

TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS

Catherine Wong

Our father sent us to San Francisco the week that Leah lost the last of her baby teeth. Milk teeth, our mother would have said, but she had run away three days before to New York City.

That was the week our father boiled hot dogs every night for dinner. They go with everything, he explained, though when the buns ran out, he never bought another pack. For months he had been revising the errata of one of his textbooks, on the material nature of time. Even before our mother was gone, he spent the hours before and after dinner reviewing the proofs alone in his room. The week she left, Peter and I ate on the torn-up couch in front of the television seven nights in a row—in her absence the dining table felt large and purposeless.

On the third day we turned on the news and saw that James Earl Ray had broken out from prison. A mess of reporters was crowded around the Tennessee sheriff, shouting that the escape was all a hoax. Admit it, a man at the front kept yelling, wasn't the FBI behind the whole damn thing? When I looked up again, Leah was grinning in the doorway, her smile bloody and newly windowed, the tooth so small in her outstretched palm that at first I mistook it for nothing.

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Our father had retained Bill and Linda from college; they had moved to the opposite side of the country and sent separate cards for Christmas and New Year's. Despite fifteen years in Pittsburgh, our father had made no friends there outside of a couple of students from his physics department, who sometimes invited us to barbecues. We all understood that these invitations were perfunctory. Afterwards, or sometimes even before the evening was over, they always mentioned a job or postgraduate program that required a letter of reference. Only our mother pressured everyone to go, forcing Leah into braids and pressed linen blouses, and matting Peter's and my hair down with a sharp-toothed comb. Over the years her preparations grew more elaborate. Once, before a Memorial Day cookout, she sewed Leah a red-and-white ruffled dress from checkered gingham. Later that summer she made Peter and I matching button-down shirts from the same fabric, and when Peter outgrew his a

year later at age fifteen, she passed it on to me and made him a larger one, traveling across town to buy a second bolt of gingham. At the time, I resented the outfits, which she laid on our beds for these useless parties sometimes six days in advance. I recognize, only now, what I did not understand then, how loneliness can wash away even the acid taste of bartered company.

The day after our mother left, I walked into the kitchen to find my father hunched against the wall and nodding as Bill and Linda consoled him over the telephone. Though I have tried, I cannot forget how he looked, defeat worn so visibly into his shoulders that I turned my head away. On Sunday he called the three of us into the living room before dinner and announced that they would be taking us into their apartment for the summer so he could spend some time alone figuring things out. We'd get to go to California, he said, and it would be like a vacation. When no one replied, he said we would be back before school started. They were childless, he added, and we took this to mean that we would be left to do what we wanted.

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When we arrived, Bill and Linda gathered us from the airport and took us home before we understood we had landed. They lived in a one-bedroom apartment on Alvarado and made space for us in an enormous walk-in closet that they crammed with an air mattress and futon. Linda taught history at a community college and Bill worked as an engineer at a company that made automobile parts and neither of them cooked. While we were there they brought home takeout Chinese for many consecutive nights, or loaves of white supermarket bread, and sometimes for breakfast and lunch and dinner we ate the same ham and mayonnaise sandwiches. As the oldest, Peter claimed the futon as his birthright. Most nights the air mattress deflated by morning, and then Leah and I woke bunched up next to each other, coughing into the sticky dawn.

Leah whispered that outside there was an ocean of other Chinese kids and the truth was they were impossible to ignore. Even in Dolores Heights, they slipped around us like water. The first week we fought each other to figure out who would go up to a pack of kids rolling Schwinn past the corner, but even though Peter was seventeen and probably almost twice their age, they just laughed at him when he said hello and biked away. You could smell it off of us, a placelessness so immense it felt familiar—as if they and we had always known it was there and were only now just speaking it aloud.

In June the weeks slid up and down like a song I had heard on the

radio that skittered over the synth with a recognizable rhythm but no discernible tune. My siblings began to drift in and out of the apartment, coming back after dinner and often after dusk. Our father called nightly, and then on weekends, and then not at all.

Towards the middle of July, Linda left a newspaper on the kitchen counter and we read that all of New York City was engulfed in a blackout. For a whole evening we imagined our mother there, swallowed in that exuberant darkness and making her way through the wild unlit streets.

In August I turned fourteen and made a cake for myself from jelly sandwiches with the crusts torn off.

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Steven, when he came, came from nowhere. He was nineteen years old and wore his brown hair tied up with twine and we learned everything about him from Linda. He'd grown up in the house next door, she told us. He'd been gone for nearly half a year. He'd been away at vocational school and was learning aircraft repair and he was only back now, she speculated over dinner, because he'd given up or flunked out or messed around with the registrar's daughter and gotten kicked back home.

We saw him the first time out the living room window, sprawled on the front stoop of the yellow Victorian next door, and afterwards we observed him from our apartment for a week. Most afternoons he sat at the top of the stairs, putting Marlboros out against the rubber of his sneakers and whistling at girls from the doorstep. A honeyed magnetism hung about him. Always, they came—he was like the girl I had read about once in a Ripley's Believe It or Not comic my mother had brought home from a library sale who could crook her finger at any wild bird and coax it to fly to her shoulder.

Shortly after, Leah threw out all the blouses our mother had bought her and a week later she discovered mascara. Leah was well angled and already, at age twelve, learning to wear a thin affect of disinterest, but the lashes made her look clownish, somehow too urgently defined. In the mornings when I went to take a shower, she was already there, squinting into the mirror as she recapped the brush. Sometimes I watched her, until she shooed me away. My own upper lip had gone soft with fuzz and sometimes I ran the back of my hand across my face in the night. But in those days I was still unwritten, and there was no one to look at me.

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The day I wore the *Revolver* shirt I was carrying milk back from the bodega. We were always running out of things at the apartment, and if I volunteered to get cigarettes or the groceries, Linda sometimes offered me the change. The shirt was not really mine—I consumed music passively, catching the tail end of songs that filtered, dry and garbled, through the living room ceiling in Pittsburgh from Peter's room upstairs. My brother holed up there listening to *Revolver* and *The White Album* on repeat, studying these records and their liner notes with a meticulous intensity I recognized from our father. On his sixteenth birthday, my parents had bought him the shirt and after six months it had passed on to me in a stack of discarded T-shirts and oversized jeans.

When I rounded the corner onto our block I saw Steven, smoking on the stairway outside his house. He was turned away, leaned up with his back against the railing, but when I unlocked the door to our apartment, he looked around.

"Nice shirt," he said. "Good album."

"I like 'Eleanor Rigby,'" I offered, because that was the only song I had heard enough times to remember. I fished around in my memory for things Peter had told me. "The chords are really weird."

"Yeah," he said. "You could say that."

"I like it," I said quickly. "I like that it's weird."

The houses on the whole block were pushed up together, close enough that you could leap from one set of stairs over the railing to the next. Steven leaned across the space between us without standing up and extended his hand.

"Steven," he said.

"I'm Eli," I told him. "I live next door with Bill and Linda."

"I know," he said. "I've seen you and your sister and brother around."

"We're here for the summer," I said. "Until we go back to school."

Steven dropped his cigarette onto the steps and ground it beneath his sneaker. "Where're your parents?"

"Our dad's back in Pittsburgh," I said. "Where we live. But our mom moved away in June, to New York City."

He looked at me. "Did she go to Chinatown?"

"No," I said. "Actually, I don't know. But I don't think so. She was born in Houston. She doesn't even speak Chinese."

"Oh," he said. "Well, maybe she'll send you a postcard or something."

"I don't think she knows we're here," I said. The carton of milk was growing heavy, and Steven looked disinterested. "It doesn't matter, anyway," I said.

He stood up, but as I turned away to open the door, he leaned back

over the rail. If I was into music, he said, he had a bunch of mixing gear in his basement he wouldn't mind showing me sometime.

I knew nothing about music equipment—I remembered only that Peter had saved up, once, for a small mixing desk that he kept in his room and did not allow me to touch—but I said that sounded cool. I would love to check it out, I told him. I could come over now, even, if he wasn't busy. I was already setting the milk down on the stoop when he said sure, and I went down our steps and up his and followed him through the door.

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Inside, Steven led me through a cramped hallway, wallpapered with a striped yellow print that matched the shingles. The house where we lived with Bill and Linda was split into apartments on each level—I sometimes saw Linda talking with the older woman who lived above us, discussing the weather or the morning news—but I could see, as Steven kicked off his shoes into a pile by the door, that his family owned all of their floors. The hall snaked around the corner and as we passed, I looked at the prints of flowers and painted landscapes tacked to the walls. Next to one of the doorframes there was a photograph of a mustached man, with his arm around a blond woman in a brown sweater.

“Are those your parents?” I asked Steven.

“My mom,” he said, “and my stepdad.”

“Oh,” I said. “Do you like him?”

“I guess,” said Steven. “I spend all my time here downstairs, and they mostly just leave me alone.”

He pushed open a door to a staircase and we went down. The basement was small but well lit, unlike our own back home in Pittsburgh—our mother had piled it with boxes of off-season clothes, and Leah, sent down once to retrieve a set of scarves, had refused to ever enter again.

Steven headed towards a corner cluttered with records and cassette tapes. They were stacked onto a wooden bookcase and scattered across a desk pushed against the wall. On the edge of the desk there was a black reel-to-reel recorder. I had seen these before in department stores, showcased on shelves next to the televisions, but up close the machine was inscrutable to me, a mess of buttons and dials. It was imposingly large, nearly the size of the suitcase I had taken to San Francisco, and the reels of tape reminded me of dinner plates.

I stood there, looking, and then Steven lifted down one of the reels.

“I love this thing,” he told me, with unexpected earnestness. His uncle had introduced him to this and other machines, he said. Afterwards he had pumped gas for three years to buy his own. There was a stool

pushed under the desk, and he sat down and began to unwind the reel; in his hand the tape looked frighteningly fragile, thin enough that I could see through it in the light. Next to the recorder there was a paper box. When Steven opened it I saw that there were eight or nine fresh razor blades inside, the edges dangerous and beautiful. He picked one up and held it out to me.

You could make all kinds of stuff this way, he told me. Fades and loops and other crazy things. If you cut it right you could carve up the tape and rewire it into an entirely different song. He was marking the surface of the tape with a pencil to show me where to cut, and as he said these things I listened and did not listen. I did not really care about music. I left that to Peter. As he spoke I was not even sure if these lessons were for me or for no one in particular, if it would have been enough for him to hold and cut the tape alone, but still I was transfixed by his own transfixion, by the absolute narrowness of his focus. It was like standing next to but not under a circus spotlight, close enough to see the air split by the tightness of the beam. Steven had long, unkempt hair that he usually wore pulled back into a ponytail, but today it hung around his face, untamed and loose. With his hair down he looked younger, smaller somehow. I watched him fasten the tape back together with a sliver of Scotch tape and then he fit the reel back into the machine.

“Listen to that,” he said, when he turned it on. The place where we had made the cut sounded stuttered and wrong to me when it played but I closed my eyes, as he had, and said that it sounded amazing. He stood there as the reel turned, bits of Scotch tape stuck to his palm. With his eyes shut he looked blissful and calm and in that moment I wanted to become him.

There was a band I might like, he told me, when he had turned off the deck. They were punker than he usually liked but his friend Brian was the drummer and if I wanted to come see them they were playing tonight.

Sure, I said. Yes.

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They would be on at eleven, he said, at a strip club down the street from the Mab. They probably wouldn't let me in at the front but I could go around to the back, where they unloaded the amps, and if I told them I knew him they would probably let me in.

Okay, I said.

When I went home the milk was still on the steps. It had gone creamy and sour in the sun and I threw it out in a dumpster at the curb. Bill and Linda were out and Leah left in the evening to visit a girl down the block

and Peter was God knows where. I stole a leather jacket from his closet to wear to the club and ate dinner alone, taking a streetcar map Bill kept around the house into our bedroom to look up the route. At ten there was no one to notice when I left.

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It was cold when I made it to Broadway, the streets loud and jammed with punk kids shivering in their ripped-up jeans, but inside the club the air was thick and woozy with bodies. I went around to the back of the club as Steven had instructed, prepared to lie about everything, even my name, but a door was propped open and people were already spilling in and out into the alley. I wove through them blindly, looking for Steven, but inside everyone was moshed up together and it was impossible to see. People were dancing so hard I wasn't sure they could hear the music. They crushed into each other and the chairs and the walls, and I clutched at an empty striptease pole with the sense that I was drowning, buffeted on all sides. On a stage near the bar, a drummer was whaling at the kit with his eyes closed. Brian, I thought—in the light I could see little flecks of sweat flying off of him into the crowd. I pushed around and around without finding Steven, and after about an hour I felt deranged with sound.

When I couldn't take it anymore I fled towards the bathroom. There was a single stall for everyone and a line with no order, and I pushed around the man at the front before he could protest and shut the door. Inside the walls were violently red, scribbled over with marker so thickly I felt like I was being yelled at from all sides, and someone had pulled all the paper towels onto the floor. I went over to the sink and splashed water on my face. In the bathroom mirror I could see that I looked swallowed up in Peter's jacket, the sleeves enormous and bunched around the shoulders. I drank some of the water from the sink and then sat down on the floor with my knees pulled up to my chest. By the time I stood up again the man outside had begun pounding at the door.

I was near the exit of the club when someone crashed into me. "Eli," they said, and I looked up to see that it was Peter.

"Peter," I shouted back at him. His eyes were rimmed red and even through the music I could hear that his voice was unlike himself, unmeasured and thick.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Steven invited me," I said. "He knows the drummer in the band."

"I didn't know you talked to Steven," Peter said, and even through his new stumbling voice I could hear that he was admiring and jealous. "Where is he?"

I shook my head. We had come in a while ago together, I started to say, and gotten separated in the crowd, but then—with a shock of relief—I saw him, hemmed in by shadows towards the back. Steven was sitting at one of the spindly-legged tables, next to a pair of teenagers in denim jackets.

"Over there," I said, pointing. "I just left to use the bathroom."

Peter squinted over at him and then looked back at me, refocusing. He reached out towards the jacket and lay a hand on the sleeve, but I said I had to go back, and pulled away.

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The band on stage had been replaced by two guitarists with gelled-back hair. Steven was holding a glass, watching expressionlessly. When I was close enough to the table, I waved and he looked over.

"You made it," he said. "Did you get to hear them play?"

"Yeah," I said. "They were really good."

"They were all right," Steven said. "But whoever's on right now is fucking awful." He held out the glass to me, pale and nearly full. "You can finish it if you want."

I took it from him and gulped it down and then pulled a chair up next to him. In the basement I had never been this near, separated always by the tape deck or the desk, but now I was so close that I could see, beneath the fabric of his shirt, the outline of his collarbone.

In my life I have felt that immense exhilaration of closeness only one other time, at age twenty-three, on my first and final visit to China. I traveled alone and after six days of saying nearly nothing, I gave up on speaking altogether and took a tour bus that went to a zoo. I saw a tiger on display outside of the ordinary cages, separated from the crowd by only a thin wooden gate, a single ring around one ankle as if it were a prisoner in a useless chain gang. When the crush of onlookers thinned on one side, I went up to it until I could make out the individual muscles on its back. Then, too, I felt the same electric thrill of proximity, the distance between us suddenly unimportant despite the crowds.

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In the club the music had grown loud and opaque. Steven was nodding along now, his shoulders rising in sync with the drums, and I sat there without moving. I felt a simple wonder at my own want. It hung in the space between us and was tangible to me, the way a hot iron bends the air above it to its own hue. As a child, I had sometimes crawled inside

closets and other enclosed places, surrounded in those minutes by the intimacy of walls. I thought of this now when I saw the distance between our shoulders; if I could have, I would have folded myself into that space and stayed there. Around us the crowd seemed to expand and contract like one giant breath. Through the drink the club felt bright and useless and warm.

When I looked back up at Steven, he was staring at me. I followed his eyes down, my jeans taut and incriminating and between us like a witness, and though I did not look back at him again I thought of throwing myself into the undulating crowds and burying myself there, as if they were waves. Instead I sat on the stool, shrunken with shame and my own thin, yellow, faggoty scent. Next to us the teenagers in denim were rocking to the music, harder now, with an intensity that looked like they were shoving each other. We were thousands and thousands of miles from home, I thought then, and I began to cry.

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I remember, when Steven reached over to embrace me, that his body was startlingly soft. It was a gesture that was only brotherly—I knew that, even then. He smelled of must and salt. Over his shoulder the world swirled large and unfamiliar, loud with a band I did not know. I shut my eyes. After a while I pushed him away.

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“Is that your brother?” he asked suddenly. I looked around and saw that Peter had found us again, pushing unsteadily towards us through the crowds. He was halfway to the table when he paused, and then he bent over and vomited onto the floor. Steven went to him, pulling my brother upwards, and I saw ourselves as he saw us. We were little boys who missed our mother. “I want to go home,” I said.

Outside the club it was raining. The world had taken on that shimmery hysteria that came with storms—everywhere people were scattering, crowding under awnings and doorways, and towards the entrance a woman in a leather jacket was holding a hand over her head and saying fuck, fuck, fuck, as if that would help anything. When the trolley finally came it was mostly empty, except for a man with his feet propped across two seats, and we made our way to the very back.

Peter’s eyes had gone glazy and unfocused, and Steven kept a steadying hand against his shoulder even sitting down. I took the seat across the aisle and looked out the window. As an infant I had been

calmed by driving and trains—my mother often repeated how most nights she had circled for hours around the neighborhood in our dented sedan, going nowhere until the motion of the car lulled me to sleep. To my side I could hear the whistle of Peter snoring and Steven shifting against him. The rain was coming down so hard that I could no longer see the city, just the rain leaping up again where it struck the sidewalk, and eventually I simply leaned my head against the glass.

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On our family’s first and only trip beyond Pittsburgh, an unmemorable road trip through West Virginia three years back, my mother bent over suddenly into the backseat and told me to hold out my palm. The fate line was too shallow, she told me, for a boy my age; my life would be bent by a ceaseless pattern of self-inflicted turns. Our mother was not a superstitious woman. For this reason the memory makes no sense. But there is a clarity when I picture this, so sharp that sometimes I believe that I dreamt it.

She was wrong, of course. I had never been one to bend anything, not least the river of my own life. I did understand, though, how Steven could love the tape as he did—the simplicity of a razor blade, how time and tape could be recut so easily into a second whole.

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But there is no such thing as a song that lasts forever. That was the catch, Steven told me, how even tape falls apart in the end—in five or ten years, he said, the plastic started shedding away. If you were desperate you could put the whole thing in the oven and bake it until it held back together, but still there were no guarantees. Sometimes if you put a recording like that into the deck the song would just shred on the reel.

He showed me a reel he had baked and another that was too far gone to salvage, the cellophane sloughing off in translucent pieces that reminded me of moth wings. I looked, all those tawdry hours of song falling apart where he held them, and although I did not care about the tape, I stood there, coveting his hands.

In those days I cared so little about so many things that it was incredible, my capacity to drown myself in feigned interest. The next day, for instance, I was eating scrambled eggs in the kitchen when Linda sighed and said suddenly that our country was coming apart at the seams, and for nearly half an hour I ate and agreed. Afterwards she threw up her hands and went out for a smoke. When she was gone I sat there

for a long time. There was no one around and I left the apartment and climbed up the house stairs, past the other apartment and through a latched door at the very top that opened out onto the roof. The street below was emptied and calm. After fifteen minutes I reopened the latch door and went back downstairs.

This, looking back, was the start of a quiet in that summer. Though I saw Steven often, I would not speak to him again. In that last month, Leah spent most nights at the home of another girl she had met near a playground, and we were lucky to see Peter for meals. Our father never called. After our father was dead, Peter left me a voicemail—though by then we had not spoken for nearly a decade—to say that he was throwing out the boxes our father kept in the attic and had learned, from a stack of old calendars, that by that August a second woman had already broken our father's heart.

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When we got off the trolley, Steven walked us to the top of the stairs. The door was open; I had not locked it when I left. Peter shook his head, as if he were waterlogged, and we went up the stairs without turning on the lights. Leah was curled on the futon when we entered, still awake and staring up at us out of the night. Peter lay down beside her without taking off his shoes and turned to face the wall.

Outside there was an ambulance—I climbed onto the air mattress to the sound of sirens. Once they passed, the night felt huge with silence. Then we lay there, listening to our own tuneless breaths, so close we could have reached out and held each other there in the darkness. ■

PREPOSITIONAL PHASES

Deborah Gorlin

—In memory of Amos

As we lower the dog from above,
earth makes us face the degree
of its black. Even at that depth,

earth can be precipitous. Only three feet deep,
if that, to the bottom, slick obsidian, down.

The dog, alive then, stopped.
Off, different than. Between
is a length of breath, fat moment.

Placed in the hole around him,
beneath him. The dog's body, below,
his paws against, his legs across,

his shoulders next, to earth.
Clash of dog, not polka dots and plaids,
but two orders of matter juxtaposed

like sky and viscera, don't go.
Each distinct. Ground of ground.
Dog of dog: except, despite, contrary

to, earth. Until. Shovel in
earth turns it to dirt, throw dirt over
the dog, dirt upon the dog.

Now fur in dirt. Claws in dirt. Tongue in dirt.
Ears and eyes in dirt. Snout in dirt.
Dog sealed inside earth, still, separate.

It gives over, and off, within the dirt, along
with dirt, throughout, lost to it, on and on,
of earth, since.