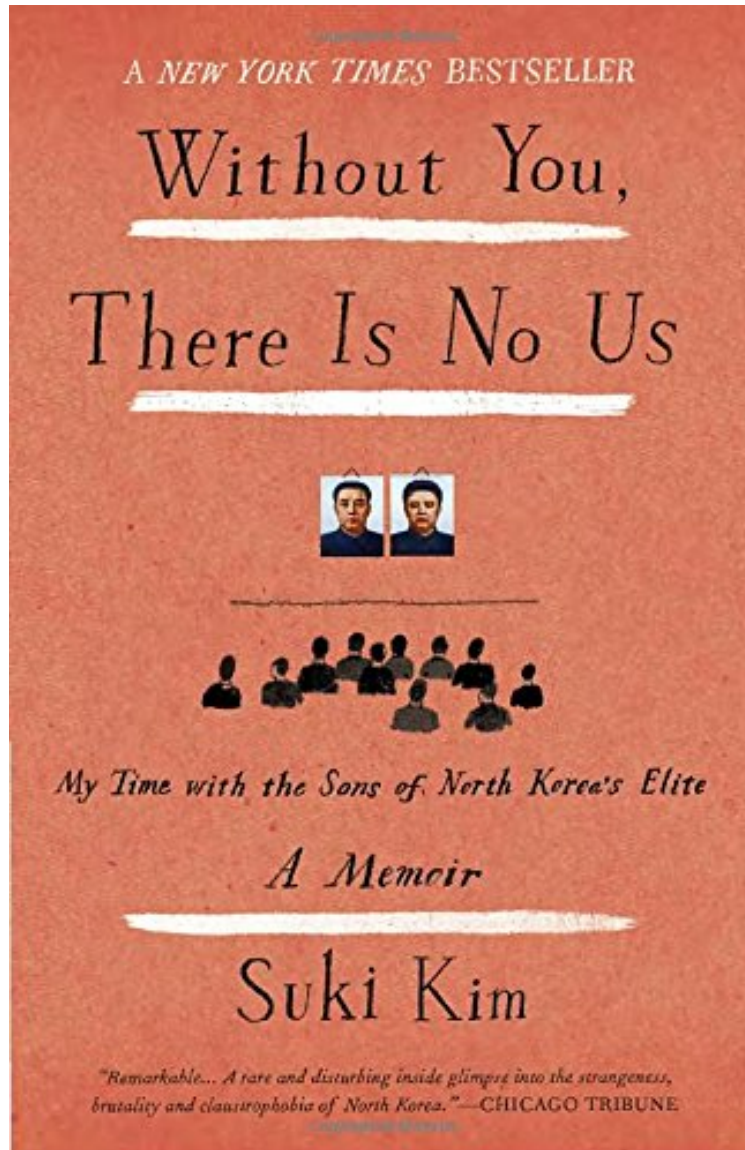


# Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite

Suki Kim

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**Suki Kim : Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite:

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. The Ever Present LeaderBy Anne PhillipsSuki Kim spent a year at the outskirts of Pyongyang, North Korea teaching English to "privileged young men aged nineteen and twenty" and this is the "reported memoir based on journals and notes" of that time as well as several visits to the DPRK (Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea). There is a lengthy introduction giving us necessary background about Suki's family, her aunts and uncle abducted into North Korea, the life of Koreans in the South and her upbringing in America. Then we have to jump to the school establishment in Pyongyang run by missionaries and the recruitment of Susi, a known journalist with previous journalistic experience. This bit about the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) remains suspect throughout the story, but it is a fascinating book. Suki's introduction begins with a lengthy shopping list of all the things she should procure for her stay in North Korea - ibuprofen, sanitary napkins, vitamins, "plus as many protein bars as I could jam in my suitcases." Detailed reminders of what to do and what to bring and what to pay. The description of her initial impression of North Korea "deafening silence" - there are none of the familiar noises of a Western city, yet permanent blasting of music from loudspeakers. The male students are obviously selected based on some unknown scheme and are working extremely hard to meet prescribed quotas and thresholds, There is an ever changing collective or group learning. There are mandatory outings. But most fascinating is the inevitable lapse of the teacher/missionaries into the thinking of the Korean collective - the worship of the Great Leader, Kim Il-sung. The book ends with Suki's leaving the school when the students are plunged into mourning at the death of Kim Il-sung. Suddenly, there is a chasm between the North Korean students and the teacher.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Revealing the humanity within the future leaders of North KoreaBy Jonathon BoatmanSuki Kim's memoir offers an insightful look into the daily lives of the college-aged children of North Korea's elite, revealing the humanity within them that has been covered up by the personality cult of the Great Leader. This is not a full account of the political situation in North Korea, nor does Kim claim it to be, but rather the perspective of a first-generation South Korean immigrant that could not have been captured by another author. For someone in the circumstances that she was in, with the family history that she had, it is reasonable to say that she does understand something about North Korea. However, it is this perspective that simultaneously leads Kim to misunderstand North Korea because of her desires for a Korea that she imagines once existed before the breakup. This search for a Korean identity causes Kim to leave North Korea at the end of her memoir having only gained a particular, controlled, understanding of the country. What is gained, though, is perhaps one of the most valuable insights into the mindset of North Koreans in the 21st century. While her presentation is certainly biased towards the childish innocence of her students and her longing for a missing Korean identity, Kim is able to show what the educated youth of North Korea are thinking about and how they may act in the future. These are the students who will eventually rise to the top ranks of the Kim Jong-un regime, and it is important that we see some sort of humanity exists within them. But it is clear that freedom, as we know it, does not exist in any level of North Korean society. Will these students fall into their pre-determined roles within society or will they exercise some of the free-thought that Kim tried to expose them to? Can they overcome Kim Jong-un and set North Korea on a path where it can determine its own future? These are the ultimate questions and, sadly, the answers may not be the ones that rest of the world wants.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. This book was amazing. From beginning to endBy GCAsThis book was amazing. From beginning to end, Ms. Kim writes with incredible detail and explains everything so amazingly, it makes you feel like you are the teacher at PUST. The story of her relationship with her students was wonderful to read as it developed. At times I felt just as frustrated as Ms. Kim because of it seems her students took steps backwards rather than forwards when it came to taking what she taught them and trying to see a wider picture. I had to remind myself that these are North Korean students, no matter how privileged, there are so many things that are hidden from them. As Ms. Kim's students finally began to open up at the end of the book, I could not help but shed tears because no one will ever know what will become of Ms. Kim's "gentlemen" students.

A haunting account of teaching English to the sons of North Korea's ruling class during the last six months of Kim Jong-il's reign Every day, three times a day, the students march in two straight lines, singing praises to Kim Jong-il and North Korea: Without you, there is no motherland. Without you, there is no us. It is a chilling scene, but gradually Suki Kim, too, learns the tune and, without noticing, begins to hum it. It is 2011, and all universities in North Korea have been shut down for an entire year, the students sent to construction fields except for the 270 students at the all-male Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), a walled compound where portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il look on impassively from the walls of every room, and where Suki has gone undercover as a missionary and a teacher. Over the next six months, she will eat three meals a day with her young charges and struggle to teach them English, all under the watchful eye of the regime. Life at PUST is lonely and claustrophobic, especially for Suki, whose letters are read by censors and who must hide her notes and photographs not only from her minders but from her colleagues evangelical Christian missionaries who don't know or choose to ignore that Suki doesn't share their faith. As the weeks pass, she is mystified by how easily her students lie, unnerved by their obedience to the regime. At the same time, they offer Suki tantalizing glimpses of their private selves their boyish enthusiasm, their eagerness to please, the flashes of curiosity that have not yet been extinguished. She in turn begins to hint at the

existence of a world beyond their own such exotic activities as surfing the Internet or traveling freely and, more dangerously, at electoral democracy and other ideas forbidden in a country where defectors risk torture and execution. But when Kim Jong-il dies, and the boys she has come to love appear devastated, she wonders whether the gulf between her world and theirs can ever be bridged. *Without You, There Is No Us* offers a moving and incalculably rare glimpse of life in the world's most unknowable country, and at the privileged young men she calls "soldiers and slaves."

A New York Times Bestseller "Chilling reminds us that evil is not only banal; it is also completely arbitrary." New York Times Book "Quasi-apocalyptic, but amazingly not speculative I devoured [it] for its wry and rare observations on that inexplicable land." Daniel Handler, Wall Street Journal "Daring... Kim finds that paranoia is contagious and can become chillingly routine. 'My little soldiers were also little robots,' she writes before departing, mourning not only that she must leave, but that they must stay." Boston Globe "Remarkable A deeply unsettling book, offering a rare and disturbing inside glimpse into the strangeness, brutality and claustrophobia of North Korea Kim's book is full of small observations that vividly evoke the paranoia and loneliness of a nation living in fear and in thrall to its 'Great Leaders' Her portraits of her students are tender and heartbreaking, highlighting the enormity of what is at stake." Chicago Tribune "A book about censorship, trust, fear, love, and truth, seen through the prism of a school that functions as a comfortable prison The title comes from a song the students sing in honor of 'The Dear Leader,' including the lyric, 'Without you, there is no us.' Within that title, and this book, is a multitude of truths." Philadelphia Inquirer "Sometimes personal histories retain a potent electromagnetic force, [like] Suki Kim's rivetingly topical look inside the most isolationist country on earth." Vogue "Enthralling... Reveals the perplexing innocence and ignorance of one of the world's most secretive countries." O: The Oprah Magazine "A devastatingly vulnerable account... Kim's stark and delicate language, intertwined with the suspense of being an undercover journalist in a foreign-yet-familiar land, truly humanized North Korea for me." Slate "Touching, beautifully written... A rare, intimate portrait of life in the world's least-known country: grinding poverty for the masses, bland tedium for the ruling class, no fun, no freedom, and fear for all." Katha Pollitt, Salon [Kims] account is fascinating She is an outsider telling an inside story Her relationship with her students is the most interesting part of her book It is tempting to treat the cult of the North Korean Kim dynasty as a grotesque joke, as the makers of *The Interview*, the recent Hollywood movie about an assassination plot against the current "Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, have done. Suki Kim, quite rightly, does not. The oppression and starvation of millions of people, and a gulag that enslaves up to 200,000 prisoners, many of them worked to death, is really not that funny Kim got a close look at some of the cult's manifestations Her frustration and rage about the waste of young lives and talent crushed by a horribly oppressive system is entirely justified. Being punished for dissent is bad enough. But to be forced to parrot lies and keenly applaud one's enforcers is a form of constant mental torture. Ian Buruma, New York of Books "A vivid, uncompromising and intensely personal account." Minneapolis Star-Tribune "A starkly revealing look at this hermit nation... Kim opens herself as well as the DPRK to scrutiny... Moving and emotionally evocative." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette "Offers great details about [the students] blinkered worldview A frank depiction of North Korean life." Foreign Policy "Readers intrigued by Kim Jong Un's recent extended absence from public view can gain insight into the repressive system that shapes North Korea's ruling class from Suki Kim's new memoir." Pittsburgh Tribune- "We in the West know almost nothing about life in North Korea, including even how its elites live (read Suki Kim's terrific *Without You, There Is No Us* for one of the few accounts)." The Nation "Suki Kim's compelling reports for *Harpers*, *The New York of Books*, and others have expanded and deepened our understanding both of life in the North, and the West's profound misapprehensions about it. [This book is] a fascinating, if deeply fraught document about the education of the North Korean elite, an aspect of the country that until very recently has been almost completely occluded Kim's access to the boys constitutes the unique nature of her book [and] illuminates just how sheltered they are." Los Angeles of Books "[An] extraordinary and troubling portrait of life under severe repression [Kims] account is both perplexing and deeply stirring." Publishers Weekly, starred review "A rare and nuanced look at North Korean culture, and an uncommon addition to the 'inspirational-teacher' genre." Booklist, starred review "A touching portrayal of the student experience in North Korea, which provides readers with a rare glimpse of life in this enigmatic country... Well-written and thoroughly captivating." Library Journal, starred review "Strangely terrifying A beautifully written book that greatly expands the limited bounds of what we know about North Korea's ruling class." Barbara Demick, author of *Nothing to Envy* "Terrifying and sublime, *Without You, There Is No Us* is a stealth account of heartbreak. Suki Kim, brilliant author of *The Interpreter*, penetrates the soul of her divided country of origin, bearing witness to generations of maimed lives and arrested identities. This look inside totalitarian North Korea is like no other." Jayne Anne Phillips, author of *Lark and Termite* and *Quiet Dell* "This superb work of investigative journalism is distinguished by its grave beauty and aching tenderness. So skilled is Suki Kim in conveying the eeriness and surreal disconnect of the North Korean landscape that I sometimes felt I was reading a ghost story, one that will haunt me with its silences, with its image of snow falling upon a desolate campus, with the far laughter of her beloved students." Kiran Desai, author of *The Inheritance of Loss* "Like an explorer returned from a distant planet or another dimension, Suki Kim has many extraordinary tales to tell, among them how different and how

awfullife is for those who live in North Korea. The devil is in the details here, for her gritty narrative focuses on everyday events to reveal how repression shapes daily life, even for the most privileged. Yet Kim also bears witness to that part of the human soul that no oppressor can ever claim." Carlos Eire, author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana* "In language at once stark and delicate, Suki Kim shatters the polemic of North and South Korea. She couples an investigative reporter's fierce desire to strip away the fiction of the Hermit Kingdom with an immigrant's insatiable hunger for an emotional home, no matter how troubled and no matter how impossible." Monique Truong, author of *The Book of Salt* "Combining a great novelist's eye for character and a skilled journalist's grasp of politics, *Without You, There Is No Us* helps us understand North Korea like nothing else I have ever read or watched. The elegance of Kim's prose and her great compassion for ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary situation kept me turning the pages, riveted by her story. This is a book that rejoins North Korea with humanity." Suketu Mehta, author of *Maximum City* "What a unique book this is! It delivers a beautifully and bravely observed inside account startling, insightful, moving of the planet's most notoriously closed and bewildering society. But what I liked best about it was being in the company of Suki Kim's voice so intimate, vulnerable, obsessive, resilient, confiding and charming." Francisco Goldman, author of *Say Her Name* and *The Interior Circuit* From the Hardcover edition. About the Author Suki Kim is the author of the award-winning novel *The Interpreter* and the recipient of Guggenheim, Fulbright, and Open Society fellowships. Her essays and articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Harpers*, *The New Republic*, and the *New York of Books*. Born and raised in Seoul, she lives in New York. From the Hardcover edition. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. part one *Anti-Atlantis* 1 At 12:45 p.m. on Monday, December 19, 2011, there was a knock at my door. My heart sank. I knew who would be there. I ignored it and continued shoving my clothes into the suitcase. The knock came again. She knew that I was inside, and she was not going to go away. Finally I stopped what I was doing and opened the door. There stood Martha, a lanky twenty-four-year-old British girl with glasses, with whom I had been sharing teaching duties. You must come to the meeting right now, she said. I sighed, feeling the weight of the past six months there among thirty Christian missionaries, now gathered in secret for the pre-Christmas prayer meeting. Then she whispered, He's dead, pointing at the ceiling. I thought that she meant God, and I was momentarily confused. I have never read the Bible, and my family is largely atheist. Then she said, him, and I realized she meant the main God in this world: Kim Jong-il. Was it fate that my North Korean experience began with his birthday and ended with his death? It was February 2002 when I first glimpsed the forbidden city of Pyongyang as part of a Korean-American delegation visiting for Kim Jong-il's sixtieth birthday celebrations. It was only a few months after 9/11, and George W. Bush had just christened that country part of an axis of evil, so it was an inauspicious time for a single American woman to cross its border with a group of strangers. Over the next nine years, with each implausible crossing of its immutable border, I became further intoxicated by this unknown and unknowable place. This isolated nation existed under an entirely different system from the rest of the world, so different that when I arrived in 2011, I found myself in Juche Year 100. The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) follows a different calendar system, which counts time from the birth of their original Great Leader, Kim Il-sung, who died in 1994; Juche, which roughly means self-reliance, is at the core of North Korea's foundational philosophy. Almost every book I ever saw there was written by or about the Great Leader. The state-run media, including the newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* and *Chosun Central TV*, reported almost exclusively on the Great Leader. Almost every film, every song, every monument heralded the miraculous achievements of the Great Leader, the role passed down through three generations, from Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un, who was twenty-nine when he assumed power in 2012 and became the world's youngest head of state. It has been reported that every home in the country is fitted with a speaker through which government propaganda can be broadcast, and that more than thirty-five thousand statues of the Great Leaders are scattered across the country. But while the regime dabbles with nuclear weapons, provoking repeated United Nations sanctions, the people of North Korea suffer. The 1990s famine (known as the Arduous March) killed as many as three million, more than a tenth of the entire population, and even now the World Food Program reports that 80 percent of North Koreans experience food shortages and hunger. It is estimated that forced labor, executions, and concentration camps have claimed over a million lives since 1948. According to the latest UN report, the DPRK maintains some twenty gulags holding some 120,000 political prisoners (Human Rights Watch estimates 200,000). These numbers are inevitably approximate since nothing there is verifiable. Almost no North Koreans are allowed out, defectors risk execution and almost no foreigners are allowed in except those on packaged tours, most holding European passports, and they get to see only what is allowed. In this global age of information, where secrets have become an anachronism, North Korea stands apart. My obsession with this troubling country because it indeed became an obsession based on more than just journalistic interest. The first time I entered North Korea, I was not sure what a delegate was and did not know much at all about the pro-Kim Jong-il group I was traveling with. This makes me sound either extremely irreverent or extremely young, but I was neither. My ignorance was willful. Since getting a visa into the country was so difficult, I thought it was best not to appear too inquisitive. But there was something else, too: a part of me, a very insistent voice inside, did not want to know those details. For those of us who grew up in 1970s South Korea, anything to do with North Korea is accompanied by a certain foreboding. And for those of us whose family members were abducted into North Korea, this fear runs still deeper. If I had known as much as I do

now, more than a decade later, I doubt I would have made that first, fateful trip. But I did get on a flight from JFK, on Korean Air, one of the worlds most modern and luxurious airlines, and then almost twenty hours later, via Seoul and then Beijing, boarded North Korea's state-owned Air Koryo, where the only reading material was a magazine about the Great Leader. And I would cross that same border into Pyongyang repeatedly for the next nine years. Every story has its origin in a time that came before. My obsession had its roots even before I was born, in 1945. It was then, when the five-thousand-year-old kingdom of Korea was divided by the Allies who liberated it from Japan, that everything went wrong. And since then everything has continued to be wrong, and nothing, not even the three-year-long war that began in 1950, has made much difference. Or maybe my obsession became inevitable when I was a child growing up in South Korea. The years I lived there remain unnervingly still, pristinely intact in my mind. As I get older, the memory of those years grows bigger, each nook casting a longer shadow. Such is the condition of a first-generation immigrant for whom everything is separated into now and then, into before the move and after. The ocean that separates the adoptive home and the old country also divides time. I was just thirteen when we came to America. The early eighties in South Korea was a time of political unrest and economic upheaval, and my father's businesses from the shipping company and mining ventures to the hotels collapsed rapidly. Bankruptcy in South Korea was punishable by a hefty jail term, and we fled our home in the dead of night. Like many new immigrants to America, my family was now poor and kept moving from Queens to Jersey City to the Bronx to Fort Lee. I grasped few of the vast changes that seemed to have occurred overnight in my physical surroundings. I knew that I was no longer in Korea, and yet it was beyond my comprehension that this loss of home was permanent. Another foreign concept that took time to absorb was that I was now Asian, a term that I had heard mentioned only in a social studies class. Back home, yellow was the color of the forsythia that bloomed every spring along the fence that separated our estate from the houses down the hill; I certainly never thought of my skin as being the same shade. Those years were also marked by silence. My mother tongue was suddenly gone, replaced by unfamiliar sounds called English. It seemed a miracle when I took the SAT and made it to college. After graduation, I spent a couple of years in London, searching for something I could never quite name, then returned to New York to a series of part-time jobs and a rent-stabilized apartment in the East Village, where I spent my twenties. But I never felt at home there either and kept subletting my apartment and taking off, often on meager writing fellowships that required me to live in some remote place, whether it be a hundred-year-old cabin in New Hampshire or an empty room facing a desert hill in Wyoming. There were no cell phones then, and I was always calling my parents collect. I remember getting off a Greyhound bus one afternoon and standing in a phone booth outside a coffee shop in Taos, New Mexico, and my father, on the line from New Jersey, ending the call with: If you keep moving like this, one day you'll be too far away to come back. During those itinerant years, I once found myself on the Ligurian coast of Italy, which sounded better than it felt. It was a place whose awe-inspiring beauty so oddly failed to touch me that for years afterward I would look for an opportunity to drop the word Liguria in conversations, such as I wore this dress often that autumn I was living in Liguria or I never finished that novel I was working on in Liguria, as if to remind myself that I had spent nearly two months there. Some experiences are like that. You live through them, and yet you aren't quite there. Korea was the opposite. My first thirteen years remained real for me like nothing since. When you lose your home at a young age, you spend your life looking for its replacement. Over the years, I have never considered any apartment more than temporary. Each one remains spare, with bare walls and no personal touches as though I might need to grab everything in a few seconds and run. People often ask me where my things are. The question always brings me back to South Korea; in my mind, I finally return. I put down my suitcase at the base of the incredibly long flight of steps I have never forgotten and look up at my childhood home, towering above. Strangely, in 2002, when I visited Pyongyang for the first time, I felt more at home than I had since I left Seoul as a child. There was a sense of recognition. The past was all right there before me: generations of Koreans separated by division; decades of longing, loss, hurt, regret, guilt. I identified with it in a way that I could never shake off. I thought that if only I could understand the place, then I could find a way to help put the fragments back together. Like most Koreans, whether from the North or South, I dreamed, perhaps irrationally, of reunification. I returned repeatedly until 2011. I am often asked, Which Korea do you come from? North or South? It is a nonsensical question. The chance of me or any Korean out and about in the world being from the North is almost nil. Virtually no one gets out of North Korea. It is a locked nation. Locked away from South Korea, from the rest of the world, from those of us whose families got trapped there. It is the sort of a lock for which there is no open sesame, and the world seems to have forgotten why it was sealed tight to begin with and who threw away the key. My Korea is the South, the industrial, overachieving, better half that spawned out Hyundai and Samsung and in the six decades since the bloody war has established itself as the fifteenth richest country in the world. But the South is never just the South. Its very existence conjures up the unmentionable North, which, with its habitual nuclear threats and the antics of its bizarre dictator, casts a shadow far beyond its own peninsula. In recent years, North Korea has steadily become a siren for the hankering mind, making outsiders wait and guess and then wait some more, indefinitely. Both my parents hail from families separated by the partition. And it is really the unrequited heartbreak of those separations a heartbreak that lasts generations that brought me North. If this were the sort of story that invites readers to nod with empathy and walk away both satisfied and educated, I would say that I traveled full circle. But in truth my journey was barely half a

circle, a sad one that could never be completed, because those who were at the center of the harrowing history are almost certainly long dead, or old and dying, and time is running out before their stories are lost in the dust of the past. The Korean War lasted three years, with millions either dead or separated. It never really ended but instead paused in the 1953 armistice exactly where it began, with Koreans on both sides of the 38th parallel. Historians often refer to it as the forgotten war, but no Korean considers it forgotten. There is not a culture of forgetting. The war is everywhere in today's Korea. There is, for example, the story of my father's young female cousins, nursing students aged seventeen and eighteen, who disappeared during the war. Decades later, in the 1970s, their mother, my father's aunt, received a letter from North Korea via Japan, the only contact her daughters ever made with her, and from that moment on, she was summoned to the Korean Central Intelligence Agency every few months on suspicion of espionage until she finally left South Korea for good and died in San Antonio, Texas. The girls were never heard from again. And there was my uncle, my mother's brother, who was just seventeen when he was abducted by North Korean soldiers at the start of the war, in June 1950. He was never seen again. He might or might not have been taken to Pyongyang, and it was this suspended state of not knowing that drove my mother nearly crazy, and my mother, and to some degree me, who inherited their sorrow. Stories such as these abound in South Korea, and probably North Korea, if its people were allowed to tell them. Separation haunts the affected long after the actual incident. It is a perpetual act of violation. You know that the missing are there, just a few hours away, but you cannot see them or write to them or call them. It could be your mother trapped on the other side of the border. It could be your lover whom you will long for the rest of your life. It could be your child whom you cannot get to, although he calls out your name and cries himself to sleep every night. From Seoul, Pyongyang looms like a shadow, about 120 miles away, so close but impossible to touch. Decades of such longing sicken a nation. The loss is remembered, and remembered, like an illness, a heartbreak from which there is no healing, and you are left to wonder what happened to the life you were supposed to have together. For those of us raised by mothers and fathers who experienced such trauma firsthand, it is impossible not to continue this remembering.