

ESSAY

My Dear Yeast

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"Connect" by Hyewon Cho

Embracing and Appreciating Language as Identity

They says to me
“Everyone needs to learn.”
*It too hard. I too old. I try
communicate with Granddaughter
doesn't want learn language of mother
because she already speak English
Universal language.*

“My dear Yeast,
*It is a prized catch mother hen
ignorance is special bond.
I grab the hem of a mother,
watching while trembling. Show me
your fertilized love giggles.
Love, Halmoni.”*

My grandma used to live with us when I was younger. She's the one who taught me Korean while my parents were out, working with local Tanzanians. She's the one who read to me in Korean (a lot of short-term missionaries would bring over Korean children's books for me), and the one who encouraged me to continue my use of Korean at home after I would spend all day playing with Tanzanian kids and speaking in Swahili, and even when I started going to an international school and having to learn English.

When I got a little older, I realized that not every kid spoke three languages (one at home, one in the community, and one at school), so I started to slack on my Korean whenever my grandma would try to chase me down on Saturdays and have me read out loud or practice my spelling. Of the three languages, Korean was the language I valued the least because it was the language I could speak only with my family, whereas Swahili was essential in spending time with my local friends, and English was the language that everyone at school spoke. To me, Korean was not very useful, and the older I became and the busier I got, the more I associated Korean with a waste of time and something that I didn't need. (It didn't help that I had no Korean pride - I was made fun of a lot at school because I was one of the only Asians in the city.)

I tried so hard to fit in with other students at my school. I didn't like standing out and I didn't want to be the one who was constantly bullied because of my differences. Back then, being "different" was not such a good thing. In fact, I have a vivid memory of when and how I started really hating and repressing my Korean identity and language.

Hidden by the door frame,
*I watched my mom's predictable pattern of
roll, slice, stack. Roll, slice, stack.*
*4 AM wakeup call for her to pack my lunch for the school
picnic, and me getting up not too long after, unable to contain
my excitement. Will they be impressed? Maybe even
a little bit jealous of my mom's perfect Korean cooking? Probably
both. But when lunchtime finally rolled around and
the kimbap container was opened,
all I heard were the quiet "Eww"s as I
felt the slight shift of people moving away from me.*
*Reddened face, ringing ears, dragging feet. My shaking hands
found themselves tossing the kimbap that was my mom's 4 AM work,
the kimbap that had been my source of pride and joy,
into the open and hungry mouth of the trash can, which readily swallowed
my pride and my lunch, along with my favorite yellow plastic container,
the one with the smiling ducklings on it.*
*Their perfectly triangled white sandwiches, perfect pale skin,
perfect light eyes (they looked easy enough to gouge out). Sunshine
rested in their golden hair while night and fury nested in mine.*
Did I want to die or be white?
*At home that afternoon, I
shut myself in the bathroom and scrubbed my skin raw and cried
my eyes dry until exhaustion called my name.*
*The front door clicked
and I threw angry words at my mom
before slamming my door shut.*
*My mom never made kimbap again. We never talked
about the incident after that.*

After that happened, I refused to speak Korean at home. I'd only talk to my parents in Swahili (I figured I was doing them a favor, especially since they were still in the process of learning it — kids *do* pick up languages much faster than adults do!) and I would blatantly ignore my grandma's efforts in trying to teach me Korean. She continued to speak to me in Korean, but when I would stubbornly give her one-word answers in English that she could understand, she would either give up or, when she felt up to it, try to piece together her near-nonexistent English to form phrases that I'd sometimes respond to. I didn't really feel bad at the time. After all, I didn't actually need Korean. I was having a hard enough time keeping up with learning colloquial phrases in English anyway.

Caroline: Mel, did you hear about the bus driver?

Me: No, what about him?

Caroline: He got fired!

Me (never having heard of the phrase "fired" to mean "let go from a job" before): How?

Caroline: He was smoking on the school bus.

Me (thinking he had caught on fire from smoking): Is he okay? Is he dead?

Caroline: No, why would he be?

Me: You just said he was fired!

Caroline: Yeah, so he just has to find another job, but he's fine otherwise.

Me (finally understanding): Oh, I was literally picturing him on fire...

It wasn't until I was a teenager and my grandma had moved back to Korea that I finally understood why it was so important for her to have me learn Korean. She had left a letter for me to read. It was in Korean, obviously, and by then, I had stopped practicing reading the language so it took me a good while not only to decipher her handwriting, but also what she was trying to tell me in her letter. When I finally got through the letter (with my mom's occasional help) I couldn't help but cry. This is what the letter revealed to me about my grandma:

She had grown up during the Japanese occupation of Korea and had been banned from speaking Korean as a girl. She had been forced to learn Japanese, the language of her oppressors, and had felt that her identity was being stripped away from her and the rest of the country. By the time Korea was liberated from Japan, a lot of the Korean language had, unfortunately, been lost; the Japanese had burnt hundreds of thousands of Korean books and manuscripts, taught every subject in Japanese, stopped Korean print completely, and had severely punished anyone who spoke or wrote in Korean. Furthermore, Koreans were forced

to take on Japanese names, and those who refused were prohibited from enrolling in schools or receiving food rations. So, for my grandma, the ability for Koreans to regain their language after the occupation ended was a miracle. She took a lot of pride in being Korean and being a part of the movement that helped revive the Korean language, history, and culture. She didn't want that to end at me, just because I grew up abroad.

It all made sense to me. I wrote her a letter back. In Korean. With my mom's help. I ended up apologizing for my actions and explaining where I was coming from. I told her about being bullied and about my need to fit in and my frustrations of feeling like I didn't belong. And even though it took a very long time, when I mailed the letter to my grandma, I felt good. Within a few weeks, she wrote back. I responded. She responded to me. I wrote back to her. This cycle went on for years until I moved to the States for college. I think it was the letter-writing that saved my Korean, to be honest. The more I practiced writing, the better I got at it. The more I got to learn about my grandma's history, Korea's history, the history of my people, I felt a sense of pride in being Korean. It was inspiring to learn about different heroes who helped preserve the language by smuggling books into other towns or by copying thousands of pages of words to help spread them in pamphlets. Each time I received a letter from my grandma, I learned something new. In one of her letters, she taught me something I still tell people who are interested in linguistics or enjoy studying languages.

The year was 1446
And Koreans were still forced
to pay tributes to China.
We were a small country with
no significance or power of our own.
Every written and scholarly
piece was processed in Chinese,
it was a given that only the rich had enough
time and money to learn
to read and write.
Until
Sejong the Great
decided that a writing system
so easy that even a housewife could learn it in a day
should be developed.
He gathered scholars from all

*over the country to help him create a
writing system specific
to the Korean language.*

Our language.

*A writing system so perfect that
every single character
would correspond to the shape
of the tongue or mouth
formed by the speaker.*

*A writing system so perfect that
within a few years, Korea's literacy
rates were above that of China's and Japan's.*

*A writing system so perfect that
even linguists today say that it's the most
logical writing system in the entire world.*

*A writing system so perfect that
was created by our people
for our people.*

My people.

Pride. It's what I feel when I think about my language. Yes, I'm still conflicted when people ask me about my identity. I don't always know how to answer when someone asks me what my "first" language is. Is it Korean because I learned it first, even though I abandoned it for a good long while before returning to it? Has it changed to English because that's the language I do the majority of my life in right now? Regardless of what my first language is, I'm grateful. I'm grateful that I speak English and that I can take pride in my Korean. I'm grateful that I grew up speaking Swahili and still have opportunities to use it. I'm grateful that I was able to get my Masters degree in Spanish and that I got to teach it at the high school level. I'm grateful that my husband's French-Canadian, and I have the daunting task of learning French, his first language.

I'm no longer ashamed of myself and my background or my languages and identity. After all, in this global society, why not speak more than one language? Knowing another language is (and will) always be a good thing. Yes, it's hard, but in the end, it's all worth it.

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No pain, no gain.

Hakuna maptao bila maangaiko.

Quien quiera azul celeste, que le cueste.

Qui ne tente rien, n'a rien.