

## Somewhere in Southern Florida

*I am fishing for marlins at five years old, and my uncle is still alive.*

### I. Zeno's paradox

In Spanish, Señora Vazquez assigns a paper on childhood experiences for twenty percent of our final grade. Weeks later, when she returns my essay with all of its errors circled in red ink, Ma sees the places where I swapped past for present tense and shakes her head, saying I should've taken Mandarin instead.

What I don't tell her, what I don't tell anyone, is that Spanish has reconstructed my mother tongue from scratch, phonetics baiting pictograms from the murky waters of my childhood. Every verb in Mandarin is derived from past tense, an infinitive rooted in recollection: Wading through lukewarm beachwater on Independence Day, I hear my uncle call my name across the barbecue-stained sand. I turn away from the sound of his voice, submerging my face beneath the waves.

As the water clears, everything I've ever lost emerges from the depths between language and memory.

### II. Beijing, 1989

After Uncle's ashes end up in an urn, Aunt June starts telling stories. She sheds her broken English like a second skin, letting its absence shave layers from her mouth.

Uncle grows up knowing hollowness in more than one form. His grandparents raise him far from home at the end of China's worst crisis, the cusp of rebirth after revolution. When

Tsinghua University's physics department accepts him, his grandmother falls to the red-brick road, clutching her tear-stained face in disbelief.

Aunt has nothing to say about prestige. "When I married him, I'd never even met his parents."

In America, twenty years later, Uncle fills the absence of home with mapo tofu and braised beef. Before work, he buys McDonald's and KFC, letting oil and grease coat his skin.

His favorite drink is Coke. He never wastes a drop.

It's no wonder, then, that his heart fails in September, and the doctors explain his autopsy to us like it's a manual we should have read beforehand. Hunger: a void to be filled. Want: something outside my grasp, a leviathan lurking in the depths of an ocean I'll never know.

### III. Potemkin village

In October, Ma's oxtail noodles start to taste like oil in my throat. I count my bites, numbers flashing before my eyes like the speedometer of Uncle's silver Toyota.

Twenty times to chew through two bites of leek. Sixty miles we drove in December. Two hundred hours I spent in his car last year, rushing down blurred bits of grey-veined highway. Each second flips past my mind with painstaking clarity.

Eight years before my uncle's heart flatlines, we drive fifteen hours from our Chicago suburb to a sandy tourist town where no one knows our names. In spite of his and Aunt June's heavy accents, they eke out a profit by leasing out their condo, bought twenty years after marriage and migration.

Uncle's pride never wavers. He criticizes everything, including the condominium's name, *Sunbird*, which he finds tacky. I think it's fitting, though: When dawn breaks over the horizon, the second-floor balcony glows in the shape of a gull on fire.

On annual trips, usually to repair air conditioning and furniture, most of the food we eat is caught by hand. Our toes dangle from the edge of Russell-Fields Pier, ten feet above the emerald waves. Aunt June holds Uncle's fishing rod against the wooden railing, her excitement rising above the briny air. As we squint through the sea spray, trying to search for fish, my uncle calls us amateurs and points toward the translucent line, barely visible against the dying sun.

"Be patient," he says, tickling my stomach. "It can see where we can't."

Aunt snorts. "As if you're any better at this than we are."

I am five and have yet to learn to swim, to learn that hindsight cuts deeper than any fish hook. He is fifty and has yet to make use of his PhD in physics. Tonight, with my parents miles away in the Midwest, he wraps my hands around the end of the rod and teaches me how to reel in a catch.

Four hours later, our line is still loose, but he only chuckles and pats the space between my pigtails. That night, my stomach goes hungry on watered-down seaweed soup and rice, but my cheeks ache from smiling.

#### IV. chlorine

In the months after, Aunt doesn't leave her room, keeping vigil over a bed grown empty. Grandmother flies from the humid depths of Hefei to Uncle's quiet house in Elgin. She complains in rapidfire Mandarin, disappointed that Aunt keeps the A.C. turned low to cling to

Uncle's frugality, the memory of him. When she cooks for Aunt, neither of them eat, silent in their hate for each other's obstinance.

By the end of the month, Aunt June is skeletal, and Ba<sup>1</sup> stays with her for weeks on end.

As Christmas passes, I dream of Uncle's potbelly and the moments I saw him last. How death struck without mercy, instantaneous. How none of us saw it coming. I hear Grandmother over the phone, her Mandarin coiled tight in remembrance, each word laced with memories long past—verbiage I've come to hate.

I reject the bananas Ma brings when she drives me home from swim practice. *This is rational*, I tell myself, thinking of Uncle in the casket, how Aunt June halved herself over his body.

*An hour of swimming, I read, burns about 500 calories.*

## V. fool's gold

Six winters before Uncle dies, he and I live for Friday nights. After practice, he picks me up from the pool to help Aunt June run errands, occasionally driving through Chicago's pulsing heart.

Once, when we stop by KFC for dinner, Uncle orders a bucket of drumsticks while I play with the restaurant's plastic bust of Colonel Sanders. Aunt June remarks how she'd eaten chicken wings in Hefei for her nineteenth birthday. She buys me an orange juice only after three minutes' worth of pleading.

“The first American chain to appear overseas,” she quotes, sighing at the grease on her fingers. “Too expensive to eat in university.”

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<sup>1</sup> Dad

The orange juice grows sour on my tongue. I leave it untouched, distracted by the sight of the city fading into an endless stretch of interstate. Just as we're about to enter traffic, I roll down my window and dump the remnants of my tepid drink onto the road.

For the remainder of the ride, Uncle yells at me like I'm a stranger. "What a waste," he says, shaking his head, "If you're going to buy something, see it through to the end."

*It's just orange juice.* With the way he was shouting, you'd think it was liquid gold.

## VI. haiyang<sup>2</sup>

The summer before I enter high school, Aunt June decides to sell her condo. Ba tries to talk her out of it, but her decision is final. In July, battling the ninety-degree weather, Ba drives silently down the sixteen-hour stretch to Florida. Aunt sits in the passenger seat, her eyes closed in mock-sleep, and I watch the Indiana cornfields bleed into Kentucky.

When we arrive, it's pitch-black, and our eyes are so heavy that we barely make it into the dusty living room. Even so, Aunt opens the door to the balcony and lets the breeze blow bits of scattered sea foam onto her face. It's too dark to tell if her cheeks are wet.

Aunt sleeps in the main bedroom; Ba takes the room adjacent to hers. I'm left with the sofa bed by the still-open balcony. Each gush of wind feels like ice over my bones; I sleep with three blankets in the middle of July.

## VI. ablution

In the morning, I unpack peaches and peel them with a small paring knife, the one we once used to gut fish. The blade shakes in my hands, unsteadily excavating a wet heart of flesh and juice.

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<sup>2</sup> ocean

“Dad, I made breakfast,” I say. The fragrance nauseates me, even though my stomach rumbles. “I’m heading to the beach.”

“Have you eaten yet?” he calls, but I’m already shutting the door behind me.

The water is as limpid as I remember. I’m tempted to try my hand at catching some white-bellied pompanos, if only to release them later.

“It’s cold out,” Aunt June says from somewhere behind me. “Come inside.”

When I turn toward the sound of her voice, she squints at me, the sun framing both our backs. The tide rushes toward us, reaching with white-foam fingers. I’m tempted to laugh at the sight of us, stick-thin and gaunt, trembling in mid-July.

“He doesn’t want us to sell the condo,” I say aloud. “He wants us to keep it.”

Aunt doesn’t correct me, not my usage of present tense nor the truth to my statement. She only stares at the sky, her veins translucent, like the feathery film of an x-ray. A gull takes flight, crying out against the clouds. For a moment, our bones shine blue, then orange-juice gold.