Seo-Young Chu

Hwabyung Fragments

1.

A scientist, now fallen, once promised to clone me. You heard about it on the evening news. “The tiger is a holy creature,” he said, “and I will save it from extinction.”

That night I sprang to life from a picture book, the one your father brought from Korea when you were four. My eyes were crossed, my fangs exposed, my fur a puzzle of circles and streaks. My body filled most of the sky. Floating atop Paektusan, the white-headed mountain where your ancestors were born, I cast a shadow two hundred and fifty kilometers long. “D-M-Z,” I sang in your mother’s voice. “Famine. Bomb. Ceasefire. Ecological paradise.” The song was a message, its words in a language you forgot as a child. I danced like a flag, my shadow twisting and turning across a peninsula where once I roamed freely...

...Then you disappeared into the world of consciousness and America and time. And I was turned back into what I had been before you dreamt of me: a giant bell asleep at the bottom of the East Sea.
2.

...original ... not two, as they ...
...but one in number ... long ago ...
... whose unity ... a sphere, as if ...
... the sun itself ... and thus reform ...

... bisection, they ... to heal their wounds...
... memorial ... each other’s arms ...
... entwined within ... from dying of ...
... such yearning, that ... grow into one...
3.

In waters just south of the demilitarized zone, South Korean fishermen discovered a submarine tangled in their nets.

The vessel was towed and docked to the southern naval port of Donghae. When navy frogmen pounded on the hull with hammers, there was no response from inside the craft. They also used sonar scans, but these too revealed no signs of life.

A team of soldiers cut the hatch open, expecting to find the corpses of North Korean crewmembers. “Suicide pact,” they thought. “Most likely the men shot themselves…” But instead they found a chamber piled with dead magnolia flowers. The flowers were brittle and smelled of dust. Their petals crumbled in the soldiers’ hands. Buried underneath the desiccated leaves, blossoms, and broken stems lay a wilderness of animal bones.

The bones were sent to a laboratory in Seoul. Over the following weeks, scientists reconstructed the skeletons of a white-naped crane, a yellow bittern, a whooper swan, a ruddy-breasted drake, a roe deer, a gray-faced green woodpecker, a black bear, a black-capped kingfisher, a golden eagle, a musk deer, and a scaly-sided merganser. There was exactly one of each species. Analyses of the bones revealed that the animals had died of unbearable sadness.
4.

During the winter of 1950, my father and his parents were forced to leave their hometown. For weeks they walked. They were part of a crowd of refugees who had nowhere to go but south.

One day, by pure chance, they ran into my father’s elder brother. He had strayed from his National Guard unit. He begged his father to let him join the rest of the family.

My grandfather longed to protect his eldest son. But he could not break the law. Reluctantly he urged his son to find his unit. So my father’s brother returned to the battlefront.

The family spent several months in the southernmost end of South Korea. In the spring, they were able to return to their hometown. There they waited for my father’s brother.

Finally he arrived. He was gravely ill. Army generals had stolen much of the rice that was meant for the soldiers. Nothing could save him.

Afterwards my grandfather was not the same. He did not sleep. He stopped leaving the house. He wrote an elegy that did not end. Eventually the elegy killed him.
5.

If twins coalesce in the womb at a very early stage of development, what results is a single organism whose body parts contain dissimilar sets of chromosomes. The skin, for example, may be dappled. Or the color of each eye may be unique. Or some strands of hair may be blond while other strands of hair may be red. Or the heart may consist of cells genetically distinct from the cells that constitute the brain. It is said that such an organism will feel as though something is missing from itself. It is said that such an organism will spend the rest of its life aching to reunite with what used to be its other half.
6.

Despite
the symmetry
our bodies share
—birthmark, thumbprint,
chromosomes—
the two of us are not alike.
I am here. You are there.

Diaphanous, your flesh—what flesh
remains—betrays a foreign world:
the grass that you are forced to eat;
deserted cage of ribs; a mesh
of hunger-stricken nerves and veins;
a uterus that never bleeds.

... Why can’t I dig a passage
through the earth from where I live
to where you’re only just surviving.
Why can’t my fasting bring you sustenance.
Why won’t the famine die.

7.
Eat me alive
Eat me entire
Eat me until we are one