

Ed Bok Lee

DIVIDED

New York City on one of those rainy Sunday evenings you close your eyes to the pitter-patter of God's spidery fingers weaving the world in water. Ghost dust from the Twin Towers by now in every borough, creviced into every crack under shoes, on sidewalks, teeth and mouths, newspaper print, art exhibits, plays, books, contracts, police reports, billboards, INS interviews, almost everywhere

It's unclear how long I've been dozing as we trundle that dinosaur spine arching over the night's East River into Brooklyn When I awake and straighten, I see the cabbie's eyes, hovering in the rearview mirror. Looking at me, behind me, I can't tell. Black eyes thick-lashed and sleepy, apathetic to the separate world he weaves, an indestructable yellow needle, spinning his wheel through traffic twelve hours a day, seven days a week, pissing in plastic milk gallons, exhaling smoke through boarded-up neighborhoods, his cabbie light and heart turned off

And sometimes, when you feel most cold, wet, tired, and alone in this city of America's most depraved ghosts, you might ask his name. And he might say: Adan. Shamshad. Niwaz. Maybe Mohammed

And if one of you happens to see some lost eon of brotherhood in the other's dark hair and brown eyes, if you're uncertain how to feel about reverberations the World Trade Center is still tolling on human skin, the war, plutonium dripping into alleged laboratories all over the world . . . one of you might ask the other, Where you from?

Pakistan, he says tonight. You?

Korea.

And maybe watch a smile crease across his face.

Korea. Excellent futbol!

And every so often, whoever he is, whatever brown or black country he's from, the man will tell you he cheered for the South Korean soccer team in the 2002 World Cup, because man, those Koreans lacked height, experience, power, and individual talent, but still kept winning! Never once wiffed a kick on spirit, scoring headers against top-ranked teams like Italy in the final minute, holding back the wealthy American's onslaught, pushing away German machine gun goal kicks like Bruce Lee doing shao-lin splits on crack

And maybe now, passing words back and forth like warm-up balls, the man might tell you his own country's not very good yet, didn't even qualify to compete in the tournament, but his son plays on a middle-school soccer team in Edison, N. J., and though he can never make it back home in time to catch the games, he and his wife keep a magnetic photo of the seventh grader on the refrigerator.

And while it doesn't occur to you then, one day many months later you'll be driving your own car thousands of miles away through a spacious, box-shaped Midwestern state, flanked by a sea of grassy plains, and suddenly will hear a radio report about nuclear proliferation between India and Pakistan.

As the report segues into other world news of terrorist activity and war, you'll click the radio off, like these days you find yourself doing more and more, and you'll think not of the lines in that dim N.Y. cabbie's forehead, but your own father's How his own spirit was divided in 1950 by the Soviets and Americans; what it must have done to him to see a nation bloody-sewaged by limbs, shrapnel-studded men, women, and

children; faces vaporized and two million breaths settling into gutted street puddles of ash

A land to this day still occupied.

Not just two, but every building in Seoul then demolished.

How that must have ripped your teenage father apart. Love too flimsy to hold, so he strengthened it against canvas tent walls, camouflage paint, his own family's bones

And in this moment you wonder how many generations it will take to heal Iraq.

How Western forces play such brutal chess with the world and make all the pawns yellow, brown, and black. How hard it was raining the night that Pakistani cabbie dropped you off at Varick and Jackson. How your own father was always working late, catching up for years crumbled and lost, and so never saw that final slider, bases loaded, or any first-place 880 finish, not a single rainbow from three-point land. How to him sports were nonsense. Not real life.

How the night after South Korea almost beat the German championship team in the World Cup semi-finals, you called him in the hospital.

Already, before you spoke, you knew his spirits were low, and probably he wouldn't care that no Asian team had ever gone farther.

But hope comes in many forms. And on the phone that night, three months before he slipped away, you started to describe what happened in that final game.

The story of a team of no-name rice farmboys, from a nation half the size of Ohio, against all odds and history, spitting blood bright as the red flags waved by nameless,

faceles fans all over the world How these underdogs, these men who weren't supposed to succeed on the field, let alone win, possessed heart and soul

And to you, that was everything.