

Halmeoni Part IV

I. My Family Home. Georgia. January 13, 2012.

As I trudged through the trenches of high school, my mind a bruised, pulpy persimmon, little kept me grounded to the rooms I was in. My imagination was always drifting off to other places. I could barely process the dim lockers in the hallways, the people moving from class to class. In my mind's theater, I was striding out the double doors leading to the back parking lot, past the trailers crammed with bodies, past the grounds beaten with the footprints of horny band kids. My body was on the way to calculus, but mentally, I was already on the backroad, where traffic would miraculously be busy as fuck. I would close my eyes and my flesh could splatter like rotten fruit in an instant, flimsy flesh and flimsier skin strewn across the concrete.

Every day, it was like a reincarnation of sorts. Dead, and then alive. Dead, and then alive. Muscle memory alone would take me through those congested hallways.

Funny things got me through that year. Heathers animatics. Sexting my boyfriend. The feeling of dissatisfaction after sexting my boyfriend. And, many, many nights, slam poetry.

As with most of my obsessions, I didn't so much "consume" slam poetry as I did find a couple artists that I watched religiously, Blythe Baird and Sabrina Benaim and Olivia Gatwood. I watched "When the Fat Girl Gets Skinny" so many times that the punctuated rage would loop through my head like song lyrics, the words making grooves in my soggy brain. "Explaining My Depression to My Mother" was like my alcohol. Each time I played it was like another shot washed down my aching throat, the white woman with frizzy brown hair trembling through the screen of my iPhone 6, me feeding off of her pain. I loved to wallow in their words, in the gutted timber of their voices. I let myself hang off of their reedy, muscular vocal chords and pretend for a moment that my pain could be something just as eloquent, as poetic. That it could make sense,

could mean something more than the four walls of my room. Or rather, the three walls of my corner of the room, an old divider embroidered with swans the only barrier between my bed and my three siblings'.

I forgot so much of what happened in high school when I left for college. When people show me pictures from those years, I barely recognize myself, let alone the memories I was supposed to be reflecting on. I couldn't fathom that I had been that person— that I had occupied that body, pushed oxygen into those blood cells, breathed that air. How could I, then, remember what that body had been through? Where that body had been? What it had been witness to?

Despite how well my memory likes to erase itself, sometimes the past pushes through. A month ago, for instance, I was drinking coffee with a not-quite-friend at an outdoor cafe in front of the campus library. She was telling me how she'd run into both Sarah Kay and Phil Kaye, two slam poetry giants, on separate occasions when she lived in New York City.

“Do you know Sarah Kay?” she'd asked, her blonde hair swept up into a hair claw, the sun starting to set around us. The air was getting colder, was pushing through the yarn of my cardigan.

I nodded, citing *When Love Arrives*. It was actually the only poem I'd remembered from her, but it was enough for her to assume we were on the same page. As she reminisced on being pressed against Sarah on a crowded subway car, I thought for the first time in months about those endless hours spent laying in bed with my lead-filled limbs, watching those sharp, wet mouths tear through the air, leaving nothing but aching in their wake.

My friend drove me back to my dorm. I shut the door carefully on my way out, cautious as I always am when my rich friends chauffeur me with their rich cars, and walked back to my

room. I opened up YouTube and sank back into those videos and, effectively, that other time. That other body.

Eventually, I arrived at Olivia Gatwood's "When I Say We Are All Teen Girls." In the video, uploaded on YouTube by Button Poetry, Gatwood's hair is swept up in a high bun, wavy baby hairs framing the sides of her forehead. Her skin shines in the stage's spotlight. She's dressed in a sheer black long-sleeve, high necked, her collar framed by two thin gold necklaces. As soon as the video begins, Gatwood launches into her piece, her red lips and flushed cheeks bright against the black background.

"When I say that we are all teen girls," she begins, "What I mean is that when my grandmother called to ask why I didn't respond to her letter, all I heard is,

"Why didn't you text me back? Why don't you love me?"

When I'd watched this particular performance in high school, these first fifteen seconds slipped past me. I was too self-involved, too eager for the climax of each poem, the way they related to my hurt, to my bruised body. These intro lines couldn't relate to my grandmother, anyway. She never wrote me letters or called. There was no need to. We lived in the same house, she was always at most thirty steps away. And anyway, my halmeoni didn't care about love the way Gatwood was talking about. Instead, my halmeoni demanded her own version of Korean filial piety. She was always telling us to smile around her, accusing us of being disrespectful. You could say that I swallowed back my retorts, but in truth, there was nothing I could have said that would have reached her. I didn't have the words, not in the language she was speaking. I wanted to say, *I am not smiling and it was not because of you, but now it is*. Instead, my halmeoni demanded her understanding of Korean filial piety. She was always telling us to smile around her, accusing us of being disrespectful. You could say that I swallowed back my retorts, but in

truth, there was nothing I could have said that would have reached her. I didn't have the words, not in the language she was speaking. I wanted to say, *I am not smiling and it was not because of you, but now it is*. I wanted to say, *Why don't you smile first? Why don't you smile, then?*



Instead of studying the Bible or Korean (another wish I failed to fulfill for my grandma), I occupied myself with superstitions in my childhood, the top two of which were palmistry and dream interpretations. My siblings and I would spend long Sunday afternoons pouring over "The Daring Book for Girls," which was our main teacher for these topics. The lilac book taught us how, for instance, the heart line of the palm, the highest of the indentations, represented one's loves in all forms. The finger that crease starts under can predict whether your love life will be marked by contentment. My heart line swoops downward from my middle finger. My hands knew I would be a troubled, hungry lover before they'd ever touched another body.

My parents had their own magical beliefs, some of which were funny, others haunting. My father, for instance, firmly believed that shaving my and my siblings' heads when we were toddlers would make our hair grow thicker and more lustrous when we aged. He took each of our soft, malleable heads and sheared off our hair, temporary baldness in the name of our future vanity. If you look at any of my photos from when I was young and stumble upon a surprisingly naked scalp, that is why.

My mother, on the other hand, wove her own myths in the aftermath of breakdowns, many of which involved me. One time when I was young, my mother hit me, over and over, in my grandparents' bedroom. I can't remember why she was punishing me, or where my grandparents were. Why that afternoon? Had I done something wrong? Had something wrong been done to her? Whatever the reason for her outburst, I do remember my mom trying to make

me feel better by joking around. It was working. I started to laugh, tears still in my eyes, snot still coating my nostrils. And then she said to be careful, because every time I laughed and cried simultaneously, it would cause my pubic hair to grow faster.

She doesn't remember saying this, but she doesn't remember much of the aftermath of the times where she hit me. I, on the other hand, saddled with the weight of this new, terrifying truth, would swipe away at my eyes, fearful of the dangerous concoction of delight and pain that hastened a process I already felt was so out of my control.



And then there were the superstitions everyone knew about, that were woven into the rituals of everyday life. Close your eyes and make a wish when you blow out your birthday candles or a puffy dandelion or an eyelash caught on your cheek. Find a penny, pick it up, and all day long, you'll have good luck. A ladybug lands on you, and you're even luckier. Spot a four-leaf clover, and you're the luckiest of all.

Signs of bad luck always seemed to be in more abundance than good luck, though: broken mirrors, black cats, walks under ladders, ravens, crows, and magpies, spilled salt, an umbrella open indoors. While I believed firmly in signs of good luck, as a child, I refused to accept that these markers of misfortune could ever apply to me. Instead, I thought that the universe could write a special script for me: that I alone could make these signs ones of good fortune, too. When black birds appeared on the roads or on the rooftops of my neighborhood, they were my guardian animals watching over me, making sure I got home from school safe. When salt spilled, I dipped my finger in the granules and licked them off my skin, relishing in the gritty taste on my tongue.

The bad omens surrounding the number 13 were my favorite, though, to combat in the stories I wove surrounding my own life, in part because my birthday is the 13th of January, and how could anything relating to my birth be unlucky?

When 2012 rolled around, I was delighted. My birthday in that January wasn't on just any day— it was a Friday. Friday the 13th. All day at school, I basked in the sweet irony of it. A day you dread, a day where you're supposed to walk on eggshells. My friends all made jokes about the date, and I laughed along, but I was in on the universe's little secret: that while, for everyone else in the world, the day was full of booby traps, for me, it was proof I was special, untouchable.



I can't remember most of what happened that night. I don't know who cooked dinner or what we ate or when exactly everything started to fall apart or why. I don't even remember if my siblings were there with me. All I remember is that we'd eaten dinner together, my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandma, my siblings, and me, and then the table was cleared, and soon after that my mom and my grandma were fighting. I barely understood Korean then, and so the words they spit at each other meant little to me, but as I sat at the table, tension coiled in my belly and under my skin all the same. I waited and waited for one of them to quit and leave, like pinching your fingers against a candle wick to put out a flame. I waited for the argument to end as they screamed at each other, my mother at the sink, her hands sudsy with soapy water, my grandmother's veins throbbing in her neck, but it didn't. Instead, they screamed so hard they must not have been breathing any air, all of the oxygen they weren't consuming fanning the flame between them until something snapped, until the flame was so hot it was more white than red.

Did my mom throw the first plate, or did my grandma? Does it matter?

I still flinch when I hear loud noises. This isn't the only reason. But it is one of them.

Did I cry? Did I try to stop them? Was I even there?

They were throwing plates at each other, some still wet from the sink, some snatched from the drying rack. I don't know how long this went on for. It could have been minutes or a sliver of a second, but I don't think that would matter, either. It had happened, and continued to happen until my dad intervened. I remember seeing him enter from the opposite of the kitchen. The way the pit in my stomach clenched harder. The gun had finally entered the knife fight. But instead of pulling any triggers this time, my dad was the one who stopped them, who pulled my mom away, them both still screaming, my mom in tears. I had never seen my dad like this before. He looked too old for his face. My mother and grandma disappeared into their separate rooms upstairs, and my dad took out the industrial vacuum we usually reserved for the garage. As he let the plastic tube suck up all of the ceramic shards, I remember staring at the kitchen floor. He warned me not to come close, that I might cut up my feet if I did. And then, I guess, I left.

The clock eventually struck 8:18 PM. I had officially turned twelve.



“You can never step in the same river twice, for other waters are continually flowing on.”

For years after that twelfth birthday, I could only spin that night as a joke. *Wow, so Friday the 13th really does suck, for everyone. I am not special, not immune to bad luck.* It was an unfortunate reality check, a slap on the wrist from a universe on which I had tried to force camaraderie. *We are not friends*, the universe had stated decisively. *Not even close.*

It wasn't just a joke, though, and my body knew it even if my mind refused to. Whenever a dish drops, whether I'm at home in the dining room or with friends at a restaurant, I wince. I

think about the doctor my aunt works for, who once told us a story of a patient who had gotten caught in the crossfire of a shooting long ago. How, twelve years later, the bullet emerged from his side, pushing against the skin, how the doctor had to excavate it out. It is almost as if some of the plates' pieces disappeared into my body, and, like the bullet, when I hear a crash, the shards begin to beg their way out.

When your body is full of shattered ceramic, it is hard to think objectively about why it is there— what could drive a hand to grasp the circular edge, what could motivate an elbow to rotate backward, what could allow the fingers to release it, to hurtle the dish across time and space and almost smash into a person's face. A person, who they love. I was not only unable to wonder why my grandma and mom found themselves in this position, I was unwilling to. What had transpired that night, I had allowed myself to believe when I allowed myself to remember, was between them. I was only interested in the way their anger, their recklessness, had made me collateral damage. I, after all, would never go to such lengths to express my emotions. I was not crazy, like the women who had come before me. I would be different, because I swore to myself I would be.



When I rewatched Olivia Gatwood's performance of "When I Say We Are All Teen Girls" this past month, for the first time in over a year, I watched it until the end, but my ears weren't really listening. My mind was on a mental loop of that fifteenth second of the video, the words running recursively through the synaptic track of my brain:

Why don't you love me?

Why don't you love me?

Why don't you love me?

As Gatwood's voice continued to stream out of my laptop, I found myself back at that dining table, ten long years ago. My twelve-year-old self and my twenty-two year old self, two silly matriarchs holding court.

At twenty-two, I often feel like I know less about myself and the world than I did at twelve. At twelve, I believed in my abilities as a writer, and could call myself one without doubt. I knew how to be alone then, too, relished in it, the sweet solitude of slow breaths and daydreams. But one of the things I do have at twenty-two that I didn't ten years ago is the experience of loving someone for three years. Failing spectacularly at it, and wanting to be loved back anyway.

To call it dating would be untrue. My only college ex and I essentially lived together for two years, in a variety of homes. During our sophomore year, we lived across the hall from each other, though really, we lived in my room, hers perpetually vacant unless she needed alone time to write or space after a fight. When the pandemic hit in the spring of that year, we tried to go long-distance but failed, largely because of my anxiety and inability to be a good girlfriend over the phone. The same day she broke up with me, her vocal cords raw from crying all day, I offered for her to come live at my family's home. Her brother had schizophrenia, and her presence was triggering his delusions. Her mother was also making the home hell, the verbal abuse more than she could handle. We proceeded to live together as exes in the already-crammed corners of my house in Georgia, and then, that fall, we moved together to California, to live with friends, still as exes. I left early, unable to wrap my head around that word, ex, the slash of it, the way it cut through every cell in my body.

Eventually, she followed me back to Georgia. We tried to be lovers again. We lived in an AirBnB in Atlanta, in the basement of an old white Christian couple, trying not to have sex too

loud for fear they'd hear us and kick us out. This fear was not enough to keep us quiet when we fought, which was often debilitating.

When our stay was up, we moved to another AirBnB, this one five minutes from my family home. By the time our money had run out at this second one, we'd broken up, for good. She'd said she couldn't do it anymore, that I was too much, that this would never be enough. I said I couldn't do it anymore, either. Although we would continue to do everything a couple does in the months of that ugly aftermath, we never called each other our own again.

The day she called it quits, for the last time, I grabbed the glass of water in the dining table that doubled as our workspace and threw the water at her face. The liquid splashed across her cheeks and eyelids, dripped down the bridge of her nose and the sharp edge of her jaw and onto the wooden floor. Could my twelve-year-old self have ever imagined me being that kind of lover? That kind of woman? She probably wouldn't. She'd probably think I was telling a tall tale. Because she knew better. She knew better than to let her anger control her, to let her rage blind her to reason.

How do I tell her what I know now, of anger? What I know now, of rage?

A mere year of supporting someone's whole life without feeling like it was acknowledged changed me. Knowing it was partially my fault that she was depressed, knowing it was partially my fault she didn't have the capacity to thank me, much less reciprocate any of the cooked meals and massages and laundry and comfort, knowing these things did nothing to alleviate the anguish, the hurt that calcified in my muscles. If anything, knowing this pushed me more into the cookie cutter outline of the hysterical woman I had become. Because I knew why she couldn't hold me, or wash the dishes, or call me beautiful. I knew the damage I'd inflicted on her, and yet, as I scrubbed the floors of our first AirBnB every Sunday, as I washed pots and

plates forks and pans every afternoon and evening, as I drove forty minutes every day to take her out to eat, no matter how many times I swore I would no longer expect anything from her, I still found myself in the same old mantra.

Just this once, why don't you cook dinner? Just this once, why don't you fold the clothes?

Why don't you show you care about me?

Why don't you care about me?

Why don't you love me?

~~

The more accurate question, actually, is not, as Gatwood says,

“Why don't you love me?”

It is, instead, the question with one more word attached.

Why don't you love me back?

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We never step into the same river twice. Other waters are continually flowing on.

I am sitting with my twelve-year-old self, playing witness to the same scene. But where the elementary school version of me can only hear the violence, can only feel the fear knotting thick, ropey braids under her ribs, the college version of me can only hear the decades of life piling inside my grandmother, decades and decades of not feeling seen the way she wanted, of doing so much and receiving so little, despite her attempts to ask and demand it. I can only see the wall that is my mother, and the fists that are my grandmother, fighting every day to break down the bricks she helped construct, to smash the whole thing and magically find something warm and sweet and and perpetually soft on the other side. To find her daughter, smiling, to find a lifetime's worth of appreciation for a lifetime's bitter, toiling work.

I can only hear my grandmother saying, with each plate she threw back at my mother, which each sandpaper word:

Why don't you love me? After all I've done. After all I've loved. Why don't you love me back?

II. Korean Class, on Zoom. Winter 2022

I find my grandmother in unexpected places, but I find her in expected places, too. I find her, for instance, on a dreary morning in my online Korean class my junior year. The setting is expected, but the way I find her catches me by surprise.

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The first time my Korean teacher calls me by my Korean name, it is barely 9 AM on a weekday. We are on Zoom, and instead of Kaitlyn, she says, Jina-ssi. We'd discussed in the last class that, though I was as Americanized as a second-and-a-half generation Korean-American could be, I did have a Korean name. And suddenly, here it was. For the first time in so long.

The sun hasn't been out for more than an hour, and yet, as I stare at the tiny boxes that make up our classroom, my Korean teacher staring at me expectantly, I find myself starting to cry. I unmute myself to answer whatever question she's tossed to me, then quickly mute again. I wipe my eyes. I pretend I am wiping at them because it is early in the morning. I don't know, then, what has come over me.

I know now, halmeoni. I know.