RECOLLECTIONS

An immigrant Thanksgiving

So picture this: Thanksgiving, 1972. The Harbor House apartments on Davenport Avenue, New Rochelle, New York, red brick, low-rise, shot through with blacks and Puerto Ricans and then a smattering of us immigrants, the rest mostly white people of modest means, everyone deciding New York City is going to hell. Or, at least, that’s the excuse. The apartments are cramped, hard-used, but the rent is low. Around the rickety dining-room table, the end of which nearly blocks the front door, sit my father, my baby sister, myself, and my uncle, who with my aunt has come earlier this fall to attend graduate school. They’re sleeping on the pullout in the living room. In the abutting closet-size kitchen, my aunt is helping my mother, who is fretting over the turkey. Look how doughy-faced the grownups still are, so young and slim, like they shouldn’t yet be out in the world. My father and uncle wear the same brow-line-style eyeglasses that have not yet gone out of fashion back in Seoul, the black plastic cap over the metal frames making them look perennially consternated, square. My mother and my aunt, despite aprons stained with grease and kimchi juice, look pretty in their colorful polyester blouses with the sleeves rolled up, and volleying back and forth between the women and the men is much excited chatter about relatives back home (we’re the sole permanent emigrants of either clan), of the economy and politics in the old country and in our new one, none of which I’m paying any mind. My sister and I, ages five and seven, the only ones speaking English, are talking about the bird in the oven—our very first—and already bickering over what parts are best, what parts the other should favor, our conception of it gleaned exclusively from television commercials and illustrations in magazines. […]