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perceptions of beauty
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Cover: design by dongmin kim '03
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“Asian people are hot,”
a non-Asian male friend of mine recently said to me.
“Um, thanks?” I responded (secretly wondering if that
meant that the “hot” characterization applied to me as
well). What exactly is it about Asian females that makes
them the objects of desire of so many men, both Asian
and non-Asian? What makes someone have a rampant
Asian fetish? Is it genetic? Is yellow fever contagious?
How are Asian fetishes different from simply a general
preference for certain physical or personality traits? Hard
as I searched, I could not find a satisfactory explanation
of the mystery of the Asian fetish (nor a brave soul to
just come out already and write about their own particu-
lar preference for Asians).

But this is not surprising. Just think of the polar differ-
ces in the way Asians are perceived: Almond-
shaped eyes—Slant eyes. Porcelain skin—Yellow skin.
Dela- cate features—Flat face. Petite—Androgynous.
Thin—Anorexic. Modest—Subservient. Elegant—
Hooch. Status symbol—Whore. And this is only touch-
ing on the perceptions of Asian females. To even try to
scrape the surface of the perceptions of Asian men is a
challenge I feel unprepared to take.

As Asians living in such a
diverse country as America, it is
impossible to avoid dwelling
on how the other
cultural groups
view us, espe-
cially if you are
an Asian who has
not limited your-
self to having rela-
tionships with
only other
Asians. To try to
ask them all what
they see when
they look at us
would be at
the same
daunting
and too easy.
It would be like
looking at the so-
lutions in the back of your calculus textbook or sneak-
ing a peak at the Cliff Notes for a novel. You have an
answer, but now what?

In this issue of Yisei, we present to you the complexi-
ties of the perceptions of Asian beauty in the way we
know best: by exploring our own perceptions. We hope
to not merely have your eyes open and turn to us. Take
this opportunity: let your eyes look through ours.

—Jennifer Y. Seo ’03, Editor-in-Chief 2001-02
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REBEL
WITHOUT A
CREASE:

The "Asian Eye"
Takes Center Stage

by Jane Y. Kim

A few weeks ago, as I was helping a friend get ready for Citystep, doing her makeup and hair for her, I recalled a similar circumstance that took place during my senior year of high school. My friends and I were getting ready for a night out, and for fun, were putting makeup on each other. Well, actually, it was me putting makeup on my friends. One of the girls exclaimed that it was my turn to be made over, but another said, "Oh, I don't know how to do Asian makeup," indicating my eyes, which, like those of many Asians, don't have eyelids with a double fold. I, who happened to be the only Asian in the group, agreed with the other girls in admitting that makeup application on eyes like mine was different and tricky for those who weren't familiar with it. I ended up doing my own makeup that night, and didn't really think twice about it.

Another time, I had my makeup done at a department store makeup counter in a rather unflattering way. I sat on the stool, fidgeting and staring at the makeup artist's mocha-brown lips as she delicately tugged at my eyes with this or that brush or reflected on what colors to use. I felt uncomfortable the whole time, wondering how she was going to deal with my single-fold eyelids. I didn't think she would know how to apply makeup on what people call "Asian eyes." Not knowing how it was going to turn out, I was hesitant when I glanced into the mirror she finally handed me nonchalantly, only to discover the embarrassing but unsurprising fact that it wasn't flattering at all. Instead of criticizing it or saying something to the effect of—"You don't really know what you're doing, do you?"—I thanked the woman, told her that I might come back for a product later, hopped off the stool, and left, rubbing my eyes clean as soon as I turned the corner.

I've thought a lot about my reactions to situations like these. After all, I shouldn't feel embarrassed about the state of my eyelids. But I think it's difficult to react otherwise, given my background as a kid growing up in a Korean household on the outskirts of L.A.'s Koreatown. I remember when I was a kid, my mom would put tape
on my eyelids to produce that elusive fold. I would peel them off immediately, irritated by the sharp edges poking at the skin above my eyes. But then I would look into the mirror and see that my eyes had become more like my mom and my sister’s double-lidded eyes. Perhaps without actually recognizing beauty as a formal concept, I saw a difference which didn’t have to do with eyelids or facial structure, so much as it did with similarity to those around me whom I considered beautiful.

Fast forward about eight years. Now, the pieces of Scotch tape my mom had cleverly cut for my eyelids are available at the local Korean supermarket. When I pass by the makeup stand at the front of the market, I can see sheets of machine-cut tape slivers, as well as a special kind of glue, all made for the purpose of producing the double eyelid. Sometimes the polished ladies behind the counter are using these products themselves in order to show their customers how natural the induced double eyelid looks. Yes, society will not have to know to what extent their girls go to reach the more standard ideal of beauty that exists in society today. How healthy, I think to myself.

Along the same lines as this is the situation that confronted me when I got my makeup done by a Korean makeup artist for my high school senior portrait. The woman initially wanted to draw a line about a centimeter above the upper rim of my eyes, such that when I opened my eyes, it looked like I had a double eyelid. She matter-of-factly said that doing so would make my eyes look bigger. I asked her to erase it, but was a bit surprised that even a Korean makeup artist who had the skill to apply makeup appealingly to single-fold eyelids would choose to give it the appearance of one with a double fold.

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Given surrounding circumstances like these which seem to manifest an insecurity within much of Korean society, I think that I and many others like me have been effectively conditioned to view our eyes in a critical, euro-centric light, and to consider them as lacking in some way. I know many Korean girls who are constantly depressed because their eyes look small, and who feel very uncomfortable about applying eye makeup in front of other non-Asian girls. I’ve therefore come to the conclusion that my reaction to indifference or ignorance in the non-Asian world towards a facial feature that is so significant for a great number of Asian girls has to be an intentional one; because, for someone like me, such a negative reaction in the Korean community certainly doesn’t leave one confident in dealing with situations within the greater indifference of American culture, such as the incident at the department store cosmetic counter. If left to do what is most comfortable, I would probably let situations like that pass without much comment.

One might ask why I go back to these non-Asian makeup counters if I suspect I’m not going to be satisfied with the results. Why not just go to a Korean makeup counter where they know all the tricks of the trade for applying makeup on the single-fold eyelid? I wouldn’t mind doing that. But, and maybe this is just a point of defiance, I don’t feel that bad makeovers should preclude my buying from these large non-Asian cosmetic brands. After all, they often sell new products from their lines which aren’t as readily available from Asian cosmetic lines catering to a smaller
market of women who perhaps look for familiarity more than innovation. And if I’m one of their customers, regardless of whether I am Asian or not, shouldn’t I be able to expect knowledgeable, skilled service at their counters? After all, large makeup lines have made a big deal about extending the range of colors they offer for such makeup products as foundation or blush, accommodating all sorts of complexions. I see T.V. ads for makeup lines in which gobs of foundation in varying shades are displayed triumphantly as a mark of their diversified offerings. Some makeup lines use their catch phrases of the season to indicate that makeup for a new, multinational face is in order. And the models they use often look very ethnic, with heavy eyebrows or thick lips or flatter noses. That’s all very well, but if makeup lines have added colors to complement ethnic complexities and expanded their advertising to include minorities in their market, shouldn’t they also concern themselves with the makeup application portion of their expansion? The most logical way to do this seems to be to diversify the skills of the makeup artists representing their lines at department store counters. One option would be for these non-Asian makeup lines to hire more Asian makeup artists; the other would be to train their non-Asian employees to be ready for many different types of facial features, including the single-fold eyelid. Either way, I think it is high time for such steps to be taken in large, well-known cosmetic lines.

For the time being, you could speed up this process by being more upfront about the situation and telling makeup artists how you think they should do your eye makeup. Make them aware of the fact that contouring doesn’t really work for a mostly flat surface. Suggest the use of a color gradation to create a smoother, softer look, or point out to them that the bright colors many magazines tout as eye-openers don’t necessarily work on eyes with single-fold eyelids because there is no crease whatsoever to accentuate. After all, they’re there to be of use to their customers, aren’t they? Well, Asians, including those of us who don’t have that double eyelid, are most definitely a part of the market for makeup and other beauty products. Let them cater to us. But don’t let that mean that you mustn’t voice your opinion at the counter. Don’t do what I did, rubbing my eyes free of their unflattering makeup. For those of us who need these services that are now lacking, we must act the part of the consumer and make cosmetic lines aware of changes that need to take place. Corporations want their consumers satisfied, so if there is dissatisfaction at the makeup counter, changes will have to be implemented.

As for my friends—why would I still want to fool around with makeup when I’m with my friends? Well, I don’t think I should feel excluded from “girls’ night” just because my eyelids aren’t conducive to makeup application. I know that sounds trivial. Maybe it is. But it’s not really about getting my friends to wield that tricky black eyeliner skillfully on my expectant eyes, though I might very well try teaching them, letting my eyes be the subject of their first foray into the realm of the single-fold eyelid. It’s about overcoming an inhibition that has its roots in the crossover between a recognition of Western beauty in American culture, and a downplaying of natural ethnic beauty in much of the Korean community. So grab that eyeliner or pot of eyeshadow, and show your friends or that clueless makeup artist how it’s really done, minus the lingering shame. Because if those of us with single-fold eyelids start acting with confidence about how our eyes look, whether that be with gravity or humor, pretty soon, we just might be able to hop off that makeover stool and walk away without complaints—what a thought!

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Variations on a Theme

If one may overlook the grand irony in the following generalization, the most pernicious problem facing discussions of race in American democracy today is the fact that the dialogue is weighed down by too many generalizations. Pluralism, it would seem, stands antithetical to monolithic renderings of race and ethnicity, yet even in the modern era of exponential diversification, popular race discussions are unsettlingly barren of nuance and subtlety. How, indeed, does one man voice the angst, the emotion, the turmoil of an entire race? How does a single woman purport to understand what an entire race or ethnicity thinks, even if it that which she calls her own?

The simple truth is that one does not. Neither does one address the entirety of Asian American male sexuality in one short article. Asian American studies represent entire libraries of knowledge; scholarship on human sexuality represents yet more—merge the two and the topic becomes more, not less, expansive. The intellectual scholarship on Asian American male sexuality is respectably vast, but the popular writing and discussion on the topic is calculably broad and pervasive.

It is in this latter category that I choose to situate this piece. Philosophical intellectualism can be informative and challenging but so often tends toward cold abstraction. Instead, I invoke a more vernacular medium; this is not a research or term paper—there are no footnotes, no esoteric vocabulary, no inaccessible theoretical constructs. On the contrary, I submit to you an opinion piece, an “op-ed,” even a shouting off. Summing up the entire Asian American male experience remains a hopeless task, so I frame my thoughts and opinions far more locally. I present my ponderings on Asian sexuality in terms of—indeed, what could be more vernacular—hypersexualized pop sensation Britney Spears.

The obvious question immediately occurs: Why?

The obvious answer follows: Why not?

I'm a Slave 4 U

Whether we embrace it or revile it, Britney Spears has become a veritable pop cultural icon. She embodies the things little suburban girls’ dreams are made of, and the things plastic surgeons make women of. Spears represents a locus for cross-ethnic male sexual fantasy and a startling intersection point on the declining graph of quality in pop culture versus time. Grown men lust after her, little girls love her, dieting women hate her and most relevantly, Asian American men demonstrate special attraction to her.

It is unclear, and ultimately irrelevant, why
Asian American men would be particularly wooed by Miss Spears, but one might venture some amusing conjectures. Stereotypically, Asian American men are a sociocultural paradox; they are reputedly domineering within romantic relationships while marginal at best on the more general American socioeconomic landscape and weak, even effeminate, in traditional corporate hierarchies. If we hold this stereotype for purposes of argument, we might delude ourselves into seeing why Britney intoxicates with such potency in Asian American male circles. Her behavior purposefully vacillates between submissive and feminist; compare her recent quasi-hit “I’m a Slave 4 U” to her earlier single, “Stronger” and you have some idea of the range of messages that emanate from Britney’s lyrics. The cliché conclusion here points to the ways in which Britney vicariously fosters the Asian American male penchant for domination (“hit me, baby, one more time”) and meek, submissive romantic companions.

This, however, must certainly be an unsatisfactory conclusion for the growing population of second- and third-generation Asian American males who seek, as Beyoncé and her girls put it, “independent women.” It should hardly be an epiphany that there are growing numbers of Asian American men whose ideal mate might be best described by the adjectives “intelligent,” “witty,” “sharp,” and even “feisty” and not just “quiet,” “a good cook,” and “able to birth children well.”

Crude dichotomizations of Asian American male traits in terms of strength and weakness (both physical and behavioral) and desires in terms of submission and domination are merely veiled mechanisms for perpetuating appallingly tiresome sexual stereotypes in the American sociohistorical tradition.

**From the Bottom of My Broken Heart**

In an especially incisive December 7, 2001 *Boston Globe* article, Joan Anderman declares, “After listening to Britney Spears’s new album more times than is advisable, I’ve finally figured out what’s wrong. Ignoring the obvious—she can’t sing very well, her repertoire is a mess, and mom forgot to tell her that it’s anatomically impossible to be a virgin and a whore at the same time—what’s truly disturbing about “Britney” is how anguished the girl sounds.” Anderman’s devastating but remarkably en pointe review of Britney’s latest cleverly titled album, *Britney*, climaxes as she writes, “Her seduction is devoid of desire; rarely have the explicit writhings and erotic whispers of a beautiful young woman been so patently unsexy. Spears peddles an image that’s as pre-fab and plasticine as her songs. She’s simply not there.”

Indeed, Anderman writes truly; Britney is a soulless, plastic Barbie doll, which, ironically, suits her perfectly for her role as ideal male fantasy object. She is entirely a physicality, no mental or emotional strings attached, and as such, she might be particularly attractive to men whose familial upbringing renders them especially sensitive to the societal ramifications of interethnic liaisons. Asian families are well reputed for their general distaste for cross-ethnic marriages, so one might theorize that Britney Spears allows repressed Asian American men the pleasure of worry-free fantasy.

This assumes, however, that Asian American men still remain bound by the familial shackles that dictate intracultural marriage, and furthermore assumes that their families still adhere to antiquated familial hierarchies and norms. Asian families do progress at the normal rate of society, and Asian men have found themselves, dare I say it, sexually liberated insofar as cultural mandates no longer hold as fast as they used to, particularly
We respond viscerally to stimulation based on the universal, race-blind hormones we possess, not because of the race categories we erect around ourselves.

in a Western culture where the wedding of pluralism and independent thought encourages intermarriage with increasing frequency. This is not to suggest that suddenly Asian men exclusively seek non-Asian women—a brief surf of www.koreanfriendfinder.com will more than adequately demonstrate the still strong propensity of Asian men to seek out Asian women. But the point is that this is no longer a necessity or obligatory. Asian American men want Britney Spears for the same reasons that Caucasian, black, Hispanic, and all men want Britney Spears. Men are men: that is all. We respond viscerally to stimulation based on the universal, race-blind hormones we possess, not because of the race categories we erect around ourselves.

**Lucky**

In the end, it's all about working what you've got and appreciating what everyone else is doing to work what they've got. I often would like to think, in fact, that the term "Asian American male sexuality" is anachronistic and that we can be comfortable dropping the "Asian American" aspect of it in favor of a more encompassing appreciation of American male sexuality. In another sense, however, I prefer not to think that, for there is something very great about being an Asian American man, as opposed to "just a man." This is a difficult balance to achieve, certainly, but I expect that it is absolutely worth achieving—the deconstruction of stereotypes can be nothing but good for the unwieldy race dialogue on the current political landscape.

In many ways, being a American guy should involve or necessitate racial distinction only to the extent that being an American citizen should involve or necessitate race, or even better, to the extent that being a human being involves or necessitates race. In reverse analysis, it's good to be alive, it's better being a guy, and most of all, it's fantastic being a Korean American guy. There is not a hint of intended chauvinism—absolutely none—in that statement, rather an optimism that the general readership is savvy enough to detect the underlying message: that categories of distinction—whether racial, sexual, or both—should serve only to edify us in our quest for a nuanced understanding and enjoyment of who we are.

Ride, boys. Just enjoy the ride.

*photo credits:*
p.7: www.britneyspears.org
p.8, left: www.britneyspears.se
p.8, right: www.spacesaver.com/celeb/clnt/Britney_Spears_0.html

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Metamorphosis Through Pop Culture

by So-One K. Hwang

When I stepped off the terminal at Logan twelve years ago, moving from sigol (rural) Korea to inner-city Boston, I had no sense for diversity or pop culture. I suddenly found myself among big-eyed, big-nosed, tongue-rolling—just generally big—Americans.

I could only differentiate between people by the color of their hair and eyes, and although surrounded by people of many cultural and ethnic backgrounds, I wondered how I was supposed to tell a white person apart from other whites, a black person from other blacks. And soon I was surprised when people asked whether my older sister and I were twins and to hear Asia called a homogenous territory—everyone there has black hair; small, black eyes; and yellow skin, right? Chinese people’s eyes are slanted up, Japanese down, and Koreans? Who are they? People repeatedly asked, “Why are your eyes so small?” I could understand, not by their words, but by their insulting gesturing. Not that I knew enough English to give any response, but I would have liked to say, “Why the hell are your eyes so damn big?”

My travel from sigol Korea to Boston was a journey around the world as well as a journey in time. Suddenly immersed in the pop culture of an American city when the ’80s were transforming into the early styles of the ’90s, I was uncomfortable in a time and place where little girls got their ears pierced when two weeks old, got their nails painted with the help of their moms, and exposed one shoulder off a ripped T-shirt balanced by a side-pony tail. Not having reached the age of being interested in popular music before the move to the United States, I didn’t know what to think of my yellow school bus driver and his morning mix of Michael Jackson and a song with the line, “Let’s talk about sex, baby. Let’s talk about you and me.” My classmates were shocked to hear that the only singers I knew were MC Hammer and Chris-Cross—uh, I mean Kriss-Kross—when I had already lived in this new country for three years. And my claims that certain people looked exactly alike, when the only common trait was the same color hair, weren’t well received.

But soon I stopped associating pierced body parts with barbaric bone jewelry of native tribes and was delighted when a family friend and nun (a very cool nun) treated my sister and me to an ear-piercing in fourth grade. As time passed, I didn’t have to go through so many mental categorizations—blond-haired group, brown-eyed group, etc.—to identify people. It’s naïve to deny that people recognize people based on skin color, a significant physical trait, but now I really see people for finer details and meeting someone involves a rush of features, a reflection of my change in observation skills and mentality.

Living in a country that is called anything from a melting pot to a mosaic, I too somehow adopted the view of Korea as a homogenous country. As I saw fewer Korean or Asian faces, I lumped the sea of black hair together. As American pop culture lured me in, I framed Korea in my memory as a timeless place, perfect with its vibrant green rice
fields and unblemished by this culture of rap music filled with distasteful language, a culture in which little girls want to look like prostitutes (or, as they call it, Britney Spears), a culture I was taught to call trash.

When I attended Korean language school during my middle school years, my teacher, who was studying abroad in the States for a few years, updated me on the cultural revolution I was missing in my native country. I remarked that I had never seen mouth-to-mouth kissing in Korea, especially in the media, and that it was quite an unpleasant shock to see mint gum commercials and shows like Beverly Hills: 90210 for the first time. She said, "When I see Americans french-kiss on TV, it looks so cool, but when I see Koreans do it, it looks so gross. Isn't that strange but so true?"

I still had not seen people make-out on Korean television, but I could imagine it, and her words articulated my immediate reaction at this unfamiliar scene. I really didn't question this "obviousness" back then. Because I was so accustomed to seeing such things in America and not in Korea, I had forgotten that such unfamiliarities usually produce that "grossed-out" reaction. American culture was trend-setting and cool, and Koreans were just pathetic copycats, right? How could Koreans stoop so low? But how could I ask this when I enjoyed and adopted American pop culture?

As I matured, I was better able to understand why my mother brought us to the United States in the first place; she wanted us to grow up open-mindedly in a way she felt a conservative and limited culture and country like Korea couldn't foster. And whenever we received news of social progress, she would vaguely say that it was finally time or that Korea needed to continue to move in that direction. For me, whenever I saw glimpses of the pop culture change on the other side of the globe, which was once my home and now the image of paradise, with its morning dew and the backdrop of the mountains in my walk to kindergarten, I felt regret and immense loss. I had put Korea in a lose-lose situation. It couldn't please me if it developed a modern pop culture like the West because change would make it a copycat loser, nor could it please me by remaining frozen in time because then it would be backward and non-progressive. I didn't know how to give Korea, a country that once suffered immense consequences for being isolationists, a chance.

As I saw Americans as well as Koreans dye and rot their hair, turning beautiful silk into wimpy frizzles, I had no desire to touch my hair with chemicals. Once I ran into someone for a fleeting second, and my first impression was that she had remarkable and unfamiliar features. I realized moments later that she was Asian but was wearing blue contact lenses. Her jet-black hair and unreal eyes—with a thick blueness rather than the natural frosty blue that sparkles—made her very striking, but I vowed that I would never do such a thing. However, when I first heard of a book called Black Like Me, in which a white man dyes his skin and assumes the identity of a black man to understand life as a person of color, I thought it would be interesting to dye my hair blond and wear blue contact lenses to understand life as a person in the majority, a person of white skin. Re-
alistically, such an experiment would fail because my other Korean features are not so easy to disguise and because so many Asians today already do dye their hair blonde and wear blue contact lenses. Theories that this trend represents Asia's attempt to become more like the West, the most powerful and dominant sphere, sometimes made me wonder whether this trend to stereotypical European looks is as perverse as pigs training themselves to walk on two hind feet in George Orwell's Animal Farm. I know that Western vogue borrows many fashions from Asia, but the achieved look is exotic and very "oriental" in such a way that the conservatism is sexy. Although I want to promote Asian culture, I sometimes wonder whether the Western use and Asian lending is abuse. Again, nothing really could please me.

I had less strong views of Korean pop music, as I had less exposure to it, but I remember thinking that it was too sappy or that the rap sounded like incomprehensible Chinese. If people want good popular music, I wondered, why don't they just listen to American music? Now as I enjoy Korean music among other international repertoire, I hit myself on the head at the realization that this was truly a narrow-minded, America-centric view.

I sometimes used to associate some of my conservative views to my being Korean, and now I can't easily make that connection anymore. I compromised by calling this side of me "old Korean," like the traditionalist views that grannies hold, but this is definitely not an accurate term to describe me. I must admit that even my grandmother accepted the changes in Korea better than I did! I wanted to categorize my views as good old home values, but I couldn't find a category that represented my conservative pop culture values with my usual liberal and modern stances. The perceptions of my one Korean eye and my other American eye made me a cross-eyed monster. Perhaps I was fooling myself and I wasn't as conservative or liberal as I would have liked to believe.

Last summer, I visited my family in Seoul for the first time in eight years, and it was one of the most memorable experiences in my life. Excitement, anxiety, and fear combined into one emotion. In the airplane ride, I read a Korean journal in which was reported the controversy of a famous, overweight comedian who had lied that she had lost weight through diet and exercise, giving false hopes to many other women, when in fact she had had liposuction and plastic surgery. The article reported that more women in Korea than ever before were anorexic, although the fairly low number, compared to the American percentage, of people considered overweight in Korea would be considered average or even thin in America. Thirteen percent of the general public in Korea has had plastic surgery, whereas the figure for the United States is three percent.

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"Oooh, So One! Check out those [Asian] guys. They are actually cute."

their age, and were part of their majority. Seeing them having fun was a great consolation. Ironically, they were surprised to hear that much of the fashion in Korea was the fashion in America. Even my aunt remarked to me, "Grape-purple hair color would look good on you," and I inadvertently must have shot her a look that said, "Hell no."

Although Korean culture had become more liberal, some conservatism had not changed. No one wore bare-shoulder tank tops or higher than knee shorts, even in the hottest days. My preppy Banana Republic tank and Gap skirt got more stares than the most outrageous hair, and I dared not pull out my Abercrombie shorts.

To which world did I belong? Would I know physically muscular, and had a sexy edge. I didn't immediately realize that they were Korean. At that time, I was caught off guard and answered, "I guess so," but looking back, I think it really was cool. I wish I could take back my reply and tell my cousin so. I asked myself, why am I so prejudiced and judgmental against my own people? Why shouldn't Korea embrace modern culture? Sure, fat tastes good, so McDonald's will appeal to anyone anywhere, but Koreans will be Koreans and fear not: kimchi will not be abandoned, as our craving must be satisfied. In the same way, modern pop culture is fun and instantly gratifying, but never once was I confused and thought myself to be in America when in Korea. Korean pop culture, no matter how "Western" it looked on the surface, definitely had a distinct, Korean flavor.

I didn't realize how wrong my mentality was until one day my school friends [non-Asian] said to me at a multicultural talent show while an all-male Asian group was performing, "Oooh, So One! Check out those guys. They are actually cute." This made me very uneasy, and I couldn't believe how this comment implied insultingly that it should be surprising that Asian guys are attractive. There should be no reason why I

To which world did I belong?

the comfortable feeling of being part of the majority ever again? Maybe I was immature and frustrated that, although I wear extra small in the States, I couldn't fit into anything but mediums and larges when shopping in Korea and that I was repeatedly told that my body type didn't fit Korean clothes. Puh! As if the very few hamburgers I've had in my life at McDonald's made my body "non-Korean"! But I realistically acknowledged that an American diet could have affected the way I grew up and developed. Perhaps I wanted to be the cool relative from America but discovered that I wasn't so cool. Perhaps I didn't like being considered old-fashioned. Perhaps I didn't like to question my mind-set and values. Perhaps I didn't like feeling uncomfortable. Perhaps I was just frustrated to discover that I blended into the crowd neither in Boston nor in my native country.

When shopping, my cousins, sister, and I stopped outside a store and looked at a poster. My cousin remarked, "Maa-sit-jii (isn't it cool)?" The poster was a picture of a man and a woman dressed in black sportswear. They were tan, athletic, and had a sexy edge. I didn't immediately realize that they were Korean. At that time, I was caught off guard and answered, "I guess so," but looking back, I think it really was cool. I wish I could take back my reply and tell my cousin so. I asked myself, why am I so prejudiced and judgmental against my own people? Why shouldn't Korea embrace modern culture? Sure, fat tastes good, so McDonald's will appeal to anyone anywhere, but Koreans will be Koreans and fear not: kimchi will not be abandoned, as our craving must be satisfied. In the same way, modern pop culture is fun and instantly gratifying, but never once was I confused and thought myself to be in America when in Korea. Korean pop culture, no matter how "Western" it looked on the surface, definitely had a distinct, Korean flavor.

I didn't realize how wrong my mentality was until one day my school friends [non-Asian] said to me at a multicultural talent show while an all-male Asian group was performing, "Oooh, So One! Check out those guys. They are actually cute." This made me very uneasy, and I couldn't believe how this comment implied insultingly that it should be surprising that Asian guys are attractive. There should be no reason why I...
Korea is not in a lose-lose situation with me anymore.

be. And the argument that Asians want to look white because of the trend to lighter hair and colored contact lenses is unfounded because choosing something that really bothered me about Korea, it would be its conformist culture itself and not necessarily the things to which it was conforming. Having grown up in the United States but having been born in Korea, I could always separate myself from American culture and gaze at Korean culture from a distance. I truly appreciate the privilege of choosing the best of both worlds, and this is not limited to the topic of pop culture. Had I grown up in Korea like my cousins, I would probably just be as eager to follow the popular trend. If a friend highlights her hair, I don’t necessarily have to compliment her, but I also don’t need to question her integrity as a person just for choosing to put chemicals in her hair.

Developing and evaluating my attitude toward the changes in Korea has been a process of self-discovery, and the experience has positively affected the way I approach change and cultural issues. Korea is not in a lose-lose situation with me anymore. I am so proud for the progress it has made, for not being the pathetic backward country I wanted it to remain just to gratify some idealized childhood memory.

www.law.columbia.edu/course_005_L9436_001/2000/surgery.htm

all photos courtesy of so-one k. hwang

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the stranger
by Joo-Hee Chung

i walk along the night beach
blue and red neon lights festive and captivating
the shimmering water dancing on my small toes
tasting the salty Pusan ocean breeze

i walk between familiar buildings
apartment windows grey and sleepy
cold winter morning air stinging my cheeks
hurrying to the warmth of my classroom

my eleven-year-old memories pieced together
unchanged and waiting

suddenly
the water is cold to my touch
familiar paths are lost
there is no love to seek

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Reflections...
...of a lonely white boy in Korea

by Aaron Miller

At about 8:30 PM on July 16, 2001, the spacious Singapore Airlines jet landed on a floodlit runway of South Korea's brand new Incheon International Airport. Were it not for the endless rows of airplanes featuring the colorful logo of Korean Air, I could have sworn I was back in San Francisco's international terminal. As I disembarked the plane, I followed the other passengers through sparkling corridors and came to the passport inspection stations. I would not have the opportunity to witness such a large gathering of non-Koreans until a full month later.

While waiting in line to have my passport checked, I had plenty of time to reflect on the somewhat fortuitous circumstances that had brought me to Korea sooner than I ever expected. During my sophomore year at Harvard, encouraged by friends and eager to obtain some respite from the drudgery of computer science, I had decided to take Korean language. I had always wanted to learn some Korean, having been exposed to Korean culture through frequent contact with Koreans and Korean-Americans who shared my passion for classical music. I was intrigued by the challenge of learning a language of which, by all indications, practically everyone else in the class already knew a great deal. One year later, after finally admitting to myself that I was not cut out to be a computer science concentrator, I began studying Korean history. So I had arrived in Korea to conduct research with Harvard funding for my senior thesis on the Kwangju Uprising of 1980, a pro-democracy student movement that turned into a bloody confrontation between the South Korean military and the citizens of Kwangju.
By the time I had finished ruminating on these subjects, I was at the front of the immigration line. I greeted the customs official, who couldn’t have been too much older than I was, in Korean as I handed him my passport and arrival form.

“You speak Korean?” he asked me in English.

I responded in Korean, “Yes, I’ve studied it for two years.”

“Where did you study Korean?”

“At Harvard.”

After silently demonstrating his approval, he finished inspecting my passport and waved me on. I proceeded to the international arrival area, where I greeted my host, Mr. Jeon. I had never met him, though his daughter was a close friend of mine who had been instrumental in encouraging me to learn Korean in the first place.

As we drove to Seoul in Mr. Jeon’s shiny Daewoo sedan, I did my best to converse with my host in my broken Korean, which had become considerably more broken after a month and a half of total disuse. But I constantly found myself glued to the view outside as I eagerly soaked up my first impressions of Korea. We drove over a massive bridge that connected the airport’s island with the mainland, and I contemplated the vast expenditure that must have supported this project to establish Korea as a major international hub for air traffic to Asia. As we neared the center of Seoul, it suddenly hit me that all of the signs were in Korean. Until this point, no matter how much Korean history I had learned, Korean for me was a language spoken by Korean-Americans. The concept of a distant country across the Pacific where everyone spoke Korean was unfathomable to me.

We finally arrived at Mr. Jeon’s home. It was a cozy house with a small garden in Daeji-dong, Gangnam-gu, a section of southern Seoul dominated by tall commercial buildings. Mr. Jeon’s wife greeted me with boundless hospitality, emerging from the kitchen with a juicy subak or watermelon.

The next morning, I had only a few hours to take in Seoul during the daylight before my flight to Kwangju, but the images from that day would stick with me. I was astounded by the large number of identical apartment buildings, their pastel-painted concrete structures invariably topped with the logo of one of Korea’s chaebol—the large conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai, SK, and LG. I caught glimpses of more apartment buildings of the same type when my plane descended over Kwangju. For some reason, I had assumed that this style of architecture, hardly pleasing to the eye, would be limited to the capital city. It turned out that I would be living in one of those buildings for the next month.

Once on the ground, I spotted an excited group of three people who looked like they were expecting someone. Since I was the only Westerner in sight, they recognized me immediately. I had arranged a homestay through the Kwangju Center for International Visitors, and I knew nothing about my host family except that they consisted of a husband (Dr. Shin) and wife (Mrs. Shim) with a ten-year-old boy (Juyeong).

Once we reached the car—another Daewoo—juyeong climbed into the back seat and didn’t take his eyes from me the entire way. My host family was apparently expecting that I would know practically no Korean, but they soon realized that I could carry on a decent conversation about simple topics. Both of the parents spoke some English as well, so between the two languages we could communicate slowly.

The Shins lived on the seventh floor of the first building in a large apartment complex called Geumho in a section of northwestern Kwangju. Despite the seemingly haphazard placement of these apartment blocks, I marveled that each one seemed to be a self-contained community, with its own markets, shops, and parking garages. The Shins’ apartment itself consisted of a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. While it was cozy, it didn’t feel small. During the next month I stayed in Juyeong’s bedroom, while he slept in his parents’ room.

I soon settled into a routine in Kwangju, taking the number 37 bus each morning to Chonnam National University (from here on referred to as “Chonnam”). I spent much of my time at that college’s “May 18 Institute,” an organization devoted to researching the Kwangju Uprising. In Korea, the uprising is widely known as 5.18 (pronounced o il pal in Korean) after the date in 1980 when the demonstrations began. In fact, the practice of referring to historical events by their dates is widespread throughout East Asia. Koreans even refer to the Korean War as 6.25 (yul i d), which seems ridiculous considering that the North Korean invasion on that date in 1950 was only the start of a three-year conflict. I have often reflected on this style of designating events
after the tag "September 11" (or even "nine one one") has become so frequent in our national vocabulary. I know of no other event in American history that has become so firmly associated with a single date.

In addition to my work at the institute, I also scheduled several interviews with participants in or experts on the Kwangju Uprising. Practically everyone I talked to was impressed that an American student would be interested in an event known to few people in the U.S. My first interview was with Yi Jaeui, a journalist who had watched many of his college classmates fall in the spring of 1980 and who later wrote a moving firsthand account of the incident.2 I met Mr. Yi in front of the student union building at Chonnamdae and got into his car. I had assumed that he would take me to some restaurant or coffee shop where we could sit down and do the interview. Instead, he asked me, "Would you like to go to the May 18 Cemetery? You said that you hadn't been there yet."

So I was given a tour of the cemetery where the victims of the military massacre were buried, and I probably had the best possible tour guide. He pointed out the graves of various leaders of the student movement, usually adding, "He was my friend." The magnitude of the loss of all these young people was very moving, and I was close to tears several times. I saw many graves of students my own age or younger. Bak Byeonggyu, freshman, Dongguk University, 19 years old. Hwang Hogeol, 20, killed May 25, 1980. Im Jongin, aged 21 years, one month, twelve days—almost exactly my age at the time of my visit.

After the emotionally draining experience of walking through the cemetery, it was uplifting to interview Mr. Yi, who was obviously very dedicated to the cause of Korea's democracy movement and determined that the sacrifices of his friends should not be in vain. At the end of our two-hour interview, he pointed at the children playing in the large open park at the front of the cemetery. "These children instinctively understand the meaning of democracy," he said in perfect English. "We must be sure to teach our children the importance of democracy and reunification, not anti-communism. Only in this way can our country become truly democratic."

At the other extreme, I had a disastrous interview with a professor from Kwangju University about two weeks later. I had scheduled the meeting for a Monday afternoon, and was accompanied by Bak Juntaek, a Chonnamdae student who would be my inter-
preter. Because of bad traffic and pouring rain, we arrived approximately eight minutes late, only to be told by the professor's secretary that he had already left. Both of us were incredulous, but I rescheduled the interview for the following morning.

We arrived early this time. I exchanged pleasantries with the professor, with whom I had already spoken on the phone. As I began asking questions, he suddenly launched into a five-minute lecture that my friend Juntaek reluctantly summarized for me. Essentially, the professor was annoyed that I hadn't made an appointment with him at least a month in advance, and that I hadn't provided him with questions ahead of time. He also warned me that he was extremely busy and that I should only ask him very specific questions directly related to my research topic. For the rest of the interview I did just that. He ended the interview by telling me in order to be a true scholar, I should learn Chinese, Japanese, Russian, French, German, and possibly Italian. I found this to be quite ironic coming from a professor who didn't even know English. Furthermore, according to him, I should marry a Korean woman. I thanked him for the advice, failing to understand his strange personality.

While I was in Kwangju, I was constantly impressed by the kindness of the college students I met. I was invited to a meeting of Chonnamdae's English conversation club called BBC ("Building Better Community"), whose members treated me as if I were a visiting foreign dignitary. I was impressed that they could so easily converse in English about Korean politics, the discussion topic for that meeting. Afterwards, I was invited to join them for dinner, then soju and beer. Later that month, the Kwangju Center for International Visitors invited me to give a short presentation about my research and experiences in Korea. After the program, I walked around downtown Kwangju with five of the college students who had attended. One told me that he felt I had an excellent understanding of Korean culture and that I interacted with Koreans very well. I was touched.

I always attracted a lot of attention in Kwangju. I had never experienced the sensation of being instantly distinguishable as a minority. During my month there, I saw foreigners—mostly English teachers and the occasional Mormon missionary—only four times, though I was told that there were several thousand foreigners in the city during the summer. Everyone stared at me on the street, especially young children, who would often exclaim "Miguk sarani!" ("American!"). When I responded, "Ne, miguk sarani ieyo" ("Yes, I am American"), they would either look at me as if I were from outer space, or run away. One day I was walking around the campus of Chosun University with Juyeong and his mother, and we came upon a group of perhaps thirty kids who were part of a summer tae kwon do camp. They suddenly started waving and yelling "Hi!" in my direction. The camp director noticed this, came over and introduced himself, and asked if I might like to see a demonstration. Again feeling like a foreign dignitary, I watched as the eager children lined up and proudly performed various tae kwan do moves in perfect synchronization.

My host family was always gracious and accommodating, and they never ceased to be amazed by my interest in Korean culture. I was somehow able to communicate with Juyeong, even though he knew only a few words of English. He could understand my Korean reasonably well, but it was difficult for me to understand him because he used many slang words and his pronunciation was somewhat distorted. Juyeong always wanted to take me on walks around the neighborhood, I suspect partly to impress his friends. After all, not every Korean child has an American big brother visiting for the summer.

Not every aspect of my experience with the Shin family was positive. The very first day I met them, Dr. Shin asked, "Are you Christian?" Not "what religion are you," but "are you Christian."

"Anio, yudaeni ieyo," I answered. ("No, I'm Jewish.")

I still remember his response vividly. "Ah, you are Jewish?" (He pronounced the final word more like "Juwishi.") "You see," he continued, "Jesus Christ is... only God... just... people don't know!"

Despite this awkward first approach to the subject, I assumed that religion would not be a frequent topic of discussion with my host family. However, Dr. Shin brought up the matter no later than my very first night in Kwangju. I don't remember the entire conversation, but we somehow ended up talking about the Holocaust. Dr. Shin explained that the Holocaust, like everything else, had been predicted by the Bible and was part of "God's plan." And although he stated it in a rather circuitous fashion, he also argued that this
event was God’s punishment for the Jews because they did not “accept the whole Bible.” Needless to say, I was deeply disturbed by his remarks, though I thought it wise not to create a tense situation my first night there.

I also ran into problems when I agreed soon after I arrived to accompany the family on their four-day vacation to Gongju in August. I was told a few weeks later that this “vacation” was actually a “very important meeting” for their church. Fine, I thought, I’d come along and explore Gongju on my own. Then about a week before the vacation, I was suddenly told out of the blue that this event was a suxianghao or “Bible camp” and that Dr. Shin had already reserved a place for me without my knowledge! I had to then carefully explain that I had come to Korea to do research, not to study the Bible. This was followed by an hour-long lecture during which Dr. Shin argued that it was the will of God that I had come to Korea to stay with his family so that I could become “born again.” Despite his passionate attempts to change my mind, the family respected my wishes and I arranged to stay in a Kwangju hotel while they were gone.

When I mentioned my difficulties with evangelism to my friends over the phone, they invariably asked, “Didn’t you tell them that you’re Jewish?” Of course I had, but unfortunately that was part of the problem. Apparently, since I was one of God’s chosen people—and, according to Dr. Shin, the best people on earth, though Jewish tradition does not claim such superiority—I had a special obligation to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Dr. Shin insisted that Jews were so absorbed in being successful that they failed to understand the nature of God. “God is alive,” he told me. The concept of God being “alive” seemed rather strange to me—God is not human, therefore God has no “life.”

My Jewishness definitely added to the curiosity of the Koreans I met. Once, just to see what it was like, I attended church with the Shin family. After the service, which included a rambling sermon of one and a half hours, I was introduced to the large church choir. My host, who occasionally served as the choir’s conductor, told me that all of them had studied Jewish history very thoroughly. (I refrained from pointing out that the Jews had changed a great deal in the several thousand years since the Torah was written.) However, I was apparently the first Jew any of them had seen. It was a weighty burden to be charged with representing both Americans and Jews at that moment.

Finally, living with my host family provided a unique window into Korean society. It would be dangerous to assume that what I observed was universal. Still, I couldn’t help noticing that Juyeong was incredibly spoiled. This came as a surprise after having met many Korean-American parents who are quite strict with their children. I also once had a curious conversation with Dr. Shin during which he half-jokingly asked me if I was interested in marrying a Korean woman. He added that he knew several “obedient” (sunjongjeogin) women in his church. A bit shocked by his use of the word “obedient” to describe women, I explained to him that in the U.S. this would be considered very sexist. I’m not sure if he understood me, but the experience nevertheless demonstrated that women in Korea are still seen as subordinate to their husbands.

When it was time to return to Seoul for the final two weeks of my stay in Korea, I was a bit sad to leave the students I had met. While we drove to the airport in Mrs. Shim’s car—all the while listening to a tripe song entitled “Yesu, Yesu, Yesu, sarang ui jumun” (“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Lord of Love”)—I knew that I would not miss the constant proselytizing. Still, I had bonded with my host family during the month I had stayed in their home. I said goodbye to Mrs. Shim and Juyeong,
who did not look happy, and boarded my flight for Seoul.

I was excited to be in Seoul again. The capital city is considerably more cosmopolitan than Kwangju, and seeing foreigners on the street is not at all unusual. The size of Seoul was daunting, but luckily the subway proved just as fast, clean, and cheap as my Korean textbooks had described. I continued pursuing research leads during my stay there, but also had the opportunity to engage in more touristy activities. I visited one of the royal palaces (Chang-deokgung), the War Memorial, Seoul Tower on the top of Namsan, and the street called Insadonggil where traditional Korean crafts are sold. I even had time to take a tour of the Joint Security Area in the Demilitarized Zone, on the border with North Korea.

Though my time in Seoul was brief, I was there long enough to be struck by the differences in lifestyle that distinguished the capital from Kwangju. Seoul is in every way a modern city dominated by consumer culture, while the people of Kwangju tend to have a more provincial mindset. Koreans really do think of Seoul as the center of their national life, and financial resources are poured into the continuing development of the city. This has negative consequences, too, of course. Seoul is not a particularly beautiful city, as I noticed from the observation deck of Seoul Tower. I left the capital wondering if other regions of Korea would ever become similarly developed, and what effect this would have on Korean society.

During my six-week stay in Kwangju and Seoul, I learned a great deal about Korean culture, improved my Korean, accomplished some of my research aims, and had many unforgettable experiences. I was happy that I had the opportunity to visit two very different locales, since many visitors to Korea have only enough time to see Seoul and its environs. Most of all, I was humbled by the realization that as much as I thought I knew about Korea, I still found it very challenging to meet Koreans halfway and establish effective communication between two cultures. After my trip, I think I began to understand why some Korean-Americans I know dislike going to Korea. I can imagine that the pressure of looking Korean but not conforming to Korean expectations would be daunting.

Though I was more homesick for the U.S. that summer than I ever had been, I already started to miss Korea from the moment I stepped off the plane in San Francisco. I do hope that some day I can go back—to meet old friends, make new ones, and expand my knowledge of this exciting country.

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1 In Korea, the wife keeps her surname after marriage.

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From Starcraft to Net-Speak: Investigating South Korea, the World's #1 Broadband Internet User

The first Internet connection in Korea was established in 1982 when SDN (System Development Network) was connected from Seoul National University. It was not until 1994, however, that KT Kornet, the first commercial Internet service, came onto the Korean Internet scene.

by Joo-Hee Chung & Christine Kyuyoung Lee

Since then, more than ten Internet Service Provider companies have entered the Internet market and are now in fierce competition with each other. Some of these companies include Chollian, Naunuri, Hitech, and i-net. Until not too long ago, Korea's network system was mostly composed of HANA/SDN, KREOnet, and KERN—three major branches of connection primarily geared towards research purposes. As users' demands have increased, however, commercial Internet service rates have been increasing exponentially.2

In fact, today, according to the Korea Times (September 27, 2003), South Korea has the highest broadband penetration by far in the Asia-Pacific region, which ultimately makes South Korea the world's #1 broadband user (Broadband refers to new, high-speed TV and PC cable services such as ADSL). “The results show that currently broadband connections make up about 95% of Korea's total, unique audience that accesses the Net from home,” said Kim Tae-Hyun, marketing and sales director at Nielsen/NetRatings, the company that released the survey results. Compared with other countries renowned for high-tech industries, such as second place Hong Kong with 53 percent and Taiwan with 35 percent, the numbers are staggering indeed.

Why Korea? Though the broadband boom may seem baffling, experts explain that there are some unique factors in the Korean technology industry that resulted in this phenomenon. There have been enormous changes occurring in the information infrastructure itself in Korea. In the streets and subways of Seoul, broadband suppliers' advertisements such as those of Hanaro Telecom's Hanafos (boasting teen heartthrob You Seung-Jun) or Korea Telecom's Megapass are ubiquitous. The fierce competition between these and other suppliers, along with the easy and cost-effective installation of broadband due to the high percentage of apartment housing, prices were driven down to around forty-thousand won (US$30) per month.

This high-speed broadband infrastructure is significant in that it allows users to gain faster access to more web pages. Another Nielsen/NetRatings report indicates that Koreans spend more than twice as much time online than most countries, viewing a whopping 96 pages per surfing session - more than a third more than Taiwan, the next highest in terms of page views.5 In addition, the accessibility of broadband Internet has been found to have an effect on the characteristics of Korean Internet users. According to a June 2001 article by the Internet magazine Intage Express by Intage, Inc., Internet users in South Korea are mostly young people, with low penetration rates of 40-49 year olds (29%) and
those above 50 (6%). Penetration rates also varied by profession, students (84%) and office workers (76%) having much higher rates than service/salespersons (35%) and housewives (24.3%). More notably, unlike many other Asian countries, most Korean Internet users logged on from home instead of from school or work. This is explained in the article that “an influx of “Internet ready” apartments, and the well-known Korean love for Internet gaming, may be contributing to this trend,” showing that the Korean broadband infrastructure indeed affects Korean Internet demographics.8

The broadband growth was not arbitrary, however; it was carefully planned and orchestrated by the Korean government. In 1995, the Ministry of Information and Communication embarked on a three-stage plan to spend 32 trillion won (US$25.3 billion) in building the information infrastructure by 2010. The first stage was reached in 1997, laying optical fiber networks to cover 80 cities. The second stage - wiring the entire country with optical fiber lines to power high-speed Internet and telecom services - was finished last December, five years ahead of schedule, because the ministry “advanced the timing to meet the surging need for the Internet and enhance Korea’s information technology (IT) competitiveness.”7

Interestingly, the high-tech infrastructure the government and President Kim Dae Jung has pushed so hard to construct has also influenced the government in some ways. The high-speed network has quickened the establishment of an “electronic government system” according to the minister, resulting in a large percentage of government offices using high-speed lines to handle administrative duties and deliver public services. Also, the demand for political reform and honesty has been realized through government or media websites, where ordinary citizens provide feedback through polls and discussion forums. No longer can the government hide behind the complicated web of red tape and system of bureaucracy. The fast-paced Internet era is providing Koreans with the thing they most desire from the government - transparency. This has always been an issue in Korean society, ridden as it is with tales of bribery and issues of veiled political decisions. Finally, through the Internet, Korean citizens are being given a chance to shape a more accountable democracy.

This “Internet transparency” is only one aspect of a newly developing Korean Internet culture. Of course, the development of Korean Net culture cannot be explained without a discussion on “PC room culture.” In fact, some assert that Internet industry’s rapid growth was rooted in the PC rooms and the game “StarCraft.” Before, there were only a few game manias that would play games over the Internet. However, once StarCraft became popular, the number of PC rooms (an Internet café type of place in which one has access to high speed connection for a nominal fee) based on LAN connection rapidly increased. Now, one cannot walk in the streets of Seoul without passing by at least one PC room per building. In today's PC rooms, although most of the game players do still play StarCraft, there are a wide variety of other activities that are available in a PC room. One can play games, or do “hwa sang chatting,” which is when one looks into a camera while one chats so that it adds visual aspect to the online social experience. As the PC room provides a space for young people to interact with each other, other social spaces, such as coffee shops, bars, and billiard rooms have been converted to PC rooms.8

However, this sudden growth of heavy Internet usage brings with it negative side effects. Problems commonly associated with Internet addiction anywhere—like the isolation of the individual, misusage of anonymity, and tendency to take relationships too lightly—are magnified manifold for Korean Internet users today. Recently, the world-famous Internet research institute Netvalue put out results that indicate that Korean net surfers’ rate of visiting adult sites is ranked first in all of Asia. In a given period of a month, 56% of Korean Internet users visited adult sites.9 According to the organization Hangook Namsung Eui Junhwa (“Korean Men’s Calls”), more than 650 husbands, frustrated with their wives’ Internet addiction which often lead to extramarital affairs, have called in to seek help and advice.10 Even young school age children are not immune to these egregious symptoms of Internet addiction. A middle school student runs a web site on bomb manufacturing instructions while an elementary school student who logged in to a suicide web site eventually took his own
life. Among these extreme cases, the more pervasive problem that plagues young people today is simply spending too much time on the Internet and in PC rooms. Experts claim that the level of Internet addiction has reached new highs can only be described as “the new drug of the digital age.” One eleven-year-old spends six hours per day in front of the computer while a sixteen-year-old high school freshman confessed to even skipping his meals to spend at least ten hours per day playing Internet games. The latter already has attempted to run away from home to a PC room, and currently, in Sinchon Severance Hospital’s psychology department, 10-20% of total patients is receiving treatment for Internet addiction. Such students often stay overnight in PC rooms, going to school straight from there. One student admitted that it is “difficult for [him] to concentrate in class because [he] is distracted by devising different Starcraft game plans.”

There are more ways in which Internet culture negatively affects young people. One parent recalls being shocked at reading his high-school-age son’s composition for school—his son’s work was replete with language usage that do not belong in serious academic writing. His assignment showed no regard for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and spacing—a prevalent phenomenon in Internet chat rooms. This disturbing trend of language pollution through the Internet is in no way limited among the student population. In fact, although there are online lingoese like “lol” and “brb” amongst Internet users all over the world, in Korea, the problem of net-speak has gone beyond the level of abbreviating or writing phonetically. Of course, there exists the equivalent of lol, brb that are created for the sake of convenience. For example, “video” can be shortened to “vidyo” and “Seoul” to “Sui.” But many people have expressed concern over the fact that many young internet users have started to use language so distorted that it seems like a foreign language or a secret code, rather than just a cute or short version of the original language. For example, “jib” becomes “dwb” and “chingoo” becomes “tinggoo.” “Bo nae joo sae yo” becomes “bun ae jyoo sae yuh.” Furthermore, more and more people are starting to use graphics, symbols, and Chinese characters and have started to ignore rules of grammar and spelling altogether. Recently these concerns have prompted some 3000 internet users to sign a petition for “correct hangul usage on the internet,” headed by “Damoin” and “Iodo,” two big internet service companies in light of this year’s Hangul Day, October 9th, 2001.

Internet culture prevails outside of the PC room as well. U.S. sociologist Don Tapscott first coined the term “net generation” in 1997. Since then, the term “n-generation” (or n-seidai) has been incorporated into the Korean culture to refer to a group of young person born after the year 1977. Because it has become such a central part of Korean culture, most people in Korea think that the term originated in Korea. Members of the n-generation are characterized by their creativity, independence, originality, and egocentrism. The most obvious way in which the concept of n-generation permeates everyday life is in consumer culture. Studies have shown that n-generation is more sensitive to advertisements than any other age groups because they are constantly looking for ways to express themselves visually and externally and set themselves apart from others. Korea communication Freetel spent 10,000,000,000 won (approximately 7.7 million dollars) to change one of its brand names from PC 016 to (n)016 because they anticipated how the n-generation would play an important part in consumer culture. Mobile communication services such as this one is the main venue by which the Korean Internet culture thrives. As of now, cell phone usage has exceeded regular phone usage, and there are many companies such as TTL, n-top, Na, itouch, iclub, and Khai, that are devoted to keeping internet culture and mobile communications connected. With a motto like “if it’s not unique, throw it away,” n-generation has become not only the consumer, but also the origin of production. Their constant search for something spontaneous and original pressures the marketing industry to crank out products that are more creative than ever. This relationship perhaps promotes the characteristically Korean tendency in which fads become popular in a short time and then die down just as quickly. Because the members of n-generation, who are looking for something unpredictable, are sensitive to the marketing strategies geared towards them, they eventually buy the new and creative products. This erodes the novelty of the product, and the conformity that results from this phenomenon leads to another set of consumer demands, once again launching both consumer and producer alike into the cyclical nature of consumer-producer relationship of the n-generation.
This sudden Internet growth and broadband seems to mirror both Korea’s industrial history of the past few decades and the Korean people’s love of fast development and change. The challenge will be to successfully control the growth and prevent it from snowballing at an uncontrollable pace, leaving social problems and other side effects behind in the wake of the craze, such as the Korean industry did when it developed at a breakneck speed from the 1960s to 1990s. Though the industrial growth has generally been successful, numerous aspects such as the education system or social welfare have been neglected as a result of the Koreans focusing solely on speedy development, and have consequently have festered into major issues today.

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Falls on Glass by Anna Joo

Smoky mouths and my solemn gaze
cross the white
and brick of Puritan ghosts
centuries-old: you,
under the slightest
weights of eighteen virgin years
on our soles.

Above the curl of your
chapped lip
   towards the pale
in which I search:
a ripple and
you lose a lash.

A left eyed miracle,
the hole of a
world birthing a black sun.

In the soft
flapping of white: a patriotic banner
of residuals —
mercury,
falling

save
a hot battle and a
piece
in the misery of first love.

Tomorrow?

Along the glint
where the heavens kiss the mud
one tossed
bedsheet
embracing the horizon
that world
within
its folds, 
leaving you to frost 
and bite.
By the friction 
and layer of polyester 
lining lamb: you and 
I, 
beyond 
the Wonderland.

A flutter 
inside
swollen
inside out.

And the gleam 
under glass, 
housed below 
parting grey from 
brick: our 
nocturne heavy, 
resting underneath 
Chopin’s bones. 
Twelve footprints 
but only the wind 
at the door.

You: white, 
sheath opaque 
and a stained glass between the drapes.

Blush, but don’t break: 
demure 
pre-face, 
a love hemophiliac 
after the glimpse of 
yesterday: 
a snowflake on my lash 
and transparent romance 
clear ahead.

Anna Joo ’04 is an Economics concentrator in Eliot House.
On October 24, 2001, noted authors Heinz Insu Fenkl and Ty Pak visited Harvard to discuss and lead a workshop on the recently released Kori: The Beacon Anthology of Korean American Fiction, edited by Fenkl and Walter K. Lew. Fenkl and Lew write in the introduction to the anthology:

A traditional Korean shamanic ritual lasts through a day and a night, and during its twelve phases, which are called kori, the shamaness invokes spirits and ancestors, allowing them voice in the world of the living. A shamaness may speak for a frail departed grandmother, taking on a diminutive quality, or she may embody the spirit of the Great General, whose fierce nature and stature seem to defy the ability of her body to contain them. A kori is part of a multilayered ritual with a complex spectrum of unexpected and previously unimagined expression.

Korean is a lively and clever language with a penchant for homophones, and so the word kori is, itself, like the parts of a shamanic ritual, a rich layering of meanings.... For us, the title has served as an underlying resonance that provides both direction and sustenance for the collection. For the reader, we hope the word kori will function as a reminder of the thematic strands that weave together the selections in the three parts of this anthology, representing those things carried great distances, then summoned into literary form and exercised or freed. A kori embodies the intersecting of one world with the other in ways we find parallel to the nature of Korean American prose fiction from its origins in the 1930s to the end of the twentieth century.

Harvard students and faculty received this anthology warmly at the workshop, with praise for the two esteemed authors. Fenkl was born in Inchon, Korea, in 1960. His autobiographical novel, Memories of My Ghost Brother (1996) was a finalist for the 1997 PEN/Hemingway prize. According to the headnote to his story in the anthology, "Fenkl has an academic background in folklore, shamanism, and anthropology; he is also a transla-
We didn't want to make this America-centered; many anthologies use America as the point of reference and then things are illuminated by that standard. What we wanted to do is challenge that, so we have works that are set in Korea or set in the United States.
writer at the outset of each story in your anthology.

Fenk: Yes, but here since it's a Korean American anthology, we don't have quite the same issue [as Hagedorn], but we also did not want to just have a chronological survey. That would have been very easy to do. What we structured this on was a journal that Walter edited, and if you look at the structure of that, you see that the pieces are in a very strange sequence. It allows you to read it forward, but also just browse that book, because the pieces are arranged in such a way that they have resonance back and forth. Walter also edited Premonitions, an anthology of North American Asian poetry, which was also organized by a more resonant logic than any chronological or any explicitly thematic one. So here, since we start with the notion of the shamanic performance, we decided that we could actually go in and out of the performance—we don't start in a way that's normally chronological—the old things are in the middle. We use a certain accessibility to introduce readers to particular themes and once the reader is familiar, we then go through the things that are much more postmodern.

Yisei: So in this case, it might actually make sense to read Kori from start to finish for that sense of thematic continuity?

Fenk: Yes, I think if you started at the beginning, you would be following our ideal sequence, but you could also read it chronologically, and it would give you a different sensibility. I think the introduction frames things in such a way that if you read the introduction and then go through the headnotes, even if you have read the pieces out of sequence, you would actually be creating your own context. So we spent a great deal of time with the organization.

Yisei: Tell me a little more about selection. You have a lot of the major Korean American fiction works here—Native Speaker, East Meets West. Is it just coincidental that most of these writings are very well known?

Fenk: This is one of the compromises we had to make for the slimmed down volume. Beacon, of course, was concerned that the book sell, so they did nudge us toward having recognizable names, especially since we were going to have to organize the book mostly through reprints. Walter and I decided that the thing to do with the lesser-known writers would be to save them for a future volume. That's why if you look through this table of contents, you'll see that it's sort of like a greatest hits CD. These particular excerpts, however, might not generally be parallel to the way that book is generally seen—a couple of selections which give a fragment of a hologram—you have a small piece but it reflects themes of the work as a whole.

Yisei: What was interesting to me was the way that most of these pieces are autobiographical, at least to a certain extent. How does one define "fiction" as you deal with issues of immigrant identity and autobiography—how is it that these pieces constituted "fiction" to you?

Pak: You have to know the subject really well, so the best candidate for material is your own autobiography. But then you have to play on it and you have to give it a twist. One of my stories is about a University of Hawaii English professor playing around with a student, and to this day, my wife thinks that was real! But it’s always a play—it goes beyond your own life—stories you hear from your friends.

Now that Asian American literature is a genre, the ante is up. Not only do you have to have the story and the material and the competence, you have to do it better than someone else.
Fenkl: We wanted to select and contextualize these pieces in such a way that somebody who knew nothing about Korean American writing would be able to read the works and come away with something other than a glimpse of an exotic backdrop or a common glimpse of ethnic writing.

Yisei: It seems like we are toeing the line between fiction and non-fiction here, and it almost seems like there really is not such a clear divide. How does it personally impact you to take something close to you like your own experiences and make it into a work of "fiction?"

Pak: It cathartizes your frustrations. I think you become a little distanced or detached from those feelings—writers often make bad husbands or bad wives. They are not capable of total immersion or commitment because they have this capacity to detach—I think everybody is capable of that, not just writers—but a writer has to hone that aspect of his/her nature.

Yisei: And somehow make it universalizable so people can read it and understand what you're going through, which helps me form my next question. Who is your target audience for this book?

Fenkl: I guess the target audience for this book would be just a general readership. But when we did the headnotes, one of the criticisms was that they sounded too academic. The book is geared somewhere in between classroom readership and general popular readership.

Yisei: Are there any ethnic specifications there? Is it geared toward Korean American audience or general?

Fenkl: What we hope is that a large number of Korean Americans will want to read it because of a vested interest in the fact that this is a Korean American anthology. But we also wanted to select and contextualize these pieces in such a way that somebody who knew nothing about Korean American writing would be able to read the works and come away with something other than a glimpse of an exotic backdrop or a common glimpse of ethnic writing—like simply eating at an ethnic restaurant one night.

As for the issue of autobiography versus fiction, I have two takes on it, one as editor and one as writer. When we edited the volume, our consideration was that we would pick things by their interior logic and to look at the qualities in them that made them simply more than a memoir. A memoir is organized by the truth of the experience, whereas something that began as autobiographical and becomes a work of fiction is governed by some other aesthetic—the logic of the story demands something else. In autobiographical works, when they are written in a literary mode, I think what happens is something about the language, imagery, structure governs the order of the final piece. When I'm doing my own writing, I actually don't distinguish between autobiography and fiction, because as far as I'm concerned, the very act of remembering is a fictional act.

Pak: You know, when a writer uses his own life as material, he no longer thinks upon it as something that is his own. The moment I write down someone else's story, it is just as if I had lived it. At that point, the distinction between who actually lived it disappears.

Fenkl: You can see how Ty is resonating with the shamanic theme—even if the story originates from someone
else, when you are the writer, you then convey it to the readership. I think we both believe that the writer’s role has a sort of moral requirement. The writer in America today is basically a commodity, but there is actually a rhetorical power to good literature, and that rhetorical power should be used in some positive way, not simply to sell lots of books or to make money. One of the problems that faces the writer in the United States right now is that there is a tremendous pressure to compromise one’s serious literary intentions simply to be marketed.

Pak: I like to think about it more in terms of integrity—being honest. That’s ultimately what dictates how the story goes. The next novel I’m writing is about a character who is Korean, born in Russia, then settles with Korean in central Asia, then comes to Korea and is instrumental in making Kim Il Sung dictator. He becomes a general during the war and is in prison for a while, comes to the U.S. My instinct says he has to die—he is killed by a religious fanatic. But my wife said, “To make it popular, let him live!” That’s just one example. The ultimate direction of the storyline is determined by this integrity—if you want to call it morality, character, fine.

Yisei: Tell me your thoughts on the future of Korean-American writing. Right now we’re a predominantly second-generation population. As we move into the third generation, how do you see these voices changing, if at all? Do you see Korean American fiction becoming more integrated into the American canon or do you see it always remaining separate and even necessarily so?

Fendt: From an academic point of view, what I see happening is that Asian American writing has become, de facto, a genre. When things like Snow Falling on Cedars are taught in Asian American literature courses by mistake, that basically proves the point. Danielle Steel can now write an internment camp narrative and sell more copies than anyone else’s internment camp narrative. So you don’t really have to be an Asian American to write Asian American works anymore. Korean American writing hasn’t yet been genreified in that way because the general population isn’t familiar enough with Korea for that to happen, but it’s beginning.

The challenge this sets for the Korean American writer is that previously it was enough for you to be of a particular race or ethnicity and write something that was authentic, usually from your life experience, usually an immigrant narrative told from the point of view of having arrived in America looking back. That sort of thing was enough to get you published. Now that Asian American literature is a genre, the ante is up. Not only do you have to have the story and the material and the competence, you have to do it better than someone else. In that sense, the genreification is a good thing. But at the same time, the issue of authenticity now has been turned on its head, and that’s going to take quite a while to play out in the academy. But I think if it’s a problematic thing, in the long run, it will be good for Asian American writing. It’s kind of unfortunate because I think now if you’re an Asian American writer, you’re basically required to go and research your own literature—you have to know what’s written.

Pak: Should we stop writing because there was Shakespeare? Some people say he covers the entire range of all human emotions. Of course he does. But you can keep writing. The energy that the young writers display is just amazing. I knew my limitations after reading the book. I think we have much talent. I think we have a great future—our young writers are well-informed and motivated, and I think we’ll have some great mainstream writers who will be rooted in their heritage.

Paul Kwak ’03 is a History & Science concentrator in Mather House.
The following is an excerpt taken from Sazzae, a novel that Harvard graduate Jocelyn Morin '87 started as her creative thesis project. The book is about two American youths, Max and Lois, in the quick and vivid landscape of Tokyo, Japan. Here they meet a handsome, shy Japanese, Shintaro, and contrive to turn him into a teen idol called "Tomorrow". The plot thickens when a love triangle develops and Shintaro's shameful secret is revealed.

Stage lights go down, auditorium lights up. A hush spreads across the room, then comes the soft chatter of the audience, the judges, the singers. Max tries not to notice that someone’s shaking his shoulder. Kato. Max's eyes open. "Would you like whisky?" Kato asks, "Jaku, whisky?"

"Is it over?" Max says.

"Yeah, owah. The result will be next week."

"Oh. Do tell me."

"Of course."

Into the whisky bar. "Please, a little more water," Kato begs the girl in his lap.

"But your English is better when you drink," she coquettishly argues. "And look at the gaijin. His glass is orange; he can drink so much more than you."

Kato's face could not be any redder. He takes the glass from her and downs it in one swallow. Everyone laughs.

"The American is the professional drinker," someone points out.

"He have more blood than we do."

"I think so too. (I can't believe I said in English!"

"You are drunk."

"I can speak to Jack! Do you like the Japanese singer?"

Max smiles. He plays with his chopsticks to prolong the silence. Nothing wrong with killing two birds with one stone.

"Maybe Jack sees a better singer in America."

"No," Max says, "not in America."

The judges look at each other. The hostess fills all the glasses. Sits down next to Max, rearranges his place mat.

The fat judge breaks the silence. "Not in America? Where, Jack, is the better singers?"

The thin judge answers. "It must be in Europe."
Kato adds, “There are many, many gaijin here in Tokyo.”
The thin judge says, “So desu ne, but they can’t understand Japanese, and can’t be a teen idol.”
“No,” Max says, “not a gaijin.”
“Really?” says the fat judge.
The thin judge repeats, “Really? How did you met him?”
“Well let’s see. First of all, he is a Japanese boy. Very handsome. We met at a good friend’s company party.”
“Ahhhh. I see.” They shake their heads in agreement.

“The boy’s grandfather was a famous, uh, scientist,” Max says, “and his mother knows everything about the stage.”
“Does he practice singing?”
“Does he practice? Are you kidding? Every day, this boy wakes up before dawn and goes to Shinjuku Gyoen Park to practice.” Max starts to pour himself another drink. The hostess takes the bottle away from him — “It’s my job, thank you!” She tries to add some water to his whisky. Max stops her with an icy look. He takes a swig of whisky, swishes it around, swallows. Max’s eyes successively meet those of the four judges. He says, “This boy Shintaro, fills his mouth with marbles, and then tilts his head back to practice singing.” Max gargles the remainder of his whisky to demonstrate the principle.
“He sound like the kind who thinks teen idol is a game,” says the thin judge.
“No, it’s scientific,” Max says, “but maybe he’s too clever for you. His I.Q. is very high. Tokyo University asked him to enter a couple years ago, but he refused. He loves singing so much.”
All eyebrows raise. “Tokyo University? That’s good for marketing.” The hostess calls over two more hostesses who beg Max to repeat the story of the next great teen idol. The table is full.
“He is very serious, very handsome, and has the best voice in Japan. And. His image is the kind that makes the best teen idol,” Max continues.

The hostess translates Max’s speech simultaneously in a low whisper to the two non-English-speaking hostesses.
The fat judge says, “What did you say his name is?”
“We call him...uh...‘Tomorrow,’” Max says.
“Please bring him to this club,” says one hostess.
“I don’t know,” Max says. “He doesn’t drink. Like I said, a teen idol must not only be handsome, but also innocent. Someone teens can respect and, uh, trust. A role model.”
“So desu ne. I told you all so just today,” says Katosan.
The judges agree. “So desu ne.”
“This boy has the image that makes the best idol. He is so gentle that birds come and land on his
“For you, Katosan, no problem,” Max says.
Kato bows. “Thank you. Now let’s go Turkish bath!”

***

Companion at one’s side, Max is finally excited to be out, for the momentum, and all the random elements. The screeching of the trains is ending like a symphony beginning. The rain falls steadily. Shintaro’s socks are soaking up all the puddles. It is quiet now. The neon signs have all been extinguished. The stragglers are walking in utter blackness. Down the street they go, past the small park, past the sporting goods store, in this direction, in that, past the four-block-long Depaato, dark as a tomb now without its teenagers looking into windows, sauntering down aisles, searching for the newest colors, pink, day-glow green, searching for the newest oldies, in mirrors, on racks, behind doors and counters, beyond elevators and escalators going up, up higher, farther, faster, sky-rocketing into modernity amidst the crinkling and crunching of paper bags. They go by in their exquisiteness.

There is one large red lantern overhead and one dimly lit black and white neon sign. “Here,” Max says, and guides Shintaro to an orange linoleum staircase.

Shintaro hangs back in the street. “I... I think it’s nothing there.” They penetrate the darkness of the stairwell. Shintaro flicks his gold lighter and casts shadows all over the stairs. He sees a narrow wooden door.

Lois’s heels click on the pavement. Someone’s girlfriend stretches to kiss her boyfriend, kiss, and is enclosed in the crowd. Day-glow skirts flutter into the stairwells, downward-winding, all-extinguishing. At this hour it always seems that something dark will erupt in the ironwork mazes beneath the city. The midnight sky encloses Lois. The living have been expelled by the inaudible click of ten thousand tiny golden second hands. Or a digital code: To the catacombs.

The wooden door opens and shuts. Inside, the student-, captive-, master-, spirit-hearted folk cackle and drink their brew swaying and standing, dancing, hugging, licking, biting, frothing at the mouths. Each time the door opens, it lets out a “wah, wah.” A communal voice that emits a primal, go team go — “wah, wah” — and each time the door shuts, it lets out no sound at all and, in fact, ceases to be a door with its camouflage. The waiter wafts about exchanging full glasses for empty ones. “Wah” — the wooden door opens again.

Lois’ ears adjust to the hoarse communal scream. Her eyes adjust to the darkness. Everyone is back, as if they’d never left. On the other side of the room all aglow in the spotlight of her eyes stands Max. His god-like hand grips a fluorescent drink. His perpetual eyes canvas the room like hers not noticing anything. He doesn’t talk to anyone. This particular plan requires a great deal of subtlety and patience as can be measured by the rapidly expanding space opening in the crowd that had been standing around him. The hard part is getting the boy to overcome his shyness. It could take months but then, once Shintaro becomes an idol, he’ll be free. Max chugs his gin-and-tonic. The boy’s so shy, he thinks, it could take years, decades of decadence. Let’s see, lesson number one. He’ll just let the boy flounder for a while.

As if to spite Max, Shintaro is at the height of his capacity for boldness and manages to stare quite audaciously at Lois’s dark curly head tilted so gracefully forward, eyes up like a kitten’s and emanating that painfully beautiful sense of melancholy. He’d known she’d have to come. Now she is here. There. Lois, more beautiful than he’d remembered her. There is no way to communicate with the dream creature. She speaks dream-language. If only she could hear him sing! It wouldn’t make a bit of difference. He is not worthy of her. She is too beautiful. She belongs to another world. He could never make her love him. And even if he could make her love him... how could he be so selfish as to defile her? And if he could be so selfish as to defile her, how long could he hide his background from her? No, no, no. She would find out. And what then? What would be left of him if the most precious thing in his life refused him? If she thought he was dirty and refused to touch him?

By now, the three have exiled themselves to the three walls where the bar is not, to wait with themselves, their reputations at stake. The three jungle cats. Three doubts. Nerves all exposed to the air. Each grows still and waits for nothing, never. Slowly.

A man with an edge wouldn’t let you burn him out. No, he’d trash your whole life first. Your family’s. Your hometown’s. Your friends’.

A long time and a lot of subtlety. Patience.
Work. That's just the way it's going to have to be; the kid can never become a teen idol by himself.

And if he could be so selfish, how long before she found out, before she called him dirty? untouchable? how long?

Not entirely aware of being aware of each other, they stare into space, into the chasms between them, *le Nouveau Savoir-Faire*, the exaggerated postures, the haggling. The arabesques, sublime.

The smoke, the music, the beat, beat, American beat, the New Sazzae. No. Not American, not Japanese, neither cure nor escape, not anything. Yea. Friday-night-nothing at the new survivor. And the *rhythmica intoxica* goes on. Every head swims to the thud, every drink drowns out those time cards, those trains, everybody enclosed now in the purply walls of the throb, everybody feeding off the same Friday-night-sazzae.

The waiter cranks up the music. Max returns, stands next to Shintaro, follows the boy's eyes to the center of the dance floor. "She's not such a bad girl."

Shintaro looks into Max's blue eyes. Laughs.

"O.K., she's a good dancer."

"Yes."

"The macho woman is aware of her sexuality... Do you want to dance?"

"Oh, no. I can't dancing."

"Can't dance!? But you want to be a singer, right?"

"Right, but... I can't dancing, because of my shy," he says.

Max assumes an unusually serious tone. "Your shy is not to be protected. A singer cannot be shy. Well, what will you be if you cannot become a singer?"

Shintaro starts. The blue eyes pierce his defenses. "I don't know," he says, "I... I will become a singer."

"Um... do you want to lose your shy?"

"Yes, but —"

"Then let's dance."

Shintaro stares into the vibrating bodies. There she is, always disappearing, re-appearing, smiling, then cool, distracted, and suddenly laughing with her
dance partner. Shintaro looks away. If he had learned to dance a long time ago, he'd be able to dance with her.

"Come on, I'll teach you everything."

Shintaro's eyes haven't moved from Lois's shoulders.

"I know people who can help you audition at the record company. But they don't accept shy singers." But the boy stares blankly ahead. "O.K., forget it. I can't teach you to dance. People who dance dance because they're listening to something in them that's always listening to the music and always wanting to dance, and if you don't have that thing, you aren't an instrument, and you can't dance."

Shintaro watches her sweating face, smooth, untroubled as if lost in sleep. "I got it," he says into
Max's blue eyes.

"You did?" Max smiles into his glass. "O.K., finish your drink."

Shintaro swallows half of his gin-and-tonic at once and sets the empty glass down on one of the tables. He takes a deep breath and turns to Max.

"O.K., now first, listen to the music. Don't think, just feel the beat."

"The beat?"

"Yes. The rhythm."

Max beats his palm against his thigh. Max holds both of Shintaro's forearms, and makes the boy hold his. Shintaro closes his eyes, and Max begins pushing him from side to side with every other beat. Once Shintaro catches on, Max speeds up and hits every beat. "Good," he says.

It's true. Shintaro has a knack for dancing.

Max starts to get off of the boy's arms. He should be able to do it on his own now. But Shintaro's hands fall limply down to his sides. His eyes open, and he stops.

Max laughs and grabs the boy's brown wrists. When Shintaro opens his eyes the second time, he finds they have drifted into the center of the floor and are dancing next to Lois. He mustn't stop. He twists his hands free and struggles to keep the beat. Now the music seems to make perfect sense. He is its machine. The thrill of it throws him off balance as the song ends. "That was really good!" Max says.

"It's very difficult."

Lois appears at his side. "Do you like this music, Shintaro?"

"The music gets louder when I danced."

...*

They lowered their voices as they passed under the gates and entered the large gravel yard. Rice-papered buildings surrounded them and the grounds. Off to the left stood the wide steps of the Meiji shrine. Shintaro handed Lois a ten yen coin. She watched him bow his head, close his eyes, and a moment later, toss the coin into the wooden box in front of the altar. She did the same. They pressed their noses to the grating that separated them from the inside. They walked back down the steps. "Is it true you finished Harvard?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And that's where you met Max?"

She had met him in Detroit. She had met Maximilian on the Champs Élysées. In her Latin class. He climbed in through her window. When she asked him where he was from, he said Leningrad. He said, Corsica. He was playing in a café when she met him. "Yes."

"How?"

"On a day like today. I was afraid to go back to school that year. That made me angry at everyone. I must have come across as an incredible snob. People were nice to me, but I pretended I didn't see or hear them."

She pulled her sweater tighter around her. She remembered the first time he came up to visit her in her room at Harvard. She tried to blow him off, but he invited himself in. "I asked him if he wanted to play a game," she told Shintaro.

"Sure," he said. He said he was a poker player. "I made $100,000 beating rich South Africans last year and the year before."

"You took two years off?"

"Yeah," Max sat on her bed and told her about Africa.

He leaned on his elbow on her bed. She shuffled a deck of cards. "Why didn't you stay there?" she said. They played poker. She won the first hand.

"Let's play again," he said.

"No," she said. "Here, let's see if you are better at chess."

"You can't just play one hand like that."

She held out her hands. He picked white. He was muscular. "Check mate," he said.

"I have an exam tomorrow," she lied.

"Come closer," he said.

"No," she said. She wanted to look, not touch.

"Good night."

"Good night," she said, but he didn't move. He lay back against the bed. He seemed to have fallen asleep. His eyes were closed. Then he said, "Even next to me you're a million miles away. I'm going to my room."

"Good night," she said again.

They walked through the grounds. "Did you make a wish," Shintaro said, on the path again.

"No, did you?"

"Maybe."

She quickly said, "That's a beautiful shrine. But it's very strange."

"Yes," he said. "I think so too, and I am not a gaijin."

Lois turned around and looked at him.

"Foreign," he said. They walked down the gravel path, red leaves strewn in front of them.

The leaves were aflame when she met Max.
She'd ridden her bicycle through Cambridge the next day. The buildings had changed over the summer, and she felt like a ghost coming back to her past. It was all different. It was healthier and more elegant. Wooden and renovated. She looked around for people she knew as she walked through the square, searching, searching against all odds. She'd been homesick abroad over the summer. Now she couldn't accept that this place that was hers would have to be re-met. The names of the restaurants had changed. The streets looked fresh.

She met her roommate on the steps, on her way to class, as if they'd been walking around there forever. No deaths, no pregnancies, just class. Her roommate was looking fit. She said come to my Japanese class, but Lois had this feeling she'd miss something if she didn't wait in the Green House Cafe. Lois walked along alone to the cafe. Indeed, no sooner had she bought a cup of coffee, than she saw Max the trader. Maxi-million, who lived one floor down. She lifted up her glasses.

"Hi," she said. They sat down. He had said, "Why do I make you nervous?"

They walked through the yard.

"Do you think Max is intelligent as you?" Shintaro asked.

"Of course not," she said. She used to try to educate him. She would buy him books. She grabbed a magazine and walked to the bookstore reading poems. One was about a guy being depressed with his girlfriend about fifteen years earlier in the Harvard Advocate. He said the sky was falling with the leaves. She looked up at the red and yellow leaves as she walked across the Kirkland House courtyard, and it was true, the sky was falling with the leaves. He said he was worried about getting caught somewhere without any cigarettes. She wondered where this guy from this sixties poem was now. She took out a cigarette and walked on until she got to the bookstore. She rolled up the magazine and stepped inside. Now she was looking for books for Max. That's how she spent her free time that semester, looking for books for Max. She didn't know how he was ever going to read all of them. Maybe she bought them because she imagined he would always live close by. They could fuse their libraries. She would get back her investment with marginal notations and astute witticisms. The main thing was, though, that she liked imagining Max reading the books as she read them. So, when she went for a walk, she browsed through bookstores. It was remote communion. Each book she opened up was like an axis, a dimension. She opened them and extracted in minute appreciations, only sensing part of their purpose. There, beyond, lay Max.

She walked slowly down the aisle, took a detour, the scenic route, turned up another aisle that would bring her finally to her goal, when... someone tapped her on the elbow. Or rather, brushed her lightly. She thought about not looking. It was light enough, ambiguous enough to have been
accidental, ambiguous enough for her to pretend that there had been no intention behind it. And as long as she didn’t say anything, she could continue browsing through the bookstore with her impenetrably silent Max. She had almost walked quite away out of range and into freedom when she found herself standing face-to-face with an ex-friend, who had graduated and moved away.

He followed her to the fiction section. “How long are you here for?” she asked. That really meant, I thought you had already left. He knew it. They had gone out the year before. “Where are you going, Mexico?” or have those plans evaporated like everything else? she didn’t ask.

He wasn’t Max. I never knew anyone who was so easy on himself, she didn’t say. She couldn’t stand those droopy-eyed looks now. Instead she laughed. Did she used to think he was funny? Yes, they had laughed a lot. Now they relied on their cocktail-party etiquette. “What are you doing?” he finally said, not because he wanted to know, but because the question was already obvious and hanging in front of them, through avoidance fully expressed. “What am I doing? Hm.” She was turning over the three answers in her head. He would know if she lied. She’d lied before. It was the only thing that worked. “Reading,” she said. He helped her look for a book. He didn’t know it was for Max. He left for Mexico. Or maybe he was still wandering around Harvard Square. He had been good, but she brought the books back to Max. She wasn’t going to marry anyone, so she might as well choose the newer man over the spiritually better man. That would do it. Max was very enthusiastic about the books. It made her happy in a general sort of way. Proved for a second that she was not just in love with the idea of love.

There was something to be said for being just a little bit uncomfortable all the time. Just enough to keep you on your toes. To keep you up to your standards and awake. The worst of all fates had to be to sleep through life. Walking home from Widener later that night at midnight, half the lights in all the dorms were on. Burning the midnight oil, hanging out. Something was always happening. She was alive.

Their feet crunch on the gravel. Shintaro says, “Now you say you met Max at Harvard.”

“Yes. Wait a minute,” Lois says.

Her eyes are big and deep brown.

“And are you telling me everything? How are we supposed to be friends if you don’t trust me?” she asks. “Friends have to trust each other.”

Shintaro opens the dictionary again. Firm reliance on the integrity, ability, or character of a person or thing; confident belief; faith. Reliance on something in the future; hope. To have confidence in. To believe . . .
He closes the dictionary, is silent for a long time.
“O.K., I trust you don’t tell ANYONE, even Max.”
“I promise.”
“Because I never told anyone. Not even Japanese or Max. You promise?”
“I said I promised. Don’t you believe me?”
“I cannot become famous.”
“Why not?”
“O.K., well, a long time ago, before the Tokugawa Emperors of Japan, the emperor who kept the peace for hundreds of years. Before them even was a —” He looked up a few words in the dictionary. “— a class of people called . . . burakumin.” Shintaro took a deep breath. He was surprised at himself for saying that word. “Do you know what that mean?”
“No.”
“Oh.” Relief. He could still leave and be completely safe. The words force their way to the surface: “That mean—” He looks into the dictionary. “That mean ‘untouchable’.” He falls silent. His hands are shaking.
“I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”
“Don’t you see? ‘Untouchable’ is the worst thing in the world. No one can discover that.”
“You mean your family was untouchable?”
“I mean ‘was’ and ‘is’ are the same in Japan. ‘Untouchable’ is dirty, not clean, like animals, people think.” Now he is shaking uncontrollably all over. “I am untouchable. I am untiouchable.

Author Jocelyn Morin graduated from Harvard in 1987 with a B.A. in English and American Literature & Language, Creative Writing Option. She earned an MBA in Finance from NYU’s Stern School of Business. Now, she is a retired foreign exchange options trader, writing full-time and living in Australia with her husband and two children. Her novel, Sazzae, can be purchased online at www.Amazon.com

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Self-Absorption
When countenances fail to mesmerize,
And crystal eyes no longer crystallize,

A heart aflutter flails with muted spite,
And fetching figures fail to fuel its flight,

When beauty languishes in short supply,
Its elements surrendered to the sky,

The mirror gleans with adulating bliss;
It shows the object worthy of your kiss.

Inspiration
If only warmth could melt her icy gaze,
And turn her wondrous countenance his way...

If stars could gather light and volatize,
The blackened blinds that veil her eyes...

The breathless wind would graze her supple skin,
And then implant a wondrous dream within:

Two entities unite and both ascend,
As time, in all its gurgling flow, suspends.
Consummation
Through swirling pools of incandescent light,
A gilded wavelet ripples from the haze,
And sets a distant island in its sight,
With Triton’s green expanse the daunting maze,
The swaying sea spray crowns the jeweled bead,
Silence whips the frothing fog and thickens,
Still the light endeavors to proceed,
And in its wake the tranquil liquid quickens,
The dripping diamond parts the misty veil,
Then delicately glides upon the bubbling crests...
And soon the unknown shore the waves assail,
The distance forded at the beam’s behest...
A budding blossom marks the place decreed,

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Resolution?
A lapping, billowed stream of luminescent dew,
Convenes and siphons towards a frosted pew,
And hanging from this gilded precipice,
A bobbing liquid sphere concludes its genesis...
The crystal droplet falls amidst a lucid streak,
Then softly lands upon a rose’s blushing cheek,
The solemn vow is sealed, the deed is done,
An elongated tale this furtive kiss has spun...

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Crossing the Border

a short story by Sung-Won Hong
artwork by Janet Kim

At the end of World War II in August 1945, the Japanese withdrew and the Korean peninsula fell into the hands of the United States and the Soviet Union. The 38th Parallel was hastily chosen as a temporary divider, but it soon became a hostile border, with the Soviet Union representing Communism to the north and the United States standing for the free world to the south. Suddenly, Koreans who were used to coming and going freely between the North and South were inspected by Soviet and American guards; soon they could not pass at all without the explicit permission of the occupying powers.

This story takes place in Korea in this tense time between 1945 and 1947. Japan's withdrawal from Korea, the Soviet and American occupations, the beginning of the Cold War, and the eventual period of a divided Korean peninsula provide the backdrop for this short story.
“Papa.” The boy held the man’s head with his two hands and called to his father.
“What?”
“I’m cold.”
“Very cold?”
“No, just a little.”
“Try to endure it then.”
Still holding his father’s head, the boy huddled into himself more as if trying to show how cold he was. He was sitting on the rucksack his father carried on his back like he was riding a wooden horse. On top of the rucksack was a cushion for a seat like a saddle.
“Papa.”
“What?”
“What am I supposed to say? When we come upon a Ruskie…”
“Did you forget again?”
“I want Mommy. Let’s go to Mommy…”
“That’s right. That will do. All you have to do is say those words and cry.”
“Then will the Ruskie really let us go?”
“Of course! He sure will… if we’re going home to see your mom, nobody will arrest us. So you just say those words.”
The man squeezed the boy’s two legs, dangling on his chest. The boy seemed to cheer up a little, feeling his father’s strength on his legs. But a shade of anxiety and terror still overshadowed his mind.
From the moment they left home three days ago, the boy had been wracked by constant fear. His mother and his two young siblings had left for somewhere by wagon about fifteen days ago. For those fifteen days without his mother, his father didn’t go to his job at the county office. He just whiled the time away idly with the boy at home.
It had already been three months since the boy stopped going to school. School had closed suddenly one summer day. The Japanese flag, always flapping the wind, had disappeared from the flagpole, and his classmates – Nobuyoshi, Morino, and Miyoko – became beggars, sleeping on the straw mats at the plaza in front of the train station. But the most unfortunate classmate among them was Teruko, who used to be the prettiest girl and the best student in the class. Teruko’s father was a high-ranking officer. The boy once saw a picture of her father at Teruko’s house. Teruko’s father, in an army uniform with many military
Their lovely colorful clothes were dirtied in two days, and pretty Teruko with her good manners became a beggar, poking around the neighborhood garbage cans with her brother. And one day, even those sad beggarly lives ended.

decorations, was mounted on a tall horse wearing a Nippon-do, a Japanese sword. Teruko seemed to be very proud of her father like that. But Teruko’s family eventually faced an even more gruesome unhappiness than Morino’s or Miyako’s. Teruko and her five-year-old brother suddenly became orphans one morning.

Nobody knew for sure what really happened to Teruko’s parents. There was a rumor that Teruko’s father killed Teruko’s mother, then cut his own belly out with his Nippon-do. Without her parents, Teruko held her little brother’s hand and walked around her house, endlessly calling “Ga-jang, Do-jang...” “Mommy, Daddy...” At that time her house was being plundered by robbers. All the Japanese-owned houses, including Teruko’s, suffered from these burglaries. They were cautious at first, but later the robbers came and went as if it were their own home. Teruko seemed completely oblivious to them. Calling her absent parents anxiously, she would hold her brother’s hand and wander round and round her house as it deteriorated into a complete mess.

But this didn’t last for even ten days. After the burglaries, young Choson men took over her empty house and drove Teruko out of her own home. No one could say how it happened exactly. By that time, though, Teruko and her brother were wearing the kind of colorful clothes that were only worn on holidays. Funny rags, inked with Chinese writing, dangled peculiarly from safety pins on their backs. The boy couldn’t understand what it said, since it was in Chinese. But one day the boy asked, and his father carefully clarified the words: “These children are the daughter and son of Lieutenant — of the Japanese Imperial Army. The parents of these children killed themselves on the — day of — month in the shame of losing the war. Though their parents died for their crimes, these children are innocent. Whoever finds these pitable children, please send them to —— hyun, Kyushu, where their grandparents reside.”

In the end, Teruko and her brother never returned to their home in Kyushu. Their lovely colorful clothes were dirtied in two days, and pretty Teruko with her good manners became a beggar, poking around the neighborhood garbage cans with her brother. And one day, even those sad beggarly lives ended. Their gaunt bodies were found under the stone bridge of a naeng-myun (cold noodle) restaurant. On the day their bodies were put away, the boy sneaked into a back room and wept softly, holding his breath. He couldn’t understand why Teruko and her little brother had to meet with such tragic deaths. For two years, from kindergarten to first grade, he and Teruko had been friends. But the
grown-ups restrained him, and he was not even allowed to get near her. The boy's mother also cried secretly for the dead children until her eyes became red. Even though they felt bad for her, the grown-ups didn't seem to want to help her. The boy couldn't understand their contradictions. Why were grown-ups not willing to offer Teruko a spoonful of rice when they felt so sorry for her?

Besides Teruko's tragic death, the boy couldn't understand a lot of things. After the Japanese left, the dirty looking soldiers called Russkies came into town. They were peculiar. Their white skin and sandy hair arrived in town by wagonload, and they plundered randomly. They wore dirty, oily army uniforms, ate hard black bread with their horses, rode their stolen bikes through town, and randomly mugged passersby of their watches at gunpoint. They were merciless looters on the one hand, but at the same time, they were funny soldiers. They had never tasted melons before and they peeled pumpkins and gourds and ate them like watermelons. The most interesting thing about them was the way their mouths moved when they ate pine nuts and sunflower seeds. They would put half a fistful of nuts and seeds in their mouth at once, and they would amazingly spit out the shells from one side of their mouth. They did it so swiftly that the boy was fascinated by their skill.

The boy witnessed one of their horrible assaults one day. The soldiers showed up at the salt shop in his neighborhood at sunset. Two of them wore long-barreled rifles on each of their shoulders. Two Russkies went into the shop and aimed their guns at Keum-Soon and dragged her inside the room. There were no adults at home, only Keum-Soon and her younger brother, Moon-Ho. One of the soldiers came out of the room pointing a gun. He chased Moon-Ho out of the house and stood in front of the gate. Many spectators gathered in front of Moon-Ho's house when they heard him crying and shouting. The Russkie stood at the gate with his gun and nobody dared to go in. Time passed. The Russkie who had been in the room with Keum-Soon rambled out of the house, buttoning up his pants. But when he came out, the one who had been at the gate went inside. Somehow Keum-Soon, who had been in the room, didn't make a sound the whole time. Despite the number of people standing in front of the gate, nobody dared to say anything; they just stood, helplessly fearful of the soldier with the gun. After a while, the other soldier finally came out. The spectators moved back and made way for the two soldiers. The soldiers carried themselves as if nothing had happened and walked away to disappear somewhere.

It was at about this time that Moon-Ho's mother arrived. She rushed madly into the house and cried in distress when she opened the bedroom door. After the soldiers had left, the people gathered around Moon-Ho's house, rubbernecking to see what had happened. In a moment, the bedroom door was opened and somebody came out carrying Keum-Soon on his back. Keum-Soon, unconscious with her eyes wide open, was carried out, bleeding profusely from between her legs. The scene gave the boy a chill that left him with goose bumps. He didn't know what the Russkies did to Keum-Soon, but the way she was passed out with those goggle eyes was enough to make the boy afraid of them.

After this incident, the whole neighborhood was seized by fear. Everybody locked their gates as soon as dusk settled in the early evening. Lines of cans, bells, and other noisy objects were strung from house to house as an alarm that could be sounded if a Russkie appeared. If one of them showed up at one house, the residents could pull the line to get help from their neighbors.

But it was a fear of the Russkies that made the boy's family decide to leave the city. Their hometown was originally in Kyongsang-nam-do in the south. The boy's father had moved his family to this place looking for a new job. The city was as different as any other strange land would be for the family; after the war, other Koreans here eyed them suspiciously. The boy's father did not work at the county office with the Japanese for this kind of conspicuous surveillance. His family wasn't rich, but they led quite a comfortable life compared to other poor people. After the Japanese were driven out, the Russkies came into the city, and the poor people suddenly became their own masters. Wearing armbands, they were on good terms with the scary Russkies, often loafing around with them. They occupied all the vacant houses that had belonged to the Japanese and arrested the rich people, beating them badly.

As the situation evolved into this, many people absconded from town, destined for South Korea. To get to the South, they had to cross the
border known as the 38th Parallel. There the Ruskies and their party kept strict precautions to keep a close eye on the people who tried to go south. Those going to the South without a convincing reason were considered to be runaways from crime in the North. Ruskies and the Preservation Public Peace Corps would arrest them and interrogate them about their reasons for crossing. If a crime was revealed during the interrogation, they would be punished severely. That was why the boy’s family had divided into two parties to cross the border. If they were arrested, his mother and two younger siblings who had left earlier were supposed to say that they were going to see her husband. The boy and his father, who were leaving later, would pretend to look for his wife in his hometown. If father and son were arrested, the boy just needed to put on a good act of crying and whining for his mother while holding his father’s arms. To the Ruskies and the Public Peace Conservation Corps, they would be nothing more than a pitiful widower and his son looking for his wife. Fortunately the boy’s father could speak in perfect Kyongsang-nam-do dialect. There was no better way to prove that he was from the South.

The gravel road followed the stream and then continued uphill, sloping gently. The boy, sitting on the rucksack, began to shiver with cold and tension. As the moon was hidden under the cloud, deep darkness set in the dense forest. Except for the sound of the wind blowing over the forest, only that same desolate stillness hung low in the air.

“Papa.” The boy called to his father again.
“What is it?”
“Is it still a long way to the Public Security Police Station?”
“No, it’s not far from here.”
“Why is it so cold?”
“Are you really cold?”
“Are there any tigers in the mountains?”
“There aren’t any tigers in these small hills. The tiger lives and hides only in big, deep mountains.”
“Isn’t you cold, Papa?”
“Nope, not a bit.”

The gently sloping narrow mountain trail stretched to the deep valley. Down to the left side of the trail, white stones in the stream came into sight through the rifts in the young pine trees. On the right, the crimson loess from a landslide ran onto the trail. Suddenly, the boy on the rucksack grabbed his father’s hair tightly.
“Papa.”
“What?”
“Try to listen...”
First the beam flashed on the father, then passed to the boy, who became deadly pale with horror. Kept in the light, they stood there blankly, until finally someone asked them a question.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The father slowed down and stopped, standing like a post. The sweeping wind, rushing over the forest, carried the dim sound of people singing. Since the singing came from so far away, stopping and starting with the wind, it was hard to recognize unless he listened very carefully. The father, standing straight as a post, stepped forward and spoke softly.

"They're singing, huh?"
"Yeah."
"What day is today?"
"Saturday."

The silence hung. Careful about what was under his feet, the father walked deliberately. From the rucksack, the boy looked out over the dwarfed pine trees apprehensively. Who would sing from deep in these mountains? The song was not sung by one or two; it was singing like the shouting of a group of people. If he listened carefully, he could hear the loud banging that kept the rhythm between the singing. Judging by their shouting voices, the group seemed to be drunk. But who in the world would be singing so loudly this late at night? There didn't seem to be any inhabited regions in these deserted mountains. Seized with fear and choked with strain, the boy spoke to his father in a trembling voice.

"Papa, who are they?"
"What do you mean?"
"The singing people."

The father firmly grasped the boy's legs without replying. The boy tried to ask again, but closed his mouth suddenly and curled his body. His father hadn't needed to answer. The boy already knew who they were, the people who could sing this late at night in mountains this deep.

The narrow sloping trail suddenly curved and turned to the right. They rounded a bend to a clear but deserted field. There were signs of a person approaching up ahead. Father and son, tense with fear, were badly startled and hid themselves to the left of the trail. In their haste, the boy hit his forehead hard against the branch of a tree. Losing their balance, father and son collapsed chaotically into the thick grass. Luckily, they weren't hurt, the grass having broke their fall. When they got up, a bright beam of light shot out like an arrow under their eyes. First the beam flashed on the father, then passed to the boy, who became deadly pale with horror. Kept in the light, they stood there blankly, until finally someone asked them a question.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Trying to block the light with his hand, the father made no reply. The person on the other side moved the light and briskly approached the two.
“Come out here. You’re trying to cross the 38th Parallel, right?”

The boy held his breath and looked up at the man. He was wearing a long sabre on the left side of his waist and a gun on the right. But it was the two young men standing next to him who really scared him. Both of them, wearing gray Korean clothing with rubber shoes on their feet, had their hands and waists tied with thick red rope. The two men bound with rope were frightening, and they looked at the father and his son with expressionless faces.

“Can’t you hear me? Were you trying to cross the 38th Parallel without the permission of the Public Security Police?”

“Yes, sir...” The father, who had not given a response, finally bowed his head low and replied with a heavy Kyongsang-do accent.

“My home is at Jinju in Kyongsang-do. I am on my way to go home with this little one, sir.”

“Didn’t you know that you’re not allowed to cross the border without the permission of the Public Security Police here?”

“I know, sir, but this little one has been crying for his mom day and night. I don’t care where I live, but I’m desperate to do this for him, the poor thing.”

The boy, standing blankly, paralyzed by fear, finally began to deliver the sad lines he had been practicing for so long. “Papa, let’s go to Mommy... Where’s my Mommy? Let’s go to Mommy right now...”

When he practiced it, not one tear had come to his eyes, but nownow), as soon as this boy opened his mouth, unexpected tears streamed down his face.

“Look at him, sir. He is like this all the time. If it weren’t my son, I wouldn’t dare to cross the border. I came here selling fish, but now my son and I are stuck here because of the 38th Parallel. If I knew that there was going to be this border, I wouldn’t have come here with my son. I brought him without thinking. Sir, I’m begging you. You can see that I’m Southern because of my Kyongsang-do accent. If you think I’m lying, I’ll bite my tongue to death right now to prove to you that I’m telling the truth. Please spare us, for mercy’s sake, sir.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you go. Without a permit, nobody can cross the 38th Parallel. Come now, let’s go to the Public Security Police office in K—gun.”

“Sir, I’m begging you! For pity’s sake, if you let the matter pass just this once, my son and I can go home. You understand my situation now, don’t you, sir? If I lie, let me be struck to death by lightning.”

“Tell your situation when we get there. If you keep holding off like this, I’ll have to tie you up to take you along with me.”

All of a sudden the father knelt down and held the boy to his breast.

“Son, what can we do... We can never get to your mother now... what did I say to you, son— you kept pestering me to let you come even though I didn’t want you to...”

Crying with his son, the father suddenly looked up at the man again. “Sir, why do you stop Korean people who want to go to Korean land? When this poor fish merchant wants to go home, what kind of crime is that? You want to take us along with you, but you’re better off killing us here and now. It would be better, sir, to be shot to death by your hand than to live with this little one in a strange land.”

“Come on, hurry and stand up.” With his hand on the hilt of the dagger, the man shouted at them at last. He seemed uneasy with the other two prisoners under his guard.

“Didn’t I say that you could tell your story when you got there? Stop being so stubborn or I’ll tie you up with this rope and drag you along with me.”

As he spoke, the man untied the rope from his waist. With his head down, the father stepped away from his son and staggered over toward the man.

“All right, tie me up, sir. Take me and my son away, all tied up.”

Seeing the father with his two hands thrust out, the man looked a little discouraged. But without any warning, the father punched the man in the chin, and the man collapsed to the ground with a bang. Everything had happened in the blink of an eye, and the boy, wide-eyed, looked first at the man, then at his father, and back again. Then another surprise took place. The two young men who had been tied with the red rope with vacant faces bit off the rope that bound them and spoke to his father.

“Thank you, sir! We’re saved! The Public Security Police Station over there is in chaos because
they’re all drunk. We’ll take care of this bastard; you hurry up and leave.”

After speaking to the father, the two young men untied the rope with their teeth. Now freed, they approached the collapsed man in the bush.

“Let’s go!”

Pulling the boy’s hand, the father hurriedly ran from the scene. Pulled by his father, the boy turned to catch a glimpse of the two young men. He saw the men raising two heavy stones, heaved high in the dim moonlight. Two heavy stones lifted high in the air, rhythmically falling like a huge pestle pounding grain in a mortar. His whole body wrung with terror, the boy climbed up the hill in a flurry with his father.

Daybreak started faintly. The boy and his father and the two young men with Korean clothes were striding on the broad newly-constructed road. Unlike yesterday, the boy was now on the back of one of the young men instead of sitting on his father’s rucksack. His father’s rucksack was now being carried by the other young man. By daybreak, the tall young man with the boy on his back was half-running and he turned to look at the boy’s father.

“Where is your destination, sir?”

“Seoul.”

“Do you have any acquaintances in Seoul, sir?”

“Yes, my wife is waiting for me.”

“Has your family been living in Seoul, sir?”

“No. We used to live in G—gun. My wife and two of my children left about fifteen days ago. Even though I crossed the border safely, I won’t know about my wife until I get to Seoul.”

“Our destination is Choonchun. After you saved our lives, I’d like to invite you to my house, sir.”

“Oh no, thank you. I can’t afford to stop anywhere now. I still have a long way to go.”

“Then at least I’d like to know your name, sir.”

So long as we live, we may meet again someday in the future.”

“What are you going to do if you know my name? That whole thing was a nightmare. Just thinking about it makes me shudder.”

“When we saw that you put your hands out, we just closed our eyes out of despair. Did you notice that we were constantly sending you eye signals, sir?”

“Did you give me eye signals? I had no idea.”

“Our whole bodies were bound with rope and you were the only hope we had. We were praying that you’d attack him—you knocked him out with just one blow.”

“At first I didn’t even think about punching him. But when I saw him hold the rope, I almost gave up all hope. Thinking about being taken away all tied up, I wanted to give one last effort for my life.”

“Anyway, thanks to you, sir, we were saved from being dead. Seeing the way you knocked him out, I have to ask... were you an athlete in the past?”

“I boxed in college. Little did I dream that I should use that last night.”

“How about that! Sir, that’s why you could knock him down with just one blow. He was completely passed out. We were fortunate to have met you, sir.”

Sprawling out on the young man’s back, the boy suddenly closed his eyes tight. Since the incident last night, it had been on his mind constantly. It was more appalling than he could even imagine, and he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Two stones lifted up and down alternately under the faint moonlight. Why did those stones come down so hard? What happened to the man had been straddled in the attack? The boy didn’t have the courage to ask the frightening question. Maybe this would be one of those mysterious ones that would follow him for his lifetime.

Sung-Won Hong, Writer

Sung-Won Hong was born in Soo Won, Kyoungh Province, South Korea. He studied at Kyung University where he majored in English Literature. He began writing seriously after one of his short stories won the Dong-A Ilbo’s 1961 New Year Literature Contest. In 1964, his novel A Military Village of D—Day won the Dong-A Ilbo’s Open Prize for novels. His novels are South and North, Mon-Dong (The Dawning Sky), Moon and Knife, and The Last Idol, among others. His short story collections include “The Tyrant” and “Weekend Trip.” Hong has received the Korean Literature Award, the Award for Contemporary Literature, and Yi-Sang Literature Award.

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