
POETRY | SPRING 2021

The Spaces Between

By Jennifer Li

Every morning, I arrive in silence –
deep, delicate quiet that fills my throat before
it is broken by murmurs of *good mornings*
and dark coffee.

This morning, she is a patient with
the cadence of 60s *telenovelas*, consonants
tumbling over the cusp of psychosis – she is,
they say, both sweet and frightful, a
lesson in contradiction. She trembles, limbs
twisted and askew. “Linda,” she calls me,
“pretty” in her native tongue, pinning me down with
her gaze. I cannot tell, with her, if it is a compliment.
Her hands gesture at me, gnarled and shaky,
“¿Hablas español? ¿Me entiendes?”

The attending physician beside me is
serene, patient, aged spots lining his face
in a pattern that resembles my late grandfather,
crouched over his crinkled Chinese pathology books
laid out across his large glass desk.

“The diaspora,” the attending remarks.
I feel the word sit itself inside me as viscerally
as the tug of her skin when I move
to examine her joints. She pauses, for a
brief, clear moment. “Sí,” she says.
It is the shortest phrase she has spoken amongst
the syllables fighting to be heard –

Her thoughts, a diaspora,
remain scattered. Scattered brain, localized
damage, a scattered, localized population.

Displaced, scarred, darkened
velvety skin over her unnaturally curved spine.
When I let go of her hands,
she flings them out once more.
“Estoy muriendo,” she announces, over and over –
and her daughter beside her
sighs, a barely-there huff of breath into the stale air.

“As we all are,” the attending responds,
in English, calm and thoughtful.
Outside, in the hall, someone laughs.
When my grandfather died,
I watched reruns of slapstick cartoons on mute,
fingers numb around his leftover calligraphy brushes,
steeped myself in raw, unbridled silence until
I finally looked up *congestive heart failure* and learned
to scrape the pain out of the hollow of my throat.

“Estoy muriendo,” she moans again,
louder. Her daughter is writing in a notebook.
I am the only one listening. I reach for
her legs to feel for swelling.
I try, fruitlessly, to smooth out the
wrinkles in the fabric of her pant legs.
She is abruptly silent.

When I look up, she is smiling,
like she has been waiting for this moment,
smile merely momentarily misplaced,
lost in the diaspora. “Linda,” she tells me again.
Her legs are still, and I roll her ankle
into the spaces between my fingers.

I can still taste the remnants
of coffee in the corners of my mouth.
In the quiet, the attending begins
to type.

Jennifer Li is a fourth-year medical student at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia. In 2016, she graduated from Emory with a Bachelor of Arts in English concentrated in multi-ethnic contemporary American literature and a minor in Music. She has always held a strong belief in the power of the arts and poetry to exemplify interpersonal connection and the human condition. Li is also passionate about addressing healthcare disparities, highlighting intersectionality and patient-centered care, and mentorship and education. After graduation in May, she will be pursuing a career in Internal Medicine.

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