ESSAY

Still Life with Deer

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"Constellation Light" by John Boudreaus

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1.

Amah taught us how to fold. First, it was a paper boat, then a ball. A frog, then a crane. Then a shirt with two slots for a pair of trousers with pointed hems. When we ran out of glue, we used sticky rice to fold fans. The most beautiful thing she had ever made was a woven deer. She would undo the strips of her worn-out abanico fan and choose the ones with the right length. When she passed away, I asked Saku, my third uncle, if I could have the woven deer. He shook his head and kept it, together with the turquoise Underwood typewriter and the coal stove, which my cousin now uses during cookouts. Good thing he didn't give the deer to me. Otherwise, I would've unravelled it to find out how to make it. In my uncle's studio, the deer now lies in one of his old Japanese chest drawers.

2.

In the days following Amah's death, my four uncles and my aunt sorted through her closet, drawers, and cabinets for things they could keep and throw away. My grandmother had always been a private and reticent person, prone to angry outbursts whenever her things went missing. Had she been alive and well, she would have been outraged seeing them go through her clothes, jewelry, bags, and cans of Danish cookies, where she had kept her buttons and threads. I remember my youngest uncle, Kuku, securing a box with packing tape, which screeched relentlessly as he ripped it off its roll. What happened to the bottles of unused Green Cross alcohol, the one that Amah applied on her skin to keep herself cool on hot summer days? Where were her cereal bowl, spoon, mug, and plates? Who used them after we had left? Did they know they used to belong to someone who's now dead? Her clothes were either donated or burnt during the burial to provide for her in the afterlife. My aunt and my mother got hold of her jewelry and knitwork. Who got to finish the Nescafé Classic instant coffee she would always have in the morning without milk? Or the Danish cookies in the blue round tin can? Where's the jar of brown sugar I stole spoonfuls of as a child? Who got to keep her Bicycle playing cards? Where did the stacks of United Daily News Amah used to read with a magnifying glass go? Did she leave anything behind for me?

3.

Saku once told me that when the Japanese forces reached Amoy, China, where Amah spent her youth, she saw a soldier run after her friend in the fields with a bayonet. She never saw her friend again. Whenever the soldiers came, she disguised herself as a man and hid inside the closet. They said she was starting to lose her mind so my great grandparents decided to escape to Manila with her.

4.

Amah lived her whole life in fear. The war destroyed her notion of time. The past just never

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seemed to come to a halt. She believed that an external force greater than her was trying to hurt her. Towards the end of her life, she saw silhouettes outside the window; hence, the closed blinds. She heard the people on the television calling her name. She saw people in restaurants staring at her. In her youth, she would lock herself in her room whenever there were visitors. Days after the burial, I was sitting on the double glider in the living room and found her maintenance pills in one of the cushions. She fervently believed that doctors were trying to poison her.

5.

Siku, my fourth uncle, walked out of Amah's bedroom. He ruffled my hair when he saw me. He would only do that to Billy, his giant black Labrador, whose fur shines in the sun. Siku stepped out of the house to the garage and, through the screen door, I saw him take his glasses off and wipe his puffy face with a handkerchief. When all of them had finally left, I opened Amah's bedroom door. Her things were not in the places where they used to be. The familiar smell of Green Cross alcohol, Johnson's baby powder, and Ivory soap had somehow left the room, too. The air was heavy and the silence was deafening. Had she been alive, a slight alteration would have escalated to yelling and accusations and, as an admittance of mistake, concluded in a blaring quietness when the object of interest was found. Enmeshed in that same stillness in her room, now even more deafening, I realized that she was indeed gone — Amah wouldn't have left her blinds open, moreso let other people touch them. She wouldn't have let her closet be stripped bare of her things. She wouldn't have let the pictures of herself standing next to a Christmas tree in Rockwell or locked in an embrace with her daughter during her stay in LA be taken away. Somehow the empty plastic picture frames on top of the Orocan drawers and the empty photo albums made her death even more real.

6.

Amah and my brother were watching WrestleMania when her leg went numb. Gua e sosi. Gua e sosi, she said, reaching out her hand to me as she was transferred to a gurney. My keys. My keys. Locking all the doors in the house was her night time routine. Without fail, she would put her keys on a plastic plate on top of the Orocan drawers before going to bed. And during the day, she would keep them in the front pocket of her duster, together with her handkerchief for her chronic sinusitis. She had left them on the plastic plate when she was rushed to the hospital that night. One week later, she was dead.

7.

Aren't all signs of death conjured up in hindsight when our mind tries so hard to connect the dots after a loved one's death? The signs, as people always say, are the unusual things the deceased do before they pass. Amah certainly gave out signs. She would never have stepped

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out of the house alone, much less gone for a walk. She would never have had her hair done by a different hairstylist, much less by a neighbor in the garage out in the open, where anyone could easily see her. She would never have watched a Bruce Lee movie on a computer, much less with earphones on because she was worried about her ears getting damaged. But all of this she did despite her fears.

8.

Wreaths and countless flowers from Amah's distant relatives filled the icy room. Amah used to tell me that friends would leave if you got no money to show for it or if you had nothing valuable to offer. Amah would always eat her bowl of congee with sweet potato alone for her 5 pm dinner. On hot summer afternoons, she would douse her whole body with Green Cross alcohol and turn on the air conditioning. Every single day, she killed time playing solitaire with her dog-eared Bicycle playing cards made from cardboard. Before each game, she would pour Johnson's baby powder all over the cards, spread them across the bed, and slide them towards her in swift motions as she collected them in a deck. She would cut the deck in half and shuffle the cards repeatedly before laying them on the bed. This was her afternoon routine.

9.

Amah used to eat from a cereal bowl with yellow and blue squares arranged in grid-pattern composition around its shoulder. She only ate with a metal spoon, never with a fork or chopsticks. Before she got ready for dinner, she would change into her pajamas. She was wearing a white pair with dainty blue poppies days before she was rushed to the hospital. Mang tsap gua, I said to her out of spite when she invited me to have dinner with her. Ignore me. Don't bother me. Leave me alone. I was watching TV in the living room. She stood up, hitting the edge of the table with her body. And for the first time in her life, Amah, with all the nerves she could master that day, stormed out of the house and walked to my uncle's place four houses down the road, her metal spoon clinking against the cereal bowl as she left.

10.

If I had known then what I know now, I would have acted differently. They say that suffering in order to live to tell the story is costly. Amah, out of fear nurtured in war time, despised anything unfamiliar. How can you love and be with someone you can never understand? Her reluctance to try new things, her fear of going out of the house, her profound inability to assimilate to the local culture in Manila, and her annoyance at anything perceived as different seemed to mask this fear of the unknown. The way I acted, my dark skin, my broken Fukien, my taking after my father, my explosive laughter, my being maharot — or carefree — in my younger days shut me out into her unknown.

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11.

Stress, the surgeon said when they asked him for the possible cause of the blood clot. My heart sank when I heard it. I couldn't help but think: Did our argument cause her heart to pump more blood than usual, freeing the clot from somewhere deep in her system, like a rock dislodged from the earth by the sudden jolt of moving water? The chance that she would get well after the surgery was slim. It was still a chance nonetheless. After the surgery, which removed the blood clot, Saku and I stayed in the room with her. She was complaining about lower back pain. We thought they were bedsores, so I massaged her back with Johnson's baby powder. The doctor went inside the room, listened to her heart with a stethoscope, and left in haste.

12.

Amah was lying on a steel table in the hospital morgue. Her skin was still fair and she looked like she was sleeping. It must have been just a couple of hours. They said we needed to take out her dentures. My aunt couldn't, so I tried. I remember it vividly even now, more than a decade later. It shouldn't be a false memory, because I can remember the tightness of her dentures in her mouth as I tried to remove them. My brother and I were waiting outside in the hallway when Amah's heart suddenly gave out. But I remember it was an aorta that ruptured due to sudden blood flow that finally killed her. Did I massage her back too vigorously when I shouldn't have?

13.

The signs wouldn't have happened had we not fought. If she had not stormed out of the house, alone in her pajamas despite her fears, she wouldn't have invited me to take a stroll in the neighborhood. She wouldn't have asked for the neighbor's help to cut her hair. She wouldn't have said yes to me when I asked her to watch the Bruce Lee movie on the computer. And sometimes I can't help but think: If we hadn't fought, she wouldn't have died.

14.

It wasn't grief, Saku said when we talked about Amah's passing a decade later. He regretted the things he hadn't done and the things he hadn't done well enough. Saku gave me a piece of advice: Always be good to the people around you. Once they're gone, they'll never come back, no matter how many flowers you leave on their grave. The first time Amah suffered a stroke, my brother went sullen and quiet. The water motor broke down and my brother had to fetch pails of water and climb up the stairs to water her plants on the balcony every single day, hoping that one day she would return and see her plants alive.

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15.

For me, it was guilt. Amah used to grow aloe vera to keep her skin moisturized and her hair from falling out. She'd dab the aloe vera gel on her face, lips, and scalp every night. Days prior to her death, she asked me to transplant her young aloe vera plants to the yard, perhaps her way of trying to reach out to me. But I didn't. I had stopped spending time with her and, over time, I slowly forgot how to understand. Days after the burial, when everything had finally sunk in, I found myself bawling over her aloe vera plants as I carefully transplanted them in the yard.

16.

Inside the hospital, we basked in the artificial daytime from the bright lighting along the corridors, making time immeasurable. I fell into a kind of whirlpool of hoping and letting go. My guilt-ridden self made a bargain with God: If she came out alive, I would do everything to make her happy. My resentful self thought otherwise: But what if she woke up and told everyone that it's all my fault, like she always did whenever something terrible happened?

17.

Lola looks like she's sleeping, my 4-year-old cousin said when I lifted her up to see Amah's body inside the coffin. It was the first time I saw Amah with full makeup on. She was wearing a light beige blouse and skirt, which Tuaku, my first uncle, had bought her several years before. Lying there, she was smiling.

18.

There were only a few things that could make Amah feel at peace and happy: watching WrestleMania while eating boiled peanuts in bed, shopping for ballet flats, and folding and weaving paper animals. I would get excited whenever her light beige abanico fan frayed at the edges. That's when she would carefully undo the strips and fold them one on top of the other with her bony fingers until she turned them into a deer.

19.

Amah's passing is about losing the oldest member of the family, who possessed all the memories we could ever want to remember. It also meant losing our childhood home. Her last words before she died were never to go back to the old house. My brother and I didn't believe it — Amah loved that house. While she was still alive, she kept talking about going back and looking for her missing things. They sold the old house to a business owner, who turned it into a warehouse. On Google Maps, it looks abandoned and rundown. For us, her absence means one less person who can tell stories about our childhood.

20.

When I was young, on our way home from one of our road trips with Amah, I asked my

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cousin why the moon was following us. She said it’s because it was big and far away. That time I couldn’t grasp what she meant by that. Now that I’m older, I realized what it meant, especially for me: Amah’s passing, no matter how distant it may seem, keeps creeping back to me — Golden pothos. Hibiscus. Aloe vera. Nescafé classic. John Cena, The Rock, Warrior, and The Undertaker. Black cats with white bellies on the streets. Boiled peanuts. Dragonflies. Solitaire. Origami. The conch in my little cousin’s bedroom. Woven paper deer.

21.

I don’t have anything in my hands right now from Amah. What I do have is a woven deer made from strips of shredded Manila folder. I taught myself how to make it from a Russian website. And strip by strip I wove them together as I tried to reconstruct Amah in my mind and what it meant to be someone who had always lived in the past. Letting go was non-negotiable in the art of losing someone.

22.

Dead people don’t speak in dreams. I dreamt about Amah only once after her death. She was wearing her new yellow duster with tiny flowers she bought from Unimart-Greenhills Shopping Center. She was sleeping in her springy bed, her head resting on her arm, without a care in the world, as the sun flickered through the window, lighting up the whole room. Right then I knew we had finally found our peace.

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