10-1-2008

Writing Sample

Jang Wook Lee


Rights
Copyright © 2008 Jang Wook Lee

Recommended Citation

Hosted by Iowa Research Online. For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.
Invisible Man

A day is coming when I shall suddenly be unable to feel myself. Face-washing. Meal. A woman’s telegram: How beautiful a place this is; I have no idea when I shall go back to Seoul. I leave your news behind and go out. Behind my back the door shutting off the time allotted to me. Am I outside the door here? Objects indicating absolutely nothing. Casually beautiful things. Cigarette butts, for example. Paving blocks. Leaflets advertising ‘instant loans’ handed out by middle-aged women.

Maybe it is only possible to explain an age by several deaths. The roadside trees at Jong-no 2ga. The wind at Jong-no 1ga. It is not true that Prince Kropotkin became an anarchist because he could not endure a meaningless world. The wind at Kwanghwa-mun. Roadside trees. Wind again. Psychoanalysis is repulsive. In a Baum test more than ten years ago, I deliberately drew broken trees. The doctor said: Let’s think of a method of treatment. What he gave me was a placebo.

And the things that are still close to me are dying things that connive together. Signboards, for example, desperately lined up pointing at something. Flesh simmering alone in October sunlight. Between my shading hands, the sunlight is suddenly indifferent. A paper plane flying beside Yi Sun-shin’s statue, heading for the Mediterranean. I recall: there was a moment like this; at that time maybe I folded red paper into a boat that I sent floating off down a slow-flowing river, that boat has maybe run aground somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico by now.

The automatic sensor fixed to the urinal in the Kyobo Building toilet. Flashing a red light as I approach, the only proof of my existence. I do not send a telegram saying: Since you’re not in Seoul, I feel deadly lonely. Come back, come back. The signboards lined up in the streets are quiet like deliberately broken trees. As I mutter, Oh, another placebo, a paper plane lightly passing through my body. With things that very gradually erase themselves, some day, in the transparent sunlight of the Mediterranean, just a stroll, at least.
Missing

I was gradually delivered to you.
I was born outside of myself.
I could recall nothing, yet
without the least error
I began to vanish.
As I walked along the street
the memory of someone
made my hair stand on end.
Passers-by watched the sight
of my feet leaving the ground.
When my eyebrows and lips and even my shoulders
were vanishing impetuously yet quietly
someone suddenly
in some utterly remote place
looked back.
In the sunlight
I stretched both arms wide.
Killer’s Love

1. There is never any alibi. In the moonlight streaming down outside the window, the white birch tree is bright. But I wonder why sleep only comes for the body, not for the heart. I wish I owned a nice rifle. Dawn moonlight. There was a time when my soul was full of a vanished popular song. Then several police cars went hurtling recklessly through the night streets, sirens howling. Outside the window, sirens, sirens, streaming moonlight.

Streaming moonlight. Shall I recall the days when I went around with a dead guy’s song packed in my bag? In the end, what raised me was complex, so I still remember the phrases of such things as the sandstorm blowing into the fallen sunlight. I don’t give a damn for alibis. I just wish I could sleep well. Sirens, sirens, into multiple layers of time. Moonlight streaming down.

2

Old photographs, they are like a previous life. But you there in the mirror, what life does that face come from? An early morning somewhere with a sound of music full of hostility. The reason the blade of my razor can conceal itself so well is because it’s turning at a fearful speed. So ultimately what I abhor are people who regret their whole lives. The invisible blade gliding over the cheeks. There is never any alibi. But will someone be able to turn on some music for me?

My love’s music. The white birch tree is still, losing the moonlight. Just as every tomb needs rituals, I spend long mornings in veneration of clattering spoons and bowls. On such a morning is there anything that can never ever be got rid of? But will someone be able to turn on my love’s music? My ears, that indifferent sound of the shoes of people hiding long-lasting hostility, and my ears.

3.

Wind blowing toward some distant spot. New placards in the streets flapping. Did I ever scowl at the eyes of the old politician smiling on a page of the evening paper? Did I ever see a purple bus with various posters flapping and flowing, a woman’s white legs dangling? An afternoon walking along the wind’s long corridors, there is never any alibi. Wind blowing toward some distant spot.
Wind blowing toward some distant spot. Until twilight falls I browse the roster of names in my dark bag. The only mark on the roster, my name is an infinitely long labyrinth. Again a sound of shoes echoing down that corridor, so has my impatient foot walked along empty streets? And there did I meet the eyes of an old silent dog? Wind blowing toward some distant spot. Moonlight streaming down again. My love’s music. Ultimately, my life is a quest for infinite silence. All for the sake of an alibi.
Guerilla

Maybe it’s going to snow soon.
I long to walk once again with snowdrifts above my ankles.
Just as someone used to stand there endlessly
the appartment’s windows are drenched in long silence.
And I lean forward to hear distant sounds,
the slope a damp mist is once again climbing.
The cold gradually growing stronger, did my lips
mutter: I want to put a stop to this? Or was it:
Mother’s face as she lay dying was beautiful, but
it did not snow.

If I hold my breath and look back, thinking someone has just gone past,
a wind that blew long before is there.
One street light close to the vanishing point quietly goes out.
While the parched darkness is passing through me,
I remember several letters.
Was it that sweetheart with the too vague shoulders,
or maybe it was some old friend, but

I do not think that some kind of stubborn obsession
made me do this. Only with this languid tension
just aiming a black gun barrel at the gradually approaching dread.
In which case the darkness of the front line is excessively familiar. As yet
the yellow lines on the outer ring road are scattered in all directions
but very soon thick fog will envelop the city.
The chill of the slopes. I am waiting for some signal.
And I shall mutter: Mother’s face as she lay dying
was beautiful. Like the street light close to the vanishing point
someone is flickering inside the far-away wind.

Translated from the Korean by Brother Anthony of Taizé
Fish Practice

I become a fish for a day.
Water dreams
and has a premonition.

In the water
my diet progresses daily.
I don’t distinguish water and air
or divide the clouds and plankton.

I know that there is even a waterfall beneath the sea
watch the seasons go by
and listen to the shadows grow.
My thoughts shrink
like a river

My weight halved all at once
my memories fade all at once
all at once
I become an arrested eyeball.
A fish that understands the fish
a fresh fish

I think about the numerous nights
when the fish open their eyes.
Hungry people swarm.
A distant day that complements
the premonition begins.
Noises

At eleven a.m. I absorbed the noises.
At eleven a.m. I was as noisy as possible.
I opened the window and became numerous voices.
I was transformed in the speed of the sound.
I go inside you
and became the memory of thirty seconds.
I flowed by my mother’s
raining rotten body.
I became an endless source
of random gossip.
I became carnivores’
endless appetite.
The blood passing through the blood vessel
and its splendid angle,
the rapid growth of children,
the sound of milk turning sour,
I have become the widest open mouth
of a protagonist in a silent film.
At eleven a.m. I closed my ears
At eleven a.m. I shut my eyes
I was perfectly silent.
Let’s Clean

As the morning cleaning begins the dust moves elsewhere
then return
next morning

yesterday
and also ten years ago
become dirty

I have an expiration date.
You have become spoiled.

A clean nightmare
a love affair dirtier than all the remaining years together
cursing alone

we can think sanitarily
Shake hands
and shake our heads
stop breathing

after a while
cry alone.

Are the shadows clean?
And your distant sleep?
As the night approached
we set out one by one
and returned
when the alarm clock went off.
Misunderstanding

I will be misunderstood. By you
by wind
and also by the calendar.
I will be misunderstood. At a breakfast table
in front of a traffic light
in the end I will
brush past myself
inside the train
that has just emerged
after making its way through a long tunnel

As the sudden sunlight swirls around my thoughts
and swarms to the opposite window
You who were inside my thought,
the wind,
the suspect and
the Vietnamese boat people mentioned in a lower column
of the international section
sparkle on the river

I who have not been captured by you, wind, or sunlight
my leaning becomes fixed
inside the speed of the eight a.m. train.
The people who are misunderstood for life
wander other worlds
with their heads tilted.

Someone places a hand lightly
inside my momentary dream.
The Travelers

Let’s go to Hup’o Go to Hup’o and become the music that falls to the ground with the simplest expression A place toward which where the old whales slowly head like a swirling mist when small trembles gather to form a horizon
Finally, let’s go to Hup’o

Travel is enjoyable.
Today the ants form a file and march.
Instinct is fragrant, the hot cicada died, and it’s summer.

A blinking dot that moves above the navigator. I of the summer close my eyes, You of the winter observe all directions forever.
We leave together, then return in a flash.

But I’m dizzy.
I have traveled a rotating planet at extreme speed.
We reached the future every day like a cat that has turned to jelly, for we spun for so long. Where

are you, where is my love?
I’m still traveling and my body keeps getting erased like the way meat disintegrates inside a stomach.
I followed my dead woman’s morning

and wandered about Russia, India, and Siam.
If I go to Cuba, will I be able to see romantic revolutionaries?
Please take me to Havana’s nearest beach.
I’ll cup my hands and shout as loudly as possible.
Cuba is Cuba, Havana is Havana.

But today my hair keeps growing in another direction.
Did I love you?
Erasing my boyish expression, my hair forgets numerous barbers and grow towards the sunset. As the dream and the bed in which flowers bloom disappear, my hair is cheerful, uniquely creative.
When rain falls on me, a strange morning arrives for you and when I have nothing precious then you can’t help blinking your eyes and when I read poetry as a materialist, you decide at last on your final journey.

Let’s take another spin together around the neighborhood. We’ll meet. Somewhere.

Have you ever seen the spectacle of the Milky Way blink and disappear into the Black Hole? Is that place an intersection? That night my we walked along the shore of Ch’ŏngp’yŏng Lake.
**Day of Remembrance**

With so much to commemorate
between the esophagus and the small intestine,
we chew deliberately.
We commemorate the stomach
and the gallbladder
and the spit that dissolves everything
today too, the anniversary of someone's death.
A day that there was war.
The cloud outside the window resembles last year's joke
and the joke doesn't have enough blood.
What was a mother yesterday
isn't a living thing today.
And the children take pleasure in lying all day,
while I marvel at the ability of plants to endure.

What can bare its teeth
will have an esophagus
and be lonesome.
While the world circled,
last year's jokes were forgotten.
Dozens of teeth emerged above the white rice cakes.
We chewed what we ate deliberately
and slowly came to understand
the speed of the stars.

***