

PREFACE

The following piece is a contemporary short story was written for an assignment in a Creative Writing (English 109) course that I took in the English Department at UCSB. The original piece was written in response to the prompt “Portrait of a Sinner at Dawn,” but the version below has since been edited, first for a peer reading and then again for a public reading event that involved the rest of the class and other spectators. I’ve included this particular piece because it’s an accurate portrayal of my dialogue and descriptive writing. This is also one of the only stories that I have ever edited for oration, and that I delivered to a live audience.

Catcher

By Jamie Hu

Life kills us all. Everyone bursts into the world screaming on a ticking clock and the chase begins. Life follows us around with a red marker until we forget to look left and right before we cross the street and it springs out of a crack in the sidewalk, ready to write us into our graves.

That day is still waiting for you. But me? I can tell you how it feels. No amount of silken shirts, hair dyes, perms, and makeup can change the fact that life marked me with a red X on the day I was born.

A sharp pain in my ribs shocks me awake and I hold my breath as I fumble for my desk. Liang, his bare back to me, stirs in his sleep and I freeze as I wait for his breathing to align with Yue’s again. I grab my phone, slip out of bed, and pull my checkered robe tighter against my chest as I flash the dull light of my screen around the room. Finally, I catch the familiar flash of my case’s orange cap and snatch it off of the cabinet of drawers. Press down, unscrew, water, cold down my throat...liberation. The pain isn’t gone yet, but it will be soon.

I sink to the musty brown hotel carpet and try to remember how to breathe. I inhale with Liang, exhale with Yue. She’s got a rattle in her breath that I recognize over Liang’s huffs and whistles. I’m not sure why I pay attention to their breathing so much, though it must have something to do with how aware I am of my own. I exhale again, eyes closed, and then rise on tiptoes to the curtained window.

Hundreds of meters below us, the city is stirs. The haze of dawn starts to suffuse it like candlelight, flickers of orange bouncing off the buildings and the few cars and passersby that slide through the cityscape as if through a dream. For that moment, they all hover with me in the fever dream between life and death, awake and asleep.

My pill case is still in my hand; I’ve got four capsules left for the next two days. Then it will be time for another hospital run. In my pained delirium, I wonder if it would be less

miserable to pen one of my usual threats and break in with a mask. For a moment it tempts me, but a voice in my head makes me hesitate.

This is the one thing that belongs to you: your life. Shouldn't that be sacred?

The question doesn't sound like mine. Years earlier, I followed my mother into an empty church and sat with my eyes closed as she whispered sacred things for me under flickering glass mosaics and glowing paintings. I believed her then, trusting that the world had greater plans for me.

I know better now. I see her staring at me through the glass and shake my head. She was the kind of faithful that could never imagine that her son was beyond saving. She's still pleading with me—Catcher, *please*—but I push her out. *No, Mama, I can't. And besides, you never called me that. You didn't live to learn that name.*

Bitterness seeps into my chest. If I got shot and gasped to a blood-spattered end in damned hospital, what would I earn? I picture it: a thin man running haphazardly down a white hall, nothing in his shaking hands but a case of red pills wrapped in plastic. Maybe they would recognize him for what he was and let him go.

That's what a dead man looks like, they'd tell the patients who laid down and waited for it. You can't think like him, or you'll end up like that.

"The city that interesting, Catcher?"

I turn. Liang has sat up in bed. He leans against its frame with his arms slung over it, legs crossed, the perfect expression of kingly imperiousness. Beside him, Yue has curled into a ball, her face tucked out of view behind her mane of orange curls. One of Liang's arms lazily crawls down from its perch on the bed post and runs its hand through her hair.

"It's waking up," I respond after a pause.

"Is that what you think about when you look at that?" he asks, cocking his head at the window. "How poetic."

"And you don't?"

"Of course not. Every time the sun rises, the world is slightly different. People are born. People die." His eyes gleam as he looks over my shoulder through the window. "Someone who existed yesterday doesn't anymore."

"Poetic."

His smile flashes. "Isn't it?"

"You concern me."

"I concern you?" he laughs. "You're the one who punched me so hard I couldn't see through one eye. And you didn't even stop there."

"You stepped in front of my car."

"You hit me with it."

“Because you wanted me to.”

“Yeah. It’s called intention. Didn’t *you* think about what you were gonna do with the car when you stole it?”

“It’s not about that.”

“Maybe it wasn’t then. But how about now, when you’ve got a car full of a rich dude’s money and no idea how you’re getting it away from his angry friends, who just happen to have guns?”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“We? Nah, this is your mess. I’m holding out just to watch the shit-show.”

“Oh, so now it’s *my* shit-show.” My pain makes my vision spin; two Liangs raise mirrored eyebrows at me. “Tell me, since when have you planned anything that doesn’t involve a plastic bag or speeding car?”

“Why would I need to? And besides, that plastic bag doesn’t count. Not interesting enough.”

“Death isn’t supposed to be interesting.”

“And why not? Isn’t that what you’re doing?” He jerks his head towards my hand. I realize that I’ve turned all the way towards him and revealed the pill case in my fingers.

I squeeze it out of sight, reddening. “It’s not what you think.”

“Isn’t it? You think I can’t tell that you’re dying? Me, an expert?”

“You can’t be an expert at death, you raving idiot, if you’re not—”

“You’re missing the point. Why are you hiding it? You know the shirt doesn’t help, or the bad makeup.”

“Like your pink eyeshadow is doing you any favors. You look sick.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’ve living an aesthetic, dude. You can choose to understand it or not.”

“Understanding isn’t a choice.”

“Yes, it is. Most people just don’t realize it. I choose to live like this and people can understand if they want to or not. I’m not pressed.”

“You should be!” The petulance in my voice is apparent even to me, but I don’t care. “You shouldn’t be trying to kill yourself for fun and then asking people not to judge you. You’re young!”

“And so are you. Young people shouldn’t have to fight their bodies just to stay alive. Young people shouldn’t have to live through the guilt of murder.” He gestures at Yue and I flinch as she does. She looks the same age as him, maybe a little older, but the haunted light in her perpetually round eyes makes her seem like a child. A tortured child. She sees blood on her hands even now, and hides them behind the covers.

“Yet, here we are,” Liang finishes with a shrug. “That’s life, Catch.”

“And that’s why I fuck with it,” I retort. “Life doesn’t want me to have anything? Well then, I take the cars it gives other people; I take their coats and their satin shirts and their pearl earrings and their stuffed wallets. I take and take until it takes me to the hospital.”

“Then what? You lie on a white bed and think about all the shitty things you did to people? People who only ever saw a nicely dressed man with a nice perm and his manicured hands elbow-deep in their wallets?”

I wince and don’t respond. Liang clicks his tongue and starts to crawl back into bed. Yue draws closer to him, murmuring something that I don’t hear. She raises her voice.

“Come back to bed, Catcher. It’s not as warm here without you.”

“I’m good.”

“They’re after us,” she whispers in her rattling voice. “Please, come back to bed before we have to go.”

I lean farther into the sill. The city is screaming at me: cars honking, tires screeching against the hot pavement, people laughing and chatting and shouting across the street. I close my eyes and try to answer, breaking the glass in my mind and letting myself drop to the streets below.

But I can’t. I’m a dying man, but I love the bed of the living. I turn and stumble towards Yue’s voice until the pill finally swallows the pain in my chest.