

Searching among the snow-covered graves, I finally found his. The Mangwol-dong gravestone, which I'd seen a long time ago, had only had his name and dates inscribed, no photo; they'd had the black-and-white photo from his school's records enlarged, and put on the new gravestone. Those flanking his all belonged to high-schoolers. I peered at those youthful faces and dark winter clothes in what were presumably middle school graduation photos. The night before, his brother had repeatedly insisted that Dong-ho had been lucky. *Wasn't it lucky that he was shot so he died straight away, don't you think that was lucky?* A strange fever had burned in his eyes as he begged me to agree with him. *One of the high-schoolers who was shot next to my brother at the Provincial Office, who's buried next to him now, when they exhumed him there was a hole right in the middle of his forehead, and the back of his skull was completely missing. He can't have died straight away, so the soldiers would have shot him again to be sure that they'd finished him off.* He told me how the boy's white-haired father had wept soundlessly, his hand over his mouth.

I opened my bag and took out the three candles. I stood one in front of each boy's grave, knelt down and lit them. I didn't pray. I didn't close my eyes, or observe a minute's silence. The candles burned steadily. Their orange flames undulating soundlessly, gradually being sucked into the centre and hollowed out. Only then did I notice how incredibly cold my ankles were. Without realising it, I'd been kneeling in a snow drift which covered Dong-ho's grave. The snow had soaked through my socks, seeping in right through to my skin. I stared, mute, at that flame's wavering outline, fluttering like a bird's translucent wing.

Reflection

1. Theme of loss and grief

How does Kang's description of the graves and the youthful faces evoke a sense of collective tragedy?

2. Characterisation and coping mechanisms

What is the significance of the brother's repeated insistence that Dong-ho was 'lucky' to have died instantly?

3. Symbolism

How do the descriptions of the candles and their flames serve as a symbol for memory and impermanence?

4. Imagery and tone

How does Kang's use of sensory detail, such as the cold ankles and snow seeping through socks, enhance the emotional tone of the scene?