

Winter That Year

by Yi Munyol

Translated by Brother Anthony

I think the time has finally come when I can try to explain what happened that winter, all those years ago. I'm well past thirty now, and I've got a family I have to provide for; so every morning I go out to work, wearing a suit and really looking quite respectable. At last I have come to realize that all our feelings need to be filtered over and over again, and that fine phrases achieved by exaggeration, or misrepresentation, are nothing at all to be proud of.

It was more than ten years ago. For a couple of months during the winter that year I found myself working at a rural inn in a remote mountain village in the northern part of Kyongsang Province, employed as a *pang-wu*. In the old days, 'Pang-wu' was a boy's name, common enough among country-folk, but by that time it was simply used as a nickname for any general handyman or dogsbody.

Needless to say, I did not originally quit school and leave home just to go and work as a *pang-wu* in that god-forsaken spot! When I first set out, I headed for Kangwon Province, farther to the North, intending to get work in the coal mines there. But in those days people were having a hard enough time earning a living, and it was no easy matter for a nondescript scruff from nowhere, like me, to find a job at all. In the end I only once got a chance to go down a mine – a privately-owned one; it was appalling. A private mine, well, it's . . . but you can still find magazine articles about such places, so you can imagine what things were like ten years ago! On my first day underground, I saw the supporting wall of one gallery collapse on two men, burying them alive before my very eyes! I was so horrified, I gave up the idea of becoming a miner, once and for all. As a matter of fact, in one corner of my little travelling-bag I was carrying a bottle with some pills that would have finished me off in a couple of minutes, and intellectually I had always lived on what you might call intimate terms with death. But I could not endure the idea of dying like that.

So I headed southwards, until I came to a tiny fishing village out on the east coast, where I had a vague idea of getting work on board a fishing boat. Again, things didn't work out. I spent ten days hanging round the quayside; the village men scraped a living by fishing close inshore on small narrow boats, but not one of them so much as glanced at me. Once, I plucked up all my courage and spoke to the pirate-faced owner of one antiquated motor-boat, asking if he had any work for me. But he began to mock me openly, observing first my pale face, then my uncalloused hands:

'My! What a fine family you must come from! You get straight back home to your books, sonny. Why, you'd be bringing up your last new year's dinner before we were a mile out from port!'

I had no choice, I left there and headed blindly inland. I still remember the bright autumn leaves and the deep blue of the sky above me as I went climbing stubbornly over nameless hilltop passes. I walked for five whole days, taking paths without knowing where I was or where they would lead, until at last I reached that inn.

I paid for my first night's stay there with the last of my money and, after ordering

wine and drinking until I was half-drunk, I fell asleep as if I had not a care in the world. But when I woke up the next morning, everything looked decidedly grim. Here I was, in an absolutely unfamiliar place, without a penny to my name. There was no other solution: I asked the inn-keeper, who looked kind-hearted enough, to help me find some sort of job in the neighbourhood, and in the end he took me on himself. Not with any kind of regular pay, mind, just board and lodgings, with expenses and a bit of pocket money. I accepted, because really I was in no position to say anything one way or another. Thinking of the work I was going to have to do, I couldn't say I was being hard done by.

Now, if I seriously intend to get to the bottom of what happened to me that winter, I shall have to ask what was going on in my mind between the moment when I first left Seoul and my arrival at that place. The idea that I might be able to work as a miner, or on a fishing boat for that matter, was really quite ridiculous; yet such had been my intention from the moment I first set out from home. So I must admit that I was not being completely rational, but that does not mean that there is absolutely no explanation for the evolution of my feelings.

As I have already implied, there had certainly been no clear intellectual motivation underlying my departure; it had been provoked mainly by a feeling of emptiness, a kind of despair deriving from the fatigues and confusions of two years at university, brought to a head by the death of a close friend. Everything had got blown out of all proportion – it seemed to me at times that life was asking me to make some kind of radical decision: either hurl away its bitter cup, for example, or ignore the bitterness and go on drinking from it. That kind of stuff. The idea of an ultimate radical decision was excessively emotional, of course, but I can't help feeling that the fact I was only twenty at the time excuses me at least in part.

Besides, there was another, vaguely optimistic side of me which felt that the difficulties I was going through were something that everyone has to face once in a lifetime; in that case, the confusion and fatigue would one day be overcome. Once they were things of the past, they would turn into precious youthful experience. Maybe even my idea of becoming a miner or fisherman should be seen as an attempt to move in the direction of some such optimism. I had an inkling that my dreadful confusion was the result of having been too long dependent on empty speculation; at the same time, I was aware that the brain achieves its best repose when the body is hard at work. My departure, then, was no desperate plunge into some over-hasty conclusion about life, but rather the recognition of a need to give my mind time to rest while I was sweating away at hard work, so that afterwards I might be better equipped to find some kind of clue to the real form my life should take.

I suspect that another reason why I drove myself towards hard, rough work and extreme situations should be sought in the delights of that kind of self-torment that is so easily mistaken for self-discipline. In other words, if I drove myself as I did, perhaps it was not really from a wish to confront life, but rather in the hope of finding an alibi, by maximalizing misery and pain, that would absolve my past failings. Or did I intend to provoke a crisis that would draw out my latent capabilities?

I must confess, though, that I have had these thoughts only very recently; at the time, I was completely dominated by a feeling of apathy and indifference. As far as in me lay, I tried to avoid anything that might solicit too much attention from me, or provoke thoughts that I would find it hard to cope with. There were moments when I used to let myself sink into a

completely soporific state of silence and inaction, suggestive of total imbecility. So I suppose it was my apathy and indifference, rather than any urgent financial need, that explain why I accepted so unresistingly that job as *pang-wu* in a village tavern – a job which, if we are talking about degradation, may seem like the ultimate in degradation.

The tavern I had landed in was almost too big for a small provincial town. It had nine rooms in all, and normally served as an ordinary guest-house for passers-by. There was a ‘special’ occasion, though, when it became something else: a rural *bordello* with a girl on duty in every room! I’ll tell you about that in a minute.

My main task every day was to ensure that the oil-lamps hanging in the nine rooms would burn properly that night; I also had to make sure that the floors were kept heated.

In addition, I was supposed to sweep the courtyard, all two hundred square yards of it, carry in drinks, take orders to the brew-house, and so on. In actual fact, the yard was usually swept by the landlord himself – he was a bundle of energy – drinks were always carried up to the rooms by the six or seven serving-girls, and one of the men employed at the inn knew the brew-house family well, so that there was no need for me to go panting there and back.

Even so, the work was very hard to begin with, and it took all my time. First, every day the chimneys of the nine lamps had to be cleaned of a thick layer of soot; it was just as arduous to trim the wicks so that they wouldn’t smoke when they were turned up to give a bright light in the rooms. It was equally no easy matter to split the logs – carted down from the nearby hills – into firewood to heat the floors of the nine rooms. On days when the logs brought down weren’t dry enough, finding good kindling was an extra worry and by the time I had all nine fires going properly, burning dead pine needles to dry out the damp wood, it was always past midnight.

Still, there’s a proper knack to everything, and before one month was past I had got used to it all, indeed I was enjoying my work and had become quite proud of my skills.

Those lamps had burned late into the night, sometimes casting their brightness over scenes of riotous merry-making, with all the intoxication, passion, and emptiness that go with that, so by the time I had washed off the heavy layer of soot with warm soapy water, then rinsed the chimneys in clear water, wiped them dry and polished them bright with a cloth, I too would begin to feel cleaner and brighter. When the moment came to light the wicks, carefully prepared so that the flame would not crack the glass or smoke, the sight of the regular flame burning inside the clean chimney gave me a feeling not unlike that an artist derives from the completion of a laboriously created work of art.

It was the same with the heating of the rooms. In preparing the firewood, I was never stingy or haphazard. Normally, every day I would choose six logs from the pile brought down from the hills and dumped at one edge of the wide yard. Three crooked and full of knots, three straight-grained and regular, ready to split with a single blow of the hatchet; first I would saw them into lengths of about fifteen inches, then, stripping to my shirt, I would begin to chop them into firewood in the pale winter afternoon sunlight.

There was a pleasure in splitting the straight-grained logs of red pine with a single stroke of the axe, to be sure, but even now I cannot forget the intense satisfaction that came from cleaving at one blow those roots of young pine brushwood, all twisted and full of holes, after a careful scrutiny. But the most impressive task of all was using that firewood to light

the fires. I wonder what I used to look like to people who saw me? Did anyone ever realize that I felt as if I was celebrating a solemn ritual of fire-worship?

At nightfall, after an early supper, once the lamps were lit in the nine rooms, I would lay an armful of firewood by the fire-hole outside each of the rooms; then I would set out on a pilgrimage, visiting each shrine in turn, clasping some sheets of newspaper and two large bottles.

One bottle would be full of wine, the other of paraffin. The wine I used to take from the big jar that was always kept brimming full in the kitchen – my employers were not very fussy about such things. The paraffin I used to buy with some of the pocket money they provided, it was my solution to the endless problem of getting the fires to catch.

By the time I had completed the round of all nine hearths, both bottles were usually empty. Likewise the pockets of my jacket, that I had stuffed full of dried fish and other delicacies from the kitchen to nibble as I drank. Then, pleasantly mellow, I would go and lie down in the little room allotted to me. Sometimes, if I felt particularly cheerful, I might return to the kitchen and knock back a few more glasses, but more often than not I would either fall asleep at once, or lie there gazing absently at the reflections of the flames still dancing before my eyes.

To tell the truth, if I ever have the chance I intend to study the teachings of Zoroastrianism. There in front of my nine hearths each day I felt quite sure that I was contemplating the shadows of the gods of the Fire-worshippers, the god of Good and the god of Evil, despite the silence they kept. I witnessed solemn rites of purification and sacrifice too, and as the flames spread then died, I felt that something was being brought back to life in me, rekindled. I like to think that it was perhaps the fire's sacred powers that gave me the inexplicable sense of peace and contentment I felt then, as I murmured, 'If this is eternity, all will be well!'

Now I must mention that 'special' occasion. The quiet country inn was suddenly turned into a *kisaeng*-house, with nine private suites, at least half a dozen girls, and dozens of visitors every day! All through the spring and summer, the house had been almost totally empty, only occasionally welcoming a chance visitor or two: a scribe from the mountain regions, or a newly-appointed school-master who had not yet found lodgings of his own; but as the late autumn winds began to blow, the place came alive.

First the courtyard flower-beds, that had been left neglected since the summer, were tidied up; then the shabby walls, the peeling corner-posts and main gateway were refurbished. Next the stained and tattered paper covering the lattice-work of the sliding doors was all replaced, together with the wallpaper and floor-coverings. Finally, rough curtains were draped across the peep-holes in the doors.

Once all these renovations were complete, there were other preparations to be made. The landlord went as far as D. to fetch girls; his wife went to nearby A. to purchase high-quality delicacies, things you wouldn't find even in the big city *kisaeng*-houses. During the period in question, the inn was completely closed to other guests. Once all the preparations were complete, we opened our doors to a small group of privileged government officials commonly known as 'the inspectors'.

It may seem odd, at first hearing, that the arrival of a handful of officials should

require so many rooms, and girls, to say nothing of a cartload of high-class delicacies every week! I myself could not understand all the owners' hustle and bustle when I first witnessed it, just after my arrival at the inn. But then the inspectors arrived, and I soon began to understand. You see, these officials were going to weigh and evaluate the quality of the leaf-tobacco which was the area's main crop. The population of the place was upward of ten thousand at that time, but the annual revenue was in the region of seven hundred million Won or so. When you remember what things were like back ten years ago, you will realize that the tobacco was a source of enormous wealth for the whole area.

Now, the decision as to the quality of the tobacco depended entirely on the inspector's naked eye. Of course, I suppose there must have been some kind of standards laid down to guide them, but you could not expect mechanical precision. A margin of one or two points in either direction might depend on the official's state of mind. And that margin could not really be guaranteed or checked, there was no accountability.

Yet that couple of points could make all the difference to the farmers. It was enough to make their crop either an enormous success with a big profit, or a failure. The weighing, too, had its influence on the final profit. There was a fixed norm, of course, but all the bundles of leaves were not absolutely the same weight, so that allowances had to be made which varied according to the person doing the weighing. From what I heard, whether the inspection was done well or badly could make a difference of up to a hundred thousand Won to an average family. When you remember that in those days a full year's tuition at a private university only cost fifty thousand Won, wouldn't you have tried to influence the outcome?

I am sure things have changed now, but in those days the people living there had basically two channels by which they might try to bribe the inspectors. One involved the committee of the Tobacco Growers' Association, but that was often ineffectual, there were too many delegates, the secret might easily become public. The alternative method was both discreet and sure, involving as it did only the landlord of the inn. That was the reason why his establishment was so full of high living during those special occasions.

I still remember it all quite clearly: the daily drinking parties echoing with the women's flirtatious laughter, and the sight of the government officials besieged by obsequious farmers. Two of the inspectors, one A and a certain B, lorded it like great emperors. Later, when I happened to find out how low down on the administrative scale they really were, I was quite scandalized!

Still, I hope the reader will not get me wrong. Certainly those men acted insolently and arrogantly towards me, so that I nourish a real animosity towards them; but what I am writing is not being written with the thought of bringing their past misdeeds to light.

My most unforgettable memories of that place are all connected with the girls. They were lovely, but often they looked so wretched and lonely. They came from various places.

The landlord of the inn claimed to have found them through an employment agency at D. but the girls all came from different regions and towns. If there was one who came from an island in the south, another was from a remote mountain village in the north; if there was one who had been driven off an American base, another was a semi-intellectual dropout from a technical college.

In all, about a dozen women came to work at the inn during the two months I spent there. The life they led was superficially full of gaiety, but they inspired pity at the same time.

Early in the evening, when they were dressed in their elegant billowing silk skirts and blouses, moving lightly like bright swallows, wearing tasteful make-up, those girls looked really beautiful. When they were moderately drunk, and excitedly deciding which popular song to sing, or bursting into screams of laughter, I somehow felt that life could even be fun. When the girl who was particularly popular with inspectors A and B began to pull out 500 Won notes from her blouse or slippers, thanks to the farmers' method of indirect bribery, I would even go so far as to reflect that some jobs are not so bad after all.

But when I witnessed the insults that the girls had to take from insistent guests, completely naked, or saw them lying unconscious after vomiting up the mixture of drinks they had been forced to swallow, the only thing I felt then was pity. It was always a challenge to see them when they came in late the next morning after washing their faces. Their skin showed tints of blue or flushes of scarlet, from all the drink and the cheap make-up they used.

None of those girls ever ate any breakfast; then at lunch they would make do with a bowl of noodles, or some rice mixed with vegetables. And nobody would eat anything at supper-time, either. I was appalled when I found out why. They didn't eat, so that they could get through more of the expensive drinks and delicacies in the guests' rooms later. It was a trick they had learned from the harsh brothel-keepers of the cities, and it had stuck with them like an unwritten law. It played havoc with their digestive systems, so that at times they produced the most dreadful retching sounds.

I remember one incident: there was a very young girl, called Miss Kim, who was the current favorite of inspector A; one day we had just sat down to a late lunch when inspector A suddenly called for her. She had mixed an appetizing bowl of rice with vegetables and was about to take the first spoonful when the message came. She put the spoon back in the bowl and went across to the inspector's room.

Scarcely ten minutes later she came back, her dress dishevelled. She threw her spoon down noisily onto the table, swore, "Son of a bitch!" and spat; her eyes were full of tears. A few five-hundred Won notes were still peeking out of the sweater pocket they had been stuffed into, as if to mock the kind of girl she was. For some reason, I felt a pricking in my nose, my throat constricted, and I put my spoon down.

One of the women couldn't sleep at nights because her breasts were swelling; she had been obliged to leave at home the baby she was nursing when she came to work at the inn. Another went down to A. every Sunday to visit her husband in the army. Then there was the girl who cried every night because she missed the young brothers she had left behind with her step-mother. All those sad memories. . . And there was a woman whose whole body was covered with whip-scars and cigarette-burns, only she couldn't forget the man who had done it to her, so that when she got drunk she would grab someone and pour out all her woes far on into the night; the thought of that woman's infatuation still brings tears to my eyes.

I have other memories, too, of course. I remember how the local people, who had come into big money thanks to the tobacco they grew in poor fields that had previously been good for nothing but millet or maize, would spend money like crazy, while good-for-nothing big-shots who had once been mere lumber-thieves went swaggering around. I shall never forget how some spent all day playing Mah-jong feverishly in back rooms. A few were so obsessed with scoring *chen-pa-wan* and *pen-chi-tung* that when the police finally got them

for illegal gambling, they couldn't take their finger-prints because the tips of their fingers had been polished smooth by the tiles! Then there was a group of unpaid resident journalists who came flocking around like mosquitoes, all the fantastically-minded members of the Journalists' Association, local station-heads of big national papers which in our town were lucky if they sold a hundred copies all told . . . But that's enough of that. I'm in no position to blame or pity any of them; and besides, this book isn't about them, either.

All together, the first weeks of my life there were pleasant enough. The most agreeable thing as far as I was concerned was the fact that I was earning my living with my own two hands. True, I had sometimes supported myself before, but that winter's sensation was a new and special experience for me.

What made my life there even pleasanter was that nothing demanded too much attention or provoked thoughts that I found hard to cope with. I admit I've painted a pretty lively picture of the tobacco inspectors, the girls, and the farmers, but in actual fact, it has taken an immense effort to bring them all back from the dark corners of the distant past. Besides, at the period I am writing about, they were only pale shadows flitting to and fro somewhere outside the walls of my apathy and indifference.

Things could not go on like that indefinitely, though, and before two months had passed, I was beginning to hear two contradictory voices within me, both trying to arouse me out of the kind of hibernation I had fallen into.

One was sly and insinuating:

'You left home and school as if you were setting out on some tremendous quest for truth, and you've spent a couple of months wandering around looking solemn and earnest. Now what? Have you got to the roots of that feeling of emptiness and despair that you said kept pursuing you? Have you advanced even one step in the direction of that so-called 'decision' you kept insisting that you wanted to make? Aren't you just masking your cowardice and indecision under some kind of superficial self-torment? Isn't this life you're enjoying so much merely running away, aren't you putting things off? . . .'

While the other voice would murmur in melancholy tones:

'It may be that your decision to leave home was courageous and justified. You rejected all the ready-made values that the world accepts, and you set out because you wanted to find and verify for yourself another set of principles. But surely you're wasting your youth and your talents here in this crazy dump? Don't you realize that at this very moment you're being overtaken by a whole lot of kids, all smarter and nimbler than you are? . . .'

I first heard those voices one morning on waking early with a burning thirst provoked by the previous night's excessive drinking, and they grew sharper as the days went by.

Previous to that, for some time past two people had already been compelling me to think about moving on from there.

One was a newly-arrived girl, Miss Yun. She was placid enough to look at, and when she had a moment she used to scribble the words of popular songs into a thick notebook she kept; but she was all the time pestering me with her incredible fantasies:

'You're a poet, Pang-wu, aren't you? I know all about you. You used to live in a big city, didn't you? You went to university, too, didn't you? I know all about you. It may not look like it, but I used to have a lover just like you. But we've broken up now, it was better

for both of us, we loved each other too much.'

That was usually how it went; and that simple-looking girl, who seemed just right for pop-song lyrics, was for ever pestering me. Sometimes she would go rummaging through my bag while I was out. At other times, escaping from a guest's room, she would follow me while I was lighting the fires. If I said nothing, she would get angry, claiming that I was insulting her. But if I was foolish enough to respond, her unbridled imagination would go leaping higher than ever: 'Your father's the head of a big company, isn't he? The girl you loved died of leucemia, didn't she?' She used to drive me almost crazy.

The other problem was the deputy head of the police, with his thick chin and protruding eyes. For some reason or other, he began to take an intense interest in me, after first noticing me one day during a chance visit to the inn. He was an incomparable nuisance. Somehow he convinced himself that I was a desperate criminal and that I had done something serious enough to earn him a long-overdue promotion. I was called to the police-station several times, and it was so intolerable that in the end I produced my student identity-card. But that only fired his enthusiasm. How many student demonstrations had I been involved in? What anti-government organizations was I part of? Wasn't I connected with the XX Party that was currently going through the courts? . . . It was infuriating.

So I decided to leave that place. One morning, as the frost sparkled on the branches of the persimmon tree next-door, I took a brief farewell of my employer at the inn, nobody else, and walked briskly out of the town.

There is only one other thing to mention in my recollections of that spot, and that is my strange parting from Miss Yun. I had already gone a couple of miles when I heard a voice calling me from behind. It was Miss Yun, who had somehow learned of my departure. She came running up panting, and I am sure she would have flung her arms around me if I had not deliberately adopted a hostile expression. Abruptly holding out something wrapped in pretty paper, she said:

'It's a handkerchief. I had it all ready for you. I knew you'd be leaving soon.'

She paused, then added in a sad voice:

'That man wasn't really a poet. He was a swindler, he beat me up and took all my money. I did so want to love a poet. Will you remember me for a long, long time?'

For some reason, as she spoke the girl's eyes were moist, and that was the only time I felt that her eyes did not look stupid. When I think about it now, I rather wonder if she was not a poet herself.

It was already deep mid-winter. After covering almost five miles, I reached a crossroads where the road leading inland met another leading to the sea. Oddly enough, I chose the road leading seawards, although I was not born near the sea, there had never been any special event in my life to link me with it, and this time I had no practical reason for going there, no thought of working on a boat; I simply chose the road that lay in the opposite direction to home.

I still have a notebook kept from those days, and there I find I wrote that the sea was calling me. With almost no trace of artifice or exaggeration, I wrote that the sea had been beckoning to me and tempting me for a long time past. I suppose that the inner voice I was hearing then was the radical one that had been insisting I should make a decision. Clearly, I

obeyed that voice; I made up my mind that the sea would be the place where I would finally decide whether to cast away the bitter cup or persevere in drinking it. Of course, underlying that decision is the fact that I had just turned twenty. Frankly speaking, is there any folly you are not ready to commit at that age?

Anyway, I duly turned towards the sea, which lay about twenty-five miles away as the crow flies. But since I would be obliged to make a long detour round the rugged peaks of Mount Taebaek, the distance I had to cover was in fact almost fifty miles. That was a stiff four days' journey with my flat feet, but I stubbornly set out to walk the whole way.

I advanced at first with a heavy heart. The road I was on would not have made anyone happy, and I remember a kind of ominous premonition, a tragic feeling that I might never return.

Once I reached the first wayside inn, though, that mood quickly vanished. Instead, I was soon absorbed in childish delight at the thought of being on my way to somewhere unknown, tipsy from the wine I had drunk to make up for breakfast, which I had skipped in order to set off more quickly. The road winding its unending way around nameless slopes, the stark branches of the roadside poplar trees where the pale winter sky seemed to dangle, the crisp odour of petrol borne in the clouds of dust stirred up whenever a vehicle passed . . . after a while I began to murmur those lines in which Virgil once praised the joys of travel: if I had been free to choose my own destiny, it would have been a life in the saddle . . .

All that day, I was truly a Happy Wanderer! As soon as the winter breezes cleared my head of the effects of wine, I would stop and carelessly take another drink at some tavern or roadside store; and whenever I found the view particularly attractive, I would sit down and rest until the sweat cooled and my whole body began to shiver.

Other travellers, and with the cold we were all walking briskly, became good companions along the way. Responding to their various attitudes and expressions, I cheered them along, showing sympathy, or admiration.

When I was overtaken by a local man belonging to an opposition party that had never held power, I became a student expelled for leading demonstrations. I touched his heart with talk of things I had heard the previous year, and delighted him with a denunciation of the government's scandalous agricultural policies remembered from some militant article I had read. He told me about his own lofty political ambitions and added that he was called Park Yukmun (six talents), a name not easily forgotten; when he asked my name I at once gave him that of a well-known student leader. It was rather embarrassing when he earnestly invited me to spend a night at his house, as we were about to part.

Meeting up with a yokel as tipsy as I was, I became a fighter straight out of the backstreets of Seoul. I overawed him by mentioning a few of the big names of that milieu, then gained his respect by recounting various celebrated fights that I had either witnessed or been directly involved in. I was greatly helped by an outdated thriller I had once read. Still, I was lucky that dumb-looking lout didn't propose a sparring match then and there!

Next I met up with an elder from a country church, a sober farmer in his fifties who didn't give me time to speak a word, he was so busy denouncing the Demon Drink. I also walked a mile or so with a young factory girl on her way home for the lunar New Year. She told me she was a clerk in a city office, but I could see at a glance how poor and weary she was. If she couldn't find a good husband on this visit home, our next encounter might well be

in a bar in some red-light area.

There was a teacher from a local school on his way to do his turn as night-guard, and we drank a bottle of *soju* together. And an old cattle-merchant who proudly displayed the lighter his son had brought back from Vietnam. All in all, it was a very merry journey. I sometimes almost forgot why I was walking along that road.

I had not the slightest feeling of melancholy by the time night fell and I arrived in a village up on the spur of a hill with a little church perched above it.

In such an out-of-the-way spot I was not expecting a hoary castle with a feudal lord on the look-out for a passing minstrel, or a princess ready to take my hand in hers. I had got used to plain food and fatigue in the course of my recent months' wanderings, and my feelings were likewise atuned to solitude and twilight.

As I expected, there was no inn there. What did that matter? If you prowled around that kind of village long enough of an evening, you could always be sure of coming across a house with lights burning and a murmur of voices issuing from it, where a group of young villagers would be busy making ropes out of straw, or playing cards. There you had no problem getting a place to sleep. Otherwise, you could always apply to the village head, who was given a couple of bushels of rice a year for welcoming passing travellers.

Supposing neither of those solutions worked, you could use the village hall or the meeting room belonging to the 4H Association. They were usually marvellously unheated, but at a pinch they did offer a place to curl up in for a night's rest, at least.

Otherwise, so long as you had your identity-card with you, you could sleep snugly in one of the reservists' guard-posts, found at frequent intervals in that area. There was therefore generally no need to go around knocking on peoples' doors begging to pay for a place to sleep.

So it turned out that evening. After I had eaten a leisurely supper in a little roadside store, I strolled around the village; it was not long before the guard at a checkpoint challenged me, and the problem of my night's lodgings was settled.

Once they had checked my identity-card, the young combat-policeman and the two village lads on guard-duty with him proved very hospitable. They invited me to share a drink with them, and gave me the warmest spot on the floor to lie on; except for the lice I felt crawling in my underclothes the next day, I can say I received nothing but kindness there.

The second morning, despite having a sore head and a stomach burning from the previous day's mixture of drinks, I still felt just as merry; after the combat-policeman had treated me to breakfast and a hair of the dog at his boarding-house, I duly set off. The day before, I had only covered about fifteen miles, yet my feet were already beginning to blister. They were not particularly painful, but I rubbed the inside of my walking-shoes with soap, following some advice I had heard once. I hurried along, still glancing indifferently at the buses that stirred up the dust as they passed. If it hadn't been for the second encounter of the day, I reckon the whole journey would have been most agreeable, at least until I reached the sea.

For some reason, I disliked the fellow from the very second I set eyes on him, with his pale consumptive face and over-long untidy black hair. I didn't really believe him when he said that he had been convalescing from TB in his native village for the last few years. Of

course, I ought to have noticed at once his neat white hands and the big pen-mark on his middle finger. I suppose the fiasco I endured that day was equally due to my mind's not being properly awake and clear after the previous night's drinking.

I took a moment to size him up, then repeated my antics of the day before. Feeling that he had a certain intellectual or speculative air about him, I became a Seeker after Truth. I began to lay it on, talking of God and Man, of morality and values, the world and existence. Sure enough, an expression of admiration soon appeared on that fellow's face, the same as I had seen on the faces of my companions the previous day. I duly continued with increased enthusiasm.

But as the minutes passed, his expression showed less and less interest. He listened in silence until I had finished, but for the last few moments before our ways parted, his expression was clearly one of utter contempt and derision.

Seeing this change come over him, and seized by an inexplicable irritation, I became more and more feverish. By the end, in a kind of frenzy, I was going on about books chosen at random, works that I had never been able to understand, simply repeating what I had read in commentaries about them.

Yet I was obliged to part from him without having being able to bring back that initial expression of admiration, and the crushing proof of how utterly I had failed came when we were already nearly fifty yards apart; from beyond the corner he had just turned I heard the most peculiar kind of scream. I went rushing fearfully in that direction. But it had not been a scream. It had been the sound of the laughter he had been bottling up for far too long, exploding mingled with a hacking cough it provoked. There the man was, leaning against a small rocky outcrop, doubled over, laughing and coughing at the same time, so that he was nearly fainting. There were traces of blood on his lips and hands.

'Forgive me, ha, ha, I can't help ha, ha, laughing . . . ha, ha . . . Thank you so much ha, ha, for your lecture on basic philosophy, ha, but you ha . . . haven't understood Hei . . . Heidegger and you've obviously never ha, ha, read any of . . . ha, the ordinary language philosophers but . . . ha, ha, ha . . .'

That was what he painfully gasped out, once he had recognized me. Frankly, I felt strongly inclined to murder him on the spot. How can I tell you just how wretched I felt? An acrobat falling off a tightrope could not have felt more miserable. Ten years later, I still blush to think of it. My grudge against Heidegger and the Oxford philosophers of ordinary language dates from that incident; I have never been able to read them.

I walked on, plunged in gloom for the rest of the day. The wind suddenly seemed icier, keener, the sky loomed heavy and dark. As my wandering grew lonelier, increasingly the sea became real and concrete. One glance, and that fellow had known me for what I was.

At university, I had desperately admired the myths of the older students, but could never comprehend their ideology. What first fascinated me was not their iron will or strong convictions, but their magnificent memories of past victories. Then, when I saw them broken and negated by a power they could not resist, I gave them up them without regret, taking nothing with me but a few scraps of abstract ideology and an exaggerated feeling of resentment.

It had been the same with the cultural and aesthetic circles I then began to frequent. Was I really in pursuit of the essence of Beauty? No. It was all a sham; drunk with the

applause that had greeted the odd poem read at a candlelit ‘Literary Evening,’ or a few short essays published in scruffy private magazines, I was hoping to enjoy an even greater spurious reputation in the future.

I read at least a thousand books then, certainly, but can that be called a Quest for Truth? Was I really aflame with the splendor of the pure Idea? No. I was inspired with adolescent vanity when I read them, it was all for a table in a student bar, for a cup of coffee in a coffee-shop, sitting opposite some silly girl, nothing more.

Yet I dared to say, “Ideology has betrayed me, beauty has rejected my approaches, studies have brought me nothing.” In short, I denied all values before I had any basis for judgement, and gave far too much importance to a groundless sense of despair and futility. In the end I merely made a mess of everything, sinking more and more into intoxication and sheer abandon.

On I trudged, so absorbed in these nagging thoughts that I quite forgot I ought to eat something, or might stop for a drink. Changes in the surrounding landscape no longer touched me. Various voyagers overtook me, it was as if I did not see them. Perhaps those unpleasant thoughts are also to blame if my first encounter with that man, who was to make such a deep impression on me, left me so unmoved.

It was late in the afternoon, and I was walking along a road beside a stream. Suddenly my eye was caught by a thread of smoke rising from a bonfire burning by the stream. Someone seemed to be hard at work beside the fire polishing something. I approached absent-mindedly, and saw it was an old man sharpening a knife on a whetstone. Beside him lay a wooden box with shoulder-straps to carry it by; the lid was open and I could see knives of various sizes neatly arranged along the sides. By the fire he had laid out a variety of whetstones and a small grindstone.

I had approached a few steps nearer, when the old man lifted his head to examine the blade of the knife he was sharpening. He looked old, but was not as old as I had at first thought. The blade shone pale. The knife looked like an ordinary kitchen knife, but it was narrower than normal in the middle and more sharply pointed at the tip. After intently examining the blade, he shot a sudden look at me as I drew near. It was only a passing glance, but it was as if an icy dart had pierced my breast. There was something uncommonly malicious and bloodthirsty about both the knife in his hand and his deeply wrinkled face.

Quickly regaining control of myself, I glanced again towards the old man, who was once more absorbed in his task. I saw nothing but a common-or-garden knife-grinder. And the new knife he had taken out to grind was just an ordinary, slightly rusty kitchen-knife of the kind you often see. My sudden curiosity had brought me to a halt; now, embarrassed, I quickly withdrew.

It was only after I had gone a couple more miles that I realized what had intrigued me: up in the mountains, practically every household has its own whet-stones, so that there was no need for a professional knife-grinder; besides, why light a fire at a cold stream-side and grind knives with water drawn from under broken ice? But I had no chance to think more about all that. Night was coming on, and I could see the village of Y. wrapped in its evening smoke waiting for me. I was very tired.

What a truly awful nightfall! It was as sad as the sleepless first night of my not very

auspicious marriage, spent in a cheap hotel room trying to comfort my sobbing bride. Why did that town of Y., that I reached with a weary body and heavy heart, look so desolate? It was the most sizeable settlement in the area, but there was not a single light to be seen. It was not quite dark yet, but in the streets hardly a soul was moving. All you could hear was the sound of the wind moaning in the telegraph lines, there was not even a dog barking.

I was as tired as could be, and although I had no money to spare, I looked around for an inn. But I went down even the narrowest alleys without being able to find one anywhere. So I decided I would eat something first, and went back towards a tiny Chinese restaurant I had noticed. I was thinking of taking a quick bite there, then asking where I might find a room for the night.

I was just lifting the dusty curtain of the restaurant to go in, when I heard someone call out my name behind me: ‘Yonghun! It is Yonghun, isn’t it?’

Astonished, I turned round and saw a young woman standing in the misty twilight, but at first I did not recognize her. She was coming nearer to take a closer look, as if she could not believe her own eyes. It seemed most unlikely that anybody in that region could know me, but instinctively I did the same.

‘It *is* you! Thank goodness I called out! I didn’t think it could really be you!’

She recognized me first; then I saw who she was, and exclaimed,

‘But what are you doing here, Big Sis?’

‘A school teacher goes where she’s sent. What about you? What are *you* doing here?’

‘Me? Well . . . I . . .’

‘Let’s go home first. Why, it’s snowing, isn’t it?’

Indeed, it had begun to snow. It had not only been my low spirits that had made the sky look so low and dark all afternoon!

As we made our way to her rented room, I tried to recall my memories of this long-forgotten girl I had learned to call ‘Big Sis’. I am not really sure how closely related we were, we were some kind of cousins, with her the elder by several years; and my first, clearest memory of her dates from an autumn day many years before. I was still attending primary school in my native village, she had gone away to attend middle school in nearby B.. I think it was a Saturday afternoon, and I had stayed behind late at school to play. I met her by chance; she must have been on her way back home for the weekend, I suppose, and we walked the rest of the way together.

I have no idea if she was particularly fond of me, we were only distantly related, after all, but she took me by the hand, and as we were walking along she stopped to weave a little garland of cosmos and wild flowers. But when she held the garland out to me, smiling sweetly, for some strange reason I was seized by a feeling of utter panic. I took a step backwards, turned my back on her, and ran off as fast as I could. It was only when I grew up that I realized it was her beauty which had frightened me

I also recall that later on, when she was at university and I had taken a year off after finishing middle school, I often used to visit her to borrow books, she had so many that interested me. Then, when I was in upper grade of high school, I heard rumours that she was involved in an unhappy love affair. I was struggling past eighteen at the time; that was the last news I heard, and I had almost forgotten her.

According to the rumours, she had ruined her life by falling in love with a man who already had a wife and family. The relatives who transmitted this gossip had seemed to be all the more shocked because she had been through university, and was very pretty.

‘It’s incredible! How come you’re living here, Big Sis?’

Overcome with emotion, I repeated my question as we reached the gateway into the simple house in which she had rented a room.

‘I studied in college, so I became a school teacher; I became a school teacher, so I have to go wherever the Board of Education sends me. So why shouldn’t I be here?’

She spoke lightly, and yet I seemed to detect darker undertones to her voice.

‘You go in and rest while I get supper ready. My room-mate isn’t back from her holidays yet.’

It was a large neat room, better than it looked from the outside. Oddly enough, it was divided into two distinct halves without there being any visible partition. On one side there was a metal filing-cabinet and a low writing-table, on the other a chest of drawers and a desk with a chair. The books were different, too. Above the low writing-table was a three-tier bookshelf crammed full of collected works and volumes of essays, while on the higher desk a few specialized books lay strewn. Stuck inside one of the books was a red biro, as if someone had just been reading it.

‘Which side is yours?’

I could guess, but I took the precaution of asking, nonetheless.

‘The side with the chest of drawers, but I expect the other side will be warmer,’ she shouted back from the kitchen. She must have been boiling rice on a wood fire, for I could hear the crackle of dry pine branches.

I sat leaning against the wall close to the chest of drawers. The floor was warm there too, and as my frozen body began to thaw I was overcome with an irresistible drowsiness so that I longed to sleep.

‘Hey! Wake up and eat first! You can sleep later.’

The light was on and the meal was set out on a little table. I must have dozed off without realizing it.

After she had cleared away the table she said, ‘You need a wash. Your face anyway, and you smell awful. There’s no bathroom here, you’ll have to wash in the kitchen. I’ve heated some water for you. Come on, you can’t expect anything more in a place like this.’ After the meal I was feeling drowsy again, but I duly got up and went out to the kitchen. I had just finished my sketchy wash when she pushed in some men’s underclothes. They were clean, but not new. I took them, although I did not really feel like putting them on. She seemed to read my thoughts, because from behind the door I heard her say,

‘He doesn’t come any more. I don’t need them.’

There were echoes of past tragedies in the way she spoke. To spare her recalling any more painful memories, I rapidly pulled on the clothes she had given me.

‘I’ve left your clothes hanging outside. They seem to be full of lice. For goodness sake, what’s the matter with you? Are you a tramp or something?’

‘I’m hitch-hiking around, it’s a way of spending my winter vacation.’

‘That’s not true! I’ve heard how worried everyone is about you.’

She seemed to have heard rumours about me, too.

‘So what’s going on, then? They say you’re on the bottle, as well.’

‘Is that an offer?’

‘I’ll give you a drink, if that’s what you want. But tell me, aren’t you going to go back home?’

As she spoke, she pulled open a drawer and took out a bottle of scotch, half-full. Seeing me looking suspicious, she smiled sadly,

‘He left this behind, too. But he won’t be finishing the bottle.’

‘You’ve split up?’

‘For good, maybe.’

As the alcohol took effect, I suddenly asked her,

‘Was he a good man?’

‘Very.’

‘You couldn’t have got married?’

‘It’s strange, you don’t blame me like everyone else. Yes, we could have got married.’

‘Why didn’t you, then?’

‘His wife died . . .’

‘All the more reason . . .’

‘She killed herself.’

‘ . . .’

‘He took his two little girls and went abroad. They left last autumn. Pour me a drink, will you?’

She sipped her drink, seeming to savour it. Feeling dazed, I ventured another question.

‘So what are you going to do now?’

‘Certainly not follow some ridiculous tramp’s life like you!’

‘Then why did you come here?’

‘I volunteered. I wanted to be somewhere quiet where I could do some reading. But I’m going back in the spring next year. I want to do a master’s degree, I’ve already chosen my area.’

‘ . . .’

‘I’m going to study ethics.’

‘Are you really alright?’

‘You mean because study never helped anyone?’

She gazed at me for a while with thoughtful eyes.

‘You think I’m running away too, don’t you?’

‘No, but . . .’

‘Don’t worry. Despair is the fiercest passion, and the purest, too. People get unhappy because they don’t really despair. Like you.’

‘ . . .’

‘Go back to school. Go back, you’re only twenty years old!’

‘That’s what I intend to do.’

‘Go back and read more, think more. That’s the only way to reach true despair without having to experience all the pain I’ve been through.’

Our conversation was slow and often interrupted; by this time the bottle was empty and her cool rational approach to life had begun to crumble. I have heard since that she is

now a university teacher, but that evening she had not yet completely freed herself from the possibility that her life might end miserably.

When I came back from the next-door store with another bottle, there were traces of tears in the corners of her eyes. At the sight of them, a sadistic streak awoke deep within me.

‘You’ve been crying, haven’t you?’

Drinking wildly, I shot out the question.

‘It’s a woman’s privilege.’

She replied in feeble voice, and suddenly looked much older. Unable to contain myself, I spoke violently again.

‘You ought to get married, Big Sis.’

‘Really?’

‘And have five children.’

‘Really?’

‘And get old early.’

‘Really?’

‘And die when the time comes.’

‘Really?’

After that, it got messy. I have the impression we sat there sobbing together between glasses, and I recall singing a mournful song with her, too. Finally, we both passed out on the bare floor. But what am I doing, telling you all these depressing things?

I woke around midday.

‘What snow! Come outside and look! It must be a foot deep!’

She had got up and had been tidying the room; she seemed to have regained complete control of herself, her voice and face were back to their normal tranquillity.

‘You can’t think of leaving today. With the state of the roads around here, buses can’t get through when it snows at all. And this is a real blizzard!’

I was spooning soup into my parched mouth as she spoke in a wheedling voice. Through the sliding door I could see the snow falling thickly. Suddenly it felt very snug and cozy there indoors. But I stubbornly began to prepare my departure.

‘I’m walking anyway so . . . I’ll be off now.’

‘You’re weird! What’s forcing you to leave like this? Have you got a date with the sea, or something?’

I could feel a real sisterly affection and concern in her reproaches, but I was leaving all the same.

‘It’s eight miles from here to the pass, and then another eight after. That means that if you set out now, you’ll probably be forced to spend the night out in the hills. You’ll be killing yourself for sheer spite.’

Finally resigned, she saw me off as far as the edge of the village before turning back.

Everything was blanketed with snow. The steep slopes and rugged peaks for which the region is famed, the poor fields, the hamlets along the roadside, the old white poplars and the tar-blackened telegraph-poles . . . everything seemed stunted and abandoned, buried under thick layers of snow. And more was still falling steadily. My swollen feet were hurting but I hurried on. I was anxious to get across Ch’angsu Pass before nightfall.

The houses soon vanished far behind me, and I was alone in a remote snow-filled

world. The snow kept falling. That night, I wrote:

Was it a fool's enthusiasm, or youthful madness? I rushed on over mountain, fields and hillsides, up to my knees in snow. I walked all afternoon, without getting more than eight miles from Y., and here I am in Changp'ung, the village at the foot of Ch'angsu Pass. I had supper with the village head, a kind enough fellow, and now I am lying in the community house. I'm having a hard time with my blistered feet, and my whole body is aching.

But . . . I have nothing left. Neither the conviction that all this physical suffering will do me good spiritually, nor the intuition that the sea ahead is waiting for me with a revelation. I am rushing on as my heart dictates. I wonder just how deep this winter's roots go . . .

It was still snowing when I awoke the next morning. At the local store, while I was forcing myself to eat some breakfast, I heard on the radio that it was the heaviest snowfall for thirty years.

The price of the meal was absolutely outrageous, but I felt much better after it. I had not been drinking the night before, so everything tasted good. Before setting out, I bought some straw ropes and made straps for my bag so I could carry it slung on my back. Then I wrapped strips of rubber around my lower legs to serve as leggings.

The snow was now nearly two feet deep, and still falling. Walking was the only way of getting about and the village folk seemed to consider my departure extremely reckless, the woman at the store told me bluntly to take care not to freeze to death. But I couldn't have cared less.

Luckily, the snow stopped soon after I left the village and I went ploughing on, plunging in beyond my knees. The road was invisible, and I had to rely on the poplar trees growing along it to guide me. In no time at all my shoes and trousers were soaked, and my upper clothing was damp, so that my body steamed in the warmer air that followed the snowstorm. After covering a mile or so, I saw the heights of Ch'angsu Pass towering ahead, blocking my path like some invincible giant.

Those things which make the strongest impressions remain longest in the memory, and that first sight of Ch'angsu Pass still remains vividly etched in my mind. Yet the memory can very easily distort or exaggerate the facts. Therefore, rather than risk trusting my memories, I prefer to transcribe the jottings I scribbled down at the time in my note-book. The sentences are loose, the conclusions over-hasty, the whole mood is one of intense agitation. But that makes it all the closer to the truth . . .

Ch'angsu Pass, more than two thousand feet above sea-level!

I have seen the very essence of beauty! I think I shall never forget the three hours' climb I have just completed. I shall never again feel those same emotions, on any mountain, anywhere in the world. If there exists a perfection of beauty that we can attain, I have just witnessed it here. Oh, all was great because beautiful, sublime because beautiful, sacred because beautiful . . .

I shall never forget the splendour of that snow-decked peak, the mystery of the pale blue shadows filling the valleys below; or the heart-rending beauty of the pines, with their branches broken by the piled-up snow. I shall not forget the unyielding, stately oaks, as the melting snow on their branches glistened in the sunlight, or the elegance of the larch trees' delicate branches decked with white blossoms of snow, recalling a young bride in her wedding-veil. Even the haughty junipers stood reduced and humbled.

The pathetic beauty, too, of the layers of arrow-root and cotton-creeper in the valleys, darkly veiling timid ash-trees and old oak-stumps, or the fragile tips of azalea bushes and bleached mountain grass just peeping above the snow.

As I crossed the ridge, thickly studded with decades-old bushes, I was seized with a sudden sense of awe. The thin black stems of the leafless shrubs stood out in stark contrast against the dazzling white of the snow. What human hand could ever produce such beauty, I wondered, uniquely composed in black and white, gorgeous yet not vulgar, aloof without being grim.

By now the sky was completely cloudless, and everything lay bathed in a brilliant sunlight. The winter sky shone paler and therefore clearer, deeper; the distant heights of the T'aebaek Range reared beneath their covering of snow, far more majestic than any of the world's most celebrated peaks.

The wild birds in their flight, the winds that came blowing, all seemed to shun and avoid that place, and I moved on alone, scarcely daring to breathe, through an eternal cosmic harmony with its tones of absolute stillness. Because of my blisters, I was obliged to walk barefoot most of the time, but felt almost no pain, so overwhelmed I was by the marvellous spectacle around me.

By the time I arrived at the foot of the pass, I was nearly weeping. I felt a kind of ecstasy, an ecstasy I think nobody could have understood. I had seen the essence of beauty. No matter what the specialists of aesthetic theory say, what I experienced up there was no mere perception of beauty, but a direct knowledge of it.

Beauty is the beginning and end of all values, the sum total of all concepts and at the same time an utter void. We may say things are true because they are beautiful, or beautiful because they are true.

Things may be called good because they are beautiful, or beautiful because they are good; holy because beautiful, or beautiful because holy . . . Yet in itself the Beautiful is nothing. But it opens onto all values, and makes possible the use of all concepts; such is the true greatness of the Beautiful!

All my travels were uniquely for this moment.

Yet before I had even left the mountain slopes behind, my emotion had changed to darkest despair!

In all my wanderings, one of the things I had always felt about my future life was that it would have an artistic aspect – would have something to do with the creation of beauty. No matter what I might say, beauty was the value that to the very end I hesitated to pass judgement on.

Now, though, following that intense emotion, I suddenly became aware of another

aspect of the beauty that had so impressed me: its divine dimension, its utter perfection, that must ever remain essentially unattainable by human beings. I realized that anything we humans, short-lived dwarfs as we are, could achieve as creation would never be more than a grotesque imitation, despite all our efforts. In which case, the life I had envisaged would merely be a hopeless struggle to attain the unattainable. It seemed to me intolerably stupid and reckless to want to go on living such a life.

I was suddenly overcome with fatigue, utterly exhausted. I had covered little more than eight miles, but had been walking across the mountain non-stop for more than three hours, all the time wading through two feet of snow, so that, with the accumulated fatigue of the previous days, I was about ready to drop in my tracks. Besides, having walked most of the way without shoes, my feet were numb with cold. Even the little travelling-bag on my back seemed to weigh a ton.

I gave up all thought of further progress that day, left the hillside track, and entered the first little store I came to. I longed to rest, thaw my frozen feet, and eat something warm. I was glad to find that the snug dining room was completely empty.

I had just finished eating the bowl of noodles I ordered for my lunch, when the door opened and a man came in. It was the old knife-grinder I had seen beside the stream two days before! The remains of snow on his damp trousers, and his soggy shoes, showed clearly that he too had come over the mountain through the snow.

I don't know why, I was pleased to see him, and I gave him a nod of recognition. He ignored me completely, ordered a bottle of soju and a bowl of noodles, then let himself flop back flat on the floor, with his feet hanging out through the door. It was an insult, but oddly enough I didn't feel angry. Deciding not to try to address him again, I observed him quietly.

I had been wrong to think he was old. Despite his unkempt beard and deeply wrinkled face, he didn't really look more than about fifty. It must have been his grizzled hair that had made me take him too quickly for an old man.

He never once glanced in my direction but remained lying there, half-dozing, gazing up vacantly towards the ceiling. When the food arrived, he ate and drank silently, sitting in the doorway. He corked the remaining half of the bottle of soju with a wad of plastic, put it in his box together with a few packets of dried noodles he purchased there, and left as he had come, without saying a word.

For a moment his unexpected appearance distracted me, but I soon forgot him again. I was still crushed by the beauty I had seen on Ch'angsu Pass, and the hopelessness of attaining it. I felt like a professional gambler who has just lost his last card, gloomy and wretched. What now could fill my life's cup?

No doubt it was that melancholy frame of mind that made me want to drink. I called the landlord, who had been scowling into the room from time to time, and ordered a bottle of *soju*. I had not eaten anything much, so although I nibbled a few dried fish the drink went straight to my head. Before I had half emptied the bottle, the pain in my feet was wiped clean away and forgotten. By the time the bottle was empty I was quite merry.

At least my gloomy feelings had to some extent evaporated, so I ordered another bottle. Once I get drunk, I'm always afraid of sobering up, even now, and it must have been worse then. I gave in to the charms of drinking for drinking's sake. My main mistake, though, lay in what happened next.

I was just finishing the second bottle when I was suddenly struck with a wild surmise: the knife-grinder was on his way to the sea, just as I was! Perhaps the alcohol was to blame, but that idea turned into a firm conviction, and at the same time I was seized with a sudden impatience. I felt that if he reached the sea before me, there would be no point in my going there!

Under the pressure of that idea, I drained the bottle and left the inn. I had reached a point where I was no longer conscious of pain or fatigue. The short-lived winter day's sun was already low on the horizon and the icicles hanging along the edges of the thatched roofs on the roadside cottages looked like bright crystals shining in the pale sunlight.

I did not get far, though. In the second village after the inn I met up with a merry band of lads of about my own age. Some five or six in all, they were coming down from hunting rabbits, that were unable to run fast in the deep snow; one of the two they had caught was still alive and struggling.

Was it the alcohol I had drunk, or was it the thought of approaching twilight? I joined the group on the spot. Perhaps I promised to pay for my share of the drinks at the party they planned to have; anyway, they gladly counted me in.

The party took place that evening in the building of the 4H Association. But the rabbit meat was not so good as I had anticipated, and the two big bottles of *soju* I provided, coming on top of all I had already drunk, meant that I did not see the end of the evening. I survived the general presentations and the first few rounds of drinks, then I passed out.

Early the next morning, I was torn from a deep sleep by the bitter cold. The room had been well heated with several armfuls of wood at the start of the evening, but now it was cold as an ice-box. And what a draught, with the icy wind blowing relentlessly through the holes in the tattered paper door!

There were a few traces left of the evening's party, but none of the lads with whom I had been celebrating was there. It was a little after four in the morning. I looked around the dimly-lit room to see if I could find anything to ward off the merciless cold, but there was not so much as an old sack. I thought of asking for a room in a house in the village, but not a light could be seen anywhere. There was a certain glimmer coming from the snow, the outlines of things could be discerned roughly, but the early winter dawn was still too dim for me to take to the road. Some snow I thoughtlessly swallowed to quench my thirst only chilled me more, so I went back indoors where I was forced to fight against the fierce cold unaided.

At that moment, what I felt in my shivering was less the bitterness of the cold than a horror of dying. As if driven by a practical necessity, I wrote out a last message with fingers I kept blowing on to thaw. That ridiculous document is no longer in my possession, but I still recall some of the rather pathetic expressions it contained.

It was addressed to a childhood friend. After writing '*In case something happens,*' I explained that although death had been my close companion during the last few months, it had been there only as one possible alternative, and not at all in this present form. Even if I had played recklessly with false ideas, I felt sure that the darkness in which I had been wandering had been that which precedes the dawn, and that at present I was already standing in the new day's first glow. I reminded him how much I had loved the world and life itself in days gone by.

In view of all that, I think I must have tried to make it clear that my death was not in any way a suicide. People always have such distorted ideas about that unhappy form of death. Even when someone chooses suicide for quite valid reasons, people would rather trust their own vulgar interpretations than the tedious explanations advanced by the dead person himself. And since he is not there to make any reply, their rash conjectures remain without response. I could hardly expect it to be any different in my case, and there was nothing to prevent people from giving an exaggerated significance to my demise . . . I suppose I must have been driven by thoughts such as these.

I asked my friend to destroy everything that I had written over the last year, and to repay my friends all the debts contracted in the course of various drunken escapades. I included some details about the debts in question, and concluded by asking him and his Teresa to pray for me.

Day was breaking by the time I had completed that long, wordy, pointless letter. Storing it carefully deep in my bag, I plucked up all my courage and left the building.

It was still not sufficiently light for me to set off, but there was light enough to find my way around. It had started to snow again. Not the previous day's big drifting snow-flakes, but steady snow driven by an icy wind. The only good thing was that I would not have to fight against the wind as I walked.

My first intention had been to warm myself up and get something to eat in the village before setting off, but the entire place showed no signs of waking out of its deep sleep. So I resolved to leave and hope to find something better in the next village along the way.

I went out into a strange, alien world, where the only sign of life was the sound of the wind sighing through the bare branches of the trees along the roadside. The fields, now more deeply covered than ever by the new snow, lay like a vast empty sea. The line of trees alone indicated the road, which was otherwise simply a white river of snow. Yet strangely enough, someone had been there before me, leaving a trail of footprints down the middle of the river. But those prints only attracted my attention for a moment, on account of the terrible cold that was driving me almost out of my mind.

As soon as I left the village, I began to run, and went on running. More than anything else, I had to shake off that intolerable cold. Normally I would have lit a fire with dead branches and twigs, but since everything was buried under two feet of snow, all I could do was run. Running was necessary too, in order to reach the next village as quickly as possible.

Luckily, since the snow had frozen during the night, I no longer sank in up to my knees as on the previous day. After a while, my body began to lose something of its stiffness, and my breath steamed white.

As soon as the cold vanished, though, I began to feel unbearably hungry. Not that simple hunger you feel in the stomach, but the kind of hunger that racks your whole body. I began to regret bitterly my last three days' negligence in not eating properly. In particular, the day before I had taken almost no solid food at all except breakfast. At last, unable to bear it any longer, I stopped, gasping, and swallowed a handful of snow. I felt a momentary aching pain, nothing more, then it brought back all the cold I had so painfully rid myself of.

I started to run again. Now feeling seriously threatened, I summoned up all my strength to run faster. The trees along the edge of the road rushed past me, as if I were in a speeding train. I felt I was flying, whereas in actual fact my pace was slowing and my feet

were beginning to drag. I was later to realize that the eternity I thought I had covered as I ran that morning was little more than a mile in all.

Gradually, though, the sensations of cold and hunger left me, as my consciousness began to waver, and I felt an almost irresistible desire to sleep. Deep snowdrifts beckoned like plump cushions, several times I felt an urge to collapse into an eternal sleep. I was no longer capable of distinguishing where the road lay. There was nothing to be seen but a vast sea of snow, and I kept going by sheer instinct.

I don't know how long I went on like that; suddenly I vaguely heard a voice shouting: 'Hey! hey! That's not the road! This way!'

I looked around, abruptly jerked out of my trance. At some point I had left the road and gone plunging off across the fields.

'This way! This way!'

Again I heard someone calling. I squinted towards where the voice was coming from. First I made out the wavering flames of a small fire. Then I saw a hovel that had probably been used as a daytime shelter the previous summer. Finally I made out the vague silhouette of a man. I came a little to my senses. Summoning up all my remaining strength, I went running in that direction. To my astonishment, I found the knife-grinder sitting there.

'It's madness in weather like this!'

He spoke quietly, at the same time making a rough cushion for me to sit on with some of the dried millet-stalks he was burning in his fire, and I collapsed forward onto it, almost embracing the flames.

'Watch out! You'll scorch your hair!'

His voice was firmer now, and as he warned me he put out a hand to restrain me. But my mind was in no state to register the sense of his words. Seized by a new attack of cold, I sucked in the heat of the fire as someone thirsty might gulp down water.

'Pull your legs back! Your clothes are on fire!'

There was obvious irritation in his tone now, as he brushed at the bottoms of my trousers that had caught in the flames.

'First, something to eat.'

When I had recovered my wits sufficiently, he took a fire-blackened pan from the wooden box he always carried with him. He arranged a rough hearth at one edge of the fire and, after throwing several handfuls of snow into the pan, he began to feed the flames. He added more snow, until the pan was half full, then he took a packet of dried noodles from the box and broke them into the boiling water.

It was not until I had drained the last drop in the pan that I really came to myself. The man had been watching me all the time I was eating.

'Thank you very much.'

I felt a little ashamed at not having said anything before.

'You'll have to pay for the noodles,' he said, his voice quiet again. Flurried, I took my few remaining five-hundred Won notes from a pocket and held them towards him.

'Just one, and that's too much,' he said, taking one note from those I was holding out. He stuffed it into his pocket, then handed me four hundred Won in change. There was a kind of dignity in his attitude, that would brook no contradiction.

'And what made you set out so early in this snow?'

I was busy licking peeling skin off the roof of my mouth, the result of eating the boiling noodles too quickly, when he casually shot out his question. I remained perplexed for a moment. Would this knife-grinder be capable of understanding why I was heading for the sea? But at the same time I felt that I must not lie to him. Trying to be as frank and simple as I could, I told him where I was going and why.

‘I guessed as much. People only do crazy things for crazy reasons. If you’d been a fishmonger on his way to buy fish, you’d never have set out so early in weather like this.’

Then, with an expression half way between a scornful smile and a real smile, he went on,

‘It looks as though you and I are going to do exactly opposite things down there.’

He seemed to have grasped my real intentions despite the rather confused explanations I had offered him. But his words troubled me strangely.

‘So you’re going to Taejin as well?’

‘That’s the harbour nearest here.’

‘What do you mean, do the opposite?’

‘It looks as though I’m going there to kill and you to die.’

He spoke without the least hesitation, while I suddenly shuddered. I asked stupidly,

‘Who . . .?’

He looked at me sharply for a few seconds. There was something inquisitorial in his gaze. Then he smiled, a smile darker than before, an odd smile that might have been expressing scorn at himself or contempt of me.

‘The charm of trust lies in its possibility of betrayal. But after all, you owe me your life, don’t you?’

‘What?’

‘I mean, I want to trust you. I want to tell you my story.’

I was still confused, trying to understand his words, when he suddenly asked, ‘How old do you think I am?’

‘Umm . . . about fifty, I’d say . . .’

‘That’s exactly ten years older than I am. It’s all on account of the nineteen years that bastard got me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Let me tell you about those nineteen years.’

Once again he seemed to hesitate, then made up his mind and began his story, in a low, thoughtful voice, a kind of monologue:

‘In those days we dreamed dreams, big, dangerous dreams called liberty or equality. It’s an age when people dream, but we were worse than most. We bought acetic acid and glycerine to mimeograph leaflets with. And we kept our knives sharp. Apart from our leader, we were all about twenty.’

‘. . .’

‘Then one more artful woke up before the rest of us. He reported us while we were still giddy dreaming. The one who killed himself just before he was arrested was the luckiest of us all, I reckon. We were all arrested, tortured, and tried. Our leader was sentenced to death, I and one other got life. The other two got ten and fifteen years.’

‘. . .’

‘It was the time of the War. The only reason we survived at all was because there was absolutely nothing linking us with the North.’

His words chilled me with horror.

‘It was our hatred for the one who betrayed us that kept us going through the endless years we suffered in prison. We had been much more deeply hurt by that betrayal of trust than by the shattering of our dreams or the collapse of our ideals. We swore revenge. And there was this knife to remind us of our vow. One of us made it, he learned to use a lathe in prison.’

He drew a knife out of his box. I recognized it as the one he had been sharpening when I came across him the first day, up beside the stream.

‘The first of us had his sentence reduced. When he came out at the end of seven years he had this knife hidden in his coat. It was no easy job trying to find the traitor. At first he tried sincerely enough, but his sentence had been relatively short, and that helped his reinsertion. Soon he had a job, savings, a wife and children.’

‘...’

‘After eleven years, the second came out, also thanks to a reduced sentence. By then, the first had settled down. He very humbly excused himself, and passed the knife to the second.’

‘...’

‘It was no different with the second. Less than two years after his release, he came to visit us and said that he wanted to leave the knife to someone else. Those of us still inside spat on him.’

‘...’

‘At last, the third of us was freed. But we had no chance to pass him the knife, because he was sick, so they let him go although his sentence was life, the same as mine. He died almost at once.’

‘...’

‘So finally, when my sentence was commuted after nineteen years, the knife passed to me. That was last March. And I was not like the rest. For a forty-year-old ex-politico who gets out after rotting inside for nineteen years, reinsertion is almost out of the question. I pursued the traitor with more determination than my comrades. This knife-grinding trade didn’t just offer the possibility of carrying the knife around legally, it allowed me to earn a living as well. And at last I’m within reach of the bastard.’

‘You mean, he’s in Taejin?’

‘That’s it. From what I hear, things didn’t go too well for him either. At first he got a few favours from the police for having shopped us, but then they dropped him because he was taking bribes. After that he had a hard time of it. It seems that for the last few months he’s been working out there on a fishing boat.’

He fell silent for a while, then scrutinizing me carefully, he asked, ‘So don’t you want to turn me in?’

His mysterious smile had come back again. Then he fell silent, as if he regretted having spoken so freely, and he didn’t say another word until the time came for us to part. The snow had stopped and it was broad day-light when we left the shelter. We walked almost eight miles together in silence, then parted at a fork in the road with the town already in view.

‘You come down on your own. It’s better they don’t see you with me. Just in case there are problems later.’

He left me with those words, spoken in the same emotionless voice I had heard when we first met, and went walking firmly ahead. I didn’t even say good-bye, and absently watched him go.

Now we have reached the last chapter in my narrative of the events of the winter that year.

It was about two in the afternoon when I entered Taejin, it was sleeting. I had stopped a couple of hours at a small village to rest and dry my clothes.

I hear that nowadays Taejin has developed into something of a seaside resort, but in those days it was an insignificant little harbour, where nothing ever happened except perhaps in summer. The unfrequented wintery port made me think of a haunted island. The last few miles were anything but smooth, too. This is what I scribbled in my note-book that day, on a page stained by the falling sleet:

Sea! I have come. Why were your calls so insistant?

These last few days, you have summoned me in many forms, called me in a host of different voices. I have seen you in the lowering sky, in the flying snowflakes. I have heard your voice in the howling north wind and in the sad sobbing of the trees along the road. Your call was all round me, in sleep, and dreams, and drunkenness.

Therefore I have come to you like this. Nothing could block my way, not the blizzard, the worst for thirty years, not the lofty mountains without a single proper road. These eighty miles racing through frost and snow have not been too arduous, I did not give up, although my feet are blistered and my face is on fire.

The last few miles before I reached you were the worst. The empty road, exposed on all sides, was whipped by biting sleet-filled winds. The snowflakes falling on my cheeks and neck melted instantly into icy water that ran down over my bare skin. My frozen shoes grew soggy from the slush along the road. My damp hair froze stiff and tugged at my scalp. But I still kept running, like a faithful dog obeying its master’s call.

Now tell me. Tell me why you are calling me. I am listening.

For a long while I remained standing silently in front of the sea. Strong winds were pushing endless waves towards the shore, where they slammed against the rocks and clawed at the sandy beach. I was wrapped in a kind of mist, where the drifting milky spray and the snowflakes dropping from the dark sky above mingled.

I still remember it all. The frenzied sea, the dark sky blending with the waves, the solitary seagulls soaring with their dying cries. And the sudden realization of my own miserable insignificance.

I wonder now whether the silence I had fallen into was not another of my vague raptures. And whether in that rapture I was not expecting some kind of communication with the sea. As if I was hoping for the reply to a question I had in fact long since resolved, but which on my own I could not lay to rest, a question that may seem absurd now, but at the

time was desperately important to me: should I throw away the cup, or persevere in draining it?

Yet the sea seemed only intent on emitting roars I could not understand. ‘Answer! Answer!’ I went down to the water’s edge, as if insisting. The dying waves carressed my frozen feet with a sort of gentle warmth, then, as the warmth reached my knees, stronger waves sent me reeling.

I stood there for a time, struggling to keep my footing, and gazed at the writhing of the ever darker sky, the ever wilder sea, as I strained my ears. A little way off, a few grey gulls had settled on the back of the tossing waves, and were resting weary wings.

I closed my eyes. It was as if a faint ray of light was slowly rising from the very depths of my consciousness. I had the impression that the sea’s mystery was about to reach out and touch me, speak words that would at last bring all my wanderings to a happy conclusion.

I waited for it to become clearer and more distinct.

A long moment passed. But finally my eyes were forced open by a violent blow against my thighs and the thunder of an enormous wave striking the nearby rocks. And just at that moment a tiny event occurred on the edge of my still-blurred vision. Unless it was an illusion? A tiny grey gull floating not far off was suddenly overwhelmed by the unfurling surf of a mountainous wave.

The bird flapped its wings once, sank, and did not reappear. Even in the state I was in, I prayed and prayed that it would come back up, but there was no sign of it. Then I was sent staggering, as the reflux from the huge wave that had engulfed the bird suddenly crashed twice, thrice, against my back.

From that moment, my body seemed to be entirely dominated by instinct. Despite the seduction of the sea’s apparent warmth, I strained every muscle to get back onto the shore. That momentary exposure to danger had set me ablaze with sudden new vitality.

It was an intense, but equally a sad and melancholy flame. For it showed me a true image of myself, as small and weary as that gull the waves had swallowed. There I saw my own wretched existence, buffeted by great waves of absurdity and despair. Then suddenly the roaring of the sea became meaningless, its frenzy nothing more than the empty motion of an inanimate object.

I’m going back home. It’s time to finish this too serious game. The sea has turned out to be nothing more than a fraud, like all the other things sent to mislead us. Can anything offer us salvation, when God himself has given up all idea of saving us?

But still the gulls must fly and life must go on. If a gull gives up flying, it is no longer a gull; if a person gives up trying to go on, he is no longer a person. The cup that each receives has to be taken and drained. Despair is not the end but the real beginning of existence . . .

Those are the last lines I noted that day, and they too are marked by stains of sleet. But despite that unexpectedly resolute conclusion, I was unable to overcome an inexplicable feeling of despondency, of grief even, that went with it. No matter how level-headed and rational you are, an experience of despair demands more of you. I know I stayed for a long

time leaning against a rock there on the beach, weeping.

Truth to tell, my despair was not yet complete enough to become the starting-point of a new life, but certainly the despair I experienced there at the edge of the sea afforded me an invaluable sense of freedom.

If there are no absolute, objective values that can guide us, our salvation lies in our own hands alone. Our lives are not in the control of any external powers, they necessarily receive their seal of approval and their fullness from what we ourselves decide.

In that sense, my cousin back in Y. had been right. Despair is the purest and most powerful of human passions, and in it lies our salvation. That discovery was determining for my life in the years that followed. For I chose beauty as my absolute value, on account of what I had experienced at Ch'angsu Pass.

Now I am reflecting. A truly artistic temperament builds on an absolute despair concerning beauty. What makes the greatness of the artist is not the creation of beauty, but the fact of taking up the challenge and suffering, while knowing in advance that creation of beauty is impossible. The same is true of this story . . . In the end, if it is found to possess any value, it will not be because of my imperfect portrayal of that winter's beauty and authenticity, but on account of all the nights of weariness and pain I have endured while writing, knowing perfectly well that my task was an impossible one.

I had more or less regained control of my mysterious grief and despondency when the knife-grinder reappeared. Despite the noise of the waves and the wind, I gradually became aware of someone nearby. I looked around and saw him on the other side of the rock I was leaning against. How long had he been there? I couldn't tell.

I noticed that he looked different, wretched and worn out. The wooden box he had been carrying lay now at his feet, like a defeated warrior's abandoned armour. He seemed deeply absorbed in private thoughts, as he stared blankly towards the sea.

He had not noticed my presence. Seized abruptly with a strange feeling of sorrow, I drew near.

He did not move, though I was only a few steps away. I stood still for a moment, afraid somehow of disturbing him. He was still lost in his thoughts, unaware of my presence, but finally he turned, not towards me but towards the box lying there. Stooping, he rummaged for something in it, and drew out the knife I had seen that morning. He stared at it for a few moments, then, as if suddenly making up his mind, he hurled it with all his might towards the sea. The knife curved through a long arc, and disappeared in the waves.

'What are you doing?' I blurted out, feeling strangely shaken and somehow, at the same time, disappointed. He suddenly seemed to acknowledge my presence, and gazed at me sadly for a few seconds, before replying with a sigh,

'Throwing away an illusion I've been carrying around for too long.'

His response made me understand why he was looking so crushed and miserable. He had lost the only thing that had mattered to him – his tenacious hatred.

'The bastard was living in a half-ruined hut, with a sick wife and two kids covered in boils. The kids were crying with hunger and the wife was dying. I reckoned it was more of a punishment to let him go on living.'

He smiled mournfully. And I knew he was lying, at least the last part. I knew it intuitively, at the sight of that melancholy smile.

‘The bastard begged me to kill him, but I refused.’

Hearing those words, that sounded like another excuse, I suddenly wanted to ask the real reasons for his forgiveness. But another, even stronger impulse, took hold of me. Leaving him where he was, I ran to the bag I had left lying on the other side of the rock. I pulled out the letter written the day before and the bottle of poison I had been carrying around for the last six months, and contemplated them for a few seconds, just as he had stared at his knife.

Slowly he approached me and began silently to observe my movements. I wonder if the time had really come or not? Anyway, I wrapped the bottle in the letter and hurled them with all my strength into the sea. They flew in a curve, were swallowed up, and vanished.

‘What did you throw away?’ he asked in a strange voice.

‘Sentimentality. And my knowledge, it was rotten before it was ripe.’

A few years later I came across him one day by chance in a small town. He was earning a living drawing pictures with a red-hot iron on wooden boards. It must have been something he’d learned to do in prison. His shop was not very big, but judging by the steady stream of customers, things must have been going well enough for him. I should also mention that he had a pretty young wife with him, and a one-year-old son.

Yet strangely enough I have absolutely no memory of how we parted back there on the beach.

The next day, I was in a train on my way to Seoul. It was a fine bright afternoon in late winter. As the train was passing through a peach orchard, I noticed that the tips of the branches were already touched with red, a sure sign that when spring came the blossom would be more than usually splendid.