FLASH NONFICTION

Chungking Express

by Cookie Noh

"Multiethnicity" by Viviana De Cecco

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Reading English texts is taxing. Like a bricklayer, I have built understanding block by block with patience. However, the rare vocabulary items, colorful idioms, and endless sentences have imperiled my persistence. Before lethargy sets in, I should reactivate my drained brain with some speed-reading in between. To find Korean books, I used to visit the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library on Market Street and head up to the third floor.

On the international bookshelves, Korean is among 40 different languages. Due to its diversity, the selection on each language shelf isn't very comprehensive but enough to satisfy the urgent hunger for my mother tongue. The New Arrivals section showcases the latest titles although some were published a few years ago. It is filled with assorted titles, ranging from language learning guides and the esteemed Korean-American chef's cookbook to travelogue essays, and a few books of literature, mostly novels. The longer I browse them, the more curious I become about book acquisitions, randomly curated like a cross-genre compilation album.

I'm sitting in a seminar room at the branch library in Inner Richmond, where a diverse Asian immigrant community has shaped this unique neighborhood. A flyer on the vacant storefront reads *Join Chinese Martial Arts Club Today!* Cash-only dim sum parlors, vibrant and exotic grocery stores, and acupuncture clinics have all enriched the charm and authenticity of San Francisco's second Chinatown. At the corner of the China Bank, the elderly erhu musician adds the finishing touch with nostalgic and delicate melodies.

The Richmond branch library offers an extensive collection of Chinese books and media materials for their primary users — Chinese residents. When I first opened the library door, it felt like stepping into a multicultural film scene by Wong Kar-wai. A grandma wearing reading glasses was sitting on the couch, flipping through a *Sing Tao Daily*. In a community room, four seniors were playing Mahjong on a round table. From time to time, some of them asked me questions in Chinese. I apologized for not being able to speak their language and guessed their requests in silence. They might be asking, "Is this computer in use?" or "Would you help me send the document to the printer?" Later, during the annual Summer Stride, I found myself exploring the intensive Chinese classes for beginners at the library.

Here is the safest bet to find Korean novels besides the Main Library. Is it a sign of cordiality for the neighboring country? One summer day, I picked up a book written by one of my beloved novelists, Cho Haejin. You might have stumbled on the Netflix film *My Name is Loh Kiwan,* based on her original novel *I Met Loh Kiwan.* On the bookshelf in the Korean section, *Hwanhan Sum* (?? ?; which can be translated as *Dazzling Breath*), one of her short story collections caught my eye, and most importantly, it was a newly released I hadn't read yet. I could revive my brain by turning the pages effortlessly at my normal speed, and

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finally get off laboring on a brick wall, building the text line by line.

“Until she moves to find her path through the snow, piled carelessly, I stood there, wanting to watch her a while longer.” (Cho, p. 200)[1]

I turn toward the window overlooking green lawns in the library yard, where kindergarten kids are on a field trip. The teacher’s aide, seemingly in his mid-twenties or younger, watches them to ensure they are safe during their activities. When a kid falls onto the ground, he would rush over, lift them, and comfort them for a minute. The scene from the highlight chapter of *The Catcher in the Rye* is overlapping. Holden Caulfield imagines himself as a guardian in a rye field, catching children from falling off a cliff.

My visits always end in the children’s reading room, and I spot a girl lifting their heels high to reach a picture book placed out of their grasp. I take it from the shelf and hand it to them as a catcher in the library. It seems to be the largest picture book here, three times the size of a usual one and much heavier. “Please hold on tight.”

I’d like to get on the train of their inner landscape, somewhere I’ve never imagined or reached at my speedy mental transit. Traversing stories about people on the margins, I am confronted with myself, standing at the edge of a cliff. One step further there and I could plunge into the void. The voices on the page give me pause and turn me toward life once again. It is like finding someone running through the field of rye, radiant waves with light.

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[1] Cho, Haejin, *Hwanhan Sum.* Moonji Publishing, 2021, p. 200. Translated by Cookie Noh.

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