**Bolt Trap**

(Class of 1940 Prize in Fiction)

Each of us knew why we were there. We had fled from small dogs and mowed lawns, but behind the chain-link fence, hung with green tarpaulin, we let what we did explain. Some of us brought in stereos and put them among the shipping pallets. Once Que dropped his palette, and the paint ran into the rugged ground, mixed, and hardened into nubs against the bricked-up garage door, which looked to some of us like anthills reemerging after you’d poured tobacco water over the entrances a month ago and killed them all. Que spat at the overall-wearing kid – he’d gotten the paint from Blick, expensive blick – who’d caught his arm with her cable walking past. It was the same feeling you have at an amusement park or carnival – we saw something in our own mirrors, saw traces of each other, the dust that floated off music stands and was brushed off walls right before the artists began to shake their cans, the insides rattling like bells. We loved Que, and her. Some of us thought his hands stank, and some of us thought Overalls’ Carmina High planner was the color of a bruise, but we threaded ourselves into the thin hallways and drew speckled Mayan skulls onto the exposed wood ceiling. We loved ourselves.

The valuables were lugged upstairs, where the plywood and dry white paint was stacked – a vintage keyboard, multicolored ink bottles with packets of needles, a start-up EDM glockenspiel. We hung spray-painted fabric in the windows spelling out “Bolt Trap” and funneled electricity in through a drywall hole. The mattresses, eaten and worn, were more of an afterthought. There were more and more of us everyday – we couldn’t tell our property apart anymore, or know exactly where anything came from. We watched our stained feet to keep from tripping over the snaking electrical cords, clambered over the mounds of tattoo designs and wind-up clocks. Overalls told us she’d rather design than shoot up anymore. Once Que brought his mother for a terrible visit – she’d clicked her tongue at the murals Duncan had put hours into, asked for Que to take her to the chiropractor like he’d agreed to after listening to the beat Theodora had created from antique bicycle parts after a rare small grant. We were jealous – bit our tongues clean through at the thought of money for our work. We rousted ourselves and the old soft fury about luck, grew gigantic ears that flopped over Theodora’s shoulder, listening for the essence of her success.

Finally Que left with his mother, bringing back a small plastic tool for us he’d taken from the office. It was shaped like two whale humps and hewn from electric blue plastic. No one could figure out what it was for. So Que let us bid – everyone wanted it, hungered for a part of the mystery in their art. The price shot up, we shouted collectively, shoot it up, up up! Overalls tossed forward a bag of roasted whole pig bones, perfectly clean. We wanted to outdo Theodora, shut her up, slam her face into the puddle of expired engine oil on the floor, talking items so fast she couldn’t get a word in. Yes, yes, an authentic Hawaiian lei that Kate handed for Que to feel whether the flowers were real, only to break apart in his rough hands and Kate screaming and diving for the petals before Duncan wheeled in a sculpture of auto parts, wheeled it into her, accidentally, and left a charcoal-black mark on her cheek. Theodora yelled, we cheered, Theodora threw her spare music amp at Que’s feet, we crushed parts of it then chickened out, Que holding the strange tool above his head, we watched Mara the bi-ex-bodybuilder turn someone else’s music on and offer a medium tattoo to Que, wouldn’t it look good on your arm? We watched and grabbed at Que’s elbows when he kept refusing, until finally he ran down the rickety stairs and we chased after his rich scent. When he ran out beyond the fence we all stopped. Some of us poked around the single entrance a little more, and those who knew Que best ran out along the nearest blocks, but we were mole rats – suddenly struck and turned around by the breeze, unable to see or follow far beyond Bolt Trap. We recollected our items – crushed, dented, disfigured by, it seemed, our crowd’s very heat. We left to our own corridors until Que came back in a few hours and informed us all that he’d returned the tool to the chiropractor’s office, snuck around the door and left it as a doorstop, which was as much guts as he could handle. And we felt, rather than heard, him announce the party.

Outward we looked, and friends of friends arrived that night, after we’d set up Theodora’s contraption and a poster announcing her grant, which might invite luck on us if anyone new came around. We cleaned up, repainted the faded letters in Bolt, let Overalls have an opening act, had Mara offering small ones for free. We watched Kate throw the broken lei away rather than offer it to us, dissed her under our breaths for selfishness. But even she helped Que display paintings, and found examples of Mara’s work to stand beside her for the first hour. We polished our music, set out cheap wine, wired the room to bursting with sound, everyone pitching in for spare mics for the acts and spare scarves for the less devoted Bolt Trap homeless, who lived in their own unfinished rooms in the belly of the warehouse. All of us rented makeshift rooms – the water was rarely murky though the heating often clanked and stopped like someone interrupted while speaking. Outside, the tarpaulin, our only indicator of wind from the upper floors, was still as we drank and danced. We shared our joy, played and shoved our creations around, shining in the warm daze. Overalls cut off a large portion of her hair sometime. Mara had just finished her eleventh tattoo as we moved and sang, as focused as the point of her needle toward the happiness that Bolt, that Bolt, have you heard, Bolt Trap had gotten us a legend, some legend of people who sweated underneath the strobe lights yet smiled at their own thoughts, their own work!

There were flashes of Que, dancing, when the first cable sparked. We hurried to replace Theodora’s ruined beat with a song. We could no longer get downstairs. Light began to bounce off Duncan’s figures arranged in the main hallway. We imagined breathing this heat of creation, a fever from our very guts, it becoming a part of us. Some of us threw ourselves, like logs, out the window and through the night. Those of us nursing hangovers quickly added another shot to our lemon water. The haze and smoke rose quickly, like we were waking up to find mist far as we could see after a clear day. Oil puddles on the floor began to ripple, then vapor. Each of us knows this feeling, rocking inside a cabin full of mirrors, none of which seem to portray yourself as yourself in the true size. Que looked to be overreacting – he’d been pushing his paintings out of reach of the biting light, running toward the stairs only to sway back only to go there again, looking down toward the warmth. Overalls had vanished. Mara was too calm, and we watched her batting away the flames from her equipment, the tattooed people long gone from her side. And outside, siren blared and water ripped the middle letters of Bolt Ship apart, fabric scattering like snow. We held the strange coldness of moving lights, the faint blast of water ever cascading downwards. We worked together, pushed our art away from the stairs – the laptop with the winning beat, the jewelry and the welded parts.

We watched our cables heating across the ground as warily as if they were snakes emerging from

desert hideaways, or from camouflage. The ash we smeared on our cheeks without knowing if we were

doing it on purpose, to look like artifacts we’d seen in museums. We cried briefly, but never against the

space, never against the rarely-seen owner who’d rented out a space for our happiest times, then watched

the windows melt away from the sills. When the roof fell in and we could not watch we watched the

tarpaulin below us, burnt and billowing from our force, not so much heating or moving but becoming

louder, then hush.

**Angls of Nrthrn Blvd**

Chestnut once asked me if I knew where I was. I said yes, I was in a dressing room. No, she said, exactly where. The address and all. I mean, I’m pretty sure we’re still in New York but I never keep track of where my parents take me every week. I don’t think I’ve even looked at the number of the street. Do you? I said no and added that it was pretty weird. By this time she was hunched over, picking at her shoe. I could see the soft bumps of her spine through her leotard. Me neither. Darn, I laced this whole thing wrong. Could you help me undo this knot? Her stubby fingers picked at the tight ribbon. I helped her. She said thanks. I’m just trying this out, you know. My mom thinks toe shoes are expensive and besides I like swimming better. You’re nine, right? I confirmed this and she said she was the same. We continued like this for a few more minutes. She peeled back the topsoil and I poked at the squirmy mulch, fascinated. She built up the plaster walls of Jana Joy’s Dance School, nails between her braces-caged teeth. I inspected the caulk and the heads of countless dark-haired girls milling through the sun-slathered entrance for lice. Chestnut just kept talking and somehow I found myself reluctantly giving her gel toe pads the first sprinkle from my brand-new canister of baby powder. I even stamped on her pointe shoes the way I had been taught a week before to soften them, and she said they felt better, then asked me if I thought it was weird that

‘Boulevard’ could be shortened to ‘Blvd’.

“I guess. I remember being surprised seeing ‘Pkwy’ somewhere and how my mom told me that it was actually ‘Parkway’.”

“Yeah! It’s like the vowels were taken out of it. Maybe they just didn’t have room or something but then other words should be like that too instead of squishing all the letters so small that sometimes you can’t even read the word.” Chestnut stood up, wobbling on the stiff soles, then braced herself against the wall and rose onto one boxy toe, then the other. That was what everyone did, and like me last week she went down heavily after a second. I copied her, excited, but could only keep on my toes for a few

more moments before I thudded back.

“Is this right? It kind of hurts.” I shrugged, and she walked in an uneven circle, the shoes making

her feet sound like a horse’s on the wooden floor. Then both of us went out into the studio. After class I

wanted to ask Chestnut what she’d thought but she was one of the first to get picked up, and I didn’t see

her next week, or the next. I didn’t really think about her for a while, actually, because a few weeks later I

got cancer.

I was very convinced. The new nubs on my chest were sure signs of my declining health, and during showers the coin-sized bumps ruined the vast bone field of my chest that had, for the majority of my life, promised smoothness and painless collisions. A few days later I called my mother into the bathroom and pulled down the collar of my shirt. She had brought the newspaper in with her and her fingers were stained gray. Cancer, she said quickly. What, really? Yes, and with this parting word I became a warden. Nothing could change me without my permission. Early on I pressed into them gingerly, fingers square over the two intruders underneath my nipples. Secretly, in showers or under my covers. As lying on my front became more painful and my leg began to descend, inch by inch every week during ballet floor extensions, the unfairness of my disease struck me deeper. I would press more often, leaning against a wall at school or nudging them with my elbows, imagining them breaking and dissolving. I was the kind of person who defined herself by the number of chest blocks I could do in playground soccer, and reveled in every increment of ballet flexibility I claimed. The sore lumps of tissue would make me useless exercising, make me forget the proficiency and confidence I had in my body. I interrogated my mother at least once a day, who always repeated her diagnosis, then offered me dinner or asked about my homework. To be honest she was busy and I was busy too, mutinously pushing at my chest more and more. Never really harder, though. I was afraid of pain that didn’t come from normal exercise and I was afraid I would make it worse by exploding them or something. You can see why I forgot Chestnut for a while.

Jana gave Chestnut her name. She was new, and I must have been late the first class she was there because I never got her real name. Next week everyone was wondering what to call her because her only name was in another language and was hard to remember. Chestnut didn’t offer anything up, and so Teacher Jana said that her skin looked like the inside of a chestnut. Jana was sitting behind Chestnut, pushing Chestnut’s body toward her straightened legs. Every time Chestnut bent a knee Jana pushed that down as well, but I saw that she was still going easy on her, letting her get away with a slight knee bend as long as Chestnut’s stomach touched her thighs.

It was true, Chestnut had a tan, and the name stuck with me at least. So I watched her begin sharpening her body to support ballet. We didn’t talk much the year she was there, at least I didn’t, and we looked like friends solely because she talked so much. Her gritted teeth and sweating body never transformed into tears like some of the younger girls. She said that she would be able to arch her back and touch her thighs with her head like me in two months. She did. How about a split against the wall? She did it three months later. I learned that she meant what she said so I heard the weird things out.

Chestnut bit her nails, and I often saw her chewing away at scaly bits on her rubber mat during exercises. I still didn’t cut my own fingernails so they grew in the long periods between my mother’s trimmings. My thing was that I’d scrape the dirt from underneath them so much that the white part became translucent.

She always chose a spot at the back but I saw her in the mirror in the brief moments of changing sides and shifting legs. We competed in the humid studio on warped linoleum and endured Jana’s harsh adjustments and slaps with the provided bowls of pretzels and gummy bears. Multicolored lights were strung at the top of the floor-to-ceiling mirror in December, and the closed front door would be casually wedged open every now and then come March. By July it would be gaping to air the then-sauna of a studio out. When our feet were deemed sturdy enough for pointe I began aiming for radio silence, too focused on the precarious new height I now had to possess. Chestnut didn’t let me get away with that. None of that boring adult weather and economy stuff. Why can ‘Boulevard’ be ‘Blvd’ but ‘pointe’ can’t be ‘pnte’?

One of the last times we performed together she got me and a younger girl I didn’t know to pose. It was backstage, near the bouquet of plastic-wrapped flowers in a vase. Some of the water had spilled onto the plastic fold-up table, and the bulbs over the makeup mirrors were dimmed. Chestnut told us to kick our legs out as high as we could to either side of her, and we grabbed onto them as she straightened her leg, kicked it up in front so that her thigh touched her nose, and held it for a moment. I was impressed.

“Charlie’s Angels. I saw it from somewhere. See, our legs are the guns.”

“Shouldn’t we do this on stage? Our parents want to take photos.”

“Eh, we don’t really need that.” Chestnut’s eyebrow suddenly looked too arched, and the sequins on her outfit had started to fall off. The curl at the end of her eyeliner seemed thin and exaggerated, so I looked at myself in the dark mirror. Sure enough, I was the same. Stage makeup is meant to be seen from a distance. She shooed the other girl off first and followed, chatting with me about fourth grade, how’s fourth grade treating you?

Chestnut still hadn’t come back when Jana noticed. I was standing in line for a series of spins on pointe and all I could notice were the splitting seams in the shoes of the more experienced dancers. The satin had run ragged and whenever one went down I saw the exposed canvas on their toes in the mirror. It was very quick. Jana took the collar of my leotard, as if feeling it, then pulled and let go. It snapped gently against the sweat that had become my skin.

“You should start covering that up.” Then she swept past me, yelling instructions at the dancers to space themselves out a little more. I looked down at the dark round smudges that, I now realized, had become more and more apparent over the past weeks behind my pink leotard.

“Chestnut’s not here? Again? The rest of you all come on time, right?”

My flesh had teased me with every evidence of permanence and now it was confirmed. By then I had begun to realize the truth but had refused to cover and hinder myself. It wasn’t my lack of knowledge about my body that made the room spin then, but the knowledge that I still didn’t know why types of streets could be abbreviated. I pretended a brown spot on the far wall was her face as I spun unsteadily. She would ask her mom about the lack of ‘pnte’. I had fewer routes. Rising onto pointe should look effortless. I would take a Jana Joy Dance School business card, which had the address of the place. The new satin slipped and I was afraid of falling. Arching my arms around as best I could with every turn. That is, they were stuck at a certain angle, caught between the shame that tried to conceal my chest and Jana’s judgment. Or were they one and the same?

Chestnut‘s never been this vulnerable. She still hasn’t gone through this in my mind. She stays there, in the dressing room, reasoning that we would probably know about abbreviations if we had to, bet it would be different if we had to bring ourselves here. People think believing in Peter Pan is stupid. I don’t know if I’m stupid. Her light brown skin has unraveled so that she’s just a cluster of ideas in large handwriting. She makes it fit, taking out what is possible for her. Better. Better than nothing at all.

**The Semester of Fading**

**Dr. Mary Ren**

**Contact**: mren34@longinghs| 728-843-2732

**Office**: 246 (a room I haunt with a swivel chair that runs ridges into the carpet and four people whose

backs of heads I can recognize on sight)

**Office Hours**: Late afternoon, sometimes in the deli a few blocks away where the cashier makes you put

the money on the counter instead of into his hand. Once in the Tempest Bar and Grill on a thin yellow

stool.

**Course Description**: This course is about reduction. It’s about me knowing the difference between a

metaphor and a simile at age eight, and me eight months later writing in a notebook with six pictures of

tamagotchis on the cover. The green and blue ones were winking, greeting me with round, whole bodies. It

will involve naps in a dented SUV, wearing a sweater from a thrift store. By November, the focus will be

America’s romance with tragedy and going out for a run at one am carrying nothing. Preparation for the

final will largely involve crafting formal literary essays and my conjoined twin.

**Texts:** We’ll discuss American novels, essays, and poems of the twentieth-century that recur in my dreams

as shrapnel bombings and nomads wearing haute couture scaling a valley. We will redraw the shape of my

back and the look of my face, delve deep into the symbolism of lights so bright you know there’s going to

be surgery one way or another. The text is either buried in Fort Acacia Cemetery in a half-size enamel box

or has been donated for medical research.

**Attendance:** Punctuality is my punctuation. It keeps you from floating off like a balloon, pops rather than

allow you to shrivel from pressure. I will not be in attendance for most of the semester as I’ve started

feeling glassy. I’ll stand there and explain but everything’s ephemeral. It’s a shame but really it is.

**Grading:** You will be graded based on your aptitude as an armchair philosopher and on your ability to

cauterize a wound. Please, no jeremiads. Catalogs of woe do not inspire me to subscribe to your soul. Class

participation is optional, as always.

**September 5 “The Things They Carried”, Tim O’ Brien**

We will open our study with a through analysis of division, from cutting to stitching to pedaling a bike on

the edge of a high bridge with a low fence. The first time I read this I was on a flight by myself. Speeding

towards a global affairs program, side still throbbing and flexing my scholarship bandaid on top of

cockroach-infested bathroom cabinets and pajama pants with broken waistbands that I had to keep pulling

up. A man with blonde arrow-shaped forelocks whistled in the aisle, only pausing to say that I looked like

a lawyer.

I will try to lead a discussion on Lt. Jimmy Cross and his obsession. It doesn’t do any good to run

your mind to death without knowing her coldness, or warmth. I will try to infuse symbolism into blown-off

body parts but I won’t quite manage it. Destruction doesn’t matter, the destroyed are only hidden. She’ll

write him and he’ll read her for the rest of his life.

After the plane landed I got off and got lost. It must have happened while I was fingering my

stitches or gazing at the Arabic above a flower shop. Where were the chaperones? I started walking.

Whenever I look down in this classroom I’m still looking at stained white airport tiles.

**October 10 Passages from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” Henry David Thoreau’s**

**“Civil Disobedience,” and “Selected Poems” by Emily Dickinson**

Which childhood can I never escape from? I remember all the roofs I’ve been on. Here is an itinerary:

Shall I postpone my acceptation and realization and scream at my eyes,

That they turn from gazing after and down the road,

And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent,

Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and which is ahead?

After a while I began graduating stuff. He had only shared part of my liver and a kidney and after his

deflated body was gone I put him out ⎯ him, with his translucent, easily-bruisable skin and missing toes,

so that he only had lumps for feet. He had latched on somehow, hungry for my strong heart and

functioning respiration, and weighed no more than an average housecat. So I left every school with honors

and would occasionally climb onto roofs. First it was the garage, onto which I slung from the balcony and

clung to the red ceramic tiles. Far below, the backyard encircled weeds up to my hip and mosquitoes. I will

pose a Socratic Seminar on the brown snail I found sucking on a brick there as a major project for this unit.

Additionally, there will be an assignment in which you mimic Emily’s dashes ⎯ her ability to cut the page

neatly. We will have a debate over whether she was a good cook, or at least a precise one. No gristle, but

the remnants hang like ghosts.

**November 3 “Their Eyes Were Watching God” by Zora Neale Hurston**

Class adjourned.

**December 7 “The Scarlet Letter” by Nathaniel Hawthorne**

To be honest I still don’t know the others in my office. The swivel chair is too new and too heavy to

maneuver. After the parent-teacher conferences the whole gaggle burst into the outside world, voices

echoing down the staircase and pushing with a crunch on the main door like nobody’s business. Luke was

kind enough to invite me but my desk has a photo of my mother so truly no one expected me to go.

Stomach growling, I tapped at my computer: A…

A what? ‘A’ was used much too much in English. Appendage? His mass used to hang off of my

body like a knapsack. Adulterer? Had he cheated my mother by squirming onto my body like dried sap to a

tree?

As demonstrated, this unit will involve a lot of questioning. We will question, and lead from that;

we will analyze the portrayal of Puritan society and Hester’s self-sustainability. No womb could cook her

up ⎯ she isn’t devoured. No twin leeches off of twelve-year-old *her* and makes her short of breath. She

chooses her breath, and if she loses it it’s because she’s climbed too high an altitude to breathe and be

anything other than whole.

**January 9 “The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald.**

Sometimes I miss him. I sometimes wonder if he could ever have counted to three or stacked alphabet

blocks, one day simply grabbing all of my neurons and moving my body, and I would be cheering him on

with an invisible mind. This lesson will begin with an introduction to 1920s America and a transplant of

Nick and me, or possibly switching us at birth. We couldn’t afford dividing me at birth, so I covered him

with thick, soft jackets and was called a buff rugby player once. Summer burned me up and my face would

become water and melt like a snow angel, or so I’d thought at the time. This unit will culminate with an

essay on the philosophy of swimming. You may elaborate on the mentality of both floating and treading

water. Undress, classmate pool parties and beach trips would tell me. People who like green are more

compassionate. There’s a reason why the sun isn’t green in this world. I was embarrassed like I am now

fresh out of academia and teaching these jaunty young people. Now I wish I had taken off those sweaty

skins, bared him to the world when I still could.

**Final**

Your final is to accumulate and multiply yourself as a representation of what you have learned in this

course, undetermined by essay or exam. Now I look at those four backs of heads and I see tendons and

ligaments bridging them. With every touch my students are stuck together, the fine details of fingers and

noses as indistinguishable as individual cloud wisps seen from the ground. Bits and pieces, but not

chimera, and I give this extra flesh to you. The office sees me as whole, and thus when strangers meet me

they think that I was always whole. You will be evaluated by your completeness ⎯ the level of your

understanding and embodiment of being uncut, unabridged. I want to give my self up to this school but my

skin, meat and organs are loosening, fading from view. I just can’t say, even now, that the body they see is

only half I own.

**Other Than I Am** (Novel Excerpt)

Synopsis

Sixteen-year old Jocasta Ling, a Singaporean-American young woman, struggles with isolation

from culture, religion, and peers while growing up in New York City. Following her throughout her

adolescence is pressure from her mother to have children due to her mother’s own struggles with fertility,

and stress from this causes Jocasta to conjure up an idealized child, who haunts her imagination. Aspects

of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* also haunt her, particularly because of the connection between her name and

Oedipus’ wife and mother, after which she was unknowingly named because naming without knowing

origins is common among her relatives, who take up American names late in their adulthood when they

travel to America. Jocasta’s love of humor and STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields

contrast against the modern tragedy she is embroiled in, as she struggles with her culture’s acceptance of

what Americana determines as physical abuse, develops mental illness, and goes to the hospital to recover

for a while. Along the way, she discovers herself as asexual and explores the feminine divine through

several tumultuous platonic relationships. Orion, where she attends high school, gradually deteriorates in

her perception into a hothouse of despair and engorges worser possibilities of that environment, including

a fleeting attraction to a science teacher that only ends in apathy and incompletion, as she gets more

consumed by her internal struggle before recovering. Jocasta traverses all aspects of NYC in search of

friendship and a way to gain her voice back from her personal struggles throughout. She discovers the

significance of her family history on her parents’ behavior and learns to become less selfless as she grows

up.

**Other Than I Am**

I used to spend a lot of time taking care of other people’s hearts. By that I don’t mean I was

particularly good at being compassionate and helping the needy and all that, just that I spent a lot of time

not catering to my limits.

Take your birthday. I called my mother, your grandmama, over to me and quavered, Is this it? And she looked and said Yes, and I wrung my hands and said Now what? And she told me she had extra supplies in her room and she was beaming so hard to make the Grinch keel over, as she had bled so late a doctor had once told her with absolute certainty that she would never be able to have children. but she didn’t listen and took a lot of multivitamins and ginseng root. She’s like me in that way, but I was an average bloomer, so typical that it surprised all of us when I bled for the first time the day I turned twelve. I’m convinced that the instant I appeared as a blip on her sonogram she began educating me on how childbirth and fertility were absolute gifts, God-given or not, in what I would have heard as whispers through the womb, absolute divine fortune, and that if I ever was lucky enough to have that power I was to use it for my advantage and happiness. I suppose that indoctrination must have taken its toll on my conscience because if it hadn’t, you wouldn’t have shimmered into being the instant my mother left my side.

You smiled and unraveled my hands and I couldn’t tell whether you were a boy or a girl because even then I knew that would be desperately self-serving. I have seen you be two different people, sometimes, because that was what you wanted to be, and I have never liked opening up my hands and telling any kid that sometimes the world is less than one would hope it could be.

But you were there, and you said my name, which gave me shivers because I rarely say anyone’s

name and I have only heard mine in return from strangers or people I’ve only seen for about two seconds.

And besides, it was my full name, and that tendency probably wouldn’t go down in modern teenage

society.

You, my child, my womb-life, smiled and told me, Jocasta Ling, you are the most selfish person I

have ever met.

I told you that I was the only selfish person you had met.

You frowned at my feet, then grinned devilishly, gazing up fast as a hare with new inspiration.

Nowadays I suspect that you looked like my mother back in Beijing, or what I imagined her to look like in

the high bright dazzling moment of her life right before her sister ran away.

You leaned in close and chirped in my ear eagerly that I was the most selfish bitch you had ever

met.

I told you that I was the only bitch you had ever met because I liked to be funny, a trait that I’ve

supposedly inherited from my father, but which I’ve personally squirreled away as my own since. Even

then, my jokes were my go-to propriety, which often made me feel like a revolutionary.

Before you could answer my mother was back with a small, light green package in her hand,

radiant. I tried to hide you but her loveful eyes passed you and landed on me. She held the pad like a

weapon or a parachute and for a moment I was afraid. Then I caught it, and my heirloom was complete.

This is what I know: I am not hysterical, nor prone to hallucinations, not an untimely rape victim or a cynical someone or other who has lived far too long in a big city. If you happen to read this, and I know you will ⎯ because even if you never exist in the physical sense and I never get to feel your skin and the flaws on your cheek, you’ve haunted me ever since I bloomed ⎯ try to believe what I’ll lay down in front of you. My morals won’t allow me to sustain falsity for long, and by my morals, I mean my selfishness, because when I began this I knew I wouldn’t be able to stand hearing my own lies to myself come out of someone else’s mouth. Say I’m old, actually old and not the old I’ve known by living to the age of sixteen, with dementia and teetering in this kooky wheelchair listening to someone or other read this to me. You puked when you hit your sister, some guy would say, and I would ask, did that actually happen? And he’d say, Sure, you puked in the trash can next to the Duane Reade because this is your truth, and I’d go on believing that because I’d have forgotten my own truth, and would have to be reminded of this untruth every five minutes until I died, though probably they would be too busy attempting to resuscitate me in the last five minutes to listen to anything I tried to say and I would go to my grave not even knowing what truth I had left behind, let alone how untrue it was.

The other night on the Old Mall girls were rollerskating in the middle of the street, their laughs like bird calls. On both sides of the river hares ran rampant, and one day I had seen one sprawled on the hot concrete, not a single fly canvassing over it. There were none now. What no one tells you about the Midwest is that cars seem to drive at the speed of planes, and motorcycles are parked in neat chrome rows in the sun. I wondered how anyone avoided burning their hands on the handles during the kind of day it had been earlier.

Out on the lawn blankets coated the grass, and on them sat people in shorts and college shirts, tanks and sundresses. Sprawled out, arm-around-waist, lone and nibbling on chips. A young girl in a blue hoodie hunched over, cupping the space in front of her mouth – a moment later the cigarette illuminated her pink crocs. I kept walking with the little group that had seen the movie that night. I had, too, but it had already been a few days into my camp scholarship and after watching the close-knit clump chatting like old friends I watched the moon waver behind a heat haze. Walking behind them I saw crowds stopping on the sidewalk and gazing toward a white building. A cyclist had stopped mid-spin, perched on his bicycle. As we kept walking the trees parted and a large screen projected on the marble building showed Ferris Bueller gesturing in a lightweight way, the way I remembered from school during an afterschool screening last year. I had been by myself in the backmost seat, taking in the multiplicities of heads ridged against the auditorium screen with a bag of sour candy in one hand I didn’t eat. I thought about how sick I’d been at home even though I never seemed like it until recently, not even after ten years when I’d convinced myself nothing would change.

Our group paused to point, slowing down to take in the scene and discussing how cool it was, which I agreed with. Then we went on toward the end of the block, watching cars rush by in front of the lighted red hand. The others were a little bit ahead of me because I was craning to look back. I have this weird interest in the past, you couldn’t imagine. But now when I stopped looking back there was a long gap between cars and the group was shrieking and hurling themselves across the road. They weren’t looking at me, really. I hurried to catch up but drew back as the dark revving of a red pickup hurtled in front of my face, then a flow of cars that tunneled through the lane with loud engines, loud lights. Looking carefully across the street I saw that no one had turned around, and that everyone was disappearing into the night. Maybe they hadn’t even noticed I was there. To be honest this used to make me upset before but after the past year it’s just a brief lurch somewhere in my abdomen that never lasts very long. I stood peacefully on the corner, listening to cicadas. That was when the man came up to me.

I’d seen him ahead while with the group and thought myself safe as long as I ignored his body

slacking against the short brick wall around the mall like a mannequin. As I stepped closer to the street he

started chewing something nonexistent. He had a gaiting twist to his jaw when he chewed, and a red welt

was high on his cheek. I paid the price for this looking. When a motorcycle battered the quiet I jumped,

and he loped over to me.

“Ni hao. Please, can you give me just one more dollar for a beer?” His brown hair shone with

moisture, on the verge of but refusing to drip on the sidewalk. The reddened face stared back at me as he

mangled the language, then slid into English with intoxicated smoothness. I was very tired. All I heard was

my mother’s brainless giggling, only to me and my sister after we had passed the offender, because there

was truly nothing else for her to do whenever someone at the bus station bowed and greeted her this way

back in New York.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.” I was sorry for him. He muttered, then stumbled away in a vague

circle before coming towards me again. The street was clear and I walked across it fast. The man dug his

toe at the edge of the sidewalk as if he were caged. His pale eyes stared at me as he began rolling his thin

shoulders.

“Bitch. Gonna push you an’ lock you into a goddamn hurricane shelter. Someone fucking will if I

don’t.”

I let out one last sorry for him but it was as if I were underwater. I was sure he hadn’t heard and thought it was only fear dissipating in a sparse breath. When I got behind my first locked door my neck ached from how I had kept looking back. So I still live with these consumers, though I’ve gotten better at it ever since you vanished. In bed I laughed and huffed at how I’d pried open his jaws and embedded them into my ghost look-a-like, who’s pretty demure and reads Chinese fluently. I laughed at how he’d looked like a polar bear in a zoo, who knows the white rocks are not really ice and spends his days an unmoving yellow stain against those same rocks. Then I drank water from a plastic bottle and climbed up my bunk. With the whirr of the air conditioner I sank deep into Manhattan on the one train, where there was no barrier between me and the water along the very south. A white herd dog chased me until I caught it by the waist and dropped it into the river. I plunged into a pool full of cattle, dun-colored snouts mooing and flicking their whey tails at the chlorination. Reemerging a little heavier, I rode a carousel horse into the church summer retreat my mother had enrolled me in when I was twelve because it was cheap. We only stepped foot twice inside a church before she began working on ophthalmology and utility bills and could only rarely drive me and my sister for leisure. Displaced off the horse I was kneeling on a green hill above Tuhar Lake, dinner between me and one of my roommates. Her black hair rustled above her preserved babyish face as she sat.

“Give thanks.”

“I don’t know…what should I say?”

“Give thanks for the food.”

“God we thank you for this food.” A feral panting set up once the old fear throttled my throat, inflamed with the familiar lack of knowledge of what to speak next. At once a crowd of the littler children began shoving me back with their stubby limbs, heaving me off the mountain with steam-engine violence. They were the children of my mother’s church friends. They were ones who had studied this since they fingerpainted with peas, ones whose time and luck were as steady and large as the pendulums in bell towers. This allowed them to accustom themselves to a certain truth. One of them chipped a little part of flesh off my arm. At this point I descended through a prism from this failed chance at community, then through a soiree where only I heard gunshots through flashes and chimes of colorful voices. I nibbled at the eczema on my legs with my long fingernails and pore-sized scars fell off in geometric rounds. Craving something or other I landed on a mezzanine with moody lighting and my childhood car sold for parts crashed into my hip. My body broke apart painlessly and howled frequently. Three hours in I woke up and went to the shared bathroom to urinate.

I would have sweated it out until morning before but now I knew better. The hearts of others could

never be much more valuable than mine. I’m still really careful around other people when they sleep,

though. Permitting themselves to rest near me makes me feel close, and if they snore that’s just footsteps

across a bridge. If I go to sleep and join their fold I can eliminate instantaneous loneliness entirely. I’m not

lonely now, not anymore, but I used to be. I’ve turned over the idea of company in my head for a long

time, rustling these leaves by waving the branch as if fruit will fall out without me even touching them.

These days, I can talk, when they wake up.