

**Piece for Pierogi / Piece for Potsticker**  
**Created by Emma Clark**  
**Chinese Arts Now Festival 2021**

The audio piece is 17 minutes long and is primarily narrated by Emma, an American woman in her late twenties with a warm, friendly voice.

[Low sounds of a dreamy, textural synth play an improvised melody of long, held notes and chords under the following spoken text:]

Have you ever done this before?

If this is your first time, welcome. I'm really glad you're here.

By now, your filling should be prepped, your wrappers ready, and you should be ready to fold. But if you've just gone for a take-out instead, don't worry, I won't hold it against you.

Before we get started, I want you to take stock of where you are.

I want you to capture this moment in time and store it for later.

Can I ask who you're cooking these for? Is it someone you cook for often? Or is this a special occasion?

Where are you right now? Is this a room that's really familiar or are you living some place new?

Is there anyone else in the room with you?

The surface you're working on – what does it look like? Are there any patterns or textures to it?

What is the floor made of – tile? Carpet? Wood?

Are there any particular smells in the air, from the ingredients, plants, the outside world?

For many people, the kitchen is a space of memory – be it positive or negative...

Do you remember the first time you cooked for yourself?

The first time someone cooked for you?

What was the meal – and did it taste any good?

[Melody continues]

You may begin.

[Music fades, and the sound of a vintage dinner bell plays]

[New music emerges: a bright synth melody of rapid, descending notes loops under the following spoken text:]

Dumpling

A broad classification of dish that consists of pieces of dough wrapped around a filling, or of dough with no filling. The dough can be based on bread, flour, or potatoes, and may be filled with meat, fish, cheese, vegetables, fruits, or sweets. They can be prepared using a variety of methods, including baking, boiling, frying, simmering, or steaming, and are found in many world cuisines.

[Music warps briefly and cuts out]

[The following text is spoken by the computerised voices from Google Translate:]

[British female] Dumpling

[American male] Potsticker

[Chinese female] Jiaozi

[Japanese female] Gyoza

[Polish male] Pierogi

[Hungarian female] Derelye

[Ukrainian female] Varenyky

[Sound of a vintage dinner bell plays]

[Spoken narration switches back to Emma:]

I want to let you in on a little secret...

My first jiaozi were not homemade. My first jiaozi were from the frozen aisle at Costco.

[Bright melodic xylophone intro plays, loud at first, blossoming into a bouncy tune in the style of a vintage advertisement. The music quiets under the following spoken text:]

Costco – a cavernous wonderland full of bulk groceries, discount appliances, and free samples – often in enough quantity that you could eat an entire free lunch while getting lost in the aisles.

Ling Ling Potstickers come in these massive 2 kilo bags that'll keep in the freezer for as long as you need.

They're somewhat plain, with slightly slimy exteriors. They're quick, no bullshit – a crowd pleaser that I was crazy about.

My mom would serve them with a dipping sauce of straight-up white vinegar and a side of steamed white rice. Despite the fact that she was working 70, 80, 100 or more hours a week to keep us afloat, my mom always found a way to cook dinner and make sure we ate together as a family every night.

The practically ready-made Ling Lings made life a little bit easier, and despite their simplicity they always felt like an event.

[Music crossfades with a soundscape of New York City – rain, car horns, pedestrian chatter – which plays at low volume under the following spoken text:]

When I moved out and started cooking for myself, there was no Costco nearby. Instead, I took comfort in Trader Joe's Pork Gyoza Potstickers – which had a slightly redundant name but were unfailingly dependable, affordable frozen delights.

Those royal blue packages were a lifeline in my first few years on my own, when my cooking skills stretched about as far as chicken in a pan and packets of boiled tortellini.

On a cozy night in, they were a balm for the homesick. A thread between my childhood and my emerging adulthood.

On a depressive morning, they helped me to survive. They're still good cold and don't require any effort, other than opening a Tupperware lid.

Those dumplings kept me safe, at a time when I felt really alone.

[City sounds fade out. The sound of water hitting oil in a pan plays and continues to sizzle under the following spoken text:]

This is the sound of oil and water

Within it I hear my mom's intuition

I hear my agong's silence

I hear my stepdad's laughter

I hear an argument with siblings out of step with one another

I hear the chatter of friendly company

I hear the waves of the Pacific Ocean

[Sound of water hitting oil in a pan plays again and continues to sizzle]

This sound is full of secrets

It is a yearning, from thousands of miles away

It is a quiet comfort, of two people sharing a space and never needing to say a thing

[Sound of oil fades, followed by the sound of a jet taking off]

Do you ever use food as a language?

Or watch how people interact when they eat?

Read between the lines of what they're really trying to communicate?

[Soundscape of a café in Budapest fades in – patrons chattering in Hungarian, bright folk music – and underscores the following spoken text:]

A few years ago I went on a mini solo backpacking trip.

I had recently moved to London and had yet to see much of Europe. So I found a cheap return, packed my bag, and worked my way from Prague, to Vienna, to Budapest.

My dad's dad immigrated to the United States from Hungary decades ago. My memories of him are few and far between – burnt skin under the desert sun, an air of mystery. He lived in a trailer on the grounds of a junkyard, surrounded by crushed, rusted metal on the dry borderlands somewhere between California and Nevada.

When he passed, it had been years since our last visit.

On my way to Budapest, my dad gave me the address of my great aunt Iluzska and her husband, who lived somewhere on the outskirts of the city.

It was the dead of winter – I hopped from wi-fi hotspot to wi-fi hotspot confused about how to navigate to their house, with a phone battery that kept cutting out in the cold. I nearly bailed on the meeting – I was anxious about the pressure of meeting family members who were basically strangers, my time in the city was limited, and I was worried about affording a cab.

At the last minute, I managed to get ahold of them and made up my mind that I would find my way there. It would've been too rude to bail when they'd prepared a meal for us to share.

Our visit was warm, if halting (they spoke little English and I spoke no Hungarian).

We smiled and nodded.

We spoke through objects and food.

We spoke through dumplings.

They showed me pictures of my grandfather in Hungary and the States –

A dashing man in a tux brandishing a cigarette, singing onstage through a vintage microphone.

A rugged man with black sunglasses leaning against an old Cadillac.

They gifted me a traditional embroidered blouse, and insisted I walk away with a container full of leftovers.

They thanked me for coming – few people in the family made the effort to come see them anymore.

[Café sounds fade out]

I don't know if I'll ever see them again, to be honest. I don't even know if they're alive anymore – we didn't keep in touch.

But I'm grateful to have shared that one meal, that moment in time.

[A new synth melody – individual notes ring out, bouncing back and forth]

[The following text is spoken by a computerised voice from Google Translate:]

[German female] Fernweh

[Synth melody continues]

[Spoken narration switches back to Emma:]

A German word roughly meaning “far-sickness,” a kind of wanderlust, a longing for a distant place. More poetically, a homesickness for a place you've never been.

[Melody strengthens, joined by bouncy, echoing chords]

Have you ever tasted food that transports you? Takes you home? Makes you feel that very particular form of déjà vu?

Was it something you made yourself? Or were you watching the hand of another? A family member, or a friend?

[Melody dissipates]

If it's alright, while we're here, I'd like to share something with you.

[Sound of gentle bird song plays under the following spoken text:]

My Auntie Katherine died very suddenly last April, early in the first lockdown.

We didn't know it was coming, so I didn't get to say goodbye.

There was nothing remarkable about the last time I saw her. We hadn't seen each other in over a year.

In the hallway of a damp flat in Walthamstow, I watched a video, through a Zoom screen, of a stranger in a plane pouring her ashes in the San Francisco Bay and flying over the Golden Gate Bridge.

To me, she was glamorous, complicated, and mysterious.

[Bird song fades out and is replaced by a soundscape of a restaurant in Hong Kong – clattering of utensils and fragments of conversation in Chinese – which continues under the following spoken text:]

For most of my adolescence she lived far away in Hong Kong, the land my agong had left decades prior.

I saved every postcard she ever sent me, building a portrait in my mind of a glittering place in constant motion, a place we'd go together one day.

Hong Kong and San Francisco share a deep history, built from two centuries of migration, but to my childhood self Hong Kong felt as far away as a person could be...the stuff dreams were made of.

[Hong Kong soundscape fades out]

The night of her passing, I was 1,500 miles away, across an ocean, making dumplings.

[Bright, propulsive synth melody emerges – high-pitched notes playing arpeggios in rapid succession, with a slightly echoing quality]

In many ways, she gave this to me – this inheritance of steam.

Over her silver-painted dining table, she'd gather friends and family from her travels around the world to make dumplings together. We'd bond, chat, drink, and fill our stomachs with laughter and good food.

If we had nothing else in common, at least we had this.

I still haven't figured out what it means to speak or think about her in the past tense.

But folding, pinching, pleating each piece with care, it feels like one small thing I can do.

[Last notes of the melody echo and fade, replaced with the sound of ocean waves]

[The voice of Emma's stepdad Nestor plays, deep and robust with an American accent. He is speaking a prayer in Ukrainian.]

В ім'я отця, і сина і святого духа, амінь. Смачного.

[Spoken narration switches back to Emma:]

My family is not religious – we spent most Sunday mornings on various soccer fields throughout the state of California.

But we never started dinner without bowing our heads to hear grace, spoken by my stepdad, three times in Ukrainian and once in English.

I never actually learned the words, but I can still hear the melody, the shape of the sounds, clearly in my mind.

[Repetition of the recording of Nestor]

В ім'я отця, і сина і святого духа, амінь. Смачного.

[Emma again:]

Up until this past year, I never would have described myself as someone who “loved cooking.”

I did it out of necessity, barely.

But within this forced pause, I've started to realize just how rarely I took the time to slow down and nourish myself in the previous version of my life.

My mom is one of those for whom food is a love language. She texts me pictures of things she's making and works hard to perfect recipes that her loved ones care about. My stepdad never got to visit Ukraine with his parents before they passed, but for the briefest of moments my mom can conjure them, through varenyky and borscht.

Through her hands, I see the challenge, the skill, the *art* in cooking, its offer of care and connection. This past year I've learned, maybe for the first time, how to start caring for myself, and better caring for those around me. I had to, or I wouldn't have survived. I've started to see the tiny sparks of comfort, pride, and joy in this process.

In its way, it's a small act of faith.

[Ocean waves fade out and a synth melody emerges, similar to the tones of the beginning of the piece, playing long, held notes that drone under the following spoken text:]

This is a ritual of remembrance  
An act of healing  
An act of hope

An act of grace

It takes humility  
It takes practice  
It takes patience

You wrap up your hopes and your fears and you seal them with a prayer

A prayer for safe passage  
For protection  
For a better life  
For courage on the paths we walk between one another  
For building a home inside ourselves  
For loving each other silently when we cannot find the words  
For forgiveness, again and again  
For eternal sunshine and eternal rain  
For a soaring airplane looping past rose-tinted clouds lined with gold

[Melody continues with new chords emerging]

I want you to hold a wrapper in your hands for a second.

Memorize how it feels.

Every time you do this, there's you, in the present moment, and there's you, in every moment before.

Did you know that this dough is a portal through time?

You're at once a child at your mother's knees, an adolescent ignoring (but secretly storing) her every word, an adult trying to make friends in a tiny flat with stained carpet floors.

And if we should be so lucky, you're an elder yet-to-be, whose beautiful, wrinkled hands carry a lifetime of knowledge and strength, and the memory of all the lives you've ever lived.

[Melody fades out]

Before I go, I wanted to ask if maybe you could pass this on to someone else?

[Synth note rings out, echoing]

And I want you to know...

I'm thinking of you

[Another synth note rings out, echoing]

I carry you with me



[Another synth note rings out, echoing]

Goodbye

[Three synth chords ring out in succession, the final one echoes until it fades out]