



Stories of Change



Byun, Wol-ryong. *Taedongmun, Pyongyang*. 1954, Hakgojae Gallery, Seoul.

A Tender Heart of Spring Recess

After the pandemic passes, I hope what remains are the tender memories, the compassionate hearts that endure and restore.

By BORA HAH | May 21, 2020

For a while, I couldn't write. There had been too many surprises, too many dramas stirred by Covid-19. Like most people, my life also went through some major changes: the outside scenery has changed from swaying palm trees of Honolulu to sleek skyscrapers of Seoul, and my summer plan to do an internship as a journalist in New York evaporated. In March, I couldn't think straight. In April, I was busy adapting to a new reality, teaching and learning online. And finally in May, impossible exhaustion rushed in. Here in South Korea, the country I had grown up, outdoor activity is still limited and flights to and from overseas remain halted. Due to such restrictions, South Korea's postal services are refusing to mail out cotton face masks to my close friends in the US and a contract letter to my publisher regarding my short story publication.

These days I fear checking news or refreshing my email inbox. Numbers. What I fear are the numbers. It saddens me to see tens and millions of people whose lives got crushed by the virus appear as flat numbers or curves on graphs. A few days ago, I received a devastating email from a humanitarian aid organization I support. According to the email, the country where my sponsored child resides is experiencing radical food insecurity in response to Covid-19, and the organization cannot guarantee whether the child's family will receive proper food or supplies through government distribution programs.

A New York Times article has predicted that about 265 million people would suffer from hunger by the end of this year. The pandemic has doubled the number. I had to stop reading there and shut my eyes, feeling a pang in my gut. I knew too well what famine was and what it can do to people. In fact, my short story coming out this fall is centered around the widespread famine in North Korea, known as the "Arduous March," in the mid-1990s. I had spent almost two years in graduate school researching the subject for my creative writing thesis. I learned that famine is not a one-time event, but a gradual process. Consequently, many North Koreans did not notice the presence of famine until dead bodies piled up on the streets, and people got executed in public for stealing a few potatoes. Some starved

while waiting for food given by their Public Distribution System while others left the country for better lives. As a South Korean who remembers the 90s as the golden age of “Hallyu,” the global popularity of South Korean popular culture, the great famine and traumas of North Korean diaspora, which I was utterly unaware of until I went to college and taught English to North Korean defectors in Seoul, tugged at my heartstring.

My story was meant to mend certain stereotypes framed upon Koreans. When I first came to America at nine, I was asked, almost every day, by random Americans if I came from North or South Korea. When I answered that I came from the South, what often came back to me were long sermons on how their uncles or fathers had fought in the Korean War, or how they felt sorry for South Korea being a “sitting duck” in between powerful nations, or how crazy the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was to make its people into mindless slaves. Although these days Korean culture is gaining more recognition with the spread of South Korean TV dramas, films, music, literature, and so forth, I still felt an urgent need to put more human portraits of Koreans out there, the images of ordinary Koreans making love, losing love, and sometimes regretting their choices. Most importantly, I wanted to tell the world that there are people behind the gleams and dreads of the two Koreas.

Last year at the Swedish Academy, 2018 Literature Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk has delivered a lecture on the value of tenderness as a cure for a humanitarian crisis. Defining tenderness as deep emotional concern about another being, the Polish writer delineated the idea of a tender narrator in fiction, who can encompass every individual’s life in a novel. The key to the invention is the belief that the world is an interconnected living entity, and that people are small but powerful components. In my opinion, the ability to be tender comes from one’s willingness to acknowledge her wounds; only then the person’s horizon expands beyond herself. In 2013, I had experienced a significant loss in my life: an unforeseen illness had struck me, and I spent ten months in a sickbed, screaming in horror and remorse.

For many following years since my recovery, I ventured into the world, wanting to understand why I had to go through such heartbreak and pain. I never did. But while witnessing the lives of so many patients in the hospital that were consumed by equal or perhaps greater suffering than mine, I understood that I was not alone, either in this world or in the crisis. The very critical moment I realized that I believe I became a writer of an empathetic journey, a tender narrator.

While the world outside the window is yet a struggle, enclosed and carefully monitored, I at least wanted to share my tenderness on the world wide web. That said, I hope we won't lose our tenderness we carry in our hearts because of Covid-19. In the fleeting moments when we are tempted to give up on understanding others, or worse, throw sharp comments or judging stares, I hope tenderness would be there, mending our brokenness with modest love. After the pandemic passes, I hope what remains are the tender memories, the compassionate hearts that endure and restore.

Starting from mid-March, the beginning of spring recess, America has seen exponential growth of Covid-19 cases, including Hawaii, where I attended grad school. The campus did not open even after the break, and I, an international student with no proper health insurance in the US, had to pack two years of my life within two days to return home, South Korea. I still haven't seen my friends to whom I only left a shy smile of see-you-soon-after-the-break. Without an official graduation ceremony, I completed the master's program last week, which means my student visa will expire within the next two months. With airlines suspending flights between Seoul and Honolulu, and a frozen job market, I'm uncertain if I could go back to the US anytime soon. However, upon my news of exile, so many people wrote me kind messages and even offered their places, food, and rides in case I changed my mind. That I know for sure was tenderness born in these wild times.

I still don't know what to name this period; no definite word or image comes into my mind. It has been

almost two months since I returned to Seoul, but in my dreams, I casually return to Hawaii, to school and familiar faces. My days in Korea are as simple as holing myself in my room and writing stories, or ordering delicious Korean delivery treats I had craved for so long such as spicy *tteok-bokki* or fried chicken, or taking a long walk around my quiet neighborhood. Often times, I feel as though the spring recess never came to an end. At night, I lie in my bed and wonder if there could be a hidden agenda, which this long, long recess has brought me.

Back at the University of Hawaii, at the Kuykendall Hall where I took most of my classes, there was a bulletin board across from an elevator. One of the posts pinned on the board was a quote by writer Maxine Hong Kingston. It said, "In a time of destruction, create something." The first night in Seoul, I had a dream, which took me back to school. I walked up the stairs of the Kuykendall building and found myself arriving on the fourth floor. The lights were dimmed, and I felt cold air brushing my shoulders. Then, suddenly, terror kicked in. I realized that I was alone in the building. Everyone left; I was locked inside. Curling my fists into balls, I looked around, to the east and west, but could not find anyone. When I felt like screaming, I woke up. The dream, which was a nightmare after all, came to me repeatedly throughout the first few weeks. And when it finally disappeared, I began writing.