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Drinking Bird Spit

The word “disgusting” doesn't quite do it justice. “Revolting”, however, may be too strong. It's somewhere in the middle. More of a dis-volting. Or re-gusting. Either way it's not so much the taste that makes it nasty because it's actually quite bland. It's the texture. Not as viscous as human snot but not as flowy as water. It's a strange hybrid of the two. Think Jell-O that hasn't been fully hardened. It's runny with a bit of a bounce. Occasionally you will find slivers of twig, like scratchy little presents for your throat. My mom would always forget to take them out. She's the reason I have to drink the bird spit.

I grew up without medicine because my mother doesn't believe in Aspirin. How anyone could deny the existence of an entire category of medicines is beyond me. Her cure for a headache is a fifteen-year-old tube sock filled with rice. Stick that in the freezer and it's a cold pack for your head. Pop it into a microwave for about two minutes and it's a sock-shaped heating pad.

Tylenol was not allowed in my house either. For backaches we had to rub a quarter-sized drop of an unnamed green liquid onto our muscles. Later, I would discover that this substance was actually a concentrated form of menthol which is illegal in the U.S. and most of Europe. How mom got it into the country is another story. Let's just say it involves about three feet of bubble wrap, my sweet-looking grandma and an unsuspecting customs agent.

But of all the ancient Vietnamese cures in my

household, bird spit was the most mysterious. When the rice-sock and the contraband liquids didn't work, bird spit was the last stop. Apparently it could fix anything. My aunt swears it cured her hot flashes, and my dad insists that it re-grew six hairs in his bald spot. When asked how the drink worked, my mom would reply, "No one knows. It's just magic."

I can't remember the first time I drank bird spit. Mostly because it's been a staple of my family's medicine cabinet since, well, as long as I've had memories. I had just assumed that yen, which I thought translated to "bird saliva", was simply a Vietnamese euphemism for "magical drinking potion." I do, however, recall the time I found out what it actually was.

It wasn't until I was thirteen when I asked my mom what yen was made of. I was slumped on my bathroom floor, train-wrecked with a case of the flu when my mom said, "Yen is made of yen." My fevered mind thought she was making a feeble attempt at some misguided Confucian proverb. She sensed my confusion and then clarified by making a spitting motion and flapping her arms like a chicken.

"Well, crap." was probably my first thought. After a quick mental calculation, I concluded that over the course of my life I had consumed 3.4 gallons of bird saliva. Unadulterated twig-filled bird spit. Then I threw up in the toilet.

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