

KIM, Young-Ha

The Monster is Growing

When I told people that I was going to America in August, almost everybody who knows me asked, “How about your wife?” At first, I didn’t care. I answered, “As you know, she has to work.” But they advised me to go to America with my wife. Actually, she had traveled to many countries with me, from Paris to Hochimin City, Sapporo to Bali, Antigua, and even Phnompenh, Cambodia. Yet, we just hadn’t been to The United States. After answering about a hundred of the same question, I came to admit that The United States is special. My friends hadn’t asked those questions when I had been traveling to other countries. It occurred to me that they had concealed their ambition to go to America. My wife asked me why they thought that she should come with me. But my friends said my wife was silly, and they said, “You ask why? It’s the United States. That’s all.”

My mother was born in 1939. When the Korean War broke out, she was only 11 years old. She had three brothers. One of these uncles was a policeman. That means that he stood on the right side, opposing the Communists. He lived in the South, but both the North and the South were a mess. The left and the right were living amongst each other, like vegetables in a salad bowl. At the beginning of the war, the North was winning. Communists who had been living in my uncle’s town caught him. My young uncle, only 21 years old, was burnt to death in front of my mother like a pig at a carnival. The executors and the prisoner had been friends before the war. My mother must have been horrified. After I graduated from high school and entered the university, which was, by the way, one famous for its student movement, she would say, “Don’t have any political intention. Don’t be interested in any movement. It’s so dangerous.” At that time, 1986, the face of a friend of mine was once on the cover of TIME. He was throwing a fire bottle in front of my university with a mask on his face.

After losing her brother, mother became an orphan during the war. Her other brothers raised her. As a child who lost her parents, she also lost the chance to have a proper education. She met my father who was an officer of army, in her late 20’s and got married. Just after she got pregnant with me, he enlisted on a cargo ship to Vietnam in 1968. From a base in Vietnam, he sent many things to my mother, for example, a doll poodle which had a radio inside. The nipples of the doll poodle were switches to turn the

radio on and off and to tune in radio stations. It looked like a speaking doll in a fairy tale. That kind of stuff, “Made-in-USA” things were a source of jealousy for neighbors. Two years after he left for Vietnam, my father came back home. He brought with him hundreds of LPs, including those of Louis Armstrong, Billy Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald. My Father didn’t know anything about jazz. Actually he didn’t have a turntable to play the LPs. “My American friends recommended those,” he shrugged. But I’ve never seen him listening to those LPs. Never played LPs and always smiling faces of singers meant America to my family for a long time. She dreamed of the United States as a nation of smiles and plenty of C-rations. When I told my mother that I was going to Iowa, she muttered, “If possible, live there. Do not return home. If you live there, I can visit you. How great it is!” (*Please don’t say anything to the Immigration Office. Definitely, I’ll go back.*)

Whatever! My first strong impression of America was, unfortunately *Hustler*. When I was 11 years old, we lived in the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), the border area between the North and the South. My father was a battalion commander there. The DMZ is a kind of area where a running deer would die suddenly because of an exploding mine. They were installed almost everywhere. I would turn over in my bed hearing the sound of mines blowing up. It was like a peal of thunder from long distance. Sometimes North Korean soldiers would pull a pig near the border and butcher it. They must have been proud of eating pork. Behind them, on the ridge of a steep hill, the huge red letters would say, “Let’s expel Yankees from our country. Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader. Yankees go home.” South Korean soldiers would yell to them, “Fuck you, you idiots.” And they would fire blank shots and laugh loudly.

One day, I was on my way home from my elementary school outside of the DMZ. I had to wait for the Jeep my father had sent. I was wandering around the bridge, which connects the DMZ and the non-DMZ area. There was a small garbage dump, where I would often find something interesting. This day, I found a weird thing and I picked it up. A half-naked woman lay down under the title, *Hustler*. As I opened the magazine, the centerfold opened. Women and men were hugging and hmm, hmm, blah, blah. I brought it and reported it to a military policeman. He rubbed my head, “Good boy!” and kept it in his office. He said, “Never mind. US GIs would throw away this kind of thing. What dirty bastard they are!” I think He must’ve enjoyed that unexpected present. That’s all. But the impressions stayed for a long time. Naked adults in a garbage dump. That was also another *America abroad*.

October 25th was a holiday in South Korea. Nobody could guess what holiday it was. It’s UN day. *United Nations*. We, students, had to learn and sing the song of the UN. Why? Teachers would say that because UN troops had saved us in the war, we have to

commemorate them. But we knew the UN actually meant the United States. Though thousands of Turkish soldiers and hundreds of Ethiopian soldiers had fought what was initially the United States' war. If Harry Truman had given up the South, would Turkish and Ethiopian soldiers have come to save us from the Communists? Definitely not. We, everybody in the South even the North, knew that well. As we see now in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has been main character like John Wayne. Anyway, because it seemed so ridiculous to make USA day, they made a UN day instead. . I think South Korea must be the only country, which once had UN Day, actually USA Day. I was born and grew up in that weird country where UN day was a holiday. Even though we knew that day was actually USA day.

As time passed, I graduated university and joined the military service like any other guy in South Korea. Eventually, I became a writer. Now, I know the United States is not a naked adult in a garbage dump, nor smiling face on the cover of old LP that wouldn't be played maybe forever, nor my mother's paradise where nobody kills each other, neither is it the "have-to-go" place like my friends say. But I think the United States might be doomed to be a nation of images. Maybe those images are what America really is like. The United States is the empire of images that ordinary people all over the world like me might have been making. In my opinion, they, Americans, seem ignorant about it. So it is easy to be frightened and horrified, whenever the people of the United States experience some kind of disaster like September 11th. They suddenly come to know how others imagine them, and they are shocked.

The image other peoples have of the United State is a kind of a monster. Unfortunately this monster might be invisible within the United States now. If Americans read only their novels and watch their movies, they will never know what is growing in the minds of people outside the United States. Literature helps to make the monster visible. Novels and poems allow us to stand in other's position and see ourselves through their eyes. That's why we, international writers, are here. But I think the hourglass is running out. There seems to be not much time left. The monster is growing fast.