

Ed Bok Lee

## THROWN

*for A.M.*

Those were moments of stones, hand-packed clay, firecrackers, stained-glass, footballs and fists driven into pimply faces calling you *chink*, *gook*, the *fuck* *yous*, and everything else you threw – to be tough, fight back, to feel your own rage, what flying was like in one sore arm, hurling a black rubber ball at the side of a factory all summer, sliders through rain, breaking bats and the skin on your knuckles against sheetrock, plywood frames, stucco and cement, like another boy in some lost age might have axed a path through the forest, or eviscerated a cow –

Balls turn to beer bottles, front grilles, and cracked windshields; three probation officers; sipping Everclear all ninth grade in that back alley, that river cave, that abandoned Northern Pacific boxcar, sizzling chronic colds and nosebleeds off a white-hot mirror you smashed for seven more years of what you thought couldn't possibly get worse,

running out  
the front door from a crazy man with a limp and loaded 12 gauge, your own father, who swore in a language you could hardly remember, and so laughed at like water on a grease fire, spat buckshot words back you knew he couldn't understand, so hurt worse, like *cocksucker!* through shivers, a steel barrel piercing your chest

until one midnight you packed a garbage bag, popped a downhill clutch, and bolted over highways and cornfields; bright-lit cities of alcohol, mushroom, and acid-infused blues; Kansas City in a \$14 a night motel with that girl's wicked drawl that first crackled through a KFC late-night, drive-thru speaker; her sweet skin to the dry bread of your own like warm butter; Montreal, Juarez tipping topless waitresses at the razor-wire border of heaven, or was it hell? –

Still throwing things out of car windows: dead birds, stolen stereos, work bandages, and baggies licked clean to air all the moldy rooms you ever tried to laugh at yourself in – propelled by some wind or power or dream your mother had that you would make it to California, Colorado, New York, and all the way back to that Minneapolis ledge you stood on with your friend, Andrew, another lost, brotherless Asian man with no face or voice in this land, balancing mid-winter with a bottle of Wild Turkey in one hand, reeling on that Gold Medal Flour factory rooftop overlooking the Mississippi, slurring drunk debates all night over the war in the Gulf, conspiracy theories, freak accidents, religion, and fate –

like how on Lake Street one wet July, mosquito dirges by starlight, a comet scraped high across the atmosphere, and we remembered that astronaut lady from the space shuttle Challenger who never got her Sally Ride back – a draining cloud of smoke for a soul who wanted to fly, like anyone, any earthling, but maybe it just wasn't her time –

Between throwing and flying, not everyone comes back.

I did. Andrew didn't. I should have heard the paranoia's triumphant rattle in his throat; witnessed with my two clearer eyes my best friend spiraling through blackness – a final plummet no blunt, no high, no amount of smoke or needle could store inside.

But life, even when falling, rubs and tears at the dark.

Years later, his seed of a son named Han, born in the aftermath of his father's deserted life, just three weeks after ashes shaped final wings over the northern shore of Lake Michigan,

now plays Tchaikovsky on piano. This beautiful, hoarse-voiced boy with little hands so sticky they somehow stretch to reach a far key just in time. Some days they don't make it, or land wrong, but he doesn't stop. With the seriousness of a miniscule saint tucked in his brow, he plays with the focus and grace his father, before losing all, once argued with me in defense of God –

I want to tell him, this stubborn five-year-old I watch while his mother works at the Chinese restaurant, trying to be two parents, trying to feed him with art, common sense, and reverence for a Korean-Chinese-Vietnamese-American story of the past no one will ever be able to translate for him –

I want to tell him not to listen when his older fourth and sixth grade neighbors taunt, shouting *fag!* for practicing Vivaldi or *Carmen* on a Saturday afternoon; sit back down, more will come . . . But who am I to grasp at anyone when all I've ever held has flown, sputtered, exploded mid-air like too much need crammed inside a prayer? Who am I to demand when anyone dares try to silence him, when he dares silence himself, to keep stretching his hands over that sea of black and white keys, don't stop, keep pumping those brass pedals with your tiny feet, life isn't perfect, almost never adds up, and it sure the hell won't last, so fuck it, dig deep and just keep throwing yourself, something, anything for as long and hard and far as you can . . .

and I promise you,

I swear to God

one day

it'll all come back.