

“The Itaewon Tragedy Was a Pentadecagon” by Paige Eaton '23

I

Itaewon is an eruption of neon and shaking bass, drenched in a sticky residue of alcohol and street food. Ten feet separate the dive bars and narrow alleyways from the large, open street. Here, people shuffle and shout, dance and raise drinks with shaking hands.

Itaewon is the foreign center of Seoul, a place where foreign holidays are celebrated, drawing crowds in the hundreds of thousands. Halloween draws all resident vampires, *Squid Game* characters, zombie doctors, and princesses in glittery light pink dresses. They mesh together in a surging but usually harmless sea of humanity.

All it takes to go overboard is one missed step, one plastic wrapper sliding underfoot, one set of hands primed to push their way through.

Humans are mostly water; drops turn to downpour, smacking the pavement, roaring in white-foamed fervor, cracking ribs and crushing lungs, bursting blood vessels and breaking hearts in two.

Shoes torn off, faces squeezed into deep visages of agony, screams rain from deadening lips, sparks of life sputtering out, snuffed by a crushing lack of oxygen.

In a closed system, a chemical reaction does not affect the mass. The smoke from the extinguished wildfire is thick, and if you mix it with the ashy remains, it is fundamentally the same.

But you can never get that heat back, reverse the reaction into a blaze of life and glory. When the inferno is first tempered, embers remain to rekindle it, and by blowing and pressing on it, it may be revived, but eventually all embers die.

II

The moon is a solitary object. Unlike our overcrowded world, it stands alone in mourning over the lifeless bodies of the slain. The moon was but a glimmer that night, easily swallowed up by the flashing lights, blaring sirens, and buildings so close together one could lay down and reach out to touch all of them. Bodies pressed fatally into them but a week ago, echoing, haunted cries following them as they were carried away on the wind.

According to some ancient Greeks, the moon was the home of the dead. It's not hard to imagine. The desolate, dusty, silver-gray landscape twists with sorrow, with craters where the scarred face of Artemis has protected us. The dust that lines the clothes and belongings of Itaewon's victims is also moon-dust. Sometimes the moon is drenched in blood, crevices a rusty brown, long lost scabs peeling open.

III

The Itaewon Crush killed 156 people. Most suffocated from the sheer humanity piled atop one another. I can't even name 156 people. I can't imagine having 156 bodies piled atop me. The sheer heat of humanity, the paralyzed muscles lining the lungs, the crushing fear as the darkness creeps in, the heat turning to deadly cold, screams melting into silence. . . . Multiply that by 156. Now it may as well be infinite.

156 is many things. 156 is an abundant number. 156 degrees is the internal angle of a pentadecagon. Fifteen sides make a pentadecagon; fifteen is a blend of one, five, and six. Fifteen is a day of rest.

But 156 hearts stopped, 156 pairs of cold limbs, 156 swollen faces, choked breaths.

IV

The BBC wrote that "South Korea demands justice for the young," the young who have suffered Sewol, the rushing tide of death, the sickening salty depths of listening to corrupt authority.

On April 16 of 2014, eight years ago, 299 people drowned in the Pacific Ocean. 250 of them were high school students en route to a school trip. The captain, sitting high on his salt-crusting seat

of authority, told those kids to stay put while he found his way out of the fatally wounded ferry. Later, they found cell-phone footage from waterlogged cabins floating with death. Students cried out in fear, so similar to those in Itaewon. "Political trauma of Sewol disaster haunts government response to Itaewon," the Korean Herald proclaimed.

Those that survived grew up, endured high school, only to find themselves smothered and drowning in a different ocean. The police were called six times that night before the tragedy. They spoke of walls closing in, bodies dropping down, forewarning the disaster. They faced the same cabins flooded with people, the same absence of those sworn to protect them, and were consumed by it.

V

Today, Itaewon sits empty and silent; trash litters the murderers' walkway, the silence broken only by the wails of a nation.

One mother pulls down a flower arrangement sent by the president. She screams in agony. Monks chant hauntingly through the streets. Soju is poured out, one shot for each victim. One candle is lit to replace the spark of life in an act of futile and false imitation. Pictures and flowers adorn the gates of the subway station where many victims likely walked to their death that night.

South Korea has declared a week of mourning. Artists are canceling shows; the country is shutting down in a state of universal trauma and shock. Anger is brewing under the surface, exploding out in candlelight vigils turned protests, shaking voices calling for explanations of the unexplainable. Where were the police? Why was there no crowd control? Why did they die this way? And in response, they are told to call it an accident, absolving the government of all wrongdoing.

An old man brings steaming, hearty soup, traditionally brought to nourish the dead. He lays down a mat and kneels down in silence. He is trespassing on a crime scene. Although cops were sparse the night before, they immediately notice his small, hunched presence.

Grabbing his shoulder, they force him away from the bowls laying gently on the dusty, trashed ground. He struggles and breaks away. *We must send these kids off with at least a meal!* he shouts, the sound of it filling the empty space.