

# Nomad

Heather Qin



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## Self-Portrait as Love in Late August

Cindy and I cradle in the dark to watch *Sleepless in Seattle*, our feet tangling in the sheets, damp in the pool of summer's lap. We savored old movies before we knew what love was, watched white woman kissing white man kissing white woman and dreamed up our own princes and ways to be saved. One August midnight, we punched holes in the fabric of the earth to bury time capsules without ruining our nail polish, the whites of our knuckles blistering into flowers, dark and wet. In it we hid love songs and honeysuckles, ATM change, the brightest flashlights. Our fingernails ruined, we read our palms to unearth the chance of rain tomorrow, traced the moon sailing across the white skies of our eyes until we feigned hallucination. We took turns roleplaying fairy tales, but there were no boys in the neighborhood. We were both princess and knight. We were too young to know that king and queen were anything but the same. How much better it was that we dreamed in clichés and best friends, sisters, anything but lovers, and

I would go back if I could. These days I can fall in love with any face: the moon, the forest, black holes, supernovas, anything but the portrait of someone who looks like me. At church, the pastor announces that sinners will be hunted as blood sport and that could be today. Cindy and I take turns sleeping to make sure we're still here, declare ourselves sisters out of earshot. The day we stopped going to church, we were still dressed in our Sunday best, the scent of detergent and fabric softener in every fold of lace. Instead, we hid in the backyard where we buried that time capsule, decorated our palms with switchblades and little star-like holes, licked the blood off our palms until our mouths were one and the same.

## Ultramarine Hymn

*Tell me about something you'll remember even twenty years from now*, she said.

I'm thinking of the bluegrass we ran through  
when we were children, past the babble of the creek.

Tell me you remember when we got lost in the forest,  
and for hours I sat there, waiting to be rescued.

The next morning, you awoke and your forehead shone  
with a new pane of sweat. Tell me you remember when

you broke your wrist and it never grew back right;  
you shrugged and said *it bends like this now*.

Now, you choreograph tea parties alone on Valentine's Day,  
study how to be a better girl, too good to be loved.

Because every departure begins with a promise.  
Because you never told me this is what you thought life would be.

Every weekend, I pick marigolds that grow in wild  
fires, buy new sundresses and lip gloss

like every other girl: always wanting too much.

Tell me, is there a need for every want, a necessity for every crime?

Or, we can sneak onto the beaches after nightfall, wire-boned fences  
latticing our thighs. We'll find sand under our fingernails weeks later

as if we, too, can be naughty and still girls. The constellations  
will engrave themselves into the whites of our eyes, pupils swelling

like when they say you see something you love,  
like my eyes the day you moved in—girlish, unafraid.

## Self-Portrait with Hunted Deer

I rained out of my mother like a prayer.

Sleeping in the room over, I am not small.

People look at me and see my grandfather digging for bullets in the Sierra Nevada, my grandmother's voice tangling like rope when she hears a knock at the door.

Praise the creek we played in, the water thick and sleepy: small town, fabric softener, the scent of alcohol in every sheet of water.

Praise the pastor when he pays his respects to the billboards, scooped out of the earth as flowers. *Keep 'em out!*

At night I'm awakened by fireworks, the men hunting deer in the forest behind our house.

On this side of town, my mother scavenges the floorboards for pennies. She said they mean good luck, the shiny ones. Praise the penny I found in the river, held it under my tongue until it soured like southern rain.

I try to believe their blessings will firearm into our bones and blitz them new again.

Praise the hand that's covering my mouth. Praise the white man blowing smoke into my eyes.

*Sorry, didn't see you there.* He tells me to run along home, which is his way of saying *go back to where you came from.*



I'm told I'm nicer when I'm quiet. When I adult. I empty. Until there's no river for me to return to.

Keep the voice somewhere safe. Keep the center of the target away from the windows.



While you slept, I stole down to the front porch, watched  
the moon lay on its back. Night peeled itself  
from the deck, limb from limb, moonlight trapping itself  
between the tiles. I water the leaves  
of your dead gardenias. I drink until I wonder  
what the stomach does with too much water.

I do not know how to carry this burden.

When I was twelve, I was not soft or small or strong  
enough to till a field. Every night I hung my skin up  
to dry and tried on smallness when the sky  
turned over its dark underbelly. How long since  
your grief. How long since I was born.

I'm trying not to hate you.

Only years later I learned  
how a sister carries her grief, knowing she must teach  
another girl silence, thankfulness.

Only that a good sister is  
a dead sister. Only that I wake  
to the scent of hunger, my mouth buckling  
at the sight of an animal.

## **All the Sisters I Know Work Overtime**

Are you tired? Are your legs sore? Are your knees  
steeped in scabs, fingernails slicked with flies  
and backwater fish innards? Did you bury your phone in a pot  
of rice after dropping it in the gutter? Did the gutter spit  
sewage like a gasp? Like when you came up for air?  
Did you eat the rice? What did the abandoned train station  
look like on the way home? What was on sale at the convenience  
store? Are your footsteps more delicate with each passing day?  
Do you dream of the future? Are you full? Are you telling the truth?

## Portrait of Girl as Monkey King

I, too, could turn into seventy-two different things.

This is freedom, unfiltered. Boy running down  
the splintered street, plowing through fruit stands, shooting

squirrels out of trees. I didn't check for cars before I crossed  
the street. I cleaved through the night with streetlights shouting  
my name, courage bursting like a fistful of flowers. Street

camera illuminating my face, I stuck my tongue out and  
laughed and laughed. My greatest ambition was to turn  
into a meteorite in retrograde, barreling toward infinity—then, girls will

be girls, unafraid of touch. I spray-painted the church  
with graffiti as I walked a girl home, and she clutched  
my arm like a searchlight, afraid of the dark. I, too, used to be

afraid, whittling night down to its ghosts. Another time, I played  
god, filled the new church in town, prayers lining my teeth gold, tongue  
furnished with worship. When a man prayed for good harvest, I applauded

his patience, watching his faith grow to outlast the winter. So it would  
separate my body from desire. I grew accustomed  
to falsetto: living beyond my means. The night I came home without

a costume, I searched my face for blood. My accent sheathing  
its dull blade: girl only useful when found.

## **In Which I Do My Makeup in the Rain**

And cover my face so the white doesn't wash off.

I was good at hiding my teeth & my voice. At the  
twenty-four-hour drugstore, I pocket the most

expensive shades, the overhead lights flinching off  
the lip of the bottle. I dream in camera filters  
and fitting rooms. Where else do we learn to

undaughter ourselves, softening our bodies into  
glass. It's January and already my cheekbones ghost  
under my skin. I try on prom dresses after hours

and preach paper cup diets, girls on TV. Because  
here, we measure ourselves in right angles. Maybe  
it's better this way, when we mistake beauty for safety

and dress up just to stay at home. In middle school  
ballet class, my teacher would watch us through  
the mirrors, moaned how she could see my lunch.

I didn't look any different, but felt shame pooling in the lap  
of my collarbone. These days, I find myself glancing at  
my braids in the rearview mirror, hoping someone will

find me. I want to chisel myself into street lamps and stain

glass window sills, trade this face for something  
worth protecting. I hung up my pointe shoes and thought

it's better now that I quit. My ballet teacher said that  
people who live in the past aren't living. I believe it all.



## **My Sister Comes Home After Graduation**

She crawls out of the driver's seat wearing the months on her face, hair thick as a forest. We said welcome and dusted off the red pickup truck. We brushed her hair and set the table and turned the clocks back to trick ourselves into thinking there was more time. We ironed the old clothes and packed them in garbage bags to donate. Enough, she says. Enough care and home-cooked meals. I did not mean to welcome her with a full mouth. My sister says she raised chickens with her roommate in college. My sister also says that when it rained, they tied the chickens to the timber frame under the porch so they would not escape, but they still emerged with heavy wings. She did the same with the cat until it scratched black divots in the floor, but who am I to protest? Don't think about it so seriously, she said. When she trades our pickup for a sedan this fall I'll watch the other cars swim around her, that cracked license plate familiar as family. One year later, her voice will be a smudge in the rearview mirror. It is all so fast and unfair. When I say I want to be held I mean her touch resurfacing on my face. I mean her touch seeping through my hair like summer rain.

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## Geography Test

1. Consider Tobler's first law of geography which states that all things are related, but closer things moreso than further ones. Explain or show all work:
  - a. How do you set a table for a man you do not know?
  - b. How can you possibly miss a home across an ocean?
  - c. Must you love your father more than your grandfather because you are only one life apart?
2. Thomas Robert Malthus feared that population growth would outpace agricultural production, eventually resulting in mass starvation. Explain or show all work:
  - a. When do we know if we are hungry enough?
  - b. Why are some accustomed to hunger, while others protest at the slightest overcooked fritter?
  - c. Suppose we have a number of rations  $n$  and a number of families  $f$ , where  $f > n$ . Some poor families  $f_1$  have small children while others  $f_2$  consist of affluent single parents. How can  $n$  be maximized to feed the maximum number of families  $f$ , where  $f_1 \neq f_2$ ? What is the opportunity cost?
3. Ester Boserup contested Malthus's theory, arguing that humans would find new means of agricultural production to keep pace with population growth. Explain or show all work:
  - a. If humans could find new means to agriculture, is it possible to find new means of embrace?
  - b. Would one ever exhaust themselves smiling differently at everyone they didn't quite like?
  - c. If a girl behaves in a particular way in the presence of men, write an expression  $g(x)$  for the number of years it would take for her to become unrecognizable.
4. Chauncy Harris and Edward Ullman's Multiple Nuclei Model states that as cities grow in complexity, they will become less dependent on the Central Business District and develop edge cities. Explain or show all work?
  - a. What, if any organ, could replace a heart? Or, would it simply evolve to be vestigial, a memory fossilized in silence?

- b. Suppose humans theoretically became less and less dependent on what was once necessary. The heart beats 100,000 times a day. The tongue swallows over 500 times a day. How would we prove we're still here?
  - c. When you first left your mother country, how did you survive without a home? How could you tell what was yours?
5. Ravenstein's Laws of Migration propose that men and adults are more likely to migrate than women and families, and most people migrate a short distance. Explain or show all work:
- a. Write an exponential decay function  $f(x)$  for the value of your family after your father left three cities ago and you haven't seen him since.
  - b. If men are the first to leave, why do families still beg their gods to have sons?
  - c. Where are we going?

## Conversation with My Neighbor Who Lives Upstairs

*To Ah Yi in Apartment five, third floor*

Shanghai, January 2nd, 2023

Dear Ah Yi,

I think I'm going insane. It's raining inside me, lonely, and outside the buildings are crumbling  
into the sky as I watch stories airing themselves out on clotheslines. Sorry I  
complained

about wanting to hear your voice after your telephone bill expired. Outside, I've been  
trying to look for signs of life: a child's chalk scribbles, boots fossilizing in the mud,  
rust

snarling up utility poles. My mailbox is full of undelivered letters. I woke up this  
morning and realized how much I miss you after Grandfather died. It wasn't in a  
hospital or a funeral home,

he wasn't even given that much dignity. I visited him three days ago in an overstuffed  
room.

It was hot. His eyes orbited a far-off planet, another estimated casualty. Do you  
remember

the fire in the next town over, light hurling into the Urumqi sky? Locked doors, locked  
windows, locked history. My mouth still aches with hurt when the officials said they  
were better off dead

because they couldn't escape. Do you remember Tiananmen, Ah Yi, you must have been around my age then. Do you remember the truth thinning down the barrel of a tank turret?

On TV a taboo, in the countryside the worst famine in human history. Thirty million deaths.

In my textbook: a natural disaster. This, too, is an act of violence. Our sin: act of disbelief—

fuzzing our teeth with spores, censorship furnishing our tongues, a claw scraping us clean

until we were one and the same, like when we met, holding hands with your brother

through the prison bars after you darkened yourself into the backseat of the police van, charged for telling lies, no, opening your mouth, Friedmann's equation chiseled across

your palms, when you paid for your survival in counterfeit bills, when we sat where two people could touch as people and call it freedom. I'm still waiting

to hear your voice over the phone.

## **We Left at Dusk**

That was the first time I got a haircut, laid still against the porch as my mother slammed a knife down the middle the way she prepared meat. When crossing an ocean, she explained, leave anything too heavy. That included hair, family photos, the rugs my grandmother wove parts of her eyebrows into. In another memory, I was seven. I scooped fistfuls of afternoon, sparklers licking the cold crunch of November air. My sister and I posed before the faded film posters, modeled ourselves into good girls anyone would want to take home. Growing up, we wanted to be actresses. Now, mother tells us to hide in the back of the van and help her count our inheritance in jewelry. Instead, I look outside at the black roads windmilling past, dissecting each pair of eyes that meet us and rehearse their scowl-smearred faces. Before we sold the TV, I remember an interview where a lady in a black dress said that actresses must be able to hide anything, even themselves. My mother weeps at how the next city over, we'll be another headline splashed across the back page of the news. I asked her why being famous wasn't a good thing. The car hobbled over a pothole, my stomach sloshing into my throat. I dreamed I wasn't seasick. In my hands: an Emmy. My face lighter than her gold-coppered wings. At center stage, the camera beams so bright it lets me be

anything, even loved. Everyone on TV is clapping, this admiration rare as a wound. The only girls on TV that looked like me were wrapped in a dark shade of dusk, their faces shawled with neglect. The orange filters from Mexican movies stain our cheekbones, only more dark, more dangerous.

If I could paint my lips with honey, play the role of the main girl collecting prayers in the train station, maybe I would never find us here: my mother crying at the airport terminal as businessmen flock past, a knot of my hacked-off hair in the recycling bin ten-thousand miles behind us.



## To the Mother Crying at the Airport Terminal

*after Kim Addonizio*

Remember the first snow in your hometown, the time you waded waist-deep in winter and opened all the windows? The first time you shivered during supper, the wet clatter of your wrist echoed against the table. Remember as if your life depends on it. Remember it like first blood, like first kiss. Forget fortune, gunfire, mouth oiled in another man's spit, the blistered terrain of your knuckles unzipping in the sun. Hold hands with your brother through the prison bars. Don't answer your phone. Air out your grief as laundry. Trust me, no one was born knowing anything about disaster. Open the window. Listen: children singing to the blind man outside, choreographing a play in the cellar of his eye. Forget the time you darkened yourself into the backseat of the van, paid for your survival in counterfeit bills. On the beach you bled into seawater as kelp forests curtained your ankles, cut your hair with bandage scissors and tossed it into the waves like ashes. This you can remember without choking: your daughter riding a bike, all the way down the sidewalk for the first time. Curiosity is her toil. After she falls asleep, you'll get tired of dressing your grief. Tomorrow is not a salvation but a piece of a body you'll forget. Remember & remember it again. You'll get there too—second snow whipping into your lungs, sand fleeing your palms, laughing until you lose your voice. You do not have to be strong.

## To You, Three Summers from Now

By the time I learned how to grieve, my tongue still stumbled  
over the same words. I made myself breakfast this morning

with lemon water and the hand-painted bowl you bought  
at your sixth birthday party. I admit: I am afraid of thinking

of the people I miss the most. I tried to find your camera charger  
but my hands could only search as far as my knees. Some days,

Mom can't stand to look me in the eye, afraid she'll see you again.

When you died, she started working more as if she could forget about you

if she had no home to return to. When you died, you always ate your meals  
twice, chewed until saliva furnished your insides like grease.

Were you full? Did you remember to wash your hair?

I don't want to tell you what a girl can do to a girl.

Overhead, the sun sugared into a beet, red and dark.

Your eyes sunstruck in the corridor of summer.

Your eyes large enough to dig a new well in.

Ten summers of gentrified shopping districts, ten summers

of hurling through fences on a bike meant for one, the handlebar  
confetti teasing itself loose. Ten summers of begging Mom to find  
a better-paying job. You asked why she always returned home  
branded with new blisters, cheekbones pockmarked with peanut oil.

I can't go back and ask her for you, or ask why  
all the fathers here work overtime. I want to know why

you confused this side of town for a city that never loved you back.  
I keep waking up at night to check if I'm still here.

It's true that I got my ears pierced before mom said we could.  
It's true that I'm still learning how to swallow this sister-shaped absence.

At dinner, I fill myself with expired plums and the space you left behind.  
I want to tell you that I have always been most jealous of people who knew  
what they wanted life to be.

## After the Rain

Forgive me that I never hugged you  
so tightly as the day you died, maybe I forgot love  
is another synonym for exhaustion. That night  
the moon angled its searchlight over the hospital's flood  
path—river of bones, shivering drainpipes. We dove  
into the flooded street, seafoam thirsting into second-floor  
windows. Our palms searched for the grandmother  
next door who slept with a rosemary-scented  
candle and the girl who sung lullabies to sleep when  
she thought nobody was listening and the father  
who boiled tea at midnight, his forehead herringboned  
with twelve-hour shifts. The water's surface was  
wallpapered with past lives: coke cans, maple tree  
branches, children face-down in the dark, a colony of  
lily pads. Their lungs were the best flotation devices. We searched  
for doorknobs, bodies, anything warm enough to become  
a life raft. Maybe that was the last time we trusted  
anything that looked like it could be alive. Maybe, that  
was the last time we could be proud of where  
we grew up, before the monsoon sheared  
through the sidewalk like windfall, abandoned cribs  
creaking into boats. I can't bear the rain: how it collects,  
gallops over footbridges, irons a nightdress frozen  
against my skin. Forgive me when I came up for  
air again, arms empty, reaching for a hand to hold.

## Antifragile

When the world ends we are free to do anything we want.

Sister takes me to the casino up north, the meat market,  
and we eat blue crabs at the farm-to-table on paper plates  
smeared with wine. The waiter wrinkles his nose when we order

steak over salad but doesn't know the downtown

slaughterhouse stopped employing girls only two years ago.

One block away, a man robs a jewelry store with a flame  
thrower, prostrates himself at the pavement and asks *isn't this what*

*you've always wanted.* In the drugstore, the camcorder blares  
videos of children training for war as they settle on pigeons  
for target practice. The road glazed with bird blood. Someone yells  
at me what I am going to do now. Again. I turn around and see

my body from the outside, tracing my finger along the outlines  
of factories for my blood. Outside my life I am always caught  
watching: the shape of my hair, width of my wrists, the stomach  
inside me, the deftness of my throat. When I was born they said

I was a creation of god until I longed for godhood. My sister studied  
the French Revolution and even today, we roam the streets more statue  
than soldier. On the bridge the sirens are fuzzy with heat and even now  
I think about the time where girls emptied their screams into gutters. About

fire and how smoke rises, starving like animals, starving like a gasp,  
the meteor still rushing forward. A man with a gas mask and chainsaw  
approaches me and asks if I want to be hit. I am walking perpendicular  
to the railroads wondering what to wear tomorrow. I keep walking anyway.

## Racing into the Night

*after Ayase*

In my first memory, our new apartment still ached  
with wet paint and you mistook beginnings  
for endings. It was afternoon and you  
were intoxicated. Your hair was slathered  
lichen. I stand on the balcony, the one you gazed at. Before  
we moved in, we were told the previous owner had  
a sickly wife. A wife who flung herself, daylight  
scissoring each broken bone. I shared two cocktails  
with the ghosts of you I trick myself into seeing. You  
claimed to speak their language. *Are you a ghost?*  
You laughed, said you wish. Old notebooks, dead  
birds speared with broken glass, eggshells drowned  
in yolk—that's what you left. I always hated how you watched  
the world through the window of a moving train,  
far away. What do I cherish? Those times we stole  
the lip gloss we could never afford from Hermès, chased  
our vacations across the airport runway, shared  
black coffee while you listened to me through  
the wrong end of the playground  
megaphone. On your birthday, you flew  
off our fire escape, mistook recklessness  
for courage, multiplying the suns until you knew  
the shadow of death. *You are good.* I repeated it  
until you nodded, having forgotten your name

while Mitski spun through hospital speakers, throat still  
tight like a fist. I open the windows to air out  
each promise you made. How lucky, living in a world  
where another's yes is a means of survival. Am I a good person  
yet? I'm sorry I keep gorging myself on what  
nobody wants to hear. When October moved  
in across the street, you dream three nights in a row  
about dying in a train crash, windows and rails  
shattering across the sky. Only this time, I tell you  
to get off the train. It's cold outside, but let's walk instead.



## Lessons on Healing

I want you to repeat after me. I want you to plunge your hands into the throat of the earth until they glow soft and brown like a new brand of fabric. I want you to practice opening the lantern of your chest. Be honest. Look up at the galaxy and the stars blinking like a thousand eyes and promise yourself you will love yourself like something worth loving. Tomorrow it will rain and you will watch the birds and the hills and the gulches yawning open and the farmland billowing like the folds of your mother's skirt. Tomorrow I trust the lake will be blue and green and clear as a bell. Enough waiting for the moor to thin. Enough sawdust and wildfire and smoked-out candles. We've both grown gray and gold under our eyes. I want you to hike through the rainforest and its curtain of leaves all dressed in little wax raincoats. Keep your eyes open, wide as a river. Can you believe one day you will forget the sounds of cars?

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## About the Author



Heather Qin is a writer from New Jersey. A Best of the Net and Best New Poets nominee, her work has been recognized by the *New York Times*, *Narrative*, and *The Adroit Journal*, and can be found in *The Margins*, *Diode*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, among others.

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