

Halmoni

Part 8

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When the new L word has become ‘lockdown’ and memories of ‘normal life’ feel like a sci-fi movie, Puppy doesn’t know how to think anymore. It has been reading a novel about a person who is travelling across their country, hopping in and out of strangers’ cars, spontaneously getting on flights, sleeping in random motels, walking into cafés to eat and chat with whoever happens to be sitting there ... Now, this reads as science fiction to Puppy.

Puppy feels like a dry box folding in on itself. It has switched off certain feelings and sensations inside itself as a survival tactic during the unrelenting times of the new L word. Two days ago, it went on a walk with a friend, who said somewhat dreamily: “Remember this time last year? We were all so in love with each other and the lockdown had just come down upon us for the first time!” Puppy didn’t register the part about love, but immediately felt murky inside about how long the new L word had been continuing. Later on during the walk, the friend blurted out, “I want to touch you! Can I touch you?” and put her arm around Puppy’s shoulder, which only made it feel even stiffer like a dry box closing in on itself.

That same afternoon, Puppy called its grandma. She had forgotten how to receive a call on her device, so Puppy waited until its aunt came home. Its grandma held the phone in such a way that Puppy could only see her forehead for the entire call. Its grandma said: “Because you see my face so much, you will remember it well after I die, won’t you?” Puppy agreed that it would. Its grandma said how she thought of Puppy not as her

grandchild, but rather as her own child. When feelings that Puppy had long forgotten began to stir inside it, its grandma suddenly shouted: “You need to get married!” Puppy let out a faint laugh.

The morning after the call, Puppy caught itself humming the song *Reflection* from the Disney movie *Mulan* (1998) in its kitchen, while making muesli.

*Look at me,
I may never pass for a perfect bride, or a perfect daughter.
Can it be,
I'm not meant to play this part?
Now I see, that if I were truly to be myself,
I would break my family's heart ...*

Puppy smiled softly as it remembered back to its teenage years in South Korea when it sang this song very passionately at a school talent show. ‘How embarrassing ...’ it thought, especially now that it was aware of this Disney movie being a silly appropriation of the original version of the story, *The Ballad of Mulan*, written around 400 AD. In the Disney version, Mulan meets ‘the perfect man’ at the end. In the original version, she doesn’t meet or want any man. It ends with the following verses:

*Most people tell the gender of a rabbit by its movement:
The male runs quickly, while the female often keeps her eyes shut.*

*But when the two rabbits run side by side,
Can you really discern whether I am a he or a she?*

This morning, Puppy talks with its grandma for a short time, because yesterday its grandma got her first Covid vaccine and Puppy wants to make sure that her body is reacting well to it. Its grandma is thankful that Puppy worries about her, and says that she hopes she will live long

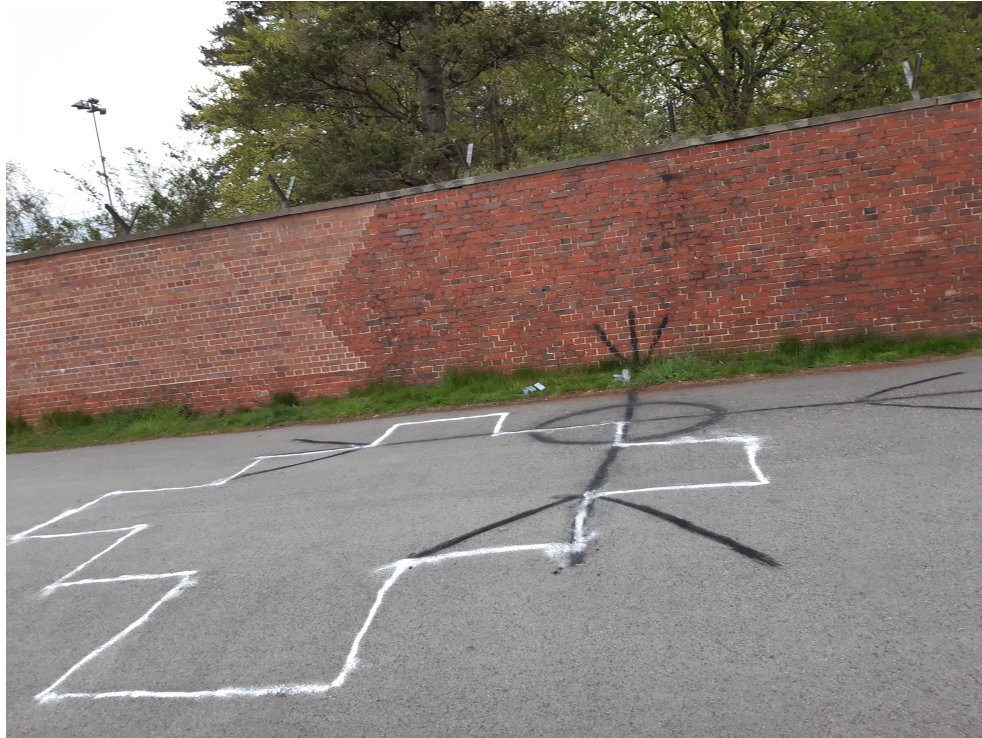
enough to see it get married and have children. Then, she adds, “How can I return your kindness in calling me?” She thinks for a moment and exclaims, “I will tell you how much I love you! I love you, I love you, I love you so much, like the expanse of the sky and the earth!”

After hanging up, Puppy thinks about the reason it started this series *Halmoni* – to introduce its world to its grandma, hoping that this would help her understand that Puppy doesn’t wish to live a life with marriage as its main goal. But now, at the end of the project, Puppy feels that its grandma’s way to love Puppy is wanting what is ‘good’ for it, which, in her view, is marriage and children. This is her expression of love, and the way Puppy wants to love her is by accepting her expression of love without letting that shake its own desires in life.

That afternoon, Puppy goes to Tempelhofer Feld to watch a performance *New Territories* by Eli Wewentxu and Sharon Mercado. It is cold and grey. The park is quite empty. Puppy arrives early and waits behind a big tree, so as to not peek at the performers preparing. Sharon comes to Puppy after a while, and tells it that they will activate an intervention and Puppy can watch from anywhere. The two performers, both wearing all white and with caps on their heads, each draw a sign, one in white and one in black, on the wide concrete pathway. After that, they carry out various steps and hops in relation to each other along the lines of their drawings.

Puppy enjoys it when an older-looking person with glasses and long blond hair on her bike shouts out, “Entschuldigung, kann ich vorbei?!” But Eli just looks up without any expression and doesn’t budge. The person grumbles and bikes around her. Then, a younger looking person without glasses and long blond hair on her bike apologises profusely (“Sorry, Sorry”), while riding around the lines of the drawings. Another passerby comments, “A rally?” At one point, a black dog jumps happily at Eli, which she, with a smile, pushes away. Some people stop to watch for a moment, some people pass by. Some people step and cycle on the drawings, some

people take extra care not to touch them. A big police van drives by, its occupants looking intently at the scene, but keeps on driving. A young child climbs up on a tree by the performance site and watches quietly ...



After the performance, Sharon explains that the signs are from an agricultural calendar from where she and Eli originally come from. They are trying to understand and revive these “ancestral calendars” with their bodies. Sharon explains more about the signs. For example, on the black sign, the edge to the east means soil, but on the white sign, the edge to the east means rain. Puppy asks further questions, but as soon as it realises that the signs and the meanings are in a very complex relationship to one other, it doesn’t try to understand. Sometimes, it finds it best to simply let things be. Some people step on lines and boundaries and others go around. Some people demand space and some apologise for taking space. Some watch from afar and some fling their bodies right on top of their point of interest. Some days are warm and some days are chilly. Some days your box folds inwards and some days it opens outwards.

On its way home, Puppy listens to a voice message from Poppy, reciting a poem, *A True Account Of Talking To The Sun On Fire Island*, by Frank O'Hara.

[...]

*And don't worry about your lineage
poetic or natural. The Sun shines on
the jungle, you know, on the tundra
the sea, the ghetto.*

[...]

*And
always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. That
is your inclination, known in the heavens
and you should follow it to hell, if
necessary, which I doubt.*

[...]

Some people try to remember their lineages and some don't think about them at all. Some people fight for their desires and beliefs, and some embrace the way things are. Sometimes you make way, and sometimes you don't budge. Sometimes you have to shout out for others to make way for you, and sometimes you can look around and see that there are different pathways available to you.

Along with the poem, Poppy sent three paintings they recently created. Puppy doesn't understand them, but likes them nevertheless.



radiant hands



ghost dance



redfox and snake

That night, Puppy dreams of its grandma's voice. It is in a room where it hasn't been before. The phone rings. Puppy picks it up and hears the familiar tone. They stay on the call for a long time, without having much to say, but just being content that they are sharing the moment. At one point, Puppy asks its grandma what she is doing this evening. "Nothing," she replies. Puppy suggests that it come over to her house that evening. She is happy to hear this and tells Puppy what she will prepare for dinner for it. Puppy feels a calm happiness sinking down into its body.