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## a place called home

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# a place called home

## foreword

This series of poems is in part a response to Wendell Berry. Infused in Berry's work is a strong sense of place; these are evident particularly in the books *Hannah Coulter* and *A Place on Earth*. The subject matter of Berry's book *The Hidden Wound* is also extremely relevant to this sequence, for I feel that Berry's discussion of race deserves a response.

Berry insists that it is possible to choose one place, and call it home. He mourns the loss of this practice in modern society, particularly through the trope of children leaving the small town and the agrarian society to move to the city. Yet as a young adult living in a season of transition, it is difficult to resonate strongly with this idea. Berry leaves me with difficult questions - is it possible to find one place to call home? If it is possible, must that home be a person's hometown?

I also want to discuss place as a cultural feeling. Do Berry's ideas about place and home hold up when we include the idea of race into them? For example, what do people do when they are culturally (and racially) disconnected from the place they live? In *The Hidden Wound*, Berry mentions an African-American family who were descended from freed slaves. They eventually moved away from the town they had lived in for generations, because it would never be their home, no matter how long they lived there. Even within Berry's own work, it is certainly possible for a person can feel culturally out of place in the place she or he was born. I find it is difficult to completely swallow Berry's framework of land and place, because it creates a simplistic picture of the human sense of belonging.

This series is not written only to challenge Berry, though I hope it does. I also seek to share some of my own perspective. As an Asian-American, with a Caucasian father and a Korean mother, I often feel caught between the two cultures, searching for a place to call home, one that offers acceptance for both my Korean and American heritage.

I know that I am raising hard and uncomfortable questions in this reflection and through my poetry, and I also recognise that I do not answer many of these questions. But it is beneficial to sit with discomfort, to let it converse in our hearts, to understand that answers are not always available for the questions that plague us. I have sought to write in a posture of grace, and I hope you read it with the same generosity in your hearts. This is an unfinished work, one of processing, seeking, and one day, of finding.

- Genevieve 수년 Hartman

## “a place called home”

it feels, sometimes,  
like i have searched my  
whole life to find  
a place to belong,  
to call home -

to be seen  
first as human,  
not confined to Asian,  
to feel  
recognition without expectation.

perhaps i didn't  
always know  
that i needed to find  
this reconciliation,  
within myself and  
with the people around me.

yet i know now -  
the people themselves  
make up the place;  
if i cannot  
live in harmony with one,  
i cannot be at peace with the other.

to find that peace,  
that belonging,  
is what i long for most.

it feels sometimes,  
out of my reach,  
just beyond the next hill.

## “roller skating”

i stumble slowly, grasp the railing,  
uncoordinated and unsteady -  
my heart beats fast, loud in my ears  
as i lose control of my feet.

once i'm off the rink and reach the rug,  
i'm on safe ground again.  
i don't worry that i'll slip. here  
i catch my breath, inhale dusty sweat.

as i sit, a girl my age comes over to  
introduce herself - i've seen her once  
or twice this afternoon - she greets me,  
so i speak up, respond politely.

then i can see the shift of surprise in her eyes.  
the next words that tumble out  
leave me as shocked as she was  
when first she heard my unaccented words:

“not to be weird, but at first i thought you were chinese.”

the unsteadiness that i felt  
when i couldn't control my skate-clad feet  
is back; the carpet rolls forward -  
her safe ground remains, but mine is lost.

## “echoes from the bus”

i sit, the fourteen-year-old  
in the corner of the bus,  
beside my 할머니 -  
we are surrounded by  
the wrinkled faces of her friends.

they exclaim rapidly, incoherently,  
and point towards me, wild with delight.  
i listen uncomfortably, hoping  
for the familiarity of English amidst  
the overwhelming flood of church-lady glee.  
then i hear “예쁜아기” -  
they think I’m a pretty baby.  
this is one piece of a long string  
of words that I cannot grasp.

finally, 할머니 translates -  
her friends are telling me  
that i look like her.

mom says that too;  
dad always responds that  
i favor his sister.

either way, the resemblance  
only goes so far.

## “the greater cost”

얼마요?

how much is this?

i ask the Korean shopgirl  
about the cost of the fan,  
carefully trying to hide  
my poor accent,  
knowing -

i won’t understand  
her response and will have  
to ask 엄마 for help.

i’m not sure why  
i bothered to ask  
in the first place -  
i don’t know  
what i expected.  
this place does not  
belong to me.

the 부채 is priced at ₩2,000 -  
i wonder how much  
it will cost me to understand her -  
this culture, this language, this land.

## “mixed up”

once i was called a “mix.”  
at first i didn’t know what to make of it  
for no one had ever been so bold  
or quite so blunt.

when i thought about it  
i felt mixed up inside -

of course there are  
different parts of me,  
but they are joined together,  
mixed  
inseparably, intertwining  
strands of being

perhaps it is a strange title  
but it is a fitting one -  
i always have been mixed up.

## “standardized tests”

i never know what box to fill  
when i’m asked to check  
one.

why must i split myself this way?  
allow me to  
choose two -

why can it not be both for me?  
for i am  
both at once.

## “versus”

things seem to end up this way,  
in this rigid form in my mind -  
us versus them.

a few words draw  
out the visceral feelings  
and i scan the room,  
searching for faces like my own,  
seeing only them, for most  
often i am outnumbered.

i long for a time, a  
place where it can just be us,  
where i'm not expected to have  
an authoritative opinion  
just because my skin  
does not match theirs,  
and i am not baited by  
opinionated people who have  
no real idea what they speak of.

i know there will be a few  
in the majority who will  
try to sympathize  
and understand; it isn't  
easy to be different -  
but they, like  
me, are minorities.

i am tired inside,  
and i long to be understood,  
in their white sea of faces.

## “forgiveness”

how can i forgive  
when i don't feel  
you deserve or even desire it,  
when i am challenged  
beyond my limits and  
hurt, immeasurably,  
by the ink on your pages?

how can i forgive you,  
give you mercy,  
for what i see as wrong  
and you do not defend?

i ask myself  
every day, every hour -  
this is my reality,  
the place i live now.

and i struggle against  
all of this - what  
is my proper response -  
rage? hate? love? pain?

forgiveness?

i don't know, precisely -  
but i do know -  
i despise being angry,  
that hate kills  
any hope of love, that  
pain is not a satisfactory end.

so i learn to choose -  
i pick my  
battles and my wars  
and i desire to learn,  
to be able to grow and  
grant grace.

## “generosity”

without memory  
there would be no grace.  
without brokenness  
there would be no love.  
without pain  
there would be no generosity.

so when we are hurt by each other,  
when it feels like we will  
never hear each other's wearied voices  
or see the wounds concealed  
by smeared reflections and shame

when that hurt comes,  
familiar, expected, inevitable,  
i will try to remember -  
without that pain,  
i could not give undeserved mercy;  
i could not learn  
generosity.

## “someone different”

when you  
tell me you are color-blind,  
that you don't see race and ethnicity  
and see everyone the same,  
then proceed to point out my skin color -  
it tells me that you  
don't actually care to find  
reconciliation, because you are too  
privileged to understand what you're talking about.

can you see why this is hurtful?

when you  
single me out,  
ask for my opinion on Chinese politics,  
on cultural differences in education  
or racism in the west,  
just because  
my skin is different than yours -  
it tells me that  
you don't care to understand me as a person,  
that you only want my opinion  
as an Asian, as someone different.

can you see why i feel like i don't belong?

when you  
ask if i'm an international student,  
ask where i'm from -  
it tells me you assume automatically  
that i could not  
be just an American,  
born and raised,  
that because i'm Asian,  
i am too different to belong here.

can you see why i find it hard to call this land my home?

## “goryeo – 고려”

when i gaze across the globe, i see  
a country bound by its division,  
where north and south mean the  
difference between free life and repression.  
how can these wounds heal  
after so much war and time?  
can splintered pieces of heart and  
land join in reconciliation?

\*

though efforts may prove  
fruitless, when years go by  
and feelings do not change,  
i find comfort still  
for always there is  
the chance that one day, the  
hopes and growing pains will be enough -

people will change and  
a country split in two  
will knit together, again one.

\*

i see in myself  
the same shattered shards -  
like my heritage,  
i have not yet  
reached internal peace;  
i do not yet belong to myself.  
two parts at once  
joined and divided,  
forming a broken whole -

i try somehow to fit  
fractured edges together

and i will seek until  
two cultural halves unite,  
fully reconciled,  
finally complete.

## “green cemeteries”

i will lay down in the green of the cemetery  
beside bodies long decayed, and we will be one.  
though gender, religion, and race may differ,  
we will be here, communing with each other  
and the grass we sleep within.

one day the color of my skin and the shape  
of my eyes will not matter, and all will lie  
in green cemeteries and be one.  
the whole world together will share love  
and embody peace, communing finally  
with one another and our God unseen.

## glossary

### echoes from the bus:

할머니- pronounced *halmoni*, meaning “Grandma”

예쁜아기- pronounced *yeppeun agi*, meaning “pretty baby”

### the greater cost:

얼마요- pronounced *eolmayo*, meaning “how much?”

엄마- pronounced *eomma*, an informal address, basically meaning “mommy”

부채- pronounced *buchae*, meaning “fan” - the handheld, folding kind used to cool yourself off

₩2,000 - 2,000 won, approximately \$1.75

### goryeo:

고려- pronounced *goryeo*, referring to an ancient Korean dynasty that ruled from the 10th to the 14th centuries. Under Goryeo rule, most of the Korean peninsula was unified. The modern “Korea” was derived from this dynastic name.