

A HOME FOR US

The girl pinched and pulled the skin on the top of her hand, then released her fingers and watched it, elastic and supple, instantly return. In her childhood, in the small village where her father had grown up, her grandmother had told her once that this was the only real way to tell if someone was old.

The shrunken woman, small even in her memories, had demonstrated first on the girl. Squealing laughter and deep lines in her sun beaten skin had accompanied each pinch. She was old, but the life bursting out from under her perfunctory, loosely tied headscarf radiated even at her finger tips.

When her grandmother in turn pulled at the skin on one of her own hands, the girl could only stare at the old woman's face. As easily as the laugh lines had come, equally deep furrows along her forehead took their place and she tsked with disapproval. She became strange and serious – the game they had been playing was over. Her sunken eyes stared out to an imagined distance and the girl innocently asked her if she wanted to cry.

She only understood years later, after seeing a picture of her grandmother as a young woman, why she had been so discontented pinching her elderly hand. Her life had been hard in the rural countryside – hardly once straying from beyond her own village's borders. She had married young and raised her children, the girl's father and many aunts and uncles, almost as a

child herself. She hadn't chosen that life, but had been forced to live it. She was beautiful in that photo – something that could be accepted but never forgotten.

She pinched her skin again. Had she already grown old too? Would her Grandmother smile or frown pinching her skin now? She had already been dead many years and the girl would never know.

Though the girl had already been in the country for two weeks, having visited extended family till now, this was the first night she would stay in her childhood home.

Her bedroom had been emptied since her last visit, orderly with only a minimal amount of inoffensive furniture and accessories. It looked similar to all the rooms she had lived in for the many interim years– organized only from a lack of possessions – and she felt an unexpected feeling of acceptance seeing it like this.

She was seated at a small, wooden writing desk that had been transplanted from another part of the house, with a letter before her which she had been trying to write for the better part of the night.

She looked down at the letter and saw that her hand had become filled with red pinch marks. With her elbows resting on the table, she closed her eyes and slowly threaded the same reddened hand through her hair. The world was small like this in the familiar darkness of her closed eyes, with only one sense to manage at a time, and she slowly, listlessly let it slip away through her fingertips.

Without any warning, the world snapped back to size from the loud, rapid buzzing of an insect.

She looked up, shielding her eyes with one hand against the glare, to see a large fly continuously hovering between the ceiling and the naked bulb overhead.

She stared blankly at its erratic movements, alternately buzzing and clinking against the glass.

A slow sense of dread crept in with each grating sound of the doomed fly. Either way was so clearly and entirely hopeless; this empty guest room was no home for a fly, there was nothing to survive on, but neither was its only alternative should she try to let it outside – it was well below freezing and snow had been falling all night. She half considered the shortness of a fly's life generally, then thought that it might eventually make it somewhere else in the house where there was food, but her thoughts decayed watching it mindlessly clink against the light bulb.

“How did we get here, fly, huh?”

She absently cleared the hair in front of her face and re-read – without a change in result – the same lines she had been re-reading for the past hour.

Her involuntary thoughts and the memory of last weekend's events returned to her. The moment played over again, a man she barely knew asking her to marry him.

It had been a massive, opulent affair – like almost all the weddings in her culture – and many of the guests had come just as much to meet their future wives and husbands as to congratulate the bride and groom. She remembered she was sitting with family friends during the reception, her eyes closed, still recovering from the time difference. The same conversations comparing past weddings, the importance of this school or that one, pay raises, promotions, babies and tradition abounded. She felt herself in the darkness float upwards. Her feet floated imperceptibly close to the floor, her folded hands lifted slightly from her lap and she forgot the language the people around her were speaking.

She had made the trip between the continents countless times before and with each trip back something of herself had gone missing along the way. It had been an incremental process,

but now she was just too light and often started to drift away – it was in this moment that the man had proposed to her.

She had known what to expect then when she arrived here earlier this evening. She had delayed visiting her mother as long as possible, but finally she had to come.

Strangely quiet and apprehensive, her mother had sat at the kitchen table with tea and asked her if they could talk. She was close in age to her and they had always loved and respected each other like sisters, but she hadn't grown up here – she simply couldn't understand. Her mother had married in the same way and only wanted the best for her, the girl knew this, and yet she felt such a profound disappointment when her mother had urged her to accept the offer – she was getting old she said, it was time to think about her future.

So many reflected moments cascaded in either direction.

Her mother knew how she would react to such a thing and it made it all the more disappointing that she had arranged it with the man's family anyway; everyone acting in accordance with some undefined, deep set role.

The girl paused, again hearing the loud buzzing above her. She turned, slow and unresponsive, to stare at it again

“What can we do fly, what can we do?”

The large, unthinking fly instinctively circled the light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A tired realism kept her from criticizing her mother any further. It was normal, expected even, for her to want this – for her family, herself and her displaced culture. In one exhausted motion, closing her eyes, she put her arms on the table and laid her head down.

As a small child, her father had been a victim of political violence; leaving the girl, her siblings and her mother alone in this world. For a sleepless year they had all shared the same

bed, poor and surviving with the help of her father's parents. Finally an uncle – one of her father's brothers – helped them emigrate here. They lived with him and his family until they could afford a place of their own.

With the girl's eyes shutting tighter, she recalled with a prick the embarrassment those early days, the children who had made fun of her with words she only half understood. Her mother had worked all kinds of jobs to support her family, including cleaning jobs for parents of classmates. She had neither been able to tell her mother about her embarrassment nor defend herself from her peers. The background and words had been missing, the picture had only partially filled – colors and forms donated from different languages, cultures and countries – and even now she felt the picture was only complete as an elaborate forgery.

Suddenly, familiarly, she felt herself float an undetectable amount out of her chair. Her crossed arms serenely hovered above the surface of the wooden desk. What was chair or arm in any language? When she felt she couldn't hold on any longer, she opened her eyes and found herself squinting at the same intractable words of the half written letter.

The brother of her uncle's wife had often been at their house during those first years. Buoyed by the inestimable value of natural citizenship and a few years older than the girl, he had helped her and her siblings integrate and had been something like a brother to them. This was the man who had asked her to marry him last weekend.

Like so many men before him, she had recognized the base desire in his face and answered him with practiced eyes and the considered phrases of convention. She could control what her face communicated with men, but she couldn't help the shape of her body. He hadn't really seen her since her family had moved out from her uncle's; certainly not since she left to go

abroad, and his reaction to her at the wedding had likely been amplified by this long absence.

How little they all knew. Would he even want her if he knew that she had already loved before?

She got out of her chair and walked to the mirror of the vanity that stood against the wall opposite the desk. Although she had just recently been to a stylist for the wedding, her shoulder length, black hair looked dirty and uneven from constant clearing with her hands.

Her reflection in the childhood mirror had changed. She was still slim, but her child's body was gone and had been replaced with curves just like those in the photo of her Grandmother.

Preoccupied hands, disconnected from their host, cupped her breasts over her shirt. Her perception of herself had changed with her body too, mingled together with the men of her life, and the sensation of her body being touched like this echoed their warmth. The trembling tenderness of first love had past, as had many others after it, but somewhere inside of her was still the girl who had known all of them. All their love was gone now. But where had it gone?

There had been joy, surely, but some of them she had simply left; she didn't know why, and even if she did, she wasn't sure if she would have acted any differently. She was an atheist despite the after school religious classes her mother had painstakingly paid for all those years.

Should there be an afterlife she thought, as her arms dropped lifelessly to her sides, let those shared moments have an afterlife too.

What difference did marriage make then? There had always been some small, broken pieces that kept them from fitting together and they would only break further with time.

Wouldn't this be true for anyone she would meet?

She caught the change in her reflection. No, even if all of it had just been passing time and impressions in between, she would never marry someone like this. She too would grasp in vain like everyone else, but would do so without groping.

She straightened her spine and turned back toward the writing desk and the solitary letter on its surface. Her family was used to seeing her go, but any lingering thoughts should be, if unanswered, at least acknowledged. This letter would have to be enough for tonight.

Just as the girl felt some strength return to her, the fly started to loudly buzz again, stopping her cold. An abrupt apprehension betrayed her resolve and her fingers curled with a shudder into a shaking fist. No matter how she chose to live her life, or how far she traveled or how many languages she learned to speak, she would at the very best, and forever, just be the accompaniment of any number of other flies to any number of other flames.

She walked to the bedroom's entrance and shut off the light – aware that she should continue with the letter, but able only to feel her way back to her chair, not quite lost but not quite found, and lay her arms on the table to close her eyes and rest.

She felt herself in the familiar darkness again float upwards. Her feet floated imperceptibly close to the floor, never touching, and she blissfully, if however momentarily, forgot what floor was in any language. Even now she wasn't touching her chair and her buried face and strewn hair had a silent understanding with her arms and the table – like with everything else; exist and be close, but never touch.

She weakly reached out with one hand for the letter in front of her. Its unwritten words that had been circling in her mind finally drained down into her heart.

“Where did we go wrong, fly?”

The girl sat like this for a long while until she heard the fly again. Its rapid buzzing left the ceiling and headed toward the window. Raising her head, she opened her eyes and found herself squinting at a room filled with the pale colors of dawn. She stood up, still clutching the letter, and slowly approached the windowsill over the radiator. It was warm and covered with a row of plants she remembered her mother used to keep in the kitchen.

She was close enough to see now. The fly was sucking sap from one of the small plants, its grating buzzing now a humming voice. Beyond it, outside the window, above a border of white snow, pink clouds effortlessly drifted onward and she felt her chest rise with them.

The longing for a place that had never been slid away from her. Whatever was, or would be, was here; a part of a whole and in it they would live forever.

As she watched the fly, a faint smile came to her lips and tears gently fell from her eyes onto the letter still in her hands. She knew now that she had made a mistake in judging her family. She also knew it had been a mistake to judge herself. It had been nothing but mere conceit, a persistent illusion, to think that she could judge anything at all. She understood that she would never think of anything as separate in this world again. An imaginary door dissolved within her, neither open nor closed.

Leaving the unfinished letter on the desk, she stepped out the front door to walk in the freshly fallen snow and morning light.