

*Crystal Mun-hye Baik*

B E F O R E

T H E

F I R E D O G S

S T E A L

T H E S U N

A N E L E G Y

B E F O R E



T H E S U N



Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies

A SERIES EDITED BY

INDERPAL GREWAL, CAREN KAPLAN, AND ROBYN WIEGMAN

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

B E F O R E

T H E

F I R E D O G S

S T E A L

T H E S U N

A N E L E G Y

DUKE

*Crystal Mun-hye Baik*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM AND LONDON 2026

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

© 2026 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project Editor: Lisa Lawley

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Warnock Pro and Comma Base

by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Baik, Crystal Mun-hye author

Title: Before the fire dogs steal the sun : an elegy / Crystal Mun-hye Baik.

Other titles: Next wave (Duke University Press)

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. | Series:

Next wave: new directions in women's studies | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025035456 (print)

LCCN 2025035457 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478038641 paperback

ISBN 9781478033769 hardcover

ISBN 9781478062257 ebook

ISBN 9781478094609 ebook/other

Subjects: LCSH: Baik, Crystal Mun-hye | Collective memory—Korea | Grief | Korean War, 1950–1953—Social aspects | Korean Americans—Biography | Koreans—United States | Korean diaspora

Classification: LCC DS916.55 .B35 2026 (print) |

LCC DS916.55 (ebook) | DDC 951.904/2092—dc23/eng/20251117

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025035456>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025035457>

Cover art: Sun Young Kang, *neither here nor there*, 2017.  
Courtesy of the artist.

THIS BOOK IS FREELY AVAILABLE IN AN OPEN ACCESS EDITION THANKS TO THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARIES.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

For those who have persisted.

For those who have returned.

Young Ok Baik

Inki Baik

Sukyoon Kim

Yong Soon Min

Palestine

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

# A CIRCLE OF STORIES

NOTE TO READERS ix

I. 아버지 || FATHER . An End Is a Return to the Beginning 1  
II. 어머니 || MOTHER . The Eye of the Storm 13 . The Wind Phone 45  
A Cooking Lesson 67 . The Diasporic Family Album 98  
III. THE MEMORY KEEPER . Posthumous Translation 147  
IV. INVOCATION . Grief and Return 117 . A Protection Spell  
Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik 159

DUKE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 163 · NOTES 169

BIBLIOGRAPHY 177 · INDEX 183 · CREDITS 187

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## NOTE TO READERS

Korean words in this book are translated into English using the McCune–Reischauer and Revised Romanization systems. An exception is the spelling of family names; I have chosen to maintain the original spelling used by my parents and family in the United States. In some cases, Korean names are spelled the ways that they are written in East Asian contexts: surname followed by first name. I have made exceptions for writers, artists, scholars, and family who consistently use their first names followed by surnames. Last, I have chosen to decapitalize the *north* and *south* in “North Korea” and “South Korea,” given that these are fictional designations forged through the destructive violence of colonial occupation and empire.

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

·  
A Z EN D IS A R E T U R N T O T H E B E G I N N I N G .

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

ON DECEMBER 2, 2022, my mother experienced what one therapist described as a “break from reality” and was institutionalized at a psychiatric facility. During her emergency stay, my father drove his Toyota Camry to a nearby park, overturning it in the process. Two days later, he died in my parents’ home. When my mother was later released to the care of her three daughters, she came back home a transformed person, someone we hardly recognized.

In a span of one week, my parents as I knew them disappeared.

.....

In the immediate weeks that followed, I was immobilized by relentless waves of panic and despair. Following Mom and Dad’s retirement from their convenience store, I imagined that their days would be filled with more ease—even if illness would be an inevitable part of their lives. For the last decade of his life, my father navigated the debilitating conditions of diabetes and end-stage renal disease, while my mother struggled with chronic depression. But I could never have anticipated what happened to my parents that winter. The circumstances surrounding my father’s death were also murky. He was nearly blind and had not driven a car in over three years. Even now, I am uncertain whether his car crash was intentional. But as distraught as I felt, my grief did not seem wholly cut off from my everyday emotions. Rather, it seemed to be an unwieldy outgrowth of an anguish I had long harbored about my parents’ precarious lives in the United States, and the specter of family secrets that hovered, like white noise, just above the semblance of normalcy.

The unsettling sense that my grief was not new but gnarled in something older intensified as I attempted to find my father’s estranged family in Korea and learn more about my mother’s depressive episodes. Over meals, in phone conversations, and in email correspondence, I spoke with several of my mother’s siblings about their family history in Korea. Though our conversations were often filled with pauses, an auntie and two uncles patiently answered my questions the best that they could. I also spent time with family photographs I inherited from Uncle Sukyoon, my mother’s 남동생 (namtongsaeng), or baby brother. Given

my father's total severance from his family, locating his history was a more haphazard process. Besides a handful of photographs and a fuzzy video recording of a family funeral, the only other entry points into my father's history were a few anecdotes shared by my parents, and published writing about and by Baik Cheol, my paternal grandfather, who was a prominent—and controversial—literary scholar in south Korea until his death in 1985.

As I assembled a makeshift archive consisting of correspondence, family recipes, translated texts, photographs, dreams, rumors, and mourning rituals, glimmers of a diasporic family history materialized. Remnants of story cohered around war, abandonment, and family separation, as well as profound sorrow and colonial complicity. Gathering these disparate stories intimated that my father's death and mother's hospitalization were embedded in larger stories that did not begin or end with them. Though not inevitable, these events were points within historical trajectories catapulted by decades of war, upheaval, and migration. Situated in this way, the calamities of 2022 were long in the making, even before my birth and the births of my sisters. Without my knowing it, my grief became a portal into feeling and writing about Korean diasporic genealogies of war in relation to, but also beyond, my family of origin.

.....

*Before the Fire Dogs Steal the Sun: An Elegy* is conceived from this raw space of grief and mourning. It crystallizes through an emotionally driven or a felt form of writing I describe as *diasporic grief*. My understanding of diasporic grief is grounded in my training as a feminist scholar, writer, and memory keeper. In particular, I am grateful for the expansive work of Black, Indigenous, and women of color writers like Audre Lorde and Dian Million who have taught me how crucial it is to theorize with and write through emotions.<sup>1</sup> In essays like “The Uses of Anger” and “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Lorde rejects Cartesian logics that sever the mind from one's body, senses, and feelings. On the contrary, knowledge, for Lorde, is intimately entwined with the body and feelings, which provide an “incredible reserve of creativity and power.”<sup>2</sup> In her scholarship, Million (Tanana Athabaskan) centers the firsthand testimonials of First Nations women living in the settler state of Canada. As political acts of dissidence, these harrowing narratives of racial and sexual violence not only refuse the measured objectivity of the white set-

tlar gaze; rather, as emotionally inflected knowledge, the constellation of words encompassed by these testimonials also constitutes *felt theory* and fundamentally shifts what can be uttered about the brutal violence experienced by Native women in Turtle Island.

Building on these feminist offerings, diasporic grief as an embodied form of writing is tied to the uncanny sense that my sorrow was not only a visceral response to what befell my parents. Rather, the unfurling of my grief moved me to articulate an interlacing of historical conditions that impacted the becoming of my parents, and the complicated ways I loved and lost them. Putting into words what I had been hesitant to verbalize, or thoughts I did not even know I needed to articulate, catalyzed reparative ways of thinking and writing about my parents and their militarized histories.

When I started to write again following my father's death and mother's hospitalization, my intention was not to write another book. I instead wanted to provide shelter for the torrent of questions that were difficult, even shameful, to ask out loud. These spurts of writing became a haven for disclosure. But as sentences filled the computer screen, I was taken aback by the frenetic velocity with which I wrote. In the first several days, I typed nearly thirty pages of single-spaced text. There was a cathartic freedom to my thinking and writing I had not experienced in a long while, especially as someone trained in academe. This openness was conditioned by an understanding that I was not writing to "intervene" in a body of literature or to craft an "argument," at least in the most conventional sense. I took to writing because it was the only thing that seemed to loosen the density of grief lodged in my body. Mourning through the quietude of writing allowed me to acknowledge all that I did not know, while spending time with my parents in more patient ways. Writing *with* rather than *against* my grief created elegiac space for the tears, anger, and contradictions that filtered into the stories I gathered about my family. While I remained in this grievous place, it was impossible to write about my parents' lives without addressing the unstable parts of their upbringing and their migration from Korea to the United States in 1984. In turn, this transoceanic migration was a single moment within diasporic histories that transpired through colonial occupation, war, poverty, and peninsular division.

Diasporic grief in the context of Korea holds specific meaning and weight. When I write about who and what has been lost, I am not only in communion with the dead. My mourning extends to the living whose

D

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

pasts collapse with their present and future. I lament for the disappeared whose fates remain unknown. I grieve for the partitioned land marred by subterranean mines and disappeared bodies. Diasporic grief unhinges the boundaries that separate the living from the dead, the human from the nonhuman.

Between 1950 and 1953, up to ten million people in Korea were separated from their loved ones by a border imposed by colonial forces that slashed the peninsula along its belly. This fortified line remains today, and most separated families, at least those who are alive, wait in numbed agony with little to no information about missing family and friends. Like so many other Koreans I know, my family was ripped apart and reconstructed by division. My paternal grandfather and maternal grandparents were born in the provinces of North P'yŏng'an and South Hamgyŏng in northern Korea. To the best of my knowledge, my mother's and father's parents left their homes in the north for Seoul and Beijing, respectively, between 1946 and 1950. They were never able to return. What they left behind were families, friends, land, rivers, and so many other things I cannot name. My grief partially stems from the realization that the geopolitical conditions that led to my family's banishment from their ancestral homes remain firmly in place today. Currently, as someone who carries a US passport, I am barred from visiting what is now north Korea, a country that has been bombed, incessantly ridiculed, and demonized by the United States.<sup>3</sup> While I will never definitively know the full extent to which war and division transformed the lives of my family, this book compelled me to revisit childhood scenes of violence, addiction, and refusal as plausible sites of militarized rupture that have never been fully reckoned with.

Through grief, my writing became a bridge that opened me to my parents' suppressed memories, even if through speculative terms. There is so much I didn't know about my parents and their childhoods in Korea, and this remains true today. But rather than an emotional affliction, my diasporic grief became a tender way to return to my parents and the absences they left. Locating my mother, father, and myself within these braided ancestral histories expanded how I came to understand familial lineage, in relation to not only kinship but also land, water, and place; food and embodied memories; language, both alive and lost; and Korean feminist comrades, both living and deceased. Familial genealogy is a *multitude* rather than a single naturalized thread. How we hold, feel, and name family is not just through biology, nor is it solely through

the web of social affinities we nurture beyond blood ties. It is an interweaving of both, with people forging varied permutations depending on where and how they are located, and the social norms that dictate who can be loved and who must be banished. But in writing this book, it was important for me to spend time with my mother's and father's kinship ties to acknowledge that their families, as refugees, did not have the option to stay together. Although our families of origin can enact extraordinary harm, they can also be imperfect places of care that are torn asunder by war, dispossession, and militarized colonial destruction. Families of origin thus are not naturally intact or given forms that should be taken for granted. They are, instead, shifting formations defined by power. In this way, diasporic grief does not encompass only bereavement and sorrow. It is porous and generative, enveloping the ways we care for and keep memory, and our capacity to feel and name contentious lineages through thinking, writing, and ritual.<sup>4</sup>

By drawing on diasporic grief as a felt practice of writing, I vehemently reject the distance expected between scholarship and the richness of emotional life. Too often academics treat these as oppositional poles that should or can never touch. In contrast to this assumption, this book centers personal forms of address, feelings and sensations, and everyday moments like the cooking of meals and solitary walks. An emphasis on the mundane dimensions of daily life provides readers with the opportunity to slow down and consider the complex personhoods of those subjected to the violence of war and occupation. My decision to attend to these routinized moments is intentional, given that colonized peoples are rarely afforded the opportunity to exist—in life or on paper—as fully fleshed beings who love, hate, eat, rest, and desire. By refusing to abide by the elisions produced by institutional and familial violence, my writing engages diasporic histories through a speculative archive of letters, extended conversations with the dead, and deferred encounters with family photographs. As Christina Sharpe and Brandon Shimoda teach us through their poetic writing, critical uses of our imagination are crucial if we are to survive the insidious erasures of history and memory—which are never accidental or innocuous.<sup>5</sup> Rather, they are conditioned by vectors of power, like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and class violence, that mirror back to us the societal values that dictate who can be known and commemorated, and who must be vanquished from memory.

As an *intimate* cultural history that refracts the militarized colonial histories of Korea through the lens of the “I,” this book places at front and center several questions that guided me as I grieved without knowing where my writing would take me. What ethical stakes and vulnerabilities arise when scholars are implicated in the histories of violence we study and write about?<sup>6</sup> How do we write our diasporic family histories when they can only be encountered through silence, insinuation, translation, and estrangement? What vocabulary must we conjure to describe the intimate scale of harm induced by war, even if such forms of expression evade the institutionalized language of academe? Last, I consider the sobering questions offered by Sora Y. Han in *Mu, 49 Marks of Abolition*. All this time, “Who have I been writing to? Who have I been writing for?”<sup>7</sup>

.....

Although this book is written in a personal voice, it does not offer a comprehensive or definitive biography. While this was never a goal of this project, offering a “complete” family history, no matter how much we *think* we know, is an impossible task for different reasons.

For one, memory is a selective enterprise. In my parents’ families, it is the eldest patriarchs who are remembered, with their professional and prolific accomplishments as intellectuals and healers well documented in family mythology and institutional archives. In contrast, the women in my family, including both of my grandmothers, exist as spotty traces in the family memory archive. While I know relatively little about my grandmothers’ lives, I know that they ultimately married older men and were raised to believe that their primary roles in life were to be self-sacrificing wives and caregivers. A rigorous contention with gender norms and social expectations thus is crucial to *what* and *how* I write: While these gaps in family knowledge were challenging to navigate, the juxtaposition of gendered familial presences and absences enabled subversive routes to touch memory. Drawing from my paternal grandfather’s professional writing, accolades, and intellectual records, I imagine the sticky underlining of unspoken intimacies affixed to these public recollections. For my maternal grandmother, I consider the socioeconomic and gendered strictures that limited resources and opportunities available to her; at the same time, I refuse her wholesale erasure by dreaming onto paper the submerged possibilities that could have been.

D

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

AN END IS A RETURN TO THE BEGINNING · 7

For reasons I do not fully disclose in this book, I do not extensively write about my maternal grandfather and paternal grandmother, though momentary encounters with them percolate throughout these pages.

In lieu of completeness, diasporic grief prompts social imaginaries and reparative ways to dwell, think, and write with what we don't know. Silences, innuendos, and hesitations are not workarounds in my writing. They are its conditions of possibility. They give me permission to summon stories occluded from the historical record *and* the family memory archive through speculative forms of writing. Different genres of writing that range from the epistolary to spellcasting modes potentiate lines of open-ended exploration foreclosed by more traditional methods of academic writing and research. Feeling and writing in improvised ways was not only a liberating experience; it was necessary for this book.

With this in mind, this book unfolds through four parts: “아버지 || Father;” “어머니 || Mother;” “The Memory Keeper;” and “Invocation.” These sections are enmeshed with overlapping questions and responses that return throughout the book. The first three parts each encompass two chapters, the first written in narrative prose and the second in a different mode of writing that spans from letter writing to the visual essay to the grief ritual. The fourth and last part of this book is a protection spell composed by the poet Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik, a longtime collaborator, a confidante, and my twin sister.

*Before the Fire Dogs Steal the Sun* attends to what is possible and what we may need to let go of when we dive into the ocean that is our diasporic histories. In the past several years, I have learned that the depth of these waters, beneath tumultuous waves, is vast if not infinite.

.....

I leave my generous readers with two last notes. First, even as I draw on Korean cosmologies of ancestral mourning and grief in my writing to consider the impact of unresolved violence within my diasporic family, I do so without using the cultural paradigm of *한*, or han. *Han* refers to a collective sadness embodied by the Korean people as an ethnic community, due to generations of sedimented trauma resulting from empire, war, sexual violence, and family separation.<sup>8</sup> While I find this term powerful and impactful in how it addresses violence as complicatedly layered, I worry that its overgeneralized use in public discourse has diluted the specificities of historical violence. To a certain degree, han

in the social imaginary has become an umbrella term that captures a blended multitude of traumas, like sexual violence, colonial displacement, and financial ruin, sustained across generations of Koreans.

Consequently, these generalized articulations have stymied the development of a critical vocabulary that challenges racist, sexist, and ableist assumptions in Korea and the Korean diaspora. While unintentional, diagnosing an emotional condition for an entire people, regardless of time, circumstance, and location, can pigeonhole women's bodies for the patriotic project of nation building. This is especially true in discussions that tackle "taboo" and effeminized disabilities like chronic depression, suicidal ideation, and madness, all matters taken up in this book. For example, as the devastating histories of Korean "comfort women"—who endured years of rape, assault, and sexual slavery under the Japanese colonial regime—have taught us, women are too often perceived as the embodiment of colonial harm and shame in Korea and an impediment to national progress. When it comes to Korean "comfort women," han has been taken up precisely in this manner by conservative pundits, politicians, and governing administrations alike. These actors identify Japanese colonialism as the main culprit of national trauma in Korea, even while they simultaneously treat "comfort women" as a contentious issue that could disrupt bilateral relations with Japan.<sup>9</sup> As a result, heteropatriarchal, ableist, and racist norms that directly contribute to gender and sexual violence remain intact. This book conjures an alternative language to name submerged forms of violence that chronically manifest, without relying on untroubled notions of *inherited* trauma. That is, rather than diagnosing depression, psychic pain, and grief as naturalized inheritances transmitted from generation to generation, I describe the systemic conditions that reproduce destructive forms of violence in localized ways.

Finally, the title of this book draws inspiration from a line included in the chapter "The Wind Phone." It alludes to the Korean mythology of the 불개 (bulgae), or fire dogs, which narrates the origins of solar and lunar eclipses. In this ancient myth, the kingdom of darkness releases its ferocious bulgae to chase and capture the sun and moon. In essence, eclipses are the evidential work of the bulgae, as they leave gaping bite marks in these luminescent bodies. These events are thought to unleash intensified spiritual energies, while exposing the underbelly of the world. At the same time, an alternative universe is created, where time stands still, even expands. In this temporal break, the living can en-

counter the dead with care and caution. As they return across space and time, the bulgae and their bite marks are cosmic reminders of the shape-shifting nature of celestial bodies as they dissolve from solid spheres to glowing crescents to a hidden presence. Inevitably, these passages of violence and disappearance are entangled with transformation, even possibility. This book is conceived with this myth in mind. When my world was collapsing and closing in on me, my writing provided a cocooned sanctuary where time stretched long enough for me to be quiet and still. In this soft space of reprieve, I breathed through the changing seasons as I mourned for my parents and ancestors. At this moment of planetary catastrophe, where there seems to be less and less time, I am grateful to have had this opportunity to return and remain through the gifts of listening and writing.

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

10 • BEFORE THE FIRE DOGS STEAL THE SUN

# NOTES

## AN END IS A RETURN TO THE BEGINNING

- 1 Million, “Felt Theory”; Lorde, “Uses of Anger”; Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.”
- 2 Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 37.
- 3 Since 2017, all US citizens have been banned from traveling to north Korea. The policy was implemented by the first Donald Trump administration (2016–20), was continued by the Joe Biden presidency (2020–24), and has been sustained by the second Trump administration (2024–present).
- 4 Here, I think of the critical scholarship of Jinah Kim, who describes insurgent melancholia as an agentive form of activism and organizing in the context of the Korean diaspora. Refer to Jinah Kim, “Insurgency of Mourning.”
- 5 Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes*; Shimoda, *Afterlife Is Letting Go*.
- 6 I honor the feminist writers, scholars, and artists, including Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Elyse Semerdjian, Hazel Carby, Latipa, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Clara Han, who underscore how the *personal* is a critical dimension of historical and theoretical writing.
- 7 S. Han, *Mu*, xiii.
- 8 For an especially incisive and compelling historical contextualization of han, refer to Sandra So Hee Chi Kim’s “Korean ‘Han’ and the Postcolonial Afterlives of ‘The Beauty of Sorrow.’”
- 9 As an example of this, I refer to statements made by Moon Jae-in, the president of South Korea from 2017 until 2022. While Moon was perceived as a supporter of Korean “comfort women’s” struggle for justice against the Japanese government, he also expressed concern regarding the potential negative economic ramifications affixed to the “comfort women” issue. Following a January 2021 judgment handed down by the Seoul Central District Court—which ordered the Japanese government to pay damages to twelve former “comfort women”—Moon voiced concern about the financial fallout that could follow the ruling: “(Asset sales) will not be good for the relationship between South Korea and Japan” (quoted in Suzuki, “Moon ‘Honestly Bewildered’”). Moon also added that com-

D

U

K

E

Y

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

pensation had already been provided to survivors through the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, established with ¥1 billion provided by the Japanese government. See Ji-eun Kim, “Moon Admits He Was ‘A Bit Thrown.’”

#### THE EYE OF THE STORM

- 1 Didion, *Year of Magical Thinking*, 26.
- 2 Danticat, *Art of Death*.
- 3 My grandfather’s name is phonetically spelled more often as Baek as opposed to Baik in English-language academic publications via the Revised Romanization System. Thank you so much to Ju Hui Judy Han and Jeongsu Shin for their translation support in regard to my paternal grandfather’s publications and biographical information.
- 4 For an engaging study and exploration of the early historical roots of the Korean transnational adoption industry before 1950, refer to Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*.
- 5 As detailed later in this chapter, the 1953 armistice signed among combatants in the Korean War halted armed fighting without formally ending the war. Since then, no peace treaty has been signed, and the Korean Peninsula remains divided along the 38th parallel.
- 6 Clara Han’s *Seeing Like a Child* discusses how the Korean War shapes everyday lives across multiple generations and diasporic spaces, less as hauntings or spectral ruptures and more as material living conditions.
- 7 In 2012, my twin sister, Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik, participated in what was then known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (or DPRK) Exposure and Education Program (or DEEP), organized by Nodutdol for Community Development, based in New York. Since 2017, the program has been suspended due to the travel ban placed on US citizens by Donald Trump’s administration (2016–20, 2024–present) and extended by Joe Biden’s administration.
- 8 As shared in the next chapter, the only person that I am aware of who migrated to the south with my maternal grandparents and their children was my grandfather’s mother.
- 9 H. Kwon, *After the Korean War*, 100.
- 10 Joo Ok Kim, *Warring Genealogies*, 131.
- 11 Gallagher, “Thinnest Line.”
- 12 It is ironic that most south Korean citizens are able to visit north Korea only if they relinquish their south Korean citizenship. In 2001, I relinquished my south Korean citizenship when I was twenty-one years old and became a US citizen.
- 13 Cristiana Kyung-hye Baik, “Wreckoning,” in Baik, *Reencounters*, 162.