

RIVERS BETWEEN US

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Abstract

Rivers Between Us is a short story collection that mediates the consequences of the Korean War lingering in the everyday lives of Koreans. The six stories paint raw human portraits of Koreans haunted by ghosts of the Korean War: a North Korean missionary who left his country and failed to return for the widespread famine floating the world as a ghost; a radio announcer from the North who pretends to be a South Korean receiving mysterious letters; a North Korean singer who is asked to sabotage her previous life at the cost of her stardom in the South; a South Korean military man who goes on a DMZ patrol only to run into ghosts whose lives were sacrificed during the war; a professional translator educated in America encountering a ghost of his dead father who had sent his child abroad out of fear of the war; an elderly woman diagnosed with dementia opening up her traumatic past as a war orphan to her granddaughter as the illness progresses. Weaving the forgotten and unforgotten Korean history into magical realism, *Rivers Between Us* reveals emotional truth behind the gleams and dreads of contemporary Korea.

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This is the story.

The story is the story.

It tells itself to itself.

It tells itself to itself.

It tells itself to itself.

Again and again and again.

—Julia Cho, *Office Hour*

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Introduction: The Unforgotten Korean War

Rather than a discrete event, war is a continuum, an ebb and flow in intensity that occasionally spikes. War has always been a part of our lives, a dull hum of white noise that blends in with the air conditioning, the computers, the hum of traffic.

—Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*

Historians often refer to it as the “forgotten war,” but no Korean considers it forgotten. There is not a culture of forgetting. The war is everywhere in today’s Korea.

—Suki Kim, *Without You, There Is No Us*

The Beginning

What is lost is only known by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.

—David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss*

The memory is the entire. The longing in the face of the lost. Maintains the missing. Fixed between the wax and wane indefinite not a sign of progress. All else age, in time. Except. Some are without.

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

It was a bad time to visit the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The political strife between South and North Korea was at its peak. In August 2015, two months before my trip, the South Korean Defense Ministry officially denounced the North for sneaking into South Korea’s DMZ and planting three landmines right outside South Korean guard posts. The landmines, housed in wooden boxes, exploded as two South Korean staff sergeants who volunteered to lead an early morning patrol opened a barbed-wire DMZ gate. Sergeant Ha, a twenty-one-year-old soldier, stepped on the first two landmines, and Sergeant Kim stepped on the third one as he approached his wounded colleague. As a result of the two explosions, Sergeant Ha lost his two legs and

Sergeant Kim lost one leg. South Korean military swiftly investigated the case and concluded that the incident had been plotted by North Korea. A spokesman for South Korean military vowed harsh retaliation against the North, including the resumption of loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts that blasted everything from K-pop to bitter criticisms of the North Korean state. On August 21, eleven days after the loudspeaker got turned back on, North Korea fired artillery shells at some of the speakers, all landing at Yeoncheon, a South Korean border town, and the DMZ. This escalated the diplomatic tension between South and North Korea to a semi-state of war. Although an agreement of reconciliation was made later the month, the incident once again made it clear that the Korean DMZ, a 160-miles-long and 2.5-miles-wide border barrier that cuts the Korean Peninsula in half, was the political game ground where two Koreas meet with hope and fear.

However, inside the DMZ Peace Train, a South Korean excursion train that travels from Seoul to the DMZ, I had boarded in the early morning of October 2015, the tension was nowhere to be found. The train rather had a jolly feeling: its walls were festooned with colorful decals of flowers, hearts, and wild animals; the ceilings were covered with the DMZ photos themed around Korean history and ecology; pastel green colored plush train seat covers had pinwheel images tinged with bright yellow and purple; and the train's loudspeaker played cheerful upbeat music. Throughout the two-hour journey, finely made-up female train attendants, wearing sage green berets, dark ivory utility blouses, beige knee-length skirts, and platform heels, kept pacing back and forth between the train to check on the passengers. They also sold snacks and took photos for the passengers. Those photos were later displayed through television monitors installed on the wall. Instead of a train that headed to the DMZ, a heavily armed middle ground between the South and North, it felt as if I was falsely taken to an amusement park.

After making several stops, the train reached at Baekma Goji Station, meaning “White Horse Hill.” The station was named after the Baekma Goji Battlefield, a historical site of the Korean War where bloody battles lasted for 10 days while the ownership of the hill changed 12 times. It was called the “White Horse” because after 300,000 bombings, the hill’s ridge was destroyed and resembled a figure of a pale threadbare horse. At the end of the railway platform stood a tall, white signboard that read: *The Northernmost Point. We want to be back on track.* In fact, the Gyeongui Line, which the DMZ-train uses, was built in 1902, and the railroad stretches from Seoul to all the way into Sinuiju, North Korea. With the division of Korea, however, the Gyeongui Line also got torn in half; Baekma Goji Station is now the farthest point a South Korean train can reach.

My justification for the trip was to find the truth. At the time I was working on a school assignment, which was to translate a travelogue written by Shin Eun-mi. The book initially received accolades from South Korean readers for humanizing North Koreans, making to the recommended-reading list of the Culture Ministry, but later faced a severe public backlash that Shin advocated the North Korean state. After multiple rounds of interrogations by South Korean prosecutors, Shin, a US citizen born in South Korea, got deported to the US for violating South Korea’s anti-communist National Security Law. Of course I did not need to visit the Korean DMZ to do my homework better; and yet, the assignment awoke something critical inside me, that I had no proper definition of the troubling subject, North Korea, in my own terms.

The truth was North Korea had been a mystery throughout my life. The public education I received in South Korea, where I grew up, treated the North as the country’s taboo topic. In classrooms, no one, including myself, ever brought up the subject with any seriousness, and teachers, without any reason, bypassed whatever small or big portions reserved for the North in

our textbook. Portraits of North Korea painted by South Korean media were the same hazy images of a short and chubby old man in a baggy suit standing in front of gray and bare concrete buildings. When I came to America at nine, I learned that North Korea was the butt of the world's joke. As a child, I was asked, almost every day, by random Americans if I came from the North or South. When I answered that I came from the South, what often came back to me were long sermons on how their uncles or fathers had fought in the arduous Korean War, or how they felt sorry for South Korea being a "sitting duck" in between powerful nations, or how crazy Democratic People's Republic of Korea was to make their people into mindless slaves. Then, at home, my father would warn me and my sister that we girls should never let anyone identify us as North Koreans. Having grown up under the first Korean War generation, he inherited immense fear of the North. As for my mother, she suddenly sank into dead silence whenever someone mentioned North Korea, a nation that took away her grandfather's life. It has been almost seven decades since the war reached a truce, but in the minds of many South Koreans, including my parents, the war refused to end.

But from the outside, it seems as if the Korean War has now become a forgotten subject. Looking at today's South Korea, its bright city lights, efficient public transportation, and polished landscape architecture, it is hard to imagine that the country's per capita income used to be less than 100 USD. Times of war and poverty lies only in the memories of the elders, and the younger generation lives on without knowing much about them. Nonetheless, as Viet Thanh Nguyen stated in his book, *Nothing Ever Dies*, "[T]he domestic lives of the nation are inseparable from the war" (9). That said, when given close attention, the traces of the Korean War thrive in contemporary Korea.

Returning to the story of my maternal grandmother, I remember her keeping the family story as a secret until she turned seventy. Until then, she had lied to her children that she had lived an ordinary life under decent parents and siblings, her life unaffected by the war. In reality, my grandmother's father got executed in public for being mistaken as a North Korean spy during the wartime. His wife, who could not handle the shock, left home to never return, leaving her teenage daughter behind. As an orphan, my grandmother begged her relatives to take her in and toiled for them as their housemaid until she got married to a man who died young. The memory of the war, to her, became a traumatic history that silenced and spooked her. Meanwhile, the mental trauma got passed down to my mother, then myself, embodied as blind fear of the North. Consequently, within our family, anything that has to do with North Korea is immediately labeled as dangerous. Grace M. Cho, in *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, eloquently explains the internalization and inheritance of trauma: "When one loses her place in symbolic order, she is then bridging the gap between body and spectral voice, so ghost voices settle in the body. In the case of the woman who hears but cannot speak, her silence resonates with the voices of a haunted history" (178).

During the DMZ tour, I visited the Labor Party Office, Mt. Kumgang Railway, Myeolgong OP, and Baekma Goji Memorial. Each site provoked different thoughts and memories, but my favorite was the last stop, the Baekma Goji Memorial. There, I ran into a beautiful open landscape of mother nature. The sky was clear blue with scattered clouds that hung low; the mountains on the horizon had multiple layers of green; and the golden rice paddy field shimmered every time the clouds moved in and out of the way. Mesmerized, I hurriedly took note of my impression, using the term "beautiful" many times. Before I ran into that scenery, "beautiful" was the word that not once came into my mind when I thought of North

Korea. I knew I would see the North when I visited the DMZ, but my imagined version of the country was some colorless wasteland with no sun, no clouds, no life. I later learned that due to the absence of human development, the Korean DMZ has turned into a wildlife refuge where even endangered species could thrive. Although I saw no people over the guard posts and wired fence, I longed to see people on the unreachable side. If only I could see one person walking over the beautiful nature, I felt I could believe the person as a full human, and the country as real.

On a train back to Seoul, I wept in my mind for Korea's division for the first time in my life. How unwise it was to turn away from each other, I thought. How powerless we Koreans were in front of history that failed us many times. I could not stop thinking about the Korean War and its consequences, the traumas that permanently haunted people. I wondered: What exactly did the war do to people? What did it feel like to live through the war? How did they cope with it? How did they fail to cope with it? The trip to the Korean DMZ has partially filled in the missing gaps of my understanding of my personal, familial, and national history in a larger frame. Naturally, I thirsted for more stories and knowledge. I wanted to weave them together to draw a map of my complicated emotional and geographical journey. An act of self-discovery and self-expression, capturing the history in a form of art felt like an important mission, which Nguyen calls a crucial ethical work for creating just memory (12). By creating a mimetic fiction of the history that is forgotten but also unforgotten, I wanted to confirm the traces of the Korean War lingering in the everyday lives of Koreans. With that, I began writing this thesis.

Form, Genre, Symbols

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain

unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbrining of this effect, then he has failed in his first step.

—Edgar Allan Poe, *Graham's Magazine* (May, 1842)

I was twelve when I was murdered, fourteen when I looked into the Yalu River and, finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead.

—Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*

According to Frank O'Connor, the difference between a short story and a novel is not the length, but the way a story is being told. Unlike the novel, the short story cannot capture the totality of human life. Therefore, a short story writer should select a specific entry point to approach his story. The short story is “something that springs from a single detail and embraces past, present and future” (22). Whereas the novel expands its world through building layers of time, the short story owns immediacy. It is a hit-and-run. My choice to write a short story collection lies in the same context. Instead of a gradual and chronological development, I wanted to focus on selected moments viewed from a specific angle, the ordinary people's perspective.

Moreover, a short story collection allowed me to display a broad spectrum of the subject matter by playing with different time frames and voices. To give a brief summary, *Rivers Between Us* is comprised of six short stories that are intertextually connected with the never-ending traumas of the Korean War: “A Free Life” delineates the condition of North Korean diaspora; “Rivers Between Us” contemplates Korea's division and human loneliness; “Song of No Regrets” examines multi-layered truth behind the two Korea's propagandas; “I Shall Offer” embodies the war's bodily sacrifices; “The Untranslated” presents cultural disconnection experienced by second-generation war victims; and “A Kind Woman” explores the loss and psychological trauma of the war.

There were several short story collections that inspired me to follow the form. While the answer for which ingredient makes a short story collection may vary, works that I found to be most applicable and compelling were the ones that had a unifying theme or culture. First, I was heavily influenced by Krys Lee's *Drifting House*. Set in the United States, North Korea, and South Korea, the nine stories in the book function as a discrete unit, but when put together, they sing a dark choir of the condition of Korean diaspora: "The Goose Father" paints a gloomy portrait of Gilho, a self-sacrificial man who sends his family abroad for better education then suffers in the private; "At the Edge of the World" introduces a North Korean family settled in America and their cultural dislocation as defectors; and "A Small Sorrow" ponders repressing social obligations crowned upon Korean women through eyes of Eunkang, an artist and a wife of an unfaithful husband. In her stories, Lee constantly pushes her characters into the extreme. From an abused mother who comes to Los Angeles in search of her daughter ("A Temporary Marriage"), a salaryman who becomes a homeless during the IMF crisis ("The Salaryman") to North Korean children struggling to leave their country at the cost of their sister's life ("Drifting House"), challenge and survival are a given in Lee's world. Consequently, her characters are often found bewildered while living through reality, their failed dreams:

The clock had mercifully stopped its ticking. Dust motes spun, zigzagged across the cloth-covered sewing machine, the love seat, the militant rows of perfume bottles on the armoire, then lifted. Mrs. Shin stayed hidden under the tweed comforter as she had for the past few hours or days. It was night, it was day; it was America, it was Korea; it was nowhere, and she was no one. She would not be able to manage Mr. Rhee's sympathetic gaze. (22)

I also admired Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake*. For his stories, Murakami sets a specific time frame, 1995 Kobe earthquake, namely known as the Great Hanshin earthquake, to

demonstrate its catastrophic aftermath in the victims' daily lives: a wife spends five straight days in front of television watching images of crumbled buildings, burning streets, and broken railroads in Kobe ("UFO in Kushiro"); a married man who loses his family due to the earthquake repeatedly dreams of a young child dying in a locked refrigerator ("Landscape with Flatiron"); a middle-aged woman from Kobe living with the unforgiving heart for her past lover ("Thailand"); and a child haunted by an apparition who tries to squeeze her in a little box ("Honey Pie"). The second epigraph of the book, which is a script excerpt from Jean-Luc Godard's film, *Pierror le Fou*, is the key to Murakami's creation:

RADIO. ... garrison already decimated by the Vietcong, who lost 115 of their men ...

WOMAN. It's awful, isn't it, it's so anonymous.

MAN. What is?

WOMAN. They say 115 guerillas, yet it doesn't mean anything, because we don't know anything about these men, who they are, whether they love a woman, or have children, if they prefer the cinema to the theatre. We know nothing. They just say ... 115 dead.

Brushing with his unique surrealistic style, Murakami expertly transforms the inconceivable incident into personal and unforgettable history.

Finally, Henry Dumas' *Ark of Bones and Other Stories* has given me the bravery to write for my people. As an African-American writer, Dumas wrestles with the theme of racial division and violence related to Black experience. His stories well understand white dominance in America and suppression permeated in Black communities. My favorites were "The Crossing" and "Will the Circle Be Broken?". In "The Crossing," Dumas touches the history of slavery and racism deeply rooted in the American South. As a summary, three children go on a walk, and one boy brings up the idea of pushing a girl in a river. The other boy disagrees, mentioning the

murder of Emmett Till, an African-American teen who was lynched by white men and dumped in a river in 1955. At last, the children get over with the argument and start running away, giggling. The story is a playful rendition of the crime. In doing so, Dumas skillfully retains the terror of the experience. In “Will the Circle Be Broken?,” three white men go into a jazz club despite warnings to listen to a rare afro-horn performance. By the time the performance ends, the men are found unconscious. The juxtaposition between the holy instrument and the condescending white male characters reverses the Black and White discrimination and embodies the power of Black legacy. Likewise, maintaining brevity and experimenting with mythicism, cinematic descriptions, and Biblical references, Dumas establishes a successful example of a short story collection that represents the Black community by inviting readers to see the world through the Black people’s perspective.

In *How Fiction Works*, Wood has written that “fiction is both artifice and verisimilitude” (xiii). Wood claims that fiction should work on crafting tools, which allows a story to be connected to the world and to become real. Indeed, I layered multiple techniques to compose a story that works, such as imagery, details, and use of foreign language. Most importantly, I created ghosts as a single effect to be used throughout the six stories (see the above epigraph by Poe). Ghosts are the important devise that signal the status quo of contemporary Korea, imprisoned between now and the wartime.

In the making, I referenced Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Refugees*, Chang Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, Han Kang’s *The White Book*, and Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*. The four novels feature ghostly figures as an epitome of one’s unresolved history. For example, *Comfort Woman* tells a story of Akiko, a World War II refugee from Korea, who displays an abnormal lifestyle. Half her time, she falls into strange spells and talks to invisible ghosts. As the story unravels,

readers see that Akiko has been haunted by her days at the so-called “recreation camps,” where she served as a sex slave to Japanese army men, living a dual life with the spirit of Induk, another comfort woman whose body was brutally destroyed by the Japanese soldiers:

. . . when I heard that woman’s voice in the room full of men, I knew Induk was there.

Slipping into the body of a doctor, she stood beside me, shadowed by mask, gown, and a halo of light. And though I could not see her face, though it had been some time since she last came to me, I knew it was her, just as I’ve always known. (36)

Whereas in *The White Book*, a ghostly figure appears inactive, barely alive in a distant memory of the protagonist: “It was on that day, as I walked through the park, that she first came into my mind. A person who had met the same fate as that city. Who had at one time died or been destroyed” (33).

Ghosts in *Rivers Between Us* also enter their stages in various ways, sometimes directly (“The Untranslated”: “A strange thing happened that night: Jisu came home with his girlfriend and found his dead father sleeping in his bed.”), sometimes disguised (“I Shall Offer”: ““I’m a ghost,” he said. “Corporal Jang is still away on leave. He won’t be back until tomorrow. I borrowed his appearance to talk to you.””), or sometimes as the characters themselves (“A Free Life”: “The driver chuckled, but only silence came back. When he looked back, he saw his quiet passenger staring intently at him, his face pale like a ghost.”).

As the title suggests, a river is a recurring symbol in *Rivers Between Us*. It represents separation and rebirth. For instance, “Rivers Between Us” opens with a scene of Sung-hee leaving her country, North Korea, for an arranged marriage in China. Her immersion in the Tumen River resembles Christian water baptism, a brand-new life cleansed from sin. In the South, she erases her identity as a North Korean and turns herself into a South Korean by

acquiring the Seoul accent. This brings her fame and wealth. However, towards the end of the story, the narrator confesses that the rebirth was an impossible dream: “It didn’t take her too long to realize, however, that no man could start fresh, free from the past, from the choices. After all, the past was all she had. It was all she had to live with.”

Similarly, Chul from “A Free Life” also attempts the rebirth. He follows a South Korean missionary and crosses into China for his Christian missions. He changes his name to Matthew and later settles in America. But the conversation between Chul and a taxi driver hints that Chul had drowned himself in the Hudson River. The narrator says, “It was much later that he understood what it means to lose home, family, lover, even his own name.” To Chul, the river is a site of remorse, loss, and trauma.

Representation and Concerns

[T]hrough an act of memory it looks to sites of unacknowledged loss in order to piece together the remnants of the Forgotten War—the memories of its survivors, the bodies of the dead . . . Such memory reveals not only hidden histories of grief but also continuities with contemporary geopolitics.

—Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless generations.

—Margaret Walker, “For My People”

In *Republic*, Plato argues that all art has mimetic nature. His view of mimesis is negative because the process of imitation inevitably results in an incomplete or limited representation. When writing *Rivers Between Us*, such was the recurring concern: How would I create characters or

incidents that are outside my community? How would I do it while avoiding stereotypes, cliché, or misrepresentation? How would I bring out authenticity in a story without having a firsthand experience? This presented as a major issue when the subject was North Korea, a territory I was unfamiliar with.

My cure was research. I relied on testimonies, fiction, memoir, journal articles, interviews, photographs, and documentaries to gain in-depth knowledge and insight into the subject. As an example, Sandra Fahy's *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* presents intimate images of famine and politics of modern North Korea. Coupled with abundant interviews of North Korean defectors, Fahy offers a busy inside view of North Korea and how ordinary people have coped with the regime, which are hardly known to the outside world. With the book, Fahy argues that the nation cannot be interpreted without personal history.

To a certain degree, Fahy's book resonates with Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. In her work, Demick interviews six North Korean citizens from Chongjin, North Korea. Through their intricate and personal stories of love, family, ambition, and survival, the author ultimately humanizes people of North Korea. The first chapter of the book, "Holding Hands in the Dark," eloquently explains the effect: followed by a satellite image of the Korean peninsula at night, which proves lack of resources (electricity) in the North, the narrator tells to a story of a couple who finds the darkness as their space of dating: "The darkness confers measures of privacy and freedom as hard to come by in the North Korea as electricity. Wrapped in a magic cloak of invisibility, you can do what you like without worrying about the prying eyes of parents, neighbors, or secret police" (4-5). In such way, Demick sheds light on the day-to-day images of North Koreans that had been long dismissed or belittled.

Meanwhile, in *Without You, There Is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea's Elite*, Suki Kim focuses on the issue of surveillance in North Korea. The book contains Kim's six-month investigative journey while teaching English to North Korean students from elite class. After spending two semesters at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, Kim finds the state's tightly controlled censorship unlivable: "Some teachers whispered that this was a five-star prison. We knew that we could never pass through the gate except on trips to go grocery shopping tours at designated times, when minders planned out outings down to the minute and accompanied us" (72).

Another large-scale concern in writing was nameless fear and common stereotypes I held against the subject. Despite extensive research and writing, at times I was visited by ghosts of my intergenerational trauma, which continuously impelled me to retreat from writing. Due to this fear, I could not tell my family about my journey to the DMZ. In 2016, I volunteered as an English tutor for North Korean defectors living in Seoul to broaden my perspective. The experience was a cold splash of water, finally adding colors to the preconceived, black-and-white images of North Koreans I used to have. Around the time, I also began drafting stories, which turned out to be early versions of *Rivers Between Us*. But again, I could not openly talk about any of these experiences; coming from a South Korean family that has been traumatized by the war, having such keen interest in North Korea felt like betraying their hurts. That said, writing *Rivers Between Us* did not necessarily expel inner ghosts of mine. Instead, I could deconstruct my past that is not only personal, but also familial and national. In this regard, the purpose of this thesis is to mosaic the scattered pieces of the Korean War.

Previously I mentioned Henry Dumas and that his courage to write about his people from their perspective inspired me to write *Rivers Between Us*. In the same vein, I want to stress

that this thesis was written specifically for the Korean audience. It is for this reason that Korean words in *Rivers Between Us* has not been italicized. However, the work embraces a larger audience as the loss, trauma, and misunderstanding are a universal theme. Transliteration wise, I used the Revised Romanization system with a few exceptions of words that are more commonly known in English, which have been spelled according to the McCune-Reischauer system.

Withstanding possible minor factual errors and the risk of misrepresentation, I continued writing, hoping this work could un-suture the history of the Korean War, which I believe is too deeply carved into the hearts of Koreans to call it forgotten.

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A Free Life

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.

—Heraclitus

Jun

Jun never understood his brother. The two looked different, to begin with, so much so that people hardly guessed them to be brothers: Jun had a square face and a medium height, whereas Chul had a pale, oval face and was already six feet tall by the time he turned sixteen. Their personalities were also different: Jun was a scholar, quiet and observant, versus Chul a fighter, outspoken and ambitious; and perhaps because of this, the two didn't get along very well.

It was a casual Tuesday afternoon. Jun was alone at home, a 3,000-square-foot apartment in the heart of Pyongyang, watching *The Lion King*, a gift from his diplomat father. When the doorbell rang, he opened the front door. To his surprise, three men were staring at him with suspicious eyes.

“Are you Comrade Kim Chul?” asked one of the men.

Jun shook his head.

“He looks too young. He must be the younger brother,” said another man. He was holding a photo of Chul taken at his high school graduation.

Before Jun could answer, the men pushed the door open and went into the house. First, they checked the kitchen and the living room, and later tried all four rooms, including two

bathrooms and a small balcony. Then they began rummaging through the family's personal belongings, opening every drawer and closet. The house soon resembled a pigpen.

"Your brother, where is he?" the first man barked at Jun.

"I don't know." Jun recoiled, dropping his stare to the ground. But in truth, he knew. Two months ago, his older brother, who claimed himself to be a son of God, had crossed into China, following a missionary from South Korea. How Chul became a Christian Jun never knew. It must have happened while Chul was away in China to attend a university. His original plan was to obtain a degree, come back home, join the Worker's Party, and get married. Instead, Chul fell in love with God. The first night he came back from China, he called his brother to his room and showed him the Bible. At first, Jun didn't know it was a Bible because Chul had wrapped it with a newspaper that had the face of their Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il.

"I found life." Chul's eyes gleamed in delight. "I am free now."

The word *free* disturbed Jun. It reminded him of a South Korean propaganda flyer he found buried in the mountain several years ago. It was a photo of a naked girl seductively lying on the floor. Right below the photo was written: *Come to the Free World!* Having never seen a figure of a woman without clothes, he felt intimidated. He then quickly left the spot, leaving the flyer behind.

The second man emerged from the master bedroom, holding a bottle of Jun's father's whiskey in his hand. He sat on a dark cherry dining chair and pulled out a cigarette from his jacket pocket. Turning his face to the first man, he said, "Comrade, I think we lost him."

The first man ignored this. He looked at Jun squarely and said, "Did your brother leave you with anything? Like a book or anything to read?"

Again, Jun shook his head. In his mind, he recalled what Chul had warned him earlier: “If I don’t return or you don’t hear from me, do not try to find me. Discard all my belongings before the authorities come, and when they do, tell them that I ran away. Don’t be sad even if I die; I will be in my Father’s house.” At the time, Jun responded with a cold contemptuous look. He thought his brother had gone crazy, spending stacks of American money and fake travel passes to deliver the message of Yesu Geuriseudo to underground believers and fresh-off-the-boat defectors from China.

Finally, the men gave up.

“Don’t ever think about telling people what you saw today,” the third man said as he exited the house. “You don’t want to know what happens if you do.”

Jun nodded. Yet in the back of his mind, he had a bad feeling that the same thing would happen again in the near future; if Chul came back, he would continue his mission, including purposefully leaving pocket-sized Bibles in public restrooms. For this, he would get arrested, perhaps go to a prison camp. He would endure his time there, sometimes in sorrow, sometimes in pride, until his family bribed the camp guards to release him. That is, if only he came back home.

Hana

She had a dream that night. In her dream, she saw Chul. He was still eighteen, ambitious and beautiful. They were holding hands in a dark hallway. November, and it was raining outside. The electricity was cut again, but the two young lovers were rather pleased for that. “Your hands,” Chul whispered, “they’re too cold.” Hana immediately blushed. She tried to release the grip of

their folded hands, but Chul didn't let them go. So they walked like that, neither of them speaking much.

This relationship, Hana believed, made sense to her. Their parents had known each other since they were little, and although this love was a surprise for both, it also seemed natural, an easy and sure path: Hana would become an English teacher, Chul a proud soldier of North Korea.

Flashlights glared from a far distance, and the couple quietly parted. "See you later," said Chul. Before he disappeared, his long, delicate fingers drew the shape of an arc on Hana's left shoulder. It remained there like a tattoo of a butterfly.

Every fall the dream returned to her, and she woke with a broken heart. She did not know what made that ancient, childish, and fleeting nine-month relationship so strong. Many years had gone by, but it seemed as though their love never ended.

During those years, Chul went missing for an unknown reason and Hana got married to another man who used to be a monitor of her apartment complex during the widespread famine, the Arduous March, in the mid-1990s. Like her family, he was few of the privileged who did not have to worry about what to eat each day or take extra naps to quiet their stomachs because of hunger. Her husband liked her from the beginning. Hana felt it from the way he avoided her eyes and smiled at her like a child. She also understood that her husband mistook her pity for love, but she accepted this, as pity felt better than her longing for Chul. After marriage, she followed her husband to Japan, where his relatives had gone to live, for better lives.

From time to time, Hana wondered where Chul could be now. She hadn't seen him since their high school graduation. It was a difficult time then, their country suffered, and all colleges had shut down suddenly. Hana decided to wait, but Chul went away, to China. "I will miss you,

every day,” he said. But even years later, he did not come back. His family would not speak about this, and instead fled the country in the dead of night. But again, it was a difficult time: indifference and irrationality prevailed throughout the country.

Hana’s pillow was damp with her sweat. It was still dark outside. She heard the slow breathing of someone lying next to her. She took a deep breath, prayed for a miracle, and opened her eyes: she saw a familiar face instead. She saw an old man who gave her a home and food. This was what she wanted, she realized at last. Hana closed her eyes once again, still hoping for hopeless dreams.

Matthew

The morning traffic was awful since Matthew got into the cab. It was the beginning of a long Thanksgiving weekend and it seemed like everyone was going somewhere. Among many American holidays, Matthew hated Thanksgiving the most; it reminded him of home, and America was not his home. Long ago, when Matthew was young and passionate, he often left home, crossed many rivers until he knew how to read them in darkness and cold. It was much later that he understood what it meant to lose home, family, lover, even his own name. Yet it was too late by then. He had nothing to blame but himself, a young man blinded by youthful hopes.

“See the river over there?” The taxi driver with a strong southern accent pointed to his left, the Hudson River. “Last year a guy drove straight into that river.”

Matthew quietly stared at the river. From the surface, the river seemed calm and clear. But Matthew knew better. Viscerally, he could feel the shock of cold water cutting his soft skin and a sudden change of current that would gulp him down like a hungry animal. He remembered

the first time he had crossed the Tumen River. It was late at night, and a missionary who had been guiding Matthew presented a carton of Marlboro Red to a soldier guarding the post. The soldier with a square face casually accepted the gift and ordered them to take off their clothes. He watched them undressing and picked up Matthew's dark green corduroy jacket his mother had bought for him.

They had chosen the wrong night, however. The moon shone so brightly that it was nearly impossible not to miss them. "God is with us, God is faithful," the missionary repeated, more like a mantra than a prayer. Matthew was terrified, but secretly he felt good, thinking he was now joining the burden of the cross, that he was now one of them. When the two men reached the other side of the river, a Chinese pastor greeted them, took them to a safe shelter, and prayed all night. It was he who suggested Matthew abandon his Korean name, Chul. For safety, he said. Matthew was also told not to give his fingerprints to anyone; that way he could pose as a fresh refugee in many different countries.

"Funny thing is, no one, not even his wife knew why. He was just a forty-something plain old salesman, a husband and a father, and then out of the blue, boom! He drowned himself in a river. Man, what kind of life is that?" The chatty driver sounded almost excited.

Matthew's eyes began to twitch. It was a sign that a migraine was coming, that pain was about to begin. Matthew rolled his fists and counted numbers: *hana, dul, set . . .*

"Strange. You remind me of him, even though I don't really know his face, except for the small, blurry picture of him in the paper." The driver chuckled, but only silence was returned. When he looked back, he saw his quiet passenger staring intently at him, his face pale as a ghost.

Rivers Between Us

Between you and me stand a low wall that you cannot see my broken heart.
If only you could have seen my deep cuts.
If only I could have heard your deep sighs.
—Kim Yuna, “Walls”

Sung-hee

An accent can be a disguise. An old man who guided her through the river taught her this. He had gray hair, his back hunched, but he was lean and swift like a bird. He was a professional: he knew exactly what to say and give to the drivers, officers, border patrols, where to step, when to wait, when to cross.

In darkness, the river shimmered like Tahitian pearls she saw at the Sunam Market in Chongjin, her hometown. The market was once a bustling trading site where merchants, including her father, sold unauthorized foreign goods on the ground. Growing up, Sung-hee had lived the life of modern bourgeois, boasting her fine tailored Japanese clothes, Samsung mobile phones, and thumb drives of Hollywood films. But when the North Korean government launched a surprise currency reform in 2009, old money was dumped in streams; economy collapsed, and naturally, the market closed. Then, Jin-hee, her younger sister, disappeared. No one knew where she went, and ten months after she was last seen, Sung-hee concluded that her sister’s dead—it felt better that way, to come up with a closure than to leave the door open with a million different possibilities.

But three years later, Jin-hee appeared on television, a popular talk show in South Korea, a land of abundance the sisters despised but looked up to. The show was more like a beauty

pageant, starring a group of finely made-up North Korean women sharing their life stories in the glamorous South. When the emcee asked about her defection, Jin-hee, who now went by Mina, said she felt fate calling her on the day she crossed the Tumen River, that she was fed up with her life in the North, with its sameness and lack of information. She cried at the end, quiet tears flowing down her rosy cheeks. “Eonni,” she spoke to the camera, “come find me, I’m here.”

Sung-hee bit into the lower lip with her shivering teeth, tasting blood in her tongue. Icy wind teared her, but she wouldn’t turn around.

On the old man’s cue, she entered the river. The water was cold, thousands of needles poking her skin. The old man, wading ahead, occasionally looked back at her. Sometimes, when the current changed too quickly, she lost balance and drowned. Under the water, she heard the roaring of the river piercing through her ears. And needles, sharp needles everywhere.

Tae-sik

All Tae-sik could think about was sex. He just could not have enough of it no matter what. The other day while making out with a bony nameless girl, he almost passed her out. Later on, her pimp, a man whose voice sounded like a teenager, mildly complained that the girl had cried no several times, but Tae-sik couldn’t recall any. He did remember, though, that he kept pushing deeper and deeper into her because he wanted more, and believed it was possible, to get lost in something completely and wholly.

After the business, the girl sobbed incessantly, her face buried into her chest. Tae-sik opened his wallet and threw money at her, a bit more than promised. “Ya,” he said, irritated by her crying. The girl looked back and almost automatically shoved the money into her tiny purse.

Her hands trembled as she put on her lacy underwear. Upon exiting, she drew the shape of a half-moon for every step she made. But never once did she look back. It was a sign of great shame.

Tae-sik knew this from experience.

Time ran slowly on a Saturday afternoon. He didn't like this day, this life. Not because it was poor or tedious but because it was planned: he had no choice but to live this way, he thought. Tae-sik flicked his cigarette into a glass ashtray, sunk into the bed and shut his eyes. He felt tired. He always did.

Out of habit, he turned on the radio. It was one of his secrets: Tae-sik couldn't sleep without the light and noise, a permanent mark of an only child. Although he only needed a dull humming noise to run in the background, lately he found a particular broadcast that intrigued him. He didn't know the exact name of the program—it wasn't important to him—but he liked the tender voice of the female announcer. Oddly enough, with her voice, he could finally sleep.

Since he was young, Tae-sik didn't know how to dream. His dreams were never a dream, but his past. In dreams, he would be a little kid again, as young as eight or nine. In dreams, he is back in his hometown, his three-story elementary school in Pohang. It is lunchtime, and his teacher calls him out. He looks up: the teacher, a woman with a short, permed hair, is beckoning at him. Little Tae-sik walks toward her, smiling anxiously, but she does not smile back. When he comes into her reachable distance the teacher suddenly whacks his head with a long wooden stick. At this, he loses his smile and balance. He hears thunder in his head. The teacher throws a paper at him. She orders him to kneel on the cold marble floor and sign the paper. She warns him that he is doing this instead of his parents, that it is an important promise that they will pay his tuition within a month. Filthy child, she says as she turns her face away

from him. His friends get to watch all of this. A new student from Canada with blond highlights in his black hair, laughs in the corner. And Tae-sik cannot look up. He does not want to.

It was later in the evening he received the call. He was still in bed where he screwed the crying girl.

“Corporal Kim,” the caller said, “report your current location.”

Tae-sik sprung out of the bed. In a clear loud voice, he answered, “Corporal Kim, I report: I am ten miles away from the base.” His face cringed. He hated it when they called during his leave.

“I want you to come back right away,” the caller said. “I will not repeat. Come back in an hour—you’re dead to me if you don’t.”

Sa-rang

There was another letter in her office mailbox. She already knew who it was from. Since several months ago, someone wrote her letters. Always anonymous. A clean, white envelope. Almost love letter.

Dear Sa-rang, the letter began. The sender had an interesting handwriting. Even before he revealed his gender, she knew the person was male by his careless hangul. *I keep thinking about the weird Japanese story you read last week. I wonder if it is true, if there is a tree, somewhere in a faraway island, a tree that is older than three thousand years, a tree that serves as a shelter for the deserted monk, save him through the storm and wildfire. If there is one, I would like to go and see. I want to lie down in front of it, place one ear to the earth, and listen to*

the roots, nature, the universe. Sa-rang-ssi, I want to read your inner thoughts too. I want to see the world—as you do. Maybe someday I can.

After reading she disposed of the letter in a nearby trash bin. She didn't know why the person was doing this or why he had such a keen interest in her, a no-name radio announcer. He never explained. Even when he divulged his personal life, he lacked the context. He said that he was vexed with his life. That his father died in his late teens, but he did not feel sad because he deserved it.

Perhaps it is a wrong thing to say, he wrote in one of his previous letters, but I believe he should never have become a husband or a father. He should have died much earlier—oh yes, he was that awful. One time, when I was fifteen, I came home and found him sprawled in our living room with a woman that wasn't my mother. I told him that I could not stand him anymore, that I would leave the family. Do you know what he said? He said thank you, he said he never needed a son like me. Sa-rang-ssi, I learned that day that my life was a mistake. I guess that's why I understood the story you read today, why that old man wanted to kill himself, why he drank so much, and what he desired—nothing, that was what he wanted, absolutely nothing.

His last line resembled what her sister wrote in her final message: she said she couldn't take it anymore, the rumors that always followed her that she was a spy from the North, the quiet whispers of her college classmates that pitied her country. A few male students pursued Mina since her appearance on television, but no one really wanted her—they were just curious to see her kind, a pretty girl from the forbidden land. According to Mina, the return was possible. Deep in their hearts, she said, everyone wished to return.

But she stayed. Every time she thought of going back, she dreamed of the night she crossed the river. After she and the old man came out of the inky water, a young man approached

them. The old man called the man seonsengnim as he cocked his head. The young man bowed back, but his eyes looked elsewhere. “You did well, you did well.” He patted her on the back, smiling in contentment. She didn’t answer. “No time, no time,” he urged every time she slowed her pace. The three walked and walked through the sporadically lit forest until they reached an open field with scattered pigpens and houses. One of them was the young man’s place.

Tomorrow they would wake up as the newlywed.

Before the old man left, he gave her a long, square stare. He said, “Once you reach the South, learn their accent, their language.” He looked different under the morning sun, she thought, much older and frailer. “Learn their world. Blend into the background. Never stand out from the crowd. Be calm; be smart.” She nodded. “Remember, people like you and me, we’ll never be like them. They’ll never trust us, and so you shouldn’t trust them either.”

That night, her brand-new husband named her Sa-rang. “Because you’re my greatest love,” he explained, blowing warm air in her ears. She closed her eyes and swallowed fear as he unhooked her bra.

The memory was as old as a decade. With her perfect Seoul accents and fashionable clothes, no one could guess of her origin anymore. But in her mind, she never changed. She was always Moon Sung-hee, the beautiful daughter of North Korea.

Tae-sik

“Are you deaf?” Sergeant Lee’s voice echoed in the empty hallway. “I told you to be easy with the kid. Do you know what kind of humiliation I went through because of you, Corporal Kim?” He handed Tae-sik a document he was too familiar with—it was a third notice from the army, a

warning for the case of a possible assault. “You could’ve gone straight to the military prison this time,” said Sergeant Lee. “Honestly, I don’t care what you do out there. All I want is no trouble. This is my last year here, and I want it to be smooth. Do you understand?”

Tae-sik quickly nodded. He didn’t like the way Sergeant Lee, his boss who was at best five feet five and two years younger than himself, treated him like a six-year-old.

“They took your leave back. You’re grounded for six months,” Sergeant Lee said.

For a brief moment Tae-sik looked up, flashing his eyes at Sergeant Lee, but quickly dropped his stare to the ground.

Sergeant Lee didn’t miss this. He kicked Tae-sik in the right leg hard. “Sibal, you think I’m enjoying this?” Sergeant Lee reproached.

Tae-sik shook his head with fake enthusiasm.

“Speak,” Sergeant Lee demanded.

Tae-sik stood straight, locking his hands behind his back and stated his title and last name. In his mind, though, he knew that Sergeant Lee wouldn’t go on for too long: he was a soft one, too soft to be anything.

“Fix this,” Sergeant Lee whispered as he walked past Tae-sik. “And don’t ever make me repeat.”

On the way to his residential building, Tae-sik stopped by his own little smoking spot, a narrow alley behind the cafeteria he had found three months ago. He crouched down and leaned his back against the brick wall. He felt strangely comfortable in this space. It reminded him of his childhood: when he was young, he had waited for his parents in front of his house after school every day. He circled around the neighborhood to collect broken glasses of emerald green soju bottles and small copper coins. He scared away tailless stray cats and red-eyed pigeons.

When he got bored of that, he sat on a curb and plucked ants' legs one by one or folded every page of his textbook and played with it as if it was an accordion. Sometimes other kids joined him. Together they set fire on whatever they found on the street and competed who could spit further. It was after dark when his parents came home from the market, their hands full of lumpy plastic bags filled with leftover food.

That night Tae-sik called in three privates from his unit and punched them for their untidy cabinets. After he sent them back to their dorm, he spent hours sitting on a cold toilet seat in the bathroom stall, listening to the soothing voice of the female announcer. He wanted to talk to her.

Sung-hee

For a month there was no letter, but it arrived at last.

Dear Sa-rang, I can't get over with the thought of dying. Since young, I have dreamed of hanging myself—a quick, simple death. This life has been nothing but pain to me. Sa-rang-ssi, do you believe in God? I don't. But I do think there is a greater force out there, much greater than us earthlings. But whoever, or whatever, that is, I believe it must have an evil soul; otherwise I cannot understand why the world is so full of tragedies. But no matter, I'm tired of all this. My Sa-rang, I will die tomorrow. Please tell me that I did well, that I came a long way, despite all the trouble life threw at me.

At the bottom of the letter, he signed his name in Chinese letters. “Kim Tae Sik,” it said. Sung-hee traced his handwriting with her index finger. Big. Knowledgeable. A man of great knowledge. She picked up the envelope and checked the postmark: the letter was sent from a

post office in Pohang, a city that's three hours away from the capital. Why was he there? she wondered.

Through the hallway window, she observed the snowing landscape outside: pale, naked trees, square-shaped buildings, wet asphalt roads. The sky was painted in dull gray without a trace of the sun.

"You are wrong," Sung-hee muttered at herself. She imagined the face of the stranger who wrote her so many letters, a man with a crushed heart, who could once smile like the summer sunshine but no more, who has no one around him to listen to him, his stories, his hurts, his life. "Tae-sik-a, you are wrong: pain is our life. It's the only thing that makes us real," she wanted to tell him. Did he really die? The thought led her to her sister, it always did. She tried to call her through strings of brokers, but they couldn't find her anywhere.

She pressed her fingers against the frozen window glass: instantly her fingerprints were stamped, melting the frost. She pressed once again, this time with more pressure. Up close, the fingerprints looked like ocean waves pushing and pulling away. Then they became the Tumen River that kept biting her in the neck. The ice-cold water, the terror and hope she had for a new life, a rebirth, instantly revived. It didn't take her too long to realize, however, that no man could start fresh, free from the past, from the choices. After all, she learned, that the past was all she had. It was all she had to live with.

Darkness quickly blanketed the city. Everything faded away, every color and shape. Everything except the sharp winter wind that wouldn't stop crying like a motherless child.

Song of No Regrets

Dear wind blowing through an empty field, please take my heart with you.
Who could ever know?
This heart that wishes to brush past even a single blade of grass.
Even a single wildflower.
—Myeong Seong-hee, “Please”

The ceiling was white except for a few rusty spots where the paint was peeling. Far in the distance, I heard metal clattering, the sound of wheels clicking the floor. I blinked in slow motion, adjusting my vision to light. Then, suddenly, all the memories returned. I realized I wasn't at home; I was lain on a hospital bed, my left hand hooked to an IV line. Feeling heavy pain in my chest, I shut my eyes. To my disappointment, I wasn't dead.

I was twenty at the time and had everything everyone wanted—good looks, wealth, education, talents. My skin, which my mother made sure to keep away from the sun, was luminous like mother-of-pearl. My fingers were long and slim like those of pianists. I kept my black hair waist-length without layers and straightened it with a flat iron every morning. Boys pursued me since I was in elementary school: not knowing what to do with their affection, they would tease me with my name, clothes, whatever they spotted; or follow me to my house to ring the doorbell and run away when someone answered; or slide in love letters in my school locker without signing their names. Only a handful of brave men who approached me without shy sarcasm could win my love, but everywhere I went, I felt stares from men, checking me out from top to bottom.

I knew, since I was a child, that my family was better off than others. My father, Yang Jin-ho, used to be a head coach of the North Korea national football team; my mother a once-

popular movie star. Our family lived in a three-bedroom apartment in Pyongyang granted by the government. My father knew a lot of important people, including Jang Song-thaek, the husband of President Kim Il-sung's daughter. Every night our house brimmed with my father's guests. From early evening to the next morning, they drank expensive whiskey and nibbled on various anju dishes my mother brought out—boiled pig feet, spicy octopus, seafood pancake, marinated beef, steamed egg, warm noodle soup.

As a good Korean daughter, my role was to sit next to my father and sing some songs to enlighten the guests. I didn't sing North Korean songs in a thin shrill voice that praised the country's ideology; I sang foreign-language songs. My favorites were Alla Pugacheva's "Million Scarlet Roses" and Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On," songs I got to know through numerous cassette tapes my father brought from his overseas trips. Holding an empty emerald soju glass bottle with a spoon stuck in its neck to imitate a microphone, I sang with my rich low voice, a voice my father jokingly referred to as the voice of the capitalist. Drunken into a stupor, the guests sang along, their faces ruddy and bloated. After the singing, they complimented my talent and opened their wallets to give me allowances.

Singing was my universe—it delighted me more than anything else in this world. When I was thirteen, my father bought me a radio, with which I could listen to South Korean radio shows. When I first listened to Seo Taiji and Boys' "I Know," my heart stopped.

I want to love all your scent,

All your breath

That still wets my body.

The smile, the tear, the heart of heart you wouldn't show me.

The upbeat melody and provocative lyrics shocked me, so much so that I instantly turned off the radio. But a moment later, I found myself turning it back on:

I really liked you, you and only you.

Dear my love, who is giving me such grief,

Don't ever say goodbye.

You and only you were my everything.

Then, when a radio show host mentioned Kim Hyun-jung's excellent dance moves, I had the second shock wave—singing and dancing at the same time! The idea was so foreign to me, but helplessly attractive. In my mind, I pictured myself performing on the stage of South Korean music program broadcasts, which I watched at home every day after school.

But the happiness didn't last for long. The summer I turned seventeen, my father had visited the hospital for his back pain and find out that he had lung cancer in its final stage—it was so bad that doctors refused to give him surgery. He died before his thirtieth radio therapy session.

After his funeral, my mother removed bricks from the walls of our apartment, a secret hiding place where my parents kept their valuables. Every object was in disguise—cigarette packets had rolled up U.S. dollar bills, wine bottles were filled with gold and diamond, and large frames of the Dear Leader portrait hid shiny revolvers. She sold most of them in a black market. With the money she earned, she bought an ice-cream factory in town. The factory stabilized our finances but gone were the days when people would send invitations to fancy social gatherings or gift rare foreign goods. I was no one without the social privileges. Many people left me, seeing my bare self without power and luxuries, and for those who stayed, I left, unable to stand their pitiful smiles.

Then came my aunt's imprisonment. For some reason, she got involved in political turmoil and was imposed a life sentence in a concentration camp. Her imprisonment left a permanent stain in my family record, and as a result, I was excluded from all auditions I applied for. I could almost always make it to the top-tier, but I was turned down in the end without a proper explanation. One time, there was an open spot for a vocalist to teach South Korean songs to agents going undercover in Seoul. At the audition, I sang "When Cold Wind Blows" by Kim Ji-yeon and "Someday" by Lee Sang-eun. The judges amazed at my perfect South Korean diction and told me that I would get the offer. I told them about my background, but they reassured me that I would be accepted. From that day, I prayed to God, to Buddha, to the sky, the earth, to all gods in the world. Just this time, I repeated in my prayer. Just this time and I won't ask for anything again. Three weeks later, I received a phone call: once again, I failed to pass the background check.

I lost all hope with the rejection. I didn't feel like living anymore. Even if I abandoned my western singing style and turned myself into a Juche singer, I wouldn't become a professional singer for that one line in my family record. And without my father, who had been my emotional rock, life seemed gray and dull. That was why I drank a bottle of pesticide one afternoon. Death, that seemed to be the only thing I could have with my own will, although even that was considered a crime in my country. There was absolutely nothing I wanted in my life, not even wealth, fame, or love.

My mother lied to the doctors about my suicide attempt. With her natural acting skills, she made them believe I mistook the poison as water. As she spoke, she broke into long wails, wrapping her arms around me. But when no one was around, she refused to acknowledge me. Even after I

returned home, she avoided talking to me. Each morning she prepared a large meal on the kitchen table and stayed late at the factory. I stayed in my room for most of the time, sleeping and thinking. We were grieving in ugly shapes.

About a month into our silent punishment, she showed up in my room. It was an early morning. I was in bed, but not sleeping.

“Mi-ran, wake up,” she woke me with a tender voice.

When I looked up, I saw my mother dressed in her brown sweater and a long black skirt. Her bobbed hair was neatly tied up.

“We have to leave now,” she said.

I made a slight frown.

“Get up and take your belongings. I’ve got a call from that everything is prepared. In an hour, we will leave for Musan.”

“Wait, what?”

“Mi-ran,” she said, as she sat on the edge of my bed. “You’re a gifted singer. In the South, people won’t turn you down because of your background. Eomma will do everything to make your dream come true.”

I couldn’t answer. To be honest, I was scared. Although I admired the foreign culture and hoped to visit the outside world someday as my father, I never thought I’d sneak out of the country like a thief.

She sighed. “I’ll give you some time to think over. When you’re ready, pack your stuff and come to the train station. Eomma will be there.”

“What about the factory?”

“I told them you’re sick. People won’t look for us for a couple for days, at least.”

“Eomma,” I called her urgently, seeing her rising from the bed.

She glanced back at me.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“I want you to be happy,” she answered. “Your father, if he was alive, would have done the same thing.”

I waited until she left. I rolled out of the bed and opened the curtain. The city looked familiar: the low- and high-rise buildings with white and red panels on their roofs that read, “self-support,” “self-reliance,” “self-defense,” “homeland,” “unification”; the empty asphalt roads in a pale dove color and tall, white street light fixtures; endless rows of well-attended pine trees, zelkova trees, and ginkgo trees; the serene Taedong River where I hung out with my friends, taking photos of each other with my father’s old Leica. This was my home.

Distraught, I pressed my forehead against the window glass, feeling the cold shock. I remembered my father telling me about Seoul, how the city resembles Pyongyang in many ways. “South Korea is a rich country,” he said, “but they’ve gone crazy with money. They boast about their economy but can’t see money becoming their religion. That’s not good. Look at me: I have plenty of money, but it cannot cure my cancer.” He had just finished this twentieth radiation therapy. He was exhausted, his skin dark and dry.

With a short laugh, he said, “I really thought I’d live at least until eighty. I was wrong. You remember Uncle Byung-ju? He called me a coldhearted man when I refused to pull strings for his daughter’s employment. I was so mad I stopped talking to him. But now, I regret that. Miran-a, do what matters to you in your life. But with your talent, do good things.”

His words lingered in my head. I wanted to tell him that I too wanted to follow his advice. I wanted to bloom with my talent to its fullest. I so much wanted to do so. But no matter

how hard I tried, in this country, there was no way the record could be undone. I closed my eyes and tried to think. If I left, I would have the freedom to sing in the way I wanted and perhaps become a world-famous singer like Celine Dion. But the cost of a failed exile was an imprisonment, if unlucky, a public execution. If I stayed, I would have to work anywhere the government assigned and would be asked to leave the job upon my marriage. Time went on; I felt my heart pumping too fast. I didn't like neither options, adventure nor comfort.

At last, I closed the curtain and began shoving clothes into a large duffle bag. Either way, I knew my life was put on a test.

The first-class train didn't look like first-class at all. My mother and I had the whole compartment by ourselves, but many window panes were broken and the seat was stained in old yellow. Occasionally the train stopped at random stations and officers came in to check our travel passes. To them, my mother said we were on our way to visit our relatives. When they shot us with hostile glares, she quickly pulled out Marlboro packets or cognac bottles. The journey was supposed to last for twelve hours, but because the train kept making stops, sometimes resting for hours, it took us nearly two days to arrive at our destination.

Musan was much colder than Pyongyang. There were no tall skyscrapers or paved roads. Instead, the place was surrounded by greenish-gray mountains and most of the houses were wooden shacks. I noticed people staring at us, for our fair skin and decent outfits stood out in the crowd. I looked away, quickly reaching for my mother's hand.

To avoid suspicion, my mother and I had to split up from there: she would hide at her friend's place while I stayed with a broker who would guide me to the river. Before we parted, my mother gave me a long stare and mouthed "I love you."

The broker turned out to be a young man with narrow eyes. From his square jawline and a wide nose, I guessed him to be a China-born Korean. The first night, we stayed at a shabby hut in the mountain. The hut had no toilet or electricity, only a large wooden table and military sleeping bags spread on the floor. Soon night fell with jet-black darkness. I couldn't sleep. Each time the wind rustled through the window covered by thin plastic vinyl, I shuddered in fear.

In the morning, the broker handed me a make-up foundation much darker than my skin. It was supposed to make me look like a local, he said. He also tried to teach me some Hamgyong dialects, but after hearing my awkward accents, he told me to just keep my mouth shut.

Hours have passed since we began hiking up the mountain. My feet were sore, and I was getting thirsty.

"You said it'd take an hour," I complained sheepishly.

At this, the broker smiled, a cunning smile. "An hour for myself, not you. You're slow like a snail."

I tore the peeling of my upper lip skin, hurt by his words.

He chuckled. "You city girls always complain. That's all you do."

I turned my face away, trying to ignore the sinking feeling swelling in my gut. I wanted to shoot back with a sharp word but couldn't pull the courage. Instead, I hurried my steps to keep up with him.

"You've never worked anywhere or made money yourself, isn't that correct?" He grinned again, showing his upper front teeth.

"Why are you saying such things to me?" I curled my hands into fists.

He didn't budge. "Tell you what: South Korea is not a paradise. It's a hell. Folks there treat us less than dogs. Why bother to leave home for such misery?"

“I don’t want to hear that,” I snapped, placing the palms of my hands over my ears.

With a disgusting look in his eyes, he said, “You’ve watched terebi too much. Whatever you saw, it’s all lies. You’ll never live in an upscale apartment in the city or marry a rich comrade. And college? Yes, you can go to anywhere you wish. But I tell you, once your classmates and professors know *who* you are, you’d rather want to drop out of school.”

By then the distance between he and me grew even further.

I cried out, “Wait, don’t go that far!”

“You’ll regret it!” the broker shouted.

I ran as fast as I could, but he was too fast.

“Just die here! I’m doing you a favor!” He waved with a playful smile, then turned his back.

“No, no, no. Please wait for me!”

In no time, he disappeared from my sight. Abandoning my duffle bag, I swiftly passed through the tall autumn trees. Overgrown wildflowers and shrubs often threw me on the ground. I cried and cried like a wounded animal.

“Days later, I woke up near the riverbank. I crossed the river by myself later at night.”

As the floor director motioned, the audience simultaneously let out lamentations.

“What happened to your mother?” the emcee, who was a big chubby man in his forties, asked.

“I met her after I came to South Korea. She told me she’d thought I was dead. We cried so much when we reunited. I also thought she was dead.”

“What a story you have,” the emcee said with a sorry face.

Behind the camera, one of the staff writers raised a large sketch pad. It read, “Soo-young: What got you into musicals?”

At this, a singer who was sitting in the panel asked, “What got you into musicals?”

The writer flipped to the next page: “Mi-ran: I came to South Korea for my musical freedom.”

I saw the cameraman shifting the camera in my direction. With the main producer’s signal, I answered, “There were so many restrictions in North Korea, even for music. It was impossible to live. I came to South Korea for my musical freedom. I didn’t know anything about the musical when I lived in North Korea. When I first saw it here, I fell in love with it. It was the highest form of art I’ve been looking for all my life.”

It was the line I went through with the staff writers several times before, but I still found myself fumbling. It was my first appearance on a South Korean broadcast, a music audition program, after three years of living as a no-name artist. My mother was right: here, no one stopped me from becoming a singer. But no one cared about you unless you became a bigshot.

As I spoke, I saw the emcee raising his eyebrows. Clearly he was irritated by my clumsiness.

Now the sketch pad said, “Wrap up the conversation.”

Quickly erasing the bored look on his face, he asked, “Why did you choose this song?”

I looked up at the sketchbook. It said, “The song of a woman in search of her freedom.”

Clasping my nervous hands behind my back, I answered, “This song reminds me of my life in the North, the times when I had absolutely no freedom.”

The floor director motioned clapping, and the audience broke into a round of applause.

The emcee shouted, “Please give it up for Yang Mi-ran from North Korea!”

Soon the stage lighting faded, and music kicked in.

I walked to the center of the stage. When old memories rushed in, I closed my eyes. For now, I had to be the queen of persecution, her song of no regrets.

I Shall Offer

Rivers and mountains bloom under the blue sky.
Day breaks in our new land of prosperity.
If the youth you and I offered to our nation is a road to freedom and peace,
I shall offer all my youth.
I shall offer all my life.

—Yu Ji-man and Kim Hak-song, “Heart of the Warrior”

The first time Hosu saw a dead body, he pretended he didn't see. Amid cold winter of January, he was on his night shift, patrolling the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Usually, the Republic of Korea army made their soldiers do the patrol in pairs, but that night, Corporal Jang, who was supposed to accompany Hosu, went on leave for a family emergency. Inside the DMZ, everything was dark and desolate. The wind pierced through the wilderness in high-pitched squeals. Hosu carried a heavy machine gun with him. Along the path, he ran into several red-flagged signs that warned of land mines, but because of the freezing weather, he couldn't think straight. The Skeleton Troop, where he was stationed, was in the village of Cherwon-gun, Gangwon-do. Winter here was much worse than Daegu, where he had grown up.

Hosu shivered, his fingertips growing numb. When he exhaled, his breath turned into a white cloud. He clenched his fists and continued walking.

What he first saw was a large, black object poking out of an icy mound. He slowed his steps, then stopped. His first guess was a sea eagle. Maybe a crane. He walked closer, wanting to have a better look at it. After putting down the gun on the ground, he scooped up the snow with his hands. He kept uncovering the mound until he could make out a figure of a person.

“Shit,” he said.

He grabbed his machine gun with trembling hands and aimed at the human figure: it was a boy, except that he had been long dead, his swollen fingers black and blue. He was young, perhaps twelve or thirteen. His face was half covered in snow, glowing like crystals under the moonlight.

From afar, Hosu heard footsteps. What would happen if the soldiers saw him with this dead body? The thought made him fretful. He shut his eyes and broke into a quick prayer: *Dear Father in heaven, please have mercy on me.* He then got up, covered the body with snow, and left.

Hosu was a sergeant in his troop. He had six more months to serve before he completed the twenty-one-month compulsory military service. At this point, most of the difficult training, such as the CBRN defense training that locked people in a gas chamber, he was done with. And thanks to his title, no one messed up with him anymore. When he was a private, there was a sergeant who used to beat him for no good reason. The sergeant would call him to a bathroom late at night to punch him in the gut or made him hold a plank pose for thirty minutes. Hosu reported the assault to the service support office several times, but nothing happened, and it made the sergeant even more pissed off; so he stopped reporting and endured the harassment until the man got discharged.

But the funny thing was that although he had disliked the strict hierarchical structure that shaped Korean society, after he made sergeant, he found himself enjoying the power; now, with a single word, he could make privates and corporals do whatever favor he asked for. This sweet taste of authority was his pure novelty.

In his life, Hosu had never been a leader until he joined the army. He was five foot nine and had a small round face that made him look younger than his age. He had a shy personality and it took him a while to call someone a friend. Being an only child also attributed to his shyness. When he was young, he used to live with his parents in a modern two-story house in the suburb Daegu. His father was a successful businessman who ran several different businesses at the same time. Then, in 1997, the IMF crisis broke out. Like most Koreans, Hosu's parents went bankrupt with huge loans they couldn't payback. He couldn't remember much about those days, except the one night he was abruptly shoved into his father's car. He arrived at his cousin's house, which became his new home. Since then, he grew up separated from his parents who had to stay hidden from the government. He joined the South Korean military right after finishing high school to get away from his relatives who treated him like an uncomfortable guest.

It was three in the morning when Hosu came back from the patrol. Soldiers in his military dorm were already sleeping. Hosu quickly slipped into his bed but had difficulty falling asleep: every time he closed his eyes, an image of the dead body haunted him. In his mind, he kept returning to the site where he found it. He saw the same icy mound over and over. And when he crouched, suddenly frostbitten fingers appeared and held him by the wrist. "Ajeossi," the dead body would speak to him. "Ajeossi, please help me."

Three hours later, Hosu woke up for a morning march. As a sergeant, he made sure that everyone in his dorm was properly changed into their dark gray training outfits and berets. He led them to the field where soldiers lined up according to their platoons. With drowsy eyes, the men began singing the national anthem:

Until the day when the East Sea's waters and

*Mt. Baekdu are dry and worn away,
God protect and preserve us.
Long live our nation!
Three thousand Li of splendid rivers and mountains,
Filled with Roses of Sharon;
Great Korean People,
Stay true to the Great Korean way.*

Towards the end of the song, the sun came up, and training sergeants blew their whistles to begin the march.

After the 3-mile march, Hosu went to a military church instead of the cafeteria where most of his colleagues ran into. The military church was a square-shaped brick-building. Because services happened only on Sundays, the church was empty when he walked in. He wasn't sure if he believed in God, but he liked the soothing atmosphere of the church. He took a seat in the back row and closed his eyes. In the quiet, he prayed for the well-being of his parents and his own. A moment later, he felt a light tap on his shoulder. Hosu opened his eyes to see an old man looking down at him, smiling.

“God heard your prayer,” the old man said.

The old man, who seemed to be in his eighties, was wearing a clean black suit. He had a small body, but his prominent chin and wide nose gave him a masculine impression.

“I'm a Korean War veteran,” the old man stated proudly. “Me and my friends have been doing a DMZ tour since yesterday.”

Hosu nodded. His troop, being on the forefront borderline between North and South Korea, was not only a heavily armed military fortress, but also a major tourist site. He was told

to behave properly, especially in front of the tourists, since the soldiers in his troop were the country's living propaganda.

"I hope you're enjoying the tour," Hosu said politely.

"Oh, I certainly am," the old man replied. "I just had an excellent breakfast here. I always tell people that rice from Cheorwon is the best!" His boisterous laughter echoed in the church.

Hosu nodded again.

"But for people like me," said the old man, changing the texture of his voice, "this is not a fun trip. No, not at all. In fact, yesterday, my friend Yong-min cried at the Mt. Geumgang Railway. His family is still in the North. Or, they used to be. Who knows if they're still alive? Anyway, one time, I mean a long time ago, right after the border got closed, Yong-min sent a person to his hometown, Wonsan, to look for his family. This man found them, but the daughter was too young to remember her father, and his wife refused to speak to my friend because she didn't want to upset her new husband. It broke my heart to see Yong-min sobbing like a child when we walked up the railway. His home was right there, and yet he couldn't go."

Hosu nodded again. He had a feeling that the man would go on for the whole day if he didn't stop him.

"Then we went to the Labor Party Building. It was well preserved considering its age. But no matter: that building was where the commie bastards tortured our people. If not for President Roh who threw away our rice and cows to the North, the crazy regime could have collapsed." The old man clicked his tongue.

"Seonsaengnim," Hosu finally intervened.

But the old man continued. “You know the Baekma Battlefield, that place saddened me the most. Back in the day, the hill was filled with dead bodies. Piles and piles of dead bodies. There were too many dead bodies that we had to dump them all together under the ground like trash.”

At the mention of dead bodies, Hosu’s eyes widened.

“The stench was awful!” the old man said, frowning.

Hosu naturally mimicked the frown.

The old man said, “This DMZ area, I bet it’s home of dead people. In the old days, so many young people like yourself got randomly picked up from the streets and were sent to the battlefield. None were properly trained for the war, you know. They were literally there to give away their lives. Ah, you will never know what a luxury it is to live in today’s Korea. My generation, we didn’t have any of this. We just suffered, suffered, and suffered. That was the only way of living we knew.”

Hosu felt his heart beating faster than usual. Like a mirage, the image of the dead girl popped in his head and disappeared in a flash. He wanted to ask more about the dead bodies, but right then the old man’s friend came in and took him away.

Back in the dorm, several soldiers were resting, including Corporal Bae, who was reading in his bed. He was so into the reading that his forehead was furrowed with deep lines. A student at the Seoul National University, Corporal Bae reminded Hosu of friends he had in high school who anxiously waited in front of teacher’s offices to ask questions.

“What are you reading, Corporal Bae?” Hosu asked.

Corporal Bae looked up, fixing his horn-rimmed glasses. He was twenty-three, three years older than Hosu, but his shaved hair and large eyes gave him a look of a younger brother. Without changing the posture, Corporal Bae saluted Hosu and said, “Sergeant Park, I’m reading a book about history of China.”

“The history of China? For what?” Hosu chuckled.

Corporal Bae blushed. “I went to an international school in Hong Kong when I was young. I lived there only for a few years, but I thought the country and culture was quite cool. Also, it’s my New Year’s resolution, to enhance my linguistic and cultural competence.”

“How many books do you read in a year?” Hosu asked.

“I try to read at least a hundred books a year, Sergeant Park.”

“A hundred?”

“Yes, Sergeant Park. That would be eight books per month.”

At this, Hosu snorted. When was the last time he had read a book? He couldn’t remember. Secretly, he envied Corporal Bae. It was rumored that Corporal Bae’s family was a chaebol. While Hosu didn’t care for an expensive car or a large house, what he truly admired about Corporal Bae was the calm he carried. Corporal Bae never boasted his wealth, but every time he talked, his words hinted that he didn’t have to worry about paying his rent, tuition, insurance, medical bills. For sure he had no interest in learning about Chinese history, but when he saw Corporal Bae reading about it, he wondered if his disinterest stemmed from his poor education: ever since he moved into his cousin’s house at thirteen, attending hagwon or getting private tutoring were the things he couldn’t possibly ask for. Rather, as soon as he turned eighteen, the legal work age, he had to work part-time here and there to earn his allowance, PC Bang, fast food restaurant, gasoline station, clothing store, anywhere that hired him. Had his life

presented him with the opportunity and time to study and travel abroad, perhaps he would also have had the desire to learn about world history, politics, or law. The thought made him blue: life was damn unfair. It was the reason why he couldn't fully devote to God.

“Corporal Bae,” Hosu asked, “have you ever seen a ghost?”

“Not yet, Sergeant Park. But I know that Private Shin has been seeing one.” Corporal Bae eyed Private Shin in the corner, engrossed in playing his guitar. A plump man of medium height, Private Shin was the most entertaining person in the platoon. He was known for composing awful love songs every night.

“He is?” Hosu turned to Private Shin's direction. Private Shin was singing a song about a man who was never able to confess his love to a girl he loved.

“Yes, Sergeant Park,” said Corporal Bae. “He said the ghost he saw was very pretty. A fair-skinned woman with long black hair. In fact, he claims that he even attempted to make love to her.”

The two men looked at each other and laughed.

“Why do you ask?” Corporal Bae said.

“It's nothing,” Hosu answered. “Some bizarre man told me that this area could be filled with dead bodies of soldiers who fought in the Korean War. That made me think of ghosts, but never mind. I guess I was overthinking.”

Corporal Bae skipped a moment, and said, “I don't know anything about the war ghosts, but I do know that three dead bodies were found near the Wasu Stream a few years ago.”

Hosu narrowed his eyes. “Tell me more.”

“Our army explained they were North Koreans who got carried away by the stream, but honestly, I don't believe that,” said Corporal Bae.

“Then what’s the truth?” Hosu asked impatiently.

“The truth,” Corporal Bae said, “that’s hard to know. I feel like everything that’s happening here is so mysterious.”

Hosu nodded, signaling Corporal Bae to go on.

“Sometimes,” said Corporal Bae, “I feel like a ghost when I walk inside the DMZ. It’s such a strange place, don’t you think? I lose sense of time and space there.”

Hosu had never thought of the DMZ that way, but he nodded anyway, compelled by Corporal Bae’s hard stare.

Corporal Bae put down his book and sat up to face Hosu. “Before I joined the army, I imagined the DMZ as a narrow strip of wasteland where military men pointed guns at each other. But nature here . . . surprised me. The first time I went into the DMZ, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Mountains were wet with early morning fog, and two Siberian musk deer locked eyes with me for one moment, then continued their path. It was as if I did time travel and went back to centuries ago, way before we came here, before the division, the war.”

Hosu simpered. What did his country look like before the war? He couldn’t picture.

Corporal Bae shrugged and went back to his reading.

At midnight, Hosu walked to the guard post. After reporting his arrival, he went to the DMZ gate. Corporal Jang was already there, waiting for him. When he saw Hosu, he saluted with a cool smile.

“Long time no see, Corporal Jang,” Hosu said.

“Long time no see, Sergeant Park,” Corporal Jang replied. He unlocked the DMZ gate, then gestured Hosu to step in first.

“Thank you,” Hosu said. “By the way, is everything all right with your family?”

“Yes, Sergeant Park. My grandfather passed away a few days ago. But I was never close to him, so it wasn’t that sad.”

“Oh?”

“He was a strange man. He hardly talked and always stared at me with this terrifying look on his face. Anyway, how were you, Sergeant Park? I’m sorry you had to do the patrol by yourself last night.”

“No worries,” Hosu said. “A ghost tried to scare me, but it was all right.”

Corporal Jang chuckled. “You saw a ghost?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What did it look like?”

“It looked like . . . a person.”

Corporal Jang laughed.

Soon the two passed a tunnel and began descending narrow mountainous slopes. The snow-covered ground was very slippery, so they walked with caution.

Once they reached the second guard post, Corporal Jang called out Hosu. “Sergeant Park,” he said. His voice fell deep.

Hosu looked back. “Yes, Corporal Jang.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m a ghost,” he said. “Corporal Jang is still away on leave. He won’t be back until tomorrow. I borrowed his appearance to talk to you.”

“What the heck are you talking about?” Hosu’s voice cracked. He tried to stay calm, but he felt shivery tingle traveling down his back.

“My name is Lee Nam-soon. I died last year. I used to be a fisherman from Yeonpyeong Island. In 1965, I got abducted to North Korea while fishing in the western coast of the peninsula. A wooden shaft approached our boat, saying they were lost sailors. But they were not. In the North, I was imprisoned at a labor camp. I toiled more than sixteen hours each day. I was treated less than an animal because of my South Korean background. By the grace of heaven, I was able to return home five years later.”

Hosu stood still and stared at Corporal Jang. The high wind kept slapping his face. The person in front of him surely looked like Corporal Jang he knew, a tall, lanky man in his mid-twenties.

“When I came back, I couldn’t contact my family because I was afraid of putting them in danger. I didn’t want them to go through what I experienced, the horrible, horrible interrogations, violence, and false accusations from South Korean prosecutors. The police thought I was a North Korean spy. They locked me in an anti-communist building in Namyong-dong, in a tiny room that had a desk and a bathtub. I was cross-examined about my background and my time in the North. I still remember the gray building, its fifth floor, people being dragged in the dark hallway like cattle to the slaughter. When the police couldn’t get the answer they wanted, they waterboarded me and beat me until I pooped out of my mouth. The torture lasted for more than ten years. Since then, I lived alone, pretending I was a deaf-mute.”

Hosu bit into his lower lip. He looked around, and for a moment, he saw dark trees and bushes turning into black fingers, curling their bodies and howling through the passing wind.

“Young man, do me a favor: please go tell my mother that I am well. At ninety-five, she still misses me and lives with terrible han for losing me. She frequently visits a shaman in town to find out about me. She hasn’t moved out of my childhood home, hoping I could return one day. I will tell you the address. Please go tell her that you met me in your dreams, and that I was doing well. Please. I beg you.” Corporal Jang kneeled down on the concrete floor and clasped his hands together.

Hosu stepped back in fear. “What’s going on, Corporal Jang?”

“Oh, please!”

“I—I—can’t,” Hosu said, putting his hands in the air.

A moment later, Corporal Jang got up, dusting off his hands. With a wide grin, he said, “Just kidding.”

But Hosu didn’t reply. He couldn’t move his lips, his fingers, his legs.

Seeing the terror on Hosu’s face, Corporal Jang said, “Sorry if I scared you. I didn’t mean it. Really, I’m sorry, Sergeant Park.”

Hosu closed his eyes. He could hear the pounding of his heart. When he opened his eyes, he found himself alone in the wintery field.

The Untranslated

If you remember me, then I don't care if everyone else forgets.

—Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

A strange thing happened that night: Jisu came home with his girlfriend and found his dead father sleeping in his bed.

Until then, his evening had been smooth. His manager almost made him work overnight, but he artfully escaped the office, pretending he was going to the restroom. Once outside, he walked to the subway station and squeezed himself in a jam-packed train. At seven o'clock, he was at an Italian restaurant. Hae-jin, his girlfriend, was waiting for him. They ordered creamy chicken pasta and prosciutto-arugula pizza and shared the meal.

Around three months ago, the couple met through a blind date set up by their mutual friend. Hae-jin was a secretary at an accounting firm. She was thirty, tall, and outspoken. Whereas Jisu was a translator at an educational publisher. His middling height and a small nose diminished his masculinity, but he had a nice, deep voice many people found to be attractive.

After dinner, Jisu suggested going to his place for a glass of wine. Hae-jin agreed, her face beaming like a birthday girl.

It was dark inside his apartment near Seoul station. Jisu intended to keep the lights turned off, afraid they might kill the mood. He led Hae-jin to the living room and went to the kitchen to find a bottle of Riesling. His favorite was Cabernet, but his past dating experiences told him that women in general favored white wines over red.

A few sips made them jolly. They did small talks—work, friends, life. Then they made fun of each other, laughing and pointing at their scarlet cheeks. When the time came, Jisu drew Hae-jin to his side and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips. It was their first kiss.

A while later, they entered the bedroom. Jisu carefully laid Hae-jin in his bed. As he prepared to climb up her body, he heard her shrieking. She pushed him away to get out of the bed and told him to turn on the lights. And he did.

There was a stranger in the bed. It was a man. He was crouching, holding his knees with his hands. Middle-aged, protruding stomach, bald. His face was buried in his chest.

“Shoot!” Jisu exclaimed.

“What, who is it?” Hae-jin said as she fumbled to put on her clothes.

“I think—I think this is my father.”

Hae-jin made a face. “But your father—”

“I know,” he snapped.

“How is this possible?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Should we call the police?”

“And tell them what?”

Hae-jin clammed. A heavy silence fell between them.

Jisu dropped his stare to the floor: he saw his barefoot and sprouts of hair on his toes.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last.

Hae-jin wanted to leave. Jisu offered to walk her outside, but she refused. From her firm voice, he understood that she was upset at him. Why should women be so sensitive? he

wondered. Now he had to throw a load of shit to reclaim her attention. Whatever, he told himself. He was too stunned to think about gifts and surprise events.

“Perhaps,” Hae-jin said as she flung her bag on the shoulder, “your father came to see you.”

Jisu couldn’t answer. All he knew was that he didn’t want to be alone. But his girlfriend was leaving.

“You’ll be fine,” she said, smiling.

Early in the morning, Jisu called his mother. “Father’s here,” he said.

His mother remained silent. She didn’t believe him. Rather, she asked if he needed to see a therapist like herself.

“I’m serious,” he said. “He’s sleeping in my bed now.”

His mother sighed audibly. She told him that she would drop by sometime this weekend.

He frowned. “Can’t you come earlier?”

“Okay, okay,” his mother replied.

When Jisu returned to his bedroom, his father was still there. He brought a chair from the kitchen and placed it where he could see his father. Ten years ago, this man in front of him had hiked up the Mapo Bridge and jumped into the Han River. It took three days for the police to find his body. It was a suicide, the detective said. But there was no memo left from his father to explain his death. That nearly drove his mother crazy.

“Abeoji,” he said, surprised to learn that he had not spoken the word in a long time. He looked at his father, then turned his face away. He never knew how to talk to him. To be honest, he didn’t want to.

When he was a child, his father had often told him a story about a family that crossed the river at night. In the cold winter of 1950, the family became refugees on a wooden raft. Their destination was the southernmost region of the peninsula, anywhere that was far from their hometown, where they heard the war was going to happen. It was difficult for the family to get on board because they had a newborn baby. People on the raft were reluctant to take the baby, afraid it might burst into crying. The mother begged for mercy and lied that the baby seldom cried. All through the night, the raft drifted the vast water, carrying the mother and the baby in her arms.

A few days later, the family arrived at a port town named Busan. On June 25, the bombing began. No one knew then how long the war would last or when they could go back to their hometown. The streets brimmed with hungry people begging for food. Three years later, the war reached a truce, but by then it was too dangerous for the family to return home.

“I was the baby,” his father said in his booming voice, hitting his chest with an open hand. “We did OK in the South. My parents worked at a local market, selling fruit and vegetables. They worked hard. There were no weekends or holidays for them.”

Jisu nodded.

“By the time I turned seven, my parents could buy our own house. Food was also plenty. But on the inside, they were rotting away. My mother especially couldn’t get over with homesickness. She missed her family and felt guilty for leaving them behind. At night, she often had nightmares. She told me that bad things happened in her dreams. I didn’t get to know what exactly they were, but they haunted her. Whenever she had the nightmare, she woke up screaming in horror.”

Placing his hand on young Jisu's shoulder, he said, "Kim Jisu, wake up! There is no time for you to be lazy. You think the world will feed you for free? No way! You must work hard. You must."

In the coming years, his words became ghosts that followed Jisu everywhere. Whenever challenges fell into his life, a voice told him to wake up and do better. Naturally, Jisu desired only the best. Like his father, he became a perfectionist who achieved things driven by terror.

"Abeoji," he called him again. Only silence answered.

Sunlight flooded through the front door. Jisu noticed his mother carrying a huge basket wrapped in a pink wrapping cloth.

"You really don't have to do this," he said, snatching the basket from her.

His mother ignored his words. She took a quick scan of the house, and said, "Can't you keep your place a little tidier?"

Jisu shook his head in dismay. "Father's still here," he said. "He's in my bedroom."

His mother nodded. She sat on the living room sofa and prayed. His mother nodded. She sat on the living room sofa and prayed, "Dear our Lord in heaven, thank you for always taking care of Jisu, your beloved son. . ."

In the kitchen, Jisu unwrapped the basket: it was filled with meat and seafood pancake. There was no way he could eat all this.

"You don't cook," his mother said, entering the kitchen.

"Eomma," he said, "this is too much." This has been the permeant source of their argument: no matter how many times he refused, his mother insisted on visiting his house on a regular basis to cook and clean for him.

“Isn’t it better than not having food, son?” his mother said, smiling.

Jisu surrendered. “Let’s go see father,” he said, pulling her sleeve.

“Okay,” she answered, “but let me put this away first.”

Jisu helped her with finding containers he didn’t even know he had. Part of him wanted to blame his mother for his awful cooking. He never learned to cook; when he was young, his mother kept him away from the kitchen. “Go study,” she would say. “Good fortune escapes a man who enters the kitchen. Cooking is for women.”

His mother crumpled to the floor when she saw her dead husband.

“I thought you were kidding,” she said.

“I wasn’t,” Jisu replied.

His mother walked closer to her husband. “Can I touch him?”

Jisu shrugged. What could he say?

His mother placed her hand over the husband’s shoulder. “Yeobo, Jisu appa, Is it really you?” Her voice trembled.

Jisu had to look away; otherwise he would have cried.

“Oh, this shirt, you retained, thank God. I had thrown them out a few years ago, but you found it. Good, that’s good,” his mother murmured. With her hand, she stroked his face many times.

“Jisu appa,” his mother spoke tenderly, “at home, I have a new Bible for you. The one you used to have I had put it inside your coffin. I regret it now, though. I wish I could have kept it for myself. But at that time . . . I thought you would need it on your way to heaven.” She stamped her tears on her shirt sleeve. “There were so many things I wanted to tell you. Each time

I went to bed at night, words mounted inside me. I wanted to tell that I could not forgive you. No, Jisu appa, that was wrong. But I also wanted to say I'm sorry. A week before you . . . you did *that*, I remember you hugging me from the back. I was so surprised I instantly avoided the embrace and smacked your wrist. I was upset at you because, well, you know, we hadn't shared any physical intimacy since long ago. I—I didn't know that you were suffering that much. Had I known I would have behaved differently. Please forgive my indifference."

Turning her face to Jisu, she asked, "Have you ever dreamed of him before?"

"No," he replied. "You?"

"One time. A little after his funeral. It was bizarre."

"How?"

"I was standing in front of a giant cave. When I went in, I saw him waiting for me."

Jisu tilted his head in confusion.

"He said, 'Young-shim-a, see me as I am.'"

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. But I felt he was telling me to move on."

He nodded gravely.

"I know you two didn't really get along. Why, he was mean to you sometimes, but that was because he didn't want to give you the life he had. He was always afraid that there might be another war in this country. He wanted you to be safe. You remember him telling about his family, right? His mother and her nightmares. At times your father also had bad dreams. He dreamed about his mother."

At this, Jisu barely stopped himself from smirking. Safe from what? It didn't make sense to him. From his understanding, it was his father who took away his safety, his happy childhood,

his best friends. Memories cascaded in his mind. When he was twelve, his father decided to send him to America. Without a word, applied for a student visa and purchased the plane ticket. He said he had a friend in New York, and that his family would take care of him until he went to college.

“What about my friends?” Jisu sulked, shocked to hear the news.

His father laughed. “When you go to America and speak good English, the world will put you in a high position. You will meet many people who are the leaders of their industry. *They* will be your friends.”

Jisu began hiccupping. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't form a full sentence.

Seeing the tears in his son's eyes, his father yelled, “Wake up! Don't be ungrateful. If I were you, I would have bowed at me for allowing such incredible opportunity. You think it was easy for me to arrange this thing? And where do you think the money came from?”

Jisu nodded.

“When you go to America, forget this shitty country. Live like a real American,” his father said.

But unlike what his father had had told him, America was not a paradise. Jisu felt the weather too hot and dry. In school, it was worse: no one spoke to him, for his English was a broken one. His host family didn't like him either because every night the child refused to go to bed if he didn't get to his mother on the phone. Every day and night, either at home or school, he closed his eyes and counted from one to ten. It was a game he believed he was playing with God. He believed one day God would do him a favor and bring him back to Korea.

It took him his father's death to make a return. With that, Jisu had to drop a tenure offer from a university in New York and move to Seoul to take care of his mother. And just when he thought their lives were settled, his father came back. What a selfish man, he thought.

Jisu opened his eyes: his mother was still patting his father's face, repeating, "Oh, our poor husband." He couldn't decide if he was sad or angry.

His mother wanted to make a seaweed soup for her husband. She said it was for his upcoming birthday.

"Go get them," she said, handing a slip of paper to Jisu. It was a list of ingredients she needed to make the soup.

But when he was about to head out, his mother stopped him. "You may take up too much time," she said. Her sole request was to watch the father.

In the living room, he saw stacks of paper piled on a coffee table. Then a thought hit him that he forgot to go to work today. Like an anxious dog, he ran around the house to find his cell phone. Time was seventeen past noon. How did this happen? He was never late to anything. He kept biting his lower lip. He felt terrible about himself. What an irresponsible child, he scorned himself.

After calling here and there, he could finally reach his manager. He explained that there was a car accident.

The manager sounded a bit suspicious but let him go in the end. After finishing the call, Jisu rested his exhausted body on the sofa. I shouldn't sleep, I shouldn't sleep, he kept telling himself but ended up falling asleep.

He smelled sesame oil. Out the long, narrow balcony window, he saw the sky melting into pink and orange. Then he heard a chopping sound, water boiling, a ventilating fan running noisily. He rose from the sofa and went to the kitchen, massaging his stiff neck and shoulders.

The dining table brimmed with food. It was as if ten people were visiting his house. On top of the soup, there were grilled mackerel, marinated vegetables, three kinds of kimchi, spicy raw crab, fried chicken nuggets, tofu salad, and a colorful array of sliced fruits. There was no space for more food, but his mother was working on roasted pork belly.

He stood behind her mother and watched her cook: her hands were so fast she could chop the scallion without looking.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

His mother turned back with a surprised look. She contemplated his offer for a moment, then smiled.

He went to the stove and stirred the seaweed soup with a long wooden stick. The seaweed, chopped in small pieces, floated in the saucepan with tanned beige mussels. He checked the seasoning with a large dinner spoon.

His mother quietly stared him, but quickly turned her face when their eyes met.

“Why do you think he came back?” he asked.

His mother didn’t answer. Using the blade of her knife, she carefully lifted the pork from the chopping board and laid it on a plate. When she was done with that, she said, “Can you pass me the salt?”

“There’s no space for that,” he said, passing the bottle.

Again, his mother didn’t respond. Holding the bottle upside down, she sprinkled the salt on the meat until it looked like it had snowed on the plate.

A Kind Woman

I came to this world to live well, not to live long.
—Na Hye-sok, “Divorce Testimony”

That afternoon, I saw my eighty-three-year-old grandmother talking to the plants for the first time. She was standing in front of the window, her upper body bent toward her indoor garden—Chinese evergreens, peace lily, aloe, begonia, Christmas cactus, English ivy, camellia.

“Halmoni, I’m here,” I said, smiling.

“Come on in,” Jin-sil answered without looking.

I stepped inside her room and put down my belongings on the metal foldout chair. A familiar odor of urine numbed my nose. It was one thing I could not get used to this place, a nursing home, which became my grandmother’s new nest from six months ago.

“How are the plants doing?” I asked.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she cupped the white camelia with her hands.

Moving here was her last resort, although it had always been a possibility. From several years ago, she had displayed signs of memory issue. In the beginning, they were trivial as misplacing her phone or forgetting where she had parked her car. Jin-sil had actively denied the illness—calling her doctor a man with a brain of a rock—until one night she couldn’t locate her apartment. If not for a kind taxi driver who insisted on calling my mother for help, she might have wandered through the streets on a cold winter night and, perhaps, would have failed to return. The thought always frightened me.

“I brought some tangerines,” I said. “Mr. Lee from the market gave me big and ripe ones. He says hello to you.” I took out the tangerines from a flimsy plastic bag. I had one more bag that had Fuji apples and a pack of rice cakes in a rainbow color.

Jin-sil nodded. For a moment she looked up and said, “He’s so kind,” but soon went back to her plants.

When I returned from the bathroom with a basket of washed tangerines, Jin-sil was sitting at a coffee table next to the window. An electric kettle was making a hissing noise in the backdrop. Jin-sil patiently waited until I sat down.

“Yeon-su-ya, when will you get married?” she asked.

I simply smiled, unable to tell her that her granddaughter was once married and that she had attended my wedding three years ago. In my mind, I could see Jin-sil wearing a beautiful pink and gray hanbok, bowing at the guests with graceful smiles. She liked my ex-husband, Min-woo, a doctor from a wealthy family, so much so that she had had refused to see me for a year after my divorce.

“What’s wrong with you? Why won’t guys date you?” she questioned.

I laughed. “No, grandma. Everyone wants to date me. It’s me who don’t want them.”

“That’s an odd thing to say. You should find a man, my child.”

“I’m working on it,” I said, quite enjoying the lie. Although her doctor advised me to correct her memories right away, at times I just played along with them.

“For twenty-four years. That’s long enough. What does your mom tell you?”

I lifted my chin up with a beaming smile, knowing exactly what to say. “She said if she could go back in time, she would not get married and go to France and study literature.”

“Ha! What a brave woman,” she said sharply. “If not for your father, she would have become a lonely, miserable old maid.” She fidgeted with a teaspoon, her gaze fixed at the tea kettle that now cried loudly.

“No,” she said after a long pause. “You’re not in college anymore, aren’t you?”

I shook my head no.

“How old are you, my child?”

“Thirty-four.”

Jin-sil threw me a surprised look, her mouth agape. Her expression grew dark.

“It’s OK, grandma. You still look like seventy, certainly not in your eighties.” I chuckled, hoping the joke would lighten up her face.

She didn’t laugh. She poured hot water into the cup and added three spoons of instant coffee powder. “I’m too old,” she said, peevishly. “I’ve lived for too long.”

To distract her moodiness, I pushed food in her direction. “Have some,” I said.

She took a small bite of the mujigae tteok and made up a smile for me—she wasn’t good at hiding her feelings.

After my divorce and a year of silence, Jin-sil had reached out to me last fall. She took me to her favorite Japanese restaurant in the Seoul Grand Hyatt where they served 10-course kaiseki meals that cost 200,000 won. She didn’t say much even after the waitress had brought us chocolate ice cream mochi for dessert. She would cut the mochi in half with a two-tine dessert fork and let it melt. Then, in a calm voice, she began to talk, about her frequent headaches, loss of memory, random panic attacks, her surprise plan to sell her apartment and a car to move into the nursing home. I nodded, quietly absorbing the shock inside. Finally, she requested that I be her caregiver. “I don’t want to be bathed by stranger,” was her reason. A three-bedroom

apartment in Yeouido was a compensation she had offered in return of the service. This triggered harsh criticism from my relatives that I was aiming for her properties, but that wasn't the case. In fact, I was hesitant to take the offer as I knew she wasn't asking for help. She was expressing her sympathy to her granddaughter, a divorced woman with an unstable part-time teaching job at a university.

I went downstairs while Jin-sil took her nap. In the hospital lobby, I saw children chasing after one another, giggling and screaming in joy. Their mothers were seated in the back, conversing in merriment while their eyes remained on their kids.

Min-woo and I never planned to have children. It was our compromise since the beginning of our relationship. "I want to devote all my attention to you," he said, and I agreed. But without a child, I felt largely disconnected from my friends who were already working on their second or third child. I had no cell numbers of well-known private tutors to share or organic cotton diapers to boast. They envied my freedom, but I envied the steadiness of their lives.

Jin-sil was still in bed when I returned. I thought she was sleeping, but her eyes were open, fixed at the television. In the screen, a pretty woman, who looked a bit beaten up, was walking on an empty street alone at night. I realized that the audio has been muted.

"Do you understand without sound?" I asked.

"I don't need to. They all tell the same story," Jin-sil replied nonchalantly.

I sat next to her and began watching the show together. Now a car followed the woman from her behind. The driver had a grim look on his face. The woman didn't notice his following until the man stopped his car, got out of it, and abruptly held her in his arms. Tears rolled down the woman's cheek, and the man murmured words I could not decipher. He gently pulled her away and studied her looks from head to toe: her face was bruised, big and small purple patches

bloomed here and there, and she was barefooted. The man shouted at her words I couldn't hear and stamped his feet in anger.

Jin-sil changed the channel to ESPN: a basketball match was on air. In silence, the players busily ran in the court.

Min-woo used to love watching sports channels. He himself was an athlete who played tennis, golf, sometimes football, too. Through his enthusiasm for sports, I saw his ambition. He was intelligent, quick, and focused when it came to achieving goals. Unlike the men I had dated in the past, he didn't make me wait: one date immediately led to another, and within a month, marriage slipped out of his tongue, and naturally, I said yes on the spot.

A while later, a nurse brought in Jin-sil's dinner. I watched her finish a bowl of seaweed soup. I strolled the hallway back and forth a few times with her, then headed home.

The next day I went to a women's university to teach art history. This week's lecture was on modern Korean painters, Byun Wol-ryong and Lee Jung-seob.

"When you're at home, do you feel at home?" I asked to the class. It was a habit of mine, to open each class with a question.

Some students nodded, whereas others put up a question mark on their faces.

I smiled. "Artist Byun Wol-ryong was born in 1916 in Russia as a second-generation Korean immigrant. His father went missing even before he was born; he was raised by his single mother and his grandfather who used to be a tiger hunter. Sounds ancient, I know." I chuckled. "As an aspiring artist, he went to the Leningrad Institute for Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture to achieve his doctorate degree. In 1953, Byun crossed into North Korea as a consultant for the Pyongyang University of Fine arts to help the school restore North Korea's art

education that had been interrupted by the Korean War. Even though he had refused to attain North Korean citizenship, Byun enjoyed his life in the North. Can you think of why?"

One student in the front row raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"Because he wasn't a foreigner there."

"Very good," I said. "In North Korea, Byun could feel this instant connection we all crave in a relationship. As a goryoin, Byun and his family were grouped as a minority that belonged to neither Russia nor Korea; so when he arrived in Pyongyang, he fell in love with the city, the people, even the nature. In other words, he felt at home."

I turned the PowerPoint slide to the next one: Byun's painting popped up, titled "Repatriation of North Korean Prisoners of War at Panmunjom." The painting depicted a prisoner exchange that took between North and South Korea in 1953.

"Unfortunately," I said, changing the tone dramatically, "happiness didn't last long. In 1954, after spending 15 months in North Korea, Byun fell ill from overwork and returned to the Soviet Union, hoping to come back soon with improved health and more art supplies. Sadly, while he was gone, North Korea suffered from a political turmoil, which made Byun's reentry to Pyongyang impossible. Until his death in 1990, Byun was not allowed to return to North Korea, the country he had considered his home. Let's take a moment and imagine of the painter's devastation."

After a pause, I showed the students his other painting, titled "Gajok," meaning family. In the painting, one boy was crouched on the left side of the canvas, his back turned from the audience, and looked over at an open landscape of paddy fields and layers of greenish-gray

mountains. An old man and a young woman were sitting on the right, gazing at somewhere far away.

“In 1986, Byun was seventy-years-old. His brushstrokes and colors for this painting are bolder than the ones painted in his prime years, but they amplify the sentiment he held onto. By now you can guess what it was, right? Longing. It was longing. Through the painting, the Korean diaspora artist embodied an intense longing for the homeland he could no longer visit. After he returned from the brief stay in the North, Byun lived in Russia for the rest of his life, but not quite feeling at home. Although he could not be in the North physically, he continued to paint imaginary landscapes of the country and wrote letters to his colleagues, students, and fellow artists in Pyongyang to share his dreams of one day returning there.”

The class fell into a silence.

“What else do you feel from this painting?” I asked.

“Regret,” someone answered.

“Nostalgia.”

“Hope?”

I nodded. “Uh-huh, you’re all right. I’m sure Byun’s later life was dominated by all those powerful emotions. Now, there is another artist who had to endure the painful longing.”

The projector screen showed a black and white headshot of painter Lee Jung-seob, smiling playfully at the camera. “I guess you’re more familiar with him. This is Lee Jung-seob, one of Korea’s finest artists.” I saw the students’ faces brightening with recognition. The following slide was Lee’s famous artwork named “White Ox.”

“Lee was not only a gifted painter, but also a devoted husband, and a true romantic. He was a man of love letters. It is known that he wrote more than ninety postcards to his wife while

they dated. I mean, that explains, right? Oh, how many days and nights did we have to beg men to write one!”

Small bursts of laughter came from here and there.

I continued. “Interestingly, Lee shares many common denominators with Byun. Like Byun, Lee was born in 1916. He grew up in Pyeongannam-do, which is now the land of North Korea, with his single mother and two other siblings. It is known that he had a lively personality, springing around the village like a stray kitten—believe it or not, his mates called him Tarzan! In fact, Lee was good at all kinds of sports, running, swimming, boxing, skating. He was also a good singer.”

As I said this, memories of Min-woo swept through me. On our third date, he took me to noraebang and sang me Kim Dong-ryul’s “Drunken Truth,” a classic love serenade.

Whenever I am in front of you,

I prepare myself to say this.

But I always end up saying the opposite thing, then regret.

I won't hold back anymore:

I loved you since I first saw you. I still do.

After he finished the song, he put down the microphone on the table and looked at me dearly. I quickly understood what he meant and closed my eyes to let him give me the first kiss. When a person next door fell out of tune while singing “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor, we pulled apart, giggling. Enough, I told myself as I hurriedly turned the presentation slide to the next one. Enough.

“In 1932, Lee went to Japan to enter the Teikoku Art School, then transferred to the Bunka Gakuen, where he delved into Fauvism and experimented his style more freely. There he

met the love of his life: Masako Yamamoto. The couple fell madly in love and moved together to Korea in 1945 to get married.”

I showed the students one of the postcards Lee sent to his wife, a drawing of a man gingerly holding a woman’s feet.

“Yet as Byun’s did, his life was also attacked by an uninvited guest. Can you guess what it was?”

“The wife’s family,” answered one student.

“What about them?” I asked.

“They disapproved him because he was a Korean,” she answered.

Another student chimed in: “And because he was a poor artist.”

Such were the common misconceptions about Lee’s marriage. In truth, Yamamoto’s parents were Christians and did not mind the ethnicity of their daughter’s partner. I pondered how to put this in a decent language, not wanting to sound as if I was correcting the students’ opinions. Gentleness was my priority value in teaching, in everyday life; Min-woo used to call me a kind woman.

“Considering the time period, a middle point between Japanese occupation and liberation of Korea, yes, many artists who lived through that era did suffer from racial discriminations and financial difficulties. However, as for Lee Jung-seob, it was an outbreak of the Korean War that changed the course of his life. The war caused a permanent separation between Lee and his mother. Lee, his wife, and their two sons fled to Busan and had to keep moving around. In the end, in July 1952, while the war was still going on, Lee sent his family back to Japan for safety reasons.”

I showed the students two oil paintings by Lee: “Family with Doves” and “Gray Bull.” They showed a stark difference: the first one possessed a dynamic energy whereas the second one depicted a threadbare bull in monotone colors.

“Both were painted after Lee got separated from his family, but they carry quite different moods, as you can see. The painting on the left manifests the painter’s strong will to be reunited with his family. Indeed, Lee had planned to return to Japan as soon as he held his own exhibition in Korea and earned a lot of money through his paintings. He had written many, many letters to his family during this period. The reality was harsh, but his soul brimmed with hope.”

“Regretfully,” I said, stepping toward the painting of a helpless animal, “his first private exhibition didn’t turn out well. From then, the artist entered the state of irrecoverable despair. Everything that used to make himself a fine artist—his zeal for esthetics, longing for his family, hope for financial stability—lunged at him. In his final years, he suffered from anorexia, malnutrition, jaundice, hepatitis, and schizophrenia. Lee Jung-seob died in 1956, in Seoul. He was merely forty years old.”

The last slide was one of Lee’s last works, “River of No Return,” painted in the year he passed away.

“Today we learned of the two talented artists with a bit of painful history. Let me finish today’s lecture by reading you a section from Rainer Maria Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet. He said, ‘Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present, you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant

day.’ There are too many mysterious in our lives. Too many questions that cannot be answered. So instead of trying to overcome the issue, keep it with you and study it from many different angles. Find many different entries. And remind yourself that perhaps the answer lies in the journey itself. Have a wonderful week, ladies. And don’t forget to turn in your assignments.”

“Gamsahamnida,” the students choired uniformly.

“Peonies return with season. Birds come home. But my love, why are you still not here?”

My steps were buckled in the entrance, taken back by Jin-sil’s singing voice that dipped low—it sounded different from the one I knew.

“Peonies return with season,” she raised her voice, “and war ends.” At this point she spread her left arm and gently pulled leaves of a rubber tree as if shaking hand with someone.

“But my love, why, oh why can’t you come back?”

When the song ended, Jin-sil touched baby clusia laid on the windowsill. “I need more of them,” she murmured. “Don’t think they are mere plants: they’re my sisters in disguise. I have to be good to them, so that when my Lord is content with my good deeds, all of us can be saved. All right?”

I didn’t answer, still watching her from a distance.

“A-a-arirang, Arirang, A-arariyo-o-o. Let me go over Arirang Hill,” Jin-sil started to sing in a new, booming voice that filled in the room.

One million two thousand mountaintops of

Mt. Geumgang in Gangwon-do.

Instead of praying in the Buddhist sanctuaries

Of Eight million nine hermitages for sons and daughters

*Who are not in your way, stop persecuting me,
This lonely, lonely stranger in town.
A waterwheel in Jeongseon spins all year round,
Here and there, there and here,
Round, round, round, round and round.*

Jin-sil folded her torso forward and began spinning around the room.

“Halmoni,” I called her. I was worried she might bump into the furniture.

She stopped spinning at my voice. When she looked back at me, there was terror in her eyes. “Eomma,” she said. “Oh, it’s you, my eomma.”

I stepped back in fear: she just called me a mother.

Jin-sil kneeled on the floor. “Forgive me. Oh, forgive me.” She rubbed the palms of her hands together and wept. “I didn’t know who they were. I thought they were good people. They said they were friends with our father. I—I really didn’t know anything. I didn’t know they could take him away like that. I didn’t know I was giving away father’s life.” Her arms were now hugging my ankles. “Forgive me, mother. Please, please, please. You have to forgive me. I didn’t, my kind mother, I really didn’t know anything. Please forgive me!”

“Halmoni!” I shouted as I pulled her away. But the more I did, the more desperate she became.

“Eomma, don’t leave me!” she shrieked. Her eyes full of tears; her hair a mess. “I beg you. Please.”

I squatted down beside Jin-sil and embraced her. “Shhh,” I calmed her. “Halmoni, it’s alright.” Jin-sil panted in my arms like a wounded animal.

But minutes later, she looked at me in anguish. “You lied to me,” she said.

“What?”

Jin-sil tried to stand up on her own but was drained of strength. I tried to help her, but she pushed me away. “You cunning bitch dare lied to me,” she said, pointing her index finger at me.

“Halmoni, it’s me,” I said in a tender voice that woke my ex-husband every morning.

“It’s me, Yeon-su.”

“I trusted you, and yet you robbed me!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t think I don’t know about your devious scheme. You’ve been selling my properties behind my back, haven’t you?”

“No!”

“And what did you do to your husband?”

So she did recognize me. But what about Min-woo? When did she meet him? Or did he meet her?

“He told me everything.”

“What? What did he tell you?”

Jin-sil turned her face away and refused to talk.

“Grandma, tell me, please. What did he tell you?”

“That, that— that you slept with other men every night!”

By then I understood that she was talking complete nonsense, making things up in her head. I had never slept with anyone other man other than Min-woo. He was the first and last man I ever made love with.

“Get out of my place. I don’t know you. You’re a dirty slut,” she said. She was now sitting on the floor with crossed legs like Buddha.

Later when I came back with a nurse, I found Jin-sil collapsed on the floor. She got moved to the intensive care unit, where she fell unconscious for three days. Her doctor explained to me that Jin-sil’s delusion was simply a side effect of her medicine and that it would disappear once they changed her medicine. Nevertheless, her words remained in my mind.

My sister blamed me for the incident.

“It’s because you didn’t take care of her properly,” she said over the phone.

I was walking down the path leading to the campus gate, looking at flowers in full bloom.

“I did everything I could,” I argued. “Besides, you weren’t even there.”

“Ugh,” she groaned. “That again. I’m not like you. I’m a busy person with a full-time job and children to take care of.”

“You mean your two-year-old who gets stuck in his preschool from 8 to 6 every day?”

“And a husband.”

I frowned. She was a queen of pointed remarks. “Thank you very much.”

“Speaking of, why do you still talk to that ass?”

“Min-woo’s not an ass,” I defended immediately, then regretted.

“Oh, come on,” she said, laughing coldly. “Don’t shame your education. A man who hands his wife to his mother as a slave disguised as a daughter-in-law is called an ass.”

“I wasn’t a slave.”

“Yeah, maybe not a slave, but an idiot!”

“Eonnie!”

With a sigh, she said, “I’m sorry. It’s just that it pisses me off even now to think that my sister endured all that crazy drama.”

“It wasn’t—”

“—I mean, what kind of mother-in-law owns a spare key to her married son’s house?”

“It was only—”

“—Didn’t you say that she also joined your wedding anniversary trip to Jeju Island? And her smarty doctor son said what? ‘You must understand. My mother lived a difficult life?’ Who did you think you were, an angel?”

There was no point in arguing. I looked up to the afternoon sky: the color was teal blue with hints of stone gray. After gulping a silence, I said, “I have to go now.”

“Listen you fool,” she said in a scornful tone, “my friend said she saw you with the ass at a bar in Gangnam last weekend.”

I had to shut my eyes. Bad luck. Bad, bad luck. Why should Seoul be such a small pool, Gangnam even smaller?

“I’m warning you for the last time. Don’t crawl back into the rathole!”

“Yes,” I answered, but the line was already disconnected.

My lawyer had told me that our divorce was clean and simple because we had no children. Min-woo kept our apartment, and I saved my books and paintings. But even after the divorce, we visited each other occasionally, went to restaurants, gallery openings, baseball matches. I thought that was what a liberal woman would do—keeping things cool and maintaining the friendship. I desired to be the New Woman like Na Hye-sok, Korea’s most outspoken feminist writer, painter,

and teacher, whom I taught in class this week. Born in 1896, Na, a prominent artist and scholar, questioned and denied a conventional role of a Korean housewife. Even when the world took everything away from her for a short-lived affair, she continued to challenge unequal treatments of women. Na died alone in 1948 at a hospital for vagabonds. Despite the sad ending, I still admired her strong will, intelligence, and free spirit.

On Saturday Min-woo called in, saying that his football practice got canceled due to rain. I was at home, copying Paul Gauguin's "Nevermore," my favorite amongst Gauguin's. The French artist was a ruthless chaser of Orientalism without a doubt, yet his deep frustration, acid interpretation, and persistent inquiry of both the physical and spiritual world deeply attracted me. When I told Min-woo that I was busy, he said, "Let's go watch a movie." Min-woo was a man who believed movies were a waste of time; he would watch it only when he wanted my attention.

The Japanese film I chose was boring. Seated in a dark theatre, I felt Min-woo's fingers sliding beneath my skirt. I shifted my legs in irritation.

"Why?" he whispered.

I looked at him: his charming face saddened me.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

I shook my head no.

Min-woo quickly hid a smile. He crossed his hands on his chest, no longer looking in my direction.

There was something deeply humiliating about the situation. With Min-woo, I often felt that way. I loved him dearly, from the day I met him, but being with him made me feel like I was wrong. For him, I had to tailor myself to his wants, which were impossible to satisfy.

I came to this world, to live well, not to live long, wrote Na in her essay, titled “Divorce Testimony.” She was the first Korean woman to study western oil painting, and the rare one to pull a love marriage, then a divorce. In classroom, I shared this quote with my students and asked them: “Are you living well?” Now, the same question came to me. Are you living well? Kim Yeon-su, are *you* living well? I glanced at Min-woo’s profile, his long eyelashes and inky eyebrows. How could you hate someone you love already? I wondered.

Min-woo refused to face me: he was signaling that it was my turn to sweet-talk him.

Unable to stand his attitude, I collected my stuff and walked to the exit. Although I hoped for a change, he didn’t follow me out.

With a racing heart, I roamed around the rainy city, passing the Seoul City Hall, Deoksu Palace, Kyobo Bookstore, statue of Yi Sun Sin. I went all the way up to the gate of the Blue House. At last, I found myself arriving at the Plaza Hotel, where Min-woo and I had first met. I didn’t go in. Instead, I hailed a cab in the lobby. The driver asked where I was going. I named the name of my grandmother’s nursing home.

Jin-sil was lying on her sickbed. Since they changed her medicine, the hallucinatory symptoms seemed to have disappeared, but the new medicine sucked away all her physical strength. Now, her bed was her home. I sat down on a folding chair next to her bed, hoping she wouldn’t tell me that I looked familiar like she did last time. Jin-sil’s pale hand reached mine. It was so thin like a slender woody shoot.

“Hi,” she said.

I smiled, my eyes watering.

“Why?” Jin-sil’s curious eyes studied my face.

“I met Min-woo,” I confessed.

“Who’s that?”

“My ex.”

“It’s alright. We’re here for you.”

“Huh?”

“My angel, don’t be sad. We’re very pleased to meet you.”

I noticed that her voice changed, this time like that of a young girl. I could almost see my face crumpling in grief.

Eyes closed, she said, “Thank you for remembering to visit us on this very special day. Come, come, sit with us. Make yourself comfortable. Kyung-hee ironed your shirt. Kwang-sook made rice and twenty side dishes. In-young prepared a hot bath. There should be not a thing to worry about, but if there’s anything we can do for you—really, just anything!—let us know.” She outstretched her arms as if she were a housemaid welcoming an important guest.

“It is a wonderful day today, but nothing is as good as you. God must love you so much, my dear angel. Your face, skin, hair, height, it’s all made to perfection. Your eyes shine like stars at night. Your voice shall tame even wild beasts. Your knowledge outruns all brilliant men on the Earth. How lucky we are to have you here with us today. We have waited and waited for this day.”

“Grandma, stop!”

“Before you came, we were mere dirt on the streets, nameless. But now that you are with us, looking at us with that gentle smile, we shall bloom like flowers.”

“Wake up! Wake up!” I began shaking her by the shoulders.

Finally, Jin-sil opened her eyes. She said, “God, I’m sorry for everything. It was all my fault. Oh, please don’t leave me. I promise you. I’ll be better, much better this time. I’ll be the kindest woman in this world.”