Tourist Attraction

Growing up, the Las Vegas Strip was my front yard. Timidly, the small presence of my apartment complex sat between the Stratosphere and a luxury condo complex, the two looming over with height so commanding in it’s presence it seemed to make my apartment apologetic for it’s existence. The direct split between grandiose and unassertive houses made up my neighbourhood dubbed Naked City.

The neighbourhood isn’t scandalous for the hedonism expected from the city but rather for the tales of crime. It is the area locals warn the foreign about: Don’t go further down the back-end of the Stratosphere and you’ll be fine. Don’t stray away from the lights of the Strip and you’ll be fine. Naked City was once the center of the ideal Vegas daydream, the title being drawn from the neighbourhood being once preoccupied by industry workers such as dancers, waitresses, and showgirls, who would sunbathe in the pool courtyards nude for an ideal tan. Now, the neighbourhood sits half-dead to the prior liveliness of opulence and carefree living. There were many lessons I learned living there in my elementary school years.

Lesson one: The more hardened you are, the less geometrically you think. Triangles, squares, rectangles: the quintessential shapes used to draw the perfect house. Looking down at my paper I noticed the contrast between my blob of a building to the carefully constructed houses, drawn perfectly symmetrical and geometric. The directions in my art class were simple: all you had to do was draw your house, and yet, somehow, it felt as though I had managed to fail. I had drawn my apartment complex in an unintentionally honest manner: it was ugly and messy and realistic and yet the crooked lines brought a sense of innocence. Do people really live in houses like these? Square, neat, clean-lined houses?

Lesson two: The smell of chain-smoke still carries into your hair. Learning to periodically hold my breath was a skill I acquired as I walked through the Stratosphere, passing stoic figures burning through cigarettes the same rate they burned through their coins sat at slot machines. It seemed useless, though, as the smoke would cling to me all the way through reaching the casino’s arcade. This was one of the many ways the city would impose itself onto me. It was things like my bus stop being a street on casino property and my nearest grocery store having slot machines integrated into them that would continue to prove the city’s confidence in demanding it’s presence be known, this confidence being somewhat admirable to someone like me who was as self-effacing as my apartment building.

Lesson three: I am both the tourist and the local. Daughter to an immigrant and daughter to a refugee, my family and I are wide-eyed tourists, allured to the great American Dream that is just as promising as the slot machines whispering the temptation of riches to the blinking signs guaranteeing fun and excitement. Although the Stratosphere and the condos loomed over just enough to hide my neighbourhood almost shamefully, the occasional taxi would drive by with an aura of apprehension, the wide-eyed tourists peering out the windows to view the most interesting attraction of them all: poor people. On the very top of the Stratosphere people lined up to bungee jump off as I watched apprehensively through the view of my apartment window, watching with intrigue to the most interesting attraction of them all: the rich and the reckless. There is camaraderie in this strange vacuum of difference.

Living in (quite literally) the shadows of the luxuries expected from the ambitions of Vegas seen through the looming condo, the Stratosphere, and the Strip, I carry these lessons today integral to my identity. Though my neighbourhood is touted as the place to repel from, the compact apartment where I learned many little lessons from acts as a blood vessel to the heart of the city.
HSIAO, ETHAN

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Category: Critical Essay

Complicity or Solidarity: Dichotomous Interactions of the Asian and Black Communities

“Whites love us because we’re not black.”
—Frank Chin, Asian-American writer

On May 25, 2020, two atrocities occurred—one known, one unknown. The first was the brutal killing of George Floyd, choked under the knee of a white cop, unable to move, unable to do anything but cry out the shaken words, “I can’t breathe”. The second, however, was the overlooked actions of a bystander who, despite having the power to end this horror, chose instead to turn a blind eye.

Tou Thao, an Asian-American police officer, stood just a few feet away while his partner kneeled on the neck of a dying Floyd. Silent, unmoving, and complicit for the remaining 8 minutes and 46 seconds, Thao made no efforts to intervene and, later, no efforts to retrieve medical help. This refusal to act was a staggering choice alone, yet it also represented a hidden and pervasive reality that exists regardless of conscious recognition. Far from unique, the racist principles of colorism are deeply entrenched in the Asian minority, particularly with regards to Black-Americans. The sole difference between Thao and the larger ethnic community is that only the prior has been held accountable, a crisis and injustice which requires confrontation.

Today, many Asian-Americans are at odds with their Black peers, perceiving them as dangerous, untrustworthy, or any other stereotypical description. Even amidst the national protests, a great number of Asians dismissed the prospect of educating themselves or allying with Black-Americans, some going as far as to claim that they had “brought it upon themselves”. Across the nation, select minds rejected any involvement with the issue of racism, defending their inaction through the reasoning that there simply wasn’t anything to act upon and that, even if there was, Black-Americans had done nothing to merit such support. From all standpoints, there’s an undeniable phenomenon of hate and hostility in the Asian psyche. The question soon becomes: why?

It seems incomprehensible that two minority groups would find themselves so divided in cause, especially given their shared non-majority status; the only rational explanation, then, seems to indicate a dark subtext of intolerance. However, if we view this matter through the lens of history rather than ideology, an entirely new discussion comes to light. Instead of a cultural issue of anti-Black sentiment, it’s revealed that the race relations of Asian and Black Americans are a narrative shaped by white supremacy and systemic oppression. The far-reaching roots of a prejudicial past remain intertwined in the affairs of today, a result of the racial wedge formed within the last few decades. Only by confronting these experiences—the hard lines of history—can the Asian community truly stand in solidarity with its Black brothers and sisters.

Stretching back to the mid-1800s, the Asian-American existence has been more definitively one of reliance than independence. White systems of dominance posed the impossible question of assimilation or persecution, an ultimatum which came with a secondary implication: silence or complicity. Adopting the majority’s beliefs and, by extension, their way of life became a necessity for survival in America, fostered by the trauma of circumstance and hegemonic thinking. The days of antiquity simply allowed for no right answer in the trade of one’s own life for that of another. Invariably, this does not justify the actions of the present nor is it intended to. It does, however, provide some keen insight into overcoming historically tenuous interactions.
During the California Gold Rush and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, the U.S. imported thousands of Chinese workers in an effort to exploit cheap labor. The white majority began to feel threatened by the influx of immigrants, taking to the streets in protest of their presence. Racial vilification was soon underway, propagandists perpetuating the distorted message that those of Asian descent were dangerous, uncivilized, and otherwise undesirable. On a national scale, immigrants were received with opposition and, in some instances, violence. The 1871 Chinese Massacre, considered among the worst lynchings in American history, ended with twenty three dead at the hands of a five-hundred-person mob. Eventually, in a spurt of fanatical hatred, white lawmakers were emboldened to pass the first immigration ban outlawing a single ethnic group: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This xenophobic demonstration of ill-founded power provided just enough fuel for outright acts of cruelty to break out, more fervently than before.

The following decades would be characterized by persecution and discrimination, white mobs, like that of the 1871 Massacre, assaulting Chinese migrants and burning Chinatowns. In time, this escalated to larger acts of racial prejudice. On September 2, 1885, a fight broke out between white and Chinese miners in Rock Springs, Oregon. Twenty-eight Chinese were killed, and every home in the town was looted and burned; bodies lay mangled in the streets, many in pieces or hacked to bits. The same story was told in 1887, thirty-four Chinese workers found dead at the Hells Canyons Massacre. Altogether worse, however, was that this inhumane treatment extended far beyond those of Chinese descent, inequity and contempt remaining at-large amongst other ethnic groups of Asia.

When the Philippines were a colony of the U.S., many Americans denounced Filipinos for their “supposedly unclean and uncivilized bodies” (De Leon). During World War II, Japanese internment camps were established, forcibly relocating around 120,000 Japanese-Americans and requisitioning the majority of their property. By the time the Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, the Asian population had already endured decades of maltreatment, trauma, and intolerance. It comes as no surprise, then, that when offered acceptance, Asian-Americans weren’t in any position to say otherwise, socially or politically. They could either be complicit “with white people in a country built on white supremacy” (Nguyen) or they could be an enemy of that very same group; move up the hierarchy and gain equal status to whites or continue to be a victim of prejudicial beliefs and bigoted ways of life. Truly, the impossible decision of white association marked the birth of the racial wedge.

In the coming decades, Asians were cast as a “law-abiding, peace-loving, [and] courteous people” (Tang). Favorable stereotypes of academic affinity and honest character soon gained momentum, a complete shift in the previous narrative. However, with each emblematic role pinned upon the Asian-American people, the relations between the greater Asian and Black communities grew increasingly tenuous, a product of the wedge’s divisive objective: to pit minorities against one another. In an attempt to deny entrenched institutional racism, the white populace had cultivated the notion of “Asian success” and, by extension, “Black failure”; it posed the rationale of meritocracy, that if Asians were able to “achieve” the American Dream, other non-white minorities should be able to do the same. Though intrinsically wrong on multiple levels, these marked ploys exacerbated negative sentiments and reinforced reductive conflict between the two groups. Rightful outrage towards white systems of oppression were, instead, pinned upon fellow victims, a pointless yet enduring act. As an existing tool of white hegemony, the racial wedge has driven monolithic barriers of enmity, breeding internal biases and, in the case of Asians, outright resentment towards the Black community.

Historically, whenever confronted with the Black-white racial divide, Asian immigrants have chosen to side with the dominant populace; solidarity with the Black community would equate a revocation of the so-called American virtues and a return to systematic persecution. As such, complicity with the white tyranny became the default avenue, a tradition passed down from generation to generation even after it ceased to be necessary. Over time, this has led to distinct anti-Blackness and colorism in the Asian community, completely separate from the instigation of prior centuries, though heavily rooted in past ideologies. To make matters worse, Asian-Black interactions have only grown more hostile in nature, a crisis that obligates attention in the pursuit of social equality.

Consider, for example, the Los Angeles Riots of 1992. Sparked by the brutal assault of Rodney King, the Riots led to the looting and destruction of over 2,200 Korean-owned businesses, costing an estimated $400 million. 35-40% of all such damages were directed at Korean property, a clear indicator of race relations. This sentiment hasn’t waned upon entering the 21st century, a 2014 lawsuit against Harvard University revealing that interracial conflict remains a poignant issue. Of particular concern was the underlying subtext of the Harvard case, Asian-American students arguing that affirmative action “discriminated against Asian applicants in favor of Black… candidates” (Pan). Such a clash of animosity has taken national headlines more than once, in many forms, and with both sides as
the aggressor, a powerful fuel of the ever-widening racial fissure. In 2014, Chinese-American officer Peter Liang shot a 28-year-old unarmed Black man, Akai Gurley, while performing a routine patrol. Liang was later sentenced to 5 years of parole though many in the Asian community felt that he was being scapegoated in the prevalence of police brutality. Protests soon erupted, Chinese-held signs of “Peter Liang Deserves Justice Too” standing opposite to that of “Black Lives Matter”. The symbolism couldn’t be any clearer.

As history dictates, the reality of the racial wedge was imposed by a system of oppression yet now survives in the absence of true solidarity. Still, let it be known that division isn’t the entire story nor is it the only possibility moving forward. Though the past may illustrate a long framework of interracial conflict, it equally displays a path of unity.

Black freedom fighters and Asian-American activists have routinely found themselves on the same side of history, offering camaraderie to one another in times of sweeping injustice. Despite the racial wedge, reciprocated gestures of decency continue to persevere. Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs were two notable bridges of human rights, having applied Black Power rallying techniques in the fight for Asian-American liberation. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. took direct inspiration from Ghandian nonviolence, expressing this philosophy at the basis of his protests. Richard Aoki, Japanese-American ally of the Black Panther Party; Bayard Rustin, African-American advocate of civil rights and founder of the Free India Committee; Ram Manohar Lohia, Indian parliament member who opposed the Jim Crow laws; Sue Bailey Thurman, Black author and pioneer of the Pilgrimage of Friendship; and Larry Itliong, Filipino-American labor organizer who launched the first Delano Grape Strike in protest of poor working conditions—these are the names and stories that define the crossroads of today. From the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to the Immigration and Nationality Act, Asian-Americans have long benefitted from Black advocacy, and, for years, Black leaders have stood boldly at the helm of reform. Now, for the first time in decades, the Asian community is being asked to do the same.

A question has been thrust upon the Asian-American people, either to stand in solidarity or fall in complicity. As it is, history informs our current path of neglect. Yet, history is simply that—history. The future remains uncertain, untold, and unwritten; the decision to fight gross humanitarian injustice remains in the hands of the Asian-American people. I can only hope that, this time, we make the right choice, following in the legacy of change. Perhaps then, a new chapter in history may begin.

“Being Asian-American means wearing many layers of identity. At first glance, a man of Asian ancestry. At first spoken word, an American. At deeper reflection, a person of color in America. At the core, a person who seeks peace and social justice.”

—Eddie Wong, Executive Director of Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation
The Debt

I was born lucky, in many ways. I entered the world under the north star, at a time where rain still fell and the food was plentiful. When I grew enough I learned of death, as all children did, but it was a distant thing - a cryptid wandering between the words of stories, not truly as one with the real world. Mother would sit me on her lap at night and tell me of spirits captured in the stars, constellations mapping old and wondrous legends as ancient as the night sky itself, and she would whisper to me that there was power in tradition. That our blood was a hallowed one, lines running unbroken for millennia, thousands upon thousands of ancestors faithfully worshipping the old gods. She taught me how to kill animals in a way that was respectful, deft fingers guiding my wrist until the hand holding the knife no longer trembled. I was born of the sand, she made sure I understood, and eventually to the sand I would return.

Yes, the old gods had been kind to me. I should have been grateful.

Mother imparted three truths on my sister and I, the day that she left. The first: binds of blood are ever tied with sacrifice. The second: the old gods remember their debts, and one day they will be paid in full. The third: there is nothing else left for us here. We are each other's sole inheritance. We must take what we can and leave what we must and no matter the circumstance, keep walking west until we have found what we are searching for. That was the day we began chasing the sun, and we have not stopped since.

White sand blankets the earth as far as the eye can see, shaped by a benevolent god's fingers into gentle peaking waves. A desert breeze passes, whistling across the dunes, and though it is docile and mostly playful I can feel its painful dryness seeping ever-deeper into my skin. That is not a good sign when the nearest marked village is still a day of ceaseless walking away, and at the thought, my sluggish heart gives a pathetic little flutter. I grip my water skin, turn to Sister, tip my head to the side. She can read the question in my eyes, and I can read the tired annoyance in hers. A shake of the head, so minute as to almost be nonexistent, and she continues marching ahead though the endless desert. She is right, of course. She always is. Stopping now would only mean restarting our journey tonight, which would be dangerous for more reasons than the bitter cold. My sore muscles can wait. Water cannot.

Though I could not have fathomed it as a child, we have lived this way for the past few years. Traveling as nomads, carrying little but necessities and using Father's old rabbit-hide map to find restocking points when the days grow too brutal. Coin has fallen out of favor: the drought has evaporated any pretense of civil society, and instead we barter with whatever we have. Bits of salvaged scrap metal, shards of glass surrounding crater-sites, raw and tanned animal skins... we collect what we can to make ourselves valuable, but never so valuable that anyone would want us to stay overlong. We have molded ourselves into the shape of amicable wanderers, mysterious strangers still half children with sleeves filled to the brim with any kind of trinket you could desire, but nothing ever free save for the fleeting smiles.

Time passes, fickle and slippery and falling through our fingers like so much sand. The sun is setting, but it is not the harsh, cold desert that I have come to expect from winter. Instead, the sky is blushing in nostalgic shades of dusky pink and orange, a swan song for long childhood evenings spent watching ever-shifting sunsets. A performance from the heavens just for me, Mother had called it, and the thought is so laughably childish that it almost surprises me when I feel a savage melancholy clawing through the smile broken on my face. I miss it, I think, and the admission comes fiercer and rawer than it should. It's not as if I haven't retraced every one of those days with a heavy hand, circling and re-circling the especially precious moments, silently repeating the most mundane words Mother said to
me in an attempt to keep the memories fresh. I know I must not forget. I will not let myself. As long as I am alive, I am a vessel through which my old life still breathes.

I shake my head to clear away the stray thoughts, mentally chastising myself for getting off track again, and fix my gaze on the blistering horizon. At this distance, the sharp crests of sand all blend together into a blurry, ridged line that Sister says carries everything we are looking for. I do not know what that is yet, but she has ideas. A home, she has promised me under the cool canopy of night, a far-away land full of gold and adventure. A land so rich with treasures that no one would ever want for anything. A land where we could carve out a little place for ourselves - maybe a shop or a stand, where I could blow glass and she could tie together lengths of string and stone to make necklaces and bracelets.

Sister tells me of this mythical land every night before bed, half a prayer, and the tone is different than it is during the day. Softer. Everything about her is softer. The scratchy cadence of her voice wobbles as it tries to replicate irreplicable soothing; she skims callused fingers over my forehead when she thinks I am sleeping, and lightly sketches the symbol for 'blessed' just the way Mother did. But she is not Mother, and I know this, and she knows this. I wonder if she ever gets tired of protecting me and putting me first. I think I would. But then again, I am selfish. Duty did not beat it out of me the way it did to her.

The sun sinks below the horizon, the shadows lining the dunes turn strange, and we are transported to a world wrapped solely in shades of blue. I keep an attentive ear on our surroundings, waiting expectantly. It is not long before I hear it. It comes every evening, the melancholy song of the desert. It is part ululating cricket choir, part whipping breath of wind, and perhaps I fill in most of the gaps with my own imagination but it does not matter: it is still the most beautiful sound I have heard within the suffocating silence of a cloudless night. My own skin has shifted beneath the peering specter of the moon, rough, tanned hands turning ghastly white, imperfections smoothed and sanded away like Father used to do to sculptures. I close my eyes and steal away just one moment, hearing the lizards and scorpions scurry through a desert that is as much mine as theirs, and I think it is the closest thing to peace that I have felt in a while.

"We should set up camp," Sister says, frowning at the map held between her hands. "I must have underestimated our distance to the next town. I'm sorry." She pronounces the words like being wrong is a moral failing, condemnation drawing her mouth into a thin line and grim self-flagellation tightening her grip until the knuckles in her hand are as white, protruding spikes. I do not know that I could say anything to alleviate the crushing responsibility set upon her by Mother, so I do not try at all. Instead, I begin unpacking the blankets strapped to my back and subtly slip my blanket into hers. I have always been better at keeping warm, so it is no great punishment to endure. Hopefully she will be too tired to notice that she has one more than she should.

The fire comes to life with a quiet roar, almost subdued as it licks at the tree bark we use for fuel. Sister shuffles a little closer, tossing me a piece of hare jerky. It is rubbery and salted generously enough to make me cough, but it soothes the gnawing in my guts well enough.

"We are almost there," Sister says softly. She is staring into the fire with a certain furious intensity, as if she will be able to read our futures in the ash if she just tries hard enough.

"I know," I reply, laying back on my bedroll with a sigh. The sky is absurdly clear tonight, the smoky tapestry of the milky way cutting through the sky alongside clusters of pinprick stars. Mother told us we were alone when she left, and right now, under the crushing weight of the icy atmosphere, almost drowning in endless sea of alabaster sand, I cannot help but think that maybe it was also a blessing. Solitude takes the edge off, shifts the weight off my shoulders, makes me feel small and clean.

I reach into my pocket and take out the handful of cactus flowers I picked while walking. Red, orange, purple. It is a satisfactory assortment, all the petals unbroken and whole. Almost perfect. I spend another few heartbeats admiring the delicate shape and bold color before scattering them into the fire with a few words of whispered prayer. Sacrifice. It is in our blood. The flames devour the buds hungrily and perhaps it is just my imagination but the stars overhead seem to shine just a little brighter for us.

I do not remember falling asleep but I must have because I am awoken abruptly by the sound of my name. My eyes
flutter, groggy, still half-delirious with sleep, and through the hazy veneer of my lashes I see a crowd of masked men and women unmounting from camels and hurriedly shoving our belongings into thick burlap sacks.

There is another shout, more panicked this time, with a frayed edge of desperation that draws deep from some hidden pool of energy inside me, and I have never been so scared in my life as when I realize that it is Sister's voice. I kick off the sleeping bag and look around frantically for her, unsheathing the carved bone knife at my hip with stiff, rigid fingers.

I hear a wet squelching sound, a choked scream, and when I turn my head Sister has buried her scimitar in some man's stomach. When she meets my eyes she does not look scared, only relieved, so I turn my head to look over to where the other thieves are almost getting away. I do not have time to think about the decision I have unconsciously made so instead I push energy into my legs and charge wildly toward the nearest camel with a vast fount of adrenaline where my fear should be. Quickly, too quickly, I am right beside them, and it is an easy thing to shove the knife into the beast's eye and twist. It screams violently, kicking off its riders in pained convulsions, and there is some part of me that is screaming along with it. I am sorry, I think, even as I yank the knife from its eye and run away from its death throes and toward the other camels.

Fear has burned through the cloudy film of sleep and instead I am left frantically awake, the blistering cold causing a quiet, unsurmountable shaking in my bones that threatens to drop the knife from my grip. Behind any thought I might have there is an incessant undercurrent of prayer, panicked whispers on my breath providing the lyrics to the song of violence raging around me. Sand jets out in wide sprays beneath my pounding feet and I am faster than I have ever been before, but it is still not fast enough. By the time I reach the next camel, everyone around me knows what I plan to do. There is a flurry of shouts, the clear ringing sound of an unsheathed sword, and suddenly the cold kiss of metal against my neck cuts clean through the red-hot fervor of panic stampeding through my skull. The verse of the prayer I am on falls dead and silent in my mouth.

"Don't touch him," I hear and I think maybe that sentence contains the whole of human fury, every drop of rage that has ever been experienced. Another heartbeat passes, the air is saturated with commotion, and then the sting of the sword disappears completely. There is the dull thump of a body hitting the sand, the frantic sound of approaching steps. When I turn around Sister is at my side, scimitar dripping an erratic droplet pattern of blood onto the ground.

"Brother," she says roughly and maybe she meant to tell me to run but I will never know because there is suddenly a large hand clapped around her mouth and nose, squeezing hard enough to bruise, squeezing hard enough that she flinches in pain. The man presses his forearm around her neck, yells some order in a tongue I cannot understand and suddenly he and the rest of the thieves are swarming around the camels like ants to honey, mounting their ridged leather saddles in movements too smooth to be unrehearsed. Another few seconds of utter confusion, of feral animal despair like I have never felt and they are racing away on a slobbering beast with everything and everyone I have ever known or loved. Panicked thoughts loop and tangle within each other, balls of yarn tumbling frantically around the recesses of my skull and I run toward them with legs that are numb and cold, I keep running because it is the only thing I have ever been good at. Running from home, running toward the sun, running to Sister.

I am not good enough.

At some point when I cannot see them anymore something in me gives out and I fall to my knees like I have so many times before. I press my forehead to the cold sand and try to remember the exact pose and maybe I say the words to the prayer wrong, choking on my tongue between sobs, but still I beg. I beg the old gods, I pray to them and I swear to them that I am willing to do anything to make this a dream, just please give me my sister back, I will do anything. And I keep whispering the same mantras and the same praises over and over and I keep promising as many offerings as they want and nothing is happening. Worship and sacrifice, the cornerstones of my life, have failed me.

I am out of ways to grovel and plead. I have submitted as much as I know how to, I have offered every piece of my life that there is to offer. I need - I need to do something else.

Mother's words return to me like the tune to a childhood song just remembered.

What she said… it is blasphemy, of course, but what does that mean to me? I am willing to burn in hell forever if it means Sister is still alive. For the slightest of chances.
"One thousand years," I say hoarsely, and though my voice is splintering I seal the cracks with more resolve than I have ever had before. "One thousand years of worship, of prayer, of sacrifice. Of debts. That is the equivalent of what you owe my family."

Nothing answers me but the dead, all-encompassing silence of an endless desert.

"I want a boon in exchange," I continue, and I hate how childish my voice sounds so I force anger into it. "I know you are listening, gods, so listen well. We have given you unwavering faith and unceasing service, we have carried your banner proudly and we have kneeled before your idols. We have fought wars for you, died for you and sacrificed to you every day. For that, we are owed. We are owed, do you hear me?"

They hear me.

On the horizon, the sun sets below the sand. Clouds gather from nowhere and everywhere, and in a matter of moments, I can feel warm rain streaking through the pale sky and running down my face like a parent's loving hand. Seven flashes of lightning streak over the dunes, then silence and stillness.

In the distance I can just barely make out the shape of a camel trotting, carrying with it a shadowed figure on its back. The moment is fragile as freshly blown glass, and I do not allow myself to really, genuinely believe that my wish could've been granted until Sister leaps off the back of the camel, races toward me and envelopes me in a painfully tight hug. For a while, we do not speak. I like it like that. Finally, she breaks the silence. "What did you do?"

I sigh tiredly into her shoulder, eyes fluttering closed, and though my next words are vague I know she will understand perfectly. "Our debts have been paid."
Celestial Bodies

i.

I start my homeschooling career when I am eight. It is a painless transition; one day I wake up at seven forty-five on the dot, and the next I wake up whenever I please. The house is vast and hollow, and sleep-deprived high-school tutors keep me occupied with big new ideas erected from mechanical pencil lead – chemistry, trigonometry, Shakespeare. My mom swaps out plastic trays covered in sweating cling wrap with kale and edamame shakes; I end up missing greasy school lunches more than I miss my friends. For that first year, I do not choke on warm, amniotic fluid, and being alone does not yet sting.

ii.

My sister is also homeschooled, though she starts a year before, and unlike me her reason for quitting the American public school system lies in competitive tennis. Weekends are reserved for tournaments a city or two over bursting with helicopter parents dragging ice-filled coolers half as large as their twiggy kids. I go with her to provide moral support, which in practice means sipping water bottles nervously and clutching the strings of my floppy hat in the bleachers. Fifty feet away, she is wrought brass made flesh: bent at the joints, baptized in sweat, noon sun glinting feverishly off the skeleton of her racket. Through the chessboard pattern of the wire fence, I watch her. Large sections of the summer are cordoned off so she can fly to Los Angeles and Denver and Boca Raton and train with the kinds of coaches that churn out Grand Slam winners; those times, I stay in the hotel room and stare out curtained windows with gorgeous views of the parking lot. I spend several Christmases sitting in the dark on the last step of our staircase, waiting for the tell-tale garage-door grind which would signal that my parents and sister are back from nationals in some miserable little town in Ohio, but my sister wins more than she loses so typically I get a phone call at around eleven telling me the good news: she made it to the semifinals and they're staying for another two days.

iii.

I read about the Greek primordial goddess, Gaia, from the book of myths my dad gives me for my birthday, and of how she was worshipped as the personification of the Earth. I imagine her swallowing the blanched moon whole, chalk-dust sugar staining her molars; I imagine her holding the sky between her teeth, possessed of a curved spine whose juts burst through the planet's delicate skin as great white mountains. I imagine what it is like to be expansive – whole, all-consuming, a titan built from elbows and knees and ribs, pressed up against empty space, yearning to be bigger. Yearning to be more.

iv.

At some point as I grow up, as I sprout shoulders and hips and sacrilegious language, I develop a fascination with perfection. I count the indents on my bedroom walls (two, from the times my dad threw plastic blocks across the room after failing to teach me multiplication.) I go on walks around the neighborhood and kick rocks in the Polaroid silence and spit at the plastic grass, looking for some scrap of divinity lying around that I can pocket and make mine. I write down a list of things that, in my opinion, come close to holy: unblemished hands with saintly geometries,
immaculate planes of shifting Arctic ice, tangerine street-lights saluting in a straight row down my block. That night, I arrive at the conclusion that this tideless flesh is no less malleable than bloody clay; that I can and should emulate perfection through cleanliness of the body; that I can be the magical size-shifting girl of my very own circus, taking up less space by crumpling into myself.

I begin by kneeling on the bathroom floor.

v.

This vast, hollow house is starting to feel like a gutted corpse of stucco and plaster. I run my hands across the wood of my desk and it is tangible. I run my hands across the column of my throat and I am not. Sometimes I think of how few people know me, of how thin and sparsely my web of connections is stretched, and I convince myself that if I wanted to I could fold myself into the dirt under the garden and no one would notice. I learn of Schrödinger once in physics and once again in chemistry and cannot help asking – if I am not seen outside the caving walls of this house for six goddamn years am I still as real as everyone else?

vi.

Genesis 3:23: Eve is banished from Eden when she eats the apple.

The Greek myth of Persephone and Hades: Persephone is doomed to remain Hades' bride when she swallows six pomegranate seeds.

Snow White: a beautiful girl falls into a deep, death-like slumber when she accepts food offered by an evil queen.

Can you see the pattern yet?

vii.

On one of the few times I leave the house, my dad brings me to watch a comet. We stand in the cold for hours, he and my sister and I, squinting at the darkening sky in a grassy enclosure in the middle of nowhere. At somewhere around nine-thirty, my dad excitedly presses binoculars to my face and tells me to look up, beyond two parallel stars, and focus on the tiny speck of silver. I observe the comet crawling across the atmosphere millions of miles away; a few seconds later, it disappears behind a milky wisp of cloud.

When I go to bed that night, I dream of myself as space-dust – trails of luminescent vaporized ice and orbits that go round and round for ten thousand years until the sun melts them to nothing.
If a Tree Falls in a Forest

fly
How curious that we smack down the fly without even asking what he's up to
perhaps it would be better if we could feel something
beyond guilt or sorrow, I think it would help if there was blood on our hands
I suppose it's up to interpretation in the figurative sense
but I think the literal is what we often need
Guts and gore and blood are a nice reminder of murder that we don’t get with the fun-sized fly
For a second I feel very heavy at the thought that perhaps the fly I have just killed was really just looking for his last
place to lay down
and he trusted me, or at the very least
did not fear me enough,
so he laid down on my computer keyboard to say goodbye forever in a dignified manner and I squashed him
like a…
well…
bug
Or is the better word human?
and then I rubbed his carcass into a million pieces
sprayed some hand sanitizer and wiped my hands off
And now I’m typing this on the very keyboard where he died
I smacked down the fly without even asking what he was up to, and now I’m going to pretend that somehow I’m
different

If a Tree Falls in a Forest

Wednesday night after the rain
The roads soaked like sponges
I could imagine them puffing up
The way Jenny from the library said her eyes did when she cried

Driving home sky
Colored sherbert a little melted, mixed, held behind fog
The sort of sight that words were too much for
Rain brought out the ugly metaphors
The bad poems
The leaves from the trees and the soil from the sidewalk
The quiet of
Wednesday night

He said “Maybe the two of you are just growing apart”
But thinking back now, I don’t know about that
Maybe it's as simple as this:
they grew up, while i grew down
no one ever tells you what to do
when the death of a friendship is
Less of an execution
And more of slow internal bleeding
It is like draining the water from the bathtub

**The Birds and the Bourgeoisie**

At seven years old,
in my PE class,
Us first graders had to practice relay races to learn teamwork.
In these races,
There’s a baton.
It looks like a hotdog.
It does not taste like a hotdog, we found that out quickly
This baton, in all of its plastic, stick-like glory,
was very important
the symbolistic backbone of relay racing, if you will
The teachers said to hold tight to the baton,
then run until the whistle blew.
This would be a piece of cake.
They say run,
I say how high.
On my turn,
I ran and ran and ran and the whistle blew.
And, although I didn’t understand why I had to stop,
I did
and then the baton was handed off to the next patriot, and the cycle continued.
Later, it occurred to me;
why run the whole race, when you can run ¼ of it
and call it teamwork?

Eight years later,
copying the answers to the chemistry homework on the gym floor,
I was running the relay race again.
(Teamwork is really just a codeword for cheating).
(Secrets are best said in parentheses).

**The Matriarch**

My hair is wet, dripping down my back in a way that makes my shirt stick uncomfortably
I’ve got to be going, I’ve got a thing in twenty minutes
Dad is here on time like he said he would be
but my hair is all tangled from swimming and I can’t get a brush through it to save my life
I’m standing by the kitchen island, holding a comb, telling my dad that we’re going to be late because
well,
my hair
when my grandma takes the comb and comes to stand behind me
She says that it’s easier if you start at the bottom and brush your way up
She does just that
almost rhythmically so
and I’m reminded that my grandma is a genie with hair because
there was a time when she did this for a living
I imagine other girls standing where I stand
grabbing the countertop for support
letting my grandma work
nevermind that my grandparents moved here, to this house, well into retirement
Sometimes I just forget that my grandma is a person
a whole person

who hasn’t just lived here her whole life taking care of children and grandchildren and a husband

It feels impossible to imagine her young in the way that I am

I don’t even have words for it

The way I stripped my grandma of her existence as an individual

It’s easier to imagine her as a background character in a show

where the past is only implemented in flashbacks that are necessary to the plot, my plot,

because it’s easier
to pretend that her life started the moment I was born

Sure, the sun is setting on my childhood, but I can’t put it to bed just yet

Tastes of salt by the beach

Goosebumps outside the store that sold marbles

A wedding

A funeral

Moments where I thought that if I blinked hard enough my brain would take a picture

It didn’t

And yet she has always been my grandma,
quick to comb my hair and bake me cookies and make me quilts

attending every school awards ceremony even if the seats hurt her back

And I licked her heart clean like the bone of a chicken wing

It seems odd that for all she has given me, it will be all she leaves me.

A reminder to brush my hair from the bottom up and several lifetimes worth of love.

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**Asking For a Friend, When Do We Get Out of Here?**

I wonder right now if your eyes are open or closed,

but even though I could easily know by looking at your face,

which lies right next to mine,

I don’t look,

because I’m pretty sure that that would break the rules

(albeit the unstated rules)

of these conversations,

the silent understanding that the secrets we choose to divulge should be handled with the care of a Catholic confessional.

She was laying in my bed for the hundredth millionth time and I was still not quite used to it.

I could only ever do this sort of thing with her,

and even then,

only when the lights were off

It was already too much to think about if I was laying too close or too far or breathing too loud or-

“Well do you think he really loves me?”

She layed careening on her side, hunched so her face was mere centimeters from mine.

I turned to lie on my back.

“Maybe.”

I didn’t think he loved her, but it didn’t seem like the time to tell her.

“Are you sure?”

I weighed this question in my hand like a coin,

trying to guess whether heads or tails was the right answer

These types of conversations were something I stored in my pocket to mull over later

Every time nighttime rolled around

and we found ourselves on the edge of consciousness,

I wondered if we were really just making another excuse to bare our souls with each other.

her breaths spoke their own sort of language, one whispered quietly in space but roared in proximity, a tongue that I could translate if I could only listen.

“I mean, it isn’t really me who needs to be sure, you know?”

“Yeah, yeah, I was just thinking, like, I kind of want to break up with him.”
She waited.
“Oh.”
Long pause
“Do you think that’s really really dumb of me?”
“No, it’s just, I thought you liked him.”
“I don’t know, I thought I did, but now I think I liked the idea of having someone more than I liked him.”
I told her I get what she means
Because I did
And we talk
To be honest, reader, I don’t want to tell you much about it
Because it feels like opening up the underwear drawer that is my heart
But I loved her for a lot of reasons, and I wish you could have heard her speak
So you would understand at least one of them

She cracks her neck
Her fingers
Ankles elbows
Nudges her foot up against mine
Interlocks our toes
Turns the lamp off and goes to bed
she broke up with him about a week or so later,
and I didn’t think about that conversation for a while.
It didn’t come back to me until
I began to like the idea of having someone more than I should’ve, too

I know we are not friends anymore because the other day I caught myself wondering
“Would I even feel it if you died?”
I never realized how nice it was
to have someone who knew the story because they had lived it with you
From now on,
Everyone who knows me will only know the me that I choose to tell.
It did not occur to me
that I would not want to be a storyteller in all aspects of my life.
And I know, I know, it’s not the end of the world
My brother says even sex gets old after some time
But
If someone were to slip into my bed in the dead of night and brush their toes up against mine in that way she did
I think I would combust right then and there on the spot
And the dust and the ashes
From the explosion of my body
Would float up and mingle with the stars
Brushing each other in that way of ours
Holding hands
Like we held feet