

marci calabretta cancio-bello

NOCTURNE: YEAR OF THE SNAKE

“TRUST ME. I KNOW WHERE WE’RE GOING.” Tonight, my friend Kim and I ramble down a street in the Itaewon district of Seoul, South Korea. She has been in Korea much longer than I have, teaching ESL at a local university, and seems to know how to find all the secrets tucked in the folds of this city. For example, she knows that I have been craving a bowl of noodles for days. Not just any noodles, either. A bowl of buckwheat noodles handmade before me by a man with thick forearms strewn with flour. Ropes of dough boiled-to-order and covered in a thick, sweet black-bean sauce with diced carrots and onions. This craving, once small and quiet in my lower belly, has snaked its way up to nestle beneath my left clavicle. I am insatiable.

Kim pulls me into a narrow doorway that is already overcrowded. Two rows of tables cramp the space between the low wall dividing the dining area from the open kitchen. The aroma of fresh-sliced garlic, browning onions, and red pepper paste wafts from the enormous silver pots lined up and boiling on the stove. A line of customers presses against the wall and spills outside, waiting for takeout. Orders are flung across the long, narrow space, above the clink of metal chopstick, the hum of conversation, the sizzle of saucepans. Although Kim’s haircut is the same wavy bob spotted all over Korea this autumn, she is tall and broad-shouldered, and older than me, and there is something very American about both of us as we squeeze past the line and find a tiny table in the back. A middle-aged woman is just now clearing away the dirty dishes, and glances at Kim as she stacks two bowls still slopped with spicy red sauce that assaults my nose.

“Two orders of *jjajangmyeon*,” Kim says, hanging her Louis Vuitton handbag on the back of the chair. She adjusts her gray pencil skirt and the black cardigan so often included in her teaching ensemble. Above the din, I can hear one of her black pumps tapping on the white tile under the table. *Jjajangmyeon* is the Korean adaptation of a Chinese dish that translates as “fried-sauce noodle” and is traditionally made with buckwheat noodles and a black-bean sauce. In this restaurant, one of only two like it

in Seoul, the noodles are made by hand. In the enormous restaurant window stands a man clad in white, with a white apron. A hawser of dough is strung between his wide-flung hands. The air around him is full of flour.

“So,” Kim says to me. “Can I ask you a question?”

At the end of my last semester in graduate school, our professor asks the class to write a lyric essay on the lyric essay. This is meant to be a broad prompt, the professor says. You do not have to incorporate everything you’ve learned about what the lyric essay is or can be. The essay itself can be a demonstration of what is possible. She looks at me, bobbling in the doorway, face creased with confusion, and says, “Just write. Whatever you think a lyric essay is, even in some small part. Whatever comes to mind.”

The *jjajangmyeon* man sprinkles the wooden counter with flour and stretches the length of dough between his outstretched hands. He swings the dough up and down like a jump rope, and crosses it over itself, slapping it onto the counter. Again the dough sags up and down. He flicks his wrist, and the dough twists itself into a small noose. He grabs the looped end with one hand and brings the dough up again with the other. Repeat. Twist and pull. The corded muscles in his forearms flex, his breath nothing but powder. He sprinkles the counter with more flour, and rolls the dough in it, loops and folds and pinches the ends together over and over. It writhes and twines around itself, until the strands of each noodle begin to form.

What comes to mind is this: An ancient funerary text, found in the tomb of King Tutankhamun, describes two serpents coiled around the head and feet of a god, each with his tail in his mouth. This is to signify the unification of Ra and Osiris, heaven and the underworld, the beginning and end of time. In Greece, Plato describes the circular, self-cannibalizing being as immortal, the first living being, representing the soul of the world itself. Norse mythology tells of Jörmungandr, the middle child of Loki and a giantess, the Mithgarth-Serpent who grew so large that he encompassed the world and grasped his own tail. It is said that when he lets go, the world will end. His brother, the great wolf Fenrir, will eat the sun while he devours the earth. We know this serpent as the Ouroboros.

A lyric essay begins from nothing like itself, or from everything you have ever known. It is a mosaic, a girl's black braid, a complex equation that has left all but the music of letters and numbers behind. It is a snake coiled in on itself, belying its length and venom, its strength to press itself dangerously against the curve of the sky. No, wait. Let me try again —

“Are you in Korea to find your parents?”

This is the question that everyone asks adoptees, that nobody seems to think is inappropriate to ask. The question I will take years to learn how to answer. Do you really want to know about the girl with a neat black braid or straight bangs who lifted her brand-new school uniform for the wrong boy and got knocked up somewhere between those navy pleats and early autumn? Do you want to know why she cradled me in her womb for forty weeks despite the cultural stigma, and then gave me up to be raised by a set of parents with eyes and patriotic tendencies of a completely different color? Are you asking whether I think she expected to ever see me again in her lifetime?

Yes.

“No.”

The father I know looks most like his mother: the sharp, Roman nose of Italy, the rounded body and short stature, even the curving front sweep of their cropped hair. He shares her tilted jawline, her olive skin, her bright blue eyes with small, taut pupils. I share none of these characteristics with either of them. I have only my father's temper, and his love of pasta.

The last time I saw my grandmother, her hair had completely whitened. She let me drop the bay leaf into the pot of bubbling red sauce, let me turn the sweet thick sausages with the wooden spoon. She taught me how to speak with my hands the language of desire and satiation, rolling lumps of dough between my palms until they became the long, thin bodies of noodles, dropping then in boiling water to soften and coil at the bottom of the pot until they floated, ready.

In the eighth volume of the first known scientific encyclopedia, *Naturae Historiae*, Roman scholar Pliny the Elder described a serpent “with a white spot on the head,

strongly resembling a sort of a diadem.” This scaled creature, known as a Basilisk, was considered king of the serpents, and was said to have the power to kill with a single glance. The Roman poet Lucan traced its origins back to the blood of Medusa, the famous Gorgon. When Perseus beheaded Medusa, “serpents were bred from the fallen blood and came hissing out to display their forked tongues.” Athena forbade Perseus from passing over Europe with Medusa’s severed head, lest the cities be turned to stone from her dead-eyed stare, so he sailed across the untilled region of Libya. The Basilisk was one of the snakes that sprang from the blood that fell on the Libyan soil. “The Basilisk lives in the desert, then; or rather, it created the desert.” Later, in the Middle Ages, it was rumored that only a cock’s crow could kill the serpent, or a mirror: the Basilisk could be struck dead by catching its own gaze. Apparently, these days Harry Potter can also destroy one.

“Lyric” implies that the essay must begin in poetry, in the impulse to describe the world moment by still moment. Whatever primordial fire burns within the moment of poeticism must be apprehended to breathe life into the body of the essay. The image is jolting, a lashing-out of the imagination to capture and internalize some aspect of the world that has caught your eye. The piece must grow from there, must shed its scaffolding and make the unknown known.

“Lyric” indicates that narrative is not required. Nor, necessarily, is fact.

It takes only 15 milliseconds for a snake to lash out at its prey. The king cobra delivers enough neurotoxins in a single bite to kill an Asian elephant. The venom of a black mamba can kill a grown human in less than 30 minutes.

Young snakes shed their skins every four to six weeks; adults, every three to six months. They do this endlessly, slipping from themselves larger and smoother, and leaving behind nearly perfect representations of themselves, torn open and brittle.

Currently, the anaconda is the largest known species, averaging lengths of 17 feet, although one recent specimen was recorded as measuring 30 feet. But in Cerrejón, Columbia, Smithsonian Institution intern Jorge Moreno-Bernal discovered the fossil remains of a 40-foot-long snake, including the rarity of its skull. “Snake skulls are made of many small bones delicately fused together. When the animal dies, the skull falls apart. The bones get lost.” Bernal called the beast

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Titanoboa, and the Smithsonian premiered a movie titled *Titanoboa: Monster Snake*. They are still trying to reconstruct the magnitude and complexity of the beast from what little of it remains.

“Open your eyes.” Christmas, 1996. We are at my grandparents’ house, corralling my mother’s side of the family for the annual group photo.

This is after the traditional cheese ball and crackers, the roast turkey and honey-baked ham, the macaroni-and-cheese made with Helluvagood extra-sharp white cheddar, and fresh, hot rolls still smelling of sweet baked wheat. This is also after the coffee and ice cream, our choice of red velvet cake or flaky-crust ed apple pie.

“Open your eyes,” my mother says to me from behind the camera.

I do not tell her that my eyes are already open.

The *jjajangmyeon* man pinches the strands of dough between his splayed fingers, slices the noodles free, and drops them into the vat of boiling water. Within minutes, he fishes them out with a mesh strainer and divides them in two. The middle-aged woman ladles the thick black-bean sauce over the bed of white strands and delivers them to our table. She also brings an earthen jar of kimchi that has been fermenting in the ground for three years. It is almost too sour, but complements the sweetness of the black sauce, and I can’t bring the noodles to my mouth quickly enough.

One of Carl Jung’s successors, Erich Neumann, interpreted the Ouroboros as a representation of the pre-ego “dawn state,” the infancy stage experienced by both mankind and the individual child. Jung himself identified the mythic serpent as an alchemic symbol, “since it is said of the Ouroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself. He symbolizes the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites, and he therefore constitutes the secret of the *prima material* which [...] unquestionably stems from man’s unconscious.”