

Diglossia

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## Prologue

They returned her clothes to him from the evidence locker three days after calling to say that the body had been found. Five days after Saul's great-aunt Insoo had disappeared. He had just come home from the crematorium, dressed in black slacks and a suit jacket with a crisp white shirt and black tie. The idea of dressing up had seemed perfectly sensible as he stood in the guest bedroom of his great-aunt's home inspecting himself in the mirror. But he realized what a silly thing to do it must have seemed to everyone else once he arrived. He was the only one there to retrieve her ashes, just as he had been the only one to deliver her cadaver from the morgue, and the only one to be by her side in the last year of her life. As he sat waiting in the reception area, he felt the staff's eyes passing judgmental glances over his sweatpants and t-shirt. A piece of him regretted not taking the time to put on some slacks and a collared shirt, but most of him did not care. There had been no way for him to know how to dress for the occasion. He had never gathered someone's ashes before.

It was an unusually foggy summer's day. The normally wispy trails of water vapor that haunted Acantilado in the mornings were replaced by a haze that spread from far beyond the ocean horizon to the edge of the inland mountains. Saul needed his high beams just to see more than a few feet in front of him as he proceeded on his mission. Insoo had asked him to spread her ashes from the highest point of the cliffs after she died, something Saul's father objected to.

"Body should go back to Korea," he'd insisted over the phone. "We have family plot there, uh?"

She should be with *harabeoji* and *keun harabeoji*.” Eventually, Saul had convinced him to let it be. Insoo had not returned to Korea in almost sixty years of life. She had no desire to in death.

When the afternoon brought no relief to the weather, Saul decided he would have to brave the narrow road leading up to the cliff in spite of the fog. He could not say when he would return to the house. But he knew for certain that he could not bear the thought of leaving his great-aunt’s remains to gather dust with her worldly possessions in an empty house. She had once told him her greatest fear was being found. After so many years of solace it was the idea of being discovered that terrified her most. He would not leave her, abandon her, to be found again in death. As she had wished, he planned to scatter her so that she might never be recovered, though he knew that he would always keep her close. He had no choice.

They arrived just as he was about to leave. The refrigerator and freezer had been wiped down one last time to remove any remaining water that might have melted from the thin crust of ice that coated the freezer. All the furniture had been covered in opaque plastic sheets that made the house appear like a gallery of formless, faceless ghosts. The curtains had been drawn, the bathrooms cleaned one last time, and the trash and recycling loaded into their containers. With the urn tucked beneath one arm, the black suitcase he had first come to the house with a year ago waiting by the door, and the old metal trunk his great-aunt had left him beside it. He was finally been ready to leave. He slipped on his shoes and reached for the door knob, only to be stopped by the sound of knocking.

Officer Malone and Officer Schmidt greeted him as he pried the door open. A pair of khakis and one sky-blue polo were neatly folded in Officer Schmidt’s hand under a pair of ankle socks tucked into the mouths of two black rubber sandals. Saul greeted them with a low voice.

He had hoped he would not be seeing them again, and it was difficult not to betray this in his tone.

Officer Malone peeked around Saul's shoulder and eyed the suitcases. "Going somewhere, kid?" he asked. He spoke with an unnerving ease that made his words sound calculated and rehearsed, as if he had spent the morning practicing in his bathroom mirror. Saul always felt small in his presence, not only because the man towered above him, his head nearly scraping the doorframe, but because he spoke and looked at Saul through sharp green eyes in a way that always reminded him of the pistol, taser, and baton strapped to his belt. As he looked up at Maloney, he could feel Schimdt's gaze cut into his neck from under him like a noose ripping flesh at the end of the drop. Saul nodded, hoping the less he said the less time they would spend at the door. But Malone was not a man satisfied with only part of a story. "Where to? Don't you have some responsibilities to wrap up here, son?"

"I'm going to my uncle's. Gonna be spending some time with my cousins." Saul looked up into Maloney's eyes, wishing he could look down at the floor without inviting the officers' disbelief.

"Huh. I see. Your uncle." Maloney pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows at him. "How long you gonna be there?"

Saul tilted his chin towards his chest and glared at him, his gaze cut to a sharpened edge by the angle. "Can't say, officer. Probably not for too long. At least a week."

A wet squelching sound like the squeal of a rat answered him as Schmidt sucked his teeth. He pressed his shoulder against the doorframe, making the wood groan under the weight of his stocky frame.

“Not running from anything, are ya?” Malone said. They chuckled. Malone lifted his forearm and pressed it against the doorframe, crossing his legs as he shifted his weight.

Saul ground his teeth, pressing his already square jaw into a perfect right angle. His vision pulsed as his heartbeat pounded at his temples. “No, sir,” he muttered, staring at their mouths. Their teeth gleamed in the low light like wave-swept rocks. He was quiet for a moment, trying to find his words amidst the din of their loud smiles. “Is there a reason for your visit today?”

Schmidt pushed the pile of clothes into Saul’s chest. “We just came to return your great-aunt’s clothes.” Saul fumbled and cradled the pile in his arms as Schmidt lowered his arm suddenly. “We’re sorry for your loss.” The words rang hollow against Saul’s ears, but he managed to mutter a thank you. “Well, that’s all we’re here for,” Schmidt said, stepping away from the door with his hands on his belt. “Have a safe trip.” He winked and clucked his tongue at Saul before turning and walking down the driveway. Malone stood still for a moment, looking Saul up and down, and then turned to follow his partner.

When the officers got to their car, Malone leaned back in the driver’s seat and shook his head. “What’d I tell you. He’s hiding something.” He looked out at the window at the small cottage, peering at the silk curtain obscuring the interior.

Schmidt sighed beside him and rapped his fingers on the dashboard. “I’m not so sure, Sean. No evidence at the crime scene. Departed didn’t have life insurance. Didn’t even mention him in her will. Nothing concrete. You sure about this?”

“Damn sure. My gut’s never been wrong, you know that. I think it’s just hard to tell coz of his face. All their faces are like that. Like you can’t really read their expressions or tell what

they're thinking. But I just know." He turned the key in the ignition and began to pull away, keeping his eyes fixed on the house.

Schmidt looked down in his lap, then back out the window at the house. "I suppose you're right. They're hard to read. It's a little unnerving."

Saul peeled back the gossamer silk curtain and watched the police cruiser disappear from view. Both of the officers kept their eyes fixed on the house until it was behind them. Saul went into the master bedroom and slipped the pile of clothes into a drawer. After gathering his things, he stepped outside and loaded the suitcases into the trunk of his black Lexus.

Leaning against the trunk with the urn under his arm, he lit a cigarette and gazed down the road at the cruiser's taillights, which disappeared into the fog with a swift turn. After waiting a moment, he climbed into the car and placed the urn in the passenger seat before pulling out of the driveway and driving down the road. Behind him, the old house slowly ebbed away from view, until it was engulfed in fog, and nothing lay ahead of him but road.

The Lexus bobbed along the road to the top of the cliff. A veil of fog shrouded the sun into a wide smear, filling the air with a dim glow that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. When he reached the peak he stepped out and felt the cool haze settle on his skin like grated rain. Even at the vantage point, Saul could make out nothing around him under the expanse of all-consuming grey. Below, the unseen waves lapped upon a shore in slumber, the rumble and gasp of their coming and going the only sound that could be heard. With the urn under his arm, he walked to the cliff's edge. It stood over the haze like a solitary island in a vast, forgotten sea of rolling fog. He opened the urn and tipped it. The ashes fell over the cliff in a thin stream that dissipated into a shape like the end of a painter's brush as his aunt scattered to the

winds like pollen. The sea breezes swept against him, filling his nostrils with the scent of salt and rotting things. As he watched his great-aunt's remains disappear into the haze he wondered if she had remembered his promise the night she came here to die.

In a few seconds, the plume of ash ebbed to a trickle. Saul tipped the urn back and looked down at the small pile remaining at the bottom. The air rose and fell around him, twisted and scattered in every way along the crisscrossing paths of the winds. He wondered where his great-aunt was now, which rocky crannies, trees, waters, and living things she had already settled in and seeped into. But the grey offered no answer beyond the unbroken silence and stare of the illuminated fog. She had been dispersed by the elements beyond his ability to trace her, cast far out into the unknown where she would never be recovered. There was no finding her now, except at the bottom of the urn.

Possessiveness surged in his chest like a squall on gentle waters. He closed the urn and tucked it back under his arm, shame filling his mouth with a bittersweet taste like candied copper. He stepped back into the Lexus, and after placing the urn in the passenger seat, headed back down the road leading away from the cliffs, and her.

Overture

With bodies, I begin  
their incessant shifting to new forms new  
modes, new beings.  
O, gods, creators of all moving, breathing and  
silent things, inspire my tongue to speak all  
that has come to pass, from  
the watery nebula of boiling oceans to  
canopies of steel, concrete and glass.

Long, long ago  
before the frothy seas sloshed along  
the lip of continents  
before the sky rolled its blue mat over  
the cragged, ancient earth and  
before the land, too,  
was nothing: a turbulent mass of  
torpid space—chaos—within which  
wood, wind, metal, earth, and fire  
lay compacted, confused so that

불 did not

burn and 물

안으로 헤엄

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metal crumbled

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바람이 breathlessly

불어 so that all things were inverted and

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	水				
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	ㅋ	□ 大	木 ○	水 人	ㄹ
	木 人	ㄹ	ㅈ	ㅈ	金 風
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## Chapter 1

Before morning broke, Insoo dreamt of the river. She was in an expanse of bottomless water. She could not tell if she was blind or if the world had been eaten by night. Her hands shot through the surface like pale fish as she struggled to climb the water. The river sloshed over her; she gasped desperately for breath as her head bobbed up and down on the waves. Overhead hung a sky unmarred by stars, draped in nothing but the same raven ink of the water. Unseen creatures wriggled besides her bare legs, fastened themselves around her ankles and knees as she kicked and fought to stay above the surface. Water gushed into her mouth and spilled out of her nose, filling her head with a frothing pain.

She closed her eyes swung her arms to and fro like the oars of a doomed ship in a storm. Then, there was nothing, as if she had been swallowed by the dream, blotted out by the inky sky and water. A light sparked in the distance, the moon clicked on like a light, and she was running, running on land by the river.

The wet sand clung to her bare, hardened heels as she sprinted along the bank. The light of the moon broke into bright shards on the choppy water. The earth shook from the pounding of artillery fire, and she with it. Cold cut into her lungs and scraped the skin of her face, hands and legs. The air was singed with the acrid, metallic scents of gunpowder, blood, and hair. It seemed as if she was getting nowhere as she ran. Though the scenery blurred around her the distant glow of flames she ran towards never came closer. The ferocious hammer-blows of the artillery shells sent her careening and stumbling along the sands, but no matter how hard or far she ran the force of their impact and blasts remained the same.

She was screaming. “Kyungsoo-*ya!* Sungsoo-*opba!* Youngsoo-*ya!* Where are you?!” Their cries rose through the crash of shells and crackling of fire and whistled towards her from every direction as they weaved on the winds. The sand burst beneath her feet and splattered against her bare knees and shins as she bolted towards nowhere. Her heart beat against her chest till her blood began to boil and panic sublimed into every thread of her flesh. The brush and tall grass of the bank coalesced from the shadows. She could go no further on the sand, but her feet carried her on the unending path in spite of her will, chasing the cries of her siblings and the smoldering flames.

Time was just a heavy thing tumbling past. Something large moving swiftly through the night she could not measure. At last she willed herself to dive into the brush and crashed through a web of brambles of reeds. She collapsed on her hands and knees into the soft mud, and the clamor of war disappeared, as if it had fallen on a spark into the sludge with her. The mess of branches and leaves covered the light of the moon and fires, encasing her in darkness. Rising to her feet, she stumbled through the mud, calling out for her brothers still, her throat worn like an old rag from her screams. A murmur scratched at her ears. It was Sungsoo. She stopped and bent her body forward to listen. His voice crept towards her at first, then built into a gallop. “Insoo-*ya!* Insoo-*ya!* Run away! Run away! Take them and run away!”

“Sungsoo-*opba!*” Her voice seemed to echo from a place far behind her.

“Take them and go! Run away! Run away!” His screams cut her cry to ribbons in the dark. Her lips parted, but her voice faltered as it rose and sank through her body into the earth with a weak gurgle. The mud rose all around her and soaked in Sungsoo’s voice until only a trickle remained.

For a moment, it was all silence and only darkness. A thin whining filled the quiet as a shell sailed down along a shaft of light and slammed into the muck with a splatter. It sank into the pool of sludge, and the mud receded till only the hard dirt beneath remained. Framed in the shaft of light ahead of her was a pig on its side, its posterior half charred to a wrinkled crisp. It looked at her through unblinking, milky eyes. She could see its breath in the air like a ghost as its chest lurched up and down with desperate gasps, dragging the ripped skin over and off of the gleaming white tips of its exposed ribs. Maggots crawled along its hide and burrowed holes into its flesh, releasing clear trails of purple and yellow pus that oozed down its side. Flies danced around the wounds, hastily sucking in the fluids and nibbling at the flesh, sampling different spots like greedy prospectors in search of gold. Anguish broke in her gut from a capsule and diffused through her like drops of ink in water. The pig closed its eyes and heaved silently, then opened them again and matched Insoo's gaze. "Insoo-ya. Run away."

Insoo bolted from the bed mat. On her hands and knees, she stumbled in the dark of the hut, panting heavily. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks and settled on her bloody lips, stinging the open cuts as she whipped her head about in a panic. The sun had just begun to crest over the horizon, and she could see its light trickling in from the windows and under the door of the hut. A warm hand stroked the back of her neck, and another pressed against her chest to bring her to her knees from a prostrate position. Halmae pulled Insoo back to the bedmat and laid her head down in her lap. She took Insoo's hands, which she always said were too big for a girl's, and wrapped them in her dainty palms, wrinkled as the skin of an old fruit and rough as granite. A gentle stream of clucking, shushing and sighing babble flowed from her lips as she rubbed Insoo's hands between her own.

From the corner of the hut, Youngsoo sat with his back to the wall, his face hardened into a disapproving grimace. A mass of white cloth trembled behind him. Kyungsoo peeked around their brother's back, his pupils wide and shaking. "*Noona*, did you have a bad dream?"

Halmae rubbed her hand on Insoo's shoulder. The old woman's long, lank hair fell over her left shoulder in a silvery cascade that shown in the light streaming in through the windows. She looked at Insoo with the same knowing, defeated look she always gave her. Insoo swallowed and brought her knees in to her chest. "No. It's ok," she whispered. A hesitation lingered in the air, pinned to Kyungsoo's fear, which palpitated and radiated through the room like a fire in winter. "I saw a pig," she finally said after a long silence.

The boy crawled around Youngsoo's side and propped himself on his knees in front of his sister. "That's good luck. That's good luck. That means we'll make money today." He nodded curtly, his small, round face drawn into a serious expression, and patted his sister's feet. "Maybe we can even have turkey."

Youngsoo cleared his throat. "I keep telling you, Kyungsoo. They only have turkey in November. Get that idea out of your head."

"We might make enough today to find some." Kyungsoo said. "You don't know everything."

Youngsoo hissed and raised a hand threateningly. "Shut up."

A resistant croak escaped Halmae's throat as she slapped Youngsoo on the knee. Her head shook as her hands weaved for him not to speak to the boy like that, who had hung his head to cover the tears building in his eyes. Youngsoo threw an impetuous glare at the old woman, matching her gaze, and rose to his feet. "We don't have time for this. We should've left already. Money doesn't make itself." He snatched a few burlap sacks from the opposite corner of the

room and tossed one to Insoo. “Let’s go, *noona*. Get up. You,” he tapped Kyungsoo with his foot. “Stand up and stop sniffing. Men don’t cry.”

After a glass of weak tea and half a fist of rice to start their day, the siblings left the small hut on the edge of the city with burlap sacks slung over their shoulders and began their long trek toward the market. Insoo fingered a bowl in her free hand and began to hum a song as they walked. The last rains of summer had passed the week before, and the cool morning air, cleansed of smog for the moment, felt good against her skin. Ahead of her, Youngsoo led the way, his shoulders hunched and his neck craned under the weight of some unseen thing. Kyungsoo scampered between them, dragging a stick behind him that left a long, squiggling trail in the dirt that Insoo made sure to step around as they pressed forward.

The temporary fullness her breakfast had brought disappeared in a matter of minutes. Emptiness squirmed in her stomach, gnawing into her flesh with its tough hide. She plodded forward on bloodless limbs that shuffled and stepped ahead of her thoughts. If she had the desire to she could let her legs crumble beneath her, and her chest plummet to the earth like a stone, or a bomb, like something never meant to stand. But her body pressed on out of habit, the defeated inurement to the everyday. She looked up to set her mind on other things.

Ribbons of sparrows, magpies, and geese fluttered across the wide blue sky. To the east, the rising sun spilled vermilion and fuchsia across the horizon like watercolors, filling the city streets with amber light.

When they reached the market, the heat of the day had begun to gather, and a veneer of sweat clung to Insoo’s neck like a second skin. Mosquitos buzzed excitedly around her head. The sun rose further above the horizon, and the brilliant colors of the dawn drained away to a crisp blue. The world began to rouse itself from slumber. House flies emerged from their hiding places

and whipped back and forth from trash heaps to people, humming like racecars. Stray dogs and cats stalked into the streets from the alleyways, patches of fur worn away by mange and hungry threats gleaming in their eyes. The scent of rotting trash and sweating bodies rose with the mounting humidity.

The streets began to teem with a throng of people beginning their days. Merchants came into the market with their carts dragging behind them, their faces fixed into stern, concentrated grimaces. Farmers rode in on carts led by oxen and mules, with potatoes, rice, barley, soy beans and cabbage piled behind them. Twisting knots of children dressed in clean, freshly-pressed uniforms chased one another on their way to school. As they passed Insoo and her siblings, they fell to a hush and watched them with distrust brimming in their eyes. Men with and without beards and dusty shadows under their eyes idled by their storefronts or passed through the main road from the alleyways with cigarettes hanging from their lips and bloodied aprons, dust-streaked jumpsuits and newly-shaved suits clinging to their thin, stiff frames. A hundred signs advertising cobblers, butchers, seamstresses, restaurants, general stores, penny merchants, bars, and tailors clung to the windows of the multi-storied buildings on either side of the street. Store owners unlocked their doors and swept their stoops. Some smoked cigarettes, others drank strong tea or watery coffee as they chatted with the merchants and farmers setting up their stalls along the sidewalk. All around them, women of all ages with blank, haunted expressions etched into their wrinkles and smooth faces passed with plastic bags sagging from their waists and baskets clutched under their arms or balanced on their heads.

Youngsoo leaned against the mouth of an alley and waited for his siblings to catch up to him. He looked down at Kyungsoo and grunted. "We'll be back in a couple of hours. We're going to the base." A policeman walked past, eying them warily. Youngsoo glared at the officer

and spat. "Be careful not to get caught. If anyone asks where your parents are, your mother's sick in bed." Kyungsoo nodded and took the bowl from Insoo, letting his stick fall to the ground.

"Meet us back here," Youngsoo called as the boy took off running down the street.

Insoo could not remember if it had been two or three years since she had started to follow Youngsoo through the city. It had been the winter after the war ended; the same winter in which she had awoken one morning to find her great-grandmother mute, mouth bobbing and hands flapping about in a quiet frenzy. A week later, Youngsoo disappeared for three days, his first time vanishing. Insoo went to look for him the second day. She walked the city calling his name and asking if anyone had seen him till her cheeks cracked and burned, but found no sign of him. When she came back to the hut, Kyungsoo asked if Youngsoo-*hyeong* had gone away to be with Sungsoo-*hyeong*. In the meantime, Halmae sat huddled in the corner staring at something her grandchildren could not see with their young eyes.

At dawn, Youngsoo tumbled through the door to the hut, his face and neck mottled with ruddy splotches and his skin reeking of tobacco and liquor. He stood swaying in front of the open door and dropped the burlap sack slung over his shoulder to the ground where it landed with a dull clatter. "Wake up! Wake up, your royal majesties!" he crowed. "I've brought gifts! Ho ho ho! Santa Claus has come! Santa Claus has come!" Teetering on his heels, he crouched down and flipped the sack inside out, sending cans of Spam and Campbell's Soup sprawling across the floor. He hopped up on one foot and reached into his pocket, producing a thin, flimsy stack of bills. He tossed it onto the bed mat with a grin and then collapsed to the floor.

They rose from the bed mat and gazed at him, lying on his side in a haphazard way, hiccupping and chuckling. Before Halmae or Kyungsoo could react, Insoo scuttled from the bed



mat and began picking up the fallen cans and piling them in the corner of the room. Halmae picked up the stack of bills and began to count it slowly. A muffled ululation filled the room as Youngsoo belted the words to a foreign song into the floor “I’m wuoking behaiiiiiinnn...” he howled. He rolled onto his side and swept his limbs over the ground in a luxurious flourish. Drool crept from the corner of his mouth as he inhaled deeply and sang, again, “I’m wuoking behaaaiiiiiinnnnn.”

Halmae placed the bills in her purse and rose from the bed mat. She grasped Youngsoo by the forearm and pulled him to his feet, making exacerbated sounds at him. With a rag, she wiped the drool and stained liquor from her grandson’s mouth, fussing at him all the while. He shuffled, held up by the old woman’s grip, and groaned the melody of the song. When she had finished cleaning him, Halmae grabbed him by the arm and hauled his teetering body to the bed mat. His wiry body crumpled towards the ground, but the old woman caught him by the armpits just before his head slumped against the wall. She set him down and rubbed his back, cooing and clucking her tongue.

Youngsoo groaned and hummed a few notes of the song, his cheeks burning brighter and brighter shades of red as he panted and squirmed. After a moment, his head jerked up and looked back at the old woman with a lopsided gaze. “Halmae! Halmae!” he shouted. A limp hand fumbled for her knee and shook it vigorously. Halmae looked down at the boy and smiled at him. “Halmae, Halmae I brought food. I made money. Look.” He raised a hand to point to the stack of cans Insoo had arranged in the corner. Halmae took his hand between her own and patted it while nodding her head, as if to say that she had already seen. She traced his brow with a short, stubby finger. Youngsoo pressed his face back down into the mat and groaned. “Are you proud of me,

Halmae?” She grunted and smiled back at Insoo, who sat staring in disbelief. The boy muttered something inaudible and fell silent. After a few seconds, he began to snore.

Insoo spilled across the floor to Youngsoo’s side. Kyungsoo rubbed his eyes and collapsed beside his older brother, too tired to be perturbed by the morning’s disturbance or begin to process it. Indignation flushed through her body in a wash of heat and dizziness. Her palate swelled and twisted into a hard lump. The world shimmered on the tears building in her eyes. How could he behave like this and receive no punishment? Did it not matter that she had gone looking for him? She looked to Halmae and studied her expression intently. The lines cutting across her forehead and besides her lip darkened as concern and sorrow tightened her face. There was no hint of anger or consternation in her visage; no disapproval or disgust etched into her skin. Insoo waited on her knees with her nails biting into her palms for the old woman to strike the boy, but Halmae remained motionless, as if she were frozen in one moment as the world hurdled on around her. Insoo ripped the flaky skin of her lip with her teeth to keep from cursing. Fury sloshed about in her chest at her great-grandmother’s apathy. Did she not care what kind of person Youngsoo grew up to be? Did she not care how he treated the family? Hot blood and impulse rushed through her head, and she decided that if Halmae would not discipline her brother, she certainly would. Her open palm shot up into the air like a soldier’s salute and whipped towards Youngsoo’s backside.

Halmae snatched Insoo’s wrist as it fell and pushed it back into the girl’s lap with astonishing strength. Her eyebrows, worn and thin from use and age, slanted into harsh, authoritative angles. A calloused hand splattered with sun spots shook in front of Insoo’s face. Halmae stooped her neck down to match the girl’s gaze and clucked her tongue. Ever since Insoo could remember, Halmae had been shrinking, and as her bones and flesh wore away her skin

bundled together and sagged like heavy pouches. Her eyelids hung past her lashes in a heap of layers that shaped her eyes into commas. Yet, even with so much of her eyes covered, the urgency of her gaze shone through unencumbered.

Halmae took her hand from Insoo's lap and placed it against her chest, raking her nails against the paltry cloth as she made a fist against her heart. She looked back to the sleeping boys and then back to Insoo. Her hand swung from her chest through the air then back again, sweeping the fingers under the palm. The hand dove back to her chest and balled into a fist against the old woman's sternum as a gasp peeled from her lips. Her eyes trembled as if she were pulling something towards her with all her might, something she could not bear to lose. Then, her hand swerved back outwards, and her fist unfurled and fell by her side. Something unseen flew from her palm and escaped into the air beyond reach. The old woman placed her hand back in Insoo's lap.

Insoo sat in silence for a moment, watching a thick, green vein splayed across Halmae's hand pulse as the time trickled by. She could tell by her motions that Halmae had said and done nothing for fear of losing Youngsoo. For fear that he might leave and never return. A tenderness ached in Insoo's chest, something like pity, but not quite. But even still, her rage condensed and accumulated to greater masses within her. Where was this care when Halmae dealt with her? What made Youngsoo so special that he could do as he pleased with impunity? He wasn't even the eldest. "He's drunk!" Insoo hissed. "He's drunk and he disappeared for days. What if he had died? What would we have done then?"

The old woman's hand slipped from Insoo's lap and back into her own as she slumped back on her jagged ankles. She looked towards the door at nothing in particular, chewing a

wrinkled lip as she thought about what the girl had said. Then, she lifted a hand and swept it upwards, as if she were brushing away Insoo's words.

“What makes it all right for him to be drinking like this? He's a child!” Insoo could tell she was testing the limits of Halmae's patience, but pushed on in spite of this, her sense of justice too perturbed for her to remember her manners.

Halmae flicked the girl in the middle of her forehead with enough force to leave a temporary dent. She snatched the purse from the bed mat and waved the bills in front of her great-granddaughter's face.

Insoo rubbed at the raised mound between her eyes and bit back her tears. “I make money too,” she whimpered. “I'm older than him also, and I don't disappear for days and come home drunk. He has no reason to be doing so if he's younger than—” Her voice came to a sudden halt as Halmae mashed her open palms against the girl's budding breasts. She tilted her head at Insoo and gazed deep into her eyes, then allowed her hands to slip back to the ground. Before Insoo could say another word, Halmae lifted a flat palm and gestured to Youngsoo's sleeping body, then all around the hut, towards the roof, door, and walls. She lifted the purse in one hand and pressed the other back against Insoo's chest, a tired, pitiful look in her eye.

They sat together, reticent and unmoving, Halmae looking into Insoo's eyes as the girl stared down at the floor. Eventually, the old woman gathered Insoo's small body in her arms and pulled her close to her, cooing softly and petting her hair. The scratchy material of her great-grandmother's clothes pricked at the skin of her face and neck. The girl could see nothing pressed against her great-grandmother's bosom, so she closed her eyes and breathed in the gentle musk that clung to the old woman. After a while, Insoo began to sob silently, her body convulsing as she struggled to breathe, and spit, snot, and tears poured from her face. Before

long, she fell asleep in Halmae's arms, and the old woman placed her down on the bed mat and began preparing the meager grains of rice in their possession with a can of spam.

That was how the transition was made, and how Insoo learned that her age could not afford her any power that her sex did not guarantee.

Since then, Youngsoo led them on excursions around the city, most of them near the military base. His vanishings continued from that point, becoming more frequent and lengthier with time. Each time, he returned with his sack filled with canned goods and the stench of alcohol fresh on his breath or hanging from his skin in a stale cloud. And each time, he came back with more knowledge about the base and its schedule: when and where the guards would be standing and changing, when the mess hall staff would be emptying their garbage, what time the Seoul trash collection services would be arriving, which buyers were offering the best prices on copper wire and lead. He would disappear for days, sometimes almost a week, and then reappear with a sack of canned soups, Spam, sprouting potatoes, stale bread, and old, hairy onions in one hand and a thin stack of bills in the other. Every few weeks it was the same. Insoo would wake one morning to find him missing from the bed mat, and his shoes gone, and wake another morning to the odor of old liquor and tobacco slumping into the mat with his limp body.

Halmae never protested to Youngsoo's behavior. It was not as if he made more work for her with his disappearances. His absent days meant more food for her and the two other children, and the fruits of his labor ensured they had enough food and money to stave off starvation, cold, and eviction. He never returned home sick or forgot to remove his shoes when he passed through the doorway, so there was never anything extra for Halmae to clean up besides some scattered bills and provisions. Indeed, it seemed there was nothing Youngsoo could do to provoke her ire. Every time he returned she offered him the same mixture of sadness and uncommunicated worry

as she led his wavering body back to the bed mat. Without complaint, she fixed his meals, patched his clothes, and tended to him when he fell ill. As time passed, Youngsoo began to assert himself as if he were the elder of the house, a change to which Halmae quietly acquiesced, although Insoo did not. When she asked Halmae why she tolerated Youngsoo's behavior, the old woman sighed and let her shoulders slump. With the square end of a short finger, she traced the creases folded into her cheeks and neck, and rubbed the eroded points of her wrists and elbows with the loose flesh of her palms.

And that was how Youngsoo became the man of the house, and how he began to lead them about the city. Each disappearance armed him with new knowledge of the finer workings of the city and the military base. But he would never say where he had gone, or who he had seen, or what he had been doing. And so, as Youngsoo became a man, he also faded from Insoo, until he was but a shadow of the brother she had known, a specter in a haze of things unspoken and unknown. He spoke less and less as the years trudged by, and the few things he did say concerned the immediate details of things: where to go, when to meet, who would accomplish what task, how much food was left in the house. He never spoke of himself: what he was feeling or what he had experienced. He had become a man, he would say. Insoo wondered if that was all a man was, someone who spoke of everything around him except himself.

They walked up the road till they came to the high concrete walls of the military base. Coiled barbed wire ran along the top, its sharp teeth gleaming ominously in the sun. The incline of the hill nurtured a stitch in Insoo's side that gnawed at the sparse flesh hanging from her ribs with each step. Spit simmered to a paste in her mouth. A dull pain like the shockwave from a grenade echoed in her head. Cars tore past on the wide road, the angry blares of their horns

battering her. Her knees and calves cried out to crumble, but the sharp pain in her gut pushed her on like a spur. As Insoo ground her jaw her teeth slipped and slit the inside of her cheek. Slices of skin drenched in blood fell to her tongue. She chewed and sucked on the sweet, coppery taste and swallowed, relief flooding her as the liquid reached her stomach.

A column of soldiers approached from around the corner, their feet rising and falling in unison like machinery. Youngsoo and Insoo turned their heads down as they walked past. She could feel their looks sliding down their long noses and landing on her neck. The hunger pangs evaporated for a moment as the tingling lightness of panic and fear shot through her limbs and head. One of them burst into a chuckle as they passed, and men around him began to laugh. She turned and saw them gazing back at her, teeth bared. The leader of the column barked an order like breaking ice back at them, and they fell quiet. Insoo shuffled her feet forward and jabbed her brother in the rib. "Let's get out of here," she hissed, and tore ahead as fast as she could without breaking into run.

The base sprawled for miles at the edge of the city. As the sun climbed up to the top of the sky, they hiked along the wall, keeping their heads down and mouths closed. They stopped at every garbage heap, searching for cans, bottles, bullet casings and pipes. After an hour, they came to an inlet along the base of the wall filled with discarded foodstuffs from the kitchens. Youngsoo turned back to Insoo and nodded. She stopped by the corner of the wall where the inlet began as her brother pressed on ahead to the other side. She turned and watched the traffic pass by, keeping the inlet in her peripheral vision. A man stepped out with a crate balanced against his hip, his body wrapped in a white apron flecked with orange and olive stains. It was one of the dark-skinned Americans with flat noses and coiled hair, a *heukin*. Insoo watched him

curiously as he descended towards the trash heap. She had always wondered how a single country like America had so many people that looked so different from each other.

As the man turned his back and headed towards the door, Youngsoo bolted from his spot towards the contents of the crate the man had left behind. Insoo bit her tongue to keep from crying out. This was not how they did things. They had not even checked to be sure that there were no guards coming. Darting her head back and forth, she scanned the road for approaching soldiers but saw nothing. With a deep breath, she ran behind her brother and began sweeping everything in sight that looked edible into her sack. As she scattered cans and heaps of vegetable skins to the side, swarms of flies erupted in her face with the stench of rotting food. She waved them away and snatched at the remaining edible goods with the calm efficiency born of routine.

The sound of someone clearing their throat made both of them freeze in place and look up. The *heukin* man was looking back at them, one hand on the door knob leading back inside the walls of the base, and the other on his hip. Insoo bent her knees and prepared to bolt if she had to. She could hear Youngsoo's breath quicken as he reached for the sack he had left on the ground.

The man bit his lip and looked inside the door, then peered as far as he could down the street. His eyes met Insoo's, but it was not a confrontational look. Rather, it seemed that he understood what they were doing. He nodded at them, and then disappeared back into the base.

A shout broke the silence that had passed between the three of them. A guard approached them from the street, his rifle raised and his mouth firing harsh calls. Without thinking, brother and sister bolted toward the other side of the inlet, only to find another guard with his gun raised at them. Flanked, Insoo and Youngsoo pressed their backs against each other as the pale guards approached.



The one in front of Insoo sneered and jammed the end of his rifle into her chest. Blood drained from her extremities. She was acutely aware of the spot where the guard had struck her, as if he had punctured a hole in her through which all the shame of the world began to rush in. Her palms began to salivate. A tingling sensation shook her joints as she turned her shoulders in, trying to make herself as small as possible.

The guard's bright green eyes scintillated in the shadow of his helmet. He made a crude sound like bones being crushed and began to circle around them. The guard that had discovered them swung around to face Insoo, his lip curled in a stoic expression that belied the glee glinting in his sand-colored eyes.

Behind her, Insoo heard the guard cry out and start chuckling to himself. Something pushed Youngsoo against her, sending them both jostling back and forth for balance. She turned to see the guard with green eyes clutching Youngsoo by the jaw and speaking to him. Flecks of spit splattered his cheeks as the boy stood with his jaw ground shut. The guard spoke at him loudly, his voice rising again and again in a way that suggested he was interrogating Youngsoo, who refused to answer. After a moment of silence, the guard slapped Youngsoo across the face three times and barked at him. As each blow landed on his face, Youngsoo's head snapped back like a branch whipping in the wind, but he refused to fall. The green-eyed guard growled like an animal about to make a kill and spat to the side of the road.

Without warning, he rammed the butt of his rifle into Youngsoo's gut, who coughed and collapsed to the ground clutching his ribs. Insoo screamed at the man to stop, but his companion raised his rifle and pointed it under her chin. She closed her mouth and swallowed spit as the cold metal point nestled atop her trachea. He bayed an order at her, shoving the point of his gun

into her throat, then repeated himself. Not knowing what else to do, she kept her mouth closed and stood as still as she could.

Youngsoo lay on the ground coughing and pushed his hands into the dusty concrete, struggling to come to his feet. The guard let out another enraged howl and stomped on his back. Youngsoo stayed silent and tried to stand again, only to have the man push him down once more. At last, he looked up, his face smeared with dust and marked with cuts on his lip and cheeks, and spoke to the guard. For a moment, they spoke back and forth to each other, Youngsoo panting whatever words he could and the guard snarling and barking like an angry dog. Then, for a reason that Insoo could not discern, an easy smirk settled on Youngsoo's face. He looked up at the guard, matched his gaze, and uttered a low growl that made the man's face melt into a blank, stoic expression. Blood spilled from Youngsoo's mouth and left a loud stripe on his chin.

The green-eyed guard squeezed Youngsoo's jaw and jammed the end of his rifle into the boy's mouth. The glee was gone from the man's face and replaced with the unthinking, furious urgency of fear. A muttered, rambling line of speech spilled from his mouth, punctuated by sudden rises in tone and volume that Insoo could not interpret. Youngsoo gagged as the guard stabbed the rifle against the back of his throat in the middle of his speech. When he was done, he stood there, panting and shaking as he towered over her brother. After a moment's pause, he pulled the gun from Youngsoo's mouth and swung his foot into his ribs. A coil of spit landed on the boy's face as the guards stepped away from the both of them.

Insoo waited a moment and looked to the guards, who stood seething with their rifles crossing their chests. The one who had held her at gunpoint barked and waved his gun at her. She dove for Youngsoo and pulled him to his feet with his arm over her neck. The soldiers shouted after them as she led her brother away. When they turned the corner, he pulled away from her

and bent over the pavement. Blood and saliva dribbled from his mouth to the earth on a hacking cough. She laid her hand on his back and rubbed it in circles, but Youngsoo swiped it away in an angry spasm. “Don’t touch me,” he snapped. Insoo stepped back from him and watched as he cleared his throat and spat out more blood.

A man pushing a cart filled with scrap passed by them and laughed. “Did your sister do that to you?” he hollered. Youngsoo glared at him as he passed, but the man waved his leer away with a flippant hand and a raucous laugh.

Youngsoo stood straight and swallowed, his shoulders set back in a perfect curve. Wiping his mouth, he turned back to Insoo and looked her in the eye. “Don’t tell Kyungsoo. Don’t tell Halmae,” he muttered.

Insoo grunted. His eyes turned down to the ground. She gazed at his black pupils, wondering why he hid from her. “You knew those soldiers,” she said, thinking it would be redundant to ask. “Who are they?”

He sniffled, then turned away from her and began to walk. “Let’s go. We need to find Kyungsoo.” Insoo stood and watched him stroll down the hill along the wall of the base. Then, with a sigh, she followed.

## Chapter 2

Saul hurtled down the one-lane road. He had no idea where he was. Furrowed rows of farmland spread out for miles on either side of him, littered with wilted piles of leaves gasping in the heat of August. The mirage lay ahead like a glittering sheet of tin, forever dancing just beyond his reach. Saul scanned the GPS for directions on how to get to 99. 5 was clogged. He didn't know why 5 was clogged, but it was. The traffic reporter on the radio blamed it on over-congestion, as if that offered any sort of explanation.

The tracts of rumpled fields slowly turned into run-down shanty houses on either side of him. He caught glimpses of kids running around in circles, their sunkissed arms waving in the clouds of dust they kicked up. Plump abuelitas and nanas sat on porches and drank homemade lemonade with too much sugar. A boy about Saul's age fed peanut butter to a mutt in the dirt. Saul pressed forward across the farmlands, chasing the mirage towards the mountains.

The road ended at an intersection. Saul stalled at the end, looking left and right, trying to make out which way to go. The GPS insisted that the road went on, but all he could see was a neat phalanx of apricot trees in front of him. He tapped the minus sign on the touchscreen map and scanned the yellow lines for a path that led to 99. He couldn't make one out. Shifting his glance between the path on his left and right, Saul finally steered the Lexus down the right-hand path and shot down the road in a bolt of black.

The orchards and fields continued on either side of him as the houses slowly disappeared from view. Up ahead, Saul could see a sign advertising a gas station, the faded orange paint popping against the powder blue sky. He pulled into the parking lot next to an old Chevy pickup with a red paintjob smeared with dust and rusted scrapes.

He stepped out into the harsh, dry air. A man was sitting in a chair in front of the convenience store, absentmindedly turning a beer can about in his hand. There was a weariness about the way his shoulders hunched forward and his sunburnt, thick arms draped over his full belly. As Saul approached the doors of the store, the man looked up at him through small, watery blue eyes. Saul studied his face, wrinkled and weather-beaten like an old scrap of parchment.

“Somethin’ I can help you with, kid?” the man croaked, eyeing the Lexus Saul had just emerged from.

“Uh, yes.” His shoulders stiffened. “I’m trying to get to 99.”

The man nodded, looking back at Saul before staring across the road at the unmoving branches of the orchard. He turned his head and spat in the dirt. “Where you headed?” The man tilted his head at Saul and threw him a tight-lipped sneer.

“North,” Saul muttered, looking down in the dirt. An uneasy shudder rattled down his spine. The man was looking at him in a way he knew white men looked at him when they felt like toying with him. Saul had seen it plenty of times before. But there was something different about it this time, unique, though still quite familiar. A weak jolt of fear twinged through the muscles of his neck, and a chill wave of anxiety surged from his gut into his chest. Sweat crawled down his palms, and in the glint of the man’s pale blue pupils, he realized there was something more to it. A seething and slowly accumulating rage. A hunger, not to be fed on flesh but to be sated with blood. Saul glanced about quickly. There was no one else around. He shifted one foot behind him and put the entirety of his weight on it.

“North? That’s not a place. That’s a direction!” A croaking laugh billowed from the man’s throat, shaking his heavy gut and wide shoulders. He slapped his thighs and looked up at Saul with an amused smile, his eyes brimming with transparent expectation that hung over a

murky, unspoken threat. Saul forced his lips apart and gave a nervous chuckle, but the stranger must have heard the false tones of his laugh, or maybe Saul had just reacted too late. The man curled his lip and nodded. “Just a bit of a joke, boy. No need to be so serious.”

“Wasn’t serious at all, sir.” He lifted his cheeks and forces his lips further apart into a painful grin. “It was funny.”

The man grunted and spat again in the dirt. “Just keep going down this road.” He pointed to the right. “You’ll see a sign after about two miles.”

Saul nodded his thanks and stepped back towards the car. Once he entered, he could see the man watching him from the side mirror through squinted eyes and a stony expression. As he turned back onto the road and drove away, he peaked into his rearview mirror and watched as the gas station sign broke apart in the mirage. It shimmered like a spirit hovering over the asphalt, and then split into two amorphous, tangerine ghosts before finally refracting and dissipating into an uncertain cloud of musky orange.

Saul idly traced the scar on his left temple. The stranger’s look still rang in his head, those blue eyes cutting into him like spurs through his mind’s eye. He knew where he’d seen that look before.

It was the first day of spring, and he and Victor had walked down Campus Road, past the row of three-story brick frat houses lined with wrought iron fences and contained in perfectly trimmed and watered lawns. Knots of brothers in tanks and shorts and their girlfriends speckled the front of every house. Some were nearly passed out in lawn chairs, beer cans hanging limply from their hands and their eyes obscured behind squared plastic shades. Others ran back and forth on their lawns, tossing footballs or Frisbees back and forth. A new playlist blasted from the

windows of every house, overrunning the sidewalk with the heartfelt howls of country vocals, the robotic whine of electronic synths, and deep, air-trembling bass blasted from a symphony of bleeding speakers that spilled together into an indiscernible sonic soup of popular songs neither Saul nor Victor could ever remember hearing outside of the radio or Campus Road.

At the end of the street, four of the larger brothers on the block sat on the stoop to their house, their bare, bulging shoulders glowing pink in the weak sunlight. They were talking lowly, passing a cigarette between themselves over sips of beer. As Saul and Victor walked past, they stopped and looked up at them. The one on the highest step ground his jaw as they walked past the house, his eyes narrowing into a piercing leer that seemed to cut through Saul, who turned to see Victor looking back nonchalantly. The brother staring Victor down bit his lower lip, baring his teeth. The rest of his crew kept their glares fixed to the back of Saul and Victor's necks as they continued down the path.

"The fuck was that about?" Saul said, once they were out of earshot.

"That's Alex. Boy Kylie's seeing now."

"So? What's he got beef with you for?" He turned his head slightly and caught a glance of Alex and his boys half a block away. They were still watching them.

"I don't know man. Maybe coz I used to fuck his girl. Maybe he's just another white boy lookin' to fight some Asian dudes. Who the fuck knows." He scuffed his shoe against the sidewalk and spat, jaw clenching as he sucked his teeth.

Saul gave a low, nervous chuckle. "Come on, dude. You're exaggerating again. Probably just jealous type, huh?"

"Maybe. Not like they were together when we were fuckin. Got no reason for tryna intimidate me and shit when I'm walking around minding my own fuckin business, *ee shibal.*"

“Ah, ah, ah come on.” Saul remembered ignoring the squirm of dis-ease in his chest as he spoke. “Probably been drinking too much, huh? Let it go man. It’ll be all right.”

Victor had glanced at Saul with frustration and pity for a moment, but it had passed too quickly for him to feel right saying anything about it. After a moment of quiet, he cleared his throat and muttered, “Yeah. Probably just drinking too much.”

But Victor was gone now. Now it was just Saul chasing the mirage.

And now it was another gas station. Now a faded green aluminum sign pointing at 99 North towards Fresno.

Saul followed the sign and curved along the twisted freeway entrance before shooting off into 99, going from thirty to eighty-seven in a matter of seconds. The road opened up to him, spreading its wings as Saul sped down its spine in a sleek, black streak. The road was bare except for a few shipping trucks and SUVs scattered throughout the lanes. The three o’clock sun blazed above him. Aisles of young crops and telephone poles blurred past on either side as he crept towards a hundred miles per hour. There was nothing but the low vibrations of his engine. Saul reached for a cigarette and lit it, cracking open the window to let the azure coils of smoke spin out into the open air. The sound of rushing wind slashed into the car, scalpel-like.

After twenty miles, the farmlands slowly gave way to fields of yellow grass, and Saul could see clearly ahead for miles across the flatlands. Snow-capped mountains hung in the distant east, hazy from the dust of summer. The mirage dissipated before his eyes, and there was nothing, nothing but the road to Acantilado.



## Chapter 2

The sun was beginning to set over South San Francisco as Saul passed by on 101. Rows of houses rolled up and down the surrounding hills, each of them painted a different pastel shade of pink, orange, green, and blue that melded into the amber slowly burning its way across the clouds. Saul had been to South San Francisco before, and every time he passed the multicolored Spanish-style tenements and wondered what it was like to live in those hills, cloistered by the highway within a maze of buildings colored like homemade Easter Eggs. He continued up 101 through San Francisco, driving silently through the low, light fog.

He drove past the huddle of billboards at the city's entrance, advertising vodka, local lawyers, cell phone providers, and radio stations.

He drove past the skyscrapers of the financial center, clustered together like a canopy of stone and glass.

He drove past the line of piers along the wharf, past the tourists idling by their Sundays.

He drove across the Golden Gate Bridge, a thick head of fog smudged with vermilion and saffron beneath him.

He drove past the cleanly broken cliffs and ragged rock outcroppings northwards, entering the woods under the gentle blue of nightfall. Darkness fell quickly, and he could see nothing except the cars around him, the amorphous, collective shadow of the ancient redwoods, looming over him like huge sentries in the dark, and the constant needle points of thousands of stars above him. He drove through the woods and the hills along 101 before transferring to 128 and finally to 1.

The evening waves below the cliffs washed upon a shore in slumber. The black night seemed to close around him, its impenetrable umbra obscuring all but the most immediate

portion of the road. A sign lit up in his headlights. ACANTILADO: 20 MILES. Struggling to stay awake, Saul turned on the radio. It was a news report. Something about an accident up in Sonoma County.

“Witnesses state that four cars were involved. Three have been confirmed dead, one in critical condition and three others hospitalized. Police have yet to confirm the possibility of a DUI.”

The passing lights of cars in the opposite lane blinded him again and again, leaving him dazed and with spots dancing at the edges of his vision. The darkness coiled and twisted from his peripherals, closing in on the strip of road illuminated in his headlights.

“Just terrible, isn’t it? Though hospital officials have yet to confirm it is believed that a seven-year-old boy is among the injured.”

Saul shook his head, slapped himself across the face. Heat spilled down his neck and slid along the skin of his arms and back; his whole body seemed to erupt in itching.

“No other information yet on the status of the other survivors.”

His throat clenched, and a dull pain burst from his chest, as if a piece of metal had been stuck deep in his sternum. He tugged at the seat belt, grabbing his shirt and scratching himself as he flailed.

“Eyewitnesses report seeing several badly injured people. Apparently a lot of blood at the scene tonight.”

Air seemed to trickle down his throat even as he gasped desperately. The road flashed red.

“We are now hearing reports that this may have been a hit-and-run, police are on the lookout for—“

He jammed his fist into the radio and pointed the car towards the side of the road. Sweat covered him like a second skin as the heat pricked at his back. The road flashed red again. Blood. He yanked at the seat belt and finally managed to tear the strap off the buckle. A wet road. A mess of mangled limbs, twisted masses of cartilage and bone. Blood. Victor.

He slammed on the breaks. A car tore past him, horn blaring like a scream.

Saul threw himself from the passenger seat and fell on the road. He crawled back towards the car, limbs shaking and buckling as the world blurred around him in a mess of shadows. He leaned against the door of the Lexus, gasping. It was over. There was nothing he could have done. He slowed his breathing and closed his eyes. Slowly, his lungs began to work again. The scene of that night materialized before him from the darkness behind his eyelids. Victor's hips twisted at an impossible angle, his spine protruding through ripped skin and cloth. The sad, peaceful smile on his face glowing through blood and water.

Saul opened his eyes, stood up and sat on the hood of his car. His vision restored itself as quickly as it had seeped away. He lit a cigarette.

It was all done now. There was nothing he could have done then. Nothing he could do now. He flicked the cigarette across the highway after smoking half of it and climbed back into the car. With a deep breath, he brought the Lexus back onto the road and pressed forward into the night. He kept the radio off.

Saul had barely entered the town along the cliffs when he arrived at the home of Insoo Jung.

His headlights splashed against the stucco walls of her house as he pulled into the driveway. Saul could see the stooped shadow of his great-aunt in the living room. Peeking

behind the silk curtain, Ms. Jung watched as Saul got out of the car and retrieved his bag from the trunk. When he started to come to the door, she opened it.

Ms. Jung was unlike any other old Korean woman he knew, or would ever know. Rather than a freshly dyed, Levittown perm, she wore her hair long and let it silver with age. She was wearing a guacamole colored shirt and khaki pants. She wore no make-up, and Saul could see each of the thousand rivulets the years had carved into her skin.

Saul bowed and greeted her. She grunted a response and held the door open for him to enter. She took the bag from him and rolled it into the guest bedroom as he removed his shoes.

Ms. Jung turned and told him that the room was his, and then she asked him if he was hungry. He said he could eat, and his great-aunt began to warm up some *denjang jjigae* and rice. If he had told her he had eaten a burger at a rest stop three hours ago, she would have insisted on feeding him anyway.

“How was the drive?” Ms. Jung asked.

Saul squinted at his great-aunt, who was pouring the soup into a bowl for him. He twirled his chopsticks between his fingers and set them down on the table with a soft clink. “Good,” he answered. “I’m tired now, but it was a good drive.”

There was a silence between them as Ms. Jung ladled the stew into a bowl and set it down in front of him with a bowl of rice. “Do you want kimchi?” she asked.

“Yes, please.”

She pushed herself from the table to her feet, grunting as she did so. Saul began to get up from his chair, and was about to ask her where it was so he could get it, but she waved a hand at him and grunted some more. Ms. Jung opened the refrigerator and brought out a mason jar

stouter than her own torso, the bubbling, red juice sloshing about as she set the jar on the counter.

“How are your parents?” Ms. Jung began to scoop the limp strands of cabbage from the jar and place them in a smaller bowl.

“They’re doing well.” Saul idly rolled his spoon in the soup, watching the bean curd churn like clouds in fast-forward. The pungent smell of garlic and pickled cabbage filled the room. Saul closed his eyes. It was a good smell. Strong, distinctive, homely.

Ms. Jung hobbled back to the table and set the bowl of kimchi down by his rice. Saul thanked her, and she grunted a reply. She reached out with one gnarled hand covered in sunspots and steadied herself as she sat back down. “Have you been to my brother’s grave?”

“No,” Saul answered. He set his spoon down on his plate. “My parents have though. The next time I go to Korea, I’ll visit his grave.”

They were silent for a while. The waves were a distant whisper in the night, and the fluorescent lights let out a delicate screech overhead.

“Is the kimchi good?” She touched his hand lightly and smiled.

“Yes. Thank you.” Saul looked down at his great-aunt’s arms. The loosened skin dragged along the bone, pockmarked with delicate round scars shining in the light. The right arm bent slightly inwards as well, like a misused crowbar. He wanted to rub the scars until they blurred into her skin, but he knew that would do no good. Saul traced his own scar on his left temple for a moment, and then returned to his food.

Ms. Jung didn’t notice his scar; she asked more questions about the family, letting healthy pauses settle between questions so Saul could eat. At the end of the meal, he tried to bring the dishes to the sink, but she pushed him back into his chair and insisted that she do it

herself. As she wiped a sponge along each plate, she told him to go to bed, that she should show him her shop in the morning. Saul did as he was told.

Making his way to the guest bedroom, he spotted a small wooden picture frame on a nightstand in the living room. It was the only picture he had seen in his great-aunt's house, and it was of her on her wedding day. After listening to make sure she was still busy cleaning dishes, Saul picked up the frame and studied the frail young woman. She gazed into the camera, uncertain of whether to smile or remain poised in her white wedding dress, clutching her flowers of indiscernible color at her side, unsure of where to place them. Next to her a tall, Nordic looking man beamed at the camera. He had a chest that leaned forward like the bow of a ship, nearly crowding his young wife out of the photograph with the width of his shoulders. Saul looked down at the man's arm, where Ms. Jung's thin fingers nestled delicately, decisively into the crook of his elbow.

As he lay in bed tracing his scar, Saul let his mind wander back to Victor.

Kylie had just left after her first visit in months. She had come with the same face she'd worn on her last visit, thin, pale lips stretched into tense self-consciousness, bright blue eyes cast to the floor, shoulders hunched and fingers picking at the denim hugging her hips. Saul had stepped back into his room for an hour when she came, and looked for a way to distract himself from the muffled conversation slipping under the door, but to no avail. Regardless, he'd been unable to hear anything the two had said to each other. By the time he returned to the kitchen, Kylie was leaving; the face was even more strained than before, with ruddy patches of skin under her eyes. She told him she would be teaching English in Osaka over the summer, which Saul had found no other reply to than a nonchalant "Cool." He had not wanted Kylie there, and she seemed to notice as she edged toward the door throughout their conversation. He'd asked how

she had been, and gotten an answer through ragged vocal chords that he knew to be a lie. With a brief promise to catch up in the future, she left the house with her lies and all her feelings.

Victor went to the balcony and leaned over the guardrail. He lit a cigarette and watched Kylie mount her bike and disappear around the corner. The sun set behind the housing development projects about a mile off. Saul stepped out, too, and motioned to Victor that he wanted a cigarette.

“Fuckin’ mooch. Yo, you still owe me that pack.”

Saul grinned, “I always owe you a pack.” He took the cigarette from Victor and lit it.

A crow took off from an oak tree across the street, its lonely caws piercing the trundling hum of passing cars. Victor cocked his head, and smiled. Saul took another drag of his cigarette.

“So Kylie’s going to Japan, huh.” Saul mused.

“Yup.”

“Isn’t she in, like, Japanese 2?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t make much sense.” Victor scuffed his shoes against the floor. “It’s Japan, though.”

He caught Saul’s gaze and raised his eyebrows knowingly. Saul shrugged back. “You know how it is, dude. White people and Japan.”

Victor chuckled. “Yeah, I guess.”

They were quiet for a moment, listening to the low rumble of the town as it settled into evening. Then Saul asked, “So it all good?”

“I guess. I don’t know, man.” Victor tapped his hand against the guardrail. “It was weird.”

Saul grunted. “How so?”

“She was all sorry and shit...real nice, too. Asked me how I was doing, we caught up, all of that. But she just kept sayin’ sorry. And cryin’.”

“Why’s that weird?”

“She just...aish.” Victor spat into the lawn below. “I just felt like she wasn’t actually sayin’ sorry to me. She was just sayin’ it, like...she—she was sayin’ sorry to herself, I guess. She was sorry that she did some fuckin’ foolish shit like that. She wasn’t sorry it happened to me, or that she made it happen to me. I don’t know.” He spat again.

Saul snorted. “White girls.”

A laugh broke from Victor’s throat followed by a puff of smoke from his lips. Then, a gag as he started to choke and doubled over the guardrail, gripping it with his free hand. His body flopped up and down as he filled the air with hacking sounds. Saul slapped his back as Victor pounded his chest with a fist. “Take it easy, man,” Saul said.

Victor looked up at Saul through bleary eyes. “Yeah, I should probably quit. This shit’s gonna kill me one day.” His torn voice ground like a busted motor.

Saul took another drag and nodded. “Who knows, man. You might live to be a hundred.”

With a sour look on his face, Victor flicked his cigarette into the street below. “Cigarettes in Korea really \$2.50 though?”

Saul nodded. “Yeah, for real. Maybe you won’t quit then.”

Victor chuckled. “Nah, b. Imma be goin’ through like six packs a day. Comin’ back with a hole in my throat, promise.” Saul’s cigarette sailed off the balcony as he clapped his hand on Victor’s back. “Still can’t believe I might actually go though.”

“Yeah man, just a few more months.”



“Just as long as financial aid doesn’t fuck it all up for me, right?” he laughed. Saul nodded and smiled, never sure of what to say when Victor talked about the financial aid office. He turned and put his back against the rail with a sigh, then looked back at Saul. “World’s opening up to me, man. I can feel it.”

“You think?”

“Hell yeah.”

Saul looked up at the blank ceiling in the dark. Victor was gone now. He opened the window of the guest bedroom, smoked a cigarette, and went to sleep.

### Chapter 3

Acantilado was originally established as an outpost during the era of Spanish colonization. For centuries beforehand, the small harbor had been used as an ocean fishing site by Pomo-speaking peoples, who commuted from inland communities to take advantage of the harbor's abundant waters, abalone colonies, and tide pools. The first disruption began with the arrival of Russian colonists and their Aleut trappers and wives in 1812. After wresting land from local Pomo-speaking Kashaya by means of deceit, the Russian expedition party established Fort Ross several miles to the south of Acantilado. From there, a fur-hunting mission was launched which decimated the local sea otter population within a matter of decades. Though Russian agricultural settlements surrounded the fort, their limited population and narrowly-focused mission prevented the possibility of mounting a full-scale takeover of the surrounding lands.

As missions sprang up along the Pacific Coast and trade and exploration came to Northern California, the original Pomo-speaking peoples of the lands surrounding Acantilado were gradually pushed back into the interior or converted to Christianity and resettled in the nearby Missions San Rafael and Sonoma. The emptying of the coast by means of warfare, disease, trickery, and resettlement opened up the land to settlement by incoming expeditions from New Spain. Within a few years of the establishment of the missions, several new communities had been established in the area's vicinity. The subsequent increased competition for natural resources and territory served to rapidly accelerate the takeover of indigenous lands by settlers.

Yet, Acantilado's founding marked the beginning, rather than the end, of Spanish and Mexican settlements in the lands north of the present Bay Area. In 1818, a young official named Héctor García Vasquez led an expedition a hundred and forty miles up the coast from San

Francisco to establish such an outpost. Héctor was the youngest of the six legitimate sons of General Sebastián de Madrid Vasquez. He was banished to the most remote corner of the empire after embarrassing his father at a banquet, in which he fell from a balcony onto a French cardinal, breaking the elderly visitor's leg in four different places. In an effort to see to it that his expedition would fail, several political enemies of General de Madrid Vasquez conspired to prevent Héctor from accessing professional soldiers for his party. Thus, Héctor was forced to depart north with a ragtag crew of former Filipino sailors, recently emancipated black men, and an assortment of *mestizo* and *zambo* vagrants, tradesmen, and former convicts. As the party set off from Mexico City towards the Chihuahuan Desert, the architects of Héctor's misfortunes shared a bottle of wine over roast pork and jokes about who would ensure the failure of the mission first: Garcia Vasquez, his band of savages, or the *independistas*.

Fate would have it that the day Héctor happened upon the cliffs of Acantilado and discovered the natural harbor down at the shore, he would be, per usual, unconscionably drunk. Worn out by wine and travel, the young explorer fell off his horse into the dirt, much to the amusement and disgust of his travelling companions. As he lay there, smacking his lips to drive the dehydration from his mouth, he caught a glimpse of the harbor and managed to name the area "Acantilado", which means "cliff" in Spanish, before falling asleep in the dirt.

After stopping the party to sleep for a few hours, Héctor nursed a few bottles of wine before finally coming down to the harbor and clumsily declaring the establishment of a new town, of which he would be mayor. He ordered a carpenter and a former sailor in the party to build a platform using local timber to be used for his announcement. At sunset, Héctor stumbled up to the stage and threw his body onto the half-meter platform with all the strength his tired body could muster. Panting, he rose to his feet, raised his bottle and sword high in the air, and

claimed the surrounding lands in the name of God and the Spanish Crown. It was September 25 in the Year of Our Lord 1821. The next day, the Army of Three Guarantees stormed the gates of Mexico City.

That night, Héctor García Vasquez was carried out by the tide after passing out on the beach. He was the first of the brothers García Vasquez to die over the course of the next fourteen years. The rest would be killed by germs and guns in the Mexican War for Independence. After watching his sons die one by one under increasingly humiliating and sinful circumstances, the General surrendered himself to Christ and became a missionary in the Philippines, deciding that he would return 100 children to God for each one that he had allowed to stray from the path of righteousness.

Over the course of three decades, Acantilado changed hands three times between Spain, Mexico, California, and finally the United States of America. But the town survived in spite of these changes. The settlers who arrived in Garcia Vasquez's party built a small port and established a town center that would continue to stand for the next two centuries. For a few decades, Acantilado was a sleepy, albeit prosperous, little hamlet that served as the main port of trade for the surrounding small plots and ranches. The continuing removal of Pomo communities reduced the chances of competing claims on resources and territory. However, the Pomo peoples had not disappeared from the area or from Acantilado itself. Many still resided in "unsettled" lands to the north and east of Acantilado, and several converts could be found at the surrounding missions. It was at these very missions that the mostly non-White settlers found their wives, who were encouraged to marry honest Catholics loyal to Mexico and the Church as part of their conversion.

Within a few decades, most of the Spanish names in the town registry were replaced by Anglo and Russian ones. The war left most of the town's sailors, dockworkers, and farmers in serious debt, and the new settlers from the north and east soon bought up or stole their property, forcing the old residents to the outskirts of the town. At the same time, the United States government ordered the removal of Pomo peoples from their ancestral lands onto reservations, and several families with Pomo ancestry from the days of settlement were rounded up and taken away. Concurrent with this removal were a series of raids by white American settlers on black families descended from the *negro*, *zambo* and *mulato* settlers that had arrived with Garcia Vasquez. By 1860, the majority of the descendants of Acantilado's founding population had been removed by one way or another, with the notable exceptions of a few *mestizo* families who managed to marry into the Anglo population or survive by fulfilling the role of much-needed cheap agricultural labor.

Still, Acantilado remained a somewhat active port serving the surrounding area until the mid-1880s', when the nearby remains of a former Spanish mission were finally abandoned by its inhabitants and the construction of several regional railroads made small ports like Acantilado no longer profitable. In the forty years between Acantilado's first year as an American town and the start of its declining fortunes, Chinese workers came to settle the edges of the town, living and working alongside the Mexican American farmhands. As Acantilado declined into a dusty, unused fishing and trading hamlet, the small Chinese population was driven out by a white mob, who, a few years later, forced the Mexican populations across the mountains in order to claim their homes and personal plots. By then, the few remaining Pomo-speaking residents who had managed to avoid being forced into inland reservations were each nearing about 80 years of age.

Their passing just before the turn of the century made Acantilado enter the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a virtually all-white town.

It would remain as such until 1976, when the first vineyard owners, investors, bottling company executives, wine critics and journalists arrived in the area, with a handful of Mexican American families in their number. One by one, the dusty warehouses and Spanish-style homes were torn down and renovated into impressive edifices of steel, glass, and oak that dotted the smooth, newly laid asphalt. City hall was rebuilt, and the boardwalk was expanded to make space for the yachts that one by one began to fill up the harbor. Private schools and premiere Italian restaurants opened up as cheap diners and liquor stores disappeared from the street corners. The city limits were pushed two miles further from the cliffs and the shore.

Ms. Jung's house remained the same throughout, situated far enough from the shore to avoid being demolished and turned into a Starbucks. For thirty years, local real estate agents appeared at her doorway dressed in formal wear and flawless smiles. She received gentle reminders in the mail of how her property values had skyrocketed ever since the wine industry had found its way to her corner of the coast. Ms. Jung perennially ignored them. Calls and letters went unanswered and house visits were met with leers from behind the silk curtain. Each individual agent eventually gave up, but in a matter of time another would discover her while driving through the sprawl of recent homes that dotted Acantilado. It was only with the collapse of the housing market that the calls and letters stopped coming. The last agent to show his face at Ms. Jung's door had been a thin, balding, sweaty white man in 2009 whose knuckles were only paler than his near translucent skin. He had explained that he needed to get a new house on the market by the end of the week or he would be fired, and that he didn't have the gusto or charisma to go into freelance work, and that he knew what a terrible bother this must be, and that Ms. Jung

had lived there for forty years so it was probably at the very least misguided to expect her to pack up and leave, and look now, it was so like him to come to this realization right as he stood at her door, hence, he would be leaving, and if Ms. Jung could just forget about the entire incident please, and here was his card, or maybe not, but just in case she ever needed to call him, he would place it under the doormat, which made no sense, just as he *would* realize at the last second, so he placed it on top of the doormat, and scurried back to his car, wiping his salivating palms on his coarse, black slacks.

All the while, Ms. Jung watched him from behind the curtain. She had first moved into this house when the vineyards were little more than a quaint local pastime. She predated every winemaker, shipping executive, bottling aficionado, professional chef, and connoisseur that had flooded into the town in the past three decades. She was here first. She would not leave.

Indeed, by 2009 Insoo was the sole resident to remain in Acantilado after the vineyard boom. All the others had sold their homes decades ago to the winemakers who came to Acantilado in search of a place remote enough to serve as an escape, but near enough to their workplaces to avoid a two hour commute. Very few people knew her name, but everyone knew her from watching her walk downtown to work at 8 o'clock each morning. The sea winds would send her hair into a huge flurry of thrashing silver locks that each commuter could not help but see on their way to work. Those who didn't work knew her from the general store she ran downtown. Acantilado was still only a town of 5000 people, and saved from absolute isolation only by its proximity to much larger towns and cities across the thin sliver of mountains that huddled it against the shore. Housewives and students trickled in and out of the small, one story adobe building and glanced at the wooden shelves stocked with Spanish antiques crusted over with rust, at the plastic racks piled with potato chips, candy bars, bubble gum and fruit snacks

sponsored by Scooby Doo and Disney characters, at the refrigerators stocked with eight brands of soda, three types of beer, four variants of energy drink, orange juice, pulp and non-pulp, 2% and fat-free milk, brand name water bottles, and slightly aged fruit, at the racks of travel books with enhanced photographs of Caribbean beaches on their covers, gossip magazines featuring nameless pop stars that melded together into a blur after a few years, and at the board above the cashier counter where lottery advertisements promised millions, right besides the stacks of six brands of cigarettes sold for 10 cents cheaper than the store across town.

Some days she went home with fifty dollars in profit, and other days with five hundred. Jung's General Store was positioned perfectly between the local middle and high schools and most of Acantilado's residential section, so that on weekdays, packs of teenagers would come into the store to test their fake ID's and buy snacks for the walk home. A combination of these factors made sure that Ms. Jung could always pay her bills on time, put food on her table, and have gas in her car. At the age of 79, it was all she desired. Just as it had been all she desired at the age of 39, when she first came to Acantilado in a blue Chrysler with two suitcases in the backseat and a broken heart.

By the time Saul pulled into Ms. Jung's driveway with a freshly formed scar on his left temple and a single suitcase in the trunk of his car, Ms. Jung forgot to go to the store some days, and could only stay there for four hours before going home and sleeping until nightfall. Finally, she had made the decision to sell, and found a buyer within a matter of weeks. On the morning after Saul's arrival, she handed him the sale agreement she'd received in the mail a few days before. "Look for anything weird," she said quietly, before taking his dish to the sink and washing it.



## Fragment

She looked out the window of the train as it stormed past the city skyline wrapped in the vermillion glow of a winter's sunset spreading across the wide, distant sky. A veneer of melting ice lay over the Han like a layer of scratched glass, concealing the turgid rapids of frigid water that grew murkier with each passing year. Yes, they had gone to the Han that day. After rising with the sun and spending the early hours of the morning passing from hut to hut begging for materials to keep them warm, their oversized straw shoes fraying against the road, they had come to the banks of the river. An old woman tending to three children of her own had been kind enough to offer them an old, thin wool blanket, its numerous holes patched with pieces of cardboard and collected fragments of discarded fabrics. A few other families had offered a few grains of rice to fill their bowl, but of the dozens of houses they had stopped at, only a few had not immediately shut their doors to them. Kyungsoo had followed Insoo the whole morning with a stick in hand, drawing squiggled lines in the dirt as they traveled. "*Noona,*" he'd said. "Can we stop and go swimming? The water looks so nice."

Insoo had resisted at first. They had work to do. The days would be shortening, and they needed enough things to keep them warm through the winter, and enough food to keep them alive till the end of the week. But the boy grabbed her hand and tugged at it desperately, bouncing up and down as he pleaded for just a few minutes. "It's the last day of summer," he'd begged. "Soon, it'll all be too cold for us to do anything here."

She remembered looking up and down the road running along the river at the buses and cars awakening with the city. Amid the low hum of passing engines, the streets had also begun to fill with pedestrians on their way to work or simply going about their days. Soon, the riverside would be filled with walkers. "Do you want to stay here and play while I go work?" she'd asked.

Her little brother had nodded eagerly. “If I do, you have to promise me that you’ll stay right here, and that you won’t go too deep into the water. Can you promise me that? You know Song *ajima*’s youngest drowned in the river last week.”

He nodded again. “I won’t go anywhere. And I won’t drown, I promise.”

With that, she had made her own promise to return in a few hours and turned deeper into the city. The streets had begun to teem with a throng of people beginning their days. All around her, women of all ages with blank, haunted expressions etched into their wrinkles and smooth faces passed with plastic bags sagging from their waists and baskets clutched under their arms or balanced on their heads. Twisting knots of children dressed in clean, freshly-pressed uniforms chased one another on their way to school. Men with and without beards and dusty shadows under their eyes idled by their storefronts or passed through the main road from the alleyways with cigarettes hanging from their lips and bloodied aprons, dust-streaked jumpsuits and newly-shaved suits clinging to their thin, stiff frames. A hundred signs advertising cobblers, butchers, seamstresses, restaurants, general stores, penny merchants, bars, and tailors clung to the windows of the multi-storied buildings on either side of the street. Insoo spent the rest of the morning huddled by a storefront, singing softly with her hand outstretched as crowds of strangers bustled past. A few times, she reached into the pocket or purse of a distracted passerby and managed to snatch some coins or bills before scampering down the road and then reappearing in the same spot after a few minutes. Small packs of American soldiers periodically patrolled the streets with their guns in hand, their gaits languid and weaving with an easy confidence she could not grasp. Insoo had never spent much time with foreigners at that point in her life, and remembered how she would stare at their ugly faces as they walked past, intrigued and perturbed by their pale, greenish skin, their enormous noses and strangely colored hair and eyes.

A passing soldier had offered her a bar of chocolate as the sun began to come into the center of the sky. He stood with weight on one foot, letting the rifle rest on his hip as he dangled the bar in front of her. His comrades had stopped and watched as he forced Insoo to grasp at it again and again, pulling it just out of her reach whenever he got too close. He talked at her in English, the words clanging like brass on cement as his friends stood around, their low, harsh laughs like the trundling of an old truck engine. After toying with her for a few minutes, he stepped back and stood with his arms at his side and barked something at her. Insoo cocked her head to the side. He barked the word again, it broke through the air like a sharp, hissing sting. She scratched her head. Finally, he opened his mouth and let out a single, undulating, mangled note. When she looked at him with bewilderment, he had clutched her chin in a firm grip and tilted it towards him. "*Norae*," he said, stretching and rounding the vowels almost to a point of unintelligibility, but she had understood him anyway, and at last realized that he wanted her to sing. She remembered an unease spreading through her as the soldiers tightened around her, their expectant faces and postures demanding a performance. With a tingle of anxiety in her fingertips and chest, she had opened her mouth and begun to sing, although which song she could no longer remember. All she could recall was how the soldier had stared at her mouth throughout her song in a way that had made her feel as if he were consuming her, skinning and slicing her into pieces and cataloguing the expected flavor and texture of each cut, and how his eyes had shown with a hunger that made her neck tense, and a satisfaction that told her feet to wait before she ran. When Insoo was done, they broke into an exaggerated applause, and the soldier bent down and placed the chocolate bar in her hands and wiped a wet, rough kiss on her cheek to the laughter of his comrades. Then they had departed, and once she had been sure she was out of his sight, she had wiped the lingering saliva from her cheek.

She broke off little pieces throughout the afternoon and placed them on her tongue, letting the rigid sweet sweat down her throat over the hours. When she had eaten half of the bar, she wrapped it back in its gossamer aluminum wrapping and placed it in the pocket of her skirts to give to Kyungsoo later. It occurred to her then to go back for him when a hand settled on her shoulder. An old man in a tweed suit and checkered tie smiled down at her through thick spectacles, his teeth stained the color of brown rice from too many cigarettes and nights on the run. His hair was waxed into a limp, fraying part, and the skin of his hand was powdered white from the cool, dry air of the morning. “A good morning to you, *agashi*,” he said, addressing her in high form with a hint of mockery in his voice. “What are you doing out of school at this time?”

The smile he presented did not retreat. His breath rang with the sharp odor of stale tobacco mingled with *soju*. She shifted, trying to escape the man’s grasp, but his fingers dug deeper into her shoulder. He sucked his teeth at her and spat by her foot. “Answer me. Didn’t your mother teach you some respect?”

“My mother’s dead.” She said quietly, her spine locking into a stiff immobility. Her insides gurgled, as if they were urging her to flee, speaking what her mouth refused to say.

The man reached down and patted her stomach. “Are you hungry?” There was something in his gaze that was much like the soldier’s, but quite distinct. The self-assured satisfaction of the soldier was absent from this man’s gaze, leaving nothing but a visceral, visible thirst that shimmered in his pupils like water in moonlight. He waved his hand by her face, a single folded note clutched between two fingers. “I bet you could buy a lot of food with this, no?” He bent his wrist and pointed the bill at her. When she reached for it, he pulled his hand back and laughed.

“*Agashi*,” he chuckled. “Motherless or not, you ought to know by now that nothing in this world is free. If you want the money you’ll have to earn it.”

Her body screamed for an escape, but she had caught sight of a 20 on the bill and knew that she could not abandon the chance to feed herself and Kyungsoo for so long. “What do you want me to do?”

He smiled, and knelt beside her. “Do you see that man over there?” he asked, still speaking in high form as he pointed at a thin, middle-aged man attending to a stand across the way. “Go over there and tell him your brother is hurt in the alley. Then run ahead of him.” He slipped the bill into her hand. “Go ahead now. Do as I say and buy yourself something tasty afterward.” His smile stretched into a cocky grin. “And don’t even think about trying to scam me. Or I’ll break your little arms.” The grin disappeared like a gash stitched back together, and Insoo knew by his reversion to casual address that he was serious.

She could not recall what had happened then. All she knew was that she had done as she was told, but when she searched her memory for the man’s face, all she could see was a blur, as if his features had been made of paint and she had smeared them into a brush of unremarkable color with her thumb. What she did remember was seeing the man who offered her the money slipping into the alley and emerging with blood dripping from his knuckles. Somebody had screamed, calling out for help. A knot of soldiers had come thundering down the road with their guns raised, and the stranger had winked at her through the throng before turning and walking away. Then, she had run, run fast and hard till her chest burned and her lungs resisted breath. She had run back towards the river until she left the business area, and kept running, even though there was no chance anyone around her would know about the assault.

When she returned to the spot where she had left Kyungsoo, she had fallen to her knees and heaved air like vomit as her hands plunged into the frigid, numbing water. She felt as if she had been transported to another place, far up above herself, and she was only watching her body panic and cry on the riverbank. As if her skin were nothing else but a vessel she had chosen to abandon. After a few minutes, she had exhaled most of her panic from her body, only to realize that Kyungsoo was nowhere in sight.

She had stood up and run up and down the river as far as she could on either side, screaming for him. Passersby turned and watched her as she bolted back and forth like a frantic, confused animal, her screams tearing her voice hoarse. For half an hour, she had searched, but he was nowhere. Had he gone too deep into the water? Had he drowned? Had somebody taken him? She waded into the water and scanned the tide for any sign of him. Then, with a deep, chest-bloating breath, she screamed his name as loud as she could. The hum and rush of the city swallowed up the sound and its echoes. There was no answer.

The world seemed to freeze. The chill of the water rippled through her bones and suddenly, suddenly she was not there. The sky turned dark first, then began to soak with blood like a bandage over a wound. Her breath trembled in her chest, paralyzed. Bodies began to float to the surface of the water, limp and swaddled in white sheets stained with blood. Their faces were all turned down into the river, long black hair swirled in the tide like sea grass poisoned with oil. Scarlet tendrils spread from the bodies through the river like flames. The mountains and hills behind the opposite bank faded and crumbled into an undistinguished, maroon expanse, and she could not tell if it was the sky that reflected the water or the other way. A distant figure walked along the other bank, silhouetted in sanguine. Without seeing his face, she knew who it was. A scream gurgled in her throat, trapped in the cage of muscles and cartilage, lunging

desperately like a mother watching her child die. The bodies began to roll in the water. She could see their faces. A hand grasped her wrist.

“*Noona*, I’m right here!” Kyungsoo tugged her wrist, his face caked with flecks of wet sand. Insoo gasped. The chilly air cut like a blade into her lungs. She blinked and looked about her, panting uncontrollably. The bodies had disappeared and the mountains had returned. She gazed across the water and saw nothing but other children playing on the bank and cars passing on the road. She feigned the best smile she could at Kyungsoo, who studied her face curiously. “Why are you so pale?” he asked.

She tossed her head about, as if she could shake the memory from her like water. “It’s nothing,” she said. She realized her hands were clenched into tight fists and opened them. She had still been clutching the note. “I earned a lot today,” she said, straining her throat as her voice rose by several notes to a false cheeriness. “We’re gonna eat well this week.”

## Interlude

I do not know how to make love  
By Mike Trinh

I do not know how to make love

Not like,  
I don't know how  
to grip the groove  
of your hip, and dig my  
teeth in your neck, and set  
my voice in a growl, and  
twist my legs around yours

More like,  
I don't know how  
to look you in the  
eye through your  
tears, how to read your  
pain scrawled on  
tight lips, how to  
hear the unsaid spoken  
between the letters of the  
word "fine," how to  
speak in anything but  
riddles and half-truths and  
all-lies

But what I know for sure  
better than the taste of your skin  
and the weight of your hair  
and the shape of your hips  
and the girth of your voice is  
the things you won't know  
the things you won't say  
the things you'll forgive  
the things you'll let go

See,  
I do not know how to give love  
only to take love  
I do not know how to make love  
only consume love,



Love, I,  
can slurp you down like a bowl of noodles  
without a second thought lick  
the rim clean of flavor and empty the  
bottom of broth

I can take all the air  
out of you and live on  
the breath from your  
mouth grow strong by  
deflating you

I can steal your thunder with your  
lightning and snatch  
all the stars from  
your sky

This is how the sound  
of your mother crying in  
the next room teaches you  
to love, how the smell  
of scotch on your father's  
breath in the morning teaches  
you, how nightmares  
of a war you never lived teaches  
you, how you learn from a  
genealogy of napalm and  
barbed wire, land mines and  
police sirens, hunger and INS lines,  
how a heart clogged with sea  
salt and a body streaked with soot  
teaches you, this is the thirst,  
gluttony, and slow  
conquest you learn to call  
love in a man's body in a  
man's world

So run, dear, before I  
drink you, run, before  
I empty you—just  
run

## Chapter 5

It was an unusually clear morning the first time Saul drove to the hospital for Victor. The rains had swept the streets in watery sheets for the past two days, leaving the cold autumn air crisp and cool. Saul drove with the windows down. The encroaching cold of the season swept through his hair and across his face through the open window, clearing the exhaustion ringing in his head as he drove into the city. Kylie had kept him, Mike, and Seb awake all night with her crying and fretting. He could feel the skin bag under his eyes as the exhaustion draped him like a coat too heavy for the season.

She had insisted they call the police as soon as twenty four hours had passed. The night before, she had appeared on their porch, eyes and nose patched with ruddy skin and damp blonde hair bent limp on her shoulders after running in the rain. Mike had come down to open the door for her, and the moment she saw him she'd buried her face in his chest and sobbed so loudly Saul could hear her upstairs.

The hard rains from the day had subsided for a moment, leaving the night in a wet, oozing darkness untouched by the soft light of the moon and stars. The passing of the rain did nothing to allay her fears. They spent most of the night calling Victor, which always ended the same as his scratchy baritone cut the ringtone short. No one they texted, messaged, or called had seen any signs of him that day. The last person to see him had been Seb, who saw him leave the house at sunrise. Kylie was nothing more than a barrage of tears, demands, and the same recycled questions. What if he'd been mugged? What if he'd been hit by a car? What if he was hurt?

The questions remained the same the next morning, after Kylie finally fell asleep in Victor's bed, salt crusted in two lanes running down her face. The matter of the missing person's

report was the first thing she addressed in the morning. Mike and Saul tried in vain to brush her request away. It was not the first time Victor had disappeared. He was a big boy; he would be all right. Maybe he was working a job. But they knew none of these things were true. Victor had never disappeared before. There was no way they could guarantee he would be all right, and the sour, hearty odor permeating the hall from his room indicated that he hadn't gone somewhere to re-up. Seb knew this too, though he said nothing throughout the argument that dominated most of that morning to suggest Kylie might be right or that Mike and Saul were being willfully dishonest to her and themselves.

Finally, the sun began to set again, and Seb agreed to take the six ounces stuffed into mason jars under Victor's bed to his boyfriend's. "I'll just need like an hour. I gotta get over there, then make it back so I can answer whatever the cops wanna ask," he said.

Kylie shook her head with a vigor that seemed unnatural to someone with such a slight frame. "Ok, why are we even wasting time with this? We can't wait an hour; we should just call the police right now." She reached for her phone.

Mike cleared his throat. "Because they're gonna search the house, Kylie. This is a crime scene now."

"Crime scene? How? We didn't do anything wrong." She crossed her arms and lifted her chin at Mike. "How can you be so sure? This isn't fucking CSI."

Seb stacked the mason jars filled with thick clumps of green leaves speckled with orange and silver dust and swept them into his bag. "You ever called the cops before, Kylie?" he asked.

"No. Well, actually, there was this one time that there was this really creepy black dude on our street, and my mom called the cops coz he was, like, looking at people's houses and stuff. That was weird. But other than that, no."

Mike sighed audibly. Seb and Saul shared a quick look they often threw at each other behind Kylie's back.

"Just trust what Mike says, ok? Saul, keys?" Saul reached into his pocket and dropped the keys to the Lexus in Seb's open hand. "I'll be back in an hour," he said, making for the door. "Wait till I get back to call. This motherfucker gonna owe me when he turns up. Be lucky if I don't get pulled over."

"Drive safe," Saul called.

"Word." The door shut behind him.

When Seb returned to the apartment, Mike took his phone and called campus police. After the missing person's report was made, and the operator promised they would be there momentarily, his phone rang five minutes later. Mike answered. It was the police again. He put the phone down on the coffee table and put it on speaker.

"Did you call just now to file a missing person's report for Victor Chu?"

"Yes ma'am. That was me." Mike said.

"Well, there's no need to worry, he's been accounted for."

They exchanged confused looks. Kylie mouthed "What?" and threw her hands in her face. Mike leaned down towards the coffee table as if the operator could see him. "What do you mean, ma'am?"

"We can't disclose any information at this time. But he's been accounted for. He's safe. There's nothing to fear."

"Ok...well...ma'am, see, I'm just confused. Is he under arrest? Is he hurt?"

"No, he's not under arrest, and it doesn't seem like he's hurt either. In any case, he should turn up again soon. Don't you worry about it."

Saul threw his hands up and tossed them back into his lap. “The fuck.”

“Anyway,” the operator continued, “You should have more information soon. Just sit tight and wait it out. Have a nice day and thank you for your concerns.” The call ended before any of them could respond.

The next morning, Saul’s phone began to vibrate as he stepped out of the shower. He looked down at the screen. It was Victor.

“I’m at the hospital,” he said. “They just let me out. Can you pick me up?”

“Hospital? You hurt?”

“Nah, b. I’m...I ain’t good, but I’m all right.”

“All right, yo. Sit tight, I’ll be there in a sec.”

Saul had been about to put the phone back down, but Victor kept speaking. “Oh, and come alone if you can.”

“Aight.”

Kylie had spent the entire night crying in their living room, wondering where Victor could be. The three boys tried to leave her at different points in the night, but each time they’d been guilt-tripped into staying. As morning came, her tears had dried, and all the anguish had been replaced with anger. When Saul left the living room to shower, she’d been talking about filing suit. When he came back, she was still on the same topic. “Those fuckers have no right to withhold information like that,” she snapped at Mike, who sat on the floor against the couch with his eyes half open and an equally exhausted Seb resting on his head on Mike’s shoulder. “That’s gotta be unconstitutional or something. Mike, do you think that could be unconstitutional?”

Mike shrugged. "I don't think they're obligated to tell us anything if we're not family." His voice was worn like an old leather sole. "And none of that is in the Constitution."

"Oh, what do you know?" She muttered, her voice boiling with spite. "You know what? I bet I could file suit. They'd probably listen to a white girl if she complained enough. Right Mike? White girl power." She gave a nervous chuckle. Mike flashed her a look from the side of his eye but said nothing. Under normal circumstances, he might have started an argument, but he just leaned his head against Seb's.

They were quiet for a moment. Saul cleared his throat. "Where could he even be?" Kylie whined. "I just don't understand. Do you think there's somebody else?"

"I don't think the police deal in cheating boyfriends unless there's a gun involved." Mike grumbled.

"Or golf clubs." Seb croaked. "Tiger Woods, motherfucker."

Saul knocked on the doorframe leading to the kitchen. "Victor just called me. He's at the hospital. I'm gonna go get him."

Kylie sprang to her feet. "I'm coming with you." She announced.

"He asked me to go alone," Saul said. She gave him a confused look, then her eyes began to water. "Sorry." He stepped out the door before she could say anything.

The city skyline stood like a dark row of tall shadows silhouetted by the soft pinks and oranges rising with the sun over the harbor. As Saul crossed the river, he could see the morning light reflecting off the torrents and scintillating from the skyscraper windows. The whole morning smelled of fresh sea breezes and the chill of a coming winter. It was an empty sort of freshness that awakened him little by little as the air whipped into the Lexus through an open

window. The roads were starting to fill with the morning's traffic, and all around Saul could see signs of the city rousing itself for another day. A jogging couple in lime neon shirts blurred past him, followed by a few walkers enjoying the early morning hours or returning home from work. Down on the water, a single sailboat swept across the path of a rowing team. Across the bridge, the hospital building loomed over the swerving lanes of brownstone townhouses and apartment buildings lining the riverbank.

Saul turned the car towards the alabaster tower of the hospital and parked at the curb of the front loading zone. A few nurses idled by the front door, chatting as they waited for their shift to begin. An Asian American woman pushed an old man who looked like he could be her grandfather out from the lobby. Victor loped out behind them, looking from side to side as if he had not seen Saul's car. He opened the door and clapped his hand on Saul's shoulder as he took a seat.

"What's good with it?" Saul tried to ask without betraying a hint of curiosity, but couldn't be sure if he had succeeded.

Victor grunted and lit a cigarette. The smoke trickled from his lips as he stared past the buildings before them. "Sorry I didn't call you back. I couldn't have my phone till they discharged me."

Now it was Saul's turn not to respond. He grunted back and pulled the car away from the curb, leading it back towards the bridge.

"I had 23 texts, 12 voicemails. 16 and 9 from Kylie." Victor spat out the window. "You believe that shit?"

The morning's traffic suddenly appeared from the side streets, and Saul found himself locked in a cluster of cars struggling to merge into a lane. The blare of car horns burst from the cars and bleared the morning calm. "Yeah, she was really worried about you, man," Saul said.

A puff of smoke swirled from the car. "Whatever."

The honking of the cars made the silence between them seem shorter. Saul chewed the inside of his cheek, wondering what to say as the light turned green. The surrounding cars cleared and he drove on across the bridge. "Yo...but really she's been at ours for like two days. She's been worried sick."

"So?"

"So why you being a little bitch about it? What's wrong?"

Saul felt a leer cut into his neck. Victor sighed and puffed furiously at the burning stub, filling the car with a thick haze of smoke. "Did I tell you Kylie sees a shrink?"

"No."

Victor flicked the cigarette out the window as the car cleared the bridge. "Well she does. Mental Health Services."

"Ok..." Saul's voice wavered as he searched for the significance in Victor's words. "So what?"

"So you know how I have insomnia?"

"Yes."

"And how I get anxious?"

"I mean, you don't show it, but yeah, I know it's there." Saul said, trying to sound like it'd only just occurred to him, and he hadn't seen it in Victor's shoulders, eyes, and neck for years. "But so what?"



“So she thought I should go talk to her shrink. So I went.” He rummaged in the chest pocket of his jacket for a moment and produced a crushed pack of cigarettes. He plucked one from the box with his lips and offered the pack to Saul, who waved his hand in refusal. “And apparently I’m a threat to myself and others.”

Saul gave a harsh, grating laugh and let a smile bloom across his face. There was no way. He looked back at Victor; he wasn’t smiling. “Come on, you can’t be serious? Who you a threat to? You’re too blazed all the time to be a threat.”

His stoicism cracked, but only for a moment. “Well, apparently I’m unstable.”

“What’d you say? Did they point to any one thing?”

“I mean, I just...” he sighed, a thick cloud of smoke riding along his breath. “She was a white woman, the shrink. I told her I get depressed sometimes. She asked me about Kylie. I said...I said I wasn’t sure about our relationship. Coz...well...”

“Coz she’s annoying as fuck sometimes?”

“Well, yeah,” he gave a low chuckle. “And sometimes she just gets on my nerve, and asks me all these questions when I want her to leave me alone. Sometimes it makes me wish she’d disappear.”

Saul waited for the next part of his story, but Victor was silent. He turned to him and cocked an eyebrow. “And?”

“And yeah. She left the room for a long time and turned up with some cops, who said I’d better come with them. Turns out they can hold you in the psych ward for 48 hours without permission.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

“They put you in the fucking psych ward? How?” Saul brought the car onto the highway.

“I told you. They have the right to do that. It’s legal. It’s part of the health insurance thing everybody signs at the start of the year. I only got out a couple hours early coz they needed another room, and I wasn’t a high priority case.” The cigarette butt went sailing out onto the open road.

“Fuck.”

“Tell me about it.”

It was quiet.

Victor coughed and touched Saul’s shoulder. “Hey, is Kylie still at the apartment?”

“Yeah.” Saul looked blankly ahead and scanned the signs. Their exit was soon.

He nodded and tapped his fingers against the window before rolling it back up. He was silent for another minute, watching the trees and suburbs whizz past. “Tell her to leave,” he said suddenly.

It took Saul a moment to understand. “What?” he asked, as if he could have misheard him.

“Tell her to leave,” Victor said. “I don’t wanna see her.”

Saul pointed the car to their exit. They descended from the highway into a wet, wide road that snaked through the maze of duplex homes like a river of asphalt. “So...why do you want me to tell her?” He was sure Victor had to be joking, but he felt a jolt of terror pinch the back of his neck. Could Victor have been in the psych ward for a reason?

Victor rolled the window back down. “I don’t wanna talk to her.”

“Dude.”

“Dude.” Victor turned to Saul, conviction glinting in his eye. “She’s the reason I was there. Tell her to go home. I don’t wanna see her. I don’t wanna talk to her.” Saul’s mouth twitched. The light ahead gaped like a bright red mouth. He stared at Victor, studying the jagged edge of his gaze. He had never seen that look in his eye before, piercing and casual, as if he were paring away Saul’s defenses like the skin of a fruit. Victor tilted his chin. “You hear me?”

“Yeah. Fuck.” The light turned green. He pulled over.

“Just do it for me,” Victor croaked and looked down at his feet.

Saul grunted and reached for his phone. He paused. “You don’t want me to like, break up with her for you, right?”

Victor smirked and met Saul’s eyes again. The sharp edge of his gaze had dulled. “No. Just tell her to go home.”

He called her and pressed the phone to his ear, waiting. After a few seconds, she picked up. “Kylie.”

“Hey, did you pick Victor up? Is he ok?” Saul could hear her bagged eyes and stiff shoulders in her voice. It was strained and soft, like wood sanded into dust.

“Yeah, yeah, he’s fine.” Saul looked down at his feet. It all felt wrong. The impropriety made him want to squirm out of his skin like a nervous lizard. Victor was still watching him.

“Uh, you should head back to yours though. He needs to rest.”

“What?”

Saul cleared his throat. “I said he’s fine. He’s wiped out though. Fast asleep.” He looked back at Victor, who turned and stared ahead at the streets sleek with rain. “You should go home and get some rest.”

“No, it’s fine.” The urgency of her last word was suddenly gone. “I’ll stay.” Saul rolled the window down all the way. She was changing tactics, looking for a way to politely defy him.

Sweat began to bead on the back of his neck and under his chin. Heat flared beneath his skin like the roots of a plant searching for moisture. He clenched a fist and dug his nails into his palm. “Kylie, just go home,” he sighed. The cool air wafted in and felt good against his skin.

“Are you like...telling me to leave?” Kylie asked, as if he’d asked something in a dialect she’d never heard and could not understand.

He curled his fingers at Victor, who slipped a cigarette into his hand. Saul leaned back and lit it. “Yes.” A coil of smoke filled his lungs and cascaded from his nose.

“What the fuck?” She yelled. “Why? No, I—Saul, oh fuck, just let me talk to him.”

“He’s asleep right now. He’s gotta rest.” Saul wove the cigarette through the air as if she could see him, but his fingers shook as each defiant word made his skin burn and the sweat drip. He grit his teeth. “I’ll make sure he calls you when he’s up.”

“I can just wait here.” Saul could hear Kylie pout through the phone.

“You don’t have to do that. We’ve got it.” He said, trying to sound dismissive with the hope that it would hold his shaking voice still.

“He’s my fucking *naamjuh chin-goo*, Saul!” Kylie raised her voice again, her tongue struggled to switch between the sounds. The a’s and o’s were stretched like a slinky pulled into straight wire. The syllables artificial and halting, as if they’d been spoken by a robot.

Saul fought the urge to wince. He clenched his jaw till the teeth crunched against each other like jammed gears in a machine. His cheeks burned scarlet like a fever. “*Namja chingu*,” he corrected her.

“That’s what I said,” she snapped. Saul knew by the conviction ringing in her throat that she believed every word.

“Kylie, don’t be petty. I’m tired. You’re tired. Everyone’s tired.”

“Oh, I’m being petty? Fuck you, Saul.” He could hear her panting like a bull run ragged. She threw the ‘fuck’ like a wild punch provoked from someone who’d never fought before. “I’m staying here. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Oh, you’re gonna stay in my house? Is that right?”

Victor tapped him on the shoulder. “Why’re you fighting her?” he mouthed at him.

“I practically live here!” Kylie’s voice leapt from the speaker as Saul set the phone on his lap and whispered, “I’m not trying to. She won’t fucking leave.” Victor shook his head. A ragged, worn breath escaped him, like the wind flapping a torn sheet of canvas.

“You can’t make me leave.” She said as Saul pressed the phone back to his ear.

“Yes I can.” He found a steadiness in his voice and clung to it, as if he were on a balance beam and had just found his center. “Just go, Kylie. Come on.”

“Oh yeah? What’re you gonna do? Call the cops?” her voice arched and flipped and ended in a skidding sneer. It was an ugly sound, like a lump of ground beef squelched beneath a rain boot. “You know they won’t do shit to me. I’m a white girl.”

Saul’s eyes went wide. “What now?” His fingers shook as he clenched the phone.

“Oh, come on.” Kylie laughed nervously, as if to apologize without saying so. “We—”

The rage frothed from his mouth. “No, seriously Kylie? You think that shit is cute? Shut the fuck up.” He spat out the window and slammed his fist into his lap. “Just get out of my house. I asked you nicely.”

“I was joking.” Her voice shook with uncertainty. “We’ve joked about this before,” she insisted. Saul was silent. “This is a joke we have. Saul, come on.”

“That’s not a joke. Fuckin Christ, I mean.” He pressed his hand to his forehead and shook his head in disbelief. “You know what? Nevermind. Go. Just go.”

“Are you serious?”

Saul dug his teeth into the flesh of his lip. How many times would he have to repeat himself? “Yes, I’m serious. Did I stutter?”

“Fine. You’re an asshole, Saul.”

“Fuck you too.” She hung up first.

“Guess I got a reason to dump her now,” Victor mused. Saul glared at him. He chuckled. Saul took his foot off the brakes and steered the car back into the road. “Stop to get gas or something, man. Gotta give her a minute to GTFO.”

“Why the fuck couldn’t you just do that yourself?” Saul slapped his hand against the steering wheel. “Why make me clean up your shit, huh?”

The smile faded from Victor’s face like a drop of ink in water. He bit his lip and sucked his teeth. “I just can’t talk to her right now, man. Sorry.”

Saul huffed. “Fine. Be a pussy.”

Victor sucked his teeth and pulled on the remains of his cigarette till the flames licked their way to the butt. He stared out at the horizon in silence for a few long moments, holding the smoke in his lungs. At last, he exhaled and flicked the butt out the window. “All right. I will be.”

The Cost of Freedom (Lies My Ba Told Me)

By Mike Trinh

When I ask you why you came here  
the answer is always the same:  
“because the education opportunities  
for you and your sister. because  
there was a war in Vietnam. because—  
because we wanted a better life”

And I am so tired of hearing that lie,  
as if you were sitting in a Saigon bar  
at the age of 13  
with an Old Fashioned in hand,  
fretting about what sort of future  
you could give me  
as bombs fell in some distant place  
you had never seen.

As if you did not wake to  
the sound of guns  
and sprint into the sea  
with death on your heels,  
as if you never sailed  
into the barbed wire mouth  
of a refugee camp  
no lover, no children,  
just mother and siblings,

as if any of that was for *my* sake,  
or for the sake of *better*  
and not just life

Ba, I am tired of hearing  
the lies that you have learned  
to give as answers to everyday questions  
that interrogate your presence, scrutinize  
your body demand explanations for  
your existence—as if  
I am also looking for  
the comfort of knowing that you  
are not a communist, and that really,  
you love America and will make sure  
your children know their place here

Because the truth is that we  
were chased here by bombs, bullets,  
and napalm we are here as  
collateral phantoms, shadow twins  
of bodies called  
“collateral damage” and  
“the cost of freedom”

“The cost of freedom”:  
soil soaked in Agent Orange, ashes  
of an abandoned home, and a  
tongue slit on the edge



of a citizenship form so it can never  
say less than  
two things at once.

## Chapter 6

Silence filled the apartment like a gas as soon as Victor stepped through the door. It was not the quiet silence of wordlessness, but the silence of things left unsaid. As Victor and Saul came up the dampened concrete steps to the creaking, chipped teal patio, Saul saw that Kylie's bike was gone. They stepped into the house to find Mike still slumped against the armrest of the couch, with Seb passed out on his shoulder. His eyes, red from exhaustion, met the scarlet gaze of the incoming boys. Mike tilted his head at Victor. "You good?"

"Always."

Mike grunted. "Kylie was here. She left all pissed."

Victor shrugged. "Whatever."

It was a small room, rounded on one side by bay windows and cinched off by an empty doorframe that led to the bedrooms and kitchen. A moth-eaten, sagging, blue corduroy couch, a tan loveseat streaked in mysterious, unquestioned brown stains, and a lumpy, shapeless, turquoise beanbag, all of which had been salvaged from garage sales and street corners, were crowded around a low coffee table and pointed at an old flatscreen. Although the table and floor were swept clean, the room's decades of occupation by nameless bands of college students had left it with a layer of perennial grime accumulated over the years of spilled drinks, smoke, and body fluids. The entire apartment seemed to be this way, steeped and stained with memories of passing, forgotten recklessness and debauchery. The only aspect of the room that did not seem to be as old as building were the three flags hung along the available walls—one Vietnamese, one South Korean, and one rainbow. The reds of the wide fabrics poured a trembling urgency into the room only slightly muted by the pale blue light of the morning. Besides the Vietnamese flag was

a single burgundy poster, the only one to be found in the space, covered in a mustard yellow font: SIN DOCUMENTAL, SIN MIEDO.

Saul had never appreciated how the room was decorated. The colors bleeding from the walls were much too garish for his tastes. But the flag was the only decoration he had owned, and after he put it up, he'd surrendered the rest of the wall space to Mike, the only one interested in decorating. Seb had thought the idea of a rainbow flag facing the front door was unnecessary. "Anyone who knows me is gonna know what's up anyway. We don't need to be advertising it like that," he'd grumbled. But Mike had insisted. "You gotta mark the space as your own, man." He'd said, which Seb had met with a prolonged eye roll. Victor was next to resist Mike when the immigration flyer was taped up. "You illegal now, Mike?" he'd teased. Of course, Mike had found no humor in the barb. "It's undocumented; humans aren't illegal." Victor had brushed it off, remarked that they didn't know any undocumented folks, but Mike insisted. "You never know man. Gotta make this a safe space, show solidarity right here. Don't tell me you'd be inhospitable to a brother just coz he doesn't have his papers, V."

Of course, that was Michael Trinh. Never inhospitable to anyone for anything, so long as that one was somebody he could call brother or sister. "My brothers and sisters are the oppressed, the subaltern, the exploited, downtrodden, exiled and refugees of the world," he'd crooned one day, eyes crisscrossed with pulsing veins. "Those my fam. People of color. Displaced peoples. The marginalized and invisibilized. The faces at the bottom of the well and the voices drowned out by the sound of guns." He'd lifted one hand with a single finger outstretched and made cartoonish shooting noises. Victor had snapped his fingers and grunted with approval, bobbing his head with pleasure.

And to that, Seb had rolled his eyes. “You’re stoned.” Because that was Sebastian Chen. Always damp and dispassionate, like an old towel left on a sauna floor. Never impressed or moved by anyone’s fire.

Of all his roommates, Saul liked Mike the least. He had wanted to object to the rainbow flag. Something had stirred in him when he first saw it draped by the entrance to the kitchen, something resembling the pale urgency of fear and the smug detachment of disdain, but quite unlike either. There had been no one else home that day when he stepped through the door and discovered the flag, and so he had stood there for a while, testing the strange feeling like a hand groping in the dark. But the shape of his sentiment remained unknown to him, and so he’d said nothing. A nagging thought that it would be difficult to explain to girls had begun to gnaw at the back of his head, and stayed with him into the fall, although he had yet to bring any of these hypothetical girls home in the first place.

Even as he stood in the room with Victor, silence spreading like a ripple, the thought still squirmed in the back of his mind. Mike shook Seb, who woke with a groan and peered up through heavy-lidded eyes. “You’re back,” he said, looking at Victor. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks b.” A flame flickered by Victor’s face as he lit a cigarette. “Go to bed, man. You look tired as hell.”

Seb chuckled and pulled himself to his feet. “Haven’t slept in two days. Your girl kept us all up in the worst way.”

“Sorry ‘bout that.” He shrugged. “Go to sleep, though. I’m home now. She’s gone. No need for anybody to be stayin’ up.”

Seb nodded and yawned, raising his arms over his head and arching his back into a stretch. “By the way. I had to take your bud to Tyler’s, coz Kylie wanted to call the cops after you’d been gone for a while. It’s all back in your room now though.”

“Aight. That’s good. I got some friends in need coming by. Got a backlog like a motherfucker.”

“Make that paper, yo.” Seb said, his voice faltering in a half-attempted, awkward parody of his roommates’ argot. He turned and disappeared down the hall.

“You don’t mind, right?” Victor said to Mike, who shrugged.

“Whatever you gotta do to make rent, man.” He said. “You know I don’t care how you keep the roof over our heads.”

“Thanks. You wanna blaze?”

Mike chuckled and scratched the three-day stubble that had sprouted from his chin. “Maybe tonight. I do that now I’ll just pass out with the blunt in hand or some bullshit.” And with that, he stood, turned and disappeared down the hall after Seb.

Saul threw himself down onto the loveseat and propped his legs over the armrest. Victor grumbled something about coming back soon and followed the others towards the bedrooms. Saul closed his eyes and yawned deeply. He groaned and shuffled against the loveseat cushions, fatigue begging him to keep his eyes shut and passed out. For a moment, a light, conscious near-sleep overtook him. A half-dream churned behind his eyelids, foggy shapes and muted colors swirling in the dark. He was on his back, floating on a torpid, lazy sea of black, bottomless water. A voice drifted past him on the gentle tide. “You can’t touch me. I’m a white girl.”

He woke with a start to Victor shaking his shoulder. He bent over Saul and dangled a blunt as thick as his little finger over him. “Let’s get high.”

## Chapter 7

01/28/1957

*Dear Mother,*

*I hope that this letter finds you in good health. Your Christmas letter has brought me such joy with the news about everyone in the family. Please be sure to give my regards to them all. As much pleasure as I take in hearing of you all, it also fills me with sorrow to know that I will only continue to miss such moments in my time away. But my conviction in the mission of the Lord ever gives me strength to carry on. Nevertheless, I do miss you and the rest of the family with all my heart.*

*I have finally begun to settle into the facilities here in Korea. The buildings unfortunately have no heat, but the wood fires keep us warm. As of this week, the orphanage is now home to some 90 children. Father Waxman has told me that he is in talks with some unusually generous donors in Los Angeles, and that we may be able to expand the orphanage in the near future with the expected funds. My thanks go to God for this blessing, for the need is so great in this corner of His Kingdom. The poverty and suffering here are truly spectacular. I wish that I could show it to you, for trying to describe it is an endeavor I consider to be beyond my powers of description. The war has left a ravaged and desperate nation, with so many lost to hunger, disease, and the enemy's guns. Truly, to look at the teeming mobs of hungry mouths and starved limbs that fill the streets is to look upon the most wretched work that Satan has wrought in this world of sin. It is the children who suffer most. There are herds of them that wander the city on their own, living on garbage and dressed in rags. The Koreans are truly a primitive people, and it is unlikely that they will advance their culture any time soon so that they may all be fed. It is certain that we are incapable of doing it ourselves. But where we cannot sate the physical hunger of starvation, we*

*must feed the want of fulfillment which arises through spiritual deprivation from Christ. Where a whole nation of peoples suffer from deceit by the Devil and the pestilence of famine and poverty, let us provide for the meekest amongst them, the children. With expansions to the orphanage, Father Waxman believes that we might be able to take on 100 more orphans. What blessings the Holy Father brings! I am in awe of the grace and charity of His good works, and only hope that I may be a worthy instrument to facilitate his deliverance of the countless lost souls that populate this land.*

*There is other good news as well. We received a new hire this week from a small parish in the city. She is an orphan herself, and has raised her younger brothers through the war. They are all staying with us as wards, currently. I cannot quite recall her name at the moment, but her arrival is especially serendipitous as we have taken on six new children this week as well. Now, there is an additional hand to tend to these children, and I must say, quite a skilled hand at that. Already, they have fallen in love with her. Perhaps it is because she is the youngest of the few women who work here, the others being old enough to be mothers with grown children or grandmothers in their own right. Or perhaps it is because her youth has blessed her with a great beauty. In any case, her presence here has brought me and the children great happiness.*

*I would like to use some ink here to respond to your question about the biological identity of the Koreans. In my last letter, I estimated that it was likely that they were a crossbreed resulting from the intermingling of the Chinese, Japanese, and possibly other Oriental or Mongolian peoples. I have consulted with some colleagues in the area, and they have assured me that the Korean is much closer to the Japanese than the Chinese, though their cultures represent an almost perfect hybrid of the two civilizations. However, it has become apparent to me from a number of sources that such talk is often not tolerated by the militant nationalists that may be*

*found in this country, who consider the suggestion to be an insult to their dignity. Nevertheless, several sources, including native ones, have assured me that this is no more than the proud delusions of a misguided people unenlightened to the ways of science, religion, or rationalism. But, lo, this is merely a sign of the darkness the Devil has spread throughout the world. Indeed, it is clear to me that he remains at work in this country every day. There are whispers of continuing Communist and anarchist activities. Even in comparison to the heathenness of the Koreans' Buddhism and Confucianism, I would name the atheistic influence of Marx as the greatest threat to God's Kingdom here in Korea. For it has become clear to me in these few weeks that the Koreans are a people lost in the confusing maze of our modern world, and that in their lostness, they are ever more vulnerable to the machinations of Satan, who preys on their feeble minds and experience. It is only through the light of God that they may find salvation, and we as missionaries must act as the bearers of that light and banish the darkness that consumes the souls of these pitiful people.*

*I must go now. I have spent enough of this candle. Father Waxman expects that we may eventually be able to install electric lights. It would be a welcome change.*

*Happy New Year.*

*With love, your son,*

*Aaron*



## Fragment

That night, Insoo stepped into the younger boys' room and crept between the beds till she reached Seunyong's. He woke quietly when she shook him, eyes opening in the darkness at the moment her fingers touched his skin. She smiled and pressed a finger to her lips, like Pastor Jorgensen did to quiet the children. Flapping her hand, she beckoned for him to follow her, and the two of them stepped out into the cold night. "Come with me," she said with a smile, taking his hand and leading him back into her room.

Once they were inside, she lit the oil lamp by her bed to show the dress that Reverend Campbell had confiscated from him that morning. Seunyong's hands flew to his mouth, and a thin squeal of surprise leaked through his fingers. He snatched it from her bed and pressed it against his chest, twirling from side to side to let the fabric sachet around his knees. "Thank you," he whispered, and slid the dress over his pajamas. His shoulders turned in to his chest as he folded his hands against his groin and giggled, bent knees trembling against each other.

"You look like Marilyn Monroe," Insoo said with a smile.

Seunyong jumped up and down, landing on his toes to dampen the thumping of his feet. He turned, placing one leg out in a deliberate, extended step, palms clamped on his hips and eyelids batting. His thin torso curved away from her as he moved about the room in an arch. Suddenly, his head whipped around, and he gazed at Insoo with his head bowed, a smoky look in his eye. "Some Like It Hot," he said, his tongue delicately enunciating the foreign sounds. Waving his right hand, he pantomimed a fan and walked towards her, planting his feet one in front of the other so his hips swayed from side to side with each step. Insoo gave a weak smile. He stopped in front of her and turned back, as if he were modeling down a runway, before spinning into a pirouette and collapsing backwards towards her. By sheer luck, she caught him

without collapsing under their combined weight. Seunyoung's eyes opened with surprise, then he covered his mouth and batted his eyelashes at her. "Oh, my hero," he crooned.

Insoo helped him back to his feet. Seunyoung spun around once again, looking all around the small room and then back at her. "Wait just a second," he said, and bolted out the door before Insoo could stop him. She ran into the courtyard after him and watched a flash of bright pink slip into the boys' residence. A panic spread through her as she imagined Pastor Jorgensen, or one of the boys, waking up to find him in the dress again. She sprinted across the courtyard, and was about to fly into the building after Seunyoung when he reappeared at the doorway with a pair of slacks and a white collared shirt. "Your turn," he said with a grin, and took her by the hand back towards her room.

"Never do that again," she hissed when they returned to her room. "It will be disastrous if they catch you again, for both of us."

Seunyoung nodded and offered a weak grunt. He was old enough to understand these things. "It slipped my mind," he said with haste. "Sorry, I won't do it again." Insoo rubbed his shoulders and smiled. "Put it on! It's your turn now." He beamed.

Somehow, Seunyoung had managed to guess her size. This was not too surprising to Insoo—she was not much taller than most of the boys, and some of them had already outgrown her. Once she had fitted herself into the slacks and shirt, Seunyoung herded her towards the mirror. With one hand, he scooped her long hair into his fist and carefully shaped it into a bun on top of her head, tying it in place with a limp cord of twine. "You look like a time traveler," he giggled.

Insoo touched the collar beneath her neck, feeling the rough, starched cloth between her fingers. She pushed her shoulders back and straightened her spine. The pads of the shirt made

near-perfect right angles of her shoulder blades. She imagined her breasts flattening into her chest, her jaw sliding upwards, the bulge of her throat engorging into a visible bulb. Something felt right about this, as if she had been born to wear these clothes. Before she could finish the thought, Seunyoung turned her to face him and placed her right hand on his waist as his left settled on her squared shoulder. “Can I have this dance, monsieur?” Their free fingers wove together into a shared fist.

They stepped about the room, Insoo leading her partner in a mock waltz around the limited floor space. She had never learned to dance, but she improvised her way into a steady pattern. The partners rose and fell to the beat of their dance. Seunyoung lifted her arm and coiled his body into a turn, the edge of his dress swirling against Insoo’s knees. “I didn’t know you could waltz.”

“I can’t,” she laughed. “This is all made up.”

He smiled. “Maybe one day, we can fly to Paris, and learn to dance together.” He rolled his head back and gave a hearty laugh. “Oh, Paris. We can dance by the Seine and drink coffee with biscuits. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if I wore a dress. Do you think they would?”

“I don’t know. Is there anywhere it might be all right?”

He stopped, the smile fading from his face, and stepped back from her. Then, as quickly as it had gone, the smile returned, stretching into a grin. “I like to think so,” Seunyoung bragged, his hand on his hip again. “Maybe, somewhere, there is a country where the women wear dresses and the men wear dresses.”

“Somewhere, maybe.” But Insoo knew that there was no such place. There couldn’t possibly be.

He took her hand in his again and stepped around the room with her. Insoo watched her feet step between Seunyong's and part from them again. She did not know what made her so certain of what lay across the sea. She had never been outside of Korea before. Here, in Mokpo, she was the farthest from home that she had ever been. There was no reason to believe what she did.

Seunyong lifted her arm and turned into her. She caught him at the ribcage and pushed him back. He coiled outwards, twirling like a seed caught in the wind. Maybe Seunyong was right. Maybe somewhere, far away, was a place that they could be. But she knew it could not be Paris. It would have to be somewhere even farther, someplace even more alien and unknown. Insoo could not say where that might be, but she knew she would have to travel untold miles to reach it.

The boy returned to his original stance and planted his feet into the floor. "It's getting late, *noona*." They turned to the clock at the same time. Insoo gasped, the sun would be rising soon. How had they stayed up so long without realizing? "I should get back," he said. Insoo nodded. They slipped off their costumes and passed them to each other. Seungyong hurried towards the door and stopped, turning back to Insoo. "*Noona*," he started, "should I call you *hyeong*?"

Insoo smiled. A warmth that she had never known spread through her chest like a vine flowering through her ventricles. "You should be calling me *opba*, *agashi*," she laughed.

Seunyong grinned and curtsied. "Yes, *opba*," he said, and took off into the night.

From then on, Insoo stole Seunyong from the boys' dormitory once a week. For a time, they spent the whole night dancing, slowly perfecting their invented waltz. But they quickly tired of their fake waltz, and started inventing other dances they had only heard of. Seunyong would

twirl throughout the room in unpolished pirouettes and clumsy jumps, insisting it was the Charleston. Insoo built the turns into a step that left both of them dizzy and a little nauseated in just a few minutes, something real tango dancers must have taken years of practice to overcome. In time, their play evolved to new iterations of playing house. Seunyoung would bring flowers and an empty box to Insoo and insist she play the suitor competing for his virgin affections. Every week, the boy had a new scenario for them to act out in the plain slacks and shirt and pink dress with frills. They practiced raising children, going on a date down the Seine, and a Western marriage proposal. The tender silence of night became a new world, a fresh stage upon which they could imagine other lives and new possibilities. Their adventures took place in distant lands, in unknown times of uninvented customs. This was a shared world of dreams, placed in a waking dream they lived together each night away from judgmental eyes.

But it was not long before Insoo began to feel that her life in daytime was the dream, and the nights she shared with Seunyoung the only true reality. As they danced, sang, and spoke breath into new lives, she could feel the air ebbing from the one she lived on the day to day. She found herself in everyday situations, on the courtyard supervising the children, in the pastor's office, and in the city market, wishing she could be in her slacks and collared shirt. Sometimes, Insoo closed her eyes and imagined the weight of the collar against her shoulders and neck, seeking the comfort and assurance it brought her in places she could never be without it. The first time Insoo had felt this happening she thought she might have gone crazy. But over time, real life began to seem rehearsed, scripted, and produced on a high budget and unfair labor contracts. It became easier and easier to see herself in the clothes she desired, in a body she could not have, in a world that did not exist. After all, everything else was merely imagined.

It happened once on a supply run she made with Byun *ajima*. They had risen with the sun and set out down the dirt path leading to the bus station as the children gathered in the kitchens for breakfast. It was spring, and the solitary dirt path lay in the center of a great field of cosmos blooms. In the years she spent at the orphanage, Insoo had never passed by the fields with Byun *ajima* and not heard her mention them. Even in winter, she would stare out into the blank expanse of blinding white and sigh for the return of the cosmos flowers. They'd been particularly beautiful that morning, fiery petals of amber and fuchsia resplendent with specks of morning dew sparkling like daytime stars. Byun *ajima* had been especially enraptured by them, or so it seemed from the threads of speech Insoo had paid enough attention to to comprehend.

They sat and waited for the bus. The crisp morning air energized both the women. Insoo had been up till just a couple of hours before, cross-dressing with Seunyong. Sleep had hardened between her eyelids, and her eyes ached with exhaustion, forcing her to squint into the bright morning with its garish colors. But their stillness, and the air, seemed to relieve the pain, and made the crusted mucus crumble away in grains of yellowed dust from her face. Byun *ajima* said the morning soothed her bones. "Truly, God's gifts are in the everyday," she croaked, her voice still settling into its usual alto. Insoo had not known what to say, so she grunted in agreement. Then they were silent until the bus came and carried them into town.

The bus trundled along the uneven dirt road, its shifting gears and tired engine clicking and coughing along the path. Insoo stood over Byun *ajima*, her fingers wrapped tight around the steel rail. They passed over the first half of the ride in comfortable, routine silence. Byun *ajima* was always quiet on their bus rides, as she usually was in crowds. Insoo knew she was from the north, and that she had grown up in a remote mountain village where she grew accustomed to not seeing more than a few dozen people for months, if not years.



## Fragment

Year: 1967

Aaron was buried in the church graveyard the next Sunday. By then, the rains had passed and the dampness they brought had dried up, and the earth lay dry and crumbly beneath a broad blue sky and the broad, hot sun once more. Reverend Knox dedicated that Sunday's service to the memory of the former Reverend Campbell, and invited the congregation to join him in burying their old pastor that afternoon. He emphasized the duty of believers to reserve judgment for the Lord as a privilege that belonged only to Him, the Almighty and Ever-Beneficent. While it was certainly true that Reverend Campbell had strayed from the path of righteousness, as Christians, they were all called to forgive the transgressors amongst them, just as Christ had forgiven them for their sins.

All the while, Insoo studied the grain of the wooden pew in front of her. The closed casket containing her husband was a blurred mass at the edge of her vision. She was not surprised when the crowd remained to attend Aaron's funeral, nor by the vacant stares of the throng as they struggled to stand through the dull, thoughtless elegy that accompanied her husband in his descent to the grave. She was well aware that very few of the funeral attendees were there to pay their respects—most were certainly only attending to avoid the embarrassment of being seen leaving after the sermon. Not even Reverend Knox had wanted Aaron to be buried at the church. She knew all his words on forgiveness, grace, and reserving judgment were only to silence any would-be critics. He had only acquiesced to her demands when she produced Aaron's contract and threatened to take the matter of his burial rights to the Presbytery.

The crowd began to disperse the moment Reverend Knox finished his blessing of the body. Insoo stood and gazed down at the casket as dirt rained down upon it from the



gravediggers' shovels. The townspeople shuffled about like pale wraiths wrapped in dark cloth. Beside her, Evelyn sobbed loudly and buried her face in her handkerchief. Somewhere, a bird spilled its cheery song on the wind. The air was alive with the scent of dew-spattered grass. Insoo glanced at Evelyn's shaking shoulders and deliberated whether or not to comfort her for a moment. Knowing that her mother-in-law would only push her away and find a way to blame her once again for Aaron's death, she kept her hands folded in a triangle beneath her navel. Though the vague chill of a dying winter still remained, Insoo's hands were slick with a thin film of sweat.

Reverend Knox waited until the last patch of dirt had been thrown over the grave to approach the two remaining women. He placed one hand gently on Evelyn's arm and offered a solemn, tight-lipped expression. After a moment, the old woman looked up at the man through her watery, cerulean eyes and bawled. Reverend Knox shifted his arm to her back and patted her gently. "There, there," he said. "I cannot begin to imagine the agony you are experiencing, Mrs. Campbell, but rest assured, your son's soul rests in Heaven with the Lord." Insoo bit her lip as her mother-in-law nodded through her tears and coughed. "He is in a better place now, and smiling down on you from up above."

Evelyn lifted her head and wiped the tears away with her handkerchief. "Oh, Father." Her voice was strained and warped from tears like rusted metal. "I..." she looked as if she were in combat with her own tongue. The thin-lipped, crinkled mouth lay open with a sound anxious to be spoken quivering inside. But the words never broke from her lips. She tilted her head of white hair towards the ground and muttered, "Thank you, Reverend."

Insoo stepped to the old woman and placed her hand on the crook of her elbow. "Why don't you go to the car? It's about time to get home." Evelyn headed her words without

complaint and began to walk slowly towards the church parking lot, her eyes fixed on the distant horizon. As her mother-in-law walked away, Insoo turned back to Reverend Knox. The austere compassion and grief were gone from his face like clouds swept away on a breeze. He looked Insoo in the eye, then glanced up and down her frame. A chill broke from her neck and spilled down her limbs. There was something eerily familiar in his look. Something like the looks she had known many years before from beneath the shadow of US Army helmets. Something like the looks she had spent so long trying to forget. She winced as she dug her nails into her wrist to keep from running.

Without a word, Reverend Knox walked back towards the church and disappeared into the immaculately painted building, as white and unblemished as the grocery store eggs.

Evelyn spent the remainder of the day sitting on the porch with her hands in her lap. She had sobbed the entire way home from the church and spent an additional hour weeping alone in her room. Once Insoo realized that the woman would not calm down, she had decided to let her be. She knew that she had no power, not in actions, words, or gestures, to alter Evelyn's will. Even in her rapidly advancing age, her mother-in-law's stubbornness showed no signs of abating.

A few visitors stopped by to express their condolences to Evelyn, who sat with her guests on the porch intermittently reminiscing and sobbing. Only those closest to Aaron, and the few remaining supporters and empathizers he had left amongst the congregation, bothered to stop by. Elder Ball, Joseph Sisti, Richard Kearny and his mother, and the Sullivan family all came to the house on Shepherd's Drive at varying intervals throughout the day to pay their respects. None of them spoke to Insoo or offered any other acknowledgment of her presence. Still, Insoo made sure

to leave a pitcher of lemonade with freshly cut fruit on the porch table after the arrival of each guest.

After watching the visitors avoid eye contact with her, Insoo returned to the task of packing away Aaron's things. Some of his possessions would remain in the house as keepsakes, and some of it given away to charities. The rest of it, including the house, would come under Aaron's estate and be distributed amongst the living relatives soon. A wave of nausea rocked her body at the idea of speaking to Jane and Phil again. The bold curve of Jane's red lip flickered in her mind like a film strip caught in a projector.

At sunset, Haemin came to the house alone. Insoo saw her from the kitchen window and stepped out to greet her on the porch. Evelyn tensed in her chair and gave the woman a wary look, as if Haemin might lunge for her at any moment. With her mother-in-law seated, Insoo kept her guest standing on the porch stairs. Haemin pretended not to notice Evelyn's scrutinizing looks and apologized for not being at the funeral that morning. "Andrew and Mary have stomach flu," she explained. Insoo gathered that this was likely only half the truth, as she could not recall seeing Dennis that morning either. All the same, she smiled and brushed away the apology.

Evelyn stood and quietly retreated back into the house as the two women conversed in Korean. With the porch cleared, Insoo offered Haemin a seat and told her to wait a moment as she went back inside. As she weaved towards the kitchen, she heard Evelyn call after her "Don't let that woman into this house! I don't trust her," she snapped. Insoo replied with a neutral "yes", struggling not to convey her irritation. The lemonade that she had made had all been drunken by the guests from before. She took the pitcher and filled it with water and carried it out to the porch.

“Did you eat?” Haemin asked as Insoo set the pitcher down. She sighed and smoothed out the wrinkles of her apron before taking a seat. No, she said, she had not. There had been too many things to tend to that day. “That’s no good,” Haemin muttered. “You should eat soon.”

She brought her hand up to her brow and looked away from Insoo toward the sunset. Insoo noticed a chain of dark splotches along Haemin’s wrist. “Did you eat?” she asked after a pause.

Haemin cleared her throat and lowered the hand back into her lap. “Yes. I ate,” she said with a weak smile.

Insoo grunted and placed her hand in Haemin’s lap, folding it around the other woman’s thin fingers. A group of oys came running up the street, kicking a ball and screaming. One of them stopped and stared at the two women on the porch for a moment before taking off after his friends. Insoo swallowed, and asked in English. “How do you do?”

Haemin sighed and wrapped her thumb around Insoo’s palm. “I suppose could be better.” Insoo grunted. “How are you?” Haemin asked. “I am here because I worry about you, my dear.” The words were rushed and unrehearsed, memorized phrases and sounds from tapes played on repeat and other people’s tirades. Insoo thought of how Aaron would stay up with her, forcing her to repeat the words he spoke to her again and again until she could say the words in a way that satisfied him. Exhaustion flooded her limbs and clung under her eyes as she recalled how the moon and stars sojourned across the sky and the inky blue of night faded to pale violet as she repeated the words till her lips cracked from stress and her tongue became dry and sluggish in her mouth. Aaron had always insisted he had done it because he loved her. He would toss his big arms through the air and huff about the sleep he was losing and everything he had risked. She thought about the phrase she had just said. “How do you do?” How the words turned so easily and completely in her mouth. And this was because he had loved her. Or so he said.

Insoo tightened her grip on Haemin's hand and forced a tight-lipped smile. "You should not be worried. Geokjeong hajimasehyo."

Haemin nodded. "All right," she said, returning to Korean. "It's only because you are suffering. That's all."

Insoo could not help but laugh a little. Haemin gave her a confused look. "Don't we all suffer?" she asked.

"Some more than others."

"*Geul'ssae.*" That's right.

"I know you had your issues, but Reverend Campbell was a good man. Wouldn't you say? He didn't drink. He didn't gamble." Haemin took her other hand and placed it over the bruised wrist Insoo held. "There were a few times he beat you, yes. But it was not too frequent, hm? And not without merit. He was a kind man."

A dull pain burned up into Insoo's throat from her chest. "*Uhnni,*" she choked. "I don't think he was."

Haemin scoffed and shook her head. "What was missing?"

Insoo loosened her grip on Haemin's hand and brought her hands into her lap. Her shoulders slumped and she leaned back in the porch seat. The expanse of square lawns and identical houses that lay ahead blurred to watercolor smudges of green, white, orange, and grey. She coughed. "I wanted love." And then, in English. "Happiness."

"Ha! Happiness." Haemin shook her head. "You've spent too much time listening to *migukin'deul.* Everyone here is obsessed with 'happiness'," she said, reverting to Korean. "It's all they want out of life. It's the only thing in the world worth anything to them."

The advertisement with the woman arose in her mind, her rosy cheeks and perfectly curled locks framing a flawless smile. The stylized wafts of scent rising up from a tray filled with freshly-baked, perfectly shaped cookies. White block letters at a slant: *With a new electric oven, what reason would she have not to smile?* Reverend Marshall's words rang in her ears. *A quiet wife makes a happy life.* Insoo looked up at the sky. The sun was sinking fast below the horizon, with only a sliver of the orb left burning in the sky. It bled red and orange light into the clouds like an amputated limb on cloth bandages. Insoo bit her lip and continued to stare as a front of dusty blue advanced on the corona of scarlet, pushing the sunlight into an ever-diminishing scrap of the sky. "What do you want out of life?"

"You know I'm not someone to talk about how much I've suffered. But I have suffered. The Japanese took my father from me. My mother and siblings died in the war. I married a man at 14. He lost his legs a year later and couldn't work. Couldn't do a thing. I worked in a camptown when I was 16 to keep my daughter and husband fed. I don't need to elaborate on what I did. You already know. My child died of pneumonia the year the war ended." Haemin looked into Insoo's eyes throughout. Insoo struggled not to return her gaze. Shame dropped like a stone through her stomach and drowned in rage. She wanted to explode. She wanted to throw her limbs out to every corner of the world and shake it with her screams. This was not too different from her own life. She had lost, too. She was also alone. She had been running and struggling her whole life. But it all sank in the pool of her tongue, broke into pieces and drifted away like bits of a corpse left in water.

"Insoo," Haemin said after a pause. "I have been married three times. I don't know how many people I have seen die. I do not want to die. I want to live. I want to survive. I don't care about happiness and I don't care about love. I want to survive and I need a man who will help me

to do that. I don't care if he loves me. I don't care if he makes me unhappy. I care that he keeps me fed and sheltered. My first husband couldn't do that, so I left him. The second couldn't either, so I left him too. This one, Dennis. He drinks. He hits me. He hits our children. He sweats in his sleep and his body reeks. He is ugly, and idiotic, and mean, but it doesn't matter. I am alive. I am alive, and that is all that matters. I can't eat love. I can't live in a house made of 'happy'."

Insoo sat shaking silently. Heat rushed up her neck to her cheeks. The last piece of the sun had disappeared in a wink of light, and the stars had begun to poke through the rapidly darkening sky. She struggled to speak but could find no words, so they simply sat together, Haemin looking away as Insoo glared at the side of her neck. At last, Haemin parted her lips and clucked her tongue. "You have no reason to be so selfish," she snapped. "You have no reason to be so ungrateful. With all that God has blessed you with you have no reason to complain about 'happiness'. You should be grateful to God and grateful to your husband for what you have. This is not a 'happy' world, Do not ask of the world what it cannot offer of you." She stood up suddenly and stepped away from Insoo. "It's time for me to go home. Dennis will be angry that I stayed out after dark, if he is awake. He will scream and maybe he will hurt me. But it doesn't matter. I am alive. I am here."

Without another word, she turned and walked away from the house. Insoo watched her disappear into the encroaching night, and wondered why she came, and why she stayed so long.

A thumping from the attic roused Insoo from the bed. She had not been sleeping. She had stayed awake on her back after feeding Evelyn, trying to erase Haemin's words from her head. They stained her thoughts like red wine, glaring and permanent. She thought of Haemin's story

and wrestled her fury, compassion, and shame at once. They sloshed and burned inside her, mixed together in an angry brew that gnawed a hole in her stomach. A hole the size of Sungsoo's name. A hole that felt like Kyungsoo's hands. A hole that sizzled with Halmae's voice and reeked of Youngsoo's tears. A hole with no face like the no-face of her mother and father.

Gratitude was a poorly timed joke, and the right time never. The very idea made her vision blur with rage. To be grateful for a fate somewhat better than death but still so removed from living. To be grateful for lies. To be grateful for the terror of the everyday. A sour taste filled her mouth. She sat up and tussled her hair into a mess of woven strands.

When she heard the sound she stepped out into the hall and called after Evelyn. A faint voice filtered down from the attic. Insoo made her way to the staircase and followed the sound of her mother-in-law's calls and shuffles. The pleasant smell of old, damp wood and stale mothballs came over her in a wave as she ascended into the attic. Evelyn was crawling about on the dust-coated floor between stacks of boxes and discarded furniture. Overhead, a solitary, uncovered bulb flickered and buzzed like a lazy bug. "I was just arranging a few things," Evelyn said, coming to her feet. "Couldn't sleep."

Insoo nodded and offered to help. Evelyn directed her to a stack of cardboard boxes by her side and asked for help laying them out on the floor. Insoo split the towering stack into two sets and brought them to the floor, where Evelyn laid each one side by side with the other. When she was done, Insoo knelt beside her mother-in-law and watched as she opened them one by one.

Each box seemed to open a window into other lives. One was filled with a ream of documents decorated with hasty signatures that Evelyn quickly rifled through and then set aside. Another with nothing but old pipes and a rusty shaving kit. "My father's," Evelyn explained. "I inherited from my mother. She couldn't bear the thought of throwing them away when my father



passed.” The old woman sniffled and rubbed her eyes. “I think I was just too busy to think of what to do with them. Jane was just a baby then, and that was the same year Aaron broke his arm. There was so much happening at the time. I must have just squirreled them away up here.”

“My father was a kind man,” Evelyn continued. She opened up another box full of baby clothes and passed a hand over an egg-shell colored tunic. “He was a barber. I used to sit in the waiting areas some days after school and watch him cut men’s hair and shave their beards. I was always impressed by how steady his hands were. It made me feel safe when he held my hand on the way home afterwards.” Evelyn paused and stared into space, lost in a memory. “There were a lot of men who served in Cuba and the Philippines from my town. My father too. They would talk about their friends from the war and what everyone was up to, and try and figure out if there would ever be a war with the Kaiser like some folks would say. That was a long time ago.”

Insoo grunted and watched as her mother-in-law pinched the ends of the tunic and lifted it up into the air. Her hands trembled slightly as she studied the grain of the cotton under the struggling light overhead. “And this,” Evelyn said. “Aaron wore this in his first year. Jane too.” She pressed the garment to her chest and smiled at Insoo. “I don’t think I ever told you that. Back in my day, there weren’t separate garments for boys and girls when they were infants. We used to just make all the boys wear dresses, so you couldn’t really tell if the boys were boys at all!” A husky chuckle escaped her throat as she brought the dress back into her lap. “Doesn’t that seem silly now? I’m glad it isn’t done any longer. It’s a little primitive if you think about it.”

Insoo nodded and gave an empty grunt. Evelyn smiled weakly, as if she were disappointed with Insoo’s reaction. “I suppose that’s just civilization. We make more and more progress to do what’s right with time.”

She placed the garment back into the box and sat quietly. Insoo looked down at the dress and thought about Seunyoung. The fringe of his dress twirling in the air swept over her vision. She remembered the feeling of the collar resting on her clavicle. A dull pain pressed her chest from within. She found herself longing for that feeling again, of starched cotton wrapped around her wrist and neck. Of pleated pants that rested their slight weight against her ankles and hugged her waist. The pain dug its way deeper into her flesh like a root through soil and sprouted in all directions. Something she could not name filled her limbs and throat. Tears began to well in her eyes. Quickly, she reached into herself and tore the root from within her. She had done this countless times, erased these thoughts from her head and prevented them from reemerging without a moment's hesitation. But this time, another kind of ache followed, as if she had torn something else from her being beside her sin.

Insoo swallowed and wondered if Seunyoung had ever made it to Paris, or if that dream had stayed with him. She passed a hand over the fabric of the dress at the same spot that Evelyn had touched. Seunyoung could be anywhere now, doing anything. Maybe he was even a pastor. Insoo wondered what he would think if he knew that Campbell *moksa* himself had worn a dress once.

Evelyn opened another box with a small stack of aged journals inside. She placed them in her lap and smiled. They were diaries from her girlhood, she explained. Insoo nodded and glanced back at the box. A thin pack of photographs lay in the space where the journals had been. As Evelyn read the old journals to herself in silence, Insoo took the photographs in her hand and spread them out like cards.

There were three of them together. The first, a photo of a teenaged Evelyn standing in a field by a young man in a black cap and gown. The next, a much younger Evelyn standing in

front of an older, broad-shouldered man. The two of them smiled at the camera, the man with his hands on the girl's shoulders. Evelyn was dressed in a white dress replete with ruffled silk and ribbons that seemed to match the one clipped into her hair. Insoo studied his face carefully and realized it was Evelyn's father. His face younger and firmer than the photograph of him in his old age that sat in the living room. She glanced back at her mother-in-law, who was busy reading her diaries with a smile on her face.

The last photo seemed entirely mundane to her at first, almost pointless. A large crowd looked toward the camera, smiling. There were families grouped together alongside a knot of young men, all dressed in fine formal wear. Insoo wondered if this had been from a church outing of some sort, and then noticed two figures that seemed to be levitating over the crowd, as if they were standing on the shoulders of those beneath them. She squinted and tilted the photo into the light. Two barely-discernable grey lines ran up from the figures' necks into the overhanging branches of a tree. Insoo looked back at the figures' bodies. Both were Black, one lanky with square shoulders and hips that framed a flat torso. The other's body was curved at certain points, and Insoo could see the remains of torn, ruined skirts on the woman's legs. She looked back at the crowd, laughing and beaming back at her, their teeth nearly indistinguishable from their pale faces.

Insoo touched Evelyn's knee and passed the photos to her. "Is there a story with these?"

Evelyn shuffled the photographs in her hands. A fond smile creased her face, followed by a nostalgic sort of chuckle. "This was on my brother's graduation day." She waved the picture of herself with the young man in a cap and gown in front of her daughter-in-law. "Oh, he looks so handsome. I really ought to call him soon. I remember it was the day he proposed to Pearl as well."

She set the picture aside nonchalantly and lifted the next one with her father into the light. “This was taken on my 9<sup>th</sup> birthday. My father had just bought the camera after saving up and wanted to take a picture of me. I was just so excited. I had never had my picture taken then. I know that must seem silly now,” Evelyn mused. “But back then it was much rarer than today. I suppose you must have had a similar feeling when someone first took a picture of you, right Insoo? I don’t imagine there were many cameras in your household when you were growing up in Korea.”

Evelyn’s chuckle returned, sounding just the same as it had for the last few minutes. As if she had recorded herself laughing and decided to use it for every occasion that evening. It echoed through Insoo’s body as she stared through the photograph, anxious to hear about the one that remained. She gave a neutral grunt in response to Evelyn and shrugged.

“And this one. Oh, I forgot this even happened.” The chuckle rattled forth again. Insoo trembled in a way she could not explain, as if the sound of her mother-in-law’s laugh were echoing in her flesh. “And it was such an affair, too! Isn’t it funny how sometimes things that seemed like a big deal at the time turn out to be the things you forget the easiest? Oh!” She laughed again and shook her head, then moved to place the photograph beside the other two.

An urge to let the story pass weighed on her throat, but her curiosity bested her caution. “What happened?” Insoo asked.

Her mother-in-law’s wrist turned suddenly, setting the photograph on the floor on its face. “Well,” Evelyn started, smacking her lips. “I don’t quite remember all the details. These two Coloreds, they were mother and son, I think. Or maybe not, but they were related somehow. I think the girl was his mother. Anyway, the boy was wanted by the sheriff for something. I don’t quite remember what, but in any case, the sheriff paid these two a visit where they lived, and

then the girl shot the sheriff. Which was just terrible. Tragic, really. He was such a kind man. Everyone in the town loved him.”

“After that, they managed to catch these two and take them to jail. But of course, people were very upset about what had happened, and some of them were saying that they might not be convicted. At least, that’s what I think happened. I was only 10 or 11 at the time. But then what happened is that a group of men got together and said that they weren’t going to stand for it. That these people were criminals and it was wrong for them to get away with what they did. Everyone in the town was talking about it the day it happened. We were all excited. My father made sure we were all dressed in our Sunday clothes before he joined the other men and raided the jail.”

“I remember that night we all gathered at the Thompsons’. They had a big, strong oak tree that Mr. Thompson said would be good for the hanging. I wore the same dress that I did on my birthday. See,” she flipped the photo over to reveal its face and pointed at a young girl at the front of the crowd. “Oh, it was such a spectacle! It was better than going to the circus. We had a blast. I remember after we took this photo, Mary Thompson and I played a game of tag around the tree with some of the other girls. And Mary tagged the boy and shouted ‘You’re it!’ to it, and oh,” Evelyn burst into a laugh and rocked back and forth on her hip, gesturing wildly with the picture in her hand. “It was just so funny. Of course, her mother was quite upset, that, you know, she’d touched him. I think she made her go wash after that. But it was such a good joke.”

Insoo sat still on the floor and said nothing. The smile slowly disappeared from Evelyn’s face. She made a gruff sound as she cleared her throat and put the photographs back into the box. “I guess it’s not a story that many people would find so entertaining these days, what with all this rabble and sedition happening everywhere.” Insoo grunted and nodded, unsure of what to say. The two women sat in silence for a moment. “To be honest, though, Insoo,” her mother-in-law

said. "I just don't care what they think. I'm too old!" She burst into a forced, high-pitched laugh. Insoo chuckled nervously, wishing she hadn't asked. "In any case, it wasn't like they didn't deserve it. They broke the law." Her tone deepened to a serious pitch. "*Some* people these days might say that it was wrong of the folks in my town to do what they did, but I just can't see why that really matters. That's not what it means to me. It was a fun day. A good memory, really. That's got to count for something, right?"

Insoo nodded and placed the tops back on the boxes. "It's late, mother," she said after a moment. "Why don't you go to sleep? There's still so much that we have to take care of tomorrow."

Evelyn rose to her feet and brushed the dust from her night gown, then rubbed her hands of any debris that remained. "I suppose you're right, Insoo. Thank you for spending time with me." She turned and moved back towards the stairs, and then stopped. "Insoo." Her voice was softer now, reshaped for other means. "I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry for the things I said last week. I was so upset and I said some things I didn't mean. You know that, don't you, dear? I don't really blame you for what happened to Aaron."

Insoo stared at the stacks of boxes that encircled her. She did not know whether to believe what Evelyn was saying, but she knew fighting over it would be pointless. "Yes," she finally said without turning to face her mother-in-law. "I understand. You were just upset."

"Quite upset," Evelyn repeated. "And that's not to say that I don't think Aaron made some hasty decisions in his life. I still really do wish that he had thought more about marrying you. I think it could have meant a better life for you both. But I know what happened to Aaron wasn't all your fault."

The day after the police called to say that his body had been found, Insoo drove to the morgue with Evelyn in the passenger seat to identify and reclaim the body. It was raining that day, just as it had been the night Aaron stormed out the front door, rose stems and full buds crushed in his fists. A tarp of bulging grey clouds spread across the sky to the edges of the horizon. Few people had bothered to take the time to remove the decorations strewn about their lawns and houses. Insoo said nothing as she drove to the hospital. All around her, the hills loomed in the dimness like distant things unknown. Placid, ceramic faces of Nativity scenes blurred past through the haze. Evelyn sat staring out to the hills, her dry handkerchief folded in her lap. The tears rolled slowly down her face, as if they had realized they had the rest of her life to flow. Every now and then, the slightest of sounds escaped her throat: a whimper, a sharp intake of breath, a forced cough, but she was otherwise silent.