

Comfort Women



“Hand of My Sister.” Image by Kristi Crutchfield Cox.

Editor's Note: On August 18, 2017, [Women in the World](#) published an article about the [appearance of statues](#) of “Comfort Women” on buses in South Korea. [Comfort Women](#) is “a euphemism for the estimated 200,000 South Korean girls and young women who were subjected to sexual slavery in Japanese brothels before and during the Second World War.” Only in 2015 did the Japanese government issue a formal apology to the survivors. Public acts of commemoration in South Korea, however, draw criticism from the Japanese government. Women’s Voices Now would like to thank [Tanya Ko Hong](#) for helping us to spread awareness about this still open wound for the surviving women of this dark moment in human history.

For many years after the war, the Comfort Women kept silent about their treatment. The pain associated with their past contributed to keeping the subject taboo until 1991, when Had

Soon Kim became the first woman to go public with her story.

Although I grew up in South Korea, I never learned about the existence of the Comfort Women until I stumbled upon their stories, more recently. As I read and found out more about them, I couldn't sleep and had nightmares. Finally, in 2013, I wrote a poem about their plight and the starkness of their existence with lines like, "Who can do one hundred men?"

In more recent years, the Japanese and South Korean governments have met to discuss reparations and apologies. Yet, after reading a Korean newspaper article that one of the survivors passed away in late-August 2017, my heart sunk. Now, we have just 36 survivors. Who will tell their stories? Is it too late?

Comfort Woman

On August 14, 1991, in Seoul, a woman named Hak Soon Kim came forward to denounce the Japanese for the sexual enslavement of more than 200,000 women during WWII. They were referred to as Wianbu in Korean and "Comfort Women" in English.

1991, Seoul, South Korea

The voice on TV is comforting,
like having a person beside me
talking all the time
while I eat my burnt rice gruel.

Suddenly in Japanese
But we didn't—
Those women came to us
for the money.
We never forced—
I dropped

my spoon into my nureun bap

On the screen
a photograph of young girls
seated in an open truck
like the one I rode with Soonja
over the rice field road that fall

Awake in a cold sweat
I gulp Jariki
bul kuk
bul kuk
but my throat still burns

It's 3 a.m.
I reach for a cigarette
blow a smoke
and the white smog spirals
like Soonja's wandering soul

They called me, wianbu—
a comfort woman—

I had a name.

1939, Chinju, South Kyangsan Province

We are going to do Senninbari, right?
No, Choingsindae, Women's Labor Corps
Same thing, right?
Earn money
become new woman
come back home—

Holding tiny hands
red fingertips
bong soong ah
balsam flower red

together and colored by summer's end
red fingertips

ripening persimmons
bending over the Choga roofs
that fade into distance

When the truck crosses over the last hill
leaving our hometown in the dust
Soonja kicks off her white shoes Ko Mu Shin

1941, That Autumn

That autumn night, Japanese
soldiers wielding swords
dragged me away
while I was gathering pine needles

they fell from my basket
filling the air with the scent of their white blood.

When you scream in your dream
there's no sound.

Grandma's making Song Pyunon the maru,
Is water boiling?
Will she bring pine needles before my eye balls fall out?

I feel pain
there—

They put a long stick between my legs—
Open up, open, Baka Chosengjing!
they rage, spraying
their sperm
the smell of
burning dog
burning life

panting

grunting on top of me—
Under my blood I am dying

1943, Shanghai, China

One night
a soldier asked all the girls,

Who can do one hundred men?

I raised my hand—
Soonja did not.

The soldiers put her in boiling water
alive
and
fed us.

What is living?

Is Soonja living in me?

1946, Chinju Again

One year after
liberation,
I came home.

Short hair
not wearing Han Bok
not speaking clearly
Mother hid me in the back room

At night Mother took me behind the house by the well and
washed me
Scars seared with hot steel like burnt bark
like roots of old trees

all over my body
under the crescent glow She always smiled when she washed me

My baby! Your skin is like white jade, dazzling

She bit her lower lip
washing my tummy softly like a baby's
but they ripped open my baby house
with the baby inside

What is dying?

Mother made white rice and seaweed soup
put my favorite white fish on top
–but Mother, I can't eat flesh.
She hanged herself in the granary that night
left a little bag in my room
my dowry with a rice ball.

Father threw it at me
waved his hand toward the door

I left at dusk.

30 years

40 years

forever

Mute mute mute

bury it with me

They called me, wianbu–

I had a name.

1991, 3:00 AM

[That night,

the thousand blue stars
became white butterflies
through ripped rice paper,
and flew into my room.

One,
One hundred,

One thousand butterflies—

These endless white butterflies going through
the web in my mouth,
going into my unhealed red scars,
stitching one by one—
butterflies lifting me, heavier than the dead
butterflies opening my bedroom door, heavier than shame.]

At
dawn,
I stand.



"Cimmerian Sister." Image by Kristi Crutchfield Cox.

Grandmother Talking Camptowns

At 77 years old all my teeth are gone
and the wind blows past my gums.
No windscreen in Dongducheon
where homeless live alone.

Rather than live alone
I wanted to be a monk in Buddha's temple
but they kicked me out—
I sneaked the bacon.

The Deacon's ad in the newspaper
offered a room at his church—
In exchange for cleaning I lived well.
One rainy night I drank Soju and smoked
so they kicked me out.

Damn hard work on my back for GIs—
pounded and pounded me inside
so one day it had to go.
The khanho-won removed my womb
no pension for sex trade
no yungkum.

American couple adopted
my half white son—
my half black daughter
I left at the orphanage door
and never knew her fate.

At one time I had money saved.
My brother came in his guilty face
Because I can't protect you— you do this.
He used my handling money
to become a lawyer and soon removed
my name from the family—like scraping a baby from the womb.
Still, on birthdays my sister Sook
came secretly to see me,

came with seaweed soup—
*Unni, Unni...*I waited for her to come
Unni, Unni...I waited for her to come
saved a gift chocolate so carefully wrapped—
gum, perfume, Dove soap...

Now that she's engaged
Sook cannot return—
Why can't you go to America like the others?
For the first time that day I was weeping,
Mother, mother, we should not live
Let's die together! But Mother was already gone.

The time goes so fast that people on the moon
didn't know where Korea was.
One day I met a man
and I am a woman making rice
washing his work clothes
submissive and joyful until
he found my American dollars
ran away and never came back.

Now in Dongducheon
look—
stars shimmer in the wind.