

## The Runner · *Susan Malka Choi*

FOR MY FATHER, but only recently, there is one contest ruling all lives. It's a team sport: world's best father-daughter. In his youth, my father was the champion athlete of fury, he smashed plates and laid blame and kept marathon silences, competing in all fields, and winning. The space of my childhood was like the lip on volcanos, always temporary but always renewed. I did nothing but circle him and rehearse the same fear, wondering when the treacherous ring that I walked would be blown into pieces. Now, I can't see where that rage might have lived. My father is a small man, he is devoted to our mutual victory, he has retired from all other competitive sports. He is peaceable. To prove it, he's taken up jogging.

This provides the bulk of our communication, and with our friendly machines, one-sided talks are as frequent and as satisfying as dialogue. "I have something to show, when you're here," he tells my machine, after I've informed him that I'm coming to see him. He's found something, while out on his run. He's up to eight miles a day, in all weather. The constant pound, pound of his feet against pavement has weakened a knee, flattened an arch, shot pain up his shins. He is impressed with these injuries, apprising me of their slow accumulation. He has become a believer in strength through bodily damage. He invests four hundred dollars in a custom-made arch, molded plastic and spooned, like a shoehorn. After attracting a regular ambush of farmers' dogs, he gets a state-of-the-art sonic deterrent instead of a spray, because it makes them flee without doing them harm. When the temperature wavers between zero and five, I beg him to run on an indoor track but he won't do it. "Other runners are there," he explains, "and I don't want to be in a race." On a country road narrowed by snow drifts, he dove to avoid being hit by a car, losing all his front teeth on the rock-solid ice. For two months I experienced the regular recoil of my heart when I called him, every time newly shocked by the sound of my own voice. "My father . . . isn't able . . . to take your call . . ." Two Christmases back I cajoled him into buying the machine, claiming it would create the illusion that I called even more. Hitting the red button I had nodded at him to begin, but when he opened his mouth he was mute, and he'd looked at me pleadingly.

"Alright," I assured him. "What should I say?"

He shrugged, affecting carelessness. "You say, your daddy isn't home now."

I took a deep breath, suddenly nervous. "Hi," I'd shouted into the mike. "My father, isn't able, to take your call!" Playing it back, he had cupped one ear and hunched toward it, delighted. He didn't see any reason to change it.

Thousands of dollars of dental work later he was answering again, his voice studded by an even greater number of obstacles, not simply his accent and his failed conjugations, but tender flesh and a set of false teeth. "I find a new place to run, here," he told me. A state park, twenty minutes on the byway. Even in winter, you could run on trails through the trees. Here he was the only runner. I saw the runner like a flag claiming land, blue Gore-Tex, red ear muffs, and the bright silver shoes. He crunches lightly on a bed of dead leaves.

Now, one winter since the new teeth and two since we bought the machine, he has fallen again, but this time there wasn't a car. He falls in the state park, his thin body barely denting the damp winter mulch. He takes the fall on his face and his chest, his legs splaying wildly, and there is a moment of weightlessness in his heels as the legs, upon impact, bounce back into the air. He feels dizziness as a trick of the dirt. The ground moved away, and his feet couldn't find it. He knows instantly that his mouth contains a nightmare, there is the feel of shattered bone against his tongue as a trickle of blood leaves his lips. His arms are pinned beneath his chest, cradling, and he lies that way for a long time. The abrupt end to his bobbing, constant progress down the slim forest path is answered by another sudden stillness. The curiosity that attends him is modest, attentive, and patient. At last he stands, and there is the demure ripple of movement from averted eyes and turned heads, and a brief rustle like the wind stirring leaves.

He has adapted to the dishonest use of the machine. During the week leading up to the day of my flight, he pretends to be gone, though I call at all hours of the night. I know he is sitting quietly at his bare kitchen table, or blinking sleeplessly into the dark, gaining pleasure from the familiar rhythm of the machine's whirr to life, then the voice of his daughter, the machine's keening tone, then the voice of his daughter again. He returns the calls when he knows I'm not home, hiding the thick pain in his voice with irrelevant news, of the surprise that he's going to show me. When I finally arrive he admits, through a part-way fixed jaw and a bundle of gauze, that

the doctors' tests have found enlarged red blood cells. I imagine them nudging and knocking each other, like the happy chaos of too many inner tubes on the river in summer. I imagine the clumsy cascade that they made, when his feet somehow missed the soft ground. We both pretend that giant red blood cells are an unremarkable fact. I ask him about the surprise.

"I'll take you to see, when I run," he says. "Next week, I think." He nods to himself, unwrapping a straw for his beer.

My stomach tightens. We can't look at each other when we talk about this. "Maybe you should just take it easy," I venture, casually.

He puts the straw through the keyhole in his beer can, and then slurps. For a long time that is the only sound.

"Honey," he says at last. He is wearing the red sweatshirt I bought him, the one with the soft drawstring hood. He has the hood pulled up over his head, as if he's just about to sprint out the door. There is something about his running clothes, their excited colors, their proclaimed vigor, that makes him look surprisingly frail. His hair fringes out from under the hood, and it hides the fierce flash in his eyes. His hair is thick, and all white. He never remembers to cut it.

"You see, honey, the day I don't feel like to run, that day I will *know* I am finished."

After his divorce from my mother, there was the gap of a decade— instantaneous, interminable—during which we did not talk at all. I was young and easily incensed, impatient, and my father was also young, and prone to tantrums of pride. Years stretched out like smooth skeins of taffy and fell, at the instant of greatest length, from between my hands to vanish without so much as a sticky remnant, and I did not talk to my father. Now I visit him every winter, and together we ignore Christmas. Silence is optional again, and it can be enjoyed.

We drive to the state park with me at the wheel, which he suddenly claims is a treat. "What a treat," he says, "to have you drive me around." My driving has always made him nervous but he is asking for trust, offering up this false confidence, and I know that I must do the same. His towel is rolled neatly on his lap. We will park the car near the gate and walk through the trees, and then I will follow him, somehow, while he runs. The temperature is supposed to be twenty degrees, but the land has the fecund, drenched look of impending spring. Worn furrows of corn stubble fan past

the car, and in the distance there is a speckle of birds. The sky's color is weightier near the horizon, like pigeons or pewter, as if it is going to rain. I remember this same park from my childhood, mile upon mile of surrendered farmland skirting a forest, with a pond enlarged by a dam for swimming, and a wide, shallow sheet of a creek. The land surrounding the park extends in every direction uninterrupted by a single hill or dip, and the park offers no exceptions to the monotony. Its trails are level and without landmarks. It had been publicized and unveiled with fanfare, but it had never drawn much of a crowd. It was too distant, and too unspectacular. The swimming pond was never deeper than a baby pool, and at the height of summer the creek bed would dry out in patches, leaving a stuttering trickle. The burnt wood sign that greets us at the gate is almost unreadable, and the asphalt parking lot is fractured from incursions of weeds.

I park, and we look at the trees. Without leaves the dense tangle is softer, not stark, the brown and gray shades of the bark and the dirt merging into a single, mute color. My father would call this a gentle scene, gesturing a caress with his hand through the air. After forty years he has developed an immigrant's love for unremarkable land, surprising me with his reverence for the dulled red of a barn, the flat of a field, or the gray, ragged spine of bare trees. It looks very American to him, he says, as if that is enough now.

When we get out of the car he springs up and down on the balls of his feet, and then begins to jog slowly away. Holding his towel, I can't move. I am terrified that I will hear the delicate percussion of his body, the teeth and the cells loose inside him. I am terrified of the earth tripping him up. When he has gone some way into the trees he looks back and calls out to me—a wave of the blue arm, a nod of the red muffs—and then the shoes flash, and he is bobbing again. I begin running too, clutching the rolled towel between my hands. My hips rotate awkwardly, confused by the burden in my arms, and the soles of my feet slap down flat on the unyielding ground. I match his pace but I can't match his movements, the bounding succession of feet launched off dirt, and the light easy swing of his arms. The path turns toward a 'V' of sky and then the trees fall away, and I stop at the edge of the field.

A herd of nine deer glides into the open space, their coats the soft color of everything near them. Their presence is only a silhouette movement, like dark clouds on a night with no moon. They draw up to the path just ahead of my father, and pause. I remember the deer that I've seen near my home,

scavenging in the margins of highways, or picking calmly through unfenced backyards. They never seem surprised to find that the city has overtaken them, that roads have unfurled and houses unfolded while they sniffed, eyes downcast, through the grass. My father bounces noisily past the nine deer, briefly blocking their view of the opposite treeline. In his wake all nine heads slowly turn, as if a single thread drew their gaze after him. If I ran I would see the way he does, distant trees growing constantly taller, and a path gliding under his feet. When he turns back to wave and make sure I'm still with him, the deer quickly glance in nine different directions, and then casually wander away. I am too far behind but I jump and wave back, nodding Yes.