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Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature & Culture, Volume 11, 2018, pp.
121-146 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aza.2018.0008>

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A Journal from the Alpha-Omega Kosiwon

By Park Min-gyu

Translated by Kyung Hyun Kim

and Sue Heun Kim¹

I have no idea if that kosiwon—bar exam prep boot camp—with a very unique name is still there.

Like everything else in this world, it might be or might not be. It doesn't really matter. Supposing it disappeared. No one's to blame. Ten years have passed. For better or for worse, just as people might have died, the kosiwon might have died.

If you were to go on living, that is . . .

It was while I was watching a news report titled “The Rat Growing a Human Ear on Its Body” that my memory of that secret room in the kosiwon—I could care less whether it still exists or not—came back. I don't know why. I was just watching “The Rat Growing a Human Ear on Its Body” and everything about that kosiwon came sprouting back all at once. Just like the human ear growing on a rat. Bizarrely. Sprouting.

1. The translators would like to acknowledge several members of the Korean Literature Translation Workshop held at UC Irvine in spring 2017 who offered valuable insights and recommendations when translating this short story: Vanessa Baker, Madeline Collins, Tian Li, Anat Schwartz, and Eun Young Seong. We would also like to thank the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) for providing the grant that made the workshop possible.

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I momentarily immersed myself in quiet nostalgia as if I were a snail inside the snail-shaped cochlea. Yes. Like that snail inside the snail-shaped cochlea, which is inside the human ear sprouting on the body of a rat, there was a time when I used to live at the end of a kosiwon corridor. It was a long time ago, but it's also just a plain fact. If you have never lived in a kosiwon like that, then please refrain from leaving a comment mocking me, such as "there actually is no snail living in a snail-shaped cochlea." You just can't possibly know everything that goes on in this world.

If you look around closely

If a human was living at the end of the corridor at the kosiwon, a snail could be living inside the snail-shaped cochlea. They are no different. So, this would be the story of a human living at the end of a kosiwon corridor that looks like a cochlea in the inner ear. Even though this event took place over ten years ago, the DNA from the kosiwon must be implanted in my body. It's possible that a large "ear of a kosiwon" is already sprouting on my back. Supposing that were true, I tend to think no one's to blame, even for that. Just as the ear was in the midst of sprouting, there are dead people, dead rats, and dead snails. Hence,

if you were to go on living, that is

In the spring of 1991, many things were happening

If you were to go on living, you might encounter all forms of springs, but heck, that spring was a first. The winter before, my father's business went bankrupt. Notices of property seizure were plastered everywhere inside the house and all these loan sharks barged in. The very person responsible for swindling my father at this terrible time, when he had already been forced to file for bankruptcy, was none other than his own younger brother. Of

course, that means it was my *uncle* who completely destroyed my family, but of course I can't possibly call that kind of human being my *uncle*. The house was sold and my family scattered. My parents were forced to move to the countryside, my older brother to the construction pit, and, as for me, I had to couch surf from friend's house to friend's house. It all happened at once.

And then spring came.

So when spring came, my free couch-surfing also came to an end. One day, when I was trying to eat breakfast with my friend's family, I was the only one missing a fried egg. "Look, no egg for him!" my friend pointed out. To which his mother replied, "You know, it just so happens that we ran out of eggs." I continued eating without a second thought, said thank you, and as I was getting up, caught a glimpse of two entire trays of eggs on top of the refrigerator. Behind me I heard my friend's younger sister banging down her spoon, louder than ever.

When I got back to the room, I told my friend I'd be packing my bags. He asked why. I lied to my clueless friend that I had somewhere else to go, but in truth I wanted to keep my eyes and lips sealed and just stay put, even if I had to turn into the pillars or doors of his house, which had air conditioning and steam-heating on both floors. I first went to my brother. He listened to my entire story and said, "I'm sorry, this is all I have." He quietly handed me 300,000 *wŏn* in front of the construction workers' trailer homes. Around the trailers, wild yellow forsythia were in full bloom.

Because of the notices of seizure, my brother had to leave a perfectly fine job. Knowing that even his paycheck would be subject to withholding, he had preemptively handed in his resignation. My brother's severance pay was entirely used up by my parents' living expenses and my tuition. With that money I had gone on

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to become a sophomore at an embarrassingly mediocre college. In reality, military conscription should have been my last refuge, but I couldn't even rely on that because my poor eyesight had already relegated me to reserve status. I took several local classified newspapers to the library, and in front of the building watched as a pair of white cabbage butterflies fluttered high in the sky.

On a sun-drenched desk in the library, my sticky fingers crawled like snails around the classifieds from corner to corner. At this large desk for six with no partitions, two female students sitting across from each other were reading books entitled *Shakespeare* and *Understanding the Art of Photography*. I felt belittled, uncomfortable, and embarrassed, but so what if I was belittled, uncomfortable, and embarrassed? After all, am I not the first human ever to have been enamored of the mere thought of turning into an object like a pillar or a door? The spring day was as warm as a hot cup of sugary *milk coffee* pulled from a vending machine.

Ninety-thousand Wŏn per Month. Meals included.

I had no other option. There was no room for rent even at 300,000 *wŏn* per month. The only place I could go was a place called a kosiwon—though I had never heard the term before. At the highest point of the kosiwon neighborhood hill, there it was . . . the Alpha-Omega Kosiwon, the most inexpensive mother of them all. And to cap it all, not even a single *wŏn* of security deposit was required. This place was the one ray of light that all of a sudden brightened my world, which had sunk into darkness.

The very next day, I moved out of my friend's house. Besides the computer, my load was so light that instead of a change of address, it was more like a change of location. And since my friend helped out by driving me there, it just felt like a change of scenery.

“Come back anytime if you need anything,” said my friend’s mother as I was politely expressing my gratitude.

The Alpha-Omega Kosiwon was located on the slum-like, tawdry outskirts of town, where you had to snake through several small alleys, about 500 meters from a local school. It was an old three-story building with chipped paint, but it actually had clean air because there was a small mountain behind it. At the entrance of the trail to the mountain were several cherry blossom trees waving their branches.

“Kosiwon? Isn’t this where you study for the bar exam?” my friend asked in disbelief after getting out of the car. I, too, was a little concerned, but I had already made up a plan to lie that I was preparing for the bar exam. Both of us failed to realize at the time that the kosiwons were starting to replace cheap extended-stay inns. Actually,

. . . our worries were for naught. I didn’t know these replacements were happening. But starting in 1991, as day laborers and red-light district workers began to fill up kosiwons, the number of students preparing for the bar exam started to dwindle, but both groups were still intermixed. So, it was a time when it was a little bit humiliating and embarrassing for both the people looking for a room in a kosiwon and the kosiwon owners. Anyway,

. . . we, who had no idea about any of this, tiptoed up the staircase. It was no one’s fault. Everyone in their twenties judges the world by titles or looks. We had just turned twenty, and the place happened to bear the sign Alpha-Omega Kosiwon. Finally, we arrived at the main entrance. After taking a deep breath, we opened the door. The overcrowded vestibule, which had already run out of space, held thirteen pairs of sneakers, four pairs of dress shoes, five pairs of pumps, three pairs of flip-flops, and one pair of white dress shoes whose owner you could never guess from their appearance.

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As we stepped into the vestibule, we were overwhelmed by these big letters on the framed board above. They were written in calligraphy with a cheap brush and hung in a tacky frame no one else would have dared to put up. And underneath the frame, I saw a small counter with a glass divider that had a peephole. The proprietor was an *ajumma* in her fifties. “Right, you’re the one who called earlier?” “Yes,” I replied in a voice as *courteous* as I could muster.

We were guided to my prospective room right away. The corridor was unbelievably long, narrow, and dark—barely forty centimeters wide. As if playing a game of choo-choo train, we were forced to walk single file. *Courteously*, the train continued to move forward inside the tunnel. Then, suddenly, in the middle of the tunnel, someone popped open a door and jumped out into the corridor. The timing was such that a collision seemed inevitable, but he twisted and contorted his body, gluing himself to the wall in a flash, a move unbelievably quick and obviously well practiced. It was also *courteous* to boot. My goodness! Imitating the matching contortions of the proprietor at the head of the train, we also twisted our bodies to squeeze past him. I held my breath and found myself tip-toeing. My room was at the very end of that corridor.

“We only have one room left,” whispered the proprietor as she turned the key. “Someone wanted to see the room tomorrow, but I told them that somebody was already coming today. I tell you, this room was meant to be yours.” And when the suddenly talkative proprietor opened the door, we couldn’t conceal our shock. The space was more like a coffin than a room. Utterly speechless, I let my two heels drop to the floor.

To sum up, the space where your legs would have to go when lying down was already occupied by a desk and chair.

That's where you would theoretically study. And hypothetically, let's say you started to doze off. Then you would say to yourself, I better sleep. What you'd have to do is place the chair on the desk. Wow, underneath the desk, you would never have imagined there was such an enormous space (I mean enormous given the actual dimensions of the room)! There, beneath the desk, you could stretch out your legs. So, again, to sum up, that's how you'd be able to sleep.

So, if you were to lie on the floor, you would see two clotheslines cutting across the ceiling and a small cabinet attached to the top of the desk. In the middle of the ceiling was a tiny fluorescent light resembling a faint X-ray. It was as weak as a fractured bone and as pointless as an overexposed image. It's not a light you would ever want to use, but it had to be turned on when you were in the room, since there was no window. "And, didn't you say meals were included?"

"Right. So, please follow me." We again proceeded in a game of choo-choo train and went up to the roof. There we saw a small rooftop house, and inside was a four-person table and a giant electric rice cooker. The proprietor opened the lid of the cooker as if to say, "Voilà." There was rice in the cooker that seemed rather stale, but there was a lot of it. So, "All you would have to do is bring *banchan* and eat whenever you want because there is always rice."

There was a communal sink, a bathroom, and a break room so tiny and cramped that it could be considered another private space. Inside, there was a shared laundry machine and a junky TV. "Oh right, everyone is responsible for purchasing their own toilet paper. I know that I should provide it, but whenever I leave it in the bathroom, someone always ends up taking it. It's impossible to keep up. That's why. I hope you understand."

“Then I will start moving my stuff,” I said, ironically, without any emotion.

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After handing over the first month’s rent, filling out my personal information in the ledger, and receiving the room key, all of a sudden I felt like an adult and started to think I knew a bit about how this world works. Just the way I smuggled them out of my repossessed home, I quietly started moving the computer and five suitcases to my room. Carrying a monitor nearly as wide as the corridor, my friend whispered,

“Could a person actually live here?”

As if to say it was almost disrespectful for any human being to accept such living conditions without a second thought. Depending on who is on the receiving end of such a question, it could be cruel—cruel enough to drive someone crazy, or fill them with resentment or sorrow. However, even at the moment I heard this question, I was seized by an unexpected emotion that came out of nowhere. It was strange. I wasn’t mad, resentful, or sad. I was lonely.

Just like that, I was done moving. After locking the door, I went back downstairs to see my friend off. “Are you sure you’re ok?” he asked, exhaling a long puff of cigarette smoke. His expression seemed washed out, as if he had suddenly developed jaundice. “I’m fine,” I answered. My friend briefly gazed at the sky and started his car without another word. “Thanks, bye,” I said. He only replied with a nod.

The trunk of the red sports car disappeared as it descended the hill. A breeze indicated the arrival of spring. I smoked another cigarette. The world was courteous, and the several cherry blossom trees lined up along the entranceway were still waving. So, it

was spring of 1991, when it seemed like nothing and everything happened at the same time. *When looking back, why*

. . . was it such a fine spring?

On the first night, the person who knocked on my door was none other than District Attorney Kim.

My computer was a problem. I realized that if I put the monitor on the desk, there would be no room for the chair. In other words, there would be no space for me to lie down. Since the space left me with little choice, I immediately came up with a solution. I decided not to stretch out my legs. I'm sure I've heard somewhere that sleeping all curled up like a shrimp is actually good for your health. *I know, hey . . .*

. . . it's possible. Night fell as I comforted myself. That first night is still vivid in my memory. It was enough of a "silent night" for baby Jesus to be born again, and also enough of a "holy night" for one to feel humility and poverty. I couldn't sleep. I quietly searched my bags, and in the third bag's side-pocket, I found a Walkman. However, I couldn't find my earphones. Holding my breath, I tuned in to a station and listened to music at the lowest audible volume. To elaborate a bit more, the lowest volume was so low that I couldn't make out the lyrics but could only hear the continuous "*clang-clang-clang-clang*" that barely indicated that music was playing. It was weird, but I broke into tears while listening to the *clang-clang* sound. The *clang-clang* was not a song that I knew, but it was still a great masterpiece.

Knock knock.

I knew the knock came from the person in the next room because I heard a door open right before the knock. I opened my

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door thinking it wouldn't hurt to be on greeting terms, but beyond the threshold there was only an angry face that made any greeting impossible. A short-haired man, who was unusually short, with a squat build, who looked to be about ten years older, glared at me, both hands firmly resting on his hips. His squinty eyes behind his metal-frame glasses were bloodshot.

"Be quiet."

After spitting out those two words, the man walked back to his own room. After quietly closing my door, I turned off the light, curled up, and slept, thinking I had made a huge mistake. Of course, there was no way sleep would come, but I concentrated on sleeping anyway. I did my best.

The next morning the proprietor asked to see me. She knew all too well what had happened the night before and offered me advice of one kind or another along with requests for cooperation with one thing or another. In short, the man in the next room was the last real law student left in this kosiwon. For that reason, we needed to pay particular attention to the rule of *courtesy at all times*. The proprietor called the man District Attorney Kim.

"I'll be careful."

I was feeling that I should speak up, but I decided that I would have to accept this special circumstance of mine as nothing special, just the norm. I had no other option but to rely on my special kind of passive personality. "You are exactly like your dad," Mom used to say all the time.

After that day, with a one-centimeter plywood divider separating me and D.A. Kim, we became roommates. I mean, there is no other way to describe our relationship than to call us

roommates. The sound of a pen rolling on the desk or sniffing could be vividly heard from my side. Therefore, sometimes I was mad with the need to listen to the “*clang-clang-clang-clang*,” but I would just gulp down my saliva, remembering those scary, squinty bloodshot eyes. Little by little, I became more silent.

If you actually pay attention, the human body produces all kinds of noises. In other words, humans are quite noisy animals. Because D.A. Kim’s personality was so sensitive, if I, no, if my body, were to produce even a very small sound, he would not hesitate to express his annoyance. For instance, a small groan or a slap on the wall would jolt me—causing a tremor to run through my body like a bad fluorescent light flickering on and off.

So, eventually I became a creature that produces no sound. At some point, my body naturally acquired that ability. I had grown accustomed to walking on tiptoe, to squeezing snot out of my nose instead of blowing it, to clenching one side of my glutes to silently let out gas while lying on my side—all of this to master the art of silence.

Psssst

Trapped in a small room alone, whenever I freed the fart as if it were a domesticated tropical fish with one side of my glute hoisted up as tightly as it would go, I thought about how much I really missed my family. I also thought of the words to the song “Diamond Head Mountain That I Long to See.” I had no idea why. Anyway, it was “Diamond Head Mountain That I Long to See.”

Whether North or South, the Mountain so Beautiful and Pure
Those Twelve-thousand Peaks I Long to See
Though Wordless, At Last Freed from the North
We Stand Together in Unison

Our Diamond Head Mountain That Name I Long to Call Again
That Mountain Eternally Beautiful
Tainted by the Commies for Several Years but Now We Seek
to Reclaim

That Diamond Head Mountain Calls Out to Us

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That one month was my most difficult and most lonesome period. Because it was spring, the heater was never turned on, so the actual room temperature was quite frigid. I was always alone. In that narrow, lonely, always courteous, and *courtesy at all times* room, I crouched, tolerated, persisted, and remained silent. And then one day . . .

. . . I broke down and realized that I was all alone in the world but, at the same time, could not live in the world alone. I still believe this—though it may be a contradiction. Therefore, perhaps, humans are alone precisely because they cannot live in the world alone.

Anyway, that's the truth.

After that one month had passed, I felt myself getting somewhat acclimated to life at the kosiwon. For instance, let's say I was brushing my teeth and there was the sound of someone loudly urinating inside the bathroom stall behind my back, I could just ignore it. And if that door were to suddenly swing open, and out popped a woman, I could also be unfazed. Also, if I were inside the stall, and had heard someone outside washing his or her face, or if I had opened the door and saw that that someone was a woman, I could walk by her as if nothing had happened.

It just was like that. I had trained myself to always look after my own toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, and towels. After I had gone through the agony of running out of toilet paper in the middle

of the night, I was cautious never to let my toilet paper run out. I had also mastered the skill of placing my wet laundry over the clothesline without mixing it up with anyone else's. Learning how to eat stale rice, navigating my way through the local market for the best *banchan* stall, knowing the location of the closest public phone—all became part of my routine.

There were also many changes at school. I studied really hard in order to make myself eligible for a scholarship, and accepted every possible part-time job. One day, I was told, “You don’t really stand out,” by my advisor; “You are a man-child” by my T.A.; “You walk like a ballerina,” by the freshmen girls. *I know, hey . . .*

. . . *it’s possible*. I nodded in agreement. Early summer had somehow arrived. The cool breezes had ceased, and my life was no longer idle. It was the cicadas that were humming “CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG.” They were the only ones that had the license to “CLANG-CLANG” out loud.

After a while I was able to become better acquainted with the people at the kosiwon. But even if I were to run into them, all we would exchange was a knowing glance. No conversation of any kind ever took place. I found this out later, but those people were the ones who were embarrassed about their own downfall. So, the common etiquette at the kosiwon was to avoid each other at all costs.

The women were unexpectedly high spirited. Whenever I encountered them in the bathroom, they were always dignified as they went about their business. They would go in and out of each other’s rooms, share small talk, and go grocery shopping together. Some even gathered at the rooftop house to enjoy a meal and laugh together. “They laughed!” I nearly screamed out loud when I went to the rooftop to smoke. Hearing *laughter* at that place was really that rare.

As I listened to the laughter clearly coming from the red-light district girls, I thought about how women are the ones maintaining the world. Women are healthy. Just imagining a world with only men is shameful. We wouldn't be able to look each other in the face. The sounds of cicadas crying "CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG" reached my ears again.

The only man who never felt shame in this place was D.A. Kim. He was always confident, unapologetic toward everyone, and consistently hard-working in whatever he did. Every day at 6:00 AM and then again at 9:00 PM, he would without fail come up to the roof to perform his calisthenics ritual, and when it came time to eat, he would confidently lay out his *banchan* across the table regardless of whether somebody else was already seated. His actions were, let's say, so full of confidence that those watching him felt ashamed by comparison.

For instance, even if women were around, he rigorously went through his exercise routine. He thrust his pelvis out and leaned back as far as he could. He then stretched out one entire leg and moved his hips in an up-and-down motion. I mean, if that were me, I probably wouldn't even be able to do breathing exercises in front of other people. Also, when he washed his face, of course regardless of whether or not someone else was around, he made a loud "splat-splat" and scrubbed his face so hard that it turned red. Then, he finished off with a sniff as he cleared out all the debris from his nose. *I mean if that were me, well . . .*

. . . never mind.

D.A. Kim was this kind of person. He could behave in this manner because of his pride as a law school graduate and because the proprietor gave him preferential treatment. It was clear that he was the oldest person in the kosiwon, and he talked down to people

with a commanding tone whenever he saw fit. Men as well as women who were amusedly laughing and chatting would shut their mouths when D.A. Kim came up to the rooftop. In other words,

. . . he was the perfect District Attorney in every way.

Every time I ran into him I would make sure to offer him a greeting. I mostly saw him on the rooftop house or at the dining room table, but once, I ran into him at the pub where I used to have a part-time job. Caught off guard, I greeted him, and his face dramatically reddened as he acknowledged me. From what I could tell, he wore the expression of someone whose unseemly side had been revealed. “One pint of draft beer please!” At the sight of him miserably eating alone without even ordering any food, I asked the kitchen to fix him some complimentary dried squid. At the time, neither the owner nor any other guests were present.

“What the hell is this?” he asked, glancing at the unordered food placed on his table.

“It’s complimentary.”

He nodded as if to say it’s no big deal. Using that as an excuse, I sat down across from him. I began to talk about this and that while chewing on a piece of the dried squid. There was a reason for this. I first explained to him about the collapse of my household. And then talked more about how my brother and I would have our salary completely seized even if we were to get employment. “Is it true that it is legally required” for my brother and me to pay off our father’s debt? “Is it true that it is legally required” to bear that responsibility? Shouldn’t we be able to at least meet the minimum standard of living? “Is it true that it is legally required” for us to pay the debt off until we die? I confessed to him all of these unfair and frustrating questions I

had been holding onto. He heard my desperate pleas with an aloof expression. And then, his answer was curt.

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“You owe what you owe.”

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When the back of that stinky swine disappeared over the hill, a hot gust of wind reached me from nowhere. Unfortunately, I was standing right by the air-conditioner vents with a cigarette in my mouth. The world was still very *courteous*, and, far off at the entranceway, the cherry blossom trees were still standing without having budged an inch. And so, he was after all *the* D.A. Kim who had knocked on my door on the first night. *Really* . . .

. . . *let us not discuss this anymore.*

All humans live in a compartment. Ditto

It must have been around Autumn Harvest Day when I discovered the graffiti on the bathroom wall. It was graffiti written in tiny letters back in the corner where no one could notice it—and judging from its already fading state, it had been written a long time ago. “All humans live in a compartment” was written in black pen. “Ditto” had been written in reply with a blue Sharpie. I also . . .

. . . say “ditto.”

The graffiti writer must have spent a lot of time here in contemplation. In another corner of the bathroom wall, “life is harder than the bar exam” was written in the same handwriting and the same size. It was just as faded as the other one.

“That might as well be,”

. . . was what I was thinking. At the time, I was exhausted for various reasons. I had won a scholarship, but an excessive amount of part-time work and the stressful life of “*courtesy at all times*” had left me physically and mentally drained. “What am I, a chicken to be sleeping in a place like this all the time?” That was the first thought that came to my head every morning when I woke up. In that tiny room, I couldn’t do a thing. All I could do was literally sleep.

Because it is almost impossible to move your upper body and lower body at the same time, eventually you lose the ability to move at all. Because you cannot stretch your legs, you always feel cramped somewhere, and your body becomes hard like a log. You feel like a piece of furniture—a piece of antique furniture that has always been in the same place.

Each compartment—divided by a one-centimeter-thick piece of plywood—is filled with men and women. Inside, everyone silently farts, sleeps, thinks, and masturbates. In other words, we live. The more you think about it, the more beautiful it is. You are still connected—squirming and aroused—at the same time. Perhaps like cell membranes calling out to each other? Placing my hand on the wall of the panel, I used to fall into contemplation. The door was always locked and there was no window. It was a miracle that no one suffocated. Have my lungs already degenerated? Am I not already breathing through my gills? I thought to myself while feeling my rib cage below my armpits. Now that I think about it, I felt as if there were . . .

. . . *air bubbles* . . .

. . . floating in the room. What was all that? Was it a chunk of gas that was released through the anus as if it were a domesticated tropical fish? Or had fragments of my tired and weary soul—momentarily released from my body—become a piece of furniture?

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By that time, it had already become my habit to work until I was exhausted or, on days I didn't work, to hang around and then go home literally just to sleep. Of course, I could just sleep in the break room at the beer hall, if I so desired. How great to be able to stretch my legs out. Nevertheless, I always sunk back into my compartment. The reason why I had to return every night was precisely . . .

. . . because of my computer.

At the end of the summer, there was a robbery at the kosiwon. A woman rushed into the corridor in the middle of the night, screaming "Kill me now. Kill me now." It was over her missing monthly salary—apparently stolen. Although the police came and launched an investigation, the criminal was still at large. That woman's existence continued to roll along, but her expression after that barely showed a flicker of life. The proprietor came to see me immediately after the incident.

It was because of my computer.

The proprietor repeatedly emphasized the importance of locking my door and also made a point of reminding me, in somewhat legal-sounding terms, that she was not responsible for any valuables that were not stored with her, even if they were lost in the bathroom. I replied with "I understand." She seemed to believe that the robbery was committed by someone inside the kosiwon. I could not help but think that if the robber were capable of stealing a café worker's salary, stealing a computer from a pathetic college student would present no obstacle. A 386 DX-II. At the time, it was a top-of-the-line computer second to none. And it was also . . .

. . . the entire fortune that I had in this precarious world. It was my computer that barely saved me from falling into the

status of a vagrant. Because of these thoughts, no matter what happened, I would eventually make a habit of returning to my compartment. People believe they are defined by what they have. I, too, was no exception.

One night, I stayed out quite late drinking at a farewell party for a friend who would start his military duty the next day. While all my friends seemed to want to drink all night, I thought of my computer. I left the place without telling anyone. The hill at midnight was dark, chilly, and calm. When I got back to the building with the “graceful walk” that my body had mastered, I heard someone sobbing near the entrance to the hill. Maybe it was because I was tipsy. I secretly approached the place where I heard the sound. I clearly saw a man who was sobbing under a streetlight that needed its bulb replaced.

It was D.A. Kim.

Completely surprised, I hid behind a wall of the building. Looking closer, I discovered that D.A. Kim was not the only one there. I saw a young woman standing with her back against a tree, and Kim was crying in front of her. I had never seen the woman before. The woman was unmoved, and D.A. Kim kept whining about something to her. She retained the same cold expression until she finally brushed away D.A. Kim’s hand and walked down the hill. Taken aback, I quickly ran up to my room.

SLAM.

Shortly after I returned to lie down in my room, I heard the loud sound of the next room’s door slamming shut. It was definitely a different sound than usual. What could have happened? What could possibly have led D.A. Kim to act in such a manner? Who was that woman? In the midst of all these questions, the low-decibel

sound of someone continuously whimpering “*clang-clang-clang-clang*” broke the silence of dawn and crossed through the cell-membrane of the plywood divider to my room as if by pressurized osmosis. It was like the cry of a sad insect in the distance.

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I don't remember exactly how much time had passed. The cry of an insect had been replaced by a loud rustle. Someone was hastily looking for something. Something he absolutely needed at that moment in his life? Perhaps her photograph? Or the first love letter from her? It was a night when I could not get any sleep. The rustling became more and more hysterical. I thought, “This is a night when I have to be really careful.”

Oh my gosh.

I felt as if some great force was ready to explode inside my stomach. It all happened in a matter of seconds. It was gas potentially as explosive as petroleum, not methane. And no matter how hard I grabbed my glute, I could not delay the eventual. Furthermore, the biggest problem was that I could not move at all. Any little move, and I felt that a great white shark, his mouth wide open, would be ready to emerge—not a domesticated tropical fish.

I blamed the feasting at the evening soiree, and squeezed my glute ever so slowly. I tried my best to domesticate the angry great white shark again and again. And the one who finally emerged was one single tuna. I thought it was successfully concluded, but the problem wasn't over just yet. The great white shark had not shrunk into a tuna but had been divvied up into a school of tuna fish. The school of tuna fish was not something you could easily reckon with.

Oh, shi—

Something like that could definitely be heard from next door. It was a low voice, but something that blended both displeasure and anxiety. By the time the second tuna had emerged, the rustling and the “oh, shi---” were at their peak. I was afraid. So, I promised myself again “this is the night that I would have to be more . . .,” and then the third tuna emerged from his own volition. Oh my gosh, it was not my intention, but that tuna was almost as big as the one in Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea*. I regretted it right away, but it was too late. I heard the door to the next room cracking open, and four consecutive knocks at my door soon followed. The next moment was like the beginning of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. “This is my day to die” was what I was thinking when I opened my door. It was none other than D.A. Kim who stood before me. With his angry squinty eyes as wide as they could possible get, D.A. Kim opened his mouth with a flushed look.

“Could I get some toilet paper from you?”

As I watched D.A. Kim slink away down the hallway with the toilet paper wrapped around his hand, I could not laugh, or be sad, or feel sorry for him—instead I felt lonely. Through the darkness, I heard the sound of the bathroom door quickly opening and shutting. And then, the same musical “*clang-clang-clang-clang*” reached my ear through the cell membrane of the bathroom as if by pressurized osmosis. I closed my door. The fourth tuna had already long since become a can of tuna inside my stomach. Tuna and humans alike live in compartments. I was feeling that I should write that graffiti. *Soon after that incident . . .*

. . . my brother died.

It was an accident. He fell to his death after he was electrocuted by faulty electrical work. My brother, who fell from a seven-story building under construction, was now a handful of

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ashes that had settled in a crematorium. As if he had made his last reservation in the Alpha-Omega Kosiwon, his final resting place was a small and dark compartment. Like tuna packed in a can, my brother checked into his small and dark room. Tuna and humans alike eventually die in their own compartments.

And when the next winter arrived, I had become a human as reticent as a polar bear. D.A. Kim had not passed his bar exam, one young female tenant was assaulted by a drunk client and had suffered a broken nose, the female proprietor had her purse snatched by a pair of thieves on a motorcycle right in front of a bank, and the rest of the people still tried to avoid eye contact out of shame. One day that winter, the heater at the kosiwon broke down. In order to do the repair and also to check on all of the ventilators, everyone had to vacate their rooms for about thirty minutes. I thought that I might try to have a smoke, so I went to the rooftop. As if everyone had all promised to meet, most people were gathered there. While looking at some who were chattering, some who were smoking, and some who were staring up at the sky rubbing their frozen hands together, *I asked myself,*

. . . isn't life just like a bar exam for everyone?

Once the shout announcing that the inspection of the ventilators was finished, people stampeded back into their individual compartments. I stayed put and lit up another cigarette. The world was frozen and the cherry blossom trees at the front of the entryway were hibernating for the long winter. So, unless you are a tree, humans all live in compartments. This is a lot more difficult than passing the bar exam. So, if someone had left that as graffiti, then truly, it would force me to say,

“It would have to be ditto.”

I hope that the kosiwon with a very unique name is still there.

Time passed. I spent another year and a half there. So, in total, I spent two and a half years of my life there. It feels like a dream to say that I spent two and a half years of my life in a place like that. And then ten more years passed. For better or for worse, there are people who have died, and kosiwons that have also died. But I survived. Since I went on living, that is.

The following year D.A. Kim failed the bar exam again. And then . . . actually I don't know what happened next. I heard that his parents from the countryside had come up to see him and that the last law student at the kosiwon was in tears when he had to pack his bags. But I only heard that through someone else. One day I returned home late—only to see D.A. Kim's room completely emptied out.

The young lady whose nose had been broken had it surgically repaired. It was probably during the next summer vacation. I had worked as a waiter in the red-light district lounge that she had referred me to. Take-home pay over there was a lot better than I had thought. I worked there for about four months, and one day I got very drunk and ended up sleeping with her. That was my first experience. Life is so very strange.

The clue to the burglary was found in an unexpected place. The criminal turned out to be the director of the speed math cram school on the second floor of the building. He was caught red-handed trying to steal from the safe in the Chinese restaurant on the first floor. At the police station, he admitted his crime. His confession was filled with gibberish, senseless rants of how his true intention wasn't money and he did it out of love. All this information came from the woman who had her salary stolen. Her settlement money was three times the amount stolen, and her expression now seemed to say that life is worth living after all.

I don't even know what I should say about the 386 *DX-II*.
On the one hand, it goes without saying, but on the other hand,
much needs to be said. That thing. Naturally, it became obsolete.
I don't even remember the exact moment when. What is it? This
thing called life.

I feel the same about the debt. As expected, the debt
disappeared on its own over time. This makes me think that the
world will somehow absolve us of our debts in this way. Or it could
have been my brother who, through his death, had paid off the full
debt. Whichever it may be, you owe what you owe.

I never discovered the identity of the owner of those white
dress shoes.

My father and mother spent time farming. Of course, I
send them money to cover a large part of their living expenses,
so farming is now just their hobby. Dad's biological brother was
arrested in America. News has it that he was being held in prison,
but after that there hasn't been any more news. Eventually, all
humans end up living in a compartment.

The friend who drove a sports car got married to a Miss
Korea. To be more precise, he married one of the contestants in the
Miss Korea pageant. The rumor itself was simple: he had married a
Miss Korea. However, by the time the rumor had reached everyone,
he was already divorced. And no one has heard from him since.

As for me . . . I got a diploma, a job, and a wife. Thinking back
on how I got those three things, all I can say is that I put in all my
effort and was barely, barely able to get them. Life was definitely
harder than passing the bar exam. I can only say that I was lucky.
Was it *only* me?

ONLY.

In the meantime, and again barely, I was able to get a long-term lease on a small rental apartment. On the day of my move, I cried, despite the fact that it was small and pathetic. Even if this had happened to you, I bet you too would have cried. As if it were a dream, I am able to sleep with my two feet stretched out and very, very often, I eat my own share of fried eggs. *And seldom, I mean, very rarely . . .*

. . . I remember my days in the small compartment at that kosiwon. Like just yesterday, while I was watching the news segment on “The Rat Growing a Human Ear on Its Body,” the memory came back. But that was a long time ago, and I feel that I can remember the kosiwon with relative fondness. It’s odd, just as if I could understand the ear of a human growing on a rat. Time eventually is on our side.

“It was as if I was living with a girlfriend named *Courtesy*. *First name Courtesy; last name At all times. Courtesy courtesy.*” Last night, as I was drinking a glass of beer, I was surprised to find myself joking about it to my wife. My wife started laughing. “So, what about now?” She didn’t forget to reply, *I also wondered what about now?*

“Of course, it’s like I’m in heaven.”

As I was responding, all of a sudden I thought it would be great if the kosiwon with that unique name was still at that place. I don’t know why.

After my wife had fallen asleep, I silently slipped out of bed. As I opened the veranda windows I could see the wide, magnificent night sky from the fifteenth floor of my apartment building. What

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could those lights be? What could those lights crowding the sky like air bubbles mean? Could they be sympathetic gazes of those dead people who had to leave our material universe? Or could they be the tired and exhausted souls of the living who have temporarily left the shells of their bodies, leaving them behind as furniture? I asked these questions while having a smoke.

I feel that I am still living in that same compartment. And perhaps, I worry that all of our possessions are not unlike things resembling the 386 DX-II computer. Surely that's not the case, right? All of these items are precious pieces of property for you and me, and we all live our lives trying to collect and protect these possessions.

In any case,
That kosiwon with that unique name
I hope it's still there.
Inside this enormous compartment
Even in times of failure
Or when knocked down
And even if we have nothing
I hope
So that everyone can return and sleep.

Let's say,
Even if we all stay curled up.