



The anthology of 2018 GKL Translation Award

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Overall Comments

I found reading these seven piece a fascinating and invigorating experience and was delighted to do it. Some of the stories were touching, and sad: Sister, My Little Soonae and Forever Summer were both moving in different ways, the former for the regret which shone from the pages, the latter for the loneliness so skilfully depicted. Some were funny: I laughed out loud at some moments in The Chef's Nail, and loved how surreal the story became. While A Snowflake is Melting was not particularly well translated, but the wry, dry tone of the author was clear despite this. There were well-written moments in Bukchon, but I did not find myself drawn into this story as much as I did the others. Whoever You Are, No Matter How Lonely was an ambitious and thought-provoking novel which taught me a lot about the student activist movement in Korea, as well as delving into some very dark places in the world's history. But it was Waning Crescent, or the Way You Remember the World, which

stood head and shoulders above the rest of the contenders for me – I was charmed and moved by this entirely unique story melding childhood trauma with science fiction. It was a genuine pleasure to read.

_Alison Flood(Journalist, Editor)

The short listed translation winners are a group of extremely interesting writers ; each of them with a distinct literary voice and exciting story. I was struck very much by the diversity of works ranging from an alienated office worker to a young man searching for the meaning of a taboo photograph. An advertising executive who made a mistake, a woman remembering her adopted sister, a ghost who continues to haunt, a cosmic egg, a chance meeting between a mysterious man and a woman.... the stories and novels by these contemporary writers can thrill international readers in the years to come. It is so rewarding to read many stories by writers who will be discovered in the future, and also to read some well-known writers' works that haven't been published outside of Korea yet.

The best news for Korean books is that so many fine, new translators are developing and it is gratifying to read so many good translations. Having worked with Korean authors for more than a decade when there were very few translator available, it is fantastic to read so many good new translators. The key to the success of Korean books internationally lies with the translator. The English language is the universal language of international publishing ; every editor from around the world speaks English and by speaking one language, we can all talk about authors from many languages. So, the fact that so many translators are now being grown and groomed in English helps all Korean authors and publishing immensely as well as publishers from all over the world. Oftentimes

foreign publishers are forced to translate the Korean text from English into their own language because there are not many or sometimes any foreign translators who translate directly from Korea. I always have engaging conversations about translating Korean into Icelandic, Norwegian, German, Spanish, for instance. And it, oftentimes, is a choice of either translating from the universal English or not translating at all. We all want to have Korean books translated so once again, I cannot praise all the submitted works and translators and organizations who support translations enough. You are fantastic and thank you.

And of course, it is the greatest experience to be praise and pay respects and honor one of the greatest translators we have; Sora Kim Russell. She is a national treasure. Bravo , Sora !

_Barbara J. Zitwer(Barbara J. Zitwer Agency CEO)

Three cheers for these extraordinary fictions! Each story and novel brings something fresh to the reader of contemporary literature. There's a wide range of emotions and formal approaches. Several of the entries toggle between different storylines, jumping around in time—perhaps most dramatically in Kangmyoung Chang's novel *Waning Crescent*, which playfully suggests a narrative that can be cut up and assembled in any order, free of traditional chronologies. Yun Ko-eun's *The Chef's Nail* lives up to its bizarre title, grounding various absurd premises in a story of genuine urban anomie; by the end it seems to exist in a pure realm of imagination. (It's also very funny.) The personal and the political intertwine throughout these works—not didactically, but in vivid, often furious forms, from Han Kang's unconventional ghost story (with its

critique of the male-dominated Korean workplace) to the grand, intimate bildungsroman that is Yeonsu Kim's *Whoever You Are, No Matter How Lonely*. This sweeping, sensitive novel plays with various strands of history; standing at the gates of this book is the narrator's grandfather, who writes an epic poem that encapsulates modern Korean history yet cannot distinguish itself from other such accounts. Jeong Yi-hun's lovely, surprising "Forever Summer" displaces the "Korean" narrator—actually a half-Japanese, half-South Korean girl—to a foreign country, where she befriends the only other Korean—who turns out to be, enigmatically, from the North. These are just a few examples of the vigor and wonder on display—no two entries are exactly alike, yet together they offer a world of riches for the adventurous reader. _Ed Park(Writer, Editor)

Several themes emerge from the entries for this year's GKL Translation Prize: the shadow of the Korean war, the search for identity, the presence of myth and legend, a fondness for aspects of magical realism, and a joy in the traditional art of storytelling. At times, a tendency for darkness for darkness' sake may grate with some readers – is the gratuitous violence in *The Plotters* really justified because it is 'ironic'? But the imagination shown in *The Chef's Nail* is fabulous and shows a writer transforming everyday reality into something of wonder.

Much of the writing in all the entries has a dreamlike quality that has its roots in Korea's religious and poetic past. This can be enjoyable, though sometimes a reader requires something that keeps the narrative on track. But young Korean writers' fondness for the short story form is clearly shown and there are sections of great beauty.

Writers and their translators need to be wary of assumption – ‘white skulls’ policemen and ‘Donghak believers’ may be familiar to a Korean audience, but need explaining with footnotes. Similarly, phrases like ‘in this day and age’ can also appear clunky to English-speaking audiences, though this is a very subjective area.

What the entries do show is an imaginative hunger and a delight in the ability of language to transport – and for that, readers of whatever nationality, should give thanks. _Roger Tagholm(Journalist, Writer)

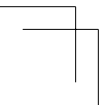
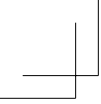
This is a hugely intriguing selection, which shows the great health and variety of Korean fiction. There is a range of very distinct voices, characters and stories, from the cosmic to the everyday, the ethereal to the distinctly earthy. Each of these tales feels distinctly “Korean”, but the stories as a whole deal with some very universal themes (love, memory, family, ageing, the sweep of history), and several of them also seem quite European in their influence and reference points, while always retaining a Korean identity.

There is something to enjoy in every single one and I was intrigued by the recurring themes of metafictional play (stories within stories; stories about the process of storytelling), which brought to mind various authors such as Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino and Haruki Murakami. There is a strong emphasis on philosophical/metaphysical inquiry, and a preparedness to question the novel form. Creativity is not a problem: the authors show a great willingness to explore the outlandish and bizarre. History with a capital H is also a notable theme: the scars of the twentieth-century are very visible throughout.

Not everything works for me. Sometimes it's a question of narrative drive and character development. Ideas too often take prominence over story and character. Ideas are central to fiction, of course, but the reader needs to be given an incentive to keep on reading. In other cases, the prose just doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Some of the translations are very strong and read beautifully. One or two falter disappointingly. And I wonder whether one or two, while fluent, are slightly too literal. Korean and English are so different in terms of register, syntax and approaches to repetition/economy that I think it can pay to take liberties when translating.

I was rather disappointed by the two novels. *Whoever You Are* shows really great promise but it does fall away somewhat. The author is obviously hugely talented and I was left wondering whether there was a way of making this book work better in English, though the translation is clearly very competent. I have a feeling that the Korean version is far better. *Waning Crescent* is a bit of a mess as it currently appears. I found it very difficult to follow. Again, I suspect that it is far more coherent in the original, although the translation reads well.

The pick of the bunch for me is *The Plotters* – a brilliant, compelling and hugely enjoyable thriller, which is far more than a thriller. I've written my thoughts about this novel separately. I hope it helps to usher in a whole new vogue for translated K-Noir, akin to the current one for Scandi-noir. It is very impressive indeed. _Toby Lichtig(Journalist)



Grand Prize

Chef's Nail

Sean Lin Halbert

Original/ 요리사의 손톱 _윤고은



Sean Lin Halbert

Sean Lin Halbert was born in Seattle and graduated from the University of Washington in 2016, he completed a double major in Korean language and Physics and he is currently enrolled in a master's course in Korean Language and Literature at Seoul National University.

he won '17th Korean Literary Translation New Artist Award' and '49th Korea Times Translation Award.

Acceptance Speech

When I first applied to the GKL Translation Awards, I never imagined I would win the grand prize. But in truth, I didn't actually win this award, not alone at least. I received an enormous amount of help from several people, both directly and indirectly. So, with this acceptance speech, I want express my gratitude to those without whom I would not have won this award.

But before I recognize others, I guess I should satisfy any curiosities that you may have about me, the translator. I was born in Seattle, Washington in 1993 to a Taiwanese-American mother and a White American father. Growing up as a child of mixed race, I was constantly thinking (sometimes consciously, but mostly unconsciously) about where I belonged. And paradoxically, it was this never-ending search for belonging that brought me to Korea. Needless to say, I was more alienated than ever living in Korea. But oddly enough, as someone who had always felt the need to

pin down his ambiguous identity, I found my unchangeable and wholly unambiguous status as a ‘foreigner in Korea’ somehow comforting.

Perhaps this information is too personal to be sharing in such a public forum, but what I’m trying to get at is that, as a person straddling several different cultures, I find the process of translation somewhat like a familiar friend. Negotiating and navigating the landscapes of two very different worlds is something I’ve been doing since before I can remember, and in that way, the translation of literature almost comes naturally to me.

There are a lot of things about Yun Ko-eun’s short story “The Chef’s Nail” that make it worthy of translating, but I chose this story primarily because I identified with the main character: a woman who spent countless hours reading books on line 2 just to make ends meet. I also found the image of the main character riding the subway late into the night as she made laps around the city both tragically modern and deeply romantic. I guess I’m a bit of a sucker for those kinds of things.

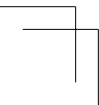
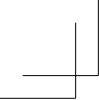
I want to now express my gratitude to a select few of the countless number of people who have helped me win this award, both directly and indirectly. First, I want to thank Yun Ko-eun for writing such a touching novel and also for replying so kindly to my unsolicited email.

I want to thank my parents who have offered me their unwavering support. And separately, I want to thank my mom for telling me the brutal truth when I needed to hear it most, and my dad for being such a great editor.

Next I want to thank Professor Heekyoung Cho of the University of

Washington for helping me take my first steps in translation. I also want to thank Professor Charles La Shure of Seoul National University for sharing his vast knowledge on translation with me. My research advisor, Professor Son Yu-Kyuong of Seoul National University, has been very patient with me as I take my time writing my master's thesis. She also has been an avid supporter of my translation endeavors. For this understanding and constant support, I am deeply grateful.

And finally, I am forever indebted to Ryu Hyunji of Yonsei University for reading all of my translation manuscripts and providing her invaluable comments and suggestions.



Chef's Nail

✱

If only Chung hadn't misread 'Chef's Mail' as 'Chef's Nail,' none of this would have happened in the first place. Everything began several months ago, the moment she had misread the sign of a shop. Chung looked from far off at a shop sign that read 'Chef's Nail,' then looked at her cellphone's memo again. She had thought that the advertisement to be made was for a restaurant, so when she saw the sign, she became confused about what type of business it actually was.

Chung wrote advertisement articles for a local newspaper. In just one day, Chung would see and read countless shop signs and company names. But 'Chef's Nail?'... that was a new one. The impression that it gave was more puzzling than it was unique or original. 'Chef's Nail' wouldn't have been a bad name for a nail salon; but a restaurant bearing such a name? That was something Chung did not want to think about. If there were such a sign hanging above a restaurant somewhere, then it would be impossible

for the people dining there to get rid of the feeling that something about the restaurant was unsanitary. However, those words were actually nowhere to be found. The shop sign was actually 'Chef's Mail,' and it was an Italian restaurant. It was just a momentary mishap.

That momentary mishap, however, was printed into five thousand copies and scattered around neighborhood shops, apartments, and residences. Somehow, Chung had even written 'Chef's Nail' in the body of the article. It was a result brought about by the confusion of two concepts operating simultaneously. 'Mail' had transformed into 'Nail,' but no one had questioned the word before it was printed. Of course, it was Chung's responsibility, but other people's eyes had been negligent too. The company Chung worked at was one that would pass a draft even if the date written on it was November 37, 2010. Right after all the copies had been printed and distributed, the project manager finally discovered the mistake and called for Chung, as though trying to find some anticonvulsant medicine. At that moment, Chung was in front of the office door, clocking in at the fingerprint scanner. The fingerprint was the same one she'd had for the last three years, but now all of a sudden there was a message saying that the fingerprint recognition had failed. Please try again. Please try again. As prompted by the voice support, Chung tried again several times, but it wouldn't read her fingerprints. She took out some hand lotion and applied it to her right index finger. It could be that her hands were dry.

"What on earth are you putting on? You're doing your makeup in a time like this?"

The project manager had come and stood squarely in front of Chung the moment her fingerprints were finally recognized. Behind

the project manager were fifteen thousand stickers with the word 'Mail' printed on them. Altogether, there were three places in the article where 'Nail' had been printed. Chung took the stamps and went around to a hundred distribution sites. She also posted stickers on the papers that hadn't been distributed yet. Chung's fingerprints were slowly getting worn down. The already-printed mistake was as unsanitary as a finger nail in a restaurant dish. And the mistake that had already been distributed was as terrifying as a finger nail that had entered a customer's mouth from a restaurant dish.

"When you attach these stickers, there are always people who peel them off to see what the original print was."

That's what Gwak said—a coworker who was working together with Chung to post stickers. Chung began to paste the stickers with more force. Gwak said that she was one of those people and that seeing the stickers only piqued her interest. Chung, however, was not that kind of person. Neither was she someone who often made this kind of mistake. She couldn't believe it, 'Chef's Nail?' Chung tried consoling herself, saying that it was only a small scratch on a nail. And she would have been right, if only she hadn't accidentally boarded the wrong bus that night. Chung had to spend a long time circling back because she had boarded a random bus; she realized she had gotten on the number 8 bus when she should have gotten on the number 4. The lines for the number 4 and the number 8 were always extended lengthily behind the bus sign, their ends wrapped around each other like a twisted donut. It was a system conducive to mix-ups, but until now Chung had always boarded the correct bus. And she had never once thought that doing so was difficult.

The newspaper company received a lot of complaint calls concerning the mistake; it appeared as though there were a lot of people who, like Gwak, liked to deliberately scratch off those stickers with their nail. What's more, the fingerprint scanner continued to fail to recognize the tips of Chung's fingers. Even when she applied hand lotion, she would still hear that her fingerprint had failed to be verified.

"Now your fingerprint has become faulty too?"

Only after hearing the voice of her project manager from behind her did Chung realize that she was scanning her left index finger instead of the registered right index finger. And like that, she had been judged as faulty.

"Chung, even though she messed up like that, she doesn't have any wrinkles."

That's what Chung's project manager said at the office dinner party. He also told her that frequent lapses in focus were a fatal mistake these days. Chung just pretended to listen to her project manager as usual, but the word 'these days' resonated with her. 'These days,' ever since that one time she misread a shop sign, Chung frequently made trivial mistakes. She would mix up the hand holding a gum wrapper with the one holding a train ticket, or she would put dish detergent instead of oil into a hot frying pan. There were also instances in front of the book drop box when she would switch the library book she wanted to return with the book she was supposed to mail. Once, she even twisted off the cap of the mouthwash she had just bought at the store and tried to drink it; she had confused it with an energy drink. Gwak said it was because of exhaustion from being overworked. Or was it Chung's project manager who had said that? Either way, it came from somebody's

mouth. “Everything is because of overwork,” someone said, “and all deaths in the world are ultimately death by overwork.”

As they finished the first round of drinks and moved onto the second bar, Chung stopped in front of a fish tank outside a raw fish house. She was with a group, but it felt like she was standing there alone. Inside the cylindrical fish tank, mackerel were rapidly being pushed around in a circular orbit. The current was too strong for the mackerel to swim in, so they had no choice but to be spun around in circles by the water—by doing so, however, the current might have felt to them more like a refreshing wave of water than it did a current. And perhaps the mackerel really did think they were swimming on their own. But in order to know for sure whether they were actively swimming or passively swimming, they would have to pick one of two options: either stop the current, or jump out from the fish tank. Outside, however, there was only the hard surface of the asphalt.

“That fish tank looks like our company,” said Chung, but her words weren’t directed at anyone.

The moment Chung spoke these words, several people from her party pretended to dip their legs into the fish tank. They were implying that they wouldn’t mind being swept away in the current. All of them were new reporters.

“Isn’t that the general trend?” said one of them. Everyone laughed, even Chung. She laughed to resist the urge—the urge that had suddenly surged up inside of her to go diving. And not diving into the fish tank, but out from inside of it. Out onto the hard reality.

The next morning on her way into work, Chung ran into the director of the newspaper in the elevator. The director was on the phone and gestured to Chung, asking for a pen if she had

one. Chung quickly took a pen from her bag and handed it to the director. At that very moment, the director's expression went rigid. Chung's expression also went rigid. What she had removed from her bag was not a pen but some dried pollock from the night before. The new reporters had said this as they slipped the dried pollock into her bag:

"It's making the same expression as you."

Chung was momentarily dumbstruck by the appearance of the random piece of bone-dry gray pollock. For a moment, she thought that she really did look like the bar food from last night. The director was probably thinking the same thing. Chung spoke first. "It was just a mistake," she said, "I didn't mean it." The director seemed to understand. However, he then said this:

"I think you need to take a break. Perhaps you keep getting things mixed up because your bag, or your mind, are in disarray. What will happen if you continue like this and then one day confuse the brake pedal with the accelerator?"

Chung wanted to say, 'And what about you? Why did you pass that draft with the date 'November 37' printed on it? And the person who wrote that date is still brazenly coming to work every day at this company. I just made a one-time mistake!' But she didn't say anything. The door to the elevator opened, and for that whole day Chung didn't do any work. On her way home, Chung tried to clock out, but her fingerprint wasn't recognized. It was clear what had happened; Chung was no longer an employee at the company.

Strictly speaking, Chung had been transferred to another department, but judging from the situation, she had become a part of the company's restructuring. And like that, she had bounced out of the fish tank. Chung felt free at the thought that she wouldn't

have to publicly expose her fingerprint anymore in front of that machine, which everyone rubbed their hands on. Thinking of that fingerprint scanner like a public toilet lessened the indignation that she felt over being fired. Gwak followed a few steps behind as Chung exited the office, and asked where Chung was going to go now.

“I guess I’ll just read a book while riding the subway or something.”

Gwak looked at Chung with pitying eyes and handed her a business card, saying it would help. After giving the business card a perfunctory look, Chung put it into her bag. And like that, Chung had fallen onto the asphalt. She had escaped. Yet, somehow she was depressed, wondering if she wasn’t trash that had been rejected by everyone, even the trash can.

Being locked up at home all day, the first day felt like it was Sunday, regardless of what day it actually was. The next day would be Sunday as well. And the day after that too. But when Sunday came for the third day in a row, Sunday ceased to be Sunday any longer. And on the fourth consecutive Sunday, unease began to manifest itself. Following a natural progression of events, Chung received a phone call from the housing manager. They said that she had to vacate her place within 45 days of her leaving the company. It was a procedure Chung was well aware of. It’s just that she never thought the procedure would be applied to her so suddenly, by the hands of another. The reason Chung had chosen to attach herself to this company, with its long hours and measly paycheck, was because of the company housing—something that was attractive to someone like Chung who had come from out of town. Chung was lucky to get housing only a year after entering

the company, and thanks to that she was able to live comfortably the last two years. But not anymore. Chung didn't know if this was also a natural progression of events, but she had also received news from her boyfriend that he wanted to break up. Both of them were busy, so their relationship was such that they only met about once a month, if even that. Everything—her job, her housing, her boyfriend—had disappeared all at the once, suddenly making her free from all attachments. Chung felt even elated because of the uncertainty of that vacuous state.

Chung lay on the sofa and stared at the wallpaper across from her. Flashing before her eyes, Chung could see the past eight years of her city life. The first place that Chung had chosen in the city was on the third floor in the basement. Depending on how you looked at it, the room looked like it was on both the second, and the third floor of the basement. You would have to jump as high as you could to say it was on the basement second floor, or crouch as close to the ground as possible to say it was on the basement third floor. There was only one thing the place didn't have. And that was a window. Reality transcended both experience and imagination. There was a window in every room that Chung knew of or could imagine; however, in that place, there undoubtedly existed a room without windows. But depending on how you looked at it, of course, it was possible to say that there was in fact a window. The only thing was, instead of opening to the outside, it opened downward. A staircase would appear if you opened the downward-opening window of the basement third floor—or second floor—room. And down those stairs was a storage room, exactly a fourth the size of the rest of the apartment. Chung had put down there things that she didn't immediately need, and she didn't open the

door again until she moved out. The day she left that place, Chung opened the downward-opening window and removed all the items, but everything got sorted into the trash anyway. Chung couldn't remember what those things had been.

It was surprising that there were 80 units fit inside of that thin apartment. Chung never ran into any of her neighbors during the time she lived there. The basement indiscriminately swallowed up everything, so you couldn't hear even the inter-floor sounds. On the day she moved, Chung finally realized that the place she had been living in was a microcosm of the city; in order to survive in the city, you had to be desensitized to other people's noise, and in order to do that, you had to be able to make a bit of noise yourself. In this sense, that building had been a suitable temporary first house for Chung. And by the time Chung left that house, she had already realized that not having any windows wasn't a big deal. Windows were not a necessary component for a house.

Going through one basement and two rooftop rooms, Chung's fourth selection for an apartment was on the second floor of a corridor-style apartment; only when moving into that place did she finally feel as though she had settled in the city. A place where both the ceiling and the floor radiated with warmth—that was the kind of place Chung now lived in. Soon, however, she would need to find her fifth apartment.

It was on the real Sunday when Chung discovered a strange note on her front door. On that true Sunday—which came after five back-to-back fake Sundays—Chung opened her front door to leave out the food plates that had come with the delivery food, something she ordered every Sunday, real or not. A gust of cold wind rushed in through the door. Chung was thankful that aside from her there

were several other apartments with delivery plates laid out in front of them. The next moment, however, Chung discovered the difference between her and her neighbors. A number. Written on Chung's door with a magic marker was the number '237.' Looking at the neat hand writing and the placement of the number, it probably was a notice and not graffiti. Or, there were rumors going around that criminals were putting messages on the doors of people whom they thought were living alone; it might be an imitation of that. Perhaps it meant the 237th target, or maybe February 37th? But wasn't the February 37th the type of date that her previous company would pass without a second thought if it appeared on a draft? Chung lit a cigarette, but this was not the type of situation that she could forget about with the smoke of a cigarette. If a calamitous epidemic was going to hit Chung's apartment, then she would have to avoid it herself. For basically the first time ever, Chung looked all over her apartment building, from the first to the last floor—all because of that number. Another '237,' however, was nowhere to be found.

Chung was not the only person living alone. She knew in general who her neighbors were. She also knew that there were no people from her team living in the same neighborhood. Chung was the type of person who, when going down the hallway, would try to guess the composition of her neighbors as she glanced at their gas bills to check that her own wasn't unusually high. She was also the type of person who had connected to, and used, the Wi-Fi of some random house's internet network the first few weeks after moving in, but had actually felt pleasantly reminded once again of her neighbors' existences when that internet connection was suddenly forcibly disconnected. And sometimes, when the neighbors packed

tightly around her would intensely use their boilers, she would feel cozy with the heat emanating through the walls. She was the kind of person who would one day come to a vague understanding about who was raising a puppy, who was a newly-wed, and who returned from work at what hour. However, Chung definitely did not want her neighbors to be aware of her. Of course, neither did she want to be differentiated from the rest of them. But perhaps they already knew. Knew that the circumstances for one woman, who had lived in this apartment for the last two years, had changed. The evidence being the delivery plates placed in front of her door regularly for the past week.

Chung couldn't figure out when the number '237' had been written on her front door. She might have called her boyfriend about now if they hadn't broken up. Of course, looking back at previous times, there was actually a low probability that she would have called him anyway. For their one-year anniversary, Chung's boyfriend had bought her a vibrator. It wasn't the kind of present you would give your significant other for your one-year anniversary, but Chung laughed over it. She had bought him a lighter, but he had just laughed awkwardly and said, "I quit smoking." The steak on their plates was getting cold. Chung actually didn't like steak that much. Her boyfriend did not like steak that much either. In fact, neither of them knew why they were sitting with steak in front of them. After that, they had called each other a couple of times, but as for physically meeting one another, that was the last time. Only now did Chung remove the vibrator from the packaging. She held it up in the air and switched it on. The feeling of the vibrator cutting through the air and burrowing into empty space. But this feeling was only something Chung had thought; in actuality, the effect of

this device with its small vibrations couldn't be known if she didn't bring it all the way to her lonely core. From afar, it merely looked like a silent pinwheel.

The next day before daybreak, the markings had spread out to all of the residents' front doors. Chung slept in late that morning. She wasn't feeling well, having exposed herself to the frigid air since early morning. She had deliberated whether she should write the number '237' on all of the doors, or start at '238' and count up from there, finally settling on '237'; if she wasn't going to count backwards, she wanted at least to resist becoming this building's first and only victim.

"Ma'am, it looks like you only have an overdraft line of credit open with us."

That's what the bank clerk said. In other words, she couldn't take out a loan. Chung tried calling here and there, but she couldn't find a suitable job either. Next to the front door was the bag that she always walked around with on her shoulder—still crumpled, just the way she had left it when she had splashed out of the company. Turning the bag upside down, some twenty-odd business cards came pouring out of the mess inside. They were business cards that she had either received from business connections or random people—but for any given card, she couldn't tell which. The business card with the words 'Bookworm Advertisement Agency' looked probably as though it had been handed to her by Gwak.

After ten days of being unemployed, Chung started working again. All she had to do was ride the vibrations of the subway every day for five hours from 6 PM through 10 PM and look cool while reading a book. The company had as many as 500 employees working in the greater metropolitan area alone. What was surprising was that

this company had already been active for fifteen years. But all in secret. Whether or not Chung believed this, it seemed like a good part-time job until she found a real job. And 15,000 won an hour wasn't half-bad either. Depending on how you looked at it, you might even say it was a better monthly paycheck than her previous job.

"Imagine some guy looking cool while reading a book. He's completely engrossed in it and even laughs to himself sometimes. What would you think? Wouldn't you be curious what he was reading? Now imagine a very intelligent-looking woman reading a book, unable to peel her eyes away. Women, if someone passes by them with a fragrant perfume, don't they stop the person to ask the brand? They might if they're really curious. But they won't need to ask the title of this book. That's because the title will be clearly visible to anyone who wants to see it. Wouldn't you be curious... Miss... is this your real name? Chung Bangbae? Hahaha. I guess we should dispatch you to line 2, so you can go to Bangbae Station."

This is what the project manager at Bookworm Advertisement Agency said to Chung as they looked over her resume. This project manager somewhat resembled her previous project manager. The project manager felt relieved that Chung's nails were well manicured. Having been applied two weeks ago, the nail polish on the edges of her fingers was starting to chip away, but the project manager didn't seem to notice such minute details. As Bookworms—that's what they called their employees—were no different from human billboards, their clothes had to be neat and clean. Chung was hired without difficulty. Her experience at a local newspaper company was acknowledged by her new employers, so she only

had to go through one day of training. Usually, they said, people received two days of training.

“Don’t think it’ll be easy. But even so, once your body gets used to it, there’s not an easier job in the world. After all, all you need do is sit on a subway and read a book. You know those clever commercials in the movies, right? The one that makes the viewers want to buy a Coke when the movie is over. We want to do the same thing and make the people riding the subway unconsciously aware of a book’s title. In order to do that, Bookworm’s workers have to expose the title often, right? Of course, it goes without saying that you absolutely have to make other people aware of you as you read that book on the subway. There’d be no use to it if the other people passed you by as if you were an extra or something. It’d be bad not just for you, but for the advertiser that has invested in you too. It’d be a waste of capital.”

The project manager said readers these days need to be given opportunities for their curiosity to be aroused because they don’t have time to pick out books on their own. And it was Bookworm’s job to fill that role.

“And I’m guessing these types of advertisements are effective? Do more books get sold?”

Hearing Chung’s question the project manager made a straight face.

“Our company has been around for fifteen years.”

Chung was dispatched for the evening shift. Now, instead of a fingerprint scanner, it was Chung’s transportation card that provided proof of when she began and ended work. Each month, the history stored on her transportation card—which she received from the company—would be reported to her employers. In the

subway, people's attentions were looking neither forward nor to the side; they were all fixed on their own laps. There were more people reading a book or looking at the video playback devices in their palms than there were people looking around. In order to gain the attention of these kinds of people, Chung had to attract their attention the very moment she boarded the subway. On her first day of work, Chung wore 12-centimeter stilettos and a 28-centimeter skirt. After checking the subway map—a calculated action—Chung would go to an empty seat and sit down. Then after checking her cellphone for a moment—another calculated action—she would remove the book from her bag. Written in green letters on the bright yellow cover were the words 'House of Slug.' This was the book Chung was to read.

Chung laughed after reading about ten pages. It was a little awkward, even to her. It would have been enough to gently let out a single laugh through her nose, then continue with a more sustained laugh, but Chung couldn't even produce the nasal laugh; she was only able to make an extremely contrived smile. Lifting her gaze slightly, Chung's eyes met with the women's sitting across from her. Chung quickly lowered her eyes. On page 20, she laughed once more. This time, it was the nasal laugh which was awkward. Come to think of it, Chung wasn't the kind of person who laughed out loud. Her laugh was always silent. Chung took a pen and a ruler from her bag and underlined several sections. She could feel the eyes of the person sitting next to her inserting themselves into her book. After a few more pages passed, Chung's shoulders began to feel stiff. The most important thing was not to lay the book down on her lap or bag for long periods of time. She had to hold the book with two hands, or lightly with one, and set

it up so that the people across or to the side could see the title. Chung relinquished her seat and got up. She had already gone around the inner circuit once. According to what she had learned during training, by now she should have read about forty pages. Very slowly, Chung turned the page of the book. The muscles around her mouth gave a small spasm. She was the only one who remained after having completed one lap. She kept reading the same something, but even that returned to the starting point. And she couldn't even remember a single sentence.

Altogether the book was 338 pages long. For the first few days she couldn't control her facial expressions, nor could she read the book. But after some time passed, she began to absorb the book's contents, and finally after she finished the entire book, she began to pay attention to both her facial expressions and the angle at which she held the book. From that day on, she always started her reading at the same place. Page 237. It was just a choice by habit, like how she had always chosen to use the third stall from the left at the bathroom of her old office, or how she always sat in the second seat on the left in the bus.

Gathering the slugs, I put them into a jar filled with granular salt. I closed the lid of the jar, and five minutes later when I opened the jar again, the slug was gone. All that remained was a sticky slime.

Chung started her work with these sentences. It was five stops from page 237 to page 242, and eight stops from page 242 to page 250—moving sideways in the subway like this, Chung had the sensation that she was adapting to the current and swimming on her own. At 7 o'clock, crowds of people surged into the subway

like high tide, and from about 9 o'clock they receded like low tide. Regardless of which station you started at, to circle line 2 once, it took about 90 minutes. Chung made three laps a day, and didn't take a day off for two whole weeks. When she looked up after having been burying her eyes in the book, she suddenly found that there was no one sitting in front of her. All that was there was a glass mirror, and in it, the reflection of herself cutting through the darkness. The image of a reader, with a book held in front of her nose, breathing between the pages of the book.

Three weeks passed, but Chung continued to read the same book, always starting from the same page number. For the next month, she would have to read more of this book. At first it was tedious, but it became a little more bearable when she thought of it like a play script. With each day, Chung's facial expressions improved. She even cried twice. Crying was several times harder than smiling, but on her third week she had successfully acted out crying. She remembered to keep turning the pages regularly, yet naturally, even as the tears dropped like hail on their slanted surfaces. Once out of the two times she cried, an old lady sitting next to her handed her a tissue and even asked what it was that she was reading that was so sad. Although no one spoke to her the other time she cried, it was clear that everyone had fixed their eyes onto the book that she was holding. Of course, Chung wasn't crying because of the book or anything. The tears were merely draining from her like bodily waste. Chung wasn't usually one for tears, but when she thought of it as work, crying wasn't so hard.

Lifting her eyes from the pages of the book and looking at one corner of the subway, Chung could see a very slow-moving dot trudging along the floor. It was a slug. What should have been an

unfamiliar sight actually felt familiar. It was because of her work; reading House of Slug each day, even if she wasn't particularly interested in its sentences, she would eventually get used to them. One day, as Chung went around in the same orbit as always, she escaped from her subway line. All she had to do was stay on line 2, but at Seongsu Station, she had left for a diverging line. It was all because those words that had been manufactured by an error in her head had passed in front of her once again. It was definitely 'Chef's Nail' and not 'Chef's Mail.' The font was also certainly similar to the one used in the design on that store front. Chung should have continued riding line 2 and gone all the way to Shincheon station, but instead she followed 'Chef's Nail.' What she had seen was the title of a book some man was holding in his arm. Chung walked along the path branching out from the inner circle. The sign post she used to guide her was only the couple of letters printed on the book cover. But somewhere along the way, she had lost those letters, and with them, the man and his book.

Chung looked at her calendar. In fifteen days from now she would have to vacate her place. On her way to work she ran into the housing manager who asked her when she would be moving. Chung answered that she was looking into it. And this was true; before leaving for work that morning, Chung had looked at this neighborhood and that neighborhood. However, there were no suitable places. She wasn't that picky, but several places had certain fatal flaws. Chung didn't want to live on the roof or in the basement. Having experienced two rooftop rooms, she was aware that the heating bill could sometimes be more expensive than the monthly rent, and having experienced one basement room,

she knew that an atopy-like itchiness would be imposed on her like taxes because of the mold. But Chung slowly became more forgiving the longer she looked for a house within a set budget. She was getting old as she began to realize little by little that neither sunlight nor windows were a necessary component of a house. Or rather, she was becoming worn down, more like a thing than a person.

Even though Chung lived in company housing, there was no one on her floor who would know her. In fact, the place she lived was used by several other companies and not just her own, so most of the people who lived there were strangers. Even so, it seemed as though her neighbors knew that she had been fired and that she had received a notice of termination. There was an enormous amount of lettuce stacked in front of the house next to Chung's, so much so that it blocked Chung from reaching her place at the end of the corridor. From that pile of lettuce, a slug was slowly making its way towards Chung's front door. Chung squeezed her eyelids shut, then opened them. She was on line 2 again.

A man entered through the first door in the second subway car and established himself in the middle of the car. Because the efficacy of her advertisement would decrease if she looked away from her book too long, Chung constantly buried her eyes into her book, regardless of whoever passed by. Then something the man said resonated in her ears. C.H.E.F.'S. N.A.I.L.

"The title of the book I've written is Chef's Nail. There's only one copy in the world. I wrote it myself. Well, that's obvious. What I mean is I handwrote it myself. Look here and you'll see. It's all written in my own handwriting, page numbers and all. I even did the binding myself. A book is like a door; you have to open it up

and enter to see what's inside. And once you're in, you might not be able to leave. Hardcover is heavy and expensive, isn't it? Well this is hardcover bound. Do you know how enrapturing the world of books is? Enter a book and find out!"

Wearing a white parka with a red scarf, the man could almost be mistaken for a chef. The chef held the front and back covers and opened the book, displaying the pages like a fan. When he did that, the chef also looked like a person playing an accordion. The book wasn't selling. Several people looked at the chef with curious eyes, but 56,000 won was too much for a book being sold on the subway, even if it was 30 percent off and the only copy in the world. But, it was Chef's Nail. Those words had appeared before Chung for the third time. Once as a mistake, another time for real, and now at a crossroads. The way those words kept appearing before her eyes made Chung feel uneasy. It also made her curious. Chung got up from her seat and approached the man.

The book had hard, black covers, was the size of a restaurant menu, and was close to 300 pages long. Written on the front in gold letters was 'Chef's Nail,' and on the back cover was a sticker with the price '₩80,000.' The content of the book was similar to the Book of Genesis. It was a very long list of things—and not just of people, but of animals, plants, art works, and things like tires and limited edition lipsticks. And the list wasn't disorderly strung together either; each word was connected to the next, like a game of chain tag, or a game of word chain. The chef's nail, for example, was followed by a story about the insoles of the customer who had discovered the nail, which was then connected to the address of the factory that made those insoles, which was further

connected to the postman who delivered packages to that address—it was a story about how one thing gave birth to the next, and then the next, and the next, about how everything in the world was ultimately connected to each other. It was impossible to read the book in one night. Fanning quickly through the book from cover to cover, Chung discovered her name and quickly tried to find again the place where she had seen her name. However, she was unable to find the name ‘Bangbae Chung’ again. She couldn’t say that the book was particularly interesting, but she kept reading, thinking that at least one or two things related to herself would come up. According to the book, the chef’s nail that was discovered in the food had a devious power, somehow connecting all the people who had noticed it to each other. Chung wondered if this wasn’t what had happened to her. Was it not that an uncastrated, rapidly erected fingernail had been possessing Chung without her knowing it? As she thought about these things, it was possible for Chung to forget about the fact that she would need to move out soon and find a new job. These thoughts, however, were things she couldn’t think about all day.

Opening her front door on her way to work, Chung discovered a note posted on her door like a notice of seizure. It said that there was one week left to her lease at the company housing. She was thankful that they at least hid it in an envelope so that other people couldn’t see.

Chung read her book as the subway went round and round, wrapping itself around the city’s waist like a hula-hoop. But she was like a machine, only reading a program determined by the same rules—never truly reading a book.

It was an hour before Chung's shift would be over when she ran into Gwak. Gwak smelled like an office party. Chung felt slightly awkward for having used so well the business card that Gwak had given her. She was a little embarrassed of herself as well. Chung was in the middle of work but closed her book anyway because it was an unexpected situation. Yet she didn't put it in her bag and instead left it on her lap. The two of them sat side by side and glided along in the same direction. Chung realized from what Gwak was saying that the business card that Gwak had given her on the day she had left the company was not the business card for Bookworm. What Gwak had given her was actually a coupon for three Thai massages—a business-card-sized coupon. When Gwak asked Chung how she liked the massages, Chung thanked Gwak for the coupon. Chung didn't mention anything about Bookworm. That massage coupon had probably already expired, and even if it hadn't, by now it would have already drifted into the city's enormous wastepaper dump. Either way, things hadn't turned out bad. If Chung hadn't been doing this work, she wouldn't have come to own Chef's Nail. And was she not working with a balanced amount of passion and a balanced amount of intensity?

"Remember what you said that one time? About the mackerel in front of the raw fish house? We still talk about that sometimes. Even today someone mentioned it. But as for me, I'm just trying to look straight ahead. You don't think about much when you surrender your body to the current, even if it is a little exhausting. You don't have the time to think about whether you're swimming on your own or not, if all you're looking at is the rear end of the mackerel swimming in front of you. Right now, I'm just looking at the butt of the mackerel swimming ahead of me. I'm racing along

in a daze.”

Chung suddenly had the thought that she was fired because she had looked to the side and not straight ahead, because she had seen her own reflection in the glass of those fish tanks. Gwak made a pitying face. Afraid that she would have to confirm that pity in person with her eyes or ears, Chung hadn’t contacted anyone after she left the company—not her friends who live in the same city, and especially not her parents who lived out of town. Probably the only people who were easy to vent her feelings to were the people at the nail salon, the hairdresser, or the skin care center. But even those people were awkward to interact with now.

“Oh, and—”

Gwak took something from her bag as though she had just remembered something. For the fourth time, appearing in front of Chung was ‘Chef’s Nail.’ This time, however, it would have been better if it hadn’t appeared. She was already in possession of the world’s only copy, but now to her surprise another copy of Chef’s Nail had appeared before her. It was the same size, the same thickness, even the same color.

The only thing that was different was the price. Gwak had bought the book for 48,000 won on her way back from covering a story.

“It was my first time buying something on the subway, but look at the title. I never thought it would actually exist. You didn’t get confused because you had read this book before, right? The author was selling it and said it was the only copy in the world, so I bought it. But looking at the first bit, I don’t think it’s particularly well written.”

Skimming the book, Chung could tell the contents were basically identical. She didn’t tell Gwak that she was also in possession of

this book, or that she had purchased it for 56,000 won. Gwak asked Chung where she was getting off. It appeared as though she assumed Chung must have left the company housing by now. Instead of answering, Chung asked Gwak a question.

"Do you know how long it takes to go around line 2?"

"I'm not sure. Two hours? One?"

"87 minutes."

"I see," Gwak nodded. Chung got off the subway first. It was Shindorim Station. After the subway left with Gwak on it, Chung sat on the platform's long bench and removed Chef's Nail from her bag. She rubbed her index finger in the dust on the platform floor, then stamped her fingerprint on one of the book's pages. The once faulty fingerprint now looked curious, like a nameless nebula. An orbit anyone could have, but which wasn't similar to anyone else's—and with that, Chung's finger was transferred to the pages of the book. Now Chung had a different copy of a different book with a different chef's nail. She put the book she was holding back into her bag and took out House of Slug. The next train was already entering the station.

The subway glided over the jagged city landscape with the same speed as ever. Like a measuring tape, the rush hour subway wrapped around the waist of the city that had become obese. Chung scanned through the names of the stations that were placed on the subway map with spacing like graduations on a rule. Sometimes she could see large spacing between the stations, but those would soon be filled by new stations. The subway lines that stretched on forever were dizzying, appearing as though they might soon become entangled like hair in a drain. When night came, however, the subway became rather peaceful. It raced along the

city like a clothes iron, going up and down, or down and up. It was a peacefulness that would exist regardless of whether Chung was there or not. An ironing that would continue, even if she did not.

The image of a slug crawling along the subway floor entered Chung's eyes. The slug crawled slowly towards the exit, then stopped and waited in front of the door. Finally, the door opened. Chung watched the slug's journey in anticipation. Was the slug going to be able to cross a void ten times its body length? Or would it fall down the gap between the platform and the subway door? It did neither. In front of the door, as it was about to attempt to cross the void, the slug was stepped on. It was squished from a solid to something flat, leaving only a green smudge.

They said they were restructuring. Half of the employees at Bookworm were cut. Chung barely survived. Instead, she received an evaluation phone call from her project manager.

"One work-time purchase of unauthorized goods, one work-time conversation with an unauthorized person, four work-time desertions of the assigned subway line, two..."

As a result, Chung received only half of her monthly salary. Shadows didn't form underground, but it appeared as though there were an invisible shadow following Chung. There were lots of eyes. Chung was being monitored. Above the people who were read, there were people who were pretending to read, and above those people who were pretending to read, there were people who were looking to see if there were people who were pretending to read. Only then did Chung realize it, but being a Bookworm monitor paid better than being a Bookworm. Of course, not just anyone could be a Bookworm monitor; it was a promotion of sorts. Chung's project

manager told her that she should try harder. The project manager said that there were a lot of professors, former Miss Koreas, even actors among the employees at Bookworm now.

“With the economy as bad as it is, the job market is getting more competitive. You understand what I’m getting at, right?”

Chung wanted to live an average life, no more, no less, just something in the middle, but this was the hardest thing to do. People who tried to reside in the middle would fall downward. That was because the people who had looked up to the top and jumped but fallen were already resting their butts in the middle. Chung felt like she now knew a little bit about what kind of stance she would have to take to maintain her place living in the middle. First of all, if you were in a fish tank, you would have to swim around in circles at the speed the fish tank demanded of you. Chung didn’t have the regulator for the fish tank. And just like that, Chung found herself once again swimming around in circles inside of a fish tank.

Chung trudged to work, and with her eyes buried in her book, she glanced at the world beyond the print, beyond the outer cover of her book. She knew that this six- or ten-car hunk of scrap metal wasn’t a stage to herself, but when she finally confirmed this fact with her own two eyes, she felt somewhat embarrassed. As many as three people who were holding House of Slug entered Chung’s field of vision. They might have been affiliated with Bookworm, or they might have also been real readers. One woman would intentionally—yet not so much so that it was obvious—bump into someone. When the book dropped as a result, she would either pick it up herself or receive it when the other person picked it up for her; in this way, she was doing a more direct form of advertisement. In the span of thirty minutes, that woman

repeatedly bumped into people and dropped the book many times. Of course it had a good effect. As the book was repeatedly dropped and then picked up again, its cover and the title on it, House of Slug, was actively being exposed to people. One guy was dozing off. Sitting with the House of Slug held silently in his hand, he repeatedly would nod off, then wake up again and start reading the book. Although nodding off while holding the book that was to be advertised was reason for a point deduction, it had its advantages because something about his expression and body position were so unique that it grabbed people's attention. As Bookworm demanded that the House of Slug be etched into people's subconscious, even if all he was doing was nodding off as he read the book, you couldn't say that he had failed in advertising the book. That man had clearly succeeded in attracting people's attention, and after that he made sure that their eyes met with the House of Slug. And another girl was just silently reading House of Slug. What she was doing technically fulfilled the demands of Bookworm, but there was nothing unique about her. She was a book-reading machine. Chung spoke to the woman.

"If a mackerel only looks ahead at the rear end of the mackerel in front of itself, it won't even have the time to think about whether or not it's swimming on its own or not. Right now, I'm only looking at the butt of the mackerel swimming ahead of me. I'm running along in a daze."

The woman didn't respond. A person with an expression like dried pollock, buried amongst the crowd and reading a book—it was Chung.

The subway read Chung's route. Her transportation card, the CCTV, and the countless people whom Chung couldn't recognize

read Chung's route. Soon, Chung would have to vacate her place. There were three days left to her residency period. She got phone calls so often it was interfering with her work—so often it was hurting her image as an inconspicuous reader. Chung turned her phone to silent and put it deep inside her bag. Checking her phone a while later, she found that there were six missed calls and one text message. It was the housing manager. The text message was asking her to pack up her stuff by the end of this week, as there was a new tenant waiting to move in. It said the new tenant's move-in date was next Monday. Strangely, however, she felt distant from the letters on her screen as she read them, as if they were from a book she was supposed to read for work or something. It felt surreal, as if it weren't her problem. Chung laughed once every ten minutes as if she were enjoying the book, and underlined sections even more frequently than that. All the while, she was wondering where she would go in three days' time. But she did this skillfully, such that she wouldn't be found out. She had become skilled at that.

"Wow, it's snowing."

This is what someone in the subway said. Indeed, beyond the pages of her book, snow was blowing like powdered narcotics. It looked just like you might get intoxicated.

Inside of the snowstorm, line 1 sometimes stopped, and line 2 went round and round, as though it were constricting itself around the drooping city landscape. As if it were a pair of handcuffs tightening around someone's wrists, or a rope tightening around someone's neck.

On the following day, when the cold made a surprise attack above the snow that had yet to melt, the subway was filled with the smell

of naphthalene. All sorts of fibers such as alpaca, wool, and nylon had come out, burdening the weight of the stuffy seasons, and mixed with each other. Chung saw the number of slugs increasing exponentially amidst the smell of naphthalene.

Chung returned home like a machine. Sunday had already passed, and now it was 20 minutes past midnight on Monday. A note was posted on her door.

‘Your lease has expired. This morning we will come to collect the items inside the apartment and move them into storage.’

Chung entered her apartment, and not long after that her bell rang. It was the housing manager. Chung held her breath. Here in this apartment, a tenant and landlord were about to have a confrontation, just like she had seen on the news. Chung still hadn’t been able to find a place. And her cellphone had been turned off for quite some time already. She didn’t want to turn it back on. Chung turned into a nail being hammered at the sound of someone knocking on the door. If there had been another door, she would have escaped through it.

Chung opened her copy of *Chef’s Nail*, which was probably just one of many, and like turning over the part in a child’s hair, searched for the part she had read; she didn’t use bookmarks. Chung pressed her ear against one of the pages and lay face down. She then spread one page beneath her cheek like a pillow, leaned the next page toward her nose, and covered herself with it like a blanket. What would it be like to lay down motionless and be squished between the pages of the book? There was only one way to compress time into space, to halt the flow of time: taxidermy. Under the weight of time and space, moisture would evaporate, and she would become eternally taxidermied. Already laying inside of

Chung's book were several flowers, taxidermied pieces of time.

Chung thought if she listened carefully during the pauses between the sounds of the housing manager knocking on her door that she would be able to hear a different sound—the echo of a book reading its own context, tired of this world's time, cramped by this world's spaces; the sound of a book, acting discrete while making an invisible escape route with its hind leg.

In the morning, the emergency key was brought out to open Chung's apartment door. When the housing manager opened the door and looked inside, there were no belongings. As if Chung had already moved and left, the place was completely empty.

At that moment, Chung was on her third lap around line 2. She had gone to work much earlier than usual. Well, it might not have actually been 'going to work.' A slug slowly crawled along the page of her book. It looked like it was nibbling not on a leaf, but on the wind. As Chung watched, the slug crawled across the print like an eraser, then soon disappeared without a trace. It had entered the recesses of the book. It was like it hadn't been there at all. Very skillfully, the slug had been compressed from something solid into something flat. Chung underlined another part of the book. As she drew the line, she decided to try going herself. Inside of Chef's Nail, every name was endowed with their own purpose for appearing, a reason for which they could not but appear. If there really were such a place like that, there was no reason she couldn't go there. Chung made a sideways glance at the subway map. The subway lines extended out in every direction like umbilical cords. The last stop for a given line might not even be the last stop. It's possible that if she continued past both the last stop and the

subway depository, she would find a umbilical cord of salvation, continuing to extend outward.

Afternoon rush hour had already passed. Chung had no clue as to how many times she had circled the city in the subway. She put House of Slug into her bag and took out Chef's Nail. The two pages that she opened the book to looked just like a window. Reading the names which gave birth again and again to more names, Chung raced from this end to that end of the subway line. The subway passed line 2, then line 5, then line 8, and continued on to line 12. Staring intently at page 237, the pages of the book ever so slightly leaned their bodies forward like a door. The time beyond the last stop, beyond the subway depository, approached her in the form of a long, dark space. When this time passed, the world of Chef's Nail would unfurl before her. Chung moved into the dirt which was devoid of holes, where no subway line had yet to form. Then finally, at the end of it all, she entered the recesses of the book. Turning from something solid to something flat.

This was her fifth home.

If only she hadn't misread the shop sign saying 'Chef's Mail' as 'Chef's Nail,' none of this would have happened in the first place. Actually, perhaps all of this would have happened anyway, even if she hadn't confused the two.

Chung had entered the book that she had so desired, but the chef's nail couldn't be seen in print or in the flesh. Only when she saw a single slug passing by in the distance like a comma did she finally realize. Realize that a mistake had occurred. Chung had intended on entering the world of Chef's Nail, but had somehow entered the House of Slug. She was sure that she had put House of Slug

into her bag and taken out Chef's Nail, but it was clear that she had confused another one of this world's many things that came in pairs—a right and left hand, work and life, day and night. Perhaps it was because of exhaustion from being overworked.

Chung read the print flowing beneath her body, print that was larger than her body.

Gathering the slugs, I put them into a jar filled with granular salt. I closed the lid of the jar, and five minutes later when I opened the jar again, the slug was gone. All that remained was a sticky slime.

As Chung crawled along above these sentences, the air and people's eyes, as though they were granular salt, caused her body to contract. Feeling like she was a slug that had been stuck to someone else's desk without warning, Chung shrunk further. In the distance she could see her first house in the city, which still had a window on the basement third floor. A person who looked small, like a snail that had lost its house, went inside the apartment. She could begin to hear the small sound of the vibrator, and soon black letters poured out from somewhere like rocks. Several of those letters pressed down on the house. As the person's shoulder concaved and their waist twisted, everything was flattened. There was no trace left at the place they had passed. Bangbae Chung was left between the lines.

Chung had already been crushed to death between the pages when Gwak opened the book. Chung's epitaph had been left somewhere after page 237. No one, however, was able to read it. Gwak thought it strange that the pages after 237 were all in a clump,

unable to be opened. Gwak put her long fingernail in between the pages and tried to separate them, but only succeeded in tearing off a few pieces of flesh-like paper from the several pages that were stubbornly shutting their mouths.

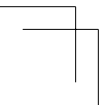
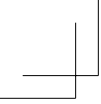
That book was also something Chung had left after she died. The image of Chung taken by the CCTV looked less like she had thrown her body onto the tracks and more like she had leaned her center of gravity into a book, then let her whole life fall into it. After that video was shown on the news, the number of people reading House of Slug increased rapidly. Although you couldn't tell whether it was just that Bookworm had expanded its business, or whether the number of readers had really increased, what was certain was that Chung's death had made House of Slug famous. The image of a woman falling to her death as she held that book in both hands had attracted a lot of people's attention. Although several of the people who recognized that it was Chung had gotten goosebumps, they had quickly subsided, as the whole world's goosebumps tend to do. The people who had regularly seen Chung on the subway said this about her suicide: "She was always reading a book. Sometimes she would cry. And sometimes she would laugh."

The inner circle line 2 went round and round. Gwak thought of that night she had ridden with Chung on the subway. She hadn't gotten any weird vibes from Chung that day. Chung just seemed normal. But Chung's words about how it took 87 minutes for line 2 to complete one lap did seem meaningful now. Gwak didn't have the time to physically prove that it took 87 minutes. She entered the company housing on Monday. She didn't know that her new place was the place Chung had lived, but if she had known, nothing would have changed. The company housing was four stops away on

the line 2 from the office. Now it was time to get off.

As Gwak tried to put the book in her bag, the book flapped its wings like a bird. Then it leapt from Gwak's bag and pierced through the subway's scrap metal roof, soaring toward the sky. Like a tempest, the sound of sheets of paper in the wind got louder and louder. The tens of thousands of books that were lying meekly about the underground tunnel opened up their bodies like seagulls and began to fly. Making low-altitude flight in some places and high-altitude flight in others, the books passed through one world. In between two worlds, the print on the pages scattered like feathers. And the books soared high. A few meters off the ground, they opened their mouths wide, found a different target, and let out a big yawn.

With a hole in its roof, the subway drifted along without a hitch, and people continued to read their books. And rushing in through that hole, were a few gusts of wind.



First Prize

Sister, My Little Soonae

류승경(Sung Ryu)

Original/ 언니, 나의 작은 순애 언니 _최은영



류승경

Sung Ryu earned her MA in translation at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. She has received LTI Korea grants to translate *Tower* by Bae Myung-hoon, *Shoko's Smile* by Choi Eunyoung, and *Don't You Use That Molten Steel* by Geppetto. She also translates non-fiction, including *Secrets Behind Things That Look Good* (2017), *Digital Playground: 10 Building Blocks of Digital Marketing* (2015), and the Korean edition of *Grandma Moses: My Life's History* (2017).

Acceptance Speech

I get nervous speaking in front of any group of more than three people, so you can imagine how little I've looked forward to this day. But I'm glad that I'm making my first acceptance speech ever among friends. And for a book that has a special place in my heart. *Shoko's Smile* is the book that made me realize how I choose a work to translate. There are books that make me think, then there are books that make me cry. I often end up translating the latter. Books that my body responds to before my head does.

Shoko's Smile took me so long to read because every time I read a story from the collection it broke my heart, and I wouldn't have the strength or the courage to read on. So I had to go very slowly, reading one story at a time like eating a box of bittersweet chocolate. I remember one night in particular, when I was halfway through the book, I lay awake for hours in horror as the memories of people I've hurt over the years came rushing

back to me. Because Choi Eunyoung's stories were, to me, a scrutiny of the scars we leave and receive.

I am grateful to Choi Eunyoung for writing a book that inspires me to become a better person, to be mindful and appreciative of the people around me. So here goes.

Thank you to the GKL Foundation for raising the bar dramatically for translation prizes and for enriching the lives of translators, both literally and figuratively.

Thank you to Yi Jin for talking me into quitting my full-time job five years ago and starting professional translation.

Thank you to LTI Korea for offering one-of-a-kind support and training ever since I started out, and for introducing me to a family of translators who have been such a gift to me.

I think the swan analogy is especially true for literary translators—swans are so graceful and leisurely above water, but you know they're paddling their butts off to stay afloat. I'd like to thank my fellow swans: Sora Kim-Russell, John Frankl, Steven Capener, and Kim Jung-ah for showing me how to paddle; JB, Sophie, Helen, Agnel, Joosun, Slin, Inhwil, Mirae, and Hyunsoo for paddling with me this whole time. You are the reason I am still afloat. And a special thank you to JB for the most heartless editing and the most heartfelt encouragement I could wish for.

Last but not least, thank you to my parents, twin brother, and my husband for believing in me more than I do.

Sister, My Little Soonae

*

Auntie came to visit my mom at the hospital ward near daybreak. It was still dark but Mom could instantly make out Auntie's face even in the darkness. She looked exactly like she had at sixteen. Long hair tied back in a ponytail, black horn-rimmed glasses, the polka dot summer dress she made herself. A serene expression on her face, Auntie placed a hand on Mom's right knee where she had received an artificial joint implant. When Mom looked at her, Auntie smiled and spoke.

"I see your knee's causing trouble for you too, Hae Oak. Can you believe it? You're getting old too, hun."

"How did you find me here, sister?"

"I missed you so I flew."

"How can you fly when you don't have wings?" "Sure I do. Look."

Auntie spread white wings shaped like semicircle fans from her back and flapped round and round the ceiling of the eight-bed ward. Mom watched in awe at first but the sight struck her as

rather funny and she giggled like a child. Satisfied, Auntie folded her wings and descended to the floor.

“It’s good to see you, Hae Oak.”

“It really is.”

“Would it have been better if we’d kept in touch?”

Auntie leaned against the hospital bed and quietly gazed down at Mom. “I still feel like we’re little kids. But we’re grannies on the outside now.”

Mom nodded as she stroked the smooth back of Auntie’s hand.

Auntie Soonae was the daughter of my grandmother’s older cousin. Grandma was looking for a young girl to help out at the alteration shop and summoned Auntie Soonae, who was searching for a job in Seoul. Mom hid behind Grandma and stole glimpses of the girl standing by the water pump.

“Now you have a big sister too.”

Mom liked Auntie Soonae from the moment she saw her standing quietly in the yard. She liked the ring to the word “sister,” the affectionate pang it evoked. Why did girls only a few years her senior seem so much older to her as a kid? Mom couldn’t even strike up a conversation with Auntie because her heart was beating so fast. Auntie didn’t talk much and blushed easily. She was sixteen but she was smaller than Mom, who was eleven, so she had to get all her clothes altered down a couple sizes or make her own. If you were looking for the shortest, skinniest sixteen-year-old girl in the neighborhood, it would’ve been Auntie.

When anything interesting happened at school, Mom’s first thought was to tell Auntie about it. She raced to the alteration shop as soon as school let out, threw down her bag, and poured

out stories to Auntie. Auntie listened to Mom's stories while she marked fabrics with chalk, threaded needles, pedaled the sewing machine.

The alteration shop was a five-minute walk from home but Mom and Auntie often took the long way on purpose. Auntie would sometimes stand gazing at high-school girls walking home, pause in front of the stationery store, or pet a dog tied to a telephone poll for a long time. And Mom would watch the sunlight shimmering on Auntie's head. In such moments, time rolled gently on and the strange optimism that everything was going to be okay filled her heart.

Mom had heard from Grandma that Auntie had been separated from her parents during the war, and her grandmother, whom she'd lived with, also passed away. Auntie never spoke of those losses but on days when work got tough or something troubled her mind, she would talk about the pet dog she'd had back home. Named "Bear," the dog had started to live with her after the war. Mom listened closely to the story, since she could count the times Auntie talked about herself on the fingers of one hand.

"Bear was so sick in his last days that he could barely eat. Still, when I called out 'Hey Bear,' he would force his head up and wag his tail. When I said 'Here Bear, eat up,' he poked his nose into his food and pretended to eat like he wasn't sick. I cried in front of Bear then. I sensed that he wasn't just sick, he was dying. I went to the doghouse the next morning to find Bear gone. I cried at school every day for a month after he disappeared. Cried and cried. I thought Bear left the house because I'd stupidly burst into tears in front of him. I blamed myself, thinking he'd gone out to die because I was hurting over his hurting. I shouldn't have let on no

matter how sad I was, I shouldn't have cried."

Listening to the story of Bear, Mom imagined herself as Bear and watched Auntie talk to Bear. Here Bear, eat up. She watched Auntie say that and sob. When she saw Auntie through Bear's heart, Auntie was the most precious person in the world. Even after hearing the story, Mom would sometimes see Auntie through the dead dog's heart. See how Auntie had lost everyone against her will and still had more to lose.

Mom loved Auntie.

Auntie's husband was Mom's friend Nan's older brother. He fell for Auntie when he saw her in passing and wrote letters to her that were hand-delivered by his sister Nan. Auntie kept his letters in her pocket and read them whenever she used the toilet or walked home with Mom.

Auntie at those moments was not the girl who worked the sewing machine and dealt with the neighborhood ladies, nor the girl who stooped beside the water pump and beat laundry with a washing paddle. While she read his letters, her face transformed into that of a twenty-two-year-old girl who pined for ordinary love.

Despite Auntie's efforts to keep the emotions rippling inside her at bay and put on a calm front, Mom saw a strange loneliness on her face. A bewildered and scared yet happy face, desperately yearning for something yet hesitant.

The two of them dated for two seasons and got married.

Auntie and Mom often met at the kalguksu noodle soup joint in front of Mom's workplace. Auntie didn't mumble like she used to and ordered her food in a loud voice. Her eyes shone when she talked. She wore what was surely a brand-new blouse with a

skirt that fell above the knee and had on a deep pink lipstick that brightened up her face.

Auntie plucked out the clam meat from each and every shell in her bowl of noodle soup and doled it onto Mom's plate, while she herself just ate the noodles.

"You shouldn't give away what's yours all the time. Or else you'll make a habit of giving and giving."

Mom scooped up the clam meat Auntie had given her and transferred it back to Auntie's plate.

"Hey, Hae Oak."

"Hmm?"

"I really want to live well. I want my life to go on like this, just the way it is now. Maybe I'm expecting too much, but I really want to try and live a good life."

Auntie said she was taking the high school equivalency exam soon. She was also preparing for pregnancy, and when the baby comes she would give all the love and opportunity she never got from her parents. Mom felt jealous of a child who was not even born yet.

Auntie hesitated for a moment and said, "No one's ever loved me like you have, Hae Oak. You were on my side no matter what, accepted me unconditionally, you understood me. This may sound strange, but you were like a mother to me."

Mom's family had always been cold to Auntie but she never once let her disappointment show. Not for the family but out of pride. She had acted utterly unfazed regardless of how they treated her.

"Here, sister."

Mom handed Auntie a cowhide wallet. It was the first item she had ever purchased in a department store.

“Your wedding gift. Sorry it’s so late. Besides, I didn’t get you anything after I got my first paycheck.”

“I have a wallet. Why are you giving me something so valuable?”

Mom recalled Auntie’s punctured wallet. The wallet she had stitched up again and again until it was in tatters.

“*You* have to use it. Don’t be stupid and give it to brother-in-law. This is a present for you, sister.”

“Would it be right for me to use something like this?”

“Course it is. I’ll get you a nicer one later when I earn more money.”

Auntie held the wallet in cupped hands as if it were a small animal and petted it gently. Mom sometimes stepped into her memories and watched Auntie in that moment. Looking at the young girl who was beside herself over a mere leather wallet, Mom asked her why she was so stunned and happy over something so trivial. You should’ve gotten better things, you deserved them, Mom told her.

When Mom arrived at Auntie’s house, she found her sitting on the stairs leading down to the kitchen. A blue bruise the size of her palm covered each of her shins, blood was pooled under the skin where her arms were scraped. The kitchen floor was littered with stem ends of kimchi, mackerel bones, egg shells, cigarette butts, soaked black beans, bean sprout heads, leek roots, and onion skins. The sinking west sun filtered through the tiny kitchen window and shone down on the filthy mess across the floor.

Mom left Auntie in the kitchen and went inside the bedroom. Underwear was strewn across the floor, blankets and mats ripped by a sharp object lay gaping open. A foundation case had been smashed, coating the entire floor in powder. Footprints of dress

shoes were stamped all over the debris.

Mom poured some water into a rice bowl for Auntie to keep her hydrated, picked up a broomstick, and set about cleaning the bedroom first. Once she finished mopping the floor, she brought Auntie back to the room and laid her down on one of the gutted mats. Auntie was shivering. Mom could have said that this was probably nothing serious, that there was nothing to worry about, but she couldn't speak. She hastily packed some clothes and toiletries from home and unpacked them at Auntie's house. When she offered to stay until at least Auntie's husband came back, Auntie put Mom's belongings back in her backpack and tossed it out of the house and locked the front door.

Mom went to see Auntie every day after work. She knocked on the front door and called her name. She pounded on the bedroom window asking to be let in. She wanted to show Auntie, at least in a small way, that she was not alone. Auntie had no close friends apart from her husband, and she had been told by Mom's parents not to consider them family, to leave and never look back. The fact that Auntie didn't have a single soul to depend on stung Mom's heart. She sat in front of the house, she didn't know for how long. Grandma stood still in the yard watching Mom.

"Soonae left today. The landlord gave me the keys. Told me to clean up the place." Grandma opened the front door. The closet, television, refrigerator, and other large furniture were gone, while cotton blankets and Auntie's clothes were neatly folded. There were no men's clothes; Auntie had somehow managed to take every last one of them. Grandma bundled Auntie's clothes and abandoned sundries in fabric.

"Soonae doesn't exist anymore. She's got nothing to do with us,

and we've no business seeing her from now, you hear?"

The bundle was bound by a knot too tight to untie. Mom struggled a while to untie the knot but gave up and sank to the floor, hugging the bundle for a long time as if it were Auntie. It smelled faintly of moth balls.

"We can help Soonae out financially. That's enough. You making a fuss will do a fat lot of good, why can't you see? You keep your nose out. Please, just stay put."

"The trial hasn't even started yet, why are you treating brother-in-law like a criminal already?"

"We don't need to hold a trial to know how this case will end. There's talk all over town already. That Soonae's man was acting on the North's orders," Grandma said quietly.

"There's no proof."

"It was on the papers, mind you. They said those riffraff read communist books and listened to radio broadcasts from the North."

"How can you of all people say that, Mother?"

"If the government says so then it must be true. Shut your eyes, shut your ears, just trust 'em. And don't go around calling her your sister or him your brother-in-law. She's not your real sister. Third cousins are barely related anyway. Don't you go blabbing anywhere."

Grandma wrested the bundle from Mom's hand and chucked it into a nearby creek. "You never thought of her as family, have you? Family was just an excuse to use her." "That's right. I did it to live. I didn't think she was family. So should you from now on. That's how you and I will save our necks."

Grandma had been a stingy, heartless woman all her life, and this was the attitude that had gotten her through her frustrating

life. Mom couldn't understand such a person and despised such an attitude, but years later she could understand the heartlessness to some extent. If you couldn't share someone's pain, if you didn't have the guts to ride out a part of their life together, it was better to choose heartlessness over half a heart. That was Grandma's way.

Prosecutors sought the death penalty for eight of the defendants, life imprisonment for seven, a twenty-year prison term for four, and a fifteen-year term for another four. The trial took place a week later in which the judges accepted the sentences recommended by the prosecutors and every single defendant appealed. According to the papers, not only did these people violate the Presidential Emergency Decrees, National Security Act, and Anti-Communist Act but also prepared, conspired, and agitated for an insurrection. Brother-in-law escaped the death penalty and life imprisonment. That was the only piece of comforting news.

Mom wrote a letter that began with "Dear Honorable Mr. President" and sent it to the Blue House. She thought that if the President cleared up his misunderstanding and heard people out, he would correct the injustice suffered by the prisoners. That's how ignorant and naïve twenty-year-old Mom was. She was a little girl who couldn't in her wildest dreams imagine that humanity was capable of framing and killing innocent people to seize even the smallest slice of power.

The appeal was held two months later, and none of the sentences from the first trial were reversed. Those sentenced to death or life imprisonment remained at the Seoul Detention Center, the rest

were transferred to Anyang Prison. Mom attended a Thursday Prayer Meeting organized for the defendants. Families of the defendants, Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, and foreigners were gathered at the Korean Christian Building. They prayed for a public trial instead of a secret military tribunal, then they prayed for the defendants in cold prison cells who weren't even allowed visits by their families.

While Mom ate noodle soup with the people there, she overheard nuggets of their stories. The story of neighborhood children who tied a cord around a four-year-old's neck and dragged her around like a dog, calling her the child of a commie and pretending to shoot her dead, while adults huddled around and watched, the story of someone's little girl who went on a picnic and found ants in her lunchbox placed there by her classmates, the story of a mother walking home from the grocery store when someone hurled a rock at her and cracked her head open. Namsan ... When that word came up, everyone fell silent as if by an unspoken agreement. If only she could, Mom wanted to take back the letter she had sent to the President and tear it to shreds that instant.

Sister, I'm sorry. Mom said this in her head to Auntie, Auntie whose whereabouts she didn't even know.

Mom came out of the Korean Christian Building and walked, not knowing where she was headed. Soon, she hit Daehakro. People were gathered at the square in twos and threes, laughing and talking boisterously. The stories of people who were with her only moments ago seemed as far away as dreams. So did brother-in-law's benignly smiling face as he said "my sis-in-law Hae Oak," and sister's glowing face whenever she was with him. Mom bowed

her head.

Mom handed the Catholic Priests' Association for Justice brochures around her office. Every time she did, the mood suddenly turned heavy and she sometimes heard low laughter.

"Ms. Lee, be a good girl and save your energy for finding a husband. Take it from someone who knows. The world can screw you over even if you keep your head down, Ms. Lee."

The department head who took great pride in having participated in the April 19 Revolution said gently, as if to reason with her, "No matter what you do, nothing'll change. Stay out of this. Grow up."

Mom went to Myeongdong every Thursday where she attended prayer meetings for the recovery of democracy and accompanied the defendants' families to hand out brochures demanding a public trial. She went for the sake of Auntie and her brother-in-law at first, but increasingly she was just drawn there. At rallies, she stood at the farthest corner listening to the speaker's remarks and briskly brought up the rear of the marches. She put the rent she owed her parents into activity funds and supported the Thursday meetings with the bus fares she saved by walking to most places.

The executions were carried out eighteen hours after the Supreme Court ruling. Unaware that the executions had already taken place, the families were on their way to discuss countermeasures to the death sentences when they received the news, and slumped to the ground. Without once being allowed to touch their husbands' and fathers' and sons' faces, without getting to say a simple goodbye or take care, not even a don't worry or don't be scared, without once getting to look into each other's eyes to their heart's content

if nothing else, they lost their loved ones, just like that. The state burned the bodies of the executed prisoners without asking permission from the families and sent them the ashes. I wanted to at least touch his dead body. Completely spent, one of the wives of the executed men managed to string those few words together. Mom couldn't stay in the room much longer and went outside.

The world sneered at anyone's love for another person, the desperate wish to give one's own life away however many times it took if it meant saving the life of another. The world said: loving others isn't worth a dime, you weaklings better watch it; what does it matter if those eight nobodies are dead, the law is what we say it is and the commies are who we say they are; when we tell you to kneel you kneel, we can easily kill you by slapping a charge on you, so shut your mouth and do what we say.

They were murdered by the state.

Only when the executions took place did Mom realize that she knew nothing about the world and wouldn't know any better thereafter. She cried silently on the bus to work and kept her mouth shut about the matter forever. People told her she'd finally come to her senses and said, That's how you become an adult. No one thought to examine the bruises inside her. The incident had nothing to do with her in people's eyes and not one of them suspected that it had marred her.

Mom confessed that she became a reticent person from that day on. She said that she was ashamed of all the naïve comments she had blurted out about the incident and of her idealist misconception of the world, that the hardness of the world—the hard wall through which common sense had no hope of piercing—had silenced her.

That silence was broken by an unexpected person.

“Hae Oak, are you okay?”

Coffee mug in hand, Mom stood rooted to the spot and stared at him. “What do you mean?” she asked and left. But the words that sounded from his cold face stayed with her for a long time. That was the first personal conversation Mom had with Dad, a year after she joined the company.

Dad had lost his first wife the year he turned twenty-five and hadn’t dated anyone for five years since. He always had a cold expression on his face, from which Mom could read neither emotion nor thought. Even back when she was busily handing out brochures to her co-workers and explaining the incident, he looked icily at her as usual. To be asked about her wellbeing by such a man aroused indignation in her, but also a curiosity about what he was really thinking.

“She was the kind of person to grin and bear too much,” said Dad.

While her flu developed into acute pneumonia, Dad’s first wife made enough kimchi to last throughout the winter. She went to the hospital only after burying all the pots of kimchi in the yard, but by then it was too late.

“We got married the week after our first date set up by a matchmaker. Since two strangers had suddenly become family, it took us some time to get used to each other. We’d never even walked side by side before. She said she was taught that walking with a man was scandalous. She was a bit of a chump. I liked that. Her gullible side. It’s thanks to that she lived with me. And my goodness she made so much kimchi, I ate only kimchi for every meal but there was still plenty left. It was really tasty though. I thought she would feel cheated. That she couldn’t even taste the

kimchi she'd worked so hard to make, like a chump."

Dad related such details with the impassive face of someone discussing a meeting agenda. Listening to him speak without pretension or exaggeration, Mom was reminded of Auntie Soonae. Mom and Dad ate dinner together after work and headed to the middle school field behind the office. They sat on the bleachers and talked, almost in whispers. For the first time, Mom broached a subject she had avoided since the executions.

"This country killed people who were innocent." "I know. It was judicial murder."

"Then why was your face like that before?"

"Hae Oak, in my hometown ... Soldiers rounded up our women and children towards the end of the war and shot them all dead, for 'fraternizing' with the North. After gathering everyone at the school field, the soldiers lined them up and slaughtered them. My mother survived because she hid in the shed hugging me, but she carried a sense of guilt with her for the rest of her life. She told me we survived by luck. From when I was a kid, I kept thinking about why those people died and I lived. How people could kill other people so easily. How they could kill a newborn infant while the mother watched. How people could sweep these things under the rug so easily like they never happened and keep pressing forward. To find what ahead? What exactly lay ahead as to make us forget what people did to people and go about life as usual? All I did was think. Since I did absolutely nothing, even if someone accused me of fraternizing with the world, I would not deny it. I don't have the courage you have, Hae Oak."

Mom and Dad didn't have a ceremony but registered their marriage and moved in together. Mom's family opposed her marriage to a

man who was much older and whose fortune and resume were nothing to boast about. And she was to be his second wife, no less. Mom became an object of disgrace to her family, who severed ties with her. It was around then that Auntie Soonae got back in touch with Mom.

“I hope I didn’t startle you, phoning out of the blue? I called your office and they told me your home phone number. Congratulations, on getting married.”

There was a click as the payphone swallowed a coin.

“Hey, I had a baby in January.”

“You did?”

“Come see us in Anyang sometime.”

Despite hearing that Auntie had a baby, Mom couldn’t bring herself to congratulate her. The fact that Auntie gave birth by herself had stunned Mom into silence. It was only after she hung up that she realized Auntie must have wanted to be congratulated by her. That must be the only reason, if any, for Auntie to call her up again.

Mom met Auntie a few times in front of the Anyang intercity bus terminal. Every time they met, Auntie couldn’t look up at Mom’s face properly. She stole sidelong glances at her and quickly looked away if their eyes met. When she talked, her eyes were fixed on the tip of her fingernails, her toes poking out of her slippers, a cigarette butt on the street, the gauze towel for the baby. Her voice had become smaller than before, so Mom had to ask the same questions multiple times. Her heels were covered in white cracks and blood blisters.

Auntie was proud of her daughter. The baby was sweet-tempered and slept soundly at night, she could stand on her legs if only

briefly, she didn't cry very much and knew how to wait when her mother worked. While Auntie talked about such things, her voice grew confident and her hunched shoulders straightened. She was putting all her hopes in the child. She wasn't wishing for the child to grow up a certain way or to become anything in particular; the mere fact of the child staying alive by her side seemed to give Auntie the energy to live. Mom thought that this child, stuck to Auntie's back taking tiny breaths, was Auntie's heart beating outside her body.

Auntie didn't mention what had happened in the past year and Mom didn't ask either. Auntie did request, however, that Mom not visit her brother-in-law in prison. Auntie explained that mailing him books to read was enough and that it was hard for him to see old faces. He got a little injured in there. That was all Auntie would say.

Mom had heard at Thursday Prayer meetings about how the people dragged to Namsan were tortured. She had heard about people whose eardrums were blown out and ribs were crushed and shinbones snapped. Not because they were hit by a car or fell off a cliff, but because another person did that to them. Mom couldn't look Auntie in the face when she calmly said that her husband had a limp now.

Auntie and Mom didn't talk about the people who were murdered. Auntie said she had attended the final trial but could say no more. She needed to talk about something else, change the subject, but the thought seemed to have knocked all else out of her mind. Mom talked about herself in such moments, albeit awkwardly. She listed every lousy part of her marriage and mentioned being estranged from her parents' side of the family to suggest that she was having

a tough time too. She said these things when she was in fact pretty happy, thinking that letting even a little of that happiness show would make Auntie feel deprived in comparison. She realized only much later that her actions were an insult to someone experiencing pain.

Mom went to see Auntie twice a month at first but her visits to Anyang turned into once a month, once every two months, then once every season. In the occasional phone call, they made superficial conversation because they had nothing else to talk about. Auntie was no longer honest with Mom and neither was Mom. Mom tried to tread on only the parts of Auntie's heart untouched by scars, like she was on thin ice, and Auntie made an effort not to bring up painful subjects lest Mom pity her in the slightest. Mom didn't even know what Auntie did for a living exactly in Anyang. The attitudes they adopted out of consideration for one another slowly drove them apart, and the bond they had forged during the time they lived together could not hold up their relationship anymore. They grew even more distant while Mom was pregnant and had a baby. She hesitated to share the details of how her body was changing or how she was preparing to give birth, for fear that discussing her pregnancy would remind Auntie of her darkest days. She would think about calling Auntie but the longer she put it off, the harder it became to call. Dear sister ... she would start her letter, but run out of things to say and give up.

As Mom's life settled down, Auntie became a burdensome person for her. Auntie made her feel uncomfortable. The wan face with no makeup, the pinky toes poking out of her cheap sandals, the unconfident look and voice, the single-minded devotion to her kid, the dried tear stains on the lenses of her glasses, the way she

tried to pick up the bill every time despite being strapped for cash, the nonchalance with which she pretended that she didn't need any help, the inability to speak up about the injustice her husband suffered. There was Mom, who thought, Sister, your attitude only vindicates the people who say brother-in-law is guilty. Then there was Auntie, who tried her utmost to react warmly to Mom's cold face and told Mom in a roundabout way, I desperately need you. Auntie's sweaty face on her rare visits to Seoul, as she cradled Mom's son and looked sadly at him. Those eyes. Her stupid repertoire about the dead dog.

"Hae Oak, remember my old dog Bear? I still think about him you know," Mom did not want to hear any more of Auntie's stories.

She did not contact Auntie first, and answered coldly when Auntie called. Auntie stopped calling Mom before long. The fact that Mom found her burdensome distressed her but it distressed Mom just as much for a long time. Even now, Mom thinks about how she could've ever forsaken Auntie Soonae. She thinks about why it was so hard for her to look squarely at someone who had suffered pain beyond her imagination. Some people break up after a big fight but there are also people who drift incrementally apart until they can't face each other anymore. The latter stays longer in your memory.

In her early twenties, Mom supposed that she would be able to make special friends at any point in her life. She vaguely expected to go on having lots of people in her life whom she could treat honestly and openly, like the relationships she had struck up in her youth. But no new relationship could replace the ones she'd lost. The most important people turned up surprisingly early on in life. After a certain point, she found it difficult to turn even the first page of relationships that she would've entered with

relative ease when she was young. People locked their hearts at one point in their lives as if by an unspoken rule. Then they made acquaintances outside those locks, with people who would never hurt them or be hurt by them, and formed savings groups amongst themselves, vacationed with other married couples, or went hiking together. Telling each other that they never wanted to go back to being twenty. Saying they were pretty clueless back then, weren't they?

Mom saw Auntie one more time. It was the winter her brother-in-law was released from jail.

Auntie's house was on the second floor of a small building behind a shoe factory. Mom climbed the iron staircase and was greeted by a closed roller shutter. She stood before it and called Auntie. Footsteps sounded and the shutter moved up. Auntie gave Mom a strained smile and invited her in, asking whether the place wasn't too hard to find. The room smelled moldy and Auntie opened the window as soon as Mom stepped in. A cold draft rushed into the room but Mom didn't ask for the windows to be closed, because she felt that Auntie was trying as she might to rid the room of the smell. The floor shook every time a car rolled by outside.

Auntie's daughter sat behind a small foldable table doing homework for the holidays. The soles of the child's socks were caked in glossy black grime. The child said hello to Mom, avoiding her face. Brother-in-law sat across from the child. He was sitting like a still-life object, legs outstretched and eyes staring at a corner of the room. He was so emaciated that his skin barely covered his bones; he hadn't simply lost weight but his entire frame seemed to have shrunk. His eyes looked unnatural as if he were

keeping them wide open on purpose and an odd smile played across his face.

“Hae Oak is here, honey. My little sister Hae Oak. You remember, right?” Auntie said to him warmly, but in a tone that she might use on a very young child, and he crinkled his face in a smile at Mom.

“Put this on at least, sweetie.”

Auntie handed a blue jacket to her husband, who was in long johns. Bit by bit he tried to wear the jacket but to no avail. Fitting his hand into a sleeve seemed too strenuous for him already and his fingertips were trembling. Mom glanced at Auntie but she averted her gaze.

Auntie’s daughter took his hand and pulled it through a sleeve for him. She pushed up his glasses, which had slipped down the bridge of his nose, and tucked in his other arm. Once both arms were in, she skillfully buttoned up the jacket. The child grabbed the black sweatpants that lay crumpled in a corner of the room and helped him into it. He was passively receiving his daughter’s assistance like an infant yet he glared at the door as if he didn’t want to meet her eyes.

“I got fried chicken. You used to love this stuff, sister.”

Mom took out the paper-bagged chicken from a plastic bag. The savory aroma of fried chicken, mixed with the moldy odor of the house, turned into the rank of stale pork. Auntie spread newspaper on the floor, while Mom ripped open the paper bag and laid out the chicken on top.

“It’s still hot,” Auntie said as she brought to her mouth a chunk of meat she’d torn off the moment she laid eyes on the chicken. This was a strange sight to Mom, having been used to an Auntie who, when eating together, always invited others to eat first before she

started eating. Auntie chewed on the meat like someone who'd been famished for days, wheezing and gasping for breath. She devoured the meat like no one else was in the room, like someone who knew no shame, dribbling saliva.

Mom gestured to Auntie's daughter to come and eat. When she held out the last remaining drumstick, the child snatched it from her hand and blew on it a few times before she brought it to her father's mouth. He turned his head away but she held the drumstick to his lips again without a word. He flailed his arms about and scowled. Auntie, meanwhile, was gnawing the cartilage off a chicken bone like she couldn't see anything. Chicken fat mingled with saliva glistened on the corners of her mouth. The child persistently tried to push the chicken into his mouth. The instant she plucked a chunk of meat with her hand and forced it into his mouth, his floundering body became still.

His urine oozed out onto the floor. Hot urine trickled past Mom's fingers and stockings, past the hem of her dress, and soaked the newspaper spread out on the floor and soiled the chicken. How could so much water leak out of a person's body. He sat motionless, growing steadily wetter. Because the floor sloped to Mom's side, the urine reached the wall opposite him. The child fetched a yellowed rag and began mopping up the floor. Auntie hastily transferred the few pieces of chicken untouched by urine onto the small table and looked at Mom. She seemed to have finally come to her senses, and her ears burned red.

"Oh dear, your nice clothes got ruined. Go on and wash up at the water pump first. I'll get him washed and changed in the meantime."

Mom went to the water pump and rinsed his urine off her hands

and rubbed her stockings and the hem of her dress clean. She shivered as she pulled back on the stockings she'd washed in cold water. The smell of soybean soup boiling in a neighbor's kitchen wafted over. Mom wasn't sad. She wasn't incensed at the people who had broken the man either. Quite simply, she didn't like this house. She didn't even want to see Auntie's daughter, that little child. All she wanted was to get out of this place and crawl into her clean and comfortable home, into the safety of her blankets. She wanted to see her child, who had on clean socks. When she returned to the room, she and Auntie had trouble carrying on a conversation. Auntie apologized over and over again for not having a new pair of stockings that Mom could change into.

"You should get going," Auntie said, her face tightening.

"But I only just got here ..." Mom said insincerely.

"This is why I told you not to come. Please, go," Auntie said with her eyes on her husband. Mom clutched her handbag and got up awkwardly. Perhaps a large truck was passing by but the floor shook violently like it was going to collapse. He saw Mom saying goodbye and mechanically returned the gesture. The corners of his grinning lips were convulsing.

"I can't walk you out too far," said Auntie as she came out of the room. Not knowing what to say, Mom kept her mouth closed and looked at Auntie for a moment, waved, turned around and walked off.

"Hae Oak," Auntie called after her. Auntie was standing with her shoulders huddled and her hands in her pant pockets. The carelessly chopped bob, the bloated figure that almost completely concealed her neck, the gruffer voice. Sister, I hate you, I hate your house, I hate everything about you.

Auntie stood just like that and gazed quietly at Mom before she spoke. Her voice was too small for Mom to hear. Mom shouted back that she couldn't hear her very well, could she repeat what she said?

"I said I'm not always like this. Really, I don't always live like this." Mom nodded, then turned around again and walked away.

Hae Oak, take care.

Mom pretended not to hear her and strode forward with her arms crossed. Not once did she look back but she knew Auntie would stand there until she was out of sight. Hae Oak, take care. Auntie said those words like she was pushing a boat mired in the shore out into the lake.

As Grandma had wished, Mom had nothing to do with Auntie for the rest of her life. But she still thought of her sometimes. She thought of her when she saw the sun setting through the kitchen window while she cooked dinner or when she saw mothers walk by carrying a baby that looked no more than a year old on their backs. She sped up when she happened to pass the Korean Christian Building or Myeongdong Cathedral, and while she did consider contacting Auntie again a few times in her life she never acted on it. Time recorded Auntie as someone who had once come and gone through her life, a fact that she chose to accept.

Mom had heard the story that immediately after death, a person's soul went to see someone very important to them who was far away. When Auntie came to Mom's hospital ward as her sixteen-year-old self, Mom knew that she had already been forgiven by Auntie long ago. Auntie's face, as she looked at Mom, had the same lonely, translucent glow it had had when she read her husband's love letters once upon a time. Every time Mom's gaze touched

Auntie, she became smaller and smaller like soap touched by water.

"You're growing lighter, sister," Mom said to Auntie, who had shrunk to the size of a palm.

"Hae Oak, remember."

The smaller Auntie's body grew, the deeper her voice rang.

"No one can kill us."

Mom imitated the way Auntie's lips moved, watching Auntie talk perched on one of the partitions in the ward. No one can kill us. Auntie nodded with her slender neck and little head.

"Don't forget that, Hae Oak."

Sunlight streamed down from the window and Auntie, now the size of a thumb, let the light carry her away. Mom's gaze lingered on the stream of sunlight from the window for a long while. Then she felt her right knee, on which Auntie had placed her hand. It really wasn't a dream. I was asleep on the guest bed but Mom shook me awake and said that a sister from her childhood had just come by the room to see her. I was as astonished by her reaction as I was scared and didn't want to hear about the matter anymore, but there was no stopping Mom once the words started pouring out of her.

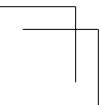
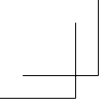
Mom wholeheartedly believed that everything she experienced the day Auntie came to see her was real, yet she couldn't be sure about that momentary feeling she had of being forgiven by Auntie. That is, until she saw a photograph of two girls in an old leather wallet Auntie had left her.

The small, scrawny girl who looked the younger of the two is hugged from behind by the tall girl. The small girl is wearing a polka dot dress she made, the tall girl is wearing shorts and a t-shirt with a stretched neckline. They are standing in front of a stone wall, beaming without a trace of shadow. This was the day

I 류승경

they went to explore the now-gone Seoul National Museum. The laminated photograph was found in an inside pocket of the wallet, which was tattered and glossy at the corners. Mom couldn't say much to Auntie's daughter who had come to deliver the wallet. She could only gaze at the photograph and quietly whisper, "Sister, my little Soonae."

Sister, My Little Soonae I



First Prize

Forever Summer

C-Translation_박아람(Park, Ah-Ram) · Jonathan Adams

Original/ 영영, 여름 _정이현



박아람

Ahram Park has translated over 50 works of English and international literature into Korean. Jonathan Adams has ten years' experience as a teacher, freelancer writer, and copy editor.



Jonathan Adams

Jonathan Adams is an English teacher of Korean language schools and elementary and junior high school.

Acceptance Speech

We met earlier this year at the language school where one of us was working and the other was studying, and became friends over a mutual interest in writing, translation, and the Canadian writer Mavis Gallant. After sharing some of our personal writing projects and receiving pointed feedback and criticism from one another we had the first inkling that we might make a great team, and went looking for an opportunity to work on something together. The GKL Translation Awards provided the perfect occasion for our first collaboration.

Jeong Yi Hyun's stories from her 2016 collection *The Age of Gentle Violence* attracted us with their subject matter—ordinary lives punctured by sudden intrusions from the surreal—and their quiet, understated effect. Jeong writes about isolated characters struggling with questions of what's right in situations complicated by generational differences, cultural divides, societal expectations, and family. In "Miss Cho, The Tortoise,

and I" an ageing bachelor bears the burden of some social entanglements resulting from his late father's romantic life; "Forever Summer" features a Korean-Japanese girl, routinely uprooted and enrolled at a new private school in a new country every few years, whose isolation among her classmates is compounded by the demands of a mother who may be suffering from an even more profound isolation.

In rendering these two stories into English, and after many arguments over what is sayable in Korean but not in English, what sounds profound in one language but cliché in the other, with each of us standing ground and giving ground at different moments, we felt perhaps more exhausted than satisfied at the end of it all. It may be that every translation is a war of attrition filled with losses of nuance and sacrifices of lyricism, so to have our work recognized with this award is both humbling and an incredible relief. That we managed not only to stay friends through the process of translating, revising, and re-revising, but also had our efforts so generously rewarded makes us look forward to more collaborations as a translator team in the future.

Forever Summer

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I remember reading long ago in a picture book I had that pigs are in fact cleaner and more sensitive than any other animal. They are picky about what they eat and where they defecate—they choose a damp, low-lying place—which is to say they are cultured enough to discard their waste. Moreover, they are exceptionally refined. They make no displays of aggression except when they are provoked. There is nothing wrong with them. Above all, they do not like to be regarded as a species, nor differentiated individually from each other. This beautiful, heartbreaking sentence has been lodged in my memory since then.

When I was twelve I lived in Tokyo. My parents rented a house on the outskirts of the city. It was a nondescript row house with two tatami bedrooms and an adjoining kitchen- living-room. It was laughably smaller than the condominium in Manila we'd just moved from, which depressed my mother, as if she were a noblewoman suddenly made to live among the pigs. My mother was

no noblewoman. She had simply grown accustomed to receiving a small stipend for her housing and living costs as she followed her husband, an overseas sales manager in a trading company, around the world from one city to another. After he was relocated to the head office in Tokyo for an undetermined period, there was nothing for her to do with her life but make compromises. One luxury she refused to give up though was sending her daughter to an international school. I pondered it from time to time. Exactly what kind of life are parents expecting for their children when they decide to send them to an international school with tuition fees equal to half their annual income?

They might have wanted me to be some sort of cosmopolitan, neither entirely Korean nor Japanese. Whatever their intentions, the first phrase I learned at school was buta'me!—"hey, pig!" in Japanese. No matter what country you go to, international school students always curse in the local language. Buta'me would also become the Japanese phrase I heard with the highest frequency.

I was the only kid in my neighborhood that went to the international school. Every morning I had to ride the subway two stops by myself to reach the place where the school bus would pick me up. In the afternoon, I had to take the same route back, the school bus and then the two stops on the subway again. My mother told me to walk to the school bus stop and back rather than take the subway. She complained all the time that I didn't exercise enough. I'd been born with a frame much bigger than the average baby. In the infant care unit, it elicited shock when people discovered the enormous baby was only a day old, and that it was a girl. During the pregnancy, my mother's appetite grew so intense no amount of food could sate it, and by her third trimester

she had gained 65 pounds. That was more than double the doctor-recommended weight gain. The fetus weighed close to 10 pounds when it was time for delivery. I don't want to blame her. Still, I always felt a sense of injustice when she obsessed over tallying and limiting my daily caloric intake. She was like the instigator of a long, multi-car collision in a congested tunnel. I was in a car way up at the front of the collision, completely innocent, unable to comprehend why soda, chocolate cake, cookies, or anything containing "fructose" were all suddenly forbidden and nothing but water was permitted after six o'clock. But there was nothing I could do. Every night I had either to go to bed on an empty stomach or tiptoe into the kitchen after I was sure everyone else was asleep and steal some food from the refrigerator, like a street cat.

While we lived there, there was only one time that I went home on foot instead of by subway as my mother wanted me to do. I arrived home drenched in sweat like I had just come out of a hot shower, dripping from my forehead. When she opened the door, my mother ran and hastily brought me a towel. The sour smell of sweat rose from my armpits and all my folds of flesh. It wafted into my nose, too. I thought I saw a flash of pity or disgust in her eyes. I walked to the dining table, roughly wiping my face and head. On the table was a cup of water with a lemon slice in it. I brought it to my mouth in silence, sipped and held it as I swallowed, repeatedly. Chewing with the water in my mouth helped to dull the hunger. My empty stomach started to growl.

When we had physical examinations the next year, I was in the uppermost 95th percentile of weight for girls my age. It had gotten closer to the average, if only slightly, from my 97th percentile ranking of the previous year. While I weighed more or less the

same amount, I had grown three centimeters taller. If anyone had been watching closely, they might have noticed the very subtle change in my shape. Not that I wasn't a fat girl anymore. I, Rieh Watanabe, at thirteen years old, was a fat, pale, introspective girl with low blood- sugar. I was still called buta'me.

Another opportunity came up for my parents. It seemed fairly certain that my father would be transferred somewhere else in the next personnel realignment. My mother ran through cities she wanted to live in in her mind. The major consideration for her was an absence of Koreans and Japanese. A city where she didn't need to care about prying eyes wondering what a Korean woman was doing living with a Japanese man, where they spoke English or French rather than Korean or Japanese, where the seasons were all mild, where income and education levels were high but the cost of living was low, where there were parks with well-trimmed lawns everywhere, where she could take the public transportation home even late at night. That was the kind of city she wanted to live in.

My parents met when my father was working in Seoul a long time ago. She was a Korean who'd never been outside Korea and he was Japanese. He knew about thirty Korean words and she knew three Japanese words: sayonara, moshimoshi, and aishiteru. My mother had committed to memory "I love you" in ten different languages, just in case, when she was a high school student, she told me. While they were dating, they conversed in bad English. Surprisingly, we didn't have any difficulty communicating, and I thought we were meant for each other, she recalled to me once, without enthusiasm. I had delusions. That's how it works when people date. For two people passionately in love, why should

language have any importance? I asked myself, then what else would have any importance for people passionately in love, and blushed. At times my mother seemed to forget that I was only thirteen. I was the only person she could talk to in her native language without difficulties. She taught me Korean from when I was a child, but it had nothing to do with national pride or a love of the language. She just wanted someone who could understand her when she spoke, a listener with the same native language as her. Sometimes I wondered if she paid any attention to the spiritual weight on me, not just the physical one.

While waiting for news of the new posting, she talked with unusual frequency about Edinburgh, where she'd lived during days as a newlywed. More than anything she said she had liked the freedom there. I didn't ask what she meant by "freedom." I was afraid she might accidentally confess it meant, life without you. I would have had to respond, my time of greatest freedom was before I was born too. I thought it would last forever, that happiness, she said, we were so in love. I'm sorry to say I had no interest whatsoever in how much in love my parents were when they were young, or how they overcame the language barrier and their different nationalities. However much in love they'd once been, their relationship was now like flattened soda in a can that had been left open after just a few sips.

It's been set, my father declared after work one evening. I don't remember when, but at some point he had started speaking only Japanese at home, even to me. His wife talking to his daughter exclusively in her native language might have woken a latent patriotism in him. They spoke to each other 5% of the time in Korean, 20% of the time in Japanese, and 25% in English. The

rest was silence. Light silence, heavy silence, comfortable silence, dreary silence, and awkward silence. The new post was in K. It was a city state I remembered hearing of. I looked for it on the map: near the South Pacific Ocean, no big difference between the summer high and the winter low, most locals having never seen snow with their own eyes. Cost of labor low, public safety unknown. That was all I could find online. My mother asked my father if it was too late to change. No, he answered. But you can choose to stay here if you want. She gave up hope then. Within a few days, she managed to find something she liked about K. I've heard there are no Koreans or Japanese, she said. There was not much else I could do but nod in response.

My father went to K first. My mother and I were supposed to join him fifteen days later when vacation started at the international school. They didn't want me to change schools mid-semester. It would be my third transfer. What I felt about transferring schools was something like resignation. No sadness, no relief. Leaving one school early meant starting early at the next school. Nothing would be very different anywhere. There were mean kids in every school, whatever the country. To the boys who called me names, I was a ridiculous pig. To the boys or girls who ignored me, I was a disgusting pig. A few kinder girls made me into a pitiful pig. On the first day at her new school, Rieh Watanabe would learn the word for "pig" in the language of K.

My mother told my father to have all the difficulties of settling in a new city taken care of in advance. It would be overwhelming for her to deal with all the different arrangements by herself: the house, the car, her child's new school, the bank accounts, telephone numbers, and who knows what else. Unfortunately,

if not unreasonably, clearing out the old place was left to her. The day we moved out of the row house, every Watanabe family possession—home furnishings, appliances, clothes, books—were neatly packed in boxes. All those various-sized boxes were to be transported in a container to the largest port of K by cargo ship. There would be a large body of water in the middle of the city we were moving to. All the boxes big and small had stickers with “FRAGILE” printed in red on them. My mother was worried they would be delayed. She kept asking them to repeat and confirm the arrival date. Tell them there’ll be big trouble if our things arrive after we do—no, tell them there’ll be big trouble if we arrive before our things, she ordered me. I didn’t see what the difference was, but I translated the sentence the way she asked me to. Since we’d moved to Japan, my mother often in public places appointed me her personal interpreter. Her Japanese may not have been excellent, but it was not that bad either. As long as people spoke slowly and didn’t use too many big words, but showed consideration for the fact that she was not a native speaker, her Japanese was sufficient for most daily transactions. Still, she seldom had any desire to speak to the Japanese in their language. She had once stood for a long time wondering what to do when she was short-changed 500 Yen in a supermarket, she told me. Standing at the counter, at a loss, she suddenly recalled an old memory in the dressing room of a broadcasting company. Before she was married, she’d gotten an acting job in an open casting call. Her first speaking role was in a soap opera as “Old Friend #3” whom the main actress was supposed to run into at a reunion. Her one line was, “Wow, you’re so much prettier.” She recited it over and over again for three days straight. Wow, you’re so much prettier. The sentence took on different

meanings depending on which word I emphasized, she told me. It's true. I said it hundreds of times, each time with a different intonation. After a while, the hundreds of sentences I'd spit out seemed to shatter like glass and disappear into thin air.

On the day of the shoot, in the dressing room, she suddenly had chest pains. It was as if one of those shards of broken glass had gotten stuck in her little finger and the pain shot straight to her heart. She walked onto set less like a young actress eager to catch her first break and more like a religious supplicant embarking on a series of trials. By the end of the day, nobody had made any serious mistakes on camera. She even made it through her one line reading just fine. But then, finally, when it aired She trailed off while telling me the story. The moment her face filled the screen, it lasted less than a minute, but she couldn't help squeezing her eyes shut. She never thought her cheekbones would stand out that much. The moment-to-moment viewer ratings were 31.2% during her scene. That meant 31.2% of everyone watching TV that night had seen her cheekbones. A few people called her parents to ask if it was their daughter they'd just spotted on screen. That was all. There were no other jobs. It might have been different if there'd been a rush of offers for bigger roles, but she didn't want to show her ugly cheekbones to millions of people just to play Employee #3 or Courtesan #3. After she turned down a couple more minor roles, the offers stopped coming. So, you can't say it was a one-sided break-up, she argued.

Granting that my mother at that age was someone I've never known, I deeply supported her decision. Certain people handle the obvious problems they face by eliminating the cause. But not

everyone. Some just hide in rooms with the door locked behind them. Why should life have to be an exhausting series of dead ends that one must vault oneself out of? In that respect, I was definitely her daughter. She decided what to do in the same way after she'd thought about the 500 Yen in the supermarket. Several other customers were sorting their groceries in peaceful silence. Sumimasen. She murmured, but nobody seemed to hear her. Sumimasen. Sumimasen. She repeated, moving her lips slightly. No one looked at her. Her heartbeat quickened. Pressing her hand on her chest, she turned around quietly and rushed out of the supermarket. It's only 500 yen, right? She asked me repeatedly after she got back home. I thought about it for a long time. It was finished business, so what exactly was she asking for? I thought about what she had left behind far away. The words she'd tried desperately to collect and show me. The shards of glass still lodged in her chest. I nodded dutifully, pretending not to know those other things.

Everything will arrive on schedule. The manager from the moving company assured me there was no need to worry, and I looked at her. She still looked worried. I was about to say that I wasn't the one worrying, but stopped myself. Please just be careful, I told him. Speaking Japanese to my father and Korean to my mother was second nature to me. Switching between the two languages was something altogether different. Bereft of all its contents, the empty house looked strange. Our small four-legged dining table had left four square stains the size of a puppy's footprints on the floor. They were neither close together nor far apart. If we had had our photo taken while the three of us sat having our meal at the table, we might have looked quite at peace. All I had ever

eaten each meal at that table were some roast vegetables, a little seasoned seaweed, a small piece of fish or lean meat with the fat trimmed thoroughly, tofu, clear, unsalted broth, and a half-potion of rice. I stood on one of the four stains on the floor and looked out the window. Leaving the windows open in Tokyo never cooled the house, even in November. The clouds hung low in the west. What direction would the windows in our new house face? Was there any chance we'd be able to look out through them at the sea? What food did people live on in K? As I was daydreaming, I heard my mother scream nearby.

She was devastated. Her necklace was missing, she said. The Tiffany necklace she'd gotten as an engagement present so long ago. It had a tiny, exquisitely cut diamond star on a thin platinum line. Technically, it wasn't lost. The small jewelry case with the necklace in it had been put into one of the boxes. She'd forgotten to take it off the dresser at the last minute, and the dresser had been wrapped and loaded into the container. The container was already on the truck, which was on the way to the cargo ship at the port. So perhaps it was just a matter of several boxes. While the jewelry case had other items including several earrings and bracelets in it, my mother kept saying just that she had lost a necklace. It was likely not for the symbolic value, as the only emblem of her eternal marriage vow, but because it was the most expensive piece of jewelry she owned. After listening in silence for a while, I corrected her: It's not lost, it just left before us with our other things. She flew into a rage. Who can guarantee that it will even reach K City all right? she asked. Do you think they haven't already opened the drawer? Probably they've already taken it. You don't know what they're like.

We went to the moving company's office. It was on an old alley at the edge of downtown. That's not a good sign, my mother muttered as we climbed up the second stairwell of the squat, old building. It was the first time I'd heard the Korean word for sign, *chojim*. The door was locked, so it seemed to be after business hours. My mother pushed some buttons on her cell phone and then handed it to me. The guy who answered said he was the manager. He didn't say anything at first. Then he said they didn't check for any items unless the client made a specific request. If we were certain that the item had been packed, it would definitely arrive at the destination all right, he said. The important part of the sentence was the first half. My mother nudged me. Ask him what they'll do if it's missing.

He was firm. It's not our responsibility. What did you say it was, a watch? Oh, a necklace. There's no way for us to establish that the watch—sorry, the necklace was in the box in the first place, is there? He threw out a rapid succession of questions. Do you have any way to prove that the necklace was in there? I glanced at my mother as I listened to him. She looked obviously displeased. What would happen if I told her exactly what he'd just said? She would fly into a rage, asking did they dare suggest she was lying. Still, she had no way to prove it'd been there in the first place. I'd happened to see a picture of my parents taken during when they were preparing to get married. She wore a low-cut ivory-colored dress with her hair tied in an elegant knot. Her long, pale, bare neck stood out. The lone adornment sitting loosely on her collarbone was the missing star necklace. It had such a delicate shine. It looked as if it would never fade, never stop shining. Which would be preferable, to fade or go missing? I hung up the phone

and swallowed slowly.

Well, he said it was there the last time they checked, I said. I never thought I was a good liar. Did he? she asked doubtfully, but her face lit up. Yes, I never thought I had a flair for acting. He said the necklace was in the case, too. Why would they open the case? she asked again, but she looked relieved finally. He assured me it would be there when we arrive, I added casually. He guaranteed it. Did he? Really? I guess he must be telling the truth then. Now she seemed to trust me completely. Making people trust. That's what interpretation was. It was then I realized I was probably qualified to do it professionally.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at the airport in K from Narita International Airport after one stopover. It was the tiniest, simplest airport I'd ever seen. In Arrivals, my mother sniffed. Do you smell something? I breathed in. The damp, heady air entered my nostrils. It smelled like dying flowers. My father came to meet us in a short-sleeved linen shirt with no tie. He usually dressed in styles that made his shoulders look square. In Tokyo, he always buttoned his shirts up to the neck and rarely went out without a padded-shoulder jacket even at the height of summer. As soon as we left the airport, the heat from the asphalt hit us. I had to catch my breath. Sweat came out of every pore on my body. It was hot. It couldn't be hotter. I found myself rolling up my long sleeves. My mother looked dumbfounded.

We hardly spoke in father's jeep. Out the window there were only mysterious fields and narrow clearings. Whenever the jeep turned a corner, a glimpse of the sea flashed before me. It was sapphire colored. I realized then I had moved to a faraway place.

After driving the coastal road for a long while, we reached a small downtown. Stores with colorful signs stood end to end in one-story slab buildings. Thin, dark-complexioned people in loose sleeveless tops meandered the streets. Beyond was the apartment complex we were moving into. With three buildings reaching high up into the sky, anyone could tell it was a luxurious residence. When we arrived at the gate, a uniformed guard lifted the bar and saluted. The housing subsidy my father's company provided didn't adjust for different regions, which meant prices here were much lower. The living room windows on 20th floor overlooked the residential swimming pool and the ocean. My mother felt immediately much better, as if she'd recovered her lost nobility. The things we'd shipped from Tokyo arrived safely. The table for four had been set in the dining room properly. It couldn't help looking spare and modest in a space so much wider than it'd been in before. Oh, by the way, what about my necklace? my mother asked, acting as if it had only just occurred to her for the first time. My father gave a mock shrug. The jewelry case was just where it was supposed to be in the dresser. My mother opened the lid. Everything was there except the star necklace. Sifting through all the boxes in the house didn't produce it.

Even though winter vacation had just ended, K was still in deep summer. I transferred into the 7th grade at the international school. Ms. Miranda, my homeroom teacher, was blonde and middle-aged. Hi, pretty girl, she greeted me. Pretty girl, she called me. I guessed either she had terrible eyesight, enjoyed making sadistic jokes, was a great philanthropist, or had some special reason for currying favor with students. Or she might have been an old lesbian with a taste for fat girls. As we walked

down the corridor together, I couldn't take my eyes off her brick-red pumps. She asked kiddingly if there was something on the floor. Just her habit, my mother answered for me. She described me as a "shy girl." I wished she'd used the word "sensitive." As we walked, Miranda explained it was a small school with just three classes per grade, and they rarely had transfer students since the city itself didn't get a lot of foreign visitors. With the addition of me, the class would be ten. Half were Asian, half non-Asian. Miranda introduced me as "Rieh Watanabe, Japanese." There was no applause or anything.

No one talked to me the whole day. That was okay. Quite familiar. There were no changes the first few days. No one even called me pig. A whole week passed before I knew the word for pig. The foreign community didn't seem particularly to like or dislike new additions. They seemed completely unconcerned. Exactly one week after I had transferred, there was a fuss over a large spider on the classroom ceiling. The girls shrieked and the boys laughed, snatching the cobwebs with their fingers. At that point, it was undeniable. For this group of students cresting their childhoods, the fat transfer student, Rieh Watanabe, held less interest for them than a bug, was deemed worthy only of indifference. There was something disappointing about that, but also comforting.

To an impartial eye, the classroom was a world that followed its own set of rules. Interestingly, the students divided themselves naturally into pairs. There were four pairs, two of girls and two of boys. They looked like different types of duck swimming on a lake. They didn't seem to be at odds, but they didn't seem to mix altogether well either. And that left a girl, Mei. An Asian girl who was the shortest and leanest in the class. It had had nine people

before I transferred, so she must have been the only one who was always alone. Her last name Chang, thick glasses, and the carelessly long ponytailed hair told me that she was from China.

Before long, I came to understand why she didn't have any friends. She had hardly any English. In debate class, we discussed the topic "Should Youth Be Obligated to Attend School?" Some argued for, others against, claiming homeschooling was okay. It was an afternoon of blistering sunshine, and the classroom, with its high-performance AC unit working at full capacity for 24 hours, was full of lethargy. The debate was thoroughly listless. Whichever side won, we would still have to keep coming to school. Everyone was forced to express an opinion. When it was my turn, I stammered that the purpose of education was not education per se, but the cultivation of good character, but we needed to ask ourselves if today's schools were really cultivating good people. That's a nice opinion, the teacher, John, complimented me. He also advised me to be mindful of where I was looking, and to assert my opinion with more confidence next time. You need to trust yourself more, Rieh. You're worth it, he said with enthusiasm, looking intoxicated by his own words. I couldn't make eye contact with him, not because I was moved, but because I felt sick. Then it was Mei's turn. Schools are good, she said. I learn English at school. Now I can speak English. I learn PE and Music, too. Thanks to school. She didn't seem to have understood the topic fully. John commented that Mei's arguments might have sounded simple, but earnestness in simplicity, also carried a power to persuade one's audience. Whether she understood or not, Mei kept her head down and blushed. I saw then there was a student in our class who held her head even lower than I did.

Then I heard a sound. It's killing me, Mei repeated softly, talking to herself, in Korean, unmistakably. I looked directly at her. Her lips were shut tight as if nothing had happened. She was Korean. How had I not noticed? Why hadn't I considered it? Koreans were by no means rare at the international schools I'd been to, either in Manila or Tokyo. I'd never told anyone I was half-Korean. I always feared it might make me even more hated. Once in Manila a girl from Busan learned my mother was Korean and started to screech and sob, saying she didn't want to be the same nationality as a pig.

The next day, when the lunch bell rang, everybody pulled out their lunch boxes. There was no school cafeteria, so everyone brought their own lunch of a sandwich or something. Every day, my mother would prepare and pack in my lunch box a small sandwich, containing half a boiled egg, and some sliced cucumber and tomato. I looked around the classroom. Every pair—Ben and Mickey, Chloe and Jessie, Jamie and Michael, Nicole and Judy—were sitting beside each other and eating their own sandwiches. Why then, I thought, shouldn't Rieh and Mei sit and eat together? Mei looked surprised when I approached. She rolled her shoulders inward and asked, in English, Why? What she meant was did I have something to tell her. I want to have lunch with you, I told her in Korean. The facial expression she made in that moment has stayed with me forever. I feel almost sorry no one else was there to remember it with me. Ah you Korean? she said. You ah Japanese! Mei blinked at me like I was a ghost. She might have hated the fact that my fat body shared the same blood as hers. I'm Japanese all right, but I learned Korean from my mother, I answered vaguely. Ah . . . ! She held the astonished tone. But your Korean is great! Thank you. I confessed then that it was my first time to talk to anyone other

than my mom in Korean. Really? Yeah, so I'm nervous, I said. Mei laughed, letting her guard down. The smile made her face cute, a face like a naughty bunny.

Once she could speak her native language, she no longer seemed quiet. I couldn't fathom how she had kept all the thoughts in her mind to herself. Oh, right, what did he say? I mean, in the debate class. I mean, John. You didn't hear it? No, I only understood half of it. Mei said her English was not good enough. In my last school we had to speak Russian. She told me she'd transferred from an international school in Moscow the previous semester. I asked if it was because of her dad's work, to which she responded, What? Then she explained she hadn't come here with her dad. She'd come alone. Alone? Yeah, I'm alone here, but . . . She paused a moment. Not totally alone—with a couple other people. I didn't understand how she'd come, with what sort of people, but I didn't want to pry. I told Her John had complimented her in debate class. She giggled. I don't believe you!

When she opened her lunchbox, it was magnificent. A thick piece of hamburger steak with proper sauce, fried shrimp, fried chicken, and several huge sandwiches stuffed with thick slices of ham, cheese and lettuce. Carefully rinsed green grapes and neatly cut bite-sized melon slices sat in a separate container. You eat all that every day? Mei's astonishment was equal to mine. That's all you eat? The second time we had lunch together, her lunchbox had all the same things in it as the day before. She handed me the largest drumstick. My mother's face appeared to me. I found myself pulling my hand away. The last time I'd had a fried drumstick with crispy batter was the previous Thanksgiving, when they served a special

meal at our school in Tokyo. Mei stared in my eyes, still holding out the drumstick. The piece of poor chicken was placed in my hand by Mei's. I brought it to my mouth hesitantly. The skin of the cold chicken was oily and the lean meat was dry and light. It was surprisingly delicious. I chewed it down to the last strand of meat stuck to the bone. Mei laughed and made her bunny face again.

The third day we had lunch together, we sat a bit closer. Mei opened her lunch box, revealing the same items, then she asked me, Would you mind eating it for me? From that day we started trading lunches. She told me the small sandwich my mother packed for me was exactly right for her. She hated anything oily. So, like all inevitable things in life, it happened because we agreed with each other. When she ate, Mei kept her mouth closed tight like a tiny bird pecking at feed. I had to open my mouth as wide as I could to accommodate Mei's thick sandwich, as I hadn't done since I was four. Every day we sat next to each other at lunch time and traded lunches. We completed the combination of pairs: Ben and Mickey; Chloe and Jessie; Jamie and Michael; Nicole and Judy; and finally Mei and Rieh. It had become a world of perfect balance.

After our seventh lunch together, Mei pulled something out of her bag: shiny white pebbles, five in total. Have you ever seen these? she asked. They're just rocks, I answered. They looked to me like Gonggi stones, so I picked them up, she said. I couldn't understand what she meant. Isn't "gonggi" Korean for "air"? Mei showed me what she meant. Her hands were small, and her fingers were stubby. She spread the pebbles out evenly on the desk, then picked up one of them and tossed it up into the air. While the one pebble was still in the air, she quickly grabbed another pebble up off the desk and caught the falling one in almost the same instant.

She repeated it again and again until she had all five pebbles in her hand again. Kuck-ki! she announced. Then she tossed all the pebbles at once from her palm and quickly turning her hand over caught them all on the back of her hand. From the back of her hand she threw them in the air and quickly turned her palm up again so that the pebbles fell into her palm and settled, safely enclosed. I watched the wizardry with my mouth agape. It was like seeing a magic in the combination of pebbles, air, and a human being.

You can do it better than I can, because you have bigger hands, she said. She nudged the pebbles towards me. Out of her hand, they looked even shiner. I clasped them in my hand. They felt warm. I threw one of them in the air as Mei had done. Before I could make any other move, it plummeted under the desk. We burst out laughing. They say with everything practice makes perfect, and they're usually right. I got better quickly. At a certain point, I was able to pick up the stones two at a time, then three at a time. As the semester reached the midway point, I started to beat Mei at it. Our classmates gathered around us spontaneously after lunch. Sometimes Chloe and Jessie joined and we played with teams of two. I learned the rule of gaining ten points, or "years," if you clapped your hands before catching the stones falling out of the air. Clapping three times meant thirty years, five times, fifty years. We clapped and clapped, again and again. How many years did we end up sharing in total? A thousand? Ten thousand? One hundred thousand?

Whenever we played with teams, Chloe and Jessie lost. We can change partners, Mei suggested. Then the teams will be balanced for skill level and it'll be more fair. I was nervous about separating

from Mei, but everyone else liked the idea, so I smiled and went along. Mei played tremendously in the match that day. Her tiny hands moved so fast it was hard to count her score. While the stones were in the air, she managed to get more and more claps. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. I thought she was doing so well, and yet I felt afraid at the same time. As she was clapping, I nudged her shoulder gently, very gently, just for fun—suddenly she lost her balance and fell. Maybe it happened because she'd been looking up at the air. It might also have been that in the moment I forgot my own strength. She toppled over sideways. Ever so slightly sticking out from the desk was the sharp end of a nail that penetrated her forehead as she fell face first on it. Blood gushed out of her forehead. The school nurse was called, but it was too severe for her to deal with. An ambulance arrived. They took me with them too, not because I had been the cause of the injury, but because I cried so loud and horribly they were worried I had sustained some kind of mental shock.

Each of us had guardians summoned to the emergency room of the General Hospital in K. Scared out of her wits hearing mention of a nail in the forehead, my mother rushed to the hospital and couldn't hide her immediate relief when she realized I was not the one that had been injured. The nail had gone deeper into Mei's forehead than expected. Worst of all, though, the bleeding wouldn't stop. Plastic surgeons were rare in K, so a surgeon sewed up the wound. Mei's parents didn't show up. Her guardians were a man and a woman, however, both Asian.

I was lying on the bed next to Mei's getting an IV sedative when I saw them come in. They approached Mei and bowed politely. They used the formal aspect, addressing her in Korean, expressing

a sincere worry for her recovery but no trace of deep affection. Affection can't be faked. As they spoke, their accent registered in my head. In that instant, everything became clear. My mother wasn't in the room, and I wished she'd never come back.

When my mother did return, she spoke to Mei's guardians in English. It's too bad, she said. Probably she had meant to say she was sorry. She seemed to think speaking in a way that could be construed as apologetic might implicate us if it came down to deciding on someone to blame. Whether they understood or not, they sat sullenly. I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I closed my eyes and pretended to be sleeping, then I peeked them open. An incomprehensible, unidentifiable buzzing flew around the room, then collided with my ears and shattered. Then I heard clear Korean. It was from Mei. I lost my balance while I was playing. It was my fault. My mother interrupted in the voice she used only when necessary. Oh, are you Korean?

Mei's real name was Mea-Hee, Chang Mea-Hee, and her country of origin was the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—North Korea. As we left the ER, the doctor advised my mother that I was in poor health, and could suffer from malnutrition if I didn't start eating better. She said she understood. I knew she was not actually listening to him. If my mother lost her mind over the idea that I was responsible for putting a gash in the forehead of a North Korean girl, the guardians of Mei must have been equally appalled that the daughter of whatever powerful North Korean had entrusted her to them was friends with the child of a South Korean woman. Or was that all just in my imagination?

The next day my mother called out to me as I was leaving for school. She said she'd asked the principal as a special favor to

have me transferred into another class. You shouldn't talk to her in the meanwhile, she said. Why not? I yelled. Would you rather transfer to another school? my mother asked me seriously. I heard her family is very powerful there. Doesn't the fact that she came to study here tell you anything? My mother had a special talent for not letting me say "I don't know" about things I didn't know, which in turn prevented me from ever asking or finding out. I looked her in the eye. Standing beside each other barefoot I was now taller than her. I could sense her deliberately straightening her posture in order not to look shorter than me. I thought about all the countless Korean words she'd spoken to me. I had to accept that they'd made me. Still I had to tell. No. My mother's eyes widened. I won't go to another class, I won't go to another school, either, I said. I will stay with Mei. When I'd said that, I felt a stinging pain on the left side of my chest. One of the shards of broken glass in her veins might have silently migrated into my body where it now swirled around.

Mei didn't show up for class. It seemed it would take time for the wound to heal. It had been a long time since I'd eaten my own lunch. It was paper thin and tasted terrible. Suddenly I felt sorry for Mei's having enjoyed this horrible sandwich. Are you okay? Jessie came and asked. I'm okay, I answered briskly. I tried to smile but it was hard to move my jaw muscles. A week passed, and still Mei hadn't shown up. Miranda didn't share any news about how she was doing. It was as if she'd gotten a special request to be extra cautious around me. The class shrank to nine. Ben with Mickey, Chloe with Jessie, Jamie with Michael, Nicole with Judy. And I, Rieh Watanabe, was left alone.

I had to do something before it was too late. One afternoon when I was at home alone, I found some manila boxes in a storage