VICTORIA CHANG

CIVILITY

Civility–died on June 24, 2009, at the age of 68. Murdered by a stroke whose paintings were recently featured in a museum, two square canvases painted white, black scissors in the middle of each, open, pointing at each other. After my father’s stroke, my mother no longer spoke in full sentences. Fragments of codfish, the language of savages, each syllable a mechanical dart from her mouth to my father's holes. Maybe this is what happens when language fails, a last breath inward but no breath outward. A state of holding one’s breath forever but not dying. When her lungs began their failing, she could still say you but not thank. You don't know what it’s like, she said when I told her to stop yelling at my father. She was right. When language leaves, all you have left is tone, all you have left are smoke signals. I didn't know she was using her own body as wood.