



Remains

Jen Mutia Eusebio

THE WATERMELON SAT at the bottom of a shallow stone pond in the courtyard. Perfectly round and no larger than a basketball. Perfectly scarless, its dark green stripes evenly set the way meridians cross a map. Here was the epitome of a watermelon. The type a mathematician would dream into the living world. Yuya Otani crouched down by the water's edge and plunged his arms through the surface, wondering how it would taste and if geometry possessed a flavor. The tongue, a knowledge of numbers.

Warmth retreated from skin, sinking toward the bones and waiting there. The pond drew from an underground spring fed by mountain snowmelt. Winter perpetual even in the height of summer. One morning when the air conditioner was still broken, Remi doused a cotton washcloth with spring water then held it against her neck the way you'd staunch a wound. Slender, was his first thought. Like the neck of a wild goose. At the library of his elementary school a hanging woodblock print depicted a flock of geese gliding across the night sky. A flat yellow moon behind a curve of wings.

But his mind flickered now to the depths of the ocean, imagining how it would be to live in altered gravity and threadbare blue sunlight. As far as Yuya knew, his guardian had never kept fish (Remi believed it cruel to deprive them of seasons, of variations to their universe) and instead used the courtyard pond to chill bottles of imported beer and fresh pears the color of moths. Today: the advent of a watermelon.





Yuya returned to the kitchen and sliced it into neat triangles. He tasted a pink translucent wedge off the knife. The sweetness was of an ordinary variety.

A steady August rain had begun to fall. It pelted against the dirt on the rocks and soaked through. Yuya would turn seventeen this year, and it would surely be another year landlocked. He had grown up along the Sea of Japan where the sound of rainfall was lost in the churning of waves. But in this town the sound was different, sharper somehow. *Was it the elevation?* he thought. Mountains rose around him. Some low and close at hand, gently sloped. Others high and jagged in the distance, reminding him of dog teeth.

When he was still new to the basin, Yuya rode his bike downtown and took an elevator up ten floors to the city hall observation deck. It was empty that morning, the tourist pamphlets and maps bleached pale by sunlight. Large windows stretched across the walls with curved white outlines of mountains printed onto the glass for easy reference. Labels and arrows to learn their names.

After a brief sweep he caught sight of his neighborhood at the base of Mount Atago; that jumble of postwar structures crouched between orchards and telephone lines and a road which led to the winery built on a rise. The tiled roof of an old house, which was now his house, and a concrete school building half-hidden among the trees. He spotted the railroad crossing and the public baths.

“The ocean will not reach you here,” Remi said to him on that first day. “You’ll soon enough dream of farther things, though perhaps they may take the shape of what you already see.”

As if she knew the shape of his dreams.

The sun descended behind the hills, clouds luminous even as rain fell. A kettle whistled on the stove. Yuya put aside his schoolbooks and set about cooking dinner. He slid open the kitchen door, the one facing the garden, and lit a mosquito coil on the veranda. Then he turned on an electric fan and warbled his grandmother’s favorite ballad into the spinning blades. His voice thrummed to Hibari Misora’s “Ai San San.”

Humans are such sad creatures, aren’t they?

Even so, I think the past rests gently on our eyelashes.

The veranda was made of smooth wood in the traditional style, extended between kitchen and courtyard. On days like this Yuya would splay across the floorboards listening to the cicadas and glass chimes as they rang out, flustered by wind. But in the evenings that spot belonged to Remi alone. Heading off to bed, Yuya would look for the contours of a shoulder in the dim or a cigarette tracing air. He’d fall asleep wondering



about the type of men who had accompanied her on such nights, before his arrival. He would guess at a face, a floating voice. Her husband perhaps? Though it was unlikely. She no longer spoke of him. Did that man even know how long her eyelashes were?

“Grilled mackerel!” Remi said as she leaned against the doorframe.

Yuya glanced up from the stove to welcome her home. Remi had forgotten her umbrella today. Rain dripped from her hair which at the tips curved inward like the lip of a cast iron bell. “I could smell it from outside. It’s a little burnt, but you’re getting better. Keep this up, and I’ll never be able to eat convenience store food again.”

“Please keep your expectations low,” he said.

Still, praise gave him courage if it meant she would praise him again. Next time he would try a Western dish like mushroom risotto or borscht with sour cream. *Please get used to this*, is what Yuya wanted to say. Instead he told her, “Sit down already. Don’t let it get cold.”

They ate while listening to the radio. Remi plucked at the snowy heap of grated radish on her plate. She sipped her tea, then with wooden chopsticks broke past charred mackerel skin to fragrant meat and watched the steam rise. She halved the body along the spine.

“You’ve gotten thinner,” Yuya remarked, as if it was something he had just noticed. “I don’t think I’m imagining it.”

Remi sat back in her chair and patted the sides of her waist. “Eating is tedious business in the heat. But when the leaves begin to turn in autumn my appetite swings back and I want to eat everything in sight, like I’m preparing to hibernate. Say, what would you do if I end up sleeping through the whole winter without once waking up?”

Yuya shrugged. “I’d pile you up with blankets and let you sleep, I guess. Though I wouldn’t waste kerosene on heating your room.”

“That’s horribly cheap of you.”

“But at least you’ll know when spring comes. You’d know through the walls, from the temperature or the chirping of birds. Winter is quiet so even asleep you’d notice when the quiet goes.”

“Is that so?” Remi smiled. “Well I think it’s rather deafening.”

“As always, you’ve gotten everything backward.”

Yuya spoke boldly but lowered his eyes. Words like “as always” and “everything” felt too early to say and overly casual for who he was to Remi, but they simply popped out of his mouth without a thought. Unrelated by blood, they were practically strangers. She had only been his guardian for two years, the one person in this town who knew what happened to bring him here. *As always. Everything. I doubt you’ve ever.* Yuya could not decide whether two years was too much time or not enough. His gaze



remained fixed upon the tabletop while Remi enveloped the mackerel's bare skeleton in its own scales and the innards she would not eat.

"What does it matter?" she finally said, laying down her chopsticks. "When in the end we simply go back to what we know."

The rainfall grew into a downpour. The timbre of it deepened. Remi picked up a slice of watermelon, rummaged through her bag for a pack of Seven Stars, and sauntered onto the veranda. Smoke escaped her lips, drifting up to the ceiling in a thick plume.

"Never fall in love with a girl like that," Yuya remembered his father saying.

He was Remi's high school art teacher, assigned to her class the same year Yuya was born. "Like a house gutted by fire," he went on. "There's not a wall that hasn't caved. She studies the form of things in order to believe in them, until she can be convinced of what they are."

A jeweler by trade, Remi spent her days in a narrow workshop in the Orion Dōri shopping arcade above a café owned by a Korean woman who occasionally modeled for her. "Ears that remind you of seashells," Remi had said, describing her to Yuya. "Tapered fingers and a constellation of moles across the wrist. On her I use white gold and pearls and stained glass. If you make things for the body then you must study the body, and its lines in movement."

As if artistry preceded the existence of flesh. Even in such a place.

Farther down the avenue was the red light district, and within it the cabaret clubs and snack bars and night-glamorous creatures who provided a steady roster of clientele, true names unasked. "It's actually Remé from 'Remedios' but call me what you like," Yuya heard her say on the phone, closing in on a transaction. Then came the switch. A stream breaking off a river. Remi abandoned Japanese, shifting into the cadences of a lilting language Yuya could not understand but for exuberant patches of English. *I'll give you a 10 percent discount. That's a lot, you know. Only for you, my darling! Only you.*

Which was a lie, of course. Nobody was special. There was Rika from Club Hummingbird and Kai from La Belle Époque and Louella from La Mariposa. They paid in cash for commissioned pieces, the freshly minted bills slipped into envelopes scented with perfume, and Yuya would press the paper to his nose and marvel how vast the universe seemed just then, and how strange.

By morning the showers had lifted. Grey clouds lingered over the higher mountain reaches, nebulous where they touched. Yuya pictured a fine, weightless mist and trees fragrant and silent in the damp. Yet in the towns of the basin the streets had





already gone bone dry. The smell of burning leaves from the orchards tickled his nose. *Fertilizer*. The thought hovered, his attention turning to the soil. *How much ash do they know to scatter?* How much, he wanted to know, before the ground shifts in chemistry and the crops refuse to yield or is it that the fruit would emerge small and deformed and rancid in the flesh?

If asked about his family, Yuya would only speak of his parents.

He'd say that his father was transferred to the Moscow branch of the advertising firm he worked for (though he held no such position) and that his mother insisted on moving with him because she had devoured all of Tolstoy and that Yuya was left in the care of a distant relative to continue his schooling in Japan. He was an only child, he'd reply to the question of siblings, which was not a lie but also not the truth.

There had been a twin brother, the two of them being what doctors called monozygotic; a single fertilized cell split to become two embryos. By luck of positioning Kou emerged older by eight minutes, and each minute that elapsed between one birth and the next was determined by him to hold the weight of a century. Yuya knew better than to question what added up to an eight-hundred-year age difference because, according to Kou, there were two types of time: the kind which ticks by and the kind which soaks into the body and multiplies and clots and bubbles and grows plump with seeds. You begin to saturate the very second you take in air.

His brother was proud of being first-in-the-world; the stronger twin, an ordained scaffolding for a second-in-the-world born floundering for lack of air. This was how Kou won arguments between them, and how Kou always slept second, waiting for the rise and fall of his brother's chest to steady next to him, the venerable and aged guardian of lungs, and Yuya had only known Kou as wide awake.

Somehow, his death jumbled the order of things.

Yuya walked to school along narrow paths which ran parallel to the main road. He passed a stonemason's warehouse and crossed a shallow canal, found a crane tipping its beak into wet mud. He heard the sound of crickets rising from clumps of wild grass where the sun could not enter. Leaning over, Yuya dipped his fingers where the shadows had congealed and remained cool. Close to the ground was still night.

His breath hitched as a familiar heaviness seeped into his fingertips. Yuya's vision unfocused—he remembered the taste of ocean pouring down his throat—and nausea awakened in his stomach, the way it did back then and many nights after. But soon the ground resolved back into view, and his own feet. Someone called out his name from the school gates: the first bell would ring soon. Yuya shouted back, "I'm coming!" and reveled in the sunlight beating down on his shoulders as he ran at full speed toward the gates.





Vacation was approaching. Carried along by the hours, Yuya sensed it in the slumped backs of his classmates and a math instructor's taut elbow as she pulled chalk across the blackboard, where a number multiplied by itself equates to the desired value which, in a squaring of roots, returns the value to what it had been. Elements jostle and complicate. Yet what of it? Because soon there will be fireworks over the river and harvest season in the orchards. There will be a festival of souls, a cleaning of gravestones.

Ancestors gallop back to their earthly homes from the afterlife, riding on the backs of horses for their yearly visit. They arrive quickly for the Ōbon celebrations and offerings of wine and sweets shaped into lotus flowers, then depart once more from the living realm, but on the backs of cows. Always slowly, this departure. The cows unhurried, guided by floating lanterns in the river.

If asked where she came from, Remi not would speak the name of the city and Yuya gathered early on that she had lived in many places before moving to his hometown and many places after. Just Remi and her Filipino mother, a woman who migrated here from another archipelago, and occasionally her Japanese father who was a good man involved in dishonest work. Those were her words, vague and full of love.

She told Yuya that they were rarely welcome where they settled. Remi's father would be called in for assignments that led him deep into those battered districts which slumbered in the daytime behind shuttered storefronts. He was invited into the back rooms of mahjong parlors. He transported unlabeled packages wrapped in brown paper to harbors and warehouses, returning home in the silent hours of early morning, the last cigarette of the night smoked at dawn. He smelled, a few old men claimed, of gunpowder. Checking his hands for severed fingers, the neighbors began to talk. About him and about Remi's mother who was dark-skinned and large-eyed and sang in the jazz clubs, a voice sweet with a touch of raspiness that her boss claimed was just like Monica Zetterlund's.

In her elementary years, Remi trained herself not to flinch when pebbles were flung at her in the schoolyard. Or when the girls in her class tossed her gym shoes into the swimming pool and the boys stuffed trash and dog shit into her desk. What did it mean, she asked her mother, when people called her blood impure? Could a trip to the hospital fix the problem? Her mother replied that there was nothing broken, therefore nothing to fix. Her father added that the absence of purity was the one condition for being born.

Ultimately, Clara Balthazar would not leave to rest the matter of her daughter's heritage. She took it upon herself to illustrate that homeland for a girl who had never





been. “Child,” she would begin in her language. “Listen to what I am going to say.” The telling of their blood called for image and inscription, gunfire and birdsong. So she told stories of an ancestral house made of stone with a Chinese tiled roof, built at the edge of a dense forest between a bay and a mountain shaped like a dragon’s spine, where she and her sisters slept on mats beneath silken mosquito nets. Where reptiles with human-like voices watched them from shaded corners, trilling with their scaled throats, *tuk-oh, tuk-oh!*

Clara spoke of the Portuguese great-grandmother who smoked the leaves of the thorn apple plant to alleviate her asthma, rolled for her in tobacco paper by a son who would become a priest. There was an uncle who grew cacao and falcata trees on the family farm and sold lumber to merchants in towns along a southern coast. He brought pure chocolate the shape of river stones to sell at the market and taught children how to build mud cannons out of bamboo, even as he warned them to stay away from the deep parts of mountains where men with rifles wandered like hungry spirits.

Remi imagined her mother’s stories floating overhead like a drifting continent, following her from one home to another. An obedient cloud with the texture of earth. “My roots stretch up,” Remi one day explained to Yuya, a faint smile flickering on the edges of her lips. “When I’m gone, you can bury me in the sky.” Then her eyes flashed, one of them bright and the other dull, and Yuya discovered his guardian to be halfblind.

“You live with a cyclops.” Remi gestured vaguely, recounting how a boy from school rammed her face against the corner of a desk. “So it goes. I would have wrecked him, dug my hands into his ribs and tore his guts out. I was ready to, you see, with the edge of a box cutter. But your father interfered. Pulled me off him. He must have thought, *God I hope my boys grow up gentle.*”

And her eye had gone ahead to the clouds or whatever afterworld appendages became untethered from flesh, for once unbound.

In the last breath of summer, Yuya’s brother returned home.

Or more accurately his body, after a very long journey, finally washed ashore. At first not recognizable, wrapped as it was in strings of kelp like a package dredged up from a long-ago time, it was the protrusion of a foot that revealed the thing as human. The initial uncertainty of the report touched Yuya’s imagination with hope. He envisioned a different journey, one without Kou’s remains: a Silk Road caravan fords an irritable river, which is narrow and turbid. A camel groans, stumbling on the uneven bed, and the load on its dusty back falls into the current. It floats down to





the estuary, where river is traded for ocean, which is wide and glistening. Above the tide are the geese and the night.

Yuya wished for the dream to be true, rather than what it really was, which was in actuality senseless. “And his head,” disclosed the coroner. “Remained affixed even with a neck eroded down to sinews. The dead can still be tenacious. The boy made his way back whole—though that isn’t always the case. Sometimes they’re all scattered. We find them in parts.”

“Where?” Yuya asked when Remi set the phone down on its cradle. She had spoken first with his parents, then made a call to the police station of his hometown.

“A kilometer down the coastline from where it happened.”

“Two years to travel a single kilometer?”

“The currents,” she replied, then pressed her fingers against his cheek. “Why don’t you just cry already? That look on your face makes me think *you* were the one the sea took away. Let’s not get things backwards.”

Yuya winced. “*What* look?”

He asked for a mirror, and the hand withdrew. “Actually, no. Leave it be. Your face is not for you to see right now,” Remi decided. “Take a walk. For the time being you must stay away from yourself.”

Long afterwards Yuya would recall her countenance —pallid and hard as if cut from marble—which she revealed to him that very moment, prohibited as he was from viewing his own. Remi nudged his ribs and pointed to his sneakers haphazardly left near the front door. He stepped into them. A light push and soon Yuya was on the other side, the door closed at his back and the August heat flooding into his pores. The clouds had retreated over the mountains, lighting mute as it tore through. He willed his legs to move.

They took him past the peach orchards in the foothills, the train station with its single, triangular platform, and the railroad crossing. Yuya observed the fleck of a propeller plane in the late afternoon sky as it descended to the west, in the direction of the aviation academy. He walked past the bakery and a neighborhood diner where through the windows Yuya saw an old woman scooping sweet red bean paste and cream into *jimanyaki* hotcakes on a grill.

The woman’s stooped back reminded Yuya of his grandmother. Every August when they were children, he and Kou would go to her village, situated further inland from their own. Because of this distance Kou started to believe that their grandmother had never seen the ocean before, or that she was somehow forbidden from reaching it. That between her and the shore a curse had been placed. So before every trip he dragged Yuya to the beach where they filled an empty plum wine jar





with pieces of coral, conch shells, and the exoskeletons of starfish. They carried the jar to the water's edge and held its open mouth to the tide.

Then, presenting this aquarium to their grandmother, Kou would puff out his chest like a hero straight out of a comic book. "Obaachan, we've brought you the sea!"

Night had already fallen by the time Yuya reached the footbridge to the prefectural office. Only the faintest edges of the mountains continued to glow. This was now the downtown district, flanked by squat office buildings and flickering street lamps. A bicycle sped past him carrying a young couple, the girl sidesaddle on the back and kicking out her feet. They rode past the bridge and under the gate leading to the Orion Dōri shopping arcade. The girl tilted her head toward the vaulted ceilings, draped an arm across the boy's waist.

As Yuya watched the bicycle round a corner, what appeared to be the murmur of ocean waves emerged from farther inside the cavern of closed shops. He hurriedly pursued the sound but discovered only paper. The dry rustle of Star Festival streamers hanging from wires strung across the arcade. In the wind, they undulated like the noodle-thin legs of jellyfish, soft and iridescent. Yuya frowned. *So it is possible to be fooled by longing.*

He passed under the streamers and fluorescent lights and, wandering deeper, found himself in a broad avenue just starting to wake. Where waiters unlocked the front doors of bars, scouring the pavement with hoses and brooms, and next to the cinema a man in a pale green kimono knelt to lay a dish of purifying salt on the ground. Somewhere, up a flight of stairs, was the high-pitched laughter of a cabaret girl ("You can't be serious!") and a cacophonous rehearsal of musicians: the blast of a trumpet and a flourish of piano keys. Down the street a trio of slick-haired men in designer suits examined their reflections in café windows. Jackets slung over their elbows. Ears cuffed with silver.

Yuya recognized his guardian's work, metals which in Remi's care found their truest form. But what ridiculous envy he felt! And in his unrest the old heaviness reached into him again. He thought of Kou, that final sight of him disappearing under the waterline. Had they been careless? The distance they kept from shore was not unusual, and his brother relished in the solitude that comes after turning landward and finding it diminished to the width of a finger. Or was it Yuya who felt that way? He could not tell anymore, just as he now doubted the shape of his own face.

Howls and a police siren and the breaking of glass returned Yuya to where he was. A gang of delinquents spilled out from a narrow alley, their arms flapping wildly as they stampeded in his direction. "Go faster! Go!" they cried out to each other, baring their teeth. Yuya braced himself, waited for the collision. A hot wind rose and





swept through the corridors of the arcade. He closed his eyes and from an open door heard the boisterous cackle of hostesses—"I've seen her in the bathhouse . . . what skin! Tight over her bones and the tattoo on her leg, yes, the one of the pearly carp, that was surely his doing..."—tangling with the drum of footsteps around him and a turbulent scatter, more wind against flesh than actual flesh, and then there was nothing more but a sense of flight.

In his memories the sea had been calm.

They were racing in the surf, Kou far ahead and gliding easily while Yuya ached from having lost too much distance he could not close. *Let him celebrate*, he decided, and slowed his pace. *It's not like we need to prove who the better swimmer is!* The shore came into view from under the arc of his right elbow. A row of umbrellas behind a shimmer of heat. The lifting of a green kite. Beneath his left was an endless and swelling blue.

It was a restlessness in the waves that caught him off guard, and warning lines in the foam. The rip current took them both before Yuya could cry out. How swiftly water passes through water, as if carved from solid channels. Yet the sea was not a thing of form. Yuya scrambled for surface, his brother's faraway hand, the thinning shore. He thought of how they had been born, one after another: Kou's little chest heaving as he wailed at first light. Afterwards was Yuya, who almost died in the womb. Strangled by his own umbilical cord, emerging quiet, drowning in air like a fish. The ocean released only one of them that day.

On the winter after the incident, Yuya was sent away from home. He would feel better with the new surroundings, his parents said. Could make new memories for himself with new classmates at a new school. They'd already made arrangements with a friend, an old student. His father pointed to the acrylic stiff-life on the kitchen wall: ripe pomegranates on a wooden table, the seeds scattered haphazardly beneath a warm shaft of light and the border between sun and membrane indistinct. Yuya pressed an ear against the canvas, listening into that other space.

He understood such things. That even in its hunger the ocean would not have him. So he accepted the woman with the pomegranates as his guardian, and on a morning of snowfall boarded a train for the mountains. Yuya passed through tunnel after tunnel until, on the other side, he entered a valley of steep hills and barren orchards—where the grip against his throat loosened and in this new place grew tender.

By the time Yuya returned to the house, rain had once again closed in on the town. The veranda was empty, and in the downpour the cicadas fell silent. He searched the



humid, darkened rooms and found Remi in the second floor study, a jeweler's loupe pressed against her good eye as she hunched over a worktable cluttered with mallets and wire cutters and sweet pastilles made from carabao milk.

"You'll be visiting home for a while," Remi said, as if the town hadn't been her own home once, and the lack of recognition irritated him. She did not turn around. "Your *real* home, I mean. Otani-sensei . . . your father, called again. There will be a ceremony. You've grown, so it's necessary to buy a new suit. Be respectful. Get a nice one, even if it isn't cheap."

"Don't tell me you're staying here."

"You arrived here alone and you can leave here alone. Bring me back a souvenir. Nothing too fancy."

"Coward," he accused. "Dig your holes, and hide in them."

"Say what you like. I've been called worse."

But Yuya did not know her enough to say more, what she was or wasn't. The things she loved or hated or how many tongues she spoke. *Thousands*, he concluded. *For animals and metals and the dead to hear, but not for me.* Perhaps for Remi—and he remembered the painting—pomegranates held a distinct charm, red seeds in multitudes confined by a single husk. Perhaps they carried the flavor of numbers, the loneliness of them.

Remi lifted a garnet up to her magnifying lens and rotated it under a lamp. The corners of her mouth twitched in displeasure. "This is no good," she spoke, though not to him. "The facets are completely off. I can't sell this to anyone." Yuya crossed the room, lowered himself on the floor next to Remi's bare feet. His shoulder blades collided against a set of drawers. Normally he was not allowed to enter here, but tonight she did not scold him. "This is no good," she repeated.

The veins under her skin looked like rivers, so he reached out and traced one across the bones of an ankle. Yuya had never touched her like this before, and this also Remi allowed briefly, with sullen hesitation. Then she removed herself toward the open window. She pressed her fingers to the lid of the prosthetic eye. "Enough already," Remi sneered, and in the allowing space Yuya apologized though she waved him off. "You wouldn't find comfort in it anyway."

"In what?"

"Don't be absurd. You were so brave just a moment ago."

"A moment ago is far enough to say I forgot," Yuya said, already giving up. "The way I see it, near a hundred years have passed since then. I'm an old man now, and you're an old lady. We're ugly and shriveled and have no more teeth. The way we are, there's no use for bravery."



SHORT STORY

She warned him, “Keep speaking like that if you want me to be angry. Who taught you to speak like that to me?”

Yuya silenced himself and a joyless laughter escaped his guardian’s throat. Remi lit a cigarette and sat upon the damp sill. She flicked ash into the rain. Embers burned close to her fingers. Lamplight cast the shadows of limbs flat and contorted upon the worktable. Outside the window a train crossed the night, and in its movement the walls of the house shuddered, like the wings of insects. The sense of being on dry land fell away, and the memory of waterline.

If not land, Yuya wanted to say, there are two options: both an endless blue and without summer, or seasons. Without a rotting of fruit, the plummet of leaves. Instead he told her, “Nobody taught me anything. Be proud of me, will you?” As if her pride could hold him. But Remi clapped for Yuya all the same, and laughed again. The hollow of her palms rattled air, and upon his tongue and between his teeth awakened the taste of salt and earth.