



S O N G S F O R T O M O R R O W

A Collection of Poems
1960–2002

Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé
Young-moo Kim, and Gary Gach
With an Introduction by Ko Un

K O
U N

GREEN INTEGER 170

Songs for Tomorrow: A Collection of Poems 1960-2002

Ko Un

Translated from the Korean by Brother Anthony of Taizé, Young-moo Kim, and Gary Gach, with an Introduction by Ko Un and a Translators' Introduction by Brother Anthony and Gary Gach

In this long awaited full survey of the poetic writing of Korea's leading literary spokesperson, the translators have gathered poems from 42 years, representing numerous of the author's 135 books. As they note in their introduction, "Ko Un is...like a force of nature."

Born in 1933 in southwestern Korea, he grew up in a Japanese-controlled land that was soon to experience the horrors of the Korean War. In 1952 he became a Buddhist monk, and began writing in the late 1950s. Since that time, Ko has been recognized as one of the most notable of living Korean writers and has regularly been nominated and short-listed for the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1982 Ko Un published his *Collected Poems* in Korea.

Green Integer previously published a selection from his *Maninbo* as **Ten Thousand Lives** in 2005. As John Feffer wrote of that book in *The Nation*, "*Maninbo*, his masterpiece, is the people made flesh. Thanks to Ko Un, they continue to walk among us, all 10,000 of them." As the *Kyoto Journal* observed "It is a monumental work of twenty-five volumes containing short poetic portraits evoking, one by one, the many people Ko Un has encountered in his life, beginning with his childhood village and expanding out to figures in literature and history. Ko Un is widely acknowledged to be Korea's foremost contemporary poet; yet he is not "the literary poet" using his art to put a grid of order unto chaos (which is ultimately too simplistic and dualistic a perspective), but rather he is able to see from a bird's-eye view, all perspectives, without superimposing any judgment, pity or revulsion."

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TRANSCRIBING THE WIND: Translators' Introduction

by Brother Anthony of Taizé and Gary Gach

We subtitle this volume a collection, since a translated *Collected Poems* doesn't look likely for an author of over 125 titles. Ah, but we might as well catch the wind.

Ko Un is, indeed, like a force of nature. Remarkable that he's published more than 135 books (every word handwritten: no typewriter, no computer). His writing spans the gamut of genres, which he's made his own: fiction, essay, translation, drama, poetry. Within poetry, the amazing array of kinds of poetry you'll find here has caused literary critics to call him "The Ko Uns" rather than Ko Un. And the blossoming of this abundant variety of poetry represents an index of the history of modern Korean poetry, and of modern Korean history itself, as we set out here in brief.

We begin with early poems, from the 1960s, which invoke the poet's origins. Ko Un was born on August 1, 1933

in a village in southwestern Korea, (North Chōlla Province), now forming part of the city of Kunsan. He was the first child of parents neither rich nor highly educated, but who encouraged their son to study from early childhood. At this time, Korea was a province of Japan, having been violently annexed in 1910, after millennia as an independent nation with its own remarkable cultural heritage. By the time he was eight, Ko Un had mastered classical Chinese texts difficult for far older students. During this period, Japanese was the only language allowed in schools and government administration. Yet Ko Un was able to read and write Korean, having been taught secretly by a neighbor's farmhand.

Young Ko Un exhibits a rebellious, nationalistic streak.

In the third grade, his Japanese headmaster asks his class what they want to be when they grow up, and Ko Un replies, "Emperor of Japan," for which he is severely punished. The occupation ceased with the surrender of the Japanese, following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, at the end of World War II ("Liberation").

As he mentions elsewhere in this book, in *Words*—one day while walking home after school, he discovered a book by the wayside, by the well-known leper poet Han Ha-un (1920–1975). When he reads the line, "On and on along the

earthen path..." he vows that from that day on, for him, his own world will be all an earthen path. He stays up all night, reading and weeping, and later recalled, "My heart seemed torn apart by the force of the shock those lyrics produced on me." That night was an initiatory experience, into poetry and, moreover, a way of life and art, taking whatever comes, journeying forth like a nomad or pilgrim, blown by the wind.

Then came the winds of war. Withdrawal of the Japanese from the south was supervised by the US, from the north by the USSR. The north developed a communist government and on June 25, 1950, invaded the south.

Ko Un witnesses rape and murder by the communists, then the Korean Army's executions of communist collaborators with family members, friends, neighbors on both sides. He is ordered to transport corpses, carrying them on his back for many nights. On the verge of mental breakdown, he attempts to block out the noises of a world gone mad, pouring acid into both ears and losing all hearing in one forever. He later recalled, "warfare reduced every city to ruins; almost every mountainous region was turned into the scorched ground of a battlefield. Destruction on a vast scale filled each and every human mind with corresponding ruins. I became an orphan, of those ruins, of emptiness."

The Korean War lasted three years, killing over three million people. During this time, the winds of war blew Ko Un to the gateless gates of Sŏn (the Korean form of what is known in Japan as Zen). He became a disciple of Master Hyobong, formerly a judge during the Japanese occupation of Korea, who'd become a monk himself because he was haunted by having sentenced a fellow Korean to death for a crime against Japanese law. During the following decade, Ko Un traveled across Korea's ravaged countryside as a mendicant. As part of a continuous pilgrimage, the path he followed ran also through his own mind. Eventually attaining high rank in the monastic order, Ko Un held several important administrative duties. Having co-founded Korea's first Buddhist newspaper, sometimes he'd fill leftover space with his poetry, which eventually reached the commendation of Korea's master poet, Midang. (No striving; his work was just borne by the wind.) This early poetry—highly emotive, and sometimes approaching an imageless Imagism, yet always grounded in his lived experience—mirrored the Korean poetry of the time, with its Japanese-sanctioned styles often influenced by early Western modernism, particularly Baudelaire, the French Symbolists, and Rilke, along with counter-tendencies in the air, such as “back to roots” movements” attuned to the nation's legacy of nature poetry, animism, and shamanism.

In 1960, Ko Un published his first book of poems, *Other Shore Sensibility*. By then, he realized he was going to have to choose: life as a monk or as a poet. The constricted hierarchy of institutionalized Korean Buddhism at that time helped tip the scales. A couple of years later, he published his *Resignation Manifesto* in a daily newspaper and “disrobed,” as it were, leaving the monastery for the secular world.

The year after he’d ordained, 1953, an armistice had been signed, ending the fighting (a peace treaty is still wanting), but splitting the nation into North Korea and South Korea, exacerbating the national trauma of the decades of having been an imperial colony. The Allies had promised Korea freedom and independence. Now the south would become an industrialized nation, but ruled by an unbroken series of dictators.

This was the milieu in which Ko Un entered the 1970s, the turning point in his life story. Falling into despair, he boarded a ship vowing once more to take his own life. However, downing one drink after another to prepare for jumping overboard, he passed out instead. When he came to, he found himself in a port in the poverty-stricken southern island of Cheju.

Looking around to see where the winds had blown him now, here he stayed, from 1963 to 1967, founding a charity school and working as unpaid headmaster and teaching

Korean and art. He published his second and third books of poetry while living here, then moved to Seoul in 1967. These books captivated great attention, especially of younger readers, one critic saying that it was work "even the gods would be jealous of." Still, like many Koreans of his time, nihilism blocked the path. Nihilism wasn't just a philosophical concept but a daily reality in Korea's devastated landscapes, within and without. After a third suicide attempt, in 1970, he lay in a coma for thirty hours.

In 1972, President Park Chung-hee amends the Constitution (the infamous Yushin Reforms), suspending normal democratic institutions and granting himself an unlimited term of office. At about this time, Ko Un reads an article in an abandoned newspaper he found on the floor of a tavern, about the self-immolation of Chon Tae-il, a young garment worker trying to improve dreadful labor conditions of garment workers. Like the book by the leper poet that crossed his path, and like his discovery of Buddhism, this event is a sudden awakening. Discovering activism, Ko Un leaves nihilism behind, eventually becoming one of the main spokespeople for writers and artists opposed to Korea's succession of dictatorial regimes, a dissident voice rallying Korea's continuing grassroots democracy movement.

Here he also discovers the crucial necessity of interfaith spirituality. "Exclusivism is no longer possible," he'd state, remembering how his comrades came from various religious backgrounds, yet all united in close bonds of love.

In 1974, the Council of Writers for Practical Freedom is established; Ko Un is its first secretary-general. The same year, he becomes the official spokesman for the National Association for the Recovery of Democracy. The dictatorship strikes back: he's arrested and locked up, the first of four major incarcerations.

During this time, too, he writes up a storm, publishing biographies of famous Korean artists and poets, and a book of translations of Chinese poetry from the T'ang Dynasty, as well as books of his own poetry. In his poetry of this period (which we've dubbed *Turning Point*), we see the emergence of a more demotic, colloquial style that is at the same time oppositional to official state-endorsed diction and themes.

In 1978, he's elected Vice-President of the Korean Coalition for Human Rights. The poems from the decade of the 1980s we've grouped under the heading *Homeland Stars*, since national consciousness is at the center of so much of them. People's hopes of a democratic renewal were sparked by President Park's death in October 1979 (assassinated by the head of his own security agency). Ko Un is released

from prison, and an artificial eardrum is inserted, restoring some measure of hearing. But in 1980 the military imposes its will once again, and the rise to power of General Chun Doo-hwan culminates in yet another military coup. In May of that year, martial law is declared nationwide. In the city of Kwangju, in South Chölla province, students protest. The military is sent in and many people are killed. The townspeople rally behind the students and liberate their city. In the ensuing crackdown, hundreds are killed.

Ko Un had already been incarcerated, along with hundreds of others. A courtmartial tribunal sentences him to 20 years' imprisonment for conspiring to incite civil war. Held in a military prison, he never knows if each day will be his last. Buddhist meditation helps sustain him. And he reflects on the lives and fates of many, many Koreans. He conceives of an epic cycle of poems to include every person he's ever known or known of. Begun in 1984 and entitled *Ten Thousand Lives (Maninbo)*, it now numbers 25 volumes; one of the most important (and audacious) undertakings of cultural memory of the late 20th century, and continuing, as of this writing.

General Chun Doo-hwan becomes officially elected president, and Ko Un is released from jail in August 1982. He publishes his *Collected Poems*. In May of the next year, he

marries Lee Sang-wha, a professor of English literature, and sets up a home with her in the countryside about two hours' drive from Seoul, in Ansŏng. A daughter, Charyŏng, their only child, is born in 1985. Family life is good to him. His literary output, already prolific, further multiplies.

Our selection of Ko Un's poetry of the '90s, which we generically entitled *Windy Days*, represents the full flowering of his wide-ranging abilities, glimpsed in the previous years. It isn't the sheer number of poems he wrote in this decade, to be noted, but rather his mastery of an amplitude of diverse forms and feelings, like the wind encircling the globe. Yet, within his wide range, each poem yields universal, vital relevance, perpetually immediate in its spontaneity.

In 1989, his unauthorized attempts to meet with North Korean writers earn him a fourth, brief imprisonment. His writing now returns to Buddhist themes (considered a betrayal by some activist writers), marked by the completion of the second half of *Little Pilgrim (Hwaŏm-kyŏng)*, serialized in the early 1970s. It's a retelling of the Buddhist Gandavyuha, the last section of the Avatamsaka Sutra (aka Flower Garland), chronicling a young child's pilgrimage across the Indian subcontinent, and the book becomes a phenomenal bestseller in Korea (300,000 copies sold, and still selling) way beyond any Buddhist audience.

Overseas, in 1992, an initial selection of Ko Un's work in English is published, *The Sound of My Waves*, translated by Brother Anthony and Young-moo Kim, the same year as the Republic elects a civilian as president, Kim Young-sam, who exposed financial scandals and prosecuted the architects of the Kwangju Massacre.

In 1997, his former jail-mate, Kim Dae-jung, is elected president. And the following year Ko Un is permitted to visit North Korea, as part of an exceptional, official, authorized visit, under the auspices of a consortium of publishing and broadcasting companies. Having recovered his passport, he has continued to travel – Australia, Canada, China, Columbia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Mongolia, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the U.S. — and North Korea.

On June 15, 2000, Ko Un was present at the North Korean capital of Pyöngyang, where the heads of South and North Korea had just signed an historic agreement. The media is invited back into the chambers, and Ko Un is requested to read a poem to commemorate the event. He reaches inside his coat, and passionately reads the poem he's written that morning about the Taedong River, which flows right through Pyöngyang and nearby Ko Un's lodging. The next morning, this impromptu reading is broadcast all across

South Korea, and his face appears worldwide in an iconic news photo, standing behind and just inbetween President Kim Dae Jung and Beloved Leader Kim Jong-il. He has since returned to North Korea, most recently as the head of an international team preparing a complete dictionary of the Korean language, covering not only the two halves of the peninsula but also the Korean-speaking diaspora across the world. Seeing unification as inevitable, Ko Un is also aware it will be gradual, like a change of seasons. He remains present, actively engaged.

In a word, Ko Un is not only an eyewitness, but also an actor in the history of his time. His poetry incarnates it, an expression of both the suffering and the hope characterizing the indomitable resilience of modern Korea, and the human spirit. So here you have, on the surface of these bright pages, testimony whose ink is still drying, as it were. Bearing witness to an answer that is ever yet to come. Songs for tomorrow, in the key of sun, rain, wind, earth, and your hearty attention.

San Francisco—Seoul

Words: Poet's Preface

by Ko Un

Some days
it seemed a guest

Some days
it seemed the host

All those years
I was dreaming
of the smoke rising from chimneys

Even now, I'm not sure who a poem is.

The beginning is a kind of darkness. There was no way I could have realized that forty-eight years of writing were going to be so challenging.

Obligated as a middle-school student to walk several miles to and from school, one day as the sun was setting I picked up a book of poems someone had dropped at the roadside, took it home and spent the night reading; by the time I had finished, drenched in tears, I longed to become a poet. A baby moth had been caught in a spider's web.

That middle-school student's dream came true after the war had destroyed many things. The 1950s were a time when more than half of Korea had been reduced to a scorched wasteland, the cities were in ruins, and for the people who were barely surviving, lost like scraps of broken brick amongst the ruins, no future seemed possible. They were helpless, obliged to begin everything anew; clusters of wooden shacks sprang up here and there. Always a wind was blowing. I was a poet, aged twenty-five.

All I possessed in those days was my sensitivity, and that was an utterly poor thing, devoid as I was of the least awareness of language. My inspiration was far too vague. I was nothing but a lost child or an orphan that had never once set foot in any of the realms of poetics, with no consciousness as a writer.

I could only feel that my body was filled with the possibility of poetry, so that the world's grim landscapes

increasingly became places destined for me, places I could not turn my back on.

Experiences I had in such places inevitably reminded me that, like every child of colonized Korea, I had to live in a world where my mother tongue had been forbidden.

Just when I quit the village's Confucian school's study of Chinese classics and belatedly entered the first grade of primary school, the hitherto regular Korean language classes were abolished and I had to begin to study Japanese, that was now termed "the national language." And it was not only in school, since there was an official campaign to impose the use of Japanese even at home.

In addition to the classical Chinese I had learned at the village school, and the Japanese studied in primary school, I also learned to read Korean Hangül writing from a farmhand in the village. I easily read the novel *Helpless Youth*, that children were not supposed to read; the descriptions it contained of the tramway terminal in Tonam-dong or the gray gloves the hero bought as a present in the Hwashin Department Store left a deep impression.

Those images combined in my mind with a line from a poem in the opening section of the *Chinese Book of Poetry*, "Who says that the Yellow River is wide? With a reed I can cross it."

In addition, traditional Japanese folk-tale heroes from my school text books, Momo Taro and Urashima Taro, as well as General Nogi and Admiral Togo, heroic figures from the Russo-Japanese war, were like splinters imbedded deep within me.

At the start of the colonial period, Japanese policy was applied in such a way as ultimately to deprive Korea of its sovereignty and its material identity. At first, the Korean language and its writing system were preserved as signs of Korea's self-governing status. But it soon grew clear that once that autonomous identity had been abolished, an "autonomy of narration" could replace that identity and that such a narrational autonomy could someday have its own cultural power, the strength to bring back to life the autonomy that had been lost.

When defining a nation, the first question is always whether it does or does not have its own language; therefore, for the frenzied Japanese colonial regime Korea's language and writing system were the final remains of autonomous identity, that had of course to be eliminated.

Together with this policy of the erasure of the Korean language went a reinforced policy of transforming personal names. Obliging every Korean to change their name into a Japanese one was at the very heart of the process of

transforming colonized Korea into part of Japan. The novelist Yi Kwang-su wrote about the happiness he felt when he voluntarily changed his name into a Japanese one. As a first-grade primary-school student, my name became Takabayashi Toraskei.

The way language functions as a symbol of people's identity not only shows how our mother tongue was degraded during the colonial period; it also obliges us to reflect on how language is home for every human being. The way Dante, after he had been banished from his native city as a political exile under pain of death, completed his *Divine Comedy* in the language of Florence, shows how he rejected the universality of Latin. Through the language of his native city, he fulfilled at one and the same time his political devotion, his metaphysics, and his poetic achievement.

In the history of Korean literature, there is a long-standing opposition between works written in classical Chinese and those written in Korean. The tradition according to which "poetry" was composed using the language of Chinese poems while "songs" employed Korean words continued until just before modern literature arose, when the Chosŏn dynasty was deprived of its sovereignty. The poems in the *hyangga* of the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) and the folk songs of the

middle ages were not poems in the literary sense but “poetic songs” in a musical sense.

This kind of tradition, the formation of modern literature coinciding with the process of colonization, brought about an effective break with previous traditional society.

The Korean War (1950–3) made both the literature of the colonial period and the literature of the years following Liberation in 1945, that had provided a setting as my own initial literary environment, look old-fashioned. The Modernism of the 1930s manifested far more predominant symptoms of that, while the rhythms of the earliest modern poetry looked spontaneously indigenous. However, the Modernism of the 1950s clumsily echoed the feelings of the city-dwellers and the period’s melancholy, but failed to attain any high level of literary maturity.

Also, the reaction of the individual subject to the heteronymous situation of the time depended on finding a coherence between the self-awareness of an oppressed colonial people and self-expression. This is where the tragedy of the nation’s division intervenes.

After the Korean War was over, just as we had to start life again like an ancient cave-dwelling tribe, so too literature had to undergo a new beginning. The most fascinating aspect of those days was the concept of Zero. But literature can

never really be divided between one age and another. Talk of a new beginning though we may, it is most likely to be in a continuity. Present-day literature is not completely separated from the early folk songs from the Yellow River basin or the epics of Homer.

But I had no chance of experiencing such literature. Beyond a happiness that after Liberation, with the departure of Japanese language, Korean literature had returned to our native language and writing system, I knew nothing except for the ancient lyric Jōngūp-sa and Yi Je-hyōn, the translator of Koryō's lyrics, the great 19th-century Korean thinker Dasan Chōng Yak-yong, the early 20th-century's first great lyric poet Kim So-wōl, and the 1930s' poet and novelist Yi Sang.

I had never had any contact with classical and medieval lyrics, or ancient Korean literature written in classical Chinese, or any of the kinds of Korean literature studied in university departments of Korean literature. I managed to discover that I was a poet, not a scholar of Korean literature, after realizing that to be a poet was freedom itself, freed from the fetters of any such human considerations.

Awareness does not come before poetry; it is only attained through the multiple stages of the ordeal involved in writing poems. Put more forcibly, my designated territory

was a poetics of experience. And the word “experience” here has to be seen as synonymous with “the imagination.”

All my life long I shall be a poet using one part of language extremely hard. This has yielded hope, but also often despair. It seems that language is the despair of language.

Despite the anguish I feel about the ambiguity that modern legal theory deals with, and also about the question whether language is or is not the unique act that brings about the essence of all things, I could not exist without language.

After conflicts between language and Zen, which is a state where language ceases to exist and the written text is rejected and that I practiced for ten years, the division finally lost its power. It may perhaps be that I was finally restored to a harmony between the two principles that the classical thinker Wŏnhyo termed “separation from language” and “dependence on language.”

I have moved on a little further from those days, as if listening to the sound of rain by night all alone. Now I have turned my head downstream, away from the river farther up. My poetry will go flowing on and on until it is fully absorbed into the ocean, and my absence is completed.

Thus my poetry is flow. That flow will at times produce rhythms as it strikes against the river banks or frolics, speckled by light and shade. Thus my poetry is resonance. In

an interview with the *New York Times* in the late 1980s, I said that “poetry is the music of history,” stressing the “music” no less than the “history.”

I believe that poetry comes closer to its essence when we take it as an object for study by the ears, not by the eyes. In that sense, it should be stressed that the poem as text is a code, and the poem as sound is life. What I call “resonance” probably vibrates throughout the history of poetry.

My own form of resonance is at times dependent on chance, like the spontaneous, automatic techniques of Surrealism, or the spread of the ink in oriental calligraphic painting. I have composed a few set-form poems in Chinese characters, quatrains with four lines of seven characters.

Apart from them, I have never composed even a single *sijo* (a fixed-form Korean-language poem), refusing to apply any kind of methodological order to the external form of my poems. If poetry is a matter of thinking with images, well, that is surely one possible kind of system, but in some cases my poetry shuddered at its own inner rhythms and hurried to demolish them.

When strict rules requiring regular form were imposed on classical Chinese-language poems like government regulations, I became a rebel. Fundamentally the poet remains free within the living structure known as a poem.

Today it is not possible to believe in such poetry. Free verse demands ever greater freedom. In an age when poetry has let go of rigid forms, what cannot be called poetry in the classical sense also becomes poetry.

Therefore, poetry is a field for limitless living organisms, where nobody is able to define what poetry is and at the same time anyone can define it to some degree. Even if someone were to proclaim that the numbers on the freight trains waiting on the sidings at Taejŏn station are signs capable of becoming poetry and have indeed already become poetry, and that therefore the life of poetry lies in the death of signs, that could not be contradicted by any kind of poetic theory.

In this respect, I reject the contemporary trend to discuss poetry as a form of text. There is no poetry in the world that ever becomes text. Poetry cannot be fixed to a desk or an Internet screen. Strictly speaking, poetry is not found in poetry books.

The spaces within the cosmos and in the immensities of time serve as the stage for poetry. Even a little love song or an elegy is a poem that exists in the cosmos. Therefore, poetry is obliged to be faithful to its public function in the world.

What is called sympathy goes beyond the unidimensional relation of person and person. That is why I have occasionally

poured scorn on the excretion of personal feelings which has been symptomatic of Korean poetry since ancient times. The voice speaking in poetry should not be that of the poet coming into the poem in person and gabbling away; if it is a true voice, the poet will become a shaman serving as a public channel for communication between one person's soul and another's.

The poet is an adventurer who employs a minimum of words to obtain the maximum of universality. A poet is not required to derive his materials from the empty void. The poet will have to reflect the materials of concrete experience, drawn from whatever the surroundings or circumstances impose, and on all the demands of the world's current state, with the urgency of autobiographical narrative. I may sing of a dog peeing, but not of myself peeing.

At times, the voice speaking in a poem becomes a collective voice, or a representative voice, and thereby a poem becomes a union of the private and the public, where the private is not separated from the public and the public is not an obstacle to the private.

I still retain some memories of things that happened before I became a poet. If I had not taken the road of literature, those memories would be nothing more than fragments from the past.

I was five when I first saw a fire: a sheet of flames rising late at night, driven by the wind, from the small farmhouse where I was born and the bamboo grove behind it. The villagers were carrying buckets of water in an attempt to quench the flames, in vain. The next day I saw ruins in the pile of ashes where my home had been. That fire and the resulting ruins took the first place in my consciousness.

Those ruins frequently overlapped in my mind with the ruins that the Korean War spread across the entire country when I was in my later teens. An individual's memories are not self-contained but are linked organically with the disasters of history, contributing to the internalization of childhood experiences and the subsequent psychic traumas that are inevitable to a poet.

I have another memory. I was five and I was being carried on my aunt's back. It was dark. Despite the fact that they were mostly rice-farmers, the villagers had to deliver such quantities to the landowners and the government that starvation was constant. It was the same with the summer barley harvest.

Rations of maize from Manchuria were distributed but the corn was mostly rotten. When it was powdered and boiled into gruel, sea-blite from the seaside mudflats was mixed with it. Mother went out at dawn to gather that

along the banks of the Mangyŏng River. There were so many women doing the same that it took a whole day's labor to fill just half a basket. Since mother was still not back by nightfall, we had gone outside the garden fence and were waiting for her. Clinging to my aunt's back, I was hungry.

Then I noticed for the first time the stars in the night sky. The cosmic landscape struck me for the first time. Only I mistook the stars for fruit dangling from the sky. So I began to beg her to pick me some stars, weeping. That first error of mistaking stars for food was the vague beginning of a poet who would later sing the stars as a dream.

For many years I kept that memory hidden. It was a kind of shame that I had no desire to reveal.

Early in the 1970s, my writing underwent a new transformation. Prior to that, no political question or social issue had been able to find a place in my poetic nihilism. Then came an incident by which finally I realized that literature cannot be detached from reality. I came to behold the sorrowful image presented by escapists who were faithful to politics by being detached from politics. I was forced to ask what literature could be in the presence of a hungry child, and I had to ponder deeply what literature could be in the presence of dictatorship. Then I realized that the intense

reality making the stars look like food to the hungry could make it possible to celebrate the stars as intense dreams. I was convinced of the magical sublimation in which food and dreams become one by means of the stars.

Without that experience in the 1970s, my literary career might well have proved to be nothing but a night where a bird sings blood-drenched songs in one corner of a mountain valley without shedding even one drop of blood. The illusion of purity and the doctrine of commitment are two paradoxical indicators of the literature that is going to transcend both and display a new vitality.

So the path of my writing is the interactive reverberation of those two dimensions, reality with what lies beyond it, and Indra's Net. Commitment was finally my new wide-open field.

My family and my hometown backgrounds were so poor in emotional terms that I had to reconstruct an imaginary world. The multiple, hyper-realistic sufferings that Gorki endured as a child go beyond our imagination; my childhood was simply so poor that imagination was necessary. And fiction reconstructs fact.

Unlike the other children around me, I had no sister. So the sadness I felt at having no sister created in my later teens

the fiction that I had once had a sister. The fiction required a greater actual feeling than fact and had to generate a kind of chemical reaction creating more truth than fact could.

My fiction developed. An abnormal or morbid psychological state, in which I was envious of bedridden patients, eventually turned me into a fictional patient, although I was basically healthy despite a rather fragile constitution. In my adolescence, sick people seemed to me to be taking on themselves the disease of the world.

Especially tuberculosis was deeply associated with literary sentiments. The people living in rural areas often suffered gastric blockages, but the only thing I was curious about was the tuberculosis I longed to catch. I conjured up the sound of coughing heard at midnight in a sanatorium.

Finally, I ended up creating a story. And it served as a starting point for my literary initiation: I used to have a beautiful older sister. She had nursed me when I was already in the second stage of tuberculosis; I had recovered but my sister was infected in turn and she died. Trapped in a sense of guilt and a limitless longing for her, I fell into deep sorrow; I carried the urn with my sister's remains with me as I traveled around, until one night I finally cast it into the sea off the west coast, performing a water-burial, then withdrew into the mountains.

That fiction became embodied inside me; it was no mere assumption but a theorem. No one believed that that fiction was in fact a fiction

This story became widely known, and critical essays began to appear that tried to understand my early poems in terms of a “sister complex.”

It was only in the early 1990s, when for the first time I underwent a general physical examination, that an X-ray revealed that one of my lungs was completely calcified as a result of a bout of tuberculosis. There had been no obvious symptoms. No coughing, no blood-spitting. Despite constant heavy drinking and two packs of cigarettes a day, I had remained quite unaffected apart from an upset stomach.

When I discovered that I had in fact been the TB patient I had so longed to be, I experienced the literary identity of fiction and fact.

I was delighted to discover that, realizing that imagination or image is not a matter of my face reflected in a mirror but a means by which I should explore the reality, that fact and reality are at times born through fiction as new realities. It seems that we bear within our human mind or consciousness the power to fill the subterranean world and the heavenly realms.

Of course, not every aspect of my poetry and writing has its origins in such fictions. Nonetheless, it was through this kind of fiction that at an early stage of my literary career I was able to pass through romantic nihilism and emptiness, non-being, the negation of reality and anti-realism with full commitment.

Literature does not impose monotonous, stereotyped values on a writer. A literary work devoid of variation and safe from fire like an inflammable substance of poor quality, is not literature. The road taken by my writing has pursued many directions. In the first years of the 1970s, my encounter with one incident sent my writing off in a quite different direction. That new path was immediately a perilous one.

This marks the significant beginning of the second half of my spiritual history. Before that, for almost ten years I had been unable to escape from a virtually incurable state of chronic insomnia. Naturally enough, the poems I wrote in a drunken haze after drinking alone far into the night were most likely to be exaggerations, and great was my bitter disappointment on reading them the next day. In the early stages of my insomnia, I had been able to get to sleep after consuming three or four bottles of *soju*. But gradually alcohol lost its power over the symptoms.

If I managed to fall into a dream-tossed sleep around five in the morning, before eight my soul was again submerged in a turbid stream.

The alleys of Seoul's downtown Mugyo-dong with their little bars and restaurants were my regular haunt. My innards grew numb with the strong *soju* and fiery-hot squid I used to devour until just before the midnight curfew.

I could find no resting-place among the bars and inns in the back-streets at the heart of the city. I often mocked the "green pastures" of the Old Testament. Rather, moments when I was wide awake were much more familiar, finding myself amidst the dissipated behavior of drunkards abusing ordinary life beneath the fluorescent lights of bars thick with cigarette smoke.

Not infrequently I would spend the night sprawled on top of a table, coldly treated by the owners, since it was impossible to go out once the curfew time came.

One morning, trash was littering the floor beneath the tables, newspapers and mimeographed leaflets were scattered on the cement and there was even a pen among them. I casually picked up a newspaper from the previous day. There was a very brief article: "Worker burns himself to death in protest."

Up to that moment, I had attempted suicide some four

times. The fourth time I had made thorough preparations. I had in my possession one hundred sleeping-pills that someone had collected by showing his identity card to purchase the permitted daily dose. One day in January 1970 I swallowed them all in a valley up in Pukhan Mountain to the north of Seoul, that had been declared a special military operations area despite being unfrequented, since it was suspected of being a route used by spies.

Just as I was disappearing beneath the accumulating snow, I was discovered by members of the defense corps, who tried to interrogate me on suspicion of being a spy attempting to enter the country. Naturally, having downed all the sleeping pills with quantities of *soju*, I was virtually unconscious. Just as I was about to be discarded as a vagrant found dead at the roadside, an officer instructed his men to take me to the emergency room of a nearby hospital. There I underwent repeated stomach-pumping and awoke thirty hours later. As my friends held my hands and comforted me, I joked that my hand was a hand from the world beyond.

On account of my own recent attempted suicide, I took a particular interest in that worker's self-immolation. Out of that deep interest, my consciousness began to establish a circuit linking that worker's reality, the grim social realities of the labor environment in the early 1970s, and the

multiple contradictions of our divided country since the end of the war.

I entered a world very different from that in which I had been living previously. Or rather I had until then been living far from the world and now it had at last become possible for me to enter it. With some hesitation, I joined other literary comrades in a firm commitment against the prolongation of the military regime for a third term. The moment I set foot there, I threw myself into action like a horse freed of its bridle.

With this shift of identity the insomnia that had made a hell of my nights for the past ten years abruptly vanished and an uncertain happiness came.

Only my poetry did not immediately follow me. The poet was one quick step ahead of his poems. The poetry was panting along in pursuit of the poet. It was my so-called “post-nihilism.”

It was not only a matter of literature. In Korean society I was an ardent activist identified with the democracy movement, and so blacklisted, while I was known abroad as a leading “dissident.” Sometimes it seemed I was completely unconnected with the literary world. In those days the people in literary circles mostly supported the government and its revised “Yushin” Constitution, forming part of the

regime without the least judgment of reality. I formed close blood-ties with the resistant forces composed of priests and pastors, professors who had been fired by their universities, reporters who had lost their jobs, leaders of opposition parties, students who had been expelled or who, freed from prison, were refused readmission to school, with all the intellectuals of that dark night-time.

At the end of almost twenty years of such activities came the June Resistance Movement of 1987. At that time I was at the head of the street demonstrations as a co-representative of the national headquarters of citizens' organizations and in the front line mobilizing the crowds.

Early in the 1990s, a civilian government was installed after the end of three successive military dictatorships, I was amnestied as a prisoner of conscience, and was finally issued a passport allowing travel abroad.

The fraught relationship with reality or history has been necessary to my writing and reality has constantly imposed a mission on my writing. If there had been an overplus of emotion about my earlier poetry, I found myself obliged to suppress that and focus on the propositions of life, freedom and equality, that should be restored to our people and our society. My writing has therefore aspired to embody

my prenatal romanticism and my postnatal realism and to transcend both of them.

In this process, I have been dreaming that the demands to overcome our country's division and our society's contradictions will be realized, at the end of a lengthy series of confrontations, with complementarity and harmony. There the unconstrained freedom proposed by the high inner liberation of the Hua-yen, the Avatamsaka Sutra, will finally dawn.

But so far as literature is concerned, I have never looked for a solution. If literature adopts as a standard an absolute wisdom, offering some kind of resolution or outcome, that would signify the death of literature.

Likewise, the life within me rejects any kind of renunciation or ambiguous reconciliation. Any gesture of my remaining life adjusting clothing and recalling times past would make me look quite ridiculous. I may have my regrets, but I have no wish to be enveloped by anyone's pity. Rather, I believe that the two forces of an imposed contradiction have sustained my destiny as a poet. That is why I have always been both this and that at the same time.

Literature begins and ends as literature. A metaphor historicizes me and estheticizes me. After that, the remains of the metaphor vanish. If a situation arises where my

writing is subordinated to political realities or ideology, I am obliged to fight against it. Therefore I am free only within literature, and often disregard the many pitfalls existing outside of literature. Society is the locus of my existence but at the same time it is a system that turns my existence into a nameless cell. Confronting this kind of heteronomy, I have never hesitated to create a literature which is in entire contradiction with the course of reality.

In short, freedom deploys itself in a variety of expressive forms. Together with poetry, my hands have undertaken fiction and critical essays, even prose narratives. There have been times when I contributed installments to seven different publications in dailies, weeklies and monthly magazines at the same time.

Such speed! And how bright the silent idleness is that follows the speeding!

Particularly, since the 1970s I have needed history. It may have been because since Liberation in 1945 I had never properly entered history, the system of consciousness; but it was also because at times when reality reigns with violence, a high level of historical consciousness is required in order to surmount that.

Therefore, literature and history did not remain as two distinct concepts but formed a single body. Or rather, the

discipline of history, seen as the fundamental option of a historical narrative, is bound to end up becoming literature. The category known as literature is practically a synthesis combining the two. It is not possible to confine it in a single definition.

On the other side from history, I cannot abandon the imagination. It is sometimes esthetic, and sometimes appears as an exclusive sensitivity regarding reality. Maybe literature is an allegory of the forms they create. In this respect, I am inclined more to Homer than to Kasyapa.

For human narrative and lyrical resonance to attain the highest forms of literature, I have walked sideways, one crab among the many submerged in mudflats at low tide.

My ardor is anti-Confucian. Or rather, anti-Chosŏn-dynasty. Here my face faintly reflects that of Hŏ Gyun. The literature and life I aim at are not in the least tinged by past absolutism, beautiful though the past may be. The traditional error by which Aristotle is supposed to have said that living creatures have no ancestors delights me.

I accept a mythological beginning but no basis can be shown for any historical starting-point or family trees of ancestors. I am fond of tales of the worlds of gods, but consider that the notion of a single absolute being renders humanity excessively subordinate. I feel sympathy regarding

the way Emerson was rejected by the group to which he belonged after asserting that each human being creates the divine.

I likewise have no interest in phantasms of the lineage of founders of Buddhist sects or of Confucian officials' family trees. So-called master-figures are unnecessary. Therefore I sometimes recall the Pratyeka-buddha (solitary awakened one). Today I am still following the path of the monk-with-no-master that I was born on.

I cannot but choose to be an orphan, without any founders of religions or reformers, without any past wrapped in authority and mystique.

The literature of a new age is not produced by descendants rooted in previous literary history; it is a present-day original literature newly born from the ground of the past. The truth of a friend is far closer to truth than that of a teacher; the literature I like is a "choral literature" that continues in a creative manner the horizontal relationship where a poem, not one oppressed by tradition but one newly born, orphaned and helpless, whispers, shouts and stays silent in relation to the poem newly born beside it.

Also I hope that my writing is ever on the move, never staying put under the same roof. Likewise the nirvana I dream of is

not so much a nirvana where there is nothing remaining as a nirvana where there is no staying.

The present is the splendor of a moment on the move between unlimited past and unlimited future.

I have had occasional glimpses of my former lives. Among many previous lives there were some where, like now, I was a poet. There were days when I was more ragged than now. At a satisfying hour as night was falling someone was weeping. Perhaps that was I? While outside in the dark, snow was falling silently like a thief, not realizing it, unable to sleep enduring the cries within. Perhaps that was I?

Now it is midday. A tramp who had spoken many lies collapsed. A motherless child was growing up rapidly on its own just over there. A woman with no country was letting her hair blow out in the wind.

The darkness in which a mother bear gave birth in winter during her hibernation high in the hills and the light within a hermit blinded by the sunlight shining on the snow in the Himalayas, all were games of suffering.

I even helped the stars to shine from afar as a wild animal, an amoeba, a ghost. And while I did so, the stars helped relieve the pain that caused me by their shining.

A host of my lives continued on through a host of relationships.

All those things are a microscopic history of my previous lives. I am not alone; the previous lives mentioned by Socrates, by John Donne and Goethe, and by the romantic poets, reveal the union of poetry and present reality. All those past lives once past, the I who is here is thirsty with longing for many more later lives. Along the horizons of my absolute abstraction not a single bird sings. The void *in extremis* is vast indeed.

I longed to become a poet. And I became a poet.

I still bear the label poet because of my sin in wasting time in past lives, past days, but that is not so much my own choice as a lifelong penalty inflicted on me by society.

Now, as when I was eighteen, poetry is my lodestar. Therefore, even when someone comments that I was destined to be a poet, I hope that I shall not end as a poet. What I want is to become the poem that is at the poet's end. Not a poet but a poem!

Translated by Brother Anthony

1 EARLY POEMS [1960–1970]

Ch'ön-ün Temple

They live
in a world all their own

Their spirits float
below the valleys and up on high
Echoes of wind

They are
a sound of night wind in pines

Bare mountain slopes
Boulders

Autumn coming

As the sound of the wind-bells
drops weeping from the rock-perched eaves
to temple courtyards

they live
in a world all their own

Now, back in the world, all that forgotten,
they long to return to the slopes
swept by the spirit wind

where they live

they

live

A Poet's Heart

A poet is born within the cracks
of crime — fraud, theft, violence, murder —
in some obscure corner of the world.

Within the foulest of curses ever sworn
in a city's poorest and roughest of slums,
the words of a poet creep into the cracks
and rule there for a while.

Then, out of all today's truth seeping through
the cracks in the evil and the lies, the poet
forms one single cry. And
other hearts beat it to death.

For sure, a poet's heart is doomed.

Nocturnal Rapture

Ah, mother's surely not asleep
and things that flow by night, night
and day,
are all silent now so I wonder
how far away the murmur of water
that went on all autumn has gone to sleep
ah, so cold and full of joy. And when that's done,
darkness, see my heart reflected
in the water's murmur emerging from within me.

Insect Voice

Late autumn leaves all fallen.

Branches stretching bare.

In such a season

might a dark stream be flowing underground?

My dreams are broken by the sound of water

as if a subterranean stream were surging upward.

As I listen, it fades away. But in blue night

as I try to get back to sleep, I hear it again.

Not with my ears

but with my eyes.

The depth of my eyes, one insect buzz!

No ears.

No sound.

Dawn, awakening by the darkness in my eyes.

Spring Rain

O waves, the spring rain falls
and dies on your sleeping silence.
The darkness in your waters soars above you,
waves —
and by the spring rain on your sleeping waters,
by spring rain even far away,
far-off rocks are changed to spring.
Above these waters where we two lie sleeping
looms a rocky mass, all silence.
But still the spring rain falls and dies.

Sleep

No matter how deeply I sleep
the moonlit night
will remain as bright as ever.

If I wake with a start
turn and nestle down again

once my eyes are closed
the moonlight trapped inside them
becomes part of me.

But are the clouds washed pure?
Pure enough for the moon
as it drops behind the western hills?

Now my sleep will be a shadow of sleep,
a shadow cast on a moonlit night.

Mountain Temple Impressions

High lofty dragonfly.

Or tears, rather.

Tears on my brow, too.

The sky falls.

No breath of wind,
not even the least thought of wind.

Yet leaves fall.

With the eyes of a blind man seeing for the first time,
an empty heart
gives birth to an empty heart.

That old monk's future days
in the sky bearing down on his back.

High, lofty autumn wind-bell.
Or, rather, nightfall.

Journey with Hans

Today at dawn I pulled on my clothes, which rustled like
millet leaves,
then mounted four-year-old Hans and went speeding off.
First harvest over, the empty soy-bean field held nothing to
block our way.

Galloping, the horse heard a bell from across the water.
Then I heard it, pressing my ear to the horse's ear.

My lonely daughter must still be asleep, breathing lightly,
hugging her scarlet slippers.
Hans will be the first to be surprised if you have grown into a
girl by the time I get back.

Already we're galloping down a white strip of road.
Hans knows my thoughts,
I never need to twitch the reins.

Along the dawn road, relics of autumn here and there lay
dozing,
only the calm air stayed awake all night covering the cabbage-
patch.

For the first time in a long time, I left my daughter behind.
The sea reminds me of the blind man's songs of my
childhood village,
and of bats, the sea that would bring us in two days to Taiwan.
Hans gallops on, his mane flying high.

Wherever we go I simply entrust my legs to the horse's flanks.
Then Hans grumbles because his boss has interrupted his
dawn dreams.

The dawn fields are empty, though farmers spend dozens of
years on them.

Hans stops under the Great Bear I saw one night last summer.
I bend forwards, dismount; the saddle will wait for me with
its warmth.

But scar-faced Hans, pestered by flies, longs to get back home.
Now it's morning. One shoe dropped from her hand,
my only daughter will wake up and feel despair.

Let's pause here just for a moment.

Isn't a brief pause significant, too?

Extravagance

Back home as a child I often gazed out from the shore at
the emerald sea.

It kept racing toward me

but I'd simply draw back, step by step, unable to go out to
meet it. The sea just remained being the sea.

Our taut clothes-line was too heavily laden, so sometimes
dry clothes flew away.

Good Sister, in her velvet jacket, caught the disease I'd long
been carrying,

caught it from those clothes, flags of the world beyond — and
from the sea, the body of this world.

My disease was ultimately buried forever in the lungs of that
paulownia flower.

Having no man she could call by name,

Sister would only call, "God! God!" or sometimes she
called "Father!"

With my skinny body I heard the fisherman's song of a field of
reeds flowing through my sister's veins.

The following spring came and left, after lingering in
the backyard,

yet a bit of spring still remained in late-blooming flowers.

White rhododendrons kept blooming until summer.

All through summer I just ate dirt and cried.
Rain poured down, drenching and flooding the broad marshy
farmlands behind our village.
All day the world was water with houses floating by.
Sister grew more beautiful, so autumn came.
Yes, truly. Sister was autumn.
The wrinkles on my blue brows were reflected in the cold
water where I washed.
Then autumn seemed to be standing there in the
sky, weeping.
Distant sirens grew distinct and above them autumn grew
even deeper.
And when only a few leaves were left on the otherwise
bare trees,
completely bare to ordinary people,
Sister would talk with those leaves.
She spoke fluently, although without consonants or bird-song.
Just below the ground of our neat garden, roots were
frolicking merrily.
The sky pretended to be our world, though it was really
Heaven
and because it shouted as it grew even bluer, I lost my habit of
constantly blinking.
All the while, my destination was waiting for me, out there
somewhere.

Once Sister started to cough, I suddenly grew desolate.
I threw back my head and stared at all of nature's creations
yet my foot did not stir. I was punished with senility.
Finally Sister coughed blood. I could neither endure it
nor lament.

She embraced that blood bundled up in her skirt. She collapsed.
That day I saw that Sister's deep inner zone was her outside,
and in her virginity our hometown sea lay immanent, with its
ebb and flow.

After that I slept my sister's withered sleep.
Her room was filled with eardrums of the living and
the dead

as outside her door I watched, night after night.
Her room was filled with the eardrums of the living and the
dead.

The day Sister changed her velvet jacket
I wandered out back beside the winter mud-flats
following her hours of ecstasy.

Early next spring her pale hand dropped
as she pointed at the empty clothes-line beaded with mist,
then departed from the world.

I did not cry. I lay close against her china-white pillow
and followed her death for some time, then came back.
The darkness in her coffin was unsure whether it was that of
Sister, or me, or some kind of joy.

Young People's Songs for the Four Seasons

spring

I stood beside your little grave and gazed.

The unfamiliar haze of my flesh trembled

in response to the haze nearby.

Sorrow of that village where

invisible things become newly visible all winter long.

A stream flows by, nourishing roots of spurge.

My springtime seems to have returned along meadows with
their infant grass

intent on putting an end to a day's agony of falling spring
rain.

And in the spring even your grave has been made new.

After waiting a while for something, I left again.

summer

I long to cross the West Sea and spend a month on Sōnyu
Island.

It's still just as when you lived there as a child.

Yet if you gather all your conch shells and fill them with the
monotonous pulse of the shore you used to tread,
what eons will emerge from them.

Not yielding to anyone's plea, I long for that island.

Summer is always more today than yesterday.

The ocean seems bluer to first love and to sorrow.

I'll forever forget the loneliness of the angel robed in
old-fashioned clothes

and I won't cross over to the island, won't cross over.

autumn

Descending from a train, at every rural station banks of cosmos
were blossoming amidst the coughing and from the heavens
your eyelids were drooping.

As night grew deeper, the stars gave birth.

On an empty table heaped with your death

I happened to receive a brief letter.

A letter is always a death, and a life.

Insects in autumn meadows die splendidly only if leaves are
blown from the trees, not simply falling,
and likewise falls the leaf of your fingerprint voice.

winter

Can I hear news of the winter when your bones were laid
to rest?

If only I could return once to your graveside, just once at
least,

and write with a wretched pencil stub, remembering the
world,

and weep, because there's nothing more to write.

Once a snowflake clung to your distant, childish lips and
melted.

But there was nothing to be done. All was Heaven's will.

I wished winter wouldn't leave, although I had to.

No matter how well we withstood winter cold as children,
it became a short-lived spirit and hid, once snow fell.

Now, longing for you has become the only thing equal to you.

I could fall asleep in your death.

Song of a Cemetery

No one comes to visit you now, but your descendants will be coming, one by one.

Last night, an insect sang on all alone after the rest had stopped, darkening the night.

This autumn morning, you're fast asleep, as precious dew evaporates.

As sunlight shines down further off, the grass tips gleam.

And near the place of early spring easter-lilies, wild chrysanthemums cluster now, blooming for just a few days.

All you once treasured has vanished, but occasional tombstones live on, amazed.

Though your bones cry out in this autumn like a rook's feathers, here in the world where you once lived it may not be so very sad.

Only a man still alive, only a real man, is driven by autumn to wander along mountain trails where no house stands.

No temples should be there, either.

You've completed your lives in this world, left only a small
death-anniversary behind,
and now there's no time-past in the world; you alone bring
time-past into being.

Close to the earth, a yellow butterfly flies by, by chance perhaps,
or perhaps by mistake,
and all autumn long keeps repeating over a tomb that there are
graves in heaven, too.

No one comes visiting you now, you simply lie here in
your graves;
your descendants will be coming soon.

Nightfall in Pyŏldowŏn

Thanks to these leaves of the June wood-oil tree,
your generous heart grows broad and supple.

At nightfall, the twilight ought to briefly linger, then fade
over the fields.

When I look up at the hills, it seems I've been looking for
several days,

as if I alone am aware of the things of the world beyond,
and already the field mice are busy down the path to

Choch'ŏn,

while some lettuce withers away at the foot of a low wall.
Shaking their heads, oxen and horses plod home
chewing empty cud, ignoring the horse-pearl tree flowers.

I sense that having one thing
is already far too much.

Over there in the twilight a child stops crying.

A waning moon rises late for pretty Sehwa in Choch'ŏn.

It keeps telling me: Grow old.

Loss

There's a trail uphill that leads somewhere.
After reading just a few lines written in an old dead tongue
I have to head for that hill
wearing canvas shoes made from a gray satchel.
Somewhere a lost object is in a hurry to be found.

There's a trail uphill that leads somewhere.
The text on the next page of a book is waiting
and someone is listening there, having brought a dead
tongue to life.
With the crunch of dead leaves underfoot
and the sunlight lingering on my worn clothes,
I sense that my heart is growing several times wider.

That object must be somewhere inside.
An unfamiliar grasshopper jumps, startled by a sneeze
provoked by the spicy odor of dry grass or fodder.
The first day is colder than the thirty-first,
yet the lost object is still nowhere around.

There's a trail uphill that leads somewhere.
At home, some elder's first death anniversary awaits.

Behind me someone is pestering my heart,
saying: there, there, or there,
but to me it's full of reconciliation; there's nothing there.
Ultimately, I suppose, that lost object will likewise be
named in a dead tongue.

New Year's Day

This is the loneliest spot in the country on New Year's Day.
I've spent the whole long winter here,
devoid of everything.

It's been a week already since the boats stopped running.
Chuja Island goes on getting smaller
until sad eyes cannot see it.

Don't overturn the glass from which you drank.
Once you're past thirty,
you can make friends with an empty glass.

Tell me, wind: what can I hope for on New Year's Day on
this remote island?

After some tedious, very tedious reading
by the light of a small oil lamp,
I mutter a single drunken line
but vowels alone can't make it audible
as far as that widower's tomb out there.

So, wind: let none live here but those who will die here.
Endurance is the greatest journey of all.
Even if the boats are completely overwhelmed by the gale,
I'm going to set out, though I've got no overcoat.

Tell me again, wind: what more can I hope for on New
Year's Day?

From the guts of a boarding house, coughs flee
one after another, that's all I can hear..

One day, they'll return, transformed into the local dialect.
Ah, New Year's greetings, buried alive by Cheju Island's
wild whirlwinds.

The Thirteenth Night of the Month

The scent of hay from last autumn's rich harvest is truly
potent.

Out behind the deathly silent village
naked young women gather armfuls of moonlight.
Now for the very first time it seems they long to be
mothers.

Stay where you are, flying fox hidden in the vegetable patch.
Every insect's life has been renewed.

What did I see reflected on the surface of a bowl of water
on which the moon was blazing bright?

Young girls struck by the sound of rain ceasing.

My my my, oh my! Let's go!

On this night overflowing with milk, what we see
are manifest signs of pregnancy. Conception.

To conceive a child.

In remote, illiterate villages, lamps are being put out.

Let's go. Beyond the sound of rain,

let's go back to where girls once offered their naked bodies.

Margins of Meditation

A few days ago one of the dead came back from the tomb.
Wearing the same old smile, his everyday clothes restored
from the ashes,

he gives a full account of himself. All around him shines a
watery light.

He talks his full, then leaves like a letter.

Beside me my young brother, body and heart purified, sees
him off.

We spend every afternoon like this, greeting and
saying goodbye.

Occasionally I hear the dead of ancient Korea talking.

They usually omit a few things, I think.

How could they reveal everything in one brief resurrection?

Their story, before and after they died, is more than a few
words can express.

After seeing them off, my brother stays silent like an
empty bowl.

Dressed lightly, he always welcomes our visitors from
beyond,

with clear glass barriers of taboo lining the hallway.
Responding simply in a quiet voice to what they say,
his heart is open, ready to receive everything, alone.

Every afternoon we welcome and send off guests from
beyond the tomb.

The light beyond the window is a sundial by which we tell
the time.

Each word my brother hears from the dead
is first dried in the sun, then preserved.

Truly, this world is the other world, huge and vast;
this world is a tomb.

Tomorrow, let's not send off those that come, let's have
them live with us.

from *Senoya, Senoya*

I'd like to buy her some toffee
but I don't have a daughter

as I pass a sidewalk store in autumn.

*

Late one night I seemed not to exist;
turning over,
forget the sound of rain, I resolved,
forget even the sound of rain next year, and the year after.

*

A man whistling as he cooks seaweed soup
after his young wife has given birth.

*

Frogs croaking in flooded paddies —
if there really is a world beyond,
echo far enough so my dead brother can hear.

*

A boat whistles in the night.
For a moment I too long to sail away
but merely pull the blanket up over the kids.

*

A poplar tree stands tight-lipped in the night;
it must have muttered something excessive

*

I don't know. I don't know.
After one kiss the world's quite changed.

2 TURNING POINT [1971-1980]

When I Went to Munŭi Village

When I went to Munŭi village last winter, I saw
how the road leading there
intersects very few other roads.

Surely death wants this world's roads to be as sacred
as death itself.

Having filled every ear with dry, parched sounds,
each road leads toward the icy Sobaek mountain range.
But life, in all its poverty and wealth, leaving the road,
scatters ashes over the sleeping villages.

When I stop suddenly, cross my arms and wait,
the distant hills look much too near.

Ah, snow — what else will you cover once you've covered
death?

When I went to Munŭi village in winter, I saw
how death receives each death in a tomb
embracing life tightly.

After resisting to the bitter end,
death listens to this world's human noises,
travels on, then looks back.

As snow falls in this world
like last summer's lotus blossoms

or the strictest justice,
everything huddles low.

No matter how often we throw a stone,
it never hits death.

Munüi in winter! Once snow has covered death itself, will
we too all be covered by snow?

Beside Sŏmjŏn River

If your heart is aching, look at a river at sunset.

I call in a low voice. The nearby hills, sharp-eared,
come dropping down, nearer now,
floating dark on the river waters.

Mount Chiri's high ridge, Nogodan, floats there like a flower.
while the river flows on alone, like a flood of dark soy-sauce
in the deepening twilight.

If your heart aches with sorrow, look at a river at sunset.

I stand here and simply watch
the great task of river and hills growing dark together —
further, silver fish drifting in sorrowing swarms near the banks,
and the river bearing away Hwaŏm Temple's
Enlightenment Hall.

Look at the river at sunset. Look for a moment as if it were a
thousand years.

Build a temple above that river,
gather there all those killed at Pia Valley and Pyŏleso Ridge
and look together at this world's river at sunset.

The river flows on, made deeper by the bitter cold.
I stand here at sunset and simply watch
the river at Somjin Ferry, unable to tear my eyes away from it,
until the river leaves the hills, the millions of peach-flowers
 like old blind men,
and even the grand temple.

What lives and what has died have now all become one.
The river is repeating the laments of girls from nearby
 hamlets.

Now both banks have faded into darkness
and that darkness is towering aloft.

The ridge of Nogodan, bright to the end, utters sudden
 birdsong.

Thus the river water darkens in the presence of a living
 person.

If you have endless ages of pain to spare, watch a river as
 night falls.

The Wee Hours

In thousandfold
ten-thousandfold darkest night
one flower's bloomed
after screaming
alone.

Close beside it
a red flower's
bloomed
speechless as iron.

Destruction of Life

Cut off parents! Cut off children!

This and that, and this not that,
and anything else as well —

cut off and dispatch by the sharp blade of night.

Every morning, heaven and earth
are heaped with all that's dead.

Our job is to bury that all day long

and establish a new world there.

Iǒ Island

No one has ever been there.

They say someone went, though,
went and never came back.

But where is Iǒ Island?

South-east. South-east of the bronze valleys of the waves.

South-east lies only
the eyeball-searing horizon.

Where is Iǒ Island?

Row as hard as you can,
skim with all sails set

Where is that island, Cheju's dream,
deep in its fishermen's blood?

Where is Iǒ Island?

Sunrise glimpsed at Songsan makes it a blind man's island.

Nothing but waves, you endless waves,
thunder on, world of waves.

Arise, white clouds.

Come rolling, mighty surf.

Where are we? Where are we?

Come surging, sea, and never look back.

Left at home, my daughter is weeping—

that sound is imbedded in the waves.

Where is Iŏ Island? Cheju folk came fishing here for
thousands of years.

It is there.

It was there, then vanished.

Where is Iŏ Island?

No one ever went there.

Yet someone went
went, never to return.

It is there, it's there.

But no. Only waves. Nothing but overwhelming waves.

Concerning Silence

Ah, silence!

Silences scattered all across Korea, South and North,
paddies and meadows:
come back!

The gents of Chosŏn times bequeathed us days for memorial
rites.

Come back now, like kith and kin returning home for
those rites,

like wind rustling through stands of maize,
return like minnows making their way against a river's current,
speeding through ripples unlike yesterday's.

Come, like the sound of a paternal cough preserved in
rotten manure.

Silence is there on the blank page of an era unable to write,
there in the roots between rocks on a cliff —
on the night-time cliff at Naksan Temple.

It's in copulating bodies. It's there in sleep.

It's everywhere: silence!

Come back, in a gigantic silence
and convene a solemn assembly of silence.

Come back, silence more frightening than any shout,
than any fierce, bestial howl.

Scatter all of Korea's silences
across Asia, Africa, the Indian Ocean.

Come back. One single silence is no silence at all.

One single sound is sound
but lives only in every silence.

All you trees in the eastward hills of Wontong and Inje,
you closed doors, closed lips,
you each and every servile human sorrow,
you cold winds raised up by an ancient ghost —
let all depart that should depart, and you, silence,
come back.

Dry up all the lies with the greatest silence on earth. The
right time is autumn.

Woodblocks of Buddhist Scripture

Sink down deep, Korean peninsula, for three whole
centuries, say,
till nothing is left above the waves,
no matter how hard one searches,
under heaven's arch over the sea. Nothing.
Then, once the whole landscape has been soaked in the sea
like the wood where the Buddhist scriptures were carved,
rise up again, three centuries or so later.
Sun, moon, stars, snowstorms,
stay as you are, repulsive things,
and once the country's tawdry powers are dead,
bring the land up again, floating lightly, quite empty.
Establish there a new nation
of new flowers, new harvests.
Let the people speak words long forgotten, rediscovered.
Let them speak a truth common to all.
Yes! Declare that now everyone is the holy one
since they, like wood-carved scriptures, remain intact.
Korean peninsula! Korean land!
The present condition will not do!
Away with mass-games! No more mass-games!
Let people live human lives, let them all be sacred.

Korean peninsula, submerge now for three centuries or so,
or else
stubbornly close your eyes and submerge for a whole
millennium!

A Secret Question

Tell me, cricket, what do you think you're doing
night after night, slicing through the dark?

Why don't you slice through people's sleep too,
shedding scarlet blood?

Ah, nowadays people don't shed blood.

All they want is an easy life.

Yet there's not an inch of ground,
not a single hill, not soaked in sad blood.

Cricket, old cricket,

drunk on icy dew, cricket friend:

every last drop of this country's dew,

each single one of our children's tears

is all blood, nothing but blood

but before and behind sleep lies asleep:

is deep sleep all there is?

Is there nothing but sleep so numb it would never notice

if you cut out its stupid liver or gall-bladder?

Cricket, old cricket, go on!

Slice through the dark, slice through sleep,

and jolt minds awake like autumn frost,

like an early, biting frost.

Taking to the Hills

When one eternity's over, another is on its way.

How could today be only today?

I'm going into the mountains with wild hair,

but can anyone console me for my guts I've left behind?

Though there's no sound of life, the heart is vast.

One winter's night, as I take to the hills

from the skies of Eurasia

with a heart vast as Eurasia

I can hear far-off waves like people's names.

Don't say everything's in vain,

for all is genuine.

Who spreads out children's radiant tears, so they bask in
moonlight?

Awakening from an eternity of bodily sleep,

not a single crease in the sleeping waters is in vain.

I'm taking to the hills with wild hair, in the shape of a ghost,

gazing at the empty things of this world

suspended on branches of trees, one by one,

taking to the hills from which there's no exit,

and the setting moon, you're

the only one to welcome me, you fierce guerilla moon.

You, moon, and the darkness of the infinity of my tiny worlds
that I look back on with head held high.

Fun and Games with a Sphere

Last night I cut off an arm
and gave it to a poor woman.
Then I cut off the other arm —
gave that to her too.
So now I have no arms. *Ha ha ha.*

Early this morning I cut off both legs
and gave them to a nearby idler.
Now I'm legless. *Ha ha ha.*
I wonder though:
What the hell am I doing? *Ha ha ha.*

This morning I gave up my torso
to a lion in the zoo.
So now I have
no shoulder-blades. No navel, either.
No lungs. What's more, no spleen or liver. *Ha ha ha.*

It can't be helped. Now I'm nothing
but a head, nothing but a head,
nothing but a head. *Ha ha ha.*

A bald monk from Chogye Temple
kicks my head away.

Off I go, spinning merrily.
Another bald monk pokes at me with his head.
I soar up high
then down I fall, *plunk*.
World games! Global games! *Ha ha ha*.

Just look at this!
With one single butt I'll send the earth,
this helpless earth astray,
off course, off its tracks.
I'll send this world off
to vanish forever into some outer space void.

Ode to Sim Chǒng

Sea of Indangsu, shine dark blue.

Arise as a cloudlike drumbeat.

Your waters, the sailors who know your waters, may know
the dark fate of the world beyond,

past the sometimes visible pathways,

past the weeping of children born into this world.

Those sailors may know my daughter's path.

How can the waters exist without the world beyond?

What I've longed for most in the world

turns into this world's fear,

becomes a fear covering my whole body.

And the lotus bud will be as

my daughter's whimpering stillness.

Can love be a bright world and my eyes be plunged in utter
darkness?

My daughter, already the waters' own mother, go forth
over the waters. Go forth over the waters like the mists
that come dropping over the waters.

My daughter, go forth and travel through every realm.

Shine dark blue, Indangsu.

Weep deep indigo.

In a Temple's Main Hall

Pull down Buddha!

Pull down that handsome, well-fed Buddha!

What's that oh so casually elegant wispy mustache?

The next day,

break down that painted whore of a crossbeam!

What the hell's that dragon's head for?

Tear the whole temple down,

drive out the monks,

turn it all into dust and junk!

Phew!

Non-Buddha, that's real Buddha.

**Our foul-mouthed Seoul street-market mother, she's
real Buddha.**

We're all of us Buddhabuddhabuddha real.

**Living Buddha? One single cigarette, now
there's a real cool holy Buddha.**

No, not that either.

**For even supposing this world were full of cake,
with everyone living it up and living well,
in gorgeous high-class gear, with lots of goods produced**

thanks to Korean-American technology partnerships,
everyone able to live freely, without loss of rights,
Heaven, even!

Paradise!

utter Eden unequalled, plastered with jewels, still, even
then,

day after day people would have to change the world.

Why, of course, in any case,

day after day this world must all be overturned
and renewed as a newly blooming lotus flower.

And that is Buddha.

Down with those fifteen hundred years foolishly rolling on,
rumbling along:

time fast asleep like stagnant water that stinks.

Arrows

Body and soul, let's all go
transformed into arrows!
Piercing the air
body and soul, let's go
with no turning back
transfixed
rotten with the pain of striking home
never to return.

One last breath! Now, let's leave the bowstring,
throwing away like rags
everything we've had for decades
everything we've enjoyed for decades
everything we've piled up for decades,
happiness
all, the whole thing.
Body and soul, let's all go
transformed into arrows!

The air is shouting! Piercing the air
body and soul, let's go!

In dark daylight, the target rushes towards us.
Finally, as the target topples in a shower of blood
let's all, just once, as arrows
bleed.

Never to return! Never to return!

Hail, arrows, our nation's arrows!

Hail, our nation's warriors! Spirits !

3 HOMELAND STARS [1981-1990]

Lunch in the Fields

It was Chaedon's mother.

She'd said they'd be planting rice

out in the big paddy-field at Pangadal, so I should join them
for lunch.

When it was lunch-time, I gladly joined them.

Seeing me, she called the laborers

and the laborers' kids

and even the women working in the field across the way:

"Come on! Come along!"

Every single one of us ate

all together

on the paddy-field bank,

the distant hills and the sky joining in,

eating heaped-up bowls of rice.

Visit to a Birch Grove

Having left Iwöl Village in Kwanghye-wön, on my way to
Ch'ilhyön Mountain,
for some reason I turned aside into a wide valley full of white
birch trees.

I felt as if someone had pushed me on. I turned to look.
No one there. Only, altogether indifferent to the distant hills
accustomed to snow,
the naked boles of the birch trees are making the world honest.
Truly, winter trees alone know no corruption.

There are no lies in sorrow. How could anyone bear not to
weep at life?

For long ages, all our nation's women wept. Weeping, they
found comfort.

The birch trees keep to themselves but I, a visitor, become one
with them.

Not everyone can come here, yet it's as if everyone comes.
The trees are beautiful, as if one with each and every one.

I gazed at the trees, their branches, the trembling of the tree-
tops in the sky,

I grew exultant before myself and the world,

longed to be burdened heavily with wood.

Rather, I longed to be docile like a new shoot born of this cold solitude,

to be tender like the meat served up at a wayside inn.

For my life has been too dogmatic; I've been harsh, even to the breeze.

How long has it been? Such a place has the intensity we only find once in ten years.

That intense reverence! My overflowing heart already knows this intensity is not meant for me alone but for the whole world.

The time is coming when people will realize they are each part of all.

I was already old in childhood days. Here, I have to be born again.

So now, one with the birches' natural winter, elated at the thought of my pretty loved one,

I begin growing up as an only child.

I turned my back on the road to Kwanghyewŏn, headed straight for the rugged path towards windswept Chilhyŏn Mountain.

Kŭmnam Street

On the third day, the body
is taken from the ancestral home
in a village up in Hwasun County
and duly buried, laid to rest
together with all the weeping and wailing;
once they're back home, people go on living
in the room where the corpse has been.
It only needs one wipe with a cloth
and the room is just a room again.

I went back to Kŭmnam Street in Kwangju
after several years had elapsed.
The fighting and carnage were all forgotten,
neon signs soared flashing in the evening air,
the street and the people enjoying themselves.
The provincial government building loomed
white in the midnight gloom,
bullet-scars erased,
seeming to ask if such things had ever really happened.

But the sound of my rumbling guts told me:
no vain-glorious gestures should be permitted here.
No high-sounding nonsense can be allowed here.

The Mothers of Argentina

Hey-ho! Hey-ho! Argentina's a long way away!
But bore through the earth and there you are!
A new world has come to Argentina, I hear.
Now, isn't a so-called new world one
where all past deeds are brought to light?

They've uncovered mass graves in Argentina.
Thousands of bones have been brought to light!
Now, isn't a so-called new world one
where all things buried are brought to light?
A world where the living shut up
and let the bones speak for themselves?

They've uncovered mass graves of children
somewhere in Argentina.
Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!
No sooner dug up, their cries echoed again
in Argentina's new world, all over the world.
What a world is this! Where kids are enemies
and have to be killed! For seven years on end
soldiers shot, then buried, shot, then buried.
Poor buried kids, their very innocence made a crime.

Now the mothers of Argentina,
all those mothers who barely survived, sobbing,
are obliged to dig up their children's bones.
They come rushing up, all carrying spades,
and uncover heaps of limbless corpses:
husbands, daughters as well as sons,
and to those mothers weeping,
embracing perhaps just one single bone,
to Argentina, a new world has come: a so-called new world,
a really new world! But did it have to come like that?

I hear a new world has come to Argentina;
I hear a new world has come to Argentina!

Mop

On windy days,
days when laundry flaps in the wind,
I want to turn into a mop
yes, without being obsequious, I want to turn into a mop.
I won't ask how far
our country's been polluted and defiled.
I just want to turn into a mop
and humbly wipe one spot, at least.

I mustn't forget the days when having become a mop
I wiped my prison cell.

Yes, I want to turn into a mop.
Once I am a mop
I want to wipe my whole filthy life.

Once through with wiping,
I want this filthy mop to be wrung out
over and over
again and again
until it can't take it anymore.

I want to be reborn as a new mop
in a new land.

Today's Ebb Tide

Let us remember.

There is a time for the world to be battered by storms.

There is a time for the world to be covered with raging waves.

Though now we're retreating with the white froth,

let's not dismiss the day for being on the ebb tide.

Surely today's the dominant reality of past and future.

Let us recall,

recall and tell our children.

Ah, this nation of unending waves!

There is a time when this world, a child that cries by night,
should be soothed.

There is a time when history is not fathers but sons.

I soothe the day, as my own child,

with the ebb tide's distantly retreating waves.

But that's not all, for there's a time to whole-heartedly repent
for what this world is.

Repenting is not a matter of beating the ground and regretting
the past,

but rather eventually doing what we could not do before.

We have work to do.

We'll all return with breaking waves on the youthful
incoming tide.

Several thousand years of our life will become today,
become the whole ocean, the whole world,
and we'll remember each of our nights, a star high up
there, shining.

A Road

Whenever I see a road, that means
I've found a place to hurry towards.
If I see a hamlet like Shinyŏng-ri or Nae-ri,
it tells me there is somewhere beyond for me to go.
That's how it is. It only takes a by-way
in Majŏng-ri, a simple highway in Jangho-won,
and I am assured of a sleepless night.
I only have to see a road and
invariably energy comes welling up.
I must go.
I've got to go.
Do not ask me where!
At its other end the road turns into a land.
It's to that land that I must go. You see,
I am part of this nation that has spent
its whole history on a rugged road —
the Valley Rift of Ch'ugaryŏng, leading from Seoul
as far as to the northeast coast —
I must travel along every road
north and south, from end to end.
For, come what may, there is a road
that leads to one united land.

I've got to go. I must,
must go.

Sunlight

I'm utterly helpless.

I'll just have to swallow my spit
and adversity, too.

But look!

A distinguished visitor deigns to visit
my tiny, north-facing cell.

Not the chief making his rounds, no.

As evening falls, a ray of sunlight.

A gleam no bigger than a crumpled postage stamp.

I'm crazy about it! Real first love!

I try to get it to settle on the palm of my hand,
to warm the toes of my shyly bared foot.

Then as I kneel and offer it my undevout, lean face,
in a moment that scrap of sunlight slips away.

After the guest has departed through the bars
the room feels several times colder and darker.

This special cell of a military prison
is like a photographer's darkroom.

Without any sunlight I laughed like a fool.

One day it was a coffin holding a corpse.

One day it was altogether the sea. How wonderful!

A few people survive here.

Being alive is a sea
without a single sail in sight.

Resurrection

East Sea, stretch wide your million trillion waves.

Who could ever tame your boundless ocean?

Sleep well, T'aebaek Mountain — at one with the sky — and
you, simple folk of Yōngdong.

Tonight is so long, without even a murmur of waves,
a round night, the world sleeping peacefully.

Empty crab shells, you are the only things moving,
yet you shouldn't simply scatter as shards of shell.

You must come to life again, the East Sea's pride,
and crawl all along the lengthy shore

from Sea Diamond Mountain to as far south as Ulchin
and beyond.

There's nothing in life worth repenting for compared to the
glory of a death,

so don't howl in tumultuous sound waves all night long.

Instead of howling unknown to anyone, return to life
in the ultrasonic sound waves of our land's rebirth.

As the sun bursts from the sea, crimson before Naksan Temple,
go racing sideways on your ten mighty legs,

your bodies fully reborn after absorbing that red glow,
each taking on new flesh in your shells, and regaining your

two crab-eyes as well.

Go crawl anew, spouting foam like a moonlit night.
Crawl, crabs, all you crabs, crawl all along the east coast.
Yes, indeed! Your resurrection, ah, your East Sea.
East Sea, stretch wide your million trillion waves.
Thunderstorms, Typhoon Aida, or any towering typhoons
are all mere desolate foam to each one of you
crabs along the steep east coast. Now you have a destination.

So go!

Nip at the fearful reefs crouching on the sea-floor many
thousand fathoms deep.

Go, then return, through miles and miles of ocean, each
holding a fragment of those reefs.

The ocean, bitten, hurt, will shine at last with pain,
covered with howling waves, furious waves
so no horizon can be seen, no matter how we gaze.

It's morning now: all the world is awake again —
the sky, T'aebaek Mountain, the people of Yōngdong
so come back now, you departed, stateless travelers,
flesh joined to every bone, soul, or whatever restored to
every body.

Come back, like laborers of every age going home
from autumn's darkening fields.

And how could this be only for crabs? You cuttlefish that went
swimming farthest,
out to latitude 136° east in the distant reaches of the East Sea,

you cuttlefish hung up drying in daylight from Kosŏng to
Sokch'o,
Chumunjin, and P'yŏnghae,
swim out again as dazzling living squid,
returning to life from every kind of death by a
solemn resurrection,
by the power of your freedom and wisdom, united as one.
Go out beyond the islands of Ullŭng-do, Tok-do, far out into
the unbounded sea.
Ah, all you who didn't survive our country's times of shame,
but died,
forlorn spirits, dead with no home —
and what's a spirit but a muttering voice, just a wind, and
nothing more —
rise up from that state; resolutely assume life again.
Each one, born again, here before the East Sea's million trillion
waves,
dance! Dance on Wŏnsan's famous white sandy shore
stretching for miles along the East Sea
on a moonlit night after heavy typhoon clouds have
dispersed unnoticed.
White-clad multitudes of old Korea, overflow in dance.
East Sea, stretch wide your million trillion waves.
Drums and bells, bury each so-called king, then ring out in
this world.

East Sea, stretch wide your million trillion waves.

My comrade, East Sea, stretch wide your million trillion waves.

Crossing Rice Fields at Nightfall

One star already out, the world's the cosmos now.
In the village, it's the season of the smell of dried grass.
Here and there shines the light of lamps used sparingly.
As I make my way home across the rice fields at twilight,
sometimes brushing away the invasive insects,
I remember old Namdong who was laid to rest yesterday.
It's as if death makes our hearts grow deeper;
I must change slightly from what I was when the old man
was alive.

I keep looking back at the rice fields, more lovely than ever
in the darkness,
more blasted by mildew than last year:
how much more work and affection they consumed.
Demanding the hand's intervention eighty-eight times,
isn't that a single year's farming?
In autumn, no matter how poor the rice harvest,
how big the debts,
in autumn the hearthfire poker too must be busy at work as
autumn demands.
Neither thought at all of leaving here, nor thought of rest.
As life goes on, time isn't such a big thing to people:
for all of us, it's the smallest thing.

On my way home, today the evening field-path is sublimely
After growing tall in drought — in late monsoons —
despite mildew and blight —
after it has so silently sprouted,
what is rice to us if not an adult?
Quick, let's be off, and with our bodies stinking of loam
lift up our kids once, holding them high in the dark,
then put them down, all one nation.

A Simple Flower

This flower's like a simple girl
who's never gone to college,
just does the housework at home
after finishing at the local high school
way down the road.

In this crazy, raging world,
she's so modest, such a modest girl.

The pride-of-Peru,
with its scarlet and white stars.

One evening that simple girl
comes out in the garden
and is suddenly awakened
about the ways of the world:
that kind of flower.

Simple daughters of Korea:
Suni, Puni!

Flowers

Spring has come,
spring's come and gone,
and yet, up here in the mountain valleys,
there's not a single flower to be seen!
Not even an everyday magnolia or cherry blossom!

Luckily, in the vegetable patch,
yellow flowers are blooming on a plant gone to seed; jubilation!
Go once around the mountain, once.
Aha! Here are masses of bushes in flower!
And look there, in that field,
a carpet of tiny shepherds-purse flowers!
Here are flowers in bloom, at last!

We've had our fill of countryside flowers.
All the beautiful flowers have been uprooted and carried away.
Off to Seoul. Off to Seoul,
away from our nation's countryside.

Not only the flowers! Not only the girls!
Even the big trees in front of the village hall,
poor things,

have their roots wrapped in ropes of straw;
soon they'll be torn up and carted off too,
taken somewhere for the Olympic Games.

Spring has come and gone,
and, alas, not a flower to be seen!
Only TV antennae everywhere!
TVs everywhere!

This Land Still Has Its Living Springs

Here and there along the shores of Cheju Island
there are freshwater springs.

They're covered by the sea at high tide,
but at evening, with ebb tide, these springs appear.
Underground, this water flows and flows then comes
gushing out.

In a valley of Mount Munsu too, down Ansŏng way,
there's a simple spring I know, innocent as a child;
a spring that flows from beneath the frozen earth.

Millennia of history!

This land still has its living springs.

Divided land, blasted land, trampled land:
though the skies are red with industrial smog,
and the springtime drought lasts a full two months,
though the revolution's been on for thirty years and still
unfinished,

though heavy metals contaminate the soil,
and fifteen hundred students and workers are currently in
prison,

this land still has its living springs.

Can gushing water rot?

How can flowing water die!?

Yes, this land has people who fight, fighters all!
Your words are perpetually new and full of strong assurance.
Amazingly, your words have no hypocrisy.
None of the hypocrisy of those who don't fight, or only
pretend to fight.

Strange to say, those who fight to the death do not die.
In this land renewal can only come by fighting.
Hours of fighting are truly life and youth.
Our modern history
is the history of the students' struggle,
the history of the workers' movement.
Fresh gushing springs!
Flowing, flowing mile after mile underground,
flowing, flowing, then gushing out beside the sea.
Springs that gush from hillsides and valleys
all over this dear land of ours, flowing, flowing,
and there, by the sea: Freedom!
equality for all, billowing waves!
Young friends!
This land still has its living springs.
This land still has fights.
So long as there are fighters
endlessly following one another,
this land will become a new world for sure!

**A new nation, and as a new nation,
with other nations,
this land is indeed a new world!**

Mokp' o Bound

That's right. Aboard an economy-class train
crossing the horizon of fields around Kimje after stopping at Iri,
sprinkling salt over a couple of hard-boiled eggs
then giving one to the kid in the next seat,
ah, early winter fields glimpsed outside!
The breathing of silent people out in the empty fields!
Pure bean paste! Fresh clay!
The invariably warm breath of people who know no change,
despite the terrible times they've endured.

A Cold Day

A cold day.

A cold, windy day.

I long to live there.

Being warm is not the only kind of happiness.

A cold day.

A cold day when all the fallen leaves

go rolling, spinning away

Brrrrrrrrr. . .

Shivering,

That's where I long to be.

Every house has made its winter kimchi

and as that kimchi ripens

That's where I long to be.

See that dog, racing blindly down the winding trail.

See the children shouting.

See the magpie perched at the tip

of that aspen bending in the wind.

That's where I long to be.

Rejoice, cold and windy day.

Rejoice most fully, here beneath the sky.

First Snow

The year's first snow is falling
to keep this era from dying.

The first snow is falling
on our bruised land, waters and hills.

With so much to be done,
first snow is falling.

How long ago was it?
that quivering, that newness, upon first holding hands.

That person's name shining
on every bare branch

thanks to first love.

Now the first snow is falling
in streets where that name is far away.

Sacrificing my innocence and my disgrace, that can never be
restored,

I have made it this far

with a hatred that can never be love,

a hatred that has not even the freedom to call a foe a foe.

But what is this era?

The first snow is falling

on you, young men,
as you're arrested and hauled away,
after hiding here and there temporarily,
your seeing, angered eyes finally closed.
And on you, too, hauling them away
it's falling.

I am watching this era's final days with great grief,
a burning unity of hearts, so strong it cannot be broken
and if ever broken,
coming together again.

Who can turn their backs and ignore
the division at the waist of our lovely land?
The first snow is falling on the rooftops
where biting songs of our imprisoned sisters spread forth.
on every roof,
on every ocean's waves rolling so fast and then breaking,
and on our struggle.

It's falling to keep this era from dying.
to tell our land
breathe deeply again.
The grief we curse is still grief.

A White Sail

No one wants a gale to blow, for sure!
And yet you, white sail out there on the sea,
you yearn for a gale with all your heart:
because only in a gale
can you really come alive.

One white sail of endurance and longing,
far out on the dark blue sea:
our battle!

I can't tear my eyes away.

To the grass beneath my feet,
this light breeze is a gale!

Fruit

Playing with the blazing sun
all summer long,
playing with the dark night,
you have brought into being
these few crimson hips on a dog-rose briar.

Just so! For they ripened to the sound
of the cricket's nightlong, chilling song.

Morning Dew

This ecstasy, so inevitable.

Ah, my desire,

which must end in a single drop of morning dew.

Your Eloquence

Every time you make a speech,
every time your eloquence
is about to overwhelm your young listeners,
I get up and walk out.

Why? Because your eloquence
carries utter assurance
but not one hair of torment.

More than that!

Because in your eloquence
there's no firm belief at all.

Before I despise you, I despise
all those who go wild at your words.
For heaven's sake!

Pumpkin Blossom

For thirty-three years as a poet
I have merrily defined beauty.
Every time, I declared without hesitation,
“Beauty is like this.” Or
“This is a betrayal of beauty.”
I went crazy
over various aesthetic theories.
But beauty
was never in any of those theories.
I was falling asleep with the lights on.

I so fear bygone days!
Never try to define beauty!
Never.

Never.

How can beauty be defined?
On account of the long rainy season
no flowers bloomed on the pumpkin creepers.
Now, the rains over,
and at last a flower has bloomed —

inside it, a bee is quivering —
outside it, I am quivering.

Pumpkin blossom brimming full of life!
True beauty!

Spies

Hey! Can you imagine a spy's loneliness?
Can you imagine the loneliness involved
not only in hiding from everyone
but in not being able to tell a soul
about the country you're engaged to serve?
Can you imagine his long loneliness day after day
when, arrested for messages in morse-code,
condemned to death,
commuted to life imprisonment,
he's spent more than twenty years
in a tiny cell with a wooden floor,
his hair turning white?

Even more surprising, though, is
such loneliness hasn't converted him
from the beliefs of twenty years ago!
With the passage of time,
his fervor all turned to dust,
yet the spy cannot let go
of the loneliness!
So which shall we call it: a tombstone,
or a breath of fresh air?

Kim Shin-muk

At ninety-six, Kim Shin-muk
said: When I die,
see me off with applause!
Then she died.
The day of the funeral
as her coffin was carried out
we all clapped,
everyone without exception clapped.
Coming down from the hills
after burying her there
we recalled her words:
Go back down clapping.
So a few people clapped.

The road between Tongduchon and Ŭijŏngbu
stretched glorious, not a GI in sight!

4 TEN THOUSAND LIVES [begun 1986]

Sam-man's Grandmother

Stories from days of old, long long ago,
the stories I heard while early mosquitoes bit my infant skin
in summer, as the crape-myrtle trees at Chungttüm
blossomed in thick clusters of pink flowers ...

“Long long ago an elderly bachelor and his old widowed
mother lived together in a village ...”

Maybe Ch'olchöng was king, or Kojong; no matter —
every tale was a tale beginning long long ago
One day when snow was swirling down,
one endless day,
though the stove had gone out and the room was icy,
Sam-man's old grandmother with her broad, pock-marked face
told a tale of an elderly bachelor of long long ago,
joining to it this time a tale of a spool of silk ...

Long long ago a boy was living in a village.
His sister was carried off by bandits but
in this emergency she unrolled a spool of silk behind her so
he set out after her, following the thread over hills and streams
until it dropped ten fathoms into a well.

Descending to the bottom of that well he found a door in
the rock

and, ah, there lay another world.

While it was midwinter in our world, peach trees there were
in flower.

He found his sister. She was due to become the bride
of the bandit leader, the following day,
in a wedding hall hung with red and blue lanterns.

“For goodness sakes! Let’s go home, quick!”

He carried her home on his back over hills and streams.

She became the bride of a bachelor in the next village;
he married a moon-faced maid also from the next village.

They ate well, lived well, survived to an age
one of hundred and eighty five. So the story went.

She was such a great story-teller, she would bewitch our eyes.

We kids used to glimpse the whole wide world in her
blackberry-black eyes.

When she died, it seemed she was eager to go on telling tales,
because she died with her mouth wide open,
and no matter how hard they tried to close it, it kept falling
open again.

Okya, The Palace Woman

Chosŏn dynasty palace women were obliged to sleep sitting
in a curtsy.

They were obliged to sleep with hands raised
as if about to rise from a deep prostration
with both fists pressed to the forehead.
because if the king should ever appear,
just once in a lifetime,
they were obliged to rise
as they were, with opened eyes,
from a curtsy with both hands to the brow.

What kind of a rule is that?

What kind of a palace rule is that?

Palace women at the end of the Koryŏ Dynasty
were in the same situation:

if ever a king had no son,
well-featured men would be chosen,
all the court women be made pregnant
then just one of the babies would be chosen
and all the remaining fathers, mothers, and babies put
to death.

The lady Okya gave birth to a daughter that way
but managed somehow or other to survive,

and escaped from the court,
ans lived as a simple commoner with her husband and child,
between the Koryŏ and Chŏson dynasties.

Yes, people experience
stormy fates.

One in ten thousand.

One in a hundred million.

To-gil Bitten by a Dog

One young girl, Im-sun from Okchǒng Valley,
and one young man, Pak To-gil
from outside the West Gate,
fell in love, came together close.

One day in a hollow up by the tombs
at the very top
of Im-sun's family burial-ground
To-gil grabbed Im-sun
and in a flash they were hard at it.

Then Im-sun's dog that had followed her,
thinking its mistress was being attacked,
took a deep bite into To-gil.

When the wound on To-gil's thigh had healed
he used to boast: "Look here:
look here, what a love-bite! Look at that."

Only in the end, Im-sun,
obeying her father,
married the son of the chief of Hoihyǒn County,

while To-gil
got spliced to a big gal from Kunsan.

That big gal often got a beating from To-gil.

The Couple Running the General Store

Whenever I pay a visit to the General Store
in the Old Market at Kunsan, accompanying my Dad,
I'm all excited, in high spirits for several days after.
The General Store stocks everything from everywhere
and the couple who run it are truly well-matched.
The wife looks a bit like an ox
Angry-looking with her always blue-rimmed eyes.
She once caught a thief who came into the store,
knocked him down in a flash.
Sometimes her husband is
so kind as to give an extra measure
to someone asking for more
at which his wife appears, exclaiming:
"Just look at him!
From what thighs comes all that generosity?"
Yet still she always covers the bowl of rice with a lid
before serving her reed-like husband's meal.
She says:
"If I simply put rice in a bowl and served it up to my husband,
what dignity would there be in our home?"
Yet sometimes she appears in the store
shouting at the top of her voice,

astounding people who've just struck a bargain:

"Why, if you keep beating down our prices like that a log will soon be a pair of chopsticks!"

She's equally sharp with the owner of the Five Dragons Store, next door:

"You'll send us some customers today, won't you?"

She's as familiar with him as her own husband.

They've been neighbors for dozens of years.

Naturally, the guy's already halfway to being her husband.

Maternal Grandfather

Ch'oi Hong-gwan, our maternal grandfather,
was so tall his high hat would reach the eaves,
scraping the sparrows' nests under the roof.

He was always laughing.

If our grandmother gave someone a bite to eat,
he was always the first to rejoice.

If our grandmother ever spoke sharply to him,
he would laugh, paying scant attention to what she said.

Once when I was small, he told me:

“Look, if you sweep the yard well
the yard will laugh.

If the yard laughs,
the fence will laugh.

Even the morning-glories
blossoming on the fence will laugh.”

Chae-suk

Chae-suk, the girl from the house by the well,
a brimming crock of water perched on her head,
gazes into the far-off distance as she walks along.
The early autumn open road lies clear ahead.

Next year

Chae-suk will be leaving here.

Chae-suk's heart swells in expectation.

Chae-suk,

so like the darkness left after the moon's gone down.

5 WINDY DAYS [1991-2000]

A Drunkard

I've never been an individual entity.

Sixty trillion cells!

I'm a living collectivity

staggering zigzag along.

Sixty trillion cells! All drunk.

A Shooting Star

Wow! You recognized me.

The Moon

Bow taut.

Twang!

The arrow strikes
your eye.

By the pain of your darkness the moon rose.

A Green Frog

One green frog.
Black clouds are filling the sky.
Just because you croaked.

What a Hercules.
You squirt!

Ripples

Look! Do all the ripples move
because one ripple starts to move?

No.

It's just that all the ripples move at once.

Everything's been askew from the start.

One Day

Lightning over the hill in front
thunder over the hill behind
between the two
one dumb pebble.

Old Buddha

Hey, what were you saying about old Buddha?

Why, old Buddha's no Buddha.

Real Buddha's a fish just netted,
leaping and jumping.

Asking the Way

You blockheads who ask what buddha is
Ask now about every living being instead.
Ask about all living things.

When you're hungry
ask about food.

Ask the moonlight about the way.
Find a port where lemon trees bloom
where lemon trees bloom.
Ask about places to drink in the port.

Ask and ask till nothing's left to ask.

The Upper Reaches of Sŏmjŏn River

I want to travel
to that sandbar out in the middle of the stream.

Where could you find a country its equal?

Gazing Up at Nogodan

I won't climb Nogodan Ridge today.
and look from there across at Panya Peak.
I'll simply stand here gazing up
at Nogodan
from the marketplace in Kurye
just as I did as a twenty-year-old pilgrim.
Aha, yes, and up there somewhere
high on a crag, a bear
must be looking down on everything here.
Neither aware of the other.
Neither aware of the other.

A really deep relationship, no?
— No regrets!

My Father's Cousin

"I'll tell you once.

I won't tell you a second time,"
my father's cousin used to say.

He was the youngest.

The other cousins

had died, killed either by sickness
or during the war.

He was the only one to survive.

When I visited our native village

he'd take charge of me,

dragging me up and down one hill after another:

"This is the grave of our great-great-grandfather's
grandmother,

this is the grave of our great grandfather,

this is where your foster-grandfather lies,

here your eldest great uncle,

and here your middle great uncle,

that's to say the father of your dad's cousin, Chong-suk.

So long as I'm around,

someone knows all these grave-sites

but once I'm gone

no one will be able to tell one from another."

Then we'd come back down,
trade shots of liquor,
and he'd soon end up drunk,
repeating the same words,
the exact same words,
always repeating:
"I'll tell you once.
I'll not tell you a second time."

In his whole lifetime,
he never once left his native town,
never went anywhere
except his wife's family's home,
the marketplace next to the harbor,
the district office,
and the primary school for Sports Day.
Father's cousin lived entirely in his native place.
Was there ever any change in him?
What change could there ever be for him?

There are times
when people in this world need change.
Those who have any aspiration
must experience change, casting off life as lived so far,

to be born anew.

In the midst of change
people may well fall
into extremely cowardly ways,
extremely offensive ways.

Such people get kicked by the world
mocked, made a laughing stock,
crawling off on all fours
to weep alone.

Today as I chopped away at a living tree,
my first hard work in a long while,
breaking into a sweat,
I glimpsed my own death.
That tree, its trunk ten inches in girth,
cracked as it toppled.
A breeze sprang up. My sweat chilled.

Rooks

Cloudy skies.

Don't just hang there, content to be sky!

Dip down, enamored of that boy at Namwon
riding a bike and towing a second alongside.

Here, one wintry midday, a flock of rooks is settling.

The bare furrows in the fields, once frozen, now melt.

Wonderful!—

wonderful!

Dry grass is fluttering.

's

Wild Lilies on Nogodan Ridge

Maybe the darkness far beneath the sea
off Sohüksan Island is really their neighbor?
How else can that patch of wild lilies on Nogodan Ridge
be so alone?

Perhaps that's why the sea
is so inlaid with wavy ridges
while they blossom and wither?

✓

On the Suspension Bridge at Namhae

Why should I bother going to Namhae
to visit Kŭmsan or Bori Hermitage?

I stop
and gaze down
at the water
under the bridge.

I imagine an animal rising to its feet
after giving birth.

I imagine a few of that old animal's kids.

I throw a stone into the water.

From far below,

I hear nothing.

Plop-splash!

No such sound.

I long to ask those new-born animal kids:

What were you born for?

Warning

Today four hundred million Asians and Africans
go hungry.

Look closer
at all those starving people in Bangladesh,
in Cameroon:

they
are humanity's ultimate image.

You Yankees, you Yanks
and Japanese—

they are your image,
tomorrow.

But isn't tomorrow already today?

It's best
when people can count as far as 10.
Once they go on to 11, 12.
utter disaster.

Ah! A lone child by the morning sea.

Writing

What is writing, really?

One time I replied
writing is cursed.

African Pygmy children emerge
from huts made of leaves
without knowing a single letter.

One time I replied
Pygmy children are cursed.

Those children are cursed by their illiteracy
while I am cursed by my ten thousand books.

Ill-advised, those who think this world is nirvana.

A Few Quick Words

At last I understand what blank margins are.
Margins are not incompleteness,
nor the familiar spaces left untouched by the brush
in old Korean ink paintings.

They arise in valleys where desire for completeness has
melted
— there, yes, there — before tomorrow dawns.

Ah, chaste omission of action.

Bourgeois? Never.
Margins have nothing bourgeois about them.
Nor are margins
cowardly pauses in battle.
Beyond battle
they form part of a face
neither friend nor foe
never met as yet.

They're skirts billowing wide, mile upon mile,
though they may not move very far;

and fragrant,
so fragrant!

Brother, the mightiest of powers is not America,
it's the margins in the millennia of human history.

Oh, subtle ache in my heart!

At last, one part of the cosmos is being reborn.

But not the whole.

Wanting the whole would be wicked, my brother.

Winter Journey

How can you can make it through winter
without knowing the fragrance of winter wind?

Dreams of that fragrance
are utterly unknown
to frogs, and snakes
underground.

Utterly unknown,
and that's the place you'll reach in the end.

Utterly, completely unknown!

A Bell

As I sped down the highway along the East Sea
suddenly the sound of a bell reached my ears.
Between the waves endlessly booming,
at the crack of dawn the sound of a church bell
reached my ears.

Kwŏn Chŏng-saeng's bell in a valley near Andong.

Oh, waking dream!
Not dream,
not reality,
oh, waking dream!

That distant bell rings in my ear . . .
Today
maybe
your poverty is paradise
oh, bell rung by Kwŏn Chŏng-saeng.

Odong Island in Yosu Harbor

You know, it's not the Palace
of Versailles that's supremely beautiful.
Rather, it's the dark beauty
in your heart.

Where in the world
could you find anything comparable?

Here now, before the camellias
on Odong Island in Yosu Harbor,
lost in a grove of camellia trees
and looking out at the sea —
that's real sorrow.

Sorrow, beginning of beauty: I now leave you behind.

Early Morning

Ah, my enemy!

Not darkness

but the sun.

The sun makes it impossible

for us to exchange quiet chin-on-hand glances,.

So after foam-like splendor,

brightness

is far from truth.

Ah, my enemy:

my awakening!

Incident at Pöpsöng-p'o

The Ch'ilsan Sea is shimmering.
Yet there are creatures
in this world that hate the light.
Their darkness
pushed me from behind,
forcing me down into the sea.
But strong waves rose in front of me
and pushed me back.

“Not you!

Not you!”

What should human beings do?
So far human beings
have killed everything
and called that culture or civilization.

“Not you.”

The sea rejected me.

“Not you.”

Heavy Snow

On days of heavy snow
even the animals
quietly withdraw into their homes
despite their gnawing hunger.
I stay home too.

Since there's heavy snow
our country has no need of religion.

Gosh! How creepy our country's religions are.

On Ch'önwang Peak

I climbed Ch'önwang Peak,
and as I surveyed all that lay spread out below,
the wind suddenly swept my hat off
and I became a son.

A sea of clouds spread in all directions.
“Father! Father!” I cried
but got no reply.

The wind almost tore off my clothes.

Springtime

The land of my birth
has never reared a traitor.
Yet always
there had to be traitors
to sit in judgment
on those who did not betray.
Without them
we would not know what judgment is.

As a child of this land
I was duly drenched
in morning dew,
I went slipping and falling,
speeding after rainbows.
I grew up amidst an immensity of love
on up until I was eighteen years old

But those who betrayed the land of my birth
did not belong to just one generation,
nor were few in number.

Now spring has come
and the land of my birth is still the same
under the skybound skylarks soaring high,
and, ah!, despite all those betrayals:
clusters of sprouting larkspur;
willow leaves.
What is this, if not love of the land of my birth?

One Day

Leaving my family behind, I set off on a journey.
In a house in Taejin, northernmost harbor of South Korea,
as soon as I rose in the morning
I swept the sandy yard
feeling extremely shabby before my compatriots.

All morning long the sunlight
plunged fiercely down into the wild sea off Taejin,
then soared aloft even higher.
I couldn't keep my eyes open.
Because of those powerful, wild reverberations
I renounced party politics and solitude once and for all.

Evening came.
The distant horizon appeared.
A distant horizon
inevitably makes this world more precious.

As I put on my coat, I realized:
what was soaring high,

high in the dark,
was not today
but tomorrow.

The owner of the house spoke:
“Let’s go inside and play some cards.”

Untitled

Here's an old-fashioned poem of the kind written before 1950, usually entitled "*Untitled*."

One day I took a pebble from
an East Sea beach and put it in my pocket
but it jumped back out, shrieking.

As it hurtled off into the distance,
it failed to make the least sound.

It had no idea of the strong emotions I was longing for.

Out at sea are flocks of seagulls
ready to peck out and swallow facile words.

Along the East Coast

As I traveled along the east coast,
I gazed at the sea's perfection
and rid myself of mother.
I was no longer mother's son,
I was a completely different son.
But no one should stir up too big a fuss.
Here and there stand virgin pine groves
bent and battered
for centuries by sea gales.
Here and there lie such graceful fields.
If in this world are places where doors are shut and locked,
here the doors are wide open,
leaving everything exposed to the sea breeze.
As I passed the DMZ, Taejin, Kōjin, Yangyang, Sokch'o,
Kangnŭng,
slipping past the East Sea horizon
as far as Mukho, patient indeed,
or farther, as far as Uljin
and on as far as Yōng'il Bay at P'ohang,
the sea never for a single moment
lost any of its perfection,

never frightened of anything.
Finally, I surrendered.
As I traveled beside the East Sea,
passing along the east coast,
a rainbow brilliance came bursting forth from Buddha's
relics
enshrined at Kōnbong Temple
high in the South Diamond Mountains!
That was what my heart felt
about the entire East Sea, that alone.
Finally, the East Sea filled my whole body,
and now, as I drop toward night,
I am nothing to you but the sound of waves.
Nothing but the sound of waves burying you and me
together.
Ah, tomb so much more venerable than birth!

An Outcry

Sunlight,
our much-traveled friend,
reaches us
from ninety-three million miles away,
(to say nothing of starlight's hundreds of light years,
or mysterious gamma rays from thousands of light years
away),
a friend, coming all that way
to guide our lives and dreams.
Where could we find another friend like that?

Yet sunlight
cannot penetrate the sea around us.
After piercing just a few hundred meters
it's stopped
and so light's long journey
comes to an end, in the dark.

In that dark,
in place of sunlight
the creatures idly swaying under the sea

make light
by their own sounds alone.

There's no other way.
Even on dry ground, in the dark
we're obliged to make light by our voices.

At this moment, a dim outcry
keeps my ears from sleeping,
like all my comrades throughout the world.

Earthworms

The sky isn't the only thing sublime.

For centuries now, people

have gazed upward

at the sky,

pointlessly.

Earthworms are my choice, underground.

There is such glory under this ground I stand on —

the soles of my feet are unspeakably happy!

Tomorrow at the crack of dawn,

on the frozen ground,

in the dark,

I'll be a cock and crow.

I'll tear up the sky.

Yǒng'il Bay

Thirty years ago
that place was like a mother to me.
Simply
like my friend's mother.

Twenty years ago
it was my mother.
It was absurd, but
I used to shout
"Mother,"
when I felt helpless:
"Mother!"

Today
factories have killed my mother.
Now,
there is no mother
to greet you, sun and moon.
And since I have no mother,
I have no dreams, no matter how long I sleep.
For millennia now, sand
has been announcing the end of the world.

Who has understood?

Those grains of sand

were once mother of every man and beast.

Yesterday

Greedy told me to become a tiger,
to turn into a tiger
and go roaring up mountain valleys.
Stingy told me to become a squid,
to turn into a squid
and swim across the East Sea to Ullŭng Island.
Short-haired Sugi told me to become a cricket,
to turn into a cricket and sing all night
even if it's still broad daylight.

So first I became a tiger,
then a squid,
then a chirping cricket.
Then on the way home
with Greedy and Stingy,
and my pal Sugi too,
we all turned into calves
and lowed
as calves should:

Moo ...

moo

moo.

The old cow in Ch'öl-su's stable
chewing its cud, turned its head and stared at us.

Tomorrow

During the rough days
tomorrow was my only green honor,
my only remaining source of strength —
having to wave
my final farewell
to each waning day.

What was real?

First this —

then that —

then that again.

If love and hate,
and the land of my fathers
were only things of today,
while under the starlight
countless nights went soaring aloft,
let glasses remain empty,
let's make no more toasts.

Tomorrow —

what a magnificent word!

What ragged destiny!

Though radiant flesh
and tyranny
now may be one,
if tomorrow is really today,
already there will be coming, like a lone child,
in the winds beyond,
without any words of welcome:
tomorrow.

Horizon

The tough Yellow Sea lies west.
People live here too, on Öch' öng Island.
The endless sea, glimpsed above the dike
is itself a flower
without a stalk.

A woman in a lonely house
preparing food in the kitchen
suddenly goes outside,
sweeps her hair up
and gazes vaguely toward the horizon.

A few boats can be seen
looming just above the horizon:
That boat!
That boat!
No doubt about it, that boat!
She knows for sure it's her husband's boat.

Her voice changes at once.

Sangsöp! Sangsöp!

Yongsöp! Yongsun!

Your dad's coming!

A mighty voice.

One Day's Song

One day, I realized:

I was sad

because

our era has no mind.

I couldn't stand

how something new

invariably gives birth to some new ideology,

I long to be caught up in that perennial fiction

called mind, unknown to birds or mice —

the isolation of a mind being raised aloft

like a kite a kid sends flying high.

I long to plunge down from there, borne by the wind.

A Yard at Night

A yard where kids have been playing boisterously.
A village where even if kids from the next village came
somehow the dogs didn't bark,
just wagged their tails.
Where the banished chicks and hens
played noisily.
It was no place at all for adults
with their coughs of alarm.
Hopscotch, kick-the-shuttlecock, scissors-paper-stone,
to say nothing of racing to the spring,
winning, losing, time knowing no end.
No need to worry about the kids while they're here.
No need for mother, in her wet apron,
to keep coming and going to see if they're alright.
The noisy playing is fine, just fine.
No trace of any other world at all.
Tomorrow or the day after make no impression here.
The children, even just ten or twenty of them,
are enough to fill the whole land.
Then the Beggar Star shone early in the sky.
As the evening grew hazy,

It became hard to recognize each other's faces
and one by one they set off homewards.
Thank heaven children have names!
"Illyong-a, Samryong-a, Kuryong-a, Mansöp-a!"
Children only have names in the dark!
Behind them the chicks flap up to their perches
in the coop, defying hunger
and peck greedily at themselves.
In the empty yard, where has all the noise gone?
Over the not-so-very-lofty hill,
stars rise, gladly following
the Beggar Star, announcing their presence.
Starlight slowly comes dropping down.
How could the world beyond not be here?
All night long the wind sleeps, dew falls,
the other world comes, plays, then goes.
When the first cock crows at early dawn,
the others follow suit from house to house.
It's a time for blind folks to gaze off into the distance.
In their sleep the children are still kicking off the blankets,
growing up to be sleepy-heads just like their fathers.

The Woman of Kagõ Island

If we're at all human
there's always some spot we can never forget.
There is such a place in this world.

Last summer
on Kagõ Island in the Western Sea, my clothes
nearly ripped in the fierce sea winds.
And in those winds a tough birch grew,
and chasteberry, with a slender stalk,
sending down roots as deep as their height,
standing firm.

And in those winds was the voice of a woman
who, early on in life, lost her husband at sea
but stayed there with her children,
celebrating his memorial rites every year.
No matter how the winds might howl,
her voice sliced through them
as she called out in a brisk voice
to her big fifteen-year-old son's tiny boat —

unclear whether she was calling
across the waves to her dead husband
or her son.

Windy Day

The greatest treason
is to die on a windy day.

When the wind blows,
all the land's banner swell full.

Everyone,
everyone becomes a banner swelling full.

How can anyone die on such a day?

Arise.

Arise!

Arise!!

Fallen horse, you too arise!

The most glorious thing
in all the world!

A windy day.

Somewhere Unfamiliar

Leave
for somewhere unfamiliar.

Not America,
not Indonesia.

Leave
your daily routines,
your never-to-be-forgiven habits.

Leave
for the newness of words invented by infants,
the newness that calls grandmother “alupa,”
yes, for a place where even a grandmother
is something new,
for that unfamiliar spot,
leave,
throwing away all your memories and dictionaries,
throwing away even your empty hands.

Leave.

Leaving is the primal birth
beyond rebirth.

Leave!

To a Young Poet

A young poet is nearest the sun.
But have you swallowed soma?
Why are you so lacking in sorrow?
Why so lacking in immaculate despair?
Those things aren't possible only in the ruins of the 1950s.
After those days when they were the only values
nowadays, surely, aren't they your first steps?
In those days such things were all a fool had,
nowadays they're only first steps.

Anxiety, anguish, even suffering, are sweet.
Such things will make your poetry leap,
such things will make your life
zoom
quick as an arrow shot from the bow.
Can't you see?
Without such things
you can never hope to see great tomorrows.
Why can't you see?

Look at one tiny fish leaping over the waterfall
rather than the waterfall's might.

Look at the world's tragedies soaring
to the clouds thirty thousand feet up in the sky,
up into those clouds' indifference
up into their random sense of time.

Start there.

Or rather dive like the hawk.

The task you must perform under the sun starts there.

Though on cloudy days
the sun may be veiled,
your task starts there.

Dear young poet! Here am I beneath your feet.

I and all the poets of bygone days
are the ground you trample.

Now write your poems.

Not yesterday's poems.

Not tomorrow's poems.

Write your own poems.

A Dead Banner

The wind drops, the banner dies.

Who'd dare call that
death?

Absurd. Utter nonsense.

When sun has set,
who'd dare call such darkness
death?

Once old soldiers have hobbled away,
the voices of newly arrived troops are first recognized
by the enemy behind the hills.

Who'd dare call that death
death?

Utterly absurd.

The wind blows.

The banner comes back to life.

So go, embrace the wind.

Then you'll grow strong,
as your world comes alive.

Lash the air with your banners.

Then go forth, advance.

The wind is blowing.

The wind is blowing.

All you banners, flap to shreds . . .

One Apple

For one month, two months, even three or four,
a man painted an apple.

Until the apple
rotted,
dried up,
until you could no longer tell if it was an apple or what,
he kept on painting it.

In the end, those paintings were no longer
of an apple at all.
Not apple paintings.

In the end, those paintings were of shriveled things,
good-for-nothing things,
that's all they were.

But the painter
gained strength, letting him know the world in which
he lived.

He gained strength, letting him realize there were things
he could never paint.

He tossed his brush aside.
Darkness arrived,
ruthlessly trampling his paintings.

He took up his brush again,
started to paint against the darkness.
The apple was no longer there,
but starting from it
emerged paintings of all that is not apple.

Evening of Memorial Rites

He had no memory
of his father, who'd died when he was two.
As he grew up, it seemed
he'd been given his father's likeness.
Once his voice broke, it seemed
he'd truly taken after his father.
At the height of the harvest
he showed no signs of laziness,
as though he'd been given his father's diligence, too.
On the evening of his father's memorial rites
the lamp under the eaves shines very far.

A Bell at Dawn

It must be dawn.
Have I heard dawn
heralded by a bell?
I am suddenly awake.

What's that bell
saying?
Is it telling me to join my hands in prayer?
Is it telling me to repent
for the past twenty years,
the past thirty years?
No, that's not it.

That bell is sounding a warning
to an age that kicks off solemn truths
as if they're mere tattered straw fences,
while it earnestly, recklessly, fills its heart
with utter greed and corruption,
heart that has never known bitterness,
The bell rings for an age
that throws into the trash-can the thoughts

that stand firm against the deepest night
and all such things.

Holding back its anger,
it's sounding a warning.

A new age of barbarity is approaching,
an age when humans won't know how to be human,
an age of monsters,
an ultra-modern age,
an age of technology;
that's what's coming.

The bell is warning
that today nothing has value,
that an age is coming
when all such things as
peace, love, and justice
will become mere toys,
much more than ever before.

Nowadays we can no longer see anything
as majestic as mountain ranges,
anything as unbounded
as the Indian Ocean.

An age is coming devoid of storms,
with their towering waves of times gone by.
That's what the bell is warning.

Poets, you're our only hope.
Arise again,
transcend this age of death and destruction,
arise and lead us to an age of humanity,
ablaze with light,
an age of life.

Hear the bell warning of all these things.

That Flock of Black Cranes

In Japan, near Kagoshima, in southern Kyushu,
a flock of black cranes is flying
straight to Siberia,
to the shores of the Amur River.
I wonder where they get their strength?

Once spring comes, cruising at sixty
or, full-speed, at eighty miles-an-hour,
crossing the sea,
the mainland,
flying straight, that flock of black cranes:
I wonder where they get their strength?

They're all one family,
interrelated,
one hundred,
perhaps one hundred and fifty,
flying in formation,
sustained by a diet of sardines.
Once they're fully rested,
one bird loudly flaps its wings,
then rises, and all rise together.

In Fall they fly southward, as far as Korea,
in springtime northward
towards the Amur River.

They live free of attachments.

Some die,
others are born.

Flying straight for several thousand miles,
that flock of black cranes:

I wonder where they get their strength?

A Short Bio

Now and again, I dream.

After a pelican has flown far across the Indian Ocean,
I dream.

Like my father back home used to dream
in the darkness when the light vanishes after sunset,
I dream.

Awakened from dreams,
I'm alive like a power line buzzing in the wind.

So far, I've always rejected dreams.

Even in my dreams
I've struggled
to reject dreams.

More,
I've rejected
every kind of fantasy,
any concept dominating an age.
Things as they are,
that's all there is.

Then I saw,
gleaming on the ocean at night,
a phosphorescence.

I saw
the waves' white teeth
glinting faintly
as they were buried in darkness.

Things as they are,
that's all that there is.

I saw
a phosphorescence that glimmered then vanished,
like the oneness
of a new-born child with its mother.

Now I approve of dreams.
Things as they are, that's not all there is.

I dream.
Yesterday
is not today;
today
is not tomorrow.
I dream of tomorrow.

Ah, this earth is the tomb of our experience.

Grave Memories

In my youth I was quite fascinated by graves, especially
the six hundred and eighty in Hwangdŭng Public Cemetery.
On my way home at night, I used to pass out
in the Sarabong Cemetery on Cheju Island.
I made quite a habit of sleeping beside graves.
Word spread.
Folks started calling me the Sarabong Ghost.

After someone died and a new grave appeared,
I used to be so glad.
“You’ve come at last!
Welcome, friend!
You’re nowhere as well off as here,” I’d say.
I was so glad.

When night fell,
I’d drink and drink
until I was utterly intoxicated.
as I passed the new grave, I’d pass out and snooze.
Once, at dawn a centipede bit me.

For a whole week, one side of my face
was swollen and aching,
the size of a pumpkin.

Once, as a novice monk
on my way to nearby Mirae Temple in T'ongyŏng
I spent half a day in a cemetery.
I'd completely forgotten the errand I was on.
Later, the head monk would give me hell.

Decades have since floated by
and now I've finally realized:
animals don't make graves.
Thus animals are better than people,
since they leave behind no tomb.
Thus animals are better than God,
a hundred times better than me.

Is that why I used to be so fond of graves?
So I could realize that one thing?
Is that why I used to cry and cry?

Resting

The era when you galloped on horseback
is past, but not gone. Another era
for galloping on horseback is here.
Earn what you need for each day
Then take it easy, eating and resting. Azaleas
still blossom all round you. Sighing
is not sorrow. When you stop to sigh,
kites in the sky seem to pause as well.

True rest should be the mind's highest state.

One Windy Day

On a windy day such as I have long loved.

“Windy!”

four-year-old Ch’aryŏng exclaims,

“Wind!”

and a brindled milking cow follows her voice:

“Mooo.”

Windy day.

Look at the grass.

Look at the trees.

Look at the animals who can’t stay still.

Thus the world comes to be,

together with the stillness of a rusty tractor.

Snake

Snake who cross my path so late at night!

Surely I'm as pleased to meet you
as you are pleased to be meeting me.

On this earth we are two of a kind.

After you, please.

I'll go my way once you have crossed.

I'll go on toward love-making,
giving birth to wisdom, until day breaks.

Chestnuts

The spines of a chestnut burr all stand erect
while the nut inside is ripening.

Pop!

Autumn has come.

When the ripe chestnuts split,
what pious caution:
no visits now from dragonflies.

The heavens alone look down.

Abruptly, a cloud veils
the sky,
and that cloud looks down.

Nothing in this world can really be named.
Names are spoken so rashly.

Day

How fortunate we are to have nightfall.

How fortunate
to recall the departed
when nightfall comes.

Sure, each trivial parting really is salvation!

Evening darkness already hangs thick.

The departed
have already come,
and soon God will come,
with silent steps.

How beautiful God is:
no form, no sound.

Clay

Winter's coldest days have come
and gone. Spring is already near.
The last traces of snow
lie wretched in the ditches.

If you are human, human
or animal, surely you're a child of clay.
Listen hard. Hear
the drumbeats in the clay?

At least once a month, you should lie
on the ground and listen well.
Hear your grandfather ringing like a bell
inside the clay?

Death Poem

A few days ago, a monk came down
from Muju Hermitage in Sobaek Mountain.
As we talked of this and that
he began to cry.
I didn't ask why.
But that must have seemed like a question, too,
for without being asked, he replied.

His teacher lay dying.
As his disciple,
it was his duty to ask his master
to bequeath a death poem,
but he had no time
before his master closed his eyes.

Because he hadn't asked,
his master left no poem, so he was sad.

On the spot I improvised two lines of verse:

Your temple eats rice
so my house feels full and sleepy.

All so true.

In the yard outside, the dog's asleep.

The wind woke it briefly, but now it's asleep again.

Beside a Compost Heap

Inevitably, this age will end.
People make their way back home
under the scorching sun,
the skin peeling off their backs,
grass piled high on the tractor.
Tomorrow the old compost heap
must be spread on the field.
Sons and daughters
working in Seoul
in hotels or restaurants
step lightly, their rural features gone.

Shit

Under that bush,
a dog took a shit.
Lifting a quivery tail,
it took a shit.

Over here,
I took a shit and feel happy.

I'm happy, happy.
Later, I realized:
it wasn't me.
It wasn't me, it was the dog
who took a shit.

Now knowing that, I feel both happy and sad.

Out Walking at Last

How long has it been?

I say hello to the magpie flying up from a treetop.

Out walking at last,
my shoes are excited.

The person walking in front of me
has shoes even more excited.

That person in front of me
looks good from behind.

Who can it be?

I wonder who can it be?

But don't try to overtake him!

Today I'm truly human behind someone else.

Above a Village

Well before reaching Hyongje Peak,
among pines still moderate in size
after perhaps a century's growth,
well before reaching Hyongje Peak,
I sent the dog back home,
just after I passed behind Unsu Hermitage.

The dog went home alone,
I remained alone.

What have I ever done
to put an end to anyone's tears?
Unable to put an end to my own,
I sat there behind Unsu Hermitage
and shed some more.

Perhaps because in this world
are children's hearts so innocent they don't realize
what comes after sunset is darkness.
Perhaps it was because in this world is the joy
of dogs silently wagging their tails

in the dark.

We should linger here,
me and the dog with whom I'm now one.

A dog barks in the village below.
The lights respond to the sound
and shine that much brighter.

An Old Woman Speaks

I moved from Sŭngdu-ri when I wed
and have lived here in my husband's home village
for a full fifty years.

Working in the fields,
cleaning the pigsty,
rattling dishes in the kitchen,
no matter what the job,
I enjoyed them all.

I enjoyed them,
yes, enjoyed them all.

My body,
there was nothing it didn't like doing.
My mother was just the same way.

Mother was small,
she nearly got wed to the village dwarf —
then she met a man like a totem pole
and I was born.

Nine others followed me,
six died, three survived.
The four of us
are scattered now in different places,
in Ch'ōnan,
P'yōngt'aek,
Kongdo,
we've all grown gray-haired and toothless.

Well, now, just look: a kite's
caught in the branches of that ju jube tree.
Such things make me happy now.

Dawn

What's happening?

In the darkness

all the forest was wide awake.

I was forced out from the forest

although there was no one there.

You see? When we know almost nothing

about anything,

surely that ignorance makes

a very good neighbor

to the finest wisdom.

I was forced out from the forest.

In ignorance, no one can have identity.

A cock crowed

and vigorously the eastern sky grew bright.

I suddenly entered a village.

It felt unfamiliar.

Kids were sound asleep with their dreams

and birds were alighting in empty yards.

It must be immensely painful
for the sun to come soaring up in the east?
Who are you? Who are you?
New morning sunlight, deeply unaware:
you shine so very darkly!

Afternoon

Each leaf of every tree
casts its own shadow.

Lower down,
each leaf of every weed
casts its own shadow.

How could the hills not follow suit?

In every valley,
every valley at midday,
no shadow appears anywhere.

The sun declines
and then
every valley, without exception,
casts its own shadow.

At that moment
all that is
reveals its own best self.

Born as a man,
how can I be myself or anybody else
without such shadows

in some valley of my heart,
without a timeless shadow?

In a Street

Have you ever
been another person?

Have you ever been
another person? Today

I have nothing but questions.

If you say you've never been someone else
since the day you were born, how will
a breath of the wind of this world
ever dare touch your hair?

Drawing Maps

I was drawing maps again today.
I drew the North Sea between England and Norway
and the shores of the Gulf of Pohai in the East,
then I tore up all my maps. This was
not it, I felt. This
really wasn't it. Just then
the wind spoke, knocking at my window. "Poor
little guy. You should draw a new world,
not the usual modern map." Not only
wind, but wind and rain spoke
together, knocking at my window. Trying to ignore
my growling stomach, I started
drawing maps again.
Not like before,
but tomorrow's maps,
with no America . . . no Asia . . .

A Certain Delight

What I am thinking now
has already been thought
by someone else,
somewhere in this world.
Don't cry.

What I am thinking now
is being thought
by someone else,
somewhere in this world.
Don't cry.

What I am thinking now
is about to be thought
by someone else,
somewhere in this world.
Don't cry.

What a delightful thing, for sure.
In this world,
somewhere in this world,

I have been made
combining countless selves.

A delightful thing, for sure.

I have been made

by the combining of countless selves.

Don't cry.

The Road Not Yet Traveled

Never say you've reached your destination.
Though you've covered thousands of miles,
a still longer road remains ahead.

While you sleep through the night
like an animal once the sun has set,
a still longer road remains ahead.

Your constant companion, loneliness,
is no mere loneliness: it's none other
than the world,
and the road ahead,
a world unknown to anyone.

A wind is rising.

Mountain

I was a mountain,
born on a mountainside,
in the days when mountains and men were one.
A laughing child,
I was a mountain, too.

I went up into the mountains,
bathed my heart
in mountain showers.
Come winter, all life was fresh.
I was the mountain, too.

In the darkness
just before dawn
and the darkness of the mountain
at twilight
I could see all I longed for,
even what lay out of sight.

Then I left the mountain,
off to hear the waves — what sea was that?
After wandering, here and there,
I suddenly looked up:
there was the mountain!

Averting its pale blue gaze, the mountain spoke:
“Come whenever you wish.”
Mountain of my origin
to which I always return!
I was a mountain, too

Sorrow

In my native village, two baby fawns died,
shot in the same moment by hunters' arrows.

Their mother came galloping up,
circled the spot, out of her mind,
then fell down dead.

No arrow touched her,
she just fell down dead.

When that mother deer was cut open,
they found her twenty-yard-long gut
ripped apart
by the sorrow of losing her fawns.

In this world, everything that exists
must experience sorrow, it's true,
but can hers be called mere sorrow?
Real sorrow has always been heart-rending.
Tonight, I'll bury my own little snack of sorrow
quietly in a hole in the ground.

Next year, or the year after,
fragrant mugwort might come sprouting
from the secretly buried sorrow, but how could that
equal the death of the mother deer?

To bring birth and the beginning of a new world
with imperishable sorrow,
the crimson sun of dawning day hastens far away.

Where Are My New Books?

My ten thousand books!
I'm throwing you all out
without so much as one last drink together.
The street's full of trash so you won't feel lonely.
I'm throwing you out.

All my ten thousand books!
No!
No! I have protested,
but between you and me
conflict has been replaced by a stupid peace
so I'm throwing you out.

Now, under a dumb, patient, daytime moon
I'm on my way
in search of new books,
different from you old ones.
I'm on my way.
Throwing you you out over and over again.

I'm on my way somewhere,
somewhere searching
for the hell of new wisdom.
I'm on my way.

Myriad Stars

Night, so childlike, with stars shining bright:
deaf-mute darkness strives with all its might,
just as every pebble on earth yearns
to fly into the sky
and strike all the stars down.

Return to Harbor

When a boat returns,
gulls are first
to come out in greeting.
How could a harbor be only for leaving?

Before the gulls,
other eyes
are out, searching,
to welcome it too.

In the eyes of sailors' wives
lies a sea
a thousand leagues wide.

How could a harbor
be only for leaving?

Rock

A rock from Sō-un Mountain
is never just
a rock.
If it's broken open:
within it time past,
born and dying
through millennia of longing,
shines bright,
a jewel formed of every kind of sound,
bewildering my eyes.

Song for a Baby

If the world had no babies,
there'd be no world at all.

A one-year-old babe goes tottering
then thuds down on its bottom.

Such a day is truly the whole world

If the world had no babies,
there'd be no world at all.

The baby cries in the night.

Such a night is truly the whole world.

If the world had no babies,
there'd be no world at all.

Quickly growing,
the baby gestures beyond.

The whole world is truly there.

Looking Up at the Night Sky

Is something new destined to be born in the night sky?
Why do noble stars crowd together so thickly in the sky?

From Persia,
Mesopotamia,
Ethiopia —
are venerable Magi heading off there, staff in hand?

Following suit, I simply cannot sleep.

A Waterfall

Standing before a waterfall,
I forgot the noise of the waterfall.

In the noise of the waterfall
I forgot the waterfall.

When have I ever been
so intensely alone?

Standing before a waterfall today
I was more alone than for decades.

Tokdo

It was never home to anyone,
never saw a newborn babe.
Out in the middle of the East Sea,
even the hoarse cries of ancient gulls
get buried in the roar of waves.
It was never home to anyone.

Rising there, unknown to anyone,
rising there, of all places,
far out at sea,
for ages a silent, rocky mound,
it was never home to anyone.

But when someone set off on a long journey
yet could not easily return,
once recovered from an unavoidable defeat, he'd find it
more than a roar of waves embraced by warm sunset rays:
it was better than home.

In primitive times no one reached there.
For centuries of windy time
it stood alone, buried in the waves' roar.

It was a place where no one was ever born,
yet ultimately, it was everyone's home
during their distant wanderings.
Oh, Tokdo in the East Sea.

Reverie

Were someone to assert
that a perfectly obvious fact
is merely fable,
or surely fantasy,
and were not just a few
but several million to unanimously consent,
then that
would be a greater violence than any fact.

Even a perfectly obvious fact
can appear to be a naughty spirit
prancing about, a midday reverie.
A flower is floating in mid-air. Aim —
Fire! Shoot that flower down!

In the House of Prabhutaratna

In notes to the Lotus Sutra it is reported that Shakyamuni Buddha, after spending eighty years traveling bare-footed throughout the Ganges Valley, left the earth,

went up to heaven,
and visited Prabhutaratna Buddha
in his abode.

The two of them set up house together.

Prabhutaratna's face grew brighter than before while the face of his guest Sakyamuni also shone exceedingly bright.

The two got on well together.

Then a bodhisattva declared

Prabhutaratna was the Sakyamuni of the past while Sakyamuni was the Prabhutaratna of this present age, so the two became completely one.

The news spread throughout the heavens and over the earth.

All the remains of Shakyamuni Buddha, scattered in various realms,

rose to heaven
and they became one Buddha.
The house of Prabhutaratna Buddha,
all this time ringing with talk,
grew very quiet.
Being one Buddha can be very boring, it seems.
So he went around sleeping with various stars,
one tonight, another tomorrow,
another the night after.
A penniless child down on earth
gazed up every night
at the stars roaming around the sky.

East Sea Lotus Flowers

A mighty babe arose
threw a stone
at the sky
beyond the hills
and that one stone
that one stone
showered down
as an avalanche
for decades after
One stone landed
in the East Sea at dawn
just in front of Naksan Temple
and blossomed
into so many dazzling bright
lotus flowers!
They still float there, dazzlingly bright.

The Passage of Time

Long ago
on his deathbed
the Buddha said:
“In days to come
when I am no more
I beg you, make no images of me.”
After that request
the people who had lost their master
had no choice:
the buddha was nowhere else
but in their hearts.

Everywhere they went,
no matter where, he was surely within.

But that, it seemed, was not enough.
Since he'd become enlightened at Bodhgaya
at dawn under a bodhi tree,
people took one leaf from that tree
offering it reverence
bowed down to it
joining palms before it.

Then one day some artists of Gandhara, inspired by Greece,
carved sensuous statues of seated buddhas

to which people offered reverence,
bowed down,
palms joined.

Mountain Birds

A New Year's Song for 1994

This new year, after a long winter,
may the newly budding blossoms be beautiful.
May lovely flowers bloom
more than any other year.
May they yield abundant seeds and fruit.

This new year, after the first leaves sprout
a few days early, one by one,
may a new world of early summer green emerge.
May that world of green toss its head in youthful glee.

This new year, may the rabbits bear young.
May the mountain birds in the hills
and the crows in the villages flap strong wings.
As they soar aloft from branches and trees,
may the shaking treetops awaken the sleepy sky.

This new year, may all that has gone wrong
between each of us
be put right, be fully put right.

May we all become neighbors whispering sweetly together.
When Fall comes, may brightly hued leaves provoke a tear.

Then may hatred cease throughout the world.

May no one rob or harm another.

Above all, here in Korea:

how much longer must South and North stay apart?

This new year, may snow fall in large flakes
and make the two one.

Burying Names

A New Year's Song for 1994

Soon the sun will rise.

I am giving myself a name.

Casting away all my previous names,

the bones of decades past,

I am making a new name.

Soon the sun will rise.

Once it has risen, the sky

will still be bright with stars

invisible to my eyes.

Then I will stop making names.

I will leave names behind.

I will leave names behind and set off,

far away from newly made names.

Truth will at last appear.

Has Truth ever appeared to me before?

In the streets of so many names,

in the gutters of so many names,

“truth” was only a name for Truth.

Has it ever appeared to me?

Soon the sun will rise.

I have lived with all those names

in order to leave names behind.

Ay, that frozen, scorching hell of names.

Setting off, accomplishing something

is merely a tomb for all those names.

Soon the sun will rise. Once it has risen,
the stars will bury themselves in that tomb.

Poems of Engagement

All these years, in windy Seoul, in Kwangju,
in Pusan,
on the edge of the DMZ
with this single body of mine,
I have improvised endless poems of engagement.
Sometimes,
I longed to be one with the ocean waves in a sudden night
storm,
a thunderbolt falling on the blood-stained events.
Sometimes,
I would stand with friends in streets of tears,
incapable of a single teardrop.

Time is not something that simply comes and goes.
I wonder what became of all the tomorrows
contained in the poems of engagement I sang,
apart from the chicks already hatched
after brooding on bright dreams.

What went flapping up today
was nothing more than a few hundred
tame pigeons.

The empty plaza did not know
it as such sacred places.

Yet if I listen I can hear:
the drum beats of a new season coming
boom... boom... boom

I hear drum beats heavy with the meaning
of the new age's poems of engagement.

Engagement makes yesterday today,
a today leading to tomorrow.

At the sound of those drum beats I spring to my feet
and gaze ahead.

From a corner of our country's destruction
and the new creation I will ever engage in,
on this snowy day
boom ... boom ... boom

I hear drum beats booming out — the time has come.

With the Little Countries

The hundredth anniversary of the modern Olympics.

The 1996 Atlanta Summer Games.

All 197 member nations were present.

At the opening ceremony each country's athletes
came marching in behind their national flag:

the Greek flag

the Norwegian flag

the American flag

the German flag

the French flag

the Russian flag

the British flag

the Australian flag

the Japanese flag

the Chinese flag

the Canadian flag, all were familiar.

Then the Korean athletes came in behind their flag,

each with a fan bearing the national symbol of yin and yang.

I'm told American television made a break at that point,

blotting out the Korean team's entrance

with a Coca-Cola commercial.

But I saw the flags of most countries
for the very first time,
so they were completely unfamiliar.
I felt sorry, very sorry
for the flags of those countries.

We only remembered the American flag,
the French flag,
or the Japanese flag.

There seemed no need to know the flags
of the smaller countries.

That just isn't right.

Haute Volta

Togo

Zaire with its torch

Burundi

Botswana

Mali:

our Korean flag should fly side-by-side
with those countries' flags.

At the time of the Kwangju Massacre in May 1980,
the little nation of the Seychelles,

which we had never so much as heard of, declared
she would not recognize Korea as a nation.
Why, our flag should fly with that country's flag.

Setting aside the big countries,
we should talk about new love
with the little countries of the world.
We should sing with them of our painful nights.

After the Atlanta Olympics we realized:
to ignore and despise little countries, backward countries,
is just to surrender to the big countries.

The Sound of a Flute

Long ago on a Northeast Asian mountain,
a thick length of bamboo lay abandoned.
Had it been flung away and fallen there?
Had some passerby become distracted
and left it behind as he went on?
Nobody knows.

Decades went by.
Rains came. Snow fell thick.
Yet each spring
the bamboo was still fresh, no sign of rotting.
It was very strange.

By night, it absorbed the moonlight.
By day, it absorbed the trailing white clouds' passage.
With time, a few holes appeared, from which
it gradually began to emit sounds.
At first, the sounds were barely audible.

Ah! Those sounds
were a subtle imitation of the sounds of heaven

and the myriad sounds of earth,
as it had long heard them.

They were a bit hoarse
a bit sorrowful, then
free of that sorrow,
they sounded unsure of what was a beginning
and what was an end.

One day,
a youth coming down the mountain
approached the sounds.
He was deaf, yet gradually
they penetrated his ears.

Then he understood
everything in the past millennium
and the millennium yet to come.
He very carefully grasped
the sound-emitting bamboo
and bore it back to his home in the caves.
As soon as he got there
he pierced a few more holes.
Then he fell asleep for seven days and nights.

While he slept
he dreamed of a new, profound sound.
At last he awoke.

The late moon was slowly rising.
The boy set the bamboo to his lips
and for the first time it emitted a human sound.
But heaven's dazzling breath
was borne on his breath. Besides, the earth's
deep breath was borne with it too.

Ultimately, that profound sound
echoed through the valley below
then beyond to the next.
Sleeping animals could hear it,
and not only they.

All the mountain's trees and blades of grass,
the spirits,
and all the people clustered below —
their sleeping ears opened by themselves
and the sound passed to and fro among those ears.

Time passed.

All the souls gathered here today
are hearing that sound too.

That sound is
this sound.

To hear this sound,
mere listening is not enough:
we need to gently open our eyes
and look
at the sound.

Returning from Abroad

In the year 627, the young Chinese monk Xuan Zang
set out down a road the state forbade people to take.
Even if it hadn't been thus forbidden,
nine times out of nine
it was a deadly road.

Yet still he set out.
Seventeen years later, he came back.
The road he returned by
was a deadly road too,
yet he came back alive.
He had a huge frame strapped to his back
and at the top of that frame
he had perched a parasol
of waxed paper and bamboo strips.
And at the very top of that parasol
dangling,
hanging down,
a very tiny incense-burner was fixed.
He came home with incense burning in it.
His right hand was holding a whisk to drive away insects,

his left hand clutched a rolled-up sutra.

Like this, he came home.

How could anyone tell all he'd been through?

Burning incense in that incense-burner

hanging before his diminutive brow,

the great master Xuan Zang

came back from his death-defying quest for truth.

After running out of incense

on his way across the desert,

he came back burning incense in his heart.

Wild Chrysanthemum

How happy the people
with somewhere to go.

How happy
the people with a place to return to.

How immensely high the sky,
even if none look up,
coming back with heads hung low.

On a hillside holding generations of my ancestors
something is waving,
a nameless, wild chrysanthemum,
just one flower
yet with that one flower
how happy I am.

The Lion

A wind is blowing.

In the Masai grasslands of Tanzania

a wind is blowing.

In the dry grass on a hilltop

an old male lion is crouching.

Indifferent whether the wind blows or not,

he simply gazes off into the distance.

What creature would dare come near?

His dignity ripens

in union with his selflessness.

Time passes heroically.

A wind is blowing.

Now the crimson ball of the sun

touches the horizon of the Masai grasslands.

How utterly breathtaking

the silence, as it summons every will.

But that old lion merely looks on.

Though the setting sun
falls in his field of vision,
he never glares fireceely,
lets the sun set
in a fountain of blood.

Today, his powerful rule of times gone by
is no more than a mere trifle.
He simply gazes off into the distance.

He gazes off into the distance
from across his enormous lifetime
without sorrow
without any sorrow.

The lion bounds to his feet abruptly
and roars
at the world.

With that sound
every animal
every tree and plant
even the twilight after the sun has set, all
freeze in a silence full of dread.

Superfluous, no?

A wind is blowing.
Beyond the lion's tail
the full moon is rising.
Somewhere,
far away somewhere, an insect can be heard buzzing —
perhaps from far off Kilimanjaro?

Sunken Bells

Thank heaven for the sea.
If I could only have
one crazy wish,
be it that all the bells in this land,
every one,
might be hurled into the sea
and sunk down deep, way deep.

Other things would follow, one by one.

For a century or so
no sound of bells and such would be heard,
nothing like that at all —
how immensely vast our land would be.

Then, once we're standing around
with the patience of skeletons,
all the sunken bells would ring
from the bottom of the sea.
Their chime
would come bursting out of the sea,
reverberating to every corner of the earth.

Last Night's Dream

A few years ago, somewhere
in the Deccan Heights of India,
after I'd thrown away everything in my pockets —
passport, notebook, water flask,
some Indian money, and such-like,
and with all those things,
part of my so-called memory too —
I stood there truly alone
as my last drops of sweat
evaporated.

Why,
I was struck by the stare of a white-headed eagle
that had swooped down like an arrow
from high in the sky
and was devouring the remains of a cow
dead of old age.

Then, raising its head a moment,
it stopped gnawing the cow
and shot a glance at me
Is it time or myself that has passed?
Last night my dreams were filled

not with that wretched bird
but that old cow corpse
full of ignorance, and devoured
by the wretched bird.
I couldn't dream of anything else.

Turtle Time

High up in Korea's eastern hills,
with a *Chop!*
and a *Chop!* a tree was felled,
chopped into pieces within the day,
chopped into ten blocks,
eleven;
there was no other way.

The blocks were carted away and finally
dumped
in a cesspool
where they remained,
completely forgotten.

They spent three years in that filthy pool
while slow-moving time went by.
Sorrow and pain were all in vain.
Some, quite rotten, were thrown away;
only one block or two
stayed solid and sturdy
despite long soaking in the cesspool.

Next, they were plunged deep
into flowing water.

One hundred days passed, while the cuckoos sang,
then they were drawn out,
the stench of the cesspool washed clean away.

When the cuckoo had sung for a hundred days,
they found themselves lying
in flowing water, goodness knows how.

From there they were dredged
and washed quite clean,
free of the stench of the cesspool.

Then they were finally
dumped
in a sheltered spot beneath the eaves.
In that shade
they dried very slowly —
as a sea turtle
after digging a hole in the sand at the tideline
lays its eggs in a pile, covers them over,
then very slowly returns to the sea,
just so they dried.

Another hundred days passed.
Now the blocks of wood
are as hard as stone,
lighter than a sheet of paper,
stony wood blocks
that will never rot in a thousand years.

Cut and shaped out of one of the blocks
a small bowl
stands here before me,
in which I shall offer up dawn-drawn, pure well water
for my distant love.

Out of the cesspool emerged a bowl
permeated with the fathomless blue
of Korea's autumn skies,
the only hues of jade on earth.

One small wooden bowl is raised in offering
near the west coast of our land.

Just as the sea turtle
returns from distant seas,
just as the baby turtles return
once hatched from their eggs,
it is reverently raised in offering here.

Light Snow

Just two people's eyes.

Nothing else.

Snow fell.

The two clutched each other's hands, shivering,
unsure which hand was whose,
their first time,
as they became one in their hearts, in darkness,
uncertain whose heart
was whose,

inevitable,
their first time, they embraced.
then collapsed, unutterably sad,
unsure
who was who . . .

shared such times, then died,
lying sleeping, buried here
after remorse on the way back home, and now
lo! the rapture of this desolate landscape. Brightly,
light snow is falling so brightly

Light snow, but whose
no one knows.

A Path Through the Fields

Even in my usual clothes, somehow I feel renewed.
Deep within people are tears
that remain locked in,
unrealized even after a decade or two of tough discipline.
They feel unsure if they're there or not
since they're half or fully submerged.
I want to become someone like that.

Today I'm on my way to meet such people's tears.
Can I hear them easily?

Today the sky is unusually bright toward the west.
Morning dew jewels the grass to its roots.
Even when the dew at the blade tips
has vanished, the sodden paths across the fields
gleam like the hidden spirit of a newborn babe.
I wonder.

Sometimes people need this kind of path.
Even if they know nothing but their usual tasks,
they need a path to walk on for no reason
under the constantly appearing and vanishing clouds

a path where they can yearn for something.
like someone far away on a long journey.
As they walk along the path, they have to meet the sound
of someone weeping, in the sky or on the earth,
no telling which.

Singing Island

In the sea off my birthplace,
there were islands scattered here and there
in a most curious way.

Among them was the very tiny
Singing Island.

When gales came blowing off the West Sea
always, invariably,
the sound of singing
could be heard around that island.

They were songs of the souls of fishermen
drowned in storms
through the centuries,
who would wake whenever a gale blew
and sing for days night and day.

As I grew up within sight
of Singing Island
some august spirit entered me
and I became a singer, still roaming today.

Became a traveling singer, awkwardly singing
awkward songs through the years,
with moments of solemnity.

Late Flowers

Like a river
summoned to come slowly murmuring round a bend.
Like the hills above such a river,
the shadows of those hills,
bidden to come passing over ridges,
to come back home with lowered heads
after wandering along other hillsides:
see how these few flowers are blooming,
after arriving so late.

If longing is half sorrow,
let's have even more sorrow.

Over now, the breathtaking season
when flowers came up in flocks
here and there
laughing brightly.

Arriving so late
at this lonely time,
after all those days of troubled, wounded hearts

under a rain of scattering petals,
they cannot help but be deaf-mute.
They are quietly blooming, blank-faced,
without a sign of either smiles or sorrow.

Stars and Flowers

No matter how long we wait,
no matter how many the stars we talk about,
the stars never get the least bit closer,
but simply hang there,
just beaming us light from billions of light years ago.

No matter how much we sing about flowers,
sing in later years
of childhood apricot flowers,
the flowers don't last any longer,
nothing of the sort.

They simply
bloom for a few days, as always, then fall,
simply fall, all at once, in a sudden gust of wind.

In this desolate world, we talk
about stars,
sing about flowers,
our hearts leaping at mention of "my star" or "your flower."

What puerile, senile, juvenile, naïveté!

This World's Words

When the wind talks,
her hair billows; her skirt flutters.

When the wind keeps silent
her village flag won't wave.

When the sky talks,
people's clothes all get soaked,
and the roof of her house gets drenched,
drops plummeting from the eaves.

When flowers talk,
her face brightly beams.

Somewhere beyond the sea, in a land of the East,
the whole world is turning to waves, the sound of waves.

Childhood Nightsoil

All of sacred nature must rot.

When I was a child,
every house had a big heap of nightsoil.

Reassuring stuff.

When you stirred it up,
the deeper you went, the more rotten it was.

— *Feh!*

There was nothing make-believe about it
and certainly
we felt no need for any god to come down to us.

— *Feh!*

That thick stench took your breath away:
a huge world it was.

Meeting Myself

Free yourself
like the bare groves of late November.
Only tight-lipped pines and firs
stand buried in the green of their needles,
as if intent on lulling to sleep
everything under the heavens.
So rid yourself of everything.
On all the other trees
a few dry leaves are barely dangling.
Having nowhere to hide,
a bird flies off,
letting a feather fall.
In that moment of poverty I suddenly stepped on a skull.

Winter Waterfall

I climbed up a valley of Kariwang Mountain in Chongson;
empty-handed, I followed the winding path.

How useless so-called enlightenment is, late in life

The valley was as honest as an eyebrow.

Without so much as a lie to offer,
the sky twanged blue.

Below, snow piled high.

From top to bottom, the mountains shared a friendly
silence.

Embarrassed by my steaming breath,

I was forced to turn back.

Just then

I saw him standing there.

I was taken by surprise

but not he.

He was myself long ago.

Keep going.

You must.

The waterfall you must find

will appear, hiding round a corner of the mountain.

The waterfall's roar
silent now
but intently waiting the waterfall will reappear
as a mass of ice, of icicles, your own kith and kin.

A phantom? A lone butterfly hovers there.
The sound of the waterfall will soon manifest itself,
imagined by someone's lonely heart,
then everything round it will appear, as well,
even flowers, though it's not yet spring.

Worker

Unusual, most unusual.
That guy only had one eye.
It took him a whole thirty minutes
to mould just one set of bricks.
If he wasn't satisfied
he'd start over,
again and again.
His boss fired him.
He started working on his own.
Those bricks sold quite well.

Unusual.
Now it took that guy a whole ten minutes
to lay a single brick.
After he'd finished,
he'd stretch his neck a couple of times
then start laying again.
Though his foreman fired him,
he completed a house
before he died —
his dream come true.
That house would stand firm for years to come.

Unusual, so unusual.
That guy used to hammer nails.
After he'd done,
he'd hammer them some more
to keep them from ever getting out.
That hammer had a great time.
It really knew how to love someone.

Reunion

One day, soon after I emerged from my fourth time in
prison,
still under house arrest,
I drew a bird on a thousand-*won* bill
like a ten-year-old child would.
Then I spent it.

Six years passed.
On February 16, 1998
the bill with my bird on it
came back to me.

The bill I had spent in Ansŏng
crossed the sea and came back to me
in a bar opposite my hotel in Cheju Island.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.
The bill replied: “Long time no see!”

Since Antiquity

In a world like ours there's plenty to do, even for
lugworms.

As the price
for one holy man's coming
thousands of extremely
unholy men come along too.

I really wonder why the Buddha ever bothered to come.

6 NEW POEMS [2000–2002]

Tibetan Night

Several floors above
any other night on earth
was the Tibetan night:
lengthy.

Lengthy, meaning at least ten times ten-thousand years.

Within the fermenting darkness,
darknesses were becoming wine.

Next morning as sunshine
spread from rocks of ice
8000 meters up
here, there,
the remaining dead-drunk darkness
awoke the night around the nomads' tents.

Strange.

Tibet has no need of religion
yet it's all nothing but religion.

Om mani padme hum.

It has no need of stray dogs
yet stray dogs were roaming the plains.
Om mani padme hum.

Name

In the Himalayan world,
peaks of only moderate height go unnoticed.

Only
peaks of 7000 meters
or 7500 meters,
have been given this name or that.

It's excellent so.
Since there are still far more peaks
without names
than have names,
this world is still extremely young.

Do you have anything to say?
Nothing.

Sky Burial

The burial place was a mound of pebbles, halfway up a
mountain.

Among the pebbles
some miniature trees had sprouted.

On a flat rock
a corpse lay stiff.

The cutting was skillfully done.
The guts were drawn out.
Then the young son cut the heart out
like a surgeon and examined it,
the gall bladder and kidneys too.

The head was treated as a head should be,
the backbone as a backbone.
The ribs were stripped and put to one side.

Blowing a bone flute, the officiant went down the hill.
No sooner was he gone
than, from above, a large vulture
landed. Furling its wings,
it began to gorge itself.

A little later, a big raven arrived
and ate its fill. Then
other birds alighted.

The wind did not stay quiet, but rose and fiercely swept
over the mountainside.

Mount Sumi

Mount Sumera!

That mountain's a great hero's penis.

Names like "navel of the world"

or "core of creation" fall short.

It's simply a penis.

Beyond the Himalayas, a youth from south India

hearing reports of Mount Sumi

after 27 years reached it

as an old man.

It was simply a penis.

In which case, you'd best get back home quick

and make love to the wife you left behind.

That's when it becomes the navel of the world.

That's when it becomes the core of creation.

Let the gate open, let honey flow.

It's a penis, there, inside the lotus.

Optical Illusion

It's very close.

It's very clear.

Just over there.

Yet even after a whole day's journey
it's still as far off, unreachable.

Far-off close-seeming spot.

People need to be far-off like that.

Almost there.

from *Flowers of a Moment*

Without a sound
resin buried underground is turning into amber
while up above the first snow is falling

*

Along the path
a roebuck
is quietly contemplating the moon in a stream

*

The beak of a chick pecking at feed —
my studies are far from complete

*

When the stalls were closing last market day
I suddenly glimpsed
Samman's ma who died last year
I suppose she came back to do some shopping

*

Mother hen outside the egg
baby chick inside the egg —
the two are really one single body

*

What's it all mean?
Peach blossom petals
have been drifting all day long into the empty house

*

Thirty years ago
a starving woman saw
a thousand sacks of rice in a mirage

from *Poems Left Behind*

As a stork flew up and away
the pine branch on which it had perched flapped vigorously.

Someone said:

That pine tree nearly flew up and away too.

*

A worm that used to play with me
as a child told me:
no matter who calls,
don't answer yes too quickly.
They're most likely not calling you.

*

Is there some kind of birdsong
inside your breast?
My ear approaches your breast.

*

It's cold.

It's the mind.

*

I stand barefoot on the springtime earth.

A flower is budding from the crown of my head.

*

What sound can be heard

with an ear that has never heard a sick child groan?

The wings of autumn dragonflies vibrate soundlessly.

*

Don't cheat.

August canna flowers are red.

*

At midnight the sound of the sick child next door crying.

**People
should not hate
other people.**

Soul

We were beetles.

We were moths.

We were pine crickets.

We hurled ourselves blindly at any kind of firelight.

After dying we came back, were newly teething babes,
were tossing waves all night long unsleeping.

You and I in those days.

Fascination

I fall into the wells in your eyes.

My steps cease in the flashing meteorite pauses
between one word of yours and the next.

The darkness of your bones resplendent in the tomb a
century hence is still, so still.

I love you.

Song for Peace

Peace is a wave,
a rolling, living wave.
Beneath that wave
swim every kind of fish
and all kinds of coral grow.
Above that wave
no one thing is higher than any other.
It brings freedom and equality to all
as far as the sunset horizon.
The white sails speeding across that wave of peace billow
full.

Peace is food.
In bygone days, sacred was the smoke
rising from the chimneys in Korea's hillside village homes
as rice for the evening meal was boiling.
Lovely the rising smoke each morning as bread was baking.
Peace is rice and bread.

Before cooking, they are grains of rice or wheat or corn.
Peace is as urgent as rice and bread.

In the ideograms of Northeast Asia, one sign for peace shows rice entering a mouth.

Peace begins as a day
when everyone in the world can eat.

Peace is a day when
everyone in the world eats bread together as friends.
Banishing starvation from the earth is peace.

Peace is a flower,
beautiful as a flower.

What if the world had no flowers:
if after days of torment

nights of grief
there was not one single flower,
we would never know what peace is.

If, between person and person,
village and village,
nation and nation,
tree and bird

there were no quiet smile
offering a flower
peace would merely be the despair
felt when a long-awaited lover fails to return.

Peace is a child.
Pretty,
so pretty,
what in the world can equal a child?
There must be a child
for a family, society, to come into being.
Centered on a child
people become Mom and Dad,
Grandfather and Granny,
Auntie and Uncle.
With a child comes the future of the world.
Therefore everyone's main concern
must be to raise that child with every care.
Peace is a child raised like that.
Peace is such a child's friend, uncle, neighbor.

Peace is a star.
The first thing a child encounters discovers in the universe
is peace.
Looking up at the stars
he wonders 'Who am I?'
And looking up at the stars
he steers his ship.

And deep in the heart of any voyager
is the peace that overcomes every difficulty.
For millennia, humanity has died during long eras of war
and living through only very brief moments of peace.
And those very brief moments of peace
mainly served as times for breeding desire for more war.
Peace was always in crisis.

Humanity
has always been a prisoner of war, caught between war and war.
Why, all the achievements of civilization thus far
have been just means of war by another name,
catastrophe.

Peace was a bird.
As gunfire rang out, all the birds disappeared.
The 20th century was an era of huge wars.
They in turn led to the long, drawn-out Cold War.
What a tragedy!
The Cold War became a doctrine.
The birds wandered, lost.

As the 20th century was the age of Korea's division
the 21st century must move on to the era of Korea's unification.
We must cast aside the old days,

welcome the new era with a fusillade of drumbeats.
Korea rose again from the ruins in North and South.
Rivers and forests returned to utter wilderness.
But division was, at first, a wall
then we grew used to it
so it turned into a mere fence.
The years of contradiction were long indeed.
The hatred born of that sickening division now removed,
we are becoming a people that breathes in harmony.

Peace is a bridge.
War blows bridges up.
Only peace can rebuild them
so people once again can come and go.
Going beyond separation
peace is bridges crossing so many rivers.

Ah, peace is a grass-green dream.
Without people dreaming
the very word peace
dies crushed by the caterpillar tracks of tanks.
Peace is a dream.
A dream where today's dream
turns into tomorrow's reality.

With even just one half such a dream
the world can move toward peace.
Peace is the future's family and nest.
It's coming. It's coming.
I must go out to welcome it.
Like June's offshore sea breeze on Cheju Isand, it's coming.

First-Person Sorrowful

I am sad. Enlightenment has proven so unreliable.

Early last century

after the Revolution, Soviet poets

decided to only say “we.”

Poets decided to refer to themselves as only

“we.”

They were ecstatic.

Their decision

couldn't take to the streets

because of blizzards

but it remained valid, lingering indoors.

It swore oaths, saying “we . . .”

all alone.

“I” had disappeared somewhere

through the mirror.

One bright sunny day, Mayakovsky too dashed out

shouting and shouting “we”.

Here was a poet of the streets.

“I” was not allowed anywhere.

“I” was wicked.

“We”

“We . . .” alone had magic power.

The sky's low pressure slowly fell lower.
Summer flowers kept being trampled.
Revolution devoured revolution.
The wind went out of every child's soccer ball.
Likewise the wind went out of the tense atmosphere
of "we."
Someone boldly
wrote "I am in love" but
still
there remained the custom of reading "We are in love."
Winter snows had not all melted.
Spring is always uncertain.

Late last century
the Soviet Union died.
One after another,
countries quit Warsaw Pact.

Since then
poets have nothing at all but "I."
Starting with "I"
every day ends with "I."
There is nothing
except "I."

Even God is only another name for "I."

Today, poets all around the Pacific Rim
are endlessly burying the ghosts of "we" and "I."
in the waves. What new birth is coming? Who
will be born next? "we"
nor "I."

Each wave is one wave's tomb, another wave's womb.

It's

It's a heart throbbing,
tears flowing from the muzzle of a gun

It's
subtracting rather than adding up
dividing up rather than multiplying

It's
listening

It's
a bowl of rice

It's
underground roots
not having to worry for the leaves up above

It's
someone's childish fluting

It's every kind of life
each individual life
not subject to other lives

It's
the sight of harnessed oxen in days gone by plowing fields
alas
oxen's millennial yokes

It's
a mother tongue

It's
one person's blood warming another person's blood

It's
a mother for whom her baby's crying is all

It's
an archipelago

It's a person being a human for another human being
a person being nature for Nature

**It's
myself finally abolished**

Ah, Peace!

NOTES

Ch'ön-ün Temple [p 57]

Ch'ön-ün Temple is near the town of Kurye, at the foot of Nogodan Ridge, the southwestern extremity of Chiri Mountain.

Nightfall in Pyöldowön [p 75]

The places named are in Cheju Island, a large island southwest of the Korean mainland. It constitutes a separate province and has its own distinctive dialect and culture. Ko Un lived here for several years in the early 1960s, after leaving monastic life.

When I Went to Munüi Village [p 87]

Munüi was a village in North Chunch'öng Province. It now lies under the lake created by T'aechöng Dam. Ko Un had gone there to attend the funeral of a poet's mother.

Beside Sömjin River [p 89]

Sömjin River flows along the southwestern foot of Chiri Mountain, passing close to Hwaörm Temple in Kurye behind which towers Nogodan Ridge. Before and during the Korean

War the mountain was the site of terrible slaughter.

Iō Island [p 93]

Iō Island is an invisible, magic island, said to exist off the coast of Cheju Island, south of Korea.

Woodblocks of Buddhist Scripture [p 97]

In the 11th century (Koryo Dynasty), 81,258 wooden printing blocks were carved, containing the canon of Buddhist scriptures, the *Tripitaka Koreana*. The woodblocks are now at Haein Temple. The wood for them is said to have been seasoned by being soaked in salt water for three years, then fresh water for three years, buried underground for three years, then dried in open air for three years. This made the wood so strong that the blocks have survived without rotting until today. In the social chaos of the 1950s, Ko Un once single-handedly defended Haein-sa and the woodblocks from a gang of prowling marauders. Without him, all might well have gone up in smoke.

“Mass games” are now mostly associated with North Korea. In them thousands of citizens are mobilized to perform synchronized spectacles. They symbolize the loss of freedom under dictatorship, when mindless conformity takes the place of essential human liberties.

Taking to the Hills [p 100]

The term here translated as “taking to the hills” usually refers to someone who is leaving the secular world to enter Buddhist monastic life. But in this poem—published after Ko Un had already been a Buddhist monk, and was now deeply involved in the struggle against dictatorship—the poet is using it to refer to the act of becoming a guerilla, a member of a group of armed “partisans” hiding in the hills. Such groups were found in Korea before and during the Korean War. The references to wild hair and ghostly shape are an echo of the lament of Ch’unhyang, sung in the *p’ansori* narrative, as she lies in prison after being tortured.

Ode to Sim Chŏng [p 104]

Shim Chŏng is a well-known figure of classical legend. To earn money to help cure her father’s blindness, she sells herself to merchants who will use her as a sacrificial offering to guarantee a safe sea journey. After she’s thrown into the sea at a spot called Indangsu, she’s unexpectedly taken to the Dragon King’s undersea palace. Upon her release, she’s found by fishermen, floating in a lotus blossom. At last, by her daughterly virtue, her father’s eyes are opened and he recognizes her. Ko Un takes an innovative approach to the traditional material, recasting it from the father’s point of

view, for example. Prof. Choi Won-shik notes: “The poet rejects the traditional interpretation of the story in which Sim-chǒng’s filial love is highly praised; he chooses instead to evoke the tragic lot of the father whose life becomes a punishment for selling his daughter. The unique space where anti-traditional Modernism and anti-western Traditionalism meet is where the poetry of Ko Un originates.” [Conference on “The Poetic World of Ko Un,” 8 May 2003 / Stockholm University, Sweden]

In a Temple’s Main Hall [p 105]

The “fifteen hundred years” in the final lines refers to the time since the teachings of the Buddha were introduced in Korea.

Kǔmnam Street [p 113]

Kǔmnam Street in Kwangju (South Chǒlla Province) was the scene of some of the most violent fighting during the military repression of the democracy movement of May 1980.

To the Mothers of Argentina [p 115]

In 1976, there was a military coup in Argentina—an estimated 20–30,000 people “disappeared.” Many were women with children. In 1977, fourteen women gathered and

marched into the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, in spite of a ban on public gatherings ordered by the junta, to demand information concerning their own missing children.

The government at first did not take “Las Madres” seriously, calling them “local” women unwilling to accept that their children had voluntarily left the country on their own, and their political presence spread, at home and abroad. Las Madres played a crucial role in the resurrection of civil society in Argentina, essential for democracy to reemerge there.

A Simple Flower [p 131]

Suni and Puni are common traditional names for girls.

Kim Shin-muk [p 149]

Kim Shin-muk was the mother of the dissident pastor Mun Ik-hwan.

The Upper Reaches of Sŏmjŏn River [p 173]

This is one of several poems celebrating many beautiful places in Korea, from the volume *Sea Diamond Mountain* (*Haegŭ mgang*). Sea Diamond Mountain is the name given the easternmost part of the Diamond Mountains (*Kŭ mgang-san*) in North Korea, where the rocky mountain drops into the

East Sea. At the time the poems were written, this beautiful site could not be visited by people from South Korea, although that has since changed.

Gazing Up at Nogodan [p 174]

Nogodan is a high ridge (1507 meters) at the southwestern edge of the mountain range known as Chiri-san (Mt. Chiri / Chiri Mountain) that fills the central part of the southernmost regions of Korea, South Chōlla Province and South Kyōngsang Province. Panya Peak (1728m) is the second-highest peak, not far from Nogodan to the northeast, nearer the central part of the mountain range. Kurye is a small town at the foot of Nogodan. Ko Un has returned here on his endless journey around Korea that began when he was a young monk of twenty.

There are few recorded sightings of wild bears on Nogodan (or any other South Korean mountain) in modern times but recently they have been returning thanks to a restoration program at Nogodan. Nothing is more familiar to Koreans than the association of bears and mountains. The Korean foundation-myth of Tangun features the transformation of a bear into a human being in a mountain cave. In some ways the bear in this poem represents Nogodan Ridge itself.

My Father's Cousin [p 175]

When you visit Korean tombs, you make offerings of wine before each tomb. Only one cup is needed. When Koreans are drinking, they keep draining their glass and handing it to another of the party, who fills it. In serious social drinking, you never fill your own glass in Korea.

Wild Lilies on Nogodan Ridge [p 179]

Sohüksan (Little Hüksan) Island is the portion of South Chölla Province lying farthest to the west.

On the Suspension Bridge at Namhae [p 180]

Well-known for their beauty, Kūmsan (Kūm Mountain) and Bori Hermitage are near the city of Namhae, which lies on an island just off the southern coast of Korea, surrounded by many other islands. It is connected to the mainland by an impressive suspension bridge.

A Bell [p 187]

Kwön Chōng-saeng, 1937–2007, was a children's writer who'd spent his life in great poverty in the region of Andong. For a time his only paid job was to ring the bell of a small village church.

Odong Island in Yösu Harbor [p 188]

Yösu is on the south coast of Korea. In its harbor lies Odong Island, entirely covered by a single grove of camellia trees,

Incident at Pöpsöng-p'ö [p 190]

Pöpsöng-p'ö is a port on the west coast of South Chölla Province.

On Ch'önwang Peak [p 192]

Ch'önwang Peak is the highest peak on Chiri Mountain

Along the Coast [p 198]

The place-names form an itinerary down the east coast of Korea from the DMZ (demilitarized zone) between North and South Korea as far as the industrial city of Pohang. The massif known as the Diamond Mountains rises from the sea just to the north of the DMZ, in North Korea, but a final range of it (the South Diamond Mountains) extends to the south, over the DMZ, and there, just outside Taejin, lies the site of Ko'nbonng Temple, one of the greatest temples in Korea, which was destroyed during the Korean War.

Yŏng'il Bay [p 203]

Yoŋ'ng'il Bay is on the east coast of Korea. It shelters P'ohang which has in recent decades become home to one of the largest iron and steel foundries in the world. The resulting level of pollution may easily be imagined, in what was previously a site famed for its natural beauty and the purity of its waters.

Yesterday [p 205]

Exceptionally, we have translated the nicknames into English equivalents when they have a specific meaning. Ullŭng Island is the largest Korean island in the East Sea between Korea and Japan.

Tomorrow [p 207]

This poem and all the poems from the volume *Songs for Tomorrow* were inspired by the hope that soon (tomorrow) South Korea would be delivered from dictatorship and achieve full human rights.

To a Young Poet [p 219]

The Rig Veda refers to priests drinking *soma*, a holy elixir producing an ecstatic, heightened awareness of the limitless, luminous nature of being.

Death Poem [p 241]

It is a tradition in Buddhist culture to sum up one's life, art, and spiritual practice in a short poem while facing death.

A common complaint in Korea was that monks were altogether too well-fed when ordinary folk were starving.

Horizon [p 209]

Ŏch'öng Island lies off the coast of North Chölla Province.

Mountain [p 259]

Koreans often avert their eyes when talking to someone.

Tokdo [p 271]

Tokdo is a rocky outcrop rising up in the sea between Korea and Japan. It is too small and rough to support a farming population. In the early 1990s, Koreans were outraged to learn that Japan considered it Japanese territory. It has for centuries been recognized as Korean territory. Ko Un joined many other writers visiting it, making a declaration of support for the Korean claim. "Tokdo Is Our Land" became a popular slogan, even a pop-song. The phrase "East Sea" has Korean resonance, too. Japan, however, would call it "Sea of Japan."

In the House of Prabhutaratna [p 274]

Shakyamuni (“Sage from the Shakya Clan”) is an epithet applied to Siddharta Gautama, also known as the Buddha (“Awakened”). According to some schools of Buddhism, there have been numerous other Buddhas throughout time, who’ve attained nirvana, ultimate enlightenment. One such ancient Buddha is known as Prabhutaratna (“Many Jewels”). While some schools teach that one who has attained nirvana ceases entirely to exist after physical death, the Buddhist scripture entitled *The Lotus Sutra* teaches that nirvana is not annihilation. As a sign of this, it tells that when Shakyamuni Buddha was preaching its contents, Prabhutaratna appeared in his abode to hear him. A bodhisattva is a person who is ready for or who has even attained enlightenment but has also vowed to help all beings become enlightened.

East Sea Lotus Flowers [p 276]

The East Sea lies between Korea and Japan. Naksan Temple rises on the edge of the sea, south of the city of Sokch’o. The sea in front of it is studded with rocks. Lotus flowers are especially sacred in Buddhism.

The Passage of Time [p 277]

Gandhara was the region stretching from northwest India up into what is now Afghanistan. Here many Bactrian Greek craftsmen, having followed Alexander the Great, settled and transmitted Hellenistic culture. When King Ashoka (270–236 B.C.E.) established Buddhism as the official religion of India, he asked artists to represent the Buddha in bodily form, who'd previously been represented only by a wheel, or an empty chair, or footprints, or a leaf from the Bodhi tree.

With the Little Countries [p 285]

In May 1980, heavily armed soldiers were sent into the south-western city of Kwangju where students were peacefully demonstrating in favor of democracy. Hundreds of students and citizens were killed in the ensuing violent repression, Ko Un, Kim Dae-Jung and hundreds more were arrested. In this poem, Ko Un is contrasting the tacit support given to the Korean military dictatorship by the United States and other major powers with the disgust and condemnation expressed by the tiny island republic of the Seychelles.

Returning from Abroad [p 292]

Xuan Zang (602–664) became a monk when he was 12. Frustrated by a lack of reliable texts and teachers, he set out across the dreaded Gobi Desert without seeking the imperial permission required by law. Reaching India, he spent some 17 years there, studying Buddhism, making a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the Buddha, and above all collecting relics of the Buddha and sacred texts. He returned to China, after another remarkable journey, and spent the rest of his life overseeing the translation of the texts he had brought back into 1335 volumes.

Worker [p 318]

Korean fatalism tends to expect patterns of good or bad luck in family stories. This man has had a run of bad luck. Then for years all went well which caused anxiety because the pattern was bad fortune. At last, he dropped dead, finally fulfilling expectations.

People aren't typically specialized in Korea, so if you get fired from one kind of job you get your next job wherever you can, doing whatever.

Tibetan Night [p 325]

Om mani padme hum is a Sanskrit mantra. It literally means “the jewel in the lotus,” with “om” and “hum” being “seed syllables,” each representing a primal cosmic energy. The oldest and perhaps most important mantra of Tibetan Buddhism (in Tibetan “*om mani peme hung*”), it is open to a range of levels of interpretation. For example, the jewel can represent the mind of enlightenment which can arise in the lotus of human consciousness. The lotus is a common symbol for Buddhism; the jewel or diamond is a symbol of Tibetan Buddhism. And the jewel and lotus can symbolize the male and female principle (*lingam* and *yonis*); (see also the poem *Mount Sumi*, following).

Sky Burial [p 328]

According to ancient Tibetan funeral customs still sometimes practiced today, a corpse is not buried but, rather, recycled in the wheel of life, generously offered up for the benefit of other living beings. The vultures are considered embodiments of angelic beings (*dakinis*, “sky dancers”), and feeding them human flesh is considered a virtue because they might otherwise capture and eat small defenseless creatures. Cremation is reserved for those wealthy enough to afford wood fuel. Water burial is used for the poor.

Song for Peace *[p 339]*

Ko Un read a draft of this poem at the Millennium World Peace Summit, at the Headquarters of the United Nations, New York City, August 2000, in the presence of over a thousand international spiritual leaders.

