

Nakdong River 낙동강 [1927]

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translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

Once the waters of the Nakdong River reach this spot, after flowing on and on for seven hundred *li*, all the river's diverging branches draw together into a single body before heading seaward. The checkerboard pattern of fields following the river lie open toward the far-off sea while tightly clustered villages snuggle nestling here and there in the breast of those broad fields.

This river and these fields and the people living here! While the river flowed on and on, the people lived on and on. So how could this river and these people ever be parted from one another?

Every spring, every spring,
the swollen waters of the Nakdong River
on reaching the plains at Kup'o
overflowing, overflowing flow,
flow on, *ehey—ya*.

Lapping, lapping, the overflowing waters
spread across the fields and plains
and so become the mother's milk
of many lives, of many many lives,
become the mother's milk, *ehey-ya*.

The plains lay open,
these waters flowed,
and from that time onward
we grew up sustained by that milk,
we grew up, *ehey-ya*.

Nakdong River! Nakdong River!
Where we lived a thousand years, ten thousand years!
Even though we journey to heaven's end
how could we forget you, even in our dreams?
How could you ever be forgotten? *Ehey-ya*.

In the early spring one year, as a group of people bade farewell to this land and crossed the river for one last time on their way to distant Manchuria, it is said that one youth in their midst beat the side of the boat as he sorrowfully sang that song, making all his equally sorrowful companions shed bitter tears.

They had long lived attached like a brood of pups to the teats of this mother-land. But those teats had already begun not to belong to them a long time ago. Things had gone from bad to worse, then a pack of people came upon them like wolves out of nowhere and began to push and jostle them and rob them of their share. Now it had become difficult to obtain so much as a single sip of milk. They had found themselves obliged to leave home and set off. Let us consider briefly how that came to be.

Since the time their ancestors first caught fish in this river, gathered grain and fruits on

these plains, long ages have passed, countless, when they were truly free. Singing in harmony, they worked together in harmony. The plains to the south and those to the north, all belonged to them. What lay to west and east was equally theirs.

However, the wheel of history turned. A class arose that ate without working, and a class that worked and fed the other class as well. A ruling class arose, and a ruled class. From that time onward, the ownerless plains had owners, the common people who had never known hunger began to starve. They no longer noticed that the sky's sunlight was lovely, no longer recognized that the clear waters of the Nakdong River were clear. For a thousand years. For five thousand years. Through all that long age they lived on in this unequal peace without a word, in silent grievance. They reached a point where they did not think their inequalities were inequalities. Like considering cloudy weather to be truly clear weather. Only history was intent on turning her wheel further. Wind heralds a shower. The flag was raised. The 1894 Tonghak uprising. The 1895 reforms. Since then, a monster roamed this land, this entire peninsula. Like an eagle beating its wings. That monster is Socialism. It passes everywhere, like a female butterfly ejecting innumerable eggs behind it, ever laying more eggs as it goes. Youth movements, peasants' movements, equality movements, workers' movements, women's movements . . . the weather of the past five thousand years has now become a mass of black clouds. Torrential rains are sure to fall. It is easy to tell what weather will follow that rain.

A dark night in early winter; it is a moment when, at the mouth of the Nakdong River communicating with the distant sea, the lights of fishing-boats drowse anxiously, while the sound of cold waves breaking on the river shore grows louder. A group of people just off a bus were standing grouped in the flickering lamplight at the top of the embankment waiting for a boat. It was mostly composed of members of the youth movement, the equality brigade, the women's alliance, the tenants' union, and other social movement groups. Poorly dressed villagers with old hats askew carrying bundles, people wearing black or white *turumagi* overcoats, scruffy suits or Russian *rubashka*, girls with bobbed hair so short it did not reach the collars of their coats, or 'new women' with their hair twisted up, and an invalid sitting in a rickshaw. They have just welcomed this Pak Sōng-Un off the bus, he having been released on bail from the prison where he was being detained on account of his critical condition; after loading him onto the rickshaw, they are on their way back to the village.

"Why, they must have been as merciless as they are said to be. To reduce a man with the constitution of a mighty tiger to such a state, how harsh their punishments must have been, those wicked bastards."

The speaker seemed to be seeing the invalid for the first time since he had been imprisoned, having come out to the bus-stop to welcome him. Someone replied:

"They treat him like that, then if he dies they'll say he died after falling ill."

"Then he ought to have gone straight to a hospital, why come all the way here?"

"I have no idea. It was the invalid himself who insisted he was coming here . . ."

"Why is the boat taking so long?"

"Ah, now the boat's bow has turned. It'll be here soon."

One man is chattering, looking toward the river bank. Then, turning to the man in the rickshaw:

"Aren't you cold?"

"It's alright. I'm not cold."

"No, you must be cold. Shall I get you another coat?"

"No thanks, I'm alright."

The invalid replies in a sickly voice.

“Hey, get that boat over here quickly.”

Someone shouts to the boatman on the far side of the river, who has managed to turn the boat’s bow and is rowing hard.

“O-kay.”

The voice sounds indifferent. Having rowed part of the way, he has stopped again.

“What’s he doing?”

“Looks as though he’s stopped to smoke a cigarette. Hey, you leper there!”

Several people burst out laughing. The boat has arrived. The man in the rickshaw is first.

“Hey, can you get the rickshaw up onto the boat with him in it?”

One man eyes the rickshaw driver and asks.

“How could I?”

“No, I’ll get down.”

People help the invalid down from the rickshaw and up into the boat. As soon as everyone is in, the boat heads out toward the far bank, to the squeak of the oar in its slot and the splashing sound of the oar in the water. Even in the lamplight, the face of the invalid seated at the prow can be seen to be dreadfully emaciated.

“Hey, boatman, let’s have a boat-song!”

“What? Why on earth do you suddenly want a song?”

Someone sitting beside him asks.

“I want to hear it . . . after all, this may be the last time in my life I cross this river”

“Hey, why do you keep saying such stupid things?”

“No! I really want to hear a song. Hey, boatman, won’t you sing?”

“No, I can’t sing at all”

“Well then, is there anyone who can sing? . . . Ah, Rosa, sing, won’t you . . . sing the song I made.”

He pesters the girl with bobbed hair sitting next to him.

“You want me to sing?”

“Yes, sing ‘Every spring, every spring’ won’t you?”

“Every spring, every spring,
the swollen waters of the Nakdong River
on reaching the plains at Kup’o
overflowing, overflowing flow,
flow on, *ehey—ya*.

.”

The melody has some of the characteristics of the traditional Kyöngsang song “Nüiliri” combined with a trace of a more modern style, it is resonant with the power of sorrowful indignation and firm determination. As a female voice, Rosa’s tone is rather too strong for a woman and might even be considered too bold, but the sound of her pure voice covered the sound of the waves stirred up on the river by the wind and wandered sadly across the night sky. The stars in the sky seemed to be blinking as though in sympathy. The people in the boat might not be headed for Manchuria at that moment, but their hearts could not help but echo anew.

At the end of the third verse, Pak Söng-Un joins in, in a high-pitched voice, looking quite hysterical.

Nakdong River! Nakdong River!
Where we lived a thousand years, ten thousand years!
Even though we journey to heaven’s end
how could we forget you, even in our dreams?
How could you ever be forgotten? *Ehey-ya*.

The song comes to an end. Sǒng-Un, twitching like a maniac, rolls up his right sleeve and dips his arm in the water, wetting his arm, feeling the water with his hand, splashing it about. His neighbor seems to feel sorry for him:

“What a fellow! We have a real problem here. This invalid, in the state he’s in, goes dipping his arm into cold water! What does he think he’s doing?”

“If I die now, it’s fine. Don’t go worrying too much.

“You’re crazy . . . quite mad. . . .

Becoming increasingly agitated, the invalid turned toward the woman beside him.

“Rosa! Roll up your sleeve. Let’s dip both our arms into the water together.”

Seizing the woman’s hand, he dipped it in the water and stirred it around.

“Five years I spent roaming overseas, and in all that time, whenever I thought of a river, I never forgot the Nakdong River Whenever I thought of the Nakdong River, I never forgot that I’m the grandson of a Nakdong River fisherman, the son of a farmer and therefore from Chosǒn, too.”

Their two hands were simply hanging feebly above the water at the prow of the boat. The invalid again gazed out at the expanse of water before him and murmured to himself:

“Once I was crossing the Songhua River in Manchuria when I remembered this Nakdong River and started to cry If a person leaves home with a willing heart, no matter how far he goes he never feels heartbroken like that”

He had no sooner spoken than the atmosphere in the boat grew quiet, almost as though they had stopped breathing. Rosa’s head, which she had been holding high, dropped and she raised her other hand to her face. Likewise, a large tear rolled down from Sǒng-Un’s eye.

For a while only the sound of the water could be heard. Using the hand that had been hanging over the side of the boat, Rosa grasped the man’s cold hand tightly.

“That’s enough, eh?”

The flavor of the accent with which she ended her words was the sweetest sounding of the tones employed by Kyǒngsang province women. She wiped the water from his hand with her handkerchief and rolled down his sleeve.

The boat arrived at the embankment on the far side. Once everyone had landed, they loaded the invalid back on the rickshaw and headed through the darkness toward the village opposite.

As he had said, Pak Sǒng-Un was the grandson of a Nakdong River fisherman, and the son of a farmer. His grandfather spent his whole life as a fisherman, his father spent his entire life as a farmer. Perhaps his father had decided to encourage his son to get ahead out of regret at his own ignorance, or perhaps he was just following what others were doing at the time; in any case, although he was barely scraping a living by farming land he rented from its owners, he made sure his son received an education, at the traditional Confucian academy, at the modern-style primary school, then at the provincial agricultural school

Once he had completed agricultural school, he worked for a couple of years at the county office as an agricultural assistant. In those days, his family thought of their son as some kind of high official, and boasted of him to everyone they met. On that account, the neighbors were immensely envious and made up their minds to have their own sons educated too.

Then the Independence Movement exploded. He made a clear decision, gave up everything he had been doing and joined the Movement. When it came to the point, he was an ardent militant. Like everyone in those days, he too spent a year and a half in prison.

Once that was done, when he came back to his family, his mother had died, while his elderly father had lost his house and gone to live with his daughter, Sǒng-Un’s older sister. That same year, life there having become impossible, the number of people leaving for Manchuria

increased suddenly. Father and son were obliged to join those setting out on the long journey, turning their backs on their former home. It was at that moment that Sŏng-Un composed and recited the Nakdong River song quoted earlier.

Once they reached Manchuria, they found it too was not a place where they could live comfortably. Pressure from the local officials, the Manchurians' arrogance, extortions from bandits, all were extreme. Father and son moved from place to place like everybody else. In the course of their travels he finally lost for ever his father, in that foreign land far from home.

After that, he journeyed throughout Manchuria, up into Siberia, went to Beijing, down to Shanghai, all the time working for the Independence Movement. Five years passed. The whole movement was stagnating and declining. He turned and headed for home. Just as he arrived back in Chosŏn, a great change occurred in his way of thinking. From being a passionate nationalist, he changed and became a socialist.

Reaching Seoul, he tried to find something to do but could not act as he wished. The reason was that the country's social action groups, instead of using their energies for some kind of task, did nothing but form useless factions, although their ideas and principles were all alike, then spent their time quarreling with one another. He joined forces with some people with aims similar to himself and started a movement designed to bring about reconciliation among factions, but to no effect; he tried to stir up public opinion but found no audience among people deeply steeped in factionalism. Finally he stood up angrily, declared in a kind of prophecy, "A time will come when these factions will be destroyed," returned to his native Kyŏngsang province, created a social movement group covering the whole southern part of the country and devoted himself exclusively to just causes, he himself taking charge of part of the area along the Nakdong river.

Seeing the state of the country, his rallying cry was, "Into the midst of the masses!"

The first thing he did was pay a visit to the village where he had formerly lived but the sight filled his heart with immense sorrow. When he had left five years before, it had been a large village of some hundred families but in the meantime its population had shrunk considerably. Instead, a large building with a galvanized iron roof, that had not been visible before, stretched ostentatiously, seeming to be scorning and coercing the crumbling thatched houses. Without asking he knew it must be the warehouse of the Oriental Development Company, that had been established by the Japanese government to exploit the land and resources of Korea. People who had once been medium land-holders had fallen to being small-holders, those who had been small-holders had fallen to being tenant-farmers, those who had been tenant-farmers had almost all left and scattered to the four winds. There was not one of his cherished childhood companions to be seen. They had all been dispersed, some to the cities, some to Manchuria, or to Japan. Not a trace, not a single post stone remained on the site of the house in which his family had lived for generations; the site was now the front yard of the warehouse, only the ancient zelkova tree that in the old days had stood beside their brushwood gate now stood in solitary splendor in the middle of the wide yard. He went rushing toward it like a child, spun around holding onto its trunk, laid his cheek against it, overcome with joy and sorrow at the same time. As he hugged the tree he shut his eyes. Memories from the past began to unwind like a thread. Memories of how in his childhood he used to hug the tree and spin around it as he had just done, of climbing to the topmost branches in summer to catch cicadas and being scolded by his bald grandfather, of the time when village youths had fixed a swing to its branches and he had pestered them to let him swing too, of playing at housekeeping in the shade of the tree with little Suni, the girl from next door, pretending to get married with Suni as the bride and himself as the bridegroom, and later, in his youth, he and the same Suni falling in love, then after she had been sold and was about to leave for P'yŏngyang, or perhaps it was Seoul, the two of them embracing in tears hidden secretly behind the tree late one night. Once all these

memories had gone drifting through his mind, he breathed out a prolonged kind of sob and opened his eyes. He muttered to himself:

“This is not the moment to recall all those kinds of things . . . really . . . tst . . .”

He turned and walked briskly away, as though intent on banishing and abolishing such thoughts. He had originally been a sensitive person with tender feelings. But he had recently been making every effort to repress such feelings by willpower.

“A revolutionary has to have a willpower of cast iron!”

Such was his life’s motto. But there were many occasions when his emotions cast off the bridle of willpower and ran free.

He began by establishing a program to be followed—publicity, organization, struggle, those three steps. First he set up a farmers’ evening school and devoted himself to educating the peasants. He set to work, stripping off all pretensions in order to be really one of them and share their emotions, doing rough farm work with them, going everywhere they were gathered, whether farming in the fields, gathered to chat in rooms, or in night classes, doing his utmost to awaken their consciousness of their rights as human beings, whenever and wherever opportunities arose.

Next he organized a tenant farmers’ union and launched a resistance movement against tyranny and exploitation by landowners, especially the Oriental Development Company, which was a great landowner.

The first year of the tenant farmers’ dispute was a success, though there were a number of victims. The following year was a complete failure. The tenant farmers’ union received the order to dissolve. The evening school was banned too. The tyranny and repression by the Oriental Development Company and the government were indescribable. No matter their zeal, no matter their endurance, there was nothing that could be done in such a country. Everything just came to a standstill. So in the autumn of the previous year one of his friends stood up in a rage and declared:

“I’m getting out of here. What can we do here? Terror’s the thing. There’s nothing left but terror.”

“Not so. We have to be here. To do the tasks of our class, it would be the same for us to go and work in China, to go and work in India, or any other nation of the world. But in our case, staying here to work is most convenient. Besides, even if we die, our responsibility and commitment is to die with the people living here in this land.”

Notwithstanding such exhortations, in the end he had to see one of his most trusted friends leave.

This sleeping land, or rather this cowering land, finally cost him dear. The cause of his deep trouble was nothing but this. In front of the village, on the edge of the Nakdong River, there was a reedbed several dozen acres in size. Thanks to that reedbed, ever since the river flowed and the village arose, people had cut the reeds to make mats, used them to make hats, sold them to buy clothes and food.

“The geese have flown off, over the Nakdong River
autumn winds blow, the reeds are fluttering.”

Now the occasions for singing this song had been lost. That reedbed was now private property. Because of the villagers’ ignorance, ten years previously it had been designated as government-owned wasteland, before finally being transferred to a Japanese man named Kadung on the pretext of ‘disposing of government-owned wastelands.’ From that autumn on, they could not even cut reeds. Representations had been made to the authorities several times but to no avail. Village folk had resisted, cutting the tip of a finger and writing protests in their blood, even organizing protest-groups bound by oaths sealed in blood. In the end, all failed. The villagers, beside themselves with fury, blindly cut and beat down the reeds which they had previously considered to be as precious as their lives. The owners hired guards, quarrels arose. Some people

got hurt. Finally, Sōng-Un was detained on charges of being the ringleader, and since he was very unpopular with the police he was severely tortured before being handed over to the prosecution, then after a further two months he had been released when the state of his health became too serious.

One additional episode should be mentioned here. It happened one market day that summer. At the market a big fight broke out between some members of the equality brigade, that were mainly drawn from the lowest classes, and market vendors, especially some of the resident merchants. It all started when one resident merchant spat out an insult as he was passing in front of the equality brigade headquarters, words were exchanged which turned into a fight, which spread until, hearing a report that enraged merchants had taken up clubs and attacked the village of the equality brigade, Sōng-Un took the lead and, having mobilized members of the youth league, the peasants' union, even the women's alliance, went rushing off to support the equality brigade. Once the fighting was over, the opposite side heaped scorn and opprobrium on him, complaining, "You louts, you're a new kind of butchers," to which he replied:

"Butchers or us, we're all human beings . . . only our jobs are different . . . besides, no matter what one's job, no job makes a person higher or lower than another. People from bygone feudal times talk like that . . . besides, we of the proletariat are obliged to make common cause with the equality brigade members. We need to recognize them as our brothers and companions . . ."

He shouted such things enthusiastically in the hearing of many people,

From that time the local women's alliance gained an additional member, Rosa, the daughter of a member of the equality brigade. Once she was an alliance member, she naturally began to be increasingly often in Sōng-Un's company. Thus they came increasingly close, until finally they were deeply in love.

Her parents, being members of the equality brigade, and perhaps wanting like Sōng-Un's parents to see their child, even a daughter, improve her lot, sent her to Seoul where after finishing high school she went on to attend a teachers training school, after which she went to teach in a primary school in the far-away Hamkyōng region, and this happened while she was visiting her home during a summer vacation. Their daughter's appointment as a state-commissioned teacher was the first and foremost honor her parents had known since the foundation of the world. Therefore her father reflected, "My daughter has the rank of state-commissioned teacher, so how can I keep on with my present job?" so he had given up his butcher's stall and even nourished thoughts of going to live in the place where his daughter was teaching and enjoy his new high-class status. This was something they had discussed and agreed on since his daughter arrived. Yet lo and behold, that fight had erupted out of the blue, after which his daughter had become a member of some kind of women's young people's association alliance, busily running around, taking up with some kind of extremist fellow, saying she wasn't going back to the place where she had been working, that she was giving up the honorable position she had reached. Her family found itself facing the biggest worry it had ever experienced. Coaxing, wheedling, all kinds of reasoning, their daughter would not listen to anything. In the end her father turned to shouting:

"You stupid wretch of a girl! A butcher's daughter, rising to such a privileged position, what could be better?"

To which she replied:

"Father, we have endured the abuses of those wicked men for hundreds of years, ever since our remote ancestors, yet you still retain the rotten ideas of that wicked breed, but I hate such a filthy job and all the rest . . . I want to live as a human being."

She was retorting to him with such arguments, when:

"Why, you little brat. So cheeky . . . What do you mean, eh, what do you mean?"

Her mother intervened in support of her husband.

"Hey, just you stop and think how hard we worked in that despised job so that you could

study. How can you talk like that if you care for your parents? Among our children you're the only one that we sent to school, a daughter too, so surely we did that expecting some kind of reward from you."

"So, Mother and Father, you mean that you did not send me to study and so become a human being, but saw me as something that can be raised to bring back benefits, just like a pig that's raised for profit."

"What the heck are you going on about? I can't understand a word you say. Why are you talking like this? Why?"

"Stop, I don't want to listen . . . I'll do as I like."

At that, her father flared up:

"What? You little brat . . . Stay out of my sight. I don't want to set eyes on you."

With that he stood up and stormed out.

After which Rosa remained collapsed on the floor sobbing bitter tears. It was not simply that she could not stand the shock of being scolded by her father. She knew that her parents acted like that because they were ignorant, and while hating that ignorance, she felt much stronger pity for their ignorance.

As always at such times, Rosa went rushing to find Sŏng-Un in search of sympathy. Understanding that, he encouraged her:

"You have to be like a bombshell fired from the very lowest level. You have to stand up to family, society, other women, and men, everything.

At that point, Rosa collapsed, burying her face in Sŏng-Un's lap, trembling with emotion, and began to weep. He continued:

"You will have to stand up to yourself, too. You must kick aside your tears, those everyday tears, the weak things that women tend to be proud of . . . We all together have to become strong people."

In this way Rosa, by the power of love and thought, quickly became a changed person. Her name was not originally Rosa. Once, when they happened to be talking of Rosa Luxemburg, Sŏng-Un had laughingly remarked:

"Your family name is Ro, so let's really call you Rosa, eh? You must become a real Rosa."

From that moment what had been a joke came true and she changed her name to Really Rosa.

It is early in the afternoon a few days after the group surrounding the ailing Sŏng-Un crossed the Nakdong River and headed for the village opposite, piercing the darkness. A procession many times longer than when they arrived emerges from the village and moves toward the river embankment. A host of banners are flapping. A double file of people is holding a long strip of hemp cloth in their hands. In front a flag edged in black bears the inscription "The funeral of the late Pak Sŏng-Un."

Behind that are multicolored pennants with the names of this or that alliance, association, union or brigade. Then a host of banners with commemorative inscriptions:

"The warrior has left us. But his hot blood leaps in our hearts."

"You have left us! Before the day dawned, you left! We will not be able to join hands with you in the dance welcoming the dawning day."

There were too many to count. Among the rest was one containing what looked like long lines of poetry:

"You often told me to become a bombshell fired from the very lowest level. You are right! I will become that shell.

"As you were dying, you told me to truly become a bombshell. You are right! I will become

that shell.”

It was clear without asking that that was Rosa’s inscription.

Late in the morning one day later that year, as the first snowflakes come fluttering down, it is time for the train to leave Kup’o station and head northward. Until the train has passed the last fields, a woman sits gazing steadily out of the compartment window. It is Rosa. She seems determined to follow the path previously taken by her dead lover. But soon she too will return to this land that she will never be able to forget.