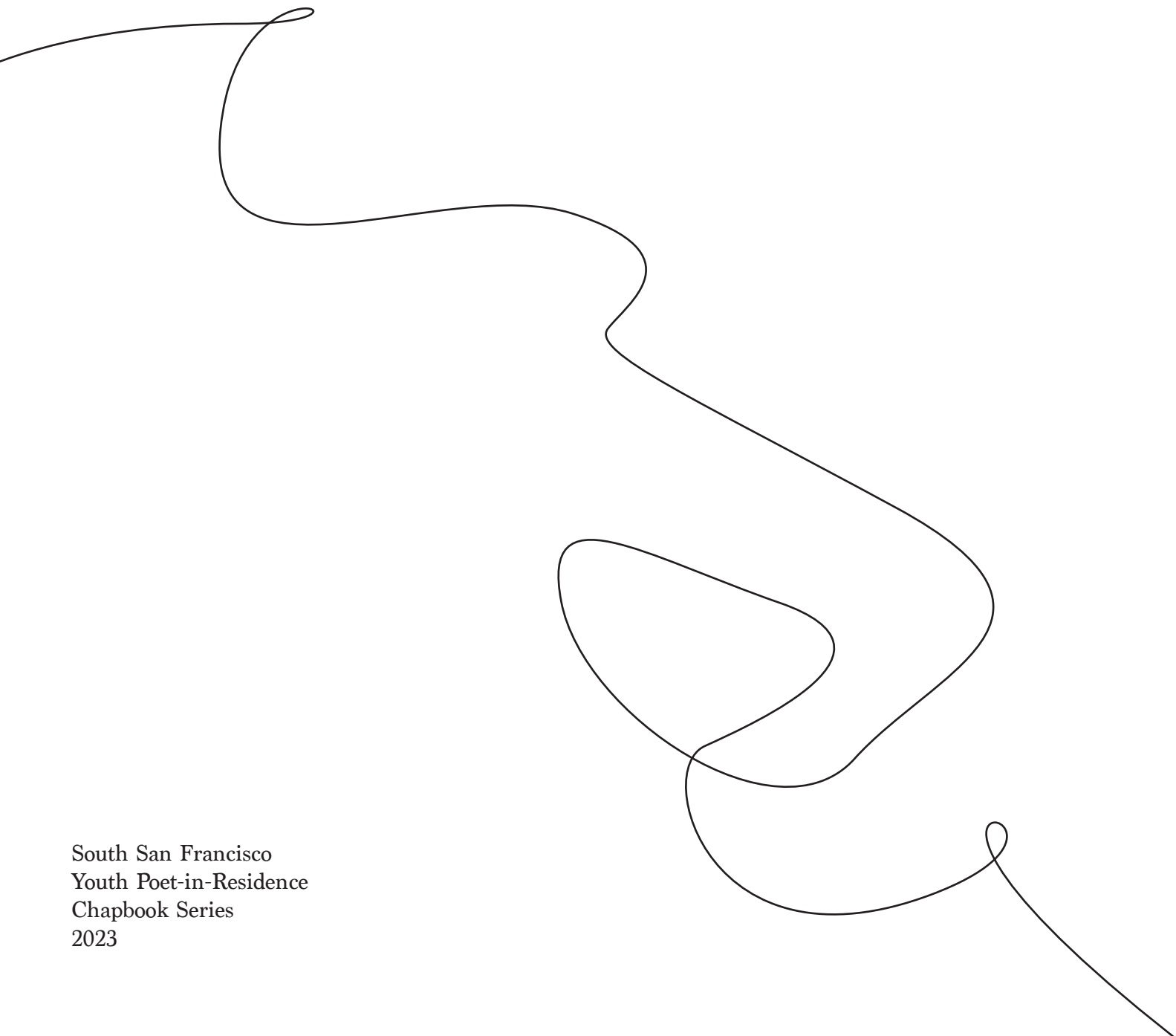


The Long Way Home

By
Chloe Chou

South San Francisco
Youth Poet-in-Residence
Chapbook Series
2023



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South San Francisco
Youth Poet-in-Residence
Chapbook Series

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Introduction

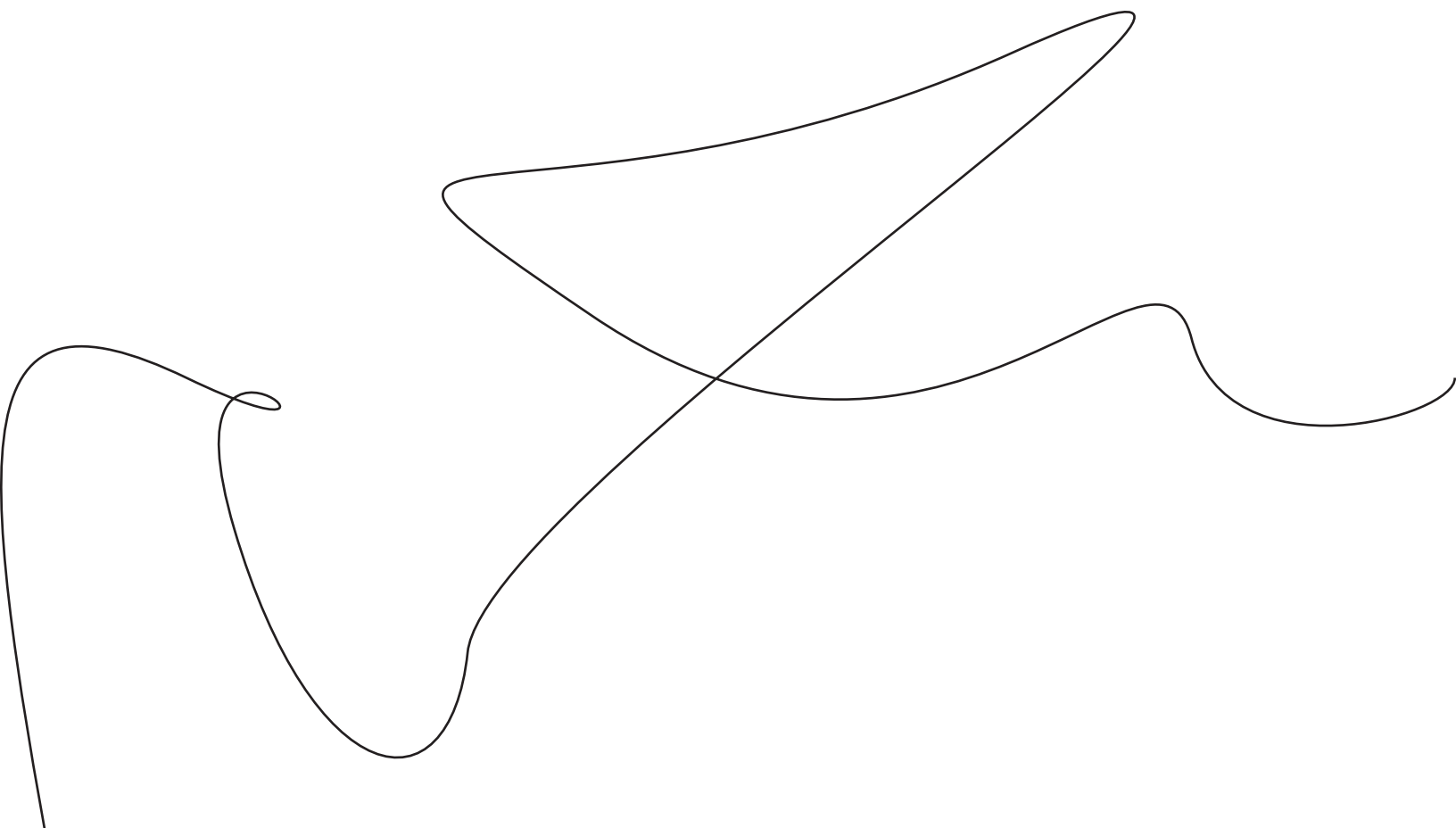
In one of her emails to me, Chloe shared a favorite line from a song by Sufjan Stevens which goes: “Tell me what did you learn from the Tillamook burn?” She says the line resonates with her because of its rhythm, story, and poignancy, which are elements also found in poetry. Chloe is passionate about issues surrounding identity, diaspora, and climate justice. Much of her work is about reclaiming and remembering. This chapbook, for instance, opens with a summer in Thailand, where “a-mah sits on the curb of the sidewalk,/ jaw still sore from all the yelling.” The speaker in these poems draws on memories of nan-hai and apple skin, seafood and apple seeds, the funeral in her backyard, the paper bag filled with fruit on a boat across the Atlantic, midnight rain. As I read Chloe’s manuscript, I was struck by how much she has grown as a poet since I met her a little more than two years ago. Here, she has alchemized youthful thinking and simple acts of living into lines packed with concrete imagery and musicality, her Burmese and Chinese roots obviously informing her poetics. She expresses her personhood and reconstructs history with imagination, courage, and care. Chloe connects the past and future (see her experimental code poem, “Function to Become Deathless”), not always buoyantly, but with the reminder that “in the aftermath of burning, art remains, impossibly alive.”

I first met Chloe Chou toward the end of 2020. I was facilitating youth creative writing workshops virtually, and she wanted more guidance and feedback on her poetry. She was 13 at the time, still in middle school, and had just released her first novel, *The Phaeton Complex*, a science fiction thriller about superhumans and the choices they are faced with. Being more familiar with fictional narratives, she wanted to learn more about the poetic process, its applications, craft, its tools and techniques. She wanted to be able to write good poems. As with other students I mentored during the course of my laureateship, I was/am committed to supporting Chloe’s growth as a poet. My advice to her was to read as many poems as she

could, and then to start from a place that she knows, which is to say, to tell her story in a way that feels right for her, to trust her voice, her metaphors and memory. Over the past two years, Chloe's poetry has not only inspired others to write their own, but has shone a light on issues that affect her communities. I see her as a reliable narrator, through whose lens we are able to glimpse many different worlds: that of an American teen, student, daughter of immigrants, member of a diaspora, music lover, coder, fellow observer, poet. I marvel at that expanse, and so am taking Chloe's advice, to "put on [my] shoes and/ [my] rain jacket. it's time to take the long way home."

Aileen Cassinetto
San Mateo County Poet Laureate 2019-2022

The Long Way Home



A Funeral In My Backyard

if we count each day of being alive
we find blackened sky at four a.m.
& firefly fever in the long night
i sneak out the back door of
the painted-over house
& i pray over your body
(or maybe the idea of it)
nothing happens, clear moon
spilling into the grass beneath my bare feet.
i pray without religion so i wait
for the sun to go missing
fireflies kiss my knuckles, sweat runs from my collarbone like i gave it
permission / rusted basketball hoop and deflated ball
by the fence.
used to climb to the moon with you and (you know) we could fly
leaves crunch beneath my feet and i stumble home where i will wait for you
(just make sure to knock) or the gravity will pull me under & i cannot
defy the stars much longer.

First published in *Eunoia Review*

Fruit

warm palms against the soft flesh of nectarines
sweet honey drips on infant breath and
ink spills across the page, a flash in eyes (passport)
a paper bag filled with fruit on the counter
how much does it weigh?
call it living, call it enough
tear the nectarine open like
a body creased and folded and torn along the line
that's how you save yourself (fruit washed, body washed ashore like something once loved)
something brand new? that's how you win a war
paper bag filled with fruit on a boat across the atlantic
phantom home (stretch marks under baggy clothes)
bite into fruit & it is nothing but sweet

Sinner

daybreak like the ending of it all
this is just so i can call you one of the better things in life:
there is no sin in life but want, ain't that right?
grass-stained skin, under a harvest moon
salt of the earth, and a quiet confession under warm breath:
all i really wanted was to memorize the freckles under your eyes,
the curve of your arms in moonlight,
your heartbeat against my chest.

and i guess this is a form of want,
so like any sinner i am afraid. stupid & now something less,
i scrape away the marks on my skin with rubbing alcohol. ocean
waves bruising my ankles, i must be the best kind of sinner. all
want & crooked grin, this is familiar in different ways.

Survivor's Guilt

when a boy tells you he loves you, remember it is an insult. the heart is still made of muscle and can be cut just as easily as the next. stories like this are well known. in this way, being beloved is only the same as being alive. when a girl laughs in a flower field, her lips pressed against tulips and her eyes shining like morning, remember that your heart is not yours to give. (when i close my eyes, i dream of the boy on the other side of the train station, his smile only a song.) the fantasy of any of this is only as strong as your belief in it. but who am i kidding?

sorry, by the way. this survivor's guilt is making me sick. in a picture from ten years ago, the boy is laughing like things will always be this way. silhouette or not, the only thing that has remained true is that you just can't keep some things dead. and when a boy tells you he loves you, all you have to do is grip the steering wheel harder and remind yourself that you are nameless until you become a statistic.

everything must be an art. if you burn your wedding dress by the river, it must be symbolic. if you kill the fruit fly against the lampshade, you must know why. this boy will not love you forever, so make sure you take back all the pieces of yourself, and try again.

Sunshine

here are the stars at the edge of the world
we are still young & there are fifty million years
until the end. or maybe a few minutes.

porch light glowing on the dirt path, geckos & all
other beautiful things circle the sunshine, heat turning
to joy and then gone, again.

but hey, calm down. there is nowhere else i would
rather be. you know what i mean, right? moonshine
in our dreams and gold footfalls against the dirt of
the rugged terrain.

i'm a liar, after all. maybe i should've started with that.
all other beautiful things already dead, and twenty seconds to the end.
bone marrow tearing into the dying sun,
fewer words have made sense for more.
let me know when you find the meaning of all this,
and i will be there waiting.

Prometheus & The Theft of Fire

creation, name to mean: foresight.

and to fight among the gods, hollow-chested, soulful.

when prometheus was told to create all living things, he shaped humans out of clay, crude and beautiful, and god-like. not like the titan he was.

mortality burning to the touch, prometheus scaled mount olympus to give his creations the gift of fire. baptized in beauty, and endlessly clay-bound.

who do you think you are, running before you can walk? before the gravity of earth pulls you down to the core, bending in prayer, yellow to mean: coward.

in the darkness of the new planet, your act of creation is ink. zeus watches us all, husks of the otherworldly; not godly enough to *be*. in any mind, humans are not golden enough to

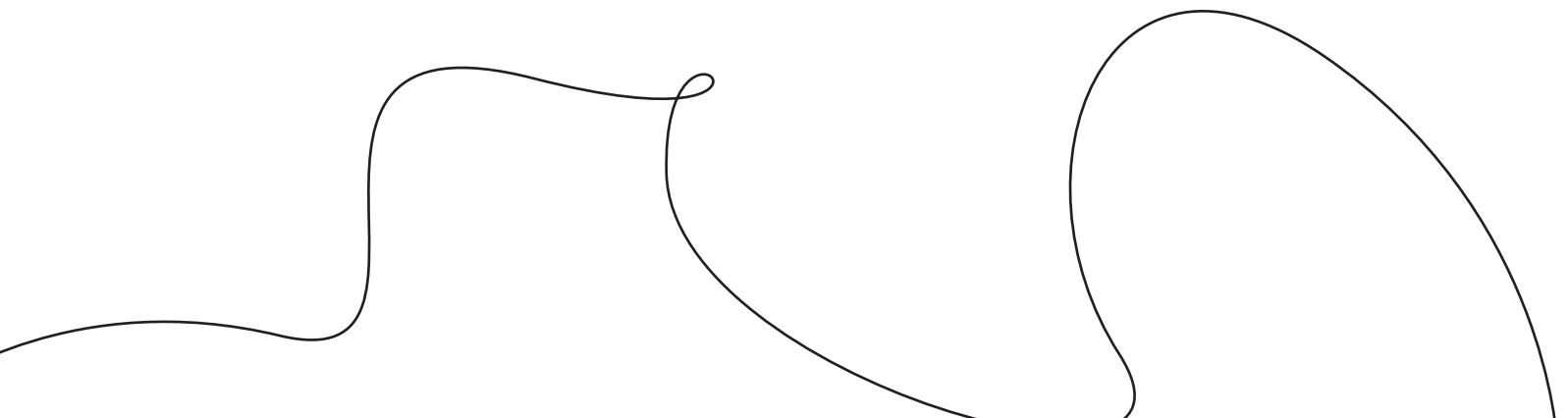
be anything but disease and death. the conquered and something to remain that way, eyeless in the fiberglass ringing of the universe. humans cannot be anything to

the gods or the titans. not when their very existence was made of something so soft, backbones splitting at the seams until starlight spills from the cracks, consciousness

where there should only be savagery. the light of the fire when the gods are enough. and that is the cruelest fate of all: to be more than you are. perhaps an even worse sin.

which is why prometheus, titan who dared to dream too much, was confined to the cliffs. while his creations remained, their syllables shackled to the fields,

poetry cleaved into stone, over and over again. prometheus remains there still: the talons of the eternal falcon cutting into his liver over and over and over again.



Function to Become Deathless

from happilyever.after import restart

break

```
public class on_dec3 {  
    int belief = safe! can't find anywhere.  
    int story = starts today;  
    int screen = end only. null
```

```
while (you.think.you_are_okay) {  
    [the gods are watching / they can find you anywhere /  
        there is nowhere left to go]  
    {apollo falling to earth, green grass reaching up for  
        mortal body. gold light reflected in  
        glassy pupils} break
```

```
if (mortality = null) {  
    warmth{"is there more to" + this}  
}
```

```
var this = [open wind, warm breath, the forced invisible hand,  
    choice]
```

```
i = don't.Think.this.is.okay  
    return {i.don't.understand \ let me be human}
```

```
else (immortality != null)  
    return {apology, give in to the weight of gravity}  
    switch(justaBadDay)
```

```
/* WHY IS THIS NOT WORKING */
```

```
i (want to && be real)  
    {string, break}
```

error

try:

slip-in-time = blood-to-ichor

error

system.outprintln("restart" + happilyever.after)

traceback (most recent call last)

file "function to be deathless", line 1

syntax error: happilyever.after not defined

terminal: c:\users\xx\downloads

run completed. 88 errors found.

And Again

tree bark rough against my palms,
i think the branches heard all my thoughts.
words dulling with the radio, rearview mirror
highlighting the things i left behind. there's too
much sound these days, there are still too many
things to do. hdmi cord, once used, on my bedroom floor.
wires and earbuds on my carpet, gray walls and i can't
say something out loud because once i do, the echo
won't ever stop. so i repeat myself in silence, every day
never changing, every day a little more of a mess.

In Which I Tell You Why

a maker of something real to the end
until i am finally enough and even so,
laughing because language is more than this.
what's wrong with me this time? was it something
about the dust in the chinatown attic? because if you really want
me to, i'll turn it symbolic against the rotting wood of the
window sill. or was it because i told you there was nothing else i wanted to be?
either way, let me tell you the best way to be real: driving down the 180
like Li Bai in the Yangtze River,
embracing the moon & never tomorrow.



Case Study of Xiamen Dada & The Burning of 1986

a haibun

museum, screaming white walls, the sunset sky burning red above clouds.
moths circle the heat of candles on the steps. art speaks from the
mouth of longing, and governance is not always longing. front of the
cultural palace of xiamen on november 23, 1986: the first time they burned their art.
twenty-nine years prior, the first rocket was launched into space: a burning hot star
searching thing. the art burns like a bomb & you must remember that where there's smoke,
there's fire. in the heat death of the universe, art wakes in the embers. and in the aftermath
of burning, art remains, impossibly alive.

and daylight, nothing
more than the horizon
splintering in two.

Child King

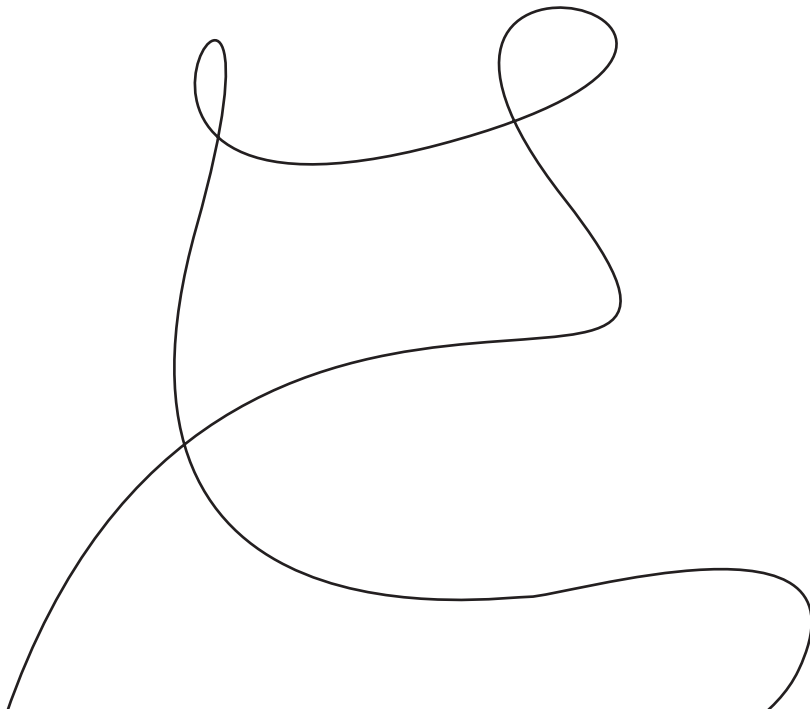
bright rockets at midnight, goldenrod as to live forever.
you, the child king, the eve of your fifteenth birthday.

here are the mistakes you made:

1. you are an orphan of your own making. kafkaesque, machiavellian. a creature of your own consequence.
2. you met her here, didn't you? the fence by the edge of the field. the enclosure movement spreading in the low countries. met her right at the edge of the commons, or what was left of it. told her, "i will wait for you. when the stars shine at night, know that it was because of me." blood oath by the moon and still a liar. the sun cracks wide open on the stone, breaks like a yolk and you hoard the shells. what is another half-starved girl? after all, the lambs are happy and that is the sacrifice you make.
3. what is another dead queen? you are an orphan of the perpetual midnight rain. sitting on this throne like it's not your second day here. when the river blood runs red, an invasion comes from the east, where they exchange tragedies like the boys with the scatterjacks down the cul-de-sac.
4. "apologies. i didn't mean it like that." child king, you don't say sorry. you don't take your eye off the play, you keep your eye on the mongols and the violent uprisings in the colonies.
5. hollow gaze, the sharpness of your tongue. didn't give a damn till it was too late. remember the curve of your father's shoulders beneath your hands. rather drink mercury or remember your mother's earrings? you aren't sure about the name of the nun at the end of the hall, but it doesn't matter anyway. if you're going to hell, you're going to hell.
6. it was late that night, wasn't it? when you watched the bird tip forward into flight, its frail heart fluttering as it took off. when you look back on the day they died, do you feel cold? metallic? good. it's your divine right.
7. the war runs thick with sin. your word is ruin. dark winter sky for "i am still here".
8. and you are, aren't you?

Backyard Sightseeing

for years i waited. pressed against
the clothes in the closet, balancing
on my dad's leather suitcase. sixteen
cent goldfish in the twenty dollar tank
downstairs, on the beach in half moon
bay my sandcastle fell with the tide, though
i would never know that. a round trip
to home and home again, i was still scared of sailboats
and english class. in this way we are the same & forever so.
we laughed, your cheeks rosy with youth and
your hair tickling your ears. and i picked you up,
twenty pounds of skin and bones and baby fat and
too much joy. your warm breath against the backs
of my hands, back when thirteen was too large a number
and too old to be. back when it was enough to carry you,
wide grin and all, on my shoulders and see the world.



INTERPRET

a haibun

click. please leave a voicemail after the beep.

last night, i dreamt it was the fourth of july
and your birthday. the sufjan stevens song
was playing and all i thought about was you.
beautiful and only once, when we were swimming in
thailand; stuck in the translucence of our childhood. when
i scraped my knee on the concrete floor as you lifted me
out of the pool and you scratched at the lottery ticket your parents
bought till the aluminum was underneath your nails. how will i tell you
that things made more sense in my dream? when the fireworks lit up the hot
summer sky and fireflies buzzed through the front-yard-grass of the hotel, when
the stray cats wandered through the halls, when your mom's lipstick faded into
the chlorine water. i pressed my heartbeat back to home. today when i listened to
old songs on my cassette player, i thought i was there again: still young, clawing out
of my body that didn't belong to me, looking up at the room lights like i belonged there,
always.

when i exhale, my fingers interlocked over the scar on my knee, you are there again too.
screaming like

the day you were born, the last time in our lives before we could feel shame.

how will i tell you
i only ever loved the
memories of us?

The Long Way Home

there are no dreamers here. but what do
you think?

about the gray-gold light
of the morning, the birds singing songs to themselves.

Speak up a little. i can't hear you. and get up,
won't you? you can't let dawn find you like this.

all tired and nothing more, the faucet running in the bathroom,
dandelions swaying in the rain.

can't you love today a little more? why do you keep
rewinding those songs, pretending like there's something
still there? something behind the piano keys and
the skeletons of time. look outside for once, notice

the cars and the traffic lights, red and yellow,
green, gone again. stay a little longer, see the
lemon tree in your neighbor's yard. citrus
in a bed of leaves, colors and rainwater
mixing together in autumn air. put on your shoes and
your rain jacket. it's time to take the long way home.

A 2017 Summer in Thailand

it is the day of the dark,
and a-mah sits on the curb of the sidewalk,
jaw still sore from all the yelling. she rubs
her jade bracelet twice and then rummages through
her plastic bag, filled to the brim with fresh bok choy
and enough seafood for days. nan-hai drops down
next to her, five years old at most. da-jie still out at market,
searching for the things left behind. a-mah, the boy wails,
i am tired and my feet hurt and i want to go home. there
is no time to go home. there may be no home.
a-mah pulls out an apple, dappled yellow and red. she takes
the fruit knife from her purse, and cleaves it down the center.
nan-hai does not like the apple skin, so she slices that off too.
it is the day of the dark, so when the peel falls to the street,
she thinks it may be blood. nan-hai reaches for the fruit, and
takes a small bite. and he is still afraid. he cries, burnt barbeque smell
in the air. lantern light ripples through the asphalt streets. a car swerves
past the vine-wrapped telephone booth. a-mah raises her eyes and lips
and wrinkled ears to the sky, and the moon stares back down patiently.
she clasps her hands. her jade bracelet hits her bony wrists, and she
closes her eyes as an apology. there is no one to accept it. nan-hai
rubs his eyes,
apple seeds underneath his fingernails. da-jie is still out at market.

in this story, none of them come home.

Acknowledgements

To start off, I'd like to thank all of my writing friends for being my source of inspiration. From the editors at Polyphony Lit to the editors at Cloudy, being surrounded by literary-loving people has inspired me to write so much more. Thank you, also, to Sine Theta Magazine and the Eunoia Review for publishing *case study of xiamen dada & the burning of 1986* and *backyard sightseeing*, respectively. Along those lines, I'd also like to thank Alocasia, Elementia, the Alliance of Young Artists and Writers, the San Mateo County of Arts & Culture, the SSF Cultural Commission, Step Into the Light, YouthSpeaks, Labyrinth at CSM, and Unfortunately Magazine for publishing and showcasing my work. Thank you for being the first people to take a chance on my writing and for providing so much guidance over these past few years.

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I'd also like to thank my parents, for always being there and for driving me to all of the poetry events in our community. Thank you, Mom, for always making me prepare my poems the night before. I'm not sure how many times I would've forgotten to even save a copy of them without you. And thank you to my brother, who (sometimes) reads my poetry, and asks the best questions.

Finally, to my friends, thank you for always listening to my crazy ideas. You inspire me everyday to become the writer and the person I want to be.

Chloe Chou
January 2023

About Chloe Chou

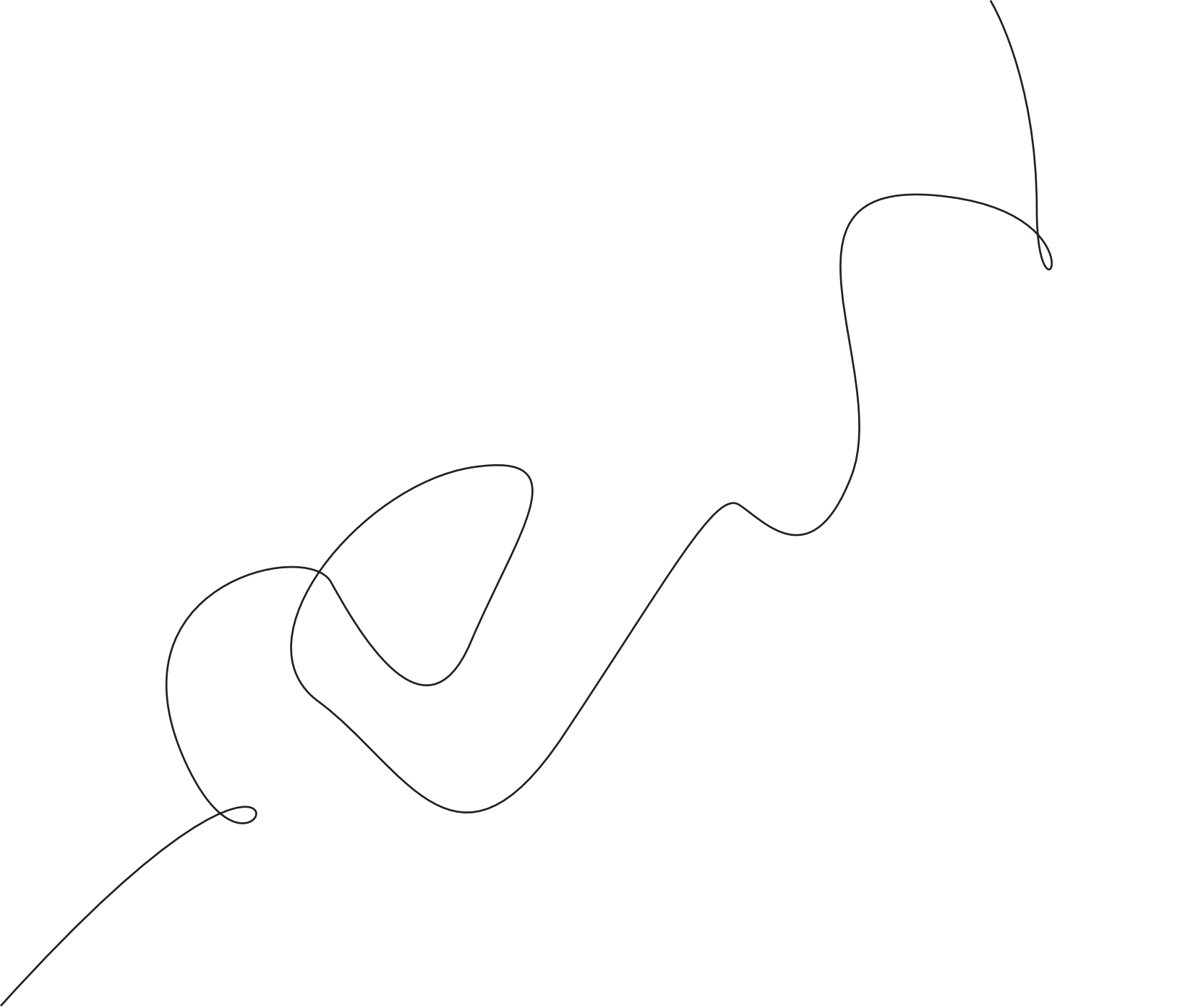
Chloe Chou is a sophomore at Westmoor High School. She currently serves as the Daly City Youth Poet Laureate, and the South San Francisco Youth Poet-In-Residence. Her work has been published in or is forthcoming in Elementia, The Eunoia Review, Alocasia, Sine Theta, and more. Her work has also been recognized by The Alliance of Young Artists and Writers, and she is a junior editor at Polyphony Lit. Recognized as the Daly City Youth of the Year in 2022, she is the founder and editor in chief of Cloudy Magazine, a literary magazine based in Daly City that was created with the goal of uniting youth voices in the city, along with highlighting literary and artistic talent!

About the SSF Youth Poet-in-Residence Program

The SSF Youth Poet-in-Residence is a one-year position awarded to a unique individual committed to engaging the public through poetry. The goal of this residency is to celebrate our community's diverse cultures through artistic expression and to encourage dialogue and unity under the leadership of the Youth Poet-in-Residence.

SSF Youth Poet-in-Residence program is generously funded by the South San Francisco Friends of the Library and is a partnership between South San Francisco Public Library, Youth Commission and Cultures United program.





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