

셋째 딸¹

for my mother

In Seoul, the hallway fills with the sound /
of a mother's muffled sobs / behind her bathroom door—
it's not joy. They're her prayers / unanswered. 셋째 딸:

we name / the third daughter, the child who should have been
a son. They carry her / in the shadows
of dusk, in the fortune-tellers' mistakes / dressing her

so no one will pity her mother. they line her up /
with her sisters, each photograph proving / grace
taught into their spines, without

sons. Until he is born. 셋째 딸: they name
the girl who wakes / before dawn to follow her mother
through the fish market / who keeps

her smile in place / resentment hidden in the fraying
hem of her hand-me-down dress / who keeps
herself invisible. She bends

in translation: 셋째 딸 / to “third daughter.”
The girl who accepts / her brother's blame
without protest / who finishes homework / who plays games

she never wanted to play / who never names
her love *conditional* / never imagines her own life
without / shame woven into its threadbare cloth. She spent

middle school / wondering if her brother would
exist / if she were a son. 셋째 딸: she feeds
everyone else first / measures herself with her parents'

pride / savors the scraps of praise they leave out
on a cold plate. Her mother said / loved her more after her father died. She said she loved her / more

than she loved her brother. 셋째 딸: we name
the woman who speaks too late / born with apology
clouding her mouth. I wanted to believe you. I wanted

to believe you. I really did. But I could not.

¹셋째 딸 means “third daughter” in Korean.

Unheard

My sister's slimy birthed body is a question
answered with the certification
of her existence, not her cries. This page
splits *before* from *after*, folding her life
into smaller, more manageable stillness.

Somewhere, a doctor presses into another newborn's
pliable jugular with his stethoscope and hears
the strain of a rattle. With one
definite stroke, he writes her diagnosis, which leaves
pressure dimples along her cold skin.

Somewhere, a mother spells words with magnets
spanned across her turquoise fridge, her daughter
ingesting each word, carelessly spraying them
across muted tiles. Layers of saliva cake the linoleum:
mom, milk, me, each word a penny lodged deep
in her trachea, a penny down a well gone wishless.

Somewhere, a man holds a sandy file
against the width of his snaggletooth, bracing himself
to read the history he cradles in his hands. Like
an epitaph to his daughter's stuffed animals, he blinks
away the matted miniature tiger's beady stare
long enough to recount the fruitless hours he spent
meandering in the neighborhood mall's theatre.

What does a name do but pin down?
Like a butterfly, wings pinned under glass.
Like a fever, measured but no less felt.
Somewhere, an older sister has just realized
that knowing is half the battle, that knowing can't
answer a question if no one else hears it.

Muscle Memory

Each time my grandma handed me the colander, she placed her hand
over mine and swirled. Honeycombed, still warm

from its last use, it sang through three rinses, maybe
four, depending on the water's stubborn clouds. She said

the starch made the rice cling—the grains slipping like silt
through my pruned fingers, softening each cloud

into the hush she'd hum. Barely, maybe not even
a song, just the rhythm: rice becoming good rice, becoming

clear rice, becoming ready. My job was to swirl until the water
gleamed with clarity. Her job was to watch

with the same unblinking eyes she used
to examine test scores, dumpling pleats, the symmetry

of my work as I wiped the table clean. The bowl always held
just enough for her, for me, and for the steam

rising until it disappeared into condensation. Each time
she called me clever, I swelled with the grains under the lid

of her watchful gaze—even when shards of enamel chipped
from the sink, even when the faucet whined. In my own

kitchen, years later, I catch myself swirling time
into fogged glass, muscle memory refusing to settle

in the past. Even now, my hands know the way—
even when my mind forgets the shape

of her voice, the bowl's bone-chill. I've learned care
lives in the repetition of small things: the lifting

of single clouds onto my plate, what's worth keeping
humming against the lid, humming in each bite.