

“Snowdrop”

by Deborah Baxter

1957. Osan-Ni, South Korea, Headquarters, K55 communications, wired for destruction if its mission is compromised.

I.

The twenty-year-old Airman Second Class follows the trail of sandbags piled thick along the road to keep sudden floods from washing away barracks and base. Acne scars his pale skin, red with razor nicks, but his curly brown hair can't hide his early balding. Curious brown eyes delight in the alien countryside. Mountains that beg to be climbed are never far away, different from his green home on Carolina's coast.

II.

The “Police Action” is recently over and a suspicious, awkward peace prevails. Unsmiling women in traditional dress stare at U.S. military, Air Force, Army, all the same, not to be trusted—a message silent but clear. Streets are unpaved; the mud sucks boots off the feet of any unwary soldier.

III.

Tiny orphans wearing rubber shoes beg in the streets; they are dressed in short rose-colored jackets; white pants cover thick cotton stockings. Each one's his baby sister; he misses her even more than his Papa or Mama. Kim Nee Yun waits on the corner near the Baptist Orphan's Home. She bows her tiny head, smiles a gap-toothed hello, giggles at his halting Korean, opens both hands for the Hershey Bar he gives her whenever he can. Her dark brown eyes search his face: she knows she's his favorite. The corners of his eyes crinkle as he smiles at her, and she grins back. One bright, cold day her hands unfold to reveal a crumpled snowdrop, a tiny spring flower—a gift for him. He reaches out to take it as he returns her bow, then places it with solemn ceremony into his fatigues' deep pocket. He dreams of bringing Kim Yun State-side with him, adopting her. But he's young, unmarried, not even old enough to vote.

IV.

Next morning, he carries candy enough for all the children
in Kim Nee Yun's home, but she's not at her customary corner;
he discovers she's been taken to Seoul. The orphanage worker
offers words that she hopes will cheer him: *Maybe better for her!*
Big chance for adopting! Big city good, Kim Nee Yun pretty,
she good girl. Jesus love her, watch over her.
But the young man is not convinced and hangs
his head as he trudges back to base.

V.

Lights out in the barracks. He presses the white flower
between pages of his service-issued blue Bible, prays
for Kim Nee Yun and his little sister, thinks of home,
then punches his pillow. His shoulders droop as he sighs,
and he wonders if God hears his prayers, if He knows
how alone it feels in this cold place.

Debbie Baxter is the daughter of a Navy veteran, the mother of a Coast Guard veteran, and the proud little sister of an Air Force veteran whose Korean post "Police Action" experience is recounted in this poem. She lives in Chesapeake, Virginia, beside the Inter Coastal Waterway with her husband, Butch, a Navy veteran himself, her 103-year-old mother, and three cats. She attended Old Dominion University and now continues her writing education at the Muse Center for Writing in Norfolk, Virginia.