

SHARON HORVATH

Dark Matter, For My Father, 2010–2014

Pigment, ink and polymer on
paper on canvas, 60 x 84 in



COURTESY LORI BOOKSTEIN FINE ART

CHANEY KWAK

Admission

The stench of the boat was like nothing I'd ever experienced, goes Adam's admission essay. The two-hour sail from the rundown port of Pohang to my ancestral village made me wish I had never embarked on the journey.

Ancestral village? Who talks like that? Not my brother.

The crew of the dilapidated fishing boat cursed in their harsh southern dialect of Korean. I held on to the railing, trying to steady myself against the forceful upsurge of the sea, while my father, Seung-Jo, gazed at the island.

Seung-Jo? We've never called our father that. "His name is Joe, you jackass," I mutter as I put away Adam's essay.

A few weeks ago, Adam sent me his graduate school application. We haven't seen each other since Christmas although our workplaces share the same zip code. From my window I can see his building tower over mine. To appease our nagging father we call each other every few weeks and leave short messages. Neither of us ever picks up.

I couldn't remember the last time Adam had asked anything of me. His unexpected e-mail was nauseating, with gems like "I'm crowdsourcing for input."

When we were kids, Adam used to call me Ostrich Boy, which was a rib at my unusually long neck. The nickname haunted me all through middle school until the rest of my torso grew into proportion. But lately I wonder if Adam's pet name for me had less to do with appearance than personality. Isn't procrastination just another word for burying your head in the sand? I printed his essay. I just can't get through it.

A week passes; I must be off the hook. My roommates have all gone to bed. Slouched over the dining table, I'm staring at the tropical fish swimming in my laptop screen saver. My stomach gurgles with cheap wine. I spin the wine's metal cap, bite my fingernails, spin it again.

I've been working on a novel whose plot I've purged of even the faintest resemblance to my own history. The world's suffered enough memoirs thinly veiled as fiction. On the flip side, after twelve years since freshman year, I'm still pissed that Professor Colonel-Saunders-Lookalike from Intro to Anthropology taught *The Joy Luck Club* as "the Asian-American experience." I'd sooner grow a Fu Manchu and pull a tourist rickshaw down Broadway before having my novel stand in for ethnography. When I day-dream about publishing my first book, that sweet fantasy

He's not my rival. He is my brother.

turns ugly with all the fingers jabbing at my jacket photo, along with the final verdict: “*That* explains the story.” No, my novel, set on an imaginary tropical island, is cruel and bold and doesn’t have a single Korean character.

The computer pings. Desperate for distraction, I open my inbox, and there it is, another email from Adam: “Hey thought about my offer? I’d ask my work friends except I’m up for a promotion and need to keep my app under wraps. (Boss purges anyone thinking about jumping ship.) Due in 2 wks I’d appreciate another set of eyes let’s touch base off-line. –A.

“Sent from my iPhone”

Some friends he has.

Ever heard of punctuation?

But I’m feeling unusually gallant. Holding onto the empty wine glass, I type with my middle finger about how much I enjoyed his essay. I reread my reply a few times before deleting it, unsent.

* * *

He’s not my rival. He is my brother.

That’s what our middle school counselor had us repeat. Ms. Hendricks, who always stayed barricaded behind her messy desk, called us in every few weeks and read from a list of questions she’d prepared.

Adam and I are twins—not identical, only fraternal, though that word doesn’t describe my feelings for him. At the end of our months-long grip, he shook me off and swam out to the world first. From day one he was taller, weighed more, and cried much, much louder: already like a real man, as Dad liked to boast to his friends. (I always wanted to ask him—what does it mean to cry like a real man?)

Ms. Hendricks took to my brother right away. He always charmed women, young or old, without much effort.

Legs sprawled and chest huffed, Adam did most of the talking as Ms. Hendricks and I listened. He seemed to revel in telling stories that I never would have volunteered, like the time when Dad drove us down the coast to go fishing. Cue in yet another father-son bonding session gone awry—suffice to say that Adam did exactly what Dad wanted on that outing, and Ostrich Boy failed.

I fidgeted as Adam blabbered on about that trip to the deserted state park, with plenty of exaggerations, and Ms. Hendricks took notes like a court reporter who’d heard it all before. When he was finished, she turned to me to throw that dreadful question: “How did it make you feel?”

As if I was going to talk about *feelings* in front of Adam. Before I could think of a believable lie, she got called out. Adam reached over and grabbed her legal pad, and I peeked over his shoulder. In neat cursive, she had written that perhaps our mother, whom neither of us remembered, had something to do with our animosity. Maybe we were competing for her posthumous love.

Adam turned red. He must have expected just another validation of his superiority. Or he was angry at the way our mother’s name was dragged through our messy rivalry. I was.

Only then did we realize we were stuck in the same boat again without a choice. While I couldn’t have put this into words then, I saw the hurt underneath his swagger as he tossed her notes onto the desk and crossed his arms. Raised the way we were by our father, the only way we knew how to express our blunt affection was by teasing, kicking, and, from time to time, choking each other. Taken away from us and misinterpreted, our complicated feelings sounded sick on that yellow paper.

Imagined characters always trump real people. Without a word, we teamed up to defend our mother by clamming up. Mrs. Hendricks tried for a few more sessions to pry us apart. “Why do you hurt your brother?” she would read from her list; “Who usually initiates the conflicts?” “Do you enjoy sabotaging each other?” Those baits were too obvious even for Adam. We grunted and repeated “I guess” and “whatever.” We didn’t care if we were going to sink together.

“Asian siblings tend to be competitive,” she said during our last appointment. “But I think you’ll be just fine in a few years’ time.”

Wrong on both counts. As she smiled and waved us goodbye, we couldn’t help but grin at each other. That might have been the last time we were just fine, whatever that means.

* * *

Crunchy outside, juicy inside—Sailors Savor Seafood Sticks™ are a tried and true American classic. (I’m not allowed to call the merchandise *fish* because the FDA classified it as a “seafood derivative.”) *Compared to regular fish sticks, Sailors [sic] Savor contains twice the natural antioxidants, which . . . which would make me a better writer than this.* I delete the last bit, but keep the “sic.”

My employer is the bottom-feeder among the city’s many ad agencies. Housed in an airless, low-ceilinged office, our workplace could belong to a debt collection firm, had it not been for the pinball machine parked by the elevator like an afterthought. None of us uses it.

Waves of grey cubicles repeat themselves, and heads emerge like divers gasping for air. Most of our clients are floundering enterprises that the other agencies don’t bother poaching.

Work’s been harmless, even amusing at times. But now, as the oldest junior copywriter, I’m beginning to panic. I have to remind myself that I’m not supposed to care about my day job, but I did feel a jab at my ribs when a former intern went on to launch a startup and sell it for millions, all while I was stuck writing about seafood derivatives.

I’ve always banked my faith in that triumphant juncture when, my finished novel in hand, I would walk out for good and begin the first day of my real life. (In my most shameful dreams, my book would be ironically dedicated to my inept supervisors.) But what if such a day never comes?

The seafood sticks are going nowhere. I pull Adam’s essay out of the drawer instead.

My father, Seung-Jo, calmly looked toward the island he’d called home for the first twenty years of his life. He was taking me, his eldest son, on a trip that would shape me as the leader that I am today.

What awaited me was a journey to my roots and, at the same time, my future. On the small island, I would spend the next three months . . . Fact check: Dad and Adam were gone only a week and a half, which I spent home alone. It

was the summer after high school, and Dad had decided that one of us should stay behind and help my uncle mind the shop. On his first homecoming in over twenty years, he decided to take with him Adam, Adam’s acceptance letter to Princeton, and two suitcases full of Costco vitamins and beef jerky to give away as presents. I drove them to the airport without saying a word; they didn’t even notice my silence. For ten days I lived on instant ramen noodles and consoled myself with the fib that I never would have wanted to go anyway. Still, between the short, faint phone calls from Dad, I never stopped imagining the adventures they must have been having.

I hate to admit it, but Adam’s version of that summer is a fun read if I can just pretend like it’s someone else’s story; the anecdote about how he misunderstood the dialect and stepped into an outhouse to shower makes me laugh aloud. I’m getting sucked in, but of course he has to ruin it by steering the essay to his unpaid internship in nonprofit, which he chose over a lucrative private sector job after college. I called his bullshit when he took that internship in microfinance, and just as I’d suspected, upon returning from Bangladesh twenty pounds lighter and scarred by dark insect bites, he promptly got a job in hedge fund management, with double the pay that he’d been offered out of college. Dad was proud; it was an occasion for another round of boasting at Christmas. In front of all the invited relatives, Dad spelled out Adam’s salary down to the last digit. Adam seemed to relish the attention as our uncles raised their soju glasses. Having wished the same path for their children, my relatives scrutinized Adam’s metamorphosis into a corporate shark, their faces a mix of contempt, envy, and hope for their loser kids.

Disgust doesn’t quite describe how I felt; disappointment wasn’t it, either. Perhaps it was bittersweet redemption, though for once I had wanted to be wrong about my brother’s motives.

“What are you reading?”

I start to find Yvonne, my boss, peering over the divider. “Is that the copy for Sailors Savor?” she asks. “It looks long.”

“Just brainstorming,” I say, turning the paper face down.

“You can toss it. We’re recalibrating our strategy.”

“We had a strategy?” I ask, with my best earnest face. “I was cooking up generic web copy.”

“You were,” Yvonne says. “But I mentioned to the client—offhand, of course—that their copywriter was, er, Asian-American.” The hyphen hangs awkwardly in the air between us.

Yvonne explains that the marketing people at Sailors Savor were intrigued by my background and decided to feature a personal story about fish sticks on their site. “You know, what with the upcoming Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month and all,” she adds.

“What the hell is the ‘Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month?’”

“Next month, apparently.”

“So they want me to rhapsodize about how their seafood byproducts gave me the energy to solve math problems?”

“For instance, yes,” Yvonne answers with a bored shrug. “You get bonus points if you work in soy sauce.”

I glare at her.

“Kidding,” she says without a smile. “You know we can only mention Sailors Tartar Sauce.”

She takes a deep breath and purses her lips together, deepening the marionette lines around her painted mouth. “Look, I knew you’d have problems with this. So I asked Matt Kim and he agreed to let us use his picture and name.”

“That IT guy?” I ask. “No way. I won’t do that to him.”

“Help me out,” she says. “They’re busting my balls upstairs.”

Though we started working in the same month, Yvonne has already reached the executive level. She wears loud secondhand clothing that draws attention to her relative youth, which she uses as her hipster drag among the older men that dominate her rank. The creative staff mocks her for being a poser, but I just feel sorry for her. Underneath her steely façade, there’s a person just as exasperated as me.

“The client wants a test site by the end of the month,” she says. “Pretend. Like you’re . . . writing fiction or something.”

I’ve never told anyone I’m writing a novel, but then again, most other copywriters have the same aspirations. The thought makes me seasick.

“Fiction is the opposite of lying,” I say. “Creation is an act of self-sacrifice.”

Yvonne draws back as if I just chewed up worms and spat them out.

* * *

Adam suckers me into picking up the phone by calling from Skype. There’s no caller ID, and he knows I like punning telemarketers.

“Stop being a diva,” he says. “Let me take you out to lunch. Somewhere fancy.”

“The essay!” I say, as though I haven’t been thinking about it. “I’ve been so busy.”

“Next Tuesday at noon. Or I’m telling Dad you smoke pot.”

“Not since college!”

“Think how he’d hound you down.” He hangs up.

Bunch of losers we are—we’re still afraid of Dad.

Truth is, I read the essay many times over. If he dialed back on eye-rollers like *passion* and *innovation*, it would actually be a well-crafted piece that would get him into top schools. But the more I think about it, all those Mr. Miyagi clichés about our supposedly wise dad—the gong, the chi, the feng shui, and the whole nine yangs—makes me want to hurl.

Tuesday comes and no matter how I try to calm down, my whole body shivers as I walk down the crowded avenue. (“Ostrich Boy!” his pitchy pubescent voice taunts me.) I’ve been tying myself in knots rehearsing a speech with highfalutin words like *exploitation*, *falsehood*, *stereotypes*, and *betrayal*.

Still, I’ve never been one to rock the boat. Once, in high school, I hadn’t even begun the final research paper the night before it was due. Adam, who was also in that class, had finished his just in time before bed. I don’t know how I thought I’d get away, but I played video games all night until Adam left early at dawn for an important tournament hundreds miles away. Instead of turning in his paper, as he trusted me to, I simply retyped the first page with my name on it. When he got a C in the class for missing the final assignment, Dad took to his hockey stick. How could he risk his college future like this, Dad wanted to know, as he beat Adam’s bare calves, over and over. I had to listen through the flimsy drywall of our house. And though I wanted to own up, I convinced myself that it would only make matters worse for everyone. Later, after imagining the worst of beatings, I slipped into Adam’s room, prepared; he simply glanced up from his textbook and said, “I own you.” And he did make sure that I was more miserable than him as he retook American History that summer.

My cell phone rings and a cheerful, young voice spills out. “Mr. Chang told me? That he’ll be fifteen minutes late?”

I ask the voice who she was.

“I’m his assistant?” Then she wishes me a good day.

This is going to be our first meeting in months. He’s not actually too busy to show up on time or at least call; he just wants to remind me who’s boss. If he were a character in my novel, what redeemable qualities could I imbue him with to make him sympathetic? Then I feel even more miserable for sounding like a writing textbook. I’ve accumulated more craft-of-writing books than I’d like to admit. I only seem to get better at critiquing myself. This week alone, I’ve written a sentence and deleted an entire chapter, reducing my five-year-old novel to fifty-some pages, double-spaced.

Instead of slowing down, I rush to the bistro and throw the door open with all my weight. Inside, dark, bulky wooden furniture absorbs the sunlight flooding in through the large windows. In the narrow spaces between tightly packed tables, waitresses in long aprons dart and make sharp turns like startled goldfish. He picked a place far from his building to avoid running into colleagues.

“Give us the most visible table, one by the window,” I tell the host and order a bottle of something imported and expensive. Chugging wine, I go over the most embarrassing part to prepare my takedown.

Working with budding entrepreneurs in Bangladesh put today’s state of globalization into perspective. As I helped a widow with a fifty dollar loan to start a sustainable handicraft store, I was deeply touched by how innovative banking practices could combat poverty, but only when informed by a sound business philosophy. This insight prompted me to enter the private sector in order to develop the necessary savvy that would later aid me in nonprofit management.

Nonprofit management! He’s not going from investment banking to business school in order to help some lady weave baskets, that’s for sure.

My father played a pivotal role in my decision. As a small-business owner of thirty-five years, he set an example of integrity and international sensibility that I try to emulate every day, even in the context of helping manage a nine-hundred-million-dollar hedge fund. My father once taught me a Korean proverb, which went,

If he were a character in my novel, what redeemable qualities could I imbue him with to make him sympathetic?

“Thanks for waiting.”

I look up to find Adam with his frat boy grin. I get up too quickly and trip into him. He extends his meaty hand for balance, and for a second, we squeeze as hard as we can.

“You look good, buddy,” he says.

I reciprocate, though the dark circles under his eyes make him look ghostly. His hair’s begun going gray around the edges. With extra pudge around his cheeks, he’s becoming a carbon copy of Dad. Why am I jealous?

Dad turned old while we weren’t looking. He was once my idea of vigor: a restless, sinewy mass in a perennial polo and pleated khaki combination, singlehandedly running the town’s biggest print shop with a handful of underpaid immigrants—the kind that he himself used to be. But by the time we came home for Thanksgiving our freshman year, his back had begun its forward arc and his hair had thinned out into a bare, frosty field. The tight, bronze face had taken on a murky dishwater hue. As I sit across the white-clothed table from Adam, I scan his slackening face as if it were a book I’ve read as a child.

“Working hard or hardly working?” I attempt. Pathetic.

“Too much stress,” he says. “They’re firing people left and right, and showering the rest of us with bonuses and more work. It’s sick. I just want to get up and leave.”

“Why don’t you?” I ask. “You must have plenty saved up. Take some time off.”

He glares at me.

*For all those
unrelenting years,
I stood no chance
at hurting him.*

“Well, guess going back to school is your break,” I say.

“I’ve been putting it off for years,” he says, “but I don’t know if I can afford to.”

“I can’t say I envy you,” I say. “But no one forced you to take out a mortgage and buy a house.”

I didn’t mean to sound so callous.

After we order, Adam rolls up his sleeves and loosens the tie. I trace the impatience in his quick hands. He needs something from me, making me feel powerful and helpless.

“Fancy noose you got there.” I sound like any other copywriter in my office. Adam only responds with a weary smile.

“How’s Dad?” I ask. Adam visits much more often.

“Fine, just fine. I wish he’d retire, though.”

“You know he’ll work till the second he dies in the shop.”

“Well, he needs to shutter that bottomless pit.”

“Good thing he can always fall back on you,” I say.

“What do you think I’ve been doing these past years? Why do you think I’m broke?”

I had no idea. That Adam’s been helping out Dad should comfort me, but it doesn’t.

Even as toddlers, Dad once told me, Adam and I weren’t very “equal”—that was the word he used. Adam liked to play by himself with all the toys. I would sit in the corner and quietly watch him, as if I was more a witness than a participant in our childhood. And here we are, one a provider and the other just a leech. I can’t bring myself to admit—Dad just sent me a check, telling me to go out for a nice meal.

When the waitress brings out our food, Adam breaks the silence. “So, the essay,” he says. “Don’t pussyfoot around. I got ten minutes before I have to head back.”

“I thought it was . . .”

He straightens his back. Seated, he’s still a good half-foot taller. As he looks down at me, I’m reminded of all the humiliation he’s caused: the derision his mouth bore when he and his high school friends pushed me into lockers, that unfair alliance he and Dad formed at home. For all those unrelenting years, I stood no chance at hurting him. I came prepared to say the truth. Plead with him, talk him out of writing some embarrassing immigrant sob story. As I scan the confident veneer on his face, I decide to lunge at him with something much, much sharper.

“I don’t think you’re much of a writer,” I say.

“Oh,” he says, shoving a forkful of shepherd’s pie into his mouth. “I mean, I knew that, I guess. That’s why I asked you for help. You’re the writer.”

“Why bother with an MBA? Just to make more money?”

He frowns. “I’m not applying to business schools.”

“You said . . .”

“I said I was applying to grad school.”

“And I assumed.”

“Yeah, fuckhead,” he says.

Adam explains that he’s through with finance. For years he’s been looking at graduate programs in nonprofit management, something to take him back to his old self. But the thought of walking away from such a lucrative career nauseates him, especially when Dad’s failing business wouldn’t last a year without Adam pouring money into it.

“I mean, who buys banners now?” he asks. “I even place fake orders just to keep him busy. You know he’d die if he weren’t busy all day.”

I look at my full plate, unable to eat.

“They don’t call my line of work the golden handcuffs for no reason,” he says. “Sometimes I wish they’d fire me. I’d sell my place—who cares if the market’s shit now—and just take off. Travel for a year, do nothing, then move to a college town . . . Then I think about how disappointed Dad would be.”

As we leave the restaurant, he crushes me by throwing his heavy arm around my shoulders.

“The Chang brothers, we need to stick together,” he says. “I’m sorry it’s been so long.”

Through shopping arcades I take a long detour. What can I do? What should I do? Back at my desk, I begin a new hook. *Seung-Jo Chang came to America with \$250, ambition, and nothing else.*

Hold it. Turn down the waterworks. *Seung-Jo Chang built his business empire with sheer will and a Confucian work ethic. Working three jobs while raising his children on his own . . .* No.

The staccato of Yvonne’s heels grows louder before she turns the corner. I don’t care.

“The art department’s been calling you,” Yvonne says. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Getting inspired.” I dismiss her with a wave of hand.

“As an orphan of the Korean War who survived on wild herbs,” Yvonne reads off my screen, “he knew how bitter hunger could be. He was determined never to taste it again.”

“Not bad, huh?”

“That’s not going to fly. We want our demographics to feel hungry, not sad.”

“Tragedy makes me hungry,” I say.

She’s quiet for a while. “Show me your other ideas,” she says at last.

What else is open on my computer? An internet browser with a dozen tabs, some sample graduate school essays I just downloaded, several pointless, funny video clips. And my atrophying novel. What have I done all week, all month, all these years while Adam was providing for Dad?

“This is it,” I tell her, my voice almost a whisper. “All I got.”

She leans in. “I’ve covered for you over and over because I feel sorry for you. But I can’t help if you want to sabotage yourself.”

“I’m not sabotaging anyone,” I manage to say.

She shakes her head. “You really think everyone else is stupid, don’t you? But if you’re so special, why the hell are you still here?”

* * *

As soon as I leave the office, the cold air sinks my heart. All the while I considered the job a joke, I have been the butt of it. But I’m not thinking about Sailors Savor or Adam’s admissions essay, or even my novel. Instead

I feel the burden of his arm on my shoulders. It’s the same gesture he made on our way to the parking lot after that fishing trip.

The three of us waded out to fish, but I kept falling back, unable to stand against the current, until Dad sent me back. I spent the afternoon skipping rocks and building elaborate sand structures, telling myself that I didn’t need them. Every now and then, Adam would turn around. Was he mocking me, or was he making sure I was safe? Or did he secretly wish he were on the beach, playing?

I spent the last hour of daylight watching them: Dad, unwavering in the ocean, as the world rushed toward him, and my brother next to him, propped tall, no doubt learning the unspoken rules of being a man. But when he came toward me, Adam’s eyes were wet and he could scarcely walk straight—so shaky was his body. I took the bucket full of fish from his hand, and he rested his arm around my shoulder, said nothing, then pushed me away.

In the park outside Adam’s office, I spend the rest of the afternoon surrounded by homeless men stretched out on benches, soaking up the spring sun. I call my father’s shop.

“Dad, do you . . . my god, do you remember that fishing trip?”

“I can’t hear you,” my father says over the whirling sound of printers. “Everything okay?”

“I need your help. It’s for Adam.”

“Good son,” he says. “You help your *hyung*, and he help us.”

I bury my face in my hand. “That’s what I’m trying to do.”

I reach for Adam’s essay. In the glow of this green day, my brother’s words ring sincere. Of the two of us, he should have been the one writing an elegiac novel. He doesn’t belong in his corporate cell.

Around me life slows to a crawl. Office workers saunter through the puddles of shadows as their starched shirts waver from white to deep navy. Schoolchildren swarm together, their light jackets flapping like fins. Hands trembling, I call Adam’s office. I can hardly believe what I’m about to do.

“I’m calling from the Kennedy School of Government. We need to verify employment information with Mr. Chang’s direct supervisor.”

The manager is curt but courteous. He thanks me for my call and says that he's sensed that Mr. Chang wasn't happy with his current position. He regrets that Mr. Chang seems to have misrepresented himself in his application: he's not in line to be promoted. In fact, another round of layoffs has been announced. Of course, he adds, all this is in confidence. But his cold voice leaves no doubt what he'll do.

When dusk falls I make my way home and lie on the floor. He is not my rival, he is my brother. And he is someone I can hurt because he is—say it, Chang—because he is someone I love.

How do you cry like a real man?

When the morning sun filters through the window, I rewrite Adam's essay and add a truthful story—about our fishing trip, about an immigrant and his heir, both fighting to stay afloat. I cut out all the minor characters. But Adam will know that I am with him. It's the best piece of fiction my brother and I will write together.

SHARON HORVATH

The Spiral (For My Mother), 2009–2014
Pigment, ink and polymer on paper on canvas, 73 x 52 in



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