

POETRY



KO UN

Ko Un, SSN,* is Korea's foremost living writer. After immense suffering during the Korean War, he became a Buddhist monk. His first poems were published in 1958, then a few years later he returned to the secular world. He has published more than 120 volumes of poems, essays, and fiction and has been nominated for a Nobel Prize several times.

*SSN, or *Soen Sunim*, is the Korean equivalent in Buddhism of Master or Venerable.

From the forthcoming book, *Songs of Tomorrow*
(Green Integer, 2008) translated from Korean by
Brother Anthony, Young-moo Kim and Gary Gach

Ch'on-un Temple

They live
in a world all their own

Their spirits float
below the valleys and up on high
Echoes of wind

They are
a sound of night wind in pines

Bare mountain slopes
Boulders

Autumn is coming

As the sound of the wind-bells
drops weeping from the rock-perched
eaves to temple courtyards

they live
in a world all their own

Now, back in the world, all that forgotten,
they long to return to the slopes
swept by the spirit wind

where they live

they
live

Resting

The era when you galloped on horseback
is past, but not gone. Another era
for galloping on horseback is here.
Earn what you need for each day
Then take it easy, eating and resting.
Azaleas still blossom all round you.
Sighing is not sorrow. When you stop to
sigh, kites in the sky seem to pause as well.

True rest should be
the mind's highest state.



Grave Memories

In my youth I was quite fascinated by graves, especially
the 680 graves in Hwangdung Public Cemetery.

On my way home at night, I used to pass out
in the Sarabong Cemetery on Cheju Island.

I made quite a habit of sleeping beside graves.

Word spread.

Folks started calling me the Sarabong Ghost.

After someone died and a new grave appeared,
I used to be so glad.

"You've come at last!

Welcome, friend!

You're nowhere as well off as here," I'd say.

I was so glad.

When night fell,
I'd drink and drink
until utterly intoxicated.

As I passed the new grave, I'd pass out and snooze.

Once, at dawn a centipede bit me.

For a whole week, one side of my face

Was aching and swollen
the size of a pumpkin.

Once, as a novice monk
on my way to nearby Mirae Temple in T'ongyong
I spent half a day in a cemetery.

I'd completely forgotten the errand I was on.

Later, the head monk would give me hell.

Decades have since floated by
And now I've finally realized:
animals don't make graves.

Thus animals are better than people,
since they leave behind no tomb.

Thus animals are better than God,
a hundred times better than me.

Is that why I used to be so fond of graves?

So I could realize that one thing?

Is that why I used to cry and cry?



Sorrow

In my native village, two baby fawns died,
shot in the same moment by hunters' arrows.
Their mother came galloping up,
circled the spot, out of her mind,
then fell down dead.
No arrow touched her,
she just fell down dead.

When that mother deer was cut open,
they found her twenty-yard-long gut
ripped apart
by the sorrow of losing her fawns.

In this world, everything that exists
must experience sorrow, it's true,
but can hers be called mere sorrow?
Real sorrow has always been heart-rending
Tonight, I'll bury my own little snack of sorrow
quietly in a hole in the ground.

Next year, or the year after,
fragrant mugwort might come sprouting
from the secretly buried sorrow,
but how could that
equal the death of the mother deer?

To bring birth and the beginning of a new
world with imperishable sorrow,
the crimson sun of dawning day
hastens far away.



In the House of Prabhutaratna

In notes to the Lotus Sutra it is reported that
Shakyamuni Buddha, after spending eighty
years traveling bare-footed throughout the
Ganges Valley,
left the earth, went up to heaven,
and visited Prabhutaratna Buddha
in his abode.

The two of them set up house together.
Prabhutaratna's face grew brighter than before
while the face of his guest Sakyamuni
also shone exceedingly bright.

The two got on well together.

Then a bodhisattva declared
Prabhutaratna was the Sakyamuni of the past
while Sakyamuni was the Prabhutaratna of this
present age, so the two became completely one.
The house of Prabhutaratna Buddha,
all this time ringing with talk,
grew very quiet.

Being one Buddha can be very boring, it seems.
So he went around sleeping with various stars,
one tonight, another tomorrow,
another the night after.

A penniless child down on earth
gazed up every night

at the stars roaming around the sky.

Translators' notes : Shakyamuni ("Sage from the Shakya Clan") is an epithet applied to Siddharta Gautama, also known as the Buddha ("Awakened"). According to some schools of Buddhism, there have been numerous other Buddhas throughout time, who've attained nirvana, ultimate enlightenment. One such ancient Buddha is known as Prabhutaratna ("Myriad Jewels"). While some schools teach that one who has attained nirvana ceases entirely to exist after physical death, the Buddhist scripture entitled The Lotus Sutra teaches that nirvana is not annihilation. As a sign of this, it tells that when Shakyamuni Buddha was preaching its contents, Prabhutaratna appeared in his abode to hear him. A bodhisattva is a person who is ready for or who has even attained enlightenment but has also vowed to help all beings become enlightened.

Drawing Maps

I was drawing maps again today.
I drew the North Sea between England
and Norway
and the shores of the Gulf of Pohai in
the East,
then I tore up all my maps. This was
not it, I felt.
This really wasn't it.
Just then
the wind spoke, knocking at my
window.
“Poor little guy. You should draw a
new world, not the usual modern
map.” Not only wind, but wind and
rain spoke together, knocking at my
window. Trying to ignore
my growling stomach, I started
drawing maps again.
Not like before,
but tomorrow's maps,
with no America...
no Asia ...

East Sea Lotus Flowers

A mighty babe arose
threw a stone
at the sky
beyond the hills
and the stone
that one stone
showered down
as an avalanche
for decades after.
One stone landed
in the East Sea at dawn
just in front of Naksan Temple
and blossomed
into so many dazzling bright
lotus flowers!
They still float there, dazzlingly bright.



Translators' notes: The East Sea lies between Korea and Japan. Naksan Temple rises on the edge of the sea, south of the city of Sokch'o. The sea in front of it is studded with rocks.

Brother Anthony of Taizé

Born in Truro, in Great Britain, Brother Anthony is one of the foremost living translators of contemporary Korean poetry, with over 26 titles to his credit. He is currently Emeritus Professor, Department of English Language and Literature at Sogang University, Seoul, where he has taught since 1980.

Young-moo Kim

(1944– 2001, Korea) was Professor at Seoul National University, and is well-known in Korea as a literary critic and poet. He published three volumes of poetry and together with Brother Anthony, he translated and published poems by many of the most respected and appreciated Korean poets of the 20th century, including Ko Un.

Gary Gach

Gary Gach is editor of *What Book!?!—Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop* (Parallax Press; American Book Award) and author of *Preparing the Ground: Poems 1960-1970* (Heirs, International) and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism* (Alpha Books). His poems and translations have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies.