The Price of Rice

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Grain to water ratio must be precise or the result
will be *catastrophe*. I let my mother speak

in hyperbole—concessions you allow someone who
survived civil war, someone whose father was taken

by silhouetted men in the dagger of night, someone
who's toiled since the age of ten, someone

who still eats last at the dinner table. Too much
liquid, she tells me, you get porridge: *jook*—which

sounds eerily similar to *gook*. The ways we must survive
mortal, moral combat. When I'd come down with

a cold, she'd prepare my favorite remedy: congee
with a dash of soy sauce, sesame oil, garnished by

finely chopped scallions. Simple, filling. An entire
meal that fed a mother and her mother fleeing

with three daughters and the eldest son, now
estranged—how a fistful of rice boiled down

with extra water satisfied rumbling bellies amid
rubble mountains, ghost artillery—the peninsula

cut in half by outsiders then left to spar for eternity:
one blind, one cursed; existential, consequential.

My mother wistfully recalls what remains, memory
broken by age and a willing, as I drown my iPhone in

a satchel of abundance. How I used to play, spreading
its stickiness on loose-leaf paper as glue, constructing

hats to pretend I was a nurse mending wounds or
a famous chef summoning feasts. When I first asked

how to prepare the perfect heap of cooked rice, she
casually filled the pot, placed her hand on top like she

were performing sacrament or taking my temperature,
letting the water crawl between knuckles and wrist.

Eyeballing it. But I wanted exactitude—a basic
math. She used to tease when I had a kernel stuck

on my cheek or held hostage by my hair: *Saving it
for later?* I've never saved anything in my life

when that's all she's ever known, using her body
to carry and shield, cushioning me from every

possible blow—taking it, taking it—so I'd never
have to be intimately acquainted with the same

country of hunger: polishing each granule clean
with spit for a bit of salvation—a pearl.