

I WATCH THE BOUGHS

by

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These poems are for my family.

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“I fear that it would be a passage from weeping into weeping and from one war to another.”

—Petrarch

From what are you separated?

My chiropractor tells me, *your sternum is shining*, meaning that the small bones in my chest are rotating, overlapping, and moving away from one another—a snared zipper. He places the pads of his fingers beneath my collar bone, willing them.

I should love the revolution, but the revolution killed my grandfather's father. He was just a rich man who smoked opium, read the stars, and arranged marriages, they say, who was brought to his knees by his own village.

His sister was paraded through town with a wooden sign around her neck. She knelt in the center for hours. The sign was hung with a metal wire; it slowly sank until her skin parted and bared the bone in the back of her neck.

Oh, I love you, Ling Ling, the man on the street said to me.

I've said it before: I don't know where I am.

◆

Search

Google Search: My Sadness

my sadness
 my sadness comes in waves
 was never beautiful
 is overwhelming
 quotes
 turns into anger
 is a suitcase
 knows no bounds
 has become an addiction

Young Asian American Women: Under Double Pressure ...
 A Hidden Tragedy – Mental Illness and Suicide Among ...
^[PDF] Asian American Women and Depression FACT SHEET - ...
 Asian American Teenage Girls Have Highest Rates ... - NAMI
 Top 10 Myths about Asian Americans and Mental Health
 Why Are Asian-American Women Prone to Suicidal ...
 I Thought Being Miserable Was Just Part Of Being Chinese ...

Google Search: My Sadness is

my sadness is luminous
 is like
 is
 is your happiness
 my pain and sadness is more

Myth: Young Asian-American women (aged 15-24) have the highest suicide rates of all racial/ethnic groups (American Psychological Association).

My Sadness Is _____

I think about being sad, all the time. Sometimes I'm afraid I'm not actually sad, but that I'm sad because I tell myself: I am sad. My sadness is the radiator in my room that spouts water

and knocks loudly on its own insides. It's the phantom leak above my desk, the water damage it left in my books.

I can't find the crack in the ceiling.

I'm worried my mother knows I worry about her.

FACT SHEET- ...

My sadness is my refrigerator
 is a sink!
 is
 is cold hands
 turns into anger
 is a pinecone
 is a pear
 is a square
 is ugly
 doesn't fit
 doesn't fit
 doesn't fit

ugly ugly ugly ugly
 ugly ugly ugly ugly
 ugly ugly ugly ugly
 ugly ugly ugly ugly

On Stuckness

Last night, a small toad appeared
on the bathroom floor. I thought
it was dried mud until I realized
it had eyes. We stared at each other
for a while, each wondering if
the other would move. Impatient,
I poked the thing with a broom.
It jumped a foot in the air,
as if a jet of water had shot up
from the floorboard for it to float
on. It landed with its back to me.
I wish I had had a sudden wind
to fling me up and set me right
during the year I tore everything down.

Two monks

come to a river and find a woman
standing on the shore. Though sworn
to not touch women, the first monk
carries her across.

✦

In Shandong, my grandfather's cousin followed him wherever he went. One morning his cousin went to his house, only to find that my grandfather had left in the night to join the army. In the moving dawn, his cousin went after him. He stopped only when he reached the Yellow River and learned my grandfather had already crossed it.

✦

My grandmother lies alone now; only her portrait hangs above the bed. She says *take me to the sea*. We say *of course*. *But why?* My grandmother tells me there's such thing as too much living. She's swaddled in a large white cloth and sleeps through the day.

✦

Farewell, farewell,
say the two monks, and continue on.
The second monk ventures behind, slow,
over ridges and grass. The thought
of the woman on his companion's back
makes his forehead heavy.

✦

Spring for me still never comes my grandfather's ashes beyond this earth

✦

When my grandfather returned—decades later, after the war—his cousin slept on the train platform for three days, waiting for him. *You know*, he told my grandfather, *I've always said that if I'd followed you across that river, I could have been a luckier man.*

✦

What's your grandfather's name? Do you know your grandfather's name?

My grandmother points to the three characters on the hanging scroll. *There*, she said, *now you can't forget.*

✦

You've travelled on but I've carried you for miles across water and wind

The Tear is Always Anything but Itself

I spend the night following leaks in the ceiling. I put a tin can under the drip but it's too loud and keeps me up. The night pours itself on the window screen and the trees wave, un-astounded. I read: weeping *is a non-coincidence with the feeling of the nearness of terror*. I haven't wept in months.

Another night a rabbit screams a near-human scream. The thought of a coyote hearing the sound and yet still clawing at its beating neck—it keeps me up. The next morning I don't want to find the severed animal in the grass so I step gingerly, eyes to the tree line.

I twist my wrist twisting a branch off a tree—
coincidence? The leaves drip on me in great big splashes,
wetting the back of my neck. Near the tree, I can barely hear
its beating. I lean in, pour myself onto its great cracked feet.

Anger Diaries

Again, the quiet night
ruined by my anger—
the moon landing of me;
the walls long and clean.

-

A tongue feeling—numbness dressed in waves.

-

Most days I forget the kitchen table. I cried there,
almost nightly, for years. In the decades since my father
came to this country, the only English book
he ever bought was a self-help volume on raising
problem children. I remember the blonde toddler
on the cover—her face twisted, mouth at the edge
of opening into a scream.

-

In the schoolyard, the kids chanted

fight fight fight

& I kicked & kicked
him until his face turned
young & sad.

-

My mother had my ears pierced at age nine to cure me of my temper.
Now, the old ache greens in my chest.
I have been cutting my hair to be kinder.

-

milk carton mouth
paper & wide open

-

At the temple, grey-haired women shook demons from the air around me. They wore blue smocks and surgical masks.

-

My mother: a riot
at the grocery store cash register. Yes, I watched
from behind the turning conveyor belt,
her broken English. But is there a word
for an anger rooted in sadness? Is there forgiveness
for us in either of our languages?

-

I broke his knee then because he named me what I am.
And his hand at my throat: a plea, if not
an apology for what I am.

-

Late night, in the rain, I walk as a child does, forgetting to watch my step, looking instead at the glare on the backside of my glasses, trying to understand its green blur of light. My recklessness—a curiosity towards small destruction.

-

That feeling when the sink begins to drain—I love it.

□

A ring softens to the angles of my finger
A strange assumption, that a finger is a circle
A true gold is a soft metal
Nothing fully unyielding
Even my mother, who knew I lied, often believed me
No character looks a perfect o
You close the □ with 3 clean strokes

Reversible Poem in Winter

I'm done here, been eating good fats
 In winter I see through branches to my neighbor's curtained window
 In sleep my body has learned to boil sweat
 The south of Taiwan is never cold
 One summer I cried in a walk-in freezer for mixing cake batter wrong
 I'm never patient enough to heat up the car before I drive away
 I'm trying to love this machine
 My father once found a mouse sleeping in its humming engine

Its humming sleeps an engine, a mouse found my father once
 This machine loves me; I try to drive away
 Patience the car heats up
 I'm wrong—cake battered in a walk-in freezer
 I cried one summer in the south of Taiwan
 Cold never boils and sweats or learns my body in sleep
 My neighbor's window curtains branch to my see-through winter
 Fats are good eating I've been done here

The Boughs

After 西西

the boughs are red the boughs
red the boughs are red

If I wake up in the morning and the pillow is gone, I'm sad.

If I wake up in the morning, the pillow is gone, and you run toward the bell's toll, I'm sad.

If I wake up in the morning, the pillow is gone, you run toward the bell's toll, and the river
reflects a brighter sun, I'm sad.

If I wake up in the morning, the pillow is gone, you run toward the bell's toll, the river
reflects a brighter sun, and, let's say, the girls upstairs are lurching topless with an ostrich in
a chair, taking pictures, I'm sad.

sad I am sad

I am sad I am

Your longed-for true form

I watched the ceiling from my low bed. It bent when the girls danced upstairs.

I looked out that window for a year, saw the water low under the bridge.

I stayed as still as I could under the bedspread.

The shower below the stairwell, as if a foot could, through the ceiling.

I washed the dishes in the round basin sink and found it beautiful, an inverted bridge.

Bent myself into a dance, watched the water.

My plywood desk splintered and sagged.

Threw up blueberries on the tile one day; I worried the heater would light the curtains on fire.

I guess it was spring then, but who can ever tell but if the river is rising?

I heard laughter out of my mouth.

The light was so bright in the mornings that the tulips opened into small, petaled basins.

Yes, I watched the moon, stilling to its height.

My face round after the night, and I tried the trick with spoons, as if cold water could.

I Swam in a Cold Lake and Then Watched My Body Convulse on Shore

I looked at my body—
a flight attendant's body,
one of the ones on a Chinese airline.

I watched them last time I was on an international
flight—their skinny arms and flat chests, their clean
sense of purpose. I had an aisle seat
and they bumped my elbow
with the beverage cart, said sorry to me in two
languages, both of them mine.

I thought *I could be a flight attendant*,
and in another life I might've been.

My cousin is a flight attendant on Eva Air.
My other cousin, born three days before me
who wants to be a model, tried to be a flight attendant
instead. She didn't get it, said there was too much
memorization and she couldn't remember everything.

I secretly know I'd be a great flight attendant.

I could discreetly close the overhead
bins, twist my hair back, tie the service
apron on, hand out hot towels, blink

my eyes big, say *tea tea* 茶茶

all the way down the aisle.

When offering small sandwiches

I might stare out of one of the windows,

imagine the ocean blue. Or say when cleaning

up a toddler's vomit, I might yearn

for a less solitary life. But otherwise, loneliness

might be okay when surrounded by other

flight attendants in the sky, my body

a body made for tending to bodies in flight.

I'd breathe in the air of neither

here nor there. I'd remember everything

about my lives on earth.



My Sadness Was Not Like a Season

It did not turn. It raged and raged and raged. For many months, my limbs were full and hot and I heard the world as if through the belligerence of water. I screamed often and from all the screaming I learned I was the same child I once was, with an anger so red it once made my father put his fist through a wall. There, that was the power—that a scream could make a man remember his hands, that it could sleep in a body for one decade and then another, that, after all that time, it could still cleave my sternum in two. I became luminous, a cold light on cedar, my sadness the ugliest brightest part of me. And wasn't that what I'd always wanted, to glow with a terrifying light, to startle even the freckled girls of my childhood, for whom all the happiest objects seemed reserved? I knew that telling sadness it was beautiful made it dangerous. But I needed it. I pet it, it was a long black horse. I combed its obsidian mane, fed it carrots, let it pull sugar from my palm so it could run and run

捨得

In her 59th year, my mother loves the idea of letting go.

She likes saying things like,

錢可以解決的問題，不是問題。
Problems that money can solve, aren't problems.

你捨得，還是捨不得？
Can you bear parting with it, or can you not?

She calls me, tells me she can't believe my aunt threw the dirty dish towels in the washing machine with her laundry.

She wishes my father still held her hand.

She says, don't tell your sister about my silly problems. I don't want her to worry.

She carves two stone seals: one with our family name and the branches of the tree we're named after; the other with the two characters, 捨得。

So she won't forget.

I 捨不得 throwing the tomato in the trash when it's gone soft.
I 捨不得 wearing white shoes when it's raining.
I 捨不得 leaving the sidewalk where the heavy sunflower blooms in August.

Her younger brother was an alcoholic. All the sisters pooled money so that he could go to rehab, but he still drank himself to death. They found him on the side of the road, his skin yellowed.

I know she was once willing to part with the silk shirts she brought here from Taiwan, but now, she regrets it.

Tragicomedy

I try to imagine
what my laughter
sounds like, but
it's hard unless
I'm already
laughing, and
it's not easy
to laugh when
there's nothing
to laugh at. I think
about my stripped
cuticles, the coiled
lining of my intestines,
the summer spent
at the corner desk,
only leaving to
wander main street
with its small shoe
stores and flower
shops of bad
carnations, and my
mouth shrinks
to stone. The cat
howls outside all
morning; its pleasure
-pain takes me
from sleep. I walk
through the grocery
aisles and find myself
mirrored in the frozen
burgers. It's hard
to laugh when I'm
alone. I don't want
to be looked at
anymore. I don't
mean to be seen.

she's the only one who
hears me sing

She's the only one who hears me sing.
The only one who hears me singing, she.

Only one, who hears my song?
One hears me sing—no, she's the only.

Who, me? I'm my only.
Hear me sing her only song.

I sing, and there's my only, hearing.
Sing her to only.

Sing me into hearing
I who is my only.

Hearing why my onlys, she sings.
Whose hearing ones to singing?

One, the only one,
Only my only sing me.

The she who sings, hearing all the way to one.
She's singing, in it I hear my onely.

TODAY IS SADURDAY

So today we sad all

day In the morning

you don't want to sad me

but anyway you root

in me I hold you a sad's

length away

We go to the diner

You sad

sugar all over the table

You have to fall

in sad with someone

else you say But

it's Sadurday I reply

I'm already

in sad

We saddle ourselves

with sad and sad on

through the day down

the street past the old man

sadding for money the sadberries

in the saddermarket

I'm walking too

sadly

What the sad is up with you?

Do I have to say it?

I'm sad

I rinse the sad from the berries

let them sad out in the sink

We sad at each other

for a long time the sad mounting

violet in our chests until

we've gone too far past

sad I forget to sad the stew

so it chews like this sadless

The sad goes down I light

a scented sad We wonder

about next Sadurday

as the sad peels

from today We climb

into sad I

sink my sad

in the sad of your neck

Target™ Haibun

I like driving around, especially in my yoga pants. I like getting out of the car, locking it, dangling my keys from my middle finger, walking through the parking lot, and into Target. When I'm longing, I like the bright lights and linoleum floors, the way the red doors whoosh open for me. Inside, I touch the lipsticks, uncapping and turning them, putting the hues to the back of my hand. I buy two tension rods to hang long curtains from. I ask, *are these the only options I have in store?* It's easy to buy the wrong thing, as easy as feeling eighteen again, driving to buy cigars in my dad's old Camry. When I'm longing I'm in that car again, waiting to bloom in the chest, crying about a bright-haired boy until my body is hot. If I just had American parents I could be loved. Maybe. *Are these the only options I have in store?* Somehow, after all this time, I still believe in an objective kind of beauty. In the makeup aisle, I see a woman with yellow hair and astonishing eyes. I think, how cruel that she wears those colors, and with such ease.

I hang my curtains
One to black out the morning
I hang them—grey, white

Early mornings I feel Taipei the street outside mild
with noise butchers carrying pigs to market the room grey
and hot my sleep elsewhere America mere catalog moonlit hours

I dream wake into loneliness so often I forget where I am

Upon today New York cold waking we listen to the streets my hand on
your sex just for the comfort of a hand I teach you listen for another
country You warm beneath me I carry you the sunned day

Ruthless

My friend lowers his foot into the cold runoff
from the stony mountain, lets out a burst
of frantic laughter. This, I think, is a happiness.

When I don't feel pain, is it joy that pours
in? A hollow vessel glows to be filled.
無, my father taught me, is tangible—

an emptiness held. It means *nothing*, or *to not have*,
which implies there was something to be had
in the first place. It negates other characters:

無心, “without heart”;
無情, “without feeling”;
heartless, ruthless, pitiless.

Is the vacant heart so ruthless?

The ancient pictogram for 無 shows a person
with something dangling in each hand. Nothingness
the image of yourself with what you once had,

what you could have. And the figure is dancing,
as if to say nothingness is a feeling, maybe even
a happiness—dancing with what is gone from you.

When I ask myself what am I missing? I think
of how much I loved to dance, arms awash
in air, the outline of loss leaping on the wall.

My Grandfather Returns to Shandong After the War

現在家鄉的道路

*The road
to hometown now*

五十年後我與二妹三妹合影

*Fifty years later, I take
a photo with my second,
third little sisters*

家中僅存下的老屋

*The only
old house
that's left of my home*

家族合影 *Full family photo*

Everybody wears navy blue

A child
in yellow
in a courtyard

Torn red
paper on a wooden door

A long dirt road lined with thin trees

blurred figure on a bike

grey brick

dusty shoes

My grandfather wore a suit and tie when he returned home

I have always loved and I still love and I shall day by day love even more that
sweet place where weeping I return many times

I'm truly sorry for the gnat that flew into my eye and lived and died there before I found it
hours later and cried it back into my hand

Reversible Poem in Recline

It's true the bed is the site of sadness
I sleep all night and for parts of the day
I watch the light from the eastern corner of my bed
Life begins to feel like a pleasure
I don't feel any safer here
Reclined until my shoulders are sore
As long as I have the boughs of trees I'll be
Sleep past sleep until sleep becomes an illness

Illness becomes sleep until sleep becomes the past
I'll be the boughs of trees
I have a long sore in my shoulders
Reclined here I don't feel
Pleasure doesn't feel like life beginning
My bed the eastern corner that lights me
I watch the day and parts of the night
I sleep all sadness
The site the bed it's true

Types of Returning

回口回口回口回口回口
回春回春回春回春回春
回去回去回去回去回去
回家回家回家回家回家

回國回國回國回國回國
回落回落回落回落回落
回歸回歸回歸回歸回歸
回復回復回復回復回復

回答回答回答回答回答
回奉回奉回奉回奉回奉
回門回門回門回門回門
回路回路回路回路回路

回來回來回來回來回來
回來回來回來回來回來

The Bricks

After 西西

the bricks the bricks the bricks
the bricks the bricks the bricks

If I'm sleeping alone and the window shines blue, I'm jealous. If I'm sleeping alone, the window shines blue, and the lavender leans towards the late June wind, I'm jealous. If I'm sleeping alone, the window shines blue, the lavender leans towards the late June wind, and you're thinking of nobody, not even me, I'm jealous. If I'm sleeping alone, the window shines blue, the lavender leans towards the late June wind, you're thinking of nobody, not even me, and I've got two pillows on either side of my head, I'm jealous. If I'm sleeping alone, the window shines blue, the lavender leans towards the late June wind, you're thinking of nobody, not even me, I've got two pillows on either side of my head, and I dream of us in a floral bed and breakfast, where a great Dane obscures me from your morning view, I'm jealous. If I'm sleeping alone, the window shines blue, the lavender leans towards the late June wind, you're thinking of nobody, not even me, I've got two pillows on either side of my head, I dream of us in a floral bed and breakfast, where a great Dane obscures me from your morning view, and, let's say, the great Dane looks you in the eye, says *let's go for a ride*, and you climb onto her back, stroking the clean curve of her jawline, I'm jealous.

jealous I am jealous
I am jealous I am

Hitting the Ground

After Sasha Warner-Berry

I can't remember if he pulled
my hair and on which night—
I'm like that these days.

He might know what parts
of me to touch. When to turn me
over. Or not. All I ever remember

is that it's blue, and then it's
morning. The long train ride home.
I never imagined that this would be

what I was promised in high school
locker rooms—the unparticular dark,
the seeping, the sinking knees.

In those days, I knew it was shameful
for a boy to call me pretty because
then he'd like girls like me, with

different parents. I felt ashamed, too,
for the ones who didn't understand
that desiring me was dangerous,

if I saw them staring at the bloomers
under my uniform as I snapped in
and out of the sky, in and out of the arms

of girls more loveable than me.
The only rule of cheerleading
was to never let me hit the ground.

But that wasn't the kind of
untouchable I wanted to be. I wanted
to be pressed against. Jarred. An object

thrown without fear of glass
breaking. At practice, Michelle did splits
on the blue spring floor as she told me

about her first time. *It hurts,*
she said. And I wanted it because

she had it. Anyway, could it hurt more

than I already did, shaking
my maroon and silver pom-poms
as if the shimmer could transform me

into an earthly animal? Every time
they put me up, I wanted to come
down, painted across the field

in the flood of stadium lights,
the vacant blue of desire spreading
as wide as a country.

Bitterness is the Chinese Root of Emotional Hurt

苦痛 痛苦
 苦難 艱苦
 苦澀 悲苦
 苦悶 愁苦
 苦惱 困苦
 苦頭 受苦
 苦笑 吃苦
 苦命 辛苦

A toiling	an astringent lowness
A labored	misery. My love used to
Bloom	overnight, the streets wide
Enough	for me to walk down. Life
A bloody	toe or two. Easy. But I've been
Making	my mother's bitter
Melon:	halved, hollowed out,
Sautéed	with garlic, salt, the eyes of
Fermented	black beans opening
To me	from the pan. It's not
Sugar	I crave, but an ache that
Still makes	the tongue water.
A sadness	held in the mouth. Is this
Savor my	ceaseless condition? If so, I'm
Sick	with it. Pull out my molars.
Make of	me a simpler O.

✦

Aubade in Milk White

My father used to be a manager at a beverage factory. At the end of the day when everyone else had left, he'd fill one of the vats with leftover milk and steam it until it was hot. Then, he'd leave his clothes on the factory floor and take a long milk bath.

Every so often I remember this story and I won't know if I've dreamt it—my father in the milk fog and silver machinery. Those were the days my father ran up debts of beer and cigarettes at the local store and before my long-haired mother began working at the factory. I imagine his body disappearing into white, his full head of black hair the first exclamation of a calligrapher's brush on rice paper. Did he long for a woman who could become my mother? Did small sounds in the silence frighten him? I want to inherit loneliness from the scene but what do I know of my father's dreams? I'm still creating my own mythology of moving water, the field mice tunneling through ice in deep winter. When I draw a bath, I'm usually trying to take myself from sadness and into sleep. And in the blackest hour of morning my head calls back my body, like the bird that circles high above, singing 回，回，回。

Ars Poetica

I'm so absorbed in the feeling
of things I forget to see the shading
of trees—I watch the boughs just to sense
their swaying. I've taken too much
from what moves outside my window;
I've asked a leaf to make me better. I've been
bitter, sick for home, bought flower bulbs
just to capture them folding inside out.
Someone asks me *what does a laurel*
look like? I can't answer, say *it must be leafy*
and green. Am I selfish? Can I say I gave
and gave? I'm so sorry. Walk me along
the barren summer to the lone cacti withering
on the avenue. I'll break my finger into bleeding.

What does a laurel forget? I selfish a leaf
into bleeding, absorb its shades of green.
I watch the boughs so lonely I bitter, fold
inside out. The swaying makes me sick
and leafy, a sorry tree in summer. Do I stop
my barren finger from flowering? The avenue
bulbs into withered feeling. I've said too much
to the window.

Can the boughs fold into feeling?
A barren bulb. I'm a window, apologizing.
I'm sickened by the flower on the avenue.
It sways like a lonely finger.

Reversible Poem in Dishwater

He carried me into the kitchen to get a glass of water
He reached for a cup in the sink filled with dishwater
Wait I said and opened the cabinet for a glass
Still he went for the cup in the sink
Why do you want to drink from a dirty glass I asked
It doesn't need to be clean he said
But accepted the clean one I held out to him

I held out a clean glass to him
He accepted he said clean is a need isn't it
I asked to drink from a dirty glass
I want you
The sink the cup still a glass cabinet open
I waited filled with dishwater
The cup sinking he reached for me
The kitchen carried me into the glass

Detachment Song

When we're born our organs
 take a pathway to their place
 in the body and that determines
 how they'll sway and shift
 during our lives. My liver likes
 to rock from right to left, kissing
 the rungs of my ribcage.
 But it's always too high up
 and gets caught. That's because
 the liver is an emotional organ.

My acupuncturist tells me to talk
 to it daily, to show I know it exists.

Oh liver, thank you for all you do,
 we coo. The next morning, I pat

my abdomen, imagine the orb
 of my liver stretching and pulsing.

The leaves of my palm plant
 are drooping, reaching towards

the heater and window. I hold
 the base of stems in my fist,

but when I open my hand
 they drop back to their arc.

That's normal, says the florist
 when I ask later, *its roots*

are just spreading. I don't
 believe her. I know the thing

is dying despite its verdant leaves.
 But when it's dark, I see

its silhouette grown wide

and wild, in want of a bigger pot.

*I'm so sorry, I want to say,
I'm very sorry. All the early love*

*I experienced until the age
of seventeen ended in rejection.*

In some ways I'm lucky in this,
but I'm not better for it.

Stop talking about my sadness,
the only thing I feel

is mine to contain. I try to catch
it in my hands, its fur wet.

I drive love into the ground until the hurt
is irrefutable, until I can feel its eyes

blinking freely in my chest.
I want to kiss an ear, a half-moon

rocking between my lips; I bite
it instead. I gave you my liver;

now I want it back.

The Sink

After 西西

the sink is white the sink
white the sink is white

If I sit down for breakfast and the egg is already cracked, I'm dead.
If I sit down for breakfast and the egg's already cracked, I'm dead.
If I sit down for breakfast and it's already cracked, I'm dead.
If I sit down and it's already cracked, I'm dead.
If I sit down already cracked, I'm dead.
If I sit already cracked, I'm dead.
If I'm already cracked, I'm dead.
If I'm cracked, I'm dead.
If I'm dead, I'm dead.
I'm dead I'm dead
I'm dead I'm

Sunflowers

The grey night, walking home, we found
sunflowers leaning against the fence as heavy
as heads. In the morning, you held my head
in your palm, and we stared at each other down
the long length of your arm. We swayed together,
if only for a little while. Then you kissed my toe
and left. I pulled the comforters out after.
You had sweat the bed; the room bloomed
with your sweetness. I thought *You can know
somebody for a long while and not know their scent.*
I thought *Love, is it for me? Could anybody ruin
me?* A week later, the sunflowers were gone,
overhead, just sky. In the driveway next
to the empty stalks was the family that lived
in the blue house behind the garden. A little boy
played with a fire truck. His mother and father
smiled at me as they held the de-petaled heads—
fondly, combing their soft faces. On the ground,
so many seeds! It felt like the final revelation
for a long while. We laughed together, then,
the mother, father, and I, and the sunflowers
laughed too, because they knew the loss was not
a loss after all, and the sunflower seeds, too, joined
in, opening their pinched mouths, and all together
we were a high chorus and they sang to me
as I continued down the road, the many feet
of their voices carrying my small heartbreak.

Reel

I'm sure of this season—a willing breeze, a heavy quilt to burrow down under—I'm a willing participant in this thing called turning—as the train goes by and the car moves past, the ground rotates on a steady lever—here, the traffic never stops because the roads are empty—the roads whatever grass you mow or pat gravel down upon—I could watch the old man on the mower for days, ear buds in, leaned back, dreaming of whatever he dreams of—mice in walls, machinery—this landscape a mechanism, fields carved with roads named after letters, snakes of irrigation sprinklers roving through the night—I light my iPhone onto the small puffed nose of a bat circling the eaves of my room—I watch a faraway life of mine move in tandem with the fraying of the bergamot in the field, the rising sea level of corn stalks—I've always been on some kind of island, wishing for a different land, above or below it—this is not new—the strange machinery of nowhere—someday I might even learn to love it—today, I love the barn swallows—their triangular wings, how they slide down tin roofs and catch themselves into flight—today I feel okay about orbits, whether the shingles will hold—I can go on believing that another rusted steel part will be found in the grass—the price of steel growing up and up—that the burning trash will swell into a stunning plumage, that the stream will appear the noon after rain, a catfish idly sailing by, clinging onto its brief riverbed.

Locus Amoenus with Migrating Deer

So much was set in winter:
My sister and I standing
in the white yard feeling

small and alive as only
children can, the snow
blaring down as we brought

carrots into the woods,
tied them up with gold
string for the migrating

deer. In the kitchen, my father
chanted a Taoist prayer;
my mother worried the floors.

I sleep alone now, as I did
in those years, each morning
peeling open like a quiet road.

At the train station, I'm always
terrified someone will jump
in front of the coming train—

more for myself than for them.
I hope no one will push me
in front of the coming train

because then I'll know
it is possible. How many years
have I slept alone? I feel safe only

in knowing that my father, too,
fears death. Far away, my mother
strings carrots across the trees.

We never went back to see
if they were gone. The deer
leave patterns in the yard.



How do I do the math to bring me back to my grandfather

My father told us stories: 西遊記, boys
borne from peaches, the sticky rice thrown
into the river so the fish wouldn't eat the poet's
sinking body, a holy man who was strung
to a cross. Our favorite was always the one
with the two men who dug a hole in the ground.
They dug and dug until they found a door
and the door opened into a world where black
was white and up was down and sugar was not
sweet but bitter.

I tried to find the seam, the dark fold beneath.

It begins, 有一天

One day—

One day my grandfather's father jumps down
the family well. He stands on the wall of the well
and suddenly drops away, into the ground,
as if he has fallen into a hole that runs through
the center of the earth.

A tube of dark water, viewed from below. A small column of light and open hands, electric.
We pan out to see that the tube of water is in fact a quiet lake at night, a small moon making
milk of its surface.

I watched *Tim Burton's the Nightmare Before Christmas* in Taipei with my cousin. We sat too close to the TV and sucked on sugar cane while he complained that the English was too fast for him, the Mandarin subtitles appearing in flashing blocks at the bottom of the screen. How can there be a Halloween town and a Christmas town parallel to one another, separated only by a door—can one exist a mere portal away from the other?

But I was here, wasn't I? Barefoot in December, spitting out sugar cane pulp in the Taiwanese heat.

If I dig a hole to China—

If the Chinese Civil War happened between 1927 and 1950 and your grandfather was 93 when he died in 2007, then in what year did he save a soldier from drowning? In what year did he flee from his native Shandong (where his father jumped down the family well) and how did he receive his island non-nation?

My father pours milk into the center of my bowl of grass jelly. In our big backyard, the blue lantern zaps insects to charcoal.

At night, I dream of men falling through dark tunnels.

All I have of my grandfather: watching him halve
dragon fruit in the tiled kitchen, rolling a pencil against
his big toe to knead out the knots. The malls in the south
of Taiwan and the shoes he promised to buy me; his garden
of tomatoes and flowers and the big clay pot of goldfish
in the courtyard, how he'd let me scatter their food onto
the surface of the water. When he knelt to take a photo, he'd turn
his baseball cap backwards. How he struck all the dinner off
the table the time my father dared say his full name aloud.
On his deathbed, he mumbled only of his life in China, a sea away.

In 1958, Mao Zedong orders a mass extermination of sparrows. They eat small grains and seeds—dark-beaked thieves. Farmers and peasants tear down their nests and shoot them from the sky. They take to the fields with drums and pots and pans; the sky knuckles with sound. The sparrows swarm scared into the air and fly and fly and fly until their bodies drop to the ground.

I did not know how to cry for my grandfather in America. Lung cancer sounds to me like an American disease.

The last time I saw him I took a video of him moving through the courtyard with his walker, waving to me every time I called out to him. A few months later, back home, my parents threw me a party for my thirteenth birthday. They recorded me, squirming and embarrassed, as everybody sang to me in the candlelit dark. The birthday footage was recorded over that of my grandfather, and when I think of it now, I still want to scream.

I accidentally said 好 to my kindergarten teacher instead of *Yes, I will.*

The poet's sinking body

My father tells me, the night before my father left to join the KMT army, my grandmother showed him several barrels of gold, silver, and antiques and asked him to dig holes in the ground to bury the barrels. The landmark was a well and a big tree. When my father went back to his village 60 years later he couldn't find the well and the tree anymore. Think about this, we could be rich with all the gold, silver, and antiques. Ha ha.

In the war, my grandfather saved a soldier from drowning in the lake. A fat man tried to grab onto him too, but he could only save one without all three of them sinking.

My aunt carried my grandfather's
 favorite flowers back from Pingtung
 and planted them in her yard in Houston.
 They're a streaky pomegranate red
 and have tapered petals and long filaments
 like a tiger lily does. *It's so strange, she tells me,
 it's the perfect temperature for them here.*

One day my grandfather's father jumped down the family well. And did my grandfather regret not saving him from his drowning.

A small column of light

I lived by a river that year and the water at night—it moved.

I try to place the years my grandfather's father slept in a barn filled with cows. At night, men would find him, pour water on his face, and clang their empty pots above him. Every night like this, sleepless and half-alive, rolled in on himself like a coiled spine. The noise a white light that tunneled through his ears.

Were there commercial airlines in Asia in 1950 or did they take ships

A hole so deep I may one day meet him in the middle.



And still I flee the belling of my hounds

And I would hardly wish to change this bitter, sweet life of mine,
 for I say: "Perhaps love keeps you for a better time;
 perhaps, though vile to yourself, you are dear to someone else."
 And I go over this thought, sighing:
 "Now could it be true? But how? But when?"
 —PETRARCH, RIME SPARSE 129

And I would hardly wish back the old feeling:
 the black water, the fire escape I so feared,
 the quiet road I laid down in. Was it sorrow?
 Or the darkened winter that would not let us forget?
 And I would hardly wish to change this bitter, sweet life of mine,

for I scalded the porcelain sink and still it shone white,
 for *you can cause unhappiness merely by noticing something*,
 for I saw the slow turning of the boughs
 and there was a morbid gladness in my knowing,
 for I said: "Perhaps love keeps you for a better time."

But who wishes to be kept? I longed for my mother's
 stewing winter melon, the smooth, wet ink
 from her calligraphy brush, my unlettered
 aunts. Love was islanded, said to me:
 "Perhaps, though vile to yourself, you are dear to someone else."

Do I say myself into the hollow of that black water
 Do I will it present just by remembering
 Would it be so easy, like tearing this page
 from a book, to go back?
 And I go over this thought, sighing,

I have stripped the bed and let the stale air out.
 I have certainly been moved by knowing
 that untouched land exists, that my father was just
 a choice my mother made once. But a brief mark.
 "Now could it be true? But how? But when?"

In Another Country

my father grows out
 a prickly grey beard
 and curly sideburns,
 his toenails a grotesque
 white. His mother
 dead, and this is how
 the Taiwanese mourn:
 we don't cut our hair
 until the departed body
 burns. All week,
 he stayed by her side—
 shedding skin, growing
 out. When I see
 my grandmother, I tear
 at my scalp. But my
 father's grief moves
 slowly. The edges
 of his mouth tighten
 as we turn the body.

After, my father
 gets his hair cropped
 close and hunches on a low
 stool in the bathroom
 so that I can dye his hair.
 I start at the nape
 and move to the bare circle
 at the top of his head,
 careful not to stain
 his scalp. He pulls down
 his ears for me, bows
 his head when I ask.
 My father's vanity
 becomes mine, as I rub
 his hair between
 my fingers, making him
 a younger man.

We don't speak of how
 he sputtered at the
 dark urn, or the years
 ahead. I don't tell him—
when you go, I will grow

*my hair out in mourning; I won't
want to let go.* No, we don't
know how to keep
what is left. White
becomes brown becomes
black, a sky deepening
on my father's good head.

Reversible Poem Written on My Twenty-Sixth Birthday

The fog descends like the moon in the ancient poems
My father makes me radish cakes
I drive through light rain in late morning
and wait for the phone call of a lover
The empty parking spot a small hope
The unlined page opens like the road

The road opens like the unlined page
Hope a small spot parked in the emptiness of a lover
The phone call waits
Late morning's light rain drives through me
Radish cakes make me my father as the moon does
In the ancient poems the fog ascends

To My Sadness

When you come back for me, I'll be among
 the cornfields, wondering about crop circles,
 long toes, my mother, and other alien things.

 It will be July, the dusk boundless and moving
 into a horizon so transparent its edge will frighten
 you. I admit: I'll be naked, swallowed

by mosquitoes, a constellation growing
 from the two bright stars of my nipples. 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. Is it true what they say, that the best lovers
 are always already inside of you, a horizon

 so known it hurts? Haven't I always felt you
 bucking in my bones, like history, like land?
 You are a moth as old as my grandfather's

village and the waters he crossed to return
 to it, a winged body that believes in me
 as a spark believes it will turn to fire, as a fire

 believes, with its mouth open, that the black
 sky will continue flooding into it.

NOTES:

“The Tear is Always Anything but Itself” takes its title and italicized line from the introduction to Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects*.

The following poems take titles from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, translated by Robert M. Durling:

“From what are you separated?” takes its title from *Rime Sparse 129*.

In “Two monks,” the line “spring for me still never comes” is from *Rime Sparse 9*.

“Your longed-for true form” takes its title from *Rime Sparse 16*.

“I have always loved and I still love...” takes its title from *Rime Sparse 85*.

“And still I flee the belling of my hounds” takes its title from *Rime Sparse 23*.

“The Boughs,” “The Bricks,” and “The Sink” are written after Xi Xi’s poem “我高興” or “I’m Happy.”

The reversible poems in this manuscript are in conversation with Michele Métail’s *Wild Geese Returning* (trans. Jody Gladding), a book of essays on the Chinese reversible poem.

“She’s the only one who hears me sing” mimics a specific Chinese reversible form from the 5th century, 反覆 (*fan fu*, turn and return), where characters “are arranged in a circle, and the reader can begin with any character and read in one direction or the other.”

The italicized line in “And still I flee the belling of my hounds” is from Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness*.