

Devoured

by Deborah Jiang-Stein

Setagaya train threads through daybreak in Tokyo and heads east towards Sangen-jaya Subway Station.

A young girl mounts the train's wooden steps. She excuses her sleepy bumps against others and leans, silent and strong on a handrail to rest before her day's work begins. At night she goes to dance clubs with friends. She wears T-shirts with glitzy graffiti across her chest. She's letting the green striped side of her hair grow out.

The girl's mother already walked the train's wooden floorboards this dawn. As she's tread for fifteen years of mornings, like her mother and her mother's mother.

They sell cheap sweets in front of Sangen-jaya. Along with cigarettes, hard boiled eggs, and thick white bread slices bagged six to a package. *1000 Dreams in Our Ovens*, the baker's motto spreads across the bread bag.

No words on the train, no words between mother and daughter. The girl will spend her life behind the candy stand, just as she's expected to set garbage out on its sunrise schedule, separating burnable and non-burnable. She imagines stuffing the family candy stand into the bag of burnable refuse.

Bicycles whiz and Armani suits worn by upright men march by, rushing towards the station stairs. The train tunnel devours thousands of people.

Empty windows watch the girl and her mother, panes guarding over her like the beady eyes of hungry spring birds in the country scouting for bugs and worms. A cool early-morning breeze blows

through the girl's hair and stirs a few stray papers around her ankle.

Somewhere, an empty tin can of milk tea flaps against a curb.

The girl looks up from her labors, her daily job to sort and stack candy and gum packets, and takes in her reflection in the glass window behind the stand. Her image interrogates her face, her dark alert features and a slight frame more suited for work indoors.

Without warning, rain begins to wash against the window, water rolling like waves. It's the only pane of glass with this surf-like downpour. Raindrops as if tears streaming out of her eyes.

Then silence. No rain, no storm. The girl sees her reflection wipe away. She no longer exists other than in a pool of water collected into a puddle on the sidewalk.

Later, when sun presses against the window and steam rises from the thin pool of water, her mother sweeps away the clutter accumulated in front of their candy stand, her broom in a vigorous fury. Bits of newspaper, a crushed tin can, and cigarette butts dump down into the drain. Along with the puddle and a few wisps of black hair.

