

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Tanya Ko Hong: Three Poems

Tanya Ko-Hong · Wednesday, March 11th, 2020

Yang Kong Ju

Koreans called her

Yang kalbo

Yankee's whore

Korean men say

No thanks—

even though it's free

She started working at clubs

doing dishes

cleaning tables, mixing

drinks for soldiers

for tips

More tips to sit next to them

More tips to pour Jack Daniels for them

More tips to touch them there with tiny bare hands

More tips to say, *I like it*

Once nobody

now a swan

She speaks some English—

honee, Got dem it—

exhales Virginia Slims

smoke between whiskey

red virgin blood

polished finger nails

Her GI tongues her

neck, gropes her breasts

Stop it, she giggles

Lucky lucky seven

when she becomes

bride to white American

Her GI laces up
his boots. Hard as stone, she says

Marry me

GI tucks a dollar bill
in her lace black bra

*

Grandmother Talks of Camptowns

At 77 years old all my teeth are gone
and the wind blows past my gums.
No windscreen here in Dongducheon
where homeless live alone.

Rather than live alone
I wanted to be a monk in Buddha's temple
but they kicked me out—
I sneaked the bacon.

The Deacon's ad in the newspaper
offered a room at his church.
In exchange for cleaning I lived well.
One rainy night I drank *soju* and smoked—
so they kicked me out.

Damn hard work on my back for GIs—
pounded and pounded me inside
so one day it had to go.
The *khanho-won* removed my womb.
No pension, no *yungkum*
for sex trade.

American couple adopted
my half-white son—
my half-black daughter
I left at the orphanage door
and never knew her fate.

At one time I had money saved.
My brother came with his guilty face:
Because I can't protect you, you do this.
He used my handling money
to become a lawyer and soon removed
my name from the family—like scraping
a baby from the womb.

Still, on my birthdays my sister Sook
secretly came to see me,
came with seaweed soup.

Unni, Unni...

I waited for her to come,
saved a gift chocolate so carefully wrapped,
gum, perfume, Dove soap...

Now that she's engaged
Sook cannot come again.

Why can't you go to America like the others?

For the first time that day I was weeping,
Mother, Mother, we should not live—
let's die together!—but Mother was already gone.

The time goes so fast that people on the moon
didn't know where Korea was.

One day I met a man
and I was a woman making rice,
washing his work clothes, submissive
and joyful until he found my American dollars,
ran away and never came back.

Now in Dongducheon
look—
stars shimmer in the wind.

Footnotes:

1. *khanho-won*: nurse
2. *Unni*: a term of respect and endearment for an older sister

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*

1946, Chinju, Korea

One year after
liberation
I came home

Short hair
not wearing *hanbok*
not speaking clearly

Mother hid me
in the back room
At night she took me to the well

and washed me
 Scars seared with hot steel
 like burnt bark
 like roots of old trees
 all over my body

Under the crescent glow
 she smiled when she washed me
My baby! Your skin is like white jade, dazzling
 She bit her lower lip
 washing my belly softly
 but they had ripped open my womb
 with the baby inside

Mother made white rice and seaweed soup
 put my favorite white fish on top
But Mother, I can't eat flesh

That night in the granary
 she hanged herself
 left a little bag in my room
 my dowry, with a rice ball

Father threw it at me
 waved his hand toward the door

I left at dusk

30 years

40 years

forever

Mute
 mute
 mute

bury it with me

*They called me wianbu—
 I had a name*

[one of two sections from the segmented poem *Comfort Woman* which were
 published in *Beloit Poetry Journal* (Volume 65, Number 1, Fall 2014)]

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