

Adult Essay Third Place

Memories Untold

By Tina Xia, Bethesda

Grandpa keeps a growing army of plants by our windowsill. It looks like Home Depot had a *Buy One Get a Thousand Free* sale, and my family went ballistic. They're nothing too special: The flowers are red and textured, the leaves waxy and opaque. From far away, they're just clearance flowers getting some air. Basking in sunlight, transient and beautiful.

My grandpa and I used to gather walnuts together in Mississippi. It was early 2004 and we didn't have much. Instead of watching Nickelodeon shows, I grew up listening to his steady gait, steps soft and measured over the park ground. Dinner in my hands, I digested stories about the Red Army, night fires, bartering for rice. I ate up everything. At night we'd walk home, streetlights winking just for us.

"Winters in Jiangsu were awful," he'd say with a smile. "Eating these walnuts is a luxury."

Since returning home from college in March, I haven't spoken to him much. But I notice his walk is even slower now, his jacket often buttoned wrong. When he brushes his teeth, toothpaste dribbles down the side, reaching all gum and no teeth. The words he say to me carry weight, heavy like walnut drupes. The space is punctuated with deeper sighs. I learn that time is liquid, like the water I pour into his flowerpots: It never wavers, continues on.

A few days after my trip to Sam's Club, Grandpa started vomiting. It started off as a minor burp but by noon it evolved to an inability to smell. As my mom ushered me out of the living room unceremoniously, all I could see were his plants sitting on the windowsill, blissfully oblivious. *Can't you see what's happening?* I wanted to scream. *He gives you everything and you just sit there, unaware.* I must've googled COVID-19 symptoms for hours, stomach churning with each new website tab. At dinner, scraping my bowl felt like pushing a plow through my heart, silver spoons shoveling too much salt. I ate a few bites of rice and left.

Memory is an interesting concept. Selfishly or not, most of our memories revolve around ourselves. We drag out momentous occasions on framed prints and splashy celebrations, and gradually smaller moments exit unannounced. But I now believe that the memories worth most are as simple as tree nut dinners and windowsill plants. They comprise who I am, hold me fast. In a world ensconced by 6-foot-apart signs, I make a conscious effort to observe—and remember—the brief moments that make our lives beautiful.

Next semester, I will return to Duke's campus. Grandpa's hands won't be there to guide me; streetlights will continue winking at night. Floored with memories, I will think of Mississippi, circa 2004. Leaves, walnuts, toothpaste. Stories, rich and alive, in my ears. I imagine myself looking up and seeing the same branches, his arms strong as nature. Pushing, guiding me up, basking in sunlight.