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Past Wrongs, Future Choices

PWFC Works in Progress Series

Wartime Measures: “Palinode” and Other Poems

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This collection is circulated to the Past Wrongs, Future Choices partnership collective for internal purposes only. It is currently in review for external publication.

Thoughts, responses, and questions most welcome!

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FOUR-LEAF CLOVER

Night falls, and I open the album
I've chosen not to open until now.

At first, I don't understand
why she's left it to me: Polaroids
of a honeymoon in Vegas,
mimeographed evacuation orders—
and then, a dozen four-leaf clovers
pressed between wax paper,
looking, somehow, less fragile
dried than alive. We picked them
together. Or, over twenty years,
I watched her comb through tall grass
in parks, baseball diamonds,
overgrown lots, the backyard of the house
they would lose to debt—sifting stalks
so tangled they rippled like water
under her hands. What is luck
but an endless negotiation between
what one wants and will not have?
Having been an orphan, having been
born with a face that led to a camp,
she had seen more cruelty than kindness.

She saw it blossom in me: *Yan cha*
bōzu she muttered whenever I hid

Lego in my sister's shoes, shattered
a snail's whorled home—*Engimono*

each time she found those four
lobed leaves, their radial symmetry

like an MRI of a dreaming brain.
What she loved most about the world

were its ephemeral forms: miso's
maelstrom in a bowl of stock,

the bubbles blown and tumbling
from a pipe cleaner's twisted loop.

Shi, she sighed near the end,
meaning *four*, or maybe *death*,

blood drying in the cracks
that cut across her lips and made it

hard to speak. I wouldn't know.
I never learned the tongue

she murmured behind closed doors.
Behind those half-open in my mind:

her swollen limbs, the x-rays'
ashen ghosts. What is luck

but someone else's easier history,
a hand drawn from a deck rigged

for regret? I am full of remorse
counting the moments I chose

to forget what she had
so keenly, ineffably, known. Luck:

the iridescence marbling
the bubble before it breaks. Luck:

a child failing to master
the future tense, an orphan shutting

the door to a tarpaper shack. Once,
when I was eight, she bought us

scratch tickets at the station
and won forty dollars. We played

until there was nothing left.

PALINODE

My mother is stalking cabbage moths
with a tennis racket. She looks
most like herself when she tenses
then swings over rows of kale and romaine
at the white specks floating through
blue shadows. She is bisected
by the swaying frame, distanced
by the poor resolution of the video
my sister just sent. Her left hand
is bandaged: tendonitis from picking
caterpillars and eggs off the leaves
with chopsticks. As if to prove
obsession is its own lineage
I have spent hours checking the sun-
stunted shiso for iridescent beetles,
bodies tufted with fine hairs
like the down on a dandelion seed,
spent years wondering what it meant
to be her or her parents, uprooted,
dispossessed. I can see so clearly
time's possession in the way I speak—
like her—the preference for detail,
for impossible control, how my skin
has pocked and wrinkled, the first gray hairs
growing up my temples. I am thinking
of the time she was enrolled in an ESL class,
even though she only spoke English;
the time she told me on the phone
that because I had left, I couldn't
come back; the time I stole twenty dollars
from the jar under her bed; or all the times
she corrected my pronunciation: *repeat:*
indistinguishable, inconsolable, inevitable
that I won't return home for another year.

By then, she will have stopped dyeing
her hair. There are no equivalencies,
only echoes. I am alone and watching
my mother watching something above
her head. My mother is swinging
and missing. My mother is crying
for her mother. My mother is referring
to herself as *Oriental*. As *old*.
The cabbage moths arrived on the coast
in the late 19th century, just before our family.
Now, these shimmering beetles
are weighing down the leaves.
When I look back, my mother
has become indistinguishable
from the shadows under the trees.

AT THE BORDER

Its night. I'm not from here. Inside
I'll press my fingers against the screen,
recite my monosyllabic fealties
while their dog sniffs up and down my leg.
I won't be who they're looking for.
Once, my grandparents were. A suitcase each,
they shuffled down chain-link corridors
and slept in livestock stalls. He was twelve.
She was eight. Their lives incised
by a hyphen that hadn't held, a censor's
smear of ink. I think of how the dappled dark
holds all other nights, like the faces in a face.
Of how this falling snow is a kind of sleep.
Of countries dreaming of being awake.

SABA

I point and the fishmonger
hooks two fingers inside its jaw,
lifts it gently from its shell
of ice, and lowers it
onto the scale draped
in butcher's paper.
Blue flames flicker
under tigrine stripes.
Examined closely,
this mackerel is exponential:
an ink-block print,
an expression of surprise,
cirrus-dappled sky,
a still-life's thin-stemmed crystal
and sliced lemon—
or, of course, a silver belly
charred golden in a pan,
daikon grated like a hill
of melting snow.

Home away from home,
I run a finger over teeth
fine as the burrs on a file,
watch its eyes tarnish
in the apartment's dry heat,
and listen for the rasp
as the filleting knife nudges
where ribs wrap into spine.
On speakerphone: a raspy cough,
then my grandfather
lapses into a language
I was never taught.
The starts and stops
of steel scraping bone,

verbs and nouns
balanced in absentia
on the red wave of a tongue.

Salt-sweet, acidic,
the fish tastes
of the coastal shelves
where it schooled each spring.
Studied closely, any word
is a primer in adaptation:
from the Latin, *macula*,
meaning spot or stain
on skin, or an eye's burst vessel,
sallow shade—the way
my grandfather's
have clouded with age,
the way even memories
become mispronunciations.

I remember the docks in Steveston,
where he would lean
over trays of frozen bodies
fanned out like bouquets,
prodding the scales
and checking the sclera
for clarity—*saba, hamachi, sake*—
how once, jokingly,
he called me *hāfu*.
How, years later, at a reading,
a man pointed out
my struggle to say
my mother's maiden name.

Who doesn't tire,
now and then,
of trying to map the past
in the oily flesh of a fish,

the sour scent of a fruit,
strangers asking for easy
authenticity, clearer origins—
or why the only words you know
are the words for food?
The only certainty,
the uncertain imagination:
pin bones bristling visible
under the bevel
of a blade, argent bodies
plunging as one
through their own refraction.

In an izakaya, blocks
from the boardwalk
where I grew up,
my grandfather praised
my wife's flawless pronunciation—
couldn't fathom
she'd learned it in a class.
After we paid, he snagged
two quarters from the change
and, with a loose-wristed flourish,
vanished them,
proffering empty hands.
I knew the trick.
He taught me it
when I was young.
I could see the overlapping silver
caught between
his finger and his thumb.

