

Histories

I.

Eighty-six years mark the wooden calendar while she pours congee to the brim, eyebrows entangled as pungent porridge smoke rises above cracked porcelain bowls. Cracks like the antique spider webs framing the wooden boards in her restaurant. They tally forty-two splintered dishes and they praise my grandmother, a gifted cook, over tectonic plates. French businessmen consumed rice noodles crafted by her crinkled palms, the hands that served soup the morning South Vietnam fell into silent chaos. Even when the foreign man plucked twenty-one plums from her only shrub, she served his empty insides. As each full moon passes, her light leather skin folds itself, each fold counting suns since she last folded my father's clothes. An invisible Atlas, she pours congee to the brim, as if compensating for the night when she can no longer lift the pan to serve them, him, or me. Each summer, my grandmother knits guilt into my waitress dress and hot privilege lacquers my tongue. I swallow each gated community, each "Made in Vietnam" sticker, one bleached spoonful after the other.

II.

It is July and we play chess on paper with Chinese characters sharpie-etched on origami note cards, fan dancing as his stray hairs float like dandelions. Bobby Fischer rings no bell in my grandfather's ears, but YeYe plays chess against himself until he can no longer discern the kings from the queens, so he opens the set when the sun rises again. He is the first to sacrifice his knight to keep his measly pawn. It is August and YeYe adjusts the pawn by its shiny shoulders and remarks that pawns can become queens but knights—well, knights will never stop being knights. That day I learn to castle and keep the queen on her color. I breathe the viscosity in this game of rules.

It is September and the waning crescent above starts to feel like a metaphor I cannot decipher. When it is October, I am the last one standing at the school spelling bee. When the headmistress hands me a tiny plastic card, I travel two spaces from the apartment square to the five-story mall; the glass chess set tastes a few months overripe—I still ingest. The sentences on the newspaper are foreign to YeYe, but he tears out the picture of me in the local newspaper, completes the weekly Sudoku puzzle before the bus brings me home. Some other questions are easier left unsolved. It is November and eighth grade graduation costs fifty dollars this year and signatures are sought. He scrawls the few letters he knows on the line. I hum the busy tune. Words like *overdue rent* and *green card fee* remain ticking bombs. It is December and checkmate becomes inevitability, like the stillness in the moments before a solar eclipse—the hush following the pawn’s coronation.

III.

No, I was never baptized, never immersed in the holy lake of San Francisco or sprinkled with pure water. I do remember the church ladies knocking at our door, Grandfather answering with his accented *thank yous*, the blue eyes glancing at me in pity, probing if anyone else lived with me. I do remember the King James Bibles they left, the red pages leaning against the battered yellow translation dictionaries that never learned the nuances of either language. I do recall the ring of church hymns, the Crossing of the Red Sea, the idea of purity. I tried to explain to Grandfather the distinctions between the beliefs of the Protestants and those of the Baptists, but could not distinguish them myself. I do remember tea and mooncakes in place of cookies and milk. By night, Grandfather retold fables from *The Journey to the West*. By day, we trekked behind the Buddhist monk and the monkey king to India for the sacred texts. The tales are only a soundtrack, but through my grandfather’s soothing tone, I forget about the mosquito bites, The Second Coming, and how the boy next door whispered that only churchgoers go to Heaven. I ask Grandfather if he is afraid of dying. He laughs; *why* he should fear death. I say, because the end seems so ominous. I mean, *it’s the end*. I do not remember he once cared for three sons and a wife in a cottage a hemisphere away from here. They are in *tianshang*, a castle in the sky—their own sort of heaven.