

IN VAIN I CHANT A MAGIC VERSEBY

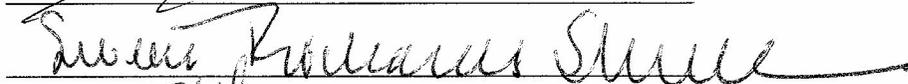
by

Danielle Harms  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
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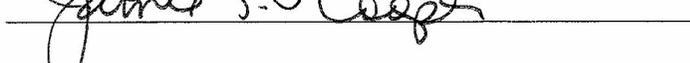
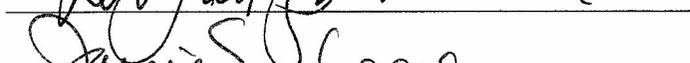
Committee:



Director



Department Chairperson



Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

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In Vain I Chant A Magic Verse

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Name of Degree, as in Master or Doctor of Science or Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Danielle Harms  
Bachelor of Arts  
Gustavus Adolphus College, 2009

Director: Kyoko Mori, Professor  
Department of English for Master of Fine Arts

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George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA



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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my endlessly encouraging partner Greg and the many faculty, friends, and family who mentored me as I pursued this project. And above all, this work is dedicated to those who survived staggering adversity yet still found the fortitude to share their stories.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank those who helped me along the way, especially my thesis advisor, Kyoko Mori.

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## **ABSTRACT**

IN VAIN I CHANT A MAGIC VERSE

Danielle Harms, MFA

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Dr. Kyoko Mori

This thesis explores the lives of those women who survived enforced prostitution in the comfort stations created by Japan before the surrender of the Empire in World War II. It focuses primarily on girls and women from Korea who became euphemistically known as “comfort women.” It is a story with three parts: the period of time when Korea was under colonial rule and women were coerced into comfort stations, the years of silence that followed, and the contemporary redress movement that continues today. It also includes my efforts to understand the complexities of the issue.

## TO TELL A TRUTH: AN INTRODUCTION

“Is reconciliation possible without some kind of powerful, transcendental faith? Surely, as many have argued, a first step in the politics of reconciliation and forgiveness is knowledge by seeking, learning exactly what happened, to whom, by whom, and why.”

-Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Undoing,” 2004

She came to her press conference dressed for a funeral or a celebration. It depends on what you see in the color white. That August morning in 1991, when the 67 year old Korean woman pulled her white *hanbok* from its hanger, stepped into its billowing skirt, and slid her arms into the wide sleeves, she was dressing herself in the color her ancestors had worn for over two thousands years. Young Koreans watching the press conference on TV that day saw the traditional outfit they donned to mourn a death or celebrate a holiday. Elderly Koreans saw the white cloth police officers had smeared with paint brushes dipped in dark ink after Japan gained control of their country. The color once represented purity, modesty, and peace. The Japanese banned the white clothing during their occupation. After World War II ended in 1945 and Korea was liberated, the streets filled with people clad in white once again, and the clothing took on

shades of resilient pride.

The white fabric of her dress also represented truthfulness, which was why this woman in poor health had traveled from her home in Seoul to Tokyo to address a room packed with people. To tell a truth. She had spent most of her life protecting a secret she would soon share with the public. She shifted in her seat behind a long table crowded with microphones. A line of people, all but a few men in dark suits, stood behind her. Reporters waited with notebooks in hand. Photographers focused their lenses on the grooves of her face. She smoothed her hair, from the part in the center down to the neat bun gathered at her neck. Someone gave her a white cotton handkerchief, and she clutched the fabric between knobby fingers for just a few more moments before the life she had known would change.

Once she spoke into those crackling microphones, her name would appear on television screens and in newspaper headlines. She would be revered and hated. Yet after decades of careful silence, she wanted the attention of everyone who would listen. Months earlier the Japanese government had responded to the calls of activists and historians to investigate its role in a massive system of sexual slavery that operated before and during World War II, institutionalizing rape by offering girls from across Asia as an amenity for the “comfort” of troops. It wasn’t an issue many officials were eager to re-visit, but they had little choice under the pressure of unsealed archives corroborating what most people already knew but rarely discussed: that the Imperial Japanese government had maintained this

vast system of military brothels during its campaign to expand across Asia, that the girls made to work in these “comfort stations” had little or no choice, and that officials in the highest ranks oversaw it. Yet after a brief investigation, the Japanese government published a report issuing a resounding denial. The government played no formal role in this system of “comfort stations” and bore no responsibility, they claimed.

After that, she was too angry to remain anonymous.

The Japanese Empire kept careful records during the war, with detailed regulations that described how supplies, soldiers, and even horses should be transported. But not women. The “comfort girls” were recorded in ledgers as equipment, wiping away their identities and replacing them with faceless tallies until they received new Japanese names in the camps. She wanted to change that.

She wanted people to know that fifty years ago, at the age of seventeen she was forced into the very system of sexual slavery the Japanese government had denied creating. She wanted people to know that her name was Hak-Sun Kim, and she was not a nameless line buried in forgotten paperwork, but a sixty seven year old woman who grappled each day with memories from the camps. And she wanted action. For herself and the tens of thousands of young women who once shared the same fate, she had come to Tokyo in pursuit of justice, knowing it meant she would have to lean into the microphones, share her name, and recount horrific details of her past. Beneath the table Hak-Sun busied her hands with the handkerchief. She gathered the white fabric between her fingers and spread it

apart again, until the seams would stretch no further.

I first learned about the history of Japan's so-called "comfort stations" from those two hands, folded one on top of the other before the full white skirt of a *hanbok*. They were lined with wrinkles, knobby at the joints, and reminded me of my grandmother, a white woman from Iowa. She grew up in a small farming town where she went to her homecoming dance with my grandfather and was crowned the queen. I loved hearing her stories about feeding the pigs on the family farm, but in comparison to the elderly Korean women I saw with stooped over spines in Korea, I knew my grandmother's life was uneventful in comparison. Still, her hands carried the lines of her past struggles, just as Hak-Sun's did. I encountered Hak-Sun Kim's hands February 2, 2010, in the first slide of a presentation to the American Women in Korea Club during its monthly "coffee break" meeting held on a top floor of the Grand Ambassador Hotel in Seoul. I was one of a hundred or so women seated around tables in a conference room that offered a panoramic view of the capital's towering buildings, and the taller mountains beyond. At the front of the room, a sandy-haired woman named Sarah stood behind a podium and introduced herself as a representative of the House of Sharing. She explained the House of Sharing was a Korean organization that ran a center in the Seoul outskirts that advocated for the comfort woman redress movement, hosted educational events for visitors, and provided housing where some of the survivors lived together.

Sarah pointed to the two hands on the screen, and explained that they belonged to Hak-Sun Kim, the first woman to give public testimony about what she had survived in the comfort stations. In 1991, she and two other women joined with 33 other bereaved families to file a law suit in Tokyo's courts. The other two comfort station survivors chose to remain anonymous, so Hak-Sun's name was the only one to appear in the case. Beneath the picture was a quote from Hak-Sun that said, "We must record these things that were forced upon us." Sarah explained that the quote expressed a central aspect of the organization's philosophy to educate the public about this chapter of history in the hopes awareness would help to prevent similar atrocities in the future.

She clicked through slides with maps and charts outlining the relevant history. She clicked through a series of maps from the 1900s, with a dotted trail of Japan's military invasions scattering across Asia. The red that marked Japan's territories bled across the map's national boundaries, and came to cover the Korean peninsula beside a timeline that showed 1905, when Korea came under Japanese influence as a protectorate, and 1910, when Korea was annexed and became a full-fledged colony. With the history primer behind us, Sarah explained that as Japan led a military campaign across Asia, the government established "comfort stations." When she said the phrase comfort station she used her fingers to make quotation marks in the air, a gesture she repeated with more emphasis when she referred to the "comfort women" coercively recruited to work in the camps.

“But who did it comfort?” she said, “Certainly not the women. At the House of Sharing we use these ‘air quotes’ to show that it’s a euphemism used by the Japanese. Since the living women are elderly now, we prefer to call them *halmoni* to show respect. It’s a respectful term for grandmother in Korean.”

It was clear from her pronunciation that Sarah’s Korean speaking skills were strong, which was a rare skill among most Western ex-pats. She explained that it’s hard to know for certain how many “comfort women” were in the camps, since so many records were destroyed at the end of the war, and others remained sealed. Scholars have found evidence to suggest that the number was between 60,000 and 200,000 women. They came from countries that the military had invaded across Asia, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. But the majority of women, she explained, were drawn from Korea, because its status as a colony gave Japan easy access to the population. Sarah pointed to a list of reasons why the Japanese military chose to set up the comfort stations: to control the spread of venereal diseases in civilian brothels, to prevent Japanese troops from sharing information with local prostitutes or women who might be spies, and to curtail the incidences of troops raping women in front of their families and locals in the occupied population, as they had in the invasion of Nanking, China. She paused to highlight the hypocrisy in that reasoning- to prevent rape by institutionalizing rape. She projected a map of Asia speckled with dots, and explained that each one represented places where records show comfort stations existed. The dots were all over Asia, in every country the Japanese army

had a presence, from remote islands in the South Pacific to cities in Manchuria. Sarah explained that sometimes critics denied that the comfort women existed, or that the military had any role in operating the military brothels, but that this map should address that doubt.

“How could they get to these places, from their homes hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles away?” she asked. “These roads and railroads and shipping routes were all controlled by the Japanese government. The only way these women have gotten to all these places was from the military transporting them.”

Sarah described a normal day in the “comfort stations,” showing a picture of a thin mat on the floor of a sparse room, and explaining that usually each woman would wait in her room for the troops to come. She showed a picture of Japanese troops lined up in the courtyard of a squat building, and explained that the men would wait their turn, and got a certain amount of time with the woman depending on their rank. Lower officers might be given 30 minutes, and only high ranking officers could stay the night. She quoted a surviving comfort woman saying that on the week days, she might have to offer sexual services to a dozen men, and more on the weekends or before a big battle.

Sarah showed a picture of a wooden sign covered in Japanese writing, and explained that it was just a few of the rules that the troops were supposed to follow. They weren’t supposed to visit the stations drunk, for example, nor could they hit the women. But these rules were rarely enforced. Each woman was given

monthly exams from a military doctor to ensure that she didn't have a venereal disease and wasn't pregnant. She said that many women recounted first understanding what was expected of them in their new roles from a military doctor, who became the first person to sexually assault them after performing an initial exam. Sarah explained that the women were instructed to use condoms, but that sometimes there were only given one, which they had to wash between uses. Pregnancies, she said, were customarily aborted, sometimes forcibly and using dangerous techniques. When Sarah had begun speaking, a din of conversation lingered as many of the women continued to catch up with each other. Now, the room was silent, and every so often you could hear sharp intakes of breath as people gasped.

I was an American in Korea, but I wasn't a member of this club, which consisted mostly of the wives of military officers and multinational execs. At 22, I stuck out in the crowd as the youngest person by far. My boyfriend Greg and I had moved from Minnesota to South Korea eight months earlier to teach English to elementary students at a language academy. We had both just graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College, a liberal arts school in one of Southern Minnesota's small towns surrounded by fields of soy beans. The fourth of July, 2009 was our last night in the US. Twelve hours before leaving for the airport, we had watched fireworks explode over the St. Croix River.

On the flight to Seoul, I watched on the screen as the little icon representing

our plane migrated further and further from the American Midwest, where I had lived all of my life. I watched as we passed over Alaska, the Bering Strait, the Northern sliver of Russia, and the Pacific Ocean. Fumbling with chopsticks I couldn't quite control, I saw a block of new countries come into focus on the map. I found South Korea, separated from North Korea by the line marking the 38th Parallel, and dwarfed by Russia to the north, China to the northeast, and Japan to the west. Barely an hour after watching Japan blip onto the screen, then carefully avoiding the air space over North Korea, the plane landed and I walked into the humid coastal air of South Korea. A representative from the school was waiting with a sign printed with our names, which he held upside down and facing his chest. He drove us to our new home in the city of Ilsan. It meant "One Mountain." Ilsan was ten miles west of Seoul, eight miles south of the North Korean border, and only a few decades earlier there wasn't much more than crop fields in sight, let alone skyscrapers and language academies. It was a planned community meant to absorb some of Seoul's overflowing population. When we moved there, its population was over a million people.

At the time, I didn't know what a *hanbok* was, nor how to pronounce the word. I had never heard of a "comfort station," nor a "comfort woman." I didn't have the faintest clue who Hak-Sun Kim was, nor the movement she had been instrumental in starting that day eighteen years earlier in Tokyo. Greg and I unpacked our suitcases in our new apartment on the fifteenth floor of a massive building, with one window that looked out on a courtyard bordered on all sides

by other apartments. I stared into my neighbor's apartments curious for a glimpse of what their lives were like, and wondered if they did the same.

While I had Greg's company to rely on, we had both been looking for a larger group we could feel a part of. I brought with me naive assumptions that teaching English in Korea would be a lot like my only other experience living overseas during a semester abroad in Norway my junior year of college. I knew that with my blonde hair and light eyes wouldn't allow me to blend into the local population as it had in Scandinavia, and that teaching would be harder work with more responsibilities than I'd had as a student. But I thought I would immediately find a community to belong to, like I had in the international students I met in Oslo, and that this foreign country would soon feel like home.

At first, I figured I would become part of the tight knit community of foreign English teachers who worked at my school, and eventually the larger group living in my town. I had about a dozen English speaking co-workers who were in their twenties and thirties, and initially Greg and I accepted every invitation they offered to crowd around a too-small table at one of the many barbecue restaurants for grilled meat and beer. But I didn't find the community I was looking for in my co-workers, or the other English teachers I met in town. Actually, Americans and Western foreigners, in general, didn't impress me much at first. I had been eager to find a job that would allow me to live overseas, but I was just looking for a new experience. I wanted health insurance, but I also

wanted the opportunity to do fulfilling work, to have a positive impact on the place I lived. In my last semester of college, after exploring dozens of options, I obsessed over whether to tutor college students in China, assist lawyers investigating sex trafficking in Guatemala, or work at a community center in Northern Ireland. I chose the job in Korea because I knew it was a way to put my long history working with kids as a coach, mentor, and tutor to good use, and I was impressed by the support provided by the school in Ilsan, and the infrastructure of English education in general. The school was an after-school immersion program where the students spoke only English once they walked through the door, which meant that I could teach even though I wasn't fluent in Korean. It also indicated that the school wasn't just talking about its goal to teach students to speak English, but actually achieving it. The school had been around for over a decade, and had about a couple hundred students with a staff of about 20. I wanted to work in an organization that was effective.

I didn't yet know much about South Korea or its history besides what I had learned in my US history classes: World War II after the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor, the Korean War, the DMZ. Yet I was eager to work hard at my job, and use my personal time to travel around the country, in order to learn more about Korea's past and present. Despite all the soul-searching that led me to South Korea, I hadn't realized until I was in Ilsan that English education—unlike community outreach in Latin America or Northern Ireland—was a lucrative industry. It was clear that some of my co-workers shared a similar outlook, and

came to Korea with a commitment to education and respect for the culture. But in 2009 the English teaching industry was rapidly expanding, and just about any native speaker with a college education, a clean record, and a passport could find a high-paying job. There were hundreds of thousands of Americans teaching in Korea. A friend of mine often said that Korea attracted the lowest common denominator of Americans. He called the most extreme examples LBHs, which stood for Losers Back Home. Perhaps most of these people, too, originally had good intentions, but the expendable income and lack of accountability led many of them to be someone in South Korea that they rarely were back home. All too often that someone was drunk, lazy, and uncaring, even cynical. I had grown up in a small town in Wisconsin, with middle class parents who sent me to public schools, dropped me off at swim team practices before the sun had risen, and made sure I got confirmed in our Lutheran Church. I believed in the value of hard work and conscientious toward the world. Seeing others around me set such a low standard for how to be an American in South Korea made me want to be better. Beyond coming to school sober and without a hangover, and earnestly putting in hard work, I wasn't quite sure what "better" looked like. I was on the lookout for models of the kind of expatriate I hoped to be.

What I'd really hoped was that Greg and I would make a few close Korean friends. That proved a struggle too. Though my town was close to the capital, it didn't have the population of young cosmopolitan Koreans who spoke two and three languages, like Seoul did. It was hard to find Korean peers who spoke

conversational English in town, and though I was taking language classes offered for free at a Papa John's restaurant across the street from my school each week, I was far from conversational. There were about five Korean women who worked as support staff at my school. They were helpful and warm, but like so many Koreans, they worked such long hours I truly didn't understand when they found time to do anything but sleep.

Unlike Norway, where I looked pretty much like everyone else, I stuck out in Ilsan, and it wasn't just because of my blonde hair. The women I saw around town were impeccably dressed, and often in high heels. Their hair and makeup always seemed to be perfectly done. In some ways, I saw a lot I could relate to in the Korean women I knew. They were staggeringly independent, having achieved impressive career success at young ages. The woman who owned the language academy I worked at ran it with unflinching authority, and was only in her late thirties, with a young daughter she enrolled in the school's preschool. Yet I felt clumsy and foolish in my daily wardrobe of khakis, sweaters, and clogs. I swung in the opposite direction of the Korean women around me. I let the highlights grow out of my hair until it was dishwater brown and stopped wearing makeup, as I struggled to decipher if the gender roles around me that looked forbiddingly patriarchal. It seemed as though women were expected to be hyper feminine, hyper ambitious, and hyper domestic, all at once. The majority of my students came from wealthy families, and talked about mothers who were well-educated, but stayed at home while their husbands worked long hours. In public, women

seemed to fawn over men, some of them even leaning down to tie their male companion's shoe laces. Mostly, I didn't know what to make of Korean women. I was at a loss as to how I could maintain a casual conversation—much less real friendship—with the Korean women I met.

If Korean women perplexed me, Korean men posed an even greater challenge. My apartment was near an outdoor mall with a block of bars and restaurants that were busy at all hours of night whether it was a weekend or not. When I rode my bike to school at noon each day, I regularly passed men in well-tailored business suits sleeping on park benches and still passed out from the previous night's drinking. Greg and I laughed at the absurd sight, but internally I felt repulsed and angry. My students often wrote journal entries about their fathers, and how little they saw them. Some of them had jobs in Seoul, where they stay in rented apartments during the week, and came home on the weekends. Even the students would attempt to make jokes in their writing about their fathers drinking too much soju, but it was clear they were confused about how to interpret their father's behavior.

Mostly I belonged to my classroom. I had always enjoyed working with kids, and I knew I had an interest in teaching, but I still surprised myself by how strongly I cared about my students and felt invested in their lives. I was good at my job. I loved my day-to-day interactions with students, but the bigger picture was troubling. The idealist luster of all the positive change I would create in the world had rapidly faded and I quickly shed some of my outsized expectations. It

was clear that profit margins were the school's priority. The school was a branch of a franchise, and our curriculum, down to the text we should read and the workbook pages we should assign for homework, was created by administrators who weren't in the classroom but in the corporate headquarters in Seoul. Still, I felt pride in my work and the progress my students made each day. After a few months of negotiating the space between my goals for the classroom and the school's priorities of improving test scores, I felt I had struck a balance. Best of all, the kids were incredible. They were sharp, enthusiastic, and creative. They also became the primary way I learned about Korea, and helped me make sense of the many extremes that I observed in the culture. Korea was the most modern and technologically advanced place I had ever experienced. And yet, it was simultaneously the most ancient place. My students debated centuries old battles between kingdoms that no longer existed as if they had happened that week. And when they discussed the Japanese, they could transform from sweet kids drawing me pictures to violent plotters of mass destruction.

"They're crazy guys," I heard my students, boys especially, say again and again. "We will fight them." Yet in the next breath they were practicing their Japanese vocabulary, or discussing a trip their families had taken to Tokyo or Kyoto over the summer.

"The food is better," one of my students told me.

I totally lacked the background knowledge for making sense of the contradictions that characterize the fraught relationship between Japan and

South Korea. I considered myself a well-educated person, and a feminist aware of the critical social justice issues of my time. And yet I was living in a place where nearly everything was new, and I had much to learn.

The meeting of the American Women Club in Korea was on the first Tuesday of February, 2010, when I had been in Korea for about six months. I was looking for models of women who demonstrated a way of being in the world I could emulate. I knew I was a progressive feminist, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. In college, I did what all the other politically active feminists did. I took genders studies classes, volunteered for liberal campaigns, joined a consciousness raising group, and signed up to be in the Womyn's Awareness Center's production of the Vagina Monologues. There was a whole structure on campus of ways to act on whatever interests you had. Outside of the structure of professors, clubs, and classes on a college campus, I was still figuring out what it meant to be an American expat, what kind of expat I wanted to be, and how to go about that.

I had heard mention of the comfort woman issue because of a weekly protest that convened each week outside of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. I was disturbed by what little I heard, and curious. When I stumbled on an announcement online that an organizer would be speaking about the issue I decided this was my chance to learn something about Korea that I didn't know. I found the Grand Ambassador on a map, right next to Dongguk University and Namsan Park, a tree-covered mountain in the center of Seoul that held a Shinto

Shrine during the Japanese Occupation. I calculated how long the subway ride into downtown Seoul would take, determined I could make it back before work began, and made up my mind to attend. This was a new community of Americans I had never been exposed to.

After a few months in Korea, Greg and I had found a small group of close friends—English teachers who weren't solely interested in drinking heavily whenever the opportunity presented itself and saw the value in coming to work without a hangover. But we were such a small group and all of us were only a year or so out of college. As I rode the elevator into the highest floors of the towering Grand Ambassador Hotel, accompanied by a staff member who stood at the panel of buttons waiting to ask which floor guests needed to reach, I held onto a small hope that I wouldn't just learn something but find some kinship in the group of women too. My sense of belonging to a place meant having a close group of friends my age sharing similar experiences, but also a loose network of acquaintances and mentors too, of all ages and with situations different from my own. As I stepped off the elevator, I saw these women were older and wealthier than most of the English teachers I encountered. Walking past the tables of fruit salad and coffee and into the conference room reserved for the meeting, I knew the women in attendance occupied a totally different space in Korean life. A few had the flowing linen clothing and funky silver jewelry signatures of eccentric lifelong travelers, but for the most part these women belonged to moveable communities that created a microcosm of the US wherever they ended up.

As Sarah brought her presentation to a close, the chairs of one committee or another presented her with a jumbo novelty check with a small donation, and they posed for a picture. I saw a few women wipe away tears. The club president stood, and asked for another round of applause.

“What a harrowing story,” she said, “We can’t thank you enough.”

The room applauded, and the president announced that next month they would hear from the manager of a shelter for teen mothers banished from their homes. The members were moved by Sarah’s presentation, but it was clear that the House of Sharing and the survivors who lived there were the tug-on-your-heart-strings cause *du jour*. The discussion progressed to the next order of business on the agenda, and another member rose to give updates on preparations for the spring gala, which would have a Night-at-the-Oscars theme.

The meeting paused for a break, people huddled at tables around the room offering Girl Scout cookies for sale, brochures from doctor’s offices providing women’s health services and plastic surgery, and racks of charms for bracelets. I made a bee-line for Sarah’s table. So far, the American Women Club in Korea seemed like another group in which I was welcomed, but ultimately an outsider. Sarah was a different matter. She represented so much of who I wanted to be, and the group of people I wanted to be a part of. She was ambitious, integrated in the culture, and committed to a worthy cause. I thanked her for her presentation and helped myself to one of every brochure and leaflet she had set out. I attempted to ask her if it was hard to get such a strong emotional reaction from people,

knowing the majority of them were not likely to act on those feelings in the future. I was genuinely interested in her answer, but I also wanted to give her a signal that I wasn't one of them. I was one of whatever she was, or at least I wanted to be. I stumbled over my words, and instead the comment came out revealing the snide criticism I was already forming towards the club she had been invited to address. Sarah looked a little uncomfortable. She did not immediately invite me into her fold, but she did tell me about the visits the House of Sharing offered one Sunday a month for English speakers.

“You should come,” she said. “They're announced on Facebook and you can sign up by email. It's a whole day thing. You get a lot out of it. Look into it.”

I promised I would, and rushed off to make my way back to Ilsan in time for work to start. On the subway ride home, I snuck bites of Peanut Butter Patties I bought from the Girl Scouts table, and pulled out the brochures. That emblematic image of Hak-Sun Kim's hands patiently folded, yet expectant, was printed on the cover page. I read the material from start to finish and then read it again. I found a summary of Kim's story, and another quote from her testimony, “I wonder what interest the Korean or Japanese government would have in the miserable life of a woman like me whose death will end it all,” she said in 1995. She died two years later, at the age of 73. Beneath her name the year of her birth and the year of her death were joined between the boundaries of a parenthesis. Since her public address in 1991, the lawsuit she joined had been tied up in court. Four months after Hak-Sun died, a court condemned the old Japanese government's policy

and ruled that the country needed to compensate the three South Korean women \$2,300 each. The decision came too late and offered a pittance compared to the damages. But it was a small milestone in a long and ongoing fight for reconciliation. Running my hands over the picture of Hak-Sun's hands, I wondered what she would have done on the day the decision was finally announced, if she had been alive. Would she have celebrated a victory or mourned a loss?

Five years have passed since I attended the American Women Club in Korea. In that amount of time, I finished my year of teaching in South Korea, spent a year teaching in Hungary, and moved to Washington, DC to study creative writing in graduate school. Last summer, Greg and I returned to Korea for a brief trip, where we visited our favorite places, got engaged to marry each other, and remembered all the things we had come to love about the place and the people. In that week, I accompanied a young Korean advocate to the demonstration outside of the Japanese embassy, went back to the House of Sharing where a few of the survivors lived, and visited a new museum that activists had fought for years to create commemorating the comfort women. Whatever compelled me to learn about the comfort women had been persistent. Something grabbed me in the gut listening to Sarah's presentation and has refused to let go. It started with the image of Hak-Sun Kim's hands and her resilient story, but the stories of other survivors clinched my commitment to their

cause. The sight of elderly women, still in search of something that resembled justice. The thought of what it must have felt like to sit in a room with men lined up outside, awaiting their turn to come through the door. The memory of the young girls they had been, and the sexual brutality that changed the women they would become.

It's been five years since I lived in South Korea, but that thing that first drew me to the issue of the comfort women remains. In the time that's passed, I've met living survivors of the comfort stations and bowed my head at memorials for those who have died. I've stood beside protesters outside Seoul's Japanese Embassy, and spoken with volunteers who dedicate their lives to finding reconciliation for crimes committed decades before they were born. I've seen the paintings of the survivors, read their testimonies, and listened to their songs. I've watched them cry and yell and beat their chests and laugh and pray and and suck their teeth and cluck their tongues and lean on their caretakers and nod off to sleep during speeches at the US capitol. I've read every book ever published in English about the issue, just about all of the relevant news articles, and every scholarly article I've gotten my hands on. In an attempt to make sense of this chapter of history, I've filled pages with notes, and more with questions for which I've yet to find a sufficient answer.

So when a close friend recently asked me why I was so interested in the comfort women, it should have been easy to respond, but it wasn't. I hesitated, and attempted to piece together a series of half-answers, but only ended up

speaking in circles. As she pointed out, if I was going to ask others to invest their time and emotions in the story of the comfort women, as Sarah had done in the presentation, I'd better know why I cared so much in the first place. But my hesitancy to answer wasn't because I didn't have a reason. It was because the answer had become clear to me over the space of years and with such intricacy that I hadn't worked out how to articulate it.

Though it may seem callous for my friend to wonder why a white, American woman who initially had few connections to this part of the world or the people who lived in it would care so much about this, it was a valid question. I've always been an avid reader, volunteer, and advocate for one cause or another, especially those impacting women. But the comfort woman issue seemed to have a gravitational pull that drew me in with a force I had never felt so strongly for so long. My friend wasn't asking why I cared at all, but why, in a world full of cruel injustices, past and present, this one had held my focus so fully. At times, I had drifted away from the issue, and other times I moved closer, but since learning about the comfort women five years ago, I've been caught in their orbit.

At first, it was the sheer cruelty of what these women experienced that drew my attention. The horrific things that happened in comfort stations spanning Asia to thousands of women, not on one occasion or two but every day for months and years, was appalling. It took my breath away. The smaller, personal details were just as troubling as the big-picture statistics. A yellow sweater an estranged mother gave her teenage daughter the last time she saw her. Tickets allocated to

each soldier to exchange for sex with someone who couldn't refuse, collected in a pile by women asked to meet daily quotas. Families abandoned. Bodies scarred. Babies lost. I read testimony after testimony given by women recounting what they had gone through in Imperial Japan's military brothels. And at first, that interest was probably driven by some of the same grim fascination that makes people lean over the barricades at the US Holocaust Museum, knowing they will see graphic images of bulldozers pushing corpses piled upon corpses. It's a blend of concern and perversity not so far from the impulse that makes us watch cable documentaries about the grisly murders of serial killers years after the fact.

Yet the more I learned about the sheer magnitude of the comfort stations, the more my shock gave way to surprise. How did I not know about this earlier? How is it that each generation of children entering schools since World War II's end has not grown up in the United States learning about this, and that the events have been similarly overlooked across the world? This system of enforced military prostitution was unprecedented. Elements of what occurred in the comfort stations are sadly not unique in history. Sexual assault has long been recorded in wartime conflict, sexual trafficking persists in huge numbers, and governments have managed legal and military prostitution in the past. However, the chillingly bureaucratic institution of the comfort stations, which so carefully regulated institutionalized rape of women who were largely deceived or coerced into their roles and had no choice of leaving them was previously unseen in recorded history. The open knowledge and maintenance of this system by people

at ranks all the way up the hierarchal ladder, to the emperor himself, also sets this apart in history. The comfort station system violated international law of the time, including treaties Japan signed, and constituted a war crime. And yet, when I moved to South Korea, I had never heard the term “comfort woman.”

The more time I spent in Korea, the more I realized how little I knew about this part of the world. In seventeen years spent in classrooms, I read book after book about the cruelty of the Nazis and the suffering of those in concentration camps. Yet, I had learned few specifics about human rights atrocities that occurred during the same period in Asia, let alone of a huge system of sexual slavery perpetrated by another fascist empire at the time. Not only that, I knew so little about this part of the world that I had no frame of reference for understanding how the comfort woman’s suffering fit into the region’s culture and history. I now know that prominent Japanese leaders saw Koreans and other Asians as “inferior,” which was an oppression complicated in Korea, where women were considered inferior to men. The same reasons for why it was urgently important that every generation learn about what transpired in history’s most extreme examples of violence driven by racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination—like slavery, Nazi concentration camps, and the Rwandan Genocide—also explained why it was so important that we learn about the comfort women. While the numbers of those killed and imprisoned in the concentration camps far surpasses the size of the comfort stations, both are a grisly demonstration of unprecedented acts of organized violence, and the human

capacity for dehumanizing cruelty on a large scale. And yet, the comfort women have been sufficiently overlooked in history, even in their own countries. The more I learn, the more surprised I am by how little I know. And the more convinced I am that it is crucial for everyone learn about the history of the comfort women, the years of silence when the comfort station systems was rarely publicly discussed, and the contemporary struggle for some resolution.

Eventually, this surprise gave way to a desire for some sort of action. It was clear that a wrong needed to be made right in whatever ways were possible so many years after the fact. The comfort women have never received the level of justice advocates sought. The redress movement is in many ways a model of grassroots activism, but the Japanese government has yet to admit the extent of its role in the comfort stations, acknowledge what happened as institutional rape, offer reparations, transparently and consistently maintain that the comfort stations are a recorded fact, include the history in textbooks, or offer a full and unflinching apology. It's one more unaddressed fissure that continues to create tension between Japan and Korea. It seems unlikely that the region will ever fully recover from the colonial history without a public dialogue about what happened in that period to whom, why, and how. It's a conversation that's been had in the past in half measure, just insufficiently enough for the path to full reconciliation to be stalled. I continued to care about the issue of the comfort women because it wasn't an issue of the past, but an ongoing struggle of the present bound to continue into the future.

I continue to be committed to this issue for what it reveals to the entire global community about our discomfort with openly discussing sex, and the crushing consequences that follow. Everyone involved has been appallingly incapable of navigating this thorny issue, and uncomfortable in discussing sex. At first glance, it boggled my mind why this was not resolved. Most of the women are dead, as are most of the people who were responsible for the comfort stations' existence. Japan is no longer a military empire, but a thriving democracy without a standing army. Korea, the country where the majority of the comfort women originated, is no longer a colony of Japan conspiring against its enemy, but an ally and one of its largest trading partners. Once sealed records have now been unearthed so that there is no doubt that the comfort stations existed, and were managed by the Japanese government with the help of private citizens. The world that allowed the comfort station system to go un-investigated has realigned itself and is a vastly different place. It's no great secret that during the World War II era many countries did many terrible things. As an international community, we have faced horrors just as unbearable, and we have reconciled the crimes of the past with the people of the present.

And yet, the redress movement has dragged on for years, often with reasonable goals that look all but impossible to achieve. What's clear is how totally uncomfortable we as a people, from the Japanese government to the Korean government to the US government, and down to each country's citizens and advocates and critics, are in simply discussing sex, much less confronting

sexual violence. The whole redress movement demonstrates how this discomfort has huge consequences, leaving a gaping wound open for half a century that has come to fester into a present day rift tied up in steely nationalism. The story of the comfort women offers a microcosm for exploring what a global inability to discuss sexual violence may indicate about us as modern people, and the moral boundaries we have yet to face.

But in the end the thing that has always made it impossible for me to forget about the comfort women has been the survivors and their stories. It's a testament to human resilience, and what people can cope with and then survive, not just in body but in spirit, with determination and strength and humor.

The first comfort woman survivor came forward to speak publicly and demand justice in Japanese courts in 1991. That year, on a Wednesday, when the Japanese Prime Minister visited Korea, a ragtag group gathered outside the embassy to demand the Japanese government revisit the war crime, and see that justice is done. The protest has continued every week since, and this summer I attended the 1,046th Wednesday Demonstration. In the years that have passed, the demands have barely changed and none have been met. While more and more parties and countries across the world have worked to champion the cause of justice for the comfort women, tensions between the Japanese government and Korea have worsened rather than improved. More and more people across the world have become aware of this shadowy chapter in history, but it seems unlikely that the increasingly conservative and nationalistic Japanese

government, embattled against shame or embarrassment, will take up the cause any time soon.

Of the thousands of women taken from their homes and scattered across Asia, to comfort stations in makeshift tents, Beijing hotels, and caves on remote islands, the vast majority are dead. In Korea, 497 women came forward in the 90s to say they had survived the comfort stations. Of those, only a few dozen remain. Their average age is 88. On her deathbed, the first woman who came forward wondered if she would live to see the Japanese government transparently apologize for what had happened to her. She feared that once all the survivors were dead, people would forget about what they had lived through and later fought against. She hasn't been forgotten, but these surviving women are elderly and often sick, and each year fewer and fewer remain. Advocates for the redress movement are engaged in a race against the clock to campaign, protest, and maneuver through political system in order to find resolution before all of the surviving women die. It's a race it seems they will lose.

A process of reconciliation between Japan and the occupied territories or colonized nations impacted by the comfort stations would require the Japanese government to meet at least the most fundamentals of the legal demands. I agree with the experts who argue that the only way that's likely to occur is if the United States government places extreme pressure on the Japanese to do so. The only way for this to happen is a widespread outcry from the US people, and the only way that would happen is a grassroots campaign. The only way that's likely to

happen is if Americans who believe in a person's right to live free from sexual violence and oppression leads the movement. And the only way that's likely to happen is if the country's progressives and social justice advocates and feminists commit themselves to starting it all.

But if Japan met every one of the activist's formal demands, this issue would not be settled. Genuine reconciliation is an ongoing process that goes beyond policy. It calls for a process, both public and private, of those who suffer attempting to understand the perpetrators of that suffering, and also the other way around. It demands that people work to understand the ways that war diminishes us all, and how the role of oppressor and oppressed can become interchangeable in periods of violent instability. In the most practical sense, reconciliation is about rebuilding relationships so that groups who co-exist in society understand each other enough to work in democratic institutions together, and are not driven by animosity, distrust, and even hatred fueled by past violence. Its the only way for countries to avoid past wrongs becoming the seeds for future violence. And it's not enough for this to occur on a macro-level, in the newspaper headlines and embassy-issued statements. Reconciliation calls on individuals to grapple with individuals, and examine not just the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized, but parent and child, husband and wife, neighbors and friends, rich and poor. It's also a process that needs people to willingly participate to examine the past and ask what discrimination existed that contributed to the suffering. That means that rather than exchanging insults and

ultimatums, Japan must re-visit its history, but Korea must as well, to examine the ways these women were vulnerable before the “comfort stations.” And countries like the US, who were complicit allowing charges of sexual slavery to go without investigation or charges after liberation, are improved by engaging in a process of reconciliation too. It’s a backwards-looking process with a forward-looking impact.

So what I should have told my friend is that I care about the comfort women and the fight for justice, and I think it’s worthwhile for others to care too, because those women were vulnerable girls brutalized by forces larger than themselves. And because we need to make sure everyone knows about this to understand the horrors that we as a human race are capable of subjecting each other to and must work to prevent. And because this is a morally clear issue that needs to be disentangled from the murky politics that surround it. And because working to understand the atrocities in the past ensures peace in the future. And because sexual violence persists and if we can’t deal with this example, so extreme but so removed, how are we to lessen the violence of today. And because for too long, these women coped alone with the unthinkable violence done to them, with a culture of silence around sexual violence that implied their suffering was not reprehensible enough for others to see as a problem. And because, though many of the survivors have died, enough are still alive and waiting for a resolution. And I care enough to tell their story because I’m left with the troubling revelation that this is a grim race against time, and that we as

Americans can play some small role that could be these women's only hope. And if you care about that, then how can you not care about the rest?

## **A WELL FRAYED COTTON THREAD: THE STORY OF HAK-SUN KIM**

When she ran, she ran fast. Hak-Sun Kim was too fast for her friends. At the missionary school she attended in Pyongyang, where nuns let girls like her go for free, Hak-Sun always took the last leg in a relay race. She knew how to win. When her turn came, she didn't hesitate. She took off, feet slamming against the ground hard enough to leave dust clouds suspended in a faded series behind her. On days like this one, when she couldn't hear a foot fall gaining ground behind her, Hak-Sun let her mind wander. Beyond the school grounds loomed Taedong Gate's highest eaves, leftover from when old Pyongyang was a gated city protected by a castle. If Hak-Sun paused to think, she might have considered whether the huge city doors were open, and if her legs were strong enough to carry her under the gate's arch, over the Teadong River bridge, and on to the mountains in the distance.

But she shouldn't allow for such daydreaming.

The year was 1937, Hak Sun was about to turn fourteen years old, and Pyongyang was as she had always known it: Occupied. It was no place for wild wandering. In the mountains, leopards and tigers were said to stalk easy prey. In the city, troops patrolled the streets with bayonets on their shoulders everyone knew they were willing to use. Hak-Sun's mother was just a toddler in 1910 when Korea became a Japanese colony. By the time Hak-Sun was born in 1924, Japan's rule was absolute. Since then Japanese—from

generals and politicians to farmers and factory managers—had moved into Pyongyang in droves.

The streets of Pyongyang were for boys and men, her mother reminded her, not young girls. Her aunts and uncles scrambled to send their sons to school and find them jobs that would honor the family. Hak-Sun would soon turn fourteen, and she knew it wouldn't be long before she was expected to marry. She'd hardly be surprised if her mother revealed she had already begun looking for suitable husbands. After that, she would spend the rest of her life serving a husband in the home, and preferably out of sight. She didn't mind hard work, but domestic chores never held her interest, and neither did the idea of sharing her home with a man. Hak-Sun had never lived with a man in the house. As long as she could remember, she'd had her mother all to herself. As a young married couple, her parents had emigrated north to Manchuria in hopes of finding work and a respite from increasingly harsh Japanese laws. But only three months after Hak-Sun's birth, her father died, leaving her mother a widow alone in a place where she had no family and few friends. It took her two years to save enough money for the trip back to Pyongyang with Hak-Sun strapped to her back.

Hak-Sun remembered nothing of Manchuria. Her early memories were of the church in Pyongyang where she went to school. It was run by Protestant missionaries, and under its roof mother and daughter found a pastime they could both enjoy. Her mother could listen to the friendly pastor's sermons about redemption and the afterlife. Hak-Sun could sing, and when she sang, she wailed, her voice rising stampeding ahead of the others. The time they spent under that roof was a break from the pressures outside of

it. For years her mother had found work where she could, leaving before dawn to harvest rice in the paddies, look after the children of wealthier families, scrub stains from of other people's white hemp clothing. When Hak-Sun was seven, her mother handed over her savings to buy the materials she needed to make wool socks from home. She sent Hak-Sun to school, where she sang when she wanted to sing, learned when she wanted to learn, and played when she wanted to play. Her mother stayed home to knit.

In the evenings Hak-Sun helped her mother. While they sat knitting together, her mother told her stories about the Korean Kingdom that unraveled during her childhood, and the kings and queens of the Joseon Dynasty who ruled it and lost it. Hak-Sun heard the legends of Admiral Yi, and the iron-clad turtle ships he led into battle against the Japanese 500 years earlier. She dreamt of them sailing out of the fog with steam pouring from their snouts like wild sea creatures risen from the ocean's depths. Hak-Sun heard about the ancient bell that once warned of invasions, forged from 33 metals in a temple yard and brought to stand beside the city gate. When she walked by the bell, now forbidden from use, and saw it rock slightly in the wind, she could almost hear the sound that once resounded through the city, 33 times in the morning when then city doors opened, and 28 at night when they closed.

She listened to stories about the fairies that lived in the forests on Moran Hill, and the beautiful kisaeng women who studied arts and poetry in villages tucked away in those woods. She sometimes thought she heard the songs they sang to entertain aristocratic men for banquets of food and performance that lasted all night. She learned that while Admiral Yi was fighting the Japanese in the seas, the famous kisaeng woman Wolhyang

Gye was fighting them in Pyongyang. She heard the story of Gye's charm, and how she used it to persuade the Japanese commander who had taken over the city, to share a meal at Ryongwang Pavilion, overlooking the curled banks of the Taedong River below. Gye captivated him by singing old songs of women awaiting their love's return. He didn't even notice that she had drugged him until he couldn't control the drowsy fall of his eyes. Gye slipped down Moran Hill and returned with a Korean general, who beheaded the Japanese commander. The Korean assassin escaped the city, but Gye stayed and was executed. Hak-Sun listened to her mother recount the day soon after when the Japanese were driven out through the Taedong Gate doors. The Korean general returned to liberate Pyongyang, and to stand atop Moran Hill, where the people drove a stake into the ground to memorialize Gye's sacrifice. When her mother tired of telling stories, Hak-Sun sang to fill the silence as they knitted. She wondered if her own voice had the power that Gye's did that night, and if Gye had hummed as she walked alone in the dark forest to distract herself from the fear of what might be in the shadows. She wondered if Gye hummed the same tune in the moments before her death. All the while Hak-Sun and her mother knitted, piled wool socks marking the passage of time.

But that was about to change. She would soon turn fourteen, and that year her mother was planning to marry again. Hak-Sun would have to share a home and her mother's attention with a step-father. He came with a daughter and a son too, both older than Hak-Sun. She had already met the son, and got along fine with him. Arrangements were being made for the daughter to marry soon. Once she went to live with her husband,

they would scarcely see her. But gaining a stepfather was another matter. Hak-Sun couldn't imagine living with him after so many years alone with her mother. She couldn't bear the thought of calling him *father*. She tried to focus on the little while longer she and her mom belonged chiefly to each other. But it was harder and harder to do. It was as if her step-father had already come into their home and begun to pull apart the threads of their relationship. Their nights of knitting transformed into battles, and now when Hak-Sun sang, it was to distract herself from the heat of accusations that went unstated. Eventually one of them grew too angry to stay quiet. Hak-Sun unleashed her fury that her mother would marry when she didn't want a new father. Her mother said it was not for her to choose. Hak-Sun sneered. Her mother chastised her for her stubborn disobedience.

“Your father was nothing but trouble and heartache when he was alive,” her mother yelled. “Did he pass that onto you?”

Their fights got worse. Hak-Sun blamed her mother for inviting a strange man into their home, and her mother held her responsible for the years she'd had to struggle alone to support a child, always on the verge of poverty.

“You finished off your father,” she raged. The tight knots of the wool thread scratched their hands and left angry rashes on their wrists. But they couldn't stop knitting. Food was short in the city and socks determined when they ate. As they sat in the evenings together knitting, and fighting more and more heatedly, Hak-Sun began to find herself drifting with the same daydreams she had on the school yard. The thought of a *somewhere else* slipped into her mind. If, at school, after taking off for the last leg of a relay race, Hak-Sun considered running past the make-shift finish line and off the school

grounds, down the Train Station street where cuttle fish hung on lines to dry, past the dormant city bell, beneath the arch of Taedong Gate, across the iron bridge, and over the river water, until the burst of Moran Hill's peonies in bloom was out of sight, something stopped her. She returned to that room where she had her mother to herself a while longer. They shared the company of socks, some finished and others yet to be completed, dangling with strands of yarn that could unravel with the slightest tug.

By the time Hak-Sun's mother began looking for ways to get her daughter out of the house, it came as a relief to them both. Her mother had been re-married for a year, and Hak-Sun had turned fourteen and gained a stepfather she couldn't and had barely tried to tolerate. Her mother found a family who looked after girls while they trained to become kisaeng entertainers. But before the family would accept Hak-Sun, she had to sing in an audition for them to decide if she had the aptitude for the skills she needed to entertain the high-class. In Pyongyang, men who patronized the kisaeng villages on Moran Hill had high expectations for the nights they spent indulging with friends before stumbling down the wooded trails and home to their wives. Throughout Korea, from the gritty ports of Busan in the south to the bustling capitol of Seoul, Pyongyang was known for training the most talented and well-educated kisaeng.

On their way to the audition, Hak-Sun and her mother barely exchanged a word. They communicated by the length of their silences these days.

"You'll try?" her mother asked.

"I will," Hak-Sun said.

“You won’t embarrass us?” her mother asked.

“I won’t,” Hak-Sun said.

Hak-Sun sang, as she had for years in church beside her mother, and the family heard potential. The father of the family negotiated a contract with her mother, who signed over the responsibility of looking after Hak-Sun and accepted a bit of money in return. When Hak-Sun completed her training and began working, part of the money she earned as a kisaeng would go to the family who looked after her. Hak-Sun returned home, packed her things, and left for her new home.

“133 Kyongje Village, Pyongyang,” her mother told her, and the address hummed in her mind like a flat-bottomed rock perpetually skipping across calm water, never slowing enough to sink to the bottom. It had the weight of a finality she couldn’t quite understand. Years later she could recall the address as a single unit, as if reciting the lines of a prayer:

133 Kyongje Village, Pyongyang.

133 Kyongje Village, Pyongyang.

133 Kyongje Village, Pyongyang

They took Hak-Sun into their home, changed her name to Kumhwa, and enrolled her in a kisaeng academy with 300 other girls. The family had accepted another girl to train too. Her name was Minjung and together the two teenager girls stood looking up at the sign on the two story building of their new school before their foster father escorted them inside.

In that school she read the shijo, the classical six-line poem her ancestors had created after tiring of their attempts to force the newly developed Korean alphabet into Chinese and Japanese forms. 4,000 classic shijo poems survived for Hak-Sun to learn in the classroom, 59 of them written by women, mostly kisaeng who had come before her. Reading and learning was the domain of men and wealthy families. But as a kisaeng, it was her job to entertain those men, and to interest them she needed to learn as they did. She might have read the two surviving poems of Lady Shin, the aristocrat poet who earned the nickname “Wise Mother” for her poems 500 years earlier . Shin showed all the qualities of an exemplary woman that had evaded Hak-Sun. They were the qualities that would likely have pleased her step-father. Lady Shin was an obedient daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, and mother. She could paint and manage her home with elegance. But she was homesick, and never stopped writing of her mother.

“Leaving behind my aged mother at home, my heart aches,” she wrote in one poem.

“My home is one thousand li away  
Over the mountains one upon another  
But I yearn to go back day and night,  
in sleep or awake.

The solitary moon over Hansongjong pavilion,  
A streak of wind past Kyongp’odae beach,  
Seagulls scatter from the sand  
and again gather together.  
Fishing boats sail in and out on the sea.

When could I ever tread

the path to Kangnung

To sit beside my mother and sew with her?"

Hak-Sun had never seen seagulls disperse and gather over the sea, but she had seen birds hover over fishing boats returning to the river banks after a day on the Taedong. She must have seen something of herself in the frenzy of birds who could move so freely, gliding wherever they liked, and yet never evaded the urge to constrict into a tight pack again. As if an invisible net had snatched them back.

And Hak-Sun would have read the poems of a different kind of longing, too, from past kisaeng. There was the work of Hawng Chini-i, a sixteenth century kisaeng in Kyongsong, in the far northeast. She had fallen in love with one of her patrons, a scholar official who had left her to return to Seoul:

I chose a wild willow branch

and plucked it to send it to you.

I want you to plant it

by the window where you sleep.

When new leaves open in the night rains,

think it is I that have come to you,

Again and again, Hak-Sun would have recited the words, until they were so firmly absorbed she could recite them from memory, to a man she had just met, or a man she had grown to love but could never marry, or to a mother a few miles away but a world apart.

Hak-Sun would have read the kisaeng's playful language of longing, "sori sori, kubi, kubi," Hang Chin-i wrote to describe her frustration with waiting for her lover, and her elated relief at his return. *Sori, sori* describes the action of carefully folding something again and again, turning it over in your hands and pressing in new creases. *Kubi, kubi* describes the act of spreading something out again, and stretching it to new lengths. *Sori, sori. Kubi, kubi.* The kisaeng chanted verses together to practice their delivery. A room of voices folding and folding in on themselves, before stretching and stretching away.

Hak-Sun would also have read poems drenched with the emotion of "han." *Han* is a uniquely Korean emotion expressed again and again by women throughout the country's history. It describes a feeling of bitter sorrow that accumulates over years of bearing the brunt of some injustice that is unresolved. It is a feeling laced with hope that things can improve, and the simultaneous recognition that they will not. It's imagined as a knot that grows in a person's chest until it's so firmly lodged in the heart that she is helpless to dislodge the tangled mess herself. It would take a great miracle, or the help of a shaman summoning ancestral spirits, gods, and goddesses to pick apart the knotted and bound han.

Hak-Sun might have copied down the han-soaked words of Lady Hong, the widow of the kingdom's crown-prince whose father had him executed in 1762 by burying him in a chest of rice for nine days. She recorded her life in a series of memoirs, describing how her husband became a depraved and embittered son who tortured animals before he died,

how she gave up her son to ensure he would have good favor with his grandfather the king, and how her own family was disgraced. She described her life as, “one long series of disasters...like a well-frayed cotton thread.”

And Hak-Sun would have memorized the verses of Nansorhon Ho, who was married to a scholar far less intelligent than her, but with far more access to opportunities and education. She begins her poem “A Woman’s Sorrow,” with a sentiment steeped in han:

The day before yesterday I was young,  
but today I am already aging.  
It is no use recalling  
the joyful days of my youth.

Hak-Sun would have read her portrayal of two small burial grounds, in “Mourning my Children,”

Last year I lost my beloved daughter,  
This year I lost my son.  
Alas, this woeful ground of Kangnung!  
A pair of mounds stand face to face.  
The wind blows through the white birch  
And the ghostly lights flicker in the woods.  
I call to your spirits by burning paper money,  
By pouring wine on your mounds.  
Do you, the spirits of brother and sister,

Play together fondly each night!  
This child growing inside me  
Dare I hope it will grow safely to full term?  
In vain I chant a magic verse of propitiation,  
Tears of blood and sorrow swallow up my voice.

What must she have thought confronted with such sadness? Did she see herself in those poems, and recognize a hint of her own anger? Or did she hear the rantings of an angry old woman, wracking her brain to turn up more sadness? Did the words inspire a new attitude each time she recited them, sliding between a character she portrayed to a sentiment she felt as she committed them to memory?

And in those two years Hak Sun would have learned the pansori. It's a theatrical narrative performed by a drummer and a performer. Unlike the poems, she wouldn't have labored to memorize the words just as they were recorded. Instead, she would have been encouraged to create each pansori anew. The script of a pansori was like a flexible outline, where the performers knew the beats they should hit, but had the license to improvise. The pansori was historically performed by traveling actors, who needed to travel light. So two people need only an hourglass drum, a mat, and a fan. In the story, the mat can be anywhere; the fan can be anything. The performer delivers the story partly in song, and partly by spoken word. It was said that for a vocalist to perfect the style of the pansori she must sing until her vocal chords bleed and then heal. So Hak-Sun sang the most popular pansori, the "Ch'unhyang ka Ch'unhyang ka," again and again until her throat rasped and burned.

Using a fan to embellish her delivery, she would have learned just when to flick her wrist and flay the paper open as she told the famous story of a teenage girl who fell in love with a boy her aged named Master Yi. He was the son of a local judge, and she was the daughter of a kisaeng, which, in the Joseon period, automatically made her a kisaeng too. He occupied one of the highest wrung of society, and she one of the lowest. But they married in a secret wedding hidden from his parents. Hak-Sun would have learned how to sing of their lovemaking with passionate lyricism, since audiences expected a celebration of their love. She would have learned how to drop her voice and share with foreboding that soon after Master Yi's father was transferred away from the town to the capitol city, and while the two lovers pledged to love with eternal devotion, they knew they may never again see each other. After the new judge arrived in the town, he demanded she entertain him, making advances because he saw her only as a kisaeng. She refused, thinking of herself a married woman, and was beaten, jailed, and threatened. Hak-Sun would have learned just how long to pause before revealing that after a long absence, Master Yi returned, and the story ended happily for all.

Perhaps in the midst of telling it, Hak-Sun imagined that the story could be true. Perhaps she developed some hope that her life as a kisaeng would be as transformed as the character's life in the story had—that she would be lifted from her low position in society by an adoring and influential companion who deserved her. Or maybe she was too pragmatic for all that romanticism, and saw the story as a farce. Perhaps Hak-Sun saw that Master Yi would never have considered the kisaeng as anything more than a temporary plaything, and that the kisaeng would have known her role from their first

encounter.

After two years in the school, Hak-Sun received her certificate and she earned a license to work. She was only seventeen, and the law dictated that she needed to be nineteen years old to work as a kisaeng. The family that took her in didn't want to wait, especially the father. Hak-Sun looked older than her age, especially with her hair styled and her makeup applied, so he went to different authorities trying to pass her off as older than she was to get the paperwork she needed to work. He brought her from place to place trying to sneak her into the system, but the authorities refused her a license.

But she was only of value to her foster father if she was working. He decided to take both Hak-Sun and Minjung to China. The year was 1941, and travel could be dangerous as Japan fought to expand the empire's reach across Asia. Before they left, he asked her mother for permission. She granted it, and walked down the Train Station Road, past the lines of fish hung to dry, to meet Hak-Sun on the platform and see her off. They greeted each other stiffly, and Hak-Sun felt terrified inside, but proud for how independent she appeared in the new outfit her foster father had bought her for the trip. Her mother held a yellow wool cardigan she had made, and gave it to Hak-Sun for the journey. Hak-Sun took the sweater and boarded the train. They were bound for China.

Hak-Sun's could almost feel the fibers of that yellow cardigan between her fingers as she watched the train carrying her daughter leave the station. She ran through options in her head of the other alternative approaches she could have taken with Hak-Sun, as if

another life was still available to them if only she could reason it into existence. But she came to the same conclusion she always did—but this was the best and only way. Yes, by letting her daughter become a kisaeng, she had relegated her to the class of ch'onmin, one social class up from the untouchables who sold manure and butchered animals. But things had changed from the old values traditionalists had clung to during the Joseon Dynasty. The caste system had dissolved. Now, Japanese sympathizers got favor, and everyone else had to find a way to make it on their own. The Japanese government was clamoring for volunteer laborists who didn't always have the option to refuse, and the domestic idleness that had been valued in the ideal woman for so long was now dangerous. Hak-Sun needed a job. Having a job was the best protection available for girls like her, too willful to easily marry. It would have taken some time to find Hak-Sun a husband. She wasn't the docile and subservient type that Confucian purists had valued for so long, and some still did. The Confucian ideal of *namjon yobi*, literally the elevation of men and subjection of women, made her squirm. And her mother was afraid that Hak-Sun would simply run away from home if she tried to arrange a match for her. That her daughter would start running and not look back.

Hak-Sun's mother knew what it was like to be alone without a means for supporting yourself. When her husband died in their first year in Manchuria, and Hak-Sun was just a three month old infant with a persistent whimper, she learned what true desperation felt like. Long before her, Koreans had crossed the border into Manchuria to gather ginseng. But it remained a wild and untamed place, run by warlords and vagrants. She'd actually considered joining the fire field people in the mountains, so desperate for

arable land that they burned the earth to force a burst of nutrients in the soil, and then went searching when that patch was dried up. But she wouldn't stoop that low. Instead she had done all she could to scrounge up enough to get the two of them back to Pyongyang just so she could strap Hak-Sun to her back and walk from family member to family member, pleading for a place to stay and food to eat. She didn't want her daughter to be so dependent on others. She wanted her to have a chance at independence, and being a kisaeng would offer that, along with some pride.

She knew that there were stories of kisaeng whose work gave way to prostitution, and that some of them were true. She also knew that the kisaeng profession was slowly changing under the Japanese, who had brought their system of regulated prostitution to Korea, where it had barely existed before them. But being a kisaeng meant getting an education and mastering some accomplishments. It was better than the other work a young, poor girl could get, like working in munitions factories in Japan, or in the fields as a farmhand. It was a livelihood.

In the Joseon Period, when women were expected to serve a husband and exist in the house's inner rooms, without the ability to visit their families much, if at all, once they were married, few poems were published by women. But a type of unpublished poem originated in the 1700s and circulated widely. Mothers and grandmothers delivered advice to their female relatives in poems that were hand-copied onto rolls of paper, so that when a woman married, she would arrive at her in-law's home with spools of guidance. Eventually these brides would add their own thoughts to the series of poems, and pass it on to their daughters. They were called *kasas*, and there were two main types.

One was the song of admonition, with instructions to the girl about how she should behave in her new home to bring pride to the family that had raised her. The other type was the song of lamentation, where the speaker rants with passionate sadness, often at being a woman in a world dominated by men. The poems of admonition tell the child that the social structures that define her are to be adhered to and not questioned. The poems of lamentation say, again and again, “I’m sorry things are as they are.” They offer permission to passionately grieve.

As her mother consented for her daughter to travel to China in search of work, and set about knitting that yellow sweater, what verses did she pour into each stitch? Did she speak into the empty room and tell the yellow sweater those old stories she’d once told Hak-Sun, so she could carry them with her? With each knit and pearl, did she leave her daughter advice or the permission to despair? On the train platform that day, did she hand her daughter a song of admonition or a song of lamentation? Perhaps she knew it was both, for her mother, for Hak-Sun, and for all these women, both were equally true.

Minjung, Hak-Sun, and their foster father were eating lunch in a restaurant in Beijing when a Japanese police officers approached them. They had traveled for days, often sleeping on the train car so they wouldn’t have to spend money on a guest house. A Japanese officer with two stars on his lapel beckoned him over from the lunch table.

“Where are you coming from?” the officer asked.

“Korea,” he said. “We’re looking for work.”

There were thousands of others like him in China, trying to avoid Korea’s joblessness. But the officer was skeptical. He shook his head, rejecting the story.

“If you wanted to make money, you could have stayed in Korea,” he said. He gestured for his men to take away the foster father for questioning, since he could be one of the guerillas who had fled over the border to China to hide out and organize.

Minjung was frantic.

“Where are they taking him?” she said to Hak-Sun, keeping her eyes turned down and on their bowls of rice “What should we do? Run?”

Two of the officer’s soldiers instructed the girls to follow them, down a side street behind storefronts, and to a waiting truck where 50 other soldiers waited inside.

“Get in,” one of the soldiers said. Hak-Sun bolted away and tried to run. But it was too late, and the soldiers caught her before she could take more than a few steps. They heaved the two girls into the back of the truck. They drove for hours until night fell. When the sound of gunshots blared, everyone spilled from the truck and hid in the ditch. When they quieted, everyone piled back on. Hak-Sun crouched in a corner with Minjung, listening to her friend sobbing mix with the voices of the men taunting them. Hak-Sun wrapped her arms around her stomach, squeezed her feet together, and tried to fold her body in on itself until she was as small as she could manage. She stared at the little yellow beads of wool knotted together in her sweater, and realized it was speckled with the stains of her own tears spreading across the fabric. To ignore the troop’s taunting, she squeezed her eyes shut and thought of the seagulls Lady Shin’s poem had released across the water. She envisioned a flock, and focused on one of the them, replaying images of its flight again and again until she had taught that bird to ignore the others when they swarmed together, and to keep moving towards the horizon. *Kubi, kubi. Sori, sori*, she

told the bird.

They drove until dusk the next day, when the truck stopped in a town that was eerily quiet, the Chinese residents having fled as the Japanese arrived. Some of the troops escorted them to a vacant house that the military had seized, and Minjung grabbed her hand while they walked. They brought the girls inside, and instructed them to wait. A flimsy curtain hung from the ceiling, dividing one half of the room from the other.

The officer from the restaurant in Beijing came into the room. He fixed his eyes on Hak-Sun and she clutched the edges of her sweater with the tips of her fingers. It seemed too small, as if it had shrunk with the heat of her tears. She wished it could cover her from head to toe, like the royal *hanbok* that queens once wore, with cavernous sleeves that reached the ground. The officer approach Hak-Sun and told her to go to the other side of the curtain. Hak-Sun fought. She twisted in his arms, kicked, and screamed. He overpowered her, shoving her out of sight behind the curtain and Hak-Sun caught sight for just a moment of Minjung in the corner. Hak-Sun saw the door open as another man, this one in a brown uniform, walked into the room and towards Minjung. She tried to keep sight of Minjung's profile through the curtain's threads and listen for her voice, wondering what would happen to her. But the officer held her down and tore off her clothing, flaying the fabric into pieces. And everything else fell away until she could hear nothing beyond herself.

When it was still dark, the officer rose to leave Hak-Sun, and she attempted to

cover her body with the scraps of her torn garments.

“You wouldn’t have needed those,” he said, “You won’t be able to wear clothes like that any longer.”

He walked from the room and Hak-Sun watched every step of his departure, willing him out the door. She stood and tip-toed to the curtain, shedding the strips of clothing around her. Peeking to the other side, she found Minjung on the ground beside a soldier in a brown uniform who was fast asleep. Minjung was weeping. Her clothing was torn, as well, and she had draped herself in fabric, but Hak-Sun caught glimpses of her bruised skin. She dropped the curtain, and retreated to her side of the room, sitting down uneasily. The officer had raped her twice during the night, and her body was shocked. She picked up the flayed pieces of her clothing, and knotted together what she could, attempting to reassemble it into something that would cover her. She found a piece of the yellow cardigan and held it cautiously, afraid what she would lose if one more stitch pulled loose. At dawn the man in the brown uniform left, and Minjung and Hak-Sun were left alone. They wrapped their arms around each other and held tight, crying while each tried to tell the other what had happened to them during the night, but couldn’t find the words.

They heard women’s voices outside speaking Korean. Someone opened the door and came in. A woman asked how they had gotten there, and Minjung explained their journey.

“Now that you’re here there isn’t much you can do,” the woman said. “There’s no

way to run. You'll have to accept it."

Their lives as comfort women had begun. Soldiers brought wooden beds into their curtained room. They received blankets, and a washing basin to keep by the door. In the daylight, Hak-Sun saw the woman was right. There was nowhere to run. They were in a red brick house with two exits, but both led to a yard directly next to a military unit that was heavily guarded. There were three other Korean women in the house, and they had all assumed Japanese names. The oldest was Sizue, who was 22. Then there was Miyako and Sadako, two nineteen year olds who had been there for months and were suspicious of newcomers. Sizue gave them them new clothing that the troops had raided from abandoned Chinese homes. She assigned them Japanese names, and Hak-Sun was now Aiko. Minjung became Emiko. They soon learned there was a hierarchy in the home. As the youngest, Hak-Sun was expected to do more of the chores, like washing and cooking. Sizue spoke the best Japanese, so she entertained the officers. With the arrival of newcomers, Miyako and Sadako gained some seniority, and sent Hak-Sun and Minjung the soldiers they knew to be rough.

Sizue gave them bottles of antiseptic solution that turned pink when diluted with water, and told them to wash their bodies with it after serving a soldier. She taught them to make cotton wool balls and insert them deep into their wombs on the weeks when they bled from their periods. She taught them to roll up strips of cloth when there wasn't enough wool. Usually the men came in the afternoons, choosing a room and lining up along the wall outside, filing in for thirty minutes at a time. They were supposed to bring their own condoms, but Hak-Sun quickly learned that there was no use in refusing those

who didn't. It only lead to a beating. She just scrubbed herself harder with the antiseptic solution after those visits, until her skin was red with the same angry chafing her mother's rough wool socks used to rub into her wrists. Every so often the soldiers departed on missions for three or four days, and when they returned Hak-Sun could hear them before she saw them, their songs gaining volume as they marched closer. She knew that after days in the battlefield, they would come directly to the house, and she'd be expected to serve seven or eight of them in a morning.

In the meantime, the girls cooked and talked. Hak-Sun couldn't stand the tedious domestic work, and seethed with anger at her confinement. She didn't get along well with the others, except for Minjung.

"Emiko," Sizue would correct her when she heard Hak-Sun use her friend's Korean name. "Here, her name is Emiko," Sizue said.

When there weren't men in the house, Minjung and Hak-Sun stole minutes together. Sometimes Minjung snuck into Hak-Sun's room with a biscuit one of the soldiers had smuggled out of the mess hall to give to her, offering half to Hak-Sun. Other nights Hak-Sun brought Minjung a bit of extra soup or a rice ball flecked with dried seaweed from a soldier. They had been in the house for about a month, and realized after a while that there weren't any new men coming. It was the same soldiers, again and again. They were sitting together late one night when they heard slurred men's voices. Hak-Sun had grown to learn what that meant. The men were drunk, as they seemed to be more and more often. They were cruel when they drank. Hak-Sun bolted into the backyard to hide in the shadows. It was no use. The soldiers easily found her and brought

her back into the house; she'd only made them angry. They brought her into the room with Minjung and demanded the two girls sing a song.

Hak-Sun and Minjung performed the shiju and pansori they'd once practiced at the academy, their voices obscured with 300 others. If they entertained them long enough the men might pass out. They performed the love story of Master Yi coming to rescue his secret wife from the evil judge, and they recited the verses of the sixteenth century kiseang Hawng Chini-i's frustrated love:

I chose a wild willow branch

and plucked it to send to you.

Hak-Sun thought of the mat performers sat on for the pansori, and how with a few words it could be anywhere. That was all she thought of. Anywhere else. She plotted her escape with each song. Eventually the soldier tired of the singing, and one of them came to her room. He raped her gently, speaking kind words and thanking her when it was done. After, he instructed her to wash him. She knew he would. He did this every visit. While he reclined in the bed, she walked to the pedestal by the doorway and retrieved the basin. She dunked a cloth in the water, and wrung it out over the basin. She brought the towel to his skin, and cleaned the sweat, dirt, and grime from his body. She plunged the cloth into the basin again until the water turned a silty gray. As she squeezed the cloth between her fingers, wiping away any trace of what had happened, she plotted her escape.

Days went by without change—the same cycles repeating themselves. She knew another week had passed when the military physician arrived. He inspected them for

venereal diseases and confirmed they weren't pregnant. When he thought one of them might have an infection, he injected them with a drug they called No. 606. Hak-Sun never knew what it was, but the shots always made her burp, and the smell made her nauseous. Then one morning while the women were eating breakfast a soldier rushed inside and told them to pack. He rushed them out the door and onto a truck, where an officer waited nearby on horseback with a long sword by his side. Minjung and Hak-Sun huddled beside each other, and Hak-Sun summoned the image of those birds flying across the water again. One by one she isolated a bird from the flock and willed it to fly across the Taedong River, over the Diamond Mountains, towards Wonsan, and over the ocean. She didn't let the bird stop to eat or drink, but willed it forward, until even she lost track of the white fleck in the cloudy sky.

Before nightfall the truck stopped at a new house, this one similar to the last, except that it seemed to be located in a more remote village. They were still guarded, but fewer soldiers came, and the physician rarely visited. Things were bleaker than before. In hushed tones, Minjung and Hak-Sun discussed escape plans. They always arrived at the same dead ends: They had no idea where they were and knew nothing about the area that surrounded them, so even if they evaded the guards, they were likely to end up lost.

One night a person Hak-Sun had never seen before came into her room. She was surprised to see anyone, because most of the soldiers were out on an expedition. He was a Korean man in his forties, and somehow he had made it past the guards and into the house. He claimed to be a silver-coin peddler. She was excited and nervous. This was her

chance. He too satisfied his desires with her and then tried to leave.

“Take me with you,” Hak-Sun said. She clung to him and repeated the same plea,  
“Take me with you, take me with you, take me with you.”

“How old are you?” he said.

“Take me with you,” she said.

“How did you get here?” he said.

“Take me with you,” she said.

She kept her voice quiet, thinking of Minjung in the room next door, on the other side of a thin wall. For the last four months they spoke of little else but finding a way out, and she knew Minjung would want to come with them. As Hak-Sun saw the Korean man softening, she weighed the risk of Minjung coming along, and as she pleaded with the man the lines of a long-ago poem slipped through her mind:

*My home is one thousand li away, a voice in her mind recited, the lines unspooling from her memory like a ball of thread kicked down a clear path, Over the mountains one upon another.*

“I travel all over China for my work. I never settled in one place,” he said.

“Take me with you,” she said.

*But I yearn to go back day and night, in sleep or awake,* the voice continued, sounding like her and yet like a wholly different person she barely recognized.

“It would be dangerous,” he said.

“Take me with you,” she said.

*Seagulls scatter from the sand and again gather together,”* the voice recited.

“It would be very hard,” he said.

“Take me with you,” she said.

*Fishing boats sail in and out on the sea,* the voice continued.

“We might walk out the door and get caught by the Japanese,” he said.

“Take me with you,” she said.

*When could I ever again tread the path...to sit beside my mother and sew with her,*” the voice said, and it sounded like her, and her mother, and the nuns at church, and the captivating kisaeng Wolhyang Gye, and the chorus of the 300 other girls at the academy in a seamless voice that resounded in her mind, bouncing against the walls of her memory and colliding again in an echo that had no start and no end.

“We both could die,” he said.

“I don’t care,” she said, “I don’t care if I die. I don’t care if you abandon me, as long as I get out of this place. Take me with you.”

“Are you sure?” he said, and she realized that in all the daydreams she’d devoted to teaching birds to escape their flock, she had never managed to train two to leave. Only the one.

“Take me with you,” Hak-Sun said.

They walked past Minjung’s room and out the house door. Somehow they avoided the notice of the few guards who were not out in the field but Hak-Sun was too terrified to make sense of how. She put one foot before the other. Four months after the officer found her, she walked behind the Korean man and away from her room with the wood pallet bed and the water basin, thinking how light her hands felt with nothing to carry.

They continued for days, and she learned new things about her new companion. She learned he knew how to find deserted houses, and quickly found her new clothing to put on, left behind by those who had fled. He was like a chameleon. He spoke Chinese, which he could pass for when wanted. He spoke Japanese too. He claimed to have attended a high school in Pyongyang, and to have a son there. Hak-Sun suggested that they return to Pyongyang, but he said only that he could not go back. He appeared to know his way around every corner of China. He was not a silver-coin peddler, as he'd claimed. It wasn't clear what he was, but Hak-Sun slowly realized he must be a middle-man for the Chinese, probably in the opium business. She passed the autumn months moving across China's war-torn land, from Beijing to Nanjing, trying to fill in the gaps that surrounded him. She didn't trust him, but she followed him anyway. Without speaking Chinese, she didn't know what else to do. He began to introduce her as his wife.

In the winter of 1942, a year after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Hak-Sun turned 18 and became pregnant with the Korean man's baby. He decided they should find somewhere to stay put, and chose Shanghai. They found a place to live in the city's French district, which they heard was less likely to get bombed than the British and Japanese parts of town. He found work managing at a pawn shop that gave out loans to people, and eventually Hak-Sun helped in the store too. She gave birth to a daughter. Soon after she became pregnant again. In 1945, as Japan surrendered to the Allies, she turned 21 and had a son. Their business was fairly strong, and for the first time she was financially stable. Yet the man claiming to be her husband was cruel, especially when he

drank. He got angry when she didn't follow his orders, and with enough drinks he would lash out at her in front of their children, calling her a prostitute and a dirty bitch. She knew that soon they would be old enough to understand his words, and doubted that would stop his abuse.

In June of 1946, they boarded a ship for Korea's Incheon harbor. There had been an outbreak of cholera among the passengers, and once anchored, they were quarantined for 26 days. She stood on the deck with her children and watched the seagulls scavenge for scraps, their squawks relentless. They moved into a Seoul refugee camp for three months, where her daughter died of cholera. They carried on. Her husband found a room to rent in Seoul, where he continued to treat her with cruelty, and she did what she could to keep him from coming near her or her son. They survived the Korean War by finding work where they could. She sold produce at a market, and he always managed to find a job. He worked at a construction site, ran a clerk's office, delivered groceries to military units. One day he was having the groceries inspected before he was given authorization to bring them on site, the building overhead collapsed. He languished in a Red Cross Hospital for a few months and, finally, died. Hak-Sun didn't pay to bury him in a hillside monument where his ancestors could bow to him on holidays, leave offerings, and ask for his favor. She had him cremated and didn't mourn. He was cruel and she didn't feel sad to see him disappear from her life.

She found new work to support her and her son, never revealing to anyone how she had spent the war. When her son was in fourth grade she wanted to take him to the sea. During his summer break she took him to the coastal city of Sokcho, on the country's

west coast. They stood on the beach, where barricades like huge jacks with massive edges rusted in the waters to prevent a sea invasion from the north. Her son swam in the waters, and suffered heart failure. He died on the spot. It was too much to handle. Those old poems came to her in fragments. She thought of the two small burial grounds, in Nansorhon Ho's poem "Mourning my Children," an extravagance she couldn't afford for her own kid. Once she read the poem and saw a bereaved woman in rage. Now she saw herself:

Last year I lost my beloved daughter,  
This year I lost my son.  
Alas, this woeful ground of Kangnung!  
A pair of mounds stand face to face.  
The wind blows through the white birch  
And the ghostly lights flicker in the woods.  
I call to your spirits by burning paper money,  
By pouring wine on your mounds.  
Do you, the spirits of brother and sister,  
Play together fondly each night!  
This child growing inside me  
Dare I hope it will grow safely to full term?  
In vain I chant a magic verse of propitiation,  
Tears of blood and sorrow swallow up my voice.

Except that she had no child to hope for. She'd never again heard from her mother, never again heard from Minjung, and had no family. She had spent much of her life serving the needs of those she abhorred, and lost the two people she loved. She drank, smoke, and took drugs until the knot of grief in her chest loosened enough for her to bear the thought of living. She sought stable employment again and rebuilt her life, doing domestic work for a family for twenty years. Her heart was weak, too, and she grew tired easily. When it became too exhausting to put in a full day, she retired. But the knotted han of unresolved anger and grief remained in her chest, and she looked for an outlet. She met an old woman who had been in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb dropped. The woman told Hak-Sun of her suffering, and Hak-Sun surprised herself by telling the old woman her own story. The whole thing poured out, a secret she'd protected so long she was surprised to hear herself tell so much so easily. She decided not to stop. Like the birds who passed over Pyongyang each spring, leaving the scraps of river for long migrations to whole new worlds, she decided to keep going.

## ONE THOUSAND WEDNESDAYS

It was December 14, 2011: the largest Wednesday protest ever to convene outside the Japanese embassy's doorstep, but not the first. Most weeks the space provided by the sidewalk sufficed, but today's crowd filled the wide Seoul street, blocking lunchtime traffic. As people grew restless for the event to start, one demonstrator remained stoically still. Amidst a chanting crowd and police in riot gear, she sat vigilant with her gaze fixed on the embassy's front door. The hope had always been that an official would emerge, long-awaited apology in hand. Instead, she faced drawn blinds and closed doors as Japan's red and white flag whipped back and forth in the winter wind.

For the last 1,000 Wednesdays, a smaller group had gathered in this very same spot and she had often joined them, beneath the Japanese flag. Today, this flag represents a constitutional monarchy and one of South Korea's largest trading partners. But Kim saw it wave decades earlier for an imperial army that colonized her country and conscripted its men. She saw it on the yellow uniform of a man who knocked on her door so many years ago, and asked her mother which child she would send to work "for the empire." She saw it on the wall behind the doctor who instructed her to take off her clothes and part her legs for his inspection. She saw it on clothing hastily piled on the floor. She saw it raised for an empire that forced her and thousands of others to work as sexual slaves in state-run military brothels. She saw it in memories and nightmares she could not forget.

And on this Wednesday, she saw it atop the embassy of a democratic and peaceful government that still refused to admit it once sanctioned sexual slavery.

By the time Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, its military was already years into an aggressive campaign to expand across Asia, invading countries and declaring their citizens “the Japanese emperor’s children.” Wherever the military went, from the plains of Siberia to the mountains of China, an estimated 200,000 women were forced to follow as sexual slaves. Many were Japanese. But as the imperial army grew, demand did too. Japan turned to women from the countries it conquered to fill the gap. The majority of these women were Korean, but survivors of Japanese “comfort stations” span Asia. Kim was 16 when that Japanese soldier in the yellow uniform knocked on her door. Though 71 years have passed, she is still waiting for an apology.

There’s a Korean adage that, “When whales fight, the shrimp’s back is broken.” Korea is the injured shrimp in this metaphor, and its powerful neighbors, Russia, Japan, and China are the thrashing whales. For centuries before any survivors of the comfort stations were born, Korea had been tossed back and forth between the more powerful countries surrounding it. Eventually, Korea sealed itself off from the world diplomatically and financially, content to pay tribute to China in exchange for being left alone. Few Koreans left the country, and fewer foreigners entered. The Korean race remained homogenous, and the forces of modernization and industrialization barely touched the Korean people. For years, the royal kings and queens stood by the system

while the peasants who made up the vast majority of the population struggled. But soon industrialization and colonial expansions would wrack Asia and China, Japan, and Russia were bound to fight for influence in Korea. But the monarchs were too focused on maintaining their own power against threats within the monarchy to prepare for the turbulence to come, and they failed to recognize outside forces that threatened its very existence.

They failed to notice that Japan had undergone a transformation. For the eighteenth and nineteenth century Japan too had been a “sealed” nation, closed off from international trade and outside influences. Internal shuffles for power and violent civil war had destabilized Japan in the 1800s, which allowed merchants from a few other countries into its ports, like China and the Netherlands. In 1853 the US Commodore Matthew Perry docked huge black-hulled steam boats jutting with cannons in Tokyo Bay, and demanded to deliver a letter to the emperor dictating Japan open up its ports to American ships. Perry sent along a white flag, and a letter promising to destroy the country in battle if the government chose to resist rather than negotiate. It was clear the Japanese had little choice in the matter. The Japanese people saw just how vulnerable their country was to colonial intrusion. For hundreds of years the Japanese emperor had held only weak authority to rule the country, which was a feudal system truly led by a series of shogun, or military leaders with concentrated power. In 1868 the Japanese restored central power to the emperor, and a period of rapid modernization and development called the Meiji Restoration began.

Railroads soon criss-crossed the countryside, steamships bearing the Japanese flag

sailed between harbors, factories fueled by coal popped up in cities. Japan was preparing to contend with Western industrialized nations. Soon Japan became the most advanced nation in Asia. A national ethos of manifest destiny emerged claiming Japan bore the responsibility of protecting the independence of other Asian nations from the colonizing Western countries that threatened them. And many Japanese leaders argued the best way to do that was for Japan to colonize their less sophisticated neighbors first and force modernization. Japanese officials set their sights on Korea.

Japan modeled its approach to persuading Korea to open its borders with the same aggressive threats Western Powers had imposed on them. The other regional superpowers, China and Russia, had expansionist ambitions of their own and noticed Japan positioning itself to gain influence in Korea. China fought a war with Japan on Korean soil in 1894, and lost. Japan now began to exert authority over everyday government decisions in Korea. The Japanese even conspired to assassinate the powerful Queen Min, who was secretly trying to align with China and Russia. They sent assassins to invade the royal Kyongbokkung Palace and killed her, then set fire to her body. Then in 1904 the Russians fought a war with Japanese on Korean soil. Korea formally declared neutrality while a war was fought between two growing superpowers on its land. The Emperor was forced to sign a protocol agreement allowing Japan to use Korea as a military base. In 1905, with Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese war imminent, Japan approached Great Britain and the US to make sure they would not interfere. In July 1905, the US reached a secret deal known as the Taft-Katsura Agreement, where the US agreed to recognize Japan's rule in Korea if Japan recognized US dominance in the Philippines.

Each agreed to look the other way as long as the other did too. Japan signed the Anglo-Japanese treaty with the UK allowing it to take appropriate measures for the “guidance, control, and protection” of Korea. The Russians pulled out, defeated, and Japan was left to control Korea. A delegation with troops, led by Ito Hirobumi, forced the Koreans to sign a protectorate treaty on Nov. 17, 1905. Guerilla armies rose up, joined by farmers and scholars and members of the Korean Army. They destroyed Japanese factories and supply lines, and freed captives. But they had few resources and training, and by 1910 the Japanese reported the Korean volunteer army was dead.

In 1901 Japan appointed Resident General Terauchi Masatake to Korea with explicit instructions to complete the annexation. Also, in 1907, Korean King Kojong sent secret envoys to the World Peace Conference in the Hague. They weren’t formally recognized, but argued Korea’s point to officials from around the globe. It wasn’t enough to take for any other countries to take up Korea’s cause. When word got back to the Japanese, they forced the king to abdicate the throne, which he did on July 19. His son, a young boy, was installed on the throne but had no real power. He was sent to Japan to live with the emperor.

Korea made other attempts to assert its independence again. Germany surrendered in 1918 and World War I ended, Woodrow Wilson proposed a peace treaty based on his fourteen points, with the doctrine of self-determination boldly asserting that all peoples had the right to choose to rule themselves. Cooperating with leaders abroad, Koreans began to write a declaration of independence, signed by 33 members of the Korean Independence Movement. They presented it on March 1, 1919. The declaration was read

at Seoul's Pagoda Park and on a pre-arranged signal, people across the nation read the declaration and began to march the streets. It was illegal to show a Korean flag in public, but people waved them in the streets, and over 2 million people marched. Across Korea, there were 1,500 separate gatherings in nearly every county. All were peaceful, but Japanese troops brought them down with swift violence. Soldiers fired into crowds. According to the Japanese military records 46,948 people were arrested, 7,509 killed, and 15,691 injured. The casualties and death rates are estimated to be much more, approaching 25,000. 715 houses and 47 churches were destroyed. The Koreans failed, but the effort was significant. Many leaders fled, and established a provisional government in China. Across the country, people wanted self-rule. Whereas earlier movements had focused on returning power to the corrupt Korean monarchy that had lost it, the throne was no longer the goal. They wanted democracy. It also indicated to the world the nature of Japan's rule, not as benevolent protector, but aggressor.

On Aug. 29, 1910, the last Korean king was forced to issue a proclamation yielding the nation and throne to Japan. Koreans became Japanese subjects, without being given any civil right or liberties that came with citizenship. With assimilation policies, the people were forced to give up their Korean names for Japanese ones. Korean newspapers were closed. Schools required the students to speak Japanese. Land was confiscated from Koreans, and Japanese farmers and fisherman were encouraged to emigrate with offers of cheap land to sweeten the deal. The main goal was to use Korea's agriculture to increase food production exports for Japan. As agricultural practices became more efficient, and more food was produced, stored, and processed in Korea than ever before, food shortages

wracked the country. The majority was shipped to Japan. While the Japanese standard of living increased, in Korea the quality of people's daily life plummeted. People struggled just to survive.

In the time that's past since World War II ended, and Japan's colonies were liberated, including Korea, much has changed. Korea was destroyed in a civil war that technically has never ended, but paused with a cease fire. South Korea and Japan signed treaties to normalize their relationship in the 60s, and now the two nations are interconnected. But the relationship remains fraught. People in Korea still feel unresolved anger about their history, and some people in Japan feel they've been asked too often to meekly apologize. The issue of the comfort women is tied up this nationalist struggle for how frame history and who was wrong by whom. While the comfort women were literally raped, their stories are often used to exemplify a national metaphor that the nation of Korea was raped. It's a troubling narrative that helps and hurts the cause of the comfort women, but links their story to that of the whole Korean nation.

It's unclear just how many people came to commemorate the 1,000th Wednesday protest, that day when Kim sat outside the Japanese embassy. Estimates of attendance vary depending on which source you consult, between 1,500 and 3,000 people, but it was enough bodies to fill the street, and enough voices to drown out the constant din of Seoul traffic. This protest originated nearly twenty years earlier, on a January day in 1992. A much smaller group of people gathered on this same street with hopes that their demands would reach then Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa during his visit to South

Korea. For years most of these women had kept secret the time they spent as sexual slaves. Raising demands at the top of their lungs was a stark change, and one that may never have occurred if it weren't for another South Korean woman with the last name Kim: Hak-Sun Kim.

Koreans had watched their television sets in shock as Hak-Sun Kim became the first "comfort woman" to publicly tell her story in a national press conference. Soon after, she became a plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit in Japanese courts with two other survivors of comfort stations, who chose to remain anonymous. They were part of the group the South Korean Association of the Pacific War Victims and Bereaved Families, which included 35 Korean war victims, represented pro-bono by Japanese lawyers. thirty-five South Korean Officials, both Korean and Japanese, largely rejected Hak-Sun Kim's claims as a work of fiction from a greedy former prostitute. Under the pressure of historical and testimonial proof, Japanese leaders have since issued murky personal apologies. Each amounted to little more than, "We're sorry you feel that way." Until her death in 1997, Hak-Sun Kim was still making fiery demands for the Japanese government to issue a clear and complete apology. She never got one. Since then other survivors have carried on the campaign, calling for Japan to formally claim legal responsibility for its war crimes, apologize, and pay reparations to survivors. That first Wednesday protest in 1992 did not yield an apology, and the ragtag group of protesters were ignored. So they tried again the next Wednesday, and the next, singing the same songs, holding the same signs, repeating the same demands, for the 100th week, the 250th, the 500th, the 999th.

The case was ultimately decided, and the women won, though not very much. Each would be the recipient of \$2,300. But it was too late. The decision spent seven years working its way through Japanese courts, and by the time it was announced, Hak-Sun had been dead for a year. She had spoken about her death often beforehand. "Once I am dead and gone, I wonder whether the Korean or Japanese government will pay any attention to the miserable life of a woman like me," she said. Her fear was that in a life of bad luck, her death would be a loss to no one.

Only once did the comfort women and their supporters choose to cancel a protest, as Japan reeled from the Kobe earthquake in 1995. Their demands have not changed much since a gallon of gas cost \$1.76, Clinton prepared to move into the Oval Office, and the Japanese government thought the clamor outside their window might fade away. Of course it didn't, and leaflets circulated the crowd at the 1,000th protest with a line of neat bullet points down the side:

- Acknowledge the war crime

- Reveal the truth in its entirety about the crimes of military sexual slavery

- Make an official apology

- Make legal reparations

- Punish those responsible for the war crime

- Accurately record the crime in history textbooks

- Erect a memorial for the victims of the military sexual slavery and establish a

historical museum

Bok-Dong Kim did not need a leaflet to remember why she was spending yet another Wednesday lunch hour outside the Japanese embassy. She had been a part of this protest since it was just seven weeks old. Since then a steady stream of survivors had told their story publicly as well. Today she was joined by four other survivors, each bundled in thick layers against the cold. They wore bright yellow vests over their winter coats that said, “Honor and Human Rights to Halmoni.” Halmoni means grandmother in Korean, a respectful title preferred over the troubling yet often-used euphemism “comfort woman.” In truth, few of the survivors are grandmothers. Many were unable to have children as a result of diseases and wounds from the “comfort stations.”

By the time it annexed Korea as a colony in 1910, Japan had a long history of condoning and overseeing prostitution. For centuries, the government had been closely regulated the “floating world” red light districts. As Japan began to occupy neighboring countries, it exported this model of government-approved prostitution too. Under Japanese Occupation, Korea’s for-profit prostitution industry doubled in just a year. The government approved and regulated brothels across Korea set the cultural precedent for its military version, designed to provide “comfort” for the Japanese soldiers. Historical documents suggest that this was a strategic choice made for many reasons. First, the military wanted to prevent soldiers from sharing military secrets over pillow talk. It also wanted to curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Most significantly, however, the military wanted to suppress sexual violence against locals. After soldiers drunkenly wreaked havoc on places like Nanking, China, the government realized that “rape, in

particular, tended to provoke strong anti-Japanese local feeling. This made it difficult to rule the occupied territories.” They issued a military order that “each soldier’s behavior must be tightly controlled and sexual comfort facilities should soon be set up.”

At first, Japanese women provided this sexual labor. As Japan’s military advanced across Asia, however, the military experienced labor shortages, and the brothels were no exception. Imperial Japan looked to its colonies for substitutes, and Korea, in particular, was geographically close, had long been under Japanese control, and its people were viewed as racially inferior. In 1885, the Japanese educator Fukuzawa Yukichi, who was widely respected at the time and whose face appears on Japan’s 10,000 yen note, said, “We have here two unfortunate neighbor countries-China and Korea...[They] do not comprehend the path of national reform. In framing present policies, we have no leisure to await their awakening and together revive Asia...We cannot treat them with special consideration just because they are our neighbors, we must treat them just as Westerners do.” Years later he clarified that many of his opinions were not meant to be discriminatory, or were taken out of context. However, the ideas were prevalent beyond Fukuzawa, and the same “strong arm” attitude of forceful expansion framed as protective benevolence that Western nations had used against Japan was now being re-packaged in full force by Japan towards its neighbors.

Korea’s cult of femininity also unwittingly contributed to so many Koreans being drawn into the comfort station system. An army doctor, Aso Tetsuo conducted medical examinations of Japanese women and those across Asia in order to determine which populations might be fit to bring “comfort” to the Japanese troops. Korea highly valued

chastity. Confucian policies had been institutionalized as law by neo-conservative purists in the final hundreds of years of the Joseon dynasty. Confucian principles saw a woman's supreme role as serving her husband in a home's inner rooms, and bearing children. That meant that Korean women were nearly always virgins before marriage, and that being subservient and meek in character was valued. Observing all this in Korean women, Aso concluded in a report that unmarried Korean women, rather than Japanese prostitutes would make "better gifts for the Emperor's warriors."

And so Bok-Dong Kim's future was decided.

On the day of the 1,000th protest, Kim's outfit took a cue from some of the crowd's teenagers, with her black slacks tucked into bulky knock-off Ugg boots. Wisps of her gray hair came loose from beneath a brown knit hat and her rose-tinted glasses fogged over in the cold. She tucked her chin into the warmth of the fur scarf looped around her neck, and pulled up the collars on her fur coat. Beside her, the other halmoni did the same, and as they settled into folding chairs, a volunteer tucked blankets across their laps. Their stooped and shaky frames were a reminder that they were old enough to have begun life in a different Korea, in an era of poverty, colonization, and malnutrition. The oldest survivor present was ninety. She had never fully recovered her voice after the trauma of sexual slavery, and spoke to reporters and friends in sign language. She did not take the podium, nor did the three other halmoni. But Bok-Dong Kim did, and her message was simple and direct.

"I never thought it would take this long," she said. "I was born as a woman but

have never had a woman's life. I was dragged to foreign army's battles, and my entire life was ruined...I demand that the ambassador of Japan tell the Japanese government to apologize before we all die."

Some have speculated that waiting for the survivors to die could be exactly the Japanese government's strategy. If so, it's working. Of the 234 South Korean women who came forward as survivors in the 90s, only 63 were still alive when Kim Bok-Dong took the podium, with an average age of 85 years old. 16 of them died in 2011, one of them on Tuesday evening just hours before the protest began. Many of the women have health issues that come with age and an impoverished upbringing, but also years of sexual abuse.

Kim's voice gained strength as she turned her gaze towards the embassy.

"You took away our soldiers but that wasn't enough. And then you took us young girls to become your slaves."

The crowd of people, ranging from children to survivors of World War II, from Koreans to Japanese and Americans, cheered with approval, clapping their hands and nodding their heads. They chanted in unison, and when the crowd raised their fists overhead, Kim did too. Nobody emerged from the Japanese Embassy. Off to the side, a traditional Korean drumming group prepared to take the stage, making last-minute adjustments to their folk costumes and tapping their instruments quietly.

The street rang with the urgent demands. Supporters waved yellow balloons scribbled in English, Korean, and Japanese that said "Apologize!" and "Justice Now!" Long banners strung between two poles insisted that "There is no peaceful future for a

Japan which has forgotten the past.”

Amidst the singing and chanting, one member of the crowd was silent. Her eyes remained fixed on the Japanese embassy across the street, never wavering, which was exactly how she would remain. This figure was a stone statue of a young girl, and the second milestone of the day. Not only had this Wednesday marked the 1,000th protest, but also the unveiling of a memorial to the halmoni. After years of waiting for the Korean government to erect one, the halmoni and their advocates had finally decided to commission and install it themselves: a life-sized metal sculpture of an adolescent girl. The halmoni rose to their feet carefully, and pulled off the sheet covering the lifelike rendering of a young girl. She didn't look like the teenagers in the crowd. Seated politely on a straight-backed chair, she wore the traditional dress that modern day Koreans don only on special holidays. Beside her was an empty chair, inviting someone to join. Her hair was cut into a short bob reaching her chin, her skin was smooth, her gaze was vigilant, and her mouth was straight, somewhere between a smirk and a grimace. She sat with an air of patience, her bare feet facing forward and her balled fists placed in her lap like she was hunkered down for a long wait.

As a younger woman, Kim had been humiliated by the whispered debates about whether the rumors were true. “Had she truly spent World War II as a ‘comfort woman?’” people wondered in hushed tones. Now she is open about a secret she spent most of her life hiding. Whenever Kim speaks about the period she spent in sexual slavery, it's always visibly painful. Her voice wavers. Her eyes scrunch and moisture gathers at their corners. She looks small and tired. This 1,000th Wednesday protest was

no exception. As she clutched the microphone with a black leather glove, her tears pooled beneath bifocals. She began to tell her story.

Kim has recounted her experience countless times, and it shows. Her delivery has changed over time. She used to speak like any person looking back on a long life. She used to meander through the decades, allowing space for the years she spent in the brothels, but also the years outside of them. No longer. Now, her story has begun to sound rehearsed. Details characteristic of any elderly person looking back on her life have fallen by the wayside. In their absence, Kim places stark emphasis on anything that supports the cause's legal and political goals. It seems this more hurried storytelling is partly because Kim is tired, and has learned to get to the point. But Kim has also learned to be careful with her words the hard way. When women came forward in the 1990s, a movement of critics mobilized to discredit both the claims and the women making them. They denied the Japanese government or military had anything to do with institutionalizing sexual slavery. Critics were quick to use the survivor's stories against them. These women were already in their sixties recollecting experiences from adolescence. Sometimes the details they gave were inconsistent or inaccurate—as any elderly person's reminiscences might be. Critics have latched onto any small detail that differed from another telling or was confusing, and used it to invalidate the legitimacy of the survivor's claims and to frame them as consenting prostitutes cashing in on the army's presence.

Led by a neo-conservative, nationalist Japanese academic named Fujikoa

Nobukatsu, this group of “anti-apologists” has insisted that Japan’s attitude towards these survivors is already too conciliatory. Nobukatsu has framed the “comfort woman” debate as needlessly villainizing Japanese men who fought and died to ensure Japan’s present prosperity. He argues that Asian countries need to focus on moving forward rather than allowing old wounds to delay progress. Above all, though, Nobukatsu is most concerned with how Japan sees itself:

“The inclusion of material describing ‘comfort women’ in textbooks is also evidence of this country’s pathology. When we write our history textbooks, we weigh every word, fearful of the reaction of neighboring nations. This is the epitome of...a nation ideologically and spiritually enslaved. Japan is not a sovereign nation.”

It doesn’t help that there is no standard “comfort woman” experience that can be used as a litmus test for assessing the validity of testimonies. The Japanese military was massive and bureaucratic. Under its control, the enforced prostitution system was no different, and there was no universal experience. Japanese Scholar Yoshimi Yoshiaki has identified three kinds of “comfort stations.” Some were directly run by the military, strictly for military use; some were managed by civilians but supervised by the military for the exclusive use of troops or civilian military employees; some were open to the general public but gave favor to the military. The differences don’t stop there. Scholar Tanaka Yuki classifies the location of the facilities. He categorizes those that were permanent, and in major cities, distinctly from those that were semi-permanent and attached to large army units, and also separately from those that were small temporary

units set up near the front line.

Another author, Sarah Chunghee Soh, has her own classification that breaks down comfort stations by the motive of those who operated them. She identifies concessionary brothels that were run by civilians seeking to make money. The second category she describes is the “paramilitary” station, where the women were embedded in a military unit that directly managed the facility for its own use, and some that were operated by the military but located outside of the military compound, and did not seek to make a profit. Unit members visited with the permission of their commanding officer on allotted days and for an allotted amount of time. This resembles the way Hak-Sun Kim described the second comfort station she was taken to, and ultimately escaped from. The last types she identifies are “criminal” brothels that popped up at the end of the war on the battlefronts of occupied territories. They seem to be improvised by the troops, and against the rules and regulations of the Japanese army.

Whatever classification system a person uses, it’s clear that some military brothels were permanent structures in cities, some were semi-permanent on military bases, and some were temporary and designed to be packed up and moved when the front line did. Some were run by private citizens for profit, and some were run by the military to control troops. Some paid cash and some used a ticket system. Some were modern and upscale by local standards; some were dismal and dirty. Some had enough resources for women to have access to cosmetics, new clothing, and decent food; others could barely provide drinking water or condoms. Some enforced rules, like those banning violence against women, requiring protecting, and prohibiting drunks; others did not. The women were

subject to conditions over which they had no control. Many of the women experienced more than one type of condition in the years they spent as sexual slaves.

In 1993, Kim did not realize that survivor testimonies would become the focal point of a tumultuous debate. Since then her public stories have been reduced to a self-conscious and awkward outline of verifiable facts. When she flew to Vienna and testified alongside other female survivors of sexual violence at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. She hadn't learned to be cautious with her words, to protect those humanizing details from public scrutiny. If you had heard her speak, you would have gotten to hear her memories from childhood. She grew up in Yangsan, a southern city tucked in verdant mountain valleys near South Korea's west coast. She was the fourth child in a family of five daughters, and everyone knew her father's name.

If you had heard her voice gain strength, sentence by sentence, you could have heard her linger over years when her family's business thrived, and to remember with a hint of pride that, "In Yang San, if it wasn't our rice field, you couldn't farm it." You would have heard her recall the years her father accumulated debt, how when he passed away, creditors seized the family land. Rather than deliver her account with precise efficiency, she paused to remember how her family, all females without a male to provide for them, found a way to manage. You could have heard Kim take the time to remember the false sense of security she felt, even as her country was under foreign occupation and the Japanese empire had begun to send Koreans overseas to fill labor shortages. She did not know she would soon join them.

Later, Kim learned to strip her story of these years. All these details of her

childhood, of days spent amidst Korean women and not Japanese men, were inconsequential in proving war crimes. She learned to cut to the chase, as if her life began the day she was taken away by that soldier in his yellow uniform. Yet in Vienna in 1993, she passed slowly through this period, remembering for at least a few moments how invulnerable she considered herself.

“Thinking I was only a girl, I went around freely, even taking the cow out to graze. But they came asking for me,” she said.

In later testimonials, this is where she would begin, when her mother opened the door to find a representative of the military. Fearing conscription, her sisters had married early, and Kim was the only daughter left. The man made threats. He said that her family would be traitors if her mother didn't cooperate.

“He didn't just take me away, but demanded my mother's signature on some document. In those days, women could not read, so my mother conceded to the demand believing what she was told,” Kim recalled in Vienna, amidst women's rights activists who nodded patiently.

Kim's mother listened to the man explain that her teenage daughter would be sent to Japan to make uniforms for the troops. To many families, this didn't sound so bad. The opportunity to work and earn could be a blessing. But Kim was young and had never been away from home or the women who had raised her. In later testimonies, she would skip these first moments of fearful confusion. She got in the habit of jumping months forward, to the first “comfort station” she was assigned to in Guangdong, China, another country the Japanese had invaded. However, in Vienna she explained that the man took

her just miles from her home, in the neighboring port city of Busan, where she slept for a week in a warehouse with twenty other young girls who thought they were recruited to sew uniforms too. She said little about how she felt sleeping on the hard floor of the storeroom, but it's easy to imagine the fear of a young girl away from her mother for the first time, how she must have told herself that it would only be three years in a factory, then she would be back to the rice paddy, the cow, and the home that she knew. Later, she would reduce this journey to a handful of words:

“I arrived in Gaungdong via Taiwan.” But in 1993 she pointed out she spent four months in Taiwan waiting. Finally, she made it to China, still believing she was headed for an assembly line.

Ten years of advocating for the same cause has molded Kim's story, but not enough to minimize the horror of what happened to her next. An army surgeon came to the girls, insisting that each take their clothes off so he could inspect them for venereal diseases. Kim scarcely had an idea what a venereal disease was, but she knew that something was terribly wrong with the doctor's demands. In later renditions of her story, she would pack this night into a few words about fear and anger, about how she ran into the darkness and hid in bushes. She would come to focus on what she did rather than how she felt. In Vienna, though, she stopped to explain the thoughts going through her head of a girl who couldn't understand why she would need to reveal parts of herself that nobody had seen.

“To take my clothes off and expose previously unexposed parts of my body in front of an unknown man, to spread my legs to a military doctor and lie there on the table made me extremely afraid and wonder what this was all about. If it was a young girl today at 16

years of age, she would know what was happening but at that time, at sixteen, you knew nothing and were really a child. I didn't even know what a man was." Kim kicked and struggled, but was held down as her clothing was stripped away. They completed the check up and moved on to the next girl. Later she would summarize this horror with a chillingly concise conclusion: "In this way, my life was ruined."

With the frequent telling of it, Kim would come to skip the anguish of the first night. But as a younger woman, she paused on that terrified child who tried to resist. After the medical inspection, she was taken to a fifteen-story building, with soldiers on the first floor, and "comfort women" on the second floor. She was occasionally allowed outside, but only under the armed escort of the same soldiers permitted to rape her.

This is where Kim has begun to organize the telling of her story like bullet points. She has learned to quantify the schedule of assault. On the weekdays, she "received" fifteen soldiers a day, on the weekends, fifty. Whole years of her life are contained in these numbers.

However, in Vienna she explained how bleak it was to realize she was utterly without options. She stopped resisting the men, quickly learning that protests only led to beatings and missed meals.

"I decided to do as I was told. But good grief...my internal sexual organs were torn and swollen," Kim said in 1993, "My only thought was to escape or die."

Her days became a succession of men filing into her room carrying a state-issued condom and a ticket entitling them to her services. She gathered the tickets in a pile and delivered them to a Japanese administrator. He marked them in a ledger, promising that if

Japan won the war Kim would get a cut of the profits. In later years, the fact that she did not receive any compensation in the comfort station and was not a voluntary prostitute would become a battle cry, but in 1993, she admitted it never occurred to her then to ask for money.

Each week, a military doctor visited Kim and the other women to check them for venereal diseases or pregnancy. While many “comfort station” survivors suffered lifelong complications from infection, Kim maintains she never caught a venereal disease. It’s easy to question this, and wonder if it is a point that Kim can’t bear to reveal publicly.

As the stability of Japan’s overseas dominance began to waver and the Allied Forces, the US among them, gained ground in the Pacific Theater, any modicum of stability in Kim’s life dissolved. The more the troops moved, the more she was jostled around Asia. After two years on the second floor of that high rise in China, Kim was transferred all around the Japanese empire, to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Java, Indonesia, and Sumatra.

“We followed behind and followed behind,” Kim remembered, a dangerous cycle that brought them just miles from the front lines of World War II. The sounds of gunfire echoed. As Japan struggled to hold their positions, and soldiers took refuge in mountainous caves, the “comfort women” were sent to them just as basic supplies were. In Vienna, Kim spared a moment for those last desperate months of warfare, when she and other women were dispatched in groups of ten into temporary camps in the mountains, walking into some of the world’s most dangerous areas to service men for a week at a time. Then, one day, “suddenly the soldiers stopped coming. The war was

over.”

As the 1,000th protest came to a close, the halmoni gathered in front of the newly unveiled sculpture of the young girl with her hands in her lap, now affixed to the sidewalk. By the end of the day, Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary announced in Tokyo that, “It is very regrettable that they went ahead with constructing the comfort woman statue.” The embassy filed a formal request with the Korean government to have it removed. They were rejected. That weekend, that diminutive little girl became the focus of an international diplomatic rumble. South Korean President Lee Myung Bak visited Tokyo for a weekend summit, and chose to address the issue directly for the first time. Dedicating more than half of his hour long meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister to discussing the open wound issue of the “comfort women,” President Lee declared, “We need to have the courage of resolving, as a priority, this issue of comfort women, which has been a stumbling block in relations.”

The crowd of the 1,015th protest was nowhere near the size that had gathered a handful of weeks earlier, but it was there nonetheless, once again with the same list of demands. As Seoul’s restaurants filled for the lunch hour on Wednesday, March 28, people began milling outside the embassy. They were a small crew, with a worn sign, and a few elderly women in yellow vests, but not many. The statue remained, but now the small-framed girl was covered in winter clothing. She had a hat on her head and a blanket on her lap. She was surrounded by flowers and teddy bears that passerby had left behind.

Since their record-breaking protest just three weeks earlier, the halmoni had seen some progress, but not much. The Japanese government released a list of acceptable books to be shelved in public schools and libraries, and one was a translation of the Korean Book: Every Wednesday, which told the story of their efforts. But there had been setbacks too. After twenty years of peaceful protests, a man had lobbed an explosive device at the embassy, shouting bigoted comments. Nobody was hurt, and he was quickly apprehended.

Huddling around the sculpture of the young girl at the 1,000th protest, the halmoni remained unaware of what was to come in the future. Cameras flashed as the four women wrapped their arms around the young girl's bronze shoulders and crouched at her feet. Kim's bulky boots stood parallel with the girl's bare feet, and she pressed her cheek to the cold metal of the statue's smooth skin.

Soon a group of traditional Korean drummers took the stage, and the air began to resound with pulsing rhythms. They pounded in unison, a simple and repetitive beat, like the ticking of a clock.

## **SOFT LIES AND SEDUCTIVE LANGUAGE: A SHAMAN STORY**

To begin they asked the restless dead to join. Before the Korean shamans could guide the wandering souls of comfort women into the afterlife, they had to prepare. It wouldn't be an easy task. The spirits were bound to be restless, so the shamans checked and double-checked that time would be wasted fumbling for misplaced brass cymbals. The spirits were bound to be hungry, so the shamans arranged rice cakes dappled with red beans and pickled cabbage flecked with red pepper, spiny dried fish and persimmons stacked like a pyramid. The spirits were bound to be cautious, so the shamans cleared the space of any threatening guests who were not welcome, first with water, then with fire. They circled with ash water, then held a match to white paper and let it burn. The spirits were bound to be angry, so the shamans had to show their intentions to make past wrongs right. They held hourglass drums and beat a steady rhythm, chanting an invitation loud enough for all those troubled souls of comfort women stuck between this world and the next to hear. The shamans implored:

Oh you restless and wronged spirits, who even before the blossoming of youth were dragged to a far away country by soft lies and seductive language, then broken harshly and cruelly trampled on, forgive us. You who felt so much shame, that you could not return to your own country and ended up dying in foreign lands so filled with sorrow! Why do you think of yourselves as shameful and dishonorable? On

the contrary, it is we who are shameful, since it is we who made you into these restless spirits—wandering painfully so far away from home, unable to return to your family and loved ones. Forgive us, we who as fellow women pretended not to know about your plight and regarded your anguish as shameful history. Reproach us for our failure to release the suffering and agony that burns in your hearts.

Once all was ready, the ritual could begin. But on June 20, 2004 a light drizzle dampened the proceedings and the skies overhead rolled with clouds that threatened worse.

“The heavens are shedding tears,” Mansin Kim, the shaman leading the day’s ceremony, concluded. The six or so other shamans helping her agreed. But before they could go on, something had to be done about this rain.

In Korea, shamanic ceremonies are often held in living rooms or the courtyards of people’s homes, but this one was out in the open in Tongyong City, inviting anyone who walked by to observe and perhaps participate. Tongyong is a coastal city on the Southern tip of the Korean peninsula, not far from Busan, the huge port that was the last stop before thousands of Koreans were shipped overseas to work for the Japanese Empire in factories, hospitals, and in the case of the comfort women, military brothels. The ceremony was held on public grounds near Tongyong City’s harbor, and fishmongers stood at their market stands nearby, pink lipstick shining as they called out the daily catch. In the water a replica of the famous Turtle Boat that Korea’s Admiral Yi sailed into battle against the Japanese rocked gently against a dock, its iron shelter hiding from view any tourists who walked into the boat’s belly. In the distance, ferries went back and forth between the neighboring islands. In the shipyard, huge vessels tugged on their

anchors, some under construction with their internal workings exposed. Local high school students in uniforms volunteered to help with the ceremony. They paused in setting up chairs for spectators, and helped the group of shamans suspend a tarp over the span of sidewalk they'd claimed for the day. The clear plastic obscured the view of the threatening clouds above, but not by much.

That rainy day in Tongyong City's harbor the shamans were there to perform a *kut*. In a *kut* the shaman acts as a medium between the spirits, who can impact the living but with whom most people are unable to communicate. She helps mediate the unresolved conflicts between the living and the dead, so that both can move on from whatever has held them back. This ceremony was specifically tailored to appease the spirits of comfort women. They called it the *haewon chinhon*. The word is composed of four characters. The first, *hae* means "to solve" or "to untie." It's followed by *won*, meaning "grief" or "vexation." The next syllable, *chin*, is associated with tranquility and can mean "placation," but can also suggest "suppression." The last syllable, *hon*, means "spirit" or "ghost." Together, it translates to mean, "untying of vexed or restless spirits," and the "calming or suppression of restless ghosts."

Shamanism is a flexible practice that often blends in elements of the religions around it, like Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. But it has no doctrine of its own. There is no sermon nor hierarchy of authority figures dictating how it should be practiced. The idea of the afterlife is not definite either. As one textbook explains, "There is no good place or bad place to go after death. But it is good to die completely. That is,

one's soul should not linger around somewhere indefinitely." When the spirits wander, they disrupt the lives of the living. A full-blown *kut* is the last resort after smaller gestures have not been effective. In Korea the shamans are almost always women, and they have complete power in their unique ability to convey the messages of the dead. Yet they are also helpless to ignore the spirits who insist on consuming them. The identity that gives them power takes it away. They are liberated and bound by the role.

Hak-Sun Kim was described in much the same way after she told her story, facing affirmation and ridicule. She is often recognized as the first comfort station survivor to speak publicly, in the 1993 press conference she gave recounting the four months she was held in a military brothel in China. Characterizing her as the "first" is not entirely accurate. When I first started researching, I made the same mistake Western writers frequently have on this topic, and oversimplified history. The first timelines I scribbled in notebooks stretched a straight-line chasm of total silence and secrecy between the end of the war and 1993, where it was interrupted by the spike of Hak-Sun's press conference. That split the history into manageable thirds, with the story of what happened to the comfort women during the war on one end, the silence that followed in the center, and the present day redress movement proceeding on the other side. I had the general phases right, but I was wrong to think of the years after the war as total silence, and my timeline was too sparse. Hak-Sun's mark deserved to be prominent, since her actions catalyzed action, but before her I had failed to include dozens of smaller lines signifying public mention of the comfort women.

The existence of comfort stations, and that girls from across Asia were coerced

into them, was common knowledge in Korea and Japan, especially among those who lived through the war. Directly after Japan's surrender in 1945, it was rare for printed texts and the media to mention the comfort women. However, the subject eventually appeared in Japanese media sooner, and with more frequency, than in Korea. Between the 50s and 1989, when the Japanese Emperor Hirohito died, more than 200 documents mentioning the comfort stations were published in Japanese books, magazine, biographies, and memoirs. Comfort women were loosely mentioned in Japanese war-story literature in the 1940s. In 1971, a Japanese woman named Mihara Yoshie who managed a comfort station published a memoir under a pseudonym. That summer the story of another Japanese survivor, Kikamaru, was published in a popular magazine which the author eventually expanded into a book about women who lived on the front line.

In 1973, the Japanese journalist Kako Senda published the book *Military Comfort Woman*, drawing on interviews from Japanese and Korean men who discussed their involvement in the system. His work compellingly featured the interviews of Tetsuo Aso, a military doctor who examined women at the comfort stations. His interest in the stories began in the late 60s, when he was rooting through archives to compile a photography collection and came across images of women that raised questions—women marching with troops, women carrying their things balanced on their heads in a style he associated with Koreans, women who weren't Japanese wearing kimonos. His book led to a sequel, and was made into a movie. In 1976 another book was published in Japan that argued the comfort women were “sex slaves” exploited in an imperial policy of

“genocide.”

The first Korean survivor gave a firsthand account of her experience in May of 1979, in a Japanese documentary called *A Grandmother in Okinawa*. Her name was Pong-gi Pae. She was brought to a comfort station in Okinawa and never left after the war's end. The documentary was popular enough to lead the filmmaker to publish a book adding corroborating testimony from Japanese war veterans, and in 1987 an author wrote a biography of Pae.

Yet in Korea, where the majority of comfort women were from, text or media broaching the topic were hard to find. The existence of comfort women was mentioned by the mass media as early as 1964, when a Korean survivor living in Vietnam died, leaving behind a sizable estate. While the coverage acknowledged her history, it focused mainly on the debate over who had legal claim to her inheritance. Comfort women were portrayed here and there as characters in Korean fiction, but none gained much attention. A few Japanese texts and films were eventually translated into Korean. Senda's 1973 book featuring the interview from the Japanese army physician was translated soon after its publication, and made into a movie. However, it was not until 1981 that a book was published by a Korean focusing exclusively on the comfort women. In March of 1984 the Korean national newspaper the *JoonAng Ilbo* published an eleven part series on the life of a comfort woman who had resided in Thailand since the war's end. Her story gained some public attention and Korean Airlines even paid for her and her family to travel to Korea. The story of Pong-gi Pae, the Korean comfort woman in Okinawa who was featured in a Japanese documentary in 1976, was published in a woman's national

newspaper in 1989. Thirteen years had passed since the documentary featured her interviews in Japan before her story was brought to a Korean audience.

Pae died in 1991, two years before Hak-Sun Kim's press conference. Her death fell in a section of those initial timelines I sketched in a section I had confined in a bracket that said "public silence on the issue of the comfort women." My label was wrong. People knew about the comfort stations, but they were not widely regarded as a problem worth public conversation or action, in Japan or Korea. That means that tens of thousands of women in Korea lived for years passing people each day who were aware that girls had been coerced into military brothels, that most had even died there, but did not demand to know more about the women who had survived and those who had not. That means that thousands of women lived with the silent implication that what happened to them was not their country's concern.

When Hak-Sun Kim died on December 17, 1997, newspaper headlines announced that she had passed away at 73 years old, six years after the country had been introduced to her. "The Closing of a Life Knotted in *Han*," one newspaper headline announced. In discussing their lives, many survivors of the comfort stations talk not only about their sadness and anger, but of their *han*. It's a word I still struggle to understand. There's no accurate translation for *han* in English, it seems to me because there are too many sentiments wrapped up in the single syllable. Some have translated *han* as "unrequited resentments," or "bitterness and anger," but those definitions, I suspect, are too simple for encapsulating the idea of the word, which Korean American writer Chunghee Sarah Soh

argues is both a feeling Koreans harbor as individuals and as a component of their national identity:

The *han* complex may be formed through subjective experiences of social injustice, unfulfilled aspiration, and/or tragic misfortune...Once generated, *han* is usually suppressed over a long period of time, developing into a complex of many negative psychopathological feelings. Because those afflicted with it typically lack the social resources and political power to resolve or remove its cause, *han* generally tends to fester.

As a graduate student at George Mason University, I taught classes in the English Department and asked Korean American students of mine, mostly girls in their early twenties, what they knew of the word. They were fluent in Korean and English, yet always gave the same perplexed look in response.

“You mean the characters?” one student asked me, “Because I don’t think that’s a word.”

“No,” I said, “I mean the feeling. I think it’s like being angry and sad at the same time. And hopeful too, but cautiously hopeful.”

She looked at me skeptically. The next day however, she lingered after the class had ended. She had brought my question to her mother, who confirmed that *han* is, in fact, not just a syllable but a word, though not one her mother would use. It’s a word used by the elderly, especially women.

“It’s both a verb and a noun,” she said, “You feel it but you also have it.”

Whatever *han* is, it’s a uniquely Korean word visualized as a tangled knot, too twisted to pick apart, resting over a person’s heart. It’s a gnarled mess of sadness and resentment, but also hope for something that is unlikely to happen. Traditional poetry is riddled with the idea of *han*, especially women’s poetry. It’s almost become a clichéd placeholder when the Korean press writes about comfort women, relying on the stock phrase that the survivors endure “a life filled with much *han*,” or “a life knotted (or bound) in *han*,” as Soh quotes.

But the press hasn’t pulled this concept out of the air. The women themselves reference it often. They curse their *han* and beat their chests and shake their fists. In articles this often gets reduced to anger about the years they were systematically raped in a military brothels. Yet their testimonies reveal that many of them ascribe their *han* to a whole list of injustices and unpleasant memories, connecting not only to the horrors of the comfort stations, but also abusive Korean men in their families, strained relationships with disappointed mothers, the lack of access to education, and lost children, either those who died, or those the women were never able to have.

“Since it was my *han* for a lack of education that made me leave home, I urged my parents do everything in their power to send my younger sibling to school,” one comfort station survivor, Pilgi Mun, said in an interview. Her father had been so opposed to her

going to school that even when she attempted to do so secretly, he found out, dragged her from the classroom, and burned her books. Another woman, Ok-Sil Kim, focused on the same resentment about first being barred from school, and then failing to provide her own daughter with an education. “This has become the major reason for my lifelong *han*,” she said.

In traditional Korean understanding of *han*, it’s a sadness that is too much for an individual to cure herself of alone. She needs the intervention of others, and the only way for a person to rid herself of her *han* is in a shaman’s ceremony, calling on ancestors and spirits for help. Many survivors chose not to seek the support of a shaman to relieve them of their *han*, partly because it involved discussing the root of the *han*, the first thread of suffering and the continuing injustices that made it turn. Instead the knot grew into a gnarled mess even the most powerful souls would struggle to undo.

The first shaman was born a princess but raised an orphan. Her father was a king in the Joeson Dynasty, and he had six daughters but wanted a son. When the seventh daughter was born, he’d had enough. He ordered a jade chest to be made, big enough to hold the baby’s body. When it was done, the king sealed his youngest daughter inside, and threw the chest into the sea. A tortoise found the girl and swam with the chest on his back. Magpies and crows circled kept watch over her from above. Buddha noticed the little princess and rescued her from the box. He brought her to an elderly couple and

instructed them to care for her. From then on she gained the name *Pari*. It means abandoned. Princess Pari. The Abandoned Princess.

When Princess Pari was fifteen years old, her estranged parents, the king and queen, became ill. Each night they shared the same feverish dream of curing their illness by drinking the medicinal water from the Mountain of Three Gods. It would be a dangerous journey to retrieve the water and bring it back, especially since the mountain lay on the other side of the Thorn Castle and the Iron Castle, two gates that separated the human world from the realm of the dead. The king asked for his subjects and six remaining daughters to undertake the task, but they all refused. He consulted fortunetellers who prophesied that salvation lay in finding his seventh daughter. Word of her parent's suffering reached Princess Pari, who returned to the home she had been cast from and volunteered to retrieve the water.

Buddha noticed Princess Pari's devotion to her father, and was moved by it. He gave her a magic flower she could use to open the gates of the Thorn and Iron Castles. She used the flower to enter the underworld and set free tortured spirits imprisoned in hell. She made her way to the mountain's water, and found a supernatural god guarded it. He said he would give her what she sought, but only after she had served him for nine years: three drawing water, three stoking a fire, and three cutting firewood. She did as he asked, and after the time had passed he brought a new demand to her, saying she could go if she married him and bore him seven sons. She did this too. When all those tasks were done, she left with her husband and sons and entered back into the human world, to take the water to her dying parents. On the way they met the funeral procession of her parents.

She held the water to their lips and let it fall into their mouths. It brought them back to life with the water, reviving their breath, flesh, and bone. To show his gratitude her father offered Pari half of his kingdom, but she rejected the gift, saying it was enough to have done her duty. She became the first shaman, escorting people back and forth between the human world and the afterlife.

Or at least that's the way that writer Kyung Chae Pae has recorded the Princess Pari story. There are at least 47 written versions of Princess Pari in writing, but many more exist. It's a *muga*, or a narrative sung by Korean shamans performed in a *kut*. The stories chanted in the *muga* are passed down by oral retellings, flexible narratives that shift with each telling. For centuries, shamans occupied a valued place in society and created a clamor with the music and dancing of their ceremonies that could be heard throughout a village. Stories like Princess Pari reverberated from one generation to the next. But that shifted when Japan forced Korea to adopt an open door policy in 1876, exerting more control until the empire annexed the peninsula in 1910. Shamanism was banned and replaced by Japanese Shintoism. When the generation of girls who were coerced into becoming comfort women was born, singing the shaman songs too loudly was one more way to incur punishment. Still, they would have heard the story, told carefully and in hushed voices.

There's a Korean adage that, "When whales fight, the shrimp's back is broken." Korea is the injured shrimp in this metaphor, and its powerful neighbors, Russia, Japan, and China are the thrashing whales. For centuries before World War II began, Korea had

been tossed back and forth between the more formidable countries surrounding it. Eventually, they sealed themselves off from the world, paying tribute to China in exchange for being left alone. Few Koreans left, and fewer entered.

Sexual violence against women as a casualty of war peppers this history. In the thirteenth centuries Yuan Mongols conquered Korea and demanded women as human tributes. 300 years later the Japanese invaded Korea and kidnapped many Korean women. In the mid-seventeenth century when Korea became a suzerain state under China's Qing Manchurians, they abducted Korean women in exchange. There's a word in Korean for these women: *hwanhyangnyo*. It literally means "homecoming woman." Author C. Choi explains that:

*A hwanhyangnyo originally referred to a Korean woman who had been sent to Qing China as a human tribute and was later returned home 'after [her] usefulness was exhausted and [her] youth had withered.' But the returned woman was far from being welcomed by her family and community. Rather, a hwanhyangnyo... was 'stigmatized as a sullied woman and labeled promiscuous.'*

In exchange for the women handed over with other concessions to the Qing in China, Korea enjoyed a period of peace. It lasted into the 1850s, when those old whales began to launch armed skirmishes on Korean territory in a string of fights for influence. But now there were other behemoths too, as the US and European countries pursued their own objectives in the region. They all exerted pressure on Korea to open for international trade. The country's Joseon monarchs only hardened their isolation policies. It was a flawed position that couldn't last. While the world beyond Korea changed, the

forces of modernization and industrialization barely touched the Korean people. It remained an agrarian society based on bartering with people down the road, not those across the world. Schools were limited, the path to financial stability lay solely in securing government jobs through a corrupt system, and women were expected to remain in domestic roles in a home's inner rooms. In a travel memoir the British writer Isabella Bird wrote after visiting Korea in 1897, she marveled at the utter absence of women in public life. She wondered where they were and what they did, since she saw them so scarcely. Opportunities for women in the late 1800s remained nearly the same as they had been in the 1300s, when Neo-Confucianists implemented rigid policies meant to rid the country of immorality. They institutionalized into law the philosophy that women were meant to deferentially serve their husbands and bear children. Bird writes that:

Absolute seclusion is the inflexible rule among the upper classes. The ladies have their own courtyards and apartments, towards which no windows from the men's apartments must look... Thus all young women, and all older women except those of the lowest class, are secluded within the inner courts of the houses by a custom which has far more power than the force of law. To go out suitably concealed at night, or on occasions when it is necessary to travel or to make a visit, in a rigidly closed chair, are the only 'outings' of a Korean woman of the middle and upper classes, and the low-class woman only goes out for the purposes of work.

When Bird met the Queen Myeongseong and spoke to her of what she'd seen traveling throughout the country's eight provinces, the woman who ruled them admitted that she "knew nothing of Korea, or even of the capital" beyond the palace walls.

It wasn't just grown women, but girls and boys who were separated from one another, starting at the age of seven. "Girl children, even among the very poor, are so successfully hidden away, that in somewhat extensive Korean journeys I never saw one girl who looked above the age of six," Bird wrote. Rarely one to reserve judgment, Bird concluded that many factors woven into Korean life converged to "give women as low a status in civilized Korea as in any of the barbarous countries in the world."

Choi argues that a perfect emblem of Korea's "ideology of chastity" was "a small dagger" upper-class women carried "as a reminder for them to take their own lives, if and when their bodies were violated by men other than their husbands, especially by invading foreign soldiers." This tradition was in the past by the time survivors began to find their ways back into society from the comfort stations, but the idea that a woman should sacrifice herself, whether by suicide or silence, to atone for the shame of sexual violation remained. As Bird observed, even as laws changed in Korea customs were slower to shift. The returning comfort women knew the backlash they risked facing if others learned their history. They must have known that many people expected survivors to hold the sharp dagger of that past alone, along with the scars that came from those jagged edges.

In the year I lived in Korea, I never saw a shaman. Or at least, I was never aware of seeing a shaman nor a *kut* ceremony, and only know about those held for the comfort women from what I've read. But I did spend the whole time attempting to figure out what kind the extent to which women had the authority to control their lives, and how that

degree of agency differed for Korean men. Like Bird, I wanted to understand the power and limitations that defined women in Korea. Often experiences led me to contradicting observations. This confused me from the first day, when our school manager Skye took my boyfriend Greg and I to a local hospital for the physical required of all foreigners with long-term E2 work visas.

“It’s weird, isn’t it, being around so many Asians,” Skye said.

She laughed a bit while dodging in and out of the city’s rampaging traffic, and neither Greg nor I had any idea how to respond. Greg studied in China as an undergraduate for a semester, but I had never traveled outside the US beyond Europe, and had never spent time in any place where I was in the minority with light skin, green eyes, and blonde hair. Skye was right in noticing that the first thing I noticed about Korea was the Koreans, but I didn’t think there was anything appropriate to say in response, especially having known her for five minutes. Later I learned from co-workers that Skye held an F4 visa reserved for Korean Americans. She was only a few years older than me and had been raised in Texas, moving to South Korea to work after graduating from college with a degree in education. But she didn’t mention that in the car, letting us assume what we wanted about where she was from. It was a choice I later learned distinguished some F4s from others.

Unlike the Korean Americans who didn’t grow up in a community with many other Koreans, and unlike the adoptees who looked Korean but grew up in white families speaking only English, Skye could pass. She could be Korean when she wanted to be and American when she didn’t. At work, she was the second command, working directly

beneath the direction in a management position of authority that outranked all the other North Americans and Koreans. In the weeks that followed, I watched closely, fascinated by the ways she could transform in the company of Korean women and American women. Even the way she held her body shifted. With the Korean school staff she giggled demurely behind a raised hand and hung on their arms. After work, with the American women at a club, she danced to house music with a glow-stick in her hands and an audacity that reminded me of the sorority girls I'd known in college. I didn't have the tools to interpret the differences between the two modes of being.

In the car on that first morning, though, I didn't know anything about Skye and the two identities she embodied. I just knew she was my boss, so I followed her down the hallway of the hospital without asking too many questions. First we had to give a urine sample, and Greg and I were both given cups without caps to fill. When I emerged from the bathroom stall, a nurse pointed me towards a table at the end of the hallway and directed me to leave the sample there. I walked carefully with my pee rocking in a cup for all to see. Then we moved on to another wing of the hospital for chest x-rays to determine if we had lied about having no history of tuberculosis on our visa applications. We waited in a small waiting room filled with Korean men and women, and when a tall man in scrubs made an announcement I didn't understand, Skye told me it was my turn. As soon as I got into the white-walled room I realized that the technician spoke no English. He conveyed through gesture for me to take off my top and place the heavy protective vest over my shoulders. He turned to leave the room, and I removed my shirt and piled it in a corner, but hesitated with my bra. I didn't know if I should leave it on or off. In retrospect

it seems silly to leave on a bra with an underwire for an x-ray, but at the moment I was focused on the risk of exposing more of myself than I needed to. I left my bra on, and when the technician returned he let out a stream of disgruntled Korean. It was clear I had been wrong. He turned and left the room once more, and I stripped off my bra.

When the x-ray was done, I went back to the waiting room. Skye was laughing and talking across the room to the nurses at the front desk and my x-ray technician.

“You forgot to take your bra off?” Greg said quietly as soon as I got to his side.

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“The technician came out here and told the nurses,” he said, “Then Skye told me.”

“But how did she know?”

“Well, he spoke really loud. Skye heard and then told me. Everyone in the waiting room probably heard,” Greg said with a slight grimace.

Skye immediately brought up the same thing, and as we left the waiting room I found my eyes darting to the faces of the nurses and the others in the waiting room. I was unsettled by how easily what I chose to expose of my body had become a matter of public discussion. My face burned with something like shame.

This wasn't the first time shamans attempted to rid the comfort women of their *han* so they could proceed into a “complete” death. In the late 1980s, as the redress movement was just finding its footing in women's organizations, a group of twelve shamans met in Inchon, the town west of Seoul with the huge airport where plane to Korea had landed. They were a loosely linked coalition that often pooled the proceeds they made from

ceremonies to take trips to the mountains or hold birthday rituals. One of the youngest members, in her mid-twenties, had just heard about the comfort women's efforts from activists, and proposed they use the money "to do something meaningful" for the society. She wanted them to design a ritual for the comfort women and partner with a woman's group to perform it. The proposal was controversial. Some were concerned about breaking tradition, others were concerned with overstepping their roles, and many wanted to keep the money for their own use. The debate winnowed the group down to six. That wouldn't be enough to handle all the spirits that were bound to attend, flocking from each of Korea's eight provinces now split across North Korea and the South's Republic of Korea. They recruited more shamans, and once they had one for each of Korea's provinces, they decided they were ready. On July 13, 1990, this group of shamans came together in one of the first public events commemorating the deaths of the "angry wandering souls" of the deceased comfort woman. At the *kut* they danced from foot to foot and sang the shaman songs:

Borrow the power of the shaman so as to  
Unbind your mountainous and river-like *han* and  
Open your heart's door.  
In the other world,  
Put on your rouge and  
the red dot painted in between a bride's eyebrows.  
Give birth to sons and daughters.

To equip the souls of comfort women for their transition into death, the shamans had

prepared five hundred articles of new clean clothing, unsoiled by any remnants of the comfort stations. It wasn't enough. The makeshift crew of shamans were overwhelmed by the needs of the spirits, and how many there were who wanted to consume them. In 2002 they tried again, forming an association for the preservation of their shamanic ritual, which was in the style of Hwangaedo, a region in North Korea they could no longer access. These shamans, too, faced the risk of being forgotten in death. With twenty competent members and many talented musicians, they tried their *kut* for the comfort women again, but again they decided it was a failure. When all was said and done after a ritual, the shamans usually felt a sense of joy, or even catharsis, after a spirit or two took over their bodies. But when these two failed ceremonies were done, the shamans felt all wrong. They felt exhausted and depressed. They said more spirits than they were accustomed to entered their bodies like a "storm." But guilt was involved too. The shamans also felt a sense that they had failed these women once again, in life and now in death.

They came up with a plan. They decided to hold a separate ritual in each of the eight provinces, subdividing the souls in need of their attention. This ritual in 2004 was the first attempt at facing a sadness they hoped would not crush them to hold.

When the British traveler Isabella Bird left Korea in 1897, China had lost Korea as a suzerain state after challenges from Japan, the last of the Joseon monarchs were fighting to maintain any central authority, and Russia was plotting a failed attempt to wrest power from Japan. Bird rightly predicted the odds were in favor of Japan

expanding its empire and was hopeful for the progress that victory might bring to Koreans. “As Korea is incapable of reforming herself from within...she must be reformed from without,” Bird argued, concluding that while the future was too uncertain to predict, the armed conflicts and “energetic ascendancy of Japan have given Korea so rude a shake, and have so thoroughly discredited various customs and institutions previously venerated for their antiquity,” that no “retrograde” replacements could slip “into the old grooves.”

Bird’s optimism wasn’t all blind or skewed. Her predictions for social progress for the poor and women were proven right in the short run. The Japanese forced modernization and introduced some vehicles of change, like an expanded school system and banishment of the old Confucian laws. Koreans contributed indigenous movements for progress too, demanding a better life for the lower classes and spawning a burgeoning women’s movement. Women saw their choices begin to expand as different perspectives seeped into Korean life. Slowly they found new opportunities available to them, so that the only professions that allowed for a life outside the home were no longer as shamans, *kisaeng*, or laborers desperate for work. But the suspicion people, both men and women, had always regarded those professionals with was slow to fade. People spoke of them as dirtied by the same illicit lewdness placed on the *hwanhyangnyo* homecoming women.

In 1990 a Korean entrepreneur and feminist leader attempted to collect data about the comfort women, but was surprised by the lack of research by Koreans. It wasn’t just the comfort women who were overlooked, she noticed, but multiple instances where Koreans worked for the Japanese, either by choice, under duress, or without any choice at

all. She also struggled to find information on forced labor mobilization, Koreans who were drafted to work in Japanese factories and became victims of the atomic bomb, and whether Koreans were involved in recruiting comfort women. When the Japanese comfort woman scholar Senda Kako took his research to Korea and found the same dearth of material, he was told, “There are many important problems in Korea, and we have no time to turn our eyes to that issue.” That’s a practical response that likely has some truth to it, since the country had undergone a civil war, and years of unstable governments disrupted by military coups. But it’s also true that discussing the comfort women necessitated openly discussing a truth Koreans struggled to reconcile—that there were ways that Koreans contributed to the suffering of fellow Koreans.

Anthropologist Chunghee Sarah Soh has examined ways what elements of Korean culture contributed to the ease with which thousands of girls simply disappeared into comfort stations without much disruption or protest. She argues that many of the young women and girls who ended up in comfort stations had made unconventional choices in an effort to gain independence. Some of the women experienced a lifetime of suffering, subjected to poverty in an outdated but resilient caste system, to a patriarchal culture than viewed repression against women as customary, and to an aggressive colonial power that valued militarism and capitalism. In telling their life stories, many of the girls, like Hak Sun, emphasized strained relationships with mothers and abusive treatment from male relatives. As Soh describes, lots of these women were daring risk takers, “aspiring youthful subjects [who] chose to boldly pursue financial independence and individual autonomy with intention of crafting modern gendered selves.” When I moved to Korea, I

considered myself a young feminist, but I had given little thought to how the suffering of women across the country and not just in the United States, had worked to making the world a place where I could make decisions with the same independence men had. The women I respect share the same audacity that later made Hak Sun vulnerable. This must have occurred to the shamans, too, who faced circumstances far less constrained by their gender because of the challenges to those boundaries that women in the early women's movement posed. Some of those choices made them vulnerable, a sacrifice that wasn't recognized but carefully avoided for the years that most of the women were alive to see their country changing.

In historical records left by Joseon scholars, court scholars claim that Korean shamanism began with the priests in prehistoric times, but the shaman's Princess *Pari muga* rejects that. It's sung in every ceremony, printed in folktale collections, and portrayed in art, proclaiming that a girl paved the way for the shamans. The tale has changed over time to reject norms in other ways too. In the earlier version of the Princess Pari story Buddha was the watchful protector of the people, and the plot reflected a value for "filial piety" and female sacrifice. Theresa Cha's rework of the story as the poem "Polynmia Sacred Poetry," in *Dictee* does away with the rigidly Buddhist god. In her story, the protagonist is no princess but just an anonymous girl. She goes in search of a remedy for illness, but it is only meant for her mother, not a father who cast her into a tumultuous sea. The journey to retrieve these remedies demands that she devote a day to the search, not a year. As this Pari returns, she meets an old woman at a well far from her

village. When the elder learns the girl's mission, she offers her "special remedies" for her mother. An earthly female has taken Buddha's place. The focus on a powerful monarchy is gone, and the supernatural male is made into a nurturing female who does not ask impossible feats of her. Instead, she celebrates the bonds that connect the girl, her mother, and the nurturing helper.

Like the Pari characters in both stories, the connection with the underworld is not an intentional choice. It's something wrought onto them. Women become shamans when spirits descend onto them and refuse to leave. It's called *sinbyong*, or "spirit illness." When ignored, the spirits become angry and punish the person they've consumed. That's how a woman figures out that the spirits have chosen her as a medium. By her suffering. The worse it gets, the more they know the spirits will not rest until a woman possessed pleases them.

Jok Gan Bae survived the comfort station in rural China and made it back to Korea when she got the *sinbyong*, the spirit illness. It knocked her off her feet. She was in her thirties, and had spent the years since the war doing for whatever work let her eat, serving as a dying woman's professional wailer for a stretch, polishing other people's brassware, eventually doing the laundry for the prostitutes who worked around the the US Army base. She called them "whores" and "western princesses" and she bought a small cottage with the money she made washing their dirty things. But then she got sick and consulted a fortune teller, who confirmed she was plagued by a spirit-sent illness. She sought second opinions from others who all gave the same diagnosis. She went into the

mountains with five shamans, and when they performed their rituals to exorcise whatever spirits resided within her, she felt her throat begin to tingle. She thought if she let her mouth open, words would pour out. The shamans saw she needed space for release, and led her to an open field. They offered her a stick of bamboo when it seemed she would lose her grip with the world. It shook in her hands.

When Jok told this story to the Korean American author Dai Shil Kim-Gibson, she said that, “At that moment, my mother’s soul entered my body and she wailed with so much sorrow. She said, ‘Oh, my daughter, oh, my daughter, the things you had to endure and suffer are so enormous. You had to overcome so many valleys of death and life. You had to cross the water and travel so far. But you are back because of my prayer.’”

After that she knew. She was a shaman. Neighbors came knocking at her door, wanting her to predict their futures and fix their ailments. If the soul of a child entered her body, she behaved like a child. If the mountain spirit came, she spoke a long pipe. If her mother came, she spoke with her voice. When they left, she was herself again, her old self. She had to climb into the mountain peaks once a month, instructed by the spirits inside her. She had to bathe in the cold water, breaking the ice that formed in the winter to enter the freezing waters so she could be free.

In another version of the Princess Pari story, “A king and queen with no sons had yet another daughter, their seventh. Full of despair, not knowing what else to do to turn away their bad luck, the royal couple offered this girl to the Birth Grandmother spirit. . . . When Princess Pari’s parents died without any sons, Saja the Death Messenger carried

them to hell. The daughter felt sorry for her parents and dived through the skies, into the earth, and across the deep, dark river that flowed past Kasi Mun, the Thornwood Gate, which is the entrance to hell. At the gate, the princess threw handfuls of barley and rice, she rolled oranges and poured whiskey through the bars, until Saja, greedy for the offerings, opened the gate.

Saja was so distracted by the feast, the princess was able to slip into hell and, once there, searched for her parents. She swam through schools of human souls trapped in fish bodies until she heard a song she recognized as the song her mother had sung when she was still in the womb. “Mama!” she cried, and caught her parents with strips of long cloth that she tied around her waist. Quickly, before Saja could belch and close the gate, she dragged them back through the gates of hell, through the earth, through the skies, and into the Lotus Paradise, where they were reborn as angels.”

That’s the version of the Princess Pari story that Nora Okja Keller puts in her book *Comfort Woman*, based largely on the testimony of Jok Gan Bae. In this version, Pari is powerful. She’s not punished. Her actions are her own and achieved without the help of men, nor driven by anger at them.

By the Tongyong City Harbor, the lead shaman Mansin Kim, called for the road to the underworld. The shamans had done their job well. The spirits knew they were welcome, they knew the shamans’ intentions were pure, and they know the space was safe. It was time to show those spirits who were willing to trust them the long road to the underworld, and for the shamans to understand what kept them from proceeding down it.

Mansin Kim asked for the long white cloth, about ten meters long and as wide as her arm were when held outstretched, that would serve as the road from this life to the next. This was the time for the spirits to communicate with the living. Mansin Kim became possessed by a nameless spirit of a comfort station survivor, and she began to speak with the high pitched voice of an adolescent. All of the other shamans could see what was happening—that her body was no longer her own and that she was in a trance, her actions dictated by the will of the spirit who controlled her.

“It is dark and lonely,” she said as the young girl, in a trance, “I am afraid.”

She was hungry, so her fellow shamans fed her slices of apples. They asked for good winds and weather. Then Mansin Kim, weeping, picked up a long strip of cloth. She tied loose knots into the fabric, and then went to the shaman around her, the people in the crowd, and the comfort station survivors in attendance. She asked each person to pull on the cloth, tightening the knots until they were taut.

Some of the women were confused, or openly sarcastic, participating to appease this shaman, but with the obvious attitude that the whole thing was overstated. But one of the survivors took a piece of the cloth, pulled the knot into a hard ball, and said, “Go well,” and “Don’t cry.” After the knots were tied, she took the sheet and whipped it against the ground wildly, until one by one the knots were beaten loose, a symbolic act to release “not only the anguish of the spirits as they start their path to peace but also the hardships of the living.”

Some young girls in school uniforms in the crowd were there to volunteer, and others simply couldn’t resist walking by without stopping. Some begin to cry, wiping

tears away as rain spattered their cheeks. Then, two shamans joined Mansin Kim, pulling the sheet as if they were about to fold laundry. Someone ripped a small wedge into one end of the sheet, and Kim walked into it, forward and forward, pulling the seam open with her body, splitting the sheet in two strips, “tearing into the road to the underworld, [releasing] the spirits so they [could] find a new path to a better place.”

They stretched out many more long white sheets, and the other shamans did as Kim had done, walking through each one, splitting the fabric in halves and quarters. They carried with them red and white cloth and announced, “We invite you to come, and throw away your blood-drenched clothes and receive these new ones.”

A pile of red and white fabric grew. They clanged together hand cymbals and beat on drums. The shamans took turns walking between the white cloth, with red clothing, then with clean white clothing, beginning their journey into the afterlife, newly dressed. They begin to openly weep and Kim Mansin fell to the ground. She called out, “Mother, Mother, it hurts. It hurts.”

People were perplexed. It seemed she was in real pain. The fellow shamans did not know what to do. They stopped the *kut* and people called out from the audience, “This is serious. It could be a heart attack.”

One person sneered, “Ignorant shamans.” The shamans returned the anger.

“It’s the southerners at fault for not understanding us,” one said.

They called out for needles to bleed Mansin Kim and release the poison in her body. An assistant brought over a diabetic’s needle, and they poked her toes, her fingers, squeezing out blood. Some people turned away, disgusted and uncomfortable.

“The spirit hasn’t fallen,” one shaman reassured, confirming the ceremony could move forward and the ghost who had invaded Mansin Kim’s body remained. Another shaman tapped two knives together up and down her body. A survivor comfort woman came over, knelt, and held Mansin Kim’s hands. She began to recover, and stood up with help. The survivor did not try to soothe Mansin Kim, but the young girl who she has summoned. They sat beside each other and the crowd of spectators and shamans gave the two women space.

“I know everything. I know everything,” the survivor said.

## **KNOTTED AND BOUND: AN EPILOGUE**

As Hak-Sun Kim sat in the conference room, waiting to tell her story into the buzzing microphones for the first time, what came to her mind in those moments before she broke the silence of the room and spoke? What episodes of her life did she return to? What memories did she hold in her mind in those last seconds, when the possibilities for late justice spread before her? When she was unaware of the years of protest to come, the conflict and doubt, the support and advocacy, the heart attack that would take her life six years later, the court case decision that would be announced in her favor, mere months after her death, the pictures of her that day at the press conference that would run in the newspaper with the quote from her below, “Once I am dead and gone, I wonder whether the Korean or Japanese governments will pay any attention to the miserable life of a woman like me.” As she sat at the table, her hair carefully parted down the middle, her hands clutching the strained threads of the cotton white handkerchief in her lap, her eyes steady, what moments of the life she had survived passed through her mind?

Was it standing aboard the ship as the first glimpses of Inchon’s harbor came into view in the distance? Was it her son’s awe when he first saw the ocean? Was it her tentative steps across that empty yard, still dark and devoid of guards, the night she escaped the comfort station? Was it the sound of the highest note she found the breath to hit in her audition to become a kisaeng? Was it the sight of her mother standing on the

platform watching Hak-Sun's train shrink into the distance, and the feeling of yellow wool, thick and rough beneath her fingers?

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Danielle Harms graduated with her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Political Science from Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota in 2009. She worked as an English teacher in Hungary and South Korea. She returned to the United States to pursue her MFA at George Mason University, and lives in Washington, DC.