

# Notes from a Missing Person

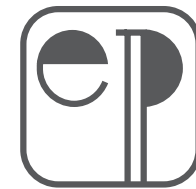
by  
JENNIFER KWON DOBBS



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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#24

## ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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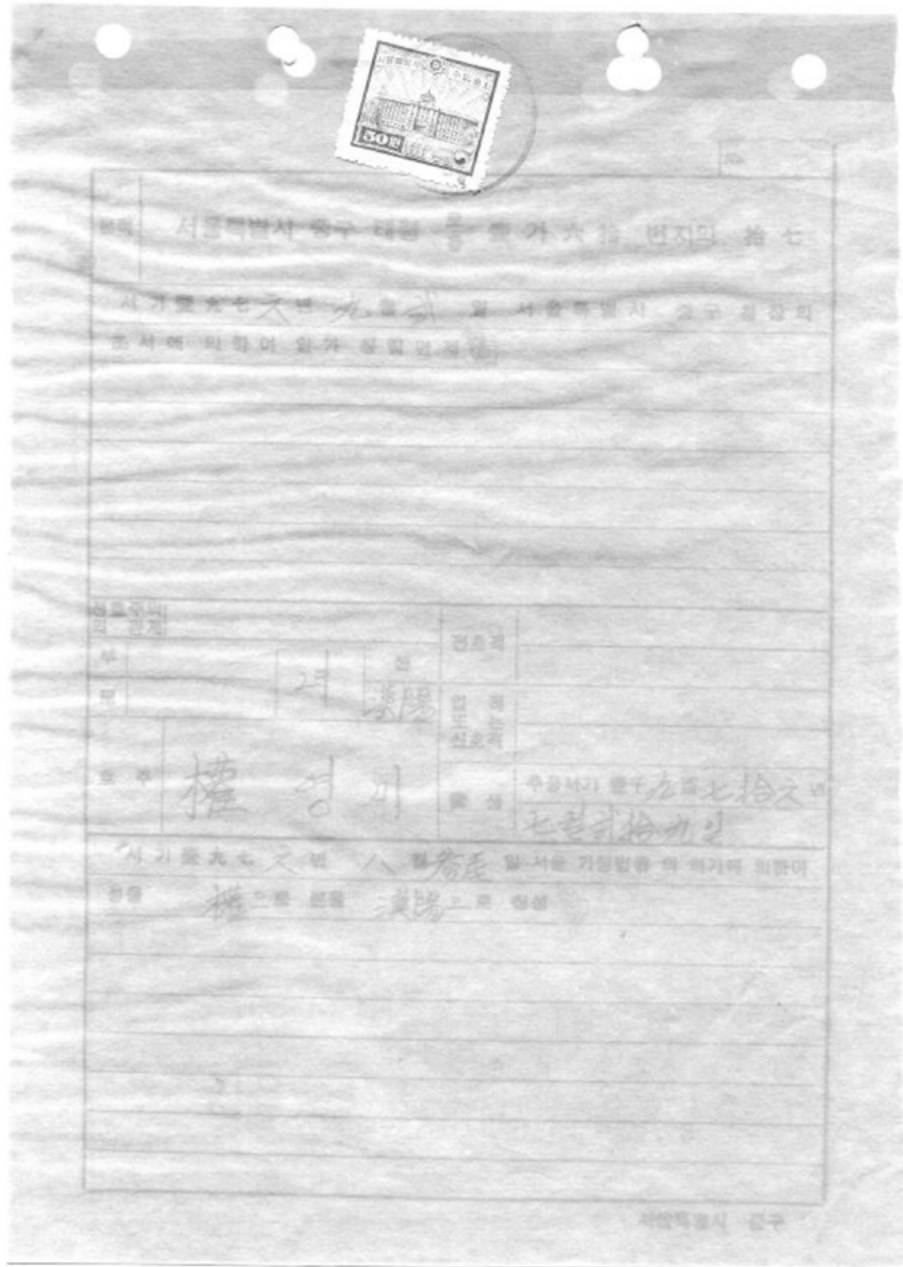
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## INTRODUCTION

After 13 years of trying to locate my Korean family, I faced the awful likelihood of never finding them because of the vast cultural, geographical, legal, linguistic and socioeconomic distances separating us from each other. This chapbook emerges from the urgency to talk back to that void.

As a language of search, these notes seek to suture space and to shift perspective. To search is to affirm and enliven a kinship deadened by forced removal, concealment and forbidding. Whether one reunites or not, one transgresses by way of the dream.

Here is a tentative doorway cut from all the fissures and fracture that I collected while blindfolded.



"now we can join a hot thing"

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

## Ghost Mask

I come from a woman's body just as we all emerge from women's bodies, even in intercountry adoption. When a woman loses her child, another woman gains the child. A correspondence of trans-Pacific letters edits skin, omits teeth, marks shaved scalp n/a, and folds fleshed facts of Mother inside a white sheet. Paper cutout. Fetish work. Ink blossoms in the shape of an orifice, not a mouth nor an opening pressed and drying. I'm breaking open a seal for a document that I'm not supposed to see: Mother's body I can't identify but that created mine.

I'm searching for her body by tracing her shadowy context and plumbing the only archive that I've inherited—my body. To imagine Mother's body is to imagine my own. To inherit her body is to lay claim to mine—a flesh and blood body vulnerable to paper cuts and sorrow—and to remember a truth so obvious that it's embarrassing to say: Mother is not a dead past/

social artifact; she is a person. She is alive even as I write these words, even as you read them.

Mother is missing, so all I have are these words. They're not enough, and yet they're a beginning to narrow distance, to shatter story, to turn the bits over in my hand, and to rename each one in an attempt to find her. If I slice my thumb, I bleed. If I smear our blood on the page, am I writing our presence together? Here's my thumbprint and its name registered and numbered. Red flakes for a field underneath. Leaflets dropped from the sky. More napalm than in Vietnam. Snow during a Swedish winter. She is not here. I can't write my way to Mother. She is not this page.

Child alone in fallout / Steady drift of cinder /  
Crimson hoods on the forest floor

This page is the Korean color of death—white hemp stitched into 8.5 x 11. I'm cutting through this rough cloth laid across Mother's form, still and bloodless, set out on a wooden workman's bench to see it as *it*, not she. Stained rags cast aside. Turpentine. The body bleeds, doesn't it? The body bruises and welts its struggles to heal—a silent speech focusing all its inner resources on damage. Mother's form, drained of blood underneath tools and dictionaries, lengthens in a lithium lamp's glare and does not breathe. Peel back

the sheet. Find citations—newspaper strips, sawdust, hay, database notes—stacked and glued into a torso, hips, thighs, arms, shoulders, angles of a mermaid piñata strung up for a birthday.

A ghost-masked child swings his arms trying to find the correct direction. He's afraid to strike and to break what he can't see. Hush. Let this fetish sway toward you.

## To Be Taped to Windows of Light

Directions: cut into strips, and then slice syntax. Affix to a glass pane with Scotch Tape during the brightest part of the day. Flare as white space. Love, walk away. Walk away, language like the smallest negligent gesture.

In the agency's kitchen, I wash breakfast plates in the sink. A middle-aged couple enters and says to each other, "She must be one of the birth mothers. Look at how young she is."

At Gyeongbokgung Palace, I try to buy a college-student ticket and lie about my age. "You're not 25," says the cashier, "12,000 won please."

I try but can't help myself. Not even the *halmeoni*, squatting in Biwon Garden, resembles me.

"*J'ai vingt-cinq ans*," I say at the Auguste Rodin Museum near Hôtel des Invalides and smile at the cashier who writes his number on my ticket stub.

In the dorm room, I unwrap the gift box the president presented to me while saying, "I held you when you were a baby and prayed tearfully." I examine a blue hand towel embroidered with the agency's name in white.

I shut off the water and turn around to stare at the couple. Stunned, they pick up some napkins and leave. All night, I hear babies crying upstairs in the infant ward. Unable to sleep, I walk up and down the stairwell. From the fifth floor, I see a birth mother waiting for the elevator. She holds her heavy stomach in her arms.

"I've volunteered to hold the babies," an adoptive mother of adult twins tells me over breakfast. "The nurses say that after the babies are born they need touch to feel safe."

China recently placed limits on the maximum age of prospective adoptive parents. "It's unfair," she says, "My husband's a lawyer in Manhattan. We have so much to give."



Listening to the babies cry, my skin tingles, as if no one has touched me for a very long time.

After returning from Gyeongbokgung Palace, I notice the maid has cleaned my room and taken the towel the president gave to me.

Over lunch, the president tells the Kansas minister visiting with his adoptive daughters, "Jennifer is a Harvard professor." Embarrassed, I say nothing, not wanting to shame him.

Ms. Lee hangs up the phone and collects my birth documents while I'm reading them. Lunch is ready, and the president is waiting.

The birth mother is older and taller than me, and we both have insomnia. We watch each other pass through sliding metal doors.

We wait in the agency's lobby. His family arrives early to take him to lunch. "I'm afraid that they're going to make me fat," he says. I'm so jealous I cover my mouth.

Before I left for Korea, I meditated on my ancestors and felt them say, "We will walk with you."

"Why are you able to cook Korean food?" the adoptive mother from Texas asks me. I ignore her question and offer her some kimchi bokumbap.

In the outdoor gallery, I'm amazed by Rodin's artistic process from sketch to cast to flame.

"We have much to give," she says, "I could've taught that little girl how to eat with chopsticks."

I don't want anyone to touch me, not even my fiancé who joked that this was our honeymoon before our September wedding.

My fiancé and I stand behind the president, who sits in front of us. Video credits play in the background while the secretary counts, "Hana, ddul, set!" In the photo, my eyes are closed.

My birth father and mother must be at least 60 years old—I guess.

The agency office won't let me copy or photograph my documents. I lock myself in the bathroom while my fiancé whispers through the door, "You're a writer, remember? Describe what you see."

Two Polaroid shots—my adoptive father and mother each in their twenties—clipped to a report: “Susan is artistic. She likes to knit and paint. Danny is hardworking.”

“Not only could I have taught her how to use chopsticks, I know Korean,” she says, pouring soy sauce on my cooking.

His family arrives in a white van. Hugging him, his mother pokes him in the ribs and shakes her head. His father waits in the driver’s seat.

The orphanage didn’t burn down, a foster mother took care of me in Seoul, and Ms. Lee is translating so quickly I can’t hear all her words nor read my scrawled notes.

Of course I remember nothing. “Then how are you Korean?” she asks, leaving most of the food on her plate.

Lying in bed and staring at walls, I imagine the birth mothers, living on the floor above, do the same, or maybe I’m vengeful.

The president says to my fiancé, “I’m very proud of her. She has grown up to be a fine woman.”

“I do remember,” I lie to the adoptive mother. “We all do in some way.”

## Recipe

First I hand mix the thinly sliced steak with honey, soy sauce, garlic, sesame oil, black pepper and salt while practicing how to say their Korean names: golgi, manul, ganjang, hoochu, sesame oil. How do you say sesame oil? What is salt? As I forget, my hands squeeze and fold the marinade into meat. What is honey? Is this the right texture?

As the taste of my hands works the mixture together inside the blue plastic bowl, my tongue won't take in the flavors. Tongue requires boiling then cooling in ice water before unsheathing it to get to the tender flesh. Dark and stiff, tongue needs to be shredded into strips or else it's chewy. That's what I read anyway.

Yet I'm remembering the sweet smoke of a Hongdae restaurant, adoptee friends shouting "Geonbae!" and shooting soju, bulgolgi spread like a blackening skirt because no one's paying attention, the scowling

ajumma running over with scissors and tongs. Hungry, I watch her balance, cut and arrange the strips, as if her hands know the weight of the meat, the intensity of the fire; or she's annoyed that we're drunk and burning our food because we don't know what to do. We're trying.

We keep drinking. We can't feed ourselves. We can't ask for more perilla leaves, lettuce or that sauce made out of red pepper paste and beans. How do you say perilla leaves? I've run out, but I keep eating anyway in that fluorescent-lit dining room surrounded by strangers calling out orders, whose Korean words collide and point at us while we snap pics of little metal plates arranged on our table. Will I ever eat like this again? I want to remember the correct taste.

In the kitchen making dinner for myself where I eat alone, I wrap each word with my tongue trying to swallow it to make it my own. Each word has its own shape and texture. I massage the meat inside of me, but it's stiff and dark. I want to boil words into it, tenderize it with questions—What is ip? What is ko?—pull the dull gray off, and excise the gristle. Now I've confused the word for mouth with the shape of the mouth. What is the correct way to serve meat? In which order do you place the dishes on the table to share with your family. How do you ask them to sit down and eat?

It should be so simple, but how do I say “family”? How do I summon them? I just want to sit down and eat with my family. I am always asking someone to help me eat. I am always pointing to my mouth and sighing, even as my hands create something for a stranger to read.

## [Aperture]

I’m supposed to seduce you with an illuminated image so that you’ll chase after fragrance.

To say this is to show embarrassment. You want the certitude of beginning—my mother’s hands tracing long lines and descending a mountain.

Like this.

Language so certain no one translates our blood and flesh or the names we call one another—  
omma, appa, dongsang, unni, ajossi, ajumma, halmeoni, harabeoji—urging each other to eat well.

No one questions whether we have the right to love each other and to be together.

No one charges us money per hour to translate my jerry-rigged mouth.

Omama, are you healthy? Does your body hurt? (Can someone ask my mother for me? I don't know the words.)

No one theorizes away my right to ask these questions in a language I read and speak, a language my mother doesn't understand.

How can I translate for her? How can I translate for you when I can't for myself?

English pursuing the verb, which holds the relationship: -ida, -yo, -ee/ya

Juseyo. Juseyo. Give me. Give me. I show courtesy by smiling and softening my eyes.

A miming of hands and mouths swinging open unlatched. The only language we share is our flesh. I pull up my eyelid corners for the image that devours my face. I bury it in my mother's hands. My hair spills across her lap.

Language so vulnerable that we must search for translators and so private that we're shamed by their listening.

Each word I write distances Omama further just as I try to bring her closer and closer.

My mother is missing. I am missing. We're separated, yet my body ages in her image. Her body grows younger in mine.

In her image, I want to touch myself as no one can touch me to find her, as no one can touch me—gently and with the hunger of a child searching and writing her mother's body from what she knows of her own.

Here are my uneven breasts, empty womb, thighs wrinkled and stretch-marked.

I'm not supposed to say this because the author has no intentions; the text writes itself as the reader activates the page with her eyes. Can we dispose of these ceremonies and be honest with each other?

I just want to find my mother. If you know where she is, please send me a message at [ym.kwon729@gmail.com](mailto:ym.kwon729@gmail.com).

Omama, oddi ishimnika? Mother, where are you?

You reading this, if you know where my mother is, please tell me. Please tell me if she is sick, hungry or in pain.

Do we need language to feed our parents or to give them medicine if they are ill?

I don't need to know the word for "blanket" to put a blanket across my mother's body or the word for "water" to pour her a glass.

I need these words because I'm trying to create her here on this page, but I don't want this page.

This is not a beginning though you must read left to right bowing your head. You must descend headfirst hurling toward the ground.

Like this.

Your eyes journeying toward bodies and their proper names.

Omma, I'm sorry if my words shame us. This page is my last resort, which is the cruelest constraint.

## Fetish Mothers

"For a child adopted as a baby, the cultural heritage of one's birth mother can only be a dead past detached from one's actual lived experience."

—Vincent J. Cheng, *Inauthentic*

To search for Mother's body is to listen with a poet's attention that can rub across the word's surfaces, to listen for a pulse, not the shuffling of documents. Mother, you sit across from a social worker—a woman who is your same age—flipping through pages and indicating where you should sign. You're heavy with me during your sixth month of pregnancy, leaning slightly backward because your lower back aches. The social worker, maybe a mother herself, disassociates from the fact that your bodies, sitting so close to each other, can do the same work: your pen following the social worker's finger indicating where you should leave your mark, your pen pointing to where the social worker flagged for your signature.

Your bodies are so close to each other that they become one body linked through paper—one that gives and one that takes away. Above you, Jesus points to his thorn-crowned heart and looks beyond the frame's plastic edge. On the social worker's desk, a wedding photo and a little boy laughing and running toward the camera. His right hand holds a red-stitched baseball. The social worker, anxious to return home, checks the paperwork and clips it inside a brown folder marked with a case number. She puts her hand on your shoulder to reassure you. You lean against a mother who wants to rush home to her child in Samsong-dong and who doesn't see you as a mother. You blur together—one taking/one giving me away.

What proof do I have that this is your story? I can only see the space. Here's a round black table, a set of gray office chairs upholstered in the Danish functional style. Here's a tissue box, a beige telephone with a red button to place a call on hold. Here are the fluorescent lights. I can hear typing next door. White industrial linoleum flecked with multi-colored chips doesn't muffle noise. Color portraits of joyful adoptive parents show mothers what they can't provide. Tan metal file cabinets. A water cooler dispenses hot and cold. Maxim coffee sticks, Styrofoam cups, English tea.

I can see the conversations around this table, the frayed gray fabric, split orange foam, the cooler's cloudy plastic, and water damage stains on the ceiling because the building was hastily constructed (as were all offices during the '70s). You would've been childbearing age—anywhere from 18 to 45—and capable of working in one of many light-industrial factories constructed during Park Chung Hee's regime, when South Korea engineered its economic miracle on your back leaning over a steady conveyor belt of T-shirts, tennis shoes, toys, toothbrushes, combs and plastic mirrors crated for export. Your hands rush to keep up with the manufacturing speedway toward South Korea's revolution from an agriculture-based nation to an economic tiger. You're a farmer's daughter from Jeolla-do or Gangwon-do, or maybe one of Seoul's own simply wanting to earn some money for family back home still squatting in an unheated room to shower with a hose. So when the social worker asks if you would sign here, you watch your hand move knowing that you will say nothing to your father or mother who take the money to buy food and encourage you to eat well.

You eat in silence that night. You feed us both with your grief.

What am I saying? I can only describe a researched context, a slanted shadow. I can only

speculate and dramatize because I can't find you. Is this a fetish or a document of desire? This is not your body. This is not mine. This is my tongue—meat flapping inside my crushed mouth. The military spam/variety meats/mad-cow/neo-liberal trade that Korea imports from the U.S. ends up in budae jigae, a stew of scraps.

\_\_\_\_ 님이 가족찾기 하고 있는 중인데 혹시 (입양) 서류를 볼 수 있을까요?

\_\_\_\_ 님이 가족찾기 하고 있는 중이라 자기 서류를 보고 싶은데 갖고 있나요?

Can we see \_\_\_\_ documents? Do you have \_\_\_\_ documents?

I don't want constellations.

Which story is mine? Which story is yours?

Mapping and re-centering.

My documents are your documents, aren't they? The words that took me from you had to admit first that I belonged to you (that you're woman's flesh, not a social artifact) even as they erased your name. I don't know your name. I only know this body that came from yours. I only know this page. I try to rewrite this language that

took my body away from your body, knowing that I will only clear this page of fetishes you would never use for yourself: birth mother, gift giver, social artifact, dead memory, trace, smear, signature, \_\_\_\_, n/a, unknown, even mother. No, Omoni, you wouldn't have been dressed like these, and if I push through your skirts, I find blankness, this smoothness that is not your face.

★

Birth mother, gift giver, social artifact, dead memory, trace, smear, signature, \_\_\_\_, n/a, unknown, even mother. What is the point of calling you such names and pronouncing you a lost or separated part, if not to drain our bodies of blood?

We do not stand across the DMZ at Panmunjeom bussed in for goodwill sunshine—lucky ticket holders drawn from the lottery mass of halmeonideul and harabeojideul who are desperate to see their parents before either one of them dies. To die with some relief, that is not our cause although we're also fighting time. I'm 33 years old and still able to bear a child, your grandchild. Can I even speak for you when it comes to our separation, your distance from those who sleep in my body? I can only talk around you, overlapping myself. Don't daughters do this when they talk about their mothers?



When my mom was pregnant with me, she didn't have nausea.

My mother's bone marrow matched mine.

It's funny how we both worry about details! Just the other day, mom called—

I see your face—the flicker of you as I have come to know you—in the mothers at Ae Ran Won, the mothers who are heavy and tired walking up the stairwells of Dong Bang. In the footage reels that I have watched of *Achim Madang*, I have witnessed a mother, half the height of a grown man, grab him and press his foreheads to her neck. The mother holds her son with a fierceness that can't be love, and yet it's a feeling that refuses to let go even though the television host interrupts to try to get the mother to separate for the interview. The camera circles to zoom in for the mother's eyes, the man's eyes who do not recognize this woman who is his mother stroking his face and refusing to share this moment for which she has hungered. The camera tightens the shot to document the mother locking her son's face against her chest perhaps in protection. Music. Clapping. Strangers watch, entertained.

Commercial break: 처음처럼

Sitting around a red plastic table, four students shoot Chamisul soju. Hongdae pulses and basses in the background. It's their first time, and they're living it up!

The brown-haired girl in a pale Burberry top will actually fall in love.

How is hope—this blood call—used against us?

What is the difference between this television show and this smear on the page, Omoni? Both of them shame us, yes? Yet you can't read this page, can you? I'm torn from your gaze. What kind of freedom is this not to be able to ask if you're hungry? Or not to ask at all but set down a plate of cut pears that you can find after a good sleep?

★

Omoni, they forced your mind to desert your body—your child to desert your body—in that removal someone else called an act of love. Yet love does not give life away. It gives life a way. It gives, and it gives. Your mind accepted your body as a vacancy, verdant yet razed to clear a way that no one celebrated or wept for. Did they know of your body emptied and discharged from the hospital, your breasts aching with milk to

nourish your child, your back carrying your child to the orphanage, or your legs folded underneath your body bent forward in shame? Did they know how good your body was to deliver such a healthy child? (Receiving nations praise Korea for its perfect, beautiful infants.) Did they know of your body ruptured and stitched lying in the hospital bed connected to a monitor? Your body, stretch-marked and sagging where I had grown, climbs Dobongsan, Bukhansan or Gwanaksan to see this vacancy inside you cupping Seoul bulldozing itself to rebuild as quickly as possible, straining against three mountains. Neon spills, honks, drinks and advertises global progress: Learn English! Harvard English Institute. The English Language Academy. English Now! Learn forgetfulness: these words whirl, grinding against your arms and face, while across the ocean, someone is holding your child, crying in happiness in a language that your child is scared of. Someone is lighting a candle a year later for your child's adoption day. Your child is laughing. Someone is telling your child that you gave him away because you loved him so much. And you become a "birth mother" who someone says loved so deeply that you gave him to her to love.

★

Even in the act of deconstruction, there's a violence that siphons from your body, which my friend

Kit Myers says is "the always becoming sign of 'family' that is instituted by the trace." Even in the word "family" there's your specter breathing through. This slashing away from your signifying body—on your body—constitutes Frederic Jameson's radical break "with another moment of socioeconomic organization and cultural and aesthetic orientation. [Your body] is defined against what it is not, against conditions which no longer prevail or are somehow irrelevant." What is irrelevant, Omoni, and what is not? Who decides context? Who empties the sign, draining it of reproductive power rerouted to power some overseas simulacrum? Disney World. It's a small world after all? It's a beautiful child. It's not your child.

Omoni, I was never as strong as you. I was 25 years old, in love with a young man who wanted your grandchild but feared providing for him. We were both students. We were poor and young. We named him Juan Alejandro. *Él era tres meses en mi matriz*. I know because, as I lay on my back while the masked doctor pulled off his gloves sighing, "I don't think I got it all" to the nurse who slathered jelly on my stomach and rubbed a paddle across it for the ultrasound, I thought of you letting go of me in the orphanage/shelter/hospital/alley/bedroom. I thought of you lying on your back, your legs spread, and your young body cold on a flat surface.

In that moment, I was your body struggling with its own possibility opened wide for instruments. "No, there's still more. See," said the nurse while AM radio played. (Patients were supposed to be asleep. I drank orange juice that morning not knowing I couldn't take the anesthesia afterward.) She swiveled the monitor toward the doctor who turned away from my parted thighs to see the green pixels pulsing in the black screen. He untied his mask and took a break. The nurse put down the paddle and walked after him. I lay on the table with the image of that vacancy I had chosen and the trace—green static in void—still moving there in my body, and felt that darkness as separation from you, me, him. The three of us lay there together connected by our bodies, lost to emptiness only a woman's body can suffer, the three of us connected by loss reaching across three generations.

★

He came back, strapped on his mask, and leaned in siphoning. I wanted him to stop, but I was afraid. I couldn't say no. I said no. I said yes. I couldn't change my mind. I wanted to change my mind. I couldn't stop the machinery, couldn't stop the procedure for which I paid, Omoni.

You never gave money. No one paid you. In Korea, they pay bad women who derail economic progress with shame, not cash. Maybe you were a student, a divorcé with runs in her stockings, an irregular worker punching keys to ring up blue sponges, or a migrant stripping off plastic gloves after the assembly line belt whirrs to a stop. Maybe you were a teenager cramming for a chemistry exam or walking arm-and-arm with your girlfriends, passing Yongsan's kijichon where the yuribang women lean against glass. Their pink glittery lips pressing hot O, pale arms and legs spreading X.

You definitely were because you gave me life; yet you lie beyond narration though others like to conceptualize you as averted damage, the what-could've-been-had-we-not-chosen-to-adopt, incapable child birthing a helpless child. I was saved from your body. Assimilation begins by fearing your body (my Korean woman's body), by carving trauma on it, a talk-story rerouting our roots toward confusion and shame. Who has the right to imagine your body away from my body? It's not your body, I fear, but this imagination saying to me before I learned how to read:

"You know what a martini is?" says a lieutenant from Akron, Ohio.

"Shaken," my mother giggles, swinging her legs.  
"No stir."

The lieutenant pinches my mother on the cheek and puts his arm around her. Later that night after last call, he pushes a \$10 bill into her hand and licks her ear.

"Stir is better. Let's go."

Mother giggles, rolls the bill up, and then slides it into her shoe.

★

What is this reality that is always a phantom, a ghost that's neither an absence nor presence, neither flesh nor shadow? It's a fiction that haunts where the body should've been, a story that strikes out for a body with memory's force:

"Where are you from?" asks my best friend's sister, the basketball team's homecoming queen. She sits down on the den's shag floor and opens her French manicure set.

"My mother's from Korea, and my father is an American soldier," I say.

"Really?" My best friend's sister shakes a jar of angel kiss and applies a thin coat in two thick strokes on her left thumbnail.

"I'm a bastard," I say, trying to copy her technique with Blue #52 on my best friend's toes.

She continues to paint. "That's not true. Only boys can be bastards."

"Korean girls can be bastards." I slide the brush against the bottle's edge.

"Whatever," she says. "That's not Katie's color."

Another attempt:

Surrounded by sons, Mother is dying of cancer and asking for a daughter who she could not afford to keep. Her eldest son holds her hand. She describes walking up the hill to the orphanage's gate, the wet grass and mud, a dull ache in her shoulder as she searched for dry ground on which to set her child down, and her child waking up crying as if she knew that Mother was leaving her in the best way Mother knew how.

Switch off the cameras. Burn the scripts. Unplug. Black out.

What are these stories except tight shot reiterations looping with fresh props, wheeled-in sets, makeup, and redesigned lighting? A dubbed voice chases after a flamingo. What of the players who peel off your face—almond skin floating in saline solution, holes where breath and sight pierce through? Towels stained with flesh-colored cream, eyelashes dropped in a wastebasket—all these are a technology of story re-inventing and re-inventing. No wonder the Material Girl adopted twice from Malawi, though the second time she fought a higher court to overturn child-protection laws so that she could take Chifundo away from Chifundo's father, James Kambewa, a domestic worker living in Blantyre, who learned from the media blitz that his daughter was alive.

★

"This 1.1 birth rate is our revenge," says Ji-Young, "because we're treated so badly."

★

At Duri Home, Omoni, you're taught to ritualize loss by sewing selvages and pleating skirts for first-birthday clothes to accompany your baby overseas. This is not a gift to the adopters. It's your gift to your child so that she will remember you. I asked the mothers, and that's what they said about their labor. This body, this child, of work belongs to you. It's a struggle to own what is yours beyond, as Hagen Koo says, "the dominant image of Asian female factory workers," which "is one of docility, passivity, transitory commitment to industrial work, and lack of interest in union activism." You're imagined as filial daughters/filial workers measuring blue cloth for hanbok: "Young female workers in the export sector," who were "controlled not only by the capitalist system but also by the patriarchal culture that had been reproduced in the industrial organization." Young women lean over gray Singer sewing machines, pumping trundles with their left feet, feeding red pant legs under the presser foot. This is also a language—love shows in details—measuring trim, hemming jackets for crisp collars and green sleeves. The rusted bobbin catches, and you pause to rethread, licking the edge to spear through the needle's eye. You whisper to the other omonideul that you're tired. (They've heard this before.) You can't work much longer. (They've heard this before.) Loss is a labor that's taking your child. The omonideul pause, listening.

Omonideul, what if you stand up like you did at Dongil Y. H. Company on July 25<sup>th</sup>, with only your bodies against the dark blue uniforms and full riot gear? What if you link arms together to form a line between women carrying briefcases and your babies lying in plastic crates? What if before such violence, you remove your clothes and begin singing, your bodies swaying back and forth, salt and sweat, hair and wrinkles, your legs and arms wrapped together as one large embrace? To take your babies is to lay hands on your bodies and to pull apart your singing. What if you refuse to work and so force the dark uniforms to manhandle your bodies to show the violence that they ask you to do to yourselves? They use your love against you to take your children. As one omoni said to me, "They tell us we aren't good enough to raise our children. We can't provide them with private English lessons. How will our children grow up to succeed?"

★

Omoni arm / 어머니의 팔 / Omoni legs / 어머니의 다리 / Omoni wrists / 어머니의 손목 / Omoni palms and shoulders / 어머니의 손바닥과 어깨뼈 / Omoni back and waist / 어머니의 등과 허리 / Omoni thumb, cheek, ears and breasts / 어머니의 엄지 손가락, 볼, 귀와 가슴 / Omoni hipbone, eyes and neck / 어머니의 관골, 눈과 목 / Omoni feet / 어머니의 발 / Omoni lips / 어머니의 입술

★

Your name is Shin Sun Mee, Lee Eun Hae, Kim Ok Shim, Kwon Joo Ae. Your name is Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Grace and Hopeful Justice. I can recite your name's shape, which is not your name or its context. I can listen around, above and below it to draw an outline to hold in my mouth.

Is this a word—sand sliding through a sieve?

Is this your body—sand assuming a vase's shape?

A mother's fate is in her child's body. As her child matures, a mother ages. Sand pours from one glass to another to measure an hour; one empties while another contains more possibility. A body emerges from another, so a body might emerge from it. A body gives, so another may give. This is how narrative works: time organized by causality's inner logic. Yet we were torn from one another, Omoni. I hear scraping whenever I say what's not your name.

I hear tanks rumble when I mispronounce Korean. I hear strafing when my eyes stop and fall mid-sentence, shocked and unable to get up. I see your

mud-caked hand cover my hand as I steady the Korean language book. Your face coughs in the mirror as I attempt to mimic the shape: 어머니의 입술 grimaces, sucks in its breath, and looks away.

★

How to be a good daughter to a mother who is not a ghost? If you were dead, I would know what to do: lay out a chesa table with soju, fruit and rice cakes. Stay up for three days drinking and singing with relatives. Make sure you never go hungry. Make sure you don't wander begging strangers for food.

★

Who are these strangers who tell me I have no right to my omoni's body? These unashamed strangers who know their mothers' names and begrudge me mine?

★

Omoni, are you allowed to imagine me, or must you also turn to context out of need? Perhaps all you're allowed is me so that fear limits context—the day I was born, the memory of my body sliding out of yours, pink

scars and lines my body wrote on yours that time fades? What sections of your memory do guards preside over, holding a nickel flashlight and a set of keys, opening bins and tossing files? The rattling in your head warns. I hear it too in the slow churn of helicopters preparing to take off, telephone line to headquarters crackling, underground drills boring for passageways that infantry could march through, police stacking shields for bus transport, basement pipes knocking while an ajossi buckles yet refuses to provide intelligence, the KCIA applying techniques learned from the CIA to compel an alleged traitor's conversion, a Parker pen drops onto tile, a map shudders, an omoni begs her eldest 아들 to confess because she and his younger brother are hungry, their stomachs knock and quiver, batons bang against bars to wake inmates who have been imprisoned on suspicion, and we're not supposed to know this, are we?

We're not supposed to recognize each another as family, yet this identification is embedded in our language. When we call out to strangers—unni, nuna, ajossi, halmeoni and harabeoji—we're one family, one Korea despite distance, difference in blood ties, and destruction of geographies and names. They say네 in recognition, continuing their work without pause. An ajossi hands me change as I gather my bags and leave his cab. An unni nods toward where the napkins are, her

fingers rolling kim bap and dotting the kim with water. Yet these are names for strangers or distant relatives. Omoni, what of the ruptured intimacy between us? What paper has disfigured our language such that we're unable to summon each other with our proper names from across a great divide? How must I break English so that you might recognize me? What parallel latitude cuts across our imaginations beginning with our bodies and what we can embody? If I never know your name, I will at least know the name that as your daughter I should call you—엄마, not mother, not my mother—because I have learned this name for myself. I am 내 딸, not somebody's daughter nor a gift that someone gave away.

To know this name is to embody relationships from which I have been estranged, to deregulate loves that I've been institutionally prevented from knowing and inheriting. This is another name for adoption if I look for bodies connected through your body, 엄마, which cluster together in my limbs, hair, nails and teeth, my ip and ko. This mouth is wae-harabeoji. This nose is jin-halmeoni. These eyes are yours. This forehead is samchon. These ears are shared by nam dongsaeng and unni. These words are our silences and speak only for me, and yet, on this page, I can press my body to the ground in five directions with my body as the center. I can reach across distances that nations insist border

us from each other. I can embrace you in forms that no one has imagined before or said because of shame. Hear this rattle? It's the call of bones to bones, muscles and tendons thrumming, the work of intestines and liver purifying the words to their cleanest elements to carry our singing across time and space. It's love. It's possibility. It's our most intimate speech.



## [Thread]

>  
> I'm K—. Can you remember?  
> ...  
>  
> May I ask...it must be very careful to say...but  
>  
> ...frankly to say...yesterday I received a phone call  
from a woman...  
> she said her very said story...she lost her daughter at  
the same period you said you were sent  
> to an institution in Wonju.  
>  
> ...but she has nothing to prove or verify anything  
about her lost daughter...  
>  
> she said more...but at this point, I think, it's not proper  
to write about that.  
>  
> ...anyhow...I should ask if you have tested your DNA.

>  
> She has done it. She said she will send it to me...  
>  
> So, I should say, you'd better do it also.  
>  
> I think it will be useful someday...that's all I'd like to  
say now...  
>  
> ...If I were you, I'll test my DNA with not so much  
hope, but strong hope that it will be useful  
> in near future.  
> ...  
>  
> I'm looking forward to here from you soon  
>

## Myths to Have a Good Time

FSH 76. I'm 35 years old. To avoid osteoporosis and some forms of cancer, I'll need to wear a patch and take progesterone everyday until I'm 50.

While listening to my doctor, I'm looking through my kitchen window to the backyard. The lilacs and day lilies are blooming. When my husband and I bought this ranch-style house four years ago, we loved its brick patio, where we imagined abendbrot with our child—"Do you want to eat inside or outside?" The back porch's roof provides just enough shade for gochujang to ripen inside clay onggi during the summer.

My doctor says she's sorry.

Last year in Seoul, my mother and I reunited after she read my story in an online newspaper. For seven years, Omma searched for me after finding out through family gossip the name of the orphanage where my grand

aunt had taken me without her permission. I was two weeks old.

My name is Jennifer. My name is Jennifer Synobia. My name is Kwon Young Mee. My name is case #1314. My name is Soo Jin. Omma named me for the monsoon rain, a northern pine mountain facing her window overlooking summer cornfields. She wasn't the prostitute who my adoptive mother said had fallen in love with a G. I. and who loved me so much that she chose for me "a better life." Instead, she belonged to the high school traditional dance troupe and enjoyed studying. After graduation, she moved to Seoul to work in Namdaemun Market while her older brother attended basic training. She sent money home to her parents, three younger sisters and brother. Her hair fell past her waist. She was the school beauty, which was why Appa lingered inside the cramped dress shop pretending to look for a blouse that November evening. Just one drink. Just one dance. Just one. Just one. Just once.

My doctor reassures me. There's adoption or something—sort of like science fiction—called egg donorship. I'm healthy and could carry a baby. She can recommend someone. I'm remembering summers and winters in Korea; my transnational search, research and advocacy; love and fighting for love; arriving and going.

Reuniting in Paris Baguette, Omma embraced me with such ferocity; my body didn't belong to me. Then she examined my hands matching hers to mine, the curves of our ears and collarbones. She pulled my socks off and recognized the shapes of my toes. She rolled up my sleeves looking for a blue spot, the bruise where my right shoulder scraped. I was born breech in the morning after two nights of labor in my cousin's house.

On the phone, my cousin said she washed me. Omma breastfed me. Unni said she was there when the car pulled into the gravel driveway. She was just a girl. She couldn't stop my grand aunt from lifting me from the yo and blankets. So she just watched Omma—still weak despite eating seaweed soup—rush out of the backroom as Como Halmoni slid into the passenger's seat. (Her eldest son kept the engine running.) After Como Halmoni's daughter told Unni the orphanage's name in secret, Unni called Omma, and they visited the director who didn't tell them about the orphanage's ties to Eastern Social Welfare Society, which had forwarded me on to Dillon Adoption Agency's office in Oklahoma.

They didn't know that my adoptive mother had tried to conceive for five years, that her husband had served in Vietnam just like Omma's eldest brother, that my adoptive father agreed to a Korean adoption in part because he couldn't imagine loving a Vietnamese child,

or that my adoptive parents borrowed money for the agency fees from my adoptive grandmother, whose deceased husband had fought in the Korean War. He trained sharpshooters who tracked Koreans in white clothes. The Japanese said communists always wore white.

How to get rid of the bitter flavor? I'm learning the taste of Omma's hands, the taste of mine making baechu kimchi. I've developed my own recipe based on trial and error and remembering Omma sealing brined cabbage leaves with raw seafood and red pepper paste and then folding them into parcels.

I know one of Wae Harabeoji's stories. I tell it to my nine year old choka, who reads at a fifth grade level. My younger brother turns down the radio so that he can also listen. Still, my choka is too young to understand distances—how these few sentences about his great-grandfather's life took 13 years of transnational searching to find, crossing the ocean and passing through translation to this moment in which we're riding together in his father's truck. How could he understand? He thinks this story is just a story, and, in a way, he's right.

Reunion wasn't supposed to be like this. I waited to have a child because I wanted my child to have Korean

grandparents, to be safe from the chaos of not knowing our ancestors. After Omma and I met in the café, we went to her apartment, and she cooked for me. She sang to me. She rubbed my back while I cried. She styled my hair and told me I had my father's eyes.

A young woman in her twenties receives between \$5,000 and \$12,000 from a reproductive medical center for her eggs, and possibly ten times more if she responds to a private ad. She will take powerful drugs that might harm her future fertility in order to stimulate her egg production to give "the gift of a child" to an infertile woman with money. In some states, her eggs might be used for medical research without her knowledge.

I didn't know if I wanted a child. I wanted a child. At the root of both truths was an abiding fear—my child turning to me and asking, "Where do we come from?" My child's face a kind of mirror like a ghost trapped in a surface and shimmering. I wasn't ready to release the ghost so soon, but the body has its own answers.

The body has its own logic. Premature ovarian failure is an autoimmune disease. The body attacks itself for no reason. The body can't recognize itself and heal.

My adoptive mother's name resembles the name Omma gave me. 수진 typed into Google Translate appears as Susan.

Omma pestered me about having a child. She sent me home with juice packs of hongsam to improve my health, but they made me sweat because my body already has a lot of heat. She has dreams about her grandchildren. She has ambitions for them and for me.

The potential is overwhelming: an anonymous egg donor with an SAT score of 800; a birth mother whose healthy newborn can attach easily; the possibility of five, ten, twenty half-siblings unknown to each other.

The day lilies need water. Prairie thistle spikes through the hostas. I'm standing in my kitchen. I'm tired. I want to go home. This loss was never a home, and maybe it wasn't a way either. Maybe it was just a drunken conversation at Bada, a bar in Hongdae, with repatriated adoptee friends who were similarly schooled in critical theories.

Maybe home was tentative. Maybe it was the serenity one feels when it's least expected. My choka shows me a dance that he created after listening for a whole week to his favorite pop song on loop. "Everybody have fun tonight. Everybody just have a good time."

He teaches it to me, and I follow. We're in sync, and we're laughing. For a moment, I'm completely in my body, and our bodies are united in a way that can only occur in movement, not in language. Then suddenly he slides and twirls. I stumble. I can't keep up, but that's why we're having fun.

I've booked an appointment for a seminar about IVF. One of the application questions asks if "feelings of loss have been properly addressed." I don't know what loss is anymore. I thought I knew. Through knowing loss, I could re-contour desire. Yet how is it possible to be the entire triad—birth sister/daughter, adopted person and infertile woman whose only hope is adoption or egg donorship—and the space beyond the triangle's conjectures?

Who gets to dream? Whose dream shrivels because life has been diverted away? Whose dream ripens? Who is told to dream in the direction of someone else's desire? Whose desire? Your mother gave birth to you through her heart? Her womb is in the shape of a heart? You're her daughter, but you can't have a child. You give life to a dream through taking another woman's child. Your dream takes on a life that no woman's child could ever inhabit. You're that child. You're trying to embody a dream, a flesh-and-blood dream.

My doctor advises me to schedule a bone density exam. My fatigue might be related to hormonal changes. Something about dryness. We make an off-color joke: "Use it or lose it." We agree about staying positive. Who knows? She's being kind.

Sometimes slipping. Sometimes falter.

Sometimes shelter. My choka mispronounces myth. He says "mithe." He asks me about the mithe of Medusa, and I tell him that she was once a beautiful but haughty virgin priestess. The goddess Minerva punished her by transforming her into a monster with the power to turn men into stone. I learned this myth from my adoptive mother, who loved Latin, her favorite subject in high school. My choka wants to know what a myth is, and I tell him that it's a story to explain a phenomenon. Jupiter throws a thunderbolt, and that's why there's a storm.

These are the last days of summer. Sometimes rain. My doctor tells me to keep in touch if I want to explore egg donorship, or to call her if I have more questions about my blood work. "Thank you," I tell her, "I appreciate it." I hang up. All the mothers in my life are somehow in my body, and I'm a woman looking at her backyard. I see Omma's pine mountain in Shillim. I see Susan's redbuds on Cleveland Street.

Does the body listen? Does the body respond?

I notice that my choka has a mole on his left cheek like mine. On Dongsaeng's backyard deck, he sits on my lap while I hold an umbrella to keep us both dry. We test the umbrella to see how it works. I follow his suggestion: tilt the umbrella to the left and close it slightly. See how it keeps the rain off? "See, Como, see? Hahaha! See?"

## NOTES

"No. 53" (Before and After Series)

Jane Jin Kaisen, 2006

Acetone print on paper, dimensions variable

"Orphan Hojuk"

From my archive, found 2007

Carbon copy on paper

Adoption agencies routinely registered children as "paper orphans" with false names and birthdates. Deann Borshay Liem's films *First Person Plural* and *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* famously document this administrative practice.

"No. 31" (Before and After Series)

Jane Jin Kaisen, 2008

Acetone print on paper, dimensions variable

"To Be Taped to Windows of Light"

According to *The New York Times*, South Korean unwed mothers' children constitute 70 percent of all domestic and intercountry adoption placements but only 1.6 percent of South Korea's annual live births. In recent years, organizations such as the Korean Unwed Mothers and Families Association and Korean Unwed Mothers Support Network have brought attention to the socio-economic stigma forcing unwed mothers to surrender their children for adoption despite their overwhelming desire to parent. In alliance with adoptee advocates, these organizations have also brought attention to other conditions breaking these families apart. 60 percent of the adoption agencies operate unwed-mother shelters and provide inadequate and inaccurate information to pregnant mothers such as misrepresenting intercountry adoption as "open," with the possibility of reunification once their children reach adulthood. However, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare reports that only 2.7 percent of the 78,000 Korean adoptees who searched for their birth families during 1995–2005 reunited.

"Fetish Mothers"

References to Cheng, Myers, Jameson (via Crapanzano) and Koo are drawn from the following texts:

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Crapanzano, Vincent. "The Postmodern Crisis: Discourse, Parody, Memory." *Rereading Cultural Anthropology*. Ed. George E. Marcus. Raleigh-Durham: Duke UP, 2000. 87–102. Print.

Koo, Hagen. *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.

Myers, Kit. "Love and Violence in Transracial/national Adoption." American Studies Association Annual Meeting, November 2009, Washington D.C.

I also reference material from my essay "Real Support for Unwed Moms," published 30 October 2009 in *The Korea Times* digital edition.

## "Myths to Have a Good Time"

This essay was influenced by egg donor testimonies featured in the documentary film *Eggsplotation*, produced by the Center for Bioethics and Culture. The Korean personal histories in this essay appear as they were initially told and translated to me in 2011, and as mentioned in the essay's first publication. Since then, the facts continue to change depending on the source and translator.

## "Ancestor/Kidnapper"

From my archive, found 2011  
Sepia on photographic paper

Because birth mothers' and unwed mothers' testimonies have emerged in recent years, public awareness has increased of the adoption-agency practice of placing children for adoption without their mothers' legal consent. In many reported cases, relatives such as a grandmother or an aunt removed the child and relinquished her/him to an orphanage without the mother's knowledge. Forwarded on to the adoption agency, the child is recorded as an orphan and her/his parents as missing and unknown.

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Now that you know the names, you can catch the swaying form, snap the fishing line and hold the finned fetish to the light. You can weigh its awkward heft in your hands, cut it with scissors, drop the painted strips into a steel bucket and strike a match. Lean toward the flames—paper hissing as it curls, blackens and ashes—to see the words return to their source. Put your face in that mouth's orange licking heat.

Omma, you're not there.

여기는 우리 어머니 안계셔요.

Omma, you were never there.

This is not where your body comes from.

This is not where a body comes from.

Omma, let this spark feed on all the protocol that would detach and inter us. Let it burn and burn so that we can embrace each other in this light.

For my younger brother 이재훈

나는 꿈에서 우리의 가족을 찾았어요.

## AUTHOR BIO



Photo: Anh Đào Kolbe

**Jennifer Kwon Dobbs** (이허수진) is the author of *Paper Pavilion* (recipient of the White Pine Press Poetry Prize and the New England Poetry Club's Sheila Motton Book Award) and *Song of a Mirror*, finalist for the Tupelo Snowbound Chapbook Award. She has received grants from the Daesan Foundation, Intermedia Arts and the Minnesota State Arts Board for her writing.

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