

Namsan and Timeless Pines

By Wailana Kalama



Namsan Park.

I came here to escape. The silence is heavy-footed, enough to intimidate the urban animal. I step away from the red road that winds up the hillside into the arid, deserted forests of Namsan Park. On the edge of winter, the trees are naked, the leafy tide coils and scatters around my footsteps. Neat piles of sawed wood lay as placeholders and seats, still blushing with life. A bridge of rusting rails above a deadened, shrinking stream. Above me, tree skeletons obscure the iron peak of Seoul Tower. Below, I can see an old man working pull-ups on outdoor equipment, and a gaggle of spirited girls, clipping in their Myeongdong heels. Climbing the edge of a trail less

traveled, I look down into the folk village. I can just hear the vigorous drumming there in the distance; wondering, as I do, what am I missing?

Time Capsule.

It takes me about ten minutes to walk down there, down into the concrete park. Earnest photographers perch on high walls for clear shots. In the cavity of tilting stone alleys lies a massive discus grave, maybe 15 feet in diameter. The time capsule was buried to commemorate Seoul's six hundredth year as capital, to be opened in 2394. Encircling the stone hearth are signatures from mayors of the world over, from Ciudad de Mexico and Honolulu to Tokyo and Paris. A group of Spanish tourists and their bubbly speech float around me as I read.



Namsangol Hanok Village.

Down into the village of black roofs and elfin eaves troughs. Clumps of pine trees, in a tender breeze, a wood pavilion. A small village of century-old architecture posted on slabbed pedestals. They say these buildings stand on ground once called Jeonghakdong— “land of the fairies.” Now there’s a teahouse, serving apricot punch, with mesmerizing flute music, wooden grills for that insular experience. Alongside the outer walls some curator has scratched vertical poems in Hangul calligraphy, lightly dyed a rainbow wash.

“In the dense pine forests of Namsan, the Daegeum echoes bravely.”

The thicket of 19th century buildings is authentic, many constructed by a single carpenter. Carpenters have a way of letting their more daring innovations shine through their own houses—humble yet artfully practical of materials and space. Furnishings are traditionally typical: string bound books, massive *buk* drums of bold, bursting colors, earthen kimchi pots, blackened clay ovens. The most curious piece is a modest shrine table, two legs cut shorter than the other two; it tilts oddly.

In the courtyard, an exhibit of weavers, curling straw upon straw, weaving baskets and a woven slipper the size of a baby. Beside them traditional games are being played: tops beaten with leather straps, dart-like arrows, kite-flying, a metal hoop to be beaten and chased. An old man sees me struggle with the tops, helps get their red spirals spinning with his gnarled brown fingers. I whip the top with the leather tails, angled and fiercely, careful not to scoop up the top’s point. The harder I strike, the longer the dizzying spell lasts.



Behind a brightly green pavilion sits a willow-cradled koi pond, opaque and the color of sick limes. Orange and white pinto fish linger just below the surface, waiting. A young mother and boy sit down and toss in snacks. Who knew that koi loved shrimp chips?

In the middle of the pond lies an islet, covered in shrubbery. A circular place, on a circular hillside that has long ago insulated itself from time with low, shingled walls. If it weren't for the flashing iphones to wake me, I'd be sure to still be there by that pond, waiting for my shrimp chips.