

Poems

by
KU SANG

Translated from the Korean by Brother Anthony, of Taizé

Contents

1. Mystery	1
Myself	1
Meditation	3
Here and There	4
Within Creation	5
In a Winter Orchard	7
Mystery	8
Midday Prayer	9
Within an Apple	10
A Pebble	11
A Bundle of Stray Thoughts	12
Concerning the Void	13
Concerning Secret Joys	15
2. Impermanent I	16
Comic Dialogue	16
White Lotus	17
Gingko Trees	18
Certain Touching Memories	19
Touching Sights	20
Komo Station, Mother's Station	21
Impermanent I	22
News of Death	23
Old Age	24
3. From Dreyfus' Bench	25
On Suffering	25
Dawning	26
Addition to Exodus	27
I Give Myself Up	28
Vested with Moses' Foresight and Wrath	29
Shame	31
From Dreyfus' Bench	32
Weeping of Magpies	33
Homeward Journey	34
The Pen	35
4. Mysterious Buds	36
In all Places	36
To John	38
Christmas lament	39
Easter Hymn	40
Before the Virgin's Statue	41
Mysterious Buds	42
Mysterious Wealth	43
The True Appearance of the Word	44

Jesus of Nazareth	45
5. Garden by Moonlight	47
Springtime Dances	47
Spring Washing.....	48
Spring Chrysanthemums	49
Scenes of a Summer's Day	51
Seaside in a Lost Homeland.....	53
Moonlit Evening	55
Garden by Moonlight.....	56
Thoughts as Winter Comes.....	57
In a Winter Street	58
6. Even the Knots on Quince Trees Tell Tales.....	59
7. Wasteland Poems	176
8. Diary of the Fields.....	1
9. Christopher's River	2
10. The Crow	67
11. Infant Splendor	72
New Year	72
Wings	73
Rebirth.....	74
April.....	75
The World of grown-ups.....	76
Shame.....	77
A tricycle.....	78
Bathing	79
Lord! Once again.....	80
Substance and reality	81
Scenes from life	82
Playing by himself.....	84
Dreams	85
Old children	86
The baby now.....	87
A bed of roses	88
Last words	89
Habitual ways of speaking	90
Picture and recollection.....	91
Fire in my heart	92
Interview with granddaughters.....	93
A wry smile.....	94
Touching scenes.....	95
A beard.....	96
Stolen glances	98
Dandelion.....	99
Like this and like that.....	100
Hole in the heart.....	101
A mirror-stand.....	102

A reminiscence.....	103
Weeds.....	104
With wild flowers	105
Humanity.....	106
Chupung Pass.....	107
A vision.....	108
Harvest Moon Festival	110
Prayer	111
A horrible feeling	112
Holy Mary, Mother of God!.....	113
Quantity.....	114
Fresh and green	115
Evening twilight.....	116
Eternity within.....	118
Come out, snake!	119
A fable.....	121
Me	122
Poetic feeling	123
Poetry	124
This year.....	125
Dirty Mop Monk	126
Jung Kwang's picture of a little boy	127
Jung Kwang's picture of a little girl.....	128

1. Mystery

Myself

It is more than
the deep roots of every emotion,
big or small, of every kind,
that squirm and kick like little children
somewhere inside

and more than
the deep-sea fish
of six senses and seven sins,
that waves its tail
like a night-time shadow on a window pane

more, too, than
star-dust littering the yards
of Original Sin and Karma,
passing through the obscure darkness of the potter's kiln

and more than
the oasis spring gushing from the desert sand,
melting again into foam and flowing
after filtering through strata of origins and time
with their rustle of dry grass,
and the crack in the glacier, or even exploding particles

more, too, than
the world, itself smaller
than a millet seed
in the cosmic vastnesses

and more than
the ether -- fullness of the boundless void
reaching beyond billions of light years
of starlight

more, too, than
the substantiality such fullness gives,
and more than its opposing nihilism,
more, too, than unknown death

more, greater,
a soundless cosmic shout!
An immensity embracing Eternity!

Myself.

Meditation

On the gleaming flank of an age-old rock,
lying like the eggs of some green insect,
fresh green moss is growing.

Is it just an effect of the springtime rain
that germinates the grain?
Or is it a return of infancy
in this centuries-old stone?

Here and now is an inevitable condition
where flowers, fruit,
and leaves too, are useless,
neither winds and rain,
nor thunder and lightning
are heard,
without distinction of day and night,
and knowing nothing of stench and perfume,
no separation of past, and real,
and dream.

Within the rock, no flow of filth, but
the brightness of a paper window in the morning sunlight!
In its communion with heaven's vastness,
accepting all the chaos of this world's variety-show,
by simply sitting there in silent meditation
it stills the ocean's tumult.

'But I am no Aladdin's lamp!'

Ah, moss so prudently clinging
to the indifferent rock!
True image of Meditation!

Here and There

A turnip field on a mountainside.
Around an ancient, springtime-drowsy rock
a single blowfly buzzes.

It comes and goes, all the time,
among old, pallid-like pats of dung
that lie in the grass on the crestward path,
now perching low on the rock's shaded waist,
now squatting high on its sunburned brow,
now moistening itself at the stagnant water
held in deep pits on its rocky crown,

then delicately folding its legs in prayer,
depositing spots of pustular waste
or laying tiny, nit-like eggs,

then flying off to land on a spring chrysanthemum's stamens,
a single red spot in the midst of the turnip field,
and there, like a little boy hypnotized by a cinema screen,
staring down at fields, rivers, roads,
as they stretch out level to the far horizon

and suddenly the world seems all suspended,
like a green, dead body,
a moment without the sound of breathing,
a moment delivered from starvation, disdain and slaughter,
this moment, without curses or conspiring,

and somehow, blowfly, dungfly,
as if for you this stillness
bred a grieving fear,
echoing, your buzzing seems to weep.

Within Creation

Beneath the garden fence,
all round the storage platform,
the rose moss blooms.

With multi-colored stamens
crowning the soft white stems
they flirt there, posing,
nudging and jostling,
rubbing their cheeks, they bloom.

The water-melon moon
is perched high in the sky;
the night, nearly spent, is moist with dew,
and tiny butterflies come visiting,
no larger than the brooch
on my younger daughter's breast,
they hover lightly over the stamens,

yellow,
red,
pink,
green,
violet,
purple,

these butterflies, flitting from stamen to stamen
in pollen quest!
Swarms of butterflies, since spring began,
even by night, flying innumerable!

Thus bringing colors to the rainbow flowers
over thousands of years, how huge a task
these tiny things have performed, to be sure!

Behind the shed soft persimmons hang red
which, before autumn came,
would scorch and shrivel your mouth;
on the hill above, the chestnuts, too,
having bristled with spines to keep strangers at bay,
now that the nuts are ripe
and shine ready to fall,

open their mouths of their own accord.

Ah, every creature, every one,
knows the meaning of here, and tomorrow,
and so they live in togetherness,
assisting each other with all their hearts;
so how is it that I, a man, stand here
this night, all alone, like a rotting stick in a fence,
understanding nothing?

In a Winter Orchard

In the orchard white with snow
like sprinkled salt,
a plum tree raises thick black branches
in a victory sign,
outlined with flowers in full bloom,
like an Easter garland.

‘Behold, whoever puts his life in me,
even though he dies, will never die;
do not be doubtful
of invisible realities.’

Playfully, a single magpie
hops from branch to branch.

*

Beside a hole gaping
like a cavity in a lung,
stiff as a corpse
an apple tree lies, a full arm’s girth.

A man comes by, dark as shade,
with a frame bound upon his back;
he lops the dead branches with an axe,
splits the trunk, and bears it all away.

‘Behold, a figure of the dead
who will tomorrow be cast
into perdition’s flames;
beware, then, lest the roots of your existence
become infected!’

A crow flies cawing
across the frozen sky.

Mystery

On the carpet spread in the prison cell,
so large that it fills the whole design,
a golden sunflower blazes.

Beyond the octagonal window
the city surges like ocean waves,
with factory-warships and high-rise steamers,
to say nothing of the slum shack cockle-boats.

In the sky, hovering over the city
as if attached to a cord,
a great black bat flies,
leading her young,
while in the room a naked man,
kneeling, opens wide his mouth,
about to devour a yellow butterfly
caught between his finger and thumb.

In the looking-glass built into one wall
a third man, like the other's reflection,
is dancing open-mouthed
in pursuit of another butterfly
while in the opposite wall a barred window,
edged with sharp knives,
looks out onto a sheer cliff
where a single flower is blooming.

Within this Mystery, my image
is beautifully weeping
towards a light that offers no salvation.

Midday Prayer

Take away this darkling veil
that lies between myself and space.
Take away from off the earth all boundary lines,
all fences and all walls.
Take away all human hatred,
greed, and all discrimination.
Take away surrender and despair,
both mine and theirs.

Restore again to me the gift of wonder, tears and prayer.
Restore again the dreams and loves of all the dead.
Restore again the hurts that human hands inflict on Nature.

And grant words to that rock, a face to this breeze,
and oh, to me grant to live eternally
as a radiancy of purity.

Within an Apple

Within a single apple's sphere
the clouds drift by.

Within a single apple's sphere
the good earth breathes.

Within a single apple's sphere
the river flows along.

Within a single apple's sphere
the sun blazes down.

Within a single apple's sphere
moon and stars whisper.

And within a single apple's sphere
our striving and our loving live eternal.

A Pebble

On the path before my house
every day I meet a pebble
that once was kicked by my passing toe.

At first we just casually
brushed past each other, morning and night,
but gradually the stone began to address me
and furtively reach out a hand,
so that we grew close, like friends.

And now each morning the stone,
blooming inwardly with flowers of Grace,
gives me its blessing,
and even late at night
it waits watchfully to greet me.

Sometimes, flying as on angels' wings
it visits me in my room
and explains to me the Mystery of Meeting,
reveals the immortal nature of Relationship.

So now, whenever I meet the stone,
I am so uncivilized and insecure
that I can only feel ashamed.

A Bundle of Stray Thoughts

1.

I, in the prison myself have built,
a prisoner lie.

You, in the chains yourself have wrought,
shackled lie.

He, in the rope himself has spun,
entangled lies.

We each, in throwing off
the bridle each one wears,

see at last the world aright
and taste of life's true joys.

2.

Life is a matter of long enduring!
Life is a matter of long enduring!
Life is a matter of long, long enduring!

Accomplishing of talent is in long enduring,
achieving of love, too, is a matter of long enduring!

Having mis-used all my gifts,
having mis-loved all my loves,

only then did I realize
that one, simple fact!

Concerning the Void

My young friends!
If you wish to hear this message,
first of all empty your hearts
and make them jars
without lid of desire
or base of anxiety.

If you do that, the rainbow of desires
and Fate with all its purulence
will be scattered wide,
like dandelion puff.
The cords of love and hate will break.
The bars of good and bad will gape.
The watch-towers of myth will crumble.
At last, I say, in peace
you will be free.

My young friends!
What is called the Void
is in fact full possession.
From darkness to light,
from fire to water,
from mud to the garden,
from food to the sewer,
from wind to the inside of the stone,
from the human to the beast,
from the fish to the worm,
from the eyes of the prisoner to the eyes of the guard,

from the queen to the beggar,
from poetry to science,
from war to peace,
flowing like melted snow
in springtime streams,
it was from the beginning
like the white spaces left
in oriental paintings,
giving birth to life and death,
to splendor and decay,
filling time and space
utterly and completely.

Therefore the Void
brings into perfect harmony
existence and generation,
as it makes possible
the co-existence of Destiny and Freedom
and, offering up the paeans of all existence,
as it brings within itself that vast celestial vault
into correspondence with itself
it is entirely a matter of mystery.

My young friends! What is this condition?
Let me assure you,
it lies in the reconciled acknowledgement
of life emerging from the blessing
of the blind abyss
and rising to the splendor of the heights.

Concerning Secret Joys

Children!

Let us imagine this place where I am strolling
to be a magpie's nest
up in the branches of an old plum tree!

Ah! You reckon I am living in a fool's paradise
and it makes you laugh out loud;
yet I have things to tell, no exaggeration,
more than any hero has.

Nowadays, Time and I
have grown indifferent to one another;
the wave-tossed world before my eyes,
this charivari of living and dying,
all is reduced to a distant reverberation
like snow by moonlight,
all human sympathies reconciled.

Children!

As I feast fresh, at break of day,
upon dawn's splendor spread along the branches
or upon the stillness of an evening twilight,
you simply cannot know
such joy as I experience then:
Fate made to correspond with feeling.

You simply cannot know
such happy pain.

2. Impermanent I

Comic Dialogue

Darling!
Don't you know?
The thing I'm looking for,
you don't know?

Don't even you know?
The thing I'm looking for now,
that thing, I don't know what it is,
that's the thing I mean!

And you say you can read my thoughts
even with your eyes closed!
That thing I've been looking for all my life,
what is it?
Don't you know?
Darling!

White Lotus

In the wastelands of my heart,
sprung up unknown to man or beast,
is one white lotus plant.

In my desert-thirsty heart,
alas, why has this bud sprung up?
For now it should bloom, but it finds no way,
this white lotus flower.

Although I anxiously watch all night,
you have no wall to shield you from harm:
suppose the urchins pluck you away?
I could only suffer, frozen, dumb.

Passers-by, coveting you,
may carry you off, root and all;
I ought to prevent that, but have no means,
bud in my heart of a white lotus flower.

If you had simply never sprung up at all,
I would not have cared, most special flower;
but now, when I see you near by or afar,
the lids of the eyes of my soul inflame.

Ginkgo Trees

-- A Song of our Marriage

Here I stand.

Turned towards you
who steadfastly wait for me,
standing there; so too I stand here.

Now is quite unlike sweet dreamland,
no response to kisses and tickling, at all;
but as we have put down deep roots of submission
into the ground of this generous loving,
you and I stand face to face.

Days and months, passing, leave in us rings of the years;
with the seasons, dreams ripen between every leaf,
then scatter,

while we simply bear fruit,
yours and mine,
as we stand for a lifetime
face to face.

Certain Touching Memories

After one group meditation session
we had a break for relaxation
in the shade of the convent grove
where a statue of the Virgin stood.

A delicately aging lady of the parish
came and sat beside me on a log bench; she began:
'The region near Songdown, that is where I am from!
Forty years ago, the mere sight of you
passing down the road in front of our yard
was enough to make me loose my senses,
and the memory has lasted a whole lifetime.
Oh, I met a nice reliable husband,
have encountered no great problems in life,
I have had several children and now
I have grandchildren too,
but your image has never faded.
Whenever I saw your name or your picture in the press
my heart would always beat faster for joy.
I have got and read all you have ever written.
And if I now go to church,
that too is by your example.
Of course, I know it must be embarrassing for you
to hear this kind of crazy talk;
but I did so want, just once in my life,
to meet you and tell you all these things!'
she said, and gracefully lowered her eyes.

I could find no reply;
'Perhaps, if you had only said this before...'
I joked.

'I could scarcely anticipate how lightly
you would take it,' she promptly retorted, to my relief.
We looked at each other, and beamed broadly.

At that moment came the sound of the assembly bell,
so side by side, like an elderly couple,
we duly made our way to the chapel.

Touching Sights

Touched by an autumn afternoon's pale sunlight,
on the piano keyboard lid
lies a pair of stockings.

They must have been laid aside
by my daughter who is living abroad
when she was leaving this morning.

Seeing this still-life composition, so strange
yet so completely familiar,
after fumbling and groping in my memories:

In Taegu, down a narrow lane behind the herb market,
opening my eyes in a singing-girl's room one morning
and, laid on a chest beside my pillow,
two stocking slippers come to mind.

At the same moment I begin to murmur
a phrase from a poem by O Il-Do:
'On a tree's bare branch her basket hangs,
where then has my darling gone?'

Komo Station, Mother's Station

Whenever I pass Komo Station,
my mother is waiting.

Out in front of the garden gate, she is waiting,
looking scarcely older than my wife looks now,
looking just as when she saw me off
the day I crossed the 38th Parallel,
out in the lane, she is waiting.

Living helter-skelter, day by day,
rattling the empty lunch-box in my satchel,
coming home from school by train, as in that childhood,
so now when my hair is as grey
as my father's was when he died,
out by the station she is waiting.

My mother, who stayed behind
alone in our North Korean home,
alive still, or dead, I do not know,
has come here now and is waiting.

(Note: Komo is on the outskirts of Taegu, South Korea, and its name means 'Mother-caring,
Mother-recollecting'. Trans.)

Impermanent I

Nowadays, in that world of other people
that flows away like Time,
my formerly panting breath subsides,
and even repentance grows faint in my breast.

As I tread on my shadow,
now more real than myself,
and stand aimlessly
like a reed waving in a dream,
and from a hole in my worn pocket
hopes and memories leak away,
fag ends and loves drop away,
bit by bit everything falls away,

no drug or drink to drown things in,
alone, awake, I stand.
Nothing matters at all.

News of Death

This spring
news of a friend's death
came twice within three days.

The ones we love and miss go first.

A poet's income being what it is,
I avoid funerals.

Whenever I stand before someone dead
I feel it's my turn next.

But nothing at all is ready.

My life has been far too unfaithful,
I have failed my family
and the world too much.

And when I enter the other world,
I shall be ashamed to meet parents or neighbors.

And then, towards God
I feel nothing but dread.

Yet news of my death
cannot be long in coming.

Old Age

Here we are in no desert land.

It is rather a fresh field, nurturing mysterious buds
that will only blossom in Eternity's land.

In youth we tended to wield our bodies
but now we must use strength of mind,
and as we rouse up our sleepy souls
we must apply our attention to metaphysical things.

Above all, let us not be slaves to specters of loneliness,
not experience cares and concerns as distractions.

Loneliness and insecurity are graces
announcing the birth of a new dimension;
using now the body's aging, and the lack of energy,
as stimuli offered to the mind,
let us advance towards life's true renewal.

The less the joys of the flesh become,
the clearer we see both life and self;
so, as the flames of faith, hope, and love burn brighter,
let us listen more closely to Eternity's voice.

Now let us awake from this illusory dream
where, like the leaves and blossoms of Nature,
all blooms and vanishes with the seasons,

and cherishing a glorious, undying dream
that will bloom beyond death, on another shore,
let us live an old age as radiant as silver.

3. From Dreyfus' Bench

On Suffering

They come storming on. Stones fly.
The boys wield dung-bound millet stalks,
the older men swing hoes as on they come in rough pursuit,
I turn and stand, tears trickling down,
sheltering a brow from which blood thickly oozes,
no sign of mother's face here,
where can I run to now?

Pursued and again pursued, I hid.
In the hut where they keep the hearse, I hid.
Insults, deep disgrace, shouts of anger,
round and round like a swarm of bees they turned
while I quickly pushed open the lid of the hearse,
jumped in, lay down, and held my breath.

My breast grew cool, like after coughing blood,
my heart grew light, like after drinking wine;
within the hearse, that neither man nor ghost dares approach,
I found myself weaving a scene from a sweet dream.
The face of one resting like a corpse in a hearse,
must seem white as the full moon itself.
A girl, sly as the harvest moon, eyes twinkling stars,
seemed to be pouring sweet oil upon my wounds:
a dream within my sweet dream.

And by the pond of memory
a single lotus flower of love seemed to bloom.
That other love was riven to loneliness,
she stood there alone, like a statue, a log,
having put off her scarlet shoes.

Riding the hearse, bright as a cartload of flowers,
and following the road towards Limbo,
even the noise of keening is joyful!
Ah, my darling in mourning white,
only wait for the third day to come.

Dawning

In the sky, now brightening to the East,
a crow passes.

As night is about to give way to dawn,
this street, as sinister as the Casbah,
is haunted by deep shadows,
a dreadful alley...

but then,
to the sound of a drum-beat,
the citadel gates, thick with moss of resentment,
creak open, and along the street,
venom-spread like a serpent's back,
a torch-bearing Sibyl rides, crying 'Awake!'
from a white courser's back.

Trampling of hooves, trampling of hooves,
clashing of spears and swords,
the screams of peoples
ready for slaughter
fill the air.

And as the sun rises,
a man vomits blood and dies
-- his smile radiant.

Addition to Exodus

You know, in those days too they made
a golden calf and worshipped it.

Trust, sincerity or love,
such basic necessities of existence,
thrown aside like old sticks or worn-out boots,
they became beasts,
fighting one another, simply wearing human masks.

The world, with Aaron's hoardes in charge,
became a place of submissiveness.

But even then there were people
trusting, waiting for Moses to come down from Sinai,
simply, in solitude.

Ah, Canaan,
flowing with milk and honey!
Ah, far off and how hard to reach.

I Give Myself Up

That driver who ran over a child and killed it,
it was I.

That hired killer who strangled a woman,
it was I.

That run-away thief who robbed a bank,
it was I.

(Second Summary Statement)

In fact, the actual agent
of all the so-far unsolved crimes
is myself, I fear.

The reasons for such crimes? I wonder.
Poverty, ignorance, the vicious circles of history?
No, rather the blood of Cain still flowing in me
committed these crimes, might we not say?
Or engendered these evils, might we not say?
So now, happily accepting my bonds,
I quietly mount the scaffold.

Whether I have any last words?
Frankly speaking, even at this moment of dying
not to be able to rid myself of the feeling
of being an accomplice with forty million others
is what I most regret.

Vested with Moses' Foresight and Wrath

Vested with Moses' foresight and wrath, I speak:
If this new year you would return to truly human living,
you must first get rid
of the golden calf you now adore:

If you would banish from your table all harmful foodstuffs,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you hope to put an end to air-pollution in your city,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you aim to abolish discord in your household,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you desire harmony with brethren and neighbors,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you are to save little children from dying in accidents,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you intend to keep marital fidelity,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you wish to avoid daylight murder and robbery,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you would prevent slaughter on land and sea,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you hope to see eternal truths taught and learned at school,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you look to be treated and healed in hospitals,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you expect the law to protect you with its justice,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you intend to reduce the gap between rich and poor,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you intend to escape mutual indifference and rejection,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you do not want the curse of another civil war,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf
and if you want to reconcile in a peaceful heart
dreams and actions,
if you would venerate once again the fruits
of invisible strength and life bestowed by such things
as Eternity, faith or love,
 first you must get rid of that golden calf.

Vested with Moses' foresight and wrath, I speak:

If this new year you wish to live purely, impeccably,
you must first get rid of the golden calf you now adore.

Shame

In the zoo,
peering between bars and netting,
I search for an animal
that knows what is shame.

I say, keeper!
Might there just possibly be
in those monkeys' red posteriors
at least some trace of it?

What of the bear's paw, perpetually licked?
Or the seals' whiskers,
or maybe the parrot's beak?
Is there really no trace of it there?

Since shame has vanished
from this city's people,
I came to the zoo to look for it.

From Dreyfus' Bench

- Convict Jean's Soliloquy

Papillon! Now the evening sea is nothing but a rocking darkness, but how could I ever forget the image of you drifting away on a coconut trunk, even though I die and pass to the other world!

Papillon! If I did not go away with you, it was not at all because I was afraid of being found out by the guards and getting lashed, or of being eaten by sharks or dolphins and becoming a sea-spirit, and it was not from a dread that your seventh escape would fail too and we would be hauled back together.

Papillon! Before you left, I could never have told you this, but I have realized that, even supposing there really is a promised land waiting with open arms to welcome us when we reach the mainland, there is no new life for us. You see, I have come to realize that this world is all a prison, no matter where you go, and that all people without exception are convicts in it. I have realized that a life spent under the fierce glares of the guards who watch over this 'Island of Death', and getting along with all the dangerous ruffians housed in our cell, while raising the 200 pigs I am in charge of, that such a life is no better and no worse than life anywhere else in the world.

Papillon! Therefore the freedom that you are leaving here in search of looks to me just like shackles. I feel that in this world there is no land without barred windows and chains, visible or invisible, there is only that freedom which we make our life's domain within ourselves and which transforms every kind of bond into our own loving and yearning.

Papillon! Having come to see all this, I let you go off alone, and now I am so very lonely.

(Note: In Henri Charrière's 'Papillon', 'Dreyfus' Bench' is the name given to a bench on the cliff-top of the Island of Death, the penal colony. Jean is a Chinese prisoner who befriends the main character but refuses to escape with him. Trans.)

Weeping of Magpies

On the roof of Seoul City Hall,
magpies in a cage, earlier than others
show running eyes.
Partly on account of the all-pervading exhaust fumes,
but mainly they weep
because their present life is so awful.

Pecking at the grain that is regularly scattered, they weep.
Sipping the water in a bowl, they weep.
Watching the pigeons in the square fly up and down, they weep.
Looking across to the distant hills,
seeing the trees in the near-by park, they weep.
Watching the cars lined up nose-to-tail, they weep.
Beholding the activities of the people coming and going, they weep.
Seeing the source of all authority at times appear, they weep.
Huddled at night in artificial nests, they weep.
Looking up by night at the stars in the sky, they weep.
Recalling the past, they weep.
Imagining the future, they weep.
And if they consider the chicks
that hatch and grow up in their cage,
the tears pour down.

On the roof of Seoul City Hall,
magpies in a cage, earlier than others,
show running eyes.

Homeward Journey

On board Gemini 6,
the rendez-vous completed,
on the way back down,
just as in the evening
farmers return homeward
riding on oxen
and playing willow flutes,

eating one mouthful less of steak
(to reduce his weight)
then pulling out the harmonica
hidden in an arm pocket
and making music, oomp-pa-pa,
eager to be home with wife and kids,
he sailed back down earthwards.

The Pen

As a drop of dew penetrates the ground
then issues as a springing source,
with that same limpid energy
let us wield the pen.

As men set fire to dense forests
then till the wild and create new fields,
with that same fertile vision
let us wield the pen.

With all the arduous sweat of the miner
piercing rock a thousand feet below
let us wield the pen.

With all the precision and care
of the surgeon's scalpel in an open heart
let us wield the pen.

With reasoned thought
bright as the snow on high mountains,
with the dexterity of soldiers
checking front-line positions,
with the slave's resolve and determination
as he breaks his irons with his bare teeth,
overcoming discouragement and despair
like Sisyphus,

vested with a love
that weeps even to see
a new-sprung weed trampled on,
with the spiritual poverty of a Paek-Kyol,
let us wield the pen.

(Note: Paek Kyol, literally 'Hundred Patches' was a famous scholar renowned for his great poverty and integrity. Trans.)

4. Mysterious Buds

In all Places

Are you within such stillness
as when, above a shimmering pond,
a dreamlike butterfly gently descends?

Are you obscurely there
in the desolate hills under rain,
their secluded places wrapped in darkness?

Are you like the compassion
appearing in hillside temple courts
where a flowering plantain's leaves
shelter a single rose-moss flower?

Are you found forlorn
beneath the bright hanging moon,
like shadows cast by a rooftop terrace?

Are you in some such height
as where chains of blue-tinged peaks
rise like screens around,
but above towers one snow-bright?

Are you in such perfect composure
as the long river timelessly flowing,
reflecting the sun and the moon?

Are you in the transparent frost
that unfolds on chill autumn mornings,
coating the naked branches?

Are you within that abundance
that undulates in the fields,
gold in the setting sun's slanting rays?

Are you too reduced to original silence,
like the soil ravaged by long winter's cold,
all fever spent?

Are you in such solemn power

as when the typhoon surges
and tidal waves race,
with clashes of lightning and thunder?

Are you as far removed
as the blending of vast blue immensity,
sea and sky made one
beyond all boundlessness?

Are you resplendent
as daybreak in the eastern sky,
high above the sevenfold rainbow's gleam,
like constellations' jewelled thrones?

Are you within the inborn joy
of swarms of fish flashing in jade-green streams
and the birds that chirp
while plum and peach delicately bloom?

Are you in the impassibility
of the mountain sheep
that nibbles grass then chews the cud,
looking up now at a cloud, now at a hill?

Are you in such spotless innocence
as shines in the eyes of a child
that gazes up at its mother and clasps
her breast through an open blouse?

Are you looking down on us
with the profound white-bearded smile
of drawings of Taoist Mountain Wizards?

You who fill all space and time,
whom I cannot serve under any such forms
but who resemble the white spaces in pictures
where the brush did not pass!

In no place confined,
by nothing defined,
everywhere present,
Lord God of all!

To John

John! My slow-witted friend!
Have you still not understood that perfect joy
would not be in you, even if having written poems
bright as the sun on a New Year's morning
you enjoyed world-wide fame?

John! My slow-witted friend!
Have you still not understood that perfect joy
would not be in you, even if you were to marry Miss World
and live in rooms spread with rich cushions
and supplied with ten thousand books,
sitting down three times a day to delicious meals?

John! My slow-witted friend!
Have you still not understood that perfect joy would not be in you, even if your health were far better than anyone else's, or if you held power over tens of millions of subjects, or if you were able to fly to Mars?

John! My slow-witted friend!
Have you still not understood that perfect joy
would not be in you, even if you were adored and revered
by your sons and daughters, while you lived entranced
by the cute antics of all your little grandchildren?
Ah, John! You old leper soul!
Why, if you want to find true joy welling up within you,
well, you may realize one day that everything
in your present life is a source of mystery
and you may come to feel gratitude for so many
undeserved gifts; therefore your brother, Francis of Assisi,
exclaimed: 'If the Lord were to take from me
all the grace he has bestowed, and give it to thieves instead,
he would receive my sincerest thanks.'

Christmas lament

Ah, the venerable Church!
With none of the simple joy of those shepherds
who came first of all
to worship around your crib!
With nothing left of the peace of your stable.

Fearing the coming of your kingdom,
tonight too Herod and his henchmen keep watch,
ready to lop off your young shoots,
keeping Christmas with glaring eyes.

And your disciples,
changing the color of the Gospel
like a beaded dress displayed in a shop window,
the color varying with the lighting,
with the enthusiastic mob,
and the Pharisees, today too,
all crowd around
you;

and like Zaccaeus perched in a tree,
one crow-like soul cries:
'On me and on all held in cursed bondage
turn, oh turn your eyes!'

Easter Hymn

On an old plum tree stump,
seemingly dead and rotten,
like a garland of victory
flowers gleam, dazzling.

Rooted in you, even in death
all things remain alive;
we see them reborn, transfigured.
How then could we doubt
our own Resurrection since
by your own you have given us proof?

Since there is your Resurrection and ours,
Truth exists;
since there is your Resurrection and ours,
Justice triumphs;
since there is your Resurrection and ours,
suffering accepted has value;
since there is your Resurrection and ours,
our faith, hope, love, are not in vain;
since there is your Resurrection and ours,
our lives are not an empty abyss.

In this lost corner of the earth,
dappled by the spreading spring,
as I imagine that Day's world,
made perfect by our Resurrection,
I am overwhelmed in rapture.

Before the Virgin's Statue

Your sweetness, Holy Mother,
comes rising from the lily of the valley!

Held down by your pretty bare feet,
coiled flat on top of the earthly globe,
not at all ill at ease, with eyes half shut
the serpent dozes and shrugs.

Shedding as it passes by
a strong smell of fresh green barley
slyly the spring breeze stirs
your skirts and the deep blue belt;
with your white veil,
your eyes that scan the skies
hold a gleam of vague resentment.

Beyond this nation's celadon skies,
beyond deep gulfs of vast nothingness,
can you glimpse from here
the Kingdom of Jesus your son
who went away, leaving in your silken breast
the wounds of the Seven Sorrows?

This May afternoon,
as I kneel with hands joined
in the shadow of the cliff at Lourdes,
all things are breathing regularly.

Mysterious Buds

The pitiless whirlwinds
have blown themselves out, and within me
mysterious buds have begun to grow.

What then is this freshness
touching my gaunt senses
that were dry as winter acacia trees?

All the things of creation,
once plunged in darkness,
turn into stars
and twinkling begin to shine;
until now locked in a tangled mesh,
my ideas flow free like thread from a skein.

Now there is nothing sad for me
about being born only to die;
all is just one aspect of eternity.

I still feel hungry if a meal is delayed,
my limbs still have rheumatic twinges,
nothing has changed, but within me
mysterious buds have begun to grow,
preparing to bloom with new flowers
once in Eternity's land.

Mysterious Wealth

Feeling today like the Prodigal Son
just arrived back in his father's arms,
I observe the world and all it contains.

June's milky sky glimpsed through a window,
the sunlight dancing over fresh green leaves,
clusters of sparrows that scatter, chirping,
full-blown petunias in pots on verandas,
all strike me as infinitely new,
astonishing and miraculous.

My grandchild, too, rushing round the living-room
and chattering away for all she's worth,
my wife, with her glasses on,
embroidering a pillow-case,
and the neighbors, each with their particularities,
coming and going in the lane below,
all are extremely lovable,
most trustworthy, significant.

Oh, mysterious, immeasurable wealth!
Not to be compared with storeroom riches!
Truly, all that belongs to my Father in Heaven,
all, all is mine!

The True Appearance of the Word

As the cataract of ignorance falls
from off the eyesight of my soul,
I realize that all this huge Creation
round about me is the Word.

The hitherto quite unattended fact
that these familiar fingers number ten,
like the encounter with some miracle,
suddenly astonishes me

and the newly-opened forsythia flowers
in one corner of the hedge beyond my window
entrance me utterly,
like seeing a model of Resurrection.

Smaller than a grain of sand
in the oceanic vastness of the cosmos,
I realize that this my muttering,
by a mysterious grace of the Word,

is no imagined thing, no mere sign,
but Reality itself.

Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus of Nazareth!
Who are you really?

Born in a stable's manger,
dying nailed to a cross with thieves,
the unlucky possessor of an absurd destiny.

Wandering around, without house or home,
you kept company with low class people,
with prostitutes and rebels,
with louts from other regions
normally considered enemies;
you enjoyed eating and drinking with them.

To the poor,
to the hungry,
to those in tears,
to those despised for their just deeds,
insulted, driven out, and dishonored
for having practiced what is right,
you dared to proclaim:
'You, you are the blessed!
Yours, yours is the Kingdom of God!'

You gave sight to the blind,
you opened the deaf man's ears,
you made the cripple walk,
you completely healed the leper's sores,
you brought the dead back to life,

as you yourself said,
heaped with the whole world's hatred,
insulted and driven out,
finally labelled a traitor
and dying without any show,
you are the ultimate failure

and to me, united with you from my mother's womb,
you are the very ground of my being, the way
from which, at times, I incline to stray,
finding it a nuisance,

at times a cause of discouragement, despair;
at times, although extremely familiar,
you look like an absolute stranger.

*

So what on earth are you really like?

You were not a thinker,
you were not a moralist,
you were not one of this world's statesmen,
and you were not the founder of a religion.

Therefore, you did not teach any kind of learning,
you did not teach any kind of rules,
you did not launch any kind of social reform movement,
neither did you teach some kind of detachment from this world.

You did not compute
anyone's past merit, or lack of it,
you did not compute
anyone's past sins, whether many or few.
Really, you overturned the thoughts and words
of everyone in the world:

'Come to me, all you
who are toiling and struggling along
under heavy burdens,
I will give you rest!'
To suffering humanity
you proclaimed liberation,

and you taught that God is our Father,
that he is Love itself, infinite,
that when, nestling like children in his breast,
we forgive as our Father forgives,
and love as our father loves,
then eternal bliss dwells in our lives,
and that, you taught, is called 'the Kingdom of God'
and having practiced at the cost of your life
the sincerity of such loving,
you bore witness by your Resurrection
to that Love's imperishability.

5. Garden by Moonlight

Springtime Dances

The old plum tree stump,
wimpled in white,
is dancing the dance of the crane.

The towering pine trees,
extending green parasols in either hand,
are performing a waltz.

Weeping willows sway in rhythms free,
bony acacias
rock leafless shoulders,
while bamboos rubbing arms and legs
step it out together.

Along the wayside where snow meets the sun
tiny blades of grass, already sprouting,
gently sway.

Seeds, roots, insects, frogs,
that had only been peeping from underground windows
now put on their springtime best,
like actors in backstage dressing rooms.

Now the breath of spring in the breeze
comes gently brushing the naked flesh.

Spring Washing

Along the edge of a barley field
weeping willow trees
dip their tresses in a stream.

Sunbeams beneath the water,
turned to golden grains of sand, dance
then pause, then flow again.

Hunched like toads
new crawled from the ground,
the village women and girls
attack the springtime washing.

Slip-slop. slip-slop,
tacka-tacka-tacka, slosh-slosh,
they beat away
as if pounding out the rice-cake paste.

Chick-check, chick-chock,
yick-yeck, yick-yock,
heh-heh, hee-hee! The tongues wag away:

Here's a baby girl born in the year of the horse!
The father-in-law's not too pleased about that!
And here's a mother-in-law too strict by half,
or a cheeky student for a sister-in-law,
but there a husband's gone back after leave,
and as for the gangsters of a certain political party...

In this pleasant scene
there still remain shadows of personal pain,
like stains in the embroideries
made by young widows.

Spring Chrysanthemums

At the window of a large flat,
in an old orange-box
with a scrap of soil
and a packet of seeds sprinkled,
spring chrysanthemums
yellow,
red,
pink,
turquoise,
white,
are spreading their petals.

Single blossoming sign of Nature
in an artificial world!

Scarcely arrived, the spring-morning sunshine
dazzles, then slips away.

At the third floor opposite, a pink blanket
waves like a tongue while the owner,
a dancer, squints across;

above, on the sixth floor, a student is listening to jazz,
brushing the dandruff from bushy hair
and staring down.

On the ground floor a bank-guard's wife,
her perm in a towel
as she fiercely beats cushions,
pauses to glance up.

And the unmarried pensioner next door,
changing the water in his goldfish-bowl,
stops and looks sideways

while the two kid brothers to the left
stop playing at housekeeping
and turn to look.

In the street a bean-curd seller,
ringing a hand-bell as he passes,

stops and looks up

and the ice-cream man,
pushing his cart along,
looks up too, wiping his brow
while the newly-married housewife
watering her flowers
cannot help thinking of her husband
whom she has just pushed off to work,
after a good number of tongue-bites,
and very slightly she smiles.

Scenes of a Summer's Day

1. Morning.

Mountains, villages and fields,
all decked with scales of green,
dazzle the eyes,

along the far-stretching cotton-white paths
men, bursting with well-being
like those you see in the city
in advertisements for health products,
out at work since dawn
irrigating the rice-fields,
are returning homewards.

2. Noontide.

A jolly lass sets out, bearing the workers' lunch
in a basket on her head,
a hairy dog trotting behind her.

Refreshed by a scoopful of makkoli,
a bowl of rice,
a moment's snooze,
the men go back to the rice fields,
while a pair of white herons
fly across the sky
with a creaking sound.

3. Evening.

Through the evening twilight,
driving a cow,
with a frame on their backs, they return.

The smoke from kitchen fires,
the brushwood gate, offer warm welcome.

As from time immemorial,
hills, villages, fields,
all are unchangingly here,
and even in this land's present chaos

this primordial scene is in itself enough
to restore serenity.

Seaside in a Lost Homeland

First, you bathe in the blue vault of the sky
as it dips itself in the radiant sea,
then, once become pale as green vegetables,
you plough through the thunderous surf
and climb the sandy beach, spread like sackcloth,
and wallow stretched out in the scorching sun;
then, passing a fringe of flowering shrubs,
you enter the green shelter of a pine grove
and there, in its green shade,
you satisfy your healthy appetite.
Ah, my lost homeland! My lost Paradise!
Wonsan! Songdownon!

*

Above your deep blue skirts,
over your silken breasts
a white towel lies stretched
and your heart vibrates heat,
a golden light as from a furnace,
and the whole universe is glorious.
Miles of bright sand!

*

My friend, my Western friend!
Do you really think the Mediterranean,
that sea of burning strands,
can be life's ultimate shore?

No, surely not!
It is not just a matter of scorching sun and blue sea,
of white waves and sparkling strands,
for the liberation we desire is not there.

Only imagine for a moment!
In the very centre of the Pacific Ocean,
that immeasurable vastness
surging to and fro in all directions,
endless on every side;
or in the Arabian deserts, beneath a scorching sun
the suffocating tortures of thirst,

tell me, how could we ever celebrate life there?

It is a terrifying thing, you know,
but I have to have in life's primordial village
a pine grove as by my Wonsan sea shore;
and at times beneath a death-like cloud of sorrow
I must remain and rest.
My friend, my Western friend!

Moonlit Evening

As the moon was bathing lazily
in the still waters of a well,
she was caught in the bucket, up she went,
was poured out into a stoneware jar.

Scooped from there in a fresh hollow gourd,
she flowed all down a bride's black hair,
over creamy back and swelling breasts,
down she slipped, and away she went,
splashing into shivers on a washing-stone.

The moon-washed flesh was now white as moon...

From high up on the straw-pale roof
the pepper-pods look down,
their faces blush redder than ever.

Glancing up at the moon,
now somehow back up on high,
the pumpkins are embarrassed
and shyly creep under their vines.

In the flower-beds the balsam flowers watch it all,
they see and drop petals at so much fun,
moistening their eyes with dewdrops.

Garden by Moonlight

In the garden beneath the new moon
faces of times gone by return.

That face peeping out from the balsam flowers?
A cousin who, three days after her wedding,
left for the North;
giving me a set of colored thimbles,
she left, with a hoarse whistle cry from the train,
but that same face, rosy as fifty years ago,
is slyly peeping out at me now.

In the cosmos flowers, the catechism sister!
Agnes, was it? Or Lucy?
With black wimple and white veil
framing her face, that ivory sister,
object of my tiny heart's deep longing,
that tall, tall foreign sister
is smiling out at me now.

And that face among the chrysanthemums,
whose might that be?

It looks like the dead face of my mother,
laid somewhere unknown in the North,
or my sister-in-law's gentle face,
(she too stayed behind),
but it could also be my future daughter-in-law's.

The crescent moon slips behind an inky cloud,
the garden now seems dizzy,
frightened too, maybe,
and wrapped in an icy breath.

Could I be developing a chill?

Thoughts as Winter Comes

1. First Frost.

Along the branches of old trees,
stripped of every last leaf,
the hoarfrost-flowering morning cleanly spreads.

The ivory brow of the catechism sister,
object of my tiny breast's deepest childhood longing,
creeps into my mind.

Purity is no matter for melancholy, surely,
yet my eyes are moist with a chill dew.

2. First Day of Winter.

Feebly advancing sunbeams
dragging long shadows
seek out the sunny spots.

The earth, with no fever left,
lies in its primitive state.

In this November twilight
my life, too, begins its return.

3. First Snow

When the first snowfalls come,
blessings descend on the blessed
but anguish seizes the wretched.

As snow drops down pale
from the dark night sky,
the lamplit streets become silent sanctuaries

and from some distant place
a raucous sound echoes,
like the call of a boat which has lost its port.

In a Winter Street

The winter twilight hangs despairingly
like the tattered banner on the red brick building,
while on the sidewalk before a crippled fence,
with strips of cement sacks in place of a sandy beach,
a few baby tortoises
lie heaped together.

The salesman stands there,
gaunt as the bare trees along the roadside,
veiled in a whitish dust,
and when his spidery hand pulls the thread it holds,
the baby tortoises scabble, scatter,
scabble, scabble, scatter,
and fall off their paper shore.

Rattle, rattle, crash!
As the shutters slam down in front of the bank
a veil of darkness descends before the eyes;
a wave of people presses on, unseeing,
and with a dock-side uproar
buses screech in and away.

As the coal-black waters of a meager stream
flow unseen beneath the asphalt where he stands,
so too in the hungry innards of the salesman,
scabble, scabble, the turtles run
and as they run they fall.

In the lamp-light,
shining there like a lighthouse on a desert island,
the scraps of paper seem a sea-bed
viewed through a fish-eye lens,
or a tomb on which a flock
of jackdaws has settled.

In this desolate scene,
suppose the corpse of some dead wartime companion
should come up and clasp his hand,
I reckon he would weep for joy.

6. Even the Knots on Quince Trees Tell Tales

1.

A bridled,
foaming,
drooling cow.

At the age of three, my first revelation of really existing
found in a face like that printed by blood and sweat on a cloth
held out by a Jerusalem woman to a man on his way to execution,
the face of a cow.

The yellow, twilit path slid up over a mountainside,
calligraphic in black and white;
and as I sat there perched on the leading cart,
in the face of the cow following behind
with an ancient chest roped to its back,
my first buds of knowledge unfolded and I wept.

* Inspired by memories of how, when I was three, we left Seoul. My father had been given a teaching post by the German Benedictines who were in charge of missionary activities in the north-eastern region of Wŏnsan. I grew up there, in the outlying locality called Tokwŏn.

2.

Descending from the gravel-strewn platform
built on an embankment amidst the fields,
if you take the road in front of the station
lined on both sides with vegetable plots,
intersected by a highway,
as you make your way between orchards and nurseries
you can see the town's old Confucian academy
while, in valley of the distant Masingryōng hills,
a temple can be seen
and if you cross the railway line
fields of millet and sorghum spread wide
with a newly built road piercing the hills,
passing among the fields like a strip of unbleached cloth

then once past the pool beside the bean field
if you stand on the bridge over the Jōkjōn River
in all directions your eyes are filled with plains
with to the north, amidst verdant woodlands,
the tower of the Catholic monastery
and nearby the lapping East Sea,
then to the west, beyond Ogu
from where a hill with a spirit shrine can be seen,
beneath the hillside site where offerings are made
lies the village with the family in charge of the funeral bier;
in a tiny thatched cottage under the poet Lee T'ae-Baek's moon
an aged couple just like mountain sages
raised their one son, precious
as the rarest ginseng growing deep in the mountains.

3.

Could it have been on account of long familiarity
with my cousin's embroidery frame?

As I gazed up,
my little breast tortured with longings,

over the wimple and creamy face
of the catechism-class sister,
whistling like a train leaving for the Manchurian border,
a river seemed to be spreading wide, flowing.

I saw
the desolate back of the sun
that day, too.

4.

In Minor Seminary,
early one New Year's Day,
I cut out from the newspaper
a picture of Her Imperial Majesty dressed in white,
then rushed straight to the toilets.

After doing like the serpent in Genesis, that squirmed his whole body
to expell like pus a blasphemous passion,
I turned my back on that monastery in which I had spent three years.

I became a follower of isms.

* When I was fourteen, I entered minor seminary with the idea of becoming a priest, but gave up after three years.

5.

I began by running away.

On the night ferry to Japan,
tossing on a single tatami space,

the cabin with its owl's eye
was a miniature tunnel with no way out,
and the roar of the engines tortured my heart.

So this young man, fettered in chains of history,
throwing aside his coat and sitting up,
turns into a nameless beast
and grinds his teeth.

Galilee with no Master!

Riding the waves of darkness,
I hear 'Praise of Death' ringing out.
Yun Shim-Dök with hair untressed
gestures to me.

* Aged eighteen, I left Korea to study in Tokyo. Yun Shim-Dök was a hero of the Korean anti-Japanese resistance movement

6.

In this enemy town, on a spring day so harmonious
it brings tears to my eyes,
I wander aimlessly all day long with a missal
and a book called *Poverty*
wedged under my arm.

Crossing the Aragawa,
which flows towards its irreversible history,
I enter a bar in Kitashenshu
and sit squeezed between Korean laborers
to swallow down *toburoko*.

‘*Kwejina chingching naneh!*’
Who will light, who will light
this lamp, who will light?
In the midst of this dark night
who will light our lamp?
‘*Kwejina chingching naneh!*’

Aged twenty, after my first taste of drink
sky and streets and people
all recall Van Gogh’s ‘Night with Stars’.

* ‘Poverty’ is the title of a book by the Japanese socialist economist Kawakami Hajimu. The Aragawa River flows into Tokyo Bay. Kitashenshu was a slum area beside Tokyo Bay. *Toburoko* is a cheap rice beer.

7.

At that time
the encounter with La Rochefoucauld
aroused a typhoon within me.
The early buds of eager desire to do good
vanished brutally, in a flash,
and, darkness-wrapped within,
I saw two-headed monsters come to life,
that tore at each other, roaring.

Moment by moment the cords of self-hatred
tightened around my throat;
the silence of heaven changed into horror,
all other people became hell
and human existence a world of utter evil...

Stretched out on my boarding-house tatami floor,
I celebrated daily
funerals of God
and sitting beside a pond in Kitsijoji Park,
I imagined the rapture of a Zarathustra
climbing up to the stronghold of the Superman.

* La Rochefoucauld: A French moral philosopher (1613 – 1680)
'The silence of heaven': an expression from Pascal
'Hell is other people': a phrase from Sartre
Kitsijoji Park is in the suburbs of Tokyo

8.

In the coffee-shop Etranger
was Yumi,
a eurasian girl
with White Russian blood.

At first I pestered her
to become my little sister,
but with no success.

One evening, near midnight,
after several glasses of vodka,
when I suddenly fell on her cherry lips,
just that once she exclaimed,
'No acting like that, brother!'

The course of my love:
constantly such falsehoods,
no unity!
And a miserable conclusion.

Thirty years later, even now,
in the Shangri-la of dreams
I always feel anxious
about my encounter with Yumi.

Impotence of affection in me!

9.

On my thickly growing branches
the *Duino Elegies* and the *Lotus Sutra*
brought out buds of pantheism.

My human life: a morning dewfall on grass.
All things existing,
that had hitherto been mere appearance,
were bringing forth light from within
and, day by day, dying.

One day, as the tears
of impermanence were brimming full,
a fountain of song
began to rise within me.

‘Until the day when my flesh becomes leaves,
my bones stalks,
and when from my scarlet blood
a bouquet of flowers shall rise,
ah, life!’

That was the first phrase of my first poem.

10.

Invoking Golgotha's Mother and Son,
praying so hard it parched his tongue,
still invoking, he died.

Such a death
in which this world and the world beyond
are linked by chains of pain!

With candles burning and prayers for the dead rising,
molded over my life, such pain
before that corpse.
And born of what seeds?
Not knowing was the worst torment.

But the torrent of that destiny
continued to flow in my veins!

Abruptly thinking to cut off that inheritance,
as I turned my face away
from my hideously stiff father,
I broke into a wail.

* My father died in 1940.

11.

Had the century's executioners all gone mad?
They were wielding their swords to east and west.

In Korea, ruled by idiot-faced puppets
like modern gods,
babies were mowed down mercilessly
like the Massacre of the Innocents by Herod in Bethlehem
while all thirty million inhabitants
ran red with blood like a budding sorghum field.

'Trample the Chinese bastards to death!'
'Beat the British and American devils to death!'

The days were crowded, day and night,
with victory flag parades and lantern processions
while I reiterated the fury that longs
to locate the world's head and smash it in

sunk deep in the illusion that trumpets heralding
a new dawn were sounding somewhere.

* The violent slogans are spoken by Japanese voices, mobilizing people during the Pacific War

.

12.

For a while, frequenting Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu,
I enjoyed playing with words:

Empty, empty,
you must empty,
if you do empty yourself away,
you'll be emptied away.

Play, play,
you must play,
if you play no tricks on me,
I'll play tricks on you.

Then somehow, frequenting folklore gods,
I went crazy exorcizing:

Belt and shoes,
tiger, tailor,
frogs, clogs,
spinning spindle,
loom and treadle.

13.

I spent some time as a stone pillar before a tomb
but in the end I could endure it no longer.

Determining to earn a living
and fascinated by the idea of wielding the pen,
I became a journalist for a government-sponsored colonial newspaper.
Removing my gall-bladder like the rabbit before the Dragon King,
I wrote in praise of the war, supported requisitions of grain and materials for the military.
There was no other choice apart from forced labor or being pro-Japanese
but since I still have not succeeded in removing the mask of antinomy
I cannot weep over what I was then.

Clamence! Devious friend,
pretend not to know me, alike as we are.

* In a traditional Korean tale, a rabbit is kidnapped and taken to the palace of the Dragon King beneath the sea. There he learns that he is to be killed so that his gall-bladder can be used as medicine for the sick king. He explains with feigned regret that he has removed his liver and left it at home. Allowed to go back to fetch it, he escapes. Jean-Baptiste Clamence is the central character in Albert Camus' *La Chute*. A lawyer haunted by guilt, he waylays customers in an Amsterdam bar and by confessing his own failings drives them to admit their own sins.

14.

Perhaps because of thoughts of a heavenly home ahead,
our love was old
from the very beginning.

We already knew that the jeweled branches of Salzburg
were mere illusions,
reckoned the blaze and sweetness
of Romeo and Juliet of no account
hoped only to be to each other
as fresh water to a fish.

Wearing traditional wedding costumes
before the cross on the altar
while Gregorian chants echoed around
we pledged to be unshakeable Arhans.

Forty years of repeated ripples
in that wish for serene love!
That pledge still retains its halo.

* In his *De l'amour*, Stendhal employs the image of branches left in the salt-mines of Salzburg for a time, that emerge festooned with glittering crystals of salt, to represent his theory of the 'crystallization' of feelings of love.

15.

Like a deer
driven toward the hunter
my time flows,
slows, panting.
In my hammering, fluttering
breast
there is a new life
moving slightly
fearful even of tickling,
preventing miscarriage.
My love!
Collapsing after racing along
a path like a patch of mugwort
snug like a grave
blankly gazing upward.

* This poem celebrates the imminent defeat of Japan.

16.

How can I communicate our delight on this day
to those who have not felt bitterness or sorrow at their nation's fall?

An ecstasy
as if the bluebird, hitherto driven out of hiding only in dreams
had suddenly flown into my arms . . .

I grab everyone I see,
and together we whoop.
I embrace everyone I meet
and we weep.

What has become of the gloom we knew prior to today?
What has become of the despair we felt prior to today?
Inexhaustible love overflows from my heart.
My whole being is seething with vital energy.

Caught in a dream that swells like a balloon about to float away,
I find myself forced to join my hands
in thanksgiving before the god of history.

* This poem celebrates the surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945. By the terms of the surrender, Japan was to lose all its continental territories including Korea. Therefore this day is celebrated as Korea's National Liberation Day. The 'Bluebird' is a symbol for happiness figuring in the allegorical fantasy of that name by the Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck.

17.

It was August 16,
the day after our Liberation.

On one side, in the market gardens
Japanese women
in gorgeous, flower-patterned overalls
were weeding with hoes
as if unaware of the news of their nation's defeat.

On the other side, in the vegetable fields
Chinese men
gaunt as spiders and covered in dirt
were scooping up night-soil and manuring the fields
as if unaware of the news of their country's victory.

That was the scene I witnessed in North Korean fields
while I, in a frenzy of excitement,
went weaving barefoot through the streets of my lost home, Wŏnsan,
at the head of a procession with the Korean flag.

18.

In a flash, August's Bluebird
turned into Pandora's box.

The heralds of liberation that had appeared before us
turned into the century's lowest dregs
and divided our land into two parts.

My hometown was submerged by the sound of Soviet submachine guns and 'Dawai,'
upstart 'comrades' went on frenzied rampages,
busily binding our limbs with red ropes
leaving bruises that would not fade.

At the start of this mysterious life
I was repeatedly forced to undergo testing like that undergone
in the desert by the Man from Nazareth at the hands of the Evil One.

Finally, my poems having been branded for seven different failings,
abandoning my seventy-year-old mother and my newly wedded wife
I fled from a land that ideology had made an 'Isle of Death'
like Papillon escaping from prison.

Taking one step over the 38th Parallel
I prayed before the rising sun
to become an Orpheus.

* This poem evokes the rapid spread of Communist control in North Korea under Soviet supervision. My first collection of poems, entitled *Ŭnghyang*, was found to be ideologically defective in at least seven different ways by the Communist censor and I fled south to avoid arrest. Papillon, the main character in Henri Charrière's book of that name, escaped from Devil's Island (or 'the Isle of Death'). 'Dawai' is a Russian word meaning, 'Give me all you have.' The poverty-stricken Soviet soldiers often said this to Koreans.

19.

The Seoul I arrived at
was mushy like porridge,
disgusting.

Everyone sang the praises of freedom
like mad but
I felt as though a giant crane
was holding me by the nape of the neck.

Once the foolish dream of rushing toward the Forbidden City was smashed,
I became journalist for a right-wing paper
pretending to have been a volunteer
serving under Franco during the Spanish Civil War.

But amazed by the gradual loss day after day
of the self's phosphorescence,
every time I rowed my boat over the sea of existence
as if probing for someone drowned with an oar
I drew up the dead bodies of my dreams
and as I did so I sang songs of requiem
while yearning for a resurrection like that
of Lazarus waking inside his coffin.

* The Forbidden City: The former imperial palace at the center of Beijing. After fleeing south, I at once prepared to go to study in China but I was forced to abandon my plans when the Communists took power there.

20.

Out amidst the stormy waves of history,
buffeted by the storms of the age,
listing to one side, was a boat.

Along the side of the boat facing this present world,
beside politicians, there are journalists,
educators, businessmen, artists,
scientists, philosophers, men of religion, and others
this world's boatmen all without exception,
who were shouting, surrounded by crowds of people, while

along the side of the boat facing the world beyond,
one elderly poet with a closely shaven head, all alone,
was sitting bolt upright before a few young people,
smoking a self-rolled cigarette

and as I approached him he greeted me:
'I am glad and grateful and happy,'
shaking my hand
over and over again.

* This poem records my first meeting with the poet Kongch'o (O Sang-sun).

21.

One group was weaving baskets
in a bamboo grove
busily composing poems
and pretending to be wise;

another group was racing about
like a pack of wolves in pursuit,
barking fiercely at everyone
and claiming to be revolutionaries.

I took Kongch'o as my Erasmus
and, encamped every evening at the bar Eternal Garden,
assembled the gods of Folly
for banquets of Colloquia.

Those unskilled performances of mine
bear the blame for several innocent young men
being snatched away by untimely death in the wartime years.

* Among those young poets, Chŏn Bong-rae committed suicide while a refugee in Pusan, while Yun Bok-gu and Kim Ul-yun were taken north by the Communists. Folly: an echo of Erasmus's 'Praise of Folly.' Colloquia: 'Dialogues,' the title of the volume of Erasmus's dramatic dialogues.

22.

‘Hwaja says that it’s a shame to see picked flowers wither and that if you simply crush a piece of camphor in your hand and sprinkle it in the water, they recover their freshness for several days.’

Those words were spoken with a laugh by my wife as she was injecting calcium into my arm. I immediately responded with a vigorous laugh of my own.

The next day I said to my wife as she was preparing the injection:

--I reckon withered flowers recover if they receive injections too,

I abruptly stuck out my arm as I spoke.

Then when the injection was over I muttered privately to my wife,

--But the effects only last a few days,

and laughed bitterly.

Hwaja is a nurse in the hospital where my wife works. I feel a secret regret that it is camphor that Hwaja sprinkles on her flowers, and not calcium.

* Barely a year after I fled south, I came down with tuberculosis and received treatment at a clinic in Masan, from my wife, a doctor, who had followed me south.

23.

Ung-ae

Ung-ae

Ung-ae

A new life
squirming, uttering
a newborn squalling.

Shy caresses for such an innocent being,
shared vows of fervent self-sacrifice, here crystallized,
before this new star that we two have brought rising
above the earth.

My wife, barely thirty and now a mother,
feeds the baby at her breast with a smile like a full moon
while she croons a lullaby
that I heard from my mother when I was little.

As I left her bedside,
wilting like a wild chrysanthemum,
the birth of this first child
was to me like a tonic full of new vigor.

24.

At the far end of a continent caught in a situation
like a quarrel between a hippo and a bear, lies
a peninsula shaped like a hare pounding grain in a pestle
and in its southern portion,
the Republic of Korea has come into being
by a decision of the United Nations.
Its flag with the *yin-yang* symbol has been raised.

On that day, the only thing that roused our enthusiasm
were the gongs, drums and flutes of traditional musicians.
On that day, all we held in our calloused hands
were hoes, spades and picks.

Yet as I prayed, I believed.

The roots of our nation's history, long, deep and broad,
will draw vital nourishment from
all the rivers that flow underground;
it will grow up slowly at first, very slowly,
but it is certain to put out branches, leaves will bud,
and it will yield the rarest flowers.

And as I prayed, I perceived

that the bitterness we would suffer
would be more bitter than gall
and the sorrow from every day's frustrations
would prevent us from seeing the way ahead
but still, such sufferings
would spur us on to ever more frantic efforts.

And as I prayed I pledged:

This land's pain shall be my pain!

25.

In those days, it was the poet P'asöng, Söl Ch'ang-su, who spoke out and took the lead in the restoration of our nation's cultural heritage.

On the third day of the tenth lunar month of 1949, the leaders of the various tendencies in the arts, with their youthful followers, gathered in Chinju, which had recently been promoted to the status of a new city.

In the garden behind Ch'oksök Pavilion, inside Chinju Castle, our benefactor P'asöng, dressed in white, performed an opening ritual; then there were a variety of artistic performances at different places within the walls of the castle, and in the evening we floated lanterns bright as the spirit of Nongae on the Nam River.

Meanwhile the merry band of visitors, led by Kongch'o, spent the night partying in the red-light district of Okbong; there was resentment mingled with their mirth, so that it degenerated into pandemonium, but that was the only vent available for their shackled daily lives.

From the start for the next ten years I was never absent as one of the younger members who needed to be forgiven countless misdeeds and picturesque episodes, among which the time I untied the hair ribbon of Sunae, a reputed hostess, and went parading about with it tied round my hat, and the loutish act of dropping my pants and pissing in front of the statue of Buddha in Oegok Temple still remain as things I get jeered at for by older friends.

Now those early times of the New Creation Cultural Festival are as remote as ancient history and if I say that its excesses and incidents are notorious everywhere, could that be just me doting about the Good Old Days?

* Oegok Temple: a temple in the hills above Chinju. In those days, the calligrapher O Jae-bong was head monk and it served as lodgings for participants in the early festivals. Nongae: a female entertainer (*kisaeng*) and Korean heroine who during the Japanese invasion of the late 16th century killed the leading Japanese general by leaping from the battlements of Chinju Fortress while pretending to embrace him.

26.

Thinking of it now,
I looked more ridiculous when I became a government agent
than if I had put on a bra and dressed as a woman.

I composed my propaganda pieces
as if they were written in my own precious blood.

What I hated most in those days
were cloying lyricism,
a fascination with nature and devotion to it.

Although our ways differed,
I took Malraux and Hemingway
as my models.

A life that brings together poetry and authenticity!

And I aspired to a destiny
such as a bullet.

27.

I reckon that anyone who experienced the shock and despair of June 25, 1950 would be less at a loss if confronted with the end of the world.

Accompanying the Korean army, transformed into a defeated remnant in the space of a day, in its so-called retreat, it was only in Suwŏn, on hearing reports that a UN force had entered the war, that I felt able to breathe freely again, as if I had boarded Noah's Ark.

Assigned at Taejŏn to the political section of military intelligence, returning from witnessing an execution of Communists by firing squad I was drinking *soju* at a small roadside store while Staff-sergeant Kim, who had been involved in the execution, poured out his thoughts:

'Before Liberation I was living in Japan, in Hiroshima, and in those days, if you met a fellow countryman along the road you felt so happy, and now those same fellow countrymen get shot dead, mark you, with my own hand and a whole heap of them, too . . . this Ism of people condemned to die . . . what the hell is it, this spooky Ism? . . . And those fellows' Ism is the enemy . . .'
and he began to weep noisily.

While experiencing warfare, and today too, thirty years later, I have heard no more striking view of what happened on June 25 than that outburst of Staff-sergeant Kim:

'This Ism of people condemned to die . . . what the hell is it, this spooky Ism? . . .
And those fellows' Ism is the enemy . . .

*June 25, 1950: the day when the North Korean forces launched a surprise attack on the South, beginning the Korean War.

28.

From Taejŏn we skirted Kŭmsan,
and then, as we left the Yŏngdong highway
we came under attack from a Communist guerilla unit.

Hastily abandoning the jeep I was in,
I crouched behind the bank of a field beside the road
and pointed the M1 rifle I had never once fired
in the direction of the enemy.

Just then I noticed the seeds from a dried dandelion
right before my eyes being carried away in a gust of wind.

The question:
'Now once my flesh is scattered like that,
where will the seeds of my life go
to give birth to new flowers?'

and the realization that
'I am eternally wrapped in a profound mystery.'

came to my mind in a flash,
making all fear and apprehension vanish
and drawing me into a rapture I cannot name.

29.

I am left behind in Taegu as part of the last defensive regiment.

Like a pursued animal that will crawl into any kind of hole,
hearing the enemy bombardments, now they have come very near,
I crouch in our darkened barracks in the blackout.

We may have been overrun by the Communists by morning,
we can't tell if the leftist brigands may not soon control everything,
and is really the only task I can fulfill as I die
simply to help make up for the small number of soldiers?

'I must become an avenging spirit, a ghost
with a knife held in his bloody lips
I must get rid of the reds with my own two hands.'

In all my life, only then
did I feel a lust for revenge.

30.

It was as if I were caught between waking and sleeping!

No sooner had one fellow with a yellow armband marked '\$' climbed on top of me and started to tie me up than another fellow, with a red armband inscribed 'Liberation,' appeared and set about strangling me.

As I was expiring, pawing the air, I did my best to guess what those fellows really were but although their faces were of the usual kind I could not tell what they truly were or why they were trying to kill me, until at last I swooned away.

That moment! Perhaps it was the moment dividing darkness from light. The heavens were full of flames like the tongued fire of Pentecost while I and the whole earth went round in circles .

I'm dizzy, dizzy, so dizzy; I call, shout, weep for mother, wife, anyone, but no answer comes and I can't even recall their faces; my distress and upset are a blazing furnace.

Suddenly, the rosary in my pocket yields blossoms of exorcism, and as consciousness dimly returns a voiceless cry arises: 'Holy mother . . . me.'

Then here I am in a pavilion within a flower garden, glimpsed in some film or in an illustration for *Paradise Lost*, dressed in a fine summer jacket enjoying excitement and relaxation like someone just out of prison, when

Bang, bang!

As I open my eyes at the sound of exploding shells, I find myself sitting as usual on a metal chair in the barracks in the light of an oil lamp.

31.

‘Do you have any idea of what our little Oki has been saying since you left?’

‘Hmm?’

‘That the Communists should leave Taegu alone, sail down to the sea off Pusan and fire their guns there; that’s what she says.’

‘Hmm?’

‘Because then our Mr. Ku would come right back to Taegu.’

‘What’s that? Even if it means the collapse of the country?’

‘That girl so wants to see you, she says she doesn’t care if the country collapses or not.’

Returning after carrying official messages to Pusan, I called in at my usual bar and was greeted by the hostess with those words before I had even had time to sit down. At that, Oki blushed deeply and started scolding her to make her shut up.

I had been a virgin when I married and had never known any woman other than my wife but that evening I removed the Holy Medal I usually wore on my breast and laid it under the pillow before embracing that same girl, who was chattering like a fool. Even I was taken aback by my desire.

32.

As a member of the advance forces that would recapture Seoul on 28 September, I boarded an American transport plane on September 21. It was the first plane I had ever been in, so I was trembling like a leaf, while the hills and villages glimpsed as I peered through the window looked so insignificant, they quite made me forget the horrors of war.

Landing in the thickly overgrown plain of Kimp'o, we headed straight for Inch'ŏn, where the streets were still everywhere thick with gun smoke.

Using a printing shop that had survived the flames, I printed out the flyers we would scatter on entering the city and was on my way back to barracks late in the evening when I encountered a very drunk black soldier in a narrow street. With the fingers of his left hand he formed a well, and with his right thumb imitated the pounding of grain in a mortar, all the while muttering, 'Where? Where?' and following along close beside me.

After repeating over and over, 'I don't know,' I finally managed to shake him off, but toward that black guy it was not anger that I felt, but for the very first time a fellow-feeling toward someone of another race and color. Is that what they call being 'brothers in arms'?

33.

If we could contemplate Seoul reduced to a heap of cinders with the delight of slash-and-burn farmers, it was only on account of that one poem.

It was because of that one poem that after Seoul was recaptured, for more than two weeks when people returned, burned as black as the natives of southern lands, and were reunited with families who had not known if they were still alive, they greeted one another by saying: 'Now our troubles are over. Let's go back home, talk and live as we used to.'

'On September 30, 1950, General Douglas MacArthur, commander-in-chief of the U.N. forces, issued an ultimatum calling on Kim Il-Sung to surrender; receiving no answer, on October 1 the drive north began with the Korean army's third division on the East Coast as the vanguard, and within two days the entire allied forces had crossed the 38th parallel.

On the eastern front, the first corps comprising the third division and the metropolitan division captured Wŏnsan on October 10th then advanced further, passing through Sŏngjin on October 28th and meeting at Kilju on the 31st while the metropolitan division, supported by sea-borne aviation, entered Ch'ŏngjin on November 25.

Of the regiments comprising the second corps responsible for the central sector, the seventh division had advanced as far as Sunch'ŏn by October 21, the eighth division made a detour through Yangdŏk and entered Dŏkch'ŏn on the 17th, the sixth division moved north through Hwach'ŏn to Yangdŏk and on the 26th the seventh regiment of the same division entered Ch'osan at 5:50pm, thus reaching the Chinese frontier marked by the Yalu River.

To the west, the units under UN control moved north from Seoul and along the coast, occupying P'yŏngyang at 5pm on October 19 with the first Korean division at their head, while on the 20th some four thousand members of the American eleventh airborne division, 187th regiment, landed between Sukch'ŏn and Sunch'ŏn, joined forces with some 800 men who landed on the 21st and reached Sŏnch'ŏn on the 31st.

Meanwhile the American tenth corps, renowned for their bravery before the Inch'ŏn landing, came ashore at Wŏnsan on October 26, with its main force advancing on Lake Ch'angjin, then passing by way of Kapsan before reaching the frontier at Hyesanjin on November 21.'

The above is not a record of historical fact for it was cruelly brought to nothing by the illegal invasion of the Chinese People's Army but I inscribe it here as an immortal poem written on our land in blood more crimson than roses by our free citizens

34.

Retreating south in January 1951, in a truck without chains,
as it struggled up, then slid back down,
struggled up, then slid back down that ridge,
and sitting there beside the driver,
trying to free my mind of fear,
there was a field I glimpsed in the valley far below,
sheltered, free of snow, like a black wrapping-cloth.

On the way back north with the family,
in the midst of blooming mountain azaleas,
there was a field like a mangy patch on a child's head,
all white with new-sprung shoots.

Emerging from jail,
on the way to my rural home, glimpsed askew,
there was a field with a mass, a host
of shepherd's-purse spikes.

In a valley at the foot of Shindong hill between Kimch'ŏn and Taegu,
there was a field all stained
with the bloody pus and tears of lepers.

My native land, the last thing I glimpsed
as I lay on the operating table in a foreign hospital—

those mountain fields!

* In 1965 I underwent two lung operations in Japan.

35.

Scene 1.

Down the street, urchins troop round a strangely-dressed girl. Some throw stones, other wave sticks dipped in cow pats or horse dung.

‘Whore! Whoooooore! Whore!’

They are set to deal with sullied motherhood according to their law.

‘I’m not your mother am I? Suppose I am a whore? What of it!’

She spits out the words from foaming lips, as a passing American jeep stops, then zooms away like the wind. Only the sound of the shouts remains.

Scene 2.

A heavily made-up woman passes, in western clothes. Kids wink at one another.

One creeps up behind and skillfully fixes a sign on her back: ‘3000 won a trick’.

‘Waha! Wahaha! Wahahaha!’

Realizing that their resistance is pointless, the children indulge in loud laughter where scorn is overlaid with self-torment.

The woman checks her heels, corrects her poise.

But until she vanishes

‘Waha! Wahaha! Wahahaha!’ does not abate.

Scene 3.

Gradually such pranks become rarer, and down dark alleyways between rough wooden shacks, children stand here and there waiting for someone.

If a drunken soldier, black or white, heaves into view, frond-like hands grab at hardened arms and tug.

‘Hello! Ok? Madam, nice! Nice! Ok?’

Having had a taste of money, the children have found their own way of exploiting this wretched reality.

36.

On the frozen ground of my heart
a bitter Siberian wind bites the flesh.

In a field of dry tangled weeds
a garbage dump
of gaping cans, smashed ration-boxes,
pages from *Stars and Stripes*, broken-necked bottles,
and in one corner the cadaver of a hairy dog, shot dead;
along the ridges bitten into the fields by tanks
the dry stiff carcass of a cat;

in front of a tent like a plastic hot-house
behind a barbed-wire fence hung with blood-stained slacks,
a GI is coming and going;
whenever he whistles, peep-peep,
wretched urchins pop up their heads, like frogs,
from holes in the ground like those where kimch'i is kept,
wrapped in colored scarves,
yellow, red and blue.

The sky suddenly
begins to spew black mist
and a cluster of crows flaps off
over the sullen hills--

this itch in my back that drives me mad,
this rising bile that dilates my breast,
who can it be directed at?

37.

I suppose that anyone would laugh if they saw someone gently caressing a squid all black with its ink, holding it cuddled in their lap.

But as I sat there opposite her, my eyes were hard.

‘Chōng-sik, do be still; when we find your Dad, he’ll buy you sweets.’

A Korean woman, too pale by far, was sitting there, almost begging her little black boy to be quiet.

After midnight, on the night train, beneath the pallid lamps the expressions of the passengers were not at all amused; on the head of the little sobbing black boy and the brow of his distracted mother drops of sweat sparkled strangely.

I observe this mis-matched black-and-white picture of mother and child, then search my pockets for a bag of toffees a half-drunken friend forced on me as he saw me off, and offer one to the child.

No doubt about it, the effect is instant. Blinking eyes blacker than jet, he grabs the sweet, conveys it to his mouth and becomes unexpectedly serious.

A second, a third, a fourth, and he comes scrambling up into my lap, grinning happily and showing bright white teeth.

I have no choice but to play the game. I take charge of the child from the woman, whose eyes are tearful behind an apologetic smile and, feeling like someone playing with the monkeys at the zoo, I mobilize caramels and all possible talents for the task.

Things soon take an unexpected turn. More than relieved at such unlooked-for help, surely exhausted in mind and body, the woman quietly falls asleep. And the child, a moment before playing wildly, no doubt feeling that the time is right, begins to snore in my arms.

Thus transformed, with no effort on my part, into being the father of a black child, in an indescribable state of mind, I close my eyes too.

Inwardly I picture the few banknotes that must be the secret of this child’s birth.

I think of the hillside where the father may have perished or of the medal shining on his proud homeward-bound breast, if he survived.

I sense in the face of this harassed, overwhelmed woman what it means to be Korean today.

Holding the now quietly breathing little innocent, I shudder at the thought of the flimsy destiny awaiting him and humanity.

Meanwhile the train races on, piercing the night, the travelers all dozing exhausted; I have now become a black-and-white picture of father and son, and on my brow rise drops of sweat.

38.

The poet comes in bravely, shoulders thrown back, dragging a friend in with him.
The whore seems caught between pleasure and confusion.
Glaring around the room, he sees a white plaster image of the Infant Jesus with hands joined
below an embroidery of pine trees and cranes.

The poet smiles bitterly:

‘Is that a picture of your kid then?’ he asks casually,

‘And are you hoping to become Mary Magdalene?’ he mutters to himself.

They come in, laying a bottle of *soju* and a dried squid on the table.

After rapidly downing a couple of glasses of *soju*, it’s time to do the remaining bargaining.

‘Take this friend to another girl.’

‘To a really kind-hearted married wife!’

‘Quickly, quickly, we’re sleepy!’

Unable to resist their shouting, the girl goes out; a few seconds later, she opens the door a c
hink and signals to the poet with her eyes to come outside.

‘That . . . that friend of yours . . . he only has one leg.’

‘Sure, what’s the problem? He’s a wounded hero.’

‘I don’t think any of the other girls will take him. So if it’s alright with you, I’ll go with hi
m.’

‘Hmmm.’

The poet is taken aback by such extreme kind-heartedness:

‘Ok then, and I’ll take another wife too,’ he agrees.

Out in the garden of the whore-house, full of a darkness as black as sin, the poet pisses and
as he does so reflects warmly that even if there is not exactly splendor in such a den, at least a
star and a poem are lodged there.

39.

In a trench on a hill near the battle front during a pause in the fighting, our off-duty soldiers with a few black GIs were enjoying a *makkölli* party.

They were quite far gone in drink, and it was a riot of jumbled half-words: ‘drink’ ‘ok’ ‘thank-you’ while one of the black soldiers had his arm around one of ours and was quietly chattering away to him about something eagerly, until at last he grabbed another of his companions by the scruff of the neck and pulled him near:

--Hey, student, come here and translate what this *kkamtungi* fellow is trying to tell me. He obviously wants to say something good.

--Why, he’s drunk too; he’s just making noises; it’s not worth bothering about.

But turning to the black soldier, he said:

--You say once more.

--You know, we differ in nationality, race, homeland, parents, and skin and everything. You know, we differ in many respects.

--Go ahead.

--But we are one, because we are the same—privates destined to die on the same day. We’re the same; we’re closest friends, you know. We’re number one friends. Sure true brothers.

--You are right. I know what you mean.

He stood up and clapped his hands.

--Hey, everyone! Shut up for a while. This *kkamtungi* fellow here has just said something wonderful.

One soldier shouted: ‘You idiot! Who cares what a *kkamtungi* says. Why don’t you sing something? Or dance?’

--Shut up and listen! He said: ‘You and I, we’re different in every way but in one respect we’re the same—we’re all privates and destined to die the same day.’

Everyone agreed: ‘He’s right, he’s right. That’s better than ‘all one against the Communists’.’

--He means that although we’re different, how could we be more closely related, because we’ll die together.

Again, general agreement: ‘That’s even better than what the Bible says.’

--That means we’re brother for life, destined to die together! Closer to one another than to parents, brothers, lovers! Right, let’s drink to this tremendous fact!’

‘You’re better than the star Kim Dong-won playing Hamlet!’

At which our privates laughed all together, the black soldiers laughed in imitation, the party grew rowdy again, and soon the trench was echoing to a joint chorus of ‘Happy Birthday to You.’

*

The allied forces go crawling upward.
There are black private soldiers among them.
Penetrating the hail of shells and bullets
one of our private soldiers reaches the top

and hurls a grenade.
A black soldier follows him up
and hurls a grenade.
Red heat, explosion after explosion, hand-to-hand . . .
As day breaks, at the summit
the South Korean flag is waving ghostlike.
The corpses of allies and foes lie side by side.
The name-tag fallen from the neck of one black soldier
glistens exceptionally bright in the morning sunlight.

40.

In that darkness, black as the inside of a potter's kiln,
there was a group that kept the lamp of existence alight
simply by the character that each one was born with.

Artillery Colonel was dismissed from the army after
shooting at an American advisor who ordered indiscriminate bombardment
of a group of refugees that communist soldiers had infiltrated,
after which he sold cabbages in a market;
Old Pilot used to bark 'Chugil Nom! I'll kill you!' on every kind of occasion,
to which he would add: 'I will sing a song,'
soothing our anger and grim feelings;

amidst the brutality of that slaughterhouse-like world,
Master Ya-in would praise God in rapture
as he recited St. Francis's 'Canticle of the Sun;'

Master Mildew, with his stake-like walking stick,
used to earn his drink by reciting poems,
inspired by the ancient Greek poet Anacreon;

Master Kongch'o used to welcome customers
to his dugout hut's 'Rubber Band Room'
with 'I am glad and grateful and happy,'
all the time chain-smoking;

I kept company with those men, day and night,
roaming Chagal-madang's
Jujube-tree Bar, Persimmon Tree Bar, Horse-head Bar,
downing gallons of drink and performing weird acts of every kind.

In those suffocating times,
they were my breathing tube,
my sole source of nourishment.

* The poem contains a number of nicknames. Artillery Colonel was Lee Ki-Ryön; Old Pilot was air force colonel Lee Kye-Hwan; Master Ya-in was Kim Ik-Jin, a devout Catholic; Master Mildew was the composer of sacred music Kwön Tae-Ho who liked to sing 'Mildew Memories.' The poem refers especially to the days when the city of Taegu was full of refugees from Seoul. The 'Rubber Band Room' was a bar run in a temporary dugout by Kongch'o (see poem 20), so called because of its ability to hold larger or smaller numbers of customers. Chagal-madang was at that time the main red-light district in Taegu.

41.

Dear native land, you are as pitiful as poor Simch'ōng.
Whenever a poet invokes your name, his voice chokes with tears.
Why is Heaven so silent still, while
the century's dregs are preparing to carve you up,
like meat on a slab?

Dear native land, along your roads your poor inhabitants
can only go crazy, incapable of either hope or despair
while your enemies and their supporters
are poised again to divide you in two--
the very thought makes you wilt like a reed.

Dear native land, home of tormented souls,
it was only chance that defended you until today,
and once again you seem to be breathing your last
while a band of young, poorly dressed brothers in arms
march north, with never a song for the souls gone ahead.

Dear native land!
Land as pitiful as poor Simch'ōng!

* In a famous traditional tale, Simch'ōng sold herself to be thrown into the sea as a sacrifice in the hope that this would enable her blind father to regain his sight.

42.

Bridge of No Return

砲門 gun port

銃口 muzzle

旗 flag

議會 meeting

卓 table

* The 20 gun ports represent my simple notion of the 20 divisions aligned along the DMZ. The 'Bridge of No Return' was the name given to the bridge which prisoners of war who were repatriated at the end of the war crossed, since they could not later return north or south.

43.

Only Pascal's reed was standing there
with white hair and whiskers
waving in the wind.
The Armistice Line!

44.

One butcher's shop lined up after another,
lumps of meat and ribs hanging from iron hooks,
dripping fresh blood;
a fire engine can be heard, its siren screaming,
followed by an ambulance.

It's a dark kiln.
It's an endless tunnel.
A metallic roar of cog smashing against cog
pierces my breast.

The rows of fresh graves in the cemetery
are covered with black flocks of rooks.
In a sky frothing dark foam
an eagle flies in circles.

On the hill behind the village with its rotting thatch roofs
stand pine trees stripped of bark reduced to skeletons,
rice fields lie scorched pale as by ringworm,
and fields yielding nothing but dust, like dandruff,
while on a river bank, gaunt as can be,
a green frog, seemingly newly emerged,
unsure where to put its feet,
simply swells up its breast.

45.

I was lying there, absently
listening to a pitch black stream running down a drain
under the creaking planks.

If a 'Homeland of Freedom' is an illusion,
What did I undergo the war for?
Why did I leave my home?
The sharper my questions grew,
the further away the answer fled.

--I reckon you've been thwarted in love?

...

--Has your wife left you?

...

--You don't seem much to like doing it, yet this is already the twelfth time you've come here!

...

Having no replies to the street girl's questions
I became the hero of 'Wings.'
Out in the streets the Hornet Gang and the Skeleton Gang roamed
and a secret service agent came rushing into my hiding place
firing his revolver.

* 'Wings' is the most famous novel by the Korean surrealist writer Yi Sang (1910-1937). It portrays a man completely dominated by his wife, who works from their home as a prostitute. Soon after the end of the war, in response to the undemocratic measures known as the First Political Upheaval, I published some editorial articles entitled 'Democratic Accusations' which provoked a repressive response from the government of Syngman Rhee and for a time I hid in a shack in a red light district in Taegu.

46.

The sea
with only the rise and fall of waves
a solitary seagull moistens its feathers
in the tossing waves
traces a line like a bow in the sky
flying
in quest of the distant land
where mate and chicks are dwelling
like a legendary lover roaming the sky
kikiki
kikiki

On and on the empty sky and sea stretch far
not an island on which to lower its wings
no sign of a branch on which to rest
in the empty sky and sea stretching on and on

At last the gull, having soared in the void
emits a pathetic cry
kikiki
kikiki
kikiki
and drops into the sea that gapes like a tomb

*

There is a roar of propellers.
On the knees of a man in one of the seats
lies a box wrapped in white cloth.
The stewardess serving refreshments enquires
--Shall I put that in the overhead rack?
--No, it's alright.
--Is it an antique? Something very precious . . .
--It's hard for me to say . . .
The man speaks hesitantly, dragging out the words.
The girl lets down the table and serves him coffee.
The man looks out of the window as he drinks the coffee
and sometimes rests his eyes on the wrapped box.

*

In the deep azure air, neither sky nor sea,

kikiki
kikiki
kikiki
kikiki
the seagull's ghost flies on.
Falls.
Flies on again.

*

In the coffee shop at Japan's Haneda airport
the man is sitting opposite a woman in mourning dress.
--There's no call for any special ceremony, I think?
he says, handing her the white wrapped box; rising grief prevents the woman from saying anything in reply.
--When he died he was cremated and part of his ashes were laid in his tomb, while I kept part aside, reckoning that the day would come when I could give them to you, and now I've brought them. This is a photo of his tomb.
In the photo, which the woman received with a flood of tears, was a stone with a picture of 'The Kiss' and the words, 'Here lies the artist Lee Chong-Söp.'

* Lee Chong-Söp died in 1956 and I brought his ashes to his widow Mi Mang-In the following year, when I went to Tokyo for a PEN conference. I conceived this memorial in the form of a cine-poem.

47.

If ever I
sold our land
became an agent for such an act
or was involved in it at all,
Chief Justice!
Do not sentence me to prison
but to death.

Once labeled a traitor to our land,
death is far more desirable
than fifteen years, or even a single day
of wretched ongoing life.

Look there, beyond the window
and see how a violent wind is making leaves fall
before they have time to change color.

Chief Justice!
I beg of you, either innocent
or death.

--October 21, 1959

* In 1959 I paid the price for my constant opposition to the despotism of the Syngman Rhee regime. A Korean residing abroad, a friend of mine, purchased two American-made vacuum tubes in Namdaemun Market and sent them to his son in law, a marine biologist at Tokyo University. This was turned into the so-called 'Radar Affair' and I, who had known nothing of that, was arrested and charged under the anti-Communism Law of 'assisting the enemy' simply because we were close friends. The prosecution demanded a 15-year sentence and this poem echoes what I said in my final statement during the trial.

48.

As sunbeams, sweet as Grace itself, glide into my cell, I seem to become a heliotropic plant.

Is my heart a sightless butterfly? Over the brick walls it flutters away and all day long wanders in search of recollection's petals, then comes back weary of itself.

If from here I review my past life, to tell the truth I have failed to distinguish even the most essential things. Abruptly the chilling thought of crisis after crisis overcome by luck arises and I blush for shame.

Now my lot is a solitary cell, like sitting facing the wall in Zen meditation; the only problem is that I have not grasped the world of sentiments and passions. That book on 'The Problem of Dharma' you sent me acts like a sharp blow from a Master's staff, so many thanks.

I suppose that these days the outside world is in the midst of spring flower-festivals and in uproar over food supplies? Here of course there are no flowers to go into raptures over, but there is also no spring shortfall of food, so perhaps this should be counted an 'Isle of Good Fortune'?

Nothing more for now.

* This poem was originally written as a letter addressed to the poet Ko Un, who came to visit me in prison. At that time he was still a Buddhist monk; I was not allowed to send it so after my release I revised it as a poem entitled 'Springtime Letter from Prison.'

49.

Friend! My western friend!
You say that you composed the outline of the plot
of your philosophical play about life, *Le Malentendu*,
on three pages of old newspaper pushed down into the gap
between your hard wooden prison bed and the wall
while I likewise read and reread and pondered it
sitting on the hard wooden floor of a prison cell.

You strive to affirm the sophisticated claim that
for Martha and her mother
life without knowing any other person,
even killing one's own brother and son
in order to reach the sea with its blazing sands
that burns the very soul,
is the true situation in which each one is set,
that only then is everything as it should be
as if it were natural,
and that only if we become someone devoid of feeling, like a stone,
with the warm touch of another's hand repulsive,
love and such like disgusting and empty,
refusing to pay heed to any lamentation,
can we attain a happiness like that of a god

but one of the most significant things is lacking
from humanity as you present it.
I mean man's natural sense of shame is missing.
Remember that
if Adam and Eve hid in the shadow of the trees after their fall,
concealing their genitalia with leaves,
that was not done out of a fear of death or insecurity regarding life,
but from the shamefulness arising from a realization
of human finitude.

That is where you are guilty of a Misunderstanding.
You seem to see the ladder leading to existential freedom
as a matter of spitting at God to the bitter end
but why can you not see that shame is the very beginning of man,
with the potential of bringing man deliverance?
Friend! My western friend!

* While I was in prison in the last years of the Syngman Rhee regime, I read Albert Camus'

play 'Le Malentendu.' This poem expresses my opposition to the existential philosophy of life, the image of the 'defiant man' embodied there. I realized that what was lacking in the existential authenticity of the main character was shame. I came to a conviction that 'shame is the very beginning of man, his original nature, the potential for his deliverance, the origin of every norm.' This became my own existentialistic theory.

50.

My friend, my Western friend!
Do you really take the Mediterranean, that sea of burning sands,
for life's ultimate shore?

No, surely not!
It is not just a matter of scorching sun and blue sea,
of white waves and sparkling strands,
for the liberation we desire is not there.

Only imagine for a moment!
Before the dejection, the desert void
surging to and fro in all directions
in the very center of the Pacific Ocean,

or in the Arabian deserts, beneath a scorching sun
amidst suffocating tortures of thirst,
tell me, how could we ever celebrate life?

It is a terrifying thing, you know,
but in life's primordial village home I have to have
a pine grove! a grove like that in my lost home
at Sōngdowŏn in Wŏnsan

and there are times when I must remain and rest
beneath that cool parasol-like shade,
my friend, my Western friend!

51.

‘Where are you going on your own like that?’

At the entrance, closed off by a straw rope, a sinister-looking youth blocked my path.

‘To vote!’

‘Come back as a gang of three!’

‘I’ll do it alone!’

‘What? I tell you you can’t! Go and ask the boss over there.

The man he indicated was wearing an armband marked ‘Liberal Party.’

‘I’m an independent . . .’

‘No more talk; get a gang of three together and come back!’

With him pushing, I simply walked away and as I did so burst out, not in tears of indignation but in raucous laughter like someone insane.

That same evening, in Masan, the first torches of the April Revolution shone out.

52.

Outcry
Outcry
Outcry
Outcry
Outcry

An outcry fills the roads.
An outcry pierces the streets.

Outcry summons outcry
to force out the fire in every heart
to suppress all fear of the dark.

Outcry of bloody fury.
Outcry of joy and tears.

That outcry
demolishes row upon row of barricades.
That outcry
silences muzzles and gun ports.
That outcry
turns the eunuchs into dogs with lolling tongues.
That outcry
pierces the eardrums
of the tyrant deaf with age,
marking the close of ten years of despotism.

In that outcry
there's a clarity like springing water.
In that outcry
there's the freshness of tender verdure.
In that outcry
there's a dream variegated like the rainbow.
In that outcry
there's a dove-like peace.
In that outcry
there's the wisdom of Apollo
the intoxication of Dionysus.

Outcry rising from our people's roots
Outcry emerging from our people's history
Outcry that will for ever be unquenched

Outcry heard even without any sound
Ah, April's outcry!

* Celebrating the popular uprisings of April 1960 that toppled Syngman Rhee.

53.

Depart in peace, brotherly souls,
without bloody complaints,
like clouds floating carelessly hand in hand
through the springtime sky.

Over fields of mugwort where gales rage,
waves of anger wringing every heart,
along the narrow way these brother have opened,
funeral corteges of freedom follow one another.

Seeds of life scattered by you our brothers!
It is not our task to cultivate and bring them to bloom
so let go of that hope, thicker than fate,
and quickly spread wings of eternal repose.

54.

Leaving behind April's banqueting tables, where
the lean meats were abandoned as each snarled at the other,
I withdrew into a solitary room of existence
embracing wounded phantoms.

The Republic's new life I had dreamed of
had vanished without trace like a child's balloon
and my contribution to the events
was the racket of a host of rooks squawking
flocking around a fresh corpse.

Strangled by one's own descent into despair
falling into a faint like that of funeral mourners
I forced my eyes open to the obvious fact
that ideals and reality are bound to run parallel.

I shook the dust and spiders-webs from my mind,
sat down at my desk and seized my pen
then like a frog just emerging from hibernation
expanded my breast, not knowing where to turn.

55.

Fleeing the proximity of reality as it viewed my metamorphosis with a perplexed gaze, I set out for Cheju Island with the monk Ilch'o.

What I chose as my daily task was the pursuit of Jesus of Nazareth in Israel two thousand years previously, for in him – who had served God from the moment he was conceived – I had discovered someone who had lived a human life within the limitations of time and space.

Occasionally I gazed up at Mount Halla, that was yawning the yawns of a saint who has peacefully extinguished all inner fire, while the jade-hued sea viewed from the quayside displayed a beautiful woman's charm.

At nightfall Ilch'o, who had the sensitivity of water boiling, and I frequented the Fisher Girl Bar, snickering together and also experiencing some of the sorrows of the exiles banished here in times gone by

* Ilch'o was the name adopted by the poet Ko Un during his years as a monk in the 1950s. At the time I was editing a translation of François-Michel William's book *La vie de Jésus, dans le pays et le peuple d'Israël* for the Benedictine Press. In previous centuries, Cheju Island was one of the places to which important figures were sent in political exile.

56.

On the way back home, I met General Park Chung-Hee in Taegu; he already had bloodshot eyes.

Under the influence of the retreat, I kept trying to steer the conversation toward peaceful feelings but he kept repeating between drinks, 'There has to be end to it,' while at the same time repeatedly singing a Japanese ballad: 'With the sounds of horsewhips hushed cross the river in the evening and at dawn behold the ranks of soldiers gathered around their general's flag.'

Returning to Seoul after forty days, we found it in uproar. The youths of the April Revolution, armed with clubs, when asked if they were occupying the hustings, shouted that they were going to cross the DMZ empty-handed in their bare feet to liberate the North.

* On the way back from Cheju Island, I visited General Park Chung-Hee in Taegu. He had been demoted from being deputy chief-of-staff for operations at the military headquarters to being deputy commander of the Second Army. We drank a lot and emptied our hearts to one another.

57.

I spent that winter and spring as a truly dreadful organizer of funerals.

*

I've forgotten who went first or followed after, but the one who first comes to mind is the sculptor Ch'a Kŭn-Ho. Hearing that he had taken poison, I went quickly and found the wooden floor of his atelier strewn with the wrappings of about forty packets of medicine and, lying on the table, together with an empty soju bottle, a scrap of paper with the message:

'Even considering the rightness of the April Revolution, it is still better for a hapless fellow like me to give up living in this world.'

He was to that degree hammer, chisel, and knife as far as his own life and existence were concerned.

*

Next comes artillery colonel Lee Ki-ryŏn. He disappeared after parting from me one day at dusk, only to be discovered a week later as a corpse wrapped in a mat at the wayfarers' cemetery in Susaek.

In his record it said how, at the Uijŏngbu front during the January 4 1951 Retreat, when disguised enemy soldiers got in among the crowds of refugees and began to infiltrate our lines, an American military advisor ordered an indiscriminate bombardment; unable to agree with that, he first wrangled with him then instead of bombarding the refugees he was being ordered to shoot, he pulled out his revolver and shot the advisor, for which he was discharged from the military.

Shall we say that he was exceptional even in death? Or that it was a fitting end?

*

Another was the anarchist Wu Han-Ryŏng. He and I were in prison together under the Syngman Rhee dictatorship. He fainted and died just after participating in the Socialist Party's unification meeting

and he cherished dreams more variegated than any poet's, knew more bitter vicissitudes than any hero

yet how lightly he managed to escape the bitter drudgery of the liberation of the proletariat and of humanity he had let himself in for!

58.

It was not uneasiness.
It was not weariness.
It was not revulsion.
It was not alienation.

It was an itch
as if my whole body were full of scabies.
An itch
capable of driving one mad.

In order to forget this itching
if only briefly
I hurled myself into debauchery.

That feeling of falsehood
after intimacy
was the only medicine.

59.

I saw the dawn of May 16, 1961, in the house of a dancer.

She was listening to the announcements broadcast on the radio as she applied her morning make-up, and kept asking:

‘Well, what is the world coming to? Will this affect you in any way, I wonder?’

I let her words flow past without paying attention, as I imitated that friend’s way of reciting a Japanese poem and recalled the Han River at dawn:

‘With the sounds of horsewhips hushed cross the river in the evening and at dawn behold the ranks of soldiers gathered around their general’s flag.’

* The military coup d’état led by General Park Chung-hee began on May 16. ‘That friend’ refers to General Park (see poem 56).

60.

On the evening of May 19th we sat down together, in a room in an empty hotel with an armed vehicle topped by a machine gun outside in the yard.

He and I both emptied our glasses in total silence.

Finally he made a preposterous-seeming remark:

‘Why shouldn’t you go to America for a while?’

‘I’d need to know English, surely?’

‘English? You’d just need to have someone interpret.’

‘I don’t so much as know proper western table manners.’

‘Still, you must do your share in some section or other.’

‘Just let me stay a poor scholar living on the slopes of Nam-san!’

Exchanging what might seem like mere jokes
we kept emptying our glasses.

* ‘He’ is General Park Chung-Hee, attempting unsuccessfully to persuade me to accept an official position in his regime. Traditionally, members of the ruling yangban class who were poor lived in seclusion in a valley of Nan-san hill in Seoul.

61.

Belatedly I have come to see that poetry
is my only function in life.

I realize that the hero must advance by poetry
through life and that in total dedication
it is the most hope-giving task there is.

I see that my ardent life
will find harmony in no other way.
I have likewise come to know that my heart's
highest sincerity lies in poetry.

--When someone falls into the water, it's not a question of whether he can swim well or not
. It does not matter how he swims, so long as he survives.

With that perception, that determination,
I vowed what remained of my life to poetry
and began to compose the hundred poems of *Diary of the Fields*.

62.

After due consideration, I shouldered the sign of a newspaper's branch office and set off for Tokyo as though I was going to study abroad.

--I'd already prepared you an office right next to mine, and now you're off. Are you planning to enjoy yourself with Japanese girls when things are in this state?

--Seen realistically, a poet is always a villain, you know. Didn't Plato banish poets from his ideal Republic?

As I gazed through the plane window at the layer of clouds,
sensing how isolated I was from that reality,
our last conversation before I left
kept delving deep into my mind.

* In 1961 I went to take charge of the Tokyo bureau of a newspaper, the *Kyŏnghyang Shinmun*, that was in those days run by the Catholic Church. General Park Chung-Hee tried to discourage me from this, directly and indirectly, since he wanted me to accept an official position.

63.

The country's material wealth was astounding
but what I envied most were its spiritual resources.

Like someone famished, I roamed the streets of Kanda,
that had once been my spiritual cradle.

I had not the least idea what I should read
among all the serried ranks of books.

The first thing I bought, attracted by its title,
was *Today's Leading Philosopher, Gabriel Marcel*,
and I stayed up all that night reading that 'grace-giving book.'

*

Dear Gabriel Marcel!

You opened for me the gateway to new affirmations of life
at a time when I was sunk deep in the sloughs of nihilism
by repeated experiences of despair about history.

You enabled my soul, which had become detached from my body,
to live in union with it again.

You taught me that each person stands alone but
also stands in company with others.

You made me realize that a consciousness of being limited
is bound to bring humility.

You enabled me to see that mystery
is not emptiness but fullness.

You showed me that living shortened by one inch
means living that one inch higher.

You taught me that the life of the world to come
needs to be lived from now on.

Oh, mystery of meeting!

* This Japanese book was published in 1957, when Gabriel Marcel visited Japan, as a simple introduction to his thought. It provided my first contact with Marcel's philosophy, that has meant so much to me.

64.

My return from Japan seemed timed
to coincide with Master Kongch'o's death in June 1963.

A giant who, alone, when everyone else in our country
was inclining toward this present world of reality,
defended the other world of the spirit,

a man of religion without dogmas
for whom a café served as a temple, church, practice hall,

a philosopher of transcendental ethics
for whom a café served as a pulpit, a classroom,

a poet who embodied poetry,
for whom heaven, earth, and streets all served as a home,

and as he was leaving this life
he bequeathed to me a breathtaking last word:
'Freedom has constrained me.'

*

Bathed in the bright gentle light of a late spring midday
the funeral procession advanced down the center of the road
like a huge, silent wave.

In the portrait, where he recalled a mountain deity,
smoke was seen rising from the cigarette
he had always so much enjoyed in his lifetime.

A whole class of girl students, not the usual male funeral attendants
led the way, carrying brightly colored mourning banners,

There was no chief mourner and the ropes
attached to the hearse were held by several poets,

some fifty or sixty Buddhist monks in ceremonial robes
followed behind chanting sutras

while artists and folk active in cultural circles
as well as ordinary citizens formed an unending cortege.

After Liberation, his was
the one and only citizen's funeral
devoid of the slightest tragic note.

65.

Being made to experience the Church's dark side
after getting caught up in a conflict of interests
was a deadly wound to my soul.

Buddhists say: 'See the moon, forget the finger pointing at it,'
but no matter how many times and how many ways I repeated it
I could not tolerate seeing the eucharistic mystery
in the hands of those foul priests
and the church buildings rising on all sides
seemed like whitewashed sepulchers of God.

If my hand refrained from fixing a 'Scarlet Letter'
on their breasts and backs, it was because
the kind, sorrowful face of my elder brother, a priest
kidnapped and killed by the Communists in the North
came to my mind and prevented it.

But although I knew how that top apostle Peter,
the rock on whom the Church was founded,
had denied his Master, Jesus,
before a mere serving maid,
it was only then that I truly understood the fact
that if the Church, transmitted through such a line of sinners,
has not collapsed but preserved its holiness,
it is uniquely on account of it being the work of the Holy Spirit.

* I was indirectly blamed for the financial difficulties of the Church-run *Kyŏnghyang Shinmun*.

66.

‘What happened to your work with that newspaper?’

‘It looks as if writing poetry is the only kind of work I can do.’

‘I’ve received reports, I know all about it. That so-called church, wearing a mask of holiness and acting in such a way – you should use the law to shake them up. Do you mean to stay silent and simply put up with it?’

‘Why not? Didn’t Jesus teach that if someone slapped you on one cheek, you should offer them the other cheek?’

‘In that case, how can the world be set right?’

‘That’s precisely the difficulty with Catholic teaching!’

‘Catholic teaching?’

Repeating those words, he offered no further criticism, while his expression showed that he felt very sorry for me. Maybe that was when he abandoned all thought of trying to draw me into reality.

* ‘He’ is Park Chung-Hee.

67.

Dear Ja-Myōng,

Finally the operation is for tomorrow, July 6. Today I have already been moved to the surgical ward, where I am writing. They've prepared all sorts of things—pajamas, underwear, oil paper, belt, feeding bottle . . . Jin-Suk's father has been to donate his blood for transfusions. My eyelids are still tingling. I firmly believe that Heaven will ensure that this operation will be successful, thanks to so much kindness and your prayers. I feel very calm. Reading the papers, I worry about the present drought over in my homeland. I shan't be able to write for some time, you know. Peace.

* Ja-Myōng is my daughter. I wrote this letter home from a hospital on the outskirts of Tokyo on July 5, 1966.

68.

After the springtime harvest was over,
while the second planting of sorghum plants
were still no higher than one of my socks
and the autumn vegetables were so young
they still looked naked,
I entered the operating theater.

My back was cut open with an electric scalpel,
a lung pulled out, a cavity incised,
flushed with antibiotics,
four ribs cut, then pushed back in,
my back sewn up;
they call all this 'cavity section
and restorative surgery.'

One week! After days of extreme pain
and anesthesia
the stitches were removed from my back,
and then, three weeks after,
I had a second 'restorative operation,'
cutting through two more ribs.

Relieved that with this it was all finished,
overcoming the pain,
after about a month
I was moved down onto the general ward.

So on the second day,
using a stick
to support my bone-aching back,
I went out to view the fields.
How surprised I was, how at a loss
on seeing those young sorghum plants,
now grown up like children
if you once come home after ten years away,
a head and shoulders taller than me!

The cabbages, each like a bride come back to visit home,
sitting there plumply pregnant and full;
and the beet field marvelously dark blue-green
like a parade ground.

After that day out in the field I got sick,
sprang a fever, took to my bed again,
and another month went by.

One day they took an X-ray
and found something called false bone,
9.7 cm on the first rib
15.5 cm on the second
16 cm on the third
19 cm on the fourth
19 cm on the fifth
14.5 cm on the sixth
between the bones
they had cut.

On the next day,
I went out to the field again,
nursing the joy of a return to life.

But the sorghum had grown no taller,
only stood bowed with heavy head,
and though cabbage and beet came running naked,
perhaps they had reached their limit, they had not grown.

As the warm sunshine of the high autumn sky
met the cool breeze
on my noticeably lighter back
I wondered if I could expect to see
any greater miracle than this.

69.

Mountains.

There are mountains.

This mountain can be seen if you lift your eyes.

That mountain can be seen even with eyes closed.

This mountain appears by day.

That mountain comes calling by night.

One is the mountain seen through the window
of the hospital in Kiyosei outside Tokyo where I had my operation,
always smartly dressed
gently advancing its face.

One is the mountain rising above the red brick wall
of 101 Hyōjō-dong, Sōdaemun, Seoul,
clad in a dress that reveals its bare flesh
looking blankly down at me.

Mountains that flicker in and out of sight within me
as if in a looking-glass in a golden frame.

Mountains.

There are mountains.

* The Japanese mountain is Fujiyama. The Korean address is that of the notorious Sōdaemun Prison.

70.

In a pause between the chanting of Buddhist monks,
a group of Catholic sisters, looking like wild chrysanthemums
blooming in a mountainside radish field,
kneeling before the departed soul of the Venerable Hyobong
are reciting together the prayers for the dead.

--Lord, grant this departed soul repose.
--And may light eternal shine upon him.

What blessed spectacle is this?
What dazzling marvel?

Two faiths that reject each other as wrong teaching, false way,
stand in opposition, calling each other superstition, evil,
each seeing the other as a brood of snakes or scorpions

and here the gates of mutual succor stand open!

Humans, do not divide
the truth that is only one.

Humans, do not divide God,
who is only one.

Hearing this report on the radio
I was overjoyed, so overjoyed I sobbed.

* The Venerable Hyobong was one of the most famed monks of his generation. He died in 1965. This poem reflects my joy at the openness toward other religions contained in the documents that emerged from the Second Vatican Council (1962-5).

71.

After vain efforts to decipher
this message, a single page
that fluttered down from somewhere, I have returned.

In the shade of palm trees at Kumong Pass,
beside the sea at Vongtau,
even sitting with aodai-clad bargirls
in Saigon,
I strove to decipher it, in vain;
I have returned.

It might be a propaganda leaflet
dropped by the Vietcong. I am not sure.

Or a trick by a Vietnamese boy
I met at Natrang orphanage. I am not sure.

Maybe it is a ploy of some secret service,
to test my way of thinking. I am not sure.

It might be a poster
of the Pope's appeal for peace. I am not sure.

Or perhaps, rather, it may be a last will and testament
left by one of our Korean heroes. I am not sure.

You see, it was
in the form of a falling tear.

You see, it was
in the form of prison fetters.

You see, it was
in the form of a hole
pierced by a falling shell.

You see, it was
in the form of a limbless skeleton.

Or rather, it was
in the shape of a bitter spirit unable to find rest.

Yet it seemed
to be something to do with Vietnam.

Yet it also seemed
to be something concerning me in particular.

Yet it also seemed
to concern my fellow-countrymen.

But it seemed mainly
to be a strong suggestion
aimed at all the peoples of the world.

And the only thing that I have felt
thanks to it
is that I as an individual,
that indeed the whole of humanity,
we are all still utterly ignorant. Only that.

So now, still unable
to really decipher the message,
since I have managed to return,
I publish it like this.

On a sheet of white paper
traced in red blood
a question-mark:

?

What can it mean?

72.

Seeds from a flowering balsam
enclosed in a letter written by a girl attending
a makeshift school in a Seoul squatter area
were sown in front of the entry to a dugout
on a high peak looking across into North Korea
and inspired the soldiers to sing every evening
that summer and fall 'Balsam flowers at the foot of the wall'
to the accompaniment of the harmonica

and in late fall that year one soldier gathered the seeds
and stowed them in a corner of his rucksack
then went across the Yellow Sea, the Indo-China sea,
landed in Vietnam, boarded a raft,
arrived at a base in Danang

some seeds he sowed in a flowerbed in front of the barracks
but the shoots dried up and died in the hot sand
while the rest he shared with a nursing officer who
planted them inside the hospital in an empty medicine bottle
where they grew and budded

but I have not heard whether
they blossomed without withering
and whether they served to dye pink
the tiny finger nails of a little local girl, or not.

73.

An old woman with a filthy towel round her neck,
the cotton stuffing sticking out from her jacket,
wearing rough slacks dyed in lye,
is carrying a worn-out wicker basket;

a woman wearing the ragged jacket from a suit
over military fatigue pants
is carrying a battered pot;

a little girl, her hair disheveled,
a charity-handout sweater over her tight thin skirt
and with striped underwear beneath,
is carrying a chipped gourd dipper,

all are roaming in quest of early spring plants
out in the plains where flocks of jackdaws fly.

The rice fields are burnt white, as if by ringworm,
the fields yield only scurf-like dust,
on the hills behind the rotting thatch roofs
stand pine trees, each with the bark peeled off.

Over the tomb-like hilltop,
a lad who had swallowed down a broth of weeds that morning
then gone without lunch at school
is tottering homewards,
his plastic book-bag rattling.

*

Towards the rice fields with their milky stagnant water,
fields sprouting bright with flames of green,
the hill with fruit trees standing in rows

a cultivator bearing a young couple
is speeding merrily
along a country lane smooth as a roll of linen
away from the village with its row of blue and orange roofs.

On the hill ablaze with flowers that shout victory
and the plains where skylarks shoot aloft
newly-weds and unmarried girls form an embroidered scene

as they gather fresh spring greens.
Now shortfalls of barley are a tale of the past,
man and nature have recovered their original accord.

74.

In your honor
there is fresh clear blue.
On that day of decision that dispersed the night fog.
There is the fresh blue
that brought a new day dawning in our land,
the fresh blue sky of May.

In your honor
sweat is flowing.
As on the brows of miners piercing through rock,
as on the backs of farmers threshing barley,
more, like workmen grasping the poles of a cart,
the whole body flows with sweat.

In your honor
lies our future.
That dazzling future when
all fifty million Koreans will rejoice to meet in tears,
casting off the grim penury and the yoke of history,
as I hasten to return to the rivers and hills of my home in the North.

In your honor
is our solemn pledge.
There is the firm pledge made by us and by you
to bring about a honey-sweet order and harmony,
cutting away all that's rotten and festering, even in our very flesh,
preventing those gang-fights and factions full of fury.

In your honor
is our honor.
The honor of those who work and sweat,
the honor of those who seek youth and dreams,
the honor of those who truly love this land—
indeed, there lies your honor and ours.

75.

Hawaii – drawn from life.
Today again my sea
is threshing hard.

Sea at Waikiki!
How can you be so beautifully
breathing at this moment?

The breeze wafting over your breast
and the typhoon overturning me root and branch
do so unaware of their true character.

*

Like an urchin's crayon drawing--
a red hedgehog sun
a moon smiling like a wooden bowl
a floating rocky cloud
a multicolored rainbow
and a dragonfly plane
are all together up there in the sky.

Below them all
I in turn
become an animal dreaming by day.

*

Brightly colored flowers, and people too,
are all blossoming.

In the sand I write
like that western friend:
'People must love . . .'
then erase it.

Then having erased it
write it again.

*

As I yawned

in my study I used to look out at
Tantalus

My companion
at home
was Diamond Head

and with Koko Crater
I've sometimes enjoyed
a secret rendez-vous.

Even if now
we thus casually part,

within me you
are linked to my tomb.

*

Amidst abundant nature
and regular social life
how is it I feel so sorry for
our own ringworm-gnawed hills
thin streams
twisted pine trees
pigsty-like homes
somber faces?

In that case, unless I die
and enter Paradise, I can't forget, can't live!

* Tantalus, Diamond Head, Koko Crater are all volcanic mountains in Hawaii.

76.

A torso like a ripe peach.

A butterfly
fallen in ecstasy on a flowery tomb.

A tongue with the perfume of melons.

A seagull plunging
into blue waves that flash white teeth.

In a gaze fixed on the distant horizon.

A roe deer
drinking at a secret spring in a virgin forest.

Abyss of Eros,
beauty of original sin

*

The purring cat's deceitful, mysterious
face.

Venus' neck
spun about with hempen locks.

On velvet breasts the imprint of a hawk's claws.

An hour-glass navel.

Buttocks smooth wooden bowls,
secret flesh of tree-trunk thighs.

The narrowing rapids of a rendezvous,
a grassy bank aflame on a spring day.

In primitive darkness,

beneath an azalea-cliff blanket
a naked woman
on a foaming, lapping wave-white sheet
joins her arms

like the cords
that criminals are bound with

.....

The cooing of doves.

Breath-taking moment, oh, mystery!

*

I draw in empty space.

That face,
that voice,
that smile,
those thighs,

but that love
cannot be drawn.

Things drawn in the heart
may not be given form.

*

With that hand
that caressed her naked body
I stroke my gray beard.

Passion faded into pale silver...

That loving, riding the bucket,
has been drawn up to the heavens.

Henceforth, all those times and places
are one with Eternity.

77.

He had become a Shaman.

His admirable chivalric heroism
had turned into Don Quixote's delusions.

His simple nature
had been transformed into self-indulgence.

Having taken refuge in an old inn,
I gazed at that friend
who had become hardened by a misuse of power

Amidst the newspapers where every word chattered
like flocks of rooks in a cemetery

and the crowds
gone out to the Tomb of God
croaking like crows

having no *Song of Protest*
my heart ached more.

* This and the next poem were written on my return to Korea in August 1973 after three and a half years abroad. President Park Chung-Hee had by that time abolished all democratic institutions and made himself president for life. 'Song of Protest' indicates the title of one of Korea's earliest surviving poems, a protest at a king's having broken a promise.

78.

You know, in those days too they made
a golden calf and worshipped it.

Trust, sincerity or love,
such basic necessities of existence,
thrown aside like old sticks or worn-out boots,
they became beasts,
fighting one another, simply wearing human masks.

The world, with Aaron's hordes in charge,
became a place of servile submissiveness.

There too the people
trusting, waiting for Moses to come down from Sinai,
felt very lonely.

Canaan!
Flowing with freedom's milk and honey—
Ah, far off and perilous.

79.

Now, sitting here on Dreyfus'
Bench,

I ponder the world
with the heart of the convict Jean
leaning on a palm tree
gazing into the distance after Papillon

as he sailed away
across the night sea.

I have come to realize that
keeping company with intensely dangerous
gangs of thugs in a single cell,
under the fierce stares
of the guards of 'The Island of Death'
and fulfilling my duty of raising
a herd of two hundred pigs

is neither better nor worse
than any other kind of life in this world!

I have learned that
there is no country in this world
without iron bars and chains
either visible or invisible,
and that there is only a degree of freedom that can be changed
taking our inner heart as territory
and using our various kinds of bonds as instruments!

Therefore standing here,
with no freedom or paradise
that can be attained anew,
is such a lonely thing.

* In Henri Charrière's *Papillon*, the main character, known as Papillon, escapes from the French penal colony on Cayenne in French Guiana, known as 'Devil's Island' or 'the Isle of Death', on his ninth attempt after thirteen years. He is helped by the ethnic Chinese convict Jean, who refuses to go with him. In the 19th century, the French officer Alfred Dreyfus spent many years in the same prison colony after being wrongly convicted of espionage, in a case that deeply divided French society.

This poem was written in 1977, when I finally turned down a position I had been offered at Seton Hall University near New York.

80.

I have taken the river as a place for conversions of heart.

Just as Christopher, a ruffian in origin, a saint,
carried people on his back across a river
while he waited for the eternal strong man Jesus,
I hoped for immortal poems from the river.

In truth, I haven't the strength to carry my only daughter over a little brook,
let alone carry people on my back across a river
and far from renouncing the world entirely like that saint
I am tightly bound with ropes of worldly affairs and earthly opinion

but still I had the idea that, if only I imitated his simple devotions
my poems too might one day
see the light of salvation.

* Saint Christopher is said to have been a man of violence who, after being converted by a hermit living beside a river, accepted the task of carrying people across as his penance. At last Christ himself came asking him to carry him (his name means 'Christ bearer').

81.

Like a two-week-old puppy
my eyes are open to God's spirit.

All things in the universe, hitherto so faded,
now emit beams of grace
while their transience, as they pass from birth to death,
that before was a source of regret and sorrow
proves now to be simply one image of eternity.

Now Heaven is not something feeding and clothing
only birds and flowers
and I give thanks with tears
that it sustains and quickens me with its efforts.

The way the sun rises in the east when morning comes
and sets in the west when evening comes,
and when the proper time is past I feel hungry
may always be the same,

within my consciousness, previously devoid of any entrance,
limitless time and space have opened
and everything is new
everything is precious
everything is beautiful.

82.

Henceforth I will no longer make the hours of life turgid and foul
by vain desires,
turning the source of mystery
into a stream of coal-black sewage.

Now I have opened my eyes to the divine grace
encompassing my life,
so from henceforth as I practice Eternity
I will show forth, bear witness in myself to
the reality of the Good, the Beautiful, the True.

In days gone by I clearly saw as I went my way
the transience and failure of all possession
as I turned away from ways unseen by the eyes
esteeming and serving only visible affairs.

Again, I clearly saw as I went my way
the immortality of those who are poor in heart
who respond to the deep call of Eternity,
firmly embracing faith, hope and love.

Now I give thanks for my inabilities
and my weaknesses
and all I need for my future life
is purity of heart. Nothing else.

83.

I must walk alone.
As he walked alone
two thousand years ago under Roman rule,
to the insults of Sadducees and Pharisees,
so I too must walk alone.

Among luxuriant gardens of evil,
although the truth is troublesome and sad,
although I often taste the bitter cup of failure,
exhausted in lonely helplessness,
just as he walked alone along the Way of the Cross,
betrayed, abandoned by the disciples,
with people mocking and throwing stones,
so I too must walk alone.

Trusting that justice will triumph, eternal,
trusting that suffering accepted has value,
trusting that our love and hope are not vain,
not putting on heroic airs,
but rather disfigured and marred beyond human likeness,
just as he walked alone on the way of Resurrection,
so I too must simply walk alone.

* Disfigured and marred: Isaiah 52:14.

84.

I turned into a crow,
squat down in the middle of a busy road
and squawked:

Caw caw caw caw

The pigeons have been caught by the hawks from the hills
the magpies are confined in iron cages on high roofs,
and in this capital city
the flocks of sparrows alone chatter as they wander pursued.

Caw caw caw caw

Every household has set up and worships a golden calf,
while they rear parrots or macaws in bird cages
so that people
enjoy as best they can their songs or antics.

Caw caw caw caw

If they happen to hear my voice
they fail completely to examine the present and repent
instead, since those useless feathered creatures still remain
they look askance, as if I'm just spoiling the mood.

Caw caw caw caw

Since the daily life they are living
looks most wicked and vicious to my eyes,
and the disaster bound to result from their injustice
is so obvious and lamentable

Caw caw caw caw

I squat there, prepared to be run over and killed
by the cars racing hither and thither,
and squawk.

85.

Caw caw caw caw

Do not think this black clothing of mine
is something unsightly.
It is the monastic habit corresponding to the ascetic discipline
I have sworn to observe.

Caw caw caw caw

Don't go blaming and mocking
this unclear voice of mine.
My throat had become permanently hoarse
with the soul's thirsts and sorrows.

Caw caw caw caw

Don't misunderstand and say
that I bring bad luck.
It's only that I, the only bird to possess inner vision,
inform you in advance of your own misfortune.

Caw caw caw caw

Your ancestors only had to hear my voice
to examine their present lives and remember their mortality,
sometimes even to think of what they called Eternity.

Caw caw caw caw

So you too should not start to spit;
turn your eyes to the lives you lead.

* At the end of the 1970s, the country's growing materialism drove me to compose a cycle of satiric poems.

86.

Lying under a white sheet,
I am carried off in an ambulance.

The evening sky hangs upside-down beneath my feet,
forming a terrible quagmire of death.

I picture my corpse like this, rigid, stretched out,
a skeleton, decomposed, reduced to dust.

Behind me, a lifetime lies smothered in error,
I have not even managed to bear buds of sweat and tears,
let alone the love that can blossom in Eternity.

No point in getting flustered now...

‘Father, into your hands
I commend my spirit.’

Instinctively repeating the last words of Him
whom I have only aped, not truly served,
I sever the link with all concepts.

And my breath becomes rasping.

* In early 1979, an attack of asthma nearly killed me.

87.

As a citizen, he was the leader I revered for eighteen years
and as an individual, he was my old friend, for twenty years,
so Lord God, unworthy though I am, I pray
in the name of Jesus, mankind's redeeming Lamb:
grant his soul eternal rest in you.

Consider the vigor, the active energy, the simple humanity
that he displayed while alive in this world
and the signs of that great charity
he bequeathed to this nation and people

and Lord God, infinitely merciful Lord God,

even supposing that he offended against your will
or that he had failings he himself could not perceive,
look down on the sweat he shed in his efforts to lead,
the blood so wretchedly shed at his end,
and grant that his soul may find rest in you.

* This poem was written to mark the assassination of President Park Chung-Hee on October 26, 1979.

88.

It's not just one person's fault.
It's not just one person's mistake.

All thirty-eight million are accomplices.

Within the assertions of mutual opposition
and the actions of mutual hatred

is lodged the absolutely essential need
for each of us to sustain and fulfill one another's life.

We must not bring about each other's downfall
by rejecting one another.

Just as bees and flowers live in mutual reciprocity,
we must advance in life's peaceful motion
filling one another's lacks with love.

*

Yes indeed! At any time, the world
is determined by
the people living at that time.

The age lying ahead of you as tomorrow
is being prepared by the wisdom and skills
you are learning and preparing today.

Every aspect of life, great and small,
stretching before you at this present moment
results from the previous ages' trials and errors
and is nothing more than a total failure.

All of you, for the sake of your tomorrow,
with the enthusiasm of pioneers in a wasteland
with minds as pure and bright as snow on mountain peaks,
with a love that weeps even to trample on a weed

for the sake of the Utopia you must create
with abounding confidence and exploding energy
today you must silently develop wisdom
today you must silently hone your skills.

89.

I am experiencing my seventies
like a shell on the seashore
that has parted from its fishy-smelling flesh
and is tossed by the world's waves.

What has enabled me to survive this far
is not the strength or the merits of my nature and destiny
but the weaknesses.

Just as the quince tree ignores the reason
why it became a quince tree
I have no idea why
I became a poet.
In a word, my life thus far
borne on angel's wings
churning the pond of the seven sins
has been a succession of adventures and errors,
the traces left by body and soul
are a mass of tales like the knots of a quince tree.

The road ahead cannot be seen
and the road I have come by is always the same,
but I believe
an unseen hand is leading me on.

90.

This is by no means barren ground.
It is rather a new seedbed for raising fresh spiritual buds
that will blossom in the garden of Eternity.

In youth the body was made to work more
but now the mind is obliged to work harder
since the sleeping soul must be awakened
and its eyes must open onto metaphysical things.

Above all, we must not be ensnared by the ghost of solitude
or experience trouble and cares by being too busy.
Solitude and anxiety are gifts of grace
demanding the birth of a new dimension,
so we should accept the body's aging and our lack of vigor
as triggers designed to detonate the mind
and advance toward life's true renewal.

As sexual pleasures diminish
the forms of others and ourselves grow more distinct
so burning more with faith, hope and love,
let us heed more closely Eternity's voice.

Now, awakening from the impermanent dream
that blossomed and withered with every season,
like the leaves of plants and trees

let us embrace the resplendent, undying dream
that will blossom beyond death on that other shore
and live out our old age, bright as pure gold.

91.

Today is Father's Day
and a letter arrived from my honorary son
in prison.

'Father, this year again
I can't pin a flower on your breast
so I just want to offer you my heart,'
he lamented.

He's in the fifteenth year of a life term; indeed,
he was condemned to death for a charge of larceny with murder
fabricated by the cruel torture of the police but then,
when his only worry was the execution day,
an appeal launched by a Buddhist monk
succeeded in saving his life and now he's forty

Thanks to the link established by my participation in his rescue
we reached a stage where we became like father and son
though I'm an incompetent, useless dad.

Still, once every month he writes
greeting me, telling me about his thoughts
and every three months or so I write back,
it's all I can do . . .

In one letter he wrote:
'In the limited life available here
if there are times of loneliness and anguish
I only have to think of you, father, and my other benefactors,
and courage, hope come surging back.
I'll try to live an increasingly sincere life here too,
without complaining or resentment.'

Again, elsewhere, he wrote:
'Today is the fourth anniversary
of the day life was restored to me.
Now my desire is to live a clear, bright life
without desires or attachment
but for some reason I am somehow all the time discovering
and being amazed at myself, how soiled and hard I am.
Yet I keep vowing to become a son
who will not disappoint you, my father.'

In yet another letter, he wrote:

‘I blame no one

for this situation of mine.

I know everything is the result of previous karma

and I pray to Buddha for its abolition.’

In this way, it is not so much that I comfort

and encourage this prisoner but

on the contrary I learn, discover more, come to realize

what it is to have a human heart

and how to control it.

And so today, as I read

and reread his letter,

I can only pray, weeping,

that before the dust of the grave covers my eyes

the day will come when, not he, but I

will be able to pin a flower on his breast.

92.

After my wife's body had been brought to the funeral parlor
I was sitting idly
in a corner of the rush mat in the reception room.

After some time an employee came in;
my daughter-in-law consulted in whispers with my daughter, aunt,
then approached me.

Shrouds came priced between five hundred thousand Won
and, the most expensive, a million two hundred thousand;
they'd chosen one at six fifty thousand, but
'Father, what do you think?'

In normal times I would have replied in a flash:
'Do what you think is best,' but
catching a glimpse of my wife's portrait on the altar
I saw she was wearing, not Korean or western dress but her doctor's white coat.

I suddenly thought to myself:
I never once in her life bought her a dress.

'That one, a million two hundred thousand Won,
use one of those.'

I spat out the words like someone angry
then turned aside.

Then on further reflection I reckon
it's just as well my wife's gone to her rest because
I reckon she'd be none too pleased with such ridiculous extravagance
and after all, if she were to come alive again
I don't suppose I would pay even two hundred thousand Won
so my heart was feeling very far from well.

93.

One day I went to give a lecture at a university in Ansŏng only to find that morning classes had been cancelled for some kind of student activity. So I said to the student who was there to help me: 'I'll be back soon; I'm going out on a date for a while.' I went into town to buy a few flowers, then set off to visit my wife's grave in a church cemetery that lies in a hillside valley not far from there.

About a month previously, the whole family had come for the autumn harvest festival, so the grave together with the grass around it was neat and tidy; in the stone vase set before the slab for offerings there was still a bunch of flowers left from then. Behind it:

Here lie
Husband Ku Johan Sang
Wife Sŏ Teresa Yŏng-Ok
Born September 16, 1919 Died _____
Born February 4, 1919 Died November 5, 1993

I had the impression that the carved gravestone was only waiting for the date of my death to be inscribed.

Crossing myself, I prayed simply for my wife's soul's eternal repose, then asking forgiveness for all the wrongs I had done her in her lifetime, I pledged to live as her faithful husband for the rest of my life, as the inscription on the stone said, and spend eternity with her after we are united in the near future. Then I came away.

As I was coming down the hill, the thought struck me that now I've reached an age when just coping with myself is hard enough, and luckily that's a fact for if I were ten years younger, I wonder if I would be able to make so freely a pledge 'to be a faithful husband' to a wife I could not deceive, just as when she was alive, and I could not help feeling scornful of myself.

Once back at the university, when the student asked: 'So how was your date?' I replied 'Rather bitter' and left it at that.

94.

1. Above the Pacific

Here I am above the Pacific
late at night.

I'm on my way to visit my daughter's family
in San Francisco.

There I'll find my grand-daughter
that I miss and cherish like Don Quixote's
princess Dulcinea del Toboso.

This old fellow, in his mid seventies
smiles happily to himself
then recalls her grandmother who for that child
opened her eyes even just before she passed away.

Why, longing flies through space and time!

Tears roll down.

2. San Francisco

The airport has not changed a bit
since twenty years ago.

The cars in the streets make no uproar
and the roadside trees look easygoing.

They're both big cities but it feels
like the countryside after Seoul.

As I enter my daughter's apartment, her neighbors
greet this utterly unfamiliar old man.
with a 'Hi!'

Perhaps because I've been living with uncourteous neighbors,
my response is a shudder.

3. One False Step

We visited Seattle.

After checking in at a motel, we went out
for supper, then on the way back
I tripped on the curb at a crossing
went sprawling, was grazed by a passing car,
and was taken to hospital in an ambulance.

The place I was taken and given a bed, the day
after my fracture was operated on, was a geriatric home;
in about two hundred beds partitioned off by curtains were
elderly men and women in their 80s and 90s, half or fully paralyzed.
They were of every color and race while the nurses and orderlies
caring for them were from thirty-six different countries!
It made me realize what a mixture the United States is.

As a result, at night you could hear mingling from all sides
each one's different cries:
'Help me' 'Taskedei' 'Zhuming' and such
with among them 'Saram salliojuoyo,' in Korean,
the constant appeal of one old Korean woman
that tore my nerves, on edge with pain,
my eardrums and my heart to shreds.

4. Back in the sky over the Pacific

I board the plane in a wheelchair.

Not having been able to visit that famous Golden Gate Bridge
with my princess Dulcinea del Toboso
we part with expressions of dismay.

This time it is midday
above the Pacific.

What fills my mind
is not regrets or longings
but the scene at the site of that accident
twenty days before, with me lying unconscious;
luckily that car only brushed against my leg,
otherwise I'd be being transported on this plane
as a bundle of bones or a corpse . . .

But instead of joy at being alive,
everyday life, with everything cast away in a flash
comes to mind, biting its tail
and making my mind and heart spin.

My leg aches in its plaster
and my whole body fills with fever.

95.

In the light of the setting sun breaking through rain clouds
after a typhoon has brushed past
I sit as usual on a bench
beneath a twining wisteria in the apartment gardens.

On the leaves of trees, flowers and grass lawn
raindrops are still glittering,
occasionally rolling off and falling.

An unseasonably gentle breeze blows past.
My body and heart feel deeply refreshed,
seeming to have entered a joyful dream
thanks to that brilliant greenness.

Is life's typhoon over?
These past times, life's crises and all kinds of matters—
wearisome, painful, bitter,
lamentable, shameful, and humbling,
all clear away like a storm abating
enveloped in an unthinkable peace and rest.

Now even the shadow of death,
approaching through the dusk of my life in this world
like that rosy twilight, this evening seems
not frightening, but rather, on the contrary, something awaited
like the calling voice, the form of my mother
who when I was a child used to come looking for me at sunset.

96.

The ashen sky visible from my sickbed
is both far off and near at hand,
like the world beyond.

It only needs a moment's reflection:
in all my life, with eighty just ahead,
I have become neither unworldly nor secular
but have lived in a semi-crouching posture
like when you squat over an old-style toilet.

Nowadays I no sooner get flustered
than it's obviously pointless . . .

A lady doctor from a hospice told me:
'There's nothing to worry about. When a person dies,
it's like a hairy caterpillar turning into a butterfly;
you'll be unfurling your soul's wings.'
Her words are somewhat comforting.

*

That sky, the only thing
I can see from my sickroom,

is infinitely high, broad, deep,
and if I am to enter the garden of Eternity that lies
somewhere either within or beyond it,

turning into the soul's butterfly once the defilements
of the flesh have been cast off like the caterpillar,
obviously I hope not only to be granted the vision
of Him whom I have so believed in, hoped in, praised

but also I imagine meeting the mother I so missed and longed to see,
my father, brother, the two sons and wife gone before me,
as well as all those kindhearted friends and neighbors,
with delight and shared joy.

Why, saying goodbye to life here
is not only a sad thing after all!

97.

Today again news came of a friend's death.
Well, we all have to go,
some sooner some later.

I suppose my turn will come soon.

Is it fear of the pain before we die
that makes death so threatening?
Surely there is always euthanasia?

But the dread of something after death
makes that a problem too.
The lights and darks of that other world.

While I evoke in this way
the afterlife, my life today
is so much amiss.

Surely, if I am really concerned about the afterlife,
shouldn't I already begin to live that afterlife,
or rather, Eternity,
today?

98.

I have spent my whole life
deceiving myself.

This is because I have dreaded
confronting myself more than anything.

Within the heart of one part of myself
is a precipitous quicksand a thousand fathoms deep

and squirming at the bottom of it
like a villain, my heart toward which
I have lived with eyes shut or averted
like someone suffering from
acrophobia or claustrophobia.

In fact, merely in my own eyes
the conscience, humanity, morality, collaboration
I have practiced outwardly and even
the Christian life practiced as a kind of insurance

all of them, a kind of dressing up for the sake of convenience
in a life devoid of sincerity or authenticity,
drank themselves into a stupor
with that chameleon-like disguised liquor.

Besides, all my life I have claimed to be writing poetry
and absorbed myself in merely concocting sweet words
so I have lived devoted entirely to sin!

But now in a not too distant future
at the gates to the beyond, in the divine mirror
I shall have to confront the true image
of my vile, disgusting self; what shall I do!

God, let it not be so!

99.

At the end of nine years
spent facing a wall, they say,
the great monk Dharma broke through the Way

while I've been bound up with poetry for fifty years
yet when I'm facing a sheet of paper
it merely stays a blank sheet of paper
and it's all so pointless—
as people put it,
I took the wrong road.

In the old days a singer
spent three years by a waterfall
straining his vocal chords
and so became a great vocalist

while in the midst of all this commotion and discord
I've written almost a thousand poems
but there's not one poem that pleases me
to say nothing of anyone else
and it's all so pointless—
as people put it,
it's a real shame.

But what can I do about it now?
I can't turn back, I can't stop either,
and I'm not in the least repentant.

Just as someone who falls into the water
whether a good swimmer or not
can't help floundering and swimming
until the moment life's over
so I cannot help writing poems like this.

*

Poetry! Now I beg you,
leave me.
I have been clinging to you
for much too long.

Because of you, I became impure,

because of you, I became absurd,
so leave me now,
for I have fallen prey to false passions and vanity,
and am trembling now with fear and guilt.

Let me return now to the innocence
I was in before ever meeting you,
to that state where I won't have to apply my mind,
where no thought or feeling or divinity
will deceive or pollute me or anyone.

Let the words on my lips
be no disguise or adornment;
may they arise from sincerity,
may I remove from my eyes and my heart
your tinted glasses
and so see the true form of all that is in the world.

Oh, poetry! Leave me now.
Because of you, I have time after time
committed the sin of embellished words
so I fear I may have to enter unending torment.

100.

Today's world is veiled in thick darkness.
From here and there within that dark night
alarm signals can be heard, appealing for help.

The whole world is full of the benefits of civilization.
Drunk with freedom, systems of thought quarrel,
create an uproar like that of cicadas or frogs
but the world, like a boat with a broken compass,
is shaken, with neither center nor direction.

Meantime, shall we say that we still enjoy peace in all that?
The crowd that makes golden calves to serve,
drunk with fraud and gambling, competition and pleasure,
are spending all this dread night in debauchery.

What
can I do amidst all this?
What could a new Ten Commandments mean to such people?
No, there's no need for anything new.
But how could anyone be subject to
those ten commandments?

When things are like this, suspend all judgment!
All that remains is to entrust and pray
to the almighty, infinite Mercy.

7. Wasteland Poems

1.

Against the window panes of a wretched hovel
children's faces
press like blazing sunflowers.

They turn away, dazzled by the sun's piercing,
and I too turn away;
a moping shadow trudges behind me.

Down an alley chosen at random I pause;
in a hedge half-smothered in ashes
forsythia flowers are budding.

Down the hill a little girl comes running,
smiling a gappy smile with no front teeth,
absolutely blameless.

I cheer up like after a drink
and my shadow goes prancing ahead, grinning.

7. (Before a War Cemetery of North Korean dead)

Ah, surely they could never close your eyes,
you, souls now resting here in rows?

It was these our hands, that until yesterday
pressed the trigger and took your lives,
that gathered up your broken, rotting bodies, your bones,
then chose a secluded mountainside where the sun is right,
and quietly buried them, even covered the spot with turf,
for truly death is more mysterious
than hatred or love.

Not far from here the road is blocked,
the homeward road your souls, like mine, must take,
and the mere silence of the empty, desert hills
weighs on my breast a thousand tons;
so while in life we were only united in hate,
now rather the tragic longing
you were not able to allay
dwells within my aspiration.

In the spring sky, nearly close enough to touch,
a cloud indifferently
floats North-ward;
gunfire echoes from afar
and before these tombs of love and hate
all I can do is weep copious tears.

8. Diary of the Fields

1.

In the fields young shoots spring up.

In the fields leaves unfold.

In the fields flowers bloom.

In the fields the harvest ripens.

Then what remains for us to do, in the fields?

Only run errands, that's all.

2.

Urging on his ox,
a farmer ploughs his field.

The long-blocked pores of the ground
burst open once more.

The frozen lungs
expand again.

The spring sky seems
almost near enough to touch.

Ox and peasant
glance upwards together.

A cloud slowly drifts
North-wards.

Mooooo!

The ploughshare bites into the ground
and rips its way through
thorns and creepers.

3.

Just three days married!
Stealing sly glances at each other,
a young couple treads down the barley field
which, still frozen, creaks beneath their feet.

Patching up the rutted rice-field banks with soil,
as if firming up their swelling, restless hearts,
step by step they tread down the ground.

To the East outpouring sunbeams break through,
to the South a haze dances over the hills
like a nylon veil;
on the branches of an old West-leaning tree
yellow and red jackets blossom,
bearing waterpots on their heads;
in the village that lies to the North
the sweet smoke of morning smoothly rises
from chimneys over yellow thatch.

Like motes of dust in a hothouse,
swarms of gnats dance before my eyes,
the birds flutter, dive and chirp.

A smell like chicken droppings
drifts across from somewhere.

In the morning when the ground first thaws
the whole world exhales beauty.

4.

Young Dog-shit's granddad,
in his dog-shit-rich fields
has emptied out shit from a basket of cane
and is spreading it round.

Millet pancakes: cow shit,
flower-shaped rice-cakes: horse shit,
coal-dust ovoids: pig shit,
raw oysters: chicken shit,
black beans: rabbit shit,
black flower-seeds: rat shit,
goat shit, donkey shit, fox shit,
shit, just call it shit,
lies scattered over the field.

Young Dog-shit saunters out,
with fish-guts hanging
from his snuffling nose,
he pulls down his dreadful ash-coloured pants,
spotted and coated with remains of rice,
and revealing his azalea-pink behind,
he strains and groans to deposit a turd.

Little Brownie comes out after him,
and goes snuffling with his shiny nose
around the furrows of the field
with their clusters of dung in crusts and scabs,
releasing a trickle of urine
before at last he expells a hard one, hiss,
and comes rushing across, wagging his tail,
trying to lick his master's behind.

Young Dog-shit raises his arse-hole aloft,
then grasping a long stick still steaming
he has plunged into the dung-pit
he drives him off, you cur, you cur,
waving the stick between his legs.

Then, lifting up his drooping head,
as he gazes at the bluish waning moon
still hanging on a northward fence
he conjures up a picture of those wild melons,

last year in summer, with their taste of honey,
but that brings back memories
of thundering stomach-ache and cramping diarrhoea
so that he shakes his head from side to side.

This time I must only eat one, or two, or three,
no more, he mutters, as with his stick-clutching hand
he presses down fingers on his left hand,
one by one counting off two whole fingers.

Up on the little hill over opposite, see
that wild apricot breaking into blossom like a battle-cry!
Skipping up and down from branch to branch,
one solitary magpie,
ejecting droppings like white grubs,
cackles to itself in pleasure.

5.

Spring's new-born babes, still dangling the cord,
lie nursing in peace at my breast,
the slight breeze strokes tickling
the soft swelling breast
and the moist secret place
as it murmurs by.

6.

Inside the plastic greenhouses
springtime seedlings are crowded together.

Pepper and spinach, crown daisy and lettuce,
egg plant, tomato, cucumber, courgette:
just like Nonsan military training center!

Fresh new creatures, untouched by corruption!

In a little while these fresh recruits too
will find themselves sent to frontlines or rearguard
on armistice battlefields of doubtful name.

In March, too, a still afternoon
in my critical guardpost,
a lyrical sky free of jet-planes!
And no sound of gun-fire.

Yet this early spring's bright balminess
somehow makes me want to weep, I wonder why?

7.

Along the edge of a barley field
the weeping willow trees
dip their tresses in a stream.

Sunbeams beneath the water,
turned to golden grains of sand, dance
then pause, then flow again.

Hunched like toads
new crawled from the ground,
the village women and girls
attack the springtime washing.

Slip-slop, slip-slop,
tacka-tacka-tacka, slosh-slosh,
they beat away
as if pounding out the rice-cake paste.

Chick-check, chick-chock,
yick-yeck, yick-yock,
heh-heh, hee-hee! The tongues wag away:

Here's a baby girl born in the year of the horse!
The father-in-law's not too pleased about that!
And here's a mother-in-law too domineering by half,
or a cheeky student for sister-in-law,
but there a husband's gone back after leave,
and as for the gangsters of that Party...

In this happy scene
there still remain shadows of personal pain,
like the tear-stains in embroideries
made by young widows.

8.

A turnip field on a mountainside.
Around an ancient, springtime-drowsy rock
a single blowfly buzzes.

It keeps coming and going
among old, panlid-like pats of dung
that lie in the grass on the crestward path,
now perching low on the rock's shaded waist,
now squatting high on its sunburned brow,
now moistening itself at the stagnant water
held in deep pits on its rocky crown,

then delicately folding its legs in prayer,
depositing spots of pustular waste
or laying tiny, nit-like eggs,

then flying off to land on a spring chrysanthemum's stamens,
a single red spot in the midst of the turnip field,
and there, like a little boy hypnotized by a cinema screen,
staring down at fields, rivers, roads,
as they stretch out level to the far horizon

and suddenly the world seems all suspended,
like a pale, dead body,
a moment without the sound of breathing,
a moment delivered from starvation, disdain and slaughter,
this moment, without curses or conspiring,

and somehow, blowfly, dungfly,
as if for you this stillness
bred a grieving fear,
echoing, your buzzing seems to weep.

9.

The green sparks that rise
from my wide-spreading breast
give warmth to heaven and earth.

A gleaming springtime barley-field.

10.

You know, I reckon the rice-field
is the field's secret sweetheart

When evening comes, they
snuggle up together
and make insect noises,
frog noises,

and then, by day, they both
feign innocence.

11.

The field,
forced up to the mountain top
together with the squatter's wooden shack,

spends every day
in just the same way
as the owner's poor household.

12.

Ting ting ting

the sound of a bell echoing down into my heart
in the rough field round this squatter's hut
built secretly in the deep of night
at the foot of Namsan's walls

ting ting ting

the sound of the bell of our brindled cow
sold at the village market

ting ting ting

blinking its white-patch eyes
as it chewed the cud, the sight of its jaws,
plod, plod, its solemn pace

ting ting ting

that sound rends
my wasted breast

ting ting ting

Bean curd! Bean curd!
ting ting
Bean curd! Bean...

Bang! slamming open the wooden door
that serves as both doorway and window,
and Plock! spitting a gob of coal-black plegm
onto my frozen chest,

storming out without a glance behind him,
our eldest son,
a student now, our Eagle!

13.

From the highway
a muttering of voices rises.

Has the land-survey team arrived?

What, 'Hadake'?

The Imperial landmark,
hammered in like a nail in a coffin!
I touch my congested breast.
And I shudder.

Note: Hadake is Japanese for 'field'. Korea was annexed by Japan for 36 years.

14.

In the kitchen garden, Man-Shik,
the secretary of the 4-H Club
has brought along his younger brother, he
completed agricultural school this year,
and together, in clean jackets and baseball caps,
they are repairing the hothouse:

replacing rotten planks,
mixing fresh soil with rice-husk ash,
spreading disinfectant,
bending sticks to make a framework then
spreading plastic sheeting.

How like the western-style house they used to dream of,
all those bright, elegant seedbeds and borders!
Now spring's early savories are growing here.

Man-Su, just back from military service,
wearing fatigues, a fatigue-cap as well,
is out weeding the barley-field.

Careful not to wound the roots,
he gently scoops up and spreads a layer of earth
and where the surface is gnawed by frost
and mined by the damp, he digs out the furrows,
smoothing and clearing the field's pores
so it can breathe and perspire again.

Pa-U gathers up a bundle
of yellow fallen leaves and brings them over.
Old Man Ironcast spreads them on the rice-seedling bed
as he goes along, gently, as if changing a child's nappies
or wrapping a baby in a coverlet.

Chemical fertilizer is convenient but,
too strong for young rice seedlings, cannot be used;
compost of dead leaves is warm and smells sweet.

After lunch
and a bowl of makkoli,
the son goes on transporting new soil
while the old man fires grass on the rice-field banks.

The stalks of grass feel the heat
and thrust their faces under the old dry grass.

The old chairman of the reconstruction committee
from the orchard house,
makes an appearance, bearing an inlaid baton.

Pruning here,
digging a hole there,
spreading manure around,
then grubbing out a sapling
and transplanting it elsewhere,

the old chairman weaves in and out
among his workers, shouting.
In the army he shouted so much
that now if he doesn't shout every single day
he cannot digest his food!
But face to face he is friendly enough.

At the village stables, those on duty
are disinfecting the pigsties and goat pens.

At the hen-house they are giving Newcastle vaccinations,
at the community warehouse they are bringing out the beehives,
at the hay-market they are inspecting fodder.

In the eyes of the cows chewing the cud in their stalls
swims the sky's milky haze.

Early ploughtime, like snow in spring,
blusters in, then melts away.

15.

After night-time rain
the field

rises with the dawn,
and washes its face

then basking in the morning sun,
combs out its hair.

16.

In emerald green uniforms
high school girls
are performing

all together!
Hear them sing
the Spring Symphony.

A barley field in May.

17.

Hey, you!
Are you big?
See, I'm bigger!

Hey, there,
look and see
which is redder?

It's ripe
so eat.
yum yum yum.

One corner
of the nursery-school garden
is a field of paprika plants.

18.

In the blue evening sky
stars live

in the yellow wastelands of my heart
flowers bloom

in each twinkling
star up there

a dream
dwells

in each variegated
flower in there

dewdrops
hide.

19.

Crunch crunch
the sound of feet

a shadow's
dilly-dallying

Here they are, Pa-u and Yeppuni!

Ah, these children!

as the young barley shoots
pressed down, rise up,
frowning and smiling

the moon that had hidden behind a cloud
slyly peeps

Hey, you!

It was in such middle-school days
that I cut out the picture
of a certain Empress
and took it into the toilets!

For such a passionate profanation,
I too squirmed.

20.

Twenty days after the traditional date for rain,
rain fell, the first in forty-nine days.

Rain? Barely twelve millimeters
and even that stopped at midnight!
But the wilting barley sprouts in all the fields
have received new life, and now they sway in the spring breeze.

Beneath the plastic hot-houses in eastern Seoul
cucumbers and tomatoes
must be beginning to flower

in the Anyang vineyards southwards
the frozen, dessicated branches
must be beginning to stretch,

the soft white mushrooms in Kangwon-do,
the round brown mushrooms too down in Cheju Island,
imbibing moisture begin to grow,

in the lands to the south, near Pusan, there
the fields of spring greens and cabbage too
emerge from unimaginable disease,

in Hwangju there in Hwanghae-do,
in Anpyon up in Hamkyong Province,
the apple orchards begin their pruning,

up in the hills the slash-and-burn farmers
prepare their potato patches

in every sheltered place of central Chungchon
the mulberry trees begin to open their eyes,
relieving anxious hearts

and in the south-west plains of Kimjae
they are still scolding the skies,
'this much rain isn't enough
to do the spring jobs out in the fields!
It's only enough to make your feet muddy!'
as the weather forecast is read out:

‘A low pressure system over Japan is combining with another low pressure system over northern China to produce a deep depression. As a result rain will begin to fall again this afternoon over the entire Korean Peninsula and is expected to continue for 2 or 3 days.’

21.

For more than a fortnight,
almost twenty days,
the monsoon rains have been pouring down.

The field's furrows and dips are full of water,
their lower reaches all submerged,
while beneath the ground the potatoes too,
naked, squelch and splash.

Old Man Ironcast's face, with its tones of burnt stone,
is these days tinged even deeper green
as, in curly linen clothes and covered with a sack,
he comes daily to the fields,
to make the water flow away,
plying his spade at the four corners of the field.

Then the son of the melon-patch neighbours,
a young rascal, creaks by in rubber boots and a plastic mack,
a stick in one hand, in the other a wet string bag
in which he is carrying a few spotted melons,
and greets Old Man Ironcast:

'Here, Pa-U's father, you might's well leave them ditches, no one ever drained a river!'

'Still, this here field's got to breathe out somehow!'

'Reckon as how this year we'm going to have to sell our melons as water-cucumbers, no other way.'

'Above ground you can always get by somehow, but our potatoes down under here are bound to be rotten, every one.'

'No matter what you do, this darned world's going to the dogs, it might as well rain straight on for three months and ten days!'

'What you say there? It don't matter what bitter words you've got inside, you mind you never speak them out! Don't you know that every word's a seed?'

Sure enough,
the rain, that had slackened to a drizzle,
now became a torrential downpour,
lashing and splashing and gushing down.

The melon-field boy went straight home
while Old Man Ironcast stood at the edge of the field
like a dead tree-trunk:

‘Heaven’s getting old and crazy too!
It don’t matter what these young folks say,
it hears and gets upset!’

He mutters what seem to be incantations
but the furious downpour of rain
shows no sign of relenting.

22.

The rain which has been robbing us of energy
has been pouring down now in violent squalls
for a solid fortnight, till everything is soaked.

The cart from the fruit-farm passes
the village entrance, as if laden
with boxes of apples, but this is something far too new:
it is bearing five coffins, large and small.

No hand bell, here, and no chief mourner,
a credit-union group of only two,
while one shouldering a pickaxe,
one carrying a spade,
wearing sacks to keep the rain off,
carelessly follow along behind.

On the muddy dough of the roadway
frogs that have lost their holes,
bearing their fragile young on their breast,
leap and fall sprawling backwards on the ground.

‘Why bother going anywhere,
I can die by my own hand,
just kill me here.’

The policeman in rain-clothes and the umbrella-bearing
neighborhood captain advance, walking in silence,
supporting on their arms an old hag, who seems to hang free,
spirit and clothing unbound and scattered.
‘Kill me here.’

As she grabs his arm again and stumbles,
the captain drops a bundle of newspapers
that had been wedged against his side.

‘Aha! Grandma! It takes formalities
to go to the other world too!’

retrieving a half-burned candle from the mud
they resume their dark, shade-like steps.

At the top of one page, huge stone-like headlines:

'Five in one family killed by pesticide!
Applied by grandmother to cure scabies!
And on another page, in characters like fists:
'Another Coup d'Etat in the Dark Continent!'
After Syria, Ghana too!'

The storm pours down
like massacres, civil wars and battles.
And as the continent sinks down,
so the newspaper melts
and settles down into the mud.

23.

Hills, villages, fields,
all shine dazzling,
covered with shimmering scales,

along the country paths stretching white like cotton,
men, bursting with health
like those you see in towns only
in advertisements for tonics,
out irrigating the rice-fields since dawn,
are returning home.

A jolly lass sets off, bearing the workers' lunch
in a basket on her head,
a hairy dog trotting behind her.

Refreshed by a cup of makkoli,
a bowl of rice,
a moment's snooze,
the men go back to the fields,
while a pair of white herons
fly across the sky
with a creaking sound.

They return through the evening twilight,
a load on their backs,
driving a cow,

The smoke from the kitchen fire,
the brushwood gate: warm and welcoming.

From time immemorial,
these hills, villages, fields,
are all in their proper places,

so in our land's appalling chaos
this primordial scene alone
offers serenity.

24.

In the flower fields, spread on wooden trays,

touch-me-not
cosmos
rose-moss
cockscorn
morning glory
crape-myrtle
lily
rose
chrysanthemum
peony
cotton rose
poppy, all,

draped in light green dresses,
are twirling in time to a waltz.

In the background: the flower-thick hills,
the green plain made up of fields of rice and vegetables,
the white paths, and the flowing river a deep blue sash,

and as the music gradually evolves in free-flowing tunes
the flowers take each other by the hand, then let go again,
forming larger and smaller circles.

Now, from either side of the stage,
their heads adorned with laurel-wreath whiskers,
a host of angel-winged butterflies
darts fluttering in,
wafting hither and thither among the flower-halters,
they dance a swaying, rocking dance.

Whenever the flowers bow in greeting,
the female butterflies apply their lips to their heads,
and if the males take their lips from a deeply-felt kiss,
the flowers wave and shake their heads,
as the whole field ripens in song and dance;

but now from a nearby bare black branch
a single spider drops, as if suspended from a rope,
and makes an entrance, stalking sideways with extended legs,

over bare flesh wearing a clinging black dress.

Yet the frolicking flowers and butterflies just go on turning,

the spider turns too, from flower to flower,
like a dark shadow poised,
and finally, as one butterfly emerges from the flowering hedge,
it flings out a coloured ribbon and wraps it round,
then to the strains of a resounding heroic march,
like a gymnast performing floor exercises,
runs leaping and bounding up and down, round and round.

The flowers, petrified every one,
stand rooted there with drooping heads
as the spider turns round and round its female victim
who trembles lightly, wrapped in its thread,
and ah, that spider's pleasure-drunk evil smile!

The male butterfly, overwhelmed with fear, is helpless,
as it totteringly follows the spider's spinning rear,
it only bows its head
and uniting two limbs, it prays,

at which the spider, having first paid no attention,
seeming suddenly filled with rage, turns
and once again produces deadly bands from beneath its body,
adopting a net-spinning pose
while the prisoner, straining now to escape,
pushes out four of its limbs.

Perhaps she is too exhausted,
she suddenly seems to collapse on the spot,
collapses forwards with only her back twitching
and ceases to breathe.

It grows still and sombre on every side,
with only a sound as of a knife being ground,
and the ill-omened call of a crow
alternating intermittently

as the spider, rolling eyes of greed,
having once danced a kind of crazy sword-dance,
trying to lift the butterfly's limbs,
sniffing around it here and there,

seeming to wonder where to start,
hoisting up its head in two claws,
opens great jaws and prepares to tear.

Just then,
emerging from the distant flower grove along a white path,
flashing in the sunlight, a stag-beetle approaches,
the pincers on its head all sharpened, arrayed in armour,
turning a double somersault, it arrives at the scene,
takes in the situation with a glance,
and seeming to grasp the facts of the matter,
having first pushed the spider aside with its horns,
laying one foot on the butterfly's breast,
with its pincer horns it cuts the encircling threads
snip snap.

But the spider, only pushed aside a little,
approaches the butterfly again and raises one leg
as if again intending to grab and tear it,
seeing which, the stag-beetle comes rushing headlong
and violently dislodges the spider with its horns,
whereupon the spider approaches one of the legs,
once again the beetle goes rushing headlong,
so that for a while there arises an exhausting battle
between the stag-beetle and the spider there,
until at last the spider quits the field
and vanishes back up into the old tree.

Whereupon the stag-beetle returns
speedily to the butterfly once again,
snip-snap, snicker-snack,
it detaches completely the spiders-web bonds
then picks up and arouses the butterfly
until it opens its eyes, raises itself cautiously,
examines its wings one by one, as it resumes its dance.

One male butterfly which had fainted away with fear to one side
now rubs its eyes, rises, comes shooting across like an arrow,
embraces the other and kisses its cheeks,
at which the flowers that had hunched their backs
and pressed their heads to the ground
lightly surge forward and form an escort

as a thunderous chorus of joy

arises, and the dance continues its frenzy,
the extasy reaching a climax...

and that old rogue of a stag-beetle,
arching its back in a hunch-backed dance
and yawning, goes off down the path to the woods.

25.

In an ash-coloured sky,
seemingly about to collapse,
inky clouds twist.
The ground, too, looks dark,
as if about to spit ink;
driven like waves before a storm,
flashing pale silver,
the wheat-fields only reinforce
this sense of despair.

‘Beneath a sky threatening rain and thunder,
wheat-fields stretch as far as the eye can see;
I have tried to express there
all of my sadness or solitude.’

*

Auvers, Sunday July 27, 1890.

There is a sky so clear it seems about to break.
Beneath the dazzling sunlight
the wheat-fields dare not lift their heads,
the air is thick, the silence exhausted,
even the insect sounds seem to echo in the void.

Like a scarecrow in a fit of madness,
all day long a man wanders raving
through the wheat-fields.
Soon dusk falls.
‘I cannot take any more.’
Crack! Crack! Crack!
The sun vomits blood and sets.
The man topples.

*

If you climb the stairway ladder,
there is an attic room
with a window fixed in its sloping ceiling,
a palid lamp with a lolling tongue.

Broken-seated chairs,

a cracked mirror where the light flickers,
a vase with crackled glazing,
a floor with gaping planks,
walls of blistered plaster,
a calendar with the wrong date.

On the old iron bed,
covered with a filthy blanket,
after lingering for twenty-eight hours,
at one in the morning of July the twenty-ninth,
the man at last expires.

Against the dead man's breast his brother
finds a single sheet of paper, a will:
'Now I have staked my whole life on painting
and it has destroyed my reason.'

*

Hearse-less, the coffin
crosses the wheat-fields.
On the village hill
can be seen the cross of the church
where they refused to lend a hearse.

No end to the wheat-fields.
A little farther on, the cemetery.
In the farthest corner, at the foot of the wall,
two graves lie side by side.

Over that to the left is written
'Ci-gât
Vincent van Gogh
1853-1890'
Over that to the right
'Ci-gât
Th{odore van Gogh
1858-1891.'

On the stone,
a hand has laid a bunch of those sunflowers
which in his lifetime set his heart ablaze;
on every side stretch those wheat-fields
he loved to destruction.

26.

Just as many people, busy memorizing one by one
the names of mythological Greek divinities,
names you can't get your tongue around,

seem not to know of Master Paek-kyol, or Lady Suro,
of Master Sosan, or Lady Sa-Imdang,

and just as so many young girls,
expert in the loves of Cleopatra,
of Romeo and Juliet, Marilyn Monroe, or BB,
or the passionate affairs of Broadway and Hollywood,

seem not to know the hard realities
of the life of their housemaids at home,

and though they enjoy tulips, cannas, gladioli,
cyclamens, hyacinths,
even changing their make-up to harmonize with them,

yet they seem to despise us, looking down their noses
as if we had no connection with their past or future,
and don't even know our names.

Think of all those traditional nicknames,
homely and piquant,
that countryside parents give to their children,
names that we love as soon as we hear them:
Rocky, Iron-stone, Rolling-stone,
Dog-shit, Cow-shit, Iron-heart,
Great Wain, Bear, Everlasting,
Beauty, Grace, Cup-Cake,
Twisty, Docile, Moon,
Powder, Blossom.

Of course, dandelion, shepherd's-purse, rocamboles,
cottonweed, clover, windflower,
leopard-flower, bellflower, or nettles,
everyone knows that kind of name,

but widowers-relish, beads-in-a-purse,
clowns-beard dead-nettle, dandruff-head,
dogs-eggs-herb, fleas-nest,

frog-food duckwort,
goblins-bridle, knotted samphire, nuncle-beet,
lady's-button, ants pagoda, kiss-the-moon,
virgins lichen, thieves-by-the-way, goblins needle,
beggars vine, toddlers-grass, madman,
did you ever even hear
such delightful, natural names?

Fix flourishing stamens
like a widower's hair
to a stem in the ground,
you have widowers-relish,

fix flowery pockets to either side
of a stubby stalk
and what you have is beads-in-a-purse,

let the shape of the flower be like two purple lips,
then by attaching two wisps of beard-like stamens
to the three parts of the lower jaw
you get clowns-beard flowers,

if all the body is covered with short fur,
has short-toothed leaves,
and two reddish flowers
dingle-dangling,
no wonder you call it
dogs-eggs-herb,

leaves shaped like globes,
the whole plant covered with thinish hairs,
the flowers seem covered with fleas
so you call it fleas-nest,

still to be found exposed to the snow
on winter lily-ponds:
frog-food duckwort,

attached to a tendril,
a great leaf up to one meter long,
so polished it looks grotesque,
goblins' bridle,

beside the sea,

great knotted stalks, and fixed to each
grows knotted samphire

also by the sea,
just like a large beet
with a beard attached,
nuncle-beet,

the naked body of a pretty girl
blooming inside a flower,
lady's button,

a spike of flowers
seemingly invaded by a swarm of red ants,
since it blossoms yellow-brown:
ants pagoda,

kiss-the-moon
has soft cotton fur all over
and on summer nights its yellow flowers
open wide and look delightful

virgins' lichen
hangs in swaying threads
from Cheju Island's trees and rocks,
while the leaves and spore-pods seem swollen with eggs.

the very name of thieves-by-the-way sounds wicked
and if ever its hairy seeds get stuck to your clothes,
there is no way of getting them off again,

goblins needle too
has needle-like seeds that cling,

beggars vine
is a mess, like dirty handmarks and footprints,
toddlers-grass
oozes yellow juice,

while madman
is dark and disordered, leaves and flowers,
all seemingly dipped in muddy water.

There are others too, too many to tell;

ladies underwiper, truth-to-tell,
hat mushroom, fly-catcher, violet, sticky-spoon,
eight-fingers,
if we preserve and respect
the names and the features of each of our friends,
who knows where it may end?

From ancient days we have often heard
'Heaven won't produce a wageless man,
Earth won't grow a nameless plant'

As people declare 'No one is above another,
no one is beneath another,'
by roadside, in fields' furrows and on mountain slopes,
without asking for anyone's help,
growing up by nature, fulfilling natural duties,
then naturally passing away, see, our true life!

And even you whom men call poets
rashly call these weeds
and so reject them!

Note: How to translate such a poem? Here the option has been to form names imitating popular English flower-names following the sense suggested by the Korean name. Trans.

27.

I stand
propped against the mountain.

There is a sense of anxiety,
like in being suspended upside down.

The trees
and people along the street
can be seen vaguely.

The road
and the river
are set in parallel lines.

Sky!
Now you touch
the soles of my feet.

28.

I am being carried pickaback
up over a mountainside.

On the back of my father's head
a motherless desolation
gleams hazily.

My helpless sorrow is that I know nothing,
neither father, nor mountain.

29.

I am nestling in the hillside,

Trousers gaping,
pissing quietly.

Chuff chuff, puff puff,
chuff chuff, puff puff,
peep peep, a train passes,
old grandfather mountain mutters.
'Going North, the Manchuria train!
Going South, the refugee train!'

Trrr Trrr
bang bang
young grandson field corrects him.
'The unification train from Seoul to Pusan!
The unification train from Pusan to Seoul!'

Old grandfather mountain repeats, as a question.
'The unification train from Seoul to Pusan?
The unification train from Pusan to Seoul?'

Young grandson field replies confidently.
'The unification train from Seoul to Pusan!
The unification train from Pusan to Seoul!'

The mountain is ignorant of present reality.
The field is ignorant of past history.

Note: the slowest trains in modern South Korea are called 'Unification class' Trans.

30.

The field is relaxing in the meadows,
as a train goes by.

From the train windows
people
stare down.

For no aparent reason,
antipathy flares up.

‘No matter where I go, my destiny is fixed’
a pop-song rings out.

And rolling up a sleeve,
I shake a fist.

31.

They're racing,
they're running.

The leek field
ahead
of the garlic field

the beet field
trailing
the cabbage field

the barley field
and the wheat field
neck and neck

the corn field
far ahead
of the millet field
as all the long legs
run the marathon.

Little paprika field
and ground cherry field
have lit a lantern and trot along

spinach field
and lettuce field
are linked together
in a three-legged race
soy bean field
and red bean field
are having a race with biscuits
strung on a string

The cucumber field
goes scrambling
up a ladder,

the melon field
is chasing a rugby ball

the water-melon field

rolls out a football

the courgette field
jerks and pulls
at tug-of-war.

The flower field
waves multi-coloured stamens
and cries victory to the red team!

The fruit field
flies paper banners
from every limb
and cries victory to the white team!

Beyond the ditch
the perilla field
is up on the horizontal bars
the dry-rice field
at the foot of the hill
is doing handstands

the sweet potato field
in the sand
is wrestling

the grape field
is clearing hurdles

and the tobacco field, ahem!
scrambling up over the buckwheat field slopes
is up on the wooden horse high in the hills.

Hurrah!
Hurrah!

Field by field,
racing in relays,

defeating
the onward flowing river,

defeating
the travellers on the road,

defeating
the hairy dogs as they run,

defeating
the rolling bicycles,

defeating
the rushing buses,

defeating the jeeps,

defeating the clouds
that float across the sky,

defeating the swallows
in their flight,

defeating
the buzzing planes.

Beyond the windows
the fields' athletic meeting,

hip, hip, hurrah!
hip, hip, hurrah!

32.

Lying
looking
heavenwards

high
deep
wide

no limit

33.

In the buses at rush-hour
people are packed together like millet seed.

Lonely crowds!

All bleeding!

34.

In the highest
Jet

In my heart
Pax

thus, one day, misreading the Bible...

35.

An electricity pole
is standing in the field.

Little bird, hush!

Now the field
is talking in a universal language.

36.

In the garden beneath the new moon
faces of times gone by return.

That face peeping out from the balsam flowers?
A cousin who, three days after her wedding,
left for Manchuria,
giving me a set of coloured thimbles,
she left, with a hoarse whistle cry from the train,
but that same face, with the painted cheeks of fifty years ago,
is slyly peeping out at me now.

In the cosmos flowers, the catechism sister!
Agnes, was it? Or Lucy?
With black wimple and white veil
framing her face, that ivory sister,
object of my tiny heart's deep longing,
that tall, tall foreign sister
is smiling out at me now.

And that face among the chrysanthemums,
whose might that be?

It looks like the dead face of my mother,
laid somewhere unknown in the North,
or my sister-in-law's gentle face,
(she too stayed behind),
but it could also be my future daughter-in-law's.

The crescent moon slips behind an inky cloud,
the garden now seems dizzy,
frightened too, maybe,
and wrapped in an icy breath.

Could I be developing a chill?

37.

In my diseased field
pink seaweed is weeping.

Teck teck fallara
teck teck fallara
a trumpet shell is calling.

This worm devouring my breast, already 28 years old,
no matter what medicine you pour down inside,
nothing but widening cavities and lesions!

Ah, my expiring days,
would you enjoy the sight
of escaping spores?

Spreading and scattering
like dandelion puff,
where will they float,
the seeds of my life,
where will they bloom?

A field of exile, draped in white,
enclosed with railings before and behind,

medicine bottles and packets of pills
like a mound of garbage
heaped round the bedside.

38.

A desperate northward sky
a pallid sun
black-robed clouds
sombre hills
dismal air
freezing wind

sick in bed
long long
twenty years

saturation
coughing blood
cavities
tumors

a flock of crows devouring the left lung
a flock of jackdaws devouring the right
a fire kindles in my back.

Gush out
torrents
torrents

strike
lightning
thunder

on the head of
ideology's phantom shade.

39.

In the autumn sky
flocks of wild geese fly away.
Casting long shadows
over my aching heart,
northwards they fly.
Each seems to hold the other's tail
as in straight lines they fly away.

Flapping
flapping
flapping
flapping
flapping
flapping
flapping
flapping
flapping
they drop down and settle in the cavities in my breast.
do
re
mi
fa
sol
la
ti
the last one
I captured.

Throb
throb
throb
my heart is racing
honk
honk
honk
my heart is weeping
honk
honk
honk
the sky is weeping
honk
honk
I set it free.

That single, lonely, flying form
is like me.

In the autumn sky
flocks of wild geese fly away,
within my heart
in parallel lines they fly away.

40.

After the springtime harvest was over,
while the second planting of sorghum plants
were still no higher than one of my socks
and the autumn vegetables were so young
they still looked naked,
I entered the operating theatre.

My back was cut open with an electric scalpel,
a lung pulled out, a cavity incised,
flushed with antibiotics,
four ribs cut, then pushed back in,
my back sewn up;
they call all this cavity section
and restorative surgery.

One week! Day by day
the extreme pain and the anesthesia wore off,
the stitches were removed from my back,
and then, three weeks after,
I had a second restorative operation,
cutting through two more ribs.

Reassured that with this it was all finished,
overcoming the pain,
after about a month
I was moved down onto the general ward.

So on the second day,
using a stick
to support my bone-aching back,
I went out to visit the field.
How surprised I was, (how not to be?)
on seeing those young sorghum plants,
now grown up like children
if you once come home after ten years away,
a head and shoulders taller than me!

The cabbages, each like a young girl come back to visit
her mother's home,
sitting there plumply pregnant and full;
and the beet field marvellously dark blue-green
like a parade ground.

After that day out in the field I got sick,
sprang a fever, took to my bed again,
and another month went by.

One day they took an X-ray
and found something called false bone,
9.7 cm on the first rib
15.5 cm on the second
16 cm on the third
19 cm on the fourth
19 cm on the fifth
14.5 cm on the sixth
between the bones
they had cut.

On the next day,
nursing the joy of a return to life,
I went out to the field again.

But the sorghum had grown no taller,
only stood bowed with heavy head,
and though cabbage and beet came running naked,
perhaps they had reached their limit,
they too had not grown.

As the warm sunshine of the high autumn sky
met the cool breeze
on my noticeably lighter back
I wondered if I could expect to see
any greater miracle than this.

41.

The kitchen garden, now autumn is ending,
looks like a meal table at the end of a party.

The homeward plodding sun's head
nods away westwards.

This seeping loneliness is
not so unlike that found
in a house just after
a funeral.

42.

In the snow-sprinkled morning field,
his hair likewise frosted white,
a man stood idle.

Not like someone involved in days of plenty,
weaving sweetest dreams,
he seemed to be emerging harrassed
from a hard long night of pain.

Perhaps slow to get to work
beneath accumulated disasters,
while the field, incapable of yielding a harvest,
lay there, matted dry grass, an empty abyss,
except where some greens grew
in inopportune corners,
like his innocent offspring.

Receiving the gold-bright sunshine,
the frost-hardened ground
and the man's breast too
breathed out misty bitterness

as a gust of early winter's icy wind
shook in passing the last dead leaf
on an ancient branch at the top of the field,
and in the man's eyes
drew up an icy dew.

43.

The heavens are all in gauze,
dropping snow.

And I open wide the doors
of every cell in my body.

My breast
gently softens.

I long to love once
from the very beginning
a certain young girl
whom I never saw nor heard,

like the blind girl
in Gide's 'Symphonie Pastorale',
I mean that love
that begins like pure white snow
and ends like pure white snow.

44.

You, the bear that from time to time came down foraging
in our fire-cleared hillside potato field
up in Samsugap Mountain in Ham-kyong Province,
making havoc, you rogue!
I heard that, driven by Russians, or Chinese, with automatic rifles,
pushed on over the Taebeck Mountains, the Sobeck Hills,
you at last arrived at Chiri Mountain,
in Namwon in whose sunny valley
Chunhyang used to dwell,

then, some time ago the rumor ran
you had been imprisoned in the zoo in Seoul, put in a cage,
and then for some reason
had been hoisted up and fixed in mid-air
on the roof of Hwashin Department Store
with a cosmetics signboard fixed to your head,

poor bear! You see, you cannot go
floating back northwards like a cloud,
and certainly you cannot rise and ascend
like Jesus of Nazareth,

after fleeing from Wonsan, the rich plains of Tokwon,
twice driven as far as Taegu and Pusan,
after crawling back up as far as Seoul,
on the slopes of Namsan at the foot of the walls
the parched ground round an illegal shack
became my lot, and your lot too,
our wretched lot.

Note: Chunhyang is the heroine of a popular tale of faithful love set in Namwon (South-west Korea). The geography of this poem reflects the events of the Korean War.

45.

In a field at dawn from which night has not yet withdrawn
see, monks in black cassocks,
some genuflecting with bended knee
some worshipping, their forehead pressed to the ground
some with both arms stretched up to heaven
some walking slowly telling their beads.

Whose great sin, what great fault are they thus weeping for?
Or what love, and whose have they once tasted
that they thus anxiously spend the night watches in prayer?

Receiving and drinking the icy air of a winter's morning,
with that chill that soaks deep down into the bones,
bare trees whose bodily frame alone remains
stand unmoving out in the field.

Ah, that purity, covering the empty spaces
at the very head of those trees, on their shoulders,
down over their limbs, to the tips of their hands,
their tightly fixed legs, to the very foot,
that limitless purity!

Monks and old trees, alike, had gone
and now faintly return with the rising sun,

first, in Silla's rainbow-tinted grove,
greeting the sun rising from the Eastern Sea
within that grotto at Sokkuram,
guarded by lovely angel figures,
all the coloured desires of each fulfilled
by that great image of Mercy!

And now, approaching the early morning river bank,
where teeming baby fish flash dazzling scales,
perched high on Christopher's shoulders
and laughing merrily:
Love's Incarnation!

46.

Only Pascal's reed standing
with white hair and whiskers
waving in the wind.

A field on the Armistice Line!

47.

This morning
on my field
white snow lies heaped high
over it pure air
simply flows.

48.

The white snow-topped furrows:
the surging waves
of the sea.

There a hunch-backed
rounded rock
dreams a battleship's dreadful dream
over and over again.

On a dead branch
one single leaf
waves breathlessly
like a sign from a shipwreck.

And in this ocean
the green barley shoots,
all lined up in rows,
are having fun.

49.

On the frozen ground of my heart
a bitter Siberian wind bites the flesh.

In a field of dry tangled weeds
a garbage dump
of gaping cans, smashed ration-boxes,
pages from the Army paper, broken-necked bottles,
and in one corner the cadaver of a hairy dog, shot dead;
along the ridges bitten into the fields by tanks
the dry stiff carcass of a cat;

in front of a tent like a plastic hot-house
behind a barbed-wire fence hung with blood-stained slacks,
coming and going, a yankee soldier;
whenever he whistles, peep-peep,
wretched urchins pop up their heads, like frogs,
from holes in the ground like those where kimchi is kept,
wrapped in coloured scarves,
yellow, red and blue.

The sky suddenly
begins to spew black mist
and a cluster of crows flaps off
over the sullen hills.

This itch in my back that drives me mad,
this rising bile that dilates my breast,
what can be causing it?

50.

Eighteen degrees below, unspeakably cold,
the flowers in their crystal palace hot-house
remain unperturbed,
the garlic field snug under thick blankets of straw
shows no sign of life,
only the spring greens, covered
with yellow plastic like army tents,
show signs of activity

but only I, the barley field, stand out here exposed,
no, I and our men on guard at the front,
each bearing a blue flame within his breast,
unable to explain the sense of the harsh season
with its burden of madness,
face to face with the fields across the river,
I persevere and so overcome.

51.

Retreating south in January 1951,
in a truck without chains,
as it struggled up, then slid back down,
struggled up, then slid back down that ridge,
and sitting there beside the driver,
trying to free my mind of fear,
I glimpsed a field
in the valley far below,
sheltered, free of snow, a black spread of cloth,

on the way back north with the family,
in the midst of blooming mountain azaleas,
a field standing out like a mangy patch on a boy's head,
all white with new-sprung shoots,

freed from jail,
on my way to stay in the country, glimpsed askew,
a field, a mass, a host,
of shepherd's-purse spikes,

in that valley at the foot of Shindong hill
between Kimchon and Taegu,
a field, all stained
with the blood, tears and pus of lepers,

my old home, last glimpsed
as I lay on the operating table
of a foreign hospital,

that little scrap of mountain field!

Note: In 1965 the poet had a second lung operation in Japan.

52.

Day after day after day
I face you.

You have been bright, and clear,
mist, drizzle, rainfall,
downpour, torrents,
bang, crash, wallop, thud,
glowering, but

I have gone on through boredom and through anger,
through sadness and through joy,
through irritation too,
pretending not to be able to hear
those cries from life's burning hell,
or the sound of the desert vastness waves

blindly respecting your indecipherable heart,
overmuch seen, a complete stranger still,
but cherishing an inexpressible love
for you that has blossomed within me,
like a ginkgo tree I face you.

53.

What has come and settled down
in the bamboo field?

Is it a thousand-years old pair of pythons,
lovingly set on the cushions of themselves
that have settled face-to-face?

Is it a wild-haired restless ghost,
lips stained with blood,
that is arranging
its dishevelled dress?

Is it a stone Buddha
that keeps changing position
to relieve its numbed feet
that is lingering there?

Rustle, rustle,
crunch, crunch

shush!

No, creeping, crawling toad,
it was you, rolling your big eyes
and scratching the rash on your back.

54.

I have another
lake

No, a river

Rather, a sea

In my lily-pond
flower field

yellow
scarlet
pink
green

multicoloured fish
are at play

in the paprika field
and the strawberry field
goldfish

in the kitchen garden
the spring greens
are fluttering fins
like fish in streams

and beyond the village
out in the fields

in the potato field
clams
in the sweet potato field
scallops
little squid in the melon field
big octopus in the water melon field

now this spot has become
my lost home in Wonsan!
Do you see the sea in front?

Barley whiting
sorghum sardines

millet mackerel
wheat herring
soy beans sandfish
red beans hair-tail
sesame minnows
buckweat sole
maize prawns
all in swarms
throng around

Wriggle
wiggle
flashing
darting
softly
softly
lightly gliding
round and round
on a wave-washed brink
the spring greens
drink gently

out in mid-sea
shrubs and trees
gulp thirstily

zelkovas and other old trees
like sharks or whales
slurp slurp
suck in

while in the woodland depths
lurk the deep sea fish:
wild grapes
green jujubes
fern-fronds
sweet asters
bellflowers
hill salsify

and there too
can be seen
arrowroot-vine seaweed
and, rare as coral,

mountain ginseng.

55.

A young girl, her scarlet hair-ribbon trailing down
over a blouse with coloured sleeves
and a long blue skirt, bears a basket of flowers,

a newly-wed girl, her apron lightly spread
over her yellow blouse and red skirt, her hair
fixed with a jade pin, bears a brass bowl with a floral design,

a woman in a white blouse, a grey skirt,
a winter hat prettily perched on her head,
bears a coloured bamboo basket,

all are out in the lark fields
digging up young spring plants.

A child, wearing a man's silk waistcoat,
riding a plump cow and playing a bamboo flute,
draws near to the hill, its pines
like green clouds, all spread with tiny flowers,

and far away in the plain dimly woven
with fields dry and wet,
beneath the stands of brightly blooming plum and peach,
you can see thatched roofs like inverted shells.

Maybe on a day like this one swallow
came with a gourd-seed in its beak
and summoning Heung-bu offered it to him.

An old hag, with a filthy towel for a scarf,
the cotton stuffing sticking from her jacket,
clad in rough slacks dyed in lye,
bears a worn-out wicker basket,

a girl draped in a ragged jacket
over military fatigue pants
bears a battered pot,

a girl, her hair disheveled,
a charity-handout sweater over her tight thin skirt

and with striped underwear beneath,
bears a chipped gourd dipper,

out in the plains where flocks of jackdaws fly
all roam in quest of premature spring plants.

The rice fields are burnt white, as if by ringworm,
the fields yield only scurf-like dust,
on the hills behind the rotting thatch roofs
stand pine trees, each with peeling bark,

towards the tomb-like hilltop,
a lad who had poured his morning broth down his throat
then gone without lunch at school
is tottering homewards,
his rattling plastic book-bag the only lively thing.

Along the country path, unfolding smooth like a roll of linen,
a cultivator bearing a young couple speeds merrily along,
away from the village with its blue and orange roofs in rows,
towards the rice fields and their pools of milky stagnant water,
the fields sprouting bright with flames of green,
those hills with their rows of fruit trees standing.

The hills ablaze with flowers that cry victory,
and the skylark-stroked plains
mingle as in an embroidered scene,
and now shortfalls of barley are a thing of the past,
man and nature have recovered their original accord.

Note: Heung-bu is a character in a popular Korean folk-tale who is rewarded for an act of kindness to a swallow by the gift of a magic seed.

56.

In the thick forest
where the furnace-sun pours down heat,
hands like great toads
strike fire from a flint
large as a stone on a storage jar
and, parting, set the fire free.

Flames attack the sky.
In a flash the jungle is a sea of flames.

Towering heavenwards, trees
tall as Russians or Yankees,
others with fat trunks
recalling greasy Manchus,
thickly packed bushes
like soldiers of South and North in arms
not understanding the recent madness,
thorn-sharp bushes bristling
with present hates and hostility,
brambles tangled in history's twists,
matted by Destiny's turning wheel,
the forest of all the powers,
down to the roots of every system,
in short, this century's entire dead ground,
with a sound of thunder,
a sound of guns,
is overturned completely and burns.

On the vast deserted mountain heights
where they ruled as undisputed masters,
the tigers, panthers, and other such
flee now with fire at their tails;
bears, badgers and boars,
that had only thought to fill their stomachs,
all fall into blazing trenches and ditches;
snakes, foxes, wolves and wild cats,
all such cunning kind
run hither and thither in search of escape,
their eyes glinting till the end;
owls, bats, and all that steal by night,
the spiders with their information net-works,
the toads, moles, rats, with all such spies and agents,

the bands that eat at every table,
as well as the nests of the birds that sang
and paid no heed to the world's affairs,
yes, even the guiltless little frogs,
all burn.

Stretch dead.

They race around in stifling smoke.

They stumble and roll.

They groan and howl in pain.

Even the blood they shed is consumed,
all crackling, consumed in flames.

A billowing tidal wave of fire!

In this great mountainside blaze

every curse is undone,

every bond is unloosed

from off this land, this people.

Oh, then burn on! Burn on!

Burn a whole month! Burn for three!

Once everything has vanished into smoke and ashes,

once the blood-shedding darkness has gone,

in the peace of the pyre,

in the relief of a mother delivered of child,

behold, a new land!

A plain in which North and South shall be one,

now forcibly divided,

united as flesh closes to heal a wound.

There, as if from Noah's Ark,

see women and men advance

wearing plaited bamboo hats,

with sound of gongs, beating drums,

blowing flutes and clashing cymbals

they advance.

They dig the ground.

They cultivate the fields.

They sow the seed.

In this vast new field,

free at last of the shadowy trace

of the resentful dead, now at peace,

celebrating the world's new dawning,

they shall honour anew none but One,

only the Trinity of autonomy, diligence, harmony.

57.

Today my soul once again
soared through the sky
then, like a kite that has snapped its cord,
borne off on the moment's chill winter winds,
it vanished away,
I wonder where?

58.

I have never so far heard
any voice whatever,
from heaven, from earth,
or from men.

Neither have I seen any vision.

Within my breast have blossomed and vanished
billions
upon billions of tales of things endured
but I could not express a single word.

59.

Was my soul born, from the very start,
with unseeing eyes?

Day after day, every day
I open wide the eyes of my being
and look up to heaven
but encounter only obscurity, only vast emptiness...

60.

Just one footstep ahead of us,
no, from the very beginning,
with the solar system turning and turning,
you, field,
have been swimming on through space.

9. Christopher's River

Prologue

Christopher!

Like you, I have chosen the river
as a place for conversions of heart.

But still, to hoist people up
onto my back, as you did,
and carry them over the water,
or to make a simple boat
and row them across,
why, I have neither the strength nor the skill;

and to do things for people, like you,
with a pure heart,
I admit I possess neither aim nor resolve.

Besides, even when I am out by the river, I find
no way to renounce the whole world, as you did;
I am so caught in the cords of normality
that as they are tugged, like a puppet I turn
round and round, round and round.

Christopher!

As I am, I follow you
out to the river.

And I hope and believe that if I go,
though only mimicking your simple self-discipline,
then, as at the weary end of a certain day you
met long-awaited Love's Incarnation,
so my poetry too may see the light of salvation:
in that hope and belief
I follow you out to the river.

1.

Fog
lies thick
over the morning river,

Sailing it seems to the world beyond,
a ferryboat glides away
wrapped in vast whiteness.

In a poplar's branches up on the bank,
one solitary magpie flaps
noisily.

The submerged sand
shines bright
like a woman's secret flesh.

Swarms of tiny fish
full of inborn joy
drift by.

Golden sunbeams striking down
create a garden, a dream.

And I too, in the midst of all this, am
surely no mere rice-eating brute.

2.

The hills, wrapped in monks' sombre robes,
draw near, settle down.

The silence of a shrine flows round.

The grass-green river waters
flushed with a ruddy glow,
are patterned with silver, with gold,
then become a snowy waste,
then put on a black veil.

The village across the river
like an altar
sends up incense smoke

and from a jetty,
in a fragile bark lit by a lantern
a lonely soul sets out.

3.

The river is holding its breath.
It flows on submissively,
as if covered with oil.

In its bright polished mirror
the sky stretches cloudless,
infinite and deep.

From the river plunged in meditation
I too grow bright within,
I gain peace.

4.

No breath of wind, yet the river
is extremely restless.

And in this silent hour
from the deepest heart
a shudder rises.

Mutability makes us weep, of course,
but is tranquillity too so intolerable?

Just as in our lives
there are always ripples,
the river too has its eddies,
large and small.

5.

Wind rises on the river.
Dark green ripples
furrow the surface,
sending waves slapping
onto the sandy shore.

Can it be that the river too bears
a grievance it cannot express?
It chatters as if complaining
and makes such a fuss.

The sky disgorges inky clouds,
and the wind is entangled in linen shrouds.

From off the pale cowering sands
clusters of jackdaws fly up and away
over hills wrapped in a misty rain.

6.

Into the river fall silver strands
of rain.

Touching the water, each drop,
like a ballerina taking a bow,
rises once more, gleams
then disappears for ever
into the vast flow.

And from the river applause rises.

7.

Into the river half concealed by haze
a silvery light melts and flows.

A ferry-boat draws in, carrying a cow
with a child straddling its back.

On the sandy shore opposite
a single post
sticks up alone.

A dragon-fly is clinging
at the tip of a fishing-rod.

From a distant bridge
a locomotive
whistles hoarsely.

Perched on a stem of grass,
a little green frog
stares fixedly upwards.

8.

Those clear spring-waters
that rose in May-time forests
now flow here, a coal-black river.

Sun and moon and clouds too
have lost their splendour,
the fresh green woods and hills
are cliffs on an ink-painted scroll.

Where the excrements of greed
issue from the sewers,
you can see, spread like a sheen of oil
over the foaming rocking water, such obscenity!

When will the day come
for our river to flow out into the blue sea?

A single flower of compassion
floats, a lotus.

9.

Watching how the river waters flow
around red mountain slopes,
I bring to mind that moment when
a single drop of dew, long seeping
through the crust of earth, sprang out,
a tiny spring high up there on a desolate peak.

Watching how the river waters wind
across the verdant fields,
I picture when at last they reach
their destined ocean's waiting vastness
and flowing into the billowing waves
leap beyond the bounds of time.

Watching how the river waters flow
with perfect ease before me,
I imagine when at last
this river, now all transmigration
with its repeated evaporations,
and I, the carcass of Karma-destiny then thrown off,
will meet again upon this spot as living beings.

10.

Laid along the valleys here and there,
having cast off their carcass of flesh and blood,
nothing but a handful of earth,
here now the ancient dead flow by.

Thus the river clasps to its breast
the desires and sorrows of every person
and flows.

So one day, soon, as I flow by,
shall I not encounter
the unthinking gaze of my youngest child
now fishing here,
of his son or grandson at least?

And then one day,
all turned to praise,
I shall sit here again myself!

11.

It was merely water.
It was a great mass of water.
That great mass of water
flowed indifferent on.

Flowing on, it always
stayed in that same place.
Staying in that same place,
it was constantly renewed.

Renewed, although the past
continued steadfast there.
The past continued steadfast,
but the future too was there.

Past and future, thus united,
became one single present.
And that single present moment
showed many faces there.

It showed so many faces,
spoke in many voices.
Speaking many voices,
its heart was indifferent to all.

Always to all indifferent, it suffered,
and suffering it was still indifferent.
Indifferent, one day it died
and dying returned to life.

12.

Holding its breath, it flows.

Out of breath, it flows.

With a broad smile, it flows.

Sunk in gloom, it flows.

Like silent protest marchers

shouting silent screams

it flows.

Like a funeral procession,

pausing in its laments,

stifling the sobs in its breast,

it flows.

13.

In the river
in springtime
springtime flows.

In the river
in summer
summer flows.

In autumn, autumn,
in winter, winter
flows.

In the river,
if a happy person passes,
joy gurgles

and if someone lonely passes,
sorrow broods,

if lovers pass,
love melts and flows.

Within the river
both nature and our hearts
find their own image.

14.

The river flows on,
without a filthy heart,
all pure of body,
it flows like time in Eternity.

The river flows on,
without a paltry body,
all pure of heart,
it flows like Eternity in time.

The river flows on,
neither heart nor body,
it flows, an essence of nothingness.

15.

Here and there
mercilessly exposing its entrails,
behold, the Han River!

And above its putrid stinking
coal-black flow
the smoke-filled sky
holds a sick sooty sun
that gleams like sewage.

Scattered near the north bank
dredgers and diggers
showing off their strength like so many thugs
emit thunderous roars

and over the bridges and overpasses
vehicles are lined up nose-to-tail
all full of crowds running after golden idols
and other crowds in quest of a new Moses
all speeding crazily along.

From a marshy spot between meagre weeds
a single water bird clears its throat
but then interrupts its grieving song
and flies off in a sweeping curve

and beyond this flow of despair
now too weary even to lap the shore,
while I long for the river remembered from days gone by
which gurgled and leaped
to my vacantly wandering eyes
Nam-San Hill seems to glower in disgust.

16.

The river
continues the past,
is not imprisoned by the past.

The river,
while living today
lives the future too.

The river,
though innumerably collective,
keeps unity and equality.

The river
makes itself an empty mirror
in which all things view themselves.

The river
at all times and in all places
chooses the lowest place.

The river,
unresisting, accepts
every violence, every humiliation,
and never denies itself.

The river
gives freely to all that lives
and looks for nothing in return.

The river
is its own master,
free despite all bonds.

The river,
caught between generation and extinction,
reveals Eternity within impermanence.

The river
every day in its Pantomime
teaches me many things.

17.

The village, with its ancient study-centre,
had flowing through its very heart
a little stream.

Beneath the split-log bridge that spanned it,
on either bank
laundry-stones were laid
and in the old pine trees rising above it
could be seen magpies' nests of former years.

In the pools
where willow branches trailed the surface,
frogs splashed
and in the shallows where ox-carts forded it
swarms of minnows swam against the stream.

The paper boat my cousin made
that I sent floating down that stream
as if innocent of shipwreck
today floats on still down this other river.

18.

Beneath the river bed
that our human eyes can see
there flows another river,
deep and wide.

Piercing downwards and sideways,
forming eyes for the lace-like strata,
sparkling like the dawn
in the deepest darkness,
it flows.

And down that silver river
petrified beasts and plants
float like sailing ships,
with at times a human corpse.

And all around those dead things,
like a thick mist, float
those dreams
and loves
and tears
and grudges
and prayers
that alive they kept within.

My poetic thoughts are there too,
the things I can neither express nor represent.

19.

In my studio, which I call
'Study for contemplating water',
hangs framed a calligraphy by Kim Ung-Hyon:
'To contemplate water is to cleanse the heart.'

In the coal-black stream of the River Han
that I can look out on from my study window
I daily rinse my turd-like heart
but far from growing whiter
it only grows blacker and more putrid day by day.

So I invited the Buddhist monk known as 'Dirty Mop'
and asked to be introduced to his faith
then on a sheet of white paper
he drew the two breasts
of a naked woman.

For a time I concentrated,
gazing at the breasts of our conversation,
but day by day my little turd
only smelt worse and worse.

And then, one day, I paid one of my rare visits
to Saint Francis of Assisi:

-- 'My dear brother Turd!
Why, a turd has to smell and rot in order
to become a flour-bag, plastic at that'
A penetrating statement.
Still tingling from that blow,
it is not yet my mind,
but it seems that my eyes have just a little unsealed.

Note: Kim Ung-Hyon is a famous calligrapher.

'Dirty Mop' is a nick-name for the artist-monk Chung-Kwang also known as 'the Mad Monk'. Tr
ans.

20.

I have spent today,
that source of mystery, today,
wallowing in the dirt.

Along the sewers of my soul,
so full of stench and running muck,
the spirits of all purity
have foamed and died.

Tomb of Time turned to a muddy slough!
Just a trickle of tears flows from the drain
and drips into the coal-black stream.

Sun and moon, and time too, have lost their shine,
and all those things that once bloomed flowers of grace
reciprocate now with a wilting look.

Ah! When will that day come
when my life and all its meaning
will flow into the distant sea
and recover eternal freshness?

21.

Like a great snake's back,
glistening and flowing:
the river.

In the darkness veiling
the forms of this world's ups and downs
flowing like the very spirit of Mother Earth:
the river.

In this night devoid of stars,
shedding gray blood,
watchful as a curse, and flowing:
the river.

22.

And within my head
another great river
flows.

In hours of silence
I listen to the murmur
of the drops as they
compose that river.

Within the chirping each one makes,
I hear my mother's lullabies, sixty years ago,
and I unload my heart, encountering old stories long forgotten,
and am entranced, as well, by life's mysterious symphony.

At one end of the river in my head, too,
there lies a tiny secluded spring on a mountain-top
and at the other lies the vast, vast sea, but
what lies beyond those, as Fountainhead and Other Shore,
remains utter mystery.

23.

The river, too,
day by day, depending on the moment,
puts on different airs.

One day
beaming brightly
it is full of joy.

Another day
glowering
it lies grim.

At times
emaciated
it cowers.

At other times
crimson-faced
it gets excited.

Other times
it sighs
repeatedly.

Some days
sobbing
it weeps.

Is then the river
so
like my heart?

24.

This river facing me today
is not yesterday's river

That river I shall greet tomorrow
will not be today's river

And while we every day meet
a new river and new people
we mistakenly believe we are meeting
the former river, and the former people,

25.

The morning river
lies thickly wrapped in mist.

The water,
its flowing,
and the horizon, too, all are unseen,
the river is an island of ancient nothingness.

But in my eyes, the river flows,
and in my head, the river flows,
and in my heart, the river flows,
and that distant horizon, too, is not invisible.

26.

An early winter sunset:
the River Han flows on.

The roar of vehicles speeding
over the bridge between bank and bank
renders the river more desolate than ever

while the declining rays of sunlight
trailing along the fringes of the main stream
reveal more than ever its utter exhaustion.

Just like a traveller on a long journey
the river, now visibly weary and haggard,

is longing for that day, some day,
when it will flow into the sea and be restored fresh blue,
so, though it clutches its belly and limps along,
it does not linger here but flows on its way.

27.

Snow flakes fall into the river.

Just as a woman glimpsed in a dream leaves
no trace in my breast but a touch of warmth,
the snow too vanishes without a trace.

Is perfect beauty
such a short-lived thing?

To reveal what truth, then,
is the white snow falling soundlessly
metamorphosed in a flash into water?

And the hundreds of millions of thoughts
which have blossomed and vanished within my heart,
where have they all gone? What has become of them?

From far off can be heard the siren
of a boat that has lost its harbour.

28.

I gaze out at the river
as if spell-bound by music,

As I forget myself
and cease to be myself, this moment, now,
this oh so marvellous state!

Now I, one drop of water
within the rhythm
of that widely sprawling flow,

without desire
without temptation
without discernment

becoming one with the transparent Real
become a calm child in the cradle.

29.

The river frozen hard
lies rigid like a corpse.

Rising pale above hard reaches of ice,
scab-like here and there
sandbanks appear.

Straws can be seen like scars
caught in the ice;
like grass in the mouth of some fossilized beast,
see, there, a scrap of cabbage leaf.

Was it dug by fishermen?
From a hole in the ice like a cavity in a lung
ripples shimmer bright.

Even in the nuclear winter of 'The Day After'
will humanity survive
like the water that flows on deep beneath this ice?

As I look out at the River Han,
lying with skinny limbs outstretched
like a skeleton in an open bier
staring upwards with empty eyes,

I can neither hope nor despair.

Note 'The Day After' : a TV drama about the nuclear winter.

30.

The river bearing within itself
unceasing tensions stored
seems so serene.

The river overcoming within itself
unending hardships endured
seems so at peace.

The river bestowing gifts on all who live
and expecting nothing in return
seems so detached.

Within, a sweating
within, an aching
within, a weeping

river.....

Only smiling to the outside world
a secret smile of knowledge,
the river flows.

31.

Off they fly

Swish

Swoosh

Flocks gather and off they fly

Flap

Flap

Flap

Flap

Rending the plastic-clad winter wind
the milky void, veering from side to side
pipipip
kikikik
off the birds of passage fly.

The birds of one flock, like acrobats,
go soaring up, then nosedive down,
soar up again, and curve into a ring,

while another, like the line of a farmers' dance,
winds around, then scatters wide,
scatters, then winds back in on itself again,

sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs,
sometimes all of the flocks together rise up,
from river's midst to the zenith, a stage
where they perform their ceaseless dance.

Here at last is the river's mouth, where
two hundred miles of Nakdong stream and the surging tide
meet and embrace like long-lost kin,

and by luck, as the sun lingers on Kadok Island heights,
on the sandy shores of Eulsuk island all covered in reeds
like fallen, scattered heaps of flowers
flocks of swans are scavenging for food,

and by Taema-tung where snow still lingers,
scampering like sprites among the clumps of rushes,
wild ducks go scurrying here and there,

while down near the ferry a barrage is rising,
resolved to mangle this natural splendour,
where dredgers and cranes, with a criminal air
roar out their wickedness.

Note The places named are in the Nakdong estuary near Pusan, a famous nature-reserve ravaged i
n recent years by the construction of a tidal barrage. Trans.

32.

Dividing snow-covered field from field,
and so forming an image of our Korean land,
the frozen river has melted and flows.
From the shade of the river's divided waist,
ice still sparkles fitfully,
sparks flaring from the muzzle of a cannon or gun,
or the edge of a sword;
while the midstream sandbanks form Korean flags,
or outline islands: Cheju, Ullong, in the Southern Sea,
and along the river's banks rise Northern ports:
Chinnanpo, Shinuichu, with Wonsan, Sohojin, and Chongjinhang too.

The southward willows among the fields
have silvery catkins on every branch
already beginning to swell and open
while the trees to the north, on the other shore,
stick up fierce branches
with still no sign of sap.

Suspended from the sky on golden threads
baby suns dangle in the water, flickering,
and reeds tremble in the stream.

Yet only a few days before, these fields
were nothing but dead-lands, frozen hard!
Just as our hatred has passed away,
now, like our love,
all melts and flows
and that infamous 'Bridge of No Return'
set up there in times gone by
now flowing floats away.

Note: The Bridge of No Return stands unused between North and South Korea.

33.

Long
long
since long ago
a single river flows.

No other eyes can see
that stream
only my eyes alone.

Yet even for me that river
having flowed then vanishes
and having vanished then flows again.

Frankly speaking, that river's appearing
is not mine to decide
it withdraws too as it will from the scene.

Nonetheless that river
tells me much.
Mostly it talks
of the unseen world
or the hidden secret of the visible world.

But since its language
is trope made object
I cannot discern if what I see
is or is not those words' reality.

And today, in that stream
like a sailing ship stands
a 63-storey skyscraper too;
what that might mean
I am carefully pondering. Now...

34.

The river bathed in spring's golden sunbeams
displays the radiant face of a bride
and as it bares the silken designs on its breast
it windingly extends
a fresh nakedness.

And as I gaze at that river's beauty
my heart, that had been like frozen ground,
explodes into green like a barley field.

35.

Young springtime sunlight gleams
with a sparkle of silver fish leaping
from the early-morning river
as white water-fowl fly up like
baby angels.

A shaggy-faced hill
shakes off slumber
and approaches the river's brink
while from the tip of an accompanying poplar
a single magpie cackles.

In the village, plum-blossomed like a victory shout,
from chimneys perched on toy-like thatched cottages
the morning smoke rises like incense,

from the barley-fields a breath of green comes wafting
like the scent of fresh chicken droppings

and as I wash my coal-black heart
in this child-fresh river
it conjures up rainbow dreams.

36.

This yearning, this longing
which I here send adrift like
paper boats down the river
will somewhere find meeting
some day fulfillment will come.

Out in the heart of that boundless sea
up in the vastness of that stretching sky
or set reborn on this earth again
or within the divine Mystery, who knows?

But once become an immutable form
within the eternal Garden of Life

this yearning, this longing
which I here send adrift like
paper boats down the river
will somewhere find meeting
some day fulfillment will come.

37.

As I stroll along the riverside in Seoul
my eyes are struck by several young couples
down in the meadow at the foot of the embankment.

One pair has bowed heads
one pair is giggling wildly
one pair is gazing out
at the river's distant flowing.

38.

Somewhere between Paldang and Yangpyong, an elderly couple
sitting on the gunwales of an empty boat on the river bank,
I to one side,
my old woman to the other,
is gazing out at the river, rippling though breezeless,
each plunged in private thoughts:

And what comes into my mind?
Just two days ago, with a million catholics in Yoido Plaza,
throned high on a splendid temporary altar,
the figure of Pope John Paul the Second,
and, glimpsed in a woman's magazine several months ago,
the figure of the Buddhist Patriarch, Song Chol,
sitting on a rock in Kaya Mountain,
those two:

one of them in the cheers of a vast sea of people,
one of them in the solitude of nature,
with no doubts about the sincerity of either,
so what can be the meaning of this contrast?

One of them in utter devotion to his task of human action,
one of them at the zenith of his task of complete inaction,
the circling of the mystery is just the same for both,
so what can be the sense of this disparity?

Those two men's figures, set together,
embody truth indistinguishably!
So this is what it means to say
that being and non being are identical!
So this is what it means to say
that stillness and motion are the same!

Seeming to hold their breath with the evening twilight,
gazing at the now calm river,
the old couple, deep in thought,
is quite unable to rise.

39.

River!

When from you I received new awareness,
all the whole world became new for me.
Thanks to your selfless sacrifice, I perceive
the mysterious forms of things that are still being born
with all my childhood's wonder, astonishment,
and praise.

In saying this, do not mistake me as meaning
I have entered some state of rapturous trance.
And do not misunderstand me as saying, either,
that I have got worked up into some aesthetic frenzy.

Those trees along the embankment edge
are just the same trees as yesterday,
the people walking along the path
are quite the usual people there;
river, you and I as well, then and now,
not the slightest scrap of change.

Only now within my panting breath
you are flowing along as well,
my eyes can see your formless motion,
my ear can hear your silent words.

In thus coming to know you,
I have come to know myself,
and now, though late, I see at last
why baptism is a symbol for being reborn.

40.

There is a place in Wonsan Bay where a river flowing down from far inland enters the East Sea, and it is a cursed spot, where the sand is never smooth and the currents swirl strongly, that every year claims several lives. Yet it was also a fine place to wash off our naked bodies, salty from bathing and covered in sand.

One day they held an exorcism there, beside the river's mouth. The Shaman used a chicken to represent the lingering soul of someone who had fallen into the water and drowned; she flapped around in the water, screaming wildly as if possessed and giving a laudable imitation of someone drowning, then when the ceremony was over she went off, leaving the chicken lying there at the water's edge.

Among our class of Minor Seminarians, the most good-natured and most mischievous boy, one Simon, having checked that the other onlookers had gone off, picked up that chicken, borrowed a pot from an isolated house there on the shore, boiled it, then put it ready and said, 'This is the flesh of an evil spirit, so let only those who are going to become saints eat it; those who cannot become saints must not eat it, so go ahead as you think best.' The class was a little horrified at these words, but yielding to a healthy appetite that was gnawing inside, all took part in that feast of saints so that in no time at all the spirit's legs and breast were all devoured.

So those happy days went by, until one day just two or three days before term began. We had spent that whole day too by the sea and now it was time to go, so we went to wash in the fresh water of the stream. Simon, who was a step ahead of us and already in the water suddenly cried, 'I'm falling, I'm falling!' He was smiling happily -- I remember this quite clearly -- gazing at him, I said 'Another joke!' and went on drying myself, but he dipped his head in the water a couple of times, like someone swimming, and then he was gone!

At that I screamed, while some fishermen who had been working on the hull of their boat nearby were up in a flash, looked stunned for a moment, then went to the rescue, but it was no use and his body was taken from the water five hours later, at midnight.

That was my first direct experience of death, so there was not only fear but also a feeling of guilt at having just looked on while my friend was dying, and for a while I could not bring myself to show my face in the village. In addition there was the secret of the Shaman's chicken added to my own insecurity, so that I said nothing to anyone, to the very end.

41.

I now have become one drop of water
and flow into the stream.

I now have awoken from the dream
that served as the very thread of life,
I now have emerged from all the real
that served by yearning to attach me to life

now I am released from time
now I am released from me.

I now have lost the form of me
there is no I to call me me
this river that shows no beginning no end
is simply I.

Now as I freely flow along
within an immutable order,
I experience the origin and end
of all created beings.

42.

When the poet Kong Cho was nearing his end, I longed to encourage him once to ‘believe in God’ but felt it would be presumptuous, so one evening as I was sitting there tongue-tied, I began:

‘In the very middle of a muddy yellow stream that had burst out and was flowing down from a dam, you were struggling naked until I stretched out a hand from where I was sitting on the bank and you grabbed me just there, and with great efforts you managed to extricate yourself; then, as you lay gasping against my knees, I said, ‘Now, that’s enough! Don’t go on languishing in quagmires of Non-being, lean back against Being.’

To which you replied, glaring, ‘You know, making distinctions between Being and Non-being is something I cannot endure!’

With the story of my dream I reached the end of my useless advice, but he, although he did not directly link up with the thread of my dream-story before his death, did one day say, as though revealing to me a hidden secret, ‘Why, freedom has shackled my whole life!’ and left me those extravagant words as his legacy.

He has been gone these twenty years and then, one night this summer, he came, in the form of a mountain wizard, walking like Jesus of Nazareth across the water of a river brimming full like that above Paldang Dam, and said, ‘Ku Sang! Being comes from Being and what comes from Being is imperishable.’ With that admonition he vanished.

What class of dream can it have been? A child’s dream? A Zen dream? In any case it makes me happy that at least in dreams our meditative conversations continue.

Note Kong Cho was the nom-de-plume of the poet O Sang-Sun

43.

In this autumn river
unforgotten eyes, the pupils of those eyes,
are still alive.

The sorrowful eyes
of my mother as she saw me off,
coming out as far as the highway
on the day I fled my North Korean home,

my father's affectionate eyes,
as he said to this willful youngest child,
'to live a little less
is to live a little more nobly,'
putting his finger on a line from the Chinese Proverbs
one day before he left this world,

the oh so compassionate eyes
of my one elder brother, a priest
surely martyred in a communist prison,

the violet eyes so widely white of Yumi-jang,
the mixed-race girl of White Russian stock
in the 'Etranger' coffee-shop down the lane from my boarding-house
in Tokyo, my heart's first attachment,

the narrow reddened eyes of my maternal cousin
when, four days after her wedding
she gave me, then a child, a set of coloured thimbles
and set off northwards, as the train whistled hoarsely,

and the eyes of the foreign sister in the catechism class,
the eyes of the Japanese policeman who once beat me up,
the eyes of the artist Lee Chung-Sop,
of the poet Kong Cho,

unforgotten eyes, the pupils of those eyes,
innumerable many, are still alive.

44.

Yes indeed! River, you and I
were born of a single origin
but you preceded me by far
yet still you are closer than I to that source.

River, you and I within that source
are living together now,
will be living together for ever,

I myself because of you,
you yourself because of me,
fulfilling one another
we embody what that source contains:
the good, the beautiful, the true.

45.

All that lives is born of water
grows by water
changes with water
and is imperishable with water.

The traces of our love
and our tears as well.

46.

In the river
the spirits of the water
going up to the sky and falling to earth
that brought forth and nourished all that lives
are whispering to one another
countless millions of tales of things endured
in the course of that great task.

47.

At the end of the first day of the Tokyo Asian Poets Meeting, I joined a few Japanese poets of my own age in a near-by bar.

As the gathering got merrier, one not-so-old poet sitting beside me, already a bit tipsy, began: 'I miss the River Han. I so much miss the River Han with its blue flooding flow. The Han River, the cradle of my youth! I miss its boundless (that was the word he used) flow.'

His voice was trembling as he spoke. At once I replied:

'Come to Seoul some time, come and see that River Han!'

Even as I spoke, I was filled with anxiety: how could I ever give him any glimpse of that 'boundless flow' he missed?

'No, for me to say I was going to see that River Han again would be an offensive thing for you Koreans, a shameless act, just like me daring to call that Seoul where I was born and grew up my home town.'

His expression was one of utter distress. I am quite unable to make any response to this kind of 'poet's sharp conscience' but just then the Korean poet who had prepared the party and was sitting opposite, spoke up:

'Ah, you! That old Han River Ballad again! And since when have poems and rivers asked nationalities? Or race? Only those who love are owners of such things; poems are written for those who have tears, and rivers flow for them too, so hurry up and snuggle down in that breast. Go and lie down in the rays of the setting sun, and contemplate the dark red hues of the River Han at nightfall with tearful eyes!'

'Thanks, but I mustn't go. This 'foreign bastard' mustn't sully that river again. It mustn't happen!'

And as he spoke, he seemed to be gazing out at the flowing River Han, to be contemplating that twilight, staring into the distance.

Today too, as I stroll along the banks of the Han, living as I do in Yoido Island, and look out at the river, piled with heaps of sand, banks flooded like paddy-fields, hacked, emaciated, devastated, with here and there its entrails gaping open, my heart alternates between wishing I had told him never to come back to Seoul, in order to safeguard his memories of the Han's 'boundless flow', and the thought that in springtime I should invite him to let him visit his 'home'.

48.

I as a single drop of water
become the river and flow
so now there is no more I.

That I which made me dream so
which made me despair so
which made me so restless
which made me so lonely
which made me so unsure
which made me so mad

that I has vanished and gone,
only the flowing remains.

Now at last I enjoy
the order and freedom
and peace of the natural heavenly state.

49.

A chilly December morning, early.
Like others who go to daily worship,
I have come out to the river today too.

Unruffled, the river seems to be holding its breath,
the opposite shore looks overcome with the cold,
all the boats are drawn up on the bank,
as a few white water-birds kick down at the river
and fly up towards the frozen sky.

And yet, from within the season's tomb-like dreariness,
what is this miracle-like ceremonial music?

From that corpse-like river, no, from within my breast,
a bamboo flute's melody drifts across,
from tiny sources here and there high on distant mountain peaks
the sound of a single drop of dew piercing through the earth's crust,
the sound of a valley stream making a way through rocks and woods,
the sound of cascades tumbling headlong from towering cliffs
the sound of the river once become a great stream, rolling on
after flowing foaming between field and field,
the sound of thunder, the sound of rain, the sound of the blizzard,
the sound of countless separate drops of dew
being born, dying, meeting, embracing, uniting,
that wonderful sound, all these sounds ring out,

and now that melody, like the river flowing here before me,
concealing its distant, far-off traces,
changed into 'The Spirit Mountain Music' drifts across,
as my past, and today, and the future too,
melting into that heavenly melody, flow on.

Note: 'The Spirit Mountain Music' is a composition attributed to King Sejong (mid-14th century
).

50.

The river
waters
flow
unceasing.

So, indifferent, the water
rises unnoticed to the sky
and becomes mist, becomes a cloud,
becomes dew, becomes rain,
and once again returns to the ground.

And this time soaking into all that lives
it becomes grass, becomes a tree,
becomes a flower, becomes fruit,
becomes a bird, becomes a fish,
becomes a beast, becomes a man.

But when that creature's
life is done,
all that water then comes out and
becoming once again a river
here, like this,
flows unceasing

51.

The river flows,
winding its way, near and far,
round lofty and lowly mountain spurs.

A river as clear as that
in which long ago Ho Yu washed his ear
and from which the herdsman led again the cow he'd brought.

On the thickly reed-grown bank
one old man, bare to the navel,
with a white beard reaching down to his chest,
carrying a fishing rod over one shoulder,
a fish-basket in one hand,
looking as if he has nothing to envy the world for,
gazes out at the river's distant flow.

'Shall I exchange peaceful retirement in the bosom of nature
for a General's charge?' is the sense of Chinese characters
written on a scroll that hangs in this study
where an equally white-bearded poet,
not involved in the seething world's election turmoil,
is writing poems on 'St Christopher's River'.

Note: The reference is to a classical Chinese legend in which Ho Yu rejects the decision of King Yao to name him as his heir, and washes his ear in a river to purify it; upon hearing this, a cowherd says that the water in such a river is too polluted for a cow to drink. Trans.

52.

Suppose that on this earth
there were no water or river:

like the moon floating
in that boundless sky,
just a rock with the form of a dead bear,

this earth too,
unable to bring forth a single living thing,
would be just another cursed rock-piled, clay-heaped
star.

53.

From Seoul Bridge to Wonhyo Bridge here and there
dredged-up sand has been piled
in mountain-like mounds,
making embankments that enclose,
cut off, shut in
the River Han,

neither a river,
nor a lake,
nor a pond,
nor a rice field,
the River Han.

A pigeon quenches its thirst
in a pool of rain-water on one such mound,
gazes intently out at the river,
then glances at me where I stand nearby, as if to say:

‘What on earth do these humans think they are doing?’

it cocks its head from side to side
and I too nod
as together we gaze at the River Han.

54.

The river flows.
Above the ground, beneath the ground,
above the sky, the river flows.

Now apart from the river
there is nothing I can see;
now all things to me
appear as river.

The river within my field of vision
flows down from a place without beginning
flows on towards a place without end
and after this earth has been destroyed
and even the cosmos has ceased to exist,
still it will flow on, flowing still.

I may be just one drop in the river's flow,
but without me the river can never rise,
and surely it cannot vanish,
and surely not be compared with anything
as an image of Eternity
for that is the way
it flows.

55.

One morning unexpectedly in the newspaper I saw
a colour photo of the lake at the top of Paektusan;
and as I gazed at it, and read the mountain-climbing article,
I cried aloud like a startled beast:

oh!
ah!
ooh!

And murmured:

There
precisely
is where
it is
!

*

Towering basalt, 10 miles round,
dark green water, 300 yards deep,
still preserving the mystery of distant ages,
still brimming with the dreams and ardour of our founding fathers,
there precisely is where it is!

Just so this people and nation that still preserves,
so vastly high and wide and deep, the fountain-head of heart,
will neither fade nor thirst.
At last it will shine out bright across the whole world.

56.

A springtime high noon,
the river is blazing flames.

Detached, icy river,
were you then thus keeping
this clear blue fire
stored up within your breast?

I was not unaware, of course,
that the source of all being was undivided,
but fire appearing in water
is something I see for the first time today,
so I rub my eyes, then rub them again,
and gaze in fascination
at the blue blazing river.

57.

In the night's dreams
the river appears:

in the deep darkness
the river begins to glisten,
twisting its body from side to side
crying aloud and groaning,
wailing, and hurling itself down.

So, like me, the river too
bears within itself
some inexplicable anguish!

Then the river suddenly surges up,
as if hurling defiance at the heavens,
and splashes down again.

At that sound I wake and open my eyes;
lo and behold, the river has perfectly purged its fury
and has become a silent flow,
in a silence not even this silent night can match.

58.

A spring evening, Yoido Island,
the River Han

blocked, confined,
divided by the banks men have made,
the River Han

and over each separate stream
there hangs one full moon:

‘The moon sets its stamp on a thousand streams’
they say, and that is exactly what I see.

At this same hour this selfsame moon
in the Nakdong River
the Somjin River
the Yesong River
the Kum River
the Soyang River
the Imjin River

and why, in the North as well,
in the Amnuk River
the Yalu River
the Taedong River
the Changjin River
and the Songchon River
is floating too!

And every person who sees this moon
must be feeling surely the deep emotion I feel?

This night alone on a deserted embankment
I sit draining the moon’s glass again and again.

59.

Bright as the monstrance at Vespers,
the sun shone down on the morning river, and from midstream
suddenly, walking across the water,
lo and behold, my master, St Christopher!

And coming up like some powerful spirit
to where I stood confused with surprise and joy,
he called out a question, like a Zen master:

‘Brother John! It’s been several years
since you chose this river for your place of work;
what have you seen in the river?’

‘I have seen mystery.’
Unexpected, that was my reply.

‘Brother John! It’s been several years
since you chose this river for your place of work;
what have you learned from the river?’

‘I have learned mystery,’
I blindly replied.

‘Brother John! It’s been several years
since you chose this river for your place of work;
what have you discovered from the river?’

‘I have discovered mystery,’ I replied,
considering the repeated questions to be a sign
of the rightness of my answer, and swelling with pride.

But the next moment my teacher,
making as if to wield the magic staff he was clutching,
glared furiously and thundered:

‘You thief! You fraud! Doesn’t that mean
you haven’t seen anything, haven’t learned anything,
haven’t discovered anything?’

My head bowed with fear,

‘Yes’
was all I could reply.

‘Yes?! That sound is salvation, that alone.
Begin again with the river, untiringly!’

‘Yes’

After a while, I lifted my head,
St Christopher was gone,
and the river was flowing on, untiringly.

60.

A single drop of water, joined with others,
becomes a river
so the river is just
one huge drop of water.

Then if one single drop of water grows murky,
by that much the river grows murky too,
and if one single drop of water grows clear,
by that much the river too grows clear.

In this human world
each person's fault
each person's love
have just the same effect.

Epilogue

The river flows...

as the bier carries off the days long past,
and the procession is filled with things yet to come,
so, bearing all the vast emptiness of a long, remote story,

the river flows...

bearing the mysterious wonder of the birth
of a tear-like dewdrop that has passed through the earth,
from a secret source like a virgin's fountain

the river flows...

murmuring all its mottled yearning,
touching the wounds received in falling
against the rocky sides of bottomless chasms,
slipping through the stony labyrinths of knowledge,

the river flows...

tingeing with hope and shame
all the passionate romanticism of the world's vast plains,
the solitude and prayer that arise in marshes,
and, ah, the bitter memories of wandering and chill,

the river flows...

now beneath Time's indifferent stare,
bearing in its breast the playfulness of water creatures,
on its back craft of painful labor and of pleasure,
gliding below bridges where good and evil, love and hatred pass,
hearing whispers of love and songs of parting,
groans of birth, groans of death, the grief of bitter souls,
making symphony with the rhythms of all that lives,

the river flows...

in sources and rapids, falls and streams,
all the hosts of being join, mingle, unite,
begetting, dying, flowing into the azure sea
to become the origin of new generation
until history at last, in sinuous fullness, perfectly ends,
the river flows...

without any shadow of past or future,
with a constant identity in a world of change,
with a love more solid than any rock,
breathing each present moment in Eternity,

the river flows...

with no concern about imminent evaporation,
weeping with desire for non-being,
smiling at the flower of illusion,

the river flows...

River! Essence of the unbeing Void!

10. The Crow

1.

Caw caw caw caw.

My friends!
I cannot tell you
how sorry I feel.

The song I long to sing you
is boundless but
my tune is only this
(how sorry I feel):

caw caw caw caw.

2.

In the very middle of the highway as the bus speeds restless onward on a springtime outing, a crow has flown down, perches there and crows:

Caw caw caw caw!

In days gone by I only had to make my voice heard in two or three caws from high up in those mountainside trees for people all to stop and feel troubled about their present conduct, reflect on their manner of living, anticipate their own death, even think of Eternity:

Caw caw caw caw!

I really do not know what has got into this present age; even though I take the trouble to come down and caw here in the middle of the road, not only is there not one that stops, but behind their tightly closed car windows, as they speed on, their faces show surprise that such a useless flying beast still survives:

caw caw caw caw!

The way this lot live, exposed to no other songs than the senseless sound of wandering sparrows being driven from the roads, or the parrot in a cage at home, or the warblers' song in a cage at the zoo, frittering away today, and tomorrow too, in so-called living! It all seems to be quite ridiculous:

caw caw caw caw!

In the middle of the highway a crow has flown down and perches crowing, as if determined to get itself run over.

3.

Erring over mountain slopes
and over the rugged fields,
filling my stomach with carrion and dead bugs,
I am a bird that practice an austere religion
under perpetual vows.

Caw caw caw caw!

Don't get me wrong and think that my voice,
hoarse with a soul's aspirations and tears,
is pouring down imprecations.
My role is only to foretell and announce
the calamities provoked by your injustices,
revealed to the enlightened eyes of my heart.

Caw caw caw caw!

Today as ever, here I am, perched
on the branch of a dead tree on a hill north of Seoul,
observing the daily life that drives you all so frantic,
vested with the foreknowledge and wrath of John the Baptist
on the banks of the Jordan, I cry aloud and say:

You vipers, repent!
The Time of the Lord is at hand.
Let anyone who has two tunics
 give one to someone who has none.
Let anyone who has enough to eat
 share it with someone starving.
Let the powerful not oppress the weak
 and use no deception.
The nation's taxes must be moderate,
 levied equitably.
There must be no injustice in collecting them.

Caw caw caw caw!

7.

Caw caw

- You shiver?

Caw caw

- Yet it's summer!

Caw caw caw

- A hawk has appeared, they say,
on the City Hall roof?

Caw caw caw

- It seems they carry off all the pigeons!

Caw caw caw caw

- The magpies caught in cages,
the pigeons carried off!

Caw caw caw caw

- What a city! Unspeakable!

Caw caw caw caw caw!

- Won't they catch us too, and crop our wings,
like the ravens at the Tower of London?

Caw caw!

- Horror! Horror!

8.

Caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

caw

ca...

ca...

c....

c....

- You are loosing your voice!

- You are getting hoarse!

11. Infant Splendor

New Year

Who ever saw a new year, a new morning, all on its own?

Why! You yourself are polluting
each day, that source of mystery,
and just turning it into coal-black waste:

who ever saw a tattered day, a worn-out hour?

If you are not made new
you cannot welcome the new morning as new,
you can never welcome the new day as new;

if your heart's simplicity is once able to bloom,
then you can live the new year as new.

Wings

When I first began to toddle
the very first thing I felt
was the fact that my legs and arms
would not move just as I wanted them to.

And now I am close on seventy
what once again I feel
is the fact that my legs and arms
will not move just as I want them to.

Once I would totter towards
my mother's outstretched hands
and now as I live gasp by gasp
clinging to unseen outstretched hands

what I am hoping and longing for is
not a jet plane
or a spaceship

but an experience of the ecstasy of donning wings,
like a caterpillar as it becomes a butterfly,
and, joining with the angels, to fly and fly
with the whole cosmos as my flowery field:
that ecstasy.

Rebirth

You should not make the mistake of thinking
that the childlike heart the sages proclaim
is the state that precedes the age of discretion;

for that kind of infancy, infant immaturity,
is shackled by instinctive impulses
or else is merely complacent and narrow,

while the spirit of childhood
that we have to attain

is an innocence, a simplicity,
an artlessness
that arise from 'rebirths' such as
recognition of the truth
and victory over self.

April

Baby buds and baby sprouts,
baby leaves and baby flowers:
hills and fields, gardens, paths,
all together blaze with green flames.

Above and below, dazzling bright.
Everything warm and snug.

Who said this is the cruellest month?
Don't attribute to the seasons
all the devastations of your heart!
Don't shut your eyes, then say it's dark.

April is Mother of Charity,
a world of new greens, and of children.

The World of grown-ups

Don't mock me and say:
Why are you so sunk in thought?
It doesn't suit your little form!

The reason I am so shocked and dumbfounded
and quite at a loss for words

is, well, oh dear, well,
is the fact that
what you adults call 'life'
is so crammed full of lies.

You shout justice, yet you act unjustly,
you mouth love, yet you hate each other,
you advocate peace as you fight and kill.

I fear I am very impertinent
but as someone else has said

unless you regain the heart of a child
you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven and
likewise if you do not regain the heart of a child
you cannot escape the snares and quicksands
of this lying world.

Shame

I wonder if you can even recall
what that thing called shame is like?

That something you first felt
when you began to be aware of things,
after you broke the vase
that mother had said 'Don't touch!'

like the day when Adam and Eve
covered their nakedness with fig-leaves
in the Garden of Eden
after they had picked and eaten the God-forbidden fruit.

Shame? What humans first felt
when they did any wrong,
a sign of human conscience,
an omen of human salvation.

But nowadays you grown-ups,
even when you do wrong, you feel no shame!

That's a sign your consciences are paralyzed,
an omen that you are heading towards destruction.

A tricycle

A tricycle belonging to one of the neighbour's children is always out on the landing in front of my study door. Friends who often come to visit me are inclined to joke, 'Surely it's time you took to riding a two-wheeled bike?'

As a matter of fact, I have never ridden either a tricycle or a bicycle. For when we were children, tricycles had not made their appearance, and when my elder brother was in major seminary he knocked down a pregnant woman with his bike and our father forbade us to ride them.

Thinking of that, I suddenly realize that this is the only instance where I have acted strictly in accordance with my father's words and teaching from my childhood days until now. And what's more, there's not one of God's Ten Commandments that I have properly obeyed and kept, either,

and soon now I'll be meeting them. How shall I dare face them?!

Bathing

My only daughter, our youngest child, just turned thirty, has had a baby girl, and they are here staying with us while she rests. In our family our sons have had no children, so laying the not-yet-one-hundred-days-old child down:

eyes like her paternal grandmother's
nose like her maternal grandmother's
ears like my father's
hands and feet like my mother's
while the way she stops crying on being bathed
and quickly regains her dignity
is like her grandfather.

My family claim that I enjoy taking a bath so much that I never skip a single day. Since childhood, when there was no bathroom in our house, I have been in the habit of washing my face, hands and feet before going to bed each night.

But nowadays as this old grandfather looks back over a whole lifetime, there is a sense of regret at his neglect in washing his heart. For although Confession offers all that is needed in the way of heart-cleansing, for lack of frequent washing the dirt has accumulated, the skin has cracked, a scab has formed and grown rough, until now no matter how much you rub and scrub, it refuses to become clean and soft. Which is why this grandfather's only hope, and prayer, is a fervent longing that my granddaughter may learn to enjoy washing both her body and her heart.

Lord! Once again

I

Lord!

Once again this midday my soul
wandering in search of your kingdom
like a kite soaring through the air
when the cord is snapped by a twirling blast
has vanished into the blue.

II

Lord!

Once again this evening my soul
like a puppy that gazes up at the moon
and barks
is barking and whimpering towards you
and gets no reply.

Substance and reality

In the course of my life in this world everything
has got covered by a thick crust of uses and categories
in my thoughts, people's thoughts,
until the substance and reality of things
can no longer be seen,
and only fossilized concepts are left scattered around.

Now, pushing aside that crust from off my thoughts,
I re-examine everything, one thing after another,
in imitation of my just 100-day-old granddaughter

and although I cannot yet see as clearly
as that monk who proclaimed 'mountain is mountain
water is water'
still, constantly entranced by the wonder and profundity
of everything,
I do not notice the passing of time.

Scenes from life

1.

The female of a pair of baby turtles
my daughter had bought and put in my study
was lying still and limp
so I hunted high and low
until I finally got hold of a bottle of tonic
and poured that into the aquarium
and this morning she had pretty much revived
swimming down beneath the plants
then climbing up to perch
on a black pock-marked stone.

2.

The little five-year-old girl from the flat above
comes in, carrying a piece of chocolate
and orders, 'Granddad, eat this'.
I lay it down, saying I'll eat it later
but she commands, 'Eat it at once'.
I have diabetes but
what can you do! Swallowing it in a gulp
---- 'Ah lovely!' No other way.

3.

Every day an elderly man
from one of the apartment blocks,
carrying a big sack slung over one shoulder,
goes around the area between the blocks
picking up litter.

Whenever we meet
I greet him and also compliment him,
and when I remark on his constant efforts
he replies, 'It's my pleasure.'

Whenever I part from this novel Sack Monk
I greet him inwardly with joined hands.

Note 'Sack Monk' is the name given to a Chinese Buddhist monk of the Tang Dynasty, who always
went around carrying a sack.

In Korea it is customary to greet a Buddhist monk by bringing the hands together and bowing.

Playing by himself

Before the little girl next door
went to primary school
one day on seeing me she said,
'Granddad, they say you're famous?'
So I asked her,
'What's famous?'
She replied,
'I don't know!'
and I told her,
'It's something not good!'

This year, now in the second grade of middle school,
she studied one of my poems printed in their text-book,
and told me she had said that she knew the poet well.
'So what did you tell them?'
I asked;
'That you're just an ordinary old man, but
that you look like a little boy playing by himself!'
she replied.

I was delighted with her answer:
'Well done! Thank you!'
I said, praising her,
and felt cheerful for the rest of the day.

Dreams

Last night I had a wet dream.

My partner was a young woman lovely as pear-blossom, but she was not my wife, so it seemed like adultery. I felt very self-conscious on waking up.

One night recently I dreamed I had become the head of our Korean CIA. In daily life, if someone I meet says, 'You should try to get a good position in society,' I sometimes jokingly reply, 'Maybe I can become director of the CIA!' But this is too ridiculous!

Now I am getting on for 70, and I believe that after we part from our fishy-smelling bodies, like empty sea-shells along the shore, our life continues away from the waves; but although these are only dreams, is it all just some kind of child's foolishness? Or is it a sign of how deeply the Seven Sins are rooted within my subconscious?

I wonder if I shall ever get free of such fantasies, waking or dreaming?

Note: The Seven 'deadly' Sins, seen as the basic categories of human sinfulness in traditional Catholic teaching, are pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, sloth.

Old children

As a digression to a poem:

The fact that in the previous poem I described a dream in which I had become the head of the KCIA was mentioned by one friend at a meeting of our 'old children' group and each of them had something to say:

- Hey, do you write so thoughtlessly because you want to be arrested for nothing?
- My dear, are you already doting? You're talking nonsense.
- A poet as head of the CIA, there's a fine idea!
- Even if it's only a dream, it's disgraceful!
- Writing that in a poem, you should be ashamed!
- It's the end! Even a so-called poet has got so twisted!
- Doesn't it mean that the world as it is is unsatisfactory?

Listening to so many differing opinions, I could only laugh, smiling blissfully like a child having fun because a trick has worked and people have fallen for it.

The baby now

The baby now
is seeing something.
Is hearing something.
Is thinking something.

It's seeing forms like those when
Mohammed in the cave on Mount Hira
received revelation from God.

It's hearing voices like that which
rang out over the head of Jesus of Nazareth
when he was baptized on the banks of the Jordan.

It's lost in thoughts like those when
Shakyamuni attained enlightenment sitting
beneath the Bo tree in the forests of Mount Gaya.

No, the baby is seeing, hearing, thinking
something that is none of those.

It's seeing, hearing, thinking something
that no one else can see or hear or think:

something that as a quite unique human being
it alone will have to bring to bud and blossom.

And all on its own it's smiling sweetly.

A bed of roses

I am glad and grateful and happy.

Wherever one is, that is the best place to be.

Maybe you think that where you are now is a bed of thorns,
but you see, really it's
a bed of roses, the best place to be!

I am glad and grateful and happy.

Note This poem is a version of the words with which the poet Kong-cho (O Sang-sun) used to greet visitors. The 'best place' is marked by a flower-patterned mat on which the guest is invited to sit (Trans).

Last words

On the day the poet Kong-cho died
after completing his full life's span
in unhindered freedom without any concern
about each day's food or a place to rest,
as I was helping care for him

he left me these words:
'Freedom has shackled my whole existence!'

More significantly, Jesus of Nazareth,
who has shown me eternal life,
when he was dying nailed to the cross
truly fulfilling the will of Him,

cried out,
'My God, my God,
why have you forsaken me?'

Did those laments and cries of distress arise
from scepticism about their lives?
from uncertainty about their lives?
No! Certainly nothing like that at all!

But supposing there had been no such confessions,
they would merely have been people who lived
guided by their own fantasy,
sustained by their own persistence;
therefore those words are
a final affirming of their lives,
a final perfecting of their lives:
lives they lived as something offered up.

Note: Kong-cho was the pen-name of the poet O Sang-sun.

Habitual ways of speaking

‘Old Pilot’, that I was close to during the Korean War, if ever he saw or heard of anybody acting improperly, would first cry out, ‘I’ll kill him!’ in a loud voice, then say to his startled companions, this time in very sweet tones, ‘I will now sing a song,’ which would make us laugh and smooth down our bad feelings.

However, at some time or other his way of speaking transferred itself unconsciously to me so that nowadays I find myself saying
‘I’ll kill him!’ in the street
‘I’ll kill him!’ in the bus
‘I’ll kill him!’ at meetings
and worse still
‘I’ll kill him!’ in church
and as I read the evening paper
‘I’ll kill him!’ ‘I’ll kill them!’
not so that anyone can hear
but again and again without regard for time or place.

They say words are the seeds of action, and as the symptoms are getting worse day by day, if now in the heart there is a silent gun, the number of those I long to suppress keeps increasing one by one, so that if ever that desire materializes, I have fury enough to commit mass murder, and I am myself astonished at that bottomless endless murderous intent.

And just now suddenly there flashed into my mind the realization that of course if ‘Old Pilot’ always used to add the preposterous refrain ‘I will now sing a song,’ to his repeated ‘I’ll kill him!’, it was designed to act as an antidote.

In future, whenever the thought ‘I’ll kill him!’ arises, I’ll likewise recite at least a favorite poem, so that there will be no murder, not even in the heart.

Note ‘Old Pilot’ was a nickname given to the late air-force captain Lee Kye-hwan.

Picture and recollection

The other day, as I was looking at a book of paintings by 16th century European artists, I saw a picture of a man with one arm shackled to a great rock, the other rising in the form of a wing; it all seemed extremely familiar, and after careful thought what emerged was something that happened when I was five or six:

The yard of the unfenced house next door to ours in the village was covered with grain spread out on straw mats to dry, and the whole family living there had gone out; the door of the main room was open, and up on the roof of the earth-floored space in front of it a hen was flapping around, one leg tied by a cord to a heavy stone.

After observing it for a while, having made sure nobody was near, with a great effort I snapped the cord, then ran away fast, went home and spent the rest of the day hiding in my room.

When evening came I emerged and this time peeped into the yard from a distance, only to see that the hen was back flapping around at the end of the cord attached to the stone.

Immersed in my recollections, I began to feel that my whole existence has been rather similar to that picture, to that hen.

Fire in my heart

Another memory from when I was five or six.

A young widow, more or less thirty years old, I suppose, had rented a room in the guest-quarters of the house next door and she earned her living working in the laundry of the nearby monastery, a consecrated widow in the Catholic church.

Born late and growing up alone under the care of elderly parents, I was very much attached to that young woman, and she was very fond of me, too, so that I not only frequented that house regularly but even sometimes spent the night there with her, without any objection from my parents.

One autumn, it was a bright moonlit night like tonight, I had fallen asleep after playing beside the woman as she beat out the washed clothes on a fulling-block; in the middle of the night I opened my eyes and found her still beating away Tock-tack Tock-tack and half teasingly asked her, drunk with sleep,

-- Aren't you going to sleep?

then turning over lay down again, only to hear from behind me,

-- Sure, when the fire in my heart is out!

Of course, at that age I had no idea what the fire in her heart could be, or how it could be put out, but those words lodged somewhere in a corner of my mind, ready to emerge vividly as I lay here, unable to get to sleep on this bright moonlit night.

Interview with granddaughters

I have two granddaughters,
one by my son, one by my daughter.

Their names are Hyang-na and Hyang-ji,
I chose the names myself.

Just gone two and just gone one,
they are still tiny mites.

We fix a date
and meet once a month.

When the day comes both
have so astonishingly grown
that it's not a matter of cute tricks,
they merrily lead me such a dance
that for half a day this old granddad
with his white hair and white beard
doesn't know if he's coming or going.

It's like something from a cartoon
I leave it to your imaginations

but anyway, for me those days are
the most immaculate and utterly innocent moments.

A wry smile

I went into Toksu Palace gardens
on my way to give a lecture for housewives
and there, sitting on a bench in the shade
of the wisteria-covered pergola, was
my sworn friend but, would you believe it!
Well! Sitting there as bold as could be
elbow to elbow with some young thing!

I simply couldn't believe it of him,
so I called out, 'Old fellow!' to embarrass him
and he came across, saying,
'Are you jealous or something?'

'Do as well as you can!
I'm for the flower-beds too!'
a bantering reply
but going on my way I reflected:
he's over seventy
and his wife died last year
he's living alone in the flat
so maybe.... I thought.

When I came out after giving my talk
there was my friend sitting downcast
alone on the bench
-- Jilted already?
I asked mockingly.
-- My granddaughter, fallen in love,
ran away from home, wanted to talk,
he replied, smiling wryly.
I likewise gave a wry smile and together
we strolled off towards our usual bar.

Touching scenes

1.

That one is coming near hippity-hop
with quick steps.

That one is going off slip-slop
dragging his feet.

That one is beaming ha-ha
happy smiles.

That one is sitting grrr
all huddled up.

They are all getting worked up
at the thought of becoming president...

I am observing them all hmmm
idly.

2.

In an evening sky that has descended lower
than the nearby 63-storey building
the waning moon of early winter
hangs so very lonely.

On the 11th floor veranda of an apartment
one old poet, having gazed out for a while,
humming a line about 'The old site of a ruined castle'
withdraws into his home,
leaving the moon all alone.

Note: 'The old site...' is the title and the first line of a well-known Korean song. (Trans.)

A beard

From the early spring of 1980 I was confined to my bed for about three months by a severe attack of chronic asthma. As a result my beard grew thickly beneath my chin and there was really nothing I could do about it.

As chance would have it, that was just when the 5th Republic was being launched, and the kingpins of the moment wanted to have my paltry reputation, no bigger than a pig's tail, on their side, so they set out to drag me into their 'political reality'. Of course I firmly declined, calmly urging them, 'You can see I'm on the rubbish heap, what help do you think it will be to have me?'

Whether it was my words or my face that finally convinced them I'm not sure, for at first they were all hoity-toity, with 'Even if you refuse, we'll go ahead with our decision and announce your name anyway,' but finally they picked on someone else, and as a poet I safely survived one more of the ups and downs of our country's troubled history.

However, apprehensive of possible further demands or enticements, I decided to let my beard stay, with only a little trimming, just a white beard on my chin, like the old men of former times, and at first all the people I met had something to say about it; those not particularly close to me but much younger would say,

-- It suits you so well. Anyone has only to see you to know that you are a poet. You look like some wise master or hermit, far above all earthly things.

They would laud it to the skies, while my family and close friends said,

-- Take that thing off your face. Haven't you got anything better to do?

-- To be sure, you look just like the founder of some heathen religion. Now show yourself in your true colours!

Their scolding and sarcastic remarks came thick and fast.

And whenever I went to any meeting, for want of a better topic the conversation would always end up focussing on my beard, so that for fear that in such groups as The Hundred someone would demand a public explanation as to why I was letting my beard grow, since I could hardly tell the real reason, I would say,

-- I felt that you were not giving me sufficient respect, so to get a little more...

Which once provoked Sok Dong to say,

-- From now on let us all resolve to respect Ku Sang's beard, and nothing else!

For which I had to endure a burst of mocking laughter.

How time heals! Now 7 or 8 years have gone by and my beard seems to have found its place ; luckily no one seems interested in criticizing it nowadays, but there is one annoying thing about it: at present, whenever I attend any public function I can be sure that the TV cameras will come zooming in on this white-bearded face of mine. And since that seems to get broadcast, my acquaintances often greet me with 'We're always seeing you on TV,' so that it seems to have had quite the opposite effect to what was intended when I grew my beard in the first place, but I can't shave it off again... Well, nothing's perfect in this world, is it?

Note: The Hundred is an association founded by the late Ms Kim Hwal-lan. Sok Dong is the literary name of the children's writer Yun Sok-chung.

Stolen glances

A midsummer day at noon
the temperature is hovering around thirty-five;
Sprawled on the wooden floor of the living-room
of a flat on the 7th floor of the block in front
a young woman clad in a light chemise,
her legs stretched out in front of her,
is delving into a water-melon with spoon and knife
and devouring it.

Behind a mesh-window
up on the veranda on the 11th floor of the block behind
an old man with a white beard
feels his mouth watering at the sight of it all.

After a while, having finished eating,
she lifts the hem of her chemise with one hand
and fans herself with the other.

The old man on the veranda, seeing this,
slowly blinks once, then turns and goes back into his room,
fanning himself audibly with the fan he is carrying:
the statues of Han-shan and Shih-te roar with laughter.

A little later, when the old man returns to the veranda,
what meets his gaze across the way?
The young woman has changed her dress and is kneeling
very decorously opposite some gentleman.

Turning as if disappointed, the old man of the veranda
retreats again to his room, muttering
'What chameleons women are!'
and the two monks titter and giggle more than ever.

Note: Han-shan and Shih-te: two Chinese Zen monks of the 7th century Tang Dynasty. Famous 'monastery fools,' they are traditionally shown in fits of uncontrolled laughter.

Dandelion

A solitary dandelion growing on the railway line
pushing up through the gravel between the sleepers

every time a train passes by
has its eyes filled with dust and smoke
its ears deafened with the roar
its heart sinks down
and it nearly dies.

Yet as the seasons pass
it puts out leaves
rears up a stalk
then flowers
and produces a globe of puff.

Now those seeds
floating off on the breeze
will sprout afresh
in those green fields over there.

Like this and like that

Apartment-life may be like a henhouse
in the middle of a concrete jungle,
but there's plenty of sunlight comes in
and it certainly can't be compared
to Diogenes's barrel.

In the open spaces front and back
trees stand here and there
and as they change with the seasons
they allow an experience of the wonders of nature
while a few chrysanthemums and roses
equally enthrall my soul.

Strolling on the river banks where wild plants grow
and gazing out at the River Han
is my daily task
and now I have become a single drop of water
within its flow
so that there is nothing I can call myself.

Only the people I meet indoors or out
may seem a little out of breath
like athletes running in a stadium
but that too will change!
The problem is that when I was young
the folks at home were too easy-going.

Like this and like that
my life nears its close
and even death that I used to dread
has now come to seem cozy like a mother's hug.

Hole in the heart

Somewhere deep inside my heart
a hole has opened

so that as I touch
that emptiness or rather
that boundlessness
that eternity

out of that place
that can only be called
the Void

a miraculous breeze comes blowing.
A mysterious sound comes chiming.
A divine word comes ringing.

And as I, becoming a baby again,
respond
with pre-verbal language,

as everything in the whole world,
each in its own place and with its own form,
becomes a bright star and shines,

as I experience my immortality,
the transience of life grows more precious still
and I am most utterly happy!

A mirror-stand

One evening recently I went to a restaurant in Insadong that I often frequent; as I entered the dining room I noticed a mirror-stand with a mirror about the size of a book, and struck suddenly with an uncharacteristically laudable idea, I asked the proprietress:

-- Let me know what shop round here sells those mirrors, and I'll get one too.

-- You want to give one to your granddaughter?

and at the end of the evening as we were leaving, I was handed that mirror-stand all kindly wrapped up and not allowed even to think of paying for it.

I carried it home cheerfully and said to my wife, with a show of bravado,

-- Now at long last, how about a luxurious experience thanks to your dear old husband? and gave it to her; she unwrapped it, looked, then, seemingly disappointed, said,

-- It's too early to give it to Hyang-na, she's barely four, we'd better keep it a while, then give it to her.

As a matter of fact, the big mirror-stand that my wife brought with her when we married forty-four years ago got lost when we fled southwards soon after Liberation in 1945 and from that time until now, when she is seventy, she has made do with hand-mirrors or wall-mirrors; it's needless to say carelessness on my part, though with her position as a practising physician if she had really wanted a mirror-stand it would not have been beyond our possibilities, but since she is by nature someone with no interest in prettifying herself, she gets along fine with just a hand-mirror.

A few days later I went back to that restaurant, taking a pottery flower-vase adorned with a painting of a landscape by Unpo by way of return:

-- And was your granddaughter pleased then?

I replied,

-- She's still only a baby; she doesn't know what a mirror-stand is!

and made up my mind that I really would arrange to give my wife an Yi Dynasty-style mirror-stand, but as of the time of writing this I have not actually got round to doing so.

Note: Unpo is the professional name of a famous contemporary deaf artist, Kim Ki-chang.

A reminiscence

Seeing the face of Miss Rim Ch'un-aeng,
triple gold-medallist at the Asian Games,
shining from the TV screen,
her expression seems so very familiar.

After long rummaging through my memories
I recall Modigliani's 'Portrait of a Woman'
pinned on the wall of my boarding-house room
when I was studying in Tokyo in my early 20s.

At the time I admired and loved
that haggard-looking face so much
I even bragged to my friends
I would marry a woman like that.

In the end, I couldn't meet any such girl
and I got married to my rather more cozy wife,
and now, after forty-two years have gone by,
at last just such a girl has appeared.....

Well, they say that Goethe when he was 70
fell passionately in love with a girl of 18?
And Henry Miller, who survived until last year,
is supposed to have sent telegrams of courtship
at the age of 70, too?

But me?
Well, that's another matter!

Judging by the mirror
today of all days
my grey hair and my grey beard
look whiter than ever.

Weeds

One day last autumn, Professor W, whom I had met when I was at the University of Hawaii, came to my study during a visit to Seoul.

Then a little later Professor W's Korean student, who had accompanied him on his visit to our house, arrived with a truckload of various potted plants which he duly brought up to my study, saying,

-- Professor W sent me a hundred dollars to buy pots of flowers to put in your study. He insisted on potted plants.

I only said 'Thank you,' receiving them calmly and gratefully, but once he had left I burst in to gales of laughter, such as I rarely enjoy.

In actual fact, I already had on the veranda of my study two potted orchids, as well as 5 or 6 other kinds of potted plants, but Professor W must have taken them for weeds and mistakenly felt that at my study was a sorry sight indeed, without a single decent flower in it.

However, that foreign friend's kindly-meant gifts were rather too intrusive for my taste and I got tired of seeing them; then as spring came they grew even more bulky and threatened to be even more gaudy until at last today, after mature consideration, I finally sent the whole lot off to a convent.

And now I am contemplating my weeds with a very peaceful feeling. These nameless wild flowers first came up of their own accord several years ago in a pot where some spring chrysanthemums had been, and they vanish and reappear, reproducing themselves in this or that pot. I have only to contemplate them -- even though I am sitting here in a secluded room on the 11th floor of a concrete jungle hen-house apartment block -- to feel that I am walking along the lanes or over the hills of my childhood home.

Besides, as I contemplate their tiny, fragile, mysterious flowers, I really sense, to the point of tears, that truly 'Solomon in all his glory' cannot be compared with one of them.

With wild flowers

In a flower-pot out on my veranda
where orchids had died off
a wild plant came up of its own accord
and produced flowers like white dust.

This single tiny plant,
occupying this moment in eternity
occupying this place in infinity:
the fact that it has born flowers,
the more I think about it,
the more it seems mysterious beyond measure.

Indeed, this being called I too,
occupying this moment in eternity
occupying this place in infinity:
the fact that I am face to face with this wild flower,
the more I think about it,
the more it too seems mysterious beyond measure.

And finally as I muse over these things I,
escaping from the being called I
and united with the wild flower

as one expression of eternity and infinity,
as one part of eternity and infinity,
as one love of eternity and infinity,

now exist here.

Humanity

I have this little granddaughter, not yet two, Hyang-ji. She comes once a month to pay a visit to her old granddad, and every time she comes I am struck by how much she has grown, not only in body but in heart.

This time when she came, as we were sitting eating supper around the table in the living room of my flat, my wife and her mother feeding her or she feeding herself as she moved around on their laps, suddenly up the little rascal stood, crossed to the sideboard, pulled a sheet of tissue-paper from the box lying there, toddled across to her granddad, and proceeded to wipe away the drops of sweat that had gathered on my nose!

From what I have heard, they say that humanity began to evolve two thousand million years ago from single-celled organisms, and we had become fish by about one thousand four hundred million years ago, by which stage affection was already being exercised, then by about four hundred and fifty million years ago we had become animals, with affection being extended to the young of the species, then about one million years ago when humanity appeared, at last affection was extended to other people and even to other kinds of creatures.

‘Humanity’: that kind of affection extending both to other people and to other creatures! That is precisely the ‘barometer’ indicating the difference between people and all the other animals, it is love, mercy, benevolence, so there is nothing special about the teaching of the sages who tell us that we should manifest such ‘humanity’ concretely.

Having experienced our Hyang-ji’s flawless humanity, I have been deeply moved and happy now for several days. And I feel ashamed of my own humanity, dulled through lack of use, like the affection of the beasts.

Chupung Pass

On the steep slopes
at Chupung Pass
a mass of mountain flowers I cannot name
comes into view.

A pretty woman in Korean dress of ramie fabric
sitting beside me
exclaims in a warm voice,

‘Oh, just look at those flowers!
Aren’t they lovely!’

Her sigh echoes that of the Lady Suro.

Stroking my grey beard I evoke the image
of that old man of thirteen hundred years ago

evoking his image today in this place
as the old man thirteen hundred years before
from his place on the mountain slopes by the East Sea
evoked the image of me today
and inside the speeding express bus
alone I feel sad
and alone smile sweet smiles.

Note: The Lady Suro was a governor’s wife renowned for her beauty in the Silla Dynasty.
The ‘old man’ figures in a Silla dynasty song: ‘Song of an old man offering flowers’.

A vision

Here I am, sitting on the wooden veranda
of the Amitabha Hermitage, a building
three hundred years old, as old as old can be,
pillars and walls all askew,
perched on the middle slopes of the outermost ridges
of the Diamond Mountains.

Sound of the breeze
sound of streams
sound of birds
absolutely nobody near
only sometimes a squirrel
taking a short-cut through the garden
stares up wide-eyed.

Sitting thus for half a day,
looking up at the strange rock shapes
of Longevity Rock,
or gazing out at the distant East Sea,
or up at the clouds drifting by, then
casually stepping down into the garden:

Is this some kind of apparition?
My mother.
In the forty years since I left my home in the North
she must have died and I know nothing of her tomb:
my mother

is there in the sky above the fresh green trees
that cover Sonhwa peak,
just like the Virgin as she appeared at Lourdes,
enveloped in a halo!

The form is so lifelike
I rub my eyes, brushing away tears
and take a few steps forward
and, ah, she has vanished.

Mother...

Harvest Moon Festival

Mother,
your unworthy son is older now
than you were when I took my leave of you
for the last time,
and it seems my hair and beard are whiter
than my father's when he died.

Mother,
I have heard that after my elder brother, the priest,
was taken away by the communists, you found refuge
in the house of your god-daughter Johanna
until you died,
but were you laid in a coffin?
Were you provided with a grave?
I do not know,
and I cannot picture your burial-place,
to my greater grief.

Mother,
today is the festival of the Harvest Moon,
they say a million people have left Seoul
to go and venerate their ancestors' tombs,
while groups have come from Japan and China
for the same purpose,
but I just attended a Requiem Mass this morning
and now, sitting here absently
at the window of my study,
I am gazing up at the clouds as they drift Northwards.

Oh mother.

Mother.

Prayer

Those people know not
what they do.

These too know not
what they do.

Deliver us
from this blind strife.

Give us eyes to see
at least as much as two-week-old puppies can.

A horrible feeling

Everybody knows the story, how in the New Testament the Pharisees dragged before Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery, and asked,

‘The Law of Moses commands that anyone guilty of this sin should be stoned to death; what do you say?’

To this double-noosed snare of a question Jesus at first made no reply but indifferently stooping down wrote something on the ground, but when they demanded a reply he raised his head and said,

‘Let one among you who is without sin be the first to strike her!’ and the main point of the story is that on hearing this the Pharisees went away one by one, beginning with the eldest.

What we have to note here is the fact that Jesus is concerned to show up an attitude common both to the Scribes and Pharisees of his own time and to today’s experts in the ways of the world: they consider justice and love, which are one, as two separate things, and confuse the sin and the sinner.

But the more I see and hear of life in today’s world, the more I have a horrible feeling that if such a legal dispute were to arise in present-day Seoul, the adulterous woman, of course, and Jesus of Nazareth as well, both would simply be stoned to death on the spot, and my heart grows dark and full of dread.

Lord God!
Deliver us from utter evil.
Lord God!

Holy Mary, Mother of God!

Holy Mother,
our life in this world is such a mess,
I am afraid even to talk of it, but since now
we cannot deal with it ourselves,
I beg you to tell your son our Lord in heaven
something about it.

Holy Mother,
just as our Lord prayed his Father from the cross
to forgive people
because they did not know what they were doing,
I beg you to pray earnestly your son our Lord in heaven
to forgive all these nations
clamoring here in the chaos of the seven sins.

Holy Mother,
as you kept on at your son
at the marriage in Cana
until he changed the water into wine,
I beg you keep on at your son our Lord in heaven
like any human mother,
to straighten out our life in this world.

Quantity

When buying beef or other meat,
if you ask for so many *kǎn*
a rough guess is good enough,
but if you ask for so many grams
then guesswork is not acceptable.

If you hear of so many degrees
above or below zero,
you can estimate if the weather is hot or cold,
but if you hear of so many millibars of pressure,
you can't estimate the power of the wind you will have,
and if they can tell you the 'discomfort-index'
why the devil can't they calculate a 'comfort-index'?

Then as soon as they go on to talk about
velocity per second and the speed of light
your head begins to ache,
while if someone ever mentions calory-contents
you lose your appetite for that meal.

Worse still, when they talk of
'improving your sexual levels'
as they often do in the papers
in advertisements for magazines,
do they mean that the sweetness and joy
of a kiss can be measured chastely?

Since today we are all living
in a world of measureable quantities,
I am an old man quite out of step with the times.
But I have one question.
As the world goes running after quantity like this,
why is the world of quality reduced to such poverty?

And if they calculate values as they do,
why is it that the theft of a few thousands
and the embezzlement of a few billions
are not punished proportionately?

Fresh and green

My head frosted white,
I gaze up at the fresh green
of the courtyard ginkgo tree.

As I gaze up at the fresh green,
the image of last winter's gaunt skeleton
comes to mind:

then where in this fresh, bright greenery
are hidden the footsteps
that are hastening on towards decline?

If that tree is every springtime
full of new life, it must be
because its roots are sound!

Then if your approaching death
is to be blessed with Resurrection,
the roots of your heart must likewise
be kept free of decay.

Evening twilight

It was quite by chance that the three of us happened to visit the Olympic Park; emerging from the wedding of a member of a friend's family, one day in late February, we were so struck by the intense spring light that it seemed wrong to separate and go home to curl up so soon.

We had not thought to bring along our old-age pensioners' cards but the girl at the ticket booth charged us the reduced rate anyway and, indicating one of us, remarked with a smile, 'Isn't that one 'Sonja's Rules of Warfare'?'

It may be called spring, but still there was nothing to be seen in the park but dry withered yellow lawns and trees standing skeletal, everything was infinitely dreary and the so-called modern sculptures standing around struck us as not so very beautiful.

Passing over a hillock, we found another trio of old men, of about our age, advancing shakily towards us: nothing to write home about, as the saying goes.

-- My dear, what say you go and join up with that lot?

My friend the novelist Chong Pi-sok suggested sarcastically, looking at me.

-- Why, do you think you're any better than them?

We swapped jokes blithely enough but although our clothes were perhaps a bit better cut, they were really the spitting image of ourselves.

Passing the place where you can see remains of old earthen fortifications, we reached the top of another rise. From there we had a view of a distant pavillon, a pond, a stone bridge. But by now the three of us had run out of energy for further walking. It was the poet Kim Kwang-kyun, who was using a walking stick, who spoke first,

-- Nothing special worth looking at over there!

-- With companions like you, there would be no fun in it, anyway!

I said, disparaging our company, so that old Pi-sok burst out,

-- Ah, if only even old Lady Minister had come along, for want of anything better!

And we all burst out laughing.

We grumble at one another, yet after all we are nothing but dried-up trees; we had wanted to

observe the spring: but how can there be any cheerfulness left for us at our age? Turning, the three old trees look up at the sky where a pale twilight is gleaming.

Note: 'Sonja's Rules of Warfare' was originally the title of a classical Chinese novel, which was adapted into Korean by Chong Pi-sok and became the basis for a popular TV series to which the girl was referring.

The 'Lady Minister' refers to the essayist Ms Cho Kyong-hui, who was previously a Cabinet Minister.

Eternity within

1.

Day and night, inside the confines
within me, snarling,

I wonder what that ferocious beast
is really like?

Has it glimpsed some prey?
Today it is bounding high.

2.

Aimlessly drifting
over the sea within me,

I wonder where is the port of call
of that anchorless skiff?

The waves seem rough.
Today it is rocking wildly.

3.

Endlessly stretching its pinions
in the vastnesses within me,

I wonder when and where
that bluebird dream will be fulfilled?

It longs for the Gardens of Immortality.
Today Eternity lies within me.

Come out, snake!

I went to the opening of a retrospective
exhibition of paintings by the great master
Pung-gok (Song Chae-hyu);
bringing together the major works of his
lifetime's career -- seventy years --
it filled both floors of the Hoam Gallery.

Strolling round the gallery with him
I said, just to have something to say,
'Are all these really painted from your own inspiration?'
and congratulated him;
'Sometimes I copied other people's things,'
was his riposte.

We moved on a bit then stopped
together in front of a painting
entitled 'Come out, snake!'

Beneath an evening moon as big as a tray
a frog as big as a rock is sitting
squat on his behind, his back legs spread out,
a bulging stomach as big as Namsan hill;
on the palm of his left paw extended before him
he is holding high a big glass brimming with liquor;
with eyes big as saucers, his mouth gaping fit to split,
a strange and touching sight, all flushed with drink...

'Aha, your self-portrait, my dear!'
'Hmm. Do you possibly know this admirable condition?'
'Well, I'm no good at the way of righteousness,
but when it comes to the way of drinking...'

We looked at one another and guffawed loudly
'Do you still drink, old friend?'
'I've said good-bye to all that! What about you?'
'Me too; doctor's orders!'

We each fell into a melancholy silence.

A fable

In the early days of the Chosŏn Dynasty
the great statesman Hwang-hui
said in a quarrel between woman servants
-- What you say is true
and what you say is true.

His wife standing nearby,
seizing on the ambiguous equivocation,
remarked,
-- Your wife is true, too.

In my younger days I could never fathom
Hwang-hui's inner thoughts
and simply took it for some kind of joke,
but now I keep discovering how similar to him
I myself have become in this world.

It was not that he meant that those women's words
were relatively true, or that he could not tell
if they were good or bad,
he did not speak with an intention or calculation
to sidestep or appease,
but he had come to understand that
all human opinions and wisdom are always imperfect,
and I understand and sympathize with his decision
to suspend judgement for that reason.

Me

I am two of us inside.
Or maybe rather three.

The I that people see outside,
the I close hidden here inside,
and the unconscious I
that I myself cannot divine,
each I stands apart.

Today again: after a haircut and shave
in a local barber's shop
as the girl was giving me a massage
her hands touched my private parts
and for a moment there was a quarrel
between me wanting to warn her off with a 'Don't'
and me hoping her hands would slip that way again.

You can say that this kind of fight
between me and me inside is constant,
but recently one night in a dream
I was with a woman I'd never met
and it's ridiculous but I ejaculated;
who was the I acting there?

Which of these three, then,
is the real or false me,
the good or bad me,
which of them is really me?
The more I wonder the less I know.

And as I reflect this way and that,
I get more and more anxious
about which me will be involved
the day I die and go to be judged.

Poetic feeling

Each month for this series
I select bits of idle chatter such as this
and turn out things called poems,

so that one young poet, perhaps finding it rather odd,
observed, ‘Then it seems there is absolutely nothing
in the whole world that is not a poem?’

Right! There is nothing
in the world, to be sure,
that is not a poem.

From humanity on down,
in every thing and every act,
all that is true and good and beautiful
is all poem.

More than that, in every person
and in every thing and in every act
the good, the beautiful, the true dwells.

And it is written that where sin increases
God’s grace increases all the more.

Discovering that,
and then like a child
savoring and enjoying it,
is to be a poet.

Note: ‘Where sin increases...’: Romans 5:20.

Poetry

Usually when we talk with someone,
no matter how much a speaker dresses up his words,
if they are not stamped with sincerity
those words will never touch the other person's heart;

much more, no matter how gorgeous the symbols of a poem,
if reality is not there, how will it ever move people?

People commonly claim that words and thoughts are distinct,
but really thoughts and feelings are experienced in words
so that it has been said 'Being dwells in language'

And just as another person may savour the beauty of a rose
blooming in a neighbour's garden more than the actual owner,
or just as the trampling of a roadside weed
may move someone else to tears of pity,

a poem is something born, brought into being and written
out of a 'universal sensitivity' and compassion,
so never try to find or get or write a poem
while haltered by ownership or self-interest!

Ah! The wonder of the Word!

Note: 'Being dwells in language' is from Heidegger's Poetry, Language, Thought.
'Universal sensitivity' is Paul Valéry's definition of poetry.

This year

As this country rocked like a boat in Galilee's storms,
I spent the whole year not losing my belief in God alone,
just doing as I could what had to be done.

Laid up sick, I suffered for more than a month,
there were many hard things in the family and the world,
but having endured it all meekly, it proved more valuable
than any good fortune could have been.

These days, as I dream bright dreams of the world beyond,
entrusting all things to His divine Will,
even if storms are forecast for the coming New Year
there is nothing I fear.

Dirty Mop Monk

All in tatters both outside and in,

he claims he'll swab off every last trace of filth
from this world with his mop; I am dumbfounded.

A scrawl of black ink:
the back of Dharma's head!

My! What infant splendor!

Responding properly to you is no easy thing!

But as I stand panting here
at the crest of my life,

unexpectedly encountered,
a shower of grace!

Note: Dharma is used here in its original Sanskrit sense of 'truth'.

Jung Kwang's picture of a little boy

A snow ball rolled,
scraps of charcoal stuck in,
a child's face and,
to round it off, a nose askew
made of a dead leaf,

that's all the face is and yet
more lifelike than the real thing,
isn't it a marvelous creation?

Why does this child's face
look so familiar to us all?
As it must, inevitably!

It shows both you and I
in swaddling clothes
as we were cherished once at our mother's breast,

it shows both you and I
as we shall become again
sometime, at long last!

Jung Kwang's picture of a little girl

No contour to her face,
no neck, no arms,

below the flowing locks that hang
like a rotting thatch roof
covered with trailing gourd creepers,
a silhouette in inky lines
like two old broken posts,

while beneath eyes and eye-brows that look
like bits of straw fallen to the ground
and arranged evenly by chance,
just like an unhealed wound in form,
a nose,

and to crown it all a red dot:
cherry lips too are
on the way out.

This rough-faced little girl
has the expression of a crawling baby
that is gazing up towards its mother

and as it melts into the sweet smile of a love
that cannot be perceived with just the five senses,
it shines with a light of higher purity
than the light of the morning sun.

She is adopting an air
that would put even Venus to shame.