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Home as the Direction of Search

*“Our destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search.
Fixed in its perpetual exile.”*

-- Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Dictee

Wearing a white pointed cap and red and blue striped robes, a *mudang* recites a poem to begin the *sitkim kut*, a Korean cleansing ritual intended to guide the deceased who linger in the family home to the world of the dead. Accompanied by a tasseled drum, she dips, lunges, and whirls entreating the inauspicious spirits to speak their *ban* or wound of injustice, resentment, or loss still strong enough to sour the food and make the elderly ill. An intermediary, the *mudang* unties knots of white cotton between the dead and the living. Her art does not reconcile. Instead, as written by the contemporary poet, Shin Kyong-Rim, the *mudang* and the living sing:

Go your way in peace, they say, go your way in peace.
With your broken neck, hugging severed limbs,
go a thousand, ten thousand leagues down the road
to the land beyond, without night or day;
go your way in peace, they say, go your way in peace.

(Trans. Brother Anthony of Taizé)

While writing about home, I see her spinning form pause and turn toward me to offer paper money and cakes. Her small brass bell rings. It's tempting to accept these objects, a pale mint *hanbok*, or even the finest snow dew tea as images of my own, mementos I can take with me. Yet I have no memory, which is a way to recite one's ancestral names. I am listed in the national registry as the head of my family because I am the last and the first, the only one, which means that I have survived my father and have no brother, mother, or grandmother who can assume the role instead. The only familial bond courses through my hands holding nothing.

So I turn to form -- how my fingertips curl upward as I spread them out, my palms' arced lines stretch to rose like another layer of earth, which is also a chronology. Or what of the hands that found me, held me to the light in order to discern my date of birth? Still, hands cupped to support my shape, flattened to release and let me go, then returned to their natural position of swaying. So natural that I long ago abandoned the direction of return that's familiar to the Korean public, which enjoys watching family reunions on morning talk shows such as KBS "Happy Sunday" and films featuring adult adoptees tripping over Seoul's neon signage. Screens bolted onto skyscraper rooftops advertise trends: a young woman pursing her lips in delight while her dark plate-shaped eyes follow a floating bud opening into a new soft drink. She sighs. A digital genie watching the bottle take shape, or the bottle emptied before it's filled with the ether of which all dreams are made?

Home/Lands.

A collection of essays commissioned by the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa to mark the third New Symposium held on the island of Paros, Greece, in May 2008.

It's true; I'm grasping. I have studied and admired the lines: "... and again I hear/ These waters, rolling from their mountain-spring/ With a soft inland murmur." There is no "Once again" that follows. No "Once upon a time." I cannot recollect in tranquility or otherwise. Home was never so static – a guarded garden or gleaming city – nor was the journey homeward not without challenges that have the power to change. Even Odysseus steering his ship toward Ithaca refused dreams offered by the lotus eaters, a powerful witch lover, or time's monotonous passage – each night measured, woven, and unwound in a time he shared but did not know – in the pursuit of a dream that felt more true despite its seeming impossibility. If "home is the form of the dream, and not the dream," as the poet, Larry Levis, says, then home is in the direction of search through dreams.

This too is a dream just as all quests are routes through longing. In 1976, I was born in Wonju-si, Gangwon-do, Korea in the latter part of July during monsoon season. On August 8, someone placed me at the Sang Ae Won's gate, and at 5 p.m. on the same day, someone found and brought me inside the orphanage. Someone wrote the story – "Father's Name: No Records, Mother's Name: No Records, Father's Whereabouts: No Records, Mother's Whereabouts: No Records..." and approximated a birth date based on the degree to which my navel had healed. Because the Sang Ae Won did not keep infants, it referred me to the David Livingstone Missionary Society (now known as the Eastern Social Welfare Society) in Seoul. Determined healthy, I was placed in foster care. Four months later, Dillon Adoption Agency bumped a childless couple living in Sand Springs, Oklahoma ahead of a Texas family on their waiting list, and I was adopted in December 1976.

Twenty-one years later when I needed to apply for a passport to travel to Kyoto, Japan, I received my documents stuffed inside a silver Naturalizer shoebox. Astonished, I unfolded the mimeographed copies printed on yellowed onion skin paper and touched the creases that time had sharpened to cut through the page. It was rumored that my birth documents had been destroyed in the orphanage's fire. Looking at them for the first time, I was stunned by the ticked boxes that defined which silences were mine, and I thought of a child's voice forming in the midst of these apertures opening on to nothing. Even nothing has syntax, I realized, and so I wrote "Face Sheet" in two voices. One language found from the documents spliced with (colliding against?) another from an imagined child listening to rumor:

She controls her neck & bowel movements well. Abandoned by:
 Father: X Mother: X Include here guardian's attitudes and motives in

*I was lucky not to end up a slut too or dead. Said you didn't name me,
 so I'm not under contract. No agreements were made nor terms defined us.*

Releasing child: President Kim would like the child in a nice home.
 \$450 Payable, Dec. 76. Remarks/File No. ____ Child's attitude toward N/A.

Reading this poem again eleven years later, I imagine the home that these silences (____, X, and N/A) implicitly built, a home constructed of purposeful forgetfulness, as if memory would've tested its sturdiness by rattling beams. Yet these documents – frayed edges, holes, and cuttings – tell me nothing about my history. There is only form. Time crumbles the ink such that an X remains as a raised impression, a type of Braille my fingertip can touch. X marks the spot of nothing. So why

hide this nothing inside a black box that survived talk of fire? Perhaps these are embarrassments – forgetting the forgotten, silencing the silences that Time finishes off – to which ones shrugs while creating one type of home? I don't know. To focus on a home's form is to consider the spatial, to measure and resolve problems of distance, and to answer this question. In which direction should I stake and clear the ground?

These are my hands unfolding nothing with care. I am one of 200 thousand – each one different but part of an overseas Korean Diaspora – first created by the aftermath of *Hanguk Jeonjaeng*, or the Forgotten War as it's remembered in the United States. Our search for meaning is always in the direction of home (Korea and the North American, European, or other receiving nation that adopted us), not because blood calls to blood or nature versus nurture, but because the human need for narrative requires a beginning for – if Horace is right – “men can do nothing without the make believe of a beginning.”

So I begin again in a field in Wonju-si at the base of Chiaksan, named for three loyal pheasants and set in the middle of Charyeong Mountains. During monsoon season, dark clouds collar Chiaksan's peaks, and valley grass holds the ground to prevent pounding rain from washing out the black loam, fragrant with root rot, that's good for peach trees and potato crops.

Here, right before spring, my great-grandparents might have plowed and sown seeds in the early morning during Japanese colonization. Their names changed and written in Japanese, which they were required to speak. They may have fled from here with our family to the mountain's caves while the Republic of Korea and the United States fought a critical battle against China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a ferocious parachute assault that turned the direction of the Korean War toward the ROK and U.S.'s favor. Here 23 years after the war ended, weeds might have choked the peach trees and potato plants that were abandoned because the government stipulated that everyone work in the new factories. Leaving here on an early August evening, my mother, dressed in her blue uniform and carrying me, might have walked up a muddy hillside path toward the Sang Ae Won's gate and placed me beside it. Maybe she checked the ground for stones, or maybe she was rushed, afraid of being seen? Forgetting began as she descended down the overgrown road, and another one found me later that evening and unlatched the metal door.

When I returned to this field 30 years later and listened to cranes knock down the sloping hills for high-rise luxury apartments, I saw forgetfulness clearing away to build homes named Happiness Villa and Splendor Living that boasted European living with the latest amenities. This field was not my home, yet I needed to move toward and away from it.

I needed this motion for perspective, to pan backward to see how the Korean War shattered the compass. War consists of two parts – intention and prosecution. Though the former sought to contain communism by intervening in a civil war (thereby setting a precedent for Vietnam, which shaped an entire U.S. generation's conscience), the latter led to more napalm dropped during any war in history and air bombs leveling all of Korea's major cities. Following this absolute destruction, the Korean Diaspora to which I belong emerged because U.S. soldiers left behind single mothers who were unable to keep their children, families were separated or members killed, post-war poverty forced families to select which mouth they would no longer feed, among other reasons, some hidden and others simply unknown. The war not only drew the 38th degree parallel and ceased fire, ripping families apart that just happened to be on either side of the new border, but it also redrew Korean

identities to include a Diaspora scattered all over the world. How can U.S. history forget this war, though it developed a persistent logic that informs how the U.S. currently wages war, spends unprecedented military budgets, invades without an exit strategy, establishes a security state on the home front, and legislates a program of transnational adoption as a humanitarian response? As Bruce Cumings argues, “The result is a kind of hegemony of forgetting.”

I have no memories of Korea – a casualty of war, its legacy, or a dream without images? I don’t know. I don’t remember the grass growing wild, the Wonju River, remnants of war-time train tracks that were destroyed to prevent deliveries, light rimming the fog cloaking Chiaksan’s peaks. I cannot identify my father’s body or locate my mother’s address. My name might be a social worker’s hurried gesture. Often, I am asked what claim I have to Korea other than blood or curiosity when I lack a story, yet that too is a story and a dream too easily offered that I choose to resist, just as I cast aside the dream of my mother as a prostitute or the one depicting my parents as dead. If these options are possible, then the inverse is equally imaginable. Why persist in dreaming in the direction of death? The truth is my family is not lost, despite this hegemony of forgetting that interrogates as a way to divide me further from my family. Even now, while I am writing, my family is sleeping, they are walking to the store, they are working at their respective jobs, they are hurting one another out of pettiness the way family members sometimes do, and they are helping each other, but in their absence, I feel them in the way my body cannot tolerate lactose, how I heal from a cut, the shape of my bones, and what escapes translation but gives form to the silence connecting us.

These divisions and silences are part of my inheritance as a Korean just as forgetting provides an uneasy legacy for U.S. citizens. I am both. They keep an uneasy peace at the Demilitarized Zone, also a field of forgetfulness. In August 2007, I visited Panmunjeon, the Joint Security Area, and witnessed soldiers stand at attention on both sides of the blue line. Because the North Koreans arrived at Panmungak before my tour group, they were allowed inside the conference room, where a line runs across the green felt table’s width. Facing the tour group, the guide advised us not to move in a sudden way that might alert the soldiers and not to make gestures that could be used as North Korean propaganda. I looked through my camera’s zoom lens to see these people, who are my people, wearing dark suits and dresses and photographing one another in pairs or groups, and I remembered my friend – the grand niece to the Korean poet, Kim So Wol, who lived in the north before such lines mattered. His poem, *Chindallae-kekot* (Azaleas), inspired hope against Japanese colonization:

If you go away
because you cannot bear with me
in silence I bid you Godspeed.

Azaleas aflame on Yaksan Hill
I will gather with full hands
and scatter them in your path.

Tread with a tread,
light and gentle,
on the flowers as you go.

If you go away

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because you cannot bear with me

no tears will I weep though I perish.

(Trans. Jaihiun Kim)

I asked myself while watching the North Koreans observe me, a Korean American adoptee whom they no doubt regarded as South Korean, what poem – what language – might help us to understand the way we search for home? What song might reach across this bad dream and all the others through which we steer across, that demand us to forget the ways in which we remain connected? Surely there will be variations of this song such as mine:

Little one, though you go away
because you cannot bear with me,

one day you will search
the graves of ancestors

not for my name, but for yourself
to find the azaleas of Yaksan Hill.

Surely, I will never see you again.
I will not weep,
because I can imagine you are

a grandfather
who slips off his sandals to walk gently
on the flowers across Yaksan Hill.

In recent years, the North and South Korean governments have allowed families who have been separated since the Korean War to reunite, and plans followed to construct a permanent reunification center at Mount Kumgang in North Korea. Along with symbolic acts of unity such as sending North Korean athletes to the 2002 Asian Games held in Busan, flesh and blood ones between family members remind that the DMZ cannot partition the heart. The need for a language that can transgress competes with time. Since the North and South Korean governments began accepting family members' names for 3-hour reunion meetings, 12,000 have died. For those who gathered together and embraced across the conference table, they may die before doing so ever again.

In the United States, this dream of reunion – should it be chosen – can only be partially fulfilled because U.S. immigration law prohibits an adoptee from sponsoring her/his birth parents and, in this sense, limits the type of home that an adoptee may create. Yet providing a home for one's parents is an ancient right that all cultures recognize as evidenced in their literature. The right to raise one's children at home is just as fundamental. If homes are vulnerable to racism, poverty, political ideologies, gendered violence, natural disaster, and war, then whose homes are fortified against these traumas, and whose homes are left vulnerable? Which homes lose their children?

Which ones gain the privilege of inviting these children inside and renaming them as their own? Economics should not determine fit parenthood when homes made of mud, hides, found objects, single rooms, engines, logs, cloth, and corrugated metal bake good bread inasmuch as the 1950s ranch-style home that dreamed against communism.

Standing in the field at the base of the mountain, I kneel down and tear off grass, turn it over, and study its weightless green. This is not a way to build a home. A wind flaps and lifts the blade out of my hands, and I remember walking by the ocean a few years ago. That's when I first noticed nothing doing its work – how it moves and removes every image that I try to imagine as mine – and I decided to try to beat nothing at its own game:

How could I forget at the beach's edge,

a mound of twisted kelp laid on its side
as the tide rolled in to pull it apart, rolled in pulling

like midnight hands across a clock-face

to deny it body & so drag it back into the black water?

But it's knots moved like sinew with the currents;
moved with, not against, and so stayed

in a bed of sand carved out by undercurrents
lifting it gently on to the bed.

Impassive, its leaves undulated in the slow swirling,
rose & fell, rose & fell, & I could see,

exposed to moonlight,
not a tangle of leaves but a letting go

of names that would weigh down its body
like cargo buoyed far then forever lost.

I can't bear this, can't stop
translating her body by water to move it again & again & . . .

not *omma*, now mother, now the Indo-European root,
now the sharing

by Latin *mater* & the Greek

meter, not measure's source yet I count
back to *mater*, the heart of matter,

matter with a heart, *maternus*, & every material

bearing her trace,

bearing her variously in the grain of everything

Because I am moving in the direction of search, I am dreaming in a language of forgetfulness, and because I do not remember or never knew all the names, I surely am forgetting. Still, there is a field in Wonju-si below Chiaksan, and in this journey, it joins with another for Elysium, where the spirits who drank from Lethe's water wait to reincarnate. While riding in the DMZ tour bus, I notice a *durumi*, a red-crowned crane, opening its long white wings and taking flight. Once thought lost or near extinction, the bird had found a home in this center of violence – a sanctuary that peace might level – as if forgetfulness enabled a reunion between bird and tree. Though I have gone my way in peace like the *mudang* and the living asked “down the road/ to the land beyond, without night or day” and back again searching, I have not forgotten this bird.