

RA Heeduk
From *Scale and Stairs*
Selected Poems

The Word for “Yeo”

What was forgotten became a rock-under-water.
Submerged in the waves of oblivion,
it rises from the water. And because people
can't call it an island, they call it a *yeo*.
Crying *yeo*, Bird *yeo*, Daecheon's mom *yeo*, Chilling *yeo*, Black *yeo*...
Around these names something hovers, like the cry of a wave
that whirled around for a long time and then passed them by.
While some hang their memories out to dry in the sun,
which might have sunk under the way forever,
others try to give a name to their faces
only to disappear in a flash;
they might have called the rock
that never returned, even at ebb tide, *yeo*.
It's not because the tide was ebbing
that the *yeo* revealed itself,
but because the birds circled low over the submerged rock
and fluttered their wings for a few days.
From their wet wings came the sound of *yeo*.

The Custom of Aerial Burial

I didn't realize until this morning
that the dried fruits in my room were increasing.
The pomegranate and orange on my desk are harder than stone.
And now that they've lost their fragrance I'm relieved.
I finger the hard rinds, I tell myself
they might have gained eternal life by losing their fragrance.
The acorns that fell on my head last fall
are arranged in a small bowl;
a bell rings when I shake them.
The fruits of the briar are still red.
Whenever I see fresh flowers or fruit,
I think I should bury them

before they rot in their own juices,
which has led me to adopt the custom of premature aerial burial.
I can't help myself, I hang their fragrant bodies upside down
in a well-ventilated sunny place
to dry the blood and flesh.
I used to stir with a wooden scoop
the sugary flesh on the stove,
and flee the scene in disgust.
I wonder if I'm suffering from a kind of xerosis.
Someone told me that I have a knack for drying flowers,
but this was only to suppress my nomadic blood.
Entering the room,
I caught the fragrance of dried flowers
and heard the loud cry of lips shouting at me—
of multi-layered lips that never touched wet thighs,
amid the flowers turning light as butterflies.

New Moon

Her waxing body must have been too heavy—
she sat down to rest on the ridge at dawn.

Sometimes even God is unmasked!

Deep in the mountains, I turned around
and caught her furtive eye, her soiled feet.
Blushing, as if she was being watched,
she hid behind a cloud
and reappeared in the distance.

The imprint of her bottom will still be vivid
on the ridge,
and the trees will keep the bright scar,
like Isaiah whose lips were cleansed by a burning coal.

Renting a Room

To rent a room in Damyang or Changpyung
to visit like a chipmunk,
I looked in every village I came across.
Walking past a place in Jasil,
I saw common flowers in the yard
between a traditional Korean house and a modern annex.
When I entered through the open gate,
a man was sharpening his scythe on the grindstone
and his wife's scarf was wet, as if she had just returned from the fields.
“Excuse me, I wonder if I could rent a room.
I'll stay here two or three nights a week.”
When I pointed at the traditional house
she smiled. “Well, our children moved to Seoul,
so we live in the annex. Yes, the main house
is unoccupied. But in our hearts we still live there,
our family history is embedded in it.”
Listening to her, I saw the clean wooden floor
on which lay the last light of the day.
I left without pushing for a room,
wondering if the couple knew
that I had already rented it, was living in their words—
that in their hearts they lived in the vacant house.

A Door Opens

A door opens,
filling the universe with snow.
Then a thousand doors close,
stopping traffic.
The cold ankles
of dried stalks, buried in snow,
don't take a step.
All sound is imprisoned,
only a distant, feeble sound reaches me.
The borders are freezing,
but the water hasn't closed its doors yet.
I crouch by the sound of the water.
A thousand doors close.
Only the gate of water leading to you is open.
I try to fish out the snowflake
disappearing in the water.
Wet snow in a wet eye,
I enter the open door.

The Stockings I Removed

After running to the point of exhaustion,
a brown mare collapsed here
unable to go any farther.

Because the face of life is a close-knit net,
stockings run at the least provocation;
their knee and hip joints are already loose.
The skin of desire peeled from the body
remembers the curve of the body.
My bare legs look as strange as the clown who removed his costume.
When I pick up a stocking and throw it in the water,
a hectic day takes shape
and the soaking mare,
in darker colors, raises itself again
to put on another costume.

Her mane will dry overnight like the wings of a dragonfly.

Crying Over Light-Green

Even as I scoop Korean sushi
into my mouth with a trembling hand,
the train forces the fields of summer into my eyes.
The light-green rice paddies prick my pupils.
Why is the field so green?
No, the word “green” is hardly adequate.
Every shade of green is said to be the same,
but to me light-green is different—
a color containing a wave or a rustle
that never bows its head.
Look at the pure rice plants.
Why is my heart so dark?
I swallow a fourth piece of Korean sushi
and moan. The sunlight washes over me until I fade out,
as it will fade out at dusk,

and tears overcome me—the minimum requirement
for emotion to circulate in my body.
Like juice, light-green gathers in my eyes.
Well, I must have left something in that light.
The train runs through the summer fields in the afternoon.

That Part of the Wave

When I cross the iron bridge over the Han River
the ripples catch my eye again.
I look at the river with unfamiliar eyes,
having left Seoul with my small deposit for rent.
The I of yesterday struggles in the water.
The ripples rise about an inch then fall.
It occurs to me that the ripples were my share
of what I had when I lived in Seoul.
Like the rising wave, I've moved
more than ten times.
Like the rising wave, I've reared
two duck-like children on my back.
Like the wave, my love also
rises a little and vanishes.
It was just under the low wave where I lifted
my knees, too tired to keep walking.
In this city where many lives toss and flow
I tumbled and struggled; I've built
and torn down too many days on the ripple
that never returns its original spot.
Seoul is like a huge pointillist painting.
A ripple sparkles and speaks to me.
Where shall I go on the rising ripple?

Past the Happiness Rehabilitation Center and the Hungry Bridge

Once or twice a day I travel
 past the Happiness Rehabilitation Center and the Hungry Bridge.
 On my way to and from home
 I have to pass them,
 even when I am neither happy nor hungry.
 Because there's a speed bump
 by the gate to the center,
 my body rocks, no matter how slowly the bus goes.
 When I pass the children with disfigured faces or limps
 and my mother comes out on the other side of the road to see me,
 I feel that just having a normal body is
 a form of guilt. But the bus is already
 passing the Hungry Bridge.
 The bridge is called that because its mid section droops
 and low roofs stand in a row along the stream.
 Pumpkin vines on the dirty walls and ivy
 on the bridge—how they creep through the world.
 Changeok Bakery is just past the Hungry Bridge,
 though its flour mill is usually silent.
 Happy rehabilitation and hungry Changeok—
 passing over the speed bump
 the engine suddenly roars,
 as if to say that the way to and from home
 means passing contradictory metaphors.

White Cloud

Lining up in the cafeteria
 we order as much as we want,
 as much as our daily desire is allowed.

A bowl of rice—400 Won. A bowl of mallow soup—200 Won.
 Stir fried pork—1000 Won. Boiled spinach seasoned with soy sauce—400 Won.
 Cold jellyfish dressed with sauce—600 Won. Kimchi stew—1000 Won.
 Baked harvest fish—1000 Won.

When I hold a spoon,
 I see another hand holding a spoon
 in front of me.
 I know whose hand it is.
 It was just handing out handbills in the street.
 The handbills are soon discarded
 but the hand cannot eat until they are all gone.

Impassively the hand eats
a bowl of rice.

The grains of boiled rice carried by the chapped hand
continue to gather and scatter like clouds
between the blistered lips.

In the dark pupil of the eye that chews the grains
a tatter of white cloud
whirls for a while then disappears.

Scale and Stairs

If you climbed up the back stairs to the church
a piano stood like a sad black animal
in a corner of the nave.

The child reflected in the black sheen of the piano
opened the cover and cautiously began to play.
Though her hands were too small
to thaw the frozen keyboard,
the sound rising into the cold air of the church
was incense for a ten-year-old to burn.
The back door opened,
and when the deacon and his old mother entered
she shut the cover and walked down the stairs.
There were two cushions in the nave
where the old woman and her son knelt
to worship in a strange tongue.
The child learned the fascination of frenzy
watching their ecstatic worship on the stairs.
The sound rising into the cold air
froze again along with the keyboards.
For a long time the black sheen of the piano
silently reflected their prayers,
their frenzy, the gestures they repeated.

A piano has scales
because its blackness swallowed some landscapes.
And while the child sat on the stairs waiting
to play,
the air darkened by a half tone.

Cutting Off a Finger

My mother's finger was cut off
by a slamming door.

Or should I say that she stuck her finger in it
to stop the slicing wind.

Honey, don't shiver, just
feed the hungry wind this bloody piece of meat.

At the sight of the flame ignited by the blood,
the coyotes outside the door ran away.

O my mother pacing and pacing,
clutching her pale stiffening finger like a candle.

St. Zelkova Tree

The old zelkova tree in Deoksanri Changryung
bore new leaves this spring, though its trunk was burned.

Pushing upward into the sky with the tip of its twigs
it draws out leaves, like the banyan tree,
again and again from its fire hole.
How can it bear such splendid leaves,
scarred by a stroke of lightning that struck and split its chest!
In the black fire hole dug into itself
it boils down its own flesh and serves it.
Day birds and night birds visit the fire hole,
a family of squirrels has moved in,
clouds and stars fall into it.
In the black fire hole where even the wind holds its breath
lights gather to burn, every light.
Branches of black cries reach out
from the nest of the crow that flew away.

The zelkova tree in Deoksanri unfurls its green wings.
like a soaring bird whose legs are chained.

The Underground Flower

There is an orchid that only blooms underground.
Because it never shows itself above ground
few are said to have seen it.
Only white ants can enter the blooms,
drawn by the fragrance rising from the runnels cut by the autumn rain.
The orchid withers in sunlight,
which the white ants burrow into the ground to escape,
their bodies sparkling white, though they work in the dark.

Like undeveloped film, this orchid never shows itself;
its whole body consists of roots,
even its blooms are just hidden roots.

Translated from the Korean by Won-Chung Kim and Christopher Merrill
