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Seoul Searching

Also in this issue:
The Ahn Trio Interview
East-West Rainbow
An Adoptee’s Return
contents

4. Editor’s Note

SEOUl SEARCHING

5. A Subway Sea of Black Hair
   by Michelle Lee

8. Connection: An Adoptee’s Return
   by Casey Daum

10. A Time Machine in Downtown Seoul
    by James Cha

13. Red & Green
    by Janice Yoon

FICTION

31. Dust, Light and Water:
    or the Woodcutter and the Fairy Revisited
    by Angela Hur
    Photos by Jane Ro

POETRY

29. One and two and three and four and five
    by Yumi Kim

41. Han
    by Nina Sawyer

42. Beside a Chrysanthemum
    by So Chong Ju
    Translation by Won Park

COVER

by Jason Cho
Photos by Halla Yang

FEATURES

20. An East West Rainbow
    by Paul Kwak

22. Momma Always Says...
    by Jenny Seo

26. The Ahn-Plugged Interview
    by Joohee Lee

PHOTO ESSAY

18. Momentary Snapshots
    by Tri Phuong

ART

30. Photograph
    by Jean Ryoo

40. Photograph
    by Dara Cho
Can one go home again? For the immigrants of the mid-19th century, the answer was assuredly no. Once they had boarded their boats in their Old World homelands, they had committed themselves to living out their days in a foreign land. Port cities of Europe saw countless scenes of heartbreaking farewells: sobbing mothers laying their eyes on their sons for the last time, wishing them well while inwardly grieving as if in mourning.

Once these immigrants arrived in America, they found jobs, married, raised families, and did all the things one had to do to establish a new life. Every now and then, they might tell their children stories of the "old country," of grandparents and cousins they had never met, but to the "yisei," the second-generation, these stories were just that --- stories. When the crossovers of the Atlantic grew old and died, their stories died with them, for the yisei had no direct experiences of the old country.

In contrast, jet travel has made it much easier for our generation to go "home" again. Spending a summer with relatives in Korea has almost become a rite of passage for our generation, and we don't just ask each other "whether" we've been back to Korea, but rather "when" and "how many times?" Our yisei experience is markedly different from that of previous generations of immigrants, for as James Cha '01 writes in "A Time Machine in Downtown Seoul," we can actually relive the pre-crossing lives of our parents, or as related by Casey Daum '03, an adopted Korean, it is possible to visit the orphanage where one spent one's earliest years.

In many ways, our lives are defined by our histories, and whereas the history-lines of previous immigrants contained an abrupt discontinuity where it jumps from one country to another, ours in some sense bifurcates into two parallel lines, the thicker one representing our newer and very much predominant sphere of existence in the U.S., and a fainter, thinner shadow-line representing our continuing lives in Korea, imagined perhaps through some nostalgic memories and a sepia-colored photograph. Yet each time we travel to Korea, those two lines intersect again as our memories of Korea clash with the reality of modern-day Seoul and our American upbringings.

What do we look for when we go to Korea? What do we actually see? These are some of the questions that are explored in this issue of Yisei Magazine. We hope you enjoy reading the following pages.
A Subway Sea of Black Hair

by Michelle S. Lee

On an idling bus edging out of Seoul, I could feel my body expire the stress that the heaving city carries. I had never felt so many people, adjusted to so many sounds, or perceived so many different things to see. As I stared out the window, looking at a fierce greenery I could have never imagined to be so close to such a dynamic, developed downtown; I overheard the sturdy sounds of English words. They cascaded out of a conversation from a couple sitting behind me like a smiling friend. Before I turned to meet new comrades I realized that if I don’t seek out these people, they wouldn’t know I was an American. I look Korean. What a childlike realization.
I found that the couple was actually from India. They were English speaking gerontologists teaching in Japan and vacationing in Korea. Never in my fairly colorful imagination would I have conjured such a scene. It is amazing to meet or be in a situation that you could never even dream up in a million years of fantasy. I love it when life reminds me that it’s about more than the unexpected, it’s amazing take-your-breath-away-and-throw-it-at-you. The wonders of being alive knocked me down while I was stuck in traffic.

Later on during my first trip to Korea, my mother decided that I ought to learn about some of the country’s history. We visited Kyongbok Palace, a congregate of old-styled buildings founded by the Yi dynasty in 1395. Since its construction, the colorful buildings of the main Korean palace have been reduced to ashes by repeated warfare and fires. Nevertheless, after each catastrophe, the buildings were rebuilt and remained on the grounds until the late 19th century. In 1592, the Japanese burned down Kyongbok palace. For 275 years the
palace lay as ruins until the second to last king of Korea, Kojong rebuilt it in 1867. The palace was burned and sacked again in 1910 by Japanese soldiers during the beginning of their unwelcome stay in Korea that lasted until 1945.

As my mother and I wandered in and out of the modern day reconstruction of the palace, we were bombarded by other tourists. What I immediately noticed amidst the Italian tours, the Chinese bus load, and the American guides, were the number of red umbrellas. I could see five or six bouncing red umbrellas followed by single filed Japanese tourists. I questioned their presence at Kyongbok Palace. For what reason were they visiting a place their ancestors brought to ruins? Were they sorry to see a replica as I was? Did they come to see part of their history or Korea’s history? I wanted to know what they were thinking as the guides explained the burning and looting of Kyongbok Palace because I didn’t know what to think.

My grandmother is in many ways Korea personified just for me. It warmed my heart to see her at ease. She was home. A country where she felt comfortable, accepted. For when she lived in the United States, she was always tense. Her broken English and 4 foot 11 inch frame were not normal. I am so glad I was able to know her as she is, a capable and strong woman, unafraid of saying what she thought and doing what she wanted. I didn’t have to help translate her bank statement, the news broadcast, or order food for her. She took care of me in a place that was foreign to me. It saddens me that I will probably not know her on a level where we can be equal, where we won’t be anxious about the words that are going to come out of our mouths or apprehensive about trying to fit in. As I boarded the plane for home, I turned and waved goodbye. A barrage of people crowded the boarding ramp and my grandmother lost sight of me. I could see her through the triangle of space left by a woman’s hat, a man’s shoulder, and a crying baby. She was still waving although she didn’t know if I could see her. That act of waving just so

"A subway sea of black hair. The pungent smells of Seoul. Overbearing salespeople."

still there touched me more than anything.

I like to think that my summer in Korea was an individual experience, something that only belonged to me. The culmination of my life moments helped to shape an interpretation of the ancestral country in a way that no one would understand. However, I have found that my trip has been very similar to other Korean-Americans. Although it is often a point of humor, it bothered me that I felt the same emotions as other people in something so personal to me. A subway sea of black hair. The pungent smells of Seoul. Overbearing salespeople. And yet, there are some parts of Korea that have remained mine. I am willing to share them because I know that no matter how well I can describe the situation or my feelings, a reader will never really grasp my connection with Korea because, for me, it is a tie with my family, my like, and my identity. I didn’t find myself in Seoul, but I took with me specific emotions and intimate feelings I cannot forget. I witnessed things that were remarkable in their originality and incredible in their existence. Forever will I try to be alert to what I found and saw in Korea, for I know such greatness exists everywhere, it derives from people.

Michelle Soohi Lee ’03 is hoping to do a joint concentration in Anthropology and Government.
Connection
An Adoptee’s Return
BY CASEY DAUM

I was born in Pusan to an unwed mother and given up for adoption. I was given the name Nam Mee, meaning “beauty from the south.” Meanwhile, in the United States, a childless couple was praying for a baby to complete their family. With the help of an adoption agency called Love the Children, my parents and I were brought together; I arrived to my new family on Thanksgiving Day.

Last summer, I visited Korea for the first time since infancy. It was at an orphanage there that I realized what a miracle and a gift that my life has been. Thirty Korean adoptees... return to the land of our birth... awkward bows... joyful smiles... pride... pain... adoption... invited by the president of South Korea... beautiful country... sorrow... the orphanage... the orphans... connection... understanding... peace.

The beauty of these children was enigmatic; it lay both in their innocence and in their profound understanding of sorrow. As I held one of the tiny orphans, my own long hair mingled with her soft strands and I opened my heart, both to her and to my past. I now understood the courage and love that it must have taken for my birthmother to give me up, so that I could have a better life. As an unwed mother, she sacrificed her pride, her dignity, and her reputation to carry and give birth to me. This orphan in my arms lived a life far different from my own, one devoid of love, because of her shameful illegitimate birth. Yet when I gazed at her I saw no shame, only an innocent child with little hope in her life. Her story probably began much like my own, but with a much different outcome. As our matching almond-shaped eyes met, our shared Korean roots bridged my seventeen years of love with her three years of sorrow. The pride that I felt at reclaiming this land became tainted by anger, as I realized that mere social stigmas were leaving these children forsaken in

나는 부산에서 미혼모의 아기로 태어나 입양 시키기 위해 버려졌다. 내 이름은 남쪽의 미인이라는 뜻의 남이로 붙여졌다. 한편 그 당시 미국에서는 아이가 없는 한 부부가 아기를 갖기 위해 기도를 드리고 있었다. 아이 사랑이라는 입양 단체의 도움을 통해 나는 지금의 부모님과 만날 수 있었다. 추수 감사절에 새로운 가족을 갖게 된 것이다. 작년 여름 아주 여름을 때 이목 처음으로 한국을 방문했다. 그 곳의 고아원에 가서 내 인생이 얼마나 크고 작은 기적과 축복으로 채워졌는가를 깨달을 수 있었다.

서른 명의 한국 입양아들...우리가 태어난 곳으로 돌아가다...어색한 사람들...기쁨에 찬 미소들...가슴...배,...고통...인생...한국의 대통령이 초대하다...아름다운 나라...한과 서리몸...고아...교류...이해...그리고 평화.

그들의 순수함에서, 또 한에 대한 진정한 이해에서 비롯되는 아름다움. 이 아이들의 아름다움은 순수하게 같았다. 그 자그마한 고아들 줄 하나를 내 손으로 안았을 때, 내 머리카락과 그 아이의 부드러운 머리털이 얽히는 순간 나는 내 가슴을 열었다. 그 아이와 나의 관계가, 그저서야 나의 사랑과 내가 조금이라도 나의 삶을 누릴 수 있도록 하기 위해 나를 포기할 때 필요했던 용기와 사랑을 이해할 수 있었다. 미혼모로서 그녀의 자신의 자존심과 위엄, 그리고 평판을 회생해가며 나를 낳았을 것이다. 내 품 안에 있는 이 고아는 수모스럽고 협력적이지 않게 태어났다는 이유 때문에 내 경계와는 완전히 다른게도 사랑 받지 못한 채 살고 있었다. 그러나 이 아이의 모습에서 수도 대신, 단지 인생에 대한 희망을 잃어 버린 순전한 아이를 볼 수 있었다. 이 아이의 이야기도 아마 내 것과 비슷하게 시작 되리라. 하지만 결과는 완전히 다르게. 우리의 반달 모양의 눈들이 마주쳤을 때 우리가 공유하는 한국의 뿌리가 내가 17년 동안 겪었던 경험과 이 아이의 3년 동안의 한을 연결시켜 줬다. 내가 이 땅을 다시 찾아낸 지부분은 사회적 오명 때문에 이러한 아이들이 고아원에 버려진다는 것에 대한 반도에 알ектор였다. 한국 아이들은 거의 전부 한국을 제외한 나라들로 입양된다. 왜 한국인들은 입양을 안 했/controllers 손이 왜 그렇게도 버린을 받는가? 왜 어떤 아이들은 입양되고 또 어떤 부류는 고아원에 남아 있어야 하는가? 이렇게 많은 아이들이 이 곳에 흘러 남겨질 때 왜 나는 입양의 축복을 벗겨들고 있는 자책감 싱긴 질문을 던졌다.

微妙 그 때 난 그 날 느낀 인생, 사랑.
그리고 하나님이 대해 다시 한 번 강함을 느껴 내의 무언을 발견했다. 내 인생 이야기를 통해 다른 사람들에게 입양이 사랑을 통해 두 문화를 연결시킨 소중한 선물이라는 것을 알려리라. 내 가족 (나를 입양한 가족) 과 나는 하나님께서 서로의 인생을 채워 주시기
The beauty of these children was enigmatic; it lay both in their innocence and in their profound understanding of sorrow.

Orphanages. Korean children are adopted almost exclusively to countries other than Korea. Why don’t Koreans adopt? Why is unwed parenthood so vehemently scorned? Why are some children adopted, and others not? I questioned with guilt why it was that I was given the blessing of adoption while she, and so many others like her, remained alone in this place.

It was then that I realized my mission, based upon the renewed gratitude for life, love, and God that I discovered that day. I would show others through my story that adoption is a precious gift, one that brings two cultures together in love. My family (and when I use the term “family,” I refer to my adoptive family) and I believe that God chose us for each other, to complete each others’ lives. By openly sharing my story with others, I can also impart an understanding about adoption. With my unique background, I have the power to dispel cultural tensions and demonstrate the worth of orphans to Korean society. Hopefully, my actions can promote both national and international adoptions.

When we stepped outside again, I found myself accosted by the beautiful scenery of “the Land of the Morning Calm,” yet now it was bittersweet for me. The peaceful beauty of the landscape melded with the startling realizations of the orphanage, creating a paradoxical alloy of serenity and pain. As we left, the children cried out tears of confusion; they did not understand why once again they were being left behind. My own tears were for the poignant understanding that I had found, an understanding of what my life was and would be. I remembered the sorrow and innocence of that little girl’s face, and made a silent promise to her and to the others that I would make a difference, in all of our lives.

My return to Korea gave true meaning to the coexistence of both of my names: Casey Ann Daum and Lee Nam Mee. I consider my background to be multi-dimensional; the Irish Catholic traditions of my family, the Korean culture of my ethnicity, the thoroughly “Americanized” nature of my upbringing, and my identity as an adoptee all represent parts of an ever-shifting and growing balance. Since childhood, my family and I have celebrated my “Airplane Day,” the day that I arrived after a long plane ride from Korea. Every summer I volunteer as a camp counselor at Camp Sejong, a Korean culture camp for adoptees. The camp means more to me than I can adequately articulate. When I was younger, I attended as a camper and gained both exposure and pride in Korean culture. Now, as a counselor, the most beautiful part of camp is being able to work with the children there. I feel extraordinarily privileged to be able to be a role model and “big sister” to the campers as they begin to explore their identities and culture.

Casey Mee Lee Daum ’03 was born in Pusan and adopted at the age of 4 months.
I reluctantly visited Korea for the first time in the summer of 1990, a ten year-old kid who would have rather spent the month of July home in New Jersey hanging out with his friends. I hated wasting a month of my valuable time in a strange country where I couldn't understand anyone. I hated the appearance, the smell, and the texture of the exotic food, much of it so different from the American-Korean hybrid I was used to having. I hated sleeping on hard floors so unlike my comfy bed. I hated the ravenous mosquitoes that accompanied the drenching rain. I hated having to go to the bathroom in fetid outdoor stalls where the toilet basin was simply a hole in the ground. I hated the soporific day trips that we took, the boring buildings of humdrum historical value.

Whoopee. I hated Korea.
As an impertinent ten year-old kid, Korea meant very little to me. The little that it did mean was mostly negative. Despite being born in Flushing, New York, I didn't grow up among Koreans. Somehow, Korea and I just never hit it off. I never learned the language, preferring my native English to my parents' Korean. I never liked the food, preferring my Big Macs to galbi tang. I never had many Korean friends, preferring my multicultural classmates to those of my ethnicity. Fortunately, age brings new perspectives. Last summer I went to Korea as a participant in the International Summer School at Korea University. Unlike the last time, I looked forward to returning to Korea, seeing my relatives, meeting new people, and perhaps learning a couple of things on the side. I suppose that nine years of additional maturity had dissipated my once-fervent hatred of Korea. Age had provided me with a lens through which I could look back upon my painful memories and dismiss them as artifacts of an ungrateful child's impatience.

So I arrived in Korea with an open mind, eager to create some positive memories of Korea. About 50 other Americans and Canadians of some Korean descent and I took some classes in the language, society, culture, and economy of our ancestral land. Presumably. Many of us decided the nightlife was far more interesting than the classes we took during the day and adjusted our priorities. College-age young adults can have lots of fun in Korea. Many of us spent much of our time playing pool, bar hopping, singing karaoke, and that quintessential favorite activity... clubbing. And of course, many of us did these activities after several shots of soju. Soju seems to be the national beverage of Korea; one can even buy it in convenient juice boxes.

One can easily lose one's bearing in such a setting; I know I often did. As a ten year-old kid, all I wanted was entertainment. I would have been happy if I had fun in Korea. Nine years later, I was having a lot of fun in Korea. But something was wrong. There I was in the land of my ancestors, simply having lots of fun. Somehow it seemed wrong—perhaps the amount of money my parents shelled out to fund my hedonism influenced my perception of the experience. In any case, it seemed as if I should be learning something, something important. After all, I probably could have had as much fun anywhere else.

And then one weekend, my uncle drove me through the streets of downtown Seoul. I suppose that I was having a certain degree of fun; my increased appreciation of and identification with Korean society made the trip entertaining. My uncle pointed out places of interest, pointing out the gates of Seoul, the City Hall, the presidential residence, and so on. They were beautiful, historic, and exquisite; I found them interesting but unremarkable and forgettable. Except for one building. The building itself I didn't care for—I'm sure it was beautiful, historic, and exquisite. But I did care about the small plaza in front of it. As well as a nearby street corner. And a restaurant. Because my uncle told me that my parents often met at that plaza, turned that street corner, and ate at that restaurant many years ago. Somehow, once upon a time, my parents had fallen in love, and they had gone on dates.

Unuh, Unuhna. My parents in love? My parents had lives before they were my parents? The simple concept had been beyond me for all of my years. Sure, at some point, I went through the fairly common childhood traumatic revelation that my parents must have had sex and perhaps continue to have sex. The realization that even my parents submit to carnal desires was accompanied by a visceral recoiling and a banishment of that realization into the recesses of the mind. But perhaps if I had permitted that...
realization to linger, I would have been able to perceive my parents as more than mere parental entities. But it seems that such a revelation would have to wait until my uncle’s tour of Seoul. Because at that moment, as my uncle and I passed by that plaza, I realized that my parents had lives; yes, they had lives before I was born, before they had moved to the United States, before they had gotten married. And I realized just how little I knew about their lives, how little I had cared. I had never given any thought to finding out about the personal histories of my parents. As far as I was concerned, those six-and-a-half combined decades were irrelevant. But unlike my reaction to realizing my parents had sex, I now wanted to know more about their lives.

Sure, I knew some details about their past. I knew, for example, that my mother had been the eldest and had married my father at a young age. I knew that my dad studied law at Korea University. But I didn’t know any personal details. I didn’t know anything about their day-to-day lives. I didn’t know those details that not only make them human but also what they are as humans. I wanted to know why they married each other. I wanted to know why they left Korea. I wanted to know how they handled their first years in the United States. I wanted to know about them—the real them.

“Soju seems to be the national beverage of Korea; one can even buy it in convenient juice boxes.”

Sure, my father had always told me stories about his past. He told me that he was a smart student who often taught lessons to his fellow classmates. He also told me that he was a dumb student who did not leave himself enough time to study. Smart. Dumb. Smart. Dumb. He always seemed to interchange the two, depending on whether he wanted me to feel dumb and inspired to improve myself or feel cautious and determined not to let myself make the same mistakes he did. I always listened disinterestedly to my father’s biographical stories with my head down and my body motionless. I did not perceive his stories as fascinating bits about his personal history, just tools he used to run maintenance checks on my academic behavior. I really didn’t know anything about him or my mother, and ignorance breeds a certain degree of estrangement.

I love my parents, but I had always felt somewhat distant from them. I had never felt that I could relate to them; they seemed so different from me. Part of the problem has always been a language barrier. My ignorance of the Korean language and my parents’ lack of mastery over the English language have always hindered my relationship with them. My father, in particular, has always been a mystery to me. I find it difficult to speak to my father, not only because of language issues but also because of the role he has played in my life. He had for so long been a towering figure in my life, one who demanded the most out of me, one who castigated me for screwing around, one whose approval I always required, one who insisted that I study and study—and then when I had some free

"video still by dina cho"


12 yisei winter 00

James Cha ’01 is a Biochemistry concentrator living in Mather House.
Dad loves to look at green trees – to the point that he’s almost caused accidents. One summer when we vacationed in the East Coast, he was so mesmerized by the “wow, so green!” trees he momentarily forgot that he was driving. When we went to places like Yosemite, he would always marvel with childlike wonder at the great redwoods and sequoias.

“Wow,” is all he would say. I, on the other hand, didn’t get what the big deal was about.

Until this summer. Like a wide-eyed, mesmerized child staring into a candy shop, my forehead and palms were smashed against the plastic plane window as I looked down and I finally understood the obsession. The scenery of the past 12 hours changed from that of a still glassy blue ocean to the sight of miles and miles of luscious green trees that blanketed the hilly terrain, as we finally entered into the aerial boundaries of Korea.

Wow. These trees, this was the green that Dad loved so much. This is the place that Dad calls home. How could he not love the green, coming from a verdant paradise like this?

The plane followed the path of a winding river, which soon led us to a part of the land where lush trees were replaced by towering buildings. A highway of colorful aluminum cars appeared, flowing past along side the Han river. Slowly, we descended into Kimp’o Airport.

Despite the fact that I had been in Korea just two summers before, I had no impressions about it. This time, my dad was with me but I would be “on my own,” living in a dorm at Yonsei University. It was just me and Korea for six full weeks. Driving out of Kimp’o airport, my dad handed me a bag. I looked inside – a cell phone! It was about the size of a Snickers bar, maybe a tad bit smaller and a little wider. Now, I was equipped. I was good to go.

Until we got on the freeway for the five o’clock traffic. I was looking at all the drivers in the cars and the buses packed with people, it hit me – they were all Korean! Nobody with blond hair, nobody with dark skin. Regardless of the fact that I grew up in a part of Southern California where 53 percent of my school had been Asian, I wasn’t prepared for this. The thought was shattered by whiplash when my dad suddenly braked. Three cars were trying to merge into the lane in front of us at once. I looked out into the crawling sea of cars and noticed that nobody really was in a lane. The painted lines on the street meant nothing as each driver squeezed in and tried to get to their destination as fast as they could. “Wait your turn,” I wanted to yell. They were impatient. Impolite. Their ruthlessness was probably taking them longer and putting others in unnecessary danger. As the traffic cleared, the cars zoomed past us, racing at a beyond-the-limit speed. The clincher was the traffic campaign banners that (ironically) hung on the overpasses – loosely translated, “It’s only five minutes. Let’s stop speeding.”

One person I met later put it well: “The first thing you ask when you get here is, ‘what’s wrong with these Koreans?’” The thought behind that is, am I really one of them, a Korean, too? I was appalled at the lack of consideration as I was in a supermarket and a man just shoved the cart in my hands aside so he could get through with his cart (without an apology!), and as people ran straight into me and continued to speed walk through me without an “excuse me.” I angrily labeled the Korean society as people only concerned about themselves.

In such a world, I wanted to look different, to be unique amid the homogenous sea of Koreans. I didn’t want people to think that I was just another one of them – pushy and impatient – but I look Korean. I am Korean. But not one of them, I thought. So I decided to speak in rapid English whenever I walked around with Korean-American friends. My “other”
world at Yonsei turned out to be very much like home. English was spoken everywhere in my “international” dorm.

However, after a couple days of speaking all of ten words in Korean (and that to order some jja-jang-myun), I concluded that if this was what the next six weeks were going to be like, I would experience a very limited side of Korea. I didn’t want to be the stereotypical Korean-American who went “booking” every night at Juliana’s and spent inordinate amounts of money buying bottles of Crown Royal to look cool. Maybe once or twice would be fine so you could say you did it (after all, it is part of the Korean night culture) but to do it every day – there was more to Korea than noraebangs, PC bangs, “joy photos” (sticker pictures), and night clubs.

What I wanted to go see was the barbed wire. No, even more than that – I wanted to go see North Korea. I always found North Korea fascinating, in junior high, I dreamt of being a foreign correspondent for ABC reporting on the reunification of North and South Korea. I attempted to write a term paper my sophomore year in high school about my recommendations on how the unification of the peninsula should be approached, complete with possible theoretical political models of government and steps of diplomatic action. Maybe it’s genetic – my ancestors originated from the northern middle part of the peninsula near the 38th parallel.

But my connection with the North hit me in a personal way a few years back when I saw a picture of what I think was a kindergarten – a screenless, paint chipped window framing a view of a couple of wide-eyed faces of children. Behind them, the room was dark, accenting the hollows of their emaciated white visages. Their eyes looked straight ahead, but their gazes were listless, scared, and empty, as each day passes by with less to eat and live on. But what locks my stare with their motionless gazes is the shape of their eyes – almond-shaped, like mine. Looking into that picture is like looking into a mirror; their faces are a reflection of my image fifteen years ago. These children could be my distant cousins, blood relatives – these were Koreans, just like me, being starved of life.

I could have been one of those faces.

* * *

I went on two unsuccessful pilgrimages to the Panmunjom in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the forbidden, forsaken land that sprawled northward across the mouth of the river. The first weekend I went to the Reunification Observation Center. On the way there, my dad and I drove on a freeway called “Freedom Road.” And just a couple lanes to the left of us, two rows of barbed wire, searchlights, and military watch towers lined the entire path up the western coast.

Across the river, about three miles wide, is North Korea. So near yet so far away, were those green fields, the same beautiful green I had seen during my descent into the South. I dropped a couple hundred won into binoculars and scoped the land to take a closer look. To my amusement, I could see a smattering of small houses, and winding through the fields and hills were dirt roads. Suddenly, a person next to me excitedly informed his family members exclaiming in Korean, “There! There are people there!” With that announcement, the others eagerly grabbed for the binoculars to be next to see the discovery. I frantically searched the terrain and found them, too. Seven, I counted, people walking along a dirt road. They seemed close enough that if we all yelled at once, they would be able to hear us. It was a surreal moment, thinking that these meanderers were probably completely unaware that on the other side of the river, people of another country were observing their every move, fascinated, as if they had spotted a new type of lifeform.

But I wondered if the family next to me remembered that as they shouted with excitement about seeing these people in that foreign land that we were all Koreans. Those people were my brothers and sisters – I mean, they really could be distant relatives. Yet we were by some invisible line somewhere in the middle of that three-mile wide river.

At that moment, I felt like I was more aware of my Koreanness than the South Korean natives. As one Korean-American at Yonsei said, “In America, we’re Koreans, but in Korea, we’re Americans” – among people that look just like me, I am a whe-gook-in, or a foreigner. I figured the South Koreans would perhaps look at these
North Koreans the same way – as whe-gook-ins, separate and different from themselves. In contrast, I felt a deep connection with the people across the river. They were Korean, regardless of North, South, or American, just like me and those next to me. I felt that I had an international perspective of being Korean, seeing how I am different, but also aware of how I fit into the bigger picture of diversity, relationally. I came to what it meant to be “Korean” as a result of my upbringing in an ethnically diverse environment. I wondered if Koreans in South Korea could understand such identity issues amid a homogenous society.

Just the next week, one of my dad’s best friends from elementary school said, “Don’t try to think you’ll know everything about Korea by the time you leave.” He was right. And yet, I was claiming that I had more passion and knowledge about what it meant to be Korean than them – the native Koreans. Besides, I was the one here at Yonsei to learn about Korea. I had taken on a similar arrogance that I so despised about the Americans as they imposed their “superior” foreign policies on places like Korea and Vietnam. It was so silly to think that I had the one and only right, real answer to what it meant to be Korean.

However, I felt like I still had a piece that the native Koreans did not have – the picture of an international Korean connection versus a pure “cultural essence” view. Even in the way I saw the North Koreans and what I thought about reunification – to me, it made sense to become one again, and it is a future event that I expect will happen in a few decades – I envision one big happy Korean family. But I realized that was perhaps an idealistic, taken-for-granted vision as I listened, in shock, to a yu-huk-seng in my Yonsei class who said reunification shouldn’t happen because the North and South have evolved to become two different, incongruent countries. Second, he added, the North Koreans would probably view South Koreans as American-Yankee sellouts and may want nothing to do with their southern brothers and sisters.

Then it hit me – as much as I want to see the North Koreans and South Koreans as “my people” – what would North Koreans think of me, born and raised in Yankee land, who speaks English as a native language and Korean in a strange accent? Wouldn’t the North Koreans, too, see me as a whe-gook-in? Was 50 years long enough for some sort of social Darwinian evolution to occur within the scattered populations of Koreans, and transform each group into cultural species too different to ever be considered one again? For a moment, reunification became a foolish delusion of a Western-born and raised mind who probably really didn’t understand the complexities behind the whole idea of being Korean. Would unity be impossible? Were we too different?

But I wanted to argue – weren’t we still all the same Korean, of the same blood and ancestries?

For a moment, reunification became a foolish delusion of a Western-born and raised mind who probably really didn’t understand the complexities behind the whole idea of being Korean. Would unity be impossible? Were we too different? But I wanted to argue – weren’t we still all the same Korean, of the same blood and ancestries?

That following weekend, my dad and I made another trek to see Panmunjom and the demilitarized zone, with no success. First, we found that you could not hold a South Korean passport (only I could go in with my US citizenship) and one needed to make reservations for special tours that are allowed to go there. Nor could we see the tunnels the North Koreans had dug to infiltrate into the South during the Korean War, because the rains that poured the week before had flooded them. We returned back to Seoul, escorted again by the double rows of barbed wire along the western coast.

Meanwhile, back in Seoul, my initial conviction to present myself as a “different” Korean changed to trying to pass as a “pure” Korean. Earlier, I had made superficial judgments of Koreans, and I thought that I should really try to dig deeper and give everything and everyone a chance. It was a good thing. As difficult as it was to believe, the chutzpah of the city actually became enduring, complete with its impatient people and bustling glory.

The ultimate test of assimilation for me was to get into a taxi and talk to the taxi driver. Early one, many times upon saying, for instance, “Ewha Yuh-dae ro ga-go ship un dae yoh!” [I want to go to Ewha University, please] he would know I was not one of them. One even made it abundantly clear how much I stuck out as an anomaly: “You look Korean, but why is your Korean so atrocious?” I was crushed. I had failed. But it only motivated me to try harder. Another time one driver asked if I was a gyopo [an overseas Korean] and I resignedly said yes. But then, he started to test out some English phrases that he knew, so I ended up teaching him a couple sentences. He commented that my Korean pronunciation was almost there, but there were just a couple consonant sounds I had a tendency to roll, as well as my j pronunciation sounding like a z. The things I learned in a cab ride – from linguistics to how one confessed that he was thinking of illegally

winter 00 yisei 15
immigrating to the States. I told him not to, with a smile. I told him to be legal, thanked him, and went on my merry way.

* * *

Seoul was growing on me in ways I never thought it would. But what I loved most about Korea was the part out in the country — where the land was still pristine, untouched by the tentacles of roads and forests of apartment complexes. I loved the green, for reasons I couldn’t quite point out.

It’s a vibrant chameleon green that changes with the time of day and comes in myriad forms. It manifests itself as luscious leaves, short grassy carpet, lengthy strands of grass, corn stalks, and rice paddies. In the light, the sun-kissed rice paddies emit a golden tone intermixed with the green, making it ever more shimmery and alive. In the shade, the color is a deep, rich emerald, with bluish tones that add to the color’s vigor. Perhaps because of this uncertain quality of the ubiquitous hue, the Koreans give it an ambiguous name — pu-roo-dah as I read in an essay in my Korean language class. It makes no distinction between green or blue — vast green meadows are called pu-roon duhl-pan [fields] and the blue of the heavens is called the same pu-roon ha-nul [sky]. Culturally, I learned that the pu-roon hue also has significance as it symbolizes youth and hope.

It was the weekend before I left when I finally saw the best view of North Korea, as well as the most mesmerizing sight of the pu-roon land. All I had to do was go “home” to Kimp’o; there was a little house where my hal-abhujee was born, where my hal-muhnee had lived when she married my hal-abhujee, and where my ah bebe grew up in his youth.

This part of Kimp’o is actually so close to the border that you can hear radio broadcasts blasting from the side of the North Koreans. In a rousing rhetorical voice they tell their South Korean compatriots that “we in the North under our great leader Kim Jong-il are living and eating well. Don’t play the role of being America’s puppet nation, but come to North Korea.” Young Korean men in their army uniforms complete with their semi-automatic guns patrol the area; to enter, you need to show your paperwork and get clearance, identifying your reasons for visiting and who you are going to visit. My “second” and “third” grandfathers (the younger brothers of my grandfather who was the eldest) lived there now, in their small country homes, attending to their chili peppers, corn fields and rice paddies.

Part of the reason I went to Kimp’o was to visit my grandfather’s grave — the father of my daddy who I never had the privilege to meet. We trampled through a roadless forest and fended off mosquitoes to get there. We emerged atop a hill and along with my grandfather’s grave were the resting places of my great-grandfather and great-great grandfather, going all the way back to seven generations. Their hilly graves perched atop a miniature mountain, like the kings of the glorious past continuing to watch over their land and descendants. Waves of verdant mountains surrounded me — that same ever-changing pu-roon color that first welcomed me on the descent to Kimp’o airport just six weeks before.

After paying my respects to my ancestors, my dad said we could go see the barbed wire fences from here. So, with him and my grandmother in the car, we drove just a couple minutes beyond the hills of green. On the way, I looked that the earth, and understood why the grass was so green on this land.

The soil was red.

I think it was in elementary school that I learned color theory places green and red as “opposites” (though in actual terminology they’re known as complementary colors) — the two, when put together, while said to “clash”
do so because bring out the best bright qualities out of each other. It’s a difficult relationship to explain. But how much more the color of the soil, the green of the land – and how they worked together complementarily – meant to me, as the road opened up to a beautiful breathtaking view of Korea’s beauty:

Two farmers are working in the golden-green rice paddy. Less than a 200 feet away is the double barbed wire fence that separates the North from the South. Beyond the fence, a river opens up: to the left is a beautiful green island – it’s called Hak sun or Crane Island, because many cranes live on the premises. And right across the river, North Korea continues on to the horizon. It’s close enough to yell across, close enough to ride a boat across and get there in five minutes. But present reality makes it impossible.

I wanted to buy that piece of land – the rice paddy, the island, the view of the North. I thought, this is the best place one could ever be at. It’s the place of interface – where the two Koreas meet, but my family happened to be based on the southern side. What a beautiful place this would become when the two sides combine.

But this dream was shattered as my grandmother pointed to the to the hills of North Korea. “Look,” she said, “they’re green now, but look, they’re bare. There are no trees on them because they’ve dug up everything they could for food.” It’s true. The red soil is a little more visible because the trees are gone. It was a striking visual contrast of the two states – farmers looking toward yet another fruitful year of harvest as they worked in their rice paddies, while just across the river, were the bare hills, stripped of life by people scrounging around for food.

* * *

Both lands share the same red soil. It is a land that has seen and absorbed much bloodshed and pain, through years of conquest and oppression. The images of the Korean War that I watched in a video during one of my Yonsei classes replayed in my mind – a small child upon a woman’s back as they were fleeing from the burning capital, a small little boy in tattered clothes next to a trash heap. For all I knew, these could have been – no, they were – my mother, my father, my grandmother. Even recently, the famines in the North and the IMF crisis in the South continue to pain the peninsula. The ramifications of struggles still exist in today’s Korea – the increasing numbers of children at orphanages after IMF, homeless people on the street, the borders lined with barbed wire. The pain, as people say, the han is deeply rooted within the heart of the han-guk sa-ran, the people of the han – a longing, ineffable anguish;

it is still a hurting land.

But from this red, tear-watered soil springs an unsurpassable, vigorous green. Without the pain and the struggles, the hope can’t be so alive and so vibrant. It is a country that was forced to grow up too fast, when the good intentions of others unfortunately paved the road to a hellish history. But within the hearts of the Korean people, I believe there is still a childlike hope that dreams of rebirth, a wish that one day these two lands will become one, where families divided will meet again, and the hurts of the past will be healed.

It wouldn’t be just a reunification of the land, however – it would be the coming together of all the past struggles, as well as the future dreams. It would be the unification of all Koreans, all over the earth. Though what I saw now was incredibly tragic, I wanted to believe that the future would hold better times, when we would all be whole. I hope that there would be a time when no Korean would be a whe-gook-in, but just Korean.

I think the Korean language is perfectly correct to very insightfully capture the shimmery fluid quality of the blue-green that both are different yet one and the same in one word. That Koreans, born and grown in the North, in the South, in America, in Europe – wherever – with all our different perspectives could come together and create a greater whole. That difference would not bring conflicts and clashes, but bring an interdependency, a complementarity.

That night, at my third grandfather’s little home, I looked at my relatives. My third grandfather talking to my father about land issues. My grandmother talking to her brother-in-law, my fourth grandfather and my third grandmother (wife of my third grandpa). The carefully and tenderly prepared dinner table with the small han-cham plates covering the entire area. Of course, the soju bottle.

In each of them, I saw a part of myself in my dad, my grandmother, as well as part of my dad in his uncles. As different as each were, in looks and in generations, we were still all the same.

That night I looked upon the green-blue land with hope -- the hope for the soon coming of the day that Korea would see the realization of her own namesake. I wanted to believe in the song that many Koreans still sing, that our wish is reunification -- and I wanted to add, of all Korean people.

To be one people, one family. To be Han-guk -one country across the 38° parallel, across the oceans and the seas, throughout the world.

Janice Yoon ’01 is a Social Studies concentrator who lives in Cabot House. She dreams of buying a piece of land in North Korea.

winter 00 yisei 17
momentary snapshots

BY TRI PHUONG

Tri Phuong '01 is a Social Studies concentrator living in Eliot House. He was born in Vietnam and left the country when he was six years old.
Faces of my people—
young and old peering
through the foreign lens of
immigrant son's U.S. camera.

In my former home
of rusted bikes
criss-crossing Saigon's street
by coconut trees
and grunting pigs
lives are tangled
in the hard lines
of two sunburned hands.

Black grime on white shirt
barefoot little girl
buys moonshine for
grandpa skipping along
poor village's mud paths
stares at me before I fly away.
With the swift approach of Census 2000, which will inevitably depict a rapidly changing face of America, questions of personal and national identity have assumed a dominant role in national- and university-level discussions of culture and its increasing globalization. Professional as well as amateur historians seeking to metaphorize the uniquely American ethnic diversity are closely questioning the merits (and, of course, the demerits) of the “melting pot” and “patched quilt” representations of the American demographic.

These discussions have most frequently declared the patched quilt metaphor to be the more desirable of the two for its emphasis on individuality within (perhaps despite) singularity. Similar diversity metaphors that include the “rainbow” metaphor—the unique colors of the rainbow combine to produce one beautiful rainbow—are admirable in their attempts to emphasize individuality, yet tend unfortunately to project an idealized, plastic model of American diversity. Furthermore, some note that the patched quilt metaphor fails to include any suggestion of identity adaptation or integration; that is, that according to the patched quilt model, persons of various ethnic groups need not undergo personal change to accommodate fluid interrelations.

The many critics of the melting pot metaphor point to the ideologically opposite feature of the “melting pot,” namely, that it suggests a wholly undesirable homogenization of American identity. Symbolically, the bright colors of ethnicity are combined in the heat of the melting pot to produce a drab and unattractive melange.

Clearly, each model has its inadequacies, and neither is completely accurate, but is it also unlikely that any single model will ever capture perfectly the complexity of American diversity. A synthesis of the strongest features of each model is perhaps the most suitable compromise and the best approach to a less myopic view of race relations.

The advantage of this ideological integration is most evident when applied to the complex debate over ethnic assimilation. Although present in all age brackets of society, questions of assimilation and attachment are most pressing during the college years, a time when many first fully realize the personal significance of these questions. College students of all races encounter these issues, though it is commonly misconceived that only non-white students must grapple with their ethnic identities.

Non-white students including Korean-Americans, admittedly, must answer additional questions; those students of the second-generation, who constitute a significant segment of Korean-American college-age individuals today, face even more questions of identity, often finding themselves pulled in opposite directions by the East-West psychological dipoles of Korea and America. An obvious attempt at bridging the cultural chasm is seen in the hyphenated appellations, “Korean-American” or “Asian-American” by which such students, literally, “identify” themselves. While these labels are frequently sources of a certain measure of pride, they may also unwittingly function as hindrances to the betterment of race relations. If it is unqualified racial acceptance that is desired, some would submit, then the single term “American” should logically be applied to all. Yet this argument circles back to the earlier melting pot debate in that with the removal of the specifically-identifying prefix, so is removed the unique sense of individuality that characterizes diversity in America.

Ethnic clubs on college campuses across the nation confront this dilemma as well, taking the opposite approach in many instances. The Harvard Korean Association (KA) is notably not the Korean-American Association, nor is the Chinese Students Association the Chinese-American Students Association, though KA president Christina Yoon says that “there is no particular political message inherent in the name.” This trend, nevertheless, is perhaps an indication of a
collective subconscious yearning to hold onto a heritage that seems to be slipping away with each day spent "assimilating" into white American culture. Korean-American (or Korean, depending on one's felt loyalties) students like their hamburgers, Abercrombie and Fitch, and Star Wars while they can't get enough of their rice, kimchee, and Poongmul.

Accompanying this duality is a curious sense of guilt felt by Korean-American students who feel a duty to keep alive the spirit of their ancestral land. Some utter Jeremia prophesies of the supposedly swiftly diminishing ties to mother Korea, labeling the yisei a "lost generation". Signs of this widening gap arise everywhere, most humorously in the new course entitled Foreign Cultures 80: Cultures of Modern Korea, taken predominantly by students of Korean descent.

In one particularly memorable section discussion, teaching fellow Scott Swanson was discussing the famed Song of the Flying Dragons, when he asked the seventeen students, fourteen of which are of Korean descent, whether they had heard an ancient Korean fable. Swanson rattled off the fable's Korean name with flawless inflection, prompting the fourteen sheepish Korean students to burst out laughing because they were clueless in regard to the fable and/or because they all realized that Scott Swanson, a former Mormon missionary from Utah (see Yisei, Spring 1999), has a stronger command of the Korean language than many of them. 3

Other instances abound in which such mild embarrassment is felt at a perceived lack of information and understanding of Korea. One significant means by which this "ancestral conscience" may be relieved is the aforementioned association of Korean-American students with other Korean-American students. There exists inherently among Korean-Americans a strong sense of community as a result of collective history and shared experiences. Friendships among Korean-Americans are extremely healthy and cathartic, as described by a female Korean American college student 4 questioned for a study published in the fall 1999 issue of Amerasia Journal.

I would say the whole immigrant experience really brought us closer together. It's like they know what it's like to have parents who do not speak the language fluently, who are handicapped...culturally and verbally. And they know what it's like to see their parents working seven days a week and in these often dangerous settings or very kind of blue-collar work like dry cleaning. So I think that common experience ties us together.

It is indeed healthy and personally edifying to nurture friendships with other students who also address an internal dilemma between the desire to remain connected to the mother Korea and a desire to achieve great success in America. Ironically, it is the latter desire that often causes Korean parents to de-emphasize the "Korean" education of their children in favor of an "American" one to facilitate the greatest chance of advancement in American society. Most Korean-American students realize with time, however, that the two need not be mutually exclusive; a rich understanding and appreciation of native Korean culture is no handicap to one's ascent through corporate America. Furthermore, the constant focus on the preservation of Korean culture in America can be immensely repressive of individuality. It is a ridiculous ethnic paradigm that forces Korean-American students to second-guess their every implication of contemporary American culture for fear of somehow betraying their ancestors.

Such suggestions of a Faustian tradeoff between Korea and America are irrelevant and miss the point. Immerging oneself in the literature, music, and language of Korea is entirely appropriate and beneficial as an exercise of personal edification, and, to a certain extent, as a legacy for posterity. As the patched quilt metaphor dictates, Korean-Americans may rightly take pride in the lushness of Korean history and culture. But guilt for not being more thoroughly versed in the language and writings of Korea is functionless and repressive, as is excessive concern in regard to the fate of future generations. It is innately human to return to one's roots, as future generations of Korean-Americans will most likely continue to do.

Thus, it is time to throw off feelings of guilt and regret and to continue to forge a (Korean-) American identity that bows to the past generations of Korean ancestors but stands tall on the American stage as a trailblazer for future generations of Korean-American descendants. The current problem, it seems, (and yet ironically, the solution) is that Korean-Americans are neither here nor there—they are, symbolically, the hyphen—not, by any measure, totally "Korean," while the current race paradigm seems to indicate that neither are Korean-Americans yet full-fledged "Americans". Ideally, as more Korean-American faces proliferate the mainstream, however, Korean-ness will in fact become naturally a part of an indivisible American-ness. Simultaneously, the two national histories will be united (as will a global history with a more broad realization of the universal humanity that underlies race) and those of Korean ancestry need no longer confront issues of guilt or internal division, because their "two" identities will no longer be so compartmentalized. The fates of all future Korean-American generations and even of American identity, it seems, rest now in the hands of the yisei and other transitional second-generation groups who stand figuratively across oceans, poised to construct permanent bridges underneath themselves. Assimilation to this end need not imply ethnic treason or submission, nor need it be simply an unfortunate means to an end; it is better viewed as a privilege, an opportunity for second-generation Americans to enjoy and fuse the best of both worlds and in so doing, stand in the gap between America and the homeland, thus broadening the collective American history and enriching the American psyche and identity.

1 A study published in the fall 1999 issue of Amerasia Journal of the UCLA Asian-American Studies Department found that 51.6% of all "second or later generations" attend college.
2 See article in a 1993 issue of Yisei.
3 In addition, a study published in the fall 1999 issue of Amerasia Journal indicates that only 9.4% of Korean adolescents surveyed describe themselves as fluent in the Korean language.
4 The respondent, Sandra, attended a private women's college in the mid-1980's.

Paul Kwak '03 lives in Canaday and plans to concentrate in History and Science.
MOTHERS ARE MOTHERS. They like telling their daughters what to do. Add on the fact that my mother’s a Korean mother, and you’ve got double the effect. I don’t mind all of this free advice. At least I know she cares about me. (The day my mother stops nagging me will be the day I know that she has stopped loving me.)

"I want you to have a professional job, like a doctor or a lawyer. You need to have this kind of job because you’re a minority and you’re female. I want you to be powerful in this world...I want you to send your kids to Andover and Harvard. Oh, and make sure you have them do Kumon, violin, and piano...That boy looks like a playboy. Stay away from him...You should get married after graduate school, or at least by the time you’re 25. Find yourself a nice boy at Harvard. You should marry someone you love...but it would be nice if you married a Korean. It’s easier for the families. Oh,

"don’t marry a Korean boy from Korea."
but don't marry a Korean boy from Korea..."
"Why not?"
"Because your cultures are different. He is Korean and you are American."
“What’s that supposed to mean? You raised me with Korean values. I got chased around the house with a wooden spoon just like everyone else. What, is it because of the Korean male stereotypes? Because they’re sexist and demanding? Because they’re wife-beaters?"
“Korean males are not wife-beaters.”
“So then what is it? What, would he be the man-in-charge?”
“Yes.”
“In Korea does the husband always come first? Would he expect me to cook for him every night?”
“Yes, and don’t think you can get away with just cooking him ramen every night.”
“Uh, that’s not so bad. Most males expect that. That’s not a cultural difference. And besides, I know Korean culture.”
“No you don’t... oh no... you don’t know what Korean mother-in-laws are like.”
“Ohhh..."
So basically I’d be expected to listen to my husband, do what he says, to heed his decisions, and to take on the traditional duties of the wife: cooking, cleaning, and raising the children. And all of this would be to not only be a good wife to my husband, but to avoid any heated altercations with my mother-in-law... Interesting... And my husband would take on the traditional role of the man, to be the head-of-the-house and to be my “protector”... Okay... So then do I, as a female of the nineties, have a problem with this? Hmm...
Well, you know what? For the eighteen years and nine months of my existence, people have always expected me to take care of myself, and, being the oldest child, I never had an older sibling to protect me or to stick up for me or to give me advice. I always made my own decisions. And yes, maybe this has made me a bit bossy, but other people just don’t seem to want to challenge me. They always let me, or rather, make me and expect me to make the decisions. In a large group, I usually end up deciding where to eat. I’m expected to know the directions, and without fail, people follow me even when I’m obviously going the wrong way.
And if that’s not pathetic enough, I can count on my fingers how many times a guy has held a door open for me; in fact, in high school, I got in the habit of opening doors for them. So what, you ask. What’s the big deal with doors? This is the nineties; get a life, you say. Okay, so maybe I do need to get a life and...
wake-up from my impossible dreamland. But that simple act of having a door opened for me just makes me feel so...nice. Don't get me wrong, I can hold my own in a male-dominated world. I don't need extra help or special treatment to survive. Having a door opened for me has nothing to do with whether I can compete with males. Many hardcore feminists would argue that letting a member of the opposite sex is a step backwards for the female race. "We can open our own doors. We don't need your help!" they cry. Well, duh. Obviously we females are able to open our own doors; not even the biggest male chauvinists can deny that. It is definitely not a sign of passiveness. I would argue that when a guy opens a door for me, it's a sign of his respect for me. And that's not the only plus, having a door opened for me just makes me feel so much like a...girl.

And you know something's wrong when someone tells you that you're not a girl, that you're a boy, or that you're gender-less. Hey, I've even had guys tell me that I'm their butt buddy. And it's not like I'm a tomboy either. My mother made sure that I turned out as a girl and that my brother turned out as a boy. I played with Barbie and he played with Transformers. My sheets were pink; his were blue. I did ballet; he did soccer. And if that's not good enough proof for you that I'm not a boy or gender-less, I assure you that I do not possess the Y chromosome or any other distinctly male traits.

Sure, maybe you think that it's just me, that I'm some strange girl and that this situation is specific to only me. Okay, maybe I'm just repulsive to the opposite sex. But do you know how many countless other Asian girls have experienced this? Just the other day one of my Asian friends had an Asian guy tell her, "You are very aggressive...or assertive. Guys don't like it when girls make them feel like women." We're talking about the most innocent-looking, big-eyed, 5'2" Chinese girl, who in no way goes out and attacks guys or bashes on them. What has become of the
world?

Now what does all of this have to do with whether I should marry a Korean from Korea? I'm tired of always having the burden of being the decision-maker. I'm tired of never being asked if I need help. I'm tired of people never worrying about my safety. And yes, I'm tired of opening my own doors. Right now I'm thinking that a Korean guy who takes on his traditional role as MALE sounds pretty good.

And yes, I've had contact with guys from Korea. (Yeah, I'm an idealist, but I'm not that patheticly naive to idealize Korean guys and write an entire article in their defense without having met them before.) For the first time in eighteen years, I felt like a girl. He called me daily. He worried when I got locked out of my dorm at night. He told me to rest when I was tired. He called me to make sure I had gotten back home safely. He freaked out when I started screaming into the phone, thinking that I was being raped or hurt, when in fact I was running away from my goofy friends who were chasing me around Hyundai Department Store, trying to listen in on my conversation. And...he opened doors for me.

Okay, so maybe later on we would have had conflicts. Maybe I'd get sick of listening to him and doing what he wants to do. Maybe he'd get sick of me always stating my opinions and wish for a cute, little, passive girl. Or maybe I had just found an exceptionally special guy. But feminazi or not, no girl can say that they don't want to be treated like a lady. And after eighteen years of playing the "male role," I'm ready to reprise the role of female.

Mummy Dear, don't be shocked if I choose a guy from Korea over an American...they're not that bad...really they aren't... ●

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거의 기절할 지경이었다. 사실现代 백화점에서 날 쏟아 오는 친구들을 피해 다투고 있었는데, 그리고... 그에 나름 위해 둔을 열어 쏟겠다. 그래, 아마 나중에 우리에게도 간들과 마찰이 있을 거라. 아마 아마 저 멋을 둘고 하라는 대로 하는 것이 실종날 수도 있을 것이다. 개도 내가 항상 지지 않고 내 의견을 알리는 것이지 지치시자 그만하고 순종적인 여자를 원할 수도 있다. 아니면 내가 정말 예의를べ로 특별한 사람을 만나 것일지. 하지만 여자라면 그 누구도 여자로 취급 받기 쉬워할 사람은 없다. 게다가 18년 동안의 남자 역할 덕분에 난 이제 여자로서의 역할을 제대로 할 준비가 되어 있다. 엄마, 내가 한국에서 자란 남자를 선택해도 너무 충격 받지 마세요... 그들도 그렇게 나쁘지만은 않아요... 정말로요...
All about music, sisterhood, and a sprinkle of marriage talk...

We were in somewhat of a disheveled state having power-walked a good number of blocks uptown from Grand Central (in New York City, that is) dragging our overnight bags and unfortunately dressed in overly warm overcoats, when my friend and I finally reached Vesylcka, a Ukrainian café. Sticky and out-of-breath was indeed a great state to be in, when we were set to interview the fashionable and musically renowned Ahn trio.
My friend waited by the café entrance as I reserved a table for a party of five, and when Lucia, one of the two twin sisters and the pianist of the group, was the first of the three sisters to arrive. She waved, signaling me to come over. The first impression was somewhat shocking. Lucia barely looked older than in the early twenties with her child-like face, her urban-style denim clamdiggers, and shy smile. The catch was, she just turned thirty. Her petite frame was punctuated by the two lumbering bodies of the two dogs she was walking with leashes in both hands. We were introduced to her dog Nikita; the other was a jindo gae, a native Korean dog, that she was taking care of for a friend.

Just as introductions ended, Angella, the twenty-eight-year-old violinist and the youngest of the three sisters, appeared, as if she was cued to enter. She had a spunky air about her, with her pixyish shorn haircut, bright blue plastic frames, and a velvet ankle-length skirt in brilliant shade of sapphire velvet. She greeted us with an enthusiastic smile, gave us a firm handshake, and asked us how our trip to the city had been. After several minutes waiting for Maria, the cellist and the other twin sister in the trio, Lucia and Angella got a bit worried and called her on her cell phone. It turned out that Maria had been waiting inside the café for several minutes. Maria had a dark sophisticated air about her, with her sleek long hair, furry black coat, and classy shades. Finally settling outside, the threesome began to tell their story.

The sisters made their first public performance playing together in Seoul in 1979 and two years later, in 1981, moved to the U.S with their parents. They attended public middle school and high school in northern New Jersey and spent their weekends training under Juilliard’s precollege music program. They’ve also been included in documentary programs aired by NBC and PBS during the 1988 Olympics held in Seoul. Lucia, Maria, and Angella began their musical training around the age of seven on the piano and along the years, picked up their specialty instruments (piano, cello, and violin, respectively). The sisters have been officially performing and recording together as a trio for five years, and have already been honored with an ECHO Award (often referred to as the German equivalent of a Grammy) for their EMI Classics recording of works by Dvorak, Suk, and Shostakovich.

A great deal of the media attention has been on the trio’s unique and both praised and criticized fusion of vibrant style playing chamber music, mixing of classical and more contemporary repertoire, and cutting edge fashion sense. They’ve recently graced the cover of A Magazine’s June/July 1999 issue, which featured a piece on Asian-American female classical music artists and the influence of contemporary culture on classical artists’ more modern and edgier images as well as experimentation with fusing classical music with more contemporary flavors. Lucia, Maria, and Angella’s talent and beauty have been featured in Vogue (January 1999), Esquire magazine, Time (in a cover story entitled “Asian-American Whiz Kids”), and GQ, among other publications.

Having been noted more than once for their “bold” sense of style, I was curious to know if they ever felt any pressure to “tone down” or model themselves after a more “conservative” or “stereotypical” impression of what the general public has on what a “classical musician” should look like, all three were emphatic in their responses.

“I don’t understand how our image has anything to do with our music,” Lucia said, somewhat exasperated by this question. “I really don’t think this ‘mold’ that the public has exists.” Maria joined in saying that “image was never an issue for [them]…our music is our focus” and that how they choose to dress is actually a reflection of their own tastes.

Angella’s response to the question was more complicated in the sense that she experienced a struggle with this issue. “Definitely in the media, they get a different feel from us… Just being women, attractive women. For me there is something different about that because even in the greatest reviews we get they always mention what we’re wearing, which is frustrating because I think, ‘are you here to listen to our music or to see what dress we’re wearing?’” A moment’s pause. Angella said she’s given the issue of physical presentation a lot of thought, “but the conclusion I’ve reached is, no matter what… if I’m not happy or comfortable with who I am and if I’m trying to change myself to a more conservative image to meet people’s expectations, I really wouldn’t be happy.”

There is no question that having your sisters as professional co-performers has its advantages as well as the disadvantages. It wouldn’t be hard to imagine that the closeness of being sisters can easily become a distraction while remaining a plus in some aspects. When I asked them about the disadvantages and advantages of having to work in a professional and serious setting with the people you grew up with, the three sisters all looked at each other and laughing, all instinctively reacted with similar “oh my god… there’s so many!” Angella was the first to mention the advantage that they never had the problem of loneliness. “We spend about seventy percent of the time traveling… being together makes all the difference… it’s incredible…” She said the end with emphasis. Maria felt that “the way that we have to travel and work so closely together, it helps to be sisters…. It’s hard in some aspects, but to me it’s
Being as close as they are, the sisters never had deal with problems of sensitive egos, of being brutally honest and being able to come out and say, "ok, this isn’t working... this is bad" during a practice session, or having to deal with one person trying to stand out from the rest of the group. Being in a high-pressure profession as chamber musicians and having to constantly be judged, the strength and support that each of the them give to another allows them to really enjoy themselves while performing. But at the same time, there was no question that the same advantages they had from being such good friends also posed as disadvantages. As Maria put it, "Sometimes spending so much time together can be very hard... sometimes I really don't want to know so much about my sisters!"

They also found that the same Korean-style bluntness they could have with one another which helped to save time in terms among practice sessions among other things, could become too extreme at times. But it seemed that for the Ahn sisters, being as sensitive to each other's needs and being able to "read" each others' emotions, the advantages of being sisters as well as professional counterparts outweighed the cons.

Angella's view was that "in terms of us feeling the need to become role models, I see this need or concern to be a more worldly thing... not just for the Korean community... we never turn down a chance to do musical workshops when we have the time."

Then there was the inevitable question that every eligible young woman must face. What about the issue of marriage, or the preceding task of finding the "right" one? Women of our generation who lead busy professional lives surely must struggle to find a balance between work and the prospect of raising a family, especially if they're Korean. Do the sisters feel any kind of pressure to seriously consider marriage at this point in their lives? Angella replied that if there was any pressure on the issue of marriage, it certainly didn't come from their mother. Laughing, then she added that if anything, the pressure probably came more from her mother's friends. Maria followed by saying that she didn't feel marriage would have any big impact on their careers, seeing that "they're two different things." For Angella, "it's all about knowing your priorities... something you learn to juggle. You don't know many people of our generation who give up everything for marriage, or the other way around."

Being young women possessing great talents, intelligence, self-assurance, and beauty we couldn't forgo the topic of how their success influenced the way that men viewed them, making them out to be these "untouchables." Maria had to admit that it was "definitely harder... mostly because you travel so much." Angella agreed with her sister but found that the general attitudes she sensed from men was that they did find the three of them somewhat unapproachable. However, Angella did not think of that as being such a big issue seeing that "for many women of our generation... You'd want someone that wouldn't feel intimidated by your personal success anyway. I think that if you're meant to be with someone, you'll find them eventually."

Not wanting to linger too much on the issue of relationships, I turned to the question of what their future projects and trips were. The sisters plan on continuing with another "Ahn-plugged" album, which will be a compilation of works by living composers. They intentionally wanted to work on pieces by the more well-known composer as well as those who they felt were "neglected" because of their young age. Both Angella and Maria felt that it was their duty to make sure that the talented and newer composers were more exposed to the public.

At the time of the interview, they were also planning to go to Korea two weeks later on a project with Body Shop, aiming to stir public awareness on environmental issues as well as to make music available to the public through a musical concert.

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One and two and three and four and five?

There is one.
moment of not-so-glamorous happiness.
that tickles my soul.
to no definable, no grammatically correct end

To m o v e my fingers.
is this not happiness?

vein and bone
smuggled beneath opalescent skin,
the tips, near my nails, shriveled
like the overcooked spinach served in the cafeteria.

I just took a bath, you know. And when the band-aid peels off,
yellow skin has vanished and
white is my fingerr,
my suffocated finger. not my own finger. But I still like my fingers.
because they m o v e. me.

and the clinking piano keys to produce flighty Fauré in my
box shaped living room (the bubble shaped glass vase tumbles to crash, like
my fingers, against the waves of melody).
these fingers of mine, pudgy as
they are, clamp into fist,
penetrate glass, and concern me- I guess I'm too
violent. and I need to be aware of where my fingers land.

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Dust, Light, and Water:
\textit{or} The Woodcutter and the Fairy, Revisited

\textbf{Prologue}

There's this Korean fairy tale of a woodcutter who runs into this deer that talks. Well, this Bambi begs the woodcutter to hide him from a hunter, which he does. The deer turns out to be a god and so grants the woodcutter a wish for saving his life. The man complains of the most common human ailment-loneliness. So Bambi directs him to a secluded lake in the mountains where heavenly fairy maidens bathe by moonlight and tells him to steal one of their robes, because without it, they can't go back home. So, late that night, the woodcutter spies on the skinny-dipping fairies. He watches them, mesmerized by their beauty. One by one they return home floating back into the moonlight, except for the one who can't find her robes. So she ends up naked and alone in the water, and the guy ends up with a beautiful helpless creature who's totally dependent on him—basically, every guy's fantasy.

He takes her home, and she even comes to love him. Of course, he never tells her that he stole her robes. She just thinks she ran into the right guy at the right time, while she was naked and stranded from home. They live happily ever after, that is, until she becomes a manic-depressive because she's earth bound and forced to live as a mortal's wife. Finally overcome by guilt, the woodcutter shows her the robes thinking she'll like to look at them at least. Perhaps, he thinks that his humble love is enough to deter her from heaven. But alas, the foolish mortal has overestimated human affections. She dons the robes, takes her children into her arms, says goodbye, and floats back to her celestial home. If the story ended there, the moral would be that honesty is the basis of all healthy relationships. But Koreans are stubborn lovers and persistent storytellers, and the story goes on.

The woodcutter then tracks down Bambi and begs for help. Bambi says that ever since some guy stole the robes, the fairies no longer come down to bathe, instead they lower a bucket from which they draw water. So the woodcutter climbs in this bucket and enters heaven. There he is reunited with his wife and family. Too easy of a redemption, if you ask me. Well, the yokel begins to miss home because he is heaven-bound. He wants to visit his mother, because as we all know, Korean men are obsessively devoted to their mothers. He is given a flying horse but forewarned that once his feet touch the ground he can never return to heaven. So he flies down to his mother's home and she, overcome by his filial piety, makes him some tasty gruel while loading upon him the traditional guilt trip perfected by generations of Korean mothers. The bowl of gruel, however, is so hot that when the woodcutter reaches out to receive it, he drops it onto the horse. The horse rears from the scalding pain, throws the woodcutter upon the ground and returns to heaven leaving the bewildered man on the dirt floor. He can never return of course, and so lives out the rest of his life in misery and self-blame.

I suppose this is the Korean way of saying that we can't pretend to be something else, nor can we expect our lovers to be. He was of earth, and she of heaven. More importantly though, the moral of the story is that men who are too
attached to their mothers will never find themselves in a healthy relationship.

* * * * * * * * *

My brother was in love with a fairy woman. I could imagine what he told his friends when he got drunk: “She’s a fairy, really, all light and shimmer and so delicate that I can make her disappear very easily, blow her out of my own world and back to hers. Five foot three with shoulders so small I wonder whether my love can crush her into the ground. Without her even realizing, that is.”

He made his girlfriend sound more like a mushroom trip, what with all the pretty colors and winged things flapping around. I asked him if he got flashbacks as well. I could also imagine what he’d say three months later when his trip had faded and colors became drab and flat again: “She’s an annoying little insect, I tell you. The kind you’re willing to chase all up and down the hill just to swat it against your palm. And I tell you what, she’s sucking my life’s blood, leaving a hard, puss-filled welt in my heart.” But for now, he was happy and I wasn’t stupid enough to wake him.

“So what is she like?” I asked.
“She skips,” he said.
“You mean her heart is light and bouncy or something?”

“No, she skips, like she’s stepping with magic dust. That’s how she moves around.”
“And you like this?”
“She makes me happy and...light.”
“Well, just be careful. You know what happened to that other Korean guy who fell in love with a fairy woman.”

“What?”

“He got stuck living with his mom for the rest of his life.”

I thought about this fairy thing for a while. The next day I met my best friend Jerry at the bus station. We were going home together for the weekend and I subtly skipped towards him. He got a funny look on his face, and I thought for a moment that I had caught him with my fairy dust. His black eyes had that intense piercing look, but that’s just because he had forgotten to wear his glasses. He squinted at me, focusing on my body and I began to falter under his gaze. My skipping lost its rhythm and I sort of teetered towards him. Then he looked up at me, lifting my hair that had fallen in my face from my skip of seduction and said, “What’s wrong with you? You gotta go to the bathroom or something? You have some kind of a groin spasm.”

I shot him a nasty look. “Let’s just get on the bus,” I said.

Jerry Moon had never been sensitive to anyone’s light, much less his own. Hunched over with long dangling legs, he was always leaning on something, even if it was just air. He was wearing grey flannel pants and a blue sweater with tiny moth holes in the right sleeve. He looked like the kind of kid that grew up to be an antique book collector—dusty and pale and removed from time.

Jerry and I went to middle school and high school together in New Jersey before we came to college here in Connecticut. We didn’t exactly plan it, but Jerry said he’d been planning it since before puberty. We’d been friends since 6th grade when I moved into his neighborhood. He was the kind of kid that boys loved to tease because he wouldn’t react. He just wouldn’t say a thing or even look at them, just get even quieter. I thought it was kind of spooky the way he wouldn’t get angry, so I got angry for him. I’d stand up from my chair and speak in my faltering Korean. I never
brushed my hair back then, so it would sort of flare out from my face like a lion’s mane. My voice would get more guttural and I’d point my fingers at them rolling my eyes.

“Teacher! Trina Nam is cursing us again! She’s doing her Oriental curses!” they’d cry out calling me witch and other things. And when they got really scared, they’d hurl my Korean name at me, since it was the only Korean they knew. Imagine little white kids chanting “Goon Wu Nam! Goon Wu Nam!” I got sent home a few times and my teachers told my parents not to teach me Asian curses because I was disrupting class-time. My mom thought my teacher was an idiot.

So while I was practicing oriental voodoo on my occidental victims, they eventually stopped bothering Jerry. They thought that Jerry had sent me from overseas to act as his guardian. I don’t know why I bothered to act as his avenger but the truth is, while I defended him from the other kids, he defended me from my parents. Not that my parents were mean or abusive, he just defended me from their apparent lack of interest.

I always thought that my twin brother had been greedy from birth and that he drained all my mom’s love and affection. We were sharing the same womb and for some reason the doctor just didn’t notice me. I don’t know how that’s possible since he should have heard two heartbeats but I guess my brother’s heartbeat just sort of drowned mine out. Anyway, my mom was in labor with him for a record 35 hours. She struggled and writhed while the sun came and went, and then suddenly the entire world fell into silence. And as if on cue, my brother came out, bloody and beautiful. He was a huge thing and every nurse fell in love with him. While everyone was fussing over him, I sort of slipped out, like the pickle in your hamburger you don’t notice until it falls out. It was lucky that one of the nurses happened to be near. She caught me a few inches above the linoleum floor. Although I was unexpected, my parents decided to take me home as well, luckily for me. So, naturally, after that whole ordeal, I thought that my mom didn’t have much to remember me by. I sort of slipped out very easily, always an afterthought. And Dad just didn’t notice anything that was going on outside of television. My brother paid more attention to me, but only because he felt sorry for me. Maybe that’s why I ran away so often, to see if they would notice.

The first time I met Jerry was actually the first night we moved into our new American suburbs. The day we moved in, all the neighbors came to welcome us. Little children were handing us their mother’s casserole dishes and things. Little Jerry Moon gave me a container of tuna salad. When I showed this to my mom she said to me, “Oh how nice. Please thank your mother for me. You should come over and play with my daughter, she’s about your age.” She patted me on the head and called after my brother to help her with the boxes. That was the first time I ran away. I didn’t know where to go though, so I asked the first kid I saw, who happened to be Jerry. He was staring me out of his huge glasses that took up most of his face. I asked, “Hey, where do kids go when they run away?” Jerry said that he didn’t know but that I could run away to his house until we thought of a better place. Thing is, we never did think of a better place.

I ran away from home so many times that Mrs. Moon regularly set a place for me at the table. After dessert my brother would pick me up and we’d walk across the street back home. By then the T.V. was on, it’s blue light casting weird shadows on my parent’s faces, and they wouldn’t even see me walk.
past them into my room.

Jerry and I were on the train heading back to Fawny, New Jersey. I was going to see my parents and their blue lighted faces, and Jerry was going to his house to get fussed over by his mother. His mother has a tender spot for me. I suppose I’m the daughter she never had, which is a lot better than being the daughter you didn’t know you had. She was happy that Jerry and I ended up going to the same college, and she takes credit for putting us up to it. The truth is, we had planned it long before.

One night, Jerry and I went to see this movie at the local mall. We had this fight. He didn’t like the movie and I did, and I said he didn’t have any artistic sense, that he didn’t see things the right way.

He said, “I see it the right way, it’s just not the way you see things.”

“Well if we don’t share the same vision then maybe we shouldn’t be friends,” I said.

“You see things as you want to, and that’s perfectly okay with me, just don’t impose it on me like you always do,” he said.

I don’t know why what he said hurt me, but I told him: “Well, maybe I don’t realize you see anything at all because you never tell me anything—what you want, what you’re afraid of, what your hopes and frustrations are. Maybe if I knew these things I wouldn’t have to see for the both of us.” He just stood there, quiet as usual, which infuriated me even further. I could never get any reaction from him.

So I told him to get out of the car and then drove off leaving him standing in the middle of the parking lot. He walked home. Later that night, Jerry knocked on my window, waking me up. He asked me if I wanted to go for a drive with him. I felt very guilty and wanted to make amends, so I quietly followed him out to his car. We ended up back at the mall parking lot. I thought he was going to leave me stranded, just so he could prove his point about symmetry being art’s greatest virtue. But instead, he got out of the car and asked me to come out and sit with him. The lot was dark and empty, dotted by small trees and lighted by a few lonely street-lamps. At school, whenever I got depressed, I’d sit in the parking lot on the cement blocks that tell you where to stop your car. I sat on those cement things hoping that some car wouldn’t see it under my ass and just keep on driving right over me. That night, I sat on the block with Jerry next to me.

He didn’t speak for a long time. He just sat there looking at how the moonlight and lamplight, coming from either side of us, doubled our shadows so that one pair touched heads while the other turned
apart from each other. Finally he looked at me and said, "I do know what I want. I want us to be friends for a long time. I want us to go to college together. Somewhere far away from Fawny, New Jersey."

Well we only got as far as Connecticut. But it was the best we could do.

I majored in Botany, then Astronomy, then finally changed to Folklore and Mythology. To this day I get confused and think about oak trees on Neptune, dryads bathing in a petri dish, or a lonely star making love to the moon goddess—basically transplanting things to places they don't belong. Jerry on the other hand, has been studying Molecular Biology through all four years. I swear he saw the whole world through that damn microscope. Once we got to college, we couldn't spend as much time together as we did during high school. I wanted to explore and Jerry needed to study. And we didn't need each other like we did before. It's sad that he doesn't need me anymore, but it's good for him. He still let me play his protector anyhow. I didn't need to defend him from 12 year old boys, but I still could point out a lot of things he couldn't see—like which girls liked him and why he shouldn't date them.

I was also happier at college. I found others who noticed me. My brother thinks I can only exist through other people's perception of me. That's why I was so unhappy at home. Whereas my brother who got all the attention, now believes the whole world exists because he wills it to. He says I now seek people through whom I can validate my existence. My brother normally doesn't talk about anything besides himself and his relationships so I took what he said to heart. I think he was right. What he says can be disturbing at times, but only because he's so eerily close to truth. For instance last year he was chasing Lucy F ugly who is this uber-Lutheran, Bible-banger, she's like Super Christian with cape and everything.

I asked him, "Aren't you at all worried that her beliefs will work like a chastity belt?"

"Not at all. Christians are very generous with forgiveness. You see, Protestantism, supported by the capitalistic-minded bourgeois in the Reformation, is much more economically efficient in forgiveness than Roman Catholicism and its confessionals," he said.

"You mean they eliminate the middle-man, thereby allowing sinners get direct to the divine source," I said.

"Right, and when forgiveness is so readily accessible, sin becomes too tempting, almost justifiable and necessary because that's what's bringing the sinners to their God," he said.

"And do you really think that while Lucy's
screwing you, her fluffy-little mind is rationalizing how the Christian principle of redemption necessitates the defamation of her hot little holy body?” I asked.

“Of course not, I have to do it for her. Which is step seven—remove any sense of guilt immediately after the act. That’s what keep them coming back for more,” he said.

“How do you see the world?” I asked in wonder.

“As I choose to see it. I wouldn’t have it otherwise.”

My brother’s calculating notions of romance scare me, but I have to admit his theo/sociology makes sense. More sense anyway then his current fascination with his mushroom trip romance, the girl who made him feel light and airy with the simple slip in her step.

Jerry and I were on the bus and I was staring moodily out the window, not forgiving him for mistaking my charms as a groin spasm. This didn’t last long because I was getting bored so I turned to Jerry who had been reading and tried to explain my failed attempt of being light.

I told him, “My brother is dating a fairy. And no I don’t mean he’s gay. He sees his new girlfriend as being shimmery and light or something. Says, she skips around and smiles all the time.”

“Oh, she’s that kind of a girl.”

“Yeah, so I was just trying it out, my skipping that is. Tell me Jerry, am I more like Tinkerbell or am I just Jiminy Cricket?”

“Neither. You’re more like, Thumper.”

“Does that make you Bambi?” I asked innocently while vigorously slapping my leg up and down the floor. The woman next to us glared.

He didn’t say anything. I went on.

“Disney movies are so full of sexual abnormalities you know? Thumper releasing all his sexual anxiety with his overdeveloped foot. Oh and the Little Mermaid, that movie is basically about bestiality—close encounters of the fish kind. And Alice finds Wonderland through a long tunnel in the earth. And then don’t forget Prince Phillip thwacking his way through all the thorn bushes surrounding the castle with Sleeping Beauty in the phallic tower.”

“What’s your point?” Jerry asked testily.

“Never mind. What’s with you anyway, Jerry? You usually indulge me. Why are you so nervous?”

“I’m having problems with Julie. I think we’re gonna break up,” he said, finally looking at me.

“Why? I thought you two were doing so great. You were my only example of a functional relationship.”

Jerry only looked past me outside the windows.

“I don’t like the way she sees me.”

“What, are you out of focus or something? Why don’t you get her some glasses?” He didn’t get my reference.

“I want her to see me as who I am, but she projects all these expectations. She sees me as something I’ll never be,” he said.

“What’s wrong with her seeing your potential, wanting you to be the best you can be and all that crap?”

“Trina, it’s not my potential, it’s not even me. She wants to be with a different guy, basically, while keeping the same face. If she can’t see me as I am, if she decks me out with all these expectations that don’t belong to me, then it’s never going to work out. I’ll just end up leaving her someday, anyway, so I’ll just do it now.”

I didn’t know why, but I was relieved to hear this. I always liked Julie, but somehow I didn’t like her with Jerry. But I never told him this because I didn’t understand myself why it looked wrong to me, that is, until now. She was crazy about him, but I sensed that she never appreciated him, not like I appreciated him. She thought he was so sweet and confident and determined, but he wasn’t like that at all. Whomever she fell in love with wasn’t Jerry Moon, not at all. Jerry was as confused as I was, maybe even more so because he never told anyone about it. And he was trusting. And most of all he let me pretend that I was protecting him from the world when in fact it was he who was shading me from its harsh rays. I guess that’s why Jerry was so calm all the time. He had to be, for my sake. I lifted the brim of his hat and looked at his sleeping face. Then he opened his eyes and asked me what I was doing. “Nothing,” I replied, dropping the hat back on his face and turning away to hide my own. When he woke up a few minutes later we talked about friends, school, and what we were going to do at home. We talked like old times, except that I wasn’t the old me. I was quieter, trying to dim myself so that I could see him better.

We finally entered the bus terminal in our hometown. I jabbed Jerry in the side and he woke up with a start. We walked from the bus station to our street. I dropped by to say hello to Mrs. Moon, who of course asked me to stay for dinner. I ate at my usual place.

Mr. Moon spoke to me for the first time without adding a grunt after my name. He asked me how I liked school and told me that I should be looking for a nice young Korean man to take care of me. Mrs. Moon added, “Our Trina doesn’t need taking care of by a man. Look how well she takes care of our Jeremy.” I smiled shyly.

“You kids should try out our new swimming pool. Uncle Gee Sook put it in himself as an anniver-
sary gift," Mr. Moon said.

“It’s not as big as their own pool, but my willow trees makes it look a lot prettier,” Mrs. Moon said.

Afterwards, I went home and when I got to the middle of the street Jerry called out after me, “Come by later for a swim or something.”

“Sure.”

I unpacked my things as I spoke to my brother who was also home that weekend.

“So how’s Tinkerbell?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“Your fairy girlfriend.”

“Oh, everything’s good. Yeah.” He smiled.

“Do you love her?” I asked.

“Yes, I do. And the great thing is that she loves me more.” He looked gleeful and naughty, like a little boy who just stole candy from a smaller kid.

“You’re horrible. You know that? So you’re happy because you’re more in control.”

“Well, yeah. It’s a good feeling to know that someone loves you more than you do them. It’s like protection, or insurance from getting hurt. Does wonders for the ego as well.”

“Isn’t it better for love to be equal?” I ventured.

“It never is,” he said. “So just hope that you don’t lose out.”

“So what if you love the person more than he loves you?” I asked.

“Don’t let them find out,” he said.

“Did you know that Jerry and Julie broke up?”

“Really?” He looked absentmindedly through my magazines.

“Yeah, he says she doesn’t see him,” I said sarcastically with finger quotes.

“Well, it’s not really a surprise,” he said.

“Why do you say that?”

Finally he looked up at me and smiled.

“He’s always been waiting for you to finally notice him. And since getting a girlfriend like Julie didn’t help, he probably thinks dumping her will.”

I just stood there wondering at this womb-mate and mother stealer of mine. He really did stun me sometimes.

“Oh Trina, I may look at only my wonderful self, but that doesn’t mean I’m blind to the world around me. After all, the whole world exists only through my perception of it. It’s simply a projection of my mind. So of course I notice things, like how Jerry has always been in love with you.”

I think the fairy dust was going to my brother’s head. What was he talking about? Jerry loved me? Definitely, he was delirious because of that girl skipping circles around him all the time. And yet, why shouldn’t he love me. He knew me, didn’t he, better than anyone else? He knew all about my failed attempts at finding love that made me out to be some lone psycho groping in the dark. And still he was my friend. I thought I could love him too. After all, I knew him as well, didn’t I? He even said so. Sort of.

When my brother and I turned sixteen, my parents decided to go on a short vacation leaving us behind for the weekend. I kept hoping that they had seen the movie “Sixteen Candles” and were just playing a joke on me, like they were going to spring a surprise party on me or drive in with a new car. When I waved goodbye to them driving off, I thought how clever and sweet they were. My mother kissed me on the cheek and she looked so happy. She said they were finally going to see some friends who lived in the next state. I went along with the joke. But then I got to the fridge and saw a birthday card stuck on the door. It had a kitten playing with a ball of string on it. Inside it read “Dear Sam, Happy Birthday. We love you very much. Hope you like your new car. It’s in the garage. Love, your parents.” There was no other card on the fridge, no other car in the garage. Apparently my parents forgot that I would have the same birthday as my twin brother. But I suppose the doctors didn’t explain that too well.

I wasn’t too disappointed. Sixteen only means something to white American girls whose daddies buy them diamond earrings and throw them sweet sixteen parties where boys make love to the girls while the mothers are downstairs drinking diet coke and rum. Sixteen to me meant that I wasn’t supposed to care. Then again, my brother was the one who got a car on the day both of us experienced that miracle of birth.

For the first time I got angry or lonely, I didn’t run away to the Moons. Instead I called Jerry to come over. He brought some birthday pot with a pretty hookah as a gift. I raided my father’s liquor closet and I poured scotch on the rocks for us. We watched old Disney movies. I think we were watching Bambi.

“You know how Disney movies are all the same? Plot wise?” I slurred. “Maybe all the movies are about the same people, just different lives. Like they were reincarnated, except the mom never gets reincarnated ‘cause she’s always dead. But anyway, maybe Walt Disney was Buddhist or something, you know? He was trying to tell us that we all live the same lives, fight the same struggles and sing the same crappy songs.”

“Maybe.” He took another swig. I grabbed a cushion and sat on it like the caterpillar from Alice in Wonderland. Sucking from my new hookah, I puffed my cheeks and blew into his face.

“Who are you?” I asked in my deepest most
languorous voice. He didn’t respond. “I mean in a former life.” I said.

“I haven’t really thought about that.”

“Let me help you then. Tell me two quirks about you, and your worst fear,” I said.

“You’re not serious,” he said.

I closed my eyes and waved my hand at him to begin. He started slowly at first, “Well, my quirks—people do mention that I tend to floss a lot. And ummm, I also like to collect those little stuffed animals that have suction cups on their hands and feet so you can stick them to windows. Is that a quirk?”

“Madame Chang says, most definitely.” I hummed and waved my head side to side.

“And my fear—well, I don’t know why I’m telling you this but well, I’m afraid that I’ll wake up one day without any hair.”

“Fear of premature balding is common,” I said.

“No. I mean I’d wake up one day and I’d literally have no hair on my head or my body and I’d see the pile of hair just sitting there next to me on the floor.”

I opened one eye to check to see if he was joking. He wasn’t.

“Interesting, let me think. Well, the fear has something to do with your former profession. We all fear regressing and reliving our past. Shorn head and body—I guess you were some kind of a barber, or body waxer. And the quirks—fixation on teeth and suction cupped animals. Yes, I see. Cutting hair—the medieval barber was doctor as well as dentist, you know that’s where the floss come in. And the suction cups represent your fondness for using leeches. You were a medieval barber whose parents made you be a doctor when all you wanted to do was style hair.” I opened both eyes and tilted my head up in triumph.

Taking my chin and tilting it back down to normal level so that he could peer into my eyes, he said, “Thank you Trina, I never knew who I was till I met you.”

Okay, I know you’re thinking that that doesn’t count. That he was only kidding when he said he never knew who he was till he met me. But I still believe I understand him better than anyone else. My brother planted that bit of hope, and I clung to it. I wondered if Jerry really did love me, and I wondered why I never saw it before, why I never saw him before. Instead I gave my heart to all these losers whom I barely knew. I thought it was okay though, because everyone falls in love with strangers. It’s finding out who they are that makes that love real. I sought strangers in my quests for love because they were safe, uncreated beings. I could fill in the lines and give them a custom designed soul. But those strangers all turned out to be assholes. Here was a guy who already had a soul that I knew. And it was perfect.

After unpacking my things, I went over to Jerry’s house later that night. He was sitting by his new pool that Uncle Gee Sook put in. His legs dangled in the water. His pale body was reflected on the pool’s surface. I sat down next to him touching his body’s reflection in the pool, making it swirl around my finger.

“Do you remember that time I left you stranded at the mall?”

“Yeah, I had to walk home alone.” He splashed the water with his feet.

“Do you remember the fight we had?”

“Not really. They all sort of blend. Same themes you know.” Then he got up and looked down at me.

“I remember afterwards sitting in the parking lot and asking you to go to the same college with me, though.”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

He walked around to the steps and slowly entered the pool. He walked over to where I was sitting and hung to the edge of the pool, his wet head looking up at me.

“Jerry, are you still gonna break up with Julie?” I asked.

“I think so. Why? You don’t think I should?”

“Well, is there someone else, like someone we both know?”

“There used to be.”

“But now?” I asked.

“Not anymore.”

“Why not?” I asked, obviously annoyed.

“I grew up, saw things differently. Now stop pestering me with questions. Let’s just swim okay?”

I slipped into the pool standing next to him.

“Jerry, look at me. Let’s be friends for a long time. Okay?”

“Of course.” His voice softened.

“Do you want to swim naked?” I asked, a bit too gleeful and not lady-like enough. Then trying to act coy, I took off my bathing suit and waited for him. He silently took off his and stood there trying to understand me. The darkness of the pool sort of glimmered, casting a dark light around us. I stepped closer and touched his arms, dragging my fingers down to his hand, which was submerged under water. I took his
hand and held it. I took his other hand and wrapped his arms around me. Then I kissed him. A slight breeze shook the trees above and leaves fell around us and onto us. He broke apart from me.

“What are you doing?” He asked backing a tiny bit away.

“I love you.” I said quietly, but the words sounded rough in my mouth.

He smiled, but it wasn’t a warm smile. He looked as if he had been duped and his smile was one of accepting his loss. A slightly bitter smile, as if he knew he would be part of this joke all long.

“I do.” I said, trying to convince myself more than him.

“You can’t. I grew up with you. You’ve given every part of yourself to me for safekeeping, I’ve seen everything, and you don’t love me. But I was okay with this, because you never pretended to give more than you could. You never pretended to be anything more, you never expected me to be anything more.”

Jerry had never been angry like this. His face moved and worked against its natural peaceful expression. His change scared me. I was stupid to think that I could easily understand him with one bus ride home and a handful of memories. I wanted to cry. I moved towards him.

“No, Trina, look, you can’t just do this. It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like? So instead of saying I love you, am I supposed to say: ‘hello, you love me’?” I asked, trying desperately to be light, while also hiding my discomfort. “You love me – is that a statement or a demand, I wonder?”

“As statement, it’s true. As a demand, it’d also be true. But you’ve already asked me to do that long ago,” he said.

“But I see you, I really do.”

“You don’t. You need to see me as something else, something to protect. And I’m willing to do that for you. It makes you feel better for each of us to play these same roles we’ve been playing since we were young. And now, it’s just too late to change that.”

I wanted to tell him that he was right and that I was sorry. That I was just lonely, and I thought he was too. That it was all a mistake. Looking out of the bus window, my memories had taken on a new shade. I had painted feelings to those memories like how they paint colors on black and white movies. And I guess those movies always look fake. The colors are all wrong, so that it becomes a totally different movie. I had clothed Jerry in these illusory robes, and now I didn’t want him to take them off. It was too late. And then I started crying. But my face was already wet so he couldn’t tell.

He finally calmed down. His face resumed his usual expression. This time more tired than usual.

“Trina, we will be friends for a long, long time. But for now, let’s just swim, okay?”

I nodded my head and sank into the water swimming silently towards the other end of the pool. I felt bodiless, and I wished that I hadn’t taken a chance. I wished to continue seeing Jerry as I did before. There was so much I could lose if I didn’t. I felt light but not free, just disconnected and floating.

So I swam under water, forcing myself to feel my weight pull me down, and the water to surround me, anything to hold me in place. But I felt too weightless and small, like dust that collects on top of water. No matter how much you swirl it or shake it, the dust will just gather and mask the surface. With enough dust layering over, light cannot pass through and the water underneath stays dark. It’s just like that. And I felt exactly like that. Jerry was wrong, but the dust was too thick.

But, if you notice dust in light, you’ll see that it’s constantly in motion. You can blow it apart, but it’ll come together again and dance through that shaft of light, giving it for one instant, shape and form and feeling. Even if you spray water through that shaft, the dust won’t fall. This is what love must be like. I imagine fairy dust to be like that, as well. Always moving, always dancing, skipping the light fantastic.

Through the night, all I could hear was the soft lapping of the water echoed on the other side where Jerry was. Naked, we swam, separated by the dark water, swimming with only ourselves in a pool, not as big as Uncle Gee Sook’s but prettier, especially the way it enclosed two lonely bodies that reflected light moving through water.

* * * * *

Sometimes, I wonder what would have happened if the lonely woodcutter stripped himself of his clothes and waded through the water to meet the fairy woman. Since it was only his woodcutter’s clothing and her celestial robes that separated them, made them different, there in the middle of the lake, they could meet between heaven and earth simply as two creatures who were wet, naked and alone. And from afar, you wouldn’t be able to tell which of them was the fairy, and which was the mortal. And I’m pretty sure, they themselves wouldn’t be able to tell either. But I can’t rewrite these Korean folk tales. They’ve been handed down for generations. It’s the way things are.

* * * * *

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winter 00 yisei 39
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Han

a prose-poem

BY NINA SAWYER

I listen to pansori and I can feel the han—
the incomparable despair yet quiet acceptance of the Korean past.
I see my family picture (mine the only foreigner face) and I can feel the han—our
story of immigrants and hardship but also some success.

Look at me. Can you see my Korean half? Look closer.
How can you not see what I feel sears my soul?
The beat of the pansori grows faster and my heart follows.
Halmoni, Grandma, Mama, Uma... you two centers of my growth—both Korean yet
differently so. Halmoni from the past, Mom from the adaptive generation.
The instruments accompanying the pansori grow and soften at a regular and beautiful rhythm.
Before, only royals had access to this Korean art. Were my ancestors the privileged? Probably not. But I know they must have heard pansori—if only from one young, heart-broken girl's voice.
They must have felt the han. Or lived it.
I feel close to them when I hear the pansori. Most times, the divide is so far.
Old Korea, you scare me in your backwardness.
Old Korea, you draw me as the source of my han.
What can I do?

I went to Korea last summer, but I did not find the Korea passed to me from my
Grandmother.
Still, I recognized some of the immutable Korean ways.

I wish I could wear a hanbok more often. Actually, it's not very comfortable; I
usually grow tired of being restrained by the stiff frame of fabric.

What is it to be Korean? How could I really understand? I'm not even sure what defines "American."
But I feel both identities crowding within me, sometimes gently sharing their home and sometime competing for my attention.
I am decidedly not just "Korean" and am wholeheartedly "American," but "American"
does not capture all of me. "Korean-American" doesn't work either, so I guess "American" will have to do.
Maybe that's what "American" means—the default for what comes from jumbled identities.
America the Beautiful.

The singer's voice stretches and soars. Then brings me gently down.

I'm usually happy. But when I listen to pansori, I can feel the han.

I am thankful for feeling.

Nina Sawyer '01 is a Government concentrator living in Adams House.
Beside a Chrysanthemum

국화 옆에서
한 송이의 국화꽃을 피우기 위해
봄부터 소 /^[직새는
그렇게 울었나 보다.
한 송이의 국화꽃을 피우기 위해
천둥은 링구름 속에서
또 그렇게 울었나 보다.

그렇고 아쉬움에 가슴 조이던
마연 먼 절음의 위안길에서
인재는 돌아와 거울 앞에 선
내 누님같이 생긴 꽃이여.

노오란 네 꽃잎이 피려고
간방엔 무서리가 자리 내리고
내게는 장도 오자 없나 보다.

To bring one chrysanthemum to bloom
the cuckoo\(^1\) has cried
so much since spring.

To bring one chrysanthemum to bloom
the thunder inside the black clouds
must have cried that much.

Flower, you resemble my noona\(^2\)
who, having returned on distant backways from
the paralyzing longings and regrets of her youth,
now stands in front of a mirror.

For your yellow petals to flower
the frost must have come last night
and sleep did not come to me.

—So Chong Ju

Translation by Won Park

\(^1\) The direct translation would be the Chinese Scops Owl, which resembles a cuckoo or nightingale
\(^2\) older sister

Won Park '02 is an English concentrator living in Leverett House.
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