

The Lost Girl

for all the “lost” girls of China

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“[Newborn] Girls commonly didn’t make it beyond the birthing room. . .Maxine Hong Kingston recalls hearing tales of midwives who prepared boxes of clean ashes beside the birthing bed in case the baby was a girl. If so, they swiftly pressed her little face into the ashes. ‘It was very easy,’ Kingston says her mother told her.”

—*The Lost Daughters of China* by Karin Evans (2000)

I cannot forget how
Mother filled her grandmother’s
hand carved cherry wood box
with the silky gray ash
saved from the morning fire.
Tears rolled down her still smooth cheeks,
and dropped onto the fine soot, turning
the misty gray ash as black as the moonless night.
She feared the future.
Her wait burdened with the worry
her belly contained another failure—
another girl.
(new stanza)
She saw me, watching from the corner
but did not speak,
and I asked no questions,
as with her swelling belly, she knelt
and placed the box beneath her bed.
The silence thickened, pulsating
breathing through the room.
I had heard the shouting,
Father and Grandmother’s voices
raised in anger.
A failure once,
she must not fail again.
Even at eight, I knew
what must be.

I moved to her, and she leaned on me
forcing herself to rise
until we stood side-by-side.
Her hand clutched my shoulder so fiercely
my skin burned and my bones cracked.
I did not complain.

I knew my cost.

This time there could be no girl.