

From the tale in gray [second light after death]

a city not yet in ruins, another city built underneath slowly.
slowly tunnels shuffled through old waterways, loaded trucks
drove around as hands waved through passenger windows. the
sick old great man left the country to the north. he went north
again when another great man from the north country fell.
eldest sister moved with the army to the north. you sat on the
threshold as grandma sat on the old bench. no sound, wrapped
in her thick arms, the boy child slept in fine cotton. a chicken
on the stove. the courtyard a mess of chicken feathers, a few
of which stuck to the washbowl. water smeared. so cold and
strange. when the chicken was cooked whole, you took the gray
and white meat off and sprinkled salt, ginger slice, and minced
chive. the carcass you put back in the pot and cooked for the
rest of the day, then you poured out the stock and poured water
again to cook for another day. meat fell clean off bones that
broke into mulch, soft bones turned so white and strange in
the pot. the big bones remained whole. then the sisters circled
around the table as grandma wrapped the boy child with her
elbows, her hand tore whole white meat into thin threads, her
other hand smoothed over his belly. grandma blew some air onto
the meat threads to cool them down before the boy gulped and
crackled into giggles. the sisters never looked up.

you passed a plate of bones around the table. soft bones cracked
on white teeth, hard bones chewed into bone dust, marrows
sucked and licked clean. red paint peeled off murals, white
characters smeared by rain and fingered dirt of the teachers who
grabbed with their black hands when cornered when pushed
to forsake a world of characters that they did not know how

to read. you were there. school children on the stage in the
auditorium. children jumping up and down, whips in hand,
whips whistling in dry air. children in a square full of more
children. you were there. the teachers were crawling with
broken knees. a line of dogs licked after them. dogs howled.
other dogs joined the march. there was excitement on a wind
that blew away red paint of the other three great men on the
murals. the sick old great man was still there. you were not
there to see his hand wave across northern to southern land.
a brutal wind swept across fields, seeds taken to the full
square of the sick old great man and his school children,
crops fell in husks. you sat on the threshold for the march
to pass for snow to cover everything.

who walks without error. where turns the night to the day.

before backyards were covered in white you stood on the threshold. the sisters gathered in the courtyard, their hands crossed into their sleeves. the parents moved the old bench to the yard and sat there with the sister who was about to move west to join a march of men who needed women to settle down where crops bore little food. you looked between the heads of the sisters over that door left ajar. nobody was looking in the eyes of another, the air thickened with each breath. then the neighborhood committee woman came with flowers and a red book. the parents stood up from the bench and greeted the woman. grandpa took the flowers and the red book and put them on the bench while listening to her, glancing over the faces around her. then everybody went to the front door, you were left on the threshold. the staggered sky sharpened by the eaves funneled more snow into the yard. flowers fell on wind and buried slowly in the snow. the red book flipped some red and black characters onto your eyes which swam and swam still in the refracted snow light.

who is holding whose tongue.

before your unbraided pigtail grew into a ponytail, the
handsome old great man fell. black hair swirled onto streets.
was it the end. was it the end of night or light. school children
returned to the fields. children returned to the school yard.
children in black or navy blue. now their hair grew long and
black. on a snowy day, black hair brightened the day. you were
there on the march, your ponytail flipped from side to side.
they were not talking, school children now to work in factories
now to line up on an endless street in the big square in winter.
an army was crossing the line breaking the line. they armed
themselves with elbows, children with bloated bellies. what
scraped their spine. what stumped their sore feet. they were
lining up and holding on, breath fogged through black hair
waving loose. elbow against elbow, spread legs left foot against
right foot, they were there to keep watch.

what shines after snow. are icicles dropping eave after eave.

in circles you ran around the sealed well, fetching mud and
rice husks. it was not a different season. day grew longer after
winter solstice. duck eggs, green cabbage, and chicken feet
were dumped into the vat, chili paste was scraped around.
then the vat was sealed until the following spring when a sister
was sent to the countryside to feed pigs and throw manure in
rice paddies. you were the only girl child in the house. from
threshold to threshold, your arms grew stronger, skin cracked
and soaked in icy water. by the stove, you warmed hands. the

white cloth was taken down from the higher beam. the bat long
dead, which you buried where the roots of winterberry rotted.
window holes were pasted with newspapers and sticky rice.
a mirror was placed next to the stove, where you brushed teeth
with index finger and salt. your bangs grew even, covering
eyelids. after drying hands on the apron made from rags, you
sat on the old bench. grandpa was taking a walk in the empty
street while grandma sank in her bed in the grand bedroom.
birdless sky, not a sound dropped on the sealed well. then the
newspapers swathed over window holes, daylight dyed in black
characters that you learned to read. between water boiling on
the stove, you forgot cotton days on the bench.

is forgetting coming after longing. are the eyes still watching heaven.

you were carrying the boy child, who carried a wooden horse
and flew it around the sky where his eyes could reach. not
talking or walking, the parents held hands under the old bench
which you could not see. you stood with the boy child. chicken
feet on the table, century eggs sliced, pine leaf pattern flaked,
green liquids leaked from the opened yoke. the family gathered
around the table. light bulb hung still. no wind or rain. so quiet
and strange. they were chewing on broken chicken feet bones.
the sisters long gone to other parts of the country you did not
know. then you glanced sideways to the threshold, the wooden
horse flew off loosened fingers and the boy grabbed with his
greasy hands to tilt your head to look your eyes in his eyes.

who gathers bone dust. what flies away with longing.

the murals were washed and scraped thoroughly. the sick old great man fell. a gang of four slapped face after face. a plane disappeared on the north border. wind carried gunshots and firecracks. snow dust wiggled along the eaves. school children your age now kept house and bore children. the red book stuck to the bottom of the drawer, pages yellowed and turned crispy. calluses spread across fingers, your hands grew thickest in icy water. grandma sank deeper on the bed of woven reeds. beyond that threshold, you heard grandpa asking the postman to send a telegram and wire some money to the sisters sent to other parts of the country. it was not a long time. they never saw the sons-in-law, neither did you. what came differently from a different wind. children returned to school. it was too late for you.

what goes without a care. who walks alone across fields.

the sisters came back. you stood in the courtyard, listening to their pants brushing past the threshold. it was not a different season. winterberry rotted in the soil. the vat empty, smell of chili paste sank to the dark bottom. kettle squeaked on the stove. then a screaming came straight out of her lung, grandma sat up and shooed the sisters to the living room. they were not talking, the sisters around the table. you heated sweet olive wine on the stove. there were enough glasses for everyone. the boy child was moving all the chairs around the table, his wooden horse was left where grandma used to pile newspapers. wind swished on the

newspapers on the window holes. in the shifting light through
the lacquered window, the higher beam cracked, a few wood
threads dropped in the soot. all the eyes were turned toward the
kitchen. you stood, motionless. grandma jumped out of her bed
and pulled out the white cotton she saved from that old city that
wobbled in the mind from that long walk from a familiar city
to a strange city through rice paddies from that old man who
dangled on a higher beam in a house you never saw from the
bottom of the trunk no one ever opened after the parents
settled in this city of gardens and canals where poets washed
their feet until bleached clean and white.

what is left after bones. who keeps night vigil.

on the old bench, grandma stood up and reached for the higher beam. you looked as grandpa and the sisters looked toward the cloth where a fine thread of blood marooned and faded between thin folds. her hands on the ends of the cloth she straightened threw one end around the higher beam where the bat used to squat and yoked the other end around her neck. she was about to kick free of the squeaky bench. they grabbed with tightened hands, the family in sobless cries. you were not with them. by the stove, grandma fainted alongside sisters kneeling in the soot. the boiling kettle shook and shook until there was no water left.

in the soot are you there with them.

you were walking with them. a family in a line. after winter
solstice night grew longer. in a bed covered in white, grandma
looked to the sky from a high small window. it was too late. you
brought her preserved plum with the money you earned fixing
shoelace ends. were the plums still raining on the ali mountains.
were the trees growing in the yard. no one crossed the strait.
the city still there after ruin. a square stood far into winter. the
walk drifted in the mind. in her night sweat, you could not see
her face in the cotton. then you were walking with them, across
the threshold. before woven reeds broke in the bed, she sank.
before night turned day, a creak of bone, a strand of white hair
loosened amid cotton.

who abandons whom. what wakes to the longing for heaven.

in the yard, you hammered off bench legs as a gust of wind
unwrapped braided ponytail. grandpa and the sisters around the
bed, one fell into the grip of another arm. they were carrying
her over the threshold, their bodies meeting her body through
thin cotton. her body on this bed made from the legless bench,
she lay straight, from head to toe, no bloated belly, no sunken
spine. she was there, next to her the black furnace was lit again.
bench legs were thrown in, the white book along with the red
book along with the smeared white cloth, her clothes, eating
bowls, and her shoes. they were crackling in the fire, everything
she needed and did not want to throw away, everything she
used and touched. no child of her boy child had come into the
house yet. they were waiting in a circle and they were watching
fire, the family by her side, then the fire glared back into their
stare. her hand slowly turned cold in your hand.

by the old bench you remembered. are you all becoming stars.

no one left in the house. not the sisters, who walked over the
threshold without turning their backs. not grandpa, who walked
in circles without entering the house. not the boy child, who
was ready to sell the house. as they were watching her body
burn into dust, you smoothed hands over the buckles of that old
bench board. then everything exploded in the fire. you tried to
grab with icy hands and everything was a hand away, another
hand away, withdrawing from a day in full light.

to illuminate. is to live.