

# American Woman Suspended

Reflections of a Global Sojourner

by  
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Boise, Idaho  
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a work in progress



## **Excerpts and Selections**

This book is a narrative about 18 months the author spent near Seoul, S Korea, with her husband and two school-aged children who attended international school. Insights about cultural transitions may be useful to families who are going to (or returning from) a new culture for at least one semester, and in which the language of the new culture is not familiar.



## **American Woman Suspended, Reflections of a Global Sojourner** by Sharla Dawn Robinson Ng

- Live abroad and you're never the same.
- American Woman Suspended is a cultural memoir made of prose and poetry with a postural theme.
- It's a sequence of 45 pieces, including several short essays, a speech and a news article.
- It's about my moving from Boise, Idaho, to Seongnam, South Korea and back.
- Readers discover the 5 psychological phases people experience when they move to a new culture: involved, leaving, transition, entering, re-involved. This 5-phase cycle is condensed to an acronym. **FILTER: For you, Involved, Leaving, Transition, Entering, Re-involved.**
- The cycle repeats 4 times.
- Pattern for the poetry pieces:
  - Prose ushers reader in with context.
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  - Suggested meaning in asterisk.
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## INTRODUCTION

### JOYFULLY FREE

Transforming myself through postural shapes delighted me as a girl. I learned early that leaping is one thing and bridging a back walk-over is quite another. You **leap** facing forward. You take a few running steps, spring upward with one leg leading as the other leg trails symmetrically. Arms' swinging momentum reinforces the motion. Ideally, a leap sails for a long moment free of the ground, then lands in a distant spot nimbly with trailing strides leading to a **grounded tall stance**. A **bridge** is done almost completely opposite. You start standing still and end nearby. You raise your face to the sky, reach overhead, arch at the waist, and place palms to the ground behind your first foot. Simultaneously, the second foot and leg rise over top until the first foot and leg follow. It creates a sort of windmill pivoting around at the hips. If the bridge is done well, your hands and second foot have simultaneous contact with the ground for only a split-second, and so you return to a **grounded tall stance** unwaveringly.

This book embodies the loveliest notion that came to me as a result of transforming myself in Seoul during my adulthood: the desire to be a joyfully free person in a wholesome world—joyfully free in body and mind, living in a wholesome world with resources flowing freely.

The desire to be joyfully free in a global context is not surprising when considering my family's background. But it was not a desire I recognized in myself. Just before we moved to South Korea in 2018, we were a family of four living in Boise, Idaho. **I (Sharla)** was 48, a mostly inactive attorney, a community volunteer, working at home to raise our children. I had also been writing poetry with The Live Poets Society for seven years. **Wai** was 55 years old working at Hewlett-Packard (HP) as a printer/copier software engineer and program manager. In the 1960's his family had immigrated from Guangdong Province in Southern mainland, China, to Idaho. He was four years old and his family steadily worked to establish a family-run restaurant in Caldwell, a city near Boise. Our daughter, **Lindsay**, was 15 years old when we moved to South Korea, in the middle of her sophomore year in high school. We adopted her in Guangdong's capital city, Guangzhou, when she was a baby. **Henry**, our 13-year-old son, was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade taking advanced science and math classes when we all moved overseas. **Oscar**, a 12-year-old shitzu-poodle, had been a uniting force at the heart of our family since he was 8 weeks old. We all enjoyed the nearness of extended family and long-time friends, hikes in the surrounding foothills, and walks with wildlife on the greenbelt next to the Boise River.

After living in South Korea for 18 months, I realized that I felt actualized while living on the international scene and probably for good reason. I'm from a family of globally mobile people. At the age of 48 this self-discovery came as a surprise because — apart from a few years away for college — I had always lived in Boise, Idaho. Yet international and multi-cultural ties had been present all along. My parents hail from highly mobile military and agrarian families. They moved throughout the U.S. almost every year of their primary and secondary school days. Because my parents chose never to uproot their children from Boise, I had not understood what their globally mobile backgrounds meant to me – not until I moved my entire home and family life from Boise to Seoul and back.

At first, the move to South Korea felt like a monumental **leap** — momentum, rapid effort, a long sailing moment from one cultural way of life to another. . . . And yet the new experience felt strangely familiar. For example, at the kids' international school there were military families who said things like "hurry up and wait" which is a phrase my father occasionally used to describe his military-brat upbringing. The military mothers at the international school PTO reminded me of my father's sisters. They're informed, lighthearted, with a ready sense of humor. Moreover, I was comfortable with the speedy way many international sojourners form new friendships. I understood clearly the importance of relationships when one is forging and new life in a new place. One of the hardest parts, however, was my mistaken sense of shame for needing to belong. Luckily, my children and I received wise counseling at the Korea International School (KIS). They built a **bridge**. We learned that it's normal for adults as well as children to need a group to which they can belong. Furthermore, needs feel exaggerated when you're in your first cultural transition. When the international school offered regular counseling and volunteer opportunities for the parents of students, I made sure to show up!

I learned something about cultural transitions that has become fundamental to this book and to the way I now understand my sojourn and the sojourns of others.

The KIS counselors also put me in touch with useful resources. On insight from two books was especially helpful about understanding cultural transitions. In fact, it's become the foundational concept of this book. I learned there are five psychological phases through which people progress when transitioning to a new culture: **Involved. Leaving. Transition. Entering. Re-involved.** These phase titles come from Pollock, Pollock and Van Reken's Third Culture Kids as well as Tina Quick's The Global Nomad's Guide to University Transition. \* By the end of this journey, I hope you will

understand the relevance of this insight and allow it to dwell in your imagination as you plan a cross-cultural sojourn of your own.

Equally fundamental to this book are the poems I wrote about my cultural experiences. They are sequenced according to our five psychological phases. The poetry offers shorthand into my perceptive states of mind. If you are open to the imaginative nature of my interior experiences, you will understand more deeply the way each psychological phase feels. This book also contains cultural observations in direct narrative prose. Both styles of observation — poetry and prose —run with a postural theme. I enjoyed devising imaginative patterns around ideas of connective structures such as the body's myofascial tissues, grief that entangles a clear-thinking mind, and concrete in a city. Where I hope to finally guide you is into a **grounded tall stance**, an awareness from which you can enter a future sojourn or reflect upon a past one with the confidence of deep and understanding.

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## **WHAT CULTURE IS**

Based on my learnings in a 100-level college cultural anthropology class at Boise State University, here is what I understand culture to be: Culture is shared and socially learned knowledge along with patterns of behavior. It involves ways of thinking and behaving. It is greatly responsible for the differences between large groups of people.

Culture is necessary to human existence because it allows humans to adapt to the natural environment, forms the basis for socializing, and affects individual views of reality. Furthermore, it offers boundaries for behavior through belief systems, fear of negative reactions, and the avoidance of being misinterpreted.

There are things common to all cultures which point toward our shared humanity, such as tools, shelter, communication, methods of teaching children, cooperating to get food, games and sports, exchange of goods, supernatural beliefs, decorative arts, singing and dancing, grieving death, myth and rites of passage. Interestingly, art is the expression of a culture's values. Art also reflects ideas about beauty, conflict and world view. Art has three roles in all cultures: beauty, identity, and rebellion.

It is important to know that culture is not scientific or objective. It is a human construct designed to lead to meaningful behavior. It also evolves from the natural environment to which a society is tethered. Culture is society's way of gathering resources for survival, ensuring reproduction of the species, and transmitting knowledge to future generations. Cultures differ from one another in many key



aspects: territory on the globe, language, outward identity, and activities like public decision-making. (James People 2009)

### **WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT**

Although it is set in South Korea and the Western United States, and is written by an American in the English language, this book is not designed only for folks of these cultures. In addition, this book is not a guidebook or a manual for families on business assignment from the United States to South Korea. Nor is it intended only for an audience of an English-dominant culture.

This book is not about transitions between sub-cultures which are mere variations within a society such as rural/urban dichotomies, or western/southern/eastern dialects and accents, or legal policies among low-level government entities.

### **WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR**

This book is a resource for anyone traveling long term between cultures. You may be embarking on a long-term business assignment, a military service move, or a political ambassador's assignment. Your journey may be one burdened by poverty or social upheaval. Or you may be returning to your home culture trying to understand and express to others just how you transformed. I hope to support imaginatively the task of grasping and sharing what it means to be a human between worlds.

### **WHY THIS BOOK NOW**

I offer a personal narrative about my transformation through a cultural sojourn. It's an example that can assist a reader's development of cultural empathy for people who come into communities from distant lands. This is especially important today as masses of people are integrating through intensive interaction on the internet which often occurs while on the go with cell phones.

Living in a new culture can be more than a little unsettling. Our unique identities — how we perceive and think of ourselves in relation to others — can come untethered from the visible and deep cultures surrounding us at the moment. The unsettled ones are vulnerable to the assumptions of those who are uninformed. The unsettled ones may also have unresolved feelings which may manifest in their bodies before rising to the surface of awareness. All of this can hinder a sense of security by causing—for example—a struggle for methods of communication, for acquiring food, and for teaching children. Some people even believe the human tendency to make fearful judgements of others based on how they look has become more prevalent precisely because of the increase in global mobility. People carry cultural imprints which may not

synch with their exterior cultural projections such as skin color, language and dress. Aspects of global mobility such as these are often overlooked. I hope to shed light on the fact that each global transition we take transforms our understanding of ourselves and of others.

I also wish to mention that awareness of this psychological transformation is a global issue every bit as urgent as addressing climate change. It is a precondition to figuring out our best way forward through global challenges. How can we expect to act with global partners in a concerted effort to change the global environment for the good of the whole without first understanding the impact globalization has on our essential, individual human selves? We must study what it is we have in common, stabilize our basic humanity, then (or simultaneously) address our shared environmental challenges.

### **How THIS BOOK FLOWS**

**Cultural Transition FILTERs You Through 5 Phases . . .** Through poetry and prose, I offer my experience transforming through the five psychological phases of adjusting to a new culture. (Davic C. Pollock 2017) It's called **FILTER: For you, Involve, Leaving, Transition, Entering, Re-involve.** These five phases can actually filter out a person's essential humanity, separating it from their original cultural knowledge and beliefs. This is important for refining our self identities and for understanding the essential human experience of sojourners who may come into our communities.

**Four Distinct Cycles. . .** Watch closely. As we journey, you will experience several FILTER cycles. The first complete cycle (from Involvement to Re-Involvement) includes what I would like you to know about my life and family before we left for South Korea, during the 18 months we lived in South Korea, and after we resettled in the States. The second FILTER cycle clips along swiftly from our being involved in our new Korean community, to our adjustment period back in the United States, to finally being settled in the United States but feeling differently than we did before we originally left. The third and fourth FILTER cycles reflect back on my entire transition into and out of South Korea with the benefit of time, distance and a sense of humor. Through repetition of the five psychological phases, you will grasp the nature of cultural transitions in general and what they might mean for you or for those around you.

**Pieces that Bridge, Leap and Build . . . .** Poetry is primary. I want to be as clear as I can with my words, simply letting you see what I saw, hear what I heard, know what I thought at the time. Only poems about significant experiences are included. By

approaching you through deeply imaginative means, the experiences will reveal themselves with nuanced understanding unique to you.

Whenever you encounter a poem, it will be framed within prose. First, you will find context for the poem, something that orients you into the physical or psychological setting. Immediately after the poem, there is usually a short sentence in asterisks. This is just one suggested interpretation of the poem's meaning. Finally, the greater meaning and insights that I gained from the experience are shared in prose after the poem. Combined, these prose-poem-prose vignettes are called *pieces*. If I succeed, then you will clearly understand what the experience meant to me by reading the prose that follows the poems.

Other times in the flow of this book, you will find articles and essays by me as well as articles by others. These are also called *pieces*. They provide greater context for the way my experiences build and FILTER into new meaning.

Each time one piece ends and another one ends, you will find a mountain icon (A) or a building icon (Π). Most transitions between *pieces* are smooth because their subjects lend themselves to one another. Other transitions between *pieces* move more mysteriously, so I'll be asking you to sail free with me for a long moment. The leaping icon (Σ) indicates when these mysterious transitions occur.

**Memories Near, Middle, and Far. . . .** Memory can be fluid. In some *pieces* the meaning of the experiences developed at different points in time. In these instances, you will find "right now" memories conveyed as if I've just had the experience in the poem. Others are "middle-distance memories" acquired and reflected upon while I still lived in South Korea. Still others are "long-distance memories" capturing my perspective after I became reinvolved in Boise culture or when I was in South Korea reflecting back on my initial life in Boise.

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In this place of understanding, we are now ready for our book's journey. From Boise to Seoul and back, we will **FILTER** through the five psychological phases of a sojourner's cultural transition. We will travel mainly by way of prose-poetry-prose *pieces*. There will be **mountains** (A), **bridges** (Π) and **leaps** (Σ). We will be guided by icons that serve like the landmarks which clever magpies see when they fly. In the end we will come to a **grounded tall stance** from which you will see more clearly the human who moves globally. Together we will become joyfully free.

# TRANSITION

## MYOFASCIA, GRIEF & CONCRETE

*Transition* is the third of five **FILTER** phases a person experiences when moving from a passport country to a host country. It follows psychological *leaving* and precedes *entering*. In *transition* you're like a trapeze artist according to Pollock, Reken, and Pollock who authored Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds. Through liminal space, you find yourself moving rapidly, in one sense letting go, in another sense reaching. Timing is crucial, and there is little room for error. The platform of your new identity awaits your nimble landing while the previous platform recedes in the distance. Any number of sense-based combinations can occur: emotional overwhelm, analytical obsession, relief, doubt. It begins the second you leave somewhere, and it ends when you decide the destination is going to be OK. It's the essence of **leaping** — or tripping if one falls into it in-deliberately. Dysfunction and vulnerability may take over. Or self-reflection, empathy and freeing anonymity can catch hold. The receiving community often deems you "status-less," but under the right circumstance you may be deemed a "superstar." Special objects and photos from your passport country often confirm the bigger picture of your life. The losses, however, must ultimately be mourned.

This section of the book captures the *transition* phase of our sojourn to South Korea. Our family left Boise over the Christmas holiday in 2017. We stayed in a familiar hotel on the Boise River for several days before the long airborne journey to Seoul. Friends and family stopped by to finalize legal documents, enjoy one last meal, and take Oscar, our little dog, to his temporary home with family friends in Boise. *Myofascia, Grief & Concrete* starts here with a prose-only piece — my "First Sight of the City." My dizzying first impressions appear in "Shake and Bow." Then, awareness seizes flesh and bone from that point forward. "PINK" conveys the naked vulnerability of being sized up as an unknown quantity in a very close-knit community. In the two "Lovely Bones" pieces, my grief over cultural loss intensifies with the news of the death of my sister back in the States. And in "Body Work in Seoul" the repeated experience of deep tissue massage offers me an adventurous escape as well as relief from the stress of an evolving identity.



## **First Sight of the City**

After riding non-stop for 11 hours in a plane over the Pacific Ocean, my ears droned with the plane's engine noise and my eyes grew disengaged from the tv screen lights glowing in the dark of the cabin. When I lifted my window's shade, wonder filled my mind. "All the tall, white buildings—they look the same." The young South Korean seated beside me agreed. "Yes. This is most efficient. I liked the architecture in Los Angeles—where I am going to college—much more. So fantastic."

An hour later my family and I were rolling our suitcases through the Incheon National Airport, into the world that would be our home for the next 18 months. Ghosts of uniformity were whispering so loudly I could hear them in the sound of luggage wheels and footsteps unhindered by voices. Near the airport lobby entrance, live singers and musicians were performing "Fly Me to the Moon," a 1950's tune I'd heard many times back home. Jet-lagged, we wandered past the stage and stood for a while outside in the cold air waiting for a late-night shuttle bus. The one-hour bus ride was warm and clean and comfortably modern, like the city of Pangyo. I would later learn our new home at Time Bridge Apartments, in the city of Seongnam, was only a 10-minute drive from the hotel.

□

Hidden under South Korea's mass of concrete and glass structures, surely there were exciting new things for us to discover. It would take some time to get oriented to the dense vertical lifestyle of closely-packed, tall concrete city buildings. I felt myself psychologically letting go, simply going along for the ride in South Korea. At first, I saw a cascading kaleidoscope of new images. My home culture was so different. The two cultures even began conversing in my mind!

## **Shake & Bow dreamy conversations with south korea**

*under eyelids, imagination's dragons flap and sail through a sea of towers,  
over Tancheon and ten-lane streets, navigating hazy corridors,  
whisp-roaring fierce kindness and devotion, pivoting on magnetic-clawed  
subways railed through infrastructure's electronic conscience.*

Siberia's cat vanished in Japan's lumbering occupation,  
Now the people growl #MeToo! across time and nation.  
Guns don't survive here. The airport's a snap.  
K-Pop and kimbap. Resist North's nuclear trap!

*tangerines delight, not flowers? some sleep on stone? what necessity  
measures transactions through circular ceremony? observe wrappers,  
boxes, bags and ties morphing from merchants, sifting through my proper  
concern into bundles for cans, then disappearing from my door. . . .*

Among us remember it's whisper, not boom,  
Step in time, not ramble to one's tune.  
T-money cards, KakaoTalk, Citymapper and Waze -  
Download them all now. Expect curiosity's gaze.

*watch: I'll bow before performing, pantomime and dong (do-re-me)  
ask a poised local to please conjure this Calamity Jane's surprise  
when the han gook uh of a velvet-voiced miss piped in through thirty-  
two layers of flats to declare that . . . well . . . (shrug)?*

Time to change air filters for a good price everyone.  
Some chimes announce our wash is done.  
Look out young trout! Schubert's fishermen toss bait.  
Bali bali ladies – clothes wrinkle if you wait.

\*Adapting to culture builds a creative mind.\*

Our first few weeks in South Korea were filled with many new experiences. In this land, many modern and imaginative customs braid with traditional ones. I loved to see dinner guests arriving with Jeju tangerines in hand — colorful, healthy hostess gifts with a pragmatic side. It was a surprise to hear maintenance announcements delivered over loudspeakers in each of the residents' apartments. They quickly became a translation puzzle knitting our expat community together with text messages to confirm our understandings of the announcements. And, the little musical tunes declaring a laundry load's completion made the chore, well. . . less of a chore.



On a globe, I could trace an imaginary line, the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, from Boise to Seongnam. Here we would live for 18 months in an apartment called Time Bridge. The name seemed fitting. My American identity before and after South Korea would forever be bridged by my time spent here. What would this sojourn mean to me? What would I lose? What would I gain?

Time Bridge stood beside the Tancheon, a north-running tributary to the Han River. Beside the Tancheon was a greenbelt path steadily streaming with pedestrians and bikers. The building design looked nothing like the others. There were two 39-story

apartment towers with a connecting bridge from the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 35<sup>th</sup> floors. Electronic entry tags carried by every resident were required to enter the building and many of its architectural features, including the elevators. They delivered us in a sort of hushed discretion to and from our flat on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor every day. The 21<sup>st</sup> floor contained a bright, clean gym staffed with a cheerful trainer who taught exercise classes most every morning, Monday through Friday. The 23<sup>rd</sup> floor held the saunas — one for males, the other for females.

Going to the Time Bridge sauna for the first time felt like a real adventure. While sensuous and indulgent in a low-key way, it also required that I be on my toes, ready to catch clues from the other residents.

### **PINK**

*THE TAX COLLECTOR TAGS A PANTHER  
IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD SAUNA*

~ OR ~

*THE HIGHRISE LADIES' ASSOCIATION  
SPRINGS A FEE ON A STRANGER*

Leaping from a diamond, Pink enters poised  
bathing tote and membership card in hand.  
Pneumatic glass doors [...] on the twenty-third floor  
slice sauna steam from city lights below.

8:38pm KST in conspicuous cognito, Captain  
enters expressionless, eyeballs shifting (over/back).  
Marks precisely her slippers' orientation.  
For a swift escape. Should the need arise.

Ladies' chatter melts down a drain in the tile as every  
panther pauses. PINK.  
*Sign in, name and number please.*  
*[If she is an accidental tourist, these fine naked figures  
will frighten her away. If not, we'll send a birdwatcher.]*

8:41pm KST. Alone at last in the dry heat. Ladies'  
Association Captain has questions. And Pink's got . . . cash.  
*[Staff bonuses were just disbursed. Never mind Pink's new.  
We're always collecting.]* Pay up!

Jazz horns bloom lather from an orchestra pit ~

Pink rises, a submarine scope with ears scrubbed clean ~  
Disappears into the steam ~  
Resurfaces street-side in a trench coat among side-walkers ~  
Dollars trail and drift like bubbles into a starless sky ~ . . .

After coming back to my apartment, I find myself thinking: *I feel so conspicuous! How will I know what to do? Will I get a bill? Was I being included or told to beware?*

\* A sense of humor helps when you're caught off guard. \*

Yet I kept going back. And although most of the words spoken in the sauna were in Korean and beyond my comprehension, the sound of the women communing and the water echoing off the tiles was very calming. It reminded me of time spent grooming with my mother and sister as a girl. Over time, I learned to scrub vigorously, alternate hot and cold water plunges to invigorate circulation, and to use a toothbrush in the shower. There's such joy in simple pleasures at the sauna!

Today, when I reflect on my early interactions with the women of the Time Bridge Ladies' Association at the sauna, I feel proud of myself for being vulnerable and persistent at the same time. I also chuckle when I think of the many ways we were probably misunderstanding one another. When we later met for tea at the café on the second floor, the women flipped eagerly through a book I had brought, called *Korea Unmasked* (RHIE 2002). It is an academic exploration of Korean culture presented through cartoon illustrations. Because of the cartoons, I felt certain the Ladies were assuming I wasn't a skilled reader. But, over the next several months, several people requested I tutor the children in their families. I now imagine perhaps the Ladies were gauging my potential as a tutor for their grandchildren. Another misunderstanding happened when one of the Ladies took my cell phone from my hands and began swiping the screen and saying she would enter her contact information into my phone. With hot energy rising toward my vocal chords, I quickly swiped my phone right back with my eyes wide and my lips pursed. For the Ladies, normal underpinnings of social trust were at play, but my privacy had been violated! It was just hard to know what to think of these experiences.

□

A few months into our sojourn, Wai and I took a bicycle night tour through the heart of Seoul. We were invited to join some of Wai's US colleagues who had likely found the bike tours advertised on Naver, an internet search engine similar to Google and whose



headquarters were just a few blocks away from Time Bridge. Although our bicycles had been shipped with us overseas, we naively opted to ride the rental bikes instead.

### **LOVELY BONES**

*bicycle night tour*

*June 10, 2018*

pedaling rental bikes, touring Seoul  
along the Han with 15 US engineers.  
some insist on losing their way.  
no plan in place for wanderers, our guide  
stops short of the bridge, marks  
our waiting spot, back-tracks  
disappearing into the dense dark crowd.

engineers resurface and we begin  
moving again on two wheels  
and an inhospitable seat.  
bridge path narrows through strobing lights  
an endless stream of tailpipes  
and a neon blur of smog.

saddle bites. secretly,  
a twisted pelvis poisons the ride.  
I risk becoming a flattened heap  
stamped under rubber tread - one hand steers  
as the other cantilevers hips. hovering –  
an acrobat balancing on one hand  
while feet wheel a gyroscope below  
for an oblivious urban audience.

\*Distortion often goes unacknowledged.\*

This bike tour in 2018 marked a return to social and athletic endeavors similar to the ones we enjoyed regularly back in Boise. Riding bikes by a river felt familiar. But, I was not accustomed to peddling through dense city crowds. When the evening air temperature dropped my short sleeve tee was not enough to keep me warm. At one of our bike tour stops, Wai shopped a pop-culture clothing store to find another layer of clothing for me. Running down the arms were small repeated images of Uncle Sam in chains, and on the front spot where a pocket might go it reads "obey."

I was in a great deal of pain on the rental bike because the handlebars, pedals and seat were not configured well for my body. Shifting around on the seat made me almost

constantly aware of my bones. The ride reminded me of an unsettling dream I'd had several years prior. It was about my family of origin walking together over a bridge under a dark, starry sky. Mom, Dad (ages 60 and 63 respectively), my sister (36) and brother (24) – they were all with me (40) at our ages at the time of my dream in 2011.

I called the dream "Lovely Bones" because it ended with my sister's skeleton hovering over me in the exact pattern of my waking body. That skeleton remained in my waking vision, pinning me frozen to the mattress, with the ceiling fan blowing down through her bones and onto me. It lasted long enough for me to really study her skeleton's teeth. Then, she simply faded and I was left with the ticking fan in the soft morning light.



Emboldened by the bike tour, Wai and I decided to venture on our own away from the security of the neighborhood of Jeongja which surrounded Time Bridge Apartments. We soon drove with our children to see some pottery in another near-by city called Icheon. To get there, we used Waze. Waze is a navigation app that runs on all phones to help people manage their way through traffic. This untitled poem-fragment came to me after an uneasy moment in a kind ceramicist's shop.

Plugged-in and driving, we obey  
Waze, the voice of artificial intelligence  
leading us . . .  
but it fails to complete the transaction  
leaving the rest to a local bureaucrat  
at an office near our destination.  
She drives two miles to Icheon's  
Ceramic Village  
semaphores the spot  
waves farewell to us seekers  
in her rearview mirror.

Assuming we've arrived, I  
raise one pearl white canister.  
lidded with a golden ring.  
My inquiry is the ceramicist's distress -

an urn.

The English-speaking navigator voice of Waze is very helpful for a Westerner trying to drive while reading road-signs in South Korea. I clung to the sound of her words because the road-signs often confused me. The tangled long lines in this poem suggest the blur of what I recall happening.

B. K. Lee, Kyong Hee NAM, took his ceramics work very seriously. He insisted we watch him throw a pot on a wheel so we would know he was indeed the artist who made the finished pottery we were viewing in his shop. I thought the photo of him handing a vase to President Jimmy Carter was a pretty good indication of his talent, too. He and his wife and son were kind when I stumbled upon the urn, thinking it was so beautiful. And there had been no immediate significance to the incident with the urn. But shortly afterward, my sister died of a drug overdose. Then, my awkward cultural interaction with Lee's urn seemed like a surreal premonition.

The tragic circumstances of my sister's death added complexity to our family's loss. Reflecting back on the experience of grieving while I was living overseas, I realize how difficult it was to do without my family of origin and a larger social circle who knew her. My absence from home made it hard for my folks in Boise to mourn well, too. We needed each other. Grief grew dense. It fused with the smog in the air and became lodged in my body-structure.

## II

The wife of one of Wai's colleagues introduced me to a masseuse named Mr. M. He worked long hours, every day but Sunday, in a shop called Body Balance on the lower level of a nearby high-rise called Star Park. My goal had been to feel better by getting massage.

## Google Translate (silent strangers)

<p><b>Guarded Korean Massage Therapist</b></p> <p>Analogue clock above a wooden lute played by a dancing figure. He professes no English, grasping bits with Google Translate and a friend who speaks English to get by. Chang-ho doors to his table parted. <i>Five Hundred Miles.</i></p>	<p><b>Piqued American Nomad</b></p> <p>Grieving her sister's death dressed in black spandex. Pain remains unacknowledged except for the migraine she confesses under the barometric pressure of Typhoon Soulik. When diamonds fall camouflaged in the city's hardscape he helps her retrieve one.</p>
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\*Unresolved grief can easily accumulate and hide when you're in a new culture\*

So much chaos had been happening at once: I was learning to use technology such as Google Translate to communicate with folks like Mr. M. Typhoon Soulic was my first experience with a typhoon, and it was an unpleasant one for a surprising reason. The sudden change in barometric pressure triggered a severe migraine. I was unnerved when seeking medical care in a large city setting while burdened by a language barrier. I'd also lost—and somehow found—jewelry of great sentimental value in a marketplace. Loss and confusion accumulated in ways I'd never experienced before.



At times, when walking the city streets alone, I felt fragmented.

### American Woman Suspended

each day appears like the one before  
city ~ city ~ city  
concrete's unforgiving cushion  
uniforms fractured through crowded glimpses  
reflections of my lost sister's isolated presence  
/ all bound  
in smoggy tatters & centuries of faded cloth  
invisibly distorting a loved-one's stride.  
*if you miss the train I'm on*

*you will know that I am gone. . .*

\*Grief feels like being empty and broken for a while.\*

Had Mr. M. worked with many grieving clients? It was as if he knew the knots in my limbs and back were filled with loss. He chose to work while playing songs sung in English mostly, and some songs remained with me long after I left his shop.

I noticed others in our group at the high rise were drawn to music also. We would meet up at Once in a Blue Moon, a jazz bar in Gangnam on the south side of the Han River. There, I think we remembered ourselves—the people we were back home. Maybe some were grateful to let that go, to be redesigned. Maybe for some it was a feeling of nostalgia. The remembering through music seemed to connect us, like one tunnel space through which we were each moving alone.



From the shop foyer and changing room I walked through brown pocket doors carved to resemble a Korean temple. An arc of circles, carved out like eyelet in a girl's dress, swept across each door. Music filtered through to draw me in. On one wall in the room hung a drawing of a man reaching down to touch the stems of an impossibly over-sized bouquet. It often held my attention. Once settled, my imagination wandered free.

### **Body Work in Seoul**

*. . . Lord I'm 500 miles away from home*

entering carved chang-ho doors  
I'm modestly dressed  
neck to knee in poppy pink cotton  
language-less and blindly trusting  
my vision to a wicker basket  
presented by Mr. M. ~ glance  
sweep of his hand and I'm presented  
on an Ayurveda table observing  
his stocking feet pace silently  
around wooden tiger-claw legs  
music blossoming ~ fantastic air balloons.

*Folding/Unfolding (my book)*  
his only clue to this distorted posture.

Choreographing & performing  
consistently for my mind's eye  
Mr M. might imagine my pain  
an ungrateful hodo tiger  
himself a magpie perched in a pine  
gibbering to save this kind woodcutter.

To me, Mr. M. becomes a ceramicist  
wedging a fine lady from an earthly slab  
clay's slip tears fall  
wringing my sister's ghost free  
*not a shirt on my back*  
*not a penny to my name*  
*Lord I can't go a-home this a-way.*  
Chinese lanterns tethered to her bones  
a life's bouquet (her spine's stems) gathered  
in a simple sketch of distorted proportions  
lines drifting grieving on touch's breeze.

\*In a comfortable place grief can be processed.\*

I took some time researching on the internet, and decided Mr. M.'s body work methods were like Rolfing because the pressure was so deep and methodical—excruciating at times. That could be one reason he took time to select special music. I spoke to others who were receiving his body work and their music was specially selected too, but none of ours were the same. To get through the intense discomfort, it helped me to focus on something visual, like the bouquet image on the wall. Or, I would think about stories like the hodo which I had read about in a little book about Korean folk art. Hodo are paintings about tigers, some funny, some scary. One story was about a tiger being distracted by a wise magpie. By scolding a foolish tiger, the magpie saved a kind woodcutter from being attacked. The magpie was perched in a tree high above the tiger, safely out of reach and gibbering wildly. During the intense massages, I also reflected on my daily life in the neighborhood of Jeongja. Forcythia bloomed yellow along the river banks in spring like they do back in Boise. Magpies here looked like the ones in Boise too. I often watched them through the 12<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> floor high-rise windows as they performed graceful arial acrobatics at eye level with me.

Two months before I began deep-tissue body work, my sister had died of a drug overdose. We also lost several other friends and family members during the 18 months that we were away from home. Each loss required grieving. Hard losses were being

grieved everywhere it seemed. I'd seen articles in the Korea Joongang Daily about high suicide rates among South Koreans here. At the time Euny Hong wrote her book, *The Birth of Korean Kool* in 2014, she reported South Korea had the highest suicide rate in the industrialized world. (Hong 2014) I felt Mr. M. understood people and provided a safe space for grieving, and that, over time, the positive changes in my posture were a result of his body work. The effects of a massage would be felt in my body for days: A hip socket would suddenly fall into place while I was standing at the sink. A rib would ache deeply and then slide in line with the others. Countless little changes could be felt everywhere.

Π

With my attending massage frequently and regularly, Mr. M. could design a pattern of interactions. Any deviation would be noticed. If kept simple and singular, communication could be managed through gesture and Google Translate.

### Rituals

<b>At His Shop</b>	<b>Rolfing?</b>
<p>After he signs his name in Korean &amp; English, they form a ritual: greet, she dresses down, places treasures for safe keeping at the threshold, he works to the music he's chosen, discover and console, he states her name "Shalaaa, stand uuup" calls her to a seated stance, percussion cupping her spine's length, sincere gratitude, bow, slippers, dress, "drinkinnng" one centered cup of barley tea, circular compensation, calendar, shoes, farewell.</p>	<p>With both thumbs bearing down he's breaking myofascia loose between ribs, releasing her breath, her bones. They're both brave. Trusting. Powerful. "Please wait" Confusion consolidates like coy fish teasing ripples from below the surface of a common pond. Soon, she shares a gift – poems and photos collected with friends back home.</p>

\*Consistent patterns ease tough transitions.\*

There is a connective tissue that surrounds bones, organs, nerves and muscles. This tough connective tissue is called myofascia, and some people believe there can be a psychological element to the distortion and rebalancing of the fascia. I imagine that's one reason why Mr. M. curated the massages with different types of music. *Hit the Road Jack* really sent trigger-point knots on their way. The song gave me the power to

dismiss them. Another time, I heard a two-minute recording of an audience applauding after a classical music performance. It was as if Mr. M. were speaking directly to my body, saying that the individual elements of my structure were in harmony with one another. Mr. M. was pleased. It also felt as if “I” were less present, merely another audience member clapping for my body’s harmonious performance.

One day I shared with Mr. M. a booklet that I’d helped create with The Live Poets Society called *Folding/Unfolding*. (Dance 2016) For me, this gesture was a leap. I knew he could not read the book’s English, but it contained photos of some friends and me back home. I think this helped Mr. M. make a bridge of his understanding between “me” in South Korea and “me” back in the States.

### A

During massage, I frequently thought of home. That mysterious dream with my sister’s skeleton would come to mind. When I mentioned the way this dream foreshadowed my sister’s death earlier in these pages, I did not tell you about all of the dream, only how it ended with my sister’s skeleton hovering over me. The rest of the dream was a nightmare in which I had been walking with my family of origin over a bridge. Parents and siblings were crossing it with me. I was fighting off feelings of guilt while heeding my mother’s warning. I saw the stary sky go dark as I went frozen, surrendering under a cape. Then I remained frozen as I woke, still seeing my sister’s skeleton in the air above, mirroring mine.

## **A NIGHTMARE’S LOVELY BONES**

*back home in 2010*

a family of five with two sisters and I am one.  
the other is lost.  
pavement pads disharmony of footsteps.  
father fails to grasp. have I taken too much? –  
resist the question & observe abdominals’ casing  
distort like a spider’s web  
wrapped round a wind-blown seed.

*look out* and I’m legless, a statue like the one  
our girlhoods imagined being in a midnight museum  
as burglars’ flashlights hunt for treasure.  
homeless, sister rises, mirroring, suspended above.

breath leaves my lungs, a misty cloud rising.  
it’s me    lying prone on the sidewalk. surrender.



to teeth, calcified and breezy as only a skeleton can be.  
see her bones posturing my reflection.

blanketing cape falls and the stars go dark.

fade awake, frozen in the preceding frame,  
simultaneously realizing my master suite.  
I recognize the bones, know the fleshless grin  
for what it is,  
observe the dissipation hovering in the fan's rotation  
until she's left me a disjointed heap,  
sleeplessly impressed upon my mattress.  
anticipating the long walk alone.

\* Experiences of our past follow us everywhere. \*

My muscles seemed to have a memory for this dream. Or rather, the myofascia around my muscles remembered. Did Mr. M. know I was grieving? With his decades of experience, I believe he might have detected grief in my body's holding patterns — in the way my left shoulder hunched forward to guard my heart, or the way my right hip fell and my low back knotted up to compensate.

Seeing my sister suffer, and watching heartache ripple through the family, was one of the most deeply unsettling experiences of my life. After I had this dream in 2011, I did not fully understand my sister's behavior was that of an addict – that she was leaving us. Yet my unconscious mind was aware.

One of the ideas I often heard among the globally-mobile community leaders at the Korea International School was "leave well to enter well." Looking back, I am now deeply grateful I took the opportunity to say goodbye to my sister before I left Boise for Seoul in 2018.



### **Trans-phases & the Global Sojourner**

During a sojourn in a new country with a new culture, you are likely to experience a transformative event, situation, or activity that bridges your life in a new land with your life in the land left behind. I call them **trans-phase moments**. They may be fleeting, or they may last several days, or they may seem to come and go like an earthquake's aftershocks.

Trans-phase moments may occur at any time. My trans-phase moments occurred in the *transition* phase of my sojourn in South Korea, and I will elaborate on them shortly. However, I also wish to point out the timing of trans-phase moments of other people I knew when we were living in South Korea.

One example regards one of my husband's HP colleagues. Bob's father died in Boise just before Bob embarked on his long-term business assignment. Funeral arrangements for loved-ones were being made at the same time Bob was relinquishing previous work responsibilities as well as home responsibilities such as getting mail, caring for aging parents, and storing belongings. Bob was having a trans-phase experience while in the cultural *leaving* phase.

Another example regards a woman named Carrie with whom I made friends at Time Bridge apartments. A few months after moving to South Korea from Amsterdam, Carrie learned that her close childhood girlfriend had become engaged to be married. Plans were being made for Carrie to return to Amsterdam and be a bride's maid. She was likely in the cultural *entering* phase because she was sharing these personal concerns with newly-acquired acquaintances in our South Korean high-rise neighborhood.

Another colleague of my husband's came to South Korea shortly after getting divorced and her son was attending college in the US. Julie's role as a wife and mother were in flux, and the early hard steps as an single woman would be occurring throughout all of her cultural transition phases.

Finally, one other colleague of my husband's learned that his US bank account had been illegally broken into by unknown criminals. News of this came when Jeff and his wife were likely in the *reinvolved* phase because they had been living in South Korea many months and seemed to be widely networked with social acquaintances as well as work colleagues at HP. As much as we try and plan ahead, life in one world has a way of following us into the new life we establish in a new world.

Each global sojourn is unique. Each sojourner's trans-phase experience is unique. And, each sojourner is almost certain to have at least one trans-phase experience. A trans-phase experience gives the global sojourner the sense of being rooted in two places at once as well as feeling a mental bridge between them. It has a lot to do with our sense of being "home," in a community where we belong and feel responsible.

During this chapter (the *Transition* phase of my sojourn) I've already told you something about my trans-phase moments, which were related to my Lovely Bones dream, my recurring memories of the dream, and my poetic responses to them. These trans-phase moments progressed like this:

- In Boise in April, 2011, I had the Lovely Bones nightmare which ended with my sister's skeletal posture mirroring the posture of my waking body and the breeze of the ceiling fan blowing down onto me through her.
- Shortly after the nightmare, I wrote a narrative description called Lovely Bones.
- In Seoul on June 10, 2018, I took a bicycle night tour along the Han River during which many events felt familiar and paralleled the Lovely Bones dream of 2011.
- Also in June 2018, I wrote the poem Lovely Bones bicycle night tour.
- A few days later in June of 2018, I was in Icheon Ceramic Village admiring a white lidded urn without knowing it was an urn.
- On June 18, while I was in South Korea, my sister died and my father called to tell me the next day.
- In 2019, while back in Boise, I wrote the poem Lovely Bones nightmare.



Another Trans-phase moment, which occurred in the cultural *transition* phase of my sojourn, happened at Christmas time when I received an email from a friend. Susan was caring for our little dog, Oscar, along with her husband who had Alzheimer's disease and a long history of loving little dogs. What follows is a true story she sent to me in January, 2019.

### **The Marzipan Caper of 2018**

December 18, I was at the dining room table readying Christmas boxes to mail to my sister and brother. Among the edible goodies were pieces of chocolate-coated marzipan, each wrapped in an aluminum foil paper with the image of Santa Claus on it. I had six pieces: two each to my sibs, and two for me and Ralph.

Later I was in the kitchen fixing dinner. I heard a commotion and Ralph rushed in from the living room, Oscar under his arm, half of a Santa Claus marzipan in his hand. The other half was in Oscar's mouth, foil paper and all. We got that half out with some resistance, but basically Oscar hadn't begun to consume it, although he had surely gotten a nice taste of the chocolate. No ill effects ensued.

How had Oscar obtained the marzipan? Only one piece was on the table, but I didn't see how he could have obtained the other one. The table

is too high to reach from the floor, and Oscar had never in all his time living here made any effort to get up on the table for anything – and surely food had been available many times. His reputation was totally unblemished. I asked Ralph if he had taken one from the table; he was unsure, but didn't think so.

So I decided that one of the Santas had slipped out of the treat box while I packed it and landed on the floor without my noticing. Ralph must have eaten one from the table. I planned to ask each sib if they ended up with one or two Santas when opening their package. Hereafter, I removed fudge, cookie trays and other food from the table.

Two nights later, a pathetic series of cries awoke me at 1:10 a.m. I had never heard such sounds from Oscar, but it had to be him. It sounded almost like speech in some other language. I thought he was in his own bed in our bedroom, so invited him up onto ours. However, he didn't come up. I got up to find he wasn't in his bed! I went out through the hallway to the dining room and there was Oscar sitting on the dining room table, front paws poised near the edge, evidently unable to chance the leap down. He made a tiny mewling sound, a complex tone expressing guilt, penitence, and relief.

Instantly, I understood all that had happened. Of course! Oscar had jumped upon an incompletely pushed-in chair and then made an easy step to the table. When he didn't find the second marzipan he expected, he had to return empty-handed (so to speak). But it was quite dark and he surely could not find the chair again or leap directly to the floor. So I gathered him up, told him he was all right again, poor baby, etc, etc, and placed him in our bed at his usual spot, the warm gutter zone between me and Ralph. He said nothing further, hardly moved all night, and slept in the next morning, possibly dreaming of a "lost" marzipan that really should have been on the table.

Of course, each sib got two Santas. Oscar got one from the table but sadly (for him) didn't really score. Ralph and I split the last one. And all is well.

Hope you and all the Ngs enjoyed summer in Australia!

– Susan, Ralph, and Oscar

Unlike Lovely Bones, this trans-phase experience took place all at once. It brought a pang of longing to hold Oscar as well as a rising rush of guilt for the trouble he had

caused Susan. I re-read the letter aloud at our family dinner that night. We concluded that we were very fortunate to have friends who would not only care for our little dog as if he were their own, but also write to tell us about it with humor and compassion.

Having the support of family and friends in your country of origin is important during the holidays. But regular every day sorts of connections are just as important. One friend from home called and talked to me once a week every week in which I was away. Another friend invited me into his kitchen to reconnect by way of Skype shortly after my move to South Korea. His US kitchen, with first-floor windows opening up to a natural setting felt familiar. Our long history as friends did too. All these ties with home reassured me that who I thought I was in the States was real because others still thought of me in relationship with them in the same way as before I left. An identity is precious and you cannot create it alone!

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## American Woman Suspended, Reflections of a Global Sojourner

by Sharla Dawn Robinson Ng

Live abroad and you're never the same. American Woman Suspended is a cultural memoir made of prose and poetry with a postural theme. It's about my moving from Boise, Idaho, to South Korea and back. Readers discover the 5 psychological phases people experience when they move to a new culture: involved, leaving, transition, entering, re-involved. This 5-phase cycle is condensed to an acronym.

**FILTER:** For you, **I**nvolvement, **L**eaving, **T**ransition, **E**ntering, **R**e-involved. The cycle repeats 4 times. Here's a bit from a Leaving phase poem:

### **She Could Not Stay**

. . .  
in a lobby four stories high wrapped in creamy marble,  
glossed windows and twin sweeping staircases ~ with lines  
like an English bride's veil ~ twittering birds and all. arriving  
(or leaving) dwellers' voices resemble the lament of a cello  
or a whale's great call through the fathoms.  
tailored clerks echo *annyeonghaseo* in return, swaddling Seoul's  
travelers in loyal service, translating them one by one.

they move in swift elevators, on tobacco-hazed corners, gender-  
split saunas, coffee shops and endless stairwells.  
orchestras of common concern harmonize an un-  
utterable truth: home's roots ran shallow.  
some choirs sing melodies, consonants and vowels  
dictated through centuries, and some march on iambic  
pentameter's little black boots: *you belong here now.*

American Woman Suspended may appeal to many cultures' education systems, as well as many sectors such as corporate, military, and ambassador. It could pertain to conversations such as David Pollock's Third Culture Kids; Growing Up Among Worlds; and Tina Quick's The Global Nomad's Guide to University Transition.

My knowledge of culture is organic. It grows from my family's military and agrarian backgrounds, my marriage to a Chinese immigrant, our daughter's adoption from China, some college studies, and my global travels. My perspective is balanced. I'm a mother, a long-time community member, an artist and an attorney. I'm free of outside influence. My platform is modest. I give an annual poetry reading with The Live Poets Society at a local library. I contribute to the occasional collective-arts performance or a reading on Zoom for a local bookstore. I recently launched a website: [sharla-dawn.com](http://sharla-dawn.com). The manuscript contains approximately 28,000 words with four illustrations. It's not ready for submission and there is no self-published version.



## About the Author

Born in 1970, **Sharla Dawn Robinson Ng** holds degrees in law and English. As a law clerk, she's written judicial opinions, administrative rules, and employee handbooks. As a girl, she studied gymnastics and dance, performing in a local dance collective and on the college dance team at many sports and theater venues.

In 2022, Sharla performed in a Zoom poetry reading hosted by a local independent bookseller. Also in 2022, Sharla co-edited and contributed to a Live Poets Society poetry anthology called *A Quiet Wind Speaks*. In 2016, she performed in a Rauchenburg-funded dance-poetry collaboration called *Folding/Unfolding*. Sharla has written and studied with The Live Poets Society since 2010. She emceed many of the group's poetry readings at the Garden City Public Library, including a celebration of their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Sharla hopes to help generate a joyful life for people everywhere. She delivered a speech, *Balance—Unicycling Lessons for Life*, during a school-wide event at Korea International School in 2019. Spiritually, Sharla has migrated from humanist to an admirer of William Blake and the divine human imagination.

### Publications

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### Education & Certifications

Certified Book Publishing Professional, Nonfiction Author's Association	2023
Cultural Anthropology, Boise State University	2011
Idaho State Bar member	current
Juris Doctorate, University of Idaho	1996
Bachelor of Arts English (writing), Boise State University	1993

### Interests

Poetry      Culture      Exploring outdoors      Dance