

Stories My Grandmother Tells Me

by Gabriella K. Son (Fort Lee High School 11th Grader)

Halmoni remembers, despite her failing memory:

The first sightings of soldiers in her village

Not yet knowing they would soon meet again, at her doorstep

Taking one good look at her, seeing she was fit for the “factory”

Not yet knowing, years later, she would never find her family

Her knapsack clutched in one hand, her naiveté trembling in the other

Wearing their best hanboks, treated lesser than the dogs:

Fifty dewy-eyed girls crammed into a single boxcar

where the wind howled through cracks and the mice nibbled at their feet

At night, their cries, a sinister lullaby

The door creaking open, an alarm clock

The door slamming behind him, a wake up call

It was one hundred soles a day,

chugging towards her thirteen-year-old body like that rickety boxcar

At this part Halmoni trembles even harder:

Oh, and the stench of sake and cigarettes!

Even after they left, she would still smell their scent

Making it even harder to forget the unclean men

who were not just dirty from war

Then there are the things Halmoni cannot remember:

Her name, the Korean one

Her family, the one in Korea

Hearing an apology.