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From the eponymous novel (2002)

Looking for the Elephant

My Polaroid camera is a Polaroid Spectra. The Spectra uses a film about 1.5 times larger than an ordinary Polaroid, and it's more expensive. He bought it for me as a birthday present some years ago. I remember how happy I was when I unwrapped it and saw that it was the Polaroid camera I had so much wanted to own. He took the first picture. In that picture, I'm looking down a little with my head slightly bowed. The lipstick mark on my wine glass is still clearly visible. "Shall I take one of you?" I must have asked him. He shook his head. With one film you could take ten photos. There were nine left. Even though he didn't want me to, I wish I had taken a picture of him that day. Soon after that we suddenly split up. Now he is a person whom I can neither love nor hate any more. I brought the camera home and took a picture of my family gathered around the table.

I usually sleep lying flat on my back. When I have a stomach ache, I roll over onto my left side and sleep facing the wall. No matter what position I fall asleep in, one arm always ends up dangling down from the bed. Then I get a sudden feeling that someone is gently holding my hand. I wake up with a start. The room is dark. I can still feel the warmth on my palm. I flex the hand that hangs down from the bed. I feel that someone has snuck in and is lying on the floor or sitting motionless at the foot of the bed. But I don't even think of jumping out of bed or switching the light on. For some reason, I feel I shouldn't. Of course, that wasn't easy at first. For some time the presence scared me so much that I slept with the light on. But now I'm quite used to this presence. I breathe out slowly. I want the presence to know that I am awake. After a while, I switch the light on. There's no one there. There isn't even a sign that anyone has been there. But now I know. The presence has been here. At first I wondered whether it was one of the spirits of this house. Or was it my dead grandmother, my aunt, or my uncle?

My father comes from Y□su. Since reaching adulthood, I have been there only once. The reason I avoid the place is that it is my father's hometown. Too many bad things happen there. My father's half-brothers and half-sisters drink too much, are always quarreling with each other and crying. One of my uncles goes out on that fierce, raging sea for months at a time catching fish, and trims fish in the market. My father left his hometown at the age of nine. That was after my first paternal grandmother died. It was her birthday. For once, my grandfather and uncles who sailed the far seas, along with my aunts, had all come together in one place. She must have waited a long time for such a day. My grandmother committed suicide by cooking herself some puffer fish and eating it by herself. Not on any other day, but on her birthday. I saw my grandmother in the one remaining photograph of her. Like my maternal grandmother, who died young from breast cancer, she was dressed in white and frowning. Both grandmothers had dark, thick eyebrows. I made up my mind to like my first paternal grandmother. I thought her death was dramatic. After she died, my father left his hometown and came to live in Seoul, and when he got married, he registered this place as his permanent home. But I know he loves Y□su. I know he secretly dreams of going back there. I know that whenever something about Y□su comes up on television programs like *My Hometown at Six*, he shoots a glance at me. I turn my head away sharply, as if to say, "No way!" Aunt Y□nsuk was the youngest of my father's siblings. She was particularly fond of my father's children—that is, her nieces—my sisters and me. All year round she would send us dried sole, croaker, skate, or other fish by courier service, and she would telephone often. She wanted to move to Seoul, but after I grew up, she never came even once. At every holiday or memorial service she would say, "I should go, I should go and see you all," and cry. Among all my father's siblings, Aunt Y□nsuk cried the most. As a result, I was afraid of her. Making herself attractive with her long dress and her black hair grown all the way down to her waist, Aunt Y□nsuk got married. I heard that her seafaring husband (whose face I saw only once) often beat her. After bearing two children, she got a divorce. I also heard that she sent the money she made from her shop and her side-job at the seaside to pay for her children's education. They said she was tough. My mother liked Aunt Y□nsuk very much. "That young thing..." she used to say. And indeed, although I was her niece, we were not much different in age. Then Aunt Y□nsuk quarreled with her lover and jumped out of his fifth-floor apartment. It was suicide. My father's siblings berated her lover and asserted that he had killed her. On the day of the autopsy, my father's first younger brother, my Uncle Tos□ng, went to the autopsy room

instead of my father. My father couldn't stop retching, and was drunk. Up to now, my father has given up smoking exactly three times. The first time he quit smoking was the day he came back from my aunt's cremation. Although there had been an autopsy, it did not reveal whether her death was suicide or homicide. They said that the man who had been her lover took charge of the funeral. I guess that means he paid for the funeral service. I heard all these things from here in Seoul. Go down to Y□su? I shuddered at the thought. The funeral hall became a shambles. The five surviving siblings were all drunk, and they yelled and bawled, grabbing each other by the collar. It was on that night that I first felt the strange presence in my room. After lying in silence for a while I slowly got up. I looked over at the foot of the bed, and I looked down at the floor. "Aunt Y□nsuk?" In the dark room, I called my dead aunt's name. I felt a coldness brush past my face. These nights continued for a very long time. I didn't tell my mother or sisters. My family were afraid to talk about a dead person. I just got used to it by myself. Eventually, I didn't feel that presence at all any more. The time when I felt it again was the night after my uncle died. I mean my Uncle Tos□ng, who had watched Aunt Y□nsuk's autopsy with his own eyes. It was two years after Aunt Y□nsuk died that my Uncle Tos□ng was diagnosed with liver cancer at the Severance Hospital. While he was going to the hospital, Uncle Tos□ng came to stay in our house. He had become very thin, and his face was dark. My father's siblings were all tall and well-built. In his condition, my uncle turned down the offer of my parents' room and slept with his legs tucked up on the living room sofa. When I wanted to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I couldn't go downstairs. I was afraid my uncle might be lying there dead. My bladder was bursting. My uncle went back to Y□su with his face as black as a goat's. Two months after he went back he died. I didn't go to Y□su that time either. My father quit smoking again. I started waking up around dawn. I couldn't shake off the feeling that someone was sitting at the foot of my bed or lying curled up on the floor where there was barely room for one person to lie down. My palms were always clammy with sweat. "Uncle Tos□ng?" I called his name. Neither Aunt Y□nsuk nor Uncle Tos□ng, nor my paternal grandmother who had committed suicide long ago, answered me. In the end, I fell asleep with my Polaroid camera in my hand.

Polaroid photographs have a serial number printed on them. The first picture he took, the picture of me sitting in a local café on my birthday with my head bowed, has the number 0318 4149 printed on the back. If I had taken a picture of him

after that, it would have been printed with the number 0318 4150 on the back. The one printed with the number 0318 4150 is the picture of my family. They had come home in the evening and were gathered around a table with a small cake on it. "Now, everyone look over here." When I came in after parting with him, I pressed the shutter. With that camera, I took pictures up to the tenth frame, number 0318 4158. I took a picture of my friend on her birthday, and when my youngest sister's boyfriend came over, I posed the two of them in the living room for a photograph. I photographed a magnolia that was just beginning to open its petals, and I photographed my old training shoes. As I used up the frames, number 0318 4151 then 4152, 4155, and up to 4157, winter turned to spring and summer passed by. I didn't get another chance to take a picture of him. I was down to the last frame, number 0318 4158. I fell asleep holding my Polaroid camera with only one frame left. I woke up. I held my breath, then pressed the shutter as if in a surprise attack. The film came straight out as if snatched from the camera. I hurried to turn on the light. I pressed the film with my warm sweaty hand to make it print faster. Slowly, faint shapes began to appear. The joy of taking photographs with a Polaroid is in being able to see your pictures right away, and in the short wait while they are printed. It's like the excitement of watching a door that might admit the person you've been waiting for each time it opens. But that night, I couldn't feel that kind of excitement. Excitement! On the contrary, I felt as scared as if someone were clutching the back of my neck with both hands. I looked quietly at the photograph where the colors and shapes appeared distinctly within the 9x7.3cm frame. It wasn't my dead grandmother, Aunt Y□nsuk, Uncle Tos□ng, or a spirit of the house. It was some great big elephant.

I've been living in this house for eleven years. Today it's been made into multi-family housing, but eleven years ago it was a small single-story house with a little yard. My father bought this place. He demolished the existing house and built a new one to his own design. While the house was being built, our family of five lived in a single room nearby. When they had something to quarrel about and wanted to raise their voices, my mother and father would go to a local inn. My father made another room on top of the roof. This is the rooftop room in which I now live, and in which I am writing this. Originally, it was my youngest sister's room. I used to write squatting on the floor downstairs. I wanted to have an enormous desk. When my youngest sister went away for a long time, I called some male friends of my other sister to help me move up here from the downstairs room. That night I

wrote a letter to my youngest sister. “Well done, sis,” came the reply. The rooftop room had no space to put a desk either. I bought a little high-gloss table. The lacquer is now coming off the edges in places and the legs wobble, but it’s still usable. Even if I get a bigger room, I don’t feel like changing my desk any more. Yet I still hanker after a big desk with lots of drawers. “People always have to learn to be satisfied with less than enough.” That’s what my mother always said. In my rooftop room I would read, write, and make late-night phone calls. In the twinkling of an eye, several years went past. When my writing didn’t go well, or when I quarreled too badly with someone in the family, I wanted to leave this house. When I went downstairs from my rooftop room at night to use the bathroom, I would accidentally tread on the legs or stomachs of my family members who were sleeping on the floor of the dark living room. In the darkness we’d be startled by each other and cry out, “Who’s that?” “Who are you?” I banged on the wall of my rooftop room with both fists. The wall didn’t fall down. The house my father built was stronger than I thought.

On Sunday afternoon I went to Seoul Grand Park in Kwachŏn. It was a few days after I saw the elephant. It was very windy, and there were crowds of people. In the zoo, there was a chrysanthemum festival going on. People were taking pictures in front of the bright blossoming chrysanthemums, and in the flamingo enclosure nearby, the long-legged flamingoes were flapping their wings. I went straight to the elephant enclosure. An African elephant was slowly walking around inside its broad S-shaped enclosure, wriggling its long trunk. I couldn’t help feeling disappointed. The elephant was much further away than I had expected. It was too far away to take a worthwhile photograph. Trying to get closer, whenever the elephant moved to the left I ran that way, and when it changed direction I quickly ran back to the right. The elephant was certainly popular. The whole of the long curving fence was crowded with both children and adults. I guessed that the African elephant in that enclosure must be an elderly male. Older males live alone. They eat plants in the early morning and evening, and during the day they rest in the shade of the trees. They sleep standing up. Sometimes they sleep lying on their side too. The elephant that came to my room slept lying on that cramped floor with its bulky body bunched up tight. Its trunk was curled up and bent inward toward its body, as if I might try to steal it. I couldn’t tell whether it had big tusks or not, so there was no way to know whether it was a male or a female. The elephant that had been walking back and forth by the same fixed route through its enclosure sometimes

seemed to think of something and stood still on its thick legs, gazing out of the enclosure. Then, as if it was nothing after all, the elephant started to plod along again, retracing the heavy steps by which it had come. Whenever the elephant flapped its ears, a cool breeze rustled the front of my clothes. From the bag that I was carrying over my shoulder, I took out my Polaroid camera. I put a new film in. If there had been a better Polaroid than the Spectra, he probably would have bought it for me. But it was not easy to find the right films. I ordered them specially from my regular photo shop. When I went to pick up a film, the owner of the shop told me that the Spectra was not widely distributed, and it would always be difficult to get films for it. He said if I took the camera back to the store that sold it, they would exchange it for an ordinary Polaroid. It would be a kind of refund. I ordered three more films at one time. It was the last present he ever gave me. Suddenly, the elephant stopped walking and put its front feet up on the inner barrier of the enclosure. There was another barrier two or three meters away, and the gap between them was dug out like a ditch. It looked as if the elephant was going to jump right across it. I was nervous. I wondered if I was going to see the elephant fly up like a bird. At the moment the elephant raised its long trunk, I pressed the shutter. The film popped out. The elephant took its front feet down and turned around. "A sensitive animal." It was hardly likely that the elephant had heard the sound of the shutter, but I said it anyway. A steel gate was opened and the keeper came out into the enclosure. He gave the elephant a bun, which the elephant took in its trunk and ate. 4:40pm. The elephant followed the keeper inside through the steel gate. As soon as the elephant was gone, all the people moved away from the enclosure. I went to the next enclosure, where the Asian elephant was kept. But the Asian elephant was already gone. I read the notice. "The Asian elephant has weak eyesight and, because of its short neck, cannot see behind it." Cannot see behind it. I was quite sure. The elephant that had visited me that night was not an Asian but an African elephant. The elephant. Its eyesight is weak but its hearing and sense of smell are excellent. It can run at 50km per hour. Its body surface is covered with thick hair. The front teeth in its upper jaw grow long and form tusks. The elephant, the largest land animal on earth.

I felt that something was unclear. But I didn't want to inquire too deeply. I went out a lot. I really wanted to move out of the house, but I had nowhere to go. One day he came over with a bunch of flyers. He held my hand and took me to look at some rooms. Ironically, all four places were rooftop rooms. I ripped up the flyers

right in front of him. We ate some warm soup and rice. We crossed the road and went into a newly built twenty-story officetel. The custodian gave us the key. There was a big desk, and a wardrobe, and a bed, and a shiny sink. I led him by the hand. I pointed out through the window where the traffic was whizzing by. "This is not going to work." "I guess not." "Looks like it'll be too noisy." "That's what I was thinking." We returned the key and came out of the officetel. We went to have some chicken. It was less than half an hour after that. Even now, when I hear my mother's footsteps coming up the stairs to my rooftop room, my pulse races. My mother came up to my room. She said our family would have to leave this house. There was so much that my parents hadn't been telling their three daughters. She said our house was going to be repossessed and put up for auction. My father's elder brother, who had twice borrowed money from him, had disappeared. I couldn't blame my father. It all came from trying to improve our life. For the first time I understood the meaning of the expression, "They ended up on the streets overnight." My father quit smoking. He stayed in his bedroom all day. He even ate his meals by himself. My father's face became dark and gaunt like my dead Uncle Tosong's. My mother's ears bled. I wanted my younger sisters just to carry on with their studies. That was probably no different from my parents' desire to keep these things hidden from their daughters. I thrust a kitchen knife between the red bricks of this house. The house was very strong. We began fighting to keep our house. I dashed hither and thither. It was a job that someone had to do. "I'm sorry I can't do anything to help you," he said. "I'm not so much afraid of losing this house as I am of losing you." I blurted that out from fear of losing the house. He cried. "Don't cry." I comforted him. I didn't cry myself. The time when my pent-up tears finally burst out was when the elephant came again. I buried my face in the vast flank of the elephant, covered my mouth with my hand, and wept.

Now and then he calls me. "Are you okay?" His voice is sad but affectionate. I give a mirthless laugh. "Are you doing okay?" He's not just asking after me, he's asking after my house. Then he asks me something else. "Has the elephant come again?" Sometimes he seems more interested in the elephant's welfare than in mine. On the day I went to the zoo, I took three photographs. The elephant with its front feet on the fence, the elephant wiggling its buttocks as it walked with its trunk raised up to the sky, and the elephant plodding toward the setting sun with its head bowed down. My lonely elephant.

I ask myself how I came to live in this house all this time. There were surely times when I might have ended up living somewhere else instead of here. There was the time when I had turned twenty, and there was the incident that all my family still remember when I was kidnapped. Strangely enough, I don't have much recollection of my twenties. Perhaps it's because I never told anyone about those times. Last autumn, I went to give a guest lecture at S— University. As I was about to go into the lecture room, someone stood in my way. She spoke my name. I stared hard at her face, then said with a little gasp, "Ah, it's Y□nj□ng." She said she had seen a poster about this event on the campus bulletin board. "I wondered if it was really you." I faltered badly. I took her name card and hurriedly said goodbye. She must have been studying computer graphics all this time. Looking at her name card, I saw that she was now a senior researcher in the Media Center at that university. I remember that even after I went into the lecture room I couldn't speak for a while and just sat there vacantly. Y□nj□ng was one of the people who knew me back then. I said I would get in touch, but I didn't contact her. A year went by. At last, a little while ago, I sent her an e-mail. "Y□nj□ng, I wonder how the people I used to know back then remember me, and where they all are now. Do you still remember what I was like in those days?" I had had dinner with the chief editor of a certain website, and we were walking along a street in Sinsadong to get some tea, when someone called me from behind. "Hey, Fatty Cho!" I didn't stop walking. I didn't look back. Why couldn't I see a tea room? I quickened my steps. My companion gently touched my elbow. "It looks like someone is calling you over there." As soon as I heard the word "Hey!" I knew whose voice it was. That was remarkable. I was about twenty-one when I knew those people, so it had already been more than ten years. I could still hear the voice that kept calling me. I turned my head with an indifferent look. "Hey, Fatty Cho!" "Ah, how do you do?" "Is it really you?" "It's been a long time." I greeted Director Ch□ng and Assistant Manager Pak formally. "What's this? Look at her!" They chuckled. I used to go to work with my hair (which I had permed for the first time in my life) tied at the back like a country girl. In the morning I always shampooed it and put on my stockings. Every time I dried my wet hair with the electric dryer, I thought to myself, "Where shall I go today?" I was often absent from work. Once I was even absent for three days in one week. At lunch time I came out by myself and went to a big bookstore in a building opposite my workplace. At that time there was a fast food restaurant in the basement of the bookstore. There, I would eat a hamburger and read a book. I would read a whole book at a sitting. When I was

tired of reading, I would call someone from the public phone. I would also peer into the galleries near my workplace. When I eventually went back to work, my colleagues would give me disapproving looks. I would spend about four hours on my lunch break. I didn't join my colleagues to eat out or socialize with them after work. Sometimes I would remain by myself at the office and read a book or spend hours poring over the four-dimensional computer graphic images that my colleagues were making. With computer graphics, my colleagues made stars, they made camels walking across the desert, they built apartment blocks. They also made animated images for TV commercials. It's not shown any more, but there was a commercial for a cold medicine called Purupen made by a certain pharmaceutical company. It was an animated commercial that showed someone riding a bottle of Purupen like a train to a child with a fever. I had a hand in making the frames for that. There was nothing they couldn't make. Staying behind by myself, I held the mouse and clicked buttons at random. In the morning, I heard my colleagues' angry cries. "Who did this? Who erased all this?" My face was always expressionless. When I was going downstairs to go to the bathroom, someone suddenly grabbed me from behind and pressed my back against his lower body. "Don't you know how to smile?" It was an interior designer who often came to our office. When we finished work, Assistant Manager Pak said he would drop me off near my home. I got into his car. He told me to put my seat belt on. I pulled out a generous length of seat belt. After some hesitation, I put it over my head. "Don't you know how to put a seat belt on?" "Is something wrong?" I looked at him with a glum face. His dumbfounded look is still vivid in my memory. Even now, whenever I ride in someone else's car, I secretly worry that I might put the seat belt on wrong as I did then. "So you write." Director Ch□ng and Assistant Manager Pak knew about my current activities. "Yes." "Let's get together with Y□nj□ng and Assistant Manager Kim Ch□ngh□i some time." "Yes." They seemed extremely pleased to run into me. Director Ch□ng and Assistant Manager Pak kept chuckling. They asked me to write my phone number. I wrote some number or other. I don't know whose phone number it was. I had hated myself for being fat, I had hated myself for skipping work, I had hated myself for lying, I had hated myself for not being able to understand the computer graphic manuals that I had to read. I worked at that company for seven months. Then I handed in my resignation. "Think again." It was Director Ch□ng who said that. "What are you going to do?" he asked. Sometimes when I go to Sinsadong or Kangnam I look at the World Book Center. I still see myself standing in that bookstore at the age of twenty-one, absorbed in a book. I

lived in this city at that time too. I never got a reply from Yǎnjǎng.

If I hadn't been able to get home that time, I would not be living here now. My family, also, would not be the family I have now. At the age of three I was kidnapped. My kidnapper was a middle-aged woman who was unable to have children. To change my appearance, she took me to a beauty parlor. She must have asked them to give me a perm. She went out of the beauty parlor for a while. That was my chance. I cried for all I was worth. Just three years old, I could remember Pongsin Church. The owner of the beauty parlor took my hand and led me to Pongsin Church. That's how I got back home. The house I lived in at that time has been condemned and demolished, but Pongsin Church is still there.

I've started to eat before my father. When my sisters come home late, they call me first. My father is smoking again. In the morning my mother cleans my shoes. In the rooftop room, the books are steadily accumulating. "There's too much stuff in your room." My father worried. I didn't care. I bought myself a television, and I bought a printer. There wasn't room to put a foot down. I moved some of my books downstairs to the living room. I bought some new bookshelves. I got rid of the living room sofa. Beside the refrigerator, and where the sofa had been, I put bookshelves. Each time I set up some new bookshelves, I felt as if I were moving a tree, but the feeling didn't last more than half a day. The things from the living room, and the wardrobe that all three sisters shared, were moved into the main bedroom. My father put up a column in the living room. That was to support my rooftop room. Even now, my father paces around downstairs every day worrying that the rooftop room might collapse from the weight, while I worry how my parents can stretch out and sleep in a room that is so crammed with their daughters' stuff. On the night when he had said "I'm sorry I can't do anything to help you," he wrote me a long letter. It was a letter full of his feelings of powerlessness and regret. At the end of the letter he added: "Things that are deeply felt are sure to last." He wrote, "People don't always live and love in the same way; nothing endures as it was at first." He wrote, "We have to change so as not to change." And he also wrote this: "That's how love must grow." A letter. The word "letter" is very sad. Since we split up, I have never taken out that letter to read it again. And that's not the only letter I've never read again. Sometimes I think of it. And I think, "Why did we split up?" Eventually, in exchange for keeping the house, I lost him. I look at the photograph of my family that I took when I got home

after parting with him on my birthday. My family don't know that the table is an elephant's head, that the sofa is its back, and they smile broadly as they dig their sharp elbows into it. "Look, this is an elephant." If I said that, they would laugh it away and say, "She's writing stories again." The elephant is pretending to sleep and has closed its eyes, but I know it is not asleep. I don't forget to keep a butter-coconut cookie or a banana always at hand. I don't know when the elephant might come again.

My father went down to Y□su bearing his three daughters like medals. It was 1996, the year I entered university at the age of twenty-five. That night there was a drinking party. Someone got drunk and burst into tears. I mixed with my relatives and drank a fair amount myself. The next day, that big extended family went for a picnic together. We rented a minibus and drove quite far along the coast. There we rode a boat. Odong Island was visible in the distance. It was a hot midsummer day. No one can remember the name of that island any more. No matter how hard I think about it, I can't remember where the island was that we went to that day. Actually, Y□su is a place with innumerable unnamed islands. But now it occurs to me that our island may not have been in Y□su. Aunt Y□nsuk brought all the food. My uncles, cousins, and aunts gathered around the stove and cooked the meat and clams. My relatives ran into the sea and swam and played with a ball. All my cousins resembled their fathers with their long legs and slender bodies. My cousins laughed merrily in the hot sun. Startled by the sound of their laughter, I dropped my parasol. For the first time, I saw my father swimming. He was as swift and supple as a seal. I saw it for the first time in my life. I must have completely forgotten that this place was my father's hometown. Uncle Tos□ng, who had come back from a long sea voyage, had a big bottle of rice wine constantly at his lips. "Uncle, don't drink too much." I told him what he didn't want to hear, as if I were speaking to my father. It was probably from around then that Uncle Tos□ng's liver trouble started. "Leave him alone," said my father. Although Aunt Y□nsuk had brought the food, she hardly had time to eat. She was too busy clearing away the pan that the meat had been cooked in and frying the frozen clams and seafoods that she had been keeping in the freezer for months, and boiling chicken too. My other aunts washed the dishes, led by the loud voice of Aunt Y□nsuk. They too were sharing a big bottle of rice wine. A pot of Tolsan leaf mustard kimchee was soon finished. My mother was drunk from three glasses of rice wine and lay on a mat. The sun was really hot. The sea looked infinitely deep. From it, my uncles and

cousins beckoned to me. I shook my head. None of us three sisters knew how to swim. "They threw me in the sea the day I was born," said Aunt Y□nsuk. I took off my socks. It took courage to go into the sea. Holding my sisters' hands, I walked into the water step by step. Then suddenly, my third uncle, Uncle Toyun, pushed me hard from behind. I fell right into the water, fully dressed. From deep under the water I could hear my aunts, uncles, and cousins all laughing. I was not afraid. Somehow I thought I might be able to move my arms and swim instinctively like Aunt Y□nsuk. After all, I was the daughter of my father, who knew all there was to know about the sea. I scrambled out of the water. Around me, my father, three uncles, three aunts, and six cousins were all swimming peacefully. Today, two of them are dead. The rest call my mother often. I hear that one of my uncles started to get water on the knee a while ago, and another hurt his back and can't sail any more. It scares me how people keep dying. I hate the rainy season, I hate blizzards, and I hate wars. Sometimes I'd like to see once more the faces of those who have died. But that will only be possible in the distant future. The sun set. The rice wine was finished. The watermelon and the octopus and the meat and the lettuce were all finished. Aunt Y□nsuk's husband cleared everything up. He did the driving too. He didn't look as if he would beat a person like a dog, but I didn't care for his slanted eyes. We went a long way around to the home of one of my uncles. My father, my uncles, and my aunts stayed up drinking until dawn. Someone quarreled and started crying, but they were soon screaming with laughter again. All the way home, my father didn't say a word. Perhaps when my second paternal grandmother, who is over eighty years old, passes away, I may go to Y□su again. Black hairs are starting to grow again on my grandmother's head. When my father is drunk, he talks about that summer excursion. He also talks about his younger days in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Kuwait. My father used to write us a letter twice a week. My mother wrote a letter to him every day, and at her insistence, we three sisters obediently wrote him a letter once a week. Letters that said, "Daddy, we're all well and we're doing okay at school, we'll study hard," and then had nothing more to say. My father's letters that crossed the sandstorms of the desert were just the same. "Listen to Mummy and study hard. Daddy is fine." Letters that differed from each other only in the date. The letters that our family exchanged like this for about ten years are in a big earthenware pot on the rooftop. Like burying winter kimchee, a layer of plastic was spread inside the pot and the letters were sealed up inside. My father did it. To this day, I have never opened that pot. I've already started to wonder what I should do with those letters in the future after my father

passes away. Every day we're paying for the house, and every day we're losing the house, but thankfully nothing has changed much so far. In the morning, my father brings in the newspaper from the front steps, my mother cleans the shoes, and the three sisters go out to work. When I'm out of hearing, my father complains that no one seems to notice the cactus is in bloom, and my mother gives us a hint. My mother doesn't come up to my rooftop room. When I get a phone call, she puts the receiver outside the door of my room and goes back downstairs. Now that she has trouble with her joints, I wonder how long she will be able to climb those stairs. Even when I am reading or writing, I often go downstairs. I hope one of my sisters will get married soon and leave this house. If one room were empty, we'd be able to move the things from the main bedroom there and put a sofa in the living room again. I'm afraid I may be the last of the sisters to remain in this house. My father still worries that the rooftop room may collapse, and I worry about his daughters' possessions and books encroaching on his bedroom. I'm not the happiest person in the world, but I'm not the unhappiest either. When I'm hurt or my pride is wounded, I sit at the table for an hour or two trimming anchovies. If we have no anchovies, I peel peanuts. Sometimes I dress up and go to an Italian restaurant to eat pasta and drink wine. My mother still says that people have to learn to be satisfied with less than enough. Now I know what she means. It has taken a long time, though. I am still living in this house. This is the house where my happiest moments and my unhappiest moments are preserved. The rooftop room is warm. It's winter now. I can hear spoons being laid on the table downstairs. "Let's eat!" My mother shouts up to my room. "Okay!" I reply right away, and I bound off down the stairs.

Sometimes I wait for him to call. He is the only one who understands my elephant story and listens. I can pick up the receiver and chatter away for an hour just about my elephant story. I don't take photographs any more. Yet something still appears. Now and then the house wriggles and moves. Then I think to myself, "Ah, the elephant has come."