Whisper Yet

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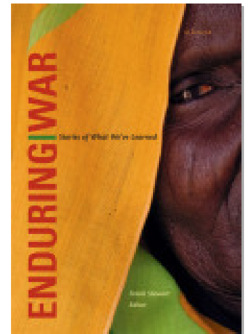

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CH'OE YUN

Whisper Yet

If that's what you really want, my child. If you want to be an assassin, the assassin in your comics, then yes. I can see you walking soundlessly through streams of mysterious moonlight, scaling walls impossibly high; I can hear your nimble, light-footed steps as you pass by the village of the unforgivable. If you were an assassin, what would your weapon be? I can see you in the middle of a vast plain under the moon's white halo, trying to decide which way your path lies. But I can't visualize the weapon rising from your hand. Perhaps a small glowing wand? Like the light of your eyes, so clear and bright that they glow green in the night? Yes. Your weapon must not have a sharp cutting edge. Like light or air, it must be impalpable, yet it must make everyone stand stock-still before it and look about himself. Yes, my child. If it is so, you may become the child assassin of your comics. If in that way you can stand in the face of a tidal wave. If in that way you can transcend the hearts and minds of those who are hurting.

Allow me a cigarette, my child. A wisp of smoke disinfects the inside of the belly. Like the fog. Like the light of the setting sun. Look at the woods out there. Ah, why should I long for the bramble patch that once seemed so desolate? It's no use. Whoever has lingered at dusk on the shore of a woodland lake knows. Knows that the boundary between day and evening, water and sky, one utterance and another becomes blurred at a certain moment. Knows precisely where that boundary becomes blurred. Isn't the world's most beautiful scenery located at such boundaries? Tears flow from my eyes at such a moment. Why? Is it because of you? I see now that no tear is ever entirely pure. For dissolved in joy there is sorrow, just as the most extreme sorrow invariably brings with it, however small, an expectation of happiness. So tears are like a narcotic: if not allowed to flow at their appointed time, they awaken the convulsions that lurk in the depths of our very existence. So, my child, we must learn to see the tears of those who cry unseen, or who want to cry but cannot.

Yes, it would be a good thing. If only people were honest enough to cry when they must, my child, flowers would bloom inside my belly. Why there? Because nothing is more honest than the inside of the belly. Doesn't everything happen because of what happens inside the belly? After the world was

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Mamuthones, Mamoiada, Sardinia.
Photograph by Ferdinando
Scianna, 2003. Magnum Photos.

made and since the very first day humans appeared in it, has it ever been different? Long live the inside of the belly! Inside the belly where once you were. Yes, long may it live! I must put on my sunglasses. The sun is still hot.

An orchard in northern Kyŏnggi Province. We were spending a week there, a week our daughter had so wished for—a *vacance,* as we called it. When she was little our daughter often confused *vacance* with Pakk'asŭ, a popular tonic, giving us many a laugh. There she sat, wearing sunglasses with pink frames, the plastic lenses nearly black, her lips thrust out in a pout, arms folded like a grown-up's. Though I could not see her expression, I had the impression she resented the blazing sun and its heat, and the blandness of the scenery. Seen through my heavily tinted sunglasses, the sea, the yacht, and the goldfish in her diary were a jumble, the sea bluer, the yacht whiter, and the three goldfish more orange and undulating, as if in violent revolt.

"My child, you look just like Greta Garbo the way you sit."

"Who's Greta Garbo?" she answered sullenly, staring into the still scenery where the light of the white-hot sun cast the shadows of the trees in clear relief. She looked like she might burst into a tantrum.

"The most beautiful woman in the world—at least that's what Mama thinks."

"Yeah?" she said, flashing a smile. I returned to my afternoon doze, and my child to her summer vacation picture diary.

A lake. Is that the right word for such a small water hole? Still, that's what everyone called it. This lake peeked shyly from a thicket of scrub at the foot of a hill and a soft, clear light seemed always to play about its shores. Located in such an out-of-the-way place, it was a welcome sight to a person clambering down the hillside at dusk. Water striders making innumerable tiny dimples on the surface—in my mind I can still see very clearly the barely visible legs of those insects and the busy flapping of the birds. Small and nondescript though they were, those birds flew no less impressively than the hawks soaring confidently among the mountain summits. They traced large circles low in the sky, then dropped down to skim the narrow surface of the water before soaring up and around in more low circles, ultimately to catch and consume small fish. They might have been kingfishers. Evening meals in flight. Yes, birds in the wild are sometimes more elegant than people.

The monsoons had been awful that summer. One day, after they had finally passed, we saw that a lake had formed. And with the lake came the birds, and with the birds the water striders…Anybody who has spent hours sitting by that lake knows: from whichever side you looked, you saw only half the sky reflected on the surface of the water. For a very long time I was unhappy that the sky was not reflected in its entirety. When I close my eyes, the first thing I see is the lake reflecting all of the sky, except where it's in the shade of the trees. For a long time I thought the lakeshore would be the place

to welcome you into the world. Why? It was probably the lonesomeness evoked by the scenery there. On the very day you first opened your eyes I wanted you to see the lonesomeness of the deserted orchard. Not the closed room with the pink curtains and the extra-tiny bed and the humidified air, but the field spreading beyond the lake and its desertlike thicket of scrub. I wanted you to see the starting point of your life. Those who have seen the wasteland come to feel a deep sense of shame about life. And they do not expect too much from it.

"My, this lake is lonesome."

"What lake? The lake where Dad went fishing?"

"No."

"Mama, you're talking to yourself again!"

One of my husband's friends had sold his business and resettled his family at this countryside orchard. If not for his suggestion, my family and I would have spent this summer, like other summers, watching Hong Kong martial arts films or heaven knows what other videos, with scarcely a glimpse of the outdoors. Neither of us relished the prospect of fighting our way through the hordes of people packing the popular vacation spots—assuming we could afford to go to those spots in the first place. Nor were we as a couple resourceful enough to devise a new and different form of vacation. So when my husband's friend suggested we look after the orchard during his family's absence—he was taking everyone, including his parents, to Guam or Saipan or some such vacation spot where the coconut palms sway like they do in calendar photos—we for our part, and each for a different reason, welcomed it with shouts of joy. Finally we were going on a vacation! My husband gave me a conspiratorial wink, probably thinking about the fishing hole that was supposed to be thirty minutes away, while our daughter could hardly sleep thinking about the *vacance* she had so wished for, as well as our promise to let her feed the chickens and ducks at the orchard. As for me…the single word *orchard* aroused a strange madness in the depths of my mind, and gazing into the distance, I nodded.

But this orchard was different from the one I had conjured up in my reveries. It was too large and luxuriant, not a single water hole anywhere but noisy animals everywhere. With thirty-some chickens, a dozen ducks, and a turkey, peacock, and parrot to boot, and with more high-priced garden plants and shrubs than fruit trees, it was more a zoo and a nursery than an orchard. In the morning, following the instructions of my husband's friend, we turned on all the whirling irrigators and watered by hand those spots the hoses didn't reach, and by the time we finished feeding all the birds—having had no chance to rest—our morning was gone. Even feeding the birds was no easy task; our daughter soon followed me at a distance with an unhappy expression as I made the rounds of the smelly bird cages with a feeder. It was heavy labor.

Still, I was happy. An orchard. The orchard I had known was a small, lonesome place at the verge of a hill in a secluded mountain valley. And

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there was a lake. That lake had been my secret pride when I was little and all by myself in Seoul, attending school. It was the one thing, my one and only trump card, that I could shout out in my mind when those brats in Seoul got to teasing me. *You know what? We have a lake at our orchard in the country—a lake!* I pronounced "lake" with a great deal of pride, because there was a face that always followed in its wake as soon as I uttered that magical word, and there was a secret love I had received from the owner of that face, a clumsy love I felt to be almost unconditional, a love that lasted because it was clumsy.

I learned early on that not all that has vanished is beautiful. Throughout my life—or half of it, at least—I learned it through Uncle Chŏng, the handyman at the desolate orchard my parents had acquired in the countryside with much difficulty. He referred to himself as Ajaebi—a humble, avuncular appellation—and that is how he was known to all. Both the orchard and Ajaebi are gone now. For a long time I shut the memory of his life out of my mind. He passed away early, barely beyond his mid-fifties, and to settle the debts that had accumulated over time we were forced to sell the orchard just before my daughter was born. In its place there is now an inn resembling a hillside villa; no trace of the orchard remains. He's gone and the orchard too, and the lake has been filled in with dirt. And what I am left with is one thing alone—an overwhelming sorrow. The sorrow of one who has never repaid even a measure of the great love she has received, who just when she's become faintly aware of her gains and losses in life and attempts to repay that love, realizes that the object of her indebtedness is gone. The sorrow that fills her heart at that instant is like water filling a well. And whenever it wells up, I have a mad desire to speak endlessly of the debt of love that was once my pride and the lake that is a small symbol of that love.

But I have never told anyone my story, all of it, to its conclusion. Not even my husband. He too grieved when we sold the orchard that had meant so much to me, not as much as I but still enough to comfort me. And back when we had started dating, he had already heard enough about the orchard handyman, who had long since passed on. But to tell all about a person's life to someone who never knew him is troubling work, indeed an impossible task for one who lacks the patience to explain everything step by step. Worse, because my listener, however empathic he might be, does not share my emotional twists and turns, he is likely to feel left out. For this or whatever other reason, my stories invariably came out stale and bland. There were times when I thought I had related the entire tale, only to feel the next instant an emptiness both unexpected and bewildering.

Even before I became aware of it, because of a slight movement of the curtains or the shadows cast by flowering plants—frequently it was something quite insignificant—the old sorrow would well up from my heart, choking me. The story of the orchard and of Ajaebi, in what tone of voice

should I tell it? Should I tell it in whispers, as if revealing with great reluctance something hidden and taboo? Should I tell it breathlessly, exaggerating like we do when we're talking about a person with whom we have no direct connection? Or perhaps the tone should be offhand and frivolous, as when we say, "How horrible," but don't really mean it? I guess I could highlight the anecdotes in a more tragic tone—in a way that might come closest to the reality—but the strange thing is, the melancholy I feel won't let me do that, because I'm afraid that the tragedy in my voice would destroy the words and make them disappear.

"Mama, I've finished my picture diary."

"Let's have a look…Well, this doesn't look like a diary to me. There's no ocean, no yachts where we are now. Why don't you just draw the ducks and the turkey?"

"Mama, I'm tired."

"Then how about I tell you a story—a story that happened a long, long time ago?"

"A true story or one that's made up?"

"A true story, of course."

"You mean that story about when you lived in the country? Mama, you're so old-fashioned."

"All right, then, you can go play instead."

As if freed from an onerous curfew, she picked up the dragonfly net that was leaning against a tree and ran off toward the house. Her mind had already zeroed in on the backyard, where flowering trees were in bloom and where in a thriving tangle of weeds the dragonflies had their stronghold.

My child, why don't people grow up sooner? That you are still a child wears me out so. Yes, my child, I'll tell you the story you're fond of, the story about the bicycle. I wonder if you remember all the stories I whispered to you before you were born. Stories innumerable that I whispered while I waited for you. You were fond of the bicycle story and the lake story. Do you remember? When I felt you grumbling inside me and I told you the lake or the bicycle story, you became still. Yes, there was a bicycle, a magic bicycle. I don't remember when my eyes and my body got so used to it, but the bicycle became like another pair of legs attached to my own. My child, look over there, in the shadows of distant time—that bicycle leaning against the stump. Do you see it? Ah, of course the air in the tires is taking a rest, the chain and the leather seat are discolored, the spring beneath the seat is rusted. But no matter. To be at rest is to loosen, grow slack…Still, my child, imagine that bicycle with a basket on the carrying rack, the old tires pumped full of air and shedding their dust, the wheel spokes whirling, the chain oiled…Imagine it speeding through the secret shaded places of the orchard…My child, nobody can touch the bicycle resting in the shade. If you touch it, it just might crumble into dust.

On the day the lake came into being in the orchard, I knew that you too would someday come into being. I must have been about one and a half times your age. At the end of that year's awesome monsoons, a large water hole was hollowed out. The lake came into being a few days later. It was Ajaebi's gift. Yes, my child, after he dug for three days and three nights in the large water hole made by the long rainy season and he captured the water streaming down the hillside, the lake came into being.

There are times when, quite unexpectedly, we become witness to someone else's life. Like the other evening, when I saw something that ought to have remained unseen. On that cool early summer evening, I had gone out to the walkway fronting our apartment building and was looking absently at the building opposite, waiting for our daughter to come back from her friend's. Since ours is a crowded apartment complex, the interiors of the apartments across the way, less than fifty yards off, were clearly visible. My absent gaze was caught by something: a man and a woman grappling over a knife—a large kitchen knife, there was no mistaking it—a horribly chaotic scene that was clearly visible against the background of the lighted interior. The scene—more exaggerated, surreal even, because their voices were inaudible—was like something out of a violent film. Quieting my pounding heart, I went to the door of what I thought was their apartment and strained to listen. No sound came from within. There was only a stream of words from a television blaring from the open door of the next apartment, but the voices sounded as stereo in my mind.

There was nothing I could do. I felt strangely impotent, which always makes me mutter to myself, "What a fool I am." But in this case my inaction turned out to have been the correct thing. On the weekend a few days later, when the knife-wielding couple passed by me, smiling, their arms linked together affectionately, all I could do was walk by them quickly with my eyes downcast so I wouldn't stare at the bruise on the woman's face. I can't count all the times such things have happened to me. Things everyone else would soon forget, considering them unimportant, yet they destroy the tranquility of my everyday life each time they happen. How frightful it is to witness the hidden lives of others! I had come to understand early in life that to be such a witness is to incur a debt that will follow you around all your life. And that was when I asked myself, without really understanding what I was asking, "Did Ajaebi love me because he chose me to be the witness to his life, or did he choose me because he loved me?"

Only later, much, much later, when I began to uncover the links essential to understanding his life, did I ask myself a different question: "What did he wish for when he chose me as his witness?"

Our daughter is now eight years old; in no time she'll be ten! After capturing three or four dragonflies, which she proceeded to imprison in her yellow plastic dragonfly house, she looked like she was going to be prancing around for a while, but now I couldn't see her. I wondered if she had gone

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inside for a nap. Maybe it's because we had our daughter almost in our mid-thirties that our vacation plans, right down to the packing of our bags, always turned into a big production. We wanted to make it the kind of vacation she would remember all her life. Playing at being an American Indian, or a firefighter…Not long ago her dream was to be a firefighter wearing a red helmet. Now her dream is to be an assassin infiltrating an extraterrestrial world.

Different from our grand plan, as soon as my husband rose he left for his fishing hole in a village off beyond the orchard. Why didn't I dislike him, this maniac for fishing? I liked to visualize him beneath the scorching sun, sitting at his fishing hole after throwing in his line. It was like we were each playing at a secret game we alone knew. When he returned in the evening and put down his creel, empty except for a few still-wiggling loach, I loved seeing his face with such a purified look. Yes, I like people who know how to sit for a long time in front of water. For I know it's not something just anyone can enjoy. After lunch together, my daughter and I sat on a mat spread out in a corner of the orchard and I tried half-heartedly to play along in a game she had suggested, but my thoughts insisted on wandering the orchard and lake of my long-ago childhood.

I don't know by what course of events my parents, originally from Songnim in Hwanghae Province, came to own the orchard that became their livelihood. I vaguely remember hearing that they might have been helped a great deal by someone from their ancestral village who had come south earlier and grown wealthy. My parents, innocent beginners in life when they had lived in the North, came south all by themselves and settled down to a life of farming, in which they had little experience. They cleared hillsides into dry fields and they planted fruit trees. Still, I don't remember them ever being well off. They named their orchard—and me—Songnim, or Pine Forest, after the ancestral village, though there weren't many pine trees on our Songnim Farm. Perhaps because the work of the orchard was too much for my inexperienced parents, my father had frequent bouts of sickness from early on. How much more desperate the situation would have been if on a certain night a certain man had not arrived to live at the orchard. If not for that man's helping hand, the orchard would have reverted to its earlier state, a wilder, uncultivated hillside. As it did after that man was dead and gone.

That young man was Ajaebi, and he spent the difficult latter half of his life with my parents as the orchard handyman. But I don't remember him ever being young. Because he called my mother Older Sister and my father Older Brother, I thought he was a relative. In time I heard he was a former P.O.W., an anti-Communist who at our orchard had found a new life. According to what I overheard my parents say when I was a child, he had been found unconscious and wracked with fever at the foot of the hill. Luckily my father was the first to see him. In two weeks' time he was

healthy again, and before long he became known to the village people as one of my parents' distant relatives. Since what I call our village consisted of no more than twenty households in a remote mountain valley, it was almost as if Ajaebi had dropped out of the sky and into our orchard. When the village people talked about him, the term "P.O.W." would slip out now and then, dark and sinister. But I soon forgot that darkness, because I could not reconcile it with the bright smile that lit up his eyes whenever he looked at me. And the others too must have forgotten that word as they came to know him as the person who single-handedly took on all the difficult work of the village. In this way, coming to our orchard at about the time of my birth and becoming one of our family, he became indispensable not only to us but also to the village people. A relative who didn't speak the amusing and affectionate northern dialect my parents used and who worked in silence the whole day long. Such was what I understood of him when I was little.

Because of Father's chronic illness and Mother's having to nurse him as well as do the physical labor around the house, I have a lot more memories of time spent with Ajaebi than with my parents. I played baby games with him, sitting on his knee; I learned to read from him before starting elementary school. Taking me to and from school, a mile and a half away, was also his responsibility, as was looking over my homework with me sitting beside him, as I'm doing now with my daughter, and telling me ghost and goblin stories in a slow and halting manner, deliberately mimicking an old man. The orchard was his, at least in the sense that his hands were the means by which everything there was accomplished. As soon as school was over, I would follow him around, learning how to prune trees and plant flower seeds. One summer vacation he made a tree house for me out of thin planks, and there I sat and played. When the weather was good, he would sneak food from the pantry for our fishing trips—food that Mother was saving for the ritual birthday ceremonies for Grandfather and Grandmother, left behind in the North. They were delicious happenings, delicious enough to have nearly erased any memory of deprivation. Thus I reached the age of ten following him around, heart and soul.

The day I turned ten, Ajaebi had a meeting arranged by a matchmaker. He had been refusing to consider marriage, even though he was by then in his late thirties. Did he suddenly give in that one time to my mother's insistence, or did he merely go along with it? He took me with him to meet the woman, who worked at a soup-and-rice place in a town some six miles off. The dirt road over the mountain pass seemed unusually bleached out and endless that day. For me, who had been roughing it at the orchard like a feral beast, it was a genuinely curious experience, enough so that I could vividly recount all the details. Additionally, the dark interior of the soup-and-rice place; the old woman with the moustache under her nose just like a man's, the likes of whom I had never seen in my life; and the melancholy

faces of a man and a woman, mouths clamped shut, the old hag sitting between them, puffing on a cigarette and continually filling Ajaebi's drinking vessel—all these established in my mind a fixed bias against the so-called matchmaking meeting. It took root in my consciousness, accompanied by enough stink and gloom to chill my heart.

It was on this very day that I became for the first time a witness to his life. The decisive moment came—if we were to look at its effect—when he asked me on our way back, "Song-a, dear, you saw her. How did she look to you?"

Maybe it was because his face was flushed from drink and he wasn't used to drinking. When he looked at me with an unusually bright gaze, I knew this was no time to play games or to lie. "She didn't look like she could live at our orchard. Right?"

My answer arose from my very real concern that if this match were to take place, he might leave the orchard forever and go to live at the soup-and-rice place with the sorrowful-looking woman who wasn't even pretty.

He didn't say anything for quite some time. By then the town was behind us and we were walking along the bleached-out dirt road. I remember it was spring, because he made me a flute with a twig broken off a flowering tree.

"Yes, Song-a, you're right. Most likely she won't be able to live with me. Anyway, Ajaebi has a son. And besides, since my wife is alive and well, how could I get married again? It's foolish."

"If it's your son, Ajaebi, then isn't he my brother? Where is he? Can I bring him home with us?"

"No, Song-a, you couldn't bring him home even if you knew where he was."

"Wow, Ajaebi, I think you made that up."

"Yes, Song-a, I made up a story and I'm being a tease. I don't even know why I said that."

Still, the woman from the soup-and-rice place came to live at the orchard. And then one night she left—left without even taking her things. She had been with us for six months. That she stole away from the orchard was perfectly understandable. After she arrived, Ajaebi accompanied me to school more frequently, coming back long before school was out to wait for me by the playground, smoking. By then I was feeling all grown up, so I considered Ajaebi a nuisance because if I went home with him, I couldn't play with my friends after school. After the woman arrived, he would remain longer and later at our place than at the little cottage at the foot of the hill that he had built for himself and her. And more frequently he and Father would play chess until very late, and as they had always done the two of them would talk endlessly together, and he would sometimes fall asleep on the wooden floor of the veranda outside our family room. And whenever he and the woman were alone, he would come for me and have me sit with them like a hostage in order to escape the awkwardness and

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stiffness between them. As the days passed, the undercurrent of deep, gloomy silence wore increasingly on my nerves, finally making me bolt whenever he summoned me. It was at this point that the woman vanished.

I have often thought that I was responsible for the woman's flight, that the gap between Ajaebi and the woman became wider because of what I said on our way back from the matchmaking meeting. But as I grew older and discovered more about him, and as I looked back on their brief life together, the only conclusion I could draw was that what happened to them had been unavoidable, and no one could have done anything about it. For, to put it in a sentence, he was in a different place entirely.

My child, I feel dizzy. Sometimes I am greatly distressed because I fear I have brought you into an unsafe world. Although some have suggested I try the so-called mind control or zen, I wonder if I am not an offspring of a reptile family. Because I feel most comfortable when I am crawling on the ground. My child, if I had a chance to start over again, I think I would first change how we measure things. For sure. I would measure all distances and heights by drops of sweat. Mount Paektu, Mount Halla, Mount Chiri… Mountains like these would be measured by 500, 400, 300 drops of sweat per yard above sea level, and from Chongno to Seoul Station 50 drops of sweat per yard, and so on. Work would also be measured by sweat. Work of 400 drops of sweat per hour and work of 500 drops of sweat per hour. Measured this way, the lake into which Ajaebi put the sky on a certain day—how many drops of sweat would it be worth? And I wonder…what if we could convert all the tears we shed in our lives into energy? The energy of one teardrop… What should be the conversion rate for the energy of our tears? Just call it drops of?…Like, for instance, tears worth five drops of energy. Such a pointless game allows us to forget the frightful holes we see when the ground suddenly splits open.

I can't help smiling when I think about your beginning. I thought there surely would be a peal of thunder and my body would radiate bright light. Such signs would show themselves everywhere in me, letting the whole world know. But you came quietly, without a sound, without a sign. Two months inside my belly before you announced yourself. So secret and so shy you were.

My child, you who are without the energy of tears, you whose tears cannot yet be converted into energy. What stories shall I tell you now, stories that are not whisperings inside the belly?

I never saw Ajaebi shed tears. But the strange thing is, when I think of his aged countenance, what comes to mind is a wrinkled and tearful face—perhaps because I alone knew of the several times when he might actually have wanted to cry. That face of his then was the face I disliked the most, the face that made me most angry. Upon reflection, it occurs to me that I rarely saw on his face the shimmering smile that reminds me of springtime heat. To the village people, the orchard handyman was only a reticent, melancholy man of small stature, albeit a workman extraordinaire.

I knew—though I don't know precisely *when* I first knew—that he was neither a former anti-Communist P.O.W. nor a native of my parents' ancestral village, only that he had escaped from somewhere. I didn't learn this from my parents or from the villagers with whom we had the most contact. But whether it was intuition or the exercise of my imagination triggered by some ambiguous clue he happened to drop when we were alone, I came to understand he had been a fugitive. From what precisely, I never knew. It seemed such a grave matter, I dared not ask about it.

When I was thirteen, I became for the second time a witness to his life, a witness who could only conclude he was a fugitive, with all the privations that entailed. The small event that occurred in the summer of that year could have been related to my leaving home for Seoul. For it was he who expressed the deepest regret—grief even—at my leaving to go to school there. To me his expression of regret and grief was the most natural thing. Young as I was, I took his expression of love for me as a kind of bonus, something I deserved above and beyond the love of my parents.

I made several trips to Seoul with Mother to apply to a girls' middle school, now that I had finished elementary school back home. My parents had no relatives in Seoul—they had come from the North all by themselves so Mother and I spent a couple of weeks at an inn, until we decided on a boardinghouse for me. Leaving me by myself in our shabby room at the inn to prepare for the entrance examination, Mother ran around Seoul from dawn till late at night. She had already decided I would pass the exam as a matter of course, but even after she found a boardinghouse not far from the school, she continued to spend entire days going around the city. Clearly her attention was taken up with something other than my entrance exam. And it could not have been simply the curiosity of someone who was a stranger to Seoul, for she wore the same peculiar expression she sometimes displayed when she talked about the family and the landmarks she had left behind in her ancestral village—an expression equally of excitement and blankness. A similarly misty expression had doubtless veiled my face as well when my husband made his proposal about taking care of his friend's orchard. Looking at Mother's face late one night when she returned to the inn, I knew immediately she had found whatever it was she had sought.

As soon as we learned I had passed the entrance exam, Mother hurried back to the orchard to catch up on housework. I had no problem adjusting to Seoul, maybe because I had inherited from my parents the toughness of Hwanghae people. I would astonish my classmates by doing wild, eccentric things like running barefoot out onto the playground when it rained; lifting effortlessly the flower pots no one else could lift in the gardening class; and reviving in one week an all-but-dead flowerbed. Although I was summoned now and then to the school-counselor's room because of my loud wailing and laughing in the empty after-hours classroom, I managed quite well in my own way.

"Father is unwell, come home this weekend. And don't forget to buy such-and-such medications and bring them with you." Rather than such letters from my parents, I much preferred Ajaebi's succinct missives: "In your absence even the grass is withering—Ajaebi." Letters that had me mumbling to myself, "Ajaebi is a poet."

My first summer break from school in Seoul arrived. It was during that summer break that my father's chronic heart disease turned decisively worse. Ajaebi's nursing of Father was even more devoted than Mother's, which continued unchanged in its intensity or tenderness to the very last. Any change? Unthinkable! Better than brothers born of the same mother, each understanding the other by glances alone, they became practically inseparable. Several times late at night I saw Ajaebi scribbling and erasing in old notebooks I no longer kept. That I became particularly interested in these notebooks only belatedly might have been because I too had begun to keep a journal around then. For all I know, he might have been writing in notebooks for quite a long time.

Whenever there was a pause in the work of the orchard, Ajaebi would come running to Father for one of their low, whispered conversations. It seemed to me that for the most part he talked with Father about matters related to the orchard. They would speak in hushed voices for the longest time. When Father had been able to move about with ease, they used to sit together on the wooden bench in front of the house. But after Father's condition worsened, they closeted themselves in the room where Father's bedding was spread out. When they were thus engrossed, it was understood no one was to disturb them; Mother was to sleep in my room or in the room across from Father's, because they would talk through the night. Their whisperings, coming seemingly from afar, sounded so peaceful that even recalling them evoked in me a sharp and aching longing for them.

At the end of that same summer there occurred a strange journey. Ajaebi, as he often did, wanted to take me into town to get Father's medications and look at new and improved insecticides and farm implements, and it was perfectly sensible for him to want someone along to help him bring everything back. But as soon as we got into town that day, he hurried through the errands. And then, leaving our purchases at the farm machinery store, but without a word of explanation, he took me onto a bus with him. Two hours over country roads, off the bus for a quick lunch, then back on. Something fierce about him prevented me from asking myself why I followed him so unquestioningly, and the face gazing fixedly outside the window was too icy and forbidding for me to question him. I ended up falling asleep inside that sultry bus without exchanging a single word with him.

The place where we arrived as the sun was slanting past its meridian was a small town not far from M City. We went into a snow-cone shop near the depot. Only then did I notice that Ajaebi was advancing toward the fringes of old age. He was by then barely forty. I saw traces of tears beneath the

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eyes of that prematurely aged face. With folded arms he was pressing down hard on his chest, as if by doing so he might hold his aching heart in check. In a strained voice he ordered two of my favorite sweet buns and a glass of crushed ice mixed with sweet beans. I grew anxious watching the flies flitting about madly inside the shop. Ajaebi himself touched none of the things he had ordered.

He was not the only one unable to outrun time. I too had reached a certain age: I was too embarrassed to play the baby or make him laugh by saying something totally absurd. And it was I who started sobbing quietly. Waking from an uneasy sleep, finding us in a strange town, I was overcome by the thought that I was an utter failure in helping Ajaebi in his desperate effort at self-control. There was also a feeling of lonesomeness produced by the fading light of the waning day. But more than anything else, I was afraid I would prove incapable when he finally put to me the task for which we had come such a long distance. If there was ever a time when I so regretted my immaturity as a child, I can't remember it. Had I been a grown-up, I would have found the appropriate words to ease his feeling of helplessness, instantly lifting the gloom from his face by a miracle wrought with a grown-up's wisdom—or so I had thought at the time. But how is it now that I am a grown-up? Recalling how I used to think back then will occasionally bring a wry smile to my face. For if I were to face the same events now as an adult, no doubt I would have tasted, as I did then, the same shocked confusion of utter helplessness. There are sorrows that cannot be eased.

"Song-a, there's something I want you to do, and it's very simple. You can do it, I know you can. All you have to do is toss this inside the gate when no one's looking, that's all. Nothing's going to happen."

As he said this he slid a ticket-shaped letter into my handbag on the table, a letter he had shaped by folding a half sheet of notebook paper lengthwise, then twisting it three times so the top and bottom corners folded into each other. He then produced a sheet of paper and explained in a whisper that on it was the address and a rough sketch of the house I had to find. For an instant the image of Mother back then in Seoul, tramping around the city and copying something down after returning late to the inn, superimposed itself upon the address of the house. And then I understood—Ajaebi was doing something against my mother's wishes; in handing me this rough sketch, he was going against what he had promised not to do.

He went over the steps again and again until the directions began to sound automatic: find the house, wait till no one was around, drop the letter inside the gate. What lay before me seemed like a journey to the country of death. Vaguely afraid that a mistake in carrying out the task might imperil not only Ajaebi but also my family, I was trembling as I left the snow-cone shop. Along the way I must have asked about the name of the district, the location of the post office, and the way to the rear gate of the elementary school; I must have encountered people as I went along—peo-

ple and faces impossible to remember now. Rushing around in confusion, having lost my bearings on a street that stretched out in a straight line, I felt exactly like I did trying to follow a road in a nightmare. As I approached the house, though, I regained a degree of cool-headedness that surprised me. To quiet my wildly beating heart I entered the playground of the elementary school—the final obstacle to my destination. A hot wind swirled around a lonesome playground vacated by schoolchildren on summer break. I was all alone. To understand the nature of the task I was performing, I took the ticket-shaped letter from my handbag, unfolded it, and spread it out. The familiar longish strokes of Ajaebi's handwriting appeared: *No time for the moon to rise on the water of the stream.*

A sentence without head or tail. A message that made no sense. I turned over the sheet, but there was nothing else. The deserted playground seemed an infinite expanse, and I was terrified.

In the end, dropping the letter through a gap in the closed gate of the isolated house was not so difficult. It was as Ajaebi had said. Arriving at the ill-fitting gate, I peered into the shabby-looking cement-layered courtyard but saw no one. How could I fail to do this much for Ajaebi! I must have steeled myself with such thoughts. In went the letter.

I jumped up. A faint voice had called out, a slightly hoarse voice saying something like "Song-a." Then I realized the voice was for my inattentive ears, and yes, it must have been calling me for some time. A child's voice calling "Mama," and not my name, Song-a. I looked around, feeling only the high noon's heat surrounding me like a wall of fire—nothing came into view. On the mat were my daughter's bag with her summer vacation homework, the picture diary with the sea, the many-colored crayons smooth and shiny, looking like they were about to melt. I looked wildly in all directions. My hair stood on end and I broke out in a sweat.

She wasn't there!

I tried to call her, but my voice stuck in my throat. I ran toward where I thought the faint voice had come from. I couldn't hear it now. The only sound was the incongruous squawk of the turkey a short distance off. I went inside, looked into every room, found only dark, cool silence. Like a madwoman I ran through the ground floor, the basement, and the storage room calling her name. I flew out of the house thinking how ghastly and disheveled I must look, ran to the backyard where I had last seen her with her dragonfly net. I shouted insanely, "*Ŭn-ha! Ŭn-ha-ya!*" And finally I heard the faint, reedy voice calling "Mama." But when I turned in the direction of the voice I could see nothing. *Maybe the front yard!* I ran there, backpedaled away from the house, and looked up. There she was, up on the roof, where the sun's scorching heat was beating down, face daubed in black crayon, not daring to move, fixed to the spot. I felt like my blood had evaporated. With a supreme effort I managed to control my voice. The girl, though fearful, was sitting smartly astride the ridge of the roof, as if riding a

horse. I remembered there was a ladder out back. She must have climbed that ladder onto the roof. I mustered just enough energy to say prayerfully, "My child, what are you doing up there?"

The image of our daughter falling from the roof and writhing on the ground flashed through my mind. She stared at me in silence, evidently surprised at my calm façade.

"You need to come down right now. You don't want to get sunstroke, do you?"

Eyes tightly shut, I slowly turned away from the frightful scene. She called out to me, her voice urgent. I turned back to see her small hands reaching out toward me.

"Since you climbed up there all by yourself, shouldn't you climb down by yourself? Mama will stay right here while you climb down nice and slow and careful."

I imagined a fiery sparkle in her pretty eyes. She started to move. Cautiously. Like a cat, first one step, then two. Yes, that's it. That's my girl. Yes, just like that. *Ŭn-ha-ya,* I shouted in my mind, *for you it's that easy!* Finally, her face disappeared from the roof, and a short while later she ran to me from the back of the house. That brief interval felt like eternity.

I embraced her small, hot body as hard as I could. Only then, freeing herself from my embrace, did she run to the shade, sit, and burst into plaintive tears. In the emptiness of the orchard her cries reverberated.

"You look like a chimney ghost. Come to Mama. I'll give you a bath."

"What for, when you hate me so, Mother!"

She spoke formally when she was resentful. Violently shaking her head, she resumed her crying, which before long became a wail.

"If you keep on crying like that, the turkey will run up to you thinking you're her sister. Come—come here."

She looked like she wanted to laugh, but stubbornly she shook her head again.

"What for—you hate me so, Mother!"

I went close and held her tightly. She squirmed like a fish.

"Don't you know how much Mama loves our Ŭn-ha. More than love. Mama *respects* her."

Over and over I kissed her cheeks and the crown of her head, hot to the touch. Long enough until her sorrow melted away. Until her squirming gradually ceased and she yielded her small body gently to my embrace.

"Respect is better than love, right, Mama?"

"Not better. But heavier and deeper."

"Mama, why do you respect me?"

"Because you don't yet have the energy of tears. And because you came down safely from the roof."

"What's the energy of tears?"

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"Well, I wonder sometimes."

I took her to where the faucet was and picked up the long hose lying among the still-small garden plants. I opened the faucet all the way. The strong gush of water was like a shout of joy. I turned the hose on her baby-chubby naked body caked with dust and dirt.

This child, who is like a rose moss with its small plump leaves. My child, you who are still without the energy of tears, you who still live in the country of poets, you who are like Mozart and van Gogh, what shall I do with you? I just want to crush you in my arms. My child, I like it when you do crazy things. Like coming home with your feet bruised from playing jump rope; like when you wailed for more than five hours like a pig getting its throat cut because you wouldn't accept my unfairness; when you never give in and ask for forgiveness; when you threw all your toys out the window in a tantrum because you didn't want to go to school; when you put a doll in your place and ran away like the wind just as I was about to punish you by having you stand with your hands raised high like tree branches. It's at those times I like you the most.

We had ourselves a delightful time playing in the water and acting silly. We returned dripping wet to our mat in the shade and she sat quietly, chin on her knees and wearing the prettiest expression. When she was little she sometimes awakened before we did, and looking up toward the window she would quietly regard the dawn light streaming in. Her face as I awoke to discover it then was the face of a philosopher. Impulsively I drew her to me in an embrace, and turned the page of her picture diary. With a blank page before me, I picked up a half-melted blue crayon. She looked up at me, her interest aroused.

"Mama, draw Ulysses. And Argos!"

Ulysses and his loyal dog Argos seemed to have been transformed into a righteous assassin and his partner in the comics she read. I drew a circle.

"Ha, what's this?" she asked, eyes wide open, gently biting her lip. She seemed perfectly content now that she was in her mama's embrace, with an expression that always made me smile. But her eyes were already misting over with sleep.

"What do you think? Try and guess."

"The sky?"

"Possibly. What else?"

She drew invisible lines with her finger below and beside the circle, making up the syllables *ŭn* and *ha.*

"Since it's Ŭn-ha if I do this, it's my name. Right?"

"Yes indeed. And what else? Close your eyes and think. This is a lake. And also a bicycle wheel."

She gently shut her eyes, her expression thoughtful. And she said, as if she was trying to be kind, "Mama, please tell me the story about the house in the country long ago."

"All right, but you have to promise not to open your eyes…Think of a lake that's round. And also a bicycle with two round wheels whirling in furious circles. In the village where I lived at your age, there was a forest where a lot of tree families lived together, and also a lake where every morning the trees could see their reflections as they washed themselves. On the surface of the lake, slim girl insects called water striders swam the whole day long, and in the evening kingfishers swooped and soared above the water searching for their dinner…"

The weight of her head came to rest on my chest. Released from her tension, she had fallen asleep.

My child, it's a war out there. Always a war, whatever the year, whatever the hour, whichever the continent. No matter how hard you try to escape it, and whatever defenses you put up, the smell of war seeps through the cracks in every door—you can't hide from it. It's a horrible smell, hard and sticky, and it cuts up the world in straight lines. I wish I could change all the ugly words in the world for your sake…I wish I could give airlike lightness and softness to all the hard muscle-bound words, and exchange all the stinking words for the names of wildflowers: pearlweed, sengreen, wild rose, goosefoot, veronica, buttercup, kirilow indigo, squill, fern acacia, fringed pink, aster, and this one—rose moss, yes, rose moss…My child, you must somehow become a poet who turns ugly words into beautiful ones, stench into fragrance, from whose mouth flows music…You must become a classical poet through and through. You know how to make words like "toe," "peanut," and "snot" sound beautiful. When you were learning how to write, you wrote your family name, 박*, crookedly—you said the word was laughing. The stink that seeps into this faraway orchard's stagnant wastewater, please get rid of it quickly, my child. Your smile is a very strong, very fragrant deodorizer. My child, who can smile so radiantly, you might be from another world. That's why as soon as you get on the bicycle and start moving forward, pedaling fast with your short, thin legs like the water strider, I feel my chest start to pound. I see your bicycle accelerating, the front wheel lifting into the air, soaring higher and higher.*

The old notebooks Ajaebi left behind were filled with incomprehensible scribblings too formal to be diary entries, and among them were a considerable number of neatly aligned but cryptic passages like this one:

> A small lake is there. All around the lake I planted rose moss.
> When will all the dots on the calendar become stars?
> Flesh, love, people, livelihood, white frost, frost pattern, have a good life.

Several of these coded passages were transferred to single notebook pages, and once every few years they were folded into ticket-shaped letters. Written always in longish strokes. Ticket-shaped letters always folded three times. Well, maybe they weren't all coded messages.

Five times all told over the course of ten years or more, from the first journey to the last before his death, I delivered his odd letters. The recipients were his wife and son, three or four years older than I. But I did not learn these things from what he said to me. There is such a thing as knowledge before explanation, that which is too obvious. Besides, during that decade between the first and the fifth delivery I gained enough composure to be curious about the recipients. Never again did I experience the kind of vertigo I had felt in front of the first house, which had made everything go blank before my eyes, the house in the vicinity of M City with its old slate roof falling in. And never again did I, as I had the first time, prowl about the house before throwing the letter into the yard and running away. Once, I saw them through a crack in the gate, saw them from behind. And I couldn't forget it—that wasn't how you should look at somebody.

For each of the five deliveries, the address was different. I don't know how he managed to find the new address when the family moved. Let's assume Mother had found the first address by asking around. What about the next one? Our journey when I was thirteen, whatever untold secret my parents had guessed from our late-night return…I do not remember Father, Mother, and Ajaebi sleeping that night. My parents scolded him long and hard—a verbal rebuke, not a quarrel—and Ajaebi must have kept his silence throughout, because I did not hear his voice. I fell asleep in my dark room trying to follow the irregular, changing images flickering behind my closed eyes.

I never did find out what promise he made in response to my parents' tearful appeal, but in any case my courier duty would resume just when I had almost forgotten it. This is something I've never revealed to anyone.

For a long time I thought his cryptic odes to nature might be coded messages. An ingenious method of communication devised for himself and the recipients when unavoidable circumstances had compelled them to part. Sometime later, when I became better acquainted with the details of Ajaebi's life, I discovered that the importance of the letters was simply to let the family know he was alive; a faint signal that he was, albeit from afar, functioning as a sort of lighthouse keeper, transmitting a beacon generated by despair. But since he did not or could not show his face, ever, he was a lighthouse keeper the family could not accept. How anachronistic life sometimes seems! For by the time I had decided I could no longer tolerate the situation, he had passed on to the next world.

The third letter I delivered to an address in Seoul. From a very small hilltop house with a half basement on the outskirts of a town, to another small but somewhat better home, and from there to a slightly larger house in the traditional style—although the houses I knew were only of these three types, the family had moved several times over a period of ten years…And one evening very much later, several seasons after his death, in a sudden fit I ran breathlessly to the house where I had delivered the last of the letters. I

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cast off all the customary precautions—looking to see if anyone might be watching, surveying the surroundings, worrying about any potential harm to his family—for the purpose of conveying to them the clamoring voices within me. Determined simply to create an incident. Belatedly.

They were no longer there. At the district office I learned that the son's name had been removed from the list of registered residents. The reason? "Gone overseas." The wife's name remained, with no indication that her residence had changed. In any event, neither of them could be seen in the house where they used to live. In their place were a young couple with a child, just like us, and they appeared quite happy. They said that when they first came looking to rent, as well as when they moved in, they saw no one except the owner, certainly no renters, and the day they moved in, the house was vacant. The best they could do for me was to jot down the owner's address. No further did I pursue the whereabouts of Ajaebi's family, in accordance with Ajaebi's own example. As a show of minimum courtesy in respect of their tragically wasted past.

My child, when will people all grow up to be as big as you? Your forehead seems so broad and deep. Like the small lake, the lake bordered all around with blooming rose moss. I feel a thirst when I am looking at you. My child, let's walk out onto that road. I shouldn't be like this, but whenever you are asleep, child, I want to shake you awake. And to chatter on and on. Yes, while all those people of long ago were sleeping peacefully, a crack appeared in the earth…That's today's story, which has become an old story. Ah, my child, I have not yet found the way. How shall I tell the story? Should it be the story of a storm? The story of a light spring rain? Or maybe it should be the story of the hot summer sun that's beating down like it is now?

He was a fugitive. A death sentence awaited him. He was a high-ranking official, a member of the Workers Party in the South. He was in hiding, awaiting his chance to escape to the North. He was arrested in transit. Miraculously he escaped—even though the guards had taken his clothes and personal effects to prevent that very possibility. He had fled on the back of a dark night as on the back of a horse. Into an orchard. Forever.

Such were the details I heard from my exhausted mother when I went home to attend Father's funeral and then Ajaebi's, the details spilling almost unconsciously from her mouth like a shaman's chant. Perhaps it was because of my unbearable grief at having lost him, but in this history I had learned belatedly, I found an excuse to hate him. What kind of grand escape had I expected? A fool, a dullard, a coward, a cowardly fugitive. I resented having been chosen to witness the life of such a pitiable person. I blamed him as if he had prevented me from speaking with his wife and son, whom I had so wanted to meet, when actually I myself was to blame, infected by that insidious history that had oppressed his life. It was something effected by my twisted emotions. I was mad with resentment that although I had been the carrier of his messages, I had not shouted out even once, "Your

husband, your father lives at the foot of that hill over there!" Hating him so passionately, it seemed, I could gradually ease my sorrow. Fortunately, my hatred did not last long.

Sometime later I went home to sell the orchard, which by then had reverted to an overgrown hillside. There were insufficient hands to work it, but more important was our need to sell it to pay off the debts connected with Father's long illness. Three or four workmen were already at the orchard constructing a retaining wall. My daughter would be born shortly.

Sitting by the lake, where I could look out at the road stretching in a straight line from the orchard, I viewed with loving attention every detail of this familiar landscape, which I might never see again. Although it had not been kept up, to me it was peace, even if it were to vanish one day. The trees, silent partners, knowing all that had happened at the orchard, indifferent to any worries that might come tomorrow, were like a network of tiny veins etched against the blue sky. The trees had shed their leaves with the coming of fall.

In my mind there appears an image—Father taking a short walk on that deserted road, laboring, his hand resting on Ajaebi's shoulder, and Ajaebi next to Father, looking like his shadow. Just the two of them. I've always thought they looked most beautiful at such times. What did they have to talk about? Father, when he was young and healthy, used to make anti-Communist speeches in town and at my elementary school. Father, who had chosen to come south all alone, leaving his family behind in the North. The people in the audience would nod their heads in approval, making me feel proud of him.

It was Father who had found Ajaebi in the orchard, a man who had once been a dedicated official of the Workers Party in the South. And Father had protected him from danger, becoming his lifelong sworn brother. And in Ajaebi's notebooks that Mother gave me, there was much more than writings in praise of nature. Those notebooks were filled with—though the handwriting was often illegible—the thoughts, incoherent as they were, to which he had clung all his life, and the threads connecting all that had happened to him. He seems to have lived his life unreformed, and not to have concealed any of it from Father or Mother. Many events inexplicable by common sense alone seem to have occurred before he came into their lives and after he departed, and those events stayed with them.

I heard their whisperings everywhere in the orchard. Was it the fundamental differences between them that prompted their endless whisperings? Especially late at night on the bench in front of the house, in the narrow paths of the orchard, in the vicinity of the lake at the foot of the hill…All I had to do was listen, and I could hear them whispering like the wind. Especially at the lake. That whispering is what makes me remember, bringing a gentle smile to my face even now, after so many years, our bleak and difficult life at the orchard.

Another image: how old was I then—twenty-six? twenty-seven? It was summertime, as it always is in these images, and the weekend—and my vacation at the orchard—had come to an end. I had to be back at work in Seoul the following day, and I had set out with the food Mother had prepared for my train ride. I had almost reached the road, the one that was visible from the lakeshore, when I heard the soft crunch of bicycle tires on the dirt path, a sound almost like whispering. It was Ajaebi with his whitening hair. He didn't call out my name, just smiled a toothy, wrinkled smile—a smile whose depth I didn't appreciate until later. The crunch of the tires stopped and he got off the bicycle. There was a shabby basket on the carrying rack, and in it a vase of rose moss.

"Put that on your windowsill and you'll have something to remember me by."

He wheeled the bicycle around, and the crunch of the tires faded into the distance. That was the last time I saw him. I was tied down to my job, and one day during my lengthening absence from home he very suddenly passed away. Leaving me with an aching heart and a vase of rose moss.

My child, why am I so thirsty today, and why is your sleep so deep? All around me is stillness. Wake up, my child, wake up and listen to my words. What if I blink and then see that the lake has come back to life?…What if the wheels of the dusty bicycle resting in the shade should start whirling soundlessly by themselves?…What if all the whispering in the world should turn into flowing water?…My child, I have so much to whisper to you, like I did when you and I were one body. How should I tell the story now? Shall I tell a story of tears, a story of laughter? A story of days gone by, a story of days to come? A story of air, a story of fluid? My child, the sun is still so very hot… Shall I tell you the story like I did when you and I were one body?

Translation from Korean by Kichung Kim and Bruce Fulton

Bonfire, Mamoiada, Sardinia.
Photograph by Ferdinando
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