

Wildflower Post

Newsletter



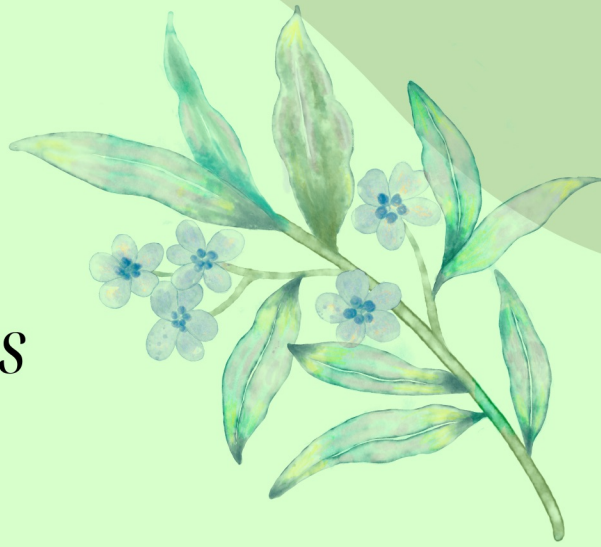
TODAY'S WRITER

Jane Helen Lee

Jane Helen Lee is a Korean-American writer currently based in Seoul, South Korea. She has been recognized by YoungArts and the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for her work across screenwriting, poetry, and fiction and is an alum of the Kenyon Young Writers' Workshop. She also serves as Editor-in-Chief of Unseen, the academic journal of the Korean Youth Honor Society, and finds joy in writing, debating, and volunteering at her local rehabilitation center.

Between Names

JANE HELEN LEE



I was a collector of languages before I knew the English word for “language.” I would gently pluck foreign words from overheard conversations and save them like colorful marbles in my pocket, later turning them over, swirling their smooth coolness between my tongue and sounding out *hola*, *nǐ hǎo*, and *안녕하세요* (*annyeonghaseyo*). Through the sun-dappled filters of childhood that gently curtained my vision, there was something quietly magical about waving “hello” or saying “thank you” to a stranger in their mother tongue. It felt as if I were weaving a thread between myself and someone I might never meet again.

In my mind, the complicated *kanji*, *hanja*, and *hangeul* forms a patchwork quilt of syllables and syntax, woven from the voices of street vendors, lullabies, movies, and late-night whispers between siblings. Even when I couldn’t understand the meaning, I could feel the emotion behind a sentence: the rise in pitch, then the tremble, then, finally, the laughter tucked like a baby in a swaddle between vowels. Language, to me, is and will always be something so achingly human.

But at age eight, I nearly lost my mother tongue.

My first language was Korean, and I learned English at a pretentious “English-only” preschool where white teachers would give Korean children names like “Emma” and “Madison.” When I moved to the US at age six, my mother (*omma*) was shocked by how fast I forgot that my name was 재인 (*Jae-in*), not Jane. Suddenly, 엄마 (*omma*) was mommy and 숙제 (*sook-jae*) was homework. Shaken, she took my education into her own hands, helping me to re-learn and etching the lesson so deeply within me that it could never fade.

I once came across a piece of writing that claimed we are different people to each person we meet. To my mother, I am “재인아” (*jaein-a*), to my dad, I am “peach”, to my brother, I am “누나” (*noona*), to my classmates, I am “Jane.” I am 寶貝儿 (*Bǎobèi er*), 헤레나 (*hae-le-na*), Janie, peanut..., and I could go on forever. But that left me wondering: who am I to myself if all the names and identities I answer to have been lost or borrowed as changing masks to wear when interacting with others?

See, when someone calls me “재인아” (*jaein-a*), I reply “응?” (*eung?*) or “네?” (*nae?*) and I’m what you’d describe as mature, and if you discount my hunched posture, maybe even ladylike, but call me Janie and I will change to become ever so childlike. Say “누나” (*noona*) and I will be strong. But despite being all these things, all these people, at once, I am just *me*.

To me, I have no name, no title. The voice that tells me “you shouldn’t have said that” or “hey, you look kind of good today” has no name for me. The thoughts I think that you will never hear except through the filtered microphone of my many masks do not belong to any one person; they belong to me, the many “me”s that together compose a jar of water made murky with the mixing-ins of paintbrushes tainted with colors from all parts of my life: every memory I have lived, every word I have spoken, and every song I have sung. And I can only hope that my jar, rinsed so many times of all the colors I have lived and palettes I have used, is not a dirty gray.