

“The Willing Reaper” written by Yonnie Yang, Age 14

Life is a lovely matter. A twistedly tragic yet enthralling tale in which you may weave your own fate, yet must learn to accept lost stitches in the loom.

The beings that contain such power glow with a light unlike any other. Though they always begin on their journey with eyes glimmering of visions of the future, once they arrive they forever learn to appreciate the silent peace of Death.

It's ironic, isn't it? For spirits so beautiful to wish for something as solemn and dull as I.

Yet, the first time she called for me was in middle school.

She was all aglow back then, her soul pulsing with light and a furious, naive type of joy. Her hair was a constant reflection of herself: luscious waves braided into perfect pigtails, shaped every morning by the soft hands of her mother. She was the first to recognize me, to ever be able to see my figure. How, I'll never know.

Her call came with the tingling feeling of premonition, yet when I first saw her bright eyes and earnest smile, I believed instantly my instinct must have been mistaken. I watched her with gentle amusement. Her innocent joy reminded me of the youngest stages of Life, and for that I adored her.

I allowed myself to watch over her for a second longer, then decided to leave. I could already sense that my presence was necessary in hundreds of other locations, an old man surrounded by his grandchildren, a young woman sleeping in her hospital bed, a grouchy old maltese being comforted by his owners as the vet stood over them. Those ready for me would not wait.

As she hurried from her class, a cold hand grabbed her by the wrist, wrenching her backwards as her eyes widened in fear, though the way she winced reflexively told me this wasn't an unusual occurrence.

I turned back to them as her wide-eyed expression shifted to shameful acceptance. I could only watch as she reluctantly surrendered her lunch to the gang of girls, only to have them laugh at the foreign food and hurl it over her neat braids. She cried out as hot soup dripped down her brand new school uniform, one that her parents had so tirelessly worked to buy. Her voice died in her throat as the girls tossed the empty containers at her feet, sneering as she hastily swiped the tears from her cheeks.

Carefully, she picked the last of her mother's prized kimchi from the ground and wiped the stain from her skirt, but the dark blemishes it left on her soul wouldn't be washed away so easily. I knew this feeling, one that had made me despise Life for toying with its most kindhearted souls. I knelt beside her, snapping shut the Hello Kitty containers and stacking them primly back into her lunch box.

She smiled at me, eyes like stars gazing into my empty ones as she asked who I was. When I told her, she waved me away.

“Thank you, but I don’t need you yet.”

I visited her more and more as she grew older.

In many a late night of endless pressure and isolation, when her tears stained the pages of her textbooks until the words were shriveled beyond recognition, I felt her summon my presence again.

This time she understood who I was. She had begged for me to come, and yet the moment she saw me she turned away, afraid.

Her soul was still kindled with light, and though it had dimmed with the years and flickered with occasional uncertainty, there remained a will to be strong.

I wiped away her tears and placed my hand gently on her cheek. That day was not the first or last I would see of this pain, and yet my heart ached for her like it did no other. I reached out my hand, offering her an escape to a world of peace.

Her voice wavered when she finally spoke.

“Thank you, but I can’t need you yet.”

The next time she called for me I barely recognized her. Her soul flickered insistently and her pure heart was bruised with fresh fingerprints, a display of the harsh grasps she had only recently escaped. I could see the dark circles taint the light of her eyes, her lips cracking in the cold apartment as she shivered with a chill only she could feel.

She avoided herself, looking away hastily when she caught sight of herself in the mirror, and therefore began to hide from the reaching arms of Life. I watched as she refused to eat, silently hoping to wither away.

I noticed her sigh as I emerged from the shadows. She reached shakily for her coffee mug, fingers trembling against the handle as she studied me.

Her fingers, worked down to the bone from countless hours of mismatched jobs, were too weak to hold even that. The cup dropped from her feeble hands and shattered against the ground, the hot liquid stinging her skin, but she barely reacted. I noticed her fingers twitch as she glanced at my outstretched hand, an invitation for her to join me.

For a moment, I saw her reach.

Life's attempts to subdue her had finally destroyed her. I would bring her tranquility, if she allowed me to.

But then I saw it.

A fighting spark, smaller than a candle's flame, bloomed at the edges of her soul.

When she looked up at me, I saw in her eyes the child of Life I once knew.

"Thank you, but I won't need you yet."

The last time I saw her, she welcomed me. Life had outlined her face with deep wrinkles, the crinkle of her eyes holding memories of a lifetime's happiness. Nothing like the soft skin she had when she was a child, although now her soul seemed to flicker steadily, unafraid, accepting.

She said a tearful goodbye to her beloved family, hushing a wailing baby in her arms before nodding up at me. The gentle warmth she'd held in her soul for so long filled the room as I stepped closer.

I held out my hand, and she took it.

"Thank you for waiting."