

THE MIDDLE HOUR

SELECTED POEMS OF KIM CHI HA

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THE STORY OF A SOUND*

For some time now, in the heart of Seoul they have heard the strangest sound. Some people quake like aspen leaves and sweat freezing streams at this sound . . . A strange business; and stranger still, these are guys with money, the real big-load operators.

K'ung.

—There, that sound.

K'ung.

A canister of tear gas bursting?
No.

K'ung.

The war starting? An A-bomb exploding? A Hirohito fart? Nixon's cough?
No.

K'ung.

The Red Army salute guns greeting big-noses in T'ien-An-Men Square?
No? Then what?

K'ung.

There, do you hear it?

K'ung.

Does anyone know the story, where the sound of that *K'ung* came from?

K'ungung, K'ung.

Listen you people, and you shall hear the story of a sound.

It wasn't in Russia, China, Japan, or America either, but here in Korea,

the eastern part of Seoul,
where the dust swarms up in Ch'ongyangni,
and beyond it lie the coal-black fluids
of Chongnang Brook..

Jammed together down its banks,
the squatter shacks perch in bunches wherever they fit,
ratling this way, trembling that
in the slightest breeze blowing by.
Way in the back of the darkest corner
of the most ramshackle shack
lived Ando, up from the country
to find his fortune.

Ando worked like an ox,
but was timid as a mouse, simple
as a sheep—the harmless sort
who doesn't need laws to live right.
But some strange twist of fate,
some lousy inheritance from a previous life
made whatever he tried

go bad.

It might start well, but it wouldn't come out;
what looked good for a while just wouldn't turn out.

Get married?

How could he? He couldn't find a girl friend.

Buy a house?

Not a chance. He couldn't get the rent for a
whole room.

He couldn't find money for food, and if it looked
like he might get a job, well,
from this day to that day to the very next day
they kept putting him off till it went up in smoke.

"No backer? No go here."

"No school tie? Nothing doing."

"No deposit? No return."

"No soup? No dessert."

Without any money, and no one to help,
there wasn't a deal he could start.
The shake-down artists shook him,
the rake-off operators raked him,
till not a thing was left.

He could yell all he pleased—it was no use.
Or fling himself down in a rage—no help.
He could struggle, kick, open his eyes wide
and glare all around, or just close them,
resigned to his fate:

it made no difference,
it was all the same, and no good.

He began to think of hanging himself,
but couldn't find a rafter.

Gas wouldn't do—the windows were full of holes.

He couldn't slip away

on a mixture of poison and wine—

there was no money for a cup

and nothing else to use,

so no way, he had no way:

no way to rest, no way to put his feet
down on the ground and just stand.

Just once to have the guts

to stand up firm on his two feet

would have brought down a flood of accusations
for crimes never heard of before, never seen, never imagined.

So what else could he do? Spring summer fall winter,
day and night, rushing from place to place
what did he get? Not a dog's nose,
not a rat's ass, not a blackbird's belly.

He would rush to the front, then race to one side;
race to another side, and rush to the back,
stand on his hands,
drag himself drizzling shit.

If he earned ten *won*, a hundred was taken away;

earn a hundred, and lose a thousand.

Three-hundred and sixty-odd days, one after the other without a break, first this guy, then that one: guys with good connections, well-developed greed and guile, the ones with gangs of cronies: this one with "Official" stamped on his forehead, that one with "Junior-Grade" on the bridge of his nose,

three times three makes nine, the plate goes round and round;

the guy with "swindler" in his smiling eyes and nimble tongue; the one with "Fraud! Fraud!" flashing from his gold teeth

Tortured, chewed, battered and bit, kicked, bloodied, trampled into the ground; even the tiny bit of money he had hidden away under his clothes

for the journey back home was stripped away. He was squeezed flat, beaten shapeless as a bowl of mush, half dead, a walking corpse, and then what? All over again:

"Enemy agent! Commie Flag!

Boy buy me some noodles and I'll let you go."

"No! Give me the training instead."

"You can't!"

"Control yourself! Where is your haircut?

Pay for the ticket and beat it!"

"But I can't get a haircut; I don't have the money."

"You have to!"

"Unsanitary shack! Settle up for the flies and get out!"

"But I rent by the month."

"You can't!"

"Three un's and five no's! Three fives is fifteen, so you owe fifteen hundred!"

"But I haven't had a meal in five days!"

"No excuses!"

"Pay up in advance! Settle your taxes! Your fines! Your whatever is left!

Your security!"

"I'd rather jump in a cess pool and drown!"

"You're not allowed to die!"

Rice money, shit money, water money, fire money,
La da di da da;

Room money, clothes money, shoes money, medicine money;
money for pickles, money for soy sauce, money for
coal, de dum di di;

Add to this, add to this money

money for congratulations,

and add to this money

money for condolences,

and on top of this,

for contributions;

on top of this,

for the local officers,

on top of which,

the price of going back and forth,

on top of which

the money lender,

on top of whom,

way, way on top, this and that,

add it up, and add it up,

until every which way, from bottom to top

Ando was wrapped up tight.

What was he to do? What else could he do

but race around frantically trying to earn a rat tail's
worth?

Like a rabid dog in snow, or a tiger pup with its tail on fire
he raced round and round:

one foot up, the other down;

this one up, and that one down.

If he raised this foot, he put the other one down,

lower a foot and raise the other.

Veering this way, lurching that,

hop, hop; jump, jump,

at his frantic pace he sets out.

Chongno, Myongdong, Mugyodong, and Tadong: real estate, insurance, finance office, trader's; he was an errand boy, office boy, janitor, watchman. He went through each one once, then on to Tongdunp'o, Sihung, Mallidong, and Ulchiro: textile factory, iron-caster, sugar-mill, clothes maker; he was a factory hand, a furnace man, a dispatcher, whatever, racing around trying this and trying that.

Then Kupabal, Ch'angdong, Changanp'yong, and Kwach'on; puddling stew in It'aewon, radish leaves in Tamsimi.

At South Gate he sold pigs bellies, and puffer eggs at East Gate, hoop-sticks at Kwanghwamun, silk worm larvae in

Mugyodong.

At construction sites he was a dirt-carrier; on movie lots he was an extra; a delivery service go-fer.

Back and forth, right and left, helter skelter, in his frenzied race,

puffing and panting, north south east west, harried, exhausted, starving and sick, until crazed one evening as the sun was going down

he planted his two feet down on the ground, rolled his eyes back in his head and yelled

"Agh! What a dog's life this is!"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than *Clankety-clank*, heavy handcuffs were snapped on his wrists and Ando was dragged straight off to court.

Bang, Bang, Bang...

"State the charge."

"The crime, your honor, of standing on the ground with his two feet—
and spitting out groundless rumors."

"Oho! That's a big one!"

"The defendant, by standing on the ground and spitting out

groundless
rumors, your honor, is guilty of

the impertinent use of feet without proper authorization;
the upstart relaxation of the corporal being;
the crime of tranquilizing the mind without permit;
plotting to usurp and appropriate the fundamental human
qualitative

substance, in plain disregard of the defendant's own
wretched poverty;

the crime of wasting time in oafish cogitation;
perverse idleness;

the crime of harboring weak-willed thoughts of suicide;
being an idle bystander, as if he were some floating cloud;
looking up at the skies without shame;

tendentious expansion of the cranium;
the impudent trespass upon the special-class privilege of
standing comfortably;

the impertinent neglect of our national policies for
INCREASED PRODUCTION
OF GOODS FOR EXPORT WITHOUT A
MOMENT'S REST;

opposition to the THREE NO's, the FIVE UN's, SEVEN
DON'T's, and the NINE
ANTI-NEGATIVITIES;

the crime of thinking up GROUNDLESS RUMORS that
would BEWITCH THE PEOPLE
and CONFUSE THE WORLD;
the intent to pronounce said rumors;
the pronouncing of same;
the intent to propogate said rumors;
the propogation of same;

the crime of INSUFFICIENT VENERATION FOR
THE FATHERLAND;
DENIGRATION OF THE MOTHER TONGUE;
comparing the fatherland to an animal;
the crime of making it possible for other countries to conceive

of our fatherland as an animal,
thereby and in conjunction with DISTURBING THE
ENVIRONMENT FOR CAPITAL
INVESTMENT;

the crime of promoting social disorder and instigating unrest;
the crime of agitating the people;
the crimes of pessimism, being weary of life, other-
worldiness;
providing comfort to the enemy;
harboring anti-system thoughts, and advocating same;
the crime of supporting by empathetic means the
establishment of an
anti-state organization or network or group;
the crime of promoting the clarification of personal
self-esteem,
fostering in turn the development of spiritual and
ideological self-reliance which inevitably nurtures the
consciousness leading to anti-state riots;

in addition to which the defendant, for violating the
provisions of the special anti-anti-social manipulation
law, is hereby found guilty of all crimes as charged.
Therefore, in accordance with the law, it is the solemn
judgment of this court, that immediately upon
adjournment
one head be removed from the defendant
to prevent further thinking or pronouncing of such
groundless rumors;
two feet be cut off to forestall the
recurrence of inflammatory standing on the ground;
and to prevent the breeding of future
seditious types such as the defendant, that one
reproductive organ and two testicles be removed;

And finally and furthermore, whereas there is the clear
and present danger that defendant may resist, his two
hands are to be bound behind his back; he is to be

wrapped in one water-soaked leather straight-jacket;
and the opening of his throat is to be jammed shut with
a hard, thick, and long-lasting voice-blocking tool; after
which he is to be put in solitary confinement for five
hundred years."

Bang, Bang, Bang.

"No, you can't!"

Snipsnap.

"My thing's gone! Don't!"

Snipsnap, snipsnap.

My balls are gone! Stop! You can't! Don't!"

Crea-k, Clank.

"My neck, my neck! Where...?"

Rattle Wham!

"Oh no! My legs too, gone at a stroke!"

Then the arms are bound in back;

the leather jacket;

the voice-blocking tool shoved in tight...

And so, pitiless they threw poor Ando into the moss-grown,
dark and dreary cell.

Shua-Bang! The sound of the locks, echoing farther
and farther away down the tunnels of the prison...

No!

This can't be! It can't!

How can it be?

How can it?

*Starving, in rags, I worked nearly to death;
Beaten and yelled at, I didn't say a word.*

No chance to rest, to sleep, even to lie down.

Then why has this happened?

What awful crime

has brought this unbearable punishment?

Oh geese flying so high!

You know what is inside me.

Tell me: where the millet stalks

reach their long shadows

through the heavy sunlight

by the newly-built road,

is my mother still standing,

waiting for me?

Weeping silently,

in clothes worn far past

their season, does her gaze

reach out, time and again

toward Seoul?

Dear mother, I shall return home;

return, even though I die.

Though my dead body be torn

in a thousand, ten thousand pieces,

I shall return.

Through this wall,

over the next,

even as a spirit

I shall pierce and vault

these red brick walls.

I shall return, mother;

even in death, I shall return.

Ando would have cried out this song,

but what tears, what voice did he have?

Without tears or voice, deep within

each night he sang out his crimson, blood-red

No! No! NO!

Roll, then,

roll your body,

beating with it

K'ung.

Again, and yet again

he slammed into the wall:

K'ung.

K'ung, K'ung.

There were those who couldn't sleep at all when they heard
that sound rising up,

people with money, the ones who could really

blow the wind right by. They sent out their strict orders to

have that fellow executed, and yet

K'ung.

It's a strange business, how that sound seems to drive some
people mad.

K'ung K'ung:

You can hear it now, night and day, never
ceasing.

There are some who call it the work of a ghost;

others will tell you it is Ando, somewhere

still living,

and ceaselessly hurling himself against the walls.

They say this stealthily, whispering from ear to ear,
while a strange light flashes from their eyes.