In Two

by Sean Koa Seu

I.

I was an only child. And, like all only children hidden amongst the sprawling lawns and winding byways of the suburbs, I played by myself. My mother would cook dinner and watch the television, waiting for my father to return home from work. She would listen to Brian Williams drone about the War on Terror as she pushed the asparagus around in her skillet, back and forth, back and forth, never letting the stalks sit still enough to brown. Most nights my father would return home very, very late. This never stopped my mother from preparing dinner promptly at six. Potatoes on the stove! Salmon in the oven. He'll be home soon.

I would lie on the wooden floor of our kitchen as she cooked. I would spin my Crayola markers like tops, as fast as they could go until the marker became a semi-opaque circle, an illusion of completeness that I could destroy by stopping the spin with my finger. I once told my mother I loved this spin so much that it broke my heart. She gasped, asked how my markers could have possibly hurt me, and I, having misunderstood the meaning of the word "heartbreak," became utterly perplexed. I thought "breaking your heart," meant that you loved something so much that your heart split with joy. No, my mother told me. Heartbreak comes in twos. I went back to spinning my markers, a child alone, unsure of what she meant.

II.

I don't quite remember the twin towers falling. I was, after all, only four. My memories are appropriated from a documentary I saw in a middle school current events class. I remember thinking it incredibly dull.

As for the day itself: I enter the living room of a small farmhouse. I glance at the television on the bookshelf. The second tower falls over and over again, on repeat. Falling straight down, vertically, top to bottom, top to bottom. My father seems somewhat concerned, his crow's feet deepening with the flicker of the television screen. In this memory, he has aged ten years. I remember the lines of his forehead, his head of gray hair. Strange— I know for a fact that in 2001 his hair was still jet black.

And then September 11th bled into the 12th, into November, into 2002 and so on. My mother shakes her head, muttering "nothing's been the same since..." as I scribble with my Crayola markers on blank sheets of printer paper. I'm sprawled out on the floor without socks, and probably without pants, anywhere between 2004 and 2008. A *60 Minutes* episode plays somberly on a television set. I know it wasn't our flatscreen, which we certainly didn't buy until much later, after it had become inappropriate for me to roll around on the living room floor in only underwear.

Another memory: I'm a high school junior. I open a textbook and find, to my surprise, that 9/11 has been added to the canon of American history. I have never

imagined that history could include the lifespan of Britney Spears. The photograph of the smouldering first tower looks exactly the way it did in my head. Suspicious, since photographs seldom replicate reality so well.

But the truth is, I never inhaled the cloud of dust, or ran from falling rubble, or heard even a rumble. I never saw the posters of the missing. I never even saw the post-tragedy episode of *Saturday Night Live* until years after the fact. The deaths of three thousand people were merely far off echoes from beyond a screen, or the cover of a book, or occasionally hidden underneath the lid of a barbeque on the Fourth of July. And echoes are hardly enough to stop a child from spinning his markers.

I couldn't understand why the World Trade Center was unique. Why was this different from the strangling of that sixteen year old girl three towns over. Why was this different than unplugging someone from a respirator on Grey's Anatomy? Why was this different than shootings in Tacoma, than G.I. Joes and army tanks? Why were these two towers different?

III.

In 2001, they destroyed two towers. In 2003, they destroyed one more. Please don't ask me who "they" were. The "they" hardly matters to a small child.

The third tower was my father's workplace, Seattle City Hall. The City Council would replace its old municipal building with a new, sleeker version. A demolition team had been hired, a wrecking ball obtained. On my father's last day of work in his old office, my mother and I were invited to a children's lunch. We ate ham sandwiches off paper plates in the windowless office kitchen, while the adults sipped their Starbucks iced lattes, and afterwards each child was gifted an eight pack of Crayola markers. We were told, much to our delight, that we could color on the white walls of the office building. I spent the rest of the afternoon running manically through empty hallways, trying to fill every wall with as much red as I possibly could. My best companion, Squirrel, tagged alongside me.

Squirrel was the only person in the world who understood me. In fact, he was my first friend, a companion of an only child. After my mother's little heartbreak-speech, I was fully resolved to experience heartbreak myself. *Heartbreak comes in twos.* And so Squirrel was my second in command. He wore a coy expression that clued me into his every thought. He spoke in a voice that sounded almost identical to mine, except maybe an octave higher, and he could, strangely, finish every single one of my sentences.

Squirrel would give me advice on what to draw with my markers. He'd tell me to draw a rainbow, with little clouds on the bottom, or a house with a yellow roof. Squirrel would even draw too sometimes, although his drawings were a little too morbid for my taste. A building on fire? Men with guns? He was a bit much.

But on this day, the day of ham sandwiches, Squirrel and I fought. He had lost the red marker, and after a dramatic argument which ended with my delivery of a long, scolding monologue about the

intricacies of heartbreak, I left Squirrel in the windowless kitchen to go play on my own.

It was only hours later, on the ferry ride home, that I noticed he was missing. Squirrel was gone. Abandoned. Still in a windowless kitchen, destined for demolition. But all my father's things had already been moved the five blocks to his new office. To the old office we could not return.

Three days later, a wrecking ball. The tower collapsed vertically.

I was, once again, an only child.

IV.

Sophomore year of high school was the year of 9/11 jokes. I had two friends, Chris Fraiser and Chris Hart, one who never smoked marijuana, the other who had never been to the dentist. We would watch *Pulp Fiction* and listen to Madonna on vinyl, and sometimes we'd walk to one another's houses on roads last paved in the nineties, pine needles sticking to our sneakers.

We had our 9/11 conspiracy theories, derived mainly from those dark parts of the internet our parents told us not to go. Places with neon green text on black interfaces, the word *jihad* underlined, italicized, and bolded. These websites told us it was an inside job. It was Dick Cheney. It was Uncle Sam, it was Mickey Mouse. Or the Jews.

We'd ride the school bus every morning and preach these theories to whoever would listen. A girl named Kelly was extremely susceptible to Chris Hart's charming explanation of the first tower's demolition. "How could it have fallen so cleanly?" he'd ask, as Kelly slid her hands inside the long sleeves of her hoodie. She'd giggle with an "I don't know," and wait to be asked to homecoming, a question which Chris Hart declined to ever broach. A budding homosexual with a crush on my comrade, I would stare at Kelly intently, hoping to God she'd disappear, or at least stop giggling. These bus rides were often nauseating.

Chris Fraiser would chime in occasionally with an oil-related conspiracy, but usually he'd just listen to My Chemical Romance on his iPod Nano, unaware of the burgeoning love triangle seated beside him.

I remember where I was on that day in late October. I hadn't taken the school bus, as I'd been called to school early to help build a set for the drama club's production of *Fahrenheit 451*. We had just erected two towers, which would, eventually, be bridged by a long metal platform. The towers took a lot of craftsmanship; the wood was painted to resemble steel. The construction pattern was cross-hatched. Work to be proud of. A good start to a typical day.

Except that it wasn't.

I received a text from Chris Hart as I swept sawdust from the stage.

"Some girl just got hit by a truck."

"Kelly? Haha."

"No. But Kelly saw it too. We don't know her name."

"Oh. For real?"

"Yeah. In front of the bus. At the bus stop."

"Did you see anything?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

The school hummed with her name: Trudy. The local news had finally managed to capture our attention. Teachers couldn't get cellphones out of our hands quickly enough. Students constantly checking small screens in search of an update. Is she okay? She's in critical condition. Will she live?

They drove her to our football field in our county's loudest ambulance. A helicopter landed between the goalposts, a private show for the entire athletics department. They wheeled her over the green in a stretcher. Look! It's her! They flew her to St. Joseph's. How exciting. She remained there for two days.

We were discussing *1984* when they announced her death over the intercom. Emily Cobb shrieked. And shrieked. And shrieked. Our class sat uselessly until another Emily, Emily Lee, finally stood up, approached the crying girl, and escorted her out. Finally, silence. Then: "Let's resume our discussion of Winston Smith."

That same afternoon, Chris, Chris, and I sat outside the Aquaculture building. We peered through the windows to see a tank full of tiny fish, swarming rapidly through two columns of rising bubbles.

"She told me once that she liked bacon ice cream." Chris Fraiser announced to the fish. "In swim class."

"That breaks my heart." I offered, unsure.

Chris Hart's eyes gazed past the fish tank. Two days ago. What had he seen? He wouldn't say. In fact, he didn't talk to us for a month. For a while, he would only talk to Kelly, both of them spurred on by a mutual fear of I don't know what. They started dating; I was traumatized. When Chris finally started speaking to me again, we had a lot less to joke about.

V.

Sherry and Sylvia Davis were twins, indiscernible from one another. Even their outfits were identical, until about the fourth grade, when Sylvia decided she hated pink, although not many people noticed. Syvlia and Sherry were, for a long time, synonymous with each other, even though Sherry was soft-spoken and thoughtful, and Sylvia was terrible and brash. Sometimes, it seemed as if the two girls were locked in a battle with one another, although from the outside they remained indistinguishable.

Often I would play with Sherry and Sylvia by the monkey bars. It was here that Sherry asked me if I liked her more than her sister. I said yes, although I wasn't absolutely certain that was true. I had never played with Sherry without Sylvia.

Throughout middle school, Sherry and Sylvia tried to be as different as possible, but few people could tell. The Davis twins were defined primarily by each other, Sherry becoming everything Sylvia was not. As Sherry became more studious, Sylvia became less so. Sylvia dyed her hair seven different colors, and Sherry stuck to her natural brown. Sherry made honor society, Sylvia sat in lunch detention. But still, no matter how much they attempted to dissolve their twinhood, the Davis twins still remained identical.

The girls may have kept growing that way forever, until Sherry had become an accountant-like jewelry maker and Sylvia a

jewelry-makeresque accountant, but no. One night, their elder brother died unexpectedly in his dormitory at the University of Washington, his heart stopped by a lethal cocktail of study drugs and alcohol. The Davis family became the first family we knew to appear in our local newspaper. My mother circled their family photo with a huge red Crayola marker. At school, my classmates and I would stare at this grayscale portrait until we had memorized the discrepancies in each face. Sherry Davis and Sylvia Davis. No longer just the Davis Twins. Seen for the first time, in black and white. Would they mourn in the same way? Did they both cry? Which one cried longer?

Sherry and Sylvia disappeared. A week later, they returned to school. Despite their matching black uniforms, no one had trouble telling them apart ever again.

VI.

My mother had two cockatiels. She kept these birds in a precarious hanging cage over the fireplace. During earthquakes, this cage would swing back and forth like a pendulum, the birds screeching like cuckoos. Neither of these birds had names, as they were adopted from my recently deceased uncle and my mother had never bothered to learn what he called them. To her, they were simply the Love Birds.

My mother had a small obsession with love birds. We had an entire salt and pepper shaker collection featuring doves and chickens and pigeons. Each salt had its pepper. These little ornaments perched atop our kitchen cupboards. Safe in their nests, their love could never die. My mother preserved this love by seeing that these salt and pepper shakers were never used. If we never shook them over our asparagus, they would never be broken.

As for our living birds, well, they could hang by a small chain.

I started calling the two birds Salt and Pepper from the moment I realized I couldn't call both of them "Birdy" without confusion. These new names, however, were extremely fluid. They'd often switch halfway through the week. They would fight in their cage over these names, and I would watch the flurry of feathers with morbid delight.

One morning, after a particularly bad domestic dispute, I awoke to find Salt (or was it Pepper?) on the floor of his cage. I alerted my mother by tugging the sleeve of her blouse. She disposed of Salt without ceremony. Okay. Sure. I guess we don't have funerals for birds. I went back to coloring with my markers. After all, he wasn't my responsibility.

Pepper (or was it Salt?), on the other hand, seemed immortal. I grew older with Pepper, until I reached the age of ten when my mother decided I was big enough for a bit of responsibility. She decided I would now be in charge of cleaning the birdcage, of feeding and watering little Pepper.

I hated this job. I'd have to touch Pepper's soiled newspapers with gloves. I read "Labor Day Sale!" and "Iraq drives Bush's rating to new low," through layers of bird poop. The water dish was always filthy with feather oil, and every time I tried to replace the bird feeder Pepper would peck

me. I grew to hate Pepper, for all his ingratitude.

I became increasingly careless. Sometimes, I'd forget to refresh Pepper's water. I wouldn't clean out his cage for days. His living environment became increasingly filthy. I'd learn to execute the cage-cleaning just in time to evade my mother's scolds. I was a well-fed only child: how could I have known that neglect has consequences?

One morning, I woke to find Pepper lying on the bottom of his cage. I became inconsolable. I demanded a burial. My mother, who would have been perfectly content with throwing the little corpse in the compost, helped me make a coffin out of a shoebox. Losing Salt was none of my business. But losing Pepper felt like losing myself, if only because I was supposed to have fed him sunflower seeds.

I wonder if my mother had been teaching me a lesson. My reaction to the death of Salt had been vulgar at worst, apathetic at best. A perceptive mother might have given me chores on purpose, if she thought it might have taught me the value of life. It worked. Grief is guilt. It is knowing that you are connected to the dead, that your actions, if you take responsibility for them, affect the lives of others. It requires two, the missed and the missing, the lost and the loser. Did Pepper mourn for Salt? I mourn for them both. If only I had never been made to clean that damn cage. For the next month, all I could draw with my markers were pairs of love birds, porcelain, stashed safely in the cupboards.

VII.

My father is lying between the two of us, my mother and I. We are far away from our kitchen with the hardwood floors, far from the asparagus my mother used to cook for him. But some things remain the same. In front of the bed, mounted so that he could watch (back when he could open his eyes) is a television set. "Full exoneration," and "EU extends Brexit deadline," scroll in small letters at the bottom of the screen. A newscaster is speaking, but the TV is muted. All we can hear is the heart monitor.

His hair is gray now.

My mother's is too.

As children, we learn agency by separating ourselves from the rest of the world. This is called self-object relation. We divide the universe into the subject and the object, the manipulator and manipulated, the loved and the lover. There can be no killer without a victim, no loss without a loser. No building collapses in a vacuum. No light goes undivided. No person dies alone.

When I was three months old, my father flew me to Honolulu to visit my ailing grandmother. This was the first time I had been on a plane. No one on our flight could have predicted that an identical plane would crash into the Pentagon three years later. Were we somehow responsible? Ignorant, bystanders? Any tool can become a weapon. It's the price we pay for convenience.

Sometimes I sit behind the wheel and I recall the two thousand children killed each year in automobile accidents. Or the 363,000 innocent people killed in our twenty-year war. I didn't know them

personally, of course; I didn't know any of them. People die, we say. Of course we're correct.

And cancer too. Was there anything we could have done?

So now I say goodbye to the man I watched watching the towers fall. And I say goodbye to the couple my parents were. And I say goodbye to my father and me. The two of us. Together.

And we unhook him from the respirator.

Two days later I'm at the airport, flying back to my new city. It seems so natural to fly now. I remember in preschool, looking up through the overcast sky to see enormous planes taking off from SeaTac Airport, huge jets flying to Vancouver or Houston or New York City, unable to comprehend how the giant metal machines could defy the sheer force of gravity. I would draw these enormous aircraft with my markers, although I stopped drawing a long time ago. Now I only circle articles in the newspaper.

But, of course, the planes fly on. That's what they do. They flew on after my grandparents witnessed their flock over Pearl Harbor. They flew on after 2001, and they'll fly on again, whatever the cost. It has something to do with air pressure on the wings, how there is more pressure below than above, or so I hear. My mother could explain it better; she used to be a flight attendant. She's good at explaining things. I did, afterall, finally grasp the meaning of heartbreak.