

A-na

I.

A-na was the first word I learned. A-na, two syllables, forming into one call, my guardian

angel. A-na used to pick me up late at night, from the tutoring centers, after lights had shut down

in the mall. When the bus drifted into nightfall, street lights blurring in my eyes, she would

stroke my head, promising me hot red bean soup at home. Clock ticked into midnight—A-na was

still there, on the edge of my bed with dim lights on. I fell asleep on her lap, waiting

for my parents to come home. I was afraid. I held on to her, tight, every night, my safety net.

I watched the shadow of her, walking out, back arched, legs unsteady.

I was so scared of her dying—what would become of me?

II.

i don't know when it started / a-na's attentions / turned into ticks on my back / infinite questions gnawing at me / no matter how hard i scratched / *Aren't you cold / Let me get you a jacket, aiya / Why aren't you drinking hot water / Don't you have to practice flute now / Isn't the light too dim for homework / Do you need to turn up the TV / Why aren't you wearing those new sneakers / Who are those people in your class / Don't you need to eat this with chopsticks / Don't you need to leave in 10 minutes / Don't you need to bring this book with you / Aren't you ... / Don't you ... / Do you ...* / i glared and cringed / at the way she would notice every movement of mine / at her shanghai-infused mandarin pronunciations / at the awkward way she inched forward in her shoes / at the her arm trembling when she lifted the cup / at her idling around the house every day without a friend / at the lack of elegance in the way she chewed / a presence dull and ancient / a lineal stain / that i've worked my whole life to scrub off / haunting me like a phantom / hoarding plastic bags that weaved into nightmares / eluding the rule of operant conditioning / hanging onto me like an expired friend / *no, a-na, i'm a grown-up now / i would push her away / i don't need you to keep holding my hand when crossing the street / time and time / please, 别看我, don't look at me / again and again / 走开, go away / the cruelty of me / not what a granddaughter should be / sorry but i couldn't help it / the cruelty of me*

III.

“Be nice to her, she’s old,” my parents would say,
as if they themselves did not scorn her like a plague
when she folded their clean laundry the wrong way.
That was enough to tell.

Now tell me, was there not a part of you that ached,
that wished you could unsay what you had said to her,
undo what you had done to her, reach for her hand with
your warmth? Tell me, did you not also see the trauma

that brewed into who she had become, her frail figure
trembling in the night, looking for a harbor? Tell me, did you
not notice how the pennies she saved were never for herself,
how her eyes, though murky, focused always on you, only you—

We aren’t so different, we’re all cruel,
we’re all cruel because the world taught us to be.

IV.

I watched the shadow of her, walking out, back arched, legs unsteady.

对不起, A-na. *I’m sorry.* 我想你了, *I miss you.*