

## ANTI-HERO: A SERIES

### Split Level

He's probably packed full of booze when he tumbles  
[down]  
stairs to the basement tile, or maybe it's just  
[dark?]  
I'll never know. I'm sleeping down the hall, the steep  
[steps]  
far enough away that the fall doesn't wake me.  
[Dad,]  
home, who knows how many months. Mechanical bed  
[takes]  
place of the dining room table. Cast, then brace. We  
[two]  
learn to push the bed buttons to raise or lower  
[at]  
will. We run updownstairs, toting toys everywhere.  
[Once,]  
a toddler tea party. We climb in bed, where his  
[bone]  
recedes like a hairline, so his spine never un-  
[breaks.]  
So childhood fractures. What I know now is our  
[hearts]  
are both full of pain. I woke to sirens – screamed. Him  
[too.]

*Down dark steps, Dad takes two at once. Bone breaks, hearts too.*

Note: A ribcage is a poetic form invented by poet Athena Liu, consisting of 24 lines alternating between 12-syllable lines and a monosyllabic word in brackets. At the end of the text, the bracketed words — or spine — are read from top to bottom.

## Malpractice

My father performs open heart surgery on me  
without any medical training. Cracks the sternum

with the busted edge of a tequila bottle. No anesthetic –  
just the promise that he's doing this out of love.

Like so many things, my heart wasn't broken  
before he got there. Now my most vital organ slops

through his fingers. The unskilled grasp  
spills more blood than it saves, and my body

is sinking like a ship. He can't believe the mess  
I've made. This is obviously the perfect time

for a cigarette. My open chest, now an ashtray.  
He has no idea that he has no idea what he's doing.

My vitals are crashing. Now that he's distracted, I  
reach for my own pulse. Lay it in the chest cavity

like a newborn in a cradle. I hurry the thread  
through dry lips and then the eye of the needle.

A quick whip stitch will leave a crooked scar, but it's all  
I can do to get out of here in one piece. At the door

he stops me. Tries to apologize, even though  
he has never known how to be sorry.

## **Packing A Lunch for My Dad**

It's not that he doesn't know his way  
around the kitchen – it's that he doesn't have  
a kitchen, or a house, or much of anything  
anymore. He spends his days on the sharp  
edges of rock bottom, sleeping  
in the park and panhandling.

I haven't forgotten his relentless thirst –  
not forgiven either – but also  
not willing to assign anyone to hunger  
for chasing the miserable wisdom  
at the bottom of a tequila bottle.

What I'm trying to say is: for months,  
my mom allows her ex-husband to come over  
each morning. He tracks dirt into the kitchen  
of a house he has never lived in. I pack  
baked chicken and Rice-a-Roni  
in the Tupperware, and say  
*I hope you have a good day.*

## 114 Degrees

*Water is life.* - Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Elders

Five days ago, my city stopped  
delivering water to unhoused people  
stranded on heat islands.  
Policemen prevent lingering  
in the shade. It's now a crime  
to not have a home. The news reports  
insist that hydration is essential  
to prevent heatstroke.

Heatstroke means  
to be exhausted by the sun.  
75% of the body – which is water  
– is extracted through excessive  
sweat. Skin turns tomato red.  
The body temperature surges;  
the pulse does, too.

At this point,  
water is a necessary intervention.  
Douse the body, drown the skin,  
drench the throat, or else  
confusion sets in. When the fever  
exceeds 104 degrees, sweating  
stops. The body, wrung out like  
a sponge, can no longer cool itself.  
This is life or death.  
Dizzy & disoriented, hungry  
for air but with dry lungs.  
The nervous system takes  
damage; next, the brain.

Thirty minutes  
without water in this heat  
is all it takes to become  
another statistic.

## **Alternate Universe Where My Father Dies a Hero**

The headline reads "2 Sailors Killed  
In Persian Gulf." Next to it, a picture of my father,  
before his hair grew wild in every direction.  
Here, a dixie cup over his regulation cut.  
Behind his placid smile, the Stars and Stripes.

Details are sparse. A maintenance accident  
in the shipyard took two men. A young man  
knocks on my grandparent's door  
in Northglenn, Colorado,  
with devastating news. 8,000 miles from  
the accident site, but ground zero  
for the tragedy unfolding.

Both sailors arrive home in pine  
draped with Old Glory. Heroes,

but not important enough for Carter.  
An undersecretary greets the families  
with his deepest condolences.  
Hearses lead the way to Arlington.  
A flag with creases deep as a  
dress uniform, presented to my grandmother.  
She sobs in technicolor as she buries a son  
while a bugler wails in Taps.  
21 bullets hit no one, but still two bodies  
are lowered into the ground.

At the wake my aunt laments  
all the becomings buried with him.  
He'll never be a computer engineer,  
or a drunk, or sing another Sunday at church,  
or meet my mother.