

The Five Bandits

by Kim Chi-ha

Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

Whoever writes poetry, you should be daring, not finicky-fussy. Write straight like this.
My writing-brush had an untamed spirit, a rugged tip,
and for that crime I was dragged off to jail, butt-flogged,
but that was all a long time ago; now my joints and sinews itch,
my rash lips flip, wrists mutter and twitch,
coercing me to write again no matter what; I can't stand it.
Oh my god! What the hell? I don't care what happens to me.
Even if my butt gets flogged again, beaten till it catches fire,
I'm going to write one ever-so-strange story about some thieves.

Long ago, long long ago, after Tan'gun had founded a nation at the foot of Paekdu-san
Mountain on the third day of the tenth month,
among things seen by navels, heard by arses,
the foremost was our Eastern nation;
it enjoyed perfect peace, the most prosperous peaceful peace since Tan'gun.
How could there be any poor people, any thieves then?
Farmers all used to die of stuffing themselves till their bellies burst;
sick and fed up of wearing silk, they went about naked year in and year out.
True, Ko Chae-bong¹ really was what you call a thief
but after all, even in Confucius's days the bandit Dao Zhi arose;
the world may be full of abuses, corruption and crushing taxation,
but even in the Golden Age of Yao and Shun the Four Evils existed,
so even wise kings and admirable ministers cannot fully control the stealing habit,
that starts at three and stays with people till they're eighty or more.

Once five thieves were living in the heart of Seoul, the capital city.
To the South, see, turds go bobbing
down the Han River, that's nothing but sewage, with Tongbinggo-dong high beside it,
to the North, its treeless hills bare as a chicken's bald ass,
with Söngbuk-dong and Suyu-dong spiring aloft to the North again,
and in the space between South and North, packed tight, tight, tight, shacks cluster,
cluster like crabshells, cluster like snot, and above them soar
Changch'ung-dong, Yaksu-dong, shacks freely demolished helter-skelter to erect majestic
gates.
Those gateways, soaring high as they please, gaudily glittering,
lead to magnificent, luxurious palaces full of flowers.
There the music never stops, by night or day; the sound of rice cake being pounded never
ceases, tra-la-la, tra-la-la, thump thump thump.
Oh, here's the den of the Five Bandits, by name ConglomerApe, AssemblyMutt,

TopCivilSerpent, General-in-Chimp and HighMinisCur², all ferocious under heaven,
guts swollen big as Namsan hill, throats as tough as Dong Zhuo's navel.
Ordinary folk all have five viscera and six organs in their bellies,
but these thugs have an additional thieving gland, as big as an ox's balls, inside their bellies,
so they have five viscera and seven organs,
and though originally they all learned thieving from one boss, now they each have their
specialty.
As they engage in thieving day and night, their skills are god-given, pretty well.

One day the five thugs met together and said:
It's ten years since we went into the thievery business, sealing an oath in blood,
day in day out, we've piled up mountains of know-how and gold, so what about staking a
hundred thousand pounds of gold
and holding a contest to show off the feats we've perfected in all these years?
Having agreed, they hung up a banner with 'Theft' written big and held their thievery
competition.
It's balmy springtime, weather sunny, breeze brisk, clouds wafting,
and each one firmly holds a golf club aslant
as they go rushing ahead, afraid of losing, boasting of the secrets of their craft.

The first comes forward, ConglomerApe's his name.
Wearing clothes made of money, the hat on his head made of money, the shoes on his feet
made of money, the gloves on his hands made of money,
gold watch, gold ring, gold bangle, gold buttons, gold tie-pin, gold cuff-links, gold buckles,
gold teeth, gold finger-nails, gold toe-nails, gold zippers, gold watch-strap, he comes forward.
His big ass drooping, his great belly bulging, poop-poop farting, he comes slithering forward.
Just see his skills! This creature ConglomerApe, just see his skills!
He grills ministers yellow, he boils vice-ministers red,
adds vinegar, soy-sauce, mustard, pepper-paste, loads of monosodium glutamate, garnishes
all that with shredded peppers, leeks, garlic, then gobbles, yum-yum,
gulps down bank money replenished by tax funds, money borrowed from overseas, plus
every kind of specially privileged concessions, in a flash,
seduces pretty girls to be his whores, keeps pounding on them day and night, breeding kids
with all his might.
All the girls he breeds he blithely offers to guys in power as mistresses, night snacks,
gathers their whispered information, makes winning bids, buys up land cheap, secures a rake-
off when roads are built,
at a cost of five Won he swindles his way to thousand-Won jobs, always pays his workers in
promises;
in tactful quibbling he's a Monkey King, in dexterous coaxing he puts Chinese cooks to
shame.

Another comes forward.
AssemblyMutt comes forward.
Back bent like a hunchback, slit-eyed like Cao Cao,
he comes forward lisping in a wheezing voice.

His hairy torso's wound round with revolutionary promises,
the hat on his head, the badge on his chest trumpet revolutionary pledges,
hawking and spitting, wielding a glittering golf club held high like a banner, he shouts loud,
slogans gush forth from his forked snake's tongue :
Revolution! New wrongs for old! Reconstruction! In place of illicit wealth, make wealth
illicit!
Modernization! In place of illicit elections, make elections illicit! Priority to farming! Make
poor farmers quit farming!
Construction! Make every house collapsible! Social purification! Follow thoroughly the
example of Chōng In-suk, Chōng In-suk! ³
Rise up! Rise up! Bank-notes! rice-hooch makkōlli! fisticuffs! bedbug ballots! smallpox
ballots! harelipped ballots!
Owls, weasels, double-crossers, ghosts, all rise up together in the holy war of ballot stealing!
In his 'Art of War' Sun-zi says that a soldier does not despise cunning, a ruler is a thief,
public promises are empty promises.
Remember that, you stupid citizens, and get well away from me. You stink, yeuk . . .
I'm off to play golf.

The third comes forward. TopCivilSerpent comes forward.
His body shaped like a rubber balloon, eyes like those of a venomous snake, corpselike, blue,
rigid flesh,
with tightly clenched lips, he's obviously a cleanhanded official.
Bring him any kind of sweetener, he solemnly shakes his head: We do not like sweeteners, of
course, just so, indeed.
But only look behind his back. He's wearing another face there.
He stares nimbly around on this side, stares glibly around on that side, plumply, plumply,
brazenly, brazenly, so blatantly, but his teeth are quite a sight.
He's devoured so many sweeteners, they've rotted black, rotted till they've crumbled, he's
obviously quite completely corrupt.
A mountainlike desk, a chair deep as the sea, sitting straddling high and low, this fellow
whose merits are big as the horn of a rat, sitting as high aloft as the sky, with one hand, 'No
thank you,' with the other, 'Yes, yes thank you.'
What's possible is absolutely out of the question, what's impossible is no problem at all, with
piles of documents on top of his desk, piles of banknotes under his desk.
To high-ups he's a fawning spaniel, to low-downs he's a brutal hound; he takes his cut of
public money, solicits bribes,
When did I ever do such a thing? Clouds in Heaven be my witness! Hostesses in swanky bars,
high and low, they have no problems, do they?

The fourth comes forward. GeneralInChimp's his name.
In height he's tall as an eight-foot-high wall,
the line of low-ranking soldiers under his command is as long as the Great Wall,
with hairs sticking out all over his body, white rings round the irises of his eyes, a tiger's jaws,
twitching nose, a short bristly beard, quite obviously an animal.
Gold, silver, nickel, bronze, brass, brightly colored silk or satin ribbons, his entire body is
covered and wrapped in a ton of decorations.

With his black dog-legs kicking this way and that
he comes crawling out on all fours. Just look at this GeneralInChimp's skills.
He fills the sacks of rice destined for his troops with sand, after taking the rice and selling it
on,
serves up a hair or two from the pork and beef destined for his troops, devours all the meat
alone.
When his troops are freezing to death with no barracks in midwinter
he tells them they'll work up a sweat by working, forces them to labor all day long,
takes the wood destined for the barracks and builds himself a bigger house.
Official cars, clothing, coal, even money for snacks and wages, presents for the troops, he
takes them all.
If a soldier gone AWOL for hunger gets caught, for discipline's sake he beats him up, locks
him in.

AttentionAttentionAttentionAtEase! Attention

He takes hefty handsome guys and serves them up to his wife as playthings,
while he has his own mistress, with whom he plays erotic war tactics in bed, engages in close
warfare, uses strategies both offensive and defensive; he's huge one moment, thin air the next.

The last one comes forward.

HighMinisCur comes forward.

His tongue coated white, full of dregs of wine sticking out all over, he emerges,
glaring eyes veiled by disgusting mucus, his left hand conducts the national defense with a
golf-club.

His right hand fumblingly scrawls the words Production, Export, Construction on a girl's
breast:

Ha ha, hey, that tickles, Sir!

You ignorant bitch! How dare you say that affairs of state tickle?

Export though people starve. Produce though nothing sells. Use the bones of those who've
died of hunger to build a bridge across to Japan; let's go over and greet their gods!

As he blows a broken trumpet to the beat of a fissured drum, inside he's thinking of the
profits he can grab.

He has the use of a black sedan, and owns a Mercedes in secret, but look, to show his
integrity he only ever rides a simple Corona.

From the budget he gobbles a packet, the lot; when tenders come in he devours a great chunk,
and all the time chewing gum to hide any odors.

Smoking Kents, he scrawls: 'Crack down hard on imported goods,' scribble-scribble on
official documents then, aha, admires his wonderful writing.

To sleek-tongued, half-deaf reporters who come running after him on hearing scandalous
rumors, he replies:

How dare you talk of crime and corruption to your nation's prime-minister?

Then he murmurs lines from an ancient poem praising the joys of life back in the countryside
before asking: What's your handicap?

Ghosts observing the peerless skills of these Five Bandits,
quite taken aback, exclaim in horror: If we're caught by them we'll have not one bone left to
call our own.

They take to their heels, scared out of their wits, which explains why nowadays so few people bother to make offerings for the dead.

Now the contest begins to warm up, like shitty pumpkins ripening in early autumn.

Pay heed to my words!

Is anyone out there?

Arrest those five bandits who bring disgrace to the nation!

Merciless, royal decrees came crashing down,

like thunderbolts out of the blue, crash, crash, crash, thundering down repeatedly, pouring, gushing down.

Indeed, at once, I will arrest them and bring them to you, Sire, one replies and withdraws.

The chief of police withdraws. Just watch how he behaves.

From his pig's snout, his carp's lips thick with white dregs of liquor, spittle drooling,

bushy-bearded like a third cousin by marriage to Zhang Fei, protruding eyes red as he's just gobbled up a good number of folk,

on his forehead a wen the size of a fist that swings to and fro whenever he runs,

his arms spread wide, he rushes around like a great millstone, roarrrring like a lion:

Hack that rogue down, tie up this rascal.

The Blowflies, gangsters from red-light districts, from Chongsam, Myŏng-dong, Yang-dong,

Mugyo-dong, Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn, with the Tapshimni Bluebottles, the Wangsimni Dungflies,

he'd sweep them all up, drag them in, make them kneel, beat them up, batter them around, kick them about, tread them down,

pinch them to pieces, bite them to bits, throw them over his head, hurl them head over heels, tidy them up, wrap them up and put them away,

hit, smash, fold up, pound, wring them out, string them up,

snap, chop, hash, poke, spill, screw them down, stew them, make them bend like the weeping willows along the stream in the song.

Six-sided clubs, triangular iron bars, hooks, long knives, short knives, big knives, small knives,

ropes, handcuffs, clubs, truncheons, cudgels, whistles,

revolvers, pistols, rifles, machine guns, hand grenades, tear-gas grenades, smoke shells, vomit shells, shit shells, piss shells, cumshells, coal shells, charcoal shells,

all those he would bring and neatly arrange, thunder out a rrrroar—

and startled by howled threats loud as a tiger's fart, crowds of country-folk, dragged in, trembling, begin to shudder and cower.

There's BrightBoy Kkwesu, a farmer from Chŏlla, trembling, all a-tremble as though he'd encountered mid-winter in May or June.

Hey, you! You're one of the Five Bandits, aren't you?

No, Sir!

What are you, then?

I'm a snatcher, Sir.

A snatcher? So much the better. Snatcher, Shoplifter, Pusher, Pickpocket, Crook, all taken together,

make up Five Bandits, right?

Aigu, I'm not a snatcher, Sir.

Then what are you?

I'm a pimp, Sir.

A pimp? So much the better. Pimp, Whore, Brothel-keeper, Hooligan, No-good, all taken together,

criminals against morality, make up Five Bandits, right?

Aigu, I'm not a pimp, Sir.

Then what are you?

I'm a gum-peddler, Sir.

A gum-seller? So much the better. Gum-seller, Cigarette-seller, Stockings-seller, Sweets-seller, Chocolate-seller, all taken together,

selling foreign goods, make up Five Bandits, right?

Aigu, I'm not a gum-seller, Sir.

Then what are you?

I'm a beggar, Sir.

A beggar? So much the better. Beggar, Leper, Rag-picker, Panhandler, Cadger, all taken together,

Five Bandits inclined to crime, that's your name. We should dispatch this beggar fellow off to prison at once.

Aigu, aigu, that's not who I am, Sir. I'm not one of the Five Bandits at all. I once was a farmer

but, unable to eat, I came up to Seoul to earn a living. When it comes to crime,

the only crime I'm guilty of is that last night I was so hungry I stole a bun, that's all.

This way, smash, that way, bash, upward, twist, downward, crunch,,

lash him, whip him, drown him, burn him, tan his hide then flay him, fly the plane, hang him upside-down, fill him with soapy water mixed with powdered peppers, vinegar, still what comes crawling out of his mouth is an impudent groan:

I'm not, I say!

Nothing more.

The chief of police gently urges him. Just look:

Just tell me who the Five Bandits are and where they are, I'll save your life.

BrightBoy Kkwesu, hearing that, thinks: Right, and answers:

The Five Bandits are ConglomerApe, AssemblyMutt, TopCivilSerpent, GeneralInChimp and HighMinisCur, five wild beasts; right now they're holding a thieving contest over in Tongbinggo-dong.

Aha, I've often heard those names somewhere. Are they really wild beasts?

You bet they are. Beasts, and really vicious beasts at that.

Right you are. Good boy. You should have said that before.

The chief of police was so content he slapped his knees

only he hit so roughly the knee bones were smashed, but still,

even if he's almost dying, death is private while merit is public.

You, Kkwesu, lead the way. I'll catch them red handed, then once they've been drawn and quartered, I'm sure to be promoted.

With Kkwesu leading the way, the chief of police sets out.

Tiger eyes glaring fiercely, giant eyes blazing like daylight headlights, glaring madly,

brrm, brrm, brrroom, snick snack,

punching, yelling, he rushes along like a gale of wind.

Out of my way, make way, I say.

pigsty's splendid in Japanese mode,
below the house a pond is dug, in the pond a mound of stones rises high, layer upon layer.

Then peeping in through the slightly open door, he sees:

nacre cabinets, matt-surfaced steel trunks, phoenix-adorned dragon-chests, dragon-adorned phoenix-chests, a chest with three thousand three hundred and thirty-three levels, flowered-wardrobes ornamented with painted carnations, a jade salver the size of a playing-field, candlesticks in gold, silver and bronze, soaring high as buildings, electric clocks, electric rice-bowls, electric kettles, electric chopsticks, electric vases, electric mirrors, electric books, electric briefcases,

iron glassware, clay woodware, Chosŏn celadon, white porcelain from Koryŏ, Picassos hanging upside down, Chagalls hung sideways, orchid paintings by Sŏkpa glossily mounted in gold-lacquered frames,

four hundred scroll paintings hanging up, eight thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight paintings of mountains, rivers, flowers, birds, butterflies, people, all crammed together,

pewter earthenware, Tang vases, Japanese vases, American vases, French vases, Italian vases, a television sheathed in a tiger-skin rug, a Sony recorder in a marquetry chest, a Mitchell camera on a tortoiseshell table, an RCA projector beside a coral book case, a Parker fountain pen in an amber writing-brush holder, chandeliers with candles lit, castor-oil-burning standing lamps, indirect-direct, straight-curving, ceiling-floor-wall lighting, bright-dark, gorgeous-discreet.

He beholds the women's ornaments: hairpins of green jade, shoes adorned with white jade, brooches of gold, teeth of platinum, flowered amber ear-plugs, yellow amber vagina-plugs, coral butt-plugs,

ruby navel-plugs, buttons of gold, ear-rings of pearl, luminescent jewels as nose-rings, amethyst necklaces, sapphire armlets,

emerald anklets, diamond girdles, turquoise spectacle-frames,

only their rings are gilded three-penny lead rings that sparkle away for all they're worth like torches in darkest night!

As he beholds all the different dishes, the cosmos trembles at the sound as he gulps down flowing saliva:

broiled cow-hair, fried pigs' nostrils, goats' beards in batter, boiled deer horns, shish-kebab of four-footed chicken-legs, dried pheasant-fins,

tempura of bream-wings, pickled corvinas' toenails, the ears of croakers, bass, amberjacks, flounders and sweetfish, cut off and served up raw in salads,

stews of the scales from octopus and sea-slugs, pork cutlets of beef, beef cutlets of pork, soup of swellfish with its blood not drained,

fresh chestnuts, broiled chestnuts, crab apples, pear seeds dried and wrapped in gold foil, banana rice punch, pineapple punch, sugar-coated fig-flower petals,

honed cookies made of rongalite bleach, honey-cakes of methadone, saccharine condiments, poached frog-spawn broth, lentil jelly, seaweed jelly;

magniputrescent-fruit liquor, Suntory, cassia-angelica liquor, Champagne, pine-needle liquor, dry gin, shrimp liquor, absinthe, aralia liquor, Johnnie Walker, wolfberry liquor, White Horse, Mountain Hermit Liquor, Jim Beam, panacea liquor, Napoleon Cognac, rice wine, rice hooch, soju, sake, firewater, kaoliang spirits, vodka, rum!

Mouth gaping wide, no thought of shutting it, the police chief drooldrooldrool-drooldrooldrools and speaks:

Surprise, surprise, indeed!

Is all that wealth the booty got by stealing?

If I had known, I would soon have become a bandit too.

My enemies they are, my enemies, those two syllables, 'conscience,' my mortal enemies.

As he stands there lamenting and reflecting inwardly,
one glides up and slides a glass into his hands.

It's a drink he's never seen, never heard of, let alone tasted before.

Helter-skelter, one glass, two, hurry-scurry, three glasses, four,

Drunk at last, the police chief rises, launches into a speech,

but he must have devoured too many snacks, his teeth are almost worn away,

from his mouth comes the sound of teeth grating together as he jabbers on, yet his voice is grave, his logic impeccable,

the words of a sage:

Esteemed and venerable master bandits!

Being a thief is not the crime of thieves, but the crime of society that produces thieves.

All you most honorable and respected lord thieves, you are no thieves but faithful servants of society

and it is my most earnest hope and desire that you will ever advance, progress, speed forward, gain ground.

At the end of his speech applause mingled with laughter rings through the world,

while the police chief grabs poor BrightBoy Kkwesu, binds him fast:

Wretch, I'm booking you for calumny.

Twilight is falling.

Nostalgia mourns as the sun sets beyond the western hills.

The solitary goose seeks its mate, the crescent moon hangs faint on high,
the river burns red and flows like blood,

alas, the night bird complains so sadly sadly, alas, alas,

bean-sized BrightBoy Kkwesu, tightly bound, totters at the police chief's haughty belchings.

Alas, alas for our poor BrightBoy Kkwesu, alas.

Starving in Chōlla, came up to Seoul to earn a living,

suffered mistreatment of every kind in East Gate, South Gate, Pongch'ōn-dong, Moraenae,
and now he is headed, he has no choice, he's headed for prison now, for sure.

Alas, who is there can rectify this unjust, lamentable, regrettable fate and bring about justice?

Farewell, Kkwesu!

Goodbye!

Farewell, in Heaven's name!

So BrightBoy Kkwesu is led off, thrown into jail.

Next, the Five Bandits summon the police chief and, condescending to acknowledge his laudable valor,

invite him to be their guard, living in the kennel beside the main gate of their mansion.

On hearing that, the police chief is thrilled with delight.

He shouts for joy, tra la la. He brings along all kinds of weapons, arranges them in solemn order, lives happily ever after in his kennel, until one bright, cloudless morning, suddenly, just as he was stretching, struck by lightning, he died.

Just then, the story goes, the Five Bandits dropped dead too, blood spouting from every one of their six orifices. Ha ha ha.

All their deeds, unforgotten, have remained alive in the mouths of a hundred generations, passed down at length until at last they found fertile soil in a poor beggar poet like myself.

¹ Ko Jae-bong murdered 6 members of a family in the course of a robbery in 1963, for which he was hanged.

² The “Five Bandits” is a term often applied by Koreans to five high Korean officials who supported the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, so betraying the country. The poet used special Chinese characters for the names of the Bandits. Pronounced in Korean fashion, they sound like the words “Conglomerate, Assemblyman, High Civil Servant, General and Minister” 재벌(狢猿), 국회의원 (?猯狢猿), 고급공무원(跼磔功無猿), 장성(長猩), 장차관(曠차갓 + 差曠) but several of the Chinese characters use the radical ‘dog’ or are otherwise related to dogs, pigs and monkeys etc, to suggest the bestial quality of these figures in an insulting way. This cannot be paralleled in English, of course, and a parodic parallel has been invented using ConglomerApe, AssemblyMutt, TopCivilSerpent, GenerallnChimp and HighMinisCur.

³ Notorious call-girl with high-profile clients who was found murdered in 1970 in mysterious circumstances