

Inside the Glass Door of the Seongnae-dong Clothing Repairs

SIN YONG-MOK

Translated by Brother Anthony and Jake Levin

In an alley bent like a carp's backbone
sunlight too is bent. Time, a hunchback too
has a hard time traveling
so between galvanized iron walls sits
a sewing shop with a low glass door.
At nightfall when earth's tilt coils the sunlight
sometimes girls
might look at the shop from a distance but
what they see is just their white faces
reflected off the dark behind the glass
and whoever it was that walked up that alley
that turned into a sheet of paper
must have wondered what lay inside the glass door.
Sometimes to turn up the legs of newly bought trousers
a customer pulls at the door handle
like it's a cover of a fairy tale book.
But the old wife's not there
just the husband spitting out a bit of thread
who, with amphibian eyes, greets you briefly.
If someone shows him
the length of the trousers with their thumb and forefinger
he pretends not to understand
just vibrates his gills then soon
as if to train someone's needle's eye in biting
he begins a backstitch that looks like an ellipse.
Inside the glass door is a wave

that no one coming out expects
 as the husband checks the rake
 of the thin, ever-thinning needles
 in the two fins lying on the sewing machine.
 Threads with buoyancy float about
 and a carp that lives on thread hides there.
 Sometimes a newspaper comes flying and knocks at the door
 but the door doesn't open. If it frequently allows time to enter
 the carp's scales will grow dry, so the glass
 obstinately keeps its dentures clamped shut.
 Next to the bent alley, there's a sewing shop.
 Since all the Seongnae-dong people
 have gotten thin like paper
 no one has taken a peep inside the glass door.
 Like how a fluorescent tube gets bent in a fish tank
 whenever people pass the store
 they can't avoid their footsteps from twisting.



A White Butterfly

SIN YONG-MOK

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A white butterfly is not like anything in this world. Any child pursuing it is sure to fall down.



Lazy Corpse

SIN YONG-MOK

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The target becomes accurately visible when the arrow flies and strikes it
a beautiful whirlwind
but once the arrow has struck it, the target cannot rid itself of its name
and at that moment
when the blade slashes the wrist, it is like death appearing.
Here is the sea
vast, blue, peaceful
and until they're hooked
nobody realizes that creatures
with such sad expressions are swimming through it.
Fish, they are like the sea's arteries.
It might be hard to believe
but only inscrutable incidents can be pointed at with a clear finger—
cracks in a glass and traces of spilled water
or the growth rings of a felled tree
or torn-up scraps of a letter
the color of burned ash
the oasis of red blood emerging from the hot asphalt of an intersection
when the motorbike sharply cuts a corner
and violently strikes the speeding taxi like a cross.

The corpse once concealed within the living body made accurately visible
so therefore, everything is already a corpse!

I had this realization on July 11, 2008.
I received a phone call from the university hospital
and while I was rushing there, Father had become a corpse.

Mother clutched the young doctor's grubby gown and shouted
How can a living body become a corpse?
Why can't a corpse become a living body?
My brother's tears were blood minus the red.
Setting my living body down beside Father's corpse
at the back of the hearse as it headed homeward
I messaged a friend:
Father's is the first dead body I have ever seen.

From that moment on I've only been able to speak
with the torn lips of a fish caught on a hook.

Rather, like the hole in a target struck by an arrow
to tell the truth
death is no incident. Perhaps it's alchemy.
I have never seen the beautiful cracks hidden in a glass
nor the mysterious growth rings a tree has
until they were broken or felled.
But after all
if tears are mixed with red dye and injected into a dead body
the living body will circulate tears instead of blood.

No need to understand, of course.

Because the first time anything comes into this world

we reckon we have understood it already.

It's something like this. We understand music.
 And if that's the case
 aren't instruments weapons? Isn't that thing
 that fires at the silence hidden in the air that rains down music
 a gun?
 The singer that weeps before murdered silence
 and you, too, aren't you a lethal weapon?
 Slashing oblivion, producing sorrow.

That blade's true name is despair, a living body
 circulating tears instead of blood.
 I have no recollection of that girl I first saw
 at my middle school entrance ceremony
 March 2, 1987
 amidst the spring flowers that winter fed its heart with
 and the breezes that spring offered its lungs to
 I stayed up all night writing a letter.
 Some days later
 I took the letter, returned unopened
 tore it up and burned it in the most beautiful dusk that exists in my memory.
 I had failed to hit the target. So
 that girl still remains a whirlwind to me.
 No need to understand, of course.
 Since there's no graveyard in my phrases for those I offered
 like corpses that had lost their deaths
 after that, I never wrote a single phrase for anyone else.
 Speaking from the viewpoint of a fish with torn lips caught on a hook

here is life
 vast, blue, peaceful.
 In front of Seoul's City Hall and on Seoul Station Plaza

still burning Yongsan, shattering Gangjeong,
as in Moscow and Berlin and Melbourne too
my life was quiet.

I shot nothing, stabbed nothing, nothing,
things I could not break, or sever, crush, or burn
like a lazy death.

I shall not return

to the house with a sofa with beige armrests
with windows that stars pecked at
where the front door opens easily only at night
therefore

off to the bar in the alley

in front of the house where I used to gaze at the rain-swept street
after ordering sake with raw mackerel, laughing
and chattering all night long and getting drunk
or as a fish unable to swim through tears

in a dimly lit officetel

as a moralist loftily turning the pages of a translation
with fingers pure as a preservative
nothing but logic and analysis

into a religious life of truth convinced of being able to sort out a life
where blood and sweat and flesh are tangled together
into that corpseless epitaph

in a dimly lit Izakaya

only capable of walking down a simple three-dimensional alley
after consulting a two-dimensional map, as a sociologist

into the combined chemical action producing the wounds of strangers
only treating itself, and feeling compassion for this world
time comes mixing red dye into the sea.

As a target struck by time's arrow

the moment the sun's beautiful whirlwind abruptly stops

and the eternity of a glass falls to the floor
 or the tottering of a tree engulfs the teeth of a saw, or
 the shriek of paper crumples and smoke's phrases are left as white ash
 the void of the motorbike flies up over the taxi—
 and from this spot indicated by the fingers of certain death

I'll never be able to return

Letters caught on a faint fishing lamp
 are transporting the sand of humiliation onto the shores of desire.
 Into that unadulterated time—incapable of slaughtering anything
 simply put

I'll not return.

But now, as the living body of a fish not yet dead but dying

I wonder, *When will the end come?*

The end is bound to come sometime, like a lazy corpse
 looking at fully restored memories piled neatly as dust

Things like Father coming home one evening with a fish threaded on a
 reed

like the fish's gills opening and closing at the tip of the reed

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once supper is over, for sure, Father's body is what I will have become.

