



**EVERYTHING MATTERS**

*hauntings*



*1*



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## editor's note

“Every house is a haunted house. Ours is no exception.”

I read these words in a WhatsApp message from Yo, in-house philosopher here at Everything Matters.

He continues discussing, briefly, how mourning and grieving well, given the hauntedness of our houses, is an essential and urgent task of ethics, politics, and housekeeping.

I might add printing and distribution, here, too.

Everything Matters is a haunted publishing house. Haunted by the so-called death of print; haunted by the constriction of digital distribution and social media, the death of misbegotten dreams of a free internet, a useful digital local<sup>1</sup>; haunted at every turn by the Culture here, suffocating and inane, lurching like a bastard uncle towards unforgivable profit;

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1. Though, like, for sure they were lying the whole time, these days the fragile princelings of our digital distribution platforms are super fucking clear and loud and twerpy about their intentions to turn any remaining dregs of useful digital publication into, either, like, full on heritage foundation propaganda machines or dogshit AI-powered manosphere grift mills. Ideally both.

As a trans publisher I have been feeling particularly annoyed about all these insecure and violent social media executives as of late, but my point is only what we already know: it's looking bleak out there, friends, and it's not super clear how we should go about mourning the calamities and losses and extinctions and murders that we are simultaneously entangled in, abstracted from, and forced to bear witness to through 4-inch screens, as some dipshit gets rich off of our disordered attention. It's all really quite a lot, nevermind sifting through the more everyday sorts of griefs and losses that being in the world entails bearing.



haunted by lost parents and grandparents whose work we continue; haunted, now, by you too, whose hands cannot help but smudge ink off our pages, whose eyes might not make it this far.

It is against many odds, dear reader, that you find yourself holding onto something physical, a paper and ink anthology of words and images that has made it all the way from our press to your fingers.<sup>2</sup>

We asked, through an open call, to hear about your hauntings and ghosts, “those unapproachable presences of absence in our lives, the lingering riddles of history and our past, the never fully fathomable horizons of unfinished business encircling our everyday,” as Yo names them.

The 11 writers and artists represented here understood the assignment, and what has grown from this perhaps overly-emo prompt is a communal relic of loss, an artifact of a beautiful attending-to of grief and hauntings. Given that our press is entirely made up of nerds who fuck pretty hard with grief, we’ve been excited about this, and it’s been an honor to hold such a thing closely.

Ours seems to be an age of grief, perhaps only because all ages are. But these days the fires burn hot, and the stakes are high for the grief-averse.

There is much to mourn. Let’s do so together.

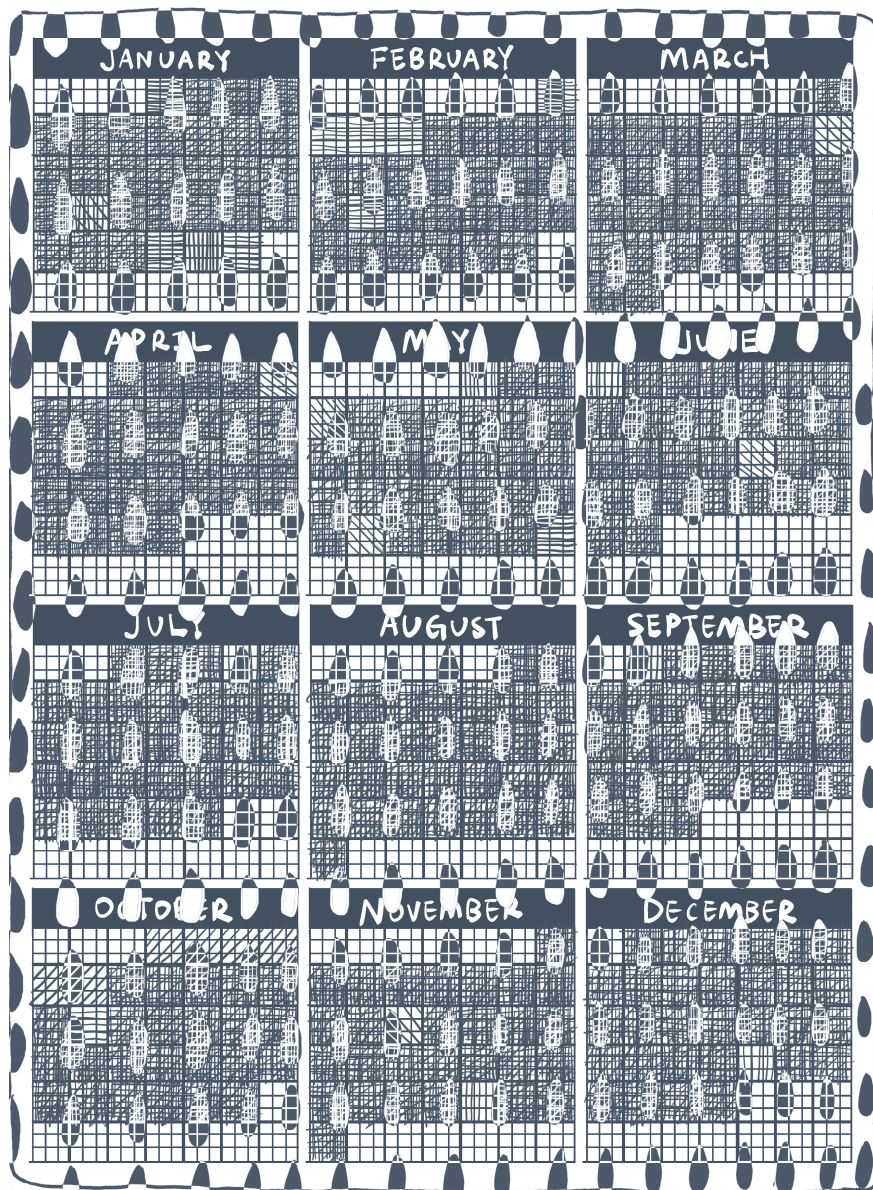
-will



2. These odds are political, and they are urgent.







INTERPRETATION OF THE 2025 CALENDAR

# bike repair

audrey larson

I'm piecing together an old bike  
sorting through parts in a bag  
drawing out dried up leaves, scraps of old plastic and,  
sometimes,

the part I need.

My hands are smudged black

the smell of it all,

the cold metal, the damp air, the used grease,

fogs up the moment

I look down at my hands

and see my father's cracked skin

and knobby knuckles

cherry red new grease

I turn the wrench around and around

attaching myself to my own life

disentangling debris from the gears

scrubbing at the steel with a wire brush.

The sky has been howling these days

kicking up old things, blaring them across neighborhoods,

dragging them through the scenery

knocking on my windows at night

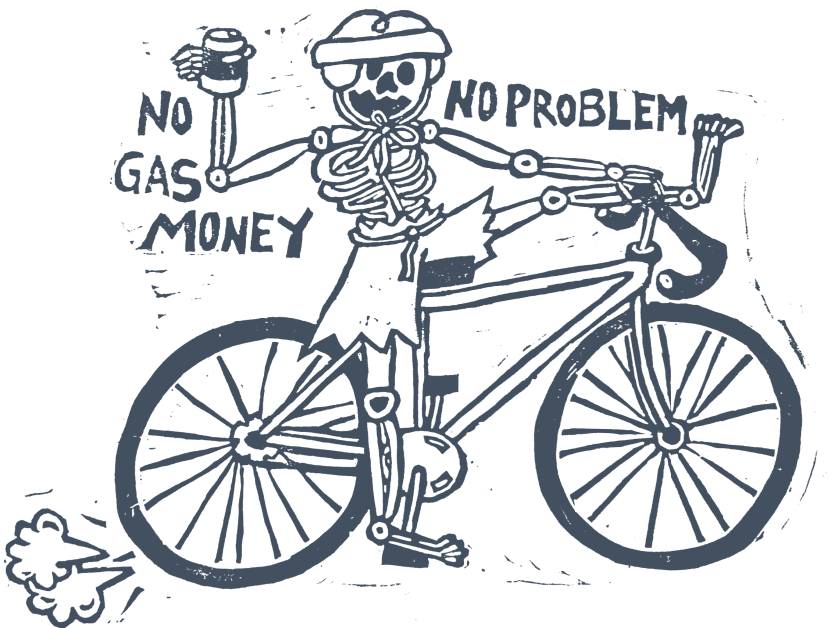
I refill the bird feeder when it gets low

imagining those tiny bodies battered by the storm,

arriving to the small place of rest underneath the cover.

With our last bike project, I learned a lot of new things,  
and a lot of new tools  
the most fascinating was the chainbreaker  
a thing held to be infinite  
released with the right strategy of force  
slowly, dutifully, boringly  
turned around and around  
a small click maybe, not much else  
and the heavy loop falls.

I blocked my mother's number last month  
no wonder the weather took a turn for the brutal  
enough, eventually, has to be enough  
the dam can't hold forever  
I track down the missing parts of the bike  
I wrap the handlebars with new tape  
I pedal hard to keep myself warm.





# THE SEARCH

roy magat

Watching a father observe his body  
crumbling—is an exercise  
in orientation. A body starts and ends

like a question: My baby brother's first steps  
were arguments. They had no targets.  
They were ideal—apathetic

to their ability to change. Once, on a high rooftop  
in the city, I saw sister silently marveling.  
At the skyline shimmering. Like the teeth

of a distant key. I saw the swarm  
of gunmetal clouds. Screaming down rain that shone  
like razors. Mother has been drinking so much lately,

she's like a crossword, or fog,  
or that word, remote. My foremost goal  
is to start a church dedicated to the saints

of duct tape and glue. I'm the chair  
of the coalition for sitting still under aspen  
and shutting the hell up. We metabolize the same  
world

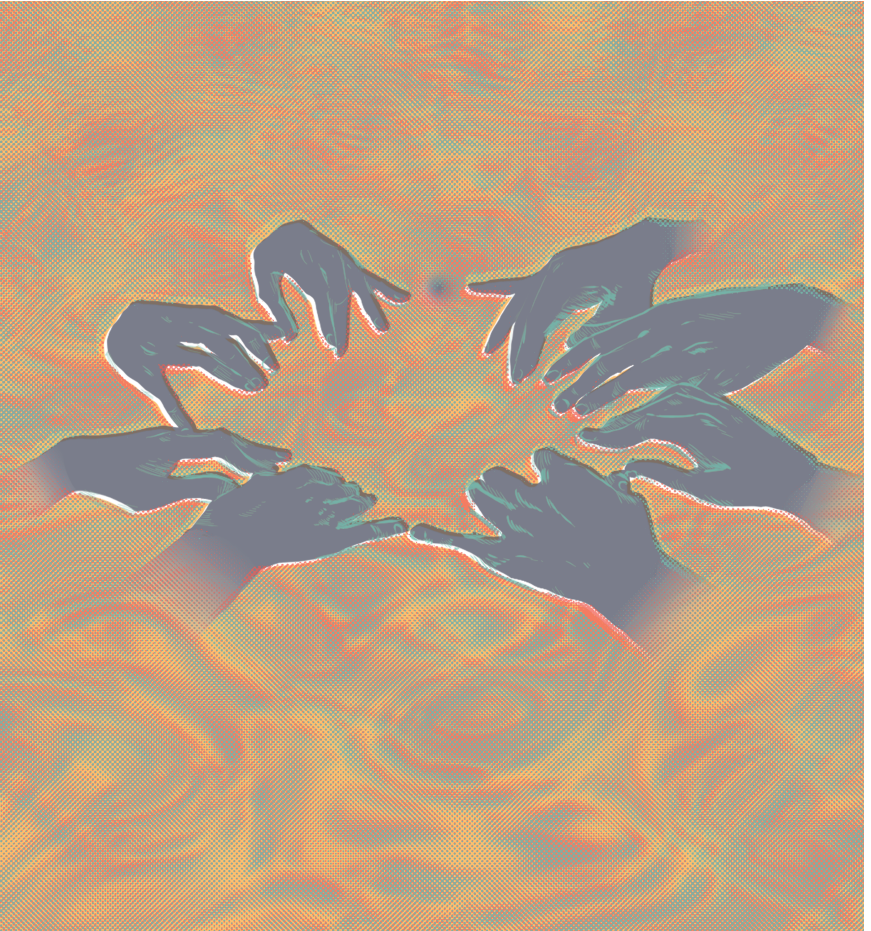
that will metabolize us all. And what is  
your life? Please describe your home  
in gentle detail. Let us nestle it inside the  
heart

of a cyclone. When I was nine,  
my family and I visited a Holocaust  
museum  
to eat lunch. I made something:

I asked a question that froze  
the entire cafeteria.  
My life has been a desperate search

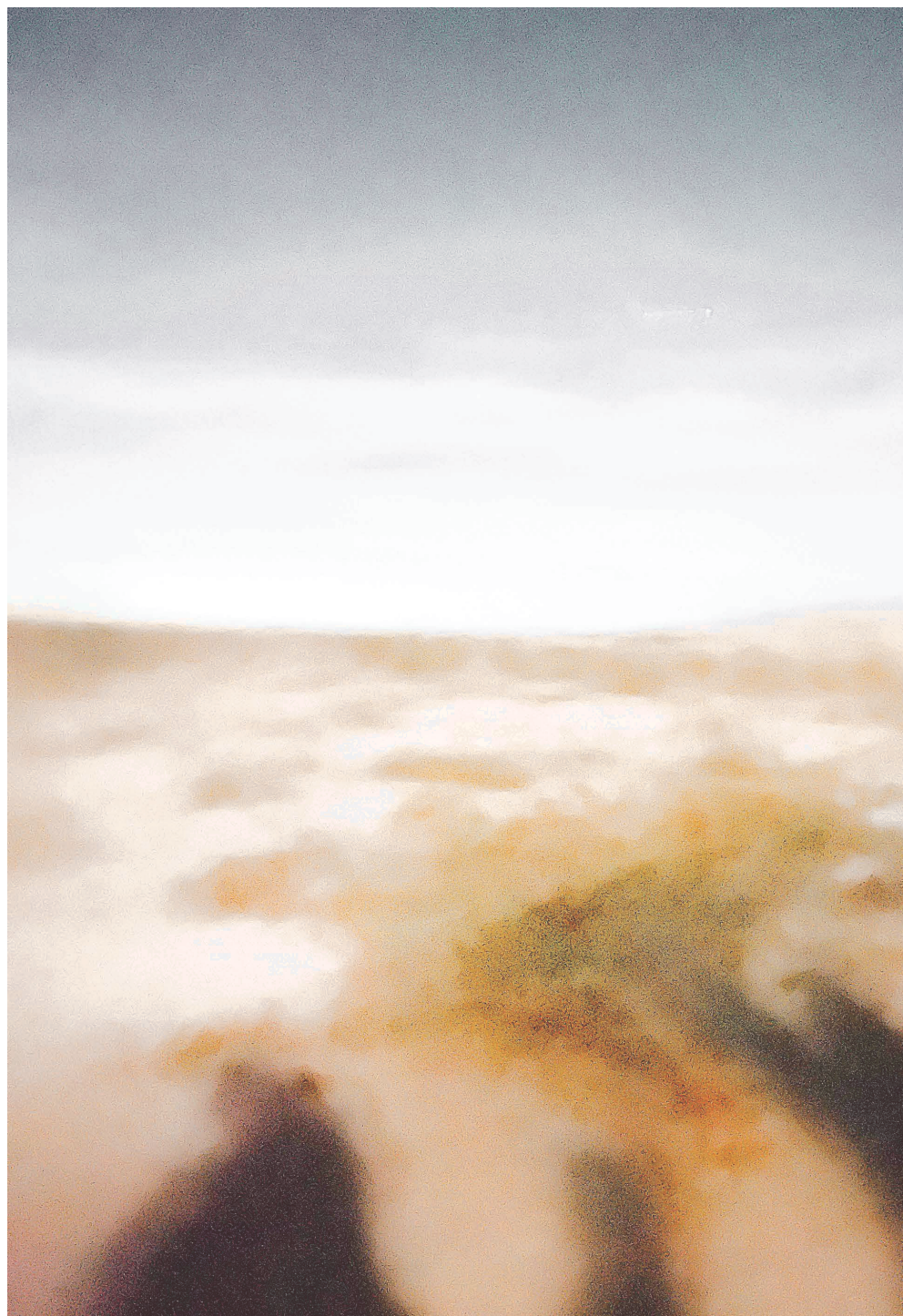
for that same gem of serenity.





seance - madeline nave







# ALIEN LAND LAW

jingtian zong

While heading south toward the Mojave National Preserve, my friends and I noticed a strange glow crossing the sky and joked that it must be a spacecraft coming to pick us up. Aliens, we called ourselves. The four of us—from the Philippines, Singapore, Brazil, and China—were the only non-U.S. members of this field research trip, among seventeen students and faculty from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

The legal term “alien” first came to me in social security registration paperwork. Before long, it became a code word among my immigrant friends. Words hold power. This word, which constantly reminds us that we live here on temporary, restricted terms, becomes something different when we claim it as part of our identity. Each time we call

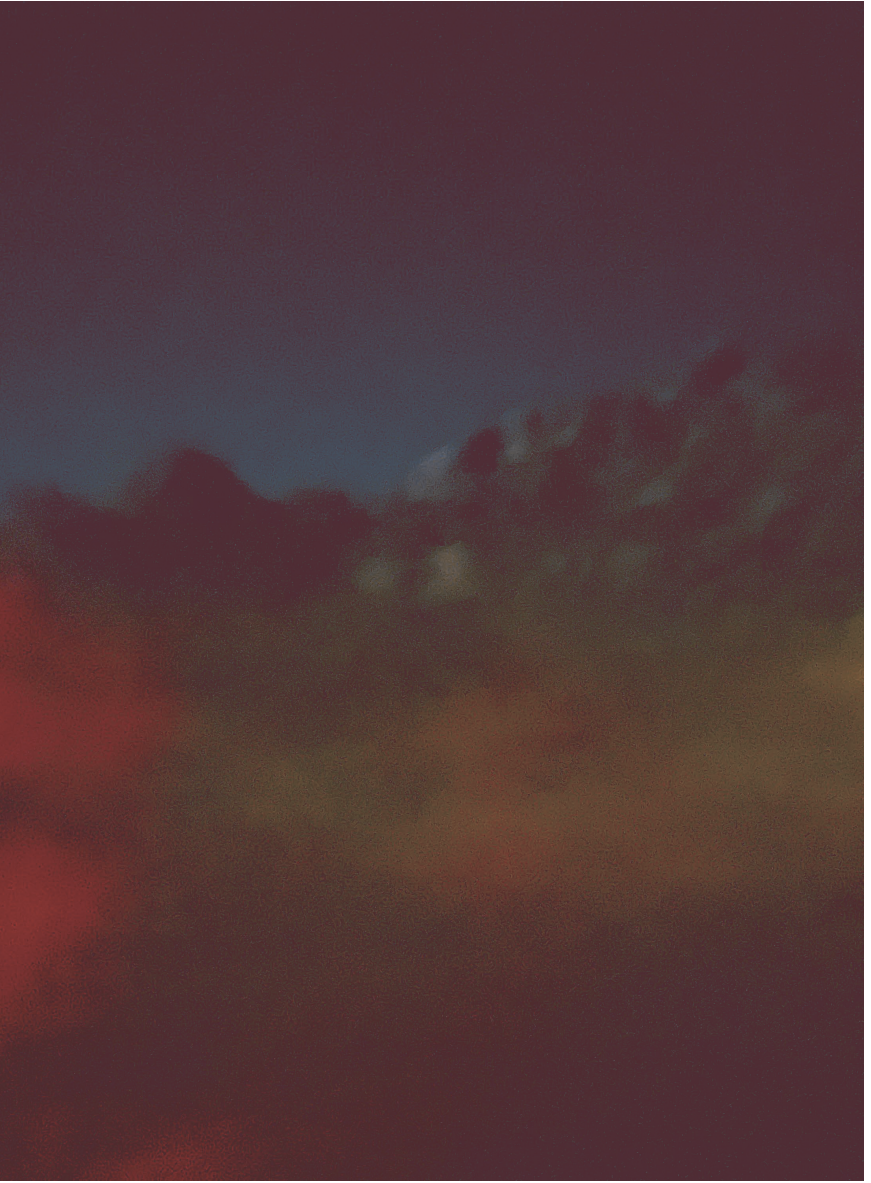


ourselves “aliens,” we gain some control over who we are.

My excitement of visiting the desert was tempered by unease over an expected art project. Before registering for this trip, Mojave, to me, was mainly a computer operating operation system—a flat, template desktop image. Although I read about the area’s history, including the stories of the Mohave tribe, before our departure, I knew those materials would not become my “handy tools” for instant art-making. I was wary of the artist-as-

tourist mindset, yet also concerned that I might end up as the silent Asian artist in the group. How does one even begin to interpret a place that feels so foreign?

Our field research team arrived at the Preserve at night, just a day after a full moon. The Preserve was bathed in bright, pure white light, accentuated by the eerie red glow of our vans’ tail-lights. A water tank and two portable toilets stood at the end of the campsite, backed by rock hills, looking almost like a space station.



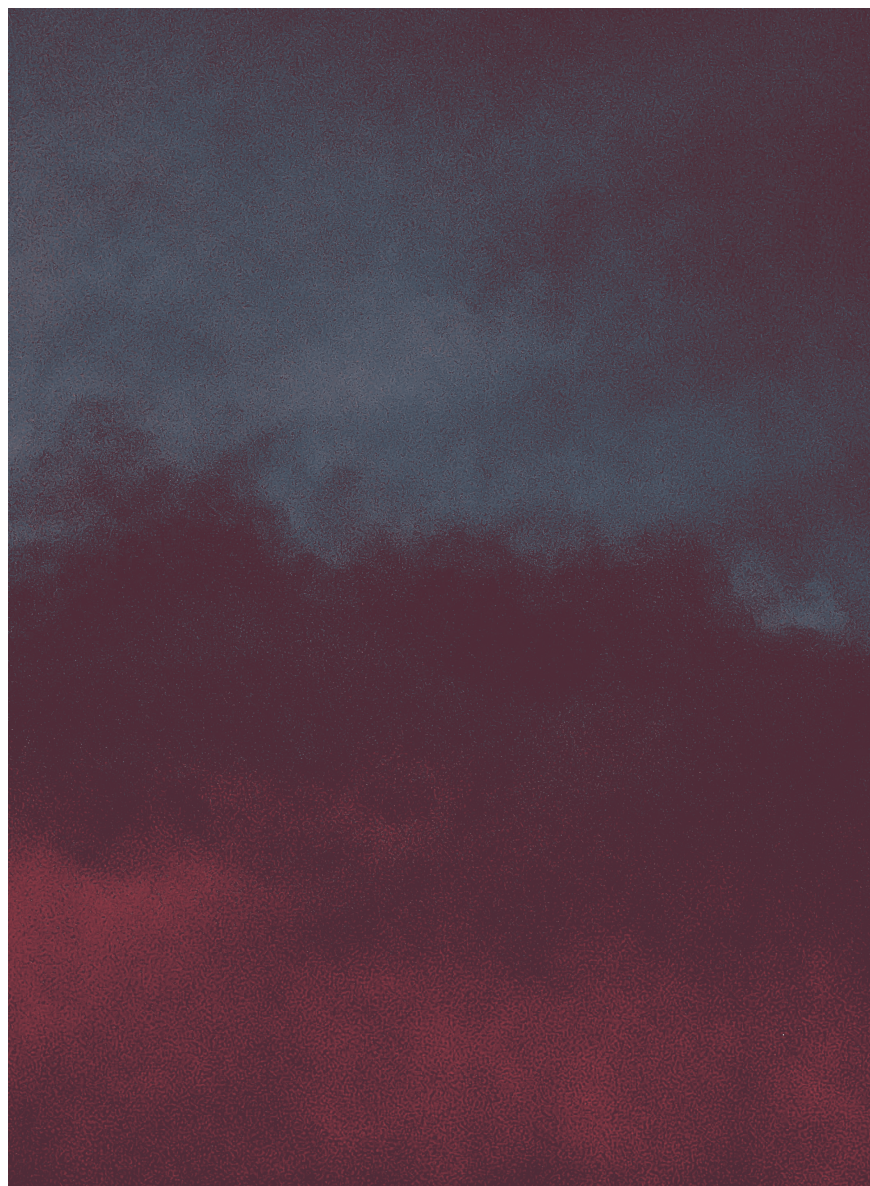




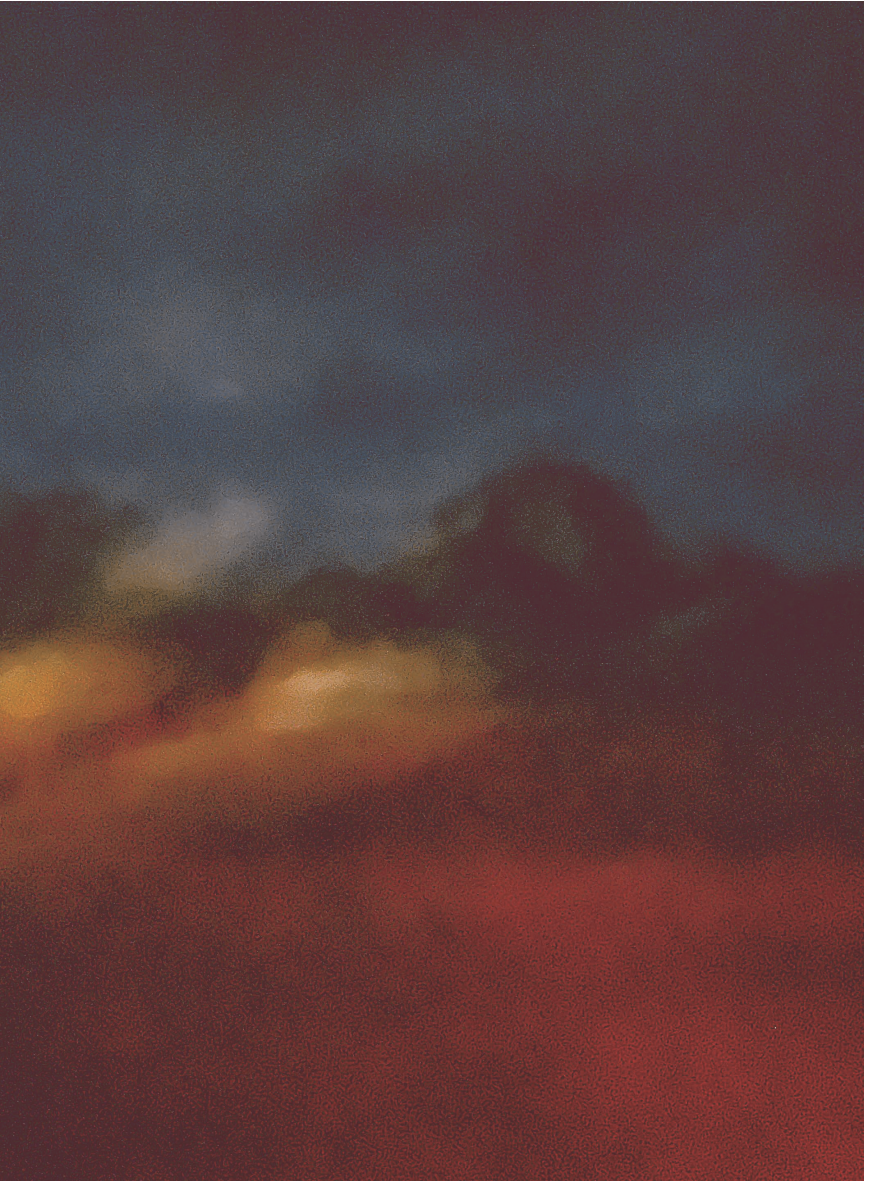


Daytime in the desert was designated for hiking, petrograph hunts, and delicate photography practices. At night, without proper equipment for night photography, I stopped trying to capture clear shots and began experimenting with my iPhone 13 camera. With the long exposure algorithm, rather extraterrestrial visual effects emerged: landscapes in motion, dunes speeding by, blurred visitors, ghostly light trails, and the glow of Las Vegas in the distance. As I looked at these images, I felt a strange sense of connection with the landscape—a bond forged through alienation.

On the way back to Santa Cruz, we stopped at the National Chavez Center, where we saw an exhibition about Cesar Chavez’s long fight for immigrant labor and civil rights. A brief mention of the “Alien Land Law” caught my attention. Passed in 1913, The California Alien Land Law “prevented Asian immigrant farmers from owning land in California.” For a moment, the phrase “Alien Land Law” drifted my mind to images of the Mojave’s alien landscapes. It was only later that I read about the broader history of “alien” as a legal term beyond 1913 and the territory of California.

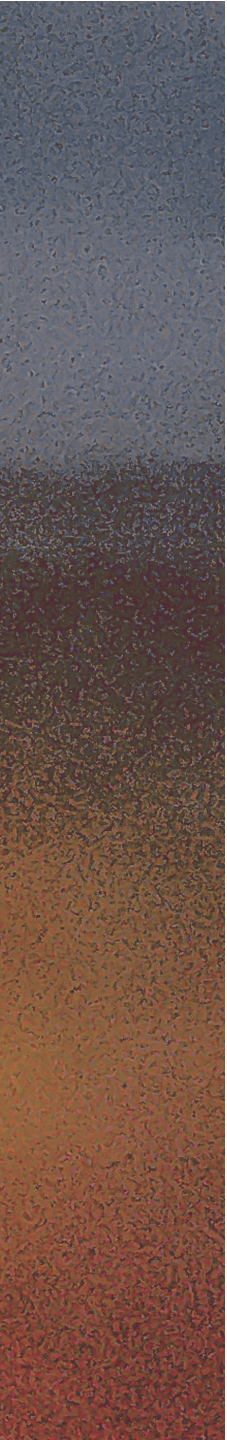




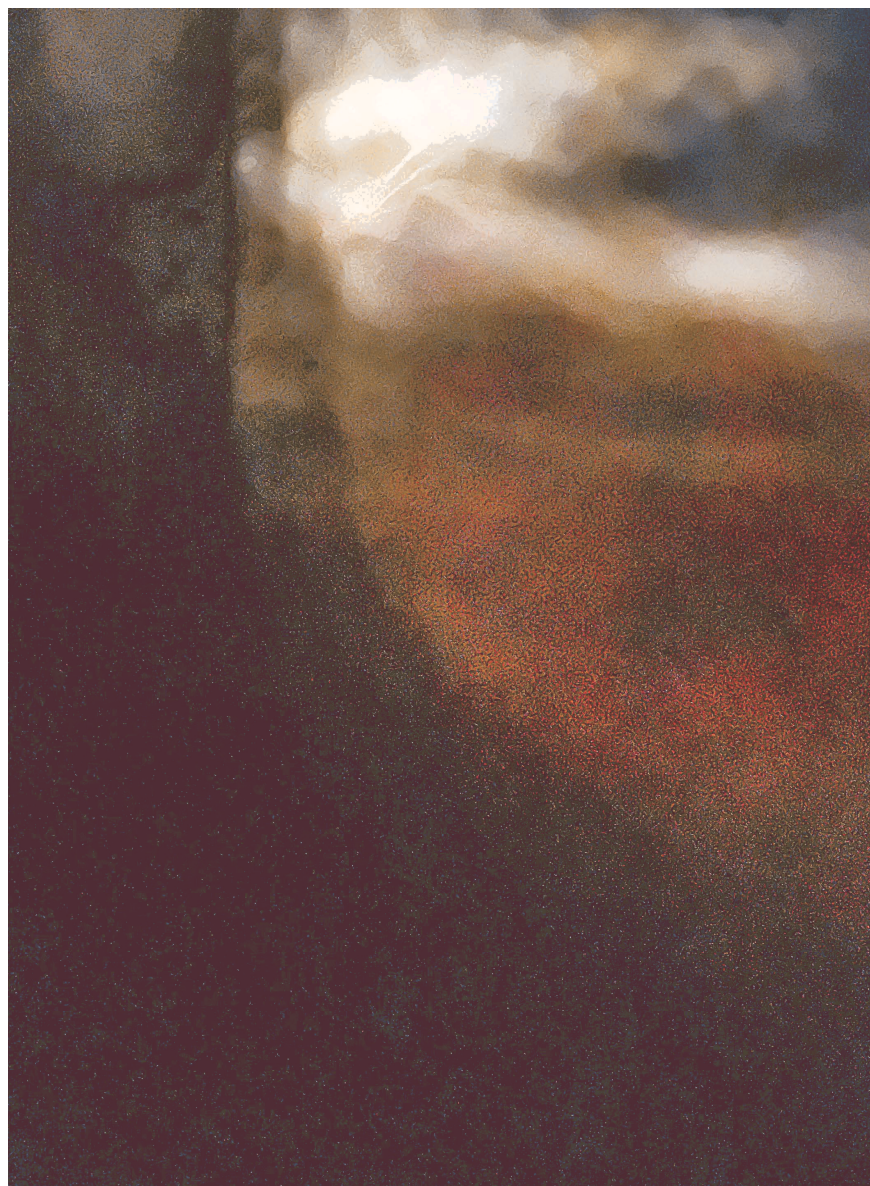














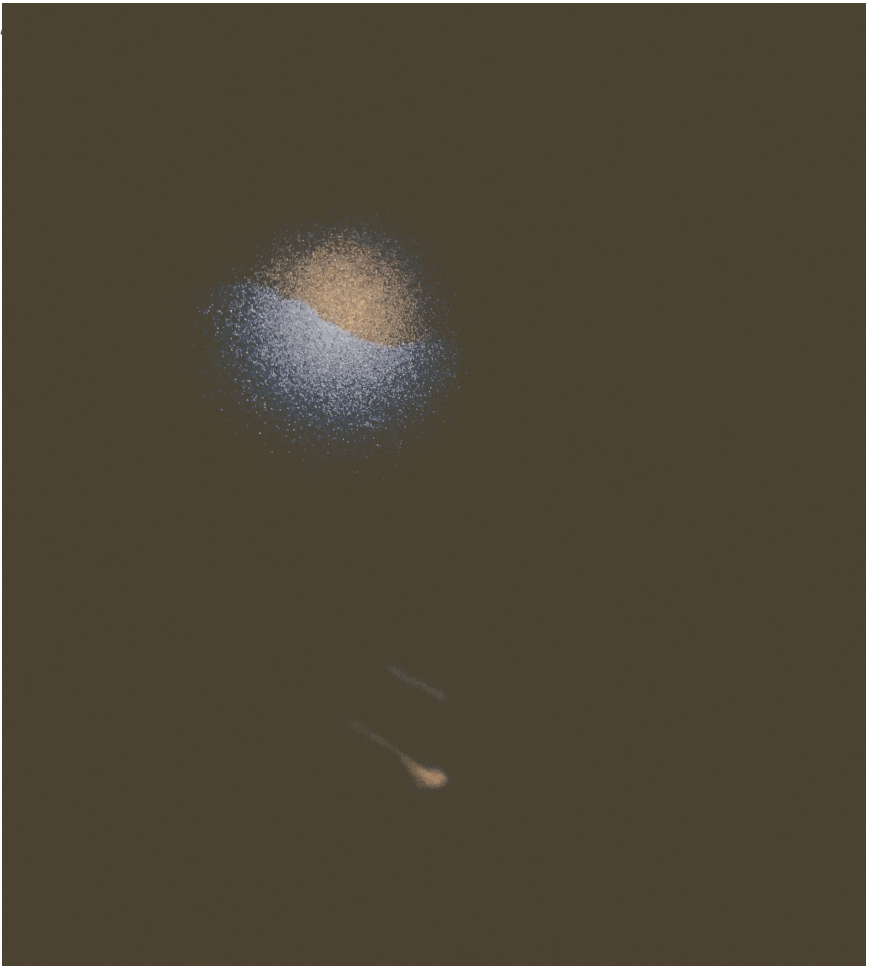


On May 3, 1913, California enacted the Alien Land Law, barring Asian immigrants from owning land. California tightened the law further in 1920 and 1923, barring the leasing of land and land ownership by American-born children of Asian immigrant parents or by corporations controlled by Asian immigrants. These laws were supported by the California press, as well as the Hollywood Association, Japanese and Korean (later Asiatic) Exclusion League and the Anti-Jap Laundry League (both founded by labor unions). Combined, these groups claimed tens of thousands of members.

Though especially active in California, animosity for Asian immigrants operated on the national level too. In May 1912, President Woodrow Wilson wrote

to a California backer: “In the matter of Chinese and Japanese coolie immigration I stand for the national policy of exclusion (or restricted immigration)... We cannot make a homogeneous population out of people who do not blend with the Caucasian race... Oriental coolieism will give us another race problem to solve, and surely we have had our lesson.”

California did not stand alone. Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming all enacted discriminatory laws restricting Asians’ rights to hold land in America. In 1920, the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed various versions of the discriminatory land laws — and upheld every



single one. Most of these discriminatory state laws remained in place until the 1950's and some even longer. Kansas and New Mexico did not repeal their provisions until 2002 and 2006, respectively. Florida's state constitution contained an

alien land law provision until 2018, when voters passed a ballot measure to repeal it.

Excerpted from the Equal Justice Initiative's A History of Racial Injustice.

<https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/may/3>





# a beginner's guide to dead birding

alex raycroft

It is 5:30 am and I am holding a dead ovenbird in my hand. I stand on a sidewalk that has just been washed by the workers who come out before the sun, clearing business facades of the trash and shit and death that accumulates there at night. No quicker way to quell the desire for a breakfast sandwich and coffee than a bloated rat and the wafting stench of dried urine.

Ovenbirds are just a tad smaller than the brown house sparrows that you probably see all the time in parking lots, furiously fluttering about the remnants of someone's discarded lunch. They have a bold white striped chest, olive-brown back, and an orange crown flanked by two dark brown stripes. Their name comes from the

shape of their nest: built of mud and sticks and grasses, it looks just like a miniature wood-fire pizza oven.

This ovenbird was found just minutes before by a street washer who placed it gently on a railing where she would be safe for collection. Her beak drips with blood.

She is one of billions of birds that will fly overhead by starlight this fall, migrating south from their northern summer homes. On the outer, untidy edges of science a kind of magic happens: tiny feathered creatures weighing less than a handful of quarters fly hundreds of miles each night across a giant magnet called earth in a symphony directed by the stars, racing sweeping cold fronts to reach kinder climates. And when, thousands of miles away, the soil begins to thaw and teem with squirming, legged things and trees start spitting out their tongues of green, they fly back to their place of birth. If it's still there, they'll often return to the very same tree where they first stretched and cracked out of some warm, dark membrane

into the frighteningly wide and bright day.

The limp ovenbird in my hand is still warm. At the end of her eight hour, non-stop flight she crashed into a shiny pane of glass. What's left of the life in her pours out into my palm.

When stuck in a cage, migrating species shudder, rapidly beat their wings, and move quickly between perches when birds of their species are migrating. Researchers call it *zugunruhe*—migratory restlessness, a wired anxiety to fly, to leave.

Now the coiled-up, frenetic energy that it takes to get her through the night has nowhere to go but out. I put her in a ziplock bag and keep walking.

Around one billion birds die each year in building collisions like this. Some think this scale of death signals the beginning of the slow process of extinction. Many of the deaths are preventable: turning off lights inside buildings at night, applying anti-collision tape to windows, and using bird-safe glass all lower the risk of disorienting migratory birds.

But the cost of these changes is an inconvenience, especially in cities built of glass. Imagine thin whitish stripes every two inches across your penthouse view. Do you know how much people pay for a pretty view?

I walk the same route every Friday morning. Sometimes, if we're lucky, there aren't any birds; sometimes they are injured but still alive. Those birds are taken to a rehabilitation center in the city. There are so many birds we don't find, and birds we find for whom it's too late to help. Carcasses gnawed on by the cracking jaws of a squirrel. Flattened piles of feather and flesh, married to the pavement by a bike wheel.



It is drizzling and cold. My yellow raincoat is soaked through. I pass by a man slumped over in a chair under an awning, an umbrella at his feet next to a dirty styrofoam 7-11 cup. His hand dangles and his black coat is damp and worn. I wonder if he's dead too. I wonder how to tell, and how mad he would be if I tapped on his shoulder and woke him from his sleep. The people I'm supposed to call to ask for help would make him leave if he was alive, probably charge him with loitering. I keep walking and the ovenbird stiffens and grows cold in the plastic, its dead black eyes fixed on nowhere, gently swinging with my step.

In the news whole cities drowned. Thousands of pagers exploded in grocery stores and homes, blowing up hands,

eyes, faces. Men were strapped to gurneys and shook as they choked on poisonous gas and people called it justice. Limbs of children lie strewn among the rubble of their homes.

It is suggested among moral philosophers that we cannot be responsible for what is outside of our control. I can't prevent that bird from striking this glass building that I have no personal ties to, so there flies the burden of responsibility. A flirtatious, flattering little theory. "Well," we ask ourselves, "what can I do about *[insert your favorite thing to ignore here]*?" We gesture up the ladder of perpetrators. We shrug and shake our heads, say "it's such a pity," or "someone should really do something."

And still every morning we pay to have our



streets scrubbed clean; we hate the smell of piss before our blueberry muffin and even more to be asked by a stranger with bad breath if we have any cash. We'd do anything to keep the dank, dirty stench of death away from our neat, pristine, unhappy lives. Turn off the news. Call them terrorists, there's no reasoning with terrorists. Say there's nothing we can do, or we don't know what to do.

In the city at dawn there is death everywhere: the Ovenbird, a poison-swollen rat, rotting teeth in a sleeping stranger's mouth, a Common Yellowthroat with a crushed skull. It means nothing that I am powerless against the overwhelming weight of it all, *for here it is before me anyways*: a stranger either dead or in a cold, wet, miserable slumber; a tiny warbler lying limp in a puddle on the concrete. And most often I keep walking. Sometimes I hold my breath to avoid the stench.

## **“I am guilty for all and before all.”**

And the beautiful, messy, ever-rustling world doesn't give a damn. It heaves and sighs and leaks and shakes, an ever-churning amalgam of death and life and resurrection. A Black and White Warbler leaps up the rough branch of a great oak tree. Maggots writhe and twist in the flesh of a rotting feathered thing. A man stands with wrinkled cardboard on the thin white line between two lanes of traffic, begging for change, flirting with a quick end. A Spotted Sandpiper with windmill legs whizzes to dodge crashing waves on the

beach. Terns fly to great heights and haphazardly dive towards their unexpected prey. It's an ethical horror show with infinitely many beautiful and horrendous scenes, and you're in it.

I don't know how to play my part well, and maybe I can't. But I do know I have to keep trying to do it anyway. To get close enough to breathe it all in. To mourn all the birds that never make it home, and politely argue with building managers about buying bird-tape and turning out lights at night. And to try to convince you to join me.\*

*\*Maybe dead birds aren't your thing. Weird, but okay. What is your thing? Go find it. And then go do something about it.*

DEAD BIRDING TIPS & TRICKS:

- Check out [birdcast.info](http://birdcast.info) to see when migration through your area will be particularly high. You can sign up for alerts. Be especially careful to turn lights off or shut your curtains on these nights.
- Go out in the morning when migratory birds are landing and most likely to crash. Look around glass buildings, windows, doorways wherever you happen to be dead birding.
- If you approach a bird on the ground and it doesn't fly out of reach, it's likely stunned or injured. You can gently place a piece of fabric (e.g. a t-shirt) over the bird, and put it into a brown paper bag. Clip it shut, and try not to jostle it around (would you like to be jostled if you just got the world's worst concussion?) Jot some notes on where you found it, take pictures if possible. Take the bird to a wildlife rehabilitation center in your area.
- If you find a bird killed by a window strike, you can take a picture and report the details to a local Lights Out chapter, or google if there's an Audubon Society in your area and ask them if they know where to report the information. (If you work with a local chapter that collects dead birds for research, you can put the bird in a ziplock and stick it in your freezer til you can take it elsewhere. Just don't tell your roommate).
- Don't be nasty: wash your hands after handling.

# bombay beach, salton sea



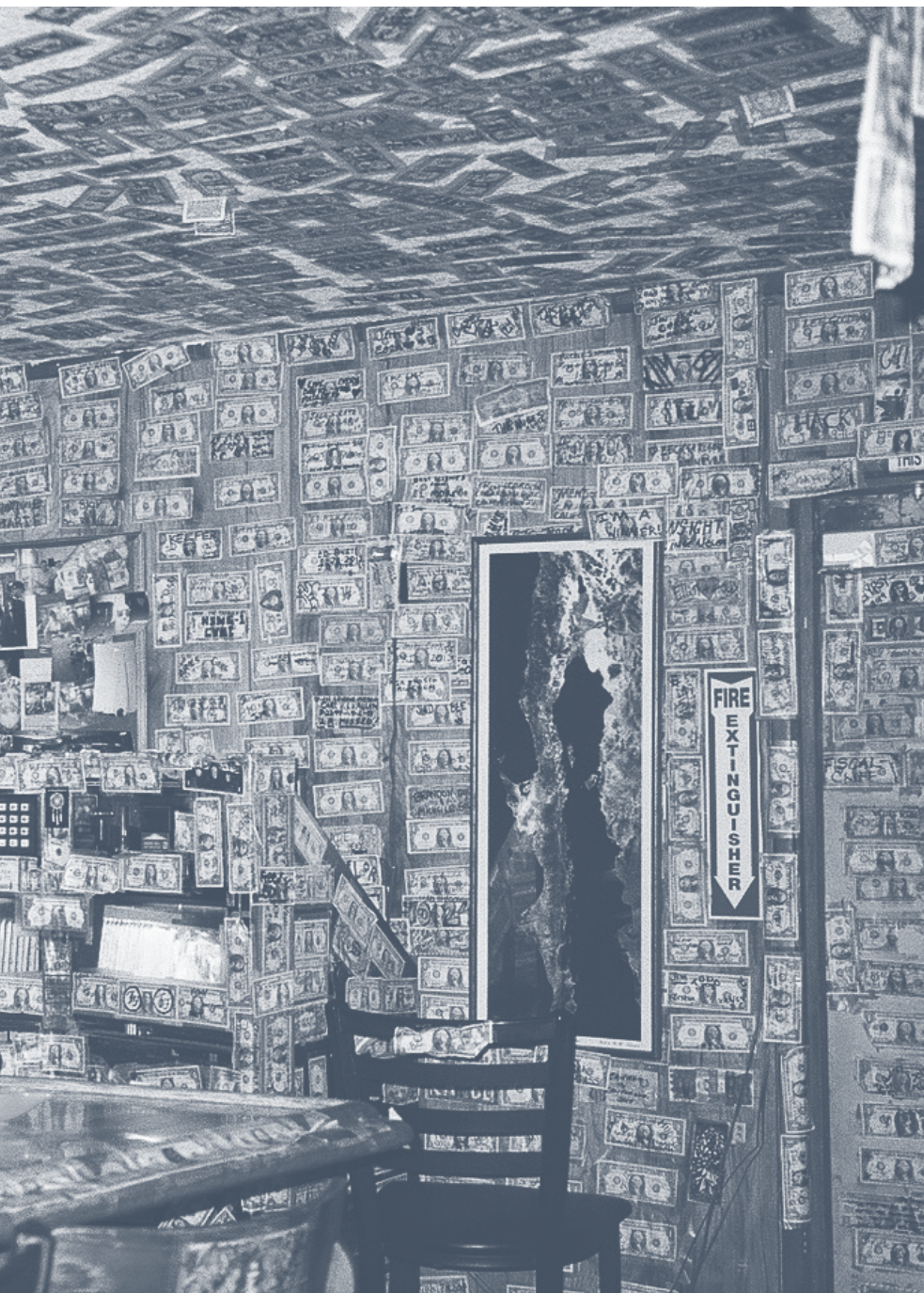
sophia sun

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# dear ghost

mica england

200? :

**Description:** One image of two children in the yard of a house with a white picket fence.

**Figure two:** A boy with black curls. He is normally quiet and soft-spoken, but comes alive in the presence of his companion.

**Figure one:** A tomboygirl. Like the boy, she is naturally shy, but comes out of her shell when with him. The girl gives the boy a red lizard toy for him to take home, but he leaves it behind.

Dear Ghost,

Nothing went according to plan that day. The summer weather was overcast and muggy, and the water ice-cold. There wasn't enough of it coating the slide, so our limbs skidded painfully across the plastic. By the time my dad had gotten the flow just right, you had already lost interest. I did my best to bear the cold myself. Did my best to have fun for the both of us. I still do.

2022 :

**Caption: “I have a shadow  
that is always black, And  
is sometimes behind my  
back. He sleeps in bed with  
me, But he never talks, you  
see.”**

Dear Ghost,

I feel you in my chest. You are the ever-present heaviness. The sharp gasp where your breath ends and mine begins. The hot sting in my tears. I feel you in my sheets. Or rather, I want to feel you in my sheets. I want so desperately to feel you again. To hold you and never let go. The absence of you burns and chills me.

I want to feel your touch. I want to touch you. I want to touch the body I never knew, the older body you turned into. I wish we could have touched each other more. Touched each other in the ways we wish to touch each other now as adults. But also in the playful way our relationship will always circle back toward. Us in the child bodies we never left. The child bodies we only knew.

You didn't like your mother holding you, but I could. You didn't like others staring at you, but I could. But I would never stare. I would only look. Maybe I should have stared. Maybe that would have kept you in my mind. I looked too gently and now I can barely remember your face.

I don't know if you ever felt at home in any of the houses your mother moved you through. Did you ever have a home? A true home? I can only remember traces of each of those houses. The swing set where we'd sit and talk. The upstairs playroom with all your video games. I'd sit beside you and watch you play, cheering you on and sometimes joining you for co-op. The fridge filled with our frozen green

beans. We'd sit on the kitchen floor and eat them one by one, crunching and cooling down. We ran through rooms and tried to catch each other with your Pokéballs. We broke a vase. We hid from parents. We played with your Gameboys under tables. The Gameboy you chose for me was Pikachu yellow.

You met me at mine a number of times. We traded Pokémon cards on my bed, then laid back, side by side, and watched the dinosaur decals move across my walls. We raced the cars I got from cereal boxes through the house. We hid and whispered and

You left me something behind. You left me. Your mother kept moving you farther away. You left me.



We got older and fell out of touch. You left me. You left for college and never looked back. You left me. You decided that one day enough was enough. You left me. You left me. You left me.

**September 2014** :

**Description: One image, hanging. One image of a limp body; the head has been cropped out of the frame.**

**December 2017** :

**Caption: \_\_\_\_\_ I need you to come through. Are you ok? Are you at peace? Did you suffer? Are you still with me?**

Dear Ghost,

Three years after your death, ? years since we last spoke, I pulled The Fool. When I flipped it over, I felt you. It was you. I immediately started sobbing. Sobbed because you found me. Sobbed because you finally answered. Sobbed because you assured me that you were alright. Sobbed relief and sobbed gratitude and sobbed loss and sobbed.

No. I brought my bias,  
my baggage, my \_\_\_\_\_ to  
the reading. I saw what I  
wanted to see, believed  
what I needed to believe.  
I wish-fulfilled. I made  
sense of my unfortunate  
situation. How could it  
really be him? Be you?

But in subsequent  
readings, I kept pulling

The Fool. Years later, I  
continue to pull The Fool.  
No matter how much I  
shuffle, no matter how  
long between readings,  
he keeps finding me.  
When I need him, he  
shows himself. He keeps  
showing himself. You  
keep yourself in my life.

Dear Ghost,

XXXX :

**Caption: They  
appear to be happy.  
They are (still)  
together. We are  
still together.**

The first long conversation we  
had, I was high – head soaring  
in edible-induced lightness. My  
head swayed and my fingers  
moved on their own, controlled  
by something-someone other  
than myself. Swaying side-to-  
side, words spilled out in a  
syntax not my own. In clipped  
prose and clipped punctuation.  
In your tone, flat and precise.

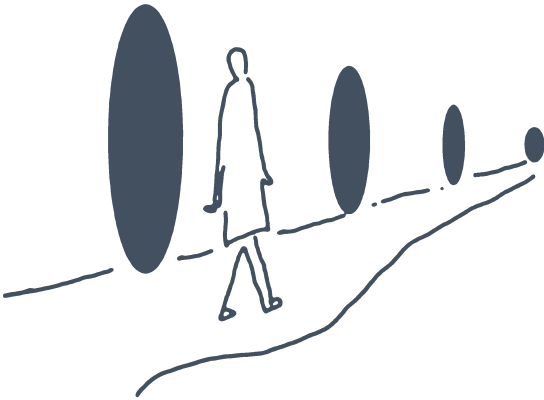
But was it real? Is it real? How could it be real? You hallucinated. You fantasized. You're delusional. You're desperate. You're coping. You're crazy. You're

Do I know for sure that it is my ghost who I am communicating with? I am only addressing an idea, a stand-in for my ghost – I fear. I know?

Maybe I never knew him at all. But I know his Charmander, our red lizard toy. I cup it in my hands and raise it to my lips. I know it was left behind, but I have it to remember you by. I am grateful you forgot. Your forgetting allowed me to remember you. Your mistake became my gift.

I remember I had gifted it to you, but you didn't take it. At first, I was insulted. I thought you left it behind because you didn't like it. Or didn't like me.

Maybe you knew, even then, that I needed it more than you did. Than you ever would. Maybe you knew, even then, that you would leave. And leave me behind.



# an inheritance of ghosts

hope tan

## the funeral

If you asked Mina what she thought her summer would consist of, she would've told you her plan to log as many hours as possible and chase an elusive promotion. Instead, she ended up using all her paid time off and all remaining goodwill with the HR guy to get 15 and half days off. What prompted the sudden change?

Her mother had died. Her mother always chose the best of times.

With her trip looming, Mina fielded pitiable looks, the occasional flower, and an overwhelming amount of baked goods from the middle-aged women of the office. HR guy, for all his benevolence, also turned out to have

a big mouth. And in a small office, gossip to do with Mina, its youngest employee, spread fast. Mina wished she could've corrected them all, told them that honestly, she had not liked her mother. She didn't even know if she had loved her. But sickly sweet sympathy, stifling or not, was much preferred to the judgment



she'd have faced if she had let loose that hard truth.

Though her mother's death was sudden, Mina wondered if she was supposed to *feel* something. She wondered if she should feel more guilty that they hadn't spoken in the six months leading up to her passing. She wondered if it was abnormal that she had approached the funeral with logistical prowess, as if she were planning it for a distant relative and not the woman who had birthed her. She wondered if it was odd that for the life of her, she couldn't summon any tears.

Mina had come to the conclusion that she didn't really care. And that was okay.

So here she was, in the motherland she hadn't visited since she was in high school, dressed in an itchy black *hanbok* in the middle of summer. "Her mother's solemn photo seemed to glare at the large memorial altar surrounding it, offended at its stature. Her mother would never be able to stand its *disgusting grandiosity*. If you asked Mina, she would say her mother couldn't stand not being the most imposing presence in the room. Guests and mourners

straggled in to offer their condolences, most she doesn't recognize. They turned their nose up in amusement at her half-broken Korean and Mina feels her mother's glare on her back. *It's your fault* she thinks to herself. Her mother never bothered to teach her when she was younger and she certainly was too dead to complain about it now.

Mina wouldn't have been surprised if some unexpected half-brother had shown up. In fact, she wished one would, so they could take over the *sangju* (chief mourner) role that would typically have been shouldered by a male relative. Mina certainly did not know what her mother did when she retreated to Korea after Mina graduated college. Had she passed in the States, Mina would be forced to

give some kind of moving eulogy, and yet, when she really tried to summon her wits, she found she hardly knew her mother at all.

Mi-seon Oh. Born to a once-reputable Korean family (whom Mina had never known), she married Mina's father and immigrated to the United States, only to leave him shortly thereafter. In life, she had been a cold, callous woman. As far as Mina could remember, she had never once spoken about her family in Korea, nor Mina's father. She never tried to integrate into American culture, and Mina always felt a residual air of disappointment from her mother that Mina had grown up with English as her native tongue.

As she stared at the hard, unfeeling gaze of

her mother's funerary portrait, Mina couldn't help but remember how often she'd stared into those same eyes, begging for an ounce of affection. Mina's mother was not one of those single mothers who worked hard to make sure their child never felt the absence of a father. Mina had felt that absence profoundly, when she wished for a father who would save her from the emotional tirades of her mother. Mina sometimes wished her mother would hit her instead. Maybe a brawl would break the dam, resulting in some conclusion about their relationship that was impossible to describe with words.

Yet, as Mina had grown older she'd realized the tense weekends filled with screaming, closed doors, and scorn were clearly abnormal. She recognized, and resented, the fact that even today a voice a hair too loud could elicit tears in the corner of her eyes. A slammed door across the hall of her apartment always made her flinch.

If Mina were to give that eulogy, she could speak for hours about her mother's unhappiness and discontent, a void that Mina had never been enough to fill, despite her best efforts. Once,

perhaps, when Mina was younger and far more idealistic, she had pleaded for them to attend family therapy. She hoped that somewhere deep down there might be some explanation, some fuzzy resolution to the mess that had become their relationship.

But Mi-seon had laughed, *how American*, she drawled. *My daughter, a gyopo!<sup>1</sup> Therapy, she sneered, isn't real. If you want to talk, you should talk to the dead, they're the only ones who can't do anything but listen.* By then, Mina had graduated college, walking a ceremony that Mi-seon had not attended. A month after graduation, her mother had returned to Seoul, leaving a note declaring Mina grown

up, with a secure job, and no need for a mother to coddle her.

With a thousand mile distance between them, Mina felt she'd finally breathed a sigh of relief she'd been holding her entire life.

It turned out that burning a body takes much longer than you'd expect. For some reason, Mina had expected the whole affair to be done within the hour, but upon a quick google search, realized she would probably be here for six. And so the sparse mourning party grew sparser and the buffet in the reception room grew ever colder. Mina could feel her knees tingling with numbness and shifted uncomfortably on the stiff

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1. gyopo is a term to refer to emigrant Koreans, often used derogatorily to insinuate a lack of true Koreanness

pillow the memorial home had laid out for her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure that looked remarkably like her mother.

“Min-ah,” the voice called. When Mina was in fifth grade, she refused to answer to her Korean name. Her mother hadn’t liked that. Mina turned toward the sound. The last time someone called for her like that was her last call with her mother.

“Yimo,” Mina stood up to greet her aunt, Mi-seon’s younger sister and the last surviving member of Mina’s maternal family.

Mina did not know her aunt very well, save for the occasional visit to Korea, but she had always remembered her fondly. Yimo was infinitely more maternal than Mina’s own mother had ever been, and Mina remembers wishing that Yimo had been the one to raise her when she was a child. Even now, her aunt fussed and fretted over her, persuading her to go into the reception room next door to eat something. Soon, a hot bowl of spicy beef stew (*yukgaejang*) lay in front of Mina next to a bowl of steaming rice. Yimo gestured

for her to eat, and Mina, ever respectful of her elders, dug in.

“You know, they say you have to eat *yukgaejang* to prevent ghosts from sticking to you after the funeral,” Yimo remarked. She had aged since Mina had last seen her, now sporting the curly haired perm of many elderly Korean women. Mina supposed that with age came increased superstition, and only nodded in placid agreement as she drank her soup.

“I promised your mother I’d make you eat a bowl after she passed,” Yimo continued. Mina bit back a scoff. If her mother did exist as a ghost, Mina was sure she would stick somewhere far away from Mina. Distant in death as she had been in life.

“That’s nice of her,” Mina smiled tightly, “I’ve always loved *yukgaejang*.”

“How is, uh, Sam, doing?” Mina stiffened at the mention of her ex-fiance.

“Sam and I split up a while back,” Mina softens her frown, “I thought my mother told you.”



A few years ago, when Mina had caught Sam smiling too often at his phone for comfort, she had called the only person she thought she had left, her mother. And though Mi-seon had picked up the phone and listened to Mina sob through her story, she had flatly told her that it wasn't her place to meddle in Mina's romantic affairs, and that she wouldn't want to impose. She hadn't bothered her again after that.

"Ah, yes, I think Mi-seon had mentioned," her aunt smiled, picking at the *kimchi*. Mina couldn't stop the subtle roll of her eyes.

"There's no need to pretend for her now, Yimo. She's gone, and we both know we weren't on the best of terms. I'm not surprised she never bothered to tell you."

"Now, now, Min-ah, you know that's not true. She cared in her own way, she just wanted to give you your space and independence." Her aunt tutted, scooping more side dishes into her bowl.

"Yes, I'm sure that's what it was," The steam pricked at Mina's eyes as she lowered her gaze to focus on the food in front of her.

"It was difficult, living in the shadow of war," Yimo murmured, "It haunted her all her life. She hoped it would be different for you. That you would have your own life."

"I thought Mom was born after the Korean War," Mina replied, "What do you mean she felt haunted?"

"Ghosts don't die so easily, my dear," her aunt met

Mina's gaze, "For some of us, they may never leave."

Yimo handed Mina a worn photo album, "I came here to give you this. It was your mother's. She wanted you to have it; perhaps it will help you understand."

Mina accepted the book warily. She'd never seen this album before, even when she'd snooped through her mom's things when she was young. It was strange to think that she'd leave something as sentimental as this behind for her estranged daughter, but it was rude not to take it.

After her aunt left, she leafed through the photo album. As expected, she barely recognized anyone in the pictures. An old family photo, of what must have been her mother and Yimo,

along with a stern-looking uniformed man that must have been Mina's grandfather, and a woman dressed in traditional hanbok, Mina's grandmother. A couple pages were dedicated to a young woman who must've been Mina's mother and a man she didn't recognize. Mina shut the book, not wanting to see anymore. This was to be her mother's legacy? A photo album full of people Mina had never met, didn't recognize, and didn't care about? Memories from a time that Mina had never known, time capsules from a Mi-seon she never knew? Mina stared back at the funerary portrait, its frigid persona a stark contrast to the album. Cold, callous, neglectful, she decided. That was who her mother was in life. That was the mother that she knew. And this

posthumously gifted photo album couldn't possibly change it.

As far as Mina was concerned, her mother was dead. Their relationship died years

ago. The painful chapter of her life that had been their relationship was closed. And Mina was happy to let it, along with this photo album, collect dust.

**the haunting** Just like the cremation, making gravestones in Korea took much longer than one would think. So instead of being buried, her mother sat in a jar on the mantle of Mina's service flat, looming over the photo album.

With 12 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  days left of her PTO, Mina decided she might as well enjoy the sights of Seoul. She traversed the palace museums, went on hikes up mountains, and gorged herself on as much authentic Korean food as she could get.



But something strange was afoot. Somewhere between the echoes

of the cicadas and the relentless humidity, she kept seeing what looked like her mother in the crowds around her.

That was impossible right?

And yet, every so often, in the corner of a clothing store mirror she'd spot what looked like her mother perched on a chair, only to turn around and see another Korean *ahjumma*. Or she'd look up from the bowl of *naengmyeon*, cold noodles, to meet her mother's gaze across the restaurant, only for her to blink and see an empty chair.

Mina found no solace in her dreams, every night she inexplicably chased after a young woman, beautiful, tall, and angular, and just when she seemed on the verge of

catching her and seeing who she was, Mina would wake.

After four restless days, Mina sat dumbfounded at her dining table, her mother's urn mocking her from the mantelpiece. She cupped her head in her hands, stirring her coffee mug. Her mother had not crossed her mind in years, and now, suddenly, she couldn't stop hallucinating her. Mina was going insane. *Death is inconvenient*, she thought.

On the fifth day, she called in the cavalry.

"Yimo," Mina greeted as she slid into the seat of her aunt's local *pocha* restaurant.

"Min-ah, I'm surprised you called," her aunt eyed her with calm curiosity, no doubt noting the

shadows that rimmed Mina's eyes, "Of course, I'm always glad to see you. What made you call?"

Mina picked at the rice cakes in front of her. How could she phrase it in a way that *didn't* sound insane? *Hey Yimo, I think I see my dead mother in every crowded place I go.* Like that wasn't a one way ticket to a psychiatric ward.

"Min-ah?"

Mina paused before stabbing another rice cake with her chopsticks, "Do you ever, like, think you see things that aren't, you know, there?"

An uncomfortable beat of silence skipped in the space between them. "Never mind, I know it must sound silly-"

"Yes. I have," her aunt interjected, "When my father died."

Mina's eyes widened. She leaned in, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "You mean you saw him? Just, like, around?" She gestured to the air around them.

“We call them, *gwisin*, ghosts. If you’re seeing one, it means you have unfinished business. It’s not something you can escape by going back home either. You need to confront it,” Yimo took a long sip from her tea, “That’s what I had to do.”

“Confront it? But every time I catch a glimpse she disappears.”

Yimo sighed, “I take it you haven’t looked at the photo album, then?”

Mina leaned back in surprise, “I’ve, uh, leafed through it. What does that album have to do with this?”

“Min-ah. Just, look at it, truly. Envision yourself in its pages and let your mind do the rest.”

## the dream

**It was 12:48 am and Mina sat in bed with the photo album perched on her lap. *I must be going crazy. This whole *gwisin* thing was just some kind of hereditary shared psychosis between her and Yimo. Well, she shrugged, I guess this album is worth a try. Crazier things have happened.***

The album cover was green and frayed, reminiscent of a time long



past. As she flipped it open, she glanced over the stoic family portraits. Everyone in those images, save Yimo, had been lost to time. As she flipped to the next page, her mother smiled up at her, face pressed against the mystery man. *How beautiful*, Mina thought. She had never seen her mother smile like that before. It was almost unrecognizable. A few pages later, Mi-seon was dressed in white next to Mina's father, in an ornate ceremony. Mina had seen this photo once or twice before. Any trace of that former happiness had been replaced by a stiff, dignified smile. *She must have been around my age in this*, Mina realized with a start. Looking closely, she noted what appeared to be bruises around Mi-seon's wrists. *An unfortunate injury?* Mina mused, flipping the page.

The rest of the album was foreign. Baby photos, candid, pictures of Mina that she had never seen before. *When did she take these?* Mina's eyes slowly drifted shut, perusing childhood memories she had long forgotten, and for a brief second, it felt as if someone was tucking her in.

*When Mina opened her eyes, she found herself floating. Just ahead, a young woman, the one Mina had been chasing these past few nights, stood, staring. Her black hair hung loose, drifting like ink around her face. She beckoned toward Mina.*

"Who, who are you?" Mina asked, "Where is this place?"

"I'm Vicky," the girl grasped at Mina's wrist, "Come with me."

*Mina blinked and suddenly they stood in front of an old hanok, a traditional Korean home, in Seoul. Vicky gestured for Mina to step inside.*

*Mina followed the lamps lighting the path, before coming across the living room. A father, mother, and two girls sat around a dining table on the floor. As Mina examined their faces, she realized with a start that one of the girls had her face. She gasped before Vicky shushed her.*

*“What is going on? Who are these people?” she asked.*

*Vicky held a finger to her lips, “Just watch.”*

*The meal was somber. Nobody spoke, and an air of apprehension permeated the home. The father calmly set down his chopsticks as the rest of the family followed suit. Without warning, he flipped the table over, yelling at the mother about the state of the meal.*

*Mina looked away on instinct, breathing in sharply. She cringed as she heard the sound of flesh hitting flesh. When she looked back, she saw the girl, not-Mina, wearing her face shielding the mother*

with her body. In the corner, the younger sister had curled into a ball.

Mina looked at Vicky, “Why are you showing me this?”

“The War left scars on everyone. Some men returned aggressive, irascible, impulsive, unable to regulate or control their emotions. Unable to cope with the devastation they witnessed, they brought it into their own homes. They needed that feeling of accomplishment, of dominance. What better way to get that than through their wives?” Vicky looked somberly at the scene before her, “The mother was pregnant during this time, though he hadn’t known it yet. They lost the baby, a son. Nothing was ever the same.”

•••

Vicky guided Mina out of the hanok, and into the streets. The sky had shifted from night to day, where they came across a couple. On closer inspection, it appeared to be not-Mina with a tall, lanky boy. They held hands shyly, walking along the neighborhood. Not-Mina smiled up at him brightly as he embraced her, before stopping short in her tracks, blood draining from her face. The mother took in the scene before her silently, before wresting not-Mina’s hands from the boy and yanking her back inside.

“What’s going to happen to her?” Mina asked. Vicky silently directed them back in the direction of the hanok.

Night had fallen once more. Mina got the foreboding feeling that whenever night fell, bad things happened in this home.

Not-Mina knelt before her parents. Her father held a wooden stick as he paced around the home.

“I will not,” he said softly, “have my daughter bring dishonor on our home.” He hit not-Mina hard on the back. She bowed over, but remained silent.

“Of all the boys to fool around with,” the father enunciated each word with a blow to not-Mina’s back, “you chose a half-Jap bastard?” His voice spiked with fury.

“You are a shameful traitor. Fraternizing with the enemy,” The blows came down harder and harder. Blood seeped through

not-Mina’s clothing as she silently swallowed back tears.

He turned to the mother, breathing heavily and pointing the stick at her, “You raised her like this? You can’t even give me a son and you raise this bitch to sell out for the enemy? He’ll kill you, he’ll kill us all!”

He dragged the girl up by the collar and spit in her face, “You disgust me. You will never see him again or I’ll kill him myself. No one would care anyway for that filthy mixed race brat. You stay in this house for the rest of your life until I find you someone to marry.” He tossed her to the floor, limp like a ragdoll.

Mina almost burst into the room herself, but Vicky shook her head, “Why are you showing me these

awful things? He's a monster and we're just here to stand by and watch?"

Vicky smiled sadly, "His mother was a comfort woman during the colonial era. She got impregnated by a soldier right before the Japanese left. His hatred comes from his own self-loathing."

...

When Mina blinked, her and Vicky were suddenly in a wedding hall. Not-Mina had grown older, her parents hair had grayed, and her younger sister was no longer a child. She was dressed in all white, next to a man that was not the lanky boy from her youth, but rather appeared to be a decade her senior.

Gone was the girl who had protected her mother at the cost of herself, or the girl who refused to let her father see her cry. In her place, not-Mina was stiff and malleable, worn-down. She smiled at her new husband after a wary glance from her father.

Vicky and Mina followed the new couple on their journey across the ocean to America. It was a polite, cordial relationship between them. Mina hoped

perhaps that not-Mina might find a new start away from her family here.

Mina hoped in vain.

Not-Mina's new husband hid his horrific nature in a much more subtle manner than her father had. When upset, he hit her in places not easily visible to the naked eye. Cigarette burns to her stomach when he was drunk. He'd pull her hair to drag her around. And when they had their child, a tiny infant girl, he would hold the baby while whispering threats.

"Vicky," Mina swallowed, voice choked up with emotion, "Why are we looking at this? Why did

you bring me here? Who are you?"

Vicky grasped Mina's hands, "Close your eyes with me." Mina closed her eyes, feeling a chill rush down her spine.

And she remembered. She felt the anger not-Mina had felt toward her father, her mother, the world. The joy and happiness she'd had with the boy. The despair, loneliness, fear, courage, and hope it took to raise a child after all she'd been through. And deep inside, buried underneath all these things, Mina thought she felt what might have been love.

She remembered whose story this was.

## the burial

**When Mina awoke, the summer rains had descended upon Seoul. She picked up her phone and dialed the memorial hall.**

“Hello? Yes, I was wondering if I could add something to the gravestone I ordered.”

...

Mina watched as the teal urn was laid to rest into the ground. Beside it, she placed the photo album, before signalling they could cover it back up with dirt.

She knelt down on the wet earth, breathing in the scent of dirt and incense. Before her stood a granite gravestone.

*Here lies Mi-seon Vicky Oh.*

*Mother, daughter, survivor.*

Mina wept.





EVERYTHING MATTERS

