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EVERGREEN

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BY

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ABSTRACT

EVERGREEN

BY ASHLEY KIM

Evergreen is a collection of poems about many things: mothers, Korean women, tragic love, and trees, both evergreen and not. It traces a line through the women, real and imagined, who have shaped my family, and whom I deeply desire to know, because their lives have led me to where I am now. May these voices of dancers, musicians, court ladies, and others be a way to remember my ancestors, and more deeply and fully know myself.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Baekje	백제	“a hundred counties”; a Korean kingdom established in 18 BC
chima	치마	the skirt worn as a part of hanbok, the traditional Korean dress
dubu	두부	tofu
gamgyul	감귤	a type of mandarin orange grown on the island of Jeju
gayageum	가야금	a traditional Korean plucked zither with twelve strings
gisaeng	기생	women from lower classes trained to be artists and courtesans
godeungeo	고등어	Korean mackerel
goguma	고구마	Korean sweet potato
jangachi	장아찌	vegetables pickled with soy sauce, vinegar, and sugar
Jeju	제주	an island south of the Korean peninsula
jeogori	저고리	the upper garment of a hanbok
Joseon	조선	a Korean kingdom founded in 1392 and lasting until 1897
minari	미나리	water dropwort, a plant originating in East Asia
miyeok	미역	edible seaweed
pado	파도	wave
pansori	판소리	Korean narrative song of stories and folklore
piri	피리	a Korean double reed instrument
Silla	신라	a Korean kingdom established in 57 BC
sinseollo	신선로	“food of the mountain gods”; a royal Korean hotpot dish
yakgwa	약과	deep-fried Korean honey cookies
yangban	양반	the highly-educated ruling class during the Joseon Dynasty
Yeongdo	영도	a district in Busan, at the south edge of Korea

for 엄마

Folklore

Snowy boughs bow under
the weight of our murmurs, heavy
lavender musings.

The smoke carries our stories,
tracing a line to the stars
like the thread that holds together
your linen chima, the ribbon
that ties my jeogori closed,
the straw weaved in and through
and out our sandals,

like the rhapsodic river that streams
through our mouths and pools
in our hearts, carving
a deep path through our chests.

Memories unfurl
within us and become
folklores, of wishbone roots and green sprigs
and ash-ridden soil: things we have seen
and all those we have yet
to see. Fire listens as our words
are lifted up to the heavens.

Do Korean women dance?

from a talk by Min Jin Lee

She steps out
feet clothed in straw
dust already staining
white cotton socks
brown

She hikes up
her faded blue skirt
azalea-clothed arms angled
to reveal clumsy feet
that begin to dance

She follows
no rhythm save for her
own
moving to the heart
beat of her inheritance

Seeing her move
the fisherman runs
and returns with his worn drum
the nursing mother pulls
out her spit-stained reed

Seeing her sway
the pansori singer
opens her mouth
and finally allows wind to pass
through her chords

Seeing her dance
the village people gather
for the first time since
the soldiers barged in
with their guns and their names

They join in the revelry
hearts clutched
in joyous communion
voices rising
up to the heavens

And in the middle of it all
is the girl
head tilted up to the sun
salt tears and salt sweat
flowing down her hairline

as she dances, hands lifted impossibly high

Self-Portrait as a Gayageum Player

I remember one morning when I was twelve
sitting with my back to my mother
as she braided my hair into a thick pleat
asking her why
I could not grow
out my nails like all the other girls

who used crushed garden balsam
to dye their tips into bright orange petals.

She held my young hands in her callused ones
and told me that to play the gayageum is a gift
to navigate the map
of twelve strings and trace
a path through the music
to pluck with force and to vibrate
to make waves in the air

to one day sing through the strings
for the court.

Today, I sit in front of the mirror by myself
and braid my hair, twisting it into a bun
and spearing through a delicate
orange floral hairpin.

Calluses decorate my fingers
and I still have never dyed my nails.
Today, I play for the court.

the court dancer

the cracks in the wooden floor catch on my new silk socks, slippery
on foreign maru as I glide to the center. light streams from green

shutters and catches on my white chima as I settle on the floor,
arms raised tenderly above my head. the first strums of the gayageum

melody fill the room, heard by the yangban, the princesses,
the king, and me. with a sigh, my long white sleeves trace a line

through the air like a flag waved in surrender and I rise,
turning to face the king. my sheer hem grazes the floor, light

as the wind that sings across the hill where I used to live
and I begin to turn, slowly at first, then faster and more desperate,

eyes transfixed on the king's. the air strains with song as the melody
quicken and my hands snap in controlled rage, sleeves flying

back and forth for my brother, slave to the king's war, for my sister, driven
to a gisaeng house for money, and for my mother, who danced this same dance once.

echoes

hangul abcdearian after Franny Choi

graceful are splintered hands
 that tend the palace willow
numb to its spiked branches and wiry strands

dim stars numbering a thousand
rise
 over Joseon when the sun falls below this earth

my mother tells me wistfully
 these are the same constellations
burnt into my ancestors' cornea, the same people that
shattered whole kingdoms—remember
 Baekje and Silla—foretold
auspicious birth of Sejong whom they will call the Great

 holding my hands still, she says
just listen to these trees, the honeyed scent of plum
 blossoms across
cheeks, a fragrant crushing underfoot

 turning her face to the heavens, she asks:
can you smell my memories
 the sinseollo I served only to the crown prince
 during my first year as a palace maid
turnip pickled bright pink, salty clouds over rough three-part ocean
 and sweet candied goguma on winter's day?

palm to my stomach, pado heart breaks
 on my placenta
half remembrance, half anticipation

From Pyongyang to Busan

In the space between sisters,
I look up and see
wishbones growing out of tree trunks,
wild cranes flying but no water for miles.

I want to remember the stories
of my mother's mother,
how the mountain people would pluck
off the bones at their stems
and carry them near their hearts,
how they would pray to be one again
with their sisters by the sea.

I want to know how they would bask
under dry persimmon suns
and pears that resembled full moons,
waiting for dangerous hope to take
root in their body.

But the wound is too wide
and that green expanse too broad.

When sisters are separated too long
will they be able to remember?

One thing I recall: Pleading with the earth
the mountain people roamed that in-between space
where deer with antler crowns stalked terrifying forests
and the eyes of four-eyed wolves glowed like tiny suns in the night
but to no avail: their wishes dropped on barren land.

I lie on the wet soil of sleeping dreams.

I know this, I do
and yet I choose to be foolish
or brave, bark scratching
against my hands as

I rise and take hold of
that young and dangerous hope.

Yeongdo Lighthouse

There is a tall, yellowed lighthouse off the cliff
the pointed top of which I can see
clear as the water that sits still near shore.

Come morning, the lone lightkeeper
opens salt-rusted windows
and lets in the dawn air

Lets it move up briny steps
around the wind-eroded gallery
between rugged stone

Out the open window
and back in around exposed panes
and through the light room

Where sunlight pools under glass
creating rivers of shadows
a stain on the endless sea.

As the day passes on, the blemish
disappears and smears in an ebb
and flow until night

falls, and the windows are pressed
shut.

It is silent once more in the lighthouse
save for the soothing symphony of waves
and a distant siren cry.

Come home, the voice calls in the language of the sea.

It is a mother's voice.

The lightkeeper rustles in her sleep.

Come back home.

Jeju Gamgyul

Last night, I found myself in a mandarin grove
planted just outside the shade of the volcano.

Sweet blossoms lined crooked limbs
like snow that settles
upon the earth after a storm

and in the in-between,
arching their way through petals, reaching
up towards the white sun,

little circles of orange had begun to grow
speckled green with youth
but full of promise — summer would be tart.

The warm air was pleasant
carrying with it the faintest tinge of citrus
and if I focused my eyes on the converging point

between the parallel rows of trees,
I could see a small mandarin light
a steady hearth, looking like home.

I began to walk towards it
but no matter how many steps I took,
foolishly relentless,

the light did not grow any bigger.
I stayed in the mandarin grove, surrounded
on all sides reaching out to the light.

leaving

grass trembles

at the thought of April, when
nocturnal animals will emerge from their slumber
dirt still clinging to their silky hides

roaming the vast forest

they will taste the remnants of
March in the clear spring that runs
between the camellia and the camphor

a dusting of
snow still settled on sturdy branches
arched with frozen tears

where sleek black magpies will perch and
jabber at each other in sharp song

change smells like cherry

blossoms, like a
kind wind that blows off hardened snow
taking with it winter's sorrow
and leaving behind bright

peonies that will unravel, layer by layer

revealing hidden
head to sharp spring light

The Crane

the willow tree hangs its head
low, arms heavy by its sides, stringy fingers
grazing the lake under endless moonlight

a pair red-crowned cranes settle on still water,
broad strokes of red marking their foreheads, bright
against white

their slender necks are lifted up to the clouds
as a rattling cry emerges from their beaks,
splitting the silence

when clouds cover the moon and light
is dull on the water, a massive shadow
comes over the lake

a flock of cranes surround the other two
below the willow tree, finding rest
after a day's flight until day comes again

quick stop

By the bottom of the salt-worn stairs, we watched
the frigid water dance, revealing mirror sand

that indulged the vanity of the sky. Up above,
the clouds burnt pink, dusted by February

sun as it fell to the horizon, and the winds sprayed sea
mist through my loose hair, tangling the ends

like the bokbunja brambles that framed the entrance to the place
that was your home, just down the street. You brush the twisted

short hairs from my eyes, durumagi sleeve grazing my cheek
As we marked the earth with our footprints

along the shore, you told me someone else lived there
now, maybe a group of fishermen who spent more

time on their rickety sailboat than in their rooms
or an older couple who spent all their time by the fire, leaving

the front yard smelling of burnt wood and pungent doenjang,
erasing you. I was there before, in your nostalgia

haze stories of heavy summer days cut
by the water and cooler nights walking down to town

for sweet, crumbly yakgwa the size of your hand, in your pre-dawn
retellings of dreams where you would leave your gat

on the rocks by your carefully folded durumagi
and swim out into the ocean, weightless,

carried away by the tide. The strange sense that
even that moment would become a memory

came over me as I looked to you, watching the ocean
dance before us under a purpling sky.

Shores

He steps forward
fine dress shoes buffed
to shine as the tiny crests
far offshore, grains of sand pouring in

He reaches out
his soft hand, holds on
to coarse white linen, dirt-stained and time-worn
edges long broken
in to fit her body

He remembers
the gayageum melody
that sang in his heart
moving through him
at the sight of her

Seeing him again
the piri in the girl's heart whistles
a soft, old melody
that lilts and waltzes like the sonorous sea
before it was speckled with foreign flags

Seeing him after all these years
the girl cannot help but to remember
who she was
bright, with hope
before violence had burned that out

Seeing him at long last
beloved face worn
by war, by hunger, by time
she reaches out
to cradle the one she so cherished

They hold fast to each other
in their new bodies, foreign
maps to be learnt and drawn out again

but the soul knows what the mind
cannot comprehend

That this is the girl
who taught him to skip rocks with ease
and that this is the boy
who would always bring her the roasted hard candy

And their hands speak a language
that can never be taken away.

Perennial

on "Decision to Leave" dir. Park Chan-Wook

Peace comes
with the high tide,
salty waves crashing
over handmade heaps,
water running
down sandy mountains

through my fingers
and pooling in palms
that ache at the center
like the ghosts of nails
pounded through flesh
and pulled back out

to yield empty hands,
a gaping hole.
The shade turns thick
as the sea grows
wilder, sending torrents
to fill my shallow grave.

My feet go first, buried
under a thin layer of sand,
then my ankles, calves,
thighs, knees. When the water
reaches my chest,
I can no longer feel

my heart's cadence,
I am no longer myself
but I follow the undulations
of the sea, smooth
even when ferocious,
rocking me back and forth

a fatal swing.

You knew my heart
followed yours, I am sure
you remember the night
when I relinquished
my breaths to you

and we breathed as one
chests rising
falling together
to give your mind rest
from hours of searching
sunken cheeks and rotten eyes.

In the dim orange light,
you begged me to leave
and set it all behind – the investigation,
the husband, the murder – and start
again, to live in truth.
But I do not know how to be

without the safety
of a sick thrill
running over my body,
without the tension
of a game of cat and mouse
that will stop at nothing—

Did you know
this game we play
is also love?
Running, chasing,
falling
between the cracks.

Nightshade

Overhead, sunlight burns
through the canopy.
Foliage glows at the edges
in ever-changing lines
of auburn, dusky yellow, white—lit aflame
by the late November afternoon.

The days have grown
cool again, like the nights
of deep winter. Can you see
the way silence burns
deep in the woods, out
where there is nothing

but the end? The creek is lined
with silver-purple nightshade,
snow-speckled clusters of pine scattered
in windswept patterns
brittle with cold. When the stars rise
over the great pine

moonlight drips off spiny leaves
and pools atop the snow, blistering
white into silver. The woods come alive
at night, silence sounding like winter, piercing
through heavy chill
and darkness—Can you hear

it, the sound of time passing us
by? There is no joy or sorrow
here with the pines, only
the slow, silky slips of moonlight
flush on luminous nightshade
and endless bundles of pine.

Wildfire

The evergreen forest offers
a sweet scent
as it dies.

Its spiny trees
blacken and char
when the wave

passes over,
limbs humbled
by the heat,

brought to kneel by the ground
and made into nothing
but bitter stubs

stripped of all
adornment, bare
as they were

in the beginning.
Face to face
with each other:

camellias and camphor
pine and fir
surrender.

But time moves on
and soon, searing
bright green will arise

from scorched soil,
exploding, uncontrolled
growth

that sweeps across
barren forest floor

with promise

of near abundance,
of new heights,

of a sweet scent
that will once again
follow the evergreen.

Minari

Before the sun had yet to appear
the sky, a garden adorned with the colors of April
my mother woke me to go to the spring.

Mist fogged up the air;
stardew, my younger sister called it
waterdust, said the older.

We knelt on solid soil, wrist-deep in
earth that gloved every crevice it could find.
Fingers dug in, harvesting every little green sprig
a testament to the earth's generosity,
a covenant to our family.

Her every move was steady,
assured as the river flows along its deep carved path.
My dull fingers fumbled with delicate stems
and jagged tears decorated half-ripped roots.

I remember asking my mother what would happen if I ate the minari,
if my insides would stain a bright spring
or if the plant would find root in my young heart
clinging to me, blood-soil and flesh-river.

If I opened up my mouth to the sun,
would the light find its way in?

Could what is green inside me bloom?

Look to the sky, she said instead.
Look to the earth, and look to that vast sea.

Thanksgiving on the Surasang

the steady murmur of soft
voices rises when the kitchen
grow warm with bodies surrounding the
steaming stone pots and rusted pans in preparation
for the king. the briny smell of braised godeungeo and pungent kick
of soybean paste soup weigh down the air, and everyone single mouth
waters. while the more experienced maids plate the dishes, carefully spooning
tender blocks of dubu into the stew and twisting cold noodles in a perfect spiral,
we sit in the corner, backs sticky against the wall, white aprons all sweat through.
our thumbs are perpetually stained orange from digging our fingers into
the soft skin of the tangerines we picked from the tree that hangs
over the edge of the palace wall, peeling off stringy pith and
breaking apart every segment. the kitchen bustle masks
our murmurs, low and steady, and in the sound,
no one notices the steady anchor of
shoulder against shoulder

Miyeok

The day before my mother was born, my grandmother bathed her in seaweed soup. The last monsoon had just passed by and the air was loaded, tacky and wet on her skin. Still, she spent hours by the hot silver pot, dented from the time she dropped it last April, moving from the kitchen to the backyard to toss out the leftover bone broth she made for her husband. She tossed in sleek dried anchovies, rough cubes of fresh red meat, slippery seaweed, and little flecks of garlic with hands that chopped, tossed, and scrubbed so much they sounded like sandpaper. She ladled wilted green blades, the tenderest beef, and deep broth into her bowl. She ate enough for two.

And so my mother came into August yearning for the sea. When my grandmother first held her daughter in her arms and kissed her still-wet head, the taste of salt lingered on her lips.

Love Poem for a Broken Fridge Drawer

I wake from inside a life, plaster
bumpy and cool against my cheek. The room
reeks of heat and sings of dizziness and I move,
a girl possessed, chasing refrigerator buzz.

My arms opens the door and a wash of cold
air cools my sleep-sweat. Warm lights illuminate
the crack in the fridge drawer. A mysterious,
thick fluid browns the surface of the bottom tray
and the side shelf is bloated with duplicate
milk cartons and Kewpie mayos.

Reaching my arm deep into my personal
cornucopia, past multiple containers
of half-eaten overly fermented kimchi
from my grandma and a bowl of ox-bone stew
long gone, white chunks of oil floating atop
clear broth, past shriveled, browning tangerines
and leftover blocks of curry, I grab the small rectangle full
of jangachi and plastic-wrapped pickled eggs
that my mom packed me last weekend.

I sit on sticky kitchen floor, spilling soy sauce
over instant rice, cutting whole eggs to reveal
crumbly yellow yolks, pulling apart pieces
of pickled meat, and dropping the juiciest peppers
and the shiniest onions to garnish. Outside, summer
is blue and moonlight looks like the ghosts

of my mother and her mother and all
the women who came before, resting
in this bowl, far from home.

Letter from a Daughter

엄마,

I do not know how to be human.

My image is reflected
in rivers
mirrors
the deep sheen of your irises.

My voice carries
in wind
blue ink
congruous diction of my sister.

Garments drag and drape on my form like laundry drying on a wire and bloated hands buff the blush of life onto my face. A shadow ties itself to my feet and mimics my every movement, mocking my learned gait.

But occasionally, I remember.

my name – you call me

가현아, you call

daughter and I remember.

I think this is what it must have felt like
to be a newborn crawling into this new world
other, cold, empty
save for your gentle hands,
holding me so precious.

You show me albums upon albums
that carry scenes of my youth
familiar, warm, joyful
뽕튀기 speckled-face &
chlorine-bleached summer hair.

Now you hold me in your arms
like you did when I was born.

You stroke my hair and run your hands
over my face,
you place your hands
over mine and squeeze
to remind me that I am here, now.

I am prone to forgetfulness
when my mind is soaked with thought
you are the brisk wind that passes through
and shines, never too hard
you are still my daughter.

I'm bigger than you now 엄마,
older than I was before –
I will never be who I used to be,
but you taught me to walk with these legs,
to talk with this voice – let me honor
the body you gave me.

Hold me, guide me
teach me how to be human.
Let me not forget
that this was the body
you once bore.
Stay with me – I still have so much
more to learn.

Love,
가현