Stars and the Crust

(A One-Act Play in the Quiet Night)

10-minute play

by

Lin Chen

CHARACTERS

Lin - A graduate student

Mother - Lin's mother (in memory)

Ming - Lin's friend from Shanghai (in memory)

Samira - A woman in Iran (in memory)

The Girl - A child in a rural classroom (in memory)

Aisha - From Cairo (voice only)

Marta - From São Paulo (voice only)

Yuki- From Tokyo (voice only)

Qinwen Zheng - famous Tennis player (on screen)

SCENE 1

Setting: Lin’s apartment, 4 AM. A desk with academic books, a computer screen, and two maps of East Asia hang on the wall. The screen displays "Feminism at Crossroads: Exploring the Current State and Challenges of Women's Rights Movements in East Asia." A black cursor blinks on the blank screen.

Lin:

(sitting at her desk, rubbing her eyes, staring at the title)

(pause)

“Harmony.”

“Futile.”

“It goes in the ‘accepted’ drawer.”

(pauses, as if remembering something)

“These papers will gather dust, like forgotten whispers in the library's shadows.”

(begins typing the first line about historical context, and reads the words she is typing)
At the turn of the 20th century…
(stops abruptly, leaving the unfinished sentence and the black blinking cursor waiting expectantly, hits BACKSPACE, and the line disappears)

“No.”

(stares intently at it, the blinking cursor serving as a metronome for something)

(Light from the screen only.)

Lin:

(reading as she types)

“Confucian collectivism emphasizes social order, relational duty, and harmony.”

(pause)

“Harmony.”

(Lin imagines)

Mother:

“You, a woman, are the crust.”

(she stares intently at the screen)

“Solid enough to hold the family together yet fragile enough to be overlooked.”

(pause)

“But never too subtle for anyone to notice.”

Lin:

(Lin watches her mother’s hands folding dough, pressing edges, and sealing everything shut)
(The filling is family life. The room is scarred by memories.)

(She looks back to the screen; presses ENTER, then ENTER again)

“Double space for who I am and who I want to be.”

SCENE 2

Setting: The room is scarred by memories.

Lin:

(Her phone vibrates with a notification from Ming. We do not get to see the message; instead, we hear Lin's memory of Ming in a Shanghai mall.)

“Ming, a mango in a world of apples.”
“She used to say——”

Ming:

“I'm a flamingo in a shoebox. Every time I grow a pink feather, my father cuts it off.”

(pause)

“He says he's helping me fit.”

(Shoppers watched, unmoved, like executioners.)
(Lin: back to the present, her fingers hover over the keyboard, reading as she types)
(Ming:she deletes the name, and the cursor blinks where Ming was)

Lin:

(pores over her research notes on Iran)

“Female students outnumber male students in Iranian colleges and universities. Engineers. Doctors.”

(Lin remembers the Zoom interview screen of Samira, Samira's voice urgent)

Samira:

“As soon as I'm behind the wheel, Lin, no holding back, I won't stop.
Stars and the Crust”

Lin:

“A generation trained, capable. They wait to take the wheel. But no one's driving.”

(she stares at her keys, realization dawning)

“They’re keys.”

(pause)

“Not everywhere.”

SCENE 3

Setting: Lin’s memory—a rural classroom with earth floors and the sound of a giant dry rock being marred under the sun.

Lin:

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Girl:

(Stands up. Her clothes patched appropriately for her age. The seams of her sweater are unraveled at the elbow)

“I want to build rockets.”

Boys:

(contemptuous)

“Girls don’t build rockets.”

“They stay home, cooking noodles for the men who do the work.”

Teacher:

(speaking gently) “Remember, we need more women like you to become modern nurses.”

Lin:

(Lin: looking the girl in the eyes)

“The stars don't care about your gender. They're waiting for someone passionate enough to seize them.”

(Light glimmers in the girl's eyes. Lin returns to her room.)

SCENE 4

Setting: Lin's apartment.

Lin

(Lin: watching a video of Zheng Qinwen playing tennis - the grunt, the muscle)

“This is a re-upload of footage from a traffic surveillance camera.”

“Zheng Qinwen covers the court relentlessly. A grunt cuts through the room.”

“They call it leadership. If you are a leader, it is essential to be "nurturing. She slides, recovers, and attacks again”

(The video shows a powerful return)

“They're delicate and listen to your desires without flying away.”

(Another grunt)

“They don't ruin the image.”

(The ball slams down)

“She's not a butterfly.”

(pause)

“She's a hawk.”

(Lin freezes the video on Zheng's screaming face and fierce eyes. She looks at it.)

SCENE 5

Setting: Lin’s apartment.

(Lin: Scrolling research materials featuring three women)

Aisha (from Cairo):

“My father says the workplace is 'not safe for women like us.”

“From home, he pays me nothing. He calls it 'helping the family.”

Marta (from São Paulo):

“I’m the first girl in my family to finish high school.”

“My mother cleans houses, but my teachers say ‘teaching is good for girls, safe.”

“I don’t want to be safe. I want to build bridges.”

Yuki (from Tokyo):

“My company hired me as the ‘flower of the office.’”

“I serve tea and smile.”

“My boss says my English is too good—‘men feel intimidated.’”

“So I translate documents in silence. They never see my mouth move.”

(In the darkness, Lin's face blends into the multitude, a silent testament to shared struggles.)

SCENE 6

Setting: Apartment. Dawn is starting to show outside.

Lin:

(Her phone buzzes—an email from Mom. A photo loads, showing a man in a suit)

“She likes a girl who knows how to listen and values family stability.

Another ingredient label.”

(Lin returns to the laptop, going through her notes, staring at a section heading ‘Political Participation’)

“My thesis, political behavior. But my life, a political game, and I've already lost my country's popular vote.”

(Lin glances at the picture, at the screen, at it again. Something changes.)

SCENE 7

Setting: Kitchen. Gray light before dawn.

Lin:

(Lin walks towards the kitchen. She takes an egg from the refrigerator, smashes it against the granite surface, and lets the yolk drip)

(She leaves the egg on the floor and goes to her computer.)

“Not pie-crust-shaped. Not mold-shaped.”

(pause)

“The pie is a lie. We're here to burn down the kitchen and re-create it.”

(She leaves the egg on the floor and goes to her computer.)

SCENE 8

Setting: Lin’s apartment, outside the window, clouds gather.

(Lin walks back to the laptop, does not hit “Print" or “Submit” for university applications. Opening her email from her mother, Lin attached ten pages—the one with Ming’s feathers, Samira’s accelerator, the rocket girl’s gaze, Zheng’s brawn, the cracked egg, Aisha’s keystrokes, Marta's crossings, and Yuki’s cavity. Lin moves the cursor to the subject line and types ‘New Recipe’.)

Lin:

“Am I sending it to the wrong address? Would she reply with 'wrong order'?”

(She lets out a giggle. The mouse button is hovering. She hits Send. The message is dispatched. The rain pours outside. Lin reclines. The blinking cursor is no longer patient. She inhales harder. Harder. The limits show themselves, yet she is already beyond them.)