

## Threshold

The car is warm as she drives through the suburban roads. You are grateful to be sitting next to her again but shift uncomfortably in your seat. She lowers the volume on the radio and double-checks her mirrors. You fidget with your jacket zipper. The car curves around unnecessary islands and bends—an obstacle course, your younger selves called it as you cycled around your hometown. Nose and cheeks blushing with winter. The wind swallowing your words. Pedalling until your legs went numb. Blurry houses melting into gardens melting into bitumen. Brakes screeching because you never checked twice and then, a mouthful of gravel.

You wonder if you should ask about netball or the Greece trip or why she didn't respond to your messages for five months. You were in a Korean restaurant when the notification came, the dark soy sauce splattering onto your dress as you reached for your phone. The thirty-two-character text was a lifeline, asking if the both of you could attend Melanie's birthday party together. You responded within seconds before she could change her mind, before you could change yours. It feels too early to ask why the invite made her break her silence. She leans forward as the car loops around a roundabout, her knuckles gripping the steering wheel. The question sits in your mouth like a cherry pit.

You keep your questions to easy-throws: uni and practice and work. She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and continues the small talk, her answers long enough to keep the conversation going without really saying anything. She reassures you everything is pretty much the same; and your eyes dart to the new tattoo peeking out of her long-sleeve shirt, a shirt you haven't seen before. You can't remember the last time she wore violet. You panic and glance at the unfamiliar keychain dangling from the car mirror, the abnormally high temperature of the heater, the way her curly hair has been straightened and scraped back into a bun. You start ripping off your hangnails with your teeth. She turns away and you notice the glint of her earrings in the dark, has she always had seconds? Then realise you were there, stumbling into the dodgy salon your friend of a friend of a friend recommended. You spent the sleepover googling homemade remedies to nurse the piercing, teabags and turmeric and coconut oil sprawled by the bed. You sigh in relief and stare out at the road ahead.

A hundred metres ahead, your younger selves hang from the monkey bars on the empty playground. She laughs and kicks the bark at your feet. Hand in hand, you scamper at the first sight of a hi-vis; the teacher's mouth hangs

open from bellowing your names. You stare out the window as she drives towards your primary school, stopping at a red light. Somewhere in a cramped classroom, you are being scolded for passing notes to her during silent reading. Somewhere in the canteen queue, you are saving her a spot while she rummages in her bag for loose change. The broken science project, the rusty swing, the shared lunches—it's rushing back to you, you're growing up with her again. You glance at her; she looks ahead unfazed. The light switches to green and the car accelerates forward. You're angry again.

The conversation lulls and you hope this is your chance. You hesitate, and she starts to complain about a classmate not doing their part of a group project. You let her, speaking only to give directions. The blue arrow on Google Maps inches further and further away from your hometown until foreign street names whoosh past. She misses an exit. And then another. The blue arrow glitches back and forth on your phone screen. At the next wrong turn, a retort curls under your tongue. Your throat is full of bees. You want to unleash the swarm; start a screaming match until you jump out the car Ladybird-style. You try to focus on your surroundings, but the unfamiliar roads offer no comfort. The monosyllabic streets do not whisper her name. The flickering streetlights do not soften her face. Here, she is a girl in the driver's seat, driving in the skin of darkness.

At last, she directs the conversation to you, returning the favour by asking about the weekend and uni and work. You answer, blunt and straight to the point. Your jacket weighs on your shoulders, a bead of sweat trickles down your forearm. She frowns at your replies, glancing between you and the road, and back at you again. She tries again, and you bite your lip from snapping back at her. The silence gnaws at you. She brings up your mother and you wince. When you look down, your hands are blurry. You blink back the tears. The car hums down the boulevard, past blotches of grey, green and white. You wipe your face with your jacket sleeve, hoping the darkness covers your flushed cheeks. She reaches forward and flicks the heater up a notch. You wonder how long you can sit here before you start to remove your layers like peeling off bandages.

She turns left and parks the car a couple of houses from Melanie's place. Pop music thumps through the walls, girls in strappy high heels stumble out onto the front lawn. White sunshine from the streetlight above spills onto the dashboard and your thighs. You rehearse what to say, ironing out the words in your head. She switches the car engine off, reaching for the door handle. You pause. You don't unbuckle your seatbelt. You don't reach for

the birthday present at your feet. You hear your voice say her name, say to wait. She draws her hand back and turns to face you. Everything is still.

"Can we stay here for a bit?" you ask.