

*Eye Jailed Eye**Intermittent: Speaking in Tongues*

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With my sister, who was carrying her electric breast pump and a small flower-patterned backpack filled with books and a laptop, I walked into the Center for the Blind, beautifully named “Siloam,” where she had found a nameless-yet-licensed therapist to ease her backpack-induced back pain. My sister and I went into two different rooms. And I laid my tiny traveler’s body down on linoleum covered bed, weighing only about 89 pounds plus the weight of the baggage I carried. The therapist first lifted my skull and said how touched she was to see my mother from how my head was formed. She assured me that my mother must have never taken her eyes off her baby, or put her baby down for a restful second, or slept, do you know honey? I could see. I told her she saw it right—absolutely right—and recalled the tales of my mother’s endless rooftop trips from sunset to daybreak due to her baby’s—a child who never closed the curtain of wakefulness—constant crying. My mother certainly did not put down her baby while her skull was malleable and continued that for a while, as I drifted into recalling my earliest memories.

3:01 AM Seoul Time

I woke up fearing rats the size of an adult’s arm. My mother had told me earlier in the kitchen that she’d seen them when my parents had just moved into the house a few years ago. The intermittent sounds of ticking and cracking I feared were probably the sounds of the old rat couple that had lived there long before my family had moved in. They wanted to scare us out of their house, as my father would do if anyone invaded our home. I stayed in bed counting the cracking sounds and thought of going down to the ground floor to call my parents in their bedroom, but I was now an old daughter, no longer a child; how could I knock at the door of my parents’ bedroom after midnight? But if the sound *wasn’t* a rat couple but the cracking of the old house we live in, then this might be an emergency. We had to take action now. I walked down to my parents’ bedroom, stood at the door, and whispered, “Mom!”

3:15 AM Seoul Time

(timid knock knock) “Mom?”

“Yes, I’m here, J.”

“When did you get up, Mom?”

“Just now.”

“Me too.”

“Actually, about fifteen minutes before. I laid in bed for a while and had just got up to pee and jot down a lecture title before I forgot.”

“Me too! I stayed in bed for about fifteen minutes, then I heard the rats you told me about earlier, or maybe the walls are cracking, I don’t know..., I don’t know. Can you go upstairs with me?”

We went up and sat on the floor with our ears to the wall. My mother comforted me that it must be the sounds of the thirty-year-old copper pipe carrying the hot water up and down; it couldn’t be another rat couple. My mind was eased, but then I started thinking about how strange it was that my mom had responded

knocking immediately. It was as if she knew I was going to call her before I did. Then again, this wasn't the first time this had happened. She always seemed to be awake whenever I called for her in the middle of the night. Is every mom like this? I don't know, because fortunately she's the only mom I have. I thought. . I wonder if she wakes up at the very same second I do, with my poor sleep pattern. I wonder if my mother wakes up even when we are not together in the same place. I live far away from her—like, really far—a flight of fourteen and a half hours, over 11,000 kilometers away. I feel sorry that I wake her up without knowing it; perhaps I haven't fully come out of her body yet; perhaps we are still connected somehow.

My mother, too, couldn't detach herself from her mother, who she believed suffered from melancholia, an affliction she inherited. My grandmother's unfortunate life with a man who had a second wife probably caused the condition, but then again, maybe it was there even before the second wife came into the picture, inherited from my grandmother's mother. As the saying goes: a daughter's life is an extension of a mother's life.

My grandmother didn't want my mother, her sixth child because her husband already had enough children from her and from the second wife. She was exhausted. She tried to get rid of her baby using all sorts of tricks: drinking soy sauce, throwing herself down a hill, and wishing the baby away. She did not want another baby brought into her melancholic world. Fortunately, my mother was born. However, she was ill and weak—perhaps because of her suffering in the womb. My grandmother, who hadn't wanted my mother to be born, then started yearning strongly for the sixth child to be her healthiest; even her husband brought home some natural remedies to make the child healthy: a goat, snakes, turtle, frog, ginseng, and so on. My mother was weak but the most brilliant among her siblings, perhaps thanks to these strange remedies. She recalled growing up alone, mostly to avoid burdening her mother's melancholia—packing her own lunch box, bringing home top grades from school, and mostly hanging out with the household animals.

She once told me that she almost drowned in a pond, as I had almost done when I was a child. Unlike in my case, an incident that my family saw and can still clearly recall, my mother's near-drowning was a revelation. She had never spoken about how she almost drowned in the presence of her friends, who clapped and laughed at her, thinking she was pretending. Later, I asked who saved her. She simply answered that she'd saved herself: the tip of her toe touched the bottom of the pond, and she managed to jump out. She coughed out a lot of fresh water and ran home. She told no one.

When I was entering my teenage years, my mother was hospitalized because of her melancholia. She recalls the incident with tears that she says are due to self-pity. I don't remember what I thought and did while she was away in hospital. I think I blamed my father, who had to do the duty of sending her to hospital for her and their three children. My mother stopped writing poetry. She still loved her husband, a lover she met in college, who rescued her from her family, which she still hated, with its house full of shamanic ghosts and Buddhist traditions. She hated her family so much she still gnashed her teeth thinking about them as well as her father's second wife. When she got out of the hospital, my mother was heavily medicated for a while, and my father took care of her very well. He even took her to his workplace so that she could get a job and be resocialized. My mother believed her melancholia was inevitable because it was inherited from her own mother. When she got sick of living, my mother's melancholia emerged as she remembers the poverty and shame she experienced after my father's business went bankrupt. Unlike in her case, my innate melancholia emerged when I discovered that something was wrong with my eyes.

The night we both woke at the same time, while we counted the unknown intermittent noises from the walls, my mother and I lay down together to recall our intermittent bursts of melancholia that my mother believed she had inherited from my grandmother, and that my grandmother probably inherited from her mother, and so on. Unlike when she had my older sister, my mother wasn't happy when she had me. She'd been kicked out of her home and left to live in poverty with my dad, who was at the time a newspaper photojournalist and earned a very small stipend. My father was the son of a widow and had four other sisters to take care of. He was a proud man, but he had no money ever since his father died when he was nine years old. Though my mother didn't have a happy childhood, she had never experienced poverty or lacked for money; her family consisted of landowners. The people and my mother's friends' families all worked on her father's land at the village where they lived. My mother was kicked out of the household for marrying my dad and her newly growing Christianity.

I told my mom, "No, no, please do not feel guilty about being depressed while you had me since my melancholia is only caused by my eyes, not by you." She said, "No, no—I have never told you this before, but one time I was extremely upset when you were in my womb since I saw an unspeakable scene and threw bottles and wailed." I couldn't believe what she was saying, because she was the calmest person I knew. She never showed emotion that way. She continued tearfully, "After that day, you stopped quickening completely, as if you were dead with shock, and I blamed myself so much. I shouldn't have been upset, I should have swallowed the pain without expressing it. I regretted, regretted, and regretted it for days, until on the fourth day you started moving again."

I was born normal sized and quite healthy, which my mother had not expected. However, my eyes were not aligned intermittently. My mother couldn't help but think that I, as a fetus, had looked away when she was screaming. I only discovered my intermittently unaligned eyes when I went to school and classmates pointed out I was looking in the wrong direction. My wandering eyes could only be seen by others. When I looked in the mirror, I could only see straight. One eye cheated on the other without my knowledge. This was nothing like being blind or nearsighted; it was trickier, and I felt a lack of control over my self-image. My only source of pride and self-image was that, as a kid, I drew and painted the best out of all the kids in town. I couldn't read numbers because they looked wiggly, but I wrote poems and stories exceptionally well. I didn't want to go to school because of my intermittently aligned eyes. Kids always asked me what I was looking at or why I was looking elsewhere. I begged my mom to take me to the doctor, and she did; I do not remember anything about the doctor's visit except the flickering red lights and my mother asking the doctor to tell me how pretty my eyes were.

Though my mother took me to an eye surgeon and had my eyes aligned, I did not believe my eyes were cured. My family wouldn't speak about it. They'd rather lie, and now I'd become an adult, a time when people are polite and do not make fun of others. As always, my eyes looked straight in the mirror. Nothing seemed changed. I still don't know if my eyes are fixed. It's a wicked irony that others can tell if my eyes are not aligned, but I can't.

This spring 2019, my mother published her fifteenth poetry book and another memoir about how she overcame her suicidal melancholia. She gives a lot of lectures, too. Because of the life she had gone through, my

mother became a mentor for many people in despair. Now I worry how to stop treating my own depression as a sort of sacrificial lamb at the altar of my worshipped idol: art. I am not the only one who stays in constant self-torture to produce artwork; it is a norm among artists—the artist suffering in sadness (I know, I know).

After I was told my eye surgery was successful, I went to college and continued to practice painting, but I wasn't obsessed with painting anymore. I wanted to look through a camera lens—a single lens, instead of painting with both my unaligned eyes (at least, I believed they were still not aligned). I quit school and traveled to New York, where I live now, and did everything but paint. Here, though the culture of maintaining eye contact is stronger than in my homeland, people do not speak about other people's physical flaws to their faces. I was fine living with my eyes in New York, with ignoring my wandering eyes (more specifically, the possibility of still having wandering eyes). When people stare into my eyes while speaking, I freeze, thinking my eyes are tricking me again. It would be different if my wrong eyes were in a fixed position, but I can never be sure. My pain in not knowing where my eyes are facing, the double images, the fear of being unguarded in a state of consciousness makes my life one of extreme sobriety. This is one of the reasons I never take any brain-altering substances, except caffeine in coffee.

My identity in the United States is different due to multicultural and racial factors, but in my home country, where most people share the same race and culture, what they are good at often becomes their identity. My strongest identity was that of a small girl who could draw and paints magnificently. During my childhood and teenage years, kids from other classes came to see me draw during the school break and asked me to draw things for them. I had my first artist's website when I was thirteen years old; on it, I published drawings every day. Nonetheless, suicidal thoughts persisted in my life whenever kids asked what I was looking at, whether they meant to make fun of me or genuinely didn't know what was going on. Though the ability to draw well sustained my self-image, after the surgery, I became rebellious. I did everything but what I was good at; in other words, I simply did everything but paint while continuing my art career, and I plan to continue to do so.

It is funny and fortunate how I thought of forgiving my eyes instead of forgetting my eye problem I thought if I kept suffering because of them, my mother would feel guilty about giving her melancholia to me; this might even take her down the dark rabbit hole of guilt-driven despair. After she spoke about her guilt over my eyes, I became determined, first, to stop feeding my melancholia for the sake of art, and second, to forgive myself and my eyes so that my mother would be free from her guilt, too.

I researched a lot about strabismus, especially intermittent exotropia. I learned what my condition is called for the first time in my life. Even though I went through suffering and even surgery, I did not dare research the affliction because it seemed like it wasn't there when I didn't look for it. No one in my family talked out about it, either, because it was taboo. I can picture my mom suffering whenever she sees me tired with my every eye are away from each other. I thought I was suffering and thinking of killing myself whenever I thought about my eyes, but I did not see how my mother was suffering whenever she looked at my eyes, which must have been every day. The blind therapist told me how my mother must have never taken her eyes off me. I saw some optometrist's presentation files on how to perform the surgery I went through and almost threw up because of the images. I was glad I didn't know about the details before I went to the surgeon with my mom. I don't remember much about it, perhaps due more to my skepticism and fear than to the anesthesia. All I can recall

was the doctor prayed for me and played a gospel song while I laid on the surgical table with my eyes wide open, yet asleep.

I learned about a strange coincidence while researching intermittent exotropia; newly published evidence suggests Leonardo da Vinci could paint and draw because he had what I had, too. His eyes wandered without his awareness and his vision switched from two-dimensional to three-dimensional. Researchers believe this is why he could paint three-dimensional depths onto two-dimensional canvases in a certain way. The more I researched the topic, the more I found hypotheses and papers about Rembrandt and Picasso and their misaligned eyes. I was mesmerized by how ignorant I had been about all of these theories. Whether they really had strabismus or not, I know I had it and may still have it. My brain can still switch my vision in a certain way as I have lived over twenty years with the ability. The study on Leonardo da Vinci's possible intermittent exotropia was only published last year, 2018, and its findings caused quite the sensation in the worlds of optometrists and art historians. I went to art schools but oddly didn't know much about da Vinci and his body of art because it seemed so distant from where and who I was. His pink tunic and love of mathematics still seem foreign to me, but I can now relate to his self-torment and self-doubt about being a failed artist who would never be able to finish anything, his tendency to be easily distracted, his habit of taking crazy amounts of notes that other people couldn't decipher unless determined to study them, and his shame-driven need for perfectionism. I'm unsure if the study will remain a hypothesis, but I am content with it. I am also content with my eyes, even if they are occasionally misaligned. I can't stay always alert—who can? I may have lost my ability to draw because of my poor adaptation to my life choices, and the surgery that I felt skeptical about its success that I still don't know.

Like the story of Samson, who lost his strength with the loss of his hair and his eyes, I may have lost my talent if I imagine my situation biblically. When I was a child, I prayed every time before I ate and slept; I prayed a single, simple, yet strong prayer repeatedly: "Father, please make me a strong child and a great painter, amen." I repeated that same prayer for nearly a third my life until I didn't feel that I no longer a child, but the combination of words stuck with me. Even today, the prayer inadvertently comes out if I am too hungry before I eat. I learned that children's angels always see the Father in heaven, so God always listens to children's prayers, but I still haven't figured out what adults' angels do. Do they get lost? I'm not sure who will carry my prayer; however, if God listened to the prayer I spoke as a child, I may stay a strong child and a great painter through my entire life, though I am abandoned to inevitably live with my choices, my skepticism, and reverse growth.

Because I am very small as an adult that people often mistake me for a child, maybe it is a good sign that my childhood-prayer was heard? Then what is left is to be a good painter despite my rebellious years of prolonged hatred. Would I be forgiven? At least I forgave my eyes. My intermittent prayer in adulthood was only an embarrassing repeat of plagiarism from my childhood's. Then again, I rely on my mother's secret speaking in tongues that no one knows what it meant even herself, hoping it redeems her daughter from the secret sin that the daughter, myself, committed to plot her eyes into jails and let them speak no words for years. Also, her unintelligible prayer may also salvage her daughter from drowning in the melancholy that she just saved herself in order to rescue the daughter out of it, too.