

# L E A V E S

After the revolution came to China  
all my mah mah owned was a wide-brimmed sunhat  
that her husband wove from reeds.  
Pretend, he said.  
You are a grand lady walking in the palace garden.

But the regime was relentless.

One unblinking eye stares from the sky above Canton:  
sweat-slicked hands clasp heavy ploughs,  
dry lips call for skinny cattle.  
Thousands of narrow backs  
twist from the weight  
of carrying a dynasty through famine.  
Under the gaze of that hot sun  
my little mah mah's body became the brown ochre of falling leaves.

Decades later, in Lyall Bay, Mah Mah hands me photos.  
A baby in hung sik, lucky red  
blankets swaddled tighter than they ought to be.

I remember that feeling – a deep pressure in my chest,  
wrinkled brown hands wrap over and over,  
a ballast tied down in a storm.  
While those hands still moved, they whispered to me.  
*You will never go hungry as I did.*  
*Winds may ravage this land, yet you will never be cold.*

On Saturdays we eat cheong fun  
out of takeaway boxes at the market.  
I hang a keipo to dry in icy Wellington wind.

Lily Ng



**mah mah:** father's mother

**hung sik:** bright red

**cheong fun:** a delicious snack made from wide rice noodles wrapped around various fillings (vegetables, barbecue pork, shrimp) and served with soy sauce

**keipo:** a short-sleeved, tailored dress with a high neckline that became popular among women in Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s (also known as a cheongsam or Mandarin dress)

(These words are all Cantonese.)

# Leaves

by Lily Ng

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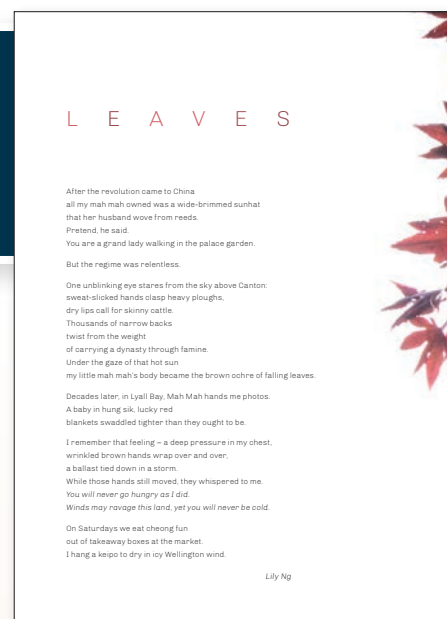
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