

**Letter to Father**  
*Johnson Cheu*  
*Ohio State University*

I have tried many times to imagine what it was like and could not. I try and try and cannot imagine what it must have been like for some scrubbed-up white man to say to you that your son, your only son, was premature, would not live, and if it lived, it would be a vegetable, or at best, severely retarded. I try to imagine what you would say to mother. I try to imagine you, shoulders fallen, preparing to walk down the hallway to see me, not yet twenty-four hours old, and not yet incubated.

That's how they treated premies back then. They left us/me/your son to die within that twenty-four hour benchmark. I did not, though a part of you did. Sometimes, I think I see the you that died in the downward cast of your eyes, the light shuffle of your feet, the way you say my name: "John - Son?" always a question, the way you retreat from domestic battles with a hurried "HOA-LA, HOA-LA, BU YAH JAN-LA. BU YAH JAN-LA, BI-TOE...bi-toe. ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT, DON'T TALK ABOUT IT ANY-MORE. DON'T TALK ABOUT IT ANYMORE, PLEASE...please?" I cannot imagine the last time everything was all right.

I used to lie awake in bed and listen to the half-Chinese, half-English, half-audible screaming, and pretend it was not you, not mother, not anything, not me. I used to imagine that God lived on the moon casting light through my window, that I would be whisked away to lie in the soft folds of his white robe, his soft, curly brown waves of hair caressing my cheek. I could find the you that died in Heaven, and make you whole again. I could heal you, would heal you, if only you would stop long enough to listen, would lift your head up long enough to look at me.

I think I always knew you were a man/my dad/not a God. I always knew it was me who made you lock up everything vulnerable in you. We both knew it was not our fault. Yet, knowledge cannot absolve the guilt. So I grew up. I played big boy. I built up walls to the world. I was perfect. I was the strongest, non-athletic, smiling boy-man the world knew. And I knew guilt and strength and joy and pain and fear and hate and violence and silence and loyalty and love. I thought I knew you, that your respect and your love, the love of you that remained alive was enough. Enough to ward off the fears and stares and hate of the world. Enough to ward off the guilt of you, of "our," -- no, -- my problem. So I blinded myself to the you that died. Buried it, and stopped looking.

Today, I saw it again: the you that died. The you that joked about getting me a mail-order bride. The you that arranged a birthday lunch with my cousin because you thought I needed someone: a surrogate dad.

I needed someone today. I needed you today. So I did it again, played boy-man. I took all the fault and fear and guilt away into myself/in my/self/me/and tried to set you free, again, thinking that if I was a little stronger, everything would be OK. It was not. I was not. I needed to be the little boy today, to cry about my hopes, my fears, my dreams. I wanted to lie in your lap today, to feel your fingers caress my cheek. I needed my dad today. And I do not know how to make it OK. To tell you it is not your fault. To make you hear. It is not your fault. Can you hear me? It is not your fault. And the man I am today knows that I cannot make you whole again. My words cannot make you whole. This, only you can do. All this I know, but the little boy wants to fix everything, to make everything OK. And the man is mad because somehow he knows this cannot be. So the little boy cries. The man writes to heal himself, trying hard to make everything OK, still. Still trying hard to say I love you.

July 1994-1997