

FROM STOVE ON FIRE [FIRST LIGHT IN COTTON]

DONG LI

you were lying on the blackening bench. so still and strange. grandma was sitting next to you on the bench edge. her hands parted cotton wrapped around your body. rice boiling on the stove. rice churned in heated water and congealed in clumps.

you never saw the sixties on that bench. you were lying in light cotton. no one in the street. empty houses in empty cities. the dead moved as usual. wrinkles sewn in the foreheads of the parents. the sisters played hopscotch in the courtyard. step after step, their eyes drawn to the granite floor, small streams splashed and soaked their shoes. their hands brushed past yellow flowers which shivered and shivered still. loose cotton folded around you, slowly losing color. the stove left unguarded. rice in the churning water. three years of natural disaster swept from northern land to southern land. rivers flooded over rooftops. measles spread like spring heat. tuberculosis passed from left lung to right lung. field after field, not a single ear of corn fell on the foot. over the cracking earth, a far cry gathered another far cry. they were dancing, those old shamans in faded costumes. kettles bottles and woks were out. they were mumbling illegible sounds. a gong was hit in a circle of people gathering for rain.

a line of black hair leveled on your forehead. a cloud lacquered window light on the bench.

you were not counting the days as the parents did before you woke to a spoonful of congee burning your lips. eldest sister moved her bench

bed out of the kitchen. grandma was sitting on one edge of the bench and looked at you through cotton wrap on the other edge. under window light, her face hid behind a bowl rising in white air. congee spilled on the edge in her shaking hand. she carried you in anger. grandpa wanted a boy child to carry the family name on a house flooded by the leaking well. grandma was tired from carrying one sister after another. kettles of boiling water mixed in water from the well in the courtyard. the sisters lowered their heads, their legs spread out, their hair flipped over their lowered heads. from the threshold to the well, they lined up and grandma walked along a trilling scream of burnt scalps. small streams gathered between their spread legs and disappeared in the cracks of the granite floor. winterberry bulbs softened and bent outward to a square sky staggered by overhanging eaves in shadow. she carried the dead brother when a revolution took place in a big square in winter. heated by bodies standing looking hovering heads over shoulders, shadow into another shadow. you did not see them. a line of war generals stood before a square of blurred faces before winter. thunder in clapping hands. a new republic lifted a new flag. the loudspeaker in the school courtyard opposite your house echoed in the radioless streets. great-grandpa did not cross the strait for the wreckage of a republic supported by an uncle over the pacific waters named sam. helicopters of cold weapons dropped at the foot of ali mountains. they were not holding hands, those old cypresses in the fog weighing on the island. birdless sky, you hid with the family in a house without heat. who was about to cover ears. who was ready to eat.

in the heart of the stove, a fire was burning. the bench was turned. you were still in fever. cotton white could not cover your blackening fingers. no one noticed. a night. light bulbs out. a city in shadow. starless light by candle ends, no moth flew. four walls loomed and loomed inward. winterberry yellow flickered window light. before snow, cold licked collar bones.

icicles gathered on eaves of dripping terror. ice thinned.

you were there. breath heaved and heaved still. who was caught in the middle of gunshots and firecracks. who stood in the earth-cracked battlefield. no fire. no rain. on stiff branches. they gathered. they were not waiting. carts after carts. the bodies were not yet ready to burn. mice ran in circles, stepping on bluing veins and through opened chests. muskrat mother was feeding her sucking kit amid straightened intestines. under, genitals bloated. she bore you in her anger. you never walked like grandma did alongside rice paddies where she pulled for seed. grandpa pulled the body out of murky water. clutching on her pants, eldest sister stared with jaws dropped. you were not seeing. she did not go blind but walked with closed eyes as if she were walking backward.

who walks behind women who walked before you. is speaking still ethical.

she was carrying you. for the first time, she took you out of the kitchen. a sheen of frost settled on the winterberry. a sheen of night sweat on the bench you left.

who watches flowers. who shuffles behind a window of battlefields.

black ice was floating on the streams which seeped through the threshold to the kitchen and melted as the stove was lit. rice was counted before it was thrown in the water. hands were rubbed so that dregs of rice dust fell in the water which was starting to boil. occasionally dried husks floated on the surface. the sisters picked and threw them out with a pair of bamboo chopsticks. the ends were already black from brushing against burning surfaces, their bamboo bodies bent slightly after long years.

cold bodies hung on desiccated limbs. slowness of the body slowed
your growing longing.

there was growing in your light breath.

were you born. are you being reborn.

hour after hour, you coughed. no cry on the bench. no breast for you
to suck. no clothes. no voice. not human. as yet. a bowl of congee was
left on the stove, forgotten in the turning of heads and hands to pass
around cold cloth for warm cloth. eldest sister down with fever after
giving birth to her girl child. a circle of faces over her unopened eyes.
everything on her face stitched together, drawn to the little nose, red
from changing temperature. her mother lay on the bed in the grand
bedroom for a full moon. occasionally warm and cold water splashed
onto your soaked cotton wrap. the niece sucked on the nipple of her
grandma. there was no milk in the house.

what blinds you to think night. what keeps your eyes from opening to
their hour.

overnight, congee grew thick. a sister watched and watched and fell
asleep on the stove. her sleeves were lit. you did not cover screams in
the ears. the sister was thrown into the water vat in the courtyard.
some flower bulbs were shaken off branches. the vat wrapped in
cotton quilts. you coughed and coughed. no jar choi in the vat. no one
tasted salt for days.

who swept leaves in the picking wind. who trimmed winterberry for
firewood.

no briquettes in the stove. mice ran thin in rice bags. moss around the well. no dripping in dead winter. tongues circled around the inside of the water vat and turned red from choi chili paste. you were left to die on the bench. grandma squeezed her breast to another mouth. you were born in the same year as the niece. her mother had no breast milk. the midwife came again and shook her head. sleeves got wet and dried again in dry coughs. lips chapped yet no blood drenched your mouth. smoke fanned out of the stove. rice dust mixed in splashed water. salt in the eye. cotton wrapped around the body wore thin. the kettle lid kept on. icicles crashed into night. some ruffling on bulbless berry bush.

flying fingers twitched on mossy spring. what lasted as long as the last.

you drove out the night. a strident cough came across the bench. light bulbs dangled violently in the kitchen. there was some moving in the cotton lump. your bones so soft and strange. faces were lit then the stove. grandpa parted the cotton and saw you. he gave you his index finger and you sucked on it, everything on your face drawn to your mouth. some smile on his face. he looked at you and waved his hand behind his back. a sister came, her head against his head. they were watching, those old bushes in the cold through window light. your bones so soft and strange, ribbon-like. lotus was taking root in the river. streams of water gathered around the well. some singing on the shivering branches. the sister took you in the arms. in the briquette soot you dropped.

is it what it was. is the world a battlefield.

in the soot you bawled. eyelids flipped open. almost, almost world that came in the first sound you made. crawling on the belly, you were inching on. and on. and on, mother.

is loneliness roiling inside you by the flaming stove.

on the bench do you learn to die.
