

Cindy Xin
Grade 11
Albany High School

Lake Water

When I tell Father I don't believe in God anymore, he doesn't say anything, just sits and stares. Mother offers books to read, offers to pray with me, but Father just looks straight ahead the same way he did when I pierced my face in three places, whittled my body twig-thin, and came home with three F's. His jaw snapped paperthin, his body curved like an old bent oak, and his eyes opened blank and empty.

"I'm sorry, Baba," I say, but receive no response. He looks down at his bowl of rice before picking up his chopsticks again.

After a minute of silence, I decide that he hadn't heard me. He had been going deaf these past couple months anyways. He had already been losing his hearing for years. I was tired from the years of repeating myself louder and louder. As my voice progressively got louder, my mouth had started to get weaker, had started to shut before it even opened. Talking became a luxury I could not afford. I just didn't have the energy.

"Then go to hell," he finally responds.

Mother takes my hand into hers and smiles at me. She scoops more meat and lettuce into my bowl, remarking about how little I've eaten.

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He was Liu Wei to most, didi to some, but to me he was just Baba. A short and silent man who could once carry me and my sister up four flights of stairs. A worker who was pious in almost everything he did, spending even sick days bending over work, refusing to rest.

On his back, our entire family had grown. Through hours of work and study, my siblings and I were given opportunities we didn't have to work for: swimsuits, ice skates, violins, even a piano. Every morning he woke up the earliest, poured out soy milk for everyone under his roof, and left before the first blades of dawn. He loved the image he had curated for himself as a silent, stoic, patriarch. Years later, when he would be forced to retire from his work, he'd fantasize about who he once was.

Over everything, he was a devout Christian. Nearly every book we owned would either detail the discoveries of Christian artifacts, the meaning of whatever verse, or how to pray. Everyday before dinner, he wouldn't allow us to eat until we had held hands and thanked God for the food. Everynight, no matter how tired he was, we'd gather in the living room to pray.

I was five when he had first taught me the meaning of God. It was April, or May. It was spring. After fits of crying and screaming, I had finally agreed to Mother's request that I should see the ocean. The stars hung lightly in the sky. The moon was a mere slither of light. I grabbed onto his jacket, terrified by the monsters that the dark was supposed to promise.

"Look, Xiaoxiao! Look at all those stars, look at the ocean, and feel the wind!" he beamed.

I continued to cry into his jacket until I got too tired to continue. Eventually he turned me around, forcing me to confront the dark, the night, and the ocean. The waves roared loudly, black and beautiful. The stars pierced the sky and my eyes despite their muted light.

"Look, Xiaoxiao, look at the world! It's our world. It's the world God created for us. God is great!" he beamed.

"God is great!" I repeated triumphantly, safe and happy in my father's arms.

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But nothing stays good forever. It had started to fall apart, like a lot of things, on a Sunday. Cars were swallowing the highway, reflecting sun off their surfaces. Birds were singing unknowingly under the blare, sitting in their oaks and their junipers far away from our bodies which lay stiff and sweaty in the backseat.

Father stared blankly at the green light until another driver honked at him. The car sped abruptly into action again, throwing me and my sister forward with shock and force.

"Baba, what happened? Are you okay?" asked my sister anxiously.

"I'm sorry? You know I'm hard of hearing," he responded.

"Are you okay?" she asked louder with hints of anger in her voice.

"I'm sorry?"

"Are you okay?"

He didn't respond and just kept driving.

Later in the day, I found a slip of paper detailing his diagnosis. Something late-stage, but something "treatable". Something deadly, but "acceptable". I held it close to my chest, tried to understand what it meant, but couldn't.

During dinner, I ended up crying though I didn't know yet if I was sad. The evening sun cut through the table, through Mother, Father, Sister and through me, cut us into pieces that were more beautiful than we'd ever be.

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I was fourteen when he taught me the meaning of eternity.

It was hard to tell whether something was a symptom of cancer or a symptom of time. Father started sleeping less than what was recommended. Father was reading his Bible less than I read mine. Half the days, he forgot to do the daily prayer. Or maybe he didn't forget. Maybe he was too tired or just didn't want to.

Everytime we prayed, his "amen" was always the last to come. After the last "amen" came, he sat with his head buried deeply in his hands, as if to express his hope or hopelessness. I was never able to differentiate between the two.

The walls of our home grew thick with mold. Whenever my mother hugged me and my sister, she felt shaky and desperate. The desks were eventually cleared of prayer books and replaced with recovery manuals. The tables, once meticulously organized, were scattered with medication and herbs.

As his body broke and broke, my body tried to grow around the cracks, tried to find a way to mend everything. I tried talking to him about my future, how many dreams I had and how I would be able to achieve them. I tried talking to him about the family I would have and the church I would become a part of. I ripped my eyes apart nightly reading textbooks and doing homework, as long as he was able to see how hard I was trying. I faked grades till he showed the slightest sign of a smile. Outside our home, I became all smoke and pavement. My body sought radical forms of nourishment after nights of peeling my face away, nights of work, nights of sacrifice. I started to skip half my classes for the streets of San Francisco. I sought hours spent in the sun and pavement, hours spent under the train tracks, waiting for one to pass over, waiting to be numbed by the white roar of sound.

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Before he was Baba, Father, or Uncle, he was a boy with loose teeth, tacky skin and a heart hungry for the best the world could offer: a ride on brother's back or an afternoon muddied by the lake or steam escaping from a bun broken unevenly in two. Spring broke lightly upon his limbs, cracked light through the mud walls onto his books, almost distracting him from study. Outside, boys whispered about Russia, soldiers, and whose mother could cook the best porridge. Their footsteps spat heavy on the leaves in a demanding rhythm. Their laughs carved hollows on the sides of his neck that he longed to fill. His brother's voice boomed over it all like a god's as he told stories of beating the village bullies, men able to grow over six feet tall, and the hole at the bottom of the lake, how he had been swimming and noticed that all that water was just to hide this big, black hole and how when they found it they could reach every corner of the planet.

“You think we'll reach Russia? Japan?” asked one boy.

His brother smirked.

“We'll reach America.”

But they didn't. Each afternoon before their parents returned from the fields they'd rush to the lake and throw themselves in the water, searching for the hole. Father would watch with envy as their silhouettes flashed black and thick through the window, aching to fill the hollows gaping now all over his body.

One day after school, he got tired of the vacants within his body, craved the lake and left school before anyone could see him. Leaving his school bag on the pebbles, he dipped himself into the water.

On sunny days the lake was a mirror of everything good in life: Blue skies slowly moving. Trees standing dense with color. One's own face rippling in the waves. However, it was not sunny that day. As he stepped closer and closer to the water he remembered that he couldn't swim. But swimming couldn't be too hard, right?

After fifteen minutes of hesitant wading, he was suddenly forced under by a small wave of water, and was barely able to reach the surface again. Before the next waves came in, Father prayed without knowing it, said hi to a God he had never met, closed his lips and prepared for death.

Instead, this is what he remembered: his brother's hand pale and murky, the warmth of shame instead of blood, God's face shining right outside the water.

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I was sixteen when he taught me about the hole in the lake, the hardship of drowning, the blackness of waiting for someone else's hand to break through the water.

I stopped checking up on him, so I was no longer able to tell how he was doing. I let him sit alone at home with nothing but the moss to watch. I stopped pretending because I was too tired to do it anymore. Instead, I looked for a hand to pierce through the water. I gave myself fully to every boy I met. I let them swallow me, and continued to offer myself even after they had spit me out. I made friends with girls stripped bone-thin, told them all my secrets, and let them toss their knives at me. I told other people I didn't believe in God anymore, even when I wasn't sure, because I wanted so badly to be like them, to hold their hands without that “God-shaped hole” getting in the way. Eventually, I believed every lie I told.

One day the girls and the boys took me to the ocean. I watched and envied their radiance, how they glowed under the California sun. In the car, I listened closely to every song they sang,

repeated the lyrics to myself as we walked onto the shore. Once the water came in view, they bound my hands and feet together and dropped me into the water and I let them, thinking they would save me. When they didn't, I forgave them, and let the lifeguard find me instead. I watched their backs as they walked away from me, watched how their skin shone so brightly, and cried.

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It was never a matter of if he would break, it was when. Sister said she didn't know him anymore. She watched him as he refused to eat the smallest amounts of food. I thought it was the chemotherapy that had pared his appetite, but she said it was his pride.

"He doesn't like being fed like a baby. It's an ego thing."

"No one would let their ego kill them," I refuted.

She laughed. "You'd be surprised."

When I first see him in a hospital bed, I almost want to apologize. The room was splintered with white, filled with scents of disinfectants and medicine. I sat beside him, unable to directly look at his face.

"I don't want you to go to hell."

His words fall flat. They don't mean anything to me anymore. We don't like to listen to the sound of things falling apart. We usually don't need to.

"Baba, I won't," I respond, knowing well he wouldn't be able to hear me.

I adjust his pillows and lay my hand on his arm.

"I'll never see you again if you do," he says.

Outside, the birds collaborate with the buses to provide some sort of comfort. Their singing mingles with the roar of engines to remind me that life was still moving on and that the streets of San Francisco could be a home if I lied hard enough.

"Trust me, Baba, you will," I say again futilely.

I want to tell him how I'd do anything to believe again. How I'd rip myself to pieces and reset the way my body and mind fit together or how I'd find the hole in the lake and learn how to swim across, stay alive all by myself. I want to tell him how I'd get everything together, go to a good college and raise a healthy family, but instead my eyes fall onto the curtains and my ears surrender themselves to the birds and the buses.

“But I believe in you. I know you’ll end up in the best place,” he eventually says, almost in a whisper.

I squeeze his hand as he closes his eyes. After a while, he squeezes mine back.