

I.

There are two women, and you
can't tell the difference between them, but you know
that they both go by Chan. Somehow, it's stopped mattering
which Chan it is. Big Chan, or little Chan. Big Chan's the one
with the louder voice, you gather.

Oh, you've never liked that voice, the shrill register,
not the way she sings in the back of the store when she's
scanning the labels.

She doesn't say "burger" the way
you're supposed to say it around here, she rolls the Rs — nah, hold up.

That's little Chan. Little Chan's the one who
yelled at you once, told you to
keep your damn hands to yourself.

Guess it doesn't fuss you
which Chan it is, not
when their blood looks the same on the linoleum tiles.

When their bones break just as easily —
hollow, like little birds.

Wings,
fluttering.

II.

There are two Chans and
you've got to be prepared for the eventuality
that the person editing these paragraphs
won't be able to tell them apart. Which Chan was it — the mother

or the daughter? The cops said the mother was
the one with the long hair,
the one they found face down behind the counter,
her right arm outstretched, reaching for the gun.
Let's just refer to them both as
Chan — Chan senior, Chan junior, even if it
breaks some rules. Let's get the piece out quick.
But wait, hold on — we got it wrong, it was the younger one.
She was the one who went for the pistol.
She was the one who fought back.

III.

I want to write your story, but I don't know how to.
You see, little Chan, we were the same age, but I don't
know how to sum up a life that I understand
so profoundly, yet don't, in all the ways that count. You know —
you and I walked
the same train platform every day and looked over our shoulders,
scared of our shadows, jumping at phantom
knives pressed to our backs. I think life would have been different for you
if you dressed like me, walked like me,
talked like me,
lived and breathed like me,
just six blocks north. I think I understand you, because
you died in the same Doc Martens I still wear when I
walk fast down dark alleys hoping to God
the next dead girl on the news won't be me.

I think we probably learned how to
cuss someone out in the same language
and I know from the funeral home notice that your mom
smiled the same way mine does.

I want to write your story

like only I could.

Speak to me.

Tell me how.

IV.

Consider the asphalt. The roadkill, cauterized in the street,
trash bags spilling their insides on the pavement.
There's a mother kneeling on the floor, stacking cans on shelves, and she's
humming along to the radio. It's a song they both know, she and the
bored college kid behind the cashier's counter who
just wants it to end. Now, what that girl wouldn't give
for the off-key mumbling about a road that's too long, paths too well-worn,
to cease. No one wants to hear
about a home that's too far, on soil they'll probably never
walk on again. She
wishes she didn't know the words,
wishes she didn't
tap her foot to the beat, that
she and this woman she barely speaks to
didn't have the same skin,
the same smile,
the same teardrop moles under their left eyes.

Now consider the man at the intersection, the man she knows all too well.

He wants the singing to stop too. But now, for the next sixty seconds,

there's a daughter, looking at her mother, rolling her eyes

equal parts frustrated and fond.

There is still life here, under the

dull yellow fluorescence that's

their own slice of sky — and

for now there is beauty, too.

For now, there is a song.