

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Lark and Termite

Jayne Anne Phillips

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Nonie The Social Services people marched right in

Termite He sees through the blue

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Acknowledgments

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About the Book

Two children: Lark and her brother, Termite, a child unable to walk and talk but full of radiance. Two women: Lola, their mother, and Nonie, their aunt, who for mysterious reasons is the one to raise them. *Lark and Termite* imaginatively enters the hearts and thoughts of a family, from their home in 1950s West Virginia to Korea, where their father has been sent to fight.

It is a story of the power of loss and love, the echoing ramifications of war, family secrets, dreams and ghosts, and the unseen, almost magical bonds that unite and sustain us.

About the Author

Jayne Anne Phillips is the author of five works of fiction. The recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she is currently Professor of English and Director of the MFA Program at Rutgers-Newark, the State University of New Jersey. She divides her time between Boston, New York and Glen Ridge, New Jersey.

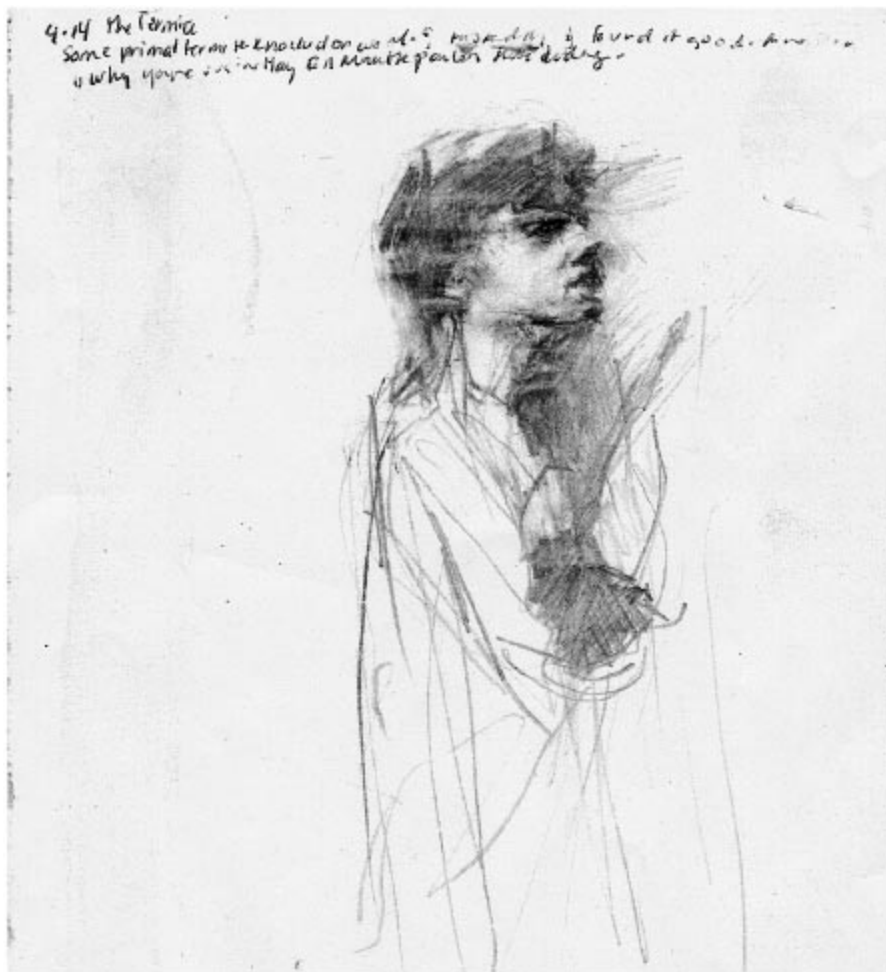
ALSO BY JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS

MotherKind
Shelter
Fast Lanes
Machine Dreams
Black Tickets

Limited Editions
The Secret Country
How Mickey Made It
Counting
Sweethearts

*for Elie (1974-2005),
for Audrey (Boulder, 1975),
and for Cho,
infant boy born and died
in the tunnel at No Gun Ri,
July 1950*

4.14 The Terrace
Some primal form to be explored on wall. I found it good. Am ...
why you're ... in May ...



Lark and Termite

Jayne Anne Phillips

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

GI's corrupted the native term han'guk saram, which means Korean, into the derisive slang "gook," which was indelicately applied to all Asians, even in later undeclared wars.

—ROBERT J. DVORCHAK,
Battle for Korea

Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER,
The Sound and the Fury

*Is your mouth a little weak
When you open it to speak, are you smart?*

—LORENZ HART AND RICHARD
RODGERS,
*"My Funny Valentine," from Babes
in Arms, 1936*

July 26



North Chungchong Province, South Korea

JULY 26, 1950

Corporal Robert Leavitt

24th Infantry Division

HE'D SHIPPED OUT to Occupied Japan in December '49; whatever baby was a tucked seed inside Lola's sex, a nub the size of a tail-bone. *You want to marry me? You going to tell your mother who you're marrying?* His mother wouldn't care, he told her, his mother was dead, he wanted a woman who'd been around, he wanted her, he'd got her and he wasn't leaving her, he never would, not really, was she hearing him? *I hear you, I'm hearing you.* Mother may I, mother me. *Left you too soon, didn't she. Left you to me.* But he's gone from Lola now, gone for months; the baby is inside her, cushioned and pure, isolate. Winter at the base in Tokyo was like clocking a job in uniform, all of Occupied Japan an American colony with its own clubs and bars. Tokyo felt fake, soft, a movie set. When Colonel MacDowell invited select soldiers to learn Korean in a pet project he called Language Immersion Seoul, Leavitt said yes to minimal advancement and a change of duty. He was in Korea by April, one of sixty LIS army enlisted men installed at KMAG. Korean Military Advisory Group was a remnant: a few hundred army brass and their support staff of minions and enlisted men. They'd nothing to do but stay put, a supposed symbol of preparedness overseeing largely symbolic

Republic of Korea troops. Leavitt imagined his baby moving in a fluid, muscular nest he couldn't touch or feel while the American military flexed its own small fist in divided territory, but KMAG's isolated outpost disappeared the June morning North Korea invaded. Four weeks of near-constant combat since are a continuous day and night bled into Leavitt's brain. Battle and the mayhem of retreat have changed the taste of his saliva and the smell of his sweat, but late July is Lola's time. Any hour, any moment. If the baby was already born, an armed forces telegram might follow Leavitt for weeks across the rutted fields and dirt roads of this bloody rout. He tells himself he won't need any telegram. Lola's voice drifts close unbidden and it's like she's standing in the war next to him. No matter how loud the ordnance or artillery, how loud his own heart hammers, he hears her. Words she said when he could touch her. *You found your mother because she wanted you to. All those years, her asthma pulled the air from that little store while your father stood in the doorway. She wanted you out of there.*

He keeps moving. Near noon of this infernally hot day, Lola's voice moves him forward. Two or three emptied villages in the immediate area constitute Leavitt's detail: "evacuation" of refugees whose unrecorded exodus proceeds apace with the American retreat. These double train tracks running west to Hwanggan are a godsend, boundary and direction for what is otherwise panicked flight and chaos. Replacements under Leavitt's command are soft recruits from Occupation forces in Japan, rushed in by boat and train to reinforce besieged American troops. Most have never seen combat or heard artillery fire. They're raw troops moved out at first light into countryside mired in another century. Rifle fire punctuates the darkness before and behind them; they've heard the terms "circular front" and "infiltrator's war"; they're sleepless and jumpy and they're right to be scared. Many of them will die before Leavitt can

teach them a thing. He has nothing to teach the Koreans in his charge, but the urgent crowd of two or three hundred thins and lengthens to a moving column once Leavitt signals the platoon to direct them off the road, onto the tracks. Easier here, a semblance of control, but there's no evacuation possible, certainly none directed by Americans. No numbered Hangul signatures in someone's logbook. No logbook. Everything in South Korea is clogged or broken. Equipment shipped quickly from American bases in Japan is constantly displaced; troop movement maddeningly slowed by refugees streaming away from the fighting. The South Korean inhabitants of numberless rural villages flee behind whatever resistance American troops can offer, their mud-wattle houses left empty, outdoor cooking fires still warm. There are conflicting accounts: Chinese Yaks or American F-60s strafed the area last night in advance of troop movement. Thatch roofs, saturated by weeks of rain, burn wet and smoky once they're set afire. Smoke veils the air like souls in drifting suspension, declining the war's insistence everyone move on.

The heat is dense, thick, and the rice fields at dawn are bright green emanations, alive with the sick fragrance they call night soil. Piled waste from countless country latrines, shoveled into pails and buckets and leaky ox carts, fertilizes the earth to yield and yield until the fields themselves are night. The spongy ground sinks underfoot, ripened and dark as any fermented secret. The ground breathes. Decay held still too long, Leavitt thinks. He keeps moving. Lola talks to him. *Nothing is wasted, nothing is waste. You think you didn't need to know exactly what you know? How many boys your age blow a horn like you can and then enlist in peacetime? You wanted out of Philly mighty bad.* Philly is gone. Villages here are encampments sunk in a time before radios or jeeps, before horns or jazz or English words. Skinny, wary dogs wolf any shred of slaughtered chicken, duck, fish gut dropped to the ground while women tend

outdoor fires and infants slung in cloth *podaegi* ride the backs of girls. Older babies stagger across the patches of ground reserved each habitation and squat when they like, teaching themselves, their trousers cut out so the cheeks of their asses plump like cleft fruit. Now those babies are gathered up, quiet in the heat. Lola says lines from the beginning, like they can start all over. *You know me now, don't you. Say you do. Whisper.* She's his own phantom, a smoke drifting close to him. The war makes ghosts of them all. Fifty years, a hundred years, they'll still be here: vestige mist moving along a double rail bed near a wobble of a stream, the South Koreans in their white clothes, the GIs in mud-crusting khaki.

Since Osan, Leavitt doesn't think beyond the war. Osan was July 5; Leavitt knows it was a Wednesday—he wrote the date and day on a letter to Lola the morning of the attack. Forty-eight hours later, one of three survivors in his group, Leavitt moved to another platoon. He moved to another, then another, moving up incrementally in rank as his superiors were killed and not replaced. He commands a platoon now and he sees that war never ends; it's all one war despite players or location, war that sleeps dormant for years or months, then erupts and lifts its flaming head to find regimes changed, topography altered, weaponry recast. The Red Chinese and the NKPA are only the latest aggressors to pour across Korea like a death tide. Leavitt imagines thousands of war dead, disbelieving their own deaths, continuing to die and die on the same swaths of contested land. The American troops press on through heavy air, discounting their apprehensions as vague scent, cloud scrim, their own shot nerves, but Leavitt senses the dead furling like smoke from the vented earth, wandering the same ground as the living. Any American who stood at Osan and Chochiwon, at Kum River, should be dead. The majority are dead. Korea is choked with phantoms who will never get home. The Koreans themselves are phantoms,

moving with their bundles and baskets, their children, their old people.

Even the villagers' footfalls sound ghostly. Diverted onto the railroad tracks, they keep a dull time, their sandals slap-thudding the muddy ties. At least they're off the road, or what passes for a road. The Americans traverse dirt trails they've broadened, rutted, bled into with trucks and bodies. All roads lead here, to these double tracks, to Lola and away from her.

Married, they'd stayed in her room for days before he left, taking longer and longer as time ran out. He shoved the bed against the wall and put the mattress flat on the floor. There they woke and slept on a stable continent whose silence never betrayed them, turning each other in circles like a clock whose two hands remained in circular, continuous alarm. Crying, Lola was nearly impassive, her face wet and still as though she couldn't or wouldn't give in to sobs. He'd never known a woman who cried like her, like she'd forgotten she was ever a child. Holding him with her silky hands, her face an inch from his, she breathed into his mouth through parted lips, and her eyes showed faint lines at the corners when she smiled. In five years, she told him, she'd begin to look her age. Good, he'd said, I'll be ready. They've been apart now longer than they were together and he feels he's more than made up the eight years between them. He can protect her now, even from herself, from him. *You found her, didn't you, on the floor. She kept vanishing for years and then she was finally gone. You're here, let her go.* Breathing, he keeps moving. He'd thought death leached air away in gasps, in the fishlike toneless labor of his mother's asthmatic wheezing. Death was small then, like the click of a light turned off, or a sigh of air escaping from a radiator. Not here. Death surges in the ground like a bass line, vast, implacable.

The past he remembers, Lola, his stateside time in the service, Japan, even Seoul before the invasion, seems to

have occurred in an adjacent dimension not quite connected to him, and the mirage he lived as a kid in Philly is cut adrift. The tenements and storefronts, the glittery concrete and asphalt, the chain-link fences bordering throbbing neighborhoods miles from the Liberty Bell, are some dream he no longer believes. Barber's poles ran their spiraled colors in the morning smash and bang, and every deli and bodega pledged its loyalties to a numbers runner smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee at a back table. Dented trash cans stood sentinel by the curbs, a gleam in the pinky bronze light of late-summer afternoons. Neon signs flashed hot-pink PIZZA and lime green BILLIARDS all night as smoke borne on jukebox phrases eased from the doors of bars. On Shabbat mornings he played stickball, marbles, basketball with the Italian kids, the envy of his Jewish friends because his parents weren't religious.

Noon on he worked in the grocery for his old man; they lived in the cramped apartment over the store. Every school day, three hours after classes, Leavitt worked for the old man. His mother cleared a shelf under the counter for his books, found a swivel stool with a back, told him to stay in it and do his homework if the old man wasn't there. As he often wasn't. Mostly, he lived elsewhere, and ranted and drank when he was around. She was the one who kept it going. Kept the radio going too, tuned low to Benny Goodman, Nelson Riddle. She was all for that dreamtime music, played in ballrooms and swank clubs she'd never see. Leavitt learned clarinet in the school band, then played a beat-up cornet until she traded some junkie musician groceries and ice cream for his trumpet. You practice, Bobby, she'd say. Sounds nice, she'd tell him. After she died, collapsed on the floor beside the old man's treasured refrigerator case, Leavitt refused to even enter the place. Sixteen years old, he used the separate apartment entrance and narrow stairs that bypassed the storefront until he

moved out. The old man soon changed the locks, and Leavitt lived with friends or girls. Two years later, in '45, he graduated high school with no family in attendance. Days, for three years, he drove a delivery truck for a liquor wholesaler. Nights he played with one band or another in bars and clubs, had a run of nearly a year with a white jazz band that played downtown and wore suits. But he liked playing the black clubs, where he learned more and made less, and the pros called him Whitey with tacit affection. He was good enough to patch gigs together, but there was finally no reason to stay in Philly.

One cold November day in '48 he enlisted on impulse and the army bused him south three days later; he took to basic so hard the brass kept him on at Fort Knox for seven months, assisting drill instructors. Fort Knox billed itself as the "Home of Armor," but Leavitt found he had no interest in driving tanks. They were dark, heavy, close inside, the men clutched together in a mechanized hole, breathing one another's air. The tank crews loved the big guns and considered themselves invulnerable, but Leavitt wanted out, into infantry, where he could see and hear and move on his own. He'd come in fit but he trained compulsively, embraced army hierarchy and chain-of-command etiquette, pushed himself to attain firsts in every drill. He saw it all as protection, survival, his own invulnerability: if he attained perfect form, he increased his options while his mind-set remained his own, and the essential privacy he cultivated was assured. Nights he lay in an upper bunk, silently practicing fingerings, his trumpet fit to his mouth, tonguing the familiar mouthpiece while men snored around him.

The first weekend basic ended, he made his way to Onslow's Club in nearby Louisville. Onslow's offered booze, music, girls who lived upstairs and quietly sold their favors. Not Lola. She had three rooms on the top floor and didn't sell herself to anyone. Onslow played decent piano with a dependable no-frills drummer while Lola sang standards and

blues. He was old enough to be Lola's father and then some, arthritic, "retired," with his cane and his bad knees, his once-powerful arms and barrel chest, and his hamlike hands coaxed an unbelievably fluid sound from the best-tuned Steinway grand in Louisville. The second night Leavitt took his horn and sat in. By the third set Onslow said they should make it a regular thing. He'd pay Leavitt in free drinks and food, girls if he wanted them. Leavitt didn't; he wanted Lola. When she finished he slipped unbidden up the stairs behind her, honed in on her, completely certain. The sounds of the club under them throbbed in the walls as she ascended above him through the narrow stairwell, hips and thighs a gauzy oval in her pale sheath skirt. Moving in near darkness like a slow, detached shape, she turned on the stairs as she paused to look down at him. Leavitt sees that shape now in his fragmented sleep or behind his eyes, glowing, asexual, like a flicker of light opening into himself. He can't shake the feeling that seeing her, wanting her, playing behind her in the club, making love to her days and nights in her rooms that became his rooms, were practice for staying alive. Then as now he moved in what he couldn't quite have, get to, reach, until her body gave it up to him like flames he sparked inside a darkness. She was luminous ground he worked and sowed, sweated for and lost. They found each other in blinding, convulsive instants that seared him open. *You sure you want this? It's not me. It's you, finding me like I'm your last chance.* He moves alongside the Koreans, touches the service revolver strapped to his waist in its snug holster. He can't control his thoughts. Walking, he fantasizes being with Lola one more time and shooting them both while he's still inside her, ecstatic, desperate to stay with her, not to die here. He imagines white explosive orgasmic nothingness before he thinks about her body as it must look and feel now, swollen full, the baby nearly born. *I'm carrying high and round, tight as a drum full of water. I know it's a boy—he turns like a fish and he sees and hears for you,*

every sound, every thought I haven't written. He thinks of the baby enclosed in her darkness and hurtles away from them, sucked into a space behind his own eyes where his brain keeps time and his blood beats in his ears.

Carefully, he moves on with his tribe. He's a refugee in his own life, sans family or possessions. Like the Koreans, he owns what he carries. He thinks of these farmers, old men, women and children, moving across exposed ground with no weapons but his and those of the boys he commands, and grips his rifle tighter. The flat green rice fields are behind them now. Green and brown hills in the near distance come together like a landscape of loins and thighs, smooth from far off, mud ruddled and steep underfoot. The NKPA had dressed in peasant garb to surround American forces at Chonan, and command changed twice in one night. Leavitt cut his way back alone through barren, rounded hills just like these: tracks and worn trails crossed with runoff and scrub pine and verge, nothing to hold on to, nowhere to hide. What was left of his scattered company took four days to find their own lines, straggling groups of three or four retreating piecemeal through barrage and sniper fire and continuous NKPA incursion. The last day, he'd met up with Tompkins.

"One minute test," Tompkins had repeated in Korean, "where are the fucking ROK?" Taejon had fallen. Eighty thousand Republic of Korea soldiers had simply taken off their uniforms and disappeared, dressed in white, and joined the southward flow of refugees. Numerous American kids would have done the same if white clothes had offered any protection. Instead they fled while they could walk, leaving M1s and Browning automatics too heavy to carry. "Babies," Tompkins said. "White man's gotta have guns. Now command will hump them back here to pick up their goddamn rifles, and whoever isn't dead will get his ass creamed."

Just off the transport ship from the States, Leavitt had signed on to play swing at the Officers' Club in Tokyo. Dance music and standards, home away from home. The place was a cement-block rectangle called the Match Box, fitted out with ceiling fans and a central raised platform for the band. That first night, he and Tompkins replaced musicians who'd finished their rotations and shipped out. Tompkins was a drummer; he liked telling everyone straight off he was Seminole and did any jack man want to discuss it. He was a big guy with a hawklike nose, a nose that could pass for Jewish without the wide jaw, the heavy-lidded, nearly black eyes, the high, broad bones of the face. Leavitt misheard his name; at the end of the first set, he asked why the hell Tompkins' mother named him Irving if he was Seminole. "My mother was Seminole," Tompkins said, "and my father was a big dumb cracker named *Ervin*. That's Spec. 4 *Ervin* Tompkins, Belle Glade, Florida: inland, near Lake Okeechobee. Plenty of Seminoles with cracker names. What about you, Philly boy, your old man named Irving? He like his boy playing jazz?"

"His name is Meyer," Leavitt said, "and no, I've not seen him lately."

"That so," Tompkins answered. "Sounds like you might have scratched up a living here and there with that horn. You twenty-two, twenty-three? You got four or five years on most of these boys." Tompkins was nearly thirty, an old man; he'd missed World War II serving time in Kissimmee. Involuntary manslaughter, first offense. By the time he got out the musicians he'd played with in West Palm and Boca had died in Europe or moved on. The recruiter didn't seem to mind that Tompkins had gone to jail for hitting a drunken adversary too hard. Tompkins figured the peacetime army was a better meal ticket than digging ditches, and here he was, in an Occupation force of uniformed kids. "You and me are senior partners," he said. "Most of these boys are so snot-nosed and soft nobody'd take their money in Hialeah."

Florida, to hear Tompkins tell it, was full of towns that might have been named for women: Hialeah, Sanibel, Kissimmee, Belle Glade. Storybook names for storybook places. Korea was no storybook. After Chonan, he and Tompkins traveled by night and hid by day when the NKPA moved. They found the swarm of the retreat east of Taejon and were told to wait a day for replacements. What's left of the 24th moves now in broad daylight, visible as fleas on a pup's belly, flanks exposed, easy to surround on flat, low land. They're setting up perimeters in a sea of moving refugees, with nothing but bazookas and 4.2 mortars to lob against Chinese tanks.

MacDowell is dead, shot in the chest at the fall of Seoul, but the ROK 6th Division he advised had defended the approach to Chunchon through numerous guerrilla incursions. The 6th was combat ready and held for three days, until adjoining units on both flanks collapsed and fled, leaving them no choice but retreat. Leavitt supposes most commanding officers actually fighting this disastrous string of first stands are dead; who knew if MacDowell had prolonged their lives or doomed them by inventing Language Immersion Seoul? GHQ would have shipped the 24th over within days of the invasion anyway. Leavitt and Tompkins would have landed in Korea as disoriented, stupidly arrogant and panicked as all the rest.

Instead, relative veterans, they move in a hard scare more like anger than fear. Not so stupid. The first months with LIS were an extension of the illusion in which KMAG functioned: the illusion there was time. Time for a first group of sixty enlisted men to learn phonetic Korean while they "assisted agricultural projects"; time to minimally increase forces without alarming politicians happily demobilizing a successful American military that, after all, deserved a resumption of civilian life. Language Immersion Seoul only deepened Leavitt's belief in language and sound as the only tincture of reality, particularly in this place; all else in Korea

seemed hallucination, the immense unraveling of a completely foreign history. Six ROK instructors drilled LIS six hours a day, six days a week, ten men to a classroom; mimeographed texts on Korean customs and history, tape recorders, timed recitations of romanized Hangul phrase and response. Daily minute tests were evaluated for tonal accuracy. They were granted weekend leave based on twice-a-session minute test scores; the tests now seemed particularly asinine and yet vitally important. The slight, finely built ROK instructors were polite and consenting except during drills and tests, when they betrayed an urgency and frustration that were infectious. Leavitt heard the hatred and distrust, the discomfort, the resentment in their voices, as warning and knowledge. They were angry and their country was defenseless; everyone would pay. Meaning didn't matter; the real content of the words was in sound itself. Leavitt punched out answering phrases in sliding nasal tones that were precise and nonverbal as musical scales. At night he decoded innocuous phrases about spicy food or the conversion of miles to kilometers, aware KMAG knew nothing. Or KMAG knew and could do nothing. They were minding a volcano. The ROK instructors stood poised like bantams, shouting. *Igot chungeso i'ssuseyo?* Which of the following items do you have? They communicated an instinctive, coiled tension Leavitt now recognized as fear.

Officially the newly imported enlisted men were support staff; afternoons they filed orders and requisitions, made supply runs for the mess. Leavitt and Tompkins were partnered in their own so-called agricultural project; they drove a supply truck to the docks for fish, vegetables, freshly slaughtered meat, *maekju* beer, and rice vodka called *soju* that could take your head off. Tompkins was happy in Seoul. He used supply runs to scope out clubs, bars, brothels; he liked the native food, sushi and barbecued *kalbi ccim*, pungent *ccigae* stew. This food is healthy, he'd

tell Leavitt. You seen any fat Koreans? You notice how they turn seventy before their skin wrinkles? You're no Korean, Leavitt told him, no matter how much kimchi you eat. But Tompkins insisted they drink *ssanghwa* tea in the barracks at night; he maintained the bitter herbs extended concentration. Their scores on minute tests were always highest; nights they were confined to quarters, they practiced scating Korean phrases just as they'd improvised swing at the Match Box. In Tokyo they'd watched officers jitterbug with their perfectly coiffed Japanese dates. The women were child-sized girls in upswept hairdos and sheath-style kimonos. They side-fastened their dresses right up to their chins with a hundred hooks and eyes: a married officer on extended rotation might buy them a little house or apartment near the base. Tompkins scoffed at them: "Fuck the white man and the white man fuck you."

"Like you're not white," Leavitt remarked.

"White like you white, Philly Jew boy. No Florida cracker tell you I'm white, or you neither. We knew how to fight before we joined any army." Tompkins smiled. "These good ole boys got their asses on another powder keg in Korea."

"Yeah, well your Seminole ass is here as well."

"Ain't that the way," Tompkins said softly. "I need me a hell of a whaling."

Those weeks in Seoul before the war, Tompkins liked to pretend the Korean whores fucked him instead of the other way around. Every day around four or five, he'd say, "I feel like getting out. Wanna talk about it?"

Leavitt would repeat his stock response: "We can talk about it."

"You sweet bohunk," Tompkins would say. "What the hell, no Jew has hair like that." He'd grab Leavitt's tight blond curls and hold on.

The papa-san at the place Tompkins frequented always looked delighted to greet them. "*Chon bul, chon bul,*" he'd grin, payment in advance, no matter how stridently

Tompkins insisted the girls *ssage haejuseyo*, make it cheaper. "You big *minam* Americans," he would tell them, gesturing with an extended forefinger, "you number one men."

Tompkins always demanded a full hour. Leavitt would follow him up the stairs and take the adjoining room. The walls were, literally, paper: floor-to-ceiling screens that turned one room into two cell-like cubicles, each with a bed, a sink, a chair, a kerosene lamp on a table. Shadows, seemingly those of a giant and his children, moved across the walls as Tompkins stood or turned or lay down, lifting one partner and then another an arm's length above him as though she were a pet or a baby. Leavitt closed his eyes, allowed an angel to kneel before him. He wouldn't put himself inside them: he adhered to this small fidelity like religion, like another charm, enjoying the control itself, the tension and the heat. The women laughed at him and blew him kisses, poised themselves naked over him to tempt him. It didn't matter which woman, which girl. In Korean, he'd tell her what to do, how to dance, moist in the little room, not dancing as she did in the bars but as she had in her village, slow ceremonial dance that was ritual and folklore. They'd all come from a village, years back or not so long ago, all the women and the girls. A girl who'd grown up in Seoul might protest she didn't know those dances, but he'd keep asking, say he knew her mother had taught her, back when she had a mother. She'd dance then, as they all did, slowly, a prayer beyond language, a shape moving in afternoon light or near darkness. The swanlike turn of the arms, the flex of the arched feet, were always the same. She would arch her back as the last sequence of movements ended, her torso very still. Sometimes she would cry and Leavitt would ask her to lie down, open toward him in his chair, touch herself until the crying stopped or turned to sighs and whispered gasps. The only sex they responded to was with themselves, and they seemed to think him so strange or

non-threatening they occasionally forgot he was there, or perhaps shared their privacy as a gift. Regardless, when the performance seemed genuine enough and time was nearly gone, he'd stop the girl and pull her to him, so aroused he was shaking. Finally she'd minister to him with her mouth, both of them listening as Tompkins rammed himself again and again into the youngest, most petite girl he could find. Tompkins called her his lucky star. Leavitt could hear him call out, nearly crying with adoration, begging her, stroking and praising her. Tompkins paid his favorite girl and her pals with *sonmul* and *tambae*, gifts and cigarettes, separate from the papa-san, and by the second week the two or three youngest would be waiting. Some nights they all went with Tompkins; they seemed to demand this of the papa-san as their due if business was slow.

Afterward, Tompkins would say he felt guilty, but the older ones gave you the clap. "Tight and light is right," he'd say.

Tompkins is right about something; he's still alive and not a scratch on him. Leavitt is unscathed as well; they're fucking charmed, Tompkins says, *voodoo san*, but it was Tompkins' voodoo. Leavitt feels a bruised apprehension deep in his gut, like it's only a matter of time before a soft core inside him betrays the hard, fast reflexes he's honed to a pitch. Tompkins plays war like it's filthy sport. I'm not really here, he liked to whisper, but MacDowell had picked them both, let them in on secrets that detonated.

Leavitt supposes MacDowell's idea wasn't wrong. If KMAG had imported thousands of infantry two years ago, enrolled all of them in MacDowell's LIS program instead of the sixty they'd imported through Tokyo GHQ, the NKPA might not have poured in so fast, driven their unresisted tank convoys down the one paved road. The Imperial Road, Koreans called it, the old royal highway from Pyongyang to Seoul, but it was peacetime and the road was empty. GHQ allowed Colonel MacDowell his little hobby. Now Leavitt wonders how many LIS guys aren't dead or captured. The few left are all

the more alien for their use of a borrowed language understood in scraps. Rumors are passed on and revised in languages secret from one another. Nearly secret. Leavitt understands a portion of what he hears until he stops listening, concentrates instead on getting the Koreans to a secure location.

Days of drenching rain have given way to ascendant heat; the mud fairly steams, sucking whatever touches it. American troops and matériel struggle north to the front as the front moves relentlessly south. The NKPA are pressing hard; an electricity of threat swells the damp humidity. Leavitt and Tompkins command two stretched-thin platoons assigned refugee management. They're to assist and direct evacuation of villages in the way of the war, keep the road clear of ox carts and fleeing farmers, but their more important objective is to rendezvous with their own company by nightfall, set up defensive positions, protect the retreat. Their recently arrived force is strung out along a moving human border; boys accustomed to soft Occupation life are dying merely to engage and retreat. Leavitt can only keep them moving, reined in where he can see them.

A streambed and culvert along the opposite side of the railroad tracks run with trickling water; the Koreans seem to think it's drinkable water, but Leavitt calls to them not to pause. *Gaesok kaseyo!* Keep going. Sounds of artillery fire drift closer as he squints into the tracks. The land deepens; ahead the tracks pass levelly across broad, matching concrete bridges; identical tunnels under the bridges span a stream and a dirt road. He'll halt the column there, let them drink and rest in the cool of the tunnels, radio command. Tompkins has the radio. Typically they stay in sight of one another, but the new troops are so raw that Leavitt walks point and Tompkins brings up the rear, mom-and-pop style, in case they're fired upon. The refugees move forward in near silence; they walk steadily along the tracks through muddy, saturated land. Far off the foothills steepen, forested

and green, against a broad horizon so impenetrable it looks painted against the sky. The land is oppressive, ancient, dominant, cultivated in small patches, borrowed for scant lifetimes of subsistence farming. Lifetimes on the move now, blinks of an eye. Whole villages emptied out, moving, frightened populations, imported armies—none of it matters. Generations of political animosity and serial foreign occupation are passing weather, and the hulking mountains watch. NKPA controls those mountains, that sky. Leavitt warned his men at dawn to stay close, stay tight. Now he pulls in the straggling platoon with shrill, aptly timed whistles, accompanied in his head by Lola's words, private sounds soft with darkness. *Baby? You tired? Come here, baby.* He's past tired. There's no tired, just a tight-strung, alert exhaustion fueled by watchful fear and barely controlled rage. Pressed and pressed, falling back in panicked or slow retreat, they're outnumbered and little supported, fingers in the fucking dike. Fear and anger turn in his gut like a yin-yang eel, slippery and fishlike but dimly human in its blunt, circular probing, turning and turning, no rest. This alone, the exhaustion, and the mud, the heat—he shares with the Koreans on the tracks. *Changma* rains have pounded Korea the past two weeks. The runny mud has solidified to warm, pliable clay, and rumor has it tanks are circling in behind them. Infiltrators in peasant white have repeatedly moved behind American troops by joining crowds of refugees. No way to know.

Leavitt's shrill, pursed-lipped signals (*here's a kiss for you babe*) pierce the dull slip-timed sound of movement across the wooden ties of the railroad tracks. Easier than struggling through mud, but the necessity of measuring each step proves too much for the old people, some of the women struggling with infants and bundles. They've fallen out onto the gravel between the two lines of track, straggling on at a slower pace. Leavitt lets them; he can't afford men to police both sides of the column, can't guard against infiltrators on