

I. bell peppers

I absentmindedly rub my finger on the taut, dirt-wet skin of a grape, and hold up the bunch for my mother's inspection. She shakes her head, pointing to a cluster of slightly discolored grapes near the bottom of the bunch, and I feel a wave of eight-year-old resentment towards her. I want to be in the temperature-controlled fruit displays of Whole Foods, not the Boston Haymarket, where the sidewalk is perpetually damp and the price signs are irregular cardboard scraps with Sharpie scrawls. So my mother gives me a choice: come with me, or don't eat the food I make with it.

I watch the old Chinese lady next to me surreptitiously pluck a fat, glistening grape from the bunch that I had picked out and pop it in her mouth, spitting the seeds out in the gutter.

I hold the plastic bag open as my mother drops bell peppers into it—red, yellow, yellow, red—there, that should be enough. There are a lot of people at this stand, and I watch all the hands reaching into the pile of bell peppers, the arc of each one tracked by the vendor's eyes. My mother gives him five neat, crisp, dollars just as he glances down, and we start to walk away.

We are yelled back by a thick, Bostonian “Where do you think you're going?” as the vendor starts in our direction, pointing a grimy fingernail. “Did you pay me? You people this days, thinking you can strut in here—”

“I paid, I just did,” my mother replies, flustered, and I cringe at the accent coloring her words. The man sneers, “Yeah? OK, let's ask your kid. Children wouldn't lie, right?” He turns to me, and after standing immobile for a minute, I force myself to nod my head imperceptibly, unconvincingly. He eyes us again, this Chinese-American mother and daughter, and declaring us not worth the effort, turns back to his stand.

My mother storms away, forcibly batting away my efforts to hold onto her jacket. “Useless, worthless child,” she spits. “You cannot even say one word in defense of your mother.” She weaves purposely through the throngs of people, and I feel a childish sense of terror every time she disappears around a corner ahead of me, my tears only blurring everything further.

I am still holding the bag of bell peppers, the plastic cutting into my hands.

II. mistakes

If I open my eyes wide enough when she is screaming at me, I can convince myself that the tears are from the dust in the air, not her words. When she tells me to look at her, I do, but not directly—fixing my eyes on her mouth instead of her eyes. I need to disconnect myself, at least a little.

Once, for my sarcasm, she locked me out of the house. I stood at the door, calling out her name until *mama* didn’t even sound like a word anymore to me. When my father eventually lets me in, I take off my glasses and study my face in the mirror, trying to pick out the features that belong to her. There is a cut on my lip from her hand (which time? I can’t remember). All I can remember is that sickening second right before it happened, a thrill of *nonono i take it back please i’m so sorry* except it’s too late, the hand is already coming towards you, and then there’s the crack of sound and an explosion of red pain, and then the unexpected humiliation that follows no matter how many times you’ve expected it.

I don’t wash the blood off on purpose—instead, I bite directly into cut, tasting the warm iron.

That night, I stumble, bleary-eyed, to the doorway of my parents' bedroom and see my mother sitting up on the side of the bed, crying into the phone. I felt a strange sense of guilt and revelation, as if I had been reading a book and had accidentally flipped to the last page, to discover a conclusion I had not wanted to know yet.

When I was little, I would cry whenever I saw her crying, even without knowing the reason why.

The next morning, she wakes up early to make me breakfast—eggs, and beef and noodle soup. She silently spoons the pieces of beef from her bowl into mine, and when I protest, she says that she doesn't like the fat on them.

There is no fat in it at all, only the flavor of her bitter apology crunching like sand in my mouth.

III. blame

Boston has the sunrises, and Los Angeles the sunsets. I suppose I was too disillusioned with all the beginnings in my life, and so I went to the other side of the country to seek out the ends. Still, at the time, I convinced myself I was attending college in California because the school had good psychology programs.

In the two years I have been here, I have always been the one to call—twice a week, usually at night, making sure the time zone difference favors her. But for the first time, there is a missed call under her name. I dial back with equal parts hope and trepidation—for what, I'm not sure.

How am I supposed to tell her that there is no way I can come home right now, with my lab research and final exams season coming up? It's only a diagnosis, anyway. But I can already envision her stony, pinched face in my mind, already hear her berating me for being ungrateful and selfish.

When the second call comes a month later, I book the very next available flight to Boston. It didn't matter anyway—I was two hours too late.

I am eight years old in Haymarket again, clutching the bell peppers, and I can't see where she is, and all I can see and hear and taste is metallic guilt and panic.

nonono i take it back please i'm so sorry