

“Where Exactly” by Ch’oe Chinyŏng

Introduced and translated by BONNIE TILLAND

Ch’oe Chinyŏng (Choi Jinyoung) (b. 1981) was educated at Duksung Women’s University, where she studied Korean literature. She debuted in 2006 with a short story published in the literary journal *Literature and Practice*, which won the New Writer’s Award. She is known for her novellas and short stories about aimless youth and others at the margins of South Korean society. She is sometimes referred to as a “post-IMF generation” writer, foregrounding the concerns and worldviews of those who came of age during and after the financial crisis of the late 1990s and early 2000s. She has also been heralded as a queer and feminist writer who sympathetically represents the voices of minorities in South Korea. She received the Hankyoreh Literary Award in 2010 and the Sin Dong-yup Prize for Literature in 2014. Choi has published five novels, and a short story collection (*The Top*).

“Öditchŭm” (Where Exactly), the story translated here, was published as one of seven stories that comprise *The Top*, which was published by Ch’angbi in 2013. The stories in this collection explore the growth processes and social constraints on their young protagonists. In some of the stories the protagonists turn to violence, in others they grow and come into their own as young adults, and in “Where Exactly” and another story (“Worldville Unit 401”) towards the end of the collection the characters are stuck in aimless situations not of their own making, and from which there is no escape. The twenty-something protagonist of “Where Exactly” has been quietly and steadily trying to build a life for himself, but has been continually judged by society, his parents and his girlfriend as not ambitious enough. The story begins with the protagonist following a handwritten map his father gave him, to a building in an unfamiliar neighborhood where there is apparently something that “it would be good for him to see.” As the protagonist looks for the mysterious building with increasing desperation he is surrounded by others who are also searching, though none are able to offer any help to their fellow seekers. The growing sense of horror of the maze-like Seoul neighborhood

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threatens to push the story into the fantastic, but Choi prefers the absurd aspects of reality to fantasy. The simultaneous urgency and ridiculousness of the protagonist's situation is driven by Choi's trademark simple, direct, and relatively short sentences. The story captures the psychological milieu of South Korea's young generation, trapped in what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," driven by their own desires and the desires of society for them, always having to seek and strategize despite the low odds of finding what they truly desire in this frantic, unending searching process.

Despite her unflinching engagement with the realities of young people in South Korea, and her unwillingness to give false hope, Choi's most recent works have ended on a somewhat more hopeful note. After grappling with the emotional devastation in the aftermath of the Sewol ferry disaster of 2014—in works such as *Proof of Ku*, 2015—Choi's most recent novel, *To the Warm Horizon* (2017), offers hope in the love of two female characters. Unlike her previous works, *To the Warm Horizon* is speculative fiction, set in a future in which a pandemic has caused the book's characters to flee South Korea. It seems noteworthy that Choi's characters can only find love and escape the cruel optimism of competitive South Korea society once that society has been destroyed, allowing those at the margins to finally claim their due.

“Where Exactly”

Where are you, exactly?

I exited the subway station and unfolded the map Father had drawn for me. After going straight go right. Cross at the crosswalk and turn right again. Go straight for a while, then go left. As for how long it would take, or exact streets—they weren't written. It was a rough map on which the names of the few buildings he had bothered to draw appeared to be worn away. It was hard to make out my father's writing. I couldn't tell whether that syllable was a *ta* or an *a*, a *si* or a *so*. Although he had drawn Chinese characters in a few places, my knowledge of Chinese characters was so lacking that I couldn't even write my father's name in them. Sōngwōn Building (or maybe Sōnwōn Building, or Sōun Building?), Third Floor. This was the building drawn at the end of the map. This was the place I should ultimately end up at.

Out of habit I walked looking only at the ground. Several pairs of gray, black, and brown Ugg boots and sneakers passed beside me. I felt a vibration. I took my cell phone out of my pocket and bumped into someone walking in the opposite direction. My phone fell to the ground. Thick clouds of breath burst from my lips. “I'm sorry.” The person apologized briefly. Messy hair. Fatigued face. Old and dirty sneakers. A black jacket with muddy splotches on it. He had the look of someone who had been wandering around for a while. After handing me my cell phone he stuck his hands in his jacket pockets and began walking quickly in the direction I had been heading. I turned a bit to stare for a moment at his retreating figure. “Oh right, the subway station,” I muttered. I couldn't find the subway entrance I had just come out of. My phone buzzed again. The person I believed loved me, An. I stood

staring at the spot where I strongly believed the subway station should be, like an idiot, and pressed the “connect” button.

“Yeah.”

“Where are you?”

“Uh, out.”

“Out where?”

“Where indeed...?”

I looked at my surroundings. It was an unfamiliar place.

“I’m on my way somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Uh, my father told me to go someplace...”

“Yeah, but where?”

“The Sŏngwŏn Building. Or the Sŏnwŏn Building, I don’t know.”

“Huh?”

“I have to go and see to be sure.”

“Why did he say you have to go there?”

“I dunno. He said it would be good to go.”

“Are you off work?”

“Mm-hmm. But...”

“If you got off work you should have called me.”

“But you know...”

“I’m off too.”

“Weird.”

“What is?”

“The subway station disappeared.”

“Huh?”

“It was right here...”

A beeping sound alerted me that another call was coming in. “Just a minute, I have another call. I’ll call you back.” I pushed the connect button again. It was Father.

“Are you going there?”

“Yes, Father.”

“How far have you gone?”

“I just came out of the subway stop, but...”

“You have to find it. They say it’s a little tricky finding your way there.”

“...Yes, it seems that way.”

It wasn’t that the subway station had disappeared, only that I couldn’t find it. It was possible I had gone the wrong direction while staring at the ground as I walked. As Father had said, it was tricky to find, so this was possible. This wasn’t fingernail clippers or a lighter—subway stations don’t just disappear.

“Pull yourself together and get over there,” Father said.

“Yes, Father.”

After hanging up I opened Father's hand-drawn map again. From the subway station I had only gone straight. The station should definitely be back in this direction. Family Mart, Paris Baguette, Kimbap Heaven, The Face Shop, Olleh, Café Bene, BBQ Chicken. Looking at the shops lining the sidewalks, nothing was out of the ordinary. Only the order in which they were laid out on the street was different—otherwise they were the same stores as in my neighborhood, the area around my company, and An's neighborhood. But somehow they were unfamiliar. Although the stores with the same names stood in a row on the street, they brought me no feeling of intimacy or comfort. Hungry, I went into a convenience store and bought a cup of instant ramen. After tearing off the packaging and pouring the water in, I started to talk to the convenience store clerk while I waited for the noodles to cook.

"Uh, is there by chance a Söngwön Building or a Sönwön Building in this neighborhood?"

The clerk continued moving her fingers fast across her cell phone keyboard. She shook her head and said she didn't know. She looked underage. A pink pimple on her white cheek was, somehow, very pretty.

"Then how far do I need to go from here to get to a road that turns right?"

"There are roads like that if you go up, but also if you go down..."

The clerk said this while pointing vaguely first at the left side of the street, and then the right.

"Which way is up and which way is down?" I spoke while gazing at the pimple that moved whenever she spoke. "I came out of the subway station, and if I keep going in that direction..."

"Uh..." The clerk tilted her head to the side and stuck her neck out. Her thick, light brown hair swished gently against her white neck. "There isn't a subway station in this neighborhood." She wore a cold expression. "There is one, really far away. It'll take a while."

I tried to estimate the time I had spent walking. Had I really walked that much? It was possible. I could have arrived here after walking for a long time with quick steps and an empty head. I got anxious thinking I could have already passed the street that veered right, the one I should have taken.

"If you go straight up in that direction there'll be a street to the right. But there are a lot of streets like that around here."

The clerk stuck her head around the glass door and spoke while pointing out the direction. The way she spoke was kind and sweet. An had once spoken with that kind of voice, with those kinds of mannerisms, to me. Had it been that long? I was suddenly struck by this thought. It was a thought I had many times recently.

"Well, I guess all neighborhoods are like that," I said with a smirk. With a look of annoyance the clerk resumed staring at her cell phone. I gobbled down my swollen ramen noodles in three gulps and bought a bottle of water and a pack of cigarettes. As I took my change my fingertips lightly touched the palm of the clerk's hand. It was soft and warm. It felt like squeezing a girl's belly. It wasn't unpleasant. As I left the convenience store I rubbed my own hand. A rough, hard, dry hand. It was like the calloused heel of a foot. My mood soured. As I smoked I wondered whether to go back the way I had come or to continue the

way I had been going. I started to walk. I tried to pay attention to my walking speed and the passing of time, but things didn't go my way.

A street veering to the right suddenly appeared like a long pencil lead snapped at an angle. At the corner a Kookmin Bank and Woori Bank faced each other. I had about 500,000 *wŏn* in Woori Bank, but tomorrow it would all be depleted in an automatic credit card payment. Kookmin Bank received a direct deposit of 300,000 *wŏn* every month. In two more years I will have saved fifteen million *wŏn*.

For the last several years I had been unable to deposit any money into my savings on account of my student loan debt. The first time I made a deposit I was truly happy. But my good mood died when An said in a cold voice, "At this rate, when will we ever be able to afford to get married?" I felt like an idiot for not being able to deposit more than 300,000 *wŏn* a month. I had said to An, "Do you want to marry me?" and then repeated myself when she didn't answer, and it turned into a huge fight. I had really only wondered if she was actually thinking of marriage, but An hadn't taken it that way. She had taken it to mean that I didn't want to marry her. Had it been a problem with my tone of voice? Though I resented having to do it, I apologized—I'm sorry, I was wrong. An didn't hear me out, and yelled at me, asking me why I had even bothered dating her.

After our fight An didn't take my calls for more than two months. She finally contacted me in the spring. An had decided she wanted to continue seeing me, and I had decided that I should break up with her. Although we were headed in opposite directions, I figured I should meet her one last time. When we met and had a drink it became too troublesome to suggest that we break up. Though we started seeing each other again, An didn't feel as close as before. Before our troubles the concept of separation had never seemed to occur to An, but now this concept was like a time bomb waiting to explode. Separation. The possibility of breaking up. I had tasted that possibility during the two months of not seeing An. Sometimes it tasted bitter and sometimes it tasted sweet. The phone rang.

"Why didn't you call?"

It was An.

"Hmm?"

"Why didn't you call back after you hung up before?"

"Ah, I forgot. Sorry."

"Where are you?"

"The same place."

"You still haven't found it?"

"Nope."

"I'm almost home."

"Okay."

"Today too, you know? I heard it again."

"Heard what?"

"I was talking to a friend I hadn't seen for a while, and she asked where my boyfriend worked, and I told her, and she was all *like that*, all of a sudden."

“Like what?”

“All like, ‘that place really stinks!’”

“Uh...”

“Is your company really that bad?”

“Well. Huh. I really don’t know.”

“Then why do they all say that then?”

“Seriously. Why do they?” After I said this I was quiet for a while. I had heard this so many times. If I said I worked at M Company, the response was always: Isn’t that hard? Isn’t the pay terrible? I heard there are no advancement opportunities? But even though the pay wasn’t much, at least it kept coming. And with that money I could pay back loans, set up a savings account, eat, get around, go on dates, and live well. The people I worked with weren’t bad, and I guess that work at any job is hard. I didn’t need to make a lot of money for no reason, just working with my head down day after day. M Company wasn’t an illegal job. Like other companies M Company proudly made and sold products for a reasonable price. Products that contributed to human life. So I had some pride in my work. Then why did people treat me like a patient with an incurable disease when I said I worked at M Company?

“Even my own mom,” I said in a dry voice. “She tells other people I’m preparing to become a grade 7 civil servant.”

“Your mother?”

“Yeah. It seems like she thinks my being an exam prep student for the civil service is better than making money at M Company.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Every time I went out on the weekends to meet An, Mother nagged at me like I was a high school student in the thick of university exam preparations. *You, if you go out playing around like this when are you going to study? You know this is a difficult exam, right?* Every time Mother confronted me like this I got confused about what I was doing. Sometimes I didn’t know if I should just play the role of the obedient exam prep student in front of my mother, even if I wasn’t going to become a civil servant. However, there were times that my mother treated me like a respectable office worker. My parents’ birthdays. New Year’s. Harvest Festival. Parents’ Day. On days when I would give them some spending money.

“You don’t have any plans to transfer companies?” An asked.

“...Nope. Not yet. But I might be fired before I transfer.”

“Why?”

“The product made at our company has started being made at a bigger company. A larger quantity at a lower price.”

This was why I got angry. It was not that people held my company in low esteem that made me angry. It was that even my low position was going to be taken away from me.

“Then transfer.”

I was silent.

“Did you hear me?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“I like how things are right now.”

“But you don’t know when it’s going to be gone.”

“If I go somewhere bigger it could just be gobbled up by somewhere even bigger.”

“Then it’ll be okay if you just go to the biggest place.”

Again I didn’t answer.

“You don’t think you can?”

I want to keep the place I’m at now. Not go to a higher place. I walked silently on a street packed with bars. Wobbling people. Puking people. Shouting people. A woman laughing, *kekak kekak kekak*, almost breaking the frozen night air with her sharp laughter before stumbling backwards. And so many people walking the same road I’m walking silently.

“When you get somewhere call me.”

An, who had been putting up with my waves of silence, wrapped up our conversation in a suddenly cautious voice and hung up before I could even mumble a reply. I opened the map Father had given me again. I showed the map to a middle-aged woman standing next to a stoplight and asked directions.

The woman, glancing at the map, said in a stern voice, “Go back.”

“It’s not in this neighborhood?”

“It was a mistake to come. You have to go back.”

“To where?”

“The way you came. Go back the way you came.”

The woman repeated for me to go back. As if I was an unwelcome visitor who had come calling in the middle of the night.

“Is this here?” I asked again, pointing to the crosswalk drawn on the map. As soon as the light turned green the woman put her feet in the road like she was shutting a giant gate with a bang. Because of her insistence that I “go back” I felt jumpy and uneasy.

“Excuse me?”

I grabbed a man walking in front of me. The man turned his head. He was younger than me. As I went to show him the map, he put his head down and said,

“This is my first time here too.” He quickened his pace. I ran after him and asked politely, “Then where did you come from? How did you get here?”

The man looked back at me suspiciously and reluctantly answered,

“I took the subway.”

“What stop? What stop did you get off at?”

I expected him to say he had gotten off at the same stop I had, but a strange name burst from his mouth. When the light turned green the man started running. Though there were a lot of things I wanted to ask I couldn’t catch up to him. I walked down the sheltered street he had disappeared into and the neon signs of a whole bunch of motels blinked, clamoring for attention. When I saw those lights I felt cold and hungry. I wanted to go into a warm room, wash myself with warm water, and rest.

Instead I entered a convenience store. I chose some snacks and went to pay, but I couldn't find my wallet. I couldn't feel my wallet in its usual location in my coat pocket, and as if to make a liar out of me, there wasn't even a coat pocket. I patted my breast pockets with both hands and then took off my coat, squeezing it thoroughly. I clapped my hands all over the inner and outer lining. My phone rang. It was Father.

"Yes, Father."

"Not there yet?"

"No, Father. But..."

"Have you eaten?"

"No. But Father..."

"It's taking you longer than I thought."

"Yes, Father. But..."

"Spit it out."

I was stuck.

"You can't find it?"

".....Do I really have to go there?"

"Why? Is it too hard?"

"Why do I have to go there?"

"When you get there you'll know. It won't be a waste."

"Father, the map is strange."

"Just because you can't find it."

"No. Everyone says they don't know what I'm talking about."

"They don't know because they haven't gone there."

"Have you been there?"

"Hurry up. It's late. Call me when you get there."

He hung up. I decided to turn back. I had no wallet and no money, and I was tired and hungry. I couldn't trust the map or my Father's words. Though I might return tomorrow, I was going back now. I wondered if I should go the way I came, and I thought of the convenience store girl who had said, "There's no subway station here." Had that girl stolen my wallet? Had she sewn my pocket shut? I thought of the girl's soft palms that were like soft insides. I felt that it must have been a long time ago that I met her, that the girl must have gotten old and died. The clerk at this other convenient store looked at me through the glass door. She was young. So young it was creepy. I called An and told her I had lost my wallet.

"Have you checked all your pockets?"

An's words were paired with a smacking sound, like she was eating something. I answered that not only did I have no wallet, but my pocket had even disappeared.

"Are you joking?"

An took my statement that I had lost my pocket as a joke. Thinking about the many times recently that she hadn't accepted my sincere words, wondering when this dynamic had begun, I got annoyed. Since the day that I had asked "Do you want to marry me?" so many little alleys had popped up on the road of our relationship. Sincerity was a path trapped

between two alleyways. It had lost its way. In its place misunderstanding continuously gave birth to puppies. There were no shortcuts, there were no street signs, and if you asked anyone they pointed in different directions.

“Where are you? I’ll go there.”

As soon as I heard this my irritation, which had been swelling like a balloon, developed a big hole. As I worried about how to explain where I was, An badgered me again. “I asked where you are. Do you not know?”

I couldn’t reply that I didn’t know, and so I told her the name of the subway station I had gotten off at. It would be fine if I could get there before An arrived. I could at least do that. I hung up the phone and looked around. I would feel more at ease if I just knew what the neighborhood was called, but I couldn’t see any signs on the sidewalks or the road. The addresses that you could count on being on the side of buildings were not there. I went into another convenience store and asked the name of the neighborhood. A strange name burst out of the clerk’s mouth. I asked him how to get to the closest subway station.

“It’s pretty far from here. It would be best to take a taxi.”

When I replied that I had lost my wallet and had no money at all, the clerk grabbed a receipt and drew a map on the back, muttering, “It’ll be tough.”

On the receipt the clerk gave me he had drawn a crude map. I left the convenience store and nervously examined the map. After going straight go right. Cross a crosswalk and go right again. Go straight for a while. Then left. I took out the map Father had given me from my coat pocket. It was very similar. I don’t know whether the streets on the two maps just looked similar, or if the two maps were really referring to the same place. After going straight go right, cross a crosswalk and go right again, go straight for a while, then left—but surely there are many streets like these in the world. You could explain all streets this way. I stared at the two maps nervously for a while, and suddenly was seized with the thought that I must find the place no matter what, and that I should hurry and walk.

After going straight go right. Cross a crosswalk and go right again. And I repeated going straight for a while again. Alleyways that veer right appeared often, and crosswalks were also common. I felt like I had been spinning around in one area, and it seemed like I had passed by several neighborhoods repeatedly. I hardly ever lost my way in my life. From birth until now I had lived in one neighborhood, and usually came and went between the same places. I had few experiences of going to unfamiliar places, and I hadn’t traveled so widely that I had ever lost my way far from home. When I didn’t know where I was I would ask for directions and adults would tell me how to get where I was trying to go. Yesterday evening when my Father gave the map to me he had said,

“If you could go here it would be great.”

When I said, “What’s there?” he said,

“There’s someone you should know there.”

I replied, “I’m busy these days. I’ll go when I have time.” I had replied thoughtlessly, but I had to tell myself not to worry when I saw my Father’s tired eyes and mouth that kept moving as if he had something to say but couldn’t spit it out. I told myself not to be scared.

I grabbed people passing by and asked them for directions. Most people said they didn't know. Some people's explanations were extremely complex and long, and I couldn't follow. One middle-aged man told me confidently that I should go one way, but I wound up facing the same alley of motels, so I thought of finding the man and cussing him out. For a while I wandered in search of the man who had given me bad directions, forgetting about the Sŏngwŏn Building or Sŏnwŏn Building and the subway station. But eventually I returned to the idea that he had not given me bad directions, but that I had just gone the wrong way. The phone rang. It was An. I was angry when I picked up the phone and snapped,

"Where are you?" Though I was the one who couldn't find the subway station, I yelled at An.

"I can't go."

An repeated this a few times. It sounded like she was crying.

"Are you crying?"

Had An lost the way too? I was suddenly afraid.

"Dad got hit." An's voice was shaking. "The police have come and it's a mess."

"What? Why was your father hit?"

"A guy passed in front of our house and said, how can you live here? He asked if our house was fit for human habitation. He said places like this should be torn down and apartments should take their place. He said to his kids, hey, if you don't listen to your dad you'll wind up living in a place like this too. So my dad said..."

"Who?! What kind of asshole says that?"

"Yes, people live here, that's right. We've lived well here all our lives. I've had kids and raised them here and everything. I'll live here until I get old and die. So what the hell are you going on about, you son of a bitch'... What's going to happen? Come here. Come help me."

I couldn't tell An, now crying so hard she couldn't speak, that I had lost my way. So I said, "Okay, I'll be there soon," and hung up the phone. I headed to a big road to catch a taxi. A mixture of annoyance and rage combined to form one hot emotion, filling my body and rushing about, pouring out of my mouth and ears. It didn't matter how much I waved my hand, more than ten taxis passed me. I finally caught one and told the driver the name of An's neighborhood. "I don't go there." The taxi driver shook his head listlessly and drove away. Five or six other taxi drivers said the same thing. I opened my cell phone and looked at the time. It was nearly midnight. In an instant my hot, bubbling-over emotions disappeared like they had been lies. I had gotten on the subway right after getting off work at six. Taking into account the thirty minutes I was on the subway, could I really have been wandering the streets for that long of a time?

Aimlessly running in the direction cars were driving, I caught a young man and asked directions. Even as I asked I knew it was useless. No one knew the answer and just answered however they wanted. I predicted that there was no reason I would get the answer I wanted from this guy, a young kid who didn't seem to be from this neighborhood. "You don't know either, right? Of course you don't know. We're in the same position." I arrogantly asked him just to confirm what I already knew he didn't know.

“Ah, so it’s your first time here too,” the man responded. He seemed as flustered as me, seemed to want to fight as much as me, and seemed as scared as me.

“It seems like there are no roads I haven’t already tried.” He spoke while slouching. “New roads keep appearing.” His face was jaundiced and his body was thin. “But in the end they’re all similar roads. So I get more confused.”

The man was wearing a cheap, shiny, poorly-fitting black suit, and he shivered as white clouds of breath poured from his mouth. The weather was too cold for going around in just a suit. I asked him what he was looking for. The man answered that he wanted to go home. I asked again—where did you originally want to go that brought you here? Well, the Söngwön Building, or the Sönwön Building. The name of the building I was looking for jumped from the man’s mouth.

“Why are you looking for it? Who told you to go there?” I pressed him.

“They said it was a place I definitely had to go before it was too late.”

The man answered, looking all around him. The man’s face, ears and hands were frozen, as red as if they were bloody.

“Do you have money?” I asked the man. The man’s expression turned from one of annoyance to one of anxiety. I asked the man if I could borrow just the taxi fare, telling him I would give him my workplace, home address, and phone number.

“Do you think I haven’t tried taking a taxi?”

The man’s tone turned serious. Something I had said had turned him into a weary old man.

“There aren’t any taxis that leave here. Give up.”

When the man told me to give up, that was it. A fire I had been holding in burst out.

“Then what are you going to do? Where are you going to go?” I yelled. The man looked disgusted. He roughly pulled at his clothes. I had only yelled at him, but I felt like I had grabbed his neck and shaken him.

“I have to find it—the building,” the man replied, squaring his thin shoulders.

“But you said to give up!”

“What I meant was...” Turning toward a large and broad road, the man spoke. “Don’t even think of leaving this place.”

Dreading being left alone, I followed the man. I turned around often to see if anyone else was following us. Although there were a lot of people going the same direction, I couldn’t know where they were going. I was afraid to ask. Calls kept coming from An. Every time she asked me where I was I stuttered and lied. *There’s a traffic jam. It’s taking longer than I thought. It seems like there’s been an accident. I’m almost there.* An’s questions were like waves, and turned into my questions for the man. *Do we not have the name of the building wrong? Haven’t we already passed it? Are we in the wrong neighborhood?* Sometimes it seemed like everyone else on the street was also looking for this building. Sometimes it seemed like they had already gone there. I drifted from thoughts that I should go to An or that I should first go home or just that I should get out of this neighborhood. And finally, when I had latched onto the thought that if only I could find the building everything would be fine, the thing that tortured me was not rage and

irritation but resignation and dread. It seemed like the subway station and bus stop waited for me at the same place as the building, wherever that was. The man's footsteps were excessively fast, and I was ashamed that my footsteps were slower than his. In order to catch up with him I questioned him incessantly. *Where are you from? How old are you? What do you do? Are you married? Where did you graduate from? Look here. What's your name? Do you like soccer? Where did you do your military service? What's your hometown? Look here. I'm talking to you!* The man glanced back at me and continued walking wordlessly, without pausing. I took a tiny amount of comfort in the fact that although he was wandering like me, he had been doing it for longer.

We came to a street with bars and motels packed together again. It could have been the place we had passed before and it could have been another similar street.

"Look here."

I called to the man.

"Haven't we been here before?"

"Why are you bothering me this way?" The man turned to me and spoke with irritation in his voice. "If you mistrust me then don't follow me. Let's look on our own. Separately."

My breath stopped at the man's cold reaction.

"But we're looking for the same place...this neighborhood has so many fucking identical roads."

"How can you be sure that we're looking for the same place?"

"It's the Sŏngwŏn Building, or the Sŏnwŏn Building. Shit. We're looking for that."

"You aren't even sure of the building's name."

"You don't know either!"

"So we could be looking for two different places. Everyone's tired and irritable. But I'm quietly but steadily continuing to look. So why are you following me and talking so much? *You? Right? Am I right? Are we wrong?* Every time you speak I lose energy."

While I was listening to the man's words my cigarette went out. I felt dizzy.

"Look here." I tried to speak calmly. "Let's continue after getting some rest. It's after 2 a.m. We'll be up all night at this rate. How about we eat something. Or close our eyes a bit. I lost my wallet, and have no money. I have to work tomorrow. I don't have much phone battery left. But this neighborhood makes us wander around in circles, son of a bitch. Don't you think you walk too fast?"

"What do you want with me?" Maybe it was because of my unintentional swearing that the man's tone was gentle.

"What do you know about where we're going?"

"I don't have any money either. It's been a long time since I spent it all."

"I said, what do you know about where we're going?"

"You're following me."

"So you know worse than nothing?"

"But you're still following me."

"Why am I following you?"

"Aren't you following me because I'm going the right way?"

My phone rang. I pressed the “call” button. It was Mother.

“Where are you? Why haven’t you come back?”

“Uh, Mother. I got lost.”

“Are you drinking?”

“No, I got lost, I said. But...”

“How much longer are you going to live like a good-for-nothing? When are you going to study? This test is the kind of test that almost everyone fails, even if they study to death.”

“Mom, I’ve lost the way. I don’t know where I am.”

“I don’t know what you’re doing either. How long can you live this way? Don’t you feel anything when you look at your father? The things that are useful when you get old—”

“Mom. Is Dad there?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“Where are you?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Pull yourself together. It’s such a waste.”

I hung up the phone and called Father. While the phone rang I took out another cigarette and smoked it. I hung up and pressed “connect” again. The man was sitting crouched in a plastic chair in front of a convenience store. Time passed without pity like the leg length of a giant. Looking at the bright sign of the convenience store, not one of the ones open 24 hours, my mind felt cool.

“Have you arrived?” my father asked.

“No, Father.”

“Really?”

“Father, can you give me the exact name of the building?”

“Didn’t I write it down?”

“I can’t make it out.”

“Just follow the road.”

“Tell me the name, please, Father.”

“I don’t remember either. If you just follow the road you should be fine.”

“There are so many roads like that.”

“But still, there’s only one place you need to go.”

“Have you been there?”

“It’s late.”

“I asked if you’ve been there.”

“...That’s hard to answer.”

“Where are you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

“No, where are you, Father?”

I collided with someone. My cell phone fell to the ground. The person who ran into me grabbed my phone and passed it to me. “I’m sorry,” he said. It was a man wearing a

black jacket. On the jacket there were muddy splotches. Disheveled hair. Worn and dirty sneakers. I stared dumbly at the man's back as he quickly walked away, hunched over, and called to him loudly. The man didn't turn around, but disappeared like a shadow slipping into darkness. The man who had been sitting on the chair in front of the convenience store started walking again, in the same direction the man in the black jacket had gone. My phone rang. It was An.

"Where are you? You said you were coming, so why haven't you?"

"I told you I lost my wallet. I'm going crazy here too!"

"My dad is really hurt."

An was crying. Listening to her voice choking with sobs, I wanted to die. Although I'm sure he was really hurt, at least An's father was with his family, I thought. He hadn't lost his way, or his wallet, so I guess he was where he's supposed to be.

"I'd hoped you could be at my side at a time like this," An said. "I believed that we had that kind of relationship."

"No, listen. This isn't the kind of leisurely situation you're thinking of. I've lost my way, and my money, fuck, and everyone's just talking over me, and this map is a joke. If it continues like this I don't think I'll be able to get to work tomorrow."

"Take a cab. If you take a cab it'll all be fine. If you come here I'll give you money. You're an adult, why didn't you think of that?"

My frustration rose. If I tried to explain what this place was like to those who were not here, I would be treated like an idiot. I hung up and ran in the direction of the darkness the man had disappeared into. The streetlights appeared, disappeared, on repeat. Trying to make sure I didn't miss my chance to guess where the man's back had gone, I ran so fast I could hardly breathe. The alleys became more and more inclined. In the hazy night sky there were lightly glimmering old motel signs and red crosses scattered here and there. A strong wind blew. I pulled at my coat collar to cover my neck and ears. I felt unspeakably distressed as I got closer to the man's back, clothed only in the thin suit.

At the edge of the steep hill I could see a circumscribed horizon. I couldn't even begin to guess what was beyond that. I flipped open my phone to look at the time. The battery must have died because the screen was black.

Arriving at the end of path, the man came to a sudden stop and looked back at me with an anxious expression. I stopped. I dreaded going up to where the man stood.

"What do you see?" I asked, standing still.

".....The road down."

He and I shook with exhaustion. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the map Father had drawn for me. I had folded and opened it so many times that messy holes had formed at the dog-eared edges. The place where Sŏngwŏn Building (or Sŏnwŏn Building) had been written was like a black hole as well.

"You there yet?" my father asked.