

Seven Poems by Cho Chihun

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Introduction

Cho Chihun's 趙芝薰 poem, "P'ach'ou" 芭草雨 (Rain on the Banana Plant), has been my constant companion from the time I left Korea in my early twenties. Pinned to my desk, this poem always brings me back to my village mountains in Korea, quenching my homesickness. My endeavors to translate Cho's poetry into English is a small way to pay my gratitude for these poems.

Born in 1920, Cho Chihun is a canonical figure of modern Korean poetry and a renowned scholar of Korean aesthetics, culture, and history. Written in a modernist free-verse form, his poetry is deeply rooted in Korean soil, imbued with the sounds, smells and colors of pre-industrial Korea. In 1939, his first poem, "Old Fashioned Dress" (*Kop'ung ūisang* 古風衣裳), was published in the literary magazine *Munjang* 文章 and was followed within a few months by "Monk Dance" (*Sŭngmu* 僧舞) which became one of the most beloved poems of the modern era of Korea. These two poems highlight the aesthetic of Korean traditional culture as it was lived during his time. Although the poems illuminate the beauty of specific local culture, they resonate with a timeless feeling. The permeating elegiac mood in these poems reflect Cho Chihun's acute angst over vanishing Korean heritage. These poems were written at a time of heightened pressure by the Japanese colonial government to erase Korean cultural identity. Cho Chihun had once said that his poetic foundation sprang from his attachment to what was vanishing in his native culture.

In 1946, his poems appeared in the collection, *Ch'ōngnok chip* 青鹿集 along with the works of Pak Mogwōl 朴木月 and Pak Tujin 朴斗鎭. The three were known since as the *Ch'ōngnokp'a* 青鹿派 or the "Green Deer Poets." Under the threat of a western cultural influx, the Green

Deer Poets' aim was to reassert an Eastern view of nature. In the spirit of the four gentlemen (*sagunja* 四君子) – the plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo of literati painting – they viewed nature as a fellow traveler on this earth, sharing the transitory moment. The beauty of their poems comes from their attempt to enter nature's heart and treat nature as a soulmate, intently smelling, listening, seeing and relating to nature as a corporeal entity. Zen Buddhism also profoundly influenced Cho's poetry. After college, he became a lecturer at the Buddhist college in the Wölchǒng Temple at Odae Mountain (Odae-san Wölchǒng-sa 五臺山 月精寺) and lived the life of a lay monk. Although he was only there for one year, the experience deepened his poetic foundation and expanded to his relationship with natural world. Cho Chihun's poetry offers us a way to rediscover our true and intimate place within nature.

Monk Dance

A gossamer white silk *kokkal*¹ hat
like butterfly wings, how delicately folded!

Her shorn head, bluish,
under the white chiffon *kokkal* hiding,

the light, gleaming on her two cheeks,
so exquisite, saddens me.

At night, when the yellow candle burns quietly on an empty stand,
the moon wanes on each leaf of a paulownia tree.

Her sleeves are long so the sky is wide
as if she is about to turn, her foot in a melon seed *pösön*² flies up in the air.

Timidly lifting her dark eyes toward the sky,
at the distant star light her gaze comes to rest.

On her peach-blossom cheeks, two drops dapple;
although living is weary, her passion is starlight.

Her hands swirl as they extend, then fold back again;
her palms gather as if in a prayer from her heart's depth.

The night is awake, even the crickets chirp into the wee hours.
A gossamer white silk *kokkal*, like butterfly wings, how delicately folded!

Old Fashioned Dress

¹ A *kokkal* 고깔 is a ceremonial headdress made of white transparent silk fabric shaped in a square.

² *Pösön* 버선 are Korean socks with tips tapered into the shape of a melon seed.

At the end of a long heavenward-soaring *pyŏn*,³ a wind chime cries,
below the eave's end, the half-moon hides behind a bead curtain.
Glimmering, the spring night deepens like the sound of a cuckoo.

How lovely, how beautiful, she is in her *hanbok*:
her *hojang chŏgori*⁴ top, the blue jewel toned bodice,
the shoulders' nests, the lavender *hojang*,
the white crisp collar brightening her face.
Below, many unswerving lines of skirt flow down,
turning themselves into a curve.
The twelve folds of her long *ch'ima*⁵ ripple gently.

On her leather shoes, hidden in her *ch'ima*,
the clouds rise at her toes, the thin vines run off to the sides.
Soundless, she glides through the grand hall, softly opens the door.
You are a monarch butterfly, telling us some country's classic tale.
as if you are a monarch butterfly, downcast your eyelashes, dance lightly

Tonight, I am returning back to live in the old time:
closing my eyes I tune the *kŏmun'go*⁶ strings.
Along with the melody, like the thin willows,
I sway my white hands.

³ *Pyŏn* 附椽 are rafter extensions that soften the slope of a roof over the eaves, sometimes turning it upward.

⁴ *Hojang chŏgori* 回装저고리 is a type of woman's top made with fabric of contrasting colors of fabric on the shoulders' nest.

⁵ A *ch'ima* 치마 is a woman's skirt.

⁶ A *kŏmun'go* 거문고 is a six-stringed Korean zither.

Watching the Falling Petals on the Sleeves

for Mogwöl

Over the cold mountain boulder, the sky, distant,
the mountain birds cry.

The clouds drift over
seven hundred *li*⁷ of waterway.

The flower petals wet the traveler's long sleeves.
O, the sunset of the village by the river where wine ferments in every home!

Tonight, as I sleep,
in the next village, the flowers fade.

Being tender-hearted and sorrowful perhaps is an illness.
Under the moonlight, quietly quivering, I am moving on ...

⁷ One *li* 里 is approximately 400 meters.

Pinnacle

Suddenly, I found myself standing on a fathomless cliff.
At this precipice, at this edge of sky, surrounded by clouds,
a single stem of a nameless flower. Who made it bloom here?
These flower petals, unlike others, don't vanish in the air
like water droplets, splashed by the stream colliding with rocks.

How many eons did the starlight need to awake,
crying to be bloomed as a single blossom?
Inside a sinning person's heart, the spring water wells up
and dews his eyes. These dews slip into the burning
chamber of his heart and become a cool shade. I realized
that in these small petals, there was this huge shade.

A drop of shade shrouded my entire universe.
Into a drop of my blood, the slumbering universe curled up.
Where there was no wind, the flower petals created wind,
a gesture, calling me to come. O here, from far away,
or from very near, an invisible flower's branch pierced my heart;
a jolting fragrance, like the scent of some wild beast, infected me.

I was not a wise person, so I sought eternity
from this single stem of a flower. Nor was I an immature child.
Hence, I renounce my free will to kiss the petals of the pinnacle
and to fall into a long sleep for this eternal illusion.

I descended the mountain path. Pebbles sparkled sharp
like edges of a knife to suck in all the sunlight. In an old tavern,
the owner still lived; more wrinkles added on his forehead.
Over the fence, a peach tree has blossomed like a cloud. On the blue
bamboos, fresh blood flowed in each blade; mountain birds still cried.

Suddenly, a white butterfly! A butterfly! A butterfly!
*Please don't catch me. My life would perish like the butterfly
whose powdered wings have been touched—*
O, what is this tear-wet butterfly?
The petals of the pinnacle tinged my heart; without ill feeling,
I was smiling quietly at my guilty conscience.

*Kayagŭm*⁸

1

As the moonlight shimmers, I open the window and sit alone.
My bosom full of the chrysanthemum's fragrance, ails in loneliness.

The blue smoke of a cigarette furls in the cold wind;
the red shadow of alcohol turns my cheeks hot.

On this hushed heaven and earth, no one to visit me,
although the universe is vast, old memories enliven me.

I fall under the moon as if the dark night is an ocean
of roaring water, where a straw-thatched home floats away.

2

As if I am paddling a canoe, I put the *kayagŭm* on my lap,
tune its twelve strings and lean on the wall quietly.

As I slowly close my eyes, my mood runs ahead of me;
I let my mood take over my ten dancing fingers.

Beyond the cloud, on the high road above, a lone goose glides crying;
in the Milky Way's clear water, myriad stars are immersed.

What regret do I have that I relive in my dream
and call the name of my beloved I had once forgotten?

3

Full of wind in the *kayagŭm*, dreams rise endlessly,
even if all twelve strings were severed, the *kayagŭm* would still ring.

Pressing on each string to let go of my knotted sorrows,

⁸ A *kayagŭm* 伽倻琴 is a twelve-stringed Korean zither.

bobbing my head momentarily, my hands lift lightly.

Ttungttung ttung tudu ttungttung hŭnghŭng ũng tuduttung ttung...

When I forget all the forms and rules, my fingertips clot with blood.

Why do the clouds stand still! Why is the moonlight so white!

At the soaring sound of water, the blue mountain crumbles.

First Prayer

O Heaven, tear down this wall please!
This cursed wall blocks us from seeing the faces our loved ones
and feeling the touch of their hands, so tear down this wall please.

War cruelly killed the innocent people, their blue sighs
piled up inside the wall, which is covered with green moss;
with your own hands, one morning knock it down please.

Our only wish is to be one—our land cannot be broken in two.
Like the medicinal hand of mother rubbing her child's aching stomach,
tenderly as that, stroke with your hand please.

From this heart to that heart, our wish rings like the sound of a bell,
for this year—
even if everything explodes in fire and burns to ashes,
open this wall please.

Give us light please. Give us the bull's howl please. O heaven—

In Front of History

Standing alone on the high hill, clad in layers of blood,
I sing some sort of a song
for the new sky that will always open up brilliantly.
O, the glory of defeat will be for me!

Standing in this empty space, as if I am nailed here,
I sing my song without knowing the meaning.
O, my eternal glory, I wait for you before you come;
after you come, I will still wait.

I become the sorrow, resounding quietly in this vast universe.