



KŎRI

The Beacon Anthology of
KOREAN AMERICAN FICTION

Edited by
HEINZ INSU FENKL
and WALTER K. LEW

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*For Hea Rean Lew and Young Hea Lee,
longtime contributors to the Korean
American community of Baltimore*

—W. K. L.

*For Hua Sun Lee and Ok Hui Yi, who
brought the clan to America*

—H. I. F.

*And for K. W. Lee, who has never given
up the struggle, and the family of
Younghill Kang*

We all need a country. And I, in desperation, needed two.

—LUCY LYNN KANG SAMMIS, 1930-95

CONTENTS

	Introduction	xi
1	PATTI KIM from <i>A Cab Called Reliable</i>	5
	ME-K. AHN from <i>Living in Half Tones</i>	18
	GARY PAK "The Valley of the Dead Air"	31
	CHANG-RAE LEE from <i>Native Speaker</i>	45
	LEONARD CHANG from <i>The Fruit 'N Food</i>	60
	HEINZ INSU FENKL from <i>Memories of My Ghost Brother</i>	70
2	YOUNGHILL KANG from <i>The Grass Roof</i>	88
	from <i>East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee</i>	93
	KIM RONYOUNG from <i>Clay Walls</i>	105
	RICHARD E. KIM from <i>Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood</i>	126
3	SUSAN CHOI from <i>The Foreign Student</i>	147
	SUKHEE RYU "Severance"	168
	TY PAK "The Water Tower"	186
	WALTER K. LEW from "The Movieteller"	209
	WILLYCE KIM from <i>Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid</i>	220
	NORA OKJA KELLER from <i>Comfort Woman</i>	228
	THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA from <i>DICTEE</i>	246
	Suggested Readings	259
	Credits	265
	Acknowledgments	267

INTRODUCTION

A traditional Korean shamanic ritual lasts through a day and a night, and during its twelve phases, which are called *kōri*, the shamaness invokes spirits and ancestors, allowing them voice in the world of the living. A shamaness may speak for a frail departed grandmother, taking on a diminutive quality, or she may embody the spirit of the Great General, whose fierce nature and stature seem to defy the ability of her body to contain them. A *kōri* (the *ō* pronounced as in “on”) is part of a multilayered ritual with a complex spectrum of often unexpected and previously unimagined expression.

Korean is a lively and clever language with a penchant for homophones, and so the word *kōri* is, itself, like the parts of a shamanic ritual, a rich layering of meanings. Its range of homophones could refer to a path or an avenue, a hook, or distance or range. A related verb form, *kōl-da*, evokes the ideas of suspension, provocation, or communication (specifically, to call on the telephone). As a suffix, it suggests the idea of “material for” (as in fixings), “cause for” (concern or worry), or the “subject matter” or “source” of a story or tale. For us, the title has served as an underlying resonance that provides both direction and sustenance for the collection. For the reader, we hope the word *kōri* will function

as a reminder of the thematic strands that weave together the selections in the three parts of this anthology, representing those things carried great distances, then summoned into literary form and exorcised or freed. A *kōri* embodies the intersecting of one world with the other in ways we find parallel to the nature of Korean American prose fiction from its origins in the 1930s to the end of the twentieth century.

As writers, we do not always speak for ourselves. In fact, one could argue that we hardly ever speak for ourselves because the self is so complex and indeterminate—always just beyond the reach of our willful consciousness. Many well-known writers have gone as far as to say that they were speaking for their characters, who came to them fully formed. Toni Morrison, for one, has said that the final version of *Song of Solomon* came to her in her father's voice, which sustained her after many failed drafts.

It would be easy to dismiss these writerly claims as eccentric or metaphorical. After all, the notion of the muse and of the artist as the mouthpiece of the divine has existed in Western literature since its earliest beginnings. But sometimes such writerly claims, though they are not literal, are more than merely metaphorical. They represent a state of mind that defies description in any conventional language, a state of mind that can only be described by acting it out, by producing those signs or voices, whether they are of one's ancestors or some seemingly arbitrary being called a character.

To be a writer is to assume new personae or to speak in a spectrum of voices, some over which the writer has no conscious control. One of the fundamental ironies is that readers will see things in a work that often circumvent or transcend the writer's intentions. In the present collection, several of the authors trace writerly origins (in themselves and in their characters) to an urgent need to express stories told to them by other people. The narrator of Patti Kim's novel obsessively recites a litany of scenes and stories bequeathed by her father lest they be lost. One of Gary

Pak's missions is to reveal the sorrow and injustice buried in the depths of Hawai'i's history and landscape. Looking back at her first novel, *Comfort Woman*, Nora Okja Keller is amazed by how different the narrators' voices are from her own, while for Ty Pak the writing of socially relevant stories in the often horrific intersection of Korean and American geopolitics has become a life-long calling.

Korean culture has a long tradition of speaking for—or as—others that has become both a curse and an ideal for Korean American writers. As a nation that is still one of the most conservative Confucian patriarchies in the world, it maintains the old structure of the literati as the moral voice of society, resonating with earlier times when court councillors attempted to remain morally correct even at the expense of disagreeing with the king, losing their lives, and exposing their family or clan to cruel punishments. In the face of patriarchy, one of the unspoken roles of the Korean woman was to act as the intermediary between disempowered men (sons, husbands, fathers) and higher male authority. And although often condemned by Confucian ideologues, indigenous Korean Shamanism, in both its ecstatic, woman-centered form and its more gnostic masculine form, involves the invocation of ancestral voices and the grievances of wronged spirits. In the modern era, particularly following Japanese colonization (1910–45) and continuing through the partitioning of the nation under the aegis of the Soviets and the Americans, and the subsequent military dictatorships in both North and South, Korean writers have had to take ultimate responsibility for their literary works, even if it meant facing imprisonment, torture, or threat of execution.

Such traditions can be a heavy burden to carry over the arc of the Pacific to American soil and through the generations, but you will find them embedded in all of the works in this collection, even in those that attempt to escape them. Even resistance to cultural legacy conveys it through the negative space of inversion. To negate a thing, you must describe it; or, in shamanic terms, to ex-

orcise a spirit, you must first invoke it. And so in this anthology, though you are reading writers who composed their works in English and who describe scenes far removed from its geography and people, you will find the specters of Korean tradition conveyed in tropes of displaced blood, culture, language, land, gender, and nation, sometimes most poignantly when there is the threat of loss and alienation.

The Korean language is layered with a history of appropriating and coexisting with Chinese, Mongolian, Japanese, and English. Its written form is also a sort of Cabalistic performance of the connection among the body, sound, and text, partly because the scholars who designed the phonetic alphabet in the mid-1400s made it an explicit point to show, graphically in the shape of the letters, how the human vocal apparatus formed the sounds of those letters. The importance of a standardized vernacular written in a flexible, easily learned native orthography was recognized by both Korean nationalists and Japanese colonialists; that is one of the reasons why, during the darkest period of the colonial era, the Japanese banned the use of Korean and why they viewed the Korean Language Society as one of the most profound organizations of resistance. When a language already full of irony and subversive multilingual wordplay lingers in the background of writing in English, the Korean American narratives take on a palimpsest-like quality, resonating with a literary history, even if that history seems to be obscured by the linguistic shift. Even Korean American writers who do not speak Korean draw, in their works, upon that background resonance that lurks like an unavoidable indication of cultural memory, that residue of blood, language, custom, and historical trauma.

What, then, are the conditions of the American or diasporic present that so intensify the individual's need to establish a literary form and vision that either revives or extinguishes traces from an ancestral realm? Epochal shifts in Korea like colonization, division of the country into communist North and capitalist South,

war, rapid industrialization, and movements for democraticization have been powerful forces within the development of Korean American literary consciousness. Certain historical circumstances in America have also cried out for expression by literary artists: the excruciating hardships of plantation work in Hawai'i in the early decades of the twentieth century; the changes in class, status, and familial role experienced by immigrants while trying to survive on the margins of the U.S. economy; the long period of Korean Americans' relative isolation and disempowerment enforced by the Exclusion Act of 1924 until the immigration law amendments of 1965; the subsequent arrival of new South Korean immigrants who created tens of thousands of small businesses and several Koreatowns; growing interracial tensions in urban centers and the legacy of violence and political conflict that eventually exploded in the destruction of painstakingly built livelihoods in the 1992 L.A. Riots.

In the literary world, writers have either resisted, accommodated, or taken advantage of the expectation that they produce images of Korean Americans that epitomize either irreparable foreignness or assimilation into a contented American life—both of which are forms of racial humiliation. Examples of resistance include Sukhee Ryu's sardonic treatment of the "American dream" in "Severance," Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's fragmentation of official state narratives in certain chapters of *DICTEE*, and Younghill Kang's contestations with his prominent editor Maxwell Perkins over the plot of *East Goes West*.

Writers like Younghill Kang, Richard Kim, and Ty Pak, emigrated at a late enough age to vividly recall the events of which they later wrote, such as the brutal suppression of the March First Independence Movement in 1919, the Japanese Imperial Army's forced labor camps near the end of World War II, the bloodbath and betrayals of the Korean War (1950–53), and the liminal existence of mixed-race children in U.S. Army camp towns. Others, even though they also spent most of their childhoods in Korea,

often set their stories in America—or in the anxious new zones that emerge between cultures, economies, and landscapes.

Still other writers originally had little direct contact with Korea, and not all of these belong to the present younger generation. Kim Ronyoung, for instance, was born in Los Angeles in 1926; because Kim's mother was intensely involved in the overseas independence movements and had her children attend a local Korean-language school where they learned nationalist history, Kim's childhood was deeply imbued with feelings for Korea. Others, however, have grown up largely among non-Korean Americans, and have had to rely on their parents' stories, visits to Korea, translations of Korean literature, and English-language scholarship in their search for symbols and experiences that could help sustain their reimagining and understanding of the relation between disparate worlds—of which almost nothing in mainstream American culture provides a sufficient or sympathetic image. The appalling history that symbolizes so much of the saga of the twentieth century; the family secrets; the unique aesthetics found in music, dance, poetry, and painting; the exhilarating landscape; and the ceaseless exuberance and vigorous resentments of Korean society have, in fact, proven so powerful that there has been no limit to the dedication with which Korean American writers have sought to create a new sense of self and world. Even in works that do not make Korean or Korean American issues their dominant focus, there are luminous touchstones and traces: certain puns and allusions in Gary Pak's work; the integration of Korean shamanism, Roman Catholic transubstantiation, and French symbolist poetics in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*; or the righteous cook, descendant of plantation workers, and "disinherited daughter of the mayor of Honolulu" who emerges from a phone booth as "Ta Jan the Korean" in Willyce Kim's novel *Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid*.

While in this introduction we have emphasized social, historical, and biographical aspects, the underlying consciousness of the

works we have selected is clearly fictional, even when the surface of the narratives might seem to be autobiographical. In this sense, we are thinking of fiction in the original sense of the word as something that is constructed—and thus uniquely fitted to its topic and task—and not necessarily something that is the opposite of fact. In each work the use of language, point of view, or the structure of metaphor reveals an underlying concern for conveying meaning in the most trenchant way possible, whether the narrative is told in plain language or whether, because of extreme disjunctions, the work seems not to be a narrative at all.

For the reader unfamiliar with Korean or Korean American contexts, this collection is meant to be read in a three-part sequence. In Part 1 we have presented works that can be understood with little additional contextualization, in which the settings and allusions will be more or less comprehensible to general readers and yet introduce many of the themes and issues that pervade much of Korean American fiction. Part 2 takes a chronological leap backward to the works of formative early Korean American writers—Younghill Kang, Richard Kim, and Kim Ronyoung—who are part of a repeatedly returned-to legacy. In Part 3 we make a categorical jump to works whose context and fictional techniques may be more fully appreciated after the first two parts of this anthology. At the same time they represent the rich, multiply inscribed reality of contemporary Korean American culture.

—The Editors, October 2000

Part ONE

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PATTI KIM

Born in Korea in 1970, Patti Kim immigrated to the United States when she was four. Kim has a B. A. in English (1992) and an M. F. A. (1996) from the University of Maryland; she won the 1997 Towson University Prize for Literature and was a nominee for the Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction.

A Cab Called Reliable (1997), from which we excerpt the final chapter, is a work heavily laden with the weight of autobiography, though its surface is clearly the result of much aesthetic artifice. Kim herself has said that "emotionally, the book is very much autobiographical, but the events are not."

In fact, the events of the novel merely constitute the surface narrative, which functions rather like the chain on a charm bracelet—it provides the structure to which the more important elements attach themselves. Under the surface, the novel reads like a record of the real and imaginative longing Ahn Joo feels for her lost mother, who took Ahn Joo's younger brother and disappeared in a cab from the "Reliable" Cab Company when she was only eight years old. Living alone with her alcoholic father, enduring his depression, romances, and abuse (both explicit and implicit) for years, Ahn Joo awaits the day when her mother will return, her faith sustained by a

single cryptic note. But her mother never reappears, and Ahn Joo finds voice in her increasingly complex and poignant attempts at fiction and poetry.

In the end, Kim has created a fiction about a woman whose psychology expresses itself in a narrative about her own growth as a fiction writer. It is somewhat surprising to find the novel so often marketed in the Young Adult category, but perhaps that is because the narrative begins in a naive style and becomes increasingly sophisticated, following the underlying theme of Ahn Joo's growth as a writer. In the chapter we've selected, the theme of food preparation (typical in ethnic fiction) is particularly double-edged because Ahn Joo's name sounds like "side dish" in Korean, the kind eaten as an accompaniment to liquor.

A Cab Called Reliable dramatizes what will be apparent as an odd lacuna in the work of Kim Ronyoung and suggested implicitly in the work of Susan Choi later in this collection—the complicated relationship between the Confucian father and the Americanized Korean daughter, a relationship all the more charged because of the father's loss of personal and cultural authority. The father becomes radically disempowered in a new country in which women—at least on the surface—command, and are required to display, more public power. In the way that Theresa Hak Kyung Cha draws on the shamanic tale of Princess Pari as an important subtext, Kim implicitly draws on one of Korea's central tales of female virtue, the story of Shimch'ŏng, the Blindman's Daughter.

Kim has taught at the Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and currently teaches fiction writing at the University of Maryland. She is working on her second novel.

from *A Cab Called Reliable*

You liked anchovy soup, so I stunk up my hair and the house to cook it for you. You wanted eel, I almost burned down the house smoking it for you. You liked live squid, so I fought with its tentacles to dump them in the *kimchi* for you. I cut them up, dumped them in the stinging red sauce, and they were still moving. You wanted to listen to old Korean songs, so I bought a tape of "*Barley Field*," "*When We Depart*," "*The Waiting Heart*," and "*The Wild Chrysanthemum*" at Korean Korner for you. For weeks I heard, "*Above the sky a thousand feet high, there are some wild geese crying*," "*Where, along the endless road are you going away from me like a cloud? like a cloud? like a cloud?*" "*Lonesome with the thoughts of my old days*." I had to eat my corn flakes with crying geese and rivers that flowed with the blood of twenty lovers. You wanted to read a story about rabbits, so I borrowed *The Tales of Peter Rabbit* for you. You liked cowboy movies, so I bought John Wayne videos for you. You liked to garden, so I stole Mrs. Lee's perilla seeds for you. Your help quit on you, so I skipped two weeks' worth of classes to fry shrimp, steam cabbage, boil collard greens, and bake biscuits for you. You liked Angela's mother, so I drove to her store in Southeast D.C. to set up a dinner date for you. You thought you were

losing your hearing, so I laid your head on my thigh and removed the wax out of your ears for you.

You sat on the couch. Your feet rested on top of the table. Your gray eyebrows fell over your drooping lids. On top of your heaving stomach, your hands were folded, and the remote control was balanced on your left thigh. You flipped through the channels when I told you I had grilled the croaker and that my car was up to 9,000 miles. You flipped through the channels when I asked you to show me how to change my oil. Without turning your head to look at me, you said that I had to get under the car, that I would crush my head, that I would die. Too dangerous. You told me to get it done and that it was cheap, as you handed me a twenty-dollar bill from your shorts pocket and walked to the kitchen table to eat your grilled croaker. But it was a Sunday evening. Everything was closed on Sunday evenings, and I could already hear the knocking.

"I can hear the knocking."

You broke off the tail end of the croaker and bit into it, leaving the fin between your thumb and middle finger. You chewed the bones and spit them out. "Knocking? That's something else. Not oil problem."

"Anyway, I need to know how to change my oil."

You sunk your spoon into the rice. "You write anything?"

I lied to you and told you I had written two stories.

"That's it? When you write something big? Write something big for me."

"I am not going to write something big for you. That's impossible."

"What about?"

"What about what?"

"Your stories." Your chopsticks poked the middle of the croaker. The skin slid off. You'll save the skin for last, right after you've slurped its brains out, after you've sucked its eyes out. Makes you smarter. Makes you see good.

"One's about that woman you told me about. You know, the

one who lived on Hae Un Dae Beach with her daughter. And the daughter always wore that black-and-white knit dress with the snowflake patterns?"

"What about them?"

"Well, the daughter grows up and finds a job at a bakery and leaves her mother on the beach."

"That's not true."

"I know. I'm still working on it."

You looked at me, but I stared at the thin layer of grease floating on top of your water. You wanted to call me a liar, but instead you asked, "What about other?"

"It's about your friend who had the two wives. The first one was a little crazy, so he brought in the good-looking second one who sold cosmetics?"

"What about them?"

"The crazy one ends up jumping out of their apartment window on the eleventh floor."

"Didn't happen like that. But sounds good. Second one sell better than first one. Dying at end is good."

"Just show me how to change my oil."

"The first story, that kind don't sell. You need violence. America likes violence." You spit out your bones. "Like this story. I know. Robber breaks into doctor's house with gun. 'Give me your watch, jewelry, money. Give me everything.' Doctor's not home, but doctor daughter's home. She gives him fake diamond ring, fake ruby ring, fake everything. Robber's happy and goes. Robber tries to make money, sees everything's fake and gets mad and goes back to doctor's house, kidnaps doctor's daughter, and puts tattoo snakes on all over her body. So no one marry her because of tattoos."

"People with tattoos get married."

"Not all over body. Korean man don't like tattoos."

"Then they shouldn't get tattoos."

"Man don't get tattoo. Girl gets tattoo because robber puts on her."

"And he thought she would never get married because of the tattoos?"

"Oh yeah. That's true story." The spinach in your teeth moved.

"Here, you've got spinach in your teeth." You waved your hand at the toothpick and dislodged the spinach with your tongue.

"You buy part and oil?"

"Bought part and oil." You pushed yourself away from the table. "Fry croaker next time. Not enough beans in rice. And you boil spinach too long. Too long. Nothing to chew."

I followed you outside to the driveway with my oil filter and bottles of oil. The crickets started making their noise, and you told me to turn on the porch light. I turned on the porch light. You told me to turn on the driveway light. I turned on the driveway light. The moths and gnats flew in circles above your flat top azalea shrubs like they wanted to drill holes in the air. You told me to get the lightbulb with the hook and the long extension cord on it. From basement, not back there. From basement. You hung it on the hood of my car. You told me to get, you know, car has to go up. The red metal things where the car goes up. And brown carpet in garage. Rags in shed. Bucket behind shed. Not that bucket, stupid. Flat bucket to go under car.

"There is no flat bucket behind the shed."

"What's this?"

"It's a triangular basin. It's not a bucket. Buckets are cylinders and have handles on them."

You threw the bucket under the deck, slapped your right calf, and mumbled something about hell and the mosquitos that surrounded you.

You stood in front of my car. The armholes of your tank top were stretched out showing your chest. Your plaid shorts hung underneath your round hard belly, and your socks were pulled to your knees. You waved the four fingers of your right hand to come. Come. Come. Stop. Your head jerked back, and your chin formed another fold of skin, as you burped. Tasting the croaker again, you licked your lips and swallowed. The crickets screamed

from your garden. The streetlights came on, and the mosquitos gathered underneath their light. Slowly, you kneeled and pushed yourself with your slippered feet underneath my car.

Your back rested on the piece of the brown carpet that used to cover the family room, wall to wall. One inch padding underneath. Every step, our feet used to sink in, and our toes would grip the standing fibers. You used to yell, "Take off shoes! Take off shoes!" at my friends, and they would run across the carpet with embarrassment, cheeks turning pink, and leave their shoes at the front door.

The lilac bush collared the driveway light, making it look like a groomed poodle standing still in an angle of your triangular garden. In front of the light, a rock with the glowing "3309" in white paint. The left side was lined with azalea bushes like four green basketballs growing out of white pebbles. The right side was lined with pine trees that looked like four green miniature teepees. And the side that lined the edge of our front porch, more azalea bushes, but with flat tops like coffins. In the center of it all, the stump of the magnolia tree you chopped down because its leaves were clogging up our gutter. The Spanish moss you had planted surrounded the stump and began to climb the rotting bark.

You placed the basin underneath the spout and unscrewed the blue filter. The black oil poured out onto your fingers, then into the basin. You wiped your hand with an old sock.

"Where you drive your car? Oil is so black."

"Let me do it. I'll catch the oil."

"Don't touch anything. Your hands get dirty. Keep clean hands."

"I don't care if my hands get dirty."

"Keep clean hands."

"What do I need clean hands for?"

"Keep clean hands to write."

The oil dripped into the basin. Standing up and wiping your hands on the sock, you told me about Miryang. Miryang. Mi-

ryang. Miryang. I know. That was the village you grew up in and in that village was a bridge you had to cross to get to school in your bare feet even during the winter because your father bought you only one pair of shoes on New Year's Day, which you stuffed in your pocket so that the soles wouldn't wear out. And when the soles wore out, you nailed wood to the bottom of your shoes, but the wood gave you splinters, so you poured soil in your shoes; it felt just like walking in a fertilized field.

I know about the tree that stood next to the well. The tree that you climbed and napped on. The tree from which you saw the well holding the floating village virgin. The tree under which the village grandmothers peeled potatoes. You've already told me about the man with three teeth and eight and a half fingers who ran the village grocery. Who would get so drunk by early afternoon that he'd give you a bottle of *soju* rather than the bottle of vinegar your mother was waiting for at home. I've already seen the soybean woman rolling her cart along the dirt road through the village. The chestnut woman who strung her roasted nuts on strands of her own hair. The cows bumping into each other within the fence. The stink of manure in your mother's garden. The stink of sewage when it rained. The rice-grinding factory where you met your mother-in-law. You've already told me about the girl with no eyes marrying the man with no ears. About hiding from your father when school tuition day came around because he'd make you work in the field. Yes, I can hear him yelling, "What good is school? What good is school? Go work in the field." I know about how he broke your watch on your wedding day trying to strike you across the face. It was your engagement watch from Mother. You didn't know then, did you? That she would leave us. Why don't you tell me the truth? Is she my mother or isn't she? How else could she have so easily left me? Why don't you just tell me the truth? I already know about your brother reading books by candlelight underneath a quilt that caught on fire. You don't have to tell me about your sister who was knuckled by your

mother so often that she had a dent on the right side of her head and lost her mind and is now steaming rice and boiling potato roots for Buddhist monks. Don't you think I remember the apples, eggs, chestnuts, persimmons you stole and hid in the hole you dug and lined with rocks next to the village manure pile? You don't have to start singing about trying to forget, trying to forget. About walking to the sea sands from day to day. About how summer has gone; fall has gone; now the cold winter in the sea. Abba, I know the women divers searching for clams have disappeared. Stop it. Stop singing about trying to forget, trying to forget by walking to the sea sands from day to day.

You closed my hood, and I drove my car down. You picked weeds out of your garden while I put everything back in its place. You waited for me. When I walked to the door, you followed me in, saying, "Joo-yah, remember when you sing *Bbo gook bbo gook bbo gook seh?*"

"Abba, I don't remember that song."

"You remember."

"I don't."

"*Bbo gook bbo gook bbo gook seh . . .*"

"Abba, I told you I don't remember. Stop it." You saw me roll my eyes. Your shoulders jerked back. Three folds of skin formed on your chin. You removed your gray hat and scratched your bald head. Your belly grew as you took your breath.

When I walked upstairs, I heard you say, "No matter how bad my father treat me, I never talk like that. Never walk away like that."

I did not hear the usual sounds of the evening. No commercials from the television, no faucet running, no flush of the toilet every two hours, no refrigerator door opening and closing. I did not hear you speaking to Angela's mother in Korean on the phone. *How was business today? Did you do well? How's Angela? I sent you a letter. Did you get my letter? Ahn Joo? She's writing her stories upstairs.* You didn't call me down to make you Sullok tea or peel apple-

pears or listen to your stories about kite fights, crispy grasshopper legs, and midnight runs to the village nurse's window where she changed her clothes in the light. I waited for you to call me down, but I heard you climb the stairs, pass my room, and shut your door.

That night I opened my window. The passing cars on Morning Glory Way were the first sounds I noticed when we moved here. Never heard cars whiz by like that tucked away on the fifth floor of our apartment at the end of Burning Rock Court. I thought a family room with fireplace, living room, dining room, a country kitchen, basement, four bedrooms, two and a half baths were too much for us, but you said, "Future. Future. Think about future." So I thought about the future when I entered junior high and high school, and I raised my hand when I didn't understand how rectification, amplification, and oscillation worked in explaining electrical currents or why bromine was called bromine. I raised my hand when I had to go to the bathroom or if the boys in my lab group were eating all the peanuts we had to weigh. I memorized Xe for Xenon, At for Astatine, Pb for Lead; postulate number one, the points on a line can be paired with the real numbers in such a way that any two points can have zero and one; postulate number two, if B is between AC, then AB plus BC equals AC; Il a mis le café/Dans la tasse/Il a mis le lait/Dans la tasse de café. . . . I thought about the future as I stood in front of Mr. Huggins's geography class and recited Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida . . . all the states in alphabetical order within two minutes. I thought about the future as I bowed and received my classmates' applause.

When future, future, future finally came, the walls of our house were too close together, the ceilings weren't high enough, the floors weren't low enough, and I needed more bedrooms.

Across the street, Mrs. Goode's dogs panted, barked, and jingled the fence. The crickets were going mad, and birds screamed at each other. Mrs. Cutler's high heels tapped quickly against the sidewalk. Mrs. Winehart's car wouldn't start. The phone next

door rang. The lawn mower roared. When the wind blew, the screen of my window rattled.

I went downstairs to prepare your tea. As I waited for the water to boil, I shut my eyes tight. But the mahogany bookcase you built when I entered college, the television case for which you hand-carved the legs, the pine coffee table with the drawers that took weeks to make, the kitchen cabinets you stained, the round breakfast table you made me stand on when you cut out its top, the hardwood floors you laid in the living room, and the oyster white kitchen walls you painted stared at me, even behind my closed lids. I could let the water boil and all this wood go up in flames.

Light came from underneath your door. I put down the tray, knocked, and slowly turned the handle when I didn't hear your usual, "Uh." On my hands and knees, I slid the tray into your room.

You had already spread your quilt out on the middle of the floor. Your box of a pillow on the right side. Bare windows. Empty walls except for the photograph of Mother's blurry face tacked above the breakfast-in-bed table. I could never make out what she looked like in that picture. Her hair blew in her face, and she looked like she was shaking her head. No, No. Like she didn't want to be photographed with all those pigeons. A tape player and a digital clock on top of the same table. Underneath, a shoebox of tapes. A pile of three red floor mats in the opposite corner. You sat under the window and fanned yourself.

"Open the window if you're hot."

"Too much noise outside."

You lifted your chin and asked, "What tea did you make?"

"You know, the usual. Sullok tea."

"I thought you make ginseng with honey."

"Why would I make ginseng?"

You reached over for the tray and pulled it to the edge of your quilt. "Because you want to say something important to me." You said it slowly. You wanted to get all the words in the right order.

With legs crossed and hands folded, you sat in the center of your quilt and waited for me to tell you. I wanted to pour your tea and join you, but I remained on your wooden floor near the door.

In Korean you asked, "*Abn Joo-yah, what is it?*"

I wanted to tell you that I needed you to tell me about the princess-weaver and her lover, the cowherder, who met at the bank of the River of Heaven every year. How was it that they fell in love? Why did the king separate them? How is it that they meet every year?

Or that I had written a story about your first visit to your grandfather's grave. Fake pink azaleas in a tin can in front of the tombstone. That I had gotten everything down. Your pouring *soju* on the mound. Your peeling a banana and leaving it there for him to eat. Your pulling the weeds off the mound and saying a prayer about how you wanted to be good. Your finishing your prayer and getting up to go, thinking that he would never have known if you had come or gone. Your picking up the banana and eating it. And on your way out, your thinking about how your grandfather died. About how your father never took him to the hospital. If they had opened his stomach, they would have seen the disease, and he would have lived another year. I wanted to tell you that I had gotten everything down. Even the rosebushes that grew like vines on the gate. The fields of rice. The woman who carried a tub of cabbage on her head. The other one who fished for anchovies along the ditch in her rubber gloves. And that I had ended the story with you walking past the two women, leaving the graveyard, and thinking about how you didn't have enough *wons* to buy the dog soup at the end of the road.

Instead, in my best Korean I said, "*Abba, I can't stay here any longer.*"

You reached over, poured the tea, and sipped it. Your gold caps sparkled from the corners of your smile. You placed your cup on the wooden saucer and rested your head on your pillow. I opened your closet, pulled out the light blue blanket with the butterfly patterns, and spread it out over you.

"*Abn Joo-yah, I don't need a blanket tonight. It's hot.*" Your eyes were closed. You pretended to sleep.

"*Abba, I'm sorry.*"

"*It's all right. I'm not going to die from the heat.*"

I folded the blanket away from you and left it at your feet.

"*Abn Joo-yah, leave the tea when you go.*"

"*I know.*"