

Jessica Kim

Broken Abecedarian for America

America doesn't have a body—just
the rupture from a pistol,
broken like a mother's backbone. One night,
I return home to find her
collapsing into her own tongue: a second-
hand language she bought for a
dollar. Mother rinses her mouth clean,
cleanses her face until it becomes an
envelope for undelivered love letters.
To love my country is not about
forgiveness as it is about indifference.
How I can sleep soundlessly with the
glaring redness of a rocket. Outside,
the sky is a deadweight,
hole-punched by another bullet and not
fireworks. *Please*, I want to
indulge in history without retreating
in pain like a crumpled newspaper
jammed into the bottom of my backpack.
Tonight, the mockingbird
keeps me awake and afraid. Tomorrow,
I will imprison myself,
Los Angeles skylines wired into my palms—
it's better than encountering
myself in a mirror at the department store.
Girl fluttering her wings like a monarch,
never reaching home. Too fragile to be
American. I can't help but become
obsessed with the lipstick that's only
worth thirteen days' of starvation,
possibly less. At school, the fingerprints
of girls on tabletops like countries
quadrated into pop quizzes. To love
my nation is to talk about one-sided
revolutions. On the battlefield, a victory.
At home, a mother afraid of
school shootings—says *be careful* almost
as if I am not already full.
Tight-stomached, pulling my body closer
to hers because it's the only
unhardened object within reach. Unlike
America, I inhabit a body I wish to
vacate, and I know this isn't the answer
she is searching for. I am defeated again,
when the syllables of the American Dream
vibrate like bombs ticking, ready to burst:

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xenon-smear'd lips. If only I could contain
the wholeness of a language in a poem,
yellowed at the edges. To love America
is to model my mouth into a fat
zero, having nothing left to surrender.

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Ghazal for K

Last summer, halmeoni moved to California, bone-dried and thinned
like seaweed on the kitchen counter. She asks why I have not thinned,

fattened instead like a whale ready for slaughter, and blames the grease
on miguk food. I want to tell her I am not American, hangul thinned

into the back of my tongue and unreceptive to the stench of modernity.
The only word I remember in Korean is sijang, hunger. Oceans thinned

by extinction, a harbor split by upturned boats, famine kneeling in front
of our bruised mouths. Halmeoni says sijang also means market, thinned

aisles of canned tuna and fake kimchi, the commodities of my past I want
forgotten. What remains of my weekly allowance, I squander on thinned

cityscape portraits and white pearl necklaces. Maybe this is why halmeoni
mistakes me for an American girl, future Hollywood star. Foolish, thinned

with dreams about dead origin stories. Yesterday, it was about a father aspiring
to be a mayor, also sijang. Today, it turns into an elegy for my father, thinned

white hairs as trench lines in warfare. Halmeoni reminds me of the Korean
wars I have not lived through, dynasties wrecked by bullets, history thinned

inside the barrel of a rifle. The summer before my father's death, halmeoni
swapped his body with an aircraft, propelled it towards the Pacific-thinned

waves, escaping westward. Midway, shipwrecks invaded his body, so I learned
to spill his ashes into Californian seabeds before I had ever known the thinned

callouses of his hands. This summer, halmeoni moves back to Korea, says loss
is too foreign to her. Alone, I unlearn jeonjaeng, war, the memories thinning.

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Fish-bodied

In Korean, *mom* means *body*. I imagine a body shaped like a raw jeon-uh, silver-skinned but small like a daughter without a homeland. To survive, I memorize the muscle-movement of a mother tongue, watching eomma's swollen lips waver across a foreign coast. Words unmouthed like broken apologies thrown out to sea. See, in my language, *uh* means *fish*; in another, it is the dehydrated whimper of eomma on her deathbed. She clutches my palms in a plea for me to return home and I understand now, that han-guk was never mine to begin with. I forget how to translate death into elegies; I instead liken eomma to a jeon-uh, greyed and dried out, unable to live longer than two days in a water tank. The country a cage of self-destruction. I pick at its ripened scales, then admire its upturned belly, whitened by the bygone summer. It is early autumn: not a season for death, but completion. Eomma chews a jeon-uh in its entirety, both flesh and bone meshing into cremated ashes. I choose to dispose its softened skeleton, to cleanse away this sickening obsession, to renounce a language that cannot differentiate mother from a body.