ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: ISAMU DREAMS OF FLYING

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Thesis directed by: Professor Howard Norman, English Department

Fictionalized events in the life of Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) are woven with the story of a boy fascinated with airplanes, who grows up to be an artist. This section shows Isamu and his mother, Leonie Gilmour, traveling to Japan to live with his father, poet Yone Noguchi. In Japan, Isamu is raised solely by Leonie. He is surprised when she gives birth to his sister, the dancer Ailes Gilmour. Facing racial discrimination and feeling envy toward Ailes, he departs in 1918 for boarding school in Indiana. Interspersed with this is the story of a boy, David, who builds a model airplane that he wishes to show his mother when he visits her for a week. Raised by his father, he is envious of attention his mother gives her boyfriend. As an adult, David begins dating a woman named Elizabeth, before he moves to Japan to teach art.

ISAMU DREAMS OF FLYING

By

Ashlie Kauffman

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Advisory Committee:
Professor Howard Norman, Chair
Professor Maud Casey
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Dedication

For my mother,

and in memory of Margaret Elizabeth Stoll (Betty)

(April 1, 1921–October 24, 2002)

Acknowledgements

In order to re-imagine events from Isamu Noguchi's life, I am largely indebted to research conducted by Masayo Duus for his biography, *The Life of Isamu Noguchi: Journey Without Borders*, some aspects which I note below as being particularly influential. Other books of import for this part and additional sections of this project include: *Isamu Noguchi, Human aspect as a contemporary: 54 witnesses in Japan and America*, Ikko Tanaka, Creative Direction; *Isamu Noguchi, East Meets West*, by Dore Ashton; *Isamu Noguchi: The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum Japan*, from the Isamu Noguchi Museum of Japan; *Isamu Noguchi: Master Sculptor*, by Valerie J. Fletcher, *The Wonderful City of Tokio*, by Edward Greey, and *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, from Kodansha.

On page 26, the phrase, "their voices like singing birds," is altered from an essay Leonie Gilmour completed for the Bryn Mawr alumnae report, noted on p. 57 of Duus, in which she wrote: "the chorus of girlish voices...are to me like the voices of birds chattering an unknown tongue." Also on page 26, the italicized poem lines are from William Blake's poem, "Ah! Sun-flower."

On page 28, the indented italicized lines are from a book review in *The New York Times* from September 11, 1909.

Italicized lines on page 29 are adapted from Leonie Gilmour's letters. "*Your father was a bird who flew through my room*" is a line adapted from one to Catherine Bunnell, documented on page 34 of Duus, in which Leonie wrote, "I have a fancy as if he [Yonejirō Noguchi] were a bird that flew through my room and is vanished." The line, "*And you, you, a tiny caged bird-ling, trying always to escape through the many doors and windows, longing to voyage alone"* is adapted from a February 1906 letter that Leonie wrote to Yonejirō about Isamu, noted on p. 42 of Duus: ""He was like a caged bird lazily looking to door and windows for escape."

On page 43, the italicized lines are from *A Child's Introduction to Torah*, by Shirley Newman, ed. Louis Newman and illustrated by Jessica Zemsky, published by Behrman House, Inc., for The Melton Research Center of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1972.

Page 65 contains lines from Moira O'Neill's poem, "Beauty's a Flower."

Page 97 contains lines from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

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Isamu Dreams of Flying

March 1907

The vessel he and his mother are riding in across the sea tosses the child as he sleeps. He is snugly nestled into his carriage with its worn rattan cover, outgrowing the shape of it even in this month's passage. His small body senses the ship's forward movements, shallow across the sea's bedcovers. His breathing echoes its paces.

In his dream, his mother tells him their fortune from the pattern of the green leaves that skim the surface of the tea in her cup—not allowed for a child as small as he—the tea emanating a scent of sticks and weeds. Their fortunes are linked, their futures.

The dream-leaves begin making shapes in the steaming water, which replicates the pitching and falling of the turbulent sea and sends the leaves spinning. They become a fish that stirs deep inside a pond: a fish with long, translucent wings, suddenly rising from the bed of the cup and growing large enough to swallow him, carry him inside its stomach.

He points and gestures toward it, yet his mother does not see. He wants to fly alongside this fish that is like a bird, which gathers momentum and then speeds farther ahead of him until it diminishes slowly and disappears—its wings glinting sunlight at him and flapping rhythmically, with great pain—with screeching—until the whole animal dissipates into a trail of cloud and steam.

His mother, beside him, is surprised he sleeps soundly. They have traveled from California, across the Pacific, and have mere days left before they will arrive at the port

in Yokohama, where the child's father will meet them. She does not know what he will think of the two-year-old son he has not seen—the son whose eyes, unlike hers, are heavy-lidded, whose face is round and tanned—half-blooded, yet distinctly Japanese—and yet she does not care, as long as she may raise her son, with his father, in Japan.

She does not hear the roaring engines, far into the future, that are passing through her child's dream. She does not see the fleet of great machines that cut the sky and are destroyed so easily when they fall, the flapping of the steel wings as the fish-bird from her teacup touches earth far ahead of them and breaks at its points of weakness, then catches fire, as if in cremation. She does not see its ashes scatter and cool into a blue-grey glaze on the earth, the place of its beautiful death.

~

The child waits with his mother in their small cabin below the boiler level, while passengers depart the ship—the boiler's muffled hisses punctuated by faint booms and clangs, like approaching lightning and thunder. When the strange man comes for them and tries to lift the child from his carriage, the child's lips tremble and he screams—until the hands release him, until his mother clasps him to her and places him once more in the basket he has been so secure in, repeating *Hush, it's Papa*, pulling the cover down so it will shield his face. He is safe beneath it as they push him along in front of them, his mother speaking softly while the man makes broken sounds.

When they depart from the ship and enter the bustling port, the strange man with the broken voice lifts the cover to the child's carriage, and forces him up, to the sight of more strange faces. Though the child does not see it, the man signs a name for him on a page of unfamiliar characters, a new name, that he has not been called. His new name means courageous. His new name—Isamu—means *brave*.

~

Only the moon helps him sleep, at the house in Hisakata-chō. When she does not appear, weightlessly rising in the sky of their Tokyo village, his father tricks him: shining a lantern of bamboo and paper, with flame inside, from behind the shōji screen that separates his room so faintly from the night, from the sound of wind cutting the treetops. He gazes at the light from the moon's single eye and wonders how it flies without wings—or if it is really the sun, naked and cold—asleep without its haloed fingers and stripped of its golden dress.

The nights his father shines the lantern, the boy wishes for the moon to be the sun rising early, sneaking into the night with its robes of luminous gauze.

He spends the days ushered from room to room by his mother—clomping outside in his wooden geta, eating rice cakes stolen from the servant girl. He watches his father's movements behind the screens to the study—the room of the paper lantern hanging beside the desk. He listens to words that his father repeats, louder and louder, like clapping. As the sun goes down, he holds his hands up to the screens and makes the shadows of birds flying—wonders why each time their wings beat, the sky is covered with another layer of dust, their shadows erasing as the sky becomes darker, as their wings become the sky itself.

~

As the season changes, he adjusts to the sounds that flow through his father's house—the trees whispering and swaying, the passing peddler beating his drum. He runs out into the yard to hear the peddler's song—*don-ka-don-ka-don, don-ka-don-ka-don*—before the drumming drifts away, before the peddler himself disappears with the blank cloud of winter that so quickly slips into the house through the delicate, rice paper screens.

Trowel in hand, he stomps his feet on the hard Tokyo earth, stomping to the drumbeat. He hits the trowel on the dirt, hits and hits, pounding and knocking.

Isa-a-mu, his mother calls. *Where are you digging a hole to?*

The peddler's sound vanishes as the trees begin their evening whistling. His mother comes outside to collect him, nudges him in past the door, her coat rustling with the trees.

Were you digging to the other side of the earth? she asks, her hand warm on his cheek.

Just digging, Mama, he answers.

~

His father has suddenly vanished. *No privacy in the house*, his mother sighs. *He has gone to stay at the temple.*

Isamu climbs to her shoulders and she carries him through the yard, his mittened hands grasping her chin. She takes one of them in her glove, kissing her lips to his palm.

Temple? he points, peering across the bamboo fence, to the rooftops of the Tokyo houses he spots on the other side.

~

In the spring, the trees release their blossoms suddenly, as if weeping. The pink and white, five-petaled tears collecting in the yard. He grasps in his fists as many as he can hold, carries them to his mother. *Why is there so much crying?* he asks.

~

He watches his mother pack their belongings, filling the bamboo baskets with clothing and shoes, plates and books. His kites she folds carefully—tucking seabird and dragon heads down inside of wings. His father has not returned. *Hidden away*, his mother says, laying the kites flat in a wooden box.

He slides open the screens to his father's study; *Otōsan*, he calls, bowing before he enters. He inspects the room for a box—one, perhaps, that is hidden in a corner, in which his father sits perched, waiting to jump out like a toy on a spring. A bird flapping its wings.

As he walks the room's perimeter, shadows begin collecting at the edges of the windows, staining the paper screens with curious grey figures. *Isa-a-mu*, his mother calls. A shadow suddenly hops along the jagged, mountain-top-like lines sketched across the paper and flits away silently. He watches it disappear as it hits the wall's edge, and looks down on the floor for it, wondering if it's fallen, if he might see the real bird there, lying injured—the suzume and not its shadow, its dangerous heart thumping in its body.

The trees' branches become an aviary—the sunset sinking lower, the day becoming dusk, sparrows erasing from the mountaintop as the paper grows dark. *Isa-mu!* His mother's voice is stern, masculine. He must leave his father's study, with the lantern by the desk, leave behind their Hisakata-chō house—the Weeper and Yoshino alone now in the yard, the flitting sparrows wondering where he's gone.

Fear of Falling Sky

August 1979

Saturday

The boy in the attic room is making a model airplane. He leans to look at a photo in one of the large, glossy pages of the book that's fanned open on his desk—*Early Flying Machines*, a copy from his father. The 1911 double-winged flyer he imagines he's assembling is as big as a boat—twenty-six feet long, four hundred and eighty square feet of wings—its wheels taken from a milk cart, its big X propeller powerful enough to pull the plane way up into the sky. The men behind it are readying the rudder to push the plane for liftoff; the pilot waves from the cockpit, his goggles and flight helmet secured in place, ready to face the wind currents.

The boy climbs onto his knees and leans further, sorting through the remaining tools and supplies spread all around him: the broken pieces of rattan, snapped by accident; the thin steel wire; the tangled linen thread; the small, wooden spool he's unwound it from; the aluminum mixer that seems light enough to fix to the plane's tail end. The rubber bands, the glue, the sewing needles.

It is a Saturday—not a day of rest. He has sat in the attic through the filtered sun of late morning and then afternoon while his father's been at the church, counseling parishioners. He has bent the rattan strips to form the outline of the plane's four wings, glued the silk fabric across them, then stitched and tightened the silk until each wing curved upward at the end, away from the plane's spine. He has secured a metal rod that's

only a little tarnished along the end of the spine with thread. He picks up the mixer that he's unscrewed from the kitchen eggbeater, positions the hole at just the right slant and slips the mixer onto the rod. He tucks the end of a clipped rubber band inside of a small bolt, squeezes his fingers between the mixer's curved blades, and carefully fits the bolt onto the rod, twisting it until it grips—almost everything in place. He flicks the mixer with his finger, listens as the blades spin.

He thinks how the plane could fly fifty feet. Maybe even double.

A slight breeze rattles the windows and he turns his head and glances into the yard at the white blossoms of crape myrtle, the large, southern magnolia—some of their flowers still blossoming. His mother loved the crape myrtle, would pose him under it for photos when she still lived with them, when he was smaller. He would stand behind the tree, trying to wrap his arms around its group of trunks, or sit beneath it in the shade while she trimmed the outer limbs, helping her collect in a pile the thinner, bare sticks she had snipped from it so the branches wouldn't cross when they grew bigger.

He bites his lip when he hears his father's voice rising through the hatch in the attic floor. "David, are you coming down for supper?"

He needs only another minute. He is intent on finishing the airplane before the next day, Sunday, when he'll go to his mother's house for the week, for the first time since early Summer. He cuts a piece of thread and knots one end around the center of the plane's spine, grabs hold of the desk and steps one foot up on it and then the other—being careful of the plane, of his small piles of supplies. He pinches the other end of the thread,

pulleys it on a hook twisted into the wooden beam above him, and gently suspends the plane, to see if it balances as it hangs from the rafter.

"David," his father calls.

He pulls a chair out at the dining room table, straightening the cushion that's tied to the chair's spindles and setting his airplane on it, the fabric the color of wet sand. He looks over his shoulder toward the kitchen, through the opening from one of the swinging doors being propped. His father stands at the stove scooping food onto one of their plates, his shirt only half-tucked into his pants. The fan above the stove is on, but David can hear him humming while he finishes up, opening and shutting cabinets. David knows his father will like the model plane, and though he wanted to save it as a surprise and show it to him once he'd chosen a name for it—painting the letters in deep blue cursive across the wings—he feels too excited to wait. He seats himself on the chair beside it and hoists his legs up, placing the plane between his silverware settings and holding his face close, lightly brushing his fingertips over its white silk wings.

"I need to set down your plate, David."

His father's arms reach over him, holding a plate and a small cup. David angles the airplane upward and it takes off into the air—lands to the left of his napkin. His father pats him on the head and calls to him as he walks back into the kitchen, bumping against the other swinging door. "Place your feet on the floor, please, like a grown-up."

He shifts and pulls up his knee-highs, dangling his feet toward the ground. His toes just brush the carpet. He's still small, but can tell he's starting to get taller. His father is one inch shy of six feet tall, the same height as David's grandfather—the same height David might also grow to once he's older. While he waits for his father to come say the prayer, he swings his legs back and forth like he's kicking, or a marching soldier, his

heels hitting the chair bar like a soldier's bass drum: *—bum—bum—bum*. His father eases into the chair at the head of the table and takes David's hand, squeezing it, nodding at David to bow his head. His father's hand is warm. He repeats his father's words quietly along with him, his father drawing them out: *Bless it to our bodies, this food for thy use. Make us ever mindful of the needs of those who have less. Amen.*

"You must be hungry after not eating all day, David." His father leans back, regarding him, pushing one of his sleeves up. The chair squeaks loudly. "You didn't touch your lunch."

David maneuvers toward the table so his toes are firm on the floor. He picks up his silverware and starts to cut his porkchop. He spears a piece of it on the vegetables and slowly twirls the fork, watching the light reflect on the metal. He doesn't feel hungry yet. He thinks of what he might say about his airplane—about where they might fly it together when he's back, or about the ideas he had while he made it—how he figured out how to make its weight even. He looks over at his father, observing the lines across his forehead, the circles of skin that are pulled down just slightly beneath his eyes. He wonders if his father is tired any.

"I finished my plane," David says.

"I noticed that. It looks pretty good." His father loosens the knot of his tie and flips the tie over one of his shoulders. He reaches an arm across David's plate and lifts the plane by its top wing, squeezing the rattan with his thumb and fingers and positioning the plane in the center of the table. The short wooden dowels that make Xs between the wings for the wing flyers and struts look to David like reflected half-diamonds, if they were bisected by a glass mirror. The rattan seems slightly warped on the outer right wing,

where it curves. He'll have to stitch it stronger. His father turns the plane around—the winder in David's mind spinning so quickly from releasing the rubber band engine that its blades become invisible in the sky, exciting the crowd of observers.

"What is this?" His father arches an eyebrow, his fork pointed at the aluminum mixer.

David feels his face grow hot. "It's a winder, Sir."

His father sets his fork down, swallowing. "I see that. And where did you get it?"

David thinks to the spoons and sharp knives stuck together in the drawer of odd utensils—the twirled set of blades with the red-handled crank always hooked on something else, like the potato masher, or cookie cutters. The crank never seems to work. He knows he should have asked permission, that being polite is one of their rules.

"From the egg beater, Sir," David answers.

He watches his father dab at the corners of his mouth with the folded square of his napkin. He can tell he's angry, though his face seems calm. David's palms start sweating, and he wipes them on his pants. If he can't use the mixer, he can't use as thin a rubber band; he can't get the engine to work as fast.

"David—"

"I need it, Dad."

"That's not the point, David. What I'm trying to teach you here is honesty." His father sets down the napkin. "You know how to ask for things before you take them."

"But it'll fly further like this."

"Son, would you like it to fly at all? We ask permission for things first, *before* we use them."

David feels tears start behind his eyes, embarrassed he's been yelled at. He reaches for his milk, holding the cup with both of his hands, his hands jittering when he lifts it to his mouth. His father's not usually so stern with him. David wanted him to be proud, to realize what a good idea he'd had—how far the plane would fly with the mixer propelling it ahead. He wanted to show it to his mother.

"I understand you're upset, David, but you have to own up." His father puts both of his elbows on the table and folds his hands together, resting his chin against his knuckles. He reaches over and squeezes David's arm, scrunching the vinyl tablecloth, his voice growing softer. "You're going to have to put it back together. You were supposed to use a wire key. Use tin for a propeller. You can make it work fine with those."

"But it won't fly as far." David's cheek feels wet. He sets his cup down, the milk tilting back and forth, and folds his hands tightly in his lap. "Can't I use it this once? So Mom can see it?"

He looks sideways at his father, worried about what he'll say—his father's eyes looking past the plane at something that is absent—before he sees him shake his head.

He thinks of the horizontal surfaces that buoy a plane in the air, how a still wind will let them glide forever. If he could, he would make his body horizontal, remain in flight how angels do, or clouds.

In the morning they'll wake up early so they can get on the road to his mother's. They'll drive there right from church. He will fix his plane before they leave. He climbs up the attic steps, the plane in one hand, touching each step with the other hand to balance himself. The steps float, but not freely, the sides fixed by beams of wood that anchor one step above the other. It is like he is walking on water—on a plank for boarding a boat, or like flat wooden rocks he can walk across—surfaces that fall from the ceiling, disguised as a steep ladder.

At the top, he pulls the string to the light bulb, steps around the worn boxes packed with his parents' old belongings, toys he used to play with, camping equipment and photographs. He places the airplane on the desk and leans toward it on his elbows. He puts his hands over his ears, feels his forehead wrinkle as if it's confused, or hurting. He feels his nose start running and wipes it across his arm. He slips his fingers back between the blades, twists the bolt off, and pulls off the mixer. He pulls off the wooden spool he used to weight the plane's front end, and unknots the end of the steel wire that he'd wound tightly around it, making short red scratches, like stitches, on his fingers. He holds the wire and lets the spool drop off of it slowly, the heavy weight of the wood unrolling the thin wire, until the spool hits the attic floor with a tap, and rolls across it, disappearing in a shadow.

They drive outside of the city on the half-loop of the expressway, before connecting to the interstate that leads to his mother's house. He daydreams they are coasting above, his father in the seat behind him, piloting—Wilbur and Orville Wright, a team of flyers.

His father's eyes drift along with the car's motions between the yellow and white lines of the road. The clouds in David's daydream drift upward into the atmosphere—stratus, cumulus, cirrus—all circling the earth in layers of condensed moisture, small droplets of water and ice, like glistening stars in their own floating universe.

A plane beginning to descend seems to follow the car. Second Lieutenant Charles Lindbergh gliding toward Paris, on a solo flight, preparing to touch down.

"Dad, how come the plane looks like it's going the same speed we are?"

"If we were up that high it wouldn't. It would look much faster. It's the perspective you're seeing it from that makes it seem the same. The distance."

"Oh." David squints his eyes at the plane gliding lower. "How come we've never gone anywhere?"

"We've gone lots of places. Charleston...Chattanooga..."

"In a plane."

"We haven't had time yet, Son. That's a life of leisure. Or of too much to do."

David watches the plane pass through the gauze of a low cumulus cloud—stratocumulus. The plane's long body is covered in oval-shaped eyes that never have to

close or blink, though there are people behind each of them. He wonders what it's like, up there looking at the inside of the cloud as the plane punctures it open.

"David, wind your window down. Let's get a cross-breeze through here. It's beautiful out. And we've got a long ride."

He wraps his fingers around the handle on the door and winds it like the hand of a clock, but in the wrong direction, counter, using his arm strength to push the handle up and forward and then yank it back toward him, repeating the motion until he's lowered the glass completely.

He reaches his hand outside the car, his wrist resting on the window frame where the vinyl and metal meet, and fingers the smoothed edge of the glass, where it's tucked down inside the door, in its resting place. The wind from the open window hits his face. It feels warm. His father's voice grows louder over it.

"I'm sorry you missed my sermon today. All the women asked after you."

"What did you talk about?"

"Well, I wanted to tell you. I talked about doing things your own way. Not taking the easiest path, but finding your own." His father glances over at him. "King David, who your mother named you in honor of, had only a few pebbles and a sling to fight the giant Goliath with, even though he had been offered armor and a sword, and he became a king because of those few pebbles."

David watches his father nod as he speaks. Strands of hair his father's combed back, where he's balding, flap down over his forehead.

"He used what he knew to work with, you see."

"Did you talk about King David?"

"Yes I did. I had been thinking of you."

"You were?"

"Goliath, I believe, was not a true giant, but someone who had been like a giant to David. You can say that the Lord helped David to overcome Goliath, but you can also say that he found the strength in himself, through courage. The Lord's strength, you see, was inside David, like it's inside all of us."

He leans his head toward his shoulder and rests it on the doorframe. His father reaches over and tousles his hair.

"You did a good job with your airplane, David. It looks mighty powerful, I'd say. I'm sorry I made you upset."

He hears a sadness in his father's voice, the wind singing a sharp tune over it. His father begins to whistle, as if singing back to the wind, and he shuts his eyes and listens.

When they arrive at his mother's, the maple trees are spinning propellers into the yard. The car crushes the stones in the driveway. He lifts his head up, then a second time after it falls again. He must have fallen asleep, his head still groggy from staying up late.

His father clears his throat, speaks low. "There's another story that David pleased King Saul with his music. Your mother wants to teach you the piano." He sees his father lift his eyebrows and give a half-smile, as if telling him a secret. "By the end of this week you might have learned some."

He strains his neck to look for his mother as his father pulls the brake up. A shadow passes by the house's front window.

"This will be a nice week for you," his father says. "I'm glad you rested up this morning."

He lifts the metal button locking his door and pushes the door hard to open it. His father stands holding his small blue suitcase, the end of a t-shirt sticking from its side.

Jay, his mother's boyfriend, leans in the house's doorway with an arm propping the screen open. He wonders where his mother is, whether she is just running late, or is out getting things for their week together.

"Good afternoon," David's father calls.

"Lynn ain't home yet," Jay calls back. His belly protrudes from under his shirt. He lets the screen swing shut and angles himself in the doorframe behind it, crossing his arms as he speaks.

"When's she due?" David watches his father tilt his head to the side, inspecting.

"Couldn't tell you."

"I can wait. I'm not due in Raleigh 'til six. Plenty of time."

"The place ain't clean for you to come in."

"We're fine to wait in the car," his father says. David hears him let out a huff of breath as they each open the car's doors again.

They sit in silence with the windows down, the car off, but the radio playing.

"This is the station your mother and I always listened to, in college," his father remarks. "They played the standards, even from before our time."

"But you went to different schools."

"I would drive to see her on weekends. It wasn't so far that I couldn't."

David looks at the clock, calculating the time they have driven in his head. Maybe they could visit his mother more if they woke up earlier for the trip, or if his father could drive him on Fridays, when school got out, if they'd gotten enough rest.

"Ah, this is a good one." His father adjusts the volume knob. "Cole Porter."

His father taps his fingers on the wheel, sporadically humming the melody. David tries tapping his feet along with him, bobbing his head to the beat. They're into another song when he hears his mother's car pull in behind them. He watches in the side-view mirror as she steers to the driveway's edge and parks—remembering the mirror's perspective, that she is closer than it seems—how at a close distance, like this, she is traveling the same speed as them—that it would be easy to catch up, even when they're stopped.

His father turns off the radio as his mother leans her head through David's window and plants a kiss on his cheek. Her hair brushes against his neck. "I missed you,

honey," she says. Her voice sounds slowed down, like she wore it out already, earlier in the morning at her work.

"You too, Mom." He squints up at her with one eye, his hand shielding the sunlight. Her uniform is light peach, the white buttons on her dress like flat pearls reflecting and shimmering. She clenches the fabric at her waistline and tugs upward, pulling up her nurses' stockings. She rests her hand on her front waist, awkwardly. His stomach feels like there are butterflies in it, like he's nervous about their week, about whether they'll have any fun together.

"Hi, Marilyn," his father says.

She lifts her arm up and tucks her hair behind her ears. "How are you, Bill," she replies.

His father ducks his head down toward them. "I'll be back through to get him next Sunday, but I don't know the time yet. It could be late, if that's all right."

"I'd keep him longer, Bill, I'm just working too many nights."

"No, no, that's fine. He has to get back to school in a couple of weeks."

"This was a long one," she says. "I haven't seen my baby for a while." She places her hand lightly on David's head, runs her thumb over his hair.

"Yes, it was," his father responds.

"Thank you, Bill," she says, opening David's door. "Thank you for bringing him by."

He climbs out of the car again, his mother lifting his suitcase from the sidewalk, where his father had left it sitting. He leans in through his father's window and puts his arms around his neck, hugging him close. His father kisses his forehead, pats him on the

shoulder. He turns toward the house with his mother, the sidewalk covered in dried propellers—seedpods—that he steps on when he walks—their wings like delicate paper. He remembers what he has forgotten and turns back toward the car, his heart beating faster. "My plane, Dad," he yells.

He sees his father reach into the back seat and then twist back toward him, holding onto the thin box he had placed his plane in earlier that morning, cushioned in plastic bubbles.

"You did a good job," his father says again, handing him the box. "Measure how far it flies for me. Have your mother take a picture."

His father starts the car up and begins to back away, waving to him through the windshield.

"Did you bring me something nice?" his mother asks. She pulls open the screen door and steps aside, while David ducks down under her arm, carrying the box with his plane in it in front of him.

Isamu Dreams of Stories

September 1908

It seems as if they have flitted away, bird-like, he and his mother, to the other side of Tokyo from Hisakata-chō, taking shelter in the house with the painted red gate. His mother has taken a job in Yokohama, rising as the sun does to catch the train each morning.

Alone all day with the maid, Isamu balances the zabuton in the shapes of Tori arches, building tunnels for the toy-sized railway cars that he places in line, one after the other, because they need one another in order to move, to journey to far destinations.

In the afternoon, when the sun is full grown, he runs into the yard to greet the small group of neighbor children who pass the house daily, who sing out *I-sa-mu-san!* to fetch him. They float behind the bamboo fence as if they are large, magical butterflies, a signal that someone loved will soon visit. He wonders if one day, there might be a visitor from America—his grandmother, or his Aunt Catherine, who sometimes sends letters—or even someone he does not remember. Perhaps even his father will come from the other side of Tokyo—by foot, like the peddler—curious as the children are about him and his mother.

Long after the children's voices fade, he lingers in the yard, looking among the stones and grasses to spot the colorful shine of armor worn by tiger beetles, or the soft, wooly bodies of caterpillars. Under the plum tree that's missing all of its red and white blossoms, he finds a caterpillar he admires, its head hooked on a leaf, and regards it up close, brushing it with his fingers. *O-cho San! Miss Butterfly!* he whispers.

Because the maid does not object, he brings it with him into the house—making its bed in a bowl of grass and leaves and willing it to grow wings, to change before his eyes.

In the dark, when he is sleeping, he curls his body inward, then stretches out as far as he is able, as if a transformation could happen, deep within his dreams, as he is passing through dark tunnels.

~

His mother has found him a kindergarten, where she walks with him each morning before departing for Shinbashi Station, for her train—even walking him there as the season approaches winter. Bundled up, they clop along in the dirt, part of the way next to the large wheels of a rickshaw that are higher than his head, its spokes circling and flickering past. She tells him about the girls she teaches, their voices like singing birds, how she cannot understand them, except for their gestures, or the words they repeat to her in English from the poems and songs she reads to them. He holds her hand tightly as he recites with her her favorite lines, lines about a journey—about watching the setting sun—just before she kisses him and waves him goodbye. *Ah Sunflower, weary of time, who countest the steps of the sun. Seeking after that sweet golden clime, where the traveller's journey is done*.

At his school, he senses that he is different from the other children, who are full Japanese and who carry, in their faces, unfamiliar expressions. They seem as fascinated with him as he, of them, is shy: the boys with their smooth, egg-shaped heads; the girls with their delicate kimonos and hairpins. Most, he loves playtime in the garden: the downy heads of the animals curled in their wire cages, that he pets and feeds with pumpkin seeds; the afternoon view of the peak of Fuji mountain. He gathers in his pockets leaves that have fallen and traces them onto parchment above an outline he draws of the mountain—leaves sailing all around it.

After the maid brings him home, his mother returns for supper, reads to him before bed. She warms the hibachi stove as she pulls her stool close, describing old tales

of wind and water: clouds carrying memories of samurai warriors; immense takara-bune ships come to bestow people with treasure, blown by the seven gods of luck into each Japanese harbor. He wonders if this was how they sailed to Yokohama, he and his mother, a wind god blowing their ship half way around the world, taking them to Japan, to visit the house of his father.

After she puts out the lantern—her skirt swishing away like leaves whispering to one another—he lies awake in the dark, looking toward the paper screens with his eyes as wide as he is able, to see when the moon might appear, for the surprise he might see within its shadows.

~

A parcel has arrived from his father, decorated in ink-brush figures and chrysanthemum stamps, whose blooms announce the autumn's colors, with something important for his mother. She gestures for Isamu to follow her and sit by the mulberry desk, where the other letters and bundles sit stacked. She removes a blue, cloth-covered box from the paper wrapping, slipping the box's small, ivory pegs from their fasteners, and lifting two small books from inside—books she says have been written by his father. *This is your father's poetry*, she says.

She opens the cover of one, and reads, *To Leonie*, from the inscription, pronouncing her own name quietly. She carefully unfolds the letter his father has sent along with the box, and then after, a page from a printed newspaper. She leans her head on top of his as she reads from the page—a book review from America—pointing out the words although he cannot yet decipher them.

Quite a treasury of butterfly wings...
seemingly made of breath and bloom...
the strong framework of iridescent insects...
an art of delicate exclamations.

He watches her reading silently on, feels her breath moving softly inside her.

~

His mother stands behind paper screens to tell him stories with her hands. Deep in his dreamworld, it is as if she has many fingers, shaping birds with tree-branch legs, insects with many wings.

Your father was a bird who flew through my room. And you, you, a tiny caged bird-ling, trying always to escape through the many doors and windows, longing to voyage alone.

Her long hands prod him. He opens his baby beak, her finger-shadow insects flying about the room.

~

He has made a wave in school, in his second year at the kindergarten: a ceramic sculpture that he has sat on the table for his mother to admire, a wave rising out of the ocean, decorated in blue and white glazes—the white a clear gloss when he applied it to the crests, before it was fired in the brick kiln where the salt flew over it—the fire making it permanent. *Salt like the salt in seawater*, he thinks, wondering how they took the salt from the sea, how it looked before the water left it.

He hears his mother's footsteps on the tatami, her shoes stepping where they should not.

Isa-mu, she calls.

What a lovely wave, she remarks when he enters the downstairs room, barefoot—because in Japan, he's been told, boys who go to school only wear shoes in the garden—or walking along in snowfall.

Is this for me? For our table? She gathers her hakama skirt and pulls him onto her lap. *You remember the waves from our voyage, don't you. Even though you were small*.

I want to shave my head, Mama. Like the Japanese boys, because I am Japanese, he says.

She runs her hand through his hair, fixes a curl over his ear.

But soldiers shave their heads. You don't want to be like a soldier with a shaved head.

She stares at him intently, holding him and whispering close, *My darling child, Japanese boys must grow up to be soldiers. And some of them must fight and die.*

He looks into his mother's eyes, regarding her carefully—her pale skin and pointed nose; the clear, sea green glass of her irises. *I don't want to do that,* he agrees, wrapping his arms around her.

~

His mother begins returning later in the evenings, busy with extra jobs she has found, even journeying to Keio to tutor students at University. At night she is too tired to sit with him; in the mornings, come late Spring, she is ill. Each day when he wakes, he notices more of their belongings are packed away, the toys they had brought with them from California no longer in their places.

Are we leaving for America? he asks his mother.

We are only leaving Tokyo, she says. *To be closer to the seawater.*

When she tells him this, he furrows his brow, worried at how far they will now be from his father, who is still hidden away, somewhere in another house.

When can I see Papa? he demands.

The sea will be good for our health, she answers.

~

His father does not visit before they leave the house with the red gate. When they shut the house's door he feels jolted, standing with his bags and baskets. At Tokyo Station, he is sucked into a sea, dodging the horse-drawn streetcars, the Japanese men and women walking briskly past him and his mother turning and staring as she pulls him toward the train—him wishing, for a moment, to live far off from Japan, from its cradled moon of islands—floating far out on the sea, ferried wherever he imagines.

His mother drops his suitcase once the screen swings shut.

"You can put that down there." She gestures past the sofa at the dining table, where there are piles of gadgets and papers.

"Can I put it upstairs? In my room?"

She turns to lock the screen and sighs.

"Be back down quick."

He steps over the shoes and boots thrown at the bottom of the stairwell and hurries up the steps, slowing himself down when one squeaks under the freckled carpet. He walks on his tiptoes around the corner to his room, balancing past the bathroom where he hears Jay urinating, the door opened a few inches.

Inside his room, he plops down on one of the twin beds—the one with his grandmother's quilt folded at the bottom. It's pushed up beside a dormer window with a couple of his old toys on the ledge: a wooden car on a pulley, a metal toy train engine, both with moveable wheels. He lifts off the white cardboard lid to the box and unfolds the sheet of bubbles. He picks up his plane with both hands and then holds it on his lap, hunched overtop of it, twisting the key and watching the tin propeller twirl, the rubber band unraveling quickly. It seems to work good, maybe better than with the mixer—the rubber band staying taut. He'll show the airplane to his mother after dinner, when they take a walk together to the park up the street, where there are swings and monkey bars, and a big, wide field, where they've always gone for walks since she moved here to her new city, away from him and his father.

Jay stands in the doorway with his work pants on. He fastens his belt around his waist.

"What is that thing?"

David answers him without looking up. "An airplane I made."

"Huh? Speak up."

"An airplane." He lifts his head, clearing his throat. "A 1911 double-winged flyer. I made it."

He climbs onto his knees on the bed and places the plane on the window ledge in a patch of sun that's almost escaping, the rays about to hide behind the roof.

"Hey," Jay sputters. "Get your shoes off the bed."

Jay's boots shake the windowpanes as he walks down the hallway. David leans his head on his arms in the dormer, gazing out one of the panes. The house across the street has a magnolia tree, almost as big as the one back at his house—but a pink one, and not white—the branches more bare, with less greenery, though it's starting a second blossom. There's a wooden bench underneath with some petals on it, blown off the tree by the wind, or maybe shook off of it by squirrels or chipmunks, scurrying along its branches. His father must be back on the highway by now, coasting closer to Raleigh, maybe listening to more oldies. Maybe he's put his driving glasses on, or is belting out a song like when they listen to the choir at church, singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* or *Oh Master Let Me Walk With Thee*. David starts to hum, drumming his fingers in the patch of sunlight. The paint under his fingers feels waxy. Jay's lived at his mother's for a year now, though she said they'd met earlier. There are boxes of his in David's room, piled up in the corner where there used to be a trunk, the closet packed with things of his mother's.

He moves the plane closer to the train engine, touches the train's metal wheels. They would put the train around the tree at Christmas when he was young—the engine and all the train cars. His mother would make it chug along, entertaining him with it. His father would whistle like an engine, making the motions of the train conductor, which would make David squeal. He misses them all spending time together. He misses having his mother at home, though it's been almost four years since she moved out of their house, two years away from their city. He hears footsteps again, down the hall, and lifts his head to listen, remembering that she told him to hurry. It sounds like the footsteps have stopped. He slides back off the comforter, careful not to touch his shoes to it, smoothing it down as good as he can when he lands back on the carpet.

He leans his head back, squishing himself into the corner of the sofa while the dark green horizontal lines scroll up and down the television screen. His mother stands in front of the set, adjusting the antenna with both of her hands, making Vs in various directions.

"This TV never works." She hits the brown plastic panel on the TV's side with her palm. The antenna tumbles onto the floor, knocking something over.

"Dang this thing." She bends down to pick it up, setting a picture frame back on top of the set. David squirms on the cushion to get more comfortable, watching her crumple the tin foil so it's more compact on the antenna. He tucks his knees up into his chest.

She glances back at him while she turns the channel knob. "Can you take your feet off the sofa, please? Jay doesn't like that."

"Can I just take my shoes off?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Sure, honey. That's fine." Her hair swings behind her shoulder when she turns her head away. She pushes in the TV button and sighs again, while the TV makes a womp sound and goes blank.

He nudges at the heels of his shoes to get them off and pulls his feet back up on the sofa. He leans his elbow on the sofa arm.

"You don't have to sit up like that. You can lay your head down."

"I'm okay."

She sits down on the cushion next to him and pulls him to her, combing her fingers against his scalp. "Your hair's gotten so curly, David. I'm glad it's still so blonde. That's how mine was when I was younger."

She smoothes his hair over to the right, across his forehead. He likes his hair longer, is glad he hasn't cut it yet before school starts. He wants to hug her back, closer, as she combs his hair with her hand, but instead leans his head against her, tucking his hands between his thighs, like he's a baby still, while she rubs up and down his arm.

"Sorry we couldn't get a new TV before you visited this time. I can usually get it if I hit it right."

"It's okay, Mom."

"It's always money for one thing or another."

He isn't sure what to say, so answers "Mmm-hmm" and nods. He can feel her heartbeat muffled against his ear, the sound reverberating in his eardrum. She smells like baby powder with perfume in it, like Easter flowers. In the spring, his father had taken him to pick out a present for her for Mother's Day, a locket that could hold perfume and was shaped like a heart, with a tiny pink flower painted on it, that they put with a card and mailed. When he saw her last, she had worn the locket. He wonders if now she has it in her room somewhere, with perfume in it, maybe sitting on her dresser where she can use it.

"What would you like to do this week?" She rubs her finger on the end of his nose and then pinches it a couple of times, pulling her thumb into her palm, like she's stolen it from him.

"Dad said you had something planned."

"Oh really? What was that?"

"The piano. He said you would teach me to play it."

"Oh—is that something you'd like?"

"If you want."

"Here, get up a minute." She pulls away from him and walks over to the window behind where the piano is, sorting through some booklets that are stuffed onto the downstairs dormer ledge, beside the plants and bottles.

"Will you pick an instrument for band this year?"

"No, Ma'am. Next year. They only let the fifth graders."

It doesn't seem like she's listening. She stops flipping through the booklets and pulls one out, leaning against the window frame. The light from the window makes her hair look different colors. She places a hand to her neck and scratches, where the hair is frayed on her neck. She closes the booklet and looks up.

"Come on. Sit down." She drags the bench over the carpet, giving him room to slide in. "Good a time as any, right?"

He moves toward the middle of the bench and she scooches in beside him. She lifts the lid to the keys and fastens the booklet to the music rack using small metal clips. She pulls the chain to a miniature light that illuminates the paper, even though it's still daytime. The music looks like a church hymnal, with swirls and lines and notes, though there are words from another language that David doesn't know how to read yet, written below where the music is.

"Here, let me just play this first so we can hear the tune."

She reaches her arm across him and starts to sound the notes, thumping one of the floor pedals. An upbeat march starts to pound and boom. He's heard the song before, in music class when he was in First or Second Grade. He would play it for his father on the recorder he brought home, his father showing him the finger notes.

Jay comes clomping down the stairs and sits to put on his boots.

"Good thing I'm heading out." He winks at David's mother.

"Very funny, aren't you?" She stops playing abruptly and gets up to grab Jay's coat.

"I'll be home around two."

"Try to come sooner." She holds the coat up while Jay slides his arms in the sleeves. Her voice is lower, like what she's saying to him is private. "I'd like us all to have dinner together one of these nights."

"Me too." He kisses her on the lips and raises his voice again to David. "Have fun, sport."

He steps out the doorway and David's mother leans after him, one of her feet twisting around the other while she holds open the screen. She lingers. David sees Jay's hand reach back and smack her in the rear. David blushes, pretends like he's looking at the music sheet.

His mother's face is red when she turns around to him. She brushes away hair caught in her mouth.

"You ready?" She sits back down beside him.

"I like this song," he says.

"Good. That makes it more fun. Here."

She takes his hand and moves it toward the left of the piano, helping him position his fingers. He can smell Jay's cigarettes on her. He coughs, nervously. She starts the song again, a set of keys away from him, pressing one note down and then the other. He follows her fingers, repeating what she plays, her notes sounding the same as his but higher. She starts to sing, and he joins in the second time they play it. He likes listening to her sing, trilling her Rs like a bird call, the soft G for *Jacques* sounding like she's saying *shhhh*. They laugh when they roll the Rs together, his mother exaggerating hers to try and help teach him.

"Now let's learn the notes." She plays each one in order, starting with the first note they played for the song. "This is the scale: "Dohh, Rayy, Mee, Faahh, Soll, Laahh, Teee, Dohh. But it's from C to G—Ceee, Deee, Eee, Efff, Geee, Aayy, Beee, Ceee."

"Why does it start with C? Why doesn't it start with A?"

"I'm not sure, Sweetie." She covers her mouth a moment, yawning. "Here, you try."

He presses the notes one at a time, moving his finger to each of them.

"No, no, like this. Keep your hand in place until your pinky. And keep your fingers curved, like you're holding a small ball. A baseball."

He fidgets and starts the scale again, then messes up and tries it once more. His hand like on a ball. His fingers moving in order.

"You know," she interrupts, "I ought to get dinner started, and maybe take a nap. Would you mind that?"

He taps the keys again without pressing them, thinking through the notes while he looks down at the piano. It's only four o'clock. He usually eats at six. He wonders how long it will take her to cook, why she needs to stop playing so early.

"Are we going to the park after dinner?"

"Yes, if you want."

"So we can play piano again tomorrow?"

"First thing in the morning." She closes the music book and stands, stretching her arms out to the side.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Oh don't call me Ma'am. I'm a little tired, but I'm still young." She squeezes his shoulders and then leans over him and pulls at the chain to the light, while she kisses the top of his head.

The stairs hardly creak at all when his mother goes up to her room. He's been lying on the sofa while she's fidgeted in the kitchen, opening and shutting cabinets, opening and swinging closed the refrigerator and oven doors.

He turns the pages of a book he got when he was younger, from his grandparents, that his mother had on a shelf above the television. He doesn't remember drawing the star on Moses' shirt, on the cover. The six-pointed star. The Star of David, the shield. It's above a matching white skirt, with a belt around it like a rope. The sandals on Moses' feet look like ones David's father wears, when they walk in the woods near their house. Moses' big cartoon toes poke out from them. There are pencil marks inside the book as well, where the pages fold together, pieces of eraser stuck to them, where he must have tried erasing the pencil so he wouldn't get in trouble.

He flips to another page and reads silently. *Who started the world that we see around us? Who designed the seeds so they could grow into plants? Who taught the birds to fly high in the air? Who taught the fish to swim deep in the water?* The drawing is of a fish, jumping from under some waves, the white spray from the water like little paint drops on the picture. The sky in it turns from pink to purple, with some shapes cut out, that he thinks are a flock of birds lifting from the water.

He closes the book and sits up. Moses looks like God on the cover, with his hair scared white when he comes down from the mountain, after listening to God's words. Or like an action figure, with the star on his shirt. Captain America, but like a grandfather.

He pulls himself up and walks over to the television to put back the book. He slides it into place between some magazines and a World War II book. The photograph his mother had positioned on the TV again is of her and Jay at the beach, maybe from that summer, holding cans of beer. Jay's arm is wrapped around his mother's waist. It's placed in front of a photo of David when he was small, two or three, on his father's lap, though his father's cropped out of the picture. David picks up the photo of himself, the bright green shirtsleeves of the shirt he has on the same color as the number on his shirt. It looks like they're at his grandmother's house, his mother's mom, on the red velvet rocking chair, next to the gold couch and curtains. He looks like he's upset, like he may have been crying, his eyes a little swollen. He doesn't know if it was his mother who took the photo or someone else, maybe his grandmother even. He sets down the photo, moving it to the side a little so it's not hidden anymore behind the one his mother had picked up, leaving it in a place where she can see it better.

Garden of Light

April 2003

He opens the car door for her, noticing how the black dress that she's wearing clings to her at her hips, as she bends down into his car and climbs in. She smoothes her dress under her once she sits, pulls something out from the bag on her lap and reaches her hand up to the visor. He closes the door carefully, his top hand holding the window frame, his thumb along the edge of the barely lowered glass.

He walks around to the hood of the car and waits for a break in the traffic. He had felt nervous when she opened the large red door of her building and stepped out onto the stoop, in black high heels, more dressed up than what he's seen her. She had answered she'd be right down, the second time he rang the buzzer. A few minutes later she stood behind the door where, through the glass, he could see her leaning over, propping a hand up inside the doorframe, presumably putting on her heels. He'd waited on the sidewalk, below the stoop, looking up at the door when she stepped out from behind it. He turned sideways so it wouldn't seem like he'd been watching. She leaned into him at the last step, when they were eye level, one of her arms reaching around his waist, apologizing for it taking her a minute.

The traffic isn't pausing. Her street's lined with cherry blossoms, the buds starting to emerge a little later than usual. He steps closer to the road and realizes she's watching him through the windshield. She smiles once she catches his eye, one of her hands raised behind her head, holding her hair up. He taps the hood of his car and glances at her again, this woman who he first saw only a few months before, who he has asked to come with

him, and is about to introduce to colleagues, his mentors. He places a hand in his pocket, fidgeting.

When he climbs in, she's pulling her hair back in a bun at her neck, the ends fraying out loosely from the top of it. He starts the car and turns down the radio. He likes hearing her talk. She normally seems quiet when they've been out places—observing things, he thinks, how he does, also—though it seems that she talks more when they're alone, just the two of them.

"I almost cancelled," she says. "I was sick all day."

He's surprised for a moment, then feels relieved. He's been thinking about her the whole week since he asked her to come with him, though he doesn't want her to think he's been nervous. He isn't sure if he's made the event sound too important. He hasn't told her yet he'd be presenting an award to his mentor, as part of the exhibit opening, though he'd alluded there was a ceremony. He doesn't know still, whether he should have asked her to join him—if the event will seem too formal, or if it won't be a fun enough date. He doesn't know if it'll even matter.

"You could have cancelled," he tells her.

"Oh no, I wanted to come. It sounds fun. Really."

She can't tell if he's nervous this time. The date feels more official than their others, though it feels slightly strange to her, even intimate, that they're heading to another city together, though it's less than an hour's drive. She holds her hand to her mouth, thinking she's going to sneeze, but strains into a yawn, hoping he doesn't notice.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

She likes how sincere he seems. She brushes her bangs out of her eyes and tilts her head to the side, thinking for a moment.

"It was a hangover, actually." She laughs once she says it. "Very out of the ordinary. I don't know why I drank so much. I don't usually."

"Too many cocktails?"

She smiles at his Southern lilt. "No, I had wine," she answers.

"You like wine?"

"I don't drink a lot of it. But I do like it."

She's glad she's come, although she still feels tired. She doesn't want to tell him that she was lying on her bathroom floor until the early afternoon, that she has a dense pain over her right temple that's been lingering since the morning. She wants to be able to talk, to be polite during the ride, but she's not sure she can stay awake. She still feels groggy, and probably needs to rest still. She hopes he won't be offended.

"Actually, do you mind if I sleep?" she asks.

"No. Not at all. You can put the seat back."

"You don't mind not talking?"

"No. Go ahead."

"Thank you," she says.

She lowers the seat down and shifts her body to lift her legs up, angled toward him slightly. She feels more comfortable that way, on her left side, but turns her head to the right, so he can't completely see her while she sleeps. She props her hand up under her chin and gazes for a moment out the window, at the tall archways of the townhouses on Saint Paul Street, that they're passing by on their way out of the city, the gold, late

afternoon light reflecting on the red painted bricks. She loosens her hair from the bun again, it pulling too much at her scalp. Even tired, she can tell she's feeling anxious, not quite sure of what to do, of her actions. It's odd to her that she hardly knows him. She moves her hands to her lap, tucks them between her knees.

When she closes her eyes, he looks over at her knees—at the raised, wrinkled scar the size of a fingerprint on one of them. There's an edge of black silk from her slip that's showing below her dress, that he can also see between the dress's stitching. A hair across her neck descends into the dress's V; he feels, for a moment, like he wants to place his hand on her cheek, gather her hair and lay it over her shoulder. He won't tell her yet that in five months he is leaving. Right now, just meeting her—in the middle of his job, his city life, not even packing his house—he can't imagine the departure. She reminds him of someone he can't quite recall, feeling familiar to him, as if he already knows her. He wants to kiss her, but he is not sure yet whether she wants him to. He is not sure if it would be good idea, even if she were awake.

He fiddles with the volume of the radio, keeping it low to not disturb her, before turning on the CD-player and picking out a track. Freddie Hubbard, *Little Sunflower*.

She props herself on her elbows and squints toward the window. There are houses with tall columns and large, outdoor chandeliers. He's driving slowly like he's about to park.

"Are we there?"

"Almost. I wanted to take the scenic route."

"I thought I felt the car stop."

"There are a lot of speed bumps in this neighborhood."

"Oh." She pauses, pushing herself up. "It's pretty."

Her eyes feel puffy. She sweeps her hair back from her forehead and cheek. There's a stray hair caught in her mouth, that she pulls off of her tongue.

"I like this house coming up," he says. "Not the house, actually. The garden."

She listens to his speech, how he draws out the word garden like it's something he cherishes. She massages the ache in her neck and lays her head back against the seat again, looking at the houses, not feeling out from her sleep quite yet.

They pass a row of hedges blocking the view, and then a tulip bed opens up, climbing a long hill.

"Oh—it's beautiful." She sits up abruptly, pushing back at the seat. "I love white tulips."

He leans closer to see it also. He's glad how happy she seems, that she shows it so easily. The scent in her hair reminds him of redbuds, the trees lining the park near his

house. He thinks she'd like to see the cherry trees at the Basin, that'll blossom just days from now.

"What's your favorite color?" he asks.

"Hmm. I don't have one, really."

"Of tulips, I mean."

"Oh, that." She laughs at herself. "Black, actually. 'Queen of Night.' I know it's weird."

"Not at all. They're beautiful. That's what I thought you would say."

"They're more a dark brown. I like white ones second, though." She smiles like she's appeasing him. She stretches her arms and legs out, adjusting her seat upright.

"I feel the same way."

"They're opposites. As much as they can be."

"Exactly." He wants to kiss her but he won't.

"You know we're always talking about flowers," she says. "Last week it was dandelions."

"That's technically a weed."

"I know. But we make wishes on them when we're little."

"Strange that children make wishes on weeds."

"I liked the story you told me," she says. "About the dandelion."

She turns toward him and looks at his profile, the light scruff on his cheeks, his hair curling over the top of his ears, even though it's receding. His lashes are longer than she'd thought. He blinks a few times, his smile lines showing at his eyes. She likes how he smiles, with his lips pressed together, him turning to her and winking. He seems glad

that she's remembered his story—something about his father; it seems like he's glad that she's there.

He circles around the cobblestone entrance to the museum and double-parks near the grassy island with the water fountain, removing the car key from the key ring. A valet opens her door and helps her out. He steps from the car and walks toward them, handing the valet the key, worried he should have opened the door for her himself.

He takes the ticket from the valet and holds his hand up an inch or so behind her back, hovering, while they walk toward the museum's entrance. "This could be fancier than I thought," he warns.

He's wearing tan suit pants and a white, collarless button-down. "I think we're dressed okay," she says.

"You look good," he replies.

She thinks he looks a little embarrassed for saying it, maybe somehow ashamed, though he's given her a compliment. She's not sure how she should respond. She steps in front of him on the entrance path. "Thank you. How did you get invited to this?"

"I guess I know some people high up."

"That's good."

"I taught a class here once. A one-day workshop. I'm on their list. Our school's affiliated."

"So you get invited to fancy things."

"I guess so." He pauses. "The presentation's at the end. It won't take long."

He touches his hand lightly against her back as she steps before him into the museum. In the entry room, she turns and widens her eyes at him, walks over to a Monet

of some cliffs next to an ocean, the cliff faces sharp white with dark purple shadows, the slope of the close one gold mainly, with scatterings of pinks, blues, and greens. The beach is shaded and rocky, the sea half emerald, half cobalt. He studies the one next to it, *Meadow at Giverny*.

"I've never seen these." She cups her hand over her mouth, whispering to him.

"It's their permanent collection," he explains. "They open the exhibit rope at seven."

"Oh okay."

"We can eat first, though."

He guides her through the rooms toward the museum's back entrance, the steps shaped like a horseshoe around the long outdoor buffets with their white tablecloths, covered in serving platters.

They make plates of food for themselves and sit on the museum's back steps, watching the lines of people around the buffet. He points out a man he knows, in a white shirt also, standing by the bar.

"Do you want anything to drink? It might help your hangover."

"Thanks." She laughs. "My headache's gone. I'm okay."

"Do you want to go over with me?" He nods toward the area where the man is standing.

"I need to eat, actually. I didn't all day. You can go talk if you want."

"That's all right. I'll sit here with you. I need to eat, too."

She balances her plate on her lap, taking a hair band from around her wrist, and pulling her hair up into a ponytail this time.

"Did you see any chopsticks?" she asks.

"I saw the kind you get for takeout. I can get you some, but they splinter."

"It's better than using our hands," she says.

"In Japan it's traditional to use your fingers."

"How long were you there?"

He pauses before he answers her, thinking to when he first left, a few years after college. "Three years, just about." He rubs his fingers against the crown of his head.

"I have a friend who lives there now, but I've never been."

"You should go." He remembers the commute into Okayama. "I would drive along a river every morning. The Yoshiigawa. It's very beautiful."

He sets his plate beside him and rests his elbows on his knees. She notices how his hands fall toward another from his wrists, how he touches the pads of his fingers together—taps them nervously, but with the rhythm of a heartbeat. The shadows from his fingers fall below him on the concrete, like they're making the shape of some animal.

"Here. I'll grab some for you."

He gets up from the step and the shadows fly off. He places his hands in his pockets and looks down at her, briefly, the sunlight washing out what she can see of him, before he turns away.

When he sits down again, he hands her a pair of chopsticks sealed in paper, with the words on them upside-down, the way he hands them to her.

"Thank you." She covers her mouth while she's eating. "Now hopefully I won't break them wrong."

"Here, look at this—" He holds out the pair he's gotten for himself, after tearing the paper case, showing her three sticks joined together.

"Wow, that's so weird."

"I've never seen that happen." He holds them in front of him for a moment, then pulls out two and sets the other beside him. "Now we have an extra if you break one."

"Come on, you have to use all of them." She lifts a piece of maki to her mouth and sets down her chopsticks.

He takes the third one out and tries to fit it between the others. "I don't know—" He says it with emphasis, raising his eyebrows. "I don't think I can do it."

"No, try like this." She slips the chopstick from his hand and slides the tip of it through a crease between his fingers.

"Now hold it there," she says.

"I'm trying. It doesn't work."

She sets her plate to the side. "Can I try?"

He hands her the three chopsticks—the ends toward her, the tips toward him. He watches her arrange them carefully, in one position, then another, until she begins to motion with them, spreading the tips apart with her hand, and then touching all three of

them into a point. He watches her flexing her fingers, like she's doing an exercise with them, her smile widening. He's actually pretty impressed.

"You're a natural," he says.

"I think the trick is keeping the bottom one still." She laughs. "This is fun. See? I like this."

"You'll have to keep practicing."

"I don't know if I can remember it." She looks over her shoulder. "I wish we had a camera. Can you draw?"

"I can."

She hears the rise in his voice again, the bass line resonating beneath his soft, careful speech.

"Wait," he says.

He takes the invitation from his inside jacket pocket, patting his other pockets for a pencil. When he finds one, he begins to draw her hand, first the line of how her wrist curves, then the lines of each of her fingers. He adds lines for the chopsticks the way she's positioned them in her hand, like she's making a bird's shadow with them. He sketches in the wrinkles on her thumbs, slivered moons at the tips of her fingernails.

"Do you mind if I keep your drawing?" she asks.

It sounds like she's asked him something intimate. "Not at all," he says. "Consider it yours."

She moves the tips of the chopsticks apart again, her hand motioning like a wing. "Next time you see me I'll be a pro," she says.

"You already are." He begins to shade in the drawing with the side of the pencil, pressing lightly on the lead.

"Hurry. It hurts."

"Almost."

"Sorry I bragged," she adds. "I hope you're not punishing me now."

He places the pencil behind his ear, holding up the drawing.

"Oh I love it," she exclaims. "Look, I can get your nose." She reaches toward him with the chopsticks and plucks the end of his nose with them, gently.

"Gross. You don't want to eat with those now."

"They're not mine, they're yours."

"Oh, great." He smiles at her with one side of his face, pretending to be cynical.

"You won't mind using your hands, though."

He leans toward her, feels a hand on his shoulder. The pencil falls and bounces on the step.

"I just wanted to congratulate you on the position, David." The man in the white shirt bends toward him.

"Thank you, Carson, I appreciate that."

"It's a great school."

"Are you on your way in to the exhibit?" He feels slightly nervous, unsure of what might be said, watching Elizabeth lift her hand to her eyes and squint.

"They just opened it." The man lingers briefly. "See you inside?"

"Yes, soon." He watches as the man walks inside. He should have introduced them. He smoothes the drawing with his hand, then turns back toward her with his head tilted.

"Elizabeth," he says.

She sets down the chopsticks. "Are you mad I took your nose?" she asks.

"Can I kiss you?"

She pauses before she responds, but he puts his hands on her face and presses his lips to one cheek, and then the other, and she slowly breathes him in.

Isamu Dreams of Cocoons

May 1911

He feels himself hurled like a windblown seed into the dark sands of Chigasaki—cones of thin pine trees scattered on the land where the Tokaido rail has taken them, speeding south from Tokyo station to where the Sagami River spreads its mouth to Sagami Bay. The boughs of the pine trees reach like rising suns above the river, though the pines are to the west of him as he peers at their formations, their roots bracing in the shifting sand, their trunks uniformly straight against the shock of wind that tries to sway them, tries to uproot.

The river flows toward them out of Lake Yamanaka, highest and shallowest of Mount Fuji's five lakes, water spilling from its lip onto its long path downward from where the mountains' lava fingers pressed deep into earth for water, pressed veins deep into the rock. The blackish bark of the Chigasaki pines that he will soon learn to skin for whistles seems to him now like ashes rising up, rising from the remnants of lava.

His hand grasping his mother's, he bows to the god of the mountain, the *yama no kami*, wondering whether his father has returned to their empty house—alone in Tokyo—in Hisakata-chō—now far away from them as they gather their bags on the train station platform, beginning to plant their feet.

~

They plant themselves in a farmhouse, surrounded by a grove of mulberry trees with their deep purple fruit, remnants of webs caught in their branches. In summer, he climbs the trees with the fishermen's children, swims in the shallow offshoot of the river, collects the long-armed beetles clinging to every bush and bark. His new friends scamper in the trees, shouting at the passing foreigners, *Stinks of butter! Stinks of butter!* Their hands like nets ripping through the leaves.

~

After the fruit has fallen, he watches the farmer's wife spread the long branches of mulberry leaves on her trays of white silkworms, stretched out and fat, so unlike the peanut-shaped cocoons they will soon form, as have the others that now sit in a bath of hot water. He helps her by holding the branches he gathers from a pile on the floor, so she does not have to bend over, her age reshaping her spine so that she grows toward him instead of taller, hunching lower and lower until threadlike webs form around her, pull her into the earth.

At night, the scent of silkworm cocoons reaches up to the room he shares with his mother, where he dreams of the white threads like falling water, the farmers' wife reeling silk from the cocoons one by one, and spinning the silk yarn into a cloud—each of her thumbs and fingers pressing the silk floss tightly together as she pulls and pulls, spinning a cocoon around the house.

~

He walks to the village school through the grove of dark pine trees behind the farmhouse, wary of meeting the sunburned farm and fishermen children he thought had been his friends, who've grown rough at the end of summer, who've grown to taunt him, even on the open paths. The sounds the pines make seem to echo invisible children calling him *Baka:* Dummy. *Gaijin*: Foreign.

This word hurts more, confuses him. *Noguchi, Isamu*, he responds, calling his name out for the teacher, declaring himself present—by his paternity, Japanese. He has made it safely to school, and yet time will pass slowly until the school day's last hour, when he will find his way home, propelled through the dark pines by the patter of children running, much too closely behind.

~

His mother's swelling belly leaves her tired at night when she returns to the farmhouse after her daily journey to Yokohama. *My sickness makes it difficult to live here*, she says. They pack their belongings once more, find a two-story cottage far away from the pine-cone paths, far from any neighbors.

~

His mother returns one evening to the cottage they have rented with her illness abated, her belly again soft, smaller. She carries a baby wrapped in white silk. The baby's face is round, with eyes like his are, flattened. She looks like a silkworm pupa, her face poking out first from the velvety shell, or like a worm about to shed a skin. Something from the farmhouse? From her school? He leaves a question on his face for his mother.

Your sister, Ailes, his mother leans and whispers.

~

Youth's for an hour, and the taste of life is sweet. Ailes was a girl that stepped on two bare feet.

His mother's voice reciting, rocking his baby sister.

Fear of Falling Sky

It's a few minutes after six p.m. His mother's late coming down for dinner. He walks into the kitchen thinking he can get a snack, opening some drawers and cabinets. If he stretches high enough he can see the meatloaf baking in the wall oven, the ketchup burnt onto it, with smoke coming off. He goes ahead and reaches up to turn the dial to zero, hoping it's all right with her. He moves a stool over and climbs onto the counter on his knees, looks in another cabinet, high up, and finds some peanut butter Tastykakes, the box not yet open. He shuts the cabinet and climbs down, not sure if he's allowed to undo the box. He probably should have asked for a snack before his mother went upstairs for her nap.

He hears a dog barking out in the neighborhood, probably outside while its family eats dinner. He walks back to the living room and looks out the window, traces a finger over the keys to the piano. He decides to head upstairs.

"Mom." He knocks at her door softly. He can hear some music playing—faint, like it's in the background—maybe from her alarm. "Mom." He knocks on the door again, harder. He hears her turn, moving things on her nightstand.

"Oh, geez. I'll be right down." His mother sounds groggy. He hears her sliding things around again. Something thuds to the ground.

Isamu Dreams of a Lightning Strike

June 1914

He gazes at Mount Fuji through the round window in the top room of the house, as he waits for his mother's figure to appear along the path on her way home from the train station. Ailes has been put down for a nap, finally quieted from crying. Isamu tires of having to play with her things to keep her always entertained, of helping the maid clean and bathe her. Of her hands rummaging through his toys and books. He wants his mother to come home soon, to have their time alone.

Thinking he has missed the train's brief passing through his view as it approaches, he anticipates her and times her appearance. When she does not emerge from between the trunks of blooming Yoshino, his stomach flutters, like an eyelid or a wing, and he anticipates her again, until he sees the train cars' quick duplicating of the first car's image, a kind of fluttering in his vision, just moments before the train will reach the station, before his mother will step off of it and return again from where she teaches, as she returns to him each evening before the sun sets.

With Aisles asleep, after supper, he still has his time when his mother reads to him, from his favorite book of myths.

It is sad, very sad, she says, *when the boy's wings melt and he falls*.

He imagines the boy falling, propelling into a vortex that opens in the sea, hurtling down inside the funnel and then drifting to the ocean floor and waiting, until the Sea God gives him fins, the salt spinning around him like glimmering stars in the

ocean—the boy moving effortlessly through the world's deepest spaces, finally without the risk of falling.

All he wanted was to fly, he thinks.

The rain breaks over the mountain from out of the large, billowing cloud, and the cherry blossoms swirl into the air. He watches again from the window before bed, looking out once more at the peak of Mount Fuji, at the empty railway line, the echoes of the train long departed from the steel tracks, the raindrops sounding the metal. When he sleeps, turning over in his bed, he dreams of carving stones with his hands, hollowing passages through the mountain, his body emanating energy like a lightning bolt, his hands like live flames, with the power to make dissolving things permanent. Isamu, driving the chariot through places with no light, until a man's body, a child's, is suddenly burning before him, falling through the sky.

~

At the beach in Chigasaki, he watches his mother become smaller as she lifts her arms one after the other to propel herself into the distance, toward the small island nearly two miles out, that from the shore appears rough and strewn with rocks. He sees how calm the water is surrounding the island, and though he wishes himself there for her arrival, the waves seem too high, the sea too foreboding, for him to ever have the strength to reach it.

When he can no longer see her, he resorts to teasing Ailes, throwing piles of sand at her and running, as she gathers the wet sand grains in her fists and attempts to throw back—Ailes who has no concern for their mother's whereabouts, trusting almost naturally what Isamu cannot—that their mother's return is certain, that the summer is merely a dream in which no threatening forces exist, no harsh seas or storms, no catastrophic happenings, no sudden, swirling vortexes hurtling boys who tease their sisters to the bottom of the sea.

By Ailes' age, he had crossed the enormous Pacific, safely somehow, his mother holding onto him, or him to her, as if she were his life preserver. Ailes is not American. She has never lived there, in the hills of California, as he has, and though he had once begged his mother to attend the American school on the Bluff back in Tokyo, he is tired of it, tired of the journey by train, of the Catholic priests and the peculiar instruction. Though he knows his mother will not let him leave Japan—would not be able to leave with him now that she has Ailes—he will refuse to go to school. He will no longer

receive the suspicious looks given to *ai no ko* children. He will not allow his mother to force him.

He packs sand loosely in the shape of a wave a half-meter tall, and when it is formed, kicks his foot through it. He thinks of his father perched at the edge of his bed in the spring as he suffered from measles and the accompanying fever—his blood boiling as it does at the center of the earth, far below the crashing waves. His father, who was less concerned with the red marks that had spread over Isamu's body than with the surprise of Ailes' presence—a child not his—his face as red as blood and bumps, furious at being made to look foolish—furious at Isamu's mother.

The tide begins to come in and Isamu raises his head, expectant of his mother's arrival. Among the crests forming and breaking on the bay, he locates her figure heading toward them—resting among the swells after she takes her last stroke and then slowly emerges from the surf—waving at him, briefly, as she runs across the sand toward Ailes, gathering her into her arms.

Garden of Luminosity

They had walked into the main room of the exhibit almost right when it opened, some of the first people down the stairs, having stood in line talking, close to one another, when they finished with their plates. Now she doesn't know where he's gone. She's been standing near the corner before a sculpture of a hanged figure, its arms and legs in motion, contorting, like there's been some kind of struggle. She can't discern what kind of metal the figure's made of. The placard is in the corner of the room, on the wall. It's not bronze, but is a dark, black-brown, all seeming like polished skin. The figure hangs from a wood beam that's balanced on steel pipes, like on a jungle gym on a playground, the wood a piece you would jump up to grab. It looks enormously heavy, this figure balanced from a rope. The rope isn't a hangman's knot; it hangs like how a swing would, just a loop tucked under the neck, like its head is bowed and someone above holds a long, taut necklace, that yanks the hanging body. If it could just slip off the rope...

She has a hard time breathing, looking at this sculpture. She turns and looks around again and sees him leaning in the entrance to the other room, watching her. She catches his eye but he turns his head sharply as if he hasn't been watching, looks back again and nods, his eyes more open, like he's just now recognizing her. She thinks he must be embarrassed. Even though they've kissed now, it's still strangely awkward, only their third real date, the fifth time she's seen him. Fifth or fourth. From a distance, his hair seems darker, though under the gallery lighting there are gold highlights to his curls. She's only dated a man who has been balding once before, and he was cocky, not quiet, like David. He has his hands in his pockets, looking now at a painting on the wall. She

likes him, but who knows whether things would work out, even if she wanted them to. She hasn't told him she's moving back to New York, but she knows she'll have to soon, not that it's far from them—not that he couldn't visit. She turns again to look at the hanging figure, the light hitting the top of its head, the muscles, the center of its chest...

She feels too hot, like she might pass out. She walks over to the placard, the exhibit title wrapping around the edge of the card in some kind of antique-looking typeface, *The True Artist Is An Amazing, Luminous Fountain*. Monel (nickel alloy), Steel, Wood, Rope. Then her eyes go upward: Isamu Noguchi. 1934. Then *Death (Lynched Figure)*.

She steps back and looks over at the top of the sculpture. The wooden beam perfectly planed and smoothed, the burls running horizontal. The ends of rope fixed within the wood somehow. Ship's rope, maybe, to bear that much weight. From the back, the figure's darker. There's a sorrow to it, but not quite. Something she can't articulate.

When he joins her, she's in front of an arrangement of broken tiles, painted with cherry blossoms, the cracks in the tiles their branches.

"Did you see that one?" she asks, nodding to the figure.

"I did." He seems tentative when he answers, pausing. "Do you like the piece?"

"I love it, actually. But it's hard to use the word 'like' when it's disturbing me inside—you know?"

He hears her voice reverberate with her breath, the sound of getting kicked. He taps his fingers together. "I would kiss you again if there weren't all these people around."

"That's sweet." Her heart starts racing, but she laughs.

"I would," he whispers.

She watches him drum the fingers from one hand in a fluttering motion on his shoulder, down to his wrist, like on a piano.

He studies the corners of her mouth. "There's a tinge of sadness to your smile right now."

"Just for that second. I promise." She combs her fingers in her hair, resting her hand there. She doesn't know why she's feeling like this. It's not like she knows him well.

"You asked about my job," he says. "I didn't know how to tell you, but it's not around here."

"Oh." She stops. "Really?"

"I'm going back."

"Back where?" she asks. Her expression changes, and he sees the sudden nervousness he's been feeling since they got there reflected in her face, her mouth as she purses her lips. She turns her head from him and folds her arms in front of her. He hears her breathe out.

"Do you still want to see me?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"I wasn't honest."

She pulls her bottom lip in before she speaks again, biting it. "I haven't been either, David."

"Something I should know?" he asks.

She wrinkles her forehead like she's concentrating. No better time than now, she figures. "I'm going back to New York soon," she says. "I'm leaving in summer."

He looks down at his feet, then takes her arm and moves her toward the doorway. "Here," he says, stopping. "We have a season, then?"

"One and a half."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"That's good, isn't it?" He starts walking them into another room, his arm brushing against hers.

"I think so," she answers, and she feels him hook her fingers with his, feeling for her hand.

Isamu Dreams of Sinking

June 1918

He has been gathering his belongings carefully, for weeks making lists of the items he would take with him, that are now in his bag as he gazes over the remainder, left there for his mother to pack and put away, now that he will no longer live with her—her decision to send him off having come more easily than he'd expected. His favorite wooden chopsticks, the small, worn teddy bear from Aunt Catherine, and the carpentry tools with which he learned to carve rabbits and dragons from the cut branches of cherry trees, are all arranged carefully in the folds of his clothes, for protection. Though he senses his own excitement, he is fearful of returning to America alone, and though it is he who is leaving, he who had again begged his mother, he feels instead as if he is being left, his mother and Ailes floating steadily away, the entire island chain torn up from the earth's core and drifting out into the vast Pacific, while he remains fixed where he is, his feet suddenly rooted in an empty basin in the ocean.

~

The day before his departure, they walk one last time in the Kamakura gardens, he and his mother, admiring the great Gozan temples that appear as if mountains in a pop-up book, enormous and grand against the perspective of the flat, folded rice paper, with its Japanese script whispering the mountains' deepest secrets. She tells him to select a talisman from the toy sellers, and he searches among the stands for one of the grass-woven owls he remembers a man holding out to him on another visit, to tempt him, the ones to protect him from illness, that remind him of the horned owls studding the trees outside his childhood home in Tokyo—hooting at the moonlight as he fell asleep in his bed below the moon's white eye, that gazed without blinking through the wind-whipped paper screens.

He listens as his mother speaks to him of the new school he will attend, of the American wilderness and frontier, that he is sure to find in Indiana—where, he thinks, he may even see an owl up close, perching before him after it soars through the forested landscape.

He is to write once a week; he is to send news of his studies, to tell if he has been polite and is making new friends. He is to go by the name Gilmour, his mother's name, though the name seems uncertain to him, awkward. And yet he thinks that, like an owl, his eyes fully opened and unblinking, he might continuously watch what is behind him, the place he has come from, always looking back, even as his body faces forward. The owl now in his pocket faces front, rigidly, two children tucked under its wings. His mother puts her arm around him, as they walk through the gardens together.

Take a look at the gardens, one last time, she says—and he wonders to himself when she'll follow.

~

His mother hurries him toward the dock where the steamship is waiting, at the Yokohama port where she says they first arrived. He tugs at her waist as they rush toward the boat, the *America-maru*, poised against the backdrop of the Japanese harbor, the small suitcase he's carrying hitting against his leg. As they part the crowd in front of the gangplank, he is shocked to see his father, older-looking and yet smaller than he remembered, a newspaper curled in his hand, pressing his silent, stern gaze at them, eyes blank and unrevealing. His mother stops abruptly, clutching Isamu to her side. He is suddenly anxious, knowing that his father will scold him, will be angry when he finds out he is leaving. And yet he realizes suddenly that his father must know, that his mother must have alerted him of the voyage.

I received your letter, his father says in Japanese.

You have something for Isamu? His mother has asked his father a question, in English—refusing to speak his father's language. He hears a firmness in her voice, a deliberate expectation, and he realizes she has demanded money for his departure, and not merely sent word of his leaving, not asked his father to come and say goodbye. He looks to his father, wondering if perhaps he has brought him a gift, and then wonders if he wants him to return to Tokyo, if there is some reason that he may want him to remain a Noguchi, want him to stay in Japan.

He is my son, his father insists, and the argument begins formally, Isamu standing there transfixed as his parents quarrel before him, listening to his father's demands, his mother insisting that Japan is no place for him, and clutching him in her arms, holding

onto him tightly, before pushing him away from her toward the boat, toward the line of boarding passengers.

Isamu-san, his father shouts, *you are to stay in Japan!*

No! his mother orders.

He feels as still and hard as stone, sinking down through the ocean.

No! he hears himself yell back at his father, now angry at the man who has come to stop him from leaving—and yet angry at his mother, pushing him away.

From his notebook, he takes a sheet of square paper from the bundle his mother had surprised him with, days before he left, white on one side and embellished on the other, with a monochrome print unique to each sheet: pine trees, flapping cranes, bamboo leaves, bird cages. The moon over flowing water.

The paper he has chosen has plum blossoms—his mother's favorite—on the decorative side. He begins folding it toward himself—valley fold—then away—mountain fold—again and again, in rectangles and triangles, until tail fins emerge, and then a small hole at the base of them that he puts his lips to, blowing the folded paper into a delicate goldfish covered with five-petaled blossoms—like the petals of the Yoshino—like the five points of stars or the five Buddhist temples. *A fish found only in the Orient*, he remembers his mother saying, when he first saw a goldfish sold in a street vendor's oval tub, the peddler passing their house with his drum.

He has not yet left his cabin, peering from the small window at the world in its fishbowl, the world he is once more sailing half way around, uncertain of where he will land.

~

Fireworks shot from the deck of the boat roar into the black sky. He has come above to celebrate with the ships' American passengers, now that he has something to celebrate as well, and beginning a letter to his mother: explosions cracking and sizzling as they fizzle into the black ocean; the black sky tainted with red and blue clouds that drift off into the nothing continually growing behind them, as they pierce the nothing that's ahead of them with the ship's grand bow.

It is July 4th, the American Independence Day. *Late tonight we will cross the International Date Line and will have a second fireworks celebration!* he writes. *I am so glad I am American again*. Coursing through the waters so unfathomably deep, the dark sky so impermeable, he is unaware of his mother's fears sending him off from Japan, unaware of the rumored attacks by boats that hide under water, German boats—*untersee*—of their danger to American ships or even ships transporting Americans, such as the one on which he journeys. He is cutting the Pacific in what seems the wrong direction, entirely unfamiliar, a world out in front of him he has no recollection of, no connection to except in his birthright, as his mother's land. He is unaware of the war in which America's role has already been fixed, this July 4, 1918, even though the Americans are whispering of it—this day of life he will start again now that he is once more an American and no longer Japanese. And yet transported over waves that travel back and forth, constantly in flux, emerging from the past and back, he wonders if he is even sailing. Somehow the world will be new to him, and yet somehow he returns to the

past: Magellan traversing the world and back, first one day early, then one day late—remaining forever in his life's single day, the journey ahead of him long.

~

The pine trees they spot from the ship as they near the Pacific coast seem like enormous men: magnificent and stately emissaries who have voyaged to the shore, determining the fates of those who approach, cautiously welcoming. Everything about the landscape is new, and yet he sees before him what appears like a mirror, an instance of déja vu: the Chigasaki pine spires flashing briefly before the ship as it sails toward America. He imagines viewing the coast as an eighteenth century explorer, Cook or Malaspina, over one-hundred years before him seeking a waterway to the Atlantic, an iceless passage through which ships could meander, traversing the globe and discovering its wonders, discovering the harmony of plants and earth, pines that mirror one another on both sides of the Pacific basin—Indians that appear, in the slant of their eyes, to have descended from Japanese forbearers.

Closer to the coast, the sudden cliffs emerging from a bank of fog like an enormous, unfathomable glacier, he realizes that he knows little of America, none of its interior, the country before him broad, the land sinking deeper than is penetrable.

~

With his suitcase and sack, he descends the ship's gangplank, his name and destination, "Isamu Gilmour, La Porte, Indiana," written in his mother's hand onto a tag she had sewn to his shirt. The Japanese leaving the ship look at him as if he is not one of them; the Americans gaze questioningly as well. He begins to feel the peculiar sense of being lost—left behind—and wonders if he should step back onto the boat, onto the vessel that had transported him so determinedly to America's west coast, somehow reverse his direction.

His mother has arranged for a YMCA official to meet him upon his arrival, and as the man walks toward him with recognition in his face, having sought out a small boy with an Oriental-shaped face, traveling on his own, Isamu is suddenly fearful. What if he does not like his school in Indiana, land of Indians, land of the frontier? Will he be able to find his way back? Should he avoid the expected confusion, and ask the man the way to Los Angeles instead?

"Well, well, traveler." The man jauntily greets him in a tone Isamu cannot understand, swiftly reaching his fingers into his inside coat pocket. He offers Isamu a piece of shiny flat foil, and Isamu puts his hand out, taking the bar of silver from the man and gazing at it, then studying it with a wrinkled brow. He looks into the man's eyes as the man bends toward him, pupils blue and flashing. "Unwrap it," the man says.

Isamu does so, and as the official prompts him, takes a small nibble from the powdery yellow rectangle found in the silver wrapper, working it toward his throat and preparing to swallow, just as the man halts him from doing so.

"No, no, no. You don't want to do that. Chew it, but don't swallow. Chew it until you chew out all the juice. Quite wonderful." The man smiles at him broadly. "Have you never had a stick of gum?"

Isamu shakes his head. He is thankful for the stick that turns soft in his wet mouth, thankful for the friendly man, and bows so he can show it.

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He is the only child on the train bound for Chicago. Lanky young men in their late teens and early twenties, all wearing soldier uniforms, scramble into the seats surrounding him, propping sacks behind their heads or under their arms and slouching into positions meant for sleeping. Chicago is three days hence, though it will take two more trains to get him to his school. The soldiers, talking excitedly of the war's front lines that they are on their way to see, shower him with cookies and Cola, presents packed for them by mothers and younger sisters. Reading Isamu's nametag, a soldier laughs and shouts out to a friend, "Look—Gilmour! We've found your baby brother!"

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Though the tag on his shirt instructs the train captains to send him on to LaPorte, once arrived, he seeks out the local train line and boards it to Rolling Prairie, to the Interlaken school. The vast fields of corn that sway and bend beyond the train's windows seem to him to be endless, sprawled out on all sides, interspersed with pastures on which it seems there are not even animals, much less Indians, the conferrers of all the fields of corn that his mother described to him. He thinks of the sheltered canopy of the forests of Japan, the solitary flower blossoms behind rocks and at the banks of streams, blooming even beneath the dense overhead of trees. Caught in the train's momentum, his face against the glass, he's unable to spot any birds or caterpillars in the green sea of cornstalks blazing by him, any flower blossoms in the green fields.

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The dust of the Indiana countryside stirs and resettles as he walks the road to his new American home, weeds and knotted underbrush trailing the length of his path. With each hilltop he reaches in the road, he sees a spattering of haystacks dotting the landscape, until at the next bend he identifies a silo, then the outlying buildings of a farm, and then finally can see a lake, its far edge marked with the log-cabin buildings of the school he is approaching, clustered together like forts.

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He is surprised by the silver lake water of the early Indiana morning, reflective like a mirror—the summer sun rising just as the crew of schoolboys jump daringly into the lake, for exercise and washing before breakfast. They must swim to the middle and back, the water more clear by the time they return, hoisting themselves onto the small wooden pier and letting their legs dangle so as to wash the sediment from their feet, before drying off and dressing again.

He is as daring as any of them, the Midwestern boys raised in this landscape of ruggedness and stretched-out land, not afraid of the distance from shore, of the early-morning chill of the water that the summer sun has not yet warmed. His mother had told him stories of his infancy in America, of him running barefoot on the California hills, dark as an Indian, happy to sleep in their tent on the hillside even through the winter, with fields of red and blue wildflowers on all sides of them.

He returns to the camp of dormitory tents, following his roommate—an older boy from the Philippine Islands who is Oriental, like him—knowing that he does not miss the cold winters of Japan, the Hibachi stove barely warming the house, through whose papered screens the wind blows harshly.

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He unwraps his carpentry tools from the woven bamboo work apron given to him by the old Japanese cabinetmaker, planning out which of them he will use for carving his wooden owl—a gift he will send to his mother. He will make the head moveable, fixed to the body on a twisting peg, that he will whittle like a miniature spindle.

He ties his apron around him, pulling the thick straps to the front and lining one strap over the other, then looping one beneath and pulling the bottom one through, in order to knot them together. He carefully arranges the tools he will use, the chisels and gouges standing upright in the narrow pockets, the course waterstone for smoothing the owl's wings lain deep in the wider compartment.

In Japan, he had been carving cods and carp, and yet here there are newly discovered animals. He has not even seen before some of those on the farm—the horses in the stable, the cattle and the wooly sheep. Neither has he seen an owl here, but he knows they fly through the forest where the boys' tents are, shuddering from the beating wings—their owl eyes blinking like the late-rising moon that hides behind sleeping clouds.

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Agapoan, his Filipino roommate, teaches him to ride cowboy-style, to ride horses trained for working. They blow into the horses' nostrils, careful to do it nicely, so that the animals will know them. They hoist themselves onto the fence posts and then the horses' saddled backs, hooking their boots into the dangling stirrups, tapping their spurs lightly on the hide. Isamu smoothes the mane of the horse he is learning to ride, the horse that is the tamest, its brown spotted skin signifying its difference. He whispers into the horse's ear as Agapoan tells him, knowing the horse does not hear his words, does not know his language.

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"What is your name?" a Japanese cook asks Isamu at cleanup after dinner. *O namae wa nan desu ka?*

Isamu's face turns red. Agapoan is waiting for him, with others; surrounded by school friends Isamu suddenly cannot speak Japanese.

"Isamu," Agapoan calls.

The cook nods and smiles. "Isamu desu," he says, as if telling Isamu how to say his own name.

Garden of Ash

She shuts the door behind him, and immediately thinks of the moments he has just spent kissing her, standing in the middle of her one-room apartment. She was surprised from his shyness how he slid his hands down her back while they kissed, lightly cupping her shoulder blades and then firmly tracing the muscles running along her spine down to her hipbones, until he let one hand slide further, and she felt him grab hold of her, kissing her more forcefully as he did.

She takes the bouquet of orchids he brought her as a surprise—the reason for his visit—and walks with them to the kitchen. She lays them on the counter and rummages in a drawer for scissors, then steps on a small stool to pull a vase down from above the refrigerator. She turns on the tap and holds her finger under the water until it cools, thinking of how her body tingled when they kissed, how it was still tingling—how flushed she felt when he pulled away and they stood gazing at one another.

She feels a nervous fluttering as she immerses the orchids' stems in the vase of cold water, careful to snip them while they're submerged, so that air wouldn't be trapped inside the stems if they were plunged into water after. The sunlight through the living room window had hit her eyes when he pulled away—of the upper wooden screens, only one could be closed, but she kept them both open until mid-afternoon when the room would warm too easily. He had stopped by at noon when she was taking lunch, on a break from studying, and he was on his way to D.C. to teach for the afternoon. He had shielded her eyes with his hand. His kiss had been shocking, like the beam of sunlight when he'd pulled away, like too-cold water. She was surprised at herself that she hadn't

been able to recall where they'd met, or through whom, the second time she had seen him. She thought it was strange he was insistent, asking her to dinner when she was uncomfortable giving him her phone number, and then fumbling and telling her his number wrong when she said she would call him instead. His friend had intervened, corrected him, and he blushed. *I'm an idiot*, he'd mumbled. And then what she'd heard him tell his friend: *She'll never like me*.

She sets the vase on the mantle above the fireplace, the marble stained with soot from years of use prior to the chimney being sealed and the house being turned into apartments. Somehow ashes have even collected on the mantle. She turns the arrangement toward the sunlight and notices how the unopened blossoms are shaped like birds with their wings closed, how the orchids' shadow projected against the large, spotted leaf that's tucked behind the bouquet looks like birds perched on tree branches. *Sitting in a tree*, she thinks, singing a schoolgirl's rhyme to herself.

She places a hand to her face, beginning to feel anxious. The kiss had been so different from their first, when he asked her for permission and leaned toward her on the steps of the museum, when she had been wanting him to kiss her but had not wanted to seem like she did, even after the shy glances and movie dates.

Hours later, the room too warm, she brushes a stray dried petal from the mantle, that is warm to her as well, and soot smears onto her fingertips. She leans her head against the marble to study the orchids—the marble warming her cheek—plucks one of the closed blossoms from its stem and guides her thumbnail into the seam where the petals are joined together, until the blossom splits open and she pulls at the petals gently, laying them into place, exposing the orchid's insides.

She runs her finger over the smooth skin of the petals that are a deep rose pink, and thinks of her lips touching his. She begins to feel panicky, realizing how quickly the next three months will pass, that two weeks of it will be spent packing her things. She notices the scalloped inner petals like a miniature orchid inside the one she has opened, and wonders, if she counts all of the orchids' petals silently to herself, the exposed orchids and the ones that are hidden, whether she might end on *he loves me*.

Isamu the Brave

He sits beside the road with Agapoan, waiting for the train to pick up the remaining students who are leaving with the summer. He has heard a rumor that the school is closing down, and though the others are all departing for their families' homes for the break—Agapoan, being older, leaving for military school instead—Isamu will wait for their return, come mid-September, just a short few weeks away. Once the train arrives and the students climb on, Isamu starts his dusty walk back, kicking stones ahead of him, already planning his school projects for when the other students return.

Within days, lines of marching soldiers arrive, taking over the dormitories and bunkrooms. There are more than two thousand of them, far outnumbering Isamu and the two groundskeepers he has been following through their days, curious what will befall him. Like the soldiers he had met before, the ones who by now are fighting in Europe, these give him candies and small trinkets, cheering as they jog by him, asking him to run them errands in return for a coin or several. He observes their strange practices: the standing in formation, the jumping in and out of tanks, the canon firings and rifle drills. When some grow sick, coughing spreading from soldier to soldier, he wonders if they are pretending, to not have to leave school either.

~

Alone in the student dormitory, his fever climbing, he does not see the few dead soldiers in coffins with American flags, the heavy-lidded boxes placed in the backs of the covered trucks that look like metal wagons. When the trucks drive away, he does not see the direction they head in, taking the soldiers home and not to the front lines, not to the towns in Europe that the Germans have already taken, not to the German capital, not to raise a flag up in a distant warring land.

Instead he lies in bed, reading *Le Morte D'Arthur*, enrapt with the smiting of horses and men, enrapt as the jailed Mallory had been, writing, *Pray for me while I am alive that God send me good deliverance and when I am dead pray you all for my soul*.

When his fever plateaus and tumbles, and he is able to leave his room, the few recruits left on base say that the war has come to an end, that they are the last few soldiers waiting to return home, never to see any fighting.

~

No word has come from his mother, no envoy sent to ferret him out and ship him back to Japan. He pretends he is there hiding, in the midst of shriveling cornfields, the stalks sinking down to protect themselves from the wind. The coins he has collected from the soldiers seem unsteady in his pockets; he feels fearful they will fall out when he gallops on one of the horses down to the main street of Rolling Prairie, to spend the coins on bread and milk.

He wishes, now, he had befriended the Japanese cook, wishes he had found out where the man lived and if he might need a helper, that he had even discovered the cook's name and not been so fearful, stiffening when anyone approached. He wishes he had asked the groundskeepers if they were to disappear as well behind the students, teachers, and cooks, that he had known he would be abandoned, even by the last two workers. He doesn't know a soul in Rolling Prairie, or any nearby town, or what he's expected to do. He has finished all of his reading; he has taken and polished his tools and shoes, scoured the floor in his dormitory.

He canoes across the lake, the clear waters seeming lifeless and sterile—the clear sky above seeming dull and bleak, reflecting nothing into the lake's mirror, nothing into the water it contains.

He has written three letters to his mother; he has calculated the days it will take the letters to travel, the three by train, the two weeks crossing. He counts in extra days for each to be sorted with others, at every major stop: LaPorte, Chicago, Seattle, Tokyo, and then to Chigasaki, before they finally reach her hands. He has calculated the time for her

to write to him—barely any time at all—and for a letter to travel back. He is canoeing across the lake, waiting.

~

Someone has remembered him. Mrs. C. A. Lewis, wife of the school Treasurer, has sent him to Rolling Prairie, to the home of a family that has lived there quite long—tending to fields and meadows, and slaughtering cows and pigs. He attends the public school, made of brick and not logs, and after his school day is done, sets out for the local garage to pay for his lodging and learn a trade—as he would have learned many at Interlaken. Mrs. Lewis seems sure his mother will approve, that she will find his education both rugged and well-rounded, though the boys at the new school do not admire his skills as much as the ones he had spent his summer with—do not admire anyone from the wilderness school for privileged boys, back the long dirt road—and certainly not half-Japs. At the end of each school day he is taunted again, the hateful faces striking something that feels like metal inside him—metal that has begun to clang—that keeps clanging, clanging, clanging, on and on and on.