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Writing and Music

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Panel: Ekphrasis

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EuGene KIM

Writing and Music

Every so often, my mother talks about the irony of life, comparing my childhood days with my current life as a writer to illustrate her point.

When I was four years old, I entered preschool and stayed there for three years. Back then, it was rare for kids to attend preschool for that long, but both my parents worked, so I had no choice. Korea was being swept by a craze surrounding early childhood education, so preschools were teaching kids how to write the Korean script to prepare them for elementary school. In my case, however, I still couldn't read or write by the time I left preschool. Whenever I got home, I would just draw. I would draw dozens of naked girls in a single day. Looking back on those days, my mother confesses her heart sank when she realized I was about to start elementary school but couldn't read or write my own name.

On the first day of elementary school, the teacher asked us to come up to the chalkboard, one by one, to write our names and briefly introduce ourselves. I had practiced writing my name a couple of times with my mother beforehand, but when I approached the massive chalkboard that loomed over me, my mind went blank. It was as if a thick fog had clouded the inside of my head. I could feel the eyes of my teacher and peers behind me. A cold sweat ran down my spine.

This is not only my memory of the first experience that taught me the social properties of language, it was the beginning of a highly internalized emotional discord—tension, fear, despair, frustration—that I felt every time I approached language, a discord that still haunts me to this day.

A year later, upon my mother's recommendation, I began learning to play the piano. After seeing the results from my dictation exam, she probably concluded that I wasn't the academic type. Navigating the piano's ivories made me feel special; for the first time in my life, I felt like I was apart from the rest. The music I could create through my shoulders, arms and fingers was a warm and familiar world that required no words. Yet here I am right now, a writer, struggling through language as I always have while I compose these very words.

Explaining the impact that music has had on my life is both easy and impossible at the same time. The piano accompanied me throughout all of childhood, but I have no desire to play it these days. I couldn't tell you why. But perhaps I can elaborate on the role that music has played in my writing.

When I get an idea for a story, I have a mental habit of trying to find a piece of music to go along with it. Because of this long-formed habit, the folder on my computer containing my short stories is also filled with titles of compositions that accompany the stories like subtitles. One piece of music for every piece of writing. I never use the same title twice, nor do I ever assign more than one piece of music for a single story. Thus, I have a collection of twenty-five titles to accompany my twenty-five short stories. Of course, I follow a few rules when selecting my music: First, only instrumental pieces with no lyrics. Second, nothing too fast. Third, the instrumental lineup must be simple.

Yes, I know. I'm aware that it's a silly and strange little habit. Yet I truly believe that this old habit of mine relieves the tension that exists between me and language, and helps my sentences to adopt the flow of the music I've selected. I adjust the length of my sentences according to the music's rhythm and pace. Occasionally, I'll even surrender to the impulse to alter the narrator or recycle a certain episode over and

over. I always read my words out loud. Whether this is a literary act or a musical one, I can't say. What I can say, though, is that I usually prefer wading between territories. Somewhere between using words, remaining in silence, and hesitation.

(Translated by Felix Im)