

When You Trap a Tiger

Author's Note

When I was little, my halmoni told me stories.

My younger sister and I would curl up in bed with her, and as she spoke of ghosts and tigers, our world filled with magic. In those moments, I would have sworn I heard tigers outside the bedroom, their sharp claws *skritch*ing against the wood floors. I could practically see their shadows seeping under the door.

On those nights, I felt connected to a line of Korean women I'd never known—as if their stories still lived in my blood. When I listened to Halmoni, I wasn't part white, part Asian, one-quarter Korean, mixed. I was just full me, and I knew it in my bones.

Years later, when I left Hawaii for college, I abandoned the stories—not intentionally, just by accident, as though they'd slid under my bed and gathered dust. Before long, I forgot they were missing.

I didn't know how much I needed them until late in college, when somebody asked if I was Korean.

Just a quarter, I answered. The words felt wrong as soon as I spoke them. The answer, quite simply, has always been *yes*. But somewhere along the way, I'd started dividing my blood into parts.

Wanting to be whole again, I turned back to the stories, reading old fairy tales and searching the internet—but they were different now. These were not my halmoni's

stories. Somehow they had shape-shifted. Maybe they had changed. Maybe I couldn't find them. Maybe my halmoni had told different versions, and invented some entirely.

When I asked her to recall her stories, she waved her hand. *Oh, so long ago*, she said. *I don't know what I say*.

So, with nowhere else to turn, I wrote my own story.

I started with my favorite: two siblings run from a tiger, escaping into the sky to become the sun and the moon. It's a popular story, with many variations, but I always felt like the story was hiding something—and I wanted to know its secrets.

The tiger in that story is clever and determined. It dresses up as the children's grandmother. It hunts them down. It attempts to trick them, and when that doesn't work, it chases them far and wide. It tries to chase them into the sky.

The tiger is ceaseless in its pursuit, and I always wondered, what does it want? Nothing so crass as meat; this felt like more. What could be so important, so powerful, that the tiger would chase these children across the world?

I wrote a dozen drafts in search of the answer, but it did not come easily. It was as if I had to prove I was trustworthy before the story would reveal its secrets.

So I worked for it. I dug back through my family history and the history of Korea.

I read about colonialism and oppression, about a hidden language and forgotten stories, about comfort women and imposed silence. But in this dark history, I found strength, too. Korean people—Korean women, in particular—are fierce and resilient, and as I worked, I understood my halmoni and myself better.

My research revealed strange coincidences. In an early draft, I'd written about star jars full of magic, without really knowing why. The idea had seemed to come out of nowhere.

Later, I discovered Chilseong, or the Seven Stars—a deity that watches over children and is often honored by the setting out of bowls or jars.

Similarly, in my story I'd invented a small Korean island where the sea parts once a year. While poring over a map of Korea, trying to find a place for my fictional village, I learned that it already exists—Jindo, a seaside island where once a year, due to a combination of tides and maybe just a bit of magic, the ocean really does part.

I worked like this, alternating between writing and research, treating these coincidences as clues, as if I were piecing together a story that had already been told long, long ago, and I only had to bridge the gaps.

I worked my way through history, all the way back to the Korean origin myth. And there, I found the biggest coincidence.

Before my research, I'd had a vague understanding of the origin myth, but for some reason, my halmoni never told us this one. It goes like this:

Long, long ago, there was a heavenly prince who ruled over Earth. His job was easy enough until a bear and a tiger, tired of their wild lives, asked him to turn them human.

He said that if they lived in a cave for one hundred days and ate only mugwort and garlic, they would become women.

The bear succeeded, and the god rewarded her with a human body. Together, they created the Korean people.

But the tiger was impatient. She wouldn't deal with those conditions. She ran out of the cave and was doomed to a life of stalking through the forest as a beast, alone.

I'd known about the bear-woman, but until then I'd never heard about the tiger. And yet in my draft, I'd written about a tiger-girl who asks a sky god to turn her human. The words had felt right when I wrote them, though I didn't quite understand them.

Now, *this* felt like more than a coincidence.

Yes—maybe I'd heard the story before, and it had burrowed, long forgotten, in my subconscious. But all the same, I felt connected to something bigger. I felt the way I had so many years ago, as if these stories lived in my blood, even the ones I'd never heard before.

I dug deeper into the myth and found a critical essay called “Begetting the Nation,” by Seungsook Moon. According to Moon, “the transformation of a bear into a woman carries the deep social meaning of womanhood epitomized by patience to endure suffering and ordeal.”¹

And with that, the story finally fell into place.

Here was the secret history. Because if the bear represents Korean women—or a version of womanhood that means suffering and silent endurance—what, then, of the tiger?

What about the woman who refused to suffer and was banished for it?

What would happen if she came back?

What would she want—and what story would she tell?

¹ Seungsook Moon, “Begetting the Nation,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 41.