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Small Face, Big Eyes

By

Beth Jarrett

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2020

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Small Face, Big Eyes

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ABSTRACT

Small Face, Big Eyes is a collection of autobiographical essays and memoirs about my experience living in Incheon, South Korea as a Native English Teacher between 2011 and 2013. The collection captures the elements of my life, and the life of fellow expatriates, that took place outside our teaching jobs. Through topics such as smoking, drinking, and eating, I highlight the consumptive nature of living abroad, the way one indulges on the “foreignness” of the culture. I illustrate a South Korea that is unique to my experience of the country, avoiding cultural explanation or romanticisms.

Utilizing different lenses of autobiography such as memoir and essay, I maintain a relationship with my “factual” experience of the events as they transpired. Where dialogue appears, every effort has been made to replicate the conversation as best as memory and narrative can allow. David Sedaris says that “memoir is the last place you’d expect to find the truth.” Similarly, my manuscript explores notions of “truth” and “real,” while also creatively depicting my life in Korea. This is not to say that *Small Face, Big Eyes* is non-fiction, but that it is not fiction, and is as close to a truthful depiction as I hope for, while still offering a compelling story.

DEDICATION

한국을 집처럼 느끼게 해준 친구들을 위해.

~사랑해~

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Jjan! Geonbae!

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Heartbreakers

Restless right leg tapping Morse Code for “cigarette.” In a classroom, in a restaurant, in line at a store, I wait for a cigarette.

My mother quit smoking when her forefingers held my ultrasound image. She claims that she smoked casually, partaking only at bars and parties. My father still inhales a pack a day, smoking in his screen enclosure lounge where the white aluminum frame drips goldenrod from the ceiling. This nicotine-stained threshold warns visitors that a smoker lives here, the trapped air of the foyer thick with a sweet tar smell. The wall of stale smoke does not faze my mother, the purported former casual smoker. Perhaps the smell reminds her of a younger self, the two of them smoking in tandem. My father lighting her cigarette, an artifact of his last gentlemanly favour.

At nineteen, in my first year at York University, I bummed a cigarette from a cute boy to impress him. I threw up between drags, forcing an end to the night. I don’t remember his name, or he never gave it to me. I remember the image on the package he extended, an actual heart, artery engorged with a blockage. In bold, white lettering on a black panel, the Canadian government warns that “Cigarettes are a Heartbreaker.”

Fingers drumroll on thumb, clench drumsticks into fist. Jam hand into pocket, draw blood from palm. Lick blood with fingertip.

I constantly get asked to show proof of age, the woman at Spadina Smoke and Variety giggling every time she sees the 1987 on my passport. “Oh, you’re so old!” Every time. But there goes my pubescent father, when still a lingering soprano in the St. Michael’s choir, stealing my grandmother’s Du Mauriers and swapping them at the convenience store for his brand:

Player's Navy Cut, the package adorned with the cartoon image of a bearded blue-eyed sailor circled by a life preserver, ships sailing off in the distance. My mother remembers Papou sending her to the corner store to pick him up a pack. He let her keep the pennies for her childhood brand, Popeye's, chalky sugar cigarettes with tinted pink tips.

My six-year-old bliss: sucking on the white end of a Popeye or gumming up sticks of chocolate wrapped in parchment rolling paper. In the late 90s, Puritans stole Popeye's pink tips and rebranded them 'candy sticks'. Smoking a candy stick is not nearly as cool as smoking a Popeye. Drunk versions of me have lit the wrong end of the real thing, even with my Popeye training. I've gagged inhaling a burning bleached cellulose filter.

Index and middle digit pinched, rubbing back and forth, ham radio tuning. Jaw clenched, teeth grinding, mercury fillings rubbing, static forming, bad reception, no station to station.

To pass the drug test required by my South Korean work Visa, I abstained from smoking pot a full month before my departure. A friend offered me one of his mentholated 'bitch sticks' at a party as consolation. I felt like a French madame cradling what's essentially a tobacco Popeye, toothpick thin but long. It tasted like a candy cane. Four weeks of bitch sticks.

I bought my first pack of smokes in South Korea. A charter bus picked up twenty of us from the airport and dropped us off at our lodging in Dongincheon. All the literature referred to our stay at the "Paradise Hotel," but the building had "Olympos Hotel" written in large, white letters across a black awning that shaded over the entrance. A handful of my fellow jet-lagged jetsetters immediately lit cigarettes in the lobby of the Paradise Olympos, and with those Bic flicks, I began to sweat.

On my seventh birthday, Ontario banned indoor smoking. At Kelsey's, my father requested the smoking section, elevated above the rest of the restaurant like a stage. He pulled in the ashtray when the server brought our cheese sticks. We went out more in the months before the ban than we ever had before. Now you can't even smoke on a patio in Toronto, though I've smoked on the other side, concaving my ribs with the wood beam divider to reach my lager.

In the outdated hotel lobby, where a peach marble crept up from the floor to dramatically oversized pillars, a multitude of fresh black plastic ashtrays, newly christened on every surface. The Incheon Metropolitan Office of Education had booked two floors to accommodate the eighty-eight foreign English teachers coming in that weekend, but the hotel staff had not prepared a single room. The IMOIE coordinators looked more frazzled than those of us fresh off our fourteen-hour flights, but they weren't the ones lighting cigarettes. The one Korean coordinator emphatically discussed something with two of the concierges while her two foreign coworkers stood behind her, arms crossed. Their formation resembled an hourglass and the new teachers looked on from a distance, standing next to their suitcases, nauseated by the time.

When you travel fourteen hours into the future, strange things happen to your body. You feel awake, alert, like three Five-Hour Energy drinks in a row, possessed by a power that pushes everything into a hyper autopilot. Apparently, you can also become a smoker before you've smoked more than six bitch-sized cigarettes in your life.

Intimidated by these full, tobacco-tasting tobacco sticks, I wanted something mentholated and I wanted something skinny. I didn't have the courage to trouble these strangers for one of their vomit-inducing smokes, my heart still stinging from the last one I tried to take

back. But one of them might be down for an adventure. One of them would have to reload eventually.

A deep voice interrupted my latent nicotine thoughts. I turned around and saw a man wearing pajama pants with bears in Santa hats on them, paired with Birkenstocks and a t-shirt that read San Diego State University.

“Excuse me,” he shouted at the one free concierge, “where can ... buy ... ciga ... rette?”

I sympathised with his struggle, despite the shouting. I hadn’t thought to ask a local for help locating bitchy minty niccy sticks. I abandoned my purple suitcases and scuttled over.

Eyes dry, rolling in all directions, darting. Pick invisible gunk from tear duct. Eyelids blinking “cigarette” like an Aldis lamp. Bite lip, pull skin, split kissers, suck the blood out.

The concierge didn’t understand my potential new best friend’s English and contorted her face inward in confusion. I gave communicating a try, working in what turns out to be my best second language – mime. I pretended to smoke a cigarette and slowly repeated, “where,” I shrugged, “buy,” I ran my index and middle finger together, “cigarette,” as I made the smoking motion again.

“오, 담배!” our concierge exclaimed back at us.

“Well, what do you think that means?” San Diego laughed at me.

“I don’t know!” my invisible cigarette burning between my index and middle finger, “What if we just go outside and try to find a convenience store?”

“The airport had a 7-11,” San Diego pointed out. “I think we can recognize one of those.” We waived off the concierge and headed out the front doors of the Paradise Olympos.

Stepping out the doors felt disorienting, the landscape layered with shades of grey, from the heavy sky, to buildings in the foreground, to the asphalt of the street below. The hotel sat atop a hill, and the steep driveway dipped into the street. The only colours were faint, on signs across the street, some of them glowing neon, none of them familiar. In the distance, I could make out a shop with ‘Family Mart’ written in friendly green English above. Two old men held court at the patio furniture below the sign, the orange table coated with brown beer bottles, the cracked cement below them littered with skinny cigarette butts. The number one consumer of bitch sticks in Korea is the ajeossi. ‘Uncle’ cigarettes.

These ajeossi had been staring at us from the moment we walked out of the hotel, their gaze sustained as I tossed the door open, and an electronic bell rang in recognition. I looked back to catch a glimpse of what Korean brand skinny smokes would look like. A dainty white box labelled “Esse” in a blue serif lay open, thin cigarettes spilled out, wet from beer condensation. I belly-laughed at how preposterous this brand sounded. I asked San Diego, “Esse means, like, dude in Spanish, right?”

“Yeah?” he answered.

“Looks like I’m getting a pack of dudes.”

I became an initiated smoker. Es-se min-teu, my brand, the label a winter green, the taste, a combination of spearmint and spice. Every cigarette reminded my mouth of the feeling of a good brushing, with an added fuzzy sensation to my teeth and tongue. The addiction had been

written into my DNA, inherited from my Dad. I smoked in the bar and I smoked in my apartment.

I didn't smoke at work, at Si Cheong Middle School, or anywhere in sight of it. Women smoke in secret in the bathrooms of Korea, each stall equipped with an ashtray for hen parties in the powder room. No toilet paper or soap, but you could always count on an ashtray. I never saw a teacher smoke in the bathrooms though, and I did not want to be the first. I waited for an initiator in perpetuity.

I abstained from when I left my apartment at 7:50 in the morning until I got home at 4:55 in the afternoon. My loft tall with smoke, my breakfast cigarette hung from my lips while I ironed a blouse. Ash christened my chest, left grey confetti folded between lace in my bra. I would unceremoniously kill it in a mass grave of butts, a small pink cup lined with aluminum, Hello Kitty's expressionless face stared back while I buttoned up my shirt. Hands shook from the nicotine, index finger stained saffron from the fingernail down. My morning routine: foundation, blush, mascara, perfume, a thorough scrubbing of my right hand, scraping the layer of carcinogen so that none of my coworkers would know.

Had those dainty skinny sticks lost weight? I finished one before I felt like I had started, one inhale and then nothing but filter. Six months a smoker and in the market for a new, grown-up style cigarette, I browsed the store with my minimal Korean, sounding out the phonetic alphabet, to ask a clerk for their behind-the-counter drug. Most of the boxes were white, and besides "Marlboro" or "Camel," the names felt as foreign as my own did.

I found myself drawn to a brand called "Bohem Cigar Mojito," pronounced mo-jee-to. A pretty teal pack, decorated with gold leaf palm trees, a warning on the top flap written

exclusively in elusive Hanguel, which only represents sounds. It's easy to ignore words when you don't recognize them as words.

My friends knew me for the silly bohem cigarettes, tasting of mint and a hint of lime chemicals. Most of us were committed smokers, and the first person who ran out would often pick up packs for the pack, tossing down a bottle of soju before returning to the bar like some sort of cigarette-runner, a demented Santa Claus, purse exploding, pockets bursting with multiple packs of Marlboro Gold and This Plus.

Two packs on a Friday, two packs on a Saturday. After completing my contractual year, I signed up for a second. I had become addicted to the lifestyle. I could dance in a club with a lit cigarette, I could text with the tip dangling from my lips. After a one-night stand, the mo-jee-offered a shot of mouthwash during the walk of shame. This all changed with Jersey, who would have stayed a fling had he not compared my legs to cigarettes and gotten himself hooked. He took me for breakfast after, locked my jaundiced finger into his knuckle, the smoke from our cigarettes coming together to form the same cloud.

When we started dating in earnest, he teased me constantly for not smoking real cigarettes, then he would sneak one from my pack. The bohem cough real and unmistakable, and after chain-smoking in a noraebang, singing my lungs out, my voice sounded like it was filtered through sandpaper for most of the following day.

Jersey smoked Marlboro Red or Lucky Strike. Filthy, stinky cigarettes, a man's cigarettes. The intense odour lingered in my apartment, making me miss him for days following his visits. Smoking in my apartment our luxury: foreplay, dinner conversation, post-coital

reward. Him lighting my smoke like a fire between fights and sex and good mornings and goodnights.

Sixteen months into my stay, some students caught me in the Art Centre square. They documented my life of sin outside the school walls with their smartphones. The next day, the head English teacher confronted me in my office.

“Students have pictures of you smoking. Smoking. Is. Forbidden,” she insisted, spitting each word.

Cram hand in pocket, fidget with lighter, play with keys. Mouth like binary, zeroes and ones spell out “cigarette.”

“I don’t smoke at school, I only smoke in my free time,” I wavered.

“You are a woman. Please set a good example.”

I did not renew my contract for a third year.

I brought two cartons of Cigar Bohem back to Ontario. It took only two weeks to turn them into butts that lined the ashtrays of my father’s lounge. He set up a chair for me, my own table, my own ashtray. I couldn’t find a menthol that tasted as nice in Canadian stores, so I switched to Belmonts at seven times the cost. I didn’t even think about price in Korea. Now it would cost me fourteen bucks for a smoke that tasted like hard tobacco, no lime to wash it down.

Two years in Korea and all I have to show for it is this lousy habit. My mother sighing when I go out for a nicotine fix. No cause has been worthy enough to end the battle, not monetary, not health. It’s the only souvenir I have of Korea. Eventually, everyone tires of the stories.

I missed everything about Korea but Si Cheong Middle School. I missed Jersey most, the thick odour of Lucky Strike and their constant tease. Sometimes I'd breathe deep in the smoking lounge, the stale Belmont smell the last that I have of him. I crave him in bed, or I crave his Lucky Strikes. The bunched-up sheets look like his legs wrapped around mine, or a pack of smokes spilled across the bedspread.

Ribcage contracts, squeezes heart, pushes lungs. Gastric acid punches larynx, bruises bronchi. Pulse increases, blood rushes, veins swell.

Foreigner

Camping in the mountains of Gangwondo, no electricity, 3G service. He grabbed my hand and squeezed the moment we stepped out of the back seat of Rock's rental Kia and inhaled clean air, the weight of yellow dust and car exhaust lifting from our respiratory system. Hand in hand, we walked toward our campsite cradled between mountains, folded between a slow-moving brook and a vegetable garden, a small *hanok* that divided the ground and the garden. An elderly Korean couple who tended the site resided in the left portion, and two gendered bathrooms stood on the right half. I had never camped before, and the sight of toilets and Korea's famous shower-sink duo washed any anxiety away.

Blue sky reflected in Jersey's brown eyes. Almost a month since I saw a blue sky. Incheon stretched grey panoramically. Some nights there shone brighter than the days, the neon bouncing off low-hanging pollution, illuminating wiry winding paths of noraebangs and brothels and convenience stores.

Rock called Jersey back towards the car. Rock chose his English name after Rock Hudson. His girlfriend didn't speak English and she knew Rock by a name Jersey wouldn't have recognized. Rock popped the truck open and he and Jersey began unloading the tents while I stood next to the girlfriend. The two of us awkwardly released giggles to fill the silence. Despite having shared a car for three hours, I still didn't know, or couldn't remember, her name.

"Can I help you gentleman at all?" I asked, fishing for conversation.

"Let us men set up the tents," Rock insisted, "and you girls can go swimming."

I snatched my backpack from the trunk and followed Rock's girlfriend to the ladies' room. The proprietor picked red peppers from a long row of bushes, her curly grey hair contained in a white kerchief, loose forest green pants billowed between sturdy knees which lurked behind a sagging apron. She paused and sparked an animated conversation in Korean with the girlfriend. I stood by for a heartbeat, then continued towards the bathroom.

When I emerged, bikinied, they were still talking, laughing. My ears began to burn at *waygooken*, foreigner. Almost a year since I arrived in Korea and I still didn't have a handle on conversational Korean. At Si Cheong Middle School, I was talked around so frequently that I learned to ignore the sound of my name. The English teachers discussed my curriculum, but all I had to work with was "Beseu" or "*yeongeo*," the Korean word for "English." I didn't want to feel left out during my vacation. My bikinied body halted their conversation for a breath, but then the *halmoni* started again, cackling out a Korean placeholder sound that I felt in the back of my throat: a guttural cough, a hacking noise.

My skin reflected the sun the way the water in the brook did, my thighs emitting a foreign brightness. The summer before, I spent every free hour sunbathing in Toronto, and now I winced at my blanched limbs: my skin alabaster without tan lines. A year felt as far as Toronto. The women submerged in chat, the men deep in pole holes, so I ran to the shallow brook, my arms and legs like bicycle reflectors in the sunshine.

Gangwondo wasn't our first vacation together. A month earlier, two weeks after we hooked up, Jersey and I went to Mudfest. The trip to Boryeong from Incheon, organized by "Intrepid Foreign Excursions," offered two departure dates –late Friday night or early Saturday

morning. Because Jersey already attended Mudfest the year before, Friday appealed to his “drink until die” lifestyle.

Experienced *waygooken* friends of mine, like Sumter, prescribed one trip to Mudfest per Korean tenure. He described the festival as “a great excuse to get fucked up on a beach full of foreigners.” I asked him in the sunset of his third year why he recommended only one trip to Mudfest, and he told me that I “would know why on the Sunday.” I told him that this trip marked Jersey’s second, and he said, “well, darling, that says all I need to know about Jersey.”

On Friday, I finished teaching at 4:30 and ran home. The dark sky dragged humid curtains from the clouds. After sleeping with Jersey, what used to be obnoxious about the peninsula became quirky, charming. Before, I had plenty to complain about: the long day at work, a nicotine fit, the impending storm threatening beachy fun times, the weight of the air slowing each step towards the weekend. Now, I skipped through the dark streets to Bruce Springsteen ballads, coiled the cable of my headphones around my fingers like an old telephone cord. A few weeks before, I considered leaving after my contract expired in August, but the idea of being without him fermented my stomach lining into kimchi.

Jersey began as a one-night stand, a Carlsberg-fueled response to skinny jeans, curly hair, and his tongue in my mouth, but escalated quickly into a mutual addiction. Almost every day after: *Troll 2* and *The Room* and Taco Cielo and barbeque, punctuated by hands and lips and the fumbling of button-fly Cheap Mondays. My hands shook when a cigarette quivered between his lips. I packed my backpack carelessly, tossed my bikini and makeup in between texts, “miss you,” “can’t wait to see you,” “miss you more.”

Jersey and I planned to meet for a romantic Pizza Hut dinner before the bus to Boryeong. Korean pizza places often too adventurous for our foreign palette: crusts stuffed with sweet potato mousse, toppings of corn or shrimp or maraschino cherries, a drizzle of mayonnaise or butter. Pizza Hut offered safety. The servers avoided us while we stood by the English “Please Wait to be Seated” sign. The staff nervous to speak either perfectly passable or nonexistent English to white foreigners who speak either perfectly passable or nonexistent Korean. But Jersey aggressively asserted Korean phrases: *yogiyo*, over here, *shillehabnida*, excuse me, *dugae myungeehyo*, table for two. He stopped a bookish-looking server by grabbing his arm, a boy considerably shorter than Jersey with round wire-rimmed glasses and a bowl cut. Jersey dropped his voice by half an octave and rounded out each Korean syllable. Then he said something I couldn’t understand.

“*Jamsiman-yo!*” the boy responded. *Just a second*, I thought, but maybe not politely. He continued with his circuit, getting away from us.

“He’ll be with us in a minute,” Jersey smiled at me.

“Yeah, like the sign says he will.”

Waist-deep in the brook, Jersey turned around from inserting Pole A into Insert B. Curled his lips at me. I could have drowned. I tried to dip back into the water, cheeky, hide my blush, but my knee licked a rock. I surfaced with a small cut.

“*Gwiyeobda!*” he exclaimed, clapping his hands. *Cute*. A downstream of blood wouldn’t help my cause, but it running down my leg, invitation to be teased. I checked the floor of the

brook for more dangerous debris. Found a clear spot. Sat in the water. My head bobbed at the surface, so I tilted it towards the top of the mountain, submerged every hair. Admired the way the bright, alien sun punctured the local fauna while I bled into the brook.

The world instantly dark, my eyes covered. In my right ear, Jersey's voice asked me to "guess who," pulled me out of my sunny subconscious in the brook. "Are you rolling your eyes behind there? Classic."

"I guess you're done with that tent?" I asked.

"Not really. Rock said that he'd do the rest himself." He lifted his hands from my face, shoved them under my armpit to tickle me.

"I can see how he'd get frustrated," I squirmed away, grabbed my knee. "Fuck! I scratched my leg trying to get away from you."

"Oh no," he placated, bent over to look. The small, visible scratch had already stopped bleeding. "Shit. Maybe the *halmoni* has some Band-Aids or magic leaves or something."

I'd squared the blame onto him, but he never apologized for anything. I chalked it up to him being American, New Jersey specific.

"Magic leaves?" I asked him. "What, do you think she's a witch?"

"You know Koreans, they love that Chinese medicine."

I sat at the Pizza Hut, facing Bupyeong, waiting for the *pepeoloni pija* Jersey ordered without consulting me. Our fifth-floor table, next to a window, overlooked the square – a small patch of grey grass bordered by tall windows. The sun already obstructed by pollution and the *Pati* building, the street just started coming to light. Streetlamps lined the square and illuminated cracks in the road, headlights from taxis filled potholes as they careened in front of the station. I reached for Jersey's hand from across the table. My heart finally felt at home amongst the neon. But the glow from his iPhone provided him a better landscape, or at least a landscape mode.

After dinner, we arrived at the designated meeting point just before 7 PM, as did the bus. None of the other foreigners. Only Illinois, the director, stood outside the open bus door, tapping on his cell phone. An *ajeossi*, the driver, smoked a cigarette next to Illinois, his leg propped up on a granite bench. A bottle of soju rested next to his grounded leg, which Jersey pointed to. "I bet that's his," he barked out in full earshot of both the *ajeossi* and the director. "A refreshing drink before his long drive to Boryeong."

"It could just be garbage," I offered in the driver's defense. Bupyeong's streets always had a healthy coat of trash.

"Watch yourself, Jersey," Illinois warned. "He might speak English."

He did not speak English. The *ajeossi* took a deep swig of the *Chamisul* with comedic timing.

"Cool and fresh," Jersey lit a cigarette at Illinois.

I followed suit, dragged a menthol out of the case and carefully bit the filter. Jersey extended a lighter before I had the chance to dig one out of my purse.

“I got it, *nuna*.” *Older sister*.

I took a long drag of my cigarette. “Don’t call me that.”

My leg had already stopped bleeding by the time Jersey helped me out of the water. “Do you still want a Band-Aid?” he asked.

“How about a beer-aid?”

He shot me with some finger guns, told me “you got it,” and ran off to the campsite. I followed behind, limping, half dramatic and half to keep the scab from reopening.

In front of our tents, logs encircled a fire pit. Jersey threw me a cold Cass from the cooler between the tents, grabbed one for himself, and opened the bottle with his molars. I sat on a log. Using my Sufjan Stevens T-shirt, I dug the bottlecap between my thumb and forefinger and twisted. Took a big swig of watery lager.

“That’s disgusting,” I told him after swallowing. “You have beautiful teeth. Your parents must have spent a fortune on orthodontic work, and now you want to deface your teeth opening bottles of shitty beer?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t ask for these.” He let out a big, toothy grin. “Come on, baby, feel the Illinois!” He poked the graphic on my shirt, then shouted over to Rock and his girlfriend.

“*Rokeu! Maegju taim!*”

Rock responded, “*Jamsiman-yo!* We have to go out to get meat for dinner.”

I threw down some Cass and clapped my rings against the bottle. “Yay! Adventure time!”

Rock turned around. “No, Beseu. Only the men will go shopping.” He grabbed his girlfriend’s hand and walked her over to us. “Listen, *Ji-something* was talking with the *halmoni* of the campsite. She has never seen a foreigner. She and *halabeoji* are very excited to have you both here. You are their first! They want to have dinner with us.”

Jersey loved to be the trailblazer. It played to his American colonial instincts. He asked Rock, “will there be *soju* involved?”

“Well, maybe, but Beseu and *girlfriend* will help the *halmoni* pick *kkaenip* for *ssam*.”

What he volunteered me for sure sounded like woman’s work.

Jersey and Rock left me, the girlfriend, and the *halmoni* to pick greasy leaves. Left me alone and unable to communicate, all because I have a vagina. The night Jersey appeared, Kelowna tried to convince me that Jersey was gay. “It’s the shorts,” she warned. “No heterosexual man would wear Daisy Dukes.” I bet that’s what they were up to, I thought, pulling the minty leaves with fervor. Kelowna knew better than I, Jersey rock-hard for alone time with Rock, a guy who picked his name after a heartthrob and hard parts his hair down the middle.

“*Anniyo!*” the *halmoni* shouted, grabbed my hands, shook them. She mimicked the motion, my angry tugs at her low stalky weeds. She made an aggressive X with her forearms, “*anniyo!*” From behind me, she took my hands like puppets, gently twisted the base of the leaf with my fingers, pulled it loose. “OK?”

“Okay,” I repeated and mimed the action. Soft. Genial. Treated each leaf tenderly. The three of us, curled off fuzzy leaves, filled baskets. The sun set behind the mountains. Pink sky, purple, navy.

Almost 7:30 before the next person showed up. Cork came armed with a small backpack and a large clanking tote, boarded the bus with his high-pitched laugh. “Look who it is!” He pulled out a large bottle of Bacardi 151 by the neck.

“Now you’re fucking talking.” Jersey grabbed the bottle. Twisted it. Cracked the seal. Poured a generous shot down his throat. Hissed. “God damn it!” Recoiled.

“Oh, you can’t handle it, Yank?” Cork giggled. “Mudfest is gonna fuck ya right up!”

I grabbed the bottle. “May I?” Cork gave me a snicker of permission. I opened the top, took note of the small filter on the top, a metal capper punctured like a sift. Eased the bottle, angled to hit as little tongue as possible. Tasted the burn, shivered the warmth off.

“We’re all damned now, J.”

Eleven more expats, and then the neon guided our bus out of Bupyeong coming up to 8 PM. The Bacardi passed around, twelve foreigners swigged. Only Illinois avoided the warm bite. “There’s going to be eighty on the bus tomorrow morning,” he cautioned. “Treat tonight as a warmup.”

That must have been what we were doing, warming up, washing down Bacardi with Dry Finish, singing our favourite *noraebang* songs while the scenery changed from high rises to rice patties. The horizon, now exposed, poured orange sun into the bus, leftover from the day.

“I love the country here,” I told Jersey. “It has a different kind of serenity, you know?”

He kept screaming the chorus to “Karma Chameleon.” Gave me a rum kiss, took a sip of his beer during the bridge. Hid his phone. Sent a text message.

I kept my eyes on the passing patties. Happy in love.

* * *

Hours or minutes later, Rock and Jersey arrived back at camp with bulging white shopping bags, gravity spinning the plastic handles into thin strings. The jangle of glass like music, clanking together an old Korean melody. Sweat stung my eyes. I wiped my brow with the back of my minty hand, squinted at their shadows inching forward. Without daylight savings, summer nights start early in Korea. Without the neon of the city, it hit me: I had forgotten how dark a night could get, how dark the night had gotten. The silence broken by, “Babe! Babe! Babe!”

Basket glued to hip. Hands sticky, fuzzy. Makeup dripped past chin. I couldn’t get mad, could I?

“Whaaa?” I wined out. Halmoni said something to the girlfriend in Korean. Girlfriend said something back. I stood there erect, a prairie dog, still, wide-eyed.

Somehow, he managed to get behind me. Again. His hand on my chin, my hands push his chest in retaliation, leaves fell through air so still that it might have caught them.

“Why you do?” I asked, mimicked my students. “How you do? How the fuck did you get back there.”

“Oh, Beseu baby, best back teacher,” he laughed, patted my ass. “The thing’s a magnet. Couldn’t help myself if I tried!”

I would have blushed if I thought the women had an idea what he said. What I called my “Korean filter,” the capacity to ignore every Korean person around because of “translation,” a physical language barrier that prevented any shame.

I tried to direct the conversation away. “Where’s Rock?” I scrambled to gather the leaves, pushed them back into the basket.

“He’s setting up some bar-bee-cue-tee.” He pinched my basket between his left thumb and pointer, pinched my jaw with his right thumb and forefinger, pinched my lower lip between his. My eyes tried to find the halmoni. Nowhere in sight. No girlfriend. My hand grabbed the back of his neck, brought my face forward. He pulled away.

“Come on, there’s time for that after the soju,” he laced his fingers into mine. Dropped my basket into the halmoni’s as we walked past.

“How was picking leaves?” he asked.

“Fucking women’s work,” I responded, grabbed a pack of Marlboro Red’s from his back pocket, pulled one out with my teeth. “Bayee hanss arr sicky,” I hissed, cigarette against my

palate. His hand extended a lighter it to my face, it hissed back. Deep inhale. “Those leaves are so fucking gross,” I exhaled with a mouth of smoke.

“Baby, watch your language.”

Hiss.

* * *

Fourteen fucked-up foreigners fell from their bus, fumbled for fumes. Hands stirred in bags, pockets, plastic wrap crinkled, cardboard concaved. Fourteen flammable foreigners lit fourteen cigarettes.

Incheon lived at all hours: lights blazed, horns blared, laughter burst from bellies, and if ever there was a moment of stillness, it surely broke by the buzz of a bottle of beer or soju. We brought the noise of the city. Aggressive English in global accents shouted over the calm of Boryeong, spilled down the only street in sight and poured over the sand and into the ocean.

“The sky is still fucked,” I hammered between drags. “Like, I’m from a city, but we can still see stars at night.” Surrounded by my friends and Jersey, but no one paid me any attention. I leaned into Jersey. “Like, I mean, one star, but the night sky wouldn’t be, like, totally fucking grey or something.”

“Baby, are you giving Boryeong one star already?” Jersey laughed. “We haven’t even been here for one cigarette!”

Houston chuckled, straightened her beautiful floral dress with her hand, her Mojito cigarette angled away. “Beth, you judgemental girl!” she chimed in. “You already bummed out about this place?”

Exasperated, I backpedaled. “Guys, I was talking about the sky.”

But the city *was* pretty shitty. The corner where the bus let us off had a GS25 on the ground floor of some 4- or 5-storey glass building, and a knock-off McDonalds, Lotteria. I could make out a few pensions down the left of the street and, to the right, half-erected stands, ghost-like tarps. These tents spilled out onto the beach, where the ocean matched the grey of the sky and bled into the horizon.

I reached over and grabbed the 151 from Cork’s hand. Swig, cigarette. Houston grabbed the bottle, pushed her glasses up her face. She chugged the bottle, hidden in her hair cave. Exhaled, like a kettle.

“Shit,” she exhaled. “Of course you were talking about the sky. Looks like it’s going to rain.”

I don’t remember how late it could have been. All I remember is that I ate something shitty from the convenience store in the street, a sad ham-and-cheese sandwich cut into two triangles, some yellow sauce oozing into snow white bread, the cheese more processed than the meat, washing down each bite with a tall can of Dry Finish. That I took a cigarette break between triangles. Listening to Vampire Weekend on Houston’s phone, dancing, waving my sandwich. I remember the other foreigners realizing that Jersey and I wore the same outfit,

denim shorts that ended just past our hips, low cut heather grey V-necks, black sneakers, black-framed sunglasses at night.

“You guys are disgusting,” Houston pointed out between smoke-inflicted coughs.

“We’re mupples,” I pointed out with the tip of my sandwich. Matching couples. A phenomenon unique to Korea, stores catering to matching outfits, from his and hers leopard print *paenti* to sweatshirts adorning the same cartoon bear. An everyday sight: hand in hand, Korean man and woman, black Chuck Taylors

Chester came over to us clustered in the middle of the street, telling of a found noraebang on the second floor of one of the pensions. “We’re going, collect yourself.” Chugged too much Dry Finish, almost Dry Finished all over myself, before I ran to catch up.

* * *

Rock peeled *samgyeopsal* off a metal grate with disposable chopsticks, flip it, the fat dripped and screamed into the fire below. We sat around the fire. I slowly sipped a Dixie cup filled two-thirds with beer, topped with a drizzle of soju. *Somaek*. The girlfriend and I occasionally made eye contact, and one of us, smiling, would break it, move our line of sight into a patch of grass. Jersey smoked chains of smokes, lighting cigarettes with other cigarettes, occasionally singing a line of a song to Rock.

Some time later, Rock broke our silence, said something to his girlfriend that ended with an upward inflection. She scurried towards the plastic bags, the coolers: pulled out plates, separated chopsticks, portioned half a jar of kimchi onto a paper plate, half a plastic container of

a bean sprout salad next to it. Like a dance, she twirled around and left our campsite, moved towards the hanok.

“How’s it going, Rock?” Jersey’s cigarette fuming up under his sunglasses and into his eyes. Tears streamed down his face, but Jersey puffed away.

“Good. The samgyeopsal will be done soon. Ji-something went to get the couple. You know, who owns this campsite. You know, they have never seen a foreigner before.”

“Well, not for an hour, anyways,” I responded, poured myself another beer. Jersey splashed in some soju.

“Oh, Beseu,” he beamed. “Just have fun!”

I wondered what Rock and Jersey talked about, alone. I certainly felt alone, now. Conversation with Rock had been strictly utilitarian since we arrived, maybe every time. I tried to remember previous hangouts with Rock, but details were as fuzzy as the basket of those ssam leaves the halmoni carried over to the buffet log. She and halabeoji shared the log across from us, and Ji-something offered them each a Dixie cup, poured them some beer.

Then, Korean flying around the flame. Jersey, one eye glued to his iPhone. Rock peeled samgyeopsal from the flame, cut it into pieces with scissors, a paper plate held too close to the flame caught pork belly confetti. He handed it to the still-standing Ji-something, who placed it on the food log. So graceful in her smooth moments. Her thin arms, legs, slow, arpeggio. This mystery woman; the soju, the Ji-something, everything blurry. The Koreans still spoke Korean, but I couldn’t hear anything anymore.

* * *

All the noraebangs our group had encountered, collectively, separately, had the same controller. This noraebang showed its age, a foreign, smaller controller, about the size of a portable CD player, covered in saran wrap. Almost all the buttons white, a few blue ones surrounding the directional pad. Keyboard below. The number pad occupied the left side.

Nobody in our group knew how to use the controller, apart from the number pad. This new apparatus threw the intoxicated foreigners off. Almost a year since we learned to navigate our regular stone tablet, exclusively knowing to input the four or five number identifier from a large photo album catalogue of outdated English material, only knowing buttons to queue the song, or to cancel it. Some of the other buttons adjusted the pitch, tempo, but we couldn't figure those out. Numbers, enter, cancel.

The catalogue in the Boryeong noraebang lacked some of our favourite 90s songs: "Say You'll Be There," "Backstreet's Back," "You Oughta Know." The proprietor brought us metal pails of beer and soju bottles, glassware on a cafeteria tray. The striped wallpaper at home in my great-grandmother's cottage, pastel yellow and blue stripes against a nicotine-stained white. The walls as tacky as the vinyl orange banquet, the sound of legs and arms peeling off the surface while fourteen foreigners crowd around two song catalogues, trying to find the English section.

Jersey typed in a number, one the machine wouldn't recognize. "What the fuck? It doesn't know "Karma Chameleon?" He lit a cigarette with his fingers wrapped tight around a bottle of Hite.

“What did you put in?” Houston quickly flipped through the gummy plastic pages of the book.

Jersey let a large plume of smoke escape his lips. “Two-oh-six-five-three,” the smoke said.

“Yeah, it’s nine-one-oh-four here,” she responded, her finger pointed to an arbitrary page. She raised her eyebrow. Jersey got up, danced to the midi intro music, and I got up too, sat next to Houston.

“What’s up?” I asked and took a generous swig of my beer.

“Does he know another fucking song,” she pried, tried to light a cigarette, her fingers too sticky to spin the spark wheel. I took the lighter from her hands, started a fire, brought it over to her face.

“Honestly, I couldn’t tell you. He really loves this Boy George fucking song.”

By the fourteenth or so time, fourteen of us up and dancing in the small space, banging tambourines against hips, embers complimenting the small, spinning disco ball. I leaned in to join Jersey in his singing, but he swung the microphone to face the crowd.

* * *

The halmoni and halabeoji left immediately after dinner, a simple *samgyeopsal* spread that couldn’t have soaked up all the alcohol consumed. Pork belly, kimchi and soybean paste wrapped in furry leaves left me hungrier than when we started. We never said a word to each other. Rock, the only link between our two worlds, didn’t face us the whole meal, didn’t bother

translating the conversation. Just, “they have never seen a foreigner before.” As they left, I tried to say, “thank you,” *kamsahamnida*, but my slow and clumsy syllables made me sound like a child.

Warmed by the stagnant summer humidity and soju, I leaned into Jersey, his long arm wrapped around my shoulders, nuzzled into his ribs.

“What if we went for a walk,” he asked. “Go check out the scenery.”

“I’d love that,” I responded, cooing, stumbled trying to get up off the low log, almost put my foot in the fire to steady myself. Jersey extended a hand only then, “watch out,” he warned, said something to Rock in Korean, who said “oh kay,” each letter punching and deliberate.

We walked down the dirt path hand in hand, followed the brook, sandwiched by low rising mountains and thin-branched trees with spiked green foliage, low-hanging spindles, ginkgo trees and feather reeds. Even the grass grew in a darker shade of green. The sky felt darker every step we took away from the camp, away from the fire, farther from the light from inside the hanok. Eventually, the brook took a left turn, and we arrived at an old and handmade bridge, oil striped the middle, marked the untreated wood.

Jersey swung around the railing, sat on the side of the bridge, legs dangled, skating across the surface. He lifted each foot and removed a flip-flop, tucked them inside of each other and between his bare thigh and the bannister. I leaned against the railing, dipped my face towards his, couldn’t quite reach for a kiss.

“Look up,” he pointed to the sky. “I can’t remember the last time I could see so many stars.”

Stars, planets, the Milky Way trailing between them. It looked like some of them were moving. Jersey buried his face into his phone, the glow exposing our position for miles.

“It’s a meteor shower,” he read. “The Perseid. I’ve never even seen this in America. How crazy is it to see in Korea?”

I reached over the railing and pushed the button on the top of his iPhone with the weight of my entire dangling torso. “So experience it,” I instructed him. “Knowing the name won’t change its beauty.”

He yanked my leg, I tossed it over the side of the bridge. In tandem, we lay on our backs.

“Could you understand any of the dinner conversation?”

“Sort of,” he replied, “but you don’t need to know all the words to get the gist.”

I audibly nodded, my crisp “mmm” hummed in the still air. We lay with our arms pressed against each other, against the dirty, untreated wood. Could have been ten minutes. Could have been hours. Eventually, he broke the silence by whispering, singing “I Will Follow You Into The Dark.” I joined him, a chorus of two soft voices, a song the mountains wouldn’t recognize, in a language they’d never heard before.

* * *

I don’t remember how we ended up on minibikes. The only stand open in the Boryeong night more than eager to take our won. Louisville staying in a pension down the road, a few buildings from ours; he came to Mudfest with a different tour group. Jersey spent most of the night texting him for his arrival time, wanted to surprise him. The two of us shared a minibike

built for one child, our knees well past browbones, pushing that little motor to a jogging pace. It would have been faster to walk, but Jersey loved this idea, and I always find myself a willing participant.

He lost control of the bike right before the pension, throwing me a few feet down the road. Louisville, witness to the catastrophe, started yelling at Jersey. “What the fuck is your problem? You could have killed her!” His long face somehow longer, growing red with anger.

Jersey circled the bike back over, a hard U-turn in the middle of the road, around my splayed body. “Calm the fuck down, it was an accident.” I tried to get up, but stumbled, my leg covered in scrapes, tiny beads of blood burst from my shin.

“You two are both drunk. Go to bed.” He turned into his pension, disappeared for the night, despite the twenty-three messages Jersey sent, the ten calls Jersey made.

So, Jersey and I went to our pension, had sloppy sex on the floor. We shared a room with four other people, and who knows where they slithered to. I don’t remember how we got a key and I can’t remember how we knew which room was ours. I remember the hard laminate floor against my back, cold on the humid July night. I remember his sweat stinging my skin, clogging my pores, rubbing friction sores onto my legs. His breath heavy with Marlboro Red and Bacardi 151. Leaving our shirts on, not throwing a bed mat down, my grey V-neck catching on the crease of the floor panels. Him ripping it trying to free me, out of breath. Short, but sour. Over before it began. We left the room with the windows steamed, our smell dripping with the condensation.

Somehow, after, we ended up in the ocean. I remember not wearing any clothes. The cold, grey ocean against my hot skin washed the night away.

* * *

We drank the last few beers by the fading fire after we returned. Rock and his girlfriend retired to their tent, we talked about home. My homesickness spoke its own language, one of Kensington Market and the inconvenience of the TTC, the CN Tower compass, a clock hand against the sky.

“You know,” I told him, “I’d planned on leaving before I met you.”

“Going back to Toronto?” he asked between drags. “What would you do?”

“I don’t know. Nothing about this place made sense.”

“But you’ve lived here for, like, ten months?”

“Yeah. Ten months, or ten years.”

“And it makes sense now?”

“No, but the nonsense became something fun.”

It took us over half an hour to put out the fire. We couldn’t find a bucket and we couldn’t find water. Handfuls of sand only muted the flames for a moment before they roared back, cackled at our pathetic attempts. All at once, the alcohol hit me, and I threw up into the fire, spewed beer and soju and a little bit of samgyeopsal into the pit.

Jersey didn't ask if I felt okay. He lit a cigarette, poured the rest of his beer over the ashes. Before I turned in for the night, instead of brushing my teeth, I pulled a mojito cigarette out from its case. Mentholated. We smoked in silence. Since we only had one sleeping bag, we slept folded into one another, the stillness of the night keeping us company.

* * *

Mudfest ended by beginning: I woke up hungover, ill but iron-willed. We started drinking before considering food. Beer breakfast washed down with a small kimbap triangle. The sky foreboding, heavy overcast, ruining the day before it even began. The mud of the festival a matching dark grey; filled inflatable pools for wrestling, inflatable slides coated, lined inflatable obstacle courses. We arrived at a ghost town last night, but the beach this morning teemed with foreigners.

"You know," lectured Jersey, "Mudfest used to be a holy Korean day. About cleansing the skin, preparing it for the summer harvest."

"And now it's a foreigner thing," I sighed, drank my beer.

"No, I was just bullshitting you. Totally created to sell cosmetics."

When I ended up with a cocktail in a bag attached to a lanyard, I should have known to expect trouble. After squeezing out the last of a vodka orange, I felt incredibly sick. Still hungover, newly drunk, and not nearly enough food or water, I almost passed out at a picnic table trying to eat a hot dog. Jersey took me back to the pension where I slept for most of the day, only getting up to puke or peek out at the hard rainstorm. It poured most of the day, but I lay on the floor, without a pillow, and without Jersey checking in on me once.

I woke up to a dark room. The sun had set, the Mudfest-ivities had ended, yet the rain still drizzled, pecked at the window. I went out for a cigarette and to find Jersey, or anyone. Out there soaked, muddy, wasted, he sat perched on a bench with Rock and Montana, yelling about something or other. I asked him how the rest of the day went, and he could barely respond, spilled off his seat. I helped walk him to the GS25 and bought us cups of ramen, poured in the hot water, let the salty mix ferment.

“Baby,” he slurred, lit the wrong end of a cigarette. “Baby, I’m not going to be able to fuck tonight. Why don’t we just cuddle and listen to Bon Iver.”

I stood still in response, not quite sure how we got here from there.

Drinking and Diving

Since returning from Korea, I've picked up swimming to replace drinking. Took weeks to accumulate the accessories: a one-piece bathing suit that didn't dive into my navel and tie around my neck, optical goggles in -2.5, the courage to expose thick thighs and noodle arms flailing for air when my weak body inevitably failed to make it across the pool.

Not like I can't swim. Sponsored by the Toronto District School Board and my maternal grandfather's property taxes, I received two forty-five-minute lessons a week in my elementary school's swimming pool. When the six of us first moved into his three-bedroom one bathroom semidetached in the east end, I was nine and had never swum before. I might not have even owned a bathing suit. My two sisters and I shared a bedroom, my parents in a large closet next to the bathroom. my brother slept in a small bed at the foot of my grandfather's. A modern Dickensian nightmare: bunk beds, staggered showers, a dresser shared among three girls. I asked for my own room every Christmas; Santa brought Barbie accessories.

Seven of us in my class classified as 'shallow enders,' four new to Canada and the English language. The swimming instructor demonstrated strokes on the dry deck, spinning her arms around, mimed for us to try by pushing her hands out towards us. She would shout in one-word sentences, "kick!" or "flat!" in an aggressive staccato that bounced up the tiled walls, absorbed into the vaulted ceiling. Those in the deep end obeyed the sound of a whistle, swam across their narrow section of the pool, congested like guppies. We shallow-enders had enough space on our side of the buoy to spend ten minutes of class practicing floating in sterile chemical soup, never once making contact with another.

At home, we lived compartmentalized. My father made his way directly to the bar from work, coming home good and wasted. He justified his daily pilgrimage as release from his stressful computer networking job, but I think it was more an escape from our bottlenecked house. Every day, he arrived home after dinner, drunk and angry, his sentences legato and slurred together, “shaddup,” “wha-id ya-do now.”

When we first moved to Toronto, he haunted Jimmy’s Good Eats, a Chinese restaurant neighbouring Hollywood Video in a near-by strip mall. Once a week, my mother, stroller in tow, checked on my dad if Jimmy didn’t answer the phone. My siblings and I sat in an orange particle board booth, swinging feet, watching the game on a small, suspended television mounted next to the industrial range. Sticky walls, the same Black Sabbath cassette brought in by one of the bikers, side A until the tape stopped and Jimmy flipped it over to B. Crispy garlic chicken wings, the currency my dad spent to silence our restlessness; we couldn’t ask questions with a full mouth.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, I drummed on my desk all morning, anticipating swimming lessons at 2:45. My mother often forgot to wash my swimsuit, so in the morning I fished it out from the hamper, waved it over the heating vent, and wrapped the damp suit in a dry towel, hoped no one would notice the smell. In the changeroom, girls made faces, then jumped into the deep end, bobbed on their side of the buoy line. The heavy chlorine and language barrier kept the shallow enders off my case, each of us a full adult’s arm span away from each other. I juiced our forty-five-minutes for every drop: perfectly mimicked the instructor’s dry strokes, translated them to the water. Before the school year ended, she moved me over to the deep end, told me, “you could have been a fish in another life.”

My parents never encouraged any athletics. Money was allocated for my father's bar and pack-a-day lifestyle. My mother teased me for my running, "your long legs look ridiculous," and "you throw your feet to the side like a clown." The pool was safe, hidden from their world, sterile and clean. I still have a box of wrinkled swim meet ribbons, Grand Champion of the Toronto District School Board.

As I graduated from elementary school, Dad graduated to Occasions. A bigger bar in a smaller strip mall, built in the parking lot of a No Frills, a sliding glass door that opened to a patio in the summer. Find Dad next to this window, occupying a bench, outing a cigarette into a Corona bucket underneath. My mom started joining him every night, my brother and two sisters left in my care at home until she returned with dad in tow. Sometimes we had family dinners here: the soggy Caesar salad wrap accompanied spongy crinkle fries to make the plate seem full, my baby sister gumming on Cheerios.

Drinking, a family tradition, my father's parents gathered every night around rye and cokes, smoked unfiltered cigarettes that stained faux wood panels lining the room off their kitchen. Maybe Dad felt that he led a better example by bingeing outside our tight walls, but he still stumbled home each night, smoked Player's Light from his leather recliner, enjoyed a nightcap or two before passing out onto himself.

At eighteen, I moved into the Carleton University dorms. I exchanged my two sisters for one roommate, a bunk bed for my own twin. My new freedom came in flavours. Victoria and I were kicked out of a bowling event during frosh week for flasks of Absolut Limon in our bags. I drank a pink Nalgene's worth of Smirnoff Raspberry and Kool-Aid at the Sam Roberts concert. I took swigs of Fireball Whiskey between bottle tokes next to the canal locks. I made grape Jell-O

in my bar fridge with Global 94% from the SAQ in Hull. I fell quickly into the pastime of adults – drinking until I threw up into a fountain, or my purse, or an empty pizza box in some Air Force conscript’s dorm room.

I did occasionally drink in high school, thanks to Amy Chau. I purchased her driver’s licence on Yonge Street, north of College. The sign advertised band merchandise, basement level. Diving below street level, a dimly-lit windowless room, walls painted khaki, grid lined, t-shirts lynched from the squares. Circular racks of Metallica, Ride the Lightning, a man electrocuted, glowed in the dark basement. Under a glass display case on centre stage, Ontario drivers’ licences, Saskatchewan, Manitoba. The man behind the counter in an old army surplus coat the same colour as the walls, his long hair taut in a ponytail held by an elastic band. Easily twenty years older than me, but somehow more acne. I approached the counter. Mostly men for sale, most of the women blonde. I squinted at the selection, urging a white woman with dark features to materialize onto one of the cards.

“I have something for you,” he finally offered. “Might not be perfect but it’ll work.” He pulled up an old metal box, spun a combination, creaked the top open, leafed through his secret collection. Pinched a card between dirty nails. Threw it onto the glass top.

“She’s a little Asian, but I think you can pull ’er off.”

Amy Chau was more than a little Asian. Obviously Chinese, with long black hair framing a clear face far more beautiful than my frizzy brown locks ever could. Three years older, she existed on a real license, blacklight approved, for twenty bucks. I didn’t ask to see any others. I wanted Amy. I would straighten my hair; I would apply heavy eyeliner. I would do anything to be Amy Chau, the Scorpio, born in the year of the Tiger. And I could be her, at least

on the rare Saturday in the LCBO, in Sneaky Dee's, in The Cathedral. If I could remember her fancy postal code, sustain eye contact with the bouncer as they second and third glanced between the card and my face, stone-faced like her picture.

My post-Korea self wonders if the lifeguards have their own Amy as my goggled eyes focused on the stand, the girl's shiny yellow ponytail perfect contrast to her red uniform bathing suit. I thought of myself, bloated with yesterday's beer, hiding under a black-and-white printed suit, obscured by warm blue water. Consider sinking, but not drowning.

In the third week of my Bachelor of Journalism program, I knew I would not pass any of my courses. My first university lecture, Introduction to Journalism, me and one hundred and ninety-nine hopeful students each knew that the program would shrink by half two semesters from now. The instructor, a *National Post* writer, told us that, "if you came to Carleton to change the world, to become famous writers, then you are in the wrong place," and piled the lectern with newspaper style guides. *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, each book dramatically thudded onto the steel desk, thick and bound by a plastic spiral.

"These," she instructed, "are the filter that every issue you cover will syphon through before you see it in print."

I bought the textbook, but never returned to class. I opted to drink every day of the week instead, pilgrimages in a twenty-dollar taxi to the SAQ in Gatineau, weekends dancing in sticky bars across the Ontario-Québec border, Le Petit Chicago, Le Bop. I could leave Amy behind, just be Beth, short dress glued to eighteen-year-old legs, peeled cheap Aldo stilettos off vinyl dance floors, contacts crystalize by smoke machine, shoo away greasy thirty-year-old Québécois

men, disco ball, Feel Good Inc. Partied until Carleton's voluntary withdrawal deadlines then returned to a warmer Toronto perma-drunk.

I spent the rest of my school year sleeping in, worked the evening shift at Tim Horton's. I quickly started with Dad throughout the weekend, countless Canadians from the beer fridge in the basement. In the summer, I told him I would go back to school, study literature instead.

"I don't care," he responded. "You'll just drop out again. This time, on your dime."

He extended the neck of his beer bottle in a gesture of 'cheers'. I clinked back, too drunk to know what our celebration meant.

My English degree at York University: funded by bartending, fueled by alcohol. No longer sponsored by my family, I worked slinging cocktails in a miniskirt, shorter than my extended arms, short enough to appreciate the cold radiating from my middle finger against the warm flesh of my leg. The 'upscale casual' restaurant-slash-bar of my employ had floor-to-ceiling slate tiles, black granite flooring, red snakeskin print leather seating, granite tables. Spandex uniform tank top hugged erect nipples, suffocated goosebumps in the cold building, came in sizes small, extra small, and extra-extra small. Two-and-a-half inch heels put me into perfect eye contact with the Italian patrons, if my eyes emerged from my low-hanging scoop neck. The restaurant's guests showed off their new money by buying me shots of Patron and Jägerbombs. They always looked at my name tag, magnetized onto my chest, to refer to me by name.

I learned time management in round two of my Bachelor's, managed my time between the contemporary literature classes that I loved, the electives I hated, work, and punctuated it all with drinking. Aurora and I drank together before work, margarita pitchers at Chili's or just-one-

more pint at the Firkin. We drank after work, free pours past three am. We drank to celebrate the end of midterms, even though our programs didn't have midterms. We drank to christen patio season, to close patio season, to pray for patio season. She and I blacked out three Beerfests in a row, exchanging hard currency for plastic coins, prying feet out of the mud to stagger to the next craft brewery tent. We took turns passing out at Halloween: we were sexy vampires when my stiletto got caught in the left corner pocket of a stained pool table before I fell asleep with my face against a toilet seat; we were Betty and Wilma when Aurora threw up into a rocks glass, chased it down with a vodka cranberry, and then threw the vodka cranberry up into her purse.

We never talked about what we would do after we graduated, if we graduated. We never talked about school, our readings, our papers. We talked about drinking, about the next time we would drink, about the times before where we drank. So, when the end of our degrees came closer, we only had the party planned. It takes a lot of foresight to consider the afterparty. Foresight turns to hindsight after the fourth round.

I had already taken an extra year of my second-round of university. Teaching English in Japan seemed like an easy solution to guaranteed employment, to explore the country for free, to travel the east for cheap. There are three stages of interviews to teach in Japan, and by the time fall turned to spring, I still had not heard back. I posted to Facebook, looking for pity rather than advice.

“Have you considered teaching in Korea?” Orleans, a distant former classmate, messaged. He had taught there for eight months, and though he littered his Facebook page with photographs, events, and aphorisms from the land of the morning calm, I scrolled past them in my News Feed.

“It’s a good job to kill time, be paid to live somewhere new and even save some money,” he messaged me from the future. “Most people here don’t want to teach forever.” He sent me the link to his recruiter, a small office by Davisville station. “You can bring all your documentation directly to them. It’s a really low-key application process.”

The Korean government would pay me more for having a degree in English literature than if I had studied any other subject. The English Program in Korea (EPIK) only asked for proof of my degree, a criminal background check, and a ‘basic’ medical check on arrival to clear me of AIDS, tuberculosis, or drug use. In exchange, they would pay for my airfare, my apartment, health insurance, and four weeks of vacation, all on top of a generous salary.

It took them two weeks to accept my application; two more for my Visa.

A Google search on Korean culture in 2011 led me straight to soju. Soju, the most popular distilled spirit in the world, Korea’s national beverage. As celebration for my successful application, I found the signature green bottle at the Yonge Street LCBO. Eight dollars. I pulled it out of my purse at my going away, warm, and handed it around the circle. Parkdale nearly threw up in her mouth; Church Street swigged a whole third of the bottle down in one go. “Shit’s basically water,” he smirked, would have drunk the rest if I didn’t take the bottle away. I took a generous sip, as though it was soda. The product tasted like gasoline, like nail polish remover, like shitty old vodka. My face pickled in response.

“Not sure I’m going to get used to this,” I spat out, soju spilling from the side of my mouth.

I’d get used to it.

The first time I jumped into the pool at the Aquatic Centre, almost twenty years after my first swim, my body, no longer buoyant, sank to the bottom. Each limb resisted physical activity, hardened to protect itself from any exertion. I pulled myself to the surface with the lip of the pool, kicked frantically. My box of ribbons wilted in response, embarrassed. Mom's voice in my head echoed with the pool's acoustics, "you're a smart girl. Don't waste your time trying to be an athlete."

Better to drown in a beer than in a chlorinated public bath. In a bar, I'd avoid being saved by a beautiful teenage lifeguard with sinewy arms.

My arms exhausted after the first three strokes of front crawl. Every braid of muscle tangled into my shoulders. My anvil biceps wanted to cast anchor, sink to the bottom, make the lifeguard with tight curls and a red tank fish me out. My legs took over, frantically cycling forward. Every inhale a gasp, inviting water into my lungs. Made it to the other side. Barely. Took seven minutes to catch my breath.

Breaststroke on the way back, less reliant on my arms, which had yet to loosen up. I sank down, pushed off with my feet, brought closer to the floor with every swipe, hands creating resistance. My kicks should mimic a frog but again they pedaled, circular, pushed me farther down. My lungs ached, but every time my head bobbed up, I forgot to breathe.

My first week in Korea, EPIK orientation. A group of twenty met in the lobby of the hotel our first night, asked the concierge where to find a "good time." After different attempts to articulate our interest, the concierge pointed us to "Wolmido," called five taxis and handed each of us a business card with the name and address of our hotel, a small map on the back.

We entered the taxis without an idea of how much they would cost, or what a Wolmido was. When the cars careened into a small amusement park, the excitement in the taxis peaked, girls squealed, guys bro-fisted. But we emerged to a dead fair, the only people at the grounds, our twenty white faces. I dipped into a convenience store and taught my peers that Korea had no open container laws (learned that from Orleans, who told me convenience stores would become my favourite Korean bar), bought a plastic two-litre bottle of “Cass RED 6.9%.” Probably the worst beer I’ve ever had, and I’ve drunk from a bottle of Keith’s that someone left on a radiator for so long that it went through a second fermentation process, thick and frothy like rabid saliva.

But I didn’t nurse that red beer. I chugged away at the oversized bottle, felt the bubbles of the air force the carbonated liquid down my throat. I let it pass over my tongue, poured it right down the back of my throat. Much larger than my purse, the beer weighed close to five pounds, and I found myself swinging it at my side, which didn’t help it go down easier.

We walked through the grounds, watched carnies operate empty rides, not knowing how to board them. The strong beer and jet lag brought amusement to the neon of the park. The group thinned at an incredible rate, people got too drunk or lost or afraid of getting in trouble. Five of us eventually ended up in a restaurant, or a bar, or some sort of business enclosure. The only word we knew was soju, and soju bottles quickly filled the table. Three Americans, a South African, and I lost track of the night, lost track of our sobriety, lost our business cards. I still don’t remember how we got back to the hotel.

The next morning, sore, our first seminar, lectured on not leaving the hotel grounds. “You will have one year to explore Incheon,” the program coordinator wagged her finger, “this is not the time.”

We'd make the time. Lock a bunch of twenty-something recent university grads in a hotel and they'll make alcohol appear. Mississauga and I found a one-point-four litre bottle of soju at the GS25 the night after. He hadn't tried soju yet.

"We're going to need some chaser," I told him. "This shit is disgusting."

A matching green bottle, "Milkis," an opaque white soda. A crudely drawn star on the label, a man in a suit carried away by a balloon. "Fantastic Feel!" it promised. Opaque liquids do not make good mixers, but in the business of new experiences and fantastic feels, I picked up a bottle for eight hundred won. Eighty cents.

Milkis does not, it turns out, make a good beverage, even on its own. Sickly sweet, oddly thick, the soju started going down easier in comparison, and so the Milkis ended up down the sink. Eventually, the evening blurred away. Late for my morning seminar, hungover, no idea what happened between the pouring out of Milkis and waking up.

I thought that, once I finished orientation, our group would grow up, the drinking would slow down, work would prevent weekday parties. Work instead became the reason we drank. The only common ground our group had: schools that purposefully ostracised us, would speak around us in a language we didn't understand; schedules that changed at the last minute, planned lessons made second to Sports Days or Picture Days or "maybe today students will just watch a movie;" cultural shifts that never became easier (the fire drill at my school involved a trash can being set aflame and classrooms practised using fire extinguishers to snuff the blazing bins out, toxic black fumes filled each room and bellowed down the hall towards my office).

After class, at the bar, tip my glass, extend it to my expatriate comrades. Cheers to Rosa, my co-teacher who spoke four languages and reminded me that, "you are not a certified teacher,

so please do not plan lessons. Please have students listen to you and repeat.” To Ms. Yee, my soon-to-be-retired co-teacher, who had an education in teaching English but couldn’t comfortably speak it, whose laissez-faire attitude turned the students into anarchists. Each expat had co-teachers to drink about, drink to, drink for.

I get asked all the time about my experience *teaching* in Korea, but the teaching is never what I want to talk about. I spent twenty hours of my week performing in front of forty middle schoolers. I’d follow a digital textbook with the class, stilted English voices exchanging forced conversation (one of the chapters, “Ready to Explore Extreme Excitement,” had two teenagers discuss their feelings about Zumba, an ‘extreme’ sport), from which the students repeated, sentence by sentence, then played a ten-minute game that I would take from an online public forum, animated Powerpoints infused with YouTube clips, Mr. Bean and Pictionary. I was more a cultural lesson than an instructor. They asked me if I only ate hamburgers and sandwiches, they thought the only world in Korea I knew was in their school. I started rewarding good behaviour with snapshots of my life on the peninsula, pictures of me in Seoul or Busan, shielding a beer with my purse or behind a friend’s back.

Teacher Beseu bored me. Stilted at the conversations in the textbook, ‘teacher’ became a character I stepped into between 8:30 and 4:30 Monday to Friday. No one at Si Cheong Middle School knew the version of me that roamed the streets of Incheon past five.

Monday Funday at N’s Pub, a concrete dive above a fried chicken restaurant, the walls without personality save a digital darts board. The sojito (pronounced not like mojito, but phonetically, so-jee-to) the driving force, a cheap cocktail of soju and the Tang version of artificial lemonade. Thursday’s reserved for pizza at O’Malley’s, an Irish pub (or a ‘Irish pbu,’

according to the signage) on the fourth floor of an office complex, outfitted with black-and-white stock images, what I assumed to be football team scarves hanging from wooden rafters. A long, wooden bar ran along the back wall, with L.A. the bartender slinging pints of Red Rock behind it.

A figurehead in the Incheon community, L.A. was one of the few foreigner bartenders employed in our small city of four million and became a big brother figure to his fellow expats. One spring night, I had brought in a beer bong, a funnel taped to a tube, and made him a proposition. “I want to offer to buy your patrons pints, so long as they do it in the bong.” His stipulation – “I drink from it first. From the tap.” He got on his knees while I held the funnel up to the line, pushed the brown lever forward, and watched a thirty-something man suck beer, his mouth a perfect ‘O’ around a cheap plastic tube. This was also the night I met Yonkers, the only member of his group not disgusted by my offer. There’s a picture on Facebook of this encounter: me, tall, knit lace stockings under denim shorts, oversized glasses, laughing at the bald man in front of me, down on one knee, sucking on a tube, while Louisville empties a beer mug into the funnel I held.

I met Louisville at another Thursday night tradition, bar trivia, that started at Goose Goose but migrated to Cheap Shots, the other foreign-owned bar in town. Oklahoma and his Korean wife Tina offered similar fare to O’Malley’s, but where L.A. would join us in beer and banter, Oklahoma was already in his forties, balding grey hair and stout, a reminder of what life could look like if one never left Korea. Possessive (he always asked where I went if I missed a trivia night, or his once-a-month beer pong championship) and competitive, Oklahoma had a way to ruin the vibes of any given night. But still, I would go to his bar after my personal pizza and a few pints of Red Rock at O’Malley’s, join Kelowna and whoever she dated at the time,

and form a team to answer pop culture questions. Eventually, I started hosting the evening as our team won more nights, a better use of my Powerpoint skills. The first night that Louisville, Houston, and Chester joined us, they had been in Korea for less than a week. Louisville's enthusiasm carried the evening, his boisterous answers shouted over the busy bar, announcements of pride or disappointment when I took up the answers. They didn't win that night, but so enamoured with the energy, I brought the table a pitcher of beer after the game, at around 11:00 pm.

Expected in the office at 8:30 in the morning, though I wouldn't teach a class until at least 9:10. "You always look so tired," Rosa commented on my visible hangovers. One day, two months in, I came to work, bags slung around my eyes as usual, to find a cot next to my desk. "I think that you need more rest," she explained. "I had the administration put a bed here, so you can sleep between your classes." Mid-morning naps, the first time Korea made sense to me.

"Maybe Korea is affecting your disposition," she explained. "There are many new sicknesses you have not had in Canada."

Hongdae: an abbreviation of *Hongik Daehakgyo*, Hongik University. A neighbourhood in Seoul stacked with clubs, bars, and karaoke rooms, buildings pressed against one another like bodies on the one-hour subway ride from Incheon. A consistent Saturday pilgrimage, dinner at the BBQ place on that hill behind Cocoon, chain-smoking, soju swilling while *samgyeopsal* curled on a grate over hot charcoal coals. Hongdae Park while Jersey argued with Yonkers over the next migration, Good Time 24 bags pregnant with soju and Dry Finish tall cans, the handles thinning in my sweaty palms, stretching towards the pavement. Conversation shouted over b-boy dance circles, over silent discos and boxing matches foreground to a playground backdrop.

Sometimes I'd leave the group to slide down a yellow plastic slide, gripping my tall can, leg tattooed by fresh Sharpie graffiti along the slide's lips. When we finally met up, Orleans boosted me above the small public washroom building, my legs clamoured against the white brick sides. At the top, a communal bottle of soju shared among strangers: a skinny blond boy with a midwestern accent, a Korean girl who couldn't speak English, a goth exchange student from Germany.

Susie Q if we were sober enough, descend into her basement belly, dark cedar lining the staircase. A wall of vinyl behind a middle-aged Korean DJ, his black hat and sunglasses concealed him in the dark space. Centrepieces to the tables, paper *kissbang* advertisements, pens to write requests on the back. We knew to keep the music current to our parent's youth: Yonkers and I sang Lauper's "She Bop," Jersey dedicated "Edge of Seventeen" to me while he cooed the lyrics like a pigeon. Push some table out of the way, create a dance floor: ABBA, Creedence, Earth, Wind, Fire. Houston and I scream Diana Ross to each other, "I'm Coming Out." Go to the granite bar, order a "Susie Q Cool," an orange cocktail, vodka, soju, something strong and sharp. Order two, four, until the bar closed, sometime between two and four. The curls of the bartending *ajumma* bounce to the shimmy of the cocktail shaker. Jersey and I went for our anniversary, she brought us a tray of fresh fruit, kissed me on the cheek, asked to take our picture. Her husband, the DJ, and she had been together for forty years. "You two love the same," she told us. I stole a stack of the *kissbang* slips, wrote Konglish sentences (English written phonetically in *hanguel*), tucked them into Jersey's shoes and pockets.

And always, the self-service bar on the other side of the alley from Susie Q. Helped ourselves to beers, organized in fridges by their price: 1,000 for Cass, 8,000 for Blue Moon. Start at the expensive end, work towards Cass when they all start tasting the same. Ignore the

music, K-pop whatever, maybe some Maroon 5. Sit at a long table with a recessed bucket at the end, vessel for the bottle kill count. The volume of our English always louder than the sea of Korean, and louder still with every new fridge christening. A picture on my Instagram captured the moment where Yonkers cracked his tenth beer, the bottles neatly lined up in front of him, captioned “honourary Canadian,” his raised eyebrow dark against his bald head.

Afterward, dancing. Club FF between eleven and midnight, unlimited cocktails, 5,000 won cover. Blue checkerboard floors, basement to a garage: small tables with ashtrays, a closet-slash-green room to the left, uneven stairs to the right. Downstairs, a stage in the back, a long table with bench seating and crooked barstools on the right. A small dance floor, dark, claustrophobic, always shoulder to shoulder, tit to tit. A band played in the background, filled the whole stage, foreign or Korean, didn't matter. Our feet stuck to the floor, peeled our shoes off to circuit the line, continual rum-cokes. Yonkers and I closed a loop, not leaving the line to even go to the bathroom. Lit a cigarette. Out a cigarette. Leave at 12:01, come back after two, Franz Ferdinand and Arcade Fire. Much drunker, dance moves improved. Usually graduated to beer, down a bottle of Hite in a song, fill it with cigarettes.

Close the night in a Ho Bar, fourteen locations numbered one through thirteen plus a ‘Luxury’. Served us at six in the morning, sun rising, bottle service. Dark, seedy chain of bars lit up by black lights and glowing blue tables. Hard to remember the interior. Grab a Cheesy Gordita Crunch from the only Taco Bell in Korea for brunch. Take the subway home with churchgoers, Sunday afternoon. Fall asleep. Yonkers had a habit of falling asleep on his way to Dongincheon, the last station on line 1. The subway would loop back and he'd wake up back in Seoul, would spend his whole Sunday trying to get back home again.

Hongdae's routine, established in chaos. I couldn't wake up for seven in the morning, but I could easily stay up past it, one too many budget energy drinks from the Good Time 24, Hot 6ix. I feel a hangover coming on trying to remember. The 5,000 won for five shots of budget tequila poured into test tubes at Tinpan (before they banned foreigners). 3,000 won cocktails served in bowls at *Obec* (five-hundred), a club outfitted to look like a cave, and how I fell asleep in one of the grottos while Reno accidentally put his hand through a djembe lying around. Fighting to avoid Itaewon, the foreigner neighbourhood.

Designed for the nearby military base, Itaewon had winding roads of sports pubs, clubs, hookah bars, and foreign restaurants. Gritty, white crowds screamed on the streets, threw up in overflowing gutters in front of the Tudor-style French restaurant across from a GS25. I could never divorce Itaewon from my scariest memory in Korea, Seoul Pub, about two months into my stay. Auckland took me for drinks at this second-floor pub, dimly lit and crowded with GIs and too many pool tables. A giant GI in uniform yelling at a short, middle-aged Korean man. The GI had been playing predator to a too-drunk Korean girl of about nineteen and the Korean man intervened from across the bar. When the Korean guy started getting into the GI's face, the GI struck him with his rocks glass, cranberry juice watered-down blood, stained the front of the Korean man's white button-up.

"Let's go," I told Auckland. "I don't want to be somewhere where the bullies drink vodka cranberries."

When "Gangnam Style" became popular in the west, the summer of 2012, it had already been playing endlessly in Korea for a full season. Friends from home (who had never thought twice about Korea or my involvement there) sent me messages from the past. "Explain this to

me,” Aurora’s message demanded, “I don’t understand this song.” I didn’t know how to explain to her how limited *my* understanding of it was. “All I do here is get fucked up,” I wrote back. “The only places I go to are bars.”

My understanding of Korean culture, limited to unabashed alcoholism. The drinking culture of my group of expats, of all the expats, did not come from a vacuum. Koreans, after all, abolished ‘last call’ culture, bars open until sunrise weren’t doing it for our sake. The streets of Hongdae, congested with stumbling Koreans, slurring, swilling soju, smoking cigarettes. Next to the piles of garbage, kimchi and rice vomit, a passed-out twenty-something leaning against an overflowing trash bag, dressed in designer clothes destined for Instagram. Louisville, on his way to school, once saw a Korean man, in a suit, passed out in the middle of a crosswalk. When he walked home that evening, the man had been moved to the sidewalk curb, his snores audible.

Near the end of my tenure at Si Cheong Middle School, the teachers held a sort of ‘appreciation’ day. Rosa told me that we would be going to Seoul for the day to “celebrate Korean culture,” but kept the itinerary a surprise. Once the bus departed the school, the vice-principal, a short greying man who always wore his pants high, held up by a thick brown patent belt, got on a microphone and made an enthusiastic announcement over the bus’ PA system. The teachers roared in response to some of the things he said, and his secretary went through the aisles of the bus, handing out small paper cups and generously poured soju into them. “*Kombei!*” he shouted, ‘cheers,’ and the bus ceremoniously shot their cup down. This happened two more times, though only I and the male teachers indulged in the last round.

The bus brought us to a traditional Korean restaurant, wooden from floor to ceiling, the seating and tables recessed into the floor. Boiling pots of soup rested in the middle, an

assortment of glasses and side dishes filled the rest of the table. I sat next to Rosa, who only spoke Korean to her colleagues. She and the other teachers would frequently laugh, and my anxiety spiked.

When the vice principal came around with soju, I gladly imbibed.

“You have had many drinks of soju already,” stated Rosa.

“Yeah, I know,” I responded, “but it’s rude to say no, isn’t it?”

Rosa grunted. True, though she still placed her hand over her glass. Said something to the vice principal in Korean. He rested the bottle on the table, grabbed his glass from across the table, and offered me a ‘cheers’ on the spot.

“You are a good drinker!” he announced. In English. My eye widened. I had no idea he spoke English.

“You know, I used to be an English teacher.” He said something in Korean which shoed Rosa out of her seat. He rested next to me.

“It is an important skill to have in Korea, to be a good drinker. It is part of our culture.”

He circled the table, poured shots for the teachers who would imbibe. I sat sipping, nodding. Spent the rest of the night drinking on my own, texting my friends SOS messages, meet me at O’Malley’s later. I arrived after ten, wasted, thirsty for conversation.

Drinking became my export from Korea. When I went back to Canada, drinking felt like my entry point back to the country. I sat with my dad at the kitchen table, jet-lagged and empty, throwing beers back.

“What did they do to you there?” my dad posed on his eighth beer.

I returned from Korea six years ago, and I never came up with an answer to that question until now. It wasn't so much what they had done to me as much as what I had done to myself. My expat friends faced the same reverse culture shock when got home. London, who now lives in Toronto, recently commented on our drinking there, that “I knew I wanted to be an alcoholic, and Korea helped me realize that dream.”

My current partner points out to me, “You never know when to stop.” Because I never learned how.

The pool offers the shallow end to lane swimmers, but I decide to start deep. Struggling to breathe, I push off from the side of the pool and try catching my breath while treading water. I struggle trusting myself that I won't drown. With every kick, every swift move of my arms, I feel like giving up, grabbing the lip and clinging to it. The lifeguard doesn't trust me either. But the second I can, I quickly bring myself back to the edge just to push myself off again.

I think back to those Hot 6ix energy drinks. When Drake started calling Toronto the ‘six’, I think of that bullet can every time: the phoenix logo, a bird emerging from flames on a sea of blue. And here I am, breaking the water's surface with every breaststroke, trying to trade ethanol for endorphins.

Backstroke. I knew that, even if I wouldn't trust myself to swim, that I could always float back to the edge.

Flavour Country

My mother placed a parcel wrapped in a white garbage bag onto my sister's lap and told her to "keep it still and don't you dare peek." She drove while we deliberated in the backseat, our whispers hidden by the bouzouki cassette.

"Is it heavy?" I asked her. She lifted it up, pursed her lips, raised an eyebrow. "Sort of? It's definitely not light. It's cold, though!"

"Cold? That sucks." My brother poked at it. The package responded with the sound of crinkled plastic. "It's really hard."

"Don't touch it!" my mother barked from the front seat.

"How am I supposed to hold it without touching it?" my sister snarked.

"Don't give me that lip! Just hold the damn thing still in your lap."

I leaned over to my sister's middle seat, hovered over the garbage bag present. I whispered to her, "We'll figure this out." My brother craned his head over from the other side to overhear, nodding his head. The baby nodded her head, too.

"Whispering is rude, Beth! What the hell are you kids saying back there?" my mother punched out each scathing word.

"This music sucks," I said out loud.

"Don't say things 'suck'," she instructed. "It's rude!"

"Ruder than whispering?"

“Shut up!”

My mother pulled into a gas station. She usually went to the full-service Beaver on Gerrard rather than pumping her own gas at Danforth. “I hate the way gas pumps make my hands smell,” she’d complain to my father when he pointed out the extra cost.

“Don’t you dare look into that package!” she insisted, pocketing a small package of baby wipes.

She pumped the gas, the numbers rolled, and the sound of fuel rushed into my grandfather’s powder blue Toyota Corolla. When the pump bounced back into her hand, forced that hard sound into the tank, she ejected the spigot, cradled it, pulled out a baby wipe. She wagged her index finger at us, wipe clutched into her palm, before going inside the station to pay.

“Okay, she’s not facing us!” the words escaped my mouth. “Andrew, you keep watch.”

“Damn!” he exclaimed. “I want to check it out!”

Already unwinding the garbage bag, I told him, “we’ll tell you what it is, I swear.”

The garbage bag unveiled another garbage bag, this one for Mac’s Milk. My hands shook, but my sister’s lap remained still, her eyes ingesting every unfold of the bag.

“What’d’ya got there?” Andrew peeked back from the window.

“It’s just bags all the way down,” my sister told him, “keep your eyes on Mom!”

I peeled back the Mac’s bag to uncover an eye staring back at me. I screamed.

“It’s a head!” I shouted. “It’s a real head and it’s looking at me!”

“OH MY GOD EW!” my sister screamed down at the uncovered face in her lap, conflicted between throwing the head out the window and the resulting wrath from my mother.

“This is so gross!” I tried to wrap it back up, but now my sister’s legs were shaking, squirming, and I kept uncovering different parts of the face. Wide-eyed, sinew exposed, a furry snout with a wet nose, clenching its jaw and baring its teeth.

“It’s a goat or something!” I squealed, frantically wrapping.

“She’s coming!” Andrew shouted. He spun his head around. “So gross,” he said, turned back to face our mother, waved at her. “She looks mad.”

“Yeah, well I’m mad too!” my sister wavered. “She put a face on my lap!”

“Don’t. Say. Anything. Mary.” I instructed. The package looked as dishevelled as we did.

Of course, she knew. She opened the door and asked, “What did you find?”

Mary screamed, “OH MY GOD MOM YOU GAVE ME A FACE. You put a face on my lap, that’s so nasty, I’m never going to forgive you.”

“Serves you right,” she spat out. “You won’t find it that gross when you’re eating it later.”

“You’re going to feed us a face?” I asked her.

“You won’t even know.”

Of course, we ate the face. My mother made stock from the lamb's head, just like she'd been taught to by her mother. My dad told me a story about how, the first time she tried to make this lamb stock for him, she didn't screw the top of the pressure cooker on properly. "We were cleaning brains off the ceiling for weeks," he laughed. "She never made it with me around again. It's fucking disgusting."

She cooked *avgolemono*, a soup made from eggs, lemon, rice and, of course, face stock. We happily lapped up the thick and sour stew, pieces of the face embedded into our spoonfuls, but it looked like any other meat. She made *trahanas*, porridge from cracked wheat and sour milk and liquid face, red with tomato. We threw in chunks of *feta* cheese, breaking it off with each scoop of soup.

When my mother fed us *skoti*, we chewed its horrifying texture, chewy and hard, knowing that, if we didn't eat our pan-fried liver, we wouldn't eat. The weird compressed organ meat of *magiritsa* made my sister throw up the year that we discovered it wasn't just tough flesh, but it didn't stop me from slurping up the soup around it.

My mother didn't know that her meals prepared, prepped me for culinary experiences in South Korea. She couldn't. The woman only knew oregano and lemon, salt and pepper as seasonings. She imported her flavours exclusively from Greece. I had to, on my own, gain a palate for spicy foods. In my early twenties, I dated Courtice, a thin man whose body rebelled against dairy, and so he punished it with vindaloo curries and buffalo wings. The only thing that I knew about curry before him: the aroma, rich with spice and thick with sweetness, a foreign smell that I couldn't translate to taste. One night, lying on my dorm room floor, learning about each other, he revealed his love for all Indian food.

“You have to introduce me,” I begged him. “I’ve never eaten anything spicy.”

He almost jumped. “That’s insane,” he exclaimed. “You must have grown up eating some pretty boring shit.”

He ordered chicken korma, butter chicken to our residence. Big, floppy pita dangled out of a paper bag, the familiar bite of garlic enveloped the small space, pushed right up against the cinder block walls.

“*Naan*,” he corrected. “Garlic naan. I ordered some gentle curries, so you can get the taste of it. If you like, we can graduate to something spicy the next time, maybe a nice vindaloo.”

He tore a piece of naan, opened the butter chicken, scooped a chunk of white meat and tomato sauce, shoved it into his mouth. I repeated, a child, using all eight fingers and both thumbs to rip the soft bread coated in garlic fragments, pinched out a piece of chicken from the Styrofoam bowl, shoved the giant mess into my mouth moments before it all fell apart. Cardamom, cloves, cumin, cinnamon, coriander: I melted, an instant addict to *garam masala*. The curry resembled nothing I had ever tasted before, complicated yet cohesive.

“You know that one of the spices in butter chicken is called fenugreek, right?” Courtice asked.

I laughed, re-crossed my legs, reached for the naan. “Oh, the irony is not lost on me.”

That meal became my gateway drug to spice. I needed to try it all, every curry, and so each week we ordered progressively spicier Indian gravies. Courtice always ordered *raita*, cooling yogurt in case. But I learned to pioneer through a difficult meal, and the payout with

Indian food far exceeded lamb-gut cubes. I sweated with pride. By the time I signed my contract to teach English in South Korea, I'd outgrown my relationship with Courtice, yet maintained my love affair with spice.

Over farewell beers, my suitcases already packed, Brampton asked, "have you ever even tasted Korean food? You know that shit is spicy, right?"

I had not. I didn't even think about it. He and I shared a bottle of *soju*, passing it around at the party he threw for me.

"Because you're never coming back," he told me, his face scrunched by the bitter bite of Chamisul. Chased it down with a sip of Coors Light. Let air escape. "So you should probably get a taste for it now."

"Well, if it's anything like this soju, it'll get easier with each swallow."

On my eleven-hour flight to Seoul, Korean Air properly introduced me to the fare of its homeland. *Bibimbap* versus airline chicken à la King or beef noodles.

"Have you had Korean food before? Are you sure you want something that spicy on a long flight?" the squirrely white girl in the window seat asked in a nasal tone, her hair frizzing out of control. "Don't you feel like you're trying to be too brave?"

Don't you think it's brave to not have checked that giant head of hair, I thought, as the flight attendant pointed to the red travel toothpaste tube on my tray.

"This is *gochujang*," she explained, her glistening smile beamed through each word. "It is very spicy. You *squeeeeeeeze* as much as you want into your bowl, and you stir to mix in the flavor."

Frizz next to me looked into the blue contact lenses of the flight attendant's perfectly manicured face and said, "She's never had Korean food before – she doesn't know how spicy it will be!"

My bowl looked incredible. Julienned cucumber, mushrooms, sprouts, brown root vegetable masked a bed of rice, a fried egg crowning the head. In a satellite dish, *kimchi*, fermented cabbage, wilted in a bath of red sauce. I wondered if the red sauce in the tube would match, unwrapped bamboo chopsticks, split them down the middle, sanded down the splinters.

"You know, you don't have to rub them together like that," Frizz spewed, chicken à la King spraying the empty seat between us.

I put my chopsticks down, fished a cable from my bag, pulled attached iPod, headphones in, cued "My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy." Volume at ten. Chopsticks in formation, I pinched a sliver of kimchi, gingerly tongued the crispy leaf. Sweet, fishy, gently spicy. Crunched down, heat intensified. Christening by fire, sinus drained, mucus kissed upper lip smiling. Rested chopsticks across bowl's edge, twisted off lid for red sauce, punctured safety seal with sharp point on cap's back. Squeezed contents onto metal spoon, viscous red paste. Slowly brought spoon to tongue, perfect marriage of sweet and spicy. Heat intensified. Water followed. Heat continued to intensify. Emptied remainder of tube into bowl, stirred.

Despite Frizz, I ate the entire contents of my bowl, each spoonful delighted with a different flare. If my spicy bowl punished me later, she wouldn't have to deal with my trips to the bathroom from the window seat.

Which, of course, it didn't. Her chicken à la King, however, made her pass my chair no fewer than eight times. I never made it easy for her, never got up from my seat, never moved my legs out of the way.

Deplaned at 4:30 pm, tomorrow. Shuttled to the Paradise Hotel, or the Olympos Hotel. After hours of chaos, the hotel not prepared for eighty-eight future foreign teachers, dinner served in Ballroom A. Heavy cream curtains pinched and pleated at the ceiling, dust particles illuminated by their cracks, falling towards green-blue carpet with a yellowing x-pattern. Ten circular tables draped in heavy pink tablecloths, a camping stove centrepiece. A small sign, "vegetarian," on the far-left table. Small, white, shallow dish satellites: kimchi, bean sprouts, yellow discs, brown chunks.

One of the first to the ballroom, I grabbed a chair at the table closest to the door. I tried to grip the flat, stainless steel chopsticks, but my fingers locked, the sticks slipped and shifted in my posture. Almost ten years of chopstick experience, albeit self-taught, and I felt like I was manipulating these spears for the first time. I would grab my sticks, watch myself fumble, frantically check behind me if I had a witness, or for a struggling ally. Foreigners slowly poured into the room, most in pairs, none of them trying to sit next to me. I used one of my chopsticks to push a piece of kimchi onto my spoon. More of a burn than the Korean Air kimchi, the Paradise served a wilted cabbage, fragrantly fishy. Then, a short, stout stranger pulled out the chair next to me.

"Never used chopsticks before, eh?" the chubby boy asked me, eyeing up the spoon cradled in my hand.

"Not metal ones. Not flat ones," I answered, my intonation equally as flat.

He dragged his chair closer to the table, shuffling his feet forward, dragging the heavy banquet hall seat with him. “I went out for Korean barbeque before I came here, so I know what I’m doing.” He clumsily cradled the chopsticks between his fingers, stiffly pinched a brown chunk, which crumbled into a million pieces.

“Oh yeah, you’re a real expert.” I rolled my eyes.

He tried to grab one of the pieces of brown chunk, but it too crumbled. He moved on to the kimchi, but by then his hands shook nervously, he started sweating before the spicy cabbage hit his lips.

“I saw you at Pearson. You from Toronto?” He tried to start a new conversation, but my attention remained glued to his chopsticks.

“Never lived anywhere else. Until now, I guess. You gonna try one of those yellow discs?”

“I’m from Mississauga, but I was living in St Catharines. You know, for school.”

“Mmhm.” I spooned up some of the brown chunks. Potato, soy sauce, boiled. Salty, mushy. I never thought of soy sauce and potato together before. Still not sure, I scooped up another spoonful, ignored chubby GTA boy. No, they shouldn’t go together, I determined. Though if you’re going to have boiled potato, it’s nice for it to have flavour.

The boiled potato next to me could use some salt, I thought. Maybe some soy sauce. He persisted, “so, you were born and raised in Toronto, eh? I’ve never met anyone raised in the city before.”

“There are dozens of us,” I responded, my mouth full of mushy root. “Try the yellow disc. I want to know what it is, but it’s definitely not scoopable.”

“And that brown stuff?” he asked.

“Potatoes in soy. Your turn.”

He tried pinching a yellow disc, it kept flipping over, refusing to be picked up. I manhandled my chopsticks, a barbarian with one in each paw, kept the sunshine circle steady with the left spear while I stabbed through its belly with my right. I took a bite, pungently sour, crunchy. It didn’t taste yellow. Pickled. I took another bite. Soapy.

He laughed and prodded, “so, what is it?”

“I have no fucking idea, but I do not care for it.” Heavy emphasis on the ‘not’.

The table filled by this point, foreigners encircling camping stoves on tablecloths, fumbling with Korean chopsticks. A few seats around the table, a girl asked in a British-ish accent if “they have any goddamn forks in this country?” I stifled a laugh and showed her my yellow circle kebab, the bite mark almost directly into the chopstick.

Three Korean women filtered out from behind a curtain, dressed in hotel uniforms from the 70s: starchy long pale blue skirts synched at the waist with oversized matching belts, puffy short sleeved matching blouses, a pale pink silk scarf tied in a bow and neatly tucked under their collar. Their scarves matched the tablecloths. Purposely? They glided through the dining room, turning each of the camping stoves on, lighting the dining room with propane-fueled flames.

The British-ish girl grabbed one of them as they ignited our cooker, “can you get me a fork?” The woman straightened out her poufy sleeve, gave her an awkward giggle and clearly told her, “sorry, no English.”

Once all the stoves were aflame, the Korean women quickly retreated behind the curtain, returned with large stainless-steel pans to crown the cookers, christened their contents with a large ladle. “Please do not eat,” they recited to each table, the contents of the cookers quickly coming to a boil with their words.

“I thought she said that she didn’t speak English,” the girl sputtered out, her hands bumbling, clanking her chopsticks together. In frustration, she threw them onto the tablecloth, where they crashed into a dish of kimchi, splattered red fishy juice onto the pink fabric. “Goddamnit! I’m going to go fucking hungry in this country.” The boy next to her picked up a sliver of greasy cabbage from the dish with his fingertips, tilted his head back, dropped it down his throat.

“Just go for it,” he said Irishly, “don’t bother with the sticks. I’ve never used ’em before. I’ll figure it out eventually.” He grabbed a larger leaf, which drooled down his white t-shirt on its way to his mouth. “This shit is great.”

The soup in the middle of our table bubbled in agreement, splattering red broth around the camping stove. I got out of my chair, craned my head over the pan. The bright red soup teemed with kimchi, slivers of grey-brown meat, and a racing stripe, sliced squares of white firm tofu down the centre. A friendly sprinkling of green onions bobbed, dodged boiling bubbles. The fishy, spicy smell, totally tantalizing.

“Please do not eat!” I had upset one of the workers. I sat back down.

“What’s it at?” Irish asked from across the table, stood up.

“Please do not eat!” she repeated, sterner towards him, shook her finger.

“She’d better be careful, I like to be talked to like that,” he professed, and my mouth couldn’t help but purse. “Tell me what to do, miss!” He pulled his chair away from the table, sat down, his legs now fully exposed, jeans crossed at the ankle. He’d be attractive if he could just shut up for a minute; I poked another sliver of kimchi onto my spoon.

“It’s like a kimchi soup,” I informed the table. “Smells fishier than the sliced kimchi, though, and there’s meat and tofu in the mix.”

The attendant came back, poked at the soup with the ladle, turned down the propane. “Please eat,” she told us and started serving soup into our small, porcelain bowls. A new attendant emerged with a catering cart full of small stainless-steel bowls with lids. The servers uncapped the bowls, full of purple rice, presented one to each of us, placed the lid underneath the bowl, a sweaty coaster that caused the bowl to spin around.

Mississauga started eating his rice with his chopsticks, blade by blade. He’d be here all night eating like that. I grabbed my spoon and started shoveling glutenous purple rice into my mouth. The table followed my lead, spoons hitting steel bowl soundtrack to silent chewing. No one else dared dip into the liquid kimchi yet, curled steam bubbled out the surface. No one dared to continue conversation with spoon rule now established, young foreigners pushed side bean sprouts and potatoes onto their spoons with single chopsticks.

The soup tasted spicy, watery, a little greasy. The pork created a skin of fat on the top of the soup, a layer to break before getting to the meat of it. Because it only required the use of a

spoon, bowls quickly became empty, refilled. I remember the table eating in silence, only stainless steel against plastic providing background sound. At the other tables, the occasional small talk bubbling to the surface just to cool down, spoon against metal, spoon against ceramic, chopstick dragging across ceramic.

On the third day, they served us budae jjigae. By then, Ballroom A possessed a different energy. Friendships formed in the streets of Dongincheon, smoking under the awning of the hotel, staying up past curfew, sneaking out in the middle of the night. People now trickled into the formal mess hall in clumps: the heavy drinkers, the smokers, the Koreaboos (those obsessed with Korean culture), the sexpats (guys obsessed with Korean women), the vegetarians, and the South Africans (the only nationality who stayed glued together). My alliance divided between the heavy drinkers (with a student visa to the smokers) and the only foreigner among the South Africans – my eyes fixed on a curly blond from Cape Town, his accent that foreign, charming not-British, his eyes as blue as the waitress' uniform.

Too busy flirting to pay attention to the soup on the camping stove. My hands running down his arm, hair toss, giggling when he said something about Cape Town, me listening, not listening. I didn't smell the hot dog soup, just his Calvin Klein Obsession. My obsession: his biceps, triceps, and the way his t-shirt framed them. He reached over the table, ladled soup into my bowl, "I think there's spam in it," his accent articulated, but I couldn't afford my full attention.

"Oh yeah," I replied. "Spam soup, why not."

Yes, basically, spam soup. Spicy red-hot dog broth, chopped up hot dogs, slices of spam, mushrooms, ramen noodles, topped with a layer of processed cheese. I'd find out later that

budae jijigae, soldier soup, created through a collaboration of American and Korean GI rations during the Korean war, a very popular dish. But this day, this first encounter, I leaned over my small ceramic bowl of processed meats, the liquid cheese swirling into the red broth, and almost retched.

I didn't want Cape Town cutie to know. I missed my mother's face soup, her weird would now serve as a comfort. He fondled the ramen noodles with his metal sticks, clanking them together, the noodles sliding back in rebellion as I dug my nails into the palm of my hand. My soup, now cloudy, hot dog bits bobbing. His noodles slipping, conversation slipping, silence. I spooned some rice from the metal bowl. It spun on its saucer lid, clashing metal on metal in time with his chopsticks.

"I can't grab these fucking noodles," he hissed out. "I hate these goddamn chopsticks."

"We're going to go hungry here," I responded, "between the metal chopsticks and the hot dog soup, I don't know if I'm ever going to be able to eat again."

Of course, that wouldn't be the case. My co-teacher, Rosa, collected me at the end of orientation week in her silver Hyundai sedan, the harsh lines clearly carved in the nineties. Rosa reminded me of my mother, her temperament short, her patience nonexistent. She looked around forty, bags under her eyes, her perm framing a permanent state of exhaust. Our first task together: immigration. I needed to apply for my Alien Registration Card, ID that I would always have a legal obligation to carry. During the ten-minute drive to the office, she texted on her giant smartphone and I tried not to freak out about her driving, fixed instead on the window, taking in the low-hanging Korean street signs and their phonetic English translations, the silver high-rises reflecting the harbour. Of course, eighty-seven other teachers headed to immigration on the same

day, as well as many Chinese dockworkers who arrived moments earlier on a ferry. We pulled a number and sat. I ached to talk to some of the other teachers there, but they were fully engaged in conversation with their co-teachers, talking about America or Scotland or the hotel.

“Do you know where I could buy some water or something?” I asked Rosa around ten- or twenty-minutes in.

“There is a machine over by the toilets, but this wait might be very long. Please sit.” She shuffled over to a desk labelled ‘Reception’, her glittery wedges leaving skid marks on the tiled floor like snail tracks. A soft, polite exchange in Korean later and she skated back.

“They said we have a two-hour wait. I do not want to wait for two hours, it’s lunchtime! Are you hungry?”

Almost off-put by our sudden candor, I nodded my head sheepishly. “But what if they call our number?”

“Then we will get another number.”

She busied herself on her tablet/phone for a minute while I waited for her to initiate our next move, sitting still on the stiff, vinyl-wrapped chair, jealous of my peers. I could sense Rosa’s and my future: stressed by her lack of interest in helping me, neglected because of her relationship to her smartphone, tense because of the language and cultural barrier she didn’t want to bridge. I, a chore to Rosa.

“Come,” she instructed, and I followed her to the Hyundai, a still jet-lagged puppy. We drove directly across four lanes of traffic before I had the chance to buckle up, Rosa glued to her giant phone while car horns blared.

A small, one-storey blue building, the outside wood panelling weather damaged from years of typhoons. The name of the restaurant hand-painted in red on a white sign created an awning over the sliding glass doors, the kind of door that lead to a backyard in Toronto. The glass stained with fingerprints. Rosa slid the worn wooden handle, the weight of the door displaced her posture and she nearly slipped from the front of her wedges into my arms. Rosa didn't turn around, not even when she slipped out of her wedges and walked into the restaurant barefoot.

I didn't realize that people in Korea dined in their bare feet. I thought the country with smartphones the size of clay tablets would have long given up on going barefoot in public. I crouched awkwardly in the doorway, unbuckling my favourite soft leather Mary Jane's, and fell directly on my ass before getting the first one-off. I had taken them off a million times before, but never in front of an audience, my pixie hair spiked with Lush pomade, my purple magnolia-printed chiffon dress barely covering my crotch as I felt the dirty floor against my thighs. A burst of heat under layers of makeup erupting from my cheeks, my shame the main course. I undid the rest of the left shoe, moved onto the right before standing while holding my dress down.

The restaurant: blue linoleum floors, cream walls, monochrome paintings of lighthouses, waves crashing against piers, faux-pine particle-board tables close to the floor, a kitchen not quite obscured by a plum curtain. Rosa already sitting at a table by the wall, under a carp painting, her knees protected from the linoleum by a thin, vinyl cushion. She handed one to me with one hand, the other cradling her phone close to her face.

"Your dress is too short. You cannot wear that to school," she said without looking up.

I responded with a quick “mmhm,” sat down but couldn’t get comfortable. Sat on my legs, moved my legs under the table, shifted my weight from left to right thigh, back again. A ponytailed woman wearing a pink floral dress shirt and a dirty blue apron around her waist came to the table, spoke to Rosa in Korean. Rosa kept her focus on her phone, spoke to the waitress, without ever consulting a menu.

“Don’t worry, you will not notice your discomfort when lunch arrives,” Rosa told me as the woman brought us a clear plastic container of water, and two small, white plastic cups. I poured her a glass of water, then myself, and the waitress returned with a tray full of satellite dishes – cabbage kimchi, radish kimchi, cucumber kimchi, bean sprouts, and brown discs with holes arranged in the shape of a flour.

“I’m sorry, Rosa,” I almost whispered to her, “but what are these?” She looked up as I pointed to the small plate of brown circles, then went back to her phone.

“I don’t know the English for them,” she said, “*yeon geun jorim*.” She said the Korean slowly, syllable by syllable, simultaneously infantilizing and helpful. She typed something down at her phone. “Lotus root is the English, braised lotus root.” She didn’t look back up again, thankfully, so I could struggle with the metal chopsticks in private.

The lotus root, pickled sweet, lightly braised, sprinkled with toasted sesame seeds, crunchy and chewy. I understood why Koreans would enjoy it, a perfect balance of opposites. The kimchis, each seasoned the same, offered wildly different textures: the crunchy radish only slightly absorbed the spicy red seasoning, but pungently pickled in sour rice wine vinegar; the cabbage limp with heat, soft but slightly crisp along the veins; the cucumber almost mushy, the

spiciest, the flavour of hot pepper penetrated through the soft membrane. I wondered how my mother's barnyard meats would taste covered in the versatile paste.

The waitress wheeled a catering cart over, placed two large bowls on the table in front of us. Half-empty, greens topped with thin slices of raw, white fish, sesame seeds to garnish. Poking at the salad with one of my chopsticks, uncovered cucumbers. The waitress put a silver bowl next to me, rice, lid on. I waited to follow Rosa's lead. She quickly, effortlessly pinched greens and a piece of fish with her chopsticks, put it into her mouth, swallow, repeat.

Now, I loved raw fish, but it occurred to me that she never asked if I'd be okay. She didn't notice me mishandling my chopsticks, didn't watch the fish slip from my grip one, two, four times before I got it together. Soft, slightly sour with rice vinegar, an easy chew. Paired beautifully with the greens, crisp, bitter, dressed in the same acidic dressing. Thankful for the lack of conversation, I savoured each bite, buying me time between chopstick struggles.

Then Rosa asked, "have you ever used chopsticks before? I don't think they have forks here."

My mouth full, I shook my head. Swallowed. "I've never used this kind of metal chopstick before coming to Korea, only bamboo ones. They're flat and slippery." I laughed nervously.

"Maybe next time, you should pack a fork in your purse. You are a foreigner, after all."

Never returning to immigration, after lunch Rosa dropped me off at my new apartment, a low-rise above a few restaurants and a bridal gown store. *Chung Jin* in gold roman letters above the entry. Floor 5. A loft, my apartment's high ceilings coated the space in bright sunshine,

illuminated the amount of garbage left behind. Rosa didn't come in. She stood at the doorway while I struggled with my suitcases, wheeled them in and onto the sticky laminate floor. She handed me a slip of paper with a crudely drawn map on it, wished me a "restful night," and turned around.

"Wait! Where is a grocery store?" I would have to buy cleaning products before I could unpack: I spotted open containers of takeout covering the kitchen table, filling the sink. I couldn't see a trash can, so I would need one, too. The teacher before me left a few days ago but didn't clean up after herself. I knew that Rosa's job didn't include cleaning the Native English Teacher's apartment, but I wished that it could have been someone's. Well, someone else's.

"There is a HomePlus down the street. You will find food there." She wanted to go home. So did I. My apartment had windows twice my height, overlooking a park, mountains in the background. My bed up a set of stairs, separated from the large living space. But the brown leather couch faced a large television and had pillows, a blanket – everything indicated the teacher before me slept on it. It felt wrong to disturb what felt like a stranger's nest, so I didn't touch any of it. Even though I saw a washing machine under the kitchen burners, I knew that I would need new linens, too.

"Thank you, Rosa. I'm sure I can find it," I reassured her. "Have a nice night! See you tomorrow."

"Yes," she said, turned around, left.

I stood in that doorway, absorbed the silence before grabbing my purse. Walked four blocks down Yesul Road to the HomePlus. Composed of two floors, the ground floor a grocery store, housewares on the second. My mission: cleaning products. The aisles labelled in Korean, I

decided to comb through the store, acclimatize myself to its layout, since I would return later in the week for actual groceries. The expansive produce section started this adventure, but the selection seemed limited – huge islands of Napa cabbage and small cucumbers, with a freezer section full of different size dishes, dispensers for flimsy plastic bags on the side, waiting to be filled. A small selection of avocados, 8,000W, sounded like a fortune. I swallowed my disappointment as an appetizer, pressed on to a counter that served hot meals, barstools lining the lip.

Still full of lunch and unable to read the menu, I didn't pause for long, ignored the deli counter at the back and moved on to the small section of dairy. A lack of cheeses, a single brand of milk, an assortment of yogurt drinks but no containers of yogurt. Seven different brands of processed cheese slices– sheets of plastic labelled 'gouda' or 'camembert', distant cousins to Kraft Singles. On the other side, a full aisle of ramen: cups, packets, 'family size' portions adorned with cartoon racoons, anthropomorphic squid, all the containers coloured in shades of orange or red. Red, I realized at that moment, the colour of food in Korea. Every meal had a red component. My mouth began salivating, anticipated heat at the thought of the flavour of red.

The aisles, unlike any Toronto grocery store: a full row of rice, packaged in bags, in vacuum-sealed cubes, in small microwavable containers, in an assortment of red, purple green; a large section of curries, a couple cans of Campbell's Chicken Noodle and Cream of Mushroom soups, what I assumed constituted the 'foreign' food section; too many different kinds of canned tuna and meat, not enough canned vegetables; two kinds of bread, morning toast and butter bread (two years of buying one or the other, I never figured out what the difference was); two rows of soju, beer, and Korean wine. And then, the cleaning products. I came across things I could at least recognize in every other section, but nothing here. Spray bottles with poison

labels, what I assumed to be dish soap, what might have been laundry detergent. Then I found Asian Mr. Clean – a cartoon brawny man in a thin white tank top, identical to Mr. Clean, if not for his black buzz cut and Asian facial features. I spent the night with Mr. *Hom Seu Ta*, my home suitor, vigorously scrubbing away all evidence of my apartment's past.

Si Cheong Middle School, an easy twenty-minute walk from my apartment, past city hall, along an eight-lane road bordered by walls lined with ivy. I gave myself forty minutes my first day and quickly switched over to not giving myself enough time as the days dragged on. I hated teaching, but I hated lunch even more.

Served on what I would describe as a prison tray, a metal rectangle with three small recessed bowls at the top, two large ones under them. One of the large bowls, made for rice, the colour of which rotated with the days of the week. The other, a place for a bowl of soup, variants of dishwasher-coloured opaque broth with a pathetic filler: grey meats, or discs of flavourless radish, or soggy and wilted green seaweed; never two together. One small dish for kimchi, which altered between cabbage, radish (shredded or cubed), or cucumber. The kimchi usually my favourite part of the meal, even long after I tired of it. Another small dish, a vegetable usually, slimy seaweed salad or mushy bean sprouts. None of the vegetables maintained any textural integrity – the cafeteria workers making lunch in portions to feed two-thousand students and sixty-something members of staff never perfected the art of crunch or crisp in quantity. The last section reserved for meat, the worst part of the meal: meat. Never with any appetizing colour, greasy, slimy, I could never recognize what kind of meat I scooped out of the pan and onto my tray, and I almost never finished the small serving I took.

Every day, I picked at this food, every day I went to lunch alone and I ate it alone. Occasionally, a Korean co-worker would practice their English with me, complimenting me on my use of chopsticks, even when I fumbled, admiring my ability to eat spicy food as though I had never eaten it before Korea. It shocked my students that I ate the same lunch as them every day, since they were under the impression that I only ate hamburgers and sandwiches.

Our only date, Cape Town took me to a restaurant across the park from my apartment, on the recommendation of his co-teacher. “She told me that it’s supposed to be a remedy for hangovers,” he laughed, and set the date for a late Saturday afternoon lunch. The restaurant had a similar aesthetic to that first fish salad place Rosa took me to: crude acrylic paintings of pastoral scenes, cows, fields of wheat on the walls; synthetic wooden panelling separating from the wall, bubbling into the body of the restaurant; low wooden tables, stacks of plastic cushions like high-rises against the picture window at the front of the restaurant. When we entered the restaurant, a woman with tight curls quickly ran to the door, showed us our table dramatically with her arms like a car salesman. A man scurried to a stack by the window and brought us two cushions.

Cape Town laughed, “this is silly.”

I smiled back. “What, that she has the same hairstyle as you?”

We sat down to a continued flurry of action. The woman brought us ten different side dishes, four at a time, coating the table with small saucers of recognizable and unrecognizable foods. The man brought us a plastic container of water, two cups, poured us each a glass.

“Is it the service that your co-teacher recommended?” I asked, “because this really is an experience.”

“No, it was the *gam ja tang*.” Cape Town spilled out each syllable as game-ja-taang. But the woman repeated it, a question mark at the end, her *gam* sounding more like *kam*. “*Ne*,” Cape Town responded, “um, *maekju dujae* too. *Ju say oh*.”

“*Ne!*” she enthused back at us, and the man almost immediately responded with a tall glass bottle of Hite and two small glasses with Cass on the side. “I like how the glasses never match the beer.”

“*I appreciate how quickly he brought the beer,*” Cape Town responded, a little annoyed. His tone shifted, but I couldn’t pinpoint the cause. I wanted to ask him what I had done to upset him, but my anxiety kept me tight-lipped. I checked my new phone about a million times, hoped that someone would message me. His only move, a stack of index cards folded in his pocket, Korean on one side, English verso. He practiced Korean while I finished off the beer, and when the woman came back to the table, I tried to order another. She had a red apron in her hand, motioned her hands quickly upward, gesturing me to stand up. I unfolded my legs from under the table. Cape Town stayed focused on his studies. She reached up to my head, looped the neck of the apron around my neck, chuckling about my height to herself while she tied the apron together around my waist, tight.

The man carried over a cauldron of soup, struggled to make space for it on the table, shoved the untouched side dishes out of the way with the bottom of the bowl, brines spilling and hissing against the hot steel sides. Red, with a thick layer of foam and fat covering giant bones, potatoes, the soup boiled and bubbled green onions around. The man brought us two containers of rice, two small, plastic bowls, and a large silver cylinder full of tools: tongs, scissors, comically large chopsticks.

“How do you think we should tackle this?” I straightened my apron.

“How should I know?” he barked, sighed, “maybe we start with the tongs?”

He tossed a chunk of bone into my bowl, the marrow foaming and spilling onto the tender meat. I pulled gently at the meat and it almost liquefied at my touch, pouring off the bone. I switched to my spoon, scooped the meat up. Spicy, fatty, the sting of onions, the earthiness of mushrooms – complex tastes working both in harmony and opposition.

“This is amazing, what’s it called?”

He responds, “*gam ja tang*,” and I hummed in agreement. “*Gam ja tang*,” and turned my focus entirely on the thick, red soup, transformed the meat into a porous mush with the touch of my spoon.

The indigestion hit me later that evening. I considered it the result of the awkward fallout of Cape Town’s and my bullshit date, or my sour stomach stemming from the stress of work. And certainly, the instant rumble from my stomach during a night of drinking, soju to blame. I spent months blaming my sensitive guts on anything but the food until Yonkers announced one night at barbeque: “You guys, I only shit once yesterday.” He jiggled his belly in delight, the Madonna cartoon on his pink t-shirt nodded in agreement.

“How the fuck did you manage that?” Houston reacted in awe; her eyes wide behind wider glasses.

“I have no fucking idea. It was solid, too.”

A conversation that would normally be met with disgust had excited us all, thrilled our hearts with potential. I hadn’t digested anything normally in almost a year, and besides passing

jokes, I didn't fully realize that the other foreigners struggled, too. As I pried the pork belly from the metal grill, my intestines roared at the idea of taking a break.

"What did you eat yesterday?" Houston pried, her hands busy fumbling with chopsticks while pinching some bean sprouts.

"Here's the thing," Yonkers explained, "it was Pizza Thursday. I think the secret is eating shitty Western food."

"Are our bodies homesick?" I asked. I thought back to last weekend when I ate some of my favourite dumplings sitting in the gutter. Bursting with minced pork and chive, I quickly devoured three of them before Houston pointed out that the Styrofoam of the container fused to the bottom of the *mandu*, leaving a stringy trail. I picked it from dumpling number four with laughter. "It's fiber, or something," I rationalized.

"I don't think the street vendors consider the Styrofoam," Yonkers said.

"And I mean, look at all the meat we eat," I added, cut the *sam gyeup sal* directly onto the grill. "Our bodies probably crave vegetables!" I picked up a piece of the pork belly, dipped it into a combination of sesame oil and salt, rested it on my tongue, let it dissolve before chewing.

I tried to appease the home 'sick' ness of my digestion, but Korea pushed back. The Italian place a few doors down from my apartment, Moon Pasta, didn't serve anything I recognized. Penne Arrabiata, sweet, sugary, like ketchup. A gorgonzola pizza, no pizza sauce, topped with a generous drizzle of honey. Chicken Alfredo, greasy, with the consistency of yogurt. Garlic bread topped with granulated sugar instead of parmesan, crystalized crunchy. Rice pasta instead of semolina, chewy, consistently overcooked. I tried everything on the menu in the

two years I lived in Incheon, and nothing tasted like I'd find it in a College Street restaurant in Toronto.

Besides McDonald's, the only place I knew to get a burger, Burger B. I found myself in Hongdae every weekend, and I always begged the crowd to indulge in a 20,000W burger. Beautiful gruyere cheese, caramelized onions, shoestring fries and a shot of milkshake lowered my blood pressure dramatically, the comfort of home nestled in a brioche bun. Occasionally, Yonkers and I treated ourselves to an expensive small Pizza Hut pizza, the cheese of the Korean chain "Pizza School" horrified us.

"You can't even get a pack of processed cheese for 5,000W at the Home Plus," I explained, "why would I think that you could make a whole pizza for the same cost?"

Monster Pizza in Hongdae opened late in my tenure in Korea. The only place to get a slice of pizza in the country. Almost no seating inside the small shop, we'd eat our pepperoni slice on the side of the road, washing it down with a convenience store beer. Usually after two am.

The fried chicken of Korea, the gold medal of my food experience there. I couldn't figure out why the Koreans loved fried chicken so much, how they put such deliberate and extreme care into their spicy batter, the crisp skin, the array of chili and mayonnaise dipping sauces like side dishes.

"Everyone loves fried chicken," Austen explained. The end.

The Koreans call it *chimaek*, a portmanteau of chicken and *maekju* or beer, and the restaurants that served chicken usually only served those two things (and soju, of course). I

couldn't get enough of it, craved Love Me Tender and Frypan, popular chains guaranteed to pop up in any neighbourhood. Dragged into a new fried chicken restaurant once and served an entire chicken fried into pieces: feet, face, the whole bird.

* * *

Five years since I lived in Incheon. I started walking home to the Annex from Yonge and Eglinton. An eight-hour job sitting in front of a computer, the hour-long walk my favourite part of the day. One sunny summer day, I just kept walking, past the University of Toronto campus, past Spadina and past Bathurst into Koreatown. Buk Chang Dong Soon Tofu on the bright orange sign, the corner of Bloor and Clinton, my favourite Korean restaurant. I went in, ordered the *haem ul soon du boo* off the limited menu, and bathed in the anticipation. I didn't touch my phone, my book, just picked at sweet bean sprouts and perfectly fishy kimchi.

I get so homesick for the red. No one here wants to eat it with me, or at least not often. It's a hard sell, the potentially spicy broths complex with foreign flavours.

Before long, the Korean server brought me a hot stone pot of bubbling red-hot soup, clumps of white tofu congealed together over shell-on prawns. I cracked the raw egg into my soup, spun it around with a cold spoon, soft poaching it in the spicy broth. Steamed my face over the bowl, clam and muscle shells clamoured against the stone sides with the bubbles of the boil. Dipped my spoon in, rolled it in a large blob of soft tofu. Waited for the boil to stop, for the soup to relax before taking my first taste. It always comes back to soup, I thought, bringing the spoon closer to my face.

Swallowed. Inhaled. Home.

Tunnels

Walking home from another disappointing night in downtown Windsor, I saw a sign on Ouelette, 'Tunnel to USA'. Like I hadn't already tried to. In Panmunjeom, at the DMZ, the 38th parallel lined with tunnels, North Koreans trying to dig their way South. "They might have been trying to send spies, or bury bombs," the tour guide said as they took our picture by larger-than-life letters: red D, green M, blue Z. The tunnels a cute quirk alongside 'demilitarized' mascots, adorable North Korean cartoon soldiers with their proportions all skewed, grinning ear to ear.

When I fell in love with Jersey in the summer of 2012, I pictured our future: green M for 'marriage', for a green card. Korea, just a Band-Aid solution to leave Canada; his American birth certificate, the suture. Both of us ten thousand kilometres away from where we started out, pausing our lives, running from adulthood.

The morning he told me that he loved me for the first time, more of an afternoon, ten degrees Celsius hotter than we'd ever experienced. And only the first weekend of July. But Jersey never understood the measurements.

"You're making that up," he'd say to metric. "Those aren't real numbers."

I ended up 'home' a summer later, leaving two years behind at Incheon International. We held hands the whole forty-five-minute taxi ride to the airport, arrived four hours before my direct flight into the past. Korea gave me one last sunny, blue sky day. The drive passed between mountains, marshes, to a long bridge over the Yellow Sea dotted with rocky islands. When I first arrived, I took at least twenty pictures of the landscape, my red Sony Cyber-shot oversaturating rocky formations from the charter bus's window. But that day, I could only see Jersey.

Jersey helped me check in for my flight, helped me throw sweaters and pajamas into a trash can when Air Canada wanted to charge \$150 for the extra pound in one suitcase. He scratched my scalp, kissed the back of my neck while I blew my nose into the last of the pocket tissue. I wouldn't need to carry them anymore, the bathrooms in Toronto always had toilet paper, paper towel. Throwing out the packet, Rilakkuma frowning at me on top of my former knits, sent me over the edge. I wept, my world in two fifty-pound suitcases revolved into the unknown behind the checkout desk. The woman behind the counter's discomfort was palatable, sour. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her expression crooked, a forced smile downturned by gravity.

These Korean moments, this vacation oasis, he told me one night at the beginning of June, would be the best solution to our geography. Jersey didn't want to live in Canada, didn't want to get married. We cried in my bed together, the low ceiling circulating our humidity back to us, my tears catching in his chest hair. He kissed the top of my head, my hair tangled into his stubble, drops baptised my crown.

Jersey whispered 'ciggy' as the woman handed back my passport, took my free hand, slung my backpack over his shoulder. Dragged me from the counter, tugged me from the temptation of sulk and self-pity, out automatic sliding glass doors and into the sunshine. I started weeping again; he went into my purse, uncovered a pack of Cigar Mojitos, crumpled and crinkled, crushed by my wallet and the Galaxy. Chuckling at my hot mess, he pushed bangs out of my face and stuck a crooked cigarette in my mouth.

“You’ll be fine, baby,” he flicked his Bic, brought it to my face, shielded by his cupped hand. “Better than fine! You’ve missed home so much. You probably won’t even think about me!”

I had considered myself a veteran of public transit when I moved to South Korea, but the Seoul subway system translated me into an amateur. An expected silence in subway cars, even when rush hour has people standing on each other’s feet. Conversations between friends hushed to whispers deep within the intestines of the city, and still the only voices in the car. The subway tunnels double as bomb shelters in case the North attacks, and so they sit hundreds of metres below the earth. I missed the rattle of the trains at street level, the Toronto subways roar from beneath grates on Yonge street, kicking dust onto my grey Toms.

I missed the way the Bloor Line pops up for sunshine at its polar ends, tunneling its way upward for a breath of fresh air. Line 1 on the Seoul metro mostly sits above ground, on old train tracks, yet hidden from the sun by tall buildings and sound. I love the way the TTC climbs up near High Park, the tag marks on the intermittent concrete walls creating blurs of colours when the train hits full speed.

A Boeing 787 Dreamliner waited to take me to Toronto, but Jersey had become my home, the bed I’d slept in. Lullabies of cigarettes and kisses and Iron and Wine, taking turns reading our favourite books. I never got my copy of *Women* back from him. When I took it out of the library a year later, I could still hear his Bukowski, a growly New York accent (“didn’t he live in California?” “Oh honey, what do you know about American geography?” and then we played the ‘name the states’ game and I got forty-four versus his forty) reading and repeating the

word ‘cunt’ until it became a trigger for laughter (“Oh honey, what do you know about cunts anyway?”).

He outed most of his cigarette and put his arm around me, allowed himself to be pulled into the quake. “Oh, baby,” he cooed, “try to breathe.” I took a long drag of my smoke, held in the flume, let it slowly erupt from my nostril. He could stop all this by saying out loud how hard it felt for him too. One sentence.

Instead, he softly sang our noraebang song, “Summer of ’69,” chosen by him because of Bryan Adams’s Canadian citizenship. When he first started singing, I smiled a goofy smile. The song, it turns out, is about nostalgia for a past love, a celebrating of a reckless time. I had sung the lyrics a thousand times, followed the words on a video with an African safari in the background, but had never really listened before.

I will never again weep like I did there, on a concrete bench, outside of Incheon International Airport.

“Time to go,” he whispered to the wet stripes on my jaw.

Security at the airport is fully concealed from check-in, a labyrinth hallway hidden behind a ‘Cebu Airways’ ad, palm trees and smiling white faces on a white sand beach. He walked me to where he couldn’t walk me anymore and kissed me one last time. To try to stop me from crying, he shoved his tongue into my mouth while my carryon suitcase blocked airport foot traffic.

“Thanks for the ride,” he said, and turned goodbye.

My neck craned the whole way down the hall as I walked away from him, taking down the TSA's stanchion and getting tangled up at the waist. He laughed as I spun out of it, but, freeing myself, I turned to laugh with him, but no Jersey. I wanted to run back, to find him, but all that had ended now.

I can't have been the first person to cry through security, but they scanned my backpack twice for drugs. Took ten minutes looking at my full body scan, a new technology implemented months before. I wondered if they saw the shape of his arms still curled around my rib case, the imprint of his lips on mine, his fingerprints on my scalp.

I couldn't get myself to stop crying, not on the sterile monorail to the international terminal, not at the gift shop where I bought overpriced metal chopsticks and a large bottle of water, not at the gate where I busied myself calling my friends for the last time – Yonkers, Houston, Louisville – “I love you” sputtered between quick inhales, not in the smoking room where I smoked my last indoor cigarette just before they called me in to board. I sauntered back to the gate, the rush ended, and everything else just starting. I felt nauseated, worried that I'd use an air sickness bag for the first time. The colour in my face stayed behind as I boarded Air Canada.

My carryon handle had attitude, didn't want to retract. A flight attendant rushed to my aid; tears welled up. I tried blinking them away as he forced the small suitcase above my head.

“What were you doing in Korea?” he asked as I took my seat. He put his hand on the headrest behind me. A closer look, old enough to be my dad, smile lines splintered his face. “I lived here for the past two years,” I told him, trying to restrain myself from weeping. I pushed my backpack between my knees, avoiding any more eye contact. “I'm going back to Toronto.”

“Well, welcome home!” he proclaimed, and turned around.

Me, a twenty-six-year-old baby, crying to contain a tantrum.

But I booked this flight.

Takeoff. I watched Korea disappear, first horizontally, then vertically. The trees blurred into each other, the mountains fell behind clouds, the water faded into sky. The second the seatbelt sign turned off, I buzzed for a drink. The same attendant appeared at my side. I wanted to order in Korean, but I slipped into my mother tongue. “What beers do you have?” I asked him.

“We have Hite, Coors, Canadian, Heineken, Stella, and Mill Street Organic.”

“To stay in the spirit of things, I’ll have a Canadian.” My dad’s beer.

“Of course,” he said, an audible smile. I shivered as he left, taking in the silence of the plane. No one sat in my row, or the row next to me. Only forty people crossing the Pacific with me, including my new flight attendant friend. I breathed in deep from my nose, remembered Plath and *The Bell Jar*: “the silence depressed me. It wasn’t the silence of silence. It was my own silence.” I listened to my breathing, heard my tight, tired lungs press into themselves, press out against my chest. I could hear the hollowness inside me, the space that surrounded them, accommodating them. I felt my heart expand and contract. Shrivelling.

The steward tapped on my shoulder. I jolted, grabbed the beer from his hand and provided a weak “thank you.” Before he turned around, I downed a third of the bottle.

Clawing the beer around my left index finger, I flipped open my backpack. The night before I left, my friends held a good-bye party for me at O’Malley’s, my favourite bar in

Incheon. L.A., the bartender, made me a personal pizza, a fare only available on Thursdays but he made a Sunday exception. I didn't pay for anything that night, Yonkers ensured that my hands always had a drink on the left and a cigarette on the right. The bar nearly bursting with people, I felt as though my two years in Korea really meant something. A few of my friends from Seoul had come out, Sumter and his boyfriend Tofino. A lot of my friends had already left Korea, I'd said goodbye to them at parties just like this.

A tradition in Incheon is to gift the person leaving with a Korean flag, which people signed like a yearbook. I wanted to read my flag at my party, but my friends refused to let me. "You'll cry!" Navan told me, her sweet Irish accent almost stern in her request. "Don't touch it yet!"

Here, on this Air Canada flight, cradling a Canadian, felt like the right time. Too large to spread out on a small space, I pulled the tray beside me out, rested my beer in the holder. I ran my hand along the flag, hearing my friends' voices and accents. I saved Jersey's for last. Got angry at Rock's new girlfriend signing her name so close to his, crowding his precious space, but then:

"Yo baby, It's been amazing spending the past 14 months with you. I'm so glad I met you and I wish you all the happiness in the world. May there always be a moose in your hoose. Love, Jersey."

I chugged the last of my beer. Pushed up all the armrests in my row. I lay across all the seats, covered myself with the flag, slept until Pearson. Ten hours. The attendant never woke me up, not for one meal.

I hung the flag on every wall I've lived since. At a restaurant job I held six months after coming back, I started into a story about convenience store beers, the obnoxious service bar guy announced, "hey, did you guys know that Beth lived in Korea?" and was met with a chorus of laughter. From every server working that night. And from a few regulars.

A year after returning, in my small, dingy bedroom in Kensington Market, weeping in a drunk sadness, I ripped the flag off the wall. I covered myself in it and pictured myself tunnelling my way back to Korea, the last time I felt loved and infinite. In Canada, I was an alcoholic, but there, I was just another foreigner. In Canada, alone, in Korea, surrounded.

I tried to find him on Tinder. Swiped right thousands of times hoping to find his image in the deck of cards. Every time the bell rang on the door of the restaurant I worked at, I hoped it was his hand pulling it open. My phone would vibrate, I wanted him to be the reason.

I read Mari Kondo's book on Japanese decluttering and tried exercising him from my life. Donated the artefacts of his memory to Goodwill. Threw out the Polaroids. Hid the flag. But memories of him too tangled up in the experience of Korea. His ghost lives in every story, even the ones he didn't play a role in.

He emptied out a part of me that will never feel whole again. Half a tunnel.

My South Korea:

Representation in *Small Face, Big Eyes*

In *The Educated Imagination*, Northrup Frye explains that the “framework of all literature ... [is] the loss and regaining of identity” (Frye 30). The pilgrimage of identity aptly describes life itself, and nowhere is this loss and regain more appropriate than within the autobiographical travel narrative. The focus of this genre lies inherently in the deconstruction of a previous identity, one of the author in their home environment, to form a new identity, one of the sojourner.

In my collection *Small Face, Big Eyes*, identity plays a key focus in the construction of my account of my life in South Korea. To avoid “debasing” the Orient “as an object of study” (Said 96-7), I instead chose to focus on my personal journey navigating life as an English as a Second Language teacher in South Korea, offering as much transparency as I could to each topic. This transparency stems from the expectations of autobiography and memoir as genres, ones that define travel writing as a non-fiction narrative of geography and culture.

The weight of “autobiography”

There is an inherent expectation for works labelled “autobiography” to be utterly truthful accounts. This expectation establishes a relationship of trust between the author and the reader. Philippe Lejeune has famously described this relationship as the “autobiographical pact,” a “pledge of responsibility” that the narrator and the author are the same, “a person whose existence is certified by vital statistics and is verifiable” (Lejeune 11).

He defines autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his

personality” (4). For Lejeune, the authenticity of autobiography is marked by grammar, the use of the first-person point-of-view establishing a direct link between author (the ‘real’ person) and narrator (the person narrating from within the text) (5-7). The reader’s trust in this authenticity lies in what Lejeune calls the *proper name*, the author using their real name as the name of the narrator (13-16), which creates a “contract of identity ... sealed by the proper name” (19). He believes that “identity is the real starting point of autobiography” (24), and the use of the author’s proper name provides the link between the text and a “world-beyond-the-text” (11).

As author and character, I knew that I wanted to use my proper name in my collection, so I included it in almost every piece: in “Foreigner” (*Small Face* 22), “Tunnels” (87), “Flavour Country” (53), and “Drinking and Diving” (37), I have other characters refer to my character as “Beth.” In “Flavour Country,” I offer the real names of my brother Andrew (54) and my sister Mary (55), who, as family, operate as part of my core identity. I also used my Korean co-teacher’s assumed English name Rosa (43, 66) since it was already a pseudonym (and I never knew her real name). However, I hid my friends and fellow expatriates’ “true” identity behind aliases that pointed to their places of origin, such as Aurora (38) or Yonkers (45). It was common among the expat community in Korea to directly associate a person with their hometown. Although such monikers deny these characters the opportunity to be in a world-beyond-the-text, the nicknames keep their identity private, while maintaining the spirit of the Korean expat experience. My naming strategy also provides a good workaround for those individuals whom I have not kept in touch with and would not be able to receive consent for using their actual names.

Daniel Mendelsohn, in his article “Stolen Suffering,” discusses the importance of a factual identity in autobiography, specifically referring to falsified autobiographic accounts of

the holocaust. Identity, for him, “is precisely that quality in a person, or group, that cannot be appropriated by others” and that “the line dividing the authentic from the ersatz needs to be stressed, rather than blurred” (Mendelsohn). Mendelsohn’s article discusses the appropriation of tragedy for capital gain, but any autobiography exposed for circumventing truth and violating the “autobiographical pact” is often met with a vilified response. Appropriating the experience of others goes against the very idea of the “autobiographical pact”: the reader expects the text to be about the author’s experience, and the exposure of fictitious elements of this experience betrays the trust that the reader has placed in the author.

A recent and famous example of a falsified autobiographic account is James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, a book which Frey originally marketed as a “memoir,” then later a “semi-fictional” novel, once allegations of inaccuracy and deception surfaced. Frey “knowingly intended to mislead” (Dahmen 118) with his memoir, embellishing or fabricating facts about his drug rehabilitation to entertain readers and, ultimately, sell more copies of his book (119-20). In doing so, Frey belittles the experience of former drug addicts seeking rehab by sensationalizing it, and the exposure of his falsification of facts serves to alienate the reader from the text, since it no longer qualifies as non-fiction. In Susanna Egan’s book, *Burdens of Proof: Faith, Doubt, and Identity in Autobiography*, she uses *A Million Little Pieces* and James Frey as the primary example of controversy in the “disconnect between the author as a person ... and the written life, ... the textual identity” (Egan 3). As Lejeune believes that grammar shows the authenticity of autobiography, so does Egan, as she states, “autobiography is ... rhetorically distinct from fiction in its imagination of a self” (11). The provenance of autobiography lies in the use of a specific grammar that links the ‘textual identity’ to the author and forms a relationship that “determines the source, origin, or authority of the text, its claim to credibility” (23).

Mendelsohn discusses the “James Frey scandal” in his article, stating that “the most dismaying response ... was the feeling on the part of many readers that, true or false, his book had given them the ... ‘redemptive’ experience they’d hoped for” (Mendelsohn). Though he describes his examples of falsified holocaust stories as “far more reprehensible” than Frey, Mendelsohn uses the notoriety of Frey as an example of the power the author of an autobiography has over the reader. The common denominator between Frey’s book and falsified holocaust narratives is empathy on behalf of the reader; the reader invests more emotion in the factual nature of autobiography than they would otherwise in a work of fiction.

Frey’s book appropriates the grammar of autobiography, as the novel’s narrator and protagonist are named James three pages into the book (Frey 3). The protagonist states, “my name [is] my life” (10) when asked for his name at the rehabilitation centre, as though his name carries the weight of his existence. Frey’s use of his own name aligns with Lejeune’s belief that the proper name is what carries the power in autobiography, as it contains the person in the world-beyond-the-text. Frey, in *A Million Little Pieces*, tells readers that “honesty and openness are very important [in rehab]” (26), which does not reflect how Frey treats his experience in rehab within his text. *The Smoking Gun*, the website that outed his book as embellished, investigated the report of his arrest, a “maypole” scene of the book, and found fourteen lies or embellishments (“A Million Little Lies”). The article quotes Frey’s appearance on Oprah Winfrey’s talk show in 2005, where Frey explains that “if I was gonna write a book that was true and ... honest, then I was gonna have to write about myself in ... negative ways” (ibid). When confronted by *The Smoking Gun*, Frey admitted to exaggerating his arrest for “obvious dramatic reasons” (ibid).

These “obvious dramatic reasons” would be to create a more compelling narrative, but one that strays from the spirit of autobiography and, in turn, violates the autobiographical pact. In *A Million Little Pieces*, Frey announces that he is “drawn to books” and uses them as an escape, “if I can’t [get out] physically, I would like to do it in my head” (Frey 70). Egan notes Frey’s desire to be a writer “in the tradition of Hemingway, Burroughs, and Kerouac” (Egan 54), for whom Frey states that “the genre of memoir didn’t exist” (55). The difference between autobiography and memoir is focus: memoir centralizes one time rather than a whole personal chronology, or “concentrates more on others than on [the self]” (Peel 2).

By these parameters, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* qualifies as a memoir, as the text chronicles his life in Paris in the 1920s. Hemingway follows Lejeune’s later defining of the autobiographical pact, in that he narrates the text through his voice and utilizes his and others’ proper names. However, what makes *A Moveable Feast* an interesting example of memoir is the preface Hemingway includes. In it, he informs the reader that, if they “[prefer], this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always a chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact” (*A Moveable Feast* ix). Fiction can, for Hemingway, enlighten fact, exemplify it. Though Charles Bukowski’s novels are marketed as fictional, they are “obsessively autobiographical” (Madigan 455) and Jack Kerouac was “noted for frequent use of autobiography” (451), allowing the authors opportunity to play outside of autobiographic expectations. Both authors established pseudonyms for themselves: Bukowski becomes Henry Chinaski (457), Kerouac has the alter egos Sal Paradise (*On the Road*) and Ray Smith (*Dharma Bums*). The authors chose to imagine the self as an other, a fictitious limb of their literal selves.

Popular non-fiction writer David Sedaris's 2009 serial essay collection *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* controversially describes his work in the author's note as "real-ish" (*When You Are Engulfed in Flames*). This statement contrasts with the author's note in his 1997 collection *Naked*, where he states that "the events described in these stories are real" (*Naked*). He began referring to his work as "real-ish" in response to articles such as "This American Lie," *The New Republic's* 'outing' of Sedaris's work as being fictionalized. The author, Alex Heard, quotes Sedaris in an interview admitting that he "exaggerate[s] ... but all the situations were true" (Heard). Heard does "not equate him with Frey" (Heard) but attempts to bring him down *Smoking Gun*-style just the same. The contrast between the two authors is tone: Frey is attempting to elicit sympathy from the reader, whereas Sedaris is hoping primarily to amuse them. "Sedaris's intention is to entertain, and he does not see autobiography as anything other than story" (Cardell and Kuttainen 102); Sedaris extends the parameters of the definition of autobiography for the sake of creating a humorous text (103). He told the *New York Times* that "memoir is the last place you'd expect to find the truth" (Lyall). This distinction that Sedaris makes, autobiography-as-story vs fiction as truth, intrigues me because it grants him flexibility: he does not find himself confined by potentially faint memories, especially when recalling stories from his childhood, to illustrate as compelling a narrative as possible. His rich dialogue and fully fleshed-out emotional experiences allow the reader to respond to the author-character as real. Sedaris is a celebrity thanks to his writing: famous not only because of the content of his work, not because of anything remarkable that he has done but because of his *delivery*, the written context.

When approaching *Small Face, Big Eyes*, I had many trepidations. Because I have no source material to work from other than my memory, I was leery of dialogue and establishing

fully fleshed-out scenes. However, going into my project I knew that I had an audience both of former English teaching expatriates and of those anticipating the experience of living in South Korea. The English Programme in Korea (EPIK) has existed since 1995 (Jeon 232), and yet there are no literary publications on the subject in Canada. Some texts do exist, such as *Learning to Think Korean* (Kohls) and *Chopsticks and French Fries* (Amara), but these are purely informative and lack narrative insight. The absence of relevant accounts persisted after my return in 2014 and reverberates still in 2020.

With *Small Face, Big Eyes*, I wanted to produce something that I felt comfortable sharing with the friends that I made in Korea, stories that could be both accurate *and* entertaining. The “James Frey scandal” fresh in my head, I aimed to avoid upsetting or alienating real individuals who would feel betrayed by inaccurate accounts. However, I also wanted to craft scenes, to offer readers new to the idea of South Korea and living abroad. This desire led to the dynamic collection of *Small Face, Big Eyes*. Each piece offers readers a window into my life in Korea, with each of these windows filtered through a differing narrative perspective (i.e. eating, smoking, drinking).

I took two separate approaches to the pieces in my collection. “Heartbreakers,” “Drinking and Diving,” and “Tunnels” are all personal essays, while “Flavour Country” and “Foreigner” follow a more traditional memoir style. While a memoir is structured in the same way as a novel or short story, the personal essay has a “sense of discovery”; it’s not a “narrative of the voyage, but also the voyage itself” (Holladay 84). I was drawn to the personal essay because it affords liberties to writers of autobiographical text, possessing a power of directness within language rather than with traditional scenes or dialogue (89-91). Though autobiographical writing is “for and from memory” (Bartkevicius 136), it is “intruded” on by the present self

(Freeman 89). It would, therefore, be impossible to recount moments exactly as they were nine years ago since those memories are informed by my present 2020 self. The essay offers the opportunity to reflect on my experience in Korea with as much transparency as possible.

“Heartbreakers” and “Drinking and Diving” exist within the full chronology of my life and have present-tense narration grounding them within my life after Korea. “Heartbreakers” only offers one full narrative scene, that of my initial purchase of a pack of cigarettes in Korea. Otherwise, the essay jumps between anecdotes, allowing myself as a writer the liberty to convey to readers the events as I remember them. It avoids dialogue or exacting details, and instead captures the feeling of the experience, and reflects on my personal history from a more current time.

However, my more traditional memoir chapters stay true to the spirit of autobiography and memoir, even if some of their details are partial fabrications. Jocelyn Bartkevicius believes that “fictional techniques in memoir are neither lies nor embellishments” (Bartkevicius 138). The genre of autobiographical writing is much more nuanced than critics of Sedaris or Frey may understand. Valerie Holladay states that “despite any claim to be a true and accurate record of a life, an autobiography simply cannot be true” (Holladay 89). As the author, I know that “Foreigner” and “Flavour Country” are “true” – that the events depicted transpired essentially as I have written them, without hyperbole – but the dialogue has been mostly manufactured, and some details have been filled in and smoothed out by fiction. This is because working from memory is fallible. While some of the criticism of Sedaris has been drawn from his embellishments in dialogue (Lyll), dialogue “has long been crucial to memoir” (Bartkevicius 134). Mark Freeman quotes Ernst Schachtel on how memory provides a “barrenness in content, by an incapacity to reproduce anything that resembles a really rich, full, rounded, and alive experience” (Freeman 89). There will always be the temptation to utilize fictional elements

within autobiographical writing to tell a compelling story (267-268), and these fictional elements do not minimize the efficacy of autobiographical narrative. The distinction between my work and that of Frey or Sedaris is an awareness of the difference between embellishment and fabrication, and my commitment to trying to produce my experience as authentically as possible, while still telling compelling stories.

The travel narrative

Travel writing can lend itself to problematic portrayals of foreign cultures. It stems from a colonial history of illustrating the difference between the colonial power and the colonized land (Bhabha 149-150). The appeal of the travel narrative stems from this “fantasy of difference,” one that exoticizes the culture being written about and strengthens pre-existing notions of otherness (150). María Lourdes López Ropero quotes Percy Adams: “as propaganda for international trade and for colonization, travel accounts had no equal” (Ropero 52). Travel narratives possessed great power in “the construction of national identities” (52) by offering readers a chance to travel to destinations through the problematic lens of colonial discourse. Travel narratives played a large role in enforcing problematic stereotypes and enforcing a self/other, colonizer/colonized, master/slave polarity within textual depictions of foreign countries (Bhabha 150).

Contemporary travel writing, however, has evolved from the depiction of this “fantasy of difference.” Instead, authors of travel narratives are “subject-oriented,” and often utilize the travel narrative to resolve some “inner conflict” (Ropero 51). Autobiographical writing was born from the Western, Christian tradition of confession (Chin 11-12), a cathartic drive to purge oneself of wrongdoing and receive penance merely for the act of confession. Contemporary

travel writing stems from this autobiographical writing culture. Due to the modern travel writers “awakened social consciousness” (Ropero 53), travel is maligned to “backdrop for the traveler’s very personal concern” (53). Rather than an objective, pseudoscientific exploration of a foreign culture, travel writing has evolved to be more in the spirit of the subjective memoir. It has paved the way for what Ropero calls *countertravel writing*, postcolonial writing that “dismantles the Eurocentric views that gave rise to the genre” (54). Postcolonial authors enforce the confessional nature of autobiographical writing, utilizing travel as a “quest for self-understanding” (53) and travel writing to navigate that quest. Susanna Egan quotes James Olney, who says that “the ‘I’ in autobiography ... half discovers and half creates itself in writing” (Egan 13). The other half of the formation of the autobiographic ‘I’, in the case of travel writing, happens on behalf of the travel itself, the geography and culture that inform the ‘I’. The act of travel exposes the origin of the ‘I,’ and forces the speaking self to consider the conditions that formed that ‘I.’

Of course, even contemporary travel writers fall into the traps set by the genre’s colonial past. Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*, much like Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, climbed to fame with an Oprah’s Book Club sticker affixed on the cover. Her year of travel is triggered by the dramatic ending of her marriage, though she does not feel that that story is “appropriate” to discuss in her book (Gilbert 12). Funded by a book advance, she first moves to Rome, to fulfill a lifelong dream of learning Italian in a city she describes as a “fairylane of language” (39). She obsesses over the beauty of the city and the mystery of those who inhabit it and believes that the Italian language is key to accessing it all (39). Though syphoned through her desire to rediscover herself after marriage, she nonetheless fetishizes the city as a space of separateness from her origin (Bhabha 162). She has committed a lifetime of fetishization of the Italian language,

pursuing it instead of other romantic interests, and sharing a bed with Italian phrasebooks and dictionaries (9). Though Gilbert admits that she went to Italy to “understand” herself (116), most of her accounts of the country starts with the word “beautiful” – “beautiful Bologna” (98), “beautiful faith” (90), “beautiful” people (66-67), “beautiful word[s]” (71). Her heavily romanticised account of the country comes across as propaganda and furthers the difference between Italy and North America. Her accounts of India and Indonesia are equally as problematic, if not more so. Her three months in India largely took place in an expensive, rural Ashram surrounded by other wealthy foreigners (119). In Indonesia, she sponsors a lot of the impoverished individuals she encounters there: Gilbert raised eighteen-thousand dollars for a woman, Wayan, to purchase a house (274), and Gilbert’s friend warned her that Wayan might “get all Balinese” and sit on the money, never purchasing the property the funds were intended for (303). Gilbert projects herself as a “white saviour” in her memoir that foregrounds the search for self, demonstrating a world ripe for Westerners to seek their identity in the difference of others.

In *A Tokyo Romance*, Ian Buruma writes that “true depth of feeling can only be found with people who have a culture in common. Transcending the borders of language and shared assumptions will result in disillusion” (Buruma 11). However, he continues that he did not heed his own advice, fell into the romantic notion of Japanese culture (11), overly sexualized the people (46), and obsessed over the fashion (67). He was brought to the country by Donald Richie’s *The Inland Sea*, a travel narrative that sells Japan as a haven to “escape” from the West (Richie 14), where the Japanese are “sea people” slowly being corrupted by the West (75). Richie cannot read Japanese (156), though he can speak with the locals. He imagines it must be “very special” to be Japanese (82), describing their “child-like” innocence (84-85) and lack of

individuation (152) as humanistic ideals. Though he concludes on the note that Japan is a “mirror” where Westerners see the people “and ourselves” (310), the text ultimately describes a quest for this stereotyped Japan that is “attractive to a heritage-starved, history-parched American” (15). Too many travel narratives to Japan persist in this colonial mode, a problem I see as inherent to Western writers who travel to Asia write about those experiences as some sort of expert and cultural guide.

David Sedaris approaches his travel narratives directly through the lens of personal identity, even though he too is obsessed with language. He structures *Me Talk Pretty One Day* into two distinct sections: section “One” starts with a story about his attempts to correct his speech impediment and contains essays that take place before he moves to France, and section “Deux” chronicles his life in France and his pursuit of learning the language. Unlike Gilbert, Sedaris moves to France because he believes that “living in a foreign country is one of those things that everyone should try at least once” (*Me Talk Pretty One Day* 155). His partner Hugh speaks French (155), so the French language serves as a desire for commonality between the two as well as independence and freedom in France. Most of “Deux” recounts his struggle learning the language with humour, and Sedaris manages to make this process more egalitarian by making fun of Americans. He begins “Make That a Double” by differentiating two kinds of American French speakers, those who speak the “Hard Kind” and those who speak the “Easy Kind” of French (187) before he even begins talking about how the French speak it themselves. He is aware of his position as an American and, by discussing his origins at the beginning of the essay, he offers a transparency to the reader and exposes his bias. Sedaris avoids romanticizing the ‘other’ country as Gilbert does, and approaches the dichotomy he experiences with humour rather than fetish.

Portraying my understanding of Korean in *Small Face, Big Eyes* was simple because of how little Korean I spoke. It also gave me the opportunity to expose my ignorance and illustrate how menial my understanding of the culture truly was. In “Drinking and Diving,” I demonstrate this lack of awareness when I go to a Korean restaurant with my colleagues from the middle school (50). I show anxiety and paranoia at not being able to understand what they are talking about. In “Foreigner,” I also highlight my inability to speak or understand the language (11). Language being the key to access, in this manuscript I wanted to show my own sense of difference, and other myself against Korean nationals. In this way, I attempt to reverse the typical colonial travel writing that situates the author as some sort of authority (or at least witness) and locals as exotic other.

“Heartbreakers,” the first piece I wrote for *Small Face, Big Eyes*, was inspired by Sedaris’s “The Smoking Section.” An eighty-three-page essay about Sedaris’s journey as a smoker, “The Smoking Section” is broken into two parts: Part I, his life as a smoker in the United States and France, and Part II, his life post-cigarette in Japan. “The best way to quit smoking is to change your environment” (*When You Are Engulfed in Flames* 258), Sedaris explains, and goes on a ‘journey’ to re-invent himself as a non-smoker in Japan. The essay embodies the pursuit of identity much more than it highlights differences in cultures. My history as a smoker was exactly the reverse of his – I picked up the habit while living abroad, and although I had cigarettes in my history, my life too could be divided into this before/after dichotomy. Instead of juxtaposing Toronto/Korea, I focus on the self as pre-smoker/smoker. This, I found, made a much more compelling story, and showcased a specifically me-Korea, instead of the country itself.

This piece led to “Drinking and Diving,” an essay similarly structured around drinking. Unlike “Heartbreakers,” “Drinking and Diving” zooms chronologically to the purging of the vice of drinking – though it had started before Korea, it took a new light and my alcoholism became an “export” from the country: “My understanding of Korean culture, limited to unabashed alcoholism” (50). I highlighted the way I took advantage of the cultural artefacts that I could access and understand, and how pathetically limited that understanding was. In doing so, I showcase the consumptive nature of the ignorant foreigner; how foreigners can only have access to the aspects of a country that seem *less* foreign to them, and how separate their experience is from anything authentic of the country they sojourn in.

Small Face, Big Eyes is a project clouded in representation: representation of the truth, of South Korea, and of myself as an individual. The portrayal of my experiences in Korea has been carefully considered to produce a collection that possesses variety, honesty, and literary merit without leaning on problematic depictions of the country or culture. Throughout my thesis, I wanted to showcase the Korea that I experienced, that I shared with my fellow expatriates, and not attempt to convey the “authentic” country as it exists independently of myself. For this reason, I lean into Egan’s notion of autobiography holding a rhetorical distance from narrative fiction. I want readers to trust the autobiographical pact, to imagine these experiences as actually happening to the author-as-character, while still enjoying the tales. I do not regard *Small Face, Big Eyes* as “travel writing” – and am especially uninterested in the reinscription of the colonial power structure that Bhabha decries. *Small Face, Big Eyes* is a memoir, a personal reflection. Korea provides the geography and setting, but the collection highlights my lack of access to the culture and stands as a cathartic purge of the person I became when I lived there.

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