

## “Perfect Love”

By Ariana Martinez for Between the Essays on BBC Radio 3’s The Essay, created with support from Falling Tree Productions

### Transcript Key:

Speakers (in order of appearance): In this transcript, Speakers’ words will all appear in size 14 black type. **Speaker names** are in **bold size 14 black type**.

**Taehee’s Poem:** The central character of the story, Taehee Whang, also appears as an altered version of themselves as they read a poem. This voice is distinguished from their typical speaking voice by the addition of slight reverb.

**Taehee Whang:** Taehee is the central character of the story and speaks in their typical, unaltered speaking voice.

**Narrator:** The narrator appears several times throughout the story to mark transitions. The narrator is voiced by a different person, and their voice is distinct from both Taehee and Taehee’s poetic reading in tone. The narrator’s voice has also been processed with slight reverb.

**Ambient Sound:** In this transcript, ambient sound will appear in black, size 12 type. Descriptions of ambient sound will be indented away from speaker text.

*Music: In this transcript, music will appear in black, italicized, size 12 type. None of the music in this work contains lyrics, but it will be described in a way similar to that used to describe ambient sound. Descriptions of music will be indented away from speaker text*

End Transcript Key.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT:

Bells and windchimes ring in the distance as leaves rustle in the wind. Dry leaves crunch underfoot.

**Taehee's Poem:** "You used to tell me there was a perfect love..."

Footsteps through dry grass and leaves, wind continues to blow. Birds chirp. The buzzing of cicadas rises gradually and fills the sound space.

**Taehee's Poem:** "...that never gets tangled, that never gets wrong, that is always right, that is timeless."

*Music enters: Music is a series of rapid scales, electronic tones sweeping up and swirling in space, looping back on themselves as they rise and fall in pitch. Beneath this spiraling flurry of cool tones is a lower, warmer series of notes that marks slower time. The music is resonant and fluid with no hard edges.*

Footsteps break out into a run through the grass. The natural setting transitions to an urban setting as wind and grass are replaced with the sounds of digging through falling rock and rubble.

**Taehee's Poem (spoken in Korean): English Translation :** "The face that I dearly wanted to see only passing by."

The sounds of digging transition into the sounds of a train passing on an overhead platform. A subway door opens and closes.

**Taehee Poem (spoken in English):** "The face that I dearly wanted to see only passing by."

A New York City subway announcement plays as an above-ground train barrels through Queens. The announcement says: "This is a Queens-bound M Local train. The nextstop is Myrtle Avenue, Broadway. Stand clear of the closing doors, please. The train continues to pass through the station, making a high, screeching sound as it goes.

**Taehee's Poem:** "How do I access your archive? How do I access your archive?"

The passing train's sound fades away, and there is a brief moment of silence.

**Taehee Whang:** My name is Taehee Whang and I am an artist based in Queens, New York, and my preferred pronoun is they/them. I'm the eldest of a family of six; so, my parents and my three younger siblings.

*Music begins: The music is a series of steps in the shape of a pyramid—rising up to a peak and falling again. It moves with one big step up and then falls with two smaller steps back down, starting where it began. The music is made up of warm, electronic tones. Higher, cooler notes blink above the staircase at long, irregular intervals.*

**Taehee Whang:** When I was a child, the apartment that we lived was actually owned by my grandfather. Sometimes when I dream, I remember that specific apartment complex and playground and other bits of that neighborhood.

*Music continues and begins to slow and stretch in time.*

Sounds of neighborhood activity slowly fill the sound space: children laugh and call out, older people pass on the crowded streets, faint snippets of conversation layer on top of one another.

**Taehee Whang:** And out of all my grandfather's grandchildren, I'm the only one who actually has memory of him.

Neighborhood sounds reverberate and bounce around in a wider, expanded sound space before fading out.

*Music reverberates before dissolving.*

**Narrator:** What rests inside you, warm and singing?

**Taehee Whang:** My grandfather apparently was very stern person, but like, he really, really adored me. And one of the incident that I remember was I just love blowing on birthday cake candles...

A match strikes and a flame erupts into the sound space. The flame dies out and fades into a stream of crackling sparks.

*A children's music box plays the "happy birthday" tune, but the sound is filtered as if submerged underwater or coming from far away. The crisp ends of notes are rounded and soft instead.*

Amidst all of this, a faint, glowing sound created by tracing one's finger around a water-filled glass bounces back and forth from left to right in the sound space.

**Taehee Whang:** ...like, I just loved it. Even though it was not my birthday I will just go and like blow out their candle. And he just like let me do it.

**Taehee Whang:** I think my understanding of like family love also came with discipline. But with my grandfather, I just did not have that. I look back and smile because, like, there was no pain associated with it.

The glowing, bouncing sound is the only one left in the space before gradually fading away.

**Taehee Whang:** Even though when he was in his sick bed, I'd be like so overjoyed to go to his apartment, you know?

**Taehee Whang:** He passed away when I was pretty young. So I think I was able to retain very good memory of him, like showing the pure care.

**Taehee Whang:** This person really loved me, but haven't thought about him for almost 20 years.

**Taehee Whang:** And then very recently, his memory just struck me...um...and I'm just like, oh yeah, I do want to visit him.

*Music begins: The music tumbles in like the feeling of a lock's pins falling into place, or the slightly irregular rolling of an octagonal pencil across a desk. It is made up of a mix of warm and cool electronic tones, the warmer, deeper tones grounding the tumbling sequence for a moment before it resumes its rotation.*

Cicadas rise, wind blows, grass rustles.

**Taehee's Poem:** I remember the day you left me. I was chewing soft chrysanthemums. Bitter white juice stained my grief. Maybe that's the reason why you always come back to me whenever bitterness welts on my eyes.

*Music continues with the addition of a warm, sustained, pulsating tone that runs through the tumbling sequence like an electrical current.*

Grass sweeps back and forth.

**Taehee's poem:** "Welcome, welcome, welcome. You came back to me as a sensitive plant."

Birds chirp before fading out with the cicadas. One last bird squawks—its voice brittle and cracking into two parts. The ambient, outdoor noise of a light breeze through trees remains.

**Taehee Whang:** Usually Korean traditional mound, they are located more recluse grave site, so mostly in countryside, or in the mountain, up in hills. The radius is about like five feet, six feet like circular mound. And I think about tall as maybe three to four feet and usually the well taken care of mound...they have like a fresh grass growing out of it and the shape is pretty intact. There's a gravestone setting your friend dating the name of the person buried, which family they're from...

Resonant bells and windchimes ring deeply, holding their notes for long stretches before colliding once more.

**Taehee Whang:** And they don't always have it, but there is a very small altar where you can put food and drinks for the ritual.

Resonant bells and windchimes continue to ring deeply, holding their notes for long stretches before colliding again.

**Taehee Whang:** Based on their gender, there's a difference in terms of how you mourn certain person. Imagined back in the day, like if there is someone who passed away in a family, all the preparation will be done by women and the ceremonial part will be done by men. That's like the pretty basic structure that I knew of and kind of experienced it too.

Bells and windchimes come to rest. Grass rustles below.

*Music begins: As above, the music tumbles in like the feeling of a lock's pins falling into place, or the slightly irregular rolling of an octagonal pencil across a desk. It is made up of a mix of warm and cool electronic tones, the warmer, deeper tones grounding the tumbling sequence for a moment before it resumes its rotation.*

**Taehee's Poem:** "In order to recall you, my grief has to be gendered so that when I step on the mound, you're buried. My body will be forever alien."

*Music continues*

**Taehee Whang:** If I recall the ceremony or the ritual to remember someone that I loved and like someone who loved me back, the ritual language is gendered.

*Music shifts, slightly lower in tone now.*

**Taehee Whang:** And my instinct would be like, oh, that's the language that I learned, so I want to have some kind of relationship with it, you know?

*Music continues.*  
Grass rustles.

**Taehee's Poem:** "I'm not your eldest son. How do I access your archive?  
I'm not your daughter. How do I sound my loss?"

*Music shifts lower again, tumbling rapidly into place before slowing down, and is then replaced with a brief, simple sequence of round, electronic tones.*

**Narrator:** Is there a right way to stay warm?

Music and electronic tones fade out into silence.

**Taehee Whang:** Visiting his grave I think became more rare occasion, because my mom's side of family, we don't really have many male heirs. So it's like mostly now work of my aunt, my mom, and my grandmother. But I moved to America and then after that I haven't really been able to visit.

*Music begins: The music is a series of steps in the shape of a pyramid—rising up to a peak and falling again. It moves with one big step up and then falls with two smaller steps back down, starting where it began. The music is made up of warm, electronic tones. Higher, cooler notes blink above the staircase at long, irregular intervals.*

Birds chirp, insects buzz, breeze blows within a large sound space, all sound coming in from across distance.

**Taehee Whang:** I sometimes dream about it or just like...I do have a memory of what the site looked like. Oh, I know like if I enter this cemetery, I know which direction I need to face to see his mound.

Birds chirp, their small bright voices fluttering quickly on top of one another. They echo, calling back and forth to one another.

**Taehee Whang:** Ok, like, is it possible for me to like virtually walk from where I'm standing in Brooklyn to my grandfather's mound in Korea?

Footsteps through rough dirt and gravel enter and exit the sound space.

**Taehee's Poem:** "It has been 20 years since you left. Other than my memory, your pixelated mound on Google Earth is the only proof of your existence. I got on Google map hoping to find your mound as I remember it."

Landscape sounds are replaced by the soft bubbling and gentle waves of the sea. Small, crisp bubbles burst quickly in a swell. Waves break slowly against a shore before fading out.

**Narrator:** Do you know the way across this strange sea?

Taehee Whang: This is my way of trying to visit. It might not be like the best way, but yeah, yeah, that's the way that I have. And you know what? Technology is here. I'm going to use it. You know?

Sea sounds drift out after one last wave breaks. The sound of quick typing on a mechanical keyboard enters the sound space.

*Music ends on a high, cool note.*

**Taehee Whang:** Just having that vicinity in my mind, I think I kind of first Googled the potential location and I think from that result I just like...try to find the most similar cemetery entrance that I remembered.

**Taehee Whang:** So on Google map, I typed in my Brooklyn address as a starting point...

*Music begins: Music is made up of scattered, cool, twinkling light. High, bright, crisp notes blink in offset pairs while slightly lower, rounder notes float in the surrounding space.*

**Taehee Whang:**... and like for the final destination for the Korean cemetery that I found. So once I got the route, I, starting from my Brooklyn apartment,

*The music continues, joined by a stream of warmer, more solid light—more wave than particle, a consistent ringing note through space.*



The sound of a computer mouse clicking once breaks open the space for a new voice to enter. Google Earth reads using text-to-speech: “Brooklyn, New York.”

**Taehee Whang:** I just click and drag and click and drag the route. Like go past like upstate New York, Canada...

Computer mouse clicks several times. Google Earth reads using text-to-speech: “Canada”

**Taehee Whang:** Pacific Ocean

Computer mouse clicks once more. Google Earth reads using text-to-speech: “The Pacific Ocean”

A powerful splash swells into the sound space, and the space fills with water. The water holds Taehee’s voice, distorting it. Taehee’s voice drifts among large, wobbling bubbles. The sound space is unstable, pressure shifting from ear to ear.

*Music grows louder before sinking under the water.*

**Taehee’s Poem (repeating and overlapping):** “In this house, I still miss you. I waited and waited because I really wanted to see you.”

Sound space dries out, and Taehee’s voice is no longer distorted by water and pressure. Instead, the sound of running on dirt and gravel travels from left to right.

*Music emerges from the water, uninterrupted.*

**Taehee Whang:** And some part of Russia and China

Google Earth reads using text-to-speech (starting to distort and skip): “Russia. China.”

**Taehee Whang:** Past North Korea

Google Earth reads using text-to-speech (even more distorted, breaking, skipping): “North Korea”

**Taehee Whang:** ...into outskirts of Seoul

Google Earth Voice (distorted, breaking, skipping): South Korea

*Music fades out.*

Footsteps through dirt slow to a walking pace.

**Taehee Whang:** It was really interesting like to see all the landscape also being abstracted too. Once you go to like different parts of countries, there are like very limited information obviously. Even in South Korea, it's not as detailed.

*Music begins: The music is a series of slow steps landing with a bounce on a hard surface. It rises and falls through time as if it has failed to grasp what it was reaching for on the way up. It reaches with cool, high electronic notes—radiant and striving, opening and closing twice before falling. It falls into electronic, neutral tones, neither warm or cool—a middle ground from which to try again.*

Neighborhood sounds (children laughing and playing, people navigating crowded streets, bells ringing, tree leaves rustling) from earlier in the story return but they are distorted and broken. The sound space fractures and skips. Words and ambience feel abruptly sliced through and an undercurrent of fuzzy, radio static attempts to glue the fragments together.

**Narrator** (their words are also fractured, skipping and abruptly cut): When the road darkens, is warmth the same as light?

Wind blows. Grass rustles.

**Taehee Whang:** I basically was trying to locate any cemetery that seemed familiar to me, and even to check if it's the correct one, I couldn't answer it nonetheless, because it's only the skin-like reflection of Google Map.

Windblown ambiance and music fade out to silence.

**Taehee Whang:** To be honest, as raw footage, without knowing any context, it's a little bit boring and it's not really a hundred percent true to how I feel.

Music starts again.

**Taehee Whang:** Like, I don't really feel catharsis.

The sound of dry leaves crunching is punctured by the harsh stabbing of a shovel into rocky soil. The sound space is full of granular texture, dispersed by the shovel striking in from above. Hands pull leaves and dirt aside, creating a trench in space. Deep, raspy breaths begin to fill the sound space. The breaths forcefully pull and push air into the space.

**Taehee's Poem:** "Now that I am the only grandchild with your memory, I found out how fragile home, family, and my own body are as they fell apart, without any foundation to rely on."

Long heavy breaths punctuated by the shovel breaking soil slow and stop. A large tree splits, wood grain and fiber pull apart, stretching the sound space tight. Roots are pulled up through soil, breaking the sound space open and dragging rocky fragments through. The sound of a wooden branch scratching against brick draws lines through the sound space. The scratch cuts deeply into the sound space and it winds, arches, and straightens out before exiting.

**Taehee Whang:** I think there is still underlying responsibility. Like if you are good family member, you should try to remember your elderly family figure. when people have no direct means to participate in this intimate family ritual, how do we re-measure intimacy?

*Music begins: Music is made up of scattered, cool, twinkling light. High, bright, crisp notes blink in offset pairs while slightly lower, rounder notes float in the surrounding space.*

**Taehee Whang:** So, like in the future, how do I wonder about inclusive family in Korea?

*Music continues, bright twinkling tones joined by a stream of warmer, more solid light—more wave than particle, a consistent ringing note through space.*

Grains pass from one ceramic container to another. As they fall, their sound bounces off the hard surfaces of the sound space with thin traces of reverb. The sound space is hollow and its contents shifting. The branch tracing over brick returns, drawing faint, distant lines in space.

**Taehee's Poem:** "And the day when I join you, I wonder what my mound will be like."

*Music brightens and twinkles, quick bursts of light before going out.*

**Narrator:** When you are laid into the earth and buried, what will become of your warmth, your residual heat?

The grains trickle out of the sound space, which darkens into silence.

**Taehee Whang:** When I'm in my old age, I hope I could get remembered by my younger siblings and maybe with my chosen family too. Wind blows and birds chirp in the distance.

**Taehee Whang:** I imagine it to be like some kind of personal ceremony...

Footsteps tentatively enter the sound space, walking through tall grass and dry leaves.

**Taehee Whang:** ...where everybody could participate and just have their own catharsis.

*Music begins, slow steps rising and falling, warm and ringing in in the windblown space.*

From silence rises a swarm of cicadas, music, a gust of wind, and the cool, bright tinkling of bells.

*Music fades out as the ambient sound is blown away.*

END TRANSCRIPT