Farmers' Dance

A Cycle of Poems by Shin Kyong-nim

Translated from the Korean
by Brother Anthony and Young-Moo Kim

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Introduction

Brother Anthony

Shin Kyong-nim was born in 1935 in Ch'ongju, North Ch'ungch'ong Province, in what is now South Korea. He grew up in the midst of Korea's old rural culture and in later years went travelling about the countryside, collecting the traditional songs of the rural villages. His literary career as a poet officially dates from the publication in 1956 in the review *Munhak Yesul* of three poems, including "The Reed," but for years after that he published nothing, immersing himself instead in the world of the working classes, the *Minjung*, and working as a farmer, a miner, and a merchant. The experience of those years underlies much of his finest work as a poet. He only graduated from the English Department of Dongkuk University (Seoul) in 1967, when he was over thirty.

His fame as a poet dates mainly from the publication of the collection *Nong-mu* (Farmers' Dance) in 1973, some of the poems from which were first published in the avant-garde review *Ch'angjak-kwa Pip'yong* in 1970, heralding his return to the literary scene. It would be difficult to exaggerate the historical significance of this volume in the development of modern Korean poetry. In 1974 *Nongmu* earned Shin the first Manhae Literary Award, bringing his work unexpected publicity and critical attention. Shin thus helped open the way for public acceptance of a poetry rooted in harsh social realities, a militant literature that was to grow into the workers' poetry of the 1980s.

Many of the poems in this collection are spoken by an undefined plural voice, a "we" encompassing the collective identity of what is sometimes called the *Minjung*, the poor people, farmers, laborers, miners, among whom the poet had lived. He makes himself their spokesman on the basis of no mere sympathy; he has truly been one of them, sharing their poverty and pains, their simple joys and often disappointed hopes. Shin is one of the first non-intellectual poets in modern Korea and the awareness that he knows the bitterness he is evoking from the inside gives his poems added power.

Echoing throughout *Nong-mu* are memories of the political violence that has characterized Korea's history since its Liberation from Japanese rule in 1945. The divisions and conflicts of the first years of independence culminated in the Korean War (1950-3). Later, throughout the 1960s and 70s, the government's policy of industrialization led to a further brutal uprooting of rural populations that had already undergone

severe dislocation in the course of the war, and violence continued. In those years, all forms of political opposition or social organization were forbidden and fiercely suppressed under the increasingly severe dictatorship of President Park Chung-Hee. In particular, any advocacy of workers' rights was considered to be an expression of communism, a sign of support for North Korea, and was punished as a crime against national security.

In a literary culture accustomed to the individualistic "I" speaker of the western romantic tradition, or the fairly unspecified voice of modern Korean lyrics, the collective "we" employed in *Nong-mu* was felt to be deeply shocking. The leading recognized Korean poets in the 1960s and 1970s were writing in a highly esthetic style inspired by certain aspects of French Symbolism. Poets and critics alike insisted that literature should have no direct concern with political or social issues. This had already been challenged in the earlier 1960s by a number of younger writers and critics including Shin's mentor, the poet and essayist Kim Su-yong, who was killed in a car crash in 1968. In particular, Kim's advocacy of a poetic style reflecting ordinary, everyday spoken language, with its colloquialisms and pithiness, is reflected in Shin's poems.

Nong-mu took Kim's rejection of conventionally accepted literary style to new heights and gave rise to an intense critical debate. A major literary scission occurred and the more activist, 'engaged' writers established their own movement, advocating social involvement. Shin Kyong-nim has continued to play a leading role in this movement. He has served as president of the Association of Writers for National Literature, and of the Federated Union of Korean Nationalist Artists. Members of these groups were repeatedly arrested and harrassed throughout the 1970s and 80s.

The poems of *Nong-mu* often express with intense sensitivity the pain and hurt of Korea's poor, those of remote villages in the earlier sections, but the final poems focus in part on the urban poor, those marginalized in industrial society. The first edition of *Nongmu* published in 1973 contained just over forty poems, mainly written years earlier and full of echoes of rural life. A second edition (1975) added two extra sections containing nearly twenty poems written between 1973 and 1975, in a more urban context. Some critics regret this expansion, feeling that these poems are less powerful, but the fuller version represents the poet's final option and is here translated in its entirety

Later volumes of Shin's poetry include *Saejae* (1979), *Talnomse* (1985), *Kananhan sarangnorae* (1988), *Kil* (1990), and *Harmoni wa omoni ui silhouette* (1998). Shin uses easily accessible, rhythmic language to compose lyrical narratives

that are at times close to shamanistic incantation, or at others recall the popular songs still sung in rural villages if not in Seoul. Much of his work composes a loosely framed epic tale of Korean suffering, as experienced by the farmers living along the shores of the South Han River, the poet's home region, in the late 19th century, during the Japanese colonial period, and during the turmoil of the last fifty years.

No poet has so well expressed, and so humbly, the characteristic voice of Korea's masses, both rural and urban. Shin never sentimentalizes his subjects but rather takes the reader beyond the physical and cultural exterior to reveal them as intensely sensitive, suffering human beings.

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These poems, as poems, are not very difficult to understand, they can mostly speak for themselves to the attentive reader. Yet at the same time, they are deeply rooted in the cultural particularities of the Korean countryside. They assume a readership familiar with the life that was and, to some extent at least, still is lived there. Few non-Koreans have had a chance to see and experience that life, and for them a few explanations may prove helpful. Rather than provide notes to individual poems, we have brought together the information that a reader may need in this introduction.

The translators have had to deal with a series of words that have no equivalent in other cultures or in the English language. We have chosen to keep certain words in Korean and to offer here a brief indication of their meaning. The words are not mere isolated translation problems, they are expressions of the culture in which they are used. Korean culture has no exact parallels elsewhere, it should not be confused with the cultures of China or Japan.

Some of the untranslateable words are names of musical instruments: *ching*, *kkwengkwari*, *pokku*, *nallari*. In Korea's rural communities, music, like every aspect of life, has a religious dimension. The fundamental religious spirit may be termed Shamanistic, the belief that there are spirits which help and spirits which cause harm. The annual rythm of seed-time and harvest is punctuated by bursts of noisy percussion music played by the men out in the fields or in the streets and yards of the village, designed to encourage the good spirits and discourage the harmful ones. The rhythms of this music easily provoke an irresistible desire to dance, and this can put people into a kind of trance. The Korean farmers' dance is done mainly with the hands and arms twisting in the air, with the rocking of the shoulders playing a vital role. The feet move little, the dancer turns while remaining on the spot. Dancers do not touch

one another.

The team of musicians leading the dance usually have a small set of instruments. Some are made of metal: the basic rhythm is set by the *ching*, a deep-voiced, resonant gong 18 inches or more in diameter that is beaten at the start of each musical phrase; over this, the main musical flow is the work of two or more *kkwenggwari*, small rattly gongs held in the hand and beaten with hard sticks in a great variety of rhythmical patterns, at times engaging in dialogue or competition with one another.

Other instruments used include various kinds of drum, not named in these poems, with the exception of the *pokku*, the smallest kind. In addition, there is the *nallari*, a kind of oboe or clarinet in that it uses a double reed, but far more strident, designed to pierce through the clamor of percussion instruments in a series of sustained notes at the climax of the dance. There is no clear distinction between musicians, dancers, and spectators, the dance is communal and although the players are usually men, the older women will also join in, while younger women mostly stand watching.

The rural areas, especially in the south-west, are rich in popular songs of which only one, the *yukjabegi* is mentioned explicitly. This exists in many versions, it expresses the pain and endurance of the poor in vibrant tones. Shin Kyong-nim has always been particularly interested in such songs and their rhythms echo in his poetry, as well as their themes, for many traditional songs are evocations of the sufferings of the poor and unfortunate.

Another major source of potential difficulty involves food and drink. The Korean staple diet is rice, which is eaten with *kimch'i*, a preparation of uncooked long-leafed cabbage or other vegetables salted lightly, then seasoned by the addition of powdered red pepper husks, ginger, shrimp paste, and other ingredients, then allowed to ferment for a time.

When someone is too poor to buy rice, or is too tired to cook, there is always *ramyon*, cheap packs of industrially produced dried noodles sold in every village store, that need only to be boiled in water for a couple of minutes, with the contents of a little packet of powdered stock added to give taste. *Ramyon* is very popular but has little nutritive value.

Another kind of noodle mentioned in the poems is *kuksu*, a thicker kind of soft noodle, often served at parties or as a snack, where the soup in which the noodles are served may include a little meat and fresh vegetables. Noodles are made from wheat or other kinds of flour.

Drinking plays a big role in these poems, and in Korean life; it is always communal, almost never solitary. The most

popular drink used to be *makkolli*, made of rice and drunk in pauses during work to give energy, as well as after work for pleasure. The main drink mentioned in the poems is *soju*, a cheap colorless distillate considerably stronger than *makkolli*, drunk from small glasses. It is still the main drink of men drinking of an evening. Beer was not part of rural Korean culture. Its absence from these poems is significant.

Koreans never drink alcohol without eating something: pork, dried squid or octopus. Another dish mentioned in this connection several times is *muk*, a brown jelly made by boiling up flour made from acorns and served cold, sliced, seasoned with soy sauce. The acorns grow wild, and can be gathered freely, so that *muk* is recognised as a food of the poor. It was especially valued toward the end of winter, when stores of grain were running low and no fresh plants were available.

Drinking is done in various places. In the village store, bottles can be bought to be drunk on a space arranged just outside, or to be taken away. Roadside bars also offer a minimal space for drinking, just something to sit on and a place for the glasses. Then come the larger establishments with rooms indoors. Finally there are the more expensive houses, where the drink is served by young girls who are also expected to entertain the customers by singing and dancing, and in other ways too, so that the term "whore-houses" has once or twice been introduced.

The Korean year begins with the Lunar New Year, known in the West as the Chinese New Year. This usually falls in February. It is the day when offerings are made to ancestors, and everyone adds one year to their age, since babies are born into their first year and so are "one year old" at birth. The full moon of the eighth month is celebrated as the Harvest Moon, *Ch'usok*, when offerings are made to the ancestors in thanks for their care for the family. Offerings are also made on the anniversary of deaths. They involve the all-night preparation by the women of a table of food, which is then offered in the early morning when the men (not usually the women) make a series of prostrations and take turns in presenting cups of rice-wine. The food is then eaten by all those present. The menfolk have often spent the whole night drinking, playing cards, and talking in the loud, hearty voices that characterize Korean male social discourse.

The graves of the dead (often termed "tombs" in English translation) are scattered across the Korean landscape, mostly on south-facing hillsides. Traditionally there were no communal graveyards, although members of a family are often buried together on a hill bought for that purpose. The circular earthen tumulus above a burial varies in size from a small

mound for the humble to a large hillock for royalty. The graves of children and people of the lowest classes were left unmarked. Visits to the grave prolong the celebration of offerings at home; food is laid out, prostrations are made, and wine is offered.

Although the traditional calendar was lunar, there is also a set of twenty-four days with names indicating the stages of the solar climate, that does not follow the variations of the lunar calendar. Such dates mentioned in Shin Kyong-rim's poems include *Kyong-chip* when frogs are thought to mark the end of winter by emerging from hibernation late in February, and *Ch'oso* which heralds the end of the extreme summer heat late in August.

The landscape evoked in the poems is very unlike that found in Europe or America. The Korean landscape has very few open plains. Most of the territory is covered with range upon range of steep rocky hills, wooded at least in the lower reaches. There are many valleys carved out by streams that become rushing torrents after rain. The roughness of the terrain makes travel difficult, there were no highways in pre-20th century Korea. Because of their steepness, it has become customary to call the Korean hills "mountains" in English, although few are more than a thousand meters high.

The villages usually stand at points where the land levels out enough for paddy-fields to be practicable, although there are also isolated settlements in the hills. The poems often evoke the larger towns where markets are held. The seven-day week was not a familiar measure of time, and markets still often take place on a five-day rhythm. The market areas remain empty on the other days, the peddlers and merchants moving on to nearby towns where markets are held on other dates. Around the market are little alleys lined with small rooms where people eat and drink.

The traditional Korean house has certain characteristic features that are mentioned in the poems. These houses are rapidly disappearing. Until the 1970s most houses were roofed with a thick layer of rice-straw. The walls were made with wattle and daub, or a more solid mixture of clay and straw. There were no inside corridors, each room gave directly on to the yard, with a fairly narrow wooden step or platform sheltered by the eaves running around the house in front of the doors. Shoes were left on the ground below the step, which was quite a high one, high enough for an adult to sit with legs hanging down.

The rooms were raised above ground level by the *ondol* system of underfloor heating. The heat and smoke from the fire in the kitchen at one end of the house passed under the stone floors, heating them before emerging through a chimney at the

other end. In larger houses there would also often be a *maru*, an open space with a wooden floor, covered by the roof, where people could sit in the summer. Each room was closed by a sliding door of open fretwork to which white paper was pasted. The windows were similarly covered with paper; window glass was unknown.

The climate evoked in the poems is extreme. The summer temperatures can rise beyond 35 degrees, while the winters are bitter, sometimes reaching minus 30 degrees Celsius. Winter brings a certain amount of snow, more in the mountains. In late June and early July there is a rainy season when heavy downpours are common. As a result the summer is not only hot but extremely humid and therefore unpleasant. The long autumn, lasting from September until mid or late November, is Korea's most beautiful season, with bright sunlight and deep blue skies.

Compared to the humble human setting, the main events of Korean history are not mentioned in the poems, but they play a major unspoken role. Certain dates are important. From 1909 until 1945, Korea was under Japanese rule, annexed and colonized in a particularly ruthless manner. This provoked an Independence Movement which was launched across Korea on March 1, 1919 and continued despite fierce repression. March 1 is the day when this movement is commemorated.

The Allied Forces never landed in Korea during World War II but demanded that Japan should withdraw from it on surrendering. The date of the Japanese surrender, August 15, 1945 is therefore hailed as the day of National Liberation. The allies agreed that the USSR and the USA should share responsibility for the land's transition to full nationhood, the USSR in the north, the USA in the south. In the south a Republic was set up in 1948 under the leadership of Syngman Rhee but without the participation of the northern areas, where a Communist regime was taking power, led by Kim Il Sung.

On June 25, 1950, the armed forces of the regime installed in the northern part invaded the south, opening the Korean War which still continues, no peace treaty having been signed. Before the 1953 Armistice froze the division on the country along or near the 38th Parallel, some three million people had died.

Syngman Rhee continued as president of the Republic of Korea until 1960, when he was due to reach the end of his constitutional mandate. His regime had become notoriously corrupt, so when he indicated his intention of taking a new term in power, popular indignation was expressed by popular demonstrations including high school and college students, in

Seoul and elsewhere. The armed forces opened fire on the unarmed students on April 19, 1960, killing many. Syngman Rhee was obliged to step down and it seemed that a new dawn of democracy was at hand.

On May 16, 1961, the military led by Park Chung-Hee staged a coup and he took power, continuing as president-dictator until his assassination on October 26, 1979. During his rule, the process of urbanization and industrialization begun under the Japanese was intensified. Korea was one of the poorest countries of the world in 1960, with few mineral resources available in the south. Economists talk of a "Korean Miracle" but these poems show the same events from a very different perspective.

Urbanization led to the depopulation of the villages. Since poverty was general, the price of basic foodstuffs was naturally low. Farmers were poor; many had no land of their own but depended on work in the fields belonging to others. People would illegally clear a small patch of land in the hills in which to plant some vegetables of their own. When industrialization began, wages had to be kept at minimum levels and this meant that social peace could only be preserved if the price of food in the cities were kept equally low. This in turn meant that the farmers in the villages could still earn almost nothing.

Young people were thus encouraged to leave the villages to look for work in the new industrial sector, as poorly paid construction workers or unskilled laborers. The new wealthy class in Seoul wanted housemaids, and village girls were lured to Seoul by this prospect. Very often they ended up in bars and on the streets of the red-light areas of which Yongsan was only one.

The sufferings caused by poverty are one of the main social themes of these poems, with the feeling that there is no escape, nowhere to go where life might be better. At the same time the poems suggest that the simple people evoked in them are intensely human, a humanity expressed by their ability to share life together in simple friendliness, in joys, in sorrows, and even in fist-fights.

It was a revolutionary step, only partly inspired by socialist currents of thought, to find in the lives of Korea's despised poor a worthy subject for lyric poetry. The influence of these poems has been correspondingly immense and in their celebration of Korea's nameless masses they deserve a worldwide audience.

Part 1

On a Winter's Night

We're met in the backroom of the co-op mill
playing cards for a dish of *muk*;
tomorrow's market-day. Boisterous merchants
shake off the snow in the inn's front yard.
Fields and hills shine newly white, the falling snow
comes swirling thickly down.
People are talking about the price of rice and fertilizers,
and about the local magistrate's daughter, a teacher.
Hey, it seem's Puni, up in Seoul working as a maid,
is going to have a baby. Well, what shall we do?
Shall we get drunk? The bar-girl smells
of cheap powder, but still, shall we have a sniff?
We're the only ones who know our sorrows.
Shall we try raising fowls this year?
Winter nights are long, we eat *muk*,
down drinks, argue over the water rates,
sing to the bar-girl's chop-stick beat,
and as we cross the barley-field to give a hard time
to the newly-wed man at the barber's shop,
look at that : the world's all white. Come on snow, drift high,
high as the roof, bury us deep.
Shall we send a love-letter
to those girls behind the siren tower hiding
wrapped in their skirts? We're
the only ones who know our troubles.
Shall we try fattening pigs this year?

(1965)

Country Relatives

Nowadays I hate our uncle's place down in the country.
Once uncle's at market he's slow coming home,
rooks flock fit to darken the sky, cawing
in the persimmon tree that's dropped all its fruit.
My cousin, a college graduate, says he hates
the whole world. When he suddenly goes rushing out
after browsing through letters from friends, I know
he's off to an all-night game of mahjong again.
The chicken coop looks bleak,
with just a few feathers left drifting from the chickens
sold off last spring. I wonder if my aunt
misses her eldest son? Clearing out what used to be
his study-room on the other side of the yard, she cries
at the sight of the mottoes he wrote on the wall:
We may be poor, we're not lonely; We're
powerless but not weak, only I don't understand
what the words mean. I wonder
if he's living in some other country now?
The pigs have gone to pay off co-op debts.
In front of their sty chrysanthemums bloom bright.
My oldest cousin planted them. Now his wife
wants to pull them up and sow pretty
cosmos in their place and I hate
my grandmother too: she used to be so kind, now
she keeps gazing at the ridges in the sold-off fields
and sighing away with watery eyes.
Nowadays I hate our uncle's place down in the country.

(1966)

Lands Far Apart

Old Park's from Kuju. Kim's a fellow
grew up in some Cholla coastal place.
The October sunshine still stings our backs.
Stones fly, dynamite blasts, cranes whine.
Let's go to the bar there under its awning,
hand in our chits, drink some *makkolli*.
All we've got left now is our pent-up fury,
nothing more. Just oaths and naked fists.
We hear tales of outside from the council clerks
who dump their bikes beneath the big tree.
Oh, this place is too remote, we miss
the city's din here in this god-forsaken construction site.
Tonight let's get out to the bars down the road,
play cards for money,
belt out songs at the tops of our voices.
The siren wails; one final slap
at the fat behind of the woman who cooks in the chop-house,
and off we go, dragging our carts along,
covered in dust, counting the days
till pay day. Outside the drying room a dog
is barking; down the sides of the yard
where red peppers lie drying, the village kids
play at *ch'egi* using their feet. The girls,
keeping the sunlight off their heads with a towel,
giggle away the weight of the stones in their panniers;
the foreman yells at the top of his voice. In this remote
far-off construction site the autumn sun is slow to set.

(1966)

Wrestling

The bustling market's done. The market-place wind
blows chill up overall sleeves.
The visiting merchants have packed up their goods
and are waiting in front of the mill for the truck,
or crowd the back rows round the wrestling ring
with folded arms and anxious murmurs.

The last bout, the deciding match, pits
the toughness of one scrawny native lad
against a visiting wrestler. The kids
bang tin cans and scream,
stamp in disappointment, but in the end
it's the native lad who gets overthrown.
The last day of *Paekjung*, the late summer festival.

The old men round the ring spit in disgust:
why, they lost every year.
In great glee the visiting team try to lead
the ox they won round the market place

but once outside the school yard
there's only the unlit highway.
Tired of the smell of *ch'amoi* and watermelons,
the men parade back to the village,
the weary looser leading the way,
their starch all knocked out, like mourners at a magistrate's house.

(1972)

After Market's Done

We plain folk are happy just to see each other.
Peeling *ch'amoi* melons in front of the barber's,
gulping down *makkolli* sitting at the bar,
all our faces invariably like those of friends,
talking of drought down south, or of co-op debts,
keeping time with our feet to the herb peddlar's guitar.
Why are we all the time longing for Seoul?
Shall we go somewhere and gamble at cards?
Shall we empty our purses and go to the whore-house?
We gather in the school-yard, munch strips of squid with *soju*.
In no time at all the long summer day's done
and off we go down the bright moonlit cart-track
carrying a pair of rubber shoes or a single croaker,
staggering home after market's done.

(1970)

The Night We Make Offerings

I don't know what dad's dead cousin's name was.
The night we make the offerings for him,
        winter rain is gloomily pattering down
and the younger relations, having nothing else to do,
gather in a side room where the floor's been heated
to gamble at cards or play chess.
From the lamplit verandah rises the sound
of a hand-mill churning out a slurry of green beans.
When our uncles arrive from their distant home,
their greatcoats full of the stink of grass,
we go out with lanterns and delve
into the roof-thatch after nestling sparrows.
Tonight's dad's cousin's offerings; winter rain
patters down in my heavy heart.
Dad's cousin spent a miserable short life
and I don't even know what his name was.

(1969)

Farmers' Dance

The *ching* booms out, the curtain falls.
Above the rough stage, lights dangle from a paulownia tree,
the playground's empty, everyone's gone home.
We rush to the *soju* bar in front of the school
and drink, our faces still daubed with powder.
Life's mortifying when you're oppressed and wretched.
Then off down the market alleys behind the *kkwenggwari*
with only some kids running bellowing behind us
while girls lean pressed against the oil shop wall
giggling childish giggles.
The full moon rises and one of us
begins to wail like the bandit king Kokjong; another
laughs himself sly like Sorim the schemer; after all
what's the use of fretting and struggling, shut up in these hills
with farming not paying the fertilizer bills?
Leaving it all in the hands of the women,
we pass by the cattle-fair,
        then dancing in front of the slaughterhouse
we start to get into the swing of things.
Shall we dance on one leg, blow the *nallari* hard?
Shall we shake our heads, make our shoulders rock?

(1971)

Shadows of Flowers

Apricot blossom shadows fall
across the old wooden planks of the co-op porch
where a bottle of *soju* and some dried squid lie.

The breeze lifting our coat-collars
is still pretty chilly and I only wish
that the laughter of us poor folks,

laughing to read "Plant rice in dry fields"
and "One percent off the farmland tax"
as we browse through the newspapers,
would grow as bright as those flowers up there.

One apricot petal
falls into the glass.
The union cart's on its way to market.

(1967)

Snowy Road

I walk through the night, off to buy opium.
Down a long mountain trail in driving sleet,
sleeping by day hidden in the back rooms of inns.
When I'm weary, I call the woman in to play cards.
When I make her laugh with my suggestive jokes
under the faded photo of the landlord
who was falsely accused and stupidly killed,
the wind entangles itself in the branches of trees
on the hill behind and weeps
like the sorrowful ghosts of lads that starved
and now all I have left is two powerless fists.
As I fill my stomach with a bowl of dumpling soup
the woman goes on and on bewailing her lot
and we keep laughing out loud like two mad fools.

(1970)

One August

Someone was playing the harmonium in the empty classroom.
Minnows wouldn't enter the fish-trap we'd set up
in the stream dammed by a laundry-stone, so
we kept dashing into the water,
    that didn't come up to our belly-buttons,
and peeling *ch'amoi* melons in the warm afternoon.
When the sun declined the beauty-parlor girls
came out to watch us fishing
and ended up frolicking about with us
but we felt ashamed of the dew on the early evening grass
and of the full moon too.
When we took a byway back to the market square
the harmonium had stopped playing in the empty classroom
and the lane by the brewery stank of manure
as if all the whole world was rotting away.

(1972)

Party Day

Dad's cousin's been drunk and rowdy since daybreak.
Cheerless leaves are falling on the awning.
Women clustered in the back yard are making a fuss,
the excited bride's boasting about her new husband.
Have you forgotten? Dad's cousin's drunk and rowdy.
Have you forgotten the day your father died?
No point in listening to his stupid voice.
Finally a proper party comes alive beneath the marquee,
the excited bride's boasting about her in-laws.
Even though the truck's arrived, drawn up in front:
Have you forgotten? Dad's cousin's drunk and rowdy.
Have you forgotten how your father died?

(1972)

Summer Rains

The whole house is full of a thick stench of pig.
The clerks have slaughtered a piglet and are killing time
in the visitors' room at the village captain's house,
so we carriers from Hansan are free to stay in the store
where we dip our share of pig's lard in shrimp sauce.
After talk of eating out in prosperous gold-mining days
a dirty joke raises a boisterous laugh but
it's been pouring with rain for nearly a week,
our pockets have run out of fags and vouchers
a mouldy stench has soaked into work-clothes and bones.
Drinking till we're tipsy, we play cards on the straw mats
to see who will pay for the *kuksu* noodles.
Later, covering our heads with plastic umbrellas,
we climb up to the vacant construction site.
The women out to view the water avoid us,
hiding behind the rusty tractor
while the old woman at the canteen who lost her son in June
sits there heedless, drenched in the monsoon rains.
Old So is worrying about his flighty wife
and Pak is spinning tales of stockings he never bought,
so fine that his daughter's flesh would have shown right through.

(1972)

Today

Stomachs full with half a bowl of *kuksu* noodles
washed down with *makkolli*,
banners planted with slogans proclaiming
Agriculture is the Nation's Foundation
we're dancing round the village head's front yard
with the county magistrate leading the way,
our gratitude to the nation deep in our bones
as the magistrate dances the hunchback's dance
to tinkling *kkwenggwari* and booming *ching*
and the instructor bangs away on a *bokku*
for our 13.4% increase in grain production
an expressway less than twenty miles off
and local kids dressed in tattered rags
swipe dried octopus
upend crocks of wine
the drama broadcast through the village speakers
is much better fun than the news
that the old man down at Dragon Rock has died
the womenfolk are drunk
as they sing on and on in the inner yard
while the younger girls out at the back
practice new songs
until they're hoarse
and ah, I wonder, who knows
what day today is
with the entire village out dancing, drunk
under fluttering banners?

(1971)

Part 2

The Way to Go

We gathered, carrying rusty spades and picks.
In the bright moonlit grove behind the straw sack storehouse,
first we repented and swore anew,
joined shoulder to shoulder; at last we knew which way to go.
We threw away our rusty spades and picks.
Along the graveled path leading to the town
we gathered with only our empty fists and fiery breath.
We gathered with nothing but shouts and songs

(1972)

The Night Before

Hearing their cries.
Hearing screams.
Hearing the sound of bloody nails
clawing at walls.
Who wants to take the side
of the poor and downtrodden?
Nobody wants to talk
of those things. Hearing the sound
of footsteps racing away.
Hearing the sound of people collapsing,
falling. The sound of helpless
men's sighs covering those deaths,
hearing above them the sound
of furious whiplashes raining down.
Hearing the sound of songs.

(1971)

The Storm

The bicycle store and the *sundae* soup shop closed down.
All the inhabitants came pouring out into the marketplace
shaking their fists and stamping their feet.
The younger ones went pounding on *jing* and *kkwenggwari*
while the lasses came following behind them singing.
Lighting torches made of cotton wadding soaked in oil
they set up an out-of-season wrestling match in the school yard.
But then suddenly winter arrived
dark clouds gathered and dropped damp sleet.
The young men scattered and hid indoors
only the old and the women still tottered about, coughing.
All winter long we shook for dread.
And in the end the bicycle store and the *sundae* soup shop
failed to re-open.

(1972)

That Day

One young woman all alone
follows weeping behind a bier.
A procession with no funeral banners, no hand-bell in front.
Ghost-like shadows
along the smoke-veiled evening road,
a breeze scattering falling leaves
down alleys with neither doors nor windows,
while people watch hiding
behind telegraph posts and roadside trees.
Nobody knows the dead
man's name that dark
and moonless day.

(1970)

Hillside Lot Number One

Before the sun sets
the wind comes visiting hillside lot Number One
It shakes the roofing spread over every house,
tears the newspaper pasted on the fretwork doors,
sprinkles rock dust
over the wretched inhabitants' faces.
Once the sun has set, smoke from burning pine branches
spreads across hillside lot Number One.
Men unable to enjoy the nation's prosperity
deceive then strangle one another,
finally taking knives and shedding blood,
while smoke clings to the folds of the skirts
of women grown weary of poverty stomping their way
downhill to the railway station.
Before night falls in hillside lot Number One
there's a sound of keening. The parent
who's got hold of poisonous globefish roes
intending they should all die together
gets drunk and changes his mind after all
but the lass who's had a fatherless child
seeks out a cliff and hurls herself down.
Then as darkness comes to hillside lot Number One
a gale that's swept over plains
strikes against the hillside behind,
turns into every person's tears and comes pouring down.

(1970)

He

One snowy night
he comes visiting me.
Beating at the door just outside the window.
Anxious to tell me
something.

I see him again
in my dreams.
Standing
barefoot on the snow.
Blood flows
from his feet.

He is gazing at me
with pitying eyes.
Approaching me, he grasps
my hand.
His lips
call my name.

As I awake
the dawn bell is ringing.
I can hear his voice
within the bell's clamor.
I get up
and throw open the window.

I stare at the snow
heaped before my window.
At the stains of his blood
spread on the snow. At his furious
glare.

(1972)

March 1, Independence Movement Day

When every alleyway's soggy with sewage
and by each house with its shabby shaky wooden fence
tattered rags hang flapping like flags,
our country hates us. When the first day of March
visits this remote hill town.

When unemployed youths fill the alleyways
and the plots of the poor spread ever wider
in house agents dens, barbers' shops, *soju* bars
our country rejects us. When March the first
once again comes to this remote hill town.

We do not believe that flowers will bloom
in this dust-laden wind. We do not believe
that Spring will come riding
this dust-laden wind. And alas, we do not believe
the news of our country borne on this dust-laden wind.

When the lasses have all become whores and left,
the lads gone crazy slashing at daylight
so that all the county is sullied with blood
our country leaves us for good. When the first day of March
goes off and abandons this remote hill town.

(1966)

The Road to Seoul

His sighs have soaked
into the tumble-down stable.
Helpless regrets.

On the crumbling terrace
his wife's tears
have formed pools. Ghostly voices
of poverty cursing.

The broken persimmon tree rots
and his children's voices
have permeated the rotting floor.
Oaths of despair and wrath.

When spring breezes blow, the old
suyu tree weeps.
Looking down
the road to Seoul
stained with our blood . . .

(1971)

This Pair of Eyes

--A statue sings

I was robbed of my two arms by an enemy tank
then my tongue was bitten off by an enemy's teeth
so now all I have left is this
pair of eyes.
Will someone tell me to give them away as well?
They'll never manage to wrest from me this
pair of eyes.
I will observe autumn leaves, snow,
their end,
falling on the heads of my poor compatriots.
All I have left now to watch the end
of oppressors and oppressed is
nothing but this
pair of eyes.

(1972)

They

They walk barefoot
through the pouring rain.
Bruises have formed
on the gaunt hands they clasped.
They call for me
in angry voices.
They spit
in my terrified face.
On their white-clad shoulders
blood has clotted.
They go rushing heedlessly
through the raging storm.

(1971)

1950: Death by Firing-squad

1.

Rain pours down, wind howls, and guns
all vomit flame. Lament now,
trees and grass! Remember the murderers' faces,
earth! That autumn of 1950
a throng of two hundred innocent souls
fell here, one by one. Rage, heavens! Transform
this river into a stream of blood.
Only finally the murderers all escaped.
Come back to life now, innocent throng, and
testify to this filthy history.
Night spread, burying the corpses; rain fell,
washing away the blood. Is there not one
that came back to life? Are they all weeping,
turned into bitter spirits under the ground?

2.

Well over ten years later, on that spot now
stands the weekend bungalow of one of
our country's honored rulers. In the lounge
wicked deals are done by night, foul plots
are laid. And the weak-chested little daughter
is dreaming. Dreams of young lads wading barefoot
through the river. She opens her eyes in the night;
in the grove out behind, a crow is cawing.
A bleak wind comes peeping sadly through
the window. Has not one come back to life?
Then is there no one to testify?
To this filthy history? Are they all weeping,
turned for ever into bitter spirits under the ground?

(1969)

Part 3

The Abandoned Mine

Uncle was whisked off one day and never came back.
Dandelions might be blooming up on the swelling dumps
of ore and muck deposited by trucks,
it was the usual chilly April
as uncle's friends in their sneakers
gathered in our yard and tossed back *soju*.
I could not understand why they were shaking their fists.
People said at night evil spirits emerged
from the many empty hovels, so in the gloomy back room
lit dimly by a lamp I played pasteboard dump all by myself.
The wind scattered slag dust before banging at the door
then howled just like my friends' father's voice--
he died crushed when the mine caved in.
The war was over but still the village lads
vanished one by one and didn't come back.
In the empty gold pit ghosts howl even in the daytime
while the sound of the owl is more revolting
than the things uncle said and did when he was drunk.

(1971)

Kyong-ch'ip: End of Hibernation

Lying there in just her mud-stained underwear
the wife trembled all over and kept on coughing.
All day long the underfloor flue had shaken
in that rice-mill backroom
rank with the stench rising from soybean malt.
The young team of miners under their ten-watt lamps
started a belated game of *sotta* lasting till late at night,
while I took the wife's place, prepared *muk*, carried wine,
fanned the fire to heat the floor.
Even the cart-boy who had come for the rice sacks
got dragged in too, the game was going fine
when suddenly the cock crowed; I collected my cut
and went to order the morning soup
for the wife, who had to go out to help carry dung.
The village square was cold though *Kyong-ch'ip* was past.
Old Six-toes's wife--he got shot in the war--
was there throwing wanton smiles all about her,
preparing morning soup full of cabbage leaves.

(1971)

After the Summer Rains

In the summer that year we moved to the house
just in front of the gold mill. There
we opened a store selling dies and brine.
Uncle got on well with the miners from other parts
and I can't forget that tedious drought during which
he spent all the time drinking, ending up drunk every day.

Stuck in the store, Dad could think of nothing but *soju*,
while nightfall was the only thing I enjoyed.
Across the road in the gamblers' club
as soon as night came you could hear sounds of singing;
when the girl had had enough of being pestered by drunks
she escaped to our house and hid there, trembling.

I can't forget that summer's sultry
heat. The peasants gathered muttering by the stream
at the crossroads. On the day the shower came
they scattered and ran in all directions,
the whorehouse yard was stained with blood.

At last, though the rains had come, that kid whore
left all of a sudden for the local town;
perhaps she wasn't having much fun any more,
she never came back, just like uncle who left home too.
The stream rose and we were forced to take refuge
on the hill behind the house; we couldn't forget
that stink of blood, and there was a rumor
we'd be moving back to the market square after the rains.

(1972)

That Winter

Sleet filtered down over the gold mill and
in the guest-room of the carrier's just below it
we boarded for four bushels of rice each.
Yon-sang and Tok-taek had gone home to celebrate
the holidays, the wind driving past the cliffs was grim and
all day we sat hugging the iron stove with its oak wood fire
talking about a kid whore called Yongja
we'd met at a boarding-house in front of Chech'on station.
Sometimes we went rushing off to the widow's tavern
for a bite of pork that we chipped in to buy on credit.
At about full moon, when heavier sleets always fell,
the carrier's grandson, who'd gone away to make his fortune,
came back even poorer than before and
we held a party for him to celebrate only
the party soon turned into a fight.
The village lads and the laborers from Hansan
divided into gangs and traded blows,
knocked heads together, threw dishes about.
The unseemly conduct didn't last long;
soon they were sorry and burst into tears,
began a new party, passing glasses round to the *Yukjabegi* beat.
When we clenched our fists and stepped outside
the valley mining village was dark as pitch; there was
not one girl left, all were off working as housemaids.
Falling down, tumbling about, we
bellowed out songs. At first light
we were not afraid though dogs barked and cocks crowed,
the sleet had now turned into a solid snowfall,
the mountain paths were treacherous, slippery with ice.

(1972)

Before and After March the First

Mahjong game, dawn, wallet empty.
Step into street, face shrivelling at biting wind.
Turn into Noraengi the miser's place.
Get drunk in a flash at daybreak.

Shabby boots thick with mud at the bar.
Still early dawn, before sunrise,
but the marketeers are silent for dread,
pigs off to the slaughterhouse
shudder and scream for all they're worth.

Go staggering into the unheated room.
Lifting a face livid with poverty and fear
the wife keeps on and on pestering: Let's leave
this dreadful place before March the First.

(1972)

Hibernation

No matter what anybody said, I could never believe them.
With the sole exception of bad days, every day the wife
went out to work on the newly cut road up to Seoul while I
staved off hunger with watery gruel and spent the year
in the cartoon shop beside the bus-stop.
From time to time my friends came flocking in to kid me.
They would drag me through the streets, force me to drink
and make me lead the way to the whorehouse
then suddenly drag me off to the stream-side and kick me.
Frequently my wife would embrace my scraggy neck and weep.
The sand-filled wind was specially cold that spring
and my wife was completely frozen, pale and shivering, but
I spent all the rest of the year in the cartoon shop
and no matter what anyone said, refused to believe them.

(1972)

Going Blind

Once the sun weakened, the lads from the lower village
came calling on me, bringing bottles of *soju*.
The wife used to jump and cry out if even so much as
the shade of an apricot blossom touched the window;
it took only a few glasses of *soju* to stir us up
so that we stamped on the floor then pranced round the yard.
After that we would start to turn just a little bit crazy.
Weeping aloud, giggling too and shouting out loud,
we'd drag the wife out to dance the hunchback's dance.
At last she fled to the lower village, her endurance exhausted,
at which my voice abruptly lost its power.
The weather was still bad despite the extra third month
so that my voice calling the wife stayed pinned to the ground.
I dreamed I'd shaken off the lads
and was about to set off for some distant city.

(1972)

The Road Back Home

After we've lost every trace of laughter all day long
when we try to smile in front of the alley grogshop
our faces twist and contort.
When we clasp each other's hands warmly
our hands feel cold and rough.
As we limp through night-covered poverty
freed from all the people who hate us
we rage, and repent,
curse but then part,
and when we push open our rooms' curbside doors
and call our wives' names,
our voices turn into keening laments.

(1965)

Mountain Town Diary

Shall I go on living this slovenly life?
Sleep refuses to come
on a snowy night.
Young Park's in a cell, old Song's
in his sickbed, and I'm here beside my
skinny wife with her head pillowed on my arm,
separated from one another.
The only thing I can hear should surely be
the crunch of snow falling on the roof?
I recall the poet from my native region
kidnapped and taken North. I recall his
remarried wife. Why should I lead such
a slapdash life? In this mountain town
I grab the kids' pocket-money
to buy coal, drink liquor,
play *sotta* in the night-duty room.
I recall one unfortunate poet,
I recall his crippled
daughter. The only thing I can hear should surely be
dogs barking in a distant hamlet?
On snowy nights all I can hear should surely be
the sound of trains rolling over the rails,
while our poor friends go mad,
go mad and finally die? Shall I go on living such
a slovenly life, in this mountain town?

(1965)

The Backwoods

The lightly frozen stream,
the tavern across the road,
that night the first snow fell.
The frustration
of the backwoods lay spread across the playground.

Together in the night-duty room
ordering and eating a dish of *muk*
even after a couple of miles' walk
all the way to the market-place,
the dark poverty-stricken night
still has a long way to go.

Talking of Seoul, its
filthy pride and corruption
in this alienated classroom without
one pencil or notebook, where thirty
percent of the kids have no lunch to eat.

Let's forget our
laments,
the despair of the backwoods
buried under the homeward path.
That night the first snow fell.

(1971)

Part 4

Mountain Town Visit, a Story

Market day, yet business is slacker than normal.
Drought, so in the fields hot dust clouds rose while
roofs, stone walls, stood weary like the laborers.

The bus stopped in front of the common market
from where the wife's grave could be seen.
Beneath a roadside stall's awning I and the boy
drank a tepid beverage produced by foreign capital.

I wonder why my hometown friends, seen again at last
after long separation, have such bloodshot eyes?
No words. Just hands clasped
and shaken. That lying smile.

The narrow alley of the chicken-shop littered with stones
and sticks and hoes. Out in front of the barber's shop
that used to ring with farmers' and miners' quarrels.
The rice-store path where volunteer firemen used to run.

It's market day, yet everywhere is gloomier than normal.
Rough hands grasp mine as I walk away from the wife's grave,
grasp and won't let go.

(1972)

Country Bus Terminal

Once past the end of Ulchi-ro
I start to smell smells of home.
Across the muddy bus station yard
in the freezing unheated waiting room there's
an old man with ice caught in his moustache,
on closer inspection he's a neighbor from Shinni-myon
worrying about the piles of rice-straw
he's unable to bring in from the paddy fields,
complaining about the early cold and the icy wind.
A woman chimes in with a sigh:
Well if that's all there is to complain about . . .
The woman keeping the tavern at the road junction:
Well if that's all there is to be anxious about . . .
Confusion spreads, the waiting room grows colder still
and for some reason I feel afraid of the folk from home.
Shall I stealthily sneak away,
catch a bus back to Ulchi-ro?
Only once I get to Ulchi-ro
I feel more cowardly than ever.

(1972)

A Friend

Spotty always used to get praised in composition class.
His father guarded the tombs of the Hongs of Namyang.
He worked at the cooperative rice-mill and set himself up
in an earth-walled house with no *maru*.

Wheat bran came wafting as far as the straw mats in the yard.
That friend, meeting me again after ten years, grabbed me
bought cucumbers and sour *soju*
then sent his wife to boil up some *kuksu* noodles;
his wife stammered bashfully like a young girl.

I knew her father.
I knew him; he used to deliver liquor on a bicycle,
a sturdy fellow, always in high spirits.
I know that mound of stones too, covered with bindweed
under the zelkova; he was stoned to death and buried there.
Is that why you're ashamed of your wife, and your first kid,
in third grade, shy of strangers just like her?
Of the A-frame in front of the kitchen, the rough water jar?

Old friend. Nowadays I can make my way alone
to the pine grove up behind the warehouse.
That place where my cousin and his friends
used to make charcoal, old friend.
We get even more drunk surrounded by the wheat bran
and the noise of the mill,
go out to the market, arms round shoulders.
Old friend, is that why you're ashamed?

(1973)

Commemorations

1.

Cotton *turumagi* overcoats
stinking of *makkolli*
the men squatting on straw mats
were discussing the times with haggard faces.
Fearfully emaciated faces.

Still the kids were cheerful.
In a bonfire lit under a sheltering rock
they roasted stale rice-cake *ttok* and dried pollack,
went racing in circles and toppling headlong.

2.

--Even after twenty years the home village
hasn't altered in the least. Poverty-like
smoke holds the village wrapped
and in it dogs are barking
kids are crying and they are all
shouting at me.
Speak out! Speak out! Speak out!
Alas, there is nothing I can say.

(1972)

Part 5

A Reed

For some time past, a reed had been
quietly weeping inwardly.
Then finally, one evening, the reed
realized it was trembling all over.

It wasn't the wind or the moon.
The reed was utterly unaware that it was its own
quiet inward weeping that was making it tremble.
It was unaware
that being alive is a matter
of that kind of quiet inward weeping.

(1956)

Graveside Epitaph

After living a lonesome life, he died.
He was buried on a quiet hill with
a stream flowing in front and a hill behind.
One warm spring day with a mild wind blowing
a white wooden marker was standing by that grave.
It stood with the same lonesome look as his life had had
exposed to every wind.
Yet that marker did not suggest a past
with nothing worth remembering. Its fragile face
that was growing darker as time went by
looked sad.
It was quietly calling attention to something
that might be heard and might be seen.

(1956)

Deep Night

1.

All those people who ended lonesomely.
That wind that once blew on the hilltops.
That moonlight.
All those things behind the bell,
now weeping in company with the bell.

Those things deprived of name and shape,
things heaping up now in my heart.

2.

One day or other
I too will turn into something like those
and like them lonesomely go back somewhere.
That lake somewhere
where on that day I shall go and quietly weep.

Someone's sad heart.

(1956)

A Baby

1.

He is gazing at the snow piling up beyond the window, his expression says it's lovely and mysterious. He waves a hand. Just like the baby tree used to wave its leaves.

He has knowledge of every secret.
He knows the reason why the snow falls, and the beautiful whispering sounds it makes,
all that he knows--a replete still life.

2.

In a little while he's going to learn the word "Mama." That is the point at which he will lose the secret contained
in the word "Mama."
But he doesn't realize that.

Flower, tree, star,
as he learns each word with a joyful, happy heart, he will lose one by one the secrets each of them contains.

The day he loses every last one of the secrets, he will have become a full human being.

3.

Then one day with snow piling up like now he
will suffer torment at the thought of some girl.

Strolling beside the stream
he will weep, homesick for himself.

(1957)

On the Top of an Extinct Volcano

Unendurable frustration turns into blazing fire.
One day in an explosion shaking heavens and earth
it erupts, blasting through the earth's crust.
It is aware of nothing on account of that rapture of mad frenzy.
The mountain shaking
as the flames arch high into the heavens.
All the plants and trees catch fire and burn
rocks melt and flow like water.
--Then ten thousand years pass. A hundred thousand years.

Look. Now
In the crater that once spouted fire
stands a pool of water so cold it freezes the fingertips.
A host of minute mountain plants invades the top
where you can see traces of a hikers' camp.
Now and then the lonely song of a bird rings strange in the ear.
Far away glimpses of river, sea, and empty plains.
Listen. The sound of the wind.

I will force my breast open like the crater
that once spouted fire,
fill my breast with nothing but the sound of the wind.
Even sorrow will be fine. Even if something
should torment me it will be fine.

(1957)

Part 6

Night Bird

I woke from a dream
where I was pursued by a bier
round and round a zelkova tree.
Suddenly I heard a bird sing.

Wake up now, mistreated wretch.
Open your lips, downtrodden wretch.

Flying carefully through a lowering sky
with not a spare inch for so many resentful ghosts,

that night bird sobs so sadly.
One boy sobs sadly, too, pitifully
clinging to the back of the bier.

(1975)

Moonlight

We talked of old times till late at night.
The hillside inn wasn't far from the quarry.
In the yard the moonlight was bright as broad day
and we averted our eyes, ashamed even in moonlight,
as we talked far into the night about the old days.
We made no distinction between hoaxer and hoaxed.
On the slopes, daisies shone white in the moonlight
and with shoulders drooping at having lived so meanly
all night long we talked empty talk.

(1973)

The River

The raindrops sob and weep.
Weeping, they pierce the muddy ground.
The children are avoiding the raindrops.
Weeping, they roam about in the river.

Could the river forget that sound of weeping?
Could it forget the sound of guns and cries?
Could it forget those tiny fists and little bare feet?

The wind sobs and weeps.
Weeping, it goes swirling over the river.
The children go wandering after the wind.
Weeping, they wander in the falling rain.

(1973)

That Summer

One person's tears
summoned tears to all the village
and one person's song
brought songs crowding into all the county.

Brought clouds crowding in,
brought wind and rain crowding in,
produced flowers and dances,
produced curses, imprecations, resentment.

One person's song
brought songs crowding into every street
and one person's death
produced death throughout the land.

(1974)

A Legend

He was always drinking,
he went mad, grew rowdy,
then finally the rascal died.

Up the mountain road running past
the village where I was born and bred
is an old tree that's a spirit shrine

with red and yellow strips of rag
hanging.
He became a ghost, squatting there cross-legged.

On summer nights all thick with mist
in bitterness, in bitterness
that rascal weeps.

In bitterness, in bitterness,
the old tree also weeps. That rascal
has come to life again, squatting there cross-legged.

(1974)

Exile

1.

What Ernst Oppert thought about our ancestors
was right.
What he thought about them was right, as they gathered
in a ragged mob on that riverside hill.
It was not they who hated him.
We know who those wicked people were
that tore Féron's companions apart at the cattle market
then made him live for five days
and five nights on the grass he grazed.
Yes, Oppert, we know.

2.

Who can they be, who demand in this dark
that we consider friends as enemies? And nowadays
who can they be who insist that lies are truth?
The streets are all covered with darkness
but Oppert, it's not we who hate you.
In the compulsion to consider friends as enemies
Féron's descendants are leaving this land again
loaded on steamers.
Who can be the people who are driving them away,
who can they be?

(1975)

What We Have to be Ashamed of

It's not only the stench of muddy alleys.
It's not only petty slanging matches and fist-fights.
What we have to be ashamed of
is not only this deep poverty.
It's not only the darkness that almost never lifts.

When August comes we may be elated but
sitting on our creaky office chairs
or on a narrow bench in a *soju* bar
we clench fists about some boring baseball match
played abroad, nothing to do with us at all,
let some crazy missionary work us into a frenzy,
get excited about tall tales told by an economist
from some underdeveloped country,
but it's not only these kinds of things
that we have to be ashamed of.

It's not only this lily-livered kind of false merriment,
it's not only our two fists shrivelled up with fear.
What we have to be ashamed of
is not only the wild way we cheat and get cheated.
It's not only the darkness that hides heaven itself.

(1973)

Friend! In your Fist . . .

1.

We'd had a hard frost, the day Ch'ang-tol's Dad died.
His body was lying wrapped in a straw mat in one corner of
the yard of the oil-press house strewn with paulownia leaves
while his wife lay swooning beside him.

Ch'ang-tol and I played with our tops.
Too frightened to go back home we just went on playing
with our tops in the rice-store yard as night fell.

2.

I know that you've got a sharp knife concealed
in the fist that's clasping a *soju* glass, friend.
When we met again in the eatery and in the bar,
I saw the fire burning in your eyes.
I'm your friend. I saw your shoulders move
in disbelief, insist as I might.

Why, friend, I saw the falling paulownia leaves
heaped on top of the straw mat wrapped round the body.

(1974)

Someone

Someone is observing me.
As I clench my fists, resolved not to be afraid
in the steep alley frozen icy white
behind my back someone is mocking me. That evening
I was drunk on the smell of a girl's face-powder
but I just talked on about what Blanquist did in 1871,
talked about a hometown friend who'd died wretchedly.
Someone is rebuking me.
Yes, indeed,
rebuking me behind my back as I shudder
at the sound of the wind sweeping through that alley,
as I lie tossing beside the sleeping kids.
Is snow falling tonight upon that tomb?
Someone is observing me.

(1975)

Part 7

In the Dark

A stench of blood arose in the falling rain.
And sobbing could be heard in the wind.
It was summer yet the streets were frozen white,
folks had shut their gates and shuddered hidden indoors.

Could all those past deaths have been in vain?
That year's bloodstains could still be seen on grass and rocks
up in the hills where I had gone, taking the kids.
Deep at night all the grieving spirits would wake
and fill the dark valley with their keening laments.

Tell me, friend, what am I so afraid of?
I was so anxious that I woke the kid to go for a piss,
and recalled vividly the last shot in Père Lachaise
Cemetery. My eye shouted: Look, look!
My ear screamed: Listen, listen,
to the very first empty stillness
but I felt ashamed to admit that I knew
the tales entangled in that mountain valley.

We buried our friend in the lee of a rock
then scrubbed and wiped our muddy hands
wondering if really all those past deaths had been in vain,
that had taught us just how strong we were?

In this summer night loud with the keening of blood
in flowers, yes, and in dewdrops, too,
tell me friend, what am I so afraid of?

(1974)

Mountain Station

Flying coal dust came rattling at the paper lining
of the inn room's door.
Eyes opening to the screech of coal-trains on the railway line
retained an image of the hands of friends chained there
while the small station was astir from daybreak.

A shabby alley with fish-shops next to a little substation whose
humming passing into the power lines only brought false reports
that spring would never come to this isolated valley.

Local youths went crazy and searched travellers
while I wondered what on earth might be
more frightening than death and in my ear

friends' shouts could be heard, songs could be heard,
yelling not to be afraid
though lightning scorched my hair or thunder split my ears.
Even if that icy morning star was no longer on our side.

(1974)

Year's-End Fair

I'm looking increasingly haggard,
ashamed of being alive.

Along the now dismantled rails
a little county town
a cold year's-end fair.

I shut my ears
to the sound of the biting wind
to whispers full of malice.

All day long I wandered through the market alleys
hoping to find someone I knew.

(1974)

A Chance Encounter

That woman seems to have forgotten my face.
In a *haejang* soup place down a lonely alley
by the bus stop, strangers to one another now,
we satisfied our hunger with loach soup and *makkolli*.

I hear it's thirty miles to that construction site.
That woman really knows no news of the wine house
where we used to sit on the wooden bench cracking filthy jokes
while autumn showers stirred up as ever a smell of dry grass.

Her husband used to work as a mechanic in the substation;
he was older than me, from the same village.
He used to bang the *pokku* and go the rounds of wrestling matches
but then strange rumors spread and she became a widow
though the woman seems to have forgotten that too.

The field paths bright with buckwheat flowers,
the riverside alive with whispered oaths,
the mountain winds that used to moan with us in despair and rage,

the path we hurried along, that sound of singing:
the woman seems to have forgotten all that too, now.
Let's just be two strangers, two separate travellers,
she seems to insist.
I'll have to hurry all alone back down that muddy road
in the driving rain.

(1973)

Travelling Companions

That woman talked about her nine-year-old daughter.
She talked about the white running shoes she wanted to wear
and the sweet potatoes she carried in place of a proper lunch.

It had been drizzling since early morning.
The tavern yard covered with wild spinach was white with dust
and I smiled silly wanton smiles
at that woman who was selling beauty-products.

I knew nothing then of the way her body stank.
I knew nothing of the talk being spun in the poverty
of the dried fish store.

When the clock on the wall, slow, struck three
the night crew, already awake, kept pestering her.
In the village beneath the steatite mine
it had been raining since early morning.

We suddenly became travelling companions.
We had no idea where each was going
yet neither of us asked the other.

(1973)

Diary Entry for *Ch'oso* Day

By early summer I had no friends left to visit.
The room we rented by the gate of the grocer's behind the market
was so hot it seemed to steam by early morning and all day long
I guarded the room the wife left empty, going out to knit
and marvelled that I had not gone mad.
Sometimes I would crack a joke with the owner's big daughter
and get scolded for my pains.
If I was hungry I would visit the locals selling *ch'amoi* melons
in front of the beauty parlor and idly squat there.
First we would worry about the rice harvest back home,
then worry about the price of livestock all the time falling,
then decide to find a construction job before *Ch'oso* came
so as to get away from this wretched Seoul.
But then the wife's haggard, weary face as she came in
clutching a bag of rice squashed all such thoughts.
A rumor said an irrigation association was to be set up
near my home village but the baby asleep on the wife's back
hardly ever smiled though it was over a hundred days old.
Ch'oso went by unnoticed in late August and soon people
were preparing to sell baked sweet potatoes in winter streets.

(1973)

An Alley

Ch'oi the barber reckons Seoul's fine all the same.
The muddy evening alley's fine,
where he comes home carrying packets of rice and a mackerel
if only he goes out with his clippers in a bag.
Sitting there on his stool having a twenty-Won haircut
is like being back in the village barber's by the substation.
With his nose all red and his hands trembling from drink
his wife tottering about in a belated pregnancy,
Ch'oi reckons the alley with its stench of fish is fine.
The ceaseless squabbles and bickering are fine.
Hiding in the barber's shop browsing an old newspaper,
combing our hair and practicing songs,
the days go by and we might be bored, frustrated,
yet Ch'oi reckons our steep hillside slum's fine.
The lights dimmer than back home and the sound of radios is fine. The poverty and vexations of the slum are fine, where the women
wander about together looking for ways to get some cash.
Now what was the name of that drunkard's crippled son?
What's the name of his daughter always out collecting bills?
Barber Ch'oi claims he ran an inn in some remote southern town
yet still he reckons Seoul is fine.
He reckons the kids swarming in the alley whose hair he cuts
and their tough impatient mothers are all just fine.

(1973)

We Meet Again

We first met
in the squeaky back seat of the classroom
up the cold dew-sodden stone stairs.
Mates from Kyongsang and Cholla
as well as Ch'ungch'ong provinces,
we first grasped hands in friendship
in rain and wind and dust.
In shouts and curses and fisticuffs.

Our second-floor wooden boarding house room in Ch'ungmu-ro,
the grog-house down that obscure alley in Ulchi-ro,
the ruins of Myong-dong,
dark basement cafés,
that old professor's lectures on western history
echoing in the classroom,
the silence in the library on Saturday afternoons
the distant roar of trams
if you turned a page.

In winter that year I was passing through Munkyong
so I turned into the chemists and made a phone call.
A friend came dashing out,
his great hands white with chalk,
he said one was up in some Kangwon mountain town
running a fish shop, while another was in charge
of a rice mill in a remote Ch'ungch'ong village.
We're all scattered far and wide now,
in factories, mines, even in distant countries,

we get up in the night and hold out a hand,
we look to see what's flowing in our blood,
we see things clotting in the dark:
the noise of shouting blazing up
in Cheju and Kangwon and Kyonggi provinces
in rain and wind and dust,
in nostalgia, dissatisfaction, and fruitfulness.

(1974)

Shin Kyong-nim

1935: born in Ch'ongju
1956: first poems published
1973: *Farmer's Dance* (*Nong-mu*) published
1974: *Nong-mu* awarded 1st Manhae Literary Award
Other publications: *Saejae* (1979),
Talnomse (1985),
Kananhan sarangnorae (1988),
Kil (1990),
Halmoni wa omoni ui silhoutette (1998).
1998: Daesan Literary Award for Poetry.
President, Association of Writers for National Literature
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