Striped Shadows on My Feet: A collection of creative endeavors

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Striped Shadows on My Feet

A collection of creative endeavors

photos, poems and stories by Malia Kim
A note about the Author…

I am two women. On the one hand, feeding horses, smelling sweetly of hay and coffee, I care for my animals and the hills around me with a whisk and baking pan; on the other, I’m pushing through life in a blur of colors and intensity, cutting bright fruit on a chopping board, wearing high-heels in my seventies and shopping the fifty percent off sale at Belks. I am not one without the other.
When her oldest son told her he wanted to marry a Korean woman, she mixed her dough thick and sticky, cutting light strokes through the middle. Fat, melting noodles, soup-soaked to tenderness, like white worms caught in a rain puddle.

A 100 day party for her grandson. His face appled and caked, still, in the pictures. He would grow up bored with their swimming pool, speaking three languages, and never learning how to say hello.

When her other son told her he would marry an American, she waited to change the bank accounts until they got a dog and cable T.V. At the wedding, she wore Korean dress—a pink flower in a white wedding.

A stiff foil skirt scratching the pews. Recipes in her book were full of garlic and soy sauce, sprinkled all over her Korean Presbyterian Bible in a complicated swirl pattern; molecules of her own DNA, like freckles on fair skin.

When her oldest son told her he was getting a divorce, her house smelled rotten for days. Until she found the dead birds, cracked beaks, wings bent in her chimney. She scooped them up in a white sheet and burned them in the backyard. The 100 day baby torn off the pages of legalese and used for kindling, paper curling, ink dripping. A coin pressed into his palm as a consolation prize.

An easy task once the matches were lit. Easier than having to learn English. Eaiser than having a white woman in the family wedding.
Grief

The way she tells it, you’d think he left her.
Smiling through their hollow-paned windows,
hair combed to the side, not greasy, for the first time
in months.

“He stopped me from following,” she said,
Suspicious.

I was afraid to encourage her.
She was over-ripe. Mushed lips cracked,
skin-stretched and transparent.
There were lump-knots on her face.

“I’m so far away, I’m on the moon,” she said,
Ravenous.

Her eyes, like wet water wheels, streamed tears.
She was back in Seoul, probably, standing in the kitchen
making kimchee or rice or bi bim bop.
I’d never been farther than Europe.
I didn’t know what he looked like young.
A note about the photos:

Growing up, Halmony wouldn’t let us end a meal without some fruit to cleanse our pallet. The bright colors on these plums reminds me of the yellow earrings and red lipstick she wore to church.
Blue Glass

The thing I remember most about my girlhood in Beijing is the hutong neighborhoods. Especially, the way the houses were smushed together so that each shanty looked like a piece of a bigger thing. Almost like a brick and concrete accordion. I used to pretend that I could jump from one house to the next in giant strides, my shoes making thunks on the pavement, careful not to land in the places where the houses touched.

The homes were slanted, with corners worn and steps missing. If you tilted your head a certain way they looked like old kitchen wives with heavy bags on their shoulders. The people who lived in the houses liked to squat low on the sidewalks, spitting into the street, cursing the weather and the war. The shingles of our own roof would come loose and fall away during thunderstorms, joining the rain in its descent to the earth.

Our shanty was really one half of a home that had been divided down the middle. Mother and I lived on one side and the Ming family lived on the other. Our house alone in the neighborhood still looked new with clean, solid walls of whitewashed concrete. The inside was dark and stank of cat piss and garlic. The cat had claimed a section of the living room for himself, shitting and pissing neatly in the corner. I was afraid of it and stayed mostly in the kitchen, looking out the window at the people on their way to the market. My mother liked to watch them too, because they usually turned their heads back once or twice to glance at our house.

“See? They’re noticing our walls.”

My mother’s smile avoided her mouth altogether, leaving it hard and tight. I could tell she was smiling from a certain softening of her eyebrows.

“Our walls are cleaner and more expensive-looking,” I said.

“More Korean,” she said.

Once a week Mother put on some old clothes and scrubbed the walls. Afterwards, her hands would crack and peel from the harshness of the soap. The Mings never scrubbed their walls and our building ended up looking like it had been halfway dipped in bleach. On our trips to the market, Mother would stalk by the Mings’ front windows.

“Chinese women have no sense of cleanliness,” my mother would say.

I would nod, taking a second to work myself up for the next giant stride.

* 

The day I found the blue piece of glass was the same day the market vendors stopped obeying my father. It was also the day the light hit my mother in a strange way. It was early. Before the wives with small children could come out, but after the old women had already gone. The relatively empty street made me uncomfortable. Usually, I liked to run my fingers across the textured backs of lychee and Asian pears, hopping from fruit to fruit amongst a purposeful stream of women. Without customers, the vendors looked colorless and out of place. I stayed close to mother, keeping my eyes on the threads that hung from her shirt sleeve.

“You’re not a toddler anymore.”

She quickened her pace, pushing me back slightly until I was left perched between the dumplings and the vegetables. My father hung further back, the shiny buttons on his army uniform peeking through the opening of his jacket. He was standing stiffly, back arched and uncomfortable. The sun was rising at the mouth of the alley, but his figure blocked the light.

I squatted where I was, folding my elbows together and resting my head on my hands. Ahead, I could see her approaching our usual vegetable stand. She picked up a few cucumbers and turned to leave.

“That’ll be 60 Yuan.”

“What?”

“60 Yuan. 20 Yuan each.” The vegetable vendor was a tall, skinny man with a pot belly that was puffing up and down like an Adam’s apple. His eyes skipped over to the mouth of the alley, tracing my father’s shadow. His hands were clutching and releasing strands of green beans. “Sorry.”
I squinted to make out my mother’s expression, expecting to see the thin, firm line of her lips. But the outline of her body was slightly blurred, tinged with the gray-blue shades of early morning. The light shifted and I noticed my father had left the alley.

“I’m getting the cucumbers to make dinner tonight.”

The softness of her voice made my stomach hurt, and I reached down to scrape my palms against the city road. The rough texture of the pavement felt good. My fingers traced the outlines of ridges and grains of dirt: definite, concrete and whole.

That’s when it happened. I felt a sharp pain in the bottom of my hand so that, for an awkward minute, I thought the road had bitten me. When I looked down I saw that a piece of glass had cut my palm. A flawless, clear-blue piece of glass that was smudged on one corner with my blood. I looked around to see where the glass could have come from, but there was only pavement, and the vendor stands which had wood, cloth and food but no glass.

My mother was coming quickly toward me, so I put the glass in my pocket. It seemed as good a place as any.

*  

My father was an officer in the Japanese army. He stopped by every Monday and Wednesday evening for dinner and sometimes on the weekends. He also stopped by for lunch occasionally and to go to the market. He usually came in uniform, the shininess of his buttons and shoes looking too sharp in the dimness of our home. On the evening after I found the blue glass, he arrived early. He sat cross-legged on the floor playing dominoes with me. When the soup began to boil over on the stove, I ran across the room and stood on my tiptoes to stir it. The broth made sizzling sounds as it hit the burner. The cat was purring.  

“Yong-hi, come here,” my father motioned me back to the floor. Mother remained seated in the kitchen, stroking the cat. She had been silent since his arrival.  

I sat down. He looked different sitting on the floor. His legs made giant triangles, pulling his army pants taut and exposing his socks. He didn’t usually play games with me. I fingered the blue piece of glass in my pocket, careful to avoid the sharp edge.

“I found a beautiful piece of glass today.”  

It took him a moment to focus on my words.  

“Where?”

"At the market. I don't know where its from."
"Probably someone's eyeglasses."

I looked at the eyeglasses sitting neatly on his face and tried to picture my piece of glass fitting there. It seemed to be too blue, but I wasn’t sure. I carefully fished it out of my pocket, watching my father. “Do you think it matches?”

He took the glass. In my father’s hands, it looked clearer than I had remembered, delivering only the faintest tinge of blue. There was even a slight bend to it, as if it had indeed been part of an eyeglass lens. He studied it for a moment, turning it over in his hands. Then he looked at me, cupping his chin with his hand, thumb on one side and fingers on the other, in a way I hadn’t seen him do before or since.

“Do you think it matches?” I repeated.
He let his hand drop and shook his head.

“Just glass,” he handed it back to me, “Is dinner ready yet?”

My mother stood up and dished the soup into bowls. She sometimes made Japanese dishes for the nights Father ate with us, but tonight our kimchee-jiggae dinner was decidedly Korean. Halfway through the meal, she finally looked at my father, her lips thin.

“I’m sorry there’s no cucumber salad. There was trouble at the market.”

My father’s face tightened and he shook his head in response. A few strands of his hair, usually combed firmly to the side, fell across his face.

“How are we supposed to eat?” she said.

“I’ll bring you food from the base.”

I ate my kimchee-jiggae down to the very last grain of rice. I decided that I liked Korean food better than Japanese food even without cucumber salad.

“That stupid vendor,” she said.

My father ate his rice slowly, careful to keep his mouth from getting too full. “You should have known. Too many of my men have already been sent home. I can’t guarantee you anything anymore.”

After dinner, my mother hovered in the living room, her hands drawn up, standing lightly on the balls of her feet. She resembled the cat, muscles taught, ready to spring. My father sat at the kitchen table, his glasses reflecting the light from the fireplace. The lenses looked like two small candles burning.

“Toshio, would you like to come back with me?” My mother gestured toward the bedroom she and I shared.

He took his glasses off and began cleaning them, making sure to get the corners near the nose piece thoroughly.

“No,” he said.

After my father left, I pretended to go to bed. By pretend, I mean I sat in the doorway to the bedroom, half-in half-out, watching my mother stroke the cat.

* 

The Ming sisters knew that my father was going to leave China even before I did, and told me so afterward. They were two years older than me and knew twice as much. Jia and Jie Ming were stringy, identical pole-bean girls whose upper teeth pushed past their lips, so that their mouths hung open in round O shapes. They liked to play outside after they came home from school, tempting me with dangerous yo-yo competitions or loud rounds of piaji—a Chinese version of Pogs.

I’d wait to join them until after my mother went to take her afternoon nap. She’d leave the cat to stand watch by the door, his flat cat-lips threatening to meow an alarm. To get past him, I put one or two anchovies in a small dish on the opposite side of the kitchen. Eventually the salt smell would draw him away from his post. I could hear the wet sucking sounds of him eating as I slipped out the door.

“How was the market?” Jia Ming’s mouth stretched across her big teeth and into a smile.

“Did it smell like fish?” Jie said.

“It only smells like fish on Thursdays, dumb girl,” Jia said.

“If I’m dumb you’re dumb,” Jie said.

The sisters fell to the ground giggling, their mouths even rounder than usual. I stood to the side, admiring their synchronization. The glass in my pocket felt heavy, and I wondered what Jia and Jie would think of it. If it would change for them like it had changed for my father. And then I thought that whatever they thought of it, it’d probably be the same thing.

“Yong-hi.” Jia and Jie had finished laughing and were sitting up, looking at me. Their heads were tilted in opposite directions. I couldn’t tell if they had been whispering or not. “Let’s do something dangerous,” Jie said.

“Yes, somewhere far away,” Jia said.
“I can’t go far,” I said. The cat liked to sit at the window and watch me.

“Well we’ll go without you,” Jie said.

I considered showing them the glass again, just to get them to stay. But outside in their yard, standing in front of their dirty walls, I was afraid to take it out.

“Let’s try the abandoned house at the end of the street,” Jia said, “that’s not too far.”

I traile behind them, purposefully stepping on the gaps between the houses and feeling a little thrilled at my audacity. I thought about mother and whether she was actually sleeping or just sitting quietly in her room, staring at her walls. Either way, I was sure the cat was with her.

When we arrived at the house I noticed that its walls, like ours, were made of concrete. But large sections of it were missing and broken. Glass littered the yard and the house on either side of the broken walls. There was so much glass that the ground looked like it was covered in clear, sharp snow. Dark, half-enclosed rooms were visible from the street, and I could even see a toilet, its lid gone, its bowl full of brown rain water. A broken bed frame, wood splintered and sticking up at odd angles, and some old children’s toys reminded me that a family had lived there. There was a yo-yo half-buried in the glass. I couldn’t imagine anything significant coming from here. Everything looked like only the outer shells of important things. I felt my hand slip into my pocket and wrap around my blue glass.

“What do you think of all this glass?” Jie said. She walked up to the house and began examining the scattered glass. She bent so low that the tips of her hair trailed across the broken edges.

I took a few steps backward, back toward the houses with people in them.

“It’s awful,” Jia said. She took my hand, her fingers firm and filmy with dirt. It was odd to have one hand wrapped around the glass in my pocket and the other hand wrapped around someone else’s. My head cleared and I loosened my grip on the glass, transferring some of that pressure onto Jia’s hand. I looked at her, but she wasn’t looking at me.

We stayed and explored the house a little longer. On the way home, my hand was smudged with dirt from where Jia had held it, and I was careful not to step in the places where the houses touched.

* *

On Saturday my mother decided that it was time to visit the Buddhist temple on the outskirts of the city. She made her announcement while scrubbing the walls of our house. Her fingers, curled and wrinkled over rough cloth, were scrubbing the walls so hard I could see places where her skin was coming off. We packed a lunch and caught the 11:30 bus out of town later that day. I could see the cat in the window as we walked to the station.

The mountains surrounding the Buddhist temple acted like a high roof, enclosing the area. Even though it hadn’t rained in a few days, the ground, air and wood felt damp and heavy with water. The roofs of the temple buildings jutted out into the small community, only to be sucked back into the leaves and branches of the mountains. It seemed as if the buildings were only partially available, likely to be consumed entirely by the mountains in the coming decades. I could hear the monks chanting in some private corner, their voices reaching much farther here than they would in the city. I wondered what kinds of dwellings the monks lived in, and whether or not they were clean.

The doors to the main worship hall were open, leaving almost the whole side of the building exposed to the dampness of the mountain. But once we went inside, I was surprised to find the room warm and dry. My mother took off her shoes and walked quickly over to the table where hundreds of candles were burning like sprinkles of fire. She lit one and placed it at the corner of the table.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“Your father,” she said.

Then she went to sit cross-legged in front of the Buddha statue, one pale bare foot facing up toward the ceiling and the other tucked underneath her. I sat behind her, careful to imitate her position. We rarely came to the Buddhist temple and my mother never worshiped at home. Temple trips were reserved for the times when
mother couldn’t scrub enough dirt off the walls, or when the cat was sick. I just watched her, tracing the grace-
ful outline of her neck, and watching it disappear into the dark depths of her hair. Her lips were relaxed and
pink, puffed out slightly. I liked to compare her to the giant golden Buddha statue in the center of the worship
hall. Her position, directly in front of the Buddha, and their identical, erect postures made her look like a small-
er, mirror image of the statue. I felt the outline and shape of the blue piece of glass in my pocket. It felt round
and smooth, almost fragile, and I realized that the glass could have belonged to my mother. Or at least some-
thing she owned, like the glass handle of her yellow, blue and red fan from Korea.

I felt a sense of elation. In the unfamiliar softness of my mother’s mouth, the perfect brokenness of
my piece of glass, I could feel the imprint of Jia’s hand in mine. I felt like the abandoned house must have felt
before it fell apart. Like my father must have felt when he thought about Japan. It was a scattered feeling- not
altogether wholeness, but something like it.

“What’s that?”

I was so surprised to hear my mother break the silence that I didn’t answer her right away.

“What’s that in your hand?”

“A piece of glass I found at the market.”

She stood up in one smooth motion. “Throw it away,” she said, her lips thin, “you can’t carry around
pieces of garbage in your pocket.”

I waited until she was occupied with her shoes before hurrying over to the candle table. I stood the glass
up on its side behind my father’s candle. By candlelight the glass looked so blue and thick that it seemed to
curve around it, acting as a sort of enclosure. The glass was close to the flame, and I thought the flame might
melt a groove in the glass.

That night, my pocket felt empty without the glass, and I cried quietly, hiding my face underneath the
blanket. But I fell asleep quickly, and in the morning, it took me a minute to remember why I had been sad the
night before.

*

My father left us the following week. He kissed my mother goodbye and gave me a nod while he put on
his shoes. I did not expect to go with him. He was going home.

On the evening after he left, my mother sat in a chair, staring at the wall. I liked to think that she was imagining
the giant Buddha statue in front of her. I remember noticing how scarred and broken her hands looked. There
were raw spots and cuts where the skin hadn’t healed from the last time she scrubbed the walls.
Me

My Korean grandmother used to pinch my face to give me the nose she never had.

An unflattening of the features. A westernization process. She didn’t have to worry

I was half caught in the creek bed, half country kid, half not hers. My tongue swollen like a bee sting over An-young. Hello? didn’t you know the universal language is numbers,

like the number of Easter eggs I found in your yard the number of field diamonds in the dirt

the number of curls in your wig that I wore on top of my head like a hat. A miniature oriental.

The plastic-stick restaurant booths on the other side of town where I ate stolen chicken fingers

from another grandmother. The two of you sipped coffee next to the piano in the blue-paneled living room. You tea, her coffee, thrown together saying “How are things in your neck of the woods?”

I’m only two halves buried in separate continents, leaving an empty cup and spilled water

ruining the wedding pictures. The ones with one white woman too many. My brother and I up to our necks in gray area,

the non-color between too much and too little. But if I could to ask Libra to drop one of his weights, to watch it fall, crashing into a sea of sameness, I wouldn’t.

I’d rather give my kids Korean names. Or paint striped shadows on my feet.
Listen, the word of the day is young.
A possible definition is a person near the beginning.
Smaller bones, densely compact with marrow
the color of red bean paste, might be found later by archaeologists
in a dried out lake bottom outside LaFollette, Tennessee.

(My children’s grandchildren might be wearing some sort of self-air conditioning jumpsuits and exclaiming over the whiteness of the bones.)

In other words, new springtime smells like sand.
If it's about to summer storm, wet sand. The kind of heavy air
that makes for lying on the loveseat in the sunroom,
sweat seeping into the cushions, tanned legs lined up side
by side, knee to knee, lines of flesh on fabric.

(Or a small pile of thin-legged kids, sweat-soaked and stoned,
trying to avoid the heat by the river)

My mother made the sunroom hotter just by sitting,
shoulders drawn up, in a covered easy chair, the clicking sounds of summer nights
occupying the space between us. And there was something else there too,
slipping off the wood-paneled walls, something like oil.

Because my mother isn’t the type of person you write poems about.
She’s too well put together for that kind of wandering. But there she was,
crying in the sunroom.
Waiting for the Horse

The melting part of the day
when sun spirals sink their teeth into pavement.
She held Grandma’s homemade bag of old fruit,
crinkled plastic against her buttery palm.

Brother was too short for his own liking,
Standing on tiptoe to whistle a horse call.
Hands full of withered clover, outstretched,
And calling—no, wheezing-- a low wissss.

Grandma’s call was like a freight train,
Wheeet, Wheeet. Clear and cracked, it hit heaven.
It was this or nothing-- a full moon moment.
Waiting was browning the apples.

Her hands twisted the space between
barbed-wire spikes, each hand holding hours.
The absence of the horse,
clear in the green-gapped field, stung her cheek.

We’ll try again tomorrow, grandma said.
The scattering of dead clover was silent.
The apples too rotten to eat,
Brother threw them into the gaps between the trees.
To Grandma

Dolly Parton and I have come a long way from your living room.

Dancing bare foot on top of bare foot, brushing up against the aloe plants

spiking in the windowsill. She never rushed us—

not on that worn carpet floor. Not in a room with a rocking chair

and muddy galoshes. She loved us too much for that.

In my car on rainy stretches of highway between one point and another

without a single cow field in sight, I’m still singing its all takin’ and no givin’,

my country accent kicking in.

And you’re back in your living room bare foot, watering the aloe plants.
Field Diamonds

When Shady was twenty-three, she discovered she could kill dogs with the power of suggestion. She imagined them, bodies muted and stiff, mouths black except for the teeth. They fell heavy to the ground, crunching foliage, the sound leading their masters, hampered by boots and guns, to find them.

The way Jeff told it, though, the dogs were shot. Hunters mistook them for prey, and they crumpled, blood seeping from the bullet holes. After the gunshots, there weren’t any sounds. Or maybe there were, but he didn’t remember any.

She had wanted to bury them, but Jeff threw the bodies into the creek bed, letting the water carry them away during the next thunderstorm.

* * *

They lived between low pastureland and the higher mountains of the East Tennessee foothills. The land had a dead beauty, made more potent by age. Even in the midday sun the mountains looked old. Worn. Eroded away to reveal sharp ridges of limestone like teeth.

In the afternoons, Shady took walks. Her steps had the same rhythmic drive as dance. The clumped dirt beneath her feet, the burn in her thighs, made her wish she could take off her shirt and feel the cold air against her stomach.

The mountain hid things, like the old moonshine still that sat beneath a maple, edges thin and rusting. Higher up she found an abandoned camp where someone had propped branches against a tree trunk to make a lopsided teepee. There was still a burnt ring of earth by the clearing’s edge, and a bag of rotting food. She remembered the smoke from a few months back, smeared black against the sunset. Jeff had just gotten home, asking,

“What’s dinner?”

“Beans.”

“Did you see that smoke on the mountain?” he said.

“He looks like he’s a ways up there,” she said.

“He probably ain’t got nothing. The deer are hiding from the cold this time of year. I bet he’s one of those guys who lost everything after that factory closed down and he’s living up there so he doesn’t get put in jail for homelessness. I’m gonna ask him to dinner, I bet he knows Daryl.”

“Jesus Jeff,” she said, “if you want to.”

But Jeff took off his shoes and lit a cigarette. She was relieved. She thought whoever was up on the mountain would be the type to take the silverware.

* * *

The beagle puppies were housed in a cage at the bottom of the hill behind the trailer. The cage sat high off the ground, its bottom made up of criss-crossed metal bars. The dogs’ shit would fall between the bars so that the grass underneath was greener and lush.

The puppies looked like fat, white worms, and the cage made it worse for them. They had to crawl around, their paws folding around the metal. Litters were separated from each other by more barred metal, so that each group occupied a channel. It made the business of selling dogs more efficient and organized. After a couple of weeks, Shady painted the cage blue and stuffed straw in the corners.

“To make the dogs more appealing to buyers,” she told Jeff.

The puppies piled on top of the straw, and they sold three in five days. Jeff got excited. He stayed home from work to make phone calls. They had sex that night and the next. Afterward, Shady lay breathing low, listening for the sounds of the mountain. But the only discernable sounds were the soft ones the leftover puppies made, fumbling around in their cage.
A man came in from town with his daughter to buy a puppy, their Chevy Nova skidding and scraping along the gravel driveway. Jeff had left to talk to a man about buying more dogs, so Shady took them down the hill.

“How pretty, look Isabel,” the man said to his daughter.

“They look like beetle larvae,” the girl said.

“Be nice,” the man said.

They had a puppy out, the little girl regarding it warily from a distance, when Jeff came home. He saw them and came trotting down the hill, eyes wide, holding out his hand. The men talked, the girl stood silent and the puppy floundered in the grass.

“You a business man, Leonard?” Jeff asked.

“Well, I work at a bank if that’s what you mean.”

“I love banks,” Jeff said, “You hungry?”

“We were going to stop at McDonald’s on the way home.”

“Shady makes the best cookies. You like molasses?”

Jeff started back up the hill to the house. The man followed, trying to avoid the muddy spots and dog shit in the yard. Halfway up the hill, he called over his shoulder, “You want cookies, Isabel?”

Isabel stared back at him until he gave up and headed back toward the house. She switched her gaze to Shady, methodically picking at a large scab on her chin with an index finger.

“How do you know what beetle larvae looks like?” Shady said.

“I was digging around in the yard, looking for moles, and I found one. I didn’t know what it was at first, but I poked at it with a stick, and dad told me to stop, that it was beetle larvae.”

Shady reached down and put the puppy back in its cage. It stumbled a little before it got used to the metal bars again.

“You got any field diamonds?” the girl said.

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s go dig some up. You can find them in the creek bed.”

“Your daddy might be back soon.”

“You think so?”

Shady looked at the puppies.

“Come on,” the girl said.

They made their way up through the woods, picking a path through the autumn leaves. Shady hoped they weren’t creating too much of a trail, it made for a better walk if they came back through a different way.

Shady used to be in love with a man with two last names. Miller Pritchard. A man, her father declared, who did not know which foot to put forward first (on account of his two last names). Which was true, in a literal sense, because he preferred not to walk. Instead his most intimate pleasure-- more than women, money or the brown loafers he wore every Sunday to church-- was flying. On hot summer afternoons after she fed the animals and did the kitchen chores, Shady watched him. He was a yellow whirring machine, dropping low over the dammed up Tennessee rivers, and skirting the edges of the trees. When he landed, the buoys from his sea plane pushed at the water, spraying wetness like long fingers over the lake. Her blouse would get wet from the spray.

“Did you know field diamonds are real diamonds? I’m gonna make my dad rich by finding a bunch of them. Then we can put them in the bank so we won’t lose them. There’s probably enough to make me rich too.”
Isabel crouched low next to the creek bed, her hands sifting through flat, brittle rock.

The sun was already beginning to set, and Shady found herself searching for the smudge of smoke from the homeless man’s camp.

“Why are you looking at the sky? The diamonds are in the dirt,” Isabel said.

“Sorry, I’m waiting for the sun to catch one. It’ll be easier if you see a glint.”

“But digging’s faster.”

Shady thought she saw movement in the trees from the direction of the camp. But the wind was pushing the tree leaves and branches around, so she could have been mistaken. “I don’t think it’ll be found unless it wants to be found.”

“Since when do you know so much about field diamonds?” But Isabel straightened and squinted, hands on hips.

They made their way slowly along the creek bed. Isabel would stare at one spot for a while, hard, and when she didn’t see anything, she ran ahead in frustration, only to stop short and slowly retrace her steps. By the time the sun had set she was squatting low and digging through the dirt again.

“Let’s go. It’s dark, your dad will be worried,” Shady said.

Isabel dug harder, her lap collecting dirt in small piles on her jeans.

“Look another day.”

Isabel sighed, “No, we have to do it now.”

“Why?”

“Because if we don’t, I won’t be able to keep it safe at the bank or make it into a necklace. It’s the most important thing and I don’t want to forget.”

Isabel was hunched into herself, dirt in hands. Shady picked up a handful and began searching. They hunted for field diamonds until Isabel fell asleep, and Shady carried her back.

* *

Shady’s father’s funeral had been held at First Baptist Church off Eliezer Road. The church was wooden: pews, ceiling, floor, and altar. She thought if the devil ever decided to show up the whole place would burn.

When they got back home, Jeff dished the funeral casseroles onto plates and heated them up in the oven. She was tired.

“You remember your dad and how he ate his biscuits? Picked them apart to pieces and ate it like a chicken,” he said.

“That’s right. Momma always told him she’d have to start feeding him corn and things from the chicken feed if he didn’t stop.”

They finished their dinner and left the dishes in the sink. Before bed, Jeff gave her a baby doll nightgown, the kind with lace straps and a see-through bodice. It was wrapped in black paper.

“You know, because you were feeling so sad.”

“Thanks Jeff.” She hung it in the back of her closet next to an old raincoat and a sleeping bag.

* *

The weather had started to change from autumn to winter. The trees were thinning out, the air wasn’t holding as much moisture. When she stood on the back porch, Shady could see the moonshine still through the gaps in the trees.

She wouldn’t have kept up her walks-- the air was too thin and she could see most of the mountain, exposed, from her own yard-- except that Jeff had lost his job, and so he was at the house much more than before. She went walking one day after discovering their phone lines had been cut off, hiking up through the path that took her past the abandoned camp. When she came back, she found Jeff out working on new cages, driving stakes of wood deep into the earth and hammering the tops down.
“Jeff, I found you a job interview.”
He grunted with the effort of the stakes.
“A sales position. Insurance.”
“Alright.”
“It’s Monday in town.”
He swung again and half missed, driving the stake in at an angle.
“Goddammit.”
“I’ll lay a suit out for you.”
“Can’t do it that day. I’m hunting with Paris.”
“Jeff.”
“Shady, Goddammit, not now.”
By the time Jeff had finished, she was laying dinner out: cornbread and canned vegetables from the garden. He went back to the bedroom instead of lighting his usual cigarette. He came back, cheeks shiny. He’d combed his hair.
“I got you something,” he paused for effect, “a diamond.”
He produced a clear plastic bag that held a gold chain necklace with a small diamond at the end.
“Where did you get this?”
“At the flea market. The guy showed me it was real because you can see the cuts in it. See? Put it on.”
He took it out of the bag and hooked it around her neck. “You and that girl were out looking for field diamonds, but I got you the real thing.”
“Field diamonds are the real thing.”
“It’s quartz.”
“How much was it?”
“Oh not too much. But you’re worth it.”
They began to eat.

* 

The night Shady killed those dogs she had been baking an apple pie. Her apple pies had ten pads of butter, at least, which she spaced evenly over sliced apples and cinnamon. She liked cutting the butter, especially after she let it sit out for an hour to soften. The knife slid through in even cuts, thudding lightly on the cutting board in a sort of rhythm.

She had been cooking all day. She began early with a cobbler, getting the idea after finding some frozen blackberries she’d stored from last season. The countertops and kitchen table were full of molasses cookies, yellow cake, cheesecake, and one pineapple upside down cake that sat, taller, in the middle like a dessert king. The cookies were inedible. She had made those around dinnertime and forgotten the eggs. They sat, flat and discolored, on a plate in front of the upside down cake.

By the time the apple pie came out of the oven, the sun had set. She began cleaning the dishes, taking extra care to wash and dry her hands. She was out of butter. She sat down on the couch, fingering the diamond necklace around her neck. The gold links were weak and pulled at each other, giving a little to the pressure from her fingers. She hooked a finger over the diamond and tugged until she could feel the pressure cut into the back of her neck. A sharp sting that subsided into a dull ache after a while. She increased the pressure gradually, gritting her teeth against the pull, holding her neck erect. She could feel the necklace weakening, the links spreading apart, and at the same time the skin around her neck began to split open. She thought of the way the yellow sea plane’s spray felt against her face on a hot summer day. It dripped down the back of her neck, running small rivulets down her spine, mixing with the sweat of her back. She thought of the dogs hunting, slowing down their sprint, until finally they lay down in the leaves, letting the quiet of the mountain wash back over them. The necklace gave first, breaking just above the diamond. It fell away, and Shady was pushed back onto the sofa. She rested there, knees drawn up and hunched. By the time she got up to clean her neck, Jeff had come home to cry over his dogs. He didn’t notice the diamond gone.