

I can't be sure of anything now.

When I went to see you that last time, what might have happened if you hadn't promised to be back that very evening? If you hadn't spoken to me so gently, setting my mind at ease?

"Dong-ho's promised to be back home after six, when they lock up the gym." That's what I told your father. "He's said we can all have dinner together."

But when seven o'clock came around and there was still no sight of you, your middle brother and I went out to fetch you. Under martial law the curfew started at seven, and the army was due back that evening, so there wasn't so much as a shadow stirring in the streets. It took us a full forty minutes to make it to the gymnasium, but the lights were off and there was no one to be seen. Across the road, some of the civil militia were standing guard in front of the Provincial Office, carrying guns. *I've come to fetch my youngest boy*, I explained, *please, he's expecting me*. Their faces pale and drawn, they insisted that they couldn't allow us in, that no one was permitted to enter. Only the young can be so stubborn, so decisive in the face of their own fear.

The tanks are rolling back into the city as we speak, they said. *It's dangerous, you need to hurry home*.

"For God's sake," I begged, "let me inside. Or just tell my son we're here. Tell him to come out, just for a moment."

Your brother couldn't stand by any longer; he declared that he'd go and fetch you out himself, but one of the militiamen shook his head.

"If you go in now, that's it, we can't let you back out again. Everyone who's stayed behind has decided to do so at their own risk. They're all prepared to die if they have to."

When your brother raised his voice to say that he understood and was prepared to go in anyway, I quickly cut him off.

"There's no need," I said, "Dong-ho'll come home as soon as he gets the chance. He made me a promise...."

I said it because it was so dark all around us, because I was imagining soldiers springing out of the darkness at any moment. Because I was afraid of losing yet another son.

And that was how I lost you.

I pulled your brother away from the Provincial Office, and the two of us walked back home through those deathly silent streets, with the tears streaming down our faces. Neither of us spoke.

I'll never understand it. The militia with their faces pale and resolute, did they really have to die? When they were just children, really, just children with guns. And why did they refuse

to let me in? When they were going to die such futile deaths, what difference could it possibly have made?