

Stages

BIRTH

The doctor tells me she is small, underweight. In those brief fragments of the day where she is asleep, I am afraid of something I cannot name. I place my hand over her heart, requiring those quiet fists of reassurance to know she is still here. Her silence is something I fear, to know she is quiet given what she is capable of. The visitors—bearing an assortment of pink items and dinner platters—tell me she is beautiful. *A blessing*, they say. *God's child*. Yes—but I am not the right one for this child. I worry she will slip through my hands, shatter like a glass vase in front of me, that soon I will bear witness to my faults. I feel she is safer in my mother or sister's hands. She is small—too small—why isn't she growing? It's only a matter of time, the doctor says. Time. This is what they tell my husband about his Visa, too: wait for your time, wait until America wants you. My husband waits with sleepless nights and a restless mind. I wait with a foreign body. It's an exercise, I suppose, preparing me before I am once again foreign to a new country. I cannot recognize these rough patches of skin that had once emerged as barriers, sensing my daughter as an invasion. Now, her presence is enough to make me forget myself. I awaken to her cries, and when she drifts back to sleep, her fingers are wrapped around mine. At that moment, I feel she is melting me, softening me in all the hard places.

CRAWLING

We are here in America, here where the baby first begins to crawl. I feel she can sense this new country around her, already carrying the restlessness of a foreigner. Here, she begins to eat the soft rice I mash with my hands. American food is cardboard, the doctor said to me before we left. Feed her what you eat. I wish for the doctor here besides me. I wish for my mother and sister, too. But these are the choices we made. Life is a trading game, my mother once said to me. You give up one thing for another. I do not have enough time to wonder if we have given up too much, and for that, I am grateful. The baby exhausts me, every waking moment she is shoving something down her mouth. She thinks she is invincible, unaware of the harm she is capable of inflicting upon herself, oblivious to anything beyond her needs and wants. Slow down, I want to tell her, along with the other women in the apartment whose English I cannot understand. No problem, they say, when I tell them my English is poor. But it is a problem, I think, as I am reduced to a nod and smile in front of them. This is all they expect of me. I am suddenly missing what everyone else seems to have, something I never knew I needed.

ADOLESCENCE

She is older now, old enough to take the yellow bus to school in the mornings. She forgets about me quickly, and all at once, I am reminded of all those sleepless nights I once spent with my hand over her heart, realizing she will never know of them. In the evenings, my husband begins to teach me driving. Again, in front of the wheel, I am reminded of those first months with the baby in my hands: my heart pounding with fear, afraid of what I would do. This is one reason I

cannot give my daughter what she wants. She wants a good, fast, TV mom, but I am nothing like that. I am not fearless enough. Not familiar enough to my surroundings to be fearless enough. One week, they are having presentations during the school day, and I ask the bus driver if I can ride the bus to school with my daughter. Sorry, she says. The bus is only for the kids. My daughter does not push for me to come either. She is embarrassed by my English, by the kind of mother I am. I try my best to do what I can for her; I cook the pasta and bread she asks for. She wants it bland, tasteless, a replica of the image on the back of the cardboard box. Don't follow your friends, I tell her. What do you know, she says. I don't know many things, I say. I tell you what I know.

TEENAGE

She begins to come home later now, performing in the theater at her school. It makes me proud to see her on stage. Her English is clean, sharp: it comes out wrapped graciously in slick film. It is nothing like mine. But when my husband and I go to see her, she meets us in an empty hallway before rushing us home. She does not want us there, and soon, to fulfill her wish, we stop going.

With my empty days, I begin to work at a department store, riding the metro bus downtown and back everyday. As the days pass, I ease into greeting the driver, occasionally making small talk with the passengers. Soon, it is something I begin looking forward to: a daily exercise of my English.

At the store, there are clear glass cases holding diamonds and creams I am careful around. In a long time, I wish for something I cannot have. Instead, I buy my daughter a few things she wants: a phone, some nice shoes, some makeup for her shows. Thank you, she says, before disappearing into her room. Americans, I come to realize, say thank you only because they must.

On the rides to and back from the department store, my body begins to ache: a pain I recognize only from the days following my daughters' birth many years ago. Because of these winters, I tell my husband. I tell him not to worry; he is tired enough, and I do not want to burden him with my inconveniences. On a day the pain is particularly bad, my daughter comes home crying. She shuts the door behind her. You don't understand, she says. You will never understand. I say no more. I have become a burden: something unwanted, incapable. Her sobs slip through the door, and all I can do is listen.

AFTER

Osteogenesis Imperfecta: this is what my doctor tells me is breaking my bones. I call my daughter to tell her; she is in New York studying English Literature. I keep the phone call brief, not wanting to disturb her studies. She is doing what she loves, and for that, I am proud. With her gone now, it is only my husband and I. We go on long walks before we go to bed early. Too early. I am reminded of all those sleepless nights we once endured with our Visa's pending, our daughter crying. There was a time she made me afraid, but now, she is strong enough to follow her dreams, to get what she wants. America lets her follow her dreams. She is not like her mother. She knows what she wants. This is what it was all for—what we gave and what we

received. My daughter comes home one Friday. She is older now, beautiful in the way everyone said she would be. We are watching TV and she takes my hand, wraps her finger around mine.