

“My favorite aphorism about New Jersey is that only the strong survive it. I see that place here in all its chaotic splendor and that strength in the carving marks on each finely cut image. This is a perfect and glimmering book that could only have been forged in Jane Wong’s bloody and beautiful heart.”

—ELISSA WASHUTA,  
author of *White Magic*

“Jane Wong, with her poet’s eye for precise and delightful detail, carves out a quintessential story of family, gambling, loss, heartaches, toothaches, and above all, love. *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City* takes a father’s addiction to the prismatic casinos of Atlantic City and places it against a mother’s fierce, unsparing devotion and a daughter’s struggle to make sense of loss. I love the tenderness and ferocity of her prose, unsentimental and wrenching, that refuses easy triumph in its immigrant story and isn’t afraid of uncovering both beauty and brutality. *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City* is, at heart, a love story between Wong and her mother, Wong and herself.”

—SALLY WEN MAO,  
author of *Oculus*

“To borrow Jane Wong’s own words, there are sparks coming off Wong’s blade of language. The spunky voice in this memoir shines through. I’m so grateful to Wong for telling her unique story in only the way she can, and in the process, expanding the possibilities of Asian American stories. There’s so much heart in these stories that explore race, class, and family history, that we can’t help but root for the protagonist. This is a big-hearted coming-of-age book that simultaneously asks hard questions.”

—VICTORIA CHANG,  
author of *The Trees Witness Everything*

“Searing, stunning, and singular.”

—KYLE LUCIA WU,  
author of *Win Me Something*

**MEET ME  
TONIGHT IN  
ATLANTIC  
CITY**

MEET ME  
TONIGHT IN  
ATLANTIC  
CITY

*A Memoir*

JANE WONG



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

This is a work of nonfiction, except for a handful of names and identifying details changed to respect individuals' privacy.

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*For my mother and brother, my everything.  
Let's get pizza, you know where!*

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**MEET ME  
TONIGHT IN  
ATLANTIC  
CITY**



## DRAGON FRUIT

IN THE MURKY BROTH OF YET ANOTHER HEARTACHE, MY mother cuts me slices of dragon fruit. I'm home in Jersey and slumped at the kitchen table. My hair is dip-dyed in snot, tears, and hot mascara. She hands me a slice, the white interior flecked with black seeds like suspended ants. The slice dangles on her knife, the glinting steel close to my mouth. I eat it off the knife. I've always eaten fruit this way, right off the sparks of my mother's blade. I take it into my throat, still heaving from too much survival mode. The taste is mild, despite the fluorescent hot-pink flame. The seeds punctuate something I know must come. It slides down my throat like a sweet summer slug.

"Jane, you have to be strong. I need you to eat more," she tells me, cutting another slice.

But I tell her I'm so tired of being strong. Fuck strength, fuck resilience, fuck lessons to learn, fuck trying and trying and trying! I tell her I don't want to be strong. That I can't be strong anymore, even if I wanted to be. I want to be weak. I want to fall completely apart. I want all the atoms in my body to crumble, scree of the self. I want to lie down on this cold kitchen table forever. I want to be a-sloth-who-hasn't-shit-in-a-week weak. Cracked-ice, dish-soap-bubbles, mild-hot-sauce, rabbit-paralyzed-by-fear, my-breath-leaking-from-me-like-an-ellipsis weak.

I expect her to disagree, to demand strength, to tell me I have no choice. Did she have a choice, staring at the gaping pits my father left behind?

This time though, she doesn't fight me. "So be weak," she says, almost like a threat. Sticky fruit juice encircles her jade bracelet. Fruit flies rouse around us, dizzy stars. "But you have to eat more dragon fruit and clear your system."

She wants me to shit it out. This time, she hands me the knife.

# 1

## MEET ME TONIGHT IN ATLANTIC CITY

LET'S BEGIN HERE: ON THE GROUND. OR RATHER ON THE slabs of wood above the ground. In July, 1854, a New Jersey tourist train from Camden made its inaugural voyage to Atlantic City. Tourists came to stick their toes in the Atlantic Ocean—steel blue, the color of whales they'd never see. They came to lean against each other in the high dunes and make promises they couldn't keep. They let the wind lift those promises up, caught in the chandeliers of expensive hotels or the beaks of passing seagulls. The women who came held frilled umbrellas—jellyfish along the shore. And when they returned to their jobs and errands and thumb-sucking babies, they carried sand with them, making the train car a beach in and of itself. Glitter of the sea. This is how the boardwalk came to be: a frustrated railroad conductor and simply too much sand for his own sweeping sanity. On June 16, 1870, boards were erected, 10 feet wide and 12 feet long.

Just to be clear: this is not our story. Not yet. Our story moves across that steel-blue fantasy, onto another continent, toward a place where there is no such thing as “vacation.” My ancestors will stare at that word, 假期, as if it were a cloud that could disappear at any point. On this continent, there are herds of oxen and lily pads the size of

promises that can't be made. As a small child, I dreamt of this story. Of an ox and my mother riding its back, the hair on its hide so coarse, it makes your throat hurt. Our story, our history, is a different Atlantic City.

It is 1988 and my mother is still dreaming in Toisanese—not a single word of English worms its way through her open-mouth sleep world. My little brother, Steven, had just been born, howling like a wolf who knew he was a boy. Four years earlier, when the nurses placed me in my mother's arms, I stared at her silently. She held me up to the fluorescent hospital light and declared: "I'm afraid. She knows too much." By 1988, my father had been holding illegal mahjong gambling circles for five years, often in the basement. Cigarette smoke escaped like doves from underneath the floorboards. And the shuffling. The shuffling sound of mahjong tiles, a porcelain earthquake. I learned later that some of these tiles used to be made out of bone or bamboo. Now: Bakelite, plastic. My father always invited the same people to play with him: the Chicken Bone Man, City Uncle, and Balding Uncle. His friends always played with toothpicks dangling out of their mouths, moving the sticks from side to side in concentration. My brother and I named the crew the Toothpick Gang.

Just to be clear again: our story is not about small enterprises. Our story goes beyond the small batons of \$20 bills passed around the mahjong table. Beyond the table's green felt, stained with cheap Tsingtao and sky-high piles of gnawed bones from the Chicken Bone Man's self-evident pastime.

Our story is Atlantic City. We are talking about the Taj Mahal, Caesars, Bally's. Casinos depicting worlds my father simply couldn't fathom. At Caesars, there were towering white columns so extravagant they held up nothing at all. There were white statues of horses braying, a ceiling painted like the sky with white clouds, the busts of white people we assumed were famous but were really just white. My

parents didn't even know where Rome was on a map or that Rome existed. But Caesars was gleaming in its whiteness. Who could say no to the patina of wealth?

This is how we arrived: on that Chinese tourist bus where you have to fan yourself with your \$10 gambling voucher and put your cigarette out in a Dixie cup. Or, if you hit it big like we once did, you can arrive in the dolphin-colored leather of your BMW, before you inevitably crash it into the Garden State Parkway median. No air-conditioning and the windows down, to save on gas mileage, of course. We arrived over a century later on a boardwalk full of non-white faces. Shoulder pads, pinstriped suits, and an amalgamation of languages punctuating the salty air. The poor, the working class, the hopeful in red-tag sequin dresses from Marshalls. Here we are! Yes, here, with self-serve wine and crab legs at the Palace Court Buffet—all of which we marveled at, but never touched.

\* \* \*

**DURING THE 1870S**, THE boardwalk was broken apart after each summer came to a close and moved into storage for the cold season. Board by board. Stored like quilts, like pickled radishes, like a family who won't look each other in the eye.

For repeat patrons, i.e., patrons who threw enough money away, casinos offered free hotel stays for the whole family. Each Valentine's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, my father disappeared into the red velvet of spinning roulette tables. We had other plans. Steven and I tested the structural soundness of hotel beds by jumping on them. Once, a cockroach flew out of the mattress, disturbed in its sleep. It somersaulted in the air, a perfect 10. "How is this fancy?" my mother bemoaned. She was used to crushing cockroaches and punched its antennae lights out. K.O. Game over.

Steven and I traded the remote back and forth like secrets, marveling over cable television. We spent hours watching channels we didn't have: Nickelodeon, MTV, Disney. We sang a dirge for basic television. *Rest in peace, you piece of shit. Rest in peace, you piece of shit.* In the afternoon, we walked the boardwalk back and forth with the other Chinese American kids who were never allowed to play that water-gun race. No stuffed dinosaurs for us, no Dippin' Dots. The game operators, home from college and tipsy on Pabst, were always shouting at my mother, words she didn't understand. "Hey gorgeous, lemme get your number while the brats play!" and "I'd let you play for free any day, baby!" and "Hey pretty lady, you speakee any Englishee?" At 26, my mother was all pink lipstick and confused by the attention, but she knew to accept gifts from white people: an ice-cold Coke pressed against her cheek, a stuffed orca whale for Steven.

Here is one scene, on a shore of many: on the way back to Caesars, my mother sits on a boardwalk bench, the dune grass behind her like the back of a throne. From her purse: stolen bread rolls from the Palace Court Buffet. She chews out all her anger on those bread rolls. Gnarls in the crust. Soft middles demolished along her patent leather heels, digging into boardwalk cracks. Seagulls swarm near her, in full praise. Glitter of the boardwalk.

"I'm tired, Mommy," I whine, pulling on her earrings with my sandy hands. Next year, her earlobes will split open from too-heavy earrings. The infection will heal and yield a scar I will grow jealous of.

"Tell that to Daddy."

The sky is all lavender and dragon fruit. Everywhere around us, people gawk at the swirling sky and take pictures. Later, when I ask my mother for baby pictures of me, she'll tell me we were too poor to afford a camera. She'll simply repeat: "I held you up. You didn't blink and had the biggest eyes I've ever seen." *I'm afraid. She knows too much.*

I lean my head against her sharp shoulders, which will always vacillate between sharpening and softening. Steven joins the seagulls and starts eating bread crumbs off the ground.

“What’s it like in there? Where Daddy goes?” I ask her.

My mother stares at my brother. He has my father’s eyes—big and shining like a dying flashlight. He will grow to be as tall as my father: six feet, to be exact. He will be a handsome man who has to shave, every day, stubble sprouting like fine bristles. But at this moment, his tongue is speckled with sand and gluten.

“Stop that right now,” my mother screams at him. “Stop that, stop that!”

Soon, Steven is wailing, and that unrelenting sound answers all my questions. Meanwhile, an off-duty clown strolls down the boardwalk with his date for the night. She is holding one of his oversized bowling pins and laughing like something is stuck in her belly. Chilly wind cuts through the sand and the boardwalk shifts underneath our feet. Was winter coming? Yes, but not now: her hair is coiled cotton candy. “Show me that new trick,” she sings in the dwindling light.

I did not know, at that time, what my mother thought of Atlantic City. What she thought of that fake blue sky at Caesars, of transparent lettuce with Russian dressing, of my father—a man she barely knew—throwing money on a table for something utterly intangible. Not long ago, she was a farm girl, sucking on sugarcane after hiking up the mountains to gather wood for the stove. This is before she was arranged to marry my father at 19. My father: a tall stranger who moved to a country where a piece of plastic could buy a car. My mother’s name, because she’s real: Jin Ai.

The scene continues for Jin Ai, but not for us: at 6:00 AM, my mother wakes up from a dream in a language she doesn’t yet understand. *Hey gorgeous, hey pretty lady, hey baby.* She walks past our sleeping forms—consumed in white down feathers—and

pulls on her heels. With purpose, she takes the elevator to the first floor. She walks into that red-velvet room and follows what her heart does not desire. My father is whiskey-eyed and half-asleep—a drowsy raccoon hunched over the blackjack table. His shirt is unbuttoned one too many and his empty wallet is an open window. My mother clenches her fists and imagines raising them to the fake sky above. Her eyes swirl like a whirlpool. No one will ever know if she’s crying.

My father doesn’t say her name or look up. “One more game.”

Dozens of floors above, we are still dreaming. *K.O. K.O. K.O.*

\* \* \*

**REMEMBER: THIS STORY IS** not about small enterprises. This story expands like an oil spill; it touches the fins of every faraway shore. This is a story poor immigrants share, like those packed bunk beds shared with false uncles and false aunts. Just to be clear: we are targeted. This is no mistake. This can’t be boiled down to cultural proclivity for luck. Casino buses roll into Chinatowns across the country like ice cream trucks for a reason.

Cache Creek Casino, north of San Francisco, has a pet fish fittingly named Mr. Lucky: a two-foot-long dragonfish, also known as an Asian arowana. In an article on these fish, the *New York Post* likens their round scales to coins, and reveals that they can be worth up to \$300,000. Cache Creek’s vision: Chinese gamblers tapping the cool blue tank, hoping for luck. Wendy Waldorf, a spokesperson for Cache Creek, tells the *Los Angeles Times* that the casino caters to Asians, a significant market. In New York, NBC News reports, discount buses depart from Chinatown to take approximately 30,000 Chinese gamblers to casinos outside the metro area each week, including those in Atlantic City. In 2011, a bus on a return trip from the Mohegan Sun in Connecticut crashed and killed 14 passengers. With mangled limbs



and empty pockets, whose grandmother was lost, whose father? In “How I Got That Name,” Marilyn Chin writes of her own father’s gambling addiction:

While my father dithers,  
 a tomcat in Hong Kong trash—  
 a gambler, a petty thug,  
 who bought a chain of chopsuey joints  
 in Piss River, Oregon

In a 2012 *MELUS* interview with Chin about her gambling father, she speaks about her siblings and the necessity of humor: “We had to laugh deep from our guts to keep from crying.”

Across the country, mirroring Chin’s Piss River, Oregon, my father played all night in Atlantic City. He did not stop to eat or go to the bathroom or ask where his family was. My father owned a Chinese American takeout restaurant on the Jersey shore, and we would lose this one asset from his gambling. He did not dither in that red-velvet world of his. When we didn’t go to Atlantic City with him, he’d disappear for days, sometimes a week. My mother ran the restaurant without him, her arms scraping the fryer, grime peeling like bark. Her anger: strips of wonton wrappers seething in that fryer, slow and dangerous. She was a motionless alligator ready to strike, and we avoided her gaze during those reptilian days.

When we’d drive home from Atlantic City together, my father would glow over his winnings. He’d flail an arm back in that poorly won BMW and toss a couple of \$20 bills at us. “Liar,” my mother would say, staring out the window. “You lost. You always lose.” The new leather burned our thighs as we watched the Parkway smokestacks grow exponentially.

She was right. My father always lost in the end. Next year, he would ram the BMW into a median on his midnight way to Atlantic

City. What he would lose beyond money—his job, family, and sobriety, among other things—would not be clear to him until much later. Perhaps it's still not clear to him now; I wouldn't know. Underneath those boardwalk boards, there is so much rotting trash.

Gambling addiction rates among Asian Americans in the U.S. are notably high, according to psychiatrist Dr. Tim Fong at UCLA's Gambling Studies Program. In a 2007 article, Fong and his co-author Dr. John Tsuang speak about how factors such as shame, denial, guilt, language barriers, and help-seeking behaviors heighten pathological gambling within Asian American communities. Did my father seek a different future for all of us, or just for himself? One truth: the sky was always blue at Caesars. A director at the NICOS Chinese Health Coalition, Michael Liao explores the relationship between immigration, gambling, and social status. In his 2016 article "Asian Americans and Problem Gambling," he speaks about the impulse to gamble being tied to matters of control and decision-making processes. Among vulnerable communities who may feel powerless in their everyday lives, this is one way to take action. After we lost the restaurant, my father was unable to hold a steady job. He would spend a few days working for someone else as a cook, only to storm out shouting and hurling spatulas. His apron would be thrown in the trash, ties dangling in the wind like snakes. The same goes for that factory job, that A&P grocery job, that dim sum waiter job, that, and that. "I'm the boss," my father would snarl beneath a plume of cigarette smoke. His brown leather jacket slumped around his shoulders as if he were unable to shed his own hide. I always found it funny that his jacket's interior label read: *I Don't Want to Go to Work*. And so he didn't. My father rarely spoke to us, even more rarely in English, and this is what we remember him saying the most: *I'm the boss*. Translation: What can I hold onto?

Our shared story moves away from the past and into the future. In 2016, the Lucky Dragon Casino, proudly calling their casino Las Vegas's premier Asian-themed resort, opened. A 1.2-ton gold-plated

dragon dangles from a chandelier. In its press release, the casino was clear about its target market: the larger Asian diaspora, particularly Chinese. Located inside the casino, Dragon's Alley is a restaurant modeled after night markets in China and Taiwan, with red chairs and napkins, a neon sign, lanterns, and even full-sized, decorative bicycles. It even has a brick wall flown in from a government-housing alley in Beijing. If you touch the wall, you can practically go home. David Jacoby, the Lucky Dragon's chief operating officer, reassures patrons via the *Los Angeles Times* that the casino is "heavily feng shui'ed." It's true: the kitchen is blessed in the glitter of the American dream. Cleansed in luck, in that steel-blue water we all traversed.

\* \* \*

MY MOTHER TRIED TO leave many times. She woke up in the middle of the night and packed a suitcase, folding each dress like a present for no one in particular. And each time, she failed to get out the door. My brother wouldn't leave his dinosaur blanket behind and refused to pack it. I begged for us to walk past that door, into the blinding snow. I dreamt of the icicles stinging my cheeks: relief. Ngin Ngin, my paternal grandmother, crumpled like a poorly made bed by the front door. If she had to endure her arranged marriage, why couldn't my mother?

It was my father who ended up finally leaving. That day was like any other. I went to school. My mother slept, since she'd started working the night shift for the United States Postal Service. And there were lunches and recesses and leaves falling from trees and ants crawling through a maze in my brother's classroom. But he—my father—was gone. Just like that. Breaking down the boardwalk. Except it was perpetually winter and we were thankful for it. That week, my mother opened the windows of our house to let the cigarette smoke out. To air out each promise, each day my father disappeared in Atlantic City. She changed the locks. She surveyed the brilliant brass doorknobs

in her hands and thought: *These would make beautiful earrings.* All three of us carried his dirty floral armchair replete with cigarette burns down to the basement. We shoved it into a cobwebbed corner we could all forget.

Disappearance is a strange choice. I'll grow to learn this later as an adult, when a parade of men will suddenly leave me. One strange attempt, in the months that followed: my father broke into the house through the basement window and left half a rotisserie chicken, a red packet with \$5 in it, and a scribbled note: *Happy Birthday, Jane.* My birthday had been months ago. I thought of the Chicken Bone Man as I tore the salty, glistening skin from the leg; yes, I ate it. I was grateful, even for this. I ate that chicken down to the white bone, clean. With my father at six feet tall, I wondered how he climbed into that tiny basement window. He must have finally transformed into a raccoon.

One summer in Atlantic City, my mother bought us hermit crabs on the boardwalk. After trips with no ice cream or boardwalk games, which truly were a scam, this was a sign of utter generosity. We loved the crabs dearly. We kissed their shells and let them strut along the hotel room floor. In the morning, my father was passed out in bed, still in his cheap button-down and too-big slacks. He had been gambling again all night. My brother and I watched, our hands over each other's mouths, as one of the hermit crabs crawled all over his back. Manifest destiny.

Decades later, when I asked my mother why she bought us those hermit crabs, she talked about waiting. "I remember standing outside of the gambling floor, watching you both run all over the place. And I remember looking around me—at the other wives waiting with children. How I looked just like them. Tired. And thinking: Why? Why am I standing here?" She paused, removing the daggers from her eyes, thrown in the direction of my father. "I felt bad for you both. I bought you hermit crabs."

\* \* \*

IN SEATTLE WHERE I live now, it's the Snoqualmie Casino. The casino buses are luxury coaches, with toilets and air-conditioning. They pick up patrons in the Chinatown-International District, right behind the Uwajimaya grocery store. When I'm grocery shopping for anything that reminds me of home—persimmons, sour dried plums, and Chinese pickled vegetables—I swear I see my father boarding that bus, loafers polished in kitchen grease. I take one step closer to see better, hugging my sagging grocery bag to my chest. But then: another. He looks like my father too, with his leather jacket and wet black eyes, as if he's been crying. In this gray and misty city, it's hard to tell. They're all my father. Do I care if they are? Regardless, I wish they'd look at me. This is what I think, as these aging Asian gamblers take the vouchers from the casino bus driver and hold them tightly in their hands. *Do you see me? Look at me!*

This is the story of lost enterprises. I was 31 when Ngin Ngin passed away. She had dementia for years and remembered only two people toward the end of her life: my father and me. She'd repeat the same story about taking me to the swing set at a park. Underneath this story is my father's story: his love for his mother, the only person he never left. When my father abandoned our family, he moved in with Ngin Ngin and stayed with her for as long as he could. He peeled her red grapes; he brushed her white hair; he clipped her softening toenails. Decades ago, my uncles and Yeh Yeh, my paternal grandfather, had left the village and moved to Hong Kong to make money in the big city. Ngin Ngin had remained and raised my father, the baby of the family, alone. When she died, I was on tour for my first book of poems, *Overpour*, in Shanghai. In Jersey, as she was lowered into the dirt, loose as coffee grounds, I was restless from jet lag and staying in a hotel that smelled like recycled air. She was a celebrity at her local Dunkin Donuts in Matawan. Every time she came in, they

took a Polaroid of her and gave a free small cup of drip coffee and a Munchkin. She couldn't speak English, but the word for coffee in Toisanese sounds pretty similar: kaa fe. When they'd try to give her a coffee cup sleeve, she'd wave them away; her hands could handle the heat. Photos of her in a fleece vest covered the café wall like a shiny patchwork quilt. But her photo wall eventually stopped. I wondered if the baristas were worried, peeking their heads out the door to see if she was around the parking lot's corner.

A couple of months after Ngin Ngin passed away, when I returned to Jersey during my winter break in 2016, my father called my mother out of nowhere and asked if I was coming home. "I can't remember the last time he called. Something's not right," she said, half laughing, half suspicious. The absurdity of it all. "He said he wanted to see you. I told him it was up to you."

How the scene went, after all was lost: my father arrived through the garage door as if he'd lived here all along. No knock, no announcement. It'd been many, many years since I'd seen him. My father had grown old. He wasn't how I remembered him as a small child or teenager. All his rotten teeth had fallen out. One golden crown hung from his mouth like a cardboard crescent moon. He was in gray sweatpants and holding a gift of four giant oranges—the size of small planets. We sat awkwardly around the kitchen table. My brother weaved his hands together as if they were glued. My mother peeled her own orange—an orange she'd bought—and aimed for a slowly brewing growl. My father, in his flitting laughter, told us how he'd learned to make his own wine. That it tasted terrible, like dirty feet. He announced in mixed Toisanese and English: "I can do whatever I want now." We all silently wondered if he was drunk. My mother, finished with her orange, grabbed a cleaver and started beheading apples. Tart slices rolled across the counter. It was time for my father to go.

Steven, 28 and fully bearded, had bought a bottle of merlot when he heard that our father was coming. As our father pulled on his

shoes—stained white sneakers covered in grass cuttings—I watched my brother offer him this gift. Steven laughed, deep from the gut, to stop himself from crying. He was sweating, and I hoped that the bottle would slip right out of his hands and break open in the hallway, sputtering like sweet pomegranate seeds everywhere. At least, then, our father wouldn't take it. Later, when I asked my brother why he gave him the bottle, he said in the gentlest voice: "To pass the time."

I think of my father drinking too much and watching the NBA playoffs as I watch the playoffs. Of drinking himself to sleep and dreaming about his mother, her purple jade bracelet shining deep within the earth. Of how he jolts up in bed in the middle of the night, how he needs to see his daughter, right this instant. He'll remind himself not to talk about how much money he won or how she hasn't grown or any memories really. *Maybe*, he'll think, *I'm better now*. And the giant oranges. *Don't forget the oranges*.

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**LET'S NOT FORGET: THIS** is the story of lost enterprises. Of boarded-up pizza joints, lonely stuffed animals sans tipsy game operators, echoing parking lots with floating trash, and neon lights toppled over like sandcastles. A ghost city. In 2012, the Revel, a \$2.4 billion casino, opened. The Revel was the most anticipated undertaking in Atlantic City at that time; the entire exterior was built with glass, as if it could disappear at night. A casino that disappears into thin air—which it did, just two years later.

It's fair to say that the Revel did not have luck on its side. During construction, lightning struck a worker's bucket lift and killed him. Three construction executives died in a freak plane crash. This was another world my father could have dreamt in, abandoned in rotting, unlucky luxury. Hotel rooms with punched-out windows. Echoing concert halls with families of soprano rats. Seagulls building velvet

nests, declaring their own American dream in feathery, squawking, bird-shit glory. Jim Whelan, the former mayor of Atlantic City, said “Atlantic City is like Dracula—you can’t kill it, no matter how hard we try.”

These days, if I close my eyes, I can hear Bruce Springsteen’s “Atlantic City” playing in Tony’s Baltimore Grill, a surviving Atlantic City pizzeria, or maybe in our old Chinese American takeout amid the hiss of the wok firing. Sometimes I imagine my father in the future: in his late nineties, strolling along an empty boardwalk with me. He walks with his arms cradled behind his back, as elderly Chinese folks often do. We walk, and he points out how the howling waves sound just like they do in the South China Sea. What kind of luck do I need for this to come true?