ways one could feel solitude.

My father listened to her ramble. By the time she was done talking, it was already nighttime.

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SEVERAL YEARS AFTER my father first met my mother in the café, they moved in together. My mother retrieved the umbrella from her closet and handed it to him.

When he closed his hands around the handle, he almost dropped it. The metal shaft was frigid. The iciness spread into his arms. Still, he held it, feeling the temperature drop in his veins. Outside, rain slammed against

the windows. The pounding raindrops vibrated through his bones.

A few years after I was born, my mother told me my father's life story, which turned out to be a sequence of deaths: his father died in his childhood, his mother in his teens, then his grandparents, and then his aunts and uncles. From that day in the café, my father recognized in my mother the same loneliness that dwelled inside his ribcage.

Now, as he held the umbrella, he felt the coldness that flooded both of their bodies. It was a full minute before he handed the umbrella back to my mother. In the sky above them, a bolt of lightning flashed. A thunderclap rang through their ears.

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I BECAME MY mother's blue umbrella so that I could watch my mother cradle my infant self. It was summer. Sunlight poured into the house. My father was mowing the front lawn.

As my mother sung me a lullaby, she wondered what kind of child I would become. Every day, she rubbed my hands between hers to check to see if they had gone cold. She put her ear against my chest to see if a hole was growing there. My father said she was being paranoid, but secretly, he worried too. Neither of them ever quite got rid of the empty spots in their bodies. They feared I had been born with the same hollowness that haunted them.

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I TURNED INTO the blue umbrella to be at my mother's side as she watched my childhood self play on the playground. In the distance, I spotted the little girl that was once me rocking back and forth on a swing set. The sky was still a light blue. But heavy gray clouds gathered above us.

My mother placed her hand on the umbrella's shaft. As her fingers wrapped around it, I could hear what she was thinking. For a moment, she contemplated leaving me behind in the park. She would pack up her things and walk away. Then she would have dinner with my father, and only decades later, when both of them were old, would they remember me again.

Before she could make a decision, my childhood self ran over and clasped her hand. My mother wondered if her grip was strong enough to keep hold of me. If I ever left her, she wanted to be the first one to let go. Twenty minutes later, we arrived home. She released my hand and went to her room, shutting the door behind her.

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I WAS MY mother's blue umbrella on the day that it became mine. On my eleventh birthday, she gave it to me. I ripped apart the gift wrap and stared at the tattered, faded umbrella.

"What is this?" Back then, I wanted many things—toys, books, clothes—but not a used jumble of fabric and metal.

“It’s an umbrella. It was mine. My mother gave it to me when I was about your age,” my mother said.

“I thought you were going to get me dolls.”

“Next birthday, maybe. You’re a big girl now. You can walk alone now. Even in the rain.”

“Why isn’t the umbrella new?”

“It was mine. Now it’s yours.”

At eleven years old, I didn’t know enough to ask: How long would it take for my mother to find me if I ever got lost? Was the umbrella a sign that she wanted me gone, like my grandmother did? Or was it mere resignation, a realization that she couldn’t hold onto me any longer?

I kept the umbrella in my closet until the autumn rain, when I walked to school with only the canopy over my head.

• • •

LAST THANKSGIVING, MY parents and I were sitting at the dining table with a whole-roasted turkey. The storm clouds blocked out the sun, making the world dark. Breathing in the windless air that came before a downpour, we carefully forked the meat into our mouths.

My mother sang to break the silence. The melody was quiet, almost inaudible. But I listened to it. In the few minutes after she finished, I almost believed that her words had stopped the rain. My parents and I talked through the evening about everything from the weather report to neigh-

borhood gossip. By the time we were finished, the sun had sunk below the horizon.

That night, I pressed my hand against the window in my room to feel the raindrops rolling down the pane. Even though my fingers went numb from the coldness, I tried to remember what it felt like at dinner. The talk. The sudden closeness. The fleeting belief.

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TODAY, AS I wake up from becoming my mother's blue umbrella, I am about the age where I should be leaving my parents' home. Every day, when I look at the umbrella leaning against the corner in my room, I wonder how lonely I will be when I walk out of my parents' front door for good. I wonder if I am lonely right now, and if so, how long it will last.

On some days, I put my hand on the handle, waiting for the time when I will feel the iciness rush through me. Then I will know that the holes in my parents' chests have passed on to me. From that moment on, I will go through life grasping onto people, recognizing that my fingers are not strong enough to make them stay.

But the handle is not frozen yet. The sun is coming over the horizon. I sit in my bed and feel the warmth of dawn on my face, in my chest, through my heart.