

Ethan W. Kim

*My Lovely Shudder*

The end of the shudder is  
the end of my life,  
so I have wandered in search of the shudder for my life.

Every life conceived in a shudder  
and passed through trembling legs  
spreads out its tentacles and longs for the world of communion.  
Because one's habit forms one's fate  
there is no liberation as long as one is alive;  
the fluttering in the web is the existential dance.

Plunging into vacuum saves me from this hell of shuddering.  
But the vacuum is no less another hell,  
because shudder is the energy of life.  
All life allows is to move from one hell to another.  
In the moment of transition,  
in the pause between shudder and stillness,  
heaven passes like a shadow.

The off-beat shudder of my life  
written in a score of long hell and short heaven,  
my lovely shudder.

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*My Lovely Tremor*

I am alive today  
because of my tremor for you.

As my body trembles at the air caressing my lungs  
your words vibrate delicately  
and tap the drum of my ear,  
and your love  
with its many tongues like huge waves  
twines round my body.

In the thrusting and pulling  
our boundaries fuse  
converging in a peak that crests.  
The high tide of your love invades me  
and I drown in a sea of tremor.

The shudder of death will not be much different.

With your many fingers you smooth  
the ebbed-out mud field of my life;  
the wave of love running through your fingers  
joins with that of my pulse  
and flows through my spine into eternity.

In the sea bridging life and death,  
I am alive today  
just because of your tremor in me.

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*Soap Opera*

The bubbles are delirious  
that the hands of the world  
create by touching me.

When they rub me hard  
I grow molten  
and dowse myself in the white foam.

Because I knew  
that all life is dirt and stains  
I decided to love  
the disgraces that cannot be erased,  
and those with the hands like Lady Macbeth's.

When they put out  
their hands aching with scars and conspiracies  
I melt my own body  
and fold them in.

Because there are things that cannot be spoken,  
and true love  
is but for the two involved,  
I choose silent dissolution rather than disclosure.  
I suppose love is, above all else,  
to dissolve oneself  
and to melt away.

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*Aching Body*

Chiselling aches. Chipped away,  
decades old flesh is ripped off.  
The cry of the wood runs through the chisel handle  
and through my hand up to my elbow.  
At the shock of hammering my bones turn numb.

A festival of the Brazilian kingwood, the American chisel,  
and the Korean sculptor.  
The kingwood resists revealing its inner flesh like a coy woman.  
The harder the wood resists, the sharper the chisel sets its edge  
and the sculptor's hammer exerts more strength.  
Each claims its own being resolutely.

I carve the wood and think  
that my love of the wood is, in reality, my desire  
and my desire is *your* pain,  
that it is pain that melts desire into love,  
that only when *your* pain becomes mine  
and we are united in it  
does desire change its body into love,  
and that all communion begins from pain.

When the wood opens its body willingly  
the sharp edge of the chisel becomes the caressing finger  
and strokes the wood's body,  
and the sculptor's hammer awakens the wood's soul.  
The grain of his dream and the hidden grain of the wood meet  
and yield a pattern unknown to the world.

Joy fills the kingwood bowl.

*Autumn Nirvana*

Suffocation is  
delirious.

"Please let me go free, now."  
The tree agrees to cease to breathe;  
the carbon dioxide stops  
circulating in the capillaries  
and oxygen  
fills in  
the water and sieve tubes.

The trunk which trembled with light green  
and the limbs which cried with dark green  
sit still, in silence  
and the leaves which howled in the storm  
swallow the motion;  
now they burn only a red resignation  
like funeral lamps.

On my way down,  
holding a leaf lit with their lights,  
my irregular pulses burst open,  
undoing my endeavor to stop breathing;  
I am unworthy even of the bliss of suffocation.  
Even at the feeblest movement of the air  
the web of my life trembles

and captures  
the pain of the sad beings  
who can't help but breathe.

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*Forsythias*

Yellow spurts  
ejected forth  
with the tickle of the spring breeze,  
though buried and cooled in the frozen earth  
and their hot bodies are soothed with ice.

The burning bush at Mount Horeb  
which did not burn up  
walked out of the book  
and bloomed in this world of man.  
Words of fire  
which light the shadowy ground.

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*A Prison Like This*

Would there be such a prison,  
once you are in,  
you can never walk out,  
or rather you never wish to escape,  
a prison that melts with soft touch  
my spider hands stretching to all corner of the world,  
and brings to a halt with a breezy smile  
my wandering glances?

Would there be such a prison,  
which thralls me in from the lot  
of my empty life slaving toward freedom  
and would teach that every flower blooms  
only in the dark patch of the lot where it has taken root,  
and that only its push and struggle,  
being unable to move even a step outside,  
and its patience and longing  
finally break open the darkness and open the flower,  
the one which teaches that the pattern of tears  
and fragrance of pain are engraved in every blossom?  
Would there be such an ecstatic prison  
which takes me in?

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*My Mother's Garden*

I never imagined that so many flowers would have bloomed.  
When Father was hospitalized  
and Mother left home to nurse him  
I worried about the plants  
and went out onto the balcony;  
it was full of flowers--  
hydrangea, gardenia, thyme,  
and others whose names I didn't know.  
Suddenly it struck me  
that her dreams and longing as a girl,  
when she herself was a yearning flower,  
have rushed away like rapids  
through the valley of her deep-wrinkled life,  
and that she now tends so many flowers  
to sustain her weak body and dwindling life.  
When I collected myself and looked again  
the girl who was to be my mother, whom I have never seen,  
wearing a pigtailed with ribbons, blushing  
and smelling of fragrance more exquisite than hydrangeas,  
was sitting quietly in the garden.

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*Terminal at Midnight*

There are people who cannot get off even at the last stop.  
They hear the repeated warning  
"Last stop on this line,"  
but the heavy souls who rented their bodies to fatigue and desire  
cannot wake up.  
At a time when the clock calls it a day  
and narrows its spread hands into a black hole of zero degrees,  
the train threatens to return to its base,  
but those who have no base  
desperately cling to their ecstatic coma.  
Carrying their fears of more of the same  
and their prayers for something different,  
the train leaves the terminal towards the yards.  
Only a long shadow which even death refuses to carry along,  
because it is mortgaged to life,  
hovers on the dark platform.

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*The Damascan Spring*

The new shoots  
at the end of boughs  
look like green spears.  
They operate the keratotomy  
of removing the hardened parts  
which have been festering  
during the long winter.

Incising my eyes open  
the high tide of life strikes me;  
my gaze slips  
between the azalea and mountain cherry,  
and a dizziness, like motion sickness  
traps me.

An occupation army, spring  
takes me by surprise,  
removing  
the thick scap of death  
encrusted as I have lived as a prisoner of life.

At the splendid cruelty of the spring  
I lose my way  
and stand agape.

The life which overpowers me drives me to live.

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*Lost Water Bottle*

When I turned around the mountain waist and began to climb the steep slope, my heart pounded hard , and sweats oozed from the open pores and streamed down along my back. Though I had crossed several passes the mountain was reluctant to show its peak and I gasped severely, almost out of breath. I collapsed on a flat rock and groped for the water bottle I always carry in the net pocket outside of my sack. But I couldn't find it. My hand grasped only the empty mesh. Where on earth did I drop it? How could I not hear it fall?" With the sense of betrayal that what should always be is not where it should always be, my thirst doubled, sudden despondency invaded me. Wiping away at sweat, I calmed down. When I picked up my sack, it felt too heavy; I had only put a storm jacket into it. When I hurriedly zipped it open, the bottle was waiting for me, scoffing at me. I climbed down the mountain bewildered at my sense of the betrayal and despondency, and also the unexpected sense of relief.

And waiting at home, there was my wife.

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*Winter Walk*

I

No snow is so heavy it can beat the sun.

The boundary between the sunny side and the shadowy one,  
between melted snow and frozen  
is muddy and slippery.  
All boundaries in this world are this dangerous.

Flowers bud  
at the scars where the boughs incised their own bodies.  
Only the precarious spots of death  
raise life.

II

The slightly bent oak  
opens its body to the caressing sunbeam,  
and its root pushes sap upward with all their might.  
When the sunbeam and the sap break their boundaries  
and accepts each other,  
the tree breathes misty haze  
and hides its shyness.

By pecking away the winter frozen within itself  
with his entire body,  
a woodpecker  
sprouts spring.

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*Rain Carries Many-layered Sorrow*

Rain falls, weeping off the broad leaves of paulownia outside the window.  
People say it rains sadly  
but rain isn't sad at all,  
because its body has neither pockets nor a heart  
to contain sorrow.  
Even if it feels sorrow  
the feeling would never penetrate into its inside  
so as to trouble the inner being of the rain.  
Instead, sorrow climbs on the back of the rain and vanishes quickly.  
Only we are sad  
who watch the rain.  
It is nothing but our own sorrow that makes the rain sad  
which does not know sorrow at all.  
But to know that rain is never sad  
and the sorrow of the rain is ours entirely  
is a sadder thing indeed.  
Rain falls sadly,  
carrying many-layered sorrow.

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*Cranes at the DMZ near Chulwon*

They dance, caressing each other's necks.  
Taking the tunnels inside the mountains,  
which the acid of man's hatred has dug for the pipes of an organ,  
the deep sound of their love  
makes exquisite music,  
melting the mines.

With their intense motion  
they swallow  
even the sound of cannon fires  
rumbling in the gray sky.

Love may begin from a place like this  
where hatred collapses.  
The cranes, as messengers of indifferent winter  
nullify all man-made boundaries.  
Ignoring man's admiring eyes,  
they soar high  
while I plunge into the dust.

The festival of life is ecstatic  
even on rice fields covered by nothing but stubbles.  
What is more obstinate than life itself  
is the will to be alive.  
The cranes witness this cruel truth  
with their delicate white and black bodies,  
and I am ashamed of myself for being a man  
who has no clothes to cover my shame.

The twilight over the mountains  
encircling the rice fields  
hides its blushing body within the dusk.

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