

“Sickbed”

In a room overlooking the street, Cherin, a young woman transplanted by her mother from Sierra Leone and rooted anew in the salt-soaked clay of Los Angeles soil, wonders why her white girlfriends at UCLA had been tireless in their tight-lipped insistence that she was beautiful. As though in spite of, not because of. After their BA's they dispersed, floating away on parachutes of optimism and rosy health, diminishing on a skim of fortuitous winds. Their heartbeats must have been strong beneath the silver ear of a stethoscope. While here she stands in her Pomona apartment, slanting thin against a security-barred window fogged with expired breaths and smears of anxious fingerprints, her strength draining through the soles of her feet. Very few signs of life animate the neighborhood. Just one: Glancing back over its shoulder a black lab without its master trots down the block, almost running through the slow tremble of twilight. The dog

wears a yellow collar with wind-chiming ID tags, lolling tongue the length of flaccid pink displayed on shards of ice in a butcher's display window. A trailing leash jounces on the sidewalk to the accompaniment of pistoning paws. When the paws' nails scratch the concrete, the sound of a match gritting against a damp striker strip is whispered.

The story of the dog takes only a few seconds to unfold and then the story is over, leaving a sepia wisp of time that dissolves almost before it appears. It is a forever-embryonic story that delivers scant satisfaction because it is shackled by evanescence: dog — escape from master or liberated by master — dog's perilous journey into the unknown. Memory can step in to replay events, but memory left to its own devices is passive and can propel the scene no further than its own brief lifespan. Only the imagination can extend what has happened; in this sense it is more powerful than time or memory.

She can no longer stand and finds herself socketed into a sickbed that is a gaunt foot wedged into the black boot of the room's dark corner. Her cellphone on the tilted bedside crate grieves for calls or texts, all these weeks silent as a swirl of snow. With her jellied soap-bubble memory of the view outside the window, she will never know what happened to the master-less dog — whether the animal trots toward a new chapter of freedom at the end of block, or whether death, a rusted door appearing in the middle of the intersection, will creak open and with the lure of a fragrant bone suspended in midair, draw the dog in before it can leap over a quicksand of obstacles to the curb on the other side. No matter how

she flings her limbs or twists her torso, the bed is still a cauldron of sheets simmering around her arms and legs. *Mama, I wrote a song and sang it into your ear to whisper goodbye to you when you lay on your sickbed. I'm still sorry you had to work so many jobs. I miss you so much that I don't care about this virus.* A goodbye song returning to whisper again. But she can no longer imagine Mama's face.

In other bedrooms exiled in dusk, hushed in the shrouded neighborhood where ambulances never arrive, dry lips are twigs where heat and ash have settled, a scraped taste of dust builds a salivary tenement on the tongue. While the dog wavers, panting, sitting alone on the moldering rim of the barren intersection.