



Bridgewater Review

Volume 15 | Issue 1

Article 7

Jun-1996

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Recommended Citation

Hurley, Mike (1996). Three Wars. *Bridgewater Review*, 15(1), 11-15.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol15/iss1/7

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THREE WARS

Mike Hurley

TOMORROW, THE SUN!

"*Tomorrow, the Sun!*" was the last thought that crept through the mind of Pak Sook-ja as she huddled the stiff appendages of her small body closer together, her bare legs tucked under her on the frozen dirt.

She felt a jabbing chill prickling along her frail (even for an eight-year-old) form as the acidic Korean cold etched and hacked its way through her thin, torn clothes, deeper and deeper, penetrating her flesh. "*Tomorrow, the sun,*" she thought numbly as the torpid dream aroused a passion of warmth and satisfaction within her. "*The sun; the hot, beautiful sun!*"

Sook-ja shivered as a sudden breeze iced her spine. Then, in the comfort of a merciful nothingness, her head sagged, and she crumpled onto the cold ground as the raw, freezing tongue of winter rasped her tiny feet.

Choe Jung Suk, warm as buttered toast, heard the alarm clock singing in the next room. Abruptly it stopped, which meant that mommy was awake, and soon the house would be alive with the wonderful smells of breakfast. Soon, too, she would have to get up, and so, acting like the little girl she was, Jung Suk slid deeper into the soft, quilted bed, the thick covers wrapped warmly around her ample seven-year-old body.

Cautiously, she raised her right eyelid—ever so slightly—just right for peeking, and within moments her cheating eye saw the frame door, with all the beautiful birds colorfully painted on it, slide back, and saw mommy rustle in. Already dressed in a rich red

chima and multi-colored *chogori*, mommy glided across the warm wooden floor under Jung Suk's carefully concealed peek and kissed her daughter gently on the forehead.

Jung Suk tried hard to pretend she was asleep, as do most little girls, but mommy knew better—mommy always does. She wanted to lie stiff, still, but mommy was tickling her, and suddenly, with a burbling explosion of giggles, Jung Suk jumped up into the waiting, loving embrace.

Surrounded by the fetid smell of sleepers' sour breath, Hong Tong Sun lay wide awake, waiting for the sun to be lifted into the crisp sky. It was cold, terribly cold with a twitching chill peculiar to the Korean winter. Even lying between the big warm bodies of his *halmoni* and his oldest sister, the rawness found him.

"If only the sun would come up," he thought. Then grandmother would get up, remove the burnt cinder from the pot-bellied stove and light a new squat *suktan* briquet. And then, breakfast—warm rice—and, if he snuggled up to the stove, a meager portion of one-sided warmth.

Tong Sun jumped up and methodically shook everyone into consciousness as the first feeble rays of the winter sun shot through the bleak sky. "*Halmoni,*" he urged, "wake up. It will be a very busy day. I must begin at once, and I must have my breakfast. After all, grandmother, even though I am only nine, am I not the man of the house? Do I not do my best to provide for you and mother, my

three sisters and little brother? Wake up, *halmoni*. I must go to work."

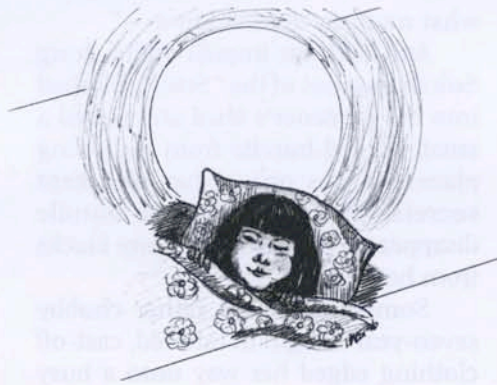
By the side of a refuse pile in a back alley, the smaller heap that was Pak Sook-ja quivered as the morning sun danced with a thawing nibble upon her face and played hide-and-peek over her hair. A sick dog, as thin and as wretched as Sook-ja herself, cautiously crept toward her. Sook-ja giggled, perhaps for the first time in her life, as the dog's ragged tongue slapped up and down her bare feet, licking the frozen moisture from them. She squirmed, but she did not fully awaken until the starving dog, having licked and sniffed, retched, urinated, and moved on.

Sook-ja sat up, partially dried her feet with her hands and then stood up, smiling at the sun. "*The sun! The hot, beautiful sun!*" Perhaps some day she would marry the sun. But, no time for such idle pleasure now. It was time to go to work. If business was good, maybe she could get some scrap to eat today.

Jung Suk held her hands pressed hard against her stomach as she went out to play. She had eaten more than she should have for breakfast and was on the verge of being sick. She trundled over to the car port, climbed into the back seat of the family "Scout" and threw herself on the seat, pressing her plump belly against the cold plastic, hoping to stop the churning within. The coolness of the seat covers felt soothing, and soon she fell asleep.

"Oh, but the little fire feels so good," thought Tong Sun, as he slowly ate his tiny ration of rice. "Barely enough for a working man like me to live on, but more than many." He set his empty bowl by the stove, kissed his grandmother, mother, sisters; put on his ragged dirty jacket; took his baby brother by the hand and went out into the streets. It was time to go to work.

A ragged, wretched, pathetic, filthy little figure stood on the sidewalk in front of the Grand Hotel in downtown Seoul; her clothes were tatters, her limbs covered with dirt. She moved about frantically from one passer-by to



the other, her tiny hand outstretched, crying with a weak, pitiful voice, "Ten cents! Ten cents!"

Sook-ja ran to all who passed by, but few people really saw her; she was only a ubiquitous tiny voice from somewhere around knee-level. "Hello, *juctda!* Hello!" she cried, pounding her clenched fists on this man's trouser leg or that woman's coat hem. "If only they'd look down," she thought. "Hello, hello!" she begged, tears in her voice. "Ten cents, *juctda!*"

"How disgusting," snorted one voice; "What a filthy little beggar," denounced another. "Go away," they all said. Firm hands turned away her little fists as she pounded for attention; strong fingers pried her hands off a pant leg or a wrist. Through it all, a small, anguished voice pleaded, "Ten cents."

In the market area, a little boy with a ragged jacket walked along, holding an even smaller boy by the hand. At the corner, Tong Sun stopped and turned to his baby brother.

"Remember what I've taught you," he said. "Look sad, whine, and keep your hand out. Let your nose run. Look for *gajjins*; they're easier. And remember to touch them; Americans can't stand being touched by beggars. Here, put some more dung on your hands— They hate that, too."

Tong Sun picked up a lump of fresh ox dropping and smeared it on his brother's hands.

"Wave your hands in their faces and pound them with your fists. Sometimes they'll throw a coin just to get rid of you."

The little boy with the ragged jacket then helped the smaller boy climb on his back, piggyback, and together tall enough to be noticed, they took up the cry:

"Ten cents. Ten cents!"

In the back seat of the jeep, Jung Suk awoke. Her stomachache was gone and in its place was a hunger for candy. "But mommy says I'm too fat," she complained to no one in particular. "She won't let me have any sweets; but

what mommy doesn't know—"

And with an impish smile, Jung Suk slipped out of the "Scout," dashed into the gardener's shed and pulled a small ragged bundle from its hiding place. It was one of her well-kept secrets. Then she and the bundle disappeared into an alley many blocks from home.

Sometime later, a rather chubby seven-year-old girl in tattered, cast-off clothing edged her way onto a busy street. She paused momentarily to place a few artistic smudges of dirt on her face and clothing, and then blended into the hustling crowd of shoppers, merchants, and beggars.

"Ten cents. Ten cents!"

The sun had been abed several hours in the mid-winter sky before a tiny shivering bundle moved slowly away from the Grand Hotel. Few people had noticed her, and there had been little to eat today. Sook-ja forced her bare feet over the icy concrete sidewalk. It was time to find a place to sleep. Maybe tomorrow—

"He doesn't whine enough, mother," explained the little boy with the ragged jacket. "We did all right, but I could do better if he'd whine." He reached into his pockets and placed a small heap of dirty coins and tattered paper *won* into his mother's hands. "Maybe tomorrow—I could take Sissy."

"You're a good son," his mother said, running her hands through his hair. "Now come and have your supper."

"Whatever is the matter with you, Jung Suk?"

"I'm sick, mommy," she replied truthfully enough. "I don't know why," she lied.

Pak Sook-ja sat down on the frozen ground. There were tears in her eyes. Her feet were numb, but she didn't care; she couldn't feel them anymore.

Hong Tong Sun, his stomach partially satisfied with a small bowl of rice, crawled between the warm bodies of his grandmother and his oldest sister, and went to sleep.

Choe Jung Suk ran to the corner

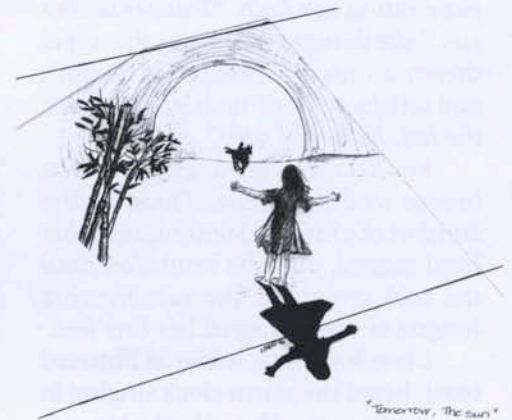
of her bedroom and relieved her belly. Then she crept back into her soft, warm bed with the big thick covers.

"It's cold—So cold!" thought Sook-ja as she huddled her small body closer together. She tucked her nearly-frozen feet under her and buried her hands between her knees. "*Tomorrow, the sun,*" she thought as her tears turned to tiny icicles. "*The hot, beautiful sun.*"

A rosy glow overcame Sook-ja, and she began to dream. She dreamt it was her wedding day, and she was waiting for her *wang-ja*, her prince on a white horse. She dreamt she was standing in a big open space where the sun was just beginning to rise.

Oh, and how warm he was—the *sun*—as he put a ring around her finger.

The hot, beautiful sun!



THE SERVICE OF ADDAM

Corporal Addam was the tenth man out from the road, on the left end of a sweep closing in from the southeast on a squalid assemblage of huts known as Binh Tay. Second unit was deployed to the right. The two squads were beaters, driving the enemy before them. They were the hammer to smash the foe upon the rock northwest of the village, where the rest of the company waited.

Stomachs were filled with acid. Men were jumpy, nerves taut. Most of them sloshed through the rice paddies, but here and there a man found a dike and walked the dry edge. Addam was one of the few...until a mine blew him into the water.

Fingers twitched—jerked—and three rifles spat! unaimed. It was a sure signal for the rest of the men to empty their clips. Huts splattered. Thatched roofs flew apart. Running shadows fell. Grenades exploded. And quickly there was nothing left but smoke, fire, death, and dying.

Addam lay half in black water, red seeping out and puddling around him. His right leg was tattered, his side pierced with shrapnel.

"*Frigging shit!*" he cried, jaw tense, teeth clenched against the numbing nothingness that told him he ought to be in pain. "I don't want to goddamn die. Not here! Not now! *Not in this frigging shit!*"

He felt an expected hand on his shoulder and turned to look at Death.

"I'm not frigging ready!" he yelled. "I don't want to go!"

Death stood in the combat uniform of an American lieutenant and looked at Addam without interest. He seemed almost normal; he might have been human. He spoke without emotion. "The choice is *mine*," he said.

The dying corporal tried to calm himself. He screened anger and resentment from his voice and flipped out a line he'd rehearsed fifty times a day since entering Viet Nam: "Spare me, and I will serve you."

Death laughed. "You?" he mocked. "A corporal? What can you do for me—No, don't answer. I don't want to hear worn-out phrases like 'Spare me and I'll bring you a hundred to take my place.' Listen to me, son. I've got all the help I need. Thousands, millions—I've got thugs and assassins, generals and politicians, tobacco companies and drug pushers. I've got cults and organizations and entire countries. When it comes to dealing from the deck of death, they're professional.



What can you offer me?"

Addam smiled. "A new idea," he said. "Something unique, different from anything you've ever been offered before."

Death, who had been stretching forth his hand, paused. "What is it?"

Addam pulled back a painful inch. "Not so fast," he protested. "I want a deal first. You might take my idea and leave me here to die."

Death cocked his head. "I like your spunk, friend," he said. "You're in no position to bargain, yet you make demands. Your temerity amuses me. Tell me more."

Addam struggled to sit up, to support his back against the muddy side of the dike. "Not now," he said, "but I guarantee you'll be pleased."

"And if not," inquired Death, leaning closely to look into the corporal's eyes, "what do you lose?"

"My life."

"Already forfeit," said Death.

"Yes, but I'll go with you willingly."

Death roared with laughter. When he subsided, he shook his head. "Insufficient!" he said. "After the pain that comes before death, most come quite willingly indeed."

"Nevertheless—"

"Yes, nevertheless, I like you, Corporal Addam; there's some quality about you. I'll take a chance. What are your terms?"

"*Life!*" Addam cried with sudden animation. "Full recovery from my

injuries within three months, and three healthy years thereafter—with an option to renew."

"And *my* service?"

"When we meet again I'll give you an account. If you are pleased, we can extend the contract. If not, well...."

"Done!" said the lieutenant, as he began to fade away, and only in the last moments could the corporal see the avaricious specter behind the face of Death. "I shall call upon you at eight p.m., three years and three months from this date."

Upon the instant, Corporal Addam was in good hands. A buddy applied a tourniquet to his leg, another found a medic. Within the hour he was partially patched and evacuated to Third Field Hospital in Saigon. A month later he was Stateside. In two he was marveling doctors with his recovery. By three he was discharged and commenced upon a civilian life. And thereupon began the service of ex-Corporal Addam.

He started by wallowing in the flesh pots of Chicago, where he became a glutton of overindulgence and built a tolerance to alcohol, a wall against emotion, and an appetite for sex. When he was ready, tempered as a fine instrument, he moved on to the slums and cheap tenements and public housing projects of New York. There he played in the fields of poverty, seducing wilted lilies, ungainly wallflowers, immigrant blossoms, and impressionable buds with false sincerity and promises of affection, an



easy smile, a heady lifestyle, and a handful of dollars. When his reputation began to precede him, he took to Philadelphia, and St. Louis, and San Francisco.

Those who knew something of ex-Corporal Addam said he was only making up for youth lost in Viet Nam. Others speculated that having come close to death, he was trying to experience it all as rapidly and as generously as possible. Distraught parents and relatives of those he had ravished said he was nuts and ought to be put away. Sympathetic psychologists called it a temporary manifestation of post trauma syndrome. Viet Nam vets turned their heads and tried to deal with their own problems. Only the fact that Addam kept on the move saved him from counseling or hospitalization or civil prosecution.

He was in Kansas City when his three years and three months expired.

"Well," said Death, as he appeared in the guise of a drug enforcement agent, precisely at eight p.m., "what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Quite a bit!" Addam answered. "I'd say I've been an excellent servant."

"Excellent? Why, I've kept an eye on you. In three years who have you sent to me? You've killed no one, been responsible for no deaths, started no wars, unleashed no deadly diseases. You have done nothing but dissipate yourself in drink and flesh. And yet, you call yourself excellent?"

"Ah, but consider. You ask me who I've killed. What would that gain you? Where is your profit? How does it enlarge your kingdom? Everyone comes to you; none escape. All are yours whether they come by my hand or another's; whether they die by war or famine or pestilence; whether they are brought in infancy or kicking youth, or dimly find their way through the feebleness of age. In the end, all come to you! You gain nothing that you do not already possess. *Humanity is like so-much money in the bank. It is already yours. You may withdraw it*

whenever you like."

Death was puzzled. "My other servants—"

"*Are like thieves!*" said the ex-corporal. "They have drawn from your account and presented you with what you already had."

It was a logic Death had never encountered before. "How then should I be served?" he asked.

"By deposits instead of withdrawals."

In spite of his stern control, Death drooled. His mask fell away and greedy anticipation glimmered in his eyes. "And what have you deposited?" he asked.

"*Sir!*" said ex-Corporal Addam, in the manner of a military report, "with unflinching dedication to duty, I have fathered eighty-seven children!"

GENERAL WEYMOUTH COMES HOME

Slowly the drums beat!

Harness and leather creaked. Rifles snapped. Muffled feet thundered a muted cadence.

The crowd, mourning-banded, hushed and pulled back to clear the way. Parents lifted silent children to their shoulders. The flag, heavy with honor, flew half its mast and drooped by. Behind it came the men in dark attire, and the men in matching suits, and the widows and orphans and ministers of God, and the marching band...*as slowly the drums beat!*

General Weymouth was coming home.

A flat-bed truck, draped in black and festooned with blue-starred bunting, lumbered down the parade route. On the bed proudly rode the burnt and mangled wreckage—the general had died in that helicopter—and men like toy soldiers in new paint stepped solemnly by its side *while slowly the drums beat!*

Then came the general's coffin, raised high on a horse-drawn caisson for all to see. Old veterans rubbed their eyes, men of age took pallor, women turned away, and children gazed in shock and disbelief.

General Weymouth had come home.

Slowly, *while the drums beat*, and the crowd surged behind, the procession filed its way to Wilbur Park. When everything was in order, the dignitaries took to the stand and the microphones.

"John Quincy Weymouth was one of us. He was born here in Wilburville. We nourished him, we watched him



grow, we touched his life as he touched ours, and we cheered him off to war. Now he has come home, his final duty done."

The speaker turned aside, nodded his head, and a functionary raised his hand. A crane near a 12-foot tall black monolith came to life, and all eyes watched as a cable turned out. Two workmen mounted the truck bed and climbed the helicopter wreckage. Together they caught the hook and guided it to an eye specially welded at the point of balance. "Thumbs up," and the crane began to reel in.

Slowly the drums beat as the crashed remnant made its last flight, turning slightly in the air as it rose. The crane swung to the right and lowered its burden to the polished granite block. Other workmen, on scaffolding around the stone, guided the twisted metal into place and secured it with eight three-quarter-inch bolts slipped into pre-drilled holes. The workmen came down and quietly took the scaffolding away. All the while, *slowly the drums, slowly the drums, beat*.

The functionary received a signal and relayed it to the dignitary, who again nodded. This time, his favor produced a captain who marched, normal step, to the caisson draped in red white and blue bunting.

"Honor Detail," he intoned in a half-whisper. "Ah-ten...*hut!*" Eight men snapped to attention. "Prepare to execute, by the numbers. Ready...*hut!*" The eight slow-stepped into position, three on each side of the caisson and one to either end. "Ready...*hut!*" Six reached out to take hold of handles along the sides of the coffin. The men in front and back remained stationary. "Ready...*hut!*" Six lifted. "Ready...*hut!*" Seven men moved forward, six bearing the general on his last ride. The eighth man waited until the coffin had cleared the caisson and then followed at its foot. All eight, nine with the captain, marched in somber step to a quiet cadence—as *slowly the drums, slowly the drums, slowly the drums, beat*—until they stopped by

the granite rock. "Ready...*hut!*" And they lowered the coffin into place on a stone dais raised in front. "Ready...*hut!*" They released their hold and stood at attention. "Ready...*hut!*" And they moved to form a rank by one side.

Another signal, and a rifled squad marched to stand at parade rest on the opposite side. A bugler stood behind.

"I hereby dedicate this monument to the memory of General John Quincy Weymouth. Henceforth and forever shall this playground be known as Weymouth Park."

"Ah-ten...*hut!* Prepare to fire."

"Ready—"

"Aim—"

"Fire!"

And slowly the drums—
Stopped.

Taps filled the air...

The dignitaries and the veterans and the soldiers, and the widows and orphans and ministers of God, and even the men of age, went away. But parents lined up to take their children past the memorial. For they had enshrined the general *in a clear glass coffin*—unwashed, burnt and broken, exactly as they had pulled him from the burning crash—that their youth might see the *glory* with which he was covered, and the *honors* he had earned in war.

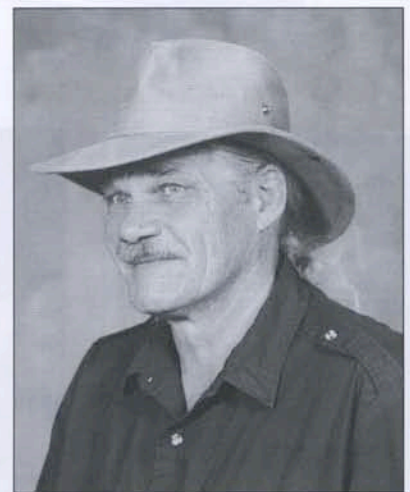


A Note on previous publications:

"Tomorrow, the Sun!" was originally published in *Z Miscellaneous*, Vol 2, #6, November 1988. It was published in Dutch translation as "Morgan, de Zon!" in *Horizon* #53 [Liedekerke, Belgium], June 1989.

"The Service of Addam" was originally published in *Crossroads* #2, June 1992.

"General Weymouth Comes Home" was originally published in Dutch translation as "De Thuiskomst van Generaal Weymouth" in *Horizon* #72 [Liedekerke, Belgium], June 1991. *Horizon* reprinted it, in English, in #76, February 1992. It has also been published in Segregansett Press Chapbook #7, *General Weymouth & Other War Stories*, February 1994.



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