PLOY : An Immigrant Daughter's Archival Survival Strategy

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PLOY: An Immigrant Daughter's Archival Survival Strategy

A Dissertation Presented

by

PORNTIP ISRASENA TWISHIME

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2023

Communication
PLOY: An Immigrant Daughter's Archival Survival Strategy

A Dissertation Presented

By

PORNTIP ISRASENA TWISHIME

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DEDICATION

For immigrant daughters in diaspora

& for those who raise them
I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.

Maxine Hong Kingston

*The Woman Warrior*
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The beloved mystic, scholar, activist, teacher, and Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, says, *the most precious gift we can offer others is our presence*. Many have gifted me their presence through the years and seasons of this dissertation, and I have tried to honor their presence by making it visible in the pages of this document. I firmly believe that a dissertation is a collective and collaborative project despite the language and structure surrounding the work of a dissertation that mark it as a product of one individual. I share and celebrate this milestone of completion with all of you.

One of the gifts I cherish most from the dissertation process has been cultivating a community of mentors and colleagues from across institutions and industries.

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ขับคุณเท่าทุกกาล

It’s time to begin again.
Transnational human migration is commonly conceptualized as the moment a person crosses national borders. In “PLOY: An Immigrant Daughter’s Archival Survival Strategy,” I advance a framework of migration in which migration is an ongoing embodied and relational process, one that continues after a person crosses national borders. This framework maintains that migration exists as a meaningful concept because of the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts that give this type of mobility meaning. I use a performative novel methodology to construct and represent this argument; a performative novel methodology uses fiction and the novel as a performative text and as a mode of inquiry and critique. The performative novel component of the dissertation is titled PLOY and illustrates a mixed-documented Thai American family’s ongoing and uneven relationships to the U.S. immigration system.

The dissertation is divided into three parts. Part I outlines a conceptual framework for the performative novel which draws upon the theories of performative writing as method and Asian American literary and cultural production. Part II is composed of the
novel manuscript. The novel follows Ploy, a PhD student whose research about Southeast
Asian migrants and life converge when her father reveals he may face deportation to
Thailand. PLOY is a meditation on the effects of immigration on migrant families, and an
emotional story of survival and kinship in the wake of loss and misfortune. It is a story-
based argument that contextualizes migration and presents it as an ongoing embodied and
relational process. Part III is a methodological afterword that describes and reflects upon
the performative novel as scholarly practice. As a mode and product of research, this
dissertation critiques the U.S. political and military involvement in Southeast Asia and
the politics of storytelling, documentation, and archives by linking those histories with
the present-day resettlement and livelihood of Southeast Asian refugees and migrants in
the U.S. today and the ongoing precarity they experience in relation to the ever-changing
immigration system. By presenting this argument in novel form, I draw and expand upon
the embodied, aesthetic writing methodologies of queer and feminist scholars and writers
of color.

Keywords: migration; performative novel; stories and storytelling; Southeast Asian
American Studies; Performance Studies in Communication; creative
methodologies
PREFACE

My name is Ploy. Or, I should say, one of my names is Ploy. I’ll explain more later. For now, I’m telling you this because on the cover of this writing you’ll see my name as Porntip Israsena Twishime, and you might not know that my name is also Ploy, which is the title of this dissertation. The institutions that file away writing and the processes that make writing available aren’t conducive to messy things like multiple names. Who knows, you might find my names listed as Twishime, Porntip I or Israsena Twishime, Porntip or some other combination. And it wouldn’t necessarily be wrong. But I wanted to introduce myself, your writer, to you, my dear future reader, in my own words.

You see, while writing, I thought of you. I thought about how I am writing to you who exists in my future. And about how you are reading what I have written in what is now my past. The time of my writing and the time of your reading do not overlap, and things happen between now, when I write, and then, when you read. This makes the very words I write now like a time machine.¹ A time machine that I built with a Macbook Pro I purchased with my teaching money back in 2018 and that you enter into from whatever future time that you’re reading this. These words are our meeting place. Welcome!

¹ This note draws inspiration from and is an homage to Ruth Ozeki’s 2013 novel, A Tale for the Time Being, in which she collapses the time gap between the writing and reading of a personal diary that moves from Japan to North American on the waves of a transpacific natural disaster. Much of Ozeki’s interest is in time beings—the bodies and people through which time occurs. My project builds on this by meditating on the economy of relationships and modes of connection and intimacy between time beings. For me and this dissertation that occurs through the written word.
My dear future reader, there are two things I want to tell you.

First of all, while I share the name Ploy with the title of this work, the novel enclosed in it, I insist, is not my story. *PLOY* is a novel, a work of fiction that yes, stems from my lived experience as a Thai American immigrant daughter. Where “my story” and “the fictional story” starts and stops, I can’t exactly tell you. I know, it’s sticky and unclear. For that, my dear future reader, I accept responsibility. My vision is to point you toward something other than an urgency to parse out the “real” story and the “fictional” one. That is, how stories, both real and imagined, and what lies between that invented dichotomy, shape our realities.

The second thing I want to tell you is that I occasionally use *we* and *us* in what follows and that might be unclear too and, for some dear future reader, even uncomfortable. I write these words with slight discomfort myself, understanding the risk of an imagined collective. And yet, it’s a risk I am willing to take. For me, the collective *we* is less of a description of a group of people and more of an orientation device. One that names and reminds us of our relationship to one another—writer and reader, who work together across modes, space, and time to produce and imagine what this writing means.

Thank you for being with me, my dear future reader. โชคดีนะคะ

Ploy
Worcester, Massachusetts
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PART I.

Conceptual Framework: The Performative Novel
& Disruptive Asian American Narrative Strategies
Globally, nearly 300 million people live either as international migrants or internally displaced people. Over the past several decades, the number of people compelled to leave their homes has continued to grow, and along with such growth, migrant detentions and deportations have skyrocketed in the United States (from where we live and write) and globally. Except for those who can show that they fit into a narrow spectrum of state-designated family ties, skill sets, large bank accounts, or protection needs, possibilities for acquiring legal status have been greatly reduced or entirely cut. Legally present migrants, too, increasingly lose status and become routed into detention and deportation. Legal channels disappear ... if there is a migration crisis, it concerns the unaddressed conditions that push many to migrate when they would prefer not to, and the impacts of punitive state, supranational, and populist responses including expanding illegalization, detention, and deportation.

—Karma Chávez and Eithne Luibhéid, *Queer and Trans Migrations*

On Tuesday, October 2, 2018, I received a startling thread of text messages from my father explaining that his green card was apparently invalid. He had tried to renew his driver’s license at the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles when the clerk at the counter declared his green card expired. This was an unwelcome surprise for my father and for me. His permanent resident card, also known as a green card, was issued in the 1980s and had no expiration date. In fact, it was standard procedure for green cards issued between 1979 and August 1989 to not have an expiration date (U.S. Customs and Border Protection). My father attempted to explain to the clerk, using his clearest and calmest English as he tells me, that his green card had no expiration date, that it couldn’t be expired if there was no expiration date. He pointed at the card.

The clerk refused to accept his green card as “proof of legal presence” and turned my father away with an expiring driver’s license and an apparently expired green card. When I received his text messages I charged out of the shared graduate student office space in my department to find “privacy” in a hallway corner and called him for more
details. The phone rang in my ears and my mind flooded with the images and sounds of xenophobia that had become painfully familiar under the 2016 Donald Trump presidential campaign and then presidency. A horde of young white men parading around the University of Virginia with burning torches. Children at the southern U.S. border with México lying on concrete in cages with extraterrestrial, tinfoil-looking blankets. Know Your Rights educational campaign cards. I placed my father in those spaces and waited for him to answer my phone call.

For months after my father’s experience at the Ohio BMV, which unleashed a series of dealings with the U.S. immigration system, I was plagued with questions about migration and how inaccurately we imagine migration to the United States. In the United States, we participate in constructing neat and tidy stories about migration. They often sound something like this: a forlorn person overcomes an obstacle by leaving their homeland and enters the United States in search of a better life. The respectable and virtuous ones, as the story goes, enter through the immigration system. “Others” evade the immigration system and enter by other means. Both of these migration stories conceptualize migration as a moment, as the moment a person enters the United States. But what my family was learning through my father’s ongoing experience with the U.S. immigration system more than twenty years after he entered the United States is that migration is an ongoing embodied and relational process that affects not only individual migrants but also their kin, and a process that carries on long after the moment of entry, such that renewing one’s driver’s license twenty-some years later becomes a part of migration.
In this dissertation, I advance a framework of migration in which migration is an ongoing embodied and relational process. *Migration as a process* contextualizes migration. That is, it puts migration in context. It maintains that migration exists as a meaningful concept because of the social, political, cultural, and historical context that gives this type of mobility meaning. It looks outward toward institutions, structures, and discourses that give migration meaning. In these ways, the framework of *migration as a process* takes migration as an analytic through which we can examine how institutions, structures, and discourse attribute meaning to transnational mobility. This stands in contrast to the framework of migration as a moment. When conceptualized as a moment, migration is an objective fact about a person crossing national borders. It does not necessarily account for the context that makes migration significant, nor “the unaddressed conditions that push many to migrate when they would prefer not to,” as Karma Chávez and Eithne Luibhéid describe in *Queer and Trans Migrations* (1). Migration as a moment is a framework that, in effect, decontextualizes migration. It isolates the fact of migration from the contexts that make migration significant, meaningful, and powerful.

*Migration as a process* challenges and confronts the framework of migration as a singular moment. It accounts for the mundane and routine ways that migrants and their kin come to migrate transnationally and later experience the effects and outcomes of an immigration system that was founded upon exclusion (Robinson) and that maintains exclusion by prioritizing particular immigrant subjects by class, place of origin, profession, ability, religion, and sexuality (*Lee America for Americans*; *Lee The Making of Asian America*; Luibhéid and Chávez; Chávez; Luibhéid *Entry Denied*; Luibhéid *Pregnant on Arrival*; Dolmage). Placing migration in context also means examining
factors that contribute to and in fact drive migration, such as war, colonization, occupation, invasion, empire and militarism, environmental injustice, genocide, uneven economic policies and sanctions, political violence and instability, safety, and aspiration, among others. In these ways, migration is more than an individual action to cross national borders. Migration is more than my father leaving Thailand and entering the United States. Migration is the process of intersecting and colliding factors that shape the movement of a person across national borders and the discourses that give this movement meaning and it encompasses the time before and after an individual crosses national borders. Migration includes what propelled my father to leave Thailand and to enter the United States, him doing so, how, and the outcomes and experiences of this transnational mobility. The function of reconceptualizing migration as a process is to interrogate the institutions, structures, and discourses that embed this kind of transnational movement with particular meanings that affect value, material conditions, access, and livelihood because migration as a process can account for a migrants’ life prior to entering the United States and their life while entering and after.

As the immigration matter with my father continued to unfold, I documented what my father shared of the experience with me knowing that I might need to call upon my notes in a bureaucratic proceeding or some possible legal battle. I theorize this work and process an archival survival strategy—archiving out of necessity, to take and to hold onto whatever power one has before a racist, xenophobic, and white settler colonial immigration system. I captured screenshots of text conversations. I researched and searched files and archives reporting on immigration history, law, and policy changes. I kept journals in which I reflected upon my relationship to my father and how our
relationship was being shaped by the immigration system. And by extension, I discovered my own relationship to the U.S. immigration system as an *immigrant daughter*. An immigrant daughter is a subject position within immigrant families whose care work is primarily bureaucratic, meaning they navigate the bureaucratic systems for the immigrant family. Although not all daughters of immigrants are immigrant daughters, and not all immigrant daughters are daughters, I deliberately use the language of care work and daughter to name the often gendered and generational labor of this particular subject position within the family unit. As the immigrant daughter in my family, I archived the ongoing migration experience for myself and for my family, out of necessity and distress, stemming from a deep mistrust of the immigration system. This wasn’t a research exercise. It was survival.

During my research, back in 2018, when I was trying to help my father, I uncovered a memo from the Department of Justice’s website that was originally issued in 1995 declaring that green cards formally issued without expiration dates would expire in March 1996 and that they must be renewed to maintain a “valid” documented status (Department of Justice; USCIS). This meant that my father’s green card had expired more than twenty years before he knew of its expiration. It also meant that any attempted communication to my father about his expiring green card had failed. He was not aware that his green card had expired in 1996 until he was denied the possibility of renewing his driver’s license in 2018. As a family, we felt helpless and we couldn’t afford legal advice or representation. The information on green cards issued without an expiration date, surely affected thousands of green card holders across the United States, but information about this change felt clearly obscured and hard to come by.
The experience of not knowing what to do next, if there was anything to be done, and if there was, where to find (or afford) help strained my already labored relationship with my father, both of us bending under the weight of what to do. I attempted to capture the strain, the weight, the bending by journaling and taking screenshots on my phone of our curt and awkward multimodal and multilingual messages. At the time, I didn’t think of this documentation or experience as research material, and certainly not a future dissertation. It was a comedic form of therapy. A part of survival.

I didn’t come to think of this work as research until much later in the process, at some point I can’t quite recall, when I noticed that my journaling unconsciously expanded beyond the scope of what was happening to my family. I began connecting our experiences with experiences that other people had shared with me and that I’d heard from community activists, films, social media, journalism, and oral histories. I had vivid dreams and visions that weren’t about my family, and I wrote about those. I wrote about my fear of separation and a potential deportation. What my life and my family’s life would look like if my father was forced to leave the home he made for himself, for us. Through this creative, therapeutic process, the writing shifted from documenting our experiences out of survival to an examination of migration itself. And, the documentation that began as part of an archival survival strategy to deal with my family’s interactions with the U.S. immigration system became a story, that is this dissertation—a performative novel.

A performative novel is a methodology that uses fiction and the novel as a performative text and as a mode of inquiry and critique. This methodology builds upon personal narrative and aesthetic storytelling practices by early queer and working-class
feminist writers of color, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Maxine Hong Kingston, among many more. When taken up in academia, their performative writing contributed to an epistemological shift in which the object of analysis shifted from content about women of color to the production of knowledge about women of color. In this dissertation, I combine these writing practices with narrative strategies identified in contemporary Asian American literature, such as multiple and shifting narrators and autobiographical fiction. As I describe below, I identify these narrative strategies as disruptions to the dominant racialization of Asian people in the United States. Combined, these performative writing practices and disruptive narrative strategies examine and critique dominant narratives of race and migration by providing a methodology and mode of storytelling that produces alternative stories of migration. Stories in which migration is ongoing, embodied, and relational. This is the performativity of the performative novel—doing the thing it refers to: a novel of migration referring to and reproducing the story of migration itself.

The novel follows the central character Ploy who went to graduate school with dreams of documenting the untold stories of Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees. Five years into her PhD program, she’s struggling to find a publication outlet for her research. Just as she’s about to abandon her studies, Ploy’s research and life converge. Her father reveals that he may face deportation to Thailand after living in the United States for more than 25 years. The unfolding immigration proceedings and her mounting resentment toward both academia and her family force Ploy to make unexpected decisions. PLOY is a meditation on the effects of immigration on migrant families, and an emotional story of survival and kinship in the wake of loss and misfortune. It is a story-
based argument that contextualizes migration and presents it as an ongoing embodied and relational process.

Although the documentation and journaling that began as a personal archival survival strategy from my family’s immigration story, *PLOY*, the novel, is not our story. This dissertation isn’t about my father or his immigration experience, nor is it my perspective or experience of immigration in relation to him. As I discuss more fully in the Methodological Afterword, this dissertation is a work of fiction. The performative novel is a genre of writing that relies upon fiction and literary tools to examine and illustrate the elements shaping reality, like how the conditions of migration shape reality. It is also a format that allows me to move beyond the personal, not toward objectivity or universality, but for my family’s privacy and to prevent future harm, exposure, and vulnerability.

I borrow Christina Sharpe’s words and wisdom about sharing personal family histories and experiences out of context and with academic audiences. In the opening pages of *In The Wake*, Sharp recounts her extended family’s losses and interrupts her own storytelling practice when she says, “There are other stories to be told here; they are not mine to tell” (6). She deliberately discontinues a story about the abuse her adopted nephew experienced before being adopted by her sister in order to make a point that violence in the wake of chattel slavery is not sensational, but particularly mundane and the details need not be disclosed to understand the violence. Like Sharpe, I deliberately use vague dates about my father’s immigration history and purposefully do not disclose what happened with his expired green card or what actions our family took, his current whereabouts or immigration status, because it is not my story to tell and because the
Purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate that migration is ongoing, that it, in fact, has no end. The details of my father’s experience need not be disclosed to understand the violence. The framework of migration as a process recognizes that migration does not end in a neatly wrapped story. Migration continues and the U.S. immigration system continues to change.

The dissertation is divided into three parts. The remainder of Part I. Conceptual Framework introduces the dissertation and outlines the conceptual framework of the performative novel which brings together Performance Studies, Asian American literature and literary theory, feminisms of color, and queer of color performance and critique to theorize constructions of race and migration under the conditions of U.S. empire. I draw upon writing practices found in Asian American literature to construct a multimodal and multidisciplinary performative novel writing methodology that is specific to the Thai American context of PLOY. By working through these disciplines and scholarly practices together, I propose novel writing as a critical and conscious methodology and mode of inquiry. Part II. The Performative Novel is the novel manuscript titled PLOY. Through the novel, I argue that migration is an ongoing embodied and relational process, one that affects both migrants and their kin and that carries on long after the moment of entry. In Part III. The Methodological Afterword: Impossible Asian American Stories, I conclude the dissertation by reflecting upon the performative novel methodology and its ability to account for loss using literary tools. I define literary tools as research tools and I describe the multimodal research methods I used to craft PLOY that include autobiographical fiction writing, narrative analysis, Thai
cultural production and language studies, and historical and archival research. I offer the performative novel methodology as an additional mode analysis and cultural production in the repertoire of narrative methodologies in Performance Studies in Communication. I end with a discussion of the dissertation’s contributions to the fields of Performance Studies in Communication and Asian American Studies.

This multidisciplinary move between Performance Studies, Asian American literature and literary theory, and Gender and Sexuality Studies arrives at a moment in Communication when scholars across the field, including Performance Studies, are making calls for scholars to acknowledge the “normative core of scholarly inquiry” and to decenter “academia’s pervasive White masculinity” which reinforces and reproduces the underrepresentation of scholars of color in Communication (Chakravartty et al 254, 257). The authors of “#CommunicationSoWhite” suggest that it isn’t enough for the discipline to grant people of color access into the discipline (ibid). Instead, the discipline must curb “citational segregation, disparity, and socialization” (260) and “look within on questions of representation and citations, and act[ing] towards taking more seriously an account of race as a central analytic” (263) in order to examine, expose, and confront the long-held racist and colonial histories and legacies embedded in the discipline and in academia more broadly, including the ontological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions of inquiry that continue to center white, masculinist, heteropatriarchal, and western ideas, paradigms, and studies. Although Performance Studies in Communication is often represented as a social justice oriented field of study and approach to research (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett; Langellier and Peterson Storytelling in Daily Life), there is an underrepresentation of scholars and artists of color and their scholarship. For example, in Text and Performance Quarterly, the top-tier journal for Performance Studies in
Communication, out of a sample of 225 articles, only five percent feature a person of color as the first-author and only two percent have race-related keywords (Chakravartty et al 256). Penchan Phoborisut further observes that of the limited race-focused scholarship published in *Text and Performance Quarterly* there is a dearth of research pertaining to transnational and Asian/American issues of race. This alarming absence of critical and conscious scholarship on race in Communication has not gone unnoticed by scholars of color in Performance Studies. In fact, performance scholars of color, like Phoborisut, have argued and called for more rigorous studies of race. E. Patrick Johnson argues that “performance theory provides a critical analytic to navigate the slippage between racial and ethnic performance and performativity, material embodiment, and discursivity” (106). Johnson’s special issue on “Race, Ethnicity, and Performance” in *Text and Performance Quarterly* insists that studies of race using theories and methods of performance not only theorize race, but also theorize performance itself. In these ways, research concerning issues of race is never only about race; critical and race-conscious research theorizes other social and political concepts such as performativity, materiality, embodiment, and discursivity.

It is through and alongside these scholarly traditions and genealogies that this dissertation intervenes in the dearth of race-focused scholarship and to the “normative core of scholarly inquiry” in Performance Studies and Communication (Chakravartty et al 254). *PLOY* centers Thai American characters, migration stories, contexts, and epistemologies of relation. In these ways, this dissertation contributes to research on race and migration from an Asian Americanist perspective and also builds upon and expands narrative methodologies in Performance Studies in Communication by proposing the performative novel as a methodology.
The Performative Novel

The modifier *performative* in *performative novel* does two things. First, it names the critical paradigm of performance this dissertation research is situated within. A critical performance paradigm is concerned with producing performance-based knowledge and examining what knowledge is and how it is produced through performance. In these ways, performance as a paradigm is different from performance as an area of study. As an area of study, performance applies other paradigms (positivism, postpositivism, constructivism, etc.) to performance texts and events. But, as a paradigm, performance challenges fundamental constructions of performance by reimagining what counts as performance and what performance is (Conquergood; Madison and Hamera; Pelias and Van Oosting; Diversi and Moreira). The performative novel in this dissertation, *PLOY*, is as concerned with the content of the novel such as stories of race and migration, as it is concerned with how the novel produces and circulates those stories as well as how the novel reinforces and challenges the norms of knowledge itself.

The second thing the modifier *performative* in *performative novel* does is reference the performativity of the research practice. Writing is performative, as Della Pollock argues, when it is simultaneously referential and constitutive. It relies upon language, discourse, and textuality, and it builds upon, reinvents, and reroutes language, discourse, and textuality. This is what makes writing perform. The *performative novel* likewise relies upon and also builds upon the format of the novel. It draws upon discourses of migration and race and also reroutes the discourses. This is what makes the
performative novel perform. It references the novel, stories of migration, stories of race, as it reconstitutes them.

Taken together, the *performative novel* confronts and reconfigures the distinction between theories of creativity and creative practice. This arbitrary distinction is an example of what Alexander and Mohanty call “cartographic rules” in U.S. academia; rules that “unjustly organize human hierarchies in place and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways” (27). Performance unlocks and redirects those cartographic rules by pulling “the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice” (Conquergood “Performance Studies” 145). I employ this performance paradigm to bring together theory and literary practice, to heal the division in academia that suggests that the literary isn’t theoretical to begin with. This, Conquergood argues, is “the most radical promise” of performance—the ability to acknowledge and attend to multiple, simultaneously different ways of knowing (ibid 146). Literary as knowing. What makes this radical is the way “it cuts to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy” (ibid 146). The performative novel taps into this scholarly practice by examining, exposing, critiquing, and reimagining knowledge, its function, and the process through which it is produced, through the novel writing.

*Novel Writing as Storytelling and Method.* In their essay, “Writing A Method of Inquiry,” feminist scholars Richardson and St. Pierre explain “Writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled *method of discovery*” (967 italics in the original). They take writing as a fundamental component of inquiry and indeed a method of research. They describe writing as a method for formulating questions. Writing
as a method for contemplating and responding to questions. Writing as a method for revealing, exposing, and reimagining realities. Writing is both the “data collection” and the “data analysis” (970). They argue that writing as method is a theoretically and culturally conscious mode of research in which researchers give attention to the historical, cultural, and linguistic conventions of writing and scholarship; “researchers can no longer think of inquiry simply as a task of making meaning—comprehending, understanding, getting to the bottom of the phenomenon under investigation. … this does not mean they reject meaning but rather that they put meaning in its place” (969). By *putting meaning into its place*, Richardson and St. Pierre theorize writing as method is a meta-methodology that provides insight on the content of the research as well as the discourses that structure and give the content of the research meaning. In other words, when writing is the methodology, we don't simply use writing to communicate our research findings. We use writing throughout the research process and questions along the way how the writing itself functions and frames our understanding of the content that we write about. The research is in the writing and the research is the writing because writing is always embedded in language, discourse, and power which are under conscious analysis as well. This is the work of performative writing, the performativity of writing—what Pollock refers to as “the doing” (writing) and “the thing done” (writing) ("Performative Writing"). Writing is both the process and the product of inquiry that has the potential to repair the division of theory from creative practice. In addition to examining and writing about novels, I use this dissertation to contemplate the process of novel writing by actually writing a novel. In doing so, this dissertation simultaneously
examines stories about Thais and Asian Americans and also contributes to that body of work. Theory, critique, and practice come together in and through the writing.

The central question asked in the novel *PLOY* is: How does one navigate and survive the subjection, the loss, and the intimacy of kinship under the conditions of a xenophobic and racist immigration system? The genre of the performative novel both poses the question and seeks to address it through fiction writing as a process and a product. In the novel, the question is taken up through a fictional father-daughter relationship whose intimacy is shaped by the loss of valid immigration documents. Loss here names a condition of migration and resettlement. To migrate and to resettle is to accept loss. That may be loss of homeland, if homeland was previously available to the migrant. Loss of language. Loss of access. Loss of privilege. Loss of kinship. As I discuss in Part III. Methodological Afterword, loss does not always necessitate resolution and recovery as it is not always possible or even desirable. The performative novel and fiction writing offer a queer orientation to loss and a methodology that is capable of accounting for loss that interrupts normative and colonial logics of resolution and recovery.

Writing in this dissertation (both the process and the product) is conceptualized as a mode of storytelling and therefore a communicative process. As Langellier and Peterson argue, “storytelling is first and foremost a human communication practice” (*Storytelling* 2). It is a process of negotiating and creating meaning. In mapping a performance-based framework for storytelling, they contend that storytelling is 1) embodied, 2) situated and material, 3) discursive, and 4) open to legitimation and critique. Storytelling necessitates “some body” and “bodily participation” (ibid 8); this includes the speaker and the listener “hearing and voicing, gesturing, seeing and being
seen, feeling and being touched by the storytelling” (ibid). In these ways, storytelling is also always relational. Every body, they further explain, is situated and material and is “constrained by the material conditions of its corporeal situation” (ibid 14); constraints “define what is possible” and include possibilities and boundaries of time, history, language, place, and culture (ibid). In performing the storytelling process, speakers and listeners draw upon discourse to give the story meaning; “discourse divides and rejects what is meaningful from what is meaningless, what belongs to the narrative and what does not, what contributes to understanding and what does not” (ibid 19). Because storytelling is discursive, it makes the process dangerous in the sense that it reproduces discourse, even an effort to redistribute or challenge discourse; “The danger that storytelling poses is this potential to critique or reinscribe ongoing strategic arrangements” (ibid 26). Therefore, by understanding stories and storytelling as a performative process through which meaning is negotiated, we unearth the ideological dimensions of storytelling. And in this performative space, through the reiteration the doing and the thing done, stories situate, enact, and (potentially) unsettle the embedded “relations of sex, class, race, sexuality, geography, religion, and other expressions of identity” (Langellier “Voiceless Bodies, Bodiless Voices” 208).

Langellier and Peterson’s framework of storytelling emerged from their study of storytelling in daily lives—listening to and telling stories. This framework accounts for the performativity of storytelling in that storytelling is both referential and constitutive: storytelling produces stories. I apply this framework of storytelling to writing—producing and consuming writing. For, writing also produces writing, and writing is a mode of storytelling. Writing, its production and consumption, is similarly 1) embodied,
2) situated and material, 3) discursive, and 4) open to legitimation and critique. As Gloria Anzaldúa says, “writing is nothing if not a bodily act” (*Light in the Dark* 105). In this way, all writing is embodied and personal, regardless of whether the content is “personal” because it comes from the body. Likewise, when consumed, writing is processed and filtered through reading and listening bodies. And, as with storytelling in daily life, bodies that write and consume writing are constrained by their material conditions. In order for writing to have meaning and to be meaningful, writing similarly draws upon discourse and is therefore embedded with the power and potential to both critique or reinscribe discourse and relations.

*PLOY*, the novel component of the dissertation, for instance, is a material and discursive product resulting from my writing process. In the most basic material sense, the novel exists as words on a page or screen. The novel is a physical product made through the material conditions and constraints of my material body and situation. For instance, my mixed and limited capacities to understand, speak and write English and Thai shapes the novel. Language shapes epistemology; when we give language to something, it indicates that the thing is worth languaging. My knowledge and my writing practice are shaped by the fact that I can only access Thai novels through English translations because I am unable to read and comprehend Thai literary texts written in Thai. At the same time, while English is my primary language, in daily life and in research, my limited knowledge of Thai language and Thai epistemologies also profoundly shapes my writing. For example, I include Thai relational, kinship terms throughout the novel, a way to name intimacy that doesn't exist in the same way in the standard English American novel, which I discuss in the Methodological Afterword. My
access to Thai language and epistemologies, no matter its limits, informs the production of this Thai American novel. Another material condition, and in many ways constraint, shaping the production of PLOY is the element of time. In literary circles, the time it takes an author to produce a novel is often romanticized; *it took her years to write the novel*, a sentiment denoting a mystical dedication to craft and following the writing wherever it takes the author at whatever cost. But, as a doctoral candidate with funding restrictions and as a new mother surviving a global Pandemic with an infant, I wrote the first draft of the novel manuscript in one year. This is not an excuse for poor writing or bad craft. It is an acknowledgement of the material and embodied realities shaping the production of literature and a recognition of the stories we tell about the arts and how art is produced.

In the discursive sense, PLOY draws upon, contributes to, and is constrained by discourses of migration, Asian American-ness, kinship, and loss. In other words, the novel is meaningful because there are existing frameworks that make a person leaving Thailand and resettling in the United States with a family meaningful. I establish discursive meaning by referencing frameworks like migration in the novel. Many novels about entering and resettling in the U.S. already exist. Together, regardless of what they say about migration, they suggest that migration is a meaningful discourse, one worth languaging, in this case through fiction writing. By referencing discourse, the novel re/constitutes the discourse. The performative novel is critical and conscious of how the writing contributes to existing discourses. PLOY suggests that migration is an ongoing embodied and relational experience through the story of a father-daughter. It references an existing framework of migration and also consciously contributes an alternative
framework to the existing discourses of migration. These discursive conditions and constraints are inextricably linked to the novel and its production.

Moreover, the material and discursive constraints surrounding the reading, the consumption of *PLOY* shapes how the reader attributes meaning to the text and therefore how the writing is understood. The writing reaches you, a reader and consumer, in your current material conditions whatever they may be. Perhaps, you are still surviving the same global Pandemic me and my child are, or perhaps you are further into a distance future, perhaps at time when moving and resettling in the United States no longer occupies the same discursive meaning that it held in 2018 when my father’s green card was called into question. In whatever conditions you are reading this writing, we are making meaning out of this text together. We are telling a story about migration together.

I use this relational storytelling framework to conceptualize writing—the process and product—as a way to insist on the specificity of authors and readers, as a move to “radically contextualize” (Langellier and Peterson, “Shifting Contexts” 152) writing by materially and socially situating the bodies involved in making writing meaningful and powerful. Indeed, the meaning and power of *PLOY* is not established solely by me, the writer, but together, with you, the reader, as we both draw upon discourse to negotiate the meaning of *PLOY*. Novelist, filmmaker, and Zen Buddhist priest, Ruth Ozeki frames this relational practice between author and reader as “a crucial collaboration,” as “cocreation” (“A Crucial Collaboration” 34). This conceptualization of the author-reader relationship, one that reimagines the relationship and the writing process as collaborative and more egalitarian, importantly redistributes meaning-making power from an author-dominant process to a more relational and embodied process. In constructing a multimodal and
multidisciplinary conceptual framework and methodology for writing and the performative novel *PLOY*, I build upon Ozeki’s notion of cocreation through the queer of color concepts queer intimacy (Pérez) and disidentifications (Muñoz) in order to more fully account for the power embedded in and the stakes of producing and consuming writing.

*Queer Intimacy.* Queer intimacy refers to the conditions of relation and the affective labor among bodies in public performance (Pérez). It is an orientation device—a map or compass of sorts that is embedded in and routed through bodies in relation. Queer intimacy orients us, our bodies, toward the conditions and feelings of relation. These relations rely upon and constitute the intimacy between speaker and listener, writer and reader, performer and audience—an intimacy which may be “rerouted as and through public(s)” (Pérez “When We Call One Another by Our Names”). Pérez describes the comfort and familiarity of being brown in a brown space with other brown people, who are all anticipating a brown performance; the collective anticipation of the performance, she depicts, as feeling “electric… warm… between bodies in the packed house” (“Staging” 375). It is this public negotiation of space and feelings that makes the personal, the affective, the intimate queer. In this particular instance, the performance is staged, and queer intimacy names the negotiation of meaning between and among the audience and the performer.

Queer intimacy can also name the conditions of relation and the affective labor among bodies engaged in writing. When writing is conceptualized as performance, writing can be understood as a public site of relation and negotiation. When the writing is
made public, it is no longer only up to the performer to write, suggest, determine the meaning of the writing. As Pérez explains, “the stage/staging of personal narrative in public for an audience generates a public negotiation of meaning across these relations” (“Staging the Family” 374). Through the negotiation of the performance, the doing, the performer and audience enter into a public, affective mode of relation. In a similar manner, writing, like the stage, is a relational site of queer intimacy. Both, the stage and writing, are objects, and Sara Ahmed maintains that objects orient us toward embodied affects and meaning making. The material objects of the stage and of writing are different; the stage, a physical object capable of holding bodies, and writing, a physical object held by bodies. Both objects point those engaged with the objects, either the stage or writing, toward a shared and relational encounter. As with the stage, when writing is shared, it is no longer only up to the author to write, suggest, determine the meaning of the text. Writing becomes the public performative and relational site where the author and reader negotiate the meaning of the text.

The novel, I argue, is a particularly interesting format of writing to make sense of the economy of relations in and across writing. The writer, in their material constraints, creates characters who represent people, ideas, and discourses, who reach the reader through publication and circulation of the novel. In reading the novel, the reader, in their material constraints, processes the characters, story, plot, and discourses made to represent people, ideas, and discourses. The author and the reader may agree or disagree on the statement or function of the novel, and in this dis/agreement is a negotiation. A negotiation of meaning routed through public address (the writing) and through affect (as produced through the writing). This an affective intimacy routed through writing made
public, making the intimacy between author and reader indeed queer. Queer intimacy provides an expansive framework for understanding how the social actors, in this case, writer and readers, converge, convene, and relate across difference.

Disidentifications. In addition to being intimately queer, the relations constituted through performance are also potentially coalitional. Kimberlee Pérez and Dustin Bradley Goltz frame the system of relations enacted through performance as coalition in their article, “Treading Across Lines in the Sand.” They describe the process of relating as a BROWN-DYKE-GIRL and a WHITE-JEW-GAY-GUY, and in doing so, they argue that relating to one another makes the process of understanding across difference possible. Pérez and Goltz shift the focus “from the site of the individual personal narrative to the site of the relation between performers, the process of dialogically constructing narrations of self and placement of personal narratives into dialogue, underscoring the stories and the histories that bring them together and pull them apart in their relations with one another” (249). Pérez and Goltz frame both their performance with each other as well as their performance with the audience as coalitional. Coalition isn’t easy, and they point out that performance is vulnerable and depends upon vulnerability. When one opens themselves up to co-performers and audiences in hopes of a coalitional politic, one makes themselves vulnerable to co-performers and audiences that have power to push together and/or pull apart a performance. And yet, it is precisely in opening oneself up to vulnerability that relating occurs. What Pérez and Goltz offer by naming and attending to these relations, both in and between the performance, is a methodological and aesthetic tool for revealing structures of power across relations of difference. In a similar way, authors release their
writing into the world, making both their work and themselves vulnerable to readers. The power relations between and among author and reader are, of course, unequal. The reader arrives at literature on the author’s terms. The author has the first move, the stage or floor so to speak. The author puts forth a call to readers. And the reader may or may not respond to this call. Certain readers, well-known critics, popular social media influencers, other authors, scholars, campaign organizers, carry more power than other readers. Readers have the power to push together and/or pull apart writing. To meet the author in a coalitional space, where relating across difference is possible.

The phrase “relate across difference” might suggest that one’s difference determines one’s potential for or terms of relating. That those who are similar are somehow connected and transcend relations, while those who are different require relating because their difference divides them. Pérez and Goltz challenge this assumption. They name their *BROWN-DYKE-GIRL* and *WHITE-JEW-GAY-GUY* identities to confront the ways that their identities appear structurally and socially incompatible. Their identities do not determine their potential for relating, though there is a structural and social logic that may suggest otherwise. Muñoz reroutes these structural and social logics of difference with his theory of *Disidentifications*, in which he charts an “anti-identitarian identity politics” (176). This anti-identitarian identity politics “is not forged through shared images and fixed identifications but fashioned instead from connotative images that invoke communal structures of feeling” (ibid). It is a reimagining of identity on new terms; it is a turn away from the essentialized notions and logics of identity, such that “men are like this, Latinas are like that, queers are that way” (Muñoz 6). It is an alternative entry point into identity, what Muñoz calls “identities-in-difference,” a
concept he traces through Third World feminisms and radical feminisms of color (6).

Identities-in-difference refers to “a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere … [and] is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere” (7). It is this framework of disidentification that enables Muñoz, for example, to read Jack Smith’s uncomfortable and excessive depictions of the Third World as the work of disidentification rather than the work of “orientalizing” and “tropicalizing” the Third World (x). A performative opening emerges between the reiteration of norms (the doing) and our interpretation of that reiteration (the thing done). And in that opening, non-normative meanings can be generated. The potential for worldmaking is unlocked and accessible. Worldmaking, in Muñoz’s conceptualization, is not a fluffy term through which we reimagine the world as a better place. Rather, worldmaking is a performative mode of critique that confronts “oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people” (Muñoz 195). The non-normative is made generative and generous and meaningful for all the ways it opposes and resists the dominant ideologies that make “minoritarian people” “minoritarian.” This is the work of disidentifications and worldmaking.

In this dissertation, I apply disidentification to writing in order to redistribute the shared power and labor of making meaning out of writing. As demonstrated through Muñoz’s reading of Smith’s depictions of the Third World, readers and consumers of writing also do the work of disidentifications. It is not simply the performer, the artist, the author who potentially disidentifies with the logics of representation and difference embedded in writing. It is also the critic, the audience, the reader who potentially
disidentifies. It is you and me drawing and building upon the knowledge we have of Thais, Asian Americans, U.S. empire, migration, and the U.S. immigration system to make sense of *PLOY*—its characters, setting, plot, conflict, and resolution. It is an accounting of the different interpretations of these elements of the writing and how those interpretations may emerge and stand in relation to one another. In these ways, the writer and the reader negotiate the meaning of a text as a mode of relating across difference through a framework of performative writing. The performative novel. This negotiation occurs in and through a complex system of representation, logics, and discourses and bears the potential for coalition and worldmaking. Thus, writing as queer intimacy, through storytelling, through the body, orients us toward disidentification—a critical mode of inquiry through which we might come to examine and confront systems of representation, logics of power, discourse, and identity, such as gender, sexuality, class, and race.

**The Performative Work of Asian American Narrators**

Asian American writers and Asian American scholars engage in the work of disidentification described above. Asian American fiction is a particularly interesting and compelling body of writing with the potential for queer intimacy, coalition, and disidentification due to the politics, discourse, and logics of race and representation that surround and often constrain Asian American literature. In this section, I describe what I call *the performative work of Asian American narrators* in which narrators disrupt the normative logics of race circulating around Asian American fiction. These disruptions
provide disidentificatory entry points into undoing and rerouting, or otherwise
disidentifying with, the normative logics of race.

In *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds*, Stephen Hong Sohn
calls the normative political and ideological landscape through which Asian American
literature is imagined and received “the authenticity paradigm.” This paradigm
“circumscribes Asian American writers assuming unification among the author, narrative
perspective, and narrative content” (ibid 5). For instance, a Thai American writer is
presumed to write about Thai American contexts from the perspective of a Thai
American character. This logic of “authenticity” is a racial and racist one that emerges
from the history, culture, and politics of twentieth-century Asian American literature.

According to Sohn, twentieth-century Asian American literature can be divided
into two major genres: autobiography/memoir and ethnoracial bildungsroman (4). Both
of these genres functioned in the twentieth century as a political challenge to the “hostile
and dehumanizing caricatures of Asians as yellow perils, model minorities, dragon ladies,
and kung-fu masters” by centering and underscoring the importance of self-representation
(ibid). Over time, however, this logic of self-representation, meant to subvert racist
representations of Asians became an expectation for “authenticity” in Asian American
literature, which solidified the authenticity paradigm and through which twentieth- and
twenty-first-century Asian American literature is commonly (mis)read. The authenticity
paradigm depends upon readers ability to link the author with the narrator and narrative
content, limiting the scope, trajectory, and literary and theoretical value of Asian
American literature. Most importantly and most destructively, the authenticity paradigm
encourages us to read Asian American literature as evidence of “Asian Americanness”
without considering, and even masking, the logic of the racialization process that renders particular bodies and contexts as raced, like that of Asian American.

Asian Americanists have long argued against the notion that Asian American literature functions as proof or evidence of Asian Americanness. Instead, they argue, Asian American literature is a body of work that theorizes race, racism, racial formation, and power (Lowe; Chuh; Sohn). A foundational concept in Asian American literary theory is Kandice Chuh’s concept of subjectless discourse. Chuh looks to Asian American Studies not to complete the category of “Asian American,” but as theoretically subjectless in order “to critique the effects of the various configurations of power and knowledge through which [“Asian American”] comes to have meaning” (11). In other words, Chuh argues that authors, texts, and characters are only Asian American insofar as they are racialized as Asian American. This framework of subjectless discourse widens the scope of Asian American literary studies—making possible different questions. Instead of asking who is Asian American or what texts “count” as Asian American texts, we can ask more pointedly about the production of racialized subjects. How do certain authors, characters, audiences, and texts become marked as Asian American? How are they made to represent Asian America? And how might these texts instruct us on the logics of representation that are to literature, particularly fiction, that is written by and supposedly about Asian Americans? The framework of queer intimacy turns our attention to the economy of relations between these social actors—authors, characters, audiences, and texts. Each social actor is a participant in the meaning-making process. This
raises questions about how the meaning of a particular text is constructed. Who participates in the production of Asian America? How do they understand their relationship to Asian America and Asian American fiction? How do these relationships contribute to the reproduction of Asian America? And how might these reproductions be facilitated through disidentification?

I raise these questions to confront the paradigm of liberal multiculturalism in which difference is only acknowledged as a means to universalize difference. Liberal multiculturalism operates on “attempts to retain a liberal conception of subjectivity while simultaneously claiming to take seriously radical critiques of precisely the liberal subject” (Chuh 6). Asian American literature is a particularly compelling body of work with the potential to expose and critique structures of power, and especially liberal multiculturalism, because “the contradictory history of Asian Americans produces cultural forms that are materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen to the [U.S.] nation” (Lowe 30). According to Lisa Lowe, Asian American cultural production is at odds with, is incompatible with the norms of U.S. citizenship and belonging, situating Asian American cultural production as a countersite to national culture. Lowe continues, “This ‘difference’ is not a matter of mere technical innovation that we might find in aestheticist texts that are critical of traditional forms and of mass culture but resides in racial formation as the material trace of history” (ibid). It is here that Lowe links cultural production and literature with theory: the production of Asian American literature is a theoretical practice through which we might investigate and come to understand racial formation in the United States, making Asian American literature not only about craft, technique, and aesthetic, (though these are of course
important and generative points of analysis), but also about the logics of race, racism, racial formation, and power. From this perspective, Asian American literature disidentifies with normative logics of race and representation and the framework of queer intimacy provides a means through which we might unlock, examine, and contemplate this disidentificatory potential.

Narrators in Asian American fiction are a generative point of analysis for this work because they are fictional characters who are racialized via their perceived connection to the Asian American writer. As Sohn suggests, a major component of the authenticity paradigm assumes unification between the author and the narrator: “In the Asian American autobiography and Asian American bildungsroman, narrative cohesion typically results from the maintenance of one narrator or main character, whose life readers follow from the beginning to the end and who can or could be conflated with the author” (4 italics in the original). In other words, “authenticity,” narrative cohesion, and literary value for Asian American literature depends upon whether readers are able to draw connections (real or imagined) between author, narrator, and narrative content. This paradigm is so ubiquitous that readers, critics, and even Asian American literary scholars (mis)read and conflate the author and the narrator of fictional/non-autobiographical texts (Kim). Because the authenticity paradigm insists on a conflation between author and narrator, narrators of Asian American fiction complicate and expand the framework of literature as queer intimacy for the ways they are made to represent and embody racialized Asian Americanness.

Narrators are not the author, even in autobiography; they are, instead, characters produced by the author and imagined by the reader, and are subject to the logics of race
and representation consistent with Asian American contexts. The narrator, then, also becomes a social actor with an imagined (raced) body that comes to represent the author’s (raced) body. Which is to say, rather obviously, that narrators in Asian American literature are subject to the racialization process that renders Asian American literature as “ethnic” literature or more simply “Asian American.” Narrators deliver the Asian American narrative to readers who through queer intimacy labor with the author to generate meaning about the text. The author and the reader use their bodies (writing and reading) to create another, literary body—that of the narrator. The body of the narrator (whether described physically in the narrative or not) points us directly to the politics, importance, and urgency with which we ought to consider issues of representation, the body, and relationality in literature.

This is the performative work of Asian American narrators; narrators of Asian American fiction disrupt the authenticity paradigm. Queer intimacy provides a framework for understanding these disruptions as an embodied form of disidentification. Queer intimacy names the affective economy of relations at work in the production and consumption of Asian American fiction. Fiction is the modality that brings the writer, the reader, and the characters and the story into a shared and affective relationship. They meet on the page, in a queer space that was first produced by the writer and then gets reproduced as the reader reads it. An intimacy, routed through a public modality, fiction—a process that generates meaning of the text. Asian American narrators deliver the story in what they do (and do not) tell their reader. Their performative work as narrators makes disidentifications possible. A disidentification with Asian American fiction is a conscious recognition of the logics of representation that mark Asian
American writers, characters, contexts, and stories as raced, as well as a reorientation of those normative racial logics. In the following section, I argue narrators in Asian American fiction can be crafted in ways that disidentify with Asian America, and the work of disidentifications, as Muñoz instructs, makes possible alternative ways of understanding and being in the world.

_Disruptive Asian American Narrative Strategies_. Authors of contemporary Asian American literature confront and challenge the authenticity paradigm Sohn describes. These narrative strategies are craft driven, aesthetic, and performative choices made in the writing that disrupt the normative logics of race that compel a conflations between Asian American author and narrator. In effect, they expose the racial logics embedded in the authenticity paradigm and redirect the gaze from Asians as others to an examination of the very gaze that others Asian people. This is the performative work of Asian American literature; it references and reconstitutes the discourse of race about Asians and Asian Americans. I draw upon these writing practices to construct a multimodal and multidisciplinary performative novel writing methodology that is specific to the Thai American and Asian American context of _PLOY_. I employ two disruptive narrative strategies: multiple and shifting narrators, and autobiographical fiction.

The first narrative strategy is crafting multiple and shifting narrators who interrupt the logic that conflates the author and the narrator. This narrative strategy makes it difficult to link the author with the narrator because the nature of a multiplicitous narrator challenges the notion that there is an “authentic” narrator
to which the author can be tied to. The second narrative strategy is to blend autobiography with fictional narrative material that toys with the assumed relationship between Asian American author and narrator. The genre of autobiographical fiction assumes, instead, that even when an author writes from their lived experience, it is always a contextualized narration of that experience. Both of these narrative strategies are disruptive, disidentificatory tactics, ploys. They critique and reimagine the world and the logics that regulate Asian American literature by confronting and rerouting dominant ideologies through which Asian American literature is understood. After explaining these two narrative strategies and how they disrupt the authenticity paradigm of Asian American literature, I conclude this section with a discussion of how these narrative strategies function as a methodology in PLOY.

Multiple and Shifting Narrators. A narrative strategy that Asian American authors use to disrupt the logic of the authenticity paradigm is crafting multiple and shifting narrators. In these texts, authors interrupt the Asian American authenticity paradigm by inserting multiple, major narrating characters with shifting points of view who often control parts of the narrative. This strategy makes it difficult, if not impossible, to conflate the author with any one particular narrator or any one version of a particular character.

There are numerous Asian American fictions with this general narrative strategy and there are numerous variations within this narrative strategy. One variation of the multiple narrators strategy, for example, is to have two major first-person narrating characters that both provide (often competing) narrative content as in My Year of Meats
(1998) by Ruth Ozeki. Another is to have a first-person narrating character and an accompanying third-person narrator as in Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013). Yet another variation is to mix multiple first-person narrators with multiple third-person narrators, such as in Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (1990) which has upwards of five major first-person narrating characters and several third-person narrators. Another variation is to have so many characters (both narrating and not) that it is difficult for the reader to even establish who the narrator is at a given time as in *Rolling the R’s* (1995) by R. Zamora Linmark. By making it difficult and sometimes even impossible to determine who is narrating, Linmark rejects clarity in representation by disorienting and obscuring characters, their motives, and their role in controlling the narrative. The move to reject and disregard “authenticity” through the unidentified and unidentifiable narrator in *Rolling the R’s* raises questions about self-representation. Under what conditions does one wish to represent themselves? Under what conditions does one wish to conceal their identities, their motives, and their desires? In these ways, I read Linmark’s work as being less about self-representation and the representation of Asian Americans and more about the theorization of representation itself. *Rolling the R’s* questions whether representation is possible and under what conditions is self-/representation desirable.

There are also variations of the shifting narrator strategy, which suggests that narrators, characters, and perhaps people, have multiple selves. This calls into question the authenticity paradigm by challenging the notion of an individual self as thee authentic self and instead presenting the self as multiplicitous and always in relation to others. There is an abundance of Asian American fictions with this narrative strategy and there are various degrees to which this narrative strategy is used. In *On Earth We’re Briefly
“Gorgeous” (2019) by Ocean Vuong, for example, the narrator, Little Dog, switches points of view with great frequency—from first-person to second-person and ultimately to third-person and back all while maintaining his role as narrator. Whereas “The Sympathizer” (2015) by Viet Thanh Nguyen doesn’t use a shifting perspective until the unnamed narrator is subjected to the North Vietnamese re-education camps following the War in Vietnam. Other novels, such as “A Gesture Life” (1999) by Change-rae Lee and “The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts” (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston, use this shifting narrator strategy so discreetly that the reader may actually miss the shifting point of view. Kingston uses multiple points of view in a way that questions the notion of a true or authentic self. In “The Woman Warrior”, readers come to know the narrator through her own voice and narration and by observing the narrator observing herself in relation to her mother, her siblings, and her aunt through a third-person point of view, suggesting that there are actually multiple notions or iterations of the self that are informed by one’s relations with others. This narrative strategy of shifting points of view can be a discreet, yet effective challenge to the authenticity paradigm which relies upon static, individual, singular notions of the self—a true or “authentic” self. Because to write the self from multiple points of view is to suggest that there are multiple selves or at least that there are multiple dimensions to one’s self that we come to understand in and through our relations with others.

“The Autobiographical Novel.” The genre of autobiographical fiction, likewise, is a narrative strategy that disrupts the authenticity paradigm. It challenges and confronts the racial and racist logics that link Asian American author, narrator, and narrative content by
turning the notion of authenticity on its head—pairing and blending the autobiographical (what we tend to imagine as “real” and “authentic” narratives about one’s lived experience) with fiction (what we tend to imagine as “not real,” “made up,” or at least inauthentic narratives of reality). The authenticity paradigm of Asian American literature assumes a reality in which author and narrator are or could be synonymous. Autobiographical fiction plays with the relationship between author and narrator, assuming, instead, that even when an author writes from their lived experience, it is always a contextualized narration of that experience. In other words, even “real” or “true” stories are narratives. A fiction of sorts. This is not to equate facts with fiction or to suggest that facts are “post-truth” but rather to underscore that facts are always products of and embedded in assumptions about reality and that facts and realities are always narrated. In Simon Lovat’s essay “Whose Life is it Anyway?” on autobiographical fiction, Lovat argues the notion of the self is an assumed, western reality. “We simply narrate ourselves into apparent being,” Lovat contends (65). “Not only is autobiography, as a mode of literary expression, inherently fictive; anything one may say about the ‘self’ is also always-already a fiction because the posited self is a fiction” (ibid). What he means here is that the logic that divides autobiography from fiction conceals and even misses the ways that we narrate our realities and our assumptions about reality.

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2 Post-truth accounts for the “larger social transformation [currently] underway that signal[s] a turn toward both denial of myriad forms of social facts and evidence (such as racism and climate change) and a corresponding ‘re-naturing’ movement, where innateness and fundamentalist logics divorced from a serious engagement with context and substantiation are increasingly mobilized as central explanations for everything from ecological devastation to diverse women’s underrepresentation in technology” (Ho et al. 160). My argument that facts and realities are always narrated and are always embedded in narratives does not adhere in any way to the fascist post-truth paradigm in which facts are decontextualized to deny realities and to maintain power and control. If anything, this argument about the relationship between narrative and facts, instead, hyper-contextualizes facts, where they come from, which discourses they draw upon, and what they do.
Wynter, Black feminist philosopher and novelist, conceptualizes this human condition as *homo narrans* (McKittrick 25). A “co-evolution” of “bios/mythoi” in which the human emerged as a “hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species” (ibid). A species that narrates our realities. In his essay, “Frustrating the ‘I’,” performance scholar Dustin Bradley Goltz calls this the “‘I’ in Process,” in which the notion of “I” is constantly remade with each iteration and as it is deployed in relation to different audiences.

Autobiographical fiction importantly draws our attention to the posited self, mythoi, and the ways that we narrate our selves, our worlds, and our shared and not shared, assumed realities. It is a direct challenge to authenticity.

In these ways, autobiographical fiction asks us to consider the relationship between reality and our narration of reality. How they inform one another. How one’s lived experience informs the stories we “make up” about ourselves and our place in the world. How the “not real” informs our lived experience and our understanding of it.

Autobiographical fiction opens up the imagination and reality of our lived experience. As Asian American author of autobiographical fiction, Alexander Chee, says: “The story of your life, described, will not describe how you came to think about your life or yourself, not describe any of what you learned. This is what fiction can do—I think it is even what fiction is for” (*How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* 200). This is precisely how Chee describes his debut novel, *Edinburgh* (2016), a coming-of-age novel about Fee (not Chee), a young Korean American boy from Maine (like Chee) who becomes aware of the abuse that his fellow choir boys suffer by their choir director. When asked why Chee didn’t “just” write a memoir about abuse, he explains that fiction allows the author to betray their own characters, “done to reveal the ways they are human” (*How to...* 248), in
ways that memoir and autobiography limit the author. Autobiographical fiction, Chee argues, also allows the author to decenter one’s self as a way to draw out the political stakes and the structural significance of the personal narrative (Chee, The Thief of Lives Session 2). In other words, according to Chee, writing about the self is not narcissistic when the question isn’t about the person but about how the person becomes that person and why (ibid). Autobiographical fiction negates that there ought to be a link between Asian American author and narrator, and it also reroutes politics and logics of representation.

Therefore, autobiographical fiction is both a genre and a methodology. It is an approach to and the product of writing fiction that is deeply and consciously informed by the author’s lived experience as well as the author’s understanding of how one came to live and make sense of that experience. Unlike in the genres of memoir or autobiography, in autobiographical fiction imagination and fiction are made central and active elements of the genre for the ways that they inform one’s lived experience. Rather than focusing on what “really” or “actually” happened in one’s life, the focus is on how what has happened in one’s life is understood given the conditions and contexts under which one experienced them. Autobiographical fiction intriguingly turns our attention away from the autobiographical, the “authentic” and toward how the character, the person, a life, a world comes into being. The focus is not about fact, truth, authenticity, or the “real” story of one’s life but about how stories and worlds are created and how those stories and worlds are narrated to create persons. As a methodology, autobiographical fiction reorients the function of lived experience from a telling of happenings realized in one’s life to how reality has structured a life. It is the difference, for instance, between
recounting a traumatic experience of abuse from your childhood and using fiction to aesthetically articulate how you understand the experience of childhood abuse on the formation of a person and their lived reality. This methodology points us to the structural and cultural dimensions of narrative through storytelling and through queer intimacy. It is an expansion upon the performative writing practices described above, for it takes into account and performs how the narration of our realities functions in our everyday lives. The narration itself is rendered as a fully present and active component of storytelling.

In Part III. Methodological Afterword, I elaborate on the specific methods I used to craft, structure, and compose the novel. These methods include autobiographical fiction writing, narrative analysis, Thai cultural production and language studies, and historical and archival research. I explain, for example, how I drew inspiration from the environmental and place-based descriptions of refugee camps in the oral histories in the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California Irvine to write the scenes located in a refugee camp in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. I elaborate on the methodological implications and ethical considerations of creative scholarship that draws on primary sources and lived experience to create fictional worlds. I outline and reflect upon these methodological processes and choices in the conclusion to allow readers to engage in the meaning-making process of PLOY without my explanation or understanding of how the novel and its craft operate.

The methodology I used to write PLOY combines the performative writing practice of feminist scholars of color and performance scholars with the disruptive narrative strategies identified here in contemporary Asian American fiction. These
writing practices work alongside one another to reorient normative and dominant ideologies. As described above, the performative writing practices of performance scholars and feminist of color in particular redirect the function of knowledge—from the production and accumulation of knowledge to *that and* a consciousness of the process through which knowledge is produced. Performative writing may, for example, center queer women of color, but the writing isn’t only about queer women of color. The writing produces and accumulates knowledge about queer women of color, examines how knowledge about queer women of color is produced and circulated, and provides alternative modes of knowledge production about queer women of color.

*PLOY* likewise centers Thai American characters and contexts in order to contribute to the production of knowledge about the racialization of Asian American people and also to expose, analyze, and critique how knowledge about Asian Americans is produced and circulated. I combine this politics of performance with the disruptive narrative strategies identified above in contemporary Asian American fiction. These writing practices extend the political work of performative writing by challenging the specific logics of race that operate in and through Asian American fiction—authenticity. Asian American fiction may include content that could be read as “evidence” of Asian American otherness, such as the description of food or the characters’ eating practices (a commonly racialized subject matter). However, these disruptive narrative strategies use narrators and fictional narrative content to interrupt the logic that points to Asian American authenticity and otherness by directing readers to the cultural and institutional structures that mark Asian Americans as racialized others. *PLOY* takes a similar approach; conscious of how the text and its characters and contexts will be racialized as
Asian American, I offer the novel about Ploy as a meditation on and examination of the racialization of Thai American people as Asian Americans.

*The Specificity of Thai America.* This dissertation makes a significant contribution to Asian American Studies and Performance Studies in Communication because of the specificity of Thai America. Thais in the United States are an appallingly understudied migrant group (Thepbiriruk, “Thais in Diaspora”). To say there is a dearth in scholarship across the social science and humanities that engages with the everyday lives and livelihoods of Thai Americans is an understatement. This is not at all surprising given that within Asian American Studies, and even within Southeast Asian American Studies, where there is a vast body of scholarship concerning Asian and Southeast Asian diasporas, Thai and Thai American contexts remain understudied.

Asian American Studies first emerged from the 1968 Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front Student Strike at San Francisco State College (now University) with a “fierce commitment” to community engagement, activism, and education (“Our History”; “Our AAS History”). Given the historical and political context of the War in Vietnam and the critical activism confronting U.S. empire in Asia, much research pertaining to Southeast Asia, and its diasporas, tend to focus on Vietnam, the Philippines (a former U.S. colony), and more recently Laos and Cambodia, where the United States dropped more than 280-million cluster bombs during the Secret War in Laos (Legacies Library). These studies reveal a range of effects, outcomes, and histories of U.S. empire in Southeast Asia, and there is much work still yet to be done. Part of that work is examining Thai and Thai American contexts and histories. Historically and
presently, Thailand and the United States maintain a political allyship. For example, Thailand was a crucial location for both Southeast Asian refugees, particularly from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Legacies Library; Vang), well as for the U.S. military in Southeast Asia (Padoongpatt). In centering a Thai American story in this dissertation, I argue that Southeast Asian American stories and Thai American stories more specifically are central to a critical and intersectional race consciousness. They reveal the ongoing effects of U.S. empire in Southeast Asia across multiple generations and communities of Southeast Asian people living in the United States today.

Thais in the United States comprise more than 300,0003 people with sizable settlements in California, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, Texas, and Florida (Padoongpatt, “Thai Americans”). While there are only a handful of academic articles and monographs about the specificities of Thai America, there have been several recent dissertations in this area. This growing and emerging network of scholars is establishing a body of critical scholarship by and about Thai America within an Asian American Studies framework that is critical of U.S. empire. In this work, U.S. empire is central to the migration, and thus presence, of Thai people in/to the United States and central to the racialization of Thai Americans as Asian Americans. U.S. militarization, occupation, and empire across the Asian continent and the Pacific is expansive—geographically from West Asia to the Hawaiian Islands and historically from the nineteenth-century colonization of the Philippines and annexation of the Hawaiian

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3 The U.S. Census Bureau and the Royal Thai Embassy estimate that there are approximately 300,000 people of Thai descent in the United States. However, the number is likely to be much, much higher for several reasons, including that there is a high number of undocumented and “exdocumented” (Padoongpatt) Thais that reside in the U.S. and that tracking Thai people through the U.S. census is difficult since it asks for participants’ ethnicity and there are more than seventy ethnic groups in Thailand (Thongchai), one of which is “Tai.” Therefore people from Thailand who identify more closely with their ethnicity rather than their nationality, such Hmong or Mon people, may not indicate Thai on the U.S. census.
Islands to the ongoing U.S. military presence across the Middle East. The study of Thai people and their migration to the United States offers rich insight into the mechanics and specificity of such an expansive U.S. empire, as Thailand served as a strategic political and military partner to the United States (Padoongpatt, “Thai Americans”; Thongchai). In fact, the first wave of immigrants from Thailand, “made up primarily of male government officials, political elites, and formally educated middle-class Thais from urban Bangkok” (Padoongpatt “Thai Americans” 839), arrived in the U.S. between 1945 and 1965—a time period when U.S. immigration law largely barred people of Asian descent from entering the United States (E. Lee The Making of Asian America). There is more research to be done on how the political and militaristic relationship between the U.S. and Thailand enabled such migrations to take place. After the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act, also known as the Immigration Act of 1965, which struck down the xenophobic immigration laws barring the entry of Asian people to the United States, the second wave of Thai immigrants entered the U.S. “alter[ing] gender and class dynamics among Thai Americans because it included a significantly higher number of women, younger migrants, tourists, students, and a lower number of professionals” (Padoongpatt, “Thai Americans” 839).

Even though Thai immigrants “arrived at a rate higher than any other immigrant group [between 1965 and 1975], increasing 20-fold from a few thousand to about 100,000 by 1975” (ibid), Thai people occupied a very different political and economic position than other Asian immigrants, particularly other Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees who were arriving in the United States during and after the Vietnam War (Thepbiriruk, “Thais in Diaspora”). Unlike other Southeast Asians, who arrived in the
United States knowing the U.S. as a colonial parent and/or military presence in their home country, Thais arrived in the United States knowing the U.S. as a political and military partner. This conceptualization of the United States as a partner is also tied to the tendency for Thais to romanticize the fact that Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country to have never been formally colonized by a western nation. As Sookkasikon explains, this “idealistic history of Thailand is mythological as U.S. foreign policy, economic investment, and militarization have exerted strong external influences upon Thailand and its people” (22). Little research has examined the specificity of the U.S. political elite and military’s influence on Thai people who migrate to the United States, regardless of gender, profession, class, and social mobility. These early studies and dissertations, however, demonstrate crucial connections between Thai Americans and U.S. empire in Southeast Asia and help bring specificity to the grandiose, expansive tactics of U.S. empire. Thus, critical studies of Thai people and their migration to the United States are also a study of U.S. empire in Southeast Asia.

U.S. empire is also central to the racial formation of Thais as ambiguously “Asian.” Michael Omi and Howard Winant define race as “a concept, a representation or signification of identity that refers to different types of human bodies, to the perceived corporeal and phenotypic markers of difference and the meanings and social practices that are ascribed to those differences” (111). This means that race is both the process through which particular bodies are marked as different as well as an assignment of meaning to those differences. Omi and Winant theorize this shifting nature of race as racial formation: “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (2015, p. 109). In the United States, racial formation is
“tethered” to “the ideology of white supremacy that… [sic] has transformed into an increasingly complex system of dispossession and violence. The inequality at the center of racism and white supremacy is based on the enduring power of race as a flexible and shifting category” (Rana 202). As Thais enter the United States, they enter into an existing framework of race and a “dominant U.S. racial glossary” (Padoongpatt “Too Hot to Handle” 94). This racial glossary racializes Thais as ambiguously Asian.

As Mark Padoongpatt explains, the “hypervisibility of Thai food and [the] invisibility of Thai people in the United States” (Flavors of Empire 174) is an insightful indicator of the racial formation of Thais in the United States. It is a common joke among Thai people that our Thainess is commonly reduced to food. When people ask the “what are you?” or “where are you really from?” questions in response to our bodies and our names and then learn that we are Thai, they often reply with an exclamation of their love for Thai food. In many ways, Thainess is not legible in the U.S. ethno-racial glossary except through the exotification of Thai food. The word “Thai” itself often isn’t even indicative of Thailand; in my experience of explaining Thai/land, for many Americans, “Thai” (a demonym for people from Thailand) is misassociated with “Taiwanese” (the demonym for people from Taiwan). Thainess is legible as ambiguously Asian until it is named, and then it is often only recognized if there is an association with Thai food. This is why Mark Padoongpatt’s study of the racialization of Thai food and Thai people is so important because, as he argues, “while white U.S. citizens used the taste of Thai food to racialize Thais as the ‘exotic,’ nonwhite other and reestablish the boundaries of race—Thais also relied on taste to discern and maintain critical ethnic differences between themselves and other Asian groups in an attempt to undermine their racialization” (“Too
Hot to Handle” 86). In other words, Thai Americans distinguish themselves from other Asian Americans through food, but the exotification of Thai food imposed through the discourses of U.S. racial imaginaries reestablishes Thais as ambiguously Asian. Which is to say, Thai people are marked and raced as Asian through existing discourses of U.S. empire, militarism, and tourism that exotify, Orientalize, and other Asian peoples. While PLOY is about Thai Americans, the function of this dissertation is to turn our attention to the racialization of Thai people, offering insight on how race operates in the United States. This is the political work of critical Asian American Studies (Chu), that positions Asian Americans not as another racial group in the United States, but as a racialized discourse that can examine, expose, and critique race-based subjecthood.

This dissertation builds upon the scholarship already available about Thai America through this critical Asian American Studies framework of U.S. empire by centering Thai American characters, contexts, and stories. PLOY centers Thai Americans as a way to contemplate how certain people, bodies, sites, practices, and ideas are racialized as “Thai American.” Under what conditions does Ploy’s father enter the United States? How do the Thai American characters understand their racial identity and their relationship to race, other Southeast Asians, Asians, and people of color? How does race in this story inform other social processes such as gender, class, and sexuality? This approach redirects the Orientalist gaze, whereby Asian American people, contexts, and stories are offered up as evidence of their foreignness, un/assimilability, and un/belonging. Instead, the protagonist Ploy looks to and beyond her relations to reimagine migration as an ongoing embodied and relational process. In these ways, like the performative work of storytelling, queer intimacy, disidentification, and Asian
American fiction, this dissertation turns to Thai America to expose, interrupt, and reroute
the normative logics of race in the United States that mark and racialize particular people,
contexts, and stories as ambiguously Asian.
PART II.

The Performative Novel: *PLOY*
ploy (n) / ploi / ENGLISH:
a tactic, strategy, or cunning plan
to turn a situation to one’s own advantage

As in, Don't take any notice of her—it's just a ploy.  

พลอย (n) / phloi / THAI:
a mineral, or stone
shaped, carved, or otherwise manipulated into gems often used as jewelry and ornamentation

As in,  예수님หญิงคนหนึ่งฝันว่ากำลังทีนหนาเพชรพลอยที่มีค่ามาก.

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4 Example of ploy offered by the Oxford dictionary.
5 Example of พลอย offered by the Glosbe Thai-English dictionary translated as, a young woman dreams about discovering gems of great worth.
Por

The last thing Por said to his firstborn, Ploy, before she left was a cold and worthless, “okay.” It wasn’t at all what he had planned to say. His plan was to order her return; he wanted to tell her, “Come back and finish what you started.” But his voice was broken—the sound of “okay” a barely audible crack in the noise of the Detroit Metro airport around them. He wasn’t even sure if she’d heard him say it.

Ploy did hear, and “okay” wasn’t what she wanted to hear or what she anticipated. What she wanted was an apology. Por’s hushed okay landed between them in what felt like a singular moment of stillness—his arms awkwardly wrapped around her, her arms carelessly slack at her side, not returning his embrace. They stood momentarily in stillness like this, their first hug. Their world came to a halt while the rest of the world carried on around them.
The airport is a world of movement, a sea of stop-and-go cars and people with places to be, and there they were standing together in an embrace. To outsiders, they looked like any other hugging pair saying goodbye at the gates of the airport. To the two of them, they were unrecognizable. They didn’t recognize themselves or each other. They couldn’t see it, but each one of them was becoming someone new.

When it happened, “okay” fell out of Por’s mouth, betraying him. He was, under normal circumstances, a man of great control. Controlling his words and his composure was a source of pride. It was one of the few things he considered himself good at. But saying goodbye to Ploy, after their inevitable crumbling, was not normal. His firstborn was loyal and generally obedient, predictable and reliable. It was why he held on so tightly. He needed her. Although Por didn’t anticipate this departure, now that it was happening, he realized it was not at all surprising.

Por should have seen it coming. But his impulse to control his affairs, his family, and especially his daughters, in his particular way, obscured his ability to see what was so clearly coming. When his ex-wife, her mother, left, Por saw it coming. There were unmistakable signs—late and unpaid bills, cold dinners, a locked bedroom door, months without sex, and conversation that only pertained to their two little and growing girls. As the signs collected, Por knew his wife would leave and he didn’t try to stop her. It wasn’t that he wanted things to end too. No, he wanted her to stay. He needed her then, like he needed Ploy now. He didn’t try to stop his ex-wife from leaving because it might look like desperation or begging, and even if he was desperate for her to stay, which he was, he was unequivocally opposed to begging anyone, especially a woman, for anything.
That was when his wife, his ex-wife left. This was Ploy, his firstborn, his
daughter. It never occurred to him that a daughter could leave her father, and under these
peculiar circumstances, Por couldn’t control his mouth. In that momentary lapse of control, he let out the cold and worthless goodbye.

“Okay,” he said from discomfort, from regret.

The end was always in motion. In the two months before they said goodbye, the end had quickened. Por reached a point where he didn’t recognize himself anymore. He stood at the threshold of the bathroom door in his apartment and looked in the mirror. It reflected an old, old man. There was a new sag in this man’s cheeks. His whole face was darkened by the liver spot under his left eye. Por tricked himself into seeing the smooth, wrinkleless face of his youth by blurring away age. He squinted and watched the face in the mirror transform before him. He smiled at himself remembering who he used to be.

On the other side of the threshold, in the hallway, on his book-less bookshelf, is a display of two old black-and-white photographs of the man Por remembers being. The man in the photographs has a head full of thick black hair, worn like the Beatles. Mopheads, he called them in his best British accent though it sounded more like Thai than English—mawp haeds.

He returned his gaze in the mirror and combed what was left of his graying hair across the top of his head and fastened it in place with a cloud of hairspray. He coughed and then shooed away the hairspray that didn’t land on his head. His hair was the switch
that turned Por into an old man. It made him age faster than any other observable feature. The full head of thick, jet black hair, the mop head, kept him youthful into his fifties and even his sixties. The sixties mop top, what it’s really called, was long out of fashion, but he wore his hair like this simply because it made him look young, healthy, and handsome. Until it didn’t. His hair grayed overnight, and the hasty color change caused his hair to thin at a pace he couldn’t manage. After a ten-hour shift in the kitchen at House of Siam, where he tossed a seasoned wok in front of flames, he removed his uniform hat with the restaurant name embroidered in gold lettering and the state-mandated hair net, and he found a handful of hair in his hands. There was nothing for him to do with the hair but to throw it in the bathroom wastebasket where it collected over the week.

At first, the comb over worked and he denied the hair loss as long as he could. Por’s hair was so thick that losing handfuls, at first, didn’t seem to make much of a difference. At 73, the combover no longer worked. Giving denial another chance, he let the hairspray settle atop his head. He squinted at himself and realized the comb over is a trick he can no longer pull. He dragged himself out of the bathroom and dug through the hallway closet for the black, second-hand Carhartt hat he bought last year at Savers.

On his way back to the bathroom, he stopped at the bookshelf and looked at the photos of himself. The young man in the photographs, the man Por longs to see in the mirror, has a long, oval-shaped face with matching thin lips, the top nearly identical to the bottom, and a perfectly round mole under his nose. The photographs are charms from an older time—worn with age and carried across nations and lifetimes. In both photographs, Por is smiling. They are real smiles, candid smiles, not forced or posed. In one, it looks like the photographer caught him off-guard and accidentally captured what
might have been a joke between close friends. In the other, the smile is small. It doesn’t say I’m happy, but I’m here.

Por adjusted the hat and flashed himself a second smile. He closed his mouth as soon as he opened it. This version of his smile reminded him of what he has tried to forget. That his gums cause discomfort. That he’s never been to the dentist. That decades of smoking and drinking coffee add up. That his mother was right so long ago when she’d told him to take care of his teeth or they’ll fall out one day. Apart from his hair, the only other reliable indicator of his age is his teeth, or rather, his missing tooth. Por shrinks a little more everytime he sees the hole in his mouth, wishing it had been a molar that fell out, not the tooth just left of his front two teeth. What happened to his mother’s little boy, the young man in the photographs with a head full of hair and a mouth full of teeth?

Por starred in the mirror, demanding an answer from himself. His silent gaze radiated authority and resolve—a power he learned as a child witnessing adults chide children with glares, and a power he perfected over the years as a father himself. His gaze is a power that he cultivated out of greed, a deep-seated greed for certainty and control. He increased his control by giving looks that said don’t you fucking dare. When he saw his own gaze, the one he cultivated over his life, he tells himself he is no longer who he was in those photographs. Those are not the same two people. Life led them in different directions.

On that day, two months before Ploy left, Por had two things to do—renew his driver’s license and pay the rent. He gazed at himself in the mirror for a second longer, and made his way to the front door of his apartment.
Por stood waiting on top of the old door mat, trodden with his weight, holding a plastic envelope with both hands containing the renewal documents he organized the day before. Inside is his Social Security card, sealed in a ziplock sandwich baggie, a recent electric bill, and his green card. He stood in place until Golf arrived.

Golf lives a three-minute drive from Por’s apartment in a complex called Hidden Oaks. The developers from the 1980’s must have thought it was creative to name a brown apartment complex settled among the tall, dark trees on the other side of I-475 “hidden oaks.” The developers are long gone now and they probably didn’t have tenants like Golf in mind.

When they pull up to Hidden Oaks in Golf’s red Honda Civic, the parking lot was practically empty with only two other cars in sight. Normally, the parking lot is full when Golf arrives after his shift at House of Siam, usually pulling up shortly after 10pm. That day, Golf parked just short of the doorsteps to his apartment.

“It’s Monday,” Golf said. “The neighbors went to work already.” He shifted the car into park and Por nodded, understanding, taking a look around. They got out of the car in unison, a familiar routine. Golf made his way up the stairs and to his apartment, and Por took Golf’s place in the driver’s seat. Golf watched Por adjust the car. Por reached under the seat and pushed himself back a few notches. He toggled the little black button on the door to adjust the side mirrors slightly inward. Por does this all with ease. He was familiar with how he fits in Golf’s car.

Six months ago, Por borrowed Golf’s car for the first time. He needed a way to
pick up his prescription refills at Meijer. On his way out of the parking lot, a young man driving a souped up black Honda Civic almost hit Golf’s Civic before speeding off.

“Shit!” Por said wondering what it would be like to have to tell Golf he was in an accident and that the car he worked so hard to buy for his family was damaged. Instead of immediately returning the car to Golf, Por drove home and chose an amulet to hang in Golf’s car from a collection he ordered on Ebay from a seller named Lucky1Amulets. Without giving it much thought, Por picked the oldest amulet of the lot. It was gray and made of bones and ash. The Certificate of Authenticity explained the amulet was consecrated by Phra Ajarn Nu at Wat Pho—a collector’s amulet known for its protective magic. Por selected a matching chain and placed it on the rearview mirror. He turned the amulet to face outward, toward the front windshield to ensure its line of sight. He started the car, placed his palms together in a wai, and prayed that the amulet would protect him when driving Golf’s car and that it would protect Golf and his family too.

The amulet still hangs in Golf’s car and Por has seen it so many times that he barely noticed it that day, as he reached up for the rearview mirror with both hands and gently tilted it downward, ensuring a line of sight directly out the back window.

As he backed out of the parking space, Por rolled down his window.

“Thanks. I’ll be back for lunch.”

Golf waved and walked up the last of the steps in silence. He opened the brown door and locked it behind him.

The Bureau of Motor Vehicles on Heatherdowns Boulevard opened at 8:30 in the morning. Por was the third customer to arrive that day, and he grinned with satisfaction.
when he took his place in line. While he waited for someone to unlock the doors, Por checked the documents in his folder again. He unsealed the envelope and glanced at each item. Everything was still there in the same order he had arranged it. He took the green card out of the ziplock baggie. He folded the baggie in half and placed it in the plastic envelope and sealed it again.

Por took a closer look at the green card, flipped it over in his hands. The last time he had to renew his driver’s license, the clerk had asked him where he got his green card.

“Isn’t it obvious?,” he wanted to say. “I got it from your fucking government.” Instead, he quietly answered, “from the government.” He wasn’t sure what made her ask such a question. Did his green card look like a fraud? Was it the old lamination? Was it the angle of the camera? The pose? in which the government photographer had asked him to turn to this side for a profile. He turned the card over again and studied his own mugshot. Whatever it was, this version of the green card, from 1984, had something about it made the BMV clerk suspicious and it unnerved him.

Por slipped the green card into the front pocket of his jeans and waited, now first in line. A little black board hanging above the counter flashed #003 in red and a woman waved him over. She looked friendly, smiled big as he approached. She could be a House of Siam regular. Someone he might have cooked for. Someone who orders pad thai, no spice. He arrived at the counter and wasted no time.

“Hi. I want to renew my driver’s license please.” The clerk sat in a cushioned chair on the other side of the counter. She had to look up at Por on the other side of the counter. There were no chairs for customers, an uncomfortable inequity. The clerk focused her hazel eyes on Por and he saw her friendliness turn sour.
“Can I have some proof of citizenship or legal presence—like a green card?” She asked. The request sounded more like a demand. He pulled the green card out of his front pocket and handed it to her. He peeked at it again as he handed it to her. The top of the card read “RESIDENT ALIEN” in big, bold, navy-blue capital letters. The clerk’s eyes scrutinized it, turning it over in her hands.

Por watched her study the card. What was she looking for? She paused on his picture. In the profile, Por’s gaze is downcast and gentle. Her eyes moved from the card to Por. The old man standing in front of her still looked very much like the young man in the photograph. Aged, yes, but the same meager look and handsome in his own way. She examined him further. The most obvious change was the man’s dire hair loss. His hat covered whatever was left, and the gray strands of hair hanging loose looked lifeless and on their last leg.

The card says it was issued in 1984 and that he was born in 1945. She does mental math. He was 39 when the photo was taken, and he was 73 that day he went to renew his driver’s license. He had wrinkles now that he didn’t have then, mostly at the corner of his eyes and across his forehead. The wrinkles on his face, a sheer statement of age rather than an accumulation of emotions lived on his face. The dark mole to the left of his nose in the photo stands out but made itself a home on the face in front of her.

The line grew in a matter of minutes. It buzzed of impatience behind him. What’s taking so long? He imagined the tapping of feet. He wanted to ask if there was a problem but he decided not to in case doing so accidentally spoke a problem into existence. The clerk looked at Por and then at the growing line behind him. He turned around too. The line was already out the door. He grinned for another moment, pleased he had the
foresight to come early.

The clerk tried to meet Por’s eyes but avoided her. She waited for his attention. She opened her mouth like she was going to say something, but she stopped herself, letting out a barely audible and uneasy “uhhhh” instead.

Por’s name is misspelled on the card. Maybe that’s what she was going to say. But the misspelling appears on all of his documents so the clerk wouldn’t notice it. Finally, she spoke, holding up his green card.

“Please, tell me sir. Where did you get this?” Por sighed and then chuckled to himself, relieved at the question. A simple question he’d answered last time and that had a simple answer. He raised his gaze to meet hers, but instead he looked past her at the collection of new cheery 2018 Ohio license plates—“The Birthplace of Aviation.” Looking at the clerk would conjure an amalgamation of anger from the past visits to the BMV. A simple driver’s license renewal had turned into an immigration hearing of sorts, an examination.

The clerk repeated the question, nodding toward the growing line.

“Sir, where did you get this ID from? I cannot accept this as valid proof of legal presence.” Por looked down at her sitting in the chair and noticed she was chewing neon pink gum that connected the top of her mouth to the bottom. He remained silent, unsure how to convince her. Por watched her turn the gum over and over in her mouth.

She commanded his attention when she snapped her fingers in his face.

“Sir, can you understand me? Your resident alien card expired. You cannot renew your driver’s license with this!” She thrust the card between them like he might not know what card she was referring to.
“I’m a permanent resident alien,” Por finally told her. He pointed to the big bold letters at the top of the card she held in the air between them. He pointed and repeated.

“Permanent resident alien. And I have been driving here for more than 35 years.” He repeated himself again and again, worried her lack of response meant that she didn’t understand him.

“I’m a permanent resident alien. This is my green card and I am here to renew my driver’s license.” The clerk understood him. He spoke clearly, but she said nothing, waiting for him to take the card out of her hand.

“My green card. It has no expiration date.”

“Look at the card.”

“No expiration date. Can’t be expired!”

He pronounced this slowly, still worried the problem was that she couldn’t understand his English.

She placed Por’s green card on the counter to turn him away. The clerk waved and shouted past him at the long line of people.

“Next!”

Golf began their ritual with an offering. He took the brown paper bag from the table before him and opened it, unfolding the neatly pressed flap. He pulled out a smaller, clear plastic bag that was sealed at the top with an orange rubber band and puffed up like a pet store bag with a fish in it. Inside was not a fish, but prik nam pla.

“Mod made it last week,” Golf boasts. He handed the puffed up bag to Por.
“She put extra chilies just for you, Loong.” Loong, not Por’s given name, but a relational one. One that signifies age and position. Loong, the elder of the two. Por, old enough to be Golf’s father. Golf, the younger of the two, young enough to be Por’s son. Blood is not what brought them together, and that doesn’t matter to either of them or to this ritual that began four years ago. On the first Monday of every month, their only day off of work and soon after getting paid, they set a standing lunch together. It was never quite decided that the two of them should eat together in public, but it became a ritual after the first two months.

Por set the plastic bag back on the table between them and sipped his coffee in silence. When Golf said Mod made the prik nam pla, Por knew that she didn’t ferment the sardines herself. That would require fresh sardines, topical heat, humidity, and time, none of which is readily available in Toledo, Ohio. Por understood that Mod combined store-bought fish sauce with her perfected ratio of bird’s eye chilis, garlic, shallots, and lime. So simple a recipe that it’s easy to get wrong. Mod never gets it wrong.

The table was set for lunch at New Empire, an overindulgent name for a restaurant sitting in the parking lot of an abandoned strip mall. Inside, the dining room is optimized to fit as many round banquet tables for ten as possible. The space was wide and expansive with three of its four walls made of floor-to-ceiling windows that flood the dining room with light. The place had potential, but it had long been neglected. The natural light made it easy to spot shortcomings. The wood paneling was nicked and cracked. The orchid-themed art lost what little color and energy it began with. Calcium coated the steady waterfall in the goldfish pond. The tables were layered with age. Each one was overlaid with thick glass measured to the exact size of the table. Under the glass
was a faded red tablecloth. Golf and Por sat at their usual table in the corner where two walls met. Both faced a window, watching a traffic light, the midday sun high in the sky. Por sat at nine o’clock, his body thin and bent forward from age. Golf sat at six o’clock, his body fleshy and large taking up both the five and six. They bathed in each other’s silence and avoided sustained eye contact.

By the time Por emptied his white porcelain cup, an overworked, middle-aged Chinese woman brought out noodle rolls, chicken feet, shumai, dumplings, taro puffs, and fried shrimp balls. She balanced the little plates on a warped plastic serving tray she carried with her left arm. She made room on the table, setting each plate down where Por and Golf sat muted. Neither man moved or moved their belongings as she rearranged the table for them. Recognizing the regular diners and wanting to save herself another trip from the kitchen to their table, the server left two blue and white saucers on the table for their homemade dipping sauce. Empire Kitchen offered more than ten dipping sauces, but for some reason, a reason she couldn’t understand, none compared to whatever it was they brought in their brown paper bag. When she completed the food puzzle, she left them to themselves and returned to her corner of the dining room.

Por carefully untied the rubber band and released the imprisoned air from the bag. A witchy stench of sour fish and garlic permeated the room. He poured the translucent liquid into the saucers in equal measure. Clumps of green and red chilis, seeds and all, plopped into the saucers. One for Por and one for Golf. Watching from her corner, the server slouched against the hostess stand and rolled her narrow brown eyes. The kitchen bell dinged, beckoning her, and she disappeared into the back.
Por and Golf continued their meal with hardly a word, apart from the occasional question demanding only a simple answer. Por swallowed the last cabbage and leek dumpling, and spoke up.

“What did Mod cook for dinner last night?” As he spoke, Golf eyed a shard of green chili hanging from Por’s gums where he was missing a tooth. The missing tooth is mostly imperceptible unless Por is eating. He does a good job of hiding it. Green filled the gaping black hole in Por’s mouth and Golf struggled to remember what he looked like before, when his tooth was still there, when they worked together less than two years ago. The blackened tooth fell out shortly after Por was fired for working too slowly in the kitchen where they met.

They met at House of Siam, a local favorite for authentic Thai cuisine, where they worked back of the house and where order is always in order. The mexicanos camouflaged their tattoos with long plastic gloves and washed dishes in the corner. The Thai women tucked their dyed hair in their formally crisp white hats and chopped cold foods of every color. There’s a fat man among the women—that was Golf. Mod stood right next to him pounding herbs and other fixings into different curry pastes. They had a beautiful child whom they called Noi and who used to, before she could walk, sit in a car seat near the mexicanos.

The other Thai men who worked in the kitchen were cooks. Each one having his place in front of the flames. Na Wit worked the first wok, supposedly because he was left-handed and it made sense to have him cook first and next to Por who was right
handed that way they didn’t accidentally bump arms when shaking their woks. The unspoken reason why Na Wit cooks first in line was because he was married to Khun Fah, the owner.

She opened House of Siam thirteen years ago. Na Wit and Por were her first cooks. Which was why Por occupied the second wok station. To his right was P’Nat who joined the kitchen after graduating high school. His mother, Khun Fah, taught him how to cook. These three worked the kitchen and while it wasn’t their job to manage the back of the house, everyone—the Thai women, Golf, and the mexicanos—looked to them for direction. If one of them was having an off day, the others followed. Staff lazily picked at their food during the workday instead of feasting together on dishes during the slow period between lunch and dinner. If one of them was exceptionally happy, and how rare that was, the others followed. Diners overheard the kitchen singing karaoke so raucously they thought the staff was drunk back there despite no one having had a single drop of liquor.

The three cooks operated that way. Leaders who weren’t assigned leadership roles. They assumed kitchen power on their own. They moved like a single unit, sending steaming dishes to the front of the house through a little window in the wall dividing the front from the back. A threshold through which papers become plates. Where servers passed back scribbled down orders to the food preps, who passed it onto the cooks, who then passed steaming hot food back to the servers. Once in a while, a farang, typically a woman with an overly friendly face slightly sunburned from a day at the lake, managed to stick her head into the window. After getting past the servers, she’d shout back at the cooks: “Delicious! This is the best Thai food in town! Thanks guys!” The cooks smiled
back at her mostly because they know that smiling is a thing farang do habitually and they get irritated when their smiles aren’t returned. The others smiled too, though the farang don’t seem to notice them—those who made that hot plate of pad thai delicious; the clean plate, the chopped veggies, the fresh shrimp paste, the hand-measured noodles, the perfectly portioned meat, the scribbled order specifying NO MSG!!! She only thanked the cooks, and they didn't mind. They accepted her praise on behalf of the team.

Unlike the lineup of cooks, the turnover for dishwashers and food preps was hot and frequent. Dishwashers were in and out sometimes as often as every other month, but there had been a steady stream for the last nine years. It started with Manny, short for Emmanuel, meaning God with us, as he told Khun Fah when she hired him. Khun Fah was skeptical of hiring anyone who wasn’t Thai for a Thai kitchen. She’d heard horror stories about other kitchens that had communication problems, or something called *ethnic tensions*, because of hiring different people. When she interviewed Manny for the dishwashing job, she truly only did so to appease her daughter Mint who was dating Manny’s son Mateo. Every day for weeks, Mint came home from school in the white BMW X5 that Khun Fah got her for her seventeenth birthday and begged her mother to hire Matty’s father who was desperate for a job. Just to shut her up, Khun Fah agreed to interview Manny with no intention of hiring him. But when she met him, she saw he had a kind and lucky face. She didn’t listen to anything he said—she didn’t care. They sat at a table for two an hour before the restaurant opened. Khun Fah took one look at his face and decided to hire him. Khun Fah had learned to read faces from her grandmother. Manny’s nose was fortune incarnate—his bridge was smooth, drawing the eyes down to
the round, fleshy tip that perfectly hid his wide nostrils and thick nose wings. It was the first time Khun Fah, she later told the crew, had ever seen such an ordained nose.

Manny started washing dishes that day. Khun Fah introduced Manny to the kitchen, and everyone quietly introduced themselves, annoyed but curious that Khun Fah hired a mexicano. She replayed the story in Thai, explaining he had a lucky face which would bring House of Siam good fortune, and everyone understood why she hired him.

To this day, Manny was the longest working dishwasher. He washed for nearly a year before moving up to Detroit with his family. Mint and Matty broke up a month after they left. The distance was too much of a burden and Mint got tired of being the one to drive to see him since Matty didn’t have a car.

Before Manny left the restaurant, he sent a close friend to replace him. Over the years, the same thing happened. A dishwasher would have to move their family elsewhere, and before leaving, they would send in a replacement. Khun Fah called it good fortune. When Golf showed up at the back door of House of Siam Vico was washing dishes. Golf’s daughter Noi took a liking to Vico who sang to her in Spanish while he scrubbed and who played with her while the dishes dried.

Noi cried for three full days after Vico left. She didn’t like his replacement, and nobody liked a crying baby in the back of the house. Her shrieks sliced through the cacophony of kitchen sounds. Frozen, hand wrapped curry puffs dropping into hot oil. Metal spatulas hitting woks. The steady pok-pok-poking of a wooden pestle pounding against a clay mortar. Golf and Mod could feel everyone’s eyes boring down into their skulls when she burst into a wailing fit, but they knew better than to leave their place at the prep station to console her. She wasn’t hungry or in pain. She simply didn’t like the
new dishwasher and that wasn’t enough of a reason to abandon their kitchen duties. They
couldn’t risk losing their jobs and they knew Na Wit had an eye on them. Everyone
knew. Por knew as well, and that’s why he made an unusual effort to befriend the newest
food preps, Golf and Mod.

Food preps stay on longer than dishwashers, usually a couple of years at a time.
Golf and Mod have been there for the last four years and Noi was practically raised in the
kitchen. This year, she started going to a public pre-school during the day. Everyday after
school, she went straight to the kitchen where she hung around and tried to be helpful.
People gave her jobs when she asked. She did little tasks like stacking plastic to-go
containers and organizing silverware. There was always more work than workers and the
unwanted tasks rotated among dishwashers and food preps. Refilling soap dispensers.
Washing the vent hoods. Sanitizing surfaces, the fridge, the freezer. Emptying and
cleaning out the ice box. Cleaning the floor drains. Wiping walls to prevent grease build
up. Unpackaging bulk food products like the vats of fish sauce purchased directly from a
distributor in Samutprakarn. Occasionally, the restaurant had extremely busy seasons,
like when a local food critic reviewed House of Siam or when the restaurant won a local
foodie award, and sometimes Khun Fah hired more help. Specifically, more food preps
who could get food to the cooks faster.

Since P’Nat graduated high school and joined the line ten years ago, House of
Siam has always had exactly three cooks. The kitchen could imagine moving from three
to four cooks, but not from three to two. Which was why everyone was shocked when
Por lost his job. He and Na Wit were the first cooks when the restaurant opened and now
Por was the first cook to go. The kitchen anticipated it was coming—Por was well-
beyond his youth. In fact, all the workers, every last one of them, from the front of the house to the back, tapped their feet at Na Wit wondering when he would say something to Loong. Nobody suggested that Na Wit fire Loong. They didn’t even have the courage to suggest what they really wanted, which was simply for Por to pick up the goddamned pace. They couldn’t say it to Por and certainly not to Na Wit. But something had to be done, they whispered to each other. By the time P’Nat finished stir-frying two dishes for an order, Por was still tasting whether the dish he was working on had enough palm sugar. P’Petch, a server, would stare into Por’s wok through the front window, as if her eyes could cook the food faster. For a good tip, she needed to deliver three hot dishes to the table at the same time. He was so slow and old, at a time when the restaurant was its busiest that pushed Khun Fah to let him go. By the time Por was gone, no one was surprised that they had to let him go or that Khun Fah had finally gone through with it. 

What genuinely surprised everyone when Por left was that a woman showed up the very next day to cook in his place. Na Wan, a tiny little woman no one had ever met, appeared in the kitchen with a fresh hat and apron. The new kitchen uniform looked crisp and professional on her. The uniform bold and demanding before it’s layered in food and oil. Because it was one of the busy seasons when Por was fired, everyone expected Khun Fah to hire another cook quickly, but no one expected the cook to be a woman. 

It turned out Na Wan was a good fit for the cook line. She had a big mouth and demanded respect. Her age helped with that. She was old, probably late-fifties, but not nearly as old as Por who was 72 at the time. Her auburn-colored tattooed eyebrows said *I don’t give a fuck*, and from what everyone could tell, she didn’t give a fuck. P’Nat moved
over to Por’s old wok station—second in line—and Na Wan stood third, tossing her wok for hours right next to the men.

Golf was the one who told Por that he’d been replaced with a woman.

“Shiiiiit,” Por said, his Thai tongue drawing out the vowel in the way that made it sound like sheet instead of shit. “Maybe she fucking him…could be!” He snorted at Golf who ignored what Por was insinuating—that Na Wan slept with Na Wit to win the last bid for the highest paid position in the kitchen.

It was in this kitchen, where Mexicanos wash in a corner, where fat men are relegated to the women’s bench, where men are made to withstand the heat, where men can now be replaced with women, and where Golf and Mod showed up at the backdoor looking for work, that Golf and Por became friends. Why Golf and his family showed up at the backdoor of this particular Thai restaurant is a story they never shared with anyone. Silence an understood language in the kitchen. Nobody asked the other for more information than they give on their own and that’s why Por only asked questions with simple answers.

Back at New Empire, Por repeated himself.

“Huh? Did she cook anything yesterday?” His tone was measured and even, not rude or forceful. Simply looking for an answer. Por tongued the front of his gums and sucked the chili through the hole in his mouth. Golf pretended not to see it.

“Kaeng khiaw waan,” Golf replied, “she made kaeng khiaw waan last night.” Then Golf offered to share the leftovers with Por. They finished their lunch like this
asking and answering dead-end questions. An ambivalent, but nourishing ritual of comfort and denial.

After lunch, there was nowhere to park in front of Por’s apartment. Every spot in the parking lot was taken. Golf inched as close as he could to the walkway leading to Por’s apartment and stopped the car. He blocked at least three parked cars in the process. Por opened the passenger door and the autumn sun beamed into the car at Golf. Golf squinted toward the light with one eye shut and pressed together his hands

“Bye Loong,” he said to Por.

Loong was what everyone at the restaurant called Por. He was the oldest and so they honored him by calling him Loong, meaning elder uncle. Por liked that he has at least one power over Na Wit—age. Na Wit who had the power, with Khun Fah’s permission, to fire Por couldn’t just fire Por like he did others. One time, Na Wit refused to give a food prep a reason for why she was let go.

“It doesn’t matter,” he explained to her as he flipped her last khai jiaw. “It has already been decided. Today is your last day.” And that was it. She left immediately.

On the day that Por was let go, Na Wit had to calculate his steps and words. He wasn’t firing some kid that could find another Thai kitchen to work in. Na Wit knew, everyone knew that when Por left House of Siam for the last time that he would never work again. No one would hire a 72-year-old man. Por doesn’t talk about how it happened. Na Wit had to show some respect is all he is willing to say. It settled and satisfied Por to know that Na Wit had to make these considerations even if it still meant that he lost his job.
Instead of returning Golf’s wai, Por nodded without a word and closed the car door. Por shuffled across the parking lot, his feet barely lifted off the ground and his upper body leaned forward, as if to propel him in the direction he was headed—hunched, shortening him by three inches, the years of standing at his wok station finally catching up with him. Golf watched Por drag himself from the car and to the door. He wanted to walk Por to the door, but it was better not to offer help because offering would imply that Por needed help. By the time the sun slowly hid itself behind a cloud that came from nowhere, Por turned around and raised a hand to gesture that he made it.

The sun was gone and Por entered his apartment.

A gentle layer of dust greeted Por at the front door. Por used to dust the furniture in his one-bedroom apartment on Mondays when House of Siam was closed. This was his “everything day”—the day he did everything besides work. It was the one day of the week that he could sleep in, which he never did since he had everything else to do, such as dusting the furniture, cleaning the kitchen and bathroom, going to the bank and post office, shopping for groceries at Meijer and the circuit of Thai grocery stores, picking up his prescription medicines, Toprol and Glucotrol for high blood pressure and Type-2 diabetes respectively, eating a hot meal that he didn’t cook, taking a joy ride alone in his 2016 Toyota FR-S before it was repossessed, visiting old friends if he wanted, which he rarely did, and running other errands he might need to take care of that week. Now that he didn’t work, every day was a different kind of everything day. Por had all the time he needed to do everything but he lacked the energy and motivation to do any of it, and he
seemed to do none of it.

The dust that welcomed Por home wasn’t dust to him. It was a companion. It tended to the furniture for him. In the center of the living room was an oversized coffee table layered with piles of car magazines organized by year from 2000-2017. The piles were pushed to one side of the table, and the opposite side doubled as Por’s desk with pens and envelopes for paying bills and a file organizer where he stored his documents. The television that Por bought from Best Buy stood in front of the wall facing the brown velvet couch where he slept.

He started sleeping in the living room shortly after he was fired from House of Siam. The night he was fired was the best sleep of his life. He slept for sixteen hours straight without waking. When he did finally wake up, he felt satisfied like he had just finished a big family meal. The following night and every night after that he couldn’t get himself to sleep. He’d lie in bed listening to the sounds of his neighbors in and around the building. He didn’t like to hear others so eventually he moved to the couch where he’d drown out the noise by watching TV until he fell asleep. At some point, he decided to skip trying to fall asleep in bed and started his nights on the couch.

He filled the bedroom with stacks of second-hand clothes he collected over the years but never wore. The stacks of clothes around the perimeter made the room look spacious, but when it had a bed in it, the room looked tight. There was only enough room to walk around the bed.

At the beginning of last summer, Por gave the full size bed and mattress to Golf for Noi who was getting too old to sleep in bed with Golf and Mod. Por remembered what it was like to sleep in a bed warmed by others—lovers, his ex-wife, and his
children. Oddly, he didn’t like to be touched while he was sleeping but he did like being crowded and pushed to the edge of the bed. He and his ex-wife used to share a queen size bed, and he gave that one away too when he moved into his one-bedroom apartment, downsizing to a full size bed. The smaller bed fit him better. It was warmer and there wasn’t as much unoccupied space.

Por slipped his feet out of his shoes one at a time and put them in their designated place. He aligned his shoes with the doormat where they waited for his next departure. Por handled the plastic envelope containing his documents with both hands and walked over to the desk side of the coffee table to set it down. His bladder sent him to the bathroom and so re-organizing the documents had to wait.

After relieving himself, Por sat on the desk side of the couch. He picked up the envelope and paused. Why put them away? These were probably the same documents required of the green card renewal. He scooted forward, to the edge of the couch to better reach the brown accordion file organizer. He filed the documents away, believing it would be better to have them in their rightful place for the time being even if he’ll need them again very soon. He began unraveling the black wire that holds the envelope shut. Reaching in, he pulled out each item and filed it away. Both the social security card and green card went under the “Vital Docs” tab. The electric bill went on top of the pile of documents filed under the “Proof” tab.

For the first time in years, he wanted a cigarette. There were none in the house. His youngest daughter, Manee, threw them out before she left for college four years ago. Had it been that long since he had a cigarette in his own home? Manee isn’t the nagging type
but for some reason she always hated his smoking habit. It confused him because he knew that Manee smoked marijuana with her friends on the weekends. He was too embarrassed to say anything about her smoking and kept quiet whenever she commented on his.

When she left for college, she pleaded with him.

“For real, Por, please ja. Don’t buy these things. They’re really bad for you. And, and they’re especially bad for someone your age na… kae laew!” She winked at him. Saying it in Thai made it seem like aging was a compliment, not an insult, the way it sounds in English. Manee was smart and tossed all the cigarettes she could find in the apartment complex dumpster that way he couldn’t fish them out later.

Por was the kind of person who smoked in seasons. It wasn’t an addiction but a comfort. There were times when he smoked, and time when he didn’t. When he stopped, for whatever reason—boredom, expense, inavailability—he wasn’t bothered at all. He didn’t understand the commercials for nicotine patches. Those were for weak people. People who couldn’t control their own desires and bodies. He didn’t need nicotine patches or cigarettes. Cigarettes were only for comfort. He was in control.

That day, for the first time in years, Por wanted a cigarette. But with no cigarettes in the house, Por walked over to the kitchenette and boiled a mug of tap water in the microwave. As the mug spun in the microwave, he pulled a golden bag of Vinacafe instant coffee out of the cabinet. He grabbed the kitchen scissors and cut open the sachet of coffee, mixed it, took a sip, and returned to the couch. This time he sat in the middle of the couch, in front of the empty portion of the coffee table. He set down his coffee and grabbed the remote control. The ziploc baggie covering the controller rustled under Por’s
grip and YouTube recommended the Thai women’s volleyball match against Russia that happened yesterday in Kobe, Japan. Exactly what he was looking for. He reached across the table for his glasses and his phone.

As the game played, Por began typing a message to his Ploy. Holding the phone only inches from his face, he squinted and typed:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Today I went to renew my driving license but I couldn’t do it} \\
\text{I have the old green card.} \\
\text{Now they need the new one...}
\end{align*}
\]

Por reclined back and rested his head on the top of the couch. The Thai national team was in excellent shape this year for the Women’s World Championship. Their first match of the championship was two days ago and they beat South Korea in a nail-biter. South Korea took the first set, but Thailand won the next two. South Korea took the fourth, but Thailand took the fifth set at 11-15 for the win. Surely, they could beat Russia too though it wouldn’t be an easy match.

Por’s eyes felt heavy and they started to close before the game moved through the first set. Por took off his glasses and set them on the empty seat next to him. He fell asleep and missed Thailand take the first set against Russia.

\~

When Por left the BMV he sat in Golf’s car for a minute thinking about where he could renew his green card. He hadn’t had any interaction with the immigration system since he received his green card in 1984 and so the process was a mystery to him. Where to begin? He decided to try the Social Security office on Monroe Street where he signed up for Medicare. By the time he got to the Social Security office the waiting room was already full. Por pulled a number and sat in a corner that had two empty seats. He waited for forty
minutes until a red-haired lady with a toothy smile waved him over.

“I’m sorry, sir. We can’t help you with immigration issues here. This is the show-shul suh-cure-it-ee office,” she exaggerated her pronunciation loudly.

“You’ll need to check with USCIS. I recommend you get a lawyer or something for your situation. I sure wish I could help ya.” What a pity. This old man sat in that stuffy waiting room for nearly an hour to see someone who couldn’t even help him. There had to be something she could do for him.

“Here, let me see if I can find anything on the USCIS website,” she offered out of guilt.

“Wh-what is that?” Por asked, “US what?”

“U-S-C-I-S. It stands for… hold on a sec. I’m pulling up the website. … Right here… um, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services! USCIS, you’ll need to talk with them about renewing your green card. Let me type it in for ya and see if it brings anything up.” Por watched her type. She was fast and didn’t have to look at her hand when she typed. She looked at the waiting people instead.

“Here’s something…” she said. “Looks like you’ll need to submit a couple a forms. I can’t really tell which ones to be honest… hmmm… and it looks like you’ll have to pay something like 500 bucks to get the thing renewed. Yikes! That sure is alotta money. Like I said, sir, I’m sorry I can’t help ya. Hopefully this’ll get you started.” She grabbed a piece of scrap paper and wrote USCIS.GOV on it with a thick black marker. Por took the paper from her hands and said “Thank you, ma’am.”

Out of ideas, Por moved on. He went about the chores he needed to do that day. He went to the bank to withdraw money for his rent. He paid his rent and then drove back
to Golf’s apartment where they met before lunch.

The slow pang of an empty stomach woke Por from his sleep. He inhaled and pressed into the couch with both of his hands to get up. His glasses were still on the couch next to him and they crunched under his weight but they didn’t break. The TV flashed an erectile dysfunction ad from YouTube and Por realized he slept through the whole volleyball match. Who won? He reached for the remote, hit the replay button, and a thought materialized. He never sent the text.

He sat back into the groove of the couch. It was still warm from sleep. Por put his glasses back on, sent the text he typed out earlier, and then he typed another message:

*I went to do it but it costs $780..*
*Oh shit, have to go back home..*
*Can’t afford to pay them.. today is the 1st*
*Rent is due!!*

Por picked up the cold mug of coffee and walked it back to the kitchen where he reheated it in the microwave. The microwave glowed. Por turned and opened the freezer, grabbing a blue HUNGRY-MAN frozen meal. The microwave dinged and he replaced the coffee with a plate of salisbury steak and mashed potatoes. When he was done in the kitchen, Por returned to the volleyball game with his dinner and coffee and waited for Ploy to reply.
Jihyun Park

Jihyun took another sip of the house cabernet and watched me cut the deck. I pulled a card and handed it to her. She folded the sherbet-pink-colored card toward her, glanced at the face, and then pressed it against her chest. From my side of the table, the back of the card, decorated with two rows of four stars, looked cartoonish and juvenile against the severity of Jihyun’s burnt charcoal gray cardigan with leather sleeves. Her hand pinned the card to her chest and her pointer finger tapped an almond shaped nail painted a navy darker than the night sky. She tapped patiently waiting for my response. Her tapping synced up with the house music—a feel good, instrumental playlist The Muse played on repeat and seemed louder than usual. Her cheeks were rosy from a second glass, two shades darker than her peachy blush shimmer. She took another sip and laughed.

“Uh-oh, Ploy…” she taunted me. “It looks like there’s going to be trouble in paradise!”

“Paradise?” I asked her. “You call this paradise?” I rolled my eyes. “The Midwest
is the Midwest is the Midwest. I grew up 650 miles away and it’s the same from here to there. A vast expanse of flat land and corn.”

We, once again, agreed that there are warmer and sunnier places to do a PhD. We entered the Feminist Studies PhD program believing that it really would only take four years—five max—to finish. That we would kiss the Midwest goodbye forever, landing a tenure-track position on either of Coasts. And there we were, sitting in the middle of town, at The Muse, our usual spot, a coffee shop by day, a wine bar by night, discussing my non-existent love life five years later without a PhD and only one chapter of a dissertation.

“I’d love to be in paradise, Jihyun.” I said. I rested my glass on my bottom lip. “We should have studied in Hawai’i. I’m sick of winter and it hasn’t even started yet.”

I finished my second glass of the cheapest rioja as Jihyun dangled the tarot card in front of me. I took a guess. This was a game we played as a way for me to learn tarot. When it was just the two of us, I drew my card of the day and handed it to her. She looked at the card and gave me clues. Then, it was my job to decipher the clue and identify the card. We’d been doing this for years, since the second semester of our program, and since I didn’t really practice tarot apart from this little game, I was usually wrong. We mostly did it to pass the time together.

Jihyun and I became close friends fast during our first year of the program. We took the feminist film studies class offered that first semester and our shared hatred of the course bonded us. I hated the class because I thought it would be a hands-on type of class, where you learn about filmmaking and how to make research creative. Instead, it was about
theories of film and I know absolutely nothing about film theory, which made me feel like I couldn’t participate in class discussions. She hated the class because Angela Grayson, the professor, only taught American films and never mentioned feminist films or filmmakers from anywhere else in the world. Jihyun is the kind of person with a presence that no one can ignore, especially those who try, like Angela. Every time Angela started a class discussion, our heads and our eyes would turn to Jihyun, curious to know what she thought, what she had to say. Angela didn’t like how much space Jihyun took, or better yet, Angela didn’t like how much space we gave Jihyun. Her perspective and experience as an transnational filmmaker gave us more than Angela’s expertise on film history, and Angela doesn’t have the energy that Jihyun has. After class, Jihyun and I would walk to The Muse and shit talk the class over a bottle of wine.

At the end of that first semester, the department hosted a winter party and Jihyun pulled out a worn deck of Marseilles tarot cards from her Manu Atelier handbag. Over an open bar and a buffet dinner of hearty beef stew and roasted veggies, Jihyun read tarot for our fellow graduate students. Everyone at the table laughed when she told Rich, the quirky and high-spirited guy—the only guy—in our cohort that the Four of Cups he drew meant that tomorrow’s hangover was going to be somehow instructive to him if he let it.

“The four golden chalices filled to the brim with red wine,” she explained slowly, coolly like she was receiving the message from another dimension that we weren’t in tune with, “aren’t an invitation or permission for you to go out and indulge yourself. No,” she pointed to the card, “it’s a warning that you’ve been taking for granted that the chalices have been full. Don’t, then, overindulge. See how you feel tomorrow about that hangover.” Everyone laughed, especially Rich, the first drunk of the night.
I was too worried that night about what my reading might reveal about me to our cohort. It wasn’t Jihyun I was worried about. I was drawn to her. I wanted to open up to her, to share parts of myself with her, parts I’d never shared with anyone else before. It was everyone else, Rich included, who I wanted to keep out. The less they knew about my personal life and my goals and aspirations, the better. In those early days, I had a profound anxiety that academia and its little minions would steal everything from me, my goals and aspirations if I didn’t hold them tight enough to my chest. I saw academia happily spit out PhDs who were a few years ahead of us. When I met them I quickly learned most of them were struggling to ends meet, adjuncting five different classes at five different universities. I didn’t want that for me so I held tight to myself, built a wall, keeping things tidy at a distance with colleagues.

Instead of taking my turn at the first winter party, I asked her how she learned to read tarot. She told us she learned to read tarot when she was in college in Seoul. She studied French and signed up for a conversation partner. She was paired with a French study abroad student named Jacqueline with purple hair. One day, Jacqueline brought a tarot deck to their session and that was all the introduction she needed. Jihyun was hooked. She claims that her French language skills took off when she started learning tarot with Jacqueline. Before Jacqueline returned to France, she gave Jihyun her Tarot de Marseilles deck as a keepsake and a blessing to practice tarot. The same deck that Jihyun used at the winter party and still use to this day.

On the last day of that feminist film theory class, Jihyun and I celebrated at The Muse. We were almost done with the bottle when I asked her if she would do a tarot reading for
me sometime. I didn’t know it at the time but she carried her deck with her everywhere and she did a reading for me on the spot. Her deck was encased in a red velvet bag with a drawstring.

“It has my stone sewn into it,” she told me, sweeping open the bag and revealing the cards.

“Your stone? What do you mean?”

“Here, inside the lining,” she showed me the stitching—the inside of the bag, raw like I’d just seen an unfinished painting. “There is a stone. Inside. My stone. A black kyanite.” When she said this, she fingered the stone hanging from her neck on a black leather cord. The stone looked like magnetic powder frozen in time. “This,” she said, “this is a black kyanite. It’s what’s called a ‘high frequency’ crystal for grounding, vision, and balance.”

I nodded, entranced at the world she was leading me into—tarot, crystals. She fanned the deck before me and I drew two cards.

“Témperance” she pronounced with a French accent, pointing at the first card, “comes from the Latin word temperare meaning restrain. But I sense something else is going on here.” She looked me in the eyes for a moment and then turned back to the cards laid out between us.

“Yeah… the Queen of Cups,” she pointed to the second card I drew, “has something to say about this need to temper, to restrain. Though I don’t think it’s actually about restraint at all.” I tried to follow what she was saying.

“You may feel overwhelmed by all the possibilities around you and all the things competing for your interest,” she continued. “Rather than restrain and cut off those
possibilities and interests, the Queen and the Angel of Témperance are inviting you to trust your intuition. To go inward to find témperance in the French sense of the word—moderation. Turn inward to make sense of these possibilities and interests. All the elements you need in this season are here for you. It’s up to you, Ploy, to find the right balance.”

It was true, I thought. I needed to approach all the opportunities that the beginning of a PhD program offered with moderation. I didn’t know how to put together a plan of study or what a plan of study even is. I bounced from class to class, following tangential interests, like film or creative forms of research. I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I signed up for a PhD program or how to navigate it. What I knew at the time was that I wanted the life of my college professors—teaching two classes a semester, reading and writing in between, and long winter and summer breaks. What I know now is that I might not actually want the life of my professors. To only teach two classes a semester, means that I need to produce research at an alarming and quite frankly an unsustainable rate of something like two articles in major peer-reviewed journals per year and always have a book project going. I hadn’t had luck with publishing yet and I couldn’t see myself at a point where publishing peer-reviewed articles regularly was doable and more importantly meaningful to me. I didn’t want to speak to the insular world of scholars and “experts.” I wanted to speak with regular people whose lives are affected by the kinds of research I’m interested in. But how?

Jihyun was right. The cards were right. The first semester of the PhD program was a blur of directions. I didn’t know where to turn or how to cultivate my research and career interests. I needed moderation. Focus.
That first winter break, after Jihyun read for me, I ordered my first tarot deck
online—Kawaii Tarot. I disregarded the old adage that you shouldn’t purchase your own
first deck after reading online that most tarot readers these days actually do buy their own
first decks. Kawaii became my favorite everyday deck for its simplicity. The cutesy,
playful two-dimensional images that looked like Hello Kitty drew them herself are
deceptively simple. I find the simplicity of the image distills the meaning of the card in
ways that other decks lose sight of by overdoing the imagery.

Jihyun sat holding one of my Kawaii cards against her chest and waited for me. *Trouble
in paradise.* I assumed she meant a break up. I shuffled the deck of cards in my mind and
tried to picture the image of a breakup.

“The Ten of Swords?” I asked, picturing a ring of ten swords made of cold, shiny
plastic pointing inward toward a red heart cracked down the middle.

“Nope,” she said, clearly bored with my response.

I grabbed the black Moleskin journal from my bag and I set it on the table
between us.

“The sun!” I said and I turned my face up to the ceiling pretending to soak up the
tropical sun. “My skin needs more sun.” Jihyun nodded in agreement, dabbing at the
supple skin under her eyes which were perfectly made up.

I flipped through my notebook looking for another guess. As I flipped, Jihyun told
me she was not talking about paradise—a place.

“Ploy, not Hawai‘i. Forget Hawai‘i. You’re here. We both know this isn’t
paradise but it’s not hell either.” She paused and I pretended not to hear her.
“I’m talking about your love life!”

“I know Jihyun,” I told her. “I get it. That’s why I guessed Ten of Swords—breakup. I know you meant love life. But there is no trouble in paradise for me. I have no love life to speak of.” I said. I strained to read my own handwriting.

“Well, not love per se,” Jihyun explained. “It could be dating, sex, whatever. You don’t have to be in love with someone.” It wasn’t that I didn't tell Jihyun about dating or my sex life. I did tell her when there was something to tell but there’s rarely anything to tell. I wasn’t interested in getting involved with anyone on campus. I could hardly find time to be off campus socializing and meeting new people, and dating apps weren’t my thing—the men are slimy and the women are worse.

To divert the attention away from me and back to the goddamned card, I asked if I drew the Three of Cups reversed. I threw something out there.

“No again,” she put a finger to her lip and seriously considered it. “That could be read as the end of a relationship too. But no. Try again.” Waiting for my next guess, she debated whether to have another glass.

“Are you going to have another?” Jihyun checked her hair in the blank screen of her phone and adjusted her bangs. Her chin-length bob always looked perfect—softly tucked inward toward her face, precisely jet black, except for the ends which are dyed an ashy blue, so dark you only notice the blue when the sun hits it right.

I nodded with an eager grin. Jihyun waved over Malcolm who was behind the bar and knew to bring another round. Normally, I would’ve said no to another glass on a weeknight, cutting it at two, but the longer I stayed away from my apartment, the longer I could avoid the rejection email burning a hole in my inbox.
It popped up on my phone this morning when I was walking to class. The subject line read: *MS Decision for Margins*. I knew better than to click it and try to wade through the reviewers’ comments minutes before teaching. My eyes moved faster than my fingers, which were just about to delete the notification when I read the notification’s irrefutable preview. It began: *Thank you for submitting your manuscript to Margins: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Journal. After careful consideration, unfortunately we have decided not to ...* Rejection as clear and clinical as day.

In that first semester of the program, Dr. Jameson, the chair of the Feminist Studies Department, taught a colloquium on publishing. She advised we get used to rejection as soon as possible.

“It’s the name of the game in academia,” she proclaimed. What she didn’t tell us was how to do such a thing apart from separating the personal criticism from the criticism of your work. “The faster you learn to do it, the better,” she concluded. Jihyun was sitting across from me at the seminar table and gave me the *fuck that* look, her eyebrows raised in skepticism. When the colloquium ended, Jihyun caught up with me and quietly laid out an assertive line of questions meant for Dr. Jameson.

“What if I can’t separate the work from the personal? What if my work is personal? What if the point of my work is to show that the division between our research and the personal is an arbitrary boundary and that they are in fact inseparable? Besides,” she continued, “all of us are personally motivated by something to do research… money, status, promotion, expectations, an invitation, curiosity, goodwill, justice, hope, optimism, whatever!” She huffed. I simply shrugged. I’d been rejected for lots of things by that point. I applied to lots of scholarships as an undergrad I didn’t receive, and I was
only accepted to three of the seven grad programs I applied to. These rejections either came as silence or boilerplate template rejections. Despite my years of rejections, none of compared to the vile and brutally specific rejections I received on article manuscripts from academic journals as a PhD student, and no prior rejection had ever left me feeling as deflated and inconsolable as journal rejections had.

After teaching with as much feigned enthusiasm as I could muster, I dragged myself to the library to face the rejection email, knowing it was certain to come up in my advising appointment with Jennifer the following day. She’d ask about the terms of the rejection. My plan before receiving the rejection was to tell her I was still waiting to hear back from the journal. The waiting period left room for cautious optimism. That was out since Jennifer was the only person I can’t seem to lie to. The only thing worse than facing the rejection and the reviewers’ comments head on is not reading them at all and then admitting to Jennifer that I didn’t have the courage to face the rejection.

I skimmed the letter. I scanned the page for keywords and phrases—“not to publish at this time,” “not yet raising a rigorous argument,” “egregious omission of fundamental disciplinary texts,” “artless”—and I winced. Before I closed the laptop, I read the conclusion indicating the editor apparently saw “significant promise” in the essay and was interested in seeing it developed, though the journal would not be pursuing its publication at this time. She wrote that the journal is committed to publishing the work of young scholars of color, “especially those writing on topics about their communities.” She added that she wrote to me directly because she’d decided to use the desk reject “tool.” The word choice “tool” made me cringe. The editor was probably the kind of professor who let their students call them by their first name. I pictured her sitting on her
desk using the term “tool” to make it sound like she was using the system rather than letting the system use her. This tool, she explained in the email, allowed her to reject the manuscript as the editor without sending it to reviewers because there were “basic field-specific flaws” with the essay that would apparently turn the reviewers off. In other words, I deduced, my writing wasn’t worth a look.

Malcolm placed two very full glasses of red wine before us and took the opportunity to speak to us.

“What else I can get for you ladies, my favorite regulars?”

“That’s all,” Jihyun replied. When he walked away, she whispered to me, “he’s so fuckin’ thirsty.” I rolled my eyes and cringed in agreement, pretending to gag.

“So what about this tarot card?” Jihyun asked, scrolling her phone.

“I must have drawn either Death or The Tower? Am I right? Is it one of those?”

She looked up and the screen on her phone went black. Her smile told me I was right.

“Pick one. Which one do you think it is?”

“Death.” I said with a confidence that seems to only show up when I’m out of time.

She threw down the card. I was wrong. It wasn’t Death. It was The Tower. The image was plain and straightforward. The card between us had a little tower in the center, a standalone building. Just above the tower was a gigantic lightning bolt. It was nearly half the size of the building, indicating that one bolt of lightning would strike the tower and overtake it, destroy it completely.
“If this card’s not about your love life, Ploy, then tell me what it is about.” Jihyun raised a tattooed eyebrow at me and returned her empty wine glass to the table.

“Jihyun, it’s definitely not about my love life. There’s no one for the universe to strike down on my behalf.” I shrugged my shoulders and took my last sip. She rolled her eyes and waved down Malcolm who flushed with excitement to be of service again.

I wanted to stay longer. The thought of going home alone to my dissertation was unbearable. I realized now my dissertation vision was too ambitious. I ignored the multitudes of people who told me so over the last three years. My primary goals were to capture and archive 280 oral history interviews with Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants living in Middle America, and to make them available. I committed to record exactly 280 as a reference to the estimated 280 million cluster bombs the United States dropped in Laos during the Secret War between 1964 and 1973.

Three years later, I have only 90 oral histories recorded and I was running on empty. Less than empty. I hadn’t anticipated the unending rote tasks for each and every interview. Find people willing to talk on record. Coordinate schedules. Identify accessible and quiet meeting spots. Explain release forms and copyright laws. Send reminders. Feign casualty when an interview falls through in hopes of potentially rescheduling. Test the mic. Hit the record button (easy to forget). Listen to each recording. Generate transcripts. Review and correct transcripts. Title, label, categorize.

Of the 90 oral histories I had then, I’d only processed about 30. At some point, early in the process, I agreed to interview families and kin together. Lots of people felt more comfortable telling their stories on-record, in community, which I appreciated. The stories have more texture, nuance, and perspective. The stakes became clearer when
someone butted their way into a relative’s story, or corrected someone. The oral histories became significantly more compelling as data, archival material, and stories. But transcribing multiple speakers and processing communication between them had, at least, tripled my workload. It took me three times as long to review and correct the transcript, partly because I couldn’t quite figure out how to best capture the tone and nonverbal cues between speakers within the written transcript, and partly because I kept putting off the work.

Malcolm approached and I grabbed my phone for an easy way to look busy. Por’s picture from ten year’s ago was on the lockscreen with a little red notification message.

Malcolm reached the table. I unlocked the phone and clicked Por’s photo from ten years ago. He’d aged a lot in the past year. I thought it was working in the hot kitchen that was aging him, but he looked older and older by the day after he was fired. Not working aged him faster. His hair thinned out and what little was left was no longer black but gray.

Usually, his texts came in routines—mornings, he sent the weather forecast, afternoons, a lunch report, and evenings, a Thai greeting or prayer graphic someone in Thailand had sent him in their morning that I couldn’t read. The messages on the screen were not those.

Confusion set in. Wine gurgled at the bottom of my otherwise empty stomach. Heat retched through my veins. How long did I have this headache?

Por’s green card expired?

“What the fuck?” I exhaled, placing my phone facedown on the table.
“I know right? Thirsty, I told you” Jihyun nodded.

Malcolm was strutting back to the bar. I let her think that I was talking about Malcolm. He was thirsty and neither one of us was interested. My temples throbbed. With every pulse, I wondered what would happen with Por. Could he renew his green card? What happened to poor and unemployed immigrants who are found to have expired documents? Would he face a judge? The pulsing turned into a loud thumping. Would he face deportation charges? Should I interview my father for an oral history?

I hated myself for thinking of this as a research opportunity. I regurgitated sour wine and swallowed it again. Fuck my research. I raised the glass to my mouth again and knocked my head back. Nothing. My tongue was dry. The glass was empty. I chuckled. Jihyun did me a favor and pretended she didn’t see me try to drink from an empty glass.

She looked the other way and then at her phone.

“Hey,” I said, trying to get her attention again, trying to distract the both of us from leaving. I waved my hands to draw her eyes to me. I pointed to myself and then a thought occurred to me. I laughed when she finally looked at me. My laughter grew fast, louder, booming, and uncontrollable. It drew unwanted stares. I felt the crowd of eyes. I saw Malcolm watching from the bar, but I kept going.

I knew Jihyun didn’t mind attention. It doesn’t bother her like it normally bothers me. She adjusted herself in her chair as people looked on. She leaned in, closing the gap between us.

“What is it? Did I miss something?” She whispered. She wanted to be in the know.

I wiped the tears at the corner of my eyes and felt drool at the corner of my
mouth. I laughed again, embarrassed. I tried to speak. My throat was dry but my voice worked.

“I think the universe is trying to tell me something,” I said. I pointed at the tarot card on the table. I picked it up and brought The Tower inches away from my face. I showed it to Jihyun.

“Look! The universe is telling me I should break up with my dissertation. That’s the relationship that’s killing me.” I cackled. I was tormented by the work that awaited me at home, the rejection I needed to address but never would.

Jihyun didn’t laugh. I saw her shrink and people turned away from us, returned to their own conversations. Jihyun sat back in her chair and folded her long, thin arms across her flat chest.

“Hey,” she said softly, in her yoga teacher voice. She reached across the table and placed a warm hand on my shoulder. “Your work is good. And meaningful. And important. You are literally building an archive from scratch.” The word archive settles into my stomach like a boulder at the bottom of the ocean. The longevity of the project sounded good would when she said.

I picked up the glass. It was still empty. I set it back down. Jihyun moved it away from me.

“You’re going to finish, Ploy. We’re going to finish.”

She picked up The Tower card from the table and handed it to me. I took one look at it—the tower was being struck by lightning—and I began laughing again. The people stared again. I reached for the glass again and then remembered I’d already finished it. I dropped my head in my hands. The blood rushed to my head and my head couldn’t pump
it out fast enough. I couldn’t stop laughing. My fingers went numb and I kicked under the

   table to keep my feet from going numb too.

   “I should break up with my dissertation,” I said under my breath. The Tower will

   be struck by lightning.

   “What?” Jihun asked. Her quiet encouragement turned to concern.

   “What did you say? What’s so funny?”

   I threw the card onto the top of the deck and tossed the deck in my bag.

   “The ivory fucking tower is gonna be struck by lighting!”
In the morning, the hangover was worse than the night before. The last time I drank too much was almost ten years ago, right before I turned 21. It was at the beginning of my study abroad program in Thailand, before I knew any Thai people, before I ditched my fellow study abroad students. At least that time, I’d vomited. That helped. Three glasses of wine with no food, I learned the hard way, was enough to push me past the tipsy point but not enough to make me vomit. It took away the pleasures of drinking and of eating.

When I showed up at Jennifer’s office the next morning, I still hadn't eaten. The nausea wouldn’t let me. The only thing I took was water and ibuprofen—both the night before when I got home and in the morning when I woke up.

There were three students lined up outside of Jennifer’s office waiting to talk to her. I arrived two minutes before our ten o’clock meeting and I didn’t have the heart to tell them I had an appointment. I lined up, against the wall, right behind them. At ten on the dot, Jennifer arrived with her keys in one hand and a midnight blue Hydroflask in the
other. Her chunky black platform boots added five inches to her height and weighed her cigarette thin body down. I wondered if her feet felt heavy. She was thin and I think it was because of the cigarettes. She’d probably just smoked one for a mid-morning snack. I was familiar with her routine. If she didn’t have her mid-morning snack, she’d ask me to take our meeting behind the building where she smoked on our smoke-free campus.

The waiting students were glued to their phones and didn’t see Jennifer walk up. Jennifer shot me an awkward grin. I shrugged, not wanting to move my body more than necessary. I leaned against the wall.

“Good morning,” Jennifer said to get their attention. They looked up at her.

“Hi June. Selena. Ava. Thanks for coming to see me. Unfortunately I have an appointment right now,” she nodded in my direction and I shifted uncomfortably from both their stares but also from the sloshing in my stomach.

“But,” Jennifer continued and they turned back to her, “we can talk after class today or during my office hours tomorrow. If those times don’t work, send an email and we’ll find a time to connect.” June, Selena, and Ava nodded. Ava walked away first and June followed. Selena hesitated and I recognized an urgency in her slouch, in her languid response. She’d chewed her bottom lip until the skin peeled off and bled.

I needed the bathroom.

“Hey,” I said, quietly, raising a finger. “Professor Vong,” I only called her by her title when undergraduate students were present. “I’d like to make a quick phone call if you don’t mind. My family’s having a bit of an emergency. It’ll be a few minutes if you wanna chat.” I looked at Selena with a smile, but not too smiley. I wanted it to look like convenience or coincidence, not pity. I didn’t pity her. I understood her. I wish I’d had
someone like Jennifer when I was an undergrad. I’d cried in the wrong person’s office once when I was an undergrad.

Selena looked at me and then Jennifer, who unlocked her door and invited Selena in. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, pointed to it, and winked at Jennifer before I rushed to the bathroom.

I gagged myself in the bathroom and I finally vomited. It tasted dark and sour. My throat burned from the retching. I rinsed my mouth and washed my face in the sink.

Jennifer’s door was still closed when I returned. I took a seat on the hallway floor and opened my phone. I didn’t plan to actually call anyone but I called Por. No answer. I scanned the messages I sent him last night. I wanted more information about his green card—what happened at the BMV, when he got his green card, whether it was actually expired, and how to renew it. Luckily, I verified from the call log, I didn’t try calling him last night. Still, he hadn’t replied to my message. He hadn’t even opened them yet. I called again. He didn’t answer.

Jennifer’s office was darker than usual. The gray skies darkened the room, making the announcement of my rejection seem more pitiful and dramatic than it really was.

“Any word from Margins yet?” She settled into her chair, swiveling it away from her computer and toward me. She had bags under eyes. It wasn’t unusual but it was worse than usual. I pretended not to notice them.

I anticipated her question. Last spring, she told me that I really should have a publication out before going on the job market next year. I agreed and we made a plan to
send this paper out by September. I sent it to *Margins* on September 30th and desk reject came a week later.

I was flattered she remembered to ask after the submission. I just wish I’d had a different answer to give.

On my way from the bus stop to her office, I rehearsed different ways to deliver the news. I could play it optimistically, explaining the editor said the essay has “significant promise” despite not sending it to reviewers. She’d probably used that phrase on grad students who submitted to *Still Critique*, a peer-reviewed academic journal she co-founded that published photo essays. Another option was to be matter of fact with her, as if I finally figured out how to not take rejection personally. The last idea to cross my mind was to lie and say that I hadn’t heard back yet. I decided against being optimistic because neither of us are generally optimistic and she would see through that. I wanted to be honest with Jennifer.

Jennifer reminded me of the middle school counselor I’d forgotten about until I met Jennifer five years ago. She reminded me of Ms. Christianson who pulled me out of 7th grade bio lab to check on me because my homeroom teacher reported “out of concern for my well being” that my mother had left our family. Sometimes when I was with Jennifer I thought about Ms. Christianson. Ms. Christianson was gentle and spoke softly, like Jennifer. She asked me questions and actually listened to my answers—the first time an adult talked to me like I had thoughts, feelings, and things to say.

Her listening was sharp. One time, Ms. Christianson corrected me for saying “Miss.” Christianson.
“Please call me Ms. Christianson, mzzz,” she buzzed. She sounded out the difference between Miss and Ms for, which I appreciated because I didn’t know the difference.

I wasn’t sure if Jennifer was the kind of person to correct people who called her Miss. Vong or even Ms. Vong instead of Professor or Dr. Vong. She didn’t look like the average college professor. She looked younger than she was, and not wearing makeup only made her look younger. Her face wasn’t polished or pretty, but it had a unmistakable presence. It was round. Her black eyes were round. Her cheeks were round. Her chin was round. Her petite frame made her features appear squished together, like her face was wrapped up in a ball. She wore oversized clothes that drape her stick figure, edgy elbows and shoulders the only indicator of her shape. She mixed traditional Khmer textiles and cuts with high top sneakers and dark overcoats. It looked like she walked right off of a grungy New York fashion runway and into our drab and drafty campus hallways. She stood out like a sore thumb. Her hair was long and the darkest shade of brown I’d ever seen. She tied it into a bun with her hair alone. She could do it without pins and without looking. I’d seen her do it mindlessly many times while teaching or casually in her office. Her hair was thick even though there was a large chunk missing from the back of her head in an undercut—revealing a buzzed triangle at the nape of her neck. I bet people off campus, especially kids, the ones likely to call her Miss. or Ms. Vong, wouldn’t assume her title.

When Jennifer asked about the essay, I said more than intended and it all sounded rather dramatic, particularly when I told her I have nothing to contribute to academia. When I
finally caught myself saying too much I pivoted with a question.

“Do the rejections ever get easier?”

“Honestly…” she said. She leaned forward in her chair, landing two hefty boots flat on the blue carpet between us. “Yes and no. I nearly always get a rejection or revise and resubmit. I’ve only ever had one paper accepted for publication without major revisions.” How could this be? She was an editor of a journal not a flailing grad student like me. She continued, “Personally, my initial response to rejection is disappointment and shame. That response is there every time. You know that communal archive article that you cited in your prospectus and that I’ve heard you talk about and reference in conference papers… that paper,” she exhaled, letting out a fizzled sound of depletion, “I had to revise and resubmit that paper three times for the original journal I wanted to publish it in. And on the third revision, they outright rejected it. I had to stop working on the paper for six or seven months before I could look at it again and send it to another journal, the one that eventually published it. And with that journal I had to revise and resubmit twice.”

I heard what Jennifer was saying. I heard her trying to relate to me, to stop me from feeling sorry for myself, but her story made me feel worse. Rejection was the norm; this I already knew. But the more people talked about it, the more terrible it sounded. I sat in silence with nothing to say.

“But over the years,” she said, “I learned to anticipate the response I know that I’m likely to have—disappointment and shame—and with the help of my mentors and colleagues I’ve learned to let that be my response and then to respond to that response. To care for that part of me that needs attention when I’m faced with rejection. In other
words, what I think I’m trying to say—sorry for this long-winded response, is that I don’t fight my initial reaction. That whatever you’re feeling right now is okay and it’s okay for you to let yourself feel it. I let myself feel the rejection, the disappointment and shame, and then I respond to those feelings. I focus on taking care of myself and my emotions before addressing the technicalities of and the reasons for the rejection. Have you had time to take care of yourself?”

I didn’t expect her to end with a question, to turn this back to me.

“I took a bath,” I told her, though it sounded more like a question. My headache was returning and I was suddenly hungry. The day’s missed meals finally caught up to me.

“Good, good.” Jennifer nodded her head. “When you’re ready to go through the editor’s comments again, I’d be happy to go through them with you. Sometimes it helps to have someone reflect back to you what they think the reviewers are saying.”

“I’d like that,” I told her and it was true. I liked the idea of going over the rejection together. She was an editor and could help me interpret *Margins’* editor’s comments with more generosity, with more vision. I agreed to bring the letter to our next meeting.

“That’ll give me some more time to take care of myself and my emotions.” I tried on her language. She smiled at this.

“Okay,” she said and held our eye contact for a little longer than I was comfortable with. Then, she turned to open her planner and flipped through the pages.

“I have Tuesday, October 16th as our next meeting. Two weeks from now. Is that right?”
“Yeah, that’s right. I’ll be here. With the letter from the editor.”

“Great, and if you’re comfortable doing so, you can send the letter to me in advance of the meeting that way I can read it before we talk. I’ll put on my editor’s hat when I read and let you know where I think the editor is coming from.” Jennifer scribbled something down. Before I had time to agree, she looked back up and said, “These things are time sensitive and you’ll want to respond to the editor sooner rather than later. So take the time you need to process, but do keep your response time in mind. Editors try to anticipate what will be published in their journal issues far in advance. If she’s being sincere about wanting to see the essay developed more before sending it to reviewers, then you should really consider whether you think the journal is a good fit, and if you decide it is, then you should respond as soon as you make that decision.”

I told her I would, though the thought of sending anything to Margins again seems ludicrous.

“Ploy, can I ask you one more question? It’s okay if you don’t want to answer.”

“Of course. You can ask me anything.” I said, eager to please.

“Is there something specific in the letter from the editor that is sticking with you?”

I looked at her sideways. “What do you mean?”

“You said that this rejection makes you feel like you have nothing to contribute to academia. I wonder if you can articulate why this rejection in particular makes you feel that way. Again, you don’t have to answer me, but I wonder if you have an answer for yourself.”

“Oh, umm…” I tried to come up with something quickly, something smart, something witty. “Well, the only thing that comes to mind right now,” I ventured,
stealing five more seconds to think, “is that maybe I… or my… I’m worried that
recording Lao refugee and migrant oral histories and writing about Southeast Asians and
our experiences in the U.S. isn’t enough of a contribution for academia. I mean… I think
it’s enough. It’s enough for me. Your work tells me that it can be enough.” I paused and
thought carefully about my words. I didn’t want to seem like I was flattering her, but I
admired her work. It’s what drew me to this program.

“Your archive of photographs is powerful and empowering,” I continued. “Your
work connects the violence of U.S. empire abroad to life here in the United States. That
stupid saying about a picture says a thousand words—I get it and I finally agreed with it
for once when I saw your work. The archive speaks for itself;” I realized I was saying too
much again and that I wasn’t really answering her question. She nodded off my answer,
shying away from the flattery.

“I want to do what you’re doing,” I concluded. “That’s the whole point of putting
together this archive of oral histories. The stories speak for themselves. But I’m tired of
trying to sound smart in essays about the archive, and I’m tired of writing out other
people’s stories for them. Documenting them is enough for me, for the community. Their
stories don’t need me to retell them, to interpret them, in order for the stories to be
enough.” I was glad I said this. It was what I truly believed.
Manee

I boiled a pot of water on the stove while I waited for Manee to call back. I tore into two red and white packages of Me Goreng. As children, Manee and I devoured everything Por cooked for us. As preteens, we stopped eating his food. At 11, I shrieked when he poured a spoonful of sugar into my savory and spicy noodles, afraid the sugar would ruin its bite. I refused to eat the noodles, and he insisted that I eat them, but I trashed the whole bowl when he left the kitchen and I covered the tossed noodles with a crumpled pile of paper towels. Manee loved the Cool Whip Por served in a plastic Disney bowl until her best friend Bethany from school told her it wasn’t actually ice cream. We both loved the wiggly texture and nutty flavor of kanom tuay but we were shocked watching Por season the dessert with salt. His combination of tastes and textures suddenly seemed impossible to us. Sugar on noodles. Salt on desserts.

After a prolonged boycott, in which we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch everyday, Manee and I finally adopted Por’s cooking and made it our own.
Like Por, I sprinkled a teaspoon of sugar over my Me Goreng. The sugar mixed with the flecks of red chilis. I tasted for flavor, ensuring the sugar balanced out the saltiness of the seasoning pack, added another teaspoon and tasted again. It was good. I dumped the double pack of noodles into a porcelain bowl.

I sank into the couch and ate, happy to be home alone, happy the hangover was gone. The Chinese coin plant on the side table next to me was wilting. The round leaves were yellowing. I emptied the bowl of instant noodles, set it in the sink, and grabbed the watering can to make the rounds.

Visitors sometimes joked that my apartment, a large, old family home my landlord recently flipped into apartments he could lease out, was a jungle, overrun with plants from warmer, tropical climates. They weren’t wrong. The plants had accumulated over the years. When I moved in three years ago, I had only two houseplants. The place was completely empty except for a single worn utility glove hiding in the corner of my bedroom closet. I was the first tenant in the “newly renovated” apartment. The place wasn’t “renovated” in the sense that it was updated, functional, or stylish. It was “renovated” meaning the old home was partitioned off into several new living quarters. The newly erected walls clearly didn’t match the original footprint of the home. The space felt dull, empty, too clean and little clinical. I filled it with things I love over the years. Books, thrift store collectibles, items from graduate students passing through, and plants.

My first plant was an unexpected, and frankly unwelcome, gift from a friend named Aiko. Seven or eight years ago, she moved to Chicago and gave me a plant she couldn’t take with her because she was joining a world-traveling trio that performed
classical music at fancy events.

“Here,” she said, dropping the potted plant in my hands. “This one’s my favorite and I can’t take it with me. I want you to have it.”

“I don’t know what to do with it…” I didn’t want the responsibility of keeping her plant alive.

“No, really. You can’t kill the thing. Just make sure it has some sun and water it when you think of it.” Aiko wouldn’t take no for an answer. I took it home with me as instructed, and to my surprise, I didn’t kill it. It sat at the foot of the bookshelf in my bedroom. The leaves covered a collection of books I bought during coursework and won’t read again but couldn’t bear to get rid of.

Aiko’s plant introduced me to the world of houseplants. A world unknown to me until I’d stepped in. Three years later, the place crawled with plants making little worlds out of my apartment. I tended to them as best I could, giving them the water they needed and a place to be. Some plant people maintained a strict routine watering schedule. I preferred to watch the plants and to only water them when they showed they needed it, the moment before the leaves discolored, when the soil dried, when the stem rotated. They’re brilliant communicators and exceptional engineers. Plants know how to turn water and light into food, leaves, and blooms of all colors. I admired them. They’re wise enough to drop leaves and blooms when they require an unsustainable amount of energy. They ask for what they need when necessary and receive when it’s given.

I watered and rotated each plant in the apartment and returned to the couch an hour later with Manee on the phone. She was the only person I spoke to using video chat. She never called. It was always video chat. The call started with our usual updates and
check in. She told me about the latest show she binge-watched over the weekend with friends. I pretended to listen. Then, I reported on the number of oral histories I’d recorded since we last talked—four, making it sound like I made more progress than I really had. Manee feigned interest and encouraged me to keep going.

I tested the waters and steered us carefully toward the conversation about Por’s green card. I was certain she didn’t know about Por’s expired green card yet. If she did, she would’ve called in a frenzy or at least skipped the niceties at the beginning.

It was no surprise that Por told me and not her. She’s outwardly emotional in a way that Por finds confusing. He’s the kind of father who either completely ignored displays of emotion or straight up laughed at them. I learned early on to keep quiet, and I was good at it. He rewarded me with little things like a literal pat on the back, the only physical affection I remember ever receiving from him as a child, or he let me stay up late reading a book. I liked those little rewards and I liked being good.

Manee cared less about being good. She was satisfied when she expressed whatever it was she felt the need to express. Concern, desire, disdain, joy, excitement, and fear. Por’s primary way around Manee’s need to express is to avoid any engagements with her that might set her off. He kind of treats her like a pet. Giving her what she wants as often and frequently as he can, like giving her permission to go to a fancy art school where she’s racking up enough debt to last her a lifetime. He’s gentle with her in a way that’s self-serving because her lack of reaction is what he’s after, not her wellbeing or happiness.

“Thanks for calling back, Manee,” I pivoted, “I have to talk to you about something… it has to do with Por.”
“Is he okay? What the fuck P’Ploy? What happened? Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

I sighed into the phone. “He’s fine. I just don’t really know what’s going on and he hasn’t been responding to my calls or messages so I’m calling to see what you think.”

“Well, what is it? Say it already!” Manee cried.

I told her what I know, which wasn’t much. I was still working off Por’s text messages from the night before and the little information I gathered in afternoon from the internet. I told her Por said he couldn’t renew his driver’s license because his green card had apparently expired and that he needs a new one. I told her the renewal would cost upward of $800. I heard Manee breath into the phone. I could hear it over my own voice.

“Do green cards expire?” she asked.

“Yeah, from what I read online, nowadays most green cards are only valid for 10 years at a time. You’re supposed to renew it every 10 years.”

“So why didn’t he renew his green card? That’s so unlike him! He is always on top of his shit.” Her questions came quickly. I barely had time to answer before she launched another.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Let me finish?” I stopped her. I clenched my jaw and I laid back onto the couch.

“I read online this afternoon that in the 80s green cards were issued without an expiration date. I don’t know if he has one of those. I’ve never seen it. Have you?”

She shakes her head no.

“I’m guessing he has one of those green cards, otherwise, like you said, he would have kept up with the renewal. He’s so Type A he wouldn’t have let something as big as
his green card fall through the cracks. And, here’s the other thing,” I added before she interrupted again. “I found this little memo from 1995 issued by the Department of Justice announcing that these old green cards—the ones without expiration dates—would expire in March 1996!”

“96!” Manee whimpered. “That’s when I was born. This is bullshit! I bet they added expiration dates so they can keep better track of people. 1996!” she repeated. “Are you saying his green card has been expired for 22 years? For as long as I’ve been alive?”

I admitted I wasn’t sure about any of this or if it was even relevant to Por’s situation. I didn’t know what kind of green card he had. I asked in my messages, but he still hadn’t returned my calls or texts.

“So what are you saying?” She pressed.

“I’m saying we might need a lawyer.”

“A fucking lawyer? For what?” Manee got up and paced the room.

“In case, he has to go through some immigration proceedings or I don’t fucking know. Which is exactly my point! I can help with all his other shit. Food assistance, rent control, calling for his appointments, prescriptions, whatever! I do all that shit for him because I can. But I don’t know anything—ANYTHING—about immigration law or policy. I don’t know what to do. An immigration lawyer would know what to do.”

Silence settled between us. Manee sat back down and cleared her throat, gathered herself.

“What I hear you saying P’Ploy is that you agree with Por… that you think he should try to renew his green card. And that an immigration lawyer could help him with that. Is that what you’re saying?”
Her question silenced me. I cleared my throat, reached for air. Was she implying Por should continue living with expired documents?

Manee swore she wouldn’t put him at risk.

“Trying to do the right thing won’t work P’Ploy. You know how he is. He thinks that if you follow the rules, everything will turn out the way it’s supposed to. He doesn’t realize that the rules can be a cover, a scheme for making you more vulnerable. It’s bullshit!” I nodded in agreement.

“Officers can go to your workplace and other public places to detain someone. Because they can! Here in Cali, things are different. Whole goddamned cities are sanctuaries. You don’t have to hide out in churches. But you know that Toledo isn’t a sanctuary city and there’s no hope for Ohio becoming a sanctuary state.”

Manee’s long black hair filled the screen on my phone while she talked. Her hair hadn’t been that long since we were little. I used to braid it in the mornings before school.

“Braid it like Mommy used to braid your hair,” she used to say holding up a photo of me she’d pulled down from the fridge. It was an embarrassing school headshot from when I was in second grade and obsessed with Disney’s Pocahontas. Every morning for months after borrowing the VHS from the library, I begged my mother to braid my hair like Meeko the raccoon braided Pocahontas’s hair in the movie. My mother always braided my hair when I asked her to. When she left, I braided the hair on dolls I no longer played with. The first time Manee asked me to braid her hair I learned that it was harder to braid a person’s hair than a doll’s. Unlike the doll who sat through my tugging and twisting, Manee tugged and twisted back. I brushed her long coarse hair back and parted her crown into three locks. Folding one lock over and under the others, I weaved a single,
long braid down her back and fastened it with a hair tie.

Back then, Manee had light brown hair, almost blonde, so light I thought she was adopted even though I watched my mother’s stomach grow with enthusiasm. As she grew up, Manee’s hair darkened to a burnt cinnamon brown. She first dyed her hair black in middle school. It took us all by surprise. Apparently, Manee looked just like Por’s mother with black hair and he didn’t like to be reminded of her. It took me years to get used to. Now, I couldn’t imagine her with any other color. It suited her as an adult. It looked natural.

“Last year,” Manee continued into the phone, “our class designed and circulated images and protest signs to help spread the message on sanctuary and the atrocities done by ICE. Remember that screen print that I made with the fists growing out of a pile of waste and that I posted on Instagram? It went viral and then NPR did a story on our class. Do you rem—”

“Manee!” I interrupted her. “I know,” I lowered my voice. “I circulated the print. I even bought like ten posters to support you guys. There’s one right there on my wall.” I turned my phone to show her that one of her prints was hanging right above my workspace. Her lips turned down instead of into a smile.

“No art that I make,” her eyes turned down too, “could save Por.”

“Save him from what? You don’t have to save him!” I declared, annoyed with her theatrics. I took a deep breath and then continued at an even lower volume. “I thought you should know and I thought you’d wanna chip in for the renewal. That’s all. You don’t have to. I can come up with the money on my own.”
“It’s not about the money!” She barked back. I bit my lip and stared at her. Manee swiped at her eyes and we both pretended her eyes weren’t filled with tears.

“We can’t expose him,” she said quietly, assertively. “And you’ll do that if you try to renew a green card that’s been expired for more than twenty years.” A single tear dropped from her right eye leaving a liquid trail down her round cheek and she wiped it away.

“Think about it P’Ploy… his documents have been expired for as long as I’ve been alive, and you want him to walk into an immigration office and confess that he’s been living unemployed in Toledo and out of status to an ICE officer?” She paused for effect and I let the silence linger.

I couldn’t deny her very reasonable point, even if she was being dramatic about it. We had to consider the potential consequences of revealing to the state that Por’s green card expired more than 20 years ago. Were there other expiration dates and deadlines we didn’t know about? What if there was a specific date, a random date we didn’t know about, that he had to renew his green card by? Would he be punished for not renewing sooner? What were the punishments and how severe? A fee? Jail time? Deportation? How could we get answers to these questions?

“I want to help,” Manee confessed though I already knew this to be true. “I have money to contribute, but I have to be sure that—or at least I have to be more confident that renewing his green card won’t fuck up his immigration status. If he could fly under the radar for 22 years, then he can probably keep at it. I don’t want this renewal to get us caught up in some immigration scare. I’ll chip in if it means he can stay.”

The call ended on an unpleasant note. We didn’t make any decisions or agree on
what direction we should pursue. Manee was right. We needed more information, but I knew well enough that meant I was going to be the one searching for more information.
Dr. Rhonda Williams

Every Wednesday, I saw Dr. Rhonda Williams in her office on the edge of Prospect Park. She’s a psychiatrist, who’s also a psychologist, who initially declined to take me on as a client because I didn’t take meds nor do I have a history of taking them. Rhonda put it to me this way during our free phone consultation a year ago.

“I have a long waitlist of people who need to see me, a psychiatrist, because they need a doctor who can prescribe the medicine they need to be well. Ploy, it’s fine that you don’t take medicine. My hope is that you would be well with or without medicine—not everyone needs medicinal support to be well.” Her voice was methodical but kind like she’d said the same line many times before and to many other people, and sincerely meant it to each one nonetheless. “But as a practitioner,” she continued, “I am limited by the number of clients I can take on and I try to prioritize those whose needs best match my background, training, and services.”

I told her I understood her reasoning, that I appreciated the need to prioritize who
she sees and who she doesn’t see and under what circumstances.

“This is part of why I’m looking for someone to talk to in the first place…” I said, accidentally saying more than I intended. “Well, I, I— never mind, Dr. Williams.” I quickly tried to end the call when I realized I was still talking. “I don’t wanna take up more of your time. It was nice talking to you today and thank you for—thank you for your time.”

Instead of hanging up, Rhonda asked me to go on.

“Well…” I slowed down, scanning my mind for the right words. Finding no better way to say what I wanted to say, I told her plainly, “I have a problem saying no.” Her silence persuaded me to keep talking.

“I want to be able to say no to people, like you just did. I think it’s totally reasonable to say no to people. You had a good reason to say no and you did it. You weren’t mean or anything. You just told it like it is. Limited time, limited resources—no. I want to do that. Say no. But for some reason, I can’t seem to say no even when I know I’m within reason.” I said all of this as a way of admiring her, of complimenting the power she possessed and used to say no. A power I knew I had, but couldn’t put to use.

Rhonda ended our call with well wishes and I dropped trying to find a therapist. As far as I could tell, the counselors at the Mental and Psychological Health Center on campus were white women. Women, I rationalized, who wouldn’t understand what it’s like being the first generation in my family to go to college and being the only one to pursue a doctoral degree, and how being a woman of color shapes that experience. I wanted a therapist with a doctorate, meaning, a psychologist, someone with a doctorate in psychology, because she would have also experienced the simultaneous privilege and
torment that academia is. I didn’t want to have to explain myself or the toxic and highly competitive context of academia to her—a pretty stupid thing for me to think when individual therapy revolves around explaining myself with her guided questions. I intentionally say her because I wanted the psychologist to be a woman of color, preferably Asian American, but with limited options, I searched for a woman of color. Dr. Rhonda Williams was the only name on the city’s Providers of Color excel spreadsheet I stumbled upon online that was close enough for me to visit regularly and that took my graduate student health insurance. Turns out, the psychologist I found was also a psychiatrist and her practice was primarily a medical one. Her medical degree was in higher demand than her psychotherapy practice was.

Two weeks after our consultation, Rhonda called and left a voicemail. She had an unexpected opening in her schedule and thought it would be “worthwhile for us to work together.” Her words were always deliberate—like she’d invented a language for the two of us. I was skeptical at first, ignoring her call for three or four days. I didn’t want her to push meds on me. The night I listened to her voicemail I dreamed of an electric purple “no-pill” that was designed to cure my no-problem. Pop one-a-day and billions of brain neurons would flash big purple X’s that only I could see across my eyes and I’d systematically convert those signals to verbal and written no’s. When I woke up I heard my neighbor Sal, with whom I share an adjoining wall, singing an unrelenting rendition of “Purple Rain,” accompanied by his drinking buddies.

I called Rhonda back the following Monday and told her that I wasn’t interested in starting meds but thanked her for reconsidering me as a client. She assured me that she only recommends and prescribes meds when it supports her client’s “overall wellbeing.”
She says “wellbeing” a lot.

“Prescribing drugs for clients who don’t want to use psychotropic medicine for their mental wellbeing contradicts my primary goal which is to support clients as they navigate various forms of mental and psychological challenges with various supports in place. I don’t take medicine off the table for any of my clients, but prescribing medicine is only one of the many services I offer.” Rhonda suggested that we meet in person for an intake appointment. I agreed and we met later that week.

Rhonda was nothing like what I had imagined. I pictured her serious, tidy, proper, like how she spoke intentionally, using every word with purpose. Dr. Williams, I thought, would be the kind of psychiatrist who wears a freshly pressed suit to every session and takes notes in a leather-bound notebook with a fancy fountain pen that has her initials RW embossed on the cap. I was wrong.

I arrived fifteen minutes early in case I had trouble finding the place, but it was no trouble. On the walk from my apartment to her office, I passed barred up liquor shops and the last standing corner store in the area, which clashed with the illuminated and colorful new organic food markets, insurance buildings, and chain dine-in restaurants.

I could see Rhonda’s office before I knew it was her office. A cool blue wood paneled home rose above the dying autumn trees. The color looked like it had once been painted a brilliant sky blue that had grown even more spectacular as it faded over time. When I reached the front of the house, Zoe Kravitz was smoking a cigarette on the refinished stone steps leading up to the house. Zoe Kravitz, the actress and model, the daughter of Lenny Kravitz and Lisa Bonet. Had I come to the right place? This is a home
not an office. I wondered if Zoe Kravitz was one of Rhonda’s high-profile clients. Maybe she had a secret home here and she sees Rhonda when she’s in town. The carefree, I-don’t-give-a-fuck personas that Zoe plays in television and film that I admire so deeply came off even more naturally in real life. The world around her seemed to follow her, respond to her, exist only for her. The lifeless, fallen leaves on the ground around us complimented her eggplant-colored, recycled cotton dress. Her locked hair fell loosely on her shoulders, down her back matched the color of the trim on the house. The sun graced her cheekbones, and her cigarette glowed orange like an oversized garnet ring on her hand. She saw me and didn’t react.

Playing it cool, I walked up the stone path watching my own feet. I stepped cautiously on the worn stones not wanting to trip in front of a celebrity crush—my first time to meet anyone remotely famous. As I approached, Zoe turned her head away from me, blowing smoke. I stood at the bottom of the stairs and Zoe tilted her head back toward the house, the lenses of her sunglasses reflecting the sun, and offered me a seat on the wicker rocking chairs. I declined and joined her on the steps. She turned to me with a smile. It wasn’t Zoe Kravitz. Her eyes were set wider than Zoe’s and sunk deeper into their sockets, which strangely made her more attractive. Sitting next to her on the steps, I noticed freckles spanning her nose and cheeks. They were barely noticeable and only slightly darker than her warm almond skin. She must be another client, I reasoned with myself. I hid my lapse in judgment and returned “not-Zoe’s” smile as I got up to go inside. She put out her cigarette in an otherwise empty ceramic ashtray on the steps and introduced herself to me.

“Hi, I’m Rhonda.”
“Dr. Williams? Hi,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound confused. “I’m Ploy. Sorry for coming early. I wasn’t sure—” she closed her eyes deliberately, exaggeratedly, and I stopped talking.

“You’re right on time. Please, come in Ploy.”

Her office isn’t just an office. It’s where she lives—it’s her home. The cast iron door plate hanging above a razor thin, modern doorbell dated the house more than one-hundred fifty years old. Rhonda walked me through her foyer and living room to an office in the back corner of her house where she sees clients. She closed the door behind us and pointed to a hazelnut leather sofa in the middle of the room where I took my seat. Across from the sofa is an armchair that I would learn is Dr. Williams’ chair.

“A little music wouldn’t bother you, Ploy, would it?” She asked me.

“No, not at all,” I replied. I turned to see what she was doing, turning casually to conceal the fact that I was still surprised that Rhonda was Dr. Williams. That Dr. Williams was Rhonda. It’s not that Rhonda isn’t serious, tidy, or proper like I had imagined. She’s all three of those things, but differently. She’s serious in the sense that she takes her work seriously. A professional speaker and listener. She speaks and listens with precision, with intention. She doesn’t mince words. She takes them very seriously. She doesn’t use words as weights to dangle over you, but as the strings that bear the weight of your pain, your history, your entanglement. Rhonda is tidy in the sense that, like her words, everything has its place. The current place may not be its forever place, but it is a place for now, and from what I could tell from regularly being in Rhonda’s office, her home, place matters. Of all the things Rhonda is, she is most definitely proper.
Not the fancy fountain pen with her initials kind of proper, but the I grew up in a wealthy Black family and got my doctorate at Stanford (I spotted the degree sitting in a busted frame on the bottom shelf of her bookcase), but I’ve made a conscious decision to use my economic privilege in the most ethical ways kind of proper. Rhonda wears sustainable clothing that, to be completely honest, looks like she picked up at Goodwill, though I envied her casual, muted, slightly androgynous and outdated style. She has a vegetable garden in her old, renovated home with rustic charm. She supports small and local businesses, artists, and organizations by buying their products, art, and music. And she takes a hell of a lot of insurance from what I saw on her website.

Behind me, she placed a needle on a spinning record. Some funky type of classical music, completely unknown to me, started playing. She turned the volume down to a whisper and I turned back around to pretend I wasn’t watching her. Rhonda took her seat in the armchair across from me and we began.

One year later, Rhonda was still gentle and patient with me and I found it really fucking annoying. She began our sessions by playing music, settling down in her plush burgundy chair that looks like something from a furniture consignment shop, but probably cost two-thousand dollars at West Elm, and then asking a general question like “how have you been since our last session Ploy?” or “what feelings are you bringing with you today Ploy?.” Rhonda says my name with nearly every sentence spoken. I often mirrored her and cringed when I did it because it felt forced but I did it anyway because I wanted to be calm and purposeful like her.

On the Wednesday after I learned about Por’s green card issue, I’d decided not to
tell Rhonda anything about what was going on with him. On the way to Rhonda’s house, Por finally texted me back. The message only had his A-number from the green card. Nothing else. No context, no backstory, no additional information. I called him immediately.

Our conversation started like every one of our conversations starts—weather and food. Yes, I confirmed, it is cold on campus today, and no, I don’t know what I’m having for lunch yet. He droned on and on about a Thai women’s volleyball match he was streaming online. I waited for a pause in his sports report.

“So… ka Por,” I inserted myself into the conversation. “Did you get the text messages I sent you?”

“Yes,” he said. I waited for him to say more but he kept quiet. I sat down at an empty bench one block from Rhoda’s street.

“Well, do you remember when you got your green card? Jum dai mai ka?” I repeated the question in Thai hoping to make my frustration sound sweeter. Though I’m never sure if I actually sound sweeter when I speak Thai or if I’m romanticizing the language I can barely speak. For the most part, the only vocabulary I have came from Por. Every word he never spoke to me was one more word I probably don’t know.

“Jum dai na luk. The government gave it to me when there is no expiration. Green cards don’t expire na.”

“Yes, and…”

“And what?” He asked forcefully. If I didn’t know him better, I would have thought he was offended. But I knew he wasn’t offended. He was annoyed that I was prying again. Asking for more information than what he thinks is necessary.
“And—” I fumbled for words, afraid of actually offending him by continuing to question. “And do you know which version of the green card you have? I think you might have a version that was issued without an expiration but that actually expired in 1996. I need to know which one you have so we can figure out what to do next na ka.”

“Next, I get a new one na,” he said definitively, ignoring my question again.

I pulled the phone away from my face and set it face down on the bench. I closed my eyes for a moment and took one deep breath. Contemplative breathing—something Rhonda recommended trying. I brought the phone back to my ear, opened my eyes, and I realized that Por had turned his volleyball match back on. I could hear the TV blaring in the background.

“Hello ka?” I yelled into the phone.

“Ja,” he replied engrossed in the volleyball match. “Thai woman playing laew na. They play Trinidad now. Gotta go. Anything else?”

“Yeah,” I braved. “One more thing. Are you worried about what might happen if you try to renew the green card since it’s been expired for so long? I mean… aren’t you considered out of status? What if they fine you? Or something? Something worse—like arrest you or… uhhh…”

I didn’t want to say the word I was dancing around—deportation. If he was deported I didn’t want the responsibility, the guilt of speaking it into being. Then, I remembered it was Manee who first spoke the words.

“Manee seems to worry that you might get deported. Are you sure you wa—”

It’s expired. That’s all. I need to renew my green card. Can you do the application for me? It’s the one online. The woman at the Social Security office told me it’s online. Just download it first and do it for me, okay na?”

I wanted to say no, that we need more information, but my voice didn’t work. It was frozen like the cold from the wooden bench had crept up my jeans, up my legs, into my stomach, and stopped in my throat. I wanted to say he should find a lawyer instead. That maybe they have pro bono immigration lawyers in Toledo. I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

He continued, “Just tell them I don’t speak English na. You do it for me. Nothing bad is going to happen. Gotta go. Bye bye.”

And that was it. He hung up and I walked the last block to Rhonda’s office.

When Rhonda asked her opening question I evaded. “To be honest, Dr. Williams, the last two days have been a total blur.”

Rhonda made gentle eye contact with me to bring my attention back to the room.

“I’m fine,” I continued, “It’s just my thoughts and energy have been so scattered this week. I’ve been pulled in so many different directions that I feel like I don’t have enough energy to send in any one particular direction. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think I do know what you mean, Ploy. Would you like to say more about what you mean?”

“Not really, Dr. Williams,” I told her but kept talking anyway. “A family issue came up this week and… well it’s irrelevant.” I changed gears, steering us back to our usual topic of conversation: issues of work, time, and expectations management.
“Anyway, I’ve made a little progress on my dissertation. We can talk about that.”

Rhonda shifted in her chair, running her hands through her locks which rested on the arms of the chair. She looked me in the eyes. I held her gaze for a few seconds but turned away sooner than I wanted to. I wanted to show her I could maintain eye contact. I thought it’d demonstrate my mental fitness and wellbeing.

“What do you think about setting aside our regular conversation and talking today about what’s most pressing, most urgent in this very moment? We can place our regular conversation topic right next to the family issue that came up for you this week Ploy. Hm?” Rhonda smiled when she said hm.

“Like I said, I don’t think it’s really relevant.” The words came out of my mouth faster than I had time to think. I felt my stomach retch when I heard myself try to say no without actually saying no to the one person who is trying to teach me how to say no. I should do us both a favor and tell her no.

Is she testing me?

I couldn’t do it. And here’s where it sucked the most—Rhonda was still gentle and patient with me.

“All things are relevant to what we do in here Ploy,” she explained.

In the morning I went to Jihyun’s yoga class in the campus fitness center. She teaches yoga there twice a week to, as she says, “get out of her head and into her body.” I drop in when I can and I usually do, but today I had to drag myself there. Leaving the warmth of my heating blanket at six a.m. was the last thing I wanted to do. The main thing that called me out of bed was Jihyun’s questioning if I didn’t show up. By now she expects
me there, not because she presumes that I ought to be at her yoga classes, but because I regularly attend of my own will and it’s noticeable when I’m not there. I didn’t want to tell her, or anyone really, about Por. And more than not wanting to tell Jihyun, I didn’t want to lie to her.

In the dance studio where Jihyun teaches yoga, the fluorescent gym lights are off. There’s a floor lamp with a slender wooden body in the far back corner of the room. The lamp sits across from the frameless full-length mirror wall and carries just enough light into the studio for you (and others) to see you do yoga. When I walked in this morning the lamp was on and there were already five students doing preliminary stretches on their mats. I nodded hello to Jihyun and she waved back like she does to all of her students. I rolled out my yoga mat furthest from the lamp, at the edge of the room. Seeing myself and others do yoga breaks my concentration. I can’t go as far with the stretches. I can’t balance as well. I stay “in my head” when the whole point is to “get into my body.”

Jihyun began class with a breathing exercise. Sitting tall in a cross-legged position, we all followed her cues.

“Place both hands on your chest.” I did.

“Yes, there. Feel your body’s energy—the way it works for you with or without your awareness. With this breathing exercise, we want to become aware of the work our bodies do for us just by breathing.” Jihyun’s yoga voice is different than her everyday voice. At first, it made me feel like I was eavesdropping on a conversation she was having with someone else. Eventually that feeling went away. She’s very good at leading restorative yoga and the context of restorative yoga is different, as it should be, than the context in which I came to know Jihyun—graduate school.
“Begin to slow your breathing. Let’s try for an inhale of four counts and an exhale of eight. No need to strain yourself to meet those counts. It’s only a suggestion. Listen to your body and gently ask it, allow it to slow down. We’ll try it together now.” Jihyun counted our breaths in her velvety yoga voice—inhaling for four and exhaling for eight. After three breath counts, she told us to breathe at our own pace.

I followed my breath. Without Jihyun’s count, my breath raced, in and out, faster than my lungs could keep up with.

I counted for myself.

Inhale two, three.

Exhale two, three.

Green card.

Immigration, I mean. Inhale two.

Exhale two.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Deportation. No. Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Warmth on my back. I reached for it. A hand. It belonged to Jihyun. With her other hand, she offered me my purple water bottle. My arms refused to move. Eyes in the mirror. A waking herd of cows watched us in the mirror. Arms and legs folded under them on the ground. Heads peering up to see the commotion.
“That’s alright Ploy,” Rhonda said. “Let’s both note that you don’t want to discuss the family issue right now and return to our usual topic of conversation. Last time you told me that you were going to send out an essay for review for publication. Do you have any updates on that front?”

I told her about the rejection.

“How does the rejection make you feel?” An obvious question for Rhonda.

“It feels good to have an answer.” I lied. Nothing about this rejection felt good. I worried she knew I was lying. I retraced my answer.

“Obviously, it wasn’t the answer that I wanted. I wanted the essay to be accepted but it feels good to have an answer…”

Why did I say it again?

“I think what I’m trying to say” I tried again, “is that getting a response was a relief, but I don’t feel good about it. I feel frustrated that every paper I send out for review ends up a total failure, then I get stuck in my work, like I can’t write anymore, then I give up on that paper, and eventually move onto to something else. Which is why I don’t have any papers published yet. Because what I’m supposed to do is rework the rejected papers until they get accepted somewhere.”

“Do you remember our first phone call?” she asked me.

“Yes.”

“You told me, Ploy, that you have a problem telling people no. Do you remember
“Did I say that?” I chuckled casually. “Sounds like something I’d say,” as if that wasn’t the thing I hated most about myself, what I came to her for help with.

“Perhaps, now do tell me if this doesn’t sound right to you,” Rhonda says, “but maybe one reason why it’s difficult for you to tell others no when they ask something of you is because you struggle with rejection yourself and worry that you may cause them the kind of pain you feel when you experience rejection.” I felt her eyes follow mine as they bounced around the room—a blinding overcast sky in the window, an abstract painting she probably got from a local artist on the wall behind her, a smudge on my Doc Martens.

“Does that resonate with you, Ploy?”

“I haven’t thought about it that way before.” It was the only thing I thought to say.

“Have you given any thought as to how you’d like to respond to this rejection?”

“I have. I talked to my advisor about it and we decided to review the rejection letter and make a revision plan together. Then, I’ll reply to the editor saying that I want to revise the paper and resubmit it for another review. Basically, this time, I’m gonna try to do what I’m supposed to do.” I told her with false confidence. I hid the fact that I deleted the email I drafted to Jennifer with the rejection letter attached.

After meeting with Jennifer, I wanted to retract our agreement. I didn’t want to send her the editor’s rejection letter. I didn’t want to see it ever again. I had an irrational fear that the editor’s letter might wake Jennifer up to how insignificant my writing and ideas were.

I didn’t tell Rhonda any of this. The nature of our relationship depended largely
on what I did and didn’t tell her, and I wanted her to think that I was making progress. I wanted to make progress.

“That sounds reasonable Ploy. Would I be pressing too much if I asked if and how the issue concerning your family is shaping how you’re responding to the rejection and to your work?” I bypassed her question about asking a question and went straight to the question itself. That was the expectation most people operate under anyway. It was a waste of a question. The request isn’t really for permission to ask a question the person just asked you, but an acknowledgement that there is reason not to ask such a question even though they’re doing exactly that. From what I know about Rhonda, though, she is the kind of person who would actually ask if she was “pressing too much.”

I told her that was a good question, but I hate how easily she connected the work-related stuff to my family stuff.

“I think the issue with my family has distracted me from feeling the pain of the rejection. I’m focused on what’s going on with them instead of what’s going on with me and the essay.”

Rhonda pulled her floor-length, faded teal cardigan over her crossed legs as if she was getting cold and paused before she spoke again.

“Tell me, Ploy, how you see your role in your family.” In addition to saying my name repeatedly, Rhonda also often asked questions in the form of statements. She used a quiet, wondering voice. I admit that I liked hearing her say my name, usually placed mid-sentence. It’s effective, but that’s how I knew it’s part of an act, an act to get me to talk. Over the past year, I learned that Rhonda asks deceptively plain questions, questions that seem like there’s an obvious and simple answer to, making it not at all worth asking, until
I start answering them and then realize, oh shit, she was right.

It irritated me that she knew she was dropping a bomb of a question. She did it with such innocence and curiosity. Sometimes it seemed like my answers surprised her. I knew that couldn’t be true. She was a psychologist, a psychiatrist. There was no way she hadn’t already had a client who experienced the things I was describing. I wasn’t saying anything new. But I kept going to my Wednesday sessions with Rhonda. I wanted her to be gentle with me. It frustrated me, but it worked. Her gentleness got me to answer her questions truthfully most of the time.

Rhonda sat on the edge of her chair and bent toward the coffee table before us. She grabbed the steaming artisanal ceramic kettle and poured hot tea into a tiny teacup. She held the cup with both hands and listened to what I had to say.

I told her that I became the mother figure in my family when my mother left us. That I was thirteen and the oldest daughter and what choice did I really have. I told her that I admired my mother, that I envied her because she had the choice to leave my family and she took it. I told Rhonda I was still trying to leave.
Ploy regretted what she’d told Rhonda, that she resented her mother for leaving, and worse, that she was jealous of her mother because she could leave Por so easily. Divorce made it easy for a wife to leave a husband. But there was no contract legally binding father and daughter in any way that could be dissolved as needed. These weren’t surprising or new thoughts for Ploy. She’d felt this way since the first time Por had her complete a food stamp application at the age of 13, a task her mother was apparently the one to do. Back then, it felt good to be useful, like Ploy was the one holding together a fallen family. But that quickly wore off as she became the designated family secretary and manager. She wanted out.

Leaving for graduate school was a subtle and understandable reason to leave. It didn’t carry the weight of a permanent dissolution like a divorce. In fact, it didn’t suggest that Ploy was looking for a way out of her family at all. This was the best part. It seemed
like the next step in her career trajectory, a convenient maneuver under disguise. She didn’t have to end the relationship or take the responsibility of setting boundaries or initiating a discussion with her family. Graduate school did that for her. She never spoke these thoughts to anyone or wrote them down anywhere. Saying it to Rhonda was the first time for her to say the words, to hear them in her own voice, and now that she had, she didn’t like the feeling that came with it. It felt like an open wound on the roof of her mouth. Her tongue rolled over the wound making it worse. The wound had to grow before it healed. And the wound hurt.

After the session with Rhonda, Ploy walked to the library to work. She had two goals—forward the desk rejection letter to Jennifer and begin drafting chapter 2 of the dissertation. Ploy accomplished neither. She didn’t attempt either one. Instead, Ploy searched for and located the green card renewal application. She opened and scanned the application form, and then read its stock questions over and over.

There were more questions on the form she didn’t know the answers to than questions she did. It was impossible for Ploy to fill out the application even if she was willing to. She hadn’t decided what to do yet, heed Manee’s precautions or move forward with the renewal as Por wished. Whatever the case, the questions intrigued Ploy. The application provided an opportunity for Ploy to ask questions about Por and his family in a way that was likely to make him answer. Por had never mentioned the names of his parents, or when he entered the United States and at which port of entry. It wasn’t Ploy, supposedly anyway, who wanted the answers, it was the state that demanded them. And it was Por who demanded she complete the renewal application for him.

Ploy closed the PDF and resolved to forget about the application until she was
capable of thinking more clearly and until she and Manee had more assurance that the application wouldn’t put Por at more risk. She put away her laptop and unloaded the books in her backpack onto the table. Reading was a comfortable entry into work for Ploy. Some called it procrastination and warned against it. Ploy needed it. Reading helped her go inward, to develop her thoughts before she had to unload them in words on a page. Reading helped her put meaning in place, and at the moment, everything felt out of place. The desk reject hit her hard and fast, flying back in her face only two days after finally sending it out for review. Her dissertation was at a standstill with an empty waitlist of oral history interviews to do. Her father could be at risk of serious immigration proceedings, perhaps even deportation. Keyword, may, and she wasn’t sure how to verify whether this was true and to what extent.

Ploy was desperate to put things back in place, or at the very least, to feel like somethings in her life were in place. Reading was a reliable practice. She had three books in her backpack, all pertaining to chapter 2 of the dissertation, a literature review on U.S. empire in Southeast Asia and its effects on Southeast Asian diasporas in the United States today. Ploy picked up *Flavors of Empire* and read.

On the tenth page, she shut the book, stuffed it and the rest of her books into her backpack, and hurried out of the library with her phone ringing in her ear.

Manee picked up on the other end.

“Hey, it’s me again,” Ploy began. “I just realized something! Legal status isn’t the same as having valid documents. I was just in the library reading this book about Thai restaurants by this guy named Mark Padoongpat. He was saying th—”

Manee interrupted her mid-sentence.
“What does a book about restaurants know about an expired green card?”

“I’m trying to tell you!” Ploy said. “The author is a researcher. He knows what he’s talking about. What I’m trying to tell you is that he has this exdocumented concept.”

Ploy threw her backpack onto a nearby bench. She didn’t sit because she wasn’t staying long and because the seat was freezing.

“Exdocumented means—hold on—let me find the page and I’ll read it to you…”

Ploy unzipped her backpack, grabbed the book, and thumbed through the opening pages.

“Here! Exdocumented is when people quote ‘enter the U.S. legally under temporary student and tourist visas but eventually overstayed to become what I’—what he—calls exdocumented. You see?”

“No,” Manee said flatly. Ploy threw the book back into her bag and continued her walk home.

“Look Manne, I know Por didn’t come here as a student or tourist but the exdocumented thing made me realize that Por isn’t exdocumented or even undocumented. His *permanent residency* didn’t expire; his *green card* expired.”

“I don’t get it P’Ploy. How can you jump from students and tourists to an old, unemployed man with a green card that expired more than twenty years ago?”

“It’s a concept not an example.” Ploy replied in a condescending tone.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that his immigration or permanent residency status didn’t necessarily change because his green card expired.” Manee remained silent. Ploy thought about what she was saying, hoping that what she said was actually true and not just an application or a projection of the exdocumented concept. She didn’t know what she was talking about.
She would cling onto whatever she found. It was easy to convince herself it was true. It was what she wanted to believe.

Por’s status didn’t expire. His green card expired. His green card could be renewed. Sure, she told herself and then Manee, there might be a fee for not renewing sooner but he was still a permanent resident. His status had to still be in tact.

“Think of it this way,” Ploy tried again, “when your passport expires, it doesn’t mean that you’re not a U.S. citizen anymore. It just means that you need to renew the document that functions as evidence of your citizenship. Ya see what I mean? His status didn’t change. His document—his green card just expired.” This sounded right to Ploy. She told herself it was right. She convinced Manee it was right too even though Manee didn’t say much.

“I think we need to renew,” Ploy told Manee definitively. “Besides it’s what Por wants.” She added that to remind Manee and herself this was about Por, not some philosophical debate about an immigration concept. This was their father’s life and livelihood. There was an added benefit that Ploy was going to learn more about Por through the questions on the renewal application form.

Manee only said okay before she hung up the phone.

Moments later, Ploy received a notification on her phone that Manee transferred money to her bank account.

Later that night, when Ploy finally started transcribing her next oral history interview, Por called.

“Don’t do the application na,” he ordered.
“Arai na ka? What made you change your mind?” Ploy asked.

He told her he didn’t have the cash to do it since he just paid rent and that he’ll need a few months to get the full amount ready.

“We’re going to pay for it na,” Ploy told him.

“Who is we?” He choked like he was dislodging something from his throat. He didn’t know Manee knew about the situation.

“We… luk luk. Manee and me. We’re going to pay. The biometric fee is $85 and the app is $450. That’s $540.” Ploy repeated the total in Thai to emphasize how expensive it would be, as if to say, you’ll owe us. Not in money but in deed. It turned out that the clerk at the Social Security office was wrong about the price. It wasn’t $800 but and unexpected $540 was still significant.

Por took the bait and cursed into the phone.

Ploy let it simmer, wanting him to sulk. $540, Ploy’s take home pay for a two-week pay period, two times his month’s rent, and four times his monthly food assistance allowance.

“Better wait na till I have the money,” Por tried again. This was exactly what Ploy wanted—a sliver of power, no matter how minuscule, to tell Por no.

“No,” Ploy said happily. This was an opportunity to leverage her power. “We are not waiting. We’re doing it now na ka. I’m gonna call you this weekend to fill out the paperwork. I don’t know the answers to the questions so we have do it together. Okay na?.”

Por agreed. Ploy hung up the phone and returned to her work.
In the days leading up to her phone call with Por, Ploy reviewed the I-90 application several times. She examined the questions she didn’t have answers to, which were the majority of them. She read them over and over again as if the more frequently she read the questions, the more likely answers were to appear out of thin air. They didn’t. She wasn’t surprised by how little she knew about Por. Growing up, Manee and I asked Por relentless questions about Thailand and about him.

Where is Thailand?

How did you get here?

What’s Bangkok like?

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Do we have any cousins?

What were Khun Bpu and Khun Ya like?

Do you miss your parents?

Is there McDonalds in Thailand?

Do they like Hello Kitty too?

But their childish curiosities rarely yielded answers. Por either ignored the questions, giving no response, offered a lie to appease them, or a simple one-word answer. Yes, apparently there was McDonalds in Thailand.

What did surprise Ploy was that she finally had an in. A reason for Por to reveal information about himself, his history, and his family. Or, she thought, our history and our family though she rarely thought of his family as her family because she didn’t know them as family.

She knew Por had a younger brother and sister living in Thailand. They had
refused to see her when she studied abroad in Bangkok as a college student and she didn’t know why.

She knew that Por’s parents were dead. They’d been dead for as long as she’d been able to understand that parents also have parents, who were known as grandparents. She never had the chance to meet them or her mother’s parents for that matter. Ploy knew no grandparents.

When Ploy and Manee asked Por about his parents, he never gave any particulars, nothing that made them feel like real people. He only spoke of them as ghosts. It happened in the morning. Por sipped his instant coffee and recalled Khun Bpu visiting him in his sleep. It seemed to happen more regularly after the girls’ mother, his ex-wife left them. Khun Bpu visited him because he was disappointed in how Por’s life had turned out, Por used to tell his children. It felt like he was blaming them for his shitty life. That was all Ploy knew about her grandfather. He was apparently displeased with Por which made her, as an adult, wish she’d known her grandfather. She felt that they’d have something in common, a point of connection—a disappointment in Por.

The I-90 application to renew Por’s green card ensured that Por couldn’t brush her off the way he did when she was a child. If he wanted to renew his green card, he’d have to answer, even the most basic and factual ones like the names of his parents, names she’d never heard before. She reread the application questions over and over in the days leading up to the phone call.

Ploy filled in the answers she already knew, typing them up and aligning the text so they fit neatly into the little vertical boxes of the application. The form was originally designed to be completed by hand and quickly uploaded as a PDF online without any
adjustments to the format. Chains of rectangle boxes appeared on the page for applicants to neatly print their responses one letter at a time.

The first question asked for Por’s Alien Registration Number. She pulled it from the text message Por sent her the other day. The next asked for Por’s names. She purposely spelled their surname wrong to ensure it matched the misspelling on his other documents. Ploy filled in his mailing address, gender, date of birth, city and country of birth, and then scrolled to the last section called Biographic Information, leaving everything in between blank. It asked for his race and ethnicity.

As a family, they didn’t talk about race and it was not a conversation Ploy wanted to start. Ploy and Manee talked about it from time to time, but mostly as it pertained to large abstract collectives, like the US, Asian Americans, Black Lives Matters, etc. — nothing regarding their family. Ploy found it easier to teach feminist theories of race to 20-year-olds than to speak to her own father about his life as a Thai in the United States. She had questions. Did he think of himself as “Asian”? If he did, since when? When he was a boy in Thailand? Was it later in his life? Did his life in Ohio measure up to the American life he aspired to when he left Thailand? Was he disappointed like his father? Was he happy here? She wanted to know, but she never posed these questions not even casually.

This made Ploy feel like a fraud in front of her students. They didn’t know it, but she taught them theories of race and how to interrogate the logics of race in their everyday encounters, but she was incapable of even broaching these topics with her own family—the very people who inspired her interest. She hated herself for not being brave enough to ask.
Ploy checked the “Asian” and the “Not Hispanic or Latino” boxes on the green card application. She skipped the height and weight boxes; she’d have to ask him those details. She checked the “Black Hair” and “Black Eyes” boxes. She listed his phone number and the yahoo email address she made for him several years ago when she moved away for grad school.

The last page asked for the Preparer’s contact information. Ploy debated whether to list herself. On the one hand, she wanted to limit her responsibility, her culpability in Por’s immigration as she could. She feared being called upon in the event that he was fined, detained, or worse. On the other hand, there was no way she wouldn’t be called upon. Ploy was his firstborn. She would be responsible, culpable, questioned if he faced any proceedings. Manee too. At least if she listed herself on the application it might indicate to the reviewer that Por had at least one person to vouch for him. But did that really matter when she didn’t know how to advocate for him in the first place?

At ten o’clock on Saturday morning, Ploy called Por to complete the unanswered application questions. He didn’t answer. She tried again. No answer. Ploy nestled into the couch with her laptop and a cup of hot tea. She scrolled through the PDF again and landed on the last page. She started to type her information into the Preparer’s section. There was no option. She had to do it. The man couldn’t even answer his phone for a scheduled phone call from his daughter. What if an immigration officer tried to contact him? Would he answer? What would he say? Her fingers slammed against the keyboard. It was in Por’s best interest.

Ploy drank her tea waiting for Por to call. It was already ten minutes after ten. She
had nowhere to be, but she’d waited all week for this call. Por was going to tell her things she knew nothing of—his history, his family.

She picked up the phone and called Por again. The phone rang in her ears, a robotic drill in three-second beats. He didn’t answer. Ploy returned to the kitchen to refill her teacup with hot water from the electric kettle on the counter. The bag of rooibos bled into the hot water in oblong circles.

Her phone trilled from the couch and Ploy rushed back into the living room.

“Hello ka,” she answered, a pitch higher than expected. She cleared her throat.

“Hello ja luk,” Por replied in an even tone.

They carried out their phone ritual with ease and intimacy—the weather and meals, a familiar starting place. Something they could both agree on. Ploy said nothing about the missed calls. She turned to the application, explaining she already filled in what she could. Their conversation moved from the familiar to the unknown. Neither one knew what was ahead of them. Ploy didn’t know the answers to the questions and Por didn’t know what questions she would ask.

Ploy started at the top, verified the questions they both knew the answers to. She read each question aloud with its accompanying answer. Por approved in low guttural diphthongs. It sounded like the initial vowel sound of ugly.

“Gender. Male.”

“Uehhh”


“Uehhh”

“City of Birth. Bangkok.”
“Uehhh”

“Country of B—”

Por interrupted the line of questioning.

“Noooooo,” he said like Ploy had bothered him. “No, no, not Bangkok na. Nakhon Phanom.”

“Arai naka? It’s asking what city you were born in.”

Por repeated himself. He was born in Nakhon Phanom, not Bangkok. Ploy tried to ask the question another way. There was a misunderstanding.

“I thought your family was from Bangkok. That’s where they live chai mai?”

“Chai! They live there now. We moved there when I’m young. But I’m born in Nakhon Phanom.”

“Where?” Ploy asked again. She was still unsure if they were talking about the same thing. The miscommunication was not a matter of misinterpreting the question. He understood what she was asking. It was Ploy who misunderstood the situation. She’d always assumed Por had been born in Bangkok, that was one piece of information she was certain she knew about his family. It didn’t occur to her that he could have been born elsewhere. In fact, he never told her he was from Bangkok or that he was born there. She’d assumed it, convinced herself of it, never questioned it. There was so little for her to go on that she’d made stories out of practically nothing. It was what she had.

“N-a-k-h-o-n,” Por spelled into the phone. Ploy quickly typed it out under question number ten.

“P-h-a-n-o-m.”
“Ka,” she said, confirming she wrote it down. “Dtae waa isn’t Nakhon Phanom in Isarn? I thought you were a city boy na,” she asked this playfully hoping that teasing him might draw out more family history. “Nakhon Phanom sounds bahn awk na.”

Bahn awk was a term she learned from Por and thought it meant something harmless, like “country folk,” for people who live outside of the city. But when Ploy studied abroad in Bangkok she learned it was an offensive term, meaning something more like “redneck” or “hillbilly.” She chose not to say it anymore the same way she didn’t use those words in English either. But she deliberately said bahn awk here—a ploy to use his words to elicit more information. She needed more about his family, their family.

Ploy loved her name, a one-syllable name, a nickname. Her face to the world. A name that safeguarded her given name from the throws of translation from Thai to English, from the tied tongues of monolingual speakers, from unwelcome intimacy. Ploy wasn’t like other English nicknames Asian kids adopted so they had an easy-to-pronounce name. Ploy was not an English word she adopted as a nickname for convenience. Ploy was an ordinary Thai nickname Por gave her as a baby.

When Manee was born Por played poker every weekend at a buddy’s house. Everyone was Thai. He took Ploy to the parties with him where there were lots of other children running around, hiding in bedrooms, eating sweets and drinking as much pop as they could get their hands on. She liked blending in with the children, being invisible among them, but she was scared of them. She stayed where she could see Por. He sat playing poker, smoking cigarettes and red with excitement. Ploy sat across from him,
reading in the corner of the room, trying to make herself invisible. She often went undetected. Occasionally, an adult would pass her and grab at her cheeks, teasing.

“Ploy, na. You know what it means right?” She didn’t reply. She knew they were asking so they could tell her. “It means gem. Like you na ja. You are beautiful.” They pinched the fat on her body and then insisted she eat more food. It confused her.

Ploy blushed at being called beautiful and being named after precious stones. She sank further into her books. She tried harder at school where no one knew what Ploy meant and no one expected her to be beautiful. No one ever told her she was beautiful or ought to be beautiful.

On school picture day mornings, Por used to tell her not to smile too much because her eyes were small, her cheeks were round and chubby, and her eyes would inevitably close into her face when the bright bulbs flashed at the photographer’s click. Ploy dreaded the day her teachers passed out photo proofs for students to take home. When her teacher handed her an envelope with a clear film on the front revealing her portrait, instead of looking at it like her classmates did, Ploy shoved the flimsy envelope into her desk and hid them under her books. She didn’t want to see her own shut eyes, her crooked teeth, or her gummy smile even though she’d given her best smile, a real smile, when she sat for the picture. She’d toss them in the trash can on the far side of the school on her way to the bus. She didn’t understand why it mattered to Por whether she blinked in the photo or not because he’d never purchase the kids’ school photos and he’d never face the wrath of classmates’ taunts and jeers.

At the end of the school year, when the school yearbooks circulated, Ploy would eventually see her school photo. If her eyes were closed, it was guaranteed that some
slobbery-nosed kid with blond hair and a sweater vest would thrust the yearbook in her face pointing at the blunder. His laughter would be accompanied by a jingle.

“CHINESE! JAPANESE! MIXED UP KID!” On count, when the kid said Chinese, he’d use his index fingers to pull his eyelids down toward his singing mouth. Then, when he said Japanese, he’d pull his fingers up, stretching his eye lids up toward his very large forehead though it was often covered by shaggy hair. He looked ridiculous and that was his point. When he said Mixed Up Kid, he’d leave one eyelid pulled up and drag his other eyelid down and twirl his head like a cartoon who’d been knocked out and was watching stars spinning above them. Ploy would shut her eyes on purpose. She shut them so tight she could block out the sound of the jingle.

If her eyes were open in the school yearbook, no one would approach her except for the occasional classmate who invited her to sign their yearbook.

Her portraits, either way—opened or closed eyes—she believed, didn’t translate to beauty, certainly not the beauty of gems. Her eyes, she thought, were hiding behind their own eyelids. Something she couldn’t do anything about.

Ploy grew into her name after learning about gems from a National Geographic documentary. It had been playing in the waiting room at the Ohio State campus health center, where she went to see a nurse practitioner for a routine pelvic exam. An early riser even in college, Ploy took the earliest appointment slot and sat alone in a blue plastic chair waiting for her free exam. Next to her was a table made of synthetic materials offering her a Halloween-size candy bowl of colorful, and apparently, flavorful condoms. Purple grape. Banana split. Bubblegum. Tropical. She never took any. She found the thought of flavored dick repulsive.
On the screen above her, National Geographic played. It was a throwback documentary from 1991. Whoever selected what to play in the health center waiting room she couldn’t imagine but she watched it anyway because it was better than the magazine selections on the table next to the candy condoms.

“The Hope Diamond and most other minerals classified as gemstones, about 90 in all, were created in the fiery cauldron of the Earth’s interior millions of years ago at temperatures so high that rock boils,” the narrator explained. Gems were made from boiled rock formed millions of years ago, Ploy thought to herself. She could barely remember five years ago when she was in high school. What was millions of years like? How could she conceptualize such a long span of time? And how magnificent the Earth must be to make precious stones out of nothing! It was her first time to use the word magnificent. Any other application, she thought, sounded like hyperbole. But this time, truly, Ploy thought, the Earth was magnificent for making gems. For making ploy. Ploy, who felt like one year without her mother was a million. Ploy, who felt a fiery cauldron in her stomach. Ploy, she thought to herself, suited her. Not because of its beauty but because of its nature.

Ploy never thought of her name in, or as English, until an old white man told her that Ploy was a “fascinating” name. Fascinating was another hyperbolic word. A word that had no real-world application that she knew of. He approached her at the first and only graduate student mixer she attended. She wanted to make a good impression on the faculty at her new university.

“Ploy, huh? That’s a fascinating name. Who’da thunk that Ploy,” he said it sideways, “could be a person’s name?” Ploy didn’t answer him. He looked like the father
of the kind of kid who used to taunt her with jingles.

“Never heard of it before,” he said. She kept dipping her carrot into a pile of hummus on her plate looking for an escape. “Or is this a *ploy,*” he said it sideways again, “you use to capture simple guys like me’s attention?” She choked on the carrot but made it look coquettish. She hated that she did this and reoriented herself.

“Yep,” she replied. “My parents thought of you when they named me.” Then she walked out of the room leaving her plate at the too-tall standing table in the middle of the room. She made her way outside and sat under a tree on the campus greenway. She felt safest blending in with other students who were lounging outside. The interaction left a metallic taste in her mouth, the kind you get when there’s a cut in your mouth and the blood lingers all day. She never wanted to see that man again. Simple is right, she thought. The man was simple minded. What a fucking joke—professors trying to pick up students at the new student mixer. The way he said her name looped in her mind. *Ploy.* Is that a *ploy*? She realized English speakers must have understood her name as tactic all long. How would they know its meaning in Thai? Suddenly, the metallic taste turned sour and she felt her lips turn up into a twisted grin. Even better, she thought. Ploy didn’t need a translation. It had its own meanings. Two meanings she could live with. A hard and beautiful mineral organically occurring in nature. And a tactic.

Por didn’t say much about how long he and his family had lived in Nakhon Phanom. He insisted on sticking to the questions on the application form. No need to deviate or bring up old history. His daughter, Ploy, was digging for useless information. She tried one more time.
“Why did your family move from Nakhon Phanom to Bangkok?”

“That’s where they’re from,” Por replied, annoyed she was pushing.

“Who? Your parents? Are they from Bangkok?” She didn’t give him time to answer. The questions kept coming to her and she kept passing them onto him. “If your parents are from Bangkok, then why did they leave Nakhon Phanom in the first place?”

“Don’t know,” Por said. He answered so quickly Ploy assumed it was a lie.

“Did they work there or something? Or maybe they had relatives living there?” Ploy wasn’t ready to give up yet. She was too close to new information.

“Khun Bpu worked there na in Nakhon Phanom. He was stationed there when I was born.”

“Work there—doing what?” She kept going.

“He worked for the government but I only lived there for a few years na.” Por ended the conversation. “What’s next? Next question na. We gotta finish the application.”

Ploy finally stopped with her questions, but only because she knows the next question would give her something else she didn’t know—her grandparents’ names.

“The next question is your parents’ names naka. What’s your father’s name?”

“Arthit” Por said plainly. He said it without passion or emotion. How could he say his father’s name for the first time to his daughter with so little spirit, with nothing stirring him? Ploy was reading into everything, the tone of his voice, the speed with which he responded to the questions, signs of lying. She desperate for details. Was there no patriarchal piety in Por’s family or no impulse to carry on the name and memories of his father to his children? Or, maybe there was an abundance of patriarchal piety in the
family, too much, to the point of absolving all emotions into an objectification of the
man, Arthit, whoever he had been.

Arthit, she sounded with her mouth—a high tone on the final syllable like in her
own name. Arthit, such an imposing name, to be named after the sun. Por cut through.

“Amporn,” he announced.

“Huh?”

“My mom is named Amporn. A-M-P-O-R-N na.”

Ploy listened to him spell out his mother’s name, her grandmother’s name. Her
fingers moved and wrote it down. Then, she giggled into the phone.

“Jing lor ka? Arthit and Amporn?”

“I know,” he said with a surprising lightness. “That’s how the matchmaker knew
they gonna marry. Their names match.” The sheer fact of knowing their names made
Ploy want to cry, a cry she’d never cried before. A wail was building inside her chest, just
below the sternum, where she pressed her hand to catch her breath.

Arthit and Amporn. Sun and sky.

Ploy was surprised by how moved she was. The romance of her grandparents
being named after the sun and the sky. Afraid the conversation will end if she didn’t
speak up, Ploy stuttered trying to take up space on the call.

“It’s very—so… Their names— It’s so…. sweet.” Her statement sounded more
like a question. She landed on sweet though it wasn’t the adjective she was after. That
wasn’t how she’d characterize their names if she’d had more time to think, to process
their names, and their fate. If she knew more about them and their journey. She could
only think about how quickly this conversation was going to end when the application
was completed. She wanted to prolong the end. She wanted more.

“I know. It’s sweet.” Por agreed.

Ploy pulled the phone away from her face and exhaled loudly. She willed herself not to cry, knowing a display of emotions would end the conversation even faster. The tears welled in her eyes and she forced them back into her head. Por couldn’t see her but if she’d let one tear fall, she wouldn’t be able to control the rest. Her face would flood. The swallowed tears turned her face and neck a crimson red. Ploy rubbed her temples. She hated having to hide this reaction from Por. The impulse and need to hide how meaningful all of this was to her from her father overwhelmed her. This was the most they had ever talked about his parents, his family, or her grandparents, her family in her entire life.

Catching her breath, Por returns their focus back to the facts of the application. Ploy missed her chance to ask more questions about her grandparents. They covered the remaining questions.

Class of Admission—IR6. Neither one of them knew what that meant. Por found it listed on his expired green card.

Date of Admission—May 4, 1984. Also listed on the expired green card.

Social Security Number—638 75 3264.

Location Applied for an Immigrant Visa or Adjustment of Status—Toledo, Ohio.

Location Immigrant Visa or Adjustment of Status was Issued—Toledo, Ohio.

Height—5 feet, 10 inches. For some reason, Ploy had always believed he was six-foot tall.

Weight—150 pounds. A meager weight for a man who carried so much on his
back.

Ploy explained the role of the Preparer and how she filled in her information.

“If there are any issues na Por, they can contact me. Hopefully they won’t need to.”

“Okay.” He had no further comments or questions.

“I’ll get a money order at the post office when I go to mail you the application. You have to sign it and then submit it by mail.”

“Okay,” he repeated and then hung up.
Completing the green card application gave me an unexpected sense of relief. I didn’t expect to feel relieved because completing the application alone doesn’t magically make Por’s green card valid. All the anxiety associated with the renewal still circled in my mind. Will it work? What if we were wrong and submitting the application blows his twenty-year cover? What if ICE does detain him for not maintaining his documents? The case wasn’t closed. Por didn’t have a new green card. And yet, with all of those questions crisscrossing in the back of my mind, I felt relieved. Maybe it was because I learned more about my family. Maybe it was because I finished something. I crossed something off my to-list. That feeling that something, no matter how insignificant in the grand scheme of things, was done.

The application was done. I’d mail it out next week with the money order.

Riding the high of getting things done, I decided to finally transcribe Dam and Ae’s oral history—our conversation about their relocation to the city in the 90s. When I
sit with people and record their stories, I give myself three tasks—one, to invite the storyteller to begin, two, to capture the story, and three, to be present. I invited Dam and Ae to discuss leaving the cattle farming town, their first home in the United States, where, as they say, they were “the only orientals,” and resettling in the city, where there is a Lao community. But when they started telling their story, the story about resettling in the U.S. meandered and became a story about how they both ended up in the United States together. I love when storytellers reinterpret and reinvent the question. I refuse to return to the original question or ask them for an answer that they didn’t give. I trust the storytellers I work with to tell the stories they are moved to tell. I believe that when I ask about relocating from one city to another in the United States and they respond with a story about how they got to the United States in the first place rather than about actually relocating in the United States, the storytellers do answer the question. An answer that points back. Their meandering stories reveal more about history, our narration of history, and our place in it than the answers given when a researcher facilitates the storytelling process with preordained questions along the way. Why force a particular kind of story? The story is there. The question is whether we are engaged as listeners. Are we listening to the stories being told, or are we simply only attuned to the stories we want to hear in the format preordained by interview questions, journalism, and climactic narrative arcs?

I invite storytellers to tell a story and then let the stories unfold as they do. I do what I can to capture the stories and the storytellers as I listen. If they allow it, and Dam and Ae did, I video-record the conversation. Not just the storytellers, but me too, though I hate to see and hear myself recorded. The story, in part, comes from my invitation and relationship to the storytellers as well as my presence as a listener. I listen to the stories
being told, and equally, the stories that aren’t told. I listen for the pauses and gaps in stories. I listen when a storyteller struggles to find their words. I listen to the pace and patterns of a storyteller reliving (or inventing) their story. I listen for the fillers, the excuses, and the lies. I listen when there is only silence. These are all elements of compelling stories. The kinds of stories and storytelling that I want to capture in my dissertation. It’s not “just” the story on its own that I want to capture, but the process of its telling too.

When I invited Dam and Ae to tell me about their move, they began with a chuckle. The kind of snicker between intimates that makes those not laughing along realize they’re not part of that relationship, that history. That the person asking is asking something they don’t realize has such a specificity and nuance. Something that doesn’t have to be asked or said between those who have lived the history together. They share the same unspoken memory in their bones, in their blushing chuckle, like an inside joke. Dam started.

“I don’t know where we gonna live in America when we leaving Thailand. All I know is we not going back to Laos. Can’t ever go back and can’t stay in Thailand. As long as we go to America, I don’t care.” In the video recording, I watched Dam who was watching Ae as he said this. I watched him flash her a private, wry smile that was really a wink and that maybe I wasn’t meant to see.

“That’s what we thought,” Ae interrupted him. The smile, the wink, a cue like they’d told this story together before. Tag team effort.

“We thought we don’t care where we gonna live in America but when we try to make a life on the farm. We struggle. A lot.” Dam sipped his tea while Ae talked. “I don’t
know where to buy rice, how to speak English. We don’t know anyone in America except the lady at that church—some Lutheran church can’t remember the name of that church. She gave us the key to our first apartment. What was her name?”

Dam placed his teacup on the coffee table in front of us and guessed at the name, “Uh—Mary? Or Maria? I don’t remember now. Too long ago.” He said, answering Ae and then turning to me to continue the story. “We just stay inside our apartment all day, everyday. Too cold outside and nowhere to go. No one to see. Only see each other for—”

Ae interrupted him at this. I missed it when it happened, but in the recording I could see that Ae twitched when Dam said they only saw each other. Her head jerked ever so slightly and it looked like the kind of painful memory one might reinvent when you tell it with a lighthearted laughter like it’s so far gone that you don’t really remember how hard it was at the time. The truth is you never forget that it was hard. Hardness was sealed in your body, in your bones. It’s there always there but your words and your memory don’t do justice to what it felt like at the time. One of the most painful parts of trying to retell difficult memories is realizing and accepting how much you’ve forgotten about how hard it was, what it felt and smelled like, where you saw and tasted it.

It was a familiar feeling for me. This was what happened over time from laughing off my mother leaving us. I got used to people casually asking, “what about your mom?” They didn’t know what they were asking. They expected me to have a mother in my life. People tend to apologize and change the subject when I tell them she left.

“We only see each other! Nobody else!” Ae exclaimed—a stark contrast to how casually and matter of factly Dam had said the same thing. “You never see people. They
always inside alone. Never invite you in. Only see them go to and from the car and we
don’t have a car. At first it’s okay,” she said, “because we still getting to know each other
but after a few months I’m sick of Dam. I need to see someone else. Talk to someone
else. But I don’t know anyone and can’t speak English at that time.” I see the surprise on
my face in the video when Ae says they were getting to know each other. I had assumed
that they’d already known each other before entering the United States. I was wrong.
They saw my surprise and weren’t surprised that I was surprised, and then corrected the
assumption.

“She didn’t love me at first,” Dam said. “We just escape refugee camp together
and then we got stuck in a farm together. She agree to marry me before we leave
Thailand but marry don’t mean love. I always love her,” he said coldly. The content and
tone of his speech a complex turn of hand—one disagreeing with the other. He went back
to drinking tea, his cup empty. He refilled his cup with hot water from the kettle,
emptying it.

“When my family arrived in Thailand Dam was already there,” Ae said. “He was alone. Dam lost his brother on the way from Laos. Died.” And that was all that was said
about Dam’s late brother. Died. Lost on the way from Laos to Thailand. I didn’t ask for
anything more.

“Dam was alone. But in the refugee camp, no one is alone because is crowded and
many live together in one long house. Sometime more than twenty family live in the
same house. No privacy unless you find a way to build your own wall inside the house.
Dam live there when my family come. I’m the baby in my family. Ae mean baby. That’s
why my family call me Ae. I was seventeen and— I… I’m…” Ae’s story trailed off and
she busied herself, grabbing the tea kettle knowing Dam had already emptied it.

“Excuse me. I go get more hot water. I be right back Nong Ploy,” she told me. Then she shuffled to the kitchen before I could reply. I looked at Dam and he offered me a smile. His teeth were yellow from age but he had otherwise aged well for a man in his fifties. His head was oddly rectangular, like a cinder brick the color of brown clay. But the size and shape favored him. His jawline protruded forward jutting toward whomever he faced. His aggressive physical features didn’t clash with his gentle demeanor. This unusual pairing, a strong and chiseled exterior with soft and open energy, weren’t at odds with one another. It was precisely this combination that made him look youthful, like a young man with big dreams for himself and the determination to see himself through. His eyes were perfectly set apart, dark and unassuming. He had thick eyebrows just above them—the width thicker than the opening of his eyes. I thought Dam looked like he was in his forties the first time we met, but I learned that he was fifty-four during our first interview when he told me he arrived in the U.S. in 1984 at the fresh age of twenty. He and Ae were just married and still felt like children.

Ae reappeared in the camera’s shot, setting the steaming blue porcelain kettle on the table. Before she sat back down, she poured hot water for us. She poured water for me first. I raised my teacup and she shook her head, pointing with her lips for me to set the cup down onto the table in case she spilled the boiling water. Not a single drop spilled as she filled each teacup. Dam’s after mine, and then finally her own. She took her seat on the floor next to Dam and we both looked at her waiting. I was mindful not to fill my gaze with pressure, but with compassion. In the video, I looked like I was watching a
child drown—alert but unsure of how to help. I didn’t know what Ae thought of my gaze. Although I was curious and did in fact want to know more, I didn’t want to press Ae to finish the story she’d abruptly ended. I kept quiet though I’d wondered what she had been thinking in the kitchen while she was alone. A moment to collect and gather her thoughts. Would she return to whatever she had started to tell? Should she pivot and talk about moving to the city? Hand it off to Dam to finish the story? He probably knows why she suspended telling her story. He must have known what she was on the verge of saying. Why else would he have smiled at me? It indicated knowing, I thought. I liked that he smiled instead of talked. He didn’t step in and finish Ae’s story for her or explain why she had to refill the kettle at that exact moment. He let the interrupted story settle between us.

Ae began to speak, her eyes fixed on the blue teacup in her hands. “When my family got to Thailand, I’m seventeen. The only girl in my family. I have three older brothers and my mother and father are there too. Six of us. They all want to protect me because Thai guard in the camp are looking for girls like me. They…” her eyes shifted from her teacup to Dam and back. “They want to do bad things to girls who not married yet. My brothers want to protect me but the guards have guns. What can they do?” Her face softened when she posed this rhetorical question. What could her family do to protect her from the guards? A question she didn’t linger on for more than two or three seconds. Her eyes turned upward, she reset her posture, and her jaw loosened as she continued. This time she turned and pointed her manicured thumb toward Dam—the red polish peeling at the edges.

“When Dam got the news that he gonna go to America he ask me to go with him
as his wife. I said yes but I didn’t tell him it’s because I’m afraid of the guard. At the time I thought he want to marry me because he love me but later he told me he ask me to marry him because he saw the guard looking at me and he heard them talking about me and my friend. Her name was Hom. She’s like my little sister. She was only fifteen at that time.” There was a long pause between the three of us. Dam and I fixed our eyes on Ae, and Ae’s eyes passed between mine and Dam’s. The silence didn’t feel like a rhetorical tactic to garner compassion for Hom, nor did it feel like one of those ceremonial moments of silence to mourn something lost—their friendship, their sisterhood, or Hom herself, Ae’s little sister. Ae didn’t say Hom’s fate. I wondered if she knew herself. The silence, I realized now, watching the story unfold for a second time, was a brief transition from the factual circumstances under which they agreed to marry to Ae’s interpretation of what a marriage ought to be.

“He is not handsome,” Ae said chuckling, the sound coming from the very back of her throat and through her open and smiling mouth.

“He’s dark,” she directed my gaze to his arm. Her own brown hand rested on his and hers was only a shade lighter than his. “His skin is black—that’s why his name is Dam. Everyone call him Dam because he is dark. And my dad and my brothers do not approve. His skin is black and we don’t know his family. ‘Why did he live alone in Thailand? Why is he going to America without his own family? How can he leave his parents? What kind of man will leave his family?’ They ask me many question. I don’t know the answer and they want me to stay with my family in Thailand. But I tell them they cannot protect me if the guard gonna get me. I told them it’s my chance. I have to go to America with Dam. Safer for me. For them. I’m gonna send them money from
America.”

I lingered on their touch. Their brown skin stacked, paired together after all these years. Her hand on his arm. A gradient so fine the difference wouldn’t normally register in American racial politics. Their skin would be the same. Brown, sometimes mistaken for “Mexican” until they talked. But I’m familiar with the shade differences they’re talking about, easily defined and noticeable to Southeast Asians but imperceptible to Americans. Dam, was a familiar nickname to me. Just like in Lao, Thais give it to people with dark skin. But Dam’s “black” skin isn’t black at all, I thought. The same way I used to think, as a kid, that Black Americans didn’t have black skin either. The “Black” in my 120 Crayola crayon box, though it was my favorite, flattened the range of skin colors I saw in my neighbors and classmates, I used to think. The browns— “Shadow,” “Beaver,” “Sepia,” “Brown,” “Tumbleweed,” “Antique Brass,” “Copper,” “Raw Sienna,” “Chestnut,” “Fuzzy Wuzzy Brown,” and “Mahogany” — were still limited, but more fitting despite their ugly names. When I colored with Ayisha, my neighbor and first grade deskmate, I peeled the paper off the brown crayons before she joined me that way she didn’t see me reach for the “Beaver” colored crayon when I drew us holding hands.

Dam didn’t flinch or react in any way that I could tell when Ae said he wasn’t handsome. Perhaps, this was part of the story they regularly told together—two young strangers leave their homelands as individuals, meet in an unfavorable place of refuge, and relocate, together, paired, to this day, despite their incongruity. When Ae said Dam wasn’t handsome, I wondered if that was her, or their, way of telling of her beauty. She certainly was beautiful.
Ae had a kind of over-waxed, natural beauty. Her hair was natural in color, black as concrete, except that it was so precisely black it couldn’t possibly be her natural color. Her hair cascaded down to the small of her back in a perfectly straight downpour. In a picture from her refugee immigration file, she had short hair, sitting above the base of her neck revealing the tender skin where her head met her body. Her eyes were smooth, like they were as an adult, only now set below lightly penciled eyebrows—the only discernible makeup on her face. Her makeup made her face look natural, but I suspected it wasn’t. There was something off about her nose—the height of her bridge disagreeing with her round nostrils and the tip of her nose which wasn’t a tip at all. Whether or not this was the nose she was born with, it worked. The off-ness contributed to her beauty. She concealed her attempts at beauty by making herself look natural in a way that further emphasized her natural beauty. It was impressive.

Perhaps, her family prided themselves on having such a beautiful young daughter and never imagined seeing her marry a man whose beauty didn’t match hers. His head too obtuse, and apparently dark, for the kind of man Ae’s family envisioned for their girl. I replayed the video to watch specifically for a reaction from Dam and there was nothing. I made note of his lack of a reaction because no reaction was sometimes more compelling than a reaction. In this case, Dam’s lack of a reaction told me of their comfort with one another. A comfort that was honest and intimate, broken and full of history notwithstanding beauty and attraction.

Ae took a sip of her tea and met Dam’s eyes. An invitation for him to speak.

“I did love her when I ask her to marry me and go to America. She think I don’t love her at the time but if I don’t love her why do I want to protect her from the guard? I
did love her but it’s not romantic. I choose to love her and I had a way to protect her. Something I see her family cannot protect her from. It is my duty to love and protect her. So I say I love her and want to marry her. Come to America with me.” Dam looked at me as if he had to convince me of their love.

“She did come with me. Now that’s old news,” he chortled. He and Ae erupted into a quiet laughter between them. I smiled but didn’t laugh. It didn’t feel like an invitation. It felt private, something between the two of them.

Ae talked through her giggling. “When we leave Thailand we try to say bye to my family. I want to wish them good luck. But they refused to say bye. My brother told me ‘if we say bye that means we agree with you leaving us in Nakhon Phanom but we do not agree. Dam is not your husband. We don’t know his family and we cannot accept you—we cannot accept that you leave your family.’” This time Dam placed his hand on Ae’s arm and she took a deep breath.

“My oldest brother tell us that we—we…” she paused again. “That we curse my family if we leave Nakhon Phanom together.” Ae’s black eyes reddened and she shut them tight. Tears, I thought, would seep from their corners but no tears appeared. She opened them, looked at me directly in the eyes and said, “On the morning we leave Thailand, when we leave Ban Napho refugee camp for the last time, I stopped at the temple to make merit for my family. I want them to have good luck and forgive me because I’m leaving. I never talk to them for ten years after we leave Thailand.” I paused the video and backed it up.

“My oldest brother tell us that we—we… That we curse my family if we leave Nakhon Phanom together.” I replayed it again, watching Ae torment herself with
memory. Rewind.

“My oldest brother tell us that we—we… That we curse my family if we leave Nakhon Phanom together.” My attention turned away from the agony of this moment and toward a different finding. Dam and Ae lived and met in Nakhon Phanom, where Por’s father was stationed and where Por was born.
Jihyun bobbed her head along to whatever music she was listening to when I joined her at our go-to table at The Muse.

“This is for you.” She pushed a latte in my direction and pulled off her headphones. The foamy white leaf was perfectly laced up the center.

I walked around to her side of the table and hugged her from the side folding her shoulders into mine.

“Thank you!” I said taking my seat across from her. I sipped the latte. It was no longer hot. I looked at my watch. I was twenty minutes late for our standing Saturday afternoon work date.

“I figured if you didn’t show up, then I’d have two cups of coffee today.” Jihyun raised an eyebrow. I ignored it. If she saw that I noticed her skepticism, perhaps she’d want me to address it. I immediately changed the subject.

“What are you working on today?” I asked.
“I’m putting the final touches on a short that I’m showing in class on Monday.”

Jihyun turned her laptop to show me.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s from that film about The Bookshelf… you know, the oldest independent bookstore in the city that closed a few years back. I think I told you about it when I was filming?”

“Yeah, the old one with the exposed brick walls and floor to ceiling bookshelves?”

“Yes, that one.”

Jihyun took me to The Bookshelf once before it closed. It was an unusually warm spring afternoon. The sunlight entered the front window beaming, all natural spotlight for the featured books section.

“Well I’m still working on the film but on Monday I’m teaching camera shots and angles, so I’m going to screen clips to show students that where you place the camera matters as much as the content of what you’re shooting. The shot—the angle tells the story.” I nodded in agreement, took another sip of my lukewarm coffee.

“I’m putting together this short with different camera angles of people coming in and out of the bookstore when it was still open.” Jihyun pressed play. On the screen, teenagers walked past a table of books, arms-linked. Behind them, from top to bottom, the screen filled with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves holding books of every color. The shot was busy, splintering my attention in multiple directions—at the rows and rows of books, the young people laughing, at the shadows they make on the walls. The screen flashed and the shot changed. The scope was so narrow the screen only showed moving feet in
front of bookshelves. A pair of tattered red sneakers blocked the shot for a few seconds and then moved on. The screen flashed again and the shot moved so close to the bookshelf only two books could be seen. When a person walked past the camera everything was awash of dancing grays and browns until they stepped out of the shot again and the mustard-hardcover books reappeared.

Jihyun hit pause.

“What about you?” She asked and turned her laptop back around.

“I’m fine.”

She looked up from her laptop.

“I meant what are you working on?”

“Oh—I’m not sure I’m gonna work anymore today. I worked all morning transcribing an oral history. I just needed a coffee break and—”

Jihyun looked at me intently. Her eyes were large and focused, peering out at me from under her bangs. Her lips twisted to the left and she rested her face on a balled up fist. Last time we saw each other, I ran out of her yoga class. I felt an explanation gurgling in my stomach. I didn’t want to tell her about Por. I didn’t want to lie. I changed the subject again.

“And—and something weird came up while I was working. I didn’t want to miss our work date and I wanted to tell you about it.” Jihyun dragged and dropped something across her screen. I kept talking.

“I was listening to a conversation—one of my newest oral histories—one with a couple about their resettlement from a refugee camp in Thailand to the United States when I realized that the refugee camp they lived in was in the same city that my father
was born in.” I emphasized the last part to sell the excitement of my finding.

“What’s weird about refugees in Bangkok?” She asked plainly, unenthusiastically. Her lack of enthusiasm encouraged me to sell the oddity, the surprise of it all.

“Oh! My father isn’t from Bangkok…”

“I thought your family was from Bangkok?”

“Yeah, because that’s what I thought. That’s where they live. Now. I mean—I thought he was born there, but he just told me he was actually born on the border of Laos.” It slipped out. The words were new in my mind and new on my tongue.

Por was born in Nakhon Phanom. His father was stationed there. His father was named Arthit. My grandfather’s name was Arthit. He was married to Amporn, my grandmother.

“Ahh Laos, that makes sense,” Jihyun said. “And the couple were refugees from Laos?”

“Yes. Apparently, my grandfather was stationed on the border when my father was born. Then, the family moved back to Bangkok when he was young. So, in a way, I guess he is from Bangkok even though he was born in Nakhon Phanom.” Why did I keep talking?

“Wait,” Jihyun paused. “Why did your father just now tell you where he was born?” This was a fair question—a question I also wanted an answer to, though Jihyun and I were asking two different questions. I literally wanted to know why Por never told me he was born in Nakhon Phanom until now and Jihyun wanted to know what prompted him to just now tell me where he was born. I knew the answer to her question.
I shrugged and took a long drink of the latte. Drinking it faster meant it wouldn’t get colder. I pivoted again.

“The weird thing about this,” I said weird on purpose, to convince her I actually thought the coincidence was weird even though I didn’t. It wasn’t weird that Por was born in Nakhon Phanom. It was weird that I didn’t know.

“The weird thing is the mystery of it all. What was his father—my grandfather doing in Nakhon Phanom? Why would someone be ‘stationed’ there? He specifically used the word ‘stationed.’ It sounds like some military thing. I wonder what he was involved in. Maybe this is why my father’s been so secretive over the years about his family. He doesn’t want to—oh! Or what if he can’t tell me about his family?”

Jihyun let me talk. She didn’t interrupt. She waited until I took the last drink of my latte to speak. She returned to her question.

“If your dad couldn’t tell you about it all these years, why he told you now?”

I swallowed. There was no reason to lie or hide. I trusted Jihyun. She was the only person I trusted to tell. I pushed the empty mug to the side of the table between us. I leaned in. Jihyun closed her laptop.

“My father is having some issues with immigration and we had to reapply for his green card. I helped him complete the application and one of the questions asked his place of birth. I’m glad we went over what I thought were obvious answers—like his place of birth—because I would have gotten it wrong. He corrected me when I said I wrote down Bangkok. How fucked up would that of been if his application was rejected because his immigration file says Nakhon Phanom and I put down Bangkok—the wrong place of birth? I was so shocked I was wrong about my dad’s place of birth that I didn’t
even think about how a number of the Lao storytellers I interviewed spent time in a refugee camp in Nakhon Phanom. Then, this morning I was listening to my conversation with the couple when I heard the wife say Nakhon Phanom and I thought my brain was tricking me. I listened to it multiple times and it was real. They lived in Nakhon Phanom, the place where my father was born.”

Jihyun sat back in her seat, took a drink of her coffee, and stared at me. Did she want me to say more? I didn’t have more to say. That was part of my problem. I wanted more too.

She finished her drink and placed her empty mug next to mine. She opened her mouth to speak, but paused, as if she had to fill her mouth with air before she could speak.

“What’s going on with your father Ploy?” She asked with a stern tone. She wanted the truth. I looked around the room to check the place, ensuring no one could hear us. No one was interested in us, but I leaned further forward anyway to whisper.

“We just learned that his green card expired for more than twenty years ago.”

Jihyun’s eyes bulged.

“But don’t panic,” I told her. “I’m trying not to panic. His green card is expired but I think his status is still secure. I mean, yeah, it’s nerve-wracking but we’re hopeful that he can just renew the green card.”

She leaned in too. Our faces are closer than they’d ever been before.

“You did panic though, didn’t you?” Jihyn asked. My mind flashed to the yoga class. I sat back in my chair, covered my face with my hands.

“It’s okay,” she said. Jihyun reached for me.
“You don’t have to say any more. I want you to know that I’m here for you. You
don’t have to go through this alone. I have immigration shit too. It’s not the same shit as
your father but this isn’t an isolated case. The immigration system is fucked up.”

I exhaled and dropped my forehead to the table wrapping my arms around my
resting head.

“Hey,” Jihyun said gently. “I’m glad you came today. We don’t have to talk.
We’re here. Thank you for telling me.” I felt her hands on mine.
Dr. Rhonda Williams

Rhonda asked if we could pick up where we left off. Maybe she thought it would be worthwhile to discuss my mother leaving our family but there was nothing of interest to me in that conversation. Parents leave all the time.

I took the opportunity to talk about what was of interest to me, what had become my obsession over the last five days—Nakhon Phanom.

“Here’s something about my parents,” I began, making the connection to family from the start. I told her the whole thing about Por’s place of birth and how some of the people I’m doing oral histories with spent time in a refugee camp in Nakhon Phanom. Rhonda listened, only moving to adjust herself in her chair or to silently and slowly nod. I read her nods as cues to keep talking. I filled the air with Nakhon Phanom. I told her about what I’d read about the refugee camp online and what I saw on Google maps about the city. I left out the details of how I came across this information about Por, saying only that I recently learned where he was born. It was a relief to tell Jihyun about the green
card application but I promised myself not to share Por’s immigration shit with anyone else, especially not someone like Rhonda who could very well make note of what I said about the immigration status and then potentially be subpoenaed in a court case. I did register as the Preparer on Por’s application after all. I knew at the time that this was an irrational and highly unlikely concern but it wasn’t a risk I was willing to take.

Between my rambling, Rhonda waited for a pause, a way to enter the conversation.

“Ploy, you mentioned that you recently learned where your father was born…”

I stopped listening. I didn’t hear the rest of her sentence.

A lie. I needed a lie. I’d tell her that my father recently opened up to me about his life in Thailand after I shared a few of the oral histories with him.

Rhonda was waiting for my response.

What did she ask? I adjusted myself on the couch, wrapping my left foot around my right ankle. I was never comfortable wearing shoes in someone’s house.

“I’m sorry Dr. Williams. Can you—could you please repeat the question?”

“Are there more things about your parents that you don’t know? That you want to know or think you should know?”

“Oh…” I was surprised by her question, relieved that I wasn’t pressed to lie.

“Well, yeah—there’s lots of things I don’t know about them. There are definitely things I want to know and there are things I don’t wanna know. And yeah, I’d say there are some things I ought to know but don’t.”

“Such as?”

I exhaled and focused on the record spinning behind me. I didn’t recognize the
song. I felt Rhonda’s gaze on me. She was always willing to wait but she was eager too. I uncrossed my legs, shifted in my chair, and folded one leg over the other.

“Such as…” I said to show her I was thinking about her question.

“Such as, how and why my parents got together. Why they separated. What they knew about each other. What did their families think of each other? Of us—of me. I mean, what do their families think of me and my sister? I ought to know my relatives.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never met my parent’s relatives. They never came around—we never… Yeah, I never met them. I don’t know who they are. I mean—I know some of their names but I don’t know them. Do you know what I mean?” I was saying too much, and yet I was saying nothing at all.

“I think so Ploy. You’re saying that you know that both of your parents have families but that you’ve never met relatives from either side of your family. And you believe that you should have met them and you should know them.”

“I guess. But it’s not like I sit around thinking, oh I should meet and know them. I’ve accepted that I don’t know them and haven’t met them.”

“How did you come to accept this?”

I hadn’t accepted this, that much was obvious. Maybe Rhonda was trying to point that out. But I don’t want to talk about this. I want to talk about my work, my research, and how poorly it’s all going. It was so easy to hate my work and blame my failures. I wanted her to listen, to go back to where we first started, which was with work-life balance and saying no.

“Ploy? When did you accept the narrative that you should know your relatives but
that you never will?

I told her I studied abroad in Thailand when I was a college student mostly because I wanted to meet my father’s family.

“There was never any talk of them coming to see us. Manee and I used to dream of going to Thailand as a family so when I heard my school had a program in Bangkok, I realized this is how I could make it happen.” Rhonda noted this. I saw her scribbling something down in her notebook before returning the pen to lips and chewing. I could tell I was giving her something interesting. It felt good. I elaborated.

“I also wanted out. I was bored with the college lifestyle. Being in college was like living in a little fantasy world where everything was catered to you. At first, it was exhilarating—I went to all the events and activities I could. Pretty much every day for the first year I did something because it was available. I even did things I didn’t give a shit about. The basketball game. A movie night in the Commons. Interfaith dialogues. At some point, I just quit going to everything. From being so ‘involved’ in campus activities, I learned that colleges hire people—plural, lots of people actually—just to come up with things for college students to do. To entertain them. I didn’t want to be entertained. I wanted to learn things and understand the world so I decided to leave. To go into the world.”

I told her about the application process and how I planned to meet my family.

“And how did that go?”

“Uhhh, they ignored me.”

“What exactly happened?” Rhonda wanted details.

“They didn’t return my emails or phone calls once I told them I was going to be in
Thailand.”

“I see,” I monitored Rhonda for any signs of pity. That was why I didn’t want to talk about this in the first place. It was difficult enough to be rejected by your family—first by your own mother and then your extended family—but I didn’t want to be pitied. Rhonda looked at me tenderly with her large brown eyes. She closed them gently and asked if we were in communication before I went to Thailand.

“Sometimes.” We used to send greeting cards for birthdays and new years by air mail but when e-greeting cards became a thing we began sending them online.

“That’s how I had their email address. I emailed them my travel info and said I was coming. But I never heard from them.”

“How do you know they ever received your email?”

“I guess I don’t.” She had a point. There were no read receipts.

“Did you try to see them? You mentioned you had their address.”

I did have their address, and I had Google Mapped how to get from my dorm to where we used to mail cards. I never went. I couldn’t show up after sending an email announcing my homecoming. It would have been better if I showed up unannounced. Showing up when I received no response looked desperate, like I couldn’t take a hint.

I could take a hint. It was clear they didn’t want to meet me.

“And then you just accepted that you wouldn’t meet or know them?”

“Well, I can’t exactly point to when I officially accepted it. I did hold out with some hope that they would reply or get in touch with me while I was in Thailand. But they didn’t.”

“Do you have a sense, Ploy—any conjecture of why they might not want to meet
you?”

I leaned back and told her that was a difficult question because, again, I don’t know them at all and so I couldn’t know why they didn’t want to meet me. I had nothing.

“There could be lots of reasons,” I ventured. “They could be the kind of people who don’t like tourists or outsiders. What if they’re ashamed or embarrassed that I’m mixed? Although that would be odd since Thai people seemed obsessed with the fact that my mother is white.” I chuckled awkwardly, still uncomfortable with the memory of unwanted attention because of my whiteness. “Maybe my father’s family feels abandoned by my father leaving Bangkok for the United States. Or maybe my father left on bad terms. Or maybe it’s easier for them to keep their relatives at a distance—like that saying ‘too close for comfort.’ Maybe distance is the only way they can imagine or handle me. Or — I don’t know. Who knows?”

Rhonda shrugged in solidarity, and then I realized she didn’t expect me to know the answer. That was her point. She wanted me to acknowledge there could be lots of reasons why people end communication and relationships. It felt like an important, but pathetic lesson.

“Ploy, I notice that you keep referring to them as my father’s family. I wonder if you consider them your family too? Do you ever call them family or think of them as your family?”

I’d thought about this before. I didn’t have to think through an answer.

“Yeah— no— I think of them as my father’s family. I’m aware that they’re technically my family too, but I barely know my father, let alone his family, and it seems they want to keep it that way so I just think of them as his family.”
Yesterday, on my way to the post office to mail Por the application, I wondered what Por’s family knows about his immigration status or migration experience. Have they ever talked about what it was like to leave Bangkok for Toledo? Did they ever ask? Did he tell or dodge their questions like he dodges mine? Has he talked to anyone about what it was like to shift from Thai to English? To become a cook when your mother was the only one who cooked in the home? Not because it was her duty but because she was the best cook in the family and she didn’t want anyone messing up her recipes or her kitchen. Apparently, she liked to cook alone. This, I know, because Por would send us out of the kitchen when we were young and useless.

“My mom kick my ass if I step in the kitchen while she cook. You better go too na,” he’d say shaking a metal spatula at us. We would run off choking on our laughter burying our hands in our pockets which we’d filled with white bunny candies that we stole from a red plastic bag hidden behind the rice tin when he wasn’t looking.

I glanced at the clock behind Rhonda. I was ready to go. I hoped she didn’t notice me checking the time. With ten minutes left of our session, she asked me how I felt about the gaps in my family history, about the unknown, what she called an absent presence.

“How do I feel about it?” I repeated sitting with her question.

“How do I feel about the unknown? … I feel like people—my family—have intentionally kept things from me. Like, the gaps and the unknown aren’t randomly there. They’re made and sustained. And I get it. It’s okay that my family wants to keep things from me—to keep things to themselves. I mean, I may not like it. Let’s be real, I do not like it. I want in on these things. But I understand. I keep things from people too.”

I felt my cheeks flush when I admitted to Rhonda I keep things from people. She
nodded at me, knowing, understanding.

“I guess I’m intrigued about the unknown. I’m committed to it.” I wasn’t sure what that meant or what I was saying.

“You’re committed to it? What do you mean, Ploy, that you’re committed to the unknown?”

“I—uhhh—What do I mean by it? Hmmm…” I twisted in my chair and looked at the clock which wasn’t going to save me from this question.

“I think what I’m trying to say is that I don’t necessarily want to get rid of the unknown. I don’t even think I could if I wanted to. It’s not something I can resolve on my own. It depends on so many other people. I’m committed to the work of the unknown. It drives me. It’s part of me. It informs how I understand myself and my family. The unknown haunts me. The questions of the unknown are always there. In my mind. I don’t know if I’m making any sense. … Yeah, like I said, I’m intrigued by the unknown. I want to sit with it and work through it, and learn how to manage it.”

“And, how do you manage it?” Rhonda pressed.

I told her, “it depends on when someone’s asking.”

“I’m askin’ right now, Ploy.” She never sounded more serious.

“How are you managing the unknown right now?” Rhonda repeated herself.

I told her I was doing everything I could to learn everything possible about Nakhon Phanom. I told her I was fine and had another meeting right after our session so we needed to end a few minutes early.
I opened the auto-generated transcripts from my conversations with Dam and Ae and scoured them for information about Nakhon Phanom. I searched each word doc for what I thought would be relevant keywords: *Nakhon Phanom, Ban Napho, refugee camp, Thailand*, and *Wat*, for a nearby temple that Ae had mentioned she used to visit on occasion. I couldn’t find what I was looking for because I didn’t know what I had hoped to find in the transcripts.

According to the transcripts, Dam and Ae only explicitly mentioned Nakhon Phanom twice across the two oral history interviews, once in each session. It was Ae both times. The first time she mentioned Nakhon Phanom was in response to my first question: “what does migration mean to you and how has it impacted your life personally?” I read her response. Her words were flat coming from a text document and not her mouth.
Migration mean people move from one place to another place that’s not your home—I mean another country… one country to another country. Like, me. It impact me personally because I move from my home in Laos to Thailand and then America. We move a lot. Before we come to America too, we live in a refugee camp in Nakhon Phanom. Is in Thailand… On the border with Laos, my country. Just like Mexico and USA That’s what migration mean to me… I leave my home and come here.

This alludes to what I already knew—that Nakhon Phanom is the capital city of Nakhon Phanom Province in northeastern Thailand, the region known as Isarn that borders Laos to the east. What it didn’t tell me was why someone’s father, my grandfather, would be “stationed” there in 1945. What it didn’t tell me was what he might have be doing there. Or, what it was like in 1975, when Dam and Ae were there, or in 1945 when my grandfather was there and when Por was born.

The second time Ae mentioned Nakhon Phanom was in the soundbite I replayed to make sure I was hearing her right. I read the transcript anyway, as if I needed to confirm that she once lived in the place where Por was born.

My oldest brother tell us that we… we… that we curse my family if we leave Nakhon Phanom together.

Ae couldn’t give me what I wanted, which is to know my family, where they are from, and what they did in the world. Arthit could have been stationed in Nakhon Phanom to
work with community leaders on sustainable rice farming practices. He could have been stationed there as an anthropologist to study the Isarn culture. What if he was an artist and went there to learn from Buddhist sculptors in that region? Or to stand guard on the Thai-Lao border at the Mekong River? Or something worse?

I knew it was unfair to think Ae could offer me any information or even gesture toward what life was like for my relatives. But I kept returning to her words and her stories and I pictured my father and my grandfather there. By the time that Dam and Ae arrived in Nakhon Phanom, mid-80s, Arthit must have been a man in his sixties, assuming he was in his twenties when Por was born. Did my Arthit ever return to Nakhon Phanom? Was he ever stationed there again? Could he have seen Ae? Laid eyes on her? Did she remember what the men who chased young women in the camp looked like?

It was actually Dam who went on about the Thai guards in the camp. How they favored some over others. How they liked gambling, money, cigarettes, and women, and if you had money to give them what they wanted, then you were favored. I looked at the transcript and found the recording. I played back this part of the recording. Dam spoke matter-of-factly, chewing some dried fruit, turning it over in his mouth between words.

“In Laos, I train to be police officer. I go to police school but I never finish. When I reach Ban Napho the guards think I’m too young because I have 20 years but I already know how they think. Is the same as police school, you know? I know what they thinking. That’s how I use to my advantage,” his lips twisted into a shy grin. He was proud of himself for this. Ae rolled her eyes.

“Do not show off!” She told him with a quick, friendly slap on the back. “There is
nothing special about it,” she teased. They both giggled quietly and I leaned in, smiling, eager to see where he’s going with the story.

“It’s true,” Dam assured me. “I know what they thinking. The guards. I’m never police—I work in the airport since we move here—so I’m not police man but in my police school I learn how they think. They think money is powerful. The most powerful. They want it. Give them money and they will get what else they want—cigarettes and women. And they can gamble too. They like to get your money by gambling with people in the camp. You see a man need to feed his family so he gamble with them because he hope he can win. But it’s rare. Most of the time, the man go back to his family with a debt and his wife will beat him.”

He swallowed the dried fruit with an audible gulp and grabbed a handful more from the bowl on the table in front of us. He held the dried mango between two fingers and cupped the other fruits in the balled up palm of his hand. He nibbled on the mango and I mirrored him by picking up a dried mango and eating it too.

“I used to think they bad… especially when I hear them talking about young women. You know, my sister died a few years ago. And—and,” he paused weighing whether or not to say it.

“And is my first time to cry since I came to America. I been here for forty years but I never cry. Only when I find out my sister die. When I’m in the camp and I hear the guard talking about he want to fuck a girl I think about my sister. I had to leave her at home. I cannot bring her with me to Thailand and I regret it. But when I hear that, I’m happy she is home. At home is dangerous and at the camp is dangerous too.”

At the time, I didn’t notice Dam say fuck. It’s not a remarkable word to me, but
when I watched the recording I noted it because of how he’d used it in such a dull and
ordinary way. He said fuck so casually without animosity or without referencing the harm
and violence of older men wanting to fuck young women and girls. In a way, I
appreciated Dam’s callous lament because it didn’t sensationalize the violence and
because it shows how common violence against girls is. Passion and anger sometimes
unintentionally leads to sensationalizing violence, obscuring the ways violence is often
rather mundane.

“I used to hate them,” Dam told us in an even voice, his charged words
mismatched his indifferent tone.

“I think they so bad. I never hate anyone like I hate them. I want to show them
they are bad. I cannot do anything. I don’t even have money to gamble with them. They
ignore me because I’m young. But after I came to America I see the police man is
powerful but different here. They do not care too much about money. The bribe and
gambling and women isn’t working the same here as there. Here they are dangerous too.
They can shoot you anytime—especially a black. They will shoot you in public. I’m
shock! I’m shock a police man can do that in America.” He stopped speaking, emptied
the palm-full of dried fruits into his mouth, started chewing, and then continued.

“I don’t like man like that.” He chewed.

“Who treat others badly. They abuse the power. Then I realize maybe is not the
police man who is bad. I mean—the man can do bad things, yes. But is the school and
money that’s bad. How they get powerful and keep the money and power for themself.
The man just do it because they learn it in school. Like me, they try to teach me to be a
police officer. When I’m young I want to do it because I see they have power. They get
what they want. Other people takes them seriously. But I never finish. I’m never police.”

I closed the video recordings and Googled for relevant information about police or guards in Nakhon Phanom. It brought up a driving map of Thailand with stars on the location of Nakhon Phanom and Bangkok. The city is 740 kilometers from Bangkok—a ten hour drive headed northeast on Route 2 toward Laos.

I searched Google Maps for a similar but interactive map. I zoomed in on Nakhon Phanom, dragging the map and clicking on random icons that appeared. I saw a bus station, hotels, a soccer field, temples, the hospital, countless 7-11s, and the Naga Monument, the description read Riverside statue in the shape of a snake. The Mekong looked like a periwinkle blue river snaking through the middle of the map. A thin black line traveled down the snake’s back, cutting it in two—Thailand and Laos.

I dropped the yellow person next to the monument on Chayangkun Road and strolled the riverwalk through a series of blurry photos. The screen flashed and the colorful map with zigzagging streets was now a 360-degree still photograph. I rotated the screen and saw the clash of highly manicured shrubs and lush green gardens with ratty wiring and rows and rows of parked raggedy mopeds. Multicolored ribbons hung from full trees. The photo caught the ribbons dancing in the wind—each one permanently bent into an organic shape against the green leaves. I continued walking the street, moving parallel with the mountains across the river. The multi-headed serpent towered over the little people caught in the photo. It was cast in brass made to resemble a yellow gold. A garland of red flowers hung at the base of its neck at the exact spot its body splits into seven heads. The creature stood upright on an ornate base so large there is a door that
people can use to enter the base of the serpent. The body of the naga towers the people captured in the stills of Street View. The naga guards the Mekong—it's many faces to the East.

My fingers moved on their own. They opened a new tab and searched for flights from Detroit to Bangkok. My eyes watched but didn’t stop my hands. I searched until I found what I was looking for.
Professor Jennifer Vong

I waited for Jennifer at the bottom of the stairwell at the grab n’ go coffee stand near the back door of the building. In exactly ten minutes, the space would flood with students pouring out of classrooms and racing to the coffee stand like robots out of battery. Jennifer should’ve been there already. I waited for her thinking about how I didn’t do what I said I would do.

After our last meeting, two weeks ago, I opened the email containing the rejection letter one time. I planned to forward it to Jennifer, just as I’d agreed to do, but then I didn’t. I didn’t read the rejection again. I didn’t talk myself out of sending it. I didn’t get lost in the letter trying to understand why the essay was rejected. I didn’t do anything with the email but close it. I didn’t bother. That’s exactly it. I didn’t bother to read it or linger over it. I didn’t bother to send it to Jennifer because I didn’t really plan to revise the paper. I didn’t bother then and I didn’t bother trying to rationalize my inaction.
Jennifer approached me in her larger-than-campus-life getup. Her baggy black pants swung forward and back with every step. The brightly colored silk beads strung around her neck popped from under her unzipped charcoal overcoat. They rested against her flat chest. I smiled and waved her over. She returned my smile, removing her small and pointy sunglasses. She signaled to the coffee stand and where we met.

“Two hot medium coffees please,” she told the bored student worker who dutifully handed over two paper cups. Jennifer tapped her phone on the card reader. It beeped back at her to indicate the payment has been processed.

“I don’t need a lid,” she told the worker refusing to take one. She asked if I want one and I said no too, thanking the student. We moved to the coffee carafes. Jennifer filled her cup to the brim and then took a sip and headed for the backdoor.

“I’ll be right there,” I told her. I splashed cream into my cup and ran after her.

I knew when Jennifer asked if we could grab a coffee during our meeting that it meant she was also going to have a cigarette behind the building at the foot of the door leading to the coffee stand. The first time I ran into her smoking there I sat on the cement stairs and talked. I don’t recall what we talked about but I remember it had nothing to do with work and I enjoyed it. It felt like we were friends—not student and professor. The smell of cigarettes was for me familiar and comfortable though I’d never smoked cigarettes before. It smelled like home.

I met Jennifer at the backdoor a number of times. The first time was the only time it felt like we were friends—all the other times were advising appointments. It didn’t happen often, maybe once every other month, but it was verging on a regular habit since
we meet only twice a month. Jennifer looked polished, but overworked. She needed the smoke and I preferred meeting in the fresh air even if it was just a concrete slab and a metal door behind an old building, where smokers smoked on a smoke-free campus.

I supported rebellion. It was mostly maintenance staff and working-class students and professors back there. It felt like home. There was a makeshift ashtray that the facilities folks left and cleaned out regularly. I liked it.

Jennifer lit her cigarette and cut right to the chase. “I didn’t see the letter from the *Margins* editor. I was hoping to read it before we met today. How are you doing with that?”

I smelled the initial burn of her cigarette and looked up at the sky. The morning sun hadn’t reached our side of the building yet. The cold bit at my fingers. I put my coffee on a concrete step and I wrestled my gloves out of my bag.

“I wanted to talk to you about that…” I began. The gloves were already cold when I pulled them over my hands. I picked my coffee cup off the ground and gulped at it, reaching for warmth. Jennifer alternated between black coffee and a slow burning cigarette with bare hands. I watched her cigarette burn red when she took a puff.

“I planned to send it to you. Really—I did. I know we agreed on it. But I just didn’t do it. I don’t have an explanation.” She looked at me without saying a word. She knew if she kept quiet that I’d keep talking. She sipped and then puffed.

I stumbled wondering how to tell her I don’t give a fuck about the essay without sounding like a raging teenager who doesn’t want to do her homework.

“Honestly,” I told her. “I don’t care about the essay.” I said it plainly, evenly. It was true. I didn’t care about publishing that essay.
“I sent it out for review because that’s what I’m supposed to do. Write and publish. Write and publish.”

Jennifer took a long drag of her cigarette and turned her head to blow the smoke away from us. She remained quiet.

“I’m starting to wonder if I want to be an academic at all. Publishing isn’t for me. Or—what I mean is… what I’m trying to say is I don’t want to write for academics. I want my work to be, first and foremost, for the people I’m working with, the people I’m recording in the oral histories. I want them to have access to the stories about their lives. I want to see the oral history archive come to life. I want people to be able to download the recordings and hear these stories. I want this more than I want to see that essay in print for an academic journal.”

Jennifer nodded and took another drink of her coffee.

I took a drink too and said, “I just want to focus on the oral histories right now.”

The sun emerged from the other side of the building and the light inched toward us.

“I get it,” Jennifer said. She repeated herself.

“I get it. Before Still Critique got off the ground, there was practically nowhere I could publish my photographs as research, as scholarship. Editors wanted me to explain the photographs and connect them to whatever theme they were after at the time—gender, LGB, diaspora, transnational. Every time they asked me for the written work, I had to navigate, first of all, whether I wanted to do it. It’s always a choice Ploy. And, if I decided that I was going to do it, then I was very strategic about how I was going to do it. I never interpreted the photographs for people. I approached the writing like an artist’s
statement and focused on the methodology. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn’t. I agreed to do it because I want to be an academic. The position allows me to teach and work with students like you, and I cultivated publishing spaces where art is conceptualized as a scholarly method and product. That was—that is the work that drives me. The question for you,” she tilted her cigarette toward me, “is whether you want to be an academic. Who you want your audience to be. Community members? Or academics? Or both—it doesn’t have to be one or the other, but you,” again she moved the burning butt closer to me, “you need to get clear with yourself about that. Only you can know who you want your work to speak to.”

The sun was so close to us. It looked warm. I took two steps to the left and I was out of the shade.

“And I’ll say one more thing,” Jennifer continued, “I’m talking too much here but I want to say one more thing. Which you already know. Anyway, it’s worth saying. You can intend for your work to speak to a particular group of people but you won’t know whether it speaks to them until you offer it to them. And when you offer your work to them, you’re not in control. They can do whatever they like to your work. And they will. Or they’ll do nothing with it. That is the beauty of making art. You give up control at some point. You’re offering your art and you’re offering up control. This is the practice of making.”

I inhaled the cold air and then I heard myself talking.

“I haven’t said this to anyone and I didn’t plan to say it now but I don’t want to be an academic. I don’t want to teach. I don’t really like it. I don’t want to write or publish anything if I’m completely honest.”
The words were falling out of my mouth. I couldn’t stop talking. I was admitting these things to the very person who was supposed to write letters of recommendation describing me as an exceptional instructor and researcher. I needed to stop talking. But I didn’t. I continued.

“When it comes to the dissertation, I’m not concerned with getting the credentials of a PhD. I care about creating an open-source archive with all of the oral histories. I get lost in the stories they tell. I could just keep compiling this archive as a career. I could quit the PhD program and be fine. And I might. I’ve thought a lot about quitting and just focusing on the archive.”

Why did I say all of this?

“I’m planning to go to Thailand again.” I didn’t plan to tell her. I wasn’t even sure if I was going to keep the ticket. I wasn’t sure if I was going. I still had another day left to refund the ticket without any fees.

“I need to learn more about the camps that refugees lived in before they were relocated here or Australia or Europe, the camps that people keep mentioning in the oral histories. That my f—”

I finally caught myself. I realized I was saying all of this for myself not for Jennifer. I finally stopped speaking. Jennifer put out her cigarette on the concrete.

“I hear you,” she said. She stepped into the sun too and returned her sunglasses to her face. “It’s great that you’ve given so much thought to these things. It’s a lot to weigh which path to take. I’d be happy to see you as academic, and you’d make a damned good one, if that’s what you want. I’m also happy to see you outside of academia if that’s what you want. And I’ll support you as you make that transition.”
“So do you think I should quit the program?” I was eager for someone with power to suggest leaving.

“That is one-hundred percent your decision. What I will say is that the archive you’re building is your dissertation. You’re nearly finished with the work. Whether you want or need the PhD credential is another issue. But you’ve nearly earned it and it won’t hurt you to get it as you establish the archive. You’re doing the work, and as long as your in the program, you’ll have me and the institution, as fucked up as it is, as resources. That’s not to say that if you quit the program that I won’t be a resource. I will but not in the same way that I am as your PhD advisor and dissertation chair. Only you can decide whether to continue the program, and I encourage you to give it more thought, but at this point,” she said. She opened the door.

“I strongly recommend you consider a leave of absence instead of quitting.”

I followed her into the building where we tossed our empty coffee cups.
Manee was the first person I told. I told her I bought a one-way ticket to Bangkok. It was all very emotional. I said too much but that’s what happens when you surprise yourself.

I told Manee that I don’t know when I’m coming back, and that I did it without thinking, and that I’m not sure what’s gonna happen to my program, or if I’ll ever publish anything or ever finish the dissertation, and that I did something stupid, but that it feels kind of alright, and that I don’t really care what Por thinks or says or does because I’m leaving in a couple of weeks from Detroit and I won’t have to think about him or what he thinks.

“I’ll come help you pack,” was her first response. I melted. I sobbed into the phone, an unusual episode for us both—Manee astounded into silence and me spouting uncaged emotions. She listened to a lifetime of wailing in total silence, maybe five whole minutes. When I caught up with my breath, I told her not to come.

“Don’t do that Manee. I’m fine. I’m just calling to let you know. You were the
first person I thought of.”

“Too late,” she said. “I already booked a flight for tomorrow morning. And before you say anything else to try to stop me, it’s non-refundable. I’m coming. I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon.”

In the middle of the night, I looked up how to cook tom kha kai, one of Manee’s favorite meals, a dish I’d never made before, and as far as I know, was never cooked in our house although we ate it practically every Sunday for dinner growing up.

House of Siam has two large soup vats sitting next to the industrial rice cooker. Each vat contains the same soup every day of every year, except for New Year’s Day when the restaurant was closed. The one on the left, tom kha kai. And the one on the right, tom yam kung. On Sundays at closing, Manee would ladle giant spoonfuls of both soups into old Tupperware dishes my mother had purchased and left behind with us years before. Manee wanted to scoop the tom kha kai that way she could fish out every slimy straw mushroom, her favorite part of the dish. She swallowed them whole, the flesh slick enough to slide down your throat with ease. Manee filled the tupperware to the brim. I watched from the other side of the counter, rolling forks and spoons into disposable paper napkins for the coming week, and encouraged Manee to fit in as many as she could because I wanted extra mushrooms too. They were my favorite too and I didn’t want to fight her at dinner for a satisfying share of mushrooms.

The first recipe video I watched only lasted 25 seconds. I closed it as soon as I saw the cook slicing stocky white button mushrooms into paper thin fragments, no slime or flesh or substance. I found another recipe and bookmarked it.
Manee arrived at three with a duffle bag and a box of chocolate.

“These are for us.” She ripped open the plastic seal on the chocolates and let me pick first. I grabbed one and thanked her for coming. I gestured toward the kitchen, hoping she’d pick up on the smell of galangal. But Manee walked the other way, down the hall and toward my room.

“What’s first? Where should we start?” She asked.

“How about we start with food? I made—” I tempted her.

“Nahh, I just ate. I’m here to help pack up so let’s do it. I leave the day after tomorrow.” She stuck her head in my room and then looked back at me with a wrinkled nose. She walked back down the hall, squatted at the base of my wall-climbing pothos and fingered the roots.

“We have a lot of shit to do. Let’s just start. What are you gonna do with this beauty?” I made a peace sign with two fingers and pretended to snip. She frowned and I retrieved a pair of planting shears from the kitchen.

Together, we cut the pothos down to size. I sliced every three-to-four nodes and handed the clipping to Manee who placed it in a recycled peanut butter jar with lukewarm water from the tap.

A knock bellowed down the hall.

“Who is that?” Manee asked and I told her I had no idea.

I peeled the gardening gloves off my hands and shook off any dirt by patting the front of my jeans, a faded pair of lifeless pants with tears at the knees and crotch, the ones I wear when I’m not expecting company, the ones I wear to cook and clean.
A young woman stood in front of me when I opened the door. She looked oddly familiar. Perhaps, a former student.

“Hey,” she said, waving. “I’m here for the coffee table.”

Manee peeked over my shoulder and pressed her body between me and the half-open door.

“Hi, can we help you?” Manee asked. The woman repeated herself.

“… I’m the one from Craigslist.” She raised her eyebrows and her face wrinkled. She glanced at the baby pink smartwatch on her wrist. Manee was tapping my shoulder.

“You said I could pick up the coffee table at 5.”

“The coffee table, yes!” I remembered now. “It’s right here.” I opened the door and she pointed at the table in the living room behind me like I didn’t know my own coffee table.

“Do you want to take a look at it first? I’m asking for $40.”

The woman left with the coffee table, and the apartment already looked abandoned. The coffee table was gone and the pothos was no longer trailing the hallway. I couldn’t remember what the place looked like when I moved in, what it looked like before I’d filled it with my things, when it was empty. Three years didn’t seem long enough to forget and yet it was. It felt like the place had always been mine. It wasn’t actually mine; the apartment belonged to Dave, the landlord who was only slightly older than me.

The first and only time I met Dave, he handed me the keys before we’d signed the lease.

“It’s yours, if you want it,” Dave said like he was giving away leftover cake at the
end of a birthday party. He was young, in his early thirties, and eager to have his first tenants. I did want the place and took the keys, promising to complete the paperwork as soon he sent it to me. He waved a hand and told me a handshake would do for today. He extended his right hand. It looked like a child’s hand. Fresh and not yet worn. I remember wondering what it would be like to be given a family home and to have the mindset and resources to flip it into a multifamily rental property and then hand the keys over to a complete stranger. His casualty peeved me. I slipped my hand in his and squeezed firmly. Dave smiled and I walked away with the keys in my pocket.

Dave was the easiest landlord, which is in part why I loved living in that apartment. He never popped up unexpectedly. I’d never even seen him after he gave me the keys. The lease was delivered and signed electronically and the rent payments were managed online. He was responsive when I needed something from him, like the time when the water pressure in the shower slowed to a halt and the tap in the bathroom sink barely flowed. Dave replied to my text message within seconds and a plumber appeared in my doorway within the hour. He always sent someone to do the work for him. It was incredible how quickly things could be done if you paid someone decent money to do it. One time, during that peculiar transition from spring to summer, a swarm of oversized black ants took over the kitchen window. Rather than calling Dave, I made an ant trap from cleaning supplies and tin foil that I saw Gold make one summer with Noi. When the trap didn’t work, I told Dave and he had every apartment in the house treated for pests and insects that evening.

For the first year, the lease was set for twelve months. After that, it was renewable by month. We never officially renewed the lease. The unspoken assumption was that the
place was mine as long as I wanted it.

I wanted to give Dave an advanced notice that I was leaving. It would give him time to find another tenant with a shorter gap between occupancies. I suspected he didn’t need my rent money but the extra lead time felt like a courtesy and a thank you for three good years. The departure came so abruptly. I couldn’t offer more than two weeks’ notice.

I thought about calling him. Manee said I was oddly traditional in that way, thinking that more formal matters warranted a phone call rather than a text message. But I decided not to call. Worry from our first interaction lingered. I didn’t want him to flip from casual to malicious if something he didn’t expect happened. I also wanted it in writing, even if it was a text message, just in case.

While Manee set up the rice pot in the kitchen, I sent Dave a text message explaining this would be my last month. That I would be out before December first. He replied a moment later saying thanks for the head up and good luck.

Manee pulled the container of rice from the pantry and set it on the counter next to the rice pot. As Manee scooped the rice, I grabbed at it, letting the grains fall between my fingers. A few stuck between my fingers. I wiggled my fingers until there was a single grain of rice in my hand. It weighed next to nothing. I closed my eyes and tried to feel the weight. Nothing.

I continued sifting the rice in my hands over and over again until Manee pulled the rice pot from the counter and took it over to the sink. She gave the rice pot a shake and then turned on the tap. We switched places. We reverted back to our childhood kitchen where I washed the rice and she turned on the rice cooker.
I took her spot at the sink and let the pot fill with water. The water turned a cloudy gray from the starch. I picked up handfuls of rice with both hands and then squeezed my fists as hard as I could. I unfurled my hands to reveal a mountain range of wet uncooked rice the exact shape of my fist.

“Manee, look,” I said. My hands were in the air, palms open and flat so she could see the mountains of rice like Por used to.

“It’s Everest,” she laughed.

“No,” I corrected her, “it’s Kilimanjaro.”

Manee grabbed a fistful of rice and made her own mountain range. We both laughed until we had tears in our eyes.

I turned on the tap and washed both mountain ranges away. I rinsed the rice two more times. Just like Por taught us to. Any less than three times risks contaminating the rice and the texture wouldn’t be fluffy enough. Any more than three times risks diluting the aroma. The first two rinses I emptied most of the water, but on the third rinse I drained as much as possible. It is a delicate balance—releasing the water from the washed rice.

I handed the washed rice back to Manee, telling her I still couldn’t make rice without a measuring cup. She laughed.

When I made rice, I measured a perfectly portioned ratio of rice and water. I ran an index finger over the measuring cup of rice to make the measurement even, something I saw my mother do with flour when she baked Christmas cookies. Manee was different. She was like Por. They didn’t use measuring cups. She measured with her hands, a technique I only tried once and failed at. The rice was too soggy.
Manee returned the rice to the rice cooker, closed the lid, and hit start. The cooker beeped and a countdown began.

A second beep sounded from the living room. It was my phone. There was an email notification.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. It was an auto-generated email confirming Por’s immigration documents had been received.

We ate our tom kha kai on the couch and made lists of what else to sell, what to give away, and what to trash. We talked for hours about nothing of significance. It was wonderful. We laughed and we had seconds and thirds of the soup.

“This is pretty damn good,” Manee said. She spooned the very last bite. I told her it was surprisingly easy to make. The hardest part was finding galangal, but luckily I’d stocked up last time I bought some and froze it. She nodded.

“You have to tell Por you’re leaving. Did you tell him yet?”

I shook my head and said I will. She squinted at me.

My phone rang again.

“Here he is now…” I said with sarcasm. He texted me saying he got an email confirming his documents were received and that I needed to set up the portal for him so we can get the updates.

“This is the shit I’m talking about.” I scoffed. Manee didn’t know what I was talking about.

“Nevermind,” I said. I didn’t want to be the one to bend the unspoken family rule of shielding her from the bullshit.
“You can tell me. I want to know.” She grabbed my phone to read his messages, but my phone was already locked. She dropped it on the couch between us.

“There’s a lot of shit you don’t know, and I know it’s not your fault that you don’t know. It’s not that I want to keep it from you. I want to tell you… most of the time anyway, but sometimes I think it’ll just be easier for both of us if I don’t.”

“Well,” Manee said, “whatever this is clearly isn’t easy for you. Tell me, goddammit.” She took both of my hands in hers. “You can say it.”

I told her what I told Rhonda; that I felt like I became the mother after our mother left, which is fucked up because I’m a daughter and because mothers shouldn’t have to do everything for fathers anyway. And that Por never asked Manee for shit. He always came to me. I admitted that he probably comes to me because he knows I can’t say no, and she laughed at that. We both did. And she said she had no problem telling him no, and we laughed again. She held me and I fell asleep with my head in her lap.

For two days, Manee didn’t leave my apartment. She came to help me pack and that’s exactly what she did. She made lists of what to do with certain things, designated a spot for each list—the bedroom for things to keep, one side of the living room for things to sell, and the other for things to give away. I thanked her profusely, and I promised, when she asked, to keep things open between us, to tell her the truth, to share the burden of things with her, to remember we are family. I promised, but I still hid Por’s calls and texts, begging for updates on his document status. She was already doing too much with all the packing and sorting.

When she was at the apartment, I called him from the library yesterday to teach
him how to login to the immigration portal himself so he could leave me alone.

“There’s no need to check every couple of hours,” I explained.

“Just do it for me,” he said, refusing to even pull up the website. “You faster na.”

He was right. I was faster and I realized this was my leverage. He needed me and I could set the boundaries.

“I’ll check once when I wake up and once when I go to bed,” I told him coldly.

He told me to call the phone number on the website to ask for an update.

“No ka Por,” I told him. “There’s no need to call them. If they have an update, they will post it in the portal. It’s the easiest way for everyone. For them and for us. And probably fastest too na.”

He clucked at me and hung up the phone. There was nothing else for us to do.

When it was time for Manee to leave, I called a car and she left with her duffle bag and two plant clippings she promised to try to keep alive. We hugged at the door and I watched her climb into the car from my front window. I tipped the driver using my phone and settled into to the couch.

It was time to tell Por I was leaving. I purposefully waited to tell him until I reached a point where I couldn’t back out. It wasn’t my first time to keep plans and decisions from Por I knew he wouldn’t approve of. These decisions ranged in consequence and importance.

The decisions I intentionally concealed were the ones likely to come up in regular conversation. No need to hide the fact that I fucked my first college roommate. That wasn’t going to come up in a phone call with Por. It wasn’t that I specifically chose not to
tell him I’m attracted to women—he didn’t know anything about the men I’d been involved with either. I didn’t tell him anything about the people I was attracted to or slept with. We never once spoke about dating or sex. He never asked and I never offered.

My time to degree, however, was always a regular topic of conversation. Something I felt the need to hide. As a second-year college student, I changed my major from psychology to interdisciplinary studies. When applying to colleges as a senior in high school, I scribbled in applications that I planned to major in psychology. It seemed like middle ground—an arm's length from my love for social studies and another arm’s length from the expectation that Asian kids would become doctors. I was cognizant of the Asian stereotype that Asian parents wanted their kids to become doctors or lawyers, although Por didn’t impress these wishes on me or Manee. He simply wanted us to work and make money. I convinced myself he secretly wanted one or both of us to become a doctor or a lawyer. Psychologists, I’d reasoned, could become clinical doctors or phds.

In Intro to Psych, the professor introduced the class to various subfields within the discipline. The course leaned more toward the scientific than the social. I trudged through the behavioral psych and the cognitive, neurological psych lessons. Weeks four and five focused on consciousness, a new concept I wanted to spend more time with, get to know on more familiar terms, and weeks seven and eight focused on cultural psychology. In the final course reflection paper, I elaborated on consciousness and how it intrigued me. How I wanted to think more about how culture shapes consciousness. The following semester, I took a course called DuBosian Double Consciousness. I learned that the professor was trained as a sociologist, but she wasn’t in the sociology department. She was in something called interdisciplinary studies. I asked her to help me change majors and to be
my advisor.

Two weeks before graduation, I finally called Por to tell him I’d been studying interdisciplinary studies all along.

“Daaaamn,” he breathed into the phone. “What you gonna do now? Time to graduate.”

“Graduate school,” I chirped with unknowing enthusiasm. Earlier that week I’d accepted an offer for a masters program.

“What’s that? More school?” Por prodded.

“Ka.” I confirmed. I kept my answer short because I too wasn’t exactly sure what exactly grad school entailed either. Both my academic advisor and a trusted professor suggested I apply for grad programs because I’d be a good fit. Fit for what, I wasn’t sure of, but I did anyway because I didn’t have any job prospects at the time. I applied to four grad programs and got offers from two.

A similar thing happened when I was completing the masters program. My thesis advisor encouraged me to apply for doctoral programs which I did. And again, I told Por on the eve of graduation that I wasn’t getting a job, but continuing school.

The paperwork for the leave of absence was surprisingly simple, a single form with four signatures—mine, Jennifer’s, the program director, and the Dean of the Graduate School. The center of the page was empty, a white block where I had to explain the need for a leave of absence. I suspected that an impromptu flight purchase to Thailand was not reason enough for the university to grant a leave of absence. A sob story about my father’s pending immigration case might work but I felt icky knowing I’d be feeding my
father’s story to the university.

I wrote two uncomplicated sentences about taking care of a family member and printed it. The university required wet ink signatures. I did the rounds and no one pushed for more information or questioned my motives. It was approved within 48 hours. The process was so simple I worried I’d done something wrong.

I knew that if I told Por before making the leave official, then I risked being guilted into staying—a risk I didn’t want to take.

I sat back against on the couch. The apartment suddenly felt empty with only me and a few lingering piles of my stuff. Everything we planned to sell had sold, but the tattered couch, in two days.

I typed out a brief message to Por saying I was taking a leave of absence from my PhD program and going to Thailand. I tapped send, a consequential move that couldn’t be reversed. I placed the phone on the floor next to me and laid down. I buried my hands in my face. I tried to be still. Regret pulsed through my legs and into the beat of my heart. My left calf spasmed. I could have called, given more context, more information, details.

I sat back up and reached for the phone. My fingers moved quickly. I typed out a second message explaining that I’d be in Thailand doing some research. That sounded important. Reasonable, and most importantly, believable.

Por replied after midnight. The message was short, one word, no punctuation—explain.

I don’t.
Jihyun Park

I showed up at Jihyun’s apartment juggling three pothos clippings in my hands. The wet smell of soil permeated the air. I knocked. Jihyun opened the faded emerald color door.

“These are for you.” I transferred the clipped plants into her clean and manicured hands.

“What’d you do?” She screeched. “Don’t tell me you cut down that gorgeous plant in your hallway…” Jihyun looked at the plants for an answer. Her perfectly made up and lined eyes darted from the plants in her hands to my face. Before I could verbally admit to cutting the pothos, she saw the answer on my face—the corners of my mouth stretched flat, my teeth stacked, and the visible tension in my neck jumped off my body.

“Oh my god.” She said theatrically, a beat between each word, stroking the clippings. She gestured for us to enter the apartment. She hung her head as I passed through the doorway as if a relative had died. She cupped her hands and held the clippings to her chest. In her hands, in her living room, the clippings looked like they
shrunk ten sizes. Everything appeared smaller in Jihyun’s presence. The room collapsed
around her. The furniture fell at her feet. Her living room answered to her.

In her apartment, Jihyun looked bare, stripped of her iconic clothes and image. Her bob was pulled back into a flat ponytail at the nape of her pale neck. Her hair was so short that wisps escaped the elastic hair band, resting on her neck. Her face was plain and coated only with black eyeliner. She looked like a novice from the temple in her alabaster house clothes made of organic cotton. It was rare to see Jihyun like this—an intimacy I only encountered as a visitor in her home.

Ordinariness suited her. Jihyun prided herself on being anything but ordinary, that in her ordinariness, which was so uncommonly witnessed, she was extraordinary. I preferred her ordinariness. Though it wasn’t clear if what I preferred was actually seeing Jihyun this way or the rarity of it, that it was me who got to see her this way.

Jihyun asked me again why I cut the hallway pothos, and I suggested we sit down to talk. She agreed and moved to the kitchen. I followed her past the table into the kitchen where it smelled sour and witchy, the kind of kitchen I found comforting. We stood in the small, crowded space surrounded by second-hand shelving units filled with screw-top jars of nuts, spices, and teas. Each unit was systematically organized—the various chili peppers and powders on the middle shelf, the bottles of liquid ingredients on top, organized by color from light to dark, and the packages of rice and noodles on the bottom shelf.

She placed the plant clippings on the windowsill above the sink.

In the corner where the teas were organized by levels of caffeine, Jihyun pressed a blue button and an electric kettle whirred. She asked me what kind of tea I was in the
mood for and I told her white, remembering from the last time I visited that she
introduced me to a delicious floral and fruity white tea called silver needle. As the water
began to boil, Jihyun pulled out a black ceramic teapot and two matching miniature
teacups out from the cabinet above the kettle.

When the kettle beep, beep, beeped, Jihyun poured a dash of the steaming water
into the teapot. She swirled the water in the teapot and poured it into the sink, leaving the
empty teapot steaming. She pulled out a metal sieve for the tea leaves from the cabinet.
Scanning the rows of tea jars with her fingers, she picked one that was nearly empty. I
silently hoped it was the silver needle again. I was embarrassed to ask for it.

Jihyun used a small wooden spoon to scoop the leaves out of the jar and to pour
them into the sieve. After replacing the jar, she dropped the tea into the kettle, filled it
with water, and closed it with a lid.

We reconvened in the living room and settled on her sofa with the tea steeping on
the table before us. She’d prepared a tea ceremony for us. She set the teapot next to the
matching teacups, which was placed next to a black and white silk cloth folded into a
crisp rectangle.

“I did a thing.” I announced, casting a smile at Jihyun who sat next to me on the
couch. I’d smiled on purpose to convey good news was coming, realizing that my request
to visit her and talk may have indicated otherwise. Jihyun didn’t return my smile. I didn’t
take this as a necessarily grave or morose response. I might’ve read it this way if I didn’t
already know her so well.

Jihyun doesn’t smile out of courtesy. She smiles only when she actually feels
joyful, like when she’s laughing so hard that her head falls back and her mouth gapes
open and upward into a wry smile she cannot contain. She’s either totally cool and collected or bubbly and animated—one or the other as if she has a switch on her emotions. She reminded me of Por in that way.

“It’s official,” I continued. “The grad school accepted my request for a leave of absence. After this semester, I’m outta here.” I heard the words leave my smiling, drying mouth.

“I’ll be back sometime next year. I’m going to Thailand but I’ll be back after that.” I watched Jihyun’s eyes scan my face, my body. Her eyes moved methodically. They were the only part of her that moved. They traced my form. I straightened my back to match her impeccable posture, imagining a string pulling my shoulders up and back.

I told her that the leave of absence was capped at two years, but that I probably won’t be in Thailand for that long. I explained that I purchased a one-way ticket and that I’d have a better sense of how long I’d stay once I was back in Thailand and got to Nakhon Phanom. My only current job prospect with a reasonable and reliable source of income was teaching English, which, I told her, I wasn't qualified for since I didn’t know the difference between grammar and syntax.

I looked to Jihyun for a response. She stayed quiet. I needed her wise words. Her hands rested in her lap, folded. We sat there like an elder and child. I was the child, impatient, eager, and overzealous, waiting for an elder to offer counsel. Jihyun was the calm and wise elder who sat in silence to test my willpower and to show me that I had more willpower than I gave myself credit for. She was grounded and judicious.

A slow, white fog began to rise out of the teapot. Jihyun saw me eyeing the teapot and she turned her attention to it. She poured a small portion of tea into one cup, brought
it to her nose, inhaled, and then tasted it, consuming the whole portion at once.

“Let’s begin.” She nodded at the empty teacup in her hand and served us both tea by filling our cups in three rounds. She poured a third of my cup, then hers. She added another third to mine, then hers. Until finally, she filled them both. Jihyun handed me my tea and I thanked her, warming my hands with the cup.

I took a sip. It tasted like pears poached in tea, the sweetness stronger than the green of the leaves. It was the same silver needle tea she gave me last time but that I didn’t want to ask for. Childishly, I wanted her to intuit what I wanted and she had.

I drank the tea slowly wanting to sit with the flavor longer. Jihyun drank her tea in three sips and then set her cup back on the table before us. She finally spoke.

“Good for you.” If it had been anyone else wielding those words in this situation, I’d think it was from a pit of selfishness. It was a phrase I’d never heard her say before but I felt like she meant it—that it was good for me to take a break from the program. She knew I’d needed a break. I nodded, sipping my tea. Yes, it was good for me.

Jihyun continued, “You deserve time away from this place—from your dissertation. Give yourself permission to be away. To really be away. I mean, don’t go there and then sulk that you should be here doing your work.”

I shook my head to show I didn’t plan on sulking in Thailand.

“I know you,” she said chuckling. Her tone shifted to her yoga voice.

“Leave behind everything holding you here. Only you know what you need in this season of your life. Trust that you know, and follow your intuition.”

These were the words I longed to hear from Jihyun. The words I expected and came to her apartment to hear.
I swallowed the last of my tea and set the cup on the table next to Jihyun’s empty cup. She unfolded the embroidered silk cloth and covered the used tea set with the black side up.

She offered me closure. When I told Por, he demanded an explanation that I was unwilling to give. I didn’t reply to his text message and I wasn’t going to.

On my way out, I thanked Jihyun and asked if she’s willing to take any more of my plants.

“I’ll take as many of your beautiful little plants as you’re willing to part with. But of course, you’re coming back so I’ll return them to you then.” She furrowed her brows, as if to say you better come back. She wanted me to come back. It felt good to be wanted knowing that I was leaving her, knowing that I had the power to return, to give her what she wanted.

Here it was, another role reversal. Jihyun was the one being left behind. Typically, Jihyun was the one to leave. During the long winter and summer breaks she traveled home to South Korea or visited friends who live in worldly places like Collioure and Sarawak. I too traveled when I could, though not nearly as often or for as long. I never kept her waiting.

One time, because I didn’t have winter plans, Jihyun invited me to tag along on a trip to Nicaragua to visit her friend from film school. Her friend was shooting an autoethnographic film in her hometown Managua on a Fulbright. I went and came back wishing every winter break could be spent in Central America eating plantains and drinking macuá. I tasted macuá only once more when Jihyun and I attended the reception
for her friend’s film screening and the bartender’s specialty was Nicaraguan cocktails.

I was used to being the one in our friendship who was left behind. This is the first time Jihyun would be here without me. It never occurred to her, or me, that I might leave one day—leave without a PhD, leave on my own. That I might be the one to leave us behind. But Jihyun was right. I did plan to come back, and I wanted Jihyun to be here with my plants.

At the door, she asked how Jen responded to my request for a leave of absence.

I told her she was the one who gave me the idea. Jihyun handed me my coat.

“It just came out. I didn’t plan to tell her I was thinking of quitting but a few weeks ago it slipped and she told me to consider a leave of absence instead. She thinks the break will help me decide whether I want to finish the program, which I think I do.”

I wanted Jihyun to know my plan was to return, but that I might not. Part of me didn’t want her to expect me, to wait for me, and another part loved her for wanting me to come back. I opened the door and we were met with a rush of cold air.

“Take care of those little plants, please?” I said.

“I will. When do you leave?”

“Two weeks. Then, my flight leaves from Detroit two weeks after that on December eleventh.”

We hugged and I closed the door behind me.
On the way to my last session with Rhonda, my phone buzzed in my coat pocket. It was a flurry of text messages from Por. We hadn’t talked in ten days. I stopped one block from Rhonda’s office to read the messages. They came in one after another.

_The letter from uscis come in the mail na_
_Says I have to go to Detroit for fingerprint or something like that on dec 11_
_Have to be there at 730 in the morning_
_Damn_
_Have to leave by 630 na_

My phone kept vibrating.

_Don’t worry about me_
_I go with Golf_
_I don’t need your help_
_Just telling you na_

I closed my phone, returned it to my pocket, and walked the last block to Rhonda’s apartment. He said he didn’t need my help. He said he was only telling me, just
delivering information. I left him on read—information received, no reply necessary.

I arrived at Rhonda’s right on time and she had two cups of tea waiting for us on the table between the couch where I sat and her burgundy armchair.

“Thanks for the tea, Dr. Williams.” I picked up my cup and sipped it.

Last week I’d emailed Rhonda to let her know that our next session would be our last. I told her about my leave of absence and Thailand. She sent a formal reply, brief and clinical. It read:

Ploy,
Thank you for notifying me of this change.
We will review the discharge process together at our final meeting next week.
RW

I was curious to know Rhonda’s opinion about my decision to leave, to go to Thailand. There were no clues in her email so I tracked for them when we were together. She’d never had tea waiting for us before. I didn’t know if was a clue, and if it was, what it might mean. I listened for a change in her pace or tone. I watched for signs of disappointment in my decision to suddenly leave. I also looked for, hoped for signs of approval. It wasn’t lost on me that leaving may have been an outcome of the work we’d done together. Taking a leave of absence was a way for me to say no to the expectation that I should stay. I hoped she’d recognized my leave as a no, a testament to our work together.

Holding the hot cup of tea my hands, I wondered, if Rhonda saw this coming? Did she know before I knew that I was going to leave? Had our conversations shaped my decision to take a leave of absence? It certainly had but not in a specific way that I could point to and say that’s why I booked a one-way flight to Thailand on a weeknight when I
was completely sober and working on my dissertation.

Rhonda never suggested I stop or even pause the program. I began replaying our
visits in my mind.

Had she led me in this direction?

When and where did our directions converge?

How much of this was my decision?

To what extent was this decision as a shared one?

Why was I inclined to share the responsibility of this decision with someone?

With Rhonda?

Where did my impulse to share decision making power come from?

Was this a self-destructive tendency to negate my own agency and power to say
no? To think independently?

Or was this a philosophical framework in which I was grasping at an idealistic
collective in which all things are a manifestation of shared energy?

I returned to the room, using a tactic Rhonda taught me.

Identify something you could smell—tea.

Identify something you could see—my hands.

Identify something you could feel—a warm cup.

I looked up at Rhonda who was browsing, what I soon learned were, the discharge
documents on her tablet.

I continued to identify things I could see and smell in the room. Rhonda wasn’t
the kind of home keeper who decorated the place according to season. There were no
winter decorations—no twinkle lights in or on the house, no evergreens. In the fall, she
didn’t display pumpkins on the porch. Everything in Rhonda’s house, from what I could see of it, when I passed through the hallway to reach her office in the back corner of her home, remained the same. It was comforting over the last year and a half.

Rhonda began with the discharge, which was not where I expected her to begin. I anticipated the discharge at the end—when she discharged me. She handed the tablet to me.

“Let’s begin at the end, Ploy. Shall we?” Her voice was smooth and matched the vinyl low-fi beats playing behind me. There was nothing else for me to say, but sure. I nodded and took the tablet from her.

She explained she was showing me the discharge documents that summarized our work together and what she called “the nature of the discharge.” I couldn’t remember having received any discharge documents from my two previous therapists. Both therapists had mentioned discharge with such monotony it made the paperwork sound like a tedious task that would be of no interest to me. But as I held Rhonda’s discharge documents in my hands, my interest piqued. I wanted to know what she thought of me. I was most eager to see what she wrote about “the nature of the discharge” since she hadn’t said anything remotely interesting in the email. We still hadn’t talked about why I was leaving. What did she know about the nature of me leaving?

I scrolled and scanned the document quickly. I was mindful not to swipe too quickly or eagerly. I pretended to read the document carefully, but I didn't read much of anything. I nodded here and there. The third and final page listed “the conditions of discharge.”
Client is leaving the metropolitan area.

The description was as sterile and empty as her email. It said nothing of the nature of my leaving, only that I am leaving. Irritation surged through me. I sat up, leaned my back against the sofa, and looked at Rhonda for an answer.

“Discharge documents are usually kept from clients,” she said. “As a feminist psychiatrist and psychologist who values transparency and prioritizes client access to information about their mental wellbeing, I always share my discharge documentation with my clients. I offer it as closure. I find this closure process particularly important, Ploy, because terminating our work together means that I will no longer be part of your support system, and for some people, that adjustment can be quite unsettling. Going through this process together also models a form of closure, something we all yearn for, and need from a psychological perspective. I like to show my clients a meaningful way to end things when it’s time. Many of us struggle with endings and closure.”

I drank my tea to keep myself busy. Rhonda asked if I had any questions about the discharge. I had plenty. What did she think of my decision to leave? Was it irresponsible? Empowering? The right decision? Was it an indication of my mental strength or frailty?

I told her I couldn’t think of any questions. She waited for me to retract the lie. I looked at the painting behind her to avoid eye contact. Rhonda cocked her head to meet my eyes. I looked back at her and wondered what she saw when she looked into my eyes. Hers were dark brown, the color of wet earth. They were warm with tenderness and framed with red stucco colored glasses. Rhonda’s eyes held generosity and kindness. I’d punished her in my thoughts for that. Doing so really only punished me. Rhonda was
gentle with me in ways I didn’t know I needed. I was grateful for that. It took me until I
met her to realize I needed soft relationships. I didn’t know they existed.

“Ploy,” Rhonda said evenly. I smiled when I heard her say my name. She returned
my smile with her eyes, the corners turned up like a mouth. She closed them briefly and
exhaled. I mirrored her.

“Well then, if you don’t have any questions about the discharge process, let’s
move along. We have a lot to discuss. How about we start with the obvious? Hm?”

I nodded silently, waiting for her to ask the obvious question about my decision to
leave. I wanted to hear her say it.

“How are you approaching closure as you prepare for your leave of absence?”

It was not the question I expected. Rhonda read the confusion on my face and she
asked the same question in less formal terms.

“In other words, how are you wrapping things up around here?” Her tone and
voice turned slightly casual and it felt like an attempt to dumb things down for me.

“For example, Ploy, have you told people yet that you’re leaving? It’s a rather
sudden decision. And if so, how have those conversations been going?”

I told her I shared the news with several people already—my advisor, landlord,
best friend, and family. I explained the varying degrees of support. My advisor supported
the decision fully. The landlord was completely indifferent. Jihyun was encouraging. Por
was unsurprisingly impolite which I dismissed and ignored. Manee came for a long
weekend to help me pack and said she wanted to visit me in Thailand.

“At first, I was nervous to start telling people because it was a decision that
seemingly came out of nowhere. But when I started telling people, I realized they weren’t
as surprised as I thought they would be. They weren’t shocked. I don’t know why but I expected them to be shocked. For the most part, they respected my decision.”

“How did it feel for you to feel respected in your decision?”

“Good.”

Rhonda paused, put her pen in the crook of her notepad, and waited for me to say more.

“Yeah, I mean, it feels good to have their support and to have their trust and confidence that my decision is final and that I’m capable of making the best decision for myself. No one tried to convince me not to or warned me it was a bad idea.” I stopped there, sensing if I kept going I would lie or at least omit Por’s text message demanding an explanation. If I didn’t have to lie or omit anything, it sounded like I had things under control, that I was in a good place.

Rhonda reflected back that the confidence of the people closest to me in my decision to leave demonstrates my power to make decisions, announce them, and carry them out. She told me I have a support system that trusts and empowers me to make my own decisions. Por’s message flashed in my mind. Explain. His response was the only one that irked me.

“Ploy, you mentioned that your sister may visit you while you’re in Thailand. I’m sure that would be lovely. Apart from that, you won’t have the support system that you have here with you when in Thailand. Have you thought about what support you’ll lean on when you’re away?”

I hadn’t thought about that but I wasn’t willing to admit that. Not when Rhonda was so close to seeing me off and onto a bright and shiny future, an empowering one, in
which I learned to say no. I wanted to leave on good terms like a hatchling with a newfound power to fly, not one still struggling to navigate the skies.

“That’s a good question, Dr. Williams,” I assured her, “I’m still piecing all of that together but I can easily keep in touch with everyone by phone and video chat these days. It’s not the same as sitting down for tea with someone but it’s not like they won’t be part of my life while I’m in Thailand.”

Rhonda nodded in agreement and then she wrote something down in her notebook. Maybe what I said wasn’t enough. I didn’t mention her or any other psychologist. I continued, enumerating what I’d learned from her and how grateful I was. I told her how I truly believed coming to the decision to take a leave of absence was shaped directly by our work together. Rhonda listened intently without interruption. I couldn’t tell if her silence and slanted grin meant she was moved by my appreciation or if she was patronizing me. I was doing again—precluding myself from receiving Rhoda’s kindness.

A similar thing happened when I saw Jennifer last week. We both knew that meeting was going to be the last time we saw each other before I left for Thailand. The end of the semester, a rush and blur. While discussing my plans to visit local temples and historic sites in Nakhon Phanom, an outpouring of gratitude for Jen overtook me. We met behind the building again. The air cold and damp, but the sky unusually bright for a late fall day. The sun glaring above. Jen used one hand to cover the cigarette hanging from her mouth and used the other to light it. I instantly smelled the burnt tobacco.

Jennifer held the pack in my direction offering me a cigarette. Fuck it, I thought
and took the pack from her hand. A cigarette poured out. I followed her lead, held the butt between my lips, and lit. My whole mouth tasted ashy. The taste wasn’t as satisfying as the smell. The buzz came faster than expected.

The excitement of leaving gave me courage and doing something new with someone I admired gave me confidence to tell Jen how much I appreciated her. It felt like the first time we met behind the building when it felt like we were peers, friends—not advisor and advisee. With every puff of the cigarette came a cloud of gratitude.

“I appreciate you taking me on as a student before I even knew what my research would be about.”

“And thanks for telling me about your experience as a grad student.”

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you as my advisor. I would have left years ago. To be honest, I’m surprised I made it this far along.” I was the only one talking.

“In fact, I’m grateful I accidentally told you I was thinking about quitting because you suggested a leave of absence which I was unaware of. And which happened to be exactly what I need right now.”

By the time the butt between my fingers was down to the last drag, I looked at Jennifer's which was only halfway gone. I finished my cigarette twice as fast as she did. She leaned on the building, her left shoulder up against the wall, listening to my bizarre monologue of gratitude. I put out my cigarette on the sidewalk where the concrete was stained with ash from previous smokers.

Jennifer was quiet the whole time, slowly taking in her cigarette one drag at a time. She probably got a kick out of watching me smoke a cigarette for the first time and consuming it so quickly. I put on quite the show. When I was done and there was nothing
left for me to say, Jennifer took in a long drag and held it. She exhaled telling me that she’d be seeing me sooner or later, whatever the circumstances—meaning we’d see each other even if I didn’t come back to finish the program.

I heard her say the words “I’ll be seeing you again” but I didn’t believe her. It felt like this was a permanent goodbye.

Rhonda glanced at the clock on the wall and pivoted with what she assumed would be an easy and casual question to conclude our session.

“What are your plans between now and your flight to Thailand?”

“I’ll be in Toledo for something like ten days before my flight leaves from Detroit. It’s about an hour to the airport from where I grew up.”

“Are you staying with your father?” My back arched with tension and I had to straighten myself out in my seat.

“No,” I told her, “I’m staying with a family friend instead. My father and I aren’t communicating at the moment.” Rhonda looked at the clock again. We were out of time. There wasn’t time to explain that the day after I told Por I was unwilling to call the immigration hotline to ask for updates, he demanded I do even more tasks. He wanted me to call the pharmacy or to order something online that he saw in an ad while streaming his volleyball games. I said no every time. The more he demanded, the more I refused until I stopped answering his calls and texts. Eventually he stopped calling and texting. It had been ten days. No calls, no texts. Complete radio silence. It frightened me. His silence was more demanding than his requests.

I shouldn’t have told Rhonda in our last minutes together that Por and I were no
longer speaking, but I did. It contradicted the empowering story I wanted to leave her with. I watched her weigh how to respond to what I was telling her with only a minute left of our time. Her chest was visibly rising and falling in front of me. She stood up.

“Ploy, you are very capable of making the best decision for yourself. That includes deciding who is part of your life and on what terms.”

With that, she ended our session together, our relationship. She explained that I would receive final copies of the discharge paperwork for my own purposes by email within a week. She didn’t offer to stay in contact or for me to reach out when I was back in town. Rhonda walked me to the front door, holding her organic cotton house coat close to her chest, her dreads loosely wrapped in an oversized bun with a silk scarf. I turned to thank her again and she smiled at me. Every part of her softened.

As I passed through the threshold of the front door of her home, she repeated, “You are capable Ploy.”
The winter flight to Detroit was an uneventful one-hour and forty-five-minute trip over dormant corn and cranberry farms and Lake Michigan.

I found P’Petch waiting for me in the warmth of her Silver Lexus SUV on the other side of the sliding glass Detroit Metro arrivals door.

“Bumpy flight?” P’Petch asked as I settled into the passenger seat and buckled my seatbelt. I nodded and described the turbulence from the wind over Sheboygan and Lake Michigan.

P’Petch turned to face me with her right hand on the shift. Her face was oddly serious. She looked me dead in the eyes.

“Does Loong know you’re here? You’ve never asked me to pick you up before. Is everything okay? Are you okay?” I broke eye contact and looked ahead. I told her Por didn’t know I was coming home and that I didn’t tell him on purpose. It was fine. I was fine. I signaled for her to head home. She put the car in drive and we left the airport.
“We haven’t talked in weeks,” I said. “He’s mad because I’m tired of doing his shit, his way, all the time without a real thank you.”

P’Petch shrugged, eyes on the road ahead of us.

“Sounds like my mom,” she said. “She’s crazy as fuck! But Loong is gonna be pissed when he finds out you’re here and you didn’t tell him.”

She was right. This was betrayal, a tactical offensive move. It wouldn’t be long before Por found out I was in town. That was fine. It was intentional. When he found out that I’d come home and didn’t tell him or stay with him, I wanted him to worry. Not about me; it wasn’t a rescue I was after. I wanted him to worry that he pushed me away, which he did. I wanted him to worry that it was too late to make amends, which it wasn’t. I wanted him to realize that a daughter could leave a father, that a daughter could choose not to come home. I knew that it might not work, but it was worth a try. If it did work, he might take a step back and relinquish control. It wasn’t an ultimatum, but an opportunity for him to rethink our relationship.

I thought about all of this before I ever called P’Petch to ask for a ride. It took me longer to work up the courage to hit the green call button longer than the duration of the actual phone call when I finally did. It turned out, I didn’t have to ask for a ride from the airport. P’Petch offered. She insisted. She probably thought I was asking because she knew Por didn’t have a car anymore and Manee was in California. It was a relief when she offered to pick me up because it wasn’t my biggest ask. I really called to ask if I could stay at her place for the ten days between moving out of my apartment and my departure for Thailand.

When I asked I fumbled over the words, saying so much more than necessary, an
awkward way of showing how embarrassed I was to ask in the first place.

“No problem!” P’Petch cut me off. “Come whenever and stay as long as you need. I can pick you up. Just text me your flight info so I can make sure I’m not working that shift.”

I sent a screenshot of my flight itinerary as soon as I’d hung up the phone and repeated what P’Petch had said. *No problem.* Picking me up and letting me stay at her place wasn’t going to be a problem for P’Petch, but it would definitely be a problem for Por. It was the first time I’d ever slept over at P’Petch’s house or stayed anywhere in Toledo but Por’s. As a kid and even as a teenager, sleepovers were not allowed—neither having friends stay over nor staying over at a friend’s. It wasn’t negotiable, though I tried negotiating many times.

“Neverrrr! I never let you sleep in someone else home. You are not homeless. You have a bed here,” Por would say definitively, ending the discussion altogether.

It had been years since I’d been in P’Petch’s house. It used to be her mother’s house when we were kids. Por told me about five years ago that P’Petch bought the place from her mother who moved to a bigger and newer home in a better neighborhood. He thought buying a house was a waste of money and energy. He complained that owning a house meant you had to do the upkeep, take care of the lawn, shovel the snow, and take responsibility for people who came by. He had some deep-seeded concerned that a delivery person would slip on the sidewalk on an icy day and that the city would sue your ass for your home and everything in it.
I’d told him I was happy for P’Petch and for her mother who must’ve been doing well given that she could buy a new house. P’Petch and her mother left Thailand when she was seven years old. They came to Toledo the summer before I started second grade. The two of them showed up at our front door and my mother welcomed them in. Por had told her to be expecting them. I never quite understood the relationship between Por and P’Petch’s mother, but they seemed to have known each other before when he’d lived in Thailand. They never spoke of that in front of us.

Before they’d arrived, Por arranged for P’Petch’s mother to work with him at a Thai restaurant in the Toledo suburbs. On the day they arrived at our apartment, I was told to call her “P’Petch.” She’s exactly eighteen months older than me which made her the older sister—a relationship I didn’t have and had longed for but was otherwise completely impossible. I was thrilled to have an older sister, a model and mentor, I’d hoped could show me the ropes.

P’Petch was not the big sister I was looking for. She couldn’t have been. It felt like I had two little sisters. P’Petch and Manee both followed me around and did whatever I wanted. It wasn’t what I’d hoped for but I still loved it. That summer, P’Petch and I were inseparable. I took the lead on everything we did even when I tried to share or give it to her. She was happy to let me be the teacher or the cashier or the conductor. She played along as best she could—the language barrier, only a little burdensome for our games. Poorly drawn sea creatures outlined in chalk on the blacktop. Walking the catwalk that was the busted sidewalk from the house to the parking lot. Learning choreographed dances from MTV and VH1. We followed our imagination, and we relied on our invented language, a mix between Thai, English, and hand gestures, to field it.
In August, when second grade started, things changed. Everything about Monroe Elementary School was new to P’Petch and resentment clipped our inseparability. I enjoyed helping P’Petch in the beginning—showing her how to drink from the water fountain, what to do when the class recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, and then where to collect a token for a free hot lunch.

On the last day of the first week, a teacher I’d never seen before pulled P’Petch out of class. I knew she couldn’t fare for long without me. I was worried and went to Mrs. Wagner, our homeroom teacher, and I demanded P’Petch be brought back to class right away. I told her P’Petch needed me.

“Oh honey,” the curly-haired teacher with freckles and pink lipstick cooed at me from above. “Now don’t you worry. Petch is right where she needs to be. Your little friend doesn’t speak English so the ESL teachers are going to help her along. You understand, right?”

I didn’t understand until that evening when P’Petch asked me to teach her the alphabet. How could Manee already sing the ABCs, but a seven-year-old didn’t know the alphabet? I sang the ABCs over and over until it was time for dinner. Manee loved it and thought I was singing for her. By the end of the night P’Petch carried the tune and hummed along, and eventually sounded out the letters. Instead of encouraging her, I regretfully got annoyed with her, and tried to explain, with my very limited Thai vocabulary, that the alphabet was much more than just a song but letters—letters you could use to read and write with. I’d already been reading for three years and couldn’t understand how someone older than me didn’t know the function of the alphabet. It was a relief for both of us when my mother told us to get up and set the table for dinner. We ate
dinner with my mother and then watched TV until Por and P’Petch’s mother finished working at the restaurant. We’d say goodbye and they’d leave, walking to their one-bedroom apartment on the other side of the complex.

P’Petch continued to lean on me at school for the next several years. The more I helped, the more I distanced myself from her. The problem was I didn’t want to be rude, or more precisely, I didn’t want people to think I was rude. I knew it was rude to push her away when she wanted my help, but I didn’t want to spend my second-grade school days explaining things I learned in Pre-K. I wanted to learn big, new second-grader things, but I saw how the adults around us expected me to help her. They praised me and called me a good girl. A teacher would pat me on the back for helping P’Petch with this or that or smile and wink at me like P’Petch was a little secret. I wanted to be good, and more than anything, I didn’t want them to know the truth about me. That I was really bad on the inside. The truth was I didn’t want to help P’Petch anymore, but I did anyway, to show them I was good and not bad. I wanted to be good, not bad.

After a few years, P’Petch didn’t need me anymore and it was a relief. I was eager to let go. As we got older, we separated ourselves as much as we could though our lives never fully separated. In middle school, our parents signed us up for a free soccer club in a nearby township. Neither one of us liked sports, and to our surprise, the soccer gig actually drew us closer together. That was when we started what we called “the swap” — jumping back and forth to avoid our parents. If Por was home, we went to her apartment. If her mother was home, we went to my apartment. It only took five minutes to walk across the apartment complex. The summer before our sophomore year of high school P’Petch’s mother bought a house and they left the apartment complex. P’Petch still came
to hang out from time to time.

One time, her mother taught us how to drive a stick shift in the empty apartment parking lots. In high school, we waited tables at House of Siam on the same shift. The back of the house called us sisters, Petch and Ploy—our alliterating names, Diamond and Gem, advancing the story of our sisterhood.

When I left for college, P’Petch stayed and continued waiting tables. P’Petch was the sole dinner waitress for six nights a week for an entire year. P’Fah didn’t hire anyone else until a year later, when House of Siam won its first local foodie award and business boomed. P’Petch preferred waiting tables alone. For one, no one got in her way or slowed her down. Two, and more importantly, she made a lot of money. Money, the thing that could buy her what she wanted, like the house she lives in and the Lexus she drives. It’s what a job is for, and P’Petch’s job was steady and reliable, bringing in more income than I made as a graduate instructor.

“The place looks so different now!” I said when P’Petch unlocked and opened the front door. All the furniture was different. She replaced her mother’s old second-hand furniture with new furniture and arranged it so one room flowed into the next—an attempted open concept in an old Midwestern home that was still a little boxy. I touched the walls. They were painted the lightest shade of blue. It was minimalist, IKEA chic. The clutter was gone. There was no trace of her mother. P’Petch had made the place her own and I was impressed with her and happy to see she had a place to call her own.

It made me miss my apartment that I walked out of only twenty-four hours earlier.
I left the keys with my neighbor like Dave requested. I called a car to Jihyun’s for the night bringing only one suitcase and a box with the last of the plants for Jihyun. Everything else, I’d given away or sold.

In the morning, Jihyun made me breakfast—gilgeori toast and coffee. I was unusually hungry and wanted to ask for a second egg sandwich but didn’t want to bother Jihyun to make another. I drank second cup of coffee instead.

“The sun is almost up.” Jihyun remarked, raising her coffee mug in the direction of the window where an orange glow hid in the distance and then she placed it in the sink. “Time for me to run. Yoga starts at eight. Make yourself comfortable. Lock the door behind you when you leave. And please, Ploy,” Jihyun said to ensure my attention. “Please be kind and generous to yourself. Only you truly know what you need and want in life and no one can blame you for pursuing it. Trust yourself and give yourself what you need.” Jihyun walked over and kissed me on the cheek. We held each other for a quick embrace and Jihyun departed.

Washing the breakfast dishes, I wondered what Jihyun’s life after the PhD would be like. How she’d be successful on the academic job market. That she would land a tenure-track job with little-to-no Difficulty, universities looking for the sort of scholar like her who could teach multiple specialities and do creative work and organize service-learning projects for students and serve on several committees at once. Hiring committees would be right that Jihyun is fit for all of that. She’d make a fine academic, at least at first. Until her expertise, teaching, and research would push the university beyond their well-intentioned hopes for diversity and good will. After a year or two, at most, Jihyun would want her employer to confront both the conceptual and practical inequities in the
campus community. She’d push for more recruitment from the nearby big city. She’d stage a walk out with her students to protest student debt. She’d take the lead on unionizing the faculty. She’d write an open letter to the administrators demanding fair pay and institutional resources.

In ten years, Jihyun’s life looked just like Jen’s life. Or, what I could see of Jen’s life. On first glance, out and about on campus, students would probably mistake Jihyun as a guest speaker, flown in from some cosmopolitan city where people dressed like her. Upon learning she’s a professor at the university, they would gawk and flock to her classes for her attention and her approval. Something about her otherworldly-ness would make them a bit cautious around her and a little suspicious until sitting in her class for a few days. Quickly, they’d learned how tender and consultatory she is. To which, they’d respond with even more of a desire to be in her presence—taking her classes, attending her office hours and public lectures, joining the student organizations she advised, and requesting her to advise theses and dissertation projects. It was what drew me to Jen, and I bet Jihyun will be even better than Jen who doesn’t care enough about academia, the institution, to make it a better place. Jen cares primarily about her students and her scholarship. Jihyun cares about her students and scholarship, as well as the institution that brings those two things together. And that’s what will make Jihyun an excellent academic.

I placed the wet dishes in the metal drying rack that delivered the water back into the sink and hoped that this would come true for Jihyun—that when I came back from Thailand and returned to finish the program, I would find Jihyun either in this exact same apartment with nothing yet changed, or else gone. Gone to where she would thrive.
In order to pick me up on Saturday, P’Petch took the whole day off. She later told me it was the first Saturday she hadn’t worked in memory. I was grateful for her. On Sunday, the following day, she worked a double. During her lunch shift, she texted me.

*He knows.*
*I’ll call you when I know more.*

I told her thanks for the heads up and that I’d have dinner ready when she got home. I planned to cook for us but P’Petch only had drinks in the fridge and I didn’t have a car so I ordered pizza delivery. She never replied to my message and she didn’t call the whole day. I wasn’t sure what this meant with regard to Por. I was eager to hear what she had to say when he came home.

She got in around 9:30 and she was fueled. It was like that when we were teenagers. At the end of the dinner shift, after we swept and mopped and wrapped the silverware for the next day, P’Petch made herself Thai iced coffee and downed it. She’d take a long drive before heading home for the night or stop at a party with her older college friends. I, on the other hand, left the restaurant drained. My plan was to take a shower and probably fall asleep with wet hair. It puzzled me how work energized P’Petch especially ten years later. I needed a nap after teaching for ninety minutes.

I was sitting on the couch when she walked in. The pizza was on the coffee table. I’d already had two slices and I was drinking sleepy tea. She untied her shoes and hung up her coat.

“I got pizza. Hawaiian, your favorite.” She smiled at me and ran up to take a shower. Was she purposefully making me wait? In less than ten minutes, she was back downstairs. She waded through the drinks in the fridges before joining me on the couch
with two bottles of Cherry Coke. She offered me one and I said no thanks.

“You’ll never guess who I saw,” P’Petch taunted. She opened the box of pizza and grabbed the biggest slice.

“Lemee guess…” I replied with sarcasm. “What happened? And why did you keep me waiting?”

“He’s mad Ploy. Sorry I didn’t get a chance to call. We were slammed today. People were in and out until closing. Did he come to the house? When he left the restaurant, he looked like he wanted to murder someone. Not in the obnoxious white psychopath way, but in that silent, old Asian man way… that’s waaaay worse.”

She explained that she sneaked to the bathroom when she first texted me and tried to gather information about how he knew, but when she finally got something worth calling about it was too busy for her to escape to the bathroom. The bottle of Cherry Coke cracked when she twisted the lid. She downed half the bottle in one gulp. It was my first chance to speak.

“Nope, he didn’t come here. I was home all day and no one came by.” I said it like I hadn’t spent the afternoon and evening playing out different scenarios in my head after I received her text. Would he show up and demand an explanation? Would I open the door for Por? Could I get away with pretending not to be home? What might he have to say for himself? What did I want to say to him? Who would witness the encounter? Would he order me to go home with him? Would he accept my refusal?

“No shit?” P’Petch covered her mouth and burped. The sound was wet and she was so close I could smell it. I gagged and pretended to retch. Her and Manee used to burp and fart just to gross me out.
“Excuse me, “ she continued. “I don’t know what’s worse. Your dad showing up at the house pissed or not showing up at all? Stewing might be worse, to be honest.”

I asked how Por got to the restaurant. He rode with Golf when he went in for the lunch shift.

“Loong usually doesn’t come in when he rides with Golf. They usually pull around back. Golf gets out and Loong hops in the driver’s seat before taking off for the day. Today was different. Golf parked in front of the restaurant and they came in the front door.” She’d been filling the carafes with water in preparation for the after-church lunch rush when Por marched right up to her. Apparently, the only thing he said was is she here?

P’Petch said she shook her head no and then he walked out the front door without another word. She couldn't text me right away because Na Wit was watching from the kitchen window. Plus, she wanted to find out more. She went to the back to do some digging. She brought an empty basket for the silverware and headed for the back under the guise of retrieving silverware from yesterday’s last run of the dishwasher. She tried to make eye contact with Golf on her way to the back but his head was in the curry puffs he was rolling, tucking edges perfectly so. It was silent in the kitchen when there weren’t any orders yet. The music wasn’t on and the dishwasher wasn’t running since everything had been washed and dried overnight. P’Petch slammed the dishwasher open to get Golf’s attention, but nobody looked up. The noise didn’t register with anyone.

P’Petch returned to the front with a full basket of silverware and rolled it, then slipped into the bathroom to text me.

“So did you ever figure out how he found out that I’m here?” I cut to the chase.
“Kate.” She was the youngest worker, a senior in high school who worked lunch on weekends and made a black apron with front pockets look sexy.

“On Saturday, Kate worked a double to cover me.” Apparently, during the lull between lunch and dinner, when Kate normally leaves for the day, Na Wan asked where P’Petch was and Kate told her that she took the day off.

“Good!” Na Wan said. “Petch maybe have a date tonight. Finally got a man.” Everyone tuned in at this point curious about Petch’s love life, low hanging fruit at House of Siam. P’Petch never dated exclusively. She didn’t see the point of getting into something serious, she’d told me one night when I was in town for New Years.

“I make all the money I need. I have a place to live. And I can do all the things I want to do with whoever I want. Why settle down? Settle for what? I already have everything I need.”

P’Petch had never said these things to Na Wan or anyone else at the restaurant who made her love life their business. Typically, she brushed off their comments about getting old and dying alone and ignored their plans for blind dates. She didn’t give them fodder for their gossip and wishes, which made them gossip and wish all the more. So when Na Wan suggested P’Petch might have a date the whole kitchen turned to Kate who potentially had details to offer.

To their disappointment, Kate told them it was nothing like that.

“Much less juicy than you think,” she told them. “P’Petch is going to pick up P’Ploy from the airport.” That’s all she’d said, or at least, that’s what she reported to P’Petch who interrogated her when she came in for the dinner shift. Golf must have overheard Kate and Na Wan talking, and then mentioned it to Por assuming he already
knew, which he didn’t.

“Good luck!” P’Petch patted me on the thigh and took another slice of pizza.

“What do you mean?” I moved my leg and put the empty teacup back on the table.

“I mean… good luck dealing with Loong. It’s gonna be hard to ignore him for the week or so you’re here. So good luck with that if that’s your plan.”

On Monday, as predicted, Por showed up at P’Petch’s house. P’Petch saw him parking Golf’s car in the driveway and signaled a warning.

“Ploy! He’s here. He just pulled up!” She shouted to me from downstairs. She was so loud Por might’ve heard as he walked up to the house. I rushed down the stairs, wanting to beat him to the door. I didn’t want him to come in. I paused at the door to slip on my shoes and see that the foyer was lined with mud caked snow boots. It was freezing outside. Did I have to let him in? I slipped my feet into my boots. I didn’t bother lacing them and I waited for his knock. I saw P’Petch watching from down the hall and shooed her away. She ignored me and sat right down on the couch for a prime view. She laughed and I rolled my eyes at her, pleading with her to leave. She didn’t.

The doorbell rang. I opened the door and stood at its threshold. I wanted him to acknowledge I was the one in power, that he had come to see me. We both knew this wasn’t a father coming to check on his daughter. It was a struggle for power between two adults. I stood at the door and didn’t say a word. He was going to speak first. He’d need to request permission to escape the cold and enter the house. I resolved to grant him entry but I was unwilling to offer it.
Por moved slowly. First, he moved his mouth and the wrinkles on his face sprang to life. There was a black hole in his mouth, where he’d lost a tooth. His jawline had lost its edge. His cheekbones sunk into his face. His ears were exposed. He wasn’t wearing the right hat. He had on a baseball cap and not a warm winter hat. There were scraggly gray hairs sticking out of the cap. He cared more about covering up his hair loss than covering his ears from the wind. His entire body was bent in an unstoppable forward lean. He was shrinking before me. It pained me to see him like this but I had to hold my ground. I had to show him I could reject him.

“When are you leaving?” Por asked. I snorted at him with anger and pulled the door behind me for privacy. P’Petch was still sitting on the couch, listening in. I didn’t want her to see me disrespect him, but I left the door open a crack. I needed a source of heat. The wind chill had to have been below freezing and I didn’t have a coat. I thought he would ask to come in. It was too cold to stand outside.

Por was here for information. He was here for the exact same reason I was—to assert power. I straightened my back. My hands were frozen. I folded them across my chest and I felt them sweat. He was staring at me waiting for an answer.

“A week from tomorrow,” I barked quietly so P’Petch couldn’t hear. “On the eleventh.” My breath swirled in front of me. I was sweating through my clothes but my face burned from the cold.

“What time?” He asked evenly. It sounded more like a statement than a question.

This was a second chance to refuse to answer him. I kept quiet. I didn’t move.

“What time do you leave?” He repeated in the same tone of voice, even and confident, knowing I’d answer.
My body froze in place and my eyes focused on the swirling air in front of my face. I breathed deeper to make more swirls. I had no reason not to tell him the time of my flight other than to show him I could refuse to answer. Por turned his back to me and grabbed the handrail. He started down the stairs. His body was leaning too far forward when I saw him slip and fall face first. My body unfroze and my sweaty arms reached for him. I tried to catch him mid-air but I’d only moved an inch and he fell. My feet were still planted on the dirty, worn-over welcome mat. I kicked at it.

He hadn’t fallen. He was still at the top of the steps. It was a vision, a fear I invented on the spot. A vision that made me speak up.

“Noon—my flight leaves at noon on the eleventh.”

He stopped and turned back to look at me. I held my breath.

“Okay,” he said. “We pick you up at 6:30. You go with me to my fingerprint appointment in the morning and then we take you to the airport. Same day na.”

Then, he left. He made it down the stairs with no trouble, got into Golf’s car, started it, and drove away.

It happened so fast—the demand, the fall that wasn’t actually a fall, the proclamation.

An arm settled on my shoulder.

It was P’Petch.

A week later, in the middle of the night, when I couldn’t sleep, there was a full moon.

The light of the moon lit the sky. It was darker inside P’Petch’s house than outside. The
curtains weren’t drawn all the way and the moon glowed. The only light in P’Petch’s spare room was a low, steady red beam from the alarm clock on the nightstand. It said 2:04 AM. Golf and Por would be there to pick me up in four hours.

I’d woken up from a dream that I couldn’t remember. I laid in the dark of the room, in the glow of the moon, in the silence wondering what was going to happen. Por and I had no interaction since he’d showed up at P’Petch’s house and told me I was going to accompany him to his biometric appointment. I didn’t refuse but I didn’t agree either. I knew Por would read this as compliance. It was a demand after all. He didn’t offer me a ride I could refuse. He told me they’d take me to Detroit which I could’ve refused if I’d spoken up.

It wasn’t too late. There was still time to refuse. I could’ve texted Por telling him I wasn’t going with them. I could leave them waiting outside when they came to pick me up. I could’ve left then, in the middle of the night, calling a ride to the airport, and then I wouldn’t be there when they arrived.

I did none of those things. I just laid there.

The day after I saw Por I called Manee for advice. I asked her what she would do in my situation?

“Nothing,” she said. “I wouldn’t be in that situation. That’s the difference between me and you. I just tell him what I need to say to him. I don’t care if he gets mad. He usually does and then a few days later he’s back to texting me those ridiculous Thai greeting cards he knows I can’t read.”

I agreed with her that we were different and enumerated for five minutes on how
different we were and how I could never talk to him the way she does. I told her I didn’t care about him getting angry.

“Anger doesn’t bother me,” I said. “I’m just afraid of what he’ll do when he’s angry.”

“Are you afraid of him? He’d never hit you or anything P’Ploy.”

“No, I know. I’m not afraid he’s gonna hit me. I’m afraid he’ll shut me out. He’ll leave me alone with no parents.”

“Where is this coming from?” Manee asked. “Are you okay? Should I come home and try to help settle things between you guys?”

I told her not to come and not to worry. That it would work itself out before I left for Thailand. But nothing was settled and it was time for me to leave.

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. I returned to the spare bedroom and sat at the desk in the dark. I finished the glass of water and I felt around the desk for the switch to turn on the lamp. The moon is still brighter than the room with the lamp on. I look around the desk for blank paper and find some under the desk in a printer.

I slid a single sheet of paper out of the feeder and placed it on the desk. I uncapped a pen and wrote *This is not your fault. Or mine.* at the top of the page. My hand moved across the page filling it with liquid black ink. The ink formed letters, words, and sentences.

*I don’t know you and you don’t know me.*
*I guess we prefer things this way.*
*Knowing another person is risky.*
*If I got to know you, I might learn that I don’t like you.*
*That would be harder for me to bear than disliking the image I have of you.*
*What about you?*
*I wonder what you think of me.*
In the dark of the room, I filled the page. My handwriting was messy and uneven. I flipped the paper over and continued writing.

*You haven’t asked me to forgive you, but I want you to know that I forgive you for wanting me to be someone I’m not. I’m not your secretary. I’m not your personal assistant. I’m not willing to do everything you say simply because you say it. I’m not my mother or your mother. I’m your daughter who wanted your guidance, protection, care, encouragement, and understanding. I no longer want these things from you. I know now that I don’t need them. I wanted these things from you at a time when you weren’t willing or able to give them to me. I see that now. I forgive you and I hope you can see that it’s not unlike what’s happening between us now. You want things from me that I’m not willing or able to give. In turn, can you forgive me? For wanting you to be someone you’re not?*

I wiped tears from my cheeks with the back of my hand. I was writing to Por. These were the words that would end our relationship. They’d never come this close to surfacing.

I remembered what Rhonda said to me.

*You are the best person to decide who is part of your life and on what terms.* I said it out loud. I concluded the letter with a goodbye.

*I am releasing us from our expectations of the other.*

*Goodbye.*

Then, I signed my name in the only Thai script I know. I returned the pen to the top drawer and found an envelope. I folded the letter into thirds and stuffed it in the envelope. I sealed it. I set the envelope on top of my suitcase and climbed into my borrowed bed. I pulled the comforter up to my chin and relaxed into my newfound plan. I was going to accompany Por to the biometric appointment, ride with them to the airport, hand him the letter, and say goodbye forever.
Por

Ploy threw her suitcase in the trunk of Golf’s car and climbed into the backseat behind Por. The car was quiet and warm. No one spoke. From the backseat, she saw the heater knob was turned on full blast. Perhaps, neither Golf nor Por realized how hot the car was after it warmed up, like when she took a hot bath, the heat was aggressive at first until her body adjusted and then she didn’t realize how warm the surroundings were until she left the hot water for the cold air.

Ploy stuck her head and hands through the middle of the front seats to greet them. Her voice cut through the morning stillness.

“Sawasdee ka,” she said.

“Khab,” Golf replied.

Por kept quiet but lifted his head one notch to acknowledge her without words. She slouched back against the seat and moved over to the right, deliberately sitting behind Por in the passenger seat. He’d have to turn his body around to see her, an
obvious and obnoxious move, a move he was unlikely to do in front of Golf. Turning around to see her would indicate she had something he needed or wanted, that she could offer him something that wasn’t already his. Ploy didn’t want him to see her or the letter she held in her hand in her coat pocket. She sunk into her seat and watched the darkness of morning approach dawn.

There was no traffic on the drive up to Detroit. Golf took Exit 51B and pulled up to a polished two-story building on East Jefferson Avenue. In the morning’s darkness, the building looked like a scene on a stage built for a play. The fluorescent spotlights drew their attention to the building, the only visible structure in sight, except for the parking lot, lined with large street lamps. Golf pulled into the parking lot and the building grew. At the foot of the building was a large stone plaque that read U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services Detroit Field Office. The building’s exterior was covered in white stone panels and privacy windows that had a blue-black extraterrestrial glow, and at the center of the windows was a large, all-white printed bust of the Statue of Liberty. The windows glowed and shined for her, the star of the performance.

Her oversized eyes monitored those approaching the building. Behind the fancy glass building was an uninspiring, one-story red brick building used presumably for offices. From the parking lot, Ploy saw stacks of paper, large metal filing cabinets, desks, and plants dying of dehydration through the windows.

They arrived right at 7:30 am but they weren’t the first ones there. In the parking lot, Golf drove at a crawling speed as people walked from their cars to the front of the building. A small crowd of fifteen or so people had already gathered in a scattered circle
before the blue-black sliding glass doors.

Golf stopped near the milling group. If it weren’t for blazing spotlights that shot light off the building, it would have been too dark to see anyone clearly. There was a family of six—four kids under ten, a mom, and a dad. They huddled in a compact group next to the handicap parking spots before the entrance. There were more people, a random mix of people, at the entrance. Some were obviously together, like the man and woman who faced each other. The woman shivered from the cold and the man stroked her arms to warm her. Another pair were speaking to each other, their warm breath visible with every spoken turn. An old white woman with her silver hair wrapped in a silk scarf stood alone clutching her handbag. A loner watched the growing group from a short distance where he smoked a cigarette. He stood three parking spots away from the family of six and two spots further away from him was a parked police van.

“I’ll park and wait in the car,” Golf said. Por already had one leg out the door. Ploy swung open the car door behind him and rushed to join him among the waiting people. It was instinct. She didn’t think about whether or not to accompany him until Golf drove away to park the car, and she regretted that she had. It was too late to go back to the car. Golf had already pulled into a spot two rows away and leaving now would make Ploy look impulsive and tacky.

The joined the crowd of people waiting at the door though there was no way to tell if there was a line or who was going to be first. Ploy stood a few feet behind Por, with him, but not. The others wouldn’t have known they were together if they hadn’t just emerged from the same car. If Ploy didn’t have the same upturned eyes as Por.

Orange light crept from over the parking lot and East Jefferson. The morning air
was what her mother used to call “bone cold.” Ploy didn’t dress to stand in the winter morning cold. She dressed to shed a layer of warm clothes at the airport and hop a plane to Thailand. She wore sneakers instead of boots because she won’t need boots in Thailand. She bounced lightly on her feet to move her muscles without any exaggerated movements, without drawing attention to herself, especially from Por who still hadn’t looked at her or spoken a word. His stoicism, a punishment she welcomed. Being ignored by him when he insisted that she go with him made delivering her letter and goodbye easier.

Suddenly, the space station-like glass doors whirred and split down the middle like an elevator. The semicircle of waiting people closed in on the door, everyone inched forward, each person hoping to be first in line or at least not last.

In the frame of the open door was the figure of a man like a 70s game show host. He stepped forward and the semi-circle took a step back. The man appeared to be Asian, middle-aged, and inordinately confident. He wore a pressed, blue slim fit oxford, and black trousers. His hair was styled with slick black fade with long hair gelled on top. He didn’t smile but his stance, legs set hip-width apart and arms comfortably at his side, said I’m friendly and approachable. The lanyard around his neck was American-flag blue and looked tacky against his stylized look. A photo ID hung from the lanyard. Ploy tried to get his name, a habit she picked up dealing with bureaucracy—know who you talk to—a way to gain leverage, but the man was too far away. She couldn’t read his name. The font was smaller than his photo, and his photo was smaller than the big bald eagle in the top right corner with white stars encircling the eagle like a crown.
The man took a second step and moved out of the building.

“Good morning,” he projected louder than necessary. He spoke like he was starting a campaign speech. We were all close enough to hear him at a normal volume. A few people in the group replied with good mornings. Por didn’t. He stood quietly with his hands in his coat pocket, eyes turned up to the man at the door. Everyone turned toward him. The circle stood at a halt. The whole thing seemed overly staged for the opening of a bureaucratic administrative office.

“If you are here for a scheduled biometric appointment,” the man continued in his politician-like speech voice, “please make an ORGANIZED and SINGLE-FILE line against the building. That means one person behind another. SINGLE-FILE. That is for SCHEDULED biometric appointments. I repeat, SCHEDULED. If you don’t have an appointment, you cannot enter the building.” He finished his sentence and then shivered, the morning air disrupting his composure.

The circle returned to life. Relatives and friends turned away from him and looked to each other. What to do? Several rushed to line up wanting to be first. Some walked away. Ploy looked at Por who didn’t seem phased, who hadn’t moved a muscle.

“Can I accompany my mother?” A voice asked. Por looked at the man for a response.

“Only if you are the designated translator. This has to match the name on your mother’s documents.” He crossed his arms, held himself, attempted to keep warm.

Others began to shuffle either back to their cars or up against the wall. Ploy’s sneakers froze in place. Por started toward the wall without her. The cold from the cement crept up Ploy’s legs.
The man repeated himself emphasizing single-file and defining it again. He placed a palm on the wall where he wanted people to line up and patted it like it was an old pal. He flashed a grin and then recoiled, his hand frozen from touching the building.

“Miss,” he said in Ploy’s direction. “Are you here for an appointment, Miss?” He said each word slowly, enunciating, in case she didn't understand English.

He moved closer. She read his name tag. It said Andy Le. He looked happy in the headshot. His smile reached his eyes. He had the exact same shirt and hairstyle in the photograph. He looked proud of himself, confident, powerful.

“I’m asking you one more time, Miss. Please either line up against the wall or return to your car.”

Ploy looked for Por who was already in line, standing behind a couple that was holding hands and in front of a Black woman who was shushing a baby in the carrier on her arm. He looked at Ploy and their eyes met for the first time that day. It was brief; their eye contact lasted less than a moment. They shared an understanding. She must leave. There was no alternative. Then, she turned away and walked over to Golf’s parked car.

Golf and Ploy watched everything unfold from his car in the middle of the darkened parking lot. From where they were parked, the passenger side had the best view. Ploy saw it all from the backseat. The security lights on the building lit up the scene. Andy Le held his badge up to the little box next to the sliding doors. They opened and he retreated.

A few seconds later, over by the parked police van, a cement door on the side of the building, with no handle from the outside, burst open. A law enforcement officer walked out. He wore a bullet proof vest with ICE stitched across the back in large, white
capital letters. He stopped short of the police van, posing with his hand on the gun in the holster at his waist. He stood between the still open cement door and the back of the police van.

On the other side of the building goes quiet. The waiting line straightened. The irony—the person wearing a bulletproof vest is the person with the gun. Some jostled in place to get a better view, to investigate from their place in line. They bobbed their heads up and around to get a glimpse of the man, where he came from, and what he might say.

Ploy watched Por watch the officer. Por moved a little to the left of the line to see around the couple standing in front of him. The mother behind him seemed oblivious to the situation, kneeling down to release her screaming child from the carrier. All other eyes were on the officer.

The backdoor of the police van slowly hinged open. Someone was inside.

A man in plain clothes walked out of the cement door and toward the van. His hands were cuffed and a chain trailed behind him.

Another man emerged from the door. His cuffs were chained to the man who walked before him.

The first man entered the back of the van. The second followed.

Another man in plain clothes, cuffs, and chains walked out of the building. Then, another appears and another and another. Seven Black and Brown men all chained together. Each one followed the other in a single file line, exiting the building and entering the police van.

All but one looked squarely at the ground. Their faces turned away from the many eyes lined up watching them, the eyes in the car. Ploy wondered who they were. Why
they were being carried away. Whether it was better to witness or to look away. It was hot in the car. She looked for Por. His face was turned toward the wall. He hid behind the couple who were no longer holding hands. She wanted to know what he was thinking. Whether he was worried for his safety. Like she was. Whether his green card would be renewed. Whether he would be prosecuted for residing in the U.S. on an expired green card. Whether he would be detained, cuffed, and chained to other men and shuttled away to an unknown destination.

Ploy reached to the front of the car and turned down the heater. Golf nodded his approval.

The officer with the vest shut the back door of the van and pounded his fist against the door twice. The engine rattled and the van left the parking lot.

Theirs was the first parked car the van passed. Golf shook his head and whispered something to himself. Ploy turned away from it and stilled her eyes on Por.

The van turned left on East Jefferson and then it was out of sight.

Less than a minute later, Andy Le reappeared from behind the sliding doors in game show host fashion. He fanned open his arms inviting and leading the first few people waiting in line into the building. He granted them entrance in small groups of approximately five. Ploy clocked Por entering with the third group at 7:57.

When he was out of sight, Ploy tried to small talk with Golf by asking about Noi. Ploy asked how she was doing. He told her Noi was fine, but lazy since she spends too much time on her tablet. They didn’t say anything else. Ploy couldn’t think of other questions to ask parents about their kids.

Sweat built under her clothes, but her toes were still freezing. She closed the hot
air vent closest to her even though the hot air was no longer blowing. She peeled off her coat and threw it in the seat next to her. When the coat hit the seat, she heard the letter in her coat pocket crinkle. Did Golf hear it from the front seat? Could he know what the letter contained? He wasn’t the kind of father that Noi would want to abandon. Ploy didn’t want to be the one to tell him daughters can abandon their fathers one day.

Exactly seventeen minutes after entering the building, Por emerged from the same sliding galaxy doors from which Andy Le had emerged. He returns to the car shaking his head. Ploy watched quietly from behind, for a sign, waiting for what he would say. He buckled his seat belt and then cleared his throat.

“All done. All good. Let’s go na.”

Golf put the car in drive and left.
It was time for their final goodbye. The Detroit Metro international departures terminal buzzed with people jumping out of cabs and piling up oversized luggage on rental carts. I was one of them, except that I only had one regular size suitcase and a backpack. Golf pulled them out of the trunk for me and hurried back into the car.

“Choke dee,” he said in my direction. I wai in return.

Then, it was the two of us—Por and me, standing side-by-side, watching cars deliver people and leave, watching others say goodbye. This was exactly what I wanted, a moment of semi-privacy to deliver the goodbye letter. The two of us, alone, in public, worked. It practically guaranteed Por would not overreact or refuse the letter because there were people around and he had an image to control. He’d have to keep his cool. Out of sheer luck, Golf removed himself from the situation with ease, sliding back into the heated car. There was no way to plan for Golf’s whereabouts during the delivery, but I had hoped he wouldn’t be there when it happened. I wanted to spare him from the reality
that a daughter could abandon her father one day. That Noi might leave him one day too. I couldn’t have manufactured the ending better if I’d tried.

Por kept his head up and his gaze on the sliding doors to the airport. Every time the doors slid open, a hidden fan wooshed and whirled trying to keep Michigan’s cold air out of the building. Standing at his side, I snuck a look up at Por who didn’t look down to meet my eyes. I bent over and hauled the heavy backpack off the curb where Golf left it and onto my back, a signal to Por that it was time. I stuffed my hands into my coat pockets, feeling for the letter. Ready to deliver it.

Por turned his gaze from the doors. He stood motionless with his hands behind his back and watched me fidget. This was a look I’d seen many times, a look I’d been on the receiving end of more than I could recall. It was condescension and arrogance in bodily form. I’d often heard those terms applied to someone’s tone and language, but Por unleashed his condescension and arrogance with silence and surveillance.

I watched him watch me. I gripped the letter in my pocket and wondered if he knew what was coming. He didn’t flinch or speak. His breath was the only movement I could detect. Each breath spilled out of his cracked mouth as a white fog, the crisp winter air making his only movement visible to me. The confidence, the stillness on Por’s face made me want to slap him—hard and fast, the same way he slapped us as children before we learned to stop talking back.

The first time he slapped Manee was the week my mother left. Manee was six and worried. She cried for our mother at bedtime every night and I did what I could to soothe her. Nothing worked—juice brought to her bedside, lullabies whispered into her hair, rubbing her back. She didn’t want me. It was our mother she wanted. Por plowed through
the door and rushed to her bedside where the two of us were lying. Manee was tucked into my arms and crying into my adolescent chest.

“Why are you still crying?” He shouted. “There is nothing to cry about!” She cried louder. I covered her with my body.

“Look at me,” he said. Manee turned her head toward him and peered up at him. I tried to pull her inward, to turn her body into mine.

“Sit up,” he said. She sat up, her face wet and pink and her chest heaving. I recoiled, wanted to disappear.

“This is the last time… there is nothing to cry about.” Por said it flatly, measuring his voice, trying to temper Manee’s emotions. His hardness against her softness.

“Mama is gone!” she wailed. He raised his hand faster than either one of us could move, and he slapped her across the face.

The room went silent. He turned on his heel and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. Manee dropped to her pillow and curled herself against me. That was the first time I felt an impulse to slap Por, but I buried the desire knowing I would never do it.

I tighten my grip on the letter in my pocket, willing myself to give it to him already. Sounds and motions come in increasingly louder and faster waves—car brakes, opening and closing doors, wheeling bags, people sprinting, hugging, leaving. I fingered the corner of the envelope and dug the edge into the tip of my pointer finger, driving it as deeply as I could without piercing the skin. I stared at Por, wondering what he was thinking, wondering what I should say.

*Here. And hand him the letter. Or,*
This is for you. Or,

This is goodbye. Or,

I should have told you earlier. Or,

Sorry. Or, nothing.

Por’s mouth started to move. It cracked at the corners, where his age made itself known. He coughed and a cloud of warm air escaped his mouth. He was on the verge of saying something but stopped. Silence still hung between us, now facing each other. What was he going to say?

I looked at him for the last time and, instead of holding my gaze, he looked down at his feet. It was an ugly scene, witnessing a proud man swallow his words, trapping himself in his own thoughts and world.

I took a step back, daring him to speak, curious to know what he had to say, if he would say it. I took a second step back. I wanted to see his whole body when he delivered his last words to me. I wanted to be able to remember this moment. I wanted to be able to recall everything about our final goodbye. In the future, I would tell myself he had it coming. That it was best for both of us, not just me. His last words sealed the end of our relationship. I stepped back in peace, knowing that he was able to say something at the end too.

From where I stood, he looked like a lost old man, a person out of place. He stood on the curb at the airport with no bags or people to accompany him. He looked unaware of his surroundings, head turned down, standing completely still as people and objects bustled around him.

I waited for him to speak but he didn't say a word. As I pulled the letter out of my
pocket, he stepped toward me and closed the gap, grabbing my shoulders and pulling me into his embrace. It was a clumsy move, and new for both of us. My head hit his chest. My right temple landed at the base of his collarbone. I could feel his thinness through the protection of his winter coat. I stood stiff against him, my arms at my side, hands in my pockets, still holding the letter. I let him hold me. He smelled like hairspray and overly laundered second-hand clothes. We’d never hugged before. Not when I was a child and certainly not as adults. Not when my mother left. Not when I graduated. Not when he got fired. Not when I left for Thailand any other time.

Did he know this was the end? Did he have anything to say? He patted me on the back with the firmness of someone who doesn’t know how to be tender. His hand landed flat on my back. I only felt the palm of his hand touching me, his fingers flexed straight out. I counted exactly four taps. I looked around to see if people were watching this unfold. No one watched or gawked or even looked our way. We must have look like a regular pair at the airport, hugging in public. An appropriate goodbye for many, but totally usual for us.

“Thank you na,” he whispered. I shifted in confusion. My mind returned to my body. I wiggled and loosened myself against his embrace. His hands softened on my back. I wanted to pull back entirely, but I let him hold me a little longer. Did he thank me? I listened for more of his voice. Cars and buses honked and passed by.

“I want to thank you,” he said louder this time. I twisted to free my arms, to return his embrace, but he released me when I stirred. He stepped back and looked at me. His stare was gentle and honest. His eyes widened and he nodded at the sliding doors. I matched his gaze for only a moment. His mouth turned upward into a nearly
imperceptible grin. Then, I walked away letting his gratitude be the last words spoken between us.

Inside the airport, I run to the nearest trash can. I remove the undelivered and sealed envelope from my pocket and begin shredding it by hand.

It wasn’t the hug or Por’s expression of gratitude that moved me. They did come as a surprise, but I’m not so easily moved. When he hugged me and when I shifted to return his hug, even though I didn’t have the chance to actually hug him, I saw us for who we were—two hurting people, who have felt pain and caused pain, and who have the capacity to change as individuals and to change together. I can release myself of the expectations he has of me, and I can realize the expectations I have of Por without ending our relationship. I can ask the same of him and give him a reasonable chance to respond.

I tear the envelope lengthwise into three panels. I gather the pieces, stack one on top of the other, and repeat the process. I count each piece in my head until I lose track. One. Three. Six. Nine. I hear a low voice calling from behind me. It’s hard to hear like the voice is coming from under water.

“Excuse me,” the voice bubbles. The sound is distorted and I ignore it, continuing to shred the letter into the tiniest pieces of paper I can manage. I cup the shredded letter in my hands. A few pieces fall at my feet. I form the pile of shreds into a mountain in my palms. The shredded letter feels bigger, grander than the composed letter ever did. It reminds me of confetti and my mouth widens into a toothy smile. My dimples cut into my cheeks. My lips expose my teeth. My tongue tastes the recycled airport air. I swallow hard to wet my mouth.
I raise my hands over the open trash can and let the mountain hover there. I close my eyes and make a wish like a kid before an illuminated birthday cake. I wish for a safe journey. I open my eyes, and in one swift motion, I split the air with my hands. My arms stretch out wide. The letter, torn into a thousand shreds, floats in the air for a moment before settling at the bottom of the trash can.

I turn to leave, and an old woman, somebody’s grandmother, stops me. Her body is smaller than mine. She grabs me by the arm. I stutter. I stumble over her grip. She is both gentle and firm, commanding and amiable. Her presence is strong and her grip stronger. She turns my body to face her. I am weightless in her grip. My body compiles.

We stand in the middle of the airport looking at each other. We are exactly the same height, but this is only because her back bends her body forward, shrinking her down to my size. The outline of her body peeps through her oversized clothes—square shoulder bones, elbows pointed outward. She must weigh less than a hundred pounds. She looks too old to be real, to be standing before me, to be alive. She has more skin than body and more wrinkles than skin. Her hair is a bountiful salt and pepper gray. She reminds me of someone, though I can’t place who.

She moves slowly, deliberately, in a way that requires my full attention. The old woman presents a golden silk handkerchief from her pocket. I watch her unfold it before me. The yellow marigolds printed on the cloth grow and multiply with each layer she unfolds. The old woman brings the silk cloth to my face, and wipes it.

She places the cloth in my hand and it’s wet with my grief. She closes my hand around the soiled silk cloth with both of her hands and looks me in the eyes. The old woman brings my hands to her face and lowers her head to meet them. I watch her kiss
the top of my hand. I bow my head in gratitude, in confusion, in exhaustion.

The old woman tilts my chin. I meet her gaze. Our eyes are level. The old woman’s eyes are the liveliest thing about her, apart from her stable grip. They are a beaming gray, a color I’ve never seen before. She remains completely silent. She holds my hands and my watering eyes for a moment longer and all I do is nod.

With a nod of her own, the old woman sends me off with her handkerchief.

I amble over to my place in line at the security checkpoint, and I look back to see her, to tell her thank you, but the old woman is gone.
PART III.
Methodological Afterword: Impossible Asian American Stories
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*We are constantly telling stories—about who we are, about every person we see, hear, hear about—and when we don’t know something, we fill in the gaps with parts of stories we’ve told or heard before. Stories are always only representations.*

—Matthew Salesses, *Craft in the Real World*

*The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.*

—Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”

I began this dissertation with an incomplete family story from October 2018. In the story I tell you, my father was unable to renew his driver’s license because the clerk at the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles maintained that his green card was invalid. What I didn’t say in the beginning, but that I implied, and that I am saying now, is that this incident incited chaos in my family. Chaos shaped by the fact that our father’s immigration status was uncertain at a time when the Trump administration had increased the deportations of Thais by 76 percent over a period of just one year (Vu). The chaos was experienced, in part, individually, and in part, collectively.

My father, the individual at the center of the immigration issue, was made vulnerable through an ever-changing immigration system that prioritizes and values wealth, heteronormativity, ability, education, and English. His apparently expired green card affected only him, as an individual—on paper. In our lived and shared reality, however, my father’s apparently expired green card affected our entire family. As the person in my family who occupies the immigrant daughter subjecthood, and the only family member to have an advanced degree, I was entrusted and tasked with researching the immigration policies and the green card systems. My family also looked to me to
identify our father’s options and then to advise on which option he ought to take. I have no training in law or policy. I dreaded presenting options and advising in one way or another. I resented such a responsibility. It felt like the future of our father’s immigration case was in my hands, a cruel position to be in—wanting to help and not exactly knowing how, and recognizing things could be worse if I did nothing. The worst outcomes we imagined were separation, detention, or deportation. What was most cruel of all was that despite our collective decision to share this burden with our father, our experiences and the stakes were wholly unequal.

The perceived and actual risk of filling out the wrong paperwork, what I feared, and the perceived and actual risk of facing immigration proceedings as an older, unemployed, poor Thai man, what my father feared, were not at all equal. The unequal relationship to the risks and consequences is how the chaos manifested. It was discomforting and painful to accept that the outcome couldn’t be shared. The experiences and risks were uneven, and in these ways, the stories surrounding my father’s apparently expired green card are not entirely mine to tell.

What I also didn’t say in the beginning, and that I will not say now, is the outcome of my father’s immigration case. It remains an incomplete story, an impossible Asian American story. Impossible Asian American stories are stories that cannot easily be told, if ever, because vital information is missing, hidden, secret, classified, or otherwise unknown, unspeakable, or lost. The performative novel writing methodology used in this dissertation makes impossible Asian American stories possible using literary tools of fiction. The purpose of this methodology isn’t to make an incomplete or impossible story complete by filling in its gaps, but rather to study what has been lost, the
conditions of loss, and understand the stories that loss tell us. Fiction examines and illustrates how the immateriality of loss shapes our realities. Because fiction is not constrained by telling the facts of loss—what was lost and why it matters—fiction can tell loss’s story—how loss looks, feels, smells, and sounds, and how loss moves through a person and among people.

The performative novel methodology looks directly at loss to see what is there, what it knows, how it feels and operates. It does not archive loss in the traditional sense, meaning collect, possess, catalog, and preserve. It archives loss using literary tools. This is a distinctly queer and feminist of color survival practice, a way to survive loss. And to survive loss as queer, poor- and working-class migrant community is to “to theorize everyday actions and ways of making do” (Calafell 156). Scholars across the disciplines have long documented how people use stories and storytelling in our everyday lives to make sense of the world, to theorize it, to survive it (Gumbs “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves”; Hartman; Langellier; Langellier and Peterson; Lovat; Madison; McKittrick with/on Wynter,). This dissertation likewise documents how people use stories and storytelling, and it also documents the storytelling production process as research. The performative novel delivers both a cultural product (the novel) and a critique of the content of the cultural product (the dissertation about kinship, intimacy, and loss in the context of migration).

In this methodological afterword, I reflect on the writing process I followed to compose PLOY as an impossible Asian American story that was made possible through fiction. In the performative novel methodology, fiction is the primary method and literary devices are the primary research tools. I outline these elements of the performative novel
methodology, in what follows, drawing on examples from my writing process as well as literature in the fields of Performance Studies in Communication, queer and feminist of color theories, and Asian American literary studies and cultural production. I construct the performative novel as a methodology that uses literary tools to examine, engage with, and perform loss. First, I situate loss as a key term and central element shaping Asian American realities. I turn to archival research methodologies that engage with loss. Then, I define literary tools and discuss how they provide shape and nuance to loss that expands upon critical archival research methods. In discussing literary tools and the concept of literariness, I distinguish between writing about loss literally and literarily, showing how literariness directly engages with ideologies of literature. I theorize literariness as a form of queer evidence and argue that together, literariness and fiction, confront our philosophical and disciplinary preferences for and insistence on non-fiction and material artifacts over fiction and immaterial affects. I conclude by positioning *PLOY* and the performative novel methodology as a mode of scholarship that archives loss through fiction, queer evidence that offers a critique of normative approaches to loss and a pathway to surviving normativity.

**Making Impossible Asian American Stories Possible**

Loss presents an interesting methodological dilemma. How can scholars engage with missing, invisible, or lost information? In this dissertation, I turn loss into a methodology. I approach loss as a critical source and site of knowledge about power and subject formation. This means loss is not simply a fact, as in *I lost my green card*, but an opening, as in *what does losing my green card mean in this particular context under*
these particular conditions? Drawing on queer and feminist scholars of color, I read loss, silence, invisibility, and secrets as stories unto themselves. Rather than conceptualizing loss as impossible, irretrievable information, I ask: How does loss contribute to the racialization of Asian America? What knowledges does loss hold? What stories does loss tell us about power and subject formation?

Loss is central to Asian America and Asian American subjecthood. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues memory is the glue that constitutes Asian America as an imagined community (Anderson). Asian American subjectivity is dependent on memory, and Asian American memory is constituted by both remembering and forgetting. Nguyen explains, “in order to remember their shared bonds as Asian Americans, Asian Americans also had to forget, to some degree, their differences” (“Memory” 154). Thus, Asian America and Asian American subjecthood hinge on remembering and forgetting, a contradictory simultaneity of archiving and loss. This establishes archiving and loss as fundamental to Asian America and to Asian American subject formation. In order for Asian America to exist as a meaningful identitarian and/or political community, members participate through remembering and forgetting together, archiving memory and losing memory together.

Archives, then, are a key site for this methodology. Archives are where and how remembering and forgetting happens. Archives are both material and immaterial, meaning archives consist of physical and nonphysical materials. There are material archives that collect, store, preserve, possess, and control physical materials, such as artifacts, texts, and cultural products. Then, there are immaterial archives made of discursive, embodied, and ephemeral materials, like affect, memory, and lived
experience. For example, an archive may include human remains, materials often found in museums—the physical element are the matter of the remains themselves, while the nonphysical elements are the stories, assumptions, discourses, and affects surrounding the collection, containment, and preservation of human remains. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor notes that these two kinds of archiving—the material and immaterial—“exist in a constant state of interaction” (21). That is, the material archive shapes the immaterial and vice versa.

Archives are also designed to tell particular stories, like that of a coherent “Asian America.” But, as many feminist scholars of color suggest, archives are incapable of offering complete stories (Hartman; Vang; Anzaldúa; Taylor; Alcazar). A complete story is impossible. This is what Ma Vang instructs us in her study of the refugee archive; she maintains that “The archive is a site where things are missing rather than a place to retrieve knowledge” (26). In the archive, loss is always present. Loss is rendered both materially and immaterially in the archive. Loss exists as material absence—as in literally missing physical materials, and loss also exists as in the nonphysical archives of affect, memory, and lived experience. This dissertation looks at the stories of loss in both material and immaterial archives, recognizing that every archive is indicative of loss because, by their very nature, archives are incapable of archiving everything. Loss is fundamental to archival work. But rather than trying to prevent loss or to recover what has been lost or is lost, I suggest that loss is an entry point into knowledge.

During the early drafting and outlining stages of *PLOY*, when I decided to make Ploy’s dissertation research about Southeast Asian American refugees and immigrants, I listened to the “Lao Stories” oral histories project in University of California Irvine’s
Southeast Asian Archive. The “Laos Stories” project is a tremendous collection which archives an history and experience that is largely invisible in U.S. history, and as Vang illustrates, is even made invisible within Asian American history. What I personally found most compelling about the collection, and about the oral history methodology itself, was what the oral history narrators didn’t say. In other words, what was not archived. The interviewer seemed to ask similar questions to every oral history narrator about their childhood, migration experience, and resettlement in the United States, and most questions were met with quick, non-descript responses. This is not to suggest that the oral histories were non-descript or otherwise uninteresting, but rather to suggest that the interviewer was asking oral history narrators to tell impossible Asian American stories. This impossibility to tell is not a failure (on the oral history narrator’s end or the interviewer’s end). It is a condition of storytelling; a migrant can never tell a complete migration story. This does not negate the significance of storytelling. If anything, it draws our attention to the significance of loss and the value to attending to what’s not there—not to recover it. To witness it.

Fiction makes impossible Asian American stories possible. When I wrote the scenes with Dam & Ae, Lao refugees who resettled twice in the United States, I wrote beyond what I heard in the oral history archives I consulted. Some oral history narrators in the archives I consulted talked about the Thai refugee camps they lived in. They often described the camps as transitory places, where they were before their journey to the United States. They sometimes provided information about how long they were there, who they were there with, and the circumstances surrounding their departure. With Dam & Ae, I wrote beyond those informational details to include a subplot on the development
of kinship and intimacy in the context of war and migration. This craft decision is more than simply saying what wasn’t said in the oral history archives I consulted. It is a way of witnessing loss, entering it, and writing through it. This is what fiction can do. It is not a replacement for oral history. It is an entirely different genre and mode of representation.

Loss in the archive remains a crucial topic in Asian American Studies, and critical multidisciplinary Asian Americanists have approached loss in the archive in various ways. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe reads across seemingly unrelated state archives of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas which were collected, categorized, and presented in ways that obscure transnational violence. In working through these transnational archives together, Lowe maps a concealed intimacy throughout these histories. Lowe presents a methodology for “other ways of reading [archives] so we might understand the process through which the forgetting of violent encounters is naturalized, both by the archive, and in the subsequent narrative histories” (2-3). Here, loss is present in the archive through the act of forgetting violent encounters and in the afterlives of forgetting through narratives of history.

In *History on the Run*, Ma Vang reads secrets, redactions, and missing information about the Secret War in Laos and in the Hmong refugee archives as knowledge. “Rather than pursuing a recovery project to fill the gaps in the incomplete historical record,” Vang “shows that state documents present an epistemological dilemma for knowledge production” (Vang 59). She turns this methodological dilemma of missing information into a question: What do these secrets produce and what is left in the wake of these secrets? In Vang’s research, loss is replicated through the archive and creates epistemologies and knowledge that continue to shape Hmong refugee lives.
Lowe and Vang both primarily draw from large, institutional material archives to address the materiality and immateriality of loss. Kimberly Chang, social and political psychologist, author (pen name Q.M. Zhang), and founder of MemoryWorks, approaches loss in her personal and family archive through a methodological “digging” process. In her MemoryWorks seminars, and as exhibited in her hybrid text *Accomplice to Memory*, Chang writes and teaches students to approach the archive and the repertoire “like a person digging,” like an archeologist. When she was conducting family history research for her project, her father became ill, fell, and then revealed a secret that suggested he had been living a lie. But due to the injuries he sustained from the fall, Chang couldn’t ask or otherwise access more information about his family through him. She felt like she was digging up what her father had intentionally and strategically buried. “It was impossible to know the past,” she says. (“MemoryWorks”). Hers is an impossible Asian American story. In the process of digging through the impossibility of knowing, Chang developed a methodology of “writing in proximity to history that has been kept from you” (ibid). This methodology requires a critical and imaginative orientation to the archives. Imagination, Chang argues, is “so deeply tied to what we know, to your own memory” (ibid). By this, Chang suggests that our imagination is profoundly shaped by what we already know. In other words, our most imaginative thoughts and ideas are shaped by our knowledge. Imagination does not exist in a vacuum; it doesn’t come out of thin air. As forms of knowledge, imagination is inseparable from the other things we know as facts.

Chang traces this methodology to Toni Morrison’s concept of literary archeology, which begins “on the basis of some information and little bit of guess-work [through which] you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the
world that these remains imply” (Morrison, “The Site of Memory” 92). Loss in Chang’s methodology is likewise a productive place to enter into questions of absence and history. Like Vang, rather than digging to find answers or to fill gaps in her family history, Chang reimagined those gaps with other stories and possibilities within a particular historical context.

Such critical and creative approaches to loss in the archive are not limited to Asian America or Asian American Studies. Transnational feminist and queer scholars of color have also theorized loss in the archive. Many have troubled the assumption that lives and realities can be processed, preserved, and thus archived by situating the archive itself as an object of study. Scholars have analyzed what the archive and the archival process can and cannot capture (Taylor; Rawson “Archive This!”; Cvetkovich). They have critiqued the researcher’s gaze and desire to contain and fill the archive (Rawson; Morris and Rawson). And they have redirected the institutional and onto-epistemological power attributed to archives (Gumbs *M Archive*; Lowe *Intimacies*; Vang; Ward; Muñoz *Cruising Utopia*).

In her foundational study on the archive of slavery, Saidiya Hartman characterizes archives as “a kind of fiction,” suggesting that the archive is always a narration of life and reality (10). Building on Hartman’s work and other queer and feminist of color theories of archival research, which I continue to describe below, this dissertation demonstrates a performative novel methodology that produces fiction from critical archival research. This work brings together Asian American literary traditions of fiction and queer archival research as a method for analyzing the conditions of loss and Asian migration to the United States. It is through these bodies of scholarship and the questions
they raise that loss has become a particular interest to me. Its immateriality presents methodological dilemmas across several contexts and areas of study, and fiction provides a method to engage with loss as knowledge.

_Fiction as Method._ The primary method I used to compose _PLOY_ was fiction. I wrote characters, places, concerns, and worlds onto the page and into our minds. Fiction is a tool and method for making impossible Asian American stories possible. In Part I. Conceptual Framework, I outline the performative novel as storytelling and method. Drawing on Richardson and St. Pierre’s work, “Writing A Method of Inquiry,” I place writing at the very foundation and center of this dissertation. Writing is my primary research tool, rather than just the means of presenting my research. As I explain in Part I, writing is both the process of inquiry and the product of inquiry. This is what makes the performative novel a performative writing methodology. For Della Pollock, performative writing is a material, analytic, and discursive practice with a paradoxical function because it is both a means and an end. “Writing as _doing_” (Pollock “Performatve Writing” 74, italics in the original). Performative writing is both referential and constitutive. While it relies upon language, discourse, and textuality, performative writing simultaneously builds upon, reinvents, and reroutes language, discourse, and textuality. This is what makes writing perform. Performative writing.

In this section, I expand upon Richardson and St. Pierre’s writing methodology by presenting fiction as a performative writing method. Richardson and St. Pierre’s methodology pertains primarily to qualitative social scientific writing. This is not to say that they exclude fiction from qualitative social scientific inquiry or from knowledge
production more broadly. In fact, they lament that “the world of writing has been divided into two separate kinds: literary and scientific” since the 17th century (960). My aim is to extend their methodology in ways that explicitly include fiction.

I maintain that fiction writing is a method that does two things. One, fiction relies on literary tools to diagnose, question, explain, and represent social issues as they are observed, studied, experienced, and felt. Two, because fiction’s form is not constrained by fact, the form allows it to step outside of the writing and use literary tools to contextualize the social issues it addresses by commenting on how they came to be the way they are. Said more plainly, fiction as method is both a story and a meta-story—a performative story—that contemplates its own storytelling practice. My investment in fiction writing comes from what it can do; that is, make meaning of sheer loss and impossibility, or what Sadiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation” (12).

In “Venus in Two Acts,” Hartman writes about silence and irretrievable narratives in archives pertaining to the Middle Passage. She explains that “there is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage” (3) … and “The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them” (8). The hunger for lost stories is sharp, and I would add, devastating. Scholars have an impulse and desire to rescue what has been lost. But Hartman importantly instructs us that loss, hunger, and devastation is already knowledge and contains information without a need for recovery. That in fact, as Hartman describes her own process, recovery is more often about the scholar’s own desires and needs to be consoled in the face of grave loss. This presents a methodological dilemma; if not archival recovery because such a project is impossible and/or because it is self-serving, then what? Hartman asks, “In the end, was it better to leave [the silences
in the archive of slavery as I found them?” Responding to her own question, Hartman theorizes the archive of slavery as a sort of fiction, an incomplete catalog of data which presents a particularly violent story that “determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power” (10). In other words, the archive of slavery reproduces violence in ways that serve the institutions that oversee them. Hartman theorizes critical fabulation as a tool that redirects the logic that designates the archives of slavery as the authority on narratives of slavery and the Middle Passage. Critical fabulation is “a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history … that both tell[s] an impossible story and amplif[ies] the impossibility of its telling (11). This method of fiction exploits the very logic upon which archives are built: that history and lives can be contained, collected, preserved, and deaccessed.

Thus, grounded in this methodological perspective, fiction is a political method; it throws authority into crisis because it positions archives as a kind of fiction too. This is not to equate facts with fiction, but to understand that facts are always narrated within discourse that draw upon power and direct power in certain directions (McKittrick). This argument that facts are narrated and embedded in narratives does not adhere to the fascist post-truth paradigm in which facts are decontextualized to deny realities and to maintain power and control. If anything, this argument about the relationship between narrative and facts, instead, hyper-contextualizes facts, where they come from, which discourses they draw upon, and what they do.

Fiction as method attends to the discourses at play in the writing and therefore functions as a discourse diagnostic tool. As poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong maintains,
writing is a “diagnostic tool” that diagnoses “the estranging and alienating feelings you have” and that gives “language for the affliction that you have” (“Racing”). Here, Park Hong uses a metaphor of diagnosis, in which a doctor is trained to identify the nature of one’s condition based upon presenting symptoms. Depending upon the symptoms and the suspected condition of the patient, a doctor may use a variety of tools to offer a diagnosis. Park Hong likens writing to a methodological tool for diagnosing feelings of estrangement or alienation. She constructs people who experience those feelings as having received training like a doctor that enables them to diagnose social ills. Naming and articulating those feelings, she suggests, is a form of knowledge production because it diagnoses affliction. Diagnosis identifies the conditions, how it came to be, and how it stands in relation to the symptoms. Likewise, diagnostic writing tells not only of estrangement or alienation but also how they came to be and how a writer-scholar understands them in relation to their being.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ _M Archive: After the End of the World_ is an example of fiction as a method that diagnoses capitalism, anti-Black racism, and environmental destruction. _M Archive_ is a work of speculative fiction, published as research by Duke University Press. Gumbs writes to us from the future—from a future that has been destroyed by individualism, capitalism, liberalism, anti-Blackness, and people-induced climate change. She insists that Black life is a mode and method of survival and being. Throughout the text she conceptualizes ancestry and kinship, and therefore being, as much spiritual and psychic as biological. Survivors are ancestors and ancestors are the future. Ancestors, in _M Archive_, are biological, spiritual, and psychic. As a methodological study, Gumbs demonstrates the importance of onto-epistemology and the
role of the psyche and imagination in making sense of our place in the world and in history. Gumbs makes life and being possible despite living in an anti-Black world through, what she calls in the book’s synopsis, “a series of poetic artifacts.” Like Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” which meditates on how the past shapes the present, *M Archive* meditates on how the past and present shape the future. The function of fiction in *M Archive* is to describe the conditions and future outcomes of capitalism, anti-Black racism, and environmental destruction, as well as how these violent regimes feel and are experienced as well as how they came to be.

*PLOY* diagnoses loss and intimacy in Thai America as a symptom of migration. Loss and intimacy are embedded in the title *PLOY*. It aptly references a strategic and relational Thai American subjecthood. Ploy is a false cognate, meaning *ploy* exists as a word in both Thai and English with a similar spelling and pronunciation but different meanings and etymologies. In English, ploy is a noun used to reference a tactic or action meant to turn a situation to one’s advantage. The English word also has a connotation of cunning strategy. The need for a tactic denotes there is something at stake, potentially lost.

In Thai, *พลอย*, romanized as ploy, is a noun meaning gem/s with the cultural knowledge that gems are made from minerals and stones pressurized and shaped into precious materials. Ploy is also a common Thai nickname for people who identify as girl/femme/woman (one that I share with the protagonist). The majority of Thai people, including those of us in the diaspora, have three names—a given name (Porntip), a nickname (Ploy), and a surname (Israsena na Ayudhaya). Most only use two—our given name and a nickname. Surnames are rarely used in Thai society, and when they are used,
surnames are never used alone even in very formal situations except to distinguish between people who share the same given name (Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom). Given names denote formality. Nicknames, however, denote familiarity. Nicknames are a mode and method of intimacy. Kathryn Howard notes the distinctions between Thai given names and nicknames; “While the use of given names is normally restricted to formal or official interactions [like documentation], the use of nicknames for self and addressee reference normally occurs in casual situations and indicates a sense of intimacy between interlocutors” (209, my italics). Calling a Thai person by their nickname indicates and facilitates intimacy between the person speaking and the person being called upon. It signals knowing and being known apart from one’s given, formal, and institutional name.

In these ways, the title, *PLOY*, when considering both its Thai and English definitions, references the survival tactics one enacts in navigating life as a racialized migrant in a settler colonial nation state, and as a Thai nickname, *PLOY* also references intimacy, kinship, and the processes and conditions of being in relationship with others in and through ongoing experiences of migration. The use of ploy, as a title and as the protagonist’s name, is an indication of the literary. It signals to the reader that writing is *literary, not literal.*

*From Literal to Literary.* The term “literary tools” I use in this dissertation refers to the range of literary devices and practices a writer-scholar using the performative novel methodology can draw upon throughout the research process. This includes the commonly known literary devices such as allegory, archetype, euphemism, flashback, foreshadowing, framing, hyperbole, irony, juxtaposition, metaphor, point of view, simile,
and tone. Literary tools also includes other research tools such as critical archival research, auto/ethnography or other fieldwork, writing exercises, reading, walking, mindfulness, eating, resting, dreaming, or any other practice that contributes to the writing and the writing process. Together, these are the methodological tools a writer-scholar draws upon to compose a performative novel.

Literary tools signal an orientation toward the writing, an orientation that signals a turn away from literal representation to literary representation. For example, I created a jarring shift in point of view from the first chapter (narrated in third-person limited with attention on Por) to second chapter (narrated in close first-person with attention on Jihyun). The shifting point of view is a tool, a signal to the reader that this is a literary representation, not a literal representation. The move from third-person to first-person point of view indicates that I am not representing the story literally. I am using literary tools, like shifting points of view, to evoke the reader’s curiosity about the nature of reality in the story and to produce affect by the sudden and striking change.

In literary representation of loss. Loss is made a character, a force that shapes the world. For example, in Min Jin Lee’s 2017 novel Pachinko, loss shapes the story of a displaced Korean family across generations, places, and history. Rather than writing about the literal losses that Koreans endured during the Japanese annexation of Korea, Lee represents loss literally through the stories of a family living under such conditions. Loss is not only the physical materials that Sunja and her family lost in the annexation and their displacement in Japan and eventually the United States such as their home, lodging business, documentation, and community. Loss in Pachinko also includes the psychic immaterial products of loss like stability, isolation, language, connection, and
joy. What Lee’s novel does that I am not/cannot do here in this literal representation of her novel is show what physical and psychic loss looks and feels like in that particular family under those particular conditions in that particular period of time. This references the differences in genre and modes of representation. The literary can represent abstract concepts, feelings, and experiences in ways that the literal cannot or is at least strained by. This is the literariness of fiction.

By literariness, I refer to the sense and impression that results in the use of literary tools. As a writer, I was mindful of the impressions certain moments, characters, and places could have on a reader. For instance, in the opening chapter with Por, I intentionally tried to invoke a sense of bitterness and desolation by describing the layers of dust in his apartment and the ironic fact that a former award-winning Thai cook only eats microwave TV dinners in his own home. Whatever range of feelings this might raise for different readers is what I am referring to as literariness.

The term, literariness, was originally coined and deployed by early twentieth-century Russian formalists in the Prague Literary Circle to distinguish literary texts from other texts. The concept has since been challenged by literary critics, postmodernists, and poststructuralists who maintain that literary texts are no different than any other text. Other critics embrace the term, but have taken to redefining literariness. In this dissertation, I draw on the concept of literariness not simply to distinguish literary texts from other kinds of texts, as in the Russian formalist sense, but rather because the term acknowledges and names the sense and impression that literary writing like fiction evokes that literal writing does not (or does not do as well).
David Miall, literary scholar, and Don Kuiken, psychologist, identify three elements of literariness in their multidisciplinary and mixed-method study, titled “What is literariness?” One, literariness requires an “occurrence of stylistic variations that are distinctively (although not uniquely) associated with literary texts,” such as dramatic irony, metaphor, and point of view, among others (121). This means the text (any text, not only texts explicitly marked as “literature”) includes literary devices. Two, literariness results in readers defamiliarizing their responses to stylistic variations, like those mentioned above, because the literary goes beyond explanation. This means that the literary devices in the text often better represented the readers’ feelings and experience than an explanation could. For example, a literary passage describing crashing waves in an open sea might better describe one’s grief than a literal description like “I am grieving.” The literary description provides more depth, texture, movement, and nuance. Three, “the modification or transformation of a conventional concept or feeling” (121). This refers to the way readers understand and interpret a literary text through their own individual schema, which is another way of saying that while we can all read the same text, we provide different interpretations that are shaped by our individual schema.

While I find Miall and Kuiken’s framework of literariness useful for outlining the sense and impression that literary writing produces in readers, it omits the ideological significance of literariness or writing more broadly (Eagleton). Individual schema is shaped by culture (Boutyline and Soter) and culture is inseparable from power (Hall). Because writing (literal and literary) is citational (Pollock; Minh-ha; Butler), meaning it always draws upon and contributes to discourse, writing communicates and re/produces value and power, taste and aesthetic, as well as utility (Eagleton 19). It is the writer-
scholar’s responsibility then to attend to the ethics of power and ideology embedded in
the writing process. It is the writer-scholar’s responsibility to examine and consider the
discourse that the writing draws upon, from formulating research questions, to note-
taking, to representing the research in story form, and everything in between. As Matthew
Salesses argues in *Craft in the Real World*, “To wield craft morally is not to pretend that
[the] expectations [of literary craft] can be met innocently or artfully without ideology,
but to engage with the problems ideology presents and creates” (29). Salesses suggests
that craft is inherently ideological and to wield craft morally, then, is to confront ideology
directly rather than ignore it.

In composing *PLOY*, I faced endless ideological and ethical considerations—to
what extend I ought to draw from my life experience and the experiences documented in
the archives I consulted, how to represent race, gender, sexuality, class, language, and
ability, the varying stakes of including interpersonal and state-sponsored harm and
violence, naming characters and places, and whether to reference real places, people, and
policies. The list goes on and on, as the writer is accountable for every word and every
mark on the page (“Vulnerability is Power”). One of the most arduous scenes for me to
write and to revise, for example, was the immigration biometric appointment at USCIS
Detroit. This is one of the few autobiographical situations in the performative novel. I
once witnessed a situation like this, in which I was waiting for a biometric immigration
appointment (unrelated to my father’s case) at an immigration office in the Northeast
when eight Black and Brown men were ushered out of the building in handcuffs that
were chained together. I struggled with how to represent this situation in the world of the
novel. Given that this scene is written in third-person, I had to consider how each of the
central characters would witness and then understand the event. In writing that particular scene, I weighed first whether to include it, and once I decided to indeed include it, I had to consider how to represent the scene in the world of the novel and how it might be taken up the world in which we, the author and reader, live, where there is ample discourses on “good” and “bad” immigrants (Vasquez). How the reader understands and feels through that scene will be shaped by the individual’s schema and relationship to culture and ideologies. This is what literariness does.

Literariness exposes the ideological logics operating across the production and consumption of fiction, as when a writer composes a story using literary tools or when a reader consumes and interprets the literary tools presented in the story. Therefore, fiction is a political project, one that directly references and contends with the ideology of literary craft and consumption. Fiction is a political mode of thinking, processing, and representing the world and social issues through literary tools.

Many performance scholars and other scholars who use elements of creative writing in their research already use literary tools in their scholarship. In fact, the field of Performance Studies in Communication (PSC) “derives from the field of literature and focuses on the performative and aesthetic nature of human discourse” (Pelias and VanOosting 219). Text and Performance Quarterly (TPQ), currently the top-tier academic journal in PSC, was formerly called Literature in Performance (LP): A Journal of Literary and Performing Art from 1980 to 1988 (Simmons and Brisini). This brief period of LP is referred to as the “literary period” of Performance Studies in Communication and lasted for no more than a decade (ibid 9). While there was great dispute among LP scholars during this time about what made this “literary period”
literary, inquiries in *LP* tend toward the interpretation and staging of literature (ibid).

According to Simmons and Brisini, what made the “literary period” literary, even when scholars publishing in *LP* couldn’t agree on what was “literary” about *LP*, was the fact that nearly every article published in *LP* (save for exactly one) is “obviously about a literary work or literary figure, the adaptation and/or performance of literature (or folklore, or personal narrative), or the application/revision of literary criticism to the field of interpretation” (11). In comparison, by 2019, articles obviously about literature are published in *TPQ* “at roughly one article per year” (ibid 12). Simmons and Brisini attribute the waning of the “literary period” in Performance Studies in Communication to the turn to critical cultural studies, postmodernism, and the personal, which quickly lead to the renaming of *LP* to *TPQ*.

I understand this waning of the “literary period,” instead, as a blending of literature with performance scholarship through an explicit use of literary tools in scholarly writing. PSC scholars began using literary tools in/as research rather than solely studying literary tools in texts designated as “literature.” At present, most of this scholarship is composed within the genres and methodological traditions of personal narrative and autoethnography (Simmons and Brisini). This dissertation expands the range of performative writing methodologies and genres in the field of Performance Studies in Communication through an explicit use of fiction as method. Fiction as method extends personal narrative and autoethnography traditions by asking us to consider how loss, imagination, and fiction shape our pasts, our presents, and our futures.

As scholars, we are often trained to think of and present our research in terms of filling in “gaps” in knowledge. The use of fiction, as I describe in the section below,
challenges this normative urgency, tendency, and expectancy for scholarship to fill in gaps. My approach, instead of filling in the gaps, is to interrogate how those gaps were created and maintained, for what ends, and for whose benefit. *PLOY* isn’t a “real” story about what happened to any specific migrant or their family. It is a fictional story about how migration happens and the forces that shape it. The genre of fiction allows me to represent loss literarily. In this way, there is no need or reason to reveal or uncover sensitive information that leaves Asian Americans (like my family, for instance) and their communities exposed and vulnerable to further violence and exploitation. It is a methodology that examines and reports on Thai American migration—its contours, depths, and textures—using literary tools that perform the conditions of xenophobia and racism in a settler colonial nation state. It reimagines Asian America through alternative, literary, queer ways of knowing. It reorients us to loss as queer evidence and knowledge.

*Queer Literary Evidence.* Drawing on Jose Esteban Muñoz’s theory of queer evidence and ephemera, I conceptualize fiction as, what I call, *literary evidence.* Muñoz defines “queer evidence” as evidence that has been “queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof” (Muñoz *Cruising* 65). In other words, queer evidence is matter that would “normally” be called into question as legitimate evidence. Fiction is one of those queer kinds of evidence; it isn’t normally called forth as legitimate evidence of reality in the way that statistics, video footage, fingerprints, and testimonies are. Muñoz “sutures” queer evidence to what he calls ephemera, “the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures … that signal a refusal of a certain kind of finitude” (ibid). Ephemera includes both the story and
the temporal signals, sensations, and experiences that the story produces. “Think of ephemera,” Muñoz suggests, “as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor” (ibid). This is what fiction, literariness, and the performative novel do—they produce signals, sensations, and experiences in and through the reader that are shaped by an individual schema which is shaped by culture and power. Ephemera is the manifestation of literariness in our bodies, those feelings and affective reactions you experience in your body. It’s an affective intimacy routed through literature.

Kimberlee Pérez calls this affective and performative network of relationships “queer intimacy”:

Queer intimacy accounts for those ecstatic, affective performance encounters among performers and audiences wherein discourses are hailed, ruptured, and re-imagined, and wherein subjectivities collide to generate alternatives. Queer. Queer as an adjective and as a verb; queer is a disruption. Intimacy. Intimacy as a noun that names the private; intimacy may be rerouted as and through public(s). Together, queer and intimacy threaten the norm, create a space for the labor of feeling, and describe the relational doing of performance (“When We Call…” 250).

For Pérez, performance, broadly construed, is a site and mode of relation for performer and audience. These relations rely upon and constitute the intimacy between performer and audience—an intimacy which may be “rerouted as and through public(s)” (ibid). By understanding fiction as performance, then, queer intimacy names the mode of relation, the intimacy, the ephemera, and affective labor emerging out of literariness. Similarly, fiction is a public site of relation. The author and reader are actors engaged in the performance of literature, a text routed through the public/ation. Pérez expands upon the role of public negotiation in her essay “Staging the Family Unfamiliar,” in which she uses performative writing and critical analysis to argue that staging the family unfamiliar opens up queer intimacy through the audience. Pérez describes in great, affective detail
what it feels like to be part of an audience, a public that has the power to negotiate the staged performance. It is this public negotiation of space and feelings that makes the personal, the affective, the intimate queer.

Normative notions of evidence render these queer affects and ephemera as lost, if at all. Because they are felt and fleeting, ephemera cannot be collected and stored in the archive the way an artifact can be. It is immaterial. Queer evidence refuses to be archived. Their refusal is not a failure, but an instruction. It is a call for scholars to remember the ways collecting, preserving, and otherwise archiving is a colonial, heteronormative practice. In queering the archive by turning toward queer evidence, “we can re-imagine the parameters of our evidence and the sources of our histories, which is relevant … for our field's reliance on archives more broadly” (Rawson “Archive This!” 239). In “Archive This!” K.J. Rawson, articulates three queer archival practices: 1) embodied archiving that “undermines an unequivocal embrace of longevity” (242); 2) fictional archiving that “reconcile[s] historical silence and shape[s] queer futurity” (245); and 3) burning the archive that indicates “archiving is not always a desirable venture” (246). Central to each practice is loss. Loss here stands in opposition to what archives traditionally do, which is prevent loss. Queer archival practices require a different orientation to archives altogether.

Fiction as method takes a queer orientation to loss. Its orientation is not one of recovery or retrieval but one of recognition. “To accept loss is to accept queerness,” as Muñoz says, “or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality’s path” (Cruising 73).
Acceptance of loss is not a loss itself. It is a conscious move away from normative ways of being in the world and normative ways of knowing the world. Fiction as method facilitates a methodological entry into being and knowing otherwise. It is a way to write into loss and imagine the function of loss on our past, our present, and our future. Fiction and the affects it produces is literary evidence, is ephemera. Fiction is a queer method about loss, being lost, and getting lost. It is to be, what Morris and Rawson call, *archival queers*, “those who develop queer relationships with the past” (82). Fiction out of loss is a mode of archival queerness. Fiction is a form of queer evidence, of ephemera, and it produces more queer evidence. It produces more queer ephemera. It is a political reorientation of loss as knowledge and evidence as well as a recognition that recovery and retrieval are not always possible or even desirable. As Muñoz instructs us, queer ephemera is “that transmutation of the performance energy, that also functions as a beacon for queer possibility and survival” (*Cruising* 74). Writing is a form of survival. Writing produces writing. Writing is affective and produces affect. Writing is a process and a product. It reproduces itself. It sustains. Survives.
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