

Inherited Trauma

edited by

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~

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Annex Series



eohippus labs

Inherited Trauma

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From the Editor

I don't know how to write about a trauma that is not mine, yet invisibly and with utmost uncertainty, I have inherited its wounds. I don't know how to write about a wound that I cannot see, a wound that I don't remember receiving, a wound that is often forgotten but somehow felt.

I am thinking about how, as Korean-American writers, there seems to be an invisible thread that somehow tethers us along a common trajectory, common ghosts and conjurations. That we can understand implicitly a combination of real and felt trauma and suffering, perceived trauma and suffering, and also an invisible trauma and suffering, a trauma that is not ours, a trauma that is not mine, yet somehow corrupts our thoughts and feelings and actions daily.

As time passes, too, the number of primary witnesses to the Korean War diminishes. Some of us don't have access to this trauma that we have inherited, and yet we still do have access to its witnesses, our parents and grandparents. I myself feel like I haven't actively asked the questions of my family that I should have asked earlier, and as it becomes more urgent, necessary, and as I finally have the desire to ask those questions, I am not sure if I know how to articulate them, or if I still can.

Too, there is a word we are familiar with, that encompasses some of this, a word given to describe the unique emotional identity of being Korean: *han*.

Suh Nam-dong describes han as:

A feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one's guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong—all these combined.

It is only recently that I really came to understand the meaning of this word for myself. The word speaks to more than just the presence of a historical trauma. It manages to weave together the presence of an unresolved corporeal history and the impossibility of articulation or expression in relation to questions of authenticity, historical accuracy, individual subjectivity, lived/embodied experience, loss, shame, guilt. It is the guilt and shame of living as a Korean person. Too, it is the guilt and shame of living as a human being in the face of the absurd.

Even the Korean alphabet was conceived out of violence and trauma. The very language that is shared as a nation is embroiled in injustice and an impossible desire for articulation and understanding. But language inevitably fails. Humans inevitably fail.

When my father tells me stories of what he remembers about the Korean War and the time after (he was 4 when he escaped into South Korea with his family), he contradicts himself. Details from one telling change when he tells the stories again. Other stories he will not tell. He has forgotten or has decided that they didn't happen. His stories contradict the historical record. They are "incorrect" and "historically inaccurate," and yet these are his experiences: lived, remembered, felt. How do we reconcile feeling with history?

And again, how do I speak for a trauma that is not mine yet is felt each and every moment of my life? How do any of us? Especially now, I feel an urgent need for these stories and questions to be shared, especially with those who do not understand but maybe wish to, for ourselves to reconcile differences, and for those ghosts who would not be silenced.

In relation to these thoughts, feelings, wounds, I invited 4 writers whom I respect and admire deeply to respond with their own engagements with these ideas. This pamphlet is the result of those engagements.

- Janice Lee

01

Sueyeun Juliette Lee

So say it

What can I say, and how. When pain stifles and the body turns to light—what then and next. I recollect, re-collect the arcing sunlight pouring through the antique windowpane to halt, projected on the wall. I bend my wrinkled palm to mirror their dynamic CURVATURES, strive to lick its fluencies and draw ephemeral, fleet strength into my tongue. Rough, how faint. No mark. No trowel signs in the skin. No torn landscapes unveiled inside me. No heat. No words. None and none and none. Just a blurry blue bleed on the fair interior of my left wrist.

After what we said is gone. Lost. The way of things, I have learned, is dynamic dissolution, or another way of saying *transform*. Who am I turning into all the time, and who has walked through me, through these arterial conjectures we call “ancestry” or “name that space for the history you can’t hold.” Did he have a name, and she? Rough coats of paint become intimate against my softly open mouth. I want to say “umma” or gurgle. Her body draws back like blown sand on the infinite, stormy gray shore of my mind. *This room is blue.*

To express grief, I made a fragile banner. It contained words that I’ve forgotten and have no record of. They caught in the wind, they shuddered in the restless breeze over a cold body of water. From a distance, everything shone with electricity

and charge. Up close, I was solemn, prismatic. With one kind stranger as witness, the words caught fire and fled.

There's a lot I don't know anymore. The panic seeps in when I realize how banal everything can become with duration. The black bucket of my heart that swelled, flooded, wanted to pour endlessly out of my mouth—even that corrosive sea has tides and has recently receded. It stands simply like a glass of water on my desk right now. I'm observing it with detachment as I write. I tipple my finger along its rim, feel its wet mouth strive to cling again to mine.

Catalog all the things you can never know.
Now paint them in your dreams with blood.

Some things feel rightly mine. My name. The arms and legs I use to express myself, the gestures my features unconsciously make. They never betray me. I am of them and myself. Other things feel right but I question if they shouldn't feel wrong. The banks of the Potomac. The red Virginia clay of my childhood, which I can still smell. The miniature crawfish in the sparkling brook, dappled oaklight, humid summer. Many things feel wrong. This illuminated screen. The way I have to hold my body before it. How pens now feel in my clumsy hands. Never sun. Never starlight. Never wan moon like a low cup in the sky. Mine, mine, mine.

Seo-Young describes post-memory han as a type of time travel, or mind-reading, a form of speculative intelligence that rises in the flesh—the ancestral memory drawn near without words or hands. I imagine a black light irradiating my bones. A *negative sun*. I hesitated just now at the keys to tamp out those words. Negative implies oppositional. Negative can mean absence, perhaps. I think of what spins the

other way, invisibly. Is it a balance, then, for all other inherent joys? *What is a birthright if not written in blood.* "A refusal." The thought drops away like pale ash. There is no such thing as balance. We're all always tilting, turning, curving into or away or towards. Another way of saying *transform*. Try it. "In that black light, *transform*."

Am I angry? *Yes.*

Can you name it? _____

Describe this pain: *It is wet and drowns but burns.*

With what equivalent fury? *The sun.*

I never wished for elders, because they were absent in their own tribulations. I never wished for friends, because I have them in loving droves. What I wish for is some way to ignite and extinguish this black starlight inside me. I move slowly, meditatively, and others see a type of joy. I move slowly, meditatively, and I strive to channel a heaving, resentful magma core. It eats words, it exposes me as the pale paper I really am—fragile and porous, to be thrown about or soiled. A record for no recording. Just a name, set down in fire and gone.

What can I do but serve as small witness. I mark the sun's shifts on my windowpane. My memory erodes swiftly, faster each day, and my sight dwindles like steam gathering on clear glass.

What do you want to say, so say it. They suffered. Many were at fault. They were ground out into the soil then lost. *What do you want to say, so say it.* They had names. I do not know them. It feels fresh and without cause and we churn. *What do you want to say, so say it.* IT CRIES. IT CRIES. IT CRIES.

02

Don Mee Choi

Wings of Return:
Ahn Hak-söp #1

Ahn was a political prisoner from 1953 to 1995. He currently lives in a farming village within the Civilian Control Zone, on the South Korean side of the DMZ. The CCZ was created by a US Army commander after the Korean War in 1954, and it remained relatively vacant till the 1980s. The new settlements in the CCZ are commonly referred to as "DMZ Villages." To enter the DMZ Village near the City of Kimp'o, west of Seoul, I had to pass a guard post manned by young soldiers. I also observed seemingly endless barbed wire fencing across the rice fields. Ahn, now in his eighties, remains a North Korean sympathizer. Every time a missile is test-fired in North Korea, usually before or after the biannual, massive, joint US-ROK military exercises, Ahn is placed under house arrest. I recorded Ahn and also scribbled in my notebook while listening to his life story at his house, December 23, 2016. I remain a daughter of neocolony.

...I was born in Kanghwa...finished my elementary education...then the liberation...I really thought that Korea was liberated...I hid in a den during the day and came out only

at night...then the liberation...I was told that I could come out because we were liberated...I felt at the time that really, this really was the world but it didn't last long...soon I was on the wanted list...I couldn't attend school regularly...in Seoul...later Kaesong...then the Korean War...I was swept here and there during the war...I went all the way up north along the Chinese border as the North Korean troops retreated...I received orders to go back to Seoul...many meanderings...a country that's not a country, a divided country...I didn't learn English at school...I always skipped my English class...that's how much I despised America...not the people but its government...I gained my pro-independence awareness in grade two...my teacher was like a mad man and whipped us when he realized that we only knew Japanese and didn't know Korean at all...when I told my father about it he said that I would understand my teacher when I got older...I remember my father listening to the news on the radio about the anti-Japanese independence movement led by Kim Il-sung...he was referred to as a general then...I remember hearing a faint voice on the radio...I wasn't in hiding for any kind of political consciousness or reason...during the Japanese occupation I had three older brothers who were in the Japanese military...one stayed in the army and the other two planned an escape...I'd finished my elementary school and spoke Japanese...if you didn't speak Japanese then you couldn't get a permit to travel...many young women were taken as Comfort Women and young men were conscripted into the Japanese military or into forced labor...so everyone married early...my sister-in-law died a few months after giving birth and I had to find something to feed the baby...there was no milk or sugar...we were surrounded by rice fields but the rice was not for us...the Japanese took everything, even spoons and chopsticks...because one of my brothers escaped my father was constantly arrested and questioned...I

was wanted too...I'd mailed a letter with money to my brothers...one evening my father told me to quickly finish my dinner and go to my aunt's before sunrise...like I said I despised America...I really thought America liberated us...in Incheon when people came out to welcome the Americans they were shot indiscriminately...the American troops were not liberators but occupiers...I was sixteen in 1946 and began participating in the movement against the U.S. military's occupation...I ran errands for the organizers...it was after the curfew...I was carrying documents from the meeting...I ran and threw the documents into the acacia tree and hid in the well...the police officer chased me all the way to the well...he was a former pro-Japanese collaborator...my body was frozen from the cold water even though it was August...if the police had gotten hold of the documents the entire Kangwha would have been on fire...I couldn't go home...I met with someone who resisted despite being tortured for over a month with water and electricity...the stench of puss from his body was unbearable...he was beaten so much that all of his skin had blistered...he stank of rot...his insides must have been rotting too...the stench of his body is still deep inside my mind...I was arrested in Kaesong...I was in school on the second floor...a truckload of police arrived for me...then I was let out and told to report in every week...I went to Kangwha...drifted here and there...had a bad case of dysentery...I studied and exercised even in the middle of the night because I knew I would be tortured if I ever got arrested...I went to Nampo to Shinūiju to Ch'oson and across the Amnok River to China...I was instructed to go back to Seoul...I mostly studied...1951...Kaesong was attacked...I went back there...1952...many others died...I was arrested in 1953...jailed in Seoul...I received medical treatment in Taegu...I was tortured...endless torture...I didn't give out any information...more torture...the guy who was torturing

me suddenly stopped and said, don't be a fool...just admit that you are a party member...but I was just a foot soldier... 1954...I had a trial and was sent to a military prison...if you didn't bleed for a day then you had your ancestors to thank for...the soldiers came in morning, afternoon, and night and would point and yell...YOU...and you had to state your name, age, and your crime right away and if you didn't they beat the shit out of you with a club...your head...your back...the amount of food we received...less than a centimeter of rice in a bowl...barely a bite...many died from malnutrition...I tried to escape...but when I tried to run only my mind could run...my legs wouldn't move...they wouldn't follow me...my arms and legs were like matchsticks...a beansprout soup... it would be a miracle if you found even three beansprouts in the broth...even intellectuals became like idiots...their families abandoned them...under the daily abuse...YOU... and all they could say was...uh...uh...uh...but they could read when asked to read...they just couldn't speak...uh...uh...uh...from shock...I realized then how important one's environment was...how important nurture was...there were different levels of prisoners...one to five and level five got the most food...a medic in charge made a public statement that even an overweight person who lived on the food rations of level five would die from malnutrition within a year...1956... will you change your political view or not? If not write down your reason...those of us who refused to change our political view were beaten...twenty to twenty-two of us were packed into a tiny cell that was big enough for only eight people... we weren't allowed to lean our backs on the walls either... we were deprived of many rights...no visitation, no letters, no medical care...we were each given a blanket to sleep on ...this is going to sound like a lie...in the morning when we shook the blankets to fold them the dust from the blankets was so thick that it looked as if smoke was coming out of

the room...that's why we had to keep the door closed... when the dust settled it was about 2 millimeters thick...I know it sounds like a lie...I was going to die one way or the other...from the beatings or from getting sick...I decided that I wanted to be able to move my body before I died...I opened the door...the entire prison was on alert...the guards thought there was fire...I admitted that I was the one who opened the door...I won't say what they did to me...I'll leave it up to your imagination...

I'll leave it up to your imagination what a DMZ Village looks like, what his house looks like, what his dogs look like, how many of his teeth are missing, how fit he still is, how he carefully peels sweet potatoes roasted in his woodstove, how terribly beautiful the River Han looks behind the endless barbed wired fence, how many soldiers guard the Civilian Control Zone, how he points to the river, how the river connects to River Imjin, flowing from the North to South, what a country that's not a country looks like, what smoke that's not smoke looks like, how he tilts his gaze sideways when he says I'll leave it up to your imagination, the size of the blisters, whether a political view can be changed or not, whether a divided country is a country or not, what shock sounds like, how this really was the world, how deep the well was, whether the acacia tree was in bloom or not.

03
Saehee Cho

JESA

A MAP, A HISTORY, A SPREAD OF SOMETHING I DON'T KNOW. HERE IS A SLICE.

강신 KANG SHIN

(降神 · SURRENDER, TO DROP, TO FALL
GOD; UNUSUAL, MYSTERIOUS)

ACTION:
EVERY WINDOW, EVERY DOOR -- AJAR
WE TEND HIS GRAVE.
WE WIPE HIM DOWN

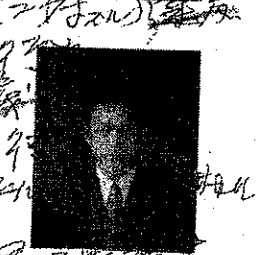
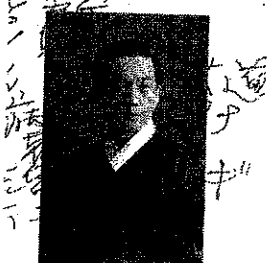
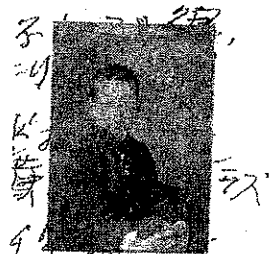
We cook for our dead, leave doors open for spirits.
I think of him, pressing through
as if through the throat of another world
only to eat a meal.

The action of shearing
Pivot around a mounded grave
She says
He was due for a trim

*For the first time in 10 days, I am alone. The first thing I do is cry because
like everything else loneliness is a matter of context. I cool in my sadness
and then shake it off.

In Seoul, I fall out of love, twice over. The flowers on other graves are of
particular interest. Polyester flowers bloom despite the snow

강신, W 5월 7



강신, W 5월 7
강신, W 5월 7
강신, W 5월 7

삼시 SAP SII

(挿匙 TO INSERT / SPOON)

ACTION:
WHITE FRUITS TO THE WEST, RED FRUITS TO THE EAST,
DRIED FISH, SEASONED BEEF, RICE, RICE CAKES, WINE,
DRIED JUJUBES, DECAPITATED FRUIT, PEELED CHESTNUTS (7),
VEGETABLE GANCHAN (3)

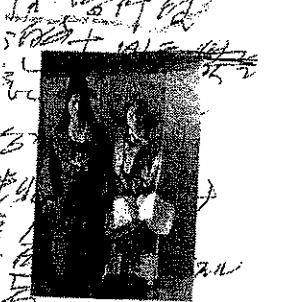
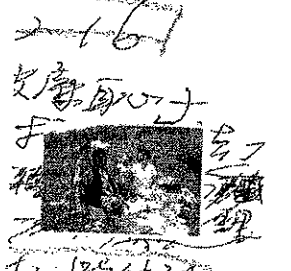
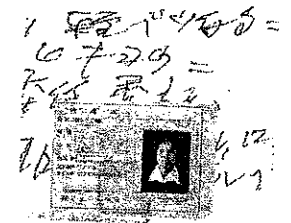
WE PLACE A SPOON FACING EAST, FACING LEFT
EVERYTHING IN ODD NUMBERS
ELEGANT MATH IS SIMPLE MATH

WE FEED OUR GHOSTS
THE DEAD ARE HUNGRY

There are little things here
I want to hold, soft.
My uncle's steady half-bow, his right arm in constant brace
as he animates chopsticks in place of the dead
heavy circles over sweet rice
the chestnuts we peeled on my grandmother's kitchen floor
How she asked at the wretched meat

The pears and apples move me, their near obscenity
The offering part is obvious but something about fruit for the dead
needs to be marked, cleanly stated
I hold the question
What whets the appetite of ghosts
Like a stone in my palm, rolling

* We eat breakfast together in hsiit-dor. Hard boiled eggs with instant
powdered coffee. I watch blonde creamer dissolve. She shrugs her
shoulders before peeling her egg and says, A, SHI "... Okay, let's eat".
My heart breaks a little. I imagine her, the weight of her tonelinear, saying
this to herrest endlancey in dawn light. In the periphery, the ghost of her
husband's chair pushing swee:



RET

초헌 CHO HUN

(初獻 INITIAL / TO OFFER, TO DISPLAY)

ACTION:
WE POUR DRINK FOR HIS SPIRIT
VIGILANT, WATCHING HIS CUP
TURN CLOCKWISE THREE TIMES OVER THE INCENSE
BOW FROM THE WAIST TWICE, AND THEN TO THE FLOOR
THE BUDDHISTS DO IT ONE WAY,
US, GODLESS, ANOTHER

We always laughed at the ice cube
in my grandfather's Johnny Walker after dinner
As if he didn't know
How she watered down his nightly drink
How she smoothed him over

Since childhood, I have always loved this full-prostrate bow
The coolness of the floor on my forehead
and the smell of clean straw
come to mind.

I like the theater of ceremony, it's true
Formality gives us an aperture to grieve
it shapes the throb, the heavy unkillable pain
into something we can only just lick at

I watch my mother burn low

And mourning to, feels like the motion of a curve
Once, in midst of a car accident, I felt the wheels turn hard against freeway,
lift off into the air
That aching feeling of lightness before a fall
Mourning feels like this, a sadness about to land

* My grandmother counts in Japanese, still.

張界=免×ル
7/14/11



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手(交)
手(交)
手(交)



手(交)
手(交)
手(交)
手(交)

手(交)

음복 EUM BOK

(飲福 DRINK; TO SWALLOW (TEARS)
BLESSINGS; HAPPINESS; GOOD FORTUNE)

ACTION

TWO SCOOPS OF RICE FOR EVERYONE
BECAUSE ONE SCOOP ISN'T LOVE
I PICK BONES FROM BARLEY CURED FISH

WE EAT ALTAR FOOD, WITHOUT ANY SACRED FEELING
THE SOUP IS VERY GOOD

My father sounds far away on the phone
It's enough to say
he feels more these days

My grandfather appears in dreams with scrolls
parsing out my future with directness
full and swift demarcations, a chop in time
all the psychics say

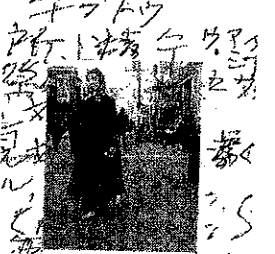
* I watch her hands as she talks about the war
the way they grow in size as the story escalates.

We eat donuts and share an American
She worries, over me
and gestures towards a past
I feel more, edge slow
Her stories pass through me, like an egg in my throat, sliding whole

手(交)
手(交)
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04
Chiwan Choi

Ghost
River
Tree

This is where my life begins.

I am standing in the front yard of our house. It is cold. I am standing outside playing by myself, the dog somewhere nearby. I must have been throwing the boomerang.

Then my father is there in front of me. I feel his hands clutch both my upper arms and I am looking up at him. He leans down, the light behind his head a halo. He is telling me about moving. This is the only house I've known. He says we are moving. He says we are going away.

It is so clear now: He tells me we are moving to another country, to a place called Paraguay in a place called South America. He tells me that my cousin's family is also coming with us. His lips are moving and I am hearing these words. He says we are moving there but that's not where we are really going. He tells me that we have to go to Paraguay because we are really going to the United States and this is the way we will get there.

And then we were gone.

But memory is just the name of the one who betrays you to save you.

*

It has been snowing or raining for 3 months straight here in Pittsburgh. I tell my wife, who is against the opposite armrest, that I'll never again say that I love the cold weather. But the thing is I've been in LA for 38 years and I was in Paraguay for 5 years before that and that is 43 years in places that don't snow, in places where I could almost smell my skin burn.

We are watching *Modern Family*. In this episode, there is hijinx around a birthday party (although now as I'm writing this I realize it may have been hilarity surrounding a wedding anniversary) and I start wondering about my own birthday parties, beginning with my 45th in downtown LA, when the police stopped my friends who were carrying me home. This is what I was told and you believe things when you have blacked out, when there is a gap in your memory, when you don't even have enough raw material to build inside you a bridge, an aqueduct, roads that can contain what your body needs for you to remember.

"Did you have a 4th birthday party?" I ask her.

"Probably," she says.

"I can't remember mine."

*

I look for reasons to not see my parents when I am in LA because I am afraid to watch them die (even though they are sick but not 'deathly' ill, whatever that means—mom still falling at least once a week because she can't find balance post-

stroke; and dad trying to figure out why he can't breathe). They are my parents and I don't know what I'm supposed to do about that other than scream until I run until I have to return to whatever's left of home when it all ends.

But last month I came to LA to see them and to ask them why we left Korea back in '75. I was 5 and we had a white dog and there was family, cousins and uncles and aunts, even a grandmother, and snow and cold and winter (that thing I will never ever wish for again).

We sat down at the table in a triangle: me and mom face to face, dad at the head.

"Mom," I said, trembling. "Why did we leave Korea?" Why did we leave Seoul to move to South America, to Paraguay, to Asunción, to a house on a street I can no longer remember, even if I still remember the wall out front, how I sat on it and watched the flood. I wanted to hear the story again, of the front yard and my father's hands on my arms. It has been so long and the voice in my head narrating has switched to my own and I want Mom's voice to be there again.

"Why did we leave Korea?" she repeated back. She opened the Lock Lock that held the roasted seaweed. She pushed it toward me. She repeated the words again.

Then looked at Dad.

*

I say:

That night he was out drinking with his friends and they were young men becoming older men staying boys and they drank and ate and yelled at the woman in the kitchen and at the waitress and they talked of their future, of how they should stay together no matter what, no matter jobs or family or anybody else's needs to live and breathe and speak, and these boys who were men who were boys spoke of the horizon and of conquerors and of killing and of building and that night while my mother held me til I slept they drank and talked about leaving, about moving, about flying across lands and oceans to a place they'd heard about from strangers.

In this place, someone said, there is a river and in this river, another said, are so many fish that you can just reach in and pick them up.

Let us go, Dad said, and become men there and another said, Yes, let us go there and stay boys.

And my father tells me while sitting at the head of the table that we left Korea because there was a river and he wanted to see it, he wanted to see all the fish in the river in this country he didn't know because he couldn't imagine anything more exciting than that.

My wife says:

What does this have to do with me? What does any of this have to do with me?

In the show, the couple (definitely a wedding anniversary) Airbnb their old apartment, the one that contained so much of their beginning, the awkward and pure romance that began their trajectory.

The party is a ruse, you see, because it's not about the party. It's about recreating what he can't remember, filling in the gaps. There are things that he, she, they, need this memory to be: the cheap wine, the faulty wiring, the youth.

It ends with fire, a flame that breaks out because their bodies don't know how to quite move and exist in what they've created.

So this is my 4th birthday. I will tell you that I remember it now:

We are in Korea. I am reading through the comic books from early morning in the corner by the bookshelf, the closest one to the front windows. I am lying on the floor, my legs crossed tight because I have begun enjoying how it feels when I squeeze my thighs together so close.

The story is about baseball. Whenever they showed a ball flying, they'd draw the ball flattened, like a donut, the flatter the faster the ball was traveling.

I can't tell you what color the characters were. It was before I knew there was something other than what we were, whatever we were — a family of four in a house too big and dark. My father built this for us, for Mom. It was a promise he'd made her when they got married and they moved in with his family, that one day soon he'd build her a house and they could leave.

And he did. He found the plot of land big enough for two houses, one for us, one for Mom's sister's family. And he built them with a yard we shared. I remember we had a second floor, the stairs at the back of the living room that led up to a space I now only remember from past dreams. My cousin's house had a balcony of which I will speak of some other time, although I don't remember ever being inside it.

There was a ghost there too. He built our house around her, the ghost, so she could have a place to sit. Then he built walls around the houses. It would be decades before I would learn who she was and that she'd been waiting for me because she needed me to remember something.

My mother lets me read through the day, read and doze on the floor. Then she tells me to wash up and get ready for my birthday party.

I will tell you that I remember that my family was there—my parents and my big brother, my cousins and uncles and aunts. My grandmother, my father's mother. I will tell you there are also neighbors and people from church and their kids and I will tell you that I am hiding behind my mother's legs, clutching at her apron, because I am terrified of them all.

She made food, my mother. So did my aunt. There were gifts. Nobody got drunk because my father only drank when he was out.

I wore nice clothes. Something I wore was green.

I became four. Then I'd become five. Then we were all gone.

I return to them. When they don't know ahead of time or if I don't call them from downstairs outside asking for them to let me in the building, my parents are shocked whenever they see me at their door. Today I just want to have breakfast with them, have my mom ask me if I want 5 or 6 slices of French toast to go with my apple and whatever other snack they picked up lately from the Mexican grocery store on Central.

How many, she asks.

I hold up my hand, fingers spread out.

Five it is, she says.

My father turns off the TV and comes to the table. He doesn't sit. He hovers above me.

There is something I need you to know, he says. He is trembling.

I look up. He looks so tall right now.

It wasn't about the fish, he says.

Not the fish, I say.

No, he says. There was something else. There was something I really wanted. I wanted to go to Paraguay because there was a tree I wanted to plant.

A tree, I say.

A Korean tree, he says. We use it for medicine. But it takes so long to grow and bloom. I thought if I could just go there and plant that tree, it would grow faster, so much better far away from our winters.

What does that have to do with us, I say, crying. What does any of that have to do with us?