

Horizons

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 17

12-18-2020

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Recommended Citation

Jeon, Young Hee (2020) "Dango," *Horizons*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol5/iss1/17>

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Dango

YOUNG HEE JEON

English 211 (Autobiographical Writing)

Mentor: Ann Inoshita

Artist Statement

Inspired by Professor Ann Inoshita's teaching in her "Autobiographical Writing" class, I wrote this autobiographical short story. I've tried to describe the tangled relationship between innocence and cruelty. As one's hurtful private memories are reminded by the most beautifully indifferent scenery, one's innocent deeds oftentimes affect others in a most hurtful way; I made my pet sick, and this caused my dad to euthanize it. It made my dad cry. My memory with Dango is the cocktail of my most innocently fun childhood and the most painful time deeply hued with guilt. In retrospect, it is perhaps the last memory of my childhood because, from then on, I became an adult standing on the other side of innocence, staring at it with constantly doubting eyes.

"They are the blood of the samurai."

Eiko, licking her green tea soft serve in her hand, broke open my memory, sealed in a dark and cold place a long time ago. Pink petals from an enormous weeping cherry tree were blowing everywhere in Kenrokuen, the Japanese garden in Kanazawa city.

"Especially the falling ones," she continued, "these represent the shedding tears for the samurai's short-lived life."

Eiko, who was a graduate student at Kanazawa University, pointed at the pink petals that landed on shy wet stones attired in thick fuzzy moss. Sitting on a wooden bench under the tree with Eiko next to me, I watched the sparkling petals running down myriad invisible stairs in the soft afternoon breeze. Left untouched for a while, my green tea ice cream was drooling thick cream down my fingers holding the cone.

"Shedding tears for the short-lived," I repeated her words and looked up at the heavily flowered branches stretched over us. Soaked in the red grief, tears of the ancient cherry tree fell

on the ground. Shaken by the boughs' endless sniffing, pink petals let go of their present and became the past.

"How's your dissertation going?" I asked, licking the big green dollop of ice cream off my fingers. Immediately, Eiko's eyes sparkled and she started talking about the progress of her dissertation that she had been working on for over six months. It was I who asked the question, but I felt myself drifting away from the scene when she brought Soseki and his *Kokoro* there. Instead of enjoying hanami and an intellectual conversation with Eiko, my mind started hovering over to an old street market in a small provincial town called Yangsan in Korea, where I first met him—Dango.

One year in May, it rained in pink and white in Korea, too. The blush petals of cherry blossom fell on fish laying in rows, with their kaleidoscopic scales just scraped off smooth blue skin. They fell into a bowl of meat soup sitting loyally in front of a drunken old farmer. A lot of them fell and were swept to the corner of the street market, but some also fell on tubs of



I was born and raised in Yangsan, a small southern town in South Korea and am currently a senior majoring in Japanese. Professor Ann Inoshita, in her Autobiographical Writing class, introduced many of precious local voices in "Pidgin" and encouraged me to see the beauty of breathing in the fresh air of different languages and cultures. Revisiting dark memories in a foreign language in the class helped me to loosen the dirt of subconscious guilt that was too hard to be dug in my mother tongue. I would like to continue writing simply to keep records of things that are disappearing because I believe it is always, "out of sight, out of mind."

red meat, so fresh I could hear them screech. In each designated rubber tub, different parts of skinned and chopped dogs were neatly piled up, waiting to be compared and bargained. Stuck fast on damp meat, petals of cherry blossom annoyed the merchant lady sitting behind the tubs. Out of frustration, she swung her fly swatter at a blood-drunk fly hovering over the meat.

In an effort to fast forward the gruesome scene in front, I hastened my pace until I bumped into my dad, who had stopped and bent forward at a cardboard box full of brown mutts.

"Younghee-ya, look at these *tonggae*! Aren't they adorable?" Dad asked, rubbing the fat belly of one of the seemingly identical octuplets. The one who just got his belly rubbed, rolled his body like a fluffy dango in kinako flour.

"Let's take one home. Pick one," Dad suggested. After taking some time to compare one another, I gave up and picked the one Dad had rubbed.

"Five thousand won, that one," said the old lady smoking behind the box. Looking at the first transaction happening, the meat lady, still holding a fly swatter in her hand, walked fast toward us and deftly snatched the five thousand won bill out of my dad's hand. "Thank you," she said, walking away.

I don't remember whether I gave him a name or not. I don't even remember how old I was when I brought him home. The only thing I remember is that he was brown, but even that was valid for only a very short time. For now, I will call him Dango, a round and fluffy rice cake, as he looked just like one on a small mountain of seven other dangos.

Dango was one easygoing dog to keep. He overcame his separation from his mother and siblings very quickly. He cried for a couple of nights, but he soon got used to being alone in a small detached outdoor hut with his neck tethered to a pole.

In a couple of weeks, he had learned how to widen his range of movement by untwining the rope from the pole, the center of his universe, and how not to knock over his water bowl, the source of his life. He first started his diet with rice porridge with bits of anchovy heads, but gradually adapted his stomach to the surf and turf leftover and all kinds of kimchi. When it rained, Dango crouched his body as far away from the opening of his hut as the length of the rope would allow, trying to stay dry from the rain beating in. When it stormed, he kept a lonely vigil, refusing to lose the tug of war between him and the pole planted outside the hut.

It was when the monsoon took a short break that I finally decided to wash him. Under the kind sun after the storm, he was sitting in his hut drying his mud-caked fur. Looking at me approaching, he stood up with his tail hitting the wall of his house rhythmically. As I offered my hand, he licked it, scratched his neck, gnawed on the side of his butt, and licked me again. He smelled like his hut, rain, and kimchi. After a good ten minutes of struggling, I successfully untied the rope on his neck and let him run through furrows between vegetable fields spread behind his hut. As if being hailed for an in-

teresting conversation, he abruptly stopped at the baby lettuces and stuck his muzzle in them until he finally decided to mark it with his urine. Then, he moved on to the bottom of the old persimmon tree, and declared it as his territory, too. After catching up with his tedious, two-month-delayed territory marking business, he lastly returned to his water bowl to drink. The bowl was flooded with rainwater. I scooped the bouncy Dango from the ground and headed to the house. He licked me on my mouth. His tongue was cold from the rainwater.

After turning on the water heater, we went into the bathroom. As I put Dango on the cold tiled floor of the bathroom, he shivered. He grabbed my arm and jumped back at me trying to retrieve himself from the floor. I stroked his back and neck waiting for water to be heated. Finally, the steam rose from the shower head with falling water warm to the touch. I wet Dango, massaging him with the shower head. The murky brown water ran down his body to the drain. I grabbed my shampoo bottle and squeezed its contents out on his fur. I lathered, rinsed, and towel-dried him. After some commotion, I could even blow-dry him, making his fur big and wild. As Dango became completely dry and clean, I became thoroughly wet and sweaty. I smelled the nape of his neck and smiled. He was fragrant just like my hair.

"Let him out now, the dog hair's everywhere!" Mom shouted as she chased after the excited dog sprinting on the linoleum floor. Dango ran up the staircase connecting the second floor and ran back down again. His soft fibrils of hair were floating in a warm afternoon ray of sunlight, glittering, and then falling. I lured him to the kitchen and secretly fed him a cup of milk before I carried him out to his old hut.

I sat in front of his hut and tied his rope around his neck. The rope looked dirtier on the now squeaky clean Dango. Laying him in his smelly hut was tricky because he fought against me going back in. As soon as his hind paws touched the floor, he kicked it to jump back on me. He desperately grabbed my arms and licked them. The tip of his lips was white with milk froth. I stood up and turned around. I heard his full-on dash stopped by the pole, his center of the universe. I heard him dashing once more, stopped by the same pole, again. Then, I heard nothing.

It was in the middle of July when I first noticed a tiny coin-sized blotch on Dango's forehead. The lengthy monsoon was almost over, and Dango came out often from his heated house to the shade within his reach, formed by an ever-growing persimmon tree.

At first, it was just a small dry spot with the hair missing. Nobody in the family noticed it but me, who gave a nice squeaky bath to Dango two weeks prior. A little dot in between Dango's eyes glared at me like his third eye whenever I came to check on his condition after school. Dango often scratched on and around the spot with his filthy hind paws. I held one of his hind legs to stop him from scratching. He licked my hand, then he used the other free one instead.

As the weather got hotter and hotter, Dango's blotch increased in number. One fifty won coin on his forehead became two coins and then three. Some coins propagated on his body made a total of six coins. Then, their shapes and colors started to change. Dry and silvery round patches became pink and red amoebas. Some started to ooze yellowy mucus. Dango dedicated most of his time scratching his patches and amoebas. He was desperate to clean his mucus off his body. He could reach some with ease. Some were hard to reach. Some were just itchy, but others were painful. Soon, he started crying.

It was his cry that made everyone notice what was going on.

"Try taking him to the vet or something," Mom suggested to Dad, who was radiating the stench of manure from three different types of farm animals at the dinner table. Leaving her suggestion dangling in the air, Dad finished his meal and opened a green bottle of soju at the table.

At night, Dango cried the hardest. Because he couldn't sit or crouch his tormenting body anymore, he cried the whole night, standing. Over him, cicadas hidden in the persimmon tree cried back at him in remorse of their short life spans. Every night, they made the most sorrowful concerto grosso pitting against each other.

Dad got some skin ointment from the vet who was the specialist for milk cows and patiently put it on crying Dango's infected skin. He started putting it on spot by spot, but eventually, he just smeared it all over Dango's body. Wrapped in purple ointment, he looked like a giant Okinawan sweet potato from my window on the second floor.

Unfortunately, the ointment treatment hadn't helped his full-blown skin infection, and Dango started waking up neighbors at night with his wailing.

"Do something, everybody's complaining!" Mom shouted in the house.

"Be quiet!" Dad shouted back at Mom.

"Seriously... he has to go, *Appa*," Mom said in her noticeably lowered voice.

Hearing the argument in the house, I put my school bag near the door. Instead of going in, I turned around and went to Dango, wrapped in a fresh coat of ointment. At my approaching, he came out from the shadow of his dark hut and wagged his hairless tail to greet me. I sat next to him, holding one of his front paws in my hand. He didn't resist or lick my hand. His paw was cold in my sweaty hand.

That night, it rained hard. Thick arrows of rain streaks hit the concrete walls of the house from different directions without rest. Water gathered in the gutter poured down to the front yard, trying to get it flooded. From the window of my room on the second floor, I tried to see if Dango was alright. However, all I could see was the mosquito screen heavily inwrought with raindrops blocking the view.

Worried, I came down to the first floor to get a better view of Dango. It was dark in the living room. No one was watching TV that night. There was no familiar sound there. Only the

sound of pouring rain outside was weaving a thick blanket covering the entire air of the living room.

In the kitchen, I found Dad sitting at the dinner table. His back toward me, he was sitting alone in the dark. A dim streetlight soaked through the window from the street outside. Occasionally, he poured soju in a shot glass in front of him. He quickly emptied his glass in one gulp and filled it to the brim again. Without giving enough time for his stomach to adjust, he emptied the second one. Right next to his soju bottle, there was another small bottle. On the side of it, there was a disposable syringe attached with a rubber band. Even though it was summer, and the humidity suffocated us in the house, he trembled like a child on a snowy day. Looking at Dad in the darkness, I forgot why I came down in the first place. I turned around and went back to my room. I crawled under the blanket and closed my eyes, forcing myself into slumber.

The next morning, the bright sun light piercing through the closed window woke me up. Wiping sticky grease accumulated during the muggy night from my face, I ran down to the first floor and put whatever that was available on my feet. As soon as I opened the front door, I charged in the direction of Dango's hut.

Under the umbrella of the persimmon tree, Dango's hut was safe from drifting away. Even though it was a weather-beaten wet mass with broken branches and scoops of white persimmon flowers scattered all over, the hut itself was keeping its shape on a newly created puddle of mud. His iron pole was there. Although flooded with murky rainwater, his water bowl was there, too. The only thing that was missing was Dango orbiting in between.

With a filthy rope left flung on the ground, Dango was gone. Inside of his hut, two-thirds of which thoroughly soaked in rainwater, I saw his purple stains smeared here and there, but not him. Dad was passing by, carrying a bucket brimming with cooked hay. I looked at him, puzzled.

"He went to heaven, yesterday," Dad said, putting his heavy bucket in front of him. I crumpled my face to stop the sorrow shooting up from my stomach. Tears rolled down my face washing off the grease.

"Don't cry, Younghee-ya," he said, and he looked up at the persimmon tree spreading its arms over us. I could see a small piece of sky through the hole of the tree. It was glittering like precious stones. Thinking of Dango who was all alone looking up at it, I found it difficult to breathe.

"Wow, so many flowers this year. Dango did a great job in composting the tree." said Dad, and he picked a couple of white popcorn blossoms off the branch near him. He put them in his mouth and started to chew. The sweat from cooking hay rained on his face. "*Mashitta*," said Dad.

Still sniffing, I picked a clean one from the roof of Dango's hut and put it in my mouth. It was bitter and sweet. Standing where Dango was standing, we quietly chewed on some more blossoms. The persimmon tree continuously let go of its

flowers on us. I wondered if Dango tasted one of these flowers. A swarm of cicadas in the tree started crying in unison. Dad picked up his bucket and walked away toward the farm.

"I am sorry, *Appa*," I whispered in a voice only I could hear. I sat in front of Dango's water bowl and apologized to Dango as well. Then, I fished floating blossoms out of his wa-

ter bowl and poured the dark water on the tree. Standing right in between the pole and bowl, I looked up at the bright hollow circle in the dark heart of the tree. The dazzling sunlight thrashed my eyes, and the world changed its colors. It pulsated in green, purple, and pink. From a wet bough that was purple, a pink persimmon flower fell.