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**AILING HEARTS, GO HOME:
ETHNOGRAPHIC STORYTELLING AND
THE LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE**

by

Bryan D. Tilt

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**UNIVERSITY HONORS
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English

Approved:

Thesis Advisor

Department Honors Advisor

Director of Honors Program

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FIRST BIRTH: INNOCENCE AND MEMORY

. . . To go a distance we must first traverse the space that is near, and in ascending a height. . . we must begin from the lower ground.

--Confucius, "The Doctrine of the Mean"

We all start out in ignorance, like frogs in a well.

--Korean saying

I visited Primary Children's Medical Center on a fresh snow morning near the beginning of last winter. The hospital was not where it had been in my childhood, a quiet neighborhood in "the avenues" section of Salt Lake City; several years ago the hospital moved to a new location farther east on the Wasatch Mountain foothills, near the University of Utah Medical Center. The old brick building now sits sedate and empty at the top of a shaded hill. My memory of the old hospital is as a bright and oppressive place, full of the stuff of life and death. There had been a giant aquarium in the middle of the foyer back then, full of bizarre salt-water fish. Some had spiky fins and tails the color of fireworks; others were black and white, like zebras; still others were the kind that would puff up when you put your face against the glass or your finger in the water. This had occupied most of my attention; I was six years old.

Victor Turner, borrowing the words of the Indian anthropologist M.N. Shrinivas, says that to be an ethnographer, a teller of foreign stories, is to be "thrice-born."¹ The first birth is the biological one, which grounds you in a particular culture; the second occurs when you leave home for a far away place and inevitably experience the "Other;" the third birth, perhaps the most elusive, is a coming home, a reentry into your culture of origin. To be thrice-born is to experience deeply the things of another place, and to bring them back, in your heart, to where you began.

The first birth entails a lack of experience. We are born, culturally at least, *tabula rasa*, devoid of a knowledge of the workings of the world. But there comes, with time, certain experiences which shape us, experiences "like rock[s] in a Zen sand garden, [which] stand out from the evenness of passing hours and years."²

My mother and father had heard about a program called "Heal the Children" from Huntley Thatcher, a social worker who lived near us in Farmington, Utah. It was a program linking children in need of surgery in developing countries with medical facilities and doctors in the United States. Though they knew little about it, they said yes when Thatcher asked if a Korean baby in need of open-heart surgery could stay with us.

Maureen O'Keefe had been a registered nurse in Spokane, Washington, during the late 1970s. Early in 1979, eager for a change of pace, she had gone to Japan to teach conversational English. On her way home, during the winter of 79-80, she had stopped in Korea and decided to visit an orphanage. Now, on the telephone, she seems just as delighted as I am to talk about

those days.³

“What I really wanted to see was an Amer-Asian orphanage,” she says. Her voice comes quickly, and sounds buoyant, as though she is smiling into the telephone. “I ended up going to the *Sung-ma*. . . *no, Sol-mo?*. . . You know, the Hospital of the Holy Mother, in Seoul. There was a half-black Amer-Asian baby lying in one of the wards, sick as could be with the measles. He was crying terribly. And in the bed next to him was Taehyun. He didn’t move. He didn’t cry. There was something very desperate about him.”

O’Keefe gave up her return plane ticket to stay at the hospital indefinitely.

“Dr. Kim Kyung-tae at the Hospital of the Holy Mother was able to make the diagnosis. Taehyun was diaphoretic: He had three holes the size of little pencil tips in one of the chambers of his heart. This offset the balance of blood flow in the cardiopulmonary region, and his lungs filled up with blood.”

Maureen, along with another nurse from Spokane, Kris Embleton, joined “Heal the Children,” and Taehyun was one of the first children to be treated.

“On that first day in the hospital, when I met Taehyun,” she continues, “I also met his father. I spoke no Korean and he spoke very little English, but somehow he was able to tell me that this was Taehyun’s final trip to the hospital, that the doctors couldn’t do anything else for him, and that they were taking him back to his family.” This would be the last time they would send him home, and they were sending him home to die.

Father Alfred Keane was the priest in charge of “Heal the Children” at the hospital, and O’Keefe petitioned him for two weeks to put Taehyun higher on the priority list to go to America for surgery. “He was clearly sicker than some of the other children.” The nurses, O’Keefe included, were responsible for everything from finding a pediatric medical center that would take the children, to asking for private donations, to accompanying the children on the long flights across the Pacific.

“Everything was volunteer,” O’Keefe says, “but the plane ticket was the hardest thing. Most of the hospitals that agreed to take children provided the treatment at their own expense, but we had to come up with the airfare.” Her voice is far away, as though she is living the events of eighteen years ago. She sounds pensive now, tired.

“Many times I’d fly back and forth with only one or two dollars in my pocket, but Taehyun was the first trip I ever made. I remember meeting your parents at the airport in Salt Lake. God, they were such nice people. And you and your brother. You couldn’t have been more than six or seven then.”

“Six,” I say, remembering that night.

I remember driving to the airport in the dark with my parents and brother on the night he arrived. Although the only luggage O’Keefe brought with her was a small green backpack full of Taehyun’s supplies and some of her own clothes, we met them in the baggage claim area in the bottom floor of the airport. I remember the airport felt hollow and terribly empty, like the middle of the night. Their connecting flight had come in from Seattle, and there seemed to be no one else getting off.

We took Taehyun home.

To a child of six, as I was, there appeared to be nothing wrong with him. My mother laid

him on the small bed upstairs. She took off his diaper and cleaned him, reached for another diaper. I remember staring at his yellow skin, his electric black hair that only partially covered the little head, which was flat on the back side. (Almost without exception, Korean babies are put down on their backs, and the bones in the head, yet to ossify at such a young age, take on a flatness like a skipping rock). I remember looking at his little *gochu*, foreign and uncircumcised.

Taehyun did not cry. My father said he was "too sick to cry," and he and my mother took turns holding him throughout the night in the wooden rocker by the bed. They took him to the hospital early the next morning, and there they found out that one of his lungs had collapsed.

Dr. Herbert Ruttenberg, a pediatric cardiologist at Primary Children's, was the surgeon in charge of Taehyun, and after only a day of tests, he declared his condition inoperable. No child that young had received the type of invasive surgery that Taehyun would need. But his present condition was also unsafe: the small holes between the lower chambers of his heart had offset his cardiopulmonary pressure, leaving his lungs drowning in blood and only partially functional. The best they could do would be to stabilize his condition temporarily by putting a Teflon ring around the pulmonary artery, a process called "pulmonary banding," which would decrease the pressure on Taehyun's lungs and allow him to breathe. He underwent the banding surgery the next day.

I had little knowledge of my parents' experience at the hospital until just last year. My mother still keeps the "what-to-expect brochure"⁴ given out by the hospital to all parents of heart surgery children. It is a six-page, tedious muddle of blocky, typewritten text; most likely the Cardiology staff produced it in hopes that a thorough understanding of procedure would quell the fears of parents who would have happily chosen the sickening experience for themselves rather than see it brought upon their child, though all knew that this was not an option.

On the glossy front page is a black and white diagram of an apparently healthy heart, with arrows winding in and out of valves and chambers, indicating blood flow. But below, in large black letters, the diagnosis reads: VENTRICULAR SEPTAL DEFECT. And sure enough, a small white arrow threads through the wall between the left and right ventricles, revealing a hole that should not be there. There is a brief introduction to the Cardiology Unit at Primary Children's Medical Center which begins with the informative, if insensitive, heading: YOUR CHILD IS HAVING OPEN HEART SURGERY. There is mention of thoracic incisions and chest tubes, endo-naso tracheal tubes, a respirator, leads and electrocardiograms, indwelling lines (intravenous and pressure), a Foley catheter, apnea monitor, and temperature monitor. There are directions for care of the child after surgery, who will recover not in the regular recovery room, but in the Intensive Care Unit— PLEASE DO NOT CROWD THAT AREA!

The surgery took several hours. My mother and father waited just outside the surgical area with the parents of other children in similar circumstances; they had to sign medical waivers for this foreign child whose foreign parents they did not know, uncertain that they would send him home alive after all was through. My brother and I must have spent the day with Grandma, or perhaps neighborhood friends, though I cannot remember for sure.

Taehyun emerged from surgery several hours later, his split sternum sutured and covered in gauze. They kept him in a crib with transparent plastic curtains to keep out germs and infection. But the pulmonary banding lasted only one day before it slipped, lighting the electronic panels of the ICU and sounding the armamentarium of buzzers and beeps.

They had to do it again.

My mother said she could not bear the thought of that little chest open again. Undoing the suture line would increase the risk of infection, but Taehyun's condition was serious enough to rule out other options. They did it again, and this time it stayed. During recovery at the hospital everything about him changed. His skin took on a healthy reddish hue, and he became more active, sitting up for the first time since he had arrived. With his bulging cheeks and trademark smile, turned up at the ends to give him a mischievous air, he became the most popular kid in recovery; the nurses aids lined up to entertain him.

My brother, Brad, doted more upon Taehyun than I did, according my mother. He was more used to playing the older brother than I, and perhaps I felt a bit of sibling rivalry at Taehyun's presence. After the surgery, Taehyun came back to our house, where he gained weight quickly. His first birthday passed in April of 1980, and he would zoom up and down the wooden floors in our house in the walker that had been Brad's, then mine. He ate everything in sight, from soft cereal at breakfast to dinner at the table with the rest of us—spaghetti and side salad was his favorite. He also pruned my mother's house plants. He would stroll along in the walker, his stockinged feet pumping, then pull himself up by the stalks and begin tearing off leaves. If nobody caught him in time, some of the leaves would end up in his mouth, and someone (usually my brother) would have to pull them out. We called him the "little oriental gardener."

Just after the surgery, when Taehyun was still sick, my parents had considered adopting him, the wonder-child that he was. They did not tell my brother and me. But as he slowly recovered, the color returning to his face and lighting his eyes, they began to see him in context. They began to see a healthy Korean child who had Korean parents. It was as though to that point his sickness had kept him in two dimensions, like someone on the cover of a travel brochure from an exotic, far-away place. But he was whole now, and three dimensional, and we all began to think of his life back home and the family that would be waiting for him.

In retrospect I see Taehyun's coming to the United States as a kind of first birth for him. The repair of his heart was the beginning of a life into which my family could only glimpse. At the same time, his coming was an early beginning to my second birth, my entry into a world in which people, children included, suffered. I remember how inconceivable the sickness and near-death of a baby seemed to the child that I was then. There was something fundamentally wrong about Taehyun's illness, and something very miraculous about his recovery. And it was never the same after Maureen came again to take him back to Korea.

There were occasional translated letters, and cards at the holidays. One letter, dated May 2, 1980⁵, came on thin, white typing paper in an airmail envelope with blue and white stripes soon after Taehyun arrived back in Korea. It was typed neatly:

Dear Dr. and Mrs. Tilt,

I am the father of Kim, Tae Hyun, the baby you kindly

took care of when he was in your town for heart surgery. I don't know how to thank you and your family, though my heart is filled with warm gratitude for what you have done for my child. . . I am a farmer in a small country town in the province south of Seoul, and I have two more healthy children. Without your help and that of all others concerned, I could never have dreamed of sending Tae Hyun to the United States for medical treatment for which our scanty family income could hardly afford to pay.

. . .I am going to close for this time, but will keep you informed of Tae Hyun's progress. May the richest blessings of the God be upon you and your family.

Kim, In Kyu

Some of the letters came with pictures of the family— Father, Mother, Taehyun, his older brother and sister. One was of Taehyun “riding” a red Honda motorcycle, propped up by his mother on the unmoving bike by a telephone pole on a dusty street. I used to stare at the pictures and wonder where the streets went, wonder about whether or not Taehyun could still eat spaghetti.

Taehyun was scheduled to return for a more invasive treatment of his heart defect on his fifth birthday. The doctors in Korea had told the family that he must reach at least 18 kilograms in order to be eligible for surgery, and the family had fed him constantly. By early spring of 1984 he was nearing his fifth birthday and had still reached nowhere near 18 kilograms; Maureen O'Keefe came anyway, however, and Taehyun was brought back to the United States for surgery at Primary Children's. This time Dr. Ruttenberg kept Taehyun at his home, and our family didn't even know he was back until after he was gone. (Sam Wee, the hospital controller at the time, had stayed by Taehyun constantly during his second visit for surgery, serving as his interpreter and cultural guide. He tells a hilarious story of a smiling Taehyun on the day of surgery explaining, in Korean, that he has no need for an interpreter. The reason: “I speak perfect English because I was in America as a baby, you know.”⁶)

A yellow, frayed Salt Lake Tribune⁷ article tells the story: on that day, early in March, Taehyun's heart was stopped for an hour by an injection of cold liquid. His blood was cooled, and pumped mechanically throughout the rest of his body. Two small holes in the wall separating the right and left ventricles were repaired with a synthetic substance that would allow his own tissue to grow over it in time. A third hole could not be repaired, but would pose no long-term problems, according to doctors. The surgery was already a success.



Taehyun underwent extensive pre-operative tests to determine the exact nature of his heart condition, and to be sure that his overall health was up to the surgery. Too weak even to sit up, a doctor's hand helps him pose for the photo (top-left). The color returned to his cheeks and his strength regained, the "new baby" Taehyun rides a toy horse (top-right). After the surgery, Taehyun's energy was never-ending. Here he is cruising the floors of the author's house in Farmington, Utah, 1980 (left).

SECOND BIRTH: EXPERIENCE OF THE FOREIGN

. . . And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up thy way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.

--Doctrine and Covenants of the Church
of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 122: 7

I grew up a Mormon. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, as it is called, is known for having one of the largest evangelical movements of any Christian sect, with young men and women serving in over 130 countries around the world. At 19, thinking I had God in my back pocket and convinced of my special responsibility to bring light to the unenlightened, I submitted my application to serve as a missionary. A person does not choose his destination; he goes wherever the authorities in Salt Lake City send him, and so, I came home one spring day in 1993 to find an envelope with the church emblem at the upper corner. I opened it, skimmed midway through the first paragraph of congratulatory formality, and read: *You have been called to serve in the Korea, Seoul Mission.* I was pleased.

Most likely I was pleased because I had no idea that this would be my second birth, my experience of things foreign. I did not understand the chaos that often comes with leaving home for experience; nor did I comprehend fully, at the time, that experience brings consequences. I can speak of this now, as a teller of stories. With the advent of Postmodernism has come an uneasiness about telling a story which belongs to another. The anthropologist Melford Spiro insists that the ethnographer, stripped of authority to speak about other cultures, has only two options: to revert to positivist theories that attempt to explain cultural phenomena generally, or to turn his gaze toward his own culture.⁸

I see a third alternative: the personal narrative in which the author is engaged with and immersed in the foreign things he writes about. Narrative is dynamic in that it catches the exchange between the author and his subject. It recognizes the necessity of reflexivity on the part of the storyteller. It captures you in the middle of experience, in the liminal zone between what you *were* and what you are *becoming*. The second birth is all about experience. It is about letting the "Other" seep deeply into you until you cannot get it out.

The ethnographer Renato Rosaldo⁹ tells of a Japanese-American anthropologist who travels back to Japan to study women's roles in that society. Culturally, the Japanese around her constitute the Other; their ways are not her ways, despite her Japanese face. But slowly, after living in Japan for several months, there comes a day when the anthropologist catches a glimpse of her reflection in the side panel of a glassy building in downtown Tokyo on her way home from the market. With shoulders slumped, arms full of tofu and *sashimi*, her slippered feet shuffling across the pavement, she realizes that she has become Japanese. She has lost her position of distanced objectivity.

This is Victor Turner's "anthropology of experience." It is a "storehouse of possibilities,"

a “gestation process,”¹⁰ a disassembling of what was in preparation for what is to come. There is an undeniable sense of loss that comes with the second birth, with experience; a sense that what you have known has crumbled and nothing has yet been constructed to take its place. It is as if your personal boundaries of ego are down and, seeing into the Other, you incorporate it into yourself. You are free to become something and someone else. Rosaldo, after living among the Ilongot for some time, saw the inevitable sense of loss in the blurring of boundaries between self and Other: “We both lost positions of purity from which to condemn the other, without at the same time having to condone what we found morally reprehensible in ourselves and in the other.”¹¹

The ultimate aim of the second birth is to understand the self through interaction with the Other, to allow for the synthesis of the two. And this synthesis is often hard won; it is the consummation which comes “after working through a tangle of conflicts and disharmonies.”¹²

At any given time in the Missionary Training Center, a conglomeration of cinder-block buildings in Provo, Utah, over three thousand missionaries are learning the evangelical trade, along with countless languages. The church gives its missionaries a cultural and demographic profile brochure on the countries in which they will be working. Mine had a little black and white map of South Korea, shaped like a sleeping tiger, with the numbers of religious followers organized off to the right side according to sect: *Protestant: 20 percent, Catholic: 10 percent, Buddhist: 30 percent, Non-religious: 50 percent.*

After completing a two-month training period, I arrived in Korea in September with twelve other American missionaries. Taebaek, a small coal mining town in the mountains, was my first assigned area, and on the five-hour train ride from Seoul, I watched the late summer sun go down over pine and rice paddies. Elder Collins, a thin Texan who had been assigned as my “trainer,” set me straight on the Korean religious issue as we stood on the open platform of the caboose, in the wind: “They’ll profess Christianity, act Confucian, and believe Buddhism.”

After about five months of missionary life I found myself in Wonju, a city of about 250,000 people located two hours east of Seoul. I was distraught at not having had the chance to live in Seoul, where I could look up the Kim family. My cousin Andy had been a missionary here five years before, and had lived in *Choong-jung-nam-do* near their country home, but after returning to the United States his apartment had burned down, taking with it their address and phone number. The Kims had since moved up to Seoul, Andy had told me several months before, handing me a detailed set of instructions on how to find their apartment by subway. But I had no phone number and no exact address. Even worse, strict mission policies kept me in Wonju with no chance of visiting Seoul.

The oppressive winter was slowly drawing to a close: several days that week we had worked outside without coats, and the cherry branches near our kitchen window were beginning to come alive. Days were getting longer and starting earlier— a welcome change to us four missionaries who were living in a drafty, all-cement flat with faulty heating. On a Sunday afternoon in mid- February I called my parents, as I did nearly once a month. The mission rules forbade such regular contact with friends and relatives, except through letters. (There is a sort of moral superiority and pride that entangles the issue of obedience within the mission, and this was the one characteristic I found most distasteful. Growing up, any sort of restriction usually pushed

me in the opposite direction; my parents knew this, and they were never surprised when I called.)

The telephone connection was mostly clear, but there was a slight auditory delay that made us feel as if we were talking under water; a question on their end would arrive at mine a second or so late, so that by the time I answered, they were wondering if I was still on the line. Our phone conversations were usually hurried and strained, each of us trying to glimpse the other's world in such ridiculously short time; often, such exchanges left my head reeling and confused, despising one or both sides of the world, and caught in a place that was clearly not one and not quite the other.

We exchanged pleasantries that Sunday in the usual way, then my mother spoke: "You'll never guess who we got a letter from."

Silence.

"Taehyun."

I couldn't say anything. I thought this impossible, and yet felt a sense of excitement and anxiety all the same.

"He just sent us a letter, in English. It says he's practicing English in school." Then she read the letter:¹³

Dear The Tilts,

Hello? I am the Korean boy, Taehyun. How are you?
It has been a long time. Many years elapsed, and now
I am 16. I am in the high school. I am studying English.
I don't know your family, but I want to know your family.
Please write a letter.

Sincerely, Taehyun

On the cover of the letter was the return address, scrawled in English, but with no phone number. Since mission rules prevented me from traveling outside Wonju, we decided it would be best if my parents wrote a reply letter giving them my address and phone number. "Write clearly," I insisted. "No cursive."

Not more than two weeks later, on a cold Friday night, the telephone rang. Elder Mower answered it and said it was some weird lady asking for "Bu-ran-shi." I picked up the phone.

Yobosaeyo?

There was a short pause, then a voice, high but clear, asked me if I was Bu-ran-shi. I had heard this Koreanization of my name only a few times, since I was known in Korea only as "Tilt." (It was always easy to distinguish between a church member and other acquaintances, since in the church my last name was always followed by *changno-nim*, the honorific title for "Elder.") For a brief minute I thought it might be my parents calling again, trying to negotiate with a Korean telephone operator.

Then the voice asked if I knew a Kim Taehyun from Seoul. I said yes. She asked if I remembered him well. I said yes. Then she told me that she was his mother, and could they come to Wonju to see me.

Taehyun, his mother, father, and maternal uncle (*gomobu*), all came out to Wonju the following Sunday in Gomobu's Hyundai Sonata. It was March 1, 1994. I had given them the address of the only major landmark in town, Kangwon-do hospital, and we met at the front gate at eleven o'clock that morning. They recognized my partner, Elder Mower, and me before we recognized them: as the only tall *migook saram* in town, we were easy to spot in a crowd. Mother gave me an unabashed hug immediately, the first one I'd had for months, for Koreans seldom express emotions between the sexes in public. She cried a little. Father just stood smiling and squinting in the early spring sunlight, pumping my arm up and down and shaking his head. I hugged Taehyun, and he let me. (One of my favorite pictures was taken that morning. Taehyun and I are standing near the hospital gate, behind a bush that is just taking bloom, its new leaves promising spring and growth and renewal. The light is almost unbearably bright, and Taehyun in his denim jacket and I in my suit and tie, are holding hands.)

Gomobu said very little that day. Later, in a small dark *kalbi* restaurant, he leaned over the table of cabbage and garlic and roasting meat, and said, almost in a whisper, "You gave Taehyun his life. You gave Taehyun his life." The words impressed themselves into my memory, and no amount of explaining—that he had only stayed with us for six weeks during recovery; that I had only been a child at the time—seemed to make any difference.

They took care of me after that like my own family, and I had the sense that my own mother and father worried less because of it. That summer I transferred into Seoul, to a grey industrial neighborhood near *Chung-nyang-ni* train station. It was a nasty place, several square miles of greasy-hot factories, filth, and squalor. The red light district was only a few blocks from the missionary house, and the only bus that took us from home to church and back--number 58--took a route right through it. Here there were only rows and rows of young painted girls behind dirty windows; pink dresses under flat, pink lights; ugly, thick-necked men in cheap suits and plastic shoes shuffling up and down the filthy aisles, peering through windows and flicking half-smoked cigarettes into the sewer drains which wound under the whole maze of cement cubicles. I would stare at it all through the bus window as we passed, searching my mind for a religious phrase that would explain the disparity between the lives outside the window and my own; there was not one.

I hated that place with its stink and its urine-greased streets. And I hated our house there, the second story of a high-pitched, torrid steel factory that cranked out 110 degree heat and automobile parts.

The Kims' apartment was about an hour's bus ride across town, and I only went there a few times, doomed by mission policy to stay in my foul corner of the city. But Taehyun would often come to me at that time, though I never let him see our neighborhood. We would meet usually in front of the *Lotte* department store near the church. Sometimes we would play basketball or go for ice cream—always with my missionary partner tagging along—but more often we would just sit outside and talk.

Early in the winter of 1994 I was transferred again, this time to *Jumumjin*, a tiny fishing village on the east coast of Korea. My bus stopped at a one-room station in early afternoon, in

front of the only stoplight in town. Our church was just across the street, so I picked up my luggage and hauled it over, stepping over a crowd of squawking chickens just inside the front door. The place was made all of cement, and dusty, but it was warmer here than in Seoul, and from the window on the third floor I could see the steely blue of winter ocean.

That night I called Taehyun's Mother to tell her I had arrived safely. It was past eleven o'clock, but she was still awake. Her voice sounded tense.

"Bu-ran," she began, (the formal, distanced "shi" had been dropped from my name sometime during the past months), "I need to ask a favor."

"Okay, anything." I was sitting on the linoleum floor in the missionary apartment; my two companions had gone to bed, and the off-shore wind was rattling the windows. Something on the roof squeaked.

"I need you to call America. Chicago. You see, I never told you this, but I have a sister there. She was married to an American GI some years ago, and we just found out. . . She's dead."

I said nothing.

"Call America and talk to them in English. Find out what happened, please." She gave me a phone number without a name to go with it, and I said I would do it, assuring her that I would call back in the morning.

I called the number that night, figuring it would be early morning in America. A woman answered the phone and I explained that I was calling for Noe Jung-bok, Taehyun's mother. The woman sobbed into the phone for several seconds. Her name was Sook-Marie, and she was Taehyun's cousin. In perfect English she explained that her Korean mother, Taehyun's aunt, had married an American military officer named Larry in Seoul some twenty-five years ago. They had gone to America and settled in Chicago, where they had eventually had two children. But Larry was a drinker, and abusive, and soon they had divorced, with Larry taking custody of both children and refusing to let them see their mother for seven years. When Sook-Marie reached eighteen years of age, she left her father and returned to her mother, in the Korea town section of Chicago. Her mother had been dating another American man for several years, but Larry was intensely jealous, and he harassed them constantly. One night, several weeks before, she said, her mother had not returned home. Police found her body in the trunk of a Chevrolet on the south side of town, about a mile away from where she had apparently been hit by a car and killed.

Sook-Marie talked and cried for thirty minutes, as though purging herself of the memory. An investigation was still being conducted, but the police had no formal suspects, she said. She also spoke of the relatives she knew she had in Seoul, but whom she had not been allowed to meet. The only pictures she had ever seen, she said, were of the family twenty-five years ago, in black and white.

When I called Taehyun's mother the next morning, the sky was bright and clear. I had to look-up in the dictionary some of the difficult words, like "pending investigation" and "capital crime," and thought how cruelly ironic it was that she hear the news of her sister's murder in my country through the tainted dictionary-Korean of my faulty American tongue.

That is the way with translating between English and Korean. There is the terrible sense that what you have conveyed is *either* the meaning *or* the feeling of the original, but never both. I felt that her sister's death should, by right, have been passed magically on to her without my

intervention. I was an intruder, privy to knowledge that I should not have, but forced into the liminal low ground of translation.

"I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry."

"I see," was all she said, her voice quivering only slightly, "I see."

We never spoke of the subject again.

Though it seemed a never-ending microcosm of life within life, my missionary service ended in June, 1995. I returned home to my family and found love that same year, but stayed only until the following summer, when I returned to Korea to attend Yonsei University. Late in the summer, just before school began at Yonsei, I lived at the Kim's apartment in Seoul. In mid-August, Taehyun started summer break and convinced me to spend a week in the country with the family. We left on a Sunday morning with Taehyun's *gomobu* (maternal uncle) and cousin, Gwan. The air was surprisingly thick and oppressive; the monsoons had just ended a few weeks before, deepening the green in the rice paddies and lengthening their stalks. We drove south along the *gookdo*, the major freeway that bisects the country into east and west.

Choong-jung-nam-do is the most productive agricultural province in all of Korea, a fact pointed to by the name of the provincial capital city, *Taejon* (literally, "Great Field"). In this country of 80% mountains, this region is somewhat of an anomaly. On both sides of the highway are open fields of rice; some occasionally give way into *insam*, ginseng plantations, the small plants supported by wooden posts and shielded by black mesh. Good ginseng can never be touched by direct sunlight, and so it is covered by mesh tents that make it an easy crop to spot. Ginseng requires an extremely labor-intensive growing process, and the crop is most often a sign of prestige, bringing its owner a sizeable profit from both the domestic and international markets.

At a distance of about 80 kilometers from Seoul, the highway leaned west as far as the coast of the Yellow Sea. Within sight of the ocean, Taehyun, Gwan, and I put down the windows and let in a salty breeze. The traffic slowed through a construction zone, and Gomobu turned the car off the freeway and toward Dangjin. After several minutes of driving inland, toward the southeast, we took a narrow, two-lane road into a small farming district.

The family's house sat on a knoll off the right side of the road, overlooking about five acres of land—their land. Cabbage had not done well in the spring, I was told, and so the fields were divided between *mu*, the large white radish, and *pa*, a variety of wild onion. The onion was planted behind the house in dry clay soil, and was nearly ripe, lending a light, sharp odor to the entire place. The radish took up most of the remaining land. It was planted in soil that looked far more fertile, and stretched the length of the farm, to the irrigation canal which separated the Kims' fields from the neighbors in the north, along the house in the south, and to the road.

Mu plants are nothing special to look at—only the leafy tops are visible. But by harvest time in August and September most local markets are bursting with *mu* averaging over one foot in length; some are the diameter of a man's calf. They are white-yellow and bulby, irregularly shaped and unattractive. (Korean schoolgirls are required to wear unflattering, skirted uniforms that show off their adolescent legs; one of the worst names they can possibly be called is *mudari*, "radish legs"). The Korean radish is notorious for depleting soil nutrition, and in a country that has practiced cultivated agriculture for over three thousand years, it is often difficult to maintain productivity. Up until the later part of this century farmers used human feces to fertilize their

radish fields; many of the Christian missionaries I had known still referred to the radish affectionately as “poop fruit.”

Inside the house Mother was cooking a thick meat stew. The smell was caustic, and kept Taehyun, Gwan and me outside until she finally demanded that we come in to eat. Taehyun’s Father had started early. He was seated on the floor at the far end of the table in loose pants and white tank top. He looked tired, but smiled.

“*Anjaso, moko*”— “Sit down and eat,” he said, spooning the reddish liquid into his mouth. The stuff was clearly hot; steam was rising from the bowl despite the summer temperatures inside the house.

“What kind of meat is it?” I asked. Mother whispered something under her breath to Father, and placed a full bowl of the stew in front of me.

“Just try it; it’s deer” Father said. I looked around the table. Gwan was busily slurping at his bowl, and so was the old lady from down the street that Mother had apparently invited for lunch. Taehyun utterly refused to eat, however, and this made me suspicious: I had never seen him balk at food. A sideways glance at him elicited no sympathetic response, however, so I lifted my spoon, ate. The broth wasn’t bad; it was spiced with red pepper powder (*gochu karu*) and a bit of sesame oil. Not nearly as bad as the smell. The meat was almost tasteless, but had a sinuous texture that no amount of chewing could break down. I just swallowed.

Half a bowl later, Father, through yellow grin, told me it was dog.

Our last day in the country we spent at the ocean side. It was close enough to walk, Taehyun told me, and many times in childhood they had. But today we walked only down the dirt path by the house, past the apple orchard (still green), and to the car. The day must have been Sunday, because even Father came with us, forsaking his watering duties.

The seashore on this, the west side of the peninsula was drastically different from the eastern one I had seen the year before as a missionary. Koreans call it simply *Sohae*, “West Sea,” though it appears on most English maps as “Yellow Sea,” or sometimes “East China Sea.” Almost directly opposite us, the *Huang-hu*, China’s great Yellow River, has its beginnings in the vast highlands of the Tibetan Plateau, then makes its way slowly and mightily eastward, finally passing Jinan and emptying into the Pacific just north of the large horned peninsula where the coastal city of Yantai sits. For ten thousand years the interior winds of the Eurasian land mass have been blowing the remnants of the earth’s last ice age eastward from Europe. This silty loess soil has gathered in northern China in massive quantities—China may, in a strange sense, owe her wonderful fertility to the West. The soil is fine-textured and yellowish, and this is where the river gets its color. The most peculiar characteristic about loess, however, is its inclination to cleave at 90° angles.¹⁴ It is said that when a farmer accidentally discovered ancient metal implements in his field during the 1970s, and the archaeologists came to excavate, the earth came away in squares without much effort, revealing one of the greatest historical discoveries in all of China--the Terra Cotta Warriors that had been buried along with *Shi-Huangdi*, the Qin emperor of the 3rd century BC.

When we reached the ocean, all of us—Father, Gomobu, Gwan, Taehyun and I—took off our shoes and waded into the water, which was a greyish yellow from the loess. We had brought with us bamboo fishing rods and nylon line. The coastal steppe of the West Sea is surprisingly

gradual: wading up to my waist took me nearly fifty yards from shore. Pulling small oysters from their shells and using them for bait, we dragged the lines up and down in the waves for several minutes.

Father caught one. It was a *mingwang-oh*, about four inches long and steely blue on its underside. Gomobu arrived almost immediately with a plastic tray that held a knife and *gochu-jang*, a pasty sauce made with red pepper powder. The fish was not quite dead when Father cut off its head. He cut the remaining three inches into thin strips, giving one to each of us and instructing us to dip it into the *gochu-jang* before eating it, bones and all. I closed my eyes and ate without chewing. The sauce was bitter, and allowed the fish to slide down my throat almost untasted. We fished and ate like this for several hours before finally returning home, tired and sunburnt.

I was used to being tested for Korean-ness like this. A foreigner is a novelty in Korea; one who speaks Korean even more so. As a missionary, I had been used to drawing crowds in the street; it was flattering at first, but lost its luster after my first few months in the country. After spending several years here, I was trying desperately to make the shift from “novelty” to “part of the crowd,” but found this an impossible task; no matter how convincing my accent, no matter how many traditional anecdotes I learned, and no matter how dark the night that hid my angular face on the street corner, a foreigner is always a foreigner.

This does not, however, exempt a foreigner from Korean custom. One does not refuse food or gifts (or anything else, for that matter) from a social superior. Though Korea has shown almost unthinkable economic growth during the past three decades, thrusting itself into the 20th century world of international cooperation, its social order remains decidedly Confucian. China—whose name literally means “Middle Kingdom”—was long considered the undisputed monarch of East Asia. Any cultural transmission to Korea and Japan generally came by way of the Chinese mainland; in fact, during Korea’s *Chosun* dynasty, official diplomatic policy toward China was known as *Sadae-juui* (“Serving the Great”).¹⁵

Confucius was born around 551 B.C. in Shantung province after the Chou dynasty’s destruction. For two hundred years the various tribes of China fought for power during the Warring States Period, a fact that led Confucius and his philosophical contemporaries to prize social order above all else. Like most sages, he left no written records of his own, but in the *Analects*, a collection of his discourses assembled by his disciples, he outlined the basic tenets of his philosophy, the *Five Relationships*, and the precepts governing them. Society, believed Confucius, should be built upon this foundation:

1. Subject to Emperor: Loyalty
2. Son to Father: Filial Piety
3. Wife to Husband: Obedience
4. Younger Brother to Elder Brother: Deference
5. Friend and Friend: Equality¹⁶

Confucian thought permeates Korean society at every level, though almost no one calls himself a “believer” of Confucianism. During my service as a missionary, Confucianism seemed to me very much like the Judeo-Christian ethic of the West: it shaped everything from government and law to personal relationships, while at the same time being nearly transparent to

members of society. Confucian thought inevitably colored the Christianity of Korea as well. The tangible, personal God that I believed in was often supplanted by a permeating presence similar to the Confucian "Mandate of Heaven." Though I had been preaching Christianity, my God was not their God. This had been a major source of frustration for me.

It is when the monsoons come that the temperatures get unendurably hot—above 35 degrees Celsius—and the temperature, coupled with the omnipresent moisture, makes any movement outside uncomfortable. The monsoons stayed longer than usual that summer, too—nearly a month—and as soon as we were back in Seoul I found myself longing for the less stifling air of the country. The months and weeks preceding the monsoons had been unseasonably dry; Father said the cabbage had been sitting in dry ground for too long, and that the entire season's yield would be ruined if the rains did not hasten. Farmers all across the peninsula were probably hoping for as much moisture as they could get. But when it came, it came in gross, salient style, flooding fields and cutting through roads. The southern provinces were spared the heavier rains. But one night the nine o'clock news reported that washed-out bridges had drowned three soldiers stationed in *Kang-won-do* who were trying to dam a river with sandbags.

The Korean educational system is, in most ways, very different from the United States system in which I grew up. Students in grades seven through twelve wear uniforms and cut their hair short—even girls, who are not allowed to grow their hair below the stiff collar of the uniform. These grades are the most competitive, and performance here determines what university, if any, a student will enter. Classes are six days a week; Sunday is the only day for personal time. Most kids, in addition to school and homework, enroll in a *hakwon*, a sort of specialty school in languages or math or music, in the afternoon and evening.

Classes were officially over for summer vacation for most students, but Taehyun, under parents' orders, was enrolled in supplemental classes five days a week. It was the busiest time of the year for Father; he stayed on the farm for weeks at a time without coming to Seoul. Mother would ride back and forth on the bus (a two hour trip, providing the traffic is loose and the construction light), making several days' meals for Taehyun and Yuri—and now me—in Seoul before going back to the province and the farm work.

On one Friday night, Taehyun was at his desk working through math problems. I said that I would be right back, that I was just going out for some chicken, maybe some ice cream. I was not the positive role model that his parents thought I was, and Taehyun easily took the bait.

"Not Kentucky Fried Chicken, though, right?" he asked from the next room.

"Yes Kentucky Fried Chicken," I said, putting on my sandals and opening the door, loudly. It was his weakness. "And probably some Baskin Robbins after that." I said these last words slowly and contemplatively, moving closer to the door.

Before I knew it, we were both climbing the paved road to the bus stop, sandal-footed and with umbrellas; the rain fell steady and hot. We stayed out all night, eating chicken and drinking Coke and talking about school and field trips and girls. He liked one girl in particular, he told me, hunching over the table, and with both hands around his Coke. But his family did not know, not even his older brother, and he meant to keep it that way.

"Mom thinks it'll ruin my studies," he said, glancing around the fancy American

restaurant with its ceramic floor tiles and fluorescent lights. The air conditioner had felt good at first, but our clothes were wet, and now we shivered. "But I don't see any harm in it. I mean, we just get together on Sundays, and even then it's just for a few hours. My friend likes her friend, too. We went to a coffee shop last Sunday."

Taehyun wanted my opinion, and I gave it to him straight, in very non-Korean style. I said something about studies being important as a means to an end, and necessary for subsistence, but love, I said, is something to live for. I knew the words were inappropriate as soon as they were out. Taehyun *needed* to study, *needed* to get into college; only about thirty percent of Korean students could enroll as it was. His parents were probably right: love could perhaps come later, after getting into college. We went to Baskin Robbins, then to a movie, then took the bus home.

Walking down the street from the bus stop, the sky overhead was leaden and yellow with the lights of Seoul, and the most torrential rain filled the streets and sidewalks. A gutter drain had filled to capacity and the excess was pouring over the cement wall which bounded the apartment complex playground, turning the sand box to mud before it spilled over again and carried sediment in all directions. I ran inside to get my camera, and we took turns snapping pictures of each other under the cement waterfall, our faces lighted by the dim, hazy street lamp, our clothes sopping. (In one photograph Taehyun is standing defiantly in front of the wall, head cocked to one side and a long, mischievous smile spread across his face. His pants are rolled to mid-calf, and his hair is plastered to his head and face, parted in the middle by the deluge.)

We stood for some minutes in the torrent, discarding our umbrellas entirely, for the rain came horizontally now. And when we laughed together, I felt as though the water had somehow purified me, had washed away the foreign dirt from my body, leaving me firmly on one continent, if only for the duration of the rains. This water that had traversed continents and oceans had swept out that half-a-world distance between us, flowing easier than words into the deep places inside us, making us understand.

Back inside, at two a.m., I awoke to the sound of Taehyun's laughter on the balcony. He was talking on the telephone with his girlfriend.

The Kim family visiting a sea-side resort near their home in Chung-jung-Nam-do, 1983 (right). The first meeting of the author and Taehyun's family took place on March 1, 1994 in the city of Won-ju, east of Seoul.



THIRD BIRTH: COMING HOME

There is nothing better than your own mother's kimchi.

--Korean saying

We are Homo Sapiens Narrans; we live by storytelling.

--Barbara Myerhoff

Melford Spiro, that anthropologist who sees the future of ethnography as either unabashedly positivistic or Western-oriented, attempts to define some of the characteristics of ethnographic writing, which has become, he says, an interpretive (hermeneutic) discipline rather than an explanatory (scientific) one: where science relies on "objective methods of inquiry," interpretive ethnography employs "insight, imagination, empathy;" and where science is concerned with theories and principles which can be "applied generally," ethnography is interested in "the particular."¹⁷

These, in my mind, are the very characteristics that should describe ethnographic writing. *Empathy*, of necessity, comes with experiencing what the Other experiences. And it is knowledge of *the particular* (William Blake's admonition to "labour well the minute particulars" comes to mind) that gives the ethnographer the authority to say what he says.

Coming home after having experienced the foreign—after it has become a part of you—and telling the story constitutes the third birth. It is coming full circle. It requires that most delicate balancing act of being "deeply enough involved in the culture to understand it, but uninvolved to the point where [you] can communicate [it] effectively."¹⁸ Having experienced the foreign you return home, and in returning home you are made aware of just how much has changed. You have been given a point of reference, a lens through which you may--and indeed must--view yourself.

It was threatening rain again outside the Kim's apartment on the last night I spent with them, a mild one in December, 1996. Not the heavy, foreboding rain of the monsoon that had passed nearly six months earlier; this was the sort of moist air that lingers more than it falls, keeping everything in a suspended state of wetness, and quieting everything outside the house.

Taehyun and his sister, Yuri, had been showing me a famous shrine that was in a small park nearby. The site commemorates the life of Yi Sung-gye, the Neo-Confucian ruler who overthrew the Koryo dynasty to unite the Korean peninsula in the late 14th century. There was an immense iron gate at the opening; we paid our entrance fees and slipped inside, shuffling through a sparse clump of poplar trees to where the tomb is kept. As we walked, Yuri gave a running commentary on everything even remotely related to the shrine: how Buddhism, under the sponsorship of the *Koryo* dynasty, slowly atrophied along with the decline of the government; how Yi Sung-gye led a massive revolt that ended in the founding of *Chosun* (literally the dynasty of "morning calm"); how this new dynasty lasted over 500 years, ending only in 1910 with the Japanese occupation.

A squirrel stayed within hearing range of the story, tracing our path through the tops of trees, leaping now and again between slender branches. No one else spoke. There was a

reverence in the whole affair, not so much because of what the site signified, but because we had just eaten a very large meal, cooked by Mother, and because the skies overhead were grey and stifling and close, and because we knew that I would be leaving for America in the morning.

As the sky darkened and the first drops of rain began to fall, we started back up the hill toward the apartment, winding through the narrow cement alleyways and black iron gates between houses. I was reminded, for a moment, of the monsoons of the previous summer. But this time the rain was gentler, and we reached the apartment only a little damp. It was now just getting dark as we climbed the stairs to the Kim's third floor apartment.

Inside, Taehyun's older brother, Taeyong, was watching *Kayo Top 10*, a Korean pop music show that gives profiles up and coming musicians. Father sat in the far corner near the piano, smoking and looking out the window.

"*Chal kkyung haesso?*" — "Did you enjoy sightseeing?" It was Mother darting the question over her shoulder from the kitchen sink. (One of my first real impressions of Mother was that she rarely sits down: whole conversations are often conducted over soapy dishwater, while folding laundry, or peeling apples).

We all replied yes, sliding our shoes off in the entryway.

Yuri found her place on the floor directly in front of the TV, turning up the volume to listen to an interview with *Noise*, one of the bands competing for number one on *Kayo Top 10*. Mother came into the living room now, setting a tray of apples and purple grapes on the linoleum within everyone's reach.

Father brought out the old steel-string guitar now, slinging it across his lap and stretching his legs in front of him on the floor. His cigarette dangled limp between his lips. Father was like that; he usually preferred doing something with his hands to conversation, and since he generally said little, when he did speak people listened. As his brown fingers made the first notes, Taehyun and Yuri scooted closer to the TV, trying to concentrate on music videos without overtly offending their father. I sat near the window, my back leaning against the wall, pretending to watch the TV, but all the while eying Father's hands, surprisingly gentle, move up and down the polished wooden neck of the guitar in a familiar folk tune. The chords came easy and light. His voice, smooth, and higher than I expected, half-sung and half-breathed the melancholic melody:

*There is one thing left to do while I yet live,
And though I stand upon a wind-swept plain
I am not afraid.
But if a single leaf from the oak should fall,
My tears will fall, too, and bring with them the sun
That will rise again in our hearts.*

*Through our unchanging love
We will stretch out our hands into the dark places,
Making them light.*

Taehyun ducked into the small bedroom to change his shirt, and came out with it only

halfway over his head; the neck caught on his ears. Down half the length of his chest, tracing his sternum and splitting him in two, was a whitish scar. It looked awkward and out of place between his nipples, as if glued-on. Taehyun didn't notice that I was watching, but his mother did.

"He would have died," she said. Her eyes were on me, wide and questioning. "Without the surgery, he would have died for sure." The rest of the family noticed now; they too looked up at Taehyun, who smiled and shrugged.

Mother went into the bedroom and brought out a large, leather-bound scrapbook. It looked aged, the pages frayed and browning at the edges. Inside were faded color photos of Taehyun as a baby in the hospital. He was a pale shade of yellow, pan-faced. His trademark, an untamed frock of black hair that covers his entire head, was present even at a few months old. One picture in the book I had seen before. It is a newsprint photograph in black and white showing Taehyun sitting upright with an array of tubes protruding from his chest. His eyes are unfocused; his face looks innocent and surprised, like a photograph of an animal taken at night under artificial light. The caption reads: *Tiny Tae Owes Life To a Caring Nurse, The Salt Lake Tribune, April 1, 1980.*¹⁹

"The doctors didn't have the equipment in Korea at that time," Father said. His hands, palms up, made a gesture of surrender in front of him. "Besides, we were living down in *Chung-jung-nam-do*. Almost every two days or so his entire body would swell up and the pain would become too much. His arms and legs shook, and his body just sweat and sweat. His skin turned white, then blue. Every two days Mother and I would take him to *Buchon*, just outside Seoul, for treatment at the Catholic hospital. But it was only patchwork. It was all they could do to stabilize him, then send him home. The last time they sent him home, at ten months old, they sent him home to die."

When Primary Children's Hospital moved across town in the spring and summer of 1994, some volunteers had found a dusty photo album with pictures of Asian children inside and "to Dr. and Mrs. Tilt" scrawled on the front cover. They had called my parents, and my mother had gone to get it. There were pictures of a family in rural Korea—camping trips, birthday parties, excursions to the beach—and she recognized Taehyun immediately. One picture shows Taehyun in yellow shorts and blue suspenders, sporting sunglasses that must be his father's, and sprawling on the grass behind a Coca-Cola can. He is the center of attention, the source of family comedy. The album had apparently accompanied Taehyun on his second trek to Salt Lake City for surgery in 1984, but had since been lost.

I am apprehensive about visiting the hospital again. Even on the other side of town, in a new building with a new sanitary smell, it still has its bright lights and uncomfortable air. I do not want to breathe deeply.

The receptionist in Cardiology seems nice enough. When I ask to see Taehyun's file from the surgery in 1984, she replies that it's probably in the archives, and that I would have to be a relative to see it. I tell her that he's my brother, and she gives me an appointment card with the date and time the records will be available.

There is a water fountain just inside the main entrance, made of twisted copper that has gone green. It is a scene from a fairy tale, with turning wheels and soaring arches and gliding

wings; there are children of all shapes and sizes perched throughout the contraption. A girl, in metallic flowing dress and hair, stands triumphantly at the very helm of the thing, as if steering the whole operation. A small boy sits near the bottom, beneath one of the water wheels; the wheel is supposed to spin at just the right speed so that the water, when it spills, will just miss the boy, but in truth it spins too slowly, and some of the drops land on his head and dangling feet. Other children are scattered throughout the metal and water, looking small and very alone, overcome by the spinning apparatus. I cannot see where the water is pumped from, but it spills out continuously and with a sense of inevitability, as though unstoppable, and makes a rushing sound that is somehow appropriate for that place of desperation.

There are shiny coins in the water, and one small boy—a real boy—reaches in with his right hand to collect some, but his mother pulls him away by his left. A Hispanic child is wheeled by in a blue cloth stroller, sleeping peacefully amid a formidable tangling of intravenous tubes and heart monitor cords. A couple, in their mid-thirties, has been standing near the fountain for some time now, talking in whispers. They put their backs toward the fountain, and the woman draws out a penny from her purse, tossing it over her shoulder. It goes straight through the center of the whirling fountain and into the blue with no sound of clanging metal. She turns and looks, as if proud of her resolve, drawing a breath now and stiffening her face. But her lips begin to quiver, and she whimpers, then sobs, into the shoulder of her husband, who holds her.



Leaving Korea from Seoul's Kimpo Airport, December 20, 1996 (left). Over the past forty-five years since the Korean War, Seoul has become a sprawling megalopolis. This photo was taken from Namsan Tower, and captures only a sliver of Seoul's east side (below).



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