

# We Who Are About to Die?

By Jennie Lin\*

## *I.*

When I wrote my first legal memo, I felt as though I had bludgeoned a small creature to death. I did not know who or what this creature was—my reader? the English language? the art of writing?—but I knew that it was small and vulnerable, and that I had murdered it. I had strung together a massive, bulky chain of prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses, twisted it in my hands, and used it to strangle something very small and good.

Before I came to law school, I spent a year writing stories in San Francisco. I read a book a day and nearly went broke buying all of those books. I lived on a street where trolleys rolled by, bells chiming, and aspiring writers without day jobs congregated at the corner coffee shop to scribble intently into black leather-bound notebooks. I lived in an old apartment with a rooftop I could reach only by endangering my life on a set of rickety, rotting stairs. From the roof I could see the misted ocean. It was an uncomplicated existence.

The following summer, I went to Taiwan to write. In the countryside of Tsaotun I wandered through burning rice fields, a lost, sooty soul followed and half-devoured by a band of ragtag mosquitoes. By day I picked bushels upon bushels of wine-colored lychees on a fruit farm nestled in the mountains. Every few hours I perched on the edge of a concrete irrigation ditch and jotted happily and nonsensically into a notebook. At night I slept on a straw mat on a wooden floor. I had never slept so well.

When I was little, my crazy mother used to tell me bedtime stories about girls who got lost in rural Taiwan when she was my age: they were kidnapped, had their tongues cut out, and were sold as sex slaves. To be sure, this was not a pretty tale, but what really made me shiver at night was the fact that, without tongues, they could not tell a single person who they were. At first they must have wanted to grab the nearest person, shake him without mercy, and shriek their names in his horrified face. But as the years went by, and none of them could assert who they were, did these unidentifiable girls themselves forget?

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## II.

I am a temperamental romantic. I am impatient with: beaches, movies, dogs, pop culture, love. I romanticize: gardens overtaken by weeds, tundras, lizards, scars, sandstorms, goatees, suffering.

After I decided to go to law school, my friends began to ask me loaded questions. One writer friend always asked, “But what about your fiction?” in the way that I imagine divorcing parents are asked, “But what about your children?” Shortly before I left for school, he suddenly stopped asking. Instead he began to say, “Good luck writing crime novels and legal thrillers.” Translated, it meant *good luck losing your soul*.

Unconsciously, I tried to romanticize the whole law school undertaking in this light—the offering up of a soul. When I boarded my flight back east, I had the recurring image of Roman gladiators staring up at a raucous crowd that thirsted for their blood and proclaiming, in the face of all that fist-shaking inevitability, “*Morituri te salutamus*”—we who are about to die salute you. I had visions of satanic rituals where bodies were sliced neatly down the middle and souls were wrested out, unwilling, startled, purplish organs that shivered in the drafty air. Or perhaps the vanishing of the soul was more subtle—a weary sigh and the donning of a suit. Whatever its form, I clung to the idea of a soul on the eve of its slaughter. I felt tragic.

## III.

During my first few weeks at law school, I suffered an incapacitating bout of insomnia. I roamed the dorm hallways at four in the morning, prowled the campus grounds on moonless nights, and lay very still in the pitch-black confines of my tiny concrete room whose walls I sensed but could not see. I might as well have been eight years old again, gripping my sheets in the dark, imagining young girls with gaping, tongue-less holes instead of mouths and gaping voids instead of identities, worrying abstractly and inexplicably about whether our sense of self is effaced with unuse.

At eight years old, I also learned I had a cousin who was my age and who lived in a Canadian orphanage. My aunt gave him up when she remarried, entangled in some complicated adult mesh of cultural obligations and the Chinese insistence on starting anew. This information, still murky to me, came up one bedtime when I had just done something that I no longer remember, perhaps bitten someone and drawn blood or shouted with all the childhood honesty of the moment that I wanted my sister to die and rot in hell. My mother leaned over my bed in the dark and whispered something along the lines of, “What kind of family gives up their children? I’ll tell you—your father’s family. I’d watch my step if I were you.”

Since then, insomnia for me has always been brought on and haunted by shadowy figures that wander dark expanses, searching in vain for some wisp of their former selves that existed when they still had tongues, expressiveness, mothers, a sense of welcome. I often thought of my aunt, who must have slipped from time to time into her own cheerless realm to brood upon this piece of her that she had lobbed off and thrust away. Am-

putees feel their missing limbs with ghostly pangs. What does separating with the inseparable do to us?

#### IV.

Aging and the passing of time have always seemed to me to be accompanied by a hardening. People become rigidified in their roles, subscribe to one school of thought or another, and retroactively assign reasons to the choices they have made until they find, to their relief, either resignation or complacency. In old age, people have canned answers to everything; that is why they sound so wise.

When plaque builds up and hardens in our arteries, the process is called arteriosclerosis and leads to vascular disease, the number one killer in America. On our teeth it creates tartar and leads to decaying gums and the most grotesque medical photographs known to man: cracked teeth growing every which way and sinking in a cottony mess of yellow and fuchsia gums.

#### V.

To utter "*morituri te salutamus*"—to say *we who are about to die* rather than *we who may die* or *we who are not afraid to die*—is somewhat defeatist. But perhaps this ritualistic acceptance of a fatal end allowed a gladiator standing alone in the open arena to fight as though he were invincible. After all, once a person has died, he or she no longer has use for such inconvenient things as fear and pain.

Romanticizing the start of law school in this way is melodramatic. It may also be detrimental. And yet it is tempting to cope, like a little budding existentialist, by assuming that only by accepting our doomed fate can we find any semblance of humanity or happiness. The initiation chant goes like this: "Yup, sold my soul. But at least I squeezed a few million out of it."

In this grisly picture of law school as an underworldly realm where, hunched over and deformed and shackled by debt, we have prematurely offered up our souls, there is little room for thoughts of identity and purpose. We must spurn some essential part of ourselves. We become tongue-less orphans, or perhaps orphaners: the stuff of fitful sleep.

#### VI.

A few law school friends claim that in ten years they will not be practicing law. In ten years they will be rich enough, or powerful enough, or, God willing, handsome enough, to do what they actually want to do in life. Others define their individual desires by pointing to some alternative. One friend says with a completely straight face that he would have been an astronaut had he done what he truly wanted. Another says, rock star. I feel as though I am back in second grade, peeking at the boys' three-sentence essays about What I Want to Be. When my little brother was in second grade, he wrote an

essay in orange crayon that went like this: “I want to be a garbage man. I will be good at driving trucks. I will be good at dumping garbage at the garbage dump.” My parents tore it up and made him write something equally vapid about doctorhood.

Seven months into law school, I have not come to many pithy realizations. But I really do not want to say that after ten years I *will* write, or worse, that I *would have been* a writer if not for law school. To put ourselves on hold, or to define our true selves in terms of some unattained, passed-up opportunity is to renounce identity in all its provocative complexity in favor of a sketch—some rudimentary idea of what we could have been but are not.

I never know what to say when asked why I am here. My answers are capricious and unsatisfactory and inevitably trail off mid-sentence into awkward silence. But when I think of committing myself to some coherent and socially pre-approved mantra, I can almost feel myself growing older, arteries hardening, teeth loosening within mushy gums. I am afraid that if I repeated an explanation often enough, I would actually believe it. I would be imprisoned by my own catch phrase.

## VII.

I am heading to Alaska in June. During the day I will research and draft motions in the Attorney General’s Office. After work I will drive twenty minutes out of Anchorage and be face-to-face with expansive solitude. At night I will bartend. Do wretched, despairing figures slump over bars at one in the morning if the sun is beaming? On weekends I will pack a lunch and head into the mountains to write. I have heard it is possible to go days without uttering a word. When my internship is over, a friend or two will visit. We will lose ourselves in the wilderness and shoot inanimate things.

What will the unrelenting twenty-hour stretches of sunlight do for my sleep? It sounds somehow comforting. When I was eight and an insomniac, I started shutting my bedroom door and sleeping with the lights on. My mother was kept at bay in some strange vampiric way, as though the light sapped her restless nighttime penchant for hovering over my bed and whispering cautionary tales with only the large whites of her eyes showing in the dark. In this small, manmade haven of stark overhead lighting, against the constant low hum of electricity being wasted, I gradually learned to sleep again.