

# LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

MASSACHUSETTS LEVEL II HONORABLE MENTION 2009

Dear Kang Chol Hwan,

I could summarize the rest of this letter with one word. Thanks.

Thanks for giving me an excellent book. Thanks for giving me a book that I can relate to. And thanks for opening my eyes.

Your book has shown me what a true beast North Korea is. Thanks to my school education, I'm well informed about Hitler and Stalin when in fact we should be warned of North Korea. I'm also conversant with Hammurabi of Babylon's cruel code. Seriously, the Cambridge Public School Department ought to read your book. It's really ironic how teachers tell you, "Don't judge things by first impressions" when they do it every day, teaching about the Nazis instead of North Korea on basis of its historical notoriety. I'm not saying that those things aren't appalling, but people need to start worrying about the present, not past.

My dad used to talk to me about how atrocious and horrible North Korea was and is. But you know how kids are. Goes in one ear, goes out the other. Now that I've matured into a 12-year-old, self-assured preteen, I finally started to absorb what I've heard about North Korea like a sponge. All of a sudden, everything I've ever heard, read, and learned about North Korea fitted together like a colossal puzzle. I wish I could shout in the world's face, "Stop worrying about things that are going to happen, or have happened! Worry about the things that **ARE HAPPENING!!!**" But even if I could, I have a feeling no one would listen. Everyone bases everything on fame and infamy, and judging from the fact that I'm not regularly broadcasted on CNN, I'm not famous.

I can really identify with you in one way. My paternal grandfather lived in North Korea and was there until the Korean War broke out. Then he hid in the woods in order to avoid being drafted by the North Korean army. When the American and South Korean soldiers advanced and were forced back, he followed them and enlisted as a South Korean soldier. It doesn't sound like much on a plain white piece of paper, but when I reflect on it, it makes me shiver. If my grandfather had failed to escape, I could have been brought up in North Korea. If my grandfather had failed, I could say *adios* to my life in America. I'd be in North Korea. And what's worse, I would most likely be in the gulag of Yodok, just like you were. My grandfather would have been arrested for treason!

It's terrifying enough to read your book and think, "Wow, I can't believe that happened." It's even more terrifying to read your book and think, "I could have been you." Right now, what I read in your book *Aquariums of Pyongyang* is happening, and I could have been there! It's not something to sit back and think the rest of the world will take care of it because they aren't. They're going to sit and pretend that just because North Korea is unimportant and relatively unknown, nothing bad is happening. They think, "Well, North Korea is obscure, and hey, I didn't learn about North Korea in school too much. They can't do anything *that* horrible." Well, you know what? They can. Maybe other people will figure out what they've ignored their whole life by reading your book.

Maybe they'll have their eyes opened. Like me.

Sincerely,

*Sun-Ui*

Sun-Ui Yum  
Grade 7