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MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



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DRIVING HOME

For a good part of 2007, whenever I drove I-80 East from Berkeley to Sacramento, I would begin to weep just past Vallejo. Here, the road suddenly sweeps from the low land of the Bay Area up into the desolate yellow hills that signal the approach to the Central Valley. At night, the road is pitch black, sometimes dense with fog. In this liminal space, like Orpheus shedding flesh to become spirit and retrieve the dead, I revert from my Berkeley life as writer and teacher back to a girl, vulnerable to the mysteries of family and loss. In late 2006, my grandfather had died, and on those drives, at first glimpse of the valley, I was reminded of the void I was returning to.

For two days in September, my family had lived in the waiting room of Mercy San Juan Hospital. There were twenty of us: my grandparents' six children and their spouses, and nine grandchildren. The nurses gave us blankets and pillows, which we spread out on the waiting room floor among runaway crayons and loose coloring pages and bags of junk food. We cycled between the crackling chaos of this base and my grandfather's somber white room.

My grandfather was deep in a morphine-induced sleep. A clouded respirator obscured his face and his arms were splotched with deep purple bruises from the IV lines. We could not help but stare at the monitor, mesmerized by the

plodding beep and jerking green line that mirrored his heart. Though we hoped that he would clamber through the layers of drugs to wakefulness, propelled by a hunger to live, we were all aware that we were waiting for him to die.

It was his fourth stay that year, and this most recent visit, instigated by his weak lungs, revealed an undiagnosed heart problem. The doctor said that the visits would increase in frequency, and that it was likely that a massive heart attack would ultimately kill him. Then the doctor gently suggested that my grandmother give permission to slowly increase the morphine, to “make him comfortable.” For the next two days, the nurses came in every few hours to adjust the dosage. In the time between these visits, we took turns whispering confessions and good-byes in my grandfather’s ear.

I wondered if he dreamed us, if he desired to speak back but could not find a path out of his opiated slumber.

By the second day of our vigil, we were exhausted. The nurses urged us to sleep. They would wake us if anything changed. My grandmother stayed with my grandfather while the rest of us crowded into the waiting room: slumped on the institutional chairs upholstered in rugged fabric and curled up in hospital blankets on the gray carpet. The room grew quiet and thick with sleep.

It was in this peace, deep night, when only my grandmother remained to hold his hand, that my grandfather finally let go.

The nurses pulled off his oxygen mask, took out his catheter and IV drips, unplugged the machines. They straightened his arms and smoothed the blanket. They turned on the fans and deodorized the room against the remaining cast of his final breath, and we came to say goodbye. When I kissed him for the last time, his forehead was cool and dry.

This memory unfolds in the time it takes me to speed from the amber glow of the bay that recedes in my rearview mirror to the glitter of suburban lights in the valley that sprawls out below me. By the time my radio catches the signal of a Sacramento station, my tears have dried, and I am singing along. I realize that a final good-bye does not exist: it comes in pieces, again and again, unexpected. Just when I think I’ve buried my grief, it springs up anew, another glimpse of Eurydice fading once more into mist.



Born in Sacramento, California, the child of parents who met during the Vietnam War when her father was stationed in Taiwan, **Shawna Yang Ryan** graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and received an M.A. from the University of California, Davis. In 2002, she was a Fulbright scholar in Taiwan. *Water Ghosts* (originally published in 2007 as *Locke 1928*) was a finalist for the 2008 Northern California Book Award. She currently lives in Berkeley, California.