

MY GRANDMOTHER PEELING ONIONS, 1934

In the moment between reaching
for another dirt-stained onion, she leans
her elbows on the kitchen table.
The sharp smell clings to everything she touches:
wooden boxes, loose earth, burlap,
the bibbed apron tied behind her back.
She rubs one eye with the upper sleeve
of her cotton dress, then cleans membrane
and clipped roots from the paring knife
blade. Inside the dry shed, behind
the house, rows of rough woven bags
bottom out like Buddhas. She tallies
the numbers in her head. Two dollars
for a ton of burlap; two dollars twenty-five cents
for the same weight of onions. Flexing
her fingers, she reaches for another globe
to balance in the palm of her hand.

MIDNIGHT, THE SPOTTED HOUND WANDERS
THROUGH THE KOBASHI'S FARM

The triangle of his head cocked,
some strange sound catches
his ear, triggers the far-off call
to something not yet lost
in his blood. Listening, he lowers
his jaw to the earth, then releases
the deep bell of his throat.
Again, his voice pursues the ravine,
but the open night closes in
faster. Crouched down on his belly,
with his eyes closed, he can feel
the furrowed land like the echoes
of his howl ringing
the moon.

FIRST CHINESE BROTHER: SWALLOWING THE SEA

after Claire Huchet Bishop

I.

Bowing at the edge, I can feel
the grainy sand beneath my palms.
I name the waters, lower my chin.
I unhinge my jaw to take everything in.
The first taste is a sip of foam—everything
the village boy doesn't know,
his finger poking clam holes
to force a high-arc squirt.
He stands, hands fisted at his sides,
as each level is revealed:
barnacles, anemones, bronzed
and many-legged starfish. My tongue
is a wave in my mouth, rushing
and flowing—kelp and jellyfish
like the blood I hold in the chambers
of my heart. When I close
lips over the last dregs, my cheeks
bulge with fullness, with roiling.
I am indigo, azure, aquamarine.

II.

Sun dims the scales of deep-sea fish
flopping their tails, gills puffing in and out.
I never thought the world could be
this quiet without the ebb and flow
of tides. Far from shore, the village boy

zigzags towards a cast-off anchor,
to a tangled octopus, towards a sucking
rivulet. Shoes crushing shells—
such a small sound. Something
rises and curls inside me: wanting out.
I raise five fingers as if I could draw the boy back.
I drum a driftwood branch
against a wide log. I flag my shirt
into the wind. His small shape
wanders further. Perhaps like
so many young, he chooses not to see.
Sweat breaks out under my chin.
I sputter. When the dam of my lips
finally parts, the sea spews forth.
My voice is lost in the sea's own,
the boy's last words as loud,
as raucous as a seagull's two-note cry.

KOKUSAI THEATRE, SEATTLE, 1965

I.

The aisle slants downward. In the dark,
I could be sliding into the big movie screen
where men with bushy eyebrows grunt,
wearing kimonos like the women
who clack their sandals with quick short steps,
hiding hands in their sleeves. Tea pours
into cups too small to hold. The husband speaks.
His wife looks into her lap. The son's voice
trembles. I think how everything is fragile
in a rice paper house.

II.

Reading the English subtitles,
the words don't match what we see.
When the mother kneels beside the sleeping
quilts to touch her boy's face,
what she says isn't "darling."

III.

The story grows sadder and sadder.
When the boy kneels beside his mother's futon,
her breathing slows, stops—eyes never opening
to see him. Suddenly the theatre fills with weeping.

My grandmother's hand tightens
on my arm; she dabs her cheeks,
noisily blowing her nose. Around me

hunch the old ladies I've just met: Kato,
Matsudaira, cranky lady Fukuhara
who argues over the price of shoyu.
All are silhouetted in the dim light.

WHAT MY BLIND GRANDFATHER SHOWED ME

His big hands outstretched,
I believed those fingers could reshape shadows,
his open palms push away the night
as he reached for the chair's back,
the blunt blade of a table. Everything
was softer in moonlight. I didn't see
his eyes, only the tilt of his head
when he listened to the rug
brush against his bare feet.
Knowing I watched him, did he feel
my breath's thin release? Slowly, I let him
guide me over walls and edges, the cool handles
of the buffet. Exposed in the morning's harsh light,
I stood in a room surrounded by his touch.

JAPANESE-AMERICAN DICTIONARY

I.

The baby pulls himself up,
stubby fingers grasping
the playpen rails
to watch his mother push
the carpet sweeper back and forth
in front of the sofa, under
the coffee table. She laughs
at his wet-chin smile, his mouth
drooling, pursing with effort.
Gorogoro, she says
and he rumbles the sound
in his throat.

II.

She's afraid of the sliver,
the dark hyphen across her palm—
the flesh swollen and red.
But she's more afraid of the silver
needle, the point poised,
ready to dig. *Hold your hand
still*, her father tells her, *so we can
take it out*. She cries to make him
put the needle away; she cries
because she wants the sliver out.
Guzuguzu girl, he sighs.

COLOR SNAPSHOT, OREGON COAST, 1971

On a driftwood log bleached
smooth as a whale, my grandmother rides
side-saddle in her print housedress,
the heavy cardigan buttoned up
three from the bottom, sleeves neatly cuffed
around her wrists, hands clutching
the slippery wood. There's something
wild in the way she leans
as the wind hurls sand at her glasses,
teasing the scarf with its knot beneath her chin,
her bare feet wearing pale pink zoris.

SUBMERGED CLOTHESLINE, SALTON SEA, 1983

How easily the backyard slipped away,
green grass forgetting its shape going gray, then blue
the garden filling with water.

How the rudder-like gate moved in a tide
before sinking under. This slowness
wears down the husk of my skin—
the salty taste of my blood so like the sea.

I cannot touch my cheek and remember the feeling.
Water level rising up the narrow shafts,
how wide the arms of each wooden pole?
My hands are full of clouds I pin to the line.
Each sheet turns and thins out of existence.