

Insides

The first time I tried *Balut*, I didn't know what it was.

In my hands it felt feathery smooth, small,
rattled when it shook. Grandfather said *Filipino delicacy*,
and put it in front of me.

I wondered how it could be considered a delicacy,
the egg that sat in front of me looked no different
than the ones, whole and unfertilized, that lined
the Mercato Centrale. Grandfather took me every Sunday
after church, showed me the fish and the fruits, shook hands
with stand owners, and then bought a *Suman* for us to split.
He would drizzle coconut sauce on my half first,
let it move through, saturate the bland rice.

I believed him when he told me *Balut* was important
to my culture. He picked the egg up and held it to my face,
said only these eggs curve this way, inward then outward,
only these eggs come in a shade like rattan Tinikling poles.
He tapped, cracking open the top,
and told me to close my eyes, that I was too young
to eat it on my own, so he would feed it to me.

As I grew, grandfather worked every weekday.
He did everything: sewed lips,
split where front teeth touched, stitched scars
to skin, soothed red spots and burns of Typhoid fevers,
Don't drink free water he'd tell me.

Over time I learned not to cry when he was busy
on Sundays, or too full to eat a *Suman*.

I learned a traditional work style, the strength
of religious faith. The ins and outs of culture.
Sometimes he removed masses of cells, replicating and replicating –
held them, steady, saw the contours they each had
in different lights, the lines and the bumps,
the sucking ups and the sucking outs.

At age eight, I ate *Balut* by myself. Pull the beak out
with the fork first, and watch the neck elongate
from its curved-ness, like it's waiting to be fed from mother.
Brown sack of mud with a backbone of yellow, bird embryo,
veined, smashed, folded over so its beak can stab at its stomach,
make it even deader. Dead thing in a shell, stuck around
its own body. Dead before it lived, in me,

stabs at me from the inside. Stabs at me to see if I feel pain.
When I turned eight, I learned I didn't want to be a doctor.
A doctor cuts up his patients. A young girl eats away her culture.
I didn't want to go deeper than skin.

*Written by Catie Wise
Milton Academy
Gold Key in Scholastic Art & Writing Awards*