

Glow With It

by Jules Chung (she/her)

I turned fifty last summer. While sickness and an awakening around racial injustice racked the country, I quietly marked my birthday with my family at the beach. We kept our strolls on the boardwalk brief. With covered faces, we enjoyed the sea air while weaving around other people to keep a distance deemed safe. In this bizarre setting, everyone became tentative and faceless. Acknowledging one another felt urgent. I tried to nod at people, to exude warmth through my eyes to honor the humanity of those I was passing, and to honor my own. I see you. I'm here. Can you see me?

Feeling unseen as a Korean-American woman is a constant. The larger culture mostly excludes us or offers ungainly representations that hold fast and make us unrecognizable to ourselves. Much of my life has felt like trying to communicate from beneath a sticky veil that I have to puncture my way through.

But the struggle for so many children of Korean immigrants includes the struggle to be seen and heard within our own families. It's hard to deny the familial conditions: Being an individual is tough. Being an artist is tougher. Coming from this very particular environment, I feel the same urgency about staking a claim for my humanity that I felt on that stroll at the beach. In the absence of art that shows us who we are, our lives as complicated people with passions and foibles seem like speculation or rumor, an urban legend.

For me, writing is a process of loving the people I know into existence. My novel in progress, *Lisa Bae: A Diasporational Fairy Tale*, is the story of a woman who has to break with the weighty expectations of her Korean-American family to save herself. While her rejection of her parents' wishes initially causes pain and tumult, it ultimately allows her to fulfill their deepest hopes that she remain in their lives as a devoted daughter. On the surface, the story is a comedic look at how one immigrant family deals with trying to get three daughters married off. But as the story deepens, it is an exploration of the insular life of a Korean-American community and the way it compounds the burdens on women. All the patriarchal ideas about the value of women outside a system of heterosexual marriage

loom large in this world of Korean, Christian immigrants. The drama around getting daughters married off to suitable Korean-American men exposes a host of issues including male privilege, inherited trauma, mental illness, brutal snobbery, homophobia, and the wound of immigration.

I say “wound” because while immigration is a narrative of agency and triumph in the popular American imagination, the reality is more ambiguous. There are elements of defeat and a sense of being marooned that are perhaps less palatable but from an artist’s point of view, essential. The peaks mean more when one has seen the valleys.

I want to upend the rosy myth of Asian-Americans as the “model minority,” a myth I find pernicious. The stereotype is dehumanizing. It flattens Asian Americans into an anodyne monolith that the American psyche can fold up neatly and tuck away into a drawer, like a nice sweater that someone has given you but that you feel doesn’t really go with the rest of your wardrobe. We are relegated somewhere that seems like a place of respect and belonging but that is actually one of permanent exile, a purgatory. I write to get us out of purgatory, to make Korean-Americans burningly specific and fully alive. I write to love us into visibility.

My parents and their peers mourned the loss of their connection to country and culture while trying to preserve what they could. They were running a gauntlet trying to “Americanize” themselves and at the same time running a rescue mission for their Koreanness. They embraced as much of American culture as was comfortable but balked at the way we, their children, dove headlong. They thought we were rebelling. We felt we were trying to survive. So how could their parenting journey be anything but tortured? It was undergirded with unfailing devotion but pockmarked with failed communication, misunderstanding, rejection, and loss. It is to make good on those losses that I write. It is to unearth the joy that I write. It is to bear witness to the pain and the glory of the lives of people like my family that I write.

At fifty, I have the empathy to see my parents as they wanted to be seen when I was younger. I had been so battered by certain aspects of my upbringing that I was determined to be a different kind of parent--a better one, I thought. Life threw me a curveball, though. My own child went through an embattled adolescence and found peace after coming out as transgender. The sense of superiority that

I harbored toward my parents dissolved during those years--because it had to. Out of love for my child and a desire to preserve the bonds of family, I had to banish every prejudice about my parents. I had to open my heart to the possibility that they would continue to show unconditional love to their grandchild. They did. It seemed miraculous to me, but they did.

Maybe in some darkly comic-tragic way, Korean-Americans have been unwitting participants in the erasure of their full humanity. I realized as I raised my own children how much I myself had been taught to ignore my own challenging emotions, to put on a happy face and a strong persona no matter what was happening underneath. I began to see the childhood traumas I suffered as tendrils that grew out of the trunk of the traumas suffered by my parents. My parents were virtuosic in their ability to hide their real feelings if those feelings tended toward pain. As children during a bloody war on the Korean peninsula, they had seen and survived things they never spoke of. Putting down roots in America was arduous and often humiliating, but they survived. In many ways, they also triumphed.

I write to honor my parents, to honor myself, and to leave a legacy for my children. I know that my stories resonate with the stories of so many others. I want us *all* to see ourselves in art and to know in our bones that we are gloriously human. I want us to glow with it.