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Writing 101

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### Chuncheon

The temple is an hour long hike from the dock. Or something like that—time gets fuzzy under a hot sun.

We take a ferry across the river, water slapping against the sides in the sort of rhythm I imagine to be a lesser reflection of the ocean, a melody sailors might think, after weeks at sea, was the sound of mermaids tapping, drumming their fingers on the hull. Mountains encase us, hugging the sprawling river as lush green trees drape themselves over their jagged silhouettes like snow does in colder places. The trees are almost moss-like from this far down—just at the cloud-tipped tops, all the way up, where you can't see the crooked trunks.

It's not the most relaxing walk. It is unbearably hot, the sweltering press of the sun heavy on our backs, our necks. There are people carrying parasols with them, and I end up taking the umbrella you give me, popping it open in some unspoken betrayal of weather tradition. Dust clouds around our ankles, settles on the backs of our shoes and the stones lining the path, the edge of the river. We are not the only ones here. It is akin to a pilgrimage, maybe, makes me think of the people that must have walked this same path hundreds of years ago up to the temple. It is still in use—reconstructed, redesigned, built to last. It was not left to rot with the storms and the floods.

There is a village at the base of the mountain, a red bridge of swaying wood connecting the two halves over a shining stream bumped with boulders, trickling.

“Take a picture,” you say, like a demand. Like I wasn’t going to do it anyways. I do.

There are fish markets here. It smells of fish and water, and the only thing missing is the feeling of sand on rough skin, the taste of salt against a too-sharp breeze. When we walk across the bridge, it sways, rocks, tilts with our slightest movements as much as it bends to each gust of wind. I think of windchimes. If this bridge broke into two, we would climb up to the other side with the wood as our ladder, fingertips cracked and splintering against each plank.

I didn’t sleep on the train here. I put in headphones, leaned against the window, watched the world spin by. It was something of a disappointment to stop. It was something of a disappointment to see everything stand still.

We climb up the mountain. Between tall trees and chattering flies and prickling sweat, our mom tells us the myth about a girl and a snake and a rock, pointing out a statue carved in the shape of the girl perched by the river flowing to the ocean. Gravitational, water traveling the way that paperclips on wooden desks creep towards magnets. It is slow, inevitable. I want to remember it. It slips between my fingers as quickly as the river tumbling down the mountain.

The temple sits in front of such a mountain. It is low to the ground. For an old temple, it looks exactly like the others I’ve seen since coming here—red, chipped columns; green and gold accents; a curved, tiled roof. It was redone, I remember, and I think I should probably feel underwhelmed, let down. But it’s still standing, and it’s still in use, and people haven’t forgotten about it even after all of these centuries. And it’s pretty. It breathes with the land like it knows it, the kind of silent understanding that only trees that have weathered storm after storm together can have. The roots of the trees must intertwine, gripping to one another as desperate hands do, an intimacy held in tandem by the rocks tumbled in bubbling streams for a millenia. Delicate, spider-spun. It is as close to eternity as you can get.

We spend five minutes there. We almost miss the ferry.

There are only so many ways you can explain a return. We walk. We talk. Tiny flies tap their legs on our skin, attracted to the heat and the sweat, and we slap them away with your plastic fan. It was just the two of us when you got it, free from a store in the city. I hadn't known the words to tell the cashier that we didn't need it, two worlds colliding in my mind like freight trains.

Here is the thing about places like this, holy, made undone, relic-like: they are snapshots of a past we don't know to be true. This country is a snapshot of a life that I never had. Perhaps: I am the taxi driver who took us to the dock, the woman who sold my mother the tickets to the ferry, the man who guided it down the river to the temple and the mountains. The elderly man I will speak clumsily to in his language, made small in the face of his kindness, who will take us to the bus stop on our way back down. The stray cat, the village's cat, that will rub against my leg, purring, as the old man laughs.

I have rotted. I will rot. My bones will return to the earth someday—stagnant, slow. It will be quiet, then. It will be slow. Slow requires existence, presence, two feet on the ground and two lungs guarded behind your ribcage.

I have forgotten slow. I have forgotten anything less than complete, utter perfection, and I have forgotten what it means to rot, to return. To be so still that the birds cannot help but circle, but my eyes would be on the horizon, and my feet would be on the ground. I would be breathing.

It is a humiliating thing to open your mouth and know that what comes out will not be precisely what you intend. My tongue was made for this language, hundreds and hundreds of years of it sitting in my bones, my throat, backed up in an inherited memory I have spent years attempting to tear to pieces, dissect it with nails too short to claw. I stumble. I trip and I fall and I

land the wrong way, limbs splayed, shoulder aching. I have learned: silence is something that must be remembered. I remember it, and I have remembered it wrong. I speak one language fluently, and it is the image, here: captured on a slip of film, measured in writing, every flaw an intention.

When we make it back to the mainland, we go to the beach. The train that will take us back to the city has tracks that sit in the sand, right up against the ocean. We will come back here with our grandparents, and our grandmother will tell our mom on that very same train about how the last time she saw these mountains, they were red, flames licking at a sky black with smoke. They are lush, green, quiet, today, as if the memory never happened at all. It is not a memory that she will share with me.

Trees remember more than we do. I smell smoke. I taste fire, long gone, blackened, on the back of my tongue.

It's cloudy when we reach the shore. *Bad day for photos*, I think as we clamber down a steep hill of sand, the wind blowing grains of it into our eyes. The closer we get to the ocean, the choppiest the wind gets, whipping at your hair, cutting at my skin. I point out a white wooden swingset sitting too close to the waves, its chains rusted, paint peeling at the edges of each plank.

We break apart. I wander the length of the beach.

I want to eternalize this. It would ruin us. We would have to burn, first, to be as inseparable of a whole as these trees, these rivers, this ocean, skin healed over thin wooden splinters. If I could swallow this sky whole—clouds slipping down my throat, fizzling on a too clumsy tongue at the precipice of a forever stillness—then there would be no room for words. There would only be a temple, one given a new face to save it from rot, and the roots of its

burning forest tangled into something living, breathing, bleeding beneath the stone. There would only be this. I would not need words at all.

From that tender spot of land between asphalt and sand, this is what I see: you, sitting in the sand, legs drawn up to hold your sketchbook. Our mom faces the crystallized ocean as it spits foam, reflecting a clouded sky. The swingset is behind us, forgotten.

My finger finds the film advance lever, hits the back of it like an accident. I push it, feel the roll twist with it, hold the camera to my eye, and press the button.

The shutter collapses, unfolds.