

## Winners - 2021 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

**Malayna Chang**

Miramonte High School - 11th grade

Essay/Memoir/Biography

### In Memory Of

The pungent smell of a newly sanitized hospital room is one I will never forget. While most people's childhood memories are chock-full of times spent on vacation with their family, parents cheering at Little League baseball games, or birthday parties surrounded by friends and chocolate cake, my memories are replete with hospital beds, beeping heart monitors, and the rustle of doctor's scrubs as they gave yet another sad prognosis with a disheartened gaze and a shake of the head. I struggle to remember the happy times of my childhood without becoming overwhelmed with everything that came after it. I learned what death was from a young age, and while the kids around me were learning the lyrics to Carly Rae Jepsen's new pop song of the summer or struggling to ride a bike without training wheels for the first time, I was working on coming to terms with what a life without my mother would look like and figuring out how I could sit through the flashing video collage of her at the funeral without sobbing uncontrollably until I couldn't breathe or see the world in front of me.

My mother played an undeniable role in my life; ironically, I would say that she has been one of my largest influences and role models despite the fairly short amount of time I spent with her. When I was a young child, I remember driving up to Lake Tahoe with her and my dad, screaming to music from *Les Misérables* and *Glee*, and learning the lyrics to Journey's "Don't Stop Believing" at age six. In Lake Tahoe, unlike other kids, we didn't ski or snowboard and instead spent time hiking up mountains and taking pictures in front of glimmering lakes.

The hotel arcades were a common haunt of ours and I remember playing the automated driving games with my sister while we laughed excitedly. When we were at Lake Tahoe, it was the only time we ever got to see snow and I remember starting mock snowball fights with my parents and my younger sister and building poorly-made snowmen.

One of my most visceral memories with my mother was reading E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* for the first time together when I was five years old. By the end of the novel, my mother and I were a mess of tears as we learned that the spider had moved on to a stage beyond life. It was the first book that we had read together that brought me to tears, and it was even more surprising to see my mother crying along with me. We had our first conversation about death and I remember discussing the cycle of life with her. I had only seen death in books and movies and I never expected to have needed to recall that conversation with my mother so soon after.

Even in the moments before her imminent death, Charlotte was still sagely uttering beautiful lines. From "salutations" to her many quips about friendship, Charlotte's words influenced me from an early age. However, the one that stands out the most is, surprisingly, "The world is a wonderful place when you're young." Rather than her many other famous aphorisms, this line still rings true.

The book explores the idea of childhood innocence and naivete: children often tend to go about life believing everything to be splendid and brilliant. I remember the first time I went to the beach; I played in the water with my father and sister for hours while my mother watched us from her blanket on the beach. When I encouraged her to come in, she reluctantly stood and dipped a toe into the water before recoiling and screaming from the cold temperature, causing me to laugh wildly. I remember building sandcastles that were more similar to three-dimensional mountains than the fortresses I imagined them to be. This is my first memory of being truly

happy for the first time. My father asked me on the drive home, "Was this the best day of your life?" I nodded enthusiastically, positive that it couldn't get better than that. My mother smiled knowingly from the passenger seat, certain that better things waited for me in my future. While I've made some good memories since then, I often recount that day at the beach as being one of the best of my life.

I was forced to grow up earlier than I should have. The days spent at the beach and in Lake Tahoe are some of my only fond memories of my childhood before I was struck by impending grief and loss. I know that nothing could have been done to prevent it but I often wonder why whatever other-worldly forces there are decided to inflict this pain upon our family at such a young age.

My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer just a few years after we read *Charlotte's Web* together. I remember driving through the orange-lit Caldecott Tunnel on the way to the doctor's office to get back the test results from a biopsy on a strange lump on her chest that seemed to suddenly appear out of nowhere. In the backseat, I couldn't focus on anything but the world outside the window rushing past me; I don't think I understood the impact that the diagnosis would have on my family. I wasn't sure what cancer was and I remember googling the term "biopsy" the night before, to no avail. My parents had been fairly hush-hush about the whole ordeal, and I didn't know much of anything about what was happening.

My mother checked in to her appointment and my father decided to take my sister and me to a run-down retail complex nearby with nothing much except a Wal-Mart. It must have been close to Christmastime, as the shelves were lined with Christmas trees, glass ornaments, and holiday wreaths. I distinctly remember laughing at some dancing Santa Claus dolls in bathtubs when my dad got the call that changed everything forever.

At first, my mother tried to stay positive. She had high hopes based on the cancer

research she had done on alternative treatments. I wasn't too worried, mainly because I didn't understand the extent of the danger she was truly in. She had a malignant type of cancer and since we had caught it extremely late, it had already taken a turn for the worse. However, I didn't know anything about the different stages and her plastered-on smiles reassured me enough to think that nothing was truly wrong.

My mom had been homeschooling me since I was five years old. She had strong ideas about the flaws in the current American education system and enrolled me in Seventh Generation homeschooled classes in which she was my one and only teacher. There is a strong stigma around homeschooled children as being "weird" or "socially inept" but I had never known otherwise and loved my life. She protected me from those stereotypes and joined me in many homeschooling groups where I made friends and developed social skills. Rather than taking tests and undergoing rote memorization, I learned in a progressive and alternative way that I believe has truly influenced my learning habits today. I took the normal subjects, including math, English, history, and science, as well as a few extra subjects unique to my education pathway at the time, such as piano, Latin, and art. I genuinely loved, and still love, learning new things, a passion that I believe was fostered by homeschooling.

My interests have always been in the Humanities, particularly writing and reading, though lately, it has evolved to a strong interest in history and advocacy. From a young age, I was writing short stories and poems and made a poor attempt at a novel at eight years old that ended up being over ten thousand words of pure fluffed-up trash. Although many parents encourage their children to work harder in STEM topics, my mother always adamantly stated that I could pursue whatever passion I wanted, no matter what it was. I used to bounce around proudly telling anyone interested to listen that I was going to be a "famous writer when I grow up." My mother, who supported me more than anything, created a website that collected all of

my writing from Kindergarten to second grade.

All of this changed when she received the cancer diagnosis. The website lay untouched and I began to start adapting to teaching myself in various subjects. She tried her best to help me but there were times when she was too weak to get up off the couch and I told her to sit back down and rest. My father tried to pitch in but he was at work from nine to five every weekday, leaving my sister and me alone, with my mother sleeping upstairs, as I taught myself how to use fractions and struggled to teach my sister the things I had learned two years ago. My mother's role in my education helped guide me in teaching my sister from first to second grade, something I will always be grateful for.

For a long period of time, my mother went to Los Angeles to undergo a new radiation-based treatment. I lived with my father and my sister for the entire time she was in LA, which helped me adapt to a life without my mother even before she was truly gone. On my eighth birthday, I visited her in Los Angeles and left the Bay Area for the first time. She gave me a beautiful pink dress and we went to Disneyland, a family of four once more. I remember wearing that dress to every "fancy" event I went to and even when I had outgrown it, I refused to stop wearing it. It reminded me of her and the happy smile she had worn when she gave it to me. Her treatment seemed to be working well and we even rode the big rollercoaster together at California Adventures, screaming as we barrelled up and down the tall cliff-like structures.

After she came back from Los Angeles, life seemed to resume back to normal. We went back to homeschooling, she watched her K-Dramas and played Pinball on the computer, and my sister and I played fake-restaurant and came up with our "princess personas" of Alexandra and Athena. Life seemed to fall back into place and I was happy that she was back and seemingly healthy again, despite residual pains from the treatment.

Then came the day we found out the cancer had spread beyond the original breast tumor.

Suddenly, faster than I could remember, she was forced to use a walker, moving at the pace of a ninety-year-old woman, and she began to lose her beautiful hair after being forced to submit to chemotherapy after her adamant years of refusal. I remember crying a lot more this time before I went to sleep as it began to set in that this time, things might not go back to normal.

My mother's condition worsened and eventually, she was lying unconscious on a hospital bed with a breathing tube stuck down her nose. Sometimes, when she was awake and lucid, she would tell me all about the huge dreams she had for me, laughing that I was gonna have all sorts of boyfriends when I got older and have a fabulous singing and writing career, after attending Harvard University. Nobody instilled as much confidence in myself as she did and I loved having these conversations with her.

Then she pulled out a picture book that opened my eyes to how dire the situation truly was for the first time. *A Story for Hippo* is a book that I hope no child is forced to read, despite the beautiful way it portrays loss. Monkey and Hippo are the best of friends; Hippo tells Monkey the most fabulous stories. However, Hippo passes away suddenly, leaving Monkey behind, devastated that he will never hear her stories again. However, Monkey realizes with the help of a friend that the best way to remember Hippo is by continuing to tell her stories. It's an elementary way of illustrating loss and the effect that it can have on people but I distinctly remember her reading the book to me while I cried next to her. It began to fully hit me that she might not recover this time.

I remember the day she passed away. It was quick but final and I remember being unable to cry or show any emotion in the moments just after she had breathed her last breath. The thoughts of all the things we could never do again hit me like a torrent of knives in the chest as I struggled to breathe. Never again would we dance at midnight to Michael Jackson's "Beat It," laughing our heads off, never again would she laughingly scold me for sneaking up

behind to watch *Glee*, a show she always said was too old for me, never again would she play the piano while I sat next to her in awe, never again would she write in beautiful handwriting a “Great job!” on my work with a little smiley face next to it. Never again would she update the website she had kept for me for so long, never again would I see her hair blowing in the wind under the massive white hat she always wore, never again would I watch her jump up and down on the trampoline while we talked about the latest book I had just read. My last materialistic gift from her was my Amazon Kindle so that I could have access to any book whenever I wanted it. She bought it especially so that I could download Lucy Maud Montgomery’s *Emily of New Moon* series, which always happened to be sold out when I told her how much I wanted the books.

My mother’s friend compiled a video of my mother from elementary-, middle-, high school, college, and beyond. I was suddenly introduced to new parts of my mother that I had never known about before. Today, I cannot watch that video without crying at her happy smile while she posed with a full face of Halloween makeup or while she stood next to her friends at her eighth-grade promotion in a beautiful dress and a huge perm. That is a part of her that I will never know and I wish I had been smart enough to ask her more about her life before she had me. My mother had always simply been my mother to me, and I never truly thought about the woman, friend, sister, daughter, and classmate that she had been to others.

Today, I rarely talk about my mother to anyone, despite the lesson I learned from Monkey, mainly because it happened so long ago that I can barely remember parts of my life with her. My family lived with flip phones and picture cameras, making the few videos I have of her voice the most precious since we never recorded as many as we should have. After she passed away, I was forced into public school for the first time. It was a harsh environment and it was hard to make friends, especially since I was still recovering from everything that had

happened and struggling to learn under brand-new circumstances. I remember a classmate calling me “weird” for not knowing what the STAR standardized tests were in fifth grade. My mother had always said that standardized tests did not promote learning and so I had never taken one. The public school system was an abrupt change that I was forced into that was never planned.

None of the current people in my social life know who my mother was or anything about her, and I mostly keep my memories of her to myself. I don't want to depress those around me or depress myself thinking about her, especially at school or when I'm hanging out with friends. I often cry a lot about “trivial” things, but usually, the tears stem from a whole mess of things that I choose to not think about whenever possible. When I'm reading a sad story, I remember the time I cried with my mother over *Charlotte's Web*. When I'm watching a sad movie, I remember crying with my family on my first movie theater trip to see *Up*. However, sometimes when I'm writing again or when I'm debating in class about something we once argued about in third grade, I remember my mother and her role in my life with a fondness rather than sadness. I remember how much I have always looked up to her and valued the advice she gave me and the compliments she bestowed on me when I was too young to truly understand the goals she had for me. Despite the limited amount of time I had with my mother, I will always treasure the moments I did have with her and the influence she has had on my life and the person I am today.

**Wendy Mapaye**  
Miramonte High School - 11th Grade  
Poetry

Sand.

there was a time when time scared me.

its hands reached out,

threatened to never let go.

i cracked and tumbled and spiraled till

i grew wings on my feet,

till i floated and circled,

till i asked,

“where did it go?”

in the light it remained,

in the dark it lingered,

and at dusk it stood.

but it is the glass on the grass

and the sand on the curb

and the hands i hold.

i was molded and melted and formed till

the ground was my cloud,

till i landed and bloomed,

till i asked,

“is this what it feels like to be Strong.”

**Chaya Tong**

Miramonte High School – 12th Grade  
Essay/Memoir/Biography

### The Memory Keeper

I was the “ultimate daycare kid” — I never left. From before I could walk to the start of middle school, Kimmy’s daycare was my second home. While my classmates at school went home with stay-at-home moms to swim team and girl scouts, I traveled to the town next door where the houses are smaller, the parched lawns crunchy under my feet from the drought.

At school, I stuck out. I was one of the only brown kids on campus. Both of my parents worked full time. We didn’t spend money on tutors when I got a poor test score. I’d never owned a pair of lululemon leggings, and my mom was not versed in the art of zumba, jazzercise, or goat yoga. At school, I was a blade of green grass in a California lawn, but at daycare, I blended in.

The kids ranged from infants to toddlers. I was the oldest by a long shot, but I liked it that way. As an only child, this was my window into a sibling relationship—well, seven sibling relationships. I played with them till we dropped, held them when they cried, got annoyed when they took my things. And the kids did the same for me. They helped as I sat at the counter drawing, and starred in every play I put on. They watched enviously as I climbed to the top of the plum tree in the backyard.

Kimmy called herself “the substitute mother,” but she never gave herself enough credit. She listened while I gushed about my day, held me when I had a fever, and came running when I fell out of the tree. From her, I learned to feed a baby a bottle, and recognize when a child was about to walk. I saw dozens of first steps, heard hundreds

of first words, celebrated countless birthdays. Most importantly, I learned to let the bottle go when the baby could feed herself.

And I collected all the firsts, all the memories and stories of each kid, spinning elaborate tales to the parents who walked through the door at the end of the day. I was the memory keeper, privy to the smallest snippets that go forgotten in a lifetime. I remember when Alyssa asked me to put plum tree flowers in her pigtails, and the time Arlo fell into the toilet. I remember the babies we bathed in the kitchen sink, and how Kimmy saved Gussie's life with the Heimlich maneuver. I remember the tears at "graduation" when children left for preschool, and each time our broken family mended itself when new kids arrived. When I got home, I wrote everything down in my pink notebook. Jackson's first words, the time Lolly fell off the couch belting "Let It Go." Each page titled with a child's name and the moments I was afraid they wouldn't remember.

I don't go to daycare anymore. Children don't hide under the table, keeping me company while I do homework. Nursing a baby to sleep is no longer part of my everyday routine, and running feet don't greet me when I return from school. But daycare is infused in me. I can clean a room in five minutes, and whip up lunch for seven. I remain calm in the midst of chaos. After taming countless temper tantrums, I can work with anyone. I continue to be a storyteller.

When I look back, I remember peering down from the top of the plum tree. I see a tiny backyard with patches of dead grass. But I also see Kimmy and my seven "siblings." I see the beginnings of lives, and a place that quietly shapes the children who run across the lawn below. The baby stares curiously up at me from the patio, bouncing in her seat. She will be walking soon, Kimmy says.

**Jarret Zundel**

Miramonte High School – 9th grade

Short Story

Per Aspera Ad Astra

Dear grandma,

I am writing this to you, Bik Wan. *Blue Cloud*.

I am writing this because you told me to become a singer, an actor, a photographer, a journalist. I am writing this because through your life's limitations you taught me never to live within the borders of stereotype, society, and self-doubt. I am writing this because your life in the US was confined by your English language ability, controlling husband, and race, because the goal of a life is to be remembered, and you could do nothing but flee and survive, because you gave me the privilege to act on what you couldn't afford.

To appreciate the struggle.

"The stars will shine your path," you said. "But don't love them too much. Don't depend on anyone."

"Per aspera ad astra," I responded. You tried to fit your mouth onto it, saying "peuh aspela ad astla" instead. I smiled and decided that was enough to learn in one day. I'd teach you the meaning some other time.

Don't you think there's some authority in age? Age is like a fortress of historical texts, because it objectifies opinions and demands at least a superficial respect.

Before you spoke, you lifted your head off the chair, opened your eyes, and took a sip of jasmine tea. We all watched you and were immediately calmed, as if the green tea was flowing, bouncing across bloodlines and into our very own throats. Behind you was a painting of a tree and many animals dancing around it, the tree, the giver of life. Beside the image was

Chinese calligraphy, the seemingly effortless strokes, portrayals of how fierce a nimble brush can be. After putting the tiny teacup down, your eyes fell softly, releasing tension, and a faint smile revealed your yellow and stained teeth. It's funny to think that wars, famines, plagues, and migrations are not just lines in a textbook but visible on our bodies and reachable by the rivers of our bloodlines. Your knitted sweater was red and it commanded our attention, but when our eyes reached yours, we were at peace. I listened with my whole being, my mixed blood searing with affirmation, fully at home.

Do you remember those kinds of nights? Quick, look, wah, good, fast-fast kind of nights. When the tips of our tongues were like fireballs, our lips, like boiling clay, our teeth, browned and humble, our noses flat and eager, our eyes not at our food. Our ears were extroverts, craving family, photos, snaps, and hard laughs, murmurs. Our dancing fingers slid, wrapping around the chopsticks, grabbing and shoving and chewing and more salt and spice, tea and warm, hot, Ah! You like it, eh? Good to eat? Good eating! Hou sec. Doh je. Don't mention it! The carts would swerve like Dragon Boats on red rivers, speeding, spilling, green on yellow. Dumplings were dropped on tables and there were some smiles and judges and cries and dialects. Then, savory juices sunk into our mouths, down our esophaguses, through our stomachs, and on the way, passing right by our hearts—and our voice boxes, where Cantonese and Taishanese came rushing out like rivers from the past, carrying into the future our sad eyes and hopeful springs—our Lunar New Year's wishes.

And then we were outside, holding lanterns. "Take it," you said. Undeservingly, I took the little red envelope, my grasp tenuous under your hopes. "Sen nin fai lok. You grow up, be a good person." Your silent voice dripped words like raindrops—almost too soft to hear, but definitely there.

"Keep her longer," I whispered. "Don't let Grandma leave." Another tear came from my

eye and I shivered under the spring stars. The soft wind blew, cooling my pulsating face further, and I raised my lantern to the stars.

“Don’t eat another,” you laughed as my hands slid down to grab another slice of the white lotus mooncake. Our family didn’t celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival, except for you. For us, the mooncakes were tokens of our ethnicity, superficial symbols of our loyalty to none other than you. “Don’t eat another! You don’t want to end up like my mother, anus always hurting, stool never extracting.” Dictionary English, a more serious tone this time. You didn’t laugh, so I didn’t either. We must have sat there for hours on moon day, me looking into your wrinkles and creases, your willowed gleaming eyes with the beauty of Chang’e, her spirit forever imprisoned in the craters of the moon.

Beauty is carried through DNA, habits run in bloodlines. Your mother’s face is unmoved and prideful as she holds baby you in the photograph beside your bed. Another one of your photographs is black-and-white except for your lips, the color of aged rubies. You are an alluring woman from birth. Like my mother, you splash on makeup before photos and change into fancy jackets. Even in your elderly years, you draw in your eyebrows. Your most beautiful feature is your onyx-colored eyes, which you do nothing to, unless you make them shine like little moons on jaded worlds.

To the untrained ear, it sounds aggressive and rushed when Cantonese pops out of your mouth in little monosyllabic bursts, but I hear tall ocean waves roaring through your throat and crashing on your lips, one middle flat tone, one high rising tone, like a language factory line. Cantonese is like a naturally organized song, each character with a unique tone. For this reason, sentences have melodies that match meaning. Your mother tongue is one of the remaining Chinese dialects that retain the ancient language’s final *b*, *p*, and *k* sounds at the end of words, so your suggestions are really commands, your melodied consoling rhythmic in my

head like nursery rhymes. But when you read Tang dynasty poems, tone balance and rhyme is preserved. In this way, Cantonese is the language that can most elegantly turn emotion into expression.

I used to pick oranges for you in your garden. I fear I'll never forget the smile on your face as I brought them back to you. "So many oranges," I would say, and you would commend me: "Hou doh, hou doh. Good boy." Your eyes would then leave the oranges, look at me, and we both knew what you meant. "You can take some home if you want." You insisted. As I would walk out the front door, my hands held snacks ranging from leftover jung to Ritz crackers to a bag of oolong tea. To leave your house empty-handed was a sin. In another world, I would have forgotten you were an endless giver, and may have forgotten to thank you in the midst of my oblivious delight.

In seventh grade, I asked you for help on math homework and for the first time you didn't know the answer: "I used to be the top student in high school," you said. "It seems that I forgot everything!" I could hear your forlorn tone, sensing that this feeling was not bittersweetness, but the opposite, worse: sweetbitterness. Was it that you weren't satisfied with four years of secondary education, your family's savings never meeting your dreams halfway? "I'm going to make fried rice now." But it wasn't the kitchen you set off to. When I walked into your bedroom, you were peered in front of the high school algebra textbook you hadn't touched in sixty years, the one you used as a high school student in Hong Kong, your forehead now tensed, fingers shaking as they slowly caressed the numbers and parabolas. I stood behind the door peeking my head around it, watching your eyes squint more and more, your eyelids clenched together so tightly. A sudden exhale, your eyelids became smooth. Steady inhale. Perhaps math had taken you back to Hong Kong, to your school, teachers, and friends. Once upon a time, you might've been laughing with two other girls and eating daan taats, talking

about plans after high school. Maybe one of your friends went back to the rice farm in Guangdong, the other to work in a factory, and you silently dreamed of setting off overseas just to be grateful for soil on which bombs would never hit.

One's expectations dictate the amount of goodness of this country. Maybe "free" to you meant breath, a full stomach, a home, clean water. Maybe luxury was air conditioning, community college, a grocery store. Will you never understand? My "free" is more than a morning's breath.

One morning, the sun's rays chased away the clouds and shined through the windows. You were cooking for me when I said I wanted a dog. You set down the oil, shaking, no longer minding the chow fun on the stove. Your expression was weary and tense. "Mama killed my dog. She ate it." The chow fun started to blacken, its burning whiffs drifting through the air and making me cough. I wanted to ask why you didn't say, "I hate you, ma! Why did you kill my dog?" I inhaled, but you inhaled faster and put your hand down on the wooden counter next to my empty plate. "She had to," you said, "or we would have starved to death." My chow fun breakfast tasted smoky, the bitter flavor in culinary harmony with the salt.

The first time you saw snow was when you were eighty-three, in Tahoe, gazing out the window. It was the first time you had been out of the Bay Area since immigrating to the US. "Jarret, is that snow? Hai seet ah?" I looked, chuckled at your nervous face and wide eyes. "Ah, grandma, yes, that is snow." "Snow?" you asked, quivering, careful, but not afraid. "Yes," I said, but I myself had forgotten what snow was—not water, not ice, but something in between. You took a sip of tea. "Snow is cold, like ice, freezing. But it is soft, like...like..." I tried to think of something you knew. "Like your sweater, but cold." Lined against the walls were some of your prescription pills, rows of Chinese medicine, and the candle I had lit. "Ngo jung-ye," you smiled. *I like it.* The candle's wick, so soft and white, now blackening, was now burning

without regret.

Every year on your birthday, I wrote you a birthday card. You would smile softly and open the letter with a knife, careful not to break the envelope. In the letters, I would ask you about your life's adventure, which seemed more tangible as I grew up. I would compliment you, your eagerness to learn, your strength. My writing techniques became more advanced each year, but for you the experience was all the same: receive my letter, open, read, "good boy." One year, I handed you an envelope with something different. You gingerly cut it open and took out the piece of paper. When you saw it, your eyes opened like baby tigers. On the paper was not a single English letter. Everything was written in traditional Chinese characters. We were both silent, and your hands didn't shake over the text as they usually did. Instead, they steadily hovered over it. Your mouth whispered each word free of any accent, chuckling at my grammar errors every now and then. At reading my signature, you reached your arms around me and I knew that Mandela was right, that words spoken in one's first language went not to the head but to the heart.

Grandpa died first. In the hospital at four AM, the whole family gathered around his corpse, his corpse that had chopped wood, crossed oceans, lived in pitch dark to pay the bills. All those times you worried about what would happen had it been you who had fallen ill. All those times he told you he could kill you. Those tireless days feeding him, cleaning after him, bathing him, watching him charm the nurses. You reached out, your hand sturdy and tense, and touched his pale face hesitantly as if his eye was going to suddenly open. I held your hand tightly in that room, our hearts beating in tandem. The nurse asked what was to be done of the corpse, and everyone turned to you. You uttered not a word. "Is he dead? Really dead?" you asked after a long moment. The doctor responded with a well-practiced sorrow and you nodded appropriately. But I could see it in your eyes, like you were gazing out at an ocean, that you

were finally at peace, that God had set things right.

Is that what “free” means to you, Grandma?

Have you ever seen someone praying like there was no tomorrow, letting it all out, begging for forgiveness as if no one was watching? Have you ever seen their hands clenched together, knees pressed against the floor, neck bent over and eyes shut tight? There was only one flickering candle in your room, and there you were, on the bed talking to God. Had you been speaking in English, I would have understood every word, but I didn't need to understand. The more I didn't understand, the more my associations of this holy language painted a million sad dreams and sang an echoing harmony of both loss and strength. Through unwavering silence I heard you were asking God to purge your illness, to bless old friends in Heaven. You were praying for my mother and her siblings, their marriages, their children, me. Maybe you prayed every night because that was all you knew, because decades ago back in your motherland, Japanese armies stormed through your villages and you went hungry, and all you could do was sit in the dark, a little girl, hands together, hoping.

Were you right to love the stars?

Per aspera ad astra, Grandma. *Through hardships to the stars.*

- Your grandson

