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The Night in Ghostly Rumor

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The Night in Ghostly Rumor

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Personal Statement

This project was born when I discovered a box set of VHS's in my mother's home: a documentary series called *The Forgotten War: Korea*. Curious, hoping to learn more about a war that occupied a total of five paragraphs in my history book, I began to watch the documentary series.

The very first film, *The First Forty Days* followed a fictional lieutenant in the Korean War, writing about the battles he had engaged in. His diction was similar to the diction of the hard-boiled detective novels. He described the firing of mortars the way Phillip Marlowe might describe following a suspect. The story was seductive: I found myself wanting to fight in the war.

My interest in the language of the hard-boiled detective novel began with my interest in narrative and Lacan's theories of the gendering of language.

My focus on the hard-boiled detective novels of the 30's, 40's, and 50's regarded two issues specifically: the depiction and representation of violence and masculinity, and the mysterious, incomprehensible women within the novels.

Lacan's Law of the Father represents those norms and conventions that socialized beings accept in order to participate in society and language. The Law of the Father is Lacan's answer to Derrida's insistence that the system of signification in language must have a center. If the masculine is what binds signifier to signified, then it stands to reason that the masculine favors prose, where language is orderly and plots are resolved.

It struck me as appropriate that detective novels seem to, intuitively, follow the same understanding: the men are the vehicles that negotiate meaning as they unfold the plot while the women are the wild unknown, the mysterious other.

Helene Cisoux posited that, according to Lacan's model, the feminine favors poetry. That feminine language, while excluded from the norms of a patriarchal society, is also freed from the bondage of convention.

Edward Said furthered these theories, suggesting that a dominant *culture* can serve as the center of language and social convention. Specifically, in *Orientalism*, Said suggests that Western culture associates itself with the normal, the moral, and the reasonable while Eastern cultures are associated with the misshapen, the immoral, and the mystic. Orientalism is the mean in which the occident can displace its own deviations in the figure of the orient, while still enjoying these deviations through exoticism. Consider opium. By associating the East with drug use, the West, by means of binary opposition, is associated with sobriety. But the exoticism of opium is an expression of the West's concealed desire for opium. Thus, the association between the East and opium is not owed to any innate quality of either object, or from the Eastern cultures themselves, but rather from the assertion and subversion of norms formed by the Occident.

Lastly, this novella was inspired by *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad. Like Marlow, the main character of my novel must negotiate the boundaries between the metropole and the colony. This story is about the journey into the realm of the "other."

I chose to begin my thesis in the knowable and logical realm of prose through the detective novel. The main character is a man, from the West, troubled by his nightmares

of the East and the death of his wife. My goal was for the main character, Weston, to journey to the feminine and the poetic. Weston's desire is to resolve the mystery of the novel, and create a linear story.

Dasom Ahn, then, is the mysterious femme fatale of this detective novel. She is the mysterious other. Dasom Ahn has, in her possession, the answer to the novel's mystery. She is the linear progression. However, Weston must negotiate with Dasom, through language, in order to fulfill his desire.

His communications with Dasom quickly complicate the novel, bringing to light Weston's subconscious desires. We discover that it is not, in fact, the peninsula of Korea that haunts Weston's dreams, but rather his own actions.

I want to say, finally, that Karl Marx's theory of reification was central to my choice of subject matter, time, and setting. Reification is the process by which we turn people, or our relationship to people, into things. We forget that every commodity produced in our society is the result of the interaction between people. We do not see those social relations because we've come to see them through the exchange of objects. It is not surprising to me, then, that The Korean War is named "The Forgotten War." The Korean War was the first international war the United States fought in order to contain an ideology: Communism. America wanted to protect capitalist interests in the East, and in doing so kept South Korea's market open to the first world. Perhaps the war has been reified, replaced by Korean products we purchase unquestioningly, oblivious to the violence and tragedy that made the Samsung flat screen TV in Sears a possibility.

The Night in Ghostly Rumor

1

The roar of the engines is constant and unrelenting. We've been listening to them for fourteen hours yet Horace still hasn't acquired the common sense to move closer to me. Instead, Horace screams his life story across the cold metal floor of the hop. For the past hour he's told me about the trials and travails of his relationship with Jeanie, his dissatisfied high school sweetheart.

"We used to really have a good time," he shouts.

Horace's face is thick and long. His dark eyebrows look like fuzzy caterpillars on his heavy brow, and his lips twist and turn under his long nose. It's easy to imagine his face five years ago, before the war. Where his cheeks are hollow and sharp there must have been some baby fat to complement his protruding bottom lip. His hair is curly and dark, and his hands awkward and large.

"I bought her a Hoover before I left. The ads all say that there's nothing women like more than a Hoover. But all she did was stick it in the closet; like she didn't like it or somethin'. Just said thanks. Not even a thank *you*, or, I love it sweetheart. I really don't know what to do."

I fold the newspaper in my lap and lean forward as far as the harness will allow me, trying to get as much of an advantage over the engines as I am able.

“Horace, my friend, don’t listen to what those advertising companies tell you. Women don’t like hoovers, they like to be listened to.”

“What?” Horace yells. I clear my throat and shout.

“Horace, you need to talk to women.” There are only twelve men on this plane. It’s strange to see the empty seats. Their wanting harnesses rattle against the metal siding. In the war they packed us tight, like sardines. Those days they needed more bodies and they needed them quickly.

“Talk?” He shouts.

“Yes, *talk* to her. Find out what she really wants.”

“What do I say?” Horace’s bushy, dark eyebrows pinch together towards the middle of his face.

“What you’re thinking, I guess. How she’s got you down with the way she’s being.”

Horace nods, thinking on this. He picks at the harness aimlessly.

“Do you got a wife, Weston?” He asks.

“I did.” I open my newspaper. My throat is getting hoarse.

“I’m sorry. You must’ve really loved each other.”

“Not at all.” I shrug at him, “She killed herself.” Finally, Horace is silent. He leans back in his seat, unsure of what to say. I can tell he’s uncomfortable, that he’s searching every dark recess of his mind for an appropriate consolation. Finally a conversation to his left about a Packard Four Hundred gives him an avenue to escape me.

I appreciate the silence.

It's been seven years since I stepped foot on the Korean peninsula. Seven years ago it was because of the war. But it's August 1957 now and I'm returning to Korea because I can't escape it. Korea, that hellish dreamscape of a peninsula.

My mission is to search for First Lieutenant Hill.

My mission was given to me back at Pacific Command, where I went after the scandal and Nadia. I had resigned from the civilian police force and reenlisted in the military to escape the accusatory looks of my neighbors. Honolulu, for the most part, treated me better than New York.

I remember having a heavy feeling the morning I before I received my assignment. I had the sense that something had been set in motion, like falling dominoes. This feeling unnerved me, and I was grateful for the distraction of a new assignment. I reported to General Perry in a cramped, narrow conference room. In the middle of the conference room there was a long, oblong table covered in maps and reports. General Perry was sitting at furthest end from me. His fists were squarely set on the dark oak tabletop. A beige manila file was open before him.

In spy movies the rooms are dark and mysterious, filled with artifacts and war spoils. But the conference room is lit with fluorescent light and there is no government issued chair, tile, or speck of dust that I can't see.

Still, General Perry is terrifying to look at even without the cloak and daggers bullshit of the cinema. Perry's mouth is frozen in a perpetual scowl. The creases between his eyebrows are deep and give you the impression that he's been glaring for a long time. His hair is always dark and neat. His clothes are always dark and neat. His breast is

covered with medals and honors, and beside them sits a golden brooch with a heraldic sun, a dagger, and a navy blue rose.

He had an assignment for me.

The boys are talking baseball. Yesterday Mickey Mantle hit his 100th home run. “The mob,” one of the guys says, “paid the army off, I’m sure of it. How do you hit 100 home runs and fail the physical exam?” The men all chime in, calling Mantle a fraud, a coward. Horace nods. He is excited by the idea, eager to believe that unseen forces were at work in Mantle’s draft.

General Perry was disconcertingly expressionless through the debriefing. There was no hint of emotion in his voice as he spoke.

“I’m very good at finding people, Captain Sterjnhelm.”

I believed him. I could imagine his spies in coffee shops, cleaning the houses of other Generals, stalking through dark alleyways.

“But I can’t find First Lieutenant Caleb Hill. Someone is concealing something. Possibly my own men. Locate him quietly. Don’t let others on to what you’re doing. Speak of this mission to no one.” He motions towards the door with a finger. “You’re dismissed.”

“Mm-mm, mm-mm.” Horace’s voice pulls me back into the plane. “I’m gonna miss chicken fried steak.”

Horace is telling me about his favorite homemade meals, adding flourishes of details after their names: steak, mashed potatoes- especially with brown gravy, casserole but none of the tuna kinds, sandwiches.

I can't feel the thousands of miles of Pacific Ocean we've crossed, but I can feel my swollen bladder, my sore back. The nauseous feeling of a sleepless night. I can feel the drone of Horace's voice bouncing around in the hollow space inside my skull.

Another fellow has joined in with Horace, and together they're practicing a new Gregorian chant, a sad farewell to their favorite homemade meals.

My watch reads 7 A.M. By now the sun is beginning to unravel across the Korean peninsula, washing rice paddies in a soft, apricot light. I imagine the sun reaching across the ocean like shards of brilliant yellow glass. I imagine the hills rising from the darkness like a wave of shifting graves as the sun rises.

The flight master yells into the cabin, "Welcome to Korea, land of the morning calm." He gives a quick debriefing on the new time zone, and the exiting procedures, before disappearing into the cockpit.

Horace looks at me.

"I had a funny dream during the war."

I blink at him above my newspaper.

"You don't say."

He nods very seriously, continuing.

"I wish I could tell the folks at home, but they might think I'm a little off." He puts an emphasis on *off*. I indulge him:

"What'd you dream?"

“It was when I was in the med tent for a bullet I got in the... The *derriere*.” He leans in to say *derriere*, even blushing. “In my dream I was standing on guard duty and it was night time. But all out of nowhere this Korean girl starts walking my way, but she ain’t walkin’ right. She’s walkin’ kind of weird, like some sort of moron or something. Or like a dog with three legs. And I get this nervous feeling. I’m watching her walk towards me, just some little ole Korean gal, walking like a cripple and yet I’m still feeling... tense. Worried like, you know? When she gets to me something ain’t right. Her green dress is wet and there’s all this goeey dark stuff seeping through, and she falls down.” He pauses, self-consciously watching my reactions. “I go over, to help like. And I start pulling up her skirt to see what’s wrong, and I remember thinking I felt real bad because maybe she’d be embarrassed by it. You know, me pulling up her skirt.” The plane begins to jerk wildly. We are all gripping our harnesses and gritting our teeth, waiting. When the turbulence begins to die down Horace continues. “But when I get it up, there’s no legs. Just a bunch of tentacles, like on an octopus. Or I think it was a squid, cause it was spewing all this black stuff. I was covered in this black, burning goop. One tentacle wrapped itself around my hand, and I swear- I really do- that I could feel the suckers on the inside of my wrist.”

We continue in silence, listening to the scattered conversations around us. The rattle of the harness buckles.

“A lot of fellows had strange dreams, Horace.” I say.

“Did you, West?”

“No,” I lie. “I didn’t dream.” But I did. Of forests.

2

The iron belly of the carrier rattles to a halt, then silence. The men look around at each other. Hands begin to move. The noise is slow to return. It comes like the first few tentative drops of a rain shower. The first guy starts to unbuckle himself, and another joins. Soon the cabin is alive with motion and sound. The clicking of harnesses, the thud as they return to the seat, the ruffling of duffel bags. I am shuffling along in line, staring at a flake of dandruff on the back of the guy before me. The cabin's floor responds to my boots with a muted crashing noise. I can see a sliver of the in the door ahead. A heavy fog lays low.

When I get out the damp and cool morning air greets me. The sky above is gray and bland, and the concrete of Kimpo airfield reflects the sky like a lake. We limp down the steps because our legs are sore from the sixteen-hour flight. I take a moment to survey the airfield and stretch my legs as the other men file off together.

The airfield is as strangely still and empty as the carrier with its empty seats.

I follow the others to check-in and piss.

My task now is to go to Seoul with the platoon from the plane and meet Inspector Kim. He will escort me to Chong Pa Dong, a remote village north of Seoul. This was the last place First Lieutenant Hill was seen. His disappearance came shortly after he began an investigation on a triple homicide committed there. He disappeared three days after initiating the investigation. Inspector Kim is the new lead investigator on the case. He has been told that I am part of the Military Police, that I am a specialist- I am- and that I will assist him in his investigation.

When I finish checking in I am reunited with my plane-mates in the back of a canvas-covered convoy. The wind that blows in between the fabric and the truck rattles my newspaper, making it difficult to disguise the case file I've wedged within it.

Hill showed no signs of psychological disturbance. He was a bachelor at 34. He served as infantry during the war.

The picture in the case file fails to give you the sense of how massive, how brutishly muscular Hill was. In the picture, he looks like an ordinary American man: well kept hair, shaved face and a white smile. But I don't remember Hill ever smiling.

My eyes slip from the hold of the waking world, losing focus until the pages begin to blur. I look up to let them rest. The back of the convoy paints a dark archway around the roadside grass, swaying and green. A cloud of dust follows in our wake.

We pass an old man leading a docile brown cow on a rope while a young boy trails behind him. The boy is stumbles reluctantly along, carrying a bushel of twigs on his back. The old man lifts his filmy, blind eyes to watch us as we pass. I get that heavy feeling again. It's the same heavy feeling I got the day Nadia died. In a moment the pair is replaced with another broad and verdant stretch of rice paddies.

I reach for my pack of cigarettes and return to the files.

Hill was investigating a rumored Communist drug-smuggling operation close to the border of North Korea. His investigation of the triple homicides might have been a matter of convenience. He was stationed in the area and immediately available for the

investigation. He gathered information as he waited for reinforcements from Seoul. But Hill could have relegated the investigation to other nearby officials; and most importantly, he disappeared during the investigation.

In the file there's a photo of three corpses. Four young women total were involved in the case, their ages ranging from 18 to 26. There are three black-and-white photos of the crime scene: in the first there are two women, tied to trees. Their mouths are forced open by the white cloth that gags them and binds them each to a tree. Their twisted arms are tied behind their back. The gags support the full weight of their bodies, bending their necks into awkward angles. The woman on the right is full of holes. Her *hanbok* is soaked through from her stab wounds. The girl on the left has her hair in a braid. Her face is pointed upwards, towards the camera. The neat braid of her hair remains intact, the soft black hair at her temples matted with blood. Her lips are missing. The jagged studs of her teeth float in an inky void where her mouth should be. On the back of the photo, in a rushed and sloppy hand is written, "Jiyeong Lee, Young-Mi Kang, posthumous, 08-27-57. C.H."

A similar inscription can be found on the back of the next photo. In this photo there is only one woman. Iron nails driven through her palms secure her to the bark of the tree. She is covered in marks and wounds. Her scalp bleeds where handfuls of hair were ripped out. She is missing patches of skin on her arms. Dark black lines of blood drip down her soft white palms. An improvised crucifixion. Her hands are nailed to the sides of the trunk, giving her the appearance of surrender.

The last photo is blurry, taken in a bad light. It does not bear Hill's inscriptions. In the photo there is a hospital cot and an I.V., and a blurry, feminine shape in a hospital

gown. Her palms rest on the hospital cot, pointing upwards revealing the vulnerable underside of her wrists. I remember when I found Nadia she was draped across the bed. Her arm was hanging off the edge, revealing the soft white skin of her wrist, and above that, a trickle of blood where the needle had kissed her.

4

The wife was part of a sister act. They played the triplet angle, but the truth was that Sister Acts booked gigs and they were three hungry girls.

Their three-person ensemble worked, more or less, like a quartet. It might seem disadvantageous to be missing a member, but it didn't matter: women only have three voice types. Sure, you can throw a fourth girl in so people get the sense of a barbershop quartet, but every extra girl you add is just that: extra. There's something linear and masculine about a three-girl act. Think of the Andrews Sisters. Three is a good number; three is all you need for trinity.

Marie and Mira passed as twins. The blonde coloring of their hair was similar, but Mira had curly hair and Marie didn't. Most guys just passed this off, because they were happy pretending they were twins. Yea, those two were all about the sunshine, kissing in the rain, and giggles. But Nadia was the shadow of their sun, the thunder in their rain and she never laughed.

The girls danced like they sang. Marie was a soprano. Her voice was flickering, and high. Her dances were manically energetic, fast-paced and full of perfectly timed laughs and winks. Mira's voice was just a touch below Marie's. It was the sort of voice

most guys liked to imagine coming home to. Her voice wasn't as flighty as Marie's but it was still sweet. Sweet the way powdered sugar is sweet. Her dances were more reserved than Marie's, full of awkward childish gestures. Mira and Marie had a way of enchanting men. Men liked how they would shrug their shoulders up and turn their palms out like helpless, mischievous little girls.

Then there was Nadia. Nadia's voice was the ground, solid earth, vast and low. Her voice was the dirt below the sugar cane. But her voice, turning and folding on itself, was sometimes molten, and violent. She was mindful of this quality, stepping beneath the delicate sound of her sisters, holding the hot rage of her song somewhere behind her smoldering eyes. There was little inflection or change in her parts. Her voice was the baseline the other two girls harmonized with. Gliding along chord progressions economically, making as few unnecessary changes as possible. Every note was a necessary note. There was no ornament or delicacy. Every note of her song was absolutely necessary; it was the skeleton her sisters tried to conceal. But I listened to Nadia. I heard her voice alone in the velvet red dining lounge. And she knew; she saw me; her eyes looked yellow in the dim light from the bar. "You don't listen," was the last thing she said to me and Mary Ford was singing Bye-Bye Blues when I found her in her black cocktail dress stretched out across the bed dead in an opium suicide.

"We're going to Severance Hospital," Inspector Kim explains. "To pick up Ahn Dasom." His full name is Kim Seung. We're riding through the streets of Seoul in his

cruiser. He curses under his breath, trying to maneuver the car around a crashed farm truck. A rogue chicken flutters up against the windshield, like a feathery white ball. He reaches his hand out of the window to bat the chicken off. Seung's hair is neat, combed back over his head into a square shape. His narrow, keen eyes and sharp cheekbones give him a wolfish look. He appears to be my age, but you never know with gooks. "Your Korean is quite good," he says, "Even for having been gone so long. Did you continue to study after the war?"

"Yes," I say. Seung glances at me sideways, waiting. I look out the window. "Has Dasom been questioned yet?" I ask.

"No," Seung responds. "She only came out of her coma four days ago." He points a thumb to the backseat. "There's a dossier on all the victims. Perhaps you should review it."

I reach back to the files fluttering in the wind.

The black and white photos of the corpses have mates: black and white family photos. The first is of the Lee girls, the youngest and the oldest victim. They stand at either side of their mother and father in traditional robes. The blue-grey of their hanbok in the photograph reminds my eye of spring green. Their postures are serious and Victorian. The youngest, Jiyeong, has her braid swept over her shoulder. In this picture she still has lips. Her hands are held together anxiously, bearing the wait of the picture taking process. Her impatience is captive; it is held in the empty space between pigments.

On the other side of the picture is Aedda, the crucified victim. Her expression is severe, and placid. Her eyes are hollow, and tired. A loose stand of hair curls across her forehead.

The next family is Young-mi Kang's. A boy, maybe ten, stands beside her father. Young-mi is situated beside her mother, her hands clasped calmly at her lap. She must have been wearing a rose, or burgundy colored vest. Chrysanthemums embroidered in gold thread weave around her sleeves. The lavish thread that contours each petal is far beyond any extravagance the Lee's were able to afford.

There is no photograph of Ahn Dasom, the fourth victim. Only a scrappy dossier thrown together by Kim. Her father was the magistrate of Chong Pa Dong before the war. He and her mother were killed while fleeing to the South. Miss Ahn runs an apothecary in the village. She is twenty-six, like Aedda. Little else occupies the dossier. Just blank space.

The first I see of Ahn Dasom is a pair of white slippers resting on the metal footrest of a wheelchair. The mid morning sun sends a shaft of light into the shadowy hallway, creating a golden gateway from which Ahn materializes. She pushes her way from the shadows like an actor from a curtain. An amber hand in a threadbare blue robe follows a pair of white trousers. Then her face: golden, bruised, staring at nothing.

The nurse and her white smock finally come into view, pushing the wheelchair Miss Ahn sits in.

Dasom's head is shaved, revealing a gash that starts above her eyebrow and angles straight back over her ear. It is pink and rough. A bruise ripened into its later stages contours the eye just below the gash. The nurse has a hand on Miss Ahn's shoulder. She grips it tightly. Dasom's eyes are dark and smolder like briquettes of coal.

Inspector Kim approaches the women, bowing politely at his waist.

"Hello, I am Inspector Kim Seung." The nurse smiles, returning the bow and a few pleasantries. Dasom turns her head away from Seung. She focuses on some unimportant corner of the parking lot, ignoring Kim entirely.

The nurse, a matronly woman, lifts her hand from Dasom's shoulder. She warns Kim, "Keep her in the chair now, she *will* try to run." She begins to walk away and Seung moves around the wheelchair to the handles, but Dasom is already standing. The nurse doubles back, her hands waving frantically as she issues off warnings like artillery rounds. "Oh, really!" She says, "Really, woman! Don't kid me! You won't sit down? I'll call the doctor and put you right back in!" Dasom is already moving away from the two. When Seung tries to take her bag of personals and she gives him the slip. Dasom settles

into the back of the car, out of the nurse's grasp. She gives the poor woman a cold, surly stare.

I can't help smiling. The girl's got some moxie. She reminds me of...

It's no time for that now.

Seung sighs, resignedly shaking his head. He retakes his place behind the wheel, turning to the two of us. "We're going to Chong Pa Dong now."

During the drive Ahn Dasom is silent. She stares out the window. Seung glances at her in the rearview mirror, and attempts a conversation:

"Hey, youngest sister, I was just trying to help back there, don't you know? I really don't understand how you could be mad at me before I introduce myself." She is silent. "Can I introduce myself, and then you can be mad at me?"

"Do what makes you happy," she says, finally pulled from her silence.

"My name is Kim Seung. I'm the detective assigned to your case."

She rolls the back window down, drowning Seung out with the wind. He clicks his tongue again, hissing inwards before saying to me, "She's impossible."

As we drive the paddies and hills slowly give way to foothills which give way to mountains. The forests we pass are dense and verdant. Birds recite frantic lullabies, somewhere distant a creek gurgles. My neck gives and my head lulls forward and the world slips away.

By the time we arrive at the village it is night. We set up our tent near the town center and turn in.

The tent flaps tremble violently. The sheets of rain sound like the snow on the television screen back home. I cannot discern if Seung is asleep because I cannot hear him breathing. Only the humming of the rain, the eerie silence beyond.

It's been a strange day. My body resists sleep. There is nothing but darkness, and the air is condensing into uncomfortable, warm dew on my neck. Monsoon season. Monsoon season, and the rain is falling. Monsoon season, and the rain is falling in the courtyard of the infirmary...

The infirmary where I was sent after I took a bullet to the leg at Heartbreak Ridge is a rag-tag set up out of the house of a lawyer, gone to stay with family further south. In the courtyard every day at two o'clock, I sit in a chair next to some gook whose name I don't know. We watch the rain together. We watch it overcome the limits of the gutters, gushing out in sheets of water that surround the courtyard in a crystalline curtain of moving water. You can meditate by listening to one sound, he told me. The leaves of the trees shake and tremble violently under the weight of the rain. The curtain of water before us distorts the leaves, turning them into blurry emeralds. You focus only on one sound, he said. If you follow the sound, he said, if you follow the sound you find,

He said a word I didn't know. I kept studying Korean after the war because it haunted my dreams. That missing word. But I forgot the sound of it.

Awake again, my arm is pinned under my side and I am uncomfortable. The rain is steady, constant. I feel nervous. I feel the dream coming.

Humming. Static.

The weeks after Nadia died were the worst for sleep. My body was lifeless, dim, restrained by an unshakeable torpor. Days turned to nights, and nights into mornings. The black label of the whiskey bottle lingered somewhere in my periphery like a Byzantium icon. Always a curtain of snow before me, contained in the fine, cherry-wood TV set. Dimness. The TV set was a miniature opera house with buzzing curtains, and I was waiting for a play that was perpetually postponed. Were they dreams was I awake was there a space between dreams and awake and did it even matter - I was gone.

The wind is picking up. It bats at the rain, separating it into sheets, into the steady beating of drums

I am in that place again: the forest, white and naked in the winter moonlight. I am tracking the wind's approach like footsteps in the frozen snow. The rattle of bare branches is only a whisper at first, but always I hear it approaching, with my flashlight pointing into the darkness, waiting for it to come. Waiting for the bone rattle of the dead twigs to engulf me.

7

The droning patter of the rain wakes me at 06:00 hours. The fabric of our tent stretches inward under the weight of the rain. The air is damp and cool. It coats the inside of my throat with a scratchy wetness.

I throw my feet over the side of the cot and rise. Seung is still asleep. I start boiling water for coffee.

The first I hear from Seung is sniffing. He lifts his head inch by inch as he sniffs until he's sitting up. "Coffee?" He asks, but he pronounces it kuh-pee. He mock-salutes me sleepily and grumbles something I can't make out. When the coffee is finished I start the eggs with a packet of government issued evaporated egg substitute. Seung is staring drowsily out the tent flap at the pouring rain. Memories of the prior day become more coherent.

Seung dresses, preparing for the day. He pours himself a cup of coffee and sits at our wobbly, tin table. He disassembles his gun, cleaning it. He speaks while he works, all the motions of gun-cleaning second nature to him.

"Listen, Weston. I'm not stupid. I know why you're here."

The egg substitute is beginning to thicken into a viscous and yellow blanket. I push it around the pan.

"Why am I here?"

"To find the American that went missing after he began investigating the girls' murders." He says.

"Perhaps you're right."

“That’s fine,” he says. “But I’m looking for justice. I have a sister the same age as Jiyeong. I want to catch the bastard who did this, and I won’t have the business of your military keep me from delivering justice to the victims.” Seung’s eyes are vulnerable, and open, but his mouth is firm. I nod.

“Solving the murders is in my best interest, as well. But you understand, the maintenance of peace in the Koreas supersedes both our interests.” Seung’s shoulders slump. He looks at the dirt floor of the tent.

“Of course.” He holsters his gun. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” That, Seung means, is the bureaucratic end. The potential involvement of North Korea puts his whole case at stake.

“I used to be a cop,” I say, “Just like you. I wanted to help people.”

“What happened?” he asks.

“My wife overdosed on heroin. And well, I was a detective on vice. It didn’t look too good. They let me resign quietly and here I am.”

He remains silent out of an unspoken reverence until I pass him a plate of eggs. He sets his reassembled gun down and grabs a fork, taking a bite. His face immediately contorts. He looks ready to spit the eggs back out; his cheeks full, his mouth aimed at the plate. After a moment he manages to swallow.

“Is this human food?” He asks, taking a sip of coffee to wash away the taste.

“Courtesy the United States Army.”

“Army food is shit no matter where you go, isn’t it?” We share a laugh.

Seung seems like a good, honest cop. I want to help him, but Hill's work is classified information and though I get the sense the murders and the drugs are connected, I can't tell Seung so.

When we finish our eggs, I pour myself a cup of coffee and offer Seung a cigarette, which he takes. I light my own and pass Seung the lighter.

"What's your theory?" I ask. Seung rolls the cigarette between his thumb and index finger as he speaks.

"I believe Aedda was the primary target. She was hung like that, facing her little sister and Young-mi." He pauses, to take a drag of the cigarette. "She had the most painful death, and she was probably forced to watch the torture of her sister and her friend. I believe Aedda knew something that she wasn't supposed to, or someone was very angry with her." He nods towards the case files. "The pictures Hill took fail to give us a complete picture of the crime scene. We're going to meet the pheasant hunter who discovered the girls. He'll take us there." He stands, brushing off his pants, adding: "I want to have a comprehensive understanding of this case before we question Dasom. Victims often provide confusing, incomplete testimonies."

After breakfast I shave. The mirror, which is smaller than my palm, limits me to shaving in small sections. It's a tedious process. While I shave Seung fixes his bedding. He tells me about his most recent purchase: a black and white television set. His wife is terrified it will start a fire in the home, but he likes to watch the variety shows. He says the variety shows are worth the risk of an unlikely fire. As he tucks his sheets in he tells

me about the most recent act he'd seen, a performance of the tragic folk song called Arirang. "Arirang," he says, "is truly a national treasure."

I can hear muffled chatter outside the tent. Seung stands and turns his head to the door to listen. The tent flap rustles as a young boy lifts it, letting another in to stand out of the rain. They must be brothers because they look almost identical, aside from their height. The smaller boy is missing half his arm. He shakes his wet hair out like a dog. The bigger boy, standing in the entry of the tent, wears a pair of muddy shorts. For a while they stand there, saying nothing, scrunching their noses as they watch me shave. Seung stomps his foot at them. They jump.

"These rascals! Don't you have the sense not to walk into other's homes? Git!"

"But we wanted to see the American," the elder whines.

"You saw him, now go!" Seung makes a fist, hissing through his teeth disapprovingly.

"What is he doing to his neck?" The younger adds, unphased.

I turn to look at the two, and they jump again.

"He understood us," the older boy whispers. They begin backing out of the tent, the younger boy clasping his brother's arm.

"Do you kids want to make a won?" I ask. They do an immediate reversal, shuffling further into the tent. Seung shakes his head disapprovingly.

"Don't encourage them, they're little thieves. They took all my chocolate."

I reach for my wallet and pull out a won, showing it to the older boy. He nods eagerly.

"Go to the Lee's residence and tell them we'll be coming in the afternoon to

“speak to them.” I say.

“Which Lees?” The younger asks. His brother answers.

“Aedda’s parents. That’s why the American is here, because of Aedda and them. *Babo!*” I nod at the older boy, placing the won in his damp palm.

“Yes, that’s right. And don’t call your brother stupid. Go now.” The older boy turns to the younger, showing him the won, and they are gone with the plop of their sandals in the mud. Seung shakes his head, muttering phrases of mock disapproval.

“Brats without discipline,” he says, smiling and shaking his head. “I only have daughters.”

We leave our makeshift tent where it stands in the commons of the village.

The main road in Cheung Pa Dong is a broad dirt track lined on either side by a few merchant stalls and the blacksmith’s. A row of scythes leans against the wooden wall of his building. A broken yoke sits disparaged and alone. He only spares us a moment’s glance as we pass, but the sound of his hammer follows us with a steady tapping. We pass Dasom’s apothecary. The door is closed.

The village is small, but not tiny. In the northernmost part of town there’s a patch of abandoned homes with fire-scarred walls. The rest of the village has been restored. The buildings that belong to the commoners are modest, with white walls and elegant rounded clay giwa tiles crowning the walls. As we pass these, the residents turn their gaze away from me, pulling their doors shut, stopping in their yard work to retreat indoors.

“Funny. Everyone’s being so inhospitable,” Seung comments.

In the village there are only a few buildings with courtyards. One of these is the manor house of the magistrate, Young-shik Lee, the father of Aedda. The total perimeter of his home must be four, five times that of the other villagers.

The village is a ghost town and the remainder of our walk is eerily silent. Only the blacksmith's tapping offers any hint of life.

The hunter is waiting for us at a small wooden bridge that fords a brook. He is dark and stout. A beard covers his square jaw. A white cloth is tied across his head. Under his gray trousers are thighs that have the dense and unmovable quality of tree trunks. His thick and meaty hands are clasped around the worn leather strap that holds a battle-weary rifle to his back.

"Hello," Seung bows to the man. "My name is Inspector Kim. This is my American liaison, Captain Sterjnholm." Seung turns to me, "This is Hong Daesu," he says.

Daesu bows, saying only hello. He adjusts the strap of his rifle before turning and starting up the dirt path.

I follow behind Daesu and Seung. Daesu glances over his shoulder from time to time, keeping a tab on my whereabouts. He maintains a cool management of his immediate surroundings. He looks to Seung when Seung speaks, but his gaze constantly roams through the branches and the loam. His answers are brief.

A small deer path leads out from the road into the forest. As we walk our feet sink into the dense layer of grass that carpets the forest floor. We pass a thicket of young

acorn trees, bearing the unripe green fruit of the coming fall. The acorns nestle together like clusters of berries between the curvy leaves.

The trail winds up a rockier slope covered in short and twisted green bushes. The multi-colored foam of lichen blankets the exposed rocks. At the top of the slope the trail evens out. The path narrows across a rocky ledge at the base of a stone outcrop, and we're forced to walk single file.

The sight of the meadow behind the stone outcrop astonishes me with its utter beauty. White wildflowers wave their dainty heads between blades of tall grass. The meadow looks soft, like cotton. The dark green peaks of the surrounding hills float like islands in a white sea.

Daesu stops at the edge of the meadow where he waits patiently for Seung and I. When we arrive he points at the ground by his feet. "The girls were all together, walking, until they reached this point." He nods at the meadow before us. "Here something happens. I found a slipper here, before their trails scatter, like startled birds." He points two fingers to the left, one across the field, and another to the right. "The strange thing is, I didn't find any other tracks leading to this point. So I think their attacker followed them in their own trails, or covered his up afterwards." He lowers his hand, grasping his rifle strap. "Animals will usually follow you from somewhere nearby, where they're hidden. Behind nearby trees, or rocks. Following you in your own path means that they're exposed. Doesn't it? I thought about what could have caused the girls to scatter." He starts forward, across the meadow.

"The girls all went separate directions. One ran straight across the meadow." We walk across the meadow towards a grove of trees that towers above the flowers and grass.

“The sun was just beginning to rise when I discovered the girls.” He stops before the grove, running his foot across a pile of rotten brown pine needles. “This is where I lost the first trail. The ground in the grove was so disturbed it was hard to really discern what happened. There was a big struggle.”

The trees filter the late morning sun until it is a dull gray effervescence that hangs below the branches. In the center of the grove is a perfect circle of blank, dark dirt. The circle is completely cleared of plant life. The dirt looks dark. It looks damp. Daesu stops to stand before tree at the edge of the circle.

“A humble man such as myself had the privilege to fight for his country. I saw many bad things in the war. Yet still, when I saw Aedda hanging from this tree, I vomited.” He turns away from the tree. He rubs at his eyelids with his thumb and index finger. “Her belly was cut open. Her guts were hanging down over her hips. And here, across from her.” He points to the tree beside the first. “Was Jiyeong. She was tied up. Her face,” Daesu pauses before he continues, his voice breaking, “They cut her lips off.”

Seung reaches for the camera hanging from his neck. Daesu points at the tree beside Jiyeong’s. “That’s where Young-mi was. She was shot right between the eyes.”

There is nothing particularly strange about the grove. Standing at the very center of the barren circle one can see the tops of each of the surrounding peaks. Two large rocks sit at the edge of the circle. There is a makeshift bench, composed of a log propped up across two rocks. It is disturbed, one edge of the log knocked off the rocks.

“Daesu,” I ask, “Do people meet here?”

“I suppose they must. I don’t know of anyone, myself. It’s considered a cursed place.” I nod. Strange suspicions are more common in rural villages like Chong Pa Dong. A cursed grove is the perfect place for illicit meetings.

“Can you show me where the other trails lead, and where you found Ahn Dasom?” I ask.

“I only followed one other trail, and that was Dasom’s. She was very hurt. I took her to the village immediately. When I returned the rain had already washed the other trails away. I can only show you where I found Dasom.”

“I’ll go with Daesu while you record the crime scene, Seung.” I say. Seung lifts his eye from the camera to nod at me. Daesu starts out of the grove to the left of where Young-mi’s body was found.

“I saw her blood. It was all over the ground. It was getting darker as it dried.” Daesu ducks under a branch, crouching and shuffling his way through another patch of bushes. “Miss Ahn must have been brought here, like the others, but crawled away somehow.” We cut back across the meadow. The sun has reached its apex in the sky. The forest is quiet. The rustling of the grasses is ethereal, floating: a complex and rolling whisper of each individual blade of grass sliding across the other. Daesu breaks the silence.

“I found her here. Her face was so swollen her eyes were squeezed shut. It looked nothing like a normal face. Gurgling noises came from her every time she took a breath.” He says, “I thought she was dead. I thought she would surely die.”

“Daesu, did you notice any other tracks leading away from the crime scene?”

“No. Only Miss Ahn’s.” He looks at me uneasily. “To follow a path in and out- that is not like an animal. But to torture those girls- that is not like a human.”

8

The hike back down affords me time to think about the girls, the murder, and Hill.

The murders are connected to Hill’s disappearance.

Hill was working out of this village. It was a convenient base of operations, close to the border but more central than other towns. When the murders happened the case was probably given to him on default. I am running through his incomplete, lackluster notes in my head. The description of the crime scene was accurate but minimal. This, and the black and white photographs seem to be the only contribution Hill made to the case before disappearing on July 30th. If Hill anticipated his disappearance, it might explain why he failed to conduct a proper investigation.

Seung and I eat lunch quietly, absorbed in our own thoughts, and then head to the Lee residence.

On our walk Seung explains that his previous interviews with the Lees were mostly satisfactory, except the lingering impression he had that the Mrs. was withholding something.

A servant- an elderly woman in pink robes- opens the courtyard gate for us. The inner courtyard is small for a governor’s home, but it still makes the building the second largest structure in the village. The largest is the Kang’s residence. A raised wooden

walkway surrounds the courtyard, connecting various rice paper doors. In the corner there is a well. It is a practical status symbol that allows the Lees to wash their clothes, cook their meals, and drink their tea without a trip to the village well or the nearest river.

The old woman ambles towards the raised walkway opposite of the entry gate. A small set of wooden stairs leads up to the platform. The stairs are perfectly aligned with a pair of sliding doors. She opens the sliding doors for us, waiting patiently as we cross the threshold before entering behind us.

The Lees sit cross-legged behind a short wooden table set before a painted silk screen. The black and white figures of cranes extend their scarlet heads towards an unpainted sky.

Mister Lee is a compact man with narrow shoulders and a narrow face. His years manifest into patches of gray hair that begin around his ears and swoop back to his neck. He is stoic.

Mrs. Lee sits beside him. She wears a simple black dress with a high mandarin collar. Her raven hair is swept into a careful bun. Dark semi-circles hang from her red-rimmed eyes.

Seung asks them questions. They answer them. They are questions like: "Have you heard anything new?" "Has anything struck you as peculiar now that you think about it?" And the answers are just like the answers in the previous interview: yes and no and utterances of lament. Mrs. Lee is quiet, watching me watch her. She lowers her head ever so slowly, an imperceptible nod. I nod my head forward only slightly.

"But why would the girls be out in the forest at such an hour of night?" Seung asks, frustrated. He slaps his hand against the table. "You were their parents, wasn't it

your business to know?" The two look at each other, then back at Seung. Mister Lee looks down in shame.

"I don't know. It wasn't like them to sneak out like that. Our girls were good girls. I don't know what business they had at such an hour." Mrs. Lee looks at me again.

Seung's demeanor changes suddenly from frustration to a delicate sympathy. "I'm very sorry to bother you, Mr. Lee. My condolences." When he begins to stand, Mrs. Lee speaks:

"Allow me to see you out." She offers us a tired smile.

"No, you should rest." Mr. Lee gently pats her knee.

"Mr. Lee, please allow Mrs. Lee to escort us," I ask. He looks at me, surprised.

He looks to Mrs. Lee again, then to the two of us.

"I wouldn't want to seem inhospitable. I suppose it's only a short walk."

Mrs. Lee stands and crosses the room as the elderly woman opens the doors again. Her black dress is long, covering her ankles. From behind, I can see that her hair is fashioned into a French twist. Very modern. She glances over her shoulder as we approach the gateway, looking for Mr. Lee. She grabs my hand, shoving a crumpled paper into it.

"Mr. Weston..." Her grip tightens, her pristine nails digging into my thumb. When she speaks, her voice is barely above a whisper. "Forgive me, forgive me for the sins of my daughters, but Aedda has dishonored this family..." With a sobbing gasp, Mrs. Lee turns and leaves us at the gate.

The crumpled paper is a flyer. On it is a picture drawn out in exaggerated reds and yellows: a woman in traditional robes and a man holding a sickle and a hammer. The word “*juche*” is written at the bottom. A rip extends across the corner of the ‘e’.

On the back there is handwriting. It reads:
at the serpent’s mouth when the moon falls red flowers blossom.

9

The air in the apothecary is thick and tastes like a gritty spice. The inside is dim, with the light of the open door to illuminate the room within. A narrow corridor, made smaller by the crowded shelves on both sides, leads to a small anteroom with a curtain and a table. Three women are busy sizing up piles and bundles of wormwood and mugwort. They pick up fungi, and deer horn, and ginseng roots that look like twisted, malformed human bodies.

It seems to be a good day for Miss Ahn’s business. The proprietor herself is busy at a table in the back, grinding some especially green leaf with a mortar and pestle when we enter. A woman with a mole on her cheek whispers to another, “Maybe it’s molding if she’s selling it so cheap?”

“I had the same thought, so I’ve been looking carefully. I think she’s worried it’ll go bad soon. What, with her absence.” The other woman whispers in return, turning a

dried mushroom over, showing the other the gills. “Most things are dried anyways, so why worry?”

“What’s this about a deal, ladies?” I ask.

The two look at each other, silent, unsure of how to receive me. They look towards Miss Ahn who, stopped in her work, makes no attempt at welcoming us. Her gaze feels too familiar and I find myself clearing my throat to speak.

“Hello, Dasom.”

“The shop is closing. Graciously leave.” She doesn’t acknowledge me, returning her gaze to the mortar and pestle. The woman with the mole speaks.

“Well, can’t we pay for what we’ve picked before we go?” she says, shaking a handful of what looks to me like a nest of brown, dry worms.

“You can leave it on a table and come for it tomorrow.” Dasom doesn’t raise her gaze to address the women. They hiss about it on the way out, whispering that she has become strange and unkindly. Seung and I stand and wait until the women are gone, their little stores of herbs piled on the counter.

Seung seems troubled by the exchange, giving Dasom a sidelong glance.

“Miss Dasom. You remember me and my American liaison, Weston.”

She returns to grinding herbs in her mortar, ignoring Seung entirely. He moves up to the counter, setting his arm atop it. “There’s no reason to be uncivilized. We’re here to help you. We want to bring justice to you and your friends.”

“If you want to help me, leave.” She lifts her gaze to meet ours. “I don’t need more trouble.”

“I understand that you’re dealing with a lot of emotions right now, Miss Dasom, but please don’t be rash.” Seung tries again.

“You don’t understand anything, Inspector Kim. I envy you, your ignorance. But heed my advice and leave. Things are not so civilized here as they are in Seoul. The girls aren’t the first bodies found in this town.”

Seung blinks. He tilts his head, looking Dasom up and down.

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m giving you advice,” she says. Her gaze meets mine. A look of startled recognition passes over her face like a flash of lightning. The muscles around her mouth relax, letting her lips part momentarily. She squints at me. “I’ll speak to the American. But alone.”

“Strange request.” Seung turns towards me. “Do you feel you’re able to handle this one?” He asks. I nod. He sighs, heading towards the entrance. “I won’t pretend my feelings aren’t hurt.”

Dasom lifts herself gracefully until she is standing and comes towards me. Even with the black eye and the shaved head there’s a certain venomous beauty about her. She walks a circle around me, sizing me up. She catches me staring at her. I look away, feeling flustered.

Dasom pinches the nametag on my uniform, squinting at the letters before letting it go. She straightens my lapel with one of her hands.

“Our fates are intertwined. Did you know that?” She asks.

“I didn’t,” I say.

“It’s not a very fortunate bond, I fear.” She returns to her anteroom, peering at me from behind the counter. “I have more answers than you think.”

“That’s why I came here today, Dasom. To ask you questions.” I watch her. A part of me feels uneasy, and though I want to believe what she says I’m not sure that she’s mentally stable.

“Did you come to ask questions or to listen to the answers?” She asks.

“I came to listen.”

“I’m the ghost of the girl you left to die.”

I’m caught off guard. I look over my shoulder, to the door and Seung beyond it. I look at her again. She is either insane, or my Korean is poor. She wants me to ask her what she means. I can see her clever brown eyes surveying my face.

“There was a lot of death recently,” I try. “Sometimes it’s hard to feel alive when your memories haunt you. But-” Her eyebrows lower. She shakes her head.

“I can’t trust you to hear the truth.”

10

Seung returns to the tent where I am waiting, after a second attempt at interviewing Dasom. He pulls up a stool, sitting across the table from me. I offer him a cigarette, which he gladly receives. Lighting it, he speaks.

“That’s one woman, I tell you.” He closes his eyes as he takes his first drag, savoring it. “Even my wife and daughters don’t give me such a hard time.” He hisses in,

through his teeth. A sign of annoyance. “Try to help a girl and she acts like you’re killing her, man I really say...”

“Do you think she knows anything?” I ask.

“Most certainly, she knows something. She wants us to know she knows.” Seung shakes his head, confounded.

We’re both quiet. I stare at the growing mound of ash on the end of my cigarette.

“Do you think she’s scared?” I ask.

“Scared or involved. I don’t know what to make of her secrecy.” Seung shakes his head. He reaches under the table, grabbing a bottle of soju. “I have a headache, let’s drink.” He grabs two tin cups and pours me a drink.

“Is she crazy?” I ask.

“Ah, who knows? Probably she is. Gombei!” He lifts his cup, I lift mine to his.

“Gombei!” I say.

We turn the cups in our hands, scratching our scalps, rubbing at our jaws. Ahn Dasom is the detective’s dream. A surviving victim, a witness. She has the answer. Solving the case only requires that Ahn Dasom speaks. But unlike clues you find in the world, Ahn Dasom’s answers are captive to a human voice. We are both feeling emasculated, helpless, frustrated. We can’t dust Dasom for fingerprints; we can’t pick a lock and sneak in to her mind.

“Interrogate her?” I ask.

“Unless we’re willing to smack her around, I don’t think so.” Seung shakes his head. “Her mouth is shut.”

We both stare at the table in silence. Seung pours another round of drinks.

“We follow her then,” I say.

Seung frowns, holding his cup of soju. He looks at me from across the table, an obvious displeasure forcing his mouth into a grimace. He looks down at his cup.

“I don’t feel like a big man either, Seung, spying on her,” I start.

“But it’s the only way,” Seung finishes for me. We lift our cups again, this time I say “Cheers,” and Seung mimics me, saying “cheers” grimly.

We divide the stakeout into shifts: daytime for Seung, nighttime for me. It makes it easier on my jetlagged psyche and I suspect that Dasom’s activities in the night are more interesting than those in the day. I kick my heels up and stare at the glowing tent sides, listening to the wind. Aedda’s note is burnt into the back of my eyelids. I see it in my dreams like the glowing backdrop of a sunset.

at the serpent’s mouth when the moon falls red flowers blossom.

I am in the forest again. Moonlight gleams on the snow covered branches. My flashlight creates a globe of light to contain the ghostly winter wonderland. My lips won’t stop trembling, the steam of my breath drifts into the night air like ether. My flashlight lands on the face of a pale tree trunk, where Aedda’s poem glistens crimson. Two dark iron nails are buried into the trunk.

The wind is just beginning to howl in the distance when I feel the hand at my shoulder.

Crickets are chirping. The world is twilight blue. The blurry outline of Seung’s face is saying: Weston? Weston? I sit up and rub at my eyes.

“Trying to get out of stakeout duty? Nice try, but I told you to take the day.”

“Carpe diem,” I mumble.

“Eh?” Seung asks.

“Nothing.” I reach over to the aluminum pot set atop the portable burner. The coffee inside is cold, full of grounds. It’s the kind of elixir you put down as quick as you can: cough syrup for coughs, bad coffee for heavy lids. Seung debriefs me: the day was relatively quiet except for a visit Dasom made to the blacksmith’s. She left with a long, thin object wrapped in a cloth. Seung is convinced it was a rifle.

I step out into the rainy night and head down the main drag until I’m at the back of the blacksmith’s. The back of the blacksmith’s is parallel to the apothecary. A tree sits at the corner of the building. From underneath it I can see both entrances to the apothecary.

Dasom not only works, but also lives in the apothecary. There’s an extra room in the back, hidden by the curtain. The backdoor looks out over a landscape of rice-straw roofed buildings staggered along a hill. The full moon is hidden somewhere behind the heavy black rain clouds. The rain is steady. I settle in under a tree, behind some bushes, watching the back door.

A soft light flickers through her window. I imagine Dasom somewhere behind her window cleaning the acupuncture needles one by one, pulling a cloth from end to point. Weighing piles of herbs on her scales, taking inventory at the end of the day.

After an hour or so of patient waiting I remember a story that a negro in my unit, John Thierry, told me during the war. It was something about an immortal witch doctor woman in New Orleans, where he was from. I imagine Ms. Ahn as a voodoo queen. I imagine her raising a dove up to the flickering candlelight before impaling it with a

needle. It gives me good entertainment for a while, imagining Dasom at the labor of John Thierry's ghost stories. Ahn Dasom sewing voodoo dolls, Ahn Dasom shaking juju charms, Ahn Dasom possessed by some god, Ahn Dasom organizing a sit-in, Ahn Dasom pulling a rifle strap over her shoulder.

The candlelight is gone.

The first thing I see emerge from the dark rectangle of the doorway is the rifle. I can make out the soft, pale blur of her face behind the dense curtain of raindrops. She is checking her surroundings, looking from side to side. At one point she looks directly at me but her gaze passes on, unawares. My eyes have become accustomed to the dark and the rain. I have the advantage for now, until her eyes adjust. Then I'll have to be more careful.

She starts down a path that leads away from the main road and towards the southernmost mountain. It is perpendicular to the path we took to meet the pheasant hunter. The mud sucks my boots in making a squelching noise, but the steady pounding of the rain overpowers it. Still, I keep my distance. I'm not worried about losing Ahn in the village. The gray sleeves of her robe disappear into the darkness for seconds at a time before I catch the gleam of the rifle again.

A mile south of town we reach the bottom of the mountain's slope. The road narrows to a footpath that winds through the forest. The soil is drier than the road in town, but it's littered with twigs to break and roots to trip on. It's darker. I have to work harder to keep Ahn in my sights.

She slides through the trunks like mercury, or the specters in my dreams.

I've lost track of time in our walk. The clouds still swallow the sky and the rain's incessant hiss has overpowered my own internal rhythms. It seems I am always watching a ghostly sliver of her robes slip behind the shadow of another tree, leaving only darkness in its wake.

11

I blamed Korea for Nadia's death.

I returned numb, insensitive to human suffering. I couldn't see that Nadia was killing herself while I sat and tried to drink my memories away. I remember reaching my hand around her belly once, and how my fingers came upon the ridges of her ribs. She was so thin.

At night I would wake and find her sitting in the dark, watching me. Her wet eyes gleamed in the light from the street. "Your screams," she said, "remind me of Paris, and the war." This image fading in the dark: Nadia crouched over the bathroom sink, slipping a needle into her arm.

I was chasing down opium dens in the day and drinking myself into a state of blissful ignorance at night. Tomorrow, I told myself, Nadia and I would find a new reason to live. But tomorrow came and went, and we kept on with the business of dying.

She was laying on the green and gold fleur de lise patterned recliner. We were watching the Ed Sullivan show. She had a brown blanket draped across her lap. It was late; I had stopped by the bar with a few of the fellows on my way home. I was eating the

dinner Nadia had left out for me, balancing the plate between my knees. We were watching a comedy act.

“What do you dream about?” She asked.

She turned her head to look at me, still sprawled across the recliner. Her pale skin was clammy, her dark curly hair stuck to her damp brow.

A bridge.

I chewed on another forkful of mashed potatoes, pretending I never heard her question.

In my dream the forest is white and naked in the winter moonlight. I am tracking the wind’s approach like footsteps in the frozen snow. The rattle of dead twigs is only a whisper at first, but always I hear it approaching. The rime that covers the trees glistens in the beam of my flashlight. I wait for the bone rattle of the dead twigs to engulf me knowing that tonight I cannot escape the wind.

When the wind comes it rips the bark off the trees and pulls the snow off the ground. I throw myself down, screaming my prayers to God. The world turns white. The wind grows louder, and louder, filling my ears with white noise and then I hear a few isolated shouts.

The white gives way to images framed in the dark archway of our convoy: the bridge, the crowd of refugees carrying their only belongings, children carrying children.

It begins with a single shout somewhere far away, incoherent but urgent. Then another, closer, but still indistinguishable. More cries begin to rise from the crowd until one voice reaches us: The Americans are blowing the bridge. A shockwave of motion

ripples through the crowd around the convoy, panicked they begin to wail, trying to push forward desperately. Two more shouts, further away: The Americans are blowing the bridge.

The shouts continue down the crowd, dividing into multiple cries with distance. Two shouts become four, four become six. They lose distinctness and clarity with each division, until the words are lost again. Then the screams begin, the percussion of a thousand feet, the revving of our convoy engine as we frantically try to pull away.

At first individual noises are distinguishable: the panicked sob of a fallen child, a woman's voice crying, "what do we do," over and over, hundreds of voices asking to ride our convoy with us. They merge into a single resonance that becomes expansive, ballooning above the crowd, outwards across the bridge, beyond the limits of my memories and into the atmosphere.

A muffled blast from behind. A jeep full of journalists is thrown onto its side.

The men in the convoy are screaming now too, grabbing each other, the sides of the truck. A soft white hand grabs at the tailgate. I try to grab it but it slips between my fingers, leaving behind a girl who collapses to her knees, watching us drive away.

The screech of twisting steel cuts through the haze of panicked screams. Distantly, another muffled boom. The collective scream grows into a behemoth of sound. The bridge begins to groan and tremble.

I remember this: a shade on the bridge. A dark shape, distinct from the bodies that surround it. I can never see the shade in its entirety. Every piece I see is different from the last. Unconcerned with the bridge the shade comes for me, always coming but never quite here.

15

The trees are gone. The air has the pure, unmixed quality of a shadow at night. Fleshy, polyp-like knobs bounce against my knuckles as I walk through a dark meadow. The rain lessens to a light shower before the clouds break and the first shaft of moonlight falls on the meadow around me, illuminating hundreds of poppies nodding their tiny, crowned heads. The stalks reach up to my waist with seedpods the size of my palm. Their tiny faces pucker around thick black gashes that bleed the milk of dreams. I crouch down in the cover of the stalks and wait for the clouds to cover the moon again.

The poppies nod their pallid heads in the wind, swaying against each other. Their heads knock against each other, issuing a dull thudding noise that ripples across the field.

The sky remains clear and rainless. I follow Ahn, reduced to an awkward rhythm of standing and ducking. When her head begins to turn too far, or she pauses mid-step I must lower myself back down. She seems agitated and is prone to checking her surroundings often. Her caution is rough on my knees.

A cluster of clouds passes over the moon, casting their shadow across the meadow. Blind in the darkness, I duck down into the poppies and wait for the clouds to pass.

The girls were involved with the Reds. The poppies, Aedda's note. My stomach sinks and an emptiness fills me from somewhere deep inside my soaked body. Ahn Dasom is a communist.

The clouds pass and the field, bathed in moonlight, is empty.

I've lost her.

The field, full of poppies, is rife with places to hide. The trees that line the perimeter conspire against my efforts, surrounding the field like a massive curtain. Their shadows provide the perfect cover, allowing one to see across the whole meadow without being seen.

Something hard and metal jabs into the back of my head. The hammer of a gun clicks.

"Lift your hands slowly." It's her voice. I lift my hands to my head gingerly. She pulls the barrel of the rifle away, stepping back. "Now stand." I stand. I try to turn so I can face her, but she jams the barrel of the gun against my cheek and pushes me back around. "I told you to leave."

"I can't do that." I say. "I'm under orders."

"What orders?" She asks. She comes around my side, the rifle balanced between her shoulder and hands. She peers at me through the sight.

"Why did Aedda have Communist literature?" I ask.

"Are your orders to find communists?"

"No."

Dasom lifts her eye from the rifle's sight. She scans the meadow, paying close attention to the tree line before returning her gaze to me.

“You’re trying to find Caleb, then,” she says.

She knows him well enough to call him by his first name. She smiles, pleased to find me surprised.

“Yes,” I say. “I’m trying to find Caleb Hill.” I hesitate, trying to think my words out carefully. “Are the people responsible for the murders involved in Hill’s disappearance?”

A sardonic grin lights across her face. Her head tilts slowly to the side, her brows knitted together in active thought.

“In a sense, yes.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. She glances at the field around us again, searching for something. I follow her gaze. We are situated in the middle of a valley, surrounded on all sides by rolling foothills. They glow with a dim, blue light.

“Caleb Hill is responsible for his disappearance.” She lowers the rifle. She handles it with an aloof ease, letting it hang from her fingers. The hair on my neck bristles, a chill runs along my arms.

“Then, Caleb Hill is...”

She nods yes.

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I follow Dasom through the poppy field to a shack where she retrieves a key buried in the corner. She pockets the key, turning to push the door of the shack open so she can peer out into the night.

Dasom gives me a sidelong glance from the doorway of the small, wooden shack.

“Hill is here.” She says.

“How do you know?”

“He left a bouquet of bloody poppies at in my store.” She says.

“Why didn’t you tell us, Dasom?” I ask. “We can protect you.”

She looks at me, suddenly hesitant. Her finger worries at the edge of her rifle strap.

“We committed treason, Weston. I didn’t survive Hill’s attack to be hung for treason.” Her gaze returns to the night beyond the door. “But I decided I’m leaving this country tomorrow. I’m selling the last of the opium and leaving, so it doesn’t matter anymore. I’ll tell you what happened, but I’m finishing what I started.” She rises and steps back into the night. I follow her. She speaks quietly as we walk, watching the forest all the while.

“It started after the war. We returned to find our village razed and our entire food store emptied.” Dasom ducks under a low-hanging branch. “Aedda and I wanted to help rebuild the village, but we weren’t carpenters. The men, what few were left, wouldn’t let

us help build anyway. We couldn't get jobs to bring money home..." She pauses, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "But poppies are cheap. A lot of labor, but cheap to grow and expensive to sell. Our first crop was small. It was only a quarter of the size of the field back there, but we made enough money to fill one of the village larders. After a few years, we grew. Jiyeong and Young-Mi wanted to help, and we needed their help." We follow a small creek that twists through the forest. Swollen beyond the limits of its bank, it laps against the base of the trees.

"Did the people of the village know?" I ask.

"Yes. All of them did. Except Aedda's parents. And Young-mi's. But I suspect that they'd known all along, and pretended not to." We take a left at a gnarled stump, hopping over the stream. She counts her footsteps, putting a hold on our conversation.

"You were at the Han River Bridge the night it was destroyed." she starts.

My throat is tight. I try to swallow. The air grows heavier and it's hard to breathe. I stare at the dappled moonlight on a nearby tree trunk and try to focus. There's only one way she can know about that night.

"Yes." I grab her shoulder and turn her around, giving her a shove. "Now my question: how were you involved with Hill?"

At the mention of his name Dasom scans the forest around us once more.

"Hill was looking for North Koreans smuggling opium. Those North Koreans were our clients. We had product, but none of the resources to sell it. So we sold it to the enemy. The arrangement was simple and lucrative. Until Hill found us."

"Is that why Aedda has a communist flyer with a poem written on it?"

“It’s not a poem, it’s a poorly coded message. Though perhaps the two things are not so different.” Dasom pauses mid-step, turning to face me again. “Hill took over our operation.” The shadow of leaves shudder in the moonlight. A sliver of light crosses Dasom’s face, outlining her scar. “He was violent, you know. He was violent and he loved Aedda like a tiger loves a deer...” She wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand. “He found out she had been informing North Korean spies about his mission...” She blinks at me with damp eyelashes, her voice cracks. “And you know the rest...”

The forest seems twisted and feral. It moves and breathes with the shadow of the leaves moving in the wind. Hill began the investigation in order to cover up his crime. He must have abandoned it when Dasom came out of her coma. The darkness between the trees gapes at us like a snarling mouth.

We continue our trek through the woods. The wet and pliant ground mutes our footsteps. We stop at a tree that is missing its bark. Dasom drops to a knee and slips her fingers into the earth.

“I dream about that night on the bridge. It starts in a forest,” she begins.

“It’s winter.” I say. I want to stop myself, but I can’t. “A wind comes from far away and everything turns white, and I’m at the Han River Bridge again, and it’s that night.”

She nods knowingly. I kneel beside her and start to dig. Underneath a layer of rotten leaves and moist soil my fingers touch something hard. Dasom speaks as we work.

“You don’t recognize me, but I remember you. It seems we’ve shared the same nightmare for the past seven years.” She pauses to grab my hand, wrapping my fingers around her palm. “I felt your hand around mine. I remember watching you drive away in

the convoy. There was something odd about the light; your face was the only one I could see. And I cursed you. I cursed you for leaving me on the bridge. I hated you for being American. I prayed for your death.”

My legs are hollow. The hairs on the back of my neck bristle. The girl on the bridge- she was so much younger then. Her cheeks were round, her hair was long.

“Do you understand my meaning now, Weston? What fate, what divine providence should bring you to my village now?”

I don't have an answer for her. She nods, accepting my silence. Underneath the dirt is the lid of an enameled box. It is black with a mother of pearl inlay of flowers.

“I want to leave, Weston. I want to go very far away.” “What do you want?” Dasom lifts the box up, clutching it to her chest as she watches me.

Redemption.

A second chance for Nadia.

I want to save Dasom because they're all ghosts,
these dead girls.

These women who haunt my dreams.

“Back in the war,” I start, “I met a man, who taught me how to meditate. He told me meditation was the means of finding something. But I didn't understand what. I want to know what that word means.”

“Enlightenment,” Hill says, behind me.

A shaft of moonlight illuminates Dasom's face, speckling her eyes, softening the hard line of her mouth. Her lips part as she draws a breath to scream, Hill's figure reflected in her terrified eyes and a whizzing noise becomes a wet thud and Dasom's

head is the first to bend towards the ground and her body follows while her brains erupt into the night air like a red rose blossoming in the night and the gunshot fills the air with the smell of burning powder in my nose and before I can reach the ground the a web of crackling thunder stretches out across my skull and I feel a pressure in my mind, I hear Nadia humming like Sunday morning escaping my body like steam from the kettle she put on the stove.

The forest dimming
as I diminish.

A corps is a body without
a heartbeat
guaranteeing my memory so
you will not forget me. Still,
the snow of this cold war coats me covering
in a virgin shroud
eyes
frozen in a nuclear winter.

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