

# Kumsan

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Faculty Essay (II)

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Youngju eyed his soju glass, and a quiet, wistful smile appeared. “Remember Kumsan?”

At Ddungbo’s, over soju and pork ribs *anju*. The soju had reminded my friend of our trip to that mountain at the southern tip of Namhae Island. Ten years ago, yes. . .

“What’s taking you so long? Not stomach cramps again?” Youngju called back to me.

“Just. . . enjoying things — you’re the one that’s. . . that’s always telling me to slow down and enjoy what’s along the way. . . In fact, why don’t we sit down a while. . . and enjoy it even more?”

He stopped, came back to me. “How long does it take you to enjoy something, anyway — you do it by osmosis?”

“Well, I guess I might enjoy a little rest while I sit here and enjoy the scenery. Anyway, it’s easier for you — that heavy pack gives you momentum.” I didn’t have a pack.

Even then, ten years ago, I was out of shape. Of course, I was already a few years out of college, and Youngju was still a young whipper-snapper college student. He had been smoking and drinking ever since sometime in middle school, and I had started only recently — but he had taken deer-antler medicine when he was just a kid, and I hadn’t.

Kumsan isn’t all that high, but it’s steep. It’s that kind of short, steep climb you just want to get over with — something like a long ladder, and who ever thinks of stopping to enjoy the scenery on the way up a ladder? But the longer I sat there enjoying the scenery, the less I wanted to get up.

Well, Youngju got me going again, and we finally made it to the top. The sun was already beginning to set, into the Yellow Sea. It was setting into a storm, way, way off. A gray curtain hung from the broad black underbelly of the clouds, brushing a sea of lead. Above this field of doom, though, was a vast field of billowy whites and pastels. I remember how that sun, as it settled into the wet clouds, hissed and spit off long shoots and wisps of fire over the whole sky.

“We’ll see it rise from the South Sea tomorrow morning, if we get up early enough.” Youngju had been there a couple times before.

Is it still there? At that time there was a small inn right on the top of Kumsan. It was very old, very simple and spare, in perfect harmony with its natural surroundings. The sagging roof was a weed patch, the cracking walls a verdant vine trellis, the tunneled

posts and verandah happy home to a thriving colony of termites — nature was busily reclaiming the inn.

We got a room, then rested on the friendly verandah smoothed and polished by the seats and stockings of generations of weary travelers. From there we gazed on the fury of the mute and distant storm, like a God musing in his cool detachment on a stormy but distant world.

We wiled away some more time, checking out the small scrubby rocky peak, wondering idly why that butterfly did this and this squirrel didn’t do that, and what it all meant, if anything — till supper was ready. Then a smoke, and some stories, memories teased from the old innkeeper. Then a nasty argument. Night fell.

Feelings were still raw when we headed to the little grocery shack. It sold everything from cigarettes to soju, but hardly anything outside of that. That was enough, though. We got a couple bottles and headed over to “the spot.” Youngju had found this place once when he came up here in his first year of high school.

“The spot” is a huge, flat rock overhang joined to the mountaintop by an unnervingly narrow catwalk. If you don’t plunge into the abyss, if you get to that rock, it’s just you and the beach, several miles off, and the moon and stars an eternity off, setting dark islands off against a sea of silver and black glimmer. And there’s the sound of the waves, gentle tonight, carried all that way on the back of a steady, gentle breeze.

We sat down on our rock, broke open the soju, looked around, and our hearts lost all memory of the anger they were filled with until — when? It happened so suddenly. Apparently the sky and mountain spirits had been creeping up on us, entered us, but so silently that we were entirely under the spell before we finally sensed it. It is not often in a man’s life that he is granted such a profoundly intimate encounter with nature. I say intimate, not familiar — a lovely, noble lady gave herself body and soul, but forbade her heart.

Into that mesmerizing intercourse with the lady drifted the husky, earthy call of a solitary *daegum*.

“Sounds like it’s from Bori Hermitage, the one I told you Yi Song-gye studied at a few years. “The mountains, moon, stars, the temple flute — the soju, of course —. . . and now Youngju had mentioned Yi Song-gye. He founded the Chosun dymasty almost six centuries ago. It all coalesced into an intuitive,

“gut” sense of Korea’s heart that was so immediate and personal it felt like a memory. The “real” Korea?

Who knows? Well then, describe it. Sorry: as Augustine said, “I know until you ask.”

“Maybe that’s why we like the mountains so much. . .” Youngju broke in. I must have been thinking out loud. He spoke softly, not to disperse this rare, ever so delicate moment. “It’s easy here to remind ourselves of what we like to think is the real Korea. We don’t come here just to seek nature, or to escape our hectic city lives. . .”

The soft breeze shifted and brought us the sound of a light surf from Songju Beach, ten miles off. The moon tried to hide behind a gossamer cloud, but gave itself away as it set the cloud aglow.

The intensity of nature’s embrace gradually relaxed, and left only contentment and security. The lovely lady had released me from her embrace.

I was myself again. “Any *anju* left?”

“You and your *anju*. . .”

A stiff breeze disturbed the temple’s light wind chimes, rustled the trees.

The moon ran from behind the cloud that had betrayed it, and ducked right behind another. The sky darkened, and the breeze brought a chill.

After a while we got up, and took another long look, trying to fix this whole thing to remember another day, when life dragged. We slipped back over the Precipice of Certain Death to the safety of the mountain.

Somehow we made it up on time the next morning to see the sun rise over the sea. No fireworks like the evening before — serene, stately, an emperor ascending his throne. And all of the world hushed, the emperor’s audience. . .

“Gentlemen! Time’s up — unless you’re sleeping here tonight,” Ddungbo cast over her shoulder as she scraped the pork remains off a grill.

“All right, we’re going — wouldn’t want you to roll over on me. . . Hey, we’ve got to get back there someday!” How many times had we said this since that day ten years before?

“Sure. . .” But it wouldn’t be the same.

“Absolutely. . .” How could it ever be the same?

## Afterword

The article about recounts my first visit to Kumsan, around 1972 or 1973. I visited again in the summer of 2006. In those days none of the roads on the island were paved, even the streets in Namhae’s capital city; now the entire is, including a one-lane concrete-bed road runs up to a 100-car parking lot 20 minutes’ climb below Bori Hermitage. Since my last visit the hermitage had been turned into a tourist attraction with bright new paint and a new identical structure in front of it, and a Buddhist goods souvenir shop two minutes’ climb above it. The day was extremely hot and I was exhausted, so I didn’t make it to the peak, where I remember the inn having been. There is an inn, though, between Bori Hermitage and the peak, and a two-story stone building in front of the inn; they have been there, according to the middle-aged man who seems to be maintaining it, “for fifty years.” The man told me that there had been an inn on the peak, until the 1920’s, and that there was nothing on the peak now. Shortly after my return to Seoul I met “Youngju” (not his real name), and asked whether he remembered an inn at the very peak; yes, he did. When I told him what the man had said about the inn disappearing, Youngju reminded me of how we watched the sun set into the storm not only from the peak but from very close to the inn on the peak. So it’s back again one more time — to the peak this time — to find out what’s what.