

1/11/19

dear franny choi,

in the first grade i remember hanging my head
low when my umma introduced herself as

yoojin. i remember feeling so grateful that my
name was esther, for i had shed my korean name

in skins. i'd already known that i shouldn't bring
bibimbap for lunch, that it would smell bad and

look as if my kitchen had unpeeled itself. reading
"Choi Jeong Min" was like sinking into my past.

i grazed on it and let it fill my bedroom, seeing
how i could find myself in your words, how my

childhood seeped through the page. i knew this
"paper thin & raceless" you wrote of. i knew it.

in there, i see my pigtails and bangs as if i were a
doll of sorts. i never liked dolls, but i played with

one in my halmoni's apartment in seoul. it was
a russian stacking doll, one you'd crack open to

find another doll to find *another* doll. i think there
were five in the one i used, and i always felt like

the smallest one, the last. it was as if my american
had hidden the korean, and maybe one day, my korean

would just disappear. i wished it would. i wished
halmoni didn't speak korean so much and let me be.

i, too, wished i didn't have "garlic breath" after i ate
her soondubu jjigae. i wished i wasn't so far away.

but now, when i think of college, i wonder what
i'll eat if not korean food, if not soondubu jjigae

by my umma's side. she tells me she won't miss me,
but then she laughs and feeds me more jjigae. i

haven't seen the star yet, but i will if this "factory yard"
lets me go. then, i'll follow the star back elsewhere.

in english class, we're discussing immigration as
one aspect of american literature, yet i do not

believe america is as home as some think. my
parents' home is still oceans away. they tell me

they hope to go back there, and i wonder why they
ever came here in the first place. if they go, i'll

follow them. i'll get lost in their streets and maybe
find my way to the yogurt lady who used to come

by, her face as banana milk as mine. then, i wouldn't
forget. when they'd ask me my name, i'd tell them

i'm yoonjin, spun from "minor chord" and "gook
name." and like you, i confess. only years later did

i know that halmoni had cancer, that god may give
and may take away. in two years, i hope to go back

to her and step inside her apartment, for i know it'll
seem like home. by then, i may know how to cook jjigae.

i'll welcome others there, too. yes, i will, with my broken
konglish slipping out of my mouth and falling to the floor.

i forget when i left my mother tongue, but i hope to find
it, let it pool in my throat and wash the past. i think it's still

there in the stacking doll, folded within the layers of
foreign that seemed so smooth. maybe then, i'll feel

its doll casings like the palms of my halmoni, only rougher
than the year before. halmoni's hair spills out slowly, and she

bends to the floor as she steps. i hope she stays long
enough for me to say *thank you* and hold her hand.

then, i will unravel the stacking doll and unearth a star,
press it into halmoni's skin so that someday, i may find her.

love,
kim yoonjin

