Cultural Identity Through My Name(s)

by Dongeun (Jane) Seo, Davis, CA

She fumbled with a rhinestone button on her purple cardigan, and then brought the pen cap to her mouth before breaking the silence. “Dongeun?” she said, waiting for a hand to shoot up in the air. I raised my arm halfway and said, quietly, “Here.”

“You can just call me Jane,” I added loudly.

“That makes things a lot easier,” the substitute teacher muttered, marking a check next to my name.

Dongeun, pronounced Dong-Un, is the first name printed on my Louisiana birth certificate, my passport, and the school roll-call sheet. I’ve heard many variations of my name, including my favorite, Don-Joon, which makes me sound French.

The name, which is rare even in Korea, means “a hill of the East.” It’s a hill I abandoned when the other kids giggled at its sound the first day of fourth grade, when I moved to California. I quickly reintroduced myself by blurtting out the only American name I knew. Thus, “Jane” was born.

As Jane, I felt a sense of belonging with a group of blonde-haired, blue-eyed peers. I packed turkey sandwiches for lunch instead of rice, even though my stomach grewled for Korean food. I walked around the house in my dirty shoes, ignoring the footprints staining the clean carpet. The more I assimilated into the American culture, the less I appreciated my own. Together with my Korean name, Korean culture became one big blur.

Last summer, I was one of a hundred Americans selected by the Korea Foundation to travel to South Korea as part of a cultural exchange. During two weeks of living in a traditional village house, I learned how to perform Korean mask dancing, make kimchi and kimbop, and defend myself through taekwondo. I also gained lifelong friendships and an appreciation for my parents’ home country.

I came home with a new desire to plunge into the 5,000-year-old Korean history, sound the elaborate curves of the Korean language, and feel the silky texture of its traditional dress, Hanbok. Luckily, I didn’t have to search far to satisfy these wishes. My parents, the ones who still call me Dongeun, have always been more than happy to teach me about Korea.

Since the trip, I’ve learned to live in two cultures. At home, I speak Korean, a vague mixture of Korean and English. I greet friends with a “Hello” and wave my hand, and address Korean adults with “Anyong,” bowing my head. In November, my family celebrates Thanksgiving and Chusuk with a dinner table piled with turkey, yams, kimchi, and bulgogi. I speak at the International House about my Korean experience, serving as an ambassador to inform people about Korean culture.

Yesterday, when I saw a substitute teacher in class, my palms didn’t sweat and my heart didn’t race. Instead, when she butchered my name, I politely corrected her, loudly and clearly: “Please call me Dongeun. It’s my Korean name.”

I’ve learned to live in two cultures.

Midwest

by Marissa Wood, Valley Park, MO

The thin two-lane road stretches on for miles. To the left is another two-lane strip of road running the opposite direction, separated by a consistent barrier of dead, unkempt grasses. The roads run along a vast, barren land of dirt and dry crops. They are the veins of life that run through this lonely, dead land.

The road goes on forever in a straight path with nothing to divert it. There is nothing. Gently it rolls across the Ozark land. Rising and falling like the waves of the ocean. The road carries on through sleepy town after town, droning on like a forced, boring conversation. A lone turkey scurries across the dry land and disappears into a patch of trees. Now and again, harshly cut cliffs line the sides of the road. They disappear as quickly as they appear.

Reaching a crest of road, tufts of an abundant forest are visible across miles of rolling land. The trees are a beautiful sea of green with tinges of orange and red amongst them. Fall is approaching. As beautiful as the trees are now, the rolling land. The trees are a beautiful sea of green with tinges of orange and red amongst them. Fall is approaching. As beautiful as the trees are now, the rolling land. The trees are a beautiful sea of green with tinges of orange and red amongst them. Fall is approaching. As beautiful as the trees are now, the rolling land. The trees are a beautiful sea of green with tinges of orange and red amongst them. Fall is approaching. As beautiful as the trees are now, the rolling land. The trees are a beautiful sea of green with tinges of orange and red amongst them. Fall is approaching.

The roads run along a vast, barren land of dirt and dry crops.

Je t’aime … Vive!

The levee broke, my heart crumbled.
Death swallowed my city; alongside you I drowned.
Remembering, remember …
Gravitational pull to beautiful coercion
Freedom of speech, sex, liquor, life and love.
Lustful cheers and a taste of sweet culture.
Remembering, remember …
Vivid scenes of overwhelming waters.
Ghastly pictures of too many bodies afloat.
Remembering, remember …
Embracer of sinners, tamer of none.
Zydeco whispers linger in my blood.
Breeder of the loose and fearless Cajun-Creole.
Remembering, remember …
Unraveling, unmasking the perception of joy.
Untangling confusion of the lives left destroyed.
Bereft of its being, stripped to the core.
Remembering, remember …
Keeper of heartbeat, releaser of hope.
Generating new life, replacing love lost.
Bridge for your people, resurrected from the storm.
Je t’aime … Vive! Nouvelle Orleans.

by Kleo Barnes, Chicago, IL