# **Spring in the Asylum**

(*Prairie Schooner*, Spring 2017)

According to the *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Freud isolated a form of repetition that not only becomes renewal, but also metamorphosis or creation. Perched in the black-and-white rafters of *LIFE* like a god, the definition of repetition would have been as obvious to him as the gleaming pocket-watch chain against his dark suit in the famous photo: the desire to return to an earlier state of things.

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That odd, dayless end of February has transformed the garage roof into a sea of dry, wavy tiles tilted toward my grasp, so I swing a leg over the white marble balcony railing. Again and again, the wind dips me in ablution as I quiver ⎯ I can’t bring myself to estimate just how far I’ll fall from here. Still, I shift my weight onto the red ceramic rows, clambering towards the pinnacle where the individual pieces clasp together like interwoven fingers. The garage itself is musty with sawdust and filled with abandoned boards and half-used cans of paint, but the twin beacons atop the Whitestone Bridge, visible from the garage peak, beckon me ⎯ I would ⎯ *I did!* ⎯ perch on that roof once a week, every week.

I stand straight up, bracing my sneakers against the tile, peering in every direction at the horizons that made me believe I could travel as far and as much as my eye could see. In matters of the heart, it is best to defer to Toni Morrison:

*“I wish I’d a knowed*

*more people.*

*I would of loved ‘em all.*

*If I’d a knowed more,*

*I would a loved more.”*

I can almost believe that there is nothing connecting me to the earth, but the threat of falling stops me

always as I sink down dizzily and press my palms to the red panels.

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I am eleven and touching the object that has focused my mind into a new hunger, shaking me far

beyond the physical groans that signify lunchtime. The laminated words radiate as I mouth them in a

mischievous, headstrong prayer:

*He who knows,*

*does not speak.*

*He who speaks,*

*does not know.*

I was fiercely young and romantic. Every day I would pass that green-and-yellow wallpapered social studies door and pretend my days peering at Lao Tzu’s words and memorizing that particular quote would be luminous. In my mind, I became a luminary instead of an awkward, uncertain kid prophesying about the reasons why I simply could not speak to my peers. It made me feel superior, and I thought superiority was the only way to mask my hurt.

My first computer only made me dig deeper. On Monday, I had social anxiety. Tuesday, Asperger’s. Selective mutism, skin hunger, OCD, even depression, though that word scared me at the time ⎯ it reminded me of a drooping plant that not even the firmest of grasps or TLC could make right again ⎯ a true diagnosis would have made my day, because I thought it meant that someone could finally help me. It could have been a special teacher, like the one I remembered following a boy named Thomas in my second-grade class who always cried, and I wouldn’t have minded a bit because if anyone asked me why I would finally be able to respond, as naturally as if Apollo himself had granted me his favorite muse’s tongue (we were learning about Greek mythology at the time) ⎯ natural as breath, as snow, as night.

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Sweat is beginning to glitter on my palms, but I perch a moment longer as I begin to scan the

roads for the silver cars that will bring either one of my parents home. Sinking back down below the

scarlet ridge, the bridge’s beacons disappear from view.

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There isn’t much I remember about my birthplace. All the Chinese parents I’ve known have had a knack for being expatriates, and I always imagined them rushing me onto a plane away from Singapore just to cement my status as an expat nearly from birth as my mother returned to China and then to New York for me to meet my father for the first time, all within my toddler years.

One memory is slick and as valuable as a diamond, though ⎯ my mother, her brother, and my mother’s mother are all there, everyone raising noodles with chopsticks into the air as high as possible. The sweat on my hands when the noodles slip limply from my chopsticks, then the *oohs* and *ahhs* as I twine a fork into the plate and raise the utensil like a flare, utterly connected with the people around me. I am smiling, grinning, in this instant, this photo in the plastic pouch in the green album with a sun on the cover. This grin is firm and faraway ⎯ I can’t see it until I open that particular album to that particular page. A hard fumble or a fire and it might do away completely.

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There are a few large, weather-stained windows propped up against the garage door, hardy spares from the home renovation when we first moved here. I strain around for a foothold on the windows’ white frames, praying that I won’t accidentally knock them down.

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The receptionist seems kind and greets me with a modest *hello*, pointing at a clipboard with a list

of blocked-out names and a row of blank spaces. “Michelle, is it? Sign here.” I sit down, looking around at

the subtle things in the waiting room that I know must reveal its true nature. The soft chairs along the wall

guide my gaze to a small bathroom, and across is a mahogany door that leads to a small hallway just past

the receptionist’s desk, on which a fake bamboo plant in a porcelain pot perches. A few paintings of

multicolored tree scenes are mounted on the walls, but when I lean in closer to one and narrow my eyes,

black marks materialize like a tiny truth in the lower right corner. *H. Zhang.*

I wonder if there will be a sculpture of my brain, but eaten and moldy, like a rotten apple. I think

that the doctor will point to the rotten bits with one hand and spin the model around like a basketball.

*That’s why you can barely speak with people ⎯ and you see that black spot? That’s the reason why you*

*can’t make eye contact no matter how much you want to…and see?*

But once inside, I don’t see anything besides four soft chairs, a heavy desk, an open laptop, a

folded silver clock, a canteen of liquid, and in the very back, a wooden case lined with books and closed

with glass from the ceiling to the floor.

My psychiatrist says: “Ahem, from what you’ve told me, I think you’re….a little depressed. A little anxious. It’s such a pity…” I’m stock still and fascinated. He continues, squinting curiously at me: “I also think you have some issues with speaking. Your mind has to go through so many censors while speaking, it’s ridiculous. Mmm, I think, at this point, medications can really make you feel better during daily life, and could make it a lot easier for you to interact with others. Will you agree to taking it if your mother agrees?” She would tell me later that she never would, and she wouldn’t discuss it with me for month after month. Nowadays, I wonder if she could have known then her hands would eventually unscrew the lids off of two plastic bottles and tip two pills onto a Kleenex that she would place gently on my pillow every morning. She would think I was always asleep but I would always wake to those soft steps with my eyes closed.

I know that I am not a prophet or a messiah or a diviner but I say yes, yes, yes anyway.

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I slip once more and decide to leap, the gutter peeling away from the brick wall and the wavering

glass pane underneath my foot shattering into pieces.

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At the beginning of high school, I discover that a sense of humor is a gorgeous and terrible thing.

My father often cracks jokes with my mother in a language I can barely understand. He also begins to

crack down whenever my mother mentions her desire to go to nursing school.

“He wants me,” my mother tells me later, “to become a housewife.”

Just when did a sense of humor become terrible?

My father has slapped me before, but this is the only time he draws blood.

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*I fucked up*. I spy the scrapes on my face in the placid mirror and eye the chipped, bleeding front tooth fearfully. I’m ruined, I am ruined. The clarity comes to me as I turn on the shower and raise my face in the ensuing rain, washing away the grime and blood so that I will appear less injured than I truly am.

I say that I accidentally opened the door on my mouth, curling my lip for the grand reveal to my

father, who arrives home first and recoils into the basement in horror at the thought of the money fixing my

tooth will cost. When my mother doubts, I redact it into a failed handstand against the kitchen sink,

spreading my mouth in a lopsided grin as I meet her in front of the hospital. She cringes. I tell the hospital

staff that *yes, I’ve always been interested in gymnastics and thought I’d press my palms to the granite*

*kitchen floor and kick my legs up over my head…*Where’s the broken piece?

*Couldn’t find it.*

No matter, we can rebuild it.

*From nothing?*

We can fix it.

The essential piece of my incisor is gone, ground deep into the brick driveway. When we come

back I linger at the place of my consecration and paw at the earth for a little while. I keep coming back. I

keep looking.

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Today the radio in the car is on.

Oscar-winning actor and comedian Robin Williams was found dead…

“There’s been a suicide.”

The car rolls out of the driveway and my mother pauses at the wheel, scanning the road for a

chance to turn.

“There are suicides all the time.”

A fire in the brain.

There is no cure for a fire in the brain.

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The brown birds perch like berries in my neighbor’s bushes that grow through the white picket fence and cast their shade over our driveway. My temporary tooth filling has turned gray so that whenever I open my mouth, there is a clear divide between the remainder of my tooth and the artificial portion ⎯ a poor light-and-dark combination that embarrasses me and throbs with pain every once in a while, but not unbearably, not yet.

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I ride in an ambulance for the first time when I am fifteen and weary from losing at bowling, losing my voice, losing the water from my eyes in droplets that slip down to my chin, and losing the warmth from my forehead against the hard, cool plastic of a bathroom door ⎯ the strange warmth the people around me found in others.

In matters of the soul, it is only prudent to defer to Elizabeth Bishop:

*“The art of losing isn’t hard to master;*

*so many things seem filled with the intent*

*to be lost that their loss is no disaster.”*

The room is much bigger than I imagined, and another bed sits next to the opposite wall. I didn’t expect a roommate. I can’t help but peer into the heavy wooden shelves next to her bed that mirror the ones beside my bed if only to know, just for a moment, the presence of all the things she keeps inside and all the things that conspicuously aren’t present, which I assume she lost the instant she came to the hospital, just like how the nurses stripped me of all my street clothes and shoelaces and school backpack and wire bra for the new forlorn danger each and every one of them suddenly possessed when transposed into an adolescent

psychiatric inpatient unit.

The nurse tells me that my mother is here. Once for a day or two when I was younger, I wanted to be an astronomer, and I know I am shedding my gaunt writer’s body when my mother’s face comes into focus and I can’t stop looking at her like a lost celestial observer from the end of a great telescope at a distant planet.

I ask if she’s mad.

She tells me that she wishes I told her first.

I see another patient enveloped in a bear hug with what looks to be her mother and father. My

mother tries her best and our arms collide awkwardly. Visiting time is over, but the tenderness lasts.

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There is a bird that flies low to the ground in circles just underneath the garage roof on the brick driveway, in a yard-by-yard nook between the iron fence that leads around the back of my house and the grizzled outdoor air conditioning unit. It visibly panics as we approach, but its wings cannot lift it even its own height above the ground.

My mother thinks that it will die soon as it looks so bewildered and drunken, even crashing into the wall once in a while, and she cautions Jennifer, my seven-year old sister, to stay away in case it has rabies. We leave for the house and I watch it spiral for a few more moments from the back window until by luck, chance, or ingenuity, it slips out from the cranny, stumbles once in the process of speeding, and vanishes over the white picket fence.

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I remember that the most beautiful thing before the hospital was before a thunderstorm. Halfway

between home and the library, climbing up the hill. You expect to see all sorts of colors during sunset, but

the hanging water in the air must have stripped everything away but the palette of deep gray and a brilliant

white underlining, like the horizon of a hare’s coat after winter. And it was all the power of the transition

in the world.

“Fourteen days!”

“Wait, how long have you been here?”

“Fourteen. Fourteen days.”

“Wow, I’ve only been here two days and I’m already dying.”

“You must be looking forward to leaving.”

“I guess I am.”

It is the last time I will see the purple smoke blooming outside against the gray November hospital school mornings, the last time I will glimpse the barrages of faces and names I grew to know and yet had never really known, because I would never see any of them again. I’m not sure what’s wrong with me ⎯ that I’m not more eager to go.

My mother asks me if I’m ready to leave. I ask about the extensive notes about the hospital I made during my stay in hopes of writing fodder. A nurse looks exasperated, handing me several pieces of paper: “We wouldn’t lose any of it after all of the fuss you made.” I take a deep breath and, guiding myself by the hospital staff’s paeans, step through the double doors onto square tiles, my mother in my wake.

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I could tell you about the time my mother attempted to suffocate me, but once, in a long-forgotten

article, I read that the infrastructure of creative nonfiction is confiding and not confessing.

In matters of myself, it is only right to defer to my own words:

*Because it is almost spring in the asylum*

*by the olive groves*

*and the sunshowers and the hymns are strong.*

*And someone will give me a bouquet*

*of roses*

*And Sylvia Plath has come out of the gas stove*

*And my tongue has a coffin, finally*

*is cremated*

*is reincarnated*

*is god’s band-aid*

*with the meadow cress and my battle dress*

*listening to the lovers*

*read their bullet poems*

*Because the shells are new*

*in the sea foam*

*Maybe someday I will be too.”*

Ever since that day, the garage roof has never quite regained its former allure, transforming into a plain

vermilion wasteland. I explain the broken glass pane and the gutter away to the tribulations of weather

and time. Even if the beacons of the Whitestone Bridge aren’t within sight, I now know that they are still

there.

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According to the American Association of Orthodontists, inside the tooth, under the white

enamel and a hard layer called the dentin, is a soft tissue called the pulp. I get a root canal about a year

after the initial break and about one year before my breakdown, when the pain spreads and my pulp

becomes inflamed and infected.

The dentist injects me and as my mouth goes numb, gradually chips away at the portion of my

tooth that has turned dark and disinfects the inside. Over the next couple of weeks, my tooth is

reincarnated. Sometimes I imagine what enormous pain I would be in if the pulp were still there.

In less than ten months, it will be the third anniversary of my last roof climb, and if I go outside

on a February afternoon like the one I just wrote about, I won’t mind the cold.

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I go to a daytime hospital school after I leave Mount Sinai for six weeks, and undergo the most

intense joy and loneliness as I return to school after two months away ⎯ happiness at my teachers’

reactions and heartache as I realize not one of my peers is coming up to me to ask questions, no one at all.

*I wish I’d a knowed*

*more people.*

*I would of loved ‘em all.*

*If I’d a knowed more,*

## *I would a…*

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My diagnoses thus far: a dollop of depression, a sprinkle of anxiety, easy on the obsessive-

compulsive disorder but enough so that you get the essence on the tip of your tongue ⎯ post-traumatic

stress disorder according to taste.

Will anyone love me less?

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There is a green photo album with a sun on the cover somewhere in my house. I’m three or four

years old and my grin is immortalized between two pieces of shining plastic.

I pass through time and space with each image; to see something is to be. To see yourself is to

become your earlier self.

This repetition is not harmful or insidious ⎯ my mother, her brother, and my mother’s mother are all there, everyone raising noodles with chopsticks into the air as high as possible. The sweat on my hands when the noodles slip limply from my chopsticks, then the *oohs* and *ahhs* as I twine a fork into the plate and raise the utensil like a flare, utterly connected with the people around me. I am smiling, grinning, in this instant, this photo in the plastic pouch in the green album with a sun on the cover.

This grin is firm and faraway ⎯ but I feel it in the clear skies of my gums and the gravestone

nubs of my teeth and all the old bodies, the new babies I hold deep in the earth of my tongue and refuse to

let go.

This face is physically gone ⎯ I will never look that young again. But I find it in myself and my

words sometimes, for this is my demesne ⎯ I echo it also.

**The Illusion Room**

It’s too cold in here, the second floor of the Hall of Science, but then again that’s how most museum air is. I watch visitors grow and shrink inside the small room, a toddler’s head above the height of a wall clock before she runs down the steep, checkered floor and becomes her original small self. A man’s hunched over at the highest point of the room, too tall for the close ceiling, too slow to follow the girl immediately. Something in the air around him, like smoke, or precipitation, tells everyone that he is her

father. He’s looking annoyed now after five minutes of nonstop running from what I can see, swinging his backpack more solidly on his back and taking her wrist like the mouth of a bottle. She’s a quiet kid – doesn’t seem to have one of those contagious little-kid laughs that can make any stranger smile. I’m waiting for the room to empty out so I can get inside for the first time in a couple of years.

In her last pass-by she looks heads taller than him at the other end of the room, taller than the clock, the fake windowsill, and stretching out a giant arm to touch the ceiling. He chases her gently and swears quietly when his head hits the top of this box-room. He pulls an arm. She stumbles to the ground and loses it, and he hurries her out into the dark hallway and out of sight. There’s room now but before I go in I stare at the reflective walls outside – acne’s back, the four birthmarks on my face are still apparent,

my hair is shiny like that of so many Asian women but that’s okay, luster is a foundation of many illusions.

When I step inside I’m disappointed, because this room used to be a childhood Friday afternoon staple. I can no longer fit on the highest part without bending over. The bright black-and-white checkered floor turns out to be warped, thin material bubbling up with every step. The dull white wall is just like every wall we have at home, and the clock is a dusty sticker. The wood paneling’s ugly and my mother and sister are at an exhibit a floor above so there’s no one to tell me how I grow and shrink. The room’s a box, air muggy with sweat and loud footsteps. Because I believe in beginnings I’m here to find out why a few people started hitting me, but I can’t even see straight.

I look this concept up online after being unable to find the book about optical illusions that I loved when I was in elementary school. It’s the Ames illusion, or a room that distorts one’s perception so that people and objects inside appear to change in size with motion. The retinal image of the Ames room is indistinguishable from that of a normal cubic room, and in fact, there are an infinite number of possibilities that will result in the same retinal image. I learn that one of the central problems of perception is when one’s visual system discards this infinity of possible Ames rooms and settles on one interpretation. I end up ashamed of this fact for its simplicity, its lack of doubt or conflict – you can’t draw blood from surgical metal – and this is telling.

It starts with little sleights of hand – the red handprints appear slowly, on my face and up and down my legs and arms. Their edges are bitten by pale yellow, and they fade away in minutes. They’re caused, to the best of my knowledge, by the mesmerizing shouting hustles that occur a few years after I arrive in America and meet my father for the first time as a four-year-old. I don’t take well to him from the start – growing up surrounded by women doesn’t prepare me for his strange voice and presence, magnified in our small rental.

I’m still young enough to sleep in my mother’s bed, so I whisper to her shoulder on one of the first nights in this new country, careful not to make it sound too bad, *Mom, isn’t he ugly?* She tells me to try to sleep and shifts her body into a smaller shape. Two family legends spring up around that first day in America, but the kind that only seems to ever be passed around my mother’s side of the family. The first one is that the birthmarks on my face, a small brown dot above my left eyebrow, two more on the centers of both of my cheeks, and another on the tip on my chin, darkened into solid black the minute our plane’s wheels touched the JFK runway. This is okay, as according to classic Chinese face mole studies their placements all spell out some kind of luck for me. The second is that on the first night, I rolled off the bed and underneath it without waking up. After a few hours my mother woke up to find me gone. As she got up to look she saw me rolling back out from under the bed, eyes closed. I’d been sleeping on the cold white tile for three hours, and in the light of the single small window she saw me climb back onto the bed, still asleep, looking undisturbed. I don’t remember any of this but according to my mom I looked possessed, her only child rolling so confidently out of the dark crevice and moving precisely back onto the bed, hair tangled with dust and dead roly-polies. This story only solidified in the morning – when she saw me, she says, she thought it was a trick of the light.

It’s many years later that I bleed – even now I want to bite back the phrase, *at his hands,* because it doesn’t sound like real life. It sounds like the blurb of another book or movie where a girl sits and takes the hit. It happens the day after Christmas, and I’m some kind of early adolescent, the dry winter air already cracking the backs of my nostrils and throat. All my baby teeth have fallen out, been carefully placed in a paper pouch that I decorated with a green marker and taped on the wall as a little kid, and been thrown out by my father – *I thought it was trash when we moved, that awful green bleeding into the wall and staining those little rocks inside.* Multiple pet fish have died, including a particularly iridescent, blue betta fish when my father accidentally left his plastic tank outside on a chilly moving day, and I’ve gotten a little sister.

I’m dry heaving and furious, absolutely sure it’s his mistake. It’s already been years of him throwing around shoes and laundry, with my mother joining in with a couple of assistant slaps whenever my baby sister is found crying with me in the same room. But even I’m shocked, not when voices escalate but when my nose erupts, blood flowing down my chin when I fail to block one of his slaps. My face is wet and my cheeks are burning, and somehow in our tussle we’ve moved into the threshold of my sister’s

bedroom. The whole while it’s been a sick kind of verbal escalation over money, grades, and accusations, rupturing the household rule of not disturbing the tenants upstairs. But from the media I’ve encountered, movies and books and TV shows, I think that this is out of the ordinary, even for us. Cupping my nose I yell hysterically,

“That’s abuse! I’m reporting you, you were never my father!” I want to say that these words blistered and made me cringe, that I instantly realized that I’ve condemned him forever, at least in the Western gaze. But there’s a reason why this kind of stuff never happens in public – in this small brick house, surrounded by insulation that I’d seen my father sweating over and curtain drapes he’d tightened so precisely during the renovation, everything stays between us in our small pocket of air. Spectacular. A real Houdini. In actuality I’m triumphant, pointing him out, even if my body can’t seem to stop shaking.

As he freezes and escapes the dim room into the kitchen, calling to my mother, I’m not quite sure

what to do next with my pliable body, with its quick reflexes and pure Western, liberal belief that laying a

single harmful finger on a child, particularly a girl, is deplorable. But right now I don’t doubt I’m right,

and the red stains on my arm and tissue agree – I’m exhausted with this deception, this complete removal

from the American society I’ve grown up in.

When I remember this, the scene’s almost circus-worthy, a magic mirror. It was all there; the colors of my inherited culture –red on off-yellow mucus on white like someone washed my native Singaporean and Chinese flags together but gave them too little time in the dryer so they’re still tangled, wet, and sunken into the metal sections – all over my tissue and flesh. How my mother had to use her brother’s money to pay for half of our own house, and the way she told me to not be like my father when I grew up. If only I’d known that my father wasn’t doing well as a contractor, how his stock trading couldn’t fully support two kids and a wife who had to go back to school after she’d agreed to his charming words to stop working for a couple years only to find her outdated tech knowledge had phased her out of the industry.

It wasn’t just a domestic, or geographical split that I overlooked, but an essential conflict of beliefs, religion-worthy in their strength, that still blurs and chills my mind like fog does to the sharpest corners and edges. I manage to find my childhood book about illusions this time and read about the paradox illusion – an object that is paradoxical or impossible, such as the Penrose triangle. This triangle is an illusion dependent on the misunderstanding that adjacent edges must join, but a man blind since he was ten months old, after his vision was restored, saw it as just a flat image. I learn that despite what kids’ magicians might see, there are no true illusions for the youngest.

“It’s too late for you to go back to China, or Singapore. If only you’d stayed there, you’d have seen how normal it is, I hear they can cane women in the street for spitting chewing gum onto the sidewalk,” my mother always says. She leaves out the specific part about Singapore and gum out all but once. There’s one more story that’s stuck with me, courtesy of my mother (she tells this to me twice in my life, gray-streaked head shaking in disbelief): “When I opened the cabinet door under the sink at our old American rental so many cockroaches spilled out, how could they all fit in that small box? It scared me half to death, I sprayed them with the killer spray that your dad got, but it didn’t work! They kept crawling out, it must have been hundreds, like a nightmare, swarming over my slippers and across a spoon I knocked down from the counter, I was so frantic to get that spray. I could barely breathe because of the chemicals but I kept spraying and it was just useless. None of them even paused. They disappeared under the bed and into the back of the TV. When we left we had to just leave the place like that because we couldn’t afford an exterminator. How hadn’t we known that the place was so dirty? I thought it was a dream they were so huge and many.”

“First generation never makes it,” my father always says. I take photos of the front and back of the

letter they hide from me a few days after I spill to my therapist, then my counselor; a single thin eight-by-

eleven sheet stating the abuse investigation. It doesn’t really hit me until then just how much I had sold my

family to the dogs. Was I just a bratty kid, the air dry enough that my nose would have bled even without

the blow? If I’d been raised elsewhere, would those shouts and hits just have been part of a normal day?

Would I have been happier raised away from a culture where (to be honest in the years leading up to this

final encounter I only watched TV during the hours of Channel Seven comedies and Jeopardy) the only

punishment for children I saw seemed to be sending them to their rooms?

None of this is something I’ll ever know, a mirage I still can’t justify apart from blurry images in

an old phone. It’s been dropped a couple times since then. The screen’s shattered and glass bit after glass

bit have started to vanish into the dust of every impact.

There’s hardly anything flashy about the aftermath, no conjurings or distracting wind. The months and Child Protective Services are a slow grind – I introduced some kind of toxin into the little air my family guarded, who’d given and have always given me the best of their food and a roof. It’s radio silence compared with what I’m used to – she passes me a piece of mail, he says hello before vanishing into the basement. They deny everything, claim my memories are fictional illusions – the perception of objects that are genuinely not there to everyone but a single observer – more commonly called hallucinations. And finally, the breathy implosion, *unfounded.* This word wrenches my confidence but also gives me a nauseating relief, as if my thin self has suddenly started moving in the opposite direction without being touched – a paper cut-out of the spinning dancer illusion, in which one motion can be seen in two ways. My life’s duality hasn’t been lifted but given a treatment that takes time. Historically I’ve had bad eyesight and after this it goes into an immediate decline, the world blurring the fastest I’ve ever known it to, arrays of glasses that switch out earlier and earlier before the standard two-year prescription timeline. My mother recommends looking into the distance, particularly across the sound whenever we’re in the car together going to Long Island – it’s hard to find that kind of clear distance in the city.

The average number of times I see my father becomes once a week. He is like a mailman now; a whisper of a presence that could become brief friendly snatches if these encounters become more frequent, but not terribly missed if unseen apart from a shadow against paper shades and the jagged creak of the mailbox at the front door. I start reading a lot of Alison Bechdel and visit the basement. I realize that I don’t know where my father spends his nights. I still don’t. But it’s fun, analyzing his environment, and only here can I ever imagine myself as an American goddess, looking for symbolism and tell-tale signs in his absence.

I go into the side room. Cans of butane for hot pot dishes, rows of suits. It’s endless. Above his couch he has cutouts from fashion magazines, posters of white men with chiseled faces and high noses posing against gray shores. The floor’s dirty with his own tracks and a tile’s loose. He has never cleaned this floor in all the time I’ve known him, and it’s dusty and woven with several spiders. In the laundry room a Home Depot bucket next to the minimal sink is filled with whitening lotions and pore-cleansing creams, q-tips and makeup applicators. I laugh as the phrase *posh fangirl* comes up in my mind, and picture myself as Alison Bechdel, piecing her father together with the agility of any American goddess in her memoir, *Fun Home*. I wonder if my dad is also secretly a gay English teacher and whether I’ll find a connection in our shared appreciation of masculinity, but I’m kidding myself, in this house that sometimes smells of dumplings and anise, tiles strewn with dirt that my father can’t seem to clean up. While Bechdel aches as if her father were already gone despite his constant flesh-and-blood presence, it’s not quite that illusory, not for me. If he’s not there he’s not there. There’s no games or discussions together, no shared interest, no common language. Instead of scandalous affairs I think I see in his posters his pining after an American job and existence, an echo of my near-daily brief pinching of my nose into a smaller, prettier shape, raising the skin between my eyebrows as if I could harden the flesh into a higher nose-bridge. It’s not wanting to be white but wanting to belong. This was an immigration that my parents gradually, reluctantly accepted as permanent – they’ve never been able to afford plane tickets to visit back where we came from. Just the luck of the draw, a deck of cards transformed, improbably, into a bird.

But the illusions always come back, the returning, nagging sense that I can’t believe my eyes.

Though my father’s not dead, his presence might as well be, a stranger to me in this small, foreign

basement.

One day, my father tells me he and my mother shot guns together. Required military training for

the Chinese Liberation Army, only five shots in each of their lives in 1988.

“Three out of five,” he says. It is like a reverse horror movie: the undead creature monstrous in its mystery and prone to hurt you gone back inside a closet. The wrappings only just beginning to harden so that he doesn’t quite resemble anything that you’ve ever seen before. Tendrils bound tightly across his body like Gilligan on his island, in a blink of minutes or decades he has been preserved into an impenetrable syrup. You recognize nothing apart from how his quickness to anger mirrors your own. I say I’d like to join the military. He doesn’t believe me.

It’s all part of the aftermath – I find myself getting into martial arts and rock climbing at school, taking U.S. Naval Academy pamphlets, picturing an angry father in any exercise of strength. I go to a play and as I watch Audrey let The Dentist give her bruises, slaps, and a broken arm as he yanks her around on stage, it turns my stomach. It’s fantastic acting, though, and I clap harder than anyone at the end.

More symptoms of this cultivated pseudo-strength crop up – I’m wary around boys who kick the bowling ball return so hard that it shakes after they miss just a few pins (since it takes one-tenth of a second for the brain to translate light signals into a visual perception, many illusions thrive on future perception theory, which states that the human brain generates images of what will occur one-tenth of a second in the future and thus everything we see are predictions). I practice chin-ups just in case. All of this comes to be known as the Central Toughness. It gathers around my family and wherever I go like soft, stinky wool. It coils into my intestines when I go to Koreatown in the rain by myself for an immigrant magazine publishing party. On the same block there’s, no kidding, a barbershop pole that’s red, white, and blue, stripes sweeping upward in the illusion. I read a piece without knowing anyone, taste gulps of wine, see the Empire State Building in the distance lit up green and don’t know why. I find out that most of the kind people who greet me are undocumented, and almost instinctually narrow my eyes, making them seem smaller when I realize that I have larger-looking eyes and a lesser accent than so many. This is how I straddle the ambiguous illusion, which elicits a perpetual “switch” between alternative interpretations. I can only really balance when these conclusions are unshakable, these methods are mandatory, this is law.

I’m in the illusion room and there is no more magic. There’s only the facts of the garish contact of

skin on skin, how it’s so important that I preserve these memories, and my mother greeting me whenever I

come in from the cold – *you didn’t wear enough, did you? Are you warm now?*

I’ve always tried to believe that one perspective is more correct than the other, raised halfway to

believe that my pain can’t be trivialized. But to think even that can be shaken up – vanished,

misinterpreted, overtaken by a crucial other half – that’s the thought that always makes me look twice.

**Joy**

*After David Sedaris*

Someone needs to give Blue Diamond a prize for hiding crack inside their

almonds. Every time I open a tin of their BOLD flavor line, I realize I never have to eat

out again because good flavor is the only thing I need in life. Ginger-and-wasabi, honey-

roasted, sriracha, it’s all there in smatterings of flavor dust coating each nut. Behind the

almond-crunching hack writer façade I save babies from trains on the daily. Once a little

blonde girl tumbled onto the tracks and everyone on the platform happened to be

crippled, elderly, or with broken legs. A parkour expert, I vaulted onto the tracks just as

the orange sign flashed, indicating that a train would run us over in less than two minutes.

The parents were waving and screaming at her but I coaxed her over into my arms with

words as careful as if I were dealing with a skittish bull. Then I lifted her onto the dirty

platform, making sure she was standing and not getting her clothes dirty on straphanger

phlegm before rolling onto the platform right as the train whipped through the station.

There were news crews. The parents squeezed me so tightly, I had bruises on my arms

that I appreciated so much I later had them tattooed on. And also the kid was a teacher’s

daughter so I got an especially nice college recommendation letter. In fact I’d like to be

remembered as the kindest person in the world....

“Don’t talk to me,” my mother said when I got home. “Don’t talk to me. Don’t

talk to me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t talk to me. It got loud for a little bit

as I tried to talk to her. On the kitchen table was a bowl of mutant cherries, twin ones

connected by the flesh. I picked at the cherries as we shouted, popped the ones that

looked like bright red butts into my mouth first before spitting the pits out into the

garbage. Then there were the half-shriveled ones, one half of the mutant deflated so that

the pit could be seen, surrounded by soft brown shreds. These were less satisfying

because they offered the meat of one plump cherry with the work of two pits.

My grandmother, who was visiting in the hopes of going to my high school

graduation one month early, came out of her room when she realized the noise was

interrupting the Asian period drama she was obsessed with at the time. In glimpses of her

iPad I saw heiresses in pastel-colored dresses and houses with intricate wood-screened

doors. She ate cherries from the bowl and told her daughter that they were “*Qi guai*.[[1]](#footnote-1)”

Weird that the one bag had so many mutants. My mother laughed and agreed,

scrutinizing the fruit as if they could explain her own daughter’s persistent oddness.

After this discovery I found the car littered with Roach Motel boxes one morning

when my mother was carpooling me to school with a freshman named Samantha. There

was a sweet, cloying smell that I thought came from the empty packages, because I’d

read a short story on the internet involving a vague insect trap that had been described as

smelling strongly of roses.

“I can’t stand it either.” My mother rolled down the windows, and when I pressed

her she said the cockroach traps had been for her real estate job. Then she said that the

smell was actually from dryer sheets in the back, even though she’d already wrapped

them in two layers of plastic bags. Even this small confession meant she was in an

exceptionally good mood. I took my breakfast from her, which was always wrapped in

aluminum foil and was a salami sandwich that day.

Another morning I’d rifled through the whole house for a single piece of clothing

without which the vivid outfit that’d cemented in my mind that day would be incomplete.

There was so much conviction in my mental image to the point where I believed that

whether a bra showed slightly more than another one through a certain shirt would be the

deciding factor on my self-esteem for the day. When I slid into the car without my full,

imagined outfit, heart pounding in frustration at my mother’s laundering patterns, it was

four minutes past seven. This meant my mother would have to drive quickly and as the

most meticulous driver on the East coast, there was nothing she hated more than going

above fifty-five miles-per-hour.

Once we’d picked up Samantha she braked too suddenly at a crossroads and her

purse fell off the shotgun seat. I felt guilty, as if I’d been the one to just sweep it off with

my arm. Then she threw my breakfast at me, a brief glitch in the careful aura she

presented to Samantha. Still, Samantha must have wondered why we never spoke, on any

mornings, until she was out of the car unlike when she was with her own mother, who

was boisterous and fooled around with her even when my mother and I were in their car.

The events before picking Samantha up in these cases of lost clothing had become

completely normal. The first few times, it’d struck hard.

"Just for a piece of clothing you mess around this morning. Get the hell out. Die

early. Why don't you die?" My mother screamed this, only falling silent when Samantha

boarded. I’d usually let my own yells fade into silence before we stopped in front of

Samantha’s house, an effect I now realize was an effort to induce the guilt she never

visibly felt. All sound was sucked out of our familial space once someone else entered it,

and who would have believed it anyway, in the kind-worded American society I idolized,

in comparison? *Not the best thing to say to someone with depression,* I would think

before me and Samantha were lolled into sleep by my mother’s careful driving and

our school’s heavy workload, *but how could I begrudge her opinion? How could anyone*

*understand what she’d done for me?* Even now she was waking up every day at six-thirty

to save me an hour-and-a-half commute. And later I’d persuade her to spend sixty-four

dollars for my grandmother, sister, and her to see me perform with the Dessoff Choirs.

What did it matter if she wasn’t perfect? Every cherry in the bag had tasted equally sweet

despite their deformations.

I’d auditioned into the Dessoff Choirs three months ago as a Singing Scholar,

which meant I attended rehearsals every Monday night with a crowd of old white women

and men whose voices, in song, sounded much younger. We ate cheese plates, cheap

cookies, amazing guacamole when the altos cared to make a batch for snack time. One

particular piece in the repertoire had caught my attention. Hidden in the middle of the

stack I’d received was a shard of a book I’d finished reading for a memoir class just a few

days before, *Brother, I’m Dying* by Edwidge Danticat. It was titled Fre O. I scanned the

back and caught the few essential words: Brother. Mourning. Haitian.

*Kote w ye fre m?* That was from the book, after the father and uncle die and are

reunited in the author’s imagination on green Beausejour mountains and wreaths of fog

dissolving against a sunrise.

I hadn’t known it was possible to be happy without saving babies from trains. It

was a powerful secret, especially when I knew none of the other Scholars had taken the

same class. And there was no way I could explain the importance of this, unless I made

them read the book.

Where was my family? Where was I meant to be? Every time that month I bit into

a cherry I chewed half off first so that I could examine the faint strings of flesh that

connected the mutant centers, compare the sizes of the pits. The tune of Fre O became my

favorite in Dessoff’s competitive repertoire of multicultural songs, and its secret

connection to a book whose events I’d read as if I were experiencing them myself was

thrilling.

It was a stark contrast to class reality. Over the years I’d realized my entire family

was unbearably odd in some way when I found no relation in how we acted to how other

students talked to each other or talked to adults, or any adult to any other adult, or any

human being to any animal. I’d begun to hate loud talking in the school hallways, and the

cruelty of class participation became apparent. I’d nursed an aversion to the activity since

birth, and in freshman year an English teacher had called on me when I’d had the answers

I’d come up with a day in advance typed right in front of me.

In the subject I loved I shook my head and stared at the floor, quaking in shame as

my peers, whom I’d determined were all immensely competent at talking, looked on.

How could I speak with meaning if I’d been trained my whole life to avoid seeing

meaning in the spoken word, in case a single phrase from my own family might destroy

me if I saw it for its true dictionary meaning? But even that wasn’t true because in all my

mother’s actions she might as well have been speaking the opposite. Weren’t all the rides,

making sure I was always full, her ability to be persuaded to attend my events indicative

of her hope, and if not her hope, then belief that I’d live happily?

The thing was, now I was happiest far away from my family, at school where I

could pick up joyful tidbits on my own. For example, the stone-carver that visited my art

class for forty-five minutes had trained for two years at St. John the Divine.

St. John the Divine. Where Joan Didion’s husband was buried in her memoir, *The*

*Year of Magical Thinking*, which I’d also read for the same class. It was a secret again as

no one in my art class was also in my memoir class. Every time he mentioned the place,

*tap-tap-tapping* his small steel hammer into the chisel he held so carefully on the letter he

was chipping away at for us, I thought about the cathedral just a few streets away and

about asking the families of the babies I enjoyed rescuing to send over some flowers to

the grave of John Dunne. Maybe the stone-carver, with intimate access, could bring some

flowers too because he would know where it was and how exactly to shimmy up the

Gothic Revivalist walls, the blocks of which he’d described so well in the carving sense.

*Make the smoothest surface you can, then use a ninety-degree measure. Really simple,*

*the trouble comes when things are curved, and it’s even harder if you’re making blocks*

*for a dome.* I propped my chin up with both hands, thrilled, and fixed the poor guy with a

stare as St. John the Divine, never truly real for me before this moment, emerged fully

formed from the dust as a place that marked the reality of a family in which words

mattered.

In the end they came, all of them. My grandmother in a sweater and lavender

jacket because she thought it would be cool inside. I hadn’t told her that the church had

no air conditioning, but the weather had dropped twenty degrees from the previous day so

I was hoping she wouldn’t notice. My mother, driving, with the three tickets printed out

and folded in the same purse that’d fallen that other morning. My sister playing Minecraft

in the back seat, wearing her headband with the black dog ears and pink bow. Funny

how I still ended up being twenty minutes late to the final choral warm-up, running past

the Columbus Circle crowds before barging into Holy Trinity and hurrying downstairs to

change into the required floor-length black dress I had borrowed. I’d never been to a

funeral but I thought our attire seemed dissonant with the spring atmosphere, and all of us

were choral singers too, artists who should have noticed the odd stares passersby gave us

when we lined up at the entrance, our dark cloth flapping between our legs and armpits

like bat skin, with the sun shining high above like an artificial jack-o-lantern light.

I spotted my mother and grandmother’s wizened faces, glad that our stress hadn’t

marred my sister, who looked as cheerful as ever seeing me on stage. We sang The

Calculus of Harmony and two Chinese songs, then came the intermission after which we

sang many Middle Eastern songs, and Fre O.

“Keep in touch,” the conductor told me at the reception. The season was over and

this was likely the last time the Singing Scholars would be with the Dessoff Choirs. I

thought he’d sensed I needed some human contact. He presented it with close one-armed

hugging and head-patting, the types of which had not happened in my family for at least

twenty decades according to my estimations.

After my mother had turned the church upside down looking for my grandmother,

who had disappeared after eating a chip dipped in red pepper hummus, we found her

outside by a side entrance. The car was parked ten blocks away and my mother wandered

around the restaurants on Broadway, thinking about buying dinner with all of us trailing

behind her lead, but it stayed a vague concept so we found the car and drove back to

Queens hungry.

“We wasted so much time,” my grandmother told me in the car. “And it was in

that old beat-up church too. All the songs must have been Christian songs, and only the

families of the singers even bothered to come.”

“What’s the point if you can’t go professional?” my mother added. We bought

three boxes of teriyaki a mile from our house and went home.

This confirmed that mornings would stay the same.

*Where are you, my brother?* I’d borrowed this thought from *Brother, I’m Dying*

while singing Fre O in the skirt I’d borrowed from a kind stranger and the top and

cardigan I’d borrowed from my mother.

The more I put language on a pinnacle the more I divided my family and its

peculiar traditions. We were coexisting, not connecting with each other the way I wanted

it to be. Had we ever connected?

Despite everything I say yes. One sunny day my mother asked me how long eggs

lasted. I looked it up and said fifteen days. I don’t know what she did next.

The cloyingly sweet scent in the car disappeared, then reemerged at unexpected

times, but I never bothered to find out what my mother was doing to the dryer sheets or

the empty roach trap boxes or anything she planned to do to anything in the world, really.

A few days later I saw summer’s first moth. I didn’t have my glasses on but it was brown

and in the lower corner of the kitchen.

The babies I saved grew up. They became addicted to BOLD almonds as well. I

spent my days listening to the ones who liked singing sing and bought the rest ice cream

except the one who was lactose intolerant to whom I gave a collection of books. Those

days I could be kind, and stare into their faces without speaking much. The teacher’s

daughter took to calling me Machiavelli after the way I cracked eggs for breakfast (I was

a regular invitee over now).

Behind my almond-crunching hack writer façade is a family careless with words

and a daughter terrified of being careless with words. But now it’s late May and we still

haven’t finished eating the bag of mutant cherries. My family trades insults while

securing our health, education, good food. Words continue to be ignored simply to

survive. But I remember the books and people and music, swallowing the old, silky

connective blooms before swilling the sweet juice around my mouth and spitting what

remains into the bowl. And in the ricochet of their tough centers there is joy.

1. 奇怪: strange, odd, to marvel, to be baffled [↑](#footnote-ref-1)