SHORT STORY NIGHT

GIRL OF FEW SEASONS

RACHEL KONDO

Short Story Night is back! Read this story and join library staff for a discussion and author interview at Lion's Tail Brewery Co. on Monday, July 12th at 7:00pm. Be sure to arrive early to find a seat.

Girl of Few Seasons

RACHEL KONDO

The night before he left for basic training, Ebo had one last pigeon to kill—a cream barred homer from the old line of Stichelbaut. The bird was from a long strain of impressive racers, a gift from his mother when he was nine years old. Ebo had put off killing this bird, his favorite, by killing all the others first: one, sometimes two, a day. It had to be done. The birds would not stay away from their coop and his leaving home meant there would be no one to care for them. Not his mother, not Daddy, who wasn't his father, and especially not his younger sister Momoyo, who was a ward of the State. Momo would have if she could.

Ebo lay awake on his futon with his ankles crossed and one arm crooked behind his head, so still he could see the moonlight shifting about him. Even the water stain on the ceiling felt like something new to see, as if the old blight was now a bloom. In a matter of hours, Ebo would be a soldier, though he hadn't much considered it. He was thinking of Momo, her absence his constant companion.

As children, on a night like this, they'd creep through the house and out the door. The Buddhist temple wasn't far, just down the street. There, a half circle of taiko drummers practiced their beats. They were bare-chested men with strips of braided cloth tied around their heads. They struck the drum skins with such force sweat leaped from their bodies in an upward rain. Momo's delight always found expression. She would throw her arms wide and bend her knees, the rhythm moving through her like a small-lipped wave. Her eyes would close, her mouth round to a little plum seed. Her face would cant to the moon as if its meager light was warm like the sun—something Ebo could see, but not feel himself.

Now, what he could feel, he could not see—these memories of his sister, each a smooth river stone set to his naked chest. Ebo shifted on his futon and tried to bring his hand to the heaviness, but the arm behind his head was numb. He waited for life to return to it as the darkness began to lift. It was no longer late, but early.

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For some, the Vietnam War was about moral duty. For others, it was a son grown too fast and gone. But for Ebo, the war was not about anything, not even killing or dying. He thought Vietnam might be like Maui, a place too quiet for fear. He thought the war might be a nameless river flowing strong after a heavy rain. If he let it, the war would take him away from Happy Valley to places he'd never been.

The United States Army had deemed him Private E-1, a ranking so low it didn't even warrant insignia. Those people who knew Ebo thought his graduating from high school a minor miracle; that he'd languished for ten months without a job was no surprise. When word of his enlistment got around, they figured the Army would give him a haircut, a uniform, something decent to do.

But Ebo had his plans. He understood enlisting meant a free trip to the induction center at Fort DeRussy on O'ahu, an island over. From there, he would travel to basic training on the mainland to a place he'd never even seen on a map. But that didn't matter. It was enough to first be sent to O'ahu, to where he could see Momo at the Waimano Home for the Feeble Minded. He'd waited nine years to visit; there hadn't been money for it sooner. What happened to Ebo afterward in Vietnam, he did not have the time to consider. Momo would be fourteen by now.

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The newly hatched squabs were the easiest to practice on. Ebo had taken a hammer to the yellow fuzz on their heads. The first squab, he'd struck too hard; the second, not hard enough. With a few other birds, Ebo had tried a sharp knife, but couldn't get the pressure right, nearly cut them in two. In the end, with the older birds that had been with him some time, Ebo took each one tenderly in his hands, lifted them high above his head, and drove their skulls to pieces against the cement.

This was the way Ebo would kill his last bird too. Better to do it now in the dull gray light of early morning than the less forgiving blare of later. He moved soundlessly through the bedroom and into the darkened hallway. He sidled past his mother's room, timing each footstep with the click of the Westinghouse fan. In the living room, he saw Daddy sleeping on the couch with an arm draped over his head and one leg bent to the carpeted floor. Though he didn't need to—Daddy was hard of hearing—Ebo eased the screen door against its latch.

The low-slung moon was a chalky thumbprint in the sky. Ebo crossed his arms against the cool and turned by degrees to all that its sheer light touched around him. Happy Valley, he knew, was nothing more than the skin between the knuckled ridges of the West Maui Mountains. Only a smattering of houses crawled up its slopes, none of them much

to look at. His feet found those few patches of grass to step on as he moved through the backyard. He dipped his head beneath the boughs of plumeria, heavy with flower, and knew where crab spiders predictably spun their webs. He could guess the size and heft of the gecko that clicked its tongue into the darkness. *Big buggah*, he thought.

The coop was a mishmash of materials, built piecemeal with tin and scrap metal, spare plywood and chicken wire. It sat at the back of the yard on cinder blocks two feet off the ground with mounds of pigeon kaka beneath it. The landing jutted out from the roof to make the coop appear as if it leaned. The door itself was just two pieces of discarded mesh screen that Ebo had sewn together by hand.

Next to the coop was a shallow sandbox that had been Momo's playpen. Now, it was where fifteen dead pigeons were buried. To ward off critters and stench, Ebo had placed a plank of plywood over its opening with a hollow tile brick on top for good measure. There was just the business of the final bird and then it would be a grave.

He sat on his heels and plugged his fingers through the chicken wire of the coop, looking for that bird now. In earlier years, it had roosted on a high post with its head tucked into its plumped body, its eyes slivered in half sleep. But recently, with age, the bird had lost the battle for a perch and lived with the weakest as puffed dots about the wire floor. And there the bird was now, still responding to pecking order, though the others were long dead.

Ebo unlatched the eyehook and dipped through the door, startling the bird into winging itself backwards, making little wafts of wind. Ebo called to it softly—*pssssh, pssssh, pssssh*—before swiping at it with trained hands, as was routine. He held the bird to his midsection, felt its heart like a tiny machine. He fanned the bird's wings, one after the other, to check its feathers for lice. He then held the bird up to one side and peered into its ball bearing eye flitting in its stitch of a socket, remembering only then that his purpose was to extinguish its tiny light.

Exiting the coop, the screen door slapped against its frame as if to call Ebo awake to the yard, already flushed with sunshine. His dawdling had cost him the gray curtain of early morning that, now lifted, revealed a world vivid with color. The killing of his bird would need to be done in clear view, without ceremony or sentiment.

Ebo stationed himself at the slab of concrete between the house and carport, widening his stance to be sure of his footing. He knew from practice to not hold back, to put his whole body into the effort. Allowing himself any fear or pity would result in pain for the bird, a dragging out of its death. The bird was just a steady heartbeat in his hands, bred for calmness, known for being trusting. With both hands, Ebo raised it high above him. He tightened his grip, working his fingers into the bird's soft give, and still, it did not struggle. He then raised himself to his toes and hesitated by telling himself not to hesitate. He reached higher, the highest he could go, and one by one, loosened his fingers as if to release the bird to the immense sky it belonged to, the sky it now climbed.

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Long before any birds, it was just Ebo and his mother on their own. People had clucked their tongues in disapproval, but Ebo never minded. He had no father, but he had everything in a mother. Her hips were fuller then, more inviting, and little Ebo, wanting to be close, always had a fistful of her dress. He had seen how others watched her mouth as she spoke, her lipstick perfectly applied. He had seen this in the man his mother brought home when he was five, the man who flicked a Primo beer bottle cap at him and he happened to catch it. The man had winked, smiling so big his cheeks rounded into two mountain apples. By the time Ebo learned to call this man Daddy, there was another child, a girl they called Momo, and buckets full of bottle caps.

All these years, they lived quietly across the street from Tasty Crust, the diner Ebo had been frequenting since small-kid time. This morning, he would go for his usual breakfast. But unlike

most mornings, he would need to say goodbye. He breathed in the cool morning air with the heat just beneath it. Seeing no cars, he still skipped to a jog when crossing Mill Street, his rubber slippers slap-slapping like fat rain against the pavement. When he got to the other side, he turned to look at his house against the West Maui Mountains, the mountains against the blue gray morning. It was unremarkable, his house. Walls of thin plywood held up a corrugated tin roof that had rust in the dips of its divots. The carport sheltered a dead Ford on cinder blocks. Clothes hung on a sagging line and brushed against the Ford's dusty hood so that the hems of Daddy's work shirts were never entirely clean. This is what Ebo would leave behind and what he would take with him like a picture in his pocket.

He walked into the sticky warmth of Tasty Crust where the old-timers were at their usual stools, living out the best part of their day, the part that was spent in the company of others. They'd each brought their copy of *The Maui News,* though they'd read it through at home. This morning, they wore Aloha shirts and their veteran caps and pins. They'd done this, marked their calendars even, for Ebo, who had enlisted as they did for their wars.

"Howzit, young man!" said Flora, the waitress who spoke for everyone.

Ebo smiled, sat on a stool at the counter. Flora set down a mug of coffee, pivoted her body like a sprinkler as she wiped the counter. Her hair, a manapua bun sitting plump on the curve of her head, had never been let down, the coif of her fringe sprayed stiff for years. She had never been anything else, which was a comfort.

"Big day today," she said, as much to the counter as to Ebo. "We is proud of you, young man, I can tell you dat. You go get'm and say you is born and raised Happy Valley. We make'm *good* in Happy Valley."

An old-timer slapped a hand to a thigh. "I remembah when you was one small buggah, legs danglin from duh chair," he said. "*Hooooo-eeee!* You was one *cute* buggah. But some rascal, you!"

Small laughter then; the others remembered young Ebo too. To this, Ebo dipped his head low, nodding, shielding himself from the gleam of attention.

"Time fo kau kau!" said Flora, setting before Ebo a plate of hot cakes with an ice cream scoop's worth of butter on top. It had been some time since Ebo's mother had been there to stab at the butter with her fork and paint circles on his stack, then her own. Back then, she'd drizzle syrup too, when Ebo would say, at whatever age, "Ma, I get'm." After Momo came along, his mother didn't have time for Tasty Crust, for their early-morning breakfasts. After Momo, she stopped being just his.

But Ebo understood. Even as a baby, Momo had been generous, smiling wide when spoken to, as if she had been born to give. Neighbors would wiggle a finger at her and she'd take it holding their gaze. *So smaht*, they'd say, noting her dark irises, how they shone especially large and nearly covered the whites of her eyes. Her fine blue-black hair swirled into a single giri giri atop her head, a sign she would never be cause for trouble. But mostly she was a mirror for their mother, who looked at her baby girl to see her joy.

No one noticed young Ebo alone. By the time he was nine and Momo nearly five, he preferred the mountains of 'Iao Valley to the tedium of school, passing his days by the river skipping rocks, catching guppies, doing nothing. He quickly learned the word *truancy*. His mother's rice paddle had no effect and Daddy had said, *not my kid*. When Ebo was held back a year, people just shook their heads thinking him a good-for-nothing kolohe. But he'd proved himself good for enlisting—something to do, a way to be gone.

After clearing his plate, Ebo dipped his hand into his shorts pocket to pay. Flora, ever watchful, said, "Dis one on me, soljah boy." Her inflections and movements were a conductor's wand to a stand, orchestrating the old-timers so they knew to rise with Ebo and to salute him. To this, Ebo extended his hand to each of them as the other diners

watched in silence. The cooks turned down the radio in the kitchen and peered through their cutout window fringed with open tickets. All the while, Flora kept to her work, wiping the counter where Ebo had just been.

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Happy Valley by then was pulsing with moderate activity. The morning sun had risen to a low perch in a cloudless sky, emanating its white light as a softness on Ebo's skin. He stood at the edge of Mill Street again, scanning the blue brightness for his bird beneath the visor of his hands.

A Buick sounded its horn in two successive beeps, sending Ebo back a step. As the Buick coasted by, the driver threw Ebo a left-handed shaka out the window. "A hui hou!" said the driver, to say *until we meet again*. Ebo's head tilted back with a smile to acknowledge the driver, a smile that was gone by the time he crossed the street. Soon Ebo would not be so known, something he had wanted for years.

Back at the house, his mother stood at the stove working a pan. Egg shells were halved, two Vienna Sausage cans curled open, everything crackling to oil and heat. Daddy was still on the couch with a pillow pressed to his face. Ebo stood there watching the house as it would be without him in it.

One hand to hip, his mother was in her usual meal-making stance: her weight shifted left and her right foot touching down to the linoleum by just a toe. Her National Dollar dress hung on her too-thin frame like drapery, as if there might not be anything behind it. To Ebo, she was the size of a child, but she was not new like a child. Her hair had lost its luster and could no longer hold color, had given in to a blank and lifeless gray. Her gaze avoided most living things and was too often fixed to the floor. She was a woman afraid of loss so that she was first afraid of life.

Even when they were a family of four, and then three, there were only ever two chairs. Plunking down to one now,

his mother's movements quickened. Not a minute passed before she turned to Ebo with a plate of food in hand and set it before him at the two-person table.

"You hungry?" she asked.

"Nah," said Ebo, "I pau eat."

"No, you–eat."

She darted back and forth, bringing him a pair of chopsticks, a glass of milk, as though he was just a boy and not a young man of nineteen, all lean muscle and strength. But because he was her son, he was a boy still. And because he was leaving home that day, she stopped fussing about the kitchen and sat down opposite him. The only other time he could remember his mother sitting like this was the day she made that call about his first pigeon.

That afternoon, she'd sat Ebo down and told him to sit still, which made him squirm. He had wanted to go play, but she shushed him, said to listen. She picked up the receiver of the rotary phone, as gleaming black as her hair was then. The dial turned and stuttered, turned and stuttered, and by the time she spoke, two warm hands had suctioned to Ebo's eyes. He loosed himself free to face Momo, whose smile was shy one tooth. He flicked her forehead and called her *puka mout* to make fun, but she only smiled wider, which made them both laugh. Snapping her fingers to quiet them, their mother spoke a final few words into the phone. "Yes. Can." She hung up smiling, something she didn't hide then. She said, "What you tink, Ebo, you like birds?" Ebo had never been asked what he thought and looked to Momo for how he should feel. Momo beamed as if giving to Ebo was giving to her. She flitted across the kitchen floor on her toes and flapped her arms like wings. Over and over she said, "Happy Ebo! Happy Ebo!" and he knew then he'd been given a gift.

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Ebo washed the dishes for his mother, the only thing he could think to do for her. At the sink, he watched his coop through the screen window, waiting for his bird, always the last to finish circling. When it finally descended, Ebo turned off the water to see it skitter back and forth along the length of the landing. He knew the bird needed food—it was long past the hour when it was usually fed. But Ebo knew he shouldn't feed what he would soon kill, something he'd allowed himself to be distracted from doing.

He reasoned with himself. Better to give the bird a little more time in the sun while he packed, was his thinking. He calculated the hours he had left before his ride to the airport arrived and went about gathering his few toiletries in the bathroom. There really wasn't much he needed where he was going, all of it amounting to the knapsack he'd had since grade school, the one with the busted zipper. He went to retrieve it from his bedroom closet and found it laid out on his futon instead. Even more startling was a shirt folded neatly and, next to it, a pair of shoes. Ebo kneeled down to these things, astonished they were there and that they were his. He pressed a finger to one milky white button in a long line of them. He lifted a shoe to his nose to breathe in the leather, put the tip of his tongue to the heel. He'd never had anything new before, let alone anything with buttons or laces. How his mother had fixed the zipper on his knapsack, he didn't know. How she'd found the money for these things was even more of a mystery. All he knew was that this was his mother's way: to give all she could, and when there was nothing left, to give her very will.

Once she had secured Ebo's first pigeon with the breeder, the bird soon posed another problem for his mother—it needed a loft. For two weeks, she had pressed Daddy to build one, but he'd only shaken his head at the expense, though it was the effort he wouldn't give. When she made up her mind to build one herself, she made her way on foot to the junkyard, with Ebo and Momo trailing. There she se-

lected wood panels either discarded as excess or abandoned as trash. Ebo found a large piece of chicken wire curled around a tire, which he had worked hard to unfurl. All the while, Momo picked through the dirt for nails, examining each one closely, speaking aloud what she discovered. "You good for Ebo," or, "You no good. Not for my Ebo." The usable few she clenched in one hand, as if Ebo's happiness was something she could hold and keep safe.

That his mother and sister did this on his behalf was almost enough for Ebo. All of the fuss was just for him—he didn't need more. The small makeshift coop they built, however shoddy, was entirely his. With the little coop, he started to believe. He believed in the promise of this pigeon and he believed Daddy might be pleased, maybe even impressed, with their handiwork.

When Daddy's ride dropped him home from work that evening, Ebo and Momo hurried to the jalousie window in the bathroom to watch him discover what they'd built. He nearly missed it, but then he didn't. Setting down his lunch pail and water jug, he crouched low to examine the structure. When he began to circle it, sizing it up, Momo pressed her head to Ebo's shoulder. Ebo felt her flinch when Daddy kicked the heel of his foot into the coop so that the sorry thing folded into itself and fell. Daddy used both his feet to further trample what they'd built, until there was no trace of their efforts in the tangle that remained.

Chest heaving, Daddy snapped open a folded lawn chair and set it down facing the pile of wood and wire. Ebo stared hard at Daddy sitting there, one knee bouncing wildly. By that evening hour, with everything on its way to darkness, Daddy appeared a darker shadow. But then movement caught Ebo's eye. Momo was no longer next to him—she was in the carport. She walked toward Daddy so slowly her dress barely moved at her knees. Her hands were cupped protectively in front of her, as if in prayer. When she stood before Daddy, she splayed open her hands from prayer to

sacrifice. Daddy glanced at her offering, which Ebo knew was a Lucky Strike. Daddy looked at his child, who was every inch his, and scooped her onto his lap. They stayed that way awhile, long enough for Ebo's mother to flick on the overhead light and see what had happened, long enough for Momo to begin picking through the dirt again for nails and for Daddy to help.

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Now, whenever Ebo looked for Daddy, Ebo knew to look there, in the carport, where Daddy smoked on the bench seat of the dead Ford. Daddy had had the bench seat removed from the car years ago, after Momo was sent away, after he'd injured his back at work and could no longer sit down to a lawn chair.

Ebo elbowed the screen door open to its usual high-pitched wheeze. At the bottom of the steps, he plugged his feet into rubber slippers and shuffled over to Daddy, who was exactly where Ebo knew he'd be. With his new pair of shoes waiting for him, Ebo now needed socks, something only Daddy owned. Ebo sat down on the bench seat next to Daddy, but Daddy stood, though there was room enough for two. Daddy relaxed against the frame of the Ford and lit another Lucky Strike. Speaking through pinched lips, he said, "You ready to go?"

Digging a knuckle into his eye, Ebo said, "I bettah be."

Daddy pulled on his cigarette and nodded. Two steady streams of smoke issued from his nostrils. He used to work for Maui County in road maintenance, but it had been some time since he'd paved a pothole or disposed of a dead mongoose. It had been even longer since Daddy served with the 442nd in the Second World War, making Daddy the closest person to Ebo who had not only left the island, but returned. In the silence, the two men were careful to avoid each other's eye, an intimacy they did not know how to share. Any other day and

one of them would've walked away by now. But the moment for that had passed and Ebo was still there, needing socks.

"Gotta ask you someting," said Ebo as he stood to ask Daddy squarely. Daddy pivoted back down onto the bench seat, set his elbows to his knees, and hung his head between his shoulders. Ebo, in turn, leaned against the Ford so that like two reluctant dance partners, they'd traded places.

"I know what you like ask," said Daddy. "Some kine advice. I know. Soljah to soljah. But only get one ting fo say..." Daddy looked up and settled his gaze seriously into the middle distance. Ebo hadn't anticipated this. He gently pushed off from the Ford, stood tall and waited.

"Duh ting you gotta do," said Daddy, "is...no die."

A brief moment passed with Ebo thinking Daddy sincere. It stretched long enough for Ebo to open his dry mouth and try to match the sentiment. But Daddy threw up his arms in amazement of his own humor, amazed Ebo hadn't yet agreed. "You see? Das it! Jus *no die*. Easy." Daddy spun out laughing so hard he began to cough until he choked. Ebo could only look out at the pavement of the driveway, staring into the sunlight until his eyes began to water. Once recovered, Daddy flicked the butt of his cigarette and it rolled, still burning, into Ebo's line of sight. "Ay," muttered Daddy, groaning as he stood, as if standing would be the hardest task of his day. Before disappearing into the house, Daddy called out to Ebo, "Eh, maybe go Paukukalo. One last time. Jus fo Daddy, eh?"

Ebo slunk into the sun and faithfully toed the butt dead. He pinched its mess between two fingers and dropped it into a gallon bucket filled with sand, figuring the bucket had another week or so to go. Since he was a boy, it had been his job to empty the ashy filth into Tasty Crust's dumpster when no one was looking and to go to Paukukalo Beach for a clean bucket of sand.

Mindlessly, Ebo tapped his toe against the heft of the bucket, as if he couldn't muster the will to kick. But the will existed and manifested itself in sudden movement. Ebo tore

down the driveway and hung a right onto Mill Street, jogging a ways until turning to face oncoming cars in a backwards shuffle. Everything siphoned to the power of his hitchhiker's thumb, now asking for someone, anyone, to stop. He didn't have the time to walk the two miles, but he had his thumb and his suddenly supreme need to go to Paukukalo—not for sand or for Daddy, but for his own sake.

A truck slowed mercifully and Ebo swung himself into its bed, rode the distance as if it was something to endure and not a necessary means to his end. The truck puttered along the back roads down toward the ocean, which, from Ebo's position, could not be seen until he was there. Then, the ocean was everywhere, something he couldn't *not* see if he tried. Two pats against the truck's side and the truck rolled to a stop. Ebo alighted, gave another grateful tap to the truck as it drove away, and waited. He waited until he needed breath, so that when he breathed, he did so as deeply as he could.

Without anyone there, the beach before him was a lonely stretch of beige with an unfurling wave for company. In a trancelike state, Ebo trudged through the sand toward the water. In a tremor of heightened awareness, he understood this place as it might've been uninhabited, before the insistent road lined its coast, before anything so much as a human foot dimpled its surface. Like the sea-salted wind in his hair, the dimensions of time could be felt, tasted, moved through. Whatever it was that every person through all of history might've felt as they looked upon what he was seeing now, all of this Ebo experienced as a tiny pinprick in his chest.

He sat down cross-legged. The grainy warmth beneath his legs brought him back into his own skin, his own memory. As they had for so many years, his hands routinely combed the sand for opihi shells, which Momo had loved for the purple swirl of their underside. He would do this while Momo chased waves as they pulled away, the same waves that would, in turn, push back toward her and send her squealing. She was happiest here, Ebo knew. Though she would never learn

to swim, the sun and water and sand were enough to animate her, like music does dancing. Remembering her now, an opihi shell appeared in Ebo's fingers like a tiny sand-swept miracle. He brushed off its back and belly, blew on it for good measure. He studied its purple swirl and the thought came to him that it wasn't just its color Momo had loved, but the fact that he, Ebo, had searched for her, would not stop searching for her, until he found one.

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Momo wasn't dead, which might've been easier. She was nine years gone. She had been taken from life as Ebo knew it, meaning life as Ebo lived it was arranged around what had been and what should have been—two points on an axis that would never curve toward what actually was. Staring into this regret was for Ebo the same thing as having his eyes open at all.

In the end, it had taken Daddy three full weekends to build Ebo his loft. By that time, Ebo's mother had decided on a second pigeon, a common blue bar, which she didn't say, but Ebo knew, was for Momo. What Ebo didn't say was that he resented this.

The first week they had their birds, the birds did not readily know their new home and flew back to their previous coop. Through their mother, the breeder had instructed Ebo and Momo to gather twigs and leaves and place their findings in the corner of the loft. A morning or two later, a nest was built. Three days more and Momo's blue bar sat in her nest, pressing herself into her first egg. Another speckled egg followed. It took a few more weeks for the squabs to hatch themselves through perfect circles carved at the tops of the eggs, another few for their yellow fuzz to be replaced by feathers.

With their squabs in the loft, Ebo became convinced the birds would no longer stray. He decided to test his bird, the cream barred homer, by taking it into Iao Valley, a mile or so

up the mountain. He'd wanted to do this alone, but Momo had followed. Even though she'd had a sinus infection that week, she would not be left behind.

The basin was dark, dank, teeming with life both seen and unseen. Banyan trees laced their fingers overhead and the fragrance of white ginger was silk on their skin. Ebo carried his wicker basket in hand as his bird stamped its feet for balance. He walked at a steady pace knowing he couldn't exactly lose Momo, but he'd wanted her to struggle in some way. And she did—she struggled to keep up when everything in her wanted to take her time. When too much distance stretched between them, Ebo turned angrily to Momo, only to see her head back, mouth open, as if the immense lushness of sight and sound might tip her over. In seeing this, Ebo saw what was beautiful. But because he had wanted it all to be his to see, and not Momo to see it through, he became mean.

"You! Some stupid, you! Hurry up!" he snapped.

Between two peaks was a riverbed of boulders rounded smooth by icy water that flowed from the mountains. Ebo's mother's mother had washed clothes there, singing her songs from home. It was where families picnicked, babies were baptized, kids passed their summers atop the rocks—every good and perfect thing.

The boulder on the other side of the river was large and flat, like a platter tipped to a lean. Because it was the only space exposed to the widest spread of open sky, it was where Ebo determined he would release his bird. But the way to it was through a thick part of the river, heavy with deep waters gone stagnant from stillness. Cresting the glassy surface was a line of rocks, like beading on a necklace laid out. Having told Momo to watch from the edge, Ebo toed his way across, alternating hands with his basket. But she followed him, put her feet wherever his had been.

On the other side, she couldn't keep still for her excitement and it angered Ebo further. He lifted the lid to his basket but when the bird didn't move, he kicked a toe into the wicker. The

bird still did not move, as if it didn't know to look up, so Ebo pulled it from the basket and tossed it upward like a handful of confetti. The bird teetered and lifted, teetered and lifted higher. It made its way up and out of sight, all of it over without ever having been what Ebo imagined the afternoon would be.

For a boy of nine, his disappointment registered as injustice—what Ebo should have had, he'd been denied. And on that day, it was Momo who had denied him his freedom to be something other than what he felt he was: second in everything. Because of this, Ebo quickly maneuvered his way back over the rocks and disappeared behind a tree. He'd wanted Momo to feel abandoned and scared, just for a little while. She called after him, confused. Even when she cried, Ebo stayed hidden.

The sun, it seemed, would set on his bitterness. It was darkest first in nature. As the daylight dimmed, Ebo saw his hand become a featureless shadow and knew his game was over. But he revealed himself just as Momo was halfway across the river. When he called to her, she looked for him and slipped. He heard her go under and bob right up, pulling for air. By the time he'd crawled over the rocks to her, water had already aspirated through her nose, flowed past her already swollen sinuses, and settled its bacterial filth wherever it could.

They were late and Momo was soaking wet, a double offense. Ebo tried to hurry her along. But Momo's bare feet pinched with pain and she moved slowly, made heavy by her wet clothing. Gone was her wonder of the place.

By the time they neared home, it was dark. Their mother scoured the street with frantic eyes. When she finally saw them, she started running. Ebo put his arms up, but his mother peeled them down to slap him upside the head.

"What's duh mattah wit you? You make me sick!"

Momo was ushered straight into the bathroom. Ebo flung himself down to the kitchen table where Daddy was sitting. Daddy said, "Look at me, boy." Ebo slowly raised his eyes to Daddy, who chose this one moment to look Ebo unflinch-

ingly in the eye. Ebo hung his head low until the tears came and he could take no more shaming. He scurried from the kitchen to his bedroom, pausing at the bathroom door to see his mother pouring hot water over Momo's bowed head. It would be his last opportunity to see Momo as he knew her, but her hair obscured her face.

Without dinner and with the trouble he was in, it was difficult for Ebo to sleep. At some distance, he heard the taiko drumming pulsating like a gigantic heart fearful of stopping. In his mind, the drummers were slick with sweat, moving in synchronicity like streamers of light. He could see their spectral dance, arms flailing faster, harder, just short of breaking. In his dream state, Ebo believed he was the drum and the wooden sticks that pelted his body painful, but necessary.

By morning, he woke up spent. He turned over on the futon to see Momo with her back to him, as she often was. But this morning she was arched in an unnatural way, as if she, too, was in pain. Ebo poked a finger into her, then again. When she didn't respond, he pulled on her shoulder and lost his grip on her too-hot and slippery skin. He tugged harder, with two hands. When her body finally tipped toward him, it came heavily and without grace. He saw then what he would never unsee. Momo's face had rearranged itself in the night. Her eyes fluttered with fever to a new spiritual rhythm and where there had been so much life, there was only white.

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To excise the beach and his memories, Ebo ran all the way home, as if what he felt he could sweat out of his system. In the backyard, he peeled off his T-shirt and stood beneath the hose for longer than he needed to. The initial thrust of warm hose water soon ran cool over his face. His bird was now on the brick steps of the coop, waiting beneath the shade of the awning. Without the sound of feed clanking against the metal troughs, the bird hadn't been called through the one-way trap door that funneled into the loft.

Ebo knew he couldn't kill it, had somehow always known. He turned off the hose and shook the water out of his hair. Determined to put a brick at the opening of the fly pen to keep the bird out, he would teach it the cruel lesson of having no home. Then it would be like the strays nobody wanted, or even liked. Just a rat with wings.

He shooed the bird into the plumeria trees and went about loosening the brick. The brick had been there for years and was embedded in grooves of hard earth, so it took some effort. When at last it came free, Ebo stood with it in hand only to find his mother behind him, peering into the coop at an unnecessary distance. He set the brick down, unsure of what she wanted.

"Show me yo bird," she said.

Ebo thought that maybe she wanted to kill the bird herself, which made him hesitate protectively. She'd probably wanted it dead all these years. But his mother rarely asked anything of Ebo and he dutifully went about trying to locate it anyway.

His mother hadn't so much as glanced at the coop after Momo's illness, with some part of her needing to blame the bird to keep from blaming Ebo. He understood her reasoning. If the business of pigeons had never happened, that day wouldn't have happened. There wouldn't have been the river, the bacteria, the fever, all of which reduced their atmosphere to the thin air of the aftermath. There wouldn't have been the attempts to explain, to name, to apply medical sense to what had happened.

Momo had had a cold, yes? *Yes.* The virus had weakened her immune system and allowed a secondary infection to take hold. *OK.* The circuitry of her brain could not withstand a fever that high. *OK. OK.* Words like *bacterial meningitis* were spoken. Words like *hyperpyrexia* and *apneic attack.* And when those words didn't register, there were apologies for the one thing that everyone understood: that Momo was not dead, but gone.

Ebo only knew that a stranger had come home to him from the hospital. Like an oversize infant, she went between

a playpen in the living room and that sandbox Daddy had built for her in the yard. Ebo would sit with her, listening to her new language come out as guttural moans that would stretch and deepen into a sort of song. When she was given a blue and yellow helmet to wear for when she seized, her face was pinched beyond what little recognition Ebo had been holding to.

In time, doctors spoke of Waimano Home. Though it was located on another island, a world away, they insisted Momo would receive attention specific to her condition. They said Momo wouldn't know the difference between her home and Waimano, that she would in fact be happier. But the day she was taken away was the day Momo's song grew to its utmost, growing louder as the distance between her and her mother stretched wider. That distance now spanned two islands, with miles of ocean and nine years of time in between. It was a distance Ebo would travel in just under an hour.

He launched another rock at his bird in the plumeria tree. He didn't mean to hit it directly, but to scare it back to the loft. Like the first rock, this one hit the bird's branch and fell to the brittle leaves below, two thuds that sent the bird higher. With his mother waiting, Ebo grabbed a handful of smaller rocks with which to cover more area, but she called him back to the side of the loft, to where she stood next to the can of feed.

"Show me how," she said, knowing the feed was the way to the bird. Ebo ran a hand through his hair, frustrated that his mother had witnessed him not thinking straight. He hurried in and out of the coop with those things that fed and watered the birds—a foot-long metal trough and a milk carton gutted at the center. By using his thumb at the spout, Ebo showed his mother how to hose everything off.

"Gotta be clean," he said and she nodded. At the feed can, he removed the lid and filled the scoop with the right amount. "Gotta keep birds little bit hungry. Dat way dey come back." She nodded again.

Though the entry was plenty high for her to walk through, Ebo saw his mother dip her head into the loft after him. She

made circles with her eyes, pulled in all there was to see. "Long time," she said. "Look good." Ebo guided the scoop along the trough's opening so that the feed fell against the metal in a clatter. It wasn't long before they heard the clank of the fly pen drop back into place and the bird was pecking at the feed with its feathered tail raised behind it.

As they watched, Ebo felt the dusty air constrict, making the confines of the coop feel even smaller. He wasn't used to a second body being in there with him. He also wasn't used to having his mother close like this, in an enclosure, where they might say those things they couldn't say elsewhere. He knew if there was ever a time to tell his mother exactly what had happened that afternoon with Momo, specifically his part in abandoning her, that time was now.

"You know I goin see Momo," he said as a means of bringing up the subject. He'd told both his mother and Daddy that seeing Momo was possible. But he'd kept from them that seeing her was the very reason he'd enlisted. He knew it was an impulsive and outsized decision that warranted, even deserved, criticism. They would have said to get a job, wait for money, then go to her. But he'd tried for a job; ten months he tried. He couldn't wait anymore and yet he couldn't explain his impatience. Because how could they know what he hadn't confessed? How could they understand the guilt within him, located somewhere beneath the ribs like a dark hunger he fed with secrecy? This guilt that defied reason, that kept its own time, made its own sense—how could he tell his mother about it here, like this?

She stood staring down at the bird with her arms crossed at her midsection. Had she heard him? Ebo wondered. Perhaps she had something she wanted to say to Momo, or for him to give her? Ebo thought maybe this might be the thing to ask his mother, was about to ask when she spoke first.

"Dis bird. Still plenny strong. Good fo my baby girl. You take dis bird to Momo."

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When just a half hour remained, Ebo slipped into his new shirt as if he was putting on another skin. He buttoned the bottom button first, then undid it, thinking that way was wrong, the top button was right. He hadn't even needed to ask Daddy for socks, because his mother had either found two pairs for him or made Daddy give them over. He wore a pair now in his new shoes, which made his feet feel awkward with bulk. He wished he had pants to wear rather than shorts.

Ebo's mother appeared in the doorway. He thought she might be pleased with his new look, all of it owing to her sacrifice, but she was distracted, barely noticed. She muttered something Ebo couldn't hear. When he asked her to repeat it, she shook her head looking at the ground as if she'd dropped the words she had wanted to speak.

"Ma—jus talk. Say what you gonna say."

She looked up at him, emboldened: "You and me. We go O'oka."

"O'oka? Why O'oka? I gotta go airport."

"Jus come. Fas kine. Real fas."

It was the last thing Ebo expected, his mother suggesting they go to the grocery store down the street. Still in his new shirt and shoes, he trailed her from the house as reluctantly as he had when he was a boy. Grocery shopping bored Ebo both then and now, but especially then, when it was his job to keep Momo from touching everything on the shelves. Back then, Ebo would put his feet at the center of the tiles and avoid stepping on the lines, encouraging Momo to try and copy him—a little game. Now he had to focus on keeping up with his mother. In the midday heat, her cotton dress stuck to the skin of her back. She didn't break pace, nor did she speak. Ebo worried he'd ruin his new shirt with sweat and billowed it for breeze.

Once in the air conditioning of O'oka, he relaxed. But his mother was still intent on something. She took Ebo by the elbow, stood slightly behind and urged him forward. They moved up and down the aisles in this way. If he had still been a boy, she would've had him by the scruff of his neck.

Of course he knew this fierce focus in his mother. He glanced back at her as she scanned the faces of other patrons, moving on the moment they were not what she wanted. But what she was after was not in the store. When they moved past the entrance again, she happened to look out the door and finally see. Ebo felt a tug at his shirt and lowered his face to his mother's. He breathed in her sweet and sour as she outstretched her arm and pointed toward the parking lot.

"You see dat man?" she said. "Quick. You see him?" She did not look at Ebo, but he looked to her when she said, "Dat man, he yo real daddy."

Ebo stood perfectly still to take in everything that moved. What he had seen was an old man in an orange vest gathering shopping carts, wearily pushing them forward and out of view. The old man had been all there was, so Ebo waited for someone else to see. He waited as people continued to shuffle past, as a voice spoke over the intercom, as registers pinged open and groceries were rung up. Ebo waited until the sounds became for him a sort of silence.

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It wasn't until he'd arrived at the airport, checked in, and sat down in the terminal that Ebo looked into the brown paper bag his mother had given him. In it were mochi balls she'd made, as well as Spam musubi that was still warm to the touch. He turned one musubi over in his hand and saw how the rice was stained brown with shoyu, how the dark green nori wrapped around the sliver of Spam and held it in place. This food he had taken for granted he now studied like a keepsake.

Airport time felt different from the experience of time elsewhere, and Ebo, who had never flown before, worried he would somehow miss his flight. But no one around him seemed bothered the way he was, all these people whose travel purposes were so different from his. None of them noticed Ebo, who was going to war on their behalf. No one

noticed him until his bird began to stir in the silver carrier at his feet. The woman seated next to him located the source of the fluttering, leaned over to peer through the bars.

"What's dat stuffs...?" she asked, putting her fingers to her nose to ask after the clumping at the pigeon's beak.

"Called *cere*," said Ebo quietly. "Like nostrils." The woman nodded and looked away. Soon she was among the many who were standing in a hurried response to boarding call.

Everywhere Ebo looked, the words PAN AM could be seen scrawled across the body of the plane, printed on a little white bag in the seat back pocket, embroidered into the edge of the hats the stewardesses wore tilted to a lean on their heads. Though he tried to be casual about it, Ebo watched closely as a stewardess demonstrated safety procedures. He pulled the tail of the strap too tightly across his abdomen and gripped the armrests during takeoff. He was amazed at the feeling of suspension and closed his eyes to feel it fully. When he opened them again, the plane was airborne. Ebo looked through the window to witness his whole island come into view and simultaneously shrink in size.

The flight to Honolulu took thirty-two minutes, gate to gate. Just as Ebo was finishing the last of his passion guava juice they'd served, the plane started its descent. Deplaning gave Ebo a slight headache, how everyone crowded him, how all of a sudden there was only one way out. In no time, he had followed the flow of passengers to baggage claim and found himself presenting his case to a taxi driver. He needed to go to Waimano Home and he only had eight dollars—would this be enough? The taxi driver shook his head, but opened his door to Ebo just the same.

As they drove along the H-1 freeway in the frenetic pace of pau hana traffic, Ebo rolled down his window and put his face to the wind. He was unsure of how he'd manage a ride to Fort DeRussy by day's end, but figured he'd deal with things as they came. Before long, the taxi exited the freeway and the glut of cars simply fell away. They drove switchbacks up the

mountain along a narrow road skirted by tall pili grass and monkeypod trees. After a time, Ebo worried the driver had misunderstood him, but then he saw it off in the distance: a building, austere and feather-white. Closer still and Ebo could make out the steel bars along the top floor windows.

The taxi dropped him off at the front of the building, but Ebo walked away from it at first to see it against the mountain. Off in the distance was a pool drained of water, sloping from shallow to deep, where a number of stray cats had gathered. The kittens played amid dead leaves and trash while the older creatures sat there, watching Ebo. As he made his way back toward the entrance, he noticed the building's exterior paint was chipped and peeling so badly it made a pattern. State-owned and operated, the building suffered from decay—not from negligence, but from lack. Ebo stepped through the doors and into the powerful smell of Pine-Sol that came at him like a wall.

After signing into the nurses' station, a middle-aged woman in pink scrubs said she'd walk Ebo to where he needed to go. She eyed his carrier and asked Ebo what he'd brought, saying, "We don't like to upset the residents, you understand."

"Jus an old bird," said Ebo. "Won't be here long."

He breathed through his mouth as they made their way, deciding there was at least a sterile sort of cleanliness to the place that he could appreciate. Along the walls were chicken-scratch drawings in crayon and chalk. Within the corridor were disabled patients, some whose eyes followed Ebo. Others sat in their crumpled bodies, waiting. "Dis place," Ebo asked of the nurse, "what is it exactly?"

The woman flicked her long braided ponytail over her shoulder. "At first, it was an asylum," she said. "Fifty years ago they called the residents 'spiritual morons' if you can believe it." She kept moving, skittishly on alert. "On good days, we think of it as a sanitarium. On the best days, a home." The nurse then pivoted on her thick-soled shoes to face Ebo

briefly. "You must have memories of Miss Momoyo before her mental status change. How old was she again?"

"Momo was five," said Ebo.

"Well, what amazes me—and what you'll see too—is how intact her nature is. In all her sweetness, she is perfect. Isn't she, Billy?" The nurse said this as she patted the shoulder of a man with bulging eyes and a jaw that went in opposite directions. She then pointed up a set of stairs, and left Ebo to go it alone.

He took his time to the third floor. At the last step, he leaned forward and looked to his right. Momo was where the nurse said she'd be, at the end of the hallway with a mop in hand. Mopping, he'd been told, gave her a sense of duty, and of home. But even without the mop, Ebo knew it was her in the helmet, now red and black. He approached slowly, soundlessly, and sat on a bench along the wall with his elbows tacked to his knees. Ebo saw that Momo, at fourteen, was taller than their mother. He saw that her hospital gown fell to her calves where fine downy hairs grew undisturbed. From her full lips hung a short thread of spittle, and as she mopped the tiles, Ebo saw she did so within the lines.

"Momo," he said and she stopped her work to slowly look up. He said her name again to bring her gaze to him. When she at last settled on Ebo, it took her some time to register a presence, then more time still to register it as familiar. All of this Ebo mistook for blankness and he looked away feeling foolish for having hoped she would recognize him. But when the mop handle fell to the concrete floor, he looked again at Momo, whose delight he'd forgotten had always found expression. The shaking of her hands, the stamping of her feet, the insistent whimper, everything lacked articulation that Ebo made up for by standing and reaching for her, by using his feet to dance around her, by shaping his voice into words—"Ebo here, Momo! Ebo here!"

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He'd been told they could sit outside for a short time. Ebo led Momo by the hand with the other gripping the carrier. When they came to a bench beneath a bottlebrush tree, he swept off the tiny red needles from the surface. Before them was a view of Pearl Harbor, the inciting place of the previous war, the one before Ebo's.

In the thin-aired silence, the bird cooed to be let free. Momo heard it and again took her time locating its source. Ebo lifted the lid to the carrier, and the bird, sensing the distance from home, the long journey ahead, struggled against his grip. He held the bird in front of Momo and she raised a curious hand. Ebo waited for her finger to reach the bird's body and when it did, he made it so that it was Momo who tapped the bird free.

Ebo knew the bird was too old to make it home, knew that it would die a watery death trying. But as it circled them now, climbing higher and higher, he let go of everything he knew. He craned his neck to track the bird as it became just a curl of calligraphy against a cloudless sky. All the while, Momo looked across the ocean in the direction of home, waiting for the bird to dip into view.