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Papaya

By Alice Ranjan

In the kitchen, I gaze at the two
papayas—one ripe and one unripe—
and remember how you once wrestled
a large, unripe papaya into your hands,
dexterously peeling away the dark green exterior and
shredding the light green interior into sinuous strands
that you then toss with carrots, long beans, tomatoes,
red chilies, garlic, and roasted peanuts ground up
with a wooden pestle and clay mortar
before adding lime juice, fish sauce, and palm sugar.
Som tum salad you said in Thai as you placed
the salad before me, neatly arranged on a platter
like an offering to the gods.

I wish I could offer you *som tum* today
because it's your birthday,
but alas, I lack your culinary skills.
So instead, I choose the ripe papaya for you,
remember how you said *papaya makes your skin look young*.
I grasp the kitchen knife and slice into its soft flesh,
the red juice splattering onto the counter like blood,
the way I imagine the surgeon had wielded her knife
when she made an incision in your chest.
The papaya's black seeds are haphazardly
nestled in the large crevice of its body
like the tumor cells packed in your tissues.
I quickly scoop out all the seeds, visible and glistening, with a spoon,
unlike the surgeon who painstakingly excavated
the amorphous tumor from your body,
praying there wasn't a single cell left.

I place the platter of papaya before you, and you smile at me
from the faded photograph next to the urn of your ashes and incense sticks,
your lips slightly parted as if you were

waiting expectantly for fruit in the afterlife
and ready to say *amen*.

Alice Ranjan is a graduate of the University of Washington-Seattle, where she received a B.S. in Microbiology, B.S. in Molecular/Cellular/Developmental Biology, and a minor in English. During her time there, she served as a founding member and editor-in-chief of Capillaries Journal, a publication that includes written and art works on health, illness and healing, as well as academic pieces on public/global health issues. She has also worked as a cancer research fellow at the National Institutes of Health and aspires to combine medicine, clinical research and the arts in her future career.

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