

‘The life of compatriots is like ‘gosari’ ferns, which bloom again even after being broken’

After IMF crisis, rediscovering dream of literature in America; ‘writing that resonates is my calling’

“That crisp snapping sound? It reminded me of moments when my life snapped. Ferns taught me what to discard and what to hold onto.”

Kim Ji-hyun (61), author of the winning essay “Gosari” at the 27th Overseas Korean Literary Awards, calmly recounted her 20-year life as an immigrant and her literary journey in an interview with Yonhap News after the ceremony.

She chose to move to the United States in 2002 for her children’s education and later settled in Seattle. Kim explained that her husband’s early retirement from Samsung Electronics following the IMF crisis was the decisive factor.

Initially, they maintained a long-distance family arrangement, but due to the difficulties her children faced, the entire family eventually reunited in the U.S. Life in a foreign land was far from smooth. During her time in Tennessee, she couldn’t even attend her mother’s funeral.

“There were no direct flights, so the round trip took three days. That left a heavy burden on my heart.” This experience later seeped into her writing as a profound shadow.

She worked as an editor at Geumseong Publishing in Korea and briefly taught English at a high school. Throughout middle and high school, she was a “literary girl” who was constantly active in the literary club and won numerous awards, but after marriage, she became a full-time housewife and drifted away from the world of creation.

“My mother always said she had a pregnancy dream about a blue persimmon tree... that it was a dream foretelling I’d become a writer.”

The encouragement she received since childhood lay dormant for a long time, only to be reawakened by the 2020 pandemic.

As her shop business slowed during COVID-19, she began writing afresh as if she were keeping a diary while gazing at Seattle’s ever-changing skies. Submitting an essay titled “Endurance,” which calmly depicted the life and inner world of an overseas Korean woman, to the Northwest Korean Writers Association contest and receiving an honorable mention, she returned to “A place of literature.” These old sensibilities felt



Kim Ji-hyun, Grand Prize winner in the Essay category

more familiar than the new.

Kim wrote about her experience personally gathering a “gosari” fern during her visit to Korea last year for her mother-in-law’s funeral.

“When you pick gosari, it makes a tock-tock sound, right? There’s that exact moment when it snaps. Hearing that, I recalled the breaks in my own life. It has to break to fit in your hand; if it doesn’t break, you just have to leave it be.”

She noted that the process of drying the ferns also resembled the process of sorting through life. Moreover, she explained that the ferns’ resilience to regrow even after being trampled was the most fitting image to symbolize her own experience as an immigrant.

“Being trampled, falling... yet still finding the strength to rise again. That’s what immigrant life is like, isn’t it?”

But winning the award opened a new door within her.

“Good writing ultimately comes from the power of empathy,” she said, expressing her aspiration to learn more deeply and observe more broadly.

“If I get the chance, I want to study more. I want to write pieces that create a sense of empathy using subjects that offer comfort to each person.”

Kim expressed deep gratitude for the awards ceremony and organization of the event by the OKA.

“I’m not even a person of national merit. Honestly, I just received this award while pursuing a hobby; yet they treated me so well. They put in so much preparation. I was deeply moved.” 🙏