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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 your same age speaking Korean, because you are Korean—flipping through pages and indicating where you should sign. You're pregnant—heavy with me during your sixth month—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 so close to each other that they become one body linked through paper—one that gives and one that takes away. Above you, The Virgin Mary looks beyond the frame's gilt 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 get 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 func-

tional 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 give. 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 60s). You would've been childbearing age—anywhere from 18 to 45—and so 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 conveyer belt of t-shirts, tennis shoes, toys, tooth brushes, 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 the 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 meat that Korea imports from the U.S.—spam/variety meats/mad cow/neo-liberal trade—ends up in *budae jigae*, a stew of scraps. One of the longest muscles in the body, the tongue lifts heaven, earth, and man when it speaks Korean letters shaped accordingly:

____ 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.

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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—a lucky ticket holder drawn from the lottery mass of *harmoni* and *haraboji* desperate to see their parents before either one of them dies. To die with some relief —that is not our cause though 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 my own.

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 mothers grabbing grown men and pressing their foreheads to their necks—women half the height of the men—and holding their sons 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 circling 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 its shot to document the mother locking her son's face against her chest perhaps in protection. Music. Clapping. Strangers watch, entertained.

Commercial break: 처음 처럼

Four students, sitting around a red plastic table, drink *soju* together. *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 and set down a plate of cut pears that you can find after a good sleep?

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> They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay. And when those frail whirlwinds fell, in scattered particles, upon the ground, no one mourned. Instead, men lit candles to celebrate the emptiness that remained, as people do who enter a beautiful but vacant space to resurrect a God.
>
> —Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"

Omoni, they forced your mind to desert your body—your child to desert your body—and 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 accepting your body as a vacancy, verdant yet razed to clear a way no one celebrated, no one 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 life had grown (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 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 you gave him away because you loved him so much. And you become a birth mother whom someone says loved so deeply you gave him to her to love.

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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, which is the statement of realness and violently marks representation." Even in the word, *family*, there's your specter that this articulation breathes 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 laid 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. (Girls were supposed to be asleep. I drank orange juice that morning not knowing I couldn't take the anesthesia later.) 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 laid on the table with the image of that vacancy I had chosen and the trace still there in my body, the trace—green static in that black void—still moving and felt that darkness as separation from you, me, him: The three of us lying there together connected by our bodies lost to the emptiness only a woman's body can suffer, the three of us connected by this loss reaching across three generations.

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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 a run 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, 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," giggles my mother 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.

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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 the 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?" Katie's sister shakes a jar of angel kiss and applies a thin coat in two thick strokes on her left hand.
> "I'm a bastard," I say, trying to copy her technique with Blue #52 on my best friend's toes.
> Katie's sister continues to paint, "That's not true. Only boys can be bastards."
> "Korean girls can be bastards." I slide the brush inside the bottle's edge.

"Whatever," she says, "That's the wrong color for Katie."

Another attempt:

> Mother is dying of cancer surrounded by sons and asking for a daughter that 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, the dull ache in her shoulder as she searched for dry ground on which to set her child down, and the way her child woke 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 / Blackout

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 tone 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 she could take Chifundo away from her father, James Kambewa, a domestic worker living in Blantyre, who learned from the media blitz that his daughter was alive.

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

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At Doori Home, Omoni, you're taught to ritualize loss by sewing selvages and pleating skirts for first birthday clothes to accompany your baby. This is not a gift to the adopters. It's your gift to your child so she will remember you. I asked the mothers, and that's what they said about their labor. The work of your hands, the child from your body, belongs to you. The struggle to own what is yours beyond, as Hagoon 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 are "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 machines pumping

trundles with their left feet, feed pant legs under the presser foot. This is also a language—love shows in details—knotting buttons, hemming jackets for crisp collars and striped sleeves. The rusted bobbin's hooks catch, and you pause to rethread, licking the edge to spear through a 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 stood up like you did at Dongil Y. H. Company on July 25th with only your bodies against the institution's 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?"

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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 엄지손가락, 볼, 귀와 가슴 / Omoni hipbone, eyes, and neck / 어머니의 관골, 눈과 목 / Omoni feet / 어머니의 발 / Omoni lips / 어머니의 입술

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Your name is Lee Soo Jin, Kwon Young Mee, Shin Sun Mee, Lee Eun Hae, Kim Hee Jung. 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.

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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.

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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 mine?

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Omoni, are you allowed to imagine me—to envision intimate possibility—or must you also turn to context out of need? Perhaps all you're allowed is me—the day I was born, the memory of my body sliding out of yours, pink scars and lines my body wrote on yours and that time can't fade—so that fear limits context? 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 on to tile, a map shudders, an omoni begs her eldest아들to 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 one another as family, yet this identification is embedded in our language. When we call out to strangers—*unni, nuna, ajossi, halmoni* and *haraboji*, we're one family/one Korea despite distance, difference in blood ties, and destruction of geographies and names. They say *neh* 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/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 other bodies connected through your body, 엄마, which cluster together in my limbs, hair, nails and teeth, my *ip* and *ko*. This mouth is *wei-haraboji*. This nose is *jin-halmoni*. 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 and 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.

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