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Beneath the Red Umbrella

Once, I could breathe under water. I was a see-through swimmer in the dark, my heart was visible. I lived in a sack of fluid, eyes closed like a Buddha, linked by a pulsing cord to a planet I had never seen or imagined.

Shop

Red and white paper lanterns, candy-colored paper lanterns, hang over a shop doorway at the end of a narrow, twisted street, and my mother stands outside. Her body feels simultaneously foreign and completely familiar: she is swollen with water and blood, and blue veins web her breasts. The bone gates of her pelvis shift and widen, and her skin feels raw, new.

A collection of cells hugs the side of her uterus.

What should I call it?

No, don't think about a name.

Two babies before this one winged long enough in the slippery dark to take on names, and then disappeared in an arc of pain.

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Though there is nothing in the shop to satisfy her cravings, she enters, and stands looking at a cooler filled with pale green and pink bean curd pastries, dikon radishes, octopus and cabbage. Smells converge in the back of her

throat, and nausea sends an upsurge of tears into her eyes. She bites her lip, leans against the cold sliding glass door. The shopkeeper nods at her from behind the counter, in a discreet way.

It's obvious to everyone—too much time alone.

Alone alone.

Abalone.

She marches toward the magazines, away from the clammy, unappetizing food, and surveys the Kanji teasers as though if she looks long enough, the symbols will arrange themselves into a pattern she can understand. Young Japanese girls with shining black hair and wayward teeth grin coquettishly from glossy covers. My mother smiles like that to herself, to no one, as though a longing glance has been thrown her way and she is demurely returning it.

The shopkeeper sneezes, removes his glasses, and carefully wipes them with a white handkerchief.

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Her husband has been gone for six weeks now, deployed aboard an aircraft carrier off the coast of Vietnam. She waved goodbye from the dock, willing away the smell of oil-soaked pilings, seaweed and fish, her yellow hair blowing back in the foul wind.

*

The bell on the shop door jangles, and in bursts a little boy, his red school cap tipped up, a small lunchbox clutched in his hand.

“Otosan!” he yells.

My mother watches the shopkeeper’s placid face transform. He and his boy beam accidentally at her—she feels momentarily caught in the glow. The excited, indecipherable letters before her swim and blur; quickly, she exits. Paper lanterns swing from the roof, filled with wind.

Pull yourself together.

Snakes

Snakes come up through the drains: in the shower, the sink, the rusty hole in the washroom floor. Rope-like, beige-brown, they wriggle and squirm, bright jewel eyes peering into the warmth of the house, and my mother claps jars over their doorways.

Wrong end of the tunnel.

The mason jars she bought just for this purpose, at the Navy base forty-five minutes away by train, having run out of drinking glasses. Somehow, it seems unhealthy to drink from a glass that has housed death, *even the death of a snake.*

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Since her husband has been away, she’s slept on a futon in the barely furnished bungalow living room, like a guest. That way, when he comes home, she too will make a return: to the

domestic life they began six months ago, still newly married enough to be unfamiliar with the contents of the cardboard boxes labeled with my mother’s left-leaning scrawl.

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The mimeographed bulletin sent by the base commander with the welcome kit says there are very few poisonous snakes in the area. The bulletin offers terse advice for coping with the challenges of being stationed overseas, and a few helpful Japanese terms are spelled out in the English alphabet: Ko-ni-chi-wa. Hello! Do-mo Ari-ga-to. Thank you! On the back page, in a grainy photograph, a Mamushi holds its flat head aloft.

Instructions for avoiding the snakes are included for soldiers: “DON’T crawl under a fence in high grass. Avoid sleeping on the ground whenever possible. DON’T put your hands and feet in places without first looking.”

The Mamushi is described as a solitary, diurnal snake, a daytime snake, unlike the irritable Okinawa Habu, a nighttime house invader with a narrow body who slinks in through open windows and cracked foundations. The Habu bites without warning, but a Mamushi will vibrate its tail when angered.

Great. My mother peers through the slatted blinds hanging in the kitchen window on sunny days before venturing to open the door, in case the big, brown snake sleeps her vengeful sleep

on the front step. *Egg stealer, rat eater.*

Train

Her bottle blonde hair flows down her back, in bright contrast with the dark-haired students and old, bent grandmothers riding the crowded train. They stare at her. *Gaijin*. Pregnant as a house with a big, bald American baby. The students make way for my mother when the doors open, but the Mamasans stand firmly in her way.

They remember the last war.

They are all widows.

They remember the bright sting inside a cloud, the boiling flame. Their sisters owned glass vases that were twisted into lumps. Their brothers owned bones that melted into air. Infants vanished as though their flesh had never been formed, layer after layer of cells stripped away.

“Excuse me,” my mother says. “Ha-su-mi-ma-sen.”

She sits down, holding the silver handrail, her breath hitching. She tries to arrange the baby out from underneath her lungs, and the doors whoosh shut, locking in the odors of all the people. She stands, and the train lurches off, a pre-recorded voice announcing the name of the next town.

A businessman in a dark blue suit sits in her vacated seat, and opens the newspaper. The letters travel up and down in columns, and he

reads them from right to left. She watches his eyes flicker over the page. Everything backwards, upside down, counter intuitive—yet ordinary, orderly. She is the stranger. She is strange.

A right hand, a left hand. Finger-fists form in the dark universe of her belly.

What if they don't?

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After Shinjuku, the train slams into blackness, a long tunnel beneath a hill. This tunnel collapsed in the last quake and killed hundreds of people; it was as though rocks and trees and loads of dirt had been uprooted and thrown from the sky by a casual hand. She'd seen it on television. Systematically, the tunnel was repaired; the dead were recovered and buried. The camera showed mortar carefully scraped over a brick, the brick placed in a wall, excess concrete smoothed away.

The train jerks back and forth on the tracks and my mother places a hand on her stomach. As it breaks out into the light she blinks.

Cage

She walks through the Ginsu: noodle shops, neon lights, hookers. Nasal music pumps through tinny loudspeakers. A girl sells horned beetles in small bamboo cages as pets. The beetles lift their black shellacked wings to show the filigreed underpinnings that allow them to fly—veined smoke.

Everything exceeds its container: she smells her own body, with its metallic tang, rice noodles in broth, beheaded fish frying with their skins on, the cucumbery perfume of the whores who wait in extravagant shoes and sparkly dresses. The pink-red and blue buzz of neon presses the nape of her neck, fidgets her eyesight. She hears beetles dumbly scraping against the sides of their prisons, tastes the smooth powder that sweeps the hooded eyes of the call girls awaiting the fleet's return.

A record store owner hawks American albums—

What rooms do they go to?

She's seen the enlisted boys come off the ship—in a bulging swarm.

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He won't recognize her when he returns. Her belly is stretched so she can barely see her feet, and girded with scars where the skin grew so fast it still looks new. She pictures him deep inside the gunmetal gray carrier; he rolls in his bunk, a thin wool blanket drenched with sweat caught in his limbs like a rag in a tree.

Gate

The guards at the Navy base gate prod each other inside their little glass booth.

— Say something.

— No. Her husband is an officer.

— Fleet's out.

— No, man.

— Come on. Get out there. Say hello.
A clamor of young men in dark blue dungarees and anchor jerseys greets my mother, piling out to open the gate.

— Lady with a baby!

— Make way!

— How're you doin' ma'am, can we carry anything for you?

— Any day now, huh?

My mother gives them a faint smile. The baby is pressed against her spine, and an elbow or a knee jabs at her ribs. She's used to looks from men. She appears iconic, easy to simplify. *Beautiful pregnant blonde. Happy American family.*

The flag whips overhead, decorating the wind with a cocky flare of color. Revolving inside her, the baby feels at the barriers of its interior domain. She shoves the side of her stomach with a flat palm.

A battalion of Marines runs by in fatigues. The rhythmic pounding of their boots gives way to a chant, and it catches in her step. Sweat pours down their expressionless young faces, and the red pattern on my mother's dress flutters in the breeze. *I had a good home and I left—your left. Left, left, left right left.*

Doctor

The doctor does his best to keep a comforting face on, pushing his regulation issue glasses up with a gloved hand. "There's nothing

wrong with your baby,” he says. She draws in a shuddery breath. “Okay, okay,” she says.
Okay. The first American word in translation.
 The masked smell of the hospital settles over her like a sheet.

Dreams

The baby sleeps, unconcerned, sometimes up to three days at a stretch, and in those times my mother dreams for two:

She wakes in the middle of the night, perspiration draping her hair across her face, the texture of spider webs. She closes her eyes to see the snake coiled in the crib.

A ship’s alarm reverberates in her ear. Her husband waves from the crow’s nest, flames climbing the ladder to his feet, his white uniform fixed like a burning star in her mind.

She gives birth in the ocean, and the baby is taken out with the tide. She watches as the umbilical spools away from her. She and her purple blue baby, a tiny nib of a face smeared with blood, a black pulp of hair. Its fingers go this way and that, like a creature that clings to the side of a rock.

Nest

I had a good home and I . . .

“Home doesn’t exist—maybe it never did. I can no more go back there than I can stay here,” she writes in a letter to no one, on a piece of scallop-edged cornflower-blue stationery. A gift

from her mother-in-law—only a few envelopes missing from the box. She tears the paper in half, then in quarters, eighths, snowing pieces into the trashcan.

*

Back in Missouri, cottonmouths swim the rivers and ponds, their white mouths closed against the current, brown snakes in brown water. They drape themselves along tree branches and sun themselves on stones. Two wooden water-skis are attached to a boat with frayed rope lines, and her father-in-law is at the helm. He holds the wheel in one hand, and turns to watch the girl towing behind. She laughs, sun streaming across her red-brown hair, and lets go of one of the lines, one-handed, skimming. Her wooden skis slick the shimmering surface of the water, and he cuts the wheel. She follows the swerve, one ski dipping below the surface.

It tangles in the nest.

My mother recalls the distance from which her father-in-law told this story, as though he spoke down a long hallway from the past into the present moment, words forming on his lips with numb precision. He’s a man who likes a happy ending.

*

I’ve heard that story before.

Music

Plinky, shamisen music plays next door, and

she hears voices speaking in Japanese. Vowels pad the sharp angles and aggressive curves of consonants. She imitates them, whispering to her giant, hard stomach, which is crowned with a knob of belly button. *Okay okay okay-u.*

A red peony sits in a vase on the table, its petals furled into a fist, and she pokes at it with her finger. *Open. Open up.* She's read that the baby can hear her voice and the strange music, that it can see light shining through her belly, as though it were sitting under a lamp. Balled up in the glowing darkness, a single sheath of skin covers its eyes. A blue velvet cord links them together.

No. A bloody rope. A slight contraction grips her, and she feels her insides shifting, fault lines opening up. She sings her made-up song in a constantly shifting key, tapping an awkward rhythm on the table with her hand. The contained sweetness of the flower is in the air.

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Her husband is passionate about music. Somewhere, violins are sawing at his heart.

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Next door, the neighbors turn the radio off.

Mamushi

Climbing the hill to the bungalow is increasingly difficult—the baby crushes down against her pelvis. Her legs throb. Unconsciously, my mother places her free hand on her lower back, as if to push herself along.

She stops to lean against a stone wall, and puts her shopping bags down. The baby reaches out its arms in the cramped, thundering dark inside her and clasps at nothing. Her blonde hair is darkened with sweat, her heart pumps so loudly it's as though her whole body is a drum.

Schoolboy voices form exclamations in the cool March air, and she realizes they are in her yard—*my yard*—and begins to walk again. *What are they doing?* She walks faster, rounding the corner, out of breath. She pushes through the periphery of the youngest boys, who cluster worriedly together, and sees the red-capped boy heave a rock the size of his own head up into the air.

He brings it down with a loud cry and she realizes what is happening—the Mamushi twists and writhes in pieces, its pale white underside roiling around in the dust. She drops her bags and screams at him: “Get away! Get away from it!”

I've done you a favor. She sees this thought written in the boy's face, and gestures to the crowd of children to move back. The snake's fangs are out and two tiny white drops leak from the tips. Its eyes are dead and wild, and blood comes brownly from its wounds. One of the younger boys begins to cry and mumble.

I didn't do it. I didn't.

Breath

The Doctor, his assistant and two nurses

stand in a receiving line at the end of the metal table, the baby cradled in the air between them. The doctor takes it and presses two fingers against the breastbone. The baby's loose, mottled limbs flop backwards over his hand.

No one has thought to bring a respirator.

My mother is collapsed, her face grayed with exhaustion. She is confused by pain, by the nervous actions of the four blue-scrub-clad people standing around her spread-open legs.

The wrinkled nib of a face, the blood sullied face.

Her husband's face, a shadow on the waves.

Caught by one foot, the umbilical chaining her to the darkness, the baby is silent as an old man.

The assistant breaks from the line and runs down the corridor, pulling a respirator on its wheeled cart backwards through time, one of the silver wheels scritch-squeaking on the linoleum floor. The small body is attached to the machine, and wind moves into it. Nothing. Wind flutters in. Nothing.

*

My mother gasps, sits up on her elbows, and I begin to scream. 