Foreign Familiar
by Lisa J. Stubbs

I'm reminded of my sometimes terrifying foreignness when a mother and daughter edge in front of us, riding back to back, on their e-bike. Amid the trafficky fluster on this main street in Kunming, China, six lanes are re-drawn to eight or nine by darting bikes, e-bikes, buses, and pushcarts: routine expedition through a crowded city in a country of risk-takers. There's nothing fluid about this commute, nothing rhythmic or graceful in the way some repetitious movements become—the kitchen staff who weave around each other cracking eggs and tossing greens, steaming, chopping, slicing, plating, cleaning, over and over again with dance-like precision. Or even the way friends around a table will reach and pluck and withdraw their chopsticks, arms extended in all directions in continuous sallies of conquest and retreat, while conversation keeps the beat. No, this is loosely organized chaos: ambition, proactivity, efficiency, need, displaying in the hundreds of vehicles manipulating their way forward by whatever means necessary.

It is aggression, and hazard, and normality; it is the daily ride home.

The little girl is facing backwards. Her vision aligns with our car, latches onto my white face through the windshield, and I watch as her nonplussed expression subtly but distinctly changes to one of shock, maybe even terror. She does not blink once as we trail several feet behind the bike, block after block; she does not point or turn to whisper in her mother’s ear; it seems she does not move at all. I smile. I do not wave, concerned a sudden motion will frighten her all the more. I laugh a little on the inside, freshly aware of my own strangeness.

Other children are more curious than scared. A little boy, waiting outside the restaurant where we will eat a pre-wedding feast, spies me and a Taiwanese friend speaking in English. He first hovers around the circumference of our chatter, then bravely approaches, sizing us each up with inquisitive eyes and uncertain ears until an adult voice jars him back to dinner and out of the phenomenon of the foreign.

Sometimes I catch adults staring, too. When I ride the bus, I note how an old lady’s lashes splay ever so slightly as her eyes widen to take in the sight of me or I overhear the faint snigger of a group of young men when they glance in my direction. Sometimes a fashionista with blonde dyed hair will do a double take, remove her designer shades for a momentary, unfiltered view. Strangers will ask for a photo with me. I consider charging, but usually just decline. In this country, where umbrellas are used more for sunshine than for rain, I am unfairly considered fair.

There is a privilege to this kind of foreignness, I’ll admit: a predictable unwarranted admiration, even if it’s sometimes tinged with disdain. But the feeling of it is hardly covetable. The otherness makes me want to remain anonymous and alone, to don headphones or one of the ubiquitous surgical face masks and hide my strangeness. Always I feel slightly guilty for not knowing the language, always pre-judged, whether for good or ill. Although I desperately want to immerse myself, I also want to avoid as many interactions as possible because I don’t have the right words, the right build, the right hair, the right face.

In the end, I welcome this smallest of discomforts as a desirable difficulty. It is good to feel the strangeness of oneself, to recognize the arbitrary nature of the familiar, to be dis-empowered, slightly ill at ease. The disruption gives me pause to self-reflect, to decide how I want to change and how I want to remain the same, to consider what unites me and distances me from others—while abroad and while at home, to think about what I’ve taken for granted that I should perhaps not, to wrestle with the frustration of ignorance, of limits, and to navigate a route (by whatever means necessary) through the traffic of foreign cultures.

But, it also gives me pause to consider what it must be like to feel foreign in one’s own country. It allows me to empathize, albeit to the smallest degree, with black and brown friends of mine who experience this strangeness almost daily in the country they call home.

When I was in my late teens, I recall walking through a posh neighborhood in Queens, New York with a Puerto Rican friend of mine—as much a brother as I’ve ever had. It was late and we were meandering and talking, casually debriefing the movie we’d just seen, but he couldn’t relax. His eyes kept scanning the private streets for cops or territorial residents who might not want us—him, more specifically—sauntering past their homes at night. I understood; I’d internalized enough of my hometown Brooklyn culture to be wary of police and to know how neighborhood lines
represent all sorts of trans-geographical boundaries. There are neighborhoods in which I can’t walk carelessly, as well. But I could not truly relate. Nor have I been able to on so many similar occasions. It’s only my experience as a foreigner in other countries that has helped me (I think) to come anywhere close to realizing the foreignness that many (most? all?) non-white Americans feel in their own country.

I think of the various types of judgments so readily passed by some white people who criticize people of color—black youths especially—for hiding behind hoods and headphones or for disengaging, for aggressive attitudes, for the numerous stereotypes of failure that loom about them, for perceived overconfidence or savagery, for un-attenuated language, and I can’t help but remember the discomfort of foreignness and imagine what it can lead to when it characterizes your whole life, rather than just a short term trip overseas. I have the luxury of entertaining this discomfort as a temporary disruption—an opportunity for self-reflection and learning because I also have a home to return to: a place where any strangeness I feel has to do with my personality, perspective, or interests rather than my appearance, attire, or language. Were I to remain in a place of discomfort, un-homed, adolescently foreign, ever the outsider, however, I think the desirability would quickly succumb to the difficulty.

There’s a way in which each of us will always feel foreign in our own neighborhoods, towns, cities, countries because we are individuals with unique modes of understanding and of expressing our realities and ourselves. But, citizens of a country, whatever their skin color or ethnicity, should be able to embrace that individual foreignness, free of the burden of a greater, outwardly imposed sense of abnormality.

There’s no magical formula for change—for striking a balance between strangeness and familiarity, but we can’t afford to be unintentional, either. Comfort, however desirable, in and of itself, isn’t a sufficient goal, nor even a valid one to aspire to. Love, and justice, and home, however, are worth fighting for and working towards. I think here, in America, we begin to make changes by walking (driving, biking, skating, rolling) down the street embracing our own individual strangeness and allowing others theirs. I think we start by suspending judgment and taking people as they come, one by one. We overcome the impulse to hide or to ostracize or “other”ize. We start with the generous and artistic endeavor of ‘making the familiar (that is, ourselves) strange’ so that strangers have an opportunity to become familiar. We imagine ourselves and others all as foreigners in order to create a broader boundary for home.

When I sit around a table of friends in a foreign country, the single white face, only half understanding the larger conversation, I find a comfortable place of both strangeness and familiarity in the acts of sharing, of smiling, of trying with difficulty to speak the same languages, of helping and serving one another, with and without words, of small kindnesses and grace. And so, just as when I am perhaps the single white face among friends at my own kitchen table, in my own country, there as here, we are all equal parts familiar and strange. And, in those moments, there as here, we are all home.