



A Phantom Childhood

Memories of my Ghost Brother

by Heinz Insu Fenkl

New York, Dutton

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Review by Marie Lee (Spring 1998 issue)

Setting a novel from a child's point of view can be as risky a venture as, say, writing a novel in dialect. How to wrest an adult meaning from a child's unformed thoughts? But if the author can pull off such a feat, the rewards are ample, as evidenced by works such as Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha*, Reidar Johnson's *My Life as a Dog*, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (which manages to successfully render both a boy's point of view and his dialect).

Memories of My Ghost Brother by Heinz Insu Fenkl should be added to this list. The eponymous narrator, Heinz/Insu is a young boy growing up as an Amerasian in Korea in the '60s and early '70s.

Pupyoung, where most of the story takes place, is a place where borders blur. It is Korea, but because of the existence of the U.S. military, what is Korean and what is American is constantly ebbing and flowing, just as the identity of the narrator takes on different shapes and shades. Because his father is often away on military duty, Insu largely absorbs the Korean environment of his mother. His daily life is conducted in Korean, and the songs and stories that fill his ears are of Korean mountain rabbits, magpies, and spirits.

But the other half of his world is ASCOM, the army post, where he goes to an American school with white teachers, where his mother plies her black market-goods trade, and where Insu eats hotdogs and ice cream. The household, likewise, is a recipient of a constant flow of American cigarettes, cosmetics, liquor, and Fig Newtons—as well as “konglish,” a bastardized mixture of Korean and English. For instance, Heinz/Insu calls his father not by the Korean “Abogee” or the American “Father/Daddy” but “Daeri.”

Often, the two worlds do not mesh well. Insu remembers his father's hands: on one occasion a hand that presents a gift: “I remember the size of my father's hand as he grasped the book by the spine and opened it to make the inscription...For my son on his eleventh birthday. From your father, Heinz.” But he also remembers “the bright white palm twice the size of my face. I had dropped a clump of rice on the floor and picked it up to smear it against the lip of the lacquer table in the customary way, to be cleaned up later, and he had slapped me so hard I had fallen sideways onto the floor. ‘How dare you waste your food! Do you know how long I work for that rice? Eat it!’ Somehow I put

the soiled and sticky rice glob into my mouth and chew it, chew it until I need hardly swallow. The side of my face is bright red, later to bruise.”

The story traverses different time periods from Insu’s birth, his beginning school at age six, up until the family leaves for America, when he is about twelve. It also traverses periods in Korean history—echoes of the Japanese occupation, the Korean war and subsequent arrival of the U.S. military forces, Vietnam, etc.—as well as going back and forth between the material and spiritual world. Fenkl’s writing provides the reader with much to admire. Much of the narrative is pitch perfect, evocative, and occasionally takes flight:

...I see James climbing the maple tree across from the Commissary, dangling upside-down by his legs, trying to drink a Pepsi from that position and finding, much to his surprise, that it doesn’t just gush out of his nose. I see him looking back at me as his mother takes him home to Paekmajang, where he has no friends because he is part Black. I see him wincing as his mother wipes the trickle of snot from his upper lip, coughing into his snow-covered wool mittens on the coldest day of winter, blasted by the icy Siberian wind. But the wind against my own flesh is warm—it is late spring—almost summer—and James is dead.

Insu’s world is the rough-and-tumble of boyhood placed in a setting where there are also ghosts, suicides, murder, black marketeering, and prostitution. Toys include puppets sent from relatives in Germany as well as abandoned but live ammunition shells—one boy who plays with one is annihilated so completely no trace of the his body is found, save for a few pieces of blood-stiffened cloth. Playgrounds include sewers and elevated railroad tracks. Games include elaborate schemes to steal from newly-arrived green G.I.s. Insu is a bystander in an incident where a baby falls into a well and is presumed drowned, and the next day the young woman responsible for the child also mysteriously dies in the well. Insu’s aunt commits suicide after she finds out she is pregnant and her GI-lover deserts her, and Insu himself is solicited by prostitutes because he is tall for his age.

Within the ubiquitous and almost mundane brutality of Insu’s world is his extended family. The family is part and parcel of the chaos and violence around it, yet at the same time, it provides Insu with love and shelter, even as it hides heavier, deeper secrets that he will only come to know eventually. The ghost brother of the title appears at the end, and for the sake of readers who will most likely like to enjoy the book on their own, I will leave it at that.

Memories of My Ghost Brother is a story of a young boy and his family, but it is much more than that. It is a chronicle of human strength, cruelty, fate, and love rendered in a narrative that can be called poetic in its best sense, but never overdone. While the author, also an Amerasian who spent his childhood in Korea, has chosen to use an eponymous narrator, it would be too simplistic to assume this book is autobiographical. But I will say that the story appears to have been wholly lived, a testament to the author’s skill, if not experience.