

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

KATE HUANG

B.A. Candidate in English
Columbia University, Class of 2028

You know it's her because you've seen her many times, ever since you came here, and you've clandestinely sworn, contemptuously and shamefully, that you won't be her. Contemptuously, because she was everything you were; shamefully, because they told you, that she was everything you can never be, and then they spat you out, built walls around their enclaves.

You distance yourself far from her: she who is smart, talented, hailed to be the next big thing; born with such brightness, utter sheens of brilliance. The future is set that she would be the pride of our country. They surrounded her, showered her with dignity. The bright young star must be protected from people like you. Your dullness must not touch her dazzling brilliance.

You hear screaming. Within the ivy-covered walls you are disfigured, red blobs swelling grease all over your face. In the corners of the classrooms, you sit in your own excrement. *Your dreams are foolish.* Just look at her. You're squandering our investment. You, the prodigal daughter. (What a waste).

She draws near you, gold medals clinking on her chest as she walks. Her blinding rays. You recoil. You run. Deep within the forest, you find a patch of woods they have not touched.

Soft, muddy, earthy, the treetops are nestled with sunshine. You dig your toes into the earth, whispering a language nobody spoke. You close your eyes. They hold you until you fell asleep. They whisper some more when you awake, pages and pages of beauty, all your own, in a language nobody spoke.

Soiled diapers were laid aside. They were here, talking your ear off with their stories, their privations, their worries, anxiously confiding in you: *Will you be here when I return? Don't leave until I fall asleep.*

On campus, you hug the books to your chest. In the classrooms, there was no longer the stench of human waste. They told you, *Your English is impeccable!*

So you earned your badge of honor. Your sheen. Your brilliance. English made sense. English was lyrical, clear, unstained. You carry in your arms the Brontës and Edith Wharton and George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. You breathe in words of unimagined beauty, awash with unbounded joy.

Then you see her again, just round the corner, another one. You wonder if your friends with tall noses see you as her. A repulsive thought to you, as if *they* entered your bloodstream.

Back at home, suddenly they swarm around you. Oh, how smart you are, how brilliant. Attempts were made to rewrite your memories. *You were always a smart kid.*

You swallow. What do you have to complain about? You're safe now, bathed in a sheen of brilliance, of glory, of future-looked-well-uponness. They would leave you alone.

On your shoulders, the impending gravestones press heavy. You decide, they must have the sun in their eyes until the very end. The medals on your chest clinked. Every day, you clean her diapers and stuff a washcloth into her mouth, hoping that silence means death.

You are called from the waiting room outside the fire chambers. Your face disfigures as you draw near them for the last time. (You and her). The ashes are still hot. You know you must forgive.