

FAR AWAY

THE DIRECTOR OF *IN BETWEEN*
DAYS RETURNS WITH HER LATEST
 IMMERSIVE EXPLORATION OF
 MELANCHOLY SUBJECTIVITY
 by KRISTIN M. JONES

"It's funny," THE 40-YEAR-OLD KOREAN-BORN director So Yong Kim says of her film *Treeless Mountain*. "The story came to me—not even a story but an image of two girls on top of a hill. And I wrote the words 'Treeless Mountain.' I don't know why I wrote that, because they were just stick figures holding a little stick. And then the story developed from there." As in her atmospheric first feature, *In Between Days* (06), about an awkward immigrant teen infatuated with her more assimilated male friend, Kim drew on her talent for working with young nonprofessional actors and mined her own memories to craft a fictional story. "It's not autobiographical, but it's very personal," she says. Long ago, Kim's mother divorced her father and emigrated to the U.S., leaving the children with their grandparents on a rice farm until they could join her. *Treeless Mountain* is inspired by those experiences.

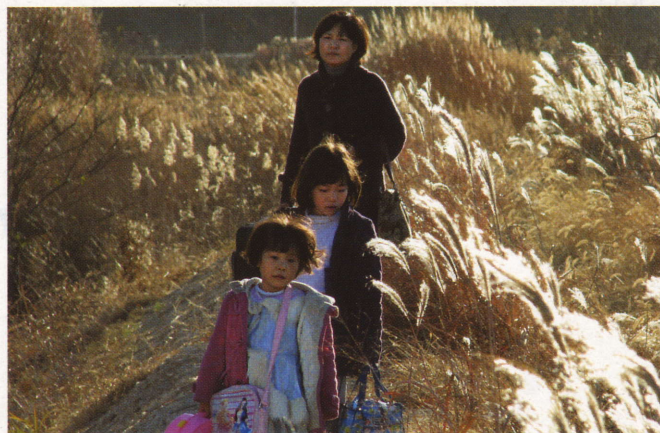
In the movie, the hill is a heap of rubble that 6-year-old Jin (Hee Yeon Kim) and 4-year-old Bin (Song Hee) climb to watch their mother (Soo Ah Lee) board a bus. She's abruptly left them in the care of an aunt (Mi Hyang Kim) in order to pursue their estranged father. Later, they return to look down on the bus stop as if hoping to spy land from a stricken ship. The scenes before they leave their home in Seoul already suggest their lives' instability—Jin rushing to pick up Bin at the babysitter's and trying to get her exhausted mother's attention, Bin standing alone on a

balcony at dusk, Jin being bathed after she wets her bed. But when Big Aunt, a self-pitying alcoholic, neglects them, survival becomes intertwined with play and magical thinking. Their mother has left them a piggy bank, promising she'll return when it's filled with money they've earned by doing chores, and the sisters begin to obsess over coin-saving schemes. And when Big Aunt follows through on threats to bring them to their grandparents' farm, their relationship with the adult world, and with each other, evolves yet again.

All this unfolds without a musical score, and often in near silence. The visuals are rife with patient close-ups of the children's faces and bodies, as well as rapt POV shots of things that absorb their attention: a street vendor's eels and crabs, a grasshopper cradled in Bin's hand, coins in the piggy bank. The measured pacing contributes to the unsentimental naturalism. Subtly meaningful events occur, but like a blank calendar, the story is parceled out into unremarkable days, demarcated by moody shots of the sky and landscape—urban and rural, at dusk or dawn—reminding us that for the children the setting sun and moon are the only indicators of time passing. Despite its quiet rhythms, however, *Treeless Mountain*, like *In Between Days*, is not without suspense. Kim says, "When I compare the films, that sense is more with the two girls, because they're so young and you're in this world that is created by the self-sufficiency that allows them to somehow swim through everything."

>> IN FOCUS: *Treeless Mountain* screens in *New Directors/New Films* on March 27 and 29.

KIM'S IMMERSIVE CAMERAWORK AND SENSITIVE APPROACH to performance were perhaps partly shaped by the path she took to narrative filmmaking. After coming to the U.S. at age 12, she lived in East Los Angeles, where a high-school elective gave her the idea of studying art. Concerned about her future, her mother insisted on business school. By the time Kim arrived at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, she was 22 and the delay had helped her focus on her ambitions. She says, "I was kind of shy, and I was painting, and it's a very solitary experience. I thought, well, I'm in art school, maybe I should look into other means of communicating? So I started taking performance classes." When she began basing projects on childhood memories, as well as Korean folklore and fairytales, Kim says, "It got me used to thinking about personal storytelling that's not directly



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autobiographical, but that could become metaphoric or symbolic." Creating looped films to project as backdrops in her installations and performances also eventually spurred her to tell stories through cinema. One experimental short, *A Bunny Rabbit* (02), was inspired by Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*.

The first version of the script for *In Between Days* covered a 30-year period. Kim recalls the reaction from her partner and husband, director Bradley Rust Gray: "Whoa, you can't make that into a film! Why don't you focus on a certain period of her life and develop that more?" I thought, okay, so it's like diving in and developing that more and more—as if you're within her atmosphere. How do you go into her life and walk through it?" When it came to writing *Treeless Mountain*, distancing herself from the story was difficult. "I had to go through the drafts and cut out the sentimentality." Influences included Ozu's *I Was Born But . . .*,

Jacques Doillon's *Ponette*, and Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows*. "Watching *Nobody Knows* made me think maybe I could make this film, because I always felt the task was daunting. How am I going to shoot this film in Korea? How am I going to find and cast the leads?" At first they spoke to talent managers, but ended up finding Hee in a foster home and Kim at her school. "Her focus was *amazing*," the director marvels of the latter. She didn't show the script to the pair, who bonded like sisters, but fed them instructions while the camera was rolling. As for her DP, Anne Misawa, "She's just very fluid. So I figured if anything was going haywire with the kids or crew, she'd just float right through."

Kim has started two new scripts, one about a male character, and hopes to try writing a short-story collection. She and Gray also take turns producing each other's films. "We get inspired by each other. Our favorite filmmakers are Lance Hammer and Kelly Reichardt and the Dardenne Brothers, and all these others, so we have similar references, but I also learn so much from Brad because he went to film school and I didn't. And hopefully to a certain extent he learns from me, because I probably do things a little wacky, a little off, that he might not do." She adds, "We try to learn more with each film. There's always so much to learn—that's why filmmaking is great." □

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