

Jeongrye

**CHOI Jeongrye**  
**Poetry**

**Tigers in the Sunlight**

I stand raising two hands.  
I hold a bomb that will burst soon.

Without movement, I'm staring through the tiger's whiskers, at its yellow, blazingly red, or glaringly green eyes.

The sunlight pours down, dazzling  
in the asphalt's silent scream.

I'm, no she is staring at it. My great grandmother, who met the tiger in a field on a slope; her head simmering, and the grave field sizzling; its eyes were burning and when it silently turned its back, she protected a young ox, her whole fortune; finally, when the women were restored to their homes, her tears fell down on the grave field; buds came out and leaves sprouted.

Today I met a tiger and it said,  
"I won't kill you if you give me one rice cake."\*

Traffic signs leave me bewildered, even when I stare at them.  
They say:

"Give me your one leg!"  
"Give me your one arm!"

However, I say I have nothing, nothing,  
and I'm not like my great grandmother.  
They say:

"Give me your whole head, heart, kidney!"  
"Give me your guts without leaving anything!"

The sunlight is fierce;  
oh, how those little tigers swarm in it!

\*Taken from the old Korean story about a mother who was killed by a tiger and her two children who became the sun and the moon.

Arriving home from work with rice cakes for her children, the mother met a tiger on the rise of a mountain. When the tiger saw her, it said, "I won't kill you if you give me one rice cake." So she gave

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a rice cake to the tiger. It continuously demanded more rice cakes from her, repeating, "I won't kill you if you give me one rice cake." When she gave it all the rice cakes that she had, it demanded her arms and legs, finally killing and eating her. Changing into her clothes, the tiger went to mother's house to eat her children. The children, seeing the tiger approach, ran away from him, and climbed up a tree. When the tiger followed them to the tree, they said a prayer to god to save them. At that moment, a strong rope came down from the sky. Using the rope, they climbed into the sky, becoming the sun and the moon.

*Translated from the Korean by Choi Jongyoll (with Jordan Stempelman)*

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### **When I Was Trembling As a Leaf**

My grandfather died 25 years ago.  
55 years before his death  
mullet soup cooked in the fireplace.  
My grandfather, grandmother, father, aunt, and uncle sat  
round and ate the soup, saying that the flesh  
made it delicious, they emptied each bowl.

My grandmother died 35 years ago.  
45 years before her death,  
a mullet, which they forgot to put in the caldron,  
was left cooking in the fireplace.  
My family ate the soup without mullet;  
they finished each bowl, saying  
that it was special  
from the flesh it contained.

My father hid himself in the cave during the war 45 years ago.  
35 years before the war  
my father was a child.  
I, smaller in his small body, saw a mullet  
cooking in the fireplace  
and finally got into its body.

And 100 years before then,  
my grandfather mullet experienced a big drought.  
The bottom of the river broke and he wriggled.  
He breathed with a mouth instead of gills,

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and then went ashore.  
My family killed and ate each other to live.  
Finally some wriggled and died.

100 years before my grandfather mullet's death,  
the surviving mullets climbed up the trees every night.  
Like the old saying  
of how the moon had risen and stars had risen,  
they climbed up the trees.  
Those tired trees standing along the dried river!  
I, who was in the mullet, shook  
as their hearts stretched throughout their arms without stopping.  
Shaking my black backbone  
and spreading my fishy smell,  
I changed into a leaf and fluttered in the wind.

When I was trembling as a leaf  
180 years ago and again 200 years before that,  
I seemed to see and hear;  
a time of moments still lasting forever  
I seemed to see  
the green things withering suddenly  
and a strange version of myself  
sinking on a ship without reason  
as I feel at this moment today.

*Translated from the Korean by Choi Jongyoll (with Jordan Stempelman)*

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## How Did a Stone Become a Bird?

My stone grew  
into a bird.  
I embraced it every night.

One day a dusty yellow wind blew  
and this stone fell from a valley in the sky.

“You are so warm  
and so lovely;  
have a good sleep.”

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I soothed and lulled it to sleep.  
When it woke up,  
I knew it would fly away.

I wanted to see its eyes.  
I wanted our  
eyes to gather together.

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### **Wild cherry blossom tree and a woman's shadow**

He, along with a wild cherry blossom tree and a woman's shadow,  
live silently together  
He has no money, no wife, no children, no house  
He is old, crawling out from between the cracks of a rock  
like that of oyster shells  
He sits there forever, wandering around,  
watching the wild cherry blossom stretched wearily about  
He realizes that spring has come  
and so stops washing the pots  
He brings in the shadow of a woman lying underneath him  
and lays her down in the patch of field  
He spreads the sunlight, covers her with the sunlight  
with its resemblance of paper, she has grown thin and white  
The wild cherry blossom, like a blind maiden  
barely holding on, there are two flowers  
on her forehead, and her cheeks are warm  
Oh, no, she is cold,  
in this unreliable spring  
A soft mist of steam rises from the place where she lain  
She drifts away, she is flying away  
above the wild cherry blossom tree, so old and so weary,  
that two blossoms, dangling gently, barely fall off  
Spring leaves once again  
She is no longer a woman in this world  
Still, he cannot live without a lifestyle like this  
with the cherry blossom tree and a woman's shadow

*Translated from the Korean by Daniel M. & Choi Jeongrye*

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### **A Smell**

A smell gets away from itself  
and looks at its body for a long time.  
The smell does not show its wings  
and its flapping sound,  
smell is the bird which body lets fly;  
smell is the guide that flies through  
the thick darkness of the underworld.

I just baked a mackerel,  
and now its smell fills my house.  
Hesitating, the smell doesn't want to leave  
while my children do their homework  
while I do the dishes.

I open the window to drive it away,  
but the smell hides in the closet through the gap in the door.  
It's silent.  
It's tenacious.  
To survive it doesn't show its wings.

The smell which swam strongly on the straits,  
glittering its leaden belly,  
now finally flies  
outside into the evening light.

At a place not far away  
a dark sky  
becomes solid.

*Translated from the Korean by Choi Jongyoll*

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### **In front of my old house**

The house is carrying a wardrobe.  
The wardrobe is carrying a coat,  
and the coat is carrying myself.

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The time flows, jolting.  
The trees standing along the street gradually run away,  
and birds fly away like cursing.

Without knowing anything,  
lava is boiling underground,  
animals copulate,  
and seeds suddenly rot.

A flood happens, and time floats on the muddy water.  
Inside the wardrobe, inside the coat, inside a headache

there was me,  
the uncatchable trap.

The headache throws me away  
the coat breaks the wardrobe  
the wardrobe forsakes that house.

I pass that unfamiliar old house like a ghost.  
The forgotten spring  
goes away like the sourness.

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## Hotel California of Puddle

*Hotel California,*  
I was captivated by the song and hummed it for a while.  
“The smell of colitas, shimmering light;  
as if she had tried to touch my head,  
one woman stood in the doorway;  
I heard the bell ring from a distance.”

How did you come here?  
Did you think this place a platform around Daejeon train station?  
Did you think this place's Hotel California?  
A tadpole in the puddle on the road after raining long!

Swimming around wildly  
in the water reflecting the sunlight like bullets,  
you fall into a faint for a moment

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as a peddler's truck passes over it, splashing its water,  
the sound of a loudspeaker saying, "Cabbage! Radishes! Onions!"

Then, for a moment, the shining puddle becomes  
Hotel California! Behind the clouds, the sound of thunder  
falls far away. At the Hotel California of puddle  
where some dances are remembered and others forgotten,

you, whom somebody left there, are listening alone to  
"Welcome to the Hotel California. You are a prisoner here.  
You can check out every time you like, but you can never leave."

"Cabbage! Radishes! Onions!"  
You won't forget the sound  
soaring up into the sky at midday, until all the water is dried  
from sunlight in the puddle.

*Translated by Choi Jongyoll (with Jordan Stempelman)*

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## Lebanese Emotion

Even in piles a watermelon ripens at the store.  
It ripens fully, and finally becomes old.  
Like a watermelon's seeds  
locked in black stripes,  
my heart, burnt, is black;  
it doesn't speak; it can't.  
Shall I call this  
the Lebanese emotion?

A donkey went, carrying watermelons,  
jingling a bell, and passed through  
an oasis in the Taklamakan desert  
and by the white poplars on the street;  
a donkey is still used instead of a wagon there.  
Craftsmen of silver and gold rings are sitting,  
to be something, at the market.

To become something-- impossible  
they die there, and I here.

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They lived there and I lived here.  
Did I live? I? In the desert?  
In Lebanon?

Like wandering seagulls  
women whose sunken eyes glitter  
wearing veils, pass houses hollowed by bombs.  
Perhaps that was me.

When I received my letter torn to pieces  
instead of his answer,  
it was just like a dream;  
I thought it was unreal.  
Shall I call it the Lebanese emotion?

In the world all lovers become old lovers.  
Old lovers return home in full glory;  
old lovers ride an resplendent automobile;  
old lovers go to Lebanon and become kings there;  
they chat in a foreign language and get married there.

Old lovers become dads; old lovers smile.  
Old lovers of black lips and white teeth,  
why don't they die?  
Why, after death, don't they flow?

From the other side of desert he comes like a wind.  
When I almost forget, the wind calls the clouds and makes them fly.  
The clouds soar up; the clouds drift in the sky; the clouds cry red.  
Covering their faces with their hands, they cry  
and look askance; finally

it rains all day.  
Shall I call it the Lebanese emotion?  
Shall I call them the Lebanese clouds?  
To fall right after flying,  
let's call it Lebanon. Okay!

*Translated from the Korean by Choi Jongyoll*

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