

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

*Hee-June Choi*

### **What's Your Name Again?**

Hee-June means "the bright gentleman."  
My father got it from a sorcerer who said  
his magic only works in Korean air.  
On November 14, 1972, my birthday, I left Korea  
with the passport name of Hi-June.  
My first plane ride,  
but I knew a lot about America  
from double-feature theaters.

In a lounge in Tokyo, a girl on a loudspeaker  
with a Japanese accent called, "Hi, June-Choi."  
I hesitated a little; I'd heard people call a dog  
"Hi, Puppy!" or "Hi, Cutie!"  
It was about my connecting flight, but she'd insulted me  
big-time: I wrapped myself tighter in my winter coat,  
knowing the actual battle was to come; all language can be  
either a tool or a weapon.

I changed the spelling to "Hee-June,"  
but people kept asking, "What's your name again?"  
I said, "Hey, he is June, not July. All right?"  
Nothing went easy; June is a girl's name.  
To tough it out, I talked about the football game on TV,  
name-dropping 220-pounders clashing for a hopping ball,  
child's play but serious. Had I known about  
the power of a smile, I'd have smiled more.

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When Boss said, "Hey, tough guy! Congratulations on finishing the job early. I read your proposal for new lithography specs. I don't know what you do, but everyone likes to be around you. Can you spearhead the new project?"

I started to work a hundred hours per week, not to disappoint him. One day, a technician with a cowboy hat walked into my office:

"You are a slave driver. I'd love to decorate your wall with a whip." I just smiled.

By now, I'd traded my thick wool coat for the jeans and t-shirts of James Dean. When asked,

"Who are you, truly?" I laughed

I'm a football player from Korea, still studying the rulebook, but chasing after the bouncing ball, getting ready for the big game.

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### A Portrait of 1896

– in the *Korean Almanac*

Balancing a large bowl on your head,  
breasts exposed for all to see,  
lips locked like rusty iron gates  
of the reclusive Kingdom.

So precious is the wooden bowl, my guess is you don't care  
how you look. On the hill behind, the village men  
play cards all day. So it's your job to put  
boiled barley on the evening table.

As the powder tray flashes, your eyebrows are up:  
a set of wings flapping into flight.  
Or are you in a panic thinking the stranger might be  
a sorcerer with lightning in his hand?

What did you do when you heard Empress Min  
was raped by those Imperial proxies?  
I just sat on my chair praying for the bell  
to ring in history class.

Smoke from her burning body,  
now circling the Earth;  
nothing could be truer than the fact  
that I breathe in your breath.

Encased in the silver film,  
did you make it safely through that year?  
If it's any consolation, you made it onto  
a page of *The 1890s*.

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### **Wreath on the Gate**

*–1997 financial crisis in Seoul*

When hit by a sudden wave, stand firm  
or get up quickly –a wave of pink slips on Friday,  
everyone at his desk thinking of his turn. Who was it  
who hung his undershirt on the park's gate?

Snow heaps on the gate post like a Buddhist's  
rice bowl. From the nearby pub,  
a chorus of Arirang belches out with chopsticks beating  
like peasants of the old kingdom.

Down the block, a dead leaf carries snowflakes  
in a puff of wind; crumpled newspapers in the gutter,  
today's headlines read, "The People Donate Their Gold:  
Half the Country's Debt Paid Off."

–a Catholic priest offered his crucifix,  
a mom her baby's ring, 227 tons.  
A hundred military trucks loaded with gold  
en route to the bankers.

Still, the bare-chested man is running  
and running around the government square;  
snowflakes clinging to the undershirt make  
a victory wreath awaiting his return.