

## Present Silence Future Bound

Silence—the sound of death—echoes across the streets of Itaewon. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* High-rise buildings stand bare of travelers. Small shops stay closed within the neighborhood. Children no longer play along the sidewalks. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* The virus has shut the world and kept everyone home within their privacy—*Tap. Tap. Tap.*—but I can't stop thinking about my eventual escape. *ONE* test is my way out, my freedom: the Suneung. *Snap.* And I need to get a new pencil.

Rats often come crawling up our basement. My mother kills them with her foot to keep them from biting. Every day is cold in the dark cellar we call our home. A slight glint of sunlight hits through the small window above the surface and grants us sight and hope for more. But that does not bother me as much as the time I lose—the deadline of the test ever nearer—with every wasted breath.

Today is 2020/12/2. One day left. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* I time myself. Everything I have ever learned from my existence crammed into an eight-hour marathon, dictating my later occupation, my home, and my future well-being—I have to sacrifice everything to see a future sunrise! Although my mother is never strict over my studying, her silent expectation of me to ambitiously reach something tangible *drives* me to strive beyond what she hopes for. I am our one chance.

My small room buzzes with the faint hum of fluorescent lights. Posture straight, surrounded by an array of open textbooks, with information swirling within my mind, I lock in. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* My heart begins pounding in sync with the ticking clock against the wall, each second an unforgiving reminder of the upcoming exam. ***Eyes glazed with focus and tension, I dart across the pages absorbing equations and theories like my life depends on it. The aroma of coffee wafts from the empty cup, an elixir fueling my midnight battle.*** Minutes meld into hours as my fingers—nimble yet fatigued—scribble across the page, creating an intricate web of interconnected concepts. The line between reality and the sea of textbooks blurs as I dive deeper into an ocean of knowledge. Breaths quicken with every passing moment, tightening under the pressure of expectations. Crescendos of stress **pulse within my veins, urging me to absorb MORE, TO LEARN FASTER.**

Suddenly, dizziness strikes. Is it the usual vertigo? *I hear muffled noises from my mother shouting behind me.* The room spins as if in a tempest. The pen slips from my trembling fingers, clattering against the desk in a muffled echo. With a pause of silence the world collapses around me, my head heavy from the void washing me away. My breathing... becomes... shallow....

A girl chisels the walls of a hallway  
With her dominance apparent in every form and motion.  
Her breathing is clear with the fresh vitality that enters her veins;  
A fragrance of flowers, perfume, and puffy bloomage of sweets.  
She hears the voices of peers entering her frame,  
Leaving a sign of recognition and remorse along a river of words.  
Along her wrist, a fractured watch refracts the moments of bountiful purpose;  
Her anterior limbs and soul live in the basking sun.  
Her eyelids only see the high skyscrapers and birds flying in harmony,  
An enormous inheritance awaits her fulfillment.  
She only wonders about the destruction of down, down below,  
Aware of the sun approaching but not the shadows.  
But tell her that death conspires impartially for the sake of no one  
In fear of being found in silence, alone.

Books floating everywhere. / I cannot see. / A flood into my abode. / My mother opens the door but I refuse to go outside. / My materials, where did it go? / A dead rat in my periphery, I'm afraid. / Outside, I see the light / of my next-door neighbor on their balcony dancing. / Already the rat hole dampens into darkness like ink-stained paper. / Murky gray a soothing feeling / for the worn-out hands and mind. / The moonlight watches me helplessly grope for an answer / in silence. / But I spiral in the same spot until my mother guides me to an oasis lit by a streetlight. / She clamps her hands on top of mine, dropping something: my broken half- / ended pencil.

Today is 2020/12/3, 8:10 am. The whole country is brought to a standstill. With my dried-stained clothes wrinkled from the downpour in my cellar home, I *rush* into the testing facility. Each step echoes the past days of relentless studying, flickering like a bulb; my heartbeat reverberating against the testing center's walls drowning out the world around me. Tension and grief become the atmosphere once I cross the threshold. Students disappear into the labyrinth of exam rooms, my body at the moment in a suspended state,

dangling in the air like an unresolved chord in a symphony. Anxiety strings me with its fingers. My future is as elusive as the dance of delicate shadows and light against an endless chasm of self. Shrouded by obscurity—all beyond that door—my worst trepidations await.

I am the next target.

*Silence—again... the room submerges into monochromacy. /*

*Hallucinations? / I feel suffocated staring at each numbered question /*

*Mind-soul drenches with the essence of my blood /*

*Every fiber / aching, longing for release. /*

*Concentrate on every written word as a lifeline, /*

*A tether to sanity / amidst the chaos within;*

*Strokes of an unbalanced / pencil, the narrative persists, /*

*Etching on the blank canvas of my existence. /*

*The weight of native words, / symbols, / and foreign tongues*

*Comes with a burden of emotion, / a desire for closure;*

*A lethargic sensation, / but a blossoming epiphany...*

*The final flourish of graphite engraves the absence of the page,*

*A sunset emitting its dying strings of elegance.*

*Silence reigns supreme but within: whispering anticipation*

*Beyond the last stroke for chapters waiting to be overturned,*

*Limitless domains of imagination, of uncharted possibilities,*

*Solace found in silent ambiguity.*

I smile. With the test complete, so too does silence sing amidst graciousness at being heard.