

“Please wait here.”

Beneath the murderer’s framed photograph is a door with frosted glass. Behind that door, she knows, the censors are busy with their work. She pictures the scene: middle-aged inspectors sporting army uniforms, their faces entirely unfamiliar, poring over the open books covering the table. The counter manager opens the door just as wide as he needs to in order to angle his body through, the movement swift and practiced. Barely three minutes have gone by before he returns to his post.

“Sign here, please.” When he pushes the ledger toward her, she hesitates. A single glance had been sufficient to see that there was something strange about the manuscript proof he has just put down on the counter. “Sign, please.”

Eun-sook signs her name, and is given the manuscript.

Any further exchange of words would be pointless. The censors’ task has been carried out, and now Eun-sook holds the result in her hands.

She turns and walks away from the counter, her steps slow and almost stumbling. She comes to a halt by the row of benches and turns the pages of the manuscript. Having spent a full month typing it up, comparing it against the original and completing the third printer’s proof, she knows its content practically by heart. Now at the final stage before publication, it only remains to be properly printed.

Her initial impression is that the pages have been burned. They’ve been thrown onto a fire and left to blacken, reduced to little more than a lump of coal.

Submitting the manuscript proofs to the censor’s office, then calling back on the appointed day—she’s been through this same process every month since starting work at the publisher’s. After checking to see which sections of the text had been crossed out with a black line—usually three or four, a dozen at the most—she would return to the office feeling somewhat deflated, and send the corrected proofs off to the printers.

But this time is different. More than half of the sentences in the ten-page introduction have been scored through. In the thirty or so pages following, this percentage rises so that the vast majority of sentences have a line through them. From around the fiftieth page onward, perhaps because drawing a line had become too labor-intensive, entire pages have been blacked out, presumably using an ink roller. These saturated pages have left the manuscript bloated and distended, waterlogged flotsam washed up on some beach.

Handling it as though it really were charcoal, friable and likely to crumble, she slipped this alien object into her bag. Its leaden weight was entirely incommensurate

with its actual substance. She cannot remember how she made it out of that office, how she walked down the corridor and out through the main doors, where a plainclothes policeman was standing guard.

There is no way, now, that this collection of plays can be published. All their efforts had been in vain, right from the start.

Her mind fumbles through those few, scattered sentences that were spared from the introduction.

*After you were lost to us, all our hours declined into evening.*

*Evening are our streets and our houses.*

*In this half-light that no longer darkens nor lightens, we eat, and walk, and sleep.*

She recalls sentences roughly darned and patched, places where the forms of words can just about be made out in paragraphs that had been otherwise expunged. *You. I. That. Perhaps. Precisely. Everything. You. Why. Gaze. Your eyes. Near and far. That. Vividly. Now. A little more. Vaguely. Why did you. Remember?* Gasping for breath in these interstices, tiny islands among language charred out of existence. How can there be water coming out of the fountain? What can we possibly be celebrating?

She turns her back on the black bronze statue of the general with his sword, and walks on without pausing. Her breathing constricted by the scarf, pain throbbing dully beneath the reddened skin of her exposed cheekbone, she walks on.