

**december in nanjing, 1937**

katanas can cut through everything.  
tonight the air is thick with silence  
and the moon is lonely.

fragile syllables, a call for *ba*, are caught  
in the torrent of ash that falls  
like winter snow onto ground stained moroccan red clay

the streets carry scars like ancient ink on paper  
calligraphed into the earth  
with rifle.

the sky is pale like salmon scales  
it watches a little girl carve her last prayer  
into the frosted, numb soil;  
she wants her brother back.

the wind collects its offerings:  
porcelain shards frozen to merlot red  
a shoe too small for flight—no laces can be wings  
the remnant of a mother's lullaby still clutching to its melody line  
the curve of a static wrist wretched in calm.

on nights like these the air tastes like metal,  
the way a promise does broken in two.

what is left behind  
becomes the city's vocabulary.  
we dictionary our history in margins.

the qinhuai swells with stories  
nobody will tell.  
years from now, the river will still porpoise  
thick crimson beneath its surface  
and somewhere a plum blossom tree will bloom,  
its flowers heavy with grief.

**he told me he knew the world**

when he told me he knew the world,  
i asked him if he saw  
finger lakes that jewel when God  
strikes them with lightning  
and fractures their tops into shards of ivory  
until emerald chips away from the coral below.  
if he felt a lover's hands  
in the night when the only sounds were love songs  
that crickets and cicadas  
sing to each other, even though they remain hopeless  
romantics deaf to each other's tongue.  
if her fingers, calloused from a day's work in the weeds,  
hold him under the rutted, icy bedsheets  
writing him a hearth from the  
words she traces into the back of his thin knuckles.  
if he has ever listened to the light breathing of his baby  
in the morning when she calls  
for her mother,  
who dons cascading white silk  
like she is ready to be wedded again  
in the afterlife.  
the mahogany wood of her casket  
is sickening. it rots under the sunlight.  
if he smelled the richness  
of a pink lotus' tear in the foggy evening  
when it tilts its carpel up toward the empty moon  
and waves goodbye to the lonely rabbit that lives there;  
the clean, almost watery scent of millennia-  
old papyrus on barricades of worship three-  
hundred feet under,  
where the desert sand whispers across the barren land  
with a sliding of shells and a ruptured fragment of t-rex bone;  
the aroma of marine matter washed ashore by the tide  
who will one day learn to accept that it has been  
long left behind.  
if he tasted vermont maple, fresh  
from their mother tree and graced by  
an oak pollen residual

from yesterday's migrating hummingbirds,  
maybe also touched up by a hair of wisteria, a peppered  
teaspoon of nearby pine.

i ask if he has any of this and he says  
none;

he does not know the world  
because the world has made itself too much for him.

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**tastes of home / taste of homes**

the gut-busting bodega is two streets down,  
one hundred and seventy-six wistful treads away.  
i can almost glean the ghostly presence of  
you, like translucent dust sparkling  
under the waning afternoon rays  
as they careen towards a memory—  
plastered door with its viridian roof  
and burgundy window frames.

it reminds me of flags, with its  
mexican aisle next to the chinese food section  
even though the world  
doesn't work that way.  
because since when was central america  
a few feet from asia?

my makeshift mother points to her chilled chicken  
packaged inside its coffin built from frosty,  
snowflake-speckled tortilla  
on the cardboard container that smells  
like my third-floor attic  
while it watches the winter plums blossom.

on another vessel,  
my standby father waves hello—  
he has just returned from war and accompanies  
the sound of our sheepdog's welcome  
as the aroma of a general's chicken.

they say it's romantic,  
but i think the red string of fate tied  
the wrong people together  
since my two countries clearly aren't compatible  
like hydrangeas and daylilies are.

and yet madre's petal caresses  
bà bà's cheek so softly,  
nearly as delicately as the spring breeze

smiles upon its kumquat branches  
after a couple moments' wet shower of liquid crystals.

thinking of them,  
i grab both of my frozen dinner(s),  
a faithful salute to both countries  
yet patriotic to none.  
my citizenship tips to no side on the scale;  
it forever teeters on a slip of paper  
that weakly squawks a CARMEN  
and holding her hand from the right, a CHUNG  
but these ten letters are too out of place.

i wonder which shard of me i should  
pledge fealty to tonight  
on my midnight run,  
searching for what might be a brief  
taste of a home.

## Truths

There are so many ways to get hurt.

You could get killed  
or worse, raped.

Keep your hair up  
so there are no strays other people can tug.

When you walk around  
don't shake your ass like those sluts you see on the streets.

Get breakfast for your brother first,  
and then you can eat.

But remember! Don't eat more than this  
or more than that. If there's a question, water is the answer.

When you put on a skirt  
I shouldn't see your knees.

Wear one bra size smaller,  
why do your boobs grow so much?

Use the three-shade lighter foundation I bought you  
you'll look whiter in the big world of willies.

Stay away from the train tracks  
so you're not the next Michelle Go.

Find your way to a rich avenue  
like Madison or Park.

Come back before seven,  
after seven there are so many more ways to get hurt.

### Rhapsody

In March, the days in the little village on the edge of Ine are murderously dull.

Samishi has long been whittled down to accompany this life through its stages. Every morning, he wakes up to the lonely call of the village chief's rooster; its name is Tomo, and its crowing is always slashing through the dense air that settles permanently on everybody's skin.

Samishi's father has a clog workshop near the bamboo shoots that line the river's edge. To get there, Samishi follows the sprouts, buttoning the dirt like a handful of brooches punctured into a ball of yarn.

His job is to take the chiseling knife and scrape scabrous wood smooth. Sometimes, he carves dinosaurs. Once the sauropod receives its javelin pole neck and the spinosaurus its coral backpack, the children come to the workshop and take their new toys. They like to pretend the meteor is coming, the dinosaurs are dying, and the world is ending. They indulge in this activity to avoid standing in the white sun and watching their copper skin become brittle chocolate by dinnertime.

Samishi's father is proud of him. He is sure that, once his little boy grows up, he will be the best clog-maker in the village—maybe even in Japan. Samishi's father has already planned out his son's life: his son will graduate from school and begin official work immediately; he will be an apprentice at the workshop for two more years and then marry the baker's girl.

Bakers' girls are the best wives: they know how to care for families so their husbands can earn money. Samishi's father believes people are unhappy with money—they become happy when they have *enough* money. He also believes Samishi will do well at the clog workshop because there is only so much money he can make. If he makes too much, he will leave the workshop and then the village... By the time their neighbors realize Samishi is gone, he will not want to come back.

These are some things that Samishi's father thinks about every day. But what does his little boy think?

Samishi doesn't think much; he likes talking to the cows. They have their conversations around midday before the cows finish sifting through the beady checkerboard of the pasture for a square where the sun has not yet announced its reign. The air is so hot and heavy that Samishi asks the cows if Newton's law about gravity is really valid; if it is, the apple definitely would have broken Newton's hand if it fell through this kind of atmosphere. The cows say that they hope someday someone will prove Newton wrong. Then, they can fly away from this earth that is filled with grass. Samishi asks why they aren't content with the grass; the cows say it is flat and unexciting and that the god who made this world was cruel in his tastelessness.

A flying squirrel descends to join them. The cows tell their new companion she is lucky to have wings because once Newton's law is proven wrong, it will be easy for her to go to the moon. The flying squirrel shakes her head; she confesses she doesn't know how to use her wings. Samishi laughs. It is impossible for a flying squirrel to not know how to fly.

The flying squirrel stretches her paper-thin patagium and licks a splinter. She says there is no need to use her wings because Ine has no predators. She likes being safe, and she thinks going to the moon will be dangerous.

The animals ask Samishi if he would go to the moon. They all know that Samishi doesn't love the baker's girl. To the cows and the flying squirrel, Samishi has no reason to stay.

He tells them he cannot marry the baker's girl because he is already in love with somebody else.

You see, Samishi is young and doesn't know what to do with his love. He doesn't even know what love is. The cows tell him that love is supposed to make someone feel good by giving them a warm and fuzzy feeling. The flying squirrels ask: isn't love supposed to be more than that?

Samishi feels his love profoundly, but he thinks if he gives up everything for his love, he will lose himself.

As the darker hours gradually break through the clouds, he says farewell to the cows and the flying squirrel and goes to sit by the edge of the sea, where the horizon is visible if he squints hard enough. He watches the fishermen reel in their nets as the setting sun dyes the sparkling water a blood-lustered red.

He wonders about his love for some time by himself before an elderly woman approaches him.

"Aren't you cold?" she asks.

Samishi glances at her. He then looks back at the waves that lap onto the seashore, trawling a baby turtle onto its backside and into the ocean.

"The nets come back empty again," he says. He knows that the oldest woman in the village is the chief's wife, who looks like a raven, and this woman is blanketed in strawberry-blondeness.

"I don't come from around here," she confirms.

Samishi doesn't want to make his father unhappy by speaking to someone unknown, but he is bested by his curiosity.

"Where are you from, then?"

She points to the waning skyline. "From across the ocean, where I am free."

She sits down on the sand, flattening her white robes and letting them spread around her like wings. Lying down on her back, she looks like an angel.

"You want to be free, too," she says matter-of-factly after a moment.

Samishi shakes his head.

"You would like to fly," the grandmother repeats, "Just like I can."

The boy shrugs. "The nets are empty," he says. Standing up, he motions to where the older men stand. "I should go help the fishermen."

The beach breeze erases his small figure from the sand. Samishi leaves in a hurry, swiftly making his way towards the fishermen huddled together like penguins. The sun grazes the end of

the azure earth and leaves a shimmering path of diamonds in its wake. Strewn across the wooden boats, the empty nets greedily bask in the last few rays of the fading afternoon sunlight.

His eyes fall upon a figure dressed in white robes that flutter above her head. She sits on a large rock with the fishermen in sight, but they do not notice her. Samishi wonders how the grandmother arrived across the beach in a shorter time than he.

"More often than not," the grandmother says, "the answers we are searching for do not necessarily sit at our planned destinations. Instead, they are found along the way."

"But I'm not going anywhere," Samishi replies, "So how will there be a journey?"

The grandmother pats the space next to her. "Just because you think you're not going anywhere doesn't mean you aren't."

The young boy shakes his head and looks at the preserved ocean, the same ocean that the dinosaurs saw and that he sees today.

*Leave the village,* it calls to him.

"There is too much I will leave behind," he says to nobody in particular.

"You're right," the grandmother admits, "Freedom given freely is just a disguise for another shackle."

"I am neither a fortune teller nor a soothsayer," she continues, "So I will not determine your actions for you. The only thing I can do is clear the mist before the paths you *can* take."

"But what if I don't want there to be more than one path?"

"Ah," the grandmother chuckles, "That is because the only path known to you is the one chiseled out by your father. Of course, you don't want there to be another path since you are only familiar with one."

The boy flushes a light crimson color that slithers the top of his cheekbones and spreads to his small ears. Watching him, the elderly woman takes his tender hand in her bony one. Samishi feels the tip of her metacarpal bones dig into his soft skin. Using her thumb, she rubs his palm in small circles.

"Sooner or later, though, you'll face the true feelings you have been trying so desperately to escape from for all this time," she says, "Now that you think about it, it feels like a tremendous waste of time, doesn't it?"

"My true feelings..." Samishi muses, the constant kneading of his palm entrancing him in a queer stupor.

The grandmother points at two seagulls playfully plummeting into the ocean one after the other. They disappear briefly before reemerging and splattering water droplets on the sand.

"See those two birds there? They're certainly afraid of the ocean because of whatever may be lurking under the surface, yet they still choose to dive into the water."

"What do my true feelings have to do with seagulls?" Samishi has trouble following.

The grandmother pinches his cheek. He turns from her. "Listen here," she says, "Humans are just like birds. They fear facing their deepest fears but still seek the thrill of experiencing them."

"For you," she continues, "I think you are fearful of your love."

The elderly woman's white sleeves touch him lightly as they sway in the wind. They flow like water, an impenetrable force cool to the touch.

"I don't even know what my love is," Samishi says bluntly.

"You don't have to," she responds.

"But I can't be afraid of something I don't know."

"Yes, you can. Many people I meet go on journeys where the destination is hidden behind clouds. Sometimes there's even rain. Or a storm. They don't know where they're going either, and they're afraid too."

"I don't care about journeys" Samishi says, "I have a good life planned out already."

The grandmother clicks her tongue. "You see, you too know your life is already planned for you. You will grow up to marry the baker's girl, and she will give you as many children as your father wants. Then, you'll inherit the clog workshop and be there chiseling away until you can do so no longer. Does that sound like a good life for you?"

Samishi looks at the sky, where a group of birds fly in an organized V-shape formation, each above the other so they can see every other family member. A blue feather floats down from above into the sand before him.

"I think it sounds like a comfortable life."

"It would be a comfortable life," the grandmother says. "You'll have everything you think you need: a wife, children, money, and your father's approval. But do you not want to create a life for yourself?"

"Will being afraid of my love hinder my journey if I take one?"

The grandmother smiles. "My job isn't to tell you how to go about journeying."

"Can you tell me anything, anything at all, about love?"

She stands up and clasps her hands before her, lightly caressing her stomach.

"Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it heals. But you wouldn't know when it does which. Even I don't know."

"What *do* you know, then?"

She chuckles. "Not as much as you think I do."

The moon hangs in the sky, looking over the village. It bows lower each minute. Samishi wonders who the moon is bowing to.

"You have a lot of love to give, child," the grandmother says. "Throughout your journey, make sure to give it all."

"I don't know where my love even is. Where can I look for it?"

She taps the left side of her chest. "You can look for it in here. あなたの心の中で."

As the village's ancient proverb reads, when you speak to another in their second language, you speak to their mind. But when you speak to another in their native language, you speak to their heart.

For Samishi, this is the first time he truly believes his heart is full.