

The Girl from No Gun Ri

During the Korean War, on July 26-29, 1950, around 250 to 400 South Korean refugees were killed in a US air attack and fire from the 7th Cavalry Regiment at a bridge near the village of No Gun Ri. The US military, fearing North Korean infiltrators in disguise, ordered soldiers to shoot South Korean refugee groups.

I.

I was sixteen when they came
war had broken out and girls
were the price of cigarettes
older women swung scythes
like broken teeth at soldiers
who were said to --- the girls
so I hid in an urn in the dark
waiting for history to pass
my name was Park Hee-Sook
I wore my hair long in a braid
tipped with a rippling ribbon
smooth as the flow of red blood

II.

my playground became a battleground
and we gathered our skirts to flee
home became a fistful of objects
pounding its dirge on my back
the communists are coming they said
you must move out or die they said
in the sun everything was too hot
I can't breathe the Americans
said *keep walking* I cannot

III.

then the sky split and the universe
was a crematory
flaring

everything was in pieces
mother
father sister home
body leg arm head
earthclod cattle burning
where am I
human meat we are all
on fire

IV.

orphaned in a day, I wear
the torn bodies of the dead,

hiding from a horde
of black bullets

I hear blood gurgle and burst
in the strafed tunnels,

a cacophony of flies
feed on swollen flesh

my throat burns like paper
in the dark, I don't know

if I'm drinking
water or blood

if I stay I will die
if I leave I will die

if I die I will die
I run out

V.

an American waves me forward
and men clamber out of their holes

I say *Hello Hello*
the only English word I know

Hello my whole family
has been killed

it is hell in there *Hello*
I cry coated in blood

I scream *Hello Hello*
and pound on their chests

you said you would save us
Hello

I am red ribboned with
the dark hands of death

as they hold me shaking
in their arms

Hello I cry
to the living and dead

as I weep all the bones
from my body

VI.

In the village, the nights
have burning blue eyes

I cannot stop my own eyes
from drowning.

The watchmen remember
my wracking with wails

as ghosts clog my throat

with their names.

Before the war ends
I walk back to the bridge

and search for remains
of my father

I scoop up his flesh
in the cup of my hands

and bury him
far from his home

O my father rest here
in the dark of the earth

as I braid your spirit
from the past

O my father hide here
in the mouth of the land

as we wait
for history to pass