

# Holding My Breath For Your Story

by [Emerald Lin](#)



Bathed in the gentle light of a late afternoon, a middle-aged woman closes her eyes. Half-turned to the audience, her expression is one of reminiscence: not quite peaceful, not quite troubled, but lost in a memory. She is standing in an alleyway: on one side, thick leaves and knotted roots climb over a mottled wall while branches dotted with orange blossoms arch outward from rusted pipes; on the other, a thin iron fence perches on top of a low roof. All emits a sense of age and history. Far back, the sky is a patch of warm, white gold. The woman's hair almost lifts in the wind, yet the moment is one of stillness and quiet. Behind her closed eyes is a story, and the audience holds their breath waiting for it.

*Please Come Back Soon* is a photographic series by Janice Chung in which she documents her mother's return to Korea for a long-awaited visit after emigrating in 1989 (Zoo). In *Please Come Back Soon*, Chung captures ordinary moments as her mother spends time with her family and explores the land where she grew up: slicing persimmons in the living room, bending down to smell a flower, and – as described above – pausing in the middle of an alleyway, lost in the moment and, it seems, in memory. A Korean American raised in Queens, Chung grew up in the local Korean community, but this was the first time she had stayed with her family in Korea (Zoo). Photographing her

mother's journey back, Chung inhabits a delicate threshold between insider and outsider. As the daughter of an emigrant returning to her ethnic homeland, Chung has a story of her own, but her mother's is the focus of this series. This is Chung's family and her culture, yet she has never directly participated in it, has never been immersed in the land and its people. While she is her mother's daughter, she did not know of her mother's past, her experiences: "It never occurred to me that she had a completely different life before she moved to New York and had children" (Chung qtd. in Zoo). The photograph in the alleyway captures this complexity: eyes closed and lost in thought, Chung's mother experiences an intimate moment, yet the witness to this moment does not perceive the full story. Like a door cracked open, the snapshot offers only a glimpse of a powerful story. One might wonder how Chung can so convincingly tell a story she can't be sure of.

A principal task of storytelling is to remain truthful to the subject, even if one stands outside the subject's experience. In his essay "Getting Others Right," Teju Cole discusses how a photographer can tell a story both as an insider and as an outsider. Raising the example of the Kiowa photographer Horace Poolaw as a model of insider storytelling, Cole notes that Poolaw captures an authentic side of indigenous life through "testimonial simplicity." Poolaw's subjects dress and pose naturally, appearing amidst the details of their everyday lives. These photographs, Cole writes, "give us lively pictures of life as it [is] being lived." The informality of the captured moments allows us a glimpse of the subjects' lives in their richness and mundanity. Chung, too, accomplishes this by photographing ordinary moments. The alleyway, the arching tree, the low rooftops, and the rusted pipes on the mottled wall are not a staged background, but a corner of the city people might pass by any day. Her mother wears a trench coat, her hair pulled back in a low ponytail. She stops, perhaps recalling a memory as she walks through the city, turns halfway – and her daughter's camera snaps. Like Poolaw, Chung delivers the intimacy she is privy to as an insider – not only as a witness to experiences of immigration and cultural displacement, but as her mother's daughter, the one who accompanies her mother, standing close behind her on a walk. Chung is the person to whom her mother would turn to share a story.

Yet Chung is also an outsider. While her mother is turning, the camera's angle indicates she is turning toward someone or something else: perhaps to tell a story, to share a surfacing memory, or simply to ask to linger one more second. The intimacy of the photo heightens the sense of witnessing. Perhaps it is inevitable that in the act of offering a glimpse of an intimate, insider moment, Chung becomes visible as an outsider. However, there are ways to maintain the subject's primacy even when the artist is an outsider. Teju Cole claims that photographer Daniella Zalzman achieves this goal. In her series *Signs of Your Identity*, Zalzman documents the painful and sensitive history of indigenous people forced to attend Canadian boarding schools. As a Vietnamese American, Zalzman is "uncertain about her right to shape the story," and so she "lets the subjects speak for themselves" (Cole 5). Instead of asserting control and

shaping the narrative, Cole suggests that the artist should quiet their own voice and amplify the subject's. In Chung's photographs, while the artist is undeniably present, her subjects retain authority in her work. Placed at the center against a slightly blurry background, Chung's mother's face is captured with clarity and draws the viewer in. Her closed eyes allow her to keep a part of the story to herself, and the audience and the photographer are held behind a boundary they cannot cross. Her nuanced expression suggests a complicated past that witnesses do not have access to, which underlines the mother's ownership of the narrative. If we ascribe emotions to the scene – the longing to connect, the ache for a lost time, these interpretations do not overpower the image of her mother's expression. In the end, the subject belongs to herself.

As Chung establishes our nuanced relation to her subject, inviting us to share both her intimacy and her alienation, she allows us to sense more immediately the multitudes that her subject contains. Though Zalzman's project and approach are quite different from Chung's, Cole could be addressing either artist's work: "[Y]ou also sense that this could be you, that these images are not a report on tribal peculiarities but on the workings of human memory" (5). The photo of Chung's mother exceeds any 'tribal peculiarities' we might seek in the image of an emigrant's return. Though the image captures a particular cultural displacement experienced by a particular emigrant, we have all walked down a street rich with personal history, recalled a memory, and lost ourselves in time. Despite any differences in backgrounds, identities, and experiences, we share an understanding with the mother, even as she retains her own idiosyncrasy and liveliness, and we thus remain unsure precisely what it is we understand.

In his essay "Steps Towards a Small Theory of the Visible," John Berger proposes that an artist should collaborate with their subject. Describing the many portraits Peter Paul Rubens painted for his wife, Berger writes: "Sometimes [Rubens's wife] collaborated, sometimes not. When she didn't, she remains a painted ideal; when she did, we too wait for her" (21). A sense of collaboration instills life into the artwork and establishes a connection with the audience, premised on the artist's – and the audience's – *waiting* for the subject. Chung's photograph of her mother is an image of such collaboration. The stillness of the picture compels us to wait, with Chung, as her mother soaks in the moment. The warm background and the extending alleyway invite the viewers into Chung's moment of waiting. Thus, even though the moment is one of intimacy, looking at it does not feel intrusive. Drawn to Chung's mother, we wonder what memory she's lost in. The mother's presence emerges in part from our curiosity, as if she is leaning out of the photograph. Suspended in this moment, we hold our breath and wait for her to speak, to move, to open her eyes. Alongside us is Chung: together, in stillness, we ask the mother to tell us her story. Perhaps this is what it means to capture the moment of another – to hold one's breath and say, silently: I am waiting.

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## Works Cited

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