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Our living arrangement is artificial. The worms don't naturally live in someone's room. In order to make this happen, I need to pay attention to their living condition. Moisture in the bin, PH balance, food...etc. I do all that. But can I even call that care when they are in a place of need because of my selfish choice?

I had a dream on the first night after I brought the worms into my room. In my dream, I saw all 1000 worms escaping their container. Some went into the cracks between the wall and the floor. Some crawled under the bed frame. Some hid in my clothes drawer. I was a bodyless eye watching the great escape.

I must have felt fear toward the strangers in my room.

M recently told me about Asclepius. We talked about his staff with the snake entwined. It is on the logo of WHO. M saw the resemblance between the spiraling snakes and entangled earthworms. Then M told me about what happened in the temple of Asclepius. The pilgrims would make offerings and be led to spend the night in the sanctuary. As people slept, the priests let non-venomous snakes move around the floor. They believed that the snakes delivered healing to the body and messages to their dreams.

I imagined earthworms moving around my room as the messengers of healing. It sounded cool but still felt like a bad dream. Blurring the boundary between their room and my room is more than what I am comfortable with in our relationship. Instead, the worms and I sleep within our own boxes. The worm box is only a few steps away from my bed. I find their company comforting.

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I dig a hole in a corner of the bin to make room for vegetable scraps. As I dig a little, I see several tails retracting into the bedding. They are fast. I wonder how they see light when they have an eyeless body.

I drop carrot peel, apple cores, cilantro, and beets and cover them with an inch of bedding. I hope they like it. I was told that worms have special cells on their skin for smell and taste. I know that because they clearly like some food over others. Learning this made me care about their pleasure. I am no longer content with bare sustenance. I want their slimy tubular bodies to wriggle in pleasure. Sometimes I see

a few dozen worms swarming over food. The juice from half-decomposed food smeared over their body. I feel some satisfaction seeing that.

I uncovered the spot where I buried some food last week. I need to check on how much food the worms have processed so I know how much food to feed them next time. There is an unrecognizable white mass that is covered with worms. My guess is the corky bottom of enoki mushrooms. I immediately think, “What did I eat last week?”

I feel strange intimacy in knowing that I and the worms are eating the same things. We are bound together by sharing food. When I eat carrots and beets, the worms will eat carrots and beets. “You are what you eat.” The cells in our bodies are made up of the same sources.

But it is not the same kind of intimacy where I find comfort when my skin touches the ones I love. We are too far apart in the branches of evolution for me to feel love. The worms are my companions. The word comes from its Latin origin Com (together) + Panis (bread) = “ones who break bread with another.”

My dad insisted that “our family always eats together.” At times, I thought it was old people being stuck in traditional values. But I have also become an adult. I now understand how easily I can stop caring. So I know the importance of sharing rituals. We form a bond as we repeat mundane things together. These rituals become a point of synchronization for people living with different rhythms.

I added some worm casting to my mugwort plant. The plants weren't doing so well. I harvested some casting as I moved the worms from their old plastic bin to the house I built for them.

The worm compost contains a diverse community of beneficial soil microbes. It is not so much the nutrients in the compost that I want to add. Instead, it is the microbes that I want to introduce to the soil in the pot. They will live around the roots and mutually benefit each other. I have seen plants becoming healthier when their soil biology improves. I hope my mugworts get healthier.

When I started worm composting, I thought the process was as simple as worms eating salad and producing nutrient-rich poop. It is actually more complex than that. The bedding has coconut coir and paper as carbon sources. The food scrap

adds nitrogen. These things get digested by billions of microbes in the bin. The worms eat the microbes. Then they produce microbe-rich poop which further accelerates the decomposition in the bin. Faster decomposition promotes further growth of microbes. It is a cycle that gradually gains momentum. They effortlessly exist in diversity and produce shit that benefits others.

I care for the worms. The worms fertilize mugwort pot. The mugwort will provide medicine for me. I don't think we are actively trying to help each other. The way I see it, we are each trying to thrive in our own ways. In our little room, we are leaning on each other.

My worms. My houseplants. We are bound by the simple things we repeat. Like a clock, we are three hands rotating at different tempos. But we exist in the same time signature.

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I am humming the melody of Kendrick Lamar's *Rich Spirit* as I add more water to the bin with a spray bottle.

*Stop playin' with me 'fore I turn you to a song (yeah)*

*Stop playin' with me 'fore I turn you to a song (ooh)*

I am afraid I will turn someone into a song, into an image, into consumable media. But I am also aware that art-making often involves turning someone into an image. Kendrick knows that too. That is why his verse sounds threatening. "If you don't stop, I will turn you to a song". Then they will be flattened by a catchy beat and become someone's earworm.

I have only recently learned the word, "earworm". When I first heard it, I pictured an insect burrowing in someone's ear for warmth. I once saw a video of a bug getting removed from an ear canal by a doctor. The patient supposedly shined the light toward the bug and made it crawl deeper. I can't imagine the stress of knowing that a bug is in my ear. I would be filled with anxiety on the car ride to see a doctor.

Foreign organisms burrowing into the body are repulsive. I think it is the thought of losing possession of the body to tiny invaders. The chest buster from *Alien* (1979) exaggerates that

repulsion into fear. Your body is no longer just you. It is you and the parasite. And you can't be separated.

I wondered whether the initial disgust I felt toward the earthworms came from my fear of parasites. I worried the moisture from their slimy body will get on my skin. Earthworms, after all, don't look too different from tapeworms, guinea worms, pinworms, whipworms, roundworms, or hookworms. Perhaps, I have been conditioned to react with disgust to anything with a name that ends with "worm". The image of a guinea worm rolled on a stick (like Asclepius' staff) as it gets pulled out of someone's leg is always vivid in my memory.

Wormwood is a cousin of mugwort. They both belong to the Artemisia family. Some people believe that the name came from the herb's usage in expelling parasitic worms from the body. It tells me that humans throughout history have hated being a food source for other organisms. And the fact that there are worms that have evolved to live on our bodies tells me that they have been feeding on us for much longer than that.

*Stop playin' with me 'fore I turn you to a song (yeah)*  
*Stop playin' with me 'fore I turn you to a song (ooh)*

The earthworms are very fragile. When I try to pick one up with my hand, I focus on moving my fingers with minimal tension. I don't want to put too much pressure on their boneless body. Even then, they wriggle, crying silently, "let me go." I pity their inability to cry. I know I would have felt more justified to distance them if they weren't so silently helpless between my fingers.

When I was younger, I was told earthworms cry. Older Korean people would point to a sound coming from the ground, "That is the earthworm sound." It sounded like something made by a machine, something produced for the sake of making a sound.

Through my research on earthworms, I learned that worms don't make any sound. The sound that came from the ground was mole crickets.

I googled "earworm". It told me that songs without lyrics rarely become an earworm. I sit and listen to the sound of silent worms.

I don't want to turn you to a song. You can't even make a sound.

I don't want to squeeze you too hard between my fingers. You can't even make a sound. I don't want to neglect you. You can't even make a sound.

Earthworms are not earworms. To make the "th" sound, my tongue is placed between my front teeth and retracts back. I hold very soft things between very hard things for a very short time. This is a very short reminder of the fragility of soft red bodies. I make sure to hold their fragile body every day.

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I gave an avocado skin to the worms about two weeks ago. The worms have eaten all the avocado my spoon missed. But the skin shows no sign of decomposition. There is a worm that seems to always hang out in the little nest inside the avocado skin. I have seen it many times already. The red worm makes a little loop in the concave.

When I pick up the avocado skin to examine what is inside, the worm squirms to hide from my gaze. It doesn't like being found. Seeing this instantly makes me feel guilty. I put it down and bury it.

When my mom stabilized, doctors wanted to do a thorough scan of her head to determine the cause of her stroke. After an MRI exam, dad told me that the doctors have found a 파리 "goa-ri" (aneurysm) in my mom's brain. A little loop in the concave. 파리 "Goa-ri" (aneurysm) sounds similar to 뱀리 "Doa-ri", a coiling snake. I immediately picture blood vessels curving in her brain like a coiling pit viper. I saw it once while walking down a hill alone when I was in middle school. The coil seemed passive and withdrawn. But I feared the snake will launch at me with its venomous fangs at any moment. I knew it could kill me. I made a big detour around the snake while praying repeatedly, "don't move. Don't move..."

Now it is coiling in my mom's brain. Pit vipers are called 살모사 "Sal-mo-sa" (殺母蛇) in Korea. It means "mother-killer" because the mother carries the eggs in their body and pushes the hatchlings out. This process is taxing on the mother's body. So the mother appears lifeless after the birth. Korean people thought the hatchlings grew by eating the mom inside out. "Don't move. Don't kill my mother."

I could feel dad's worried voice as he relayed the information he got from the doctors. "Will it pop again?" I wondered in my head. But I didn't ask because I was sure my dad had the same question. And it would be too painful for him to respond to my question. "Don't move. Don't move..."

A week before the MRI exam, I got a text from my dad. My heart sank because it was around 4 am in Korea. Mom has called me at unusual hours before. When I answered the phone by saying “Is everything okay?” she said, “Of course. I just wanted to call you at different times to not get stale”. She is someone who would spontaneously call me because she wants to hear my voice at that moment. I am relieved to know that I am someone she can call at any time. But I hate the feeling of looking at my vibrating phone and wondering if I am going to receive terrible news. So I told her not to scare me like that.

My dad, on the other hand, understands the anxiety of receiving calls at unexpected hours. That is why I was nervous to open his text message. It said that mom was in the ER because she has a brain hemorrhage and I shouldn't call him because he can't answer calls.

Brain hemorrhage. It sounded serious. I have never prepared myself for the possibility of my family having a serious illness. I could tell from the name that my mom is bleeding in her brain. But what does that mean?

Google told me: Patients usually experience the most painful headache...if they are conscious. It has a 40-50% mortality rate. An important factor is how fast patients receive medical care after the bleeding starts. What people call “the golden time” is between 1-3 hours. Lastly, it is the subtype of stroke that has the highest disability rate.

I sat down on the sidewalk and cried.

Can she get better from this?

I have become obsessed with “getting better.” I need to know if we can get better. I am obsessed because I know we are only managing. We can't go back to the time when we didn't have the things that pain us now. I exist uncomfortably between “how things should be” and “how things are”.

“별을 노래하는 마음으로
모든 죽어가는것을 사랑해야지”
*With a heart that sings the stars,
I will love all things dying*

윤동주 (Dong-joo Yoon). 서시 (Prelude). 1941. 11. 20

Why didn't he say "I will love all living things"? Thinking about this question has helped me to find a bit of comfort while being squeezed between "how things should be" and "how things are".

I wanted to look at everyone and everything I love as living. And it helped me to convince myself that we will always be thriving. Now I look at everything as dying. This shift has helped me accept the things I already had no choice but to accept. But this way, I can at least do it more willingly.

I picked up a decomposed ground cherry on Yukon St. It reminded me of mom's condition. The leafy cover has decomposed while the vein is intact. It also has a shriveled red cherry inside the net. A red dot inside a veiny sphere.

I like my worms because they are composters. They love all dead things. They unbind things that have been held together temporarily. Every time I uncover the old food buried in the worm bin, I see how fragile things are. Microbes can turn carrot skin into mush in days. *I will love all things dying.* I feel comfortable touching our skin that is held together temporarily.

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