

Inseparable by Jae Yoo

I know that they destroyed our cultural and spiritual circle that we maintained for five thousand years. They just had to leave a natural trace that actually became part of us. I don't know if I should hate them. It is ignorantly and unwittingly buried deeply in our unconsciousness. Natural hatred and attraction, like two inseparable sides of a coin, had confused me for so long. Because the scar still remains unhealed and too painful to ignore, and because I hesitate to hate what's part of me.

Broken wings were all over the country. They were forced to tear their skin and delicate white feathers off, replacing them with acute and heavy pebbles that filled their lives with sharp pain and humiliation.

It all came too naturally. My childhood desk was decorated with cute dolls in red kimonos, a gift from my father, and pictures that I took with Jini. Affectionately-spoken Japanese often filled my house, enabling me to learn some of the foreign words gradually. *Kawai, kawai, Jae san wa kawai.* I blinked my eyes and laughed a ticklish and bright child's laughter at what my grandma said to me. What does it mean, grandma? A calm, peach colored smile blossomed on grandmother's face. It means *very, very, adorable.* Another warm smile and a soft pat on my head. *Kawai.* I recited the word carefully while grandma and mom were having a short conversation in Japanese.

In downtown Kyoto, Japan, there lies a small stone monument at the spot where the ears of Koreans taken to Japan during one of its invasions in 1592 were buried. Japan has invaded Korea numerous times in known history, but when it invaded in 1592, Japanese soldiers were known to have cut off the ears of Koreans they either killed or wished to humiliate. One Japanese scholar suggests that later Japanese regimes came to value noses over ears because, somehow, cutting off noses sounds more cruel" (Lee).

Koreans love everything from Japan. On café tables in Ap-Guh-Juhn-Dong, the Beverly Hills of Korea, Japanese fashion magazines lay arrogantly. Sony and PlayStation products are sold fiercely in electronics markets. Some Koreans even say that we should admire Japan for their economic success, technology, and lifestyle. Only when it comes to history do they go hysterical and anti-Japan, remembering repeated attempts at invasion until the Japanese finally succeeded in 1910.

With artificially attached pebble feather and broken wings, still they were pushed off the solemn cliff to fly, fly, and fly. Restless slavery. Dusky ashes were fallen, suffocating and sad.

The use of Korean language was at first discouraged and later forbidden. The study of Korean history was forbidden and the Koreans were forced to abandon their traditional family and given names and adopt Japanese style names. (Nahm 224)

I, too, am attracted to Japan, a country that is so close and so far. Their fantastic and dreamy animations fascinate me. Luscious sushi satisfies my fastidious tongue. It drew me closer and closer as I consciously and awkwardly tried to resist the appeal. I wanted to understand the reason. Later I found out that I didn't have to understand it at all. It was all inside of me.

My grandmother attended Japanese schools that were set up to educate the Koreans in Japanese language, with Japanese spirits, and she of course spoke perfect and old-fashioned Japanese. My father studied abroad in Japan after receiving his degrees and spoke flawless Japanese. My Mom, being taught by her Mom, also could carry out basic conversations though not as fluently as my grandmother and my father. My best friend Erri is a hundred percent Japanese and only speaks Japanese in her house.

Modern Koreans still use some of the Japanese words. I always thought *gab-babng*, meaning "bag" in Korean, was pure Korean. Only when Erri said that the same word meant "bag" in Japanese too did I realize that it was only a fragment of what's still left in us.

In December 1922, the colonial government organized the Committee for Compilation of Korean History, and the History of Korea was published. However, it contained many fabrications and distortions, which were aimed at justifying the actions taken by the Japanese before and after 1905, as well as the policy of the colonial government" (Nam 230).

People told me that they could see a majestic tiger in the map of the Korean peninsula. I shook my head and told them that all I saw was an immobile and tiny rabbit.

When Erri first told me that she was Japanese, I told her that I had been to Japan some years ago to visit my friend. I named some famous Japanese that I knew. Kimura, Amuro, Tsuyoshi, Shingo, Mori, Utada, Hamasaki.... I recited the names of idolized singers and actors while she gasped at the names I mentioned, her eyes sparkling with amazement. Whenever she'd mention a name I nodded my head to show that I knew. When I mentioned Tokyo Disneyland, she showed me a yellow Mickey Mouse pencil lead case that she got from there, the same case I bought at Tokyo Disneyland. She was very amused and surprised, and I explained how natural it all was for me.

It was a common practice for the Japanese to abuse Koreans during the invasion. Oppressed and abused, Koreans were forced to labor. Girls as young and chaste as fresh flower buds were picked to serve Japanese soldiers like sexual slaves, legalized rapes. Young men were forced to serve in the army, in wars they didn't want to fight. Any movement of rebellion was to be punished straight. "Between August 1910 and 1918, over 200,000 Koreans classified as *fiutei senjin* (malcontent and rebellious Koreans), were arrested and tortured" (Nahm 227).

But in their unanimated black eyes they secretly kept a faint flame, waiting for a capable wind to approach them.

In the morning of March 1, 1919, thousands of Koreans shouted "Long Live Korea! Long Live Korean Independence!" in protest against the cruel Japanese rules. The crowd marched into the main street of Seoul, waving the Korean national flag. This quickly spread throughout the country. The cry "Long Live Korea! Long Live Korean Independence!" was heard everywhere. A million Koreans from all walks of life, young and old and men and women participated in the demonstrations throughout the month of March. The Japanese police responded harshly and quickly. Some 1200 Koreans were killed and 16000 were wounded (Nahm 241).

I once got an e-mail from my friend that linked me to a website with gruesome black and white pictures of tortured and abused Koreans under the Japanese rule. Victims getting buried alive.

Decapitated Korean heads with cigarettes in the stiff lips, a truculent and brutal humor played by the Japanese soldiers. A raped Korean woman with bloody intestines, a wretched and pathetic death. *How can you forget this?* these pictures asked. A big title in red was knocking my heart furiously. How can I forget this? With my watery eyes and flushing anger trying to escape my heart, I had touched my hidden inherited wounds. They were bleeding in pain again, exposed to the bitter air, open as though it were 1910.

On August 15, 1945, Korea was finally liberated. Exuberant happiness swept the peninsula. People everywhere held the Korean national flag and shouted "Long Live Korea! Long Live Korean Independence!" They stood there with bitter and empty victory that made them wonder deep inside. We are free, free at last, but without our families, what are we?

Out of curiosity, I once asked Erri to tell me everything she knows about the Japanese Invasion. "Were they cruel to Koreans? I am sorry.... That's all I know. You still have words like *ghababng* in your culture," her innocent and concerned voice answered. I didn't want to make her feel guilty. I just thought that she needed to know the truth, without any distortion or over-justification.

History should be truthful and without any bias because history will repeat itself forever if the truth is ignored or distorted, even to the slightest degree.

A recent issue of *Electronic Chosunilbo* published a story that conveyed this:

In 1982, Japan angered Koreans by publishing textbooks with false descriptions or complete omissions; particularly concerning comfort women and forced labor. Due to the criticism of neighboring countries and the voices of some people in Japan, this was partially corrected. Now, however, the same thing is recurring, spurred on by [Japanese] nationalists. The purpose would seem to be an attempt to justify its past history of invasion and domination, a truly anachronistic path to follow. ("Editorial")

Even though it's all over and everything belongs to the past, I am still afraid. Even though I wasn't even born in the era of oppression, I am still afraid. Even though none of my relatives that I know of were killed or tortured by the Japanese, I am still afraid. I am afraid that my vicarious wounds still linger inside me, affecting everything I do. Because they are part of us now, I know that I will never be able to erase it. It's part of my inseparable flesh, blood, and undying consciousness of being a Korean.

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