

the first time i was ashamed of my culture
was when i opened my lunch and you wrinkled your nose;
it was *kimchi*
a stone settled in my stomach its edge catching on something tender
and heat bloomed across my cheeks
the kind of vinegar shame that makes you want to disappear

i told my mom to stop packing things that smelled
with names people couldn't pronounce
i didn't see the way her face fell, her immigrant dream crushed
my shame at the culture she loved so dearly bringing tears to her eyes

that night for dinner she cooked white rice, rinsed three times
until the water clouded — blurred like my voices, english and korean
folded into dumplings, the accents wrestling between cabbage leaves

the next day i opened my lunch box to a pb&j
crimson jelly squeezing out from beneath wonder bread and finally,
i felt truly american
i sewed white stars to my heart,
painted red and white stripes over my face
you taught me to carve myself to fit in
but you never could get over the slant
of my eyes, pin-straight black hair, instead, you cut into me,
“*why don't you go back to where you came from?*” where would I go?
America is all I have known, the soil beneath my feet's held me up since my first breath

soohyun, my name —
do you go by anything else? for a while, i did
i shrank syllables, swallowed vowels,
made myself easier for you to chew and spit out
but these: my acrid bites, are gifts wrapped in generations of ancestors
carved into the bark of family trees that branch into two languages
i am done apologizing
for the shape of my eyes, for the smell of my food, for the sound of my name

i am the *kimchi* girl,
i belong to the jagged roots of daikon and muddied garlic —
to the unapologetic wedding of korea and america,
heating up the acid on my tongue.