

Jean Yoon
TAILS (CERTAIN MEMORIES)

One day last year, in a distant country, I was walking up a mountain when something rustled underfoot. Amidst the crackled textures of the trail, the glimpse of an uncanny gleam and smoothness turned my stomach before I recognized the form as a snake--a tiny one, the length and girth of a pencil, and now stock-still--perfect silent specimen of pure muscle. My hand reached out ahead of my decision to pick it up or not, but at the slightest touch, the snake fell in two, its tail uncoupling from its body. The head half darted away into the grass; the tail remained, jumping and thrashing in the brush. I bolted from the awful sound of it.

When the pandemic arrived, it severed the present from all that transpired before. At a touch it fell in two. But certain memories still thrash in the brush behind us, even when the head has fled the site of separation.

~

“Those moments were so intense that in a way we will be living them always, while other things are completely forgotten. Yet there is no particular story attached to them, despite their place in the story I have told you. That time spent swimming in the pool beneath the waterfall belongs nowhere: it is part of no sequence of events, it is only itself, in a way that nothing in our life before as a family was ever itself, because it was always leading to the next thing and the next, was always contributing to our story of who we were.”

A character in Rachel Cusk’s novel *Outline* tells the narrator the story of an unhappy vacation he’d taken with his two children years prior. He describes a long day full of errors and bad weather and long, arduous walking, and then, like a sidebar in the middle of that misadventure, a spontaneous swim in a deep pool they find by the side of the road.

Certain memories detach from the place where they are laid; they perforate from the ongoingness that precedes and follows, from which they emerge as events. Time slips out of time.

~

Most afternoons this summer, I would walk to the river. I watched the water for long stretches, filming it for contiguous segments of one to three minutes. I cropped out the banks, the grasses and plants abundant and busy in the zenith of their flowering, the garbage bobbing in the eddies. I held the phone still, the frame a continuous square of water.

I wanted to produce in the record of my watchings the sense of an index, so specific in its array of indications and yet so devoid of reference as to obviate the referential function of the medium. Outside the frame, the sky changed color or sharpened towards sunset. A silver patina spread over the water’s surface, quivering as it merged and blended with the wavelets. I wanted to record the myriad mute histories of the shifting surface, whose every dissipating ripple indexed a point of impact--of contact with some foreign body, or with the wind, itself nothing but the cline of two disparate atmospheres equilibrating at their interface.

One afternoon, cyclists, walkers, young and old couples stopped and gathered on the bridge, close to where I sat filming atop a concrete parapet. They lifted their phones with a sense of procedure, of being moved in unison, even of ceremony; with precision they placed the camera between their eye and the sun. The unanimous gesture exerted a certain magnetism; my hand twitched. I thought: sunsets, being the most reliable phenomenon on earth, so uniquely exposes the strangeness of the photographic impulse.

To my right, to the west, out across the river where it bends, a cloudhead of unquantifiable size bore down from above. It compressed the band of sky below it into a feral red; above, the light evanesced from orange to blue. Three geese punctuated the frame: cursors surfing across the screen of the sky. *Click.*

~

Certain memories seem not to attach to anything else in the armature of the self, the remembered story that it is. In the margins they eddy and loop in perpetuity.

I remember walking across the wet grass, deeper into the backyard, to a grove enclosed by hedges that were black in shadow and incandescent with fireflies. The sky was a milky, silent purple iris above us. I thought we were standing in the eye of god, surrounded in all directions by the infinite galaxies, exploding into life and dying away. *This is a dream*, I said. You replied: *or a long forgotten memory.*

~

Whatever lies still uncarried from the abyss within / me as I die dies with me, wrote Frank Biddart, but I prefer the idea that all the unsaids ferment and decompose into sweeter, more rank, more volatile compounds. Words don't come from within me; they oxidize at the contact point between the membrane of myself and my seeing. The skin of my teeth. Words don't come from within me; they crystallize at the fissures in the substrate. Time slips out of time.

~

My mother land was a home I had never lived in. My mother tongue was a language I couldn't speak. I had said I'd write a book of essays about mothers and motherhood. Not mothers per se, but the ways in which we (who?) measure mothers as such, represent them to ourselves, re-enact the mother-relation on other stages--civic, cinematic, linguistic, oneiric. I wasn't writing, but I was constantly thinking of writing, such that life as I lived it began to register as WRITING and NOT WRITING, but as I wasn't doing much of the former in any real sense, I was constantly NOT WRITING, and the glare of that watermarked almost every activity I undertook knowingly in the stead of WRITING. I was skewering time on the metric of everything that I had failed to make of its duration.

It was all I could do just to metabolize everything that was happening. Unable to convey them in but elementary terms, my thoughts themselves simplified, and my experience became unspeakable and wild. I read that Césaire had written his *Cahiers* upon his first return to Paris from his first visit home to Martinique. *We're writers*, R. declared to the air, we *don't have our thoughts until the words arrive later*. Not that this assuaged the gnawing guilt of NOT WRITING, but I held the idea in reserve, anyway. I was waiting for my scheduled departure to cure and frame that unending year. *Click*.

~

The second to last time I saw my grandfather in his home, he had set out a number of shallow bowls on the floor and on the low folding table in front of the television. Each one contained a pile of tiny square portraits of him, the kind taken for IDs and passports, unremarkably diverse in their neutral and officious aspect. He appeared in each one unsmiling, variously aged from middle to old age; the pictures themselves were variously yellowed.

The shelves in his apartment had once been filled with leather albums and videocassettes, the repository of a solitary life meticulously documented, and now they stood empty. I remembered his cameras on the one long visit he made to us in America. We had driven from Connecticut to Florida and he filmed through the car window. I asked him where they had gone, all those memories. "The best part of the picture was taking the picture," he said.

Certain memories don't linger or fade so much as they photodegrade, breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces, unintelligible, non-corresponding, microplastic. Images seethed with dust, the fine particulate exhaust of industries. Is dust singular? That spring, it filtered the light through a toxic patina, like nostalgia. I turned to wave goodbye, and he appeared to shrink against the bright white of the corridor, retreating into the dim forgetting of his solitude.

~

Time slips out of time. On an early morning in Tokyo, already uncomfortably warm, I asked A. to take my picture with the statue of Hachiko. I remembered the story from *Sans Soleil* about the dog that had waited for its deceased owner to come home, now immortalized outside the subway station as a token for tourists. I asked to see the picture, then I asked them to delete it. A sea of teenagers in glitter poured from the Shinjuku gate, crossed the square, and carried us onto the platform, onto the first train.

Sleepless, I traveled on alone to Takamatsu, Teshima, Osaka, back to Seoul, back to America. Back and forth from Chicago to Boston, I drove alone, stopping in Buffalo, stopping in Ithaca to drive around the lake and look for the dock I stood on the morning I left without saying goodbye to you. I was always retracing my steps or routing my plans along the moebius of nostalgia, driven by its enigmatic engine. I wanted to restage the magic of initial encounters, or failing that, I wanted to feel the absence of the past in the places where it had happened. Each successive departure hit the return key, elongating the document. *Click*.

I wanted to write about you the way certain brilliant women wrote about you. They exegized you in punk subversions of the elegiac forms, studded with citations, about the shitty men who had disappointed them, about the disproportionate shattering of the self across such a paucity of substance. I was electrified by the flexion and flourish of what could be said and thought and savored in the wake of these impoverished subjects. I wanted to participate in the genre; I convinced myself that I loved you, you betrayed me, this was pain, that was poetry.

I thought if I could describe the exact dimensions of the wound, I could fashion a stent to fit that concavity and thereby resolve the surface. But I wasn't writing; I was waiting for the writing to happen.

Jean yoon is a writer, researcher, translator, and interdisciplinary artist. their language-based practices explores language acquisition and attrition and the interface of language and memory. they have been active in portland, brooklyn, chicago, and seoul, and are currently developing an archive of food practices and ecologies with Open Kitchen in milwaukee, wisconsin.