

Red Clay Tales 황토기 [1949]

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Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

Two ridges extend from Kite Mount towards Kūmo Mountain. They each run some twenty *li*, their crests stripped bare, one declining toward the West, the other to the North-East, and give rise to nothing more than one small valley, known as Red Clay Valley. With that we have reached the geographical setting in which, gazing out at the stream that runs in front of them, old folk transmit the legends of the Wounded Dragons or the Two Dragons.

The tale of the Wounded Dragons tells how a pair of yellow dragons, intending to fly up into the heavens, were struck at that very moment by a rock that came rolling down from Kūmo Mountain, wounding their backs. The blood flowing copiously from those dragons' backs dyed a portion of the surrounding land red, and Red Clay Valley arose as a result.

The tale of the Two Dragons also tells of a pair of yellow dragons intending to fly up into the heavens; on the night before, they did not abstain from sleeping together, at which the Lord of Heaven was angered and as a punishment concealed their magic *cintamani* jewels in the heavens, at which the pair, unable to endure the grief of losing their jewels, bit one another's head so that the blood flowed and Red Clay Valley was the result of that blood.

In addition to those tales of the Wounded Dragons and the Two Dragons, there is also the tale of the Pierced Pulse.

The tale of the Pierced Pulse tells how a commander from Tang China, on reaching this spot, declared, "If a Korean strong man is born on this mountain, he will be bold enough to ravage the whole central region of China!" Then he pierced a critical pulse-point in the ground, at which for three months and ten days blood poured down the valley, as a result of which the ground of the whole area turned into red clay.

1

Across Dragon Stream, in the fields in front of Red Clay Valley some twenty people in white, arrayed in a straight line, are bent over weeding the communal paddy-field while four or five others are on the bank between the fields, one holding a village banner and the others playing percussion music.

The sun is blazing from the highest point of its course, the fields and mountains stretch green as far as the eye can see.

*Tingaling tingaling, bingbong bingbong, boom . . . .*

The music is being played on a *kkwenggari*, a drum and a gong. They constantly follow the folk weeding the fields, climbing up and down one bank after another, piercing the silence of the fields.

However, far away from the people working in the communal paddy-fields, closer to the hillside, there is a solitary figure bent over in the middle of a field, weeding it. Seen from close-up, not only are his limbs and back far bigger and longer than those of ordinary people, his shoulders and trunk are likewise remarkably strongly built, while his hair is already grizzled gray. His name is Öksoe. Just as his body is conspicuously larger than that of ordinary folk, so too he works on his own in a far away spot. Resting the hands that have been weeding the field, Öksoe climbs onto a ridge between the fields. He turns his head a couple of times, looking toward the foot of the hill. There is as yet no sign of Puni. He lights a cigarette.

From the evodia trees standing along the side of the paddy-field the noisy cries of cicadas ring out. After Öksoe has finished smoking two cigarettes, he straightens his back as though growing angry and intending to head for the tavern in search of her; just then Puni appears, emerging from among the pine trees with a small clay jar of liquor on her head.

“What were you doing that you only come now?”

As Puni approached, Öksoe questioned her in a slightly angry voice.

“Doing? What do you think I was doing.”

Puni spat out the words as she lowered the jar from her head. Her breath was heavy with drink, the rims of her eyes and her ears were crimson as though dyed.

“She’s been drinking again,” Öksoe muttered to himself.

“Right, here you are.”

As Puni hands him a liquor bowl, that strange smile of hers suddenly begins to appear at the corners of her mouth. Öksoe grabs the bowl and the jar from her as though he is robbing her. The wine swirls round inside the jar and some spills over.

Puni reacts angrily as though she has been robbed of bowl and jar:

“Just wait and see, I’ll pay that bitch back.”

She grinds her teeth. She is obviously talking about Sörhüi but her curse is groundless. Öksoe ignores her as he pours out more wine and swallows it down. As he does so, Puni glares at him spitefully and says:

“Bastard and bitch together, one blow from a knife . . .” and she grinds her teeth fiercely again.

“Why are you talking so roughly?” Öksoe scolds her, at which Puni responds:

“I’m not talking about you, I mean Tükbo.” Her words are even more puzzling.

“Tükbo? He’s your uncle or something, isn’t he? So what’s happened to make you talk like that?” She replies:

“Hmmp, uncle? What if he’s my uncle?”

She sniffs derisively and lies down on the grass with a thump. Exposing white legs stretched out below her drawn-up hempen skirt, she soon begins to snore. In the evodia trees cicadas are singing again. Öksoe pours out a third bowl of wine and as he does so he gazes blankly across at the trees. What Puni had just said about one blow with a knife stubbornly refuses to leave his mind. Who is she so jealous of? Öksoe thinks she’s being quite ridiculous. Pushing aside the jar, he starts to light another cigarette. Tükbo appears, coming down the hill opposite, swinging a wild boar upside-down in one hand.

“You’ve already been up the hill?” To Öksoe’s questioning greeting, Tükbo replies:

“Empty-handed I went, and . . .” then tosses the boar down beside Öksoe, comes closer to Puni and flops down.

He too is of a far larger build than ordinary folk. In height he is slightly shorter than Öksoe, but his shoulders are much broader. His face is a dark blue, copper-like hue. That copper-dark complexion seems to suggest that his arms are of a fearful strength. His hair is black as night. He looks six or seven years younger than Öksoe.

“You want a drink?” asks Öksoe, nodding toward the jar.

Without a word, Tükbo lifts the jar, pours himself a bowl, empties it, then says:

“Good.” He pours himself another bowlful, drinks it, and asks:

“How much is there still at home?” looking up at Öksoe.

“There’s still plenty.”

“Then strain it all out tomorrow.”

As he spoke, Tükbo directed a meaningful stare at Öksoe. For a moment a flame blazed in both men’s eyes alike. It was a fearful flame, fierce enough to melt sulfur under the ground.

2

The next day was exceptionally hot, even for summer. In the sky, clouds in various tints of crimson were blossoming like so many smokey flames. Annet-field is a cozy little valley over the hill past Red Clay Valley and since it lies along a stream, there is an expanse of white sand, green grass and a shady pine-grove. There was no better spot when Öksoe and Tükbo were going to spend a whole day feasting, playing and fighting.

The two men are drinking in the shade of a pine tree, both naked except for a pair of short

pants. First they each cordinally tore up a pig's trotter, took turns filling one another's cup, had a good time together. They usually came to drink together at Annet-field like this once in every season, and for both there was no other moment like it, filling their hearts with joy and satisfaction, while at the same time releasing all that had accumulated inside them. It was a time of unequalled happiness and reward, a sacred banquet. Compared to it, the attractions of Puni and Sörhüi seemed like mere extras contributing to and preparing their pleasure. As the two men grew heated from drinking, the tone of their talk grew rougher.

"Come on, drink up, you damned butcher."

"You blasted thief, all the time gobbling meat."

They began by insulting one another. At the same time they kept filling one another's bowls and tossing each other chunks of meat.

"Hell, gnaw away at this and croak, won't you? I'm sick and fed up with an old swine like you swaggering about with your arms round two women at once," and Tükbo throws a trotter at Öksoe.

'Hey, fellow, just you watch your mouth or you won't come out of this alive.'

Öksoe threatens Tükbo, refilling his cup. The fight is usually provoked first by Tükbo. Usually it would start when he mentioned Puni or Sörhüi. (Tükbo reckoned that was the most effective way.)

"You're licking away as though you're licking some woman. You filthy old man."

With that, Tükbo jumps to his feet, marking the end of the party, and Öksoe hurls the trotter he's been gnawing at Tükbo's face.

"Hey, you bastard, you gnaw the rest of it," and he rises in turn.

Then the fight starts. At the same time a kind of indescribable tension comes flooding into both faces. Tükbo lifts a fist and aims at Öksoe's face, crying:

"Bravo, bravo, what a shame, you old thug, if I just once let fly with this fist. . . ."

Shouting in a kind of sing-song, he hops up and down as he advances toward Öksoe then retreats again.

"Hey, fellow, come on, show me how well you can hit me with those bird-bone fists of yours."

Öksoe stands firm, calm and collected, seemingly scorning his threats.

"One jab with my fist . . . . and your head'll be smashed to bits . . . ."

Next Tükbo's fist caught Öksoe's left eye and nose. Since Öksoe had made virtually no

attempt to stop the blow, the flesh soon began to swell and blood started to swirl within the eye

“Hey, fellow, hit me a lot with those bird-bone fists of yours . . . . go on . . . hard.”

At that, Tükbo’s second blow struck Öksoe’s right cheekbone. The third landed again on the eye that had already been hit before. Öksoe stared at Tükbo, who had withdrawn some way off, suddenly bared his white teeth and laughed aloud like a maniac. Standing some way off, Tükbo is dancing up and down, singing as before. The fourth blow landed above the right eye, the fifth once again struck the nose, and each time Öksoe just guffawed as previously.

“Hey, fellow, you might as well try to push that mountain away with those bird-bone fists of yours!”

The sixth blow, the seventh, no matter how many, it was always the same, Tükbo would rush up, his fist flash out, time after time, and strike hard against Öksoe’s face, neck, breast, flanks, but each time he took it with a simple shrug, and made no attempt to start hitting back at Tükbo. Letting himself be hit without punching back at Tükbo seemed to amuse and content him, and he simply stood there roaring with laughter while his upper body grew ever more bloody.

Tükbo seemed to grow more elated, brimming with energy, and started to combine kicking with hitting. Seeing how his kicks landed on his lower belly and thighs, Öksoe could easily guess what he was aiming at and was obliged to pay more heed to his kicking.

“Long, long ago there lived a roc, that stirred up the sea for three thousand *li, li-il, li-il, ölssigu, jihwajaja, jöjölsigu!*”

Tükbo bellowed, his mouth full of bloody foam, as he went prancing about. Soaked in blood, Öksoe stood firm as a village spirit-post, merely absorbing blows and kicks from the on-rushing Tükbo. When Tükbo’s fourth kick landed on Öksoe’s privates, for a moment he seemed about to collapse on the spot, but then simply wrapped an arm round Tükbo’s neck and raised his shoulders.

“Bastard!” Öksoe’s voice made the valley echo.

After that, welded together as a single mass, songs and laughter stopped emerging from their lips at the same moment, and all that remained was the rasping of breath inhaled and exhaled, the sound of muscle slamming against muscle. Blood began to pour from both their noses at almost the same instant. Their eyes were swimming with blood, blood rose from their throats. Their faces, shoulders and breasts, that had previously been shiny with sweat, were now covered thick with blood.

Tükbo was hitting Öksoe on the jaw and preparing to escape sideways when Öksoe landed a powerful blow with his right fist, striking Tükbo like a thunderbolt beneath the ribcage to the left. Struck in the side by Öksoe, Tükbo’s face suddenly turned ashen, he staggered backwards a few paces then collapsed face-downward onto the sand.

Blood began to emerge from Öksoe's neck, mouth and nose. Holding his jaw with both hands he let the blood flow into them as if stunned, sank blankly to the ground then abruptly leap to his feet again as if crazed, went racing toward where Tükbo was lying and sank his teeth into his right shoulder. Flesh came away, the blood flowed red down as far as his elbow, and Tükbo stirred slightly but remained lying there, unable to rise.

Öksoe chewed noisily at the flesh from Tükbo's shoulder he had in his mouth, then spat out the bloody lump, after which he tilted the jar of liquor, swallowed several bowlfuls and collapsed on the spot.

Neither of them had surrendered, neither had asked for a rest. The two had collapsed as if dead together, seemingly falling asleep, and while neither was dead, they did not seem to be sleeping peacefully, either. Around the time that an evening breeze rose from off the flowing stream and the sound of cicadas in the branches began to fade, they shuddered, rose as if waking from a long drunken stupor, and began to tilt the jar of liquor they had left to one side during the day.

Their evening battles mostly tended to be started by Öksoe. This time too it was Öksoe who began the punching. Their bodies clashed fiercely a few times and in no time at all they were covered in blood; Tükbo, seemingly determined to avoid Öksoe's fists, withdrew some distance off and stayed there, just dancing about.

"Bird, bird, great roc, roc of the northern sea,  
*Ch'ijing ch'ijing chihajaja chöjölsigu!*"

"Hey, Tükbo, bastard!"

Once again Öksoe roared until the valley echoed.

"I'm going, flap, flap, fly away, stir up the sea for three thousand *li*.  
If I let fly one jab with my fist your head'll be smashed to bits.  
*Ch'ijing ch'ijing chihajaja chöjölsigu!*"

Bellowing like this, Tükbo gradually came closer to Öksoe. For some reason he did not seem to be preparing to start fighting but simply danced gaily until he was right in front of Öksoe. Öksoe barged forward and grabbed his throat. Tükbo did the same. They toppled together like two great trees.

Öksoe, after holding Tükbo by the throat and tossing him around for a while, suddenly burst out laughing loudly. His left ear was a mess of flesh and blood torn from its place, half of it was in Tükbo's mouth and he seemed to relish it, in no hurry to spit it out. Meanwhile the sun set, the dark shadow of the hill came falling and the two bleeding hulks showed no sign of rising but kept on spilling one another's blood as they tossed to and fro.

3

Öksoe and Tükbo had first met the previous spring. From that day on they had lived

together. You might even say that their lives had begun from that day. Of course, they had been alive before that, but . . . .

To begin with Ōksoe, the host, he was born in this Red Clay Valley, and until now, when he is aged fifty-two years old, his hair and beard speckled gray, he has come through life hiding a fire burning all alone in his breast. Perhaps originally it was a fire that should have gone blazing freely across the sky like a rainbow. It was in the year he turned thirteen that he had amazed the whole village by rising to an upright position holding a stone that the other youths could scarcely budge.

“A strongman has appeared.”

“A strongman has appeared in Red Clay Valley.”

People began to whisper and on the following day the village elders put on their formal clothes and gathered in an assembly to consult together.

—We’ve heard from days of old, that whenever a strongman appeared in Red Clay Valley, he was bound to be either unfilial toward his parents or a traitor to the state.

—But since that great general once pierced and drained the crucial pulse-point of this region, he may be able to do nothing.

—Preposterous. Why, my great-uncle, as soon as he was reported to be a strongman, he was dragged before the magistrate and emerged with his right arm broken.

After exchanging this kind of talk, their decision was that acupuncture should be applied to the tendons of his right shoulder. Among them all, the one who spoke up most harshly was Ōksoe’s uncle.

“If a strongman has appeared in Red Clay Valley, the authorities would never let it pass. You’d better give up on that son of yours . . . . otherwise our whole family will be ruined because of him.” He bullied his brother, who continued to sit in silence and refused to reply. Ōksoe was the only child he had.

That evening his mother clung to Ōksoe’s sleeve:

“How could you act so thoughtlessly; didn’t you realize how your father would suffer?” She wept.

The next morning, his father summoned Ōksoe:

“You are in your thirteenth year. If you want to keep your body intact you must never act thoughtlessly. Else you will ruin your own life and reduce your entire family to nothing. It’s up to you to make up your mind.”

Ōksoe took his father’s words deeply to heart. As a result he never attended wrestling matches, tug-of-war matches, events involving stone-lifting or load-bearing, anywhere

where many people gathered for contests involving trials of strength.

Once he had passed twenty, he found himself unable to cope with his abundant strength. One evening he climbed to the top of a hill all alone then came down to the valley again, carrying a rock. All night long he climbed up and down. At dawn he came down looking like a mad man, his topknot undone, his hair tousled and his eyes bloodshot. By night he could employ his overflowing energy fighting with rocks in that way, but by day he had no outlet and longed to hit and smash and bring down everything he saw, and once that struggle, that madness began to flare up he could not endure it for long. It was not that he wanted to boast of his strength, it was a desire to do something with his strength. After these reports about Öksoe spread through Red Clay Valley, his uncle addressed his father:

“Now that lout is sure to do some mischief. If only you had curbed him previously, as I said, there would not have been any more trouble, but who can rein him in now? Well, he’s your son, you take charge of him. I can’t go on living here.”

He moved away to live on the far side of the hill.

Hearing what he had said, Öksoe went far up into the mountains and wept loudly. Returning home, he sharpened a sythe and cut his right shoulder so the blood flowed.

Learning of this, his mother said:

“That’s a foolish thing to do at your age, surely? It cannot be true that all strong men are bad. It all depends on the nature of your mind . . . if your father finds out what you’ve done he’ll be furious.” She was clearly displeased.

When his grandfather was dying, his last message to Öksoe was simply that he should rein in his strength and when his father’s turn came, his last request was no different:

“When you were small, I had someone cast your horoscope and they said that you were destined to be under a bale influence, that there would be a great misfortune if you did not take care of your vigor in your youth . . . after all, strength is a great treasure so if you manage it well, a day will come when you can use it in a good cause. Just wait quietly for that day to come.”

For Öksoe, those dying words from his father sounded like a revelation from Heaven.

“A day will come when you can use it.”

“Just wait for that day to come.” Those words never vanished from his mind.

He kept on restraining the urgings of that madly rising strength, wondering if the day when he could use it might be today or tomorrow, until before that day came his hair and beard were more than half grizzled with gray. It was around that same time that he began going out to taverns and drinking with women.

One day he was drinking in company with Puni, a pretty bargirl in the tavern where the

road forked, when the girl went out, saying that another customer was looking for her and she would be back soon. She did not return, though, and soon he heard the sound of a quarrel outside so he opened the door and saw an unfamiliar traveler holding the owner by the throat, pushing and pulling him about.

Just then, a group of men who had been gambling out in the back yard came rushing up and, after an noisy exchange of words, took over the fight. The owner explained:

“Why, who ever saw such a thing? A completely unknown traveler comes along, sees someone’s bargirl and says, she’s my daughter, give her to me.”

It looks as though this unknown traveler has suddenly been attracted by Puni’s face but everybody is extremely fond of her and moreover this unknown guy seems to have grabbed her without offering to pay anything, so that they reckoned they couldn’t let this wretched, stupid fellow just walk away, and one of the gamblers first struck him on the cheek, at which the stranger leaped up, grabbed the gambler by the throat and hurled him to the ground. The whole group was filled with fear on seeing that but since they far outnumbered him, and there were tough guys as well as ruthless ones among them, there was no reason why they should move back. One lashed out, another backed him up, but the stranger showed no sign of feeling cornered, and one after another the gamblers were soon sprawling on the ground. One fellow with a broken head, one kicked in the belly, one grabbed by the flanks and hurled down, one beaten on the cheeks, all the wounded lay pale in the yard.

Öksoe, heated from drinking, could not just stand watching, he stood up and came outside:

“Why, what no-good fellow’s this?” He bellowed so that the whole house rang.

The stranger turned and looked in his direction.

“Hmm, you too . . .”

Without even finishing the sentence, he rushed forward and struck him on the brow with his head so that Öksoe was dizzy for a moment, then in a flash he had seized the fellow by the throat with his right hand. This fellow was visibly of no ordinary build but none the less at first Öksoe had simply thought that he could defeat him with a moderate effort, but once they were at grips he soon realized that this was no mere tough, stupid hoodlum. Öksoe suddenly felt his heart fill with joy as though he was being lifted into the air, and he unconsciously loosened his grip.

4

This stranger, his name was Tükbo, followed Öksoe back to Red Clay Valley that day and began to live a stepping-stone’s distance from him. Öksoe prepared a hut for him facing the path along the stream.

A few days later, Tükbo remarked:

“I feel sorry for you, already more than half-gray and without any children. Yet I’ve got nothing to offer you. So I’ve brought Puni. Take her and live together.”

Öksoe laughed awkwardly.

“And what about you . . .?” he asked. Tükbo replied:

“How come an old fellow like you worries about other folk? You only have to provide some liquor as a sign of thanks. In any case, I can’t have a niece living with me . . . .” and he smacked his lips.

On hearing she was Tükbo’s niece, Öksoe reckoned Puni must be a relative of his, one way or another, and felt more relaxed:

“You’re growing old too, just like me, so why’s your talking so fierce? Besides, even though I’m old, I can still teach you a lesson.”

“You’re good at answering back, old guy.”

While the two men exchanged banter, Puni was straining the rice wine she scooped out from Öksoe’s large jar. That was the entire wedding ceremony between Puni and Öksoe and for her it marked the start of married life. Once the wine had heated him again, Öksoe looked at Tükbo and asked:

“Are you going to go on living alone?”

“There are plenty of women left in the world, aren’t there?” Tükbo replied confidently.

“With a face as rough as yours, how many women do you think are going to go following after you?”

“Hmph, there are too many that’s the problem. That’s why Puni has become yours. She’s too fond of playing jealous, so she won’t do for me. She’s just right for a peasant like you.

Öksoe was uncertain how he should understand Tükbo’s reply. A little earlier he had offered her to him in exchange for having provided him with a house, and because he could not live with his own niece, but now he said he was giving her to him because her jealousy did not suit him.

Originally, at the tavern, Tükbo had said Puni was his daughter, then later his niece, and now it seemed he was passing her off onto Öksoe because she was too jealous to be able to live with him. However, since Öksoe was in need of a new wife in any case and since he had been wanting to sleep with Puni ever since she came as a bar-girl there, he had no reason to refuse her.

Still, just as Tükbo sometimes said Puni was his daughter, sometimes his niece, there was

something odd in her way of addressing him too; sometimes he was 'uncle' and sometimes just 'him' and when things were really bad she just called him 'Tükbo.' One evening she explained:

"It means nothing. He's part of my mother's family but we're not directly related, he's my uncle's brother by another woman."

Then on another day, when she was drunk she said:

"Who says I can't have children? Go and ask Tükbo out there: What happened to the baby boy Puni had when she was sixteen? If I don't have any children, the problem's with the man, there's nothing wrong with my belly."

Puni kept on mentioning Tükbo's name; this upset Öksoe but since he had not at first taken her for a chaste girl, he reckoned that the only way was to pretend not to hear her. Besides, piecing together Tükbo's past from a few words exchanged now and then, it seemed that originally Tükbo had been working with his half-brothers as a blacksmith in a locality near the East coast some eighty *li* from Red Clay Valley until one day in a quarrel with those brothers he had killed one, hitting him on the head with a hoe, at which he had fled to Seoul where he had worked as a servant in someone's household where it seemed he had begun a relationship with the wife of a powerful man there. That had become known and he had run away, returning to his home region and resuming work as a smith, until a rumor started that he was the man who had killed his brother before, so that he could not go on living there and he was obliged to take to the road again.

Puni talked as though the reason why Tükbo had been obliged to take to the road again, after returning to somewhere near his home intending to start a new life there, was because he had fathered a son with her, but it was not sure how true that was. Given Puni's strange ways of talking and acting, even if there had been such a relationship, so that she with her young girl's body, for she was only sixteen then, had born her maternal uncle's half-brother as she said, Tükbo's child, it was hard to believe that Tükbo was such an outstanding man that he had quit the forge he had opened with so much trouble and taken to the road again simply because of a moral deviation or error. Perhaps both reasons had worked together.

If Puni kept talking about Tükbo, it was because that was where her heart lay, and the body generally follows the heart, so that for twenty days out of the month Öksoe was obliged to sleep alone. Going to his house to drink wine or to boil pork for Tükbo might be considered not so unusual in the light of Puni's past, but even if he was really the half-brother of her uncle on the maternal side as she said, it was very improper that she so often slept there when her husband's house was just across the stepping-stones. Öksoe complained to Tükbo:

"Hey, fellow, why do you keep Puni in your house day and night?"

"Old guy, you're good at complaining about women," and Tükbo spat.

"We'll see, fellow, if you can keep your mouth intact for long."

“No need to wait long; why don’t we settle this tomorrow? If you can’t beat me, just let me have the woman instead . . .”

“Hmmp”

Öksoe snorted, as if to say he was far from being a fit match for him. On such occasions, if either of them had wine and food ready, then on the next day the match took place. Since their relationship required that they fight from time to time, Puni’s way of living was a booster. It was almost as though the way Tükbo had given Puni to Öksoe at the start, on the pretext that she was his niece, had in fact been aimed at just that effect. Puni, typically, seemed to reckon that it had nothing to do with her if the two quarreled, and continued to cross the stepping-stones, day and night alike.

Stranger still to Öksoe’s way of thinking were the jealous scenes Puni subjected Tükbo to. Tükbo always appealed to women and as he said, even without Puni he would not have gone hungry. He used to disappear somewhere for a few days then come back with a new woman in tow. But they would mostly vanish again within a couple of days.

It was disgusting to see the jealous fits Puni would throw in front of these women who came back with Tükbo. Even if she was jealous, they were ridiculous: Bitch, why have you stolen my silver rings? Give back my plaited hair-piece. Our spoons and chopsticks have vanished! Where’s my hempen skirt? . . . . In that way she would all the time plunder the new women’s ornaments or clothes, and if they still did not soon depart, she would attack them physically, pulling their hair, tearing their clothes.

If Öksoe scolded her: Because of you Tükbo will never find a wife,” she would reply in a flash:

“Nonsense. You want him to marry a thief?”

Once one such woman seemed to have grown quite fond of Tükbo and did not leave quickly but spent a month or so there with him. If Puni made her usual accusations, she willingly opened her bags and gave up whatever Puni claimed. When it came to fighting with other women Puni was unusually good at hair-pulling and clothes-tearing, but none of that seemed to work with this particular woman, who was large in build and very strong for a woman. Several times she went rushing at her to pull her hair and each time failed. After that, for several days she neither worked nor slept but stayed put in a corner of Tükbo’s room. There was no knowing what the three of them did by night, but from outside there could be heard sounds of thumping and banging as if they were fighting. Sometimes it went on all night. On those occasions, the next morning all three had bloodshot eyes while their hair was loose and disheveled. Seeing that, Öksoe remarked bitterly:

“Filthy wretches!” and he spat.

Things continued until early one morning a piercing scream was heard: “You bastard and bitch, you’re killing me!” It was Puni’s voice. Then the sound of thumping started up again. Puni was totally involved in Tükbo’s life but if you think she had no concern for Öksoe, her

supposed husband, that too was not the case. Perhaps it was a matter of “a lover is a lover, a husband is a husband,” for she carried bowls of soup over from Tükbo’s house as well as bowls of rice, prepared meals for Őksoe and his mother, and if she found washing to be done she went across carrying washing-bats. Nor was she backward in sleeping with Őksoe; rather, to borrow Puni’s words: her main complaint about Őksoe was that he was too boring in bed.

5

While Puni was coming and going over the stepping-stones, Őksoe inwardly gave her up and took up with Sörhüi, to whom he was already secretly attracted. Őksoe was a farmer by birth, he had always lived as a farmer, so that nothing about Puni, whether it be her sleeping arrangements, or anything else, were really suitable for him. Besides, he was still living with his elderly mother and whenever he faced her, the fact that he still had no children was no small source of regret. In addition, he himself also felt that he ought to leave at least one child behind.

He could not, however, expect anything of that kind from Puni with her attitude and conduct, in addition to which he had no wish to even discuss such a thing with her, so without asking her he had turned to Sörhüi. But Puni, rancorous, remarked:

“Hmm, if I can’t have a baby, it’s because the seed’s no good, not because the womb’s no good. Let’s wait and see if another woman’s thing is any different.” And she ground her teeth.

Sörhüi was not only beautiful but well-behaved, everybody in the surrounding area knew her and spoke highly of her. Left a widow at twenty-three, she had turned down countless proposals coming from all directions, while she continued to serve devotedly her only remaining family, an elderly father-in-law, and let nobody notice how poor they were. A short time before, that father-in-law had died, leaving her friendless and destitute, at which Őksoe, who had set his heart on her long before and tried several times to flirt with her, finally took charge of her.

Naturally, Őksoe was far from being the only person to come drooling after Sörhüi. Among the rest Tükbo had seemed convinced that she would be his, so that when he heard reports that Sörhüi was keeping company with Őksoe he let out a loud bellow.

“Old guy, you’ll end up collapsing, playing around with two women at once; you should stop overdoing the passion and surrender one to me before it’s too late,” he said to Őksoe as they were coming in from the fields.

Őksoe’s only reply was: “Shut your gob!” but inwardly he thought:

“This fellow surely won’t let it pass.”

One drizzly evening around the second watch Őksoe went to visit Sörhüi; the light in the room was shining red through the papered door while the sound of a man’s snoring could

be heard. Full of foreboding, he glanced at the step and the faint light was sufficient for him to see that a familiar pair of large hemp shoes was lying there. At that, Öksoe clenched his fists unthinkingly and all the blood in his body seemed to flow into his breast. He was about to seize the door handle with a trembling hand when he seemed to hear someone moving in the corner of the yard; he turned his head and realized that the pale form of someone was standing beside the dark pile of manure. He took a couple of steps and saw that it was Sörhüi.

She drew close to Öksoe and whispered:

“It’s Tükbo. He arrived early in the evening, asking to see you. I told him you were not home but he came in none the less and pestered me so insistently that finally I said I had to relieve myself, and hid here in the yard.”

“Hmm.” Inwardly, Öksoe thought:

“The bastard is calling forth his own death!”

When he was about to seize the handle with a trembling hand, he was thinking: I’ll smash his head into a thousand pieces while he’s still lying there asleep.

Tükbo did not realize that Öksoe had opened the door and come in; he lay sprawled at full length, seeming to fill the whole room, snorting and snoring loudly. The lamp was casting a faint shadow across his darkly flushed face with its rugged bones and a fly had settled on the tip of his apple-sized nose. The fly slowly climbed up the ridge of his nose, flew off, then settled on the acorn-sized wen at tip of his left eyebrow. Following the fly, Öksoe’s gaze too lighted on the wen and stayed fixed there. That wen has appeared after a blow struck by his fist while they were fighting on the third day of the third month that year. Öksoe felt moved. With a shaking foot he kicked Tükbo’s behind.

“Hey, Tükbo!” he called.

Tükbo wriggled slightly then began to snore again, so he kicked him rather more violently.

“Hey! Tükbo!” At that he opened blood-shot eyes, glanced around the room, stretched, and slowly sat up.

Öksoe put on angry voice.

“Lout, do you know where you are?” but Tükbo simply licked his lips without replying.

“Lout, do you know where you are?” he shouted more loudly, at which he glanced up at Öksoe briefly with blood-shot eyes:

“Here’s where I am.”

“Why, you lout!”

Öksoe glared down at Tükbo, gave a forced laugh, changed back to his usual expression, and said:

“I’ll give you a good whipping another day; for tonight, let’s drink.” He called Sörhüi and ordered her to bring liquor.

From that night onward, Tükbo seemed to behave rather more politely toward Sörhüi but at the same time his visits grew easier and more frequent.

“Is the lady in?”

Tükbo invariably stood outside and called in that way. Typically, Sörhüi would always reply, although Tükbo was coming to visit her, “He’s not in,” meaning by her reply that the man of the house was absent but irrespective of whether Öksoe was there or not Tükbo would enter the room, and as he kept doing it, Sörhüi decided to say nothing and simply opened the door.

Usually Tükbo would make bantering remarks in guise of greetings as he entered the room but if his comments were over the mark, he would always note the sword-like icy glare that came into Sörhüi’s eyes, then softly withdraw or sit down before quickly lying back and beginning to snore.

“You lout, be careful, or you’ll get beaten to death,” Öksoe would bristle.

“Filthy old fellow; are you so jealous that you resent your friend sleeping next to your woman’s ass? What a way for an old fellow to behave.”

Tükbo used to spit as though disgusted. But Öksoe recalled how Tükbo used to snort and spit in the same way about Puni, and would say,

“Hmm, I’ll wait and see how far you go,” glaring fiercely.

“In that case, let’s settle it once and for all tomorrow. Decide whose woman she is, I mean,” Tükbo replied, in the same tone he had previously used when talking about Puni.

“Why, you lout!” and this time Öksoe’s stare was unlike before.

In this way, once Sörhüi had made her appearance, the two men always made her the reason for their fights. As far as Sörhüi was concerned, she perhaps simply served as an excuse for them to fight, but between the two men there was also something more serious going on.

Öksoe would indicate a more serious attitude toward Sörhüi whenever he was heated with drink:

“I really worry about you,” sounding out her feelings. Whenever he did so, she merely lowered her head and made no reply.

Once, after they had been talking about Puni, Sörhüi said:

“You should break with her once and for all.”

On that occasion, Öksoe was heated from drinking and he jestingly said:

“But what if I do that and then you take up with Tükbo too?” At that, Sörhüi suddenly blushed, and after a pause she replied;

“Having been unfortunate throughout my life, I wouldn’t dare hope for a lucky turn now . . . I’m determined not to try my fortune with another man, that’s for sure,” and she dabbed silently at her tears with a towel while Öksoe, drunk though he was, on hearing the word ‘fortune’ stroked his more than half grizzled beard and muttered:

“I’m sorry, sorry . . .” and felt truly regretful.

In the days when Tükbo kept heading for Sörhüi’s room, day and night alike, every night Puni spied on Sörhüi’s door as it shone dimly with lamplight, hidden by the shade of the old locust tree standing in the yard if there was moonlight, shrouded in darkness if there was no moon. Her face gleamed with spite like a waning moon, her eyes sparkled eerily, and in her breast she carried a sharp dagger wrapped in a scrap of cloth.

6

Once Öksoe and Tükbo both began frequenting Sörhüi as though in heated competition, a change occurred in Puni’s face and behavior. She no longer chattered away noisily, curling her lips, there was no knowing where she went or what she did, but by night she no longer stayed at home, then she spent the whole day asleep wrapped in her bedding. It was not clear what she did about meals, she seemed to have almost completely given up eating. Her complexion grew white as paper and her previously constant smiles vanished without trace.

It was not that Öksoe did not notice Puni’s odd conduct but he discounted it as but he simply dismissed it as not very significant since he was preoccupied with his mother’s sickness.

One night, while Öksoe was caring for his mother and it was already late, there suddenly came the sound of a fight from Tükbo’s house. Puni could be heard screaming then suddenly the sound of fighting stopped. When Puni screamed, Öksoe’s aged mother suddenly raised herself:

“Why, son, what’s that noise? There, there,” and she tugged at Öksoe’s sleeve.

After that her condition suddenly worsened and on the third night following the old woman breathed her last.

Then came the evening of the day when Öksoe had added a new tomb to those on the

slope of the hill backing on Red Clay village.

As Ōksoe and a few of his relatives were sitting gazing at the brazier that was still burning in the middle of the yard, poor Sōrhūi's pitiful life came to an end, with a new life in her belly and a sharp dagger in her throat.

Before Sōrhūi's body could grow cold, Puni had already returned to the dark foot of the locust tree, her hands and sleeves and skirt all soaked in blood, heading for Tūkbo's house. In her right hand, still thick with blood, a kitchen knife gleamed, that she had brought with her from Sōrhūi's house.

Tūkbo had helped carry the bier earlier in the day, and build the grave mound, after which he had come home and got completely drunken, so that by the time Puni emerged from the shade of the tree behind Sōrhūi's house with that thing hidden in the folds of her skirt, he was sound asleep in the dark room where no light was burning.

On reaching the door, Puni heard Tūkbo snoring and her heart suddenly began to race uncontrollably, just as it had when her hand had seized the door-handle to Sōrhūi's room a short while before; at the same time her mind grew hazy, as she was enveloped with the smell of the dry earth she used to eat secretly in childhood. Half-conscious, Puni stabbed down at Tūkbo's throat with the knife her right hand was holding as he lay snoring in the dark. But her knife missed his throat and struck his left breast a span or so lower.

As it pierced his breast, Tūkbo cried out and tried to rise, startled, but someone seemed to have rushed into his arms as though wanting to embrace him. The thought that this was Puni flashed through his mind, he seized what was in his arms and hurled it from him violently, as if waking from a nightmare. Puni fell across the threshold.

Only now recovering full consciousness, he almost instinctively brought his hand to his breast. There something warm and moist covered his hand and at that moment, with a shudder like being struck by lightning in a dream, he sensed something like electricity running through his spine and collapsed on the spot. At dawn the next day, when Ōksoe ran gasping to the house, the room was red with blood, the stench of it filled his nostrils.

"Tūkbo!" Ōksoe called in a loud voice.

" . . . . ."

Tūkbo opened his eyes and looked up at Ōksoe, saying nothing. His eyes were blood-shot.

"Tūkbo!"

" . . . . ."

"You're not going to die, you're not . . ."

Instead of answering, Tūkbo fumbled at his breast. A great red clot of blood lay tangled there, while from somewhere near his buttocks a blood-caked knife emerged.

Öksoe picked up the knife and as he examined it, the blood soaked through his shoes and into his socks.

Meanwhile Puni, who had been lying collapsed on the reeds in the kitchen, rose startled on hearing Öksoe's voice at first light and vanished like a shadow. She was never seen again.

7

By the end of a month the surface of the wound in Tükbo's breast had mostly healed, but for some reason inwardly he seemed to be worsening. His cheek-bones grew prominent, while the cheeks below were sunken deep as wells, his face took on the color of a dried pumpkin, nothing remained of his former appearance, while his brow was covered with deep, coarse furrows that looked as though they had been carved with a knife. In the space of a month he had become a really old man.

"Any news of Puni?" he would ask, every time he saw Öksoe.

At first, Öksoe assumed that Tükbo was looking for Puni in order to pay her back as his enemy, but after seeing his expression a few times he understood it was not just that, but that rather he was missing her.

"I'll find her and bring her back," he would always reply.

But there was no trace of her. There was one rumor that said she had gone back to live somewhere near her hometown on the east coast, while another said that she was once again working as a bargirl in some tavern down in the South, and yet another report said that she had thrown herself into a well near Yöngch'ön and died.

"What are you doing?" Tükbo would ask Öksoe angrily. "You should have found her by now."

Yet Öksoe never took to the road looking for Puni. Another year, another spring arrived.

Tükbo had begun to come and go to the market occasionally before the end of the previous year, and when the grass started to grow, the azaleas to blossom on the slopes of the hills, he finally set off. Öksoe, being Öksoe, began to wait for his return from that day on. He would go to the tavern every day in the hope of hearing news of Tükbo. Spring turned into early summer.

One day in the early summer, when the foliage on the trees was already thick and dark green, Tükbo returned to Red Clay Valley, unexpectedly accompanied by a young girl. He said that the girl, who looked to be about twelve and was wearing a pale green blouse over a pink skirt, was the daughter Puni had had when she was sixteen. (Puni had spoken of a son, but . . . .)

“What about Puni?” Öksoe asked, to which he replied weakly:

“Looks as though she’s croaked.”

After that, Tükbo used to leave home from time to time and return after seven or ten days.

If Öksoe asked, “Where’ve you been?” Tükbo would reply weakly:

“Out there . . .” clearly suggesting that he had been searching for Puni.

When he was home, not away looking for Puni, he would occasionally send the girl over to keep an eye on what Öksoe was doing.

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s lying down.”

Such was the exchange between father and daughter. If ever she said that Öksoe was not at home, he would send the girl over any number of times. He only seemed reassured when she reported that he had come back home.

Once, returning home after getting drunk at the tavern, he paid Öksoe a visit. Putting his huge fist just below Öksoe’s chin, he said:

“You still can’t match me.”

Öksoe too grew excited:

“Ho ho ho . . .” he laughed loudly, at which Tükbo slammed his fist against his cheek and cried:

“You old fellow, dirty old fellow,” swearing at him in a voice full of rage, at which Öksoe regretted his thoughtless laughter and said:

“Once you’ve got over the drink, I’ll slaughter you, lout,” he roared, at which Tükbo’s eyes sparkled:

“What, fellow? Do you really mean that?” as if he could not believe his ears.

Yet Öksoe did not go to visit Tükbo the next day, not the day after that.

Two weeks passed.

Soon after daybreak, Tükbo came to Öksoe’s house and said he’d been gambling and won some money so they should go drinking.

As he was feeling thirsty too, Öksoe happily exchanged cups of wine with him, but for some reason Tükbo’s gestures that day looked extremely slow. Öksoe assumed it was

because Tükbo could not forget Puni:

“Lout, why are you so crazy that you can’t forget Puni though she’s dead?”

In return he scolded him:

“Old fellow, with your filthy thoughts about women, you’re disgusting,”

Öksoe retorted: “You poor lout, it’s been a long while since Puni fell into that well in Yöngch’ön and died.”

“This fellow thinks it was Yöngch’ön, doesn’t know about Önyang,” Tükbo replied. At that, Öksoe guessed that she had died in Önyang, not Yöngch’ön, and wondered if that was why Tükbo had been pouring liquor down his throat for the past month.

When Öksoe remarked, “Then you should be in mourning,” Tükbo seemed to think for a while, then snorted once.

As they were about to finish the liquor, Tükbo suddenly laid on the table a dagger, its sharpened blade glittering darkly.

“Old fellow, you know your crime.”

But Öksoe, as if he had unwittingly anticipated that himself, without flinching or becoming afraid, but restraining forcibly the laughter that invariably came bursting out, replied:

“Hmm, lout, I’ve . . . .” He began in solemn tones.

“I’ve spared your life until today only because there might be some use for it.” Öksoe’s eyes were blazing.

Öksoe’s solemn voice and blazing eyes expressed an indescribable satisfaction. Tükbo noticed that but merely sneered:

“Well, you’re a man, anyway, so if you resent dying indoors, come outside with me,” and put the dagger back in his belt.

Öksoe sent Tükbo back across Annet-field first and remained in the tavern where he ordered liquor to take with him.

“Soju’s good when it’s rough.”

Öksoe spoke as he emptied the bowl of soju poured so he could taste it, looking at the owner.

“We only have dry snacks . . . .” the wife emerged carrying a pile of dried octopus.

“Octopus is good enough . . . .”

Öksoe packed the octopus into his waistcoat pocket, slung the pouch holding the large flask of soju over his shoulder and followed after Tükbo.

Perhaps it was the effect of drinking soju on top of makkölli, his heart was fluttering, his pace was elated, like the day long ago when he had first got married.

“Lout, don’t imagine you can croak before you take care of my funeral.”

Öksoe suddenly recalled the words Tükbo spat out one day and the knife with its darkened blade that Tükbo had laid on the table, spitting as he did so, a while before. Suppose Tükbo’s knife blade, more than a span long, slashed through the middle of his breast, slicing through his madly fretting, itching liver and lungs, he thought, and shuddered once; he stopped abruptly and looked up, and there the sun was already setting over Red Clay Ridge, while some way ahead of him Tükbo was plodding on alone down toward Dragon Stream.