I Recount My Cousin's Nonlinear Existence

FLASH FICTION

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The night we make my cousin Junho's shrine, my mother prepares rice cakes in the kitchen. She makes each one a face, uses sesame seeds to line eyes and a mouth. *He wouldn't eat them if they didn't have a face, she said. But you know something? He would come up to me afterwards, saying that he had an upset stomach. He was worried they were alive, that they could feel something.*

When my aunts arrive, we sit together in the living room in front of the shrine. We chatter mindlessly about what has happened since the last year. We gossip about my first aunt's second husband. Better-looking than the first, we say, and laugh nervously. We tell Junho that my father has developed scoliosis, that he needs a brace for his back. Imagine that, my mother says. I thought you could only get braces for your teeth. We talk so as to drown out the silence. Our stories always start with a slow swell: the time that Junho shoved my head underwater in the pool in order to teach me how to swim. Or the fact that he could memorize entire obscure poems, the first twenty digits of Pi, rattle them off like they were names. But he didn't speak until he was five years old, my first aunt says. I remember. And even afterwards, it was like he was afraid of wasting words. It was the opposite with money, my third aunt recounts. He spent it on everything: lottery tickets, birthday cards for his mother, even after the first stroke that left her unable to read, the best cuts of salmon. No one talks about what else he spent it on. No one talks about what he was like on his worst nights: his eyes wide, the pupils like smoking coal. How when he overdosed, you could mistake it for sleep, his eyelids fluttering in the wind, as soft as a bird's wings.

That boy wanted to fly away; my mother says when no one else will speak. He wanted to be as light as air. But even as he tried, his bones weighed him back down to Earth. My second aunt says that's the problem with America: they think pain is an equation. That you can subtract until a loss emerges. When really pain is like trying to plug cracks in a wall. As soon as you get rid of one source, you find another.

I try to tell them my own story: how he would bring stray dogs home in the summer and shave their collars to keep them cool. But my sentences knot clumsily together. My words are lost in the crackling din of noise, and embarrassed, I stop trying to tell them. Eventually we run out of new stories and resume the old ones. How he kept on buying birthday cards for his mother, even after the second stroke that left her dead. He kept on memorizing poems that no one else had ever read. He kept on trying to fly away.

No one talks about the dead boy's face, how when they rolled him over, his face was the color of blue milk. His heartbeat sounded like wind brushing through the trees, sunlight bursting through stalks of grass.

I don't know how many more stories I can think of, my mother says in the kitchen after everyone departs. The rice cakes lay on the mantle, still uneaten. *I'm going to run out of them one of these days.*

That night, I wait until the house is completely silent. It's only then that I get up and begin to walk outside into the inky night. The moon is round and full, swollen like a rice cake, I think to myself, expressive like a little boy's face. The sky is full of stars and I imagine they are scattered fistfuls of sesame seeds.

I walk backward into the fields in the backyard, the dry, wind-swept grasses that reach my hips. The sky lightens, turns into orange and then pink. The clouds chase themselves like dogs hounding their

own tails. The days slur into color and noise, folding in upon themselves.

I walk until I reach an afternoon buried by time. I know this is a summer day, long ago, can tell by the ache of the heat, the whisper of the dry wind. The grass is green and freshly cut and people bustle in the backyard. I glimpse my aunt's first husband, the worser-looking one, note that my father's back goes straight without the use of a crutch.

What is a day in the span of years? What are the stars to a man who cannot see them? What is grief to a man who can't feel the moon watching him as he sleeps?

I look at the scene laid out before me and I wonder if the same mechanism that unwinds time can unravel hurt. If every door we walk into it is a door that we can walk back through. I remember asking my mother what the point of memory was. I'd rather be weightless, I said. I wouldn't want to carry anything inside of me.

You'd float off, she said. You would be air.

I remember this much; I think to myself. I am eyes without a face, ears without a head to hold them in place. I watch Junho amble up the hill as three dogs follow him. He's a boy here, the way he was when he died, but when he died his face was just a placeholder for his neck. He was so thin he looked like a sliver of ghost-flesh.

I watch him kneel with a pair of scissors. He begins to snip.

"Those dogs don't belong to anyone," someone says.

"I found them on the street," Junho replies.

"There's no point," someone else says. "The fur will grow back."

"I know," Junho says, not looking up. He keeps on cutting. ■