

# “What Is The Name Of Your Dead Horse”



CHARGE TO THE SEA / *image by Amalie Flynn*

We start again:

With promises made for silver pass, platinum deferment,  
tithing calls go out to the faithful wealthy,  
subscribers to the graveyard newsletter.

Minute Men race for lifting choppers.

Laughing to say, “Your war this time,”

Buffalo Soldiers rattle dice on the hangar floor.

Bayonets strike when the Continental Army razes  
river villages, hospital ships at the pier.

Raid command reminds, “Steel does not discriminate.”

Camping at desert’s edge, pilgrim rangers  
lift prayers to the Judges, purity rings  
glistening at rifle bolt and bandolier.

A burial procession pays praise,  
follows a lynch knot regiment  
through an air raid evening.

The River Sheriff wipes his cock  
on a daughter’s dress, washes his hands  
of a prisoner’s dreary clamor.

Bare feet twist in broken glass.

A favored son wobbles his feeble penis,  
pees in a hunting field distressed at his trophy.

With bodies in a ditch,  
evidence concealed in the weeds,  
we have lessons located in news video.

Take a lie, a grifter’s spittle,  
as the plan to beat a jury to the border.

Cross of Honor raised and burning,

The River Sheriff gestures to his girlfriends—

the weary one and the captive,  
passes them a check and a signed bandanna.  
The Humvees load under shelling.

In the February shock,  
the Millennium March is a charge to the sea,  
freed inmates a scarecrow caravan.  
Drones departing overhead,  
we find vehicles at the shoreline,  
water lapping at burning suitcases.

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# American Exceptionalism: Quo Vadis?



In view of the failures of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA, which has seen over 2 million cases and more than 115,000 deaths as of this writing, the very idea of American exceptionalism has unraveled. The expected arrival of the pandemic in the USA was met with overwhelming failures. A country with unmatched military and economic power came up with a shortfall of equipment to deal with the crisis, as well as a lack of leadership from the Federal Government, leaving states and hospitals to fend for themselves and even compete with each other. One nurse taking care of a doctor severely ill with COVID-19 stepped out of the ER weeping and cursing: "I felt incredible anger," she said – at America's lack of preparation, at shortages of protective equipment, at official dithering that had left the doctor and other medical workers at risk."<sup>1</sup> According to an unofficial list kept by Medscape, at least 145 health care professionals died of Covid-19 in the

USA,<sup>2</sup> and the pandemic is far from over.

## A Brief Overview of American Exceptionalism

In 1630, even before there was a USA, John Winthrop delivered a sermon in which he called the Puritan community, “a city on a hill.” This city upon a hill is a phrase from the [parable](#) of [Salt and Light](#) in [Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount](#). In Matthew 5:15, he tells his listeners, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

The reference to this city on a hill was mentioned both by President Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. During an address delivered to the General Court of Massachusetts, President elect Kennedy said: “I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. We must always consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us.”<sup>4</sup> On the eve of his election in 1980, Ronald Reagan said: “I have quoted John Winthrop’s words more than once on the campaign trail this year—for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining *city on a hill*, as were those long-ago settlers.”<sup>5</sup>

The term American exceptionalism gained considerable traction in the 1950s after World War II, when American historians hotly debated why their country escaped the violent disruptions that occurred in Europe, such as revolutions, dethroning of monarchies, class uprisings, two world wars and genocide over the previous two centuries. Since none of this happened in the US, they attributed it to our exceptional qualities. Historian Joshua Zeitz notes: “They conveniently glossed over the violently repressive regimes of chattel

slavery, redemption (the return of white supremacy and the removal of rights for blacks – instead of Reconstruction), war on Indian nations, and Jim Crow, which, of course, most historians writing in these years blithely did.”<sup>6</sup>

During the colonial period from the 16-20<sup>th</sup> Century, the world was Eurocentric. The end of World War II saw the rise of an American-dominated world. While European powers in-particular Great Britain and France–had used both their hard and soft power to dominate, colonize, and control the countries of the Far East, Middle East and Africa, the American approach of projecting global power has been different, tailored for a divergent time in history, as a consequence to the end of colonialism in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

However, as US power accumulated in many countries including those of South and Central America and the Middle East, a double standard prevailed, supporting dictators and despots who did our bidding, and overthrowing democratically-elected governments that refused to abide by an American dictated economic agenda. Today, most young Americans, perhaps frustrated with the Iraq War and the lengthy engagement in Afghanistan, are less likely to endorse an all-encompassing global role for the USA. Similar views are held by the libertarian senator, Rand Paul. The recent polls showing a lack of interest in the US direct involvement in Syria and in the Ukrainian crisis, as well as Trump’s ‘presumed’ isolationist views, are a fallout of our long engagement in Afghanistan and the Iraq War championed by conservatives and neo-cons.

The 2016 Presidential election saw Trump’s trademark slogans: “Make America Great Again,” and “America First.” Referring to American exceptionalism, he said: “I don’t think it’s a very nice term. I think you’re insulting the world.” That doesn’t necessarily mean that Trump shied away from the exceptional principle. He has replaced it with a different yet familiar

tag line that conveys the same sense of national power and entitlement—America First, itself a term that was associated with opponents of the US entering World War II.<sup>7</sup>

The other single most important feature of American exceptionalism is that at one time, the U.S. was a classless society with considerable upward mobility—or, at least, for white Americans, though it did not apply to African Americans or Native Americans. Furthermore, in view of our capitalist economy—a presumed hallmark of exceptionalism—most Americans were not tempted by socialism, unlike their European counterparts. The fall of Communism, the acceptance of capitalist economies in such socialist countries like Sweden and government-sponsored capitalism in China, the opening up of India to foreign capital, all implied the ascent and the universal triumph of American capitalism over socialism.

## **The Exposé of American Exceptionalism: The Coronavirus Pandemic**

Perhaps no other event in modern American history unraveled the very idea of American exceptionalism as has the Coronavirus pandemic. Its crushing arrival in the US—despite substantial warning—was met with failures in organization, lack of materials to handle the crisis, denial, and empty bravado. A country with unmatched hard and soft power failed to come up with enough cotton swabs, N95 masks, gloves, face shields, ventilators, special lab chemicals and enough ICU beds.

What was most distressing was that our paramedical and medical personnel had to work with inadequate protection at the very risk of their own lives despite wartime manufacturing and supply powers assumed by the President. I saw doctors in New York City turned into beggars for ponchos because they

couldn't get proper medical gowns. I have seen fear, anxiety, and trepidation on the faces of doctors and nurses as they surged ahead to care for COVID patients and when they had to keep away from their spouses and children following their shifts. Several dedicated doctors, my friends and colleagues, lived in their apartments in New York City caring for COVID patients while their wives and children stayed for weeks on end with in-laws or relatives away from the city and even left for other states. This was the norm of the day for medical personnel, rather than the exception.

It is deplorable that for effective diagnostic testing of COVID-19, the US was far behind many other countries, such as Germany, New Zealand, and South Korea. Indeed, Maryland's Republican governor, Larry Hogan, accepted a planeload of 500,000 testing kits from Seoul to make up for the U.S. shortfall. The aid was dubbed Operation Enduring Friendship and annoyed Trump, the "America First" president.<sup>9</sup>

There is no question that the pandemic has laid bare and ripped apart our patchwork health care system, even though it is the most expensive in the world, accounting for 27% of the Federal Budget. Indeed, in their latest report, The Commonwealth Fund ranked the US last among the most developed countries of Europe including Canada and Australia, whereas we were first in expenditure.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, the US possesses high-end health care of exceptional quality that has been the envy of the world; however, the Census Bureau estimated that a total of 27.5 million people in the U.S. were uninsured in 2018. The controversial Affordable Health Care Act, popularly known as "Obamacare," was on the verge of remedying some of these inadequacies in our health care system; however, the recent Republican administration under Donald J. Trump has ramped up its attack on the Affordable Care Act by backing a federal judge's decision to declare the entire law unconstitutional without an alternative plan.

The effects of COVID-19 have also exposed striking inequality within our health care system. Current data suggests a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minorities. In New York, the epicenter of the epidemic in the US, wealthy private hospitals, primarily in Manhattan, were able to increase bed capacity, ramp up testing and acquire protective gear due to their political and financial clout. The Mount Sinai Health System, the institution where I work, was able to get the N95 masks from China delivered by Warren Buffett's private planes.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, a Brooklyn hospital which is publicly funded and part of SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University tried to raise money for protective gear through a [GoFundMe page](#) started by a resident physician. The patients attending the hospital are poor and people of color; furthermore, the hospital gets most of its revenue from Medicare and Medicaid.

The US had advanced warning of the possibility of a pandemic 15 years ago and still wasn't prepared. "If a pandemic strikes, our country must have a surge capacity in place that will allow us to bring a new vaccine online quickly and manufacture enough to immunize every American against the pandemic strain," President George W. Bush said in a call for readiness in 2005.<sup>11</sup> Nearly 10 years later, President Obama sounded the alarm: "There may and likely will come a time in which we have likely both an airborne disease that is deadly. And in order for us to deal with that effectively, we have to put in place an infrastructure—not just here at home, but globally—that allows us to see it quickly, isolate it quickly, respond to it quickly. So that, if and when a new strain of flu like the Spanish flu crops up five years from now, or a decade from now, we've made the investment, and we are further along to be able to catch it. It is a smart investment for us to make."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Bill Gates warned us of a COVID-19-like pandemic in 2015.<sup>13</sup>

# The Future of American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism should not be defined or viewed as global political dominance different from Eurocentrism, as if we are superior to the rest of the world, nor should it be a rhetorical political slogan. Although Trump expressed the view that the word 'exceptional' is offensive, 'America First' implies a degree of arrogance irrespective of right or wrong—the interests of the US come First, rupturing the central pillars of multilateralism. In this regard, Trump's 'America First' more likely implies an isolationist view, a slogan to make his base feel good, even in this, our multipolar world.

In my opinion, American exceptionalism should be viewed as our immense contributions in science and technology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to today, which have benefited and uplifted the lives of ordinary people the world over. For example, since its founding by President John F. Kennedy more than five decades ago, the Peace Corps has contributed to solving critical challenges alongside local community leaders in 140 countries. Similarly, the Ford Foundation—and more recently the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—aim to improve health and reduce poverty and could be considered forms of exceptionalism. And it's arguable that the American system of free enterprise and venture capitalism has fostered companies with a great positive impact on the modern world.

Most countries acknowledge that the USA is a nation with vast economic and military power, and its leadership role is widely accepted. The world needs America's global engagement and its stand on human rights by the force of example, not by rhetoric and double standards.

The killing of unarmed African-Americans in liberal as well conservative cities and states—reaching a boiling point with

the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police—has gone on far too long without accountability. This violence further exposes the lie of American exceptionalism. Protestors are now taking to the streets in the U.S. and worldwide. One transformational event has intersected with yet another—a once-in-a-century public health crisis overlapping with a nationwide anti-racism movement. As stated previously, these two elements are connected. Health outcomes across the US are linked to race and socioeconomic status, and are strong predictors of life expectancy.

Rather than engage in political slogans, the US needs to realize that the economic and technological command it has on a global scale cannot be sustained with the rise of other economies in Asia and Europe. It needs to pare down the economic divide in our country: the rich getting richer, the middle class getting poorer, and the working class losing jobs to globalization. This divide needs to be addressed, not necessarily by over-taxing the rich, but by the rich and multi-billion dollar corporations paying their fair share in taxes, by creating greater opportunity with a focus on education, by bringing back manufacturing, by rebuilding our crumbling infrastructure, and by creating new sources of energy to safeguard the planet from climate change. Globalization over the last several decades has shifted the country from a manufacturing to a service economy. Corporations and government officials who lobbied for tax loopholes and higher profits bear significant responsibility for these changes.

Our disorganized health care system has to be addressed seriously, devoid of political underpinnings and patchwork solutions. A bipartisan Task Force inclusive of scientists and health care professionals must be created to deal with future pandemics.

The events of the last few months, the previous Iraq War and its consequences, our lengthy engagement in Afghanistan, gun

violence, economic inequality and racism, all beg the questions: 1) Whether American exceptionalism currently conveys the concept originally proposed by Alexis de Tocqueville nearly two centuries ago, and extolled by politicians of both parties; and 2) whether the seeming end of exceptionalism discussed in this article might be a chance for a new awakening, allowing a path forward to a kinder, gentler, and more inclusive America.



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# "Daily Exercise", "America", "I Tell My Children"



SPACES BETWEEN US / *image by Amalie Flynn*

**daily**

**exercise (haiku)**

my morning poems

have begun to sound like Tweets

fragments of bird song

**America**

we

best reflect

the  
spaces between us

when  
we stand

together

**I tell my children**

to clean their own rooms  
to play fair and make right  
to always do  
the best they can.

And then I apologize  
that I am not leaving them  
a better world  
than my own.

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## **Dissent in Iraq**

By M.C. Armstrong and Noor Ghazi



*Demonstrators, the Iraqi October Revolution (1 November 2019, 09:10:15)*

Protestors in Iraq have a great deal in common with the new wave of protestors in the United States. David McAtee, the

owner of a barbecue restaurant and an unarmed demonstrator in Louisville, Kentucky, was shot dead by police shortly after midnight on May 31<sup>st</sup> while marching in response to American police brutality. Safaa Al-Saray, an Iraqi blogger, was also unarmed when police struck him in the head with a tear gas canister in October of 2019. Al-Saray died from his injury, and this is tragic, to be sure. But why should Americans care about Al-Saray? Why should they embrace a protest movement thousands of miles away from US borders?

Many Americans would like to forget about Iraq, but, unfortunately Iraq does not have the luxury to have amnesia. Whereas America has not been occupied by a foreign nation since the War of 1812, Iraq, in spite of having nothing to do with the attacks of 9/11, remains under American supervision, and Iraq is now, once again, on the verge of chaos, which certainly raises questions about the quality of this supervision. One of the richest countries in the world in terms of cultural heritage and natural resources, Iraq is suffering today from a dangerously high rate of unemployment, a lack of quality education, and a dearth of public services such as electricity and clean water. But there is hope. On October 19, 2019, just before the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, a powerful wave of protests disrupted Baghdad and the target of this "October Revolution" was the corrupt political system that emerged from the ashes of the 2003 US invasion.

The first round of revolt spread quickly across the country after originating in Al Tahreer Square. The marchers launched a peaceful crusade of free speech in the streets of Basra, Karbala, Maysan, and Babylon, the multi-generational gatherings chanting for change in a government many now believe to be controlled by the mullahs in Iran. Just as the Americans had Iraqis locked in their grip during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the power dynamic has now shifted to Iraq's neighbor to the East. In both cases, the influence became unwelcome and has, once again, created the

potential for civil war. The Iraqi government faced her peaceful protesters with live ammunition and tear gas. The government ignored multiple international calls, warnings and condemnations. Just as McAtee was not the only American casualty of police brutality, Al-Saraya was not the only casualty in Iraq. More than 500 martyrs were shot down in the streets. Just as African-Americans wonder where the forces of freedom have gone when their young people are murdered or choked to death on the streets of the United States, Iraqis also wonder what it will take to activate the forces of freedom.

According to the Independent High Commission for Human Rights of Iraq, nearly 15,000 Iraqis have been injured since October of 2019 when the Iraqi government took desperate measures to regain control of Al Tahreer Square, ground zero for demonstrations. Like in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011, these despotic attempts at suppression included police brutality, curfews and internet blackouts to limit communication between protestors. Such media suppression enabled the government cover-up of violent criminal actions and left millions of Iraqis isolated from the rest of the world.

As the pandemic wakes up so many across the planet to the realization that "we're all connected," the situation on the ground in Iraq reveals the other side of that platitude and that very real connection. Yes, a virus in China quickly becomes America's worst nightmare in this globalized world where the line between tourism and terrorism grows blurrier every year. And yes, it is wonderful to witness international cooperation on the effort to pioneer a vaccine for Covid-19. But before public health became America's favorite media frame in 2020, its predecessor was war and terror. Most Iraqis have no interest in a third decade of the Global War on Terror, but whether its occupiers like it or not, Iraq does have an interest in freedom and democracy, and if Iraq's people can win a democratic future, the public health consequences will

almost certainly be positive. After years of bombing, burn pits, police brutality, and depleted uranium one has to wonder: could the public health of Iraq possibly get worse?

Under occupation, the answer is yes, but that is precisely the point. The occupation must end. Just before Covid-19 leveled Western economies and turned so many countries inward, young people in Iraq were marching like their Egyptian friends of 2011 and like so many Americans in the 1960s and again right now. Thousands of demonstrators started requesting United Nations intervention to stop the atrocities against peaceful civilians who were simply asking for human rights and a better life. Iraqis frequently raised the UN flag in Al Tahreer Square to grab the world's attention and make the message clear: If the UN wished for peace, democracy, and freedom in the Iraq of 2003, where there was no war, why did they send war and then, two decades later ignore the homegrown calls for peace? When will the basic dignity and humanity of the Iraqi people trump America's hunger for one more fix for its fossil fuel economy?

In November of 2019, as the October Revolution was reaching its climax, *The New York Times* and *The Intercept* shared 700 pages of leaked documents about how Iran and America have used Iraq as a battlefield for a proxy war ever since the American invasion of 2003. Far from his 2016 campaign promises, Donald Trump has maintained the policy positions of George W. Bush and Barack Obama and the mullahs have responded in kind. *The Intercept* documents revealed conversations from the Iranian embassy in which Iranian officials decried the free-thinking of Haider al-Abadi, an Iraqi candidate for prime minister whom Iran viewed as insufficiently servile to their interests. These leaked files "show how Iran, at nearly every turn, has outmaneuvered the United States" and its formidable network of intelligence agencies. But what is urgent to state before the eyes of the world is this: There are human costs for the ways in which "Iran and the United States have used Iraq as a

staging area for their spy games.” The occupation must end.

These human costs can be heard in the voices of the protestors and seen in the pattern of mass arrests among activists. Intimidation, torture, and in many cases, assassination, has been the tactic at “play.” Take the story of the activists, Hussein Adel al-Madani and his wife Sara Talib. Al-Madani and Talib were some of the first Iraqis to march against Iranian influence and government corruption. Talib, in particular, was one of the first women bold enough to take to the streets of Basra.

“But they had to stop,” claimed a friend named Abbas. “Gunmen raided their home late in 2018 and asked them to write down the names of other protesters.” Talib and al-Madani, like so many Iraqis before them, fled their country. They traveled to Turkey. But also like so many before them, Talib and al-Madani returned to Iraq. Just before the launch of the “October Revolution,” they came home to Basra. Then, on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, assassins entered their home and shot Al-Madani three times. They killed Talib with a single shot to her head. And what was their crime? Why were the protesters sentenced to death? Was it free speech? Idealism? Talib provided medical aid to her own people while her husband helped with organization. They spoke openly, opposing the influence of Iran-backed militias on Iraq.

The occupation must end.

Many other activists were kidnapped by the armed militias such as Ali Jasib, a human rights attorney who helped with the release of many arrested activists. Ali was kidnapped in Maysan province. But as the chaos in America and the Covid-19 pandemic steal the headlines, the international community seems to be forgetting about Iraq and protestors like Ali Jasib.

The Iraqi protests began with simple demands. The Iraqi people

want quality education, decent employment, and public services. However, as so often happens, these demands were quickly revised when the first protestor fell dead. The Iraqi people called for the ouster of the government and an end to corruption. They asked for new electoral laws that would protect the country from regime change wars. The persistence of the protestors did force prime minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, to submit his resignation in November of 2019, but a demonstrator from Al Tahreer Square exclaimed, "Adil Abdul-Mahdi's resignation will not make the required change. We want a new government that can respect our demands and needs. We want a home."

The occupation must end.

Just as so many Americans tire of the regime change wars they were forced to pay for under Bush, Obama, and Trump, Iraqis, too, have grown tired of the wars. But Trump continues to ratchet up the tension between Washington and Tehran. First, he withdrew from the United States' nuclear treaty with Iran, which was a small albeit imperfect first step toward peace in the region. Then, in a provocative move, Trump assassinated Iran's top security and intelligence commander, Qasim Soleimani, on Iraqi soil. While Trump's supporters chant about "blood and soil" in America and America expands its Global War on Terror to now include its own homegrown protesters like Antifa, the American president continues the Global War on Terror's policy of pell-mell assassinations overseas, broadly, and in Iraqi territory, specifically. Like Obama's drone assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki and his fifteen-year old son in Yemen back in 2011, Trump's killing of Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport in January of 2020, raises serious questions about international law, human rights, and the rationale for America's continued presence in the Middle East. The attack, far from being framed as a defense of Iraqi civil liberties, was described, instead, as a response to the death of an American contractor on December 27, 2019 at the hands of

an Iranian-backed militia. Most Americans, one suspects, do not even know that contractors, intelligence operatives, and special forces are still occupying Iraq. But the occupation continues and the occupation must end.

“General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region,” the Pentagon said in a statement. “General Soleimani and his Quds Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more.”

Although the Pentagon report may well be accurate, the larger and more uncomfortable geopolitical truth is that Soleimani and his Quds Force never would have had a chance to kill so many Americans if America had not invaded the wrong country after 9/11.

In any event, after the American drone killed Soleimani, Iraqi politicians, religious leaders, and conservative protestors chanted for the immediate withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, which inspired fear among the more liberal protestors that such an evacuation would only allow for the expansion of Iran inside Iraq. This is the chaos of occupation. The occupation must end.

When Iran announced its retaliation on the US by targeting airbases housing US forces on Iraq’s land, the demonstrators rejected this violence, too. Iraq does not want foreign drone attacks and Iraq does not want foreign missile strikes. Like the US and Iran, what the vast majority of Iraq wants is peace, freedom, and respect for its sovereignty.

In the wake of this most recent chapter in The Global War on Terror, mayhem ensued and the streets were again filled with protest and revolt. The government scrambled to establish order. Iraq chose Muhammed Tawfeeq Alawi to be its next prime minister, but Alawi was rejected and so was his successor,

Adnan Al Zurfi due to disputes over ministerial portfolios and budgets. Also, they were utterly rejected by protestors since they didn't meet the basic demands. Like so many failed states around the world, the United States included, Iraq is waking up just as the independent media, international travel, and respect for civil liberties is beginning a potentially indefinite pandemic hibernation. Covid-19 has not been a friend of free speech. Iraqi protests could not be crushed by drone attacks, missiles, torture, or government-imposed internet blackouts. But a public health crisis is a different story.

"The pandemic has adversely impacted the situation on the ground," says an Iraqi protestor who has asked to remain anonymous. "Protestors demands haven't been answered."

Although many protestors initially resisted the demands of the World Health Organization and stayed in their tents in Al-Tahreer Square, others went home. They retreated into social media where they witnessed, among other things, shared grievances from their fellow American protestors, but also a surge in honor killings and domestic violence in Iraq, a country more terrified of doctors laying hands on their wives and daughters than on corrupt leaders usurping their civil rights.[\[1\]](#) Meanwhile, the Iraqi government used this international public health crisis as an opportunity to consolidate the old order's power by appointing Mustafa Alkhadimi, the former head of Iraqi Intelligence, as the new prime minister. As protestors overwhelmingly reject Alkhadimi on social media, one wonders at this point if such rejections do little more than provide valuable intel to this spy who now runs Iraq.

Did America's Global War on Terror successfully deliver democracy to the Middle East? Just as Tahrir Square passed in Egypt, some suspect the October Revolution in Iraq will also pass away. But what those with roots in Baghdad know is that a critical mass is gathering, both in Iraq and abroad. The Iraqi

people recognize that the October demonstrations were different and far more powerful than any other in the past. The Iraqi people are getting a taste of freedom. The hunger for freedom and change is going viral just as an actual virus spreads around the world, and although Covid-19 is frightening, it is nothing compared to the horrors of war the Iraqis have witnessed for nearly four decades. This new generation of Iraqis, like other brave young people around the world, is speaking up against corruption and they are not afraid. Like Hussein Adel al-Madani and Sara Talib, they came out in October seeking a better life for the next generation. They want to be left alone by Iran and they want the US to lift its knee from the neck of their country. As one father in Al Tahreer Square said, "I am here today because I am looking for a better future for my daughter. I don't want her to live through this poverty and broken system as I did." It has been almost nine months since the start of the October Revolution and as the demonstrators continually repeat: "We will not return home until our demands are met." The occupation must end.

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## The Gift of Trey

A nuclear reactor is nothing more than a glorified water heater. Sailors as young as nineteen, kids, bombard uranium atoms with neutrons until the binding energy of the atom is no longer able to hold it together. When it finally rips at the seams, it throws energy: heat, kinetically agitated neutrons, which strike more atoms and keep the reaction going.

Inside the core, we've planted the enriched fuel in such a way that we can control the reaction, but new elements are created in the process, venomous isotopes which will outlive us for hundreds upon hundreds of generations. When time has wrought language obsolete, when it has split the cities from their foundations, the Frankenstein elements will still hurl packets of energy into the dark, so that they can rest once again. We entomb them someplace where no one can reach them, where time may work its healing. Monoliths, literal pillars of stone, adorned with skulls and lightning bolts are designed in a gracious effort to keep our future selves at bay. All this

simply to heat water. We're kids with matches and an endless supply of gasoline.

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My watch team at the nuclear plant has been operating in rotating shifts for nearly seven months now, simulating what life beneath the sea shoved into a tin can submarine will be like. A place where the hours of the day have no bearing, where sunlight has no relevance, a place where sleep will be a luxury and stress a constant companion. I work noon to midnight one week, then daybreak to sundown the next, and then graveyard to noon the next in an ever-revolving, never-failing pattern of lost memory and fuzzy intentions. I stand watch in the engine room of a submarine, quite literally, on blocks located in the center of a forest in the middle of nowhere upstate in New York, far from everything and everyone I've ever known. It took me a year and a half to finish the theoretical, classroom portion of my training in the swamps of South Carolina, and now I'm here to receive my working knowledge of the plant itself: the boiling, unsympathetic heart of the submarine where atoms slam together endlessly releasing their heat for us to capture.

I've been floating for weeks now. That's what it feels like—floating, like I'm inside a bubble where all my senses are subdued, where light and sound and taste and touch and smell all pass through some kind of foggy membrane. When I wake for the next shift, my room is very dark. The windows are covered over by aluminum foil and heavy blankets to seal out daylight. The steady drone of white noise from the television blocks all outside sounds.

There's a numbness which invades my every cell. This world I find myself in, a system of autonomic duty, lays waste to individual freedom of all kinds. My thoughts are not my thoughts. My deeds are not my own. My duty is another's.

When I finally pull myself from the bed, the alarm having screamed at me for twenty minutes, I make my way through the unadorned hallway and into the small bathroom I share with a couple other sailors. I stare at the young man in the mirror without turning on the light, the day streaming in through the window enough to cause me to wince. I look him over—large ears, dark brows nearly joined at the nose's bridge, sharpness of the cheek bones. I hardly recognize him.

\*

Between schools, I was granted leave. I went home to Mississippi for the first time since I joined up. My father hosted a barbeque, inviting his enormous Catholic family. My uncles were there, a few of my aunts, and a dozen or so cousins including Trey, a close friend as well as cousin, born on the same day I was, making us the same age. Trey had recently been discharged from the 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry, The Rakkasans. He'd been embedded with the first surge of troops into Afghanistan, then later Iraq for the ousting of Saddam. I hadn't seen him for a couple years and only heard faint hearsay of what he'd been doing with his new-found freedom.

Trey and I sat together on the porch swing at the back of the house overlooking forest running the opposite direction. His normally healthy face was drawn taut, dark rings around his eyes. He'd lost weight since I'd last seen him.

"How's things, Trey?"

"Ah man, you know, never been better," he said, smiling sarcastically, exhaling blue cigarette smoke between gritted teeth. He told me of his new place out in the country in Holly Springs, Mississippi. He bought a trailer on a few acres of land all to himself and his wife. Horses and chickens ran the place. He raised fighting cocks for money and for his own entertainment. He raised pit bulls as well. "I had to shoot one of my studs the other day," he told me. "He was growling

and acting crazy with a neighbor boy, so I cut his head off and hung it in a tree on the property as a warning to the others." He fought the cocks on an Indian reservation near his home where the laws of Mississippi don't apply. Most of his sales of the cocks go to illegal Mexicans who carry over the tradition from their home country. "They love it, man. Can't get enough," he told me. "They've got me on all kinds of pills, you know," he continued. "I haven't been exactly stone sober since before I got out."



Hermann Dittrich, 1889, from Handbuch der Anatomie der Tiere für Künstler (University of Wisconsin collections).

"Is that all you're on?" I asked him. "The pharmaceuticals, I mean?"

He grinned. "I've been taking just about anything I can get my hands on—street pharmaceuticals, whatever," he chuckled.

"It really is rough over there, isn't it?" I said stupidly, thinking outloud.

He laughed. "Shit, man, that part was easy. Over there, I knew my job and I was good at it. I didn't have to worry about bills or what I was going to make for dinner. The enemy was clear. He was the guy shooting at me and my brothers. I only had to focus on staying alive.

Over there all the bullshit is cut out. Life is just having to survive. The petty shit didn't matter like it does here. It's coming back here that's the hard part. Over here I gotta worry about being evicted if I don't pay the bills. Over here I gotta fit into this consuming, selfish society. No one knows what I did over there," he said, gazing out over the forest, "and they don't care. And now that I'm back it's hard to tell who the fucking enemies are. The bad guys here aren't shooting at me. Here they sit behind big desks in expensive suits at

the bank when I try to get a loan or they stand there with their arms folded when I try explaining how I could just use a break. They blend in with everyone else. And the enemies over there are harder to recognize too, now that I'm removed from it. I gotta keep telling myself what we did over there—what I did over there—what we are still doing over there—is right. I can't live thinking what I did over there was a waste. I have to tell myself it was worth it all. I don't have a choice." Trey's hand began to tremble, but he noticed and tucked it into his jacket pocket before I could ask about it.

\*

Something inside of me shattered then, something which was already cracked. I never should have been a part of this, I told myself. It kills me to see someone I love in the shape he's in. Trey had been a gung-ho person his whole life. He was always wound tight. The reason he was in the military to begin with was because he was caught selling weed in high school and given the ultimatum between jail time and the Army. He chose the Army, but he doesn't deserve this, I remember telling myself, no one deserves this, to be used up and left out alone, utterly reeling from the fall. I can't be a part of something that does this to anyone no matter the side. I can't, I argued. Suddenly the war became concrete for me, the abstractions now solidified. A fog descended I haven't been able to shake since.

Returning to Ballston Spa and the Knoll's Atomic Power Laboratory, I resolve to start the process of actually trying to get myself relieved from active duty with an honorable discharge. I set up a meeting with the yeoman regarding the application for receiving conscientious objector status, a designation placed upon some people due to their spiritual belief regarding the sacredness of human life, disallowing harm or death to another person. When the day comes, I find the yeoman to be a nice guy. He wears black-rimmed glasses and has large Sailor Jerry tattoos stitched along his arms: pinup

girls wearing Navy uniforms and sailing ships flying banners, sea monsters and anchors. "I've never seen one of these go through, just so you know," he tells me outright, "but I'll try my best to help you along the way." He goes over the paperwork I'm to fill out to put the process in motion. He tells me I'll have to build a case for myself, much like an attorney, with corroborating evidence showing beyond a doubt that my belief against harming another human being for any reason is contradictory to my moral obligations. Normally in these situations the person trying to prove oneself can lean on letters and statements from spiritual leaders or fellow church members, but I don't have any spiritual leaders, and I haven't been to church in years so it's not an option available to me. The meeting only serves to reiterate how improbable this route will be. Instead of my hope being renewed, I feel as though my last option has disintegrated. The earth has crumbled beneath my feet where I fall five-hundred feet beneath the ocean's surface.

The next several weeks are spent with my black-polished boots hovering, floating above the steel-grated decks of my engine room, the whirring of the steam turbines, the hum of oil pumps, the clicking of meters counting off various plant pressures and temperatures acting as my soundtrack. Time churns on ahead of me, catching me in its slipstream just behind enough to be unable to catch up. I wake up, attend to my duties, drive home, and fall asleep without much of anything coming into actual contact with me. The memories of the day glide straight through much like the unseen gamma radiation from the reactor itself.

\*

It's an unseasonably cold night in November and sleep won't come to me. Something forces me get dressed and leave the apartment, which I rarely do, makes me walk the streets of my little town. The cold doesn't faze me. My phone rings, but I don't pay it any mind. I can see myself from behind, as though

I'm walking a few steps back. I watch myself, the silvery mist exiting my lips to wrap about my head before dissipating into the air. My phone rings again, the vibration of it carries through my thigh. I continue to follow me around the block, back to my building's door and up the two flights of stairs and into the bathroom where I can see myself shutting the door. The light is on, but I don't recall if I turned it on. My phone rings again. It's my father. I press the silent button and the vibration stops. Four missed calls, the screen reads. I can see my hand reach up to the shelf beside the mirror. I watch my fingers lift the straight razor my roommate uses to keep the nape of his neck clean. Without a sense of any feeling at all, I observe myself open the razor, placing its surgical edge against the bluish twists of veins within my wrist, and then I hear the vibration of the phone against the ceramic sink. I look down, this time inside myself, and see that it is again my father. Still holding the razor in my leading hand, I slowly pick up the phone after a few rings.

"Hello."

"Hey, Son..." my father's familiar voice trails off.

"Hey, Dad."

"It's Trey," he says.

Silence.

"Son?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

"Trey's shot himself."

"Is he-?"

"No, he's been airlifted to the hospital. They say he's gonna make it."

Silence.

"We're, uh, hoping you can make it down here. Seeing you would, well it would...I know it'd make him feel better."

\*

With four days off between my shifts, I get a plane ticket to Memphis, where my brother picks me up from the airport with a glowing smile and a hug lasting longer than I'm used to. After a night spent at my mother's, my brother drops me off at the entrance to the hospital where Trey's being treated. There, I speak to a nurse and she directs me to the ICU. Trey's father, Uncle Mark, sits on the floor against the wall smiling faintly as I walk to him. His face is sagging beneath the heaviness of sleepless nights. His eyes are blackened.

"How is he?"

"He's doing great after the shit he pulled," he says. "I should've told you, he'll be going into surgery here in a little while...he blew out part of his tongue. He's on a lot of morphine."

"Can he talk?"

"He tries to talk," he says. "He's been singing."

He leads me, in an exhausted shuffle, to Trey's room.

"He got really excited when I told him you were coming," he tells me. He stays outside the door as I enter.

I find Trey sitting up in bed, legs stretched, smiling the best he can as I walk in.

"Hey Cuz," he slurs, with upturned inflection.

"Hey...Trey. How are you, man?"

"I'm fucked up, isn't it obvious?" he says, smiling through

his eyes because his mouth won't cooperate.

His speech comes out mused and drunken, but I'm able to make out some of what he's trying to say. His face is bloated and highlighted yellow with shadows of bluish-purple bruising. He wears a metal halo, a cylindrical cage around his face, screwed straight to his skull to prevent any movement of his neck. The force of the bullet broke his neck in two places. They haven't been able to bathe him properly since he got here because of the risk involved with moving him so he uses a suction tube to clean himself: his saliva, snot, sweat, the thick oil excreting from his pores. His skin has a fluorescent sheen to it from the glaze of the stuff. My eyes follow the journey of his murky fluids through a transparent rubber tube from the vacuum he holds in his hand, through the air, collected finally inside a clear plastic jar filled with liquid the color of yellowed bile mounted above his head onto the white wall behind him. The sucking sound of the tube against his skin pierces worse than any dissonant tone.

He speaks in a garbled mess like a three-year-old trying to tell a story, so he asks me to hand over a white board lying on the stand next to the table. I uncap the marker and situate the board upon his lap. He has a difficult time holding the navy-blue marker and I have to reposition it between the fingers of his right hand more than once. The words are hard to make out as his handwriting is nearly as garbled as his speech. I have to reread the scribbled lines over and over again before I'm able to decipher them.

"I've been rapping for the nurses," he writes right before launching into some ridiculous, incoherent freestyle about who knows what, as only the syllables and a specific rhythm are detectable. I'm laughing the whole time, more than I have in a long while. He's keeping rhythm by drumming along on the chrome bed railing. It's ridiculous. He writes how he's been hallucinating on the morphine he controls via pump with his left hand. He briefly describes surreal scenes of fantastical

creatures and dream-world happenings. His brain tricks him sometimes into believing the halo is a chain-link fence his head is caught in. He writes of hearing the voices of the nurses gossiping and his mind blending it with his memory, building shitty soup operas he can't escape.

"devil playing with my trigger," he writes. "angels...scared. deserted me. dont understand. they're automated...dont know how it is to be gods experiment, guinea pigs with habit and conscience...grieve truth." He points to himself with the marker before writing, "still here."

One of the nurses comes to prep him for surgery, casually offering something to the effect of, "Don't worry, everything's going to be fine." She's telling him, "There's nothing to worry about." She's making an honest effort at resting his nerves, but a switch in his brain throws and he lights up. He pushes her with strength I wouldn't expect him capable of, and he starts frantically pulling at the IVs in his arm. I don't know what to do. I'm helpless. I stand frozen witnessing the scene as if I'm somewhere else watching it. He jerks the needles from his veins causing blood to run in trickles down his arms and onto the clean sheets before splattering abstract forms on the dustless white tiles below. Trey tears the electrical monitors from his chest, from his temples.

He's screaming and for the first time I'm able to make it out, at least I imagine I can. "STOP! STOP! MY DOGS! MY DOGS! HE'S KILLING THEM! HE'S GOING TO FUCKING KILL THEM ALL!"

He's slinging blood around the room. He yells something about a horrific worm eating his roosters alive, struggling to explain to the staff the triggers aren't working on any of his guns, he's trying like hell to fight a war unfolding within his mind and all I can do is stand there, mouth open and wide-eyed watching the nurses freak out. The nurse who'd been shoved has picked herself from the floor and is now crying,

her body limp and trembling against the wall. The doctor runs in with another nurse, yells for me to leave and from outside the room through the glass, my uncle and I watch as the doctor strains to pin Trey's upper body to the bed, shouting coarse commands for one nurse to "Hold the legs!" for the other to go get some medicine I've never heard of. The new nurse runs from the room returning a few moments later unwrapping a needle from its sterilized plastic, her face changing to iron as she plunges the needle into Trey's jugular, pushing the stopper down, injecting him with calm. She then inches away and watches, taking her place beside the first nurse still against the wall staring straight-faced and drained, the front of her uniform speckled crimson, Pollock-like, with blood. Almost immediately, Trey recedes. His breathing slows as his eyes collapse into shallow holes.

The surgery is rescheduled.

I walk down the hallway with Uncle Mark. "I'm the only one who can really figure out what he's saying," Uncle Mark says. "Just like when he was a toddler. From what I've been able to make out, he was playing Russian Roulette with this homeless kid who's been coming around his place. He told me this kid came over with the gun and was talking about wanting to kill himself so Trey says he decides he's gonna scare it out of him, said he told the guy they were going to play a game. He said he put two bullets in the gun, spun the chamber, put it to his temple and pulled the trigger, and when nothing happened he handed it to the other guy but the guy was too scared so then he put it in his mouth and..." Uncle Mark demonstrates with his fingers, throwing his head back in an act he's probably been continually playing out in his head since it happened. He then turns and looks me straight in the eyes, his gaze commanding mine. "Trey said he knew he would save him, the kid." His eyes drop to the floor. "Here, I thought worrying about him dying stopped when he came back...I never imagined this."

\*

Upon my return to New York, I sit with my advisor, a Chief at the plant, and I tell him about what's happened with Trey and about my decision to apply for conscientious objector. He seems to care about what I'm saying, asking me straight away, "Have you had suicidal thoughts?"

"Uh...well..." I slip, having not expected the question. "I mean, I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about it."

"I want to take you to the hospital so they can ask you some questions, just to see if everything is all right," he says grabbing his jacket. "Can we do that?"

I nod.

The next morning, as instructed, I see the base counselor, a pudgy, balding, middle-aged man named Joe Aschner, who grew up in the city; a civilian, thankfully. He sits behind a cluttered desk beside a bookshelf lined with psychology manuals. He gazes out through large, unfashionable glasses wrapped in a disheveled blue sweater vest, khakis, and worn brown loafers. He smiles when I enter. He introduces himself with a moist handshake as I sit across from him avoiding his eyes. He knows why I'm here and begins by asking general questions about my life: where I'm from, my age, my interests. "In your own words can you tell me why you are here?" he asks.

"I don't belong here," I tell him. "I made a mistake and now I'm finding it difficult to live with the decision."

He nods. Then he asks me if I read, and we begin to talk about books and authors. I tell him I've been reading Kierkegaard, how I understand what he means when he says in *Either/Or*, "I say of my sorrow what the Englishman says of his house: My sorrow is my castle." Joe puts down his notebook and tries to lighten my mood. He asks if I listen to music and I nod. He tells me how he loves jazz, especially the standards: Miles

Davis, Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker and though I share his love of them, I don't feel like talking.

"Have you thought about medications to help?"

"I'm not gonna take the meds," I tell him.

He nods.

\*

Over the next few weeks, though the dream-states still hold sway over me, bringing with them a numbness I find hard to shake, and though the agoraphobia continues to try to coax me to remain beneath the familiar weight of my covers, I now hear the imagined words of Trey to the homeless kid echoing through my head. "You don't deserve death...You're just a fuckin' coward." The words help to ground me in some way, help me to place myself inside myself. My sessions with my counselor, Joe, begin to become the highlight of my week.

I start to feel again. Sadness mostly, but any feeling is welcomed at this point. And then, at the end of one of our sessions, Joe with uncharacteristic professionalism, seriously gazing into my eyes, tells me, "I have determined that due to conflicting with your moral beliefs, your involvement with the military is producing such stress upon you that it has affected your mental state to such a degree that it has placed your well-being in jeopardy. You are not fit for duty, which places both you and those around you at risk. Since you refuse medication, the only course of action we have is let you go. It is necessary for your improvement. I am going to write a recommendation for you to see the Navy's head psychology department in Groton. I am going to recommend you be discharged as soon as possible. We will see if they agree." We share a smile.

\*

When the time comes, I drive several hours to Groton, I've been pacing back and forth wearing ruts in my mind. I'm panicking. My heart jumps along with my legs.

I sign in with the uniformed receptionist and she tells to take a seat in the waiting room. It's bland, nearly empty: no magazines to read, no inspirational posters to occupy my eyes. I'm alone in a race with my thoughts. After what feels like an hour or more a tall slender woman in a beige uniform addresses me, motioning for me to follow. She leads me to a computer at a lone cubicle in a room down the hall where I'm asked to sit down and complete a series of questions on the screen.

Would you like to be a florist? Yes or No.

Well it depends, I think to myself. Maybe.

Have you always loved your father? Yes or No.

Yes. I mean I've been pissed off with him, but yes.

Do you have a difficult time relating to others? Yes or No.

Well, sometimes...I don't think any more than what's normal.

Do you tend to choose jobs below your skill level? Yes or No.

Uh...I'm not sure. Always? I mean, I have, but...

There are hundreds of these questions, all asking me to tell the whole truth in a single word. It's impossible to do honestly so I end up choosing conflicting answers to make them believe I've completely lost it. Afterward, the lady prints my results and takes them with us as we walk to the doctor's office. He sits in the far corner at a large wooden desk crowded with a computer and thick piles of white printer paper. The lighting is low and a dull brown washes the room. I sit in an uncomfortable chair as he takes my folder from the young officer before she turns to leave, pulling the door behind her. He reads silently for a few minutes then asks what

I think has caused my "problem." I tell him in bare words I'm in the process of applying for conscientious objector status. He glances up from the folder to give me a quick glare before glancing back down. I stare at my shoes against the brown carpet as they lay paralyzed. "You want out of the Navy?" he asks bluntly.

"I don't think the Navy is what's best for me," I say.

"You're clearly not fit for duty," he says gruffly. "It doesn't take a doctor to see that."

I don't respond.

"Well," he says, as he takes his pen to a paper in my folder, "I'm going to recommend you be discharged administratively. The medical route would take too long." Then without looking up he tells me, "You can go now."

It's all I can do not to jump up and yell and scream and slap and kiss the old man's face and throw his piles of other people's problems and unreliable test results off the desk and into the air, dancing in circles as they fall. The news anchors me to the ground, the first real taste of certainty in months, the finest words I've ever heard, the voice of a mother waking a newborn from dark dreams.

\*

A couple months after returning home, I take the highway down from Memphis to Holly Springs to visit Trey. The disassociation, the fogged trances I lived with for so long have dispersed. The darkness has lifted for the most part and I'm wading through possibility as a new acquaintance. Some days I just drive without destination. Some days I sit reading for hours in the park in midtown. Some days I do nothing but lie in bed, content with simply being my own once more. As I wheel the car onto the gravel drive, I stop at the gate where I'm met with aggressive barking and snarling from several pit

bulls. My attempts at calming them accomplish nothing, but moments later I see the familiar swaggered gait of Trey making his way to me. "Okay, okay," he says, speaking lovingly to the dogs. "That's my good boys. That's my good boys," he praises them before looking toward me.

We sit on his porch steps in the golden light of the late afternoon sun, the clatter of the summer insects spilling out from the trees and thick underbrush as the heat lays upon our shoulders. Trey no longer wears the shining metal halo and he looks fully recovered but for the fact that he can't quite turn his head more than 45 degrees to the left. I sit on his right. "Just had a new litter of chicks hatch last week," he tells me, rubbing one of his dogs between the ears. "And the tomatoes are growing like crazy, man. So much to do," he says, "I can barely keep it together."

"Sounds like you're doing well."

He nods. "Neck hurts sometimes. But I'm okay."

"You ever see the kid anymore?" I ask him.

"I do," he says. "Got him working for me. Just too damn much to do on my own. Started when I was still in the halo. Showed up one day and asked what he could do, so I showed him how to tend to the garden, how to handle the horses. Ain't bad, but got lots left to learn. Still acts like a dumb kid most the time."

I watch as he fingers a tick stuck to his dog's ear. It's deeply embedded and the dog whimpers as Trey plucks it off. A thin ribbon of blood drips down the fur of his neck from the wound. Trey takes a lighter from his pocket and holds the flame to it between his fingers. I hear the parasite singe and then pop.

"Trey," I suddenly blurt out, "that kid didn't come over that night, did he?"

Trey tosses the spent body of the tick into the dirt before continuing to search for another on the dog's other ear.

I watch his fingers pass through the dog's fur as he smiles faintly, nodding.

I immediately turn away as my eyes fill with tears.

"Thank you, Trey," I tell him, the words falling from my mouth between breaths.

"Don't mention it, Cuz," he says, removing another tick from his dog. "Couldn't have you cuttin' out early on me, now could I?"

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## The Witch



These days they call me by name: Hope. By "they," I mean the people in our small dusty town, Masaka, where everyone knows everyone. When I was a little girl living with my grandmother, all I wanted was to be known by my name, but no, they'd call me Little Girl. I'd be on my way from the borehole, where I often went several times a day for water, a heavy plastic jerrycan balanced on my head. The sun was so hot my eyes hurt from looking at it, the heat burned through my skin, and I'd hear them whisper, "Little Girl."

I walked by the women who sat on mats, their legs splayed out, peeling *matoke* and sweet potatoes, or pounding groundnuts as they caught up on the day's gossip. Men sat on low stools on their verandas drinking locally brewed alcohol through long yellow bamboo pipes dipped in clay pots. Children skipped ropes and played football. I walked along the winding brown

dirt path in my short denim skirt and blue flip-flops with semi-circles in the rubber soles dug by my heels, which I continued to wear because they were the only thing that protected my feet from stones and thorns.

"There, Little Girl goes," they'd point as they whispered. Their whispers were loud enough for me to hear, and for their children to repeat when I tried to play with them. Whispers about my denim skirt which I wore every day, about my pantie visible beneath the skirt, whispers about grandmother.

I knew from the way they whispered that I didn't belong. This was no surprise. If you knew my story, you too would avoid my eyes that were always begging for help. My parents died when I was two. A car accident. I was left behind with my grandmother, who they said was a witch.

"Witch, witch," they'd shout when she ventured out of our iron-roofed house to check on her cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, and banana garden, and the two cows which were left to meander during the day, and tied with ropes to the mango trees behind our house in the evenings.

Grandmother did the best she could for me under the circumstances. The circumstances being: She was eighty years old, her health was failing, and she was thought to be a witch. Our neighbors accused her of killing several people in the town. I say accused, because I never saw any evidence. Fine, I didn't ask for proof, but I never saw any of it, not the cowry shells, dry goat skins, drums, or a shrine. I never saw any of the things said to belong to witches.

"Look at her lion eyes," they'd whisper, "those eyes can't be human. Just look at her eyes, that's all you have to do."

\*

One case involved our neighbor, Namu. The fights with grandmother about their cows destroying each other's crops

started the moment Namu married her husband. Namu, in her early twenties, had also had several miscarriages. The day she had her fourth miscarriage, she and grandmother had quarreled. Namu's cow had come into our compound and grandmother told me to tie it to one of the mango trees. When Namu came to collect the big milk-white beautiful cow with large kind eyes that watered when it was sad, grandmother chased her away.

"You devil incarnate. The devil lives in you, and sucks blood out of your babies. The devil kills them. This one too is going to die. You hear?" she shouted, her voice carrying throughout the town. Her eyes were bright orange. They got that way when she was very angry. She continued to murmur to herself as she spread ash around her homestead to keep the devil out.

It was a cold Saturday morning and a mist hung in the sky. A small crowd of people had gathered and silently watched. They were like flies on a pile of bananas. Many of them draped blankets around themselves. The sun had taken longer than it normally did to come out. They were waiting for something to happen the way people in small towns wait for things to happen. Nothing transpired that morning. Namu left, but grandmother continued to curse and cast the devil out of our home.

"Grandma, is Namu possessed by a devil?" I asked as soon as she came back inside the house.

"What nonsense? Of course not!"

"But you said..."

"I know what I said child," she chuckled. "There's no devil. Just greedy, nasty people. Remember that. Now, I am tired and cold," she said, and went back to bed.

That evening, Namu had another miscarriage. This time the clan elders decided to find the killer, and nothing would stop

them. You see, in our town, no one died from natural causes. Someone was always responsible. If you were run over by a car, someone must have made the driver drive badly. If you fell from a tree and died, someone must have made you climb the tree. Accidents didn't happen. There was always someone who willed them. The elders ruled over the village like gods. They were in charge of the traditional courts that resolved civil matters, land, and family disputes. They weren't supposed to have anything to do with criminal cases, but they did, and their word was final.

News of the miscarriage travelled throughout the town like lightning. Within minutes, people had gathered outside in small groups with lamps to discuss the death, and speculate on who was responsible. The elders too. And so, it was that they turned up at our home.

"I didn't kill anyone," grandma said as soon as she opened the door, leaning on the stick that she used to support herself and holding a lamp in the other.

"We shall find out soon enough," said the elder with missing front teeth. The others nodded.

"What is there to find out?"

"We're going to slaughter a rooster. If it dies in front of you, then you did kill the baby. If it doesn't, we shall leave you in peace," said Missing Front Teeth and the others continued to nod.

"You've come to kill me."

"No one has come to kill anyone," said the elder who made me think of the cunning gray monkeys with small white faces that descended on our town to steal bananas.

"Then what are you doing here?"

They looked at each other.

“God gives and takes life. Not you,” Grandma muttered to herself and laughed her contemptuous laughter.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. If you’ve done no wrong, you’ll be proven innocent,” said the third elder.

“Ayaaa...,” she scoffed. “Innocent? You’ve come to kill me. Why don’t you just do it now? You don’t need a rooster to pronounce me guilty,” she said, looking beyond the elders to the people who had gathered to watch. “And you,” she curled her lips towards them, “have come to witness a murder.”

It was a clear night. There was a full moon. The sky was a bed of stars. Everywhere you looked there were stars. It was like they’d woken up to witness. Missing Front Teeth slit the rooster’s throat and released it. It jumped frantically in front of our house spraying blood on the elders and the people gathered. Everyone except grandma watched the rooster as it fought for its life. I held my breath, expectant, but the rooster jumped further and further away from grandma. The rooster grew weaker and weaker. The silence deepened. The moonlight became brighter, and the stars grew larger. You could hear the sound of the wind. People who had blankets pulled them tighter around their shoulders. All eyes were fixed on the rooster, its white feathers soaked in blood. They waited. The rooster finally lay lifeless in front of the elders.

Missing Front Teeth bent down, picked it, stood up and pointed his finger at grandma. “Its head is pointing in your direction,” he declared.

Grandma burst into laughter. “You murderers. You touch me and I’ll come for you from my grave,” she threatened before she retreated into our house and locked the door. They didn’t touch her. I think the elders were afraid of her. After all, she had just made a rooster die in front of them. They must have speculated on what else she was capable of. I saw it all

through a tiny opening in one of the wooden windows of our house.

\*

Six months after the rooster incident Grandma died. Her health had rapidly deteriorated after the rooster business. It was especially horrible at night when we were the only ones awake in the town. The pain kept her awake and I stayed up to rub water boiled in herbs all over her body like she used to rub mine when I had fever. She'd scream out in pain and I'd cover my ears. Her cries travelled throughout the village, but they didn't come to help. Can you believe it? She screamed all night and no one even asked after her health. People had a limited supply of compassion. It didn't extend to a witch.

She died on the day I received my primary school results. I got straight As. I was elated and couldn't wait to show her. I ran the twelve miles from school. I must have called and shaken her maybe a thousand times. She never woke up. She was dead.

Within a day, my relatives appeared from the neighboring towns. Everywhere I looked, in the house, outside, there were aunties and uncles, wanting to help me. Can you believe it? I couldn't. And this wasn't the end of it. They wanted the house grandma had left for me, but not me.

"What shall we do with her? We can't leave her here by herself," they whispered to one another.

"Marry her off. With her light skin, education and the grace of a giraffe, she will fetch a handsome dowry," my eldest uncle decided. And until my marriage, they agreed that whoever took me would take the house. No one intervened. Not even the elders. I stayed in grandmother's house until they found me a husband. I must say my uncle did well by me. He married me to the richest businessman in town, Tycoon.

Before the marriage, I was afraid of him, but my fear subsided the day I moved into his home as his wife and he took my hand, pulled me up from where I knelt to greet him, and said I shouldn't worry, everything would be fine.

\*

My name became Mrs Tycoon and I adapted to life as Mrs Tycoon. I was sixteen, his youngest wife, and the cherished one. To be honest with you, I didn't treasure the position of being the favored one. Believe me, when you're the third wife of a husband who is hardly at home, getting along with your co-wives is more important than his favors. For a few weeks, my co-wives were nice to me. They felt we needed to stick together to make sure our husband didn't get a fourth wife. When he married wife number one, our husband had promised not to get a second wife without her permission, but then he had turned up with wife number two, and now me. Still, as soon as he left the house, they'd sit in the living room with bread and flasks full of tea and watch Nollywood movies as I cleaned the house.

I didn't mind. I was glad to have a roof over my head. As it was, I could have ended up on the streets like so many other orphans. So I scrubbed the tiled floors of the triple-storied house. This took a big part of the morning. Once the cleaning was done I'd wash clothes and cook. By the time it was evening I'd be so exhausted my entire body ached.

\*

A few months into the marriage, I got pregnant. Twins followed. Simon and Michael. Our husband was over the moon. He finally had the boys he had longed for. Boys he already saw taking over his business. Boys he himself would groom for this. He loved their orange eyes inherited from their grandmother. He brought bags and bags of toys and clothes for them.

“Don’t buy too many clothes,” I’d say to him.

“What’s the money for?”

“But they’re outgrowing everything so fast.”

“We shall buy more.”

What could I do? He wanted to spoil his boys. He’d play with them, bathe them. “My children,” he said as he threw them up in the air and basked in their delightful giggles. He’d look at their toothless gums and declare them the most beautiful babies. This should have been fine; a father should be proud of his children. The problem was that he had three daughters, and he acted as though they didn’t exist. He never showed any interest in them and insisted they go to boarding schools. True, children need to get an education; the problem was that they were still so young; four, five and six years old. My co-wives’ arguments to keep the children at home fell on deaf ears. He insisted that boarding schools offered the best education, but this wasn’t true. I had gone to a day school and I had learned to speak English and could add up numbers in seconds.

\*

The twins elevated my status in the household. And something else happened. With the money I had gathered by saving bits here and there, I went to a salon and had my hair straightened with a hot comb. The hairdresser convinced me to buy pink lipstick. Our husband couldn’t stop looking and smiling at me when he came home. Although it wasn’t my night, he invited me to his bedroom. That night, he was a wild and yet tame lion.

He sent me to a driving school and bought me a RAV 4. I couldn’t believe my eyes when he gave me the car keys. By this time I was managing the finances of our home. When my co-wives needed to buy household items they had to come to me. I was a fast learner and he started to involve me in his business,

providing loan services to people in the town. I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't. And do you know what all this meant? More resentment from my co-wives. Frankly, this wasn't fair. Even if our husband had wanted to involve them in the business, they wouldn't have managed. They had never gone to school, couldn't read, write or count. As soon as he asked me to work for him, his business tripled. But this didn't matter; they declared war on me.

Their plan was to drive me out of our home. When you have lived the life I have, you either crumble or become thick-skinned. I got tough. When they ignored me, I ignored them. If they attacked me, I fought like a cat and wife number one got scars from my scratches. But this was nothing compared to what they both did to me. I will give you one example: A few months into the marriage, wife number two pushed me down the stairs and laughed as I tumbled down like a sack of potatoes. It's a miracle I didn't break a single bone that day. I think my grandmother's spirit was watching over me, but this isn't what saved me from my co-wives. I will tell you what did the trick.

Whatever my co-wives refused to do, I did. I'd remove our husband's shoes as soon as we got home and massage his feet, iron his shirts and trousers, made sure he had hot food even when he got back very late at night, and I sat with him as he ate. On the nights he was supposed to have sex with my co-wives, if they locked him out of their bedrooms, I welcomed him into mine. Do you know what happened? He invited me to move into his bedroom. Yes, he did.

Once I started spending more time with him he opened up and told me about his childhood. He was the youngest of thirty-one children. Can you imagine thirty-one children? His father had no money but married four women and had a lot of children. He believed children were wealth. Many of them ended up homeless on the streets of Kampala.

He told me about endless days and nights without food, the

fear of going to bed hungry and hearing his little siblings cry till their voices were grasshopper whispers. Their thin cries of hunger would stop only after they were fed. On many days, they were too weak to cry. He could never say which was worse. He talked to me about the hopelessness in his mother's eyes and the pact he made with himself to make a better life for them. When he was ten, he started to look for money, finding odd jobs here and there, but his passion was trade. At the age of fifteen he got his first stall, a tiny space given to him by one of his father's acquaintances, to sell sweets.

Because he had to work before running to school, he missed tests and exams, but he persisted and finished high school. Armed with a certificate and the ability to read, write English, and add numbers, he didn't see the use of further education. Besides, he was convinced that his knowledge of street life was the essential ingredient for a successful business. By then, his tiny space had expanded into a big grocery shop and some of his siblings worked there. He tried several business ventures but his big break came when he became a loan shark.

It was during these nights that I realized we both came from poor families. I also learned that his heart was tender and kind. It didn't stop there. He started to ask me about my life. One night, I told him how I longed to feel silk on my skin and the following day, he bought me the most beautiful silk gown, the color of the sun.

But the people of this town had no ounce of compassion left for me. Jealousy and hatred is all they had. My co-wives didn't help matters. They spread rumors of what an awful person I was. Can you imagine? I, who couldn't even harm a mosquito! All because I was now driving a car and working in an office. Do you know what I was doing in that office? Managing the list of people who owed Tycoon money. Some of them would call me to re-schedule payments. I could have bought them more time. To be honest, I didn't mind my co-wives

hating me. I was away all day and came home late in the evenings. But they started to say I and my sons were witches. Their evidence was that our husband was no longer thinking straight. Why else would he allow me to work, buy me a car, and neglect them?

This was dangerous. People had been stoned to death in this town because they were suspected of being witches. It reminded me of my grandmother. They had failed to prove she was a witch, and now they were after me. They stopped talking to me. My greetings were met with silence. "Why do you allow a witch into your shop?" the people of the town would ask the shopkeepers, shopkeepers who were interested in making money. "She's a witch, a witch," people I had never met would shout as I walked out with my groceries.

I wanted to remind them of when I was Little Girl, and when they didn't help with my grandmother and all of that. But I didn't do this. Instead, I let our husband send his goons to beat up people who owed him money. That's how he made sure he got paid. His bodyguards would either beat up the debtor until he produced cash or *visit* his family home. They'd turn up at the debtor's house at dinner time, join him at the dining table, and set down their pistols. They wouldn't say anything. They didn't have to. The debtor would send a brown envelope full of cash the following day. Our husband also took several properties of those who failed to pay him. In the small town where news travelled like waves, everyone knew what our husband was capable of. I did talk to him about making too many enemies, begged him not to send the goons to the police commissioner. Nothing good would come out of becoming enemies with the police commissioner even though he owed him a lot of money. Our husband simply said business wasn't for the thin-skinned.

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Sunday started as it always did. My co-wives prepared

breakfast. They had fried eggs, made tilapia stew, rice, *matoke* and *chapattis*. I came down to make sure everything was as it should be for our husband. It was my job to make sure everything was perfect for him. His toast had to be brown and crisp. The pineapples, mangoes, and papaya cut neatly into small squares and placed in fruit bowls. The tea had to be mixed with a lot of milk, sugar, ginger and lemon grass, and brewed in the clay pot to give it an earthy scent. I wore a white dress and tied my hair with a cloth the color of tomatoes. We were going to church after breakfast.

Our husband came down as I paced around the dining table, adding a pinch of salt, sugar, cinnamon, coriander or red chili to the different dishes. I thought he was handsome in his white sparkling *kanzu* that looked like a dress, with his head full of white and black tiny curls. The *kanzu* fell on his belly. The twins followed me around.

"My stomach hurts," he said as he sat down, "and I've got a fever."

I touched his forehead and noticed he was struggling to keep his eyes open. Just then, he vomited, struggled to breathe, and clutched his throat. His eyes bulged, and he fell off his chair.

"Oh oh oh oh no no no no no," one of my co-wives cried. I fainted. When I opened my eyes, I lay on the floor in the dining room. His eyes stared at me from one of the portraits we had taken on our wedding day and I was told the words that I didn't want to hear. After five years of marriage, he had left me. I cried until there were no tears left.

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As soon as he was deep in the soil, they started to look for his murderer. The elders and the police commissioner were in and out of our home. They talked to my co-wives and stopped talking as soon as they saw me. I was the suspect. Can you

believe it? I couldn't. I was going to be tried for killing the man who had saved me, the only person who had ever talked to me, who knew my name, the father of my children. Do you know what I was thinking as I sat before them? That I must have been cursed. First my parents, then grandma, my husband, and now this.

My trial was conducted by the same elders who had turned up at grandmother's house. This time, they had a white goat with them, having dispensed with roosters. After grandmother, they had declared them unreliable. The sun woke up very early in the morning, initially soft and pleasant, growing in intensity by the hour, and now it was intolerable. There were people everywhere; under the muvule trees and in the branches, at the town primary school compound, on the roofs, and in the classrooms. They had left their jobs and farms to watch.

Frail Little Elder cleared his throat to signal the commencement of the trial. All the murmuring stopped, hands fell on laps or at their sides, conversations halted mid-way, eyes shifted away from whoever they had been talking to and focused on the three elders, dressed in long white robes, sitting on the only furniture, three wooden chairs, in front of the crowd. Frail Little Elder explained that the trial would take a few hours. Everyone who wanted to say something would be allowed to do so. He spoke very slowly and regularly paused to breathe and replenish his energy. The act of talking seemed to deplete his limited reserve of strength.

There were only six witnesses; my co-wives, the doctor, the police commissioner, and my children. It was supposed to be a straight-forward case. My husband had been poisoned. But the twins had told me they had seen the police commissioner give their father boiled maize that morning. With his large debt, the police commissioner had reason to want him dead.

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My co-wives avoided looking at me as they testified. They said I was the one who had spent the night with him and served him breakfast. They said he was a healthy man, never fell sick, not even a headache. In the wildest accusation, they accused me of not caring about his death. Do you know why they said this? I will tell you why. Because I went back to the office a week after his death.

“His body isn’t even cold and she’s already back in the office,” said wife number one.

“She wants to steal his business,” said wife number two.

I hope you’re thinking this is crazy. This is what I certainly thought. I mourned our husband, did nothing except cry and pray, and most nights I lay awake because I wanted to be alert when he came back to me. You see, I was still hoping it was all a bad dream; he had gone to Dubai to conduct business and would return. But someone had to keep the business going and I was sure this is what he’d have wanted.

“She’s the only one who stood to gain from his death,” said wife number two.

“And her sons,” said wife number one.

This was true if all you thought about was money. Our husband had a will that left everything he owned to us. I hadn’t known about the will until his death, but no one believed me. There was no doubt in my mind what they were up to; they wanted me out of the way so they could take all the money, the property, the business.

The doctor who conducted the post mortem confirmed that our husband had been poisoned. This corroborated what the twins had told me. The police commissioner said he knew the deceased and the accused. No, he didn’t know the cause of death. No, he couldn’t prove I had killed him. No, he wasn’t investigating, he knew I had something to do with it. Of

course I did. You remember her grandmother. We all knew she was a witch. You all know how many people she killed. The Witch had started early. Imagine how many people she'll kill by the time she's done. People are already reporting how she's transformed them into ghosts and made them weed her husband's plantations at night. No, he hadn't seen this, but so many people in the town had told him.

I stared at the police commissioner. If eyes could kill, mine would have killed him. I tried to speak out, to tell the truth, but the elders wouldn't let me. Accused people had no right to speak. And now the police commissioner was sowing the seeds that'd lead to my death.

The twins were the last to testify. It was Monkey Face who asked them to state their names, hold the Bible, and swear to tell the truth. Monkey Face talked to them slowly and explained what was going on. He told them they needed to find out who had killed their father. He asked them if there was anything they had seen or heard that could help to find his killer. Simon, the older twin, did the talking and his brother Michael, nodded in agreement. I knelt and held their hands.

"I can help," Simon said. "I saw him," he pointed at the police commissioner, "the morning father died. We were playing in the garden when he came by. Father joined him. They talked. He was eating boiled maize. He shared it with Taata."

Silence fell upon the town as he talked. Nothing moved. Not the houseflies, the birds, or the wind. No one blinked. It was as though people were glued to the red soil. They held their breath. It was the kind of silence pregnant with anticipation. The twins sat on my lap. I was relieved. It had all come to an end. The silence was broken by a gust of wind that covered us all in dust.

As soon as the air cleared, the police commissioner was up in a flash. He licked his index finger, rubbed it on the soil and

swore on the grave of his mother that he hadn't seen our husband that day, the twins were lying. He raised both his hands up into the air and declared that God was his witness, he hadn't killed anyone, and if he was lying, may lightning strike him.

"Yes you did," I shouted.

"Why would I kill your husband?"

"You owed him money."

"Slaughter the goat," he demanded, "it'll die in front of the killer."

"What do the people say?" Missing Front Teeth shouted.

"The goat. Kill the goat. The goat must be slaughtered. The goat will be the judge," the people shouted back. All eyes turned towards the goat that immediately stood up and started going *baa baa baa*. It was untied from the *muvule* tree but it refused to move. Two men pulled the rope around its neck. The goat stood still until another group of men pushed it forward.

Our destiny had come down to this frightened goat that was fighting for its life. The men overpowered it, and held its head down. It must have known it was futile to fight, for it lay still. Our tear-fear filled eyes stared at each other. I wished it didn't have to die so I could live. Missing Front Teeth's cut was swift and clean. Blood gushed out. The goat squirmed and shook its whole body violently, fighting death as I willed it to die far away from me. They released it, and it ran around in small circles away from me, its head dangling from its neck. My eyes were glued to it as it gave up the will to live. I sat straight as it suddenly turned around and faced me. It collapsed and started to crawl towards me. It had changed its mind. A few minutes later the goat succumbed right in front of me. It did. Can you imagine my shock?

I was up on my feet immediately. "I didn't kill him," I shouted

"The goat has spoken," the people shouted.

Straightaway, the sky darkened, puffs of winds started, and rain poured out of the skies in buckets. The sound of thunder and lightning petrified us all and we scrambled away in different directions.

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Back at home, I moved into my children's room, locked it, pushed their bed against the door and waited for them to come for us. No one came. I spent the night calling my grandmother's spirit to protect us. In the morning, I told the twins to remain quiet and we huddled in a corner until there was a knock on the door. I jumped up, the twins screamed, and in a flash, I was back on the floor, my hands covering their mouths.

"Sh-sh-sh," I put a finger on my mouth.

"It's us," wife number one said, "please open the door."

"No," I said. "Come in here and I will kill you."

"Hope, please open the door. We need to talk to you," wife number two said.

"Am not opening the door. Talk."

"We just got news that the police commissioner and one of the elders died last night."

"What? If you're lying to me!"

"We're not lying. It's true. They found them dead, and no one can tell what caused their death," wife number two said.

It had rained cats and dogs, trees fell and houses were swept

away, and lightning struck people. The sky must have been angry and had decided to unleash its vengeance on the town.

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The people of this town now believe I am a witch. “Like grandmother, like granddaughter,” they mumble. They mumble because they don’t want me to hear, afraid I’ll not help them out when they come to borrow money. I do not blame them though. Lightning striking people like that and the mysterious deaths of the police commissioner and the elder; surely I must have some powers. Every time I hear their mutters, I smile, knowing we’re safe with our money and properties. They will never dream of touching us again.

Do you know what else happened? My co-wives have become our zealous defenders, telling anyone who cares to listen that we’re not witches. Can you believe it? Truth be told, they’re more frightened of being thrown out of the family home. Even though my fortunes have changed, I could never do such a thing, however, I enjoy watching them cater to my needs when I return from work. But when I ponder the whole thing, I actually believe in this witchcraft business. Surely, someone must have made me the richest woman in the town, otherwise how do you explain that?

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## **Don’t Erase My History and Don’t Sell My Picture**

*A photo essay on the ongoing struggle of Korean “comfort women”*



Kim Hwa Seon Halmoni looking out, House of Sharing, Gwangju, South Korea, 2010

In 2010, I visited The House of Sharing, a residence and nursing home outside of Seoul, South Korea, for former Korean “comfort women.” It was founded in 1992 by funds raised by Buddhist organizations and civic groups. “Comfort women” is a euphemism for females (mostly teenagers) who were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. These days, Koreans endearingly refer to them as “halmonis” (grandmothers). Despite the overwhelming number of testimonies and historical evidence to support their claims, no acceptable apology or legal reparations have been offered by the Japanese government. The idea for these portraits began when I got involved in creating a memorial for the halmonis. The memorial, now completed, is the first one dedicated to such women in the Western world.



Lee Yong Soo and Lee Ok Seon Halmonis visit the memorial, Palisades Park, NJ, 2011



Chinese soldier with Korean ‘comfort women’ after they were liberated by US-China Allied Forces, Songshan, Yunnan Province, China. September 3, 1944 Photo by Charles H. Hatfield, U.S. 164th Signal Photo Company, US National Archives



Kang Il Chul Halmoni in her room, House of Sharing, Gwangju, South Korea, 2010

Kang Il Chul Halmoni looked up from her chair as locks of her short curly hair floated to the floor. I bowed: “Annyeonghaseyo.” Kang Il Chul Halmoni was born in 1928 in Sangju, a town in southern Korea. In 1943, when she was 16, a military officer abducted her. She was taken to Manchuria,

where she was forced to work in a Japanese military “comfort station”. Fortunately, Korean independence fighters rescued her. After the war, she remained in China and later served as a military nurse for Korean communist troops. Upon her discharge, she moved to Jilin City and married a Chinese man. She returned to Korea in 2000.

Walking outside, I saw Lee Ok Seon Halmoni sitting on a bench under the statue of a young girl wearing a hanbok, her face framed in a white halo of hair looking at the distant mountains. “Don’t take my picture,” she said. I put down my camera.



Lee Ok Seon Halmoni in the doorway, House of Sharing, Gwangju, South Korea, 2010

But over the next day, the halmonis gradually warmed up to me. They began asking me questions about my life in America. They told me stories, summarized the latest television dramas, and showed me their garden. I painted their nails, we listened to music, and looked through their albums together.

Kim Hwa Seon Halmoni insisted that I take a picture of her in her hanbok. But after she lay down to get a massage from a young mother and her two daughters, she closed her eyes. “Maybe you should just take one of those pictures on my wall, one where I’m wearing a hanbok.”



Kim Hwa Seon Halmoni with visitors, House of Sharing, Gwangju, South Korea, 2010

Hours before sunrise, I awoke from the tapping on the hollow gourds keeping rhythm with the monks’ prayers. I thought of the things the halmonis had told me, and what I’d read in my research. “I was poor and hungry.” “I was taken from my own home.” “She was sold by her father, twice.” “Stricken with typhoid fever, she was taken to be cremated alive.” “If I

didn't do what they said, they would slash your clothes and shove the knives into your private parts." "It was no place for humans."

I closed my eyes. The tapping and prayers intensified.



Kim Soon Ok Halmoni in her room, House of Sharing, Gwangju, South Korea, 2010

In Korea, there is a concept of a collective emotion called "han," a word that embodies the sentiments of Koreans having been colonized, a kind of unity that is inherent in their collective sorrow, a darkness from where beauty can emerge.

When students protest with the halmonis in front of the Japanese embassy every Wednesday, it is with this sense of han. It is their history too.

As a Korean woman, this project was motivated not only by this same desire, but also in hopes of creating a visual narrative about their lives beyond their victimhood. I realize that it's more than just revisionist history that threatens their cause, it is also the sensationalism around their experiences that people try to fuel their own causes, like a photographer who profited off their images, or an activist who used their money to advance her political career.

It has been exactly a decade since I shot this series. There were 63 known Korean survivors in 2010. Today, only eighteen remain.



Park Ok Seon Halmoni and umbrellas, House of Sharing, Gwangju, South Korea, 2010