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Why I Write

Do you think dolphins can live in a river? I have never thought that to be possible; yet, an incredible thing happened in Seoul, Korea. Surprisingly last April, a dead dolphin was found on the riverbank near the Banpo bridge of Seoul's Han River. The Han River is very wide and deep; but sluggish; the water is not clean enough for dolphins to live in it.

Then why did he go against the stream? Why did he want to leave the West Sea and swim up the Han River? Was he looking for his ancestors who moved from land to sea a long time ago? There would have been many obstacles for him, such as sluice gates, a dam under construction, and many noisy railroad bridges. And above all, fresh water unlike the seawater could have tormented him terribly. Moreover, how could he swim over the dam? I guess that high tide made it possible for him to jump into the river. He would have suffered increasingly by the lowering of the salt content in the water. The dolphin would try to go back to the sea, but maybe he could not find the direction because his pain was too severe to generate supersonic waves. Later, an investigator announced that it was a kind of harbor porpoise. He found a big fester inside the stomach, and it seemed like the dolphin had difficulty using his supersonic waves.

Like a dolphin, sometimes I lose my sense of direction and time. I don't know where I am and when is now. Whenever these strange times happen, it's like my supersonic waves won't work. I have an illusion; I mistake a flying stone for a bird. (I had many experiences of throwing stones in anti-government demonstrations in the 1970's and 80's.) These moments are usually short, but sometimes they last long enough to build a kingdom. These moments inspire me to write poems, such as this one:

“Within Three minutes”

*within three minutes what can you not accomplish?
have a shotgun marriage
give birth to a child
a bridge can collapse
a department store falls down
a kingdom can be built*

*but
hey,
you socks, pants, and jackets
hanging in the dusty veranda!
you shame and oblivion,
drying while still remaining folded!
what are you guys doing?*

*Look at that!
a flying stone*

*quickly spreading wings
coming out from the armpits*

*before those wings get folded
you should hurry and get married
have a baby
stamp a seal
ask for a handshake
and make a nation*

*before a plane crashes
a river gets locked
sands pile up on the table.
you should arouse the cockroach
sleeping under the cupboard
you should rush and fly
with your deep blue wings under your arms*

I wander in an illusion of these moments. Whenever I ask myself who I am and what I'm doing, I cannot help but recall my past. Memories shimmer in my mind and remind me how I've become what I am. In one memory:

I may have fallen into a doze, on a train ride, I saw a small red field between green valleys. It was softly twisting around the furrow. Strangely, there was not a single plant in it. And then it disappeared. It was just one short moment. Whenever I pass those valleys, I look carefully for that small red field. But I have never seen it since.

I don't remember why my mother threw my textbooks into the woodstove. "What good will they do?" she said. I rummaged through the stove, took out the books with their charred edges, wrapped them, and went to school for the semester. I don't know why.

I don't remember what I did later with those books and the half-burnt schoolbag. I don't know why that field didn't want a single plant to shoot up, and then to where it disappeared, I couldn't know. Sometimes when I wake at midnight, I see myself lying down on that small red field.

These memories are scattered inside me, and they wander in the mist of time. In the fragments of memories, I feel like I can find my real existence, and I think it is the way I understand the world and others. As you can tell from my poems, memory is both my deficiency and my mind's ruin. I wanted to escape these moments of deficiency and ruin to reach this world. That is, I wanted to understand the pain of others, and eventually the whole world, by way of my own pain.

Let me go back to the dolphin story. Why did the dolphin leave the sea and swim up the river? Why did it desire to go elsewhere? The answer to this question is the same as the reason why I began to write. I wanted to leave the place where I had lived—to dare to swim against the times or to go to a new place. And that also brings me here now. But here, my supersonic waves won't work; my native language became useless. Iowa, where my language

became useless, makes me think of my language and my country. Korea is a very small country geographically; moreover, it is divided into south and north.

Many Koreans, including myself, still suffer from memories of the Korean War in the 50's, the division and the poverty we experienced. These days when I watch bombs exploding in a poor country on TV, it reminds me of my childhood. I also grew up eating candy, chocolates, and gum that the American soldiers threw to us along the railroad tracks. We, the poor, were hurt by the insolence and pride hidden inside the kindness of the rich. When I was young, I used to wish that I had been born in a rich country. However, come to think of it, I think I love my country because it is small and because it suffered so much in its history. Remembering the hurt is not only the willingness to recover from it, but also an effort to prevent hurting others. If I had grown up in a wealthy country, I would have enjoyed life more, wasting time and energy, drinking, dancing and so on. Of course, I would never have tried to write poetry to remember the pain.

In Iowa, my mother-tongue is useless. Here, a Korean writer, Park Kyong-ni, comes to mind. She devoted twenty-four years to finishing a single novel (which is in sixteen volumes). I love her passion for and persistence in her career. Her novel, *Land*, opens in 1897, a turbulent time when the Korean people were struggling against their history. She once said, "I didn't know how to write this novel. It was like someone else was writing it through me. If I had not been unhappy, I would not have written *Land* for such a long time—twenty-four years for one novel!"

Many Korean people think Park Kyong-ni's novel could be loved by the whole world. But there are too many references to Korean customs and too many Korean idioms to translate it easily. I love her novel and admire the full twenty-four years she dedicated to it. I admire her language that digs deep into the human mind and into our sad history.

I write in a language that is internationally less prominent than other languages. My language becomes useless when I go abroad. Whenever I think it is useless, I think of Park Kyong-ni and her dedication of twenty-four years. Difficulty of communication doesn't mean a language has no worth or no depth.

But I didn't answer why I write yet, or if, like Park Kyong-ni, I write because I'm unhappy—maybe; maybe not. We live only once; this is frustrating. So we have to do our best in our time. I think that is my duty and a courtesy. Someone gave me life and I should answer. Now that I am alive and have a memory and can feel things deeply, I have to answer the questions of who I am, and where I am. So I write.