One of a Hundred Hopeful Hymns

In the living room of my halmoni - grandmother’s - home, my sister plays upon a grand piano, lithe fingers dancing against the broken keys, they slide up a whole note and down a half step. The melody is memory, and I want to forget.

Here, I feel empty.
Leaning against dresser drawers,
I have a suitcase of summer dresses and nothing to wear.
At my halmoni’s kitchen table I nibble on kimbap and compare myself to Judas - imposter - tasting food that doesn’t belong to me with a bite too foreign to be Korean.
Here, I soak myself in makgeolli - rice wine - as I drown at this dinner table where cousins’ smiles seem like kitchen knives - double sided - we all have two faces but theirs seem to sink into symphony - the same sea.
I’m from a lake, not the ocean.
I’m asking to be written into their orchestra

but somehow, I’m not sure I can contribute anything more than a half note.
There is nothing resonant in my soul, nothing for them to play upon.
They are a plethora of measures that mean far more than my little melody, my brevity, I see, is not Korean.
I am not full - of food, faith, family -
I am only a quick glance at the girl in my math class,
a split-second decision to cut off my hair at 3AM,
a nail clipping cut too close to the cuticle - half impulse and half heartache.

I am a half-note wishing for something whole.
I am half my mother’s daughter -
half my halmoni’s granddaughter -
half a red envelope on Lunar New Year -
half a bowl of Good Luck soup -
half Korean.
I have halved my heart into pieces of what is me,
what is not me,
what I long to be,
and it is uneven that split, and yet
I have always longed for what I cannot have.
He will never have it either - my father,
who cranes over my halmoni's guitar
bends chords and claims,
he has less of a right to be here than I do - my father,
who is fed five helpings of bibimbap - my father,
who speaks out of tune with all the right intentions - my father,
who writes poetry by the lake and loves the ocean - my father,
who is the reason I am whole.

On an East Coast evening we return home.
I float in warm water - weightless, aimless.
There is salt on my tongue and a sharpness that stays stagnant in all the right ways.
In the immensity of an ocean I taste halmoni's kitchen,
I taste family that will never know me.
who live in oblivion away from my longing.
Who I can hold in my heart like a hopeful hymn -
the kind already made whole.