

Vanishing Point: Translating Language and Identity in Lee Yang-ji's Yuhi and Kazukime

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine how identity and language are formulated, negotiated, and destabilized in Lee Yang-ji's novellas, *Yuhi* (1989) and *Kazukime* (1983), particularly when these works are translated into a third language, English. Both stories are deeply embedded in the history of the Zainichi Korean community in Japan, and offer valuable insight into the trials and tribulations faced by Korean-Japanese, especially women, as they struggle between Japan and Korea. These translations and introduction hope to highlight the painful schisms and blurring boundaries in identity that Lee's characters experience, whether they are Zainichi Korean, Korean, or Japanese. This project also attempts to emphasize the simultaneously mediating and limiting role that language performs in Lee's works, where the very act of language necessitates a choice between Japanese and Korean, and Japan and Korea.

Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
On the History of the Zainichi Korean Community in Japan.....	1
On Lee Yang-ji.....	4
Chapter 1: Yuhi.....	8
Chapter Two: Kazukime.....	109
Conclusion: A Translator's Note	167
Bibliography.....	177

Introduction

While this project is ostensibly a thesis, what it is composed of in actuality is a translator's note—this introduction—and the translations of two novellas written by Zainichi Korean author Lee Yang-ji, *Yuhi* (1988) and *Kazukime* (1983). I explain my reasoning behind and goals for the project later—why I feel it is important, and what I believe it is contributing to the existing body of translated Japanese literature—but ultimately, the translations serve as the thesis statement. They must stand or fall on their own merits and demerits, and argue for themselves. My objective in this section is to provide background on the Zainichi Korean community, whose troubled history greatly informed Lee's writing, and Lee herself, who injected her stories with much of her own lived experiences.

On the History of the Zainichi Korean Community in Japan

There are several issues with relaying a concise history of the Zainichi Korean community in Japan. The first, as Sonia Ryang relates in her introduction to *Diaspora Without Homeland*, is the term “Zainichi Korean” itself. While “zainichi” refers to people—ostensibly foreigners—residing in Japan, it carries a variety of different connotations, and its application to people of Korean ethnicity living in Japan is not without debate; as David Chapman notes, “Nomenclature describing the *zainichi* is not only complex but also controversial,” touching on issues of nationality, ethnicity, assimilation, and exclusion.¹ Koreans in Japan have not always been “zainichi,” and some today do not regard themselves as such. Similarly, the notion of a singular Zainichi Korean “community” is misleading, as it suggests a monolithic bloc, which is not—and has never been—the state

¹ David Chapman, *Zainichi Korean Identity and Ethnicity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 4.

of Koreans in Japan. What grouped the hundreds of thousands of people of Korean descent in Japan under the category of “zainichi” was a variety of social and historical forces.

The beginnings of a significant presence of Koreans in Japan is commonly dated to Japan’s colonial rule over Korea—from 1910 to 1945—which saw Koreans from all over the empire come to Japan for various reasons. Their numbers would dwindle from around two million after Japan’s defeat in World War II to about 600,000 by 1948, and these 600,000 would later provide the basis for the Zainichi Korean population.² One of the first major decisions that would culminate in this population becoming—or, rather, being made—“Zainichi Korean” came in 1947, when Emperor Hirohito proclaimed that Koreans in Japan were now to be “subjected to alien registration (as opposed to residential registration).”³

This proved to be especially problematic for Koreans remaining in Japan with the partition of Korea and the outbreak of the Korean War. Chapman describes how “[the] division of North and South was reflected in the *zainichi* population, with everyone expected to declare their support for either one or the other.”⁴ (The aunt in *Yuhi* references this schism when she expresses her fear of hosting a Korean-Japanese student who might have ties to Chongryon, a pro-North Korean organization for Zainichi.) The war had far-reaching consequences for Koreans in Japan. In 1952, Japan signed the San Francisco peace treaty; under the treaty, someone’s household registry was used to determine who qualified as Japanese.⁵ Your household registry was linked to your place of origin; for a

² Sonia Ryang, “Introduction: Between the Nations,” in *Diaspora Without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan*, eds. Sonia Ryang and John Lie (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 6.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Chapman, *Zainichi Korean Identity*, 29.

⁵ Ryang, “Introduction,” 7.

Korean, their hometown in Korea.⁶ Under the new treaty, if your household registry was found outside of Japan, you were now non-Japanese, and had to go through a difficult naturalization process to obtain citizenship.⁷ Additionally, Japan did not recognize North and South Korea as countries in 1952. So, if Koreans in Japan could not be considered Japanese, now they could also not be considered North Korean or South Korean. They were stateless.

It was not until 1965, with the normalization of relations between Japan and South Korea, that one could hold a South Korean national identity in Japan. If someone selected this identity, permanent residency in Japan was possible.⁸ (Needless to say, no such option existed for someone who identified as North Korean living in Japan.) In 1992, a new law came into effect declaring that Koreans who could “trace their residential origin in Japan to the colonial period, and their descendants who were born and residing in Japan,” could be considered “special permanent residents, or *tokubetsu eijūsha*.”⁹ Notably, this status is not equivalent to Japanese citizenship.

While the timeline above outlines the forces that conspired to make Koreans in Japan “*zainichi*,” it summarizes a series of sweeping historical changes that, when experienced, were complex and messy. Moreover, it understates the realities of being Korean in Japan, which are often rooted in historical trauma and daily indignities, as Lee herself observed:

Sometimes I lost heart wondering why I had to take issue with being Korean all the time... Yet even in the midst of all that insecurity and inner confusion... I just could

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Ryang, “Introduction,” 9.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

not forgive the oppression Koreans in Japan had been forced to face against their will.... Surrounded as they are by the immediate affairs of that which we call Japan, there is a clear encouragement of ethnic abandonment and the humiliation of the homeland in the assimilationist policies so skillfully incorporated into Japan's oppressive social policies. It cannot be ignored that the clear intent of these policies is to obliterate both ethnic self-awareness and any will to the future in Korean Japanese. They aim to erase that lifestyle which should rightfully be protected. Surely this is nothing but intentional humiliation!¹⁰

These "oppressive social policies" ranged from outright discrimination—including a law, only repealed in 1993, requiring that Korean-Japanese be fingerprinted by the government—to more subtle attitudes meant to discourage Koreans from embracing any differences from mainstream Japanese society. These forces combined to encourage Koreans in Japan to assimilate socially and culturally, even as they were denied a right to participate on equal footing in society with their Japanese neighbors.

On Lee Yang-ji

Lee Yang-ji was born in 1955 in Yamanashi Prefecture, the third of five children. Her father was first-generation Korean-Japanese, coming to Japan from Jeju during the colonial period,¹¹ and her mother was second generation.¹² Lee's parents were generally of the opinion that assimilation was the best course of action to guarantee a stable and successful life in Japan. The family became naturalized citizens in 1964, changing their

¹⁰ Carol Hayes, "Cultural identity in the work of Yi Yang-ji," in *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, ed. Sonia Ryang (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 122.

¹¹ Soo Mi Lee, "Narrating the Diasporic Self as Shaman," *Japanese Language and Literature* 53, no. 2 (October 2019): 258.

¹² Hayes, "Cultural Identity," 121.

Korean names to Japanese ones. Lee's parents' efforts to integrate the family into Japanese society and culture came part and parcel with eradicating any and all Korean elements from their lives, banning everything from *kimchi* to the Korean language from the household and having Lee learn *ikebana*, *koto*, and Japanese dancing.¹³

The suppression and even denigration of her Korean identity took its toll on Lee. She saw herself as “inferior and spiritless with no mitigating touch of gentleness. And worse, a filthy uncivilized Korean.”¹⁴ The collapse of her parents' marriage and a deteriorating home environment contributed to her anguish, and she attempted suicide, but “[her] inability to even take her own life made her all the more ashamed.”¹⁵ She ran away from home when she was a senior in high school, living and working at a small inn in Kyoto where she eventually finished school.¹⁶ All the while, Lee continued to grapple with her ethnic identity. In 1975, she enrolled at Waseda University, leaving after one term to focus on learning Korean dancing and becoming more involved in political activism.

It was music that Lee turned to when she visited Korea for the first time in 1980, studying the *kayagŭm*—a type of Korean zither—and Korean folk dancing.¹⁷ Carol Hayes notes that “[it] was through this style of dancing...that she [Lee] felt she was truly experiencing the spirit of her homeland.”¹⁸ Lee enrolled in the department of Korean literature at Seoul National University in 1982, but deferred due to the deaths of her older brothers in 1980 and 1981 and her parents' divorce, returning to Japan.¹⁹ She published

¹³ Ibid., 120.

¹⁴ Hayes, “Cultural Identity,” 120-121.

¹⁵ Ibid., 121.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 122.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 120, 123.

Nabi t'aryŏng that year, with *Kazukime* following in 1983, and both stories were considered for the prestigious Akutagawa Prize. In 1984, Lee returned to Korea; she graduated from S University in 1988. *Yuhi* was published in 1988, winning the Akutagawa Prize the following year. In 1989, Lee enrolled in a Master's program at Ewha Womans University, concentrating on dance. She came back to Japan in 1992 for a brief stay that lengthened when one of her younger sisters fell ill. Lee died suddenly in May due to acute myocarditis.²⁰ She was thirty seven years old.

While Lee left behind a number of short stories, novellas, and essays, official translations of her writings into English remain sparse. An abridged translation of *Yuhi*, her most famous work, was published in *New Japanese Voices* in 1991. However, recent years have seen a surge of renewed interest in her writings; in 2022, two new collections of her works were published in Japanese. Over thirty years after her death, Lee's writing has illustrated tremendous staying power, both on its own and as part of a larger body of Zainichi Korean literature.

The issues Lee touches on in her stories are not unique to her works alone. She belongs to the second generation of Zainichi writers who “generally focus on poverty, unemployment and racism in early postwar Japan; domestic violence, the sense of alienation *zainichi* Koreans tend to feel in Japan or Korea and the painful process of self-determination.”²¹ While the authors in this category, including Lee, “articulate the concept of identity in different ways in their fiction, their prose nevertheless reveals that identity fragmentation—the problem of negotiating incongruous, hybrid Japanese and Korean

²⁰ Ibid., 123.

²¹ Elise Foxworth, “A Tribute to the Japanese Literature of Korean Writers in Japan,” *New Voices* 1 (December 2006): 47.

identities—was, in fact, a critical experience for second-generation *zainichi* Koreans of their era.”²² *Yuhi* and *Kazukime* make evident this painful schism between these “incongruous, hybrid Japanese and Korean identities,” as well as Lee’s preoccupation with its implications for not only her characters, but anyone and everyone living in a highly nationalized world. However, woven throughout her texts are details clearly drawn from her own life, particularly her love for music and the connection she felt between the sounds of her mother country and her sense of Koreanness. *Yuhi*, the eponymous character of Lee’s 1988 novella, spends her days and nights holed up in her room, listening to the *daegeum*, a Korean flute; she drunkenly scrawls in her notebook, “대금 좋아요 / 대금소리는 우리말입니다.” (*I like the daegeum. / The sound of the daegeum is our mother tongue.*)

²² Ibid.

Chapter 1: Yuhi

Ever since my call with Yuhi had ended, I was losing my composure.

On top of my desk, the sales slips and documents that needed to be processed were piling up, but I couldn't get into my work. Before long, the hands on my watch were pointing towards six; when I looked up, the office clock was showing the same time. For a while, I started on the work that still hadn't been done—I finished a little before the hour was up, and quickly got changed. I left the office at exactly six o'clock.

I ran up to the empty taxi I had hailed and got in. I was still losing my composure as the taxi headed towards home. Yuhi's voice on the phone was as clear as if she was speaking to me now, drawing ever nearer. Every time the taxi braked sharply before a light, Yuhi appeared behind my fluttering eyelids—but when the cab started moving again, she receded.

Doing something like taking a taxi to get home was a rarity for me. However, even if it saved me just one minute, I was anxious to get back as quickly as possible. But the way to my house felt longer than usual, compared to when I rode the bus back, and I could feel the car shudder as it stopped at the traffic lights that seemed far greater in number than they ever had before.

I started thinking about whether or not I had exchanged the appropriate pleasantries with my boss and coworkers when I left work. I couldn't remember things that had happened only a few moments ago. Until I got into the cab, I wasn't even really aware of myself.

It was cold; the wind was strong. A spring day in Seoul was short, and—like in winter—the difference in temperature between the morning and the evening was stark. The sound of brakes was audible around me. Each time I heard it my body felt unsteady, and I held my bag in my arms, my back bowing as I curled around it.

I climbed out of the taxi in front of my house.

I stared at the cab as I stood in the spot where I had gotten out, watching as it returned to the corner of the street we had come from. It disappeared when it turned, gently, and went around a left corner on the hilly road.

There was no one on the street in front of my house, and from the corner there was no sign of people or cars. The roar of the cab that had just disappeared was already inaudible.

Stirring from within my memories, the voice of Yuhi nudged at me. It pierced into my eyes, manifesting itself within my vision. It seemed to call out to me; I turned my head, and Yuhi was standing next to me. I could distinctly recall the profile of her face as she gazed up at the top of the winding road. The same as on that day six months ago, I stood beside her, looking up at the range of craggy mountains.

I gazed up the street, which drifted rightward and was utterly silent, the lower range of my field of vision taking in the houses that continued to run parallel along the road. The rocky mountains soared above. They were rounded in some places and thrust out sharply in others, the peaks' ridgeline—with bushes growing thickly in between the rocks—enveloping and leaning over the houses below. The rock face was exposed to the spring evening's wind. A ringing silence spread through the heavy, starless sky—even when diluted and shimmering, the sky's color around the mountains was visible.

The same as that day, Yuhi's gaze was attracted to the highest place on the rock face.

“바위.” (*pauui*) *rock*

I remembered Yuhi's voice and murmured the word, mimicked her way of saying it. I emphasized the sound of *ui*, deliberately trying to imitate Yuhi's pronunciation as precisely as I could; her awkward and clumsy voice came back to me.

The wind was frigid, so strong that it stung. Standing there with my arms crossed, trembling as I held myself, made me recall that day six months ago as winter drew close. I had put on my thick cardigan and, as I pulled on the hem, wrapped it around my body, standing there, the road declining slightly below me. The wind that day was, unsurprisingly, cold and biting. Turning around, I saw the corner of the road, with no trace of anyone on it. No matter how long I stood there, no one appeared.

Yuhi was no longer even in the country.

And, of course, not being in the house, she wouldn't appear on the road.

Standing there in the wind, staring at the street corner, I realized that I had finally regained my presence of mind.

Climbing the low stone steps, I pushed the doorbell across from the iron door.

“*Nugusaeyo?*” *Who is it?* I heard my aunt from the intercom.

“*Jeoyeyo.*” *It's me.* I answered my aunt's voice, the sound of which changed from within the small machine.

When she pressed the button on the intercom from inside the house, the iron door automatically unlocked. The lock clicked with a sound like banging on metal; I pushed on the door, and a small courtyard became visible. I entered and the door shut behind me.

Hearing the faint sound of footsteps and making sure there was no sign of people walking along the road, I stood there a little while longer.

A flowerbed had been planted on the right side of the stone steps, proceeding to the entryway door. There was a doghouse on the left side, but the dog had died a little bit before Yuhi had lived here. Now its home had been dismantled, the wooden foundation left behind with several empty flower pots piled there.

A scent hung over the garden that was different from how it smelled out on the street. It made me lose my bearings, and—for a moment—I started thinking like I was actually back in the house I had lived in; I realized that, somehow, I had become sensitive to that scent.

I felt as though I heard that sentence Yuhi had murmured on that distant day from over my shoulder—"It smells good,"—in the voice she reserved for Japanese.

A lamp was lit in the window of the living room, where I expected my aunt to be. However, through the sliding doors, the parlor was dark, and so was the entryway.

I looked up at the second story. There was a veranda behind the stone railing, and windows to two rooms sat side by side. The window to the room on the right, which was mine, and the window to the one on the left, where Yuhi had stayed, were both dark. The darkness of the entire house was subsumed by the darkness outside, enshrouding the garden even more heavily. I surveyed the house's surroundings; a silence that was heavier than normal enveloped the space.

After replying through the intercom, my aunt would almost always open the door from inside and come out to greet whoever it was, whether it was Yuhi or I. The parlor would be bright, and the front door light would always be lit. My aunt's left knee had

started hurting her not too long ago, but even then, as long as she was available, she would open the door from inside. It had been like that up until yesterday, at least.

My aunt was likely in the living room, where the only light was on. Her voice was not audible from inside of the house. No matter how long I waited, I didn't hear it, even though—when she couldn't manage to come to the entryway—she would always, always, call out for a name.

Opening the sliding door of the entryway, I called, "I'm back." The metal and concrete, bordered by the sash, grated as it shifted. The sound uncharacteristically irritated my ears. The sky, which spread out above the dark house, was somehow still a blur of pale blue; its color, combined with the wind's chill and the door's grating, transcended the feeling that it was springtime, and it felt as though it was making me remember Yuhi more vividly. The house's silence also pricked at my chest.

Sure enough, my aunt was in the living room.

However, the curtain which covered the doorway to the living room was still closed, blocking it and the parlor from sight. I placed my bag on the sofa, and hesitated as I called out to my aunt. With nothing else to do and being unsure about how best to proceed, I stood, my back ramrod straight, feeling strangely uneasy. I pressed a fingertip into the couch's shoulder. I moved my finger, drawing a line; then, I put some strength into it, digging it into the sofa's thick fabric. Pulling away, I repeated the motion, drawing another line.

My aunt remained silent. I waited to open the curtain—waited to hear her voice. I was driven by an impulse to run upstairs, but every time it rose in me I dug my fingertip into the couch.

"Yuhi left around 1:00."

I was confused by the sudden exhaustion I felt. My aunt had opened the curtain to the living room before I had realized she was moving and was sitting in the doorway. Faced with her, I forgot why I was standing like that. It looked like she had been reading the newspaper. She put the reading glasses she was holding in her hands into their case and, after speaking, shut it. I saw a newspaper spread out across the floor in the living room behind her.

“How lonely do you think Yuhi was, getting on that plane?”

She sounded furious. Since I had stepped into the garden—since I had stepped into the dark house—I had already felt like I was being blamed for something. I sighed. There was no excuse to give to my aunt. The dark parlor and entryway were cool, and, fleetingly, a hollow sensation like fear shuddered through me.

“You said you would leave work early. You said you had already gotten permission from your company, so you could go see her off properly at the airport. You were talking like that until today, at least, when—despite the fact that you promised—suddenly, this morning you said it was impossible and you couldn’t. Who is this person, who couldn’t even be bothered to pick up the phone? It was your lunch break, wasn’t it? How could you be so heartless? She waited and waited, but when the phone call never came, Yuhi said she tried to call you at your company, to talk to you. Then, after getting to the airport, she said that you called her. Did you?”

I kept silent, only shaking my head or nodding in response to her questions.

“It’s pathetic. ‘I’ll see you off,’ I said. ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to carry anything heavy by myself, but maybe together we can make do.’ But Yuhi refused. ‘Just to the main road,’ I tried, because I wanted to make sure she got to the spot where the taxi would pick

her up. But that child insisted on saying her goodbyes right at the street corner, telling me, ‘It looks like I’m headed home. Your knee has only just finally healed; you shouldn’t walk too much.’ That child said that, and then she just—left. ‘Goodbye,’ she told me, and she took my hand in hers, hugged me, and set off. She kept looking back over her shoulder.”

My fingers dug into the corner of the sofa.

Yuhi had sat on this same couch the day she came to the house. I felt like I was trapped in a hallucination, standing here now, looking down at Yuhi’s head and shoulders as she sat on the sofa.

“You have to give it your all, up to the very last moment. Weren’t you two as close as siblings? Going with her to the airport to see her off was only proper—even though it was just the phone, making a call and coming was the bare minimum. That child, all alone, had to go to the airport, because you weren’t there, and if I think about it, I just— It was so painful and there was nothing I could do about it.”

I stood utterly still, with just my unpleasant thoughts, not offering any excuses to my aunt. I had certainly told her leaving work early wasn’t an option this month that morning. I had already gotten permission, but I told the company that it wasn’t necessary for me to head out early today.

I was upset with myself, and with Yuhi. No matter how persuasive Yuhi was, with her refusing to change her mind about leaving school partway through the semester, the quarrel between the two of us—which had continued on for several weeks—had ended up being pointless. And yet, despite the fact that my anger and frustration with her had finally cooled down even before yesterday, when she departed for Japan for good this morning it became unbearable. I simply could not calmly go to the airport. When I imagined the scene

of our parting—waving to her at her gate, wondering what kind of words and what kind of facial expression I would use—I lost my confidence.

“I understand that your feelings on this are...complicated. It’s the same for me. However, you have to consider that child’s feelings first and foremost. She came to study abroad at S University, experienced some difficulties, and even though she was finally able to adjust to being a senior, she couldn’t graduate and had to return home to Japan. For Yuhi, it must have been agonizing. Even though she was just one step away from graduating... It was heartbreaking, and there was nothing that could be done about it. She was troubled to that extent.”

My aunt’s tone calmed. Her tirade had died down slowly, but I couldn’t block out her words. The conversation still seemed to be going. I waited for a break in it so I could hurry upstairs.

“How much I could have convinced her, I don’t know. I told her again and again—you should take a month to rest and recuperate if you’re ill. And if you’re absent, the other students, who are also Zainichi, and your teachers should understand—I honestly tried telling her that, again and again. Because those were the circumstances, I thought it would be fine if she just went to the university and met with each professor individually, talking to them about the situation. But even if I say that now, it’s no use. It’s such a shame, because she was such a hard-working student. What a disappointment. Just because she’s not related to us doesn’t mean you can brush it off like it’s someone else’s problem.”

My aunt gripped the glasses’ case tightly, maintaining the same posture while she continued speaking.

I didn't know where the Yuhi that my aunt came to see and the Yuhi that I came to see deviated—where, exactly, they diverged.

The scents of the first and second stories of the house were also subtly yet clearly distinct. I wasn't sure if the expressions of the Yuhi that came to be shown to my aunt downstairs and the Yuhi that came to be shown to me upstairs also differed.

They definitely weren't the same.

I thought I could thrust the Yuhi that I saw—the one that my aunt didn't know—and the words of the Yuhi that I heard that my aunt couldn't imagine, at her. When we had to accept that Yuhi wasn't changing her mind about leaving mid-semester, I was suddenly reminded that the idea that Yuhi was withdrawing due to health reasons was given to my aunt and the people at the university.

However, convincing my aunt of the Yuhi I saw conflicted with the reality of her not being in this house from this day forward, and only that reality was clear. I couldn't change the certainty with which my aunt—in her own way—thought of and remembered Yuhi, how it ultimately diverged from the figure of the Yuhi I knew. I had no choice but to recognize the reality that Yuhi was not here, and would not be here from now on; I wasn't sure that that was a point my aunt and I could agree on.

“She was cute—a really good kid. I wish I had paid attention to her needs more—I truly wish I had. But no matter what I say, it's too late now, isn't it?”

The argument, which had bordered on a monologue, shifted. My aunt should've realized that it was nothing but a nice-sounding excuse, instead of naïvely believing that Yuhi had left in the middle of the term because of gastritis.

My aunt started to massage around her knee, absentmindedly, as if she forgot I was there, an unfocused look of faint shock on her face as she peered down, her gaze falling to the living room floor.

I gave a half-hearted reply and picked up my purse from the sofa. There was no question that my aunt was lonely. I, myself, had thought of Yuhi like a little sister. My aunt's daughter was married, and I knew that she had come to regard Yuhi, who had moved into the house, as a daughter, like she was some kind of replacement for my cousin.

“You’ll understand if you go to that child’s room. She left her bureau and desk. She said, ‘If the bureau ends up being useful for *ajumeoni*²³ and *unni*,²⁴ please use it. If it isn’t, try asking the next person who boards here if they can use it, and give it to them. If not, please dispose of it as you see fit.’ I took the desk; it’s a quality one. That child said, ‘I don’t want to just sell it. I don’t want to give it to anyone else.’ She said she would be happy if you or I had it, so I agreed to take it. She gave the bookshelves to her friend from S University; they came in the morning to pick them up.”

The light by the staircase was on. I started to head upstairs without saying anything, going where my aunt couldn’t reproach me.

Quietly, I began climbing the stairs.

“When I thought about renting the upstairs rooms out to people for the first time, that child just happened to come along. She was a Zainichi, and—as if it were destiny—she was attending S University, making her a junior of your uncle. It was the first time I had decided to do something like this on my own, to take care of myself—and, ultimately,

²³ Korean word referring to a married or middle-aged woman—in this case, the narrator’s aunt.

²⁴ Korean word meaning “older sister.” Used by women or girls when referring to older women or girls who are they related to or close with. Yuhi uses this term to refer to the narrator.

it turned out like this. Even though I was planning on going to her graduation ceremony, come hell or high water. On the day that child first came to this house, I said, ‘I’m definitely going to her graduation,’ and I spoke to you about it. I wanted to try going to S University just once. I hadn’t seen the school since it was relocated from Dongsung-dong... If your uncle was alive, and he had known she was attending his *alma mater*, he would’ve absolutely doted on her—not just treated her like she was someone else’s problem. He probably would have gone to her graduation, too. She shouldn’t have been made to leave in the middle of the semester... Compared to you or I, the people at the school are far stricter; they should have encouraged her more, convinced her to stay. Your uncle loved that school; he used to go on and on about it.”

Even though I had climbed the stairs, my aunt didn’t stop talking. She kept arguing in a wooden voice, as if my dead uncle had materialized beside her and she was speaking to him. There was no way of knowing if my aunt kept talking to herself vacantly even after I was already upstairs.

It was inside of the top drawer of the bureau, like Yuhi had told me it would be.

The corner of the drawer hit my chest when I pulled it out, and I stepped back a bit. There was a manilla envelope, about 30 centimeters long and fairly bulky. I reached my hand out, then gave up. It was right in front of me, but I still hesitated in grabbing the envelope.

Bitter disappointment flooded through me, and my body trembled.

My questions and doubts over why she wasn't here, why Yuhi couldn't just stay in Korea, and how I was supposed to understand that now, when there was nothing to do about it, were a burning flash of anger bubbling up in me.

“이 나라.” (*i nara*) *this country*

Yuhi's voice darted across my mind as I stood there, still.

I remembered it—the day she had muttered that in self-deprecation; the day she had injected sarcasm and scorn into it, spitting it out between other words; the day she had murmured it in a trembling voice, unable to find any other words to replace her suffering with; the day she spoke it as if entreating; the different echoes of Yuhi's expressions and those same words. I remembered them all.

“이 나라 사람.” (*i nara saram*) *this country's people*

Yuhi's voice, flashing across my mind, was bursting with something, a sound that was particularly strong. The grating noise that the door to the entryway had made and the memory of her voice echoed.

I couldn't tear it away.

Yuhi showed a variety of expressions in my memories involving those words—those expressions seemed to overlap with me, superimposed, covering me. The uncertain intonation in her pronunciation—even in my memories, her accent was unmistakably Japanese—and her thoughts on those days were hidden.

Peeling away layer after layer, I thought that, like a callus, the film over my memories had only grown thicker.

The anger I felt smoldered, and, shaking off whatever it was that was stopping my hand as I reached out, I pulled out the envelope from the drawer. It was heavier than I had

imagined. I wanted to look at the contents, but still, I hesitated. I walked to the doorway, holding the envelope.

“*Unni*, I have a request for you. If you can, please open the top drawer to the bureau in my room. I put an envelope in there. It would make me happy if you would hold onto it.”

Yuhi called my workplace from the airport. It was a little after 3:30 PM. She was silent for a while, after she informed me, “I’m boarding soon.” She called me *unni*, then, and began to speak.

“It doesn’t matter if something happens to it, even though I’m gone. I said I’d entrust it to you, but I don’t want to burden you, *unni*. I made that request so hastily—I’m sorry. I’m at a loss as to what to do. I can’t just throw it away or burn it, and I’m not comfortable with bringing it back with me to Japan... I kept writing and writing, and it just accumulated, since I started living in your house, actually. I can’t just throw it away... *Unni*, please get rid of it, if you can. If you don’t hold onto it, it’s okay—so, please, just throw it away.”

Yuhi’s voice shook as she spoke, like her throat was spasming.

“I understand. I’ll do as you say, then,” I said.

I was constantly worrying over that phone call, from the time I left for work in the morning, even though I told myself that I shouldn’t wait up for it. I couldn’t even guess how many times I thought, *I’ll call the house*. I regretted telling my company that I wasn’t leaving work early that day. Still, I just couldn’t pick up the phone. *It would be good if Yuhi called*, I kept thinking. I made up things to do and didn’t leave my desk during my lunch break.

“It’s four o’clock, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“It came pretty soon, didn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“The bureau to the left in your room—the top drawer?”

“Yes.”

“Should I not look at the contents of the envelope?”

“... You probably can’t read it, since it’s in Japanese.”

Yuhi’s last words to me were typical, as far as parting words went—*unni, annyeongikaeseyo*, a standard response.

“Jalga.” Take care. I replied, shortly and calmly.

I hoped that she would hang up, and was waiting for the sound of the line disconnecting, but Yuhi didn’t end the call. A moment passed, such a short amount of time that I couldn’t tell whether it counted as one second or two.

“Yuhi, kajima.” Yuhi, don’t go.

Yuhi may have felt the words which left my mouth, in my voice, on the other side of the phone. Without saying anything, she hung up. I heard the sound of the phone disconnecting, and, swallowing my words, I finally set down the receiver.

There was no furniture left in the room, except for the bureau and the desk.

When I opened the door, the empty, dark room made me realize that the sun had set. The thought that my control was snapping, that Yuhi was not there, was thrust at me again.

The desk's legs were now folded up, one heavy wooden board leaning against the wall.

A bookshelf had been placed against the wall beside the door until this morning. There was a space cleared for a cushion between the bookshelf and the door; whenever I came to Yuhi's room, I often sat there, the cushion placed on my lap.

It was empty, the belongings having been cleared away; the room somehow felt small compared to how it had been before.

Yuhi is still in this room.

That sensation crept up on me, and, as I was about to leave, I was suddenly restrained. It no longer felt like I was sitting there.

The linoleum-covered floor was faintly warm. Maybe my aunt had finally installed a boiler. No matter how often I turned on the *ondol* floor heating to warm it up, in the morning and in the evening in the spring, it was still chilly.

"Lee Yuhi..."

Something muttered. Suddenly, I was forced to remember the day, six months ago, when Yuhi first gave me her name.

"This is warm."

In the center of the room, the Yuhi of my memories leaned over the floor. Placing both hands on the linoleum, before long she had sat down, crouching.

My eyes closed.

My chest hurt, and the cushion resting over my knees seemed to tremble with something like fear.

It was last year in October, the final Saturday before the month changed, when Yuhi came to visit the house for the first time.

It was afternoon, a slow time of the day.

It was probably around four o'clock. While work ended in the mornings on Saturdays, most people went home around 3:00; I had picked up the phone call from the realtor after getting back from work, which meant it had to have been around 4:00.

I had already been working at the same company for close to twelve years. My uncle had introduced me, and it had been decided I would get a job there. It was a place that released a small magazine on history and art. It was a tiny company—just the president, a few other workers, and me. I was bad with people, and tended to sit at my desk doing things like office work and proofreading.

My uncle passed away the summer of my fourth year of college. He had finished building the house we currently lived in a bit before he died, but until he completed it I made do with the library and the storage room.

It was settled that I would work at the magazine company, which was in Gwanghwamun; unlike during my days in university, the trip to the office from my parents' house in Gyeonggi Province took less than an hour and was easy. When I was in school and had to stay late, like on days when I had exams, I would often stay at my aunt's house, usually in my cousin's room. Before Yuhi lived there for half a year, that room had belonged to my aunt and uncle's daughter. She was three years younger than me, and had gotten married and gone to live in America. She had dreamed about practicing her English and traveling around—then, she met another Korean who was an accountant in the United States and fell in love, and, without even bothering to travel, decided to live in the U.S.

I lived in that house for nearly twelve years. My aunt and cousin got along fairly well, no arguments between them, and after my cousin got married my aunt and uncle had lived together quietly, just the two of them.

My cousin recommended getting rid of the house and buying an apartment in Gangnam, on the south side of the Han River. The maintenance costs for a house were considerable, and there were other concerns, like my aunt's loneliness. However, my aunt hated the idea of living in Gangnam. The development there polluted the air with exhaust fumes, which would be bad for her skin and shorten her lifespan, she insisted. More than anything, though, my aunt did not want to part with the house that my uncle had built.

I got a phone call from the realtor that day. My aunt had gone out to the garden to tend to the flowerbeds.

“He says a female student looking for a boarding house is coming.”

I turned towards the garden and spoke loudly. *I should give her the phone*, I thought, but rather than exchange it with my aunt, whose hands were dirty from gardening, I decided to listen to the realtor. I relayed my aunt's words—that we were just offering a room through *jeonse*.²⁵

“I understood that. The student said that *jeonse* was expensive and she couldn't get the full amount together. However, she says she can prepare a certain amount in the form of an advanced monthly payment, as a boarding house fee. As it so happens, she's a Zainichi Korean study abroad student coming from Japan. There isn't a type of room credit like *jeonse* in Japan, so she probably can't understand it all that well. Paying a certain

²⁵ *Jeonse* is kind of a lease or deposit common in South Korean. Someone looking to rent makes a lump-sum deposit on a space instead of paying a monthly rent; this money is then returned to them when their lease is up, and the landlord profits from reinvesting the deposit money,

amount as an advanced payment and renting out the room—that money’s interest basically becomes your rent, and when you leave you receive the full amount back. That way, rather than paying a monthly amount, you can make a continuous profit. However, even though I explained it like that, it seemed like she didn’t really get it.”

I relayed what the realtor said to my aunt, who was still in the garden. “Which university do you think she goes to?” My aunt wondered. I repeated her question to him.

“She’s a student at S University’s Department of Literature. I was wondering why she was looking here for a boarding house when she goes to that school, and tried asking her. It takes over an hour to get from here to the university on the bus line, you know. You probably have to transfer, too—even if it’s only a commute, it’s difficult. However, at any rate, she said likes the neighborhood. She’s a nice girl. She said she’s swapped various boarding houses before finding this area. She’s come to her home country, and it’s all probably felt very inconvenient, hm? It doesn’t feel like I can just not think about it, like it’s somebody else’s problem. So, I thought you might be home and tried giving you a call. May I ask your aunt something, please?”

The real estate agent appeared to think of this student rather highly.

I relayed what I had heard to my aunt.

I remembered the realtor’s place on the corner of the main road. I tried to imagine a female student in a narrow office stuffed with sofa sets and desks. Maybe she was looking worriedly at the realtor’s appearance. He was a man nearing old age, with a tough constitution, and a face that showed only stern emotions. A family acquaintance, we knew what he liked in people. However, on first meeting him—especially since she wasn’t fluent in Korean—the student must’ve gotten the same first impression I had, probably putting

herself on guard because she was nervous. A large printed map of South Korea hung on the wall in the real estate office. Thinking about the girl sitting beneath it, I realized I was already somehow acquiring an interest in this student I hadn't even seen yet.

S University was a school at the very upper echelon. I had never had any desire to take the entrance exam for it; my first choice was E University, and I went there and graduated, like I wanted. Had the girl in the real estate office been an E University student and my junior, maybe I would've been more keen about the idea of her staying with us. However, even though our schools were different, I felt an emotion resembling curiosity begin to burgeon towards her, and I started hoping that my aunt wouldn't refuse the realtor's request.

"I wonder if she should decide after seeing the room first—I don't know whether she'll like it or not," my aunt said. Not long after, she continued in a low voice, "She'd be his junior, you know?" My uncle had also attended S University.

"Is that so?" The realtor said. "Isn't that nice. If it's not too much trouble, I'm going to give the student a rough map of the area and send her on over by herself—would you be willing to wait outside for her? Another customer will be coming in, and I can't leave the office." When the phone call ended, I stepped out in front of the sash door looking out over the garden. I told my aunt that I should head outside, since the student would probably be coming alone.

"Don't do that," my aunt said, looking over her shoulder. "If the food isn't to your liking, I'll be upset. Whatever should I do?" I wasn't sure if she was asking me to take the food with me, or talking to herself.

“He said she’s changed her boarding house several times. I don’t know if we should take that into consideration,” I offered.

“Even so, why come to this area to look for a boarding house? Even though she said she liked the neighborhood, commuting to school will be inconvenient for her, won’t it?”

“I wonder if she looked him up in the list of graduates,” I teased. “Uncle, I mean—where do you think she heard about him?”

“No!” My aunt laughed. “An earnest student is good, at any rate. I’d be worried if it was someone who was a slob, or loud. I don’t know if it could be dangerous, even if just ideologically, since she’s from Japan. That North Korean organization, Chongryon, is there, you know.”

“But, then again, the realtor did say that she seemed nice...”

“We don’t know. Maybe she’s been kicked out of her boarding house and is moving around from place to place—we just don’t know. I heard somewhere that Zainichi Korean students studying abroad in South Korea usually only party it up in Itaewon and don’t even study at all. They throw their money around because the yen is so high.”

“But Auntie, she’s a student at S University. She can’t keep up with her classes if she’s out partying all the time. I don’t know about other students studying abroad, but definitely not someone going to that school.”

“It would be really good if she was an earnest student...”

That was the conversation my aunt and I exchanged.

I put the cardigan around my shoulders just so and headed out. My aunt got up from her crouch amidst the flowerbeds and went inside the house, switching places with me.

I could recall the scene of that day with absolute clarity even now, down to the most minute details.

Back then, I spent most of my days brooding. My downcast mood was probably triggered by my realization that I had let my chance of marrying slip away from me; already halfway into my thirties, I was anxious about my future. Then again, I had never been an especially proactive person. I would mope to the extent that it surprised even me, and look down on myself for my masochistic way of thinking about things. Before very long, those moments came more frequently than not, and the appeal of marriage and a steady job—and my energy for both—declined. I felt increasingly like I had wandered into a maze; I was depressed.

“You shouldn’t think of every single little thing in such a negative way,” my cousin started saying to my aunt, just before she got married and left the house.

I didn’t think that I had become depressed because my cousin got married before me, but— “You should hurry it up if there’s a decent person around.” My aunt often said that sort of thing to me.

My mood wasn’t improving; I was always listless.

If I just kept living like that, without even a hobby, or any interest in or will to do anything, what would I become from that point on? That anxiety bore down on me, suffocating. Soon, if I so much as stumbled in one of the minutiae of my daily routine, I’d be hounded by a sense of guilt that was totally inescapable.

Yuhi appeared on a day like that, around six months ago.

It was chilly out.

With the stone wall partitioning off the house's garden, the strength of the wind blowing in through the iron door from outside intensified.

I pulled tight both ends of the cardigan draped around my shoulders. Crossing both arms in front of my chest, my sweater wrapped around my body, I stared at the corner of the road sloping below me. Maybe I had something like a premonition or a hunch. It seemed like I felt something—me, depressed, being curious about the presence of some strange student. Still, it was only a fleeting thing, probably having to do with my interest in how my daily life would change.

It was a while before a young girl appeared at the corner of the road. Not realizing that she was the one who had come to see the boarding house, I just stood there in a daze. She looked like a high school student. While I got the sense that she was a girl, her hair was short and she was wearing glasses—was it strange to say that she looked like a feminine boy?

The student approached, giving a slight bow to me in greeting.

“The realtor told me about you.” She said. Her pronunciation was clumsy and stiff. It had more of a Gyeongsang accent than a Japanese one. Still, I understood her, and—a little surprised—returned her bow. She was wearing a navy polo shirt underneath a white V-neck sweater, the same shade of blue as her pants.

She didn't seem like a college student, no matter how I looked at her; she had a baby face. Her build was small, and the swell of her hips and the way she walked lent her an air of androgyny, even though I knew she was a woman. Her voice was the same way.

“What's your name?” I asked.

“Lee Yuhi,” she answered.

She taught me the characters she used to write her name when I asked, wondering what was happening as she laughed weakly and turned her head down, looking embarrassed.

“This is it,” I said, climbing the stone steps and standing in front of the iron door. I pressed the doorbell, and my aunt answered on the intercom.

I guess “painful to look at” would’ve been the best way to describe it. I already felt something like curiosity towards Yuhi—was even drawn in by her. Her Korean was more awkward than I had thought it was at first. *Maybe she’s shy and can’t really talk much in front of new people*, I tried to think. Her gestures were as stiff and awkward as her Korean was, giving me the impression that she was terribly shy.

The lenses of her half-frame glasses were large. Her jaw jutted out slightly, and her face was more boxy than round. Out of her entire face, her wide eyes stood out, and her lips conveyed her strong sense of determination with the way they often pursed. Her nose was small and weak; her glasses were so large they rendered it unnoticeable.

She was fair-skinned, and freckles were scattered below her eyes. She was cute, kind of, like a young girl, but—and I wasn’t sure why I felt this way—at the same time Yuhi was a young woman who had a boyish stubbornness to her, down to her very core.

Maybe I thought that she was like me. After all, I had decided on my own that Yuhi must tend to shut herself off from other people, and that the way she seemed to have difficulty opening up to others was similar to me.

We entered the house and she introduced herself to my aunt, and immediately all three of us headed upstairs.

The house's layout was simple. On the left side of the first floor was the parlor, to the right was the living room, and, beyond that, the dining room. On the second floor, there were two rooms on either side, one right above the parlor and the other above the living room. The staircase was positioned almost in the middle of the house. One washroom was to the immediate left of the front door, and another was on the second floor at the top of the stairs.

Along the stairs, a handrail made of sturdy wood had been installed. Every day, without fail, my aunt would polish the railing until the wood had a deep luster.

From the parlor, climbing up the stairs, the hallway stretched out abreast of the staircase. On the right side of the hallway was the washroom, and at the end was the doorway leading out to the balcony. Looking down the stairs from above, the handrail continued as a balustrade. Spaced evenly on the wall that ran alongside the hallway were two doors—the one on the right had been my cousin's, and the one on the left was mine. The room on the right, which Yuhi was to use, was just above the parlor, while mine was above the living room.

"It's a quiet place, isn't it? And the room's pretty spacious," Yuhi said when she entered the bedroom.

It seemed like my aunt and I got the same impression from Yuhi. Her smiling face was innocent. You got that sense whether you thought she looked boyish or girlish; it doubtless made a good impression on my obliging aunt. No matter how you looked at Yuhi, it didn't seem like she was a bad student who would spend all her time partying and not studying.

Beyond the window facing the garden was the balcony. It continued below the window to my room and, like a narrow hallway or the *hangul* character ㄱ, wrapped around the second story.

“Can this be opened?” Yuhi inquired.

There were two windows—one facing the garden, and the other two on top of each other in the right-hand wall. However, from the right windows you could only see the roof of the neighboring house, and when my cousin had lived here furniture had been placed in front of it and it was rarely opened. On the balcony outside that window there were jars with soybean paste and other things in them lined up.

Compared to Yuhi’s small stature—she was maybe around 150 cm—the window was tall, and it seemed like she almost wouldn’t be able to reach the key to unlock it. When my aunt opened it, Yuhi tiptoed over and stood by the window, laying her hands on the sill and peering outside.

“You really can’t see anything. You can’t catch a glimpse of the mountains from here at all,” she said. Leaving the window, her head dropped slightly; her profile was somehow sad. My aunt and I exchanged glances.

“It’s warm.”

Before very long, Yuhi—who was taking a moment to survey the room—leaned over the floor. Crouching down, she ran her palms over the linoleum, leaning over it more and more. “It’s warm right here—right here,” she said. It felt like a little much. Her appearance just then, as she concentrated, without caring who was looking, was childlike—but, at the same time, there was something about it that was almost painful to look at. My

aunt glanced at me with a face that said, “She’s a bit of a strange one, isn’t she?” and, without opening my mouth, I nodded.

“It’s been getting colder in the morning and the evening. Sometimes I have to turn the boiler on. I did it just before you arrived, so it hasn’t gotten that warm,” my aunt said. Yuhi stood, eyes raised to meet my aunt.

“*Ajumoni*, can you keep the *ondol* warm throughout the winter?”

“Of course.”

“When I’m not in class, I’m going to be spending most of my time in this room. I don’t have a lot of errands to run, so even in the middle of the day, I’ll still be here. Could you keep the *ondol* warm for me then, too?”

“Sure.”

Yuhi’s gaze dropped to the floor, and, as if she was speaking to herself, she murmured, “Even on a day like this, you’re using it, huh?”

“Didn’t the boarding house you’ve been in keep you warm?” I interjected from the side.

Yuhi kept staring at the floor, like it was hard to speak, but inclined her head. “Since my boarding house is that way...”

My aunt and I exchanged another look. We didn’t know what the circumstances with her other boarding house were.

“Lots of homes have been saving fuel, and you’ve been cold, right?” My aunt comforted her.

Yuhi, who didn’t even come up to our shoulders, appeared even smaller when she was just staring silently at the floor with her head down.

Maybe it was her normal disposition, or maybe it was because she was in a strange place, even if it was her home country, but it seemed like Yuhi was always tense—like she was nervous, withdrawing into herself and wary of her surroundings. It was like, under duress, a crack had suddenly appeared in that fragile, delicate part of a child who hadn't yet fully grown into adulthood—it felt painful, but also precarious, dangerous, even, I thought, staring at that break in Yuhi's composure.

After my aunt said, "Shall we head downstairs?" we followed her down the staircase.

The three of us were on the sofas. I was beside my aunt, who had prepared coffee, sitting on the couch placed against the wall that faced the garden. Yuhi was opposite me.

My aunt and Yuhi began to discuss a monthly sum of money for rent. While my aunt had planned to lend the room through *jeonse* in order to get a sizable sum, after meeting and seeing Yuhi, she seemed to have quickly made up her mind to rent the room in the form of a boarding house.

With the inheritance my uncle left and the land in Gangnam, it was enough for the day-to-day maintenance costs of the house. I privately thought that having a boarder like Yuhi would be a fun way for my aunt, who liked cooking, to show off her skills.

The amount settled, it was decided that Yuhi would move in the following Sunday.

"Komapsumnida." *Thank you so much.* Yuhi looked at my aunt, then me, bowing her head.

"What year are you?"

"A third year."

"And your major?"

“Tentatively linguistics, but to be honest, I haven’t decided yet.”

I stood to the side, silent, listening to my aunt and Yuhi’s exchange.

“Even though you came from Japan, you’re studying hard, aren’t you?”

“I’m just struggling to keep up.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, my husband went to S University—but he was in the economics department.”

At my aunt’s words, Yuhi’s wide eyes seemed to shine. “Is that so?” Her voice rose.

“Where exactly are you boarding now in that area?”

“Oh, X neighborhood.”

“Ah, yes, that’s a little far from the university, isn’t it? I heard you changed your lodgings several times. Why? The food didn’t suit you?”

“Ah, no, it wasn’t that, but... It’s just...” Yuhi cast her eyes down like it was hard for her to speak—like she had in the bedroom, she just bowed her head stiffly, clamming up.

I found myself taken with Yuhi’s eyes and her gaze.

The whites of her eyes were tinged with a bit of blue, like a very young child’s, making the black of her pupils stand out in sharp relief.

She rarely blinked. It felt like her gaze bit into you, the way it stayed unwaveringly on you and seemed to speak, unlike the impression I got from her appearance.

Yuhi’s voice was also distinctive. While her tone was slow, her breathing was rushed in some places, and her voice cracked in others—or, rather, it vacillated, unstable.

It wasn’t a high-pitched tone, but it also wasn’t low by any means. I couldn’t definitively say that it was a nice voice, but the beginning and endings of her words were

faint, almost blurred, somehow—and yet, there was some strong force in her voice that still managed to come across.

“Since you’re my husband’s junior, I want to do everything I can for you. Even though it may be difficult for you to speak, would you tell me what you didn’t like about your previous boarding houses? I want something to go off of,” my aunt said.

Yuhi, who had kept her mouth firmly shut, fidgeted. Her fingers, resting on her knees, began to move; she didn’t appear to realize it. She picked at the side of one fingernail with another, and then picked at the hangnail that had formed with the other. My aunt looked at me, and I looked at my aunt.

“It wasn’t a nice house like this. The neighborhood...wasn’t quiet like this, either. After I came to Korea, I changed boarding houses eight times. The university dorms were no good. It’s because I thought that, in order to know Korea, it was better to live in a house where ordinary people were; I figured I would get used to everyday life quickly. So, I was in a boarding house. Nowhere as nice as here. I was also stubborn, and didn’t think to look for a place like this in this neighborhood.”

“I bet it was loud. Probably impossible to study!”

When my aunt said that, Yuhi made an uncomfortable face before cutting it off abruptly; she loosened her mouth, which had tightened, and shook her head. It may have been an illusion, but her lips seemed to faintly tremble, like she was about to start crying. My aunt must have thought she had to change the subject immediately, because suddenly—

“Where’s your home in Japan?” She asked.

“Tokyo,” Yuhi answered.

“Is that so? My husband worked at a company involved in trade. Once or twice a year he would go to Japan.”

“Oh, really?”

“It’s been nearly twenty years, but my husband actually took me to Japan once. We went to Yokohama, as well as Tokyo.”

“*Ajumeoni*, can you speak Japanese?”

“You know, my husband could speak it because he was made to do it, in his daily life. But I only heard it a bit when I was little, and can’t do it at all now. ‘*Arigato gozaimasu*’ and ‘*gomennasai*’ are all I can say.”

“Your pronunciation is quite good,” Yuhi said, beginning to laugh lightly.

I was still anxious about what kind of place her old boarding house was. My aunt probably felt the same way. But when Yuhi no longer had to answer questions she found unpleasant, her face visibly softened and lost some of its stiffness. I didn’t know if it was because she was answering questions about her country of birth.

With the topic of conversation changed, my aunt and Yuhi continued their exchange. My aunt, avoiding the subject of the boarding house, watched Yuhi’s face carefully.

“In Japan it seems like Koreans face all kinds of discrimination, right? My husband used to get so mad about it—whether it was on television or in the newspaper, we would often hear about it.”

“It seems that way, yes.”

“You also probably know all about it.”

“Ah, I knew about those sorts of things happening in the past, and I was also shocked to hear about it, but—well—I myself haven’t experienced anything like direct

discrimination or bullying,” Yuhi said. The tension ebbed from her face, and with an air of opening up, her Korean also smoothed out. I liked the Yuhi who answered things with surprising honesty.

“But, still, I cannot forgive Japanese people—I hate them. There’s nothing I can do about how I feel, because of what happened in the past.”

At my aunt’s words, Yuhi’s eyebrows twitched and her gaze dropped. *It’s probably not good not to talk much about things related to Japanese people in front of this kid*, I thought. My aunt likely realized the same thing.

“Around where I live in Japan, there’s only Japanese people,” Yuhi started to say. “My mother and father are Korean, but I wasn’t able to really socialize with any other Koreans. Because all the schools I attended up to university were completely Japanese, I only had Japanese friends. I guess, because at that time I was hiding the fact that I was Korean, you could call the panic I felt about trying to hide ‘discrimination,’ but I, myself, have not directly faced the kind of violent discrimination we’re talking about here.”

“What about your family?”

“My father passed away. It was about six years ago. As far as aunts or uncles go, my mother has three brothers. They’re all married, and even though I’m the only child in the family who’s this old, my *eomeoni* (mother) still sends me money to help me with my studies. My mother and her brothers are half-siblings, but they’re still very close.”

For the first time since she had entered the house, her Korean had smoothed out completely, and the awkwardness in her bearing was starting to disappear, too—but I was suddenly hit with a certain idea, and fixed my gaze on Yuhi.

“How old is your mother?” My aunt asked.

“Fifty three.”

“Ah, she’s younger than me, then.”

After the topic shifted from Japan, I perceived a subtle change in Yuhi’s behavior. Every time she changed a boarding house, she was probably asked the same thing. There was also no doubt that she must’ve also answered in the exact same way. And yet, I perceived something odd in Yuhi’s manner of speaking that didn’t seem like it stemmed from her being unused to saying it in Korean.

“This *unni* here studied national literature at E University,” my aunt said, gesturing to me. I was so preoccupied with my own thoughts that I hadn’t listened to their conversation for a while.

“What did you major in, *unni*?” Yuhi asked.

“I studied modern literature.”

“Was your thesis on that, as well?”

“Yes.”

“What did you write about?” Yuhi asked, leaning in. I had a feeling that her eyes were shining distinctly behind her glasses.

“You probably know Yi Sang?”

“Yes, of course! I love him.”

“I wrote about his work.”

“Really?” Yuhi’s stretched out her back, smiling broadly as she breathed a sigh.

“More than liking him, per se, Yi Sang’s work surprised me. It’s incredible.”

Yuhi stared at me like she was consuming me. I was taken aback by the minute movements of her face, which—more than I had thought—had a certain intensity and

directness to them. I felt a kind of uncertainty that I couldn't chalk up to me just trusting people too easily, or being tender-hearted. I was forcibly reminded of what kind of bad experiences she had had at the boarding houses she had stayed in, and what kind of thoughts she had had while she was there.

"What Korean authors do you like?" I asked.

"Actually, because I've been so busy with my studies at school, I haven't really read any." Yuhi seemed to hesitate a little when she answered.

"Reading novels must be hard; there's probably so many words you don't know," my aunt offered.

"While it's always difficult, it's really just that I've been slacking off. But I've read Yi Gwangsu. Even though people say that he was a scholar who cozied up to the colonial government, and there's a lot of antipathy towards him, I have some complicated feelings about him." Yuhi's voice lowered. I was sure she probably hadn't said that she liked Yi Gwangsu in front of other students before.

"Yi Sang and Yi Gwangsu are very different," I supplied.

"Yes—but—I can't help but be interested in Yi Gwangsu." Yuhi spoke while staring back at me as if she was trying to consume my eyes with her gaze.

"Since your third year is already over, you should also probably think about your thesis," I said.

Yuhi shook her head emphatically, her mouth twisting in embarrassment and a pained look emerging on her face.

"What I should do, what themes are good—I haven't decided any of that yet." She said, her shoulders dropping.

Once she relaxed, Yuhi tended to confess her thoughts fairly directly and openly, and then she would become fragile and get hurt, I thought. I, myself, had an idea of what that was like. It was fair to say that I remembered repeatedly doing that—resisting opening myself up, and shutting myself off from others.

I noticed that my aunt was smiling the whole time she was listening to my conversation with Yuhi. She seemed to be appropriately enamored with the girl, given that the strength of the bonds between seniors and juniors from E University, as well as S University, was famous. Catching a glimpse of the satisfied look on her face, I thought that my aunt probably felt like she was taking care of Yuhi on behalf of my uncle, who had passed away.

My aunt waited until there was a pause in our conversation to interject: “By the way, Yuhi, are you alright with spicy food?”

Yuhi turned to face her and, when she nodded, the conversation between them picked back up again.

I took a step back, watching them as their voices would sometimes raise and they would break out into laughter. While she didn’t touch the subject of the previous boarding houses that Yuhi had lived in again, since it had been settled that Yuhi would be staying here, it wouldn’t have been unusual for my aunt to want to ask Yuhi things. However, on the contrary, it seemed like it was Yuhi who was eager to talk, with my aunt being drawn in and keeping up the conversation.

While she had acted similarly with me, Yuhi paid close attention when my aunt opened her mouth, exhibiting a familiarity with her, and gesturing to indicate that she was listening.

“Am I speaking a little too quickly?”

“No, no.”

“You’re not having trouble making out my Korean?” My aunt asked. I had also thought about asking that a number of times before during our conversation.

“No, I can make out everything. I understand you very well,” Yuhi assured. I didn’t tilt my head to the side in doubt, and her answer wasn’t off, but while I thought that she probably understood us, Yuhi’s general behavior of concentrating carefully whenever my aunt or I spoke made me doubt her.

“It’s a school called Waseda University.”

My aunt was asking Yuhi, who dropped out of college in Japan after two years, where she had gone to school.

But still, I thought.

When I looked at Yuhi, sitting right in front of me, and listened to her voice, that boyish or girlish delicateness and innocence it had possessed abruptly vanished and—similar to the quality of her voice—a maturity took hold before my very eyes, surprising me.

Considering it was a language she was majoring in, Yuhi’s pronunciation was too uncertain even in Korean. I also couldn’t help but be bothered by the basic mistakes that stood out even in her grammar.

On top of being unable to form stop consonants like \neg (*k*), Ξ (*t*), and Ξ (*p*), she couldn’t make sounds like \neg (*kk*), Ξ (*tt*), or Ξ (*pp*), and pronounced them as indistinguishable from \neg (*k*), Ξ (*t*), and Ξ (*p*). Hearing her speak, there would definitely be some Koreans who couldn’t make out what she was saying.

She seemed earnest and smart, but how did she manage to get into S University, an accomplishment that was fabled as being as difficult as catching a shooting star? A student who I had gone to school with had studied abroad in the United States; she said that even though she had been able to write her thesis in English, conversing was hard. However, her spoken English seemed more fluent than Yuhi's faltering Korean. Sensing a break coming in her conversation with my aunt, I asked Yuhi, "Even in Japan, could you speak a lot of *uri mal* (*our mother tongue*)?"

"No, just a little. I began by self-studying; I didn't use it at home."

"So, how did you get into S University?" I asked.

Yuhi appeared to have been asked this question numerous times already. It seemed like she had already picked up on my doubt at the inaccuracies in her pronunciation and the awkwardness of her expressions.

"I took a special exam and was accepted," she said.

Even though she seemed used to the question, the force in her eyes and the tone of her voice dimmed, conveying guilt, like it was an excuse. Yuhi continued:

"In order to study abroad at a university in Korea—I mean, in my home country—I attended a school, like a cram school, called 'Students Learning About the Homeland.' It wasn't just fellow Zainichi—Koreans living outside of Korea gathered from all over. At the program, you study the national language—Korean—as well as English and history. So, the students who want to study abroad and grew up overseas get to take an exam that's so easy that Korean students can't even imagine it, and then, they enter university. At some universities, you only have an interview; you don't even need to take an exam to enter."

Yuhi blinked several times while she spoke, as if she was stealing glances at my aunt and I. I noticed that her Korean became awkward as soon as the conversation got difficult.

My aunt and I were surprised when we heard this story the first time. When I thought about the situation of the students here—they and their parents devoting all of their energy to the fiercely competitive university entrance exams—no matter how many fellow Koreans were overseas, I felt that Yuhi was given special treatment. Fellow Koreans growing up overseas, without knowing their homeland... I could also sympathize with them, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, them being given special admission to any university they wanted engendered mixed feelings in me.

Even though I could understand that Yuhi's crude Korean couldn't really be helped, given that she had been born and raised in Japan, it somehow didn't sit right with me; I couldn't rid myself of an anger that felt akin to envy.

"So, you took a leave of absence from your university in Japan, came here, attended school for a year, and are now a junior at S University. That being said, how old are you, Yuhi?" My aunt asked.

"I actually submitted a notification for a temporary leave of absence the same time that I entered school, and returned to Japan for two years," Yuhi said. "I'm twenty seven," she continued, hesitantly.

"Oh!" My aunt's voice rose, and, not thinking, mine did as well. A strange, indescribable silence followed after. At the topic of age, Yuhi also seemed to let out a sigh of relief.

“But, counting in full years, I’m twenty six. In Korea, they say to count everything—so every time I’m asked how old I am, I try to use the first age, but I don’t like it much,” Yuhi said while she laughed, her shoulders contracting.

“You don’t look that age at all,” my aunt remarked, and I exchanged glances with her and laughed.

Evening followed.

It being decided that she would come over next Sunday in the morning, my aunt and I watched Yuhi head back to her boarding house.

“イイニオイ.” (*ii nioi*) (*It smells good.*)

Yuhi said that when she was exiting the entryway, her sneakers on and her face upturned to the sky.

Even though she had left the garden, standing behind my aunt I heard that same voice murmur, as though speaking to itself, by my shoulder. I quickly realized it was Japanese. I remembered that I heard a similar thing when she had entered the house.

My aunt watched her go from the doorway, and then went back inside first. While I accompanied Yuhi as far as the main street, we stopped by the realtor’s office, and talked with him about the settled matter of the boarding house.

We walked out to the sloping road, where shadows were already gathering, and stopped in front of the house.

“This area is really quiet, isn’t it? Is it always like this?”

“Yeah.”

The high stone wall and gates that were similar to the iron door on our house bordered both sides of the road. The rows of houses continued on like that into the distance. The incline of the road steepened dramatically around our house.

There were no people, and the rows of thick stone walls seemed to deepen the evening hush all the more.

“But S University is far from here. Are you sure you’ll be able to handle the commute? It’ll definitely be hard on days when you have classes that go on for hours,” I said.

“Maybe. But I like it here. This place—every day, I’ve been riding different numbered city buses, looking for a boarding house. I’m glad; at last, I found a good place.”

“Have you only been staying in houses that are loud?”

Yuhi didn’t answer my question; she just laughed. A little bit later she stopped, looking up at me as I walked alongside her, and, beckoning me with a gaze, she turned her head and looked behind us. I was also caught up in her and stopped, turning my head to look at the top of the hilly road.

“That mountain... *Unni*, look, won’t you? The rocky figure of the mountain range that stretches so low and far is beautiful. When it came in sight while I was on the bus, I was completely captivated by it. ‘Let’s try here,’ I thought, and I walked around looking for a realtor.”

“...”

“When I thought about how peaceful this area is, and how I could look at that mountain every day, I was absolutely delighted. Not only is this neighborhood calm, but it made me so happy, that I could finally meet people who just live their lives quietly,” Yuhi

said. Looking down, she murmured the last word in a small voice, like she was embarrassed. Her pronunciation of the adjective *joyonghan* (*quiet*) was correct. Not only that, I also sensed Yuhi's particular thoughts and feelings put into that sound.

I let out a long sigh.

The memory of Yuhi became a small lump, and continued to quiver within my chest. The small lump made me remember that sudden, unexpected occurrence and Yuhi's expression that day; each time, the lump burst open, throbbing weakly.

I looked around the deathly quiet room where Yuhi was not.

The thick manila envelope remained placed on my lap. I stared at it, my fingertip tracing over it.

“우 · 리 · 나 · 라.” (*u—ri—na—ra*) (*homeland*)

I murmured in a small voice, writing the four characters in *hangul* on the envelope with my finger.

My bitter frustration with myself still welling up within me, my body shivered. I closed my eyes and endured it. And yet, it felt like the shaking wouldn't stop. Resolutely, I stood up, and opened the right-hand window a crack. A cold breeze was able to breathe into the room little by little. I took a breath. It was as if Yuhi was there. Just like I had on that day I'd started talking to Yuhi and—claiming it would bring some fresh air in—opened the window, I took a breath and thought about standing in front of the window.

I turned on the light.

I turned it down a little, but still left it on.

I remembered that scene of Yuhi, studying for her exams, asleep at her desk, the light left on. I woke her up, calling her name while I shook her shoulder.

“What are you doing, keeping on studying like this? Or are you sleeping? If it’s the latter, you have to sleep on your futon; I’ll spread it out for you. Hey, Yuhi—what are you gonna do?”

“I have to wake up,” Yuhi mumbled again and again, but she still lay there, her face planted on the desk. Sooner or later, she stood up and said she was going to wash her face off. It was the middle of the night, a little past two. I propped up Yuhi, who was walking unsteadily, and accompanied her to the washroom.

“Sleep,” I said, laying out the futon. Spreading it out parallel to her desk, I turned off the light.

It felt like I was with my younger sister who was taking her entrance exams as I spent time with Yuhi while she studied for those two tests, the final from the end of last year that she was taking this year, and the midterm from the first semester of her senior year that she was taking for the final time.

Although the merits of the memorization approach to studying had been questioned, Yuhi’s strategy for studying was based on memorizing things completely. I was surprised by her ability to concentrate.

“*Unni*, would you be willing to wake me up a little early tomorrow? Keep me company for an hour before you head to work,” Yuhi said, the day before her exam.

In the morning, I woke Yuhi up, and while she washed her face I boiled some water and made coffee. Yuhi sat in front of her desk, holding out her notebook to me where I was seated across from her.

“Any page is good. Open it up, and say the item that’s written above. If I can recite it all, check off the page number where it’s written at the bottom with a red ballpoint pen.”

There was roughly a whole volume’s worth of content in the notebook, summarizing the material within the scope of the exam, in the form of an itemized list written in Yuhi’s characters. The subject matter for that day’s exam, for example—if there were three subjects, it would be contained in three notebooks, and Yuhi had memorized all of them. Adjectives, adverbs, inflectional endings of words—without getting one vocabulary word wrong, Yuhi would remember it completely.

You definitely couldn’t say that the *hangul* characters Yuhi wrote were skillful, and there were also ones that were difficult to read, but they gave off the impression of being distinct in a way that suggested that she was used to writing them. I saw her characters multiple times, and remembering their idiosyncrasies, I also thought back on Yuhi’s somehow adult-like expressions and voice, her gaze.

When she turned in a paper, I also read the rough draft and corrected misspellings and expressions she’d gotten wrong. You never would have imagined that Yuhi’s written Korean was so masterful, given her speaking abilities. Yuhi used phrases that surprised me; they appeared to be direct translations from Japanese, and even though I could imagine their meaning, at first glance I didn’t understand them at all.

However, I quickly got it.

Except for before she had an exam or when she had to submit a paper, Yuhi virtually never wrote in or read *hangul*. It was all Japanese books lining the bookshelf in her room, other than the textbooks she used for school and documents. I was already surprised the day she moved in. There were as many as ten boxes with only Japanese books stuffed in

them. There were books piled up on the floor. Even the ones that didn't fit onto the bookshelf were all in Japanese. They had to have been sent over several times from Japan. They also could be bought from bookstores here that would sell them for many times the price.

“These aren't books on ideology.”

My aunt often said that when she first saw books coming from Japan. I told my aunt that Yuhi wasn't interested in something like that, but rather than what my aunt was thinking, I was nonsensically irritated and even upset with Yuhi for reading only Japanese books like that. One day, while I was keeping Yuhi company as she was taking her exams and correcting a draft of her paper, my temper flared up in spite of myself and I yelled at her.

“Yuhi, regardless of everything you've said, why can't you use *ttuieosseugi* (*spacing*)? You need to leave space between the clauses, specifically in between them here and here. Here and here, too. Put so much space between them that you think it's too much. You have to get into the habit of using *ttuieosseugi* as soon as possible. You can't just keep writing on and on like you do in Japanese. Do you understand? You're not writing in Japanese. You get fed up just looking at a paper like this. If it were a paper you were writing during an exam, they might not even read it. You know it's because you only read Japanese. How many times do I have to warn you about the phrasing of these sentences, too? You should be better at this, but you don't even put in a little bit of effort. It's because you only read Japanese books.”

I couldn't forget Yuhi's expression.

Recalling with embarrassment the cynical words I had spat out, I couldn't continue and fell silent.

Yuhi, her eyes cast downward, ground her teeth several times. While she sat slouched at the side of her desk with her elbow propped against it, looking at the paper in front of her, I noticed the way her jaw spasmed. Was it because she was mad? Was it some kind of frustration or bitterness that kept her from talking back? The sound of her breathing gradually grew heavier, and Yuhi, who had stayed completely silent, as though she had made up her mind, said—

“Unni, please leave me alone.”

—her voice eking out while her head stayed downcast.

Now the desk was set against the wall.

Standing the legs of the desk up one by one from where they had been folded, I tried to place it and sit as far from the wall on the garden side as I could, like when Yuhi had been there.

I thought of the manilla envelope sitting on the floor and grabbed it, placing it on the desk. I sat in front of the desk, like Yuhi had.

Until she came to this house, Yuhi had been using and lining up two small desks with metal folding legs. She said that all the rooms in the houses she had boarded in were small and that she had intended to buy a new, proper desk if she ended up staying somewhere, but came here without getting one after all.

The Saturday after she had begun boarding with us, Yuhi and I went to buy a desk.

When I left for work that morning, I showed Yuhi where a café near my workplace was, and we arranged to meet there a little after three. We stood around and talked outside this room by the handrail in the hallway that doubled as a balustrade.

I told her I knew the name of a wholesaler district where you could buy furniture cheap, but that I hadn't been there, and I planned to check with my coworkers about the bus number and the route to get there. Yuhi had been in a good mood since the night before, when she had decided we'd go buy a desk together. That morning, she came out to the hallway, and although her face was still looking sleepy and she was wearing her pajamas, she was happily in high spirits.

"*Unni*, I don't know anything outside of Seoul. There's a lot of places I haven't even been to in the districts of the boarding houses I've been staying in until now."

"Is that so? As a matter of fact, I also haven't been to Namdaemun Market," I said. I said it without thinking just because it was the truth. It was just that places with large crowds weren't my cup of tea and I hadn't had a reason to go, so I had never been there.

Yuhi was surprised, and—like she was astonished from the bottom of her heart—kept repeating, "*Jeongmariaeyo?*" (*Really?*)

"I'm glad. If even *unni*, whose home country this is, hasn't gone there, it's okay if I haven't either. I felt this strange sense of guilt for not having been there even though I didn't particularly want to go, because everyone talked about it like it was somehow this place you naturally just had to go to when you came to Korea. I'm glad. I'm really glad."

She skipped up and down the hallway, saying, "Desk, desk," several times.

The degree to which she was surprised and in a good mood seemed extreme, to the point that it left me a little dumbfounded. Yuhi laid bare an expression that was like a young

boy or a young girl's that time. It hadn't even been a week since we met her. The way she showed her thoughts and feelings was so frank you could call her a toddler.

Yuhi, who had come from Japan, had lived in more districts and knew their names better than I, who had lived in Seoul for a while. You could say that, compared to me, she had seen lots of Koreans and was familiar with various Korean homes. Without a doubt that part of Yuhi that was terribly fragile and soft must have been exposed to aspects of Seoul even I couldn't imagine.

You could've said that I couldn't let her go.

Yuhi—who had moved from boarding house to boarding house in order to get used to how Koreans lived—made me feel the acute desire for somewhere where I was of the same blood, the same race. I had decided to simply accept Yuhi as a younger sister. At the same time, I was aware that I, as a Korean, was beginning to feel that Yuhi—who was trying to be Korean—was a helpless person who I couldn't let go of.

Yuhi had already arrived at the café we arranged to rendezvous at and met me there. We set off immediately from there. The appearance Yuhi gave off was odd; she was restless and preoccupied with the matter of the desk, and only gave half-hearted replies. When we walked out, I held her hand. She was a little surprised, and hesitated.

"Unni, Koreans often hold hands when they walk... I'm still not used to it. Most women hold hands, and sometimes I've seen men hold hands, too."

Yuhi said that like she was steeling her resolve, and—exaggeratedly, like she was making a decision—she gave me her hand.

I just laughed and remained silent. It was only natural to us Koreans to hold hands if it was a close relationship. It was funny how Yuhi talked about those sorts of trivial things as if each and every one were a matter of grave importance.

I had to hold Yuhi's hand tightly after we walked a little, and it wasn't just because we were close. After we left Jongno, Yuhi quickly stopped speaking. As we headed towards the bus stop for Jongno's second street, her pace instantly slowed and I had to tug on her hand as we walked.

It was also Saturday afternoon.

Waves of people went back and forth across the sidewalks, more than I would have guessed, and the space was congested. It felt like the throngs of people were pushed at our shoulders, and Yuhi immediately stumbled behind me. It continued like that, happening two, three times. Before very long, Yuhi drew near me and began walking like she was hiding behind my back, avoiding pedestrians who were passing by.

The wind was strong that day. It had a sharp chill that reminded me of the dead of winter. The thunderous roar—the people's voices, the wind continuing to blow strongly—amplified the volume of everything all the more.

As we stood at the bus stop, Yuhi, standing beside me as if she was sidling up next to me, clutched my upper arm and continued looking down. I didn't say a single word either, my attention preoccupied with the roadway as I searched for the bus number; I thought that Yuhi, who was staying silent, was just worn out from the crowd of people. The bus we were aiming for eventually arrived. People departing the bus and people still waiting to get on packed together hurriedly in a tight stream to the front and sides of us. I

soon noticed that Yuhi's hand was shaking a little where she was gripping my arm, and gave her a nudge.

She kept staring at the ground.

"Is something wrong? Yuhi, are you not feeling well?"

Not answering, just keeping on staring at the ground with her mouth closed, Yuhi's head began to gradually tremble. I leaned forward and examined her face.

"You got sick, huh. Is that it, Yuhi?"

"I'm fine." She answered weakly, in a voice so small only I could hear it.

The bus we were waiting for was visible.

"Yuhi, the bus is here. Should we get on? Or, if you're not feeling well, how about we give up on it for today?" I asked her, still leaning forward.

Yuhi muttered something in a voice that was smaller and quieter than before. Not even blinking, her gaze dropped to a point on the sidewalk, and—her gaze unwavering—Yuhi kept muttering as though she couldn't hear my voice. It was Japanese. Her face was pale, hardened like a wax doll's, her cheeks not even twitching; it was only her lips that moved faintly. Yuhi's mutterings sounded like a spell to me, since I didn't know any Japanese at all. The strange intensity of the tension in her expression made it seem like she was frozen in fear.

"Let's go home. How about that, Yuhi?" I said.

It was all audible to Yuhi. I knew that. She didn't want to answer. I understood that, too. She suddenly stopped mumbling. Taking several deep breaths, in a small voice, she said, "Let's go," lifting her face. Her gaze was vacant when we made eye contact, like she was thinking of something else; its focal point wasn't fixed.

I started to run. The bus appeared to have stopped a ways from the sign for the bus stop. Grasping Yuhi's hand tightly, I headed towards the bus and ran, not even having the time to turn back to look at her.

A fair amount of people had gotten off, but, getting on after all the other passengers, we couldn't find any empty seats. *Of course we can't sit*, I thought, but I was worried about Yuhi. She was standing near the exit, holding onto one of the straps hanging from the ceiling. Yuhi was still looking down listlessly, even after boarding the bus.

Yuhi's body was jarred violently every time the bus braked suddenly, almost sagging onto the passengers beside her like she was a boneless animal. I had to hold onto her shoulder to support her every time she did that, over and over again.

"You had to ride the bus to S University every day, right? Did you forget how to keep your balance? It's because I've ridden the buses in Seoul for over twenty years; I could lecture in university about how to keep your balance without your body shaking, no matter how hard they brake," I said after thinking, *I'm going to try to make you laugh*.

But Yuhi didn't laugh; she didn't have any reaction at all. While her eyes were turned to the window, I quickly gleaned that she wasn't looking at what was moving past it. Her gaze was unmoving, her face expressionless. Her excitement from this morning, which had been visible in her behavior at the café, was gone, as if she was a different person.

After several stops, some seats became available right where we were standing. I had Yuhi sit in the seat by the window, and I sat down beside her.

It was painful to look at her face's profile. I had some insight with how similar our introverted personalities were. Even though it felt as though I could become closer to her than I had been with my cousin when she was here, Yuhi acting like she had suddenly lost

her mind, hiding away within herself regardless of who was around her, was painful to look at and at the same time frightened me in some way. I wondered at that time what I was supposed to do if she really had gone crazy.

The bus driver turned up the volume on the radio. The announcers—a man and a woman—read postcards that had been sent in to the program, talked a little bit about the content of the cards, and then started playing a song that had been requested.

I noticed that Yuhi, eyes closed and her head down, bit down on her lip hard. She looked like she was desperately trying to endure something.

“Yuhi.”

I touched her shoulder.

“What’s wrong? Say something. I can’t know what’s wrong unless you say something.”

I said close to her ear, voice firm. She should have been able to hear me. I knew that. I felt that even though she did hear me she was rejecting the sound of my voice, pushing it aside.

The volume of the radio was, in fact, quite loud. The sound of the radio on the bus was often brought up in letters complaining to the newspapers. I thought that the working conditions for the drivers was the issue. The radio woke them up when they were drowsy, and it was doubtless a way to improve their mood. However, while I normally thought that, this time was different. When Yuhi didn’t lift her head and say, “*Unni*, it’s fine,” I was just about to go up to the bus driver and ask them to turn the volume down.

“Looks like we’re getting off next. You’re exhausted, Yuhi. Let’s go home.”

Yuhi shook her head. Her face, unchanging, was still bloodless, and her eyes were also vacant. She smiled weakly like she was trying to reassure me.

But it wasn't long after that I was determined that we had to get off. A street vendor got on the bus, mingling with the passengers, and he started chatting loudly as he stood on a diagonal in front of where we were seated near the exit. The man surveyed the seats in the middle of the rumbling bus and took his wares in his hand, producing a small, portable knife, and in a peculiar tone of voice and intonation continued talking.

Usually, it was nothing—the kind of scene people on a bus were used to seeing—but because Yuhi was there it completely changed.

Yuhi's head had been drooping little by little as she gritted her teeth and endured it, but before very long, she raised her head so her gaze fell above her lap and began plugging her ears with both of her hands. I pressed against her shoulder, like I was covering her back, and firmly touched her hands that were covering her ears.

“Yuhi, are you okay? Yuhi.”

I was desperate. Even though I thought that all the passengers in the aisle were looking, I wasn't calm enough to care about attracting attention.

Yuhi's voice broke out and she cried.

Even though the roar of the bus and the vendor's voice weren't audible in the immediate vicinity, I could hear Yuhi's low, crying voice clearly as we leaned into each other.

The peddler placed the small knife he had for sale in a passenger's lap, recovering it after another small chat. At the next stop, the vendor got off the bus, and his voice finally faded.

“Yuhi, hey—we’re getting off next.”

Even though her crying voice had stopped, she kept looking down. Yuhi removed her hands from her ears, and, that time, squeezed my hand back where it lay over her lap.

She eventually picked herself up. Her glasses were fogged up from her tears and breathing. I held out a handkerchief that she took, and—saying, “*Komapsumnida*,” in a small voice—she removed her glasses and wiped them off.

“*Unni*, go. Desk—I want to buy.”

Putting her glasses back on, Yuhi, without turning in my direction, kept hanging her head. Her vocabulary was on par with an inept way of speaking, like she’d only just started learning Korean.

The stop we were aiming for was close. However, I insisted that we get off before then. The radio’s volume was still raised. Yuhi nodded, and we got into a taxi from where we got off the bus, heading home. Yuhi went upstairs after barely eating any of her dinner, and did not come back down. It was just my aunt and I in the living room, so I recounted to her what had happened during the day, from beginning to end.

“She was tired of the crowd, without a doubt. She seems like a high-strung child.” My aunt said.

“But she was thrilled that she could finally buy a desk—that’s how badly she wanted one. It’s too bad!” I said.

What was tormenting Yuhi and keeping her from where she was headed?

Was it all the fault of the hustle and bustle and din and irritating cold wind, the spectacle of Seoul? But, if it was that, then it was the scenes of the Seoul I lived in, the

appearance of my homeland. I felt as though it was my responsibility if that was the case—like I had made it so that Yuhi couldn't buy a desk.

I gradually told my aunt about my feelings, hesitating as I spoke. My thoughts somehow seemed to be out of sync as I was putting them into words. However, that whole day for us had been a shock. Somehow, I had to make sure Yuhi could get a desk, I had thought.

It seemed like my aunt was struck with an idea while I was talking. She went to the stairs and called to Yuhi on the second story.

In the end, we decided to go to a furniture dealer in a nearby neighborhood that my aunt was acquainted with the following Sunday. I had to come along again. Even though that had been decided, as expected, Yuhi was still dejected and listless, and headed back upstairs.

On that day, almost six months ago, I think I should have noticed more and paid more attention to Yuhi. Now, after all that time, I felt that small lump inside my chest called Yuhi hurt with a prickling, stinging sensation. It was safe to say that Yuhi's and my memories were created and centered on that desk, in this room, beginning with this desk.

I couldn't help but feel that, in the core of that small lump, that desk stretched out, supporting Yuhi, pulling me in, the memories one by one being drawn and written from it.

Pulling the bulky manila envelope closer to me, I took out the contents and put it on the desk.

The heaviness was enough to account for three hundred sheets of paper. On the right side of the sheaf of paper, two holes were pierced, bound with a slender black string.

I remembered that when Yuhi submitted a paper in school, she would pierce holes like that and bind them with string if it was too thick to be stapled. The cover had nothing written on it, just lines, and was business use paper. Yuhi had written vertically on the paper, which you were meant to write horizontally on.

I turned over to the first page.

It was written in Japanese from the very first page, like she had said on the phone. Turning the pages one by one, the page numbers in the upper left-hand corner followed, and on the last page the number 448 was written. On four hundred and forty eight pages of business use paper, from beginning to end, Yuhi's Japanese characters were enumerated.

As for me, I couldn't read Japanese at all. The only thing I could read were the kanji I knew. I followed and traced the characters and tried to imagine the content of what was written. I soon gave up. I knew it was futile. And yet, I still couldn't look away.

The characters were breathing.

Their voice released, it was like they were staring back at me.

Just looking at them, I was made to feel that I could hear Yuhi's voice, like the sound was mounting in my head, like the depths of it was welling up in my blood.

You couldn't call the characters neat.

While a trace of rotundity was visible, they were somehow stiff and angular, and, similar to Yuhi's outward appearance, you couldn't say they were particularly feminine or masculine; you could feel Yuhi's special aura.

Yuhi's tendencies and impressions in writing Japanese characters were similarly visible in her *hangul*, thinking back on it.

Yuhi's writing in two different kinds of characters, Japanese and Korean, both gave off the impression that she was used to writing them, and were also somehow mature; still, like Yuhi, they seemed unable to conceal their insecurity and uneasy breathing.

Yuhi had probably written this every day. In this place, in the same position I was sitting in, on this desk, she had probably written out these characters.

They had expressions.

Although there were no dates, here or there a line or two being left blank, put into written form, the changes in expression were so vivid you could imagine the changes in Yuhi's heart. Certain parts and characters gave you the sense that she had written them while she was crying, and certain passages and certain characters she had been anxious, or angry; still, there were places where you were made to feel how sometimes Yuhi displayed expressions like that of a toddler's, or the voice of a spoiled child.

I couldn't help but think that, by writing these things in Japanese, within her characters Yuhi was exposing a part of herself—a part of herself that she didn't want to display in front of others—without reserve or guilt.

I took a breath, and took my eyes off the sheaf of paper.

The expression of the characters was carved and seared into me, their sounds becoming a voice within my memory, and now too it seemed to stir the small lump.

“あ (*ah*), い (*i*), う (*u*), え (*e*), お (*o*).”

I knew those sounds. “あ, い, う, え, お,” I murmured, like I was letting Yuhi try to voice those sounds. Yuhi became a character, appearing in its shape and inclinations, and murmured back to me.

A small noise was audible from downstairs.

From the crack in the door that had been left open a little, the welcoming scent of dinner flowed in little by little.

I, feeling like I had become Yuhi herself, surveyed the room again, looking back at the characters.

I was so close to her, so near to her; there were memories of me worrying over, sympathizing with, and—that time—getting seriously upset with her more than I would have at a younger sister. And I believed that Yuhi had idolized me as an older sister, and thought that we had to have been mutually attracted to each other in similar ways.

However, Yuhi was distant.

Perhaps because I was becoming used to seeing the *hangul* Yuhi wrote, I wasn't uncomfortable with Yuhi's Japanese characters at all. I couldn't help but feel Yuhi's distance, the divide between us I was helpless to do anything about, at the reality that Yuhi—who I saw every day—was writing these characters when she was by herself, without me knowing.

At the same time that I was attracted to the characters, I couldn't help my discomfort and irritation, as if I was grinding my teeth at the sight of them.

I can't leave her alone, I thought; I felt sorry for each and every misgiving she had towards Korea, as if it were my own fault. I felt like my sincere desire for Yuhi to acclimate to life in this country, even just a little, even a day sooner, was betrayed by those Japanese characters of hers.

When she started living in this house, the two of us had become close, and, in accordance with getting used to each other, Yuhi had started complaining and grumbling about things she had seen and heard when she was at school or outside.

This country's students spit on the cafeteria floor, and they don't throw their garbage in the wastebasket, Yuhi said. They don't even wash their hands when they go to the bathroom, and they write notes in pen in textbooks they've rented, and then just return them all nonchalant. This country's people try to overcharge you on a sale when they know you're a foreigner; even when you agree to share a taxi with them, they won't offer up a single thank you; even if they step on your foot or run into you they won't say anything; they immediately shout at you; they don't know how to compromise.

“Unni, in Korean there are very few, if any, passive expressions. Did you know this, unni?”

She sounded sarcastic, and there was a mean-spirited undertone that I found intolerable to listen to.

At first, I excused each and every one of her complaints. “Is that so?” I’d play dumb; there were times when I would look like I hadn’t even noticed Yuhi’s tone or the contempt in her gaze, and other times when I feigned ignorance. Why did I have to explain away her behavior? I got sick of my own servile attitude.

But still, I thought of Yuhi, and with a wholehearted desire to help her get used to this country, even just a little, just one day sooner, I turned a blind eye to her idle complaints and sarcasm and, persevering, came to grips with it. I even told myself that Yuhi's words and her attitude stemmed from her coming from Japan, and the suffering of her brethren raised outside of Korea.

“Yuhi, you’re a cheapskate. Your Zainichi compatriots are Japanese. No, you make fun of and look down on Korea even more than the Japanese do. You aren’t willing to

forgive even the smallest thing. You won't turn a blind eye. Yuhi, I don't worry about petty things—not like you. You're narrow-minded. A miser at heart.”

I couldn't take it one day and yelled that back at her. It's as easy as twisting a baby's arm, I added. I flew into a rage at her narrow-minded way of speaking, her cynicism when talking but this country or its people.

But maybe it wasn't me—maybe it was Yuhi who didn't know how to process her thoughts and her agitation, or where to put it all. She finally met an older sister-like figure who she could act like a spoiled child around and talk about anything to, and—while relaying to me all of the different things that dissatisfied her sarcastically—in the end when the roles were reversed and *my* words pierced into *her*, like I was on the verge of spitting them at her, Yuhi just had that choking, stifled expression again.

But, as expected, she was distant.

Even though Yuhi talked to me about everything—even though she vented to me about anything—Yuhi, because of the words I'd vomited up and the bitter aftertaste of them lingering in my expression, instead of trying to make the Korean language more her own or getting closer to this country and getting to know it better, did the opposite, turning back to Japanese. In the things she'd write in Japanese, she revealed herself, gave herself some relief, comforted herself, and, above all, expressed her thoughts and grievances in Japanese.

Before I knew it, my shoulders had slumped, and I took a long breath.

It couldn't be helped now if Yuhi, who wasn't in this country anymore, took offense in that way, I murmured in my heart.

It was already over.

It seemed like once again I was being enveloped in the silence and hollowness of the room. Crowded in the deserted bedroom, I kept thinking about that silence that pained my chest; it seemed to make me forget about my agitation for a bit, allowing me to shake free from it.

I breathed out, and tried to stand up.

“It was over,” I kept muttering those same words.

However, I realized I had to sit, as if that small lump was falling like a stone weight in my chest. *When had Yuhi disappeared from inside me?* I wondered vacantly. I thought back on how I might’ve been treating Yuhi like a doctor would have. Perhaps like a physician without a prescription, or a firm grasp of therapy. Therapy...but even if that was the case, how uncertain, irresponsible, and arrogant the terms “therapy” or “cure” were.

I recalled the sound of the *daegeum*.²⁶

I sighed deeply whenever I remembered that sound. That instant, as I was concentrating on trying to breathe easy, I began to feel the pain of the small lump shuddering and knocking against various things within my chest cavity.

There was a 50-centimeter crack between the bureau where I had set the manila envelope and the garden-side wall. Yuhi put the old television stand that she had received from my aunt there. A *daegeum* was placed on the stand. Just the instrument, in its case made of dark brown cloth, and nothing else.

The flute was visible when you sat at her desk in this spot, turning to the side in front of you. Yuhi put a cassette deck below the stand.

²⁶ A type of Korean transverse flute.

I recalled the form of Yuhi, listening to the *daegeum*'s *sanjō*-style music. Yuhi, that same way, would put her left elbow on the desk and lean her back against the corner formed by the two walls meeting.

Forgetting the before and after of time, time and time again, etched into my memory like a photograph, was the form of Yuhi listening to the sound of the *daegeum*, appearing by turns. In my imagination, I pulled the cassette deck before me once more—the same as Yuhi on that day—next to my body, and pressed my right shoulder into the corner of the wall. My body, between the desk, the two walls, and the cassette deck, was surrounded in all four directions. It seemed as though I was imprisoned in the corner of the room.

Yuhi had been distant that day, too.

No, already even before then, from the day she bought this desk.

Yuhi, arranging her desk like she was tucking her body between it and the walls, imprisoning herself in the corner of the room.

A dull, anxious sound appeared from within the noise of the *daegeum* that I recalled. At the same time that the sound came back to me, the still-vivid memory left behind of the scene of that one night, of the scattered photographs, appeared before my eyes.

That dull sound, even now, could be heard plainly, trailing my ears.

That day, in the middle of the night, I had been shocked to hear that sound coming from Yuhi's room. Even though it was a soft sound, it had been enough to wake me up as I slept more and more shallowly. I knew immediately from the closeness of the sound that it was coming from Yuhi's room, but I couldn't think of what in the world the sound of that beating was. However, it was truly ominous, and foretold something unpleasant. It was heavy and dull, with uneven intervals.

Counting the audible beats—*hana, dul, set, net (one, two, three, four)*—I jumped to my feet from the bed and stepped into the hallway. I immediately looked down the landing from the railing, hoping several times that my aunt would not notice me.

I knocked on Yuhi's door.

The faint noise stopped.

Yuhi opened the door a little from inside. It was already close to 3:00 AM.

Yuhi stood there mutely, not saying anything even though she was looking right at me, her head wobbling. I looked behind her. I could see a bottle of *shōchū* on her desk, and I noticed the scent of alcohol wafted off of her, too.

“Yuhi.”

When I called and started to come in, Yuhi backed away and staggered to her desk. The cassette deck was between the wall and the desk, placed vertically by the desk's legs. Yuhi stepped over it and entered the space like she was taking refuge within the four sides made up of the desk, cassette deck, and walls.

Turning her profile to me as I drew closer, Yuhi limply leaned her back against the wall, and before very long collapsed with her left arm and head resting on the desk.

The *daegeum*'s *sanjō*-style music was faintly audible from the cassette deck.

“Were you drinking by yourself? What a thing for a girl to do, Yuhi.”

I sat beside her, leaning across the desk. Only about two centimeters worth of alcohol were left in the bottle of *shōchū*, and the cup had also been drained dry. It was the cup Yuhi always drank her coffee from.

She lifted her right hand that had fallen towards the floor, dangling heavily, and slapped it against the desk. Her notes had piled up by the *shōchū* bottle. Her glasses were

placed on the stack. Her head placed on her left arm, Yuhi, collapsed loosely on her desk, moved her face, lifting her gaze to take a fleeting glance beneath me. Then, she languidly turned her face over like she had originally, repeating the gesture as though she had given up on muttering whatever it was she wanted to say.

“Yuhi.”

I couldn't think of anything else to say other than call her name. In the room, which had fallen completely silent, my ears started to get used to the noise; it seemed like the small sound coming from the cassette deck at Yuhi's feet suddenly swelled and grew larger.

“S University” was printed on the covers of the several volumes of her notebooks. Medieval Korean Language, Phonology, Introduction to Classical Literature...her glasses resting on the desk, going through the notebooks one by one, I understood they were for an exam that she had finished only a few days ago. Leafing through the notes just a little, below where the page number was, was a signature in red ballpoint pen that I had put there myself.

Yuhi reached out with her right hand, grabbing a notebook lying apart from the others at the edge of the desk, and opened it. Pulling out a ballpoint pen, she started to write something.

언니 (*unni*)

저는 위선자입니다 (*jeoneun uiseonja imnida*)

저는 거짓말장이입니다 (*jeoneun keojitmaljangi imnida*)

Unni

I'm a hypocrite

I'm a liar

When Yuhi finished writing, she slammed her pen on top of the notebook, and picked up the bottle of *shōchū*.

“Stop it.” I yanked the bottle away from her, and drank the rest of the *shōchū*. I was surprised that such a young woman was drinking by herself, and I was dumbfounded in the face of her reproachful feelings, and somehow felt saddened and embittered by them.

우리나라 (*urinara*) *homeland*

Yuhi had written. The characters were large and, because her hand had shaken drunkenly, looked disheveled. She turned the page, and there, in large characters, 우리나라 was written on both sides of the paper, taking up the entirety of the page. The ballpoint pen had dug into the paper with enough force that the four characters written down threatened to tear through the page.

“What happened? Yuhi.” I finally opened my mouth. While she was sprawled over her desk, staring sideways at the characters she had written, I realized Yuhi was crying. She collected several sheets of notebook paper, leafing through them, and still began to write in the white blank spaces that materialized.

사랑할 수 없습니다 (*saranghal eobsumnida*)

cannot love

Yuhi sniffled. Her sobbing increased, and, while holding onto the pen, she wiped at the saliva that dribbled from her mouth. Without even getting the paper wet as she still lay there, sideways, Yuhi turned it over and settled her right hand on it. She wiped at her tears that dripped onto the paper with her fingertip, feeling the pages get wet.

대금 좋아요 (*daegeum johayo*)

대금소리는 우리말입니다 (*daegeum sori neun urimal imnida*)

I like the daegeum

The sound of the daegeum is our mother tongue

Already, her hands were shaking, the disarrayed characters opening a hole in the trembling paper that was faintly visible.

The sound of the cassette deck had eventually stopped. With bleary eyes, Yuhi straightened and faced me. Her gaze refused to settle, her head wobbling. “Yuhi.” I couldn’t find any words to say except her name.

She immediately collapsed against the wall. Her head smacked against it. Her body had straightened, but she still fell over and hit her head. I stood, stepping over the cassette deck and squeezing into that narrow space, and pulled Yuhi over, holding her. She was heavy; her head had made a dull *thunk* when it hit the wall, the noise reverberating and enveloping the room. Yuhi wriggled, sliding back towards the wall, and quickly, harshly, began to beat her head against it. I put my hands over her head. With that kind of power, it was hard to believe she’d drunken herself almost to unconsciousness. The backs of my hands hit the wall. I pulled her towards me with all my strength. She shook off my arms, and lay face down on the desk. She cried lowly, her voice getting hoarse. I was shocked, and in that confined space, at a loss for what to do, I stared at her heaving shoulders.

It was this place.

That day, Yuhi was here, and I was sandwiched between the desk and the wall.

Every day, Yuhi sat here, and now, before my eyes, those Japanese characters were written, and I could hear the sound of the flute while I stared at the *daegeum*.

Now, too—like when the power of Yuhi’s skull had bashed it into the wall—the back of my right hand seemed to throb.

A while ago, I had asked Yuhi, “Why don’t you try to learn how to play the *daegeum*?” But, “Just listening to it is fine,” she said, shaking her head. It was one of those memories that I had regarded as casual, unimportant.

Yuhi, however, was so taken with the *daegeum*—often talking to me about the beauty of its sound—that I wondered why she never tried to learn it herself.

It was the same for those rocky mountains above the house.

Yuhi often talked to me about the beauty of the scenery of the mountains in the area. My aunt always went hiking early Sunday mornings, gathering water from the mountain streams. Some number of years ago, my aunt and cousin had invited me along on a hike to try it out. I climbed the mountain just once, and that was it. In addition to being a homebody, I just wasn’t interested in hiking.

“Yuhi, why don’t you go hiking with Auntie sometime?”

When was it I said that? Even though Yuhi liked the mountains around the house a lot, I knew she had refused my aunt’s invitations to accompany her on one of her trips.

“Just seeing it is fine.”

Yuhi had answered like that that time, too.

Yuhi had left the house, not learning how to play the *daegeum* or going on a hike. Her leaving had become a definite reality a few days before her departure, when she submitted her paperwork for exiting school mid-term.

Now, it felt like I was being compelled to remember Yuhi’s words that day as something awfully meaningful.

I was forced to think back on how I had turned away—not even wanting to hear her voice—without noticing at all what Yuhi had wanted to say, what she was stewing over.

My chest hurt. The voice of the Yuhi on that day burst out from inside the small lump; it felt like it was audible.

“I like *unni*’s and *ajumeoni*’s Korean... Just knowing that there were people who spoke Korean like that made it worth staying in this country. Being in this house, I mean. Not this country, but this house.” Yuhi looked down, apologized, and bowed her head repeatedly. All of my attempts to persuade her—the weeks of sniping and arguing constantly with no end in sight—had been in vain. The sight of her bowed head was irritating, and I couldn’t stand looking at it. Her last words that she had murmured were ones I also couldn’t listen to calmly, or grasp the larger meaning of.

The scent of dinner crept up the stairs and drifted through the door that was ajar.

My aunt called to me from the hallway.

I took a deep breath and put away the bundle of papers that Yuhi had left; putting them into the manila envelope, I turned to the door and answered my aunt.

I was walking to the door when I startled.

I felt like the cassette deck was tripping me up, even though it shouldn’t have been there, and was bewildered. The weight of propping Yuhi up and holding her that time came back to me. The back of my right hand, which was clutching the envelope, throbbed painfully.

Looking around the room and double-checking the manila envelope that I was holding in my arms, I shut the door behind me. I planned on putting the things Yuhi had left in a drawer on the bookshelf in my room.

Exiting into the hall, I tried to head towards my room, but my feet suddenly stopped.

I circled back—my right shoulder almost brushing the door—and strained my ears to listen to the room I had just left, where there was no sign of anyone there to listen to.

I remembered the day that I stood in front of Yuhi's door in this exact same position, listening to her voice, audible from inside the room.

It was Japanese.

Yuhi was reciting some sort of composition, or reading and speaking Japanese in a flowing voice full of inflection.

Her characters were tied up in a bundle in my arms. I felt like I was holding Yuhi, who had become them. The series of characters, seared and carved into my very eyes, flashed across my mind like images on a screen.

It seemed like the voice I heard was characters, characters becoming sound and humming in the air.

The feel of the bundle of papers in my arms traveled to some part deep within my chest and brushed up against the small lump there, Yuhi's voice resounding throughout my body.

My aunt brought out dinner, enough for just the two of us.

On the table, just two yellow kitchen mats were lined up facing each other. One of the seats in front of me was empty, and would be from today on.

While my aunt had been incensed when I came back from work, I could tell by exchanging glances with her now in the dining room that she had already recovered her mood, and she didn't bring up the matter of me seeing Yuhi off even once.

She opened her mouth after eating her meal in silence for a bit.

“I’m done with trying to rent the room out to people. Even if they’re a good kid like Yuhi, getting attached to them just to have to say goodbye in the end would be too hard.”

I just hummed and nodded. I didn’t want to discuss Yuhi. I didn’t even want to say the name “Yuhi,” or have to hear it. It was painful and suffocating and, more than anything, filled me with a sense of frustration.

“Tofu soup was that child’s favorite, wasn’t it?” My aunt said.

It seemed like that sort of reminiscing about Yuhi would continue for some time. For however many days, for however many weeks, the conversation about Yuhi would repeat, and then, eventually, the traces of Yuhi would disappear from this house, and would likely no longer be a topic of conversation. I would probably have to wait for that day when it came to my own feelings, as well.

My aunt and I both slurped at the soup’s broth.

“What a sad child. She doesn’t seem her own age at all.” My aunt said. I stayed silent and just nodded.

“This reminds me of when I made tofu soup like this before, sometimes. Yuhi came into the kitchen and said, ‘It looks delicious,’ sneaking a peek at it on the stove from behind me. Then, quickly, she’d say, ‘Sorry, *ajumeoni*,’ and grab a spoon and scoop some out of the pot, blowing on it and sipping at it while she talked. Even though I said it needed to simmer a little longer to bring out the flavor, she kept eating it like that, saying, ‘*Masisseoyo*,’ (*delicious*) and throwing her arms around me to hug me from behind. Her glasses would get all fogged up from the steam from the pot— Oh, that reminds me of how she would pull on the sleeves of her shirt and, like she was drawing circles, wipe the lens

of her glasses with them. It was like she was trying to wipe her own eyes. Something about the way she did it was funny, and I couldn't help but laugh. She was so cute."

My aunt and I both smiled, murmuring variations of, "Yes, yes, that happened a lot, didn't it?"

I had seen similar mannerisms from Yuhi any number of times.

It wouldn't have been the first time I had seen such a gesture when we went to get the desk, or on the day the one that we had requested was delivered.

The furniture dealer—an acquaintance of my aunt—was nice enough, and when we came to buy the desk that next Monday, Yuhi didn't seem anxious at all. We walked from the house to the furniture store, which took about fifteen minutes, rather than go back to the area of the city that was packed with people.

Yuhi seemed to hate desks that required the use of a chair, preferring the kind that were low to the ground and involved sitting on the floor. I had always continued to use a desk where you sat in a chair, whether it was at school, at work, or at home. Desks that made you sit on the ground wore you out, and I was pretty sure they were bad for your posture, too. Still, even though I told Yuhi as much, her feelings on the matter didn't change. She was fixated on getting a desk that had you sit on the floor. The dealer had only gotten out desks requiring a chair, like I had said—even for sitting desks, they only sold small ones or larger ones with a border attached.

We decided to order one without a sash, as Yuhi requested, and headed home for the day. We walked the way back. Even now I remembered the conversation Yuhi and I exchanged then. *What a funny kid. She's an odd one, for sure*, was all I thought at the time.

The incident on the bus had happened the day before. I assumed that her words then came from a place of nerves, and didn't consider them in any depth.

"Unni, why do you write *hangul* horizontally? Whether it was under the Joseon Dynasty or during the days of the Japanese empire or for a while after liberation, *hangul* was written vertically, so when did it change to horizontal, and why, I wonder?" She kept repeating things like that.

"It's because it's easier to read it and write it when it's horizontal. Ah, that's right—Japanese is written vertically. It may be easier for you to read stuff like that since you use Japanese vertically. But English and Chinese and other foreign languages are written horizontally, aren't they? It'll be to your benefit if you can get used to it," I remarked.

"I haven't gotten used to it, even though I just finished my third year of university and I'm a student of national literature," Yuhi said quietly, in a small voice. Then:

"Unni, I want to ask you something. What do you think King Sejong would think? He invented the *hangul* alphabet, didn't he? I wonder if he'd be surprised to see it being written horizontally—if he'd feel put out about it."

"Yes, I suppose he might be surprised, but if I were him, I'd be thrilled. *Hangul* is a writing system that was invented so that anyone in the population could use it. It's truly become the national language of the Korean people, and if King Sejong saw the state of it now—when people of every class use it—I think he'd be overjoyed. Up to the final years of the Joseon Dynasty, *hangul* was looked down on as a writing system that was only used by women who didn't leave the house. Just looking at the horizontal way it's written that's so easy to write and to read, I think he'd probably be really happy about it," I said.

“Is that so?” Yuhi muttered, tilting her head to the side in a way that hinted at her disagreement. After a short time, the two of us started on another topic.

The desk we had ordered arrived after a few days.

When I got back from work, Yuhi called me into her room, and, when I came in, exclaimed, “Look at it!” while she jumped up and down. It was a decent desk—a deep, dark brown that made it look almost stately. Yuhi grabbed my arm and, moving like she was trying to wrap around me, looked up at me from below.

“I’m so happy, *unni*—it’s like a dream come true.” Her voice shot up in her excitement. Before very long, she had pulled the sleeves of the sweatshirt she was wearing and—like my aunt had seen that day in the kitchen—rubbed the lens of her glasses, as if she were directly wiping at her eyes to get at tears that hadn’t even come out yet.

The light suspended above the dining room table wavered. It didn’t stretch very far, originating from a lightbulb wrapped in a conical lampshade, and its quality was warm and soft, intimate. The way it trembled faintly might have just been an optical illusion. I looked up at it. Within my memories, I trembled, too. Yuhi, twining around me, pulling my arm towards her—it felt like my body was beginning to shake even now.

The light only illuminated the table’s immediate surroundings. The things on the table and my aunt’s face, directly under it, were cast in sharp relief and heavily shadowed.

“I’ve been thinking about enrolling in one of those schools where you practice conversing in English—since my daughter got married and moved to America, I’ll have to go live with her, if you don’t find a husband. Even though I’m old... But, I thought that when Yuhi was here I might learn some Japanese. I inherited my views on Japan from your

uncle, and was influenced by them accordingly. Still, in the beginning, I took care of Yuhi. I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of fate in how she came from Japan."

"Did you try telling her that you wanted to learn?" I asked.

"Yes, yes. Yuhi was a good kid—I don't think she was prejudiced or anything. But even though I asked her, 'Will you teach me Japanese?' she refused. Even though I told her she could do it as a part-time job! 'I can't do it, no matter what,' 'That's the only thing I can't do,' she'd apologize earnestly, and—look there, it was that face Yuhi often made when she was bothered. Her shoulders would hunch, she'd look down, and her eyebrows would furrow, wrinkling her forehead. Like this, with her lips pursed, her face looked just like a little boy's. Why she was bothered to that extent about teaching me Japanese, I don't know—I was sorry I even brought it up," my aunt said.

Hearing my aunt speak, and just thinking back with nostalgia on those past days, I was forced to imagine what Yuhi had actually meant, which my aunt herself probably didn't even recognize.

I was sure that Yuhi turned down anyone who requested that she teach them Japanese, not just my aunt. It didn't seem like that.

However, I still wasn't satisfied with leaving it at that.

I pitched forward all the more into my own imagination, turning it over in my mind, when I sucked in a sharp breath, confused. I couldn't seem to pinpoint the reason why Yuhi would so adamantly refuse.

The irritating thought that I was simply ignorant of it punched through my composure. Yuhi, as always, remained distant and aloof.

If only she were here now, I couldn't help but think. If only she were here now, there were so many things I wanted to ask her. So many things I wanted to ask, and make sure of. *If Yuhi were in this country right now...* I murmured the same words over and over in my heart, and, before I was fully conscious of it, I realized that I had been biting down hard on my lower lip.

"Hey, Auntie—how do you feel about it all? Yuhi's Korean didn't improve one bit after coming to this house. Her pronunciation was off, and her grammar was also riddled with mistakes, per usual, to the point that she didn't even seem like a student majoring in national literature. Of course, she could write papers for her exams properly, I know. But, looking at it all, I can only guess that she didn't really want to improve her Korean. She only read books in Japanese. Yuhi didn't read novels in Korean, ever—just Japanese ones. I was well aware of it."

Despite the fact that I was venting all of my irritation and frustration without taking a breath, the bitterness spewing from my mouth was painful, and I was disgusted at how I was talking.

"If you can speak Korean, even clumsily like that, that's enough."

"But—"

"It can't be helped, since she was born and raised in Japan. What's more, I'm sure there are some circumstances involved that no one but Yuhi is aware of. You're a nationalist, you know, just like your uncle."

"..."

My aunt wasn't familiar with the various expressions of Yuhi that had been shown to me up on the second floor of the house. She probably didn't know the Yuhi who, sitting

at her desk, placed the cassette deck just so and pushed her desk up against the wall, like she was barricading herself in that space. That space, where Yuhi had scrawled out four hundred and forty eight pages of Japanese writing. Yuhi had said listening to the *daegeum*, that it was our language, the Korean language; without reading or writing actual *hangul* characters, other than the sound, that day she had read Japanese aloud.

It felt like something suddenly plunged into my eyes, stabbing them. The four characters Yuhi had written—우, 리, 나, 라—rose to the surface of my mind, flashing across the white of the notebook paper.

“But I think that sort of child couldn’t have survived in this Korea. Even though it’s unfortunate, I think it was probably for the best that she left in the middle of the semester and went home to Japan,” my aunt said, setting down her chopsticks and spoon. It seemed like she was done with dinner.

“She constantly put up with unreasonable things.”

“...”

“Without knowing what kind of country Korea was, Yuhi, with just her optimism, came over here. Even though I, of course, understand her feelings because we’re both Koreans, in the end, Yuhi is like the Japanese. She’s like someone coming to a foreign country; naturally, she’ll have a difficult time of it. She came from Japan, a nation well-known for being richer and cleaner than all of its neighbors. What she saw and heard here was a surprise, and it gave her a shock.”

My aunt added that she was going to tidy up a bit and, on that note, stopped speaking altogether, standing up from her chair. I couldn’t eat very much. I headed into the

kitchen to wash the silverware and the two of us remained silent while my aunt moved around behind me.

I understood what she had said. I thought that she was probably correct; I even felt, for a while, that there was no choice but for Yuhi to leave school in the middle of the term—as if she was a stranger who wasn't any of my concern. However, an unexplainable frustration had soon welled up within me.

“You'll be plagued with problems for the rest of your life if you don't finish what you start.”

I had said that many times over, in that tone of voice that I repeated until just a few days ago. Even if Yuhi was here now, it seemed like I would probably continue saying the same thing to try and convince her.

“Something like a diploma isn't the problem. The problem, Yuhi, is that you say you're staying here, but you only see one side of Korea. You know too little about it, but you're certain that how you feel is the only correct way.”

I remembered the sound of my own voice and recalled the events of that day, feeling, with a start, like I had frozen from something akin to fear.

Yuhi had been sitting at her desk that time, too, shutting herself away in that narrow space while she listened to me speak. It was the day she approached me for advice about wanting to quit university. Saying just two or three words, Yuhi dropped her head to her desk and quieted her breathing. But, before very long, she began talking, the words pouring out of her like she was retching them up. Her face was tilted down towards the surface of her desk, muffling her voice, and it was difficult to hear what she was saying. But, facing me, the words she was speaking, as though she were spitting them out, were audible.

“Whether it’s at school or in town, the way the Korean that everyone speaks sounds is like a canister of tear gas to me. Irritating, bitter, setting off my nerves—it’s suffocating. Everyone used the Korean that I hate, no matter which boarding house I went to. It’s just great, isn’t it? They walk into a room and just take coffee without saying anything—take your pen from your desk, borrow your clothes without asking. That kind of stuff—fine, whatever, I don’t care. It’s not like I find that sort of stuff reprehensible or something. It doesn’t matter, since all you have to do is just ask for it back or give it away. But I become disgusted with the voices of those people. Their mannerisms and their voices, their gazes and their voices, their facial expressions and their voices, their bodies and their voices... I can’t stand them. I get as upset as if I had just caught a whiff of tear gas.”

I didn’t search for the words to address Yuhi that time, either. Her voice continued.

“This has to stop, no matter what... I can’t write ‘우리나라’ (*urinara*) (*homeland*). The exam coming up is the last of this hypocrisy—it has to be the last of it. The test on the medieval Hunminjeongeum... I wrote a paper for it, in the middle of the exam, and before very long the part where you write ‘우리나라’ came, and I just couldn’t get past it. That sort of thing had cropped on tests before, but this time I couldn’t write at all, like my hand froze. The writing on my paper entered my head, and even though it seemed like if I could just write those four characters, I could write what came next, I couldn’t. My hand wouldn’t move. The other students of my home country completed the paper easily. To my left, to my right, behind me, in front of me, there was the sound of ballpoint pens and pencils, writing. My head felt dizzy, and it seemed like I was about to collapse. My ears were ringing, and everything seemed to waver before my eyes... I wrote. To who, I’m not exactly certain, but feeling something like I was sucking up to someone, trying to curry

favor with them, I wrote ‘우리나라.’ I put down that same word with the same thought four times in my essay. I finished writing it, afraid of when someone would call me out for being a liar, a sycophant... Sejong the Great. That someone was King Sejong. I got home as quickly as I could, thinking that I just wanted to listen to the *daegeum*. King Sejong believes in the current *hangul*. I respect him. However, the *hangul* being used in Korea right now I just hate; I can’t stand it. And yet, I write ‘우리나라.’ If I write it, I’ll be praised. King Sejong sees everyone and knows.”

The water cut off from the tap.

I stopped the sound of the water and went into the living room, like I was shaking off Yuhi’s voice.

My aunt turned on the TV, lowering the volume. It seemed like she had no intention of actually watching it. She pulled the coffee pot towards her and started making some.

The wind beat strongly against the sash windows behind the television. I was going to close the curtains, but changed my mind. My aunt, drinking her coffee, was staring absently at the windowpanes. I didn’t want to interrupt her thoughts by walking in front of her.

The *ondol* floor was lukewarm. The upstairs rooms were covered with linoleum, but the *ondol* down here was made up of solid wood flooring that my aunt polished every day by hand, the varnish shining.

Furniture, reaching up to the mother-of-pearl inlay studded ceiling, lined the living room, taking up almost the entirety of one wall. My aunt stretched out her legs, leaning her back against the opening between the furniture. I grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down, like I was lining up alongside her.

“It’s a lonely thing, isn’t it?”

My aunt’s profile appeared to glow a little against the background of the television screen.

“Mm?” I answered.

I thought back on how I had been with Yuhi all of the time, for the duration of those six months.

I was more worried about Yuhi when I wasn’t watching her than I was during the numerous occasions we’d met up, talked, and spent our time together. It weighed on me without me knowing why; I had just worried, for some reason.

My low spirits—approaching depression—had disappeared when I met Yuhi. You could maybe say that all of the ill will in me had been drawn out like poison, even though she was close to me, similar to me in the fervency and thoroughness I lacked. I even became more free-spirited and easy-going when I was in front of her. I was often surprised when I realized I was like that.

“I used to ask Yuhi why she should feel so guilty.”

“What?”

“Because her Korean was so bad, she often said that she couldn’t help but be embarrassed to be a student majoring in national literature. Just now, you said something about how Yuhi didn’t make an effort, but I think she understood more than anyone how she had to try. But, since she couldn’t do it, she suffered.”

“...”

“She could only see the bad side of Korea, since she had only encountered people of poor character after coming here, before she met us. When I heard about that it surprised

me. The people she met—they were the sort I hadn't seen before. Even I, a fellow Korean, would've wanted to switch boarding houses like Yuhi did."

"Auntie, I told Yuhi. I told her not to just look at one side of it. Even the Japanese aren't only made up of good people. I told her again and again that she needed to look at Korea in a more positive light."

"She seemed like she had difficulty speaking up. She thought if she did, she would spoil my mood. That's how it was. It's because, no matter how much she said that she was one of our brethren, Yuhi was like a foreigner. It'll still make you angry, when people criticize your family. Still, I was looking forward to the day that child would graduate, and I thought that if she did move out due to any issues on her part, her seniors at the university would scold us. What in the world happened at her previous boarding houses? I promised Yuhi that she could tell this old woman."

The curtains to the entrance of the living room were closed.

My thoughts traveled in the direction of the door to the entryway, lying behind the curtains.

Yuhi hated the sound that door made when it creaked open. I discovered this one day when we were about to go out together. Whenever I opened and closed the door, Yuhi scowled, upset. Her expression appeared—even now, in my mind's eye—like that of a little boy who was about to burst into tears.

"Since Koreans get worked up easily, it must've been a surprise for her, not being used to it, huh?" I said to my aunt, remembering that incident.

At one of Yuhi's old boarding houses, the owner's sons, who were just kids, would start a fight over the stupidest things, getting violent in front of Yuhi's room. She'd open

the door, all nervous, and right in front of her, the boys would fight, blood pouring from their noses and mouths, and there was just no one to stop them. Yuhi said she had even considered calling the police, but she couldn't open the door all the way. The telephone was just beyond it, but the force of those two and the awfulness of the scene was too much, and all she could do was tremble, terrified. Before very long, the boys would be rolling around on the floor, and the older brother—who always flew into a rage first—would break into a run and head to the entryway. 'I'm gonna kill you!' He'd say, and, before you could blink, shove his arm through the glass of the front door, standing there while blood went everywhere.

Yuhi, relaying this story to me, said, "Even though it sounds kind of funny when I tell it like this, I'll never forget how terrifying it was."

Her eyebrows would knit together as she talked. The older brother's arm had left a gaping hole in the glass. Yuhi said that, instead of the police, she called an ambulance. Even though it was kind of funny, I couldn't laugh in front of Yuhi when she was like that. I knew, as she said, that she couldn't help but be frightened, but I found Yuhi—who took the whole thing so seriously—to be even funnier than the incident itself.

Every time she heard that door open, it seemed like Yuhi remembered that day at the boarding house.

"Auntie, did you ever hear from Yuhi about the memories that door dragged up?"

"No."

I told my aunt what I had heard from Yuhi, from beginning to end. While she was surprised, she smiled wryly as she listened. *Sure enough*, I thought as I watched her reaction, although it was too late now for it to matter—Koreans would simply be surprised, and

chuckle at the trouble. Yuhi, by no means, had that way of processing it. She would react to the incident with immense gravity—being horrified and looking at the whole debacle with disdain—and make up her mind that “all Koreans are like this.” Even though we were all embarrassed by it, Yuhi’s feelings were different from, say, mine and my aunt’s, and in her case it would just lead to contempt and disappointment.

“It’s because she’s a sensitive child, even under normal circumstances. I was taken aback, too, hearing that story.” Her gaze drifted to the television. “I wonder why Koreans have a weakness for foreign-made things. It’s like they’re being swindled.”

“But, Auntie, there are plenty of foreigners who say they like Korea. Aren’t there a lot of them on TV who speak Korean as good as if they were Korean themselves, in speech contests and such? There are plenty of foreigners who’ve lived in Korea for a long time...”

“Did you hear from Yuhi about her *abeoji* (father)?”

“No. The first time she came to this house she said that he’d died. I haven’t heard anything beyond that, though.”

My aunt stayed silent for a bit, her eyes cast downward. Staring at a point on the floor and not looking at me, she started to speak, like she was trying to recall a distant day.

“I wondered about it, when she said stuff like how she was embarrassed to be a student majoring in national literature, and hearing about the various other things that happened at her previous boarding houses. You weren’t here; you were at work. When I brought tea up to Yuhi, in her room, the two of us would talk about different things.”

“...”

“It seems like, when that child graduated middle school, her *abeoji*’s business failed. What’s more, he said it happened because he was cheated by his own fellow Koreans. It

seems like they swindled him. But, apparently Yuhi's *eomeoni*'s family was financially solid, and—getting some help from them—they managed to continue along. However, Yuhi's *abeoji* continued to speak disparagingly of Koreans, and then, he passed away. There are some truly terrible stories. Her *abeoji* seemed to have terrible luck. It looks like two of his wives died and Yuhi's mother was his third. I'm certain there must have been some things that I simply couldn't be told about, but Yuhi said that she was able to come to this country because her father died. She finally made up her mind and came here. She wanted to defend their nation to her *abeoji*. She told me that, when she felt like she wasn't able to properly defend it, she studied stubbornly."

"..." This was the first I'd heard of it. I was surprised—at a loss for words—and felt a vague sense of jealousy towards my aunt, wondering why Yuhi hadn't told me that story. I thought back, again, to how my aunt and I had both caught glimpses of different iterations of Yuhi that the other was not aware of.

"She said that he was a good father, but seeing her parent badmouth Koreans was a terrible, terrible thing. After entering university, it seems like Yuhi began learning *hangul* on her own. She happened to hear the sound of the *daegeum* and its *sanjō*-style music, and told me she made up her mind to study abroad. Yuhi played the cassette for me in her room. She also showed me that instrument, which seemed important to her; she even mimicked playing it. She told me she played that sound for her father, before he died, and he was moved to tears."

"..."

"Yuhi said that she thought that flutes, like the *daegeum*, were the most simple and honest instruments. She also said that, because you kept your mouth mostly closed as you

played, from that your voice was expressed as sound. Yuhi told me that it was *urikyeorae* (*our people*) who had been turning this kind of voice into words, and the feel of *urimal* (*our mother tongue*) was the feel of that sound.”

“...”

“It’s lonely, isn’t it? She’s really gone. I feel like she’ll appear from the entrance of those stairs right over there, even now. ‘*Ajumeoni*, what are the side dishes for tonight?’ she’ll ask, and hug me from behind before I even realize it.”

I sat there, having trouble breathing, without responding to my aunt.

It felt like the sound of the *daegeum* was reverberating in my ears. The sloppy characters for ‘우리말’ (*mother tongue*) that Yuhi had written while in a drunken stupor also flashed across my mind, vivid.

저는 위선자입니다 (*jeoneun uiseonja imnida*)

저는 거짓말장이입니다 (*jeoneun keojitmaljangi imnida*)

I’m a hypocrite

I’m a liar

I couldn’t help but chase after the characters as they flitted across my mind, and I unconsciously almost called out “Yuhi.” Now, even when Yuhi was nowhere to be found, her name nearly came out of my mouth.

Stubbornly. I recalled the word my aunt had just used a short while ago. *Stubbornly*... I wondered if that was the case, then—if the dedicated memorization she did when she was studying for her exams was with that in mind.

“Myself, *unni*—I torture myself like this,” Yuhi said. It had been January or February of this year, during winter break. Yuhi didn’t go back to Japan, even though she

was on vacation. She told me it was the first time since she had entered S University that she hadn't returned to Japan for break, and she spent New Year's at our house.

Even though it was winter break, it wasn't the case that Yuhi would be traveling; instead, she rarely went out. She stayed holed up in her room, studying. I occasionally peeked into her bedroom on those days. Every day, she worked on reading a large Korean language dictionary from the first page. She would underline the vocabulary she had read with a red pencil, word for word, consulting a Korean-Japanese dictionary as she went.

"Yes, let's look up '고문' (*komun*) (*torture*)."

Yuhi said, and opened up to the page with the word on it, reading the definition aloud. She also marked that with her red pencil. Something about the atmosphere made it so that I wasn't sure if she was serious or kidding. I let out a little chuckle at how overdramatic she was being, but her intensity gave me an odd feeling. I already knew that Yuhi had memorized several bound volumes worth of composition in her notes, and was studying for her exams.

I remembered Yuhi—who, within my memories, flipped through her bundles of notes, studying over the course of those couple of days—and let out a long sigh.

The wind was strong, as usual. The windows shook, the sound of the gusts beating against the glass as they whirled about resounding in the living room.

My aunt had both legs stretched out on the floor, and started rubbing her left knee.

"That child came to Korea and the ideal she had envisioned did a complete about-face and collapsed. So, she doubtless became fed up with the Korean language. I think that's what her words were for." My aunt, who had been staying quiet, began to speak.

"Your uncle also talked about things like that before he died. In the area of Gyeongsang that your uncle was born in, the villages generally had a strong anti-Japanese

consciousness from the days of Japanese imperialism. It was a place where many famous anti-Japanese fighters came from. Your uncle was born in that kind of area, and because of it, he—like Yuhi’s father when it came to Koreans—also had strong anti-Japanese feelings. He said he just couldn’t think well of Japan, growing up in such an environment. He would go to Japan once or twice a year on business for over a decade, but he still couldn’t speak Japanese particularly well. He could read and write it perfectly fine, but taking the step of speaking it—it was just no good. Your uncle often used to tell me that he gave himself trouble because he didn’t want to speak Japanese all that well, maybe because of the feelings he had fostered in the deep recesses of his heart that even he wasn’t fully aware of.”

“...”

“Your cousin and I were also, perhaps unsurprisingly, influenced by him without us realizing it. It was like...feeling like we just couldn’t get used to liking the Japanese. Your cousin never considered learning Japanese as another foreign language. So, you know, it might’ve just been like that. Somehow or other, I understand Yuhi’s plight. Although it’s very sad, I simply couldn’t look at it as something that had nothing to do with me. When was the last time I considered it in any depth? My own husband and Yuhi were senior and junior, respectively, and by some kind of fate Yuhi came to live in his house, one person hating Japan, the other hating Korea, and yet they were brethren—my goodness! I thought.”

I understood what my aunt was saying to me very well. The word “fate” could also be applied to my own true feelings on the matter. However, something still didn’t feel quite right. I searched for the words, wondering if I wouldn’t be able to express my own feelings of faint frustration. I couldn’t help but think that it wasn’t as simple as Yuhi being disgusted

with even the Korean language, just because she only saw the bad side of Korea and had heard her father badmouth Koreans. It didn't feel like Yuhi's obsession with Japanese came from her backlash against Korean, either.

I recalled the sheafs of paper Yuhi had left behind that I had taken from her bookshelf. An impression from those pages, filled to the brim with Japanese characters, manifested itself vividly. The form of Yuhi—bowed over her desk and stuffed into that confined space, listening to the sound of the *daegeum* and putting those characters into written form, all the while looking at the instrument—emerged.

That burning, heavy feeling, almost like heartburn, which refused to be sated did not disappear.

My aunt, turning her face in the direction of the television, continued to massage her left knee. It had started hurting her this month. She hadn't been back to hike the backs of the craggy mountains that overshadowed our neighborhood. She didn't attempt to turn up the volume on the TV; I knew that she wasn't really paying attention to it. I wondered which day of Yuhi my aunt was remembering now, what kind of gestures or voice of hers that she was recalling.

“That child didn't try to watch TV at all.”

Before long, my aunt spoke, slowly straightening her left knee. She carefully stretched it out and started massaging it again.

“Your uncle also said that. When he started going to Japan on business trips, color television was very rare. But he couldn't bring himself to look at it at all. He told me he couldn't stand the sound of the Japanese coming from the television. Yuhi also probably never wanted to watch it. There are good programs out there that will help you practice

your language, as well as study history with the period dramas; I tried to tell Yuhi that she had to watch them any number of times. However, that child never came downstairs. She always had an excuse—she had homework, or something like that—and never made an effort to watch television. I was remembering your uncle and the reason dawned on me, but...” My aunt said, lapsing into silence for a time. She continued:

“I didn’t tell Yuhi, but in my heart I was rooting for her. Just a little more. If you overcome these difficult feelings now, it will be alright. There is no difference between Japan and Korea. It’s important to observe how you and other people live. I always cheered Yuhi on, telling her that she just had to endure a little longer, until she could figure out how to see it.” My aunt chewed on the words that remained in her mouth, shaking her head repeatedly as if she was talking to herself.

I stayed silent. Whatever the differences between the Yuhi my aunt knew and the Yuhi I knew, I agreed with what my aunt had said. It was Yuhi’s problem. No matter how much we worried about it or cheered her on, Yuhi couldn’t think, feel, or grasp her own power. She had never appeared to be a weak kid. I wondered if it was because she was too young and was going to try to say as much to my aunt when I swallowed my words.

Yuhi’s room was up and across from the living room on the second floor. Maybe, while my aunt told Yuhi about those good television programs and her and I watched them, inside the same house, at the same time, Yuhi was putting those Japanese characters into written form. That image made me close my mouth, and I felt that dissatisfied heaviness. In comparison to the low sound of the television, the noise the wind made seemed greater. The windows shook, and before long it seemed like a light passing shower was hitting us.

“I’ll peel an apple for you,” I said, and headed into the kitchen. Coming back to the living room, I sat facing my aunt and set a tray with the apple on it down on the floor.

“I wonder if Yuhi’s arriving at her own house in Tokyo,” I said, peeling the fruit.

“Probably, since she said it was close to three hours from the Narita International Airport to her house. She got on the plane at 4:00 and probably arrived in Japan at 6:00. Yes, she’s probably finally getting there right about now.”

“I wonder if it’s also raining in Japan.”

My aunt lifted her gaze to the window, and, at my words, responded vacantly with a, “Probably, huh,” as if she was lost in thought.

“When she gets back to Japan, what do you think Yuhi’s going to do first? Auntie?”

“Mm.”

I held back laughter. I sensed the small lump within my breast move faintly. I could feel sad, choking sobs bursting out of it, seeping into my chest cavity. Yuhi’s weeping and the pain in my chest—without me realizing it—warped, turning into laughter that I had to hold back.

“Auntie, the first thing that kid is gonna do is watch TV.” I burst out laughing. My aunt caught up with me and said, “Oh, absolutely,” while chuckling, a perplexed, pained expression on her face.

“Hey, Auntie, do you remember? Yuhi’s apple—she cut it like this.”

I forced the apple peel to become even thicker, cutting it more unevenly, and took off a bit of peel that was five centimeters thick, holding it up in front of my aunt’s face. She laughed. This time her expression was bright, and we chuckled together, both reminded of the exact same Yuhi on that day.

I had been in this living room, peeling an apple, when eventually I was struck with the idea of having Yuhi peel one. Even when Yuhi herself wanted to eat one, she would always bring it to my aunt or I and ask us to peel it for her. I didn't think that it was because she couldn't do it—neither did my aunt, thinking that Yuhi just had a side to her that was like a peculiar child's who'd been spoiled a bit.

Yuhi evaded me, claiming that it would be a waste of an apple. However, I finally got her to peel it, and she'd done it like that. She cut the peel in thick, jagged five-centimeter slices that fell to the tray with a *plop*. The way she had held the knife was also unsafe.

"Kuronika, akkapchanayo," (*See, isn't it a waste, after all?*) I said, mimicking the Yuhi of that day; I pursed my lips and pronounced my words clumsily, narrowing my shoulders. My aunt kept on laughing for a while.

The raindrops grew heavier. They would probably continue to fall all through the night, up to tomorrow morning. It may even rain all day tomorrow. I wondered if it was also raining in Japan.

When my aunt finished laughing, she skewered a slice of the apple with a toothpick and picked it up, catching her breath. Heaving another big sigh, she ate it. While she and I listened to the sound of the rain, we stayed quiet and ate. On the tray, the other peels were piled up, mixed with the small scrap of a peel that made me recall Yuhi's expression that day.

"I wonder what that child will do from now on. She also left her Japanese university in the middle of the term, as well as S University... I hope she can find someone decent, or she'll miss her chance to get married, like you."

I laughed while my aunt scowled at me. I took one of the pieces of the apple I had just mimicked Yuhi in peeling, and held it up.

“She’ll have to find a man who doesn’t eat apples,” I said, and my aunt let out a wry chuckle.

For some reason, I was suddenly made to remember the sight of those rocky mountains, out in the direction of the sloping road. My heart felt all choked up. It seemed like the small lump had quickly swelled.

“Auntie, Yuhi will be okay. Someday, she might bring her husband and kids and come here,” I said. The scene of those mountains glimmered, and did not dissipate.

“I wonder if Yuhi will come to Korea again, and come see us. I wonder.” My aunt said.

“She’ll come back, definitely.” I answered. It felt like something strong was pushing up in me, moving even my body. Scooting closer to my aunt, I replaced her hands and started massaging her left knee for her.

The TV’s audio was turned off, just the screen going.

Outside it had turned to a heavy rain. Large, fat drops hit the window, bursting on impact, the rain coming down like it was hurling itself at the glass of the windowpanes.

My aunt moved, opening the curtain to the entrance of the living room and picking up the phone that sat right in the doorway. Placing it on the floor, she plopped back down in front of it.

“Since, when my daughter calls, I usually talk to her first and then switch off with you,” she said by way of explanation, pulling her reading glasses out of their case. Double-checking the number in her notebook, she called my cousin, who lived in New York.

It seemed like my cousin picked up after a few moments. The pitch of my aunt's voice became higher, her eyes widening, and she called her daughter's name as though she could see her.

Suddenly, she said that she was going to hang up.

I calculated the time in New York. It was probably seven or eight in the morning. While I had told my aunt that it was probably the busiest time to have called, when my cousin was sending her husband off to work, it looked like the words didn't reach her ears. She had already been going to that spot in the doorway that held the phone.

The sound of the rain and my aunt's voice when she called my cousin's name seemed, in an instant, to collide and scatter in the living room. My aunt leaned over the phone where it was placed on the floor, like she was cradling it with her body. My aunt and my cousin's conversation continued, competing with the sound of the storm, the noise and my aunt's voice bursting in the living room like the raindrops against the window.

I leaned my back against the wall, in the opening between the furniture, and watched the rain fall down as it struck the glass.

My aunt was right by me, her face's profile and the rounded stoop of her back so close I could reach out and touch them, but little by little it seemed like her voice and the sound of the storm became more distant.

"I like *ajumeoni* and *unni*'s voices. I like your Korean... It's easier for me to immerse myself in the language, hearing the two of you speak it."

Yuhi's voice came from the same direction as my aunt's, mixed in with the sound of the rain, as if she were walking up to her. Many times when my aunt had picked up the phone and started talking to someone—even if it wasn't my cousin—I saw Yuhi, who was

nearby, listening carefully to her voice, whether it was from that sofa in the parlor or a chair in the dining room or here in this living room. I recalled her form as she listened to our voices while we talked on the day she first came to this house, as though she was moving nearer.

I wasn't sure that my aunt's voice was as wonderful as Yuhi made it out to be, although perhaps that was because I had lived with her for so long and heard her talk so much that my ears were just used to it. However, when I listened to her at a distance like this, I felt like I understood what Yuhi had meant, somewhat. My aunt's gaze, gestures, and body may have also qualified as voices, of sorts.

“ㅇ.” (*ah*) I murmured.

I closed my eyes once, opening them slowly—just like Yuhi on that day—and murmured, “ㅇ,” again.

I was reminded of Yuhi's facial expression then, in my memories, and I pictured her eyes moving, framed by her glasses, as clear as if she was next to me even now.

The scene of the mountains shimmered. Exposing the magnificent rock face and displaying the flow of that bold ridgeline, the range of towering, craggy mountains moved closer and farther away. Before very long, a large fissure appeared in one of the rocks at the summit. Very quickly, the crack widened, the rock splitting into two and breaking into bits.

I flinched. I felt as though the small lump within my chest had also split in half and crumbled. That dull numbness seemed to flow through my veins, following my blood and spreading throughout my entire body.

My aunt was still talking on the phone. Forgetting I was there, she leaned over as if she was embracing the phone, caught up in trying not to miss the voice on the other end of the line.

I hugged both knees to my chest, gathering the broken pieces and putting them together as they had been before. The numbing sensation gradually disappeared. However, its fragility and precariousness still oozed into my chest cavity even now, making it ache.

It felt like Yuhi was near.

When I closed my eyes, just like on that day, Yuhi was there, right next to me, and it seemed like she was looking up at me.

While that day had been pleasant and bright, I was aware that it had transformed into a bitter memory now. Since Yuhi wasn't here anymore, I looked back on it with a fresh set of eyes, and said that it was just a memory I couldn't help but find painful.

It was right after we had entered the new year and the new semester had begun. The two of us had promised to meet my aunt at the trailhead when she got back from hiking. It had been decided that we would bring back the water she'd collected from the mountain, which had medicinal properties. My aunt had been struck with the idea of trying to make the two of us—who didn't go outside much—take a walk, and started talking.

“Oh, goodness, look at you young girls. Hiking is good for your health! This is a great city for it, you know. You'll always be able to climb mountains like this. You live in Seoul, of all places, and here you young people are acting like this. Shameful!” She laughed when we refused to go climbing with her, and left early that morning.

We ended up taking a walk. We decided to leave the house earlier than we had to, to meet my aunt on time, and made our way slowly to the trailhead at our own pace.

The two of us headed up the road in front of our house, the opposite of our usual routine. At the spot where the road, which dipped with the hills, turned, we went down the part that extended to the left in front of us. We came to a more major thoroughfare after we had descended a bit; there was a tunnel in the direction of the larger road.

Crossing the street, we headed up, following that hilly road; Yuhi said it was the first time she had walked it. As we climbed the gentle slope, the houses suddenly stopped. Thick clusters of trees continued on both sides of the street, and to the left a small stream flowed. We walked slowly, next to the guardrail.

Ahead, the mountains towered over the surrounding area. Their ridgeline presented a boldly uneven line standing out in sharp relief against the sky, the foot of them extending from one end of my field of vision to the other.

The road widened considerably.

From time to time taxis would come up behind us, then go on and pass by. On a hill to the left in front of us, several houses made from Western-style brickwork stood in a row; above the copse of trees, their roofs were visible. It was quiet—other than the sound of the taxis going by every once in a while—with no people in sight; no birdsong, or even the sound of water from the tiny brook, was audible.

“There’s a monastery all the way up there, behind that group of trees to the right, you know,” I said, walking beside Yuhi, and pointed.

“This place isn’t like any other in Seoul. *Unni*, we’re still in Seoul, right?”

At Yuhi’s words, I laughed and hummed in agreement.

Yuhi, who had said that she didn’t want to try hiking, agreed to go closer to the mountains. She seemed satisfied with this.

That strained, depressed look on her face that I saw in her bedroom that night and her uneasy speech then were so different from the Yuhi I saw on this occasion that they were difficult to conjure up in my memory.

“You said that these mountains are beautiful, but there’s also something grand about them—something that moves you, and is almost somehow sad, when you look at them closely like this.”

“Yes, *unni*.”

Yuhi looked straight ahead, taking her time to slowly follow the flowing line of the ridge, her gaze shifting its focus.

“Each rock has their own expression. Don’t you think so, *unni*?”

“Hey, I was thinking the same thing earlier, you know.”

The weather was pleasant.

There was no wind, and the morning rays of sunlight were soft. The hue of the rock face, the blue of the sky—everything in sight was clear and calm.

Yuhi let out a giggle.

I looked back at her.

“*Unni*, I feel like Seoul’s craggy mountains represent Korea and the Korean people.”

I asked why as she held back her laughter.

Glancing up at me, then looking back in the direction of the mountains, “Because, you’re all bare, like the rocks. You don’t wear anything. You’re always exposed,” she said. She covered her mouth with her hand and, like she was chuckling at her own words, dissolved into laughter.

“Is that it, huh?”

More than words, I was glad to see Yuhi smiling.

The guardrail ran alongside the road, and I stared at the running water of the stream. The expression on Yuhi's face was bright and calm. She was silent as she leaned over the railing, but before very long she lifted her head, and looked up at me.

"Unni."

"Yeah?"

"In the morning, when you wake up, what's the first thing you think of?" She asked.

An answer not coming quickly to the surface, "What do you think of?" I asked back. I also just wanted to hear her answer.

"Even though I used the word 'thinking,' it's not really that," Yuhi said, and suddenly closed her mouth. She looked uncertain as to whether or not she should continue what she was saying. After a bit, she opened her mouth again.

"I wonder how I should say this... When you're still dreaming, but right on the verge of waking up, what do you think of? Even though you probably don't remember it very well. Me, I emit a voice. But I wonder if that's a voice, if I can even call it that, or if it's just a breath."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The sound 'ah'—not so clear or so long as that, though—comes out of my mouth."

I chuckled at that unexpected answer. Yuhi, going, "It is funny, isn't it, *unni*," kept laughing, too.

She pushed off of the railing and faced me. Her face had reverted back to its serious expression. She closed her eyes, then opened them slowly and shallowly, faintly, and

quietly voiced, “Ah.” Then: “No, it’s not that,” she murmured to herself, and closed her eyes the same way again, repeating the action.

Sinking into silence, Yuhi’s gaze fell in the direction of the small stream. You could sense those unvoiced words wriggling in her mouth.

“It’s my linguistic crutch.”

“...”

“I feel like I’m being tested over whether or not I can grasp my linguistic crutch the instant I wake up.”

“...”

“Is it ‘ㅇ,’ (*ah*) or is it ‘ㅏ’ (*ah*)? If it’s ㅇ, then I grasp the crutch that continues with ㅇ, ㅑ (*ya*), ㅓ (*eo*), ㅕ (*yeo*). But if it’s ㅏ, then it’s the crutch that continues with ㅣ (*i*), ㅜ (*u*), ㅚ (*e*), ㅛ (*o*). But I have no clear insight into whether it’s ㅇ or ㅏ. It’s always like that. It gradually becomes more and more difficult to understand. The crutch—I can’t grasp it.”

While Yuhi called it her linguistic crutch, you could have also called it a crutch made from language.

I was made to recall that voice vividly, along with Yuhi’s expression, projected onto the backs of my eyelids even now.

As the memory faded, my aunt’s voice returned little by little, as well as the sound of the rain beating on the windows, drawing closer to my ears and vibrating in them.

I stood up.

It didn’t seem like my aunt was done with her phone call.

She didn’t seem to notice me walk around her and leave the living room.

Standing behind the sofa in the parlor, I pressed my fingertip into the couch's shoulder. Feeling the texture of the thick fabric, I drew a line, slowly digging my finger into it.

I planned to go up to the second floor and look at the bundle of papers Yuhi had left behind. I was drawn to Yuhi's characters, as if they were calling out to me, and unable to resist, I had left the living room.

However, for a while I just stood there like that, staring at the wind and rain beating ceaselessly against the dark garden.

A deep, heavy sigh spilled out of me.

Yuhi is no longer in this country. She is nowhere... My murmurings pierced deep within my breast. The small lump quivered imperceptibly.

I began to feel that odd numbness—like pins and needles—in the tips of my toes, my hands, my chest, everywhere.

My sigh, with that numbing sensation, became warped, and my breath stuttered.

Looking behind me, I stood at the foot of the stairs. I felt adrift, like I had lost my center of gravity and couldn't clearly feel the floor beneath my feet.

The small lump shook violently and burst open, Yuhi's face rising to the surface in my mind.

“*o*” (*ah*),” I blinked slowly and murmured.

Yuhi's characters appeared. Her Japanese ones piled up on top of each other, the *hangul* she wrote also coming to the forefront, intermixing and overlapping.

I stood frozen at the bottom of the stairs, unable to walk, like my crutch had been snatched away from me. It felt as if Yuhi's two kinds of characters stabbed into my eyes like thin needles, the tips of them digging into the backs of my eyeballs.

The next one did not follow.

What came after ㅇㅈ did not come out, only the reverberation of that one sound coiling in my throat.

I searched for it, my throat looking to voice the sound, burning from the bundle of needles that writhed and stabbed it from within.

Chapter Two: Kazukime

One.

There wasn't a hint of a person on the long stretch of bank. Lying on the ground, there wasn't even a whisper of wind in the feeble atmosphere. She was hungry and tired, and the fever lingering from her recovery made her stagger unsteadily as she walked. The sun oscillated between the scraps of cloud in elliptical patterns; she looked out over the river, but the muddy water had forgotten its flow and only stagnated and settled.

Cosmos bloomed in bunches along the way. She stopped and crouched down in front of them. She almost dozed off when a breeze coiled up her spine like cold water. She stared at the cosmos, which trembled from the wind that bent their thin stalks. She didn't reach out and snap them off their stems—just stared, motionlessly, at the buds of the cosmos.

She picked up the hem of her skirt and stuck out her sneakers like it had just occurred to her. The color of the cosmos petals printed on them was dull, like the girl herself, who was tired of walking; the shoes were covered in dust, even though she had only worn them for the first time this morning. Her neck felt heavy holding up her sinking head. Paired with the exhaustion creeping in at the corners of her vision, her whole body felt like it was going numb. She stood, brushing aside the clumps of cosmos, and stretched out on the grass. The overgrown grass on the gentle slope of the bank was cool against her back, and for however long, she lay there, breathing as she slept.

She collapsed just beyond the entryway to the house after taking her shoes off; it was the Monday a week prior. Her head had suddenly started to go fuzzy about three hours into the school day, during class. She was barely able to keep her eyes open, her eyelids

fluttering, and her arms and legs shook. Sweat dripped from her forehead, and suddenly, her neck no longer able to support it, her head dropped to the desk with a *thunk* and she lay there, face down. Her homeroom teacher ran up to her and put his hand to her forehead. “Let’s go to the infirmary,” he said. She brushed his hand off as he propped her up. “I’ll just go home.” She practically spat the words out as she stood. She pulled away from him silently.

The teacher and the students could do nothing but watch her go, flummoxed as she seemed set on ignoring them. It felt like the spectacle in the classroom and the voices whispering were all underwater, drifting and twisting as they faded behind her. She stepped out from the gate to the school and headed back home. She had to lean on the utility poles lining the street as she went; like a marionette whose strings were suddenly cut, she would crouch on the roadside next to them. It was only due to a power lying dormant within her that she hadn’t known about until that day that she managed to stand each time and continue to walk.

She had loathed her fourth period class for more than two weeks already. She had been bothered since moving up to fourth grade and getting the new social studies textbook, but observing the personality of her teacher, Mr. Sakai, and calculating the class’ progress, she was sure they would be studying *that* page on the Monday two weeks from now—thinking about it, she began to squirm.

If there’s an outbreak of a contagious disease the school will shut down, or if a large earthquake hits...the night before, it’ll get struck by lightning and burst into flames...Mr. Sakai will be bed-ridden with a sudden illness... She thought up all sorts of things, but her imaginations, which weren’t based in any sort of reality, just made her feel

more anxious and depressed. For example, even if she didn't have Monday's class, that textbook would somehow happen to fall open to that page. As for her, she was sure that pretending to be sick and skipping school was the most reliable way to get out of it. However, when she thought about the agony of having to stay home all day and sleep, her small body was completely paralyzed, as if she was a stake driven into the ground.

Her stepfather, who had a ping pong ball-sized lump protruding from the lower left side of his jaw, shouted at her mother for anything and everything, always getting violent. Sometimes, her mother would stay silent; sometimes, she would scream and push back. She would have to see her stepfather and her mother if she pretended to be sick and was stuck at home, and at any moment the former wouldn't hesitate to use her as an excuse to start an argument.

On that page of her social studies textbook, the characters for "Korea" were printed several times—it even included a rough map of the Korean peninsula. The shock of *Korea* had already scared her before she had even registered the written content. Because of her mother's second marriage, and her just having changed schools last year, her classmates shouldn't have known about her origins. But every day that swelling, amorphous anxiety and a feeling of oppression entangled her, like a sticky spider's web.

She thought that she could usually get a handle on the feelings of adults just by taking in the sight of their backs as they walked away. Just because they were grown-ups didn't mean that they were all so great; she knew that even adults had different personalities and capabilities. She could tell just by his actions that her teacher was the same way, and she speculated on what his home life must have been like. Rather than adults, her classmates were the more terrifying presences to her. She could never predict when they

would try to orchestrate a sneak attack or retaliate, or anticipate their mean gossip and jealousy. During fourth period on Mondays, she was stuck between a rock and a hard place when it came to Mr. Sakai and her classmates... She shuddered as she imagined herself on that day.

Monday came. The house came alive in the morning, the sound of footfalls and raised voices suddenly emerging. She hadn't slept, resolving to feign illness and take the day off from school, but her spirits had been dampened overnight and she felt listless. That day, they had held the ceremony to start work on the construction of an apartment building which was being erected on the plot of land on the other side of the house. Her stepfather, who ran the civil engineering office, had been the one to kick off the design process and the actual construction, and was in an uncharacteristically good mood because of it. Her mother was working in the kitchen with some of the other housewives from the neighborhood, keeping busy. She felt awkward and a little ashamed about declaring that she was too sick to go to school on the beautiful, sunny day of the ceremony. Reluctantly, she tightened the straps of her backpack.

It was mysterious how swiftly the fever had set in, making it so that she didn't have to attend her fourth period class. The stone pillars that marked the school gate seemed to shiver and dissipate in the heavy heat of the air. At the street corner, she crouched on the ground, feeling feeble and limp. While she tried to rouse herself to stand up, the strangeness of that strength hidden somewhere in her body by chance overpowered her. She finally walked until she caught sight of the gate to her house on the right side of the road and lost consciousness. She didn't remember how she reached the entryway, or opened the sliding

door. She felt a firm hand shake her shoulder as she laid where she had collapsed. From that point, it became difficult to distinguish reality from dreams.

Her mother called an old woman to do a purification ritual after the doctor said he didn't know what the cause of her sudden illness was, gave her some medicine for her fever, and left. The appointed day of the ceremony for the apartment building was no good—the direction of the building's bathrooms and entryway were bad, too, her mother yelled, and her stepfather had no choice but to go along with it. She watched as the old woman's staff, adorned with zigzagging strips of paper, jumped up and down above her body like some kind of white animal. The old woman's moaning voice was occasionally interspersed with a strange sound that pierced into her heart, and each time she heard it, she felt as though she was sinking to the bottom of a boiling pot. She struggled to get up. However, her voice wouldn't come out, and her arms and legs stuck out stiffly, as she was unable to even move them. The old woman peered into her face, and then mercilessly started beating the bundles of paper attached to her staff into the girl's chest and head.

There was a flash of light, and suddenly she felt a pain as though her eyes were being burnt. The old woman's face and the forms of the people packed into the house disappeared. There was a pure white membrane covering everything in front of her eyes; it began to light up with such a fierce intensity that it felt as if her eyes were being pierced through. Without blinking, she kept her eyes open wide, her body stiffening. The blood vessels from the tips of her toes on up began to ripple, blocking out all sound, like her ears were clogged with water. A low moaning became audible from somewhere. Every time it was emitted, the white membrane faintly shook, creating shadows that matched the volume of the voice.

“Go out, go out in the water.”

Those words repeated three times. She heard them clearly and turned them over in her mind. Without warning, the white membrane suddenly dissipated. For a moment, her eyes were blurry and dim. Before long, however, the focal point of her vision settled on the ceiling, and she followed the grain of the wood that made it up. Her fever started to go down. Her thrumming blood vessels gradually quieted; she fell into a coma-like state.

She was immersed in an odd sensation that felt soft and airy, and yet simultaneously pressured her body on all sides. She was now in the water— Little by little, her surroundings brightened. She slowly dragged her body up. She struggled, like she was freeing her legs from the water that gripped at her ankles, and stretched her body towards the surface.

There was no one around the bed. Her fever lowering, she stared at the ceiling for a while with a clear head. She lifted her head and looked around her futon. A bag of ice was lying by her pillow. It had melted, and the tepid water felt like rubber as it shook in her hands. The room, in its messy state, made her realize that no one had come to check in on her for quite some time. She replaced her sweat-drenched sheets, changed her nightclothes, and crawled back into her futon. She felt as though she could sleep for as long as she wanted. When she shut her eyes, in her dreams she heard it. That low moaning came to life again along the length of her spine.

She missed a week of school and decided to run away from home that Monday, folding up her futon. Yesterday, she had begged for a pair of sneakers with cosmos printed on them. It was the first time she had ever begged for anything.

The grass made a faint sound, pressed under her nose. She wondered how much time had passed. She knew she was lying on the bank; when she lifted herself up, she brushed bits of grass and dirt off of her clothes, which were now damp. She crawled up the bank, grabbing fistfuls of the grass, the clouds above her head spreading out as one dark gray surface. She started to trace the memories of why, exactly, she had come to this spot, and suddenly felt a strong urge to pee, heading back down the embankment.

She put her right foot on one of the stones that had been half-eaten by the earth and lifted her skirt up. When she pulled down her underwear and squatted, the tips of the grass brushed her butt. It tickled, and she shifted, when the rock that her right leg was braced on came unstuck from where it was wedged in the ground, tumbling over. She lost her center of gravity, pitching forward and sliding down the bank towards the water. The river, with its lazy flow, was deeper than she had thought, and when she finally stopped sliding she was in knee-deep muddy water. In an instant of relief, a stream of lukewarm urine ran down the inside of her legs and into the water.

She carefully crawled back up the bank, turning up by the road. A ways ahead, a grove of Japanese cedar was visible, growing together thickly. The clouds above the trees were hazy and jet black, and they seemed to muffle the surrounding sounds of the area. The grove and the clouds created an ominous gloom that resembled a roiling tsunami. She gazed at the trees for some time, and—rather than turning back the way that she had come—walked towards that tsunami, which possessed an immense power all on its own.

A raindrop hit the tip of her nose with a *plop*. In no time at all, it began to pour, water streaming down the embankment that had been dry up until then. She walked through the rain, not caring that she was getting soaked. She had already tossed her backpack down

an old well by the bank, and now she took the cloth bag that served as her pencil case, holding her ruler and colored pencils, and threw it off towards the embankment. She held her hands up towards the rain. The feeling of her whole body being soaked to the bone and washed away gave her a sense of fulfillment. The cedar grove still loomed over her as though it was looking down on her. However, the road did not go towards the trees, instead veering right at a small wooden bridge. The girl looked back over her shoulder at that great tsunami several times as she walked through the rain.

Around the time she neared an unmanned railway crossing, the passing showers had been drawn back up into the heavens. It was bright and sunny, and looking up at the clearing sky, she sighed heavily. Sitting on a low wooden post near the crossing, she wrung out her skirt; she was amused by the amount of water that came out. The rain had also washed the sneakers she had put on that morning, and the petals of the cosmos rose vividly from the fabric. She no longer felt tired or hungry.

There was a small hill in the direction of the crossing. The station may have been on the other side of it. The girl stood and started walking. However, she took two or three steps and stopped with a start. She stiffened, her breath catching in her throat. She took another step forward. She couldn't speak. Somewhere, a frog croaked. A frog croaked from inside her sneakers. Maybe it crawled into her shoe that time she fell into the muddy water—or maybe it was when she had walked in the rain. She gingerly took another step. A croak sounded from the sole of her shoe. *Ribbet, ribbet*. The girl jumped, stripping off both shoes and flinging them towards the road. But the only thing that came out of the shoes was water, sloshing onto the ground. The petals of the cosmos cartwheeled, the shoes rolling on the gravel by the railway tracks.

Two.

She finished removing the metal fittings from the curtain rod; when she gathered the curtain in her arms, there was a poof of dry, heavy dust. Keiko held her breath, stuffing the curtain into the black vinyl trashbag. The mountain of garbage bags that had piled up in the doorway to the entryway resembled lumps of rock formed from gelatin, the base of the mountain spreading as the day progressed.

A bookshelf without books, a futon without bedding, a sideboard without dishes. The sorting racks inside the pantry in the kitchen were bare, too. Keiko was surprised at her ability to quietly survey her older sister's room now. In the beginning, it had only solicited an overwhelming feeling of dread, and she had no idea where to start working. She was resentful of her own bad luck, getting stuck with this role. The room had been shut up; she thought she heard the sound of water trickling, and rushed outside a few times.

It was nearly noon when she opened the door wide and started to tidy up, bit by bit. Every scrape on the walls or the furniture, every nail driven in, every trace of oil or smear on the stove made her imagine her sister's breathing, the movement of her fingertips. Several times, Keiko felt something prick at her chest and sucked in a breath, eventually finishing cleaning.

She carried the black trashbags down the stairs two at a time, one in each hand, making multiple trips. When she was done putting the bags in front of the apartment building, Keiko swept the room and wiped down the tatami and furniture with a dust cloth. The dull light from the cloudy sky filtered in through the curtainless windows, the quiet sounds of the neighborhood sounding outside around the apartment. *It's a warm day for*

January, Keiko thought. She finished cleaning things off with the dust cloth and opened the closet and the pantry again; when she saw that she had left nothing behind, she chanced a glance at the face of the manager standing in the open doorway.

“Thank you for your work.” The man said, as if speaking to himself, coming into the room. She hadn’t realized it when she first saw him, but after looking at it for a while, she was sure that his hair was actually a toupee.

“If the furniture is sold at a secondhand store, what should I do with the money, hm...?”

Finding the blatant way he was trying to intimate that she owed him some kind of favor unpleasant, Keiko answered: “Please do as you see fit. I’ve caused you a lot of trouble with my sister.”

“No, not at all.”

The manager—who, despite seeming to anticipate Keiko’s response, put his hand on his head embarrassedly—immediately set about appraising the furniture in his line of sight. Keiko went into the kitchen, opening the door to the bathroom by the fridge. The smoke from the incense sticks that filled the cramped room flowed in her direction. Keiko remembered the manager telling her that yesterday he had only cleaned the bathroom. She had to thank him; she could never have mustered up the courage to clean the tub herself. Behind her eyelids, the scene, frozen, flashed by like a single photograph. Her ears were tricked by the sound of water steadily dripping, layered over the image. Keiko held her breath and pressed a hand to her chest.

“Excuse me.”

She shut the door to the bathroom and picked up her coat and handbag. The manager exchanged a perfunctory farewell with her and, as he had before, kept staring intently at the furniture.

A calm, windless evening approached. Keiko headed towards the train station, starting to descend a deserted, sloping road. She could feel the exhaustion welling up in her. She recalled that the first time she had climbed this road was just three days ago.

That day, when she came to Tokyo to pick up the bag and sandals she had ordered for her coming-of-age ceremony, Keiko briskly called on her sister's place. She wasn't home. Before she went to the department store, Keiko took the train to stop by for a short visit. She climbed this very hill, alternating between looking at a map and a list of the nameplates of each house lined up in a row that she had written down and taken from a police box in front of the station. That morning, a light snow had fallen, slowly melted, and now ran, water floating listlessly in the early afternoon. She climbed the stairs of the apartment she had just managed to locate, and when she stood in front of the door with 2C written on it, she saw that several bundles of newspapers had been crammed into the mailbox, that morning's edition left below the door. Keiko, calming her growing sense that this was a wasted effort, pressed the buzzer several times. No reply came from inside the apartment. Keiko was unable to shove down her rising feeling of curiosity. She went to the building manager's office, lying and saying that she had spoken with her sister, who told her to wait in the apartment; the keys jingling as he opened the door, she got nervous while she waited behind him.

Soon after Keiko's mother died in a traffic accident, her father remarried; her older sister was the daughter of Keiko's stepmother, a child from a previous marriage. Keiko

was informed that her stepmother and stepsister were Koreans as soon as they came to the house. However, Keiko wasn't very dissatisfied with or critical of her stepmother; she could only be described as a hard worker, wearing only Japanese clothes and seeming just like a housekeeper. And, above all else, her stepmother doted on her more than her older sister. When her sister was eighteen, Keiko's stepmother died of cancer, and the day after the funeral her sister stole a large amount of money from her father's office and left home. Her older sister, who went to night school and helped with the office work in her father's studio, was entrusted with the housework in Keiko's stepmother's place when the latter was hospitalized, and she had full knowledge of where the money in the house was kept. Keiko's father declared that he was betrayed by someone he had trusted and stamped his feet; her older brothers cursed their stepsister as if they were talking about something dirty. The lies Keiko had been exposed to from that day on about her older sister, who she hadn't heard from since, were just unbearable. Her sister's name became a taboo word. She was ignored like she had never been in the house to begin with, gradually stripped away from the memories of its inhabitants.

Her older sister was beautiful; her grades were good, too. Keiko continued to be compared to her by teachers throughout elementary and middle school.

"Your older sister turned in a truly incredible paper for her exam. Her grade is also right up there."

The day her Japanese teacher, who Keiko secretly had a crush on, said that, Keiko declared that she was going to quit school, bewildering her father and stepmother. Keiko, who had an inferiority complex when it came to her big sister, would go on and on about how the older girl was a child from another marriage and a Korean, compensating for her

own insecurity by being unkind. She always treated her older sister like that. Not uttering a single word of protest, her sister would stare at Keiko, her eyes pleading. That just made Keiko more and more covert and cruel.

It was her older sister who suddenly appeared at her dorm when Keiko had just entered college. Even though she had pressed her sister on how she knew where she lived now, she had only given unclear, vague answers, presenting Keiko with a fountain pen still in its box and a paper bag with Western clothes in it.

“It’s just something to celebrate you entering university—use it if you like.” She said, and then got up and left like she was running away. After that, Keiko had started to forget all about her, knowing nothing about her whereabouts, when her older sister suddenly appeared again. It was about a month before the end of the year.

That night, she received a message from the dorm’s security guard; when she went down to the lobby, her older sister was sitting in a corner, on a sofa. At first, looking at the figure sitting there with their shoulders slumped, Keiko had no idea who they were. She watched as her big sister stood up. Her cheeks were strangely gaunt, too skinny and dull.

“It’s because I didn’t want to meet up with you too soon.”

Her sister cast her eyes down, the end of her sentence trembling ever so slightly. And, just like she had two years ago, she presented Keiko with a paper package and picked up the coat she had placed on the sofa. During their meeting, her left cheek spasmed faintly. Keiko stopped her sister, who was intending on heading home, instead inviting her to a café near the dorm. When she pushed open the door to the coffee shop that sat in front of the bus stop, she heard a subdued voice behind her.

“Don’t tell them that you saw me.”

When she glanced back over her shoulder, her sister's pale face was distorted in the darkness. Looking at her expression—which was trembling and nervous, but also seemed to be scolding—Keiko's chest swiftly began to throb painfully. That night, it had been dark and her sister's face had been ghost white like this, too... A younger Keiko had been in the living room, sitting on their Japanese-style dining table as she watched TV. When her sister ordered her to get her butt off the table, saying that they ate there, Keiko told her that she was bullying her and started bawling. Her sister was beaten by Keiko's stepmother, who tied her to a pillar in the hall. It weighed on Keiko's mind, and, before she headed off to bed, she peeked into the hallway. Her sister, at the sound of Keiko's footsteps, lifted her head and stared at her. At the same time, there was the sudden sound of a violent gust of wind, and the bamboo grove in the garden cast strange shadows that quivered from the blow. Keiko turned towards the living room and ran away.

Now, they sat with the table between them and ordered coffee; after, her sister started to talk like she was worried about Keiko's well-being. Keiko sat there, silent. She felt guilty about how poorly she had treated her sister in the past, and was startled by her questions, staring steadily at her mouth while she talked.

“Are your studies interesting?”

Keiko took a sip of the coffee they had been given with a sigh of relief. She looked back again at her older sister. Staring at her beautiful, pearly white front teeth and the feminine way her lips curved as she spoke, Keiko felt that past sense of competitive spirit flare back to life.

“It’s alright. I’m doing just fine.” She answered as though she was bored—and then broke the ice decisively: “What are you doing now? Where are you living? I definitely won’t tell anyone back at home, so tell me—just me—please.”

“...”

“Won’t it be hard if your own family doesn’t even know where you are and something happens?” Her sister’s haggard-looking profile, with her head lowered and her too-pale, lifeless looking cheeks, replaced the insecurities Keiko harbored with something that felt like sympathy.

Just when her older sister had started attending night school and Keiko had been sure that she had been liberated from her inferiority complex, her sister stole a large sum of money and left home. While she had been delighted at the scandalous rumors she had heard, one after the other, in her heart Keiko was awestruck by the other girl’s daring which the latter had kept well-hidden. *Will I never be able to beat my sister?*—her obvious sense of sibling rivalry from back then once again started to smolder in Keiko.

“If you don’t give me your address, I’ll tell Dad that you came to my dorm; he won’t think that the statute of limitations has expired yet. What you did really hurt the family financially. It was just because we’re relatives that we didn’t contact the police, you know... You get it, so just tell me—and only me—your address, and I won’t say anything to anyone.”

The words that hit her sister’s weak spot fell from her lips so smoothly that it surprised even Keiko. She insistently blamed the other girl, despite the bitter taste spreading in her mouth. Helplessly, her sister pulled out a pen and notepad.

“I plan to move, but I’m here right now. I probably won’t be soon, but...” She said, feebly, taking the time to tear a page from her notebook.

Keiko walked down the road, which sloped downward; when she reached the end of the wide residential street, she came onto a large thoroughfare with many cars. Soon, she caught sight of the café and opened the door. She sat heavily with a sigh. Something in her unconsciousness had begun to take form over the past three days, throbbing deep in her heart. She didn’t know the true nature of whatever it was that had taken shape, and her irritation at what she did not understand made it even worse.

The lightness of her sister’s urn—light enough that she could hold it in the palm of her hand—that Keiko had buried yesterday beside her stepmother brought back memories of the other girl. Maybe her sister would’ve been better off in a paupers’ grave. When the waitress came to take her order, Keiko came back to her senses, recognizing that it was warm in the store because of the heating and taking off her coat. The inside corners of her eyes stung, and she closed them. Keiko realized that no more than ten years had passed since her stepmother and sister had come to the house and then disappeared. What did those ten years mean to her stepmother, to her sister? Tears gathered unconsciously in the corners of her eyes. Keiko didn’t know the reason behind them. All she knew was the ache of whatever it was buried deep inside her chest. The nerves of her eyeballs were palpable behind her eyelids. A burning pain tingled along her brow, piercing through to the top of her head.

Three.

She moved her mouth silently, reaching her chopsticks out to the plates and bowls of side dishes set on the dining table. Tossing anything into her mouth that she could get her hands on, slurping down the broth, shoveling down the rice. She just chewed the food in her mouth a few times by rote, then quickly swallowed, hurriedly reaching out with her chopsticks again. She had been moving her mouth restlessly like that for a while now. Without the sound of the TV and people eating, the atmosphere around the table was bare, as if even the silence had been pushed aside. It frightened her, but she kept moving her mouth intently.

Her stepfather sat across the table, silent and sullen, next to her older stepbrother, Toshihiko, who was quiet, his brows furrowed. Across from her, Keiko and her younger stepbrother, Toshiyuki, sat and ate. Keiko stared, sometimes looking aghast at how ravenously she was eating, shooting scornful looks at her older sister as much as she pleased. The girl, herself, knew this, but acted like she didn't care, stabbing her chopsticks at the side dishes and moving her mouth the whole while. It was a way of eating that belonged to a starving beggar who had finally had food set before them.

Toshihiko had failed the entrance exam to the national university that was his top choice twice and had reluctantly entered a private college that summer. He was incredibly vain, and soon, he wasn't going to school at all—he started spending all of his time playing mah-jong and gambling. There were a lot of days where they wondered if he was spending the night somewhere else, only for him to show up at the front gate with a woman wearing flashy clothes; he got into an accident in his father's car, and arguments between him and his dad were a regular occurrence.

Toshihiko turned to her mother and said, “Hey, you, second wife,” thrusting his hand out, palm up. Since she just did as he commanded and forked the money over, her mother would get punished by her stepfather instead when Toshihiko wasn’t there. Her stepfather—with his red, swollen nose—would drink heavily and fly into a rage, the lump on his lower left jaw swelling to twice its normal size and turning a dark red. His face shot straight past ugly and gave the impression of a strange red ogre.

Why had her mother gotten remarried to this kind of man? Ever since she was little, the girl hadn’t understood. He drank and was reckless and violent, just like her dad from before.

“Your father went back to his home island of Jeju,” her mother said to her, one day, when she was little.

“Then he must have originally been from Jeju, right?”

Her mother startled, staring back at her when she mumbled that innocently.

Her mother married the same type of man, who would hit her and kick her, again—her feelings were that incomprehensible. When her stepfather started to get mad, the girl would sob loudly out of habit and cling to her mother’s back, like she was dealing with her father from before. When her stepfather would pull them apart and knock her off her feet, without staying down, she would get right back up and cling to her mother again.

But on that night that the tumult in the living room was audible—that time alone—and when she saw the figure of spoiled Keiko bawling, she felt a singular thought that had been simmering within her take on a clear form and rise. That gradually lightened her engorged, toughened emotions, but, at the same time, she was beginning to fear her own self for thinking such a thing.

Her mother was being beaten by her stepfather. The girl, herself, was clinging to her mother as though her life was on the line, and realized that it was simply a foolish act that exposed her unfortunate position as the stepdaughter of the second wife. It was no great pain to be knocked down by her stepfather if she could stress her own misfortune and appeal to his emotions. And with the gesture of protecting her mother, since she did not want to be thought of as un-childlike otherwise, she cried on and on in her plea to her stepfather.

Herself and Keiko, cowering in the narrow room and straining their ears, seemed to be nothing more than props set up for a play. Breathing props, props with facial expressions, truly childlike props to the adults— She found Keiko to be incredibly pitiful, and while she struggled to stretch her arms to hold her close, they continued to wait for whenever the commotion of the large-scale play would end.

At the dining room table that night, Toshihiko—who had spent three nights somewhere else—faced her stepfather. It was an explosive situation. After a short time, Keiko set her chopsticks down and stood up.

“I’m done.” She turned to face the living room. “Hey, sis—cut it out. You’re acting like a beggar.”

Her stepfather became more easygoing, like her sister’s voice had brought him back to himself, and looked at the girl as she continued to chew heavily. He had been told by the doctor to stop drinking, and he couldn’t borrow his energy from the alcohol; meanwhile, he seemed to be at a loss as to what to do with the tense situation with Toshihiko. His facial expression relaxed, as though he had let out a sigh of relief.

“Eat like that and you’ll get a stomachache.”

She guessed at what was in her stepfather's heart when he said that, and grinned.

"It's because it just tastes so good." Saying that, she got up and headed towards the kitchen, leaving the living room. She walked slowly up to the hallway in front of the kitchen, and then ran for the toilet, stepping into the bathroom. She threw up what she had eaten into the toilet bowl. Crouching beside the toilet bowl for a moment, she got her breathing under control—and then she returned to the dining room table. She reached out with her chopsticks and then started putting anything she could get her hands on into her mouth; she gulped down the rice and broth.

"That's enough! It's embarrassing for a beautiful girl to eat like that."

Her stepfather's tone of voice was joking, uncharacteristically, and she made a fleeting glance in the direction of Toshihiko. While her head was downturned, in the corner of her eye, she saw that Toshihiko was looking and laughing at her, too.

Something flapped with a *whap whap*. Her breath stopped and she saw a dark shadow flitting above the table. She immediately ducked and pressed her face to her stepfather's lap, his legs squeezed under the Japanese-style dining table. Her whole body was shaking, and wouldn't stop. Toshiyuki stood up, grasping the large moth in his hands, and flung it outside onto the wraparound porch.

"You're such a coward. Making a big fuss over a moth."

She realized that the lap pressed against her cheek was her stepfather's, and, for a moment, she felt a bittersweetness that she didn't know the source of course through her body.

"Hey, there are no more moths," Toshihiko said, peeking under the table, and her stepfather brushed her cheek. She was glad that the moth had suddenly flown up and

opened up a bit of dialogue. However, her shock made her stomach churn, as though its contents were about to pour from her mouth that instant.

“I’m finished.”

She stood, and, managing to say that, left the living room. Clasp ing her mouth with both hands, she bolted for the bathroom, draping herself over the toilet bowl. Her stomach heaved and felt like it was going to rupture, and she clawed forcibly at her throat. A flush broke out across her face, and her eyes overflowed with tears. Why did she have to keep doing this? The question stole across her mind—but she didn’t want to think about it anymore.

Leaning over the toilet, she heard a voice go, “Ass-kisser,” in her ear. The boys running in the hallway in front of the classroom and the girls gathered in a corner of the room whispering flitted by. She thought back to that afternoon.

Her instructor, Mr. Satō, transferred from another school and became her math teacher the year she moved up to the second grade in middle school. Mr. Satō, whose hairline was receding in his middle age, was quickly given a nickname and made fun of by the students because of his thick northeastern accent, more than his unrefined appearance.

That day was fifth period math. Usually, the students assumed that class would be the time for their after-lunch nap and laid face down on their desks—only a few people, including her, would take notes. When the bell began to chime, signaling the end of the school day, the dozing students yawned and stretched their arms, starting to put away their books and notes even though Mr. Satō hadn’t finished his lecture. Mr. Satō managed to bring his lesson to a close and headed towards the door to the classroom, silent. She steeled her resolve and stood up, running up to him as he stood in the doorway. She wanted to

thank him wholeheartedly for his efforts. When she pointed at a passage in her textbook and asked the question she had prepared too late to bring up in class, Mr. Satō's face broke out into a smile, as she had expected, his bulky glasses nearing her notes. The girl flinched at his terrible bad breath. And—contrary to her thoughts—she noticed the way Mr. Satō, as a man, had of getting close to female students as he encroached on her space now. Upset at her own foolishness, she blinked stiffly, and somehow forced back her tears. Shame began to burn hot through her whole body. The group of boys talked behind her back and ran off, and the girls in the corner of the classroom scowled at her.

She tore at the base of her tongue with three fingers, wondering if her internal organs would spew out. Bitter liquid snaked up her throat, and, enduring the discomfort of not being able to cough, she twisted the handle. She spat out her saliva into the running water of the toilet bowl.

Four.

Ichirō Morimoto appeared at the designated café at the exact time Keiko had arranged to meet him. He had fine features and a delicate appearance, but he didn't differ all that much from the image her imagination had conjured up after hearing his appraising voice on the other end of the phone. Keiko stood up from her chair and bowed in greeting to Morimoto, who was standing in the doorway. He recognized her instantly and headed towards her table.

Morimoto sat down, pulling a cigarette from his coat pocket. When she saw the cigarette carton, Keiko recalled the same small navy blue boxes of Short Peaces scattered around her older sister's apartment.

There weren't very many phone numbers written in her sister's address book that had been in her handbag. Some had names that had either been listed as a single character of the alphabet or were crossed out with a thick horizontal line—in the end, there were only five numbers that were legible and could be traced to the original caller. Keiko scrawled those five numbers on a memo pad and dialed. The first one was no longer in use, according to the voice on the tape, and the second one hung up, saying that no one by that name was available. Ichirō Morimoto, who answered the phone, was the third number.

Holding a cigarette between his fingers, Morimoto put it in his mouth without lighting it.

“It was suicide?”

Even though she had turned over the words she would use to answer in her mind while she waited on Morimoto, Keiko was carried away by a strange anxiety, like she had mixed up the word order.

“...No, it was an accident. They said it was a heart attack. She drank and got into the tub. She left the water running.”

“...”

“I discovered my sister when she was already dead. It really was just by chance, but I got her address from her about over a month ago—before then I didn't know where she was, or what she was doing... The day I found her, I just—for some reason—wanted to look for her apartment, so I went there planning on surprising her.”

Seeing how Morimoto remained silent, Keiko cut herself off.

“I—want to know about my sister. Mr. Morimoto, were you friends with her?” With Morimoto not answering, she asked, “Do you know where the apartment where my sister

died is?” She continued: “It’s about a ten minute walk from S Station—no, around fifteen minutes... Mr. Morimoto, did you not know that?”

Morimoto, unsurprisingly, remained silent and lit his cigarette, not answering.

The waitress placed a coffee down in front of him. He looked annoyed at the rough way she slapped the cup down on the table, and Keiko also felt like her nerves were strangely rubbed the wrong way by it. Morimoto mashed his cigarette on top of the ashtray.

“How about we go to a bar? This place is pissing me off,” he said, and stood up. Before Keiko could nod, he turned and walked to the register. Morimoto’s body—which had a tall, solid build—seemed unsteady in some way or another. Keiko realized, then, that it was because his right leg had a slight limp. For about an hour after, Keiko listened to Morimoto talk with her eyes lowered. The coke he had set in front of Keiko had melted, turning into discolored sugar water.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

During their conversation, Morimoto said that any number of times. Keiko realized that his bloodshot eyes weren’t just moist from drinking. The whiskey in his glass was getting less and less, but his tone of voice wasn’t changing.

Morimoto occasionally strained his lower jaw, keeping his mouth stiffly shut, and nodded like he was remembering something.

“I can’t talk about things in order from the beginning. Since I got that phone call from you, all sorts of things within me—like the few memories I have of the year I lived with her, stuff like that—have been hounding me, flashing by, and they won’t go away. Unable to disappear, it just burns, like it’s scratching and clawing at something.

“We broke up and two years passed. I got married in June of last year. That was in the summer, but I suddenly got a call from her at my workplace. She was worrying about how my right leg was doing. I hadn’t heard her voice in a while, but she sounded energetic, and I was relieved. When we talked about my marriage, she congratulated me a couple of times, and then we ended the call. At that time, it seemed to me like the time I spent with her was a thing of the distant past, and, of course—probably because I had just gotten married—I felt like what I had with her was over. But it was strange. And then, as the days passed, there wasn’t one where I didn’t think back on her. Why in the world... Why now... With no time to even think about the reason, I was reminded of her, and I wanted to see her so badly that my heart ached as helplessly as if I was in love for the first time. I even turned to my wife once and called her by your sister’s name. I should’ve asked her about where she was living, or at least where she worked, I lamented. ‘I’ll probably go to work today, and maybe get a call from her’—with that anticipation, I would leave the house. Days and months passed, and even though I waited, no call came. That’s how it was. ‘It was stupid to say that I got married; it would’ve been better not to say anything.’ I even thought things like that and blamed my wife.

“It’s ironic. My wife doesn’t know about what’s going on with me, and she wouldn’t be capable of fathoming that I was tormenting myself over a girl who I didn’t even know the whereabouts of. I was struck by the dark realization of how troubled and bitter and cruel the hearts of people can be. That realization ricocheted and hit me right in my side, too. I wondered how well I had understood her. I knew she was suffering, harboring something. But it just went around in circles in her head, and, finally, there was no place left for me, and she knew that, too, and just asked me for open-mindedness and

protection on my end of things. I'll be honest with you—she was way too much for me to handle. It was just that I had had it with her. But she left before I could say anything, in the end.

“I work as a chef. I left school in the middle of a term and took a tuna boat all the way to Africa and Brazil, where I worked. If I hadn't met her, I might be on that boat right now.

“When was that... I had a good friend from high school, a guy named Kōji. I went to his usual bar with him and his brother to drink, just the three of us. She was working there. She said that she hadn't been employed there for very long, but it was love at first sight for me. Kōji felt the same way, and, after a while—when even my eyes said how I felt—he told me with a weak, bitter smile that he wished he hadn't brought me along.

“Actually, I remember that it was a remarkably hot and humid day. We invited her back to my room and the four of us drank. By that time, she and I had come to talk a lot, always in the snack bar, of course, and even though I heard rumors about her from the bar's customers, I would pass them off as a joke, saying that I didn't expect her to make that kind of face. Kōji, who had a one-track mind, insisted in an earnest manner that she would never be that kind of girl. His older brother was his older brother. In his heart of hearts he couldn't help but be curious about her, all the while maintaining an uninterested look on his face—every person is unique, after all. I was the one who proposed we go to a party. When Kōji leaned across the counter and boasted to her, ‘Next Monday, Morimoto is gonna cook, so will you come?’ she quickly said yes. I was happy, but when I saw this girl who readily jumped at the chance, I wondered a little dejectedly, ‘Are those rumors really true?’ I made the escabeche she liked; Kōji played his guitar, his strong suit; and we gave her a

warm welcome. Kōji's brother was the type of guy who would proclaim how bored he was, and always smirked as he listened to Kōji and I go on and on about her nearby.

“That night, Kōji's brother started lecturing on dialectics, shouting, ‘Words, words, words,’ repeatedly and making a speech. Well, not really a speech—it was more like he was glaring at the girl with a force that seemed to lash out. He thrust his hands into his long hair, tearing at it, upset, as he talked on and on. Kōji and I both knew that that kind of bullshit from his brother was a means of staving off boredom. However, because I knew this was his way of catching a top-class chick (he always said it was ‘the best way to score an impertinent woman’) deep down I was uncomfortable, and I was about to shout at him and send him home if he didn't finish his lecture soon. The girl nodded along patiently at his speech while drinking her alcohol. She didn't appear to be impressed with Kōji's brother's loquacity, and her refreshing behavior, taking it all in good stride, gradually contained those agitated feelings within me.

“‘It is all—’

“The girl, who had been silent up until then, opened her mouth. As a result, everyone stared at her face.

“‘It is all multilayering continuities and discontinuities repeating, cyclical recurrences, and endless regeneration, obviously.’

“‘Oh?’ Kōji's brother said, leaning on one elbow and resting his hand on his chin. It seemed like he thought that she had been tricked by his speech.

“‘Come to think of it, someone once said it was like a ghost story. I'm not sure I can judge that, but... Maybe I'm just afraid to judge it with my person and not my head. I think I'm also scared.’

“‘Ghost story?’

“‘...’

“She shut her mouth and contorted her face, like she hated the fact that the conversation was continuing.

“In the room, which quieted and had the kind of energy as though a hand grenade had been tossed into it, Kōji’s guitar sounded loud. Without knowing why, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her face.

“Before I became aware of it, in the middle of the night, the girl decided to stay over; she was in the bed, and we laid two futons out vertically in the empty space and slept as we liked. The four of us were pretty drunk. When she finished doing the dishes, she sat on the bed and silently began taking her clothes off. All of them. I was still drinking whiskey by the table, and Kōji was sprawled out on the futon smoking. The girl, naked, walked to the doorway and turned off the lights to the room, and then clung to Kōji like she was throwing herself at him. In the gloomy room, her pale body was entwined with Kōji’s. Kōji’s brother came out of the bathroom and saw it, and he almost let out an instantaneous cry, but him and I—how do you say—we were overawed by the intensity of it and couldn’t open our mouths. Because Kōji’s brother knew that I liked the girl, he looked around as if he had nowhere to put himself, took off his clothes as if he was going to cast them aside, and then crawled under the terry cloth blanket.

“‘Hey, Icchan.’

“I realized she was looking up at me from beside Kōji. I averted my gaze and didn’t answer. I was on edge from all of the complicated emotions I was feeling. Then, she rose

up from Kōji's futon, and now fell on Kōji's brother, and their voices began to rise as they moaned.

“But it felt like I was witnessing one act in a play. The four of us' behavior and thoughts were truly disconnected; even though we were touching, we were disconnected. For instance, jealousy or envy, or hatred—if there was that kind of simple emotional clash, well, fine, but there was no kind of emotion at all that could be summarized like that. I had known a number of girls who were so starved for stimulation that they would sleep with any guy without batting an eyelid. But this girl didn't have that kind of parched emotion to her. On a whim, just for fun—that kind of atmosphere was also absent. Rather, it was like it was a challenge, like she was trying to break through—it had that kind of force to it.

“‘Hey, Icchan.’

“While rubbing the area of Kōji's brother's lower abdomen, she called out to me again. Her narrowed eyes glittered. Her voice also got a little hoarse and inciting, as if she were a shrine maiden, I thought absently, feeling like my arms and legs were being painlessly removed from the trunk of my body.

“Finally, I stood up. Sitting was becoming painful. I thought to myself, ‘If we're disconnected, mustn't we have our own disconnected ends?’ and was about to leave the room.

“‘Icchan, don't go.’

“As I opened the door, Kōji's voice came from behind me. I turned to look back over my shoulder, and Kōji had spun around; as he looked at the girl stroking his brother's hair, he said:

“‘*Select as you like, please.*’

“I unconsciously turned to look in the girl’s direction. Kōji’s brother awkwardly pulled his hand away from hers and put a cigarette in his mouth; the girl began playing with the edge of the terry-cloth blanket.

“‘Select—as—you—like—please.’

“Kōji said the same words as before, but more strongly this time, putting a short pause behind each one.

“I was pissed. Why the hell was he being so mean to her; there was no need for an end like that. I wanted to put my thoughts on a shelf and punch him. However, I also understood Kōji’s emotions more than enough. He cared about the girl. But, at that time, I thought it was insulting to say it to the girl in that way. In an instant, with her face twisted as she stared steadily back at Kōji, the girl, as though she was on the verge of challenging him, flew at his body. Even as Kōji covered his mouth in hers, he repeated those words any number of times. I headed outside. The windows of the elementary school across the expressway glowed in the moonlight—I remember that. Standing there, I masturbated and, for the first time in a long time, shed tears.

“Not long after that, she brought a few bags and came to live with me. She quit working at the bar at night so we could spend time together, deciding to get a part-time job at a bookstore nearby. While I took on the role of making our meals since she hated cooking, she said it was delicious and always ate a lot. But—regardless of how good the food actually was—there were a lot of times when I felt like she wasn’t really tasting it at all. Those times, it was like something was threatening her, forcing her to put it in her mouth, and she hacked up a lung while she scarfed it down. And, since she’d talk in the middle of

eating, as though she had just thought of something important, the dining table became a terrific spectacle with all of the things that had been in her mouth being sprayed across it.

“‘Stop eating like that! It’s gross,’ I yelled at her one day when I just couldn’t take it anymore. ‘Eat slowly. You know—*slowly*,’ I tried again, saying it like I was trying to calm her down, but she just started sobbing, her mouth still working as she did, and her tears were falling everywhere. I thought that she looked like a little kid, and I made an effort to pull her into my arms and just hold her. From that day on, she didn’t eat like that again.

“A few days after that, she held my face in both of her hands while we were on the futon and said, ‘Thanks to you, Icchan, I understand one important thing.’ When I asked her what that was, she said, ‘You don’t have to laugh when you don’t want to laugh, and you don’t have to make yourself talk when you don’t want to talk—it doesn’t inconvenience anyone.’

“She pulled the futon over her head and covered her face, and there was something so endearing about her—I simply held her close. I found out she was Korean that night. I just took it in stride and talked about my coworkers from my time on the boat, and about the girl I fell in love with when we went to have fun in Korea. Then, she suddenly spoke:

“‘I want to give you my virginity.’

“She then urged me to perform an act that night that I had only jokingly done before with Kōji.

“It was after the New Year started. Her left cheek started to twitch. Kōji’s brother said it was a sign of hysteria—a tic or something like that—but then she started acting weird. I worked the late shift and didn’t get back to our apartment until around eleven at

night, and there was no sign of her. ‘Where could she be?’ I wondered. She was crouched naked by the washing machine on the balcony. It was a frigid day in the middle of winter—and late at night, to boot—so I threw open the sliding door and picked her up. It was as if she had frozen in place, like water, cowering there like that. I was at a total loss as for what to do—at any rate, when I put her to bed in the futon, I bundled her head and shoulders in a blanket and rubbed her arms with all my might. Once it seemed like she’d come to, I asked her why she had been out there like that, but no matter what, she wouldn’t answer.

“She had a habit of wearing socks when she went to bed. Even though I told her it was weird and to quit it, as you might expect, she’d have her socks on before I knew it.

“‘I don’t care when I die. I’ll be able to pass into the afterlife whenever if I keep my socks on.’ She said that and laughed. Really, it was that she hated the idea of a frog clinging to the soles of her feet. ‘I don’t care when I die—’ Her words back then hinted at the incident that was to follow.

“I returned home one day and she was still sleeping. Since she looked unwell, I asked her if she had a cold, and she said it was just because she was a little tired. I threw my arms around her drunkenly. Then—in this terrible voice—she cried out in pain. I was surprised and, at the sound of her pain, I yanked back the futon and took off her nightclothes. The calves of her legs and her thighs were all covered in bruises, and her wrists and chest were wrapped in gauze, the bandages soaked through with blood.

“‘Who the hell did this to you? Where did you get hurt?’ I jumped to a hasty conclusion and pressed her with questions. The whole time, she kept silent. I was certainly shocked when the only information I could get out of her was that she did it to herself, but

because the tic I mentioned before had just gotten worse, I didn't press her on why she had done it.

"There were a lot of things like that. I hadn't been in her life even a year yet, and I was already starting to get tired of it. It was the events of one night in particular that really made me decide to end things with her. Although, she left before I brought it up.

"That night, she was in the bath. I had gotten out first and was drinking a beer while I watched TV. After a while, I thought I would wash her back for her, and when I peeked into the bathroom, she was holding onto the rim of the bathtub with both hands and just lying there, limply, on the tiles. When I lifted her up, thinking that she was just dizzy, she moved her red eyes vacantly in my direction, and—with a sudden start—began sobbing while calling out, 'Icchan, Icchan.'

"It felt like it was happening again, to be honest with you. I put her to bed and, while I calmed down, I was a little pissed off.

"'There was an earthquake earlier, Icchan.'

"'Now that you mention it, it was shaking a little.'

"I answered like that, not knowing what she was going to say, and she began talking.

"'Icchan, if a big earthquake happened, like the Great Kantō earthquake, do you think Koreans would be massacred again? I wonder if we'd be made to pronounce, 'One yen, fifty sen; ten yen, fifty sen,' and stabbed with bamboo spears. But I don't think that sort of thing could happen now—society back then was really different. And most of us can pronounce things exactly like Japanese people now. Hey, Icchan, even still—if people did end up getting killed, hold onto me tightly because I'm your lover and stay with—with me? No, nowadays there'll never be a massacre. But if there is, you'll be badly off; you'll

have to kill me. I'll run and try to escape, and behind me there'll be crazy Japanese carrying bamboo spears and swords, and I won't be able to get away, and they'll stab me in the back and in the chest, too, and I'll be covered in blood. Ichirō, it hurts, so much—the other day, I grabbed the kitchen knife that you polished. My body was numb and tingling and excited, like that feeling when you have sex. I feel like I understand why I hate cooking. I'm scared—I can't get enough of that tingling feeling. I took that knife and I cut at my chest and my wrists. It hurt. And the blood—it just came out with a whoosh. I wanted to do it deeper, but I was afraid, wondering, 'Will more blood come out?' So, then, I hit my legs with a hammer, and, of course, it hurt. Hey, Icchan, I wonder if I'll be slaughtered—hey, what's going to happen? If I'm not killed, am I Japanese? But what should I do—it hurts, and there's so much blood.'

"She got scared and shrank in on herself, clenching her fists suddenly and growing tense while she repeated things to herself—strange, incoherent ramblings. She left our apartment after some time had passed. There was no warning in advance, but I read a note she had left behind, and I had a hunch.

"'Icchan, I made *escabeche*. I don't think it's as good as yours, but eat it, please.'

"She wrote that."

Five.

The rainstorm rattled the windows. The four sides of the room seemed to approach her every time the noise swelled, like they were going to crush her. Sometimes just the floor moved, and sometimes the walls on either side would inch up to her. She thought something was sent flying by the wind and made a dull, metallic *clunk* outside the window;

the ceiling and the floor both drew close, and her body was left flattened. The storm, which seemed to go on and on, was a torturous hallucination that was limitless, repeating over and over, and she almost passed out several times.

She concentrated on the nerves in her ears and stopped breathing, as if she was rejecting the horror of that torture. While she wasn't breathing, she intended to count how much rain hit the windowpanes. She could feel the tiny, innumerable raindrops scattering before they reached the window, intermixed with the driving downpour. Instead of the number of raindrops, she began to imagine the look and texture of them.

Suddenly, mixed in with the sound of the rain, she heard a rough noise. Something had started to crudely hit the glass. She was suddenly brought back to reality with a start, her whole body stiffening. She lifted her gaze from the futon and stared in the direction of the window. The door and the window were both locked—she had checked, several times, she tried to reassure herself as she shivered. The windowpanes continued to rattle. Her voice—to call for help—didn't come out. The other party knew this, and continued to pound the glass with confidence and a reassured strength. She gave up, got up, and pulled open the curtains. However, there was no one outside the window. She changed her mind, deciding that the noise had happened in the strange hallucination, and let out a sigh of relief, relaxing and opening the window. The rain, along with the wind, swept into the room.

It was when she went to close the window and held onto the windowsill. A person's hands reached out from the sides, grabbing the edge. The next thing she knew, a man was standing there, looking up at her face. He threw the raincoat he was wearing inside, and moved with agility as he jumped into the bedroom. She expected Toshiyuki. It had never occurred to her that it might be Toshihiko beating on the window. Her strength left her

entire body, and she sat down, her back rubbing against the wall, little by little, as she slid down. The window was closed and the sound of the rain receded, and, chasing after it, she lost consciousness. Toshihiko pushed her legs apart, rougher than Toshiyuki.

Toshihiko disappeared out the window with the raincoat under his arm. She couldn't make out the words that he spat at her, a look of disdain on his face. But she understood whatever it was he had said.

She got as far away from the futon as she could and crawled onto the tatami. Curling up in a corner of the room, she wrapped her arms around her knees. She bunched up her shoulders, trying to tamp down on her weeping. However, one after the other, her tears spilled over, running down her cheeks. She held them in her mouth, biting down on them. Their bitterness grew, sliding down her throat. By chewing her tears intently, she was trying to make herself known to herself, to make herself accept everything she saw, everything that happened to her.

It was not long after that that she found out she was pregnant. Her mother had decided that the girl's partner was their employee, Takaichi. Takaichi was a young man who had been working in her stepfather's office for about a year and was the same age as Toshihiko; however, even though he definitely had feelings for her, he wasn't the type to speak or act on them very easily. While her mother had arbitrarily decided that Takaichi was involved, there were two things that had happened in quick succession that made it so that she couldn't help but assume that was the case.

One month before that night, on her way home from school, the girl unexpectedly ran into Takaichi on the train platform. As they laughed about how they happened to ride the same train, they walked back to the house together. On the way, they stopped at a café

and talked about different things, and when they got home it was past eleven. When she tried to open the sliding door, it was locked from within, even though the light was on inside the house. Takaichi, who lived in an apartment on the back of the house, was about to leave when she called him back, and they headed to the back door. It was also shut. She and Takaichi knocked on the door to the entryway, and they heard a door open from behind the frosted glass in the direction of the living room; her mother came out and unlocked the front door. “Who shut it?” Her mom asked, her face puzzled. When the girl made to take off her shoes, Toshiyuki’s face emerged between the spaces in the railing on the stairs, and he spoke.

“The lovebirds sure got back late—just what were they doing on their detour, huh?”

Takaichi glared back at Toshiyuki with an indignant expression while staying silent, and headed back to his apartment. A few days later, the same thing happened again.

“Just tell me who it is, and I won’t scold you.” Her mother continued to speak, gripping the girl’s arm tightly. “You and your blood—this mother of yours—are tied together in this world of the living... I knew it. It’s Takaichi.”

Assuming that the person who had gotten her daughter pregnant was, indeed, Takaichi, there was no bite to her words, because her mother thought she would just have them get married right away. The girl understood that, and it made her stay silent all the more. Her mother started to shake the girl’s knee, still gripping her arm. Her mother’s five fingers, which were thick at their bases, moved over her black stockings. A purple ring and a diamond ring, gobbled up by the meat of her middle and ring fingers, blurred and sparkled before the girl’s eyes.

This mother she had now was undoubtedly happy. She stared at her mother's hand as she thought that. While her stepfather's drunken violence—which had briefly stopped when he had quit drinking—was starting to come back, it was probably no great hardship to this mother. Her mother was Korean, and, beyond that, she had had to overcome her indebtedness to her second husband for having a child from another marriage in her own way. No one could find fault with her mother, who only ever wore Japanese clothes, for being a Korean. Her stepfather ultimately seemed dependent on her mother, who worked hard and put up with a variety of things. Her mother, in her heart, must have been looking back on her father, who had returned home to Jeju.

“I’ve had it with Koreans—I’ll never get married to one again,” her mother had said on the night she first met her stepfather, pulling the little girl into her arms. While the girl had pretended to be asleep, she could hear her mother speaking to herself. She brought back the day she had last seen her father in her mind. The lights in each house in the neighborhood had been extinguished and it was completely silent; it was probably the middle of the night. She had been listening to her mother and father scream at each other while she was crying on the futon, until she got up, afraid. She couldn’t hear her mother’s voice anymore. With a feeling as though she had had an ominous premonition, she got up, and when she went to the kitchen she could only see her father crouching down. Tiptoeing around fragments of porcelain and broken glass that had been scattered about, she headed outside.

She climbed up the steep hill of the sloping road, and when she looked down it she saw small the figure of her mother, her back to her. The voice of her mother, her nightclothes fluttering as she cried out in pain, “*Aigoo, aigoo,*” tore through the

wavelength of the stillness of the night and reverberated in the girl's ears. Her mother disappeared around a bend in the road. The girl plopped down where she stood and stared vacantly in the vicinity of the corner where her mother had vanished.

When she woke up and opened her eyes, she was asleep, being held on her father's lap. She turned her eyes towards the direction of the bed, but her mother wasn't there. Her father's chest was warm; she forgot the dread and fear she always felt towards him, and started to doze off again. Her father covered her eyelids with a large, rough palm.

Her mother's hand, with the sparkling rings on it, continued to shake her knee. She stared back at her mother's face. This mother could be happy—if that was the case, then so be it.

"You're not very obedient, you know. What's with that look? I'm going to tell your father all about this. He's going to have to have a talk with Takaichi." Her mother stood. The girl looked up at her.

This mother would never cry out, "*Aigoo, aigoo,*" anymore, no matter how sad or bitter she was. The rough stiffness of his jaw, his big nose that was red because of his drinking, his sour-breathed sighs, his drunken violence and poverty and the lack of any redeeming qualities in her father— The girl closed her eyes and hung her head. The strong sense of nostalgia she felt for her father's coarse, large hands made her chest constrict. "It was Toshiyuki," she murmured.

A few minutes later, she heard the sound of her mother and stepfather arguing in the living room, and she came to her senses. Toshiyuki's piercing shriek collided with something and was crushed with a grunt. The tatami the girl was sitting on quickly started to go flat, and she felt her whole body rapidly beginning to sink. Before she knew it,

Toshihiko was standing there. He sat down in front of her and shook her shoulders with both of his hands.

“Hey, don’t you ever say it was me, you got it? *Ever.*”

She was choked by his body odor and turned her face away. She had turned her face away on that rainy night, too, staring at the raincoat that had been tossed in front of her. The raindrops had glittered in the darkness, the raincoat seeming to hold its breath and crouch like a small animal.

Toshihiko began to rub his hands together. Maybe he was uneasy because she remained silent, without even nodding.

“Hey, please—like that, yeah.”

Seeing her finally nod, unable to withstand his body odor, Toshihiko got up and left the room.

She stood up and walked quietly into the shadows of the fusuma in the living room.

“You absolute bastard. Shame on you—shame! What the hell have you done to your family, huh?”

Toshiyuki’s voice was interspersed with his depressed groaning. He had burst into tears. “It wasn’t me. It was Takaichi. I saw her doing it with Takaichi. It wasn’t me, I swear.” Sniffing at the snot running out of his nose, he sobbed convulsively, screaming, “What—What— Why the hell are you siding with a Korean...? Dad... Mom dies and you bring in this mother and her daughter... It’s suspicious. I’m leaving this house. It’s all suspicious.”

Toshiyuki, her stepfather, and her mother were all silent. The girl quietly returned to her room. She spread out the futon and crawled into it; it was nice and chill inside. She thought back to Keiko, who had gone to school. If she hadn’t come to this house, Keiko

might have had to take on her role and bear it all. The same commotion that occurred today would've happened sooner or later—just a slightly different adaptation, undoubtedly.

In long intervals, she heard the howling cries of Toshiyuki. She closed her eyes. Without thinking of anything, in a moment, she quickly fell asleep.

Six.

Keiko looked at a mirror that had been installed in the phonebooth above the yellow telephone. Maybe it was because of her lack of sleep, but her eyes were bleary, her cheeks swelling in some places and dry in others. She started tracing the outline of those scabies-like patches with her finger. There was the sound of someone beating on the door to the phonebooth. Keiko came back to her senses, grabbing her handbag and stepping outside. Just then, a strong gust of wind blew the piece of notebook paper she was holding away. Keiko followed it with her eyes as the scrap of paper danced above the road and disappeared when a passing bicycle went by. She had only just dialed the phone number marked “Kayo” now and set a time and a place to meet. She had called the other remaining number multiple times since yesterday, but no one had picked up. She turned towards U Station, the place they had agreed upon.

For Keiko, the conversation she had had with Ichirō Morimoto last night was overly vivid. But, separated by the span of a day, when she tried to think back on her, her older sister remained distant and hazy. Morimoto had talked about her sister as he had viewed her, and Keiko traced the image of her sister that revealed itself from his description. However, the form of her sister in her last moments flashed across the backs of her eyelids, canceling out the incomplete remnants of Keiko's imagination. Morimoto must've had

memories of her sister that he couldn't talk about in full. And Morimoto's love for her was also something that only her older sister, and no one but her, would understand—

Heading down and standing at U Station, Keiko turned and walked in the direction of the ticket gate. She knew that the wide river she had seen from the train car window, which was bordered by grassy banks, was the Arakawa River, and Keiko felt like she was on a little outing. Below the platforms of U Station, the urban sprawl, which looked like it had been assembled in strictly neutral colors, was spread out, dull.

Kayo was already standing at the ticket barrier waiting for her. She greeted her and Keiko nodded back, following her across the wide crosswalk in front of the station. Kayo went into a café and sat down in a corner booth. Keiko's eyelids felt heavy, maybe because she was staring with wide eyes at the other woman, and she felt under the weather in some way.

“It was difficult. I don't know what to say.”

Kayo had taken off her coat; her body swelled out in three stages: her breasts, her stomach, and her abdomen. Her limbs were slender compared to the thickness of her torso, as if they were just bone, and her teeth—blackened from cigarettes—and saggy cheeks gave the impression of a landscape growing wild.

Keiko had briefly told Kayo about what had happened since she had found out about her sister's death.

“Miss Keiko, how old did you say you were?”

“Twenty.”

“Ah, then you're different from that child in three respects.”

“Hm?”

“Coming-of-age ceremony, huh?”

Kayo held her tongue as though she was remembering something. Keiko was beginning to get a favorable impression of the way the other woman spoke, the clear way she ended her words or sentences. Far from Keiko’s first impression of them, Kayo’s eyes were unexpectedly kind when you saw them up close, the whites of them not cloudy at all.

“I heard a little about you, Miss Keiko, from that child.”

Keiko had heard the same thing when she met with Morimoto, but she was still shocked that her sister had talked about her; it was because the guilt over not treating her sister kindly was coming out as regret.

“Thank you for letting me know.”

Just like Morimoto, Kayo said that several times. Her protruding gut seemed painful, and when she reseated herself, sitting with her legs kicked out to the side, she rested her thin elbows on the back of the chair and propped her tilted up face with her hands. The sunlight that shined in from the window enlivened the rough texture of her cheeks.

“I don’t even know where to begin. I’ve been thinking about that child at every turn for the past six months since she disappeared. I thought she’d be holding steady, since it’s her, but odd rumors reached my ears, and it made me feel uneasy.

“That child had a job at a small bar I would visit on my way home from work. I’ve been single all my life up to this age, so I always thought she was cute, like a daughter, and since she lived right next door to my apartment, at night when the store closed we would walk home together, and she started staying at my place, and we soon grew close.

“She was a child who acted like an adult and was mature for her age, to the point that it surprised me. And yet, she would get frightened by tiny bugs, and when the rain fell, she’d start laughing with a screech and rush outside, having a childlike tendency to get waylaid by trivial things. She had good looks and a good disposition, so I asked her why she didn’t look for a day job. Then, she answered me readily:

“‘It’s because I like alcohol.’

“She was, in fact, a kid who could hold her liquor. It seemed like her tremendous tolerance for alcohol was what made her useful to the bar. However, one day, seeing her in my apartment, throwing up again and again and seeming like she was in a lot of pain, at a loss, I said:

“‘What’s a young child like you going to do if they drink like this? It’s bad for your body and unseemly, you know.’

“I couldn’t stand to watch it. She spoke in fits and starts while she breathed out painfully:

“‘When I drink alcohol, I feel like I can be on good terms with God— Usually, God is bad-tempered and selfish, but if I drink as much as I can and calm him down, before very long, he’ll be in a good mood.’

“She was asleep before I knew it.

“The next day, she asked me, ‘Do you believe in God?’

“‘Whether you believe in him or not, God exists. He’s always there,’ I said, letting out a long sigh. When I looked at that child I decided it—I thought I’d try to take her to a meeting for my church once. While I knew my religion had a bit of a bad reputation publicly, and that my coworkers at my company kept me at arm’s length because of it, I

forced that kid to go to a meeting, even though she insisted that she didn't want to. She wouldn't talk to me for a while after that. As you'd probably expect, I was lonely, being rejected by a child whom I had grown so close to, so one Monday I went to her apartment and apologized.

“‘I don't care about that.’

“That child said that, all matter-of-fact. She also said she didn't have any preconceived notions. When I was silent, having nothing to do, she asked, ‘Ms. Kayo, what does it mean to preach down to someone?’ She asked me that. I jumped to the hasty conclusion that she was starting to develop an interest in the faith because I took her to the meeting.

“‘Driving away the false gods and teachings that cling to people, and introducing people to correct, good teachings; people experience misfortune and accidents because bad gods grasp at them. So we drive those gods away with our faith. It's about surmounting, but it's also still connected to saving others.’

“I started to explain slowly, so as to make her understand. However, all of a sudden, with a start, I stopped talking.

“Miss Keiko, you know how sometimes that child would get a unique look in her eyes—? No, instead of a look, a gaze, that gaze she would show you suddenly, at any given moment. How do I put it...? At first glance, hers seemed to be eyes filled with cynical contempt, but it was deeper than that—like they were masses of despair that had become so embedded in her body that it was a habit. That gaze of hers was fleeting, and soon her face returned to its original expression, but the tender look that followed was likely to pierce a person's heart all the more. It seemed to me like, in that flash of a look, that glint

of disdain that should've been turned outward and released was quickly refracted and bent inward. That time I stopped speaking with a start was because of that gaze from that child. But then I realized that she had her same old kind face, as always.

“I had intentionally never asked that child about her past or the circumstances of her home life because that topic of conversation seemed to be the thing she hated most. But it wasn't until nearly a year later that I started to understand a little what circumstances that child was burdened with, or what was at the core of her.

“That day, I got back late because I had worked overtime. The lights in that child's apartment were on, even though that was usually the time when she still had to be at the bar. I thought it was strange, and when I went to her apartment she was in her futon, shaking all over with a red face. She had caught a cold; she had a very high fever. I immediately cooled her face down, gave her some medicine, and contacted her boss at the bar. Since it was late at night and her fever was finally going down, I was also relieved, but in the morning when she woke up her fever had come back, and she was tossing and turning like she was in pain.

“‘How about you go to the doctor's today and get examined? At this rate...’

“When I said that, despite being unsteady, she gave me a terribly menacing look and started to shout, ‘Don't be so nosy! Just leave.’ Then—maybe because she was weak—she quickly stopped speaking, and before very long wept. I didn't know what was going on and was just confused; I really tried with everything in my power to calm her down, but she wouldn't stop crying. I took some time off from work in the end, and—even though she said she was okay and I could just go home—I was worried about her and I nursed her back to health all day long. She was so tired of crying that she slept until the evening. Her

fever also finally started to go down and she could manage to drink some milk. She talked about a lot of different things that night. For the first time, she seemed to be comfortable with me.

“That child said she had gotten pregnant in high school, although I didn’t ask about her partner. Since then, she had been terrified of the doctor’s. That was the first time I had heard she was Korean—according to her, if a Korean patient came in, the Japanese doctors had conspired with each other beforehand that they would kill them in an untraceable manner. Whether in internal medicine or in surgery—especially the department of obstetrics and gynecology, who were told they should take the womb and ovaries of Koreans to keep them from multiplying.

“‘How can you believe something so ridiculous? You’re paranoid! Are you kidding?’

“I asked and unthinkingly yelled that. However, that child was dead serious.

“‘I don’t care when I die, because I have no choice in the matter. But I don’t want to be killed like that; I can’t stand the thought of it.’

“‘Hey, don’t talk about dying or being killed like that so readily. What if a god of death approaches you, aiming to take advantage of the opportunity—keep your mind strong! I’ll teach you a good Nichiren chant, okay?’

“When I said that the child just laughed a little. I felt a bit relieved, but then I heard what she said next, and I noticed that my own face quickly paled.

“‘Ms. Kayo, I had decided. It was when I was twenty. I went to the hospital, and requested that they take out my uterus and ovaries. I planned on that surgery being my own sort of coming-of-age ceremony, but no matter the department of obstetrics and gynecology

I went to, I was refused. ‘There are other methods of birth control,’ they said, and wouldn’t handle it. I went to a number of OB/GYNs, but as expected, it was no good. At one point, I couldn’t stand the thought of myself doing nothing but thinking about it, so I decided to just die, and considered all kinds of ways to commit suicide. However, I realized that there were some things that I couldn’t understand just by saying, ‘Die,’—some gigantic, large presence. It was a wholly unexpected flash; it took my breath away. That gigantic someone knew everything, even how I had writhed in agony up until that point. What had been rooted in my mind in an instant disappeared. It was like being in water—no wind, no sound, no color, nothing, as if it were a vacuum. I felt like I was left behind there, in the water. As for me, I just want to make sure that everything surrounding me is just—I felt like I could quietly nod back, like I could stare at them at exact eye-level and not shrink back in fright—no, I was certain, like I could smile serenely.’

“I kept glancing at that child’s feverish eyes, which were moist and sparkling. They weren’t eyes that were crying. They were eyes that showed a deep will restraining some immense power. I was at a loss for words as I looked into those eyes that glowed so strangely; I felt like I was pinned down by them.

“That child disappeared suddenly less than half a month later. Her apartment was an empty husk, and I wondered when everything had been taken out. Her boss at the bar was so furious that they said things that I thought I’d never believe, but because other customers there said the same thing... That kid...it seems like she had been doing something like prostitution the whole time. People tend to exaggerate stuff like that, but soon several people came forward to say that they had seen her standing in town and calling

men over. Me, I read sutras every day for that child. It was around that time that I finally gave up hope of her ever appearing again.”

Seven.

She thought that she had laid in bed just for the heck of it, but it seemed like she had fallen asleep before she knew it. She felt a chill from her neck to her chest and woke up with a sneeze; she had drifted off into a light sleep for a fair amount of time before she realized that the cold was the fault of the wind blowing in through a crack in the window. She saw the ends of the curtain fluttering, got up, and closed the window. A vertical sliver of the sky, which was blocked by the roof of the neighboring houses, oozed a dull brown. At that moment, she was unable to tell if it was dusk or dawn, and she looked at the clock. She had slept for less than an hour.

She pulled out a cigarette from the box she had left on the kitchen table and stuck it in her mouth. The things she had stolen that day were lined up on the table. There were three items of canned food: tomato juice, coke, and a tin of boneless ham. She lit her cigarette and, as she slowly exhaled the smoke, she pulled a paper package set by the pilfered goods closer. She opened it and pulled out a small pair of shoes from inside. The sneakers, which were patterned in a flower print, seemed like they would start walking where they sat in the palm of her hand even now.

When she had gone around the market that afternoon, she had passed a boutique dealing in children’s clothing and stopped in front of the storefront window. She let out a cry of nostalgia without realizing it. The mannequin of a little girl was wearing a pair of flower-patterned sneakers. The flowers weren’t cosmos, but—from a distance—when they

were small, they looked just like the sneakers from her memory. She was hardly in the habit of sleeping with her socks on anymore these days, but she could still vividly recall the agitation of that time she had flung her shoes down the road.

She placed the shoes on the floor and started drinking whiskey, staring at them. She blinked, with a start, a few times; she felt like the shoes were gradually getting bigger. She blinked and looked again—the shoes were lined up in the same place and were the same size. However, as she expected, they still seemed to be getting a little larger. She suddenly came to a realization and kept drinking her whiskey. The pain of the alcohol, which burnt her throat, brought back the slight feverishness of her body on that day and the lukewarm muddy water snaking around her legs, below her knees.

It wasn't as if her everyday life up to that moment, with the frog from the water and the hallucinatory events of those youthful days, was hinted at—

The memories began to flash by in rapid succession inside of her.

She sat in front of the yellowed cotton of the curtains. While the bed where her mother lay was between her and the curtains, in that one scene in her memories the bed and her mother both disappeared, just the curtains and her facing each other. On the other side of the curtains, there was the sound of splashing; some woman was eating. The diminishing body of her mother, who had been so soundly asleep that she had been afraid to wake her up, appeared every other frame, then disappeared. Her mother, who had begun to give off a stink from her genitals, was brought to the hospital when it was already too late. The name of the disease was uterine cancer. She stared at the curtains, pressing a hand to her chest, racked by pain. She hated the stench of the hospital room. However, the

thought of not bearing witness to her mother's last moments made her clench her teeth, and she endured it.

Her mother drew her last breath. That time, too, the woman in the bed next to hers was making noise eating, the sound of broth splashing.

Memories called forth more memories.

A female doctor, who seemed to like people, persistently tried to dissuade her.

“Actually, I won't inquire too deeply about why you want to do it. However, even if it's painful, there are a lot of women diligently raising children. I can introduce you to a good nursery school whenever you want, if you're so inclined. People, we never know when we'll meet a good person just going about our business, living our lives, so we shouldn't become desperate because of a moment of hopelessness. What in the world will you do the day that you find someone you like and want to have his children, hm? And you're still so young...”

The attempts of the doctor, who liked looking after others, to persuade her didn't stop there.

“It's an important life—an important future.”

The words of the doctor, who repeated her talking points over and over, tore at her ears. She raised her face.

“What do you mean by life? How is it possible for people to produce life? If they could do that, then you should be able to breathe life into that pen holder, or the medicine cabinet over there, or the porcelain on that shelf, or even this chair. They should be able to hold life. Why can't you do that? You say that you can create life, so why—”

“You— You're a little touched in the head, aren't you?”

Staring at the doctor, who had spoken while pushing the rims of her glasses down and looking up at her, she stood up.

The whiskey snaked down her throat and she coughed violently. She drank some water, but the coughing did not stop. It racked her entire body, and she squatted on the floor. She placed the sneakers in the palm of her hand. The shoes still seemed like they were getting bigger. She stood up and opened the door to the bathroom, twisting the tap on the tub. Water burst onto the floor of the bath with a tremendous sound. When she looked into the mirror on the washstand, her whiskey-drunk and wheezing face flared up red-hot.

In the mirror, the flushed faces of men overlapped with hers and began to dart by.

Receiving money, slowly unzipping their pants, holding their genitals in her mouth—that was enough to make men groan, their faces flush. The tip of her tongue and her saliva aroused them even more, and they would shove their genitals down her throat. Using the expressions of the aroused men to calculate, she posed in the most dramatic manner she could think of, and started to writhe in her own dizzying pleasure.

When she writhed like her entrails were burning, and the power of her body burst from every pore—that was the moment when her old self, turning towards the toilet bowl and tearing at the base of her tongue with three fingers, and the masochistic excitement from back then, roared back to life inside of her. The men finished the act, forgetting all about their raised voices or their genitals stuck down her throat.

She didn't permit sexual intercourse for herself or for her partners. She rejected sexual reproduction and forbade herself from the act, as well as the pleasure that she could get from it. The only man she had allowed to have sex with her was Ichirō Morimoto.

One night, after they did it, she spoke to him.

“Ichchan, get a vasectomy.”

“What? No way! Why are you bringing that up so suddenly? We’re being careful, so it’s alright.”

“It’s not; it’s not.”

She was at a loss for words. *You’re under the illusion of something, the greatest illusion that all people have fallen under, the illusion of the children of all mankind, just imagine—*

“Hey, why not?”

“I don’t like the idea, and I don’t want to.”

Then—like he was struck with an idea—he jumped to his feet and picked up the bottle of wine sitting on the table.

“Let’s play a fun game, huh?”

Like he had taught her to, she tried to uncork the wine bottle for him. He spoke in a frenzy and peered at her genitals. Anger surged swiftly up within her in that instant, and she snatched the wine from his hand. The bottle, which had been held aloft, tumbled onto the floor, rolling a couple of times and making a dull sound when it hit the ground. When she came to her senses, the back of Ichirō’s foot was covered in blood.

The girl in the mirror closed her eyes. She couldn’t recall Ichirō’s face. The faces of the various men whose names she didn’t know manifested themselves and then disappeared, and even the outline of Ichirō’s face refused to become fixed. She shut the door to the bathroom and sat at the table. She drank her whiskey. The last to emerge, with a start, was the boy’s face, and she lay down on the table.

It was just last night. While she was on her way back from the train station to her apartment, she heard footsteps approaching behind her in an alleyway along the railroad tracks. The alley—sandwiched between the thick copse of trees of a Shintō shrine and the tracks—was almost completely dark except for when a train went by, and the width of the road was barely enough for two adults to walk side by side. Her spine stiffening in surprise, she held her breath.

They're going to do something to you. Maybe even kill you. Her feet froze. The sound of the footsteps gradually drew near. A train passed by. She resolutely turned around. In the light flung by the windows of the train, the face of the person behind her emerged.

It was the round face of a boy, standing there, his hair cut so that it tapered at the back. His eyes were separated from one another to an extreme degree, the bridge of his nose was caved in and the nostrils were open wide, and his fat lower lip was wet with spit. His eyes, which seemed to look at her but were not able to fix their focus, were severely strabismic. The train went by and the area fell silent. However, the movements of the boy were visible to her eyes, which were already used to the dark.

“I’m young Toshio! Look, I’m young Toshio.”

The boy presented her with what looked like a commuter pass, tied to the belt of his pants by a small chain. His innocent laughter showed on his face as he inclined his head a little to the side. She was awestruck by that expression, and was left momentarily stupefied. With great difficulty, she managed to open her mouth.

“Let’s walk together until over there, okay?” The boy said.

“Okay.”

When they stood under the streetlight in front of the gate to the shrine, the girl said to him, “You’re just a young boy, huh?”

“Yes, I’m called young Toshio.”

He showed her the commuter pass in the same gesture as before. She saw an identification card with a little picture of his face on it. Something pricked at her chest, and the inner corners of her eyes became hot. The boy turned the corner in front of the shrine.

“Hey, little guy—be careful and head home, okay?” She said to his back.

“Miss, I’m young Toshio! Goodbye!” The boy turned and waved.

She was overwhelmed by the figure of the boy and stood stock still in that spot, dumbfounded. That boy’s lisping repetition of ‘young Toshio’ sounded like ‘young Toshiyori,’ similar to ‘young elder,’ and it pounded at her head relentlessly.

The *stink of mankind* inside her that she reeked of—

The glass fell the moment she dropped the hands cradling her head, the whiskey spilling. She stared at the drink, now all over the floor, and abruptly burst into laughter. She felt a splitting crack run through her body. The crack tore up her throat, cleaving open her head. How about if her genitals and reproductive organs had been removed? The laughing did not stop. As she coughed and clutched her sides, she kept laughing. From whose womb did you drop, young Toshio—

Her face, as she continued to laugh, suddenly stiffened. And her shoulders dropped and for a while she stared, shocked, at her sneakers.

The stink of mankind. Mankind’s—

She started taking off her clothes. She got stark naked and opened the door to the bathroom. Water trickled as it overflowed from the tub.

“Go out, go out in the water.”

The groaning voice came back to life from inside her head. Like she was urged to by that voice, she submerged her whole body in the bath, the water covering her head.

She heard the sound of the ocean hitting the rocks of Jeju. She dove between the roaring waves. The sound of the crumbling surface of the sea receded and her body was released into the water. Both of her hands and feet began to play, freely, with the texture of it. A peace she had never known since birth soaked into her, extending deep throughout her entire body, and she swayed in the water forever.

Eight.

Today was her coming-of-age ceremony. In her room at home, a dyed *furisode* waited for Keiko's return. However, she now had no interest at all in her kimono, or her fur shawl. The bag and sandals that she was supposed to pick up at the department store had been left untouched since then.

She sat down on a bench by a ditch. The cloudless, bright, clear sky spilled gentle sunlight, giving off the impression of the beginning of spring and spreading out in a high, pale blue-green. Sometimes, Keiko would hear a cheerful voice and turn to look over her shoulder; a young woman, dressed in her most fashionable clothes with her hair worn up, would walk by.

While she had been sitting there like that, something within her continued to twinge for quite some time. Keiko still couldn't understand the true nature of that something. The more she thought about her older sister, the more that small something reacted to it, and the aching just got worse.

The surface of the water in the ditch reflected the child's sneakers that had been in her sister's apartment. They were brand new, patterned with flowers. Keiko recalled her older sister suddenly appearing and giving her a present. Maybe her sister was going to give those sneakers to some kid. She stood up and started walking down the sidewalk. She opened the door to a phonebooth. There was only one phone number left, and because she had dialed it so many times before today, before she knew it, she had it memorized. At the same time that the ringing started, the figure of her older sister flashed across the backs of Keiko's eyelids, like a single photograph. Her sister, submerged in the bathtub. The water trickling as it overflowed. Keiko's phone, which she had called from the station that day, was ringing nearby. The sound she was hearing and that same noise, in the same interval, reverberated.

The receiver lifted. Unconsciously, Keiko hung up.

Conclusion: A Translator's Note

Lee Yang-ji and her work came to my attention when I was taking a survey course on modern Japanese literature my sophomore year. We read the abridged translation of *Yuhi* in English, and—partway through my second year taking Japanese and my first taking Korean—I was captivated by the ways in which Lee's characters wrestle with the similarities and dissimilarities between the two languages. When the opportunity came to tackle a piece as a translator in my own right, in the form of a translation seminar during my first semester of graduate school, I already knew which story I would choose. Given the important role language plays throughout *Yuhi*, and Lee's interest in hybridized subjects caught between cultural and national divides, it seemed an especially opportune text to tinker with through the act of translation.

My decision to translate *Kazukime* was, by contrast, informed by several factors—including time, which was in short supply for translating a second story. *Kazukime* is far shorter than *Yuhi*. However, the stories intersect in intriguing ways, from their focus on female relationships to the structure of their narratives. While *Yuhi* negotiates with the intangible consequences of the discrimination Zainichi Koreans face—such as a crisis in identity—*Kazukime* addresses the more visible ramifications of this systemic violence: poverty, abuse, and death. Thematically, both stories deal with impossible homecomings, the erasure of the boundary between self and Other, and the precarity of the hybridized subject becoming the precarity of the national subject.²⁷

²⁷ For a more detailed analysis on the relationship between the self and the Other in *Yuhi*, see Catherine Ryu's "Beyond language: Embracing the figure of 'the Other' in Yi Yang-ji's *Yuhi*," *Representing the Other in Modern Japanese Literature: A Critical Approach*, eds. Rachel Hutchinson and Mark Williams (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 312-331.

Yuhi was a challenging novel to translate—more challenging in some respects than *Kazukime*, although perhaps that is because I translated *Yuhi* first. These challenges presented themselves in ways that are both concrete, with examples to point to, and more nebulous, based in the realms of feelings. At times, translating the story felt like engaging in a dance where both you and your partner are in perfect lock-step. In other moments, it was less graceful than that, and still at other points more like a war of attrition between myself and the text.

The first of the challenges was the very act of translating. It is worth pointing out how laborious the process of translation is, to draw attention to the unavoidability of the impact of the translator. Emily Wilson mentions in her introduction to her translation of *The Odyssey* that “[there] is often a notion, especially in the Anglo-American world, that a translation is good insofar as it disguises its own existence as a translation; translations are praised for being ‘natural.’”²⁸ The notion of the translator as an unseen mediator of the text to the readers—as someone who conveys, but somehow does not affect—is not only disingenuous, but dangerous; I will freely admit that my fingerprints are all over these translations.

The first step in translating both *Yuhi* and *Kazukime* was going through the texts and circling every potentially problematic term I could find. These included words that I did not know, ones that had multiple meanings, or terms that seemed particularly important; I proceeded to compile them into a list. My terms list for *Yuhi* ended up being 86 pages single-spaced, and my list for *Kazukime* 64 pages. The lists ensured a relatively fluid

²⁸ Emily Wilson, translator’s note to *The Odyssey* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 82.

translating process, where I could avoid stopping every few seconds to crack open a dictionary.

From there, I began the actual work of translating. It could take me anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour to translate a page, depending on the difficulty of the content or the number of characters. Given that *Yuhi* is 116 pages in its original form, and *Kazukime* 63, one can see how the number of hours I logged quickly piled up. I tried to translate between 5-10 pages in one sitting, so that I could feel that every time I closed the document—or opened it again—I had made some tangible progress. Some days were easy; others made me feel like I had lost all command of the English language, to say nothing of Japanese. However, even that frustration was helpful. I empathized with *Yuhi* as she bemoaned her lack of mastery over Korean. Moreover, I gained a newfound respect for the ways that Lee plays with language in her texts. The medium of her storytelling is her main subject of critique, and she celebrates its ability to bring people together while lamenting its inherent limitations—who can sympathize with that better than a translator?

Even though I tried to translate in a steady march, there were inevitably hiccups. When I encountered passages that I could not crack, I attempted the best translation I could, inserted the original Japanese into the document next to it, and flagged it for later. Occasionally, I called in reinforcements, asking one of my Japanese-speaking friends for their thoughts. The latter was invaluable, but came with its own pitfalls. When I asked a friend to look at four passages from *Kazukime* that I had translated, and included the original Japanese along with it, she returned my draft to me with no less than 159 edits; perhaps my mistake was asking a fellow translator.

Once I had addressed these problem areas, I had my first draft, my rough translation. I should note that “rough” here does not denote an imprecise translation—in fact, it means quite the opposite. One of my main goals with my translations was for the stories to be readable. Not necessarily “natural,” as Wilson cautions against, but having their own flow to them. My rough translations were precise and literal to a degree that was sometimes painful, and the ensuing drafts involved polishing or sanding down—depending on your perspective—the language. This process entailed fixing awkward dialogue, reexamining word choices in particularly key sections, and ensuring that the stories in their English translation still evoked a similar feeling in me that reading them in the original Japanese did. At the same time, I was wary of polishing things too much and eliminating the kind of idiosyncrasies that mark Lee’s writing as her own. Successive drafts of a translation feel like playing a game of telephone. With each version that you tinker with, you risk moving further away from the message of the original text; there is no definite line that you know, once you have crossed, you will have gone too far. All I could do was refer back to the original Japanese texts and make sure that every change I made felt, if not justifiable, explainable.

However, the risk inherent to most of these choices made when translating was relatively low with regards to their impact on the stories’ meanings; others felt considerably more high stakes, like the usage of Korean in *Yuhi*. Lee presents the Korean language in a variety of forms throughout her story. Sometimes, Korean words are simply written in katakana, the Japanese syllabary reserved for foreign or “loan words,” with no *hangul* or Japanese translation in kanji or hiragana to help you deduce what is being said. This was especially challenging with the term “トンネ” (*tonne*). Trying to translate this Korean term,

written in Japanese, back into Korean was a process of reverse-engineering that took several tries, in part because the word that is pronounced “*tonne*” in Japanese might sound noticeably different in Korean. I eventually realized that the term being used was “동에” (*dongae*), which means “neighborhood.”

Other times, while the Korean is written in katakana, a Japanese translation *is* provided, which is helpful for figuring out meaning but brings up the question of formatting the Korean text in English. A Korean term for goodbye, “잘가,” might be written phonetically in English as “*jalga*”; however, eschewing *hangul*, Lee writes it phonetically in Japanese instead as “チャル・カ,” which itself might be written in English as “*charu ka*.” Ultimately, as the characters are speaking in Korean, I opted to write it phonetically as “*jalga*.” However, this case exemplifies one of the myriad ways in which Lee fiddles with language in her novellas. There are also instances in the story where Korean is written in *hangul*, not katakana, with the Japanese pronunciation of the Korean simply penned in katakana on the side, as well as a Japanese translation of the Korean. During these instances I opted to keep the *hangul* as well, but the usage of *hangul* in some places and not in others—with no immediately evident pattern as to why—hints at Lee’s interest in the divide between written and spoken language.

Translating specific Korean terms also posed some difficulty, especially when the Japanese translation provided had its own nuances. The term “우리나라” (*urinara*) is used several times throughout *Yuhi*. It ostensibly means “our country,” with *uri* being “our” and *nara* being “country,” but within the context of the Korean language it often refers to Korea. Meanwhile, the Japanese translation Lee provides, “母国” (*bokoku*), means “home country” or “homeland.” Which term should be translated into English: *urinara* or *bokoku*? The

answer depended in large part on the context, and what elements of the relationship between the speaker and 우리나라 I wanted to bring to the fore; “Korea” sounds far more impartial than “homeland,” which is laden with sentimentality and yearning. Similar issues cropped up with the term “우리말” (*uri mal*)—literally meaning “our language,” but in this case specifically Korean—and its Japanese counterpart, “母語” (*bogo*), referencing one’s mother tongue, native tongue, or first language.

Word choice was significant not only in terms of the Korean, but also with the Japanese writing. Lee uses certain verbs which stand out vividly in the mind’s eye and have a number of meanings, like 響く (*hibiku*), which might mean “to resound,” “to reverberate,” “to remain (with someone),” or “to have an effect.” There were also specific terms that I encountered in the text that I knew I would have to devote extra attention to, as they touched on some of the core issues in the story. In *Yuhi*, “ことばの杖” (*kotoba no tsue*) was one such term. “ことば” means, among other things, “language; dialect,” “word; phrase; expression; term,” and “speech; (manner of) speaking; (use of) language,” all translations which carry slightly different connotations. “の” is a possessive particle and “杖” means “cane,” “walking stick,” “staff,” or “wand.” I chose to translate the term as “linguistic crutch.”

There were several choices that informed this translation. The first was the ability of the translation of “ことば” to refer to not only written but spoken language, and specifically not complete words, but even the sounds that form words. *Yuhi* uses “ことばの杖” to describe the sounds associated with the opening letters or characters that make up the Japanese and Korean alphabets or syllabaries. Furthermore, it was important that

whichever word I chose to stand in for “ことば” could be used as both a noun and an adjective in a way that was not overly cumbersome—our narrator flips “ことばの杖” to “ことばからなる杖,” what I translate as “(a) crutch made from language.”

“杖” proved tricky in other ways. While “cane” or “walking stick” would be objectively the more faithful translation, I was drawn to “crutch,” which carries similar connotations as a cane. Crutches, like canes, imply a physical impediment or limitation. Both are instruments depended on for mobility—continuation and progression—and are needed to keep pace with those who can walk unaided. Crutches and canes can also be leaned or relied on to grant momentary respite—to help catch one’s breath. Admittedly, part of the draw behind “crutch” came from the fact that “linguistic crutch” sounds less clunky than “linguistic cane.”

The debate between crutch and cane indicates a larger concern I had while translating: the line between faithfulness and creativity. My previous experiences translating were confined to homework and class exercises; there was always a right answer, and by extension a right way to translate. It was like learning to swim in a pool—by contrast, translating *Yuhi* and *Kazukime* was like being thrown into the ocean. There was no “correct” way to translate Lee’s novellas, and no definitive, “correct” translation. It seemed like there were numerous ways, however, to translate wrong. Deborah Smith remarks in her essay, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Translation,” that “translation is a profoundly strange and often counterintuitive art. It’s also perhaps the only art that can be not just bad, but wrong, and will never not be flawed.”²⁹ When I started working on Lee’s stories, this

²⁹ Deborah Smith, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Translation,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 11, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-translation/>.

knowledge was crippling. I was terrified that I would be a rogue translator—and not from any malicious intent on my part, but a fatal combination of incompetence and good intentions.

I was torn between translating in a way that was painfully literal—and felt safer for me, as a translator, but detrimental to the quality of the text—or in a manner that was more interpretative and would result in a smoother piece but felt riskier. It was at this inflection point that another bit of sage advice from Smith’s essay came into play:

[There] is no such thing as a truly literal translation—no two languages’ grammars match, their vocabularies diverge, even punctuation has a different weight—there can be no such thing as a translation that is not ‘creative.’ And while most of us translators think of ourselves as ‘faithful,’ definitions of faithfulness can differ. Because languages function differently, much of translation is about achieving a similar effect by different means; not only are difference, change, and interpretation completely normal, but they are in fact an integral part of faithfulness.³⁰

Once you start looking at faithfulness and creativity—however you define them—as opposite ends of a spectrum, or even opposite sides of the same coin, you are already starting your translation off on the wrong foot. This is not to say that “creative” translations are inherently free of error; as Smith herself reminds us, translation “can be not just bad, but wrong.” However, as the 159 corrections my friend left on those select passages of *Kazukime* suggests, there is no one right way to translate, and no one definitive translation. A change that may seem justifiable to me as a translator may seem incomprehensible and

³⁰ Smith, “What We Talk About.”

even blasphemous to another. All anyone can do is make the most informed choice they can, and dive in.

Whatever fears I may have had, translating *Yuhi* and *Kazukime* was worth the risk. I chose to translate this pair of stories specifically for a number of reasons. In order to create a greater body of translated Japanese literature—which reflects the complexities and diversity of the Japanese literary landscape—it is critical to translate more authors who occupy a position on the margins of Japanese society, and to hear what insights their unique vantage point has to offer. I also felt that Lee’s message and her way of telling it worked well within the context of translation. Lee’s primary concern in her stories is the struggle of the hybridized—Zainichi Korean—subject in a nationalized world, but she is particularly interested in misunderstandings, those elements of ourselves that get lost in translation, sometimes because language fails, and sometimes because people themselves fail. While neither of the endings of Lee’s novellas can be described as happy, per se, both culminate in different kinds of epiphanies and reconciliations. The precarity of the Zainichi Korean subject becomes, by the novel’s end, the precarity of the Japanese or Korean subject, the problems they face overlapping and the boundary between center and periphery, as well as self and Other, vanishing. Lee’s effort to bridge these gaps are certainly sympathetic to the perspective of any translator or reader of translated fiction.

By putting these stories into English—or any other language—we gain a chance to investigate and bridge other gaps. However, the textual intervention or interjection of English in this instance also provides us with a chance, at least in the case of *Yuhi*, to take a step back and reexamine the dynamic between the Japanese and Korean languages with a kind of critical distance. We cannot take the presence or function of either of these

languages for granted. I hope the nature of these stories as translated works and the attention drawn to the usage of Japanese and Korean in the novellas will likewise encourage consideration of how English is operating as an intermediary here between text and reader—not only in terms of its limitations, but also its possibilities.

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