

## ***And Fire Begets Earth***

*by Jean Kwok*

### ***Earth***

From where I was hiding under the kitchen table, I saw second brother escape from the bathroom when Papa finally forced the door open. There were thick stripes on second brother's back and ribs, red as banners on a dragon boat, and his bony shoulders heaved when he pulled on his thin T-shirt. I could hear Papa talking in a quiet voice to eldest brother behind the closed bathroom door.

It was all because second brother had said, "I don't feel like it" when Mama asked him to go buy some tomatoes. Eldest brother had clenched his fists like a hero in a kung fu movie and then the next thing we knew, he'd dragged second brother into the tiny bathroom and we'd heard the fierce thwacking of a towel and second brother's cries.

I shrank further under the table as second brother drew up a chair and his knees almost knocked against my face. I didn't want to get too close to the kitchen wall because the cracks were filled with roaches that could come out and crawl on you. Second brother's Chinese was never very clear but when he got upset, his voice seemed to bubble from his chest as though he were trying to speak underwater. He kept saying he was sorry. Now I could see Mama's plastic slippers approach and when she stood next to second brother, I quickly wrapped myself around her legs.

"Ping!" she yelled. "It's dirty under there! What, are you a dog?"

Then she left me clinging to her legs and turned back to second brother. "His temper is even worse than your father's," she said. "I don't know what I will do with him. Ever since we got here, it's been one worry after another."

The bathroom door squeaked open and I tried to slide myself between Mama and the kitchen table. Second brother seemed to get smaller as Papa and eldest brother approached us. Mama planted herself in front of second brother like a wall.

Eldest brother's muscles were still bunched tight underneath his shirt. He reached around Mama and slapped second brother on the arm. "Eh, don't get so upset," he said. "You have to learn not to be rude to Mama, that's all."

"All right, let's not talk about past things," Mama said. She gave second brother a push to send him out of the room. "Since you boys can't do anything but fight, Papa, will you go get those tomatoes for me? Only the cheap kind. Take Ping with you. Eldest brother, the kitchen needs to be swept."

I was glad I could go with Papa. Ever since we came to America a few months ago, I had to stay out of eldest brother's way too. It was because he had to find jobs for us since Papa didn't speak English. I asked Mama why we had to leave my toys and Grandma in China and she said we owed our Aunt Mei everything for getting us out at all. The only time I'd met Aunt Mei, she'd pinched my cheeks until they hurt and asked Mama why I was wearing such ugly pants. Mama told me eldest brother had to be the man of the house now.

I knew some English, like eldest and second brother, because everyone spoke English in my third grade class and I caught on quickly. I also learned a lot from television. It didn't seem so hard to me, even though sometimes when people spoke too fast, the words sounded like the river behind our old house in China. Papa said he and Mama were farmers and farmers didn't have to be educated; only the earth mattered, he said. But he still tried to study English.

I followed Papa down the wooden stairs outside our apartment. It smelled cool and damp, and a shaft of light from the small window at the landing made the dust glow golden at our feet. I tried to walk like Papa, with my shoulders pinched back and a big belly in front, but he glanced at me when he reached the bottom of the stairs and I was caught. Papa's laugh was filled with distant thunder. He held out his hand to me as he swung open the front door.

Small clumps of garbage rolled past us on the street like tumbleweeds in a cowboy movie I saw on TV. I spotted a dead pigeon lying on the sidewalk underneath some newspapers. The wind ran through its rumpled feathers. I wondered if a hawk had killed it, or maybe a brick had fallen on its head. Mama

told me Brooklyn was very dangerous and I had to be on the lookout for things that could hurt me -- left, right, above and below. I grasped Papa's hand tightly the whole way.

The grocery store had narrow aisles stacked high with candy, bottles of soda, potato chips, and a lot of other jars and boxes. I was turning a bag of pretzels around and around, wondering how they would taste, when I saw the white man behind the register staring at me and I knew he suspected I was a thief. I put the pretzels back and hurried to find Papa. He was in the vegetable section, carefully checking each tomato before he put it in the plastic bag.

"See, Ping," Papa said, "this is a good one -- not too green but not too soft either. Now, this one's skin is broken, so we don't want it."

"That one in the bag has a little mark like a cigarette burn," I said.

"You are a smart boy." Papa smiled and he took that tomato out.

When Papa and I were finished, we went to the scale to weigh them. The man who had been behind the register came over to us. He wore a dirty apron wrapped around his thick hips and his face was unevenly dotted by tufts of grey hair, like a chicken after it'd been plucked. His forehead shone under the supermarket light.

The man said something in English, chuckling in a friendly way. Papa nodded his head quickly and laughed in response.

The man slapped Papa on the shoulder, joking and talking while he scooped more tomatoes into our bag. Papa tugged on my shirt.

"Ping, what is he saying?" he asked in a low voice.

"I don't know, Papa -- something about a sale."

The man continued to put tomatoes on the scale, grinning the entire time.

"Good!" he said.

"Good! Good!" Papa responded, laughing again. I wanted to remind him that we hadn't checked those tomatoes to see if they were all right but I kept quiet. The man scratched himself behind the ear and led the way to the register. I knew I should do something because I was the English speaker but I didn't know what.

The man put the tomatoes in two bags and rang them up without looking at us. Papa was flushed although he kept nodding and smiling. The man pointed at the amount on the register. It was more than twice what Mama had said to spend.

"Good," Papa said quietly. He paid and we left.

On the way home, we each carried a bag because I am Papa's helper.

"Mama will be happy with all these tomatoes, eh, Ping?" Papa said, laughing the way he had in the store.

"Yes, Papa."

The bag of tomatoes was heavy and carved red marks into my palms.

## **Gold**

It was very hot in the factory although my third grade teacher, Mrs. Kelley, said it was now the end of autumn. Sweat ran down the sides of my cheeks and neck, making my hair clump like the brushes I used to dip in black ink to write Chinese characters. There was so much fabric dust in the air, the fluorescent light shone through in a haze. The dust covered the sewing machines, the counters where Mama lay her scissors and tape measures, the racks of clothes hung thick as leaves in a jungle. Sometimes, I would draw pictures in the dust with my fingers.

It was my job to cover the dresses and shirts with clear plastic bags. I had to stand on a chair in front of a rack with a large roll of bags over my head. Underneath was a long metal pole with a hook at the top. I bent my knees to pick a dress from the rack to my left, hung it on the hook, then reached with both hands to pull the next bag in the roll over the dress. I then made a sweeping karate chop across the top of the bag to separate it from the others. Eldest brother had taught me a few karate moves and I liked to practice when I could.

I needed both hands to get the dress off the pole and hang it on the rack to my right. If the plastic caught on the hook and tore because I couldn't quite reach, I'd have start again.

My neck and arms ached. But eldest brother said that to be a soldier was to suffer. I knew soldiers had to go through thirst and torture. And eldest brother had quit high school to work full-time at the factory ever since Papa began to

cough at night. Papa had already lost so much weight that Mama kept feeding him crushed deer horns and boiled shark fins from the medicine store in Chinatown.

Papa sewed at home until I got off school and then he would go to the factory with me when I finished my homework. Today, he'd bought me a packet of Wrigley's Spearmint gum at the subway station, but I had to promise not to tell Mama because it was a waste of money. I was saving the wrappers to make a paper belt the way my friend Pedro at school showed me. At the factory, Papa worked with the women on the sewing machines.

Second brother also came to the factory after his school but sometimes he went to English classes in the evenings and couldn't work. It was strange that eldest brother wasn't in school anymore because he'd been the smart one, always winning the prizes. Second brother had been the dumb one. But eldest brother said it was up to second brother and me to get an education now. For him, America was the golden mountain of our opportunity and he wanted to give us every chance to succeed.

When I was working on the line, I had to pee so I got off the chair and ran to the bathroom. Then I looked in the men's section for eldest brother.

Most of the men worked on huge steamers that pressed the clothes. The area smelled sharp and wet, like when Mama washed our clothes and boiled them on the stove. The outlines of men's bodies were first clear, then misty, through the shifting billows of steam and the backs of the dark heads were all alike. Eldest brother was lost among them.

When we first began to work at the factory, I'd look for eldest brother by checking for the gold chain he'd always worn around his neck. It had a jade idol of the goddess Kuan Yin on it, for protection. But eldest brother had taken the necklace off and given it to Mama to keep because the metal burned his skin from the heat.

Each time a man opened his press to lay out a piece of clothing, long lines of steam trailed between the metal jaws. Once I saw a man brush his fingertips against the surface and his skin immediately erupted in blisters. When the men slammed the jaws shut, a huge cloud puffed out, and, like a flesh-eating demon, it would swallow them up.

A man knocked into me with his arm as he was reaching for a new piece of clothing and hollered, "Get out of here!"

When I ran back to Mama, she was just uncovering the rice she'd brought for our dinner. Papa was yawning and rubbing the imprint his glasses had left on the bridge of his nose.

I'd already begun to scoop rice into my mouth with chopsticks when eldest brother arrived. He dropped into a chair and leaned his head against the wall. The thick mass of his hair left a wet stain and streaks of sweat started running down the white paint. With his eyes closed, he reached for the bottle of water Mama handed him and drank.

"Here, eat something...." she said.

His eyes were still closed. I could feel a haze of heat surround his body.

While I was eating my rice, I watched Cindy eat an apple turnover. She had fat black curls and round cheeks and her family had been in the U.S. almost five years. She was bossy and always talking about how they were applying for citizenship papers. Her sneakers had superheroes on them.

"I've been to the Statue of Liberty," she said.

I knew about the Statue of Liberty but I'd never seen it.

"It's big," she said, "bigger than this factory."

"I know." I was looking at her shoes. "We've been there many times."

I pictured a huge statue like the golden Buddhist gods in temple except that the Statue of Liberty was standing rather than sitting on a lotus blossom. I loved the temple in Chinatown. Whenever I went there with Mama, before I lit incense for any one of the gods, I always went through the whole temple and bowed to each of the idols to say hello because Mama taught me to be polite. I knew that idols were like houses for the gods to live in when they came to visit us. Otherwise, the gods stayed in the heavens and earth. I wondered where the Statue of Liberty lived when she was not in her idol.

After finishing my rice, I wanted to play with the other children before going back to work but the manager came hurrying across the floor, calling, "It's a surprise inspection! They are coming up the stairs!"

"Let them find us!" said Betty, Cindy's older sister. She was already in high school. "They don't pay us enough any--"

Her mother shook her. "Shut up, stupid girl! Who will stuff your mouth with food when the factory is closed?"

Betty's face turned red.

Quickly, a woman who smelled like onions shoved all the children into the bathrooms, separating the girls from the boys. I was crammed in with six other boys and tried not to giggle. I knew it was very dangerous. My stomach jerked as if rubber balls were bouncing in it. We were stuffed around the toilet and I got scared that I would make a noise and we'd be discovered and it would be my fault. Everyone else was so quiet I could hear them breathing.

"I have to pee," I whispered.

"Oh no...." everyone groaned.

"You'll splash on us!" one fat boy said. He was bracing himself with an arm against the wall.

"I'll be very careful," I promised.

Johnny leaned over me and hissed, "Hold it in!"

Johnny was already fourteen and could make a muscle in his arm move as though there were a mouse running underneath the skin. That settled it. I pressed my legs together and nodded.

There were voices in English on the other side of the door. I didn't want to giggle anymore. There were two different voices and they were deep. After a while, they moved away.

I jumped when the door finally opened but it was just one of the workers. Mama was waiting for me when I came out and she brushed my forehead three times with her left palm to take away my fear.

On the subway home late that night, I fell asleep against eldest brother's arm as he was telling me about our future, "And then we'll have a nice house, with a garden and ducks, maybe out in Queens...."

### ***Water***

I was standing in front of the open oven door, first putting my hands up to the heat and then rubbing them across my runny nose. The skin was red and blistered so that when I looked in the mirror, I could pretend I had a mustache. Eldest brother had shown me many times how to blow my nose in a handkerchief but I never managed to get the hang of it and I wiped and wiped until the skin broke. It was always sore. My teacher, Mrs. Kelley, told me I had to put Vase-something on it but I didn't know what that was.

"Stop doing that!" said Mama, "Why do you always have colds?" She stared at me and sighed. "Go change for school."

I didn't want to leave the oven, which was the only source of heat in our apartment, but I went to the wooden drawer where Mama kept my clothes. The central heating in the building had been broken ever since we moved in and the oven we kept on night and day created only a small circle of warmth.

Earlier that winter, the oven had broken down and the apartment had become icy cold. Eldest brother called in a huge black man dressed in blue and white from the Brooklyn Union Gas company. Eldest brother explained in his funny English how we had no heat except for the oven. The Brooklyn Union Gas

man had a kind face and when he saw me, he ran his hand over his eyes as though they hurt.

I yanked on the school clothes Mama had made me as fast as I could and my skin shrank from the freezing cloth. I tried to put my hair into place -- the front always stuck up in the morning -- and even my own hair was so cold it stung my fingers.

One of the windows in the living room rustled. It was covered by black garbage bags and gusts of wind swelled the bags into the apartment. From where I was standing, I could see through the window that still had glass panes; it was snowing. The first time there had been a storm this winter, second brother brought in a bucket of snow so I could see it close up. He told me snow was always different but it looked like the smooth shiny surface of a rock to me. I stuck my finger in it and made a hole. And then all of the snow melted into water. Eldest brother had said we would make snowmen like the families on television but he hasn't had the time yet.

I went to the window to try to see the street but the glass was blanketed by a layer of ice on the inside.

"Ping!" Mama was calling me.

I ran to the kitchen and she was standing in front of the open oven. She screwed up her face and rubbed skin cream into it as though she were scrubbing a dish, then pulled me to her and did the same thing to me, which I hated. Before we went downstairs, Mama warned me not to open my mouth in the wind or it might freeze permanently into that shape.

When we went out, the wind hit us like a fist. The sleet lashed at our faces and we stood outside the door a moment, trying to catch our breath. I could barely stand on my own. I scrambled behind Mama and buried my face in the thin plush coat she'd gotten in China. My plastic boots sunk into the ice and my toes already hurt from the cold.

Mama reached back and hooked my arm through hers. We headed forward, bent over like the old crippled woman who used to live in our village. Even without the storm, school was far away. There was a school bus but when I asked my teacher about it, I hadn't really understood what she'd said. Mama told me not to ask again in case the teacher thought I was stupid so Mama said she would just walk me to school every day.

We struggled past boarded up stores, only lifting our heads occasionally to see where we were. The ice glittered underneath the red toes of my boots as if it were trying to hypnotize me. We passed a Donald Duck mitten another kid had dropped in the gutter. I clung onto the bright orange fur of Mama's coat. It was prickly like a porcupine from the ice clustered on it. I dug my fingers into her fur.

I could vaguely hear Mama talking to the goddess Kuan Yin.

After crossing a five lane street, we passed a park and then we straightened a bit because we were now in the midst of smaller, tree-lined streets where the buildings offered more protection from the wind.

I knew we were close. I liked school. It was so warm there.

I pulled on Mama's sleeve. "Mama, you have to walk back by yourself."

"What?" She couldn't hear me through the storm.

I repeated what I'd said.

Mama's thin eyelashes were crusted with snow. She squinted to see me more clearly. "It's getting lighter. Don't worry about me."

Finally, the school stood in front of us. We went up to the brown metal doors on the side but when I yanked on the handle, they didn't move. They were locked. Maybe everyone had to go in the front because of the snow.

As Mama held onto the iron bars of the fence that surrounded the playground, we slowly made our way around the school. I hung on behind.

Finally, when we reached the front, Mama pulled the high wooden doors so hard they rattled. Then she shut her eyes and pounded with clenched fists until we heard the door being unlocked and it cracked open. I felt the heat burst from inside. A woman with hair piled on top of her wide head peeked out. I recognized her as one of the security guards.

"What are you two doing here?" She wagged a finger at us. "School's closed on account of the worst blizzard in years. **No school.** Lord, don't you people listen to the radio?" She was muttering to herself as she closed the door.

My heart dropped into my stomach like a stone and the wind gusted around us. Mama fumbled for my hand as we turned to make our way home.

## **Wood**

In the dark weeks of February, both grandmothers died in China.

Early one morning, I woke to Mama crying. Her face was crumpled like a dishrag, and she held an airmail letter so tightly in her fist that some of the stamps were beginning to peel off the envelope. Papa and both brothers were in the kitchen with her but their faces were made of wood.

"I will never see Ma again. I knew when we left China that I would never see Ma again... and I told her, 'We will send for you,' but I always knew it would be too late." Mama was heaving for air. I was scared to see Mama cry and even though I wasn't sure what had happened to Grandma, I cried too.

Mama wrapped me in her arms that smelled like skin cream and salt and said, "You are a good boy, you are a good boy."

We wept together a long time. Finally, eldest brother ran from the apartment, covering his face. Second brother followed him.

"See what you've done!" Papa said angrily. His eyes were red as traffic lights. "Stop that women's nonsense!"

Mama refused to cook anything but plain rice for dinner that night and no one dared complain, not even Papa.

Then, a week later, we received a letter saying that Papa's mother had also died. Papa sat in the corner alone, facing the wall, and I heard him making small squeaking sounds, like a mouse. None of us really knew Grandma on Papa's side because it had always been the other Grandma who took care of us.

Mama busied herself with work, her face hard.

The next day, Papa took out a bag filled with long pieces of sandalwood, which is holy because it can repel evil spirits. He had brought the wood from

China, meaning to sell it in the United States. Each of the pieces was bound in layers of linen and as the men unwrapped them, the sweet clean smell of sandalwood filled the room.

Eldest brother held his piece and hesitated. "Mama, maybe we shouldn't use this. It's worth a lot of money."

"These are evil times," Mama said firmly. "We must create in the face of destruction because they are both sides of the same coin. In the cycle of all things, it is said:

*earth begets gold  
gold begets water  
and water begets wood  
wood begets fire  
and fire begets earth*

Carve the wood."

So, while Mama and I watched, Papa and my brothers slowly sliced away at each piece of sandalwood until a dagger emerged. It was as though they wept through each stroke of the knife. Mama's eyes swelled and overflowed but no one moved from their spot until five wooden daggers had been made, one for each member of our family.

From that night on, we slept with the sandalwood daggers under our pillows, for protection.

## **Fire**

Later, Mama would thank the gods for their protection because we were all asleep the night our building caught on fire, and worse might have happened. I was buried under a heavy load of blankets and scraps of fabric from the factory when I felt warmth in the air. I wasn't used to it and woke up. The room was gray with darkness yet swarms of roaches were pouring from the cracks in the wall and rats scurried from the baseboards.

At first, I lay still as though paralyzed, then turned over and pushed at Mama's sleeping body. I shoved with all my strength and yet she seemed as huge and immovable as the mountain Buddha trapped demons under.

"Mama! Wake up, Mama!"

She sat upright and smelled the air.

"Papa! Take Ping outside!" Mama ran into the next room, where the smoke was already growing thick.

Papa took me by the arm and we scrambled into our coats. I heard Mama scream, "Get out of here!" and second brother, barely awake, hurtled down the stairs with Papa and me after him.

Smoke, pouring in from the baseboards, lay like a carpet over the stairs. We covered our mouths with our shirts but I could still taste the smoke. I thought about the small spider plant on the landing. I'd bought it from the school plant sale and I'd been proud to give the teacher the money the way the other kids did. I watered it every other day so I could be a farmer like Papa.

When Papa slowed to take the turn in the stairs, I caught the plant in my hand. It left a circle in the dust on the windowsill. Papa glanced at the little plant as we ran but he said nothing. I could already hear what Mama was sure to say: "Stupid boy!"

The heavy door slammed behind us and we fled across the street. The air was cold and wet.

We could see light flickering inside the dark windows of the restaurant on the ground floor of our building. It moved towards the window and then away again as if it were possessed. I pictured a monster made of flame that had awakened from the depths to swallow our building. I saw it licking the ceiling of the restaurant to see if it liked the taste.

"Why aren't Mama and eldest brother out yet?" second brother asked.

Papa shook his head.

I closed my eyes and invoked Kuan Yin the way Mama taught me. *Kuan Yin, Kuan Yin, I thought, please let Mama and eldest brother be all right. I promise I will never forget to do the sweeping again.*

The thick door stayed closed.

Eldest brother always covered my books for me, in red paper that shone when you rubbed it with your finger. Once, eldest brother had thrown me through the air in a karate move and I'd landed on second brother, who'd been sleeping. I hid my face in my spider plant. The leaves pricked my cheeks.

Three police cars wailed down the street, followed by fire engines. Firemen poured out of the trucks; their shadows twisted and jumped like savages. A crowd was beginning to gather, lining the sidewalk with dark figures.

"We have to tell them eldest brother and Mama are still inside!" I cried.

"Hold on to Ping," Papa said to second brother. As second brother took my hand, Papa crossed the street. He didn't even glance at the firemen but went straight to the door.

"Papa, no!" we yelled.

A fireman ran towards him, shouting, but Papa had already wrenched the door open. We saw a burst of smoke, then Mama and eldest brother pushed their way out. They were doubled over, coughing. Mama had a white cloth covering her mouth and eldest brother was holding a shopping bag. Papa grabbed them and they ran across the street.

I rushed to Mama and began to cry. I was wrapped around her so tightly I could feel her ribs. I still had one hand clamped around the spider plant. Second brother was supporting eldest brother.

Papa shoved eldest brother away from second brother and yelled, "What were you doing in there for so long, imbecile?"

Eldest brother began to stutter. "I, I had to call the fire department, Papa - - that's what you have to do in a fire!"

"No!" Papa roared. "Not even in America do you call the fire department from a burning building! You endangered your mother through your stupidity! I should beat the hell out of you!"

Papa raised his hand to strike eldest brother but eldest brother pulled free and ran behind Mama.

"Stop!" she cried, "I was getting our sandalwood daggers and other valuables, I only had to wait for him a little!"

"I'm sorry, Papa," eldest brother gasped. "Mama tried to get me to leave. I got confused. I didn't even reach the fire department, I called the police by accident!"

"You stupid clump of rice!" But then Papa began to laugh. "Eh, stop that sniveling. You were always a by-the-rules idiot." Papa reached out and ruffled eldest brother's hair.

Mama said, "Come here," and she gathered us in her arms. *Thank you, Kuan Yin*, she prayed, and I whispered the same after her.

Firemen rushed into the building. The crowd drew back as the restaurant windows blew out. Even from across the street, I could hear planks of wood crash inside.

As fire took over our apartment, the black plastic bags covering the front window melted. I felt sick. Eldest brother had bought a green stuffed dog for me. The dog had been a little difficult to sleep with because it was stiff but now I wished I had thought to save it from the fire. Papa took off his glasses and turned away.

I looked at the open-toed slippers I was wearing. I'd brought them from China. They were gold with colored plastic beads and the embroidered

phoenixes glistened against the concrete. My toes were so numb from the cold I wasn't sure I could move them.

Mama glanced at me and stepped out of her own shoes. Without a word, she picked me up and gently shook off my slippers, then dropped me into her shoes. She stood barefoot on the sidewalk as we waited to see what would become of our building.

A nun walked toward Papa. She was small and hunched over in her nun clothes and her face was as white as dough. She must have been from the church around the corner.

"Would you like to come inside and have a cup of coffee?" she asked. Her eyes were blue and she smiled at us. "We have donuts too."

Eldest brother translated for Papa, who smiled politely and said, "Tell her no. Thank you but we are fine."

Eldest brother translated into English for the nun. She raised her eyebrows. They were so pale, you could barely see them.

"But it's so cold," she said. "The little boy... surely the boy could come and get warm...." The nun made a small pleading gesture, spreading her hands towards me.

Papa began to shake his head.

"They are believers-in-Jesus," Mama said. "They will not want us if they know we are Buddhist."

"Please just come in for a moment." The nun laid her hand gently on Mama's arm. Mama must have understood her without translation because she seemed to soften.

"I'm freezing, Mama," I said.

"What do you think, Papa?" Mama asked.

Papa rested his eyes on me, then looked at eldest and second brother. He nodded. "But nobody tell them we're Buddhist."

## ***Earth***

We spent the night of the fire at the house of the nuns and afterwards, we had to live with Aunt Mei for a few weeks. Aunt Mei said we were lazy and in her way but we were family and what was she to do, turn us into the streets? We had to do all the cooking and cleaning. Luckily, one of the nuns knew a landlord in our neighborhood. Eldest brother and Papa talked to him and arranged to rent an apartment. Now, on every Buddhist holiday, Mama packs our traditional food and sends it to the nuns but never tells them it's Buddhist food.

Our new apartment has a backyard. Papa went downstairs to check it out as soon as we moved in. It had been piled so high with trash it was barely possible to see the soil underneath. Weeds sprouted everywhere. While Mama

took care of things inside the apartment, my brothers and Papa and I worked on the yard. My brothers hauled the trash away while Papa and I pulled the weeds.

Then, Papa and I began to slowly sift through every grain of soil, removing small pieces of litter and broken glass with wooden sieves Mama wove for us. My fingers got wrinkled and chapped by the salty earth. Once, I touched a long white worm as big as a snake and I screamed and ran back into the house. Papa flung it across the yard with his hoe. We only had time for the garden on the weekends because of school and the factory but once summer comes, we'll be able to do more. Soon, the soil will be usable and we're going to plant tomatoes.