

“Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone.” –Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

“*The Unintended*... pushes the envelope: within the spiral of war and loops of art is an unknown war wrapped in another, a ghost in its machine.” –Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto*

Warps

The clock in my mother’s car has always been set five minutes ahead. Her cars have changed, but this buffer time remains. Her mantra, *If we always think we’re five minutes late, we’ll always be on time*, set the measure of my childhood. My older sister and I got used to subtracting fives. *Five minutes, we still have five minutes.*

In high school, on days I overslept, I’d rely on these five minutes to soothe my anxious rage, always threatening to blow over as my mom honked her horn impatiently– already in the car, already ready to go, already waking up the neighbors at 6:30 am. Mornings were a terribly straining time for our family relations, prone to ending in tears: two girls in middle and high school, then later in high school and COVID-era Zoom college, fighting over the bathroom, outfits, packed lunches, thrown-together breakfasts, last minute homework, all before 7 am, all set to the constant honking of my mother’s car or her nagging in our ears. We needed those five minutes desperately then.

When I look back at these not so distant times, I always question the effectiveness of my mother’s strategy. Did it work? Well, we were rarely late to school, and even now, as my classmates have eschewed the imposed restrictions of adolescence for a personal freedom I envy, I still make it on time to my classes (even if this means I have to sprint across campus). My mother certainly thought school was important. But the point of her exercise in time-bending was not, I believe, simply meant to stress the importance of academics. A fundamental contradiction rests in between her action, the turning forward of the clock, and its allowances, the mental subtractions my sister and I depended on. My mother’s ability to pad the clock, to provide time

for her daughters, always resists, questions, and eludes her insistence that we use her efforts to *never* be late.

Now, as I start reluctantly gathering the bare semblances of adulthood— a savings account, knowing where my own passport is— I find myself slipping into the gaps left behind in my mother’s temporal paradox. I’m rarely punctual to social events anymore; my friends know I’ll be anywhere from five to thirty minutes late (the former for a lunch or dinner date, the latter for a fashionably delayed entrance to a dorm party). My tendency to fall behind, to slip through time, is something I’ve accepted as a part of me. And yet, in my striving to arrive on time for something yet unknowable to me, I find myself wishing again for the disguised leniency my mother gave me as a child. In those five minutes, my family existed in a state of suspension. Not yet late, never early, always trying our very best to arrive on time. We move now in spirals— my mother turns the clock forward while I try to return to the time in my life when I had more of it. Hours and years, the histories of moments and lifetimes, granted and withheld by the original timekeeper.



I’m laying on the couch with my mom, watching TV. Mom, do you love me?

Yes.

Can you say it?

I love you.

Five minutes later, I ask again. Do you love me? Or sometimes, Do you hate me?

Sometimes it’s a request, possibly a demand: Will you tell me you love me?

Always, she replies: *Yes, I love you, No, I don’t hate you.* (Or sometimes, if she’s annoyed at me: *Well...*) *Again? Fine— I love you.*

It's a compulsion, a loop we get stuck in. I ask or tell her to say it, and she indulges. One time my sister catches our strange little routine and tells our mom to stop humoring me because it's so strange. But my mom says: *I don't mind. She must be asking because she needs to hear it.*



My mother tells me I'm beautiful every chance she gets. When watching Korean dramas together, she'll scoff at the actresses' plastic surgery and proclaim they don't hold a candle to me (this is objectively not true). She's never in my life told me not to wear something because it's too short, or too revealing. In fact, she appreciates when I do. She only concerns herself with whether or not something flatters me. And when I rebel against her and wear a dress she deems ugly, she'll reluctantly compliment me anyway by saying I make anything look good. Whenever I want to lose weight, or envy another girl's appearance, she yells at me that I'm being ridiculous because I'm *the most beautiful girl in the world*. Part of this, at least in my opinion, comes from her own belief that she herself is beautiful, so she takes it as a given that her daughters must be too. Looking into my face, she proudly claims any beautiful features as her own (any undesirable qualities are promptly attributed to my Dad). A reflection on growing up as *the prettiest girl in the world*: Even if it may leave you with a misguided idea on the value of beauty as a woman, it's worth it to know that your mom really thinks you're beautiful.

In high school, I read "The Beauty Treatment" by Stacy Richter, a short story in which an unlikable rich girl gets cut in the cheek by her equally unlikable rich best friend, only referred to as "the Bitch." The resulting scar leaves her worthless in the eyes of her private school peers and deemed a lost cause by her mother (there's always women's colleges, she says, after a lifetime of urging her daughter to find a pre-med husband in university). "I knew it was all over for me. I knew my looks were shot," she proclaims. Obsessing over the way her life closes due to this one

physical imperfection, she remains stuck in this mindset for the entire short story. On my first read, I thought her insufferable, vain, dramatic, even unfeminist, for letting something so minor affect her so deeply.

When I scarred my face freshman year of college, it was a deep red line that ran directly vertically from the very bottom of my left eyebrow to about midway through my cheek. It happened five minutes before my Korean class, in the bathroom. Never late to class, I instinctively rushed to the classroom, blood dripping down my face. My classmates and professor were aghast and confused as to why I had come to class. Disoriented, I ran to the health center and came back twenty minutes later. I sat in the back, definitely not learning any Korean, as I tried not to cry. My classmates gracefully pretended not to notice. Later, I searched online for the story. I thought, at first, that it was called “The Bitch” or “The Scar” and couldn’t find it for a long time. But when I did, I suddenly understood.

“Okay: I’m a girl who’s going to Smith College. I’m going to Smith and then I’m going to law school to become a criminal lawyer who champions the rights of the victimized and oppressed. I’m going to have two cars, a Volvo for transportation and a Jag for thrills. I’ll cut a feline figure in my Agnes B. clothes and I’ll have a drawerful of jewels. Maybe I’ll even get married to some average-looking dork, but I will never be pretty and I will never be loved by the handsome men who roam this earth. My dear mother told me long ago that youth and beauty will get you everything. Well, mine’s fucked up and now I’ll never have Everything. No magic, no wonder, no fairy tales” (Richter).

During my freshman year, when I should have been branching out the most, I closed in on myself like a sea cucumber when poked. My claim to beauty, always made certain by my mother, suddenly became fragile. And in the midst of this fragility, I grew the closest I’ve ever been to my mother. She became indulgent toward me as I was regressing into a child. I’d go home nearly every weekend and lay on the couch waiting for my mom to come home from work at midnight. When she did, she’d place my head on her lap, hand-feed me soft rice cakes, reapply scar cream and more flesh-colored band-aids, and fall asleep listening to me talk late into the night, side-by-side in her bed. During this epoch of my life, tears would frequently appear

without reason in the corners of my eyes. More often than not, her hands would be there to wipe them away with a gentleness not present even in my youth.

Umma, I wanted to ask, why couldn't you have been like this when I was younger, when I needed it? But I needed it even more at eighteen, something she could intuitively sense. Freshly in college, I felt like more of a child than I ever had before. And she, gentler than she had ever been. Perhaps this was her penance for my loss of beauty. Or perhaps she only held forth softness because she could see the evidence of my pain on a now-ugly face. Unlike my several desperate and confusing episodes of depression in high school, when she dismissed my concerns and told me to figure out therapy myself, she was now so concerned I wouldn't last a weekend on campus that she would pick me up after my last class on Fridays and drop me off Monday mornings. She even encouraged me to seek counseling services. I did not, but I did marvel at my mother's newfound liberalization toward mental health. And when I was forced to be at school, I'd call her upwards of ten times a day. She always picked up. Gripping my phone in my hand, my palm heavy with the knowledge of her presence.



Umma– Umma–. I tell her everything, and she absorbs it all. In response, her voice floats across the phone line. She says that to be alive is to be lonely. She, who has never lived alone in her entire life, who moved straight from her father's house to her husband's, and had two children right after. The thought makes me feel sick. I'm on the phone, and my words enter her, tears in my eyes but never falling. I hate being alone, I hate being with people. I want to go home, I want to lie in bed next to my Mom and Dad like I am a child again. I don't want anyone to lie next to me in bed. I pray for something to cut through the foggy pain of loneliness that radiates inside of me, whether I am with people or not. In the meantime, I call my mother.



I don't remember much about that semester except its tone. It was cold, dark, and I was never outside. I spent two hours every day in the gym. I read hundreds of pages of my history textbook every week because no one told me people don't do that in college anymore. I could spend five hours on a twenty page essay, rereading Foucault or Hall for the third time in a row. I thought, perhaps, that my brain was broken. I couldn't understand anything I read for my classes, and I was so desperately attempting to. I reapplied band-aids religiously, but forgot the scar gel a lot. I called my mom crouching in the corner of my dorm's hallway to avoid my roommate, and she would remind me to apply the scar gel as I cried. On campus, I had no one I could say would care if I was gone one day— a fact I must have repeated to my mom at least a hundred times. Stuck in another loop, she replied to each of my complaints, a hundred times and a hundred times more. She'd say, sometimes gently, sometimes frustrated around the fiftieth time, *I care that you're here. What would I do if you died? You can't do that to your mother.* Her voice saturated the air around me.

One time, during a particularly bad call, she extended a lifeline. *You can always leave school if you want. Your life is more important.* It stopped me short. My mother, who doesn't believe in breaks from working, takes sixteen hour shifts, and thinks gap years are a waste of time for directionless people, was giving me a way out. Out of her words, I extracted the possibility of time.



We're in a car going back to campus, and I tell her about the relationship I'm in. I'm nervous because I'm twenty years old, I've never been in a relationship as serious as this one, I

want it to last, and I'm distinctly aware of the fact that we're twenty years old. I ask her if she thinks all relationships are about timing. She's silent for a moment— we've always talked *around* relationships, not about them. The topic is straining, especially for us, and approaching it is a new thing I'm trying. I avoid going into any detail. We dance around any conflict our revelations will bring when they inevitably take up too much space in the car.

First, the part I've heard before. *When I first met your father, I was twenty-six or twenty-seven. He was this tall, silent, weird guy I met on a blind date.* Next is supposed to be the story of how he fell head over heels for her, how he begged her to spend the last month before he left for America with him. Instead: *I just had this disappointing sense that I would marry him. It was time for me. I wanted to start a family.* I've never heard this part before, but it's just one of the many cutting truths that have come out since I've left for college, when every conversation we have feels like another unmasking. Treading back, once again, into the same territory of her past, we repeat our cycles. Every time I ask, I hear a different version of her life, a new element she reluctantly reveals. In high school, it was a shock when, after a lifetime of telling me that she had only ever dated my father, she told me about all the boys she dated for a hundred days. After receiving the hundred day present, a Korean dating milestone, she would stop seeing them. At one point, she had enough gold rings that her own mother melted them down into a necklace. Later, a less amusing disclosure. When the timeline of her different stories don't match up, I interrogate her into revealing that she got pregnant with my sister before she got married to my father. When I ask if she would have married him without getting pregnant, she shrugs. Did you even want to move to America? Didn't you ever want to divorce him? Do you regret staying? I ask her the same questions again and again, never feeling like I'm getting any closer to any concept of her past. Her love for her daughters eclipses all. *Of course I wanted to move to*

America—for you and your sister. I thought about leaving him, but then I wouldn't have had you two. I don't have time for any regrets, and even if I did, I have my two beautiful daughters. You are my life. I try to get inside the mystery of her, held within her past and my future, through these questions. Instead, we spin around and around, repeating the same pattern of confessions and obstructions.

I wonder if I'm forcing her to reflect on things she would rather leave untouched. If her revelations are as painful to her as they are to me. Our words entwine, veer across, and unfold the distance between each other. As we speed toward our destination, the clock moves forward. I wonder if we're arriving at an end.



Walking in the dark, I'm calling my mom again. Something just happened, and I can't stop freaking out about it. A boy likes me, I say, withholding so much I can't breathe. He asked me out on a date. My body sings with nerves. What I don't tell her is that I can still feel his fingers around my neck, closing in. In the brief pause before she talks, I hold out hope that something she says can loosen the tightening in my throat, can make it okay to breathe again. Maybe I'm remembering a year ago, although by now it feels like a lifetime, when every word over the phone felt earth-shatteringly profound, like it was keeping me attached to my own life. I want, I need to hear her voice secure me again.

Instead, she starts berating me for not wanting to go on the date. *You're never going to get experience dating in college if you wait around for the perfect person*, she says. Just be like her in college, think about the jewelry I could receive, use my beauty while I can. This is the last time, I promise myself, I talk to her about a boy. Then I yell into the phone. I tell her everything, I talk for hours, so she should just get it, I think. But she doesn't. She tells me sometimes, *I've*

never met anyone who thinks like you, and I don't think it's a compliment. When my words flow into her uninterrupted, she has had to stop short as well. Hearing me, my mother contends with the distance between us. You don't understand what I'm saying, I say. I feel revolted at the thought of going on this date. It's like I want to crawl out of my skin. I tried my hardest, and you of all people should know that.



A final revelation. I'm in my senior year of high school, about to leave for the start of my adult life. We're on the couch again. You look over at me and ask, lightly, about The Thing I've wanted to avoid this whole time. I freeze, immediately tearing up. I suppose you're asking because you already know. Perhaps you've noticed something within me, the mirror image of your beautiful self, that lends itself to warping. You can see, maybe, the shadow of a disfigurement in my face a year before my scar will appear. Of course, I do confess. Yes, Umma, I like girls. And no, I don't like boys.

Stop crying, you really thought I would disown you? I will always love you more than anything, you're my life. You know, it's normal, to feel this way now, but you'll change your mind later. When I was in high school, I dated two girls too at my all-girls high school. I'm shocked enough that my tears stop in their tracks. Don't tell your dad, he doesn't know a thing. When I got to college, with all the boys (and their presents!), I forgot all about them. You'll be the same, too. You're just like me.

Another fissure in our histories, another impassable distance between us. Another paradox, an enigma no words can resolve.



What I really want to say about my mother: she loves me, and I've always known that.



What I really want to say about my mother: she remains devoted to the shadow of herself she sees in me, and I've always known that too.



Our arrival uncertain, we race forward in time, even as we constantly return. Through the spirals of revelations we live in, we encounter each other once again. The histories of my mother spin in and out of my vision as I fall within and between the time she gives me. The nature of our intimacy lies in the nature of our time loop, the circular lives we occupy— how we hurt each other only to come back to each other and touch each other with our limited truths.

What fascinates me about my mother and makes her brain as much of a foreign entity to me as I am to her is her ability to move into the future, even when time compels a return. She simply chooses to live.

We sit on a call with each other. The woman that loves me on the other side, living her life while I live mine. Silent, we keep each other in our loneliness.