

Kim Sa-In
Poems

The Depth of a Landscape

The wind blows,
short-stemmed plants shudder and tremble,
yet no one pays attention.

Because of the solitary trembling
of one moment in the life of those slender things,
one evening of the universe finally fades into night.
Between this side and the other side of that trembling, in the gap
between the start and end of that moment, a stillness of
infinitely ancient former times, or maybe an infant stillness
destined to belong to a time that has not yet come,
is barely visible, lightly stained,
while within the spring sunlight of that listless stillness
I long to fall sound asleep for a century or two,
or three months and ten days at least.
Then beside my infinity, bearing the name of three months or ten days,
butterflies or bees, insects with nothing much to brag of,
may heedlessly go brushing past;
at that, as if in a dream,
I think I shall recognize a familiar smell borne on those tiny creatures' feelers or wings or
infant legs
as your gaze that grew so deep in some other lifetime.

Homeless

Removing your clothes like old newsprint
I lay you down raw on a damp mattress and look down on you.
Your gnarled hands and feet, that have lost their vigor,
the traces of skinny limbs and ribs, how weary they look.
I'm sorry.
Using you, I earned a living,
got a woman and started a family but
the only things left are stale sweat and a nightmare road.
Again I laid you, docile,
in a secluded corner of unfamiliar ground.
What else could I do?
I'm not saying there were no good days, yet
there's little hope I can ever pay even a meager wage for your labors.
Now I'm wondering if I would like to go away quietly,
simply leaving you sleeping here.
What about it, body?

Cosmos Flower

You empty pockets
of one who never persecuted anyone!

When shall we go back home
and weeping relate to father
all that has happened since we left?

Someone who Makes a Bridge Feel Lonely

God,
suppose I took a poem such as this
and worked hard to transcribe it again—
couldn't you consider that as a new poem?

I see someone crossing a bridge.
He walks, stops briefly, and looks at the distant hills,
walks, pauses and does the same again.

A little later someone else crosses the bridge.
Passing with quick steps he is soon across,
gone without trace. The bridge remains empty, alone.

Someone quickly crossing a bridge makes the bridge feel lonely.

There's a poem that says that.
(Don't people say there are many good poems?)

If you say it's not possible, well, it can't be helped.
But please, God,
don't make a poem feel lonely
by skimming through it too fast.

If I looked up at the stars too often,
wouldn't the stars get dirty?
If I looked up at the sky too much,
wouldn't the sky get dirty?

He is a spirit trembling as he quits this world.

Note: The inserted texts are from two poems by Yi Seong-seon (1941 – 2001).

The Way Back Home

Amidst thundering traffic
a yellow dog goes running on and on
along the edge of a freeway.

Will it get back home alive?

Exposed beneath a curled-up tail,
a red ass.

Late Autumn 1

I weep for that woman in pain from weary love.
Once past forty,
her knuckles grew swollen,
her face fell in, exhausted with cares.

Love,
waiting hidden beneath a chestnut tree
as late autumn's bleak half-light,
a man always staggering past
in the midst of a drunken rout,
her white rubber shoes falteringly,
follow his footprints a few steps behind,
hugging herself, sodden, chilled.

Awaking, rising late at night
when all the world is still,
that woman washes her hair.
Under a weak lamp, no one coming, no one going,
she simply rubs her hands in silence.

Nobody Knows

Where have all my old earths gone?

Where have that yard, those paths gone, moist even in sunlight?

Where have my old streams gone, with their scorchingly baked gravel?

Where has my old hill gone, with the will-o'-the-wisps that came rolling with night?

Where have the neighborhood elders gone, dignified even in vests and pyjamas? Where have all my sisters gone, with their frequent, hydrangea-like laughter?

Where have my former hungers gone? Where has the sharp smell of young green eggplants gone?

Where have they all dispersed, my once youthful mother with her many griefs, my former brothers with their hard calves?

Where have my old fivestones and marbles gone, the broom that used to beat my spine, my father's powerful forearms, the girl next door who gloated?

Where have all my old graves gone, the pale-headed pasqueflowers and pottery shards I used to play with?

Where have my old spring evenings gone? The foxtails growing under the tall poplar tree, the low chimney stacks, the languid eventide smoke?

Where has my old cramped, dark room gone? My dark grandfather, the dark coughing and the dark wicker trunks, where have they all dispersed?

Where has the old me gone? Down what streets did I wander, dispersed, a child with feet dirt-black emerging from rubber shoes?

A Secret Incident

One evening good for neither this nor that
a premature dead leaf drops stealthily beside me.

Beside me, there where I cannot help but be,
it too is simply there, saying nothing.

Thanks.

Really this is something to be grateful for.

The Depth of a Landscape 2

This road, a road along which someone having nowhere in the world to rest passed weeping with a small bundle,
this therefore sorrowful road,
with oak trees and spicebush, dog-rose and pasqueflowers, tiny weeds,
empty now, where not one animal passes all day long,
a bright, dark road.

That person set out aged seventeen,
drifted about, sat squatting as a cobbler at Jochiwon Market,
slow gestures as he sewed and polished,
eating soup with rice alone every evening in a small restaurant at an alley's end,
once in a while staring into the distance over his reading glasses,
his face,
a quiet, dark road.

*“A Girl Hunched by the Fire Making Dumplings—I Will be her Man”**

That girl hunched by the fire making dumplings—
I'll end up wasting my life,
dependent on her ruddy, frozen hands.
That girl with nowhere to go,
only whimpers, crying alone, can't run away.
She looks wretched, burned by the sun,
but her breasts and thighs must be whiter than milk.
I'll wake up late, bleary-eyed, sprawled over that body,
wipe the sleep from my eyes with my thick, drooping beard.
I'll rush over to the gambling room in the tavern at dawn.
I'll snoop around for leftover drinks,
flirt idly with the aging bar-woman,
and once I'm drunk I'll drop and spend another day out back.
I'll toss into the void a goodbye that no one hears, “I'm going now,”
then stumble home carrying starlight on my back.
When ten to twenty years have gone by like that
I'll have feebly spawned three or four children in her body.
After spawning them I'll be helpless.
That young girl
only whimpers alone, nowhere to go.
The children will grow up rough as badgers.
Lying in a dirt-floored room as dark as a cave,
my head resting on my arm,
I'll watch the dry snow flutter in through a crack in the fogged window.
Noisily puffing bitter cigarettes, I'll let some more years go by.
When that girl's waist grows thick, once her tears have run dry
and her eyes blaze blue flames,
I'll suddenly fall badly sick and make my bed under a rack.
I'll hide the liquor she doesn't want me to have and keep drinking.
When her hair is half white from years of hardship
I'll finally expire ahead of her;
by then she won't be able to laugh or cry.
She'll smoke the bitter cigarettes I used to smoke,
learn to drink the liquor she couldn't handle, learn to swear.

Would this not be quite a hopeless love?
Though I'm not sure if it makes any sense.

* The title is a line from Kim Myeong-in's poem, “A Shingle-Roofed House.”

Springtime Sea

The village head's wife
had a big behind,
it looked just like a big bowl,
it looked just like a big bowl.

The village head's wife
was big-bosomed, too,
the front of her worn vest
looked like a grave-mound.
looked like a grave-mound.

How I longed to lie like rose-moss
beside her as she dozed.
How I longed to sink
into her faint snoring.

How I longed to be reborn
as her third son,
good-looking,
go up to Seoul and set up with some wealthy widow.

Buried Deep

In everyone's heart
there is an utterly empty ocean.

In everyone's heart,
there is a long touching song,
the twisted shadow of a wild pear tree.

In everyone's heart,
there are faces frozen with fear,
bloodshot eyes.

In everyone's heart,
there is a sharp sickle concealed down a blind alley,
a blue flame.

In everyone's heart,
there is a bamboo grove where autumn rain patters down.

Rice Cake

Once maternal grandmother went off, a bowl of rice-cakes on her head,
to sell them in this neighborhood and that,
I used to pull out scraps of glass, bottle tops, broken pocket knives, medicine bottles,
handle-less knives, burst beanbags, hidden on the sunny side of the old wattle fence
behind the privy,
and play with them.

Bored of that after half the day had passed,
I would chase the innocent chickens from the house behind,
then end up being scolded by my youngest aunt
for scuffling my shoes along,
I would eat a bowl of dumplings, more kimchi than dumplings,
mingled with tears and snot.
I would hum a line or two of “Yellow Shirt” that I had learned from the radio,
then collapse on the warm floor and sleep like a cat
then seeing the door was dim, unsure if it was morning or evening,
frightened, with one cheek bright red, I would cry out
and my aunt putting wood on the fire would pretend it was morning,
When grandmother came home at sunset,
if her business had been good, I would be so unhappy.
I would spit on my fingertips and dip them time after time
into the bean-flour left at the bottom of the bowl
until my fingers ached.

Ah, those rice cakes that grandmother
used to stuff into my mouth that gaped
with longing for mother,
passing Yongsan market, I meet them again on a shabby stall,
I meet grandmother, huddled dozing.

Mirror

There is a man overwhelmed with dread.
His hair is bushy as a young pine, his beard is scraggy.
See his cautiously closed lips.
That fugitive
and I who cry No as I am driven onward
stand face to face on a cliff at the world's end.
Suppose I put out a hand: let's shake?
Oho, let's shake hands at least?
Just brushing past is surely better.
Fearful face.
Passing like strangers is surely better.

Brother and Sister

As I was going home, riding the number 57 bus,
a little girl maybe six years old boarded the bus
ahead of a boy perhaps two years older
who carefully extracted two tickets from his pocket,
seized his sister's hand and made her hold on to the back of a seat
while he swayed suspended precariously from a strap.
An empty seat appears, he makes his sister sit there,
the little girl pulls tensely over to the inside
and bangs on the empty space with her fist: "You sit here."
"I'm OK," the brother firmly reassures his sister
and looks anxiously down at her every time the bus stops suddenly,
while she holds on to the back of the seat in front with both hands
and looks up at her brother as if to say: "I'm doing fine, aren't I?"

I watch, without seeming to,
such a pretty sight.
I'm on my way home after a drink to relieve my feelings,
having attended the funeral of a friend who died leaving a young child behind,
and my eyes, that had stayed dry till then,
seeing them,
are filled with tears.

Translated from the Korean by Brother Anthony of Taizé
