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Looking for Gingko

I.

The wind lashes at the branches of the tree in front of you. You feel the cold crawling up from your wet socks to the hem of your pants. But the rain no longer holds any terror for you. Nor anything sentimental. So it's not as if you had mistakenly left your umbrella in Rm 203 of a five-story building. It is ash-colored, but it bears the inscription "corner Green House"—an engraved tablet beside a glass door, which opens upon approach and triggers automatic floor lamps, lighting up the stairs to your room. This amazed you the first time, like when you first sat on a wooden floor (the same color as the low table) in a nearby restaurant, where you pantomimed an order of *bibimbap* and *kimchi* for lunch.

You fish out a piece of candy from your bag, a token from that restaurant. You still have thirty minutes to wait out the rain, which you believe is a tail of that typhoon in Manila; three hours away by plane. Shuttle bus stop, says the sign beside you. The English words feel like a friendly pat on your shoulder. You have been studying Hangul for less than a month. You came from the main library and your class is one building away from this pedestrian lane and shuttle bus stop.

June means *tag-araw*, summer, in Korea. This is what's written in the guidebook, on Wikipedia; what your friends said when they found out you got accepted into a writing program. Still, what greeted you at Incheon airport was the equivalent of a December chill in the Philippines. You liked this and slept well that first night. In your dream, you saw colorful roses lining the length of the road and hanging from the neighbors' fences. You longed to pick them, but your guide reminded you that these belonged to other people. You shuddered at an imaginary headline: Filipina, arrested in Seoul for picking roses! The memory never fails to make you smile.

Your cellphone vibrates. *Stay dry.* From him. *How can a summer rain ravage a girl from a country of typhoons and floods?* You answer. But you sought shelter anyway. Your sister sent you a text message yesterday: influenza A(H1N1) has now spread to the Visayas. They take your temperature every Monday in this university. Even with medical insurance, you fear getting sick. In the library earlier, you found out that you can borrow up to five books for ten days. You asked if it was possible to renew. The male librarian shook his head. *Anneo opsoyo.* Weird, you thought. You repeated: "Renew...extend?" "Postpone?" he asked. You hesitated, then nodded, ready to surrender: *if that's what they call it here, fine.* Surprisingly, the limit was extended to twenty days. In the elevator, you felt tickled by giggles that refused to escape your mouth. But what if you found yourself in the emergency ward? They have their own language, their own English, which follows a different pronunciation and vocabulary. Like how they manufacture their own cellphones and cars. Even the *noorebang*, their version of our kara/videoke, which they take so much pride in.

Then—as the candy melts in your mouth and you dismiss the illusion that someone will share their umbrella with you, just like how in the subway here the men don't offer their seats—you notice the trees in front of you. There they stand among the granite buildings, adding greenery to the entire campus. They line all the roads but it is only now—in the rain—that you notice their leaves. Fan-shaped, like *abaniko*, they convince you that the trees are gingko. *Gingko biloba.*

You charge through the rain, the wind lashing at your sneakers. You cannot be late for class. At a herbal store in a mall near your place in Manila, you read that gingko improves memory and relieves body fatigue. You grab some leaves, snatching them from the twigs of a branch, bending it. You count with your fingers in Korean. This is your lesson for the day, and you have to compete against your Chinese classmates' speed and your teacher's limited English. In front of the building where your class is located,

past the road fronting the university and that row of ginkgo trees (you're sure now), the building construction never ends. Your gaze travels beyond this, goes home to your province where the latest news is of rice paddies being inundated and of stalks wilting even before the first harvest. You play around with the leaves between your fingers, before using them to cover your nose against the stench steaming from the soil, mixed with the smell of metal and cracked cement.

2.

The clunking of your heels joins the collective rush along the up-and-down stairways and tunnels of the subway from Bomun station going to Anguk. It is your first meeting, and you had agreed to meet in Insadong at two in the afternoon. You had read that this was the street of traditional galleries and restaurants, with stores selling antiques and porcelain and *hanji* paper, as well as other fixtures and decorations. You met through a social networking site. A common friend tagged you both in Book View Café's link to "About Literary Bests" by Ursula K. Le Guin. He sent you an email after seeing your pictures here in Seoul, and that started the chats and SMS.

This is the third phrase in Hangul that you had memorized: *Palli, palli*. Hurry, hurry. *Bilis, bilis*. He is already there, standing on the platform. Wearing jeans, an avocado-green polo shirt, and black shoes. The first thing you learned from your guide was *anneoyong haseyo*. Hello. You greet each other, bowing a little.

He takes you to a vegetarian restaurant that was reviewed by the *New York Times* for its Buddhist temple cuisine. You try the seasonal Buddhist monk's favorite vegetables and steamed bean curd with burdock, mushrooms, and carrots. You drink jujube tea. These are spread out in front of you, in red bowls made from zelkova trees that grow in the mountains of Chiri-san. Here, you mention your search for the ginkgo tree. You wish to see it in golden yellow, like when you first saw it in Kim Ki-duk's film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring*, which won the Cannes in 2003. The protagonist is a Buddhist monk, who carries a stone in his heart and mind. This brings you to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by the Czech writer Milan Kundera, because he hasn't watched the film.

He mentions that he speaks Czech. He lived in Prague for five years, after finishing university. "My childhood had the luxury of loneliness," he says. "My mother left me when I was six. For a long time, I wondered if there's someone who will love me, and one day, I read about Prague and there was something about its old-world atmosphere and architecture that welcomed me."

You stop drinking jujube tea and shift your gaze to his green eyes, his dimples. There you see old photographs in black-and-white, in sepia; the pirated DVD of movies that had won in international film fests stored under your flat screen TV; James Joyce's "Araby" which you had taught in class.

Perhaps that explains, he continues, why he married at 26, not only so he could take her back with him to Florida. They separated after three years. He taught English in Taiwan, and now here at a *hagwon*, a private school. Just almost six months; already.

Come to the Philippines. It's near, cheap, you hear yourself think, but you do not say anything. *You will be happy in my country, because we Filipinos love foreigners more.*

You hear "*Arirang*," the most famous traditional song in Korea—a lamentation about the never-ending wait for the return of the beloved, for the freedom of the nation. You also learned about this from the film. It is on your playlist, along with "*Usahay*," "*Matud Nila*," "*Dandansoy*," and "*Dahil Sa'yo*."

Your desire to see a real ginkgo tree grew stronger, you continue, after reading the anthology *New Writing from Korea*, which made you weep on your *ondol* floor. From envy, at the smoothness and fineness of the paper used in publication; and from a memory: the smell of the burning forests of Panay region while on a van one summer as you went home to Antique. Most of all, from the sadness permeating the entire book: husbands beating wives, wives leaving families, the cries of migrant Nepalese workers,

which you know are also the sobs and curses of Filipinos, all of which they drown by texting and attending the Tagalog mass in Hyewa during Sundays.

You both agree. You convince yourselves that you understand why Koreans are like that: because of their land's history as a Japanese colony, the series of military dictatorships that followed, the Korean War that resulted in the division of South and North, the involvement of America. They study English in order to further sell their *kimchi*, in order to strengthen their won.

Your English is good, he says. Admirable. Like your intelligence and beauty. You pinch him on the side. "Flattery will not bring you anywhere," you say with a laugh. "I'm telling the truth," he rejoins. "You are a very attractive woman, and your accomplishments, my god, you are shaming many Americans who can't even spell." By then you two are already walking to the subway station. You are headed towards Itaewon, a district famous for its English signs. Foreigners clump together here, especially American soldiers. Surprisingly, your feet do not yet feel sore, as if you are already used to wearing heels, just like how you now possess the confidence that you are beautiful, indeed—your muscovado-colored skin glistening on this summer day in Seoul, your petite body bearing the curves of Philippine roads, and your face a record of your ancestors' struggles, where a wild orchid blossoms.

You sit outside a restaurant, beneath the trees, a candle flickering in the middle of the table. Pots of roses form a row along the fence: white, yellow, red, orange. You fix your gaze on the trees. There might be a ginkgo among them. But neither of you even considers asking; you are too absorbed in your stories, in each other. When a young waiter serves you Hite beer, you both remember Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-lighted Place."

You discover that you both listen to The Smiths, and it is as if you suddenly understand yourselves and each other, as well as those who have come before you and even those to follow—just like how each new book you read adds to your dismay for humanity and the world. So both of you continue writing: you, your poems and stories, and he, his screenplays. This is why you can only stay as lovers to other people; why you will not marry.

You utter the second Hangul word you learned: *kamsahamnida*. Thank you. He answers with *komapsamnida*, the informal version. You make him repeat *maraming salamat* again and again until his tongue wraps itself around the correct pronunciation. You are standing on the subway platform, surrounded by signs in Hangul, young and old alike in heels, as a voice announces the arrival of the last train.

You hold on to the railing, map clipped under your arm, exhaustion cradled in the numbness of your neck. You imagine the hurry in his steps as he turns around and flags a taxi on the street; he knows he won't be able to catch the last trip to his line. It is like this in this country: they have the same respect for time as for their elders. The buses are numbered and travel on the same route every day. You are picked up and dropped off on designated stops. You will not make a mistake. In class, you only have to mention the examples listed in your textbook. You may add your own, but you won't have enough time left anyway. Better to just follow.

A pinch and a heartbeat. This is how you live in this city, where the rides up and down the subway line do not take you home, or bring you closer to your beloved.

3.

Ginkgo biloba. Also called maidenhair. A young woman's hair. Your hair.

It grows slowly, says Wikipedia, and lives a long time. Has foul-smelling fruits and does not flower. Shaped like a pyramid.

We only have two seasons in the Philippines: dry and rainy, you told him, so we have no ginkgo. Or perhaps you just don't know. You were already walking then, holding hands, but were yet to spot that restaurant in Itaewon. Now it is close to six in the evening, an hour ahead of the Philippines. You are

walking. Your class has just ended, where today you studied directions for four hours. You learned to add *e* after a place or direction, an indication of possession and position, before the verb-ending that is either *eso*yo (positive, ex. yes) or *opo*yo (negative, ex. no).

Your teacher tacked a map of Hankuk (Korea) on the board, and you had to indicate the location of your country. You hesitated at your two choices: *we e* (over/above) or *are e* (down/below, under). *Korea is above the Philippines. The Philippines is below Korea.* You felt a hammering in your chest. Neither was a favorable position. But before you were able to decide, your teacher reprimanded you for writing, still, in the English alphabet. After that she did not call on you anymore, the lone Filipina in a class of Tsunggo (Chinese). You thought of Maya Angelou who became mute after she was raped. You could do it as well. Especially since *Philippines* becomes *Philippine*, no “s,” in Hangul. When you asked why you could not add the “s,” your *sunsenim* (teacher) only answered *opo*yo, and shook her head. Here you have to follow the official spelling of your country’s name, just as in class you only have to repeat what the *sunsenim* says.

You long to be with him, your American friend. In your mind, you are running toward him, on a hill that has become your meeting place; you want to pinch him and pound your fists on his chest. You are slow in Hangul because you still have to rely on English for comprehension. Korea has America to thank for its progress, you remember saying in between swills of beer. You did not mouth a litany of the corruption problems in your country. Instead you told him about *Noli me Tangere* and *Il Filibusterismo*, which he also did not know about. Thanks to English, you are able to understand each other in this country.

You are walking past a row of trees that you confidently recognize as gingko. The leaves are still in your bag. You feel your exhaustion vanish with this certainty. To test the sharpness of your memory, you point to the trees in Kinaray-a, your mother tongue: *dya, amo ra, amo ‘to*; in Hiligaynon: *ini, ina, ato*; in Tagalog: *ito, iyan, iyon*, and in English: *this, that* (near), *that* (far). In Korean: *ego, kugo, tsugo*. You are certain now that you and that old fish and shrimp vendor you regularly visit will understand each other better. What you are not sure of is whether you can write these down correctly without your notes. That’s okay, you think, even the gingko tree grows slowly. You had to immerse yourself in English for more than twenty years before you were said to be good at it. You had to travel abroad in order to be considered beautiful.

Your cellphone vibrates. He tells you that he has bought a mountain bike for his trip through Hangang River and the nearby mountains crossed by railroads. “I have found the gingko. Find the red azalea for me there,” you hear yourself say. You are translating this reply in your mind when your bus arrives: IIII. You hurriedly climb inside and flash the e-card hanging from your cellphone for the fare. There are no vacant seats. But you have the strength to stand and hold on to the rail, your eyes devouring the gingko trees rushing past, until the day you meet again. You will say this—that line—in the sweetness and sorrow of Tagalog, in the slippery words of its English translation, and sing to him the *kundiman*.

Translated from Filipino by Michelle T. Tan

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