

HANNAH DELA CRUZ ABRAMS

Songs for Ghosts

Northern Mariana Islands, 1992

Late at night we sing, my cousin Laurena and I, to drive the ghosts away. Earlier we made our own dinner, fried eggs and SPAM and rice with ketchup. Now, sitting up side by side on the concrete counter of the outdoor kitchen, we smoke our mothers' thin, menthol cigarettes. Our wrists delicate as eggshells. We let the blue plumes drift up from our mouths to our noses. We don't need anyone. I am twelve. She is fourteen. Our bodies are weightless. Young girls, bird-thin, singing to keep the ghosts away. *Amazing Grace. Silent Night. The Star-Spangled Banner.* We sing every song we know, drink wine coolers, dangle destroyed rubber zoris from our dry and dusty feet. A purple orchid startles out from the trunk of a tree. Long lines of bulbous red ants labor up the walls of the empty house. Laurena's shoulder is smooth against mine. Our hair is a single bramble under twin beaching crowns. A dog howls from the dense bamboo. We howl along with it. Somewhere in the dark and tangled woods, my mother stirs in a flimsy tent, throws a leg over her lover's hip, moves her face into the space between his shoulder blades. If there is a moon, Laurena and I don't see it. If the stars are kindled, we aren't looking. On the other end of the island, Laurena's mother slumps at a poker machine with our other five aunts. They slip in one dollar, five dollars, twenty dollars. They breathe softly and contentedly

in the blue light. The whole world is worn out, drugged and sleeping. But we, Laurena and I, are wide awake, keeping vigil, raising our voices, throwing our arms around each other, and letting the high-pitched sound of our hoarse and drunken singing ring out into the night. We are singing away the ghosts, the specters and the spooks. Singing away the white lady who stuffs the souls of children into coconuts. The taotaomona tree spirits. And all our dead, loved ones who walk toward us wearing their favorite clothes. We sing and counter-sing. We could walk on any precipice and not fall, swim in the Trench and never drown. And yet, we are already winging away from each other, driven to fledge by the murmuration of cells in Laurena's belly. A top-speed division of us, of the world into Before and After. The division is a secret that will grow and grow until it splits her narrow body, leaves a narrow scar. Twenty years later, I will learn that the thing to fear is not behind you, that the hardest road can look like river, and that feathers are heavier than skeletons. Sitting up side by side on the concrete counter of the outdoor kitchen, we smoke our mothers' thin, menthol cigarettes, Laurena and I.



HANNAH DELA CRUZ ABRAMS was awarded the Whiting Writers Award for her novella *The Man Who Danced with Dolls* and her memoir-in-progress *The Following Sea*. She has also received a Rona Jaffe National Literary Award and a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship. Her work has most recently appeared in the *Oxford American*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Mayday Magazine*, and *The Southern Humanities Review*, among others. Abrams currently teaches in the Department of English at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.