

Qi Hua at his desk, peeking in my direction through a thatch of dark bangs. He stands and glides my way. Limbs drip from his body like wet strands of hair. Cagey eyes bounce from wall to wall to something I can't see. With guarded steps he makes his way to my desk, shows me the paper in his hand but looks out a window that traps his seat in a square of weary light.

"I followed the green instructions first," he says. "But now there's a hole where it says to write my name."

"No, you followed the blue ones," I say. "Read these." I point at the green print along the top of the page but my eyes drift to the window too. Its glass separates us from an alley full of rolling dumpsters. A few of the kids who work Polk Street are out there pushing the metal bins around, building rooms with missing walls and roofs. A boy in frayed prep school attire catches us watching him and flashes us a chemical grin.

"These," I say again, and tap the green words once more. Qi Hua slinks back to his seat, paper in hand, eyes still roaming the alley. He is the only one in the class actually working on the assignment, an exercise about following directions that features color-coded instructions. He can read fine but he doesn't seem to understand color. I don't worry about it though. You can live without green and blue. It's the shades of gray that count, and Qi Hua knows how to blend in, repeatedly defying school district efforts to categorize him. Despite his ambiguous nature he spends most of his time in my class playing board games with clear winners and losers. He never plays against anyone else; Qi Hua's only opponent is himself. When I assign essays, he gives me pieces of binder paper covered in long lists, or dotted with subjects and predicates strung together like monochromatic beads. *Rabbits hop. Babies scream. Fate delivers. Shoes untie.* His hesitant scrawl sometimes spreads across every bit of the page including the margins. Once he turned in a piece of paper with a single sentence on it: *This is a story about getting trapped.* As essays, this sort of writing doesn't quite work, but as visual art it is arresting, especially as a collection, so I framed Qi Hua's best work and hung it on the wall.

I am a substitute teacher in a classroom for Severely Emotionally Disturbed Male Adolescents, SEDMA for short, which sounds like "said Ma" to me, so I think of the label as both technical and strangely maternal, like Rosie, the ample-bodied housekeeping robot on *The Jetsons*. My assignment to Qi Hua's classroom was supposed to last a day, but that day has grown into months. I am called a SEDMA Literacy Specialist, but this doesn't mean I teach reading. It means I work in a room with a laminated alphabet posted on the wall and plastic, oval-shaped baskets on the tables. A big part of my job is to fill the baskets with dull, stubby pencils that make me think of scaly, hacked-off chicken claws. Sharp pencils were outlawed years ago because of too many stabbings. The other five boys in my class destroy things and hurt people and their files are fat with reasons why. But Qi Hua's subtle impulses confound me, and his file is almost empty; all it contains is a form listing his grandmother as his legal guardian, phone number, address, date of birth, and a paper trail documenting his reclassifications—from Not English

2 Language Proficient to Learning Disabled to SEDMA. If the papers are right, he's fifteen.

The principal walks into my classroom and stops in front of Qi Hua's framed essays. She is a stout, block-shaped woman who wears pastel sweater sets and the face of a person you wouldn't trust with plastic cutlery. Her rumpled stature seems to undermine her authority and to compensate she avoids good manners and dispenses orders in the passive voice. She motions me over without taking her eyes off the essays on the wall. On my way across the room, I slip past Romell who is sleeping open-mouthed on top of his desk, his head propped up on a bent elbow, braids unraveling over his shoulder in glossy coils. A glistening strand of drool connects his lower lip to the chipped Formica. He winces and I wonder if he is dreaming about the place where he lives. Someone there broke his ribs with a pool cue. Behind Romell, Angel paces the aisle, the creased twill of his Dickies whispering as he moves, sharpened features slicing air—high cheekbones, square teeth, eyes like blades. The intersecting lines of his hairnet divide his scalp into hundreds of diamond-shaped cells. I picture him wearing it to sleep. All those points snagging his dreams. He clenches and unclenches his fists, his worksheet on the floor, blank except for the sentence *Fuck you Ms. Weems* scribbled across the top. I pick it up. "Angel," I say, handing him the paper. "Good job with your spelling."

When I appear at the principal's side she reminds me, in hushed tones, that the school has a policy against all sharp objects, including the nails I used to hang up Qi Hua's work, so the essays would have to come down. "And besides," she says slightly louder, "what kind of message is this sending to the students? They shouldn't be rewarded for failing to follow directions, especially SEDMA students." She hands me a copy of Qi Hua's most recent psychological assessment. "A meeting with his guardian will be scheduled to discuss this."

The principal leaves and I toss the assessment on my desk then sit down next to Qi Hua to check his progress. The worksheet's blue instructions say to poke your pencil through the upper right-hand corner of the page, but the last line in green says to ignore everything in blue. There is no way to get rid of the hole, though once I caught Angel trying to erase the one he'd stabbed through his paper. According to the teacher's manual that came with the worksheets, I am supposed to deduct five points for it. I've never really understood why green is right and blue is wrong.

"Ms. Weems," Qi Hua says, watching the alley. A palm reader stands smoking outside the back door of her shop. "My turtle's missing part of its shell. And it's bleeding kind of. Do you think it'll be okay?"

I ask how the turtle got injured and he tells me his grandma bought it in Chinatown and asked the butcher to kill it, but when she got home she discovered it wasn't dead, so she gave it to him to keep as a pet.

He unzips his backpack and pulls out a half-finished word search. I fold my hands under my chin and peer down at the worksheet. He's circled several rows and columns of letters that do not spell anything except maybe

for words in a secret language only Qi Hua understands—a terse patois of sounds he slips into after exposure to loud noises or other disturbances. As he utters these sounds, his eyes swim with the sort of dreamy light people often associate with psychedelic drug use, but I see the subtle shift as a sign of progress. Qi Hua is reaching out, and that’s what I write down in his file. *Qi Hua is reaching out.*

“My turtle’s probably gonna die,” he says.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Qi Hua sets down his stubby pencil and shoots me a look overflowing with watery indifference. I’ve never seen him make eye contact with anyone before, especially me, so I will note this in his file. My hands, still clasped under my chin, feel attached to two different bodies momentarily connected in an awkward handshake. I stand up and drop my wrists to my sides. Angel quits pacing and now sits at his desk completely still, usually a bad sign. I dart past him to the chalkboard at the front of the room, my skirt snapping in the draft behind my legs. I picture myself bound at the wrists and gagged with the striped necktie Jimmy and I sometimes use as a tourniquet. An invisible hand grabs a handful of my hair and yanks on it and I feel the gag tighten. Whenever this happens, I press my fingers to my temples and shake my head, but neither action blocks the images or gets rid of the gripping feeling.

“I know why you do that.”

Startled, I spin around. Qi Hua stands there, twitchy-eyed. I smile and he bends his lips into a crooked snarl the other boys wear to feign apathy, but on Qi Hua’s face the expression means something else. Terror or boredom. It’s impossible to guess. I let go of my face, and my hands hang open-palmed in front of me as if clasping an invisible sphere.

“Do what?”

“Nothing.” He hands me his word search and drifts away.

I pick up a piece of chalk and write the week’s vocabulary words in neat, round print. *Erupt, replace, persevere, recline, succumb*. Succumb is the bonus word. I am required to follow a state-mandated curriculum, except when it comes to the bonus word. The bonus word is up to me. This is called the instructor’s discretion.

At home, ants bustle along the edge of the kitchen sink in three or four lanes, moving in both directions, to and from something important. Two of the insects create an obstacle in the thoroughfare, struggling under the weight of the corpse of a fallen comrade. It succumbed to the insecticides Jimmy’s been experimenting with, while the others continue their Darwinian march onward, passing their toxin-resistant genes down to the next generation, evolving into an ant super-species right in front of our eyes.

“Look how they carry their dead away,” Jimmy says, hovering over the trail.

“Weird,” I say. “I thought it was only humans who got ceremonial about death.”

“I doubt they’re planning a funeral, Valerie.” Jimmy closes his eyes, hunches his shoulders up to his ears, and shakes his head in a rapid sequence of twitches. “Maybe they eat the dead ones,” he’s saying, “or use the bodies to line their queen’s nest or something.”

“Well, then it would be like they were making an offering to the queen. That’s kind of ceremonial. Like animal sacrifice.”

Jimmy does the neck-twitching thing again and I scratch my cheek: physiological responses to the heroin and one of the few worn-out threads that still hold us together. Our relationship started out as a spongy thing we’d get lost in. We spent our first night together cocooned in a blanket on Jimmy’s mattress under the absent glow of a burnt-out light bulb. Its chain swayed whenever the Thirty-eight rumbled by outside, a warning the world was still there.

Now Jimmy exhales smoke at the bugs and extinguishes his cigarette in a plastic container of half-eaten potato salad the ants are ignoring. He turns on the tv. A program called *When Medical Tools Get Left Behind* is on. Jimmy drops the remote control on the couch and gets to work arranging our respective drugs and extensive collection of paraphernalia on the coffee table with shaky hands that don’t always cooperate with each other anymore. I cook my dope and set the sooty spoon on a stack of papers from work I left on the coffee table. Qi Hua’s word search is on top.

Jimmy draws some water into his rig from a shot glass on the coffee table and sprays it at the ficus in the corner. The plant is the only thing in the apartment that seems truly alive. Despite our abuse and neglect it thrives. On our first night together, I remember crawling off the mattress and rummaging through a milk crate full of broken cassette tapes on Jimmy’s floor. They unraveled in beautiful loops that flashed in the lights of a police car parked outside and choked an old baby aspirin bottle cradled in the mess. I unwound the container and popped the lid off.

“Be careful,” Jimmy said, his voice dope-thick and slow, eyes pinned, edges smoother now.

“Why?”

“My mom’s eyelashes are in there.”

He told me she plucked them all out once when he was nine because she thought they harbored microscopic tracking devices. He brushed the tiny hairs into the empty aspirin container while she slept.

“Is she dead?” I said.

“Mostly.”

“Mine too.”

We stayed up late that night tearing strips of flannel from the threadbare sheet beneath us, either searching for something or preparing for disaster. We finally uncovered a mutual fascination with a children’s book we’d both read as kids. It was the story of a dog who paid a barefoot girl a hundred dollars to bandage its injured paw. The girl spent all the money on gum and blew an enormous bubble that carried her to outer space with the help of a seagull.

I get to work on a vein below my anklebone while a fat man on tv talks about the time doctors left an eight-inch surgical clamp inside his abdomen during gall bladder surgery. A faceless narrator warns that this is yet another health risk associated with obesity. There’s all that extra room for things to get lost in. I empty the syringe into my ankle and for a few seconds I’m at the center of a marble, looking out through rubbery curves. I drop the

rig on the table and melt into the cold vinyl couch next to Jimmy. I glance at the bony appendages and jutting hipbones splayed across the upholstery and I feel safe knowing we are not in the same risk group as the man on television. I wonder if the man kept the clamp after it was finally removed or if he let the hospital have it back. If it were me, I would've kept it and put it in a drawer somewhere and pulled it out from time to time and thought about how that thing used to be deep inside of me like a surgical steel fetus, poking my ribs and giving me heartburn and a vague sense of dread, and now it's here in this drawer next to a stapler and a pin cushion.

I lean over the coffee table and remove the spoon from Qi Hua's word search and try rubbing away the smudge of soot it left but this only makes it bigger.

"There's *succumb*," Jimmy says. The word is hidden diagonally across the middle of the paper. He picks up a pencil and reaches over to circle it.

"What are you doing?" I grab the pencil from Jimmy's hand and write *Good Job* across the ashy blotch.

The next day I remove Qi Hua's framed essays from the wall but leave the nails sticking out of the plaster. I wiggle a couple of the pages from their frames and bring them to Qi Hua's desk where he plays Scrabble alone, Romell sleeping behind him. Across the room Phong and Andre are eating fried chicken at their desks, throwing bones at the wall, their sinewy biceps contracting with each pitch. There is a rhythmic quality to the sound that calms me. The cracking on impact, the greasy slide to the floor. The bones at his feet, Jesús diligently pokes a hole through his paper with a pencil, glancing at me through skeptical eyes, long-lashed, Aztec and alarmingly green, each blink a force of history, a question of origins: conquest or passion or something less clear.

I sit down in the empty chair beside Qi Hua. In front of us, Angel paces. "Qi Hua," I say, holding the papers in front of him. "I was wondering about these essays."

"Wondering what?" His eyes are on the game board.

I lay the pages on top of it side by side. "I'm not sure if I get what you're saying."

"What do you think I'm saying?"

I tap the essay that mentions the rabbits and fate and shoes. "I guess this one sounds like maybe it's about inevitability, how things just happen to people, you know. Nobody really has a choice."

He lifts the page up and slides some more tiles onto the board, lining them up in adjoining squares. No vowels. Triple word score. "No," he says. "You always have a choice."

"What do you mean?"

"Like in this essay." He points at a list of metals. "You can choose between a titanium alloy or iron."

"What's the difference?"

"One is lightweight and flexible. The other is heavy and rusts in the rain."

"What do you choose?"

"Iron."

"Why?"

Angel stops pacing and stands in front of Qi Hua's desk.

"Because you can't do much to it, not without a lot of heat and tools."

"But flexibility sounds good. That way you'd be kind of adaptable."

"Yeah, I guess," he says, "if you wanna be someone's bitch."

Angel shoves Qi Hua's desk, knocking several Scrabble tiles to the floor.

"Watch it, faggot," Angel says.

Qi Hua stares at the tiles. Jesús scrambles from his seat toward us.

Romell wakes up. Eyes narrow. Andre slams a greasy fist onto his desk.

*Fuck his shit up.* Phong kicks a chair over, then a wire rack full of yellowing paperbacks.

"Angel," I say, the vague clenching at the back of my neck now vice-like.

"You know what happens when you do this."

"So?" Angel says. "Fuck this class."

I get up and reach for the phone.

"I don't need this faggoty-ass bullshit."

"Then leave. Get the fuck out. I'm not gonna stop you." I take my hand off the phone and point at the door.

He freezes for a second or two, looking at me then Qi Hua. The other boys are still, except for Phong who swaggers back to his desk. Angel takes a step toward the door, grabs a metal wastebasket, wheels around. "Damn, Ms. Weems. Why you gotta hate on me like that?" The wastebasket slams into the wall behind me and the sound is over too fast. All I hear now is the mucousy thwack of chicken bones on linoleum. Angel shuffles to his desk, kicking away the Scrabble tiles and book pages in his path. Qi Hua opens his mouth, unleashing a swarm of hot, prickly noises. This always disturbs Angel the way a direct blow to the face never can. Angel covers his ears and bangs his head on his desk until his forehead splits open and bleeds. There are latex gloves and a spray bottle of bleach in a locked cabinet for when this happens. I unlock the flimsy metal door and pull on a pair of gloves. Qi Hua returns to his Scrabble game. He doesn't pick up the tiles from the floor. He just plays without them. He sets down a few more letters on the board but I can't tell what they spell. He stares into the alley. A butcher stands in the doorway of his shop's back entrance, tossing live crayfish into the gutter. They must be too old to sell, but still, what a waste.

The old man who used to live next door died a month ago and the apartment had been vacant. Jimmy and I liked it like that, so we were annoyed when a new tenant moved in last week. His name is Simon and he walks with a dour and gloomy shuffle and wears suits that are too big in the shoulders and too short in the sleeves. He avoids us except for icy hellos in the elevator once in a while, but our apartment shares an airshaft with his, so we've gotten to know him well enough. He seems to fill his waking hours with errands to Jones Street for the dilaudid and klonopins he feeds to a teenage hustler called Trixie I recognize from Polk Street. She's in Simon's apartment now and Jimmy and I sit on the edge of the bathtub, listening to her work, her opiated drawl streaming into our afternoon.

*Get on your knees bitch, she's saying.*

*Yes Mistress.*

*I told you to lose the mistress bullshit.*

"Refreshing," Jimmy whispers, tossing his cigarette butt in the toilet. "I like her bare-bones style."

"Yeah," I say. "Neat and clean."

I am in the lobby checking our mailbox when Trixie leaves. Simon follows her halfway down the stairs. The late afternoon light gives his features a pointy, reptilian quality and makes his face seem colorless and ambiguously weathered. I can't tell if he's lived a hard thirty years or is actually closer to fifty.

"It's cold," he says to Trixie. "You should really wear a sweater or something."

"Fuck that." She giggles and shakes her tits in his direction. I scrutinize mail addressed to my apartment's previous occupant: a jury summons, a coupon for free baby formula. I wiggle the mailbox key, pretend it's stuck in the lock, and watch Simon watch Trixie. She struts down the stairs and out into the cold sun, her stilettos smacking the sidewalk at an insouciant clip, probably heading for Polk to troll for other johns. The gate bangs shut and Simon doesn't move from his spot on the stairway for a while. He studies the empty space behind me as I pass him with a handful of junk mail, the scent of Trixie's Love's Baby Soft still wafting up the steps. Simon looks forlorn and content and his hair sticks out in greasy chunks the way bird feathers do after oil spills.

The next morning at work I stand in front of the class, leaning against the chalkboard. "Has anyone seen Qi Hua?" I say. "He's been out for over a week now."

Nobody is listening. Jesús squints as if my voice were an irritant in the air. Phong and Andre are at it with the chicken bones again. The janitor is mad at me about the mess but the ritual seems cathartic for them so I don't say anything. The counselors who work with those two only seem to exacerbate their aggravation. After therapy sessions they return to my class amped up on hate they usually direct at each other. Tensions fly then chairs and desks. The only thing to bring them any peace is KFC. Jimmy says it's the hormones.

"Quiet down," I say, but none of the boys hear me. Romell is asleep and everyone else is listening to Angel tell the story of his aunt's tracheotomy. She can't talk but she can still eat. She has to smoke through a hole in her throat. *They got tubes all up in her shit.* My hand floats to the chalkboard. Again, this limb does not feel part of me. I watch it drag my fingernails across the dusty surface. Jesús snaps his eyes on me. I do it again and now everyone's quiet. "I said, where is Qi Hua? Where did he go?"

"Why do you care?" Angel says, and tugs on the bandana tied around his forehead. It's replaced his hairnet since the day he split his head open, a thicker layer of defense, less porous, as if to protect his thoughts, to keep them hungry and pure.

"Have you seen him?"

"No."

In the weeks since Simon moved in he's gotten sort of neighborly with Jimmy. They've discovered some common interests. They hang out and watch *People's Court* together while Trixie and I are working, and Simon holds up the mirrors at the proper angles so Jimmy can fix when I'm not there. Simon shows a genuine interest in the broken electronics Jimmy takes apart sometimes and they spend hours discussing the many possible ways to categorize all the little parts. Simon is especially drawn to clocks. He has a thing for dismantling them, littering the floor with springs and gears. This habit makes me wary of him, but not because of the mess. There is something dishonest and creepy about turning time inside out like this. The clocks that fascinate him most are the ones with numbers printed on thin rectangles of plastic that flip over like cards in a rolodex as each minute passes, displaying the time on a series of little flaps. Today Jimmy's not there when I get home from work but Simon is on the couch doing something to one of these clocks with a screwdriver.

"Where's Jimmy?" I say.

"Look at this," he says, tapping the clock with his tool. "What were they thinking?"

"What?"

"It's actually not digital, you know? It's still analog, but it's making the leap, it's reaching out and trying to grab on to the next new thing."

"Where did Jimmy go?"

"But it missed."

"What missed?"

"This beautiful lie." He sets the clock on the coffee table.

"What? It tells time."

"It gives you what you want, so it's off the hook?"

"I already know what time it is. Just leave it alone. Isn't it Jimmy's?"

"Why do you care about the clock?"

"I don't. Okay, I don't." I bite off a hangnail and poke it between my front teeth with my tongue. "Do whatever you want to it."

Simon removes the screws and pulls off the plastic housing. He lifts the motor out with a pair of tweezers and sets it on the coffee table. I wasn't expecting it to look so fragile. I pick it up. "Can I have it?"

"Will you take care of it?"

"Yeah. Don't worry."

After Simon leaves, I put the clock motor on a shelf in the bathroom between a bottle of rubbing alcohol and a can of Raid. I lean against the sink and listen to the airshaft. Simon and Trixie have settled into their usual routine, but this time there's a third voice. A boy. I can't tell if he's whimpering or laughing.

The principal made a big deal about how an upcoming standardized test would be the only exception to the No Sharp Things rule. The machine that scores the tests might not be able to read the faint marks of the pencils from the oval baskets, so I'll need to sharpen new ones. I stay late today, staring out the window as I slide number two pencils in and out of an electric sharpener. Qi Hua is out there. He's leaning against a dumpster across the

street. The alley is otherwise lifeless. His shoes are off. He's turning them over, examining their soles. He hasn't been to school in weeks and the lady in the attendance office says his home phone number is no longer in service. I leave the pencils and walk out to where he stands, still holding his shoes. They're plastic running shoes from Payless with holes worn through the soles, but he holds them like they're sacred.

"Why are your shoes off?" I say, pointing at them.

He shrugs, shifting his gaze to the wall across the street, swinging his shoes by their tongues, one in each hand.

"Why haven't you been in school?" I say. "I miss your essays."

"I don't belong there," he says. "I can't trust you anymore."

"Why not?" A sudden jones prods my shoulder blades, knuckling the back of my skull.

"You said my turtle would be fine but it's dead."

"Are you sure?"

"It stopped moving. The shell never got better and its eyes stayed closed."

"I didn't know turtles had eyelids."

"They have upper and lower lids and a third eyelid called a nictitating membrane."

"Oh, I didn't know that about turtles."

"Most people don't."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I guess I shouldn't diagnose things I don't understand."

Qi Hua asks about class, if anyone's been playing Scrabble. "Is Angel still cut up?"

"I don't know," I say. "He keeps the wound hidden."

Qi Hua studies the cracks on the ground, his eyes shiny with a stillborn sort of radiance. A wailing ambulance flies up Larkin, its sound entering him, filling him with more strange, stunted brightness. He kneels on the sidewalk, mumbling something in his secret language to his shoes as he knots their laces together. The sound of the siren trails off and Qi Hua stands up. With an underhanded lob, he tosses his shoes high in the air. They spin in a single, fluid arc then catch one of the wires as they fall. He made it on the first try. They hang there beside another pair on the next wire, swinging back and forth in a curl of wind. We both watch them until they stop moving. Rain clouds bruise the sky behind the wires but everything below is dry and waiting.

"Why did you do that?" I say.

"Because I'm getting new ones." He turns his back and on cat feet pads down the alley toward Polk. With each step, the soles of his white socks get blacker and blacker.

The next afternoon Qi Hua's grandmother walks into my classroom as if she is shouldering an invisible slab of cement, carrying a plastic bag of empty cans and bottles I just watched her fish out of the school's recycling bins. I am surprised she showed up. The meeting must have been arranged before her phone got cut off. The interpreter from the school district's translation services department hands her a pair of headphones and she turns them

around in her wrinkled hands as if they might poison her. The interpreter gestures for her to sit down and he places the contraption around her head, adjusting the microphone in front of her mouth. I ask him why she needs the headset. “Aren’t those for big meetings where you’re dealing with several different languages?”

“District policy,” he says, untangling a long gray cord.

I look out the window behind Qi Hua’s grandmother. Crayfish crawl on top of each other in the gutter and a few climb the curb and creep along the sidewalk. Some don’t move at all. The principal pulls up in her car while the old woman and the interpreter fidget with the headset. The shells crack under the principal’s wheels, but she doesn’t seem to notice, thumbing through a stack of files as she slams the car door with her hip. When her square frame fills the doorway of my classroom, she ignores me, but smiles an administrative smile at Qi Hua’s grandmother, sits down and smooths out her skirt, then extends her hand to the old woman and asks her how she is. The interpreter translates and the old woman answers in the Chinese dialect she speaks, lifting her cane from where it leans against the desk and pounding it on the floor for emphasis. The gesture makes the headset slide down her slippery gray hair and rest around her neck.

“She says her bones ache.”

The principal smiles at this then explains why the meeting has been called. She opens a file and pulls out a copy of Qi Hua’s psychological assessment. She uses terms like “self-concept” and talks about Qi Hua’s inability to “stay on task” and mentions the language he invented, except she doesn’t call it a language. The terms “inappropriate,” and “SEDMA” come up a lot. I don’t think she’s noticed Qi Hua dropped out of school because she doesn’t mention this much larger problem.

“There aren’t really words for those things in this dialect,” the interpreter says, readjusting the old woman’s headset for her.

The principal gets flustered and sighs and tries rephrasing her statements, finally breaking all her sentences down into tiny bites, and feeding those bites to the interpreter one at a time. When he offers them to Qi Hua’s grandmother she squints and frowns.

The principal seems at a loss for words and leafs through papers to fill the silence.

“I heard Qi Hua’s turtle died,” I say.

Qi Hua’s grandmother listens to the man translate and unzips her sweater, revealing a T-shirt that says SHUT UP BITCH in large block print. She waves away the question as she answers.

“She says she made it into soup but Qi Hua wouldn’t eat any.”

“Does she know he threw his shoes over the telephone wire out there?” I point out the window. “Those gray ones.” I look outside while the interpreter translates. Trixie is there now, pacing back and forth on the other side of the street, smoking.

“She says Qi Hua did that because he’s an American now. She says he’s always throwing away valuable things and falling in love with junk.”

Trixie stomps on her cigarette and crosses the alley, stopping in front of the classroom window to check her makeup in the reflection. Our eyes meet through the glass and we exchange polite smiles and both scratch our cheeks. A couple of the crayfish have made it across the street. Trixie bends down, picks them up from the ground and drops them in her purse, then disappears around the corner.

The meeting adjourns under a restless wet sky. Outside, the alley blooms with dying crayfish, the survivors casting about with beady-eyed abandon, a dangerous freedom steering their scuttle. With a buzzing tongue I step around the live ones and hurry over the dead. Phantom vines coil around my vertebrae, a sense of implosion crimps my gut. Raindrops fatten and multiply, spattering the street, trickling under my collar, over my lips. I lick my teeth. Thirst coats them in gummy fuzz. I want to throw back my head and drink but the clench at my neck prods me home. Sometimes it's easy to forget you're not drowning, that the air is not really liquid, that you're not changing form to adapt. I push through a sandwich shop door strung with chimes. They jangle and the lady behind the counter looks up and smiles into the silvery gloom behind me, her head resting on a collar of rosy neck flesh. She impales a receipt on a spike beside the cash register and says I have to buy something if I want to drip on her floor. I scan the items pictured on the menu or scribbled by hand on sheets of paper taped to the wall: lottery tickets, Vietnamese cigarettes, six kinds of banh mi. I pass them all up and order a mung bean smoothie, the greenest thing there. The drink comes with a straw and I suck down the fluff, painting my insides the color of solid directions.

At home I find Jimmy on the couch, twisted into a quivering hunch. I wring my hair out over the carpet where the spoons and mirrors and flashlights lie scattered with the clockworks and circuit boards. In their place on the coffee table is a plastic tub for washing dishes filled with a little water and two red crayfish. Feelers wiggling, eyes bored. Beside them a record spins on a skinless turntable, its plastic and metal guts exposed.

"Look what Trixie gave me," Jimmy says, eyeing my cat, now on the coffee table peering into the tub. She raises a paw and Jimmy grabs her by the scruff of her neck and drops her onto the floor.

"What for?"

"They're pets."

"Won't they climb out of that thing?"

"Why?" he says, jiggling the tub. "Everything they need's in here."

"Oh, right," I say, dropping my soggy bag to the floor. "Where's my dope?"

"Hector says he'll be here around six."

"Why so late?"

"The rain, I guess." Jimmy splashes his fingers in the water and pulls them away to dodge an advancing claw. "Simon owes me a dilaudid. Go over and see if he has any."

I knock on Simon's door and Trixie opens it, skulks across the room and sits down on the floor. Flames of red tissue paper peek out of a lidless shoebox next to her. She crumples up the paper and smooths out the wrinkles

with her fingers. There is a systematic quality to the sequence of gestures, as if she does this a lot and has discovered something artful about the repetition. Simon sits in a battered easy chair beside a plastic bucket. Someone's in his lap. For a second I think it's another kid from the alley, his bare legs folded like careful origami, his face hidden behind a familiar thicket of dark hair.

"Qi Hua."

His gaze meets mine for the first time since the morning I told him his turtle would be fine. He has on an oversized T-shirt pulled down to his thighs. Instinctively I flip through all of my mental snapshots of him doing word searches and playing Scrabble.

"What are you doing here, Ms. Weems?"

Qi Hua rests his head on Simon's shoulder and he begins to stroke the boy's hair. Qi Hua looks serene. His eyes brim with the same dreamy light that enters them when he speaks his secret language, but now he is silent. There is no sound except the rain, slapping the bay windows behind the easy chair. Qi Hua is reaching out.

"Qi Hua," I say. "You don't want this."

He doesn't say anything, only hunkers into his stare.

"He doesn't want *what*, Valerie?" Simon says, still stroking Qi Hua's hair. His voice is calm. Something sets off a car alarm on the street below and its electronic howl drowns out the sound of the rain, triggering Qi Hua's secret language. He speaks the same word over and over and the syllables sound like short bursts of static but Simon acts like he knows what they mean. Maybe he does know.

"It's okay, Qi Hua," Simon whispers. "You're okay."

Qi Hua shifts his weight. His extremities, usually so fluid and sylph-like, now pulse with a hard, sculpted beauty.

"Come on, Qi Hua." I wipe a lock of wet hair off my cheek.

"I hate the rain."

"You won't rust."

He reaches into the bucket on the floor, lifts out a crayfish and sets the animal on his palm. It crawls along the veins that map his wrist and forearm, the tiny puncture wounds that dot his skin. Qi Hua in Simon's lap, motionless but moving, dissolving into this man's stony touch. I hear myself calling Qi Hua's name, but he doesn't say anything. Behind him a branch of lightning splits the sky. There's no thunder, just the tissue paper whisking through Trixie's fingers, Jimmy's record bleeding through the wall. *It's such a gamble when you get a face.* I turn and walk back to my apartment, my legs heavy and uncoordinated, like they are trundling through deep, wet sand. I trudge past the things on the floor, and stop beside Jimmy, still on the couch, turntable spinning in front of him, its needle hissing along the record's last groove.

"Did you know Simon's got Qi Hua over there in his lap?"

"Who?" Jimmy looks up from the wires tangled around his fingers.

"Could you turn that record over for me?"

Nausea drags me to the bathroom where I retch until I am empty and the sink is full of mung bean smoothie. It looks the same as it did before I drank

it, suspiciously green. A lot of people think the color is artificial, but mung beans grow out of the ground that way. I peer into the basin and turn on the tap. Beneath the rush of water a green film clings to a patch of rust-stained porcelain. The color grabs me and I let it hurt my head for a while. Mucous runs from my nose and I wipe it with the back of my hand, lean against the wall, slide down to the cracked tile floor. A downy layer of mold covers its grout, outlining a pattern of interlocking hexagons. One at a time, the shapes announce themselves to me in dirty bursts of white as I sit and wait for Hector. I think about calling him again and never calling him again. Beside me, the trash overflows with wadded tissues, and something at the bottom of the pile lures a trail of ants. The cold grace of their instinct cuts through me, a fleeting mercy I don't deserve. Still, if I could hold onto it I would.