

“Bloodlines”  
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Dear Saan,

Jumping right into Seoul—I want you to know your ancestral home....

*The City:*

It's funny to think back on the night I landed in Seoul.

Having just returned from my solo photography exhibition in Belgium, I arrive at Incheon Airport in an exhausted stupor. Unsure if anyone from the yoga studio would be at the airport to pick me up; unsure if there even was a yoga studio. But there was my name held up by a smiling Korean man who spoke no English. I follow Mr. Sung to his car and sit in traffic gesturing pleasantries while trying desperately to stay awake.

Two hours later, we reach *Pure Yoga's* headquarters—I'm in shock. It's late at night. *All* the lights are going full blast. The building next door to the studio explodes with a whole wall of massive shimmering disks. Neon-sequence ripples from every shade between green and purple and back again. The building across the street flashes enormous lavender neon rectangles emerging from an entire illuminated chartreuse wall. I am seduced and horrified. Passing *Hugo Boss*, *Louis Quatorze Flawless*, and *Salvatore Ferrangamo*, we finally enter the yoga studio. Mr. Sung and I are greeted by a blast of artificial heat, a New Zealander Vinyasa yoga teacher who looks like she just swam out of the movie set of “The Beach”, and my new boss: *Ms. Korea 1994* (in casual dress).

Capitalism is alive and well! *Pure Yoga* is run by *Ms. Korea 1994*. She is still! a celebrity, and continues to open spas throughout Asia. Her yoga videos are the highest-grossing, best-sellers throughout Korea, although she does not practice yoga herself. Western-style manufactured beauty and weight-loss regimes reign. This high-end yoga studio charges \$40 for a drop-in, four

times more than other studios in Seoul. And predictably, this doesn't reflect how poorly the teachers are paid for our 12-25 classes that we are required to teach each week. *Ms. Korea 1994* has put me up in *Cheongdam*—the Beverly Hills district of Seoul. *Pure Yoga* sits above *Ralph Lauren* and between *Rolls Royce*, *Louis Vuitton*, and *Gucci*. It is conveniently located among karaoke bars, *Dolce and Gabbana*, and the *Dong-Duck's Women's Center* (for some reason certain names are in English). Located between my apartment and the fanciest of the yoga studios where I teach are double-decker rows of bridal boutiques and plastic surgeons' offices.

### *The Food:*

The first day I go grocery shopping I have a mini-panic attack. A small bag of uncooked rice in my Beverly Hills neighborhood is equivalent to \$20. That's just the beginning. I decide I will have to fast for the next three months until I see a speared succulent pig's head with full floppy ears hanging in an outdoor market just a bus ride away. From my discovery of furry green and purple leaves that I wrap around everything I eat, to jumping eel-like creatures, *mochi* delicacies, over-flowing bags of dried fish—both huge and ridiculously small, massive bowls of different colored porridge, *kim-chee* gone wild—every combination of color and texture—every edible divinity is available at the outdoor markets. Dear God, there is life beyond Rodeo Drive! I am getting to know the vendors who sell tempura, flattened meat on a stick, wonderful gooey spicy steaming concoctions, of course pig's blood (that is fairly innocuous once mixed with saliva), and grilled grubs—a tourist favorite. On several occasions, I devour fish intestines that are so spicy, that for once, my brain gratefully liquefies.

It is the hottest day in Seoul in 100 years. After a white-gloved attendant chases Wonkil and me out of the Choseon Dynasty's *Secret Garden* at the *Grand Palace*, we escape to a tiny side street dive for a bowl of cold *kim-chee* soup that sends me into such rapture and infinite gratitude. It's not until I jump into the main course, that I realize the soup has burned several layers of skin off

my tongue. Suppressing intense pain, I spend the next hour or two writhing as we are plunge into a gigantic plate of fish goo. I mean *goo*. I'm not even sure which fish parts—I do know that these are textures I never want to put into my mouth again. Regardless, I am compelled to scarf down more fish intestines, fish egg sacs, squid, and mussels—all basically the same creamy gray color (and I just read *Kitchen Confidential's* persuasive rational for avoiding unknown mussels...You know, Bourdain's novel is the perfect strategy to help me survive my relationship-of-eight-years' break-up back in San Francisco).

*The Yoga:*

Since we come from a diaspora people, it is my nature to readily adapt to radically new living conditions—but this is ridiculous. I am the first Iyengar teacher *Pure Yoga* has ever hired. As such, I am clearly out of my element—a foreigner in the strange land of Power Yoga. As the only non-Asian person wherever I go on my adventures throughout Seoul, I feel so much more at home than I do teaching in the quick-fix yoga scene. The heat in the yoga studios is intended for weight-loss. I have had the passing thought that while the students are in class, the front-desk associate goes into the dressing room and changes the electronic device on the scale so that when the students weigh themselves after class, they have the numbers to prove their success—Bikram is a God of Constructed Desire.

*Pure Yoga* is offering *The Three-Month Challenge: A Before and After Weight-loss Special Summer Event* (promoted in English). There are posters of a skinny Caucasian woman leaping for joy to advertise this diet contest in which frontal and profile photos are taken (name tag included) of the yoga student before and after three months of tremendously intense yoga classes. The five prizes include a free one-year membership and Thai massages (given by two Thai refugees who appear to be in hiding in the back room of one of the studios) and facial care (first prize worth about \$2,500 for losing the most weight). I am beginning to feel a little like

when, in 1993, I was supposed to be representing US foreign food-aid policy programs in Bangladesh, but was unwittingly participating in something that felt politically vile—humanitarian imperialism in all its glory.

The heat is jacked up so high in all three studios where I teach that I frequently hold onto the wall to keep from passing out between poses. Because I haven't yet learned Korean, the focus of the students' learning is visual, so they watch and mime every move I make—not realizing that I am about to pass out from heat stroke. Often when I demonstrate a pose, students gasp with horror and awe, followed by glee. I so appreciate their willingness to jump into the unknown. The students range between 6 to 70-plus years old and each one is so receptive: the fear of the unfamiliar doesn't seem to dampen their expectations like it does for so many of us in the West. And they **love** *Savasana*, corpse pose. Chronic exhaustion is big here. This explains the subway sleepers.

#### *The City:*

I am surrounded by the subway sleepers: men in suits, cosmetically-altered women in high heels, women in high heels without cosmetic surgery, nongendered hikers, teenagers, senior citizens—all like a field of reeds—asleep, swaying back and forth as the subway barrels forward. Blind people are the only ones awake. Hoping to fill their plastic baskets, they maneuver down the center of the subway cars in between rows of sleeping passengers, playing religious hymns in English—something about "time running out for everyone". Never in public have I seen so many thoroughly exhausted people. 90 percent or more of the subway passengers are fast asleep. The business man next to me is in a heavy slumber. Since the human head weighs between 13 and 15 pounds, I am baffled to witness that in the midst of all his head rolling that he doesn't break his neck. Heads, necks, shoulders bobbing back and forth, the subway sleepers perform contorted forward bends in order to stay in their individual seats; an occasional head slung back emitting

deep guttural snores—only partially disturbed as other passengers arrive and depart. Everyone tells me that the phenomenal speed of International "Development" has created a phenomenal amount of stress in these 10 million people. Seoul is Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* gone kamikaze over-drive.

I have joined the Seoul population of working all day and playing all night (including my meditation practice and learning Korean at 3:30 in the morning)—getting between 0-4 hours of sleep and crashing on the subway. I can't resist—I have to jump right into the nightlife. It is seductively peculiar. Throughout Seoul, there seems to be no difference between day and night. Everything that someone can do in the middle of the day, they can also do in the middle of the night. John Waters would have a field day here—especially at the wholesale department stores—8-plus floors of commodities only available between 11pm and 6am; and then, he would absolutely flip out at the public baths.

*The Public Bathhouses: Jimjilbang*

You-mee and I arrive in the middle of the night, and are given bubblegum pink outfits with little matching beanies. In their plastic-surgeon-like uniforms, men and women lie around in saunas imbibing fragrant aromas that emit from the walls. Some bathers have the stamina to hang out in the *Ice-Room* with its Philip Guston-like radiators coated in a thick, thick ice; while others sprawl across a heated floor watching *Platoon*, or install themselves in a special pitch-dark theater lined with enormous cushy chairs facing *Sex in the City*.

Other rooms offer manicures, pedicures, facials, threading (that becomes another adventure), waxing, acupuncture, moxibustion, gynecological therapeutics, a barbershop, computer room, red bean ice desserts, new clothes, new muscles, Everything and anything! All 24 hours a night.

I have no idea what the translation for this particular ritual is in English. The closest I can come up with is *Kegel Mania—The Rabbinical Method*, or simply, the *couchie-steamer* (or perhaps

*Muffin-Moistener, Beaver-Steamer, UniYoni, or the Orifice-Oracle*). It clearly only exists in the woman's section of the bathhouse (I was never able to find out what the men's section has to offer). Wearing nothing but a thick, frosting pink, armless rubber cape, with only a small hole for my pink capped-head, I tentatively squat over a chair with a big hole in the seat. Under the chair is a hot plate with a ceramic pot boiling *Woman Herbs* and *Woman Minerals*. A sturdy attendant orders me to fan between my legs, and gestures that I need to clench and release my sphincters in order to *suck* the steaming herbs and minerals into my vaginal cavity. Among other benefits (the list they give is long), the *Couchie-Steamer* is supposed to be really great for the menstrual cycle, not to mention digestive issues. For over an hour, in our capes and beanies, You-mee and I laugh and squirm, (at one point, I am sure we look like we are dovening in a synagogue) as we swelter and fan and kegel—constantly having to readjust so as not to scald sensitive tissue.

Hotter than the Russian Bathhouses in New York's East Village, where if you're really lucky, you get whipped (seriously flagellated) with oak branches and repeatedly doused with ice! water; hotter than *Les Bains Maures* in Tunisia, where copiously enflashed, hairy women decked out with facial and breast tattoos are contentedly committed to body archeology with loofahs and special mud called *tfa*. So hot, the moment I enter, the skin *underneath* my fingernails begins to prickle. I quickly look around before darting back out to earthly safety. In this Korean version of pushing an inferno on earth to its limit—where one could have easily blown glass upon entering, I see a tall upside-down beehive dome ceiling, earth circular walls with an ominous looking portal for the fire, some special black wood to provide extra oxygen (as we faint), including rows and rows and rows of chicken eggs. Considering both Luis Buñuel and George Bataille found chickens and roosters to be nightmarish, I wonder how they would have felt about this particular infernal scene. Little did I know, there was a whole world I had yet to experience in Seoul's public baths.

*The City:*

Just out of the subway, I pass a “hot spot” that specializes in “Wet Kid Trick” (not sure if the “kid” is referring to snuff films or to a slippery baby goat). Too early in the morning, sometime before night has decided to go rest, I am on my way to teach the second portion of my first yoga workshop (*Standing in the Field of Wild Horses: Stress Reduction and Yoga for Anxiety*). There is so much construction/ demolition, that every day I leave my little sanctuary, I am amazed by the city’s constant changes. 99 percent of the street signs are obviously written in Korean—except for an occasional sign advertising pizza: “Made by a Man, but made for a Woman”. “Anal Clinic” (one of the few signs translated into English, besides the gendered pizza signage) is lit up in neon along the side of the pedestrian-car highway. Las Vegas gone awry—public intimacy has finally entered the fray. Above the weight of the neon lights through the haze of humidity, I look up and see the original swastika—the symbol blaring red neon on all four sides of a tower, the tallest building in the vicinity. I am told the tower may be a Buddhist bookstore or belong to an unusually wealthy fortune-teller.

Outside the “Auto Spa”, attendants are lined up in a row and bow as each car drives up for a wash. Like the parking garage attendants who wear safari outfits, *Livingston-I-presume-hats* included, and the street-traffic directors, the “Auto Spa” workers wear little white lace gloves. I begin to notice these white gloves everywhere I go—working-class people in every context.

On my way to the subway, I pass a strawberry seller dressed like s/he is ready for the Mongolian steppes, including the ubiquitous white gloves. This androgyn is curled up asleep in a fetal position amongst papers and bags as his/her heaps of strawberries collect toxic *yellow dust* blown in from China. I am reminded of the red sand blown from the Sahara all the way to Switzerland—blanketing the Swiss Alps with pink. Then there are the squid sellers whose gooey

goods absorb the diesel from the onslaught of traffic inches away. Cousteau would not be okay with this.

The entire city of Seoul is criss-crossed with crazy steep narrow streets. The incline of these roads makes the traffic congestion, speed, and the women's high heels even more precipitous. The moment I walk out of my apartment or the yoga studios, my life, like all the other pedestrians around me, is on the line. On some sidewalks there are paraplegic men wearing thick black rubber over the lower half of their body that they drag along on a dolly while pushing a cart with a blaring radio and a small bucket for money. I don't know how they stay alive. Every day is a game of *Poll Division*. For most cars, buses, taxis, and motorcycles red lights and STOP signs mean quickly speed up and weave through the six lanes of traffic coming from four or more directions. I have found that I can partially avoid the homicidal boulevards by meandering through the Willy Wonka-style labyrinthine back alley slopes.

The subway is the only really safe place from the vehicular onslaught—while offering its own overwhelm: wall-sized TV screens advertising the same work-out machine over and over; sometimes a mascara commercial or an ad for financial loans slips in. Not only in every subway station in Seoul can I find the most delectable red bean *mochi* treats (the problem is they are sold on styrofoam trays), but the subway is one of the only times/places where I sit quietly to write and read. Below the outside 97-degree-temperature and far from the yoga studios' 110-degree-plus temperature—the subway air actually circulates.

### *The Yoga:*

My yoga students "endure". People love using that word here! While I try to remember Korean phrases or even just words, they loyally hold their yoga poses. I search through my convoluted, circuitous mnemonic devices: *pyo* is the word for wall, so I think of someone *peeing on a wall* along with someone *yelling out 'YO!'*. It turns out that *pyo* is actually spelled "byuck".



As the heat in the room increases and my mental heat escalates, my tongue is trying to fit itself around my language memory—the u's, g's, k's begin to congeal into impoverished deformities of the original word; my poor students are about to collapse from holding *Navasana* or *Garudasana* or *Natarajanasana*, and all I can do is laugh at myself and move on. When I am not slipping into French, every fourth word I use in class is Korean (or a variation thereof). In the midst of balancing, bending, breathing, I ask my students to endure my jarring of their language. Last week when I was spotting a student in handstand, her body suddenly froze—upside-down rigor mortis. I was physically and verbally encouraging her to “bend,” “fold,” “hips,” do *anything!*, 17-syllable words—*just come down!* She couldn't.

Whenever I ask if my students have any questions or something they would like to share, they always laugh. I don't know why. It turns out that during the first few weeks when I wanted to find out if the students had any previous injuries, I thought I was asking, "Where do you have pain?" (in Korean). It turns out I was actually asking, "Where is your father?" as I would point to different parts of my body. *Opa, Apo, father, pain...*No matter how I try to decipher between the two, I always seem to replace *pain* with *father*, *apo* with *opa*. (Since we share the same father, no further comment needed here). In spite of, or maybe because of these communication lapses, the students are really present. It is such a joy to work with them—they clearly have faith in themselves and in me as a guide to help them explore the consciousness within their bodies.

Then I have the moments where I feel too compelled to verbally explain something about breath awareness, and I try to break down the concept of awareness—looking for an adequate translation, looking to my regular students, some of whom speak a few English words. But, I find nothing but faces looking at me waiting for the next physical instruction. Later in the dressing room, one of my students begins speaking to me in 100 percent American-English, "Oh Yeah, I studied at UCLA for four years and lived in Northern California for ten years..." —and I'm

thinking, "What?! You lived in Northern California for ten years and you couldn't help me translate the word or idea for "awareness" or "paying attention" or "being in the present" or "making choices"...?"

*The Food:*

Each restaurant meal has become something along the lines of a relay-race: twelve bowls would come down from unseen hands and arms—we start gobbling the contents; suddenly 22 more bowls arrive, needing somewhere to go—lifting, shifting bowls, swallowing without chewing, swallowing after chewing too much, witnessing more and more—56 bowls, 68 bowls, 74 bowls, 92 bowls—all such small quantities—but so much—and of course, my greedy curiosity demands that I taste absolutely everything—making the act of listening (deciphering the Koreanglish becoming more and more strained) as my taste buds and hard and soft palate, spice and temperature sensors, are flapping wildly through a kaleidoscope of reactions. My overwhelm accelerates as I am torn between needing to savor each and every morsel I put into my mouth, and needing to taste from each descending bowl.

*The Public Bath:*

Following an exquisite traditional Korean dinner with the Lifestyles Editor of the major Seoul newspaper *Jooang*—about 30 palm-sized dishes of green and red and orange delectables—ranging from tangy mugwort marinated in red chilies to garlic stems that give me such a high, to—Hallelujah! —frozen persimmons, I arrive just before midnight, at what I am told is a department store. I am in search of my next spa extravaganza. The building feels deserted. Somehow, I find the elevator with glass doors facing the city. As I ascend, I hear a murmur growing louder and louder. The low stir of voices abruptly erupts into about 50 or more octogenarians—all no taller than below my shoulders—and each sporting cellophane-wrapped thick black visors shaped into the comedy/tragedy theater masks. All 50 voices and bodies are

determined to fit into the elevator at the same time. Seoul and being raucous fit so beautifully together. The crush continues up and down the floors until I manage to pry myself free from the crowd.

I finally arrive at the department store *jimjilbang* on the 17th floor, to find streams and streams of naked women, every age and size and shape—orange towels wrapped around heads—scrubbing, scrubbing one another, sometimes several friends scrubbing one person, squatting to get more leverage, like there is no tomorrow—bright green and yellow mitts flash across bodies doing forward bends, backbends, sidebends—so Loud! In the middle of the intimate cleaning frenzy, on heated marble platforms, women sleep (myself later included)—a deep, wonderful sleep. The wet hot rooms, each a different temperature, spray herbal mists, while the dry ones stacked with minerals emit delightful, unexplainable aromas. Mud herbal, chartreuse lime baths, gloriously cold pools. Among the eight pools of different sizes, shapes, temperatures, massive rock frogs spew their healing contents into rock pools and wood pavilions. Cold pools with a range of temperatures, from cool to hypothermia-inducing, shoot out waterfalls, pummeling the women beneath them. Koreans in Seoul seem to seek out continual vigorous stimulation—every sense constantly, fully engaged: inside and out—from their taste buds to the pores of their skin. By the end, which is not the end, I become a limp mollusk—sliding across a 1950's pink plastic massage table, lined up among eight other tables laden with shiny, flaccid women. Every surface wet and hot. Bulky masseuses, who give themselves and each other a thorough scrub-down between sessions, are also heavily sweating. Some wear black panties and bras, some are naked. Mine is decked out in magenta lace. She uses almost every part of her body to release almost every part of my body. Time and space completely displace. I don't know how many limbs are rubbing and scrubbing and slapping me. An occasional, "Oh God!" or low grunt slips out of me. I feel like my body is undergoing fireworks—we *are* the fireworks—between the sound of

slapping flesh, water splashing, and women's constant voices. One after the other, more amazing sensation—I am in constant awe, being conscious without thinking, there is always one more layer of total euphoria for my body to drop into—a true lesson in abundance. From the feeling of being engulfed by the warm sudsy aroma, like Luke Skywalker thawing out inside the eviscerated biped-camel creature's intestines to the lemon-mashed-cucumber wrapped around my face to the way the masseuse pries *in-between* the sutures of my skull, metacarpals, metatarsals—miraculous! My spleen meridian and lymphatic fluid cry out, "Let's Boogie!" Because I have been reading novels about food, I keep having flashes of meat being tenderized. I don't know if I have ever gotten such a clear sense of my own anatomy—the inter-connectedness of the paths of nerve and lymph channels—connective tissue gone wild! DNA becomes a whole new meaning for me. This beyond-massage experience reconceives Charles and Ray Eames and *The Power of Ten*. The micro and macro really do become *recto/verso*! My clothes that had been tight on me when I had entered the spa, are now baggy as I leave the following afternoon, 13 hours later—I have lost that much *skin*. The next day, my blossoming bruises are the color of my masseuse's lace panties. (and the whole experience cost \$3.00)

*The Food:*

Fish Markets...breathtaking... Flayed humans from the exhibition at the *Seoul Pavilion* alongside the insides/outside of fish-market sea creatures send me reeling. I feel the same rush when I am collaborating with Marina de Van, the actress, writer, director of *Dans Ma Peau (In My Skin)*, where she becomes so pre-occupied with her own flesh, she devours her own body. That night's dinner and the next morning's breakfast: *unagi*. At the juncture to their long, slick bodies, eels are pierced on a tall spike. The pile of breathing bodiless heads grows—so silent and methodical—watching; seemingly no panic. Seeing their death reminds me of when we killed the sheep for *mechoui*, the Tunisian feast on the commune in Belgium—the sheep's impassive

expression as the knife sliced into its throat; gesturing absolute coherence. I cannot forget the quiet.

Not being able to express myself verbally in Korean, I jump up and down wildly, pointing to Wonkil's camera and then back to the cement floor: slippery with bright red blood—fresh. I can't tell if the eel's eyes are looking around—can their brains be absorbing any information? Aren't they beyond pain? Beyond any particular sensation? Can there be breath and death? I flash to living on the farm in the Alps. We had slit the throat of one of the rabbits that we raised to eat the weeds under the raspberry bushes. Sharp objects move so quickly.

I catch a glimpse of writhing octopus legs *as* they are being cut up into bite size pieces, before being cleaned off the plastic cutting board into a plastic bag. Wonkil shows me something that I had actually chewed and swallowed the night before. In my dinner it had been camouflaged as little chunks, now I see it whole—and moving—to be exact, throbbing. And a whole pile of them—breathing and making slow, heavy contraction penile-like, expansion motions—kind of like an inside-out esophagus. Dear God. And they are surrounded by spiky spiny deep red orange black bulbous extrusions, long short thick skinny scaly smooth-as-baby-butt coated wrapped viscous bare layered fin-ed tooth-ed claw-ed--talk about simultaneously inside and outside (something I have been discussing with the Korean artists with whom I am collaborating) guts galore, miraculous breathing apparatuses, shapes-forms I know no language for.

Later, in the department store foodfrenzy palace (where it turns out, the transgender community hangs out), I see the same plexiglass fish containers: this time dividing eyebrow pencils, lip gloss, q-tips, tweezers instead of all those unnamable breathing sea and fresh-water beasts.

Again, I have to stop and take a breath.

Back in sashimi heaven: lines and lines of skate and stingrays—enormous. The women are hard at work—covered from head to toe in orange and pink thick rubber and handling some medieval

and eerily effective flesh-removing devices. These serene pre-historic beasts had surrendered long ago—their exquisite gills and intestines methodically exposed and disposed of. I lurk, probably a little too closely. Every being is in transition and I want to see it all!

*The Public Baths:*

The next public bath I visit is in the *Express Bus Terminal Subway Station*. First, I am blown away by the structures of the saunas: entire domed walls and ceilings covered in quartz—quartz of every color—*every* color. Some of the rooms' ceilings unravel into spirals of charcoal for extra oxygen, supported by more walls made out of cut quartz—they look like huge luscious melons squeezed between shiny panes of glass. Other rooms are constructed entirely from quartz stones: uncut, like big, colorful eggs or hardened magnified cilia. Azurite, Turquoise, Amethyst, Cavansite, Bixbyite, Kaemmererite emerge from the walls and ceilings—tightly bound crystallized larva protruding into the dry heat. It is incredible to be sweating like a post-coitus lion, surrounded by these outrageous minerals.

Among the “Nail Art Salons” (this is huge in Korea—women have entire landscapes painted on their finger and toenails; there are “Nail Art Stations” in every kind of public venue) and the “Men's Hair Follicle Stimulation Area”, this *jinjilbang* offers Inquisitional-like machines that look like they could have been used in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest;” and actually were probably the prototype for the trash compactor in the original “Star Wars”. These foreboding huge metal, vinyl hip-compressors face the electronic douches—the modern version of the couchie-steamers in which UV light rises through rows of vinyl toilet seats. I do not know how to respond to this one. As the hip-compactor machine begins to swell and squeeze my pelvic bones together (supposedly making my menstrual cycle healthier, taking care of sacroiliac problems, shoulder joint dysfunction, fertility issues, and an extensive list of other health benefits), I look up to see an impassive-faced woman sitting across from me on her light-fed

electronic douche—her feet propped on illuminated bubbly heated plastic, quietly dovening. I wasn't particularly pleased to have my pelvis cinched—it took 15 minutes for this heaving, gurgling machine to gradually release me. In the end, post-rabbinical-couchie singe and pelvic compactor à la George Lucas, my menstruation has been fabulous! Pain-free and full of release—the best one I have had since I can remember.

This spa is kind of like summer camp, an eccentric camp. By the time I free myself from the hip vice, it is already early the next morning. The fluidity of time baffles me yet again. I find bodies strewn and sprawled throughout the various rooms and hallways, even doorways. Looking down from the second floor co-ed section of the *jimjilbang*, I see sleeping men, women, and children who appear to have delicately landed after falling from the sky. In the woman's sleeping room, there are about 30 conked out bodies—lying haphazardly in the hot, dimly lit room. Around 5am the bathhouse occupants, luxuriating in their torpor, crawl into individually stacked sleep-cubby-holes—each clutching their cell phones.

#### *The Food:*

Past midnight, women squat in the subways selling their ginseng root and control-top stockings. Everyone is constantly working—selling and buying without remorse. The continual activity throughout Seoul blows every speed stereotype of New York City out of the water. Feeding Frenzy, Full-blown Chaos—the indoor department store shopping markets, women in uniforms: plastic aprons, strange leg warmers, and mini-minis selling everything imaginable. Each seller so eager to please with her particular product: twelve different kinds of Spam next to 399 different kinds of *kim-chee* next to 50 different kinds of *nori* among 200 other kinds of seaweed next to \$8.00 imported Muesli and \$15.00 peanut butter next to grilled, marinated, dripping, dried, deep-fried, slimy, coated, crispy, rubbery, raw, boiled, crunchy, chewy, spicy, icy taste-samples on toothpicks. Anyone who has ever been disturbed by the bread in the bread basket going back to

the customers for reuse would not be happy with the quintuple-dipping into the vats in the deli containers behind the sliding glass doors. I love it. I can't stop laughing the whole time as Wonkil literally drags me through the crowds from one taste to another—toothpick-gripping shopping, sensory fanatics; stimulation fiends—their energy does not have one ounce of hostility, just a lust for movement that is somehow rooted in a remarkable stillness.

*The Yoga:*

My butchy, bushy-haired, bare-bellied waif assistant is a Korean version of me—everyone thinks this is pretty funny. In yoga class, the two of us are like the *George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*--she doesn't speak any English, so the adverbs (like *chun chun hee*, meaning slowly) that I am learning in Korean, I say and then she repeats, or the other way around. The students laugh a lot. Teaching students who don't speak English is pretty wild! I feel like Sarah Bernhardt, using full, dramatic gestures rather than words—Charlie Chaplin and Marcel Marceau would be proud. With all my semi-exaggerated gesticulations, I often feel like Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia*.

I have been working with the teachers in training—listening to some of their horror stories. I now know why these women are basically living at the studios—they are required to take four or more classes a day. And these are HOT classes. I have never seen such a concentration of frantic yoga students running late for class wearing the spikiest, sexiest high heels. Luckily for them, the studio offers valet parking. It turns out that if the students are even one minute late, they are not permitted to enter class. The initial panic to get there on time is palpable. Maybe one reason why many of the students stay for seven hours at a time—attending back-to-back drenched classes.

Over the last months, two surveillance cameras have been installed in the yoga studios (these are kept spic and span by older women patting the cameras with rolled masking tape). Maybe the cameras are part of a scientific experiment to observe the female (occasionally male) body: If 70 percent of our bodies are water, what will happen if we drain our tissues of all of their moisture,



and still wear cute outfits? Several of my students have told me that they crave meditation classes, but since the norm (Korean and American) tells us that men and women generally don't lose weight while meditating, those classes are difficult to find. I try to incorporate a meditation practice in my classes, but that requires some verbal communication—my challenge.

After teaching the trainees a four-day intensive, I get a taste of the stress they are under. I am told that during the teacher-training intensive, several of the students were vomiting—judged by *Ms. Korea 1994* for their Teacher Test, they are required to hold some of the most physically challenging poses—for all different kinds of bodies—between 7-10 minutes. The entire training is *asana* practice: no anatomy, no philosophy, no communication—*teaching*—skills. But, as I taught these soon-to-be teachers, I felt compelled to describe the interdisciplinary curriculum that the Iyengar Yoga Institute in San Francisco offers. At this point, my translator, *Ms. Korea 1994*, stops translating.

#### *The Food:*

I drink daisy tea that reminds me that Judith Lasater's acupuncturist once told me that I circulate too many "perversities" in my life and that I need more daisies. So far so good. Teeny piles of burdock, brachen, citrus rind, aster leaf, and mustard greens that sling a lasso around my sinuses (inundated with Chinese yellow dust) and holler! The bowls that we are eating from shake me the most—some sort of magical metal that rings with delight each time I dip my spoon or metal chopsticks. A sound so sweet, I want to cry in silence.

This morning while devouring my sweet garlic, *nori*, organic tomatoes, rice, zucchini, marinated egg, and amazingly tiny copper colored fish (whose eyes are almost bigger than their bodies), mixed with peanuts and sweet roasted carrots, I feel a similar rush as when I was in one of the Buddhist temples looking at a wall painting—multiple faces and hands rhythmically spiraling out

from the center. Considering how big Catholicism is in Korea, I sometimes wonder how my references to Buddhism come across.

My taste buds and hard palate are introduced to a new adventure almost everyday/night—squid pancake before a pre-dawn photo shoot; lily watermelon by candle-light on a sticky humid night, thick syrupy quince immune system drink, teeny silver fish pressed into flat sheets of seaweed with sesame seeds, gelatinous acorn "noodles", mountains of beastly, but tantalizing garlic, whole heads and brains (all shared with my Korean lover, as I shed my former relationship through oral and visual food adventures), pagoda-looking stone and wood layered bowls with just the remains of cooked rice coating the edges and bottom—you pour hot water in and drink the ricey liquid. When I do this kind of thing in the states, most people around me cringe and think I'm being waste-obsessive; here, it is a delicacy. The only thing I am not crazy about are the chunks of watermelon in Sprite and milk. My biggest excitement and pleasure is the shared part of each meal. Everyone at the table is eating and often drinking out of the same small bowls. *Eating* feels like actually *tasting*, instead of scarfing the same mouthful over and over. Being present with each bite, each gulp, instead of diving into distracted excess (that, of course, can also be completely wonderful!).

In spite of ingesting so many bowls of fermented ecstasy, I am quickly losing weight—too much, too quickly. The heat in the yoga studios has become unquestionably unbearable.

*The Yoga:*

Teaching has been challenging. Between my rib that popped out of my sternum (to me, another corporeal mystery, but supposedly it erupted out of my over-active pecs—which makes demonstrating the poses pretty interesting), the floor to ceiling mirrors, and my low-blood pressure mixed with the extreme heated studios, I have my moments of doubt.

It's difficult to adjust the students in their poses because their bodies are so slippery and my body is so slippery. The humidity in the studio fogs up my glasses, so I can barely even see them. The little amount of clothing that we are wearing becomes completely adhered to our clammy flesh—we are literally suffocating. For my late night classes, I have been teaching most of the class on the ground to avoid the top tiers of heat. As I am teaching, I feel like a cartoon voice-over—as I make sounds to represent actions. I am in a pinball machine—bouncing around the class—so that students can see me from different angles, since body is our only common language. This of course makes the heat even more extreme. I drink more water here in a day than I do during the entire time when I'm at Burning Man. I have cut up and re-sown a bunch of my clothes because they were too hot for the yoga studios. Yesterday, while demonstrating *Virabhadrasana 1*, my yoga shorts shot right off of me. I couldn't help thinking of Ms. Danielson, my seventh-grade English teacher who would fall asleep with her mouth gaping open over my desk (as you know too well, Alhadeff always meant front row)—her spittle would gather into thick gobs, then plop out onto my list of alphabetically ordered prepositions or subject-object diagrammed sentences, while her strange combinations of black lace undergarments and white polyester would slip right off of her still-motion body—landing on my desk, next to her oral froth. Is this what I am becoming?

*The Public Baths:*

This time she wears black lace. She orders me to mount a massage table that is a few shades lighter than the 50 foot fuchsia polystyrene pig sculpture outside of *Pure Yoga*. Within moments, I am lying among the scrubbed off layers of my first seven sheaths of skin. That is when I slip into unconsciousness—sort of. This experience is less about bone-grinding awareness and more about veins. Flashes of Grandfather Papoo, who had the veins stripped from his legs (a medical treatment for varicose veins)—wondering how his body would have received the scrubbing,

rubbing, and beating. What could be more nourishing than being scrubbed and rubbed while being sung to? Rabindranath Tagore filters into my memories: *The same stream that flows through my veins flows through the universe in rhythmic measure.* My masseuse plays me like an African stringed instrument. After she swaddles my skull, the nerves around my jaw feel particularly thrilled by how aggressive she is. Total surrender. A horizontal bar that runs above the massage tables allows the woman to keep her balance as she prods and crushes my thoroughly lubricated body. I think all the banging, slapping, slinging, and flinging I have experienced during my time here has kept my immune system strong. Following my excruciatingly blissful massage, I am lying on the heated marble platform that is usually covered by women who are fast asleep. Returning to *Savasana* after a little *Supta Baddhakonasana*, my eyes covered, I feel a hot towel being draped over my nether regions. I look up to see an older woman smiling as she is covering my private parts. I don't get it. We had all been naked together so many times—what happened? Has my status as a foreigner somehow emerged? Suddenly no longer as invisible (i.e., assimilated) as I thought I had been?

#### *The Food:*

Today I ate the most remarkable meal with our Korean family at a Buddhist restaurant: no less than 66 bowls of different sizes and different woods and ceramics containing almost that many different kinds of greens! This was my Nirvana. Dried, fermented, furry, sautéed, grilled, raw, mixed, plain; of the earth, of the sea, from tree limbs, and tree roots; shades of every green to brown to white to purple—if I was riddled with Attention Deficit Disorder, this would have been a perfect opportunity to go absolutely berzerk. And, to top it all off, they don't use sugar, but, dear God, Persimmon juice—the nectar from beyond—persimmon juice to sweeten their kim-chee! The white *kim-chee* (different from the dark red chili *kim-chee*) gives me unending satisfaction—its briny, sweet clear liquid with surprise pine nuts and Chinese dates is a gift from

the gods to my mouth. From the marinated roots to the lotus mixed with mountain growths to the garlic that has been soaking for over a year in a sweet something that reminds me of mead, the combination of sweet and spicy in the form of fermentation is amazingly clearing. The pleasure of eating in Korea continues to shake me to my core—whether I am engulfing just-beheaded eel or drinking some sort of ground fish—reminiscent of flowers and grace. How can so many different tastes and textures, each complete in and of themselves, fit so beautifully together in one meal? Each separate and whole and at the same time able to submit without losing its own fabulous integrity. This exchange between autonomy and connection reminds me how food combinations represent the potential for rich, healthy functioning relationships. It is possible!

*The Public Baths--My last undoing:*

This particular night, I get the Topless Crew. Since unfortunately, I continue to lose more weight, my bones, nerves, and muscles feel particularly sensitive. My masseuse is a really robust woman—our bodies so completely different—her soft, big belly and breasts. At one point I worry, is she really going to stand on me?! She does. Besides having my trachea fused into my esophagus, I survive. The bellybreast woman sends me reeling as she presses down on my brachial plexus—her elbows sliding between my armpits and the left side of my neck. I have to laugh out loud. Through her pressure, I feel the networks of my nerves—my awareness a little too heightened. I keep on visualizing the flayed bodies in *The Human Body Exhibit* (that I saw last week—just before losing my mind at the Fish Market).

The whole notion of skin and contact gives me a different perspective on my pain. This is not a Northern Californian, granola tattooed massage. These women move fast. Anything but Feldenkrais or cranial-sacral. The idea is clearly if there is a knot, marble, or in my case a boulder, in someone's neck, shoulders, back, calves—demand it out. My boobs and butt get a royal treatment—I have never under-gone knuckles like that before. The cucumber and

peppermint waft through my wrapped head—covered entirely in pulp, except for my nostrils.

Smell memories: I was eight-years old living in Dripping Springs, Texas when my mom would make fist-sized won-tons. I can smell the dough so vividly. In the midst of all this sensory hugeness, I hear a child's voice, "Omaaaa...."(Mother). I am brought to tears. When my topless masseuse helps me sit up and I eventually am able to open my eyes, I see 5 or 6 other women—including a little girl about 7 years old—all being slathered, scrubbed, spanked, and stepped on. It was beautiful, unquestioned connection.

I have decided that after living in San Francisco for eleven years, eight of them in a committed monogamous relationship, Korea has finally given me the courage to leave. For a few delicious moments, I choose Seoul as my new home, but now I know—New York City, here I come!

Gleefully and Quietly Yours,

Cara