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Food for Thought

Essay 1, Draft 3

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A Blessing

When you finally go back to your old hometown, you find it wasn't the old home you missed but your childhood.

--Sam Ewing

When I was seven years old, I spent my last summer in my hometown living with my grandparents. Their ranch was located in a spacious rural area with woods nearby. When evening fell, the woods grew more sinister looking, like a black hole sucking its surroundings inward into an endless, unreachable core. The branches and leaves brushed over each other in the dark, producing a hypnotic rhythm. The children from my neighborhood and I all enjoyed great adventures during the night: wandering inside the woods with flashlights, making ghostly noises, and running away with fits of laughter whenever a prank succeeded. One of these experiences that I still recall clearly is preparing a cicada meal with my grandpa.

We first went on a cicada hunt, Grandpa created a cicada-catching kit, including a small bucket, a pair of tweezers, a screwdriver, a brush, and a flashlight. At around seven thirty, when the sun was falling behind the mountains, we set off for our grand adventure of the night.

Catching cicadas demanded many skills, such as patience. We walked around the trees, staring keenly into the region that our flashlights could reach. We found nothing during the first ten minutes, yet we kept our confidence high. Elliptically-shaped light

gently fell on the soft ground while we occasionally stepped on the crispy branches and dry leaves. The sudden shadows that moved around the trees sent cold shivers down my spine, but my grandpa's strong figure immediately returned a sense of security to me.

He taught me how to look for small openings in disguise, because they were easily mistaken for other insects' holes. Grandpa pointed out, "The holes that ants dig are solid and perfectly round around the edges, but the cicadas' are irregularly shaped, disguised in the dust." Taking this advice to heart, I bent closer to the ground, brushing away the surrounding soil. "I found one!" I cried cheerfully as soon as I discovered a hole that fitted the description exactly. Grandpa knelt down, removed the lid of one side carefully with the screwdriver, and brushed away the dust, revealing the secret underground chamber. Shining the flashlight down the one-inch-deep tunnel, we witnessed a small creature surrendering under this extreme light, stunned and motionless. Perhaps it was bewildered, or frightened, by the suddenness of our invasion. Grandpa took the pair of tweezers and picked it up with care.

I, staring at the ground-dwelling creature with my mouth opening wide, was also stunned and motionless. I saw an almost hideous looking insect with a stout body, a blunt head, and a skin enclosing all of its secrets. Grandpa seemed to detect my surprise, "my child, do not be frightened because of its appearance. It has been living underground through consuming the sap of tree roots for twelve years. Tonight, it will complete its metamorphosis by shedding its skin, changing from a ground-dwelling nymph to a winged adult. It will live for another week on the trees, leave its future generation, and complete the circle of life..." As soon as my senses returned, I began to feel ecstatic about the capture, because we did not have to go back to the kitchen empty-handed. Just

like this, we captured forty more innocent victims. The bucket grew heavier as my skills were refined.

Around eight thirty, Grandpa and I returned to the kitchen with a bucket full of those simple souls. While picking out only five or six of them, Grandpa explained, “Those ones are not going to have a successful metamorphosis, because they are too weak. They will die soon anyway if we do not eat them.” He handed me a bowl, placing a small spoon of salt inside. I placed these cicadas inside, mixing them with water. They stopped moving within thirty seconds, and then I washed them clean. Grandpa put these cicadas on a frying pan and poured some hot sauces and vegetable oil. Within ten minutes, these fragile creatures turned into the color of cooked shrimps. I grabbed one of them, removed the chitinous skin, sprinkled some salt and pepper, and stuffed it into my mouth. I first chewed on it with reluctance, because it was hideous-looking. To my greatest surprise, it tasted even better than shrimp. My appetite instantly returned, and I ended up eating all of them.

While I was enjoying this exotic dish, Grandpa started to tell a story. “When I was young, my grandpa took me to the forest, and we got a big bucket of these interesting bugs. We only ate the weak ones, leaving the rest of them on the door screen. The next morning, we collected and sold the skins to the local Chinese medicine store. Amazingly, those gray, ugly creatures all turned into beautiful, winged cicadas, singing piercingly as the sun rose. We opened the doors and released them. Light glimmered on their large, transparent wings. It was a beautiful sight.”

When I was seventeen, I returned to my hometown in northern China during the summer vacation. The woods had disappeared; they were replaced by concrete houses.

The night sky above was occasionally brightened by the colorful neon lights from the mall nearby. The woods, the darkness, the mystery, and the excitement vanished altogether. I could no longer hear cicadas singing, even on the hottest summer afternoon. I could not find my old neighborhood friends anymore. They had moved away one by one in the past decade. I could see that many deep wrinkles had climbed up my grandparents' faces. Their hair had turned from dark black to grey, just like the cicadas' wings, glimmering under the sunshine. All of a sudden I realized that these changes were permanent.

I could no longer recall the taste of those cicadas or the way that they had been cooked, although at that time, the dish had been the primary reason of that hunt. Nevertheless, I could never forget the harmonious mixture of purple and pink on the far side of the sky when we first had stepped outside the house. It had been deep and intriguing, just like the future, mysterious. I could still sense the hypnotic rhythm of those branches brushing over each other as the sun had gone down. I could still feel the uncontrollable excitement of capturing my first tiny victim. I could still imagine the way that my little hands had held those tools, with the seriousness of a scientist and the meticulousness of a surgeon. As I stood in front of the old house ten years after the hunt, pondering, a complete picture slowly materialized in my mind: a young girl, urged by a childish curiosity, was kneeling down, peering keenly into an opening on the ground.

I spent the night in the old house before my departure. I woke up early in the morning when my face could still detect the coolness of the summer breeze. The moment my hand touched the balcony door screen, I imagined seeing my younger self picking up the cicada skins left on the doors, carefully placing them in a wooden box. Then I opened

the door before everyone else woke up. The adult cicadas suddenly sensed their newly found freedom, gathered all of their strength, and flew toward the tall trees. Their wings sparkled under the glory of the morning sunlight. However fragile they seemed, they were strong in supporting their heavy bodies, clinging to the tree stems and singing at the top of their voices. They were living the last days of their twelve years, after eleven years and three hundred and sixty four days of darkness and preparation underground. These cicada nymphs had finally turned into adults, leaving their underground chambers to pursue the freshness of the summer breeze, the warmth of sunlight, and the pure joy of living. Standing beside my younger self, I saw how these wings quivered and fifty cicadas flew out at exactly the same moment: it was indeed a beautiful sight.

They never looked back from the second their wings took flight because they knew that time was irreversible. They could not look back, or life would be too incomprehensible. The days, to them, were forever the tomorrows. Spending twelve years of darkness underground did not cast a shadow upon their memories. Instead, the time of preparation provided their primary source of strength.

Neither can I stay in my past too long because it has turned into a strength that pushes me forward and urges me to bathe under the glory of spring sunshine, to talk, to smile, and to cry while I still can. This memory has been a blessing: it has taught me how to live every second of my life to the fullest. My memory becomes my legacy.

The moment I realized the true meaning behind the cicada hunt, I accepted the gift passed down from Grandpa: with the blessing of yesterday, I was able to embrace my tomorrows.