

Cynthia Liu

Bodies of Water

In an ideal world he might have drowned.

When An-hai was six, his mother took him to the ocean for the first time. His mother grew up in a small village in Yunnan and had never been to the beach, much less an American beach. Even now, An-hai remembers the first, suffocating feeling of the cold water pressed all around him, like a black box to which his limbs were taped down. He remembers saltwater crawling up his nose, his eyes, his mouth, violating every soft open space of his body. He remembers waves like fists and dark rain like bullets shooting through the water, some storm they had not expected.

Unfortunately, An-hai did not drown. His mother, however, did.

The lifeguards, terrified college students scrambling to evacuate everyone, could not understand him. He remembers this. His mother couldn't afford to send him to preschool, not yet, and the only tongue he knew to speak was a wild, foreign one that had no place in America.

"I don't understand, buddy," said the nice American lifeguards, hugging him as he cried, *jiu ming, jiu ming, bie zou, ma ma*. He doesn't remember the after part, or when he had started drowning again. Still, he drowns a little bit, here and there, all of the time.

When they finally have the official funeral, 8 years later, An-hai feels as though someone is holding his head in a toilet bowl again. In grade school when it started he never opened his eyes, not even to fight or scream, lest the toilet water took advantage and climbed into his eyes. The space behind his eyelids was safe and pitch black. Long John, who at 4'5 was by far the tallest boy in the grade, had freaked out when An-hai stopped struggling.

"Dude, you killed him!"

“I didn’t do it! You did!”

“You killed him, Dan-man! You killed him!”

When they released him, his head bobbed towards the surface in slow motion, like a dead body resurfacing.

Even now, he doesn’t open his eyes. There’s so much shit around him he doesn’t want to see. At the funeral, when everyone is still crying their wide-open eyes out, he pinches the skin in between his thumb and pointer finger, hard, and counts the number of red and blue dots behind his eyelids. One. Two. One hundred and forty-two. This is how he breathes.

One. Two. Three, four, five—

“An-hai.”

It’s his aunt. Her eyes are so wide he can see straight through to her heart.

“Yes, xiaoyi?”

“Go on, An-hai. It’s your turn.”

So grown up, murmur the aunts and uncles and second cousins twice removed. All teary-eyed and dressed in white, as per Chinese tradition, as though a miserable American wedding.

Halfway to the stage An-hai finds that all his limbs are wet, pinned and logged with water, but his still clothes look dry, which is a difficult situation to communicate to other people. He uses his arms to push himself up to the stage and tries to conjure memories of his mother, like everyone else had.

His memories of her are all pale and dappled at the edges, mottled by the inconsistent memory of a child and the murky years that followed. Sometimes he feels her cool hands as she cut his hair in the bathroom, her crouching on the ground so that he can sit. When the cold

kitchen scissors kiss the nape of his neck, he doesn't remember the pain, only the warm washcloth she presses to the scratch as she soothes him.

Shhh, An-hai, fang song. Hu xi. Relax. Breathe.

Whenever he tries to look in the mirror, he can never put together her face.

Later that year, a college student with a silky name like Scarlett or Emma sends an e-mail to An-hai's aunt, titled *Media Request — An-Mei Lin*. Auntie Lin had stayed in America to honor her sister, but she draws the line at operating an AOL account. When An-hai opens the e-mail, the first lines read:

Hi Ms. Lin,

I hope this e-mail finds you well! :)

It did not. However, two weeks later, the college reporter is wandering around their living room, taking flip-phone photos of the red paper cuttings, the photo albums, the child's drawings of the sea, the rice cooker from Walmart. She had heard of their most poignant and heartbreaking story from her pastor, of a young child orphaned, the funeral for his own mother postponed for years due to financial and logistical setbacks. She, Emma-Scarlett, is a firm believer that everyone should have a right to be honored, no matter who or where they came from.

She interviews An-hai, nodding so empathetically at some points it looks as though her neck is loosening. "And how did that make you feel?" she would say, furrowing her plucked eyebrows, and "Yes, I totally get that. 100%."

Because An-hai is 14, he knows that questions are often disguises for things people already think they know, and it's easier to put on a fake mustache and play along. For example, when his teachers at school asked him how to pronounce his name, they weren't asking how his

name was meant to be said or how his mother taught him each of the intonations and the meanings and the order of each stroke in each character. How each of his brothers and sisters, when they came, would share the character *An*.

They wanted something more palatable, for the name to succumb to the weight of its American expectations. Anne-hi. Ond-hee. Andy. Annie.

“Why do you have a girl name?”

“That’s not how my neighbor says it. She’s Asian.”

“Can I just call you Andy?”

At the end of the interview, the college reporter set down her notepad and leaned forward. Her tape recorder kept running and running.

“Is there anything I haven’t asked that you want me to know, On-hye?”

He thought about this question and wondered what was buried beneath it.

I’m angry, he imagined saying.

Why are you angry, An-eye?

I’m angry because I couldn’t help you. I’m angry that I was supposed to. And I’m angry, Mama, because you left me.

He feels the water coming in around him, weaving into his skin. He sees all of the furniture in the room, the little, shabby furniture that Emma-Scarlett took a billion photos of on her pink flip phone, start to float up towards the ceiling as though suspended in water. Emma-Scarlett is trying to talk to him, to ask him one last question before she spins upside down, but water is filling his ears like blood.

But how did that make you *feel*, Annie?

Emma-Scarlett sends them a copy when the story is published, front page of the student newspaper. The headline reads: *8 years later, I left behind. Chinese orphan grieves loss of mother.* The story wins collegiate awards. Everyone, no matter how coldhearted, feels for the little Chinese orphan, who can't speak English or swim. Both causes of drowning.

Four years later, in 2001, the piece is also published in the New Yorker, in the opinion section. What's the opinion, An-hai wondered, that Asian people merit something?

An-hai has started going by Andy in college, not because he's ashamed, just because it's easier this way. He is a little ashamed of going to art school, after everything his mother and aunt did for him. The irony of coming all the way to lush new America just to paint pictures of water, crossing oceans with a brushstroke instead of years of blood and tears, is not lost on him.

His mother painted, too, though never well. Her drawings are still tacked up around their old flat: flowers, mountains, watercolored memories of her youth. He doesn't know if it was her dream, too; he never got to ask.

It's the only time he can open his eyes under water. When the water is in his hands, cornflower, aquamarine, wild blue yonder.

"My parents are also going to be at the fundraiser," says Kat, the new girlfriend. They met at art school. Kat is brave and modern to date someone like An-hai, who is the type of starving artist who is really just poor, not mysterious, and also barely two inches taller than her. Kat is American with a sharp, strong nose and shaggy brown hair. She insists on calling him by his Chinese name, because she wants to honor his culture. "You sure you still want to come?"

"Of course, Katey. Why wouldn't I want to? We've been dating for almost a year."

"I know, An." She sits down next to him on the couch.

“What is it?”

“Well, my parents are just a little... you know, very old-fashioned like that.”

“Is it because I’m not white?”

She shakes her head. “No! I mean—well, sometimes with things like this you can seem a little bit... spacey. It’s not your fault.” She’s talking fast. “You really don’t have to come. It’s not a big deal.”

“What do you mean? Spacey?”

“Like... sometimes, An, it’s like you just go somewhere else and I don’t know how to get you back.”

He can sense his feet starting to drift off the ground, but he forces them to stay anchored.

“I’m here with you, Kat. I’m gonna stay here. Promise.”

He means it. He loves Kat. Sometimes when he’s with her it feels like his head is above water, like she’s the sun, and her light is all over his skin.

She smiles. She loves him. But sometimes she feels like she’s propping him up, keeping his head above water, and her arms are getting tired.

“An,” says Kat at the show, “is a wonderful artist.”

“Artist?” says Judy, taking in his hair, his wide nose, the ethnic style of his eyes. They are standing in front of a giant, almost floor-to-ceiling painting of a large pink blob. There are smaller paintings of more tasteful blobs, one of which Judy puts down \$7,500 for. Judy is an interior-design-magazine style of mother, wearing crimped gold earrings and pretty, mean eyes. Her blond hair stops abruptly in a neat row above her shoulder blades. “What type of ‘art’ do you do, dear? I know your culture has lovely inky brush, that the, uh, people use to write the, what is it called—?”

“I do oil painting, mostly.” He fidgets with his tie, which Kat had tried reknitting 3 times without success. “I like painting nature and water, like oceans, pools... um, lakes...” He makes a joke about drowning and everyone laughs politely, nervously. An-hai sees water pooling on the floor by his feet, but he forces himself to look up and smile at Kat, who is watching him with anxious eyes.

“Speaking of,” says Judy, impatient to hear her own voice again. “I read this fascinating little piece in the New Yorker this morning. About an ethnic woman who drowned in the 80s saving her son and they just now had the funeral! Can you imagine?”

“Oh, yes,” adds Kat’s father. “I do remember you telling me about that one. The—”

“Apparently,” interrupts Judy, “It’s all because they didn’t have the money to fly everyone out, and it was too late to go back, since the woman’s Oriental and the only one across the sea.”

”I believe that’s an offensive term, Judy.” His eyes dart involuntarily to An-hai.

“Well, they used it in the article.”

“Well, I just—”

“I’m *quite* positive, honey.”

Kat is white and red at the same time, and she glows through the water.

“Mom,” she hisses, her eyes daggers, but cautious ones.

“What, Kitty?”

“*Stop.*”

Judy looks pleasantly puzzled for a moment, as though she’d come across a thought provoking think piece about Tuscan-style kitchens. Suddenly, she frowns, and a glimmer of recognition passes over her face.

“What did you say your name was again, dear? And-i?”

“An-hai,” he says slowly, as though from far away. “An-hai Lin.”

“Oh,” she says, genuinely embarrassed. “I’m sorry, dear, I didn’t realize you knew them.

I always get your people’s names mixed up.”

“Mom!”

“What, honey? I’m sorry! They all sound like—”

The car door slams, and Kat leaps in, her eyes wild and red rimmed.

“Are you okay?”

She starts the engine and speeds out of the parking lot, tires screeching.

“Kat, what happened? It’s fine, seriously, whatever—”

“It’s fine,” she says, blowing past a red light.

“Kat?”

“Let’s not talk about it now, okay? I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He leans back against the seat and puts his head underwater.

“Okay.”

She really is sorry. She tells him many, many times.

I’m sorry about my mom. She’s just—sometimes she can be so—I just—!

Sorry, An, I’m sure it’s so much harder for you. No, seriously, I mean it. I mean, I’ll never understand it. I want to, but you know what I mean.

I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to deal with this crap. You deserve better.

Sometimes An-hai feels a little boy in his chest, and he's crying in some foreign language. *Bie zou, bie zou. Don't leave me, don't leave me.*

I'm really sorry. I know this sounds like a shitty excuse, but you deserve better. I can't be what you need right now, and I'm sorry. I really am. You deserve something better. No, don't say that, I mean it.

I'm sorry.

I love you.

Hey, sorry, is my hairdryer still at your place by chance?

An-hai still tries to speak in class, but it's hard because it's underwater. When his American Art professor asks what he thinks of Edward Hopper's *Automat*, he tries to say that she's not in an automat at all, but trapped under the sea, lit by the bumpy bellies of angler fish just waiting to pounce on her. And what is she still waiting for, anyway? When does she get to leave?

He tries to say this, but all that comes out are bubbles.

Glub glub glub, he says, embarrassed.

All around the room, staring at him, are pale-skinned, blue-eyed lampreys, swiveling open and closed their thousand-teethed mouths. He looks down at his hands and sees that they're wrinkled now, as though he's spent 20 years underwater. He has to get out.

He leaps up and swims out the lecture hall, feet and fingers moving in a way he had never learned. Doors and walls part like seaweed, all temporary, moldable stuff. He claws through the

water until he's far away from school, from everyone, until he finds himself at the river that runs 2 miles south of campus.

The river, at least, is real. He went here once, with Kat, on their 3rd or 4th date, had breathed the air along the bank, felt the splashes of sun slipping through the tree canopy. He's not sure why his feet took him here, or how, but he hears her voice coming from somewhere. Hears them both.

I'm worried about you, An. Call me back?

The river is deep and swirling, but not quite deep enough to drown in.

An-hai, hui lai! You're too far. Come back.

He takes off his shoes. His mother is underwater, in the river.

An-hai, hui lai, hui lai. Come back.

He jumps.

Before it was everywhere, the water laps at his toes like a new puppy. The sky is sugar blue and everything is for the first time. An-mei, too, runs down the shore like a child, arms out wide, and An-hai circles her, two birds in the air, flying, flying.

What's for lunch, mama?

An-mei ties up her wet hair and reaches into the sky, pulling out fluffy steamed buns shaped like clouds, gathering sparkling golden cherries, golden cantaloupe, golden fish.

Everything, An-hai, everything.

Far above, a fisherman squints down into the water, his rod abandoned downstream.

“Good God!” he cries. “Someone’s fallen in there.” He looks wildly around him, but the riverbanks are empty. A bullfrog perched on a branch honks at him, as if to say, *well, get on with it!*

“Goddammit,” mutters the man as he strips, “the one day I go out fishing!” He cannonballs into the water. It takes him a while to drag the boy to shore, but he’s still got it. He shakes the boy by the shoulders like a bag of loose change.

An-hai gasps suddenly for air, tasting salt and water clogged in his throat. A silvery minnow catapults out of his mouth. Above him, the man glints in the sunlight, majestic and flabby like a goldfish.

The goldfish lets out a tremendous sigh of relief. “You’re okay, boy, come on. What’s your name?”

An-hai tries to speak and water bubbles out, as usual. But real water this time, and it leaves his body, finally, suddenly, in a wave of choked emotion. He gasps for air and finds it. For the first time in years, he takes a breath of deep, pure, light air.

“An-hai,” he says to the giant goldfish. He’s surprised to hear his unused tongue still carries all the right intonations, that it hadn’t abandoned its place and reason.

An, meaning safety, *hai*, meaning sea.

He hears his mother’s lilting voice in the breeze.

You are safe, Lin An-hai. You are the sea.