Nonfiction

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Towers

At the restaurant a stray grain of rice was popping on the skillet; I used my chopsticks without thinking about chopsticks and my leg only fell asleep twice during lunch. Shanna sat across from me, her dark curls framing her face in a heart shape. We'd only met the day before but I fell into her arms the moment I saw her. She awkwardly patted my back and I felt like a child clinging to a mother's breast; I finally had someone to talk to again. Someone who spoke my language. Someone who was from where I was from: America. She invited me to go to Mureung Valley with her, a mountainous terrain with multiple hiking trails that claimed to be "The Grand Canyon of Korea!" We decided to meet for lunch the next day and go from there.

I agreed, even though I'd been many times before, because before I'd always been on my own.

At the restaurant we ordered food we'd never tried before. A large pot held countless silkworm larvae all brown and steaming; we both picked at the bugs with our chopsticks, too afraid to try them, and settled on eating rice and soup instead. The soup was heartily filled with greens, smooth earthy mushrooms, and thick noodles the length of my arm. By the time my bowl was empty my belly was fat and happy and I wanted nothing more than to lay back, use my floor mat as a pillow, and drift lazily off to sleep.

We, however, had other plans, and shortly after Shanna was finished we left the restaurant and headed towards the trail that led up to the valley. The trail snaked past an ornate bridge with cranes and trees featuring half-moon shaped leaves carved into the stone of the handrails; three colorfully decorated Buddhist monasteries were scattered beyond that, with candle after candle dotting the ground around statues of red tongued dragons. Beyond that, pools of fresh running water settled in stone wells with plastic scooping cups circling the edges for drinking. Shanna pulled out a water bottle and filled it up, then handed it to me. I gulped deeply and wiped the spill on my chin with the cuff of my sleeve.

We didn't talk much until we got further into the trail, and even then we only talked when we took breaks. I didn't mind. Just the familiarity of her walk, the way her arms hung loosely to her side, the fit of her clothes and even the scrunchie she tied her hair back with when she started dripping at the sideburns comforted me. We rounded a corner and dirt became stones, stones became large rocks, rocks became boulders. My chest was heaving with the effort of climbing boulders the size of cars and hopping over rushing streams, but we pressed on.
She asked me if I believed in wishes at one point.

Wishes?

The word sounded strange here. I thought about the last time I made a wish, but I wasn't sure if hoping to find a friend in a foreign land counted as a one. After all, I hadn't thrown a penny in a well, found a four leaf clover, or even seen a shooting star since I arrived in Korea. Regardless, I shrugged and mumbled "sure," in reply. She grabbed my hand and pulled me around a large cliff face that was wrinkled with vines. Hiding on the side was a pool where two thin waterfalls met misting the trees and the rocks and our faces. Along the ground, rocks the size of my our hands were stacked one on top of the other, some impossibly high teetering in the light breeze.

"You know, they believe that if you stack rocks on top of each other like this, and make a wish on them, when they finally fall over your wish will come true," She said this while gathering four or five rocks from the ground. I mimicked her. Soon, we both had rock towers right next to each other. I wondered what she wished for, but didn't ask. She didn't ask me either.

The sun hung low in the sky and the areas between the looming mountains turned dark and brown. With evening came the cool, crisp air, and we decided to turn back. When I collapsed on the floor mat in my apartment that night, legs stiff and exhausted, I thought about the wish I made, and the many things I would talk to her about tomorrow.