

KIM Gyeongmee
FIVE POEMS

How to Eat

Be a heart like the bean sprouts boiled to the core
Never spill a single grain of the quiet in the shade of rice
Eat it all in silence though there be no height of sugar in endurance
Suffering—don't tear away its crust as if it were a loaf of sandwich bread
Let there be just one side dish, one called diligence

Am I doing something useless again all of a sudden
Will I make it to the end of my natural life
Though the pebbles of fear and regret crunch between your teeth
though the days are like the black inside of anchovies when
you feel like squandering it all and everything
take in more of that light in the eyes, gentle like vegetables

Slither out like a fish even at the regularity of life's despair and
straighten your mind and body like a pair of chopsticks
Swallow well yet another life
like a sip of water after a meal.

Crossed Lines

Butterflies, I saw them crawl
into the roses and crawl out biting a stalk of chrysanthemums
Bees with their legs dipped in camellias, I saw them spit out
little kittens with stripes
The road I didn't intend to take
Was I entered into a wrong person by mistake
Or perhaps I was draped over a person by mistake
There's nothing to be done now
even if it was a call made by mistake
to the butterflies or the camellias and the kittens with the face of chrysanthemums but
in the next life
try to make or receive the right phone call

I am the Second¹

I am going to think, I am their Second
 Whomever I meet
 Whether they are my parents, my husband, my friends or
 Those who ask me out to a drive through the spring day or
 simply anyone
 What I mean is I make a resolution, I am their Second
 No, not the Second
 like the motel parking lots along the river
 like the secret skin the color of milk
 No, just a Second as it means in English
 Not the first but the second, purely and mathematically
 Not this time, but always the next
 Always what comes later, like Hong Gil-dong², the son of a concubine,
 like the periphery, inappropriate,
 and therefore the very last

So then I wonder if you know the Law of Seconds
 Don't ever let go of your breath even if life squeezes your neck like the first wife
 Don't beg the day to spend the night with you
 Don't believe in the survival of the fittest for only in the Second
 honesty, at last, becomes heartbreaking
 The beauty of truth, the acetabulum of nostalgia, the detonator of life

naturally exist there, there especially
 So do often lift your pinkie on the sly
 and smile quietly as in Esoteric Buddhism

I am this, this of the world

¹ Author's note: In order to fully understand this poem, it is necessary to understand the colloquial use of the word "second" in Korea. In Korea, the English word "second" is used to denote a mistress or a kept woman—a modern-day concubine. The word implies an extramarital relationship that is more complex and involved than mere affairs. Men, mostly wealthy or at least financially capable men, would keep "seconds" in "hidden" homes not sanctioned by any moral or legal standards, providing for their needs in exchange for what can euphemistically be called "visitation rights." As can be expected, the seconds are usually young and beautiful women. They are powerful in the sense that they are recipients of love so great or at least so addictive that men are willing to risk social disgrace and breakup of their families to indulge in it; but they are also powerless in that they must lead a secret life hidden under the visible fabric of society, ever dependent on men for their very survival. I wrote this poem to explore those two dimensions embodied in the word "second." One more thing, Korean men used to make a fist and then hold up their pinkie to insinuate that they are indeed proud possessors of "seconds."

² Hong Gil-dong is one of the most famous literary creations in Korean history and is the main character of the first Korean novel written in Hangeul. Born to a noble family, Hong was a tremendously gifted child, but since he was *seoja* or the son of concubine, he was doomed to a life of a social pariah. He became a bandit leader who fought corrupt officials and aided the weak.

Dust

Can I fathom the world of such depth
On the smooth window pane, daffodils bloom and then zebras dash
In the empty corner, black cats in their last month of pregnancy
Breed mulky little ones and then play, unraveling balls of yarn
Everyday that stunning genesis seeped in gray,
Today I try reading it out loud slowly

In the morning at the vanity I powder and paint my face with dust
I take dust out of my wallet and, how expensive, I pay for things like coffee or watermelons and will
you give dust a ride on your way back?
I ask for a job on behalf of dust or to the house made of dust upon that hill
I go with boxes and boxes of white detergent dust and to my heart's content
I drink and eat a table full of dust and sing taking turns with dust
At the news of his death, that dust who can't be dead, I change into black dust
I listen to the honking of dust stuck in traffic and then return
To make a child dust with clouds of dust on the table or
Husband dust loves another dust, my friend dust calls and sheds wet dust and
The dust that is I writes dust called poetry

The genesis that makes something fall and settle endlessly upon the entire world
That genesis of something, will I be able to read it to the end?

Dedicated to Silence

I know now
that I invite the foolish world in when I myself am being foolish
I see the flowers, I see the flowers, I insisted so as not to appear shabby
Though the raised pattern on the coin called *you* wore out and faded away long ago
From the morning when the sound of lilacs falling was a domical grave
To the evening when I watched
the procession of robe-grey, the monks passing through the Main Temple yard,
the fishmonger's cart in the peak of summer and
the shattered fluorescent light bulb in spring
to the broken umbrella that won't close even at the appearance of the sun
That all of these are the world I have invited in

That the most effortful endeavor of them all is
washing my morningface and my eveningfeet
without upsetting the surface of water

I now know.

Translated from the Korean by Sukhee Ryu