

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

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

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

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.”

When written as verb, “essay” means “to attempt.” No longer is it only analytic, or speculative. An obsolete meaning is “to put to the test; make trial of; examine.” This opens the possibility of testing borders, exploring entire continents of literary forms for a match. If lyric is involved, should not the form be an extension of content? What strange new genres may unravel from the realm of the essay? Braid. Fragment. Encyclopedia. Record. The mind remembers what the body does not. The bones discover the same things over and over, and adapt.

At least 3,000 snake species have been discovered. One of the most unusual is considered the flying snake which “launches itself into the air while flaring out its ribs and sucking in its stomach, thus flattening and widening its body and turning into a pseudo-concave wing.” The flying snake can glide up to 40 meters further than a flying squirrel, and can “slither” in mid-air to somewhat navigate its flight path.

An easy contender for the most unusual snake is the sea snake, which absorbs oxygen from the water through its skin, and expels excesses of salt each time it flicks its tongue. The Golden Sea Snake is said to be able to detect light variations with the photoreceptors on its tail.

My father once ate a bowl of spaghetti with chopsticks, just to prove a point about the presumed differences between Chinese and Italian cuisine. That same night, my grandmother saw a snake in her garden. It was summer, 2006, the same summer I first asked my mother why my eyes were slanted and narrower than hers. Were they crossed? She combed my long black hair and separated it into three sections, plaiting it together tightly for the last time. “Of course not,” she said, and pressed her lips to my head, humming a song I would not hear again until years later, when I pulled out her ancient shears and cut off my fishtail braid, and all the questions shook loose onto the tile floor.

Noodles have been consumed in Asia since 3000 B.C. Marco Polo is said to have first returned to Italy from his 20-year voyage with the strange spidery dough that would become a national food staple. But a legal document dating from 1279 listed, among the possessions of Genovese soldier Ponzio Bastone, “una bariscella plena de macaronis” — a basketful of macaroni. Earlier than that, a 5th century Greek

cookbook included a recipe for *lagana*, a dish of thin dough layered with meat stuffing. We know this as the modern-day lasagna. Perhaps the Italians already had their versions of broad, flat noodles, but adopted China's fine strands, elusive and multitudinous as a nest of snakes, an old woman's unbound locks, a bowl of slippery spaghetti.

The Norse believe that, in the final battle, at Ragnarök, Thor and the Midgard Serpent will meet. Jörmungandr will rise from the ocean to poison the sky. Thor will strike Jörmungandr down, then walk nine steps, and fall down dead, poisoned by the Serpent's venom. Time ends. Or begins. Scholars aren't sure which.

The *jjajangmyeon* man still stands in the window, and the air around us is still thick with flour and heat. Our bowls are empty and stacked. The last pickled daikon radish has been swallowed, the kimchi repotted to ferment a few more days. Somehow my hunger has been sated. But Kim is still persistent.

“If not for your parents, why did you come all this way to Korea?”

I still do not know. My eyes lift and rake the restaurant, as if to upturn pots and ladles for an answer that can somehow satisfy us both. Kim is twelve years older than me, and I wonder what I will say in twelve years. She follows my gaze, and together we settle on the lone man standing in the window. The streetlamp illuminates the flour-dust swirling around his shoulders and forearms as he slaps another customer's dinner on the wooden counter. Flour blooms from the ropes of dough.

These are the facts: I do not know how to speak much Korean. I did not grow up playing their games or learning their idioms. I do not know in which season the red-bean desserts taste most refreshing, or when the yellow tiger-melons ripen. I do not know this city's shadows and walls the way a native might. I do not know the names or melodies of the lullabies Korean mothers sing over their children's cradles. I do not know their myths or their hymns, their prayers or their curses. I do not know how to ferment and bury kimchi, or how to bind beds of rice and vegetables tightly in sheets of seaweed. I do not know the names of my mother or my father, nor the sound of their voices. I do not know the coastline of this country.

But I do know that something in my blood is warmer in this motherland. This is also fact, but a different kind of fact. I know that the shape of my face and the slant

of my eyes align with a certain ethnicity. I know that when I was young, my Italian father could only quiet me with kimchi dropped into my mouth by chopsticks. I know that when I walk about this city that smells of silk and blooming chrysanthemums, that tastes of soybean paste and red pepper flakes, whose heart beats beneath my feet with the boom and roll of subway trains, I feel that I have both come home and left it behind.

Watching this man, I know that I have come here to watch him make noodles. I have come to see him make his own version from the dough, to use his fingers instead of palms to parse out the strands of buckwheat instead of egg or vermicelli. I have come to watch the noodles coil and bowl and float, to devour them myself, to see if they really do taste all that different. 🍜