

The Land of Morning Calm: An EP (Lyrics)

By Jina Kim

Initiation

"I want our nation to be the most beautiful in the world. By this I do not mean the most powerful nation. Because I have felt the pain of being invaded by another nation, I do not want my nation to invade others. It is sufficient that our wealth makes our lives abundant; it is sufficient that our strength is able to prevent foreign invasions. The only thing that I desire in infinite quantity is the power of a noble culture. This is because the power of culture both makes ourselves happy and gives happiness to others." - Koo Kim, Korean statesman, politician, leader, and freedom fighter

Welcome, recruit, to Joseon Freedom Fighters.
You have been forgotten, forbidden, erased,
your tie to the ancestors violently severed.
But you remember, because you loathe oblivion,
The passion, agony, and confusion.

The warrior's secret, strategic and brave,
Was veiled by drumbeats, roars, and a turtle's smoke.
The king's love, paternal to the wealthy and enslaved,
Bore a legible art, mirroring the audible.
And an imprisoned girl's springtime celebration.

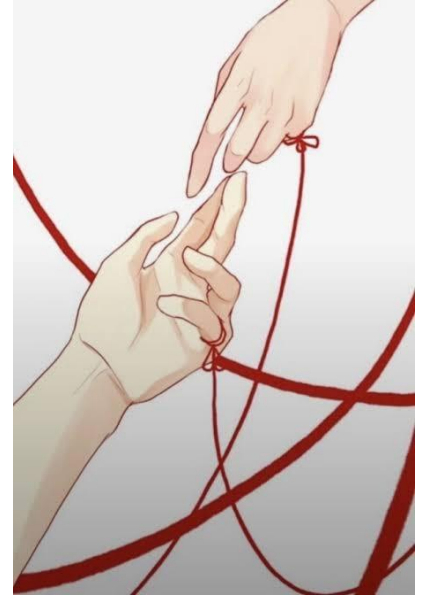
Hold on to the past. Connect with what's yours.
And feel the han, the sorrow that transcends time.
Our ancestors guide us to the promised land.



Red Thread

[Verse 1]

A crimson line against backdrops of yellow and black
 Around and around the delicate little fingers.
 Mesmerizing and forceful, I see no lack
 In how the string of fate sways, flows, and lingers.
 The fair skinned saw it first, bright in a world of white
 Frightened by the rebellious power it held.
 With their pens, they spread lies that were white
 And told us the string was colored red for bloodshed.
 In the black ear, they whispered mistrust and fear
 for the strange outsiders and their greedy ways.
 Said the chinks would take all that they hold dear
 And replace the free American way
 “These aliens like money and they don’t like to share.
 Other than their own, they simply do not care.
 Your home is bare and cheap—an easy target.
 Will you let your community become a market?”



[Chorus]

Fate will have its way, for bloodshed or blood shared.
 Will we let ourselves be divided or will we be repaired?

[Verse 2]

Rage arose, blind and violent. Misunderstandings became prevalent.
 Businesses became battlefields. Not even Tom Bradley could shield.
 Black attacked, yellow retaliated. Six were killed, little mitigated.
 Black felt respect was overly expensive. Yellow got overly defensive.
 Some saw through white’s tactics. The ice-blue eyes and the age old antics.
 But the snake’s tongue distorts and inflames without conscience or shame.
 Smelly, stingy, hateful. The devil’s words disguise persecution as fateful.
 Was Black Korea more Black or Korea? An anxious dysphoria



[Chorus]

Fate will have its way, for bloodshed or blood shared.
 Will we let ourselves be divided or will we be repaired?



[Verse 3]

Latasha Harlin was shot in the head over a juicebox
 By a hasty, scared yellow who bought off her sentence
 somewhat with money
 And that crossed the line of polarization.

And Rodney King's death, black's response to it, was a shock
To yellow as the screaming red resembled a day that was sunny
Their looting and pillaging shook the nation.
“This is our chance.” They thought, “to get back
For the humiliation, mistrust, and degradation.”
Four-Two-Nine was a reminder of trauma and lack
To a race who had fled wars, coping through
desensitization.
White watched the chaos and violence from afar
Only watched the cries for help, for security and
protection.
Dejected, yellow quickly made those wounds scar
And found guns and self-defense as their direction.
It was a battle, but only white ever wins the war.
They spark the hate, then the consequences are ignored.
It makes you think-if black ignored the devil's whisper
And yellow cared less of survival and more of community rights
And white wasn't so scared of a multi-group resister
Would fate have nurtured unity instead of ending it all in a gunfight?



K.M.H.

[Verse 1]

Hey, you. What's your name? Come closer.
 Step this way. Just a bit more. Closer, closer.
 Make yourself at home. A drink, let us share.
 You, the fair-skinned young wayfarer.
 Familiar, I have known many men like you.
 Your ancestors stole land from those with any hue
 Like forefather, like son. No different is the knife
 That threatens to take. *You* steal the way of life.
 I once knew a man like you. I even loved him too.
 Devoted, he vowed me a life, in America with no strife
 I was a weak, lost orphan. He was MacArthur's soldier
 I knew only war. He wielded visions of peace.
 He had hate for the growing power of red.
 Said Truman had the answer
 To save Asia from lying in the Communist bed.
 My country, myself, on the edge of defeat. I was pulled to his
 candor.

[Chorus]

The heart is fragile.
 Don't break mine
 If you don't want yours eaten.

[Verse 2]

He said he liked how soft-spoken I was
 Told me to pour him drink after drink
 "Take a sip with me." He murmured, "for I saved your land."
 Now show me how grateful you are."
 He liked the way I danced.
 The chattering way I laughed
 How I blushed at the touch of his hand.
 How I covered my face with my flowered fan.
 He complimented my almond eyes
 And my long, dark hair
 Because pure black reflects light, not lies
 And made him look brighter than he ever dared
 He held me tight when he was inside me.
 He grew harder at the sound of my pained whimper.
 "I'm here to save you, see?"
 And at that, my legs, my hips all became limber.

[Chorus]

The heart is fragile.



Don't break mine
If you don't want yours eaten.

[Verse 3]

The next morning, he fled.
My heart was torn in two.
It cried, raged, and bled.
Never trust a man whose eyes are blue.
You remind me a little of him, you know?
Your stoic look has his masculinity
The unequivocal faith in your place you show
Stirs the violation fueled fury in my femininity
Your strength, your youth are perfect
My mouth is watering at your scent
Ignore my tails, for a long time I have wept
For a prey that's never felt loss, I have dreamt
Don't be scared, your fear is not worthy
Close your eyes. It'll be over quick.
Tragic that I have more mercy
Than your people will ever give.

A Mother's Lament

[Chorus]

I'll wait for you. Take your time.

Umma understands.

You and I are not as different as you think.

Just don't forget the way home.

[Verse 1]

Dear son, I was initiated into the resistance today.

Even though you didn't want to join me, that's okay.

I hope that you'll understand someday

That our ancestors desire for the han not to stay

Within us. It's meant to be expressed, to be resolved.

I know you think we've evolved.

You think the sins of the *baek-in* have been absolved.

But the grief of this severance is not easily dissolved.

I know you're just trying to survive

In a world where the universal is white.

They've taken every chance for our culture to thrive,

Rationalizing that it may not unify in foresight.

Wherever you are now, live well.

Be safe and I hope you'll reconsider.

Remember, pretending is not real, it's a shell.

Don't forget who you are...or to eat dinner.

Love, Mom

[Chorus]

I'll wait for you. Take your time.

Umma understands.

But you and I are not as different as you think.

Please don't forget the way home.

[Verse 2]

Dear son, I've been getting closer with my comrades.

One of them is twenty-six years old, just like you.

Whenever I see her, I think of you and I feel bad.

Should I have tried harder to bring you here too?

She'd never tasted the sweet umami of *bulgogi* before.

So, I got what ingredients I could from the underground store.

Some soy sauce, sesame seeds, and Asian pears

It felt like seeing old friends again, I bought them in pairs

I remember the last time I made you *bulgogi*

My only son safe within my bosom

In sports, school, and friends you were winning trophies

Most importantly, we were living in freedom.



Now, we're separated and you're God knows where
Living the life we came here to live.
You've tossed all Koreanness to avoid living in fear.
Is pleasing the white man something you're willing to forgive?
Thinking of you, Mom

[Verse 3]

Dear Mom, thank you for your letters.
It's nice to hear you're doing well.
And that you're working for the better.
Lately, being 'foreign' is a one-way ticket to jail.
It's gotten worse out here.
But I don't regret my choice.
I don't really hold my culture dear,
Nor do I feel within me a raging Korean voice.
I don't feel welcome in this blank, bland world.
But I wouldn't have felt welcome in yours either.
I've been detached from my roots for too long already.
Even back then, I was less *bulgogi*, more spaghetti.
Unlike you, I wasn't doing this to survive.
It's just that white bleaches out other colors.
I don't care whether or not Koreans thrive.
But I hope you find what you're looking for, mother.
Best, your son

[Chorus]

I'll wait for you. Take your time.
Umma understands.
But you and I are not as different as you think.
Please don't forget the way home.

Artist's Statement

Inspired by Professor Regina Bradley's essay, in which she briefly analyzes Outkast's *ATLiens* as a concept album that builds a world that focuses on the past and "past-future visions"--"an envisioning of the South's future as a polytemporal space of past and present experiences," I thought I might use my creative project to do something similar (Bradley 20). Bradley discusses how Outkast takes black otherness and places it in an imaginative space outside of the historical impact of the black identity. She observes Outkast's emphasis on the future as somewhere hopeful and safe for the black South, a location that carries visceral cultural memory, expanding on the convergence of past, future, and present. I found this concept extremely intriguing--manifesting a speculative world that contains the oppressed history of one's cultural identity, one's own placement or navigation in the present of the evolved cultural position, and the hopeful, accepted, and celebratory future. I found this creative technique empowering and when listening to *ATLiens*, other worldbuilding albums (Childish Gambino's *Bando Stone and the New World*, Beyonce's *Homecoming: The Live Album*, etc.) and more hip-hop in general, I discovered that many aspects of hip-hop, such as an alter ego, harnesses this pain, rage, and uncertainty to explore an elevated existence. For instance, Beyonce's Coachella performance, the recording of which is *Homecoming*, is built around the elevation of Beyonce's black womanhood. These themes are exemplified through the performance's opening, in which Beyonce struts on a catwalk donning a Cleopatra-esque costume, hyped up by her handpicked, all-HBCU alumni marching band. The costume alone transports her from a Coachella headlining world-class pop star to the powerful, intelligent, femme fatale African queen, demanding her audience to recognize her as comparable to such a figure. Her setlist starts off in heightened femininity with "Crazy in Love" and then goes straight into "Freedom," which claims freedom through breaking chains, an imagery that evokes self-salvation from a slavery-like bondage--a metaphor that elevates the black identity by referencing the irrevocable hardships they were forced to endure and escape from. Through Korean American history, I aimed to imitate this expression of elevated existence and pride stemming from the overcoming of oppression.

I began my project with a search for the Korean immigrant struggle. Even though I am a Korean immigrant, I believed I needed to learn more about the history of the Korean diaspora and the struggles behind it. I wanted to tap into our historical sorrow and how it fuels our desire for freedom. I came across a book called *Koreatown, Los Angeles: Immigration, Race, and the American Dream* by Shelley Sang-hee Lee, who lays out the Korean immigrant experience in Los Angeles, the city with the largest Korean population in the United States. I was particularly struck by the emotions she conveys of a generational divide between first generation immigrants, who grappled with the tension of maintaining a connection to their roots and assimilating to white culture simply to survive, and third generation immigrants, who felt the resentment of being detached from their roots, exemplifying a sense of disconnect even within the community. Lee describes this feeling by stating, "...immigrants--the first generation--were cultural outsiders who experienced rejection in US society. Their children--the second generation--achieved mainstream belonging but often discarded their ethnic cultures in the process. Their children--the third generation--lamented the choices of their parents that robbed them of their heritage and left them--in their perception--culturally bland or empty," (Lee 63). This temporal divide, the tension of wanting to connect with one's culture despite the amount of time passed, was reminiscent of the temporal themes of *ATLiens* and *Bando Stone*, in which the necessity of the livelihood of culture is put into question.

Then there is the key issue of assimilation. I remembered through my own immigration experiences and I learned through Lee's book that assimilation, the ability to adapt to and blend in with the dominant culture, is vital for immigrants. Koreans put much effort into being the least Korean as possible. One Charles Yoon, a second generation Beverly Hills oral surgeon, "derided and shamed those young Korean Americans trying to retain or recuperate their Korean-ness...Yoon worried that the presence of so many unassimilated newcomers who did not speak English...and brought attention to Koreans as foreigners could make life more difficult for all Koreans," (Lee 68). This concern of not being seen as American enough or being seen as too foreign is central to the Korean American experience. The feeling of needing to abandon one's core identity to be seen as legitimate is a source of sorrow I knew I wanted to hone in on within my project, as it is still a struggle for Koreans to this day.

Although I initially set out to write an intro skit and 5-10 poems, I wanted to highlight the storytelling format of hip-hop and for this, I decided that song structure poems would be more effective. So, I ended up writing the intro skit and 3 song-like poems with 3 16-bar verses and a chorus. I titled the project *The Land of Morning Calm*, which is a nickname for South Korea that originates from the Joseon dynasty in observation of Korea's beautiful nature. The Chinese characters for Joseon mean morning and freshness or radiance. I thought this created an Eden-esque image of what Koreans imagine for our futuristic world—one where we feel free to express our cultural identity without concern for how it might be perceived from influences of the dominant culture. In terms of tapping into the sorrow of my culture, I continuously refer to the term "han." In Korea, it usually means the loss or grief of unfinished business that one takes with them past the grave. There are many legends of spirits lingering on the earthly plane because their han tethers them to the physical world. I wanted to apply this sense of urgency in spite of temporal divides in staying connected to our cultural roots and the grief associated with it. For example, in the intro skit "Initiation," I write, "Hold on to the past. Connect with what's yours. / And feel the han, the sorrow that transcends time." In a way, han is a bridge between the present and past, as well as a bridge between what needs to be accomplished with what has not yet been accomplished. Relating to this, I wanted to symbolize it as the emotional red flag in recognizing the dangers or injustice of needing to abandon this integral part of our identities, our past to survive and healing this part of ourselves. This concept served as one of the anchors of my project.

As for my world, I imagined a futuristic world in which assimilation has been taken to the extreme and all culture has been wiped out in the name of 'equality.' Although not explicitly mentioned in any of the pieces I wrote, I imagined that diversity of culture would be policed strongly. If there is any hint of cultural practice, the person would be punished. A resistance is formed, led by the Koreans, and in the intro skit, the reader is being initiated into the organization. I really wanted to associate Koreans as the leaders of a rebellion because Asians, in general, have struggled with the 'model minority' stereotype. Because one way we assimilate is by respecting authority, we are seen as the 'good' minority. This is one of the ways we have had to sacrifice our cultural roots through assimilation because Koreans have an extremely rebellious side as well. Most notably, our resistance against Japanese colonization is revered most in history. I began my intro skit with a quote from one member of the original Joseon Freedom Fighters, Mr. Ku Kim, that talks about the importance of maintaining our connection to our culture especially in the face of oppression. I named the resistance after these brave rebels as an effort to disrupt the submissive reputation we have amassed over the years. The leader Freedom Fighter invites the reader to reconnect with the past through joining and reminds them that they

refuse to live in cultural oblivion, lost and submerged in white culture because they were pushed to against their will. The leader refers to General Yi Sun Shin, a strategist and soldier who famously asked his inner circle to keep his death a secret mid naval battle after being shot in the chest, so that his soldiers would not be discouraged in their fight against Japanese forces. He also is known for designing the turtle ship, a battle ship that carried powerful cannons and blew smoke from the dragon/turtle figurehead. The leader also refers to King SeJong, who created the Korean phonetic alphabet to make the Korean written language more accessible during a time where lower class citizens could not read Chinese characters, a logographic system that was only learned by scholars and aristocrats. Lastly, the leader mentions Freedom Fighter Ryu Gwan Soon, who was only a high school student when she began the March First Movement, a protest characterized by its celebratory chant for the Republic of Korea, against the Japanese colonial government and was imprisoned and tortured for her patriotism. The leader expresses a love and pride, an elevation of the culture through the hardships we had to endure historically, highlighting how this kind of strength, artistry, and empowerment is in our engrained past, what our ancestors represent. Connecting with these powers will take us to the “promised land”--cultural freedom.

“Red Thread” was inspired by the LA riots. My uncle and one of my old bosses have lived through that incident. It is the only reason why they own guns. They have relayed to me stories of the police’s absence and the widespread fear of Koreans as they were forced to guard their businesses. As I was reading the chapter “Most of These Areas Were Formerly Black” in Lee’s book, I learned of the deep-rooted conflicts between the Korean and black community. She poignantly observes, “While common legacies of discrimination, migration, and socioeconomic struggle might have nurtured affinity and solidarity among Koreans and Blacks, countervailing forces that engendered suspicion and ill will frustrated and derailed progress toward developing a foundation of interethnic understanding informed by the belief that their fates were linked,” (Lee 109). This idea of linked fate between two communities really spoke to me. Koreans have a term called *inyeon* that means predestined ties through fate and there is a legend that people who have *inyeon* are connected by a red string tied around their pinky fingers. I thought it would be fun to explore this Korean idea of fate between the two communities and how the media, a white-driven institution, has warped something that could have been beautiful to harbor animosity to protect themselves, an injustice that Lee details throughout this chapter from the consistent conflict between mistrustful Korean business owners and disrespected black customers over and within the same inner city space. Violence was continuous, despite multiple attempts by community leaders from both sides and even LA mayor Tom Bradley to smooth tensions. The last trigger before the LA riots was the death of teen Latasha Harlin, who was accused by storeowner Soon Ja Du of stealing and after a physical altercation, was shot in the back of the head. A single juicebox was found in Harlin’s backpack—it was what she lost her life over. Du was not even supposed to be working this day. She had only been covering for her son, who was worried for his safety as he was supposed to be testifying against some Crip members. This quickly led to the full-on race wars of the Rodney King riots. With this piece, I referred to Kendrick Lamar’s “Sherane,” which is a great example of storytelling, in which there is a fork in the road and there are themes of unforeseen consequences to certain actions. I wanted to utilize this technique through the red thread metaphor, especially through the chorus “Fate will have its way, for bloodshed or blood shared. / Will we let ourselves be divided or will we be repaired?” and the hypothetical question I pose at the end of the piece “It makes you think-if black ignored the devil’s whisper / And yellow cared less of survival and more of community rights / And white

wasn't so scared of a multi-group resister / Would fate have nurtured unity instead of ending it all in a gunfight?" Rhyme scheme was something that I struggled with throughout this project, as I have very little experience with poetry. However, with this piece specifically, I wanted to accentuate the rising suspense and discomfort, imitating what Kendrick applies through his rhymes and musicality in "Sherane" and other storytelling songs, so I attempted a denser rhyme scheme in Verse 2 with rhymes aligning at the half of the line and the end.

For my second piece, I incorporated the Kumiho legend, the nine-tailed fox/woman shapeshifter, that I discussed in my proposal. I changed it slightly from what I initially mentioned to expand on the Kumiho's han, how she fell in love with a white American man who came to Korea with General Douglas MacArthur, who, like General Yi Sun Shin, was a revered strategist that was sent to Korea under President Truman's command. Koreans have mixed opinions about the help that the United States sent—it was certainly integral in securing victory for South Korea against North Korea, who was being backed by communist China and the Soviet Union, but at the same time, it was clear that the Americans had their own Democratic agenda for sending aid and Korea seems to have been a pawn. Many American soldiers who came during this time are notorious for having made families with Korean women and then abandoning them without a second thought. I wanted to express the feminine rage of these women, but also the discomfort of Koreans who, war-torn, were used in the midst of this global communism versus democracy conflict. Although this did not happen in America, I believe that this incident also embodies a form of oppression that is relatable to the Korean immigrant experience. There is a certain submissiveness that is encoded in assimilation, since it is a form of performing within the confines of the dominant culture. I wanted to make this submissiveness a theme in the beginning of Kumiho's journey with MacArthur's soldier, highlighted in his Orientalistic points of attraction towards her (her soft-spokenness, her blushing, her almond eyes and dark hair, etc.) He is turned on by domination as seen in the intimacy between the two— "He grew harder at the sound of my pained whimper." I felt that this was reminiscent of the dynamic between the minority and dominant cultures in America. As mentioned, "Like forefather, like son", the reader, in this piece, is a white man, who reminds Kumiho of her ex-lover in not just phenomic characteristics, but also in the power dynamic he projects—"For a prey that's never felt loss, I have dreamt." It is clear to Kumiho that the man has never been in a position of submission and that connects her memory to her ex-lover. It gives her an opportunity of reclamation of what she lost then by giving into domination, which I wanted to express as a form of resistance. She kills and eats the man's heart, a trait of the actual Kumiho, angered by the oppression that the dominant culture is pushing through forced widespread assimilation in this world. In terms of creativity, I invoked the storytelling aspect of *pansori*, a traditional Korean performance art that is similar to hip-hop in many ways. It is a narrative-heavy storytelling, so, like hip-hop, a strong narrator to communicate a message is common. I tried to make Kumiho's voice as a *pansori* narrator strong, sure of herself but also delivering the story in an engaging way. For example, the coaxing that she does in the beginning to the reader- "Come closer"-- is a technique that I have seen many *pansori* narrators do as a way to grab the attention of the audience. I imitated the way it is used in a song that is a more modern interpretation of *pansori* called "Changgwi" by Ye-eun Ahn, in which the first-person narrator is a dead ghost who is coaxing a mountain passerby to come closer as a method of audience engagement and setup for the story that will eventually lead to the ghost possessing the passerby.

The last piece is mostly something I thought of through my own immigrant experience. Pulling from Shelley Lee's ideas on generational divide and inspired by the letter-writing form of

storytelling in Eminem's "Stan", I touched on the cultural chasm that immigrant parents and second/third generation children face. As a 1.5 generation immigrant, I already feel the distance from Korean culture. I sometimes struggle thinking of Korean words and my parents, who are first generation immigrants, and I argue over differing values that have been shaped by our differing cultural experiences. Moreover, my son is a second generation Korean and I can feel an even wider distance that he has with Korean culture. He does not speak the language at all and even gets confused sometimes with understanding. Born and raised in the United States and surrounded in his life with only Americans, he has no connection to Korean culture, except me. I believe this widening gap is a source of sorrow for all of us. In this piece, the mother is more connected to her culture and because of this, joins the Freedom Fighters. Her son, who is more desensitized to the forced assimilation occurring in the background because he has only known the dominant culture, does not feel the need to join and stays behind. The mother urges her son to change his mind. In the mother's letters, I tried to apply Eminem's heightening emotions and stakes from verse to verse that he uses for Stan's perspective. We see a tinge of desperation that increases—from "Wherever you are now, live well. / Be safe and I hope you'll reconsider." in Verse 1 to the more pressing tone in "You've tossed all Koreanness to avoid living in fear. / Is pleasing the white man something you're willing to forgive?" of Verse 2. In Verse 3, I wrote from the son's perspective. I wanted to communicate that the gap that the more recent generations of immigrant descendants feel towards their culture is as relevant in my fictional world as it is in the real world. The voice of the son is of a more deadpan acceptance ("It's gotten worse out here. / But I don't regret my choice. / I don't really hold my culture dear") that hopefully, like the last verse of "Stan" allows the reader to come to a mediated, a bit abrupt and hollow conclusion about the tragedy of the events that have happened throughout the song. This effect somehow elevates the loss through a starkly contrasting emotional juxtaposition and I hoped to convey this in my piece as well.

This project required research and deep-thinking, but as a Korean American struggling with the concepts that I wrote about in real-time, I found this entire process cathartic and empowering. Reading about the Korean immigrant struggle, I certainly felt a deeper connection to my cultural past. Although it was certainly a challenge trying to find a good poetic structure, rhyme scheme, and even a meter, I tried to imitate it as closely to what I have learned in the music that I have engaged with throughout the Hip-Hop Poetics class, such as the aforementioned Eminem and Kendrick Lamar. I think the reader may be able to tell that I struggled with the form in the intro skit, but gained a better grasp of what I wanted in the subsequent pieces. Now that I have completed it, I can see that it was quite an ambitious project. Worldbuilding, thinking of all the elements of a world from the physicality of it to what kind of people live in it and what are the struggles of it, is no easy feat. However, it was very rewarding to see all the pieces come together.

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