

## Ebbing Away – Esther, Year 6, NSW

It was one month after my eighteenth birthday when I first noticed that my right pinky was missing. A small nub was left in its stead, as if I were a waning fragment of the moon or an unfinished drawing by a careless artist. Nonetheless I had housework to do, so I paid it no heed and continued with my life. It has only progressed since then.

As the setting sun filters through the arched windows of our kitchen, I clumsily hack at the cooked orange shell of a lobster with my cleaver. My right hand has almost completely disappeared now and I have to rely on my nondominant left arm to do everything.

“Feng! Is dinner ready yet?” My dad yells as he says some choice curse words in Chinese.

“Nearly done, baba!” I remove chunks of juicy white lobster meat and scatter them into a bowl of noodles. The aroma of sesame oil and garlic sauce curls around the kitchen and engulfs my senses like the wash of a wave.

My dad watches me struggle to pick the bowls up with one hand, yet makes no move to help me.

“Don’t forget to get the chopsticks.” He doesn’t look up from his phone.

I smooth my grimy apron and sit down. On the rickety wooden table, two incense candles are placed and a birthday cupcake is set in the middle. I wait for him to say happy birthday to me, but instead he picks up his chopsticks and begins to eat.

My mouth waters. We only get to eat seafood on special occasions. I reach out with my chopsticks, swooping down on a small piece of lobster that glistens with sauces like the surface of the sea scintillating with sunlight. My dad knocks my hand out of the way.

“Leave the lobster. Just eat the noodles.” His storm grey eyebrows are furrowed into a hard line. “Look how fat you are lah, you need to lose some weight. No good man will want to marry you.”

Obediently, I eat a bite of the noodles but find that I cannot taste anything. My tongue has disappeared. My mouth opens and closes in silent horror, but my dad pays no attention. He had always wanted a quiet daughter anyways. Instead, I spend the rest of the meal pinching the soft pudge of my belly underneath the table.

The next day is a day of brilliant sunlight and ebbing clouds. I tuck my surfboard underneath my good arm and check that I have my bus pass. As I turn the door knob, my dad appears at the entrance with his hands on his hips.

“Where are you going? Surfing again?”

I open my mouth to speak, but only breathless air comes out.

He looks at the surfboard. “Stay home. The laundry needs to be done. I’m going out to play mahjong.”

I stand there for a fragile eternity before finally propping my surfboard against the wall. When I sit down on a chair to fold the clothes, I find I can no longer get up. My right leg is gone. It has died like the soul of a bird with wings clipped for so long, it has withered and wasted away.

As I look down at my ebbing body, indignance rises like tsunamis in my heart and digs into my skin with fish hook tenacity. Why do I have to do all the housework? Why can’t I eat the lobster we supposedly bought for my birthday? I reach for my surfboard and prop myself up with it, hopping towards the kitchen with renewed purpose.

I open the fridge. Last night’s leftovers are still there. I dig through the noodles with my hand, ignoring the slick oil against my fingers and the garlic sauce dripping down my wrist. Finally, I find a small piece of lobster. I put it in my mouth, relishing in the burst of savoury flavour that fills my mouth and restores my tongue.

I can regain myself. I can regain my life. Supported by my surfboard. I limp towards the door and pick up my backpack which has my bus pass in it. My heart is a hummingbird, thrashing against the cage confines of my chest. As the scintillating sun breathes upon me, my arm and leg and body recover from obsolescence like the sky at last unobscured by grey storm clouds. I run and I run and I run until I am finally free.