

Silence, Shamans and Traumatic Haunting:

A Novel and Accompanying Exegesis

VOLUME I

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ABSTRACT

Silence, Shamans and Traumatic Haunting:

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Major Work: Typhoon Kingdom

In 1653, the Dutch East India Company's *Sparrowhawk* is wrecked on a Korean island, and Hae-jo, a local fisherman, guides the ship's bookkeeper to Seoul in search of his surviving shipmates. The two men, one who has never ventured to the mainland and the other unable to speak the language, are soon forced to choose between loyalty to each other and a king determined to maintain his country's isolation. Three hundred years later, in the midst of the Japanese occupation, Yoo-jin is taken from her family and forced into prostitution, and a young soldier must navigate the Japanese surrender and ensuing chaos of the Korean War to find her.

Based on the seventeenth-century journal of Hendrick Hamel and testimonies of surviving Korean "Comfort Women," "Typhoon Kingdom" connects two narratives through an examination of language, foreignness and traumatic haunting. The novel seeks to make a unique creative contribution to the small body of literature in English representing the diverse and traumatic

experiences of Korean “Comfort Women” and the tumultuous history of the Korean peninsula.

Exegesis: Writing at the Intersection of Trauma and Haunting: Narrative

Representations of Korean “Comfort Women” in English

An examination of narrative representations of the traumatic experiences of Korean “Comfort Women” that explores a new way of reading and writing about literatures on the subject. Chapter One provides an historical context examining events and their *forgetting*. Chapter Two presents shamanic performance as a seemingly eruptive and counter-hegemonic force that transcends the familiar confines of ritual to enact a communal memory and provide a means of engagement with historical trauma and its ghosts. And Chapter Three asks how Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* exemplify the unsettling power of writing at this intersection of trauma and haunting.

THESIS DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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MAJOR WORK

Typhoon Kingdom

“Now our peninsula is cut in half, Korea an island unto itself. But one day this sharp border will disappear and we will be reunited with our brothers and sisters on the largest continent, and the Great Chain of Being will continue unbroken for all of eternity.”

—Park Hyun-un, Acting ROK Secretary of State;
Address to the United Nations, May 13th, 1953.

1653

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

All along the island's storm-beaten coastline of black rock, flattened cuttlefish hang from scrub pines like lost kites, and the cool air reeks of brine. Gulls fall from the rent sky at dawn, perch on branches to feast, the birds eerily silent, as though this typhoon has left reverence as well as refuse in its wake.

Hae-jo thinks the quiet is oddly beautiful, and somehow frightening too, and he pauses at the tree line, casts his gaze inland as the sun crests the volcanic peak of Halla-san—the entire ceiling of the world the colour of sickness. But even the new sun cannot distract him from the shoreline for long, from the harbour, a stone's throw below, which is now a stew of crushed boats, lanterns, fishing tackle and splintered wood.

Flotsam and displaced stones shift under his feet as he approaches the mess, as if the winds have dislocated even the deep bones of the earth.

He finds his uncle, Jin-soo, already on the beach, the aging man standing still, eyes on the grey, stirred-up water.

Ajussi, he thinks. *Are you at peace?* But he dares not speak yet, not on a morning of such wreckage. Instead he waits beside the man, head bowed.

They stand like this for several breaths until, finally, Jin-soo clears his throat and points, not at the ruined harbour or dawn-lit sea, but at movement at the tideline. Men, or something like men, crawl from the wooden wreckage onto the

sand and rock and kelp and tangle of nets. Pale figures with yellow hair. *Small gods*, Hae-jo thinks, *island spirits*, until they retch seawater and one begins to weep, the cries harsh and cracked. *Demons then*. He steps backwards without meaning to, and his uncle touches his shoulder lightly, steadies him.

“*Mul gwishin*,” says his uncle. “Storm ghosts. Do not look them in the eyes or tell them your name.”

But when the first ghost crosses the beach, falls at their feet and looks up, Hae-jo cannot help himself, cannot avoid the gaze of this pale creature’s wide blue eyes. *Tiny oceans*, he thinks, before pointing to his own chest and blurting out his name.

조선 효종 (Hyojong of Joseon)

He sits on his throne at Changdeokgung, the palace quiet, all eyes on his feet as he ponders this interruption of his kingdom's hermitic state. He counts burgundy and green wooden pillars, each ceiling joist—steadies his mind, just as his father taught him. The six foreigners fidget on their knees. *Ghosts*, the fishermen from Jeju claim. But ghosts do not carry cloth bearing the insignia of the Dutch East India Company, nor do they ink their hides with symbols and pictures: anchors, fish, tall ships. Constellations of tiny brown spots mar their faces, hair like wheat fields, blue and green eyes. Such strangeness prostrate before him on pine floorboards.

This decision. This one small gesture. *A defining moment perhaps.*

Finally, he stands. “There were not seven?”

Chief advisor Byeong-ho bows low. “Father of our land. One died on the island. So it was reported.”

Yes. *Reported.* A word he must consider banning from official use. He beckons for his guards to help the foreigners rise, paces among them as his men pull them to their feet. They smell of sweat, fish and urine, and three of them tremble and fight for balance. One calls out to him, his voice cracked and harsh. A guard strikes the man's head sharply and silence fills the room again. Spies from Nagasaki? Peking? Or from their own nation beyond the far edges of the royal

maps? Fortunate or unfortunate to find themselves washed upon these shores—*his* shores—and for whom?

In truth, his mind is clear on the matter, and is it his imagination, or is Byeong-ho hiding a smirk? A bright one, this advisor. He has already guessed. There will be no invasion during the rains, no fleet setting out through typhoons to threaten the land he rules.

“These men,” he says carefully, his pronunciation delicate, quiet in his throat. “These men are most welcome.”

His lesser advisors and members of the court cannot hide their surprise, and a hushed murmur runs through the pillared room. But the foreigners watch him closely, and when he smiles they fall at his feet and speak thanks in their rough tongue. As guards remove the six destitute sailors, he takes his chief advisor aside to whisper instructions into the short man’s one good ear. “Keep them close. They will help us improve our muskets and cannons, and Joseon will ready herself for war.”

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

Bats squeal overhead as they feast on mosquitos and moths, their countless black-hooked wings backlit by the falling sun's descent toward the world's western cliff edge. He walks inland from the island's injured coast, the road muddy and empty. He and his uncle have committed treason—*this is true*—and he carries this secret uneasily, like a drop of water in the lung.

But weeks have passed without repercussions—no summons from the royal palace or visit from the king's men in the night. The same men who punished Kyeong-min, the shipbuilder's son, when word spread he'd spotted a Japanese ship and failed to report it. No matter that it was a tiny fishing boat, offshore and gone in the night, even before the squid fleet extinguished their lanterns and returned at dawn. The soldiers tied Kyeong-min to the village tree, lashed the soles of his feet forty times, left him to die of thirst wearing a headband of white cloth, letters inked in red: *traitor*.

He and his uncle delivered six of the storm ghosts to the local garrison, who transported them through mad seas to Haenam, then days north overland to Seoul. Their duty demanded this. Though perhaps the creatures had not survived the crossing, had disappeared back into frothing waters. But, if so, might they return for the one still on the island? Hae-jo and his uncle had separated this one from the group at the request of In-ha, the knife dancer, because, his uncle said,

we must fear his powers and influence at least as much as the whipping tree. Jin-soo had even pantomimed the death of this one to the other ghost-men before they'd been taken north, in case they found some way of communicating with the king's advisors. The six others had nodded understanding, but barely reacted to the news, their faces sullen, bloodless.

From this Hae-jo has learned two things: the shaman has a plan for this remaining foreign creature, and, it seems, even storm ghosts can suffer death.

Firelight ahead and hushed voices, and, from the wet gloom, carved faces: *Jang Seung*, The Guardian, and others too, first wooden statues, then volcanic rock figures, squat phallic creatures watching his approach.

So. Word has spread, he thinks, as he joins the ring of villagers around a bonfire.

Somewhere above a dense cloud covering, the full moon shines, pulls tides to the right height. And, arcing across the sky, a red-tailed dragon—a sign of warning, In-ha would have them believe. But whether this omen relates to the storm ghosts or to something yet to come remains unclear.

The shaman's thatch and adobe dwelling stands dark in shadow, and strips of white prayer cloth hang from the doorframe and a ginkgo beside. Hae-jo visited a place like this as a boy for the knife ceremony that marked him for manhood, cut the ethereal ties to the realm of demons—those famished ghosts that pulled each of them ever closer to the dark elements: the deep earth, the bottom of the sea, the precipice of the world.

He has heard the hushed complaints though, that In-ha is not a true shaman, that he is no more than a circus act, a false prophet who cares only for money and influence. This has crossed Hae-jo's mind more than once recently, although he cannot decide if it matters—if enough people believe the man has powers, he is dangerous. His uncle would say this is enough.

Hae-jo scans the onlookers for Jin-soo, but cannot see him amongst the men, women and children. Perhaps his uncle fears consequences for what they have done, or perhaps his faith in the shaman is failing too.

The crackling flame devours bone-white driftwood. Burning sage on the salty air. The crowd quiet now. He sees doubt and fear on children's faces, guesses they secretly question their elders, wonder why this night and not the next, why this place and not within the more familiar map of the village? Why gather in darkness so far from the comfort of blankets and rolled-out *yo*, evening fires that push warmth beneath floors, *undol* heat that spreads right up into their joints and limbs, melts the terrors of the night that seem so present now in this place of nightmares?

Above them, moving slowly in wind they cannot feel, hang those spectral strips of white cloth.

And then the sound, quiet at first, growing, of a knife blade on stone.

Van Persie

Father. He knows his lips move as he prays, and that the shaman watches. *The sea has claimed my companions, and the Blessed Mother has cast me from her womb onto this cold shore.*

The shaman stands over him, humming. A pale, eyeless fish flaps on the packed-dirt floor at his feet, scales soft silver in the firelight, mouth and gills open like sails waiting for the breath of God.

Do not abandon your servant in his time of need. Van Persie allows these words to strum vocal cords, rise above the shaman's steady song. He assumes he is the last living crew member, though he cannot be certain of the others' fates, nor can he quite believe *De Sperwer* is gone—*The Sparrowhawk* flightless despite hurricane winds, mast snapped like a dry fishbone, lost to seas higher than any hill in his homeland.

His limbs are warm now, his core no longer wracked by the shakes that lasted for days, but this provides little comfort in the presence of the robed shaman. The man has not bound him, but made clear what would happen if he fled, knife to throat. And where would he go? The people he has seen neither act nor speak like the Japanese—their language guttural, almost Germanic. And the Manchu would have killed him on sight. Korea? The island of Quelepart? Perhaps, but of this place he knows nothing, can imagine only a dark coastline on

a Company map, edges held by the sons of Noah, an inked reminder of the roots of all humanity.

He tries not to think of home, of how his sister and mother will never learn the truth of his fate. Eventually they will think him drowned, like so many of his shipmates. A lost soul. And they will offer the wrong prayers.

The eyeless fish continues to arc and flex its spine, willing the air to become liquid, and he joins this prayer, asks for a flood to wash him from this place, give him back to the sea. He does not fear death, nor the airless tomb of dark water that rejected his surrender a fortnight past. Instead he fears the desecration of cannibalism, the slow digestion of his flesh, the careless scattering of his bones so far from home. He is still weak, his skin covered in salt rash, stomach tight and churning from the broths and steamed roots he's been given, but he will run as soon as he can, and he will not stop until this nightmare ends.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

Two of the shaman's men drag the storm ghost into the firelight, followed by In-ha himself, curved knife in one hand, a gasping mackerel in the other. Hae-jo bites his lip as the man slices the belly of the fish, the act oddly unnatural away from boats and drying racks on the shore. The shaman holds the mackerel aloft—eyeless, of the spirit world. His men push the storm ghost to its knees and In-ha bleeds the fish's thick, red insides into the creature's yellow hair, over its pale foreign body, the wet earth. The ghost struggles to stand and cries out, but the shaman's men grip its arms, force it down.

What spells allow men's fingers such power over a spirit?

The shaman mixes drops of fish blood and water in a wooden bowl, pours it onto the sloped ground. The liquid runs uphill, as it must in a place between worlds, a place that only a shaman can inhabit and not be overcome by the island's legion of whispering gods, though some say even this is nothing more than a trick. In-ha begins to dance, robes twisting before the fire, throaty chanting quiet but steady, words for grandmother *Yeongdeungsin*, goddess of the sea, queen of the spirit world.

Hae-jo cannot take his eyes off the shivering storm ghost, the creature's pale, marked skin—anchor, cross, sea serpent. The shaman calls on the spirit of the eyeless fish to act as a guide, to clean this place and all in it with its blood, and

Hae-jo ponders sickness in his own soul, feels his bones tremble despite the fire before them. Has he acted rightly under heaven, or simply out of fear?

In-ha performs the familiar rituals of the *Muhon-kut*, asks the gods among them to guide the souls of drowned villagers safely to the land of the dead. The shaman's men continue to hold the wretched storm ghost, and In-ha touches a strip of white cloth to the bloodless fish at his feet, wraps the cloth around the shivering demon's eyes and head.

So that this roaming spirit will not be distracted by the green pines of Halla-san, as it journeys to meet the ten kings of the underworld.

In-ha inhales smoke from burning sage, exhales into the storm ghost's blind and grimacing face.

So that this water demon will not be tempted by the fragrance of wildflowers and jujube on its way to the land of the dead.

The shaman smears drying fish blood over the creature's arms and hands.

So that this shadow-with-form will not think to reach out again for those who have breath.

Blood-soaked earth into ears. The ghost shakes its head, strains against its captors, nearly throws them off, falls back to its knees.

So that it will not be drawn from the depths of the ocean again by the sound of waves upon our living shoreline.

In-ha touches the flat of the knife's blade to his own tongue, slows his dance, heats the blade in the fire until it glows. The shaman's men pull open the

creature's mouth and In-ha grabs its tongue, presses the flat of the glowing blade into it with a sizzle. The storm ghost screams and coughs smoke, blood trickling down its chin.

The blood of the living, thinks Hae-jo, sickness rolling through him as though he were caught in a gale at sea.

So that this storm ghost may not speak of us or our island among the jealous dead.

조선 효종 (Hyojong of Joseon)

The red-tailed dragon burns an arc across the night sky, and though the entire court is in uproar over such a clear sign of doom in the heavens, he sits quietly in solitude, the small courtyard of the palace lost to disruption in a maze of passages and buildings.

Doom certainly. But for whom? Half of his advisors beg him to take this as a sign to strike down his enemies. The other half tell him with all confidence that he should fear conflict now more than ever.

His servants sleep, as do his wife and concubines—even his ever-restless sons snore softly in their chambers. The silence of this courtyard is splendid and strange. No advisors in his ear. No complaints from family or magistrates. Just the purple-dark heavens burning with stars, the night air warm.

He sits with legs crossed and allows himself the luxury of leaning back against a wooden pillar. In the centre of the unlit courtyard looms the shadow of a stone turtle, a memorial to his grandfather and his grandfather's armies, who defeated the Ilbon navy off the coast of Geoje-do, near Tongyeong and Masan, places he has only ever seen on a map. Will he ever defeat the Ilbon in battle, send them limping back to Nagasaki in shame? If the stars hold an answer, he cannot read it. In truth, he has hardly ventured outside the walls of his capital, save for

annual new year celebrations at Gyeongju, where priests and *yangban* gather to watch him pay respects to the remains of his ancestors.

This burning line across the sky, this omen, and the arrival of the Dutchmen seem unlikely to be coincidental. The wild shamans of Jeju-do would agree, of course. As might the palace priests, though for different reasons. The shamans, he is told, still believe in the old ways, and would say that all things are connected—the gods of the sky with the gods of his own two hands. His priests, no doubt, would see such a portent as the Buddha's intervention in the Great Chain of Being. But, for his part, his Confucian principles must remain straight, and he must keep his mind cold even as the sky grows hot.

And this much is true: the omen will be *useful*. A sign he might enlist to help unify the court on matters of the army. The Manchu continue to press in the northwest, despite the tribute he pays Peking twice yearly. And the Ilbon harass fishermen, threaten invasion by sea from the east. The Dutchmen will have much knowledge of the Ilbon, at least, and may be able to help improve his cannons. His father used such foreign help in the past to great advantage. The court has forgotten this, of course—so focussed on their own ambitions. But there is another Dutchman in the capital. *Weltevree*, who also washed upon Joseon shores decades ago. The man has a proper name now, Bak Yeon, and a wife, and speaks their tongue. He is aging, and no longer advises on military matters, but will make for the perfect translator, and this will be crucial. The man will tell his compatriots it was his own decision to make Seoul his home all these years, lest they realize

too soon that they will never be permitted to leave the walled capital. This is harsh, but necessary. Should they bring information to Nagasaki, where their great company trades, his entire kingdom might be put at risk.

The Ilbon know little of his land, fail to see its greatness, and this is his one true advantage over them. If the foreigners are truly shipwrecked, they will help as innocents. And if they are spies, nothing will be lost so long as they do not escape.

He catches these thoughts as they flutter like moths, reflects grimly that even in this silence the heavens speak, and there is no true solace from his whirring mind. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply through his nose, examines the imprint of the stars on the insides of his eyelids, then snaps them open to find their match in the clear sky. He is told the moon shines for the king's sons, though he dislikes such talk, wonders, in truth, if it burns fiercely enough to represent his boys' hot blood. *Their mother's sons*. Again he catches himself tracking the movement of the arcing doom.

Soft footsteps on stone, his daughter's small voice from shadow.

"Abba-ji?" She stands close, her five-year-old body a tiny wraith wrapped in grey and blue.

"Beautiful One, how have you escaped your chamber?" He speaks gently, though he has been told she casts off her servants and guards often and easily to wander alone, much to their consternation, and his own.

A tiny tinkling of laughter, like a small, ringing bell. “I move like a fox, abba.”

“This is true. My beautiful little foxling.” He pulls the child close and she rests her head on his chest. Short, hot, animal breath, her paws clutching his robes. “Have you seen the change in the night sky, little one?”

“Yes abba. All the children and aunties talk about it. They say it is to be feared. That many terrible things will soon unfold.”

“Mmm. And what does my little foxling think?”

His daughter is quiet for a moment, and he wishes briefly that he had not asked the question, that they could sit like this for hours, silent and breathing—no judgement from the court, no rules for public behaviour, just a father and his daughter beneath the heavens.

“Abba. Before, I was not tall enough to reach the lowest shelf of mother’s dresser. But now I can reach the very highest. And one day I will be tall and beautiful, just like her.”

“And?”

“Abba. Everything changes.”

She says this quietly, and he marvels at his daughter’s simple and profound answer, feels a swelling of pride. Not for the first time, he wonders if this little foxling might not have the makings of a better ruler than his sons, who play endlessly with wooden swords and cannot move or breathe without shouting and running.

Not everything, little one, he thinks, though he does not speak this, as her breathing grows deep and even against his chest. My love for you is full and strong, eternal, and it burns like the greater stars that do not fall, and will never be extinguished.

이해조 (Yi Hae-jo)

Humidity's wet cloth wraps around the island now that the winds have died, and he leaves off salvaging wood and mending nets to walk the rocky point near Jeongbang Falls. The sun has broken through cloud, and slanting rays catch a circle of diving women's wet hair as they bob twenty boat-lengths out in search of abalone, whistling to expel stale air from their lungs. Snippets of breathy conversation—heavy wooden chests on the sea floor. Metal objects too, impossible to move, already claimed by grandmother Yeongdeungsin.

The island's fishermen have also found foreign items since the typhoon—the strongest storm for years—and men argue over polished glass bottles, water-logged books, bits of cloth and sail, all manner of barrels and furniture, even coins bearing strange images and marks.

Hae-jo retreats from the edge of the rocky point to the relative shelter of larger stones along the beach. As a rule, the women do not welcome an audience, though they have always been gentle with him. Pity for an orphan of the sea, perhaps, or maybe because his uncle gives them fair prices for their catch. It is because of his uncle that he does not fear the divers like the rest of the island's fishermen.

They are women. Jin-soo told him years ago. They have a different way of fishing. Nothing more.

But Hae-jo had remained unconvinced for some time, instead believing stories of sea-spirits luring men to their deaths, of airless undersea palaces and immortals.

But uncle, they can hold their breaths endlessly, and have no fear of the sea. Even the currents and rip-tides are powerless to pull them under.

His uncle laughed at that, told him there was no force in the world more powerful than the sea, and that he of all people should know better.

Because of your father, were the words the man hadn't spoken, and Hae-jo offers a short exhalation of prayer to accompany the memory.

The air hangs heavy and warm. Gulls circle. Women whistle offshore.

Any illusions he harboured about the divers were fully dispelled five summers ago, a gentle storm season, when he and his uncle had pulled in the pale, bloated corpse of a woman with their herring—the body white and naked and curled, nets cutting thin lines into flesh. Such a shocking sight next to the flashing, wide-eyed herring. The young woman's eyes were shut tight, and he had thought not of death, but of a newborn child.

His uncle returned the dead woman to her mother and grandmother, both divers, already in mourning after she had disappeared the evening before. They knew too well the lesson that Hae-jo was still learning—that there is no limit to the sea's hunger, no sacrifice great enough to keep one safe, and, his uncle was right, *no greater god.*

Thunder clap and flash from the harbour around the point. He runs down the beach to the billowing pillar of smoke, finds scattered wood and metal smouldering in the sand, men around it bleeding from wooden splinters, cupping their ears, in shock from the blast.

His uncle stands alone at the tide line in a pile of nets frowning at the fire, head tilted in thought. The aging man waves him over, but does not speak. Hae-jo must not pry, but he struggles to wait, show respect in the midst of such excitement and fear.

His uncle plucks a sliver of wood from his forearm. “Our neighbours are behaving carelessly again.”

Hae-jo nods, understands that his uncle would have them show caution amidst the refuse of the storm. Two pieces of a broken stone click into place. He glances at his uncle, who nods, as though the man has heard his thoughts.

“A black ship?” offers Hae-jo.

“How large?”

There is so much wood and metal. “Many of our boat lengths?” They have seen tall ships while out fishing, though none have landed on their shores during his lifetime.

Another nod from his uncle, his expression turning sour. The man does not need to remind him of the storm ghost they delivered to the shaman. Voiceless now, suffering alone.

“I should have known better. The storm clouded my mind.”

“*Anniyo, ajussi.* This is not your fault. I was also afraid.”

His uncle waves away his words. “Nephew. We share the same line of thought. And now there are rumours of the dead washing ashore. Buried in unmarked graves by In-ha and his men.”

“Foreigners?”

“Yes. Many, if what I hear is true. But we must not speak more of this now, not in the presence of those loyal to In-ha.”

Hae-jo wants to believe his uncle’s caution excessive, but the other men on the beach already complain loudly that the wood is cursed, that the storm and its refuse are from the land of the dead, brought forth by the *mul-gwishin*, that more ceremony is yet required, and that even if there are signs of a foreign vessel, it is surely a ship of the damned.

“They’ve accidentally lit up black powder and they know it,” comes a voice from behind them. “Silly mules.”

They swivel to face a dark-skinned diver wringing her wet hair onto the beach. She wears a loose, persimmon-dyed tunic and trousers, and she bows low to Jin-soo, while still holding the length of her black hair in both hands. Deep respect from one whom Hae-jo would not have expected it, although she has also shown audacity by speaking first.

“Are you at peace?” asks his uncle.

“Yes, *ajussi.*”

“Greetings to your mother and grandmother as well.”

“I will tell them, *ajussi*. Thank you.” She glances at Hae-jo, and he bows quickly.

“My nephew. He fishes with me.”

The woman appears to be appraising him, and Hae-jo cannot decide where to cast his gaze.

His uncle rescues him from the growing silence. “This one,” he nods at the woman, “has been diving since she could walk.”

The woman laughs without covering her mouth, and Hae-jo is shocked and pleased at the sight of her polished-pearl teeth, and then by the ease at which she and his uncle converse.

Some of the men on the beach have turned their attention away from the smouldering wood and stare openly at the woman standing and talking as if she is their equal.

He feels his face burn red at the unwanted attention. These past weeks have upset the comfortable order of their days, and he would find this exciting were it not for the way the other fishermen stare, and for the memory of In-ha’s knife dance.

The woman’s voice is full and throaty, as though she pulls words from her belly and not from her mouth and tongue. “The other women say it was you who first met the foreigners. The *storm ghosts*.” She smirks, and Jin-soo looks away.

Again, Hae-jo marvels at her audacity, but his uncle recovers and nods. “This is true.”

“The women also say that if you hadn’t turned one over to In-ha, your lives would have been at risk.”

So many eyes on them now. The woman notices, bows low again, her hair dangling freely this time, its wetness leaving marks on the orange cloth of her tunic.

“Farewell *ajussi*. Cousin. Prosperous fishing.”

He watches her leave, sure-footed over the smooth-stoned beach. His uncle returns to his nets, and Hae-jo joins him, all the while thinking on the shaman and his prisoner.

Van Persie

A nightmare of pain and darkness, of rolling on the earthen floor of his prison in fever, of a wraith standing watch over him, a dark form wrapped in cloth. He cries out, but cannot form words with his injured tongue.

The wraith repays silence in kind.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

Greetings to your mother and grandmother as well.

He does not remember his own mother, and he allows this familiar thought to haunt him as he lies awake on his thin *yo*, the ducted heat beneath the floorboards relaxing his back and neck.

Across the dark room, his uncle snores gently. The oiled paper over the window shivers in a light breeze. A mosquito whine disappears into the sound of his uncle's breath.

His whole life he has expressed the guilt expected of a son whose mother gave her own life to bring him gasping into this world of jealous ghosts, legions of the lost and drowned that gather on their island, weightless and without breath, longing to once again add substance to the ever-growing map of the world. But in his heart of hearts he cannot feel guilt for this—only a dull sense of wanting, the hauling in of an empty net that has broken.

He was old enough to remember his father though. Some said his father and uncle had looked like twins, but Hae-jo recalls his father as thinner, wiry, with large ears and quick, long fingers. *Like tiny tree limbs*, Grandmother has told him, though his uncle does not like the comparison, says their family is made for and of the sea, not the land.

His father's hands were lined with scars, as are his own. In truth, he is lucky to have only thick callouses and thin marks from the nets. Hooks and gaffs are unforgiving tools, and it is only a matter of time before one sacrifices a finger to the greedy sea. His uncle lost two fingers on the outside of his left hand, his father half of his right thumb.

Hae-jo cannot remember his father speaking, and he finds this strange, as though the memory of this sound has not managed to grow roots in the soil of his mind. But of course the man must have spoken to him. Only six-years-old when his father was lost, but still, the first son of a first son. There were surely words that needed to be passed down, kept safe, kept among familiar blood. Perhaps he had been waiting until Hae-jo was older. This too is an empty, torn net, and he fears that if he dwells too much on it he will mend the tear incorrectly, add words that were not spoken, remember what never was.

But his memory of the morning his father did not return is as clear as yesterday. Grandmother, a creaking, toothless woman who had not yet forgotten how to smile, had taken him to the village, dragged him from stall to stall for sweet potatoes, sesame oil and dried red peppers. The two of them had stopped to listen to their ancient neighbour Yin-han rattle on about fighting beside Admiral Yi three lifetimes ago, about driving off the Ilbon navy in the straits east of Geoje-do. The man kept winking at Grandmother and she had laughed, and these secret gestures had puzzled Hae-jo. Perhaps they knew each other far better than they let on in public, perhaps they found each other in old age, or maybe *again* in old age.

The old man constantly fingered the scar on the left side of his head where an ear should have been, did it on purpose to catch people looking so he could launch into his story of suffering grave wounds during the Ilbon invasion *in the twenty-fifth year of the reign of Seonjo of Joseon*, of cannon fire and being left for dead on a beach, of waking up with one ear missing and only later realizing the retreating Ilbon soldiers had sliced it off as a trophy, as they had done with thousands more. And even though Admiral Yi had battered three hundred of the invader's ships to pieces with his fifty armoured turtle boats, *sent the dwarf bastards slinking back to their islands and the port of Nagasaki*, the ear had not been recovered.

This is true, the man had insisted, coughing pipe smoke. *I cannot be buried whole. When you meet my wandering ghost, at least you'll know why.* More laughter from the old kook and from Grandmother, who told the man she and the other *halmeoni* had already placed bets on whether he'd live forever, and that she had coins on him outlasting them all.

Maybe even enough time left to go looking for that missing ear.

On they'd marched to buy onions and bean curd from old women with failing eyes, who rubbed coins between thumb and forefinger to determine their value, announced their wares by rhythmically snipping scissors in the air. And then his uncle, pale, out of breath, no words—none needed. He would not have been present were something not amiss, and Hae-jo can still feel Grandmother's tightening grip on his hand as they walked home together to sit and wait.

We cannot know yet, his uncle had said to him privately. But he is very late. And this is unlike him.

Even at such a young age, Hae-jo had understood what this meant. At least one boat was lost every year, and just a few months earlier he'd seen a family on the beach near Seogwipo dressed in white, wearing broad-brimmed hats so they could not look up from the earth, leaning on mourning staffs, the women wailing. The man's cousin had found his boat adrift and empty, nets still out, squid lanterns swinging with the roll of the sea.

Hae-jo had wanted to speak the words his uncle and Grandmother refused to—that his father had simply brought in a huge catch and was taking care with the extra weight. Or had torn a sail and landed further down the island's coast. But this would have been loose talk, *neuseunhan yaegi*, words unfit for the son of a fisherman. And so the long wait began, all day and into that first restless night, each scenario writing itself in his mind as if prophecy, each more desperate and hopeful than the last. Lying awake, ears straining for the sound of footsteps at the door, and so tired by morning that he slept through breakfast, woke in the empty house in a panic and stumbled outside to find Grandmother cracking sesame pods as though it were any other day.

What would you have me do? she had asked. *The sesame is here.*

They waited days—awful, hollow hours that he remembers now as a kind of sickness, a fever of hope and despair coming and going with the tides.

At sunrise on the fourth day they began mourning—Grandmother’s cries shocking after so much silence. He watched her pull her hair and wail as if from a distance, and still he felt a strange loss of loss, the lack of certainty preventing him from true emotion—no body to bury, feet pointed towards the western sky, no grass growing over a burial mound. Even an empty boat or some sign of wreckage would have brought some measure of clarity. Hae-jo could tell his uncle felt the same way by the manner in which the man mourned: quietly, holding Grandmother, helping to dress him in white before leading them through the village so the entire community could bear witness to their grief.

Their shaman hung a bag of rice from a cock’s leg and, dipping the bird into the sea from his uncle’s boat, blessed its feathers to soak up his father’s lost soul and pull it from the ocean with the flapping bird.

The attention from the community was expected, but then, as now, he had shied from sharing his grief, feeling somehow that if he let his true feelings be known, it would leave him emptied. He longed not for release, but for fullness—*biman*.

In the months that followed, the not knowing became fuel for his imagination. Each time he saw old Yin-han shuffling through the village mumbling stories, searching for his missing ear, Hae-jo imagined his father battling pirates off the coast of Tsushima island, fighting the *Wae* with only his gaff. If he was eventually overwhelmed, the dwarf savages would take his ears as trophies for necklaces or a shrine.

Whenever he neared the ocean he looked for his father's boat. He spent hours alone on the salt-sprayed volcanic rocks—not always thinking about his father, just staring, waiting for something to fill his emptiness.

Time might help, his uncle said once, seemingly out of the blue, years later when they were fishing for herring before dawn. *But then again, it might not.*

And now, as sleep threatens to wash over him, he thinks of the pale strangers who washed-up weeks ago, of how convinced he was that they were demons, otherworldly, *yeonsan japgwi*.

He is not ashamed of this, despite the diving woman's gentle mockery. Many forces shape their island. *This is true.* And there are many spirits in the ever-changing sea. And even if the now-silent captive that In-ha holds a short walk inland is a man, one who bleeds as he bleeds and breathes the air of the living, this does not mean there is no reason for such an arrival—no *fate*. It was not the man he had been waiting for that Grandmother Sea brought to shore, but it was *a* man, and one who had fallen at his feet. Perhaps giving him to In-ha was the correct course of action, the only way to keep his family from danger. But just thinking this leaves him cold and uncomfortable despite the heated floor, his chest tight, as though a demon of guilt has burrowed into his heart. He rolls onto his side, struggling to breathe in the dark, watery room.

Van Persie

Again the form comes to him like a spectre in the night—a woman in loose linens, long dark hair masking her face. She kneels and washes his feet, calloused hands gentle as they massage a balm over insect bites, cuts and salt damage. He is delirious with pain and fever, aware of it even as he succumbs to this state, and he cannot stop his legs from shaking, his ankle raw from the chain that binds him. His tongue is so swollen that he feels as though his mouth is full of rags, and he cannot eat.

Cool hands over his blistered feet, over swollen bites, and now a soft cloth. The hut is dark, but he catches glimpses of the wraith's face, narrow eyes reflecting bone-yellow moonlight through wooden slats. She does not speak, only washes him. He cannot form words even in his own language to ask if she is angel or devil, but she does not flinch when he moves, is surely the only creature in this place of delirium who does not fear him.

He wakes within the heat of his fever to review the *Sparrowhawk's* books, figures of salary and trade for the Company. Dates, some past, some lurking like a dream in a future that no longer seems possible. Inventory: deer skins from Java bound for Dejima. Alum. Sacks of sugar. And salaries: eight guilders per month for

Overmars, the junior boatswain, ten for Stam, assistant to the under surgeon, five each for the ship's boys. Each line of his mental ledger now a roll call of the damned and drowned. A prayer then for the lost, for his own soul, for his family who know nothing of his fate. And what of his six surviving companions?

Starless darkness surrounds him, and the dirt floor swells and rolls. He sinks slowly, clutching his ledgers, unable to cry out.

How many guilders to place on the eyes of the dead, should their bodies be recovered?

The ghost cocks her head, as if counting. He reaches out and touches the tight muscle of her arm. She does not retreat. His fear that she is an insubstantial fancy of his fever-state evaporates, and he finds himself praying silently, giving thanks as they sit next to one another breathing the same cooling, dark air. And then she is closer, the weight of her body pressing against his own. His mind reels and dips in and out of darkness, as her limbs wrap around his own fever-weak body.

When she is gone, the memory of the woman fills his mind as light, despite the shadows. He is not alone. Even on this shipwrecking rock, forces of redeeming grace act in opposition to the pagan demon who has stolen his voice, and even the fear that his feverish mind has convinced him of this cannot crush his spirit.

Silent prayers as darkness turns to light and again to darkness. Fever ebbs and flows. In truth, he is used to praying silently, lest he accidentally repeat one of his mother's prayers within earshot of the crew, all Protestant.

Jonah pitched into the storm.

He has seen it before—a slave thrown overboard for practicing voodoo during a voyage around the Horn. The man's dark skin engulfed by foaming water.

No rib-arc'd belly of a whale as salvation.

The winds had lessened with the sacrifice, and this still bothers him—that the Lord might allow such rash action aboard the small world of a Company ship to go unpunished, blessed even.

Superstition. He catches the word in the net of his mind and draws it in. What might such workings on the human mind mean for him in this place of shamans and eyeless fish, of spectral women arriving in the deepness of the night?

He dares to move the tender muscle in his mouth, presses the scabbed burn into a cheek. Pain flashes along his jaw; blood dribbles down his chin. So slow to heal, this piece of him that cannot seem to remain still.

He reels within the heat of his fever, sees a nanny from his childhood, a stern Belgian woman, gaunt and quick with pencil-thin lips—a drawing of a human, not flesh, surely, who had scolded him and his sister for arguing over sweets—her voice present now in the dark hut, Flemish accent rolling awkwardly in the foreign humidity.

*You are never to use such language among family! Do you understand?
You will show each other kindness, lest the Good Lord take your tongues.*

And her stories: one night of the bleeding Christ, the next of goblins stealing the teeth of wicked children. In his childhood imagination, all were agents of the Old Testament God—wrathful and merciful, two handed in every story.

And split into two faiths even, his father a Protestant, a bookkeeper before him, and his mother Catholic, publicly turned Orange—though in secret, during rainy winter afternoons when he and his sister were kept indoors, she would teach them prayers and catechisms. His mother's face is a pieta, sad smile and benevolent posturing, forever the mother of his youth, before grey hair and worry lines, before the death of his father to a malignant fever.

Crickets cello tunelessly in the thatch above. A breath of inky air cools his hot skin. His heart pounds in his ears as though he is underwater, and he counts beats without meaning to.

What will his mother do without income from the Company? The family's small estate in Heerlen will hardly serve her long. And his sister—without money for a dowry, she will never find a husband of suitable rank.

This last thought makes him laugh despite the pain and again he spits blood. What he wouldn't give to be faced with such domestic turmoil now, to hear his sister fret about money for proper clothing—the way she cared about such

things while still making jest of them, still able to see the absurdity in dainty fashion and coiled wigs.

His thoughts now are not true anxiety, but nostalgia, a longing for home.

He imagines the immensity of the round earth—no edges or precipices to fear, but the vastness of the seas awe-inspiring enough, the earth no longer God's flat-topped footstool, but a bead on a cosmic abacus. And him alone in the dark, chained and in great pain, waiting to be counted.

A memory on the cusp of sleep, of his father reading to him—a storm-tossed ship and many hands lost. Was this the origin of his fascination with the sea, his first call to adventure? Exhaustion and his father's bass hum: *Odysseus. Odysseus. Odysseus.*

He wakes to the steamed-earth scent of rice porridge and barley tea. One of the shaman's men stands over him, startles him fully awake. The man points to the wooden bowl and spoon, stands with arms crossed. He tries the porridge, finds he can swallow it whole without excruciating pain, though he is slow and his keeper visibly impatient, sighing loudly, as if he does not know full well why his captive's mouth is so tender.

Van Persie ignores the man as best he can and finishes choking back his meal. Slanting sunlight through the high open window warms his arms, his feet—clean now. It seems not all of his fever dreams were dreams. His captor retrieves the empty bowl and spoon and leaves him alone with his thoughts and chains.

His feet no longer itch, the countless bites and scratches faded to a dull red. The iron ankle bracelet hangs loose and chafes, but this mark too has faded. His fever simmers, but he manages to leave off his mental ledgers and memories of home for long enough to entertain thoughts of escape. Even as a small hope kindles, so returns the fear that he will be killed, or at best closely guarded for the rest of his days. He dismisses fears of cannibalism—such things are common in the South Pacific, but rare in East Asia, rumours and stories rather than cases documented by learned men.

He relieves himself in a bucket. Light slides across the dirt floor. He drifts into sleep again and is woken by the shaman standing over him, adorned in flowing yellow robes with a wide, white silk hat, brass bell in one hand, knife in the other.

Van Persie rises slowly and faces the man, makes eye contact. In truth he is terrified, but he will face death with what little dignity he can muster. The shaman speaks at him in a flow of half-mumbled, guttural syllables. Van Persie does not cry out or beg. Instead returns to his ledgers—compiles a list of lost shipmates and the salaries that the Company will stop when news of their wrecked ship reaches Batavia.

Eight guilders for the ship's gunners.

“Akgwiya mulleotgeora!”

Twenty guilders for Denijszen, the quartermaster.

The shaman calls out louder, rings his bell and waves the knife, as though carving the air between them. “Akgwiya mulleotgeora!”

Thirty-five for Vlaad, the ship’s surgeon.

He pauses as he reaches his own name—imagines the clean black loops of his own handwriting. *How much for the bookkeeper?*

“Akgwiya mulleotgeora!”

He struggles to ignore the shaman’s knife slicing the space between them, pictures the wraith-like woman who came to him amidst his fever in the night. This small hope.

Thirty guilders. All is not lost.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

Late afternoon sunlight over iron water, kelp and seaweed drifting listlessly into tidal pools. A slow, cooling breeze cuts the humidity. He forces himself to become aware of his breath, let the tensions of the day's work slide from his body, pulled back into the lapping sea by the arms of orange anemones and purple starfish. The great southern expanse stretches before him, thin clouds above, full of light.

Where are your bones Abba? And how might I honour them?

A good catch today, his uncle pleased. *Godeung-eo*. Small silver mackerel, perfect for frying whole. They'd sold them right off the boat, no need to cart any into Seogwipo. Grandmother will be pleased too—the fish is her favourite, though she has never admitted this, instead claims to accept any gift of the sea brought by heavenly winds and tides into their nets, no matter the size or specifics of the bounty. But the flaking white flesh is easy on her near-toothless gums, and tonight she will not be able to hide her smile while she eats.

His uncle has travelled to meet with yet another tax collector in town. No matter that the latest storm cost them days of work repairing nets and their boat. The man from the capital will find a way to tax that too. Tax fish. Tax them. Tax the dead—they still pay on behalf of his father because they have no grave to prove he is gone. It is fruitless to dwell on it, but his uncle must feel the same resentment sending money to the ruling *yangban* in Seoul—these men that live so

far from their island and a true day's work. So far even from the rumoured drought and famine plaguing the mainland. Even such a disaster will not affect those behind the high walls and gates of the capital.

His thoughts turn to the six foreigners taken by the king's men. In Seoul or released? Alive or dead?

"One would imagine a fisherman would grow tired of staring at the sea." The woman's voice is rich and full, as though she laughs the words, and she sits on the rock beside him without bowing or waiting for invitation.

Again he is surprised by the diver's presence, but tries not to show this. *The sea is never the same*, he thinks, *so there is nothing to grow tired of*. But he loses these words in his teeth, continues to stare straight ahead.

The woman, Mi-kyeong, speaks again before he can compose himself. "Fear not, Hae-jo. I won't drag you beneath the waves and drown you with a kiss."

He blushes at the folk tale and the thought of a kiss, but manages to laugh, and this time finds his tongue. "Is that a promise, cousin?"

"Yes, yes!" Now it is Mi-kyeong's turn to laugh, and the tension between them dissipates on the breeze. "Sometimes I think the villagers on our island still believe the old tales. The way they avoid us, the men staring at our necks and ankles, their wives ignoring us as if we were whores. Unless of course they want abalone porridge for a special occasion."

Hae-jo is embarrassed to catch himself gazing at her smooth brown ankles. He glances up at her white-toothed smile.

“Your uncle is a good man.”

Hae-jo nods. “This is true.”

“Has he ever told you about Soo-wha? *Our water flower*, my mother called her.”

“*Anniyo*. He never speaks of much, other than fish. And taxes.”

“And you never wondered why he hasn’t taken a wife? A man like that is offered many matches. Just as you will be. And soon, I would guess.”

He feels his face redden again, but does not respond, hopes she will tell him more about the man he spends his days with. But the diver just matches his gaze out to sea. She is a few years older than he is, skin tanned like a fisherman’s. Simple clothing—a frayed *hanbok* the colour of watermelon flesh—and, as before, she wears no head covering, but lets her dark hair fall down her back. Hae-jo sees an elegance in this. A beauty he would not expect to find in one so untroubled by what Grandmother would call *right thinking*.

Finally he dares to break the silence with a question. “Will you not tell me who she is?”

“*Was*. My favourite auntie. She taught me to swim and dive. But I cannot speak to who she was to your uncle. This is a question for him.”

He nods, wonders how he will manage such boldness without showing his uncle disrespect.

“Besides,” she speaks softly now, a hint of formality that catches his ear, “there is another matter at hand. I have seen the *waegukin*. The yellow-haired one. In-ha keeps him in chains, puts him on display for money along with other unspeakables: eyeless fish, a goat with four horns, misshapen birds that fly only in circles. Creatures caught between worlds. In tents and huts on the road to Hallasan.”

“But why would anyone pay to see such things? He is a man. I saw him bleed.”

“Yes.”

She does not say, *and still you gave him to the false shaman, the snake-tongued circus-master and fraud.*

“Will you take me to him?”

Again the woman smiles, but this time shows no teeth.

조선 효종 (Hyojong of Joseon)

The wood-framed paper screens slide open, and chief advisor Byeong-ho slinks into the royal meeting room with the Dutchman Bak Yeon in tow.

Weltevree, thinks Hyojong, *his true name*—though he does not know why such a change unsettles him, nor why he does not trust this man who fought so bravely for his father, and has been rewarded with a new name and a home in the capital.

The men prostrate themselves on mats before his table, and he clears his throat to signal an end to the formality. As usual, he fights to keep his expression neutral in the face of such necessary tradition and acts of supplication. They are both a waste of his time and something he cannot dispense with—not if he hopes to maintain power—and this tires him, leaves him feeling trapped by his own station.

He sits with legs crossed on elevated cushions. The men fidget, eyes darting from hanging tapestries to purple, oiled-paper screens and the ceremonial suit of armour in the small room's corner. The Dutchman's gaze lingers on a blue and white bowl, in which float pink lotus blossoms. Perhaps the man has seen a similar piece in his travels, unaware it was shaped by a royal potter taken by the Ilbon to Nagasaki during his grandfather's reign. More fidgeting. From their restlessness, Hyojong guesses they bring uncomfortable news and, for the

hundredth time this day, he wishes he were at rest in the pleasure gardens with his beautiful one, his foxling—the only one in the entire kingdom who has never lied to his face or minced words for her own benefit. Although this may change as she grows.

He interrupts his own sad thought. “You have met our guests?” He nods to the Dutchman to speak freely.

“Yes, King Under Heaven.”

The man’s accent continues to improve.

“And?”

“They are well, growing stronger. But... they were told the seventh survivor, their bookkeeper, perished.”

Impatience rises like oil in water. “But this is not so?” He looks to his advisor.

“Lord Who is Blessed by Both Sun and Moon.”

The man pauses long enough for Hyojong to think of a story the palace snake catcher told him as a boy, of two suns and two moons warring in the sky until only one of each remained. *Can one be blessed by such opposing forces?*

“There are rumours from Jeju-do that a shaman, a sorcerer, holds him captive.”

“Rumours?” Another word he would dearly like to ban from official use.

“The local governor is investigating the matter, sire.” Another deep bow. A small glass vial swings from the man’s neck on a silver chain.

An elixir? Or poison? Common enough, but what purpose might this serve in the safety of the palace? He sweeps this new worry from his mind, focusses on news of the sorcerer. So, it is not only those in the capital who watch the night sky. “And this... shaman?”

“A pretender, my Lord. Stirring up trouble among the islanders. The fool claims his hands perform the bidding of the gods.”

Simple enough to test such a presumption. “And our six guests—they will cooperate with my generals?”

The Dutchman bows again. “Of course. They have useful knowledge of cannons, though none are of significant ranking within the Company.”

Not unlike you, thinks Hyojong, his eyes resting on the *waegukin's* long red beard and silk robes—the dress of a *yangban*, a scholar or minor advisor, although his large frame makes such attempts at assimilation seem a pantomime or circus act, both sad and comical. Like his compatriots, this man did not arrive alone, though his shipmate died fighting the Han in the north—a glorious death for one who could never be raised up among the true-bone elite.

“And the six—will they try to escape?”

Both men answer in the negative and he nods, feigns pleasure, though clearly this answer comes too quickly to be the full truth. He waves the men away and they shuffle backwards in haste, bowing as they go.

Six foreigners in the capital. One in the hands of a shaman on Jeju-do. Again he dwells on the many ways in which a man can be held captive,

imprisoned by birthright and rank, by poverty, by language and custom, by love even—this last one causes his thoughts to stumble. He will never be able to bear the loss of marrying off his daughter, not even to the finest of aristocratic families, Manchu or Joseon. In his heart of hearts he wishes to cast off Confucian law and give her his throne. His foxling would wear the crown as easily as sunlight on her pale brow, and he would find true peace with his ancestors. These thoughts wash over him as he sits in the now-empty room surrounded by the rich, earthy smells of peony and lotus flower, of fresh cut grass and, from the gardens just outside, the hush-click of scissors.

Van Persie

It is the hour of bats, and they stutter and squeak above his prison, coldness creeping through the hut's wood-and-earth walls.

Lord of Heaven and Earth, will you not cast off this fetter and deliver me from evil?

Light from a torch flickers through cracks in the wooden door.

My heart of hearts longs for more familiar shores, for family. Do you not see me here? Do you not see how these heathens have turned my suffering into a spectacle?

The guard outside drops a bottle, curses.

They come to see me Lord. To stare at and prod the foreign demon in shackles.

He breathes to calm himself, stopping his prayers from descending into further self-pity and grovelling. A wisp of oily smoke wafts inside the hut. His unseen guard hums.

I am your servant, Almighty Father. Even here.

“Even here,” he says aloud, whispering without a lisp. He tests his reborn tongue on new syllables, those he hears most often, though he knows not what they mean: *waegukin, gwishin*.

The shaman has pointed out a comet in the night sky. A heavenly body to mark the doom of the *Sparrowhawk*? Or a sign of something yet to come—a great star in the east, a guiding light? He guesses the shaman is not a true holy man, but a performer. The man is not afraid of him, does not think him a ghost or demon, uses him instead to intimidate others. He can see fear on the faces of the villagers who come to stare, exchange coins for the privilege.

The memory of the hot knife searing lines across his tongue—the sizzle of metal on flesh, blinding pain.

He must find a way to Nagasaki and Dejima, to send word to the Thirteen Gentlemen of the Company. If he can escape, the board will see him safely home. But the shaman does not act alone and his guards carry long knives. No armour or muskets, but this matters little if he cannot learn his location. If he is indeed on Quelepart, off the south coast of Corea, he is unlikely to find help amongst locals—the Company does not trade here, and their business in Nagasaki will be looked on unfavourably.

A woman's voice lilts outside the door: soft, low tones and quiet laughter. The thumb-in-cheek pop of a stopper pulled from a bottle.

He breathes shallowly through his mouth, listens to the undulations of the strange language, interrupted only by the gentle cooing of domesticated quail roosting in the thatch above—he has been fed their eggs, small and speckled, tasting oddly of smoke, as though infused with charcoal.

Mosquitos whine around his ears and neck, but he has too many welts already to bother slapping at them. A layer of grime and sweat keep the worst of the swarm at bay, though this does nothing to prevent the louses in his straw bedding from feasting on him.

More laughter outside, his guard's voice rising and falling into hushed grumbles.

A cockroach scampers between skin and iron on his ankle and he shakes his leg in disgust, pulls on his chain. He has examined the lock carefully, noted how the metal workings appear at odds with the thatch and squalor of this small cluster of huts. He has seen beautiful clothing too—the shaman's robes, a woman's silk hat—all of which suggest something more to this place than he has been permitted to see. Do the greater powers of the land know of his imprisonment here, or of his compatriots' fates?

He drifts in and out of sleep, wakes to hands on his legs. The chain falls from his ankle. A figure stands over him, another at the open door, blocking the torchlight. The wraith helps him to his feet and pulls him out the door, where the guard lies unmoving, from drink or worse. The two figures slide into shadow, wave for him to follow.

As they leave behind the glowing circle of huts, his rescuer wraps a cloak around his shoulders. Faint moonlight on a woman's face and, ahead on the dark path, the broad shoulders of a man. They trot quickly downhill for some distance, perhaps a cannon shot, his lungs aflame. His wasted body cannot continue for

long, though he dares not stop. As his eyes adjust, the small shadows give way to an open expanse that must be the sea, though even now he doubts his own vision, shocked by the shimmering silver and blue in starlight. His eyes water in the salty breeze and he stumbles down the hillside towards the lapping water.

Shouts from behind them. The man ahead stops and swivels, curses, urges him onward more quickly. The ghost-like woman takes his hand and pulls him down the remainder of the rough hillside and onto a rocky beach, where the man calls out a soft greeting or signal, which is answered by the scrape of wood on shore.

The small boat rocks in the shallows as he and the woman climb aboard. Two men exchange quick words and he sees their faces for a moment in moonlight—those he first met on the beach after the wreck.

Torches wind down the path towards them. His rescuers launch the skiff and the older of the two men remains on shore, while the younger clambers aboard and grabs oars, pulls hard. The boat is rigged for a small sail, but that will be of no use to them until they have managed to clear the breaking surf. Though the tide is in their favour, the boat moves slowly.

Van Persie cannot see the older man, prays that he has managed to slip unnoticed into shadow, as torches reach the waterline. Their pursuers wade into the surf, and Van Persie leaps to his rescuer's side and takes an oar. Together they pull hard, and the skiff picks up speed as it makes depth. But this will not be enough. Several men have waded to their chests and swim awkward strokes

towards them. The first pursuer reaches for their gunwale, but cries out and disappears from sight. Another man yells and plunges underwater. Then a third. Two more panic and turn back, but neither make the shore, as though some awful rip tide or current has caught them and dragged them beneath the water's churning surface.

He and his rescuer pull on the oars until they move easily with the outgoing tide. Van Persie's muscles ache and burn, but his fear has given him strength.

A splash beside the boat and an exhalation of breath. A black shape in the water. Panic tunes his rib cage. His fears shift from human form to all manner of sea creature, until the shape whistles and calls out in the now-familiar tongue of these locals. The woman at the helm answers.

More dark shapes surface—women swimming easily in the current, their dark hair spreading over the water like seaweed. They wave and are gone, and he marvels at these mermaids of the deep—creatures he has heard much of, but never before laid eyes upon.

Once they are well distant from shore, the man next to him stops rowing and hoists the small sail. It catches wind and the man takes the till, steers them west around the coastline. The woman moves to the bow and huddles in a robe, and Van Persie finds himself desperate to thank his new companions, to ask them any of the countless questions he has about this place, about their intent and his own fate. Instead he must content himself with the cool ocean breeze on his face,

with skin no longer chafed by an iron bracelet and the glorious lack of insects on the starlit sea. The vessel skims over the water and he falls into the rhythmic rise and fall of the bow. Ropes and wood groan. The cloth sail snaps taut. Salt spray wets his lips.

He wakes stiff and cold to sunrise and the creaking skiff. They have rounded the southern coastline and now head north, more shoreline to the east, open sea gaping to the west, the water slate in the weak light of the early sky, which glows yellow behind the peak of a mountain, perhaps volcanic. It seems he has been held captive on the island his rescuers now circumnavigate—Quelepart still his best guess.

His two companions have been watching him take in his surroundings and stretch. They bow in quick nods and the woman offers him water from a skin.

The man's hands remain on the till, though he smiles at Van Persie, nods again to the oars. In thanks? Comrades in escape?

Van Persie returns the smile, feels his dry lips crack. "Thank-you," he croaks in his own tongue.

No response, though the man looks embarrassed by his outburst. Van Persie attempts to correct any breach of etiquette by pointing to the red welts around his ankle and bowing in the fashion of his companions.

To this the man responds with another smile and nod, and a repeated, one-syllable word. "Nae. Nae."

The woman watches their sad pantomime with a bemused expression while she chews white strips of dried fish or squid. She hands him a portion. He relishes the salty flavour, the texture softer than expected, easy to chew and swallow.

They remain a full musket-shot offshore, pulling even with an easterly point as the sun crests the green slopes of the volcanic peak and turns the water emerald. The island's rocks are black, save where they have been splattered white by gulls, giving the impression of a ring of ash from a fire that has been extinguished by the tide.

As they round the point and continue northwest, another open body of water appears ahead of them, and he looks to his companions, points at the land they are leaving behind, draws a circle in the air—an island, he hopes.

“Nae,” says the man again, nodding, apparently not in the least confused by his wild gesturing. “Jeju-do.” The man points to the land. Then gestures north, spreads his arms wide. “Joseon.”

Van Persie nods. Mainland, perhaps. Or larger island. The man seems at ease at the till, his movements deliberate and sure. Thin scars line his wrists and hands. From nets?

He steals a glance at the woman, beautiful in true light—tanned skin, dark eyes and hair, a strong jaw line and lithe, muscled limbs. Was it she who came to him in his fever? How much of those nights of delirium was even real, how much a figment of his mind? Strong hands bathing his feet, a cool cloth on his brow, her

breath on his cheek, neck—soft hot skin on his own. Or perhaps he had stewed alone in his fevered sweat, in love with a ghost.

The woman leans over the edge and vomits.

The sun arcs, and all three passengers remain silent as they approach the grey and green outline of a vast shore—small islands dot the coast, and the fisherman deftly aims the skiff into a channel. Gulls overhead squawk as if to claim their vessel, and a string of black cormorants cuts a line a few hands above the water off their starboard. He is told Japanese fishermen in Dejima keep such birds in wooden cages, train them to catch small fish in their long throats, cough them up for their masters.

A beautiful but fanciful idea, and whether or not such claims are part of a ruse or swindle, he knows not, nor can he guess whether there is any hope of transport to Dejima and the port of Nagasaki, to those who might help him return home to his sister and mother.

Lord, please do not let those I love give up on me, should they learn of the Sparrowhawk's fate. Put their minds at ease and let them remember me in their prayers.

He runs his thumb along the weathered gunwale, thinks not of other ships, but of his mother's secret rosary, hidden in a dresser drawer, and of his and his sister's oily fingers over the polished wooden beads, dark red and brown. The smell of pressed lavender flowers in the drawer, his sister's tinkling laughter,

whispered guesses at what powers might be held in such a clandestine object. And wishes on the beads—impossible to resist hoping in the rosary’s magic.

What had he wished for? He cannot recall a single request, though as he thumbs the wooden gunwale now, he catches himself watching the woman in the bow, dark eyes scanning the northern horizon, wind blowing strands of black hair across her face. He imagines each strand tied to a cormorant, the birds returning to her with their catch, and he cannot shake the image of this goddess before him, both lost and left marvelling at the power she holds over his mind.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

Mount Halla no longer rises behind them on the southern horizon. He swallows his uneasiness by picturing Grandmother leaving offerings on his behalf, shrine to shrine around their village and shore—fish, so that Grandmother *Yeongdeungsin* might allow them safe passage off the island, cloth, so that Father of the Wind might fill their sail without tearing it, and rice wine, to appease the Dragon Lord of Halla-san, that he might cast his cannibal eyes on other mortals for the length of their great crossing and journey.

Mi-kyeong's seasickness puzzles him, and her silence all these hours casts a shadow over their successful freeing of the straw-haired *waegukin*, who rubs the wooden edge of the skiff and smiles dumbly. The man's face is now covered in thick, curling hair the same colour as that on his head, giving him the appearance of a shaggy beast.

He does not want to let his mind rest on it, but fears Mi-kyeong's ailment is the workings of a curse cast blindly by In-ha, though the sickness comes and goes. There is much falseness about In-ha—*this is true*—and the man cannot know who stole his prisoner, so perhaps his curses will not cut sharply, nor haunt them over great distance, despite the shaman's claims that his dancing has *reached the height of the grand roof beam of the cosmos*.

He believes his uncle managed to escape the beach, such was the focus of their pursuers on the boat, and for this he is thankful. He would not have his actions bring harm to his family, though he knows his uncle would be with them now were it not for Grandmother and the care she needs.

Evening approaches, but they have already passed Geoje-do, and will soon reach the fishing town of Tongyeong on the south coast of the mainland, where they will seek shelter and decide their next course of action. They have come further east of the quickest route to the mainland in order to avoid the exposure of the King's road north to the capital. Hae-jo has never sailed this far from the island of his birth, though his uncle has made the journey many times, and has instructed him well.

Nephew, I was a coward to deliver the waegukin to In-ha, and should not have been blind to the foreigner's humanity. This boat must act as my atonement, for I have other responsibilities. I fear the true burden falls on your shoulders. We have caused a grave imbalance. I trust my brother's son to make this right.

They spoke deep into the night of the path north, of customs on the mainland, but even his uncle conceded that once they were off the island the path forward might take many turns.

You must decide your own fate here. But you are not alone. Your mother and father will go with you, and I will be here with your grandmother. We will not cease to make offerings on your behalf.

And In-ha, ajussi? Will he seek vengeance if he learns I have disappeared at the same time as his prisoner?

He might, but a false prophet makes a precarious deal with fate when he begins to lie. If he continues to claim his prisoner was a spirit he managed to chain, he must concede that his power over this creature is broken and appear weak. If he claims the demon was a foreign man taken by other men, he risks the local garrison or the governor catching wind of this and his punishment will be swift and severe.

But what if—

Yes. What if? It is time for our village to deal with our false prophet, even as he uses the fire in the night sky to his advantage. I am at peace with binding my own fate to this cause. There are others on our island who will stand with me. True-bone shamans and people of the sea. Fear not, nephew.

They approach the green coastline as the low sun turns orange. His uncle has instructed him to seek out the fisherman Cho Ji-hoon of Tongyeong to request shelter and provisions. He hopes his uncle's friend will have news of the *waegukin's* compatriots. One thing is certain: he has no intention of freeing the foreigner from In-ha only to see him imprisoned by a governor or king who does not know and honour the ways of the sea.

Eomma, abba. Guide me as I navigate new waters. Let me not dishonour our name.

Cormorants to the east, their swiftness interrupting his prayer—sleek dark wings close to the water. He watches this black line silently, unable to decide if the birds are an omen of welcome, or one final warning.

They pull the boat onto the shore and leave it hidden between towering rocks. Tongyeong lies only a short distance to the east—spotted from further off shore—and the three of them gather what is left of their water and dried squid and walk along the ragged beach towards their only hope of shelter. The *waegukin* wears a cloak over his weathered clothing. The dark hood hides the man's hair, although Hae-jo would easily guess from his posture and gait that he is not local. Others will see this too.

They move slowly over loose stones as the tide recedes. The air smells of brine and musky pollen. Shore pine and wind-whipped gooseberry cover the hillsides above the beach. Hae-jo finds himself thinking on each step, unsure of himself and what it means to be on the mainland. He has always been taught to distrust mainlanders—tax collectors and soldiers from Seoul who mock their true shamans and pry money from them no matter how little they have or how difficult the season.

What of the gods here, in this land of kings and great cities so far from the sea?

The sea has taken much from his family, but it has also given much in return. That his father might have been a sacrifice to such a god is not lost on him,

though what he should do with such thoughts is less clear, as is what it might mean for him should he need to leave the coastline to complete his task.

His companions trick their way along the beach. He would lead them inland if he knew of a road, but the shoreline is the only sure path.

Mi-kyeong stops and signals for them to do the same. She is less pale now, but Hae-jo fears for her still—sickness far from home is no small worry, whether a curse, bad spirit or food turned sour.

She must see the concern on his face. “Don’t worry, cousin. I will not slow you. But we must discuss what happens next.”

They decide he should enter the town alone to find his uncle’s friend—test these new waters. He thinks for a moment on how to share their plan with the *waegukin*, but Mi-kyeong has already taken the bearded man’s hand and leads him up the beach to the shelter of wind-breaking pines. Either the man is easily led, or he guesses their plan.

Or he trusts Mi-kyeong completely.

Hae-jo continues to walk as dusk falls, the lapping ocean matching his pace, four steps to a wave. He is nervous about arriving in this place unannounced—knows he will be viewed with suspicion. But arriving alone will allow him to gather rumours and news about the other foreigners, and, if need be, the roads north.

He finds the women of the small town collecting racks of drying cuttlefish from the narrow streets between homes, along with rows of drying red peppers

from their thatched roofs. The familiarity of this evening scene eases his fears, as does the tanned skin of the townspeople—men and women of the earth and sea, like him and his own.

He bows low to a woman gathering sesame pods from the edge of the path. She eyes him quietly, waits for him to address her.

“*Ajumma*. With respect. Can you direct me to the home of the fisherman, Cho Ji-hoon? My uncle sends greetings.”

The woman hawks spit, but points to a man hauling nets towards a thatched-roof home a stone’s throw down the dirt path. Hae-jo thanks the woman and makes his way to the man, who sees him coming and smiles toothily when he is close. This warmth surprises Hae-jo, who again bows low, delivers greetings from his uncle.

Ji-hoon laughs. “You are his brother’s son, yes?”

Hae-jo nods, again taken aback by this short, weathered man’s reaction to his presence. The man’s grey hair bristles beneath a straw hat.

“You look like your father. A good man, too. A good fisherman. I owe him my life.” The man pauses. “You any good with nets?” He squats next to his pile of hemp twine, wet and briny, and waves for Hae-jo to join him. The two men set upon the net—rebinding, cutting, rebinding. The man does not offer more information, and though Hae-jo’s head spins with the urgency of his journey and with a myriad of questions about his father, he does not speak. Instead he works thoroughly and quickly, until Ji-hoon finally breaks the silence.

“Your uncle taught you, yes?”

“*Nae*. When I was very young.”

The man is missing two fingers on his left hand. Scars line his forearms. Hae-jo watches the deftness of the man’s movements and also how he glances around them, takes stock of those who watch.

Ji-hoon speaks in a low voice. “If we keep working, the others will lose interest, assume you have come to help me on my boat for a season.”

The man is astute, both in his knowledge of his people’s ways and in his implicit guess that Hae-jo’s visit brings more than a greeting from an old acquaintance. A woman approaches the hut carrying an earthen jar on her head, her maroon and green *hanbok* brighter than those worn on Jeju-do, as though stained from the juice of ripe berries and leaves. Like Ji-hoon, her hair is streaked with grey, her skin deeply lined. After a quick exchange with her husband, the woman greets Hae-jo warmly, tells him he is welcome in their home.

“Our daughters have married. We have room for you.”

Hae-jo stands and bows low, thanks her. She smiles as she takes the jar inside the small home, leaving the two men to their work.

“My only regret,” says Ji-hoon with a wink and a smile. “No sons. Only daughters who leave. Did your uncle ever marry that diver he was so taken with?”

Hae-jo shakes his head, tries not to look surprised.

“Forever a bachelor, eh? A mountain goat, your uncle. Too brave and stubborn to marry.”

Hae-jo laughs at this and nods.

“Did he tell you how we met? Of course not. He and your father found me drifting southeast of your island, sail lost, boat taking on water. Tail end of a typhoon. I shouldn’t have gone out, but I was young and still a stubborn goat myself. They towed me in, fed me, helped me repair my sail and hull. When I returned home weeks later, the shaman and all my neighbours were terrified. Thought I’d come back from the dead to haunt them.”

A pack of children rush past, all laughter and yip, waving stacks of grasshoppers skewered on sharpened sticks. Ji-hoon pauses until they are out of earshot.

“I was sorry to hear about your father. I hope his ghost is at peace.” The man sighs loudly. “His fate should have been mine. But that is not why you are here. There have been strange arrivals on your island recently, yes?”

“This is true,” acknowledges Hae-jo, and they talk candidly as night falls.

The three travellers wake before dawn to Ji-hoon’s soft knocking on the door of the small, dry storage shed at the outskirts of town. Hae-jo dusts off straw to receive the food their hosts have brought—rice porridge and tea, as well as provisions for their journey north.

The six waegukin are with the king in his capital, Ji-hoon told him the night before. Everyone agrees. Many saw them travel north.

The man and his wife set the food before them without fuss and join them for the meal, and Hae-jo is thankful for their industry and lack of formality.

Ji-hoon and his wife do not appear afraid of the *waegukin*, although they steal glances at his hair and beard. Hens wake to flap and cluck softly outside. A salty breeze slides through gaps in the shed's wooden slats and the sun threatens to rise in the east, though the shed remains inked in broad shadows.

All at once Mi-kyeong rises and leaves the hut to retch into the surrounding underbrush. Ji-hoon's wife follows, crouches next to her and rubs her back as Mi-kyeong continues to vomit. Hae-jo cannot help but fear that she has indeed been set upon by a restless spirit, a curse from In-ha—false in his heart, but not impotent in his sorcery.

The women exchange quick words and Ji-hoon's wife tells them she will fetch the village shaman, a *mudang* who is trustworthy. A healer.

“Don't worry, nephew,” says Ji-hoon, resting a hand on Hae-jo's knee. “She is nothing like the snake on your island.”

Hae-jo nods and Ji-hoon's wife slips away without a word.

The foreigner watches all of this with an expression of alarm. Hae-jo signals for him to remain where he is and the bearded man returns to his food, though his eyes do not leave the diving woman, who sits with her back against wooden slats. Again Hae-jo wonders at the nature of their relationship, though in truth his thoughts are too full of worry over the path ahead to dwell on this for long.

There are many who would take this man as a prize and use him for leverage against the king, or even kill him on sight as a spy. You are his only hope for a safe journey. But what you decide when you reach the capital is a matter I cannot advise you on. Ji-hoon had spoken these words carefully, in full knowledge of their weight.

Leave your boat with me. There are signal towers all along the coast, and you will be discovered as soon as you try to land anywhere near the capital. You must keep your fates in your own hands for as long as possible.

A cock crows in the nearby village and the hens outside their shelter cluck and shuffle in reply.

“You are worried she will not be able to make the journey north, yes?” Ji-hoon pats his knee again and Hae-jo nods.

And that she is cursed because of me.

“Either way, your companion needs care. If she cannot travel, the shaman and my wife will see to her.”

Hae-jo sees the truth of this, though he does not want to travel alone with the foreigner. His mind casts about for hope that Mi-kyeong will recover and remain by his side. But even in his panic he gives thanks to his uncle and father for saving this fisherman’s life, and again to his uncle for having the wisdom to send him here.

Before the sun has fully risen, Ji-hoon’s wife returns with the *mudang*, a wrinkled woman wrapped in yellow robes with long sleeves, a hemp cloth tied

around her head with straw cord. She carries only small brass bells and a fan. Mi-kyeong has remained seated against a wall with her eyes closed. The shaman greets them without pausing to stare at the *waegukin*, and this composure gives Hae-jo confidence, although he sees the foreign sailor tense at the sight of garb so similar to that of his former captor's. The *waegukin* rises before Hae-jo can stop him and steps in front of Mi-kyeong. But rather than reacting with impatience or frustration at the foreigner's distrust, the shaman smiles gap-toothed and laughs, touches the man's arm, his beard. She reaches up to his yellow hair and rubs it between forefinger and thumb, laughs again. The *waegukin* blinks, but does not brush away the shaman's hand. She points to her own heart, then to Mi-kyeong, then to the *waegukin*.

“Ah, young one,” says the old woman, though she knows full well the foreigner will not understand. “Your heart is full to bursting, I think.” She chuckles again. “Perhaps this is a hint for us at the cause of your beloved's illness?”

Hae-jo tries to hide his shock at the implications of this. The foreigner, as bewildered as ever, steps aside and allows the shaman to kneel next to Mi-kyeong. The *mudang* presses her hand to the woman's forehead, then to her stomach, whispers a question in her ear, to which Mi-kyeong responds with a nod.

“Ha. Yes. No need for any *kut*. Only a blessing for what is sure to come.”

As they finish preparing for the journey north, Ji-hoon takes Hae-jo aside and confirms what his wife and the *mudang* have learned.

“Your companion is with child.”

Hae-jo feels his cheeks flush. So. Not a curse from In-ha after all. Though the truth is no less worrisome.

“On another day, this might be joyful and cause for celebration, but it means many things for you now.” Ji-hoon pauses for Hae-jo to agree, then continues. “You know she cannot continue north. The road is hard. She must return to your island to prepare.”

This is true, thinks Hae-jo, though he does not speak it, does not wish it to be so, does not understand how she could give her body to this foreign sailor, this *waegukin*.

“Also,” here the older fisherman pauses. “She is unmarried.” He glances at the *waegukin*, who is trying on a pair of leather shoes that Ji-hoon has brought—too small by some measure, but they will protect the man’s feet far better than a wrapping. “If this becomes known here, she will be in great danger. She must return to her own people as soon as she is able.”

There is much hidden in plain sight between this man’s words. Hae-jo appreciates such care and tact. His uncle once told him of a woman from a mountain village who was accused of relations with a stranger from the sea, of the displeasure of the island gods, who called for her flesh to appease their growing hunger.

There are many types of hunger, thinks Hae-jo now, frightened.

“Nephew. I can see the worry in your eyes. And shock, yes? Perhaps you are even angry.” The man pauses again. “It is not my place to give advice here, but since I am a stubborn old goat, you will hear it anyhow. Speak to your cousin before you make any decisions. Listen to her carefully.”

Hae-jo nods, though he cannot find words amidst the many currents tugging at his mind and heart.

The diver herself has spoken little all morning, and the *mudang* and Ji-hoon’s wife still tend to her with teas and a root compress on her belly. Mi-kyeong sees him watching, waves him over. He obeys and squats next to her.

“Apologies, cousin. It seems the gods have their own plans for me.”

He swallows his confusion and fear. “No need to apologize. You have already helped my uncle and I atone for our error.”

“Yes. And, cousin?”

This woman sees through him with such ease. “It is.... He is not one of *us*.” Sour words. He runs his tongue over his teeth.

“And yet you have already risked your life for him.” Mi-kyeong does not wait for him to argue. “Hae-jo. I have many thoughts about all of this, but one thing is certain: we do not decide who or what the ocean brings to our shores.”

He nods as a fat hen hops onto Mi-kyeong’s foot, clucks and bobs.

Mi-kyeong twitches off the bird. “And you will take care of the *waegukin*, yes?”

He hesitates, but nods again. “For Grandmother Sea. For my uncle.”

“Yes. And for me.” She takes his hand, traces a thin scar on his palm.

Hae-jo does not pull away, though he stares at the hen scratching secret words into the earth beside them.

“This will mean trouble for you, cousin. Great danger. I will make offerings.”

Hae-jo knows in his heart that her words are true, even if he cannot quell the surge of emotion within. And Ji-hoon is also correct; he is worried. He is stronger in this woman’s presence and unsure whether or not he is strong enough for what lies ahead. He manages to shrug off these dark thoughts, but what waits behind them is worse: a small, split-tongued voice that whispers, *why not me?*

The diver tightens her grip on his hand, as though sensing his troubled heart.

“I will not fail you, cousin,” he says. “Will you deliver greetings to my uncle and grandmother?”

She smiles. “Of course.”

One last squeeze of his hand as he stands, turns his attention to his hosts. He thanks them as formally as he can manage, but Ji-hoon and his wife wave away his words as though they are insects.

“I owe your family a great debt,” Ji-hoon reminds him. “And I will see your companion safely back across the water.”

Hae-jo bows low, deepest respect, despite the couples’ protests.

The *mudang* sings a soft blessing, waves her fan over him and the *waegukin* to cut any ties holding them back, make their feet swift as the gods', that they might walk a thousand miles in one night without tiring.

As soon as the *waegukin* understands that they are to leave Mi-kyeong behind, he refuses to walk and casts off Hae-jo's hand as he tries to lead him away. Ji-hoon and his wife avert their eyes, embarrassed, and Hae-jo tries desperately to signal the severity of Mi-kyeong's condition, though it is clear the foreigner fails to grasp even this. Finally Mi-kyeong steps forward and takes the man's hands in her own. Hae-jo knows he should turn away, but cannot. He catches the *mudang* watching the scene intently as well. She winks at him and smiles toothily, as Mi-kyeong holds the foreigner's hands to her heart.

"You must go north now. Away from the sea and my salt-water blood. My heart goes with you."

She slips the *waegukin* a small, polished stone from the beach, which he holds between thumb and forefinger. Though the man cannot possibly understand a word, he allows Mi-kyeong to push him gently away, and he follows Hae-jo down the beach towards the path north. Hae-jo scolds the man each time he looks back over his shoulder—such actions are an affront to the gods of their feet, which can only face forward. Hae-jo points to his own eyes, then north, and repeats this until the *waegukin* nods. They hike into the woods and hills as the sun rises over green ginkgo, pine and ash. Birdsong and insect whine, twigs snapping underfoot. The underbrush rustles with unseen life as the sun casts egg-yolk onto

the leaves around them. They walk in silence, each man, Hae-jo suspects, wrestling with his own demons, though the foreigner has clearly not guessed the cause of Mi-kyeong's sickness. For his part, he must close his ears to the crow-tongued god upon his shoulder, and decide the best way to make contact with the other foreigners without condemning his charge to further captivity. Black-feathered thoughts swirl, and yet his fate is now bound to that of the straw-haired man who walks next to him.

Such a great journey for an island fisherman, he tells himself. And their sea crossing was only the beginning. Ji-hoon and his wife gave them water and dried provisions, but could only tell them of the path north to Masan-si, a city up the arm of the coast.

From there you must travel northwest to the capital, taking the smallest roads you can find. Stay clear of the king's roads, take shelter in the trees at night and do not speak to anyone if you can help it. The king has spies in every village, at every crossing.

Ji-hoon also told him many useful and worrying things about the mainland—further rumours of famine, and customs that seem beyond belief.

In the capital, there are men who own more slaves than we have grains of rice. This is true. If a woman kills her husband, she is buried up to her neck by the roadside with a saw left next to her. So I am told. And no women, not even the rich, are permitted outside of their homes during daylight.

And though he cannot help but laugh at the thought of telling the women divers of his own island such a thing, he is troubled by how deeply different the customs of the mainland are, and he fears he knows even less than he once imagined. A poor guide then, a stranger leading a stranger through a strange land.

A thrush calls out to the new sun as they pass its roost on the branch of a striped elm. Hae-jo does not hear song, but the shaman's blessing.

Be at peace, grandson. You were made for this journey. And the gods agree.

조선 효종 (Hyojong of Joseon)

“Our sons found her leaving lotus petals before the stone turtle in the courtyard. Wasting them!”

His wife’s voice turns shrill, but there is no true malice in it. She acts a part and he does likewise, feigning a sage nod, gaze flitting from the covered balcony to the walled gardens and pond before them. He squints at the sun’s reflection off the library’s copper roof two courtyards distant.

“They demanded an explanation, of course.”

He fights the beginnings of a smile, focusses on the measured rings of the astronomical clock his servants have placed next to his cushions. He dearly hopes none have remained near enough to eavesdrop and spread rumours of his wife’s tone.

“She claimed she was making an offering to the god who tends magic flowers in the western sky!” The woman plucks at a seam of her blue *hanbok*.

The old ways. Curious.

“She is wild!”

She is not yours. He clears his throat. “She will cause no harm.” He lets his wife sulk for a moment, before risking further words. “I will see to it. Do not let it worry you.”

The queen sighs. A screen slides open in the empty rooms behind them. The still water of the garden pond reflects the clear sky, unbroken save for a floating pinecone.

Yesterday it was uproar over his foxling's refusal to use silver chopsticks.

She claims they're slippery, asks why she must use them.

And?

I told her it was not fitting for a princess to use common utensils.

But not, he thinks now, because silver turns black when it touches arsenic?

“Husband. I would like to look upon the foreigners with my own eyes.”

His wife's voice is calm again, measured.

So. The true matter at hand.

“Everyone speaks of them. It is not fitting that I should rely on rumour.”

Fitting? That word again. “This is easily arranged, though I will not permit them to look upon you.” Is it his imagination, or does his wife blush at this show of protectiveness?

A stirring of admiration for her pale skin, slender arms, fingers narrow as the beaks of cranes.

“Is it true what they say? That they have come from a nation beyond the edges of our maps?”

He nods, glances again at the astronomical clock. *Made during the reign of Sejong*, his father told him. *And the great king's spirit will appear to you when you sit upon the throne, as he did to me, and to your grandfather.*

Why is it then, father, that I dream only of the sea?

His wife probes deeper. "Does this omission not worry you?"

Through every phase of the moon. "A king's mind is never troubled," he lies, trying again to keep a straight face.

His wife covers her own smile with a silk fan, plum blossoms on white.

"My advisors insist there are only twelve countries in the world, that the sun could not possibly shine on more in the space of one day." He pauses as a breeze shifts the pinecone in the pond, sends ripples across the mirror.

"My husband does not agree?"

"Your husband has read the ancient texts, which speak of eighty-four thousand lands and many tongues."

"And none of them able to understand the other?"

A story he has told his foxling springs to mind. "The monks claim that once there was only one tongue and all who had breath knew it."

His wife sighs again. "You speak to me as if I were a child. Tell me of the foreigners. When can I see them?"

"Soon." *And a great tower was built to reach the heavens.*

"This night?"

"It will be so." *And when the tower fell it scattered those below and changed the world forever.*

The pond lies glassy again, the pinecone still afloat. Or perhaps, he thinks, it hangs above them in the morning sky.

Van Persie

Strange to march all day without knowing what distance lies ahead, or even of the final destination—even stranger in this age of cartography to be travelling without a map through a land of wonders.

His fisherman guide seems pleased his tongue has healed enough to attempt a few words and they occupy themselves pointing and parroting. The man is either named Hae-jo, or this is what all men are called here, and they journey in search of his six shipmates, who were blessed or cursed enough to have survived the wreckage of the *Sparrowhawk*. He is unsure what this search might involve, only that the fisherman pointed at his chest and held up six fingers, gestured one after another next to him, as though his compatriots were seated in a row.

He gathers that the journey will be long, though it is possible that his companion is uncertain of this himself. Hae-jo seems uneasy and often stops and pulls him off the path in case he is seen by other travellers, though they have met few of these on this first full day of walking.

Now, as they walk northwards at a quick pace, the fisherman points to plants and trees and Van Persie tries to mimic the man's botanic litany: *eunhaeng*, *sonamu*, *jeonnamu*—the syllables like stones in his mouth.

The air is humid, the terrain hilly and alive with buzzing insects and bird call. He wonders what other creatures lurk out of sight, shy or waiting for the night watch.

He finds the path difficult underfoot, despite the sheepskin shoes the old fisherman was kind enough to provide him with. The new footwear appears well worn, but the leather soles are in tact and he is grateful for this as he treads on roots and loose stones. He sweats profusely and struggles for breath, though his fisherman guide has hardly broken a sweat, despite carrying the lion's share of their supplies strapped to his back—most of the water, rice and blankets. Van Persie bears only a small canteen and a shoulder bag containing dried fish and an iron pot. His guide also carries coins threaded on a string, square holes at their centres—copper or bronze.

Despite the physical effort, the walking calms his mind, allows him freedom from the fears that plagued him during weeks of captivity. His purpose now is simple: he will match his guide's pace stride for stride, show that he is worthy of rescue and of the sacrifice this stranger makes on his behalf.

Foolish male pride, his sister would say. But it is more than that now, for this is all he has—this step, and this step, and this step—and he ponders the truth of his situation, unable to speak properly, bewildered in a land of sirens and shamans. Not unlike a Greek play. He catches himself smiling at this thought as his guide points to a long-tailed magpie: *kkachi*.

They crest a higher peak at dusk to see a small city spread out below them to the west, hugging the ragged coastline that seems to have curled north with them thus far. *Masan-si*, his guide tells him, pointing to the tile and thatch roofs before signalling to a path that will lead them around the settlement. Van Persie nods—does not need reminding of what might befall him should the wrong people take an interest in his presence.

They make camp on the far side of the summit so that their firelight will not be spotted, and what Hae-jo cooks they eat with their fingers, wrapping dried fish and rice in spicy, heart-shaped leaves. *Kkaennip*, the fisherman calls them, though whether this refers to the plant or the leaf, Van Persie cannot be certain.

All day he has struggled to keep thoughts of the woman they left behind from taking over his mind, but as darkness falls and the sounds of the night begin—dark wings, cricket chirp, frog chorus—he cannot help but fear for her. He would not have left her, were it not for her own calmness and her clear desire for him to follow the fisherman. And, despite himself, he trusts the healer who had so playfully touched his beard and hair.

What does the fisherman think of their parting? And what of the stone she gave him? He holds it before him now in the firelight, rubs it in place of a rosary.

He remains frustrated by the stirrings the dark-haired woman caused within him, and though he is not so fanciful to admit love, he cannot deny that he feels drawn to her, as if tidally. He cannot rationalize this feeling, despite attempts

to explain it away to gratefulness for his rescue, or fear of dying alone at the hands of the island shaman.

Father, keep her safe from harm. Let her recover from what ails her. And guide our feet now as we wander towards I know not what.

Does the man reclining beside him now pray quietly to heathen gods or spirits? Perhaps they are not as silent as his own, perhaps they speak to him from the deepening shadows—comfort or prophecy in the soundings of owl or frog. Or has this man left his gods on his island to wander as fearfully as he does, a foreigner as well, hoping only for rest before the sun rises on another day of marching?

They wake cold and stiff to the call and answer of magpies in the pines around their camp, the birds watching them rise, heads cocked, swaggering from branch to branch.

They breakfast on leftover rice and fish before descending the mountain into a long valley, the sun rising bright and warm over the green landscape. The city remains a distant murmur of rising and falling noise to the west. They walk away from it on a path overgrown with weeds and summer flowers, and although Van Persie is fatigued and cannot fully put to rest the gnawing fear of what might lie ahead, the quiet path and sure compass of his guide calm him, and he revels in the beauty of these hills, a terrain utterly unlike his flat homeland—wild and uncultivated, craggy peaks on all sides. As the sun crests these and floods the

valley, white butterflies rise around them, fluttering and dipping from flowers of all colours, flexing and closing shadow-casting wings, as if testing themselves as tiny sundials.

He thinks first of the tulip market in his own hometown, and then of the glass case of euthanized butterflies on the wall of his father's study, of the marvellous colours and those long, thin pins, of how he'd fantasized about them coming to life, fluttering against the glass until he let them out to fill the dusty, book-lined room—tiny wings over his father's wooden globe like seraphim over God's good earth.

You know us by name, have counted the hairs upon our heads. All numbers are known to you, even that of our days. Let me be your vessel here.

He would be more callous and scientific if he could, but in truth he cannot believe that even the wrecking of the *Sparrowhawk* and all he has endured thus far are in vain, nor are they the workings of rudderless chance.

The fisherman has stopped at the mouth of a second, larger valley, lush and green, and he signals for Van Persie to pull up the hood of his cloak. Before them lie terraced rice fields that run the length of the valley and up the slopes on each side, each paddy corralled by stone and mud walls. Men and women bend double in the knee-deep water, pulling rice stalks and stuffing woven baskets on their backs, while children scamper in packs along the tops of the walls, which act as dry paths through the flooded fields. These men and women wear broad straw or bamboo hats, and none have yet seen the travellers. Van Persie stares in awe,

hardly able to fathom the work of clearing and irrigating hillsides like these. He is overcome by the rich greens in the sunlit valley and feels compelled to fall to his knees and prostrate himself before the Lord's shaped earth, where the laughter of children echoes, even as his guide pulls him forward and they leave this open countryside for the cover of ash, pine and elm.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

Fair weather and easy silence as they march north, the gods of the mainland in each rocky hill and tree root welcoming them and quickening their journey. He restocks their rice and dried fish without incident, tells locals he travels to the capital to pay a family debt in service. For this he receives not suspicion, but sympathy, and though no one speaks loosely in the presence of a stranger, he picks up smatterings of deep discontent towards those in power. Rumours of grave famine in the country's heartland grow more frequent, though the villages they pass appear well stocked and fed, their fields green.

His companion grows stronger, and this calms Hae-jo's fear that he might be too weak from prolonged captivity to travel. And though he cannot quieten the voices of resentment within, the man's pace, as well as his interest in birds and plants, are joyful to behold, and Hae-jo holds fast to the hope that he is righting his and his uncle's error of handing the man over to In-ha.

Green hills without settlement, and he continues to name birds and trees for the *waegukin*, though his mind wanders back to the coast and Mi-kyeong. *A looking back*, his uncle would say. *Bad luck*. But how can he not wonder whether she has remained in the care of the *mudang* and the fisherman's wife, or already returned to the island? And what of the child that grows within her? Will it have the *waegukin*'s pale skin? His hair? Eyes the colour of the sea?

He has seen the foreigner rubbing the stone Mi-kyeong gave him upon their parting, holding it dearly, as though this shard of earth were something he might understand, or call his *own*.

At mid-day they reach a line of hills that slides into a large plain. The heart of the mainland—barley and wheat fields to feed the capital, mulberry trees for silk. The new landscape fills him with awe and fear, and he stoops to touch the earth, finds the hillside drier than those behind them. The nearest fields have not been irrigated properly and appear empty of life. Crows join their audience of magpies and he does not welcome the gaze of their beady, black eyes. Though he and the *waegukin* keep to the low hills and skirt the open plains, less undergrowth lines the path, and Hae-jo feels as if they are travelling over open water rather than through the hills they have grown used to.

He is told this is the country of the Dragon King, a god not unlike the cannibal of Halla-san. He fears that the more welcoming gods have stopped at some threshold, given way to darker spirits, those that might commune with the Ten Lords of the Underworld. His joy leaks from his bones into the parched earth at his feet and he senses that the *waegukin* feels this change too—the man appears to walk uneasily beside him, more prone than ever to looking back over his shoulder, as if willing the lush countryside they have left behind to spread further north with them.

They do not meet any locals. For this Hae-jo gives thanks and they walk as quickly as they can, keeping to the low hills with the plains to the west. They stop only briefly through the afternoon. Hae-jo tries to smile and add to the foreigner's vocabulary, but their attempts fall short, as though the loss of butterflies and laughing children weighs on even their gestures, and their shared unease grows.

They are several days from the sea now—have the gods of his family given him up for lost? And do the gods of this new place view him with suspicion, anger or indifference? He prays for the latter, but to what or whom he is no longer sure. In each place they stop he leaves grains of rice for the birds in the hopes that their mouths will be too full to deliver news of their trespass to any spirits that might wish them harm.

His uncle told him that the people of the mainland hold many beliefs, that their shamans are more like In-ha—possessed by spirits, or claiming this—rather than the healers and messengers of the dead he is accustomed to.

And other beliefs entirely, his uncle said. Golden statues and the Confucian rigours of the king and capital. But do not be fooled—many still make offerings to the old gods.

Again he thinks on In-ha and cannot reason why such a man has been permitted influence and power in their village. He hopes justice will fall on this imposter soon and that his uncle and Grandmother will not suffer at his hands.

A sharpening of focus now as they walk. Ropey veins bulge on the *waegukin's* hairy arms as the man pauses to lean on his walking stick, sleeves rolled up. Such dark blue beneath pale skin, running like roots through taut muscle.

Hae-jo wonders what the walking stick means to the man, for it is not unlike the sticks his own people carry in mourning.

They smell the settlement before they see it—pungent rot and the putrid sweetness of excrement. Soon crumbled adobe and thatch dwellings hug the path on each side, soundless.

The *waegukin* has covered his head and they make their way forward with caution, still no sign or sound of children or chickens. It is a settlement for the lowest caste, *baekjung*—tanners and butchers. Iron meat hooks hang from trees, the air ripe with the boiled stench of treated animal hide. Open-walled sheds stand seemingly abandoned with tables for slaughter stained deep red, troughs running off them to collect blood, though no buckets sit in wait now.

He scans the rooftops for piles of brambles that might signify a pesthouse, or an outbreak of some sickness, but sees nothing out of the ordinary. The smell is worse than rotting fish though, and he struggles not to gag. No gulls or crabs to deal with such decay here, only a handful of crows that perch on branches above the free-swinging hooks, heads cocked, watching, waiting patiently for their long-formed habits to be rewarded.

He rubs pine needles between his finger and thumb and holds the greenery to his nose. The *waegukin* watches and does the same. No breeze reaches them here and they come to the far edge of the village without any sign that men and women still live and work there. *A godless place*, he thinks, then corrects himself. Not godless—only full of gods he does not wish to encounter, gods that wander with empty bellies, hunters and scavengers in the realm of the Dragon King.

They pause for breath once the stench lessens. The *waegukin* stares back at the ghost town. Hae-jo understands the man's fears and questions, but cannot hope to answer them, so instead points to his own eyes, then to the path, silently pleading with his companion not to cast his gaze back over cursed ground, lest whatever haunts it follow their footsteps north.

Hae-jo beckons again to the foreigner to watch him as he kicks his shoes against a pine, knocks off dirt and dust so as not to carry tainted earth with them. The man frowns and looks backwards again. He pulls the smooth stone from his pocket, rubs it between thumb and forefinger.

A symbol, thinks Hae-jo, not of love or devotion, but of a foreigner taking what does not belong to him. Perhaps this man is no better than the Ilbon, who come by sea to pillage and take women from the island. A surge of resentment and anger at the *waegukin*'s foolishness, at his looking backwards and tempting the gods. Hae-jo grabs the stone from the man's hand, holds it before him.

“This is not yours to take! Do you understand? You must not look backwards!” He flings the stone into the trees and underbrush.

The *waegukin* appears stricken. He steps off the path to search for the stone, then stops, turns to face Hae-jo wide-eyed.

Hae-jo ignores him, heads north again at pace, ashamed of what he has done, but with no means of apologizing or making amends. They will never find the stone in such tangled underbrush, and they must distance themselves from the silent village before night falls. From behind him, the sound of the man's feet on dirt and loose stone.

And you will take care of the waegukin, yes?

Hae-jo's heart trembles as he walks.

They camp without fire, darkness wrapped around them as a blanket of ash. Hae-jo cannot sleep for the sounds of the night, near and far, rustle and scrape, the snapping of small twigs. Restlessness crawls into his body from the earth on which he lies.

You must not trust the light of the moon, Grandmother once told him. For though it pulls the tides, it also watches without blinking over the hunters of the night.

He has often thought that the glowing orb should not be pale and grey, but tinted red—the god of bloodshed, of secrets in the night, of famished ghosts and lesser spirits with needle-like teeth and claws.

All through the night he slips in and out of dreams and visions—of the ground opening to swallow them, of shadows descending to peck and tear at their eyes, of the sun failing to rise.

But at long last it does, warm and bright through the leafless skeletons of elm and ginkgo, which look as though they have burned from the top down, though in truth they are drying upwards.

They eat in haste, drink only cold *nok-cha*, the tea leaves weak in the canteen, but potent enough to get them on their feet and walking again. The foreigner follows, but the man does not attempt speech and is clearly as exhausted as he is. Each of them stumbles more than once on loose rock and dry-to-crumbling earth. Hae-jo cannot set his mind spinning fast enough to reach the south-flowing current of memory that might allow him to think on days past, of walking at ease through all shades of green, leaving a black and white trail of sesame seeds and rice for birds. Instead he dwells on the abandoned village, on the silence of that place, and he walks uneasily with his thoughts.

The sun arcs high as they reach thicker trees and shade. The *waegukin* coughs on dust, but does not stop. Crows follow their trail. Still, they move north without signs of human danger and Hae-jo gives thanks to Grandmother Sea and the gods of fish and swell, though he knows not whether even their sharp senses are open to his silent prayers so far inland on this great expanse, from which the kings of the nation have emerged—not from the summit of Halla-san, they say, but birthed by a great bear on Baekdu-san, the holy peak north of the capital.

Branches snap nearby and Hae-jo pulls the foreigner behind a copse of pines just as a small figure crashes through underbrush and stumbles onto the path. A boy of no more than five or six years, gasping through sobs, face stained with dirt and tears. The boy stands looking each way on the trail, as though frozen by indecision, unable to catch his breath properly, wheezing in dust, his arms and neck bleeding from sharp branches. Hae-jo is about to call out when another figure lunges from undergrowth on the opposite side of the path. The boy screams and falls backwards. A hideous creature in a tattered cloak looms above him, its face red and gnarled, hooked claws outstretched.

Hae-jo's legs turn to roots in the presence of this flesh-eating god, a horror from which he prays to wake but does not, even as the foreigner steps from behind the shelter of their trees and swings his walking stick in a swift arc into the creature's head, the thwack and spray of blood leaving even the child silent for a heartbeat. The creature topples onto the path and lies still, its face a mess of blood and splintered bone.

Hae-jo cannot tear his eyes from the creature's noseless face. He imagines the gaping hole whistling, though the wound does not bleed, the flesh around it leprous and grey. Blood leaks from the fallen creature's temple and ear onto the dusty path.

Before Hae-jo can question the sobbing child, a woman cries out and runs toward them from the south. The boy stands to meet her, allows himself to be

scooped into her arms, face covered in tearful kisses. He points at them and explains what has happened.

The woman keeps her distance, but lets her child stand on his own beside her. She is short and wiry, tanned muscles wrapped in a brown *hanbok*, the fabric stained and torn. Strands have fallen from her knotted hair and she struggles to catch her breath. Her eyes flick back and forth from Hae-jo to the foreigner.

Hae-jo recovers and bows, greets the woman, asks if they have encountered more creatures like the one lying at his feet. She nods, but still does not speak and Hae-jo points north, invites her to follow if this suits her.

He and the *waegukin* turn and leave the cursed place, but do not walk so quickly that the woman and child fall out of sight. The woman carries the child on her back and stumbles often. Hae-jo would offer to carry the boy, but he remains silent, allows time for each of them to sweat the spirits of fear from their bodies. He has heard stories of men like the one chasing the child—of those possessed by a demon that causes flesh to decay as though in the grave. As they walk he prays that they will not encounter others so afflicted.

The foreigner has cast away his walking stick rather than carry such a thing marked by rotten blood. This is wise, though Hae-jo does not like the thought of his companion travelling without defence. He wishes he could know the man's thoughts now, whether or not he too is familiar with the *nabyeong*, the lepers' curse. And he wishes he could communicate his approval properly, tell this

man that he has done an admirable thing, apologize for succumbing to the dark pull of the crow god's whispering.

They pause when it becomes clear that the woman cannot continue and will soon collapse on the path. Now Hae-jo does insist the woman and child join them and he shares water, dried squid and seaweed. The boy wolfs his portion and the mother immediately replaces this with her own. She is gaunt and Hae-jo guesses it has been many days since she has eaten. He gives her more food, but this time stops her from passing it to the boy.

“You will need strength to carry him, *ajumma*.”

The woman bows and eats in silence.

They sit in the shade of trees just off the path, eyes scanning their surroundings. The boy stays close to the woman, but stares at the *waegukin*. The foreigner smiles and stares back, each trying not to blink until the boy capitulates and cannot hide his own smile.

Hae-jo asks the woman if she has family. She tells him they passed her village earlier in the day, that her husband was a tanner. Hae-jo bows his head at the use of the past tense, allows a breath of silence, which the woman takes before explaining that a deep famine has crept from the earth, crops failing, game scarce.

“Many bad years, until we were starving, the old perishing before their time. And still the *yangban* from the capital sent their tax collectors. In the end they were taxing dust.”

She asks if his accent is from the coast and he explains that he is a fisherman on his way to the capital. She glances at the *waegukin*, but does not pry.

“My son and I are thankful for your assistance.”

Hae-jo waves this away and they watch the boy approach the foreigner, touch his bare arm, run fingers over the golden hair that sprouts thick from his pale skin.

The woman’s eyes do not leave her son as she continues. “I can see from your hands that you are used to hard work. Please do not think that we are rebels, or selfish-minded people. During the famine we were forced to eat the inner bark of trees and acorns. My husband... he argued with a tax collector... there was violence.”

She weeps openly now. Hae-jo is both embarrassed at the outburst and enraged by the cause of her suffering.

“The king has many spies. The soldiers killed every man in our village and threw them into our well. Before this we at least had water.”

The smell. Hae-jo’s gut twists and he finds himself wanting to turn back, to race south back to his island and gods less callous. But instead he asks a question. “And the leper?”

“There are many here. Drawn to us by green and red ghost flames that glow in the night—our angry dead burning for justice. But instead they bring us only more pain.”

Hae-jo listens in stunned silence. Evil, he thinks, is at work among the gods and spirits, a great shaper of fates. This is true. But it also lives in the hearts of men.

He tells the woman he has heard of evil spirits rotting men's flesh, but had always believed such stories were exaggerated to scare children—wives' tales from a time before kings and capitals and taxes. And, he thinks, but does not say, before foreign men with golden hair walked beside fishermen under the watchful eyes of black-feathered gods.

The woman nods. "They were once men. They usually reside deep in the hills in isolation, though many are now on the move, searching for food. They believe that the only remedy for their suffering is to eat the flesh of a child." She pauses at these words, as if the *hanguk-aw* has taken shape in the air between them, *hangeul* now, inked and blocked by her tongue. Hae-jo senses them both examining these syllables, the wall of disbelief fading as the truth is spoken into life.

The boy sits next to the *waegukin* watching a matte-black beetle lumber over a stone. The boy raises his foot, as if to stamp on the insect, but stops, choosing instead to leave the creature to its miniature journey.

And with this small act of mercy, Hae-jo stands and leads the group back to the trail north. The woman allows the foreigner to carry her child on his back, and the boy clings to the man's shoulder with one hand, tugs at yellow hair with the other.

The woman speaks little more on their march, but there is no need. The gaps are easy to fill—only women and children left in the tiny village as a colony of lepers descended upon them like a pack of animals, starving and desperate to rid themselves of affliction.

There is nothing to do with such horror, no safe place for such thoughts, so Hae-jo focusses on his feet, on the dusty path, on leaving sickness and death behind. He will deliver this woman and child safely to the next village. The woman will not betray knowledge of the *waegukin*, though the boy will not likely be able to hold his tongue. If they are fortunate, the locals will consider the child's tales a conjuring of imagination brought on by fear for his life, and he and the foreigner will outpace any rumours of their journey.

A lark whip-whistles a familiar call from a nearby tree and the *waegukin* answers with his own whistle. The child on his back laughs—a small dusty sound, but still a good noise, a sound of life. Hae-jo whistles too and his feet lighten, as bird call and answer replace the silence of the dead. The boy tries to whistle and blows into the foreigner's ear. The man laughs and shakes his head, and all around them Hae-jo sees and hears the good workings of the earth: red ants lining their own path, a squirrel rustling the high branches of a pine, his own heart drumming.

조선 효종 (Hyojong of Joseon)

Advisors, admirals and generals gather before him in the pillared courtyard of the palace. A cool morning breeze ripples the red flags his court poets claim shout praise to a king descended from kings. *And yet*, his father once told him, *such a symbol is also simply the thing itself. Your actions must make it more.* All remain silent, resting on their knees, waiting for chief advisor Byeong-ho's address.

He must not react to what lies within the wooden box at his feet. He focusses instead on the mother of pearl inlay, the polished wood—myrtle or cherry.

“Ruler of the House of Flying Dragons. A gift from the governor of Jeju-do—that you might rest easily in the knowledge that those who serve you will not tolerate any act of defiance, be it in the name of gods or men, primitive or foreign.”

He catches an inflection in his advisor's tone. Imagined? Perhaps. But the implication that he has not been resting easily is not accidental. And heavy with irony, for it is impossible not to feel uneasy at such words. In truth, the public showing is unnecessary—everyone in the court has heard rumours of the island shaman's deceit. And everyone knows the man's life is thereby forfeit. Is this ingratiating nonsense truly representative of the words of the governor, or are

these the words of his advisor? A man who wears a glass vial beneath his robes. A man trusted by his father, and yet, a man to *watch*.

The advisor bows again at his feet, purple silk robes touching the earth, then slowly opens the delicately carved box to reveal a pair of greying, bloodless hands.

He sits on an outcropping of rock whittling a new walking stick, while Hae-jo relieves himself in the trees. The fisherman has lent him his knife, a sturdy tool with a wooden handle wrapped in oiled hemp twine, not unlike one he might have used on the *Sparrowhawk*. An apology? A show of trust, at least. The walking stick is taking shape nicely—mature elm, the grain strong and light, but still young enough to flex.

They have left behind the worst of the drought-stricken region, the hills craggier here, but showing more signs of birdlife and bright green growth. Two days since the last village, into which the fisherman escorted the woman and child, while he hid himself. There is much he does not understand, but the woman and boy bowed to him before they left. *Kamsa-hamnida*. Words of thanks or parting. And the boy had thrown thin arms around his waist before scampering away. As good a farewell as a stranger might expect.

Some part of him is pleased to leave the mother and child behind. Not because they slowed their pace, but because he was so shaken by the aggression of the leper—that monstrous figure chasing the child through the woods, as though conjured from a nightmare. He guesses the sight will forever occupy some dark corner of his imagination. Each night since he has dreamed of the boy gone

missing, of wandering through dark, tree-covered hills searching for the child and whatever horrid creature might have taken him.

He had carried the boy in the hopes the extra weight and exertion would stop his hands from trembling, stop his heart from catching in his throat with each snap or rustle alongside the path. Even now, though he tells himself it was but a leper, deranged from suffering and isolation, he cannot shake his fear. There was something more at work—*he knows this is true*—a hunger, wild and predatory.

He has sailed past colonies of lepers in the past, islands of men and women whose flesh rotted upon their walking bones. And though these places were isolated and miserable to behold, they were also communities, supplied by nearby monastic orders, and those quarantined farmed the land and raised small livestock.

What he witnessed here was the same and not the same—rotting sores on the skin, the nose decayed into a grotesque hole, white bone protruding from ruined fingertips. But this was no farmer. A hunter rather. Even in the morning sunlight on this quiet hillside, miles north of the attack, he is forced to stop whittling for the shaking of his hands and for fear of cutting himself.

Hae-jo interrupts his dark thoughts. The fisherman nods to him and they return to their path north, bags light. They will need fresh water soon, but have enough food to last a few days. His new staff vibrates with each step, well tuned, and the fisherman points to it, smiles approval, though he uses no such crutch. If Hae-jo was angry at him for his actions on the island, for his closeness to the

woman, this anger seems to have passed. And though he mourns the loss of the stone, he hopes his intervention on behalf of the terrorized child has redeemed him in the eyes of his companion.

The trees stretch high enough now to break up the light, block the true horizon, and they crest and descend ever-larger hills. Within the hour they spot a flash of fur and velvet antlers, there and gone between trees. The greener underbrush and foliage is a good sign—there will be water nearby and deeper shade. At last he feels he has truly woken from days of nightmare, and he breathes easier as he keeps pace with the fisherman, who hums a strange tune. This too is a great comfort step by step, reminding him of life on the *Sparrowhawk*, of his shipmates singing on deck. Again he thinks on the improbability of his surviving the wreck when so many strong hands were lost, some just lads sailing out of Rotterdam for the first time in such fair weather.

He times his steps to a mantra, a prayer for the dead and lost. This brings him further comfort and also causes him to cast his mind to the six who survived, to Clercq and Govertszen, both ship's boys, cousins, he believes, and easily the most unlikely pair to survive—he recalls Clercq dropping one of the larger lead sounding weights onto the other's foot to the laughter of those present. Janszen and Pieterszen, gunners—men whose faces he can hardly picture. Strange—surely the faces of the living should be clearer than those of the dead. The junior boatswain, Dirckse, who plays fiddle and walks with a limp from damage done to his knee by a sliding barrel during rough seas out of Goa. And one last name:

Eibocken, the under surgeon. This man's face anything but ghostly, freckled heavily by the sun, for which he was taunted relentlessly, though he never returned more than a sheepish grin.

What to make of this list? It is possible they have already been released, put on a ship bound for Dejima in the Bay of Nagasaki, and that he will follow on another outgoing vessel, though at whose expense or grace he cannot imagine. If this is indeed the hermitic Kingdom of Corea, no ruler will look favourably on his departure for a Japanese port. But he cannot attempt to leave without at least trying to learn the fates of his shipmates, cannot simply abandon them and set sail himself.

Lord, surely you have not allowed me to survive the storm, wreckage and captivity only to perish alone?

He holds this hope close, fist tight around his walking stick.

Even after weeks on shore, there is still a strangeness to waking to an unmoving firmament and not the sway of the ship—his home for so many months. The other men had made light of his artists' hands, of his pale skin and clean clothes, of the bell attached to the lock on his wooden chest, but all in good humour, with brotherhood in mind rather than true malice. He had revelled in being part of a crew that relied each on each, something he had not experienced as a boy—his father had seen to that, always pushing him to study, excel at maths.

For a good life, a good future.

An irony in this—hours of reading alone by candle flame the catalyst that led him into the path of a hurricane. They had dropped sails, brought all hands to deck, the crew tossed and flung about, ropes whipping and snapping like a many-headed serpent, lashing men bloody. No lightning or thunder, just howling wind that ran them onto a reef. God’s wrath or His turning away, it mattered not. The storm was of biblical proportion, had left him stunned into calmness—what use was fear in the face of such power? The left hand of God or Poseidon calling forth a chaos of white foam and rain on wind. The sounds still haunt him—breaking wood and the wailing of those crushed or trapped. Hours of clinging to whatever floated in the raging surf, then rocks beneath his knees and a calm dawn, the feet of the two fisherman.

Hae-jo ceases humming, offers water, which he accepts. He tries to speak thanks: “*kamsa-hamnida.*”

The fisherman grins and nods. “*Nae, nae. Quenchanayo.*”

Days of walking and trying out his new tongue, his thoughts a web from tree to tree. *Her* hands washing his feet. The creature’s ruined fingers. He tightens his grip on the walking stick. The scenery appears so similar hill to hill that he fears he has fallen through a crack in the earth and entered some gentle version of Hades, his journey Sisyphean. There is a deep magic in this land—sirens in the water, faceless monsters in the woods.

Father, banish these child-like fears from my mind.

In his weariness he tries and fails to give genuine thanks for the shade of elm and pine. For a moment he fears he is losing his own language, that the words he has collected his whole life are falling from his head, littering the path behind him like the rice and seed his companion sprinkles for birds.

Narrow is the path.

His mother's rosary. His father's Odysseus. The storm that crushed the *Sparrowhawk*. The knife and the eyeless fish.

He was mistaken about the landscape—it is changing, the hills rockier, yet the greens ever-thicker too. Stalks of mature bamboo clack and creak high above them in the breeze. Though the terrain is steeper, of higher elevation, he still has no sense of horizon or spacious sky. Rather, of a deeper world, of richer greens and browns and animals unseen, of moving water nearby and the ever-watchful eyes of birds that mark their arrival with a trill or wit. He sinks into the overgrown path, walks as if underwater.

The fisherman seems to have noticed this change as well. He no longer whistles or hums, stops often to refill their water from streams, cocking his head and listening to the woods. Van Persie would give much to know the man's thoughts now, to hear what he hears, but he must content himself with following sight-lines and attuning his own ears to the deep sounds around them.

The cold stream water tastes faintly of pine, and they are forced to cross and recross the same winding river as it snakes back and forth across the path. They hop stone to stone, Van Persie vaulting on his walking stick. Near the edge

of a pool the fisherman pauses and points to tiny fish—small dark arrows darting through liquid copper. Water gliders ripple the surface.

But the fisherman never stops for long and Van Persie senses a cool tension in the man's mannerisms, the way his eyes flick alongside the path and at their feet. Strange to feel both peace and fear in one place. Is this how the saints experienced martyrdom? Or is it how all men feel when faced with the fate their two-handed God bestows?

At the next bend of the river, which now winds north, Hae-jo stops again and points to the bank nearest. Van Persie looks for more fish, but the man shakes his head.

"*Anniyo.*" He points to the soft earth, which holds the impression of an animal's paw.

Too large to be canine, surely, and not livestock. Van Persie looks to his companion, shrugs, shakes his head.

The fisherman responds by tilting his own head and sucking breath through his teeth. Van Persie takes this to mean the man is also unsure of what they have found, though he is clearly concerned.

So far they have seen only game, and the only creature he has feared is man or a version thereof. It had not occurred to him to fear wild predators. At once his mind races through a litany of beasts said to inhabit Asia's enchanted lands.

Low afternoon sun slants through leafy trees. They walk slowly, Van Persie grateful his seemingly inexhaustible companion has lessened his pace. Thin green shoots of bamboo lean across the narrow path, tickle their arms and legs. A cool breeze fills the air with a great rustling.

As the light fades behind trees and hills, Van Persie catches himself hoping the fisherman will stop, spy a place for them to rest for the night. And this is what he assumes the man is about when he grabs his arm, but the fisherman puts finger to lips, tugs him off the path. They scramble up to a low ridge, from which they are able to look down at the path and remain hidden from view in pine and underbrush.

Finally Van Persie hears what has caused the fisherman such alarm—high and faint, above the rustling bamboo leaves and knocking stems, a ringing bell.

Van Persie looks to his guide, who puts his palms together as though praying—a temple then, or a religious procession. They shuffle through undergrowth until they can make out the grey, tiled roof of a building across the path. As they continue through the woods, he catches glimpses of red and turquoise paint, of wooden pillars and stone statues wrapped in green. At last they find the source of the ringing—wind chimes from the temple’s roof—but still no further signs of life.

The fisherman relaxes at the sight of the chimes, though he still leads them carefully under cover of green on a ridge above the path, until the temple is out of

sight and the sun drops further. Greens turn grey and brown, and purple shadows spread from beneath trees and rocks around them.

This time Van Persie spots the danger first. He tugs the fisherman's cloak, points to a figure seated beneath a tree next to the path directly below them. They crouch and stare, eyes adjusting to the shadows. It is a man, hairless head a dark orb, maroon robes turning black in the ever-weakening light. The man sits cross-legged in unmoving meditation, eyes wide but vacant, and Van Persie guesses he is blind or in a trance.

The fisherman gasps and Van Persie follows his guide's gaze further down the path, fear prickling through his own limbs and gut. A creature slinks towards the cross-legged man, body low to the ground, quick, sure steps. The animal's eyes catch what little light seeps into the forest, its huge head steady towards the man, cat-like body striped black and white, long tail twitching. The creature is the length of two men and Van Persie cannot even cry out to warn the sitting man, crouches silently instead, mouth agape at this story-book predator stalking to within spitting distance of the monk. The cat pauses, as if its own eyes are drawn to the wide-white gaze of the seated man.

The beast does not crouch or spring, but instead circles the monk, around and around him on giant paws, sniffing, tail marking revolutions, moving as though independent of the immense cat's body, an upright pendulum, although measuring what Van Persie cannot imagine. All at once the creature slinks off the path and disappears into the shadow of trees, and still the seated man does not

move or blink, nor do he and the fisherman, even as the last light slips from the forest and they are left breathing quietly side by side, fear and wonder leaving them petrified, the night's wind picking up pace, rattling the bamboo around them like a bag of bones.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

They rise stiffly at dawn to find no sign of the statuesque monk. Hae-jo walks with a wiry energy after hours of waiting tensely in the darkness for the tiger to find them. But perhaps with no shortage of smaller prey, the beast is not interested in the risk of hunting humans.

Or perhaps the tiger was not a tiger at all.

The *waegukin* appears shaken and refuses breakfast. Hae-jo guesses the man, like him, has never seen such an animal. Surely few live to tell such a tale.

The sun reaches its pinnacle as their path widens, intersects with other well-worn trails. They must hide themselves by the roadside often as they encounter other travellers, all men, loads strapped to bamboo frames on their backs—grains and fabrics to sell or trade nearer to the capital. Others carry farming tools and bags on their way to or from the terraced fields, each paddy dotted with men, women and children.

Soon it will become impossible for them to travel at all by day, and he hopes they are able to find the village of butchers and tanners, cousins to the woman whose son they rescued from the leper, before word of their presence spreads.

They suffer under heavy taxes too, she said. They are not friends of the yangban in the capital, and will not betray your trust.

He has put his hope in this, though he worries such villagers will be less than hospitable if they fear harbouring a foreigner will bring trouble to their own.

Loud voices. Another group of travellers. Hae-jo sends the foreigner to hide among trees, while he approaches and greets the three men, bows low. The men wear thin clothing and have not washed recently, though they appear well-fed and muscled from hard work. They laugh at his greeting, but return the courtesy.

“Cousin,” says one. “Your accent gives you away, but even if it hadn’t, we would have known you were from the far south by the way you bow to men such as us.”

The other two nod and laugh again, but show no sign of suspicion or offence. “Brother, he is one of us. Look at his hands.” The men await a response.

Hae-jo nods. “A fisherman cannot look down on anyone.”

The men approve of his words. They ask where he is headed and if they can be of assistance. He asks after the village and the men confirm it is near. A settlement of butchers and tanners, they say, *baekjung*.

“Good people. Though it is a hard life so close to the capital.”

“Tax collectors?” guesses Hae-jo.

The men nod grimly. “Lazy bastards from Seoul. Why travel far when you can take more from those close at hand?”

Hae-jo makes a show of spitting. The men do likewise and they part on friendly terms. He returns to the *waegukin* and leads him away from the path and through the woods, until they reach the banks of the Han, the river wide and flowing. A great water, but of its gods Hae-jo knows little. This water moves as a giant snake through grass and he does not trust it.

When the sun hangs low enough, they enlist a local vegetable seller to ferry them across in a small boat that smells of rotting wood and onions. The man's breath reeks of rice wine and he eyes the foreigner as he rows, but does not speak. Hae-jo prays silently that anyone the man tells of their presence will dismiss him as a rambling drunkard.

As they approach the far shore, their boatman stands suddenly and points at the foreigner, as though he has only now realized the significance of his passenger's appearance. The small boat rocks and Hae-jo touches the drunkard's arm, tries to steady him, but it is no use and the man lunges at the foreigner, shoving him off his perch and onto the reeking floor of the vessel. Again Hae-jo tries to intervene, but the drunkard shouts and lurches, tipping the boat one way and then the next, his movements violent and erratic. Hae-jo can only cling to the gunwales as if they are caught in a wild storm, until finally the boat capsizes and he sucks in water, his limbs churning beneath a surface he cannot find, river imps dragging him deeper, preparing him as an offering for the snake god of the great river. He struggles violently against the current and dark forces at work around him, but cannot right himself, cannot tell up from down, until at last iron hands

grip his hair and tunic and yank him from the water onto the bank, where he remains on all fours hacking up water. He rises to his knees to find the foreigner standing over him, eyes now on the overturned boat disappearing downstream, the drunkard clinging to it as to a giant turtle in stories of old.

Hae-jo bows and coughs thanks to the *waegukin*, who nods, pats his back gently, helps him to his feet. They both stand shivering for a moment despite the humidity, before setting out through dusk until they reach the village of outcasts, a small cluster of thatched huts in a valley that reeks of animal carcass and smoke. Though the smells sicken him, there is safety in a place shunned by those in power. A tanner with green hands greets them at the entrance to the village and agrees to show them to the town elder. If the tanner is surprised at the sight of the water-logged foreigner, he does not show it.

The man leads them to the largest home, wooden and resting on stilts, an oven on one side to force hot air into ducts beneath the floor during winter—much like the one his uncle built for them on Jeju-do. The village elder greets them warmly and without ceremony, beckoning for them to dry themselves with cloths and sit on mats before him. A young woman serves them *nok-cha* in plain brown pottery, the tea warm and earthy. Another woman brings simple grey robes, which they drape over their shoulders, though the air and tea are warm enough. The elder listens carefully to Hae-jo's story, nodding without interrupting, murmuring sympathy at their recent misfortune on the river, at their lost bags and coins. The

man appears a few years older than Hae-jo's uncle and, like the tanner, does not seem in the least surprised by the arrival of the foreigner.

When Hae-jo finishes speaking, the elder confirms that rumours of the other six *waegukin* in the capital are plentiful, and that word has spread of one who escaped the king and his men on Jeju-do, though most assume he has already either sailed or perished.

Hae-jo does not need to ask for shelter or hospitality—the elder is quick to offer both—and Hae-jo bows low and thanks the man, who responds with a smile and a stiff bow of his own.

“Nephew. It has been a long time since anyone of another class showed deep respect here.”

Hae-jo replies as he did earlier in the day and the elder laughs, raises a bushy white eyebrow.

“A fisherman and a butcher discussing hierarchies of etiquette. Like a tale my mother might have told.” The man frowns and appears to chew his cheeks, as though thinking deeply on all Hae-jo has said. “I think, nephew, that there is a way we can help you discover the true fate of the *waegukin*'s compatriots.”

They wait with the elder until darkness is complete, when the man's grandson, Nam-ki, arrives to guide him to the wall of the capital. Hae-jo watches the boy's assured walk and upright posture, such a contrast to the boy they met on the road. And though Nam-ki cannot be more than eight or nine years old, Hae-jo sees the

calm confidence of the village elder in his slight frame—a boy Grandmother would have called *ae-eoreun*.

A little man indeed, thinks Hae-jo, as the boy stops and places his hands on his hips, impatient even at the outset of their walk. Hae-jo hurries to catch up and they trek in silence along the dark path north, until at last the city's great wall of stone, torch-lit parapets and bell towers rise ahead of them. His whole life he has heard stories of the capital, but he sees now that he has never properly conceived of the sheer size of its defences, nor the noise of the place, even at night, and he is glad he left the *waegukin* in the village. This is a gamble, of course, but he had little choice, despite the man's silent protests when he realized he was to be abandoned. They cannot risk stumbling into danger before discovering for certain the fate of the other foreigners. At best, he thinks, they are free men in the city and he will be rewarded for his care, though a quiet voice hisses *fool* at this small hope.

The boy leads him to a dark stretch of the wall, away from torches and the southernmost of the four giant gates facing each of the great winds.

The gates will close at dusk for fear of the tigers that circle the capital at night.

Hae-jo's expression must have betrayed his anxiety, for the elder had chuckled, patted his grandson on the back. *Fear not, fisherman. Nam-ki will protect you. Wise beyond his years and a deft archer already—I'm told he can put an arrow through the hole of a flipped coin.*

Though Hae-jo had laughed along with the man's good humour and faith in his offspring, now that they are exposed to the darkness, he cannot help but think of the white tiger circling the monk and, despite his guide's sure steps, he wonders what beasts' eyes watch them from the tree line at their backs.

"Here," whispers the boy. They stop in the shadow of the great wall and the boy whistles a bird call, the sound sharp and foreign at night.

A knotted rope falls from the parapets and the boy climbs first, holds the rope and walks up the stone to the height of four men, then rolls easily over the wall. Hae-jo follows, though less nimbly, his feet slipping on the stone so that he smacks himself against the wall and nearly falls. When he reaches the top, a man in full armour pulls him over, smiles and nods at him and the boy, then slips into the night, leaving Hae-jo panting and rubbing his bruised shoulders and knees.

My brother's son will meet you at the wall. We use the same method to bring goods into the city without tax. Here the elder had winked, told him the soldier was one of their own, conscripted for three years to guard the city. *His duty to the king does not cancel his duty to his own people. And besides, it is good business for everyone except the tax collectors.*

The elder also assured him the boy had contacts within the palace, had already sent word to arrange a meeting, though what this means Hae-jo does not know, and he fears the boy's pride may have led him to exaggerate his usefulness.

Hae-jo waits on the wall as the boy coils the rope into a neat pile. He looks out across the tiled roofs of the city—this House of Flying Dragons—and smiles

to himself at the thought of walls great enough to keep tigers at bay, but not a fisherman and an eight-year-old village boy. The city before him is a sea of candles and torchlight, and he feels as though he is not standing, but lying in a boat staring up at the starlit sky, and this causes him to doubt his own balance. He sways, dizzied by the city's vastness.

The boy touches his arm, steadies him. "Uncle. Please follow me."

They hurry along the wall, stopping in the deep shadow of a tower near a wooden staircase. Nam-ki's breathing comes quick and soft as they wait for guards to pass beneath—seemingly giant men in armour of leather and bone, carrying swords and short spears.

He is uncertain of what might happen should they be discovered on the walls at night—whether they would be killed on sight or taken captive—and he is surprised to find himself worrying less about the soldiers' weaponry than about those he might forever leave behind: the *waegukin*, the man he had first called storm ghost, Mi-kyeong, now on her own journey, and his uncle and Grandmother, to whom he would become yet another absence, a fate inherited from his father.

He stares out again over the flickering city as a white wraith enters a street below, robes flowing as fog over water. And another figure, and another, all pale and strange, filling the otherwise empty streets. Small bright candle flames float in the air beside them, reflect off the white. A collective murmur rises with their number.

He squints to see that the candles do not float, but are carried by servants wrapped in grey, the wraiths the wealthy women of the capital, holed-up inside their homes during the day, only permitted leave of their families' inner courtyards by night, when the day's business is done and the gates shut tight for curfew. He imagines what Mi-kyeong might think of such a cloistering, marvelling at the strangeness of this custom and all he has seen in this northern country—blind monks, white tigers and the faceless possessed.

The boy tugs his arm and they descend the wooden stairs and race along the wall to a small alley, dark in shadow, no torches near. Many women wrapped in white pass the far end of the lane, some carried on litters by their servants—eunuchs or women of great strength.

He wonders how wealthy these women are and fear rises from his gut. It is said that the king's line descended from heaven directly and that he rules not only the living, but also the dead and those yet to be born.

His uncle's voice in his ear. *Yes, nephew. But he can only tax the living.* He imagines his uncle mending nets on the shore of Jeju-do. This remembered place, his island of ten-thousand gods, lives within him, guides his feet, his breath, his fate. His spinning mind settles.

The boy tugs his sleeve again as a figure enters the alley—a small shadow moving along the dark wooden walls against which they wait. The boy whistles another strange bird call and the figure wrapped in grey answers in kind, joins them.

“Did you bring them?” hisses the figure through a shawl—a girl’s voice, thin and high.

The boy unwraps a package in the dimness—hardened honey candies, which the girl pockets without thanks.

“I have little time,” she whispers.

Hae-jo tries and fails to place the girl’s accent, though she speaks stiffly. She cannot be older than five years, surely too young to be wandering alone.

The boy asks for news of the foreigners and the girl responds carefully, never allowing her language to betray the source of her information. Such tact from one so young troubles Hae-jo, as does her utter lack of fear—she has not so much as acknowledged his presence. She tells them that the six *waegukin* are not free to return to their homeland, that they are to remain *guests* of the capital indefinitely.

“There is much talk of this in the courts and palace,” she whispers. “And also much talk of the foreigner who has escaped the king’s grasp.”

At last she turns her attention to Hae-jo, her face still covered so that her words seem to come from blackness. “What are you?”

The directness of the child’s question bothers him yet again, but he is too busy thinking on this new information to worry about the manners of a child from the capital.

“A fisherman,” he says to the shadow.

The girl stands still for a breath. When she speaks again her tone has changed and he can imagine her as a child of her proper age, outside in the sun, barefoot in a village not unlike his own. “Is it true that the sea is too great to see across?”

“Yes.”

“And... and is it beautiful?”

They return to the village by the same route, leaving behind the city of fire-lit wraiths. Hae-jo’s mind spins once again with plans and fears, though they travel without incident, save for the rustlings of a wild boar that crystallizes his fear of prowling tigers for a breathless moment.

Few lights are visible in the small hamlet, but he finds the *waegukin* awake, waiting for him with the elder. The room smells of *makkolli*, sour like the rice wine itself, and despite both men’s eager attention, Hae-jo feels as though he has interrupted a conversation, even if it has not involved words. But this only makes him more grateful for the elder’s hospitality. He begins his report by praising Nam-ki, who has slipped off to his own home to sleep and dream of the girl from the capital. When he had pressed the boy about this unlikely friendship, Nam-ki revealed only that the girl’s father did not permit her to eat common sweets, and he referred to her as *yeou*. Surely she had moved like a fox through the shadows, though what the boy’s true meaning was he could not say.

He manages to pantomime that he has found the other six foreigners, but that they are not free men, and he feels a strong sense of guilt as he watches this information sink into his companion's face. *The truth is heavy*, his uncle would say.

The foreigner stares at the wooden floorboards, chews his lip. Hae-jo can only imagine his dilemma and confusion. Does he understand the true gravity of this? A choice between joining his companions in captivity, or an attempt to flee alone?

The man looks at Hae-jo and shakes his head, opens both palms before him, as if weighing his thoughts. Hae-jo points to each open palm and then to his own chest.

“My fate is your fate,” he says, though he knows the man cannot understand.

They stare at each other for several heartbeats, until the elder clears his throat.

“There are many who would say a fisherman should have little to do with matters of state and the lives of foreigners. Do you truly believe your fate is tied to this man's?”

His words are deeply probing, but he speaks softly and kindly, and he smiles as he waits for a response, his expression at once inquisitive and sad, his watery eyes full of light cast by the smoking oil lamp that stains the bamboo wall next to them.

The memory of Mi-kyeong's finger tracing a scar across his palm as she asked him to take care of the *waegukin*. His own promise, to her and to his uncle, to the gods of his island. "I believe that Grandmother *Yeongdeungsin* placed this man at my feet. Please understand me—she is not just a faceless goddess. My life and the life of my family have always depended upon both her grace and jealousy. I will honour this."

The elder takes this in without moving or changing his expression. When he speaks, he speaks carefully, as though wary that his words might take shape around them. "I too believe in the fates, in a world of gods seen and unseen. And just as one such god brought the foreigner to your feet, so another may have brought you both to mine. There is another foreigner in the capital. If we send word to him secretly, he may come, though this is not without great risk."

Van Persie

The boy, Nam-ki, leads him and the fisherman to a mound-covered hillside a short walk from the village—the mounds eerie, grave-like but untended, covered in tall grass and flowering weed. *Like horse graves in a farmer's field*, he thinks, though they would never appear on a hillside in his own country, and he cannot fathom why so many should appear in one place. A chill wind exposes each gap in his threadbare cloak and the overcast sky does nothing to dispel his sense of foreboding. The boy does not wait with them, but bows and returns the way they have come. Van Persie watches Hae-jo's gaze sweep the hillside, notes how his companion also appears uneasy, though whether because of the place or this meeting, he cannot be sure.

His jaw cracks as he yawns. He spent much of the night counting crushed fleas on the bamboo wall beside his sleeping mat, pondering the fisherman's latest gestures and utterances. It seems his compatriots are indeed near, but not free, and that the danger here is great.

The fisherman signals for him to pull on his cloak and stand hidden amongst trees outside the clearing. The man places a finger over his own mouth and Van Persie nods, though in truth he is weary of being led about like a child.

The fisherman stands alone in the clearing, fidgeting with his cloak, the man's scarred hands tugging at the coarse hems and fraying brown cloth.

Unsettled hands reveal an unsettled mind—the Flemish accent of his nanny hissing in his ear.

He shivers. His own knuckles bulge white around his walking stick. He will be powerless if something here should go amiss. He rubs the wood smooth as he prays.

Three horsemen burst into view from the north and ride across the clearing towards the fisherman, who looks small and frail before their finery and steel weapons. One wears a wide-brimmed black hat of horsehair in the Chinese fashion, the two others are clad in leather armour and clutch spears, swords on their belts. The horses are a short breed, but appear sturdy and full of energy, and the rider in the lead is tall, his legs too long for his mount, green silk robes nearly touching the earth.

The horsemen sit at attention before the fisherman, and Van Persie marvels at his companion's composure—he does not flinch or cower before the riders, but stands tall until their mounts have settled, whereupon he bows low, stiffly, and the man beneath the wide hat greets him and dismounts clumsily. He was correct about the newcomer's height—even off his mount the man stands two heads taller than Hae-jo. His robes, hat and long beard give him the appearance of a sorcerer, and had he not seemed so ungainly on horseback, Van Persie would fear the sight of him.

The tall man waves for his guards to retreat and they do so without dismounting, leading the third horse to graze across the clearing.

The fisherman and the towering figure speak at great length, until Van Persie begins to worry that the discussion has become a business negotiation over his fate. He tries not to think of Hae-jo throwing the stone in anger, of the many ways he might have transgressed in this land of mermaids and eyeless fish. Has he redeemed himself? Surely his companion could have profited from betrayal before now if he so desired. Hae-jo is trustworthy. Of course he is. But the dress and weapons of these three men suggest that those who rule here are not anything like the shaman of the island, and he fears that such men will not be outwitted by a fisherman. They are now indeed at the mercy of powers far beyond their control.

At last Hae-jo turns and whistles, waves him out of hiding. Van Persie forces thoughts of betrayal from his mind and walks through his growing fear towards the pair. The tall man signals for his guards to hold steady, despite an alarmed shout from across the clearing.

Van Persie hesitates as he draws near, stunned at the sight of the robed man, who is not Corean—blue eyes and pale complexion beneath his hat, his beard red and grey.

“So,” says the man, his Dutch halting but clear. “The missing Company man is alive after all.”

Van Persie stares at the man, registers the sound of his own tongue, but cannot find words.

“Weltevree of Eindhoven. At your service. I am most pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Still Van Persie cannot speak, and the man laughs and touches his shoulder.

“Come now. Don’t tell me the cat’s got your tongue?”

Van Persie manages to greet the man as politely as he can and introduce himself, but finds each syllable thick and unwieldy. Though the burns have fully healed, his own language now seems strange, and his thoughts no longer match the words he expels.

“Your guide tells me you have endured much, and that he will not allow you to suffer further if it is in his power to prevent it.”

Van Persie bows to Hae-jo and the man responds in kind, but does not leave his side. It is at once strange and a relief to have roles of understanding reversed, as Weltevrete asks him questions and they speak of the shaman and his burning blade, of the long journey north. Weltevrete tells him that the shaman has been put to death for his transgressions, that he has seen the man’s severed hands in a box in the capital.

“Your guide was not displeased to learn of this, I think,” says the Dutchman. “I have little doubt you feel the same.”

Van Persie does not deny this, but changes the subject. “And you? How is it that you are here, wearing such clothing and speaking this foreign tongue? Do you represent the Company on some mission I know nothing of?”

The man shakes his head. “I arrived like you, my ship blown onto a reef by the devil’s breath, my own life spared by the grace of our Lord. There was

another who survived, and the father of the king made use of our knowledge of muskets and cannon to fight the Han on Corea's northern border. My companion fell, but I found honour in the eyes of the king. He gave me a home in the capital, a wife, currency to live by. A new name even. They call me blue-eyed Bak Yeon." He laughs, but there is no true joy in the sound. "Twenty years now."

"And you are not permitted to leave?"

Weltevree shakes his head. "The king, like his father before him, knows of the Company's business with his enemies in Japan. He will not free anyone with knowledge of his country. This includes you and your six shipmates."

They speak at great length of the Company, of Holland and its many changes over two decades, and of this land of hills and miracles, of tigers and shamans. Occasionally Van Persie asks Weltevree to translate a piece of his story for the fisherman, who nods and replies in the same way each time: *this is true*. And in this way the three men discuss their situation and at last come to the true heart of it all—a plan of escape for Van Persie and his compatriots.

Weltevree appears nervous now and speaks with a clipped accent, pausing often to translate. "The king's chief advisor is not of like mind with his majesty when it comes to matters of trade. He believes the six Dutchman should be used as a bartering tool with the Japanese emperor to leverage sovereignty of Corea's easternmost islands and fishing waters, and in doing so also gain favour with the Company. This is a plan full of peril, but I believe the advisor could be convinced,

with the right encouragement, to act against the king's wishes and deliver us to Dejima."

Van Persie weighs this. "And what of this advisor? What does he stand to gain?"

"Wealth and power. Perhaps a role in the Japanese government."

Or the backing of an army to replace the king, thinks Van Persie, though he does not speak this. A troubling choice lies before them. He realizes, after a moment's silence, that for the first time he can ask the fisherman his thoughts, which he does through Weltevrete.

The fisherman replies without hesitation.

"He asks if you have family in your homeland."

Van Persie nods and again the fisherman speaks without pause, though Weltevrete hesitates, chewing his cheeks as though trying a list of words.

"He says there is no greater evil than loneliness, and no greater good than family. He will help you return to them."

The great cricket symphony waxes and wanes throughout the night, as though tied to his own restless sleep, and Van Persie tries unsuccessfully to calm his mind by counting each staccato burst.

Already they have waited in the village for days—idle hour after hour resting their road-weary bodies, if not their nerves. Van Persie guesses Hae-jo is equally anxious by the way he fidgets, hands never empty, mending clothing or

shoes, pulling at perfectly strong seams until they fray and need repair. Weltevrete has promised to send word as soon as the wheels of the plot begin to turn, and has urged them to remain out of plain sight and away from the capital in case their treason should be discovered by those loyal to the king.

There are spies everywhere. Trust no one.

A breeze rustles leaves outside. A small body scrapes and shuffles beneath the wooden floor at his head. His mouth is dry, but he hesitates to rise for water lest he disturb the fisherman, who lies breathing softly next to him.

Strange, but when finally able to communicate with the man through a translator, he found that he had very little to say. He *knows* this man. Does not need more words—though he would release him of his obligations if he could, had tried communicating this through Weltevrete to no end.

He says he will see you safely on your way, and will not return south until this is so.

Such loyalty and sacrifice for a twist of fate—he catches this insectile thought, holds it still. He does not truly believe their meeting an accident of weather, but rather the hand of the Almighty acting in awful power, even if he is still blind to the significance of this greater picture.

This is true, he imagines the fisherman saying, though Weltevrete told him the man did not believe in any one God, but rather in many, that the islanders had their own pantheon of deities and customs, different even from those on this mainland.

Such blasphemies do not trouble Van Persie. Rather, he sees in the fisherman something of the true nature of Christ.

Father in Heaven. Your name be lifted above all others. Bless this man and let me honour his charity with right actions of my own.

He falls in and out of sleep, wakes to the memory of his father's brother come to visit from Gent when he was a boy, of the man questioning his father's habit of reading Homer to him and his sister—*such tales of heathen fancy.*

His father laughing. *Do not be fooled, brother, into thinking that Christ can only be found in Christ. Is this not the true story of our Lord's resurrection—that he has risen to redeem all that has been lost? Brother, his father's face red from drink, shining in the evening lamplight, believe me when I say there is more of Christ in the pages of Homer than on the lips of most clergymen.*

At this his mother had intervened, led his uncle and father to their chambers, leaving him to ponder his father's words, which he does again, thinking on this small village of butchers and tanners. They seem utterly content to share what they have, and appear innocent of any desire to betray his cause, though it might well bring them to harm.

When he asked Weltevrete about this, the other Dutchman had paused thoughtfully, then said, *You are most fortunate to have arrived in this place and not the capital itself. Those who sent word to me, I think, know much of the difficulty of being outsiders and have no hope of changing their station, and so little motivation to betray you. This is not true of many in the city of the king.*

He rests in the doorway of the small bamboo hut, watches Hae-jo worry another seam of his cloak to fraying. Afternoon sunlight shifts through high cloud, the rays scattered by the leaves of the tree against which the man sits. Though it is wise to remain hidden from prying eyes and to delay rumours of his whereabouts from reaching the capital, he cannot help but be reminded of his early days on the island, of his pain and loneliness, of the fever that rolled through him as hours passed in a blur. And of the woman who came to him in the night, her soft touch as she washed his mosquito-ravaged feet and ankles, their bodies close in shadow and moonlight.

Strange to remember and not trust the memory. *A fever dream*, he thinks, *but if so, sweeter and more beautiful than any waking moment.*

And what of their parting? *A siren that could not leave the sea.* He will not be permitted to travel back to her island, and this causes him great misery.

Hae-jo sighs and mutters at his stitching. The fisherman has hardly ceased tending to him since their arrival, making sure he eats his fill of fire-grilled meat, rice and spicy pickled cabbage that scorches his mouth. How can he not love the man for this? If only he could do more than bow and offer thanks.

He rises, limbs stiff, and risks leaving the hut to join the fisherman in the dappled shade. The village lies quiet, everyone at their work—even the children accompany their parents or grandparents, watch to learn, or gather snails from nearby rice paddies. Hae-jo has made himself useful where he can during their

stay, but he is not one of them, and Van Persie can hear the man's worries in each sigh and utterance—that too long has passed, that Weltevree cannot be trusted, that they should not sit idly waiting for disaster, but instead continue on their own. But of course such presumptions are his own cares, and maybe the fisherman is preoccupied with concerns of a different nature altogether.

The man smiles as he joins him, points to a white butterfly that has landed on a fallen green leaf. The insect opens and closes its wings—the green leaf a book cover, the white wings pages turning on the breeze. But perhaps the fisherman sees a sail, a tiny god, or simply the insect for what it truly is.

The two of them sit silently, watching this, waiting.

조선 효종 (Hyojong of Joseon)

He sits in the palace meeting room listening for the patter of his foxling's footsteps along the hallway, even as his advisors deliver messages from each corner of the kingdom. His father would have scolded him for this, recited Confucian decorum, demanded he rejoice in the tedium of administration and, further, in the glory of his eldest son one day ascending the throne, his legacy realized in the boy's hot blood. And *yet... ajik...* and *yet*, it is the tiny sandalled feet of his third child he listens for, anticipating the joy this small sound might bring to a day of business and decree.

Admiral Moon fears the Ilbon have learned of the famine in his country's heartland and prepare to attack the eastern shoreline as the typhoons subside. General Song sends word from Pyongyang that Manchu forces have reoccupied the fortress at Yengso and continue to raid supply lines despite the fealty he pays their envoy.

Such promise of war and glory might have energized him in the past, but, though many have predicated much since the great fire passed through the night sky and the Dutchmen washed upon his shores, he feels little save a growing tiredness creeping into his bones.

When might it all end? And how is it that war never leads to peace?

His father's voice again. *Do not be fooled. The absence of war is not peace.*

This is true. There are already too many restless spirits haunting his kingdom for any of the living to find the quiet he longs for now—the peace he wishes he might leave as a true legacy for his daughter. And this is why he favours her so—his sons would rather hunt a bird than ask its name.

The door to the royal meeting room slides open again and an eunuch leads the Dutchman before his table. Weltevrete prostrates himself. Though the act of supplication is appropriate, there is something troubling about the man's posture and presence.

A deep and respectful bow reflects a servant ready to do the king's will. A man who prostrates himself may claim the same, but in truth seeks forgiveness.

It is also strange that the man has come without Byeong-ho, and he asks the eunuch why his chief advisor is not present.

The servant bows and stammers. "Your highness. Your servant recognizes this irregularity. We have sent word to his chambers, but have received no reply."

He dismisses the man and tells Weltevrete to rise to his knees and sit comfortably. The Dutchman does so, but looks wretched, brow beading sweat from beneath his hat, hands trembling.

"You have requested this audience, and with much urgency. I am tempted to have you wait for our advisor, but a small voice tells me you are about to speak to the mystery of his whereabouts. Yes?"

The Dutchman bows again, red beard touching the floor. “Yes, Lord of the House of Flying Dragons.”

Hyojong bites his cheek so as not to smile at the sound of this title on the lips of a foreigner, though never has a *waegukin* spoken *hanguk-aw* so well. Still, he would like to correct this title to reflect the truth: not Lord of Flying Dragons, but King of Tired Mind, of Knees that Creak in the Mornings, of a Soft Heart for the Wrong Child.

“Speak plainly.”

“Your majesty. There is a plot against you. Your chief advisor plans to take the seven Dutchmen to the port of Nagasaki.”

Seven? He does not move, though a thousand questions crash through his mind. He breathes slowly, nods, waits for the questions to settle like sand through an hourglass, before plucking the topmost grain. “And why, *waegukin*, have you come to me with this information rather than fleeing with your compatriots?”

The man answers too quickly.

“I have served my king and my king’s father for twenty years. In Holland, I was but a common labourer for the Company, but here I have much honour.”

Rehearsed lines. But because he lies to his king, or to himself? Perhaps both. Perhaps he is afraid the plot will fail, as it will now, and that his life will be forfeit.

“When?”

“As we speak.”

Hyojong shouts orders to secure the royal family and intensify the search for his treasonous advisor and the six foreigners, to send armed horsemen and archers to each of the city's gates. His servants and messengers race from behind screens and his bodyguard joins him at his side.

The Dutchman has again fallen to the floor and Hyojong rises to stand over him, ignores his own screaming knees. "You will tell me all that you know, and you will omit nothing in the slim hope that your betrayal of this betrayal serves me."

The Dutchman nods vigorously and Hyojong fights the urge to draw his own sword and strike the man's head from his body, carry it himself to the east gate and impale it upon a spike for all to see. He breathes deeply. There will be time for this, but he must first learn everything he can. Though he has many questions, all he manages is, "seven?"

"Yes, your majesty. I have found the missing sailor. Already he travels to meet the advisor and the other six."

Hyojong strides through the palace cursing the bulk of his twelve robes, each corridor and courtyard a flurry of activity, soldiers and lesser advisors running to stations. The air ripples in his wake as he makes his way to the living quarters where his wife and family have assembled. Already, mounted soldiers search for the traitors and he has confirmed that the foreigners are missing. So—a move by Byeong-ho to win sympathy with a foreign power. The Dutch merchants, or

perhaps the Ilbon in Nagasaki. For wealth? The man already has much of this. To replace his rule then. The snake will use the Dutchmen to make new allies and usurp his throne. A dangerous and foolish game, this—to use the Ilbon is to invite ruin upon all of Joseon.

Such a strange twist of fate that the Dutchman should betray his own.

Beware a man who can be bought, his father would have said. For if he can be bought by one, he can be bought by another.

And what of the seventh *waegukin* and his fisherman guide? This piece of the puzzle does not yet fit. Taken from the shaman on the island, only to reappear so near the capital. He must speak with this fisherman, but there is much to do first.

He crosses the final courtyard, guards and attendants stumbling to keep pace, and enters the richly-furnished common room of his living quarters. His wife and sons are safely encircled by fully-armoured soldiers, wooden bits in their mouths to prevent them from coughing and dishonouring themselves before the royal family. His wife sits cross-legged on a cushion, quietly watching their boys' wide-eyed skittishness.

Like horses smelling smoke, he thinks.

No sign of his daughter and, before he can ask, his concubine's chief attendant beckons him down a hall to their private quarters, where the mother of his daughter weeps over a fallen servant, the woman's throat cut, eyes still open, blood congealing beneath her body.

He has never witnessed such a scene in the sanctity of the inner palace. As he scans the room for his daughter, his waking mind is already aware that she has been taken, that this is part of his advisor's plot. And even as the chief attendant confirms his fears, he is thinking of how this changes everything, of how his foxling's life now hangs in the balance, of how any other traitor would have taken his eldest son, and he is further stunned by the deeply personal addition of this fresh betrayal. The wellbeing of the Dutchmen matters little to him, and he would forfeit their lives without hesitation if it meant bringing a rebellion to a halt. But his *foxling*...?

He steps from the room and away from the woman's sobbing, lets rage wash over him until his hands tremble and two thoughts crash through his mind, the first loudly: that he will flay every finger-length of skin and flesh from his betrayer's bones, and the second a quiet realization that leaves him hollow and in aching pain: that some part of him still waits for the sound of his daughter's quick feet down the hall towards him, and that he may now be left waiting for this sound the rest of his miserable days.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

A wind opens the clouds and bright constellations shine through the cool night air as they flee the village and capital, race westward to the coast through paddies and bean fields lined with crepe-myrtle trees, dark leaves shining like beetle shells in the moonlight.

Many currents of thought and feeling collide as they reach the mud flats of Incheon and bear south to where the Dutchman with a Korean name has promised a boat waits to carry his companion to safety. *And away from him.* A surprising sadness tugs at his chest.

He breathes the salty air for strength. They have walked all day and night, but neither he nor the Dutchman have slowed—the pace of each driving each. The Dutchman nudges him and points to a light flickering on the beach ahead.

They approach without calling out, until the Dutchman recognizes the sound of his own language and nods to Hae-jo that they have found their party. They step into torchlight and are immediately accosted by men bearing long knives. His companion removes his hood and the men usher them fully into the ring of light, where the Dutchman is embraced by his own, men garbed in ill-fitting local linens and stockings, who appear shocked to see him alive. But there is little time wasted over this, and the men continue loading their skiff. A short man wearing the robes of a high-ranking official barks orders. The king's advisor,

Hae-jo guesses. After a moment, the advisor turns his attention to Hae-jo, speaking without eye contact.

“We are betrayed by the red-bearded Dutchman. I assumed you were captured.” The man’s flat tone displays no true concern for their wellbeing. His eyes flit along the shoreline. “The king’s men will be upon us any moment.”

Hae-jo’s mind reels, but he remains silent, watches the seven Dutchmen confer in alarmed tones. The *waegukin* looks at him, but makes no gesture, perhaps also trying to decide what this latest twist of fate might mean. Hae-jo’s stomach fills with water. His identity is now surely known to the king and his misplaced trust will bring disaster upon all who have helped him: the village of outcasts, the fisherman and his wife in Tongyeong, his own uncle and Grandmother. The road he has been walking is a bone road, the skiff before him now nothing more than a dragon boat to the underworld.

Three of the advisor’s men load boxes bearing royal seals into the boat, while another beckons for the Dutchmen to board. A signal light flashes offshore, then again—a larger vessel awaiting them in the dark waters to the west. Once they have boarded, even the king’s navy will be too late to catch them.

One of the advisor’s men elbows him. “Comrade, help us push off?”

Hae-jo nods, but pauses at the sight of a small figure already in the boat. Even in the dim light he can see that it is a child wrapped in grey cloth, face hidden. The child sits gagged and bound, kicking and twisting in vain.

The Dutchmen have boarded, but his companion has also seen the child and confers again with the other foreigners, who shake their heads.

As Hae-jo and three of the advisor's men lean into the skiff to push off, he asks about the prisoner.

“A whelp from the palace. To ransom, or sell to the Ilbon.”

One of the Dutchmen calls out in alarm and points north at the coastal road, along which a dozen horsemen ride, armour reflecting light from their torches. They wind along the road next to the mudflats and will be upon them in only a few breaths. Hae-jo and the advisor's men lean hard into the heavily-loaded boat, the bow of which is deep in sand and mud, though mercifully the stern is already afloat. They push hard and the skiff makes water, and several of the Dutchmen take up oars to turn them and pull away from the nearing soldiers. The horsemen shout for them to stop, but the plan is well-timed with the changing tide, and the skiff is nearly clear.

Hae-jo stands up to his heart in water now, still clinging to the turning boat's gunwale, as the advisor's men clamber aboard. The Dutchman calls out to him, but Hae-jo shakes his head, points to the child. The two men lock eyes for an instant before the Dutchman nods, slams his full weight into the man guarding the child, sending him overboard with a muted shout. The *waegukin* grabs the child, steps to the edge of the skiff and drops the ransom into Hae-jo's arms, as the boat surges away under the strength of the Dutchmen at oars.

Hae-jo flounders back towards the shore holding the child, who no longer struggles, trembling limbs curled against his chest and arms.

There is much shouting on the departing skiff, but his companion stands above it all. The Dutchmen outnumber the advisor and his men, and the boat does not change course, sliding through the dark water towards whatever greater vessel lies in wait.

Hae-jo hauls himself and the child out of the cold water and onto the shore, where he pulls the covering from the child's face to reveal a girl, very young, with skin like porcelain. He removes her gag and they stare at one another in the light of the moon and stars. Her shivering turns violent and he instinctively rubs her arms, tells her she is safe.

The girl remains wide-eyed and blue-lipped, staring at the calm sea, gaze unwavering as the king's horsemen reach them.

“You were right, fisherman,” she whispers. “The sea is very beautiful.”

조선 효종 (Hyojong of Joseon)

He clears the meeting room of advisors and generals, weary of the chaos that has spread through court and capital as rumours of the plot circulate. A nod to his footman, who leaves to fetch the fisherman. An entire morning of appointing new advisors, of quelling panic and rooting out those of questionable loyalty. Of acting the part of ruler, as if he is not shaken to his core by this betrayal, by the loss and return of his daughter, by this fisherman who enters and bows, the young man wrapped in threadbare linens that hardly cover his darkly-tanned neck and shoulders.

Enough posturing. He will hear the truth now. He tells the fisherman to sit before him. The man's eyes flit around the wood-and-paper-panelled room to the vases from Peking—gifts to his grandfather from the emissary—to the pearl inlay on the teak table between them, to his red and yellow robes.

“So. I will speak plainly now, and you will do the same.” Another nod to his footman and bodyguard, who bow low and shuffle backwards from the room, leaving him alone with the fisherman. The scent of jasmine petals floating in a bowl beside them cannot cover the man's stench, and he struggles to ignore this. “I would have you tell me your story.”

The man tilts his head. “My story... sire?”

The formal address comes as an afterthought, though this is not displeasing. “From the day the Dutchmen were wrecked upon Jeju-do. Leave nothing out.”

The fisherman speaks in a throaty accent, haltingly at first, but the tale he weaves is wondrous and causes a longing to swell within him—to travel with only his hat and pipe through the land of his birth, to see its hills and shoreline before he is too old.

After many words, the fisherman finishes his story and sits silently before him, trembling slightly, though his eyes remain steady. The man is afraid, but not overawed.

A test then. “Your story stretches credibility. And yet you bring it before the throne of the divine heir of Joseon.”

The accusation is implicit, but the man only bows his head.

“This is true.”

Yes, thinks Hyojong. *Every word*. “You understand that your actions are high treason?”

“Yes.”

“And you have seen the red-bearded Dutchman’s head at the east gate, along with that of my advisor’s servant?”

“Yes.”

Such honesty, so painfully out of place in the capital. And now the question that writes and rewrites itself upon the inside of his skull. “So. Why

return with..." he almost says *my foxling*, "...with the princess, when you could have fled?"

"I... I fear you will not understand the ways of my people."

His people? Forty lashes across the bottoms of his feet for calling into question the king's understanding.

"I will not ask you to speak plainly a second time."

The man bows again, though he suspects this is not out of respect, but to collect himself.

"Grandmother Ocean washed the *waegukin* upon the shore at my feet, tied my fate to his. I travelled only to see him set free. When this task was complete, so was my journey. Joseon is my home."

Here the fisherman pauses, as though mulling words. Again, so unlike the royal advisors, whose words seem ever-ready and sickly sweet on the tips of their tongues.

"And... and I did not trust your former advisor with a child. Did not want to leave her in the hands of such a man."

Then you are wiser than I. "And you recognized the princess?"

"No. It happened very quickly. I thought only that it was wrong to take a child from their family, to give her to the Ilbon."

They stare at each other. The fisherman no longer trembles. Were the room full of courtiers, the man would be struck down for not gazing respectfully at the

floor. As if remembering his station, the fisherman drops his head and gaze. The king cannot help but laugh and he takes a moment to recompose himself.

“I laugh because you have defied me openly, have admitted as much to my face, and now you avert your eyes as though my royalty matters. Tell me, do you fear me?”

The fisherman hesitates. “I fear pain, yes, if that is your meaning. But more than this, I fear what you might inflict upon my family and those who have aided me without treason in their hearts.”

Family. A wave of guilt soaks his heart. He owes this man a debt, but what must come next....

“My daughter would have you freed. And in truth...” he pauses. Such a phrase spoken out loud leaves him off balance and at sea, but he pushes ahead. “In truth, I would do this, would it not bring ruin to my kingdom and further danger to all within these walls. The people have seen my guards bring you to me, have heard of the great plot against my family. They must see how a king deals with treason. But you know this, yes?”

The fisherman makes eye contact again and nods. “I see this is how a king must act, yes. But what of the father?”

The man does not stammer, or hesitate, and his words sink deep into Hyojong’s breast.

“The father would grant you any request, save the sparing of your life.”

Again the fisherman does not hesitate. “I ask that you return my body to my family, that you see no shame comes to them and no punishment to anyone who helped me on my journey. Those who did so acted only out of hospitality and deserve no suffering for their good will.”

Such a twisting of guilt. He can already imagine his daughter’s outrage at this man’s execution. He fights to keep his own voice from trembling. “This will be done. Your identity will not be known here, and I will further see to it that your family is not taxed for your grave.”

The fisherman bows and thanks him, honesty present even in the man’s actions. This islander would make an advisor like no other, were there any way to spare his life. But his own laws will not allow for this, nor would his rule and authority survive such a mercy.

“My daughter tells me little of her ordeal. Perhaps she is still frightened and will share more in time. But she did say one thing—repeated it, even. Do you know what this was?”

The fisherman smiles. “That the sea is very beautiful.”

Hyojong laughs in delight at the correct answer and the fisherman laughs as well, the sound brightening the dim room. And though it does not last, he leans forward, allows himself to break his own royal posture.

“Tell me now, if you will, about the famine and the actions of my tax collectors. Tell me everything you can about my people and how they live.”

The fisherman smiles again and, without any formality, speaks the truth.

Van Persie

He welcomes the bracing wind on his face, the shift and shudder of the wooden ship over rough water below his feet. That the Almighty should see fit to deliver him is a great source of joy, though he cannot help but think on the fisherman who stayed behind, on the many sacrifices this man made so that he could once again sail—first to Dejima and the port of Nagasaki, then, God willing, south to Batavia and the safety of the Company's fortifications there.

The Formosan sailors, a translator among them, agreed to take them around the south coast of Corea to Dejima for the promise of trade with the Company. Tiger skins. Hard come by and valuable. The Corean traitor and his men sulk, and rarely do more than sit sullenly with their stolen treasures. They remain outnumbered, and without Weltevree and his men, or the child to ransom, they are little more than exiles of a failed coup. Even now, the Formosan sailors eye the Coreans' locked chests, which bear intricate and ornate seals. It will not be long before the captain relieves the traitors of whatever wealth they have absconded with. The former advisor may still attempt to sell knowledge of his homeland, but he no longer wields any true leverage. Had Weltevree advocated for him to the Company's representatives in Nagasaki, matters might have been different.

Van Persie casts his gaze over the lower deck to the advisor, who sits alone fingering a small glass vial that hangs from a chain around his neck.

“You are still land-locked, I think,” says Eibocken, interrupting his thoughts. The under-surgeon pats his shoulder. “Rejoice, my friend. We are free.”

He tries a laugh.

Eibocken frowns. “Another story tonight?”

He agrees and the man leaves him to his ruminations. Two days at sea and his six compatriots have shown no sign of tiring of his tales. Clouds build and tear on strong winds over green and grey seas, as he thinks back on all he has seen, ponders putting such a story to ink. He could dedicate the manuscript to the fisherman perhaps, though the man would never know it. Or to the woman who came to him in the night, delivered him from the island shaman.

Salt on his lips, cormorants off the port, sails full of holy breath.

His heart strings thrum.

이해조 (*Yi Hae-jo*)

The appointed hour arrives and he is no longer afraid, the sea within him calm, despite the frenzy of commotion in the city's square, the soldiers' rough hands.

The deep peace of returning to his ancestors and the lotus-blossom island of paradise. The swift journey home.

Sounds fade to the lapping of waves on a rocky shore. A great light wraps around him.

You were right, fisherman. The sea is very beautiful.

He passes over a body of water, as though on the wings of a great bird. And here the peak of Halla-san rises in splendour, and the figures of his uncle and Grandmother stand with a true shaman, who dances and calls out a clean, clear song asking the island's gods to grant him safe passage. More light still, a woman with dark hair lying in the water, round breasts floating above the bulging island of her belly, on which alights a bright white crane, perched and shimmering. All of this in a rushing of light and water, until he stands upon the sea before an approaching boat, a man at the helm, waving and calling out to him.

My son! My Son! I have waited so long for you here. Come. Help me cast these nets and we will fish together upon the seas of our fathers.

This one last journey, last step, ocean loud, light hot and full upon his head. He moves through brightness and swell, heart pounding, whole body trembling, and reaches out at last for his father's scarred hands.

1942

The General

He imagines Manila burning like Pearl Harbour.

He will not leave until this whole godforsaken archipelago is overrun—you *have my word*, he'd said—but it sure as hell looked like it might come to that. Japanese on the move again. Nothing left for him to do but wait in his concrete bunker, hidden beneath the three-hundred-year-old Dutch East India Company fort.

How can he not think about touring those military bases in Kobe, Kyoto, Nagasaki with his father? Thirty-odd years ago now. The irony.

Think hard on it, son. What it means to arrive in a place, to leave it. A real man doesn't take either lightly.

And another memory from years before that, of his father reading to him from a Dutchman's journal, a man who might well have stood upon the ground above his head. The shipwreck and the long walk north. Tiger skins and lepers.

Who knows, boy? You may lay eyes on more than America The Free one day.

Even Korea?

Korea. Not so far from where he is now, already firmly pinned beneath Hirohito's thumb. The emperor of the sun—a famished god if ever there was one.

What about the princess, father? Did she become queen?

The drone of approaching aircraft. So. They've come. He'll dig in his heels, all right. Show the Japs what it means to go head to head on soil housing his mother's remains. But even as he thinks this his heart sinks. Most of his men are already isolated at Bataan. Easier for Washington to send him Down Under than ship reinforcements in time.

The bunker shivers as bombs detonate, shake the whole damn island down to its bones.

박유진 (*Park Yoo-jin*)

All along Korea's palsy-drawn southern coastline, harbours burn as though lit by a thousand lanterns, and the humid air reeks of smoke and gasoline. Japanese soldiers flood cities and towns to quash yet another stillborn uprising, the Joseon dynasty exiled but not forgotten, farmers and fishermen setting fire to the industry of their occupiers, before retreating into the hills to hide and regroup.

Yoo-jin finds the glowing horizon oddly beautiful, and frightening too, as she pauses at the northern gate of Masan-si. Flames mark the undersides of billowing clouds, the ceiling of the world gone bone and orange. A siren wails.

Abba, she thinks. Be safe.

Her grandmother taps her arm. "Bad luck to look backwards. *You know this.*"

Yoo-jin bows to the old woman and turns away from the city of her birth, as gunfire erupts from the now invisible harbour.

Awake at night in the home of her uncle, her grandmother breathing beside her, Yoo-jin listens to trucks prowl the otherwise deserted streets. Even after two weeks she cannot adjust to the way the house sighs and creaks, to ginkgo branches scraping roof tiles, to the absence of her father's soft footfalls in the

hallway and kitchen as she waits for sleep. There are no men left in Miryang—all of them fighting, imprisoned, or simply *gone*.

Impossible to sleep after another anxious day of waiting to be arrested by the police—the traitors, *baesinja*. Only that afternoon she had seen a mother hauled off the street for *walking with a rebellious swagger*, her two children left crying in the dirt until one of the local *ajumas* scooped them up. Where was that woman now? And what of her children?

This is why men fight in the hills, even if this rebellion, this *ballan*, is too small, and surely doomed to collapse beneath the weight of the occupation. How far are they from returning to the routines of a past life—the fall cabbages harvested and piled for pickling, a morning trip to the market for mackerel and garlic, her work at the hospital?

A white ghost at the bedroom door as Soo-yeon enters and sits beside her on the heated floor. Her cousin was born only two months after her, but the girl seems much younger somehow and, true to this, she leans her head on Yoo-jin's shoulder.

“Can't sleep either, cousin?” whispers Yoo-jin, though she knows they both listen to the same rumble of Japanese engines, the same tires on gravel and dirt, smell the same whiff of acrid exhaust.

“They took Young-ji.”

“She mends shoes?” Yoo-jin asks another question she does not need answered so as not to betray her fear, or the way each piece of bad news adds weight—stone after stone lining her pockets.

“Her mother’s shop, yes. She is a year younger than us. The police say she will be given secretarial work somewhere in the empire. Maybe even in Japan. A job with honour.”

Yoo-jin swallows questions in gulps of dark air, puts her arm around the trembling girl, thinks back on each name, each night for weeks now. Women sold or taken to perform office work, to cook or clean, or detained for breaking curfew, for spying on behalf of the rebels in the green hills.

“Where do you think they take them?”

Yoo-jin refuses to answer, holds the girl tighter as another truck rolls past. A mounted spotlight sweeps across shuttered windows. They have removed the curtains from the house and hang their laundry out of sight, taking care to avoid the red and blue colours of the rebels—the red and white imperial flag now the only permissible decoration.

Soo-yeon’s warm tears soak her shoulder.

“Beautiful sister,” whispers Yoo-jin. “Let me brush your hair.” She takes her comb from a bag beside her floor-warmed sleeping mat and helps the girl unpin her hair. Yoo-jin brushes gently, slowly, humming softly, thinking of her own mother doing the same so long ago it must have taken place in a different lifetime.

A gift from a princess, her mother had said. Given to your great-great-great grandmother. You can tell by the handle. See here?

The faded mark of a royal house in porcelain. Stories of a princess who visited villages by the sea. Of shamans paid for rituals with treasures beyond imagining.

The girl sighs as Yoo-jin strokes her hair.

“We must be brave,” she whispers. “We fatherless ones.”

The bone-coloured dawn yawns from the east. Yoo-jin huddles at the edge of the market as twenty men return home bound at the wrists and led by Japanese soldiers. The men, potato farmers and watermelon sellers, wear the red and blue sashes of the rebellion, the colours of treason against the empire. They left Miryang weeks ago bearing ancient rifles, scythes and bamboo spears, chests puffed with pride. The army of the people. The uprising. *Ballan*.

The soldiers drag the farmers to the centre of the market, which remains eerily quiet. It will take just one bullet to end the rebellion within each of these beating hearts, she thinks. *Just one*.

Her father told her when she was a child that the truth of war had nothing to do with glory. That most soldiers disappeared from the world and were never spoken of again. The unremembered dead. *So why fight*, she'd asked, and he'd told her that this land was their soul, *yeonghon*. And wasn't a soul worth dying to save?

Anniyo, she'd insisted. *Never*. Nothing could be worth dying for. *When I am old enough, I will become a healer. To help people survive. Wait and see*. Of course her father knew she was still mourning her mother, that her words did not mean what they might, and he'd picked her up and spun her in the air, called her his little *foxling* and kissed her cheeks, carried her inside where her grandmother was jarring *kimchi*, the smell of chilli paste sharp enough to burn her nostrils and make her mouth water.

Do not look for him here, she thinks. *He is still alive and fighting in Masan*.

The soldiers line up the men and shoot them without ceremony, one after the other, and even after the final gunshot echoes through the town, no one cries out or moves for a breath, and Yoo-jin feels as though she is trapped underwater.

Women around her emerge from their shock to fling themselves on their fallen loved ones, begging to tend to the bodies, bury their own.

The soldiers act mechanically, as if they have been waiting for this, striking down the women with the butts of their rifles and dragging the corpses back to trucks. And still Yoo-jin sees this as though it is a dream she cannot bring into focus.

An ancient man limps through the market to the soldiers and stops before a young colonel, easy to recognize by the sabre at his side. The old man points a shaking finger at the colonel's chest, then spits on his uniform. For a moment, this spittle is all Yoo-jin can see—a detail she can focus on, something real and small

enough to believe. The soldier unsheathes his sword and slides it, almost casually, through the man's ribs, leaving him twitching and bleeding on the packed dirt.

All at once the trucks are loaded and gone, all of the dead taken save for the old man. This one body to bury. Women wail openly now, many bleeding from head wounds. She walks to the old man's body through a stream of blood, floating in a state of shock she cannot shake. And, as though from a nightmare, two women approach—identical twins wearing matching persimmon-dyed *hanbok*. She cowers before them, even as they claim the old man and load him into a wheelbarrow, weeping silently as they wheel their grandfather from the market.

She stares at her woven sandals, soaked red, the world unravelling like a loose thread.

“Quickly, beloved. We must leave this place.” Her grandmother's calloused hand grasps her own, squeezes.

How long has the grey-haired woman been standing beside her?

Yoo-jin's grandmother leads her past adobe houses with thatch roofs towards the brick and tile home of her uncle.

The woman clears her throat. “Granddaughter.”

So formal. Rigid. Yoo-jin's spine stiffens instinctively and she bows her head to show she is listening.

“You are too young to understand that you have been born into war. An old war that the occupiers would have you think no longer exists. You know the word *uprising*. Yes, I hear it on the lips of others your age. But we have never

been fully pressed down. And we will never stop fighting. Your father understands this, and may have already given his life for it. Great Korea. *Dae Hanminguk.*”

A thousand questions write and overwrite themselves on the inside of Yoo-jin’s skull, lines of blocky *hangeul* her grandmother taught her in secret, until she feels as if her head is so full of ink it might spill from her ears.

Still she does not speak; her grandmother will tell her more in time. But this does not prevent the panic of language within. Many emotions, but all words settle into two short syllables: *abba*.

“Go now. As you are. We will bring more clothing and food later. If the soldiers see you carrying bags, they will know.”

She bows to her aunt, Soo-yeon’s mother, and takes her grandmother’s hand, stepping out the door behind Soo. The two younger women walk on each side of the shuffling *halmeoni* through dawn-lit streets towards the edge of town. Neither she nor Soo want to leave, but Miryang is too dangerous now for women their age.

Taken and not returned, they say in the marketplace. And not just by soldiers. Koreans who need money sell neighbours, daughters, sisters. There have been rumours for years of women taken by the Japanese. But those who disappear do not return, so how can they know what is true? Some say they are just working in offices and factories abroad, that they have received letters. Others fear unspeakable fates.

Is it not enough to speak their language? That they have taken every inch of land? That the purse she clutches is full of *yen*?

Again that word: *uprising*.

Enough people go about their morning business for them to blend in as they walk—aging women and boys mostly, though a few men have left the hills to work menial jobs for the Japanese, somehow swallowing their shame without choking. She overheard one man pleading in the market, reminding anyone who would listen that the Korean police had threatened to take his son if he didn't cooperate. A mechanic, working on the same trucks that carted off his own people. *Please*, he said. *Please understand me*.

She does understand. But the same is true for everyone and it is becoming harder for those who have already lost so much to listen to such excuses. The fighting in the hills continues, more widows each day, incense sticks burning in windows to guide the souls of the fallen home.

The three women slip through the final narrowing streets and onto a path through jujube and ginkgo covered foothills, the rainy season come and gone, the greens bright and lush. A lone magpie lands on the trail before them, clicks and chirps, hopping on sharp talons. Its blue, black and white feathers strike Yoo-jin as the only real things she has laid eyes on for weeks, and she wants to greet the bird, ask why he travels alone. Soo and her grandmother stare at the bird too, perhaps lost in their own thoughts, perhaps just stunned by the bird's audacity. Finally her grandmother shoos it into the trees.

As they resume their slow march, Yoo-jin imagines her mother counting *one for sorrow*, but does not speak this, does not wish to compete with the call and answer of thrush and sparrow from the treetops, nor be reminded of the risk they are taking.

If the soldiers see us now, she thinks, *they will shoot us*. She grips each woman's hand tightly.

This time she will not look back.

The small wood and thatch hut needs minor repairs before autumn, but its timber floors are dry and no rodent droppings litter the corners. It sits deep in the hills and she guesses it will be safe to cook and heat the floors at night. Her grandmother sweeps the single room with a straw broom, while Soo inspects the outhouse. Yoo-jin takes a wooden bucket through pine and gooseberry to the riverbed that pours from pool to pool through the stone-lined gully near the hut. She dips the pail and stands in silence for a moment, alone for the first time in days, marvelling at the quiet hum: a swallow's faint whistle, cicadas' electric buzz, leaves shifting above in the muted summer breeze.

There are places like this all over Korea still, places untouched by the seemingly viral Japanese.

I will breathe in this moment, she thinks. *No matter what comes next, this place, this now, will remain within me always.*

She stares through leaves at the aching blue sky, hears her grandmother's floating, throaty laughter at something Soo has said. She wants to take stock, contemplate the magnitude of all that is happening, but how can anyone understand their own history as it unfolds?

She imagines her mother's gentle scolding: *Yoo-jin, there is a task at hand. No need to worry about more than this bucket of water, while this bucket of water is still waiting beside the river.*

This is true, she thinks, as she climbs back to the hut, her shoulder tense with the weight of the pail.

A woman her grandmother's age meets her on the path carrying rolled sleeping mats for the three of them. The mats are strapped to the woman's hunched back, and Yoo-jin helps unfasten them. The woman refuses to sit and rest, smiles and returns to Miryang.

Throughout the day more women arrive carrying supplies. One at a time, some toothless and grey-haired, some younger, but each refusing hospitality—each act of protection a tiny rebellion in the humid, thrumming hills.

The water-fat corpse floats gracefully in the river, spinning slowly past her laundry. She jumps from the water, drags wet clothing onto the stones along the bank.

Still yourself, she thinks. *It is only a log, someone's lost laundry.*

But as the body turns in the sun-lit pool, there can be no doubt about the uniform, the Japanese khaki.

She should want to run, cover her mouth and scream into her hand, this corpse such a grotesque invasion of a place that has felt safe for weeks now. But instead, she feels only a warmth of calm. In truth, she is glad to see one of *them* dead. Her mother's voice scolds her for this, of course, reminds her that this man is also a son, a grandson, maybe even a father.

She wades into the pool and pulls the body downstream of her laundry. She does not need to be told what must come next, and rolls the soldier onto his back, notes the swollen red lines across his neck, the purple bruising. No bullet holes. This is fortunate. She pictures a struggle in the night, a farmer's hands gripping a thin piece of wire fencing.

She struggles to remove the dead man's uniform from swollen limbs, but manages, props the underwear-clad body against a tree. She tries not to focus on the taut, pale skin as she returns to her laundry, adds the uniform to the pile, cleaning it over stones, working the armpit stains between rocks, until all trace of the man's scent is gone, replaced by the iron and earth smell of the river. With each movement, the stillness within her grows and she realizes she is not scared of the corpse, that her hatred for this soldier is heavier even than her mother's imagined words, that a man like this may have taken her father in Masan, killed him, her lovely *abba*.

She wrings her laundry and gathers it into a basket, ready to lift it onto her head and return to the hut, but pauses before the dead man, fights the instinct to bow, show respect for the departed.

I trust that taking your clothing will not affect your spirit's long wandering. Tonight I will bury you in secret, where no one will ever trim the grass over your grave, or make offerings to guide you to paradise. One more to join the ranks of those taken and not returned.

The General

He shaves on the flight out of Mindanao, hand steady despite the vibrating B-17. A *Flying Fortress*, they call it. So why the hell are they running scared? The press in Melbourne will demand a speech. *All wrong*. He feels this in his bones. Just more words, though he knows already what he'll say: *I came through and I shall return*. And when he does, he will bring hellfire and brimstone, and his wrath will shake the earth, dry oceans, burn the Jap empire to the ground.

박유진 (*Park Yoo-jin*)

The blue-eyed boy comes to her holding his right hand wrapped in bloody rags, and at first she fears he is missing fingers. She tries to ignore his eyes—*like tiny oceans*—instead helps him out of the hot sun into the hut, sits him on the floor and tries to make sense of his rambling. He is barely conscious, in shock, and he slurs his story of Japanese soldiers in the marketplace withholding food.

“I stole an onion, big sister. Please forgive me.”

She hushes him, fetches water and clean rags, prays he wasn't followed.

“He stepped on my hand. They held me. I couldn't fight. The women in the market say you worked in a hospital.”

Again she quietens the boy, places a wet cloth on his forehead and gently unwraps the makeshift bandages. When her grandmother and Soo return from the river, the younger woman gasps at the sight of so much blood. White bone through skin at the top of the hand, but this is no surprise—such fragile things, these metacarpals. She has seen this before thanks to both farming equipment and an accident on the docks of Masan, men with fingers so gnarled from years of work and injury that it was difficult at first to see which digits were freshly broken.

She cleans the hand, flattens it against her own palm, pulls fingers straight to the sucking sounds of bones through open flesh. The boy's eyes roll and he

faints, and Soo ducks out the door to vomit. Only Yoo-jin's grandmother clucks her tongue in approval. The old woman readies more rags as she rewraps the clean hand, using halved chopsticks as splints on the broken fingers.

Soo returns and apologizes, tells them the boy's name is Won-jae, the son of a teacher from Masan who, like Yoo-jin, has been living with cousins in Miryang since the fires. Yoo-jin tells her not to worry, shows the woman how to keep the boy's hand elevated above his heart, then steps back, allows herself to see the bloody rags as if for the first time, assess the amount of blood loss. Not as much as she'd feared. She steps out of the hut into the humidity and sunlight, into the static crackle of flora moving and growing around her.

Her grandmother joins her. "You did well."

Yoo-jin shakes her head. "I am no doctor."

"Still. You have the gift. This is true. And good. We must all become accustomed to such sights, so long as the emperor grips our homeland in his white-knuckled fist." The old woman spits and returns to their patient.

The boy wakes as the sun sets violet behind the western hills. Delirious with pain, he begs for his mother, cries out that he is lost in a terrible dream, asks for reassurance that his father is safe in bed, that Korea has been restored to the crouching tiger of his parents' youth.

She runs her fingers through his sweaty hair, touches his forehead to make sure he isn't burning too hot, watches the bandages for blood loss. The two other

women risk a fire now that the sky is dim, and prepare a meal of rice and fried mackerel.

The boy stares into Yoo-jin's eyes. "Eomma, my hand. Won't you kiss it better?"

He speaks as if he has fallen while playing in the schoolyard, picked up a splinter or scratched his palm. Yoo-jin hums as she strokes his head, tells him again to hush, to rest, that he'll heal quickly because he is so young, so strong, so brave. But he persists, holding out his bandaged hand, calling out *eomma, eomma, eomma*, his voice younger each time. He keeps moving his hand, despite her attempts to stop him, to calm him, and blood seeps through the bandages. She unwinds them and begins again with new chopstick splints and fresh rags. The boy weeps as she cleans his broken fingers and knuckles.

She catches her grandmother frowning. The boy's hand is in far worse shape than they'd hoped. Perhaps the adrenaline of his arrival had provided a rush of optimism as well as energy. The bones are unlikely to heal properly and there is a strong possibility that infection will set in, taking his entire hand or igniting a deep fever that won't break.

"Eomma, won't you kiss it better?"

Yoo-jin cradles the boy's hand in hers, whispers again for him to be still. This time he listens, beads of sweat mingling with tears over his flushed cheeks, blue eyes lit by the burning lamp. Soo and her grandmother watch. A subtle air of expectation hovers in the room. Yoo-jin tries to ignore this, continues to whisper

comfort to the boy. She presses her lips to the boy's bandaged hand and leaves him to his fever.

Outside, oddly breathless, Yoo-jin cannot shake the feeling that something has happened, that the warmth of her own lifeblood has passed through her lips into the boy's hand. Ridiculous, but here she stands, cold in the humid night, moths flitting around her ears. She walks barefoot to the river, her feet cold on the dirt track, and stands before the rushing water as ten thousand thoughts and questions catch up—each written on the paper walls of her mind. She folds and refolds, trying to make sense of it all, before dropping each thought into the river, ten thousand floating characters beneath ten thousand stars, numbers so vast she cannot decide what she feels or what her place here beside this river should be. She cannot hear the voice of her mother, or convince herself that her father is alive or dead. She cannot feel anger or pain or fear. Only a profound smallness beside the floating questions.

Her grandmother finds her counting stars, but does not scold her for leaving, or for forgetting her shoes and wandering through the dark. Instead the old woman tugs her to a smooth rock next to the river and helps her sit, her feet dangling over the water. The *halmeoni* crouches, cups Yoo-jin's feet and, still without speaking, washes them gently in the cold water.

After days of quiet, the panicked woman arrives cradling an anaemic infant, the child's skin spotted with rash, stomach swelling. The woman speaks to Yoo-jin's

grandmother, voice hushed but pleading. She has not yet noticed Yoo-jin watching. The woman's tone grows anxious.

“Since the uprising, the Japanese have taken hold of the markets and our food. There is no longer enough for the sick.” As if on cue, the child squawks and twists in the woman's arms. “If I take my son to a hospital, they will steal him from me. This happens every day. Some say they use those they take for experiments.” The woman pauses and tries to compose herself, realizes the old woman is not scolding her nor asking her to leave. “Others say if I ask for help they will take him away and train him as a soldier in the emperor's army.”

The woman is young, only a few years older than Yoo-jin. She adjusts her arms and the child, kneels at the old woman's feet.

“*Halmeoni*. We have all seen the boy's hand. We know your granddaughter is a healer.”

She does not say nurse-in-training. Or doctor. But *healer*. *Mudang*. A word Yoo-jin has not heard since she was a child, a word even her friends at school whispered behind her back, spreading rumours about her grandmother's shamanic lineage—their accents betraying roots on Jeju-do.

“I was at the market when the soldier broke the boy's hand,” says the mother, still kneeling at the older woman's feet. “We all thought he would bleed to death in the hills. But he is healing well. Please.” She bows deeper, holding the child before her, her forehead nearly touching the ground.

Through all of this, the old woman has remained silent, and now she looks up, sees Yoo-jin watching, nods. Yoo-jin bows to her grandmother, steps forward and clears her throat as she helps the woman to her feet.

“*Ajumma*. I am not what you say, but I will try.”

Soo slaps an orange blouse on river rocks until the dye fades, but does not speak nor make eye contact, as if Yoo-jin has aged decades over the past weeks and must now be afforded the respect of an elder. Yoo-jin watches her cousin dip cloth into the cool river, swat gnats, crouch from the oppressive sun beneath the branches of ginkgo and poplar, the heat and humidity refusing to lift even as summer wanes.

“Beautiful sister,” says Yoo-jin, trying to smile. “You are murdering my grandmother’s favourite shirt.”

But Soo doesn’t look up, instead drops her head lower, apologizes, continues to work the garment more gently. Not long ago, Yoo-jin might have relished the respect, but here with this woman, away from home, it leaves her feeling utterly alone.

She leaves her own pile of laundry, places a hand on Soo’s shoulder. The woman flinches and pulls away, eyes wide.

“Is it true what they say?” Soo’s voice trembles with her body. “That you are a *mudang*?”

Yoo-jin struggles not to react to this outburst, tries not to show how it tears open childhood scars, how frightened she is of that word and what it might mean for her and her grandmother.

She shakes her head. “Soo-yeon ah. You know me. I volunteered at a hospital. You saw the bandages, the splints. My dream is to become a nurse. Nothing more.”

“But your grandmother’s family comes from Jeju-do?”

The implication is harsh, but there is no venom in the woman’s words, only fear of something she does not understand. Yoo-jin can see this in her cousin’s eyes, in the way her body shakes, as though her fear of the Japanese and of what their futures hold has come to rest in her bones, turned her blood cold. And so this word matters: *mudang*. Something to fear, to be suspicious of, but also something that one might avoid, might manage to escape. Unlike the life they have been given.

“Soo-yeon ah,” says Yoo-jin again. “If I had such a gift, I would not have watched fever consume my mother’s soul. You know this.” The final words catch in her throat and she fights tears.

Now it’s Soo’s turn to touch her arm. “Forgive me, cousin. My grandmother told us stories of unnatural children who walked among us. Gods in disguise. Old *ajumma’s* tales. I should never have doubted you.”

Yoo-jin nods and forces a smile, but hears the words that Soo did not speak. *You are not from Miryang. A cousin, not a sister. How can I ever trust someone whose family I do not truly know?*

They return to their work, rubbing smells of sweat, fish and garlic from fabric with stones. This woman is the closest family that she and her grandmother have now, and even she does not trust them.

The copper water ripples as it flows, and Yoo-jin thinks of the dead soldier buried only a short walk away, of the uniform, clean now and hidden beneath a blanket in a corner of the hut. *This will be of great use*, her grandmother said, but for what or whom? After that day, she had feared the river would swell with the dead, its water running crimson, and she dreamt of bloated corpses in uniform opening their eyes to watch them in their hiding place. Guilt-induced, no doubt, for dooming a spirit to a purgatory of wandering these hills. But there is no way to absolve herself without grave danger.

“Soldier,” she whispers to the river. “You have much to answer for.”

Bullet-riddled bodies in the market. Unmarked graves outside the city limits. Sisters and cousins taken and not returned.

“If you plan to haunt me, know that I will not be accommodating company, and that I will remind you every day of what your hands have done.”

She watches the *ajumma* limp from their hut leaning on a willow branch, her foot swollen from an infected cut on her ankle. No medicine or aid this time, just a

scrap of paper with the name of an antibiotic the woman must find if she is to survive. Many such items change hands at the night market in Miryang, though they are difficult to obtain. For her part, Yoo-jin feels she cannot send these people away empty handed, tells them which herbs or medicines to trade for or steal in town. Alder bark on the pillow for lice. Coriander and red peppers crushed into a muscle rub. Morphine from the supply closet of the abandoned hospital.

But how long before the Japanese or Korean police discover them? One loose comment overheard in the market. A mother carrying a crying infant into the woods. Words traded under torture.

Late morning sun turns the flies over the water bucket iridescent. The woman has limped from sight, and Yoo-jin listens to Soo humming inside the hut, to the faint splash of her grandmother cleaning her face and arms in the river. Mosquitos hover in the shade. A pheasant or rabbit rustles the underbrush.

All at once men appear from the hillside, foliage tucked into clothing for camouflage, faces mud-streaked—a part of the forest uprooted and walking. They drag the limp body of a Japanese soldier to the front of the hut and prop him against a wall. Alive, Yoo-jin guesses, just.

The five men are Korean, breathing hard, rifles over shoulders. Yoo-jin's neck prickles. No sounds from the woods now. No breeze. The captured soldier remains still, uniform sweat-stained and bloody.

A rice farmer—crooked back—steps forward from the group and bobs his head in greeting, but he is the only one. The others just stare, as if what they want is obvious. The farmer retreats into the semi-circle of ashen-faced men, blushes as though it is he who has acted poorly, forgotten his manners.

Are they simply waiting for their prisoner to die? Or is she to offer help? The man stirs, breathing in shallow rasps, bright blood frothing with each exhalation, one or both lungs likely punctured.

As the silence stretches, Yoo-jin catches herself thinking of the floating soldier she buried. Of the neatly folded uniform in the hut. Of how many more deaths it might take to end the occupation.

Yoo-jin's grandmother returns from the river, her shuffle unhurried. She does not stop for the men, continues until she reaches Yoo-jin's side.

“So,” she says, clearing her throat, eyes on the dying soldier. “Why have you come here? Can we offer food? Water?”

Again the farmer steps forward and bows awkwardly, as if in these few weeks of rebellion he has forgotten how to be Korean. “Grandmother,” he says quietly. “No. We are here because we have heard... stories.”

A small kernel of panic sticks to one of Yoo-jin's ribs. Soo has ceased humming and remains out of sight.

One of the other men hacks phlegm and spits, speaks without a greeting or bow. “Our *friend* won't talk.” He kicks the Japanese soldier's leg. The rebel's eyes are slits and he wears his hair long down his neck.

“Tell me, grandson, how did this man come by his injuries?”

Yoo-jin cannot believe her grandmother is speaking in such a forward manner with men she does not know. Surely her question is foolish, the answer obvious.

The Japanese soldier sucks in tiny gasps, his face a mask of bruises. The men do not offer her grandmother a response. At first Yoo-jin is angered by their rudeness, but then she understands: her grandmother wasn't being direct at all, she was already two steps ahead. They have tortured this soldier to the point of death, and want her to make him well enough to begin again.

She kneels beside the soldier and unbuttons his uniform. Small round welts cover his chest and collar bones. Cigarette burns. The man's fingertips are pulp, nails torn out, fingers broken, shards of bone hanging from ragged skin. She ignores the watchful eyes of the men and removes the soldier's shirt, finds his ribs wrapped in a blood-soaked rag. She pauses to nod at her grandmother, who calls for Soo to fetch water. Yoo-jin breathes carefully as she removes the filthy bandaging, focusses on the task at hand, on her own lungs filling and emptying. The hole between two of the soldier's upper ribs whistles as he struggles to breathe. She touches the man's skin, feeling for broken ribs, and involuntarily pulls back her hand. Not just broken—several ribs are completely out of place, dislocated and snapped. He is nothing but a shell now, a husk of blood and crushed bone.

“Hurry, cousin,” says the man with long hair. “We need him alive.”

“You did this?” she asks, surprised at her own audacity and conflicting emotions. Even as she speaks, she imagines cigarette butts burning flesh. Boot toe to rib. Blade into lung.

“Cousin!” The man with long hair speaks too loudly. “You know what *they* have done.”

She does not respond, though she knows this man is not wrong, knows that if Japanese soldiers had arrived from the woods like these men, all would be lost. Yet how can she mend this man in the same way she has helped sick children brought to her by loving mothers?

Soo returns from the river with the water bucket and kneels to help clean the man’s chest and neck.

“Girl!”

Yoo-jin does not look up this time. “What happened to *cousin*?” she asks, trying not to listen as the man shouts for her to hurry, tells her that Korean lives are at stake, that she is a traitor for even this small delay. Her mother’s voice then, reprimanding her for kicking a boy in the schoolyard years ago, even after he’d slapped her best friend.

Beautiful daughter. Some things can never be right, no matter what has happened.

Part of her wants to argue with this memory, tell her mother she is wrong. *Now of all times.* But as she kneels before the dying soldier, she knows she cannot do this. Must not.

The men curse in frustration, accuse her of sympathy for the Japanese. She feels Soo trembling beside her, but a calm seeps into her own hands as she finishes cleaning the soldier's wounds, places a cool cloth on his forehead. She breathes a silent curse of her own, that the dying man's spirit will wander unfulfilled like that of the floating soldier. That he will be damned for his sins and for what he has brought to their sanctuary.

She stands and washes her hands, wipes each finger slowly with a rag until no blood remains.

At sunset she checks the soldier's pulse and feels nothing. The rebels notice the stillness of the soldier's chest and the long-haired man grabs Yoo-jin's neck, pushes her face into the soldier's. The man screams curses as the others pull him away. Each man save the farmer spits at her feet as they retreat into the dusky shadows of the hills, leaving her to dispose of the dead man. Only the rice farmer remains on the edge of the clearing for a moment, his shoulders hunched, head low. He bows before following his comrades into the hills.

Another body, thinks Yoo-jin, forcing herself to breathe, to still her racing mind, dilute the fear that shot through her when the man grabbed her.

"Sister." Soo's voice soft, shaking. *Eonni*. "Why?"

Yoo-jin tries and fails to find the right words.

Her grandmother hushes them, reminds Soo what the men did to the soldier—tells her to imagine the burns blistering her own skin. “We are not like them,” she growls.

Yoo-jin watches Soo’s face in the falling night, dark hair blending with the green-gone-grey of the trees behind her. She guesses her friend wants to shout at her. Tell her the Japanese aren’t human anyway, to think of all that the occupiers have done to their people.

But when Soo speaks, she surprises her. “When word of this spreads to Miryang, there will be trouble.”

Yoo-jin’s grandmother stands over the corpse of the soldier. Her frame appears frail and small now that they are alone in long shadows. A frog tests the air. The night watch flexes its wings.

The old woman shakes her head. “I want to believe that many in Miryang would have done the same....” She does not say *but*. Instead shrugs. “There is nothing to do but wait.” Her words fall to the blood-soaked earth at their feet, red stains gone purple and black with the fading light.

Days since anyone has come from Miryang, and this day fading too, darkness cooling trees and the slowing river. Not much rice left. She lies awake measuring portions grain by grain, wondering if she has traded their lives for the sake of *how* a Japanese soldier should die. Frogs and crickets serenade the hut with chaotic

chirping, acutely arhythmic, though perhaps she is simply too immersed to recognize the vastness of their composition.

A quick knock at the door and the blue-eyed boy enters, kneels beside her as the other two women wake, alarmed.

The boy freezes, as if shocked by his own breach of etiquette.

Yoo-jin recovers to help the boy through his awkwardness. “Cousin.” *Lost bird*. “Are you well?”

The boy bows to each of them, further embarrassed to have forced his elder to take the initiative. “Yes, older sister. Yes, *halmeoni*. Are you at peace?” He falters on the common greeting, but recomposes himself. “*Nuna*.” *Older sister*. “The men who came here are dead.”

He pauses and Yoo-jin cannot think of anything but the face of the rice farmer. That final bow.

“Everyone knows you refused to heal the soldier. This was a small problem. Some think your actions were right, some not. But now.... They were ambushed and captured. Shot in the market.”

Soo gasps and still Yoo-jin cannot think of how to respond. She has played out such a possibility over and over in her mind, but now that this moment has arrived, she feels numb.

The four of them sit in silence, breathing the dark air and each other’s thoughts.

“Older sisters. Grandmother. They say you are traitors. That information from the soldier would have saved these men. They are coming now.”

Her grandmother moves first, old limbs seemingly light as she begins to gather what little food they have. Fear trickles through Yoo-jin’s veins and into her stomach, but she pulls Soo out of bed and they bundle their possessions.

Outside in the cool air, Yoo-jin hands the boy the folded Japanese uniform.

“It is large, but you may find it useful.” She cannot imagine quite how, but she must act in hope.

The boy hesitates, as if unsure whether or not he should accept the khaki cloth. But he tucks it under his arm and bows. “Thank-you, *nuna*.” He pauses, mouth open, then adds, “I know you are not a traitor.” He holds up his hand, pale in moonlight, and flexes his fingers. “Better each day.”

A miracle, thinks Yoo-jin, though she does not reply.

Soo interrupts this thought, unable to hide the panic in her voice. “Where will we go?”

Yoo-jin’s grandmother clears her throat. “You must return to your family. They will not blame you for the actions of strangers.”

Soo starts to protest, but the old woman cuts her off. “Grandson. Take your cousin’s hand. Go now.”

The boy obeys.

“Sister,” says Soo. “Be safe.”

Yoo-jin nods, but again cannot find words, nor can she calm the avian-like jitters that run through her limbs.

The boy bows low to her grandmother and then to Yoo-jin. “I will not forget you.”

“You are only thirteen years old,” she replies, surprised by his directness. And then adds, “You will have a long and happy life.”

“Fourteen,” he responds. “And I will never forget you.”

The two figures turn and disappear down the path to Miryang.

Crickets stutter in the shadows.

Yoo-jin swallows panic. “Grandmother. Please forgive me. There is nowhere left to go.”

The trickle-creep of the river replaces her words.

Her grandmother takes her hand and leads her to the sound, along the bank towards the hills.

“Yoo-jin ah. Beautiful child. There is always somewhere to go.”

They watch the house burn from the tree-dense hilltop. Men wearing the red and blue sashes of the rebellion. One torch onto thatch, flames licking the darkness. A small tragedy amidst many, but Yoo-jin cannot stop from weeping into her grandmother’s shoulder. She expects a hushed scolding from the old woman, but none comes.

They remain hidden through the night, crouching uncomfortably until the sky pales and birds call up the dawn. Or is it the other way around, she wonders, as her grandmother creaks to her feet?

“The Japanese will see the smoke.” The old woman walks gingerly down the hill to the river and back onto the path to Miryang. They cannot journey through the hills without more food. The town is the only place within a day’s walk they might find supplies, even if they cannot stay there.

They walk through the valley, the air smelling faintly of smoke, until the path widens into a road at the edge of town. They hear the truck before it comes into view and hide in the underbrush as soldiers motor past towards the dark pillar of smoke, clear now against the morning sky.

Luck is with them today, she thinks. Perhaps they will find food, travel further north towards Daejon.

Miryang has changed in their absence. It is quieter, with many homes seemingly abandoned, entrances unswept, covered with leaves and dust, gardens untended, gone to weed and flower. They walk past the burned-out shell of a large family home, writing on the outer wall: *Ilbon-ui gullehgateunnyun*. Japanese whore.

Did the same writing mark the hut’s wall before it smouldered black? This is what the brutality of the occupation is doing to them. This is what they have become. *Siginjong*. Cannibals. A nation consuming itself.

Her grandmother takes her hand yet again and leads her through quiet streets that reek of burning plastic and sewage. Yoo-jin steals a glance at her grandmother's face, but cannot read any expression. Even when Yoo-jin was a child, her father's mother had seemed impossibly old, already disappearing before their eyes. Now it is this disappearing woman who keeps her moving.

The old woman squeezes her hand on cue, as if to say, *you're welcome granddaughter, think nothing of it. Ehu duedda.*

Those they encounter are too busy with their own business to pay them any heed as they make their way slowly to the market, which they find bustling. Even though there is no pork or beef, there are tanks of freshwater eels and the air smells of garlic and chilis. Each stall is covered by a canvas tent, and fishermen and farmers call out prices. Yoo-jin thinks of the market in Masan, of her mother taking her to buy pork belly, of snacking on fried chicken's feet. Her mouth waters at the memory. How long since they've had a proper meal with side dishes, kimchi, fresh tea leaves?

"Stay," her grandmother grunts, gesturing to the shade along the edges of the market. "No one will notice an old *halmeoni* buying rice and dried fish."

Just as the woman disappears from sight, shouts erupt from the centre of the market beside the eel buckets, a struggle, curses. Yoo-jin edges closer, tries to spot her grandmother. A group of middle-aged women drag a girl into the clearing, push her to her knees. The women form a loose ring, spitting and cursing. Yoo-jin squints for a glimpse of the girl's face and her stomach tightens.

It is Soo, hair chopped short, dirt-streaked cheeks.

The mob grows, women shrieking as though animals. *Traitor. Whore. Jap-lover.* Soo weeps and shakes violently, scrambles to cover her pale legs with what remains of her torn *hanbok*.

Yoo-jin struggles to breathe, counts *hana, dul, set...*, as she creeps closer to the mob, gut twisting.

The crowd shouts questions and accusations: *where is she? Where is the traitor? The shaman whore?*

A hail of rocks strikes Soo's head and face, and the girl drops to the earth. The circle of women pull her back to her knees, blood leaking from gashes in her forehead. And those same questions, again and again, until finally Soo looks past the women and makes eye contact, as if she has known all along that Yoo-jin is watching.

Soo's swollen lips form quiet words: *big sister. Eonni. Help me. Please.*

Despite the noise and chaos, many heads turn to face Yoo-jin, and she realizes she has allowed herself to creep too close.

An electric flash prickles the edges of her vision and she tumbles into darkness.

She wakes, head pounding, as headlights cut through darkness. Her wrists are bound and tied to a post. Soo hangs from another stake, bound as well, her body limp, hands and face caked with dirt and dried blood. Yoo-jin starts at the touch of

a damp cloth on her neck, pivots to see her grandmother squatting beside her. The old woman runs the cool cloth over her forehead, then holds a cup of water to her lips. The headlights draw closer and a truck stops before them, motor idling.

Her grandmother's lips like rustling tissue paper in her ear. "Be strong granddaughter. Beautiful One."

Piston-quick Japanese syllables as soldiers step in front of the glaring light. One addresses her grandmother in rough Korean. "What is the meaning of this?"

"A mistake," says her grandmother, rising to face the dark shape of the soldier. "Forgive us for interrupting your evening. Please continue with your business." She bows her head.

"Grandmother. We both know there is no forgiveness in this shithole of a country," says the soldier. Yoo-jin is surprised by his acknowledgment of the old woman as an elder, *halmeoni*, and by the vocabulary that doesn't match his stilted speech.

"Respectfully, officer," replies her grandmother. "Please go about your official business and leave me to take care of my granddaughters. We do not wish to trouble you further."

"Very kind of you, *halmeoni*," says the soldier, the outline of his face a black hole before the headlights. "But as I said, there is no forgiveness here. Only the emperor's will. My men will take care of your granddaughters. They are

clearly in need of medical attention. Surely this is too heavy a burden for an old woman in times such as these.”

Her grandmother is silent for a moment, and Yoo-jin realizes with a wave of dread that the negotiation is already over, that what will happen next must happen, has been waiting for them since they first fled Masan, since she buried the floating soldier, refused to treat the tortured man in the hills.

“Do you have money for us, grandmother? For the doctor?”

The old woman hands over the wallet they’ve carried since Masan. Her father’s money. The soldier opens the wallet and lets the Korean coins and yen fall at their feet, worn copper and silver shining dully in the headlights.

He picks out the yen but leaves the rest. “Worthless. We are not interested in the currency of a country that no longer exists. What else can you offer us, grandmother?”

Yoo-jin shivers at how quickly the soldier’s use of such a respectful term has turned goading and cold.

Her grandmother offers the man their small canvas bag, which he also tips out onto the earth. A few grains of rice. A pot for cooking.

“Are you a cook? Can you make us a famous dish? My men have developed an insatiable,” he pauses, as though checking the word in a mental dictionary, “...taste for kimchi. Or perhaps you are a farmer’s wife? Is there a pig hidden somewhere near? That would be a fair trade, don’t you think? A pig for

two whores?” He stands erect and still for a moment before breaking his own silence. “So? Tell me, did you work, grandmother?”

The old woman looks directly at the soldier and nods. “Yes, young one. I told fortunes.”

The soldier cocks his head, as though considering how she has addressed him, but shrugs it off, tries another word instead. “*Mudang?*”

“Close enough,” says her grandmother.

The officer translates this for his men. A ripple of laughter from the dark uniforms at the edge of the light.

“You must tell us our fortunes then, *grandmother witch*. I will go first. And you must be honest. I will know if you’re lying to flatter me. My palm?” He extends his hand, but the old woman shakes her head.

“No need. Your fortunes are all the same. I have seen the signs in the morning sky since the day you arrived on our shores when I was still young. I have seen them in the *honbul*, the burning fires that flicker over blood-soaked earth. And I see them now in the patterns your boots make upon the dust.”

Again the officer translates. His soldiers laugh and point at their own scuffed tracks on the dusty road. The old woman steps forward, headlamps casting shadows from her silhouette.

“I see two great clouds in the east, each as high as the sun, red and black, shaped like mushrooms. I see generations of death and plague. I see your emperor on his knees, begging like a dog.”

A heartbeat.

The black shape of the officer draws a pistol, places the barrel to the old woman's temple.

Yoo-jin screams as the gunshot cracks the darkness.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

He crouches in his uncle's shed clutching the khaki uniform to his chest, letting it soak up sweat from his neck and hands. Gunshots—they sound less menacing than they should, like popping fireworks—and shouts, as the Japanese *clean* the uprising from Miryang.

His aunt told him to stay hidden until the town was quiet again, told him the Japanese had spies everywhere and would know he'd visited the women in the woods, might even know his family history, the sins of his father.

He prays the soldiers will not catch Yoo-jin or her grandmother, nor find Soo hiding with family at the edge of town. He holds the uniform to his nose and inhales the metallic twinge of river water—like *her* hands.

His own fingers have nearly healed, mostly straight, and he makes a fist without wincing, his hand a grey shadow puppet in the close dark of the shed, which reeks of oiled rags and compost.

More gunshots. A truck's engine. Muffled shouts.

He imagines hundreds of families hiding in the dark, hoping the resistance will miraculously descend from the hills and drive out the Japanese army and settlers. But even as he thinks this, even as he pictures a great wind shaking leaves, rushing from the mountains, flattening his enemies with the force of a typhoon, he knows it is far too much to hope for. How many times has his father

reminded him that they have suffered thirty years of *this*, that the emperor will never release his Korean rice bowl, that more children will be born into this occupied land, the peninsula now an island labor camp no matter how many times villagers rise up and die? Besides, who would lead them now? So many dead or exiled.

There is only survival. And small, silent prayers.

That I will not be found here. And that I will meet her again. That she might see my hand and again hold it to her lips.

Born into this. This stolen land. This *bbeakkin ddang*. His father had tried to protect him. A janitor, a job Won-jae would have inherited if not for the deal his father struck with the principal of the middle-school he cleaned. *A place for my son*, he imagines him begging. *I'll do anything*. He can still see his father's grey uniform, the school's insignia surrounded by Japanese characters: *In the Service of the Empire*.

Mr. Suzuki was no emperor, but happy to play the part in the kingdom of Changshin joong-hakyo, and he gave Won-jae a seat next to boys whose parents bought this privilege in other ways: money, information, promises.

In return, his father cleaned the administrator's home on weekends and evenings. Won-jae had thought little of this at first, was only vaguely aware of his father's lengthening absences from their own small home in the north of Masansi. So he sat through lessons that were undisguised propaganda for the empire, accepted even the banning of his mother tongue without so much as a whimper.

Look closely at the map. What does this dirty peninsula remind you of? Anyone? A frightened rabbit, yes? Wooden pointer to roll-down map at the front of the classroom, Japanese territories in red. *This is the inbred character you must overcome if you are to become a productive part of our great empire, which already covers half the world. But do not despair, for our people are not so different, yes? We are trusting you with our language, our technology, our presence.*

Won-jae parroted what he needed to, learned what Japanese he could, although he was years behind his classmates, his tongue twisted by the intricate foreign syllables.

The language of traitors, he thinks now.

All so he could avoid the shame of cleaning shit from outhouse floors like his father. Not that he was ever able to leave this family legacy behind. The other boys teased him about the messes they left in the outhouses for his father to clean.

And then there were his blue eyes.

Like your great grandmother's, his father told him. A strong woman. Very beautiful. Eyes like the sea.

But his classmates had different words for him: *waegukin. Deoleoun-pi. Jabjong*. Foreigner. Impure blood. Mutt. And *aigwishin*. Ghost child. That one hurt most, as if they were not only condemning him to loneliness at school, but could not even imagine him having a family who loved him. Ruined from the start. Eyes nothing more than symbols of a contaminated blood line.

But his Japanese teacher mostly ignored him, and he liked the quiet of the school room in the mornings and evenings when the other boys were absent—the smell of dried ink and paper, clean glass windows, polished wooden floors.

He watched his father work each morning before class, starting with the school room and moving through the building in the heart of the city, not far from the harbour, where most men found work. When the rooms of the school filled with Japanese teachers and Korean students, his father moved outside to tend to the grounds and empty the outhouses, carrying refuse to the city's open sewer grates bucket by bucket.

Won-jae smells the memory, shuffles on his haunches and stretches, ears still pricked for soldiers.

Once you have come to see what your Mongol-tainted race stands to gain from our pure bloodline, you will more fully appreciate how blessed you are to be taken under the wing of the one true empire under the sun. The Chinese will receive no such offer.

A jaw-stretching yawn. No more gunfire, no engines.

If you are to understand your role in this magnificent empire, you must first fully appreciate what it has done for you. The emperor does not ask only for recognition of divine right to rule. There is also his great and unending benevolence. Consider the train stations we have built. Marvellous structures. Ports and roads too. To say nothing of medicine: no cholera, no plague, and all of this achieved in only a few decades. Before you were born, Korea was infamous

for these blights and traders from around the world avoided the crouching rabbit at all costs.

The wood and brick shed groans, as if slowly shuffling down the street towards the dark hills.

He'd known his teacher was wrong, of course, that cholera outbreaks were still common, that famine plagued the countryside while Japanese settlers and Korean collaborators became fat through government-approved trade.

Benevolence. More Japanese shit for the janitor's son.

Again he smells the uniform, wonders if it will fit well enough to see him out of Miryang when the time comes.

And when will that be?

Wet heat. Mosquito whine. Creaking wood.

Surely the hierarchy of races is clear for all to see, yes? Japanese blood is pure, no Mongol contamination, no ghost blood.

The slightest flick of his teacher's eyes in his direction. And even now he thinks: *if I could change them, I would. If I could put them out and not die of starvation, I would.* He breathes deeply, asks himself if this is true. No. His eyes are the shame of his ancestors. He must view the world through this shame, allow it to colour everything he sees.

His father tried to convince him otherwise, said they were part of an honourable bloodline, that it was up to him to continue this tradition and define his life through the works of his own hands. But these were the words of a

hopeful father, a man with a family to support, with a wife who still grieved for her second son, the child who had turned backwards for fear of entering a ruined homeland, born without breath. *Sasan.*

He slaps a mosquito on his arm. He is either waiting for nothing, or a death-truck of soldiers.

A dog barks once, as if testing the air.

He wonders if he will ever cut the grass on his ancestors' graves with his father and uncle again, or if it will be their graves he tends. He prays they will die fighting and not in captivity.

They use bayonets now, his uncle told him before disappearing into the hills. They say we aren't even worth the cost of a bullet. And they have taken thousands to build a railway in Manchukuo, to work the loading docks in Vladivostok. And Malaya. Who knows what they're really doing there? They say some even wear Jap uniforms, march as cannon fodder for the army.

There are new rumours now, of places in Manchukuo where Koreans are experimented upon—surgery without anesthesia, chemicals for war.

The stray barks again and Won-jae pins another mosquito to his neck, wipes the blood on his trousers so as not to sully the uniform.

The clatter-scratch of chalk on the board. His teacher's nasally breathing as he revised the date of expected victory.

You are all young. This is fortunate. Unlike your fathers, you will soon forget that you were once only Korean. Rejoice in this. It will not take as long as

you imagine for us to become one body, one mind. Already the war is nearing an end.

His uncle's empty house behind him, he rides his bicycle through the dark streets of Miryang, the uniform itchy but clean, trousers too long, rolled up just as he has seen soldiers do—he prays he will not appear conspicuous.

There is no use thinking about what might have happened to his uncle in the hills, or to his aunt at home, to Soo, to Yoo-jin or her grandmother. But pushing such thoughts from his mind proves impossible. He is no meditating monk with the power to banish all thought.

They say we are not even worth the cost of a bullet.

He pedals faster through empty streets until he reaches the first checkpoint on the northern edge of town, where he steels himself, ignores the impulse to slow. He must make them stop him, act surprised when they do.

A guard steps from behind a horizontally parked truck, his silhouette backed by lanterns at each end of the vehicle. The soldier raises a hand and Won-jae brakes, heart pounding as the man looks him up and down, addresses him in casual Japanese—a sure sign they are the same rank.

“Late to be riding, no?”

“Reassigned,” he replies, the Japanese syllables catching on his teeth. He has spoken too quickly. Too loudly. Perhaps the wrong word.

The soldier laughs. “Ok. Gonna be tough to see though.”

“I know the way.”

The soldier looks at him without speaking. For a moment Won-jae fears his accent has broken the spell.

A grunt. “Good to see one of your kind on *our* side.”

Won-jae dips his chin in a shallow bow, but cannot respond, can barely push down the urge to leap from his bicycle and dig his thumbs into the man’s windpipe.

The soldier smirks and salutes. Won-jae follows suit, then pushes his bike around the truck and back onto the dark road.

It is counter-intuitive to pedal northwards away from those he loves. There is no way of knowing what checkpoints lie ahead, nor how long it will take to find food and shelter. And there is the uniform to consider, this gift that has delivered him this far, but could now cost him his life if he meets armed rebels.

His right hand aches as he grips the handlebars. Bike tires over packed gravel. Cool air up his sleeves.

Father, watch over me. And forgive me for leaving our home.

The smells of ammonia, chalk dust, his father’s sweat. He’d watched from a desk at the back of the schoolroom, as Mr. Suzuki yelled a mixture of Japanese and Korean into his father’s face.

*I was wrong to trust one of your kind. What you have done is unforgivable.
A crime against my family and the empire.*

His father had stood with head bowed, puzzled, as Suzuki demanded that he kneel and beg for mercy. His father understood this and complied, though he remained silent.

Am I to take your silence as dissent? Are you so bold as to accuse my wife of lying? You are a common thief and the pearls you've taken are worth more than your house!

Won-jae pedals faster now, remembers standing and yelling for the administrator to stop, telling the man his father didn't understand, didn't speak the language, hadn't stolen anything. Suzuki had seemed genuinely shocked to discover he was being observed. But the administrator recovered quickly, commanded Won-jae to kneel as well, which he'd rushed to do before his father could protest and make the situation worse.

Naive, he thinks now. But it happened so quickly. Suzuki grabbing his hair and plunging his head into the mop bucket. Won-jae choking on the filthy water, struggling in a mad panic as headlights rushed towards him. Then all at once the pressure disappeared and he lay gasping on the wet floor, heart pounding in ears, breath so ragged he could hear it.

He fights for air at the memory, watches his front tire spin, the road lit faintly by moonlight, layers of grey and purple to each side. Miles and miles still to Daejon, a city large enough to disappear in. He could turn off the road sooner and look for a village, work in the fields or market. But in such a place he would stand out, a foreigner, no blood-right, no family. *Jabjong*.

He exhales the thought. The road is well-packed here, his tires quick, and for a moment he feels as if he could race across borders and continents, arrive anywhere before dawn, find anyone—his family: mother, father, uncles, aunts and cousins. He makes this list carefully, out of duty, though in truth he thinks of *her*; knows he would travel to Tokyo itself, the beating heart of the empire, to find the girl he cannot seem to push from his mind.

Lips to broken sinew and bone. Hands that smelled of river water.

He prays silently again that she is safe and that she might think of him, not just as a younger brother, but as a young man, a patriot, old enough to pass for a soldier in this uniform she has stolen for him, these magic pieces of clothing that have set him free when so many others have been taken.

He will find her again. *This is true*. And some day, when suffering has left their homeland, they will be together, even if all else is lost.

Lost.

His father's pale face, eyes wide. And Won-jae gasping, waiting for the sharp voice of Suzuki, for the man's hands on his head again. A spinning and then clarity—this memory he is sure of: his father kneeling over the administrator, blood from the man's head onto the floor, a pyramid-shaped paper-weight in the pooling red.

The rest a blur: dragging the dead man into a closet, mopping the floor. The two of them returning home to pack bags, his mother too shocked to argue. But the black-shirted Korean police had arrived at their home too quickly. There

should have been more time. Someone must have opened the closet door, found the corpse.

North, his father whispered to him as the police banged on their door. *Wait until dark. Find your way to Miryang and your uncle.*

The police took his mother too, though he tried to stop them. An officer had flung him aside as though he weighed nothing, and they'd dragged his parents down the street to the station. Even then he'd known there would be no trial—this was treason against the emperor, who had seen everything from his portrait's eyes on the classroom wall.

That night, confusion in the harbour, a great fire, fighting in the streets. He remembers trying to understand how he and his father could have caused all of this. If only he had not been seated in the classroom, if only he had not seen the administrator yelling at his father, if only he'd run from the room, his parents would be at home and Masan would not be ablaze.

He understands now that there were greater forces at work, and yet he still feels a connection between the fires and the blood on the floor. He pedals harder to numb himself to the rising guilt—for leaving behind his mother, for the mark a son bears when his father commits a crime, for his part in it all.

Her voice from the humming bike tires, soothing: *Won-jae. Cousin. Be at peace. These events are the workings of nations, and we are too small to feel ashamed of our actions amidst such turmoil—we orphans of empire, we lost ones.*

Lights on the road ahead and Won-jae slows, glides to a stop before another green military truck. No one greets him and his skin prickles at the thought of rifles sighting his quick heart. Voices from behind the horizontally-parked truck. He pushes his bike around the vehicle into a squad of Korean police officers. The reds of their cigarettes glow in the shadows around the truck's headlights. Beyond them a row of men and women kneel at the roadside facing the trees, hands bound. Civilian clothing, though the figures are no more than shapes in shadow.

One of the officers greets him as though he were expected.

“Heading north tonight, cousin?”

He says yes, fights to stop his voice from shaking.

“What news from Miryang and Masan, then? Troublemakers all accounted for?”

Won-jae nods and the soldier laughs. “Bit of a scare for us, hey little cousin? But it has always been like this so far south. Reds and rebels.”

The man's accent suggests Seoul or the north-west coast—it's difficult to be sure through the cigarette on his bottom lip. Won-jae snatches another glance at the row of civilians.

The police officer follows his eyes. “Rebels. Not saying much though. We're trying to figure out what to do with them. Not enough space left to keep them locked up, and the uprisings are making it hard to find work details for everyone. At least quickly.”

The mines. Railroads. Women taken and not returned.

Won-jae remains silent, thinking on the man's words. *The uprisings.* He tries not to picture the men shot in the market at Miryang, catches himself flexing and relaxing his hand.

The officer notices the tick, but they are interrupted by a shout as one of the prisoners rises and runs into the trees. A woman, quick-footed. The police officers raise their rifles too late, fire only after she is out of sight. Another of the civilians rises and throws himself at the officers, yells for the rest to run. The police open fire as the civilians race in all directions, the shadows a mess of bodies falling into trees and underbrush. The crackling of rifles and pistols, screams.

Won-jae jumps on his bicycle and rides. A bullet zips past his ear. Behind him, more shouting and gunshots. Wailing and barked orders. And before him, only the dark night and the long road north.

박유진 (*Park Yoo-jin*)

The wet jungle hums and snaps. Showers come and go in seconds, not even long enough to knock mosquitos from the air, and the insects fill the open sleeves of her white blouse, leave trails of welts on her arms, legs and neck. She stands outside the raised wooden sleeping quarters, her posture stiff, at attention before the Japanese matron, a woman caked in melting white makeup, her hair pinned high, opalescent kimono wrapped around her bony frame—a *blue dragonfly*, thinks Yoo-jin, as another insect drones over her left ear.

She stands in line next to Soo and three other Korean women she does not recognize, has not yet managed to speak with. The matron addresses them in Japanese, though she must know they will only comprehend pieces of her meaning unless she slows her speech. Yoo-jin understands more than she would have guessed, and she tries to let the woman's nasally staccato surround her, let the syllables blend with the sounds of the jungle. She must catch what she can and let the rest go without panicking, although she feels a tightness in her breast at the thought of what she is missing, what might come next.

One of the girls slaps an insect and receives the same from the matron, the woman's hand a blur. Yet Yoo-jin will take this trade—mosquitos and this monstrous woman for all those days in the dark hold of a ship, seasickness and ceaseless rocking, a tiny room with a bucket that she and Soo squatted and leaned

over. Cold rice and water once a day. Perhaps a week of this, with Soo silent the entire time, feverish and sick to the point Yoo-jin thought she would die. But even in recovery her cousin had remained sullen and quiet, as though she had receded so far inside herself she could no longer find her own senses, her own tongue.

And use it to beg forgiveness.

This thought of its own accord. Yoo-jin snaps back to attention, to the matron's painted lips, focusses on the sticky red so as not to dwell on her grandmother and that night. She can stand stiffly here now, bare this discomfort so long as she manages to leave those thoughts in a far corner of her mind. Instead, she tries to guess where the Japanese army has taken them. On the boat, she thought they were being shipped to a factory in Japan or Manchukuo, but they'd docked and disembarked in tropical heat, sat in the back of a military truck for hours, bumping along a one-lane dirt road through intense green. At each stop, bird chatter and haunting cries from the jungle, noises that echoed. And still none of the soldiers have said more than *stand* or *sit* since they were taken.

Taken and not returned.

An officer with a sword at his belt joins the matron. His thin moustache appears waxed and grey hair marks his temples along the bottom of his khaki and red hat. How could this officer not remind her of that other man standing in the headlights of the truck with her grandmother? The faceless shadow.

The man is the same height as Yoo-jin and she avoids eye contact as he *inspects* them, barks orders at the matron, who bows low and agrees, bows low and agrees.

The heat slows time, melts seconds so that they seem to ooze into minutes as they wait before this man, standing upon earth that is not home, not Korean, their collective soul—*yeonghon*, her father had said. She feels this loss acutely in her feet and legs, feels them weaken as she struggles not to faint in the heat. All of this lush and living green around them, and her standing as if she is not soulless, entirely orphaned, as if a black chasm has not cracked open inside of her. She fights panic in the face of this gaping pit, resists the impulse to fall to her knees, until, as quickly as it came, the feeling passes and is replaced by a growing warmth. This new darkness fills her with light that is not sunlight—a crackling fire, stoked by the ghosts of those she loves, and the rage within her both comforts and frightens her.

Heat amidst all this heat. *Honbul*—ghost fires. Burning.

Grandmother: I will kill this man if given the chance, send his ghost to join the floating soldier and the one I refused to save.

The officer motions to Soo, has the matron pry open her mouth, check her teeth for rot. The matron forces her fingers deep into her cousin's mouth. Soo chokes and retches, then bites down, blood spurting over her lips. The matron shrieks and struggles to pull her hand from Soo's locked jaw, red lines twisting down the woman's wrist into the blue sleeve of her kimono.

None of the other women move as the matron's wailing drowns out the ruckus of the jungle, but Yoo-jin gags as she imagines the sensation of her own teeth on bone. She vomits at the feet of the officer, but the man does not move, stands expressionless as the matron holds up her half-attached thumb, as if he has seen all of this many times, as though Soo has simply spoken out of turn and he waits for her to acknowledge the mistake before continuing.

Two soldiers strap Yoo-jin to a raised bed in the medical tent, pull her legs into stirrups and tie them. She does not struggle, though every muscle in her body is taut. She tries to breathe evenly. There is no one to cry out to. No way of fighting these men. She must be wise. Think as her grandmother taught her.

She stares up at the green tent's frame and ceiling, hears metal tapping metal and low voices. A truck's engine starts and stops outside.

A man clears his throat beside her, greets her so calmly that it takes her a moment to register her native tongue and the man's Korean features: broad forehead, strong jaw.

“Sister. *Yeodongsaeng*. Do you understand the nature of this inspection?”

She does not. Does not understand anything, save that her grandmother is dead and that someone must pay for this, that the man beside her wears the wrong uniform, that he calls her sister when he should not, and that she is entirely at the mercy of this traitor.

“We are all part of the empire now, little sister. And we must all do our part. Fulfill our *duty*. *Uimu*. A beautiful word, I think. Yes?” He doesn’t wait for her reply. “We are not so different. Each a faithful servant. Do you know where you are?”

Yoo-jin shakes her head and the man explains that they are on the giant island of Borneo, defending the southern reaches of the empire against the British and Australians.

“And now the Americans, too. We fight for glory, sister, and victory is certain.”

Yoo-jin remains silent. The man is a parrot.

A harsh, gurgling voice from across the tent becomes a shriek and the Korean man disappears. Yoo-jin can only tilt her head far enough to see the man’s back as he tends to his patient, prepares an injection, mutters quick words of Japanese.

When he returns, the Korean tells her the man has been poisoned. “The natives hunt us with darts in the jungle. As if we are animals. They have no honour.”

The man is clearly proud of his knowledge, eager to show off. *Like men everywhere*, she thinks, as he tells her he does not know the nature of the poison, only that it is always fatal.

A good way for them to die. Screaming and afraid, lost in the jungle, calling for their mothers.

She catches this last thought, thinks of her own mother and is immediately ashamed of her anger.

Why does this man speak to her in Korean? A small kindness? Or just the easiest way for him to get what he wants from her?

The man moves quickly towards her legs while she is pondering this, yanks down her loose trousers and forces his fingers inside her before she can twist her hips or cry out. His examination doesn't take long, but he is not gentle, the pain sharp. Tears burn at the corners of her eyes as the man asks her to confirm she is a virgin—pure, *sutcheonyeo*. He takes her silence as an affirmative, tells her this is very good news for her.

The man washes his hands in a bowl next to the bed and dries them, then scribbles in a notebook. “Have you placed my accent yet, little sister? No?” He snaps shut the notebook. “This is because I was raised in Osaka. A truly amazing city. Perhaps you'll have the chance to visit when the war is won.”

She imagines the floating soldier—the way the corpse spun so gracefully, so easily in the river's current. Does he watch her now?

Her grandmother answers and her own heartbeat quickens.

No, Beautiful One. No. Only those who love you. Those who have gathered to watch over you, to help you remember.

Halmeoni, she thinks. How can I survive this?

You are strong, Beautiful One. And you are not alone. We have followed you over great waters. This is true.

“I’m usually very good at guessing hometowns. There are clear characteristics. You are from the south, I think, though it would help if you would speak. Perhaps Jeju-do? The soldiers say there are mermaids off the coast of the island, near Seogwipo, who bed men on the black rocks and devour them as they sleep. Silly, don’t you think? Although I did put seventeen stitches in Madam Tazaki’s thumb this morning. Will you really not speak to me?”

Traitor. Parrot. False-boned monster.

He smiles at her, and Yoo-jin finds this more disturbing than the cold eyes of the officer or the harshness of the matron, as if this man hangs before her like a marionette, pantomiming words and actions utterly foreign to his bloodline.

“No matter. You’re obviously a very healthy young woman, and you’ll be pleased to know I’ve marked you ready for service.”

He calls in the two soldiers that strapped her down. They undo their work and allow her to straighten her filthy clothing. As they escort her from the tent, she passes the wailing soldier on his cot, sweat beading on his forehead, eyes rolled back, a swollen green and red lump on his neck like some piece of exotic fruit ripening beneath his skin.

“Pleasure to meet you, sister,” chimes the medical officer as she steps out into sharp sunlight.

The other girls stand in a line outside and she manages eye contact with Soo, her face bruised from a beating, whole body trembling. She will not survive this, is not strong enough for what they must face. Yoo-jin softens, casts aside the

anger of the betrayal in the market place—an accident, and neither of them the true cause. She smiles and nods at her cousin, though she dares not speak.

Beautiful sister. Be strong. You are not alone.

The two soldiers haul Yoo-jin back to the barracks and lock her in a closet-sized room. A wooden bench shaped like a coffin takes up nearly the entire floor, running lengthwise from the door to the back wall. The freshly-cut wood smells sweetly of peeled carrots. It has not been sanded and she sits carefully, splinters catching her cotton trousers.

Soo is with the traitor now. Strapped to a table.

Grandmother, watch over my cousin, my little sister.

She allows the last of her resentment to lift, dissipate into the hot air. She must not use energy harbouring anger against her own, against Soo, who did not ask for any of this. Besides, they would not have been in such a position had she helped revive the tortured soldier in Miryang. And she could not have lived with herself had she done so. An impossible situation. No peace in any direction. Proof that they were born at the wrong time.

She shifts on the bench and the rough wood catches cloth. She pulls four thin, inch-long pieces of wood from her loose trousers—*sa*, an unlucky number. She rolls a sliver between thumb and forefinger. Sweat runs into her eyes, blurs her vision, and she imagines a longer splinter, a spear like those the natives here might use—a weapon to hurl at the medical officer, the matron, the emperor himself if she could.

She waits for her mother's voice to scold her, tell her that only grace, *chinjeol*, can possibly combat so great an evil, that such brute force can only continue to shape her world if she becomes one of *them*. But instead the voices she carries remain silent. She closes her sweat-stung eyes, breathes the rich scent of cut wood and her own musk. Her groin stings from the man's dry fingers.

She is somewhere beyond anything she has ever felt. There is a word for this, of course, but she cannot recall it, cannot force the lines of *hangeul* together. Exhaustion, but more than this, a weariness at her own fate—this new destiny of loss, of aloneness, of fear for herself, Soo and what comes next.

She wakes after sundown to a woman shrieking, bodies against the hallway wall and Yoo-jin's door, sounds of struggle and finally whimpering.

Her own door opens to the matron's ghostly face. The woman holds up a pair of silver scissors. Behind her stand a group of soldiers, two of whom step into the tiny room and pin Yoo-jin to the bench. The matron grabs a fistful of Yoo-jin's hair with her bandaged hand and cuts it roughly. She closes her eyes and fights the instinct to struggle, tries not to imagine the snipping blades slicing her ears or gouging out an eye. When the matron is finished, the soldiers haul Yoo-jin out the door. Still she does not protest, stumbles along with the men, her grandmother's voice loud in her ears.

*Beautiful granddaughter. My child. Nesekki. Be wise in your rebellion.
Fox-like. Survive.*

The matron keeps her bandaged hand tucked into her sleeve as they walk from the hut into the hot evening.

Cicadas buzz. Frogs call like fifty creaking doors. Moths buffet the lamp light.

They stop outside the medical tent and the matron gestures to a bucket of water and a scrub brush. Another group of soldiers pause to watch, laughing and pointing.

Dim lanterns speckle the jungle and voices rise and fall in murmuring waves from the darkness. Sharp syllables from the matron and again the soldiers throw Yoo-jin down and hold her. The matron tears off Yoo-jin's clothing and douses her with tepid water. The woman uses her good hand to scour Yoo-jin's skin with the coarse scrub brush. This time she does struggle, but it is no use—the men hold her tight, their full weight on her back and legs. She weeps into the muddy earth, tries to breathe through the pain of the bristles on her skin while the matron rubs in quick circles, as if sanding wood. The men grab her arms and legs, pull her open so the matron can clean every inch of her. More water, more scrubbing. Like drowning on dry land. Her breasts sting, her buttocks, her groin. Finally the soldiers pull her upright and the matron throws more water over her, leaves her hanging between the men, unable to cover her own nakedness.

The soldiers drag her back into the medical tent, where the Korean from Osaka sits smoking, a book open beside a softly hissing kerosene lantern. He waves the soldiers away. The man's eyes meet her own, but do not fall over her

body, and for this she feels oddly thankful. At last his eyes drop to scan her scratched arms and legs, and she realizes she is bleeding.

“So,” he says in taut *hanguk-aw*. “It seems, despite your companion’s hunger for flesh, the general has asked for one of you tonight. Congratulations. Such an honour. It is most fortunate that you are a virgin.”

She shakes despite the heat, one arm across her breasts, one hand over her groin. *Virgin. Pure. Sutcheonyeo.*

The man rises and fetches a bottle of antiseptic and a cloth. She looks past him at the empty cot where the poisoned soldier lay.

“Sister. I must clean these scratches before the general sees you. I trust you will not try to eat my fingers?”

The fingers that were inside of her. A joke? She continues to stare past him.

He sighs, turns the bottle of antiseptic upside down to wet the cloth and begins tending the scratches. Her wounds burn, but she does not flinch.

The man finishes and points to a white robe and a pair of wooden *geta*, like those the matron wears on her tiny, cloven feet.

“The general requires as proper a presentation as our situation allows.”

Yoo-jin does not argue, slips the soft cotton over her shoulders and ties the cloth belt at her waist. She catches herself hoping she will not bleed into the white fabric, then feels ashamed at the absurdity of such a domestic concern.

“Do not be embarrassed about your short hair, little sister.” The medic opens the tent flap. “I’m sure the general will still find you desirable.”

The general’s quarters occupy a one-room wooden hut on stilts, well furnished with a writing desk and phonograph, tatami mats over the floor, the air heavy with sandalwood and jasmine.

The man himself sits on the floor at a low table in the centre of the room. He flicks his hand to wave away the soldiers that have accompanied her. The man has broad shoulders and a strong jaw line, though his eyes appear too small for his head—tiny buttons sewn to a doll’s face. He wears khaki pants and a military shirt, pressed and clean, unbuttoned at the collar.

A framed photograph of the emperor on a white horse watches the general gesture for her to sit across from him. She folds herself onto one hip, back straight, eyes on the mother-of-pearl inlay around the wooden tea tray on the table—falling cherry blossoms across the dark wood.

The general pours tea into two white cups, a breach of etiquette that surprises her. Does he think that she will refuse to serve him? Or does he want her to watch him handle the white and blue Korean tea set? Such expensive porcelain would be nearly impossible to find in Masan or Miryang now.

The man smiles at her silence, twists and bows at the portrait of the emperor, then utters one roughly-pronounced word of welcome in her native tongue: “*hwan-yeong*.”

It is not the correct word for this situation, better suited to greeting a ghost than a woman, and this makes her think of her first day at the hospital in Masan. She and the other nurses-in-training had lined up before the Japanese administrator, who had mispronounced a similarly incorrect greeting, then insisted through a translator that they speak only Japanese from that day forward.

You will begin each day by bowing to the portrait of the emperor.

She remembers the administrator's round spectacles, his thinning hair combed over the top of his shining scalp, and the small circle of his fish-like mouth as he spoke, as though he were sucking sounds rather than expelling them.

Welcome to the service of the empire.

The general waits for her to drink first. Her hand shakes as she raises the small cup. Sores from her poor diet line her gums and cheeks, and the warm *nok-cha* stings.

“You approve of my tea set, yes?” He speaks slowly in Japanese, testing her comprehension.

She shifts her gaze to the tea pot, to the blue inlay on the porcelain—a magpie in a cherry tree.

“Three-hundred years old. From your *Joseon* dynasty, of course. The potter was invited to Japan to work for emperor Hideyoshi. A great honour.”

Invited, or taken and not returned?

“A lucky man. And skilled, yes?”

Despite his calmness, the general does not shy from staring at her body, and his eyes flit over her exposed feet. Her skin tingles from the antiseptic on her scratches and bites, and she struggles to still her trembling hands.

The general stands quickly, grabs her arm and pulls her from the table. She drops her cup and tries to keep her balance, but he pushes her down, tears off her robe, spreads himself over her, breathing into her neck, her back naked on the rough mats.

He pushes her legs apart with his knees, unbuttons his trousers and forces himself inside her. Searing pain in her groin. She cannot move beneath his weight and thrusting.

Shock after shock of pain. She turns her head away from the man's face, his sickly breath, and focusses instead on the overturned cup next to her, the dark stain of spilled tea spreading over the tatami.

She wakes in agony to knocking on the hallway walls. Her tiny room swelters and her own blood has caked on the bench, a drying spread of rust. A key rattles the lock of her door, which catches on the frame before scraping open. The matron appears, beckons her to rise and follow. She obeys gingerly, pain radiating from her groin to her hips and stomach, her head light.

In the small hallway, the three other Korean women stand outside Soo's room, knocking, calling out to her. A pool of red leaks from beneath the thin door and Yoo-jin's stomach tightens. The wooden door has swollen in the humidity and

the women cannot open it, though they continue to knock, call out *cousin, are your ears open?*

But her little sister from the hills of Miryang remains silent, alone and bleeding, perhaps already gone. Yoo-jin thinks of all who came to her for help in those hills, the blue-eyed boy with his crushed hand, of how Soo had flinched and felt ill at the sight of blood and bone.

She steps into the blood and throws herself at the door, pulls the small handle with all her strength, until she is exhausted and the matron intervenes, drags her away.

She cannot fix this. Cannot heal this wound. Her head spins.

The General

He knows how they see him here on the deck of the USS Nashville—all bluster and corn-cob pipe. He has his speech ready for the landing at Leyte: *I have returned*. But none of this represents the true fullness of the man he knows himself to be, and as he watches the popping mortar fire across the churning blue sea, he thinks of swimming in Mindanao with his father, of water so clear he could see the bottom thirty feet below, patterns swerving across the sandy floor, clam holes loosing bubbles to rise like tiny glass spheres, weightless, as though falling upwards.

박유진 (*Park Yoo-jin*)

Mid-afternoon, the air hot and wet, like breathing water. She sits in the clearing outside their quarters next to the three other captive Korean women, each of them too exhausted and sore to speak. Fifteen men each night for nearly two weeks, one after the other in their tiny rooms.

A bird caws and trills above. The sun and jungle have conspired to steam their bodies like dumplings. Around her, the fragrance of orchids and wildflowers, the iron-musk of her bleeding groin.

She traded a day's ration of rice for a tiny square of sandpaper to use on her bench, but the lack of splinters is a small blessing in light of her bruised and throbbing body.

Still, the medical officer from Osaka has informed her they are most fortunate—*uni joeun*, he said.

Most other stations serve many more soldiers, especially on weekends. You are blessed to have been sent to this jungle outpost. Besides, most women in your position do not have me to care for them.

As if she might find comfort in his hands and eyes on her swollen genitals.

Uni joeun.

She and the other women wear western-style trousers and tunics, grey and green, which they wash and rotate with replacements every day, though they

never dry properly in the humidity. With their short haircuts and formless clothing, they joke that the soldiers must secretly crave boys.

They have also been assigned Japanese names, and the matron has settled on calling her *Michiko*, though she does not answer to it, nor will she allow herself to think of it as anything other than an insult. The same woman burned Soo's body, ignored Yoo-jin's pleas to let her prepare her cousin for paradise, to bury her with feet pointing towards home, to leave offerings for the god who tends magic flowers in the western sky.

Another bird whistles, chirps, shakes a fig leaf.

She closes her eyes and sees the spring festival in Masan—the cherry blossom queen on her flower-covered float in the harbour. She grips her parents' hands, swings between them with each step.

Her mind drifts through seasons into the crisp air of autumn harvest, leaves ablaze in slanting sunlight, cabbages stacked and ready for pickling, piles of squash, pine nuts.

A rifle cracks. Again. Men shout, and an unearthly caterwaul starts up on the other side of the barracks and tents.

She stands and follows the noise, finds soldiers in a clearing at the edge of the overhanging jungle, men in a semi-circle around a small ape tied to a whipping post by its wrists. The creature screams as if it might bring down the sky, and it winds itself tighter and tighter around the wooden stake.

The soldiers shout bets as they take turns aiming and missing.

She cannot take her eyes from the animal—even from a distance she is shocked by how human it looks, how frightened. She has never witnessed such a small creature make such a deafening noise.

One of the men sees her watching, holds up a banana. “An orangutan,” he grins. “A baby.”

A new shooter takes aim and hits the post above the animal’s head, splinters the wood. The soldier curses, frustrated by his poor aim, and he and several others gather around the post to shorten the bindings.

Branches crack above them and a second ape drops into their midst—this one the size of a man. It leaps onto a soldier’s back, sinks its teeth into the man’s skull. The other soldiers stand wide-eyed, faces speckled by the shock-spray of their comrade’s blood. One man recovers and lunges at the ape, swinging the butt of his rifle. The animal yanks the weapon and the man with it—a loud pop echoes, not a gun’s report, Yoo-jin realizes, but the sound of the man’s shoulder separating from its socket.

The giant orangutan leaps to the infant as two soldiers fire into the rusty fur of the huge animal’s back, causing the beast to swivel, howling, beating at its own back as the soldiers charge with bayonets. The animal flings its fists sideways into a man’s head, sending him airborne in a further shower of blood, even as the second soldier’s bayonet sinks into the ape’s stomach. Two more soldiers drive points into the ape’s chest and side, but still it howls and swings its fists.

Yoo-jin shakes off her fear and breaks into a run, pulls a knife from a prone soldier and cuts the infant ape's bonds. She scoops it into her arms while the other beast continues to struggle with the soldiers behind her. The tiny creature does not resist, its eyes wide, whole body shaking, deep in shock. Urine runs down its legs and onto her arms, but Yoo-jin does not pause, races down a narrow path into the jungle.

Shouts behind her now. The soldiers call her Japanese name, yell threats. She reaches a fork in the path, deep enough in the jungle that the canopy blocks any direct light and greens run into greens in the wet, dim closeness of the place, all vine and fern and giant leaves. She steps off the path and holds the baby orangutan as high as she can, pushes it onto a branch. It clings to the tree, scampers a few feet, ducks behind a leaf.

“Go on little one,” she whispers. “No need to thank me. We must look out for each other, we orphans of empire.”

She steps from the tree, chooses a path and continues running, rounds a bend as a soldier steps from the undergrowth and lifts his rifle butt—a flash of light and the dark canopy spins.

The jungle blurs green. She and the three other Korean women sit in the back of a truck next to two guards she only vaguely recognizes, though they have surely visited their barracks. *Ianjo*, the soldiers call it. *Comfort station*. She tries to picture their sweating faces above her own, but again fails to place them. The

soldiers do not leer or meet her gaze, though whether from shyness or shame she cannot guess.

The truck slows as it bounces along the rough track and, through an opening in the canvas, the jungle returns to focus—a wet prison of vegetation. She has recovered from the blow to her head, though the rust-spotted mirror hanging in their barracks hallway now reflects an angry three-inch scar running east-west across her forehead.

The Korean *baesinja* in the medical tent confessed that the emperor's war on the jungle island was not progressing satisfactorily, that even though they had surely crippled America's navy, victory was, although not in question, significantly delayed. He spoke as if reciting lines for a play, and perhaps that's what all of this was for him—a distraction, entertainment in the midst of real life.

Her grandmother's voice as the truck struggles over another depression in the road, the vehicle tilting and rocking.

He is one of us. A victim. This is true. Even if you do not wish it to be so, and even if your anger is just.

Maybe so, she thinks, but she cannot forgive him for his part in her misery.

She hears other vehicles and guesses they are part of a convoy. They pass an overturned truck, half lost in jungle beside the track. The air reeks of burning rubber and they slow to a walking pace. Another ruined truck sits beside the road, this one fire-blackened, a spear through the front window and the driver's chest, the man pinned to the seat like a skewered insect.

They gain speed and leave the wreckage behind, the jungle a blur once more. One of the soldiers watches her now and she meets his gaze. She is no longer surprised by how young these recruits are, but this one cannot be more than sixteen—still thin and pale, clear-eyed and tense.

Is he also thinking about poison darts, of spears flying soundlessly from the dense jungle, of all that there might be to lose in death?

They continue to stare at one another as the truck rumbles on. The boy's eyes flit to the scar on her forehead and she tries to guess what he might have been told about her, this mad *woman of comfort* who fled into the jungle carrying a monkey.

The other soldier elbows the boy and nods at her, whispers a word of caution. She is tempted to yell for the man to speak clearly, but of course this will only create a problem, and not just for her. Instead she sits on these words, suddenly aware that she would have spoken them in Japanese, in the language of an emperor she has neither seen nor heard speak. Maybe, like the gods that have abandoned her to this fate, he exists only in the minds of his followers.

The boy soldier blushes, shifts his gaze to his shining boots—not a scuff on them. The second soldier appears slightly older, and she wonders which of the other three women he has *visited*. Perhaps all of them, perhaps even her. She has long since lost count.

She thinks back to that first soldier, floating in his khaki uniform. Did the lovely blue-eyed boy wear it? And did it change his fate, or has he been taken too,

put to work in a mine or on a railway under the watchful eyes of his own pair of guards?

Somehow this idea does not fit, does not feel *right, mat neun*, and she realizes that her memory of this boy, this young man, has remained rooted deep within her. She breathes a prayer to her mother, grandmother and all who watch over her, to extend some measure of grace to him as well—that he might be reunited with those he loves on soil that is *home*.

Her grandmother's voice, clearer than ever.

Beautiful One. Blood of my blood. True-bone progeny. I am with you and those you love. And we are not alone. We are legion. And we are watching.

The truck slows again, but this time the vehicle does not pass any wreckage or signs of the empire's failing reach, and they crawl along as the mid-day heat turns the wet jungle into a sauna. Like the *jjimjilbang* she visited as a child—charcoal rooms and green-tea baths, huge sacks of tea in the corners of each pool. Her first time there she'd asked her mother if they were bathing in an enormous teapot and her mother had laughed, hugged her close. From then on they called the *jjimjilbang* the *giant's teapot*, and she'd revelled in the joy of a secret language with her mother, and her father's puzzled expressions when he overheard them.

Another memory, of her grandmother refusing to join them, telling them the baths arrived with the Japanese, that she would have nothing to do with them.

And no amount of insistence that they had made new rituals, that the place was their own, could change the old woman's mind.

A hand slaps her forearm. One of the girls, Hana, has flattened a feeding mosquito, the insect now a smear of blood and crushed wings on her skin. Yoo-jin nods thanks to the girl, who stares back vacantly, as if unaware of what she has just done.

“Thank-you, cousin,” tries Yoo-jin,

Hana blinks and nods. “Blood of my blood,” she murmurs, as Yoo-jin wipes away the wreckage of the mosquito.

“Little sister?” Yoo-jin is unsure she has heard correctly—the phrase so like something her grandmother might say, so like the voices. But Hana doesn't respond, her expression blank again.

She thinks of Soo's final days, of that same listlessness, and anger surges within her—she does not even know where they have scattered her cousin's ashes. Who will tend her grave, help her navigate the shadow road to paradise?

We will child. We share your anger and your love. She will never be alone again.

And peace? thinks Yoo-jin. *What of that?* But there is no response, only the truck's engine vibrating through floorboards.

They arrive at the coast in the late afternoon and their guards herd them onto the beach, where they stand beneath a wind-bent palm, watching a small transport

motor supplies from the trucks to a larger ship offshore. No one speaks to them and they wait in silence, the low sun setting the turquoise water glowing. A salty breeze rustles fronds. The jungle crackles and chirps at their backs.

The white sand burns Yoo-jin's sandalled feet even in the shade, but the sight of the ocean leaves her mind empty, the beauty numbing, even with the nearby soldiers snapping through chores.

She cannot swim, though the water calls to her—only a few truck lengths to the foaming edge. To slip beneath and be clean. To be immersed in something so vast. To be lost and found at the same time.

Her grandmother claimed her own mother could hold her breath for four minutes, long enough to sink twenty feet, fill a mesh sack with pearl-white shells, urchins, mussels, and return to the surface slowly, without panic, as though she belonged in the sea, was at home beneath the waters off Jeju-do. Yoo-jin has heard there are still women divers there who sell abalone on the shore, still speak of the Princess who visited in secret and bestowed gifts of great value in return for stories of the sea.

A wise woman, her grandmother told her. Pure blood, pure spirit.

Her mother's hairbrush, lost now, worlds away.

As a child, in the giant's teapot with her mother, Yoo-jin would wait until no one was looking and duck beneath the surface of a bath, count the seconds, always hopeful that she would one day match her ancestor's feats underwater,

though she only ever managed thirty seconds at a time, and even that left her dizzy.

A soldier drops a sack of rice and curses as the bag splits and white grains spill into the fine sand. And still she cannot shake the thought of slipping beneath the surface of the sea, of leaving behind the war-filled jungle.

Yes, say a chorus of voices. Yes. We remember this pull. The tides within and beyond the body. We are your ocean now, and you are immersed in us. Both lost and found.

Heat waves shimmer over white sand.

Beautiful One. Won't you walk into the water, let me wash your feet again?

Dark-feathered diving birds line the horizon.

You were right. The sea is very beautiful.

She shivers, listens in wonder, cannot bring herself to care whether she is going mad, her body too sore—her very soul weary, hanging limply from her bones, a concentric recession into herself. There is only now. And now. *Here.*

The soldiers continue loading the small boat as it runs its course, no sign of the matron or the Korean traitor. The absence of a dock or proper shipyard means something—this is not a simple movement of troops, but an evacuation, a retreat.

A flicker of hope in this. Small, but there.

She leaves the shade and walks to the lapping foam, sandals off, hot sand burning until she reaches the water—no shock of cold, only rushing warmth over

her feet. An uncoiling within her. The salt prickles insect bites on her ankles, but she takes a further step, water up to her calves.

“Cousin,” Hana’s voice from the tree line. “Is it cold?”

Yoo-jin turns and shakes her head. “*Anniyo. Ttatteutan.*” Like bath water.

The three other women join her and squat in the shallows, letting the salt work on their swollen genitals, tears streaming down their cheeks. Hye-rin slaps the water and murmurs *eomma, eomma*, while Hana and Chun-ja grimace quietly.

Yoo-jin wades further, flinches at her stinging groin, but hopes the salt will fight off any infections missed by the Korean medical officer. She thinks of that spear, of poison darts. The voices hear her thoughts and speak to her on the breeze over the water.

He will be among us soon. And he will answer to the legion of dead for his betrayal.

We remember. This is true.

You are far from home, young one. Hard to find. But fear not—we are with you.

Yoo-jin plunges beneath the surface, holds her breath and counts as she did in the bath house so long ago. She rubs her limbs, her body, her face, ignores the stinging salt, until her lungs burn and she stands gasping, blinking in the evening sun, the water around her stirred and clouded with sand.

The other women stare at her, alarmed, as though they feared she might not resurface. All at once they start laughing, splashing each other, and Yoo-jin

joins them, until they are soaked and exhausted, salt-caked and turning pink in the late sun.

This moment, she thinks. Just this one moment. They cannot take this from me. It will not disappear. It will live within me so long as I have breath.

Do you see this? she asks the voices. Do you see us here now? Remember this too. Make this moment eternal, this small present of being found.

Sunlight on crystal beads down their skin. Laughter over emerald bath water. Salt on lips.

Such bright light. Such clear sounds. Such pure, stinging salt.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

The watermelon sellers of Daejon-si sing him awake, and he loses the dream of her lips on his hand, her soft voice in the darkness of his fever, clear eyes locked on his own. Her wraith-like image stays with him as he leaves the shelter of the church to scavenge food, prays for fruit to fall from a cart, for a roasted acorn or pine nut to slip from a basket.

An urchin half his age scampers behind a woman selling quail eggs.

Is this how he appears—dirt-stained and desperate?

A speckled egg rolls from the woman's cart and breaks on the hard-packed dirt. The woman curses and stoops to save what she can, but the urchin darts beneath her, scoops the yolk with a piece of shell and slurps.

박유진 (*Park Yoo-jin*)

The shock of the cold is enough to silence the voices as she wanders through the complex of concrete barracks and tents, though a low murmuring follows her—the drone of wind through an unsealed window. Most of the soldiers are at the front today, and she guesses many of the men who have visited her small room will not return. The soldiers know it, and this causes different responses in each. Some become violent in their fear, fucking as if fighting for their lives. Some secret her small items or a few yen—the coins she hides beneath the tatami mat in her small room, the trinkets she pawns or sells for extra layers of clothing, rice, tea. Others weep and ask that she remember them, these men who use and reuse her body just as she washes and reuses their condoms. They are all so young: the girls with her, the soldiers. All of them facing death on a cold frontier that means nothing to them—Manchukuo just another collection of lines on the emperor's map.

She breathes deeply and her ribs ache. She cannot remember the face of the soldier who threw her into the wall—so hard she feared her lungs had collapsed.

Collar up against the wind, the battalion's encampment frost-dusted. She whispers a prayer of thanks for her jacket and wool trousers, though even these are not enough as winter approaches.

She ponders turning back, but stills this voice. True, if the Chinese husband and wife who run the *comfort station* find she has left her duties, they will beat her, but she must steal a few moments of fresh air. Just a few. And her captors are not diligent. Why these two have been given permission to remain and profit, when so many other locals have been killed or driven off, remains a mystery. Perhaps this is not unlike the situation in her own country, where some have chosen to accept the occupation as fate, while others, like her father and grandmother, have paid the high price of rebellion.

Blue morning sky tinged with yellow, the ceiling of the world clear and high, though not bright this time of year.

Even the sun is fatigued, she thinks, quickening her pace in a well-worn circuit from the *ianjo*.

She and her cousins will clean and mend uniforms all afternoon. Fresh skin for the new recruits.

Such irony, grandmother, don't you think?

The floating soldier. The boy's broken hand. *I will not forget you*, he said when she gave him the uniform. The blue-eyed boy would have seen her as a girl then, maybe even beautiful, though surely this would not be the case now. But perhaps he is no longer so youthful either, if he is lucky or cursed enough to have survived.

In the distance, gunshots, mortars, but no planes. Another prayer of thanks. During the last air raid, a plane strafed the camp, left bullet holes up the wall of

the brothel not far from her room—she catches this thought: *her room*, and lets it roll through her mind. She has become what her captors desire: no longer young nor old, nor who she was.

Wind picks up through the camp, rushes through tent flaps and cracks in stone and concrete, shifts her melancholy, stokes anger. Somewhere beneath her bruised and freezing skin she is still herself. *This is true*. Though she is too tired to examine this truth—better to think less, pray the Japanese are slaughtered at the front, even if the Chinese might use her and her cousins the same way.

She completes her circuit and stops before the concrete building. A sign swings above the door. Though she cannot decipher the Chinese characters, they can only be advertising one thing, and so have meaning for her, a life of their own, an ominous black brand on wood. Twenty women in this building, an old guesthouse, rooms split into two or three by loose boards or curtains. Another *station* nearby houses thirty more. All of them young, Korean or Chinese, their possessions uniform: a small mirror each, mats for the floor, moth-balled kimonos.

She would like to walk further today, despite the cold and risk, but her ribs will not stand a beating like Sun-hee endured the night before. The Chinese owner of the brothel struck the girl with a wooden spoon until it splintered and her ears bled. Yoo-jin has not seen her since, though the matron of the house assures them she is *resting*.

This language they use alarms her again and again, this broken Japanese, a language of half-measures and inference, in which no one seems able to speak truth. Most of the other girls are from small villages and, though her language skills are less than perfect, Yoo-jin acts as translator when she can, which spares her some housework, if not the *duties* she would give anything to avoid.

She teeters on the threshold of the building's entrance, turns to stare out at the surrounding hills, spindly pines, bare trunks and scrub. A dog howls, the sound married to the wind, and her neck prickles as she thinks of bodies dumped outside the camp, of wild dogs feeding. The Japanese honour their own fallen with cremation, and return the ashes to their homeland, but the dead Chinese and Koreans, women like her, and men who fight shoulder to shoulder with the emperor's soldiers, are burned and left, or simply discarded with the trash.

She opens the door and slips inside, the air warm and humid from hanging laundry. She leaves her winter clothes in her stark, windowless room and joins eight others in the kitchen, where they work to clean blood and shit from uniforms so they can be reused by new conscripts from Taiwan and Korea. Wet khaki hangs from lines wall to wall across the kitchen. They cannot hang clothing outside for fear it will freeze and crack, or become coated with yellow dust off the Gobi.

She ignores the ache in her fingers as they thaw, finds a rhythm to the folding. The kitchen door rattles open and their Chinese madam waltzes into the room wearing a Korean *hanbok* of pink-dyed silk—the woven fabric unblemished, flowing with the movement of the aging woman's body. All eight

women stop mid-task to watch her, as though her actions are choreographed and they await a break to applaud. The woman swirls and stands smiling before them, her face caked with white foundation, rouge over her cheeks and lips, eyebrows plucked and redrawn in high, dark arches—impossible to tell if she is truly expectant of a reaction, or if this is now a permanent expression.

And the *hanbok*—a gift, or taken from the dead? Such a garment might be worn at a wedding ceremony, or for a son's *baek-il* marking his first one-hundred days.

The woman rises on the tips of her toes to pirouette awkwardly, stumbling and regaining her balance. She has told them many times how she was once a famous dancer, had performed as far away as Shanghai and Peking. It was how she had met her husband, a fine businessman, *a captain of industry*, a match her parents had supported enthusiastically. Each time she tells her story, Yoo-jin finds it more absurd—a Chinese couple running a brothel for the Japanese army in Manchukuo, and this woman still living in a dream, still spinning beneath an imaginary spotlight.

The madam's hip catches the edge of a table, scatters rice flour onto the floor. She glares at the thick wooden surface—snaps out heavily accented Japanese. “Who moved this table? Who is responsible? It is not safe shifting furniture around without permission.”

Yoo-jin steps forward, bows low, deepest respect for the deluded princess. “Please forgive us, auntie. We will correct our mistake. It will not happen again.”

The woman smooths the *hanbok*, clicks her tongue as she checks for loose threads that don't exist. "Korean workmanship. Not so good. Not like Chinese."

The woman smiles. Yoo-jin bows again, hides her mouth behind her hand, as if blocking a shared smile she is too polite to show, although in truth she bites her tongue. The madam reaches out and touches Yoo-jin's forehead, traces the fading horizontal scar left by the soldier's rifle. The woman's eyes appear glassy this close, her pupils tiny.

"Such a shame, this scar. You were once beautiful, I think. Yes?"

But the woman does not wait for an answer, turns and stumbles into the doorway, cursing in her own tongue as she exits.

Kettles whistle and irons hiss. The shuffle of slippers feet. The matron is right: no one will ever call her beautiful again. She has fewer regulars and officers than most of the others. The Chinese proprietors only tolerate this because of her usefulness as a translator, and because she works hard without complaint. The lack of new women arriving is also conspicuous—it has been weeks, maybe a month. This could mean many things, but it seems she and her cousins are less expendable here than they were on the jungle island.

Wind rattles the kitchen's frosted windows.

Grandmother. Halmeoni. These things are true: even you would not call me beautiful now. And only you know from whom the hanbok was stolen.

Glass panes tremble.

Laughter erupts as Yeong-sook twirls drunkenly in the middle of the room, a mock pirouette. Even in the midst of pantomime the girl is beautiful, her body lithe, her features delicate, face pale as the moon.

“Worship me, my darlings. Worship the great dancer.” Yeong-sook collapses in a fit of giggles to laughter and applause from the others.

Yoo-jin watches her companions return to work—most a few years her junior, young women who should be fighting off prospective husbands, making a decent wage in factories, or even attending school. Do their families miss them? Do they *know*?

Yeong-sook sidles up to her as she folds uniforms. “*Eonni*. Older sister. Do you think the matron is a drunkard?” She speaks quietly, the discretion a surprise after her performance.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps opium?”

Yeong-sook nods.

This is hardly news. There is a Chinese apothecary in a nearby town where the medicine is readily available. Many of the Japanese soldiers use the drug to help them sleep, or numb their fear. Occasionally the men offer this or other concoctions to them, and sometimes she and the others accept, though Yoo-jin does not like how these potions feel in her body, the coldness in her veins, the sensation of floating through the nightmare of her life without truly escaping it. She would rather have the wits to hate them and this place, though often pain from tearing becomes too intense to manage without help.

“Why do you ask?”

The girl appears uncertain for a moment before responding. “My father.”

Abba, she says, not *abba-ji*. Intimate. As though is she speaking to him alone. Yoo-jin continues folding, creasing, stacking shirts and trousers, both horrified and hopeful that these same uniforms will soon be marred by bullet holes and burns, deep red stains that no one will ever remove.

The girl takes Yoo-jin’s silence as encouragement. “We had a good farm. Enough rice paddies to hire hands for harvest twice a year.”

Yoo-jin breathes deeply, lets the steamy air loosen her lungs, her sore ribs.

“He drank our profits. Every last yen.”

Anger, that the girl is prattling on about her own sorrow, swells and subsides within Yoo-jin’s breast. It is not this girl’s intention to further burden her. She needs this. They all do. A place for their own stories in their own language. Space for their words, not just the orders they receive from those who keep them.

Yoo-jin touches the girl’s slim wrist. Such small bones. Such soft skin.

Yeong-sook tells her of her family’s debt, of how the man they leased their land from took her older brother first, said he’d work off their debt abroad and return in a year or two. It was eighteen months before they learned he’d been worked to death in a mine near Fukuoka.

“The landowner insisted this was not collaboration, that he wasn’t working with the Japanese authorities, only looking out for everyone’s best interests. *Good business*, he said. *Nothing more.*”

Yoo-jin knows this story, has heard it many times: with the son gone, the daughter takes on the burden of supporting her family.

“The landowner said he was helping us. Protecting us from the Japanese. *I suffer*, he said, *so that you can work the land freely*. Suffer. *Gotong*. This is the word that haunts me now. I would like to tell him that he chose the wrong word. I would like to tell him what this word truly means.”

“What did he tell your family?”

“He said I would work in a textile factory in Taiwan. That I could write to them as soon as I arrived. And even after what happened to my brother, they *sold* me to him. At first I was hopeful, even happy to leave the farm. I imagined I could pay off our debt and keep working, use the money to attend school. Maybe one day find a husband.”

She stops speaking and Yoo-jin touches her hand again. There is no need to respond. It is enough that they help each other carry these stories—each word a swallowed stone.

“I would like to write to my mother. To tell her I am alive. But even if one of the soldiers would take my letter, I cannot find the words now. If my mother knew, she would cut out her own tongue.”

The girl’s final words trouble Yoo-jin deeply, hint at something still to come should they survive this ordeal, something for which there will be no words, no way to explain what they have become. And this looming silence frightens her.

The Chinese owner of the *comfort station* fetches Yoo-jin in the early hours of the afternoon. She fears a beating for some insubstantial transgression, but the short, balding man simply tells her to put on her jacket, that the medical barracks need extra hands, someone who understands Japanese.

The man escorts her through the camp towards the warehouse that has been converted into a hospital. The hazy blue-grey heavens hold the winter sun at a distance and Yoo-jin shivers. It angers her *owner* when the Japanese borrow his women—he will lose money if the lines become too long and soldiers leave for another station. Unlike the jungle island, there is competition here. But he cannot argue with army officers. She wishes he would lose his temper at the wrong time, receive a beating like those he doles out on her and her cousins. Still, she takes secret pleasure from his bad mood now, recognizes his stewing as the conundrum of a collaborator.

The air stings her lungs. Their feet crunch frozen mud. A magpie on a fence pole warbles and hops to the earth. They pass officers' barracks—low concrete buildings painted white. A woman stands outside an open door holding a half-rolled tatami mat. It takes a moment for Yoo-jin to recognize Chun-ja, one of those who survived Borneo with her. The woman wears a kimono now, hair pinned back, face painted white.

They make eye contact, but dare not nod or speak. An officer has *asked* Chun-ja to stay with him, and Yoo-jin is both pleased for her and jealous. One

man's needs instead of ten or twenty each night. She prays the officer who keeps her will not perish too soon.

Such desperate prayers, Grandmother.

They reach the hospital and her keeper immediately falls into an argument with a Japanese soldier over the exact time of her return. An officer intervenes.

“She will stay until she is no longer useful,” he says, smirking, as though he too enjoys the brothel owner's frustration.

Yoo-jin does not recognize the young officer, who leads her inside the building and shouts for a nurse to take over as guide.

A pale-faced Japanese woman brings her a green gown, then leads her to a basin in the corner of the small entrance and watches her scrub her hands, clicking her tongue each time Yoo-jin pauses, until her fingers are red and freezing from the cold water. When the nurse is satisfied, she leads Yoo-jin into the warehouse proper, a massive, high-ceilinged room full of beds and rolling screens, a cacophony of voices and languages, wailing and shouting, and the competing smells of rot and antiseptic.

A surgeon works behind a screen nearby, horrible shadow-puppetry accompanied by guttural moans. The nurse pulls her past the screens and onto the blood-soaked floor around the bed, where a doctor works to stop blood spurting from a soldier's femoral artery. The nurse pauses, as if waiting for Yoo-jin to faint, and then nods and snaps orders. Yoo-jin fetches fresh bandages from a tray, acts without thinking, already back in the hospital she trained at in Masan ten-

thousand years ago. If she is to be kept until she is no longer useful, then she must do everything she can to make sure that does not happen soon. At least here it is the blood of others she must contend with. She grabs a surgical mask and gloves as the patient lets out another groan and falls unconscious. The doctor works to sew the artery, snaps at her to apply pressure, which she does deftly under the supervision of the nurse. She responds without hesitation to each of the doctor's requests, until he pauses to nod at the nurse, who leaves to work elsewhere.

As soon as it is clear the surgeon's stitches will hold, he leaves the unconscious patient and moves to the next cot, where the nurse is already assessing another prone soldier's wounds.

"Name?" he asks.

It takes Yoo-jin a second to realize his question is directed at her. She responds with her true name and the surgeon raises dark eyebrows, but does not comment, nor ask for the Japanese title she was given on Borneo.

"Bone saw. Quick."

Again she acts without delay.

The patient's left arm has been burned stiff and twisted, the flesh roasted red and black, the air ripe with the sickly-sweet fragrance of cooked meat.

The blood and grinding of metal on bone should horrify her, but does not, just as it did not at the hospital in Masan or the hut outside Miryang. Her grandmother was right: this steadiness is her inheritance.

The man is barely conscious, wrapped in pain and morphine, and she keeps pressure on his brachial artery with a tourniquet, understands from the surgeon's silence that he is pleased with her assistance. The wounded soldier is Korean, though he wears the wrong uniform. One of many wasted in the name of the emperor. He whimpers as the bone above the elbow splinters and the surgeon begins again, higher up the arm this time.

I still feel your presence as a phantom limb, grandmother. I know you are with me, but I miss your solid form, your rough-skinned hand holding mine.

This time the doctor slices through bone and tendon cleanly. The soldier's eyes roll. The nurse appears pale above her mask, but Yoo-jin cannot tell if she is sick at the sight of such carnage, or just enviously fair-skinned. Her grandmother would have called a woman with such skin *gongju*, princess, partly in mockery and partly out of reverence for such porcelain-like beauty.

The princess wraps the severed limb in cloth and places it on a small table—it is still too early to discard it. Should the patient die, he must be burned with all of his appendages, though this will not be the case once whoever disposes of the dead realizes the man is Korean.

Dogs around the camp's perimeter.

The surgeon has a firm grip on the artery with his tongs and he tells Yoo-jin to take them, hold them steady, which she does with her left hand, while still holding the end of the tourniquet with her right. The doctor sees this and nods again, but does not speak.

Yes, doctor, she thinks. Please know I am descended from the great healers of Jeju-do, and that such dispositions are never lost along a bloodline.

The surgeon stitches the artery. Such nimble fingers shouldn't surprise her, but this delicate work seems a contradiction to the sawing of bone only moments earlier. He finishes by cutting ragged skin and folding it over the exposed bone, then stitching that as well.

"Eomma," the ashen-faced man calls out in his stupor. "Eomma."

Yoo-jin responds without thinking. "I am here. Sleep now. Hush." The man falls silent.

The surgeon tells her to remove the binding from the brachial artery and she obeys, and they wait to see if the stitching will hold. No fresh blood, no swelling of the stump. The surgeon leaves the screened enclosure and she and the nurse clean and bandage the man's arm, then mop as much of the blood as they can from the cot and floor, piling the soaked rags and bandages into a metal bin for burning.

A shout from across the warehouse and the Japanese nurse points at the surgeon's bloody footprints on the concrete floor, tells her to follow them. Yoo-jin obeys, finds the surgeon arguing with a Japanese soldier. The man sits rigidly on a cot, holding his helmet tightly to his head. Blood leaks from an unseen wound down his cheeks and neck.

The soldier yells not to touch him, insists that if he takes off his helmet his mind will fall out, that he must see his wife one last time before this happens.

Yoo-jin recognizes this man from the brothel, his sweaty face gargoyle-like above her own.

She removes her mask so the man can see her face.

“Miyoko?” The man stares at her.

She touches his cheek, tells him yes in his own language, manages to take his hands from his helmet, hold them to her breast, where they stain her gown red.

The soldier tells her how he has missed her and their son, how he has thought of them every moment of every day. The surgeon slips behind him while he talks, removes the helmet. A jagged piece of metal juts from the top of his skull.

She strokes the soldier’s hands as the surgeon injects him with morphine. Within seconds the man’s eyes flutter and they lay him on his side.

“Will you operate?” she asks.

“Yes. But he will die.”

Yeong Sook wakes her at dawn after only four hours sleep, tells her the surgeon waits for her at the front door. Yoo-jin washes and puts on baggy trousers and a loose shirt—men’s clothing more suited to the grim work at the hospital—and rushes downstairs. The sulking expression of her Chinese owner suggests he has lost another argument, and he does not speak as she bows low before the Japanese surgeon, tries not to think of the punishments that will surely mark her return. Not

that there is any decision to be made—she can no more refuse the surgeon's request than can the Chinese proprietor.

She hurries to keep up with the surgeon's long strides. She has not dried her face properly and the cold air freezes the moisture on her skin and hair.

“You have training, yes?” He speaks without slowing, eyes straight ahead.

She tells the surgeon about the hospital in Masan, embarrassed by her faltering Japanese, then ashamed of her embarrassment. She tries not to notice that he is handsome without his mask, his moustache thin and trimmed, high cheekbones and a strong jawline.

He seems to take no notice of her accent or awkward phrasing, and again speaks without looking at her. “If the doctors you trained under were sent to Korea, they must have been poor indeed. Especially in such a small city, a *nothing place*. But you are useful despite this. This is to your credit. You will serve the emperor by assisting me.”

A wave of guilt for helping the enemy's soldiers, yet she must delay her return to the brothel at any cost. “Thank you. But you did not need to come for me yourself. This is too much trouble.”

The doctor does not respond, continues walking as though he hasn't heard, and she fears her politeness is misplaced. All at once she realizes he did not come for her, had spent the night with another woman—an officer's privilege.

If it were not so cold she would blush at her mistake, and she is thankful for the man's silence. Another would have reprimanded her for such an assumption.

Her shame lifts into the clear sky as they walk. The clatter of construction echoes from the barracks.

Small wonder the proprietor was angry, losing her for another day to a man who had just occupied one of his girls for an entire night. He'd have paid more for this, but not as much as the fifteen men the woman might have *serviced* otherwise.

And what of this money? She has seen none of it, though some of the girls have been told they will receive their share of the profits once the war is over, when they will be permitted to return to Korea to start a new life. Suk-ja, the youngest at their station, once confessed she hoped the Japanese would win their war so she could help her family pay off their debts.

Yoo-jin didn't contradict the girl, though she is certain none of them will receive a single yen irrespective of the war's outcome. There is constant speculation and rumour-mongering amongst the women and their loose-tongued regulars about the war, but everyone, it seems, has heard something different about the emperor, the Chinese, the Americans.

As she continues her walk through the cold with the now-silent surgeon, she thinks back on her grandmother's final words.

I see your emperor on his knees, begging like a dog.

Words that haunt and warm her in equal measure.

Before they enter the hospital, the surgeon stops and addresses her curtly, eyes on the white concrete wall.

“You must give your Japanese name when asked. Speaking your language is forbidden. You know this. There are many who would punish you for yesterday’s error.”

“And you?” She bites her tongue too late. Panic stutters up her ribcage.

The man glances at her, raises an eyebrow. “I am interested in your hands. Not your tongue.”

He turns and enters the building, leaving her to ponder in what ways her torture might have changed her, how it might erupt from her without warning in foolish words or actions.

The princess from the day before meets her and points to the washbasin, though this time she does not click her tongue or demand that Yoo-jin repeat the ferocity of the first scrubbing. The woman gives her latex gloves, a gown and mask, and leads her into a small adjoining room, where she finds a cot and a waist-high trolley, on which lies a row of steel examination tools and syringes.

“You will examine your own kind,” says the nurse without expression. “You must check them for vaginal tearing and swelling, for abdominal pain and venereal diseases.”

Yoo-jin nods to show she understands as the nurse continues, tells her to treat severe cases with an injection of #606, a drug so powerful it is impossible to

keep food down for days following a single dose. Yoo-jin has suffered such an injection twice, and feels nauseous at the thought of inflicting such a treatment on another. But she is not being asked.

The nurse leaves her, and Yoo-jin pulls on her mask as the first girl enters, lies on the cot and lifts her skirt without making eye contact. The girl's abdomen is flat, and though her vagina is bleeding and swollen grotesquely, she shows no signs of infection.

Yoo-jin hesitates, then addresses the woman in *hanguk-aw*. The woman sits up and stares at her, as if unsure she has truly heard her mother tongue in this place where even their bodies are controlled by the emperor.

“Cousin,” Yoo-jin continues. “Do you have an antiseptic rinse in your *abode*?”

She uses the word *geaju*, dwelling, as if they are speaking of something normal and safe, domestic—the price of firewood, the ripeness of a green pepper, a recipe for pickling onions.

The girl nods. “Yes, older sister. Thank-you. I will use it.”

“Every day.”

Another nod and further thanks as the girl leaves, and Yoo-jin ponders the respectful address—*older sister*. How young? Fifteen?

Another enters, also in her teens, also no infection yet, but bruising over her thighs and buttocks, tearing around her anus.

Again Yoo-jin speaks her own language, watches the same shocked expression as she explains treatment, tells the girl to make a compress of mugwort, to use it on any swelling and bruises so they might heal more quickly.

The girl appears stunned, doesn't respond. Yoo-jin takes her hand. "Beautiful sister, can you find this herb here?"

The girl nods but begins to cry, squeezes Yoo-jin's hand.

"You must learn to care for yourself here. This is your fate. Do you understand?"

The girl nods again, thanks her, slips off the cot and exits.

What will become of her, Grandmother, of us—those who have been taken and not returned?

All morning a steady flow of women from the *comfort stations*, some with horrible infections requiring shots that cause them to vomit, some with injuries so severe Yoo-jin fears they will never heal properly: dislocated hips, torn flesh, fractured bones.

Pain and anger well within her at the sight of each new patient, each a sister, each bearing the weight of their own pain as stoically as she does. This should make her lose hope, but does not. Instead, it fills her with pride.

Grandmother, do you see this? Do you see how strong we are in our suffering? Surely we will join you soon. Spread flowers for us over the road to Paradise. Heaven knows we are forgotten here on earth.

Chun-ja enters as Yoo-jin is sterilizing a stainless-steel, duck-billed speculum with rubbing alcohol—the woman’s eyes flitting from cot to syringe to the instrument in Yoo-jin’s hands. The officer’s prize is slight of figure, delicate wrists and neck, and appears unsteady upon her feet, as though hollow-boned and made for flight rather than walking.

“Sister, are you at peace?”

Yoo-jin is caught off-guard by the formal greeting.

“They told me you worked here now.” Even the woman’s voice is thin, as if surrounded by too much air.

“Are you ill? I have seen you outside an officer’s tent. I hope he treats you well.”

Chun-ja nods. “Better than the soldiers on the island.” She sits on the cot.

The island. Up to their waists in salt water, this woman laughing—the sound strong and clear over crystal water. So much fuller than her voice now. And with this memory another set of voices arrives, and Yoo-jin nearly cries out.

Fear not, granddaughter. We have found you again, even in this far-flung place. We are here with you now. With the three of you.

She shivers. *Three?* “You are with child?”

Chun-ja starts. “How can you know this? I haven’t told....” Her eyes well. “Does someone know? Are their already rumours?”

Yoo-jin calms the woman, tells her she can always tell—a gift that lives in her bones, inherited from a long line of shamans and midwives. She winks at the

woman and drags a smile from her. “Your secret is yours to carry. I will not speak of it. But you must eat well—not too much spice, as much spinach as you can find. Are you ill in the mornings?”

Chun-ja shakes her head. “I was. But it has passed.” She sits for a few heartbeats, eyes on the shining instruments in their neat row next to the cot. “He says he will marry me, take me to Nagasaki after the war. He says there are many Koreans working there. Thousands. That I will be happy.”

“So he knows?”

She shakes her head. “No. But he *suspects*. He acts as though I am not a prisoner here. His prisoner. As if it is my life’s desire to be his mistress.”

Yoo-jin sits next to the woman, touches her thin wrist and, to her surprise, the woman leans into her, lays her head on her shoulder.

“I am so ashamed, sister,” whispers Chun-ja. “Please understand me. I should hate him and what grows within me. But....”

But.

“I do not. And for this my shame is doubled.”

Yoo-jin wants to scream and pound her own chest, mourn these words, tell this woman that this shame is not hers to bear, but those who have done this, those who have allowed this, those who will not help mend what is broken. But she cannot find the right words even to convince herself. Everything has changed for them. Their bodies have been stolen and they will never be able to return to the homes they pine for.

The voices grow.

You are broken like us. One-eared. Tongueless. Shattered like dropped porcelain. And you wander in shadow already, as do the unavenged dead. But we see all of this, and we do not forget. Our fires will burn until the end of days, until there is justice, until the clock of the universe reaches the blood-dawn of the great reckoning.

Yoo-jin holds the woman and closes her eyes, tries to imagine an end to what their lives have become, but cannot. There is nothing to say to the weeping woman beside her, no words in any language for such a moment.

The front has been quiet all day—no mortar fire—and the surgeon has not sent for her. She tries not to dwell on what this might mean as evening falls and the first soldiers arrive and line-up for the women they most desire. Tonight she does not fear these men, their violence, the pain they inflict on her body, though she might soon weep with the intensity of it. Instead, she fears the Chinese proprietor and his silence. He has not spoken to her since her two-day absence, but he is not the type to forget a perceived injury. She will pay, the question is *how*?

The glassy-eyed matron gathered them all in the kitchen that afternoon and informed them they were to wear kimonos that night—no exceptions—each of them transformed at last into something utterly other, *waegukin*—foreigners in a foreign land.

We must make these heroes believe they are somewhere special, the matron insisted. *A famous brothel in Peking, or Shanghai.*

Famous.

The first soldiers who visit her are somber and quiet—unusual for these men. Perhaps they are just exhausted, like everyone in this place. But they carry themselves with dignity, their steps careful and intentional—not the shuffle of tired men who will fall asleep in their cubicles and cause anger amongst the rank and file waiting.

Another man knocks and enters, finds her on her back, ready to lift her kimono, to argue over the use of a condom, but he does not undo his belt. Instead sits cross-legged next to her. In truth, she is surprised to have had so many soldiers thus far—her scarred face is considered less beautiful and also unlucky, and she is usually chosen only when the lines for the *favoured* ones grow too long.

“I am told you speak Japanese well.”

She nods, sits up, takes in the man’s features: trim eyebrows, small nose, thin lips—more like a drawing of a man than actual flesh.

“When the Mongols swept through Asia, even to the very southern islands of your homeland, they built a huge fleet of ships and prepared to invade Japan.”

“You speak like a professor.”

“An antelope cannot change the colour of its hide.” He pauses, as if choosing his words, though she cannot help but feel he is reciting lines from a lecture.

“But the Mongols did not conquer my homeland. Did you know that?”

She nods. “A storm, yes?”

“Yes. A divine wind.” He says this word quickly. *Kamikaze*. “And now it is my turn to protect my emperor and our people, to become that wind.”

She waits for the man to continue, forces herself to sit still as he stares at the wall. Finally he blinks, takes a photograph from his shirt pocket and hands it to her.

“I have no family left. Please keep this and think of me.”

He weeps suddenly, shaking, and Yoo-jin does not move until he rises, unfastens his belt, pulls out his shirt and leaves the room.

The Chinese proprietor calls her Japanese name from the hallway. She slides the sepia portrait of the man in uniform beneath her mat.

“Prepare yourself. You are in demand tonight.” His voice whines over groans from the other cubicles and bored mutterings from men waiting. “Come, come. You will find her most suitable. She is also marked by war. No need to be shy. Your scars are marks of courage here.”

The proprietor leads a man into her room and leaves them. The soldier before her is missing half of his face, his eye bandaged, scalp melted and healed, ear a deformed lump—like an animal stripped of fur. So this is the proprietor’s

revenge and his latest scheme for increasing revenue. She is to be a whore for the disfigured, the shrapnel-cut circus freaks of war.

She meets the soldier's one-eyed gaze, then looks away so as not to offend—she has been beaten more than once for looking at a man, for bearing witness to her own rape. The soldier holds out a condom, unused for a change, which she takes as she unbuckles his pants, feels him hard and trembling. He comes before she can finish putting on the sheath and falls to his knees, breathless.

The muscles in her neck tighten. He will blame her. Lash out. She watches his hands in case he draws a blade, but he remains kneeling, his one eye on his reflection in the spotted mirror leaning against the wall. He blinks, swallows with some difficulty, but does not look at her. She tries to imagine what he sees in the mirror. Does he still recognize himself beneath the mudslide of grafted skin? She cannot bring herself to mourn any casualty of the empire, but she understands this man. Like her, he has suffered immeasurably. And, like her, he will continue to suffer all of his days.

All night a circus of deformity: missing limbs, bullet holes, wounded flesh wrapped around imbedded shards of filed shrapnel or wood that cannot be removed. There is something elemental about this, these wandering dead who carry materials of the earth, of their own burial mounds, within them.

Some of the men can no longer achieve erections and they weep or turn on her in anger. By the time curfew falls, she is covered in bruises, and she washes gingerly in a bucket, applies a salve to her swollen genitals.

Despite the curfew, she longs for fresh air, an escape from the pungent reek of unwashed bodies, and she slips through the kitchen and out the back door into the freezing night. Impossible to imagine a worse punishment than what she has already endured. Her first few steps send electric currents of pain into her abdomen. She stops to check her bleeding groin, finds only a trickle.

A line of flashes along the northern horizon. Bombs, she guesses, though they are far distant, a low rumbling, as if the hills are as famished as she is. She passes the officers' tents where Chun-ja lies, a child growing within her. Yoo-jin has never become pregnant, though many of the girls have. Most are forced to abort in the hospital, then sterilized, but she has heard of a few who have given birth, the children spirited away by officers to Japan. So the stories go.

Laughter from behind a squat concrete bunker, where three locals crouch around a fire. The men stiffen when they see her. There is no blackout warning in place, but an officer might still take exception to light from the fire and noise at night. When they realize she is not in uniform, they return to their dice, pass around a glass jar. One man asks her a question she does not understand, his words tonal, heavily accented. He gestures to his lap and thrusts his hips. The other two burst into laughter.

One of the men tosses a die at her. It bounces off her jacket and falls to the dirt at her feet. A polished tooth.

Weeks of steady bombing, sometimes close enough to send them all scurrying into the basement, where they crouch in the dark as the earth shakes. She has spent more time at the hospital as the front approaches, entire days where she does nothing but mop the blood of dying men, before returning to her room and the line-up of scarred and disfigured soldiers the proprietor collects for her to *comfort*.

She sits in near darkness now, waiting with windows covered, one small candle lighting her room. She has already lubricated herself with petroleum cream from the hospital. Her genitals burn to touch, but show no signs of serious infection—a small piece of luck.

These men have grown more violent as the fighting intensifies, refusing to wear condoms, lashing out seemingly without warning. Most days it is worse for the other women, as her regulars are all injured and broken. Though this is an insult, it means fewer men, many of whom have still not healed enough to perform, and visit only to keep up appearances among their compatriots. So far, only one soldier has tried to kill her in his shame, but he fumbled with his sword in the small room and gave her enough time to run into the hallway.

Food rations are small, and were it not for gifts from the soldiers, she would have starved. Two of the girls took their own lives a week past by drinking

cleaning fluid on empty stomachs. Yeung-ja and Yeung-suk. Neither out of their teens. She did not see their bodies, was told they were burned at the edge of the compound, though surely no one would risk a fire during the air raids. In all likelihood they were left for the dogs.

Her cousins have stopped complaining of their hardships—the truest sign of just how poor conditions have become. No energy to fight or talk. Only survival.

You still have your ears. Your tongue.

Strong hands for mending nets.

It is only flesh, child. This too shall pass.

The soldier who gave her the photo has not returned. He was not the last visitor to weep beside her bed before disappearing into a rain of hot metal. But what to do with his portrait? She will dispense with it in time, of course. She knows this. But something is tearing within her again, deeper than flesh.

Sweet granddaughter. Your pain burdens my constant wandering. The flesh can break but once. The spirit tears for all eternity.

Her candle smokes and flickers. Wind cuts through mortar. A cockroach scuttles and freezes above the mirror. She could end it now. Break the mirror and use a shard. Why remain here?

Because, she tells herself, you fear the voices—fear that you too will be condemned to wander without peace.

Halmeoni. I will be with you soon. Please tell me I will find rest.

The voices do not respond to this, and she starts as a soldier pulls open the door and enters, sits beside her. Saito Ziro, the soldier with half a face. He comes often, but only to talk, which means she will not be beaten or raped for at least fifteen minutes.

He passes her a ball of cold rice. “The front is very close now. The Soviets are coming.”

She eats without ceremony, has long since learned that if she waits out of politeness she will miss her chance. Ziro, she cannot help but think of him by his given name despite his uniform, averts his eyes, and this small gesture slows her chewing. Shame must disappear now. *This is true*. There is no room for it. But manners are part of her inheritance, part of who she is, given to her by her mother and grandmother, and she covers her mouth as she finishes the rice.

“There will be more bombings,” he says. “You must be ready to leave at any moment. Do not let them take you on a boat or submarine.”

Ziro’s words stun her. At first she believes she must be imagining this conversation.

Beautiful One. In this he is correct. You must make your own way. We are watching over you.

The men waiting begin to voice their impatience from the hallway, though Ziro has only been with her a few minutes. “*Isoge!* Hurry up!”

Ziro touches her arm. “You have shown me kindness despite my shameful appearance. Thank you for this. Please be ready.”

There is no time to ask questions, to argue or think deeply on the man's words. As soon as he leaves another replaces him, and this man, missing an arm, does not want to talk.

“Just be thankful the Japs have such small pricks,” says Ok-sun, as they work blood stains from a stack of soiled uniforms.

The women in the kitchen titter, but the joke is old.

The thump-shiver of not-to-distant bombs detonating. Louder now than even that morning.

One of the younger girls begins to sing a Korean folk-song. None would have dared such a thing a week earlier, but with so much bombing the watchful gaze of their keepers has shifted north to the front.

Green willow bark, my soul is ill. Come spring, come river. Lead these weary bones home.

An explosion nearby cuts her off, rattles windows. Lights flicker.

Yoo-jin shouts for everyone to hurry into the basement. “*Bballiwa!* No time to waste.”

Seven of them scurry from the kitchen down cellar stairs, crouch amongst locked rice chests and bags of onions. Ok-sun lights a candle, places it on a small chest, and the women huddle around the tiny light. More bombs, closer and closer, until the entire building heaves and shudders. Dust rains from the floor above, snuffing the candle.

Yoo-jin's ears ring. She shakes dust from her hair, covers her nose and mouth with her sleeve. Ok-sun rattles the box of matches. Footsteps on the stairs, and Yoo-jin imagines the figure joining them will be Soo—not dead and burned on the jungle island, forgotten by those who killed her, but here all along, fighting for her life with the rest of them. The sulphur-hiss of a match catching. Candlelight reveals the madam, arrayed in lavish Chinese dress, blue silk, pearls. She steps carefully among them, pausing for them to rise and bow. Her eyes shine in the dim light, and even as another bomb rocks the building, she begins to dance, graceful now, not so much as a stumble, arms high and sweeping, flashing robes past candle flame, feet small and nimble. Rapid movement and frozen posture. Again.

Droning aircraft, flying low. Another concussive bombardment. The walls and foundation tremble. Yoo-jin refuses to cry out, though her heart stutters.

The noise fades and the madam stops before the candle. No one speaks, not even the dead, as the women file cautiously up the stairs to check the damage, leaving the madam alone before the wavering light, her watery eyes locked on the flame.

They sift through the rubble for anything they might salvage—hidden money, clothing, food. Half of the top floor of the house is gone and late morning light shines into the upper floor, their hovels now bright and alien. Smoke mixes with

dust. Sun-hee cries out at the sight of her cousin's swollen legs protruding from beneath a slab of concrete. Small bare feet. Trim nails.

Others lie buried in rubble, hidden from sight. Her own cubicle has been obliterated—a fitting end for such a place, although she would have kept her warm coat and, oddly, disposed of the soldier's photograph in a manner of her own choosing. She finds another jacket amidst the wreckage and leaves her compatriots, hurries through the cold towards the hospital, the camp a smoking ruin, dead and wounded scattered seemingly at random, in pulped and bleeding heaps, or wandering in shock as though looking for an address on an unfamiliar street, stumbling into craters or stopping before piles of rubble in confusion. Such immense destruction from the now-empty sky.

The officers' barracks have been hit as well, the air full of the acidity of burning oil and rubber. An officer she recognizes kneels beside a body covered with a blanket, the figure small, a woman. It must be her, but Yoo-jin cannot bear to stop and check. Perhaps it is not so wrong for this woman and her unborn child to be mourned by this man. Heaven knows fate has given them all enough names to remember. Let him share this burden.

Eomma, abba, halmeoni. How swollen are the ranks of the dead?

Beautiful One. You cannot imagine our numbers. More each day, earless, tongueless, weightless. We are legion, and our restless anger boils the sea.

The hospital has been partially destroyed as well, despite the giant red cross painted on its roof, and the entire warehouse is in chaos. She helps where she can, but most of the injuries are beyond healing. One of the storage rooms has burned, leaving them short of supplies.

She holds a shrapnel-filled man still as a nurse injects morphine. As the soldier slumps back onto the cot, Yoo-jin asks the woman if she has seen the surgeon.

“Dead,” says the nurse, before moving to the next screaming patient.

Something is not right—no sign of army medics, no one arriving with wounded on stretchers. She slips back outside and at once the situation becomes clear. The Japanese army is in full retreat—a line of men and vehicles leaving the camp. Ziro was right. The time has come.

She runs to the *comfort house* to tell the other women what is happening. This is their chance and they must take it. The air burns her nostrils. Dogs run freely through the camp, feeding on the dead. The barracks empty as soldiers move out, some dragging wounded comrades, others ignoring the cacophony of cries for help.

She reaches the smouldering house and yells to the other women to gather what they can and flee. But most shrink from her voice, return to their ruined cubicles, too afraid to risk running, even now.

The door to the proprietors’ quarters is open and she steals a glance inside, finds the man hanging from a rafter. His body turns slowly on the rope, as though

he is not held fast from above, but has leapt into the air and hovers there. His wife, the dancer, lies unmoving on the bed below him, chest still, glassy eyes open and locked on his dangling feet, eyebrows drawn as before, as if she stares at her floating husband in wonder.

Behold the cowardly dead.

Yoo-jin spits at the bed. After all she has endured, these two cannot even face an end to their own tyranny. There is no honour in this.

None, agree the voices, a myriad of hissing accents flooding the death chamber. And they do not deserve to travel the bone road whole. An ear perhaps? A tongue?

Yoo-jin flinches, cries out to her grandmother.

Quickly Beautiful One. Hurry!

Only Yeong-sook, who spoke of her family's debt in the kitchen, and two others Yoo-jin has hardly noticed follow her. Soon-ja and In-sook. Both younger than she, both sickly and thin. The rest stay with Ok-sun, salvaging what food and clothing they can from the ruined brothel. Yoo-jin does not blame them for this, but she cannot help but feel she is leaving them behind to die, and though she pleads, shows them the dead proprietors, they will not leave their prison, their palace of shame.

There is no time for more talk, and the four women gather their ghosts, warm clothing, a pot, a canteen and a small bag of rice. They blacken their faces

with soot in the hopes of not attracting attention from the fleeing soldiers, and walk south-east after the retreating army—they must follow in the hopes of escaping further slavery or death at the hands of the Soviets or Chinese, though their chances of slipping between armies must be slim. They keep to the side of the dirt road so that soldiers and vehicles can pass easily, but the roadside is littered with those who have died on route, as well as with officers who have stopped to take their own lives, their uniforms marking them, but also the way their bodies lie—neatly folded over blades in their bellies.

They exhale thick clouds as they walk. Vehicles whine past. Countless crows and magpies hop from corpses and circle above. Yoo-jin toes a stray onion, adds it to her bag.

“Lucky,” says Soon-ja.

Yoo-jin nods, but in truth the onion has caused her to think not of dinner, but of the blue-eyed boy whose hand was crushed for stealing one in Miryang. A lifetime ago, it seems.

Grandmother: Please let him be well. Let him become a good man.

They crest a small hill and find an officer kneeling before a broken bottle, oblivious to their approach. As they pass, the man slams his eye into the jagged glass, rolls screaming and bleeding before them. Yoo-jin pulls at her companions’ sleeves, keeps them from freezing in their horror.

The other women suck air or cringe as they overtake more dead and dying on the frosted dirt road, but Yoo-jin feels nothing for these men. She would spit at

their cowardice were her mouth not already so dry. With each fallen soldier, she becomes more determined to survive.

Grandmother, I will live to cut the grass over the graves of my family. I will speak of you and what you have done for me, of your goodness and love and sacrifice.

The voices grow in number with each passing hour. A madness, she knows. The clamouring difficult to sort, to place even—accents she does not recognize, language from generations past, asking horrible things of her. Ears for trophies. Teeth as dice. Calling down crows to feast upon corpses so they will never be whole again.

As if sensing her distress, Yeong-sook takes her hand, begins to sing *Arirang*, and the others join her, the sound of their voices an odd harmony among scrub pines and low hills. Even in song, none of the passing soldiers pay them any mind.

For once, thinks Yoo-jin, being forgotten is a blessing.

Was she wrong to spit at the feet of the floating man and the dancer? Perhaps the taking of their own lives was a mercy of sorts, a way of releasing her and her cousins. Yoo-jin catches this thought—something her mother might have said. More likely the cowards thought only of how the arriving Soviets or Chinese would treat collaborators.

Grandmother, does every country have its traitors in times like these?

And every era, every age, confirm the voices. Those who betray their true hearts out of fear and greed.

Granddaughter, what does your heart tell you now that you are free again?

She ponders this as they walk, the other women still singing. *Halmeoni. This is not clear. There is too much shame and fear.*

Many voices now. *And anger?*

Yes, she thinks. *And anger. Rage beyond all reckoning.*

They walk through the day, pausing only once to cook rice on a brittle fire far from the road. The water will not boil and the rice is hard, but they eat what they can, the sun setting red behind them.

Occasionally they hear more aircraft, but high and distant, and the others wonder out loud what has become of those they left behind, their former prison now a distant pillar of smoke. Yoo-jin fears more for their own lives, tries not to imagine what they will be forced to trade for rice and water should they run out. They huddle together beside their meagre fire, none of them managing to sleep as the cold deepens and turns their bones to ice.

Morning comes with aircraft, lower now, and nowhere to hide. Even the gooseberry bushes grow close to the earth, as if hesitant to lift their boughs into the fierce wind that numbs Yoo-jin's face through her scarf. Their walking slows

with each passing hour. No further military vehicles or troops have passed them since dawn, only a few Chinese civilians dragging wheezing donkeys laden with bundled possessions—those who have collaborated and now have no home, so cling to the imperial army.

Yoo-jin and her companions travel east towards their distant home.

But where is my home without you, grandmother? Without father? Does our house in Masan-si still stand? What four walls could ever contain my shame?

Yes, Beautiful One. We know. Our foxling's misfortune is deep as the ocean.

“Sisters, can you smell it?” Soon-ja’s mouse-like voice.

Yoo-jin cannot smell anything, her nose frozen numb and wrapped in itching wool. She shakes her head, waits for the girl to let them in on her secret.

“Salty air. We are near the sea.”

The girl is from a suburb of Busan. Smiling at Yoo-jin, she claps her rag-wrapped hands.

“And then we swim,” says Yeong-sook, and even Yoo-jin laughs.

The late afternoon sun lights gulls circling on the near horizon, and the noise of the camped Japanese army rises and falls on a westerly off the sea. Over one last hill and the iron water stretches before them, half a dozen warships offshore. A steady stream of transports bounce on whitecaps. Soldiers swarm like insects on the beach, and Yoo-jin and her companions move off the road and stand on a

sandy crest amongst scrub. They have already discussed their options, but have come to little agreement.

“Sister,” says Yeong-sook. “If we do not board a vessel, how can we return home? Surely the Japanese will retreat first to Korea.”

Ziro’s warning buzzes, but Yoo-jin has no answer for these women. The railway overland through Manchukuo has no doubt been bombed to pieces, and if they do not leave soon, they risk becoming stranded in this place forever.

We will be raped and killed on the beach before nightfall, she thinks. This is not the end of our misfortune, but the beginning. The yellow canola fields of our homeland were only ever a dream, and we have woken now to our true fate.

Barked curses in Japanese startle her and she swivels to face an officer stumbling towards them. The man collapses in a heap, uniform covered in dirt, vomit down his lapel. He sits up and waves them over, growls and claws at the dirt when they hesitate.

“You must help me,” he says. “End my shame. I cannot join them.”

Drunk, guesses Yoo-jin. He repeats himself, pointing at the beach. He slurs his words, but it is not difficult to gather that he left the front in disgrace and wishes to die.

“I cannot return home. You must help me.”

She pulls her companions away, but he shouts after them. “I have no sword. You must help me.”

The opposite of a divine wind, she thinks, though she says nothing.

“They will know what you are,” he shouts. “They will kill you before they make room for you on those ships. As will the Soviets and the Chinese when they discover what you are. Die with me. *Honourably.*”

She looks away. A transport carries an officer and his white horse, the animal held tightly by a group of soldiers. The drunkard is right. They will load their animals before giving passage to four Korean whores.

Yoo-jin asks the man if there is no way to board the ships.

“Not for me,” he replies.

“And for your nieces, uncle?”

The officer shakes his head and sits in sullen silence, face red from wind and alcohol. She turns away again in disgust—yet another who will wander the shadow road without end.

They make their way toward the crowd of soldiers, fleeing Chinese, livestock and vehicles, all of it a raucous mess—their only hope that such confusion allows them to slip aboard a vessel unnoticed, or find a Korean soldier who will show them mercy.

But as they reach the crowd, the drunken officer catches up, shouts obscenities and pulls at their clothing, calls them foreign whores. Within seconds a group of soldiers has gathered around them. Yeong-sook falls to her knees and begs for mercy. The soldiers taunt them, ask them to dance, put on a show. Yoo-jin pulls Yeong-sook to her feet, tries to keep the four of them together, but there is no where left to go.

A hand grabs Yoo-jin's hair, yanks her head back. Above them, a flock of distant iron birds.

Granddaughter. There is always somewhere to go.

The first bomb hits the warship closest to shore, the detonation ear-splitting. A shower of flame rushes over water. A split-second of dead-eared shock, and then pandemonium as more bombs whistle from the sky, striking ships and land, spreading fire and smoke, men, women and livestock crushed and torn, swimming, running.

A man grabs her arm and pulls her away from the crowd, runs with her down the beach, drags her when she falls. She struggles and looks up into the red face of Saito Ziro, his eye patch missing, the socket an angry, scarred hole. She manages to find her feet and they flee together, choking on smoke, lungs burning, the percussion of bombs and returned fire of the warships so loud she can no longer hear screaming, nor think of anything other than finding clean air.

“Rest. Drink.” Ziro hands her a canteen and she sips the water, struggles to swallow, coughs tar onto her sleeve.

They sit hidden amongst gooseberry and gnarled pine on a hill overlooking the sea, bombs still falling on the ships and beach, though fewer figures move there, and she fears her companions are lost.

One burning ship drifts to within sight, black smoke like a living creature, solid and yet billowing in great plumes. And that same white horse on the deck,

racing from stern to prow, mane ablaze, until it plunges from the ship into the boiling sea.

They do not rest for long. Ziro pulls her further down the coast, until they cannot tell if the great explosions they hear are bombs or anti-aircraft fire, and can only guess whether or not any ships have survived. Ziro tells her it is either the Soviets or the Americans finishing the war from the air, that there are rumours of great destruction throughout the empire, that even Tokyo burns.

“I am sorry for your companions,” he says. “There was no time. I do not know if they live.”

Yoo-jin nods. She will mourn them later. Now there is only each breath, her lungs slowly clearing. “You saved me,” she says finally.

She does not word this as a question, but it is one, and Ziro stares at his filthy boots for a moment before saying simply, “You showed me kindness.”

She wakes cold and stiff in the darkness huddled next to Ziro, a scraping on loose stones causing her to start, imagine soldiers in the bright moonlight. But it is the white horse, its hooves loud on the hard ground as it ambles past, the watery light illuminating its charred coat, now half black. The beast snorts, breathes ghosts in her direction, and continues down the coast, leaving her to fall back into a shivering, exhausted sleep.

They hardly speak as they walk, and when they finally reach the small fishing village, Yoo-jin assumes hunger and fatigue have caused her to imagine it. A group of aging women watch them approach, but offer no greeting, and they are soon joined by children and a few ancient-looking men.

Ziro speaks to them in halting Mandarin and the elders confer, before waving them into the heart of the village. Small houses, some concrete, but most made of piled stones and mud with thatched roofs, each structure surrounded by a chest-high stone wall. Flat fish and squid dry on wooden racks. At once she is reminded of Tongyeong, a small fishing village south of Masan, where her uncle and cousins owned a calamari boat.

“They will care for you,” says Ziro.

She understands that their offer of hospitality will not extend to a Japanese soldier, but she is too tired to argue. She touches his arm.

He looks at her hand and nods. “Men will arrive soon. They will take me.”

Two young women lead her into a hut and feed her fish broth full of seaweed and bean paste. The women are wrapped in grey linens, their skin darkly tanned. Yoo-jin sips from the hot stone bowl, her lips dry and cracked, burning as they touch liquid.

One of the women utters a word in Mandarin, a question, one she heard often in the camp. *Hanguo?* Korea.

Yoo-jin nods and the women smile. One rolls up a sleeve and reveals ugly scarring—burns, she guesses. Then the other mimes pulling up her shirt, draws over her stomach and back. She points to her legs and feet, and Yoo-jin understands—they have all suffered at the hands of the emperor's army.

She wakes mid afternoon to one of her hosts crouching before her, finger to lips. Yoo-jin nods and rises, peers out the small window. Loud, angry syllables from a man in uniform—green khakis with a red sash tied to his arm. And others dressed the same around him. They take Ziro, hands bound, to a truck.

A pang of fear and guilt—she must not be associated with Ziro or any of the Japanese, and yet this man has helped her, has now in all likelihood given his life for her.

The woman beside her puts a hand on her arm, as if sensing the rising and falling of her emotions.

As she watches the truck leave, she feels both guilt for having escaped and self-loathing for caring about a Japanese soldier, even one who has proven himself as much human as demon.

Fear not, granddaughter. Be still. This one will not wander endlessly in darkness.

The same two women feed her broth again in the evening. When she finishes, they bring heated water and cloths, help strip her dirty clothing. She stands before

them, covering herself, but they only click their tongues and chuckle, use the cloths to wet her arms and shoulders. Yoo-jin pulls away, receives a quick scolding from the woman with scarred arms.

Water over skin. Wet lines down limbs. Her grandmother's hands over her feet. She begins to weep, and the women clean her face and neck, catch her tears, cluck and murmur, weep with her.

Outside, sounds of laughter and singing, children playing.

Do you hear this too, halmeoni? This joy amidst suffering?

And still the women bathe her filthy body, warm hands and water gently exposing pale skin. More squealing laughter rings outside, rises and falls, tinkling like wind chimes from a temple's roof.

The General

He speaks into the microphone, aware of the weight of each syllable on his tongue as he reads yet another speech that has travelled back and forth countless times between Washington and the USS Missouri on Tokyo Bay. Two bombs, one on Nagasaki, one on Hiroshima. The emperor's official surrender. And a line drawn across the 38th parallel of the Korean peninsula.

Even as he speaks, he wonders whether any change so marked by the machines of war can last. What does it mean to use such force, a destructiveness that blots out the sun, moon and stars? Was this not what he wished for? Would he instead watch his men die on the Japanese home islands? No, he would rather see a million Japs burn than one more farm boy from Ohio lying dead on a foreign beach. And yet, can a change that is not of the *spirit* be meaningful?

His own breath on the metal microphone, hot and wet. And words from his mouth that he can no longer interpret, that he might as well be uttering in a foreign tongue for all the sense he can make of them.

I understand, wrote his wife in her last letter. *Your words are not your own. And you're not a politician. It's only natural to feel uneasy playing the part.*

She's right. He is no bureaucrat. He is a dog of war and he is not done fighting. He feels this in his bones.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

When he imagines the twin bombs, he thinks of dropping firecrackers into anthills when he was a boy, though he knows this isn't right, not even close. Still, the dislocation of bodies from place, the stunning flash and instant heat, the flesh-melting fire. Once, he'd found an ant yards away from a detonated nest, a black speck on white tiles outside the back door to his family's home, the half-torched exoskeleton missing three legs, dragging itself in circles.

The memory unsettles him as he waits in the driver's seat of his assigned truck at the port of Masan. The Japanese gone for the first time in his life, but the Americans in their place, and the Soviets in the north—a line drawn between these two foreign armies on someone's map, though whose he cannot be sure. And these Americans who dropped the atomic bombs, what of them? What to make of *liberators* who haven't left? Lots of talk in the barracks and mess hall of a new Korean government, democratic, as well as of reunification with the north. Still, those ants. That one ant. To care as little for a city as for an anthill. How could such people ever be trusted?

Thousands of Koreans in Hiroshima and Nagasaki too, working for the Japanese, forced into all manner of labour. Gone in a flash.

The drivers of the other two trucks stand a few feet in front of their vehicles smoking. One of them, a man at least twenty years his senior, makes eye

contact, holds up a smoke. Won-jae climbs from the vehicle into the cool morning air, the spring breeze barely tempered by salt. He shivers as he bows to the two older men, accepts a cigarette and lights it himself.

“Time to warm up, hey cousin?” says the man who offered the smoke. “American brand.” He nods at the cigarette. “Terrible, but free.”

“That’s us,” says the second man, flicking his chin at a cargo ship coming into view between two outlying islands. “From Jeju, I heard.”

Won-jae nods, as if this makes sense, though of course he is just following orders to pick up *cargo*.

The docks are quiet this morning, a few fishing boats in and out, mostly small, the port still rebuilding and restructuring now that the Japanese routes are finished. But it’ll be busy again soon—men need to work, and there will be new shipping lines to ports liberated by the Americans.

Liberated, the word of the moment.

“Wouldn’t want to be out on one of those today, eh cousin?” says the first man, pointing to a small calamari boat, lanterns strung to netting along its hull.

Won-jae agrees, blows smoke away from the men.

Just a hint of fog on the southern horizon, the cargo ship ever closer, gulls wheeling and full of noise, their frantic calls at odds with the lack of bustle on the docks. He told his mother this was why he enlisted, to find steady work while everything was still in *transition*. *Byeonhwa*. Another of the US military government’s favourite words. But in truth, he couldn’t stand the thought of doing

nothing should another war break out: with the Japanese, once the Americans left, *if* the Americans left, or with the Chinese or Soviets—who knew what the Bear to the north or the Dragon to the east might do, how satisfied they might be once the Americans had finished inking new lines?

When the occupation first ended, cargo ships like this one had arrived all over the coast bearing Koreans from Manchukuo, Japan and the southern islands of Malaya and the Philippines. Cholera-filled vessels quarantined by the Americans for weeks in port, despite the parades and drums and singing on the docks that welcomed them. So many returning, but not compared to the millions that had been sent abroad by the now-humbled Empire of the Sun to work in mines, on railways, to fight and die for a cause that was not their own.

At first, all anyone spoke of was *good riddance to the Japanese*, and of those they had lost. Now, they ask how to find and punish *collaborators*. But after thirty-five years of occupation, who qualifies? Those who did not rise up and die in the hills? Those who did not suffer enough? Or perhaps just those who wore the wrong uniform?

So long ago now, those Korean police officers on the road north, men and women on their knees, waiting to die. A throbbing anger rises in his chest and his uniform itches around the collar. How will they ever find justice for such things?

The dead, as his father used to remind him, *cannot speak*.

The older men next to him have gone quiet, their smokes burned to stubs. What events might have led them to these seagull-shit splattered docks, here in his father's hometown—the last place he saw the man?

Abba. It is not only the dead who do not speak. The living are quiet now too.

An old man rambles past pulling a cart stacked with bits of wood and cardboard. The cart, a wheelbarrow pulled backwards, teeters with each of the man's steps, the load too high. The man wears layers of filthy, torn clothing. Does he plan to sell these scraps? Repair a home? Or is he working to work, working as penance, working to prevent himself from laying down on the docks to die? The man pauses and watches them smoke, wrinkled face seemingly thoughtful beneath his grey cap. A corner of crumpled newspaper hangs from one of his faded green coat sleeves—makeshift insulation against the cold.

“Grandfather,” says the soldier with cigarettes. “Take a break. Sit and smoke with us.”

The old man stares at them, but does not respond. The soldier who spoke hands Won-jae the pack of cigarettes and nods to the old man. Won-jae approaches and pulls a smoke half-way from the foil lining for him to take, which he does quickly, pocketing the white roll of tobacco and moving on, dragging his cart along the docks. Won-jae returns the pack to the soldier and the three of them switch their attention to the incoming vessel, larger now through the breaking fog as the morning continues to lighten.

He steals a last glance at the old man, wonders why he didn't thank them for the smoke. Does the old man fear them? Look on them with suspicion? He wants to call out, *grandfather; no. You are mistaken. We are true Koreans.*

But does he know this? The men beside him are older than he, and he has no idea whether or not they might have colluded with the empire. This same question again and again, no matter how he works to rid himself of it: what is collaboration with an enemy into whose midst one is born? He speaks Japanese, was given a Japanese name, pledged allegiance to a portrait of the emperor each morning at school. Was this treason? And what of his father cleaning the house of a foreign administrator?

Years gone, and still he fears someone might have seen and recognized him wearing that uniform, that he will stand accused of crimes he did not commit.

The uniform that saved his life. A gift from one of those taken and not returned. Where was she now? So beautiful in his memories, her touch gentle as she wrapped his broken hand—a hand still scarred by the soldier's boot.

She might be in Japan, working there still. Or she could have been taken to a mine or factory in Manchukuo. Some held regular jobs. Some were worked to death. Some were killed in bombings or battle, or simply lost—gone without any trace or hope of more information. There were further rumours too, rumours he did not like to set his mind to, of men taken as lab rats for chemical weapons and medical research, cut to pieces, experimented on. *Harbin*. This city's name uttered quietly by the few who returned. And yet more rumours, of women taken and

used by the army as whores throughout the empire, killed or abandoned, or too heavy with shame to return.

If she had suffered this fate, he did not know how he might react, what anger he might loose on the world. She would not be able to return to her old life in Masan-si. She would need him.

And he had searched for her, made enquiries around Masan and Miryang, at the war offices, the Red Cross, shelters in Busan. Nothing. No word. Yet many were still scattered, the peninsula cut in two—it would take time. Years. But he would find her.

The cargo vessel slows as it reaches the inner harbour, its markings now clear: built on Geoje-do, a small ship-building port a few hours south-west along the jagged coastline.

The dull sun works on the fog, lightens the sky without warming the air. A small crane on the side of the docked ship unloads a military jeep, and Won-jae spots a ranking officer, a man inspecting the vehicle along with his driver, also in uniform. The men motor off the docks and park in front of the three trucks.

Won-jae and the other two drivers stand at attention in front of their vehicles. The officer struts before the trucks, cigarette stuck to his bottom lip. Medals and decorations crowd his lapel. A colonel. A purple scar runs from the left corner of the man's mouth over his cheek, as though he was caught on a fishing line that tore through flesh. Or perhaps it was a burn. Yet more questions Won-jae must not ask. An accident? Wounded fighting the Japanese? Tortured?

The officer's aid, a scarecrow-thin, ashen-faced private like himself, takes three packs of cigarettes from a box in the jeep and passes them out stiffly to each of the drivers. Won-jae and the others accept the handout with shallow bows, wait in silence.

The officer clears his throat and speaks in a rasp, his voice barely audible and strained—each syllable holding the attributes of the man's ruined face.

“I trust you are here because you care about the glory of Korea. *Dae Hanminguk*.” He pauses, and they respond in kind. “If you speak of this cargo, you will be court marshalled and shot. Understood?”

The colonel does not wait for a response, though they salute as he strides around the jeep, his aid scuttling to open the door. The private returns to the driver's side, points to the ship and crane. “They're ready for you.”

The crane lowers metal containers into the beds of the trucks. Shock springs flatten and groan. Engines rev.

The difficult part, they are told, will be unloading—no cranes or machinery to help—and each driver is assigned a crew member, also in uniform. The man who joins Won-jae appears only a year or two older than him, another private.

No word yet on what the containers hold, though Won-jae catches a whiff of something sweet and sickly, fertilizer perhaps.

His truck is the last to depart the docks and he follows the train of vehicles back through Masan, the city now awake, street vendors on every corner, men and women on their way to work. He tries not to look for his father's face each time he slows at an intersection. The man is gone. *This is true.* And he still has his mother. For this he should be thankful, even if she does little else than mourn her widowhood.

I was a great beauty in my day, she told him last time he visited. When I was sixteen, I was voted queen of the Oi-do Chrysanthemum Festival. That's how I met your father. He saw me on that flower-covered boat in the harbour and knew his heart would never recover.

Won-jae humoured her, of course, listened to her stories, even cleaned her home, though this was not *expected* of a first-born son. Her stories were half-truths, more romantic with each telling. She had met his father at the festival, but had never been voted queen—her family wasn't wealthy enough to pay the entrance fee. His aunt told him the truth, told him months ago that she was worried for his mother's health, feared she was slowly going mad—*jejeongshini aniya*, she'd whispered, as if the words were contagious.

But there is nothing for him to do about this, no turning back time, only this road before him now, which he drives in silence, windows cracked so the soldier next to him can smoke.

Finally, the other man speaks. "Cousin, does the radio in this thing work, or what?"

Won-jae nods. “Be my guest.”

The man rolls the dial until he finds a station broadcasting from Busan that plays Korean songs banned by the Japanese. His new partner bobs his head, hums a few bars of “Muhan-sarang,” a ballad Won-jae’s father used to sing in their tiny garden at home—a lament on leaving the village of one’s youth, on returning to find it so changed.

They drive on dirt roads out of the city and into the northern hills, pine, ginkgo and elm just starting to turn green, cherry trees budding despite the coolness, as though the land is anticipating the rains of the coming typhoon season.

“My father used to say cherry trees were the only good thing the Japs brought.” Won-jae pauses, embarrassed to have spoken without thinking, to have referenced his father in the past tense.

But the other man just laughs, agrees. “And the bathhouses. It’s Chun-soo, by the way. Lee. Private, obviously.”

Won-jae responds in kind. “From Busan? Or nearby?”

“You have a good ear for accents.” Chun-soo flicks off the radio, which has gone static as they wind into the hills.

“Yeah, but not for music. Can’t even hum or whistle in tune.”

“Ah well. Not much use for music in the army anyway. My father was a pianist.” His turn to pause now, though Won-jae guesses he is just playing his part, waiting for an invitation to speak more candidly.

“Classical?”

“Yeah. Concerts in Busan and Seoul. He even travelled to Shanghai once, years back.”

“Must have been nice having music at home. My house was always pretty quiet, except for my mother nagging my father to get a better job.”

Chun-soo laughs. “Probably true in every household in Korea.”

“Maybe. Does your father still play?”

Another pause, this one not out of politeness, the silence muted, as if full of voices Won-jae cannot hear.

“They sent him to a mine in Manchukuo in ’42. The officer who signed the order told us Korea didn’t need musicians, that the emperor would give us all the *culture* we’d ever need. One of our neighbours went with him and survived—a brick-layer, strong. But most didn’t make it out. My father wasn’t made for that kind of work. I’d have gone in his place if I’d been old enough.”

Another gap in the conversation, the truck’s cab suddenly claustrophobic. Won-jae breaks the silence by telling the man he shares his pain, that he too has lost his father, has not seen the man since he was taken on the day of the Masan fires.

Chun-soo bobs his head, rolls down the window further so the cab fills with cool air. “You ever hear a Jeju accent?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“They sound like Colonel Choi up there in his jeep. Words stuck in their throats.”

“So our shipment is from the island, then?”

“Yeah.”

The man doesn't elaborate and this puzzles Won-jae. “You gonna make me guess what we're carrying?”

Chun-soo fiddles with the radio again, but still can't find a signal.

“All the local stations were disbanded during the occupation,” says Won-jae, though there is no need to explain. It is the same everywhere outside the big cities.

Silence for a few breaths.

“Lots of commies on Jeju,” says Chun-soo finally, giving up on the radio.

“Troublemakers that wish the Soviets had taken the whole country.”

“So it's true what they say, the islanders really are commies?” He asks this because it is the only question he can speak safely while his thoughts spin. *Communist sympathizers*—the new great evil. Is he a commie because he distrusts the Americans? And what of the North? Of their brothers and sisters under the Soviet thumb?

“They're not like us mainlanders, that's for sure.” Chun-soo tries a laugh.

“Weird old religions, impossible accents. I hear women help run whole towns. No wonder there's so much trouble.”

Won-jae forces himself to remain calm. Does Chun-soo believe what he says, or is he just mimicking what he has heard—a raven with a split tongue?

“But they’re still Korean—our blood,” he offers.

“I heard they’re all part Jap now. Mixed-blood *collaborators*—*chinilpa*.” He spits the last word and tiny drops of saliva speckle the smooth dashboard.

Won-jae views this outburst as his cue to shut up, though he wants to ask Chun-soo how this can be true if it was the commies who fought the Japanese during the occupation, and not just in Korea, but in Manchukuo too. And just what *kind* of trouble on Jeju-do?

True that the islanders are different though, have always been Korean and not. A sharp memory of the people of Miryang turning on Yoo-jin and her grandmother, gossip in the market that her ability to heal marked her as a *mudang*, a shaman, that her bloodline carried bad luck from the island—a myriad of gnat-like imps turning the Japanese against them, making their lives harder.

He flexes his hand on the steering wheel as they reach Wonbuk-san, a small mountain with a tapped-out coal mine at its base. His father told him the seam was exhausted before he was born, but he’d heard other stories too: that it was a hideout for those who fought against the Japanese, that the emperor had created special units to hunt the resistance, men with mountaineering experience, headlamps and ropes, armed to the teeth.

People talked. Said there were still soldiers in the hills, wandering the mines looking for Korean guerrillas, unaware that their emperor had failed in his attempt to conquer half the world.

There are times he worries his fate is not dissimilar to that of the fabled ghosts lurking in mine shafts, that his life has become narrow, dark and small. This is not how he imagined freedom and it pains him to feel this way, when what he so longs for is to belong to something again—no longer an orphan of empire, but a piece of a larger whole, a family, a strong bloodline within a strong nation, rising up from the flattening of oppression and occupation to become what the place and its people are destined for. *Dae Hanminguk*. Great Korea. The land their soul, their souls their own, the sky blue and clear above.

But the sky is not blue and clear, and the sun has stopped trying to break through the overcast, leaving a grey ceiling spitting rain onto the dusty windshield as they turn off the main road and onto a rough track leading to the entrance of the mine. The dirt and dust are quickly turning to mud in the rain, and the truck lurches through potholes. Chun-soo wonders out loud if some of the holes are from mortar shells, and again Won-jae thinks of the Japanese hunters. The truck's left side dips into a large divot and for a moment they lose traction, before the vehicle rights itself and they carry on slowly, following the shuddering bumper of the truck ahead.

With each new jolt and lurch of the truck, he cannot help but question their assignment, but he knows from experience that such a mindset will not make the job easier.

That's why they're called orders and not suggestions, private, his drill sergeant in Busan told him. *Get your head around that and you'll be fine. Otherwise, learn a different trade.*

But what other job could he find quickly enough to support his mother? When he was a boy, he'd imagined he would become a teacher, better than those he'd had in the Japanese-run school in Masan.

I'll teach in Korean, and never yell or beat my students, he told his father one day after class, while the man cleaned a chalk-board. *We'll learn the true history of Korea, what it was like before the Japanese.*

His father had smiled and nodded. *My son. This is what I work for. Keep these ambitions close to your heart, and know that I am proud of you. But do not speak them again. Do you understand?*

Of course he understood, had seen students beaten for a single word of *hanguk-aw*, had seen a classmate expelled for declaring that he hoped one day to become the emperor, had seen grown men hauled from the streets by Korean police for distributing pamphlets asserting their right to their own language, religion, fair taxation—not even an end to the occupation, just the right to be Korean, to be *themselves*. He'd once taken a red pamphlet home to read in secret, before burning it. He'd marvelled at how he could absorb words and feel them

changing how he saw the world around him, while all the while life continued as it had before. One day, he thought, everything he learned and saw would contribute to a life he could live proudly.

His uniform itches at the neck and wrists. Rain on glass. Chun-soo hums another ballad.

The trucks ahead slow nearly to a stop, though Won-jae cannot yet see their destination. They lurch through another pothole and Chun-soo white-knuckles the handle above the window. The man breathes quickly in hisses through clenched teeth. Won-jae fights the urge to ask him what he's so nervous about—knows that each of them carry heavy memories that resurface again and again. Only a week earlier he'd nearly hyperventilated while delivering a message on a bicycle, instantly transported back to that night in his Japanese skin, riding as fast as he could through the dark.

“Can't be much further, can it?” Chun-soo's voice a taut wire.

“No, but we haven't made much ground since we turned off the main road.” A sense of relief to be rescued from his own head, even if he no longer trusts his companion to speak agreeable words.

“You get teased much?”

Won-jae glances at the man, who gestures to his own eyes. “Hell, I got torn apart in school for being a couple of centimetres short.” He laughs and Won-jae relaxes.

“Yeah.” *Foreign eyes. Bastard. Ghost blood.* “Couldn’t figure out how to hide them and still see where I was going.”

Chun-soo laughs again, tells him to keep them wide open now, whatever colour they might be.

The road wraps around another rise, smoother now, nearly level, and the train of vehicles moves faster.

He was teased for his blue eyes, but it was worse for kids accused of having Japanese blood—a certain tint of skin, a sharp nose—forget Korean family lines a thousand years long.

Children are cruel, his mother had said.

But so are adults, eomma, he thinks now, picturing the black-uniforms of the Korean police who took his father.

Chun-soo watches him and Won-jae feels suddenly naked, as though his thoughts are projecting onto the windshield before them—a film for the soldier from Busan to watch and judge.

But the man is more interested in his own memories. “My grandfather used to say low clouds are dangerous. Trap too many thoughts.”

“And blue sky?”

“Lots to do outside. No time for dark memories. Used to drive me crazy, all his sayings. Thought he was wrong about nearly everything.”

“Now?”

“Now I miss him. And I understand. When I was a kid, I couldn’t get my head around the brutality of the Japs. Couldn’t imagine how thinking might be a bad thing. And remembering. But now most days I just wanna forget.”

The trucks ahead slow and stop, and the drivers and soldiers get out, gather around the colonel next to his jeep. Won-jae and Chun-soo follow suit, and the colonel tells them they’ll back up their trucks to the mine shaft one at a time, work as a team to unload the cargo into the gaping pit.

Rain speckles their green jackets and caps. The tree line has yet to reclaim the damaged earth, and brown and bone-coloured stone rings the trucks. Won-jae strains his ears for bird call, but hears only the shuffle of boots on dirt.

The two men in the first truck return to their vehicle and back it up to the entrance. The colonel nods, tells them to work fast as the rain picks up.

They pry open the container and loose a foul smell. Chun-soo vomits next to his feet. Won-jae gags too, holds a handkerchief over his nose and fights to breathe. Only the oldest soldier keeps his composure, blows cigarette smoke out his nose as he surveys the contents of the container. A tangle of corpses covered in a white dusting of lye, skin grey, limbs bent unnaturally, mouths agape, the dead fully clothed, as if they were not decaying remains, but abandoned dolls.

The clothes bother Won-jae, in part because none wear uniforms, and in part because the clothing is out-dated—traditional garb dyed pale red with safflower petals, or blue with indigo stalks. Coarse fabrics, hemp belts.

We have come here, he thinks, to erase the past.

There is no way to tilt the container without a crane, so he and Chun-soo stand atop the pile of corpses and hoist them one by one, swing them over the edge to the other soldiers, who carry them into the mine.

Many of the dead are women, a few children—boys and girls barely into their teens. At least one bullet hole in each, sometimes many. Was this the Jeju uprising, the army of rebel commies?

The rain turns limbs slick, and he and Chun-soo slip, drop bodies. A mess of shit and blood six corpses deep. Within an hour, they reach the bottom of the container, hoist the final bodies and roll them over the edge.

They climb out, gloves and boots covered in filth. Won-jae's stomach is empty and he retches without satisfaction, chain smokes until he feels faint. The second truck swaps places with the first, and he and Chun-soo take their turn hauling the dead into the musty, echoing mine, where the others have set up a lantern at the edge of a shallow decline fifty feet from the entrance.

There will be at least a hundred souls here by the time they have finished. Abandoned in a dark hole. No one to honour their memories, cut grass on their graves.

A new sickness sinks into Won-jae's gut. What they are doing is permanent. He will wake each day with this memory, see these piled dead when he closes his eyes each night.

Time slides into shadow. *Commies. Dae Hanminguk.* Panic in his chest, a sharp pain as though a Japanese soldier has emerged from the darkness, sent a

bullet spinning into his ribcage. So many lost. He will no longer be who he was, and this terrifies him, again a small boy watching his father mop blood from the classroom floor.

A lye-dusted twig and leaf protrude from the front pocket of one of the dead men. The leaf fading green. From an orange tree, he guesses.

A shout from the trucks and Won-jae catches himself holding his breath, smoke-filled. He releases a cloud into the dim light of the tunnel's entrance. How long has he been working? He exits the pit, finds the others smoking next to their now-empty trucks.

“Find one still moving? Thought we'd lost you down there.” Chun-soo grimaces at his own joke.

They move the vehicles from the entrance and detonate a charge to seal the mine.

Won-jae climbs back into the truck and turns the key, as the dead take root, earth their way through his soul.

The General

Picture this back home, he thinks, looking out over the ruins of Tokyo. One giant, fire-blackened, six-story tower in the middle of the city. 12,000 tonnes of bunker-busters and incendiaries, but the Dai Ichi Life Insurance Building untouched. No shortage of irony there. Below, a line of locals bearing gifts for their new emperor—their *Gaijin Shogun*.

How to even begin to understand these people? Doubtful that survivors in Nagasaki and Hiroshima would be so keen to bow before an American. Twin flashes. A hurricane of light. And his voice on the radio announcing Directive One. The surrender of an emperor who had vowed to fight to the death.

Men piled high on the beaches of his island paradise.

When they redraw maps of the Pacific, they should colour it red. He'd written this in a letter to his wife, blacked it out. Instead told her he'd be home soon. Code for, *I love you, but this is what I am.*

Those beaches. Clear water. Silver flashing fish. And now this smoking wreckage, no one in Tokyo able to see further than their own two hands, whether pilfering their dead neighbours' charred belongings, rebuilding homes or lining up to lay gifts at his feet.

I will remake you, he thinks, *in my own image, in the image of America.*

He looks from the city to the small black cannon beside his desk. Another gift from the emperor. A muzzle-loading swivel gun, he's told, from a Dutch East India Company ship. Three-hundred years old. Like the Dutchman's journal.

Hope I won't need to use it, he'd joked. The translator hadn't even bothered with that one.

He walks to the small gun, traces the VOC on the barrel with his index finger. A good gift for a general, this.

You are here, said Acheson over the phone, *to manage the reconstruction of your enemy's country. Do you understand?*

Posturing. He is here because no one could stop his army, and because the powers that be in Washington are unsure if the war is truly over. America needs to reshape Japan into a capitalist democratic sidekick in the midst of commies and despots, and they are willing to spill oceans of blood to protect it, if need be.

That first radio broadcast, like reading lines for a high-school play. *For the first time in human history....* The splitting of atoms. Earth-shaping. God-high pillars of fire.

His feet ache. His throat stripped raw from breathing ash. He should leave for the day.

Soon.

He is told the Soviets have moved troops into the northern half of the Korean peninsula, his own taking the south. About time someone freed those poor bastards from slavery under Hirohito. A tiny shit-hole of a country, divided along

the 38th parallel—not because that means anything, but because Rusk and Acheson in Washington wanted a line north of Seoul. *A clean cut and a strong foothold against communism in the region*, they tell him. *All the more important now that the Chinese civil war has gone south.*

But of course he knows better. Nothing about the aftermath of war and occupation is ever *tidy* or *clean*.

Still, he'll pose for the cameras of Life, tell the world that even if there is trouble in Japan, Korea, China, he'll take on all comers with one goddamned hand tied behind his back. He has men that know how to fight, and he'll train the ones who don't.

More bluster. Easy enough. Harder to talk to the press about presiding over war-crime trials. To explain why some are absolved, others hanged. Tricky because the answer is simple and everyone knows it. If Washington needs you, it doesn't matter if you're guilty of chemical and bacteriological experimentation on human subjects. Might even help your case. It's the brutes who hang. Koreans among them, he's discovered, guards for the Japs who marched Allied soldiers to death.

One in particular stays with him—a Korean, eyes swollen shut, hardly able to stand before the tribunal. Half his ribs broken. But what stood out was his confusion. Despite translators, it was obvious he had never considered he might one day be judged by the outside world. To him, beating to death countless POWs was no more or less evil than dropping a bomb, killing under orders in combat.

Something to think on, perhaps.

What if the tables were turned, general?

His father once told him that peace was a fiction, the wishful thinking of fools. Probably this is true. And probably this suits him, the *Gaijin Shogun*—made not for peace, but for the hard reality of war.

Tokyo stretches black and ruined before him, and he wonders if he is the only one who can see it all, each tiny ant picking over the corpse of this fallen giant.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

The small red parachute falls through sun-lit ginkgo and scrub pine, lands on his polished black boots. He stoops and unfolds the butcher paper attached to the chute, though he already knows what it holds—jagged and blocky *hangeul*, red and black exclamation points added in the American style.

Brothers! Rise up for peace! Expel foreign soldiers from Korea! Joguk Manse!

The commies in the north have dropped propaganda from the backs of Soviet Antonov A-2 Colts every day since the wind changed to a strong southerly a week ago, tiny parachutes that blow over the no-man's land of the 38th.

Sketchy intel that Kim Jong-un's army masses at the border, armed with Soviet weaponry and tanks. Most of the men laugh this off, probably to cover their lack of confidence, but it is impossible not to worry.

Joguk Manse! Long live the Fatherland. With this much, he is in agreement. He has seen how the Americans deal with those who don't fall neatly into line. But rumours out of the north are no better—whole towns purged of democratic sympathizers, civilians starved to fatten the army.

He loosens the collar of his uniform, waits in the growing heat for the others to finish jerking off in the woods. American magazines. Yellow-haired women with eyes like his own spreading their legs. He understands his men's

needs, feels all the same urges, though he does not long for some pin-up from the West. When he imagines a body, it is *hers*—lips brushing his broken hand, fingers over fevered brow, hushed whispers.

He found a woman in Miryang who told him Yoo-jin was taken by the Japanese. *The healer*, she called her. *Saved my son's life before she was shipped away. This is true.* And no one has seen her in Masan or Miryang since, though even this is hard to be sure of.

He breathes a short prayer that she is still alive and safe, and not suffering in the north under the Demon Leader's thumb. They say the man is a sorcerer, a shaman of old—that he drank the blood of ten-thousand Japanese soldiers in Manchukuo. A freedom-fighter so cunning that the emperor sent a squad of assassins to finish him. But of course the Demon outfoxed them—left their heads on stakes outside a Japanese garrison, red cloths stuffed in their mouths. And more rumours: a thousand-mile march overnight, the bringing forth of butterflies in winter, the strength of ten men in one finger.

Won-jae listens to his men repeat these tales, knows they are neither fully true nor fully lies. He is more worried about Stalin and Mao, and whether they will support the northern troops. Even with the Americans, the South will not be able to stand against a combined force should they attack without warning.

His commanding officer insists stories of a massing army are rubbish, that Koreans will never attack Koreans, that they are still one at heart, still family.

Won-jae does not speak his thoughts on this matter openly, bites his tongue again and again, head full of all he has witnessed—Koreans in uniform executing civilians outside Miryang, corpses stacked like ammunition in the mine north of Masan, collaborators who still own land, companies, huge textile factories with the blessing of the Americans.

Seong-gi, a private, emerges from the woods with a magazine, offers it to Won-jae. An act of camaraderie, though a breach of rank. If he had wanted the magazine, he would have taken it first.

Won-jae shakes his head. “Not today.”

Seong-gi is three years younger than him, but taller. “Too busy pining after your lost love, Sir? A bit of fun won’t hurt, you know. Don’t gotta marry nobody.” He laughs and stuffs the magazine into his pack as the rest of the patrol returns from the bush, six men slapping each other with rolled magazines, grinning.

Won-jae gives them a moment to fall into line, then cracks a joke about foreign diseases, winks. His men laugh, gather their gear, follow him back onto the trail.

Late spring and still cold. Stuck near the new border to the north-west of Seoul, but their patrols are less onerous now that the snow has melted and the air no longer freezes their lungs. He and his men have found a good rhythm, and he is surprised how easily he has fallen into leadership.

“Nearly at the coast, Sir,” clips Seong-gi.

If you've read the charts right this time, he thinks, but says only, "good," as they hike the uncut terrain in formation, Won-jae at point. They have trained hard and none of his men lag. A good sign.

Sparrow call and magpie mimic. Spots of sun through the broken overcast.

A wave of guilt from nowhere—that his father sacrificed so much for him to attend school, only for him to join the army. But then, so much has changed. If the North does invade, they will all be soldiers whether they like it or not—perhaps this is the destiny of every man born in this place, to fight until he is killed or worn to a thin and frail version of himself.

"Twenty yards, Sir."

Salt and brine on the air as they emerge from the rough hills of pine onto a beach of black volcanic rock. Won-jae stops short, stunned, fist up for his men to halt. None of them speak, too busy with their own thoughts at the sight of the shining black leviathan beached on the rocks, tide lapping at its monstrous bulk, gulls wheeling above.

The marine welder arrives by boat an hour after Won-jae radios, his men staggered in a loose perimeter on the beach and hillside above the submarine. The welder sets up on top of the vessel, smoking as he works, doesn't even flinch as sparks and hot filament singe the skin above his leather gloves.

The man pauses to check his work, flicks his smoke into the rising water. The tide won't be high enough to dislodge the u-boat for hours, if at all.

“You tried knocking, right?” The welder chuckles at his own joke.

Won-jae glances at Seong-gi, who shrugs. They didn’t. But surely there are no survivors on this antique from Japan’s disbanded navy. At sea for years, probably. And if anyone were inside, they’d have opened the hatch once they ran aground.

“Lucky she’s upright,” says the welder. “If she lists too far, it’ll be impossible to walk inside.” He stands and stretches his back. “Ok. Good to go.”

Won-jae nods to his men, who kick in the metal hatch. A hiss of carbon dioxide that smells of rubber, like air let from an old bike tire.

Won-jae grimaces, signals for privates Seong-gi and Yeong-ho to lead the way. “Worst case scenario, it’s rigged. Watch for wires. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Yes Sir,” say the two men in unison.

Despite their willingness to obey orders, Won-jae can see his men’s anxiety in their clenched jaws and taut neck tendons as they climb down the hatch, flashlights in mouths, fresh air flowing down with them. The airlock at the bottom of the hatch opens easily with another hiss.

They pause, let fresh air seep into the vessel, then proceed along the metal gangway through the torpedo bay, missiles long spent, walls covered with pipes and wires, gauges and switches. The guts of a steel giant. None of the internal hatches are shut and they stoop from chamber to chamber, everything seemingly in place, charts and instruments, life vests and survival gear. But no signs of the crew. Even the command centre appears in tact, periscopes down, seats empty.

Were it not so dry and stale, Won-jae would feel swallowed, a fisherman in the belly of a whale.

They step into the barracks and find a corpse in uniform, a captain, doubled over on the floor, long knife through the desiccated remains of his belly, uniform stained red. No stench, just mustiness. They step over the dead captain and find the rest of the crew in bunks, bullet holes through mummified skulls, pistols in hands.

Not a submarine, but an airtight mausoleum. A vessel of the dead drifting beneath the surface of the sea for months and years, a silent tomb housing bone-relics of a fallen empire.

Perhaps, thinks Won-jae, all things must pass away and be forgotten.

“Serge?”

Yeong-ho points to a door at the end of the bunks, flashlight steady on the tiny gap between door and floor. A small piece of cloth or string.

Not cloth, thinks Won-jae, his stomach turning sour. Hair.

Keys hang from the wall beside the door and Seong-gi unlocks it, pulls it open. Bodies spill into the barracks. Long hair. Dresses. The inside of the door is covered in scratches, the women’s fingertips splintered.

Won-jae’s mind whirs through a mess of gears. Some of the women wear Chinese trousers, but his flashlight catches wooden prayer beads on a withered wrist, *hangeul* marking each orb. In his fear, he sees Korean features on the shrivelled faces, cannot help but think of *her*.

Seong-gi vomits onto a bunk.

They wrap the women's remains in blankets, transport them in life rafts to a hill above the tideline. Won-jae searches the dead for signs of identification, but finds none.

Clouds clear and the sun drops over China to the west, casting everything in gold. The metal submarine lies dark and shining, rippling water throwing light in all directions. He confirms orders on the short-wave. If he is certain it is not Soviet, they should detonate the sub before some civilian fisherman becomes curious, sets off a booby-trap. No need to gather intel from a fallen empire.

He acknowledges command, eyes locked on the dead women, seven of them in a row, gulls dipping ever closer. His team destroys the u-boat with a minimum of fuss, twisted metal showering the water. Enough damage to set off any traps and burn the dead soldiers, at least.

They clear a wide grave on a hillside overlooking the sea. He does not need to give orders—his men know how to bury the dead. They pack the earth tightly, pile stones in a ring around the site, mark a wooden sign with simple words: *Sisters lost at sea.*

Maybe this is even true. Or maybe they were lost long before this.

You are home now, cousins. Close your eyes and go to Paradise.

His men are tired, as is he, and the late spring light feels too bright for the darkness they have encountered here, too warm for his cold bones.

Seong-gi remains ashen faced and Won-jae lights a smoke, passes it to the man, who takes it with a nod.

Gulls wheel and tilt. A speck of red falls amongst the circling white—another small parachute. Then two on the southerly breeze. Then more, dropping all around them and the grave, the circle of men frozen, staring wide eyed at the falling sky.

박유진 (*Park Yoo-jin*)

They bring her the girl, feverish and squirming, sweat beading on her creased brow. Maybe seven or eight years old. Dysentery. They must act now if the girl is to stand a chance. Yoo-jin shows them which tea leaves will help cut the fever, how to crush mugwort root for a stomach compress. The women have gathered what little western medicine they can scavenge, but she cannot decipher the labels. At last she finds a bottle with Japanese script—an antibiotic she prays will help.

Another broken tea cup.

The eternal sea calls to us all.

Where is your hairbrush, Dear One?

The compress eases the girl's stomach cramps and she stops squirming enough for Yoo-jin to help her swallow the pills with tea.

Halmeoni. Do not call this one to Paradise yet. She is too young. Watch over her and my hands now.

Beautiful Granddaughter. There is no need. Your hands are steady and already the little one's form is less full in the land of shadow.

She signals to the women that the child should sleep. They file out of the hut, bowing or touching Yoo-jin's shoulder as they go, carrying the child back to her home.

Do gods like those in each stone and bird also live in each tiny white pill?

She walks to the shore, watches the tide returning, lets the sound of waves and gulls replace the voices of the dead. So many now. Ever more restless.

A flicker of memory. On a rocky beach near Masan, watching fishing boats with her mother. Eons ago.

Eomma, I dream of you and wake unable to recall what I have seen. But your voice is the same. I dream of home, of halmeoni and abba. I long to return, but my shame is so great. Is this my home now, this place where I am tongueless?

“Sister? Are you lost?”

She starts at the voice, did not see the company of soldiers approach. Koreans in khaki with red sashes. The man’s accent from the north.

“But how... how did you know I speak *hanguk-aw*?” She gestures to her rough-cut hemp trousers and tunic, too shocked to run, though she fears a trap.

The soldier grins. “In truth? You were talking to yourself. Don’t worry, sister, we won’t hurt you, or anyone in this village. Today is a day to celebrate. You haven’t heard? General Mao has won his long war. We are free to return to our homeland, to join the struggle there.”

The other soldiers shout agreement, and Yoo-jin fears she gazes upon a legion of the fallen, until the soldier reaches out and touches her shoulder.

“Sister, you seem unwell. Come with us, we have medicine and food. Tomorrow we will return to Shinuiju by rail. Eat with us, at least. Tell us your story.”

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

The shelling concusses the hillside, knocks him off his feet and turns the hard-packed earth to sand. Even the tree roots burn. Screams mix with the pounding in his ears, his head submerged in water.

He rolls onto his hands and knees, checks his limbs, runs for his platoon's sandbagged M1919 turret. He stumbles through smoke, mortars falling, and reaches a copse of untouched pine—the wrong direction.

You will hold the hill long enough to cover our retreat. Is that understood?

Not the ending he imagined, but this does not worry him. Rather, he feels a sense of relief—no need to guess how it will happen now. No more waiting.

Shells whistle overhead, light up the trees around him. He hunches, tries to see if the enemy is advancing up the hillside, but everything burns. Not all of the shelling is coming from the north—the angles are wrong. Friendly fire as well then. Command has given them up for dead. Another blast showers him with dirt and he retreats further into the pines. He must find a way back to his men, if any have survived.

A flicker of movement through the trees, hooking around the hillside. If the enemy outflanks him, he will not be able to rejoin his own, and they will ambush the retreating 5th Division his men have given their lives to protect. He

follows, away from the mortars, running and ducking to keep up, three-hundred feet, half a mile, more. He sweats in the heat, but keeps pace.

No sign of movement now and he pauses, scans the forested hillside, tries to guess his location. Impossible. Even radio communication has been a mess of contradiction since the official order to fall back—a full retreat after only one day of combat.

Mortar fire continues at his back, no longer close enough to shake the ground. The ridge ahead is covered in gooseberry and thick green underbrush, and he cannot move forward without showing himself.

Well, he thinks. Here I am. Fire behind, enemies ahead.

Enemies.

Command insists the Koreans in the north are not true-bone nationals.

Brainwashed by the commies in Moscow and Peking. Traitors.

But weren't these the same men who fought the empire? And what of their own government, of Syngman Rhee and the Americans? Was he just another puppet? Rumours circulate that half the ruling party collaborated with the Japanese.

None of this will matter if these soldiers from the north outflank him. He must fight for his Korea, the home that lives deep within him, the Korea of his father and ancestors, and he must fight so that *she* might have a place to return to, even if this is a foolish hope, a tiny flicker of light.

He creeps forward until he sees movement again. A calmness as he checks his revolver, ghosts tree to tree. Tinkling bells. Wind chimes. A clearing ahead, a temple built into the side of the hill, grey tile roof, red and turquoise pillars and rafters. No sounds from within as he moves to the gate, crouches beside a stone turtle. A small complex, only a few low buildings around a courtyard. He waits and watches, but sees no one. The monks will have fled at the first sounds of shelling.

Courage, he tells himself. *Move*.

He enters the courtyard, clocks an odd shape behind a pillar—a rope? A snake wrapped around the wood?

No, a tail.

His stomach drops as the huge black and white cat emerges to face him, ears flat. The animal looses an air-tearing snarl.

He cannot take his eyes from the predator, cannot run or raise his revolver. Thinks only, *you are supposed to be dead. The Japs hunted you into extinction*.

The animal paws towards him.

Mortars thud and detonate, and the wall of the temple behind the beast explodes in flame. The tiger leaps straight into the air, higher than Won-jae's head, twists and lands facing the splintering wood, then bolts from the complex.

Won-jae runs from the burning temple as well, no caution now, just speed down the south side of the hill as trees ignite and split around him. Faster. He

cannot feel his legs, only heat on his back and neck as the entire hillside whooshes into orange flame. An airstrike.

Into the valley and a dry riverbed, limbs numb as though he is lost in a dream, the rocks the only thing around him not burning.

He continues along the riverbed until he spots uniforms, two friendlies. He calls out, hands raised, and the men turn, salute. Privates Seong-gi and Yeong-ho. Alive or sharing his dream. Yeong-ho bleeds from his left knee. The two privates stare at him without speaking, then jump forward to pat down his shoulders and arms, and Won-jae realizes his uniform is smouldering, that he must look as if he has emerged from the blazing depths of hell. He discards his blackened jacket, smoke still rising from the cloth.

“Anyone else make it off the hill?”

“No Sir.” Seong-gi hesitates before offering details. “We thought you were dead, Sir.”

Won-jae forces a laugh for the sake of his men. “You sure I’m not?”

“Sir,” says Yeong-ho, cringing. “We failed to hold the hill. This is shameful.”

Is this true? Perhaps. And yet here they are.

“Our position was destroyed,” he says. “Friendly air strike.”

His men seem relieved by this, though they should not be. Won-jae bites his tongue, does not tell them they were never meant to hold the hill. Only die trying.

They walk south along the river bed's smooth stones, the sun setting red through clouds of smoke and ash. Yeong-ho limps between him and Seong-gi, arms around their shoulders to support his injured leg.

“Sir,” says Yeong-ho. “With respect. We saw you run straight into mortar fire.”

How are you alive? is the question the private cannot find.

They will think he is mad, of course, but there is no room here for a lie.

“I followed a tiger through a wall of flame.”

Boots on loose stone. High aircraft. Ash falling like snow.

“And Private? You could really stand to lose some weight.”

The General

His translator has a goddamned stutter, if you can believe it. Like a joke his men might tell to ease tension before landing on an enemy beach.

He breathes loudly through his nose, waits for the punchline, watches the small bespectacled man machine-gun Jap words at his translator, a Mormon farm boy from Utah, of course, who stutters them out in turn, the three of them standing in an empty meeting room next to his office.

“He s-s-says he is a city planner. He ask-k-k...” He can’t get this one out, switches gears, fights through the hard consonants of: “Please don’t go into the building’s basement.”

Jesus. Are they really going to make him ask why in the hell not? Just give him the punchline already, finish the damn joke. Rats? Flooding? A cracked foundation his engineers missed? Troubling headline, that: *Allied headquarters collapses.*

“There are b-b-bones.”

He raises his eyebrow on purpose, refuses to speak first. Seems any chance of humour has passed.

“H-h-human, s-s-sir.”

More quick-fire syllables he can't even begin to make out, doesn't much want to—would, in fact, be quite happy never to hear another word of Japanese the rest of his life.

His translator stumbles on, explains that the bombings disinterred remains from many of the city's graveyards, blast after blast tossing bones in all directions. The remains have been gathered for respectful reburial, but the locals don't know where to do this, nor have they even begun to piece them back together.

“S-s-sir. There are so m-m-many dead that—.”

He raises his hand and stops them, all the while staring out the window. *My God*, he thinks. *A building full of skeletons*. Just what he needs with the Korean peninsula about to implode.

“So, what you're telling me,” he looks directly at the civil planner, who immediately bows his head and averts his gaze, “is that if I were to climb down seven flights of stairs to the goddamned basement, open a closet maybe, I'd find a pile of skulls? Just piled up on the floor?”

A quick translation into Japanese—curiously, the farm boy doesn't stutter when speaking the foreign language. Something to ask about when he gets the chance. The Japanese man nods, replies in the affirmative.

“And they can't just burn them?”

More discussion. “It's c-c-complicated, s-s-sir.”

This time he laughs, even though he knows it'll probably offend. "That is surely God's simple and profound truth, son. And I'm guessing there are other buildings that are also full of bones? Other sites?"

Another translation and reply in the affirmative.

"M-m-many."

Presumably all of this took place after the building was inspected by his men and before his team moved in, though he rather likes the idea of a group of engineers so focussed on checking the building's structural integrity that they failed to notice skeletons in the basement.

He laughs again and dismisses the two men, stands at the window looking out over the broken city.

A city of bones.

The red sun sinks into the west, the light rich and full on the rubble and mad reconstruction below. The deepness of the evening light seems to make even this beautiful, and he catches his own smile in the window as he imagines recounting this conversation back home. Helluva punchline after all.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

He watches the northern half of the capital burn as night falls. The skyline glows and flashes. Third day of the invasion, 2nd through 5th Divisions crumbling into chaos and further retreat to the south bank of the Han, the city evacuating its northern suburbs in a frenzied panic.

The Americans are mobilizing, but not in time to save the city. Soon the army from the north will arrive on the other side of the river with artillery and tanks, and though many will try to stand, too many will flee, as they have at each major point of contact.

They run because they do not know what they are fighting for, do not believe in their leaders, are not certain they want to follow Syngman Rhee, this man who lived in America for thirty-five years. *Perhaps, they say, we would be better off with the so-called demon leader of the North. At least Korea would be whole again. At least we would have a leader who fought the Japanese.*

Heavy shelling north of the river. Men, women and children stream across the Hangang bridge, baskets on heads, some pulling carts or wheelbarrows.

Command tells them the man leading the armies of the North is not a hero of the resistance, but an imposter. But Won-jae has seen how *the imposter's* soldiers fight, their discipline and courage. Men full of belief. Maybe he waits for death on the wrong side of the river.

He should pray. *This is true.* But to whom? To his father? To the tiger spirit that now rules the land?

Truly there are predators everywhere, he thinks.

More civilians crowd the bridge.

President Rhee ordered them to fight to the death for Seoul, but the man has already fled south to Daejon on his private train. When Seoul falls, Daejon will be next. And then what? South again to the coast, to Masan, the city of his birth? Perhaps they will flee across the water to Jeju-do, make one last stand on the slopes of Halla-san, bleed finally into its black rock.

Jeju-do. The corpses. What if she had been among them? Would he still be ready to die facing north?

Beautiful Yoo-jin. Are you safe? Or have you already been claimed by the cannibal gods that continue to stalk our homeland?

Mortars hit the river and south bank before him, sending up geysers of water and mud. He barks for his men to hold steady, prepare to return fire, watch for civilians.

A group of soldiers climb the metalwork beneath the bridge, and Won-jae jogs to the nearest dugout to ask what's happening. The officer in charge outranks him, but does not seem to clock the impertinence of the question, looks at Won-jae wide eyed, sweat pouring down his face.

“Cousin,” says the man, demolishing any formality. “General Choi has given orders to take-out the bridge.”

“The enemy is too close,” says Won-jae. “There are still civilians crossing.”

And what if she is one of them?

The officer looks away and Won-jae understands. Their leaders have given up on the capital and its people. And once again he and his men have been abandoned in the hopes they might slow the northern army.

“Sir, we can at least try to block the northern entrance to the bridge. Give people a chance to clear out.”

“No time.”

The flash of light obliterates dark metal, water, thousands of souls on the bridge. Won-jae’s ears ring into silence. He feels no blast, walks towards the light and finds the bridge torn apart, but frozen, people and debris thrown from the white heat of the TNT and caught in mid-air. His breath condenses. He shivers. Ice crackles over the river.

He checks his hands and limbs. Frost stings his nose and ears. The quiet of an evening snowfall—soldiers’ fingertips frozen to triggers, mortars dangling above the bank of the river, unmoving masses of men, women and children amongst the twisted metal and bright light of the bridge.

The scrape of wood on ice as they come—five, ten, two dozen monks in white robes of mourning, bare heads shining in the light of the frozen fire. They skate on wood-block shoes along the river from the west towards the bridge. Long staffs, wooden prayer beads dangling.

A tiger prowls at the side of the first monk, white fur all but invisible over ice, its stripes swaying as it trots, black eyes recasting firelight.

The two figures stop before Won-jae. He cannot run, scream, feel anything other than cold creeping into his bones.

In panic, he calls out, "*Halabeoji!* Grandfather! Am I dead, or dreaming?"

Yes, replies the monk, his voice carrying easily through the quiet.

"I—I was at your temple. Near the new border, north of Munsan. It burned."

The figure does not respond.

Monks at the bridge circle, reach to touch frozen civilians with their mourning staffs, thaw them, lead them in droves westward along the icy river.

"*Halabeoji*. Have you come to take me?"

The monk tilts his head, dark eyes unblinking. The tiger paws nearer, snout to Won-jae's face, hot breath that smells of ash. The animal growls, a rumbling that runs the length of the river, fills the city, becomes the detonation as the bridge falls into the Han in a shower of concrete, steel and limbs.

His platoon abandons their post as mortars rain on the south bank. A sea of colliding men and women, running, fleeing. A child screams beside him and he stops to lift the boy, casts about for the child's family, but sees only chaos. He carries the boy away from the river and the burning bridge, away from the crackle of gunfire and the demon general's advancing legions.

The General

He sweeps torchlight over the stacks of bones. Sweat prickles his brow. A rising wave of claustrophobia crests and subsides, as he breathes musty air, stares at the disinterred framework of human remains.

The long dead. Not his doing. These bones might make up the foundation of his building, but their ghosts will haunt others.

He tries a laugh that catches in his throat.

How many of these dead had a part in colonizing Korea? Korea—all of his attention on the tiny peninsula now, the commies pushing ever further south. Seoul lost. Three days, that took. Daejon will be next. President Rhee's already on his way to Busan. *H.A.*, his men tell him. Morse for *hauling ass* south. How long before the man shows up in Tokyo?

The problem, he has been assured, is not with his own men. They fight with discipline and courage. The problem is that the gooks, his gooks, turn and run at the first sight of red.

“Explain this to me, oh great pile of bones: why are the gooks from the north fighting like tigers, while our gooks run like rabbits?”

Washington's spin has been nothing short of staggering. *Com mies fighting like savages. A Mongol horde from the north. Evil race hellbent on wiping out freedom.*

“Ring any bells? Sure does for me. Same stuff we said about your lot when we were tangled up island to island in the Pacific. When we were losing those fights. Thing is, and don’t go telling anyone this, your lot just wanted it more. Dug in. Least to begin with. This smells the same.”

The same. On and on. Rings of fire.

“Doesn’t help that the reds are battle-hardened. Just finished fighting for Mao. I’ll tell you this for free: they either believe in their cause or are terrified of their leaders.”

His ROK troops are just kids that grew up bullied by the Japs. And this is what Washington refuses to see. Or can’t admit.

War without end.

He steps further into the basement, finds a skull with his flashlight beam. Acheson and Rusk in Washington would have a field day if they could see him now—the *Gaijin Shogun* asking a pile of nip skeletons how to deal with a horde of marauding gooks.

“Well, that’s it then, isn’t it, oh great pile of bones? I need more men. Three more divisions to start. Full air support. Let’s see how the commies deal with fire from the sky. Turn Pyong-fucking-yang into Nagasaki the second I get a chance. Save my boys the trouble. And damned if I won’t deal with Mao the same way.”

There are still words he is not ready to say aloud, though they careen off the walls of his mind: hell with Truman, Acheson and Rusk. The holy trinity of America overseas. What did they know about war?

Nothing, says the skull.

“Precisely. Well. Duty calls. You all stay put.”

His short laugh echoes, but whether off the far walls of the basement, or the bones themselves, he cannot be sure.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

Evening falls and he lights a cigarette, smokes as he walks through camp, fading light and growing shadows casting the collection of ragged tents and soldiers huddled before fires into shades of grey. All around him, burning dots of red glow like tiny eyes.

Daejon has fallen, of course, and their fearless leader has retreated yet further, all the way south-east to Busan, one foot on the peninsula, one already on a boat headed back to America. What to think of such a man? Such eloquent words of reunification and freedom, and yet no courage to lay his own body on the line.

Seoul to Daejon to Miryang with the 4th Infantry, a conglomeration of survivors and new recruits. Miryang—strange to be in this place again, facing yet another enemy. The leaves on the hill are changing colour and coolness crackles the air. The hills remind him of her, although he has all but lost hope that she could have survived this new war.

United Nations troops have joined them in full force, soldiers from places he has barely dreamed of: Canada, England, Australia, Turkey and the Netherlands. A perimeter around Busan, with Masan and Miryang on the southwestern edge. Nothing but the sea at their backs now. Won-jae prays the foreigners by his side will help end the fighting. The air power is making a

difference, and reports that the Turks fight like demons, that the Canadians and Australians refuse to surrender no matter the odds, send shivers of resolve through his own men. He sees their confidence returning in the way they walk—no longer stooped and ducking with each distant gunshot or explosion. But with so much already lost, so many cities levelled and civilians killed, surely it is too late to truly consider *victory*.

He is told refugee camps behind the perimeter are swelling to unmanageable sizes, that the Korean National Police force works overtime to weed out guerrillas and communist sympathizers. No doubt this will be the cause of the ruckus ahead of him now. He strides deeper into the cluster of tents and finds a black-uniformed police officer shouting at a UN soldier, an American. The police officer gestures at a group of women and teenagers, shouts that they are commies and must be *dealt with*.

Dead civilians in the mine. Men and women on the road north. His own father.

The American stands hands on hips, shaking his head. Won-jae asks the red-faced police officer what the issue is, though he already knows the answer, and the man responds without checking Won-jae's rank—a problem. This police force has become an entity of its own brutal design, no longer accountable.

Who will police the police? ask his men when they think he's out of earshot. *Doesn't anyone remember how they served the Japs?* He listens to such complaints without interrupting. Could not find words even if he wanted to. He

has read reports that make his skin crawl. Lynchings. Mass graves. Live grenades shoved *inside* women.

“Fucking commies!” The police officer still hasn’t looked at him.

“And?” demands Won-jae sharply. He knows the answer, but wants the man to see he is not just a concerned civilian, that he represents the ROK as an officer now.

“I have orders to execute traitors on sight.”

Untrue. There are no orders at all. Only men acting like animals.

“And this *waegukin*,” he spits at the American’s feet, “ has no authority here. He is not one of us.”

The American nods at Won-jae, as if sensing they are of like mind. He points at the police officer, then at the civilians, who cower in the shadows of a tattered tent. “*Anniyo*,” says the American, pronouncing the Korean word carefully. “No. Do you understand?”

Won-jae nods, calls over private Seong-gi and a few of his men, tells them to take the suspects into custody for questioning.

“Thank-you, cousin,” says Won-jae to the police officer. “The army will deal with this matter now.”

The man reaches out as if to grab Won-jae’s uniform, but catches himself, hand dangling in the space between them. Won-jae dismisses this folly by turning his back on the man and escorting the women and teenagers to a lock-up across the camp. He explains to them that they will be questioned, that the Red Cross

will check that they are healthy, that they will receive a small meal. At the promise of food, the groups' pace quickens, and they march without complaint.

The American soldier walks with them, waits to see them delivered safely to the lock-up. When this is done, the soldier salutes Won-jae and thanks him. He watches the man leave. Does he even understand what he has become involved in?

He wakes at dawn to hammering. A stray barks at the echoing noise, howls until there is no point trying for a few minutes extra sleep. He rises into the cool morning air and smells his own body and the mustiness of the tent, tries and fails to remember how it feels to be clean, submerged in a green-tea bath next to his father, back and ears scrubbed red. He'd hated this as a child, but would trade nearly anything for such a feeling now.

He walks to the latrines and pisses into the reeking pit, then ducks into the communications tent to see if anything has changed in the night. The private on the radio salutes him, tells him no, that the UN lines are holding. He heads for the mess tent, but wailing from the eastern side of camp sets him running to the lock-up.

Soldiers ring a wooden pole, a severed hand nailed to its top. In a pile beside the fence, six of the women and teenagers from the night before lie unmoving, clothing bloodied. The wailing comes from inside the lock-up, where those who have been accused but not yet tried scream *treachery, injustice, murder*.

Won-jae fights to control his anger and disgust, barks orders to the nearest soldiers to take down the pole and burn it, to remove the dead. Half the camp watches now. The other prisoners in the lock-up continue to yell, though to whom even they can't possibly know. A group of Americans approach, led by the soldier from the night before, red-faced and yelling at him in English. But what could he tell this man even if they shared a common tongue? That his own leaders should not have given so much power to a police force of bullies and collaborators before the war began? That even the weight of the horrors he has seen with his own eyes will not break the frozen surface of all that has happened on this very ground?

Three more burley Americans arrive dragging the Korean police officer in his underclothes through the mud. The officer tries to stand, but the soldiers shove him back to his knees. All eyes turn to Won-jae.

“Was it you?” he asks the police officer. “The hand?”

The officer spits at his feet. “What’s the matter? Don’t have the stomach for it? No wonder your kind keep running.”

This is too much to take from a man whose only combat experience is the slaughter of women and children. Won-jae makes eye contact with the American soldier, nods, then turns his back on the police officer and whatever comes next.

Shovels scrape loose earth. Crows wing over patches of land burnt bare by napalm and pitted by mortars.

A dark-skinned soldier sketches the faces of the dead in a small notebook with a stub of pencil, his fingers pinched and cramped. The artist looks nearly Korean, though he wears a UN-issued uniform. Won-jae envies the man's concentration, how he seems utterly absorbed by each line, each scribble and shading. Dark skin, dark brown hair, dark eyes. Perhaps one of his parents is Korean.

Magpies hop and flap in a jerky perimeter around the six corpses. A soldier takes a swing at one of the birds with his shovel. Not even close.

He approaches the man with the sketchbook, but hesitates. Command would have him confiscate the notebook for official review, but he is not interested in such protocol. These dead will not be remembered elsewhere, and were probably guilty of nothing more than speaking with the wrong accent. Village after village levelled by the fighting, people scrambling in all directions, looking for sanctuary. No telling who was from where anymore, the Korean police seeing red in every shadow.

Another pit. Another pile of dead brothers and sisters. How many unmarked graves in his homeland now? How many ghost fires burning?

He continues to watch the man draw, until the foreigner senses his gaze and looks up. Won-jae feels he has been caught spying, has interrupted something private, some small piece of autonomy amidst the herds of refugees and soldiers and ruin.

"Ashi-gesseoyo? Korea?"

The man shakes his head. "Sorry. Canada."

Won-jae leaves the man to his sketches, leaves the soldiers to their digging, the dead to their bone road.

He paces the ever-swelling perimeter of the camp, tries not to think on whether or not the side he fights for is just or good. The hillside nearest is bare, burned clear by chemicals dropped from American planes. The Red Cross tells them the groundwater is no longer safe to drink, not that this will stop civilians from using it.

A poisoned well.

The forest path where he first met Yoo-jin is nearby, he guesses, although the bombings have changed the landscape dramatically. For the thousandth time, he wonders how she saw him then, still a gangly teenager on the brink of manhood. What of her now? Is she lying in a cold pit, or has she simply started out on a new path and never returned? He'd met a woman who insisted she'd been treated by *a* Yoo-jin in a military hospital in Manchukuo, but there was no way to confirm this, nor to find out why she hadn't returned with the boatloads of refugees. The war in China? American bombs? Cholera?

His gut twists.

Fingernail marks on the metal door of the airless submarine.

The General

Has he ever really looked at a bone? Up close? Fault lines and discolourations, pale and muted—a faded map inked with primitive dyes.

“Another question for you, oh wise dead. How do I fight an invisible enemy?”

All those mountains, reports of the Chinese over the Yalu, though he hasn't been able to spot them. Even went up in his own Spyglass B-19, flew coast to coast across the peninsula, didn't see more than a few women and donkeys. How was it possible to move an entire army without being seen? These were men, not ghosts. He'd find them, even if he had to raze every village north of Seoul, drop defoliant on every damn tree, napalm everything that moved.

Behold the wrath of the Gaijin Shogun. Fire from the sky, as prophesied.

When he'd fled the Philippines in '42, he'd said he would return, started over from Australia, fought back island by island, even when it looked like the war in the Pacific was done and dusted. And he was doing the same now—his landing at Incheon perfect, though he still couldn't figure out why in hell the commies hadn't mined the harbour. An *amphibious* landing. Hard not to imagine frogs in helmets rushing the beach. Probably do better than the Koreans. Never seen soldiers retreat so fast. Though the Japanese had to account for some of that—left the country headless, true leaders dead or in exile.

The reds they'd captured at Incheon had given up without a fight. What was at play there? A trap? The Chinese?

“What do the disinterred dead think of all this? You've seen Armageddon on your own doorsteps, destruction that blots out the sun. What do you make of the reds?” He paces. Nods to his favourite skull. “Yeah, that's what I think too. Commies thought it'd be over quick. Thought this *gaijin* was washed up. That he'd run scared back to Washington.”

But even if the Chinese did come in numbers, he wasn't going anywhere, would nuke them back to the Stone Age if it came to that.

“Maybe the Stone Age doesn't seem so long ago here, but rest assured it won't be pleasant. Just ask your people in Hiro-shima.”

Water pipes creak and ding. His flashlight batteries are fading, the light piss coloured. Sweat trickle-creeps down his back. The stacks of bones appear more wooden and less varied in the watery light. Like beaver dams he'd seen pictures of as a kid.

Dams. Not such a bad idea. Take out a few of the big ones in the north. Open the floodgates of hell. Drown 'em like rats.

They tell him no one's figured out what to do with the bones. Got to take care of the living first. Fair enough. In the meantime, though, he's losing good men in the field. Too many. And the cold isn't helping—lost thirty-one in one night because they got stuck in their goddamned sleeping bags.

The flashlight fades further. How many dead over the past ten years? How many bones?

“Pops was right. Peace is a fiction.”

More accusations of ROK soldiers and Korean police executing POWs, dumping them in mass graves. Reports that his men have done the same. As a rule, war brings out both the best and the worst in men. But there is no honour in killing prisoners. What if the commies start doing the same to his own boys?

The light is too weak to see by and he turns his back on the bones, starts the climb up the stairs to his perch overlooking the Chiyodo district of Tokyo. Time to send orders for further troop movements in Korea, see about taking Pyongyang now that the commies are hiding somewhere along the Chinese border.

If the bones could speak, he thinks, they would ask him how he handles such weight, world-changing decisions, responsibility over so many lives. The answer is simple: in times like these someone has to grasp the crucible of war.

So why not him?

박유진 (*Park Yoo-jin*)

Pressure on the femoral artery. The soldier calls out to her in delirium, his voice lost as a low-flying aircraft rattles the field hospital. The medic makes a mess of his sutures and she takes over without speaking. Antiseptic stings her nostrils. Mortars fall in the distance.

Halmeoni, even if it were possible to travel further south, could I ever be at home there again?

The medic curses, cowers as another aircraft shakes the tent.

Granddaughter, you are a healer. Like your ancestors before you. There is light in this.

Ten-thousand voices clamour for attention, call for the ears of their enemies, the blood of those who have betrayed their own, the rhythmic snipping of scissors trimming the grass upon their graves.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

Violet ash over snow. A field of chimneys, thousands of brick pillars scorched black by American carpet bombs. North of the 38th, the trail iced, feet numb. Not a single village in tact, only charred remains and scorched farmland, the only survivors ragged and starving in the hills, hunted by the Americans.

They say: *how can you tell the difference between a civilian and a soldier when even the women fight?* But he knows this is not the heart of the matter, that in truth the Americans are resolved to slaughter, to wiping-out an entire country if this is the only way to end the freezing march north, the fighting in the mountains. Thousands of American and UN troops have fallen here, far from their own homes—further thousands missing in action.

They tell him they are winning, that soon all of Korea will be unified under the banner of democracy and peace, but how can those who have witnessed their own children burn to death in a shower of napalm ever know peace?

The frozen crust of snow breaks with each step. He sinks inches, struggles for breath. His platoon follows the 11th Division, attached to a contingent of Canadian, Australian and British soldiers and engineers. His men busy themselves hunting carrier pigeons, while further north the Americans and their airforce chase the retreating People's Army towards the Yalu and China. So he is told, though his men are more concerned with keeping warm. They stuff their jackets with

newspapers and comic books that the American government sends by the crate. Last week they followed a trail of bloodstained comics to an entire company of US troops frozen in their sleeping bags, bayoneted in the night when their zippers froze.

This is why the Americans drop so many bombs. They have their own homes to think of, far from fire falling from the sky, bayonets in the dark, piles of children's bird-like bones, charred black and picked over by dogs and rats.

They crest a hill, find the frozen Imjin stretching east-west below, glittering white with fresh snow. The sun breaks the cloud cover and the world shines clean.

They descend towards the small camp on the river's bank, marvel at the Canadians gliding on metal blades over cleared and polished ice, long sticks in hand as they chase a small black disc, fire it back and forth and into goals at each end of the makeshift rink—an oval of wooden crates. The men laugh, fly over the ice gracefully, move the disc with their sticks as though it is effortless.

Half the men take a break and a group of ruddy-faced Australians lace-up to take their place, an instant mess of falling and sliding bodies, as the Canadians spin away, pass the disc so fast the Aussies cannot even touch it, slip and howl on their backs. The slap-clatter of skates and sticks on ice, the raucous laughter of men acting like children.

Won-jae's heart strings thrum.

The General

How many bones can the earth hold? He hears them at night now, rattling out an archaic Morse, an ecstatic shifting and crackling, a restlessness his own bones echo.

Sixth floor window, Tokyo gleaming even under cloud. All that glass. So conspicuously absent when he'd arrived.

Truman has called him back to Washington. Acheson's doing, no doubt. The commies have pushed them south again, the winter handing his men loss after loss. He has a sneaking suspicion they will end up back at the 38th.

The bones rattle up through the concrete walls of the building. *They know.* The men in power are not warriors, do not understand him or anything about the peninsula for which his men lay down their lives so valiantly. He has the courage to do what no politician is willing to—use the atomic powers at their disposal to obliterate the commie army in the field, to burn their general where he stands, to call forth a heat so intense it will dry the Yalu, outshine the sun.

A heat that leaves no bones.

One last look around the office. One last look over the city he has rebuilt.

He has never been asked to leave a war, to pretend he can live happily in the fictional world of peace. His father warned him of this, told him that in the end he was just another soldier, that he'd spend his last days following orders he

didn't like. This he can live with. Less so the commies besting his army. Nor can he find any solace in some other fool taking over command now that the hard work is done, and there is only stalemate on the horizon.

A private arrives and waits at the open door behind him—the man's reflection ghosting the window. He turns and takes in the young man's thin brown moustache, high cheekbones. A stiff salute.

He hears himself mutter *at ease*, though he is more interested in those cheekbones, in the frame of the man's shoulders, his long neck.

The private escorts him down the stairs. Shoe heels on stone.

None of this matters, he thinks. Not the shining glass of this new Tokyo, not the hair on this private's upper lip, not the politicians in DC or their stacks of reports. He has seen the bones that lie beneath it all, the yellowing, calcified truth of the world, the rattling gospel of all humanity and all endeavours under heaven. *The bones of things*. Of men and cities, of drifting continents and island chains. We map them and groom them and call them by names in many tongues, but none of it amounts to anything in the end. And why should the works of his own hands be any different?

Out the doors to the waiting black Buick—a civilian vehicle, he notes. The private holds open a door, but he pauses, looks back at the building, listens carefully for one last rattle.

“Sir?”

The private assumes he has forgotten something, but of course he hasn't. And he cannot bring with him what he'd most like to—that whole damn basement of bones shipped straight to the Oval Office itself, piled up for Truman and his cronies to stare at.

And who knows? Maybe they'd learn a thing or two.

김원재 (*Kim Won-jae*)

Another charred village, his men uneasy. Like farmers in the south, the people who watch them march now did not ask for liberation or war, rather for good crops and a fair share of profit from those who own the land, though most have never received even this. And now what? Paddies ruined. Homes levelled. The strongest backs in each village broken.

Explosions to the east—B52s dropping ordnance. Massive plumes of smoke rise into the blue sky. Friendly troops, UN and ROK, catch them up, double-timing past his platoon. He nods consent for his men to join them, while he lingers in the rubble of the village, gathers what info he can from those passing. The northern army is not content to have retaken Pyongyang and are pressing hard, the Chinese moving in numbers now that the snow has melted, taking and inflicting huge losses only five miles north, many fighting without shoes or proper weapons, but there are so many of them, some who fought for Mao, and they work in tandem with North Korean guerrillas and troops dug into the hills.

Is there a single *pyong* of land on this peninsula that has not been burned, a village not soaked in blood, a valley where bodies do not rot inches below the earth?

North, south, repeat. Seoul lost and retaken twice—the capital dust and flattened metal. They have spent more time marching than fighting, and this call to retreat back below the 38th, the line where all of this started, leaves him shattered. He barely sleeps now for the pale faces that come when he closes his eyes, for fear that when he does finally fall into an exhausted slumber he will wake to a bayonet in his gut.

The ranks of retreating soldiers thin. More lines further up the valley, vehicles. All heading south. There is little he can do here, but he feels obligated to tell any surviving villagers they have a choice to flee south before the commies arrive. He rounds a half-fallen wall and finds a collapsed make-shift hospital, Red Cross flag hanging from the ruined tent. Two helmets sit on the earth before it like mud-caked turtles.

A cry from behind the wreckage, where he finds two Korean soldiers pinning a woman to the ground. A nurse, he thinks, her green gown dirt and bloodstained, hair over her face. One of the soldiers curses and shakes his hand where the woman has bitten him. The man kicks the woman in the ribs, pins her arms while the other soldier unbuttons his trousers.

Won-jae shouts for the men to stand down. In truth, he is not surprised, is told even officers from other divisions take women from the north as whores, use them until they become ill or the army has to move at speed.

Just like the Japanese.

“Privates!” he shouts. “Walk away.” Probably he should heed his own advice, but he cannot shake the anger boiling in his gut.

The men stand to face him, clock that he is alone.

“With respect, Sir. Fuck off,” says one.

The other hasn't even bothered to belt his pants, and Won-jae barks for them to stand at attention, draws his revolver.

One last battle. And then?

He looks to the kneeling woman. A mistake. The first private draws a pistol of his own, levels it at Won-jae, tells him again to fuck off.

“Can't you see she's not one of us? Don't you have somewhere more important to be?”

Won-jae shakes his head, tries to find words, sees the woman behind the men grab a stone as large as her hand. She stands and swings the rock into the back of the unarmed soldier's head. The man topples in a shower of blood. The other private swivels with his pistol, points it at the woman, arm shaking at the sight of his fallen companion.

“You fucking wh—”

Won-jae fires twice into the man's chest, sends him crashing backwards into a wall. The private slumps and dies in a seated position, eyes staring straight ahead.

Done. I am done. I will fight no more.

Won-jae removes his helmet and places it carefully at his feet, lays his gun beside it. He peels off his jacket and shirt, folds them, leaves his freshly-shed skin behind and turns north. If he is not stopped and shot as a deserter, he will walk straight into communist lines.

Surrender. I surrender. My body. My fate. I am done.

“Cousin. Please stop.”

The woman’s voice surprises him. He had forgotten her. But he will not stop. Today he will meet his true fate. *Unmyeong*. He will find peace in death.

“Cousin! Wait!”

The woman pulls his arm, blocks his path with her thin body. A scar runs across her forehead, but there is no mistaking her face.

“Won-jae?” she says. “Those blue eyes. It is you, isn’t it?”

So. He is already dead. He did not expect such a swift end.

“Beautiful sister. I felt no pain. And I am overjoyed to see you, even if it means we have both passed into shadow.”

Yoo-jin pinches his arm and he flinches. “Brother. Snap out of it. We are not dead, even if I have wished it many times.”

He blinks. Shivers. Bombs fall to the east. The last of the ROK troops have passed through the valley, leaving them alone between armies.

Yoo-jin pulls him by the hand to the collapsed medical tent, retrieves a white robe from beneath and drapes it over his bare shoulders.

He thanks her, holds out his left hand so she can see the faint scars. “Do you remember?”

Yoo-jin nods. “Of course.”

He cannot form words. Thinks, *don't you realize I have searched for you all these years, prayed for you, dreamed of you even in daylight?*

His feet slip in mud. No, a puddle, water spreading and rising, swelling over scorched rice paddies, filling the valley around them.

“The dam,” says Yoo-jin, pointing to the black smoke in the east.

The water rises above their ankles, their knees. Debris and wooden planks bob, churning in the westerly current.

They clamber onto the thatched roof of a fallen hut, and it too begins to float as the water surges, pulls them west down the valley, away from both armies and the fire and smoke of the air raids. Their makeshift vessel spins slowly, as birds of all sizes rise, disturbed by the water, flapping and circling. Magpies, darting brown sparrows, bright white cranes.

Yoo-jin tilts her head, as if listening to music. He wonders what it is she hears. Bird call or detonation? His wildly beating heart?

Her gaze falls from the sky and rests on his eyes, though she remains silent.

“Perhaps I was mistaken,” he says after a moment. “Perhaps I will not die until tomorrow.”

“Perhaps,” answers Yoo-jin, taking his hand and holding it tightly, as they float westward through the hills of their homeland, surrendering to the strength of this great new water.

Epilogue

할머니 (*Halmeoni*)

She walks slowly next to her grandson, the slopes of Baekdu-san too rugged for her tired legs and feet, though the boy lets her lean on his shoulder, whispers encouragement.

A good boy. He will find a good wife one day. But not here, not on the cliff-edge of the world, the holy mountain that rises above their homeland.

The small, all-but-forgotten temple sits low and weathered amongst boulders, mossed roof tiles and wooden walls tucked into the grey landscape. Sunlight prickles their heads and necks, and the boy pulls a plastic water bottle from his blue backpack, helps her drink.

Granddaughter. It is time.

Yes, she replies. *My bones have told me as much.*

Wind whips the trail, stirs up more voices, though they are so familiar now she does not flinch at their cacophonied anger. Her grandson shivers. He is tall for his age, dark hair and fox-like eyes, his father's, and for this she is thankful. She would not be reminded of his grandfather in such a way, nor would she have him suffer as an outcast.

Those blue eyes. *Like tiny oceans,* she thinks.

She tells her grandson to wait in the temple. He hesitates, then obeys, leaves her alone on the mountainside to look out over cloud, rock and lake.

Here, Beautiful One. This one last task set before you. Healing is a heavy burden, and you have borne it with grace, if not ease. This one last thing, and then rest.

She shuffles to a patch of bare stone and kneels with difficulty, touches the surface with her cold hands, then with her forehead as she bows. Finally, she presses her lips to the rock. The earth trembles.

A vision of the peninsula shivering and creaking, the earth splitting, giving up its dead, exposing legions of white bone to the sun.

Ten-thousand cranes take flight in the depths of the DMZ, their bright white wings calling forth typhoon winds that shake and tear at the bunkers and guard towers, detonate mine after mine, topple miles of barbed wire, the godless false border obliterated.

Further south along the coast the storm pushes rainclouds over hills, floods mine shafts and abandoned railway tunnels, washes out hidden bones. An ear-splitting moaning erupts, a crying out of forgotten voices over the land. Ghost-fires flicker and bend in the winds.

Traffic stops dead on the Namhae expressway to Busan, where a black and white tiger pads across asphalt lanes, two cubs in tow. No camera flashes, but children's noses press against windows, breath fogging their views of the lithe animals disappearing into the lush foliage of the hills.

Back on the holy mountain, her grandson sits shoeless in lotus before a cobwebbed altar. He has no doubt heard of many gods and knows what she has

spoken of late at night, her tongue loose from rice wine and bone weariness. The boy does not bow, as if sensing that the altar is only the surface of something fathomless and unknown, but he closes his eyes and breathes deeply.

Secretly, she guesses, he prays that his black and white sneakers, which he has left on the threshold of the temple, and which he loves despite their worn soles, will not somehow disappear while he sits.

Murmuring from the roof joists, the wooden walls, the trembling earth.

The boy's eyes snap open.

He is alone in the room, and yet it is so full.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Both Park Hyun-un and the epigraph for “Typhoon Kingdom” are fictional. The lines: “I came through and I shall return,” and “I have returned,” on pages 166 and 219 of “Typhoon Kingdom” are taken from General Douglas MacArthur’s speeches in Terowie and Leyte, as found in the PBS film *The American Experience: MacArthur*, the transcripts of which are available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/macarthur/filmmore/reference/primary/index.html#pinky.

GLOSSARY OF ROMANIZED KOREAN

Vocabulary (appearing in italics throughout)

- abba-ji (pappa/father- formal, informal without “ji”)
- ae-eoreun (little man/child acting as adult)
- aigwishin (ghost child)
- ajik (and yet)
- ajumma (married woman, auntie)
- ajussi (married man, uncle)
- anniyo (no)
- baek-il (one hundred day celebration for child)
- baekjung (lowest caste of tanners and butchers etc.)
- baesinja (traitor)
- ballan (uprising)
- bballiwa (hurry)
- bbeakkin ddang (stolen land)
- biman (fullness)
- byeonhwa (transition)
- chinilpa (collaborators with Japan)
- chinjeol (kindness)

- deoleoun-pi (impure blood)
- eomma-ji (mom/mother- formal, informal without “ji”)
- eonni (“older sister” if speaker is female)
- eunhaeng (ginkgo)
- geoji (dwelling)
- gongju (princess)
- gotong (suffer)
- halabeoji (grandfather/old man)
- halmeoni (grandmother/old woman)
- Han (Chinese)
- hanbok (traditional Korean dress)
- hangeul (written word/Korean)
- hanguk-aw (spoken word/Korean)
- honbul (ghost fire)
- hwan-yeong (welcome)
- Ilbon (Japanese)
- jabjong (mutt- very rude reference to person’s ancestry)
- Jang Seung (The Guardian- Korean shamanic god)
- jeonnamu (fir tree)
- jjimjilbang (bath house/sauna)
- kamsa hamnida (thank you)
- kimchi (spicy pickled vegetables)

- kkaennip (sesame leaves)
- kkachi (magpie)
- Manchu (Chinese)
- mat neun (right/correct thinking)
- mudang (healer/shaman)
- Muhan-sarang (title of a fictional Korean ballad- “Infinite Love”)
- muhon-kut (exorcism ceremony/ritual)
- mul gwishin (storm/water ghost)
- nabyeong (leprosy)
- nae (yes)
- namdongsaeng (younger brother)
- nesekki (my child)
- neuseunhan yaegi (loose talk)
- nok-cha (green tea)
- nuna (“older sister” if speaker is male)
- pyong (measurement of land)
- sa (the number four, unlucky)
- sasan (stillborn)
- siginjong (cannibals)
- sonamu (pine tree)
- sutcheonyeo (pure/virgin)
- ttatteutan (warmth)

- uimu (duty)
- uni joeun (fortunate/blessed)
- unmyeong (fate)
- Wae (Japanese)
- waegukin (foreigner)
- yangban (ruling elite)
- yeodongsaeng (younger sister)
- Yeongdeungsin (Grandmother Sea- Korean shamanic goddess)
- yeonghon (soul)
- yeonsan japgwi (demons)
- yumyeonghan (famous)

Phrases

- akzwiya mulleotgeora! (“evil spirit begone!”- shaman’s chant)
- ashi-gasseoyo (do you understand?)
- dae Haminguk (Great Korea!)
- ehduedda (it’s no bother/don’t mention it)
- hana, dul, set (one, two, three)
- Ilbon-ui gullehgateunnyun (Japanese whore)
- Joguk Manse (Long live the Fatherland)
- jejeongshini aniya (going mad/insane)

- quenchanayo (that's fine/no matter/it's ok)