

THE ORCHID DOOR ANCIENT KOREAN POEMS

Collected and done
into English verse by
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The Orchid Door Anon

The phrase "orchid door" is sometimes used as a term to describe the women's quarters. In the same sense we find "jade courtyard," "perfumed screen" and other fanciful phrases. It also occurs, however, in the scholarly writings where it is applied to delicate elusive thoughts, the entrance to the poet's Immortal Garden.

Stilled is the lute string after hours of song.
The fountain is a shower of rainbow spray,
Lit by the moon. Upon the littered floor
Guest after guest falls into drunken sleep.
Winecups are drained. The flickering lantern light
Glimmers above a weary dancing girl,
Shines through the amber pins that hold her hair,
Mocks at the peony bud which is her mouth,
The jasmine petals that enfold her eyes.

What are such joys to me ? I turn away.
Beyond the Fountain of Ten Thousand jewels
In fragrant shadow waits an orchid door.

Lament of The Ferryman's Wife Yaw-oh. (Date Uncertain)

This is credibly stated to be the oldest piece of Korean literature extant. It was discovered in a Chinese book called " Ko-tang-si." This record states that the song was made by a woman, Yaw-oh, wife of a ferryman, Chago. One day, when Chago was crossing the river, he saw a man swimming in the stream. At that moment the man's wife rushed wailing to the bank and tried to save him, but she was too late. The rapid current overcame him and he sank. The woman then set up a wild lamentation, jumped into the river and disappeared. Chago told his wife what he had seen. She was greatly distressed and made the following curious "Lament." In the original each line has its special measure of music and each measure is an expression of sorrow.

Grey willow trees that by the river sway,
Green reeds that whisper to the pebbled sand,
Will you not weep for her ?

Wind that blows through the forest day by day,
River that flows so swiftly to the sea,
Did you not hear her cry ?

Over the meadow, gay with iris flowers,
She sped; but, all in vain, she came too late.
Will you not weep, blue flowers ?

Yellow Birds King Yoori. (17 B.C.)

Yoori's queen was a Chinese lady from the kingdom of Han. She quarrelled with the secondary wife and finally left the court. Yoori followed and tried to persuade her to return with him. She refused and, broken-hearted, he turned homeward alone. In the course of his sorrowful journey he saw a pair of orioles on the branch of a tree.

In yellow sunlight on the golden road
I stand alone.
All, all are mine—rice fields and golden road,
All but the one thing I desire.
In a tree by the road two yellow birds are mating.
Why must they sing so gaily ?

In The Night Choi Choong. (Early 2nd Century A.D.)

The leading literary light of his period, Choi Choong is described as ". . . a man of commanding presence and uprightness of heart . . ." He was a teacher and a poet with an inclination towards the fantastic. The following was written as a song to be sung with harp and drum

Light of the silver torch that has no smoke
Recalls me from the seventh world of sleep.
A shadow pine tree grows upon my wall.
On the white paper of my window screen
A shadow hill by shadow brush is drawn.
All life is shadow in my room tonight.

 I know not if I wake or if I sleep –
Music breathes through the silence; can it be
Wind in the shadow pine tree, or a song
Drawn. from a hidden harp that has no string?

At The Eagle Record Pass

During the fifth century A.D. Prince Misahun of Silla was held hostage after a battle. His brother, King Noolchi, sent his faithful minister, Pak Chesang, to rescue Misahun. The mission was successful but Pak was captured by the enemy and tortured to death. His wife knew nothing of his journey until after his departure. She followed him as far as the Eagle Record Pass where, learning that he had already sailed, she was overtaken by despair and died of grief. A shrine stands at the top of the pass to commemorate her devotion. The following poem is sometimes attributed to her but more often to an anonymous poet who wrote it to honor her memory.

Alone upon the Eagle Pass I stand
And look through tears towards the empty sea.
Who first made ships to carry life away ?
Who made the waves? They foam ten thousand miles
Before night falls, but always they return
To touch the long moon-yellow sands of home.
There will be no returning for my lord.

Mist on the land where wild barbarians wait
To slay him; mist upon crowded peaks
Which stay the feet that sped to this farewell
And came too late and now will speed no more.
O soul, go forth from me; become a cloud;
And, with the grey mist, fly across the waves !
The wind blows down the pass. The eagles scream.
The yellow shades rise up to mock my tears.

Tea Ch'oi Ch'wun (867 A.D. - ?)

This poet has been named the Father of Korean Literature. At twelve years of age he was sent to the capital of the Tangs. At that time China was reaching the summit of her achievements. Ch'oi graduated with honors at the age of seventeen and became chief secretary to the Chinese General Ko-pyung. Ch'oi became widely known as a scholar and his works were included among the masterpieces of the Tangs. In 885 A.D. he returned to Korea and was appointed chief minister of state. No date is known of his death. It is stated that, when nearly a hundred years old, he disappeared into the hills and became one of the immortals. While away on a military mission General Ho-pyung sent him a gift of tea.

Tea is the flower of Soo. The budding leaves
Fill with their murmur every fragrant garden.
Here, while my golden kettle gently sings,
I brew your gift and slowly sip,
While perfumed steam ascends.
On such a cloud a poet's spirit soars.
Surely my soul will touch the clouded heights
And come again with sweet immortal songs
Or why should such a drink—the wine of gods—
Refresh a humble scholar like myself ?

There was a time when I would seek in sleep
The plum bloom's snow to quench my fevered thirst.

And often I have filled this dragon vase
With lilies—flowers of peace—to soothe my eyes.
But now—your gift of tea ! I need no more
To calm my spirit or refresh my dreams.

Slowly I sip and, in the rising steam,
Picture each hour of friendship we have known.
Accept my grateful thanks !

The River O-reuk. (6th Century A.D.)

Walking alone on the left bank of the river
I watched the heron seek her reedy nest.

Watching white clouds, like feathered jackets fall
Into the space between two mountain peaks,
Even my soul found respite from her cares.

Only the restless river hurried on,
Sweeping from grottoes of the mountain gorge
Down to the level rice fields of the plain,
Hurrying, hurrying ever to the ocean.

Why do you flow so swiftly, little river ?
You will be lost in the blue space of the ocean
And to your mountains there is no returning.

The Swallows Ch'oi Ch'wun

After the peach tree sheds her rosy bloom
I turn toward the south and watch for you.
Lightly you float before the gentle breeze,
Like blossoms from the garden of the moon.
Thus you return from far, enchanted lands
Where red-plumed birds that I would fear to name
Hover in dreadful swamps and dragons lurk.

Now, in our reedy shallows of the north
You seem content to join your quieter friends—
White herons and the ibis of the stream.
Sweet is the hour of sunrise when I wake
To hear you chattering below my eaves.

Sweet is the noon. I sit with pipe and fan
And watch your wings against the deep blue sky,
Flicker like silver flames.

We are old friends.

Spring after spring I wait for your return.
Autumn by autumn, when the chill winds blow,
My eyes grow dim as you fly south again.

I am delighted that you share my roof
And build your nest below these painted eaves.
I only wish you would not soil my rafters !

I am ashamed for you—ill mannered birds !

Thoughts After an Audience With The King Kim Pok Sik. (1075-1151 A.D.)

The earliest historian of Korea, he was author of the "Sam-gook Sa" or History of the Three Kingdoms (1145 A.D.). He was also a fine soldier. His height is recorded as seven feet. In the year 1134 A.D. a rebellion broke out. Kim was appointed general of the forces sent to suppress it. A grand audience was held at the palace on the day before he left. The King gave him a battle axe and other insignia.

Moonlight and peace upon the river bank !
After an audience at the Dragon Throne
How kind to me this gentle silence seems !

After gay silken robes and waving fans
How restful is the stately tapestry
Of willow boughs against the rising moon !

After the splendors of the painted roof
How soft I find the dim blue distances
Unfolded from the gauze veils of the moon !

Peak upon peak, blue tinted hills of dream
Arise to break the far horizon line.
There would my soul fly, greatly needing rest.

Yet here is much of beauty, much delight.
Remain awhile, my soul. The river sings,
Sweeping below the wall on which I lean.

I am disquieted by the heavy task
That lies before me.

In the Willow Inn
Beside the river I will rest tonight.

I'll drink a little wine and soon forget
These troublous thoughts.

More brightly shines the moon.
The King has given me a battle axe.

Under the willows on the river bank
A midnight angler swings his bamboo pole.
His is a tranquil spirit, well content.

He is like Too Mok-joo who, long ago,
Came, before death, to leisure and to peace.

I, too, would know such tranquil ways and yet-

Why have I promised to direct an army ?

A fishing pole, trees, wine below the moon
Are all I really ask for.

Am I drunk ?

Meditating on The Start of a New Era Yo Inlo. (Date Uncertain Probably 11th Century)

My candle burns a flame of jade.
The peachwood comb goes through my hair
This way and that. My head is clean.
The old dead hairs fall to the ground.
I build my topknot fresh and firm.

Would that we so might comb the State
Free of her follies and her greed !
So cast aside old dead ideas
And build new strength to face our foes !

Too soon my candle gutters down.
The flame of jade is lost in grease,
And sleep drowns my desires.

A Meeting of Friends in The Mountains Kwak Yu. (12th Century A.D.)

In the story of Kwak Yu and Yi Chah Yun we find another example of fine, scholarly friendship. They studied together for the Kwagu, both attained high honors and were both given high positions at court. Yi Chah Yun, however, early laid aside his court robes and donned a hermit's coarse garments, preferring a life of solitary meditation. Kwak Yu continued in the path of official preferment, The friendship survived even this test. The following poem and the one by Yi Chah Yun on page 46 were written to celebrate a meeting of the friends

Among the mountains after thirty years
We meet again who in our youth were one.

We toiled together then by candlelight
Until the Horn grew pale, the Willow grey.

But lengthening suns have drawn us far apart.
You turned your eyes away from orchid doors. 1)
The grove of brushes called to you in vain.
Only the blue crane and the silver cloud, 2)
Ever receding, ever drew you on.
Sunset and dawn have been your red brocades,
Moonlight your wine, poured firm a lapis bowl.

Now, with my feet upon the bridge of jade,
I pause, I falter, speechless gaze at you.
How may our spirits meet ?

- 1) Used here in the vulgar sense, meaning "women's quarters."
- 2) Spiritual metaphor: prayer, meditation, enlightenment.

Kwak Yu Received at The Hermit's Retreat Yi Chah Yun (12th Century A.D.)

Last night, the autumn moon—departing wings.
Today, your visit and returning summer.

Every day since our parting I have thought of you.
At night I ask the moon to peer through your window
That, when she returns to this mountain,
She may bring me news of my friend.

But the moon is always silent.

Often I wonder whether you, too, remember
When you see blue flowers lying aslant the moon. (1
Reading the ancient books you must have marked
How many sought the cloud-enfolded path.
Sookje, Paiki, name after name, they shine
Like crystal beads threaded on silken cord.

Often, when I thought of you, I wondered
How soon you would weary of your stamp and seal.

Take off your wide-winged hat. Set free your hair.
The wind will blow the world dust from your mind.
Rest here in peace upon this rocky bed.
Though pine trees whisper they are never plotting.
The watchful stars are never seeking evil.
The clouds' soft garment does not hide a knife.

We shared our springtime. Passing winter together,
Beyond the snow line, we shall reach the Immortal Garden.

1) "blue flowers lying aslant the moon" This refers to a favorite Chinese saying, "Pawlonia flowers aslant the moon remind one of an absent friend."

Yi Kyu Bo. (1168—1241 A.D.)

Yi Kyu Bo was undoubtedly one of Korea's greatest men. Philosopher, statesman, poet, humorist, he came to be recognized even during his lifetime as the finest scholar that his country had produced up to that time. His early life was a prolonged battle with poverty and he nearly starved himself in order to reach the point in his studies which would enable him to progress along the course he had marked out for himself. Right from his earliest years, however, his mind seems to have held such absolute control over his body that physical deprivations were powerless to injure him. One record states that "the freedom of his written speech made him many enemies. He was too straight-forward for his generation and this stood in the way to block his upward course." Despite this he went steadily and fearlessly ahead, passed his Kwagu, obtained a position at court, endured a year's exile but was recalled, and finally became Prime Minister and Chief of the Official Examiners. This record of material advancement is less interesting than the spiritual development of the man's nature. Here a steady flame burned. Music and poetry were his real life. On these he seems to have subsisted, drawing therefrom mystical strength and peace which nothing could disturb. From such a fortress of the soul did Yi Kyu Bo look out upon his world with kindly humorous eyes. Alert, active, liberal in his views of men, he has left behind him a matchless commentary upon his times. His poetry is absolutely individual, untouched by the influence of any other writer, and it ranges over an astonishing variety of subjects.

Cockcrow Yi Kyu Bo.

The cock crows in his thatched house by the river.
I know that dawn draws near.

The moon grows pale.

Black are the ripples passing, one by one,
Like shadows through the white bridge of the moon.

The dawn breeze wakes where drooping willows sway.
Out of the silence comes a distant song,
Nearer and nearer,
The midnight fishermen are going home.
White are their garments as the white reed flowers,
One with white moonbeams.

Are they ghosts or men ?

I cannot tell. Their singing dies away,

On The Death of His Little Daughter Yi Kyu Bo.

My little girl with face like shining snow—
How empty now the silent courtyards seem
Where once her gay skirt flashed among the flowers !

At two she talked like some wise parrot's tongue.
At three, retiring, sweet and very shy,
She hid herself behind the outer gate.

This year, being four, her tiny hand should hold
Her first small brush. I would have taught her well.
But she is gone. Only the brush remains.

My little pigeon of this troubled nest,
Why did you fly away so very soon ?
A flash of light—you came. A flash—you fled.

I, who have learned to watch the passing days,
Can count them calmly still. But who shall dry
A mother's falling tears ?

Across the fields

A raging storm draws near.

The ripening grain
Will fall before the howling wind tonight.
Of all we sow how little do we reap !

Morning Thoughts Yi Kyu Bo.

Sunbeam with sunbeam chases mist away
From mountain tops at dawn.

Grey crags now gleam like gold above the sea,
Forgetful of the clouds that covered them,
Hiding, last night, the lustre of the moon.

Would that I so might chase away the dreams
Which held me all night long and still pursue
My spirit through the day !

Departure Yi Kyu Bo.

On the last day of the third moon the poet makes a fantasy upon the departure of the god of spring.

The falling petals of the Flower Pavilion
Fashion his perfumed bed.

There, through the last watch of the moon he rests.

Into his sleep a purple wineflower drips
The fragrance of her dew.

Laughing he wakes. Drunken with blossom breath
He wanders through the garden, seeking love.

Whom will he take to share his ecstasy ?
The peach ? Her wanton gifts have wearied him.
The mountain apricot ? Too harsh her tone.

But the silk skirts of the peony shimmer like tinted moths.
Her scarlet petals tremble. She falters forth his name.
Even in the Western Garden he would find no fairer flower.

Swiftly the last watch of the moon goes down
And flames of morning leap from hill to hill.

Retreating steps— At dawn an empty courtyard,
Departing echoes of his cavalcade.
Peony petals fall in the Flower Pavilion.
There is a sound of tears.

The Pine Tree Picture Screen Yi Kyu Bo.

Studying a painting by the artist monk Sol-go.

He built this hermit house amid the pines
And here he lived his life, alone with trees.
Each breath he drew was fragrant with their breath.
He understood their speech. Their silences
Brought him the wisdom that the sages sought.
His ears were opened to the sound that dwells
Beyond the rim of silence.

Thus he heard

Music which has no voice for lesser men.
His eyes perceived forms beyond creature forms.

Day after day I sit and gaze until,
Drunken with beauty, wonder seizes me
That ink and brush could ever bring such life,
Repeating through ten thousand silences,
The hidden things this master learned from trees.

How dark these hills! How dim that lonely shore
Where serpents slowly move towards the tide
That, swinging back, has left them stripped and bare.
Terrible monsters rest their bony forms
Against the crags, their heads against the sky,
Mysterious faces flicker through the trees
As daylight changes in this silent room
And night brings shadows to the pictured hills.
Among those awful rocks a dragon wails,
Will he come forth, with moonlight, from the trees ?

His Shadow in The Water Yi Kyu Bo.

The Buddhistic trend of thought which appears in the following is traceable to the fact that, although a Confucianist, Yi Kyp Bo had many Buddhist friends. He was at all times deeply interested in their teaching and sympathetic towards their philosophy.

Walking beside the river
I watch my shadow dance
From ripple to ripple in wild contortionings.
I think of So Tongpa by the Yungsoo Pool.
What did he see ?
Only a windblown shadow ?
Two hundred eyebrows and one hundred beards ?

Or did he gaze until, beneath his shadow,
He found the wisdom I am always seeking ?

Looking Into The Well

Living alone, who cares to use a mirror ?
I had forgotten how my face was fashioned.
Now, gazing in the well, I heave a sign
For one half recognised –
Can this be I ?

Remembering The South Oo T'ak. (1262-1342 A.D.)

One year I spent there in my distant youth.
Now, growing old, my faltering brush recalls
The brimming wells and forests of the south;
The green mist of the willow tree that falls
On mirror pools where feathered grasses wave
Above the shallow river's yellow sand,
And still white clouds the smooth blue water pave
With blocks of marble made in fairyland.

Soft is the southern rain, a silver wing
Brushing the ivy on a painted wall.
Softly the voices in the rice field sing,
Till from the dusk brocaded curtains fall
To part before a moon of ivory.
Along the river like a shadow craft,
Made from the green mist of a willow tree,
Drifts slowly to the shore a woodman's raft.

China's Snow Yi Che-hyun. (1287-1367 A.D.)

Dr. James S. Gale describes Yi Che-hyun as "one of the greatest writers and statesmen that Korea has ever known." He was a faithful servant of the demented King Choong-sung who seems to have spent most of his reign hanging about the Mongol court at Sang-to till he eventually abdicated in favor of his son. Choong-sung was then exiled to Thibet where he spent four years. Yi Che-hyun went with his king into exile. The following poem was written during the long journey of seven months' duration through China to Thibet.

Wind and snow, sweeping across the moorland,
Fling their ghost shadows over hill and river.
Folded in those far clouds the heaped snow waits.
"How soon to fall ?" we ask in anxious thought,
"Where lies the inn beyond this blinding gale ?"

All round me now the ground is smooth and white
As though the Silver River earthward streamed
In glittering cascades, or as though the hills,
Crushed by the storm, had fallen on the field.
How many colors whirling flakes reveal !
The fitful sun turns them to phoenix birds.
My pony slips upon the icy road.
My woollen robe grows heavy with the snow.
Huddled inside my cloak I strive to think
Of Yang-yang on his donkey in the storm.
Lost in these mountains, lacking any food,
He fed rich verses to his hungry stomach !

The Three Horned Peaks Yi Chon-o. (14th Century)

From the door of my house I count three mountain peaks.
The long road thither is the road of my desire.
Often at dusk their voices call my name
And love flows down to me from those far heights.
Often I cannot see them, for their form
Is veiled in mist and I am almost blind.

Yet the Lotus on their summit—that I always see.

Lament For His Master Yi Soong-in. (14th century)

My heart is full of sorrow, for the sound
Of crickets chirping gaily in the rain
Is like his laughter coming back again.

My eyes are full of sorrow, for the dawn—
A crimson tapestry on hills of jade—
Is like his robe of red and green brocade.

My house is full of sorrow, for the sound
Of all the voices in the courtyard seem
To mock his voice that now is but a dream,

Bat wings flicker in the moon's last watch,
The ancient trees are still,
Waiting for dawn. that comes within an hour.
So through my still heart flicker thoughts of you,
But *I* shall wait perhaps a thousand years !

Remembering His Friend Yi Soong-in. (14th Century)

Empty the courtyard where we paced together,
Counting the yellow blossoms in the spring.
Here, where we used to talk of ancient sages,
Your poem flaps upon the mouldered wall. 1)
The wind has torn it and the rain has beaten
Through tattered screens upon the words you wrote.
Yet still I trace your brush strokes and remember
Your "Autumn Song," the tears with which you wrote.

1) A poetry scroll, hung on the wall.

Autumn Song

Leaves of autumn hurrying through the courtyard—
Last year the patter of dancing footsteps.
This year the sound of falling tears,

Deep red maples mirrored in still, deep water—
Last year the heart of a happy poet.
This year, the blood of a warrior slain.

To-Wun (The Peach Garden) Chin Wha. (Circa. 1300 A.D.)

When the Emperor Chin si built the Great wall of China thousands of his subjects were forced into the labor. To avoid this many of them fled to Korea and established a community so happy that they did not wish intruders to enter and mar their peace. They planted a hedge of peach trees to keep out strangers. The place was named To-wun. From this the term "Peach Garden" came to be applied to any specially delectable spot and later became entangled in the legend of the Garden of the Western Queen Mother where immortals dwell. Many centuries later Chin Wha, a man of deep learning but pessimistic temperament, turned from the disorder of his own day to look back to the peace of To-wun. Chin Wlta's dreams frequently led him into the realm of fantasy. He also had a somewhat dry turn of humor.

Wild peach trees are the walls. The frail sweet sound
Of tossing petals shuts the world away.
Streams that reflect the sunrise flash their light
Across the dawn. Stars amid blossom trees
Are all the lanterns midnight ever knows.

Dogs bark at flaring clouds and chase the wind.
Men walk together there and sing the songs
We sang before our sacred books were burned.
They only count the passing of the clouds,
The changing of the season on the grass,
The falling petal and unfolding leaf.
They seek no further joy and know not tears.

Sometimes one comes from far, a wanderer
Through tangled grass and thorny wilderness
To taste the golden peaches. All too soon
The path is lost.

Recaptured by the world,

Forever after such a wanderer strays
Through market place and courtyard all alone, (1
Seeking an unattainable desire,
Scanning in vain the smoky eastern sky
Where flowers of heaven bloom beyond the world.

1) Chin Wha is obviously referring to the idea that one who has glimpsed immortality can never again be wholly satisfied with the material world. It seems here as if the poet is playing with the legendary conception of the Peach Garden.

In Kang-Nam Chin Wha.

Many inhabitants of To-wun were natives of Kang-nam. The following is a species of catch song which Chin Wha puts into the mouth of an old man of the Peach Garden. He is telling of the days of his youth "before King Chin si's harsh reign."

In far Kang-nam a thousand gardens bloom
With red hibiscus and pomegranate flowers.
Like stars embroidered on a silken loom
The jasmine blossoms fall in perfumed showers
Over the shining gardens of Kang-nam.

And I remember gateways of bamboo,
Yellow as mountain honey. Wise men said
The pigeons loved such gates. They always flew
More slowly there, with restful wings outspread
Above the yellow gateways of Kang-nam.

Yet even in Kang-nam, the taxes grow
A little heavier with the passing years.
Along each street the tax collectors go
Beating the doors with thongs, collecting—tears
And spittle from the merchants of Kang-nam.

How beautiful a place Kang-nam would be
If taxes were not there to trouble men !
In fact the thought has often come to me
That all the world might be a garden then,
Lovely as any garden in Kang-nam !

The Palace of The Moon Chin Wha.

A windblown mist goes floating down the sky
And high above the forest swings the moon.
Between white clouds the Silver River flows,
Lapping soft ripples to the crystal doors
Which screen the Wide-Cool Palace from the world.

My spirit listens and my yearning eyes
Strain to discover things they may not see.

Go forth, my soul, and learn the fluted songs
Of those who pipe across the midnight sky,
Who ride from cloud to cloud on phoenix wings
And revel in the Palace of the Moon.
The gems that tinkle in their flowing robes
Are dewdrops shot with light from falling stars.
Ten thousand years ago they drank the wine
Of youth. It made them drunk with too much joy
And, being drunken, they forgot to die.

What are they singing ? O that I might hear
One fluted note or catch one perfumed breath !
They toss their flowers across the bridge that spans
The Silver Stream. They light the Herdsman's path.

Can I not gather even one lost bloom,
One pale green gem torn from a silken robe ?

The Book of Blue Jade Yi Saik. (1328-1395)

Though an orthodox Confucian, his finest poems deal with the teachings of Taoism. The following example illustrates the Korean attitude towards the world of immortals "beyond the Pong-nai Hills."

Across the dusty market place One came
With mountain herbs to sell and gourds of wine.
He raised his hand toward the Pong-nai Hills
And sang to me—

"Why do you linger here ?

Why do you tend the fires of greed for gain ?
Quench them forever and set forth with me.
Shall I not teach you from the Blue Jade Book ? 1)
Drink but one goblet of the Moonlight Gem 2)
And, in the perfumed vapor of such wine,
This earth will vanish like a lustful dream.
Then you will climb the dawn heights of Taisan
Until the ocean seems a rounded disc
Far, far below. Your eyes will learn to read
Footprints of days that now you think are lost.
Then you will learn that nothing comes or goes
Excepting dreams which vanish into dreams.
You will be as the changeless pine that stands
Untouched by time upon the river brink.

But they who linger in the market place
Are but as reeds that fade when summer goes."

- 1) The " Chung-ok-kyul," or Book of Blue Jade, contained the secret of immortality.
- 2) Moonlight Gem was an elixir of life.

To a Dead Buddhist Friend Kim Koo Yong. (1338-1384 A.D.)

You have gone far away
Beyond the clouded peaks we sought to climb.
We find no footprints on the dusty road
To tell if east or west our master went.

You have gone far away.
The bamboo grove sings in the silver dusk
The songs you sang. The new moon's shining bow
Looks through the pine grove, seeking you in vain.

You have gone far away.
With steady staff you climbed the upward road.
Beside one stream you paused to rest awhile.
Then blinding mists swept down and you were gone.

When shall I follow you ?
Not till I turn my lingering glance away
From bamboo thicket and from sickle moon
And lose myself among the formless clouds.

The Neglected Wife Yi Tai--Ch'oong. (Circa 1385 A.D.)

One moon of joy I knew,
And in the waning radiance of that moon
I gave you a folding fan.

Your love was lighter than the fragrant wind
Stirred by these sticks of carven sandalwood.

The moon sank down behind the city wall.
How bitter was the wine we drank at dawn

Soon came the whisper of a silken skirt.
Soon came the perfume of a jasmine flower.
Swiftly for you there rose another moon.

Your new wife's face is like a jasmine petal
And like a fallen petal it will fade
After the moon goes down.

I think you do not know how cruel you are,
But why was your parting gift to me
Another folding fan ?

Thoughts in a Country Retreat Pyun Ke-ryang. (Circa. 1400 A.D.)

A favoured friend of the monarch and for twenty years head of the Confucian College. He was a man of deep learning and great piety but his excessive stinginess made him a laughing stock for all the wags of his day. In the "Lighted Bramble" record it is told of Pyun Ke-ryang: " Even in the case of the pumpkins that he had cut up he counted every slice Zest anything should be missing. He took note of the glasses of wine, as well and had the bottles recorded. Guests, seeing his stingy manner, would often get up and leave his table."

Quiet is this village folded below the mountain.
Softly the shadows fall on fresh-turned furrows.
Down by the stream I wander, gathering simples
While my books are spread to dry in the bleaching sun.

Under the sky's deep vault the wild geese wheel.

The blue wing shadow of the mountain darkens.
Across the twilight booms a bell's rich note.

Now through the bamboo thicket moonbeams quiver.

What endless thoughts awaken from the night !
With longing eyes that bridge a thousand miles,
I look toward Seoul, to you—my friend of friends,
And write this little song of fleeting thoughts.

To My Master, Kang Heu-In Sung Kan.

I gazed all day uppn my master's painting.
I read his poems far into the night.
Just before dawn my eyes perceived this truth—

 A poem is a picture turned to song.
 A picture is a poem whence the words
 Have taken life and fled into the clouds.
How shall succeeding ages name my master—
Artist or poet ? From the clear, still depths
Of his great mind such sparkling treasures pour—
Poems and pictures like the tinted spray
Cascading from a grottoed mountain pool.

Today he lifts his brush. One swift sure stroke,
One breathless gesture, disciplined, austere—
Then, from his hand, a sunlit river flows,
Gaunt rocks arise, green banks and acient trees
That sweep the water with their twisted boughs.

Gazing all day on pictures such as these
I think the Master Chong No has returned,
That you, my lord, were he in days gone by.
A thousand poems sing within my mind.

But colors fade with age. Rich tones grow dull
When touched by rain or smoke of charcoal fires.
It may be that, at last, your fame will live
In poems which are pictures turned to song.
Age cannot dim the fire of jewelled words
Nor steal the scent of breezes that will blow
Down through the weary ages from your soul.

The Grave of So-Koon Sung Kan. (1427-1456 A.D.)

Korean poets set Wang So-Koon beside the Lady Yang in the tragic and romantic quality of their histories. She is described as "beautiful as the dawn and graceful as a willow." During the reign of the Emperor Wunie (48-32, B.C.) the Turk Hyoong-no demanded the gift of a beautiful woman in exchange for promises of peace. His ravages had already been so terrible that the Emperor capitulated and ordered that portraits of court ladies should be painted so that he might make a selection. A Minister, Mo Yun-soo, seized the opportunity to extort money from the women, who gave him rich rewards to have their faces painted beautiful. Wang So-Koon refused to pay and, in revenge, Mo had her painted with defects and irregularities of feature. The Emperor therefore picked her as the one to be sent to the Turk. When he saw how beautiful she was he realised the cruel trick which had been played and was beside himself with rage and grief, but could not break his word. So-Koon had to mount her camel and ride away across the desert with the Turk. She did not go far, however, for when they reached the River of the Black Dragon she plunged into the water and ended her sorrow. A high mound on the bank marks her grave. It is known as the "Verdant Tomb."

Riding towards the north,
Watched through the darkness by the desert stars,
I think of her who, desolate, alone,
Halted her camel here.

Like flowers below the moon
The beauty of all other maidens seemed
To one who looked a moment on let fee.

Yet under these cold stars she came to die
Here, where I draw my rein, remembering her.

White Banners Sung Sam-moon. (Circa 1420 A.D.)

Sung Sam-moon was one of three men prominently connected with the making of King Se-jong's alphabet. When Tang-jong, Se-jong's grandson, came to the throne a rebellion broke out. Se-jo, uncle of the young king, seized the kingdom and eventually strangled his nephew. Sung Sam-moon, a fine scholar and a loyal subject, suffered martyrdom in the cause of Tang-jong.

Throughout his life Sung Sam-moon made a practice of writing down his thoughts in poetic form. He wrote his last poem as he rode out of the city in the death cart on his way to execution. The title of this poem alludes to the long white streamers or banners which always decorate an execution cart. The name of the condemned man is painted on these banners in black characters.

The long white banners flutter on the breeze.
Drums roll and boom to speed my life away.
Here, there and everywhere are grinning lips
And mocking eyes.

I watch the sinking sun.
Where shall I rest when all my pain is ended ?
There are no inns within the Yellow Shades—
Where I shall sleep tonight no man can tell.

Thinking of Yi Chahyun in The Pyungsan Hills Yi Whang. (Circa 1549 A.,D.)

Head of the Confucian College and the greatest master of his day, he was familiarly known to his followers as Master To-ike. He was one of the wisest counsellors who ever helped to rule Korea. He survived the Moo-o Sa-Wha but many of his best friends were killed and the shadow of this tragedy tinged all his later poetry. The chief inspiration of his life seems to have been found in Yi Chah Yun, the hermit poet of the 12th century. Yi Whang spent years studying this man's works and once made a pilgrimage into the Pyungsan Hills to visit the hermit's cave.

Grey mountains crowd against the evening sky.
The river swings away toward the west.
I follow on and on, with beating heart,
For every step of this steep road he trod.
Here, in the Pyungsan Hills the master dwelt,
Ploughing alone the field that gave him food.

Dreaming of such a sage the ages fade.
just as that rising moon fills all the sky
With radiant light, so his great soul remains
Forever radiant and forever one
With mountain peaks that only seek the clouds.
They loved him. Still they echo his great thought,
Still hold the boundless peace that is his soul.
Their silence was the splendor that he knew.
For him the wrangling glory of our world
Was but a cobweb swept before the eyes.

Meditation in The Chiri Hills Chung Yu-Chang. (1450-1540 A.D.)

He studied the So-hak for thirty years, saying, "When I live up to what I have learned in it, I shall pass on to something else." He was deeply devoted to his mother and when she died, spent three years by her grave. During this time he meditated on the teaching of the sages and on her great piety. The world considered Chung Yu-Chang an unfriendly creature, but he had a deep love for Chum-pil-chai, another noted scholar. Between the two men existed one of those unique friendships of the pen already mentioned. Chung Yu-Chang attained to such complete mastery of his body that neither heat, cold, hunger, thirst nor pain had power to disturb him. He spent many years alone in the Chiri Hills where he built a hut and learned to understand the language of the rush reeds and of the bamboos which he grew.

The rush rods flutter in the dying wind.
They whisper softly to me through the dusk.
Through them I watch the setting sun go down.
Above them now the rising yellow moon
Pours her soft light. Between their pointed spears
She weaves a silver veil of river mist.

The rush rods flutter gently by my door.
The ripening barley whispers. All is peace.
The hills of Chiri hide me from the world.
Between them, slowly floating down the stream,
Alone I row my boat into the night.

Meditation on a Summer Evening Yi Whang.

I do forget so soon. Even tonight
My misted mind will turn and grope again,
Seeking some truth which sparkled for an hour
And then was lost. I gather up my books
And place them, one by one, within the chest.
The sun goes down. Long shadows dim my room
And shadows bridge the waters of the stream
That ripples softly past the outer court.

Sun-warmed and fragrant pine trees scent the breeze.
Pale clouds are one with distant mountain peaks.
Pungent the scent of smoke that slowly curls
Like pale blue feathers from the evening fire.
Heavy the millet hangs with ripening grain.
Soon will come reaping days and harvest joy
With sound of beating flails and singing lads.

Slowly between the trees, on lazy wing,
The gaunt crow homeward flies. The lovely crane
Stands out, a clear cut picture, by the stream.

How beautiful, how very kind this hour
Of gentle dusk and slowly deepening dreams
Only, for me, the silences are filled
With broken memories. And there are tears
Which must not fall. They hover like a cloud
Always between me and the setting sun.
Yet I am silent. Words were never made
To tell such grief as mine. I touch my harp.
String after string calls through the silent night.

While Traveling as Envoy to China Yi Chung-kwi. (1564 - ?)

See Introduction (page 26), Dr. James S. Gale gives the following notes on this poet: " Not only was he a man of great literary attainments but he was also a master of the state." "His collected works number twenty-two volumes done from wooden plates and marked with his pen-name of I Wulsa I (Moonlit Sands)."

Peaceful this inn upon the river's brink
Where pale green willows trail above the reeds.
Here clouds of blossom break the soft blue haze
Of morning skies.

 And here the evening falls,
A silken banner from the mountain walls.

Long days of travel line my weary face.
Yet have I known no hour of calmer rest
Than this.

 My thoughts are like the willow boughs,
Waved to and fro upon the rippling stream.
My rhymes are ripples, breaking from a dream.

The Flowery Rock Pavilion Yi-I. (16th Century)

Yi-I, or to give his popular name, Yool-kok, was Korea's great saint. Dr. James S. Gale says of him " . . . his name outshines all others. He was a pupil of Yi-Whang. He spent one year studying Buddhism at the Chung-yang Temple in the Diamond Mountains. Finding no satisfaction in this he returned to Confucian teachings." He held many official positions and seems to have carried on his shoulders the burden of his country's woes. He eventually withdrew into the mountains to lead a life of meditation. The "Flowery Rock Pavilion" was a name given to a favorite mountain retreat where poets frequently foregathered to admire the autumn tints of the maple trees.

The red leaves on the maple trees are still
As crimson gowns that droop when dancers rest
After the last clear flute note dies away.
Tonight there are no dancers on the hills.
Green leaves, gold leaves and red, how still they hang !
Silent the reeds and grass that yesterday
Whispered around the rice fields' marshy rim.
Tonight the woods are sleeping. Well they know
Who walks from path to path, who goes unseen
With robes that, trailing lightly on the grass,
Shed from each fold a filmy veil of rime.
His breath, like blue smoke, lingers on the air,
Sweet, bitter, clean, the first faint breath of frost.
The lonely moon looks down on lonely hills.
Sadly above the marshes wild geese cry.

Thinking of His Country's Woes Yi-I.

Three moons have faded since I told my soul
This sorrow cannot see another moon.
But spring came and the withered grass was green,
Came yellow violets and a later moon.
The great rains fell. The mountain torrents roared.
Then, in the hush that follows after rain,
Green frogs sang shrilly in my garden well.
But, still, tears fall.

An Artist Paints a Picture of Purple Orchids Anon

Just after sunrise I gathered purple orchids.
I painted them all day long,
Striving to make a picture for my friend.
But not for one moment could I catch the breath of their beauty.
Never once did they blossom from my brush.

Now, before sunset, it seems that even their fragrance
Is lost to me. The purple petals droop
In the heat of this shuttered room.

I open my door. I turn to the Eastern Garden.
Out of the locust tree comes a butterfly.
He whirls and dips above the vase of orchids.
Drunken with perfume he reels from bloom to bloom.

I, who have striven so hard to hold their fragrance,
Shall I lose it to one who sips and flies away ?

A Fishing Song Han Chong-Yoo. (Date Uncertain)

Beyond the fact that he held high office at court no information is forthcoming as to the life of Han Chong- Yoo, and his literary work seems to have been but slight. The following song, however, gives such a good picture of a staid official off duty that it has seemed worth while to include it.

The light showers whisper on the river plain.
Beyond the reeds I hear a fluted note
From One who plays alone in falling rain.

Grave, as before my king on council day,
In black head band and yellow hempen coat,
I watch for fish that do not come my way.

Who cares! The soft spring breezes touch my cheek.
They bring me perfume from ten thousand flowers.
The sun goes down behind the mountain peak.

The moon, who spreads her wing on upward flight,
Bids me turn homeward. Sweet are wasted hours!
The flute's note follows through the gathering night.

A Flower of The Hills Hyang-nang. (Date Uncertain)

Hyang-nang was the daughter of a farmer in the Sanghyung Valley. She had a beautiful nature and was especially observant of the rules governing duty toward parents. Yet she was hated by her stepmother, by her overbearing husband, and by her nagging mother-in-law who finally drove her to suicide. Hyang-nang went alone to a rock above the river. There she wrote the following poem which, with her cloak and skirt, she gave to an old woman who was gathering wood. Her shoes were found on the bank of the river.

High, high is the sky above my head.
Broad, broad is the earth; deep blue the sea.
In all the meadows happy wild flowers spread
Their tinted smiles. Yet not one smile for me.

Beneath this rocky pool there will be rest.
Among the waterweeds there will be room
Even for me. Above my weary breast
The little silver fish will build my tomb.

Inscribed on The Gate of Honor to Hyang-Nang Anon.

In the year 1690 A.D. a report of Hyang-Nang's tragic death was made to the king by the magistrate of the district. A gate of honor was then erected to her memory. The master scholar of the period was ordered to inscribe a verse thereon.

Only the gentle breezes of the spring
Caress her little pair of lonely shoes.
Where are you now, O sad and fragrant flower?
It is too late to make a song for you.
Not all the singing of a hundred years
Could bear away the loneliness you knew
In one uncounted hour of falling tears!

Thinking of Lady Yang at Midnight Anon.

The two poems which follow are both written around the person of Lady Yang or Yang Kwi-Pi (Exalted Princess Yang). She was one of the famous and fatal women of history who has dazzled succeeding ages. The Lady Yang was a concubine of the eighteenth son of Emperor Hyun-jong of the Tangs. When the Emperor's chief mistress died he took the Lady Yang from his son and made her his leading princess. For eleven years all China was mesmerized by her charm. Her family battered on the Emperor's adoration. The country groaned under taxes which were imposed to provide the wild luxuries of her brilliant court. Finally a revolt broke out. The Emperor fled from the capital, taking Lady Yang with him, but when they reached the Horse Pass the soldiers of the Imperial Escort rebelled and demanded the favorite's immediate execution. Hyun-jong was forced to give her up and, in agony of spirit, he saw her led out to die. A eunuch dragged her to a wayside shrine where he throttled her with a rope. Her body was wrapped in purple hangings from the Imperial coach and thrown into a hole by the wayside.

It is probable that the legends woven around her have exaggerated her charms, for here and there one catches glimpses of very unpleasing facts. Waley states that "she was fat, wore false side-locks and an outrageous yellow skirt, was obstinate, capricious and overbearing."

It is an undoubted fact, nevertheless, that her story influenced the art of both China and of Korea to a very wide extent. Poets have written of her. Pictures have been painted, both of the Lady Yang herself and also of China's greatest actors impersonating her in plays featuring her tragedy. Korea came under her spell almost as completely as did her own country.

Thinking of Lady Yang at Midnight

Watching alone by the ancient city wall,
Thinking of one who was too beautiful,
What did I see ? What did I hear ?

Moonlight, quivering over empty courtyards,
A voice calling out of the midnight shadows,
One name, her name, echoes across the silence.
Light feet, her feet, in shoes of peacock feathers,
Dance through the empty halls. Will they never rest?

Thinking of joys that ended and sorrows which never end
I find my white robe spangled with tears for her.

Reading a Poetry Scroll and Thinking of Lady Yang Anon.

Remembering the stories told of her,
I turn the ghost leaves of a shadow book.
Each touch of her light hands, each drowsy look
From her camellia petal-shaded eyes,
Were like the butterflies
That float from character to character
All down this ancient poet's painted scroll—
Which now on rods of ivory I roll,
And, wrapped in silken fragrance, lay aside.

So, silently remembering, I hide
Her name, inscribed on tablets of my soul.

Out of five thousand, not one character
Could tell her beauty nor my tears for her.

Songs of Ki-Sang

The following songs were all written by, or else for the use of, ki-sang (dancing girls). As such they are all anonymous. They reveal so well the meekness and pathetic charm of old-time Korean womanhood that I have thought it well to include them in this collection though, strictly speaking, they have no place beside the writings of the poetic masters. The ki-sang, or " Peony Girl," as she is often called, is sometimes pointed out as one of Korea's great evils, leading men astray with her perfumed beauty, her coiled black hair, her black eyes which sparkle below heavy lids. Hoivever this may be, she has provided, and still provides, one of the few forms of lighter entertainment. Many of her songs are delicately charming. Many others are poignantly sad. That there exists a less pleasant aspect to the matter is so obvious that it need not be stressed.

Announcing Names Anon.

When ki-sang are called to entertain the guests at a banquet they move between the tables and sing as they pour the wine. As each girl enters she sings a short song punning on the poetic quality of her name.

Orchid Boat

Far to the south are silken sails
And masts of fragrant cinnamon wood.
Who knows to what far port you float,
Sailors who steer the *Orchid Boat*?

Willow Green

Sweet is the scent of morning rain.
The dust clouds vanish from the street.
And over grey stone walls are seen
The trailing leaves of *Willow Green*.

Tinted Cloud

Soft are the wings that seek Kang-heang
And One goes with them, light of foot.
Oh, starry-eyed and petal-browed,
Whom do you follow, *Tinted Cloud* ?

Remembering " Rising Moon " Anon.

Why did you fade into the dawn so soon?
Far, far away beyond the yellow hill
So-Tong-pa made a thousand songs for you,
Yet could not hold you when the morning dew
Fled from the grass. Men dream about you still.
Where are you now, O little Rising Moon?

Rainbow Sleeves Anon.

Her rainbow sleeves are gay as golden wine
Poured from a silver flask to porcelain bowls.
Between the guests she moves. Their wet lips shine.

Their eyes grow dry and hot as burning coals,
Watching her bend to pour their perfumed wine,
Watching her rainbow sleeves above the bowls.

One gives her amber beads like honeyed light,
Another, coral drops for her to wear
Like folded peach buds in her ears tonight,
While one sets bright blue feathers in her hair.
Gay are her sleeves!
Yet, in the lanterns' light,
Her face—a peony flower—reveals despair.

“Moon of White jade” Anon.

This is typical of many such songs, most of which are attributed to women, i.e., secondary wives, concubines' or discarded mistresses. On the other hand it may have been a love song written by a musician for the use of dancing girls.

Over the mountain hangs the setting moon,
A white jade lantern by a purple door.
Upon the polished paper of my floor
A pool of moonlight spreads, and very soon
My hands fall from my lute. How can I play,
Alone on such a night, the "Rainbow Spray" ?

Far off in blossom gardens of the south
My master sleeps tonight where peach blooms fall
And shoes of willow green dance through the hall.
There many a smile on red hibiscus mouth—
And hands more skilful on the lute than mine—
Surround him where the silken lanterns shine.

Ten thousand mountains hide him from my sight.
Filled with my tears and my remembering,
Deep silence broods on courtyards of the spring.
Moon of white jade, look down on him tonight !
Tell me what clouds of fragrance and of flame
Enfold him, now that he forgets my name.

"Yesterday a Thousand Soldiers—" Anon.

Yesterday a thousand soldiers passed down the village street,
Going to war, going perhaps to die.
Many of them glanced at my silken gown.
Many of them smiled because I smiled.
But only one knew of my hidden tears.

Returning Footsteps

I have dreamed so often of returning footsteps
And wakened only to the sound of rain,
Beating the willow tree, beating the paper screen
That now I fear to watch for my lord's returning-
Lest I see his shadow fashioned of mist and rain.

Talking About " Lotus Bud Anon.

This rose pink lotus bud is like her gown-
The gown that once she wore.
Those petals, whispering to the evening wind,
Seem like her silk skirt moving on the floor
Of that still room where now she moves no more.
This little lily pool is like her face.
There shadows come and go
As thoughts, unspoken, drifted through her eyes.
Speaking of her I wonder, even now,
Whether she loved me. I shall never know

The old men at the tables smiled and said,
"Her sleeves are rainbows flashing from our wine,
Her hands are petals of an apricot flower,
Her mouth a ripe persimmon's deepest red.
Who shall enjoy her favor for an hour?
Who has the gold to buy so fair a flower ?
But I said nothing, knowing she was mine.

Come Not at Dawn

Come not at dawn,
For I am weary when the morning breaks
After a long night spent in dreams of you.

Come not at noon.
When footsteps clatter round the splashing well
And shrill tones jangle by the gatehouse door.

But come at night
When flowers of moonlight in the courtyard bloom
And moonlight shadows paint the orchid screen,
 One shadow yours—another shadow mine.

The Amber Moon Anon.

I gave you perfumed fans and coral beads,
A silken gown and blue-embroidered shoes.
All these you left behind, and in my eyes
New tears are born each time I look on them.

One gift alone you did not leave behind,
The very last I ever gave to you,
When, having nothing left of love to give,
I pointed to the autumn's amber moon.
" –and this," I said, " shall be my gift to you."

Now, night by night, I watch the sky alone,
Thinking perhaps to see your shadow hands
Outstretched to touch that shadow gift of mine.

To My Son Hong Yaing Ho. (18th Century)

Twice from the dead fields havee the wild geese flown.
Twice from the hills the withered leaves have blown.
And twice ten thousand tears I shed for you.

Cold is the frost that on the forest lies,
And cold the wind which through the courtyard cries,
But colder far the home bereft of you.

The little lad whose eyes are like your own,
Whose voice seems but an echo of your tone,
How strange—he knows not what he lost with you!

This is your house—gay eaves and carven stone
I built for you. Now, ageing and alone,
I dwell with ghosts and know not which is you. 1)

Your grave is on the hill above the stream,
And there you rest, passing from dream to dream,
But I rest not, who only dream of you.

1) Another translation of this poem suggests an alternative line here: " I dwell with ghosts. Would that one ghost were you! " I select the above as seeming more appropriate. It is unlikely that a Korean would express the wish to see a ghost, even of his son. As the verse stands it indicates the extreme bewilderment of bereaved old age.

Autumn Hong Yaing Ho.

My horse crushes the dry sticks and dead leaves.
At every step he awakens the voice of autumn.
Wild winds sweep by with a sound like the tattered skirt
Of an aged dancer.

Meeting a Priest on a Mountain Bridge

On a bridge below the Water Gate
I saw his shadow lying aslant the stones.
Amidst a thousand flickering leaves
How still he seemed!
I asked him what he sought among these mountains.
He answered not but pointed with his lifted staff
To formless clouds beyond the farthest peak. (1)

1) The priest has passed beyond all material desire. "Formless clouds" indicate that which is wholly spiritual.