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# Aga

단편 “아가” 영어 번역  
(Wilderness 문학지, 서울 출판, 2013호에 실린 이보형 작가의 글)

“Aga, The Little One”

A short story by Bo Hyung Lee, published in Wilderness, a literary journal (Seoul, Korea) in Korean, 2013

Translated from Korean into English by Maija Rhee Devine, author, The Voices of Heaven (2013)



## 이매자

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Boulevard 문학지 입상

The Voices of Heaven (자서전적 소설):

It won four book awards in contests.

시집: Long Walks on Short Days

수도여대, 한국서강대에서 교직,

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Just as the Pacific War was grinding down to its end in June of 1945, my panic about “the red slip,” a draft order from the Japanese Imperial Army, dropping in our mail box mounted daily. By then, the elders of my family, my grandmother and mother, must have also felt such dread—as they heard of our men being dragged away to Japanese military. Such fear led them to worry about a certain matter. Because I was an only son, if I were to be drafted and, god forbid, got killed, our family, whose descendants were already precious few, our family line would meet a most catastrophic end. Their concern probably began a year earlier when my military physical declared me fit for draft into the army reserve. Since then, every time the subject of the draft emerged, they discreetly inquired about my interest in getting married before going to war. They also seemed to discuss my marriage prospects with others and send word out in search of suitable bride candidates.

Aware of their concern and feeling I had not been a particularly filial son, off and on, I even seriously entertained the idea of doing a “good son” deed by taking worry off their shoulders. However, every time such a thought wriggled into my head, I shook it off as a futile idea. I had my own good reason to arrive at such a conclusion. It had to do with the fact that tragically, my mother became a widow at a young age. The same was true of my grandmother, as my grandfather had died of tuberculosis long before my birth. In my father’s case, he died after an accident the

summer I turned six. As my mother was still young, just turned thirty, and with remarriage forbidden, particularly if the woman was saddled with children, words could hardly fathom her sorrow. Fortunately, my family was rather well-to-do, and the pleasure of managing the estate as well as watching me and my sister, three years older, grow provided the sole consolation in her lonely life.

If I married, went off to war and, by some fluke of fate, got myself killed, I would have relegated my bride to a premature widowhood like my mother's. If, luckily, we did not produce a child, under the reformed law, she might be able to remarry. But if we did have a child, while I might be doing my duty to my ancestors in perpetuating our family line, I would be imprisoning the woman in a life-long widowhood. So, whenever my elders brought up the subject, I muttered something like, "Let me think about it." While I dragged my feet, the ladies seemed to conclude on their own that perhaps their request was not entirely reasonable, even though they were following a traditional practice. Even if I married and had a child, there was no guarantee the baby would not be a girl. If we had a daughter, the entire strategy would collapse. Perhaps, realizing the complexity of their scheme, they began to relax their campaign to marry me off.

But as the terror of the arrival of a red slip intensified, the elders' concerns took a different turn. Even as they let the marriage issue cool down, they anted up another area of dread. If I died a bachelor during the war, my spirit would become an

unmarried male ghost. If such a catastrophe were to happen, my bachelor ghost spirit would undoubtedly be destined to roam the dark spaces of the world in an endless and futile search for a female ghost to become my spouse. So, even if they couldn't arrange a proper nuptial night for me and a bride, the least they could do was to set up a woman to spend a night with me, thus blocking the disaster about to strike me and our family. Thus, they chose a woman to sleep with me.

That sacrificial lamb was a woman named Aga, the "Little One," whom I had known very well.

Aga was a woman of an unhappy past. According to our family lore, her parents were tenant farmers on our ancestral land. One summer, a strange disease hit the region and took the lives of her parents. She was five or six. Since about then, my sister was born, with the idea of eventually making Aga a babysitter, my parents took her in, and Aga became a part of our family. Being a smart girl, as she grew up, she began to assist my mother in various other ways, too. I'm not sure exactly when my first memory of her began, but since my sister called her *onni*, an older sister to a girl, I also called her that while playing together. My family told me to call her *noona*, an older sister to a boy, but *onni* stuck.

When my sister went to a primary school, our family sent Aga to school, too. But because she was older than my sister, Aga couldn't be admitted to the same school. So, she was sent to a private *hakwon* where she could finish elementary school in four years. Then, to get her to learn skills for making a living, our family enrolled her in a women's vocational school. There,

she learned Western and Korean style dress making. After graduation, Aga worked at a dress-maker's. During that time, a good-mannered young man frequented our house doing carpentry work. Our family matched him with Aga and helped them with their wedding and housekeeping. Even after their marriage, on special occasions, Aga came and assisted our family. Every time, she greeted me happily, but I gave her only perfunctory nods.

Three or four years later, shockingly, she separated from her husband. He left for Japan, saying he'd find a job but he'd not been heard from since. Rumors flew about—that their childlessness drove him away, or, that he took off with a lover he kept in hopes of producing a child. Anyway, the night I faced Aga, her life had brought her to such a circumstance.

One day, my mother took me aside and announced that since the elders of our family made a weighty decision solely to rescue me from becoming a bachelor ghost, a fate to be avoided at all costs, I should submit to their resolution without any fuss and spend a night with Aga at an inn in Onyang Hot Springs, a well-known honeymoon spot. For a moment, I felt stunned. The elders might have been confident about persuading me to go along. But, how did they persuade Aga, who was after all, the wife of a living husband, even if he had abandoned her to a life of sleeping in an empty bed? Did she agree to this arrangement, knowing such an act would constitute adultery? With complex emotions roiling in me, I hefted. Then I decided to obey my mother. When I look back, I realize I could have resisted to the end. But I cannot deny the reason for my decision to obey after only feeble hesitancy

might perhaps have come from the stirring or curiosity aroused by the prospect of my first encounter with a fully-ripe woman.

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When I arrived at the room in the inn, Aga was already there. An awkward moment seized both of us. However, perhaps because she was older than I, she spoke first. You took a lot of trouble to travel all this distance, she said. I needed to say something, too, but no words came to my rescue. First, I didn't know what to call her. Aga? Aunt? The all-inclusive designation for a women, known or unknown to me? *Onni*? My childhood name for her? While I hesitated, she broke the awkward silence again.

“Even after I left your home, I saw you often through your young years. Ah, look at you now. You've become quite a young man,” she said.

Her mention of me merely as a young man when I was already past twenty irked me a bit. But since she spoke from a time when her image of me was that of a child, they seemed natural and calmed me. When I looked at her again, even though her face looked like any married woman's, nothing exotic, the hint of make-up on her face and the way she sat gave an impression of a person of order and integrity. I interpreted that as a reflection of her loyalty to her husband even after their separation. It struck me, then, that having a one-night stand with such a woman, who seemed like a chaste old maid, would indeed definitely amount to

engaging in a sinful act.

“Young Master,” she called me.

Then, hesitantly, she said, since it’s too early for dinner, how would I like to go to the bath? And since this inn did not have a public bath but only a family one, would I go there first? At the mention of a family tub, an impulse to joke hit me and I nearly spouted, “Well, then, why not go together?” But lacking the courage to say such a thing and also thinking it improper, I said, “Good idea. But you may go first.”

“How do I dare go first? The towel and soap are ready at the bathhouse. Please go ahead.” With that, she lowered her head.

“All right, then.” Tossing those words, I jumped out of the room. Outside, I felt a weight of a sort lifting.

When I returned to the room after soaking in the tub, she pointed to a pair of pajamas she’d brought for me and told me to change and get some rest. Then, she left the room. While changing, it occurred to me that when she returned to the room, she would change her clothes, too, and put new make-up on. In that case, she might need some privacy. So, I left and after roaming the streets around the hot springs for about an hour, I returned. While I was gone, she had come back. When she saw me, she asked where I had gotten some fresh air and said she’d order dinner for us.

Considering it was a war time, the meal was more than presentable. Aga and I ate in silence.

The inn’s maid then came to clear the table and suggested that we go for a walk in the inn’s garden or the surrounding streets a

bit while she got our bed ready. So, we went out and lingered a while in the fairly well-tended garden.

Our quarters consisted of a living room and a bedroom. Upon our return, we found in the bedroom two sets of bedding on the floor, side by side. More than anything, the two white pillows left me a lingering impression. The sight of the two sets of bedding touching each other aroused a mysterious emotion. The beds were brushing against each other. Were the hearts of the two people about to lie in them also doing that? Wondering so, we stood looking down blankly at the beds. But we couldn't just keep standing there. I took her hand, and we sat down in the living room. The moment I held her hand, I thought I felt her hand pulling back, just a little at first. I then told her that, though I'd come this far because of our family elders' wishes, I was having a difficult time trying to think of what to do. She remained quiet. After a while, with her head lowered, she spoke.

“I feel the same way. But I completely understand your mother's desperation. That's why I came. Please do what feels comfortable for you. If our time together before you get dragged away by the military becomes a good memory for you, nothing will make me happier.” But something seemed to implode, and sobbing, she could barely let the last words out of her mouth audibly. Her hand also felt as though it was shaking a little. At that moment, thinking I shouldn't just sit and hold her hand, I wrapped my arms around her, gently. But even as she leaned into me without a hint of resistance, she added a word of apology for her tears.



Shortly afterwards, as we separated, we looked into each other's face. We'd seen each other countless times before, but this was the first time we searched each other's face, reaching for what our hearts might hold for each other. A smile seemed to light her face. It seemed to signal her heart calmed itself. The inn didn't provide a radio, and, of course, there was no TV at that time. Although we did see chess and *whato* playing cards, we were in no mood to play them. What came naturally then was the sharing of the various stories from our childhood. That eased the tension significantly.

Since it was getting late, we got into our beds. I don't recall who first suggested we go to bed, or who changed into pajamas first, or who turned off the light. None of these details remain in my memory but one thing was clear. She lay in her bed, I in mine.

Though my body lay stretched out, my heart didn't feel at ease even one bit. Ordinarily, the nervousness I had felt from the beginning of the day up to that moment would have put me to sleep effortlessly, but that night, after getting into bed, tension soared. My head, though, seemed it was getting clearer. I couldn't fathom Aga's emotions, but from the absolute silence without even the sound of her breathing, I guessed her discomfort as well. Sensing it, my heart hung heavier and ached. Thinking all this was the result of my family elders' convoluted strategy, I couldn't help but conclude Aga and I had both fallen victim to their design as sacrificial lambs.

I vowed to myself several times I would not take advantage of

Aga lying next to me, as I could not shake the idea that doing so would be immoral and sinful. As for Aga, having come all the way to Onyang Hot Springs, if I made a move, her mind and body would have been prepared to accept it without resistance. Actually, since she'd travelled all that way to cooperate on a mission to rescue me from the dreadful fate of becoming a bachelor ghost, she could have approached me first. But because she had viewed me as a sort of younger brother since our childhood, it would have been difficult for her to treat me now as an adult male. Therefore, when I imagined her lying still as if dead, because she couldn't move in any direction, I couldn't shake the feeling of pity, sympathy, and apology toward her.

However, the body did not operate the same way as the mind did. My youthful instincts continually drove my body to close on her. My mind, on the other hand, ordered that I repress my desire and steer away from her. Stormed by conflicting dictates of my mind and body and repeating to myself not to harm her, I must have fallen asleep. When I awoke, the dawn had broken. It was daylight. Startled, I shot up and looked at her bed. Aga wasn't there. Thinking she might have gone to the toilet, I mindlessly stared at the ceiling. Soon, I went to the toilet but she wasn't there. Baffled where she might have gone, I returned to the living room. There on the desk, I spotted something. The note from her said, "I am sorry. Please, stay alive and return home." Perhaps, at the break of day, to take physical and emotional stresses off of both her and me, she had left the message and, with a heavy heart, departed from the inn. Anyway, this is how the elders'

intricate strategy went up in smoke.

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Upon my return home, I learned the red slip had arrived that morning. A week later, I reported to the Yongsan base in Seoul and was conscripted to the Japanese Imperial Army. A few days later, I was dragged off to Manchuria and assigned to an army base deep in a mountain in Yonbyon, where I trained on offensive and defensive maneuvers. About two months later, breaking their treaty with Japan, Russia attacked North Manchuria. Our unit received orders to defend our post at all cost. But, as we were readying to counter the Russian attacks, we got the news from higher up the war was over. As a result, though I served on the front line, I ended up facing the end of the war without hearing one shot fired or having to fire even once. Shortly, we received an order to move to Yanji. All through nights and days, we pushed hard and arrived at the Japanese base in Yanji in two days. There, we were disarmed and taken as prisoners of Russian army. During my life as a prisoner, I nearly did become a “bachelor ghost.”

In September, we were told the Japanese would be sent to Siberia but the Chinese and Koreans, who were drafted against their will, would be sent to their respective homes. However, the matter dragged on and only in mid-February did they release us. During those months of hunger, cold, and sickness with typhus that swept through the area, countless prisoners died of starvation,

extreme cold, and disease. Becoming severely weak, I contracted typhus and nearly died, but after suffering unimaginable ordeals one after another, I survived and returned home.

There, all the physical and mental fatigue I had endured broke loose, and I remained shut in for over a month. During that time, I felt an urge to hear about Aga, but the atmosphere at home made it seem as though the topic of Aga was taboo. So, I couldn't ask.

After recovery, I went back to my old college and completed my studies and by the time the Korean War broke out, I was teaching at a secondary school. Luckily, I was spared the draft into South Korea's volunteer army. After Seoul was recaptured by the UNC and S. Korean Army, eager to do even a little patriotic deed, I enlisted as an officer in charge of translation. During the UNC's January 4, 1951 retreat to south of Seoul, our unit moved all the way down to Daegu. When Seoul was recaptured in April and the battle field moved north of the 38th Parallel, I began working out of a division stationed in Yanggu along the middle battle line of the DMZ. Because Chunchon was the closest city, on weekend leaves, I went there or to Seoul. Chunchon didn't have much in way of recreational facilities, but, fortunately, it did have bookstores of new or used books. So, I often spent time at such places.

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One day, while walking around in Chunchon and turning a corner, I nearly collided with a woman. I pulled back and said a

word of apology, and when I looked at her, surprise gripped me. She was none other than Aga. She recognized me and seemed startled, too. Speechless, we merely looked at each other. I then led her to a nearby tearoom.

We seated ourselves and ordered tea, without a word to each other. Only when the tea arrived and I offered it to her did she speak.

“Are your grandmother and mother doing well?”

“Yes, they are,” I said, and added, “But why are you here, *onni*? Do you live here? Or are you visiting? What brought you here?”

“I opened a dress maker shop with a person from here. I teach tailoring, Western style clothes and traditional Korean *hanbok*, to young women. I never in my wildest dreams thought I’d see you here.”

“I work at an army base near Yanggu and on weekends, I go on leave to Seoul or sometimes to Chunchon to look around. When I tell my grandmother and mother that I saw you, they will be delighted.”

“I bet they are happy. After you were taken away by the Japanese military, I visited them a few times to offer them some comfort. Each time, though, they took me by my wrists and comforted me instead, repeating many times, ‘We apologize for what we tried to do to you.’ Even after you returned safely, and I visited them, and after they evacuated to Busan, I tracked their whereabouts and paid a visit, there, too. At that time, I learned you were working as a volunteer officer in charge of translating. But who could have known I’d see you here like this? Looking

at you so dashing in your officer's uniform fills my heart to the brim!" Though she smiled while speaking, I sensed indescribable loneliness was coursing through her.

"Ah, have you not heard from your husband, who went to Japan?"

The question seemed to unsettle her, and her smile diminished, too.

"After the Liberation from Japan, I anxiously waited for his return. But when a year, then another year passed without any news from him, I resigned myself to his not coming back. But that I must know whether he's alive or dead never went away. So, while I was in Busan, I considered making an illegal entry into Japan. That was not easy, either. In the end, here I am with neither action nor news. Since the time we spent together was short, my feeling for him is not deep. But at the same time, I cannot deny he still has a place in my heart. For that to disappear, I may have to travel to Japan at least once."

Sorry to have needlessly brought up her husband, I changed the subject to our present lives. After about an hour's time passed, I thought I'd better return to my post and was thinking of asking her about meeting again, she spoke first.

"When will you be coming to Chunchon again?" She switched to the familiar form Korean suitable for speaking to a younger person. At that change in her manner of speech, the awkwardness that lingered between us seemed to disappear, and I felt light-hearted and joyous, even. I said since I'd gone to Seoul last time, Chunchon would be fine for my next leave. She said,

“Then, we could meet around five here. Our meeting today was such a surprise, sending you off without doing anything special makes me feel bad. Next time, I will cook a meal for you. So, you must meet me here again.”

“That sounds great to me, but I am afraid it will be a lot of work for you.”

“Shhhh. I won’t do much. Your grandmother and mother would be unhappy with me if I let you go without a good meal. Be sure to come.”

After we left the tea room, she walked me to the bus station and said goodbye.

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Two weeks later, as I promised, I went to the tea room. Just as I sat down to tea, she arrived. She wore clothes a bit fancier than usual and with an air of familiarity, as if I were someone she saw every day, she came to my table and apologized for being late. After she ordered tea and while she was drinking it, we chatted casually about various things. When she was finished, we left the place. Noticing her demeanor was more cheerful than ever, I simply followed her.

Just a short walk from the corner where we had run into each other, she stopped in front of a shop and said, “This is where I work.” When she lifted the blinds and stepped into the shop, rows of traditional Korean and Western-style clothes came into view. Once inside, she let the blinds down and led me to the back

of the shop. Right outside the back door was a large courtyard. She pointed at a house across the yard and said that was where she lived. Then she said, after dinner, I should shed all worries, stay the night, and just have a good rest. She let me into a room and suggested that, while she prepared the food, if I felt tired, I could lie down and rest my eyes a while.

Her room, with a wardrobe, a vanity, make-up, and a small desk, was spotless. Her furniture and the atmosphere of the room all seemed to speak of the person she was. As I browsed through the few books and magazines on her desk, she came back and, said, "It's a bit shabby, isn't it." She then ushered me to a room across a hallway where the dinner was set. She let me take a seat and, while lifting the fabric cover off the dishes, she said, "It's not much, and I'm not a good cook either. But eat a lot and enjoy." What was laid out on the table was indeed not a big spread, but everything looked neat and clean. I said, "Oh, don't say such a thing. I will eat with much appreciation." She kept using the familiar form of speech.

"Ah, do you like alcohol? I got whisky from the American army P.X., and can beer, too."

"No, I can't drink. Even just a little burns my face and makes me drowsy."

"Really? That's fine, then. We'll just toast with beer, and we'll eat," she said, and offered beer.

That night, we made love in a very naturally way. With an almost motherly tenderness, ever gently, she led me into her, through a door inside her that she had kept closed to men for



nearly ten years.

My eyes popped open to dawn the next morning. Aga was not next to me. Remembering instantly what had happened at Onyang Hot Springs, I bolted up and looked around, bewildered. Sensing I was awake, she opened the sliding door, and, sitting next to me, said I seemed to enjoy a deep sleep. At that moment, I felt a mysterious emotion toward her. That feeling was my longing for her and finding an outlet, my desire erupted. Even before she finished her last word, I took her breathlessly into my arms. Aga did not push me away. She did not resist. And slowly closing her eyes and covering my face with hers, she allowed her entire body to be mine.

When I woke up again, it was nearing noon. We ate breakfast together and left that house and the shop. We fell silent through all that time. We feared if we broke the silence, we didn't know what might happen again.

With her house behind us, we took heavy steps toward the bus station. At our goodbye, calling her Aga, instead of *noonim* older sister, I said, "Let's meet at the tea room on my next leave." Without a word, she nodded her answer.

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But when I went there two weeks later and waited one hour, two hours, she did not show. I calmed my nerves and went to her work place. The shop was open and even had a few customers. For a business in a small town, it seemed to be quite booming.

When I entered the shop and looked bewildered, a woman looking a bit older than Aga approached me, checked my name tag, and asked if I had come to see Aga. At my answer, she asked me to wait and went inside. Soon, she came out and, looking apologetic, gave me an envelope and said Aga was no longer there. Without asking her why, I simply thanked her, left the shop, went to the tea room and opened the envelope. There was a letter from Aga.

Dear younger brother,

The day after we parted, I left Chunchon. My reason for leaving has nothing to do with you. Even before we met, the decision to leave was already made.

Even as the years wore on, I could not shake the conviction that without knowing what happened to my husband, I could not move forward with my life. That I have such an emotion does not mean I have a passion for him. That I must search for him and discover if he is dead or alive comes from a moral sense I feel as a woman who mixed flesh with him even for a short while. Just then, I heard from a friend who lives in a harbor city about a safe illegal passage to Japan. So, I decided to settle my business here and leave. Incredibly, right at that time, I ran into you.

Naturally, my mind went back to our time at Onyang Hot Springs. I went there with my mind firmly made up to gladly offer myself to the son of the family who raised me. But once I arrived there and saw you, not as the boy I knew but as a grown man, I couldn't work up the courage to go through with it.

Secretly, I hoped you would come toward me first. But the way you kept your back toward me and remained absolutely still, as though you were fighting to not violate me by touching even one of my fingers—such noble effort moved me but at the same time, it was a torture to bear. This is why after not a wink of sleep, I left a note for you and ran away from the inn.

Upon my return to Seoul, I learned of your being drafted into the army. Realizing that if one-in-a -million bad luck hit you, I would have been the cause of your roaming the earth as a bachelor spirit. That worried me beyond belief and drove me to pray for your safety perhaps almost as fervently as your grandmother and mother must have. When I learned of your safe return, I leapt with joy so great that I wanted to run to your home.

The honor of taking your virginity seems to have been mine after all. I do believe an extraordinary pre-determined connection existed between you and me. Otherwise, how could we have bumped into each other right before I was to set to leave Chunchon? That's why I promised to meet with you again. But I did not plot or anticipate such an eternally unforgettable moment from the beginning. How could a woman, used goods like me, dare to take a man without blemish like you? Of course, my mind went back to what we left undone at Onyang. But, apart from that, as a childhood “older sister,” I wanted to provide a warm cooked meal for you, who must have been exhausted from the hardship of military life and let you rest completely even if just for one night. And while there was no way of knowing if your grandmother and mother would be pleased with what I did, I felt

it was the right thing for me to do.

While we were chatting about various things, I felt the nightmare of the Onyang Hot Springs and the knot in my heart that resulted from it began to melt away. Then when I looked at you again, I sensed we both wanted each other. That's why, surprising myself, I took you into my arms. You took me into your arms, too, and you let me realize afresh what it means to be a woman. That's why, when you wanted me again at dawn, with my heart trembling with joy, I opened my body to you, as you wished, to the fullest.

But my dear younger brother, my love, you know too well we must not meet again. So please, do not look for me. I will live, remembering that one night with you as the most beautiful moment of my life.

My wish for you after your discharge from the army is for you to marry a woman from a proper family and make your grandmother and mother very happy.

Goodbye.

From Aga

As I read the letter in a far corner of the tea room, I could not stop the tears that rolled down freely. I felt like running to a deserted spot with not a soul around and shouting Aga's name. Aga! A beautiful woman beyond belief. The more I read her letter, the more my loneliness for her deepened.

Aga. Even after all these decades of not knowing where she is, whether she lives in Japan or Korea, whether she is alive or dead,

I often think of Aga, the woman who will never return to me.

– THE END –

Translator's bio:

A Korean-American poet and nonfiction and fiction writer, Maija Rhee Devine authored an autobiographical novel about Korea, *The Voices of Heaven*, (Seoul Selection, Irvine, CA, 2013). It won four awards. Her TEDx Talk showing the book's relevance to today's S. Korea is at: <http://youtu.be/GFD-6JFLF5A>. Her stories and poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *North American Review*, my chapbook, *Long Walks on Short Days* (Finishing Line Press, KY, 2013), and anthologies. Her poetry, nonfiction, and fiction works-in-progress deal with comfort women of WWII. 15 of her essays on this topic were published in *The Korea Times* and U.S. literary journals and newspapers.

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