

## Kim Soom

### The Northern Room

His wife went to the market to buy ox-foot to make soup<sup>1</sup>. Today was the day her favorite butcher stocked beef and pork supplies. Kwangno knew it because today was the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. The butcher, a Chinese-Korean, was familiar to him as Kwangno himself bought meat from him once or twice. The butcher was a big hefty man who used to squeeze his enormous body into a narrow back room when there were no customers.

On the supply day, the butcher would put out large, round rubber containers in which congealed ox blood and other innards were soaking in blood-red water.

Kwangno's wife would buy ox-foot and ox blood. From her younger days, she would boil and eat congealed ox blood after each of her menstruation periods was over. Years had passed since her menopause, but she still hung onto her old habit.

Kwangno was in an immobile posture, with his knees pulled up to his chin. He did not move a muscle and listened to some boy throwing an iron ball against the wall of his room. He also heard the noise of several sewing machines going on from downstairs where wigs were being made. His room, like a cancerous lump, was stuck on the northern side of the house.

From early morning, the neighborhood women would gather in the sewing room to sew on artificial hair into the holes of the wig molds. Ever since the downstairs half-basement was rented out, he could not avoid the noise of the machines. Even though the constant noise was enough to cause him headaches, he could not evict the people because he needed the rent money. Furthermore, since the half-basement was just a vacant space, he couldn't rent it to a family to live in it. Besides, a machine shop paid more than a family.

"Surely this boy is going to crack the wall," Kwangno said to himself, feeling as if his own body were being hit. He barely managed to pull himself up and opened the sliding window. Against the window outside were iron bars in a diamond pattern.

Kwangno put his face close to the iron bars but an electric pole blocked his vision. The alley was barely wide enough for one car to pass through and the entire neighborhood was jammed with multi-family residences.

"Don't throw the iron ball," Kwangno said but his phlegm-filled throat made his voice hardly audible.

"Don't throw the iron ball."

Abruptly, the ball throwing stopped, and only the noise of the sewing machines filled the air.

From the pocket of his white cotton shirt that was like a pajama top, he pulled out four paper packets of pills, each of which contained five pills, supposedly for

subsiding his phlegm, helping his digestion and clearing his blood. Thirty minutes after each meal, he was told to take one packet, but today he had not taken any medicine since lunchtime. He had been taking these pills for seven months but he had the same phlegm infesting his throat that made it extremely difficult to breathe or swallow food. Doctors said it was because of the dwindling function of his lungs.

Last spring, he was hospitalized for two months, connected to an oxygen tank. The day he was admitted to the hospital, he found he weighed only 84 pounds. A drastic fall from his old weight of 150 pounds.

Kwangno opened the packets and poured the pills on the papered floor. They were yellow, red, white and blue. He pulled up a corner of the papered floor until the cement underneath showed. A rotting odor rose from the cracks in the cement. Kwangno pushed all the pills into those cracks.

The sound of the iron ball hitting the wall started again. Kwangno felt as if the ball were smashing into his back.

"I told you not to throw the ball," shouted Kwangno, putting all his strength into hanging onto the windowsill and constricting his sphincter muscles as hard as he could. He was told when his sphincter muscles didn't contract any more, his life would be over. Because of the phlegm, though, his shout never made it out of his throat.

It was about a month ago when his battle of nerves with the iron ball began. From the first day, exactly at noon, the iron ball hit his wall. Kwangno guessed it was thrown by a boy at least ten years old. Every time the ball hit the wall, Kwangno felt as if the whole world shook. Or, because of his overly sensitive body, he was easily shaken even by a minute noise.

When Kwangno was about to close the window, he looked over at the window of the house across the alley. It was closed. Not a shadow moved in it. A day ago, he saw a coffin being pushed through the window. A ladder-truck brought it when the adamantly closed window opened for the first time. The truck lifted the coffin up to the height of the window.

"It's a coffin. A coffin," Kwangno hung onto his window and watched the scene.

"What are you talking about?" His wife asked sharply as she came in with his clean underwear.

"A coffin is being carried into that house."

"That's not a coffin."

"That is a coffin."

"No, it is a cabinet. It's a lacquered cabinet with traditional 'ten longevity signs' etched on it. How classically beautiful," his wife said.

As his wife said, there were the sun, mountains, water, rocks, clouds, pine trees, a turtle, a crane and a deer etched in golden clamshells.

"To your eyes, even a beautiful cabinet looks like a coffin," his wife said snidely.

Today, his wife's perfect Seoul speech was particularly offensive to his ears. Though she was born in Kaesung in North Korea, she was raised within the four gates of Seoul, so her perfect Seoul speech was natural. She spoke Seoul speech even in her sleep talk.

His wife always thought her life within the four gates of Seoul was the best time she had ever had and missed it deeply, so much so that every spring when flowers were in bloom, she had a picnic with her sisters on the grounds of Changkyong Palace, Kyongbok Palace and Duksu Palace, all famous beloved old palaces in Seoul.

From some time ago, Kwangno had felt resentful towards her for missing something so intensely at her age. It's a foolish greediness of old age. Her long phone calls in that Seoul dialect of hers was about everything that went on in the world! He condemned them as the very foolish signs of greediness of the old. Most of her conversations were usually about the small everyday happenings of her sisters' families.

"Don't throw the iron ball," Kwangno mumbled as he slowly sank down to the floor. While trying to clear the phlegm in his throat, he glared at the small pink, low enamel table with a bowl of noodles on it. The noodles had become bloated and mushy in the dried-anchovy broth. He put a spoonful of the broth in his mouth and pushed the table away. His throat condition was not bad enough to make him unable to swallow the noodles, but by refusing to eat them, he wanted to show his wife how resentful he was. On the table there was another tiny bowl from which rose an unpleasant fish smell of salted, fermented shrimp. Kwangno was uneasy as if the smell were coming from his crumbling body.

Around noon today, his wife pushed the table into his northern room and shut the door securely. The copper door-ring looked like a gold tooth implanted in a dead man's gums. Kwangno knew that the door would remain closed until his wife came back from the butcher. He had never opened or closed the door, not even touched the door-ring. The door opened only a few times a day when his wife brought in the table or his underwear. She always made sure that the door was tightly shut afterwards. Her act showed unmistakably that the northern room divided their life into two different worlds.

Again, Kwangno thought that the neighbor's cabinet was indeed a coffin. When his difficulty breathing made it hard for him to move, his wife must have gloated, he thought, since she was now the only one he could rely on. In his old age, riddled with a disease, he knew his wife was the only person he had to depend on.

To Kwangno, the cause of their division was religion. Kwangno had lived nearly 70 years in a divided country and the world, but the rift between him and his wife was the most complete and lasting. In comparison, the division in ideology, moral and political ideas, in the country and the world, seemed always somehow mitigated by compromise.

The whole situation began when she bore their first child. One day out of the blue, she went to a Catholic church and got herself baptized by a priest. Then, she began to separate herself from him, insisting that husband and parents were all separate individuals. The more galling thing was that, to her, Kwangno, who refused to be humble and obedient to God, was a man who lacked a soul.

“Well, you have mastered all the knowledge and theories about the earth and the universe, so you don’t need God, do you?” his wife sneered at him. He was indeed completely indifferent to Catholicism.

“All the knowledge and principles governing the earth and the universe?” Kwangno felt a hot ball of anger surging up his throat. Or rather his anger might be directed at himself. For 32 years and 8 months, he had taught earth science at a junior high school.

Earth Science was, as it was called, a scientific study of the earth. “Just because he taught earth science, my wife insisted and sneered that I knew everything about the earth and the universe”. Kwangno had never thought he had mastered the secrets of the earth and the universe. In the earth and the universe, there were still countless numbers of undiscovered laws and principles, as there were countless grains of sand in a desert. The principles and laws Kwangno had taught junior high students for some 32 years were no more than a grain of sand. And yet, he taught for 32 years with that little knowledge, earning salaries and providing a secure life for his family. Furthermore, the theories and principles he taught were not what he himself discovered but what he had gained and memorized from the encyclopedia.

One day years ago when there was an earthquake in Central Asia, his wife began her attack on Kwangno.

“You still think that was simply a natural phenomenon of the earth, don’t you?” she said. Kwangno didn’t find it necessary to rebut, not because his wife was right but because he didn’t feel dread or any other emotion when he saw the terrible devastation on TV. He felt annoyed by the spiritual interpretation of natural phenomena of the Catholic church. To him, not like his wife, Catholic spirituality looked like no more than a mere ritual. His indifference would have been the same even if his wife believed some other religion. Silently, Kwangno drew with his thumb on the floor the sun and the nine planets that orbited around the sun.

What Kwangno dreaded was that all the phenomena that were happening on earth and in the universe had never caused any fear in him. Earthquakes and volcanoes were not interesting to him. Kwangno had never been interested in or moved by what was happening on earth or in the universe, not even to himself. The reason was that the expansion of the universe made him still more insignificant, which in turn caused him to be more indifferent to himself. He held this same attitude toward his wife and children.

He learned that the speed of the universe’s expansion was 71 kilometers per second. While his wife prayed earnestly in front of the Pieta sculpture for their children’s happiness and prosperity, Kwangno secretly cast away all his expectations and desires for his children. He knew his children would be no more, no less than

himself, an ordinary school teacher. He was rather hoping that they would soon learn how to compromise and resign themselves. Because of his indifference, he was satisfied with being an ordinary teacher for 32 years and 8 months.

Moreover, he had never produced one single outstanding student whom he could remember with pride. The last two years and eight months of his career, he managed in silence and resignation.

Kwangno knew his wife bitterly resented that he retired without being promoted to higher positions. Even though she sneered at him, calling him a man who knew the secrets of the earth and the universe, she was keenly aware of his social status. Her pride was hurt, but it had nothing to do with her religious faith. He knew his wife deemed his northern room as purgatory and when his lungs collapsed, he would plunge into Hell. He wondered if he should try to cling to life as long as he could, in order not to burn in Hell.

If there were a few things that interested him, they were minerals, metals and rocks. Compared to climate, earthquakes and oceans, minerals were real, regular and distinct. Various phenomena occurring in the atmosphere such as clouds, winds, temperatures, atmospheric pressure, snow and rain were extemporaneous and inconstant. Clouds and winds were motivated by change. In short, they could change at any moment. Therefore, they couldn't be caught and examined. Earthquakes were mere disasters. Because of the Catholic church's interpretation of earthquakes as God's punishment, Kwangno became more apathetic to it. Oceanography that studied ocean movements and water quality was too vast for him. He had always had negative feelings about water. However, it didn't mean that Kwangno was interested in collecting minerals. To him, collecting was a sign of excessive attachment, which in turn, would bring about a desire to show off. In other words, collecting was a manifestation of material greed. Kwangno had seen many of his colleagues who collected plants, minerals, stuffed animals, stamps, art objects. They were always eager and anxious to show off their collections. To be so attached to material things as if they were their own bones and organs was a sign of old-age greed.

Kwangno was interested in minerals mostly as the names of the objects he had to memorize. Even when he was with his colleagues, students, his wife and children, he would quietly memorize them. There were about 2400 kinds of minerals, and every year, 25 new kinds were discovered. Therefore, what he had memorized were a small number. He memorized only those recorded in the encyclopedia. That was his limit.

If one compared his northern room to a mineral, the room could be iron. A lump of iron. In the category of iron, there were red iron, purple iron, and brown iron, and the northern room was closer to red iron. Minerals have each a distinctive color. The northern room was in a dark iron color all day long, but it still had a red tinge. The red tinge emerged for a little while in the afternoon, but the room remained mostly dark, as it faced straight North. The iron had crystallized in several shapes such as vertical, plate, leaves or diamond. Kwangno considered his room in the plate shape,

like piled up flower petals. He was pleased that he still remembered such facts. After all, he taught for 32 years and it was natural for him to remember that.

But there was something unusual in his room. It was a mineral luster, floating around like spots of light, which his wife could never see, but his emaciated body could sense. Kwangno was sure the origin of the light was the mirror whose surface seemed to continue to emit light. The rectangular mirror that occupied more than one third of one wall was more than 40 years old. It had no cracks on it but it had lost its essential function of reflecting things as they were. The mirror not only exaggerated but also warped everything. Kwangno hated to look at his body being bloated and warped in the mirror image. A mere thing like a mirror dared to exaggerate his body as if it were teasing his shriveling old body. Kwangno's body in the mirror was grossly fleshier and blurred around the edges. Moreover, his body seemed to be constantly floating as if pushed by waves. Kwangno's body seemed to flow in continuous downstream. It was an optical illusion. He didn't want his dying body to look so unreal.

He believed that only Time could change the shapes of minerals and his body would be changed only by Time. He could gladly accept the change in his body if it was caused by Time. Kwangno felt as if his body were an element that was stuck in red iron. If he put his northern room in a furnace and raised its temperature to 1500 degrees Celsius, his bones and flesh would flow out in melted liquid. As iron, his room would be separated and would float around. Into the dark room, a reddish tinge began to rise. He turned his head to stare at the mirror in which his immobile body began to warp and float.

Minerals were the objects he was most interested in and could talk about them without hesitation to his children. Whenever he talked to his children about minerals, his wife raised her eyebrows most unpleasantly. That was the reason why he hesitated to tell his children about the phenomena occurring on earth and in the universe. For instance, earthquakes, desertification or the order of orbiting planets. He felt he had to add some moral lessons or great tales of fantasy. His wife probably wanted him not to talk about mere minerals but some lofty and noble stories. But Kwangno wondered what is lofty, grand and noble?

Compared to a mineral, his wife was lead. Lead that dreamed of becoming gold. How foolish was man's desire to change lead into gold by alchemy. Changes in minerals were beyond human determination. Ever since prehistoric times, man had been obsessed with alchemy, but ended up with plain coloring and painting. No more than temporary changes.

"Little boy, don't throw the iron ball," he mumbled to himself as he began to doze.

His heart, liver, and stomach seemed to be controlled by his lungs. In other words, when his lungs functioned well, the other organs did too. When his lungs got healthy, the other organs would too. When his lungs worsened, the other organs followed. He knew by experience that his stomach became useless when his lungs collapsed. His stomach was gradually weakening to the level of paralysis.

“Don’t throw the iron ball.” Kwangno kept dreaming of entering and lying down in the mirror. The inside of the mirror was icy cold. “Don’t throw the iron ball.” Kwangno exhaled violently, as if to vomit his entire lungs.

There was no sound outside. His wife must not have come home yet. He knew exactly what his wife was doing by just listening through the cracks of the door. Ever since he moved to the northern room, his eye-sight had become weaker while his hearing had become sharper, as if all his audiological nerves came alive in his ears. In the morning, his wife talked on the phone nearly half an hour with one of her sisters. He could hear every word.

“Big Sister, what is ecstasy? I want to experience it before I get older.”

After being so devout for so long, she didn’t seem to have experienced ecstasy yet. All the profoundly spiritual, religious rites seemed to have failed to bless her with ecstasy. Kwangno didn’t believe she ever had a moment of ecstasy. Perhaps she didn’t know what it was. Still, she was dreaming of experiencing it.

On the other hand, “did I ever have a moment of ecstasy,” Kwangno asked himself. Yes, he did. The very thing that made him ecstatic was a collection of various minerals. The moment he faced it for the first time, he had a moment of uncontrollable ecstasy. It was on a day about 20 years ago. He was sitting in his darkening classroom looking for some suitable material for lessons. What he was looking for was not the sedimentary rock itself but the traces of Time on it. The neat order of lines that Time etched on it. It was the very ideal culmination of order made by centripetal and centrifugal powers. It was in a solid state, but it seemed to flow. At that moment, Kwangno shouted an exclamation of ecstasy. When he looked up, what came into his vision were rows of desks, neatly arranged, but how trivial and insignificant they seemed! Then, the order his wife was desperately trying to maintain at the cost of shunting him away to the northern room, wasn’t it useless and in vain?

Kwangno felt a crushing pressure on his rigid back, as if it were trampled on and all his veins seemed to be swelling. The blood that should be circulating was bubbling up, like a rotten dairy product. While the universe expanded, minerals tended to contract and eventually die out. Kwangno asked, “Does the universe constrict? Is my body shrinking in order to help the universe to expand?” It was true that humans, animals, plants and minerals would shrink and eventually, inevitably perish. The larger the animals were, the more gruesome their death was. If there were indeed truth, that must be it. Kwangno didn’t want to live longer against the larger truth.

There was one mineral he disliked intensely and that was a mineral made by magma. It was created by a momentary sublimation; therefore, it didn’t have the noble order etched by Time. It was extemporaneous and full of madness.

Kwangno believed his wife exiled him to this northern room. Since he had so much phlegm in his throat, he suggested it might be a good idea for him to move into

the northern room. His wife jumped at his suggestion. He couldn't breathe unless he spat out the phlegm and his wife complained every morning that she couldn't sleep a wink because of the burbling noise in his throat.

"My sister in Okke-dong said the northern direction is not necessarily bad by the rules of feng shui," she said. Citing her sister, she encouraged him to move to the northern room. The sister in Okke-dong was his wife's favorite sibling because she was a woman specially blessed by Lady Luck. Kwangno's wife's sister was indeed a lucky woman. Every time she moved to a new house, the value of the house jumped and her two sons became medical doctors. Even her daughter who graduated from a no-name provincial college was married off to a doctor. Now, she was enjoying her old years by traveling around the world. When Kwangno didn't respond, his wife added, "they say even artists prefer the northern direction."

She seemed determined to push him into the northern room. As soon as he retired, she began to treat him like a blind and deaf old man. His usual indifference seemed to her a sign of senility. From her such attitude, he realized that his days of social function were over. He felt as if he were a machine part that was no longer useful. His wife seemed to want to wash his body clean just as she removed spilled soup on the table with a dish rag.

Kwangno felt as if the coarse steel pad in her hand were rubbing his forehead and cheekbones.

His wife's remark that the northern room was not harmful made him realize that he had become not only a useless, but a harmful human being. She judged everyone and everything and every situation by gauging if it was harmful or not, to her, of course, as the criterion.

It had been 9 months since he moved to the northern room, and yet, he clearly remembered the day he moved. Above everything else, he found that his weight had gone down below 100 pounds, for the first time in his life. The needle of the scale pointed to 99 pounds. He got down from the scale and decided to move to the northern room with all the everyday necessities. Until then, he had always stayed in the main room with his wife even though they no longer did conjugal acts. They lay side by side at night as if they were laid out in parallel coffins.

The things he took with him were the Go game, digestive powder and tablets, medicine vials, a 30-year old Kumsung radio, a blood pressure monitor he had purchased at the East Gate market, the family budget book, an aloe plant in a pot, and a book called *The Principles of Mineralogy* published in 1962 by the Korean Textbook Company.

Soon after he moved, his wife invited her sisters to show his new quarters. Her favorite sister was, of course, among them. They brought three boxes of Japanese-made medicine that had nothing to do with lung disease. They said a few perfunctory words of consolation and left in a hurry. As if they were afraid he might try to follow them out, they closed the door tightly as soon as they got out. The act of shutting the door so resolutely was a signal that he was now completely and absolutely cut off from their life. But their voices could be heard through the door.

"Sister, I don't think he's going to die soon."



“Right. When God let a man die, his blood and flesh would dry up. You saw what happened when my husband died.”

“He must be suffering a lot, but you’re going to have a tough time, Sister, you poor thing.”

“What am I going to do if he lingers on and on? To be frank with you, I feel pity for myself rather than for him. In my old age, I may have to spend years taking care of a sick old man. Argh!”

In order to prevent him from coming out of the room, Kwangno’s wife brought his underwear and socks, morning papers and magazines on mineralogy to his room. Three meals a day were brought in too. When she had work to do at the church, she made an early meal before she left. Because of her meticulous routine of care, he could stay in the room day in and day out without feeling any inconvenience. For other bodily needs, there was a small narrow bathroom with only a toilet and a sink. No window though. When he sat on the toilet, the sink came right under his chin, like gallows.

Before he became seriously ill, his wife had the bathroom built next to the northern room as if she knew what was going to happen. Her excuse was that it would be very inconvenient when the children and their families came visiting if they had only one bathroom. When Kwangno protested that they came only on special holidays, his wife retorted that even a small apartment had two bathrooms. She had neighborhood carpenters come and put in the small second bathroom.

His wife didn’t want him to come out and interfere with her daily routine. Before he retired, all family matters were handled by her, including the arrangement of furniture and the small knickknacks within the drawers. In order to avoid any kind of friction, he adapted himself to her ways. After he saw the very idea of order in the sedimentary rock, adaptation to her order became easier.

His wife became more involved with the social activities of the church groups, as soon as he retired and stayed at home. She joined the church’s weeklong pilgrimage to the Holy Land, soon after his retirement. She demanded the money she needed to go on the tour as if it was a just and proper reward for the moral and frugal life she had endured as the wife of any ordinary teacher. Even in passing, she did not suggest that he accompany her. Kwangno stared at the door. Though his breathing was laborious, he could still walk without much difficulty.

Again, he heard the iron ball hitting the wall of his room. He mumbled to himself that the iron ball would crack the wall someday soon. “Don’t throw the ball,” he said. No one could hear him.

Though Kwangno knew he wouldn’t be able to sell his house before he died, it gave him a sense of security that the house was in his name. After he died, it would automatically become the property of his wife and children. For now, the house was what he could rely on. He built it in 1990 when it became popular to raze one-story private homes and build multi-family residences in the poor outskirts of Seoul. The demand for rentals was intense, which further accelerated the building of the multi-family, multi-story residences. To own such a residence was a matter of pride.

Every morning, Kwangno noticed one-story homes that disappeared overnight and in their place, new 3 or 4 story multi-family residences would appear in no time. Kwangno himself was pressured into doing the same by his wife's nagging. He agreed that building a bigger house and renting out a room or two would be advantageous for the family. He got a substantial loan from a bank and built a 3-story house. The ground floor was for his family and two rooms each on the second and third floors were rented out.

His wife paid part of the bank loan with the rent. In the 1990's there were more people wanting rented rooms than ever and she could pay part of the loan with the key money the renters deposited in her account. The consequence of this however was that the key money she spent to pay the loan became a debt she owed to the renters. It was his wife's duty and privilege to select the renters and collect money for utility bills. Lately however, the two rooms on the third floor remained unoccupied for three months since the last renter moved out. His wife complained that there was no renter coming to look around even after she had those rooms repainted and repapered.

Her complaint gradually transformed into resentment that he wasn't able to move his family to an apartment. To pay off the remainder of the bank loan, he had to spend a large portion of his retirement pension. He also regretted that he had built a very steep and narrow outside stairs, which was very hard to climb up and down for his 67-year old body. Though they lived on the first floor, they had to go up a little ways and his wife blamed the stairs for her arthritis in the knees.

Now, it was the early part of June. Soon the monsoon seasons would arrive. He remembered the terrible flooding of the wig shop several years ago. The heavy downpour during the night seeped into the half-basement where, in the morning, wigs were floating on the water like dead rats. A ghastly sight.

Kwangno sat in his room without moving a muscle. The iron ball continued to hit the wall. The noise of the sewing machines seemed to crawl over his feet. Then his wife suddenly came into the room holding a pair of scissors and a large piece of purple cloth. She put the cloth around his neck and began to cut his hair. He meekly let her snip away his scant hair until she stopped. His wife was particularly fastidious about his sanitary conditions. She hung a sweet-smelling air freshener on the door. He knew it was for anticipated visits of her sisters and nephews and nieces. Kwangno picked up the orange-colored comb from the Go game board. He bought the comb at the hotel where he stayed during his trip to China eight years ago. It was a group tour of retiring schoolteachers. He was used to its sharp teeth. He patted and pressed his scalp with the comb. Suddenly he longed for the meat dish had had in Beijing. It was a chunk of fatty pork boiled for hours in sweet soy sauce. He could even taste it on the tip of his tongue.

Minerals drew the outside world into the inner world. Minerals pressed down the outside world and recorded it inside. The record was expressed in several ways such as color, luster, solidity, gravity, breakability, radiation, luminescence,

magnetism and viscosity. As in all things in the universe, there were certain mechanisms in the formation of minerals.

Kwangno knew that though his room was blocked by four walls, it could not be completely cut off from the outside world. The room was constantly affected by outside temperature, humidity and sound. Even the iron ball hitting the outside wall drove him into a nervous state. The minute the ball hit the wall, the ensuing vibration spread through the four walls. The noise of the sewing machines in the basement rang through the floor of his room.

His wristwatch on the Go game board was pointing to 5 o'clock. His wife left a little after 2pm and the market was located within a ten minute walking distance. The noodles on the table were bloated and dried on the edges. By 5:30pm, the machines in the basement would stop. Kwangno wondered how many wigs were made that day.

His wife seemed determined to make and feed him ox-foot soup until he died in his northern room. Even when he was in the hospital, she would bring the soup in a plastic container that was stained in red from kimchi. How humiliated he felt by the red stains. For the first few days she hung around the hospital room all day; then she came only at meal times. Finally, when he could move around by himself, she dropped in once every three or four days and left in a hurry. Her excuses were numerous – she had to go to church, she had to wash and dry our bedding, she had to wait for the gas meter man, she was due to meet the members of her mutual savings club.

On the days when she stayed in his hospital room, she treated him like the living dead. While he was unable to breathe on his own and wore an oxygen mask, she went on a picnic with her sisters. To Kwangno, the mushy, drying noodles looked like a curse his wife had cast upon him.

“Uncle...” Kwangno thought he was having an auditory hallucination.

Someone seemed to walk around the house cautiously and stopped in front of his room. Kwangno tried to suppress his phlegm and began to move a little.

“Uncle. Are you in the room?”

The door opened suddenly and the muscles of his body began to tremble in slight waves.

“Wh... who is it?”

“I am your niece, Uncle”.

He could barely discern his niece when she entered the room. He would not have recognized her if she didn't look like his dead sister, her mother. His niece resembled her mother only around the upper lip, but she surely was his sister's daughter.

Kwangno was surprised not so much by the appearance of his niece but by how easily the door opened. He wondered if he wrongly assumed that his wife locked the door.

His niece was wearing a pink two-piece suit like a new bride. Whether because of her bright attire or the fresh smell of her hair, he felt as if he were shamefully

caught in an unsavory act. He was ashamed to show this old, lung-diseased body to a young, not so close niece, who was around her mid-thirties in age.

“Where is Aunt? She said she would be home.”

“So his wife knew his niece was coming, still she left for the market,” he thought.

“She went to buy ox-foot.”

“I’ve come to see you. I’m sorry I didn’t visit you when you were in the hospital. If she went to buy ox-foot, she must be on her way home by now.”

The niece hesitantly sat down a few steps from him. Primly putting her knees together, she glanced at the small table.

Kwangno knew his niece had to see him at least once before he died. It was a duty of a relative but she was not so close that he would have resented her if she hadn’t come. She might ask a few questions and leave for him a white envelope with some money in it. Then, she would say good-bye, go back to her everyday life and forget about him and his northern room.

Now he remembered that his wife had mentioned the niece a few days ago. She was mopping his room when she said,

“Your niece. You know it’s been almost ten years since she married. But there is no sign of her having a baby. She seems to cling to her job and money. A young woman like her, why is she so hung up on money?” His wife sounded like his niece didn’t or couldn’t have a baby because of her obsession with money and job.

“Why don’t you have babies?” Kwangno asked as if to show her he wasn’t dying yet.

“Why Uncle, do you think I don’t want them?”

“Your career and money are important, but producing grandchildren for your in-laws is your supreme duty.”

Kwangno had nothing else to say. He uttered only a few words, but he already felt exhausted.

“Uncle chose my wedding day, do you remember?” It was Cold Food Day. Uncle said I was Tree and the groom was Water. So the Cold Food Day was right for us.”

“Now I remember,” Kwangno admitted.

“By the way, Uncle, do you know how many times a person’s heart beats in a lifetime?”

Kwangno was surprised and pleased as well that his shy niece would ask him such a question. He also knew that her pleasant smile was for the sake of his dying body.

“If the standard life span is 70 years, the heart beats 26 billion times in a lifetime.” She paused and said quietly, “I would like to see Aunt, too.”

To Kwangno, his niece seemed like a still life, placed in his room. Facing the mirror, she seemed to become a solid matter like a fossil. Kwangno didn’t hear the iron ball. For the first time in the northern room, he felt true peace. It was pure golden peace. Might it not be the ecstasy his wife so desired? It was a state in which time and space became one. If so, his wife would never taste ecstasy. Kwangno was

afraid his wife might barge in and ruin this pure golden peace. He earnestly hoped she would not.

Kwangno thought the groom's sign was not Water, but Fire. The groom was full of fire. He fantasized that the artificial wigs from the basement were burning through the floor of his room.

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<sup>2</sup> The Cold Food Day which falls on the 105<sup>th</sup> day after winter solstice or about early April. People visit and pay homage to their ancestral tombs.

“Uncle, I think I was too afraid to have a baby. Last spring, I became pregnant but the heart of the fetus stopped and the fetus was taken out.”

Kwangno could not say anything.

“I wasn't sure my body could nurture a life inside me. In other words, my body is so poor, so unattractive. To nurture a living being inside me was too much. I just wasn't sure, Uncle. I think my fear seeped down to the heart of the baby,” his niece said haltingly.

Kwangno imagined that the heart of the fetus was still in his niece's womb. The heart was sublimated into a mineral through the process of transformation. Even if the chemical components might be the same, minerals become completely different things depending on the temperature and pressure at the moment of formation. Diamond and graphite were two examples. Graphite could have become diamond, a perfect mineral.

Kwangno glanced at the mirror. The niece's image was in it, slowly, eerily warping and flowing. “Did his niece hate her own body? Did she believe that only a perfectly beautiful body could have a baby? Did she have over fine fastidiousness about her body that stopped the heart of the fetus? But her body seemed perfect compared to my dying, dwindling body,” he thought.

Kwangno caught sight of a smile spreading on her face. She was obviously smiling at her own body being warped and flowing. Kwangno felt a chill. “Why did she come to see me? Did she want to experience expiration by means of my body? Did she want to see how her body which couldn't sustain a fetus, would eventually expire like mine?”

“Uncle, I'm afraid I have to go. Please tell Aunt I'll come visit her soon,” his niece said and left the room. He was alone. But his niece's image lingered on in the mirror, still warped and flowing.

Kwangno gazed at the spot where his niece had been sitting. Peace continued to fill the room as if she were still there. If so, would she still be in the mirror? At the instant he turned to look, the mirror began to contract fast. Some luminous lights floating around the room began to disappear into the mirror. In a wink, the mirror shrank into a dot. A vanishing point. Not only the mirror but life itself was absorbed into the mirror, unable to emerge. From the sound of the iron ball, it must be still

light outside. Unlike the dark northern room, the outside world was overflowing with light.

By the way, Kwangno thought, why was the universe expanding, at 71 kilometers per second and making everything in it so trivial, small and insignificant? Why was his niece seized by the idea that her body was not good enough to nurture a living being? Her excessive modesty and abhorrence of her body was making her a barren woman? If so, was the universe complete? Did it reach its ideal beauty? Did the principles of the universe hold an unchangeable truth whether man could prove it or not? Was it so complete and perfect that it kept producing new lives?

“Don’t throw the iron ball.” Kwangno lost more than 2 pounds within 4 days. He now weighed 84 pounds. He became alarmed when his weight went down below 90 pounds. His body would continue to dwindle until it became as light as a feather. He didn’t want his wife to know about his weight loss, because then she would tell her sisters and their children. They would try to put him in the hospital.

For the first time since he moved to the northern room, he sat facing the mirror. With all his strength he constricted his body until it became rigid. His body in the mirror betrayed him and wanted to move. He imagined that the ammonite in the cretaceous period was like him when it rigidified.

Kwangno also visualized the ghastly looking wigs scattered around in his room. As soon as his wife came home, she would soak the ox-foot in water all night, and cut it and boil it till only holes remained in the pieces. Then, she would place the soup in the refrigerator.

The iron ball sound stopped abruptly and what sounded like a boy’s footsteps faded away. The next moment, an old woman’s voice screamed.

“His head was cracked! His head was cracked! The iron ball smashed his head!”

The woman’s voice sounded like his wife’s.

Kwangno wanted to see outside but could not stand up. He felt his pulse slow down and his lungs becoming hardened. The window was half open. The phlegm in his throat bubbled up, blocking his breathing. He saw in his mind’s eye a coffin coming through his window, a coffin decorated with longevity signs in clamshells.

“Didn’t I tell you not to throw the iron ball?”

His voice however never made it out of his lips. His wife who went to buy ox-foot was still gone.

