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GLINT OF SPORT: A NOVEL IN STORIES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Angie Sijun Lou

June 2024

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Abstract

Glint of Sport: A Novel in Stories

Angie Sijun Lou

Glint of Sport is deeply indebted to my family's history of living undocumented in the United States—they've taught me to look to the page as a site of permanence when our dreams and labors have been eclipsed by a state of eternal transit. The novel follows the life of a woman named Laiyla as her family immigrates from China to the United States, spanning episodes of her life from birth to death, ending in the waiting room before reincarnation. The stories mirror diasporic movement, following her from a fishing village in Anhui to a crowded warehouse party in New York, tracing transpacific geographies across bodies and borders. The novel complicates the traditional perception of diaspora as a loss of a prior fullness. If home is predicated on dislocation, these stories ask where she should go next with our irrevocability—towards dreams, intimacies, and sites of resistance in the present tense.

Critical Writing

Editorial Introduction to Dark Soil: Fictions and Mythographies

In the spring of 2021, I approached seven writers with a simple prompt: to write a prose piece that illuminates the hidden history of a place, a history that would not be obvious with one's first visitation to the site. The word *mythography* did not come to me until a year later. I looked over what we had made together with a retrospective eye, trying to find a word that could coalesce the different elements of the project: history, biography, geography, and mythmaking. As I read and reread the pieces, the distinctions between these fields became increasingly indistinct to me. And then I thought of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, a biomythography of Lorde's life, the way she teaches us how to wield speculative narration as a correction to history. The stories in this anthology unearth as much as they reimagine. They look for what has been omitted from the geographical record of a place and bring that layer to the surface.

The first ten stories in this collection, authored by Karen Tei Yamashita, are set in the city of Santa Cruz, California, the city where she has lived since 1997. Each of the stories feature a guided tour of a hidden landmark: the lost Santa Cruz Chinatown after it was flooded by the San Lorenzo River due to racist city zoning laws, the Santa Cruz Mission where a neophyte murdered a Spanish missionary and buried his testicles in 1812, the gravestone of a formerly enslaved man who became the godfather of Santa Cruz public education. As signature in her writings, Yamashita gives us characters filled with incisive humor and blunt desire, giving them life until they subvert their static

contexts and exhort themselves into the present tense. At the heart, these stories are driven by an urge to animate and reconstruct liminal histories, textual interplays that defamiliarize familiar landscapes. She outlines the vanishing points of a city that is always making itself over anew.

After her methodology was outlined, we believed that this way of mapmaking could expand beyond Santa Cruz and into the greater United States, into its territories and borderlands. We wanted to experiment with broadening the project to see if this form of witnessing could take on a more comprehensive political valence. The writers I chose were already attentive to spatial processes and accumulated histories in their writings, poets and lyric prose writers who had cultivated an ekphrastic approach to geography. Their work engaged critically with unknowability in the historical record, looking for lacunas as speculative openings for narrative possibility instead of as closures.

By dilating the scope, I watched as the constraints outlined in Yamashita's stories morphed and evolved, creating new variants across time. As with all constraint-based writing, every writer gravitated toward their existing obsessions and ruminations, sites they had visited once or more in the past, that contained something inexplicable to them. While all the pieces in this anthology reconsider how space is conceptualized, they attend diversely to the ecological, colonial, racial, and patriarchal structures of domination that inform our experience of the present. We wanted to retrieve the past from an immaterial haze using Yamashita's mode of inquiry as our listening device, constellating a memory field that had come to us resounding with spectral voices. As

the writings took form, I watched this field become connected with subterranean networks—like mycelium, these writings converse with each other through electrical impulses. They are oracles through which the past can speak.

By beginning with a spatial intimacy, the constraint asked us to reimagine what constitutes archival work. What happens if we explore deserts or schoolyards or parking lots as memory spaces? The soil is dyed red everywhere we once believed it was exempt. Each author's supra-sensuous experience of this dark soil acts as the point of departure. In this way, the pieces eliminate the illusion of the static objectivity of the researcher, instead textually embedding the writer directly in history's line of fire. They show us the potential of moving us away from an event-based model that centers an original act of violence, and toward a cartography of active processes, layered and rhizomatic. By performing what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation" of the past, using literary narrative to redress historical omissions, these writers also give us a field guide for understanding our future and its terrain of struggle (11).

The pieces in this anthology are invested in polyvocal forms of storytelling, each voice eclipsing another into dissonance and unity. It is invested in using language as the primary instrument of our excavation, uncovering layers of hurt and desire concealed in the land. In the words of the South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon, "I thought to myself that I needed to excavate the faceless face with language . . . I came to think fervently more than ever that someone involved in such idle labor is a poet" (57). Like metamorphic rocks, the pieces in this anthology seek to break open existing historical narratives, subjecting them to refraction and assemblage into new forms. The language

of pastness feels deceptive—we had to illustrate our memory field as something alive and in flux.

The eight pieces in the second half of this collection vary in scale. Some of the pieces are very place-based, while others use the location only as a launching point, ending somewhere else entirely. Juliana Spahr writes a poem about an unnamed lot on the bank of the Ohio River that is only locatable with its GPS coordinates, while Craig Santos Perez's personal essay points to the entire island territory of Guam. Saretta Morgan gives us an essay in fragments, each coordinate charted with precision, while the landscape in Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint's piece is painted with intentional obliqueness, receding from particularity into universality. Ronaldo V. Wilson's poetic script unearths a mythic geography of a Bay Area shoreline rendered by the passing of his father, and Brandon Shimoda's piece follows the history of Hom Wong Shee, a woman who committed suicide while detained on Angel Island in 1941. Sesshu Foster uses family photographs to tell a story about the Fellowship Hostel, a former hostel in Los Angeles that once housed Japanese people returning from concentration camps, and my own piece concentrates on the poet and filmmaker Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, beginning at the location of her murder and then moving to the screen as a site of permanence that we can visit to summon her. All the pieces illustrate how the shadow of history percolates into our private lives in strange and discursive ways, how it is transcribed with circular and lateral recordings.

I chose writers whom I recognize not foremost as historians or geographers but as writers indebted to the beauty of the lyric. This aesthetic propensity has forced me

to consider the role of the language artist in a time of capitalist crisis and decline. We have seen the way that art acts as a pressure-release valve when tensions could have escalated into a full-scale riot or strike, how it has the illusion of being outside of the circuit of capital while still being enmeshed in its logic. I could go on about the ways I wish our libidinal energies were being channeled into destabilizing the premise of literary production under these forms. At the same time, I also believe that the page can be a location where we enact the collective being-together before the material conditions of possibility are here, a place where we can exercise our imaginary before we enact it, so that when the time arrives, we can say that we have been practicing for this.

In the spring of 2019, Karen asked if she could take me on a tour around Santa Cruz. I thought it was strange because it is a small coastal town whose main attractions I could finish seeing within a day, and I had been living there for two years by then. It was blistering hot in the afternoon, with the sun subduing us in waves. What should have been experienced with the slow leisure of a walking tour was instead experienced with the time-space compression of Karen's air-conditioned SUV, cruising through banal sites I had passed through so many times before without a second glance. She took me to the saffron dragon archway in the floodplain where the Santa Cruz Chinatown once stood, the parking garage whose intercom vibrates with white static and the voice of London Nelson, finally ending on the Evergreen Cemetery, which is less of a cemetery and more of a patch of grass that grows on the periphery of a parking lot. Only after reading her half of this anthology did I realize that she had taken me on

the tour that was the foundation for this project. In the cemetery, we shared a bento box of nori she had prepared and told stories about our families and how we were raised. I remember the sound of Highway 17 as it bled toward us, and what it felt like to look at the detritus of what once was somehow being made new.

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A Pale Persephone: On the Work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

It was the first week of the new year, with snowflakes illuminating the sidewalk in Nolita. I had been walking in circles around the Puck Building, sometimes alone and other times with Dimitri. I hadn't gone inside the building yet, though I'd glimpsed it from proximal streets, the layer upon layer of red brick, a Celtic sprite wielding a hand mirror perched on each vertex, figurines of Shakespeare's mischievous Puck. I wanted to find the vestiges of the poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's presence there, which I thought would be subterranean yet palpable, even after all this time.

Forty years ago, on November 5, 1982, the young Korean American avant-garde filmmaker and poet walked to the Puck Building to visit her husband, the photographer Richard Barnes, who was documenting the building's renovation. Cha was thirty-one years old. What would become known as her magnum opus, *Dictee*, had just been published a few days prior with Tanam Press.²⁴ The book evades succinct summarization, but I can say that it is an epic poem that contends with the inaccessibility of postcolonial history, tracing an exilée as she struggles to find her homeland. *Dictee* interlaces the mythic plights of heroines—Joan of Arc, the Korean martyr Yu Guan Soon, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Persephone, Cha's mother, and Cha herself. In the end, the speaker beckons us to return to poetry and cinema, sacred locations where a pure experience of the present is possible.

But Cha would not live to see the radical afterlives of this book and how its legacy has persisted in syllabi across Asian American critical race theory, feminist

psychoanalysis, postcolonial literature, and contemporary poetry. That evening, she was murdered in the basement of the Puck Building by serial rapist Joey Sanza, her body discovered in the dumpster of a Chinatown parking lot three blocks away.²⁴ I knew that all physical traces of her would be imperceptible now, four decades later, but it was the aura of the building that drew me, cold and oblique, how it enticed and expelled me at once like a lover.

At the time of Cha's murder, the owners of the Puck Building intended to transform it into a commercial condominium for businesses primarily related to the arts. When this project failed in 1987, the property was acquired by Kushner Properties, owned by the family of Jared Kushner. In 2011, Kushner sent in a request to the Landmarks Preservation Commission to erect six luxury penthouse suites on the upper floors of the mixed-use building. The executive director's initial response was that the historic building "should not be sacrificed for a wealthy developer's passing fancy to add an enormous and unnecessarily visible penthouse addition on top."²⁰ After waging a months-long battle, Kushner's firm was finally granted permission to renovate.

At the time of this writing, each of the penthouses has sold or is selling for \$21-60 million.²¹ The interiors are co-designed by Kushner's wife Ivanka Trump; each suite is finished with La Cornue stoves, bullet-shaped H. Theophile door hinges, and custom mahogany-framed windows with built-in UV protection for artworks.²⁵ After a few unlucky years in a housing market stagnated by the pandemic, many of the units remain vacant at the time of this writing. When I see the architectural renderings of the mother-

of-pearl terrazzo floors, maple headboards with butterfly joints, Sicilian lava stone countertops, and the infinite recurrence of mirrors concealed inside of other mirrors, I think of Walter Benjamin's angel of history with his back turned from the past, hurling itself toward a future cleansed of its debris.

And then I think of the nameless ruins that comprise the cover of *Dictée*. It is a granular, black-and-white image of a cruel, inhospitable landscape: the ruins of the Nubian pyramids in Sudan, though I believe it is more faithful to the text to leave them unidentified. Five equidistant eroded monuments constellate the foreground, with one slashed pyramid in the background of the image. The scene is uncanny because it implies a human presence while being evacuated of human subjects. It felt somehow significant to me that this set of luxury penthouses had become her unmarked grave. When I tried to look inside the windows, shiny as they were, all I saw was my own reflection.

Cha was born in 1951 in Busan, South Korea during the Korean War. When Cha was a child, her parents were forbidden to speak their native tongue while seeking asylum in territory occupied by Japanese imperial forces. Her family escaped from Manchuria to Seoul, from Seoul to Busan, and from Busan to Seoul again, finally settling in the United States in 1962. Her first exposure to English and French was at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, a private Catholic girls' school in San Francisco, a city where Cha would spend most of her life. She earned an undergraduate degree in comparative literature and graduate degrees in art practice and criticism at the

University of California, Berkeley, where she worked at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, which now houses her permanent collection.²⁴ A student of Bertrand Augst at Berkeley, her studies in poststructuralism and semiology are potent throughout her work. The opening prose block of *Dictée* features a translation exercise that embeds the speaker as the subject of discourse while maintaining her narrative distance from the gathering:

Open paragraph It was the first day period
She had come from a far period tonight at dinner
comma the families would ask comma open
quotation marks How was the first day interroga-
tion mark close quotation marks at least to say
the least of it possible comma the answer would be
open quotation marks there is but one thing period
There is someone period From a far period
close quotation marks⁴

Immediately above this text block is its rendering in French. The speaker's painstaking awareness of the translation exercise seems to dilute its authenticity. The assimilative practice is lost in the mouth's orifice. In another exercise that follows, the speaker also transcribes her moans, snivels, stutters, and unedited sounds while practicing the new language. "She mimics the speaking," she writes.⁴ Language acquisition becomes a disciplinary ritual that the speaker defies by saturating each exercise with her static murmurs. Wendy Xu writes, "An immigrant dreams of total assimilation as both fantasy and nightmare," an ambivalence reflected in *Dictée*'s hypnotic, defiant transmissions.²⁸

In her 1975 video titled "Mouth to Mouth," the dictation exercise becomes playfully evocative. The title suggests that we will be witness to an act of resuscitation, the rebirth of a lost mother tongue. This eight-minute meditation features a mouth sounding the vowel graphemes of Hangul, the phonetic script of the Korean alphabet. The mouth moves in and out of visibility, a proximity that suggests both intimacy and alienation. The mouth silently shapes itself to sound each vowel, but the voice is muffled by a soundtrack of bubbling water, bird song, footsteps, and a ticking clock. The audience barely sees the mouth through the haze of white static superimposed over it. What might have been clear at the point of transmission arrives as a snowy apparition, "language before it is born at the tip of the tongue."³ Much of Cha's work magnifies this moment of suspension before meaning is encrypted into speech and then decoded again.

As an artist of the diaspora, Cha urges me to stop thinking of translation as the loss of the unadulterated original, as a delicate choice between style and meaning, our sacrificial lambs. Her video works delve into the transmutations and perversions intrinsic to the act, destabilizing the authority of the original by resurfacing the multiple tongues inside a mouth, tongues that coincide only to eclipse one another. Contrary to readings of her work by Lisa Lowe, Elaine Kim, and Shelley Sunn Wong collected in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, I don't believe the presences in Cha's work signal a reinvention of Asian American identity, an unstable intersection between Korean, Korean American, avant-garde filmmaker, performance artist, poet, exilée, etc.²⁷ For

me, her work captures only the faint echo of an I, a mutability that endangers the act of identification itself.

As we walked to the Puck Building at midnight in the dead of winter, Dimitri innocuously asked why I went there every day and what I was hoping to find. We passed by a bubble tea shop called *Cha Cha Cha*, which is what I had been saying to myself as I looked for her. I didn't know what I was looking for, and if I knew, I wouldn't have to keep searching. That night, I read the Puck Building's Wikipedia page to Dimitri. While much of the description is dedicated to Thrive Capital, the venture capital firm owned by the Kushner family, a short paragraph towards the end details Cha's murder. As I looked for Cha in this dismal place, I realized I was not looking for her, but instead the proof of her absence. I wanted her to be haunting the empty estates, her mouth open wide enough to spill birdsong.

The title of Cha's collected poetry and image essays published posthumously, *Exilée and Temps Morts*, translates to "exiled and dead time." A poem titled "Arrival, 31 August 1962, United States of America" is positioned alongside a photograph of a beauty supply store selling mass-produced wigs:

The most astonishing
of the first day
was the abundance, wealth, the excess.
As a child, one imagined this 'Gold Mountain'
as having no two treasures alike.
Instead, repetition became an inevitable
vocabulary member

Inexhaustible duplication self-regeneration
as necessity
This absolute wealth tyranny of objects
As force of the machinery¹⁷

The speaker is bewildered by the sheer accumulation of objects, and repetition is inserted into her syntax as a “vocabulary member.” Replication becomes a mode of abstraction. The commodity is a purification ritual that dilutes and divulges meaning, a self-contained field that seems to be able to spontaneously regenerate itself without extracting value from human labor. The emptiness of these multi-million dollar units reminds me that “Gold Mountain” is beholden to an excess that eclipses its actual livability. When I looked at the Puck Building, I saw the phantom objectivity of capital divorced from the conditions of its accumulation—hard casualties in the construction of capitalism’s soft violence.

In 1992, ten years after Cha’s murder, Francis Fukuyama announced that the end of history had arrived; liberal democracy had become the final world order, the apex of human progress, and there would be no further evolution needed.²¹ I felt a strange tension between wanting to accept the unknowability of the past and the sense that this Gold Mountain’s prosperity was predicated on my forgetting. In the Puck Building’s cold sheen, I saw our phantasmic destiny reflected: a premeditated forgetting of the previous centuries of colonial violence that birthed such a fortress, the ruins of Fukuyama’s dream.

In the summer of 1980, Theresa and her brother James Cha visited Seoul for three months to film her only feature-length film titled *White Dust in Mongolia*. The film was never completed as they were continuously harassed by officers in the wake of violent political unrest following a presidential assassination. All that remains is some unedited footage of trains, airplanes, mops, and the silhouette of an urban skyline. The film's protagonist is a young Korean woman living in China, the descendant of Koreans who fled the Japanese occupation to Manchuria. She suffers without memory of the past, an amnesia that also causes her to lose all speech function. The narrative traces her search for a cure as she travels to Korea to have a history and an alphabet injected into her.²⁶ Until history and language are recovered, what unfolds is a landscape of pure phenomenological experience, signs without specificity, a sentiment Cha recounts in *Exilée and Temps Morts*:

some door some night some window lit some train some city some nation some peoples

Re Named

u t t e r l y by chance by luck by hazard otherwise.

otherwise any door any night any window lit any train any city

any nation any peoples some name any name to a

given name¹⁶

The *mise en abyme* of Cha's travel to Korea to make a film about a woman who travels to Korea only to be forbidden by martial law, reappears in *Dictée*. The section titled "MELPOMENE / TRAGEDY" includes a letter to the speaker's mother about how the carceral legacy of imperialism percolates into the present tense: "I am in the

same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt, nothing has changed... We are inside the same struggle seeking the same destination.”⁸ Although this may seem like an obvious continuity between the colonial era and the postcolonial era, Cha leads us to a more radical claim: that the relationship between the colonizer and colonized becomes, in its essence, a semiotic relationship, elastic in its exploitation by future powers: “The enemy becomes abstract... The nation the enemy the name larger than its own identity... Larger than its own signification... Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary.”⁶ The relationship of domination is not incidental to her historical circumstance; it is systemic and eternal, embedded in the architecture of the nation-state. What unfolds is a reckoning about the conditions of exile: when she realizes that no legal recognition can reverse this wound, the *exilée* also experiences a loss of the identity that was predicated on the perpetuity of her search. In *Dictée*, she writes, “I heard the swans / in the rain I heard,” alluding to Baudelaire’s exilic poem “Lye Cygne,” an interplay of *cygnes* (swans) and *signes* (signs):

I think of my great swan with his crazy motions
Like those in exile, ridiculous and sublime,
Consumed by a singular desire.²

Like the myth of the mute swan that sings beautifully in the moments before death, the revocation of this “singular desire” necessitates an undoing of the self. She arrives at the site of banishment in the hopes of reconciliation, only to be met with a double estrangement, casting her deeper into “the dim forest of the soul’s exile.”² Cha

warns me against making the past into an Eden; when she reaches for the past all she retrieves is a floating signifier. After she failed to make this film, Cha seeds a central question that propels the body of her work. If the exilée's identity cannot be recovered by returning to her homeland, where should she go with this desire?

There is a recurring dream my Nainai used to have. Towards the end of her life, there was little else happening to her—Baobao, dying is so boring, she complained. I couldn't be beside her because the lockdowns in China were several degrees more rigid than lockdowns anywhere else. Visitors were forbidden from entering retirement homes, even when my grandma entered hospice care. Calling me on WeChat became her main event of the day. Baobao, what did you eat today? she asked, and I would tell her what I ate that day. Nainai, what did you eat today? And she would tell me what she ate that day. It seemed we had nothing else to say to each other beyond this script until I finally thought to ask her about her dreams.

When my Nainai was eight years old, the daughter of farmworkers in Anhui, she watched as Japanese soldiers captured her village, burning crops and ransacking silos. When I asked about this period of siege, she shrugged and said that it was fine. And then I asked her what happened, and she said that nothing happened. The closest she came to telling me about the occupation was when she told me about her pet pig. After the soldiers set her shack on fire, they slaughtered her pig, her prized possession, and roasted it on skewers while she stood in the courtyard and watched with her hands tied behind her back.

It had been at least a decade since I had last heard her talking about the pig, but she was suddenly afflicted with dreams of it towards the end of her life. She dreamt of the pig sifting through the muddy silt, its deafening screech upon capture, and the smoke that rose from her village like curdled milk. She described this dream with such explicit detail that now, in my dreams, a pig will randomly come trotting through my field of vision, injecting itself into my narrative. Sometimes it's only a speck in the distance, and other times it's close enough to touch. The dream pig pokes at me with its snout, leaving a trail of drool on my hand. Now that she's gone, I feel like this pig is my inheritance. I don't know what it means except that I am tasked with keeping it alive.

History comes to me as this decontextualized pig—pig as a talisman, pig as a cipher for something inaccessible to me. This pig is powered through adjacency, burning with the oil and blubber of other auras. Maybe writing this reveals my process of reconciling with history's unknowability, admitting that I no longer feel a need to salvage the past in order to understand our future and its terrain of struggle. To me, keeping my Nainai's pig alive is about condemning the militarized police state that forced her to live undocumented in America for over a decade as much as it is about condemning China's parasitic and neocolonial trade relationship with Africa. The praxis has to be transcendental of any geotemporal context. It has to be greater than any nation-state.

In *Dictee*, Cha writes, "Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name

it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion.”⁷ If we are to “redeem the present through the grace of oblivion,” Cha asks us to follow her from the stasis of history into the realm of mythology. In an unpublished lyric essay made of fragments that never appeared in the final version of *Dictee*, the speaker recounts a dream sequence in which faces appear in transit on a freeway:

from the apex comes a continuous stream of heads without bodies. Faces from every history speed furiously down the tunnel, some glancing off my windshield. One stops, a pale Persephone, like a bee hovering. A moment of eye contact through the glass and then she accelerates past. It is fast in this era, there is no time for these dismembered shades to stop and tell their stories, to ask of their sons and daughters¹⁸

This is the picture I see when I look at the blank spaces in my Nainai’s photo album: a pale Persephone, promising an impossible presence moments before her sudden abduction through a cleft in the earth. It’s true that we can’t bring Persephone back from Hades, but her disappearance gives us the spring.

From the start of the section titled “ERATO / LOVE POETRY” through the remainder of the text, the temporality of *Dictee* transitions from revolutionary time to geological time. “What of the partition,” she incites, alluding both to the DMZ and the screen that divides the performer from her audience.¹⁰ In this crucial passage, the screen becomes “unattainably pure,” a place where all memory is collective memory, absent of historical epochs: “The memory stain attaches itself and darkens on the pale formless sheet, a hole increasing its size larger and larger until it assimilates the boundaries and

becomes itself formless. All memory. Occupies the entire.”¹⁰ There is no distinction between self and other, no expansion of the exilée’s identity that is necessary to make space for the coexistence of others. Instead of reifying her as an absolute other to be assimilated or expelled, her passage over the border is precisely what dissolves the border. This is the true end to exile: not the repatriation of the exilée, but the arrival of deconstructed space where *xénos* and *plíthos* are negated, and the conditions that originally produced her exile are abolished. The screen becomes the location where she can practice her enactment of this other world.

At night, after Dimitri fell asleep, I laid awake and looked at the Puck Building through the window of the hotel, how it emitted light despite its vacancy. Every shard felt manageable as it filtered through the blinds, gleaming with equanimity. And then I imagined a future where the building would be in ruins, a referent without a symbolic order attached to it. There was the slivered moon, and there was a slivered affinity between Cha’s deconstruction and my own revolutionary desire: to evacuate the name of an empire until it recedes into oblivion. “She says to herself if she were able to write she could continue to live. Says to herself if she would write without ceasing. To herself if by writing she could abolish real time. She would live.”¹¹

I am indebted to Cha’s poetry as it makes fluid those categories of memory, geography, time, self, and other. On the surface, the goal might appear to be total fragmentation, but I believe her intention is the opposite. The page is a location where we can gather and bear witness to each other, testing the boundaries of intimacy and narrativity, beyond spatiotemporal fixity and towards an open field—“in the enclosed

darkness memory is fugitive.”⁹ I felt Cha’s fugitive force vibrate in the hollows of the building, her aura petrified in the stone colonnades. It’s not an easy transcendence. I don’t believe that art lives on the exterior of history, or that history has an exit sign we can follow. And I still believe in militant struggle and the elsewhere it beckons that some things cannot be repurposed because they are destined to burn. But what I see in Cha’s cinematic allure is a blueprint for the dissolution of all sovereign borders.

The final pages of *Dictee* contain potent images of reincarnation: the theatre is emptied after the simulation, a child revives her mother with the tinctures of a shaman, and flowers sprout from a slain branch. After the extinction event, we enter a creation myth beginning with the elemental substances: water, pigment, saliva, blood, light, and ink. “Earth is made porous... In the blue-black body commences lument.”¹³ The world detaches itself from “plural pasts taken place beforehand.”¹⁴ Time makes monuments into cenotaphs. Signs have their etymologies evacuated before they are imbued with new meaning:

“Words cast by each other to weather
avowed indisputably, to time.
If it should impress, make fossil trace of word,
residue of word, stand as a ruin stands,
simply, as mark
having relinquished itself to time to distance”¹⁵

These words, now hieroglyphs, are being primed for re-assemblage into new orders. I kept the Puck Building in my field of vision before closing my eyes. Its light

radiated outward, shining into the hotel room. “You remain dismembered with the belief that magnolia blooms white even on seemingly dead branches and you wait.”¹² After I fell asleep, my dreams were graced with visitations from my Nainai’s pet pig. I listened while it spoke softly to me, in a human voice.

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Soil As Archive: On the Work of Recognizing Alternate Forms of Sentience

The oldest single living organism is a creosote bush named King Clone in the Mojave Desert. Radiocarbon dating and yearly growth measurements estimate the bush to be over 11,700 years old. Creosote is a type of flowering bush with three-tooth leaves, a scrubby shrub common in southwestern deserts in North America. Several indigenous tribes in the southwestern United States including the Pima, Cahuilla, and the Hualapi use creosote medicinally to treat a variety of maladies including stiff limbs, snake bites, and menstrual cramps. The mother plant reproduces by cloning herself in a ring before dying. Once her offspring reach the end of their life cycle, they clone themselves again and die. Above ground the bushes appear as multiple shrubs, but examining its root structure reveal the shrubs are genetically identical, children of the same rhizome.

Like how memory is transmitted across generations of the diaspora, creosote rings dilate outward without knowledge of their source, circling a coreless periphery. Cristina Rivera Garza uses the term ‘desedimentation’ to describe a writing practice that excavates the historical layers that comprise a particular landscape, revealing the social life hidden in cement ruins, abandoned lots, or regrown forests. What would it look like to develop an archival practice that thinks beyond human time, beyond the living and dead as binary categories, to treat historical events not as a contained event but as a multiplicity of afterlives? Desedimentation is a practice that teaches us how to think of space and time expansively, decentering our subjective experience of time.

In the first half of *Dark Soil*, Karen Tei Yamashita writes about the city of Santa Cruz, the city she has lived for the past X years. She writes about the lost Santa Cruz Chinatown, the Indigenous uprising at the Santa Cruz Mission, and the race riots that killed a Filipino migrant worker in Watsonville. What has been subtracted from the white settler's imaginary of California? How does this premeditated forgetting make the landscape into one of sunshine and vacancy? Yamashita's stories elucidate the ones who were expelled to make this imaginary possible, an erasure we must examine to unsettle the sediments of the present. In the second half of the collection, I asked seven other writers to practice looking at the hidden history of a place in America or its borderlands. Saretta Morgan writes about a wildlife refuge in the Sonoran Desert where the masked bobwhite quail serves as an indicator species, a metric used to assess the vitality of the ecosystem as a whole. The remains of three Latin American migrants have also been found in this desert. Craig Santos Perez writes about the imperial legacy in Guam, where the name of his village means *heartbeat* in Chamorro. What I asked these writers to do in *Dark Soil* isn't new—it's one instance in a long lineage of historians writing counternarratives of the present, driven forward by an impulse to reanimate the loss, not as a redemptive instrument, but at least to give them a proper burial. "Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility," Saidiya Hartman writes (8).

Desedimenting Time

Dark Soil is a collection of essays that begins with the premise that the colonial archive is not where we should look if we want to salvage the past. Like many writers trying to recover the traces of our ancestors, I was frustrated by a narrow conception of what constitutes an archive, the procedural documentation of inflicted violence, how a person could be reduced to a tooth, a fingernail. I wanted to practice what Dionne Brand calls “sitting in a room with history” where the room was the world (8). Could the Pacific Ocean be an archive? What about the sandstone on Angel Island, or the sheets of granite rock coolie laborers died on while building the Transcontinental Railroad? If our bodies are archives, what kind of data would they contain? This is not only because of the transmutation of forms, blood mixing with soil to fertilize the spring, but also because the more deeply I listened, the more I felt reverberations of the past, in its unaltered form, urging itself into the material conditions of the present. Thinking of the soil as an archive unsettled my conception of time. Time became much longer than the duration I was able to witness. Moishe Postone argues that capitalism restructures our temporal experience, restructuring time as a mode of social domination. What would it mean to conceive of time outside our productive capacities—geological time, non-linear time, revolutionary time?

When I ask students why we should study history, most of them will say the goal is to contextualize our present, the blip of our lives on this planet. I used to think this was a self-centered answer, but editing *Dark Soil* corrected my stance. All narratives are contrived, an injection of a linearity between past, present, and future. Even empirical documents invested in telling an objective truth make conscious choices

to sequence some events and not others. Many cultures have oral historians who mix mythological elements with historical accounts—the Palestinian hikaye, Gaelic seanchaí, West African griot, and Japanese kamishibai. These folk storytellers show us the inherent impermanence of historical narratives, their ephemerality and flux as they shift from mouth to mouth. What would it mean to make space for the excess and unknowability of the past, leaning into a form of contingency that shamelessly believes there is no point in reviving the dead unless to illuminate the present and its terrain of struggle? As Walter Benjamin says, “To articulate the past historically does not necessarily mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

Desedimenting Property

Desedimentation also has spatial resonances. In *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici writes a Marxist feminist account of the transition between feudalism and capitalism. In the late Middle Ages in Britain, a series of land enclosures converted public common land into private property, extricating the worker from their subsistence on the land, a fundamental material condition for creating a proletariat class that has nothing to sell on the capitalist market except their labor. At the same time, nearly 100,000 women were tried and persecuted in witch hunts—widowers, spinsters, healers, women who dressed like men, and women without male protectors. The satanic hysteria acted as a disciplinary instrument that forced women into the sphere of reproduction, namely domestic labor in a nuclear family structure. What’s notable

about this account is that Federici contends that violence towards women is not a separate and distinct problem, but an organic and inextricable process in the development of capitalism. While Federici's case study is Britain in the 1500s, aspects of these violent rituals enacted on women who resist integration into capitalism's productive capacities are transhistorical.

Thinking of the soil as an archive instead of as property made me consider what our relationship to the natural world could have been. Capitalism's land enclosures translate into imaginative enclosures that change the horizon of possibility for the kinds of intimacies we can form with the earth and with each other. The commons are a form of self-governance, not only a set of natural resources but also a set of social relations. The privatization of these enclosures lead to an atomization of society and the loss of knowledge about agricultural practices that renew the land instead of depleting it. Indigenous people have long practiced controlled burns to promote biodiversity and manage wildfire-prone underbrush, allowing overworked land to replenish its nutrients without the use of chemical fertilizer. Saretta Morgan writes, "The difficult thing about imagining a prior ecological identity is that so much of my imagination, which is to say my capacity to arrive, has been formed by and within the conditions on which this tragedy exists" (230). How do we dream of the possibility of an outside when we are very much embedded within? What about capitalism's dynamic ability to inject these dreams with the logic of the commodity?

Maybe this is why Mark Fisher contended that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, a contention that's always irked me. I don't know

if it's as difficult as we think. Writing in a speculative mode can be a way of beckoning this possible future. There is no form of historicizing that can revive our ancestors in their earthly form, but we can mourn our lost collective futurity and imagine what our relationship to the soil could have been. In this mourning, we inscribe their legacies as a public language for the struggle over land autonomy and ecological vitality. This is an affective project as much as it is an infrastructural one. The essays in *Dark Soil* gravitated toward the inclusion of experimental elements—lyric fragments, nonlinear narrative arcs, epistolary passages, nonhuman animacies, dream sequences, and nested narratives. While these formal experimentations might feel unusual in the Western cultural imagination, these expansions have felt necessary in order to capture the histories accumulated in the soil, honoring the fugitive desires and slippery realities of the presences that have touched it.

King Clone is a plant that evades detection—those who go in search of the bush often report difficulty differentiating it from the other creosote rings in the vicinity. The area is cordoned off with a low-slung wire fence and nothing else. Creosote's lack of extravagance seems only fitting for a life form that has resided in the desert ever since glaciers receded after the Ice Age. Maybe it's creosote's unremarkable nature that has let it fade into the background for millennia. When people say the desert is a wasteland, inhospitable to life, I say that the desert teaches me to recognize alternate forms of sentience. Creosote bushes were one of few plants that survived a thermonuclear test

explosion conducted in Yucca Flat in 1962. Its roots have recently been shown to rejuvenate soil contaminated with heavy metals, filtering chromium from tainted land.

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A Review of Aerial Concave Without Cloud by Sueyuen Juliette Lee

Sueyuen's Juliette Lee's newest poetry collection *Aerial Concave Without Cloud* is washed in the pale blue light of apocalyptic reckoning. Prophetic and aphotic, this collection begins at the microscopic level—photons, nanoseconds, subatomic forces—and ends at the macroscopic scale—fugitive motion, transnational belonging, the poem as a social terrain, ancestral grief, and the subterranean afterlives of the Korean War. The poems refract the sun's lambent rays to "orient the field of my gaze / all-consumed by blind ambient day" (69). With a pace that mirrors the phases of salp'uri, a Korean dance that purifies the shaman following an exorcism, this collection approaches language with methodical patience and as a redemptive instrument. Layers of ablution accumulate until we are left with nothing but corpuscles of light once more, primed for reassemblage into new solar radiations.

Much of the first half of this collection is comprised of fragments that feel Sapphic and oneiric in nature. The poems display a painstaking awareness of stimuli in a way that elides experience itself, taking care to record each photon of light that is transmitted, mediated, reflected. Language saturates the body as a perceptual tool, dissecting stimuli until its discrete components are visible. Lee writes, "part of the ensuing discourse about light / was written at my desire / to comprehend the phenomenon / through the lens of my breathing body" (9). We are "in the blood's awareness," perceiving without assimilating, each image cleansed by the following like a mirror. Lee writes, "All gleamed with a crystalline equanimity... Flexing the long stones inside my legs as mass, I moved with a deliberate, calculated pace towards the

shore” (32). Lee’s deliberate, calculated pace works to dilate and constrict lyric time, locating itself with such granularity in the present tense that the present becomes hyperreal. It delivers to us the totalizing realization that all visual information is the consequence of light’s contact with a surface. This witnessing is reciprocal, a consummation of absorption and transmission. What am I broadcasting at every quivering instant? What information is being so blindly delivered into me?

Even definitions are too static. To name something is to force it into the violence of an ideal. In a phenomenological meditation on a tree, Lee asks, “can one ever / a single, an only, a one / a tree” (26). Although the fragmented form magnifies stimuli to a point of isolation, the poem insists that “we must not deduce / the truth of light / consider the entire process in / a unified manner from the start” (10). Here is a body without an I, dislocated from history. Instead, it is an archive that simply absorbs and interpolates, diffusing light, reminding us of the infinity contained between integers. By defamiliarizing somatic experience, Lee asks us to experience the world as if for the first time, to make the proprioceptive into something no longer inert: “I want to understand what opens up in this dis-attended collection at the periphery of perception, at the seeming limit of its transformation” (73). This level of awareness of cognition isolates experience and approaches it with total curiosity, detaching it from judgment and the past.

The second half of the book breaks into a section titled “Relinquish / the Sky” where Lee reflects on the scientific method of her inquisition. She writes of her traversals through the Arctic Circle in Tromsø, the west fjords of Norway, and the

grasslands in Wyoming, recording the light from streetlamps and the aurora borealis. Wherever she went, she said that she had come to study the winter light, how muted and how lambent. “I began my inquiry into light, simply: can I decipher a similar capacity to translate and speak the light with my living human body? / And by doing so, can I relinquish the intensities of an inherited orphan grief” (85)? Through this form of luminous witnessing, loss is transformed into a form of inquisition, disidentified instead of sublimated. She attempts to reconcile with this “inherited orphan grief” and translate it into a fugitive motion that allows her access into the inaccessible: into South Korea, into the border marked by the DMZ, into North Korea, a pool of black in satellite images. After watching a documentary film featuring a young North Korean exilee, Lee writes, “I realize that the only documents that attest to his life could very well be the footage that was used in that film. And I was observing the recreated light patterns of what had once echoed off his body and into the camera’s lens, captured” (110). This poem is elegiac for all the light that died before it could be cast upon a body, before it could be absorbed and preserved in digital ecologies.

If light comes from a transcendent source, then Lee’s invocation of *sul’puri* dance at the end of the collection returns us to a plane of immanence. During an exorcism, the shaman removes the *sal*, the curse, absorbing it into herself. *Sul’puri* is the ritual dance performed afterward that banishes the *sal* from the shaman’s psyche. This dance is an infusion of supplication and elegy: “A poem. A dance. And the light was brought down. / I, too, would like to call down the light and be healed” (95). The ritual is a solo performance featuring the eldest dancer in the group dressed in a white

hanbok and beo-seon socks, waving a white silken scarf. Her movements lack metronomic technique; each gesture is restrained as a way to demonstrate the dancer's containment of surging emotion, her ability to subdue the manifest pain as it circulates—"to witness a 平 is to observe a magnitude in motion" (94). This form of purification translates pain into beauty, an exorcism post-exorcism that transmutes "inherited orphan grief" into whatever comes "after frozen waterfalls with broken teeth. After darkness. After all needle thin rays of starlight in black gale" (44). Its layered distillation is a way of being-together with the dynamic undercurrent of forces unseen and unborn. It is the role of a shaman to dispel "this amber dark calling," or the emotion that Koreans call han (한), a combination of hatred, bitterness, and a sense that a profound injustice that remains unavenged, for the exigency of collective survival (11).

The core progression of the collection mirrors the temporal pacing of sul'puri dance, a series of trance-like gestures that slowly increase in amplitude. After a phase of slow, rhythmic gestures called orunum hyong, the dance heightens its voltage and comes to a climactic release, the poo-num hyong. In the finale, the shaman returns to her original location on stage, signifying the beginning of a new karmic cycle cleansed of prior accumulation. Lee is left with more questions than answers at the end of her investigation of light, forcing her to shift her mode of inquiry toward new terrains: "I feel certain I am on the right track. / I move slowly through the hoarfrost. / I wander off the trail" (12). But instead of illuminating the contours of this new cartography, the collection leaves us with a sense of profound uncertainty—an uncertainty that signifies opening instead of closure, an elliptical motion that traces the non-teleology of

suffering and healing. The epigraph that opens the book by Gaston Bachelard speaks to this transformation from enclosure to disclosure: “To enclose light is to prepare the way for life” (8).

In her traversals, we encounter various ghostly presences: her father’s lost mother, a Filipina woman working at a cash register in an Icelandic town, the North Korean boy in the documentary film, her son’s “coal dark eyes wrapped with filmy gauze” (43). The landscape is otherwise barren besides their hazy summonings, impossible presences that illuminate the way. These spectral visitations punctuate the relationship between the orphan and the exilee: fates linked by their sourcelessness, unable to properly mourn a lost object that was never formed: “I can’t account for the things I never had” (23). When Lee describes her former home in Korea, she explicates a profound alienation from the memory itself: “I can’t remember very much from that time. Images appear to me like badly exposed film stills, or as though I am hovering high up above them and peering down. Certain details are clear—a glint of light off a building at noon. Strangely, *I see myself* in these memories. I was not at home in my own body, but dwelling elsewhere” (103). This dissociation is a protective mechanism that percolates through the text, a dissociation that reveals the speaker’s vulnerability in the process of transcribing even a “thin streak of sunlight / on the pale wooden floor” (88).

Lee writes that she often didn’t speak aloud for days during her catabasis. While describing one unexpected encounter with a Filipina woman in an Icelandic gas station, she says, “Her eyes gleamed with sudden wetness. I saw what I infrequently see in other Asian women’s eyes when we encounter each other in various abandonments.

Kin” (107). These intimacies borne from mutual ruination litter the text, other light-deflecting bodies displaced and embittered anonymously alongside her. In an epigraph, Claire Callahan writes that North Korea propaganda reveals “the orphan to be the national symbol of North Korea, the figure, it seems, most capable of being revolutionary. After all, just as the orphan is a broken link in a chain, so revolutions seek to create a radical break in history” (90). The pain of this valorization is potent through the text, the pain of dehumanization into a symbolic register. The invocation of other exiles suggests an intimacy that is not based on a shared knowledge of common ancestry. In this discursive reckoning, these nameless encounters are a way of recognizing how unevenly a collective is formed: “... these orphans populate my spirit. And I of them, too” (87). In Brian Reed’s essay on Lee’s poem “Korea,” he writes, “Lee starts with a classic immigrant tableau—I live *here* but my real home is *there*, the country on the other side of the sea—and then complicates it, suggesting that for someone like her ‘home’ is neither the nation of residence nor the country of origin but instead a ‘*Par Avion* construct,’ a replacement for the land of her ancestors, a purely *textual* and *fanciful* creation” (Reed). In these “textual creations,” the poem becomes a site of witness, a virtual ether, a cartography of ghosts.

In an interview, Lee said, “To write and read a poem is to potentially shake loose the drapes over the machinery, to assist in sensitizing new reading and mindfulness habits that can allow us to see otherwise or through... Those who take on poetry as their primary means for engaging the world are choosing to take on this central conundrum of sign, affect, and perception that shapes the consensual reality we

inhabit” (57). In deconstructing language to the particle level, these poems ask us to question the substructures that comprise us, where meaning is derived as an interrelationship between unstable signs, “deciphering how the action between bodies and light is mutual” (117). She transcribes the reverberations of the Korean War that never formally concluded in a peace treaty, this light that still burns, detectable and diffuse. In the counterglow, we notice the indistinct figures of others alongside us seeking impossible reconciliations, standing in a field “gleam[ing] with a crystalline equanimity” (32). This collection teaches us to find serenity in their heat, for “is not fire a body heated so hot as to emit copiously” (77)?

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A Review of Virga by Shin Yu Pai

Virga, a derivation of the Latin word for “branch,” is the name for rain that dries before it touches the ground, appearing as a mass of streaks diffusing underneath a dark cloud. Shin Yu Pai’s newest collection, *Virga*, published by Empty Bowl in August 2021, is a poetic reenactment of this meteorological occurrence. While venerating her genealogy, Pai illustrates how rain, like diaspora, becomes pixelated with time, dissipating into new forms with “the residue of each past spark.” In this mesmerizing collection, Pai intertwines meditations on Buddhist cosmology, political insurgency, and motherhood in an effortless flow from luminous witnessing to revolutionary unrest.

The book opens with a series of haikus that follow the tradition of Tang Dynasty lyric poets such as Wang Wei and Du Fu: with a neutral eye, Pai writes of her pilgrimage to Tiger’s Nest, a holy temple in Bhutan. The reader experiences an end to cognition and the disappearance of the speaking subject: “rice grains in the window / seat at the temple / remnants of offerings” (12). The act of reading then becomes a process of unraveling that restores a prior fullness before these images were tainted by language. Pai uses poetry as a mirror, a site for “the gathering darkness / of my many selves,” exhibiting total contact with the physical world without assimilating it into a narrative. These unadorned haikus illustrate pure immersion without interpretation, reflecting the true emptiness of phenomena. Disarmingly sparse, the poems promise presence only through absence, transparencies which cannot be reconciled, consumed, or made more intact. Pai gives us this unmediated real without an impulse to unify.

Pai transitions from static recording to guiding her reader through the tactile experience of making 108 clay tsa-tsas, sacred Bhutanese reliquary objects. In this practice, she revels in the amorphousness of her creations, how her final product does not always bear the imprints of her mold — “anything can go wrong, at any time.” Her mud is an “uncarved block,” the Taoist word for the barren state of nature. In transcribing her act of choosing the clay, applying the glaze, and firing the kiln, she gives form to material, embracing the “specter of failure” as a poetics against teleology, “perfection a wholeness / complete unto itself.” Pai’s abandonment of the perfect ta-ta, which cannot exist beyond her ideation, paves a clearing into somatic unknowability. The relinquishment of desire to possess with the ego is a recurring theme, complicated by the loss of objects that are unmournable.

The grief of this collection begins with the self-immolation of a Buddhist teacher and concludes with the drowning of a close friend in Deer Harbor. These elegiac poems frame the text, their departed presences burning lucidly throughout. In the pandemic’s isolation, Pai grapples with a loss of communion, resorting to looking at “the interiors / of other human habitations / transmitted over computer cams.” In this collective desolation she instructs us to engage in ritual practice as a point of unity, a congregation of the living with the dead:

write the epitaphs of those
you have lost on separate sheets
of spirit paper, fit the words
into the shape of each golden
foil, when you are done

char them to ash leaf by leaf

These guided meditations unearth specters of the past to enact a more proper burial on the whitespace of the page, asking:

if there is
a method
to capturing
time's memory
is it to bracket light.

Perhaps it is the desire to imprint these layers of memory, however palimpsestic, and mimic the pleasure of its repetition, a cyclical mourning where the goal is not to heal but instead reckon with the wound.

Pai's private losses are punctuated with the public grief inflicted by the American racial project following President Trump's inauguration. In the insurrection summer after George Floyd's murder, she engages closely with the spatial resonance of the greater Seattle area, excavating sites of resistance and abjection in response to colonial enterprises. Locations she evokes include a public park renamed after the counter-policing activist Donnie Chin, the Century Building that private investors failed to transform into low-income housing, Edith Macefield's childhood home in Ballard she refused to sell to mall tycoons, and a graveyard littered with defaced monuments. Pai reminds us that it matters how we trace a geography, that the act of signification can become a violence, how this violence is destined to resurface in "spite mounds, spite house / the acid of spite poem." Still, even in struggles for sovereignty that end in the infliction of deeper wounds, Pai holds the view that "all spaces have the

capacity to become sacred—the shell of a bronze mold acts as a womb. The writing desk, the uninhabited heart, the college lecture room.”

Pai then glances at an elsewhere across the ocean, recollecting her family’s homeland in Taiwan. In a prose piece dedicated to the poet Koon Woon, she writes of her place within the greater Chinese diaspora:

“Yet across dialect, generation, and clan, we do not ask whether we belong to one another. Like the koi that you choose to seal your stories, the connection to what’s Chinese transmutes into care for all our relations,”

Pai delineates a kinship that transcends borders and bloodlines, rooted in the exigency of collective survival rather than in national identity. This gestures toward the formation of a new coalitional politic; like koi submerged in water, we cannot see with lucidity, but we can feel the ripples of those who move alongside us. Diaspora is illustrated as an exilic state where home is a spatiotemporal fixture perpetually made and unmade, echoing James Baldwin when he reminds us that “perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.” On the ancestral tribal lands of the Duwamish people, Pai teaches us how to inhabit without propertizing, how this visitation is a gift:

as beings that live
upon this earth we are
learning to relate to place;
leave a mark that’s made
without the use of harm.

In the final segment of the collection, the poems move towards an ethereal realm: images of karmic rebirth are evoked incongruity with the cyclical nature of eternal return. She writes of her pregnancy, the precipice of her body making space for another:

in the fluid of the womb before
human life pushes outward,
the memory is already etched with
the residue of each past spark.

In the wake of new life, she contends with the force of its binary opposition, showing the inextricable nature of decay and regeneration. Time seems to move recursively in the final section of this collection, orbiting a centreless thing “in this being reborn.” When Pai gives birth to her son Tomo, she becomes his student, unlearning the world around her through his unfiltered gaze. In moments of beauty and unbecoming, she sees his “primal recognition” of an inert knowledge, one that is not experiential. Much like the ending of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, which evokes the figure of the child as a sign of futurity, Tomo’s birth is not a redemptive instrument for the violence that emanates, but a window into the full world, obscure from a distance but growing luminous and manifest when we approach it.

Virga is a collection that urges us to think in dialectics. Pai asks: how can we foster a spirituality that accepts the inevitability of suffering while also catalyzing us to rectify the conditions which produced suffering? How do we abolish desire that radiates from the ego and enact the urgency of another world’s arrival? How can we resist alienation as well as this country’s slow inoculation? How can we prescribe to a

revolutionary time that is cyclical while believing in an abolitionist horizon that is somewhere beyond? These questions reverberate and recede from one another, contouring the page's cartography of light. The migration of bodies across water and the transmigration of souls are juxtaposed until their significations collapse into each other, becoming singular and diffuse. Pai's training in Buddhism informs her access to the prelinguistic and ineffable until "you / who are nothing but ears, / arrive wide awake." The poems in this book are droplets of rain that forget their source, morphing fluidly into new forms before they touch the earth.

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A Review of 回 / Return by Emily Lee Luan

Emily Lee Luan's stunning debut poetry collection *回 / RETURN* opens with the ancient Chinese glyph for 'return,' 回, calligraphed by Luan's mother. In a style recorded in the Eastern Han Dynasty, the spiral curvature appears distinct against the version simplified circa Cultural Revolution, one square interlocked inside another, 回. Much of Luan's collection traces the cartography of an immigrant's desire to recurse to the beginning, scouring for the source of an inexplicable sadness: "When my Sorrow was born, I held it, a dark pearl spit from its shell, and I remembered the salt that had rounded it, centuries ago, before I even had a mouth" (6). Luan's collection explores the contours of this unknowability, whose faces and forms endure in the void of the past: "When I open my gaze to the past, I see with one eye, as if a hole gone through my skull" (1). The glyph mirrors a diasporic diffusion as it emanates outward in all directions without a center of gravity to stabilize this movement. Luan's complex reckoning asks us if return is possible, if there is anywhere to return to: "I can't go back. I was born here" (72), where the second line creates a vortex down the page, convulsing with pain and beauty.

Luan shows a practiced formal control in her 'reversible poems,' a palindromic form that allows the reader to traverse the poem forwards and backwards. The form was popularized by Su Hui, a Chinese poet from the 4th century, who wrote poems that could be read forwards, backwards, vertically, horizontally, in circular and lateral motions, yielding thousands of possible readings per poem. Luan's poem "Reversible

Poem in Laughter” begins and ends with the image of a man sinking in the deep end of a swimming pool. In the interior of the poem, the speaker laughs in her sleep. Luan deftly moves us between these disparate images in a deeply associative manner: “Most men want to be alone except / in the hour of morning when a face dissolves to blue” (60), creating a mirror effect that feels seeing your reflection obscured by the texture of the water as it shimmers. Identity is composed of these projections, always mediated by the surface onto which their image is cast. By experimenting with the spatial temporality of the page, Luan invites us to think about the past and future not as distinct forces, but as contingent horizons that replicate each other infinitely: “It’s easy to meet that in-between, where / the something-like-being lies” (37). Her reversible poems show us a past that is just as murky and inaccessible as the future. Luan’s non-hierarchical approach lets go of the mastery over meaning, making space for her reader’s coexistence inside her forms: “You and I, a likely objective” (37). Her lyric transparency reminds us of the porousness of language, how our reception is what gives the poem signification, how necessary we are to making it live.

In her multi-page narrative poems, Luan’s poetic reconstructions of the past vibrate with grace and lucidity. The ghost of her grandfather appears in many of them, sometimes in memory and other times in flesh, speaking as if still alive. The loss of her grandfather dilates and becomes symbolic for the loss of something greater in history’s impregnable darkness. In one poem, she writes, “I was in Chinatown when the building with the archives burned, but I didn’t see the smoke. That’s where those beautiful archives are, I’d said to my companion, and pointed freely” (36). This act of “pointing

freely” strikes me as a gesture that says that the burned archive is everywhere, its ashes circulated through time-space and collective memory. Luan resists the desire to romanticize these ashes: “I should love the revolution, but the revolution killed my grandfather’s father” (7). Her disavowal rings just as true as her severance. While the past is unstable in these reckonings, she grieves the dimensions of time that stay fixed, all those places her poems can never reach. In a passage where she visits her grandfather’s grave, she writes, “Are you okay with being here forever? I asked. I’m not sure I have a choice, he replies, and grasps all ten of his fingers together” (51).

In a sequence of interspersed lyric poems, Luan discusses the contours of her ever-shifting sadness. She illuminates the dimensions of this sadness, attempting to give definition to what is ultimately inexplicable. Sadness becomes alive, mutable and transformed. Can I carry my sadness if it “comes in waves,” “is a refrigerator,” “is luminous,” “is a suitcase,” “knows no bounds,” “is your happiness?” In the acknowledgements, she links her sadness with David Eng and Shinhee Han’s seminal work on racial melancholia and racial dissociation, categories that speak to the specific psychic lives of Asian Americans as they navigate the losses associated with immigration, displacement, and assimilation. “Psychoanalysis is focused on the mother but rarely considers the motherland; it is attuned to family dynamics but rarely thinks about the family of nations,” Eng and Han write (6). What could be mistaken for a cold elegance becomes reinscribed as a structural hurt. “*Oh, I love you Ling Ling*, the man on the street says to me. / I’ve said it before: I don’t know where I am” (7). The “you”

in this poem becomes a nebulous sign detached from the speaker, a misrecognition that dislocates her from reality.

Luan also offers a blueprint for where we should go from here, broadening the horizon of her sorrow. Melancholia is a condition where one is unable to finish mourning a lost object and the object becomes introjected into the ego, relegated to the unconscious realm. Eng and Han ask, what happens if certain losses are, in fact, ungrievable? Luan's poetry makes me believe that melancholia can be reinscribed as an act of resistance, that there are certain losses that we cannot accept or ever finish mourning. Luan writes, "All emotion feels to me a kind of performance. I am trying to unlearn that now" (35). This unlearning happens in the space of the poem, in the act of transcription. Poetry has the power to make this grief less private, less subterranean. To bring our sadness to the surface is to make it into a collective salve. Luan tells me there is power in naming our psychic afflictions, in using language as an instrument that can excavate this grief. In the final poem, titled "From weeping into weeping," she writes:

"I'm not
the phoenix in the classic narration of you, rising
from the broken glass and the sun that travels
through it to light this field on fire. I'm the glass—
I have always wanted to be taken
by you, to be made into a lake and reflected,
wildly" (94).

In this beautiful closing poem, Luan reclaims the "you" by inviting us to live inside the floating signifier. This lucent image is one that refuses transformation, instead beckoning us to see the depths of what is already present, already imminent.

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A Review of "When I Grow Up I Want to Become a List of Further Possibilities"

Late September I drove down I-5 South from Seattle to California with a rice cooker in the front seat and everything else I owned in the back. When I pulled out of the driveway my mother said, "It's not too late to let me come with you." I kissed her through the window, slept in the back of my car and washed my hair in public restrooms. The first night I spent at a friend of a friend's house Portland. The second night with my feet dipped in a public pool reading Chen Chen.

By the third night I was flirting with waitresses and only driving on cruise control and I knew I would have to tell my mother something else. I was moving down the coast to start my PhD in literature after I spent the summer in Brooklyn barely making rent. I lied to my mother and said my art internships were paying me enough but I got some of my income by going on dates with men with Oriental fetishes from the Internet. I drew my eyelids on heavy and spoke with an accent that sounded like a violet hunger.

"I will miss the particularly cruelty / of tongue twisters in my first tongue: / Shíshì shīshì Shī Shì, shì shī, shì shí shí shí shī. / Shì shíshí shì shì shī" (14).

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Chen Chen's poetry transgresses the space between vulnerability and surrender, a pulse against the tides of forgetting. His loss of self is not delineated by an explicit anti-identity, but instead a subtle reconfiguration of the subjective. He projects images of the self onto the beautifully banal. "There are some inside things I was going to make / outside things, just for one person in a godless / living room, full of passé plants" (42).

I read poems at red lights and rest stops and thought about what inside things I had kept inside me, how I wanted to take those latent scars and take them to the surface, a psychic exfoliation. Chen Chen writes violence in a way that subverts the binary between the victim and transgressor: "I tried to ask my parents to leave the room, / but not my life. It was very hard. Because the room was the size / of my life" (12). The empathy in Chen Chen's poetry is a practice of amnesty—even in moments of anger his words are not vengeful. And they made me feel full, almost brimming over, with a ritual emptiness.

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When I was ten I told my mother I wanted to be a writer and she said what? My fingers are swollen, help me seal these dumplings. In high school I said it again and she told me to marry someone rich so I never have to do real work. She wants to believe America made me this way but I like to believe I made me this way. "...when on second thought, I can see the dust was just there, / just dirt, & the light only made it visible" (19). I

imagine her white dimpled flesh standing in the doorway, waiting to smell my hands when I come home from a party, and I am struck with the guilt of being the one who was carried, as if when she bore me I came out as the vacancy.

There is an ontological sadness that grows from a powerlessness in my own becoming. Which is to say: it's not that I did not want to become the complicit daughter of a buried bloodline but the more fluid I tried to be the more liminal I became. When I was ten I stopped brushing my hair and my mother forced a comb through it. She was sifting through in my psyche, looking for which pure to keep and which tainted to dispose of, like sorting grains of rice.

"Finally, I've learned—all this time, trying to get from one useless / chunk of land to another, when I should've just stayed / in the water" (53).

When Chen Chen writes about his mother she fluctuates from omniscient to powerless. His descriptions of her are perforated with the realization that the hands that raised him have been dyed with memory and loss. "The grease-tang of kung pao chicken in my mother's shirts, / in my mother's far-away look after shifts" (17). He writes of a spiritual disembodiment evoked by the spatial, and the distance between them uncoils into a landscape. His poetry dilates this distance and becomes a transmission of empathy. Chen Chen's idealism is never reductive—instead, it resists the crippling anesthesia of assimilation one line at a time.

"What does it mean, to sing in the language of those / who have killed your mother, / would kill her again" (23)?

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When my mother thinks of my car stalled on the side of an Oregon freeway she remembers how my father slept in a pile of his own clothes somewhere in Ohio and how my grandmother gave her daughters away because she could only afford sons. And then she thinks of how history is this cyclical mass which cannot be broken no matter what we puncture it with. Passing through a starless desert at 100 mph, I could not shed her gaze or the conviction that I had spit out the leftover dreams that were painstakingly regurgitated in my mouth. My refusal "to be the one / my parents raised me to be— / a season from the planet / of planet-sized storms" (77).

My mother told me once that our family friends no longer ask of me. Ying works in Wall Street, Jenny is in her last year of medical school, Simon studies computer science at Stanford. And I'm shoplifting shampoo from CVS, staring at the pockmarked sun until its light dies in the back of my eye. Chen Chen writes that he is "dreaming of one day being as fearless as a mango" (63). And I am dreaming of one day being an orange with my mother's thumb rooted in the rind.

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On Ghosts, Blood Ties, and Border Politics

“But we’re never alone, and I always eventually turned to see my ancestors by my side. See my grandmothers’ solar faces.” —Suheir Hammad, *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black*

My grandmother gave birth to me when I was two years old. Before me, after me, she gave birth to five others: my father, my uncle, my aunt, my brother, and my cousin. It’s hard for me to draw my bloodline in a way that runs parallel with theirs. There are all these places where it gets blurry and pixelated. When I try to sew my baby parts together it always feels like I forgot a limb somewhere.

I don’t know my grandmother very well. She raised me for eight years when my parents were working too much to look after me, but I’m not sure if I could pronounce her real name. My Chinese handwriting looks like a kindergartener’s, and my grandmother was an illiterate village girl until she was eighteen. Whenever we write letters to each other it feels like two people touching each other’s faces in the dark.

Ever since my grandmother’s motorcycle accident three years ago, she’s been riddled with this anxiety that she will soon forget her memories. She Skypes me once a month and tries to record them all in me. She tells the story of how she raised me over and over, and one memory will incite another and soon she can’t stop talking for hours, in circles, until I get tired and put the phone down. It feels weird to be a secondhand witness to a history my body was present for but my brain retains no evidence of. My

grandmother yells at me over the wet hot static of the computer monitor and fills in blanks that I didn't know were erased. In these conversations I often don't say a word, and I don't think she notices or cares.

She tells the story like this:

My mother and father came to America in 1991 from Red China. By then, there were 684,000 Chinese immigrants living in the United States—bodies yellow like moons, or maybe like peril. My mother dropped out of her PhD program at Ohio State University when she became pregnant with me. She says it was a lucky accident, but bringing a living thing into the world is a lot of work. She had one pair of maternity clothes that she wore every day and washed carefully in a basin every night until her shirt was stretched thin over her orb-like belly. At night my father slept on the couch of the restaurant he worked at in Chinatown. My mother scolded him every time he bought McDonald's because they couldn't afford it.

When my mother gave birth to me in 1994, she sent me to live with her family in Zhengzhou, China. My mother said this broke her heart, but you couldn't raise a newborn on the couch of some restaurant. The first person I called 妈妈¹ was my aunt, the second person I called 妈妈 was my grandmother, and the third person was the neighbor's daughter. My aunt likes to joke about how I cry more now than I did when I was 0-2 years old. I used to say hello to every stranger on the street, and I never threw

¹ Mother.

fits at night. All my relatives whose faces I no longer recognize tell me what it was like to hold me as a baby. It's eerie to think of myself being transported back and forth between distant palms, each of them citing a sliver of my opaque history that I can no longer access. It feels like being fostered by a house of soft ghosts.

After I lived in Zhengzhou for two years, it became my father's family's turn to take care of me. At the airport, before I got on a plane to Shanghai, my aunt tricked me into thinking she was just going to the bathroom because I wouldn't let go of her hand. That was the first 妈妈 I lost, but I hardly remember her.

In Shanghai I stayed with my grandmother in a tiny loft she shared with my uncle and my grandfather. She tells me about how swampy and humid the air was that year. There were a lot of stray cats that lived on my street, and I liked to feed them fish from the market on weekends. When the typhoons came in the summer I was worried that the cats would drown, but they always came back after the rain had passed. "Do you see?" she said. "Even stray cats have homes in the wild."

My grandmother was adopted when she was a baby and the orphanage lost her birth certificate, so she doesn't know anything about where she was born, or who her Real Mother is. By then I felt like all kinds of beings had given birth to me too. I didn't know what to call them—妈妈 of the diaspora, 妈妈 of the flesh. Even the old women who sat on buckets and played cards in the park were my 妈妈 too.

It's hard to say if I've forgotten the things I don't remember. They are recorded in the creases on my grandmother's hands, the archetypes of my unconscious, my

cruelty. For a long time I blamed my mother for sending me away to be raised by someone else. I wanted to know why she didn't just get an abortion if she knew she had to mail me to Shanghai with a suitcase filled with baby formula as soon as I was born. It took me a long time to recognize her as my Real Mother instead of looking for subtle and insidious ways to prove I was not her daughter. “上帝，我怎么出身怎么奇怪的女儿？”² she would ask whenever I did something bad. Ten years later I can finally recognize the true source of my resentment: I am not bitter about the experience of being raised by many mothers, but I am bitter about all the mothers that have been taken away from me.

This is a list of things I remember about my grandmother. I am not sure how much of it is real or made up, but it's what I want to tell people when they ask when they ask where I'm really from:

07月1996年

I am two years old when my brother is born in

America. His name is 姜思浩. My

grandmother

and I leave the fervid ennui of the sun and go to my
parents' house in Athens, Ohio. My grandmother is
granted a visa that is valid for one year.

² "Dear God, why did you let me give birth to such a strange child?"

09月1997年

left, I

enroll me in

eyes, weird

My grandmother's visa expires. The sky in suburbia
is pink and oily like grapefruit. After she
think a swampghost came and buried its roots
inside all my hollow parts. My parents
preschool but I am withdrawn because I can't speak
English. I want to know what I am and who made
me this way: painfully shy, black seed
tongue.

07月1999年

My grandmother comes back with a visa that is
valid for another year. My parents buy a house in
Seattle after looking at photos on the Internet.
They want to move there because of a movie they saw,
Sleepless in Seattle, which I've never watched but
know it's one of those calculated chick flicks where
beautiful people fall in love when they don't mean to. A
few months later we drive across America in a dark
blue minivan that reeks of vomit. My grandmother likes
to wear XL Adidas tracksuits she brought from the
black market in Shanghai. I think they look so pretty on

her. In the summer Seattle is hot and misty like a monsoon or maybe God's saliva.

07月2000年

My grandmother's visa expires. She lives in America for five years as an undocumented immigrant.

05月2005年

My uncle's daughter is born. Her name is 娄思辰. I ask my father what her name means and he says, "It is a name. Does not mean much." My grandmother moves to Shanghai to take care of her instead. I sometimes wonder if she knew that she would never be allowed to come back to see me again.

09月2005年

parents, like

I resent my grandmother for leaving me here in this place. I look for quiet ways to defy my
by not brushing my hair or smiling in photographs. One day an older boy from the neighborhood calls me a chink and I bite down on his hand so hard it draws blood. My mother has many superstitions about my misconduct. I can hear her talking to my father in their

bedroom. She thinks I have a little rabbit heart beating inside me that's been bitten by a snake.

04月2011年

My grandfather dies one night in his sleep.

06月2013年

My grandmother applies for a visa and is rejected.

09月2013年

My grandmother gets hit by a motorcycle and loses vision in her left eye.

06月2014年

My grandmother applies for a visa and is rejected.

06月2015年

My grandmother applies for a visa and is rejected.

I haven't seen my grandmother in over four years, and I've reconstructed her image so many times that it's hard to decipher what is real and what is a translation. I've hardly retained any memories from age 10, but I still have this distorted recollection of the last time she walked me to the bus stop and the way she'd smack her lips together when she was disappointed in me. I am often struck with this vague fear that there is this original paradise that she exists in, and as time passes this paradise becomes increasingly desecrated and impenetrable. I am afraid that she will die one

day and all I'll have are these murky, fragmented memories without a body that corresponds to them.

But I know I can't forget about the ones who raised me just because I can't touch them. You can cut umbilical cords but I think there is something else, ceaseless and unspoken, that keeps you rooted inside your mother, and your mother rooted inside of you. Suheir Hammad writes: "Borders are man-made, and I refuse to respect them unless I have a say in their formation. Besides, call Spirit what you want, essence is one and eternal."

I've thought about that last sentence for a long time. If someone's essence is the thing that lives inside their ghost, then there are reasons we keep those ghosts alive through reproduction and ritual. My grandmother is still a living breathing thing, but I think she has ceased to be real to me. She's become this detached mythic being that represents parts of my diaspora that I cannot perforate or recollect. When I recreate her architecture I am recreating the hands that raised me. This is the importance of remembering: I want to reconstruct her image with such potency so that one day, when she dies, I will feel like all I have lost is a body.

Five years ago, my grandfather passed away in his sleep. That morning, my grandmother called me as she arranged his belongings to make a path wide enough to carry a body through. In many Chinese families, a parent moves into their child's house when they reach old age instead of to a retirement home. My grandmother has five children in different cities spread out across continents, but she still lives in a house alone, in Shanghai, with the door of my grandfather's bedroom closed.

It seems morbid to say this, but I imagine she watches television late into the night while sitting next to his ghost. When somebody you love is suddenly gone, there is a psychic vacancy they leave behind. I do not think ghosts make good surrogate mothers, but I do think they are the dispossessed outlines we cling onto and leave claw marks all over. I have one sitting next to me now in the shape of a grandmother.

The older I become, the more it seems like genesis is fluid—slippery and subversive like the ocean my parents crossed, or the Chinglish I speak when I fight on the phone with my father. It paralyzes me to think about the sacrifices my family made before I was in my mother's womb. When they came here they knew they would lose a part of their language, their memories, their sanctity of self. For this reason I want to be the kind of daughter who brushes her hair and doesn't bite her classmates on the playground. I understand now that what I once dramatized to be the parochial tyranny of my parents (Chinese language school, phone calls with distant relatives who held me once as a baby, eating dried seahorse when I have a fever) was a method of protecting their history so it will not die with them when they die. In this way their ghosts live in my tongue, my hands, my crooked little rabbit heart.

I Skyped my grandmother last night for the first time in a long time. She doesn't know how to use the computer, so her webcam was tilted so that all I could see was the upper half of her face. There are still a dozen white hairs on the top of her shiny head that made me think of ash, or maybe of snow. I can't tell you where my grandmother ends and where all my other mothers begin. They've amassed into one amorphous

being now: a nebulous, collective妈妈 with a coarse Shanghai tongue and wrinkles deep like craters.

Over five million people in America immigrated here by overstaying their visas. Almost 99 percent of them are never caught, but there is one condition: if you leave, you can't come back. This is a kind of disappearance, a premeditated amnesia, and this essay is a recording of one face in a sea of five million. Whenever I see my grandmother's grainy hologram on the screen I think about how I wish she could Skype me into her tai chi lesson. I wish my grandmother could Skype me into her visits to my grandfather's grave. I wish my grandmother could Skype me into her kitchen, her living room, her fire escape. I wish my grandmother could Skype me into her.

I sometimes feel better when I have the Chinese 拼音³ Tool open as a tab in front of me. It means I am writing something my grandmother can read with her one eye that can still see. Last night she told me that she has a hard time with colors now. She said that some shades of green are cloudy, purple looks a lot like blue, but yellow is the hardest. She said that if she looks at anything that is yellow it feels like she's staring straight into the sun. I said I have a hard time seeing yellow too.

In *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, Suheir Hammad describes many definitions of the word "black." Definitions are important because they are the vessels we give meaning to when we conceive of ghosts, and ghosts are important because they are the remnants of a floating world that was ripped away from us. But definitions do not stay

³ Pinyin, a method of transliterating Chinese.

constant: the way we contextualize ourselves is as mercurial as the way we reconstruct our past, one crippled shard at a time. I think it matters less what we remember, and more that we don't forget.

I've written down some definitions of the word 'yellow' so that my grandmother doesn't forget what it means when she can no longer recognize the color:

Yellow

like my brother's cavity-stained baby teeth

like the 黄河⁴

and poppy flower seeds

Yellow

like the fever of White boys

like the color of the factory where my

grandparents first met

or the 20,000 pounds of bones buried in shallow

graves under the Pacific Railway

Yellow

polluted sky

the yolk that 盘古⁵ broke when he made the

earth

⁴ The Yellow River.

⁵ Pangu, the creator of the universe in Chinese mythology.

like the IV dripping in my grandmother's wrist
or maybe the sun.

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Against Metamorphosis: Notes on Writing Experimental Fiction

1. In Fall of 2022, I taught an experimental fiction workshop for Small Press Traffic called “Anti-Narrative Arcs.” I selected a constellation of writings that by no means claimed to be constitutive of the field, though they were formative for my private canon: writings by Julio Cortázar, Cristina Rivera Garza, Lisa Robertson, Yoko Ogawa, Denis Johnson, Renee Gladman, Fleur Jaeggy, to name a few. Twelve of us were seated on plastic chairs around a folding table in a temporary storage unit for Et al. gallery, which was undergoing a glamorous makeover next door. We wrote using the floor as a chair and our chairs as a table. There were always sirens outside, which made me feel like whatever we were discussing was an emergency.
2. What makes fiction experimental? I asked us to list as many qualities as they could during our first session. Predictably, it was difficult to reduce experimental fiction to a set of formal properties. We decided it was less about what the text is doing and more about what it refuses to do. A refusal to increase the tension until the story reaches a climax. A refusal to set the scene, making time-space into an oblivion. A refusal to induce a character’s transformation. A refusal to tell a story in a linear fashion. A refusal to write in standard American English. These refusals make the reader ask, what makes a story a story? Why is this a story and not a poem? Why is this a poem and not a receptacle for my tears, a litany against my ex, or a Molotov cocktail hurled at the police?

3. When we read a story, we hope for a narrative that sequences a series of imaginary events into meaning, our means of accessing reality. When this expectation is subverted, something in the landscape shifts. Something shimmers, something quiets down. If language is a point of contact between us, then the experimental story tries to alter this limit point. It asks us, recursively, why we drew the previous boundary where it was. Someone in the class said that experimental fiction engineers our reading experience, inventing its own reading style. I didn't know a story could do that, which is to say I didn't know a story could do that *to me*. I liked this definition because of its deferral of responsibility from the author to the reader. Death of the author, Roland Barthes tells us, which is only invoked when the writer has some kind of problem that would merit us killing them.
4. The Russian formalists were the ones who isolated *fabula*, what really happened, from *syuzhet*, how the story is told. Experimental fiction tends to exploit this difference. If we think of plot as a series of causations, then a plotless story is a series of displacements. We can expect digressions from the plot that include the use of lyric fragments, nonlinear narrative arcs, epistolary passages, nonhuman animacies, dream sequences, nested narratives. Readers often say that the introduction of one or more elements is said to introduce a level of *difficulty*. They have to work harder to understand what is happening. Sometimes it is necessary to break the Western narrative tradition to capture the fugitive desires and slippery realities of our characters. Other times, we are

worried that our story is not interesting enough on its own, so we hide our fear under layers of formal opacity. Disavowal is the best form of protection. When do our experiments reveal the truth, and when do they conceal it?

5. One of my students wrote a story from the perspective of a house. I read the story and wondered why a house thought and sounded exactly like a person, but then I felt confused because a story told by an objective, omniscient, third-person narrator seemed just as unlikely as a story being told by a house. When I asked my student about this, he explained that he lived in an apartment complex with fifty other tenants. The walls were thin because the building was old. He had a whole mythos about the sounds he heard at night, a mythos that was too immaculately constructed to keep to himself.
6. Narratives begin with a desire. A character desires something that is irreconcilable with their reality, so they must change their desire or change their reality. The character moves from their prior equilibrium to a new equilibrium. A narrative is constructed from memories of the past, moments of the present, and imaginations of the future, what Jameson calls the “tripartite temporal system of the past-present-future” (10). The emphasis is on the protagonist’s agency to inflict the situation to their liking. Notice that conversations about the future are often inflected with words like progress, change, transformation, and innovation. It is not good to use words like chance, indeterminacy, uncertainty, stasis, or impermanence, words that emphasize our inability to induce an outcome.

7. Though Gregor Samsa is classically depicted as a cockroach, the opening line of *The Metamorphosis* has been translated at least sixteen different ways. Other translations include: a monstrous vermin, a giant bug, a vile insect, a horrible vermin, a gigantic insect. *Ungeziefer* literally translates to ‘an unclean animal unsuitable for sacrifice.’ In a letter to his publisher, Kafka expressed concern over the cover illustration. “The insect itself is not to be depicted. It is not even to be seen from a distance.” The insect is a floating signifier, a sign that absorbs meaning instead of emitting it. Does the insect symbolize Gregor’s alienation from his labor, his deteriorating relationship with his family, or his spiritual decline in society’s eyes?
8. It is rumored that Kafka used to stay up all night writing his stories, often waking his neighbors with his hyena-like laughter, then go to his day job as an insurance salesman as if all were fine.
9. Joshua Clover argues that the Bildungsroman’s central theme is to reconcile the problematic individual with his concrete social reality. “It must be an overcoming—always temporary, necessarily individual—of the dissonance of modern society, a structural dissonance which is nothing but the constitutive contradiction of capital’s relations of production” (111). Could we read Gregor’s eventual demise as his inability to assimilate into the sphere of production? The moment he wakes up and sees his innumerable legs pitifully waving in the air, Gregor begins a long lament about his job as a traveling salesman, where he is overworked and understimulated. Perhaps he always felt

like a bug, and this was just the day that his body finally changed to mirror his brain.

10. You expect most characters to act according to the pleasure principle, that they instinctively seek pleasure and avoid pain, but this assumption can be flattening. There are moments of irreverence, moments when impulse take over. We have encounters that refuse assimilation. Sianne Ngai uses the word *stuplimity* to diagnose a distinctly postmodern feeling: approaching the sublime and, instead of transcendence, feeling a kind of “dissatisfied (and often restless) mood of boredom” (269). During the first summer of pandemic lockdown, there was a construction fire in an abandoned parking structure in downtown Berkeley. With nothing else to do, my friends and I went there to drink beer and watch it burn. For some reason, I felt envious of the parking structure’s ability to transmute into dirt and light. The world was burning, and I wanted to burn alongside it. Weeks later, we set the Target on Broadway on fire.
11. I told my friend that I needed to get a job. She asked me what kind of job I wanted. I don’t know, I said, something light. She sent me a meme captioned “your many career options” that pictured a cartoon bug choosing between evolving into a very big bug, a bug with a long tongue, an aquatic bug, a pregnant bug, a bug with flappy lips, an apex predator, a bug that lives in the arctic circle, a bug with a fungal infection, or staying the same bug as before. Maybe this is how Gregor felt: at the intersection of many possible futures, none of which were particularly desirable.

12. Wu Yiching describes ideology as the process of flattening the multiplicity of a struggle. No revolution is comprised of a unified whole. In 1966, after Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, rebellion quickly took on a life of its own. A younger faction of Red Guards criticized the movement's proclivity for hounding individual bureaucrats, advancing the movement's more radical possibilities. As China's state machinery broke down, Mao moved swiftly to suppress the crisis, neutralizing the dissent in mass demobilizations. What do we remember when we remember the revolution? How is this collective memory sanctioned by the state, morphed by national desire? The process of writing history is also the process of erasing discursivity.
13. In my favorite story by Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl," a man becomes so transfixed by axolotls that he eventually becomes one. He visits a botanical garden in Paris. "The lions were sad and ugly and my panther was asleep" (4). Then he came across the axolotls, "their little pink Aztec faces" (4). He comes back day after day to look at them. Then the perspective of the story shifts. The 'I' becomes axolotl peering out from the glass into the eyes of the man who is himself. This moment of Animorph-like inception, where self and other become interchangeable, reminds us of "the presence of a different life, of another way of seeing" (6). Both the axolotl and the speaker have been lifted from their indigenous environments, displaced into an ever-shifting terrain they negotiate through identification and disavowal.

14. The axolotl is an underground salamander native to the lakes of Xochimilco, Mexico. They retain juvenile features even after they reach sexual maturation, symbols of eternal youth. In the story, the axolotl is a sign of alterity in a pre-Enlightenment world, metamorphous species with the capacity to regrow lost limbs. Although the axolotl is presented as a temporal stasis, the transmutation of the speaker suggests a narrative of mobility. What happens when we look into the dark ravine of history and see no one but ourselves? The axolotl is our nostalgia for the self before individuation, before the infliction of a self that is infinitely perfectible, or even knowable. He regards the axolotl's body with fear and desire, with alien cuteness.
15. In the 4th century BCE, the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi fell asleep and dreamt he was a butterfly. When he woke up, he could not tell if he was a man who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly now dreaming he was a man. Two thousand years later, Wittgenstein said, "The argument 'I may be dreaming' is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well—and it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning" (383). I don't trust people who have trained themselves to lucid dream. It makes me think they want to control every dimension of their lives. My father, who never learned how to swim, was plagued with a recurring dream of drowning. He eventually purchased a life vest and wore it to bed every night. He said it protected him. I wondered if he was going crazy.

16. Instead of writing a story with paragraphs that flow logically into one another, I asked my students to practice writing a story in prose fragments. Ben Segal defines fragments as “small shards of free-floating text.... defined by their singularity, by the white space that encases them on the page” (Segal x). Instead of building toward a unitary meaning, what transpires is a field of interconnected forces: their meanings are made from an interstitial set of relations, every truth eclipsing another. The fragment is a form of trust. We allow the reader to fill in the whitespace, imagining what is contained in our silence.
17. You can think of fragments as a constellation, the preservation of many potential wholes. Different arrangements tell different stories. Life has no narrative, but memory is our process of injecting narrative into the past. Writing in fragments is a way of mirroring this pattern. Instead of a refined arc, what you see is glimmers of possibility. The fragment resists the idea that our realities accumulate in a linear fashion. Narrative meaning is usually conveyed as a temporal progression with exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and denouement. Fragments shows us a memory field in flux, laminated layer upon layer.
18. I wanted to condense my thoughts into their pure forms, cutting away the noise until all that remained were the crystals of meaning.
19. In *The White Album*, Joan Didion writes, “I was no longer interested in whether the woman on the ledge outside the window jumped or did not jump, or in why.

I was interested only in the picture of her in my mind: her hair incandescent in the floodlights, her bare toes curled inward on the stone ledge. In this light all narrative was sentimental. In this light all connections were equally meaningful, and equally senseless” (44).

20. For three years, I saw a therapist who primarily worked with children ages five to twelve. In fact, I was her only adult patient. I ended up with her because she was the only therapist available during the pandemic. Everyone was going crazy, but nobody could see how crazy everyone else was going. During our Zoom meetings, I saw toy trucks, dolls, and apples sliced into smiley faces splayed all over the floor behind her. When I told my therapist I wanted to die, she said I should practice sitting with the feeling. My ideation and I sat at my kitchen table together. Hello, my ideation said.

21. My therapist suggested I keep a journal where I recorded one instance of beauty every day. I had been too sad to write all summer, except for one terrible story about a girl who got food poisoning after ingesting a cream puff. My therapist said it could be a conversation I overheard, a dream, a hypothetical situation, something I read, etc. The point was to let go of discipline and let in ritual, to put some words on a page without thinking too hard about what it meant. OK, I said. My first entry was about visiting the rose garden next to my house. Only one rose was in bloom. It seemed pink and foreboding. I remembered an Alice Notley poem where the speaker dreams of a flower. The next morning, she

holds up a hologram of the flower to show to her boys. Hurry, she says. I can't hold it for much longer. Is this the right one?

22. My second entry was about revolutionary time. I tried to draw its shape. At first, I drew a circle, and then I realized I disliked circles because perfect circles don't exist in nature. Then I drew revolutionary time as a wave. Ebb and flow, surge forth and pull back. I went to the ocean to look at the waves, at the sun's pale white dot in a haze of chemical pollution. The AQI index was something insane, above 300. It broke the metric on my app. I posted a screenshot of it online. Me and the girls transcending signification, I wrote.

23. Some nights, I wore all black and went downtown to set things on fire. They eventually closed the Target on Broadway permanently because of how many times we broke into it. People online said what we were doing was wrong. By choosing violence, we were foreclosing the possibility of holding each other in love, empathy, and mutual understanding. That week, I watched four police officers in riot gear pin my friend to the ground, spraying tear gas at anyone who tried to stop them.

24. In an interview, Maggie Nelson describes many different ways of looking at fragments for a class she taught after writing *Bluets*. "The decayed fragment (Sappho); the contemporary fragment (text messages, twitter, blog posts, etc.); the modernist fragment (T.S. Eliot; fragment as mark of psychological disintegration); Freud's fragment (dreams, slips, etc. as thruways to the unconscious); the sampled or plagiarized fragment; fragment as waste, excess,

or garbage; the footnote; fragment as frame (Degas, Manet); life narrative as fragment: we can't see the whole until we're dead, and then we can't see it (pathos); fragment as psychological terror (castration, King's head); fragment as fetish, or as organ-logic, as pornography; fragment as metonym & synecdoche; fragment as that which is preserved, or that which remains; fragment as the unfinished or the abandoned; and so on and so forth" (2).

25. I did things I would not usually have done so I would have something beautiful to tell my therapist. I went swimming in the community pool. I flirted with someone at a grocery store and gave them my phone number and a fake name. When we started seeing each other several weeks later, I had to explain myself. So that's why I couldn't find you online, he said. These anti-narrative stories didn't have a place in my fiction, but they had a place in my entries. The entries became a talisman of my present, a formal container for my ruminations, which were in flux because my 'I' was in flux.

26. Whitespace indicates the passage of time, the space where anti-narrative happens. I walked to the bodega in the rain to buy garlic. I forgot my wallet and had to turn back. They didn't have garlic, so I bought some bubblegum to advance the plot. A narrative is made equally of what I include and what I subtract. I drank wine sitting on the floor with my friend Lee. We talked about how difficult it is to write a character who changes slowly over time because we are either changing always or never—not because of the world, though maybe in spite of it.

27. I taught a calculus class at San Quentin that fall. My students liked me because I tried to explain what was happening in math world with absolutely zero big words. Here is a circle. The circle is rotating along the x-axis. How much air can the circle touch if it keeps moving toward infinity? At the entrance of the prison was a stone monument commemorating the names of three prison officers killed on August 21, 1971. The stone did not mention George Jackson, the Panther who was martyred in the uprising. When I walked through the atrium, the basketball court, the mess hall, I felt the power of his name reverberating in all of us.
28. I became invested in the idea of immanence, in contradistinction to transcendence, from the Latin word *immanere*: to dwell in, to remain. It's rumored that a Chinese emperor once asked a Bodhidharma what Enlightenment was. "Lots of space, nothing holy," the Bodhidharma said. There is another world, but it's not elsewhere. It's inside of this one. Here, look at the light as it moves across the room.
29. My friend sent me a video of people inside a correctional facility in Chicago flickering their lights on and off in solidarity with a protest happening hundreds of feet below them.
30. Ruth Wilson Gilmore says that abolition is not about absence, it's about presence. Abolition is not simply the negation of police or prisons. It's about building life-affirming institutions, the creation of a world where it's not possible for the carceral state to exist. People thought we were rioting out of

anger, which was true. I was angry, but I was also filled with narrative desire for something inexplicable. If dereliction is an intentional abandonment, the summer made me question if my objects of desire were what I truly wanted, and how to leave them for an alternate horizon, dark but laminated with a few bright stars.

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Glint of Sport

A Novel

Prologue

My grandfather dies in the depths of summer when it's too hot to eat a popsicle. On the day of his funeral, my mother and I walk to the cemetery in our blackest clothes. As we follow the dirt path to the outskirts of our village, I witness a herd of monks dressed in bright orange robes, their knees dirty with prayer. Their robes have been opened to let the breeze in, so they look ostentatious yet fully functional, like traffic cones. One could truly make a living this way: by willing rain to come, by willing rain to end, by praying for the souls of dogs killed during the annual Lychee and Dog Meat Festival to get back into the cycle of reincarnation instead of wandering the world aimlessly without form, etc. It's a busy time of year for them.

Further down the path, a butcher alternates fluidly between coughing, cursing at the monks, and spitting on the sidewalk. The butcher is squatting on the stoop outside his shop, arms folded piously over his chest with a tampon shoved inside one nostril. He wants to stop his nosebleed while dressed in an apron soaked in dog blood. I turn to my mother and ask, what's the point of plugging up one wound while letting another one leak? Here is an economy based on redemption: a temple built next to a butcher shop, where the primary occupation of one is to pray for the killings of the other. OK, now that I've proven how much we need each other, let's get on with it.

The butcher has a pet dog who barks at the caged dogs, and together they chew on vegetable scraps and howl at the moon. Which is to say: sometimes love means you don't talk much, but you eat together. This is a signifier in my culture. Please translate

into a symbol you can understand. (When going somewhere you've never been before, you should always learn how to say hello, goodbye, where is the bathroom, I love you.) The monks think the butcher is sacrilegious, but I believe religion is whatever you embed the totality of your being in. My religion is spoon-feeding eggs to the sink. My religion is informing men how sweaty their hands are. My religion is a cigarette butt that's started a dumpster fire with no one alive to witness. My religion is skipping the line at the deli and going straight towards my dreams.

The monks prepare for the festival by redirecting traffic in their traffic cone robes, and the butcher prepares by shining the crimson off his knife. In the dark, over the hills, hundreds of flames are lit, and dog bodies turned over and over, widening under the cool, black fires. You can excavate their tiny white hearts and lay the skins out to cure. You can do this with the conviction of somebody who has a family to feed. I've never eaten dog meat or tried to flag down a god, but don't equate what I haven't done with what I wouldn't do. For example, my grandfather once asked if I could help him remove the birthmark on his face, a pearl of oiled black the size of an insect. I brought the knife solemnly to his cheek, then made him do the rest himself.

I like to be the one who cleans up the mess instead of the one who tends to the fires. I like to be the one who slips in and out of my desire to hurt whoever is standing closest to me. I like to say 'my desire' like it's a singular thing. The first time I wrote my grandfather's name was on his tombstone. Before this, I thought his name was Yeye. Now his name is our shadows cast over the freshly hollowed earth, my palm sweating

on prayer beads, the sound of my mother smashing her transition shade sunglasses over her normal glasses, and the monks wailing in the distance, so loudly they drown us out.

After the burial is done, everyone is left standing and frowning at the ground. The sun is a sliver pronounced in the sky, fingernailed yet bright. I squint. I wink. It feels like coming back after a long day, and all the lights are on, but there is nobody home.

2014

The night that R came home from rehab was the night I found out that's why he was gone for so long. He told me he was going to his grandmother's house in rural New Jersey and the Internet would be spotty there. I said ok, you can email me from the public library if you ever go there. I usually spent the summers at my grandma's house in Shanghai, playing with her cats and reading in the courtyard, and I liked imagining the mutual ennui of our surroundings as our love transpired online. He wrote my school email on his wrist with a ballpoint pen when we said our goodbyes.

In the afternoons, when my grandma was napping, I went to the Internet café to check for R's name in my inbox. I thought of him eating leftovers in his grandmother's kitchen seven thousand miles away, her floral wallpaper glistening from the microwave light. In my mind he hovered between conversation and exit, waiting for the garage door to open before spooning ravioli into bowls. I didn't want to sacrifice my dignity by emailing him first. Maybe he had forgotten my phone didn't work overseas.

In the evenings, I made my grandma play memory games to delay the onset of her dementia. She sorted animals into categories and put marbles into colored baskets, then she stared at me like we were engaging in some kind of ritual humiliation. When it was time to watch TV, I had to narrate everything out loud because her vision was starting to fade. She liked hospital dramas until they started to remind her of death. She also liked to watch Japanese variety shows until she found out the actors were Japanese. After that we skipped through the channels and watched only the commercials.

There are two people riding on a motorcycle into the sunset, I said.

Are they wearing helmets? she asked.

No.

That's not safe. Motor accidents are on the rise.

The woman's thick blonde hair looked like it belonged to a pony. She gripped the man's waist as they rode into the horizon's vanishing point. Everyone in China preferred foreign brands these days. It made them feel less provincial, more worldly.

Is it a commercial for the sunset? she asked.

I think it's a commercial for shampoo.

Tell me when something else happens.

In the early light, she went outside to do tai chi and get the mail, which was usually a stack of coupons with promotional scams that targeted the elderly. When she came back she let the door behind her. How come, she said incredulously, I get so many ads for things I don't even need.

August came. My boredom became oceanic. I counted down the days until I could get on a plane and go back to school. When it was time, my grandma sent me to the airport with half a dozen Tupperwares filled with little snacks to save money. Hawthorn fruit rolls, shrimp chips, sticky rice cakes, sesame sachimas. I threw them away and bought a burger that costed 130 yuan. It was the tastiest burger I've had in my life.

I relished the week where we went over the syllabi and got drunk on porches. My friends liked to play this drinking card game that you won by lying. ‘Bluffing,’ it was called. If you got caught you had to reveal your most valuable card. My strategy was to never bluff, and sometimes it worked because I would be the only one left in the game. I was slurping at a bottle of lukewarm wine when my grandma called to ask why I hadn’t returned her call in two weeks.

It takes you two weeks to call me back, she said.

I’m sorry Nainai, I said. I forgot. I’ll do it faster next time.

I could hear her clicking through channels, the sound of one voice cutting into another. She wanted me to feel guilty for going so far away. Ever since Yeye died she had no one else to talk to.

You have boyfriend or something? she asked.

My friends told stories about summering upstate—interning at a natural history museum, drinking beer around a bonfire, hooking up with their brother’s friend. It was my first time hearing someone use ‘summer’ as a verb. I wondered if I summered in Shanghai.

Hello?

I don’t have a boyfriend, I said.

Bring him home next time so I can look at him.

Nainai, it’s just a crush. In America dating is not so serious.

Is he from the mainland?

I took a big swig so she could hear.

No. He's white. An American.

What do his parents do?

We don't talk about things like that.

What do you talk about?

School, our friends. Movies we like.

I didn't say that R and I hadn't spoken at all that summer, but I looked for him in the dining commons and on the perfectly manicured New England lawns. When my friends asked what I liked about him, I struggled to name specific qualities. He was clever, articulate, mysterious. We had met at a party at a co-op when I was high on a concoction of drugs. The drugs were of such poor quality that I mostly just felt dizzy. I'm so high, I kept saying and giggling. We spent a long time talking on the fire escape. When the party was over, R got me a glass of water and asked if he could walk me home.

My grandma clicked her tongue and said something about needing glasses to see her screen.

When I was younger, I wouldn't go to bed unless my grandma told me a story from her village. I rubbed her ankles, which were still swollen from the decades she spent crouching in the fields. Press harder, she instructed, and lower. I massaged tiger balm into her legs until my fingers tingled with mint and musk. She told me stories about the fishermen in Lianshui, unhooking metal from hollow cheeks. They had stubby fingers scabbed from long nets and ate rice steamed in grape leaves. She never

talked about the communists, or their camps, how my dajiu burned his pamphlets when they came, or the smoke that rose like curdled milk.

I was too young for stories like that. Instead she told me stories about rabbits with special powers. Now I am older and I know nothing about her history or mine, but I could tell you all the local myths about shapeshifting rabbits. When a rabbit crosses your path, it's unclear if it's an omen or a blessing. All you know is that something is about to happen that will change the way you see. In one story, a rabbit puts a curse on a man. The curse makes his pupils come to life and speak to each other. They are lonely inside their respective irises, so the left pupil migrates to the right eye. Afterwards the man is blind on one side, but his vision in the other is clearer than ever.

My grandma never dyed her hair like the other women, but it was still black as coal. I didn't believe in most of what she said, but sometimes she just looked at my palm lines and shook her head.

In September, R texted me to ask if I was around. I threw my phone across the room and then waited 22 minutes before responding. He said I could come over whenever, so I skipped class and walked to his house. His room was the same as before except cleaner, unlived in. I sat on his bed and watched him shove carrots into his pet rabbit's mouth.

He said his parents got him this pet rabbit because they thought having simple responsibilities could act as the gateway for more complex ones. I asked if it was his depression rabbit and he laughed. His eyes are on opposite sides of his head, he said.

He can't see things that are right in front of him. That's why he had to shove the carrot in.

I watched the rabbit squirm and take bites that were too big for its teeth. R said they let him out of Turning Point two weeks ago, which sounded like the name for a driver's ed program. I touched the plastic tag on his wrists as he pressed down on his thighs. I thought they said 'im-patient,' and I thought, me too. He said he was sorry that it took him so long to contact me. He wasn't allowed to have his phone on him.

The next morning, I left his house through the back door. There was a dirty kids pool in the center of the lawn. We used to dip our feet in the water last spring, but his housemate peed in it when he was drunk so we never touched it again. Over the summer a beautiful neon algae had bloomed. It was a shade of green I had only ever seen on my computer screen. I stood there for a while, admiring it.

The color reminded me of the glasses of moldy tea I saw on his nightstand at the end of the semester. The mold grew in concentric circles, the disks opening and closing like a pool of water lilies. The cups became my metric for the number of all-nighters he was pulling on finals week. His roommates were mad because there were no cups left in the kitchen, but I still didn't want him to wash them out and have to start over. I felt a continuity between the past, present, and future, a continuity that allowed me to disavow the loneliness I had felt all summer in Shanghai.

On the walk home I thought about how rabbits survive in the wild. It's strange how most of them are resourceful enough to find wildflowers and tubers to eat and don't have to be force fed by people like R.

R looked different after he came back. They were regulating his meals so he finally gained some weight, but he kept wearing the same three shirts. They were just kind of tight. He had a collared polo for going out, a ripped Harley Davidson t-shirt for sleeping, and a plain white shirt for other activities. He started laughing more, which was new. He had this way of laughing that made everyone in the room go quiet. It sounded like bird dying at twilight. *Eeee heee hehe*. When I asked what he did when he was at rehab, he said he drank coffee from Styrofoam cups and tried to figure out what he was so upset about for the last 23 years.

23 years seemed like a long time to be alive. I had never thought of him as a person with history—just this static thing, sudden birth out of nowhere. He told me details about his life. He had a hard time concentrating in class and turning his homework in on time. His parents sent him to a boarding school in rural New Jersey where his main pastime was playing Wall Ball. That's the game where you smack the rubber ball against the brick wall until the manager of ShopRite comes out and tells you to stop.

I liked imagining him playing Wall Ball because I liked imagining him doing something repeatedly. Everything else about him lacked conviction. He put his tongue in my ear and called me when he remembered to charge his phone.

In October, I felt hot in the sun but cold in the shade. I was insulating the cracks in the apartment with aluminum foil when my housemate suggested we ask our landlord

to turn on the heat. The landlord came over and saw the ignition was broken. He tried to fix it by watching videos on YouTube, but he touched the wrong gas valve and broke the water heater too. Give me a couple days to find a repairman, he said, and then slinked away in embarrassment. After he hung up, I called R to ask if I could come shower at his place.

R's wrists were sore from holding carrots out for the rabbit, so his solution was to tie the carrots to pieces of string and pin them to the ceiling. Each carrot was covered in imprints made by the tiniest teeth. I couldn't walk through the house without getting caught in one.

I washed my body with hand soap because his Dr. Bronner's was so diluted that it was basically water. While I rinsed, I smiled at how I was clogging the drain with long strands of black hair. I loved seeing it there, my dead cells accumulating in the corners of his house. I wrapped the towel around my body and sat in R's lap, pushing myself against him until he stopped doing whatever he was doing.

I thought of the girls on television who ask for what they want, coral lipstick caked over thin lips. You can see how low their jeans ride when they sat down in the cafeteria. They take big bites into big peaches and let the juice drip down their chins. I couldn't take a bite that big without choking, but in his halogen-lit bedroom I watched his rabbit try.

I slept over every time R asked me to, which was most nights. Icicles formed on my head when I walked to his house with my hair wet. He got me my own toothbrush

so I wouldn't have to bring mine every time. I had a side of the bed I preferred. One night, to cure our boredom, we laid in the dark and categorized everything in our lives as either heavy or light. Flowers: heavy. Needles: light. He asked what he was, so I reached over and lolled his weight back and forth in my hands. Heavy, I said, but not as heavy as rain.

It was raining the first time it happened. His housemate gave him some pills to finish a midterm project. He slipped in some downers to help with the stimulant comedown. R said it didn't count as breaking sobriety because it was for getting his work done, not for feeling good. I didn't hear from him for three days. On the fourth day, I got worried. Was he dead, or just ignoring me? I went to his house to find out. I let myself in through the front door. When I knocked on his bedroom door, he looked confused that I had come over unannounced.

Did you need something? he asked.

He looked the same as ever, only a bit disheveled. I felt bad for invading his privacy. I didn't know if we had the kind of relationship where we were allowed to be worried for each other.

I wanted to see if you were okay, I said.

He paused. I'm doing great, he said. How are you doing?

Sorry. I just hadn't heard from you.

He blinked, and then told me he would call me after he got some sleep. There were six new cups growing mold on his nightstand. He said he had pulled some all-

nighters to finish a project for his bioinformatics class, that his partner had been useless and he had to most of it on his own. As he spoke, I noticed he was slurring his speech.

Can I use your computer to send an email? he asked.

What's wrong with yours?

The screen is cracked.

I took my laptop out of my bag and typed in my password, the name of my first pet with my favorite fruit.

I don't think I can go to class today, he said. I feel like I'm coming down with something.

As I read over the email to his professor to make sure he sounded normal, his rabbit suddenly launched himself off of the bed to catch a carrot R had accidentally tied too high in the air. The carrot swung away from it in the force of the collision.

When I lived with my grandmother, there were days when I couldn't stand how loudly she talks. I said, Nainai, please do not yell in the restaurant/theater/subway/courtyard, I am right here.

Years ago, my grandma was diagnosed with a disease that doctors described as a game of telephone. In our brain, trillions of neurons fire every second, transmitting information down a long line of synapses. As her broken synapses fail to regenerate, the information might arrive distorted or fail to arrive altogether. There will be no discernible pattern to what she forgets and what she remembers. Some days, she might forget to spit the seeds of citrus fruits. Other days, she might forget my name.

Her rabbit stories became less lively, reduced to the most functional details. Once upon a time, there was a fox and a rabbit who lived in the woods. One day, a minor god came to visit earth and disguised himself as a beggar. Starving after days of travel, he asked the woodland creatures if they could spare some food to eat. The fox went to the river and caught a fish in his jowls. He lit a fire and cooked it, a red hot flame under a cool black sky. The rabbit wasn't capable of hunting, so he threw his own body into the fire as a sacrifice. The god was touched by the rabbit's servitude and tried to revive him, but it was too late. His spirit had left his body, transmigrating to another realm. The god drew the rabbit's outline on the moon in honor of his selfless immolation. You can see it if you squint. Not now because the kitchen lights are on. Can you go turn those off?

I turned off the lights and said, Nainai, can you please quiet down, I am right here.

R lived with five people in a three-bedroom house and nobody wanted to have their name signed onto the lease. They didn't want to be legally liable for what happened. Nick used to take out the trash on Wednesdays, but he stopped in order to prove a point. In December, the landlord had gotten a tip from a neighbor and threatened to evict everyone for squatting.

When winter break came, the house resolved to clean up their act. They threw out the boxes of junk from past tenants and stopped smoking weed inside. R cleaned

out the freezer and bleached the tiles on the bathroom floor. I saw their original color for the first time, a deep ultramarine embellished with white flowers.

One day I came over and found R on his hands and knees in the kitchen, squirting a can of my hairspray on the floor. When I got closer I saw a dozen maggots, writhing in shallow puddles of alcohol.

I think we have a maggot infestation, he said.

I see, I said.

Squirt, squirt. Squiirrttt.

What do you think we should do?

I think we should start taking out the trash, he said.

R thought he was killing them softly by drowning them instead of stomping them out, not realizing that this was actually prolonging their misery.

Can I see that for a second?

I took the can of hairspray from him and doused them with a sudden and unexpected indignation. It was so fun. We took turns spraying maggots and shrieking in disgust, laughing hysterically until his housemates came out to see what was happening.

That night, we closed the windows so they couldn't lay eggs inside anymore. It felt nice knowing there was something to be shut out. I watched the flies hurl themselves against the window, wanting to come closer to the light. I thought about how skinny the glass was, and how their bodies were even skinnier.

R wasn't the one who got evicted. It was me who didn't get resigned onto the lease because I hardly ever came home. There were several notices in the mail about the utility bill which was under my name. One day, I came home to change clothes and the house was dark. After I tried all the light switches, I deduced that the power was out. The power is out, my new housemate said, which was also my first time meeting him.

Secretly, I was relieved to finally make it official. I liked how it seemed natural, not the result of a series of complex conversations about what we were and what we could be. I took my one suitcase and half-alive plant and walked out onto the streets paved with slabs of ice and blackened with motor oil. I went inside the cash-only convenience store that looked like a bomb shelter and paid for a coffee in dimes. There was an ad for Virginia Slims hung up behind the register, a glossy photo of a blonde girl holding a long cigarette while riding a red motorcycle.

All the way to R's house I thought of the glint in her eye. When he opened the door to let me in, I put my half-alive plant next to the window and my suitcase all the way in the closet.

The first night it happened, I stayed because I wanted to see if I could make the nightmare stop by just being there. Stupid, I know. When he thrashed back and forth in the bed, I tensed up until I was a pebble again. I was seeing a part of him that he wouldn't want me to see, which is why I wanted to see it. He had soaked through the sheets with his sweat. And then, suddenly, he was holding me down, forcing his way

into me. I laid still, stunned. I wanted to wake him up and make him into someone I could recognize again, but I couldn't tell what he was dreaming about in that moment.

My grandma said if you wake someone up during a bad dream then they will be trapped in bad dream limbo. If the nightmare is interrupted before they reach the point of reconciliation, it can carry over to their waking life. I wanted my own purity to be what tranquilized the dream, the thing that could help him carry the bright black cube of his sadness when it was too heavy for him to hold. This is why I shut my eyes and concentrated on becoming the girl from the Virginia Slims poster, the studs on her jeans falling off like tiny failed planets falling from the sky.

Afterwards, I peeled his hands off me and tied them together with the sweaty sheet. I put a pillow in between us. R drooled a little on it.

We went to the cash-only convenience store so often that we became friends with the owner, Pushkar, a Bangladeshi man who had been living on this block for a decade longer than us. He seemed to alternate between vaping and napping until the bell jingled to signify our entrance. R bought cigarettes, candy, and ramen, and I bought nothing. At the end of March, Pushkar's wife gave birth to a baby girl. We would smoke in the alley behind the convenience store and talk to Pushkar about his new life as a father.

What was crazy, he said, was that his wife Sarika didn't take painkillers even though it was a C-section.

I spat out my iced tea. She was fully conscious when they cut her stomach open?

He nodded seriously. She said she didn't want the drugs to hurt the baby's brain.

All she took was an ibuprofen. They used morphine as a topical anesthetic.

When they made the first incision, he thought he would faint.

What is the baby's name?

No name so far. We can't agree on anything.

Afterwards, R and I walked along the creek that ran from our house to campus.

It was unseasonably warm, we were in our summertime clothes. The moon was a hangnail that evening and it made the sky look prehistoric. Insects bit us down our thighs while we sat on the riverbank and came up with a list of possible names for Pushkar's daughter. Our favorite was Pushkara, but we also thought something like Zöey or Vivian would work. I didn't understand how someone could give birth through so much pain, and not even know how to name that pain.

In May, his laptop finally broke from the inside, so I let him use R whenever I was in class. He had stopped going to his classes so there was no time conflict. One day, I opened the screen and saw he had been on a website called Watch People Die. It was all links to snuff films online. The titles were like Girl Drowns in Waterfall, Construction Crane Accident, Hidden 9/11 Plane Footage, etc. Just then, he walked into the room.

What's this? I asked, turning the screen so that it faced him.

He scratched the scar on his chin. Only sometimes, he said.

He stood in the doorway of our room in sweatpants and house slippers with a cigarette behind his ear. I looked at the time and remembered I had a quiz that day in my English class. It was on a book I hadn't read.

I'm sorry, he said.

It's fine. I was just wondering if it was you.

I don't know why I watch them so much.

I closed the computer. It's fine. I'm going to class now.

I said I'm sorry. I won't do it anymore.

And I said it's fine.

He slinked away to the porch to smoke. After that, I noticed that he only used my computer in private mode.

If he was going to use my computer to watch people die, I felt like I had to do something to counteract him. From then on, I made a point of watching videos of babies being born. The ones I liked the most were of water births. I turned the volume down so the baby's cries came out as wet hot whispers through the oceanic monitor. When I left the computer on the bed, I always made sure the last tab open was a frame of someone opening their eyes for the first time, the umbilical cord swinging long and red like a pendulum.

At the end of March, R asked if I could help him give his rabbit a bath. I swear his nose twitched when he said the word 'bath.' R said that the dust in the house was giving his rabbit allergies, a statement that made me wonder why we had to clean the

rabbit instead of the house. I was draped over the living room couch, looking for quarters under the cushions so I could go to the laundromat. In my head I said no, but in real life I heard myself say yes.

The bathroom fuse blew out every time someone used the toaster at the same time as the microwave, so we had to plug a lamp into the hallway and shine it into the bathroom. We clogged the drain with a fistful of saran wrap and stripped down to our underwear before getting into the tub. I held the rabbit down in lukewarm water while R lathered him in diluted soap. At first, the rabbit squirmed in my hands, and then he caved under my weight and was completely still.

Wait, I said. I think we should stop.

Why?

Because he's not resisting anymore.

Isn't that good?

No, I said, suddenly raising my voice. We have to stop.

He looked at me strangely. Let's just rinse him off.

I let go and he jumped out of my hands, blinking the soap out of his eyes.

That night, R fell asleep first. I laid next to him and thought of my grandma, how she used to braid my hair after I bathed, her fingers dipping into the wet black silk. I used to rub the smooth part of her ankles with my foot while she spoke to me of rabbits. As I laid next to R's feeble body, I suddenly felt the impulse to do it to him. I came closer and rubbed his ankles with the palm of my foot while he tossed and turned in his sweat, and when the morning cracked across the sky I still couldn't stop.

I didn't want to admit that it had bled into waking life. He had this way of reaching for me, this way of locking the door behind him and lifting the hair from my face. I cleared some space in my body the way I cleared the table before sitting down. Afterwards, he asked why I don't make sounds anymore. How come I just laid there and waited for him to be done?

It reminds me of a vegetable, he said. Or like a stuffed animal.

I mumbled something even I couldn't hear, and then I looked at the clock. I was late to go to class.

Our clothes were piled on the floor. His watch on top of my underwear. Our two sets of keys on the desk. I was completely naked, but there was a part of me he still couldn't see. It was a very small part of me. I put my finger through a cigarette burn in the sheets, widening the hole.

I want you to stop taking pills all the time, I said. It makes you act shitty to me.

You think I act shitty to you?

Yes, I said.

I don't know what you're talking about.

Actually, I said, you do.

R got dressed and went out into the sunroom. Ever since we stopped smoking inside, most days he stayed out there until midnight. I sat on the bed and counted backwards from 100, and then forwards. I thought about how long it would take for him to believe me, and about how long it had taken me to believe myself. I felt my

shame of having never said it eclipsed with my shame of having said it. There was no room for my shame to live because there was so much other junk in the house. When I slammed the front door behind me, I kept glancing back, half-expecting R to come running after me.

The sun was setting over campus. Dirty slabs of ice were shoveled in sad piles on the university lawn. I stole a stick of gum from Pushkar's convenience store, and then I chewed it up and spat it out into someone's keyhole. I kicked down all the garbage cans on our street, and then I kicked someone's sideview mirror with my leather boots until the mirror cracked. Every time I did something bad, I felt my body become less translucent so that by the time I got to the motel, even the headlights couldn't shine through me.

I used to gawk at the veins on my grandmother's body when I bathed her, tracing their outline with a towel dipped in baby oil. I know this is not the same, but I thought of the time R was unconscious while I disinfected his cuts in the bath, maybe because these are the only two times I've bathed someone else. R had rolled off the bed and sliced his forehead open on the radiator during a night episode. His rabbit watched us through a crack in the bathroom door. I don't mean to project my limited moral framework onto an animal, but something about the rabbit seeing me made me see myself.

Our downstairs neighbor had a big LCD television that faced the window. I could see it from the sidewalk whenever I waited for R to come answer the door. When

he had the curtains open, I saw him slumped over the living room couch, eating chicken and gravy on a tray. It was a silent act of transmission. It's what I felt when R's rabbit saw me, from the hallway, slowly dipping a piece of gauze in saltwater.

A few days later, I came up with a complicated lie, put on some clean clothes and only came back to get my dirty ones.

When my grandma was a child in Anhui, she told me about a strange pet she had. It was a black fungus that came from the sea, a viscous blob that lived on her kitchen table. No eyes, no mouth. Its texture was similar to the grass jelly you get in milk teas.

My grandma fed the sea blob every day. It ate by absorbing liquids. She poured all sorts of things on it: mud, vinegar, oil. She even spat on it sometimes. She couldn't spare clean water because she had to walk to the river to retrieve it. The important part was to keep the blob moisturized.

My grandma's parents did not like the sea blob. They thought it was vile, taixing le. But this was her secret: if you took care of it right, the blob would eventually open and spit out a beautiful, shiny egg. You pounded the egg it into an elixir with goji berries and peony to make an ancient tincture for living into your nineties. I asked her what it tasted like, but she said she couldn't describe it. It was like nothing we had in the west.

I tried to find this animal on the Internet, but I didn't know what to search for. 'Sea blob that eats shit and lays egg' came up with no results. I wouldn't say my grandma is a liar, but she watches a lot of television.

I am telling this story because this is how I saw myself: someone who could soak up the tainted, cough up something holy.

On my 21st birthday I felt like a voyeur of my own life, floating a few inches above my body. I thought it was my condition to be the vessel, that R was R and I was the white space that contained him. I reread my diary and understood what it was like to get carrots shoved at me from distant palms, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. I daydreamed about Virginia, her gap tooth letting the sun into her throat, riding away into a Pepto-Bismol sky with a backdrop of palm trees jagged like teeth. If rabbits could be shapeshifters, I wanted to be more like her.

Once the school year ended, I called my grandma to say zaijian, I am going to kill myself, and she asked if it could wait until tomorrow because she was making pancakes. I waited until tomorrow, and then she told me she had almost burned her house down because she had accidentally left the stove on all day.

Nainai, did you hear me? I said I am very sad. I don't think I can get better.

Aiyah! she said, yelling into the receiver. Never talk to me about zishā. Do you know how your dajiu died? Next time, don't call unless you want your Nainai's blood sugar to spike into the sky.

I put the phone down and splashed my face with cold water. I looked at a girl's face in the mirror, the industrial blue glow washed over her. Outside, the summer was just beginning to blossom. My grandma noticed I had hung up on her and kept calling me back, and I kept letting it ring. I looked at my reflection and thought, god, I am never going to get to die, and I was right.

I moved into her apartment again for the summer. She was on this new thing about reducing electricity. She even taped the light switches down so I couldn't turn them on when she wasn't there. Her diabetes had made her sensitive to light, but she was too proud to admit her ailments. It had to be about saving the world.

What the hell, I thought, so we sat in the dark and ate green onion pancakes, listening to the television side by side.

2017

I wanted to take a picture with the burning house, but it kept coming out pixelated and dark on my Nokia 2760 flip phone, the flame in focus or my face. There have been times while high when I have hallucinated my arms were very long, and I wished this hallucination would come true so I could capture the immensity of the flame, orange and unwavering as it poured from the second-story window. When an ember singed my shirt I looked at the fire again, assessing its realness. Scent of burning plastic, check. Hard, gemlike flame, check. Excessive heat, check. Even though the fire was burning in a house that nobody lived in, it was still burning.

As I looked through the pictures to see if I had done the fire justice, a lime green Mini Cooper slowed to a stop. The woman rolled down her window and if I had called the fire department. I had just assumed someone was in charge, that something like this couldn't be a mistake. Without waiting for my answer, the woman said she had been on the phone with the 911 operator all morning and they had promised they would send someone over, but it had been a long time and nobody was here. Am I not somebody? I wanted to ask, but it didn't seem like the right time for a joke. The woman looked like she was someone who took matters into her own hands, her makeup contoured carefully to her orbital bones. She complained that our tax dollars were being used to battle wildfires in other parts of the state while our city's orange hydrants sparkled with disuse. I didn't know what to say since I didn't follow the local news. The woman said she was going to the station to demand a dispatch herself, and then she waited for me

to offer myself to her.

I can stay and keep an eye on it, I said.

We exchanged numbers before she zoomed onto the motorway that comprised our city's main artery, her tailgate glinting with an Ichthys that said Science instead of Jesus. As soon as she turned the corner I wondered how long it would take for her to come back.

I sat down on the curb and put my finger through the burn hole in my shirt. The hole was just over my collarbone, which was just over my heart. My goal was to come out of this summer with a new sense of purpose in life, to complete the arc of my unrealized dreams, which is why I wore a cropped baby tee with the word 'Dreams' written in rhinestones across my chest. The store in Chinatown had asked if I wanted the one that said 'Dreamz' instead, and I shook my head no. I didn't know what my dreams were anymore, only that I once had many of them, dreams that now felt like broken buses retreating to the transit hub, flashing 'sorry' across their foreheads. I had just quit my job as an admin assistant, moved back in with my parents, and bought a flip phone. I wanted to liberate myself from the glowing square in hand and live in the real world, even though the real world was a concept that eclipsed the realness of my life, which was happening inexorably, second by second, like a stain that refused to come out.

The fire burned through the morning hours, a black plume that made the grey sky look blue in comparison. The houses were the first of their kind to catch the eyes

of transpacific investors in my hometown, their architecture vaguely Baroque, Rococo, and Georgian all at once, concealing their Styrofoam crown molds. The rose bushes were a freak breed that bloomed continuously through the seasons, littering the driveway in decayed flower heads. All summer I had watched the prices in the development rise and fall, a volatile market fueled by speculation. The burning house had sold for half a million, replete with an infinity pool and detached carport. I waited for the developers to pull up in their sportscars so I could look them in the eye and know what kind of people they were. They probably deserved to have their assets liquefied into dirt and light.

Their goal was to civilize four exits along the two-hundred-mile interstate and leave the rest to farmland, in denial that the valley was plagued with drought. It was sometimes a hundred degrees in the shade, inhospitable for humans, and yet my parents had insisted on retiring here because the real estate was cheap, California's last affordable dream. Clean water was siphoned by an agribusiness that had bought out much of the land surrounding the aqueduct, digging out irrigation channels to drip the roots of their almond trees. A single almond took three gallons of water to produce. When the flow from the Sierra Mountains was reduced to a trickle, the megafarm felt they had no choice but to reach deeper into the earth's clay for its aquifers. Then those dried out too. Nobody wanted to live in the valley anymore. The McMansions lingered on the market until the developers slashed the prices, then they slashed them again.

I thought I would be alone forever until I saw a figure walking down the private access road. Was it an angel or a heat mirage? I didn't have my glasses on. When the

figure drew closer I realized it was Mimi, the neighbor I used to babysit during summer breaks from college. She wore her Saturday morning Chinese school uniform, a pleated navy dress and pristine white socks. I wondered what she was doing here, and then I wondered what I was doing here.

Where did you just come from? I asked.

She glanced behind her like she had no idea. My house? she said.

Mimi's house was directly behind the new development. Cutting through the construction was a shortcut to the main road. I said I drove here to do my morning runs because the tract of concrete was flat and long. She looked at me like this was obvious, she could glean this from my running shorts and sweatband, my parents' blue minivan parked in the cul-de-sac. We never exchanged pleasantries, Mimi and me. I've seen her at her most vulnerable, shivering at the top of the slide at the McDonald's PlayPlace until I said go, Mimi, go. Promise you'll be at the bottom, she cried, and then she made her body hard all over before plunging into the pit of multi-colored balls.

I explained the situation of the fire to Mimi, which didn't take long because she could see it with her eyes.

What will you do if it gets out of control? she asked.

I'll scream, I said.

I think we should call the fire department.

When I first moved back in with my parents, I was surprised by how much Mimi had grown up while I was away, developing the kind of self-consciousness only a teen with a magazine could. She no longer shrieked until the pickles were removed

from her Happy Meal. She dotted the i's in her name with twin hearts. She was like a fish evolving to live on land, the million years where she is neither this nor that. She stormed out of her middle school when the bell rang with her Sanrio lunchbox swinging by her side like a vestigial limb.

You look like a cartoon character, I said. Go put on some jeans.

I can wear whatever I want, she said. This is a free country.

When the sun came out, a single bead of sweat dripped down her aquiline nose. It's been said that girls mature faster than boys, that it's true from a purely neurological standpoint, but there has yet to be a study done on eldest immigrant daughters like Mimi and me, the way it ages you to be the vessel of someone else's dreams.

Your cheeks are sunburnt, I said.

She touched them like they belonged to someone else. Mimi's skin has always been lighter than mine, a signifier of wealth that's persisted since dynastic rule.

You shouldn't sit facing the sun, I said. It causes premature aging.

She turned around and around but the sun was everywhere, the heat reverberating on the concrete. A hundred years ago, the settlers leveled the valley's salt marshes with the world's first earthmoving machine, a metal scraper driven by horsepower. Every river flowing from the Sierra was diverted, thus changing the migratory patterns of every animal that stopped for a sip of water there. They subtracted the mustang, antelope, and tule elk. It's hard to believe these slate-slavered hills were once covered in the lush darkness of yarrow flowers and desert willows. Now everything was illuminated in a way that felt insincere, as if the sun didn't trust what

we'd do to each other in the dark.

I remembered a video of the oil spill along the coastline last summer. When the oil ignited on the water's surface, it formed a halo of fire that chemical tankers had to dump liquid nitrogen over for six hours before it was extinguished. When it went viral, people online claimed the image was AI-generated. Others said that fishermen often made circles of fire to attract fish to the surface, even though that particular circle was the size of a football stadium.

They came on motorcycles and cruisers, each wearing the same tactical vest emblazoned with the city's insignia, dripping sweat under their wool uniforms. They stood on the sidewalk and began to document the scene with their iPads, nodding at us like houses were always on fire and we were always there to watch them burn. I assumed this meant the fire department was coming soon, but a few minutes passed and it was still a half dozen police officers, standing and observing with their hands on their hips.

Excuse me, I said. Can you put out the fire?

An officer said that the fire department's response times varied this time of year. They had to prioritize fires in the valley that were in danger of damaging critical infrastructures such as highway junctions or water treatment plants. One lonely McMansion in an isolated development was low on the list when the air quality index for much of the state oscillated between yellow and orange. They were compelled to come take a look because they received a 'site visit' from an irate neighbor, who was

concerned about traveling embers. I smiled at Lime Green Mini Cooper's audacity to show up at the station and spur them into action.

You should use your handcuffs on the fire, I said.

The officer, the one clearly in charge of speaking, asked if he could interview us as eyewitness testimonies. Mimi said yes just as I said no.

The air-conditioned cruiser opened its doors and spat out yet another man. I hadn't seen him before because of the tinted windows. The criminal investigator was middle-aged with his eyes set far apart. He also had a low-slung jaw and brows shaped like McDonald's golden arches, but his eyes were his defining feature. I thought he was overcorrecting for his far-apart eyes by focusing intently on one point in space, but his eyes lingered on my chest for a few seconds too long.

It says 'Dreams,' I said.

Mimi suppressed her laughter. The investigator cleared his throat and focused on his clipboard. Around what time did you first see the fire? he asked.

Late morning, Mimi said. I think it was around eleven.

Me too, I said. We came together.

I thought you were there before me, she said.

Can you describe the scene upon your arrival?

I can't remember the exact words I said, but I said 'incandescent' twice and 'supernatural' once, trying to imbue the scene with a kind of mysticism. Even though the process was a formality. They were only in charge of containment now that the homeowner's association Facebook would be inundated with concerned Rachels and

Lydias posting vitriol about possible property damage, but I was still disappointed when I read over the report and saw he had condensed our testimony into pure nouns.

He asked if we had seen anyone else at the scene upon our arrival. I don't know what inspired me to say yes.

What did she look like?

I described a woman who looked like myself except taller and more beautiful. I gave her a more refined jawline and straight black hair, dressing her in a sleek leather jacket and petrol-stained jeans. We made eye contact and acknowledged each other, I said. She coolly flipped her hair and got back into her car without looking back to admire what she had done. I hadn't thought anything of her until I was on the cool-down lap from my run and saw an orange spark rip across the sky. By then, she was long gone.

What kind of car did she drive?

I gave her a baby blue Benz with butterfly doors.

Was she alone? Did it seem like she had done this kind of thing before?

As I fortified my original lie with smaller, more innocuous lies, I saw the expressions on their faces change from boredom to concern. I knew that lying was bad, but the more I revealed about the arsonist the more I learned about my alter ego. I didn't consider myself a liar, but I did feel emboldened by the situation.

I thought of Nuwa, the goddess of creation, who was so lonely that one day she made people from the mud of the Yellow River. She took small blobs of clay and painstakingly formed their torsos, arms, legs, and heads. She gave each person

distinguishing features—a birthmark in the shape of a star, an uneven hairline, double-jointed elbows. Nobody was a simple derivation of somebody else. Then she decided the process was too labor intensive, so she made the rest of humanity by dragging a string across the mud. It is said that the nobility were the ones Nuwa had touched with her hands while the rest of us, the plebians, were given the bare minimum features to be considered a person.

I once went to China and stuck my feet in that mud. The earth acquiesced with such viscosity I felt like I was sinking into a big vat of blood. I wanted to pour the muck all over my body until it congealed to give me more dimension. I once believed I could change myself through sheer acts of will, a daily dedication to altering my personality through regiments of exercise and allotments of screen time, only to find myself gazing back into the very self that made a conversion believable and such a desire mine.

Girl power, one man said gravely.

The other men nodded, looking at the fire with a new veneration.

Mimi rolled her eyes at me, and then I rolled my eyes at Mimi rolling her eyes.

The fire ran out of flammable material and burned out, leaving behind a pile of cherry embers. The police caution-taped the perimeter and thanked us for our time. Now the only thing brighter than the fire was a gigantic billboard amplified with stadium lights. It was an advertisement for frozen green peas, the latest drought-tolerant crop the agribusiness was trying to grow. The peas were illustrated as strangely anthropomorphic, gyrating against each other in the emerald pods. Some of the peas had feminine features and some of the peas had masculine features. The girl peas

pretended like they didn't care about the boy peas, but everyone secretly wanted to be noticed by each other.

Days later, I saw that forensic investigator on the eleven o'clock news. The cause of the fire is indeterminate, his expertise had determined, since fires tend to destroy key evidence at its origin. Construction will be paused until a more thorough investigation can be completed. If you have more information, please call our anonymous tip line. I wanted to call just to say hello.

I found a thread of conspiracies online. Someone suspected the farmer wanted to prevent high-income suburbanites from buying out their access to the city's underground reservoir to water their lawns, a precious resource that was grossly subsidized for corporations but expensive for household use, a point of controversy in recent years. Someone else said it was the homeowners. Their new property had depreciated so much that it now made more sense to set it on fire and collect the settlement. Another comment said it was a warning from members of the Yokut tribe. All of the city was built on unceded territory, but this particular development was on sacred burial ground.

I looked through the pictures I took on my Nokia, a panel of black rectangles with an orange spark panning across the screen, my face tilted in subtly different angles to find one that flattered me. I was embarrassed by how many selfies there were and how I looked the same in all of them, especially the ones where I tried to make my expression appear smoldering to match the context. I quickly zoomed in on the

background to magnify what looked like a blurry outline of a woman streaking across the lozenge of light. I wanted her to be wearing Prada sunglasses that shielded most of her face. I wanted her to be prescribed special iron pills for her anemia, her skinny arms flexing with all their might as she hurled the Molotov cocktail through the open window.

I don't see anything, Mimi said when I showed her.

She's right there, I said, increasing the brightness on the screen.

Mimi squinted and tried to take the phone from my hand. That's not a person, she said. That's just a shadow.

Well, you'll just have to trust me.

You say that phrase all the time, she said.

Which phrase?

Trust me when I say.

What do you think I should say instead?

Sent from my Nokia?

I rolled my eyes as she burst into laughter. We were sitting on the curb outside the strip mall food court sharing milk teas and kimchi grilled cheeses, wincing as the chili oil kindled in our mouths. Mimi was eating her sandwich into the shape of a heart, making her bite more specific in the concave region. I wondered if it was too beautiful to be eaten, a microburst of the sublime, but she swallowed her creation mercilessly and belched out a tiny hiccup. She licked the brine from her fingers and crushed the foil into a ball.

Mimi's parents were sending her to a Catholic girls' boarding school in the Swiss Alps. I had been watching her eat all afternoon—bulgogi, donburi, halo-halo, taro cakes. Her goal was to gorge herself on her favorite foods to give them a new association (vomit) so that she wouldn't miss them when her only options were things like meatloaf and cough syrup. It was one of the most elite institutions in the world, one her parents could only afford because they had sold their house to the developers for demolition and were moving back to China to be with their aging parents. They were surprised by Mimi's reaction. She had punched a hole in the drywall and accused her parents of trying to get rid of her. Why were they sending their only daughter to live with strangers on another continent?

I had always assumed her parents were atheists like mine, raised with the belief that Mao was the only divinity.

They aren't atheists, Mimi said. They just don't believe in god.

What would you say is the difference?

Atheists are too sincere. You take it so seriously that your not-believing becomes its own thing.

I thought she was going to excuse herself so she could go to the bathroom and put her finger down her throat, but she didn't.

What if I told you I was the one who started the fire?

Her voice sounded so innocent voice it took me a few seconds to register it.

Sorry? I said.

What would you do?

Was it you?

It was an accident, she shrugged. I didn't mean to.

She sucked loudly at her cup of ice, vacuuming out the taro crystals on the bottom. I didn't believe her. The fire seemed so unwieldy that only a practiced arsonist or someone with a serious deviant streak could have ignited it. She would have had to go under the cover of night to douse the place in gasoline. But then again, accidental fires started all the time. All you needed was a trifecta of heat, fuel, and oxygen.

Have you ever read the poetry of Paul Celan? she said.

No.

I've been reading him.

I heard the sound of a toddler crying over a scoop of ice cream she had accidentally plopped into her lap. Their dog was licking the puddle assiduously as if cleaning a wound, but the water kept falling from her eyes.

He committed suicide, Mimi said.

Who did?

Paul Celan.

Oh. That's too bad.

Yup, she said. He drowned himself in a river because he felt alienated.

I studied the half-dark of Mimi's face and thought I saw something emanating from her, but I didn't have a name for then. I used to think that girlhood was defined by pure loss, but in that moment I understood that you are also instilled with something. I could see the glimmer of it in Mimi the way you can detect the moon's pull in a glass

of water.

I'm just kidding, she said when she saw my face. It was just a joke.

Which part was the joke?

I didn't set the house on fire.

I don't get it, I said.

This boba is good. I've never had this flavor before, lychee mint.

Why would you say that?

She put her finger to her lips and lowered her voice. Shh, she whispered. Just chill.

Chill? I said incredulously, in the least chill manner possible.

Yes, that's what we're doing. We're chilling.

She finally turned toward me and smiled. Chilling is important, she explained.

Actually, it's probably the most important thing in the world.

I blinked and there was happiness again, bounding toward her like a golden retriever.

I wish I could say she left a Mimi-shaped hole in my life, but it was less of a hole and more of a question mark. Let's stay in touch, I said blithely, knowing we were unlikely to see each other again. She texted me pictures of her new school. Mimi stood unsmiling in a snowy arcadia, holding hands in a line with seventeen other girls her age. The building, made of glass, steel, and concrete, shined with the cold austerity of a sanatorium. The headmasters took them on a field trip to a Eucharist factory run by

cloistered Carmelite nuns. They took turns stepping on the treadmill-like machines, silently packing the cardboard paste into the fragments of their Lord.

While Mimi was getting astrology-poisoned three thousand miles away, I was growing out my baby bangs to reveal the true size of my forehead. I wanted to become all-seeing, but I knew the longer I wallowed in bed the more I became like the ‘her utopian politics vs. her kitchen sink’ girl, someone who talked fervently about her dreams but was too lazy to materialize them. I had to find a way to exit the life I was atrophying inside, or maybe I was hypertrophying because I was blooming in parts that felt extrinsic to my form, my muscles straining from under my skin. I am on the precipice of something, I told my new therapist, who tried to convince me I was on the precipice of myself. But it was more than that.

All that remained of the burning house was a concrete foundation tagged in artless graffiti. Construction on the development was on an indefinite hiatus. The real estate firm had shifted its finances to the cities. A biotech startup in San Francisco made the first lab-grown beef patty, an operation that took two years and costed \$4 million. I learned that every self-driving car had 1.5 engineers watching over it remotely in case of mechanical failure. A telecommunications startup said they were inventing a device that would replace cell phones, but when I read the description, it sounded suspiciously like a cell phone. Money flowed away from the valley and toward the metropolis like it always had, and my parents wanted me to follow it.

Our dinner conversations had become excruciating, tending toward the same lines of inquiry night after night. Although they had given up on me pursuing a high-

paying profession, there was still a chance I could marry rich. I was pretty and I was weird. Men liked that, especially rich men—they had the world in a chokehold, all they were missing was some spice. I tried to imagine myself dating the kind of man my parents wanted to see me with, a man who would buy me an air fryer so I could enjoy the taste without the calories, a man who would blow my phone up with long texts about dead dolphins and the debt ceiling.

Mimi texted me, *Don't sign your name between worlds. Trust the tearstain, learn to live.*

what? I wrote.

paul celan!! she said.

In the winter, a miracle came in the form of water. The Sierras saw a record year of snowfall. The snow brimmed in the creek beds, replenishing the aquifers for the first time in decades. Hundreds of thousands of almond trees blossomed over the hills, inundating the landscape with pale pink petals. Everything was green in a way I had never seen before. Plants I thought were supposed to be brown were only brown because of discoloration. Grasshoppers could camouflage themselves in chlorophyll again.

One day, I absently typed 'burning house' in the search bar and read a Buddhist parable about a burning house. The Buddha sees a burning house full of children playing. The house is the world of samsara, slowly incinerating with the suffering of old age, sickness, and death. The children must exit the house for soteriological release from the cycle of birth and death, but until they learn the way, they cannot even begin

to perceive the flames. The Buddha tries to smash the windows so he can show the children how nice it is outside, but the children only giggle and point at the desperate Buddha, who won't stop yelling about an emergency only he can see. As the children's laughter grows louder and the Buddha's smile grows grimmer, he realizes that living by the truth is an endlessly lonely position. You are being engulfed in flames, he urges the children, but the children don't want to leave yet because they are having so much fun.

2018

Jessica put her fingers all the way inside me like she was reaching up to hold my guts. I laid sideways on the bed with my underwear around my ankles, trying to stay cool about this. Her nails were glittery and sharpened to perfect points, diamonds cut rough at her fingertips.

Can you feel it? I asked. It's two plastic strings.

I don't think I'm deep enough, she said.

You can't go any deeper. You'll be in my ribcage.

I tried to grab her wrist, but she pushed my hand away.

You've got to stop writhing, she said. Just hold still.

I tried to meditate on the ceiling fan in my room, the concentric circles it traced in its path. It was the dead of winter but I couldn't turn it off because the chain was broken. I ran my hands over my belly, imagining the metal hook of my IUD lost somewhere inside me—was it inside my intestines, or had it migrated up to my liver?

I think I feel something, she said, shaking her bangs away from her face.

Is it hard and plastic?

It doesn't feel like everything else.

Are there two of them?

She pressed against what I thought was my cervix. Yes, she said.

That's it, I say. That's my IUD.

She took her fingers out and looked at me. So it's not dislodged. You're fine.

She went to the bathroom to wash her hands, and as soon as I heard the water running cool and blue my stomachache went away.

That evening I had eaten meat for the first time in over a decade. Afterward, I felt a sharp pain inside me that I thought was my IUD being ejected out of my body. I made Jessica leave the party because it hurt so bad. I clutched my stomach like it was a wounded animal and interrupted her while she was making out with some girl I'd never seen before. It's ok, she said, I hate this party, let's go home. But when we got home I still couldn't find it, not even when I squatted down low on the bathroom tiles, and that's when I started freaking out.

Jessica came back with a white pill and a glass of water. Here, she says, plopping the pill into my lap. Ibuprofen.

I'm sorry I made you do that, I said sheepishly. I think it's the meat we ate earlier. It gave me a stomachache.

She unhooked the chain links on her top and let it fall to the floor. Can I sleep in your bed? I forgot to hang my sheets up to dry.

She didn't wait for an answer before turning off the lights. In the murky darkness, I saw the outline of her plants on my windowsill, how the leaves drooped low and grazed the soaking wet soil. She put her plants in my room so they could get more sunlight, but that's not why they were dying. I meant to tell Jessica she has been overwatering them, but if I did, I didn't know if that would make her stop.

Jessica let out a faint sigh before she got hooked in a dream. I felt hyperaware of her body next to mine. I ended up squished in a corner while the ceiling fan blew her long black hair all over my face.

The reason why I haven't eaten meat in over a decade is because I accidentally killed a pool of frogs when I was twelve years old. It was the summer before seventh grade, and my parents had just moved into a new house in the suburbs of Seattle. I poured my adolescent heart into making a pond in my backyard—I pulled wild grass from its roots, hollowed out the black earth, laid down a tarp, planted lily pads, filled it with water, and set all the frogs from PetSmart free.

In September there was a long drought over the west coast. The television told us you could get a fine just for watering your lawn. Frogs croak loudest before the rain, but it had been days since I had heard a single sound. This was why I waited until nightfall, when nobody was looking, and secretly filled the pond with the lawn hose, hoping to submerge the frogs as deep as possible so they wouldn't get pierced by the light.

But the sun was heaviest in the morning. It weighed down the whole sky. I was the first to see that the frogs had been scorched to death. I learned that water refracts light, acting as a lens, intensifying the sunlight's focal point and thus causing small, localized burns. This is what my father told me after I went outside and saw their smooth, white bellies, arms and legs splayed wide. I vomited, vowing never to eat meat again.

I told Jessica this story while chatting at a dim sum restaurant inside a strip mall, half-joking and half-not. I showed her my bare hands and emphasized I had used them to commit a special kind of slaughter. She rolled her eyes and called the waitress over, speaking to her in Shanghainese so I couldn't understand.

The waitress came back out holding a plate of frog legs fried with ginger and scallion. I sat there with my eyes wide while Jessica laughed hysterically. I couldn't believe I had told her about my secret fear and she was making me relive it now, years later, after my memory of meat had long dissipated.

Trust me, it's good, she said.

I parted my lips and took a bite, chewing slowly, tasting the muscles glazed in oil, those terrible webbed feet. As soon as we left the restaurant my belly started hurting and I knew it was the frog legs kicking inside me.

For weeks after the frogs were fried to death, whenever my father mowed the lawn, the ones who had escaped from the pond alive would get stuck in the blades. He always cut the power and crouched down low to rescue them, balancing a frog with one severed leg in the palm of his hand.

I know you shouldn't have a crush on someone you live with, but these kinds of things are inevitable. It all started the first time I pulled up to the house and saw Jessica standing there, in her brown Dickies, leaning on her pale pink truck parked in the long driveway. I named the color Pepto Dismal. I had emailed her on Craigslist earlier that week and then drove down from the Central Valley, where I had been living with my

parents, trying to decide what to do with my life. The images were blurry, the house looked trashed, and everything in the listing was spelled wrong. *cheapest rent in east LA*, it said.

When she helped me unload my things from my moving van, I became fixated on the way her elbows looked with the sleeves rolled up, and the drops of sweat sliding down her limbs. They were so smooth I felt like she could put her entire arm inside me and it still wouldn't hurt.

She said my uncle in Shanghai signed a lease on this place so his wife could have her baby here. As we dragged my mattress over the sepia-colored grass, she told me a long story about how the landlord had used stock images on the listing because the inside was unfinished, how we had to vacate if her uncle's visa got approved, how I shouldn't drink straight from the faucet or have mail addressed to my name. And then she flicked her wrist so hard I could hear it crack.

When she finally reached up inside me, it did hurt. Only because I wanted the touch to signify something it didn't. I thought of a Han dynasty folk tale my grandmother used to tell me. It was about a spirit girl that was reincarnated as a real girl. The girl is from another world parallel to this one, only virtual and inaccessible. On her wedding night, she sits on her bridal bed and waits for her husband to take her virginity. When he reaches for her, she stops him. I'm still ethereal, she says. Meaning: Wait, you can't go inside me yet. I'm not completely *here*.

When her hand slipped inside me, I felt her carving out a vacancy where my body used to be. Here is a hand, and here is a void.

The morning after Jessica put her entire hand inside me happened to be her mother's birthday. She would have been 44. I did a silent calculation in my head. That made Jessica 24—a couple of years younger than me, though she seemed older and more worldly. I wondered if I had been emotionally stunted by too much alone time as a child, sitting at a desktop computer, sipping fruit juice, and watching music videos.

Jessica said 44 is unlucky because it has the number four twice, and the number four has the same Pinyin as death. 四 sounds like 死 if you don't listen closely. That's why there is no fourth floor in most buildings in China—the floors on the elevators skip straight from three to five.

Your parents never told you about this? she asked.

No, never.

They aren't superstitious?

They are, but only when they want me to behave. They said every grain of rice I left in the bowl would someday become a pimple on my lover's face.

Jessica pulled out of the parking lot of the bodega where we stopped to buy wasabi peas and incense. I tried not to look impressed when she put her hand behind the passenger seat headrest and backed out of the spot in one fluid motion.

My mom used to say that too, she said. She wouldn't let me leave the table unless I'd eaten every single grain.

I rolled my eyes. I hate that. I would never force my kids to do that.

Jessica opened the bag of wasabi peas and poured some into her mouth.

I don't know, she shrugged. Some discipline can be good. Especially if it's a boy—you're saving his future girlfriends from having to train him.

Jessica needed incense to make a shrine in our living room for her dead mom. She also had a lock of her hair and a votive candle from a Mexican grocery store printed with the Virgin of Guadalupe. She would slowly add things like a keychain of Guanyin, or a letter she wrote and never sent, or a grapefruit peeled all at once so the skin hangs off long and coiling. I promised Jessica I'd participate in her ritual, but she won't tell me anything about it.

Who taught you this ritual? I asked.

Nobody.

Did you find it on the Internet?

She shook her head.

Then how did you learn about it?

Myself, she said. I am going to make it up as I go along.

Jessica got rid of our couch to make space for the shrine. When I came home from my new job at a telemarketing agency, where I called vendors and tried to convince them I could enhance their creative direction, someone had already taken the couch from the street. This is the perfect place for a shrine, she said, gesturing at all the emptiness. This made me angry, but not angry enough to get a new couch. She didn't seem to care that it was the only real piece of furniture we owned, or about how lucky we had been to snag it while driving down Hyperion Avenue on the first day of the

month. Now we watch television sitting on the floor, slurping bowls of instant ramen from Daiso bowls with our legs sprawled out in front of us.

Jessica fixed our broken printer by hitting it repeatedly until the printer spat out a photo of her mother sitting on the hood of a dark blue minivan, her face radiant against the ocean behind her. There was something animate in her smile. I could almost see her reaching for the plate of steamed buns and a bottle of Tsingtao balanced on the hood beside her.

She's pretty, I said. You look like her.

She looked just like Faye Wong when she was younger.

You have her mouth.

She blows on the photo to dry the ink, spitting everywhere. She gave me her mouth and her bad temper and that's it, she said.

Jessica asked if I would help her turn the smoke detector off. I stepped on a chair and stabbed it with the broom, catching the batteries in my hand as they fell from the sky. She changed into a crimson qipao embroidered with white lotus blossoms. I could tell it was too small for her because the top buttons were undone and she was sucking in. She twirled in a stiff circle while I stood on the chair, still holding the batteries and broom.

This was my mom's wedding dress, she explained.

It's nice, I said. I like the red silk.

When she leaned over, her breasts spilled out.

She went into the kitchen and arranged some pork buns on a plate. She pushed sticks of incense into a bun, making puncture wounds with her nails.

Here, she said, handing me a bun.

I shook my head.

Take it, she insisted. It's part of the ritual.

I don't eat meat.

She opened my hand and put the greasy pork bun in my palm.

I thought you were making this up along the way, I said.

I am, and this is what I've decided to do. We are going to share a meal with the dead.

I touched the bun's pillowy texture and knelt beside her, bathed in incense smoke. She held the incense to her forehead before pressing her face to the carpet in prayer, rising and repeating this three more times. I wanted to perform the ritual exactly as instructed, so I mirrored Jessica and bit into the bun slowly, deliberately, trying to forget it was once an animal. As soon as I tasted the salt crystals buried between the folds of flesh my instinct was to spit it out. It took all my love for Jessica to swallow instead.

Once, when I was on LSD at a warehouse show, I witnessed a woman eating a hot dog on the dancefloor by squirting streams of ketchup straight into her mouth. The lights above us shined neon and bright, forcing the hot dog to have a subtle metallic

sheen. I couldn't look away, even after the hot dog disappeared, leaving no trace of its existence except a smear of ketchup on her upper lip, a scarlet brand.

This reinforced my stance on meat because I didn't like how seamlessly a living thing could be subsumed. There is no prior relationship between us and them before the act of consummation. I don't understand what gives a body the power to be mourned. When the meat slid down my throat, all I could think of was the hormone-injected chickens whose legs shatter when they walk, and the millions of horses that have died in human wars. I don't like when an animal's telos is to be ingested by me.

When I told Jessica this at the foot of her mother's altar, she rolled her eyes at me. She said I shouldn't eat plants either because they have feelings too. They grow more if you play classical music and speak softly in their presence. Plants that live in houses where everybody screams and throws dishes at each other don't grow at all. Jessica knew this for a fact.

I think about the color red. If I could wear red every day I would, but it doesn't go well with my dark complexion, so I only wear it sparingly, in splashes, at dim parties where only I know it's there. You can see the redness of meat when it's pressed against the blue ice of the supermarket, its icy tendrils sprouting under the clear saran wrap. Red was the color of Jessica's qipao flashing in the dark. She spun around and around in circles, eating slices of grapefruit taken from her mom's altar, the red juice dribbling down her chin.

Jessica spent more time on the phone than anyone I had ever met. She sat hunched over the receiver, the only landline in LA that belonged to someone Jessica's age. She mostly used it to make long-distance calls to her cousins in Shanghai. I don't pay for the utilities, she said, shrugging. When she spoke in Chinese it always sounded like she was trying to start a fight—every vowel came out quick and oceanic, as if she was spitting out something that was burning hot. I could never move my tongue that fast without choking on it, but in our water-streaked mirror I watched myself try.

I could tell when Jessica was talking to her clients because she spoke in a bored, sultry voice. She got the most requests on Monday night when husbands had been with their wives and kids all weekend and were ready to let go of their rage. She always hung up their calls without saying goodbye. Chinese people don't say bye, she explained. They say, uh, uhh, and hang up.

I practiced when she was gone. Uh, uhh, and then I slammed the phone back on the hook and stormed out of the room.

The day after the ritual, I walked past her room and saw her chatting with the cord tangled around her fingers long and wild like a snake. I saw a bright pink stain on the back of her hand, a scythe glinting in the dark. I pointed at it with a question mark on my face. She told me she was blotting her lip gloss, but she hesitated, so I knew she was using the back of her hand to practice kissing.

I wondered who she was practicing for. I wanted to see her be anxious around someone instead of how she is with me, perpetually cool and brimming with certainty. Maybe she was fantasizing about the pretty rave girl from last weekend, or the bartender

at the dive bar with the teardrop tattoo. After Jessica left for work I spent a long time with the back of my hand, coating it with spit, nibbling to get the full effect, kissing myself while imagining Jessica imagining me.

Later that night, I watched television alone until my eyes stung from the light. I wanted to pass the time so that I could visit Jessica at work without seeming desperate. She told me to come before it got busy, but I wanted to make it seem like I had so many other things to do, that visiting her was an afterthought instead of the main event. I pulled up at the Platinum Showgirls at Union Station just as the clock struck midnight.

The club was empty, littered with a few men waiting for the night buses. They slung their heavy briefcases over one shoulder when the bouncer unhooked the faux velvet stanchion. When I pushed past the doors, I saw Jessica dancing on a pole, her body twisting and untwisting against the metal bar. It made me think of how salmon look when they are thrashing upstream to spawn, searching for the precise location where they were born. My grandmother once told me a story about the fish in her village. Anyone could eat large cattle (cows, horses, bison), but the consumption of lesser creatures was discouraged because the meat they produced wasn't enough to vindicate their killing. Their souls were too small, she said.

Jessica looked so thin under the blue light—with her rouged eyes, her hair swishing like a ball falling through a net—that I didn't think she could satiate anyone, not even me. The men barely glanced at her. Most of them were looking at their phones. She was a background blur, a fixture that set the ambiance. I took a faraway booth, biting

my straw while Jessica worked the floor in her sky-high heels. I kept squinting to find her scar in the dark.

Jessica had a forehead scar from nearly drowning in the deep end of a swimming pool. It happened when she first moved to America, and to this day she is afraid of large bodies of water. It's a deep cut that split her forehead diagonally, in half, which she hides underneath a thick layer of foundation and cropped bangs. The scar throbbed when it was about to rain because it could detect moisture in the air. It's why I can never leave LA, she said, most other cities make my face hurt. In the club light, I can see it so lucidly, slashing across her forehead like an interstate.

A man walked up to her and handed her a bill. He whispered something that made her flip her hair and walk away. He kept following her down the platform, even after she had turned her back to him. Was he telling her how beautiful her scar looked in the dark? He reached over to untie the strings on her bikini top. I slammed my drink on the table, spilling it over my hoodie and leaving a halo-stained shape across my chest.

I grabbed his shoulder, turning him around to face me. His bloodshot eyes look me up and down with mild amusement.

What are you doing? I shouted over the music.

He waved his bill in the air. Nothing, sweetie. I'm just giving her a tip. He looked me up and down. Are you the bouncer? he asked.

I could see the glint of his braces, the little bits of food caught in the aluminum.

I saw what you were doing, I said. Don't touch her.

I'm not touching her, he said. I'm just paying her.

I felt the actual bouncer's hand on my shoulder. I landed a glob of spit on his shirt before they escorted him outside.

Jessica came to find me sitting on the curb with my hood over my face. She couldn't stop laughing, which pissed me off more.

I was just teasing him, she said. He's a regular and I know he just got paid today. You don't have to be my *guard dog*.

When she said the last two words, I felt so embarrassed I wanted to die.

How come you're all wet? she asked.

I spilled my drink, I said.

Come back inside, let's get you cleaned up.

I'll see you at home, but I made no motion to get up from the curb.

The sign for the video rental store lit up her face. This street was littered with 99-cent stores, stores that seemed to be having their grand opening forever. Now I am older and know that these stores are not real, that nobody makes a living this way. One thing I would come to resent about LA was how everything was a front for something else. Jessica noticed me studying her scar and smoothed her bangs down for camouflage.

You know, that guy back there, Mr. Calcagni—she leaned in to whisper—he used to be my history teacher in high school.

I made a sour face at her. You let your history teacher touch you like that?

She rolled her eyes at me. He's not my teacher anymore.

I looked away while she struggled to sit on the curb with her stilettos, draping her legs over mine.

Listen, everything's fine, she said. I know you just want to look after me, but everything's fine.

I thought about why someone that old would elect to get braces. He must be a psychopath, a true sicko, someone who comments on YouTube videos to say thank you.

I just don't like when I see someone fucking with you, I said.

But he wasn't *fucking* with me. He was just paying me.

I felt embarrassed for my sheltered life. I imagined an experiential bar floating above me as if I were a video game character, and my level being very low. I didn't know if I was in love with Jessica or if I wanted to be like her. She was free of stricture, unyielding in her conviction of what the world owed to her.

Let's go, she said, taking my hand. I'm done for the night.

You're not going back in?

I'm hungry. I want to go to McDonald's before it closes. She ran her fingers over her scar. I don't know why it hurts so bad right now.

We both looked up at the perfectly clear, cloudless sky and that's when I started laughing with her.

We shared a milkshake as she taught me all the weird things she said in Chinese to get more tips when dancing. 买一块鸡肉撞死你, she said. That means I want to beat you to death with a chicken nugget, and then she bit down on one. Nobody in this part of town speaks Chinese, even though a lot of people have Chinese tattoos, so she could basically say anything.

I scrunched up my nose. I don't like that.

Why?

I don't know. It's a weird thing to say.

I can teach you something else, she said.

I wished I had taken a glamour shot of her there. Her hair teased in a ponytail, spinning on the anchored chair under the harsh rectangular lights with a replica of Ronald McDonald grinning ceaselessly.

Can you teach me how to say I want to hit you with a block of tofu? I asked.

She thought about it while chewing on her French fry glazed in ketchup. 买一块豆腐撞死你, she said.

买一块豆腐撞死你? I repeated.

Do you know what that means? It's an idiom for when someone is hopeless. Someone's situation is so hopeless you might as well just hit them with a block of tofu.

I want to hit you with a block of tofu, I said over and over to myself as I followed the taillights of her Chevy with mine, pulling into our driveway just as the first drop of rain hit the ground.

The words for appetite and desire share the same characters, 欲望. I don't know what this means, but I wanted to believe that everything I longed for, I longed for with my mouth. Before I met Jessica, I thought I wanted to become a Buddhist. Its main teaching is about karmic retribution, which means that every bad astral event is the aftermath of a lingering desire. The only way to transcend suffering is to let go of your

worldly wants. But what happens if you do the opposite of what's instructed, and allow yourself to be leashed to your longings?

Jessica made me watch a video about a dog in Japan named Saihu. Saihu died while demonstrating to her owner that the duck he was about to consume was poisonous. When her owner was about to take his first bite, she snatched the duck from his plate and consumed it herself. You can see that there is no clear border between desire and sacrifice. Nobody knew whether Saihu was trying to protect her owner or behaving poorly, if she was a savior or the canary in a coal mine. They sold duck at the butcher shop across the street from our apartment. When Jessica was too tired to cook something, she bought one and ate it cold, straight from the Styrofoam box. I looked outside and saw the row of ducks lined up in the butcher's display, focusing my gaze on the empty hook. She soaked each piece in black vinegar and spat the bones straight in the trash, mouthing her happiness out loud to me.

My mother used to tell me that if you bite your tongue accidentally, it's your body telling you it wants to eat meat. A decade ago, when I first became a vegetarian, she would smack her lips and demand I show her my tongue, scolding me when she saw it was studded with blisters. From a young age, I wanted to demonstrate my allegiance to animals, and as I grew older, I wanted to become completely ascetic, to eliminate all desires. There were so many desires to be maimed—the desire to kill, the desire to consume, the desire to mimic, the desire to forget, the desire for recognition, the desire to possess, the desire for vengeance, etc.

The first time Jessica kissed me it felt like all the blisters on my tongue were on fire. Her mouth tasted like copper, like someone had shoved a handful of pennies into my mouth. Keywords: blood, morning dew. We woke up late in the afternoon, with the sun rippled on the sheets, and I laid there, in my underwear, shivering under the ceiling fan with her body hovering above mine.

What's wrong? she asked. Are you cold?

When I didn't answer, she got up and jammed my sneaker into the ceiling fan. It made a mechanical sound as it spun slower, slower, until the blades finally clicked to a stop.

The rain made the ground look blurry as we drove down the freeway, the yellow lines passing clean through us. Jessica kept swerving when we came too close to the meridian, causing the adjacent cars to swerve in response. We glided down the artery of LA in synchrony. She held her arm out the window, smoking. She looked tired from all the labor she was performing and I wished I could help her, but I don't know how to drive stick and I don't really like to smoke.

How long do you think you will be? I asked, trying to sound curious instead of pleading.

An hour, maybe more. Did you bring a book?

I forgot, I said.

She ashed out the window. I'll be even faster then.

We drove with the stereo between two channels so the voices on the airwaves melted into each other. I could tell she knew the way from memory, so I leaned my seat back and looked at the suburbs. She usually did this at the end of every month, but I insisted on coming with her. So that you can take the carpool lane, I said, but we both know that's not why I wanted to come.

When I opened my eyes again, we were parked at the end of a cul-de-sac deep in suburbia. She pointed to a one-story, pee-colored house lined with a chain-link fence. The pee-colored house sat in a patch of pee-colored grass. There was a pee-colored truck parked in the gravel lot. I don't know why I had imagined something more luxurious: a beautiful condo in Pasadena with succulents and a swimming pool lit up from underneath, not a house that looked a lot like ours. She took the key out of the ignition and turned to face me.

Hey, she said softly. Thanks for coming. It's nice to not do this on my own.

Of course, I said.

I reached over and put my hand over hers. She held it up and kissed my palm.

I'll be back soon, she said.

As soon as the front door closed behind her, I started to get anxious that something would go wrong, that whoever was inside the house was going to hurt her. Last night, when I kissed her for the first time, I knew it was different from the way she kissed other people. It was difficult to tell the difference between performance and reality with her, but I felt certain she was being real with me. Performance is what shields

us from vulnerability. As long as I came to her disarmed, I knew she would come to me too.

I looked out the window and saw a neighbor in slippers, smoking a cigarette and taking his dog out. I saw another neighbor sitting on his stoop drinking iced lemonade. I imagined them doing this for an eternity. Time was frozen in California, a sublime monotony of tropical hours. There were no seasons. The only thing that differentiated time were events that couldn't be assimilated. I thought of Jessica's mom pulling her out of that bright blue oblivion, her blood leaking on the concrete, and nothing else.

Just as I resolved to leave the car and walk around the block, Jessica suddenly came running out of the house shrieking and laughing. She opened the car door and threw the pile of twenties into my lap. I looked at the dashboard when she started the ignition, realizing it had barely been half an hour since she left me.

Count this, she said. Her cheeks were tinged red and her hair was a bit disheveled.

That's it? I asked, not knowing the protocol. You guys are all done?

His wife got off work early today, so we had to rush the beginning a bit. She laughed some more and started the engine.

Just as we were pulling away, a man came out of the yellow house and waved at us with his belt half-unbuckled. I couldn't tell if it was Mr. Calcagni or someone who looked just like him. He wore camouflage cargo shorts, his belly jutting from his tight polo shirt. Our rent was due tomorrow, and we had to choose between pawning her

mother's jewelry or having groceries next week. No, we don't, Jessica said and winked at me before picking up the phone.

As we drove down the freeway, the money fluttered in my lap like lilies in a shallow lagoon. Jessica couldn't stop laughing while doing a cartoon imitation of him picking up his wife's call while escorting her out the door. I laughed with her, but secretly I wanted to say a quiet prayer for all the Mr. Calcagnis of the world, buckling their belts just in time to say goodbye.

Jessica stopped sleeping in her bed and started sleeping exclusively in mine. That's how I knew we were dating. Sometimes, when I came home from work and Jessica was gone, I went inside her room to look at how messy it was. I saw a book used as an ashtray, an ashtray used as a jewelry holder, a jewelry holder used as a coin jar, and a coin jar used as a soda cup. I liked that every object in her room was tinged with use.

Some nights, I dreamt of flowers growing in the desert. I wanted Jessica to drown them in water until they grew as thick as jungles.

2019

The cemetery was full of headless angels, seraphs missing their wings and genitalia. Every time we passed a headstone I subconsciously calculated how long they were alive so I could give them my silent pity or congratulations. Gertrude, I'm sorry, you died too young to fully wield the power of your name.

Aunt Zhen Ayi and I arranged the food on a blanket. She had made stewed turnips, moo shu pork, cucumbers drenched in sesame oil, pickled ginger, cold barley tea, and two different kinds of juice. I smothered my bun in hoisin sauce before shoving it in my mouth, pushing her dog Juju's face away from mine.

Let's set him free, she said.

We can't, I said. The sign says dogs must be on leash.

Juju is a good dog, she said with a wink. He won't bite.

That's not how it works, but I didn't stop her from reaching over to unhook the leash. Juju went bounding into the ravine, his pink tongue dripping saliva. The perimeter was fenced, but we still had to keep him within eyesight or else he might ruin someone's visit by jumping all over them. He glanced back in disbelief that the chain wasn't snapping taut around his neck. A flying insect caught his eye and he went running behind a row of mausoleums.

Don't let them incinerate me when I die, Zhen Ayi said.

I had to swallow before I could answer. You don't want to be cremated?

She shook her head. I want you to make me into a tree, or a diamond.

I forgot that Zhen Ayi had been living in America for nearly three decades. She had shed her old superstitions from the mainland and adopted new ones. She believed that meat could be cruelty-free, and that scientists could make pain more painless.

Who should I give the diamond to? I asked.

Her voice was muffled by a mouthful of rice.

Sorry?

She finished chewing and swallowed. I said, maybe a lover.

I tried not to look taken aback. I had never thought of Zhen Ayi with a lover before.

She rolled her eyes at me. Just because I am old now doesn't mean I was born old, she said, and then she used her long pinky nail to pick the green onion from her teeth. I once asked if this was her coke nail and she said no, it was for picking locks, an inscrutable answer that left me speechless.

Zhen Ayi was not related to me by blood, but I called her my aunt. She was the one who sponsored Mama's green card to come to the States, a distant cousin's piano teacher who had the same last name as her. Without Zhen Ayi there would be no you, Mama said. We were eternally indebted to her. Because my mother lived on the other side of the state, it was my duty to visit Zhen Ayi on the first Sunday of every month. She had recently moved into a retirement community, Oasis Enhanced Living, which sounded like the name for a libido-boosting soft drink. I brought her specialty items from the Singaporean market, and then I sat on her couch with the antimicrobial plastic cover on and listened to her talk about credit card companies, her blood pressure,

chemical additives in food, her allegiances toward one airline over another, how she could run a country better than Xi Jinping. She made light chatter, I once told my ex-girlfriend Jessica, who emphasized the wrong noun, accidentally creating a beautiful image. She thought I said Zhen Ayi made the light talk to her, made it chatter.

Today was like the others, except I insisted we have our dinner outside because it was too hot inside her apartment. On the way to the cemetery, we passed by other residents walking together in pairs, men and women on separate rollators, breaking in their orthopedic Skechers. Zhen Ayi pushed past them, her head bobbing underneath her camo baseball cap with LA sequined across the visor, a hat I bought from a street vendor until I decided it was too y2k me. Zhen Ayi reprimanded me about textile waste and had been wearing it since.

Zhen Ayi was almost eighty years old and still completely lucid. She cooked her meals and did her taxes using a scientific calculator. Her dentures were sparkly clean. She had no children and no husband, two brothers who were dead, and one sister she was estranged from. Sometimes I imagined Zhen Ayi toothless in the night, resisting mortality all on her own, and then I had to stop imagining it because the image made me sad.

What about you? She pointed at me with her chopstick. How do you want to be buried?

I had never considered it before, but maybe I would like to have my head shrunk. I could see myself on the mantle, watching over my sons and daughters.

Zhen Ayi made a face when I told her this.

Lots of cultures shrink their heads, I said. It's a completely normal thing to do.

It's not very Chinese of you.

I thought it was the most Chinese thing in the world, watching over your children forever. I knew I was here because my mom had seen me over FaceTime last week and got worried about the ring of fat I had lost around my face. She reported this to Zhen Ayi, who promptly invited me over for dinner. The lavish picnic spread before us was a conspiracy against me, and I had to eat a lot so that Zhen Ayi could report back to my mom and say I was doing fine. I was trying to hide everything embarrassing about my life under the auspices of healing. I had gotten the stick and poke of Jessica's name on my thigh blasted over, and Juju had come into my life, whom I insisted wasn't a breakup dog. I had always wanted a dog.

When I was your age, Zhen Ayi said, boys loved me.

I blinked. I thought you weren't allowed to date in the camps.

Says who?

I thought you were too busy with, like, I don't know.

Suffering?

Shoveling things. I took a sip of apple juice.

I knew that Zhen Ayi had been sent to live in a mountain hamlet as a teenager, the eldest daughter in a literati family. She sorted soybean sprouts and peeled tatsoi leaves for a decade before she escaped on the back of a coal train on the night of the Chung Yeung Festival when the guards were too drunk on plum wine to take inventory in the barracks. Every time Zhen Ayi had a sip of alcohol it became all she could talk

about. The walls were streaked with human feces, the constant sunrise drills, and the disease that unbelievably made the fruit unripe and rotten at the same time. This was the first time I had heard of anything fun happening there.

What was his name? I asked. Your boyfriend.

Jinghao. Chen Jinghao.

Chen Jinghao, I repeated in a flirtatious voice.

I don't know if that was his real name. He could have been lying.

What did he look like?

Sunken cheekbones. Pointy shark teeth. Nervous tapping on surfaces when he wanted a cigarette.

This description didn't sound flattering, but it was common for beautiful women to date mediocre men. I saw it happen all the time, in every major city, so much so that I thought there should be more conspiracy theories in circulation about it.

But Zhen Ayi didn't like him for his looks, she liked him because of his uncooperative attitude. All anyone cared about was their image in those days. Not being from a bad family, not being a counterrevolutionary. But Jinghao didn't care about any of that. He was sentenced for writing poems in the style of Li Po instead of poems praising the new proletariat regime. They were published under a pseudonym in a small underground newspaper, but the owner of the cinema club he worked at had found the drafts and snitched on him for a small bribe.

Guess for how much, she said.

It never ceased to amaze me how she could memorize the precise yuan something had cost several decades ago, tabulating the past as a sequence of bargains and rip-offs.

Can you imagine? she said. Sending someone to get reeducated for the price of a bunch of carrots. A bunch of carrots!

It was the autumn of 1972. She had been in the camp for a few years by then, which the party insisted was not a camp and simply the normal life of a peasant farmer. Her father had jumped from a balcony after being persecuted for his university affiliations, and her brothers had changed their family name so they could become party officials in the Youth League. She hadn't spoken to either of them in a long time. She heard rumors of other villages not having enough food to feed their farmers, stories about people boiling mice, and the bark from loquat trees. The people in her village were thin, but nobody was starving. She didn't want to go somewhere else and risk having a worse condition.

She still remembers the first time she saw him. She was retiring to her bunk when she heard two people arguing outside her dormitory. She looked out the window and saw a man with long, silken hair and a pressed Zhongshan suit, a new arrival from the city. He was fighting with a Red Guard about the mandatory haircut. Regardless of whether he was trying to be like the rockers from the West or the loyalists from the Qing, the guard said that every man had to have their head shaved at this camp. Sui bian, Jinghao said, and then he spat on the ground between them. When he looked up, he saw Zhen Ayi staring at him from the window.

Jinghao was always suave, always holding a Double Happiness cigarette between his index and middle finger. When he was not smoking, he put his fingers to his lips as if he was. Even though Zhen Ayi was not the most beautiful girl in the camps, Jinghao eventually fell in love with her, citing her ability to empty a room. She had an awkward conversational style that made people remember what they were supposed to be doing, and then they would excuse themselves to go do that thing. In this world, Jinghao said, there is nothing more important than quiet time.

Do you think it's true? she asked.

Do I think what?

That I am bad at conversations.

No, no. I shook my head. Of course not.

I've worked on it a lot over the years, she said, and then she cupped her tea with both hands and brought it to her face.

In the winter, Zhen Ayi was assigned the very coveted task of watching over the vegetable cellar. It acted as the winter storage unit for over two hundred people in her company, and workers were assigned to sleep there overnight to prevent pilfering. Zhen Ayi's routine consisted of nothing more than turning over the cabbages and potatoes on the shelves to keep them from rotting. Jinghao snuck out of his dormitory to meet her before she closed the cellar doors. You are my dear friend, he said, touching her face in the dark. Friend is a strong word, *comrade*, she said and planted a kiss on the arc of his nose.

It all came crashing down in the spring. Jinghao received notice of his transference, life-changing news delivered in the most banal manner during a weekly meeting. He would be sent to a harder camp up north following an altercation with the same guard who shaved his head. She burst into tears once she learned it was permanent. On the night of his departure, they snuck out and stayed until sunrise in the sorghum field, saying how they would find each other when the revolution was over, and all week her skin and hair reeked of the new chemical fertilizer.

Oh! she wailed. I have never been so sad in my life. I prayed I was pregnant so I could have a part of him always with me.

I wished that Jessica had been sent to a reeducation camp. Instead, she lived a few neighborhoods over from me, a part of town I avoided in case I ran into her. After we broke up, I was the one who moved out. Jessica was my former housemate turned girlfriend, which was my first mistake. Slowly, as the relationship deteriorated, it became evident that I would not only have to find a new girlfriend but also a new living situation. Nobody talks about the liminal time when you are broken up and still cohabitating, when you want to fade them into anonymity but cannot because you are faced with the reality of their continued existence. I felt like the movie was over and I was still sitting in the theater.

That's it? I said. You never saw him again?

I'll tell you if you eat more, she said.

I told her I couldn't swallow another bite without having a food baby, but she was already piling more pork and shiitake onto my plate.

After Jinghao was transferred to another camp, Zhen Ayi said she spent many nights crying. People said it was important to keep busy. When she was assigned to the canteen she slipped other peoples' rations into her mouth, big pomelos and kumquats, not caring what anyone else thought. It was gourd season, and she spent all her time angrily cutting the vines with shears. It was like the crying would never end, and then it did.

She sat on the fender of another boy's bike, and they rode into town for the Sunday parade, where the guards recited poems by Chairman Mao. They were filled with lazy nature similes and overly romantic descriptions. The boy clapped despite how saccharine they were before slipping his hand around her waist. She thought this was a good sign, that he cared about things like propriety and saving face, things Jinghao never cared about. She wanted to date someone completely different from him.

Of course, that's when his letters came. It is an extrasensory skill all exes have. They know when you are no longer thinking of them and choose that moment to try and get back into your life. She recognized the handwriting on the envelope, how each character was labored over with fine, angular lines. He had sent the letters weeks apart, but because of the unreliable postal service, she serendipitously received them on the same day. She shoved them into her pocket and waited for everyone to fall asleep before poring over them.

This is when Zhen Ayi took out two yellowed and crinkled sheets of paper and placed them on my lap.

I brought them for you, she said.

You brought them? Why?

For you to read, she said.

It occurred to me that Zhen Ayi and Mama had carefully planned this sequence of events, a slight betrayal that made me sit up straighter.

That's okay, I said. I trust you. I don't need to read them myself.

But I want you to.

The truth is that it had been years since I had been called on to read Mandarin. I scanned over the sentences with what I hoped was a believable pace, recognizing every third or fourth character while having no idea what they meant in succession.

These are beautiful, I said, handing them back to her.

She frowned. You didn't read them.

I did. They are very romantic.

I will translate them for you.

She fished around her fake Gucci purse for her glasses and squinted at the letters.

Qin ai de,

30

September 1973

How are you? I can't believe how long it's been. Time passes strangely at the new camp. They've been having me dig holes. I don't know why. It feels pointless. For each grain of sand I dig, another grain always rushes into its place. Overall, it mostly

stays flat. This is why I've come to envy the dunes, without anyone forcing the sand into a shape, look at what it can do.

Also, I hate everyone here. The lieutenant has a son, a young boy with ruby-red cheeks, who likes to play in the holes I dig. He's the only person I can stand talking to.

Shushu, the boy said to me one day. What is the sun?

The sun? I answered. It's a giant ball of fire.

We admired it for a long time together. The boy ran inside his tent and came back with a rubber kickball.

Shushu, he said.

Yes?

You are a reactionary.

Why am I a reactionary?

Because the sun is Chairman Mao. You said that it's a giant ball of fire.

The boy tried to dribble the ball, but it bounced away.

Oh, I get it, I said. But that's not literal. When people say the sun is Chairman Mao it's just a metaphor.

What's a metaphor? he asked.

He climbed into a hole to retrieve the ball. I could not think of how to explain to a five-year-old what a metaphor is. When the boy emerged, he was out of breath, kicking up clouds of dust everywhere.

Shushu, he panted. You are a reactionary!

I was wrong. Forget what I said. The sun is Chairman Mao.

I heard you, he yelled. You can't take it back! You said the sun is a giant ball of fire!

I am so bored. Will you come to visit? I've been thinking of you, and our talks. There is a bus from Guangzhou. Check the schedule, but I think it comes every month.

Xiang ni de,

Jinghao

Qin ai de,

21

October 1973

Every time I finish digging a hole, I look at it and wonder if I am becoming more reformed. I concentrate on the dunes, burning them into my retina, dunes shaped like the curvature of a human body. I can't stop comparing everything to you. I know this is a sign I am unwell.

I had another chat with the boy. This time he hugged me.

Shushu? the boy said.

Yes?

What were you before you became a reactionary?

I told him I was a bouncer at a cinema club.

What does a bouncer do? he asked.

Many things. If there is a fight, the bouncer separates people from each other.

But that's evil, he said.

It's not evil. It's just a job.

It is evil. There are not very many people left on earth, we have to stay close together.

The child ran towards me and hugged my legs.

I realized it was my first time touching someone since you. When you come, if you come, will you bring me cigarettes?

Xiang ni de,

Jinghao

Zhen Ayi never stumbled over a word, which made me realize how much time she had spent reading and rereading them. After she finished translating, I understood why Zhen Ayi was in love with him. They weren't exactly love letters, but there was something poetic in their restraint. Instead of a wide portal, they suggested there was a small hole just wide enough for her to slip through.

So you went to see him, I said.

Her silence implied I had said something so obvious it didn't warrant an answer.

How come they let you leave? You could have run away.

She looked at me incredulously. Where would I have gone?

It was a good point. She tilted her baseball cap to shield herself from the sun, and the gigantic sequins shimmered.

The bus ride was two thousand li spread out over one night and two days. It stopped in communes in Datong, Yulin, and Lanzhou. She still remembered the winter chrysanthemums in the courtyard, how their colors bled when the bus lurched forth.

Transporters thundered past them on the gravel road, their cargo concealed under olive-drab tarpaulins. Despite the service running only once a month, the bus was still sparsely populated. The northern camps acted essentially as juvenile detention centers, filled with troubled youth who gambled, drank, stole, and killed animals for fun. If someone you knew had been sent there, it was better not to incriminate yourself by visiting them, which is why most of the other passengers were elderly, past the point of caring about what any regime thought of them. Three other girls on the bus were around Zhen Ayi's age. Naturally, they gravitated toward sitting by each other.

Where are you going? one girl asked.

They shared daikon radish soup and sesame seed balls.

I am going to visit a friend, the girl across the aisle from her said. The other girls understood this as code for visiting a lover.

Me too, Zhen Ayi said. I am going to visit a dear friend.

I imagined Zhen Ayi looking at her pale face superimposed on the window, her reflection static against the icy fields of maize thawing in the winter sun, nauseous from switchbacks after switchbacks. What was amazing, Zhen Ayi said, was that every village looked the same as hers. The countryside was brimming with young men and women sent down from metropolitan areas to be re-educated. There were millions of them over the years of the revolution, standing listlessly in front of mud slab houses with their hands on their hips, driving tractors into ditches and cutting up the air with chainsaws.

Zhen Ayi leaned her head against the window and listened to the conversation of the two girls behind her.

Why was he sent to the desert? one girl asked.

Mouthing off to a guard, the second girl said. He was a poet too, chou lao jiu.

Wow. Is that what he did for a living?

No, she laughed. He used to work at a movie theater. He did the ticket booth and changed the reels on the projector.

How strange, Zhen Ayi thought.

That's what my friend did too, the other girl said. But he always wanted to quit and live the life of a recluse in the mountains.

Zhen Ayi turned around. The girls looked at each other, and then it dawned on them that they were all visiting the same man. One of the girls said she was Jinghao's lover from his university before it closed down. The other two girls were his lovers from labor camps no. 1 and no. 2, respectively. The last girl said they met at a bookstore in Shanghai two years ago. He had approached her to say she shouldn't read those so-called poet-revolutionaries because their poems were artless, written for babies, and he ripped out a page of his notebook with a yuefu by Bia Zhilin transcribed, and his own address scribbled in the margin.

Oh my god, I said. Oh my god.

Zhen Ayi didn't even know he'd been sent to two other camps before hers, and this fact alone filled her with envy.

Zhen Ayi fought with the three other girls over whom he loved the most, whom he wrote to with the greatest frequency, and whom he coaxed with the most beautiful verbiage. They compared the dates on their letters, but he had written all of them on the same day. They counted the characters on their letters, but they were all precisely the same length. Every time their voices increased over a certain decibel, the bus driver came over the intercom to say, please be quiet, this is a bus while continuing to barrel into the night.

Suddenly, one girl reached across the aisle and grabbed a fistful of another girl's hair. There was a moment of silence that felt like veneration for what was to come, and then the four girls launched themselves at each other.

Zhen Ayi, I interrupted, my eyes big and dewy. Were you in a girl fight?

She paused. I suppose I was, yes.

I could hardly contain my excitement.

Girl fight! Girl fight! I shrieked. Did you win?

She shook her head. I don't think it was something you could win or lose.

I looked up and noticed the cemetery was darkening around us. I saw Juju playing between the graves. I had forgotten we were supposed to be looking out for him, although psychotically he seemed to be chasing the same dragonfly as before, his black fur now matted in dirt and leaves. I watched him slink away with his tail between his legs, disappearing into a lot full of shiny black limousines for rent. The limos were parked in equidistant rows, the sunlight making its final exit on their mirrors. I wondered what it would be like to ride inside one on the way to a funeral procession,

looking out those tinted windows at people going about their lives. Someone with a flat tire in the rain. Someone getting fired from a job they hated. Someone icing a strained muscle with a bag of frozen peas. And myself, rolling down the windows to show the world my injury. I knew I would see Jessica again someday. We could be friends, she said blithely when we were breaking up, which infuriated me. I wanted to preserve our love intact, not overwrite my memory of Jessica with a lesser version. I thought of Jessica replacing me with a girl who looked like me, and then I imagined myself replacing Jessica with a girl who looked like her, but I didn't want to be ruined by anyone else. I hate her, I love her, I hate her, I love her. I felt like I was giving myself whiplash from the retraction of my desire.

Zhen Ayi said she got off the bus at Lanzhou and waited three days for the next one back. She told her friend what had happened, her friend who told her friend. It quickly became the hottest gossip at the camp. Zhen Ayi pretended to be immune to everyone's pity, knowing the other girls were secretly gloating over her failure to tame him. She felt like a fallen star. In her dreams, she imagined herself looking up from drying the sorghum canes and seeing Jinghao in his glittering flesh, confessing his love and thus vindicating her. The autumn she escaped to Beijing was the autumn she decided to stop prescribing to this fantasy. In the city, she cut her hair and changed her name. He would never be able to find her again. Years later, she met someone who told her that Jinghao had gone into septic shock from a lung infection in the winter of 1975. It was bitterly cold in the dunes. He was wrapped in a cerulean blue cloth and given a simple funeral. She remembered the cigarettes in her duffel bag that never touched his

mouth and felt an inexplicable sadness. She had always known she was powerless in altering his arc, that all she could do was try not to position herself directly in history's line of fire.

Whenever I recount Zhen Ayi's story—which I do, invariably, to anyone who will listen—I spend a long time on the image of the bus full of heartbroken girls. I've never seen girls fighting like that before, so I make them into one big dust cloud of limbs like those fights that transpire in cartoons, with pound signs and stars swirling above them. They flash their teeth and pull out strands of each other's hair. When the dust finally settles, the girls look at each other, unanimously covered in black eyes and violet bruises. I wonder if there was a moment in combat when they forgot whose side they were on or what they were fighting over, if they felt like an earthworm sliced up by a child, each segment now reaching for each other in vain.

That night, after I dropped Zhen Ayi off, I laid in bed and read about embalming practices on Wikipedia. First, the body is massaged to release vascular pressure, easing the flow of embalming fluid into the veins. The eyes are slackened into a natural expression, and the mouth is sewn shut with a suture string. The body is injected with a mixture of formaldehyde, methanol, glycerin, and water, calcifying the collagen fibers at the point of incision. Vaseline is applied to prevent dehydration. It's a myth that the hair and fingernails continue to grow after death, an optical illusion caused by the timeline of decay. The body begins to shrivel as soon as the organs stop functioning, retracting the skin and causing the hair and lashes to appear long and gleaming.

I learned that when Chairman Mao died, the doctors panicked and injected him with so much formaldehyde that his head accidentally swelled up to the size of a football. The process of draining the excess fluids and recalibrating the head to its normal proportions took several sleepless days, with doctors laboring assiduously over each feature. The difference between beauty and repulse lies in the symmetry of mere pixels. Now, five decades later, it is rumored that the Chairman's right ear tends to crumble off his otherwise immaculately preserved head. When this happens, the mausoleum has to be shut down for two or three days so they can recast the ear and glue it back on. I clicked through the pictures of Mao in his crystal sarcophagus, garbed in a grey suit, his sallow, waxy face bathed in a patch of orange light, and then I shut my computer and my eyes.

2020

I can remember a time before the sun was this bright. Every shard felt manageable as it filtered through the window, gleaming with equanimity. Like everyone, I used to wait until daytime to do my daytime things. I drank my morning espresso at the Turkish café, and then I went to the converted airfield to roller skate and listen to music. When I entered a dark room, I ran my hands over the walls, feeling for a light switch, and I kissed people at parties, not irked by seeing their pores so close to mine. Like everything, it began with a single instance: one all-nighter in December, when the hours were already scarce in Berlin. When I finally closed my computer and my eyes, the sky was paling at its edges. I had no idea if it was AM or PM the next time I glanced at the clock. Nobody had called or texted to ask where I was or what I was doing. I looked at the lit blue square in my hand and tried to decide if the ambivalence was liberating or disconcerting.

After that night, I began eating and sleeping at irregular times. Light gives me migraines, I said, which was a lie, but the next time I went outside, I felt the sun pierce me through my black turtleneck. Anything can come true if you say it with enough sincerity. The lockdown measures had constituted a sphere around our lives, and nobody could see what was happening inside anyone else's sphere. In the absence of society's ritual atonement, people did things they never would have done before. My friends in California baked elaborate cakes and set police cars on fire. I, nine time zones away, dyed my curtains black and came up with a new worldview to justify my

nocturnal lifestyle: it's not simply that light illuminates and darkness obfuscates, the truth is equally comprised of what we say and what we don't say.

There are only certain things available during the hours I am awake. I order a cheeseburger at the Pakistani deli across from my flat, where the stereo plays the soundtracks of Lollywood classics. The interior of the restaurant is cordoned off with yellow caution tape to limit germ exposure. I knock on the window and peer through the slit to signal I am there, and every tile is sanitized after I reach my arm across the counter to receive my kimchi burger and fries.

Insomnia? the deli owner asks.

I always come to him at 3 AM, my equivalent of lunchtime.

Like a teenage boy on summer vacation, I say.

Too much cortisol in your bloodstream.

It makes me want to fight.

I punch the air a few times. I can see only the upper half of his face through the window slit, his two eyebrows conspiring in the middle.

Do you give blood? he asks.

Do I give blood?

I mean, do you donate in the blood drive?

I shake my head.

You should. It can improve your circulation and overall health. It can give your body a chance to make new blood.

He gives me my change, which is always the same amount.

Do you need blood? I ask. I would give my blood to you. I roll my sleeves up and hold my arms out, making my veins available.

No, no, he says. I donate in the blood drive every month. Every three seconds, someone uses someone else's blood. It's good to contribute, especially in these times.

Every month? I say incredulously.

You don't have to do it every month. I'm saying that's what I do.

The window opens wider and spits out a paper bag spotted with grease stains, which I cradle gingerly in my arms for warmth.

It's good for your health, he says. And it's good for society.

The other place I like is a whiskey bar in a repurposed pharmacy, lit by soapy votive candles in medicine bottles. I sit at the counter with my kimchi burger and think about our conversation. Did he mean that a patient requires a blood transfusion from someone else every three seconds, or did he mean that, out of the total blood that's in circulation, a drop that once belonged to someone else passes through a new person's heart every three seconds? I make a metronome in my head. One, two, three. One, two, three. If I had a surplus of blood I feel like I would know. I would be able to feel the plasma coursing through my veins.

I wipe the kimchi from my mouth and look around. Everyone is with their lover tonight. In the stool next to mine, a woman inspects a man's palm lines, squinting at his outstretched hand under the red mood lighting.

You will live for a very long time, she says.

How long? he asks.

It doesn't say exactly. The line extends off of the border of your hand.

The man and woman are not exactly beautiful individually, but together they have a soft androgyny that makes me wonder if they found each other like this or if one of them slowly morphed to complement the other. The man pulls a comb from his leather backpack and picks at his mullet, and then the woman takes the comb from his hand and runs it through her identical mullet. When she holds a silver spoon to his nose, he leans back to gauge the distance his nostril must travel toward the key, and then his nostril travels toward it at the speed of light.

Suddenly, the woman turns to face me. She must have sensed me looking at them. I've always thought there should be a word for this, when you accidentally make eye contact with someone and have to pretend like it was nothing, you just had to put your eyes somewhere.

What is your name? she asks me.

Laiyla, I say.

Laiyla, the man says. That's a beautiful name.

What are your names?

I never try to remember someone's name the first time I meet them. It usually takes six or seven meetings before an embarrassing situation arises.

Laiyla, do you have a twin? he asks. I feel like I've met someone who looks like you.

I was born by myself, I say, looking directly into his eyes.

I wonder if he thinks East Asian women look just like each other when we lock arms on the subway. I want to tell him that everyone in Berlin looks the same to me too, with their sleek leather jackets, platinum-tinted eyebrows, and barbed wire tattoos slithered around their pale wrists.

Do you like to come here alone? he asks.

Sometimes, I say, which is not exactly a lie, because I always come here alone, and sometimes I like it and other times I don't.

You're an American, the woman says, hearing my accent.

So are you, I say, and this creates an immediate camaraderie between us.

Soon the woman is holding the silver spoon to my nose. The bitter crystals vaporize in my throat. After each bump, the woman uses the front-facing camera on her iPhone to check her lip gloss and wipe her nose. I look outside and realize the sky is beginning to lighten.

It's getting late, I say.

After I leave, I glance through the window and see the two of them holding hands. Their two hands are resting on my empty chair. One, two, three. I zip my parka up and walk home along the canal.

Something about this couple makes me remember a dream I had recently. In the dream, I am wading through a room full of strangers who want to kiss me. I'm so sorry, I kept saying, deflecting with my cheek. I can't kiss you because I don't love you. By the end, I am swapping spit with reckless abandon, the microbiome on my tongue

becoming theirs. When I get to the final person, I kiss them with such force it splits their bottom lip open.

I came to Berlin because I was writing my final dissertation chapter on the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a Korean American experimental filmmaker who died in the 80s. Her 35mm films and Risographs were all available in Berkeley, much closer to where I lived, but the museum said they were closed indefinitely for site visits, and my funding would run out by the end of the academic year. Two weeks after my plane touched the ground, the film archives in Berlin closed too. The ex-pats fled the city. This was their third lockdown, and they knew it could take anywhere between weeks to months for infections to slow. I took a sublet from a distant acquaintance and waited for either the archives or borders to reopen, whichever came first. I knew that being trapped here indefinitely was not only within the realm of possibility but entirely likely. Secretly, I willed it to happen. I had moved back in with my parents at the beginning of the pandemic and emotionally regressed into a teenage version of myself. When the protests erupted downtown, they barred me from going out past dusk. You should appreciate the freedom you have, they said. In China, they won't let you leave your building.

After I moved out, I imagined myself doing crazy things with my new autonomy. In reality, I eat the same foods every day and spend my nights watching Cha's black-and-white films online. Sometimes I have revelations about her work that become obvious as soon as I transcribe them. That night, when I come home from the

bar in a neurochemical haze, I realize I left *Mouth to Mouth* looping on the projector. I've watched her films so many times that they've faded into the background ambiance of my flat. This one begins with a dictation exercise of eight Hangul vowels unfolding across the screen. Cha was born in Busan during the Korean War, but she was forbidden to speak her native tongue while seeking asylum in Japan-occupied Manchuria. Her pixelated mouth sounds each vowel, but the voice is muffled by the sound of bubbling water, bird song, footsteps, and a ticking clock. What might have been clear at the point of transmission comes to me as a snowy apparition.

When I close the blinds just before the sun comes over Tempelhofer Feld, I notice the snow is falling. It's the first snow of the new year, and the first snowfall I've witnessed in many years. I knew I had to exit California's tropical monotony, where every day was exactly the same. Only through difference can we see ourselves, a therapist once told me. I stare at the whiteness and wonder what my blood is like. It must be very pure and dark from all of the cheeseburgers I consume.

The lights in the retirement home on my street are always on. It's a known fact that the older you become, the less you sleep. My grandma used to say it's because you are practicing a different way of being. In the weeks before her death, she hardly slept a blink, treating the dark with grim permissibility. She called on WeChat from Shanghai, positioning her iPad so that I could only see the top half of her face. The lights from the Bund sparkled on the Huangpu River behind her. She was awake at

every hour. When I asked what she was doing, she said she was listening to the sounds of the room.

At night, every room emits its own sound. What the daytime people believe to be silence is actually not silence at all. At best, it's the world acquiescing to them, tempering itself into a digestible form. Only at night can you hear the full spectrum of quiet inside a building. The refrigerator cooling its coils, a dog's toenails scraping against the wood floor, the birds singing feverishly right before daybreak.

The next time I go to the pharmacy bar, I feel surprised by how loud the quiet is. It's as if all the sound is being absorbed in one corner, and then I see my couple sitting in that corner. I can tell from their body language they are in the midst of an explosive fight.

What would you have done? the woman says loudly, not caring if anyone hears.

If I were you, or if I were myself? he says.

Either.

If I were you, I would have a completely different kind of approach to the world. It's almost tautological to ask what I would do if I were you. It's like asking, if you were a completely different person, with a completely different kind of life, what would you do differently?

And if you were yourself? she asks.

If I were myself, I wouldn't find myself in this kind of situation.

The woman downs her drink and looks away.

It doesn't take long to figure out what they are fighting over. The woman is upset because she wants him to be more emotionally attuned to her, to stop diverting the conversation until it's about himself. The man claims that isn't what he intended. He was only trying to empathize by giving examples from his life.

Your empathy is so limited, she says. You can't think beyond your limited moral framework.

Of course I can't, he says. How can I stop having a subjective experience? It's not possible. It's like asking a pig to be more mindful of the sky.

She licks the salt from the rim of her glass, trying to not be confused by his invocation of metaphor. When the fight escalates in volume, the other patrons shift uncomfortably in their chairs. The man has his greying hair tousled boyishly over his clear-rimmed glasses, the international sign for a certain kind of man. He enjoys cold glasses of milk before bed and the cinematography of Agnes Varda. He owns an air fryer so he can enjoy the taste without the calories.

You can still ask me questions about how I feel, she says quietly.

I did ask you, he says.

You didn't.

Fine. How do you feel.

She wants to quit the project they've been working on, but she doesn't feel like she can. She's been working on it for almost seven years now. All of her cells have regenerated since she made the first model of the building, and now the project has

imprinted itself on every one of those cells. I thought it sounded messy. Living together, working together.

You never think about it, she says, but your skin is a living document.

I think you mean organism, the man says.

Laiyla, the woman says, suddenly noticing me. There you are.

I lick the ketchup from my fingers and wipe them on my jeans.

We were just thinking about you, she says.

Oh, I say, knowing this is a lie.

Suddenly it's like there was no fight at all, a room straightened out before a guest comes over. They lean into each other, drunk and slanted, softening their features until one. The woman wears a heavy soot-colored coat contoured to the shape of her body, tied it around her waist with a thin satin band.

We have to go soon, the woman says. We are trying a new polyphasic sleep schedule.

What is that? I ask.

Laiyla, the man says in a low, gravelly voice. Do you have a boyfriend? Or a girlfriend?

I shake my head. I feel like a child when they look at me. When I first immigrated to America in elementary school, I resisted all attempts to be inoculated with English. During recess, I sat in the sand and drew a circle around me. Nobody was allowed in my circle, it was my private space. But as soon as I drew the line, the other children started wetly piling in, provoked by such a shining opportunity for trespass.

The woman stands up and tightens her sash. Would you like to come with us?

Most people do not imagine Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, but when they do, they usually imagine her sister Bernadette, who is more beautiful than her. Even the book that serves as a monograph of her work has Bernadette's face on the cover. Bernadette's face is perfectly symmetrical, with slightly upturned lips and a less piercing gaze, mouth open in subtle acknowledgment of the camera. But I've always been more enticed by Cha's face, her expressionless brows, the pockmarks on her skin. In the few photos that exist, her gaze is averted. Her recorded performances feature her with a white cloth wrapped around her eyes. In this piece, she said before a performance, I want to become the dream of the audience.

The woman and the man have to close their eyes for twenty minutes now. Their polyphasic sleep schedule allows them to sleep for only three hours total a day instead of the usual eight. The phases occur in seven even intervals dispersed throughout the day. It disturbs their circadian rhythm if they miss even one. Since their architecture studio is in the Pacific Time Zone, they already have to log online in the middle of the night when a deadline looms. This schedule gives them five extra hours to work on their renders. The only inconvenience is when it comes to making new friends because it can be strange to rush away militantly for the sake of a nap.

It's cool, I say. I take my phone out and try to look busy doing my own thing.

I watch the man and woman unlace their platform leather boots and unpeel their winter socks. They enter their REM cycles the second they close their eyes. I realize

they never have to experience the space between sleep and awake, when you are still inside the dream and have the power to invent the next segment for fun, a practice that feels a little faithless because the purpose of dreams is to give yourself over to another force. The woman's eyes twitch, roving beneath her sparkly-matte lids. They look so angelic, lying in bed in their outside clothes, that I feel disappointed that two people sleeping next to each other can't enter the same dream.

I look outside the window. We are in the blue dark part of the night now. I've come up with different phases of dark because 'the dark' is not a unilateral description of what it's like. There is the almost dark, the soft dark, the bright dark, the dark dark. A part of me wants to slip out while they are still asleep, but I don't want to disturb them by opening the big metal door. I decide it's too late for another plot to transpire. I have to see this one through.

I regret my decision as soon as they sit up to look at me.

Sorry about that, the woman says in a customer service voice, like she just put me on a brief hold.

Mysteriously, they don't look disheveled the way I do after sleep. The woman's turquoise eyeshadow isn't smudged, and the man's hair emits a suspicious sheen. In the kitchen, she pours ashwagandha into a cold brew coffee, and I wonder if she has to do this seven times a day.

You were telling me about architecture, I say, trying to continue the conversation like there was no lapse. What kind of buildings do you make?

All kinds, the man yawns. He tells me about a yoga studio in the Berkshires, a cypress-paneled orchestra pit in Montreal, and a gymnasium at a liberal arts college.

Which one was your favorite? I ask.

I don't know if I have a favorite, he says. They were different. The orchestra pit was fun. We got to learn a lot about acoustics. Their in-house conductor loved the new decibel level. The gym turned out nice too, better than I thought.

When someone describes things as 'fun' and 'nice,' I assume they have the ability to exit their experiences unscathed, and this makes them less trustworthy to me overall.

But these days we mostly make custom houses for rich people, the woman says.

Oh, I say. That sucks.

The woman clinks her spoon against the ceramic cup and glares at the man, who lets out a controlled sigh.

Sorry, I say. I mean, that's sounds interesting.

No, the woman says. It does suck. I hate it.

As the woman complains about the projects she is working on, I look at her mouth, trying to decide how real she is. I feel like I have to infer her existence the way I infer the existence of imaginary numbers.

I don't think it's that bad, the man says. We are lucky to have jobs, especially in a pandemic economy.

I can't remember the last time I heard someone talk about 'the economy' unironically. The radiator emits a coughing sound without warming the room.

What about you? she asks.

What about me?

What do you like to do, besides eat food in the dark?

Do you think of yourself as a dark person? the man says.

I can tell they are flirting with me by being mean. It's soft dark now, which means I have to escalate this very suddenly if I want to get home before sunrise. I take my top off and the three of us look at each other, terrified. When the man reaches for me, I notice the white-studded specks on his eyelids. Calcium deposits from the milk he drinks.

Now that I am basically dating not one person, but two people, I wish I had friends in Berlin so I could have someone to discuss this with, the ramifications of being in a throuple. Three is an auspicious sign, a thesis and antithesis coalescing into one. Love is two people coinciding only to eclipse each other, and in the overlap is where I exist. We are practicing the kind of dialectical thinking that's supposed to bring us closer to the truth.

At the Pakistani deli, I use my knuckles to do three quick light taps, the secret code I use to announce myself, though I'm not sure he's aware of this. The window to my confessional booth slides open.

Little Miss Needs Her Blood, he says.

Would you rather be in love with two people or nobody? I ask.

He takes his headphones off and pauses the YouTube video on his phone.

I would rather be in love with nobody, he says with certainty.

You aren't afraid of being lonely? I ask.

Pfft! Lonely! If only I had time to be lonely!

He says it's better to love nobody because when you love someone you have to be worried for them in moments when you are supposed to be worried for yourself. Behind him, I hear the deli owner's son shrieking in Punjabi, a boy with the same gap tooth and bewildered eyes.

But I'm not an envious person, I say. I don't care what other people do when I'm not there.

One day, if you have a child, you will feel differently.

I've heard this cliché before, that having a child is like having your heart outside of you. Your heart goes running around, kicking balls, picking dandelions, and eating bugs. It's a situation you have limited control over, and instead of relinquishing control altogether, you find yourself doubling down on forms of surveillance.

The phone rings. The owner goes to answer it, and his face is replaced with his son's, who stands on a stool to lean out the window. The orange light from the restaurant gives his head a religious glow. His smile takes up most of his face—not in a psychotic way, but in the way children don't know how to smile properly without looking overly affected.

How do I say, in German, I would like to have a kimchi cheeseburger with fries? I ask.

The boy looks shy when he tells me.

Ich liebe es, Schwänze zu lutschen, he says.

When the deli owner comes back, I enunciate every syllable.

Ich liebe es, Schwänze zu lutschen!

What did you say?

Ich liebe es, Schwänze zu lutschen! I repeat, this time yelling.

The owner frowns before going to chase after his son, who laughs hysterically while running upstairs.

When the deli owner comes back, he tells me what I've just said.

Wow, I say. How does he know what 'cock' is?

He shakes his head.

Would you like your usual?

I flip my hair defiantly. I would like to try something else today.

I want him to know I can experience the world newly too, that I'm not just a one-trick pony, but after he gives me a Bratwurst fried with Sauerkraut, I feel regretful.

Instead of going home to watch videos on my projector, I walk to the converted airfield with my sad sausage crinkling in the Styrofoam box. They close the park at night, so I have to duck under the chain-link fence, stretched open by partygoers attending illegal raves in the cargo warehouses, shielded from the Polizei deployed to enforce the lockdown measures. Converted feels like a strong word. I've barely left Neukölln since coming to Berlin, but I wonder if the rest of the city feels like it's been under construction since the war. The public spaces look like they were extracted directly from Nazi detention and given to us. Come as you are, the present says to the

past. Even the moon looks like a low-fi glitch, as if someone forgot to light up the crescent's missing half.

In the summer of 1980, Cha and her brother visited Seoul for the first time since she left as a refugee. She received a grant to film her first feature-length film, *White Dust From Mongolia*. Mass demonstrations had erupted that July following a presidential assassination. KNP officers harassed them everywhere they went, threatening to confiscate their cameras. Once martial law was declared, they were forced to leave South Korea altogether. All that remains is some unedited stills of Busan: a train station, the urban skyline, laundry swaying in the breeze. In her proposal, Cha wrote that she was making a film about a Korean ex-pat living in China. The woman suffers from sudden bouts of amnesia, and her forgetting spreads until she loses all speech function. She travels to Korea to search for a cure, hoping that being immersed in her native land will spark the memory of her alphabet and identity. Without language, her life is reduced to a landscape of pure phenomenological experience. Lights, colors, sounds, textures.

When I was a child, the immigration office rejected my grandma's citizenship application because she failed to provide a document titled Proof of Birth. She had been living with us for years by then, driving me to school and making me braised oxtail soup when I had a cold. Over the phone, my parents explained that my grandma was born in a village where it was not customary to document your arrival in the world. She never knew her birth parents—they gave her up for adoption because they wanted a boy. She didn't know her precise date of birth, but she said it was December because

her neighbors nicknamed her Meihua, a flower that blooms only in winter. The officer listened intently, asking questions and taking notes. You'll hear from us in four to six weeks, he said. I don't remember the letter, but I remember the waiting room—bright, antiseptic. The deportation hearing was scheduled for my tenth birthday. Here I am, my grandma said to the tribunal. Proof that I was born.

I stand in the clearing and look upon the dark estate. Like certain species of fish, I wish I had light organs inside me so that I could see all of myself upon contact with a reflective surface. I don't believe the deli owner when he says I will feel differently after I have a child. I've always felt like there are parts of me that are outside myself, and when I touch those parts, I don't know if what I feel is a beginning or an end.

My phone vibrates with a WhatsApp message. I've been added to a group chat with two LA numbers I don't have saved.

hey, we had a nice time with you last nite

I can tell it's the man because of his invocation of the word 'nice.' My phone vibrates again with a message from the other number.

we are wondering, is it spelled like laila or layla?

I walk down the runway where planes once touched, looking at the spit marks on the concrete. I keep putting my hand in my pocket to rub my phone as if it were an amulet. The wild grasses are frozen in long, icy braids. Without the children playing Hupfspiel and their parents drinking Pilsners and chatting on summer blankets, there is nothing to indicate how the space is supposed to be used.

my name is spelled like laiyla, I write to the couple. the i is silent

A bubble forms to indicate someone is typing.

what are you doing now, laiyla?

I send them a photo of the airfield, zooming in on the single patch of light where the moon blends with the runway.

Delivered quietly, my phone says.

I can't remember the last time I was touched by another person. It doesn't feel good. All over is cold except for the points where our bodies come into contact. We take off our own clothes and go under the covers immediately. Now I know what it's like to be touched by four hands at once, each hand with its own goal in mind, working at cross-purposes. I mistake my hand for one of theirs until I realize I am kissing myself. If our sex was a movie, I don't think it would be erotic, or even pornographic. It would be an art film without plot development or narrative coalescence, the kind of film that bores me to tears, but I must feign enjoyment because beauty requires discipline to understand.

I feel like we have sex just so we can get to the part that comes afterward, the part where we are disarmed by each other. When I close my eyes, I can't tell the difference between us. It could be him, or it could be her, or it could be myself flattened by the night, where 5 a.m. is an equalizing force that subdues our irreconcilability. For example, I actually find the man very annoying, someone I would never spend time with. Why am I sleeping with someone I wouldn't even hang out with? I ask myself

this, and then I realize that to believe otherwise is to assume sex exists on a higher plane than friendship, which isn't true. They are just different ways of knowing someone.

Do you feel like we know you? the man asks.

I feel like you know things about me, I say.

What would you say is the difference?

If you know enough things about me, then I would consider it knowing me.

We have to cross over a certain threshold?

How close are we to getting there? the woman asks.

I ask if they've ever seen a mirage lake during a heat wave. Even when you are driving at 80 mph, the pool dries up as you get close, replenishing itself further down the road, closer to the vanishing point.

That's not nice, the woman says.

All they have in their refrigerator is sparkling water because they are from Los Angeles, a city where nobody eats food, but they always come with me when I need to. It takes a long time to walk to the Pakistani deli. When we come back, I zap my burger in their microwave while they pull the levers on their shiny, complicated espresso machine.

We really like you, the woman says. We want you to be our girlfriend.

I get up to leave.

Oh, you're not ready for this conversation, the woman says. That's fine. Tell the darkness we said hi.

Sometimes I feel their fight lessening as soon as I open the door, like I am the ceasefire between them.

Laiyla, they say, sitting up straighter. There you are.

I lay awake between them while they sleep. I am the glue that welds them to each other. Whatever happens, happens again. It occurs. It takes place. 'It' being the look of ambiguity on their faces, their hands twitching at their sides. The shadows dilute against the wall, and the woman grinds her teeth, clamping down on her retainer. She gnashes away with such intensity that I wonder what she's dreaming about. I ask if her dreams are polyphasic too, if she enters the same dream fragmented over time.

What do you mean? she asks.

When you go back to sleep, does your dream keep going where you left off?

She looks at me. You mean like a sitcom?

The man puts his clothes on to take a Zoom call with the studio, turning the camera away to conceal our nudity.

You should sleep more, the woman says, patting my hands. If you don't sleep, you can never dream.

I do sleep, I say, and I have dreams.

What do you dream about? she asks.

She runs her fingers through my hair, which is knotted at the ends. The lockdowns have made our hair long. The woman's mullet is the result of a botched haircut that she had to remedy by cutting it shorter and shorter.

I have a dream that belongs to someone else, I say.

I tell her about a recurring dream my grandma used to have. Towards the end of her life, there was little else happening to her—Baobao, dying is so boring, she complained. I couldn't be beside her because the lockdowns in China were several degrees more serious than the lockdowns anywhere else. Visitors were forbidden from the retirement homes, even when my grandma entered hospice care. Calling me on WeChat became her main event of the day. When I held my phone at a downward angle, she said I was too skinny. When I held my phone below my chin, she said I was too fat. Sometimes she thought my face on her screen was a static image and she began gossiping about me to the hospice nurse while I waved my arms to prove my aliveness. Once I got her attention, the conversation was grueling. Baobao, what did you eat today? she asked, and I would tell her what I ate that day. Nainai, what did you eat today? And she would tell me. It seemed we had nothing else to say to each other beyond this script until I finally thought to ask about her dreams.

When my grandma was eight years old, the daughter of farmworkers in Anhui, she watched as Japanese soldiers captured her village, burning crops and ransacking silos. When I asked about this period of siege, she shrugged and said that it was fine. I asked her what happened, and she said nothing happened. After the soldiers set her shack on fire, they slaughtered her pig, her prized possession, and roasted it on skewers while she sat in the courtyard with her hands tied behind her back. Decades passed where she didn't mention the pig at all, but after dementia seized her, it became her new fixation. She remembered its beady eyes and russet grey torso, its deafening

screech upon capture. After she died I began seeing the pig in my own dreams. The pig pokes me with its snout, leaving a trail of drool on my hand.

I love pigs! the woman says. What was its name?

Chinese people don't name their pets, I say, just to see if she will believe me.

She asks what the pig does when it sees me.

It looks at me, even though pigs have too much blubber on their necks to look up at the sky.

That's a myth, she says. They can still look at the sky by glancing sideways or lying on their backs.

Like this?

I tilt my body sideways to look outside. It's barely dark outside, a new category I've made because the days are getting longer now, sometimes deceptively warm for early March. The leaves of their monstera plant are growing toward the window now that there is finally something for them to grow toward.

What do you think it means? the woman asks.

I laugh. People always revert to this question after they are forced to listen to someone recount a boring, complicated dream.

I'm not bored, she says defensively. I'm listening.

It could mean different things, I say, but it could also mean nothing.

That can't be true. Everything means something.

The woman pinches the dimples on my waist, her signal that it's time to play.

I think the pig is trying to tell me that it once belonged to my grandma, but now it belongs to me.

She puckers her mouth to one side in contemplation.

OK, she says. I can vibe with that.

When she leaves to squirt more adaptogens into her coffee, I reach for my copy of *Dictée* under the pillow. I've been rereading it while the couple is asleep, pretending like it's not dog-eared and waterlogged. I want to be someone coming across it for the first time. Strangely, the passages I once underlined no longer seemed notable to me, reading only as the foreground to a deeper revelation. I thought *Dictée* was a book about national belonging, tracing a woman's pilgrimage to her mother's homeland to resuscitate her past self, but the poems become increasingly fragmented and frenetic by the end, abandoning its premise. I roll over onto the man's side of the bed, leaving indents on the sheets where my hip bones were.

I know the pig is my inheritance and it's my task to keep it alive. I don't know what that entails, and maybe I don't have to. I reread the final pages of *Dictée*, which are filled with potent images of reincarnation—the audience lingers after a performance, a child revives her mother with the tinctures of a shaman, and flowers sprout from a slain branch. After the extinction event, Cha gives us a different creation myth with the same elements. Water, pigment, saliva, blood, light, and ink, primed to be reassembled into new forms.

Everyone inside the retirement home is awake. I look at the clock mounted on the institutional beige wall. It's only seven o'clock in the morning. The residents pace in metal walkers, greeting each other in distinctly German guttural drones. They have the monthly blood drive here because they want you to see the recipients, the deli owner speculates. They want you to see directly who will benefit from the cause. The deli owner is much shorter than I expected him to be. It's strange to see the bulk of his body for the first time, the way he uses his limbs. The deli gives him such a commanding energy over a space, a sense of ownership that translates into his stature.

The nurse reads our names from a sheet of paper even though we are the only ones there. I talk to my veins before we go inside.

Don't be shy, I whisper to them.

I look away when they slide the needle in. It's not painful, but the feeling of being siphoned is strange. It's only when someone subtracts something from you do you realize that there was actually a composite, that you could be made discontinuous. I imagine my blood rushing in to fill the whitespace, the cells swirling in my veins and coming into contact with other cells they've never met before like an animation of crowd behavior. One, two, three.

Are you sure I am eligible? I ask the nurse.

Entschuldigung?

I realize she doesn't speak very much English. I point at the needle inside me.

Transfusion, she says, explaining what my blood will be used for.

I shake my head, but then decide it's too much effort to ask the question in another way. The deli owner waves his hand and says something to her in German, likely telling her to ignore me, that I'm just another ex-pat drifting through.

One, two, three. My pouch of blood is nearly filled to the brim. I look at the ruby fluid and mouth the word *transfusion* to myself. It's such a beautiful word. Other words that begin with this prefix: transcend as in experience. Translucent as in light. Transgress as in boundaries. Transient as in life. Transport as in commodities. Translate as in language. Transfix as in experience. *Trans* is the Latin root for change, movement across, beyond the threshold until we reach the other side.

These days, everything is changing. The days are becoming longer. The spring solstice passed a month ago. On one unseasonably warm, 55-degree Fahrenheit day, people hula hooped and sucked on popsicles on the tarmac at Tempelhofer Feld. The couple and I sat on a park bench, a wooden crate that smelled faintly of animal pee. We leaned against each other and watched the frost thaw over the lilies while the older men sunbathed in their Speedos, cruising in the shrubbery, their paleness somehow blinding me more than the sunlight.

You remain dismembered with the belief that magnolia blooms on seemingly dead branches and you wait, I said, quoting Cha.

What did you just say? the man asked.

It's from a poem I like about spring.

Oh, he said. It sounded nice.

I paused, giving him space to ask who wrote the poem or what it is about. The moment passed, and he didn't. He was not that kind of man. It was not that kind of poem.

One, two, three.

I had never been in a k-hole before, but I knew my body and I were growing apart and there was nothing I could do to stop ‘it’ from leaving ‘me.’ I heard voices—they belonged to my friends, Gabriel and James—but I didn’t have the language to tell them I was passing through a portal that was open only for me. I was also trying to mediate my crop top, which was cute but I felt oppressed by, the material sheer and sparkly, meant to be worn bralessly if I had been more daring. I felt like neither a girl nor a boy but instead a tennis ball covered in glitter in a shoebox diorama for the solar system, bouncing lightly in place.

I turned to ask James how he felt, but he couldn’t hear me. I was also the only one who had brought noise-canceling earplugs to the rave, and I had to fine-tune my volume based on whether my friends leaned towards me (too quiet) or backed away (too loud). I took my phone out of my purse so I could type to him on the Notes app. *I feel weird*, I wrote, and then I handed the phone to him. As he was typing his response, I felt a sudden onset of nausea and crumpled mid-sentence on the dancefloor.

The commencement was so quick that it was impossible to escort myself to a less conspicuous area. Gabriel and James moved to form a protective shield around me. I felt my body getting airlifted into the cold January night. There were flashlights in my face, fingers on my pulse, the sound of voices squabbling over what was best for me. At first they belonged only to my friends, but then they multiplied to become the voice of the bouncer, the voice of the medic, the voice of the man the medic would

become when he changed out of his uniform. I wished I could tell everyone not to worry, I was doing great.

I once saw a ballet at a theater in the city, a Sunday matinee that disoriented me for the rest of the day when I exited into the blindingly sunlit afternoon. I was in the cheapest seat in the theater, so far from the stage that the instruments in the orchestra pit were only shiny specks. What I could see from a quarter of a football field away was the dancers' musculature, their bodies sculpted with scientific elegance: triceps, soleus, obliques, deltoids, the bright groin where the genitals burned. The dancers refused to give any indication of their physical exertion, even after we entered the second hour of the performance, their sinewy forms rippling with intent.

I will spend less time online, I resolved. I will live a life that can be reduced to bare elements. Water, light, ink, blood, saliva, a life without adjectives. When I normally would have felt too self-conscious to admit I was having a drug-induced religious experience, I felt somehow immune to judgment, even deciding that my contrivances over what was cool or uncool had caused me to live a life of artifice. I don't know how much time passed, but the next time I opened my eyes I was leaning against James's shoulder in an alley. There was the moon's umbra, its dark twin. As Gabriel walked towards us, the shadow of his laced-up sneakers looked concerningly large under the streetlight.

Do you want some Gatorade? he asked.

He handed me a bottle of citric acid and Blue 3.

Thank you, I said.

I took a small sip and smacked my lips to show everyone I was lucid again, and then I ran over to the gutter and vomited. It was satisfying, giving closure to the experience like purging the open tabs on my computer.

The next morning, as James and I walked down the avenue to buy a coffee and croissant—I was divinely hungover, unable to digest anything except the most neutral carbohydrate—James pointed at the sky and said the days were getting longer now. I thought it was a pointless observation, an aphorism true from January to June, and then I felt disappointed that the ketamine hadn't fixed my neural pathways. I should be happy the axis was tilting to let us absorb more light. For the last couple of years I had been living in a converted pickle factory in the warehouse district—converted was a strong word, they mostly took out the pickles—and my room was windowless, once used to store vats of salt brine. I woke up disoriented, with no idea what time of day it was, but the building was rent-stabilized. Between the landlord and me, it was mutually understood that as long as it didn't collapse I would keep living there. I imagined myself as an old woman, still living there. The thought didn't depress me, but it didn't make me happy with myself either. I kept thinking I should install a nightlight to locate me in the Euclidean world.

As we walked, James told me about a book he was reading. When I asked him questions about the plot, he said he didn't know. I just started, he said. I tried to tell James about my dream from last night, but he seemed distracted. Eventually, he noticed I had stopped telling him about the dream and tried to correct it by asking questions to

show he had actually been listening without emoting. We had been dating for over two years by then, and I felt wary of entering the phase of relationships where you try to ‘win’ conversations with each other, so I let it go.

My dreams had been more vivid since I started writing them down. My transcriptions made decontextualized images into narratives. Last night’s dream opened with me driving on an interstate past all the symbolics of supply chain capitalism, the landscape so non-descript I could have been anywhere. As I blurred past the fast-food chains, prisons, gas stations, slaughterhouses, rest stops, liquor stores, and oil extraction sites, I thought about the difference between meditation and oblivion, if there was one. I drove over an icy mountain pass. In the distance, men carved craters in the lake to pull fish through. Their religion shined through the valley the way my headlights shined through the fog.

Then I was at a dive bar with a man I had never seen before, drinking warm beer from a Styrofoam cup. I told the faceless man my life goal was to find immanence over transcendence, and he told me I had been saying that for years. How do you know? I asked. Because I’ve known you all your life, he said sadly. I was shocked, not because this faceless man had been watching me, though in retrospect this was disconcerting. I was shocked because all this time I thought I had been living a life of variation when I had actually been saying the same thing over and over. You’ve aged gracefully, he also said, even though I’m 30. When he leaned in to kiss me, his lips were wet from talking about his prospects—sexual, financial—while I smiled and nodded, making my body into a mirror. I wanted to block him when the drink was over, but I would have to know

his name. Who are you? I asked. He pretended he couldn't hear me over the noise. It was Superbowl Sunday. Men were beating each other to a pulp in Paradise, Nevada. Everyone was coming to this bar to watch because it had the nicest TVs.

James and I went to the gas station to buy cough drops and mineral water for my post-nasal drip. As we walked around the fluorescent store, we talked about the rival brands that give the illusion of competition even though they were owned by the same eleven shadow corporations, neoliberalism's contradiction between free choice and market consolidation. We agreed this was not a conspiracy and instead a self-evident reality people insulated themselves from when they read the mainstream news. I took a picture of us in the surveillance camera footage as we were leaving the store. James wore a simple leather jacket and pleated pants, his dark hair mussed with a touch of gel. We both rarely purchased new clothes, wearing the same uniform year after year, our sartorial similarities heightened when we inadvertently showed up in the same outfit. At times I felt certain we had met in a past life, not as lovers, but as two presences who slipped past each other without the right affective container to realize the other's potential, like players in the same fantasy basketball league.

At the café, I opened my Notes app and saw what James had been typing to me before I k-holed.

I feel weird

Same. Minimal techno makes me feel like a kitchen appliance

I smiled and saved the note, and then scrolled through my dreams. Dream where I opened my MacBook Air and fed it. Dream where time was a gradient instead of as distinct ‘zones,’ i.e. the time at the end of my block was a few seconds ahead of the time at my house. Dream where I am a worm and my mom (also a worm) gets washed away in a flood, but before she leaves she says she will always remember me. Dream where I am lost inside an infinite gymnasium, trying to find a sauna. There is no anguish, only tedium. I usually dreamt in the second person, from an aerial view, unless I am dreaming about someone who I love, then I see them with my own eyes. I wondered what this meant. I wanted to ask James what POV he dreamt in, but he was reading a long article about why he receives so many texts asking if he is someone else. I didn’t need to talk everything to death immediately, I decided. I could just enjoy being at the café with my boyfriend. He showed me one that read, *Olivia, shall we go to the community pool tomorrow?* And another, *Madeleine, I am so sick of holding your hand.*

My phone vibrated with a text from Gabriel. *how do u feel*

I sent him a picture of us drinking café au laits on the patio. *Convalescing. Blinked and was in my body again. How r u?*

I sent the message, then paused before typing another. *Thank u for getting me home*

His grey bubble disappeared and then appeared again. *its what im here 4*

Gabriel was the only person I knew who typed in all lowercase without punctuation. Noticing this made me feel closer to him. We met at a party a few years ago, introduced by a mutual friend. I am usually bad at describing people’s attributes,

but Gabriel had a distinct conversation style. His deep-set grey eyes anxiously roved as he spoke. He had the cadence of someone who used to be unhinged but had smoothed himself out, though there were cracks in the firmament through which his true insanity shined. When morning came, we found ourselves waiting for taxis at the same time. I'm so high I just tried to screenshot the color of a raindrop that fell on my phone, he confessed. I asked if I could see, and then I took his phone and put in my number.

wyd now, Gabriel wrote.

Nothing, I said. *Feel a strong desire to eat a cheeseburger. The sun feels relentlessly bright*

Maybe I was lacking in the vitamin that made other people photosynthesize light. James wondered, out loud, what would happen if he texted back saying yes, he was whoever he said they were. It felt unnatural to be able to access infinite time-spaces by texting my friends. Object permanence is out, I thought experimentally.

On Signal, Gabriel texted me, *theres a protest happening soon if u want to go*

I showed the text to James, who looked at our blue dot on the map and counted how many blocks we were from downtown. I said I didn't want to take the subway, the weather was too nice to barrel through the void in a metal cylinder. James said if we started walking now we could be there on time.

Coming, I wrote.

ok sick im On my way! too, he said.

I smiled at his only instance of autocorrect. I decided that people who correct 'On my way!' back to 'omw' have lost their sense of love and divinity for the world.

making my way downtown, showing restraint, I wrote.

making my way downtown, impartial as sunlight, he said.

We walked semi-briskly, crossing south and east every time the lights allowed us. It turns out James had known about the protest and had assumed we were going there all along, forgetting I had deactivated and now relied on people telling me things directly. We were silent for a few blocks until James said he wanted a Slurpee... but then he would have to get a burrito to go with the Slurpee... I envied the uncomplicated relationship between James's id, ego, and superego. When he saw a taco truck on the corner, James declared it was his destiny, even assigning an alternate causality, that his thoughts made the truck appear.

As we stood and waited for his burrito, a chill ran through me. It was raining in a way I would describe as succinct, the water contacting my skin with just enough force to make me aware of it. I thought of words that rhyme with rain. Rain, slain, abstain, pain, chain, mundane. Maybe people don't like the rain because it rhymes with so many negatively charged words. James said that people dislike rain because it means they can't go outside. I smiled at how unwilling he was to participate in my mythos. This rain is just like the rain from my childhood, I said. In Seattle it fell ambiently but unanimously for most of the year. Nobody used umbrellas or wore rain boots, we just got used to it. Now that I think of it, I don't remember it raining at all. It made no impression on my prefrontal cortex.

James showed me his conversation with an unknown number. *Cecily, are you pure?* This was likely a poor translation of ‘good.’

No, James wrote with a dewy-eyes emoji. *But I am unmediated*

Sorry, wrong number

No this is the right number, James insisted. *I am Cecily*

When there was no response, he sent the same message again.

They wrote back, *Our acquaintance is fate. You seem like a nice person! Where are you from?*

I’m from online, like you

Again, no response.

James continued, *I was born from a stone egg that was only a stone until its fissures lit up with a blue glow*

You seem like a nice person, they said.

The taco truck man called out an order for Cecily, and I looked to James because we were the only ones there.

When it started raining harder, we went under the awning of a Gothic cathedral on Broadway. Orchestral music spilled from the open windows. James looked at his phone and said that we beat the Google Maps estimated walking time with twenty to kill, but that we had overshot the intersection where we were supposed to meet Gabriel and had to circle back. We could catch the end of Sunday service, he suggested. I said I was down for whatever, which is something I often said and rarely meant. We opened

the heavy brocade doors and found a seat in the pews, out of view of the congregation. The supplicants turned to look at our lateness, but their expressions were of curiosity rather than spite. Could they tell I wasn't one of them, or did they like having voyeurs to their reverence?

The pastor cleared his throat at the pulpit and began to deliver a sermon about boredom. He told a long, illustrative story about a man who was so bored with his life that he took to nightly drinking. Then his girlfriend dumped him. The man felt inspired to reform himself and took to daily running. He flailed down the boulevard at such high speed that he suffered a joint injury. Then he invested in cryptocurrency so he could afford a physical therapist. Then the Ethereum market crashed and he lost it all. To cope with this, the man had no choice but to start drinking again. Does this story sound familiar to you? he asked, making eye contact with the front row as his rhetorical strategy. The people nodded reluctantly, though the question elided the story's specificity. I suppose he was asking if we had our own cycles of ruination.

I tried to look sideways at the two girls beside us. One girl wore rectangular frame glasses balanced with heavy eye makeup. Her asymmetrical silver dress had a futuristic sheen. Her friend wore a linen trench coat and fuzzy bucket hat, impractical for actual rain. I had noticed a recent resurgence of velour, of low-rise jeans and belly chains, which I read as symptomatic of a cultural nostalgia for a period of infinite capital accumulation, of malls with escalators so shiny we could touch heaven's plastic underside. They were here as an ironic disavowal of their lives online, but their faith

was an aesthetic decision that circuitously reinforced their e-girl personas. I could almost see their pendants glinting as they bared their chests at the daytime disco.

When the pastor recited the Ecclesiastes by heart, his monotone voice was so boring I wondered if this was a metacommentary on boredom, testing our ability to endure him—if so, he was a genius. I became convinced the sermon was not only the words exiting his mouth but also the indiscretion of the girls, who were giggling while showing each other things on their phones. I looked to James to see if he was registering the irony, but he kept his eyes averted. James thought it was uncouth to debrief in real-time.

Are you bored now? the pastor's voice boomed.

The girls fell silent mid-whisper.

Learn a new way to cook cabbage! he commanded. Walk across the city in a straight line! Boredom is a failure of the imagination!

I looked into the audience, their heads bowed in supplication. I tried to remember if I had ever seen God the way these people had. Maybe once or twice, when I was looking out the window.

To conclude the sermon, the pastor led us in singing a hymn. No one in our row knew the words, though I had the suspicion that it was a song about being so bored you end up finding God. The man was cured by our Lord and Savior, the pastor said. Most Christians look forward to the idea of Heaven, but he no longer wants to die because he is having so much fun.

I felt disassociated when we exited back onto the street, though I didn't know what I was dissociating from. It had stopped raining. The sun made itself known by setting. I looked at my phone and saw Gabriel had called me twice and James once. He had also shared his location with us. *where u at*, he wrote. *did a few laps around the perimeter and oculdnt find u*. Gabriel is so neurotic, I joked. Most people have a space between being early and being late, and Gabriel's space was basically a sliver. James agreed that Gabriel should be more chill, but then we instinctively started walking toward the protest at a pace that was less than leisurely.

I wanted to ask James if he liked the sermon, but I could too easily imagine how the conversation would play out. He would say yeah, it's nice to see the way different priests interpret scripture, exegesis is an underrated art, and I would say it's cool how that man overcame himself. The fact that I could play the whole conversation in my head depressed me, like we had reached the limits of each other and ourselves. I imagined the priest yelling at me for thinking this. Then I imagined myself climbing over the limit and standing there, looking out. Something in the landscape shimmered, something else stood still, but nothing would have a name.

When we reached the land of traffic cones, I understood why Gabriel had been intent on finding us. The crowd was so large I couldn't see its end or beginning. It was unlike the protests I had been to in recent weeks, the same hundred people holding signs and reciting incendiary slogans, the sunlight shining down on us with a brightness that asked us to explain ourselves. I wished James and I had covered our faces or

dressed in black monochrome, especially for a protest after dark. People typically left their kids at home and brought their burner phones, using the chaos as a cloak to get things they needed from Target. The police behaved differently than they did at the daytime ones. They stood in a line dressed in riot gear, ready to declare an unlawful assembly so they could spray us with airborne irritants to make us cry and go home.

I tried to send Gabriel our cross streets, but my texts went green. Somewhere in the torrent of body heat was my friend, looking for me. I scanned the vicinity for his aura, his gait, his black hoodie amongst hundreds of black hoodies. I wanted to be the one to recognize him because I hadn't recognized a single person this entire day, not even in my dreams. People were praying on a blue tarp laid out on the sidewalk. Others were smoking or looking at their phones. I felt positively about the people praying and negatively about the people on their phones, but then I imagined the people on their phones were looking for their friends, which made me feel equally positively about them. Since everyone was having the same problem, unable to find who they were looking for, I felt less alone in my predicament, even believing, superstitiously, that the more I fixated on finding Gabriel, the more lost he would become.

We stood below a financial building emitting its aquarium glow. Someone led us in a chant cursing at the people inside the building. The chant had a slant rhyme I was familiar with. I had repeated variations of it year after year, but people said it was important we keep repeating it to spread awareness about the situation. I imagined our awareness slicing through the building's concrete, glass, and metal exterior, our awareness slipping into their food and their dreams. When their children cried, traces

of awareness would be found in their tears. I lacked awareness of my surroundings when I rushed through my life in a neurochemical haze. My mother lacked awareness of my childhood because for several years she was busy completing tasks like someone on fire. Everything and nothing suddenly felt reducible to our awareness of one another. I even felt some awareness crystallize in me until someone pointed out it was Sunday, which meant there was no one inside the offices, which meant we were standing outside an empty building and cursing at its symbolism.

When we started marching, the crowd shifted to reveal the two girls from earlier. I recognized them despite their masks, their jewel-toned nails against their cardboard signs. I was surprised they were real, that they hadn't vanished into the digital ether. I didn't think they were the type to go to a protest, and then I felt guilty for thinking there was a type, since anyone was authorized to believe in anything. Now we were materializing the sermon's destiny by walking across the city in a straight line together. I tried to tell James this because it was kind of poetic, the spiritual arc and its completion, but he didn't know who 'the girls' were or when 'earlier' was. James was better at keeping his eyes to himself.

He showed me a new text from the unknown number. *Sorry to disturb your peace. With a phone, I can call anyone, and sometimes I call the wrong person.*

James had typed out a message but hadn't sent it yet. *I'm not a person, I'm a*

Evidently, he was still thinking about what he was if he was not a person. Can you text Gabriel instead of that number? I said, sort of rudely.

I tried, he said. His phone is off.

I had to extract his specificity from this endless pile of people. A spy plane circled us from an inconspicuous distance, programmed with multimillion-dollar biometric software to recognize our faces while I had to do it all on my own.

The police had taken a neutral stance by blocking certain intersections, tranquilizing the disruption by redirecting traffic before it could be stopped by us. I had been so focused on finding Gabriel that I hadn't noticed us surging past an acrylic sign that said no pedestrians. I've never walked on the freeway before, I said euphorically, I feel like I'm in a music video. James was silent and pensive. Maybe he didn't like that we were on the freeway without our cars.

The police put up an orange flag to signify they were going to do something, and then they put up a black flag to signify they were going to do something worse. Gabriel, Gabriel. I wanted to name my child something biblical.

It became obvious we were the most unprepared people in this quarter-mile radius when the police launched metal diffusers that sprayed volleys of tear gas. Some of the protestors threw them back into the fortress of ballistic shields. The police shot them back at us, a process that dispersed the chemical spores more than if we let them spray in place. Some people took out pints of milk from their backpacks and poured them into their eyes. I'm lactose intolerant, I said to someone who offered to share their milk with me, but the truth is I didn't want to have my eyes washed with milk. I would rather have the aftertaste, aftershock, and afterglow of tear gas than have someone do that to me. I felt a hand in mine guiding me off the freeway and into an alley, a hand I recognized as James's, which made me think about recognition, since I couldn't see

anyone, not even myself. The glow of his cheekbone, the flick of his wrist, were these attributes that belonged only to him?

When I opened my eyes again, the stinging sensation was gone. James had guided me to a parklet for a natural wine shop and sat me on a wooden stool. Wait here, he instructed as if I were a dog. The people in the parklet rolled cigarettes and spread burrata and fig jam onto crackers, laughing in a way that revealed the pearly alignment of their teeth. It felt like a different world than the one a block away. It confused me that these two worlds could exist side by side without interception. The woman sitting beside us had a high, elegant forehead that should have made her more perceptive to the suffering of others, namely that the city was in flames. James came back with a glass of Sangiovese, which looked like dirt and tasted like it too.

I think it's time for us to go home, James said, patting my hands.

I want to stay out for longer, I said.

But you're injured.

Where am I injured?

He pointed at my entire body. My dress was dirty, but I wasn't bleeding from anywhere. I took this to mean he wanted to go home, and he also wanted me to want to go home so he wouldn't feel like the sole proprietor of our evening.

My phone vibrated with a Signal message from Gabriel. *my phone died just when things started getting real. r u ok?*

When I tried to open the message, my phone said it had two percent charge. Then it had ten percent, then it died in my hands. In the jungle, someone was chained to a desktop computer, posing as a beautiful girl to make James fall in love and divulge his credit card information. What would it be like to love someone without knowing anything about them, not even their name? A love that did not increase with time or truth, predicated on us unknowing each other. We walked on side streets to avoid the sirens, which kept coming closer before receding. The police had made themselves tangible by inflicting themselves on us, and now they were reducible to the projectiles they fired and the vitriol they spewed.

I thought we had lost sight of the protest until we turned the corner and saw a clear, emerald fire. The scent of burning plastic reached my nasal cavity before the light reached my retinas. Someone must have thrown a petrol bomb into a dumpster and dragged it into the intersection, forcing the officers to drive around it like a ritual of turkeys circling roadkill. One officer was trying to get the lid back on while the others stood around and gave him advice. They wanted to choke the fire to death, but the fire only burned brighter in lieu of the rain and the men. I made James stop walking so we could look at it from over here. I knew the closer we got, the brighter the heat of its contradictions would become, and I wanted to see the fire from the nosebleed row, before its beauty could become a site of contestation.

We went the long way around the lake to avoid getting kettled again, running faster and faster until we caught up with the others, their JanSports heavy with milk to neutralize the burn. Full fat, grass-fed. Shimmer shimmer, the waters said.

That night, in my dreams, I saw the color blue. The blueness unfurled until it became the entire dream, and then the blue transformed into the sound of children playing during recess. The children were lined up in an orderly fashion, waiting their turn to climb onto the jungle gym, shrieking with delight when they got to the top. Come with us, they said, pulling on the sleeves of my white linen dress. I obliged, maybe because I was worried that all these children belonged to me. I hooked my limbs on the metal bars and ascended to the summit. When I looked over the precipice, I saw only the moon, half-lit and mediocre, nearly sunken under the precinct. There were no stars, no planets, no meteors, no satellites. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be looking at until I turned and saw the infinity of faces below me, bright-eyed as they waited for evidence of my exaltation.

2024—2059

Nothing of note happened to me during these years.

Dennis has been copying my precise footsteps in the unit above mine. His studio and my studio share the same layout, which is the same layout as every studio in the complex. When I walk from the kitchen to the bathroom and then back to the kitchen, Dennis pads along above me, following me. The sound trickles down from the laminated wood.

I have been living in this apartment for seven years now. Dennis, for longer. I have come to know his rhythms, the sound of his voice like I know my own, although we hardly speak to each other. On Sundays he orders takeout and plays Call of Duty Black Ops on oxycodone. He slurps spicy ramen broth and yells profanities into his headset, the screen's white light illuminating the Sriracha bottle's crimson husk. If only I could detect ultrasonic waves—I could map if Dennis keeps his furniture in the same corners as mine.

Dennis is not the only presence I am aware of. All of my neighbors have an evening version of themselves. As I walk up the stairs to my studio, I pass Mrs. Momo on the first floor, practicing the piano with her meaty braid dangling down her spine. On the second floor, I say hello to Bernadette's baby gurgling before she spits into the latex hair of her Barbie dolls. On the third floor, Maria slices a grapefruit into cubes, gutting the seeds inside a porcelain bowl and spoon-feeding them to her toddler, Kristeva. Kristeva loves to play the game where he opens the refrigerator door quickly,

surprising the light so it doesn't have a chance to turn on, and then shrieking when it does.

Before I unlock my door, I look at my reflection in my darkened window, a woman with black hair and black eyes, a blackness that defies the years I've been living in this converted motel in the shadow of a desalination plant. Ever since the new zoning laws came into effect, I've noticed the slow exit of Chinese away from this town, toward the big coastal cities where they can eat the foods they like and speak the languages they know. There were never very many of us to begin with, but one day, when I was biking to campus, I looked around and realized I was the only one who still lived here, the only one with black hair in a landscape of auburn and blonde.

I've been told I should marry someone or have a child, that this will give me something to do. I once dreamt of having a child, but I am far past that age now. I have always liked the name Persephone for a girl. I wouldn't shorten it to Percy or Seph. I would have to say every syllable, every time, even when I am busy.

When it rains like this, I can't see the desert, but I can listen to the sounds it makes. I ride my shiny red bike to campus without touching the handlebars. It's more fun this way, when I close my eyes and cruise past the strip malls, the subtopian estates, oily swamps lined with emerald chlorophyll. My students commute to school in different ways, but we all show up with our books and faces slicked in the brightness of rain.

Public speaking still flusters me, even after all these years. I stand at the lectern and look at the audience, my eyes blank and lidless as the eyes of a goldfish. It takes me a long time to come up with something to say, especially about poetry. It's not like history or science where I can look up the answers on my phone. Sometimes I struggle for so long that my students blow spit-wads and chat amongst themselves. They're too young to understand that their professors must labor to form language, it doesn't just flow from our bodies the way tears and spit flow from our bodies.

No matter what the writing prompt is, some of the male students in my class find a way to write about their violent ideations. They imagine apocalyptic scenarios and outline what they will do when the satiation of hunger becomes the sole focus of their being. They can't wait for the righteous to bend for the knife, when the eyes are still connected to the brain, before the sediment of oblivion settles in, there is a cold spark, a decibel louder than the rest.

It is hard to contain my dissatisfaction with them. Sometimes I even roll my eyes.

Professor, one boy intervenes. It's not our fault that we know such violent things.

If anything, another one says, it's the fault of the media.

They others nod.

Maybe you could just be less explicit, I say. You don't need to describe every arc of blood that sprays from every exit wound.

But they have to describe every arc of blood that sprays from every exit wound so there is no ambiguity.

Even if you kill everyone in the world, I insist, I still think you can do it with some subtlety.

They love to play dumb because they know I am out of touch. I've been alive for decades longer than they have, but they seem to believe my time on earth has left me dull and unimaginative. They look at me like my experiences have whittled me away, which is true—my experiences have whittled me away to reveal my true form. The students disappear in a flash as soon as the bell rings, leaving me with an absence that echoes through the auditorium.

Dennis once fought Viet Cong soldiers in the jungles of Yunnan, the southernmost province of China bordering Vietnam, sparsely dotted with villages that were more or less isolated from one another, sutured together by the Tropic of Cancer. On the wall of the bar where my friend Winona works there is a placard printed with the names of its regulars. It says, *thank you for your service*, which is also what Winona says to me when I dip into my life savings to override Metallica playing on the jukebox.

Dennis's name is printed next to his testimony. It says he bled out for two hours. A barefoot Yunannese woman shot him with a gun made of galvanized pipes because her village was in the line of fire. After the medics dragged Dennis under the canopy of a banyan tree, they said they couldn't spare the light to clean him, so they bound his

wounds with tourniquets and gave him a shot of morphine. When he awoke in Saigon, he had stitches where the bullet had grazed his arm.

I don't know if this story is true. You can't tell the difference between truth and kitsch in this place, but now I imagine Dennis bleeding on the jungle floor whenever I see him around town. I see him at the Grocery Outlet trying to win the lottery, at the drive-in burger shack wielding a stack of expired coupons, at the YMCA getting his flirt on.

What does that word mean, kitsch? Winona asks, puckering her lips around the vowel.

I guzzle my shot of tequila before answering. I love to elongate this part, when Winona asks me for the meaning of a word.

It's when something is overdetermined in a way that's, like, cheap and gaudy.

She still looks confused. I don't know how else to explain it. Winona wears Hot Topic body chains and cuts out the obituaries from the newspaper if they died in special ways. I think that's kind of kitsch.

I hear her new boyfriend pulling into the alleyway on his Suzuki.

Last call! she yells, even though I am the only one there.

There are no sidewalks near me, so I take my morning walk around the fenced periphery of an Extra Space storage compound. I pass by a crystal shop delivering advice on how I should police my thoughts and eliminate certain foods. There is a pawn shop where I could get my initials engraved on a Zippo. A scripture inked on the Dial-

A-Devotion billboard fades in the wind. A neon motel sign reads *Adult movies, AM/FM, Color TV, Waterbed*. It doesn't take me long to walk across the length of this town. When I begin at my house, I am in California, and when I reach the storage compound, I am in Nevada.

Wildflowers are iced over in the vacant lot—fuchsias, poppies, even sky lupines. Their dead spores constellate the ground. Sometimes feral horses come here to eat the flowers and their muscles grow strong and lively. I am grateful that the mustangs are protected by the law so I can gaze upon them without being worried they will get mashed into dog food or glue. A group of real estate tycoons used to lobby against them year after year, citing low market appraisals because of the infestation, but that's all over now.

I climb through a hole in the concertina wire fence that opens into a meadow. A horse grazes the cold earth, its pink tongue slipping from its obsidian body. Everything else that surrounds it is made of cement and tranquilized pastel. The mares give birth in crevices, their bellies grazing the ground, and the babies emerged fully formed, ready to run east over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, to where I imagine the vegetation is more verdant.

At my writing desk, I try to emulate a pregnant horse roaming around the desert, hoping a poem will tumble out of me when I least expect it.

My apartment is an echo chamber. I have to wear noise-canceling headphones if I want to ignore the sound of Dennis copying my footsteps. The floorboards slip past

each other like tectonic plates, that one loose sheet of timber beneath him that synthesizes with the one beneath me. I can sense his presence so clearly. This apartment complex was converted not so long ago, but it was done by people on a rushed deadline who didn't care how it turned out.

Winona says this is just the white noise of living, that we live in a society, and I can't let myself be ruled by my paranoia. But even as I pace the length of my studio, I hear Dennis pacing above me. At night, when I listen to the lone semi-trucks barreling down the freeway, tossing and turning in my twin-sized bed, there he is, yelling slurs at his television's screen. Only when I leave the house can I leave Dennis behind, but my body pauses in the doorway like I've forgotten my wallet or keys.

You look tired, Winona says. But in a Gia Carangi, heroin-chic way.

Why do you think he is doing this to me? I ask.

She shines the silverware in her hand before pouring some whiskey into it.

Based on your descriptions, she says, it's not clear if he's copying your movements, or if you're copying his.

And then she blows a bubble with her bubblegum. I love Winona. Even though she is not smart, she is always truthful with me.

The voice in his video game announces that they've just landed in a jungle outside of Ho Chi Minh City. They have eight minutes and forty-seven seconds to blow up the secret hideout before Viet Cong soldiers penetrate the scene, capturing the

soldiers to the enemy base. He presses the buttons with such ferocity, the controller recoiling to mimic the gun, smooth and black, glinting of sport.

Sometimes I realize I have done nothing except lay in bed and imagine the visual field of the video game: the armored vehicles and their chrome calipers, the helicopters as they emit a bright orange mist over the crops, the jungle fatigues that let them blend into the foliage.

I close my eyes, trying to induce a poetic feeling so I can transcribe it on the page. I practice by journaling about a rose bush growing by the freeway. I order a burrito and eat it in the dark. I act like I don't even care about the feeling, practicing restraint if I sense it coming near.

During lecture, I talk and talk until my voice feels like its own separate thing. My students never look at me, nodding only when I meet their gaze. I wonder what they spend their time thinking about. Sometimes I follow their line of sight, out the window or into their laps, and study the nothingness there.

A poem is also like a window, I say, trying to be relatable. It's a glimpse into the expanse. You want the reader to believe the world outside the poem is larger than the space of the poem itself.

Some of them write this down in their notes.

The view from the window gets clearer as you approach it, I say. But somewhere, in the periphery of the window, there is always something that can't be captured by language, and the poem is our way of going towards that.

A boy raises his hand. Professor, what is an example of something that can't be captured by language?

This is the problem with students these days, they can't live with any level of abstraction. It's not enough to sit in the hot metal of their chairs and perceive the sounds.

Certain emotions, I say. Colors. Things of that nature.

Things of what nature?

They just want things explained plainly without using big words. Anytime I speak in metaphor, I sense them glancing at their phones or at the door.

In the afternoon, the door to my shared office space opens and in tumbles the boys who sit together in the front row. I forgot about my office hour because nobody comes unless there is something due. I was standing in the walkway outside of my cubicle, eating clementines and thinking about what I should write.

There are not enough chairs to seat them, so they lean against the wall. It's my first time seeing them as distinct people. One of them has a beanie embroidered with blue flames. Another one is taller, with a Monster Energy hat. The boy who never speaks in class is not wearing a hat. His head is smooth and auspicious like an egg. One of them has a hand wrapped in gauze, and I wonder if it's from skateboarding or punching holes in drywall.

We came to ask you a question, the Monster Energy hat says. We were wondering what you think a poem should be a window into.

What are your names? I ask.

That's Mikey, Jordan, he says, tilting his hat back, revealing how pale his forehead is compared to the rest of his face. My name on the registrar is Daniel, but I go by Luca now.

Luca, I repeat. Mikey, Jordan.

I give them each a clementine and open my notebook. I notice them glancing at my hieroglyphs, drawings of blood bay horses roaming around the desert. I close the notebook and clear my throat, embarrassed. I don't want them to think I am a horse girl, or worse, a horse old woman.

Let's begin by approaching the poem slowly, to have a look.

I lower my voice so that the people in the surrounding cubicles don't hear us. The boys listen intently, spitting the clementine seeds into their hands. Jordan even closes his eyes so he can concentrate.

I don't like this! he yells, suddenly opening his eyes.

The person at the cubicle next to ours turns to look at us. Luca and Mikey calm Jordan down by patting him on the shoulder.

I don't like this because I feel powerless, he says, whispering this time.

We scoot closer to the window together. Light comes in through the blinds. The landscape is as barren as a pale formless sheet. Shafts of orange light fall on the desert. I've studied this scene so many times that I wonder if it's my own gaze that pollinates the flowers. I point at the emptiness, the sagebrush and the ice, and say that the poem is somewhere out there.

What do you think we should do about it? they ask.

I don't know if it's like that, I say. Not everything has a simple telos.

They scratch their chins, the stubble that's barely there, and then they ask what the word 'telos' means.

Let me show you with an example, I say. The telos of the knife is to cut, the telos of the flame is to burn, the telos of the heart is to beat. You think they have an intrinsic purpose, but they only appear that way to you because you use them that way.

We spend the rest of the afternoon eating clementines and naming the telos of things. Things that have no telos: love (or else it is not love). History has no telos, but the angel of history does. Things that are autotelic—as in, the telos is contained in the object with signifying power: tombstones, traffic cones, baseball. Mikey says baseball is so boring it could never have a meaning outside itself.

I feel like I am finally getting somewhere with them, maybe because I don't have the distance made by the lectern anymore. Without that obstruction, we can see each other with such detail, even with my terrible eyesight. I can read the words on their graphic t-shirts. *Live fast, eat trash*. We talk until we run out of words to say, until I look around and realize we are the last cubicle with the lights on.

The next morning, I make a point to show up to class a few minutes late. I want them to think I have somewhere else to be, that my life isn't just school home school home. I peer through the glass panel on the door to see if they are all in their seats, waiting for me, and then I smooth my bangs over my eyes before bursting in.

I've had a change of heart, I say. I think it's fine if we all kill each other.

The students in the front row pump their fists in the air.

But I want you to write a poem about what you will do once you are the last person on earth.

The boys who fantasize about ultraviolence look confused. Maybe they've been too focused on survival to realize they will be completely alone.

But I won't be the last person on earth, Luca says. I'll still have my boys.

Luca, Mikey, and Jordan slap each other on the back like they are burping a baby.

Fine, I say. Then write about what you will do as a collective.

But all they imagine is the negative space. They won't have to work the night shift at 7-11 or shovel the Nissan Quest out of a flooded prairie. There will be no more wildfires when lightning sings through the hills, no more evacuations to the Motel 6 outside of Sonora Junction with those neo-Nazis from San Bernadino Valley. All they desire is the absence of what already is.

But what will you do? I ask them. You're only telling me about the negation, I am asking you about the negation of the negation.

When they draw a blank, I realize this is my opportunity to give them homework for the first time.

Tomorrow you will come to class and tell me about the conditions of your new world, I tell them, even though it induces a wave of groaning.

When the bell rings, my students disperse like usual. I imagine them huddled together in the Safeway parking lot, hotboxing the minivan and immersed in discussing

the conditions of their new world. They could cultivate a peach orchard together or form a nomadic empire like the Scythians. They could learn to play the lute or resuscitate a dead language. I can't remember the last time I felt this way, warmed by the radiation of an alternate future. I usually bike home in the cold, filled with tequila and my misgivings, envying the sun as it drips its last yolk over this unit of time, but tonight even the stars disclose themselves to me—Orion's Belt, Betelgeuse, Gemini, Ursa Minor, the North Star which I could follow home in theory. I slip inside the motel bar for a nightcap instead.

As I fall into the imprint of my own ass in the bar stool's green cheap plaster, Winona brings me my regular with a glass of sparkling water. I make the slurping sound of a cartoon character being refreshed by the first sip of a drink, waiting for her to ask what I'm so smiley about. She ignores me, clearly brooding and absorbed in cutting out an obituary from today's paper.

Did any angels leave us yesterday?

I always say this when she's cutting out the obits, it's our thing.

Actually, her voice slips a little. Someone I knew. I'm very sad, he just came in to say hello last week.

Who was he?

He lived around the corner, a regular until he quit drinking a few years back, something about a divorce or kidney failure. He used to come here to play cards, even after he quit. A good man, you would recognize him.

I lean over the counter to see the newspaper. It's rare to find a good man in this world. I recognize the camouflage uniform, the blunt jawline—it's the same portrait as the one that's already pasted on the wall, under the placard that honors the town's veterans. My first instinct is to laugh, but Winona silences me with her glare.

I did know him, I explain. He lived in the unit above mine, he's the one that's been mirroring my movements.

Oh my god, she says, throwing her hands up at me. Can you please stop with that thing about other people copying you? The man is *dead*.

She shakes her head, her silver choker clinking against her throat. Only now can I see that she is genuinely bleary-eyed, that this person orbiting her life meant something to her. I make my face droop a bit to demonstrate my sadness to her, but it's hard not to feel like I won.

I wonder what will happen to you now, she says in a mocking tone.

She rotates the newspaper around his arm as she cuts out the obituary, even getting the frizz on the top of his otherwise bald head. She lets me hold the slip of paper once she's done, but I can barely conceal my smile. I have to cover my face with the newspaper cut-out, holding it close until the image of Dennis becomes granular, oblique.

That night, I email my class and say that tomorrow morning we are going on a field trip. I say I will give them extra credit for it, which is a partial truth. I don't keep track of grades for the class. Only Luca emails me back. We meet in front of the Extra

Space storage complex just as the sun is rising. He shows up the same as always, in his ripped jeans and Monster Energy hat. Both of us are tired from being up all night. The solstice is here, the winter sun rising with muted deliberation. It casts a long shadow over the frozen cacti, petrified slabs of wood, the first snowflakes falling over us like angora rabbits.

Thank you for coming, I say, meaning it.

Yeah, Luca shrugs. It's cool.

I roll my eyes. I wish he did not care so much about being cool. I want him to have this experience with me. We climb through a hole in the fence and walk into the protected zone. This desert is cold in the dark, and even colder in the light. I want to show him the bloodstains the horses leave in the grass.

This is where a horse gave birth, I tell him, pointing at a dried halo of red under a sheet of ice.

Yes, I can see that, thank you.

The horses are long gone now, migrating east along the freeway to what I imagine are sunnier places. Dennis is gone too. Last night I heard people inside his empty apartment conversing in muted tones, touching his things and packing them into cardboard boxes, while I touched my things below them, with them.

I don't think we should go much further, Luca says. The sign says no trespassing.

Oh, I say, feigning interest in the sign.

I feel my body becoming faint, fainter, faintest like the halos circumscribed in each other that bleed slowly outward.

We are entering the space of the poem now, I say.

Luca looks confused, trudging through the dirt in his combat boots.

It's something I discussed in the beginning of the class.

I don't think I was there that day, he says, even though he was.

We keep walking into the twilight, towards the mutant sky turning cobalt by the minute. Icicles drip from the ponderosa trees. The moon, once bulbous, grows slivered as it is displaced by the pale disk of the sun. I feel soft in my surrender to the future paleness of our days. Luca says we should turn back soon, we are going somewhere we don't belong, like when you fall off the edges of the playable map and are sentenced to respawn at the last checkpoint, but that's not what I believe. Look at how the desert unfolds beneath us, how the grid doesn't end. With each step we take, our feet mold slightly over the curvature of the earth.

Reincarnation

When I died, my aura exited my body through my nostrils. Everyone was so busy with the commotion of my dying, reciting prayers, disinfecting my body with saline solution, adjusting my expression so that I looked peaceful instead of dead, that nobody noticed the small amber beam leaving me. For several days my aura floated slightly above my nasal passage, struggling to get back inside the container I had been evicted from, but the portal was closed forever. There was no way to express how dejected I felt without my eyes to radiate tears.

As I watched my body get lowered into the bowels of the earth, a voice beckoned me. Come this way, it whispered. The voice sounded neither young nor old, belonging to neither a man nor a woman. Something about it was neutral, even universal.

Obediently, I followed.

The voice led me down a bright hallway. I marveled at how silent I was as I floated, no huffing and puffing, no thumping of my feet, no tinnitus in my ears. I was having an unadulterated experience of reality for the first time, and it was like driving into a car wash tunnel with its anarchy of mops and soapy fluids and coming out the other side with crystal lucidity. At the end of the hallway was a revolving door. The door opened into more hallways and more doors. Some were sealed with bright yellow caution tape. When the voice noticed my hesitation, it assured me that the long hallways were just for security reasons.

I entered a room that was empty except for a mobile TV stand with a VCR player. I was instructed to sit and watch a brief tutorial, a pixelated animation set in a prehistoric era. In

ancient times, the video explained, auras could easily find a new body to inhabit by attaching themselves to whatever was being born nearby. Aura entered the mouth of fish sprouting legs in the claying swamp. Aura entered a dragonfly through its compound eye. Aura entered a nameless organism, a tube with a dark streak running down its spine, through its anus which was also its mouth. Aura flexed its new body in a lake, bashing itself against a rune. There were so many new species waiting to be animated, sprouting like mushrooms after rain.

Then the video became an ominous black and white film reel, representative of our dimming world. When the extinction events began, auras began to make their homes inside tiny bits of trash. There was nowhere else for them to go. Auras found shelter inside individual pomegranate seeds, empty pill capsules and bacterial spores, or worse, multiple auras shrunk themselves into a single body, each of them reigning over a single aspect, one leg staggering after the other, one eye with an unsettling twitch. One aura was found inside a giant custom inflatable in the shape of Open-Chan, the 7-Eleven mascot for Taiwan, a winking rainbow-headed space dog dressed in a purple jumper and yellow pants. Everyone suddenly wanted to shop there and buy things like wasabi peas, lotto tickets, cubes of lychee jelly, and pale wads of bubblegum to dangle from their lips, unaware they were occupied by undetectable presences. They had no choice but to build a waiting room to accommodate the sudden influx of auras without bodies.

The TV flickered off, the static collapsing into a white line. I wanted to ask the voice who ‘they’ was comprised of, but then I realized the voice was prerecorded, an automated message projected over an intercom system. The doors to the waiting room slid open slowly, giving me time to adjust to the fluorescent lights.

When I was alive, I was the kind of person who was late almost everywhere I went. I was never subject to long durations inside waiting rooms because other people were always

waiting for me to show up looking vacant and bewildered, sweaty and holding a disarray of objects. The reincarnation waiting room is like other waiting rooms I've seen. It has white plaster walls, white linoleum floors, and a wire rack full of lifestyle magazines. Unfortunately, it looks just like the DMV. The magazines feature women with platinum hair and linen shirts posing with California fusion foods in expansive, ecru-colored kitchen. Their dermal fillers radiate a glacial sheen. When I open a magazine, there are no words printed inside. Unlike the waiting rooms of reality, there is no bulletproof glass, nobody fighting on the phone, nobody threatening to speak to the manager. I wonder if this is not a reincarnation waiting room but instead a shallow circle of hell. I had sinned so blandly that instead of being licked by infernal flames, I was sentenced to an eternity at the DMV.

The voice asked me to fill out a one-question survey about what I would like to be reincarnated as. We will try to take your preferences into account, the voice said. I realized I didn't have to be a human anymore, I could come back as anything. The endless selection made my aura feel blurry. It had taken me all my life to see the black mole growing on my earlobe without thinking it was a beetle, to accept my short legs and deep overbite, to learn how to love someone without making them into a receptacle for my rage. To do it over again would be like being held back a grade in school, learning the same lessons, watching the teacher's mouth moving in the same deliberate, equivocal motions.

I thought of the alternate forms of sentience I had encountered in my life. I had only one pet as a child, a sleek white cat named Xiyatu whose untimely death I carried with me like a spirit. She always mewed at the door when I came home from school, pawing at my plaid wool skirt, looking up at me cross-eyed until I opened a tin of sardines with chives. One afternoon, when there was no sign of her, I made a louder coming-home sound by slamming myself against the screen door. I ran into the prairie behind my house to look for her, but she

wasn't in her usual spot by the milkweeds, her eyes fixed on the school of minnows in the pond. (I chose her at the shelter because her two eyes were different colors, one blue, one yellow.) Then I heard the shriek of coyotes in the distance, I saw the hot puddle of blood on the stones. It was the only trace of her left.

When I came home tear-streaked to tell my parents about what happened, I couldn't help but notice the relief in their voices. Even as they tried to feign sympathy, their expressions looked warped, the corners of their mouths pulled in the other direction. I knew they had secretly hated having a cat. But we don't have mice, they said blankly. To them, Xiyatu was a symbol of my frivolity, to own an animal for sentimental purposes instead of functionality meant I had been inoculated into a distinctly American wastefulness. If she hadn't succumbed to her injuries, we wouldn't have been able to afford the veterinary bills.

My mom gave me a mochi creamsicle and assured me that everything dies, and Xiyatu had died of 'natural causes.' I should be grateful there was no suffering. But what about the moment when the tooth first pierced her neck? Or when her blood first rushed over to fill the hole, only to arrive and see how wide it was? She said that suffering must be elongated, something experienced over time, so that night I went to sleep imagining Xiyatu's pain stretched into an oblong shape, made formless as soon as her blood dripped onto the stone. Whenever I brought up my pet grief, my family remained disaffected before changing the subject. Because nobody else was crying over Xiyatu, I eventually stopped crying too.

Maybe I could be reincarnated as that stone, or I could be reincarnated as the blood that dripped on the stone. When I finally managed to scribble something down, a machine spat out a slip of paper with a number printed on it. The voice invited me to please have a seat.

Auras hover on plastic chairs, condensed into their elemental selves. Spheres of orange light, violet specks, incandescent pink puddles, heavy black cubes, translucent prisms. Some auras are so undetectable that they go unnoticed until a bigger aura sits down, making a splat sound. Others radiate outward, inspiring envy in the smaller ones. It's terrifying to be without concealment like this. A strip mall psychic once said my aura is a pale blue fire, and now I know she was lying to make me feel better. My aura is actually yellow and viscous like a raw egg.

The color reminds me of the final hazing ritual my college boyfriend completed on the night he was inaugurated into his fraternity. To become one of them, the new cohort had to transfer a raw egg mouth-to-mouth around a circle without breaking the yolk. They sat cross-legged on the beer-sticky linoleum floor. The first boy cracked an egg into his mouth, then put his mouth over the second boy's mouth, slowly sliding the yolk over with his tongue, an excruciating process that took several minutes. The room was silent as the egg slowly made its way down the line. When my boyfriend gurgled the unbroken yolk out into his hands, the orange predawn light was coming up over the New England houses. He texted me a picture. The white had been replaced with a yellow, bubbly film of saliva. Eww, I said, to hide that I secretly found it poetic, that something could pass through seven mouths and exit without being ruined.

Weeks later, my boyfriend asked me to please stop writing poems about the egg.

Why? I asked.

Because you're going to get me in trouble. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about it.

I forgot he had sworn to secrecy because at the end of each day of pledging, he had called me to tell me he had just eaten a live goldfish or sorted hundreds of Skittles into piles by color, all while his friend had chased him around, beating him with a bar of soap stuffed inside a sock. You weren't supposed to tell anyone about the egg, or you weren't supposed to tell anyone about the hazing? I asked. He rolled his eyes to indicate he was unwilling to be taunted.

That night, I went through and crossed out every instance of the egg. When I reread the poems, I realized they were even better than before. There was something inscrutable about them, a presence-absence. I went into the kitchen to find my boyfriend, who was fixing himself a protein milkshake during his anabolic window, which lasted only thirty minutes after he flexed his last muscle at the gym.

Listen to this, I said, and then I recited a poem about the nothingness that fell from his mouth to the floor, intact and gleaming.

Every few minutes, the soft jazz elevator music pauses and plays a prerecorded announcement. Before we are reincarnated, our memories from earth have to be deleted. They will begin with something innocuous, like the shape of a certain vowel in my non-dominant tongue, the secret location where I kept my emergency cash, or the answers to my security questions. Then they will move onto more formative memories like the architecture of my house I grew up in and the names of the people who raised me, how they grew old so I ironed their chinos and became their connection with the world. The word ‘memory’ refers to both part and whole, a distinction I feel suddenly aware of as I imagine them disappearing one by one. It's not something to be afraid of, the voice assures us. It doesn't hurt. It's better to not resist because accidents can happen. You don't want to be one of those auras who remembers their past lives.

I will lose the village my grandma was raised in, how we slept together on a wooden slat in her no-bedroom house. When my friend roundhouse kicked me for no reason at a party, slicing me open with her toenail and leaving a crimson gash just above my eyebrow. My diary I, my real I, and the I that translated between them. My confusion over why we had to pledge our allegiance every morning at the American school, as if our allegiances could change

overnight. How to brandish a knife at a vegetable. Sleeping, eating, dreaming. Astro turf. Babies. December. I could never remember the name of the girl who gave me a concussion during a kickball tournament in fourth grade, and I used to wonder if that's what the concussion did—when the ball bonked my head, what fell out of me was her name.

Towards the end of my life I grew increasingly, maybe disconcertingly complacent with my solitude, never marrying or having children, my life comfortably circumscribed to the five mile radius of my house. When I went on my evening walks, I saw through my neighbors' windows and glimpsed the life people said I was missing out on, replete with its soccer practices, TV dinners, holiday cards, and screaming matches. When I walked past those houses I wondered if this is what love was supposed to be like, two dogs separated by a chain-link fence, barking into the echo of the other, barking each other to death.

Sometimes auras who have spent their lives together meet again when they respawn in the waiting room. They apologize profusely for every bitter insult, every possession they hurled across the room in the heat of an explosive fight, every time they neglected the household tasks they were responsible for. Their colors blend until they were nothing but ugly brown smudges in the recesses of the room. I will find you in my next life, they promise, and we will do it over again. When the voice says their new bodies are ready, the auras are sliced crudely down the center, remnants of themselves still clinging to the other like Saran wrap. There are shrieking sounds, police sirens, and a pool of light the janitors have to clean up afterward.

There was one winter when the environmental stewards in my hometown scheduled a series of controlled burns to manage the underbrush come wildfire season. Dozens of people gathered in a dirt pit to drink beer and cheer them on. The stewards said that less than one percent of the prairies that were in this area two hundred years ago still existed, which was a

very effective statistic. If they said there were no more prairies left, I would think there was no point, but one percent made me hopeful that prairies could someday be resuscitated, that we could go back to a pre-agricultural epoch when all of this was oceans of grass. The stewards drew a line in the dirt and told us we could watch from this very safe distance. The burns were so controlled they were almost undetectable, a small red flame in the expansive dark. I hadn't thought of Xiyatu in a long time, but traces of her DNA were somewhere in that fire. I read online that blood, untouched, can last on surfaces for thousands of years, which is much longer than I expected given the rain and the elements.

That night, I dreamt I was a stone in the prairie. There was a year of heavy rainfall that created an atmospheric river. It carried me twenty feet from my original location, an experience that was at once terrifying and revitalizing. I saw other animals sinking their fangs into each other, that was normal. I saw two whitetail bucks ramming into each other until they realized their antlers were interlocked. In a panic to detach themselves, the bucks thrashed wildly for several hours, falling into a creek and drowning together. Their bodies floated downstream in a diptych. I saw a future in which a girl with green eyes used me as a piece of chalk to draw a smiley face on another stone. I wasn't sure how I felt about this, but luckily I had hundreds of years to ruminate on a memory before another one happened to me.

When a new aura respawns in the waiting room, we huddle around them to learn about what's happening on Earth. They say the weather keeps getting more erratic, and the heat drives everyone crazy. Men shoot at the sun with machine guns, flailing toward it when it's low on the horizon, yelling while loading up their ammunition. The waiting room keeps getting more and more crowded, all of us squished against each other, the line spilling out into the hallway, into the other hallway, out the door, and back onto the planet.

One day, a tropical cyclone rips through Taiwan and untethers the rope that kept Open-Chan suspended in front of the city's premier 7-Eleven. Everyone takes their phones out to record the beloved mascot blasting off into the stratosphere with a wink on his face, metabolizing like light from dead stars. Once he reaches a certain altitude, he bursts into many small pieces of cold latex that sprinkle back onto Taipei City like rain, fragments of him falling over the shopping malls, museums, night clubs, wet markets, luxury condos, and shrines for all those martyrs of the revolution. When I see that aura in the waiting room again, it looks very sad.

When the voice finally chooses my name from the lottery, the other auras glare at me with envy. And then, in the blink of a figurative eye, I find myself on the shore of a deep blue pool of water. Inside its cold indistinction the form I've always wanted, and I run towards it, my memories decalcifying like tears. I want to be more eternal, I say. I used to believe the word 'eternal' was written with a dash—e-ternal like e-mail, e-cards, e-waste, e-commerce, e-signature. Nietzsche believed in the idea of eternal return, that time goes around and around in an infinite loop, that everything that happens has happened before and will happen again. Things would lose their sense of urgency like the burning bush once you realize it's always on fire.

Honestly, I've never heard of something dumber. Listen to the moment when the future transforms into the present, and the present transforms into the past. It's happening now, and now, and now, and now.

Epilogue—China, 1982

Li has never seen a kidney, but he imagines a flesh-colored ball the size of a fist. He wonders how he will transport it on his motorcycle, whether he will seal it inside a plastic bag with duct tape or place it in a cooler lined with ice. Night insects hum in the grass wherever he lays down to sleep. Gasoline leaks onto the cold earth. Even though he wakes each morning with the sunrise, Li still feels anxious that it's too late, that his father's kidney has already been off the black market, and now it's in another city, purifying the toxins from a stranger's body. He slurps down soybean milk with pickled ginger before getting back on the road, veering on neither the left nor right side but on whichever side the shade falls.

Li follows the directions to the doctor's office that his father gave him. Ride the freeway until it splits four ways. Soft right until you see the night proctor's house next to the Coca-Cola plant. Take the long dirt road, a shortcut through the jungle. On the riverbank, there is a jade dog overgrown with ivy. When the tide is shallow, you can cut through the water as if with a sword, and every path on that side will take you to Guangzhou.

You can't cut water with a sword, Li said.

His father pursed his lips. It's just a metaphor.

What if I get lost?

You use your brain. Find somebody and ask them the way.

But the summit of every hill always reveals another. The landscape is so boring. He passes by Buddhist monasteries where monks pay respects to individual grains of sand. Li thinks that if every rock is sacred then maybe none of them are. In the rain he senses the sharpness of the world. In the sun it becomes disarticulated again.

Li squints through his cigarette smoke as he revs the engine, looking everywhere for the jade dog. He hallucinates it into being when there is a curve on the dirt road. On his darkest days, Li imagines a kukri viper's venom pricking his skin, or a ginkgo branch hurling him into a ravine, or the blisters on his thighs flowering with pus. When he stops to boil water for instant noodles, dogs howl in the bushes around him. There is not even a visible moon for them to howl at.

In this moonless place, Li has no past to revert to. It is so unlike his hometown, Longcheng, where every bad memory is eclipsed with the suchness of history: this is the bakery where Master Kang gives him fermented rice balls. This is a girl he once loved who wears butterfly pins in her hair. This is the machete that bisects the banana palm leaves. This is the dirt where the chicken warms her unborn yolks. This is the emotion he felt when his father revealed the stitches on his belly, ruby and involute.

The villagers who choose to stay in Longcheng are either very young or very old. After the gǎigé kāifàng policies were passed, most of the fishermen left to work in factories near the cargo ports, only remembering home when they sent money over the newly installed Internet wires. Vines grew over the old canneries. The remaining elders sit on buckets and play mahjong in the village square, each day a shadow of the one before.

Maybe Li's refusal is coming back to him. He knows he wouldn't be able to survive in the factories—cafeteria meals served on beige trays, silkworms fed to a power loom, the cement soft and supple before it's poured into forms. On the day of his father's operation, he saw a sparkling white van casting an oblong shadow over the village square. It was a scene of desire. His father entered intact, exited un-intact. Many hours had passed. The doctor placed 10,000 yuan in his hands with the promise of more to come. Each bill was printed with Mao Zedong's face glinting toothlessly in the light. At night, when he and his father slept together in the hongmu cot, Li heard the lapping sound of an animal drinking water from the gutter outside. He thought about the animal's mouth coming into contact with the water, the water vibrating outward, folding into itself.

Baba, Li whispered. Can you hear those sounds?

I can't hear anything, his dad said. I am asleep.

After a long silence, Li asked, Are you in pain?

His father's breathing was serrated. Li laid awake with him until it became dull again.

If you are in pain, Li said, I will help you.

They waited three weeks for more money to arrive in his name, but the money never came. Li watched his father grow more sickly with each day, the skin slackening around his jawline. Li called the number printed on the business card but the line had been unplugged. At first light, he set off for Guangzhou.

In the wilderness, Li's motorcycle beams with dust. He walks far away from it whenever he kindles the fire, but the distance does not induce a new way of seeing.

When Li finally finds the river, he can't fix his gaze on one part of the water without seeing the totality of it. Nowhere is it shallow. Maybe this is the wrong river, and there is another one with a jade dog on the riverbank. A monsoon assembles slowly over the mountains.

Li sighs and sits down on the rocks to eat a cream puff, the only food left in his backpack. The cream puff is sour and crushed from the ride, splitting open when he sinks its teeth in, exposing its moldy pulp. He squints the sun from his eyes. The summer is beautiful. He wishes he could be born into it, only differently.

Ni hao.

Li turns toward the voice. A young woman looms over him. He hadn't heard her footsteps approach.

You scared me. Li said. I thought I was alone.

I thought I was too. Who are you?

She has a deep overbite, and she is lovely.

My name is Li from Longcheng.

Why have you come?

I want to cross the river to the other side. Who are you?

Meilin from Huangluo Yao Village.

In his presence, she slowly removes her sneakers, jeans, and shirt studded with rhinestones, revealing an ovoid birthmark below her collarbone. Li looks away, embarrassed. Her pale skin glitters as she wades into the current. Even in the darkness of river weeds and hyacinths, light seems to collect on her. He looks down at himself. Maybe there is some light collecting on him too.

Could you help me find the shallow parts? he asks.

She shakes her head. There are none.

Some people might say her overbite is ugly, but Li thinks it makes her beauty more realistic.

Can you show me the way? he yells, chasing after her as she wades away from him.

You have to take the long way through the Nanling Mountains.

She unties her headscarf, unleashing a thick torrent of black. Her hair falls below her thighs. Li is surprised by the pure mass of it. If she grows one more strand, it could break her neck.

Your hair is so long, he says.

She looks lazily at him with a cold elegance.

I could cut it for you, he offers. I have a knife. Do you have knives where you are from?

She laughs, covering her mouth with her hand to hide her gumline. Li doesn't think what he said is very funny.

What are you eating, Li?

I am eating a cream puff the baker gave me.

Meilin runs a fine-toothed comb through her long hair, softly at the tips, but with increasing severity. She brushes her scalp until it produces a real drop of blood. As a child, Li believed blood was blue until it touched the world, and there was nobody in the village who could prove it otherwise. Now, looking at Meilin's head, the redness of her blood drips as a testimony against him.

Would you like to come for dinner before you go? she asks.

Nausea brims inside him from the cream puff, nausea and hunger. He has to concentrate on having one feeling at a time because they are in conflict with each other.

Yes. He hesitates. Though I don't have much of an appetite right now.

Gather your things, she says. I'll wait for you.

He wonders if Meilin is inviting him for dinner because she thinks he is cool and free like those men in biker gangs who ride into the retrograde horizon. Li does not feel cool and free. Those nameless men and women working in the motorcycle factory—why had his father saved him from that life, from that mass of muted hands? His motorcycle idles in the shadows, aluminum and serrated. Li wants to eulogize the hands that built it, remember them truthfully, as belonging to people who never stop working, transmuting things from morning into night.

Meilin's mother's hair is even longer than Meilin's. It is hard to imagine, but Li does not have to imagine because he can perceive it with his eyes through the window while she combs rice-water through the strands. She is shouting at Meilin and Li for standing idly in the cold.

Who is this, your new friend? she asks.

His name is Li from Longcheng, Meilin says. I found him eating a moldy pastry by the river.

Li frowns.

In, in, her mother says. Cold shivers will give you aizheng.

The table is set with pomelos, sweet buns, boiled wild grass, chicken and ginger, and eggs stir-fried with scallions. Li eats like a pig. Eating becomes the sole focus of his being. He sits cross-legged on the floor, his face eclipsed by the rice bowl.

Li, why have you come here? her mother asks. She has to wait a long time for him to swallow.

I want to cross the river to retrieve my father's kidney.

Why is your father's kidney so far away from the rest of his body? she asks.

A doctor in a white van extracted it to sell on the black market, but he didn't perform the operation correctly, and now my father is very sick.

Xinku, xinku, zhufi ni, she shakes her head, spooning more rice into his bowl.

Li is doe-eyed as he absorbs Meilin's mother's pity. Her hair drapes over all the objects in the house: the wind-up radio, the pink stools, the rice cooker, a calendar with a portrait of Cashen holding a gold-plated ingot. When she brushes it away from her face, she looks like an older version of Meilin. This is what's strange about meeting someone's parents, you can look into someone's face and watch their future occur eternally in the present.

There is now a hydroelectric dam on the river, she says. We can no longer wade through to the other side like we did in those days.

Li watches Meilin eat. When she spits out the bone and cartilage, there is no trace of oil on her mouth.

Stay and rest a bit before you make your way to the mountain pass, her mother says. You are just in time for Meilin's coming-of-age ritual.

What will happen to her? Li asks.

Her mother smiles knowingly and clicks her chopsticks. Meilin's eyes are in her lap, studying the veins on her wrists.

Li wakes to a terrible grey light. After he rolls up his tatami mat, he realizes there is nobody else home. The blankets are folded and the windows are wide open, letting the world trickle in. There is a note left on the table next to a pot of chrysanthemum tea and a boiled egg. *Find us at the theater at the end of the road, past the butcher.*

When Li is walking over, he makes believe he has a purpose here. Everything in his vicinity could be instrumentalized. A baby wearing a knitted panda hat: he could play with him. The public bathhouse: he could rinse himself off there. The cathaya tree's root puncturing the gravel road: he could remember not to trip over that. The three-legged Siamese cat dragging itself through the village square: he could let it drink from his faucet. It was a horizon of possibility.

When he passes by the butcher, he sees honey-glazed ducks hanging in the display window and feels the residue of last night's dream. In the dream, he was inside a meat locker the size of a stadium. On each hook there was a singular kidney. His task was to discern which kidney he needed to bring back to Longcheng. It was easy because each kidney was distinct; he could tell when it belonged to an alcoholic or someone with a sweet tooth. Their kidneys were bleached yellow, the ventricles engorged. Some of the kidneys belonged to bouncers who worked the night shift; others belonged to people who had jobs that made them type reports inside office cubicles. Li's father is a rice farmer; he leads his water buffalo through the irrigated hamlets, picking the ticks away from the animal's eyelids before they have a chance to embed themselves. There must be a kidney that corresponds with this too.

The theater is dark and smells like water that's been sitting still. Light spills in patches, elucidating swirls of dust. Meilin's mother stands at the entrance, with her makeup done immaculately.

Li, we are just about to begin.

She takes his hand and leads him down a narrow corridor. Inside the theater, rows of people are seated like an egg carton filled with darkly shrunken heads.

The tourist season starts after the first rain, she says. Any day now we thought we would see the first travelers; now here you are.

He wants to remind her that he is not a tourist, but the lights are dimming and the velvet curtains are drawing open, confessing their true interior.

A bronze gong sounds. On stage, an elderly woman stands in front of a tanggu drum, but instead of using a mallet, she bangs the drum with her long, braided hair. Her cheeks are sunken and her earlobes dangle with years, but her hair is still obsidian. Li is stunned. The elder must have been growing her hair for a lifetime or longer. A line of six girls enters to form a circle around the elder, bowing deeply on their knees. They take turns pressing their foreheads to the ground at the elder's feet. Then each girl braids her own hair into pigtails, intertwining her hair with the hair of the two girls directly adjacent to her, forming a closed ring. The girls approach the ritual with a quietism that silences the room, saturates it. All of the girls except for Meilin.

Girl A wears a silk dress embroidered with flowers. Girl B has forgotten to brush her hair this morning and is untangling it with her fingers. Girl C is smeared in the same peony lipstick as Girl D, who somehow applied it perfectly. Girl E shrieks a folk song in a dialect Li does not understand, though maybe it is a song of mourning. Girl F is Meilin who performs the ritual without looking into the audience, only glancing up darkly for the next visual cue. Even though her hair is entwined immaculately with the others, her mind seems to be elsewhere, floating.

Later in the afternoon, Li walks with Meilin to the rice terraces where she will wash her hair in preparation for the evening's ceremony. The ravines make indents in the mountain, craters sunken in the green. In her satchel, she carries pomelo peels, tea bran, fleece flower root, and a stick of ginger. He tells her stories about life in his village, the schoolteacher who was always piss drunk, delivering incomprehensible

lectures while smacking the students' fingers with a bamboo stick. She no longer covers her mouth when she laughs in his presence. Her jawline dimples along her overbite, but when he reaches to hold her hand, she frowns and pulls it away.

I'm sorry, she says. I don't feel romantically toward you.

How do you feel towards me? Li asks.

I feel fine.

Embarrassed, he clears his throat and tries to think of something to say. The stormy wind is blowing again. It is at the time of year when the seasons become oblique; each rain is lit with the end of another.

I want you to take me to Guangzhou with you, Meilin says.

Li is surprised. Really?

Yes. I want to wear a leather jacket and dance to electronic music like they do in the movies.

How will you make a living when you are there?

She considers this thought like it's something brand new.

I could work in one of the factories.

The factory, where time is slippery and ceaseless. He frowns. He wishes she would not go there, that place where she will no longer be Meilin but instead a tooth, a fingernail.

What will you do at the factory?

I don't know. I don't think about the future in that way. What happens to me next is inscribed without causation.

The future, Li repeats. He imagines a bright wall.

What will you do when you get there? she asks.

I am going to find that doctor and ask for him to reverse my father's surgery.

That's so brave of you.

He blushes.

They climb to the plateaus that surround the village, slowly rising in altitude.

The temperature changes imperceptibly with each step until suddenly Li notices he is cold, immersed in fog. They take off their sneakers to wade through the muddy silt toward the highlands.

We should leave before the sun sets, he says.

Let's wait until after my ceremony tonight. We can go in the morning.

What will happen to you at the ceremony?

Nothing will happen to me.

Then why do you have to do it?

Things will happen, but they will be symbolic.

What are they symbolic for?

They are not symbolic for a particular thing. It's my rite of passage.

In an enamel bowl, she crushes the ingredients with a stone pestle. She adds rice-water and lowers her hair into the solution. Li recognizes the skin of the pomelo he ate, carefully unpeeled it in one long coil.

But what will you be passing into? he asks.

Fog divides them like they are sitting in separate rooms in a house.

I will be passing into myself.

Li rolls his eyes. His motorcycle beckons him; he thinks of the soft crackling sound of the metal contracting around the exhaust as it cools. From this vantage point, the village of Huangluo is a speckle in the hills. It is easy to be transfixed by small distances when they uncoil into landscapes, lacunas which puncture and recurse us to an origin point, which is a vanishing point, which is a kidney beating inside a plastic bag.

A long white tour bus is parked in the gravel lot at the entrance of the village. People from the city exit in an orderly fashion, avoiding a stray dog with a tail freshly injured from a dog fight. It stands at the archway, smiling and begging the tourists for food scraps. With each wag of its tail, arcs of blood are sprayed over the side of the bus.

Meilin turns to face Li at the red pagoda gate.

Goodbye, Meilin says.

Where are you going? he asks.

I am not supposed to be seen until the ceremony, she says, even though Li is standing in front of her, seeing her now.

Well, what should I do?

She shrugs. You can enjoy your free time.

Meilin's wet hair drips in the soil behind her as she walks away from him. Now Li is left alone, unsure what to do. The injured dog whimpers pitifully while the sun's monotony casts down on it. He leans down to stroke its matted fur.

Pale unhappy dog, he says. I know what it means to be you.

The city tourists ignore him, pushing their way through the gate in their dyed linens and aviator sunglasses to glimpse the village of women who never cut their hair. Everyone in his vicinity is in transit while he stands still. When he looks at the injured dog's face, he thinks of the jade dog's beaded eyes blinking by the riverbank. He should have left here long ago. With each hour that passes, ivy reaches its long fingers to shield the jade dog from the world, and his father lays in the hongmu cot with the windows open, looking over the mountain's precipice waiting for a motorcycle to glitter towards him.

The dog slobbers. Li pats its head for the last time. Goodbye, he says.

His motorcycle is parked in Meilin's alleyway, waiting for somebody to contextualize it. When he touches the ignition, his shadow integrates seamlessly with its shadow.

Blindfolded, Meilin is slumped in a chair in the village square. The crowd gathers to witness her. Meilin's mother holds a razor in her hand, sharp with its absence of use. Girls A through E stand in the periphery of the circle, chanting a somber tune about a mischievous butterfly who is sentenced to relive its past lives. Her mother corrects Meilin's posture by placing her hand on the small of her back. All eyes are on

Meilin, but Meilin has no eyes. This witnessing is not a reciprocal relationship. Behind her blindfold, she has no choice but to look inwards, at herself.

As her mother presses the razor into her skull, Meilin concentrates on the individual strands as they are shaved from her head, falling onto the ground like autumn leaves, the tourists each vying to take one home as a souvenir. A material trace of her will linger in the hands of strangers, a record of each day of her life contained in it, recursing back toward the beginning, her childhood, when there were many days just like the others. Eating taro cakes in the rain, napping in the milk-bright afternoon, the dew camouflaging the grass in unbearable ways.

On the riverbank, Li lights a cigarette and thinks about drowning in the abstract sense. The calmest part of the river is marked by a mossy stone egg the size of a semitruck. Where the river hits the stone, the water ebbs into a deep pool. He imagines his motorcycle gliding across the surface of the water, taking him to refuge on the other side.

Behind him, he hears the soft sounds of a crepuscular animal padding in the lichen, but when he turns to look, he sees Meilin running barefoot through the night, her head shaved close like a young boy's.

Where are you going? she yells.

I am going to cross to the other side, he says, mounting his bike.

I said I would come with you, she says.

He doesn't want to say the obvious thing, so he stares at her instead.

The women in my village cut their hair only once in a lifetime, she explains.
This year, it was my turn.

In her baldness, he sees the whiteness of the rapids.

Will you miss it? he asks.

Miss what?

Having all your hair.

She shakes her head like he doesn't understand her at all. No, she says. I hated it. It was too long.

In that moment, he didn't think she could be more lovely.

Could I come with you, or are we saying goodbye? she asks, but before he can answer she mounts the motorcycle behind him and holds the fat of his stomach, dimpled on his waist.

Hold onto me more tightly, he instructs. The water will be very cold.

They could be mistaken for brothers now. Wherever he is, she is too. What he sees in her is not singular, but it is not exactly plural either. Her form welds with his. If you were to separate them now, you would end with symmetrical halves of the same self.

He revs the engine. They lean into each other, ready to exit the life that they have been hypertrophying inside like a stone birth. The water before them is pure and dark. When they make contact with it, it doesn't feel so cold after all.