

To my family—for their love and support.

## Acknowledgements

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The task of writing is never an easy one. As Umberto Eco reminds us, “Three fingers hold the pen, but the whole body works. And aches.” Aches, indeed, there were. But any pain, any problem, any difficulty was quickly soothed, resolved, and forgotten in the company of fabulous friends. So, to my friends: Thank you—for sharing my aches, for giving me laughter, for believing in me even when I doubted myself, and for keeping me sane through a seemingly never-ending process. But mostly, thank you for the memories—the good and the great.

Finally, I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to my family. Without their support—*mulsim yangmyŏn*—I would not have had the courage to get through what were often difficult times. Whether through home-cooked meals sent over national borders, warm words uttered over the phone, and, on one occasion, a sternly-worded letter in the mail, they never once let me forget, even so far away from home, the warmth of home. It was a long journey for me, but an even longer journey for them watching by the sidelines. It is owing to their inexhaustible patience, wicked sense of humor, boundless optimism, and loving care that my journey was possible. I dedicate this dissertation, however imperfect, to my family, mostly to my fiercest critic and biggest supporter—my dad.

## Prologue

One summer day, sprawled comfortably on my grandmother's sofa, I chanced upon a Korean War documentary playing on television. There were the familiar black-and-white images of people fleeing on foot, little children crying, women weeping at dead bodies, bombed buildings, soldiers atop tanks marked U.S. Army, and naked North Korean POWs. Every June 25, for as far back as I can remember, such images become ubiquitous. As a past that continues to live in the present, the (hi)story of division and civil war dominates newspapers and televisions—even school curriculum<sup>1</sup>—on June 25. Hence, every Korean knows the date June 25, 1950—the day when North Korean forces tunneled their way southward and begot the Korean War. So ingrained is this date that in South Korea the Korean War is more commonly called “6·25.”

As my grandmother scurried between the kitchen and the living room, making sure her granddaughter, visiting for the holidays, was pleasantly entertained, she glanced briefly at the screen and spoke mindlessly, “Is today June 25?” Perhaps I was tired of the invariable wartime stories transpiring from the screen, perhaps I wanted to learn my family's history, or perhaps I was just curious; for the first time, I was compelled to ask my grandmother, always genteel and soft-spoken, how she had experienced the war.

I already knew that my grandparents had fled P'yongyang for Seoul as early as 1947; I also knew that my grandmother had a brother who chose to remain in P'yongyang;

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<sup>1</sup> In the late-1980s, when I attended middle-school in Seoul, Korea, our school held its annual anti-communist poster (*pangong p'osūt'ō*) design competitions on June 25 to commemorate the Korean War.

and I had heard tidbits from my mother about how she and her sister were taken by cousins to Pusan<sup>2</sup> because my grandfather was much too sick to move. But refugee life (*p'inan sari*) and separated families (*isan kajok*) figured in almost every chronicle of the Korean War. Having been inundated and inculcated by such stories while growing up—in a period of peace and prosperity, albeit under military dictatorship—they had meant little to me. Now, I wondered: Were there stories that existed privately in my grandmother's memory? Did she ever revisit them—on her own?

At first, my grandmother waved off my inquiry. Gently shaking her head, she objected, “Goodness, you don't want to hear such stories!” When I pleaded a second time, however, she sat up, let out a small sigh, and began. She spoke of how assiduously my grandfather, a Japanese-educated scholar, had read even while bedridden; how a U.S. Army unit had used their house as a makeshift base and removed my grandparents to the servant's quarters; how dear food had been; how a young *yanggongju*<sup>3</sup> named Misil had lived next door; how my grandmother had occasionally looked after Misil's hunchbacked-mother in exchange for bread that Misil received from American soldiers; how hard she had tried, through friends in the United States, to locate her younger brother in North Korea.

Her stories were haphazard and inchoate, jumping between places, times, and events. One minute, she would detail the pattern of her old neighbor's vest, another, the

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<sup>2</sup> Located in the southeastern corner of Korea, Pusan became makeshift homes to millions of refugees when the war broke out.

<sup>3</sup> Literally translated as “Western princess,” *yanggongju* is the highly derogatory term used to describe Korean women prostituting to American soldiers by the U.S. military bases. It is a derivative of the more common term *yanggalbo*, “Western whore,” which affixes *galbo*, slang for whore, with *yang*, the Chinese ideograph for West/Western. Both terms are still used, albeit to a much lesser degree, to pejoratively label Korean women with foreign men. Katherine Moon explains how the branding of these women became instrumental in the promotion of both the U.S. and South Korean governments' bilateral security interests in the 1970s. See Katherine H. S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korean Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

dress she planned to wear to dinner later that day. Even as I understood the desultory workings of memory, listening to her became a little disconcerting. While not particularly verbose, my grandmother had always been a wonderful storyteller. Her lingering pauses, hanging sentences, abrupt topic changes, therefore, felt jarring. Even more unnerving was her unwarranted eagerness to qualify, even chastise, herself at the end of each story: “What am I saying? I shouldn’t tell you such wretched (*kujirehan*) tales!”; “That’s how it was in those days. You couldn’t possibly imagine life back then.”

Yet she spoke calmly, without bitterness, and with a kind of obstinate determination. Speaking as a grandmother—not an interviewee—she seemed more concerned for my feelings. Her stories were not without pathos—details of bidding her younger brother farewell brought tears to my eyes—but if there was a deeper pain she betrayed none. While the circumstances of war were undoubtedly “wretched,” her stories themselves were more wistful and nostalgic than “wretched.” Upon noticing her quietly evade a few questions, I wondered whether fifty years had glossed over the wretchedness she had experienced or whether she was barring, at that very moment of recollection, unwelcome memories. And, if the latter, for whom—herself or me?

What struck me the most was the ease—and consistency—with which my grandmother used the collective *uri* (us/we) when speaking of family, friends, and even acquaintances, but *kaenye* (them/they) when speaking of North Korea. Even as she said nothing to suggest any personal engagement with North Korea since her flight in 1947, even as she expressed the desire to revisit her childhood home someday, my grandmother seemed as much a product of postwar anti-communist South Korea as I. Yet, until then, my only references to North Korea, division, and the Korean War were textbooks,

newspapers, and annual “6·25” documentaries. She, on the other hand, had called North Korea home, lived through division, and survived the war.

Her positionality perplexed me. Speaking of her childhood in Kaesŏng or the delicacies of North Korea, the corners of her mouth pulled up to a smile; and, yet, even at the slightest mention of Kim Jŏng-il, her lips twisted into a grimace. I began to realize that the Korean War and division was not simply a historical chapter or a political state but a brutally present reality—political geography still infuses and divides us. Even as we lament families separated by division and regret the war as one between brothers (*hyŏngjegan ŭi chŏnjaeng*), we remain uncritical of the demarcation “us” against “them” at the 38th parallel. Since my grandmother was hardly political and her stories hardly ideological, I could only deduce that she, being an avid newspaper reader, had formed her opinions from the tales of fear and hatred nurtured by the nation’s conservative media.

Our conversation opened up many questions. Was it simply South Korea’s stalwart anti-communist history that had rendered my grandmother reluctant to speak on North Korea? Perhaps she felt I would not sympathize with her. Would she have been more forthright had I not been her granddaughter? What “wretched” details had she censored for my sake? How could I reach beyond her stories into those lingering pauses, hanging sentences, and abrupt shifts? Would knowing more have been in itself a good thing? What, and how, can we learn when stories are told differently for different people, perhaps tailored to suit what the person thinks the audience wishes to hear?

Upon returning to Ann Arbor, I began, like any graduate student, to browse through what had already been written about division and the Korean War; I also enrolled in my first Korean history class since middle-school back in Korea. My study of Korean

historiography allowed me to see the ways in which history was being written and re-written—a welcome awakening. That multiple national and international factors had led to war that fateful day in June 1950, that United States involvement had been capital, that some thousands of civilians had been massacred (*minganin haksal*) at South Korean and American hands, were facts I had not known until then—facts limited to the universities, classrooms, and scholarly papers. But these histories, too, focused on the political developments leading up to division. Other aspects, those difficult to capture factually—the loss of a brother, the grief of a mother, the determination to start life anew, the forging of new friendships—seemed to have little or no place in the history of the Korean War. Why, then, did they live on so vividly in my grandmother’s memory?

As a student not of history but of literature, my recourse was postwar South Korean literature. James Young, writing on Holocaust memories and testimonies, asserts that we can only know the past through stories—historical, political, fictional—handed down to us.<sup>4</sup> That is, it is not simply the facts that make up history but also how we remember and represent those facts. In South Korea, where decades of military dictatorship resulted in the ruthless policing, censoring, and even fabrication of such so-called facts, Young’s assertion warrants consideration. The plethora of literary works that take division and the Korean War as their subject, plot, and setting further suggest history’s refuge in fiction. What the nation refuses to recognize, what its history neglects, fiction illuminates through its use of conceits, flashbacks, symbols, tropes and makes space for the small, individual voice.

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<sup>4</sup> James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).



In the pages of Hwang Sunwŏn's "Cranes" (Hak, 1953) were two childhood friends who meet as enemies at the divide only to re-discover their belief in humanity; in Ch'oe Inhun's *The Square* (*Kwangjang*, 1960), a young intellectual petrified by warring ideologies; in Chŏn Sangguk's "A-be's Family" (A-be ũi kajok, 1979), a woman violently come undone in the aftermath of the war. These were not grand narratives of nations, battles, and victors but portraits, at times poignant, at times harrowing, of children, parents, siblings, families, friends struggling with their guilt, anger, hatred, and powerlessness. Here was the Korean War figured not as generalities or statistics but as inexplicable pain, unformed speech, and broken lives.

Moreover, seeing how the subject continued to capture the imagination of different generations of writers, the Korean War, and its tragic legacy of division, proved to be not an event of the past but a present and continuing nightmare. As administrations change hands, as relations with North Korea rise and fall, as ideologies ebb and flow, so the (hi)story of the Korean War, too, is constantly in negotiation—between nations, between scholars, between writers, between generations.

Whatever its limitations, I find literary accounts to offer a different way of looking at the past. Just as my grandmother chose her stories for me, writers, too, take control of their pasts by writing their experiences and memories for posterity; and, just as I understood my grandmother's stories within my own positionality, so their literary works are read and re-read indefinitely. Whether seen as recovering omissions, subverting statist ideologies, envisioning reconciliation, or healing, literature, with its shifts, changes, and instabilities, showcases constant negotiation. Moreover, writers have the liberty to negotiate their pasts with their present(s) beyond the somewhat rigid

timeframe and disciplinary narratives of history. I do not posit that literature can replace what we understand as history, only that it can offer another perspective on history, a perspective, which, I believe, enriches history.

As such, many literary texts warrant study. In my case, having been deeply affected by my grandmother's own stories—its haphazard, incomplete, and personal telling—I was more drawn to literary works that, like her stories, lacked clear beginnings and endings, that once begun would be left incomplete, that filled the pages with silences—to narratives written from memory. The mixing of time past and present in memory, the fragmentary and often contradictory nature of memory, and the historicizing and gendering of memory, made for a richer examination into the way we live the vicissitudes of our inherited history. I, therefore, carefully put forth my work in the hope that it will make some contribution, however small, to the way the Korean War is re-collected and re-considered. Not simply as "6·25" but as lives lived and broken.

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Dedication.....  | ii  |
| Acknowledgments.....                                     | iii |
| Prologue.....  | v   |
| Chapter  |     |
| I. Introduction: Fragments of Memory.....                | 1   |
| In Remembrance   |     |
| Why Literature?  |     |
| Writing from Memory                                      |     |
| II. Opening the “Spirit of Darkness”.....                | 32  |
| Lighting the Way: From Partition to Partition Literature |     |
| Nationalist History, Nationalist Memory                  |     |
| What is “Partition” in Partition Literature?             |     |
| Remembering Partition: Kim Wõnil’s “Spirit of Darkness”  |     |
| III. Shattered Speech and Broken Bodies.....             | 70  |
| Traumatic Memory   |     |
| Pak Wansõ’s <i>The Naked Tree</i>                        |     |
| From Living to Writing: Translating Experience/Pain      |     |
| Broken Languages   |     |
| Engendering Memory: The Gendered Body                    |     |
| IV. Embodied Memories.....                               | 108 |
| A Woman in a Man’s World                                 |     |
| The Lost Garden  |     |
| Through the Looking Glass                                |     |
| Bodies of Dis-identification                             |     |
| “I” am Without a Name                                    |     |
| V. Conclusion: Beyond Survival.....                      | 141 |
| Bibliography.....  | 146 |