

A Tattoo for My Mother

Do not pluck your eyebrows—my mother’s warning:
they’d never grow back. At 17, she took the tweezers to her skin
until there was no hair left. She was determined
to remake them into the perfect shape. For decades she outlined
the just-right arc, until she decided she’d brave the needle
and get them tattooed—finally, erase her mistake.

I held her hand throughout, and checked for any mistakes.
There were none, thus no need to give warning
to her coworker who wanted the same, but was afraid of the needle.
You won’t feel a thing—just a little prick on the skin.
For weeks afterwards, she stood before the mirror outlining
with her finger the perfect shape made permanent. I was determined

to have my own mark of permanence. The needle didn’t deter me
either, from getting my own tattoo. She said it would be a mistake
but I was already using calculus to sketch outlines
of floral designs, phrases I loved. I looked up the warnings,
scrolled through tattoos gone wrong—and still wanted to mark my skin.
I found a place that did not check IDs, and sanitized their needles.

I wanted beauty, some proof that I didn’t need her—
my mother—to hold my hand. I was determined
to be my own person; control my body, my skin.
I told her I was old enough to make my own mistakes.
And yet, to this day she emails me articles—headlines a warning:
Woman attacked on her run along the Phoenix canal. My mother outlining

the endless ways I could die. Her voice in my head will outlive
her. Since I was young, she's prepared me not to need her;
showed me the binder I'd need in case she went without warning,
I was to call her lawyer. Everything had already been determined—
my mother, an accountant, sorting assets makes no mistakes.
She says: I'm leaving it all to you and your brother, my kin.

These days I don't see her very much—when I do, I notice her skin
wrinkled in new places—compounded worries, she could outline
the thoughts that have kept her up: worst fears, my mistakes
Though she's prepared me not to, she wants me to need her—
to be the one I call at 3am in crisis. She's determined
to quell those little disasters that come without warning.

She's always there, waiting to say it's okay. And, didn't I warn you?
My mistakes: that tattoo I got or other bad thing I did, undeterred,
outlining my own story—this paper, my skin. My needle—this pen.

Feeding

How my mother used to eat an apple when I was young—fujis, her favorite, large and crisp—biting and turning so it would stay even all around as she consumed its skin and flesh down to the just right size for me—my child mouth which would then bite and turn it in the same way she did since back then I followed the way my mother did anything, and my tiny teeth marks would fall within, cross-over, diverge from hers on the darkening cream flesh around and around until I reached the core, where you could not distinguish where she had bitten and where I—the ridges of our teeth making a new, original pattern—reflecting, tracing back to a single beginning, a single end—her and I, again—always.

Leng Neoi Picks a Bouquet for Leng Jei at the Soccer Game

Side-lined, leng neoi invents a new game: plucking dandelions and blades of grass. A bouquet for leng jei, on the other side of the line—the center, the star player. Two games, same lesson. In second grade, leng neoi already knows desire, leng jei already knows praise. Leng neoi wraps a hairband around the stems and holds them tight. Leng jei runs the length of the field, passes the ball to no one, scores again. Leng neoi keeps count, counts the pillbugs gathering at her knees too. When the final whistle sounds, leng jei high fives everyone along his way to where leng neoi is standing—arms stretched out in offering. Leng jei takes it, says nothing, and walks away—crushing a pillbug with each step. Leng neoi is already making a new bouquet.

what the robin saw:

stubs of blades and stems—

writing on the field