

Jeannie Chang

A South Korean Woman's Song

It was in the early fall of 1950
Before the cold winds blew from Bakdusan
That the elders of my village whispered
Among themselves
News of soldiers in mustard yellow suits
Marching down from the north on hillsides in groups
Rampaging villages and killing people for treason

One morning before the dew was lifted from the ground
I woke to the noise of my mother
Preparing rice cakes in the open dirt square
As I dressed by the escaping darkness I yelled,
"My spare clothes are missing from their hooks"
Not knowing they were outside my rice paper door waiting
Wrapped in heavy purple cloth tied in a knot
My mother drew me to her side and gave me
One of the hot cakes and stroked my hair
Be good to your brother and look after him
You're the mother now, don't get in the way
Of your uncle

Just as the sun reached the top of the apple blossom trees
My brother and I departed with another family
On the road headed south

My mother waved but I couldn't tell if she was
Smiling or crying, her face wrapped in a woven muffler
My father carried my brother on his back
Walked us as far as he could
Before paying the man who would take us south
To my chicken farmer uncle
My father's lying cheerfulness is what I remember last

Now, two years shy of forty years
Since the day I saw them last
I have not forgotten
They are vivid as a flickering fluorescent lightbulb
On and off trembling
I lie still at night remembering
And yearning for the day when
I'll be with them forever in my village
My village of white pebbled brooks
And apple blossom springs