...an annual flood of ears sweeps through the entire village. They say it is common for an ear to reach fugitive status, as it flops like a crippled prisoner towards liberation and wishes for a long-awaited reunion with us (although many of the earless generation are either already dead or dying off). But these ears, they have strength in numbers, and when a single one attempts a getaway, it often faints on its trembling side, exhausted not only from the physical exertion required for any successful escape but most certainly from the deafening solitude of the past.

The cochlear runaway usually ruptures in defeat, and always before death, the oddly shell-shaped apparatus in which it dwells transforms into an ivory mound of worms, all of which squirm away with such speed that nobody has seen where they really go.

Some say they sprout impressive wings and soar off to ear heaven, where they listen to folk songs in the morning and jive to dance hits at night; they might even rest their curled bodies next to the vibrating sounds of a TV playing M*A*S*H since it brings them back to a time that’s also met the guillotine of memory. If an ear has been near angelic in its lifetime, loudspeakers play back the fondest of conversations, words exchanged—ones we imagined listening to as we died, the blood curdling and hardening in our veins like black licorice.
Some say these ears return to their prison cells, begging the guards to let them back into their community because that is all they know and find that the world outside is cruel and unknowing, cruel as it doesn’t care to know, refusing to even feign the desire to know. But the guards do not care either and throw them by the handfuls into that night’s stew, lending the tofu and vegetables a distinct, pleasurable flavor.

Others say (and this is most likely the case) that they dissolve on spot. These worms—once bound together as a composite ear—vanish to dust, and a single finger can lick up their remains off the top of a bookcase, the ivory keys of an unplayed piano, under the bed between yellowed photos and undelivered letters. On a remarkably sunny day, you may even see them performing acrobatics in mid-air, pirouetting like miniature fuzzy little stars.

The whole village of ____ knows that the mass getaway of ears occurs when the guards are most content, their bellies at their warmest and fullest, fueled by ceaseless swigs of sake and other spirits that encourage long, uninterrupted doses of sleep. They don’t seem to mind so much, the few villagers that have lived through what refuses to be named. Ones who have lived through the war fear these ears might mistake their languor for indifference. They drive pieces of scrap metal left over from the abandoned tanks and artillery, over their doors and windows for extra security with whatever strength they have left.

The villagers leave a feast of grilled, marinated meats, whole pan-fried fish by the dozens, pickled vegetables, rice cakes in every pastel color conceivable, freshly salted and roasted seaweed, on the graves of the dead that stretch across the meadow between the east and west mountains. Poppies, red as the blood that once nourished the soil, have sprung from the ground, fertile for nothing else. When the villagers return to see if the dead have eaten, they find that the ears, instead, have made themselves at home. The imprint of ears, like the fossils of mythological creatures, can be found everywhere in rice, in cakes, even in the soil when they have gorged themselves beyond rescue, sinking into the earth among the dead with their newly acquired weight.
When these ears jump off the Emperor’s walls where they hang upside down through rusted, metal hooks—the kind that recall medieval torture instruments rather than ones you might see at the butcher’s shop—they escape without the levi
ty of wings. Far from flying off like birds healed of broken wings, they flop, thump, drag, and limp rather clumsily, heavily, still imagining the oppression of our dead weight.

The feral screech of the blade as it crunches through bone and flesh replays endlessly for them. Before they dissolve into worms, with wings, as dust, as trophies in the pockets of soldiers, or relics trapped behind glass, painfully pressed into the pages of so many different albums, books, and encyclopedias, they all bend in unison, leaning towards memory as soft and marshy as the rice paddies where we lie in wait.