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THE KOREAN WAR REMEMBERED

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COVER
Photograph courtesy of Jennifer Seo
Design by Jason Cho
My maternal grandmother’s father was considered an important businessman in post-liberation Korea. So important that when war broke out in 1950, governmental authorities made sure to evacuate him to Pusan so that he would not be captured by the rapidly advancing North Koreans. Meanwhile, my sixteen-year-old grandmother and her sisters were left to fend for themselves in Seoul, a city which would change hands four times during the tumultuous course of the war.

A handsome young soldier in the South Korean army, barely a year older than my grandmother, discovered by chance my grandmother and her sisters living by themselves in Seoul. He resolved to protect them in the absence of my great-grandfather, and by the end of the war he would become both husband to my grandmother and father to my mother.

Stories like these are not uncommon in Korea. The Korean War was a cataclysmic event, one which forever twisted the lives of each and every resident of the Korean peninsula. Its bitter legacy includes the creation of the most heavily armed border the world has ever seen; the painful separation of millions of families; the establishment of two dictatorial regimes, each using the threat of the other to justify their anti-democratic practices; and perhaps, most interestingly, the stunning success of the South Korean economy, which some have attributed to a competitive zeal by the South Korean government to prove that their capitalist system worked better than North Korea’s command economy.

The economic game is over: the South is triumphant, the North is in tatters. Furthermore, the threat of another North Korean invasion no longer suffices to justify despotism in South Korea: democracy has arrived in Korea, as opposition leaders who were once targets of assassination attempts by a military junta have now ascended to positions of high political power. And perhaps most surprisingly, many members of the younger generation of Koreans do not even desire to reunify with the North, at least not in the immediate future.

Memories of the Korean War are less relevant, or likely non-existent, for the younger generation of Koreans. We Korean-Americans are even more removed by the distance which separates us from the activities along the DMZ. We will someday forget the Korean War, and when we forget, divisions will continue to exist only in history textbooks, and lasting peace will finally come to the Korean peninsula.

With this issue, we commemorate the still-living memories of the Korean War, as told through the stories of people who experienced it first-hand. In the following pages of Yisei, you will find personal accounts of rape, murder, and despair. We record in ink these memories, because one day, we shall forget the events that shaped our lives.
The fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War is a curious event in the lives of most yisei. We feel a certain duty, in a sense, to feel a certain emotional involvement with the memory of the War, yet we sense that our connection to the War is strictly intellectual. Many of us could discuss, without trouble, the salient dates, figureheads, and political intrigue of the war with the same objectivity we apply to analyses of the World Wars or other historical conflicts. Few of us, though, could elaborate on the Korean War and its personal significance to our existences. What is it, indeed, that binds us emotionally to the Korean War and why does it even matter to us? Why does the inability to answer these questions leave us with a tinge of guilt?

The answers, in fact, strike at a more fundamental issue within the lives of yisei, namely, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to claim as heritage Korea's history preferentially to America, or vice versa. One wonders if an anniversary of the American Revolution or the Civil War would evoke greater emotional and personal response than does the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War. For many yisei, the personal tie to Korean history wanes with
it is difficult, if not impossible, to claim as heritage Korea’s history preferentially to America...

each moment passed as a full-fledged member of American culture and bearer of its history.

And though it is impossible and misguided to attempt to spontaneously create an emotional bond to the Korean War, it is crucial that we pause to reflect on its impact on us, if only because it became the daily lives of our parents and grandparents for three years. It changed them, and so affects us who were reared by them and who are their legacy, for in so being, yisei are, in fact, the legacy of the Korean War.

Our most direct and profound connection to the War lies in the stories our parents and grandparents tell us in passing or in intimate chats and anecdotes, glimpses into war life that charm us, touch us, or haunt us, though their simple presentation prevents us from recognizing their significance as heirlooms, the fibers of the cord that attaches us to Korea and our heritage there. Every Korean-American family bears from the War its own treasure trove of stories, ranging from tales of struggle and violence to portraits of courage and hope from the War.

“My grandfather,” writes one yisei, “was a military officer in the South Korean army. And because the wives of military officials were in danger of being found and executed, there was a time when my grandmother had to constantly flee and live in secret. My father’s elder brother was actually born underneath a bridge because this was when my grandmother was fleeing from being found by the opposing party.”

“My father,” relates another yisei, “tells me of a time when he and his sister were playing in the field and bombers passed by overhead. My grandmother, according to my father, ran out of the house and pushed her children to the ground, covering their bodies with her own to shield them from flying shrapnel.”

Another yisei recounts from her family history, “My grandmother, who remained at home [in Kyunggi-do], was captured by the North Korean troops. They took her hostage and tied her up. They questioned her as to the whereabouts of my grandfather, but, of course, she replied that she didn’t know. She says that even now, fifty years later, she has pains in her shoulders from the beatings that they gave her.

“She was left with a slightly retarded soldier on her guard. Perhaps it was because of his mental retardation. Maybe it was because underneath his gruff exterior, he was, at heart, still a fellow village member. For whatever reason, when my grandmother asked him to untie her, he did it. And she ran. She ran as fast as she could and hid in an underground shelter. She stayed there for a couple of days and then ran to the village of my grandfather’s family.

“And there she witnessed something that was so much more traumatic than her own recent experience. There were American soldiers in the village. One day two American soldiers broke into a house where a girl was home alone. Scared, she ran to the attic. But the two soldiers pursued, and there they raped her. Some of the village men tried to stop the soldiers, but their torches were futile against the machine guns of the soldiers. So while one soldier fired into the group of men, the other raped the girl. The girl died a month later.”

Nearly every yisei has heard similar accounts, whether from his own family or from others, so that we realize, in sharing our stories with each other, that our personal family histories are, in fact, the history of the Korean War, and they humanize the War for us. It is no longer a random historical event that we choose to remember simply because fifty years have passed since it transpired. Remembering the Korean War reminds us of our place in both American and Korean history, and therefore, of our dual connection to both nations and of our roles as unifiers of those histories. The Korean War is not just another chapter in world history; let us remember, as we celebrate its golden anniversary, that it is our history and legacy to keep alive.

Paul Kwak ’03 is a History and Science concentrator and will live in Mather House next year. For more on memoirs, Paul recommends, Eric Liu’s The Accidental Asian.
Fifty Years Later, Some Lessons, and the Yisei

BY YUMI KIM

PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNIFER SEO

June 25, 1950.
The North Korean army crosses the 38th Parallel and invades South Korea.

Two days later.
The US commits troops to South Korea.

July 1953, the war ends.

As I asked one day of my opinions on how Koreans view the Korean War and the possibility of reunification, I stood mute and humiliated, scuffling my feet and shrugging my shoulders. I probed into my bits of knowledge of the Korean War—General MacArthur, 38th Parallel, UN intervention—but I could not develop a stance or opinion concerning its breakout, immediate ramifications, or how Koreans feel the effect of the war today. I look Korean, I speak Korean, I eat Korean food—I seem to be very Korean—yet I know very little about the Korean War, or in fact, any of its history. Ignorant and embarrassed, I slipped out of the conversation, pained by the fact that I could not speak intelligently about the topic.

Most of us in the yisei do not know enough about Korean history and somehow for many, such ignorance translates into indifference. Why should we as second-generation Koreans care about a war during which even our parents were babies, a war that could not possibly affect us now? Such a stance, however, makes manifest the extent of our naïveté. The Korean War generated the dilemma of a split Korea and now the possibility of reunification remains crucial and important not only to Koreans living in Korea, but all Koreans—the first generations living abroad and certainly US second generation as well. A few lessons from history reveal dynamic historical trends, trends that are helping and hurting Korea today. To understand some of the historical nuances and
developments in Korea is to confront yet another seeming testament to assimilation, ethnic identity crises, and cultural confusion. It is obviously impossible for us yisei to deny our Korean-ness, which also means that we must understand some crucial aspects of the ramifications of the Korean War, how such consequences affect Koreans today, and the necessary changes for a more stable and empowered Korea.

The possibility of reunifying North and South Korea stand out amongst other issues pertaining to the Korean War, and justly so. It is difficult for the yisei to understand the idea of Korean nationalism. Certainly we have our own forms of expressing Asian pride and our Korean-ness via popular culture, but obviously such things are not a form of Korean nationalism. We need to realize the importance of Korean nationalism because it reveals to us why Koreans believe ardently in reunification. Despite our biased views of "communist" North Korea and such, we must understand that Koreans at heart want to reunify the split country. Dating back to the seventh century Silla dynasty in Korea, nationalistic feelings rooted itself deeply into the mindsets of the Korean people. And when Korea experienced total extinction as an independent nation with the Japanese conquest and annexation of 1910, "the first time the entire nation was to submit to foreign colonial domination," the Korean identity was cherished even more. With the goal of independence, the idea of nationhood was valued above all, and efforts to "nurture its own national linguistic and cultural traditions" is evident even in the lives of the first generation Koreans living abroad who will never completely assimilate into American, European, or Canadian life, but will always maintain a strong imprint of Korean culture.

Furthermore, the partition of Korea was "one of those hasty and callous decisions the powerful nations imposed upon powerless people in the name of military and other expediencies." Koreans at the time were preoccupied with the prospect of independence and considered the 38th Parallel as more of a "temporary nuisance than a lasting barrier." Hence, reunification remains even more crucial to all generations of Korean, to all of us who cannot deny our cultural and ethnic connection. We should not consider such history to solely be Korean history, but our history as well, at least to a small extent. And certainly, with families still separated between North and South, some of us in the yisei are directly affected by the result of a divided Korea fifty years ago.

Alison Lee's grandfather moved to the U.S. after the Korean War, hoping that his wife and son in North Korea would be able to join him a few years later. After waiting ten years, however, Alison's grandfather just remarried and had other children, including Alison's father. But still pained by the memories of his deserted family in North Korea, her grandfather paid Kim Il Sung's government approximately $10,000 for a brief meeting with his wife and son. He was allowed to see them for a grand total of five minutes.

Such a story is not rare for Koreans, especially considering that 10 million family members were split up during the Korean War, and families living in North Korea are still unable to reunite with members in the South. The causes of family dispersal range from calamities of war disaster (in terms of politics and economics), the primary reason for family separation being brief refuge during fighting. Daniel Booduck Lee contends that there are profound psychological issues at stake, due to such prolonged human suffering and the denial of the right to family reunification. Although it may not be very apparent, especially to us yisei not living in Korea, the scope of this tragedy is so far reaching that when "a social outlet was made possible for those individuals and families residing in South Korea and overseas to express their desires of seeking out dispersed relatives through the news media, it was like an erupting volcano which was felt nationwide, revealing the profound impact of prolonged family separation." Currently there are 1,314,000 North Korean refugees living in Seoul alone, 600,400 more in Busan. As Lee states, "it is indeed a human tragedy that, over a span of 40 years, one fifth of entire Korean families remain still divided and their fundamental human rights of family reunion have been violated under the paranoia of cold war." And even now, with the Cold War long and gone,
there are still divided families living in both South and North Korea, unable to write, call, or visit each other. And for those of us like Alison Lee, we face intergenerational gaps or discontinuities, and such a major missing link profoundly affects many divided families, whether first or second generations. It is difficult for Alison to understand her grandfather’s history, even more agonizing to watch him grieve over the cruelties he believes to have caused in the life of his wife and son. It is a life that remains paradoxical to Alison—so foreign, and yet so close and at-home.

The advent of the Korean War also points to a dominant characteristic of Korean politics and society, a trait that weakened Korea's defenses against Manchu invasions 300 years ago, Japan in 1910, and North Korea in 1950. Due to the personalization and localization of politics in Korea, political parties were too divided in order to reconcile their opinions and form a unified force against these aggressors. Koreans have adopted localism or provincialism, which uses place (province) of origin as a point of reference in ordering one’s interpersonal relations. For example, the people from the southwest (Cholla province) are in continual battle with those from the southeast (Kyongsang province). Certainly local favoritism and loyalties are not unusual, yet Koreans go too far in personalizing politics.

Koreans are notoriously incapable of distinguishing principle from concrete, real situations. To clarify, consider the following example. For both Koreans and their people, laws are “made to rationalize and justify individual person or empirical situations of their choice.”9 Not surprisingly, presidents and other leaders of South Korea have changed the nation’s or state’s constitution in order to accommodate personal political ambitions and desires. North Korean politics as well has evolved around Kim Il Sung “to the extent that he has become an immortal being in political culture.”10 As Han Shik Park asserts, this personalization of politics syndrome is not limited to the level of national government, but pervades in the public sector as well. The yisei and other Koreans are well aware of private organizations, companies, and universities discriminating based on personal connections, “laws and regulations having only cosmetic usefulness.”11 The practice of personalization of politics has led to numerous occasions of factionalism and recurring instability and legitimacy crises. Furthermore, both political systems demonstrate the corruption that breeds with such personalization and discrimination. And we are not going to see real change until these leaders realize that in a divided Korea, the last thing that is needed is more politicking and corruption. Leaders themselves need to establish their integrity and strength, eliminating personal favors and favoritism, embracing, implementing, and making people accountable to constitutional laws and regulations.

Young Whan Kihl, professor of political science at the University of Iowa astutely asserts, “progress in human endeavor is possible only through confronting challenges with timely and creative responses. And the answer to the Korean question will demand creative and energetic responses by the new generation.”12 I believe this new generation encompasses the yisei, and hence, our role is important. “Creative and energetic responses by the new generation” does not necessarily necessitate that we move to Korea and submerge ourselves in Korean politics, but rather, that we at least be aware of historical and political issues that are currently dominating contemporary Korean culture. It is not enough that we know about Korea’s pop artists and its food—we, as second generation Koreans have a responsibility and cultural connection that cannot be denied, a link that enriches that ultimate collective identity we strive to mold.

2 Kihl, 22.
3 Kihl, 23.
4 Name has been changed.
6 Lee, 87.
7 Lee, 89.
8 Lee, 90.
10 Park, 324.
11 Park, 325.

Yumi Kim ’03 is a History and Literature concentrator and will live in Currier House next year.
Some Thoughts on Trees, Books, School, the Korean War, and Local Politics

By David R. McCann

I first went to Korea as a Peace Corps Volunteer English teacher in 1966. Although it seemed to me then a long distance in time from the Korean War, there were still no trees on any of the hills and mountains in Korea, except for the groves left on the Buddhist temple grounds. Someone threw a grenade on one of the streets in the town where I was living. One of the teachers at the school where I taught asked me to buy him a few books, and wrote out their titles for me to do so on my vacation trip to Japan. I found two or three of the books for him in a Japanese bookstore, but when I returned to school, he was gone, arrested, I was told, for having a clandestine radio and some sort of spying operation. I gave the books to the school library. The tallest building in Seoul was seven stories high, and I craned my neck like the country bumpkin that I was to look at it. Ox carts meandered through Seoul City Hall Plaza. At election time, the government party would hand out rubber shoes, gomushin, to the townspeople, and buy drinks at the local watering holes, but no one talked politics. Why didn’t they?

Fifty years ago, on June 25 1950 the Korean War began when North Korean troops invaded the South. Misled by the reports of Pak Hôn-yông, who had coordinated anti-government activities in South Korea until 1946, when he fled north, and by the speech by the American Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who declared that Korea lay outside the perimeter of America’s defense interests, the leader of the North, Kim Il Sung, miscalculated both the political atmosphere within Korea and the readiness of the United States to defend its interests in the Korean peninsula. Kim believed the war would end quickly, and that all he had to do was in effect knock Syngman Rhee, who had been brought back from the United States in 1945 and installed as president of the (southern) Republic, off his perch. Kim was wrong on both counts, as he was also in assuming that the South Korean troops, poorly equipped, in comparison with the Northern army, would throw down their weapons when they confronted the People’s Army. Although Kim Il Sung’s miscalculations played a role in his erroneous predictions...
HE HAD WATCHED WITH GREAT EXCITEMENT AS THE BOMBARDMENT WENT ON PRIOR TO THE U.N. LANDING IN SEPTEMBER 1950 AT INCH’ÔN. HE SAID IT WAS BETTER THAN NEW YEAR’S AND OUR FOURTH OF JULY.

about the course and predicted outcome of the war, it may be fallacious in the extreme to ascribe that much power over history to one individual. It must also be acknowledged that the North Korean histories assert precisely such a claim: that Kim Il Sung did direct the course of Korean history.

One factor that may be difficult to assess, in considering the reasons for Kim Il Sung’s miscalculation, is the general range and relative degree of activism in public political opinion in 1950; or to move the temporal scale back just slightly, in the period between 1945 and 1950. Kim bought the notion that the people in the south were ready for a change, and would actively participate by welcoming the North Korean troops and a change in government that they would bring. There had been wide-scale demonstrations, some of them violent, against the rice purchasing and distribution policies of the South Korean government, but by 1949 those demonstrations had been reduced by police action. In fact, the capacity of the South Korean government to impose order by arresting many of the leaders of the protest movements was the cause of Pak Hôn yông’s retreat to the north, where he asserted in reports to Kim Il Sung a much greater success and readiness than actually existed. Also between 1948 and 1949, a continuing series of actions on Cheju Island looked like a sustained guerrilla campaign against the South Korean government. In fact, however, what had begun as protest demonstrations in 1948 against the United Nations sponsored elections of a South Korean government Assembly, which in effect ratified the permanent division of Korea into two separate states, turned into a desperate struggle for survival against attacks by South Korean army troops and para-military forces. By the middle of 1949, somewhere between fifty and sixty thousand inhabitants of the island had been killed in the massive army campaign.

One might hypothesize that, by 1949, more people in South Korea were simply worn out than actively engaged in political struggle. The demonstrations, army campaigns, political rallies and all the rest were, however, the stuff of the media. A corollary to the hypothesis, then, would be the question, Other than the active political leaders and those hundreds or even thousands who took part in the demonstrations, what did the majority of the population want? The newspapers and American diplomatic intelligence reports might describe the hundreds or even thousands of demonstrators in Taegu, for example, but what were the millions of other citizens doing in the rest of the Republic, or the rest of the city, for that matter? And how would someone interested in knowing find out? Newspapers (and all the other media nowadays) report the findings, for example, of exit polls in New Hampshire, and when something approaching half the population, or at least half of the eligible voters takes part, then some rough picture of what everybody might be thinking does emerge. What if the numbers of participants are comparatively much less?

The question of the relative degree of active involvement in political events, whether rallies, campaigns, demonstrations, or elections, might also be moved slightly farther back to the period immediately after the end of the Japanese colonial occupation in 1945. We know from a variety of sources that a great number of political parties sprang into being immediately after the removal of the Japanese colonial government; in fact, the American military administration found the number and array quite bewildering, which helps to explain the somewhat resigned effort to promote the political fortunes of Syngman Rhee, an extremely difficult person with a real grudge against his American benefactors for their indifference to the Korean cause during the Japanese colonial period, when he had been living in the United States and trying repeatedly to get the Americans to intervene. Rhee was at least a known entity, and could speak English. But were the political groups, or the crowds at the political rallies which Kim Il Sung might “read” as a sign of potential support, representative of the majority? Our hypothesis continues to be No. If newspapers report events, but the great majority of the people do not take part in any given event, or even series of events, the problem continues to be How can the hypothesis be tested? Interviews might be one way. But how would a person who was not politically involved in the period 1945-1950 respond to an interview? One possibility might be a conversation such as the one I had a few years ago with someone who remembered that as a child up on a hill near Inch’ôn he had watched with great excitement as the bombardment went on prior to the U.N. landing in September 1950 at Inch’ôn. He said it was better than New Year’s and our Fourth of July. But I imagine it would be difficult to
work back through the decades of historicizing the war, especially given the not surprising explanation of the war in South Korean histories as nothing other than an invasion from the North by the puppets of Joseph Stalin, to recover adult memories of the pre-war period.

One alternative source is literature. For example, the short story “The Wife and Children” by Ch’ae Man-sik, published in 1948, is an account of a man who returns to his village home after a year or so of imprisonment, very likely, we infer, because of his political activities. (“The Wife and Children” and “The Post Horse Curse,” referred to below, are both in Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction, translated and edited by Marhsall R. Pihl, and Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. M. E. Sharpe, publisher.) In fact, the main character, Pak, had been arrested precisely on August 15, 1947, “the anniversary of Liberation.” That day was the occasion for protests against the drift toward permanent division, protests that were to be repeated on that same date the following year. One thing that becomes absolutely clear, though, is that Pak, formerly a teacher at the village grammar school who has become a “stranger ... to his house,” is the only one with any political or ideological interest whatsoever, and his remain undefined. The village is a village, with the farmers feeling threatened not by political issues but by “droughts and lean harvests.” The village boys are “playing by a stream... naked, but a few little fellows... not quite old enough for school... splashing about in the loose shorts that farmers wore.” Pak’s wife has no interest in politics, and when he soon leaves again, on some political mission, we may infer, she faces the problems of food and shelter, nothing more than that. At the end, Pak tells her he is going to sell his books, though he “swore I’d never get rid of those books!”

Judging by the evidence of this story published in the midst of the politically heated period between Liberation and the outbreak of the war, no one in the countryside was thinking about politics; they were worried about physical survival. Because the author does not mark the other characters in the story as unusual in this regard, we might infer that his representation of the rural population would not have struck readers in 1948 as dissonant in any way. The larger picture, then, is a village visited by the politicized stranger, Pak. Ideology and politics do not even register among the concerns of the villagers.

This a-political atmosphere is also part of another well-known story published in the same year, 1948. Kim Tong-ni’s “The Post Horse Curse” is set in the village of Hwagye, a traditional market town. There is no way to establish a time for the story: the setting is rural, the life of the market town follows its centuries-old patterns, and the plot has nothing to do with anything from the twentieth century. One might note, to be sure, that Kim Tong-ni became part of the literary establishment in the decades after the Korean War, and that his a-political bucolicism can be viewed as a reflection of conservative social-political outlook. Nevertheless, as readers looking back half a century to Korea in the period just prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, we might use Kim’s story to confirm the picture drawn from Ch’ae Man-sik’s of a certain degree of indifference to political matters at the time. Does this make it seem as if the villagers are “backward” in some way? To answer that question would require further reading. We might also want to ask what the stories have to tell us now about the people who might have read them back then. Presumably the readers were urban consumers of literary publications such as ones in which the stories were first published, Chugan sŏul, or Seoul Weekly, and Paengmin, Commoners. Were such readers seeking relief from the urban political scene? Was the picture of a rural life unworried by political ideological struggle “realistic,” or was it a romanticized fabrication, an invention?

The signs of poverty in “The Wife and Children” ring true enough, so one might be inclined to assume that the other pieces of the portrait rang true as well. People didn’t talk politics. People struggled to survive, and sent their children to school, where some years later an American English teacher would appear, a New Englander curious about the absence of trees, who had been four years old, not quite old enough for school, in 1948.

David McCann is a Korea Foundation professor of Korean Literature in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations.
6.25, Poetry, Translation, America, and the Next Generation

An Interview with Ko-Un

BY WON PARK

I approached the famous poet Ko Un at the mini-reception after his poetry reading on October 8, 1999, and timidly asked if I could interview him. He didn’t hesitate in giving me his phone number, and told me to call him whenever I wanted as long as it was before midnight. It took me about two weeks to gather enough courage (and work on my Korean) to actually pick up the phone and call him. I didn’t know what to expect, but talking to Ko Un over the phone was easy; in some respects, it was too easy. When I apologized for my slow, broken Korean, he laughed and said something like “What is language anyway? You’re doing fine.” We arranged a time and place for a formal interview; I eagerly prepared an extensive array of questions and practiced my Korean so that I would be able to have a conversation of some sort with him.

"I cannot live unless I write poetry. Poetry is my life and dream."
On June 25, 1950, a war arose—a war South Korea calls “6-25 [War]” (yook ee oh) and North Korea calls the “The liberation of our father country” (jo gook keh bang juhn jeng). This event was perhaps the most painful event of modern Korean history. Before the War we were a Japanese colony for 36 years. In 1945 we were liberated; 5 years later the Korean War arose. The juxtaposition of those two periods doubled the pain of our country—a pain that was already at its extreme boundaries. Fighting for an ideology (i.e. communism, democracy) that would define our confused nation—that in itself caused our nation pain to the its very bone. When the war arose, South and North Korea was the same country. I watched us killing each other. I lived through the war; I saw our entire country under bomb attack, I saw it devastated by fire, I saw the cities disappearing, I saw the mountains stripped of trees. The people’s spirit, too, were devastated in turn—like they were dead too. North and South Korea split and went their different ways; that endures today. But if the war hadn’t happened we wouldn’t be as extremely split as we are. We’d probably have a relationship similar to the one formerly between East and West Germany, or maybe one similar to the relationship between China and Taiwan. But a new dialogue between North and South Korea has begun so that from now on, a new Korean history is being created.

Pre-war literature was mostly the literature that prevailed from the 1910’s and 1920’s. In the 1920’s socialism tried to enter into the literature, but artistically this failed. After that “pure literature” kept on going and prevailed. It just branched from its roots. But after the Korean War the older emotions didn’t express or realize our lives accurately so a new literature had to begin—this is how a new literary era begins. At this time the most enthusiastically accepted theories could be best described as realism and modernism. We began.

“When I apologized for my slow, broken Korean, he laughed and said something like ‘What is language anyway? You’re doing fine.’”
to accept this avant-garde art, and tried to develop a new literature at these levels. In the 1960’s and 1970’s this new literary era became more settled, more established, more comfortable, and is still continuing today.

I began writing in the 50’s, so I’m a post-war writer. I didn’t partake in the pre-war literature but I was surrounded and aware of the pre-war literature and society. So my poetry fundamentally sees no difference between the pre-war and post-war literary elements. In the 1930’s lyric poetry existed; in the 1940’s we have an “independence” movement in the literature which involved much passion. And I have a bit of all these but after the war in the devastating environment, the younger generation (which includes myself; I was young then) started a new literary era, so that is why I would also consider myself a “post-war writer.”

My poetry might deal a bit with the war but that’s really not what it’s ultimately about. After the war I was mentally devastated and so that’s when I met poetry and began my life. I cannot live unless I write poetry. Poetry is my life and dream. When I first started writing, I dealt with Confucian ideals, the sentiments of our people, our nation, and the new era of modernity and modernism. After the 1970’s in the midst of dictatorship, I began to write anti-government, politically resistant poetry. Now, my poetry seems to combine 1950’s nihilism with the 1970’s anti-government literature in order to continue a new literary era.

Poetry has come down from the ancient times and is the method of artistic expression that humans have developed since then, so it is within our genes and our bodies. We are born poetic—so poetry is not just poetry; always it is combined with philosophy and ideologies and music and human festivities. Whether we write poems or not, we can all be called natural poets. A future “utopia” might be a society where everybody communicates in poetry.

The most striking lesson I learned in America was my newfound sense of the Black race. Living in America, I now see that the faces of blacks are the faces of what I call “real” people. I couldn’t realize this before, because I had only seen Blacks in passing. What I mean is my “real” people is that their faces, when observed carefully, exhibit a depth, a sorrow, a sense of friendship; all of the fundamental human character-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON CHO
istics and feelings show. I can believe that the human race started in Africa—all the scholarship I read about the human race starting in Africa is believable to me. I can read it in their faces. I'm not saying anything negative about whites—I think their faces have a more cosmopolitan characteristic to them. But the faces of blacks still have the original mark of the human race. I feel as though they exude this warmth indicative of the “original” human face. To put it simply, it is good and beautiful.

America is known as being a morally decadent and generally rude country. As having negative values and qualities. But the foundations, the basics upon which America rests, are beautiful. Koreans can learn from this and use what they have learned when they interact with the rest of the world.

Translation is translation, but I don’t call it translation (bun yuk). I call it pan yuk [needs a footnote explaining exactly what it is—words on bark strip; new words into new words]. When Korean is translated into English, a bit of damage is done, and vice versa. But though something is lost, another masterpiece is gained. If in the damage and loss done in the original, a new poem is created or evolved in the new language, then I would have to say that translation is very necessary. My poetry has been translated into many languages already but I want it to be translated into more. I don’t think that the translations are all good; I’m not pleased with all of them. But as more translations are made there is a greater possibility that the quality of translations would be greater. I want to deliver my poetry to Korean and Americans alike. But I don’t want to fit my poetry for Koreans or deliver what Americans are looking for. Poetry is universal and transcendent, and appeals to the hearts of all people at the same level. It is a song for all people. There are certainly poems that fit the Korean mentality, but if you write only those kind of poems then poetry becomes a secret, something that other people cannot discover, appreciate, and share.

Yisei and Samsui are very important. The second generation worries about the Korean nation, identity, and “face,” which is transported somewhat to the third generation. But will this be true in the fifth and sixth generations? Who knows? The Yisei have two burdens: they are Korean, but they live an American life. But people are made with the ability to bear more than this, so the Yisei should be able to handle their crucial task, their responsibility, of telling future generations of our real traditions. What does it mean to a “real Korean?” What is Korea? The Yisei play an important role in extending the “tree” of Korean history and tradition to the third and fourth generations.

Won Park ’02 is an English concentrator living in Leverett House.
An adoptee myself, I began researching the history of Korean adoption purely out of personal interest. However, I soon realized that this history pertains also to Koreans, Korean-Americans, and adoptees; Korean adoption has roots that extend far back into the cultural history of the nation, entwined with and based upon deeply entrenched societal traditions and values. The basis for, and the meaningful implications of, Korean adoption are simultaneously a reflection of past, present, and future Korean national identity. Transracial adoption crosses geographic, cultural, and societal boundaries to bring new families together.

The Korean War ravaged the peninsula, tearing apart land, resources, and families. Upon the close of the war, foreign soldiers withdrew from the country; they left their mark not only on the war-torn land, but also through the thousands of Amerasian children left behind. The products of brief war-time unions of US soldiers and Korean women during times of chaos, these children remained as tragic symbols of a lingering and lasting American influence on Korea. These mixed and fatherless children faced extreme prejudice and scorn.

Harry Holt, a farmer from Oregon, traveled to Korea in 1955 to help these children; he returned to the US with eight Amerasian children. His actions prompted thousands of other American families to come forward and adopt as well. Thus, Holt International Children’s Services began. Pearl S. Buck joined Holt in his mission and founded Welcome House, another adoption agency. At the time, there were few laws and little structure in the US for intercountry adoption; Holt helped to define adoption legislation and policy, while simultaneously reshaping societal norms of family and race. Today, Holt International Children’s Services is one of the largest agencies of international adoption. Since the start of Holt’s mission, over 130,000 Korean-born children have been adopted in the world, mostly to the United States, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands [Lee ONLINE].

The Seoul Olympics brought both Korea and Korean adoptees to the international public eye. Adoptive families from all over the world traveled with their children to Korea to watch the Olympics and learn about their birth-country. It became evident to Korea and to the world the large number of children adopted from Korea. The joking, yet critical summation was that “Korea’s largest export was babies.” The people and government of Korea took this as a direct criticism and a source of national shame—the sign of a weak and underdeveloped nation that was unable to care for its own children. In response, the government set quotas in 1987 for the number of children allowed to leave the country each year, and the number of foreign adoptions dropped drastically. The quota system reduced the number of children permitted for overseas adoption by 3 to 5 percent each year; the ultimate objective of the plan was to completely eliminate foreign adoptions by 2015. In 1987, about 8,000 children were adopted overseas; the quota system gradually reduced that number to about 2,057 children by 1997 [Shin, ONLINE]. However, cognatic adoption [adoption of non-relatives] in Korea was, and is still, not in accordance with traditional values and practices. Therefore, the decreased number of children permitted to be adopted by foreigners directly correlated with an increased number of children in orphanages.

This trend of decreasing foreign adoption continued steadily until 1998, when economic problems in Korea led to a sudden increase in foreign adoptions for the first time in eleven years. The Korean Health and Welfare Ministry reported that the year 1998 brought a 9.3 percent increase in the number of Korean children adopted by foreigners, as compared to statistics from the year before [Shin, ONLINE]. This rise is attributed to the “IMF” economic crisis of 1997, which impoverished and crippled many families. As a result of these economic conditions and the consequential increase of abandoned children, the government of Korea temporarily permitted the quota restrictions to be lifted in 1998.

The basis and structure of both modern and traditional Korean society indicate the causes and need for foreign adoption. The majority of children adopted from Korea are the children of unmarried parents, or orphans whose parents have died. The social milieu throughout Korean societal history has been decidedly against the adoption of non-relatives. The importance of family name and bloodlines date back to the earliest times of Korean history. Also, the influx of Confucian culture and ideals, and thus the subsequent “Confucianization” of Korea dictates specific roles and relationships for families and gender. Sheila Miyoshi Jager emphasizes the specific role for women in society and in the family, described as: “a traditional canon of
Confucian morality tales about womanly virtue and female chas-
ty” [Jager, Coursesnotes 248]. Based on this traditional view-
point, a woman who is both unmarried and pregnant directly
isolates morality. Jager recognizes “this nationalistic preoccu-
pation with feminine virtue, and the traditional Confucian
por-erization and fixity of masculine and feminine identities” to be
an integral factor in life and society on many levels [Jager,
coursesnotes 248]. As a result, even in modern society, ille-
imate children and orphans are looked down upon and single
parenthood is rare.

In order to fully understand the attitudes and traditions
in Korea that have created the “need” for foreign adoption, it is
important to trace the history of lineage of kinship throughout
history. Mark A. Peterson describes: “Korean society has been
characterized as a classic patriarchal, patrilineal, patriarchal soci-
ety” [3]. This importance of lineage and bloodlines is the very
reason why illegitimate or orphaned children are abandoned
and why there are so few domestic adoptions in Korea. Also, women
additionally hold a lower role in society than do men, which is
why single parenthood is so rare. Peterson further describes:
The Korean patrilineage can be described as ‘men related to
men through men.’ Women are incidental” [Peterson 3]. The
hokpo, or genealogical tables of Korean families list only the
men of the lineage; these tables are of utmost importance to the
family history and culture. Therefore, the adoption of non-rela-
tives in Korea is highly uncommon. The importance of blood-
lines is evident in the system of inheritance and kinship. Ac-
cording to patrilineal organization of the family, the only true
heir must be within the patrilineage. In addition, Neo-Confu-
scian ideology calls for an heir to be of the same “mind-matter”,
seki, which can only be achieved through shared bloodlines.

Before the seventeenth century, the kinship system of
Korea was a cognatic, or bilateral kinship system, meaning that
kinship was determined by both parents’ sides of the family.
During and after the seventeenth century, a classic patrilineal
mage system formed. As the kinship system changed from a
quilateral to patrilineal, the system of inheritance changed as
well. Many people mistakenly believe that the tradition of the
eldest son receiving the largest inheritance originated in the earli-
est times of Korean history. However, during the early
Choson period, the inheritance was shared equally among
sons and daughters. If a couple had no children, they
would often adopt a relative of the husband or wife, or
even a non-relative to be the heir. This child could be
either male or female. In addition, at this time women
held a higher role in society and in the family, they were
even recorded in genealogies equally with men. After
Confucianism was adopted during later Choson, Koreans
changed the system so that the eldest son became the prin-
ciple heir, a system known as primogeniture that was stipu-
lated by the Confucian classics. With the change to a
patrilineal kinship system and primogeniture came the
popularity of intralineage, agnatic adoption. When a man
who was childless or had only daughters needed an heir,
he would adopt a nephew from his father’s side of the
family. This ensured an heir from within the patrilineage.
Thus, the only acceptable form of adoption in Korean his-
tory was agnatic adoption: adoption in which the goal
was to obtain a suitable heir from within the patrilineal
bloodline.

Many misconceptions and prejudices towards adoption
exist in Korea today. An editorial in The Korea
Herald contends: “A leader in baby exports, Korea has
discarded numerous babies abroad, mainly into the west-
ern culture, where they are stamped as aliens with their
yellow skin and slit-eyed faces.... never-meant and never-
welcome babies” [Chung, ONLINE]. This editorial in-
gruetantly and mistakenly assumes that all children who
are adopted by Caucasian families are usually abused and
discriminated against, and that they never learn about their
Korean heritage. This stance could not be farther from
the truth; the procedure for adoption is proof of the genu-
ine desire and love that adoptive families have for the
children. In order to adopt, families must go through rig-
orous paperwork and screening, as well as fees that begin
around $13,000. Families choose to adopt because they
truly want these children in their lives. Many adoption
agencies and adoptive families in the US
have created support groups, forums,
and culture camps for both adoptees

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tation was that ‘Korea’s larg-
est export was babies.’
and their families to learn about their adoption and incorporate their Korean culture into their lives. In addition, the editorial makes seriously jaded assumptions and allegations about racial conditions and multiculturalism in the US.

This history of faith in bloodlines and family is deeply ingrained in Korean tradition, and has guided the country through centuries of experience. However, not all agree that this tradition can coexist with a progressive, changing nation. As John Sullivan, a staff reporter for The Korean Herald describes, “According to traditional Korean beliefs, identity is based on primogeniture, passing all family and national identity to the first born son. Children whose parents abandon them are thus deprived of an identity and became social outcasts.” [Sullivan, “Overseas Korean,” ONLINE]. From the perspective of many modern Koreans, the concept of family is situated above all else in life. While this viewpoint does possess merit, some feel that “Korea’s Confucian concept of blood lineage is obstructing its survival in the global economy” [Sullivan, “Overseas Korean,” ONLINE]. The contention of this argument is that Koreans’ myopic focus on the lineage and family precludes both individual initiative and international development. In addition, it is possible that Korean preoccupation with the roles of the family directly corresponds to apathy towards the welfare of society and community [Sullivan, “Overseas Korean,” ONLINE].

Professor Lee Kwang-kyu, a professor of Anthropology at Seoul National University, believes that the acceptance and integration of differences [Koreans who have gone abroad by means of either emigration or adoption] is vital. Professor Lee says, “‘Overseas Koreans are our national treasure. We need to understand them, and figure out how to utilize them in our international development’” [Sullivan, “Overseas Korean,” ONLINE]. Lee is a strong advocate of acceptance of adoptees into Korean national identity, as well as the movement towards social welfare reforms in Korea.

Lee’s tenacious stance in his contemporary perspective is not a solitary one. In recent years, more and more Koreans have begun to broaden their cultural ideals and norms to acknowledge Korean adoptees. The recent implementation of a new visa law in Korea demonstrates this change. Past legislation did not entitle overseas or adopted Koreans to many rights and privileges, such as buying property and applying for jobs.

The new law, in effect as of December 3, 1999, grants these privileges to “all overseas Koreans with and without Korean citizenship who went abroad after...1948,” including adoptees (Sullivan, “New Visa law,” ONLINE). With this special F4 visa, overseas Koreans can stay in Korea for up to two years. In order to receive the visa, proof of birth in Korea is required. For some adoptees, this stipulation could potentially present difficulties; thus, the Justice Ministry is formulating alternatives for adoptees, such as traveling to Korea on a 90-day tourists visa to search for birth registry, or obtaining adoption verification from adoption agencies (Sullivan, “New Visa law,” ONLINE).

Korean legislation is finally beginning to recognize the validity and entitlements of Korea-born adoptees. My personal hope is that individuals like Professor Lee will become more than just individuals- that their open-minded spirit will become that of the nation as well. I hope that both the people and government of Korea can someday openly and warmly accept adoptees, who rightfully deserve this acceptance. In doing so, they would also open their minds, embracing the comprehensiveness that is vital to Korea’s internationalization.

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Casey Daum ’03 is a Social Studies concentrator who will live in Adams House. This article was originally written for Foreign Cultures 80, taught by David McCann.
A Haven Hidden in the Hurting City:
Experiences at a Korean Orphanage

BY JANICE YOON

There is a side of Korea that remains hidden behind the shadows of success, behind the towering skyscrapers, snappily dressed men and women, the brand names (albeit probably almost all of them are imitations), ubiquitous cell phones in the latest, hi-tech miniscule models. For awhile, Korean society had been able to maintain its image as the miracle of all economic miracles — once a country left in shambles after a horrific civil war, and in just two decades transformed into an economically competitive nation in the international market, with cosmopolitan, bustling cities.

With the 1997 Asian financial crisis, however, the once well-masked cracks began to show. Society suddenly fell apart — for the first time in a long while, there were homeless people on the city streets, wandering the subways with their newspaper blankets. Families began to disintegrate. Wives were leaving husbands. Parents were leaving their children. According to an article in the Korea Herald (Aug. 16, 1999), 9,292 children under 18 were placed into state care or deserted by par-

ents in 1998 — a 38 percent increase from the previous year.

I was astounded when I first read about children being abandoned and the rising number of single parents (many fathers). How could this happen in a Confucian society where family values, such as filial piety and loyalty, were so important?

This led me to a journey that summer to an orphanage located 30 minutes outside of Seoul. Founded in 1959 by the United Methodist Committee for Overseas Relief to care for children orphaned by the Korean War, 20 years later, it grew to house and care for mentally and physically handicapped boys along with the orphans. Today, there are about 100 disabled children and about 50 non-disabled children (before the financial crisis there had only been about 15 non-disabled children in

spring 00 yisei 21
This particular orphanage has an on-site special school that serves close to 500 children with disabilities during the school year, counseling and training them. According to its fact sheet, the orphanage exists "to provide the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs for all its members."

Here, I saw the side of Korea that was hidden and hurting; when I actually saw it for myself, I was speechless. It's an image of South Korea you don't expect to see. I was only able to go about once or twice a week, which amounted to six or seven visits, but each time was a humbling, challenging experience — particularly when I worked with the disabled group. They ranged from 5 years old to a quite a few of them near my age (late teens, early 20s) or even older. I would help out with the dinner shift and play with them. Other times, I would be with the non-disabled children, teaching them a few English words here and there. All were needy and poor, wanting love and attention. Here are a few snippets of my experiences as documented in my diary... (the names of the children have been changed, and I've left out the organization's name for privacy purposes).

July 16, 1999

Yesterday, I went to the orphanage. Found it after a 30 minute bus ride and a 10 minute hike up an asphalt hill. It was an eye-opening experience, to say the least. The facilities were actually quite large — there were several buildings, classrooms and living quarters. The volunteer coordinator, who happened to be a 1.5 generation Korean American, gave me a quick tour in English and immediately put me with the disabled children. I was caught off guard, unprepared and nervous ... but what else did I expect? As soon as I entered one of the rooms, I stood there for a moment, motionless. I really was unprepared to see what I saw.

It was a room full of little mentally handicapped kids — a couple Down's syndrome kids, one mute, another boy who couldn't walk or talk. Each room — there were several — was organized by small "families" with about 6-8 people under the care of one um-mah, or mom. Immediately, I was assigned the task to give the little boys showers. Scrub them, rub soap in their hair, cleanse them with water. For the most part, the children could understand simple commands in Korean and we would show them the action they were supposed to do (like raise your hands up, turn around).

The smallest boy in the room — named Min-oo, was sooo cute. I watched him while he ate his mat-dong-san cracker snack — he ate so slowly — as if it took everything in his entire body to chew. It seemed that he even blinked fewer times while he chewed ... kind of like a computer trying to multitask and it's running out of RAM, so things take a lot slower to process and to run.

I was there for a couple hours, and we listened to Korean dong-yohs (children's songs) and I would dance with them. The kids for the most part jumped around, mumbling sounds like the lyrics once in awhile. The boy who couldn't move or talk just looked around listlessly. I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to do ... but the most difficult part came when the "mom" asked me, "why don't you play with the kids?" I momentarily froze. What was I supposed to do with them? I couldn't talk to them or play games that they could understand. All I could do was copy along and watch them "play" with their toys — which was to take all their toys out (random plastic blocks, trucks, fisher price people), scatter it out on the floor, and throw them back into the basket. Then again. They would dump their toys out and throw them all back in again, one by one. At one point, there was an older child with Down's syndrome who was very possessive and headstrong that started fighting with the mute child over a coloring book. But the mom took care of that. Many of these "moms" are workers that for the most part live on-site at the orphanage to raise and care for these children. Just three hours was
enough to tire me out. These women must have an incredible amount of patience and love that can only come from a divine source …

July 23, 1999

Today, I worked with the non-disabled children. It’s a lot easier working with them … I taught a few of them English. Or tried to teach them, rather. I gave them English names, like Brian, Michael, and Julie. There was this one kid that clung onto me. These children wanted to be loved. They wanted attention. It broke my heart to see them all here. And I felt so helpless because how much could I actually do, just coming for a couple hours a week?

July 30, 1999

After Korean class, I ran over to the orphanage to help out with the dinner shift in the disabled dorms. I helped carry food from the cafeteria — today it was a huge pot of soup with some fish, and of course, rice and kimchee. I was in a different room today. I spoon-fed one person who was my age … he could chew, respond, talk rather simple and incoherent phrases to the untrained ear, and understand Korean spoken to him. However, he did not have any control over his motor skills.

There was one small kid — really cute, but couldn’t understand a word I was saying to him … just kind of ran around like crazy, making high shrilled screams once in awhile. Another one, named Tae-Hyoung, really got attached to me. He loved the attention. His head’s a little deformed in a Neanderthalic way and understands very little. His speech is incoherent, and he repeats things over and over again. This room was generally of an older age group than the other one — one down syndrome guy who must have been about 20-some, another 25-ish guy who was an ahn jung baeng-ee (one who can’t use his legs), and a couple older guys.

What affects me the most when I go there is during their meal time — when they all say grace. It’s humbling to watch them. I was listening more carefully today (saw it for the first time last Tuesday) — and for some, it’s just a time of repeating some sounds really loudly and somehow, by unison, they all end with a loud and bold “a-MEN!” I wonder what they think about that. If they feel anything. If they know what they are really doing, to whom. Sure, they don’t know theology. But I think that probably, God lets them know who He is, somehow, somewhere. And in some ways, I think they can experience God’s love in more “pure” ways than I ever will. These people really live moment by moment — they mostly remember by the minute … and there are those times when they are all of a sudden filled with happiness, with joy. But they also know pain in an incredibly difficult and debilitating way. Yet their hearts are always childlike, I think … or have a greater capacity to be. I have been given a lot more in abilities in comparison to these people, but I think they might better use what they’ve been given, and to the fullest, more than I can. And their lives are just as precious in God’s sight, no more or no less than anyone else.

It’s tough trying to communicate with people that do not understand what you’re saying half the time, and to be patient and loving throughout the whole process. You can’t use normal, day-to-day language, Korean or English. Sometimes, it’s all through sign language. Sometimes, just copying their motions brings a smile. Sometimes, you have to ask them again and again — other times, they will tell you again and again without you having to ask. Last Tuesday, there was one boy nicknamed Jjang; I felt like I connected with him a couple times. He latched right on next to me and sit there, drumming the floor. Then he would grab my hand and lead it to the floor. I didn’t know
what the heck he wanted at first – and as kind as I tried to be, I was initially repulsed by his smell. There is a subtle yet pungent ji-rin-nae stench that I recoiled from a couple times upon entering some of the rooms. However, I can’t let that stop me … I said a quick prayer, then I started to copy his actions. I drummed the floor. A huge grin spread over his face as he cricked his neck and closed his eyes. He had this wide-toothed blue comb practically attached to his hand, and he ran his finger across the teeth, making a grating sound. He grabbed my hand and brought it to the comb. I repeated his action. We did this for awhile.

There was another kid I played with that day – we were playing marbles with rough-edged, chipped baduk pieces. Again, I was communicating by his example … or trying to figure out what he was doing. He could understand all I said, just couldn’t talk. When I understood and started to flick baduk pieces, he gave me a thumbs up and a smile. He was a real sweetie. After playing that, he sat me down and he brought his green-greyish Jansport backpack, and carefully took out a couple of his precious pictures. One was of a group of guys – singers, I think, wearing Star Wars shirts … he liked it for some reason. The other photo was of a guy and a girl, and when I asked him which one he liked, the guy or the girl, he eagerly tapped at the girl and smiled. As I laughed, he gazed into it deeply – holding the picture with both hands … I wondered, what was he thinking? Why did he choose those photos? What did he see that I didn’t see? Why that one – not others?

August 3, 1999

So, today, was yet another challenge – a challenge that tests all the things I take for granted, as well as my patience and lovingness. Today, I spent a lot of time with Tae-Hyoung. I said “hi” to him, and he “hi”ed me back. We started to communicate by giving high fives, which then turned into kind of a patty cake session. Then, started the flood of incoherent phrases, random words, and repeating, looking into his eyes, trying to understand. He kept on repeating “movie,” “gongyong” (and doing some dragon-like firebreathing action – I’m assuming he meant dinosaur? dragon?) “together,” “stawa” (Star Wars?) … I couldn’t understand, and he didn’t completely understand my questions. Sometimes he would shake his head vigorously yes to some of the things I said, then he would get all confused, and I would get all confused.

For awhile after, we looked at the newspaper, and he kept on pointing to things and I read to him what they said and he would imitate me – like SBS. He could recognize LG, KBS, pointed to pictures of soccer players and said it in Korean … things like that. He firmly grasped my hand. After awhile, I started to lose my patience with him because he wouldn’t let go of my hand if I didn’t sit next to him; he would not understand no. He would only grab harder and it would hurt. There was some pushing of limits. But I just ended up sitting next to him, and holding his hand. Because I think that’s probably one of the best things I can do … human physical touch is so important, whether you’re mentally disabled or not. At one point, he leaned his head against my shoulder, and I patted his head. The Down’s syndrome guy started tickling my feet, and I tickled him back. He was a smiley one. There was the ahn jung haeng-ee who started to fold stars – so, of course, I folded a crane. We talked a little about origami.

I had to leave around 7:20 … Tae-Hyoung followed me to the door, and he called out noona (older sister) and I said ahnyoung (bye). He said, “noona,” and I said “ahnyoung” again.

“Noona, ahnyoung.”
“Ahnyoung.”
Giggle.
“Noona, ahnyoung.”
“Ahnyoung.”

Even as I walked out into the hallway, the echoes of his call, “noona” would follow me, and I would respond into the hollow passageway, “ahnyoung.” Even as I walked out the building down the concrete hill, I heard a faint “noona” coming out of an open window. I said an audible final “ahnyoung” as I walked away toward the main street to catch the bus.

Janice Yoon ’01 is a Cabot house resident and is concentrating in Social Studies.
During the 1960's into the mid-1970's—as South Koreans grew frustrated at the oppression of their people and absent life-history—students, workers, and religious monks alike unified into the minjung or "people's" movement fighting for rights to free speech, self-expression, and social organization that could openly criticize the government. Seeking national unification as an ultimate goal and rejecting dependent capitalist development for distributive justice, activists began memorializing symbols of democracy from their more recent history—such as the 1960 Student Revolution or the 1980 Kwang-ju Uprising—and joined together under a shared and recovered heritage. One of the most effective minjung tools of historical interpretation and education used during this time was visual art. Deeply rooted in the same concept of self-expression and creation for viewers to share, visual arts provided political commentary and important reinterpretations of Korean history from the peoples' perspective.
MINJUNG ART

Unlike most political artists around the world who can be interpreted as being affected by rather than affecting the political environment, two particular minjung artists—Yim Ok-sang and O Yun—have created incredible pieces made specifically for social expression and change. The significance of their work is particularly unique because of the ways in which they both reach and impact South Korean lives. By making their art accessible to individuals of all social strata using familiar symbols of shared cultural heritage or artistic styles alternative to most “high” art, these two minjung artists communicate the voice of South Korea’s people in powerful interpretations of history and current events.

The successful minjung artist, Yim Ok-sang, realized how traditional academic art and practical modernism separated the art-world from the larger community. Thus, seeking to copy neither Western trends nor Eastern styles, Yim married the two into his own artistic renditions that could bring community and art together through personal activism. Born into a very poor farming family in 1950 that moved to Seoul during the 1960’s, Yim understood the frustration of economic stagnancy and a government deaf to the people’s needs. As a student, fellow-worker, and son of an ex-farmer, Yim’s disgust with governmental oppression grew such that he decided to use art as his tool for political expression that other people could understand and share. He believed in educating and communicating through the creation of artistic responses to social change, while exploring subjects of the natural world, human world, current events, and history.

One major way in which Yim made his art accessible to all viewers was through the use of descriptive imagery that could explain historical events without the necessity of words. For example, in his painting “African Modern History,” Yim opposes the fact that art is only expressive object and not image by using realism and clear representations of the European rape of Africa, the bleakness of war, the starvation of tribes, and the pains of an entire continent torn by outside powers. One need not be familiar with the history of Africa in order to comprehend Yim’s images of starvation, death, war, and bombing: skinny African tribes-people stand in masses in the right panel, African men carry weapons, a large arrow stab a bird on a rock, clouds of smoke billow up, tanks and missiles shoot across border lines, and centered in this same right panel are two individuals grasping each other with muscles wrenching as if either frightened or fiercely fighting. In the left panel, the strikingly simple image of an emaciated African man’s face surrounded by expanses of empty desert and the tiny image of one waving European soldier quite directly addresses the suffering of Africans while suggesting the fault of foreign war and occupation. Similarly, in the right panel, images of white men making agreements with African officials and men sitting around a map of Africa as if dividing up the continent suggest the powers affecting Africa’s recent history. Without any verbal explanation, Yim eludes to many emotions Koreans may share from their similar past of a separated North and South, Japanese occupation, and war. Yim’s simple use of bright primary colors (yellow, red, and blue) with the addition of blacks and whites high-

“Seeking to copy neither Western trends or Eastern styles, Yim married the two into his own artistic renditions...”

light the importance of his powerful images and the story that they tell; he does not distract the viewer with too much variation of color but emphasizes shape over color. Yet the colors chosen seem to have a particular message, with the predominance of red, white, and blue reminiscent of British, American, or even French flags. He portrays his message in clear detail: chaos and destruction ravage an entire continent of peoples partitioned by foreign war through decisions made mostly by foreigners. Using such images of Africa’s modern situation, Yim simultaneously portrays world events that have affected Korea in order to remind viewers of the similar tragedies which Korean people have faced beneath the influence of American and European powers.

Another example of Yim’s ability to make art accessible to any viewer regardless of educational background or social status would be his painted plaster portrait of the Kim family (Fig. 1). Here Yim appeals to the heritage shared by Koreans while simultaneously
making reference to the pains of lost family and war. Using realism in simple line-details to describe the faces, postures, and surroundings of the family, Yim may remind any South Korean of a typical family portrait taken in front of a folding screen with rice-cakes and dried fruit placed on a floor-table at the grandparents’ feet. The image describes ordinary, less affluent individuals wearing recognizably Korean clothing that most South Koreans can identify with: one man wears a farmer’s hat on the far right side, the man on the far left seems to wear some sort of a worker’s uniform, women wear the traditional ham-bok. However, this seemingly simple portrait provides an important message and tells a mysterious story which may not be immediately apparent since Yim strategically uses pastel-colors that make the entire painting unobtrusive and soft. Closer examination shows that many people have actually been whitewashed-out and are missing from the picture. Speaking to the larger South Korean public, Yim allows viewers to identify not only with this moment of the family portrait, but also with the fact that eight individuals are subtly blanked out like ghosts. To the average Korean who has lived through the Japanese occupation, separation of the country, or the Korean War, Yim’s work describes how many family members have disappeared, been killed, taken North, or jailed in the South for their involvement in Communist activity or government criticism. The mystery of their absence and the subtlety of their white silhouettes also tell the history of Korean people who have kept quiet about their losses and family disappearances for fear of government accusations. Regardless of one’s social background in South Korea, the image can be understood as a clear statement of loss, mystery, and torn families through the use of simple line-drawn details and soft color use.

O Yun devoted his artistic career to social activism in the minjung movement by making his work speak to the Korean people of their political world and own history. Even as early as 1969—before the minjung movement officially began—O Yun and fellow-students wanted to form an exhibition called “Hyun-shil,” meaning “Circle of Reality,” that could openly criticize the government. However, his professors forbid such activism at the university because they feared government disapproval. Instead, O Yun created pamphlets about the April 19th labor revolution that included his art, and handed them about the campus and city in an effort to reach people and educate. This social consciousness and desire to communicate with the public world about South Korea’s history, current events, and need for
change prepared O Yun well for his future as an influential and far-reaching minjuung artist. Influenced by Mexican muralists like Orozco and Rivera, O Yun also painted large murals around Seoul that addressed issues of political flux and expressed pride in Korea’s workers and people. Much of his early art education also included explorations of Silla, Paekche, and Buddhist art which O Yun enjoyed incorporating into his own paintings. This made his work more accessible to South Koreans who were often more familiar with their own culture’s artistic styles seen in temples and ruins around the countryside.

In O Yun’s work, “Scene of Hell” from his Marketing Series, the interesting juxtaposition of modern with traditional creates an intriguing image for all viewers that celebrates South Korean’s cultural past. Drawn in a simple Buddhist painting style familiar to viewers of a traditional Korean background, O Yun shows images of frightening demons and gods of consumerism torturing poor defenseless humans among flames and smoke. The very simple flat and vertical perspective, as well as use of plain reds, yellows, and greens create an easily accessible image for any viewer regardless of education or social background. There is a sense of interesting and busy motion as well, and as soon as one recognizes how the Han-gul, Chinese, and English characters in the painting are advertisements for Coca-Cola or Maxim, the eye is even more drawn to the image. Thus, not only is the painting style familiar to the common South Korean, but even the advertisements of the current day are familiar and interesting in contrast to the traditional nature of the images; viewers may be drawn towards the painting while simultaneously understanding O Yun’s perspective of modern Korean life. The statement is clear: consumerism and mass marketing advertisements are taking over Korea and creating hell of the traditional world for normal people. Materialism corrupts and leaves little else but pain. O Yun’s simple style reads well for any viewer and such art is extremely powerful for giving an individual expression of current events and modern opinions.

Similarly, O Yun’s print called “Grandmother” created in 1983 uses familiar imagery that is simple yet expressive. The pain of the woman and her expression of loss and mourning are clear: she sits in a slumped position, her mouth is open as if in a wail, her eyes are closed tight as if bearing sudden pain, her clenched fist pushes against the floor, and her simple white clothing is like that of people in the countryside or worn by people in mourning. Even those who are unfamiliar with South Korean culture would be able to read the pain of this woman’s expression and the emotion in O Yun’s strong lines and simple colors. There is a sense of
a tragic story in the grandmother’s face that tells of suffering which many South Koreans may feel from losing family during war and violent government oppression of labor activism. Perhaps this is why many demonstrators in the minjung movement would reproduce his images on large banners and carry them high for all to see during marches and revolts. O Yun creates a political message about loss and pain in a simple image that can have meaning in any country; it reads especially well for the South Korean who understands how many grandmothers have lost children to war and a viciously paranoid government. 

By addressing current events, conflicts in Korea, social class definitions, social disharmony, and isolation, these two artists communicate their political views and desire for social change in a way that educates and empowers the viewer with knowledge and emotion. The very essence of the South Korean minjung movement is shown in these artists’ descriptions and reinterpretations of the people’s history. The importance of their art did not depend on trendy art styles or self-absorbed personal explorations, but rather thrived as a vehicle for social and political thought made expressly for the people to see, comprehend, and share emotional responses to. Understanding that the government was strangling its workers and students, these minjung artists developed an impor-

tant resource for the masses to express their political ideals and desire for freedom of personal control, while celebrating a shared Korean heritage.


It's a Copy, Right? Wrong.

The case for the uniqueness of Korean Pop Music and Culture

by Jennifer Yehkung Seo

"What is this trash? This is what kids listen to these days? You call this music?" my father asked me during hour four of our annual fifteen-hour marathon drive up to Boston from Tennessee. No, we weren't listening to Marilyn Manson, and it wasn't AC/DC that was making my father cringe.


Half-asleep from the navigator's seat, my brother started to get on my case as well. "How can you listen to this stuff? Man, Korea turned you into a fob. You should listen to Dave Matthews. Dave's the best."

Then my father said something that completely threw me off guard. "The reason you like Korean music is because these days all Korean singers do is imitate American singers."

What? I was shocked. For almost nineteen years, my father had been telling me that I needed to learn more about and to be more accepting of my Korean heritage. And by accepting Korean music, I had proudly thought that I had just done that. But here he was telling me that no, I didn't like Korean music because it was Korean, but because it was American.

But what my father was saying just didn't seem to make sense. Take classical music, for
example. I doubt Mozart would have ever given Beethoven the evil eye, saying that he was imitating him. And would Elvis Presley, the king of rock and roll, have ever held a grudge against the rest of the world for adopting his new style of music? My guess would be no.

And besides (as cliché as this phrase may be), music is a universal language. Music is music and no matter what kind of music it is, it’s going to sound like...well, music. Of course there are different types of music, which leads to the question of whether these different styles are specific to a country or to a period of time. Is rock music American or is it just what came into style in the second half of this century? Is it correct to say that classical music is European, or even more specifically German?

Korea is more than six thousand years old, but modern Korea as we know it today is fairly young, only about a half-century old. As Korea continues to modernize, becoming a more prominent figure in the international community, it is opening up to be increasingly influenced by the cultures of other countries. Is it wrong to accept these influences? If Koreans shouldn’t be “copying” American music, then should they only sing and write in the genre of traditional Korean music? Should Koreans only sing the excessively vibrato-filled “bbonk-jak” music or the sorrow-filled pansori?

And if Koreans shouldn’t sing rock music, then what about other aspects of the country’s modern culture? What about fashion? Should Koreans reject jeans and t-shirts for hanboks? Is it wrong for Koreans to like spaghetti and pizza? Is it wrong for Koreans to get down in clubs? Should they only be allowed to perform traditional dances, such as the fan dance and sang-goo-nori? Why is it that no one has a problem with Koreans doing ballet or performing classical music? These aren’t specific to Korean culture.

Borrowing from other cultures is common. Rock and roll isn’t a totally pure genre. It borrowed aspects of jazz and the blues, both of which in turn borrowed African beats. Many songwriters include Latin beats in their music. In dance choreography you can see influences of the traditional dances of many different cultures. And how can anyone ignore the Asian invasion on fashion runways? Heck, even Queen Amidala’s wardrobe in the Star Wars prequel was largely influenced by traditional Asian garb. Until the day comes when all of the different cultures, for some reason, decide to live in separate holes with no contact with each other, this borrowing will con-
tinue. It is an inevitable consequence of the increased emphasis placed on international relations.

Even so, Korean pop music, if it really is a mere imitation, is not exactly doing an accurate job of copying American music. I would give up my highly prized slimy collection to anyone who can find an American counterpart, or better yet, any non-Asian counterpart, to the high-pitched, cutesy teenage girl group, FIN.K.L. And perhaps I just haven’t been exposed enough to the music of other cultures, but I have never found a non-Korean group even remotely similar to the dance/techno/rap duo, Turbo. K-pop, other than the obvious language difference, has its own distinct flavor: strawberry-chocolate swirl with a shot of something funky.

This is not to say that Korea is the most “differences-friendly” country. Conformity is definitely valued in the land of morning calm. Once a fashion hits, it HITS. Everyone dresses according to the fashion, and if you decide you’re too cool to conform, be prepared to have many little black eyes staring at you. I felt so out of place in my plain white t-shirt and jeans this summer in Korea, as if I had a sign on my forehead that said “FOREIGNER.” And to save me from utter humiliation, my aunts so kindly took me shopping, convincing me that what they picked out for me was better than what I had been wearing. And before I knew it, my old clothes were safely tucked away in the shopping bag, and I found myself prancing around in a white dress and a spiffy white headband that supposedly the ultra-popular actress Kim Hee Sun had worn on some TV drama.

And this stress on conformity wasn’t only in fashion. Whenever a Caucasian person would walk by in the subway station, heads would turn simultaneously, as if this move had been choreographed. (And I thought being Asian in a small Tennessee town was bad...) But perhaps the best example of Korean conformity would be the clubs in Korea. When I went to clubs, I would have to double check to make sure that I hadn’t accidentally walked into an aerobics class. It’s not like here in the States where everyone just kind of moves their body in whatever which way. In the Korean clubs, everyone does the same thing, copying the dances that the actual singers perform with their songs. Perhaps for someone like me, who can’t freely dance for my life, this kind of conformity is a good thing; it saves me from unnecessary humiliation. But I must say it was stressful getting funny looks from the people beside me because I didn’t make a heart shape with my arms at the right time. And (note: I’m sure this is an extreme case) when girls scowled at my roommate and refused to dance because she was dancing in her typical flailing-arms style, I wanted to rip their straight-permed heads out. In a society that emphasizes conformity, is there room for creativity? Yes...as long as the society allows itself to be influenced by different cultures and different ideas. It is quite natural for Korea to emphasize conformity; it is a small country with not much cultural diversity, and, as we Americans tend to forget, this is the case with most countries. As Korea continues to develop and have more contact with the different cultures of the world, it is certain that this “discomfort with the different” will disappear.

Many Koreans are afraid that their culture is being overtaken by other cultures, specifically the culture of the western world. As international relations increase, it is natural for the influx of influences from outside cultures to increase. Should one’s own culture be sacrificed for what the international society has deemed modern? No, definitely not. But these “modern” influences should not be totally rejected either. Keep the jeans, keep the kimchi...and keep on rockin’.

Jennifer Seo ’03 is a Literature concentrator who will live in Mather House next year. She is originally from Kingsport, Tennessee.
my rain child

rain water seeped through holes
in the stiff wooden stick-hut
looking up at the ceiling
drops fell longingly, slowly
the day my child died

smell of a straw mattress
beneath, comforting my swollen body
drenched in moss-smelling rain
as the drops fell quickly
the hour my grief died

the door hinges beckoning
with creaking sounds awakening
the live rain outside
pattering drum cadences
the moment my body died

but the longing, slow spirit lingering
trepidation-pierced eyes
trembling beside my side
the raucous hits of rain
I live the day my child died

to you

to me it speaks in voices limp
sighing sentiments of desire
it chants the rhythms of a covert measure
and stuns with a finale of decrescendos

to me it glides on the slippery formation of ice
from heel to toe slowly tainting its path
towards a signal, a light, a life
in which a cherry red desire ignites

to me it presses and waves
away the tender delicacies on the dessert table
reaching across to touch
and to stroke the moribund life within desire

to me it squints and flickers the
lamplight as the rays crash on the beach of its center
bringing with it, dragging along with it
a woman’s desire, a woman’s passion, a woman’s despair

to me it enhances the aroma of a sweet sweet kiss
lingering, loitering on an abused and forsaken desire
unveiling the smells of roasting audacity
and striking its fatal catastrophes, reminiscent of eternity?

to me it beholds a search for the raucous sounds of my desire, found under a tombstone of mock indifference
a supposition that perhaps he does not, he can not
hear with me, the taps of my glory and forgotten love

to me it calls out, to you it reaches.
mother night, keep me safe.
the streets are lit but deserted
as i wander my way home
bright lamps illuminate
the path my feet follow
into the night,
and into tomorrow.
the streets are wet
because today was warm
and snow melted,
running down in rivers.
a little is left,
and it is just cold enough now
that ten thousand little pricks
throw themselves up
from the dark pavement
i follow the stars at my feet
and they guide my way.
reaching the street,
out of long gone schoolgirl habit
i look left, look right
never mind that the street is one way
never mind that it is three thirty in the morning.
no one is out
no one is up.
i stop in the middle of the street
laughing, i retrace my steps.
put down my bag,
rejoin the street.
i look up at the half moon,
hug my wool sweater around me
and the road and i,
we run.

nancy garland

Standing
on frozen lava I
might slip. This
island is full
of holes, is dull
from cooling.
It breathes mist. My fingers know
where it breathes. It weeps
rain, brine. It
breathes. I stand
careful not to fall
and along the horizon I see
pink cloud island full
of space. I open
my mouth to the rain,
watch drops fall,
watch as the island of space
 drifts on the orange horizon.
These rocks, full of holes, full
of water, weep pools
around my sneakers.
Pink and orange
from skylight, full
of holes and space, I
sink into my feet.

Yumi Kim '03 is a History and Literature concentrator who will live in Currier House,
Nancy Garland '03 is a Biochemistry concentrator who will live in Currier House,
Won Park '02 is an English concentrator living in Leverett House.

Chejudo, 1999
I’ve gone to school with Lee Kinney ever since first grade. She still is in the lowest math class with all the other stupid kids. She dresses beside Lisa for gym class. Lee Kinney also dresses beside Daniela Crespo and Sally Sakelaris. Middle school is kind of weird like that. It’s the first place I’ve ever had to change in a locker room. No one knows whether or not to face the lockers when they change, but everyone sneaks a peek anyway. Most turn all the way around to the lockers to switch their shirts though. They pull a shirt up to their elbows while the other one around their neck is still down covering their chest and the tops of their arms down to the elbows. While the old shirt slips up their arms and off their head and falls on the ground behind them, they pull the new shirt real fast back down over their head and body.

But Lisa--she usually strips off everything except her underwear at once, exposing her weird little body to all the girls in the locker room. It’s like a stumpy tree trunk with frizzy curls of black hair at the top. Reminds me of when oma made my sister get a perm, and all that was left of her head was a tight fist of black curls.

The same stuff always happens whenever we change for gym class. After Lisa’s thrown all her clothes around, she plops down spread-eagled on the floor to put on her clean clothes. That sure creeps me out. Her sitting on the clammy gym floor with just her underwear on. Then Sally Sakelaris starts poking Daniela Crespo who pokes at her back and then they giggle and then they look to Lee Kinney.

“Hey Lisa, you like hanging around Will a bunch,
don't ya?"

"Hey Lisa, is Will your boyfriend?"

Whenever the boys trot out from their locker room, one of the big guys always gets scrawny little coke bottle glassed Will to give him a high five. Kind of like a be nice to the retarded kid thing. Sometimes at lunchtime you could catch Will grabbing Lisa’s crotch.

They’re the retarded kids couple. He’ll grab yours too if you try and tell him a joke.

Whenever those girls in the locker room say something to Lisa, they always speak a little bit louder so everyone can hear. They all dress in one corner across the room from me. Stupid girls. Especially Lee. She’s one dumb cheerleader. Today in science class she was flirting with a big meathead, Danny Penrod, telling him that they were made for each other because they both flunked the quiz.

"Hey, Lisa, have you ever kissed Will?"

"Know what a french kiss is Lisa?"

Once at a Chinese restaurant, I saw Lisa eating with her mom, grandma, two sisters, and skinny brother. I was sure surprised because I never figured Lisa to be Asian, but it had to be her oma because they both had the same fuzzy perm. When we walked over, my oma started talking with Lisa’s.

"Onyunghasehyo!"

"Onyunghasehyo!"

Pointing to the tall skinny boy, Lisa’s mom said to mine, "This is my nephew visiting from Korea. He plays on the top high school basketball team in Korea!"

"Really? That’s wonderful! My eldest daughter is home visiting from Yale!"

"You must be so proud!"

"Yes. She’s studying to be a doctor."

They finished in Korean and oma and I sat down two tables away. "I didn’t know Lisa was Korean." "Half. Her father is in the army." Oma opened a menu. "It’s so sad for Lisa really," she whispered, "that’s why your father and I always tested before you and your brothers and sisters were born. I was a little old to have kids you know."

Today Lee pulls her skirt up over her chest, tugs the excess shirt bottom to smooth out the top over her chest, pulls the skirt back to shimmy it down her stupid little waist, and ends with a final pat on her stomach.

"How are you today, Lisa?"

Lisa responds with her usual flash: shirt up to her chin and a gruff scream. But this time she runs around in a circle in her little lavender underwear and stops in front of me wiggling her body and weird pimple like boobs. Everyone kind of giggles. Especially those girls.


I choose a baby blue skirt speckled with white tulip heads and a pair of stonewashed Lee jeans from my closet. Holding the jeans to my waist, I carefully measure a mid thigh line. I think again and mark higher.

I try to strut around in my new shorts, but pull them off real fast. I’ve cut them so short that the bottom rounds of my butt sag out.

Roslynn Rhee ’00 is a Visual and Environmental Studies concentrator.
The Layers of Yangpa

by Jennifer Yehkyung Seo

As I stepped off the bus last October in front of NEWBURY STREET, my eyes began to wander, trying to find a face that I had only seen on videos and CD covers. I had no idea what to expect. After all, Yangpa is not your everyday make-you-want-to-barf cutesy, sugar-coated teenybopper Korean female singer; the kind that so many Asian boys on this campus are so obsessed with. The CD booklet for her third album, containing Emily Dickinson quotes and artsy-fartsy photos, is proof that Yangpa is far from being just another generic Korean pop star. With all this in mind (in addition to my previous experience of being the only non-tattooed, temperance-abiding, non-smoking, original-hair-color-donning virgin at an arts school in central Philly), I must admit that my eyes tended to fall on the more, shall we say, eccentric pedestrians in front of Tower Records.
You can imagine my surprise when out of a car stepped someone, clearly with the face on the cover of my CD that was currently sitting on top of my stereo, but dressed in simple, classic black. Waking from my moment of astonishment and chagrin at having had such a ridiculous image of Yangpa in my head (looking back on it now, I wonder what kind of a scary image she had had of me, the Korean-American Harvard student...), I awkwardly started waving my arms to get her attention. She smiled, revealing two dimples, and I wondered how this petite person in front of me could produce such a huge voice. I would soon realize that there was much more to Yangpa than I had imagined.

A joyride in search of a suitable place to eat around the Newbury Street/Copley block in a jam-packed car served as the prelude to the interview. Eventually we decided on one of the many nice little Italian restaurants on Newbury Street. Desserts all around, with the exception of fettuccine alfredo for Yangpa, who had not eaten all day.

One of the first things that stand out about Yangpa is her name (Korean for “onion”), which puts her among other famous culinary names as Meatloaf and Blind Melon. Was Yangpa trying to make some statement with her name? Turns out no. “You see, my real name is Eun Jin, but it’s too plain. A singer needs a good name,” she said. One day when she was trying to think of a good stage name, her aunt suggested the name “Yangpa.” Although Yangpa didn’t really want to use the name at first, she kept it. “There was really nothing else, and it’s so special. The pronunciation is pretty too.”

And with a name like that, of course the jokes are endless. “When we’re making sandwiches they’ll go ‘Hey, don’t you like onions in your sandwich? Then why don’t you get in your sandwich.’ Or when we go to a restaurant and we’re eating [Korean barbecue] meat, we’ll run out of onions, and they’ll say to me, ‘Hey you, get on the grill.’ I get a lot of that,” she says laughing.

It turns out that Yangpa had not always planned on becoming a singer. “Unlike the United States, where each state has important cities with many opportunities, in Korea, to do something or to become anything, you have to go to Seoul. I always assumed that I would get to Seoul by studying hard,” she says.

But Yangpa loved singing as a child. She would always sing with the radio and entertained thoughts of becoming a singer. But being a realist and knowing how hard it was to make it as a singer, Yangpa assumed that she would study hard, go to college in Seoul, and if an opportunity for her to become a singer arose, then she would try it. It just so happened that that opportunity came sooner than expected.

With the help of her uncle, an executive film producer, Yangpa went to Seoul for an audition. Singing Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You” and a Korean song,
Yangpa impressed the record producers. However, as it was that during that time there were no teenage singers, they told her to come back after she got into college. Yangpa went back to Daegu to concentrate on her studies, but when she was in high school, the producers asked her if she wanted to give it a shot then. So she returned to Seoul and prepared during her eleventh grade year for her 1997 debut.

Although many people are of the opinion that Yangpa's style of music does not have much in common with the current style of Korean music and that it is more American than Korean, Yangpa disagrees.

"When I was younger, I didn't really listen to much Korean music. I liked rock and American music, especially since I liked English and singing in English. While I was preparing to release my first album, I met a producer from LA. That was when R&B was the popular style, and since I could sing Whitney Houston songs, he said that he would make me like Brandy. Back then I didn't even know who Brandy was. But I heard her songs, and they were so good! I listened to Brandy's first album 24-7. So yeah, people say that my style is not really Korean, that the Yangpa style is sort of R&B.

But, I am a Korean, I grew up in Korea, and therefore my music is Korean."

Although most would think that Yangpa's career thus far has been fairly easy with no struggle to be discovered, hit songs, fans galore, and even the opportunity to study abroad, there is one major glitch to this seeming fairy tale:

"Music doesn't have that much meaning to me anymore," she says. While before she thought that, simply because she was so happy whenever she sang, she had to sing, Yangpa no longer thinks that way. And because now she has to sing even when she does not want to, she gets depressed.

"If I had stayed in Daegu, studied, and had gone to college, I don't know how my life would have been. I probably would have cried because I wanted to be a singer. I wanted to be a singer ever since I was little, but now that I've done it, I've realized that it's not what I really want."

Yangpa wonders what she has done with her life. While others were studying to get into college and preparing to go out into the real world, Yangpa was already there. However, even with her achievement of fame, Yangpa feels as if she has not really done much.

"I feel like I haven't done anything. Even if I get a number one song, it's not my own. I didn't do it myself. With academics, you work hard yourself, you get into Harvard yourself. It's yours. But with being a singer or any other occupation that puts you in the public eye, it's not your own. It's not your own career."

And with having received and experienced success at such a young age, she wonders what is in store for her in the future.

"When you get famous and there's all this hype around you, the only way you can go is down."

Yangpa does not want to still be a singer at the age of forty or fifty, but she does not want to be a has-been either.

"In the future I want to hear people saying, 'A long time ago she was Yangpa and now she's a great person.'"

And while other singers' goals are to be the best singer or to win a Grammy, Yangpa says that she never wanted that kind of success. "I kept thinking that I had to do something else. I don't want people to just know me as the singer Yangpa."

Which is a reason why she came to the United States. In Korea, Yangpa could never be a student. She would simply be "that singer." She even admits that doing an interview like this one was not really helping the situation. Although Yangpa says that she is not sure of who she really is or what she will become in the future, she is sure of one thing.

"I'm going to be powerful. How I'm going to get it, I don't know yet. And it is this very ambition that has left her feeling so unsatisfied. She says that there is not one aspect of her career with which she is satisfied with the exception of meeting many famous people.

Yangpa also emphasizes that no matter how successful you get, "if you don't have love in your life, your success loses meaning. You have nothing." She herself has experienced some difficult situations in this department. With her uncle as producer, her family has been turned slightly upside down due to arguments over her contract. She also recalls with much sadness how, when she returned to her senior year of high school after having been gone for six months, students accused her of having paid off the school because she received extremely high marks on a test. "No matter how successful you
are, if you have no one behind you, you’re nothing,” she says.

“I cried a lot. I couldn’t cry in front of my mother so I had to cover it up before I went back home. People are always surprised that I think about all these things.”

I met with Yangpa again in early March to see if perhaps any of her views on her life had changed within the past four months, and to see if she had a better idea of what she wanted to do in the future. I found the previously very animated Yangpa much more subdued. Perhaps it was the weather. Perhaps she was just tired that day. But to me it seemed, as her voice teacher had once said to her in the fall, that she indeed “was carrying the burdens of the world on her shoulders.” And not only was she still carrying these burdens, they seemed to have gotten heavier.

Although she still is not sure what she will do in the far future, for now she will be returning to Korea after this semester ends and will not be returning to Berklee. She is planning to stay at a Buddhist temple in Seoul with an American former-Catholic turned Buddhist monk, Hyungak Sunim (Myunzen), who also happens to be a Harvard graduate.

So then has her coming to the United States been a complete waste of time? Yangpa says no. She says that she has learned a lot about life, in particular about interacting with members of the opposite sex. “As a high school girl in Korea who studies hard, you’re really a nerd and don’t get to interact with guys. I used to hate guys because I thought they were so immature. And in middle school and high school, I used to think that it was wrong to try to get a boyfriend, that you should just study. But now I think I was wrong. Because even if I’m successful, if I don’t get along with my husband or if I don’t get married or don’t even have a boyfriend, if I go around without knowing about that kid of stuff, it would be so sad and piti-

ful. So it has been helpful coming to America. You need to live life and learn and experience that kind of stuff, and I think before I lived with only a narrow mind.”

She also says that while in the past she would always be polite and smile no matter what to everyone, she has learned to show what she feels and what she thinks.

“I do what I want. I don’t want to be a caged bird anymore.”

There are many things that I discovered about Yangpa. The person with whom I had the honor of having a cup of coffee is an open-minded person. She talks of how she is trying to be accept-
ing of and learn more about homosexuals (a topic rarely discussed in Korea). She is understanding of Korean-Americans who cannot speak Korean well or who are not in touch with their heritage, saying that it is not their fault for having been brought up that way. She is envious of multi-lingual people. She has enjoyed meeting people of many different backgrounds. And while she may not have made lasting friend-

ships, she knows that she has definitely made last-
ing memories.

Yangpa is a passionate person, even if she believes that she has lost the passion that she had when she was younger. It is obvious that there exists within her an undying ambition and desire to succeed, to have an impact in this world. Fur-
thermore, Yangpa is a contemplator with much hope. For although it may seem that she is a bit lost and disillusioned, it is obvious that she has thought and will continue to think a lot about her career, her life, and herself.

“Right now I just want to escape, escape somewhere by myself. I really want to find something inside of me. That’s what I really want, what I wish, what I hope.”

We wish you the best of luck.

Jennifer Seo ’03 is a Literature concentrator who will live in Mather House next year. She is originally from Kingsport, Tennessee.
Cheap Tricks

FICTITON BY ANGELA MARA HUR

I. Miracles Don’t Happen Anymore

When she was five years old, she wanted a pony and a dwarf wearing a red, pointy hat to lead the reins, just like in her picture book. When she was six she settled for the dwarf, with or without the hat. She prayed every night for these things. She promised God that if He granted her wish, she would forever be his handmaiden. She didn’t know what exactly a handmaiden was, but once she had seen a painting of a beautiful girl dressed in white with her golden head bowed down. Behind her stood two fearsome angels with bronze eyes. Above the angels you could see faint lines of a silhouette under the thickness of pale yellow paint. Here the artist struggled to paint the unpaintable and settled for tracing His divine glory with a few cowardly strokes. Still, this painting impressed the little girl enough to ask her Sunday School teacher what the painting was called. The teacher answered with enough solemnity to meet the expectations of the girl. “It is called ‘Behold, the Handmaiden of the Lord.’” So the little girl made a bargain with God, offering to become His handmaiden if she got her dwarf. But her prayers were unanswered and her little heart was about to lose faith, but on her seventh birthday she got a little brother whose face was quite red and pointy. She thought to herself that this God was a clever, crafty one. Or perhaps her prayers were not explicit enough. Anyhow, she had a strong sense of honor and knew that she had to pay the price.

The following Sunday after the dwarf came into her life, she accidentally left the cap off of the paste jar. Her teacher, a woman whose form and figure reminded one of the Hessian mercenaries, grabbed her ear and pulled her to the front of the class. The teacher had recently been delegated to the pastry department of the church instead of the coveted group of the “Soul-Menders,” women who comforted the poor and needy. She felt slighted by the better-dressed women who were in charge of selecting members. And so vengeance was hers by making their children’s lives into a miniature hell with construction paper flames.

She stood the girl in front of the entire class and yelled into her tiny ear. But the little girl would not tremble, and she simply fixed her eyes straight ahead. The mercenary screamed louder and the smaller children started to whimper, but the little girl said nothing. Then the teacher said, “Do you know why we remember to cover the paste jar? So we don’t get it on ourselves.” And then she dipped one fat finger in the jar and smeared it across the cheek of the little girl. But then the little girl simply turned the other cheek offering it to her teacher’s sausage finger. The old woman could not stand this impudence and she stood there stunned until her face got redder and redder. Her eyes began to bulge and then she opened her mouth. But before she could scream all the little children screamed for her, filling the entire church with their frightening, tiny screams.

Parents and choirmasters and the minister ran to the room and couldn’t understand what they saw. Thirty little crying children with paste smeared all over their faces and their bodies. Thirty little lepers bandaged in white thickness from head to foot. The teacher with one hand wrapped around a small jar of paste and her other hand coated with its white stickiness. This woman’s
hair was unraveled from its bun and her mouth hung open and empty. But most startling to see was the little girl standing at the front of the classroom. The little girl was quiet and still with her hands clasped in front of her. And her face seemed to gleam a soft white glow around her eyes. Her cheeks were clean and soft and her little mouth opened to finally say, “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord.”

The teacher was eventually discharged from her teaching duties. After a few weeks supervising the pastries she left the church entirely. The little girl couldn’t explain to the adults why the teacher had smeared paste on all thirty children except for her. She couldn’t explain also, how the teacher got so much paste to begin with. Once the children had been cleaned off there was enough paste to fill three bathtubs. And yet there was only one jar, and it was only half-empty. It was a miracle thought the minister, although a miracle with a somewhat vague purpose. Nonetheless he took it as a divine message that the teacher was unfit for the spiritual education of the children. And the little girl, well every Christmas for the next five years, she was chosen to play the part of Mary in the annual spectacle. She stood there in a white dress with her hands clasped in front and the candlelight flickering behind her golden head. She was beautiful. And everyone feared her.

II. Monkeys Can’t Write Letters

Kev had been in the zeppo monkey cages all morning cleaning their shit. It wasn’t his job to handle zeppo shit but no one else had done it and he needed a clean studio for his art. A student in his third year, Kevin had been hired by the Wonderland Zoo to paint “real-life” backgrounds for the animal exhibits. The old background had been chipping off because the paint was the cheap toxic kind that Schnitzler & Co. produced gallons of in the late 70s. After cleaning their cage, Kevin stepped behind the plexi-glass partition separating the painted background and the animals. Here he prepared his studio. As he cleaned and scrubbed the area, the zeppo monkeys pressed their bodies against the partition and as they bared their teeth, and they would proceed to grind their furry little grins against the glass. Kevin would then stop his cleaning and stare as a chain of monkeys would hump the glass in unison in a friendly “national pornographic” chorus line.

Kevin had two letters in his pocket, both from his girlfriend. One had been sent to his old address in San Francisco a week ago. He didn’t get it until yesterday when his roommate forwarded it, being a few days late. The second letter had been mailed directly to his new address. The two had arrived together, separated by time and distance, but still mirroring the same handwriting that he loved. He and his girlfriend hadn’t been in contact for a week. But now he had proof of her devotion in ink and paper. He saved those two letters as a reward, intending to read them after cleaning the cages. He also hoped that love could inspire him to create a masterpiece.

By noon the shit had been cleared. He also painted over the old backdrop with white paint that erased the past and prepared his young soul for creation. He took out the first letter from his pocket, sat in the corner leaning against the glass and read the words written by his girlfriend.

Dear Kevin,

I’m obsessed with your ex-girlfriend Laura. I have pictures of her in my desk drawer that I study as soon as you leave the room. I hit her web-page regularly, waiting for any change, perhaps a new cuddly animal or one of those inspirational poems gleaned from Reader’s Digest. What am I looking for? Well at first I was looking for something that was the same. My friends tell me I’m just being paranoid, but I can see my own face in hers. The same eyes and nose. One time, as you were flipping through your stack of old photographs I caught a glimpse of myself. Reaching for that photo I realized it was Laura instead of me.

When I first found out who your ex-girlfriend was, I was kind of worried that I was just a replacement for her—a carbon copy but a clean slate. With me, you could look into the same face, but hopefully the heart was different. Hopefully things would work out this time. And so I became obsessed with her. I tried to figure out what about her you saw in me. I even toyed with the idea that perhaps all of us are touched at birth with a fleeting image of our soul-mate. And we just go through life finding people that fit closer and closer to that image, that clue into the future. And maybe that’s why it was okay that your ex-girlfriend looked so much like me. But instead of feeling better, I just became even more obsessed. I’d follow her around campus and stare at her through the window while she was sitting in lecture. You know how every Thursday night I say I’m visiting my grandmother at the old folk’s home, but the truth is I was in the photo dark room where your Laura spends every Thursday night. In that red lit room I could see her face as I did my work in the corner. I’d develop the pictures I had taken of her and see how her face would appear magically in the pan as the chemicals brought her face into clear view.

Her face would come out of nowhere and be there standing next to me in line. And her name would just pop up everywhere uncontrollably. In my stories published in the second-rate lit rag, her name would just appear and take over the identity of my own characters. And I could swear that this one time at a football game, I was sitting across the cheerleaders, and they were spelling out “Laura” with their arms. Once I even found her name spelled out in my alphabet soup.

I would always pester you with questions about Laura. Well I wasn’t being the jealous or suspicious. No, I was fascinated, and I wanted to know her as a man would know her. And you were the closest way for me to know her in that way. The thing I realize is that I’m in love with your ex-girlfriend. When we made love I split my soul and body so that I became both you and Laura. I wanted to be you fucking Laura who was also me. I guess in truth I was simply fucking myself, but that’s beside the point. I couldn’t deal the separation of myself—soul and body—and I tried to reclaim that wholeness by sleeping around with other people, to get away from you and her. But that didn’t really help either. You may have found a replacement for her through me, but I need a replacement of her as well, and you are not enough. Look, I can’t be with you anymore. Knowing you, I’ve come to know her better and I thank you for that. I know you will understand my heart, how I must try to be with her.

-C
She hadn’t even bothered to write out the word love much less her whole name. Instead she drew a bloated, crooked heart that hovered somewhere above her initial like a lost balloon.

While Kevin was reading the letter the zebbos were doing their congo dance again, this time screaming and aiming their orange eyes at him, their sole audience. But he didn’t notice them. Not until after he finished reading the letter. When he finally looked at the monkeys, somehow they understood the sadness and confusion in his eyes and they became quiet. One even seemed to reach for Kevin’s hand, but that could have been his imagination. Kevin looked at his white backdrop and stared into its core perhaps hoping to find some kind of an answer in all that dreary whiteness. The letter was typical of his girlfriend, melodramatic and wordy and crazed. Most of all it proved her complete narcissism. He used to joke around with her saying that no man could love her as much as she loved herself…that he was in constant competition with his girlfriend for her heart.

Kevin leaned his face into the plexi-glass wanting to get closer to another living being. “I always knew she loved herself above everyone else. So what does she do? Finds someone who looks vaguely like her and falls in love with her,” he said.

One monkey consoled him with an interpretive dance that seemed to say, “That’s fucked-up shit. I never heard of anyone so fucked-up in the head as that crazy bitch.”

But this did not ease his soul. Then he remembered the second letter. The monkeys crowded behind him pressing their little groins against the glass and peering over his shoulders to read the letter that could promise anything.

Dear Kevin,

I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. I went over to Laura’s room last night. I told her everything and she at first laughed at me. Then she screamed at me to get out when I tried to touch her face. It was embarrassing because everyone stepped out into the hallway to stare at me. That night I burned all her pictures that I had taken of her. I burned the ones that I stole from you as well. I’m not writing to ask you to take me back. I’m writing because I wanted to maybe explain myself. I’m as much as a lesbian as you, so that’s not the reason. I think I had an obsession with Laura because I needed a reason to be with you. And as long as I could obsess over her, I needed to be by your side, picking at your memories, imagining myself as her when I was with you.

But even I can’t convince myself of that bullshit. Maybe your typical “ex-girlfriend jealousy” just took a tiny step into fucked-up land. Anyway, you’re smart enough to think up plenty of reasons why I am the way I am. Maybe this was all just a crazy emotional stunt for what should have been a simple breakup. But I really do wish the best for you. I don’t like animals, so I’ll probably never see your zoo work, but hopefully I’ll see your things somewhere else in the world. I’ll be looking out for them.

-C

There was no heart anywhere on the letter. Instead there was a scab of white-out above her name. Kevin scratched it off and underneath found the lost balloon, this time small and faint and pathetic.

He painted with such passion that the monkeys were transfixed at his movements. And when he was done, both Kevin and the monkeys looked in awe at his creation. Patrons flocked to the zebbo exhibit. They stared in wonder at its beauty. Even the zebras would stop their manic dance against the glass to sit and stare at that eternal sunset suspended forever between the steel bars of the cage.

At a certain hour at dusk, the real sunlight entered in such an odd way so that the zebras could see themselves reflected in the plexiglass. The reflected zebras were wispy echoes, of course, but they seemed much wiser and more real. And at the same time, the humans could see their own reflections staring back at them. Both human and zebbo became mesmerized by their images. This was perhaps the only moment where monkey and man could possibly forget the beauty of Kevin’s backdrop. Except for one very observant child.

A little child saw the wispy ghost image of a lovely girl standing beside the painted tree, under the glowing whiteness of the painted
sunlight. This reflected image was directly in front of her, so the little child turned around to see the woman who had cast the image. But when she turned around, she saw nothing. She looked closer at that lovely reflection and realized that it was not a reflection at all. In fact, it was painted into the background. That lovely girl was trapped behind the plexi-glass, locked in the paint and she looked out at the people staring at her and her monkeys. The child pointed at this painted woman and at that moment the zebbos and the humans looked away from their own reflections. They all looked at the painted girl instead. And they all agreed that they had never seen anyone so unique and true and beautiful. The way that Kevin painted his girlfriend, she looked like no other they had seen before.

III. Paranoia in a Can

Clara was shopping for her week’s supply of dinner. She was working at a daycare center and so could only afford meals that came in a can. All last week she ate ravioli. The same meal every night was her comfort, the only regularity she could expect in her life. After she had dashed off those two letters, she became so uncertain of herself and her sanity. She honestly believed at the time that her obsession wasn’t born of petty suspicion or jealousy. But the fixation had been growing so intensely, she thought more about her than him, that she had to attach a deeper significance to it. Or maybe she confused intense insecurity with intense attraction. She had known people who had done stranger, crueler things to each other. Why couldn’t she participate in this farce of humanity as well? She was slowly beginning to accept the absurdity of past events as just a reflection of her youth and personality. She had always needed to get more out of things than what they simply were. But lately, she had created too much perversion and instability in her life. And now she wanted the same meal in a can every night. Consistency is what she craved and what she found in aisle seven.

But that morning, in aisle seven, even ravioli couldn’t help her out. She could feel eyes looking at her over the soup cans. Shaking it off, she moved on towards the pasta. Clara grabbed three cans of Spaghett-O’s and in that naked space she looked into eyes that were most definitely looking back at her. She thought of dropping her basket of cheap pasta to run to the end of the aisle hoping to catch the voyeur. Instead she lowered her gaze to the bottom shelf, but so did he. Annoyed but intrigued nonetheless she cleared off a few more cans to get a fuller look at his face. He didn’t look dangerous at all. He looked to be the kind of guy who trimmed his nose hairs regularly and wore socks that always matched.

“Do you want some Spaghett-O’s?” Clara asked, pushing a can towards him.

He shook his head and moved away. She could have sworn she heard him mutter something about monkeys. She was trying to move on with her life after the whole Kevin and Laura absurdity but life had become even more freakish. The other day, she was walking down the street when a child started to point at her and scream, “Look Mommy, zebbo, zebbo zebbo.” The mother started to scold her son but she caught a glimpse of Clara and she started to stare at her as well.

Clara tried to dismiss these strange events. She had been under a lot of emotional stress lately and she was trying to forget a very disturbing period of her life. She thought she had finally escaped, but her life seemed to have turned onto another absurd path, like when an obviously deranged old lady asked her why she lived in a zoo. If Clara only knew that the Spaghetti man and the child and old woman had all recently visited the zebbo exhibit then she could have figured out that her past was creeping into her present. But all her confusion came to a rest when she chanced upon a newspaper article about how a small San Diego zoo was drawing crowds to its monkey exhibit. There in those inky pages she saw a blurry image of herself.

IV. Your Muse Is the Whore-Next-Door

Clara had called Kevin because she wanted to meet him, but really because she wanted to see his painting. Kevin waited by the zoo entrance tugging at his jeans that had old paint caked on its surface. The media attention and the general excitement of his life over the exhibit backdrop had made it difficult for him to simply forget Clara. He never really cared about her and her latest emotional stunt threw him into such turmoil. He hadn’t really felt strongly about his girlfriend until now.

He was sitting near the entrance of the zoo rubbing his finger along the scar above his right hip. He always did this when he
was waiting because it reminded him that something was stolen out of his body. Vestigial perhaps, but he knew that someday when the world finally realized the significance of the appendix, the vital necessity for it, he’d be fucked. And so he traced that scar with his finger to remind him of his mortality, of how he was incomplete. He was thinking about all this when he looked up and saw Clara walking towards him. The sun was shining behind her and he saw his painting come to life.

“Hey, Clara.”

“Hello.”

“You cut your hair or something?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t,” she said.

“Oh. It looks different.”

“Maybe you just forgot what I look like,” she said.

“Maybe.”

“Can we talk somewhere else?” Clara asked aware that the ticket takers were staring at her.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked really not knowing where he could take her without having people looking at her. After all, she was a minor celebrity or even an apparition, like the Virgin Mary spotted in a treetop or on a Hollywood billboard. Kevin wondered whether or not he should tell Clara that the souvenir shop offered T-shirts with her face and two monkeys on it. He decided not to and made sure they stayed away from the store.

“Actually, I want to see the the, that thing you did—with me.”

He led her towards the zebbo exhibit beginning to feel worried about how Clara would react. But he had wanted so much for her to see it. They walked for a few minutes in silence.

Then Clara asked, “Why did you do it?”

But Kevin couldn’t say anything because he didn’t know himself. He viewed himself as an artist and believed that painting was an emotional outlet that let him understand himself. But he didn’t quite understand what all that meant, nor could he believe its sincerity.

After some hesitation and lip chewing he said, “I don’t know, I just had to, to get you out of my mind. But it didn’t really work.”

At first the zoo officials were angry at him and wanted the girl to be painted out of the background, but so many people had been coming to the zoo, pouring money that was so badly needed. Clara had discovered that the news story generated around the exhibit was that the artist had painted his girlfriend’s image into the backdrop because of a broken heart. This was the trick of sentiment used to sell tickets, the same sort of cheap draw as showing apes dressed in bikinis doing the hula. In this case, Clara’s image had become that fleeting vision of love trapped behind glass. With her golden hair and compassionate, sad eyes, she came to represent whatever people needed to see in her. Tarzan’s Jane who could never understand his ape-man ways but loved him nonetheless. The Mary who forgave all sins and all bastards, or Guinevere, who betrayed her husband and in repentance became a nun. Somehow, the painting attracted and comforted all who looked at it. And they could not forget it either, nor its consoling peace. Her face held that saintly sway over both devout and heathen, for she was something to behold and revere. She was not a beautiful girl, but her painted self promised something more. But Clara knew nothing of this. She just knew her image was used to hawk tourists, she was a cheap poster girl for caged animals.

“How can you commercialize my feelings, use my pain as inspiration for your second-rate art?” she demanded.

“Second-rate? They want me to paint the backdrops for the chimpanzee exhibit and the koula bears…they want my art everywhere, I’m in demand. I’m finally a respected artist and all you can think about is yourself.”

“This is a zoo, Kevin. Animals don’t need art. Your backdrop, your “art,” is like newspaper cage lining for bird crap. You’re cheapening my pain. And it’s pain because I realize how stupid I’ve been, how I made my life into a joke. That is what my pain is and you just made it into monkey shit.”

“You’re doing the same,” he said under his breath.

“What are you talking about?” she asked with her voice straining.

“All that fucked-up melodrama you wrote in your letters. You are cheapening me, making a farce out of everything just so you have a new role to play. My art is for the monkeys,” and here he couldn’t help laugh at his ridiculous statement, “but at least I’m sincere.”

By this time they had reached the exhibit. Neither of them could say anything as they entered the cool darkness. Somehow, the shadowed exhibit cast an almost holy solemnity that dissipated their anger, their confusion, and they became silent. Clara walked up to the zebbo cages. She seemed to know exactly where it was. And then she saw herself in the backdrop; she looked at herself through the plexi-glass and instantly forgot about everything else.

“I don’t know what it is to be sincere anymore, to just be myself,” she replied to his question. Then she looked at the monkeys and they seemed to recognize her as one of their own. They all approached her,
the real Clara and not the painted one and they seemed to regard her as some special vision granted to them. They did not scream; they did not dance. Separated from them by the glass, Clara bent down to look into their faces. And she smiled. And at that moment they fell in love with her. And she accepted their love without struggle. She did not feel burdened to return their love, even though she did. She felt no undue expectations. They had finally found her. Or to be more exact, she had finally found them.

V. Sunday School

Clara thought that it was possible that people denied God’s existence not because their minds would not tolerate Him, but because their hearts could not. They avoided God because of His oppressive love. To be loved so by an benevolent, omnipotent God was to bear the guilt of not being able to return it, the responsibility to preserve it, and the fear that it could be lost at any moment. Clara also felt burdened by this sort of love from her parents. She feared that they invested too much of themselves, their happiness in her. This pressure to redeem their suffering weighed heavy. And yet, she couldn’t impose this same love onto them or others. Sometimes, she couldn’t help but think that if God loved man less, He would be tolerated, and even be forgiven.

Clara knew what oppressive love was all about. It forced her into roles, locked her into places where all she could do was look out and have other people look at her. Though her parents were never divorced they still fought over custody for their daughter’s heart. It wasn’t unusual for her father to “kidnap” her during a dinner made by her mother and take her to her favorite restaurant. There among the all-you-can-eat promise of salad bars and potato stations, the man tried to win his daughter’s affection. But she was miserable and ached to back home. He’d drop her off surly and defeated and return to his office to watch nature documentaries.

Clara suffered most under her mother’s oppressive love. Thing is, most mother’s guilt their children by saying to them, “you owe me your life!” But only Clara could counter back and say “and you owe me yours.”

Clara saved her mother’s life before she was even born. Her mother was this little red-headed waitress who woke up one day next to her husband of three months and realized that she didn’t want him anymore. The problem was that she was pregnant. But that problem was soon fixed. The next problem was that the abortion had damaged her insides and the doctor said she was going to die soon if it wasn’t fixed. Now she had two options. Get surgery or have another baby. But she couldn’t afford either. The surgery would cost too much and would reveal the secret Clara’s mom was desperately trying to hide. But the doctor also said that having a baby would correct her uterus and save her life in the process. A baby however would bring her back to the original problem— her marriage. She couldn’t afford the surgery by herself nor could she raise the baby by herself. And so in reality she had fewer than two choices. So she had to create an alternative choice that would make whatever choice she ended up with a welcome fate.

Forever a gambler she cast her life on a coin toss. Heads she’d die, and tails she’d have another baby. She went to her favorite bar and tossed the coin onto the countertop. It twirled and landed on the other side. She told the bartender to leave it alone, but before she could lean over the counter to read her fate, he picked it up for her and placed it on the bar’s varnished surface. It was tails. She wondered whether Tom the bartender had given her a new fate, but she didn’t care anymore. She ordered three double-shots of whiskey and bought a bottle of perfume on her way home. Drunk and reeking of cheap drugstore perfume she slithered up to her husband and made love to him. The next morning she knew she had made a choice. Nine months later Clara was born.

Clara grew up to become a strange child knowing that she was born in order to redeem her mother’s mistake, to give her another chance at a mother’s life, and in order to punish her by trapping her in a horrible marriage. So she developed these ideas that she was brought into this world as a divine agent- a blessing and a curse. She saved and destroyed a life. She was a child created for redemption and vengeance.

When she was a child, she loved to believe that she was divine vengeance acting on the behalf of the Lord. She even proclaimed herself as the Handmaiden of the Lord. She even remembers getting a nasty old teacher fired. Then when she was a college student, she became confused about her role. She really couldn’t avenge or redeem anyone. She didn’t know whom to love so she used all her love for herself. This kind of love made no demands except for Clara to follow her own heart. She could return it completely and never fear losing it. But this kind of love also trapped her in pigments that lasted as long as people came to look at monkeys and sunsets.
VI. Pygmalion Can Never Win

Clara understood that Kevin could offer her plenty of emotional fuel, but nothing of true worth. Their relationship had overstepped the bounds of absurdity, and neither could redeem the other's foolishness. She wondered whether redemption was just another cheap artistic sentiment, another cheap trick to cover up mistakes.

What was easier to understand was that the monkeys had loved her completely and without expectation. But what did they know anyway? They just ate their food and screwed each other and danced their congo dance. And yet Clara knew that their love was simple and pure and didn’t ask of anything. Not even to be loved in return. Clara didn’t need to redeem her mother or her father. Nor did she need to redeem her relationship with Kevin either. She wasn’t a divine agent sent to return balance, to forgive or punish. No one forced her to play any role. More importantly, she didn’t want to.

"Kevin, it’s really beautiful," she said.

"Thank you."

"Really, it’s lovely. It’s also ridiculous, everything is, including you and me... but still, I like it a lot."

"I’m glad you like it. Even if it didn’t get all this attention, I could still honestly say that it’s the thing I’m most proud of."

"I wish I could be proud of something," she said.

"You followed your heart, at least. You were honest with your feelings, I never am."

Clara couldn’t respond to this. But she didn’t need to. She lied to Kevin telling him that she had to leave because someone was picking her up. She lied saying that she would give him a call. She lied to him telling him that she was sorry about everything and wanted to work things out with him after she had time to think. And they lied to each other when they said they were both willing to wait and hope.

Kevin told himself that he didn’t really love either Laura or Clara. The only reason he dated girls who looked like each other wasn’t because of that mind-print that Clara spoke of in her letter. No image was given to him at birth showing him who his soulmate was supposed to be. The reason was simply that Clara’s face and Laura’s face were easy to draw. Their arrangement of features and their expressions were the easiest to capture in paints and charcoal. That was it. At least, that is what he wanted to believe. He needed a reliable, endurable model, a muse whose face would not change but whose heart could. And the only way he could keep this muse forever without having to love her was to find easy replacements. Kevin however, also realized that just as people can easily fall in love with monkeys and painted images, they can also easily fall in love with mere replacements. And so, although he knew they would never see each other again, he also knew that he would always remember her as the one who was like no other. And that he would never be able to paint her again.

Clara took one last look at the monkeys and took in their love with all her heart. And so the handmaiden broke free, stepped out of the paint and through the glass and out of the zoo.

VII. Order

But maybe it all depends on the sequence of things. It’s too bad we can’t just reconfigure events to their best time. Perhaps events could be shuffled around, so that bad memories are wedged far into the past and only the good memories are nearby—so close that you can just grab a handful of them with the assurance that not one finger would touch an unpleasant or painful one. We’d all be a lot happier if we could sequence our memories, order them in the way we want. Maybe, it all depends on the final image.

* * *

Before Kevin moved to San Diego and before Clara even knew about Laura, they were sitting underneath a willow tree. They were both greedy for what the other could offer, but at least they were being selfish together. And they really did prefer each other over loneliness.

"Kevin, what do you want?"

"A happy ending."

"That just depends on where you want to end the story," she said. "The only reason why movies or stories have happy endings is that they end it before anything horrible happens. Like if somebody gets cancer, or if people fall out of love, or if the world ends with people shooting bunnies."

"Well are we happy right now?" he asked.

She took his hand into hers and said simply and quietly, "Yes, I think so."

"Then let’s end the story right here."

Angela Hur ’02 is an English Literature concentrator and lives in Cabot House.
My Blocking Group Doesn't Mean to Block Out...

BY JOOHEE LEE

Chung + Myung + (3 x Kim) + Lim + Shim + Hur + Choi + Lee + Zymars = thirteen Korean-Americans, one Hong Kong-Chinese + one Greek-Jamaican; meet my blocking group. I never gave much thought on the personal impression that being in a nearly all-Asian blocking group would give to my peers. After all, we're all individuals who happen to be friends sharing similar ethnic backgrounds. But what started to make me think was when a friend, who was Asian herself, made a comment after dinner one day. She had been eating at a different table, and told me that she couldn't help but notice us, five Asian girls clad in similar body-skimming tops, flared jeans, and heeled shoes troop into the dining hall and line up to get our cards swiped. At first I was amused by her comment, but I couldn't help feeling a bit bothered by the idea that maybe other people had already noticed this and labeled us as being exclusive and cliquish. When I brought this up with my blockmate girls, they were all naturally a bit offended. Can we help it that we all happen to prefer figure-flattering attire and enjoy each others' company over dinner?

As the semester progressed, I have to admit that there were times when some of us felt some frustration that was connected to the homogeneity of our blocking group. At one point I couldn't shake off the feeling that I should have had given more thought about the blocking situation before I had made my decision. We all want diversity in our lives, whether we apply it to our course schedules, activities, or social circles. But the question was whether diversity necessarily applied to ethnicity. Isn't it enough that each of us had different interests, different personalities? For some of my blockmates, including myself, we couldn't help questioning whether we were limiting our experience during the remaining three years here by having made the choice that we did...

For me, this whole issue was just a phase. Having spent my freshman year in the Yard and then having to live in the Quad, away from the hustle and bustle of Harvard Square was an adjustment. Yes, there is a shuttle practically every ten minutes, but it just isn't the same as living by the River. After a while, the whole routine of going to classes, eating fly-by lunch, going to classes, running errands, and then coming back to the Quad to eat with the same people started getting to me. Don't get me wrong; I love my blockmates. But living day-to-day by the same patterns can get to anyone after a while.

But as time passed and people became caught up in their own daily lives, it made me remember why I made the choice that I did back in March. The idea of having found a group of friends sharing the same background is a comforting one. In high school, I never actively sought out to make friends who were specifically Korean. The closest I ever came to socializing amongst an Asian crowd was at church. And I was never part of the hangout-type crowd, although I did pass by them quite often on my way back home after my mother picked me up from SAT-prep classes.

When I came to Harvard, I found that there were various degrees between the extremes of being a Korean-American. Ask yourselves, how often do you get to be part of a group of people with interests and talents ranging from music composition, German film, and singing to fictional writing, computer programming, tae-kwondo, and abnormal psychology, who can still get together to laugh and stuff their faces with sushi and noodles? Or how often do you find people who will be willing to put down their books the night before exams and join you in a modern dance interpretation session while blasting on the Buffy the Vampire Slayer soundtrack? And it's definitely not every day when you find a group of guys who will hold a photo session to take glamour shots of themselves to give to you as a birthday present. And I will always fondly remember the month when the idea of the moment for the girls was to start an all-girl band called "Maria, Por Que?," until we realized most of us couldn't play any instruments or sing live. Yes, this is my blocking group. You may spot our sea of black-haired heads in Cabot dining hall, but I swear, we're not trying to be exclusive. It just so happens that 93% of us are Asian.

Joohee Lee '02 is a History and Science concentrator living in Cabot House.
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