ESSAY

Grieving In Your Name

by Bora Hah



Untitled by Harald Wawrzyniak (rûm)

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"Your name becomes a song that flows in my heart.
If I follow the water, will I get near you?"

? Kim Yuna, River

I. HIM

News of his death arrived in fall 2023. It was one season after he died; after they found his body floating in the cold, rushing water underneath the highest bridge in Korea. After his family conducted a fleeting, three-person-only funeral. And after my father's long hesitation to share with me this tragic ending of his close church member's beloved son. November brought rain. I was thirty, busy working as a staff writer for a TV show in Seoul, wondering if I could ever write my own stuff again. Especially in English.

Before screenplays, I wrote fiction. I first started writing in college, in Korean, my mother tongue. I then crossed the border to attend graduate school in America. I was there to study creative writing, which then seemed like a logical step to become a fluent bilingual author.

In my younger days, lured by all sorts of writing prizes, I was certain of my calling as a writer. But ten years afterwards, I found myself still struggling to secure a spot as a professional. I still didn't have a published novel, or a major hit TV show. Money was tight, way too tight to afford a house, a car, or even marriage. Although I tried not to, inside, I was deeply humiliated at my state. I began to question my career choices. Sometimes I grew so depressed I had difficulty getting out of bed. Then came the news.

My friend never knew, but in college, I once wrote a short story about him. It was right after I had heard from his parents that he had dropped out of school. This was a cold splash of water to me because the school he attended was a well-known Ivy League college in New York, and I couldn't figure why anyone would willingly lose such a precious education opportunity. All I knew was that my friend had trouble "fitting in" with the group.

In many ways, the male character in my story resembled my friend: a quiet male student from Korea who went to an elite school in the United States. What made a significant difference between the two was that my character didn't talk. It wasn't that he didn't want to: he simply couldn't. His severe mental illness, which he had had since seventeen, had sealed his throat, telling him that no one would understand him anyway.

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In truth, the Ivy League was never his dream. In America, he was afraid: too afraid to make any meaningful connections with fellow students, or make bold decisions such as going back to Korea, his long forgotten motherland he had left at the age of fifteen. No, he couldn't do that. Return meant failure: failure to please his parents who had worked so hard to put him through such expensive western education. And there was the military issue. With his return, he had to serve a year long military service, a mandatory duty for every South Korean male in their twenties.

But staying? Oh, staying meant enduring. Tired, he was so tired of enduring all that shame, sadness, longing, language, isolation. He found life much more comfortable in his silence. If possible, he wanted to be invisible ? free from himself, and his old emotional baggage.

Then, like a miracle, a young Korean woman befriends him. She is the instructor of his composition class. She reads his essay, a well-written and honest account of his previous days and his loneliness. Ignoring her boyfriend's concern, she invites him for lunch. She emails him when he doesn't show up for class. Ultimately he grows fond of her. He still doesn't talk, but he now meets eyes with her. He even laughs sometimes. He has a kind, child-like smile, she recognizes.

From here the story unfolds treacherously. Rather than becoming friendly, which she had hoped, he grows more and more unpredictable. He stalks her to her apartment and harasses her by sending long, long text messages that resemble love letters. Finally, she calls the police for help. At this, his heart turns cold, colder than before. And when the brokenhearted man hears racist remarks from his classmates who comically mimic his English pronunciation and dare tell him to go back to his country, his eyes light up. Curling his fingers into balls, he breaks his silence at last. In full speech, he curses them, swearing he'll kill them all. He then pulls out a gun and points at the guys who aren't laughing anymore. He stares at them, one by one, at their pale white faces. For a moment he thinks, and shoots himself instead.

After writing, I realized that what I wrote was not just a story about him, my childhood friend; it was also about Seunghui Cho, the infamous mass murder responsible for the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. Most importantly, it was about me.

II. ME

I was nine years old when my family moved to the United States. We lived in a small town called Orem in Utah where my father served as a visiting scholar at a local university. The entire program was funded by my father's company, and the deal was that he must come

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back to work after a year.

At nine, I never quite understood what it meant to leave home, but I remember feeling jolly to see my parents' beaming smiles on their faces whenever they talked about our new life in America. I thought something wonderful would happen in that new land.

The time was April 2003. America was still recovering from the unimaginable loss of 9/11. This meant them sharpening their gates, especially towards foreigners. From the LAX airport where my family transferred flights, we were put into a special group that required extra screening. As I put my socks in a red plastic bin, I imagined hostile stares looking over me from every corner. It felt as if I was proving my innocence against false charges.

As an introvert, I normally wish to be invisible in the crowd, but in Utah, my presence was unmistakable as I was often the only Asian in the group. This had been my parents' deliberate choice: they chose the particular area after learning that not many Asians resided there, and they liked it so much because it meant their daughter could acquire "perfect" English with less distraction.

Until then, I did not speak a word of English. But on the first day of school, I knew by instinct that if I didn't speak up, or learn the rules of this new country, I'd soon become the class clown. To survive, I needed to blend in. I needed people on my side.

So I became extra vigilant, soaked up everything around me, and pretended as if they were mine from the beginning. Not long later I saw myself laughing with the crowd even when I did not really understand what was going on, or coolly tossing leftover pizza and drinks into a giant trash can although I was more familiar with recycling. I even attended pajama parties when I did not feel like going because that was what American girls did.

A year later, I was almost a different person: a sweet American child who giggled often and could talk at length with strangers. I was so into my American life that at times I was surprised to see myself in a mirror: someone who looked so different from my white American friends. I quickly turned my face away in those moments, as if to pretend I did not see myself, my true Korean self.

When I returned to Korea, I had to do another pretending act, this time as a full Korean. It had been barely a year since I was gone but there was so much to catch up with ? studies, fashion, jokes, manners. Despite my trying, I got bullied a few times in school for "acting too much like an American." During those days, I lamented at my torn identity. I was well aware of the fact that I was a native Korean, but part of me felt so Americanized, and I needed that feeling as well as their language to succeed in this world. It hurt me so much that my wish to be a competent global citizen was only rewarded by being hated by my people.

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And every time the weight of this double life fell on my shoulders, I dreamt of leaving Korea.

With that in my mind, right after I entered university, I applied for a study abroad program. It was rare that a freshman got the opportunity but they accepted me perhaps because I was so desperate. My secret plan was to settle down wherever I end up and never come back home.

Meanwhile, my life had a different plan on me: six months before my departure, I developed a serious migraine. After a few misdiagnoses, doctors confirmed that I had stage II blood cancer. What was supposed to be a week-long stay in the hospital elongated into a deadly three month battle. Although doctors had reassured me that I'd survive, every day during my chemotherapy, I wanted to die. It was that painful.

On the bright side, the illness has taught me so much about life. I learned that my time on this Earth is limited and that I wish to do something meaningful with it. I prayed to God that if I could make it through this, I'd live a different life, a better one than seeking my own pleasure. Eleven months later, the prayer was answered: I was cured, and I was able to walk out of the hospital without any assistance.

The first writing prize I won was an autobiography contest held by my university. I have always enjoyed writing, but after cancer, writing was no longer a dream: I no longer wrote to impress people. Instead, I wrote because I had to, needed to, and wanted to live on. I wanted to give power to my feelings and perspectives. More than anything, I wanted to appear fully as myself with all my emotional truths. And to do that, I had to be brave. I needed to take the risk of ridicule, shame, and failure, in order to confront myself. *Why not?* I told myself while writing. *I've been through cancer. What more could humiliate me?* Two years later, I won another prize, this time as a fiction writer. The haunting story of a depressed Ivy League student was written in that transition era between nonfiction and fiction.

Sadly, when I shared that story with my class, not many understood its sentiment. Some even said they were disturbed to see a terrorist taking up the leading character, and criticized that I might be justifying Cho's crime. This was not the case at all, but I understood what they meant: the students were saying that they were unable to relate to the man's rage.

I now understand that their reaction was my failure as a fiction writer who should be able to sell anything to her readers, but at the time I was too arrogant to sense that. I rather thought the subject material was too foreign to understand for born and raised Koreans. Disappointed, I threw away my draft and began working on a grad school application in America. Once again I fell into the state of daydreaming: I thought if I went back there, to

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the land where I left part of me, people would finally get me, all my stories, and all my hidden sadness.

So it was no coincidence that I wrote many stories about Koreans in grad school: I wrote about young South Korean soldiers, North Korean defectors, *gireogi appas* (wild goose fathers who worked in Korea while their family lived in English speaking countries), Korean immigrants in America, and more. I wrote about their love lives, their financial crisis, their broken families. And loads of confusion and self-loathing.

Yet unlike my cheerful imagination, my American classmates had equal difficulty understanding my story as the students in Korea. After reading my story on a sexual assault case in the South Korean military, one student asked if this was the reality of South Korea today. I gave her a calm, cold look and said this was a work of fiction, not a documentary. I never spoke to her again because I felt so angry and stupid. It pained me too much to witness my very important topics and questions I had posed in my writing being wasted in public.

A couple months went by with me being stuck in a low-confidence mode. I still wrote stories, but I intended on not sending away anything when our school threw a writing contest judged by a Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen who came to our school to deliver a keynote speech. But in the end I did, encouraged by Professor Hsu, one of few people in the Creative Writing program who believed in my work from early on.

The story I submitted was about North Koreans going through a harsh famine called the Arduous March in the mid 90s. The idea came from my previous experience as a tutor for North Korean defectors in Seoul. Contrary to my stereotypes, my students were not victims, nor did that hold such mindsets. None of them brought up their country or regime during our conversation. Rather, they worried about college, dating, and parenting. They longed for love and security, just like any ordinary Korean woman. I wrote that story because I wanted to paint a human portrait of these people who have been dehumanized for so long.

The winners of the writing contest were announced on the day of the keynote speech. When Viet called my name as a runner up winner, I thought, perhaps, I could really settle down here. In this country I wanted to call home, in a language I wanted to master.

III. US

“Be careful, *umma*,” I said as I hung up the phone. I was telling my mother in Korea to look after her health and avoid public spaces as Coronavirus was quickly invading the country. I had little information about the disease at the time except that it was a sort of flu that could kill you if you were unlucky. March 2020, I had just kicked off the last semester of my

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Master's program, and I was desperately seeking to get some rest in the upcoming spring break.

When the spring break finally came, however, everything had changed. Coronavrius began to hit the entire world, including Hawaii, where my school was located. As a person with a history of serious illness, I realized that I could not risk my health for my studies. So within two days, I hurriedly left, never knowing if I'd be able to return.

There was no graduation ceremony. My thesis defense was done through a Zoom meeting. Months later, I found myself stuck in Seoul, jobless and broke. I wrote two manuscripts in Korean but virtually no publisher wanted to take them. The only writing that got accepted was a short essay I wrote for a Korean Drama Institution to which I had applied. One thing led to another, and I was able to make a living as a staff writer for various K-dramas, which felt like a miracle. Slowly I began to forget my American life, and the big, beautiful dream I once had to be a bilingual writer. It all sounded almost like a joke to me.

When I heard what had happened to my friend, who gave up his life to clinical depression, I felt sad, and powerless. What upset me the most was that I understood; by heart, by soul, by experience, I understood what it feels like to live his life. To be so competent, educated, and exhausted; to be so tender, beautiful, and blue. I wanted to tell him that while Korean literature, film, drama, and pop songs are being adored by the world, I also felt largely disconnected from the glamorous party. That no matter what, I was still myself, a shy girl from Korea, who, after all these years, still found English intimidating. And that this language was both my biggest blessing, and a curse.

The following winter felt exceptionally cold and long. None of the holidays in December entertained me a bit. In February, I flew to Vienna, Austria, to a foreign land I was utterly unfamiliar with, where no one knew me. Each night I circled the cold, gray city glowing with its golden street lights, hearing foreign languages from all sides.

Some nights, I looked into the deep blue eyes of my newly made Viennese friends, and suddenly thought of my friend who had also lived such an international life. I thought of my initial days in the US, and the moments I had to betray myself in order to wear a mask of a confident American sweetheart. *But for what?* I wanted to ask myself. Despite Gustav Klimt's fascinating work of art and crisp schnitzel, I spent many nights crying in my sleek, compact studio near the Pilgramgasse station.

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And when spring finally came, both in Seoul and in my mind, I began writing, again, about my friend. *Yes*, I told myself. *I still want to grieve. And yes, I still want to remember, and honor us. Again and again and again…*

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